

SIENNA TRISTEN



—THE HERETICS GUIDE TO—  
HOMECOMING

BOOK ONE: THEORY





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MOLEWHALE PRESS



# The Bereni Supercontinent



cuplisto's belt

deonna

itfios

logha

the scattery gull

padjenne

pianova

the salt flats

mbazalza

to the Pilgrim State

the iphigene sea

*The Heretic's Guide to Homecoming* is a work of fiction. The characters, places, events, and dialogue portrayed in this book are drawn from the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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Published by Molewhale Press  
[www.molewhalepress.com](http://www.molewhalepress.com)

First Edition

Print edition ISBN: 978-1-7752427-0-3

Cover art and interior illustrations by Haley Rose Szereszewski  
[haleyszer.carbonmade.com](http://haleyszer.carbonmade.com)

Maps and book design by Sienna Tristen

The author gratefully acknowledges the creators of the following typefaces, which were used in designing the text of the book: 'Gentium Basic', 'Garamond Pro', 'Lucida Calligraphy'



For Avi





*Part One*

TO BE FALLOW, TO BE FERTILE







**S**PEAK OF THIS TO NO ONE.

*Our little ones, the gods lamented, are cut from us like branches barely green. They wake on the earth and forget us, their wombs, their wishers. The shock of separation dislocates them from us, leaves them unmoored from their purpose, from the destiny they were spun for; they feel us no longer, and we all ache from the absence.*

*If only they could take comfort in the land, spoke Innos the Orderly. They would find peace in the patient cradling of the ground beneath their feet, pull strength from its solidity, find us in their sense of the familiar. But they wander and forget the shape of their lands. They lose themselves and are unable to appease the craving for a place to belong.*

*If only they could seek solace in each other, spoke Pao the Chaotic. Surely the bright thread of community could weave a blanket fit to warm their disquiet souls, could tighten the knots that tie them to us, the knots that have come so unravelled. But they know not how to communicate with one another. They bump into one another uncomprehending. They are alone together, incapable of offering each other support or encouragement.*

*If only they could carry our memory with them, said Eje the Universe, from which all the gods and their little ones had sprung. All would be well if they remembered the divinities that gave them life, if they knew to whom their hearts belonged, if they recalled their glorious birthright. But their walls of skin and bone are too thick to reach through, a lonely prison of limb too crude for the subtleties of spirit to permeate, and they drift disconnected from all.*

*And as our ancestors strayed across the deserts, bewildered and bereft without understanding why, the gods wept for the pieces of themselves they had unwittingly stranded in the material realm.*

*Fret not, for I have a solution, spoke Genoveffa the daughter of Pao. I shall*

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*teach the little ones to speak as we do. I shall form the word of the fires of creation, and my brother the winds shall pass his breath across it to cool it for their tongues. I shall weave music into their throats, so that they might talk to one another as the birds sing and the sand rustles and sighs. I shall bestow them each with words of their own, special words, magic talismans that will preserve the knowledge of which you have spoken. I shall gift them with names, and the names shall be their lifelines.*

*Said Innos the Orderly, give them a name for the ground, for the lands they are born into, that they may return to their earthly home no matter how many times they depart.*

*Said Pao the Chaotic, give them a name for their families, for the human kin they are born from, that they may ford the rivers of their lineage no matter how many generations split the delta.*

*Said Eje the Universe, give them a name for us, their source and origin, the point of their departure and arrival, that they may sense the breath of the divine on their brows and know us to be watching over them no matter how many obstacles block the path to their purpose.*

*Said Genoveffa, these three I shall bestow, and one more. I shall give them a name for themselves, a way to distinguish from place and parentage and godling, for it is by this distinguishment that they will grow into their reason for being. I shall give them a name for themselves, that they may feel the spark of their own unbridled individuality and know themselves important, no matter the forces which may seek to persuade them otherwise.*

*Make it so, exclaimed the gods.*

*With pleasure, said grinning Genoveffa. Behold: from language, life.*

*And so it has been to this day.*



# ONE



**Y**OU DON'T DESERVE YOUR OWN name.

That was the thought that crossed Ronoah's mind as he sat, restless and morose, in the darkened corner of the *Tris Mantarinis*, nursing a glass of coffee in both hands, while all around him the air rang with unintelligible fervour.

The coffeehouse's patrons were all arguing about something. That was why they came here, he understood; for the arguing. The passionate young men of Ithos, congregating and debating to their hearts' content about whatever topic caught their fancy, history or religion or revolution, politics or poetry or war. The clamour could be heard down the lane, and it was why the *Tris Mantarinis* was considered a rather unwholesome place to frequent. It was also probably why the coffeehouse was one of the only places in Ithos that welcomed travellers across its threshold. Having already earned a name for themselves as a disreputable establishment, they had presumably decided that a couple foreign faces couldn't leave them any worse off than they already were, and had thereafter tossed all sense of propriety into the ocean they bordered.

