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about 6,700 words

“Worthy of Service”

by Nikola Mikhailovsky

The cell’s air was a stench beyond stink; it was an unholy miasma, grown and cultivated to sink into the very souls of its inhabitants. It made her stomach churn, and every added second of enduring it got her closer to fainting. Why was it so primitive? Stone walls, steel doors, even iron shackles binding her to the table – her eyes twitched, how long has she even been bound?

“Look up here, girl,” a soldier ordered, assaulting the table with a rhythmic tap of his fingers. “For someone in your place, you’re real comfortable with wasting time.”

They were putrid as well; the two uniformed brutes hunched over her with their eyes as blank as their faces, and twice as bored. The one questioning her was big. Not station-folk big, but wide and bulky, with real planetside muscle.

“Ah, it’s *our* time she’s wasting Lin, ‘cus she’s already out of it. Just wants to spite us, that’s the real Rusher spirit,” said the other one.

I’m not wasting anyone’s time, you’re the ones who won’t leave me alone, she thought. *It’s not like you’re here to listen anyway.* That one scared her – withered and bald, with a band-type tattoo circling his head where eyebrows ought to have been. That local custom always made her

uncomfortable – even *before*, when the natives at least tried to hide how much they hated her. The larger soldier sighed and reset the recorder on the table.

“Aye, she’s a real villain this one. That’s what you get when you let all the world’s waste move in as they like. Another one of the baron’s pretty gifts.” He said to his scrawny friend, completely ignoring her.

“Well, I heard no matter how much o’ a villain you are, you scream all the same when the *white vests* stick ya’,” he sniggered back. “And they love burnin’ them *tweakers* don’t they Lin?”

The big one huffed, amused.

Shut up. Shut up! I’m not a tweaker, I’m not! She wanted to scream. Her arm crawled up the side of her neck, fingers sliding over the *neural port* burrowing into her flesh. She felt her skin get disjoined by a sinful sleekness of metal and, in the middle of it, a pit to her very soul. She was a tweaker, another one of *them*. She felt filthy, as if covered in some waste that could never wash off. All of this seemed like it was happening to some poor stranger, not to her.

Why couldn’t they just understand this wasn’t who she was – none of this was supposed to happen the way it did. She wanted to tell them, and she tried, but they didn’t care to hear. None of them cared. Almost like they hungered to see her dead; could complete strangers really despise her that much?

Back home the soldiers were so much nicer. When she was a child they’d pet her head and give her sweets. They were her neighbors and family, people she grew up with. They always told her parents how good she was. She wished they were there instead of these two empty orderlies. They’d understand, *they knew her*.

The skinny man grew bored. “Ah there’s no use of her, I say we call them holy bastards and finish up with this nonsense, ey?” He said, jamming an elbow at his buddy.

His question was answered by the screeching of metal – the steel door had swung open. The hallway’s light made her eyes sting terribly; she didn’t remember it being that bright when they brought her in. Her interrogators shot up to face the intruder before she could see anything.

“Sir!” the larger one called out with a quivery voice, almost as if panicked. “There’s no need for you to trouble yourself with this rabble!”

All she could see was some shadow moving behind the brown uniforms. It was tall and thin, enveloped by the doorframe’s white light. *Please let it all be a mistake, she hoped. Please tell them there’s been some error or big misunderstanding – that I was never meant to be here.*

Instead, a voice answered, “Yes, I see you’re doing a great job on your own, corporal.” It was a man’s voice, calm and flat. It permeated the narrow room and seemed to command the very air, making it still and silent. “Nothing makes me more proud of our men-at-arms than seeing their thorough training in practice.”

“Thank you, Sir,” answered the soldier uncertainly. His friend was oddly quiet now, and a faint sheen glazed over his scalp.

The shadow slid closer, and it became clearly visible how much taller he was than the grunts. She hadn’t seen someone that tall since she was a child. It used to be normal to her, growing up on the Camina Ring. Her small home pulled down on its residents with only a third of standard gravity. Small rings breed tall folk, among other things. Here on Uriel, the pull was much more oppressive, and it left her a good head taller than anyone she’d met – way skinnier too. Not this man though. He towered over the room, both physically and with some indescribable presence. She wondered, hoped rather, that he was foreign too.

“Sadly this isn’t a battlefield, corporal,” he continued, “and presently I have no houses for you to sack, or folk to brutalize – so you are free to leave us.” The shadow handed something to the bigger soldier.

