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“WHEN WE WERE STARLESS” BY SIMONE HELLER



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When We Were Starless

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When we set out to weave a new world from the old, broken one, we knew we pledged the lives of our clutches and our clutches' clutches to wandering the wastes. Season after season, our windreaders find us a path through the poison currents, and our herds scuttle over molten glass seas and pockmarked plains into the haunted places where the harvest is plentiful. We move swiftly, outpacing vapors and packs of wild dogs alike, leaving only the prints of our tails in acrid sands.

This wasn't entirely true; we left other things, too, dear and precious. But this was how it was told by the elders when the veiled moon was high and we were cuddled up with our cozy-stones.

On the moonless nights, though, they spoke of ghosts: beckoning wraithlights and treacherous silent ones, and all the other types we had classified; and the multitudes that still waited for our soothing hands out among the ruins. They spoke of ghosts like they were the ones to handle them, when it was always me.

So when Warden Renke strode up to my resting place on the outskirts of the half-shaped camp, the stark white paint of her dread-screen slapped on in haste, I knew what she needed.

"Someone found another ghost, yes?" My longing glance went to the grub'n'root stew some kind soul had left next to the pack serving as my pillow, still lukewarm from a hot stone placed at the bottom of the bowl. I reached for the harness with my tools instead.

"It's in the dome structure to the East. Asper ventured there in search of the light metals his weaver prefers. He meant no harm; he knows we need every spare part he can churn out. Said he saw strange lights."

"Alright." It could be nothing, or just another minor ghost which I would have laid to rest before the deep-night chill encroached. I stood and fingered my engraved pliers, waiting for Renke to disappear like

they all did when it came to my work. But the Warden fixed me, her pupils mere slits.

“Eat your fill first, Blessed. We need you to stay strong. Truss won’t be able to step in for you.”

And he hadn’t stepped in for years now, since the day he became a respected member of the tribe, but I didn’t say that.

“How is he?” I asked instead.

Renke looked back to where the first weaverspun tentpoles came together, as if she could see the pallet there, the thin mat of woven vines stained with blood. “He’s barely conscious. You should visit him as soon as you’ve cleansed yourself.”

It could well be my last chance. One shift in the weather, and we’d be running again, leaving our excess baggage behind. Truss never passed up an opportunity to teach a lesson, so it would probably be me he’d ask for the Song of Passing, and I was afraid it would be more than I could take. People’s hearts, as hardened and as barred as they were, were a different matter from the hearts of ghosts. I took one big mouthful of stew and swallowed. “I’ll take care of this ghost, Warden. This spot will serve as a fine resting place and see us recovered to full strength.”

Renke cast a doubtful glance down at her freshly spun leg brace, for she, too, hadn’t walked away unscathed. “Report to me when it’s done. I’ll put harvesting on hold, so hurry. No way to know how long the winds will grant us.”

The run-in with the rustbreed had not been my fault. I was a good enough scout—I scoured inaccessible ruins for scarce materials, and I never ran the tribe into the lairs of the befouled crablion or let anyone’s mind become ghost-shifted. But when the heat-baked ground of a salt flat we were crossing was suddenly riddled with burrower holes, a full legion of the writhing, rearing centipedal creatures already upon us, all I could do was to change the gentle hum of the Lope Concord to the jarring trill of the Rush and find us a path out of this trap. The air had been filled with the dry stick sounds of the rustbreed’s milling legs and the sharp smell that went for communication among them. But for all their legs, we were the better runners, and we made it. Barely. The hindquarters of our sole gearbeast were a fused mass of metal and dried fluids from a rustbreed feeder, and I didn’t want to think about Truss’ side, which had been similarly exposed. Others, like Renke, had been burned badly, too, but he had been the only one to suffer a bite and get the corrosive substance under his scales.

The ruined place I had led us into was vast and violent, some of its canyons carved by storms and some designed by its unholy builders long ago. We had been following these shadowed paths for hours, paths I would have preferred to scout before bringing in the tribe. As it was, I had to lay ghosts to rest on the run, which was a contradiction in and of itself.

I skirted the camp, listening to the whirring sounds of dozens of weavers busily spinning pots and ropes and all the things we would need to shelter and recover. Bits of Asper's cleansing chant drifted over the jagged scenery. He would be fine. Surely he had run at first sight, not even checking if it was a real ghost, or just a reflection on an unexpectedly untarnished surface. It took more than that to risk ghost-shifting. But the tribe was skittish. He would sing half of the night.

Out of the rubble and partially collapsed buildings around the camp, two ruined structures protruded into the upper airs like teeth, broken and half-melted. Loose material flung up by the poison winds had merged with the original walls like flowstone.

No such thing marred the surface of the dome. Its sides were certainly blackened like everything else, and even blacker holes yawned where some of its hexagonal segments were missing, but the telltale pockmarks to determine downwind shelter were nowhere to be seen. It loomed over the rubble as if to claim some things were unbreakable, no matter what. We would prove it wrong, if I had my way and we stayed. Because that was what we did; we cleansed the ruins by harvesting them, by feeding their very substance to our weavers and rendering it pure and useful to be sold to the settler townships up in the mountains.

Only this time we would need every scrap for ourselves to survive.

The entrance to the dome structure was a narrow, curved tube. When I reached a barrier of two thin, clear panes of glass, they swished apart almost soundlessly, releasing a draft of cool air from within. Asper must have been desperate if he had gone beyond that. I took a moment to camouflage and darted through, curling my tail in case of nasty surprises; this would have been a stupid way to lose it. At some point in the past, granules of debris had blown in, but the layer was thin and petered out after a few paces. When the portal closed smoothly behind me, one side grated a little bit on a piece of gravel that must have been displaced by my feet.

My gaze was drawn upwards. The air of the dome was still, the evening light eerily peaceful as it filtered through the once transparent segments. Gone was the cleansing singsong, gone were the high winds keening in cavity-riddled structures. It wasn't that there was no indication

of violence in this place: the tail end of a colossal metal tube still hanging from steel cords fastened around its tapered nose had fallen and destroyed all manners of tables and glass cases on the floor. But it was as if it had happened centuries ago, and peace had been found in its arrangement.

Anyone with a healthy fear of ghosts would have gone looking for the one whose invisible hand had moved the glass panes. I knew better. I was not after an inferior ghost tied to this entrance—my prey would be haunting the vast space, where the light was murky and the shadows were glistening. I went straight in to look for the veins that spoke of ghost activity, for the hiding places of ghost organs, stored away in boxes for protection.

Uncomfortably chilly layers of air enshrouded glittering heaps of shards. Once, I might have felt out of place, an unwelcome disturbance. But I had left my fear of ghosts behind like an old skin a long time ago, and what I had found instead was the unforeseen, and sometimes pure beauty.

The tribe never knew. To them, beauty meant nothing. I could have shown them the brightest colors and patterns on my skin, and all they ever wanted were the dulled hues of sand and ashes, all the better to pick clean ruins like this one.

In the end I found absolutely no sign of a ghost inhabiting this space. I resigned myself to take care of the entrance and let go of my camouflage.

When I turned around there was something where there had been no one. Like a person, a solitary figure leaned on one of the undamaged glass cases. The light pooled strangely around it, and when I flicked my tongue, the smell, the heat, and the heartbeat were all my own and told me no other living being was in here with me.

“Hello, little explorer,” it said with a clear, slightly hollow voice.

The ways ghosts reacted to people were mostly limited to precise, fatal attacks, if they were of the aggressive kind, or simple things like manipulating doors or following every move with a single red eye in the shell they animated, observant even in afterlife.