Ronoah was not from Ithos. He was not from Chiropole, the region whose western edge Ithos occupied. He wasn't even from this continent—and he could feel it. He could sense his displacement everywhere: in the voices quarrelling and contesting in Chiropolene, a language he could barely speak; in the coffee whose texture and taste were acrid unfamiliar on his tongue; in the way the humidity made everything stick to everything else, his clothes to his skin, his glass to the table, his one thought to the next. It was a message, all of it. You are different, it told him. You do not belong here. Not a guest—an intruder.

He took a tiny sip of the coffee. He wedged himself further into the corner, protectively. Defensively.

It was still nagging at him, the name thing. Burrowing into his skull like a termite into its hill, scratching its way back through the well-worn hole in his head. ‘You don’t deserve your name.’ More and more often these days, it was the conclusion he was coming to, the logical, lethal endpoint to every trail of thought. It was probably because of all this—the exotic coffeehouse in the equally exotic seaport, and before that, the island nation of Tyro, with all its secrecy and suspicion of strangers. They made him keenly aware of his unbelonging, made him search for something to hold onto, and his name was the closest to home he could get.

Between these, there had been the vast and tumultuous waters of the Shattered Sea. He had heard once, from one of the deckhands, that the ocean was the one place every human could come home to, no matter how far from home they were.

“She is mother,” he had said. “Yes? First mother. This her womb—sometimes silver, sometimes steel, you understand? But always she accepts. She receives. No matter where you born, where you go to die.”

And at the time Ronoah had believed him, had felt the pitch and swell of the sea as a cosmic cradle, had been hopelessly seduced by the sky wider than imagination and the water deeper than belief and the salt air encrusting his lungs, the tastes of old and new combined. Shapeshifter silver, to match his gold the desert. He’d been entranced, then. For five minutes at a time he had felt welcome.

He had to have been. He must have.

But from his seat in the *Tris Mantarinis*, with the weight of his encroaching gloom upon him, he couldn’t remember the feeling clearly. It seemed silly that he could ever have felt it at all.

You were a stranger on the seas, a voice in his head scorned, as much as you are a stranger on this continent, on Tyro before it. Even back south, before you so much as set foot on a ship, you were out of place in Padjenne and you know it, and everybody else knew too, it was obvious. You never fit, you only fooled yourself into thinking you could. The truth is there is only one place you can rightfully claim to belong to—and after everything you’ve done, you might as well have tossed that right overboard with the ballast.

He winced in recognition. That’s what it was. His haunting monachopsis, the sense that, no matter how aimless and awkward and lost he was here in Ithos, or in any place before it, he was bound to be equally so in the land of his birth.



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Ronoah Genoveffa Elizzi-denna Pilanovani: first name given, second name godling, third name parentage, fourth name place. There was once a time where it had fit him snug, where it had sat happily on the curl of his tongue, where the words had put him at ease—or at least, he was pretty sure there had been. Like his memories of the ocean, it had smudged out of recollection, obscured by the malaise that could have been his companion for the last hour or his entire life, he couldn't tell. Now, the name only felt like mockery. Three-quarters incorrect.

Because birthplace or no, he knew Pilanova wouldn't have him back. And parents or no, he knew Elizze and Diadenna would no longer acknowledge him as their son. And godling or no—glorious, brilliant, dazzling godling or no—he knew, with dreadful inescapability, that he was failing her.

Genoveffa. Eldest daughter of Pao the red moon, primal force of chaotic energy; godling of bravery, of adventure, of knowledge. Her chosen ones had a fire in their blood, a fierce intelligence paired with the drive to make something of it. They were world-shakers—and not commonly found among his people. He was the only one of his generation.

And he was losing sight of her plan for him with every wrong choice he made. Sooner or later, he feared, she was going to give up on him completely.

That left him with one name. And without the other three, the one meant nothing.

He jumped as a pack of Chiropolene youth blustered by and jostled the corner of his table, their zealous voices bouncing off his ears—he caught a snippet of phrase, something about the consul? Or the king?—as they settled themselves around the table directly in front of him. Some of them looked around his age, some a little older, likely all in their twenties. They had the effortless look of adventurers, the wind-swept unkemptness, the raucous voices, the wide gestures with arms and hands. The thought came upon Ronoah, spitefully, that any one of them could probably be of more use to Genoveffa than he could.