He shifted, surprised. “Sir – but nobody’s informed us 'bout–”

“I am informing you, right now.” His voice was a vice biting down on the room. “Goodbye, corporal.”

With that, the two Solar soldiers hastily shuffled out of the room. *Who was this man to frighten them so much*, she wondered. As they cleared from view, light flooded her eyes again. It was so strong. She wished to rub her eyes – to see, but her hands were bound tight.

“I apologize for this utter disgrace you’ve been welcomed with.” It was as if a completely different man had greeted her, warm and comforting to hear, with none of the disdain. “The army never handled these things with much grace, but rest assured they are still better than the Brotherhood.”

She felt a weight drop from her arms and heard metal clanking on the table. The light was gone, and his thin, sinewy presence looked down on her. She found her shackles unlocked, with her wrists bruised but grateful. His face was long and solemn, with two thin eyebrows raised, wrinkling his large forehead. He wasn’t really menacing, he was just some man – a bit old and weary looking, but who wasn’t in these troubled times?

Upon his head a large tri-cornered hat fell lightly; it looked soft, almost like a pillow. His dress was rather courtly. Made up of a cloak black as jet, which elegantly slid over his otherwise brown attire. It was stunningly featureless, only rimmed by modest bronze embroidery; the rest was a dark pit ripping apart the room. Where it was fastened, a silver brooch glittered in the dim light. It was a hand gripping four chains.

Seeing it her heart began to pound with dread. *It can't be?* she thought. *It can't be real, and it can't be here.* Goosebumps marked her skin as she remembered its meaning. That’s where the soldiers’ fear came from – and so much of it in so small a thing.

He sat across from her. “Ah,” he looked at the brooch, “You’ve noticed. I am aware most of all that our reputation precedes us,” he smiled. “People do love telling stories – or rather, selling a more intriguing reality. Their creativity for both fantasy *and* horror astounds me, truly. I’m sad to say,

however, that no matter how much more interesting my job would be if they were true – they remain just that: stories to frighten little children in their beds.”

But here one of them came true, right in front of me, she thought, still staring at the silver piece. And why would they fear you so much, if all of it were lies? Then again, both children and adults can believe strange things. That thought didn't soothe her much.

The Hand was indeed something you hear about as a child. For any king or patriarch there ever was, every turncoat, for every war and every peace – the Hand held their strings, or that's what the caravans passing through Camina would say anyway. It mattered little if you were a miller's apprentice or some plump lordling, you've heard of mankind's silver hand. The bloody hand, others called it.

But why were they here? They don't deal with stupid little girls and their stupid mistakes. If it's for her, and for a crime of sacrilege – her fate was at a coin toss. She couldn't make sense of it. Was it because of the war – did they suspect something? *Oh Stars, she thought, if they suspect that– if the Hand figures me a traitor...*

“I'd like to talk about *you*,” His long stringy hand slid across the table and stopped the recorder. “Some privacy. They have all they need either way.”

She grimaced, confused. “I don't think I'm all that interesting. Plus you're, you know– don't you know everything about – everyone?”

“Once again, myths and whispers. *Plus*, I think you are quite an interesting person, with a *very* interesting story,” he said.

“I don't know what more you'd want, my lord. I've told them everything there is–”

“Ah, I'm no lord. The Lord Protector's a lord, it's in the name,” he said, waving his hand. “I'm just some old man who works for him.”

“Sorry,” she smiled.

“Anyway, you must have told them quite a story, being as they kept you here so long?”

“No my lo— Sir! Not really, it was just that they kept saying I wasn’t convincing enough,” she said.

“So you lied? I don’t blame you, not that there is much blame to pass around. Lies come free with heads as thick as those two. I am not like them, however, and I want you to be honest with me.”

“No, no I wasn’t lying I promise. I’ve no reason to, I’ll tell the truth again if you wish,” she said, panicked. *He can’t think I’m a liar; that’s what thieves and spies do. I need to show him I’m good.* “I don’t know who those people were, honest. I’ll explain, please—”

“I know, and I don’t care about *all that*,” he said, eyeing the link in her neck. “Truth be told, I already know who provided the relic, and I know one lie doesn’t define you. That doesn’t concern me.” For a second she could feel the cold grasp of his profession; perhaps there was some truth, beneath all the wrinkles and politeness. “I want to know what came before first.”