This one drifted over to me, mimicking a walk on two legs as best it could, lacking a tail. Its whole body was obscured by a bulky, silvery layer of clothing, its head round like a bowl. It seemed insubstantial, a ghost of subtle dangers. My breath quickened, but I stood my ground. When there was but a pace between us, I lifted my hand to rap my knuckles against the semi-translucent head-bowl with just a hint of bright eyes behind. The ghost quivered slightly as my fingers

passed right through it, and on my skin I felt an almost imperceptible sensation of heat.

“Now, now, you’re a cheeky one, aren’t you?” It turned with me as I began to walk around it, cautiously, looking for the veins tethering its body to its heart. “I understand you’re curious, and I encourage you heartily to experiment. But your experience will be better if you refrain from touching me.”

The way it reacted to me, seemed to talk directly to me, was disconcerting. I felt a lump grow in my throat. Even now there were no veins. They could still be under the floor, but I somehow doubted it. I had seen a few Untethered before, even sought them out. They didn’t need to animate objects, but moved through thin air with a fluid grace. I knew they could be laid to rest with a bit of work; I just chose not to whenever possible. The world always felt lessened by their passing.

“I don’t see a tag on you, little explorer.” The ghost’s voice came from slightly above. So maybe it had stored its lungs somewhere. Finding them would at least be a start. “Would you mind telling me your name to avoid confusion?”

I looked up at the strange specter in surprise. No amount of singing would redeem me in the eyes of my tribe if I volunteered my name to a ghost. Granted, I did talk to ghosts. It was a one-sided conversation, a game of pretending at its best. This ghost wouldn’t even register my name, a name nobody had bothered to use since I became Blessed. What harm could it do, to whisper and hear it swallowed up by the still air of the dome?

I flicked my tongue. “Mink. My name is Mink.”

The round head bobbed enthusiastically. “Welcome, Mink! Now, would you like to see the stars?”

A flutter of anxiety rose in my stomach. This was more than a mere reaction; this was interaction. For a short moment, I felt this was not a ghost, but something else altogether, something alive and very old and dangerous. I fought my unease with a snort. “Stars? You’re trying to trick me with fancy tales the elders tell to hatchlings, yes?”

“That’s what most come for, but we can certainly look at something else. The rocket, maybe? Or one of the landers?” It drifted off a little bit, hands clasped behind its back. With a swooshing noise, the soft glow of wraithlights grew throughout the dome, in at least five different places. There were sounds as well, sounds I recognized: ghosts, many upon many of them, animating contraptions, whining in high voices. A legion of ghosts, seemingly springing into action in unison.

I shielded my eyes and staggered back, caught myself on one of the tables, shaken. Such a conglomerate of ghosts would take days to be laid to rest. Our wounded might not have days; they depended on the herds' output before the windreader called us off.

The untethered ghost had moved to hover next to me. "You seem upset, little explorer Mink. Is there something wrong? Something I can do for you?"

I held my face still buried in my hands and looked at the ghost through my fingers. Was it trying to help me? All I had ever been taught told me to run now, but I had never been the student Truss or the other elders had envisioned. "That's impossible . . ."

"Let's try some music to lift your spirits." The ghost drifted back and forth expectantly. When nothing happened and I began to wonder if I should have said or done something, it heaved a great sigh. "Uh . . . I'm very sorry, little explorer Mink . . . some things seem to be amiss here. I thought I had just the right music for you. But now I can't play any at all, and I just don't seem to be able to fix this defect. Ah. I shouldn't be all sad when I need to cheer you up, right? Don't you worry. I'll find a work-around."

"You miss your music?" I had always suspected some ghosts liked music, and tried to use this to my advantage. But this ghost had offered me consolation; it seemed genuinely upset it couldn't act on it. I didn't seek an advantage when I suggested: "I could sing for you."

Truss would have called me ghost-shifted or straight out mad at this point. I had nothing yet, not even a classification, just a growing sense of unease and a lot of work cut out for me. But there were many ways to a ghost's heart, and a nonaggressive, calming approach might work just as well as exhausting oneself by tearing out every wall panel for clues. Or maybe I was just trying to rationalize my own desperate need for a song.

It took some time to find my voice, because, yes, I had sung to ghosts before, but never for a whole legion of them. Soon enough I found the center of the dome was an excellent place to stand and sing.

I did not sing a ghost song, but one of ours. The melody of the Paean of Manifest Horizons rose strongly in the empty air, and it was more uplifting than the somber tones of the Song of Passing I usually sang in the forsaken places of the world, while making them a little bit more forsaken. It wasn't until after the first verse I noticed the second voice accompanying mine in perfect harmony. At first I was puzzled and amused to sing alongside those hidden lungs of the ghost. Then I felt my spirit lifted in a way I had not expected: not to chant alone

amongst the rubble of a past age, but to have a voice other than mine echoing, countering, running ahead in joy. When I reshaped the tune into a jubilating variation and the ghost followed suit without pause, though, the dread feeling crept upon me again, made my voice veer off into a warning warble. I faltered, and the ghost sang the ending notes on its own.

Ghosts were the remnants of the long-dead past, and one thing they—or at least all the ones I had encountered—could not do, was evolve, learn, grasp something new. This one had not only learned a song in a few heartbeats, but even how to mold it in the unique way of my tribe. And I finally had my classification and my name, and the absolute certainty that I would not be the one to lay this ghost to rest, or any of its manifestations, for that was what I faced: one vast ghost of many forms, one fabled entity that ruled this whole place. An annihilator of tribes. A Clusterhaunt.

“What an amazing talent,” it said, lifting its hand to its chest, where of course no heart resided. “Thank you!”

I tried to swallow against my dried-up throat, but only produced a strangled squawk. When I fled the dome, the ghost called after me: “Little explorer Mink, do you really have to leave already? You haven’t seen the stars yet!”

Terrified as I was, I would have crashed into the grating panes of glass. But the ghost moved this extension of itself out of my way, and I stumbled out before it could reconsider.

This was what was going to happen: the camp would be left to the winds, half-shaped pots and tents melting into the ruined landscape. The marrow of our wounded would feed whatever happened to stumble upon this site, our crippled gearbeast would hold its lone wake. I would paint the warning sigil of our tribe on a nearby wall in green permastain, so that no scout in their right mind would ever set foot in the dome again. And we would flee this place, maybe leave a trail of our injured as we ran, and we would never look back, never wonder what we had lost, not only in lives, but also in not taking the rare materials from the dome, in not observing the Clusterhaunt and learning about its ways.

Or at least try to coexist. I had fled on impulse, fueled by the horrors our lore spoke of. It didn’t seem so bad now that I had time to think and didn’t see a spectral host coming after me from the dome. But how could I suggest this to a tribe who, by that very same lore, left its weakest members behind to die? I would be declared suicidal, a menace, unheard.

For we were survivors, mere survivors; we never managed to be more than that, and some didn't even manage that much. We told ourselves that we made a difference, that we shaped a world, but one look at this ruined vastness told the truth: we didn't change a thing, and all our sacrifices were just to survive another day. It was enough, mostly, as long as we pretended it didn't tear our hearts out.

I was perched on the remains of a toppled roof structure and looked at the bug-catcher lights dotting the camp's perimeter in the dark. They would glow long after we were gone.