One of the men, sensing his look, nearly caught his eye but Ronoah noticed first and cast his gaze hurriedly down at his glass of coffee, holding his breath, hoping not to be spotted. He counted his heartbeats thrown hard against his sternum, one, two, three, four. He chanced a glance up. The group was engrossed in discussion, oblivious to his shrinking presence behind them. The air pulsed with the sounds of scepticism, cynicism, and while he knew it was irrational and presumptuous of him, still he felt as if the barbs of that cynicism were meant for him.

Stupid, he thought. Egotistical. They don't even know you.

That was sort of the point, wasn't it? To get to a place where nobody could hear his name and immediately cast judgement upon him for not living up to it. He had conjured up countless excuses for his behaviour when he'd obeyed the impulse that set him on the merchant's ship from Tyro to Ithos—maybe, he'd thought, maybe Chiropole would have something for him, something he couldn't find in Tyro, something that he could take back with him to the academy in Padjenne and redeem himself with. Maybe it would make Genoveffa happy, make her proud—the first Pilanovani in a long, long time to reach Chiropolene soil, the first Pilanovani to touch the North since pre-Shattering days. Maybes as many as the stars. But the real reason he had jumped on a ship forward instead of a ship back, he knew, was because he'd sought an escape from what felt like the consternation of nations, the trail of soft and horrible disappointment he'd left behind him all this way.

Ithos, to escape the failure of Tyro. Tyro, to escape the failure of the academy in Padjenne, capital of Lavola. And Lavola, to escape—

Well.

Ronoah lifted his glass to his lips, took another sip of coffee. There was a strange astringency left in his mouth when he swallowed.

All these places, they had always seemed so promising in theory. They had offered so much in the way of fulfillment—intellectual, emotional, spiritual. But once he finally reached them, they were almost uniformly hollow.

The point, said the scornful voice, is not the places. The places have never been the point, have never been the problem. It's not the places, it's *you*. The things you've seen, the people you've met, they're every bit as wondrous as you hoped they would be, but when you're faced with something beautiful all you can ever think about is how ugly you are in comparison. When you experience something engaging or thrilling or worthwhile, you say sorry to the experience for being *had by you at all*, instead of by some more useful, worthy person. You suck the wonder out of everything and replace it with dread and *maladresse* so it's no wonder you've found nothing to fulfill you on this grand adventure to nowhere of yours.

He cringed back from his own harshness, but he could not deny the truth behind the bite. All this travel, more than any other Pilanovani in history, and he had accomplished nothing of note. The scenery changed, that was all. There was no revelation; there was no sudden, blinding understanding. The life-changing moment he so

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yearned for never came. There was only anticlimax, and one person to blame for it.

And even if the places *were* the problem, he had run out of new ones to run to.

The realization overcame him hot and fast and full of disconcertion; nervously, he tapped the side of his foot against the table leg. Chiropole was the furthest he could get from home before his linguistic ability failed him completely—from what little he could understand amidst the hubbub of the *Tris Mantarinis*, it was half-failed already—so there was nowhere else to go, no other place he could hide and make a brooding nest of his embarrassment, his shame. The small bundle of salt bars the merchants had paid for his services would run out in the blink of an eye, faster if he failed to figure out how to stretch it in the unfamiliar Chiropolene economy. Even while it lasted, it could buy him food and drink but it could not buy him shelter, for Chiropole was similar to Tyro and Lavola in at least one way: the people were leery of travellers who had not been formally introduced to contact families. Anyone who showed up without an address to point to was mistrusted on principle. It was why he had no place else to turn but this coffeehouse, tellingly silent in a house of controversy, amidst these brash and empowered men that he did not belong with in culture or character because he was not a tenth of the rebel they each appeared to be, not a shred of the revolutionary, the rulebreaker. The world-shaker.

Oh, how he wanted to make Genoveffa proud. To show her he had not been a mistake. She had given him life and breath and salt and spark, and it was his destiny to honour that. To honour her. He had come all this way for her, had travelled across an ocean to find a way to grant her imperious request, demand of the divine: be clever. Be brave. Rebel against inertia.

But Ronoah was not one tenth the rebel she needed him to be. Inertia had him by the throat, and its consequence was a keen pain squatting ugly at the bottom of his soul, rotting it from the roots up.

Life is transformation, he thought. You change or you die. So change, already.

A sound cut across the din, winnowing through his thoughts to snag his attention—laughter, loud and uncompromising. The kind of laugh that made people cease midconversation to see what was so funny. Cease Ronoah did, removed from his litany of self-admonishment by his piqued curiosity. He looked in the direction of the mirth and immediately found its maker.

It was hard to miss him.