What came before. It was hazy for her as well, that great *before*. Three years turned to a complete blur in this darkness, and she could swear she stepped off the Camina docks and straight into this cell. Maybe this was it, the final destination of her dreams.

“Well I was studying here, and doing good too, or so the magisters said. That is until... the war. While there was still food. While ships still came from the Reaches.” *Was that suspicious? Does he know why I needed those ships? Oh Stars I can’t look suspicious,* “My family still lives there, see. We’re not rich sir, and they – what little they could they would send to me.”

She wanted to explain it better but how could she trust someone like *him*? Then again he has to be here for a reason. If anyone had the power to help her, it was him. *The Hand* never helped people in the stories, though.

“I needed the money. Times were hard,” she said, discomfited by his stare. “I thought this would be an easy way out, but I guess I couldn’t even do that right.”

“Oh come on, I’m not gonna believe that,” he tilted his head. “A bright mind from far away, come to study in mankind’s golden heart – caught stealing data from one of His Majesty’s courier ships? That doesn’t make much sense to me, what about you?”

You’re not gonna believe it? she thought. *Have you stepped outside? You’re the same as all the others, you have no idea what kind of world you live in.* Thinking that made her feel stupid. She fell for that lie too – the old dream, a promised future. It was a privilege above any other, *they* said – to come here; to the Old World where everything is big and beautiful. They called it the golden heart too.

“I’m no liar, I needed the money. There was no food because of *your* blockade,” she said with some contempt. She regretted it soon after. “I haven’t talked to my family in months – no letters, no packages, no money. It’s like all the Reaches were swallowed up by the void. I had to eat, it wasn’t my fault.”

She couldn’t allow the Old World to drown her and leave everyone back home to forever wonder. They were relying on her, their greatest hope so far away and so alone. She couldn’t disappoint them. At first, she prayed; for them, for herself, for a morsel of food on the street. But the Stars never answered – *and why should they, when I repay their faith like this?* She didn’t deserve their pity. Soon, gods older than the Stars took root. Gods of fear – gods of hunger.

“Of course it wasn’t your fault, you’re no common thief. A commoner wouldn’t be able to do *all that.*” He eyed the neural port again. “You were studying higher computing, weren’t you? Many from the Reaches seem to excel in the recker’s craft. It appears people here are far too superstitious for it.”

“I guess the New World breeds more open-minded folk,” she said, practically whispering. It was a foolish remark to make, especially to someone like *him*.

He smirked. “And good that it does. I believe we are in dire need of such thinking here. Many outside this room tend to disagree – I, however, believe minds can grow dull with that kind of blind

conviction. That is why we recruit in the Reaches, after all, though they dislike to admit it. That is why you were sold the story that brought you here.”

“Story? You mean you don’t believe what they say? About the Bubble, and the old world?”

She said, taken aback by his forthcoming.

“Yes, yes, it’s a crime to even suggest such a thing. But it truly is a story, isn’t it? We tell soldiers about glory, priests – the heavens’ rewards, and we tell you about the *Great Old World*.” he answered bluntly. “So tell me, how has it served you?”

She wasn’t sure what to say. Was he testing her? Why would he be, they had everything they needed to convict her already. He was too open, too sincere, it didn’t make sense unless he was honest. He was her only hope right now, the only way she could reclaim some small modicum of dignity. Why not give in, at least a bit?

“It was nothing like I expected it to be. Nothing like they told us. Every time you hear about Lordar, or Vir, or any other Bubble world they seem so–”

“Divine? Beyond any length of imagination?” he continued, almost enthusiastically.

“Yes! And I wasn’t even going there, I was meant for Uriel! And Stars, it was gorgeous – for a bit at least,” she trailed off, remembering the first time she saw a world whose dark side blazed with a myriad of tiny lights. There, where only dead darkness should have been, a bloom of pale amber sparkled in the void. It felt like a prophecy being fulfilled. In that moment she knew, everything was going to be good. How much she despised herself for thinking that now.

She continued, “When you first see it, it really is as beautiful as they say. For a time. Then your life goes on, and they put you in your little room, and you slowly start to realize it’s not meant for you – or anyone really, foreigner or otherwise.”

She remembered her first week down a gravity well. The bonespur she had to take for the planet sickness made her ill all the time, and everything was so incredibly huge. The buildings, the

streets, and most of all, the wide white sky above. It sounded silly to her now but – she was afraid of being out in the open too long.