When I finally trotted over to the ring of lights, I vocalized a lesser warning sequence. "Scout incoming," I saluted the guard I knew would wait in the shadows beyond. "I need to see Truss. Get someone to apply the dread-screen on him. I'm unclean."

She hissed gruff acknowledgement, and by the time I entered the camp proper every weaver had been moved out of my way, as well as sleeping mats and cooking utensils for good measure. A young herder still gesturing her weaver backwards lifted the eight-legged metal creature up into her arms and staggered away under its weight, even if it was far out of range of whatever evil emanations of mine she might fear. I saw Asper, too, hovering on the fringe of the camp and obviously eager for news, his weaver easy to spot because he was the only one to dread-screen its carapace for extra security. At Truss' resting place, one of the hunters simply smeared the remaining paint in her hands onto her face and throat before I came too close.

On Truss, the swirling white patterns had been applied with more care. He looked bad underneath, skin sagging in stiff folds, eyes sunken. His side was bandaged, the color of the rust-like substance eating away at him already bleeding through.

"Teacher," I said, kneeling next to him.

He lifted one feeble hand, as if to keep me from propping him up. "Talk to the elders, little foster-hatch. Why come to me? They are the ones who decide our way."

They knew only one way, but I didn't say that. "You're one of them, old man. How are you? I was gone so long, and I was afraid you wouldn't . . ."

"Warden told you that, didn't she?" He coughed, and I watched the stains on his bandage deepen. "To keep you on your toes. She knows you're prone to getting distracted."

At that, he winked weakly at me. We had always kept my bolder adventures between the two of us, as we had our differences. I wanted badly to take his hand, to feel if there was any strength left in him, but he had never been fond of touch. Or sympathy.

"I'm not dead yet." His voice was a low rasp. "Won't run for days, but if the winds are willing and you're keeping us safe, I'll eat the stuff that's trying to eat me . . . just you watch."

At that, I felt all color bleed out of my skin and fought hard to keep Truss from noticing. I had been selfish to come here, just so that I could say goodbye. "It might not happen," I offered softly. "It might not happen fast enough. And so many of us are wounded and exhausted. Even I would be hard-pressed to run now."

Part of me wanted to tell him about the Clusterhaunt. But he hadn't scouted for years, and in his day Truss had never been one to indulge in the presence of ghosts. I knew what he would have to say, and I didn't want to hear it.

He said it anyway. "Don't concern yourself with our weak and wounded, little foster-hatch. We're prepared to stay behind, knowing the tribe will survive. The elders are aware of that. They know how to handle it."

"But they don't *have* to handle it," I whispered.

Suddenly I felt Truss' hand on mine, cold and brittle. He started to say something, but in this moment, Renke strode up to us, the windreader and the other two elders in tow.

"What news do you bring, Blessed?" she asked. "Is your work done?"

I looked up at her, then back to Truss. There were days when I found joy in my job, when I felt I brought peace to the ghosts of old and betterment to the brand-new world. Today it felt like laying to rest everything I loved. "My work is never done."

Renke came closer than most dared when I was unclean, to stare down at me. "The herders are awaiting my command. Is it safe now, or do we move?"

There was no invitation to debate, no room for experiments. I only needed to utter the word; the decision was already made, had already been made since the day we set out to wander the wastes.

I fought to keep my unruly colors under control. None of the tribe could actually read them, but Truss had seen most of the spectrum while teaching me, and even with eyes half-closed he might be watching.

Renke's crest rose halfway in impatience. I could feel the eyes of the herders on me, all prepared to set out, their weavers protected in the crooks of their tails. They would never admit that survival was not always enough.

I squeezed Truss' hand one last time and finally got up to look the Warden in the eye. "Send them out," I said. "This place is safe."

The night sky was a black abyss sucking my gaze upwards, and with it went my bravado and determination. No veiled moon shed its light upon the ruins; the stars, its fabled lesser cousins, were nothing but a story to ease the weight of the dark.

I did not deserve to even think of a soothing story, because I had embarked on the darkest of tales.

Clusterhaunt. Few claimed to have seen one, the even fewer reliable witnesses weren't keen on telling what they had seen. Clusterhaunts were said to be the rarest and mightiest of ghosts, spiteful of the living, and oh-so-strong, the most powerful ghost-shifters, heart-concealers, mind-mimickers.

Tribe-vanishers.

But I had told my lie, and I needed it to turn into truth. So instead of getting back to my lonely resting place, I went to the dome once more. "Residual energies" would keep the herders from entering only for so long; then I would either have found this heart or failed them all.

First I jammed a stone I had brought under the glass panes of the entrance. I didn't want to get trapped inside, and disabling the ghost's extensions piece by piece was one way I figured I could counter its Clusterhaunt abilities. I took my lamp into the pitch-black dome and began to turn over every larger piece of rubble to find a hint of ghostly veins, organs, anything.

All too soon a familiar pale glow came up behind me.

"Little explorer Mink! What a pleasant surprise to have you back!"

I looked up at the bowl-shaped head bobbing above the silvery suit. Why would it choose this appearance when it ruled so many forms? Why not a more threatening one?

It hovered closer. "You were gone so fast last time, I thought you maybe didn't like it. But you've got them both—Curiosity and Spirit. Want to see them? They're right here, brought back to Earth after their duty was done."

Wraithlight flared to life halfway through the dome to illuminate the shapes of two battered gearbeasts. Their odd wheel-legs seemed sturdy enough, but after a closer look, I found them to be perplexingly impractical: their broad backs were plastered with strange contraptions, no room for stowage at all. They wouldn't carry even one of our wounded.

"You'll find the whole story of Curiosity and Spirit on your personal Memory Vault," the ghost went on. "Please don't forget it next time you leave. It helps you relive your whole experience in here at home."

I ignored the gearbeasts, but the ghost kept following me. "Have you lost something?" it wanted to know. "May I help you? Just ask away!" as

if it was a game Clusterhaunts liked to play. I wasn't here to talk, though.

There were just not that many alternatives. No wall panels to peel off the glass-like sides of the dome, no secret compartments embedded in the smooth, hard floor. The rubble under the fallen tail of the metal tube the ghost had called a rocket was a big pile of shards, and even the bases of the undamaged tables and cases were solid. So maybe talking *was* how I'd get to the heart of this ghost.

I turned very slowly. "You'd answer all my questions? Really?"

"Sure. That's what I'm here for." The ghost hovered expectantly.

I swallowed. I was a scout, not a master of eloquence. This could go horribly wrong. "Where is your heart?"

Among all the reactions I had anticipated, I surely hadn't expected the ghost's pronounced shoulders to sink. "Ah," it said in a somewhat small voice. "Well, you already saw on your first visit that I am not like you. And a heart is among the things that separate us." Its light grew dim. "Alas, I guess one could say my heart is up among the stars? That's where I always wanted to be, so maybe that's a justified notion."

So the ghost really liked its tall tales, liked them so much it spun its heart-concealing fabrications around them in a way that made me feel all wistful. I could have asked about its veins and lungs next, or any other part of ghost anatomy a good scout knew to look out for. But the only thing I seemed to remember was how it had tried to comfort me earlier, and somehow that made everything much more complicated.

It had diligently shuffled after me, and I was looking at its blurry form through a thin sheet of clear material mounted on a table between us. "What are you called, then?" I asked finally.

The ghost lifted its hand and dropped it again. "Oh, I . . . nobody ever calls me anything. I'm just here for your service. And on a better day, this should display the orbits of the main celestial bodies. It's in maintenance mode. I apologize for your inconvenience."