Two tables down from the group of rowdy young men in front of Ronoah was a duo sitting opposite each other. One was a boy who looked younger than Ronoah, only a few years into adulthood, leaning forward over their table with a fierce expression that his smooth face hadn't quite grown into yet. He seemed very invested in whatever point he had just made to his partner, who was the source of such uproarious delight.

Contrast to the boy across from him, the laughing man had leaned so far back from the table that he had tipped his chair on its hind legs. He gave off an immediate impression of control; had Ronoah tried something like that, he would absolutely have toppled over onto the ground, but the man balanced effortlessly. Ronoah couldn't see his face, turned away as he was. Even through the noise in the coffeehouse, he heard the pointed, emphatic *fwap* as the chair legs hit the ground again, as the man righted himself and shook his head and gestured at the boy across him. His waving hands were pale as sunbleached bone.

In a crowded room, sometimes one thread of conversation jumps out—and once it does, the ear cannot unhear it, attracted helplessly, against its will. Caught up in the sound of the man's laughter, Ronoah couldn't *not* listen to the sentence that followed it, still rimmed with the bubbles of his humour the way milk froths over fire:

“—wouldn't know shalledrim if they burned down the entire block.”

Now, his knowledge of Chiropolene was blurry at best. He wasn't sure if the man had said 'block' or 'town', didn't quite remember which verb was 'to know' and which was 'to comprehend'.

But *that* word, Ronoah had no trouble understanding.

He knew that word in every language it came in.

The shalledrim. An ancient race of humanoids superior in strength and longevity and cunning, able to snap a limb in two with a twitch of the fingers, able to claim a thousand years from cradle to grave, able to interpret the mysteries of life in a way humanity never could, unlock and unleash them in the form of seemingly magical power. A breath-taking species, and a devastating one. The apex predators of antiquity.

They fascinated Ronoah; they were what he had studied at the academy in Padjenne. They were the reason he had eloped to Tyro. They were, in a way, the reason he was here.

And so, powerless against the pull of his intrigue, he leaned toward the conversation between the two, straining to understand the brisk clip of their Chiropolene, to parse it into something he could follow.

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It was unseemly to eavesdrop, but he had to know.

There had been an era, long ago, where the shalledrim had ruled with brutal, unmovable authority. The Shalledrim Empire, it was called today—although back then, Ronoah supposed, if indeed their uncountable human slaves had called it anything, it had probably just been called ‘normal’. Or, ‘torment’. Or, ‘life’. Little to nothing was known for certain about that time, for little to nothing had survived. All that was known was that they’d existed, these creatures whose reign had finally—one day—cracked the world in two. Like an eggshell, fracturing on impact with the countertop of their relentless might. Shattering, so to speak.

They had long since departed from the real world. Forty-nine hundred years after their grip on the planet crumbled into the ocean, the shalledrim existed now only in history. They dwelled exclusively in their new, modern empire, the empire of myth. Stories about them had circulated, swelled and faded with the ages, taken on new form and lustre with each telling until today, what little true knowledge humanity had kept of the shalledrim had been eclipsed by the tall tales encompassing them, the cloth of history warped beyond recognition by its garish embroidery. They had gone from respected spectres of collective memory, to—well, to cult object. Something bandied about to add thrill to the dinner table conversation, something that bore no resemblance to the thing it was supposedly meant to represent.

People said they had wings, the shalledrim. People said they were direct ancestors of every member of royalty alive today, that all princes and princesses were secretly shalledrim. They said that they would possess you if you performed certain rituals on certain days. That they were allergic to crushed mint. That they fancied green-eyed girls.

In short, public knowledge about the shalledrim was an insult to knowledge.

From what Ronoah could make out of the conversation two tables down, the laughing man agreed.

“Hyperbole like only you people—and name them as shalledrim—complete disregard for—find such blatant misinformation—”

“—care if you dismiss—valid theory—answers to legitimate questions about—state of enslavement—”

They were in the middle of quite a heated debate—or at least the boy was, from the fervent tone of his voice and the way he kept bringing the palm of his hand down on the table edge for emphasis. More than anything, his partner sounded amused, perhaps to the point of patronizing,

perhaps not. It was hard to tell. Despite how uncannily clear it was—it seemed to command a place of honour amid the chaos of the *Tris Mantarinis*—his voice had a subtlety that defied emotional profiling. His posture was open, in any case; an easy slope of the shoulders, an inquisitive tilt of the head, like he was willing to entertain, to be entertained. Ronoah wished he was able to pick up on more of what they were saying. It felt like another sullied opportunity, this. Yet another worthwhile experience gone to waste.

“—denying the history of—please—the evidence you have to support this—all the dead shalledrim—enlightened to the fact that they’re actually completely—being dead.”