Not that she had many opportunities to enjoy the air. Her first taste of the new world was an academy guard telling her that “her kind” wasn’t allowed outside the grounds. Except during sightseeing periods of course; then they could leave for two whole hours. Despite it, her excitement didn’t die down until much later. Things still made some sense at that point, and everything was happening for a reason; everyone told her so. To go out into the world and be great, that was her destiny. She knew it since she was a child, everyone said it. From her parents to her teachers, to those very station guards that gave her sweets. She was a bright child with a golden fortune.

She believed it, until that horrid summer day. Gold rots quickly when the Stars call for war and half a mighty city gets gutted of its men. When interstellar traffic dies and the last news you hear is of fighting near your home. Little destiny remains when food grows scarce and your flesh starts wasting on your bones. She went quiet for a while.

Then she continued, “You see the people scraping by, living like bugs in concrete nests. Bread lines covering entire streets, and for those who don’t get any food bonds – well, they’ll be eating water pipe mushrooms and pests, or nothing at all.” She looked down at the table. “I saw people gouge each other’s eyes out for a keg of water. I couldn’t end up like that. I couldn’t allow it, not with so many relying on me,” she said, but he stayed quiet. *Did that make him angry?* “I’m not trying to say the Bubble isn’t better my– Sir, or that what I did was right – it was awful, but it was my only choice. Things were expected of me, I couldn’t fail.”

He turned back to the door as if making sure it was still closed. “It truly is terrible what we do, isn’t it?” he said quietly. His prominent brow curled into a frown. “This great lie we tell. Not just to you, but to everyone, everywhere. The scholar on Mars and the steel worker from the Reaches, both beguiled with the same promise: somewhere else is better – if only they worked hard enough to get there everything would align, and the Stars themselves would sing their praises. Then the worker travels to Mars and meets the poor scholar only to see everywhere is just as dirty, as desperate and

ruthless as back home.” He stared, not at her but at something else – deep in the darkness behind her. “I wonder, at times, if the wisest choice is to remain hidden. A Venusian farmer, for instance, cares little for such promises – he keeps to his wheat, forgotten by the world. Perhaps he is the smartest of us all.”

He does understand! Or does he? You shouldn't trust him so easily, stupid girl. Have you learned nothing? she thought. It felt forbidden for those words to exit *his* mouth. Was it something all the Bubble-folk knew, but were afraid to admit? She felt uplifted, perhaps he could be reasoned with. Maybe even, if he truly was *one of the good ones*, he could help. This was her chance.

“So you,” she hesitated, “you do understand why I had to do it?” The room felt surprisingly hot, and he stayed quiet. “Sir, I swear; I’m not a heathen. I never wanted to do it. You can check, go and ask them on Camina.” *If the fighting hasn't reached them.* “I always went to workday seers, and I read both the Asteron and the Postulates. What I did has nothing to do with *that*, I *hated* doing it, I swear—”

“I understand,” he said, placing a hand on his chest. “But such an extreme act wasn’t necessary, people get by plenty of other ways. You didn’t have to get the graft.” he sounded honestly sad. “So, why did you do it? This complex, painful, and by all accounts fatal thing, why?”

She expected to cry, but she didn’t. The rationality of his question even calmed her a bit. It made her recall that feeling: *the feeling of control*.

She had nothing then, all her guiding stars went dark. She had been expelled along with many other Reachmen, but there were no ships to bring her home. She was the most disgraced of the disgraceful, the scum she once feared to pass by on the street. That specific race of lost souls that seemed only to exist here, in the thriving riches of the Bubble – living from shelter to shelter, unwashed, wasted – hardly human. They treated her like a dog, and she didn’t blame them.

When *they* approached her in the night, with their familiar accents and friendly voices, she had to believe them. They promised to protect her family, in exchange for her service. They said a

mind of her potency was wasted on the streets of Uriel. What could she do but accept, she told herself then – she couldn't die here, a disappointment. Either way, she was lost. Grafting the device was terrifying, yes, and she still wondered why they'd risk such a relic on her, but it didn't matter. No sweet words could ever match the way she felt after her cardinal sin.

When she went past those gates and through the shipyard, she was in control. When she broke through the ship's locks, she was in control. When she plugged into its pitiful data storage and rushed through the Crown's most well-kept secrets with her mind – *she was in control*. It was complex and amazing and so much better than being some recker, dismantling primitive capacitors, and learning what little the Church allowed.