"Nonsense." I felt angry all of a sudden, and not just because I wasn't making any progress here, apart from trying to befriend a ghost. "People also don't call me anything since the Blessing came upon me. But I'm more than the service I render."

"I'm afraid that I am not."

I crossed my arms and hissed in frustration. Even those old gearbeasts had been named, however strangely. I could do better. "I'd like to call you Orion, then, if I may."

It just hovered there, frozen.

"I mean, we're not close enough for me to know your gender," I added. "So it's just a suggestion, yes?"

“It’s a brilliant suggestion!” The ghost beamed, radiating brightness. “Orion . . . that’s very considerate!”

I thought so myself. It was a name from the same old tales that told of the stars.

“Thank you, little explorer Mink. I’m attaching my name to all Memory Vaults now.”

And in the newly brilliant light of Orion I saw something, off to the side. Something that shouldn’t have been here, and yet there it was.

Inside one of the glass cases, bathed in wraithlight and completely still, sat a weaver.

“Don’t touch the exhibit, please!”

I had taken the weaver out and set it on the floor, where it had very frustratingly not shown the slightest inclination to move. Clearly, it hadn’t been able to bask in a long time.

“Little explorer. Your interest in this ATU shows how bright you are. But I counted 384 defects in here already, and you really shouldn’t add . . .”

I gestured at the weaver. “What did you call that?”

“People call them space spiders, but officially it’s an Advance Terraforming Unit.” Orion drifted to another thin glass-like sheet, this one larger, mounted on the floor. “Come along! See them in action.”

The weaver sat motionless. I would fetch this prize for my tribe, a new heirloom to complement our herds. But I also wanted to know how it had ended up in a glass case. Reluctantly, I followed the ghost.

“Still no music.” Orion contemplated the large glass-like screen. “I’m sorry.”

“I am sorry for adding another defect,” I said, and I meant it. As much as Orion tried to make up for his failing contraptions with enthusiasm, I could still sense his distress. “Shall we sing again?”

I did not feel like it. I couldn’t see any horizons manifesting themselves in my near future. I was still here to lay Orion to rest, the sooner the better. Had I stumbled upon him while advance-scouting, I would have turned my back and looked for another harvesting ground. But this was not an option with the tribe camping on the threshold, cultivating their superstitions.

“Maybe later, little explorer Mink. For now it will do, the display works just fine. Look.”

At first, I saw nothing; nothing I hadn’t seen before with minor ghosts. Ephemeral colors danced through the glass, almost too quick for the eye to follow. Then the whole screen, larger than myself, was

filled with the image of a weaver. I sat on my haunches to get a better look. I understood now: Orion was showing me a vision.

“Moving mode; printing mode; charging mode,” Orion said while the weaver flickered through a series of motions, completely translucent, so I could see its intricate inner workings. This was followed by an impossibly long line of weavers scuttling up a smooth ramp, then fire and smoke. “When the ATUs set out to terraform other worlds, they are equipped to deal with every hostile surrounding, to transform every unusual or even hazardous material into something useful,” Orion said, and I slumped to the floor, curling my tail around my legs. “They are constructed semiautonomous, with modes to work on individual projects, to collaborate, or to be operated by a higher-level controller.”

I must admit I wasn’t able to follow his tale, but then I had never worked with a weaver, so what did I know? The images drew me in. Weavers glinting like gems in front of a profound blackness. Weavers swarming at structures I had never imagined. Weavers working away at something that looked like the dome I found myself in, but under two bright bluish suns.

“These are other worlds?” I asked. I saw them, but I couldn’t believe they were real. New worlds, worlds not poisoned by a violent, unholy past.

Orion’s head bobbed enthusiastically. “Yes, little explorer. There are many upon many, scattered among the stars. Everything you see in here, including the visitor center itself, was built to get there. Maybe you will travel to one of them yourself one day?”

I stood fascinated, watching, and I felt fear clamp down on my heart even as it soared. This, I knew, was ghost-shifting: ghosts telling about great things, about possibilities, about progress. It was not true, it just didn’t happen, and when it happened, it was bad. This kind of thinking had destroyed the world. We were careful now, and we didn’t pursue any stupid ideas.

But it was beautiful, and that had always been my weakness. I was transfixed by the images as they flickered by, bathing me in the brightness of distant suns. My gaze drank up the swarms of weavers spinning things far greater than we had ever dreamed of. And I realized they were so much more than what we had been using them for. This would be invaluable knowledge, if the tribe could accept it. I wondered if they would even accept a ghost-touched weaver, and resolved to tell them I had found it far from the place of the haunting.

I turned to look at the creature with renewed awe. But my colors flared in alarm at what I saw.

The first light of the day filtered in through the ceiling, and I realized I had lost the track of time over the ghost's stories. Several figures were clustered together near the entrance, shuffling and whispering. Among the dozens of weavers at their feet, the one marked white with dread-screen clearly stood out in the front row. Asper and his fellow herders had come to harvest. They craned their necks, staring at me. Staring at Orion.

"Visitors!" The ghost began to drift closer. "Are these your friends? More little explorers? I'd love to welcome them."

"No, Orion!" I tried to prevent what could only end in disaster. "Stay back, will you?"

The herders had already scattered. With hectic gestures they maneuvered their weavers to hide behind them, while some broke and ran for the entrance, shrilling a warning.

"Wait!" Asper yelled. "The Blessed is in the ghost's thrall. We have to rescue her! Get Renke, hurry!"

"It's alright." I made two steps towards them to show I was free to go. "He's nonaggressive."

It was a futile effort. Most of them were crazed with fear, clogging the narrow entrance tube or fleeing along the walls of the dome. Asper, though, not only came for me, but managed to bully a fellow herder to march with him towards much more ghost activity than any of them had ever seen.

"Asper, you have to watch this!" I backed off towards the glass-like screen. "We were all wrong about the weavers."

He grabbed my arm.

"Hey!" Orion drifted closer.

Without letting go, Asper jumped. I stumbled and was caught by his friend, who dragged me to my feet without any respect for shoulder joints and their natural resistance to jerking. I hissed.

"Hey!" Orion said, louder now. "I cannot tolerate violence in here. This is a place of peace and learning. Now, behave yourselves and release Mink!"

A collective gasp rippled through the herders as they heard the ghost speak my name, and I used their surprise to detach myself.

I could not let them take me. When they got me out of this dome, there would be no turning back and setting this right. Truss would die, unsung and alone, and I would not bring a new weaver and a new vision to the tribe. I tried to back away and babbled incoherent things that probably did nothing to convince them I was not ghost-shifted beyond repair. Orion's warnings became increasingly pressing.

When Renke's fighters joined the fray, they pushed the fleeing herders back in and moved towards me, crests rising as Orion drifted in between us as if to shield me.

Then, cutting through the very fabric of this old, untouched space, I saw the glint of a spear flying. Renke's verdigris green collar-feathers were tied to its shaft. It passed right through Orion, to bury itself in the screen containing the vision. A web of cracks appeared, and the light within died.

Orion's voice shrilled, distorted and much louder than before. "Stop damaging the equipment, and leave Mink alone, now! She's under my protection."

In the silence that followed, a rustling sound came up. It was a sound we knew, but it had a wrongness to it that made everyone freeze. Instead of the chaotic concert of individual clinks and whirrs, we heard our weavers march in unison. They came scuttling from all corners, flowing together like some big machine assembling itself. I knew this behavior, I had observed it moments before in the vision, but it was uncanny to see it executed, as if they had developed a shared, single-minded purpose all of a sudden. The others just stared, but some called out to their weavers, gesturing them back to no avail.