Curse his lack of clarity. Curse his inability to understand. If only he was better at Chiropolene—if only his vocabulary wasn’t so limited to the technical, wasn’t so embarrassingly void of any conversational clout whatsoever. If only he had bothered to speak ten words of it to another human being instead of learning it exclusively for reading, for burying his nose in old mildewed texts and hiding behind their spines.

Seeing as he had no spine of his own, the malicious voice said, it was only natural he had found a substitute.

He listened harder, trying to read the boy’s lips, trying not to let his frustration goad him into giving up.

“—choosing to accept the—it’s a lie, the shalledrim hunts never happened, they—we have the power now—”

Wait, did the boy just say ...?

Ronoah couldn’t help it—he stared, openly and incredulously, still trying in his mind to double- and triple-check that he’d heard right, that he wasn’t misunderstanding or missing context, that the boy had honestly spoken those words.

*The shalledrim hunts never happened?*

Disbelief seared his skull. He caught himself with his mouth half-open—and a well of shame opened up inside him. How pretentious can you *be*, he thought, sitting here wincing oh-so dramatically over other people’s ignorance when you barely knew what a shalledra *was* until a year and a half ago? Is that all it takes, to make you so contemptuous? You’ll sit here, only a sliver past ignorant yourself, and judge a boy for what he thinks—but you won’t get up and walk over and educate him, will you? All those nights in Padjenne, in the greatest library in South Berena, and you won’t share any of the knowledge you assembled. You won’t share a thing. No—you’ll *speak of it to no one*, right?

Now that was a thought worth wincing over.

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It was at that moment—that moment as he winced, as he physically affirmed the power of his thoughts to undo him—that the laughing man twisted in his seat and looked straight at him.

His hair was soft, short, the colour of ground nutmeg. His face was clean-shaven, broad and smooth and sly, unmistakably sly. He had a beauty spot high on his cheek, under his left eye. He held Ronoah's startled gaze with such entitlement that for a whole two seconds, Ronoah forgot to be terrified—and in that fleeting slip of time something murmured through him, sieving and separating layers of him, floating them to the surface like oil on water. He felt more visible than he had in a long time.

The man smiled a dazzling, decision-making smile, and Ronoah was dropped back into himself with all due terror.

The man said something too low to hear—he was talking to his partner, though he didn't break eye contact—and then in a voice that lifted itself on the swell of conversations, easy as a vulture on the wind: "Come hither, fellow stranger, your services are required."

His first thought, absurdly, was *did he actually say 'hither' or are you just substituting vocabulary from centuries-old manuscripts again*; his second thought was a noise that sounded how his heart felt, squeezed to half its size in his chest, a cork on the bottle of his breathing. Oh, gods, you shouldn't have been eavesdropping, you shouldn't have listened in, that's rude, it's rude and unpleasant and now you're going to get in trouble—

"Really, I can feel you listening," the man called, "so you might as well come listen up close."

He didn't have a choice. Now he'd been singled out like this, it was either get up and leave the coffeehouse, or do as he was told. And he hadn't finished his coffee, and he couldn't take the house's glass with him, and he had nowhere else to go—and there was a part of him that had floated up in the span of that first glance, fragile as a waft of smoke, that was saying *take the opportunity*, and he knew it to be the part that was closest to her, to Genoveffa. That was what got him up in the end, what pushed him to his feet, knees banging on the edge of the tiny table as he went, to join the boy and the man and to face their judgement.

"Wonderful." The man hooked his foot around a chair from the next table over and drew it towards them with a scrape that set Ronoah's teeth on edge. He stood where he was, looking between the pair and trying to guess what they intended to do with him. The boy was staring at him with some heated expression—impatience? Hostility? The

lingering fervour of his argument?—and where the boy was heat, the man was coolness, regarding Ronoah with a look such as none he had ever come across. Like the air at night on the edge of the desert, feral and poised all at once. He seemed totally unaware that he was doing it.

Then he started talking, and he talked so quick and slick that the only words Ronoah caught with his desperately clutching faculties were “matters”, “opinion”, and “beliefs”. He missed the rest—and there was a lot of it. At one point the boy across the table opened his mouth in protest, but the man raised a finger in his direction without so much as slowing down or turning his head. When he was finished speaking, the two of them looked at Ronoah expectantly, and he felt himself floundering, felt himself trapped, felt his hatred at his lack of understanding, felt the seconds ticking by, each more awkward than the last, felt after everything else that he just might cry.

But the man reacted faster than feeling. He cocked his head to one side, considering. “Where are you from, fellow stranger?” Half-second’s silence, then—“Not from somewhere in Acharrio, are you?”