She wasn't a tweaker, no. She bore an ancient power like no person has for a thousand years. She was human again, more than that – machine and man entwined once more.

"It– it was the only thing I could do," she lied. "They, the people that hired me, they offered so much. I told you, Sir, I couldn't die here. It was for my family."

"No it wasn't," he said. "There were other, safer ways to get by. Ones that a person who values returning to their family above all would have surely considered. You enjoyed it. You did it for them at first, sure, but by the end – you were doing it for *you*. You were smart and good at it, and you knew that. It was the only way, not to survive, but to live, wasn't it? When all our stories came out as lies, you made your own. For the first time in your life, you were allowed to be someone *now*. Not after doing this or that, not in ten years or twenty, but *right now*, so tell me why do you still regret it?"

"No you got it all wrong, it was awful – I'm an awful person for doing it. I regret it because it's monstrous!" The shock made her pause too long and left her response a bit too stunted. *Was he right?* she wondered. It felt like he knew her better than she knew herself. That didn't sound like her though, *she was good*. Always good, always gentle, the good girl with noble dreams.

"That's the Church speaking, I want to hear *you*. I told you, don't lie to me," he ordered. "I know you want help, I know you want sympathy, so tell me if what I said is true."

“It’s not, it can’t be,” tears gathered in her eyes. “I don’t want it to be.”

“Would you rather die here, forgotten? Is saying what you already know that much worse?”

“So what if I liked it?” her voice cracked. “It doesn’t change the fact I’m a disappointment and a monster, and I’ll die either way.” She hated herself for saying it, but she couldn’t stop. “How could I not like it, when all my life I’ve been trying to climb up to *something* on a ladder of shadows, only for every step to vanish beneath my feet and leave me farther from it.” She felt a tear go down her cheek, but she kept talking. Something was burning through her lungs, and the air was dense and hard to breathe. “I did everything right, *everything*. Every single thing that was expected of me, I did it – and I lost! All of it – for nothing. In the end, I deserve this, don’t I? I betrayed everyone. I betrayed my King, my faith,” her lip quivered, “my family—”

“No, don’t say that. You’ve done well, be calm. Now I need you to listen, and keep a clear mind. You’ve probably been wondering why I’m here, and now that I know you well enough it’s about time you find out.” He said, raising his hand in a gesture that could silence thunder. “The truth is: that device you grafted is not quite so benign. Very few minds can manage an old-world link like that – use it to do what you did. The fact you can still speak with your faculties intact means you possess a talent unseen since The Enlightenment. That makes you a very special person indeed.

“I’ve come to offer you a second chance, a reroll of sorts. With it comes a choice. Either you fall asleep and awake back home, with an ugly scar on your neck and no future, hidden from the world – or I take those chains away, and you accompany me to serve His Majesty in the holy Capital.” He sat back, awaiting her response.

She stood frozen for a moment, her mind unwilling to accept what it heard. It didn’t make any sense, she just admitted to being not just an ordinary sinner, but the worst of them all, a willing one – a heretic and a traitor. “Excuse me? Sir, but – how? Why me, don’t you understand what I said, don’t you think I’m horrible? And Sol! My Stars that makes no sense; me in the Capital, a girl from the Reaches.”

“Of course I don’t. And I told you, we need people like you. There are many of your predispositions serving the realm on Titan already. You would be welcomed among their ranks, not as a stranger, but as an equal.” His voice was soft and calming.

“Titan? The Titan? Mankind’s memory? That’s the dream of every recker in the Commonwealth – no one makes it there. And this,” she touched the port in her neck, this time remembering that feeling of triumph it gave. “There’s no place for this in Sol, is there?”

“Well, you’re not just any recker, are you? And who’s to say there isn’t, the Constellar church? They find what you did an abomination, yes – but the Sun’s light fades, child, and Titan is *very* far, and very out of sight.” He adjusted his hat and brooch. “I can assure you, I am not trying to deceive you. Why would I have crossed a thousand light years and twenty worlds to play tricks on dead girls?”

He was right, it wouldn’t make any sense for it to be a trick. But how could it be true? She’s heard so many lies already, so many empty promises.

“What about my family, I can’t just leave them. I might as well be dead to them then,” she asked, almost desperate for a reason not to go.

“You left them the second you got on that ship three years ago. You knew why you did it then, and I know deep down you still know it now. The motor of your soul, the sail of your heart – would it ever be content on the tiny Camina Ring?” His words pounded with her blood, and she felt naked in front of him. Like his void-black eyes could see right through her.