I froze when I saw what their purpose turned out to be. They all came up to me, smoothly parting around me and flowing into a new formation, climbing upon each other and surrounding me with a barrier of spiky metal.

And they were ready to defend. Asper and the other herders tried to intervene as the fighters tore into the formation, and they all got burned by spurts of heated material, seared by cutting-lights, sparks flying off their scales. They had absolutely no experience with the way the herds behaved now, like a single organism lashing out.

I tried to climb over my living protection, ready to leave with the tribe to end this. "Orion!" I cried. "Stop. Please!"

"Habitat security initiated, please cooperate."

"Orion?"

But he didn't respond to me anymore.

And I remembered the most important thing a scout has to recognize: the point when fighting would only lead to greater loss. I sounded the Rush. "Flee! This is a Clusterhaunt!"

Renke took up my tune, aggressively, urging on the herders who still called their weavers. I don't know what really made them break and run in the end. It could have been the herder who recognized the carapace of her weaver and tried to yank it out of the formation, only

to get cut so badly we had to carry her. Limping and crying, we fled, and Asper's look was so hurt and betrayed I wanted to camouflage out of his sight. When I reached the entrance tube as part of the last group supporting and dragging each other, I thought I heard a faint whisper from the dome. "Safety can only be guaranteed in the habitat. Staying is recommended."

There was a difference I hadn't known, between separating myself from the tribe and being separated from the tribe. Oh, I was still with them, but I was kept off to the side, under guard. My status was unclear. Outcast, probably; a prisoner, surely; still useful, maybe.

Renke had screamed into my face, asking who would spin her a new spear, now that there was not a single weaver left. Asper had not spoken at all, but he surely cursed the day the tribe had acquired the clutch of supposedly blessed eggs that had hatched me. Others had said it aloud: "She who runs on her own shall no longer sing with us." And Truss had been loudest of all. "Is this how I taught you to serve your foster-tribe? You doom us all with your shrewd ideas. You shame me. You deny me my contribution to our survival, just because you're too sappy to accept what has to be done."

He might still get his chance to die all alone now.

My body's warmth seeped into the night-cooled ground. I was a miserable, pale heap, bound to a cracked column to protect everyone, including myself, from the mad bouts of my ghost-shifted mind. And as I stared up into the murky morning sky, still clear of the minor color shifts and scattered light that preceded a new wind, I knew they were right. I had been ghost-shifted. I had been blinded. The stars were not real. There was nothing but blackness up there.

I had been wrong all the time, dreaming of greatness and of knowing everything. I had chased visions and embraced change like it was just a pretty color I could wear, while secretly smiling at the superstition the herders held against me, never letting me approach a weaver. Now the weavers were taken, because I had lied. Because I had failed to see that they were right.

Not that anybody took the time to lay the blame at my feet—they would be crest-over-tails planning their next steps. I could hear them arguing. But it was just a waste of energy. Even if we stood a chance, we would never fight the one thing that let us thrive: our herds, our cleansers, our silvery lifeblood in this wrecked land.

Of course, without weavers, we would soon all be ghosts. And it would be a long drag down. We would wander the plains, deprived of

our purpose, deprived of our calling and our sustenance. We hadn't needed the weavers to change the world, really, but as a reason to tread on, to lay claim to hostile territory, to sustain our foolish, desolate, stubborn way of living. We had never seen what they really were, until now that they were gone, and I was the only one . . .

No.

I had to give up this delusion. I had never been the only one. I knew nothing.

To the disgruntled huffing of my guard, I started a cleansing song. It was too late for that, but I had to do something to steer my mind from the tantalizing vision, from the dread and the despair.

When I heard the soft thud of footpads on the ground, I thought somebody might try to gag me. But next came a strangled sound from my guard while a weaverspun chain dug into her trachea; that made me jerk out of my song.

Under a cover of black fabric I recognized the loam-spotted greens of Asper's scales. My first thought was that he had come to personally punish me, and when he stepped closer, I expected him to tell me he wanted me gone, that he couldn't bear to feed me one more share of spicy mothfry after all I had done.

"They're gone, because of you. Poor Peshk needs a brace, because of you, and I can't build one, because of you." He stared down at me for a moment, his tail lashing. I cringed, which made him snarl even more. "What is it with you, crazy scout?" He took off his heat cloak and dropped it near the shadowed corner I was curled up in. "You're all sickly white."

I hooked the cloak with one claw and drew it to me cautiously. "It's . . . it's my mood, yes?"

"Then snap out of it! You'll need your skill after you've warmed up." He swallowed, as if the next thing he was going to say had a foul taste to it. "They are debating. But it all ends up the same—we're going to leave. Hoping to reach the settler townships and seek refuge there. They're packing already. We're abandoning our weavers." He took out a small trimming knife. "Can't let that happen. Can't just leave my Tineater serving this Clusterhaunt. So I figured you'd be the one to come up with another idea. I saw you talk to that ghost. Like it made sense. Maybe you're shifted, and surely you're as unclean as a cesspool full of ground poison, but you've got a knack for communicating with this thing." With one swift slash, he cut through my rope.

I didn't move, just sat numbly, completely baffled. And I wondered if everybody had this one breaking point that made them fall from

grace. "This might not be in the tribe's best interest," I said softly. "What if I don't come back and you'll have to run without a scout?"

"Wrong time for regrets," Asper snarled, and he sounded strangely like Truss to me, when he had taught a lesson. Then he tossed me my tools and turned around to sit next to the guard and check on her. "Go make some sweet talk to this ghost of yours, or rip its heart out. I don't care. Just get Tineater back to me. Bring the weavers, or don't come back at all."

The moment I moved out of reach, he took up the cleansing song I had abandoned.

There were many reasonable things I could have wished for as I passed through the yawning portal into the dome again: that I knew a secret tune to make the weavers follow me out just like that; that I had Truss at my side, to hold me back with a sharp hiss from making yet another stupid mistake; that I could run, run the plains with my tribe and our herds whole and sound, and leave this place alone.

I might face the true power of the Clusterhaunt now, not the gentle inducements of the being I had dubbed Orion.

A name it hadn't responded to any longer after it had turned on us. I was very much afraid that any bond Asper relied upon might have existed in my imagination only.

Foolish as I was, the thing I really wished for was that it hadn't forgotten *my* name.

But Orion was nowhere to be seen. I could tell, because in plain daylight the murky darkness of the dome wasn't absolute. High up, where some of its ceiling panels were missing, shafts of light sliced down all the way to the ground in cascades of dancing dust motes. And there was a flurry of ghost activity. Faintly blinking lights, ghostly chatter emanating from various objects, all clocked to the clinking and whirring of the weavers. It was every sane person's nightmare, but I was beyond fear.

Or so I thought, because when Orion did descend upon me out of thin air, I blanched, flinched, and pinched my tail under a metal pedestal I knocked over while fighting for balance. Before I could lift it, two weavers scuttled over and hoisted it back up. I very slowly backed away.

"Little explorer Mink, adding some defects again, aren't you? But don't you worry. Mistakes happen, and I've got so much help now." Orion drifted closer and lowered his voice. "We're not officially reopened yet. You are a regular visitor, though. And I'm so glad to see you're back, and unharmed, too, so I'm willing to make an exception. A special tour just for you, what do you say?"