“I—” His tongue was its own obstacle. This was the right conjugation, right? Right? “I am.”

“Ah.” The man’s eyes flicked away, gaze momentarily reaching for somewhere above Ronoah’s left shoulder before returning. “*Once more, then, I think?*” he asked in perfect intercity Acharrioni, and Ronoah was so surprised that he couldn’t say anything at all, and the man took his stupefied silence for a yes.

“We two are having something of a disagreement about some rather elementary matters, and it won’t sit well on my conscience unless I do everything in my power to show the poor misguided thing exactly how and why he’s so staggeringly wrong—but that’s the thing, I’m biased toward my own opinion, doesn’t matter that it’s the truth because no argument ever broke out between two people who didn’t both think themselves wholly in the right. Well, no, they have, that’s usually where the argumentativeness comes from—fundamental insecurity with one’s beliefs—but my point is the whole thing will settle like silt if we have ourselves an arbiter. Objectivity,” he said, and gestured at Ronoah with an open palm. “If you would be so kind.”

Ronoah blinked, still reeling. Perhaps it was that he hadn’t heard it in so long, but even in his native language, the man was hard to follow. Listening to the cadence of his voice was like tumbling down a hillside, all rush and exhilaration and disorientation. He had the distinct feeling that the man had repeated himself verbatim. Including the afterthought.



“Um,” he said, ingeniously.

“You’ll want to sit down, I have a feeling this is going to take a while, and you’re obstructing the traffic besides.” With perfect timing, one of the coffeehouse’s servers elbowed Ronoah in the small of the back as they passed balancing an ornate silver teapot and a half dozen crystal glasses on a tray—the glasses rattled together as the server twisted back midstep to berate Ronoah out of the way. Shoulders to his ears, he quickly manoeuvred around the cramped space to slump into the proffered seat, feeling simultaneously boneless and like he was made of nothing but uncomfortable angles.

The boy immediately stuck his hand out, coming out of his seat to reach across the table. “I’m Hexiphines,” he proclaimed—he seemed the sort of boy who proclaimed everything he said—and Ronoah reached uncertainly back. They grasped forearms. “Welcome to Ithos.”

Despite his discomfort, a piece of Ronoah loosened in response to Hexiphines’ raw earnesty, some small amount of pressure draining. He replied without thinking: “Ronoah Genoveffa Elizzi-denna Pilanovani.”

Hexiphines’ eyes went wide and Ronoah fought the urge to take his hand back and hide his face in it. Every time. Every single time. There had never once been an introduction where he had managed to cut his own name short; it always slipped out whole, before he could stop himself, the syllables as inseparable from each other as his own limbs. Hexiphines was not the first person to look at him funny for it. “But, um—but just, just Ronoah is fine,” he mumbled, the Chiropolene words like stones clanking in his mouth. He realized he hadn’t specified it as his name. For all Hexiphines knew, he’d spouted a bunch of gibberish at him.

But the boy only nodded and squeezed Ronoah’s forearm once more. “It is so good to meet you,” he said, and he frowned a little as he said it, true mark of his sincerity. Ronoah noticed a small crease appear on the bridge of his nose as the expression manifested on his face, and it was a strange thing to find endearing, but Ronoah did. With his strong chin and full lips, the stormy cast of his brow, Hexiphines had the undeniable look of a hero about him—it was the wide, trusting look in his tar-black eyes that made it disarming instead of intimidating. He couldn’t have been older than eighteen.

The man, meanwhile, was too focused on the matter at hand to be bothered with introducing himself. “The delinquent who is presently attached to your arm has it in his head that the shalledrim hunts didn’t happen,” he said cheerfully, waving both hands at Hexiphines. Suddenly

embarrassed now that it had been pointed out, Ronoah disengaged himself from the boy's grip.

"I—" There was no point in hiding it; the man had already said he could feel Ronoah listening. "I know."

"So it is up to the two of us to apprehend the theory and beat it to death with the twin bludgeons of logic and reasoning. Explain it again," he said to Hexiphines, switching effortlessly back into Chiropolene, "and I shall translate for our judge."

Hexiphines was protesting in an instant. "No way, you're going to make it sound—!"

Ronoah didn't catch the last word. "Crazy," the man supplied, already sliding easily into his role as interpreter. He flitted between languages like a bird between trees, graceful, natural. "And no, really, I won't change a word of it, I swear. It's plenty crazy without my edits."

Hexiphines made the same thunderous scowl at the man that Ronoah had seen from across the room, the one that looked a little too put-upon. It was deflected off the man's blithe, impish grin. Ronoah fingered the edge of his glass, struggling to decide whether now was an appropriate time to have a sip. Finally, with one last, righteous sort of huff, the boy sat straight in his chair and began his lecture.