This was it, wasn’t it? Everything I did until now, it brought me to this, she realized. It felt like she was back on the Camina docks three years ago, her shuttle waiting. All she needed to do was float past the boarding tube, but in that instant, a voice told her to turn around and run. For a fleeting second, it all seemed like a terrible idea. But she did board, and here she was. The voice was right, or so she thought until this stranger arrived.

I can't be wrong again. I can't be stupid. Oh – aren't I being that just by thinking about it? There's nothing for me back home, I always knew that, and I get this offer, only to hesitate now? Stupid, stupid, She wanted to be sure again like she used to be. To know what she wanted.

“Can't I get at least some time to decide?” she asked, knowing it wouldn't make a difference.

“Now is the time to decide. Our ship leaves by midnight, and with it your fate.”

She stared out blankly for what felt like hours – like a computer overwhelmed by too much data. *This man did nothing but help, he's kind, and smart, and nothing like the other bubble-folk. Titan is a dream, and it's right there, at my fingertips, she thought. She wouldn't be a traitor, a freak – she'd be even more than she ever was. Her mind had sobered, and a sudden clarity washed over it. She felt like that girl again, looking at the darkness around her and seeing only stars in all their gorgeous distance. I wasn't meant to die here, or back home either. I'll die a long time from now, somewhere where it's lush and beautiful, where they'll know my name. Yes – yes, that sounds right.*

She smiled, an innocent childish smile, then she hid it away. She had to be serious. “I will go with you to Titan, and there I'll do my best – whatever I can.”

“I trust you will, the Archives will be happy to have you,” he smiled as well, as if to tell her it's alright. “Very well! It's a three-day journey to the Capital, and this room isn't smelling any better.” He pushed himself up out of the chair. “I say we depart before the Brotherhood's favor with me dries up completely.”

And just like that it was done. With the swipe of a hand, as quickly as it collapsed, her life had been renewed. Standing up after all that time made her legs cramp up, and the hallway's light, dim and flickery in reality, was as overwhelming as a sun. After three years – a ship was waiting for her at last. She caressed the link, and pride exploded from her fingers.

She had won, that was it. She was going to Sol.

Titan was a cold world that hardly took to newcomers. Father Sol was little more than a twinkle, one you could rarely even see through the poisonous air. You could feel truly isolated on Titan, like a dead man awoken in some purgatory. Nothing grew here, nothing spoke, nothing lit the sky. Its only crops were ancient pylons, embedded in the ice, the shards of all human knowledge. It was lonely, and harsh by all means; on the other hand – the gravity was low and the archives resembled a station more than a city. It was the most at home she'd felt for three years.

The man looked at her and smiled, encouraging her to go forward. There was a comforting feeling about him, even here; where the halls were dim, and the people few and full of secrets. He did save her life, and now they've traveled the realm together. Such trust isn't without cause, she assured herself.

All the archives were wrought in cold black stone, dug deep into the ice around them. They were a maze, kept by a strange folk, the few of them she saw. *Of course, they were strange*, she thought, *their lives serve a purpose many cannot even fathom*. Titan was the last technological refuge of mankind's bygone youth, and the vault where all its knowledge lay.

The archivists were all dressed in black, their faces hidden behind polished masks of gold. None of them spoke, yet they all somehow understood each other. Few of them even acknowledged her presence – until today, at least. Quite a posse of them had come to escort her, along with the agent. All of them wore strange hats, like nuns in a constellary – black cloth folded in a shape she couldn't quite distinguish, circling those mirrory golden faces. Despite trying his best to hide it, the agent was discomforted by them. Perhaps even he couldn't entirely push away that fear of the ancient world.

They flanked her as she moved down the ever-extending hallways. None of them said a word, and she couldn't see anything past their polished faces, shining like golden pebbles in the dark. She noticed something odd; the hallway was starting to get covered in candles. Like the kind you'd see in a church or constellary. They glowed dimly in the darkness, all melted and twisted into each other. More and more candles sprung up as they moved forth. It was impossible to see where one ended and another began, and above them – papers, hundreds of papers stuck to the walls. Yellow and rotting, it

was *real* parchment; not plastic, but leather. She couldn't read what was written on them, but something didn't feel right about it.