Part of me wanted just that, to lose my unhinged, ghost-shifted self in visions. I swallowed. "Actually, I'm not here to visit you. I'm here for the weavers." I indicated three of the creatures, spinning upwards from the floor, thread after thread, grabbing shards with their long legs to absorb and fuel their weaving while building something that looked like it would go on top of the pedestal. "They don't belong in here. They are the herds of my tribe, you see, and we need them back."

"Weavers? You have a knack for names, little explorer Mink. But you must understand the ATUs are no playthings, and they are doing what they are made for. They are not mine to give back. But they do good work, and they are well cared for. Just imagine how many visitors will take delight in this place after all those pesky defects are behind us."

I took a deep breath. I very much detested breaking things. And it had been nice, nice to get to know someone who wasn't aware of the brokenness of the world, who didn't live under the constant pressure of survival. It had been nice, but it was the only leverage I had. "There is something you should know." I worked my jaw for a moment, like something old and awful was lodged between my teeth. "They are not coming. Nobody is coming. There are no visitors anymore."

"Little explorer!" Orion's gloved hand went up to his bowl-shaped head. "What are you saying? That's nonsense. Right?"

I came close to him, and I wished I could have reached up and taken the sides of the bowl in my hands, to look into those elusive eyes. And to have something to cling to, because it hurt, what I had to do. "It's true. Look at all those defects. And believe me, you got off lightly in here. The defects outside are numberless."

And I sung him the oldest parts of the Tribesong, the way the elders had sung it to me as a hatchling, lest I forgot how the world became broken and the reign of demons had ended when they choked on their own corrupted breath, after their insatiable thirst for knowledge had undone them.

When I sang no more, Orion was silent for a very long time. He didn't even hover or flicker. I tried to stay equally unmoved. The tribe, the herds, the running, hearts thumping up our chest. That was what mattered. Not a ghost and his grieving.

"I was built to teach," he stated finally, his voice unquavering and strong, and I thought that maybe his hidden lungs weren't built to produce the sobs buried underneath. "I was built to inspire new achievements. If it's all gone, and I'm all alone . . . why am I still here?"

I had no answer for him. Ghosts despised the living, that was why, and I knew that he did not.

Orion looked up again, a hint of eyes gleaming under the bowl. "But you. You will come? You, and your . . . tribe. You returned, after all. You want to learn."

I laughed. It sounded like choking. Learning was what had gotten me into this wretched situation in the first place. "No, Orion. We won't. I'm sorry. My tribe is fear-stricken by your presence. You have proven yourself a true Clusterhaunt by taking our weavers. You are the doom of my people."

"But everything will be fine in here soon," he insisted. "Zero defects. And you'll like the stars. I promise—"

"Orion. There are no stars." I had the distinct feeling that I was about to tear his heart out with words alone, and I had to speak around the lump in my throat. "The veiled moon is a silvery blotch gliding through the upper fumes. And the stars, they are gone so long they are not even in the Tribesong; a whisper of clear lights, shining through the dark fabric of the night to give us comfort. But we can't afford to believe in comfort. There is only blackness."

"Is that so?" Orion moved again, and this was the first time he tried to touch me. His fingers passed through my cheek, leaving faint traces of heat. "You should believe in comfort. It makes you reach out again after you fall. How else would you advance? When we set out to reach the stars, there were many who would have held us back. It's a risk, they said. A waste. But we sent our eyes up into the skies, and we saw worlds up there. We have always had to cross the blackness, Mink, and it has always been vast and intimidating. We have always fallen. But this place is a monument to our resilience, and it has seen visitors from afar, who brought back the evidence of those worlds. As its guardian, I was never intended to go myself, but I saw the blackness could be crossed. And you should have trust in that, too, Mink."

My mind went back to those pristine, luminous worlds of the vision, and there was comfort in the thought of them out there. I could not condemn this comfort, even if it made my heart want to reach out and find a way to get there. Even if I needed to embrace ghost-shifting to get only one step closer. And I did. "Show me."

He clasped his hands behind his back and nodded gravely. After a while, a weaver came scuttling out of the gloom to stand close to me and pinch me in the upper calf. In one of its legs, it held something, pressing it urgently into my hand as soon as I crouched. I looked at the smooth oval in my palm, then back at Orion.

"Your Memory Vault. I told you not to forget it next time you leave."

"I'm not leaving. I want you to show me your vision."

Orion shook his head. "No. Not only you. Bring your tribe. Let me show them. Only this one time. I am not your enemy. But this is the price I demand for giving back the weavers."

Never would the elders bring what was left of our tribe into the lair of the Clusterhaunt again. Never would they trust my word, ghost-shifted as I was. And yet. I wanted them to see. I wanted to be with them again, and that would never happen when my dreams lived among the stars, while theirs still had to cross the blackness. "I'll try, but my voice in the Tribesong is small."

"Nonsense" he said. "I heard you sing. There's nothing wrong with your voice. Just use it. Educate them."

He was right. They needed to know, and I had never made the effort to tell them anything. It had been easier for me, and easier for them, to carry on as we had always done. But there were other worlds, worlds not lost to corruption and poison. This was a vision as true as any prediction of our windreader. This was hope. It would be hard work, but I had to make them understand. Even if it meant breaking what was left of trust and love. Even if the only thing to speak in my favor was the prospect of a happy reunion with our herds.

Then Orion explained to me in detail how I would get the weavers back after the performance. If I hadn't believed him before, I would have done so now, because it was a sound plan. It was, in fact, a plan I had executed many times before. And as soon as I grasped what he wanted me to do, I threw up my hands and said: "No. I won't do that, Orion."

"But you must. As I said, the weavers are not mine to give back. When I initiated habitat security, they were integrated in the defense matrix. I can command them to repair while there is no threat, but I can't undo their integration. Security is automated."

I didn't understand, and I didn't care. I shook my head.

Orion waited very patiently by my side while I came up with other plans. Waited very patiently while I cried. And waited very patiently while I added one or three defects by kicking things.

But the world was less patient. It barged in on me when Asper crashed through the entrance, the fear in his voice overshadowed by the greater horror that must have driven him to brave the Clusterhaunt's lair yet again.

"Blessed!" he cried. "You have to lead us in the Rush, now! The camp was breached by a rustbreed vanguard. They have followed us."

We were nomads, and we didn't get to keep things. Not even dreams.

So I tried to shake it all off while I followed Asper into a nightmare. People were securing exhausted young ones to their chests or trying

to force up the wounded, while right in the middle of the camp Renke and her fighters fell back against the rustbreed despite battling fiercely. Vanguard attacks were meant to delay and cripple until the arrival of the colony, and if they had to impale their sinuous bodies on our weapons to shower us in acids, they would do just that. Already the ground sizzled with ochre blood.

Everybody made way to let me take my place at the head of the column, to lead us on the quickest path out into the open, where we could outrun them. But my eyes searched for Truss' pallet, where he would die alone, as was his duty. And my mind went back to the dome, to my voice rising up through its stillness, stirring the dust of centuries.

I knew a safe place right under our noses. I could still get us out without anyone being left behind.

"No need to run," I told those nearest to me. "Bring your young ones into the dome. It's safe, I promise. The Clusterhaunt will protect us." They didn't move, of course, but I went on, louder now. "I bargained for our protection. Our weavers will defend us in the dome. You have seen what they are capable of! These walls are indestructible. It is our best and only chance! Go!"

Most of them muttered madness at me, but some snuck glances at the dome, leaving our formation with tentative steps. Others kept looking at the elders.

"Get back!" the windreader yelled, ushering them on. "Don't listen to this ghost-shifted rambling. We run!"