"So. We're told that for ages after the Shalledrim Empire collapsed there was this feudal system, right, all these regions ruled over by individual shalledrim families or tribes or whatever they had going on—and meanwhile, the human race was gathering strength and power and building its own settlements. There were free humans—which the shalledrim would think of as wild humans—and the 'domesticated' human slaves owned by the warlords. And one day about two thousand years ago, some legendary saviour thought, hey, wouldn't it be great if there were no shalledrim anymore? And magically, like in a dream or something, he had some sort of vision showing how to kill a shalledra, and he got together an army of ten thousand shalledrim hunters—which, by the way, doesn't make any sense, given how few free humans there probably were and how far they were spread across North Berena!—but yeah, for the next gods-only-know how long they invaded one region after the next and defeated the oppressive shalledrim rulers, bringing freedom to all the enslaved humans, and one day they just hunted down the last one and there was a big celebration and we're all free now. Right?"

No, Ronoah wanted to say, not right—already there were glaring errors in Hexiphines' version of the story. For one, there was no single

person accredited with the genesis of the shalledrim hunts; they had begun spontaneously across the continent, without communication between human settlements. For another, the largest 'army' of shalledrim hunters had been the Chainbreakers, a special division of the king's guard in a region that was now part of ka-Khasta, and their highest recorded number was four hundred forty-seven hunters. He had no idea where the number ten thousand was coming from. The only logical way to reach a number that high would be to count all of the shalledrim hunters that had ever existed, seeing as—and this was another fact glaringly absent from Hexiphines' idea of things—the shalledrim hunts had been an effort that had spanned over eight centuries. It was a slow build, not a battle; not a sandstorm, but a city slowly swallowed by the dunes.

But he didn't have time to point any of this out, because Hexiphines was still going, and the man was still interpreting overtop him in silvery Acharrioni, his only contribution to the tale the mischievous grin on his face.

"Except we're not. The whole story is made up. The shalledrim hunts never happened—they were a massive, elaborate cover-up by the shalledrim themselves, to prevent humankind from *actually* learning to hunt and kill them. They realized at some point that if they kept trying to rule the way they were ruling, publicly oppressing their slave race, then there was going to be a revolt, so what they did is they organized this—this big *performance*, that ended with all of them faking their deaths and absconding to the shadows, and now the humans think their shalledrim masters are dead and they can do whatever they want with their lives—totally unaware that their lives are still dictated by the shalledrim in secret."

There was a pause as everyone reached for their drinks. Ronoah kept looking back and forth between the two of them, wondering what more Hexiphines had to add, wondering where theories this far-fetched even came from, wondering what their translator thought about it. He was holding the information as carefully in the front of his mind as he would a bowl of water—it wouldn't do to go spilling any of it, seeing as they were expecting him to pass judgement on the issue once it had been explained. He had been invited to their table to do a job; he did not want to leave in shame.

He wondered why he had been singled out, amongst all the openly-opinionated men in the coffeehouse, to be their objective third party. Was it because he'd been sitting alone? Maybe Hexiphines had noticed his staring over the man's shoulder and pointed it out—but he didn't

remember it like that. The man had just turned to look, practically mid-sentence, as if Ronoah's curiosity had gained sentience, gone over, and tapped him on the shoulder.

It was tremendous coincidence, that out of everyone he had picked Ronoah—Ronoah, who might well have been the most well-informed person in Ithos when it came to the shalledrim, let alone the *Tris Mantarinis*. It was coincidence bordering on fate.

"Now," the man said in Chiropolene as he replaced his glass, "remind me, what was your primary piece of evidence?"

Hexiphines leaned forward from his straight-backed position again; he seemed too full of zeal to maintain any semblance of distance, figurative or literal, from the topic at hand. Ronoah heard single words of the boy's vexed Chiropolene spike through the translation, spicing it with erratic double-emphasis. "We've never once actually seen a dead shalledra, right? It's not like there are any graves you can go to and dig one up, point and say yes, that's definitely a shalledra. It doesn't work like that, does it? All the stories say that when they—allegedly—die, there's some kind of explosion and they disappear."

Now this was true, to a point. It was why there were entire manuals on the precise methods and materials required for shalledrim hunting, manuals dating back fifteen hundred years, which Ronoah had breathlessly beheld in the library at Padjenne—because the shalledrim had a unique and devastating defense mechanism, a biological last laugh. If the shalledra wasn't slain in exactly such-and-such a manner, then at the moment of death its body would vanish in a massive outlash of energy, gaudy as the gods' fireworks and every bit as deadly up close. The hunters had learned this lesson hard and fast.

But there *were* manuals. They *had* learned.

The man was on the same page as Ronoah, down to the letter. "So I ask the poor deluded creature, right, so what about the shelves on shelves of reports taken from shalledrim hunters over the ages, which give detailed account of killing shalledrim without the aforementioned inconvenient end?" There was a glint in his eye, wicked, co-conspiratorial. "You'll love this, this was where I abandoned all pretence at seriousness—"

He turned and leaned toward Hexiphines, one hand lifted, said something to him which sounded like "and what about the reports, again?", and the fierce, accusatory expression reappeared on the boy's features. "Well," the man translated, planting his chin in-hand and raising his eyebrows at Ronoah, "they were *bribed by the shalledrim*, weren't they?"

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In exchange for helping to pull off the operation, the shalledrim took those people, the supposed ‘hunters’—to the right, Hexiphines was gesturing with gusto, dangerously near to knocking his coffee over—“and gave them positions of power in the new ‘human-ruled’ regime. Ever wonder why most of the families of shalledrim hunters wound up becoming nobility? Ever wonder why you can trace every member of the royal house back to a hunter somewhere? It’s the slave kings of Berena all over!”

This last was delivered without the false sincerity of the rest, garlanded instead with the same crackling cackle of laughter that had drawn Ronoah to their talk in the first place. There was something so animalistic about the way the man laughed, so unapologetic for the space he took up—a laugh like a seagull, like a jackal, like something happy to be heard for miles. The sound took up residence in Ronoah’s spine and stayed there, tingling, and for the first time since arriving at their table Ronoah began to wonder about the laughing man, about his presence in Ithos, for he was the only person Ronoah had seen who looked more out of place than Ronoah did. The Chiropes were a people seemingly scooped together from the lands they lived on, their skin tinted olive as their orchards, their hair and eyes the loamy brown of well-watered soil. Ronoah was a splat of ink in their midst, with his dusky undertones, his wiry shoulder-length locs, his irises such deep pools of blue they were nearly black. But by contrast, the man just about glowed. He had incongruously pale skin, pale like yogurt, the same richness, the same fresh-made beige—the cloudy light filtering in from outdoors made him appear nearly translucent, and yet he radiated solidity, the realest thing in the room.

It was silly of him, and yet for an instant Ronoah could not help but think of himself and the man as two of a pair, opposite sides of the same foreign coin. A pair of satellite strangers, orbiting a world not their own; twin visitors in a house of truth, seeking answers to something.

“So there you are,” the man said, dusting his hands together. “You’re all caught up.”

“Did he tell you all of it?” Hexiphines demanded, rounding his ardent eyes on Ronoah. “Did he explain it right?”

“I—I think yes,” Ronoah replied, nodding. “I think I understand.”

“Okay. Good.” Hexiphines aimed a suspicious look at the man—or tried to. Suspicion was ill-suited to Hexiphines’ face; he wore it comically, a little ridiculously even, although nobody seemed to have told him as much and Ronoah would rather have walked right off the docks of Ithos than be the one to break the news.

He was feeling similarly about needing to demolish the boy's theory, torn between two equally powerful urges: there was exasperation, to be sure, the long frustrated sigh of his studies, the need to correct the concoction of hearsay and folktale chafing against his sense of reason like brick against the backs of his hands. But there was also an anxiety, cold and dragging, shadowy now but willing to take shape if necessary—as much as Ronoah wanted to expose Hexiphines to the truth of the matter, the idea of upsetting the boy made him squirm. He was the first person in Ithos to extend any sort of welcome, to express any wisp of warmth past bare minimum, and Ronoah was sure that by contradicting the boy's argument he was going to ruin any chance they had at being friendly afterwards. You weren't supposed to argue with people if you wanted them to like you; you weren't supposed to argue with them at all. If you took issue with what somebody believed you should keep it to yourself, more important to keep the peace than to trouble them with your questions, your critique, and absolutely not in public, you shouldn't have agreed to do this, the only place this kind of talk is permitted is—

Stop it, he told himself, biting his lip. You swore you were done with all that.

“The problem, of course, is that it's ridiculous.” Ronoah surfaced from his thoughts in time to catch the man flapping a hand as if shooing the bothersome argument away. “It's pure sensationalism, though that's not the problem, who doesn't like a bit of melodrama now and again, gives the world some sparkle—no, the problem is that it's *poorly reasoned* sensationalism. The whole spool of lunacy unravels when you tug a single question out of it.”

“What question?” Ronoah asked, before he could help himself. The man indicated Hexiphines with a tilt of