Whatever the papers were, many held the eight-pointed star – but the man said the Church had no reins here, all the way back on Uriel. *Many others take to the faith apart from the Church*, she told herself. *Just like me, you can still believe free from Venus. That's what this is.*

They stopped. It was over at last, the apparent infinity before them came to an end, and it felt like they were deep in the bowels of this ancient moon. They faced a mighty door, covered in more withering parchment. It coated it like some seal.

It opened, releasing a wave of warm air. An amber glow filled her eyes. As they adjusted, the enormous chamber before her emerged. It extended as far up as she could see, and likewise below. A thin bridge and center stone platform separated them from an endless abyss. Around it, uncountable towers of metal racks filled the chamber. From them hung strange sacks of amber liquid. *What is this place?* she wondered as a rising dread overwhelmed her.

Then, slowly but surely, while they shuffled down the walkway, she noticed them.

Something was inside the bags.

It appeared human.

People! Those can't be people? She felt sick. *What is happening here?* Her heart started to race. There was an altar-like object in the middle, and another one of *them*. This one was dressed in ivory, his head abloom with a great white flower of fabric. In one hand it held a book – *the* book. Like a holy brother righting a pyre.

She turned back to the agent. “What is this?” she said, confused. Some part of her almost understood what was about to happen, but it couldn't be real. She couldn't allow it to be. He remained silent, and the grim look on his face was answer enough.

She tried to walk away, back towards the hallway, towards the man who was so kind to her, but a cold hand grabbed her wrist. She stared back into a golden face and saw her own eyes peering back. They were afraid.

“Stop! Let go!” she yelled at it. “Please! Stars please!” She locked eyes with him as they dragged her towards the altar. “Please! Take me back, I’ve changed my mind, just take me back to Camina! I won’t tell anyone, I promise—” Her voice cracked with a sob.

He seemed inexplicably sad. “I told you your gift is a treasure,” he said it like an apology. “It would be a shame to waste it.”

Another lie then? Another damned lie!? She looked around, and the whole chamber seemed to spin. Thousands of bags – thousands of people. Desperate people, starving people, far away from home. *Is anything real? Is my whole life some mummies’ play?*

“Did you promise them all the same thing?” she asked him. “Did you give them all that story? About the great lie, and how unjust the world is. Did they trust you?” He didn’t answer, only turning away. *Coward*, she thought. “Please! Don’t do this!” she yelled at the golden mask holding her, but it was as indifferent as cold steel. “What even are you? Please, just let go!”

In a last attempt, she tried to pry her arm away and run, but an impossible force crushed her wrist. She screamed as her hand went numb. They dragged her to the altar, and she cursed them all while golden faces leaned over.

“Look at me! Look at what you’re doing to me!” she yelled at him. “Damn you! Stars damn you! I hope you burn, *burn!* You can’t even look at me!”

Metal hands held her down as a song haunted the monstrous hall. The priest was singing. Its voice was disgusting and deformed, barely even human. Did the Stars hear? Was that enough to buy their favor? It raised its censer, flooding the air with incense – almost like it could drown out their sins.

They brought a cable to her neck, to the chrome pit in her flesh. She struggled, writhing to reach – to rip out the dreadful orifice, but they held her tight, and the metal buried in deep. It couldn't be it, could it? It couldn't, Stars no, she was sure. There was always more, there had to be. She couldn't die? *But there are no Stars to answer, are there? For all their truths, I got the worst one. This is it.*

The last thing she saw was a liar, one among many. He stood silent and turned away as they took her. She cried, but none cared. She could excuse them, at least, whatever they were. Him, however – he was less human than any of *those things*.

She longed for the pyre now, the flames would have been a kinder fate. Most of all she yearned for home, and a time when there were still things to believe in. *You're such an idiot, such a stupid fool*, she raged at herself. *You never learn. There's Titan, look at it now, you've worked so hard to get here. Look at it!*

That's where her thoughts ended, and a sudden stream of data began. It was an overwhelming terror of information, never meant for the human mind; yet somehow she withstood it. Her mind didn't exist anymore, not on its own anyway. Yet still, some small awareness remained, and every time she thought it was too much, that her flesh would give way and break – she endured. A million times per second she endured, only to be drowned again. Her brain was a great tool, young and healthy, it would not expire soon.

Finally, a promise fulfilled – she was a part of something great, and she would remain that forever. Until the frosted hills thaw and the Sun bloats with crimson rage, she would hold this high honor; and her life would be worthy of service, and she would know only use.

In the dark, she would dream no more.