"But the Blessed is right!" I hadn't noticed Asper staying with me in the fray. He had leapt onto a crumbling wall, waving his heat cloak like a banner. "Our weavers are in there. I won't leave them. I say let's go and make a stand there! We've got nothing to lose."

I saw the eyes of the herders shift. Terrified, yes, but flecked with mad determination as they grabbed what they had dropped in the wake of the attack and started to run for the dome, a few first, but drawing more and more after them. And I saw Renke lose every battle she was in and buckle when she finally called her fighters to her side to cover our retreat.

And just like that, the tribe was on the move. I went to find Truss and lifted his dry, grunting weight upon my shoulders. He didn't quite struggle, but he did snarl.

"Don't you dare and deny me my choice. Leave me, and do what the tribe needs of you."

"I am," I snapped. "And you can thank me later, or still make use of your choice then."

He huffed, but sagged against me in defeat. The tribe had decided, after all. Just beyond the tube entrance, their courage left them, though, and they all stopped dead in their tracks. The space was brimming with ghost activity. "Orion!" I shouted, shouldering my way to the front, Truss still with me. "Where are you?"

"Mink!" The ghost blinked to life in all his silvery splendor between two shafts of light in the middle of the dome, making my people surge back against the walls. "I'm glad you came back! Come on, everything is prepared for the show."

"We're not here for the show. Please, Orion, you have to protect us. There's rustbreed at the threshold, and my people need shelter. Help us!"

The spear fighters defending the entrance shot frantic looks at Orion as he drifted closer, but the Warden called them back in line with a disdainful growl and motioned others to move up as replacements, should they fall.

"I see," Orion said, and my heart leapt when I felt his lighthearted nature yield to the gentle profoundness I had come to trust. "Harm to visitors is to be avoided at all costs. Initiating habitat sealing."

An inaudible command brought in our herds. From all directions, they converged upon the entrance, the staccato of clinking legs made it sound like we had acquired an army. Smoothly they flowed into precise lines, passing down chunks of material to the tube opening where the silvery creatures began to weave upwards from the ground, and downwards from the ceiling. Most herders just stared in astonishment, but some whooped and called their weavers' names, and a few ventured out to gather rubble for them. Not every fragment went into the quickly growing wall, though. Some ended up in scalding spurts directed at our enemies.

It was messy. Three weavers were thrown back in a spray of acid as they clung to the red-tipped mandibles of a rustbreed soldier to keep it from rearing. One of our fighters went down, hundreds of chitinous legs crawling over him. He was still screaming long after he had been pulled back out.

But soon there was only room left for a single rustbreed to squeeze through, and then not even that. The entrance was sealed, and we stood in silence, apart from the occasional thud when one of the creatures flung itself against the freshly spun concrete slab.

The tribe huddled together in the open space of the dome, eyeing me, the elders, and Orion. Some lowered the young ones to the floor, still holding their hands. Some flicked their tongues.

"What now, little foster-hatch?" I was kneeling next to Truss, trying to check his bandages. He slapped my hands away, but he was no longer

bristling with fury, his crest drooping in concern instead. "Seems we are not to become rustbreed sustenance yet. But what do *we* eat? We don't have a grub's worth of food with us, and they won't go away as long as their prey is so close."

I looked up into the fearful faces of my tribe, who had trusted me in a way I would never have thought possible. "We have our weavers. And we have Orion. Surely there is something we can come up with."

It took a long time to get them to talk. Half of them still believed the Clusterhaunt had set this as a trap for us, and they were unwilling to go near it. A few even snuck on their dread-screen, which they had brought with them of all things. Orion was no help either, curiously hovering close, displaying some tricks to get the attention of the young ones. The tribe had settled into an uneasy camp formation, a few lone bug-catcher lamps marking a perimeter, its guards clearly at a loss.

Those lamps gave us an idea at last. As soon as I had gotten the herders to talk not about our predicament or the implications of conversing with a Clusterhaunt, but about the glorious things their weavers could build together, they were unstoppable. Ideas flew back and forth, with Orion chiming in with detailed knowledge.

"These possibilities, Blessed . . . Mink!" Asper clasped my upper arm as if I weren't the uncleanest being he had ever met. Still, I was not one of them. I had no clue what exactly they planned to build, but the gleam in Asper's eyes told me it would be magnificent. "There is enough plastics in here to burn the whole colony to the ground!"

In our lamps, we used a burning paste spun from plastics. The weavers would tunnel deep and build some contraption to saturate the ground the rustbreed crawled upon and burrowed in, until all that was needed was a single spark, while we sat safely here in our indestructible dome.

"Of course you will have to learn to control the ATUs for this project, little engineers," Orion told them. "I can't do it for you."

The herders were too agitated to notice, but his tone alerted me. There had been a calm finality in Orion's words that suggested he was not planning to participate.

"Why not?" Asper asked. "I'd like to learn, but we are in a tight spot right now. I'd prefer to be educated when nothing tries to break in and eat me."

"Nothing will breach these walls, little engineer. But you won't be able to learn from me afterwards. There are rules, hard-coded rules I have to adhere to. I cannot order the ATUs to break down the interior of my visitor center to form flammable components. I cannot add defects. Habitat destruction is beyond my authorization.

As is sending the weavers out of the habitat to tunnel as long as they are integrated in the defense matrix. You have to take your weavers back. Mink knows how.”

I jumped up from the resting place I had found when they had gone into technical details. “I told you no, Orion!”

The others looked at me in puzzlement. They didn’t understand. I had not abandoned my old teacher, and I wouldn’t abandon my new one, even if he had found better students now. The stabs of jealousy I had felt since Orion had begun to focus his enthusiasm on the herders subsided, though, when he took me to the side. “I can’t give them back. So I need your help, and I’m very sorry for your inconvenience.” He hovered closer, so close that for the first time I got a look beyond the bowl and saw more than just a hint of his eyes. They were bright and very blue, luminous like the worlds I had seen in his vision. “Mink. Most curious of explorers. You should know that nothing will change if you keep clinging to the long-forgotten remnants of the past. I don’t belong here, and you know it. You opened my eyes to it. It would be a sad existence indeed to stay back with this knowledge, waiting forever. And I would have no one else lay me to rest.”

“No! Laying to rest is for ghosts. You . . . are something else, Orion. I gave you a name. You showed me the worlds.” I flicked my tongue, affectionately now, and in affect, because it passed through him yet again.

“Then save what’s left of me.” He drifted backwards, beckoning me to follow him. “Not these outdated projections, but what I stand for. This is my purpose after all, educating the next generation about becoming explorers, builders, spacefarers. Now go and save your tribe!”

He had led me to the gigantic metal tube, and pointed up its sleek form. Above its upper end, where it was still fastened to the ceiling, one of the dome segments was missing, big enough for a lithe scout to squeeze through.

I shook my head with closed eyes. Imagined one way it would all end, if I did nothing, and another, and another, all equally grim. When I finally buckled, I swallowed everything I wanted to say and turned to technicalities. “If I go, will there be enough time to teach them what they need to know?”

“They are quite adept already. They might have used high-tech tools to build spoons, but they are master-builders in their own way. I’ll teach them everything they need to know about ATU coordination. I’ll try to attend the process as long as I can, but as you know, residual energies are nothing but a short echo.” He came closer, as if to take me in his

insubstantial embrace. I wasn't entirely sure if I really felt his warmth or just imagined it. "I'm sorry you have to do this, to go into danger for me. But I'm glad you found me, I truly am, Mink. I'm glad I was not forever alone. Now don't you worry. Just remember, beyond the darkness, worlds are waiting."

What I saw when I climbed the rocket tube to the outside of the dome was a sea of writhing russet bodies. Rustbreed reek permeated the air, legs clattered like an upcoming storm. It made me understand, more than anything else, that there was no way for me to go back down and sit it out. To wait for another plan, a miracle, a change of rules, would have been madness. There was a hard-coded rule of the tribes: nobody survived a rustbreed colony. Vanguard, yes, even the first waves of the colony proper. But those below had already settled in, infesting the whole area. And yet I might be able to save everyone. Everyone alive, at least.

I looked down through the hole in the ceiling one last time. Even Asper still shied when Orion came close to point something out, and the others kept more than a healthy distance. They did not trust him like I did, but I hoped their shared passion for the weavers and Orion's attempts to entertain those who were not involved in building would keep the tribe from panicking.

I turned away and camouflaged. Everybody thought it easy, that I just had to press against any random surface and magically took on its color. But it's not like that. It is a process, a transformation, and it's more than scale-deep. The colors are a mental thing. My whole body wanted to scream danger in bright yellows and reds, and I had to convince it to calm down. When I felt positively invisible, I took up the rope and began my treacherous way down the side of the dome.

Even camouflaged, it was harrowing to see this dead place writhe with a host of centipedes prepared to tear me apart. After our first flight, there was not much left in my vial of extract from rustbreed scent glands, so I didn't fiddle with droplets, but threw the whole thing to shatter far from the place where they were clustered, obsessed with this frustratingly thin wall separating them from a tribe's worth of a feast. The whole ground seemed to ripple as they moved to investigate, and I was able to slip past the few remaining patrols.

I was possibly the very first scout to be led to a heart-chamber by the ghost's own words. It was located in one of the tall, broken buildings, beyond debris-strewn staircases descending far down into the bowels of the earth, into labyrinthine hallways with doors Orion had taught

me to navigate. A true Clusterhaunt hideout, if there had ever been one. The entrance was signed in the way he had said it would, and I made short work of its grade-4 lock with a vial of potent acid. This was, after all, my trade.

I closed the door carefully behind me, then I looked around. And the moment I saw what this room was, my chest ached for Orion.

It was a cauldron of ghosts. It was a grave.

On its other end, massive vanes behind a metal grate streamed air into my face, sufficiently cool to immobilize anyone exhausted enough to give in to the cold. There were hearts aplenty, rack upon rack, neatly placed in their boxes. But only one was still beating.

“Orion.” I stood transfixed by the slow pulses of light emanating from the box, placed my hand upon it like I had never been able to with his manifestation in the dome. Then I began to chant, because it was the only way to get moving again, to sink into the routine of a duty I had done so very often.

As I took down my tool sash and put on my gloves, I sang the Song of Passing, to tell the ghost that the sins of the past would be set right and there was no reason to linger, but I soon slipped into my own verses. I sang of the vastness of the fallen world and the vastness beyond, and I hoped it was bearable because he had my voice guiding him along. I sang of worlds beyond the blackness and a bowl full of stars, and I took my engraved pliers and plucked and cut at the right places, as gently as I could and with a touch that I hoped conveyed love, not violence, until the very last bluish light on the heart slowly faded.

A noise I had not perceived till now ground to a halt, and the breath of cool air on my face died. I let my own breath go in an anguished rush and slumped down on the lifeless heart-box, without a care for my unprotected face and arms.

At the afterthought of residual energies, I jerked up. Maybe there was still time for a proper farewell. I forcefully banned my grieving paleness and ran.

I came back to a darkened dome.

I knew what to anticipate: weavers under the control of our tribe again, flowing together to use up all the interior material of the visitor center to build secretly under the earth, slowly, but steadily creating the trap. The moment the weavers came together for their task, the rustbreed were dead already, their time burning down with every spun thread of tunnel, pipe, fuel, until they faced their immolation. I should have been glad to see the plan in motion.

Still, when I saw no ghostly lights shine from within the dome, my heart sank. I was too late. The last emanations of Orion had occurred without me. But then I heard the music.

Of all the things he could have repaired, of all the things he could have done with his last energies, he had chosen his beloved music. It was indeed very inspiring, swelling like the songs of a dozen tribes woven into one, ethereal, rising ever higher, tugging at the soul and then taking it along in a thunderous rush. The hexagons of the ceiling had been shaded to blackness, and I scampered down the metal tube of the rocket into a darkness speckled with the fearful eyes of my tribe under this display of ghostly power. Because there was also light.

Lights dotted the blackness. Clear and bright, beckoning, shining through the fabric of the artificial night. A few lone pinpoints first, then scattered scintillating clusters, until an abundance of lights pulsed above us. And as I came to stand among my people on the ground and let my gaze be drawn up, it was as if the domed ceiling had dissolved into an infinite, vast space, stretching out forever before our eyes, close enough to touch if we just strove to reach it.

None of us had ever seen the stars, but our hearts recognized them. They looked just like so many camps in the sky, bug-catcher lamps in the darkness, and I could not have been the only one to wonder what tribes lived up there.

Nobody made a sound, and only when the surging song Orion played for us ascended into our own Paeon of Manifest Horizons did they move, like a collective sigh. And I could see that he had entered their hearts now, that he had become *our* ghost, with this last show, his star-laden farewell. Renke was studying their faces as well, and when she caught me looking, she simply nodded her acknowledgement.

And so when the weavers began to move, precisely coordinated, and when we began to hear the rustbreed blindly throwing themselves at the walls again, not knowing that even now their doom was in the making, and when the stars winked out in large swathes and it all went dark, our tribe sang on in the vast blackness, sang verses of new horizons and our ghost guiding us, and our voices filled the dome like an elegy, like a hymn, and took on a shape of their own, a shape of things to come.

When we set out to weave us a way to the stars, we knew we pledged the lives of our clutches to wandering the wastes. Generation after generation, we would scourge the ruins of the broken world for lost knowledge, our herds converging on molten glass seas to build miracles we had never dreamed of.

We are no mere survivors anymore. We are still adapting to our changed existence, as our starlit minds keep finding new paths in this old world. Our gaze is set upwards now, out to unpoisoned spheres, out to unveil the moon and what lies beyond. We will never be starless again, and this is the greatest gift, a glittering song to complement our own with hope.

When I walk the acrid sands with my ghost-shifted tribe, our two newly adopted gearbeasts trundling along, I know I will not be the one to actually bring us to the stars. This will fall to Asper, who teaches our future builders and planners to control their weavers, and to paint them, too, for beauty, not out of fear. My contribution to the Tribesong is small. But as I tell it once again, I'm clutching the Memory Vault, the only thing I took for myself from the visitor center that is now but an empty, scorched husk. They are like small eggs, those Memory Vaults. I'm not a fool. Most eggs come to nothing, I know. But maybe something will hatch. Maybe there is something left of Orion in there. I'll give it to the next scout after me, and she will give it to the next and the next until Orion's Song reaches the stars. Because as small as this contribution is, I know there will always be need of us who find new ways to cross the blackness and dream of the worlds beyond.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Simone Heller lives on an island in the river Danube in a town near Munich, Germany. As a literary translator, she lends her voice to writers in the sf field by day; by night she speculates on what-if questions in her own words. Obsessions include linguistics (in which she holds a master's degree) and cartography (in which she holds on to a collection of maps far more extensive than her wall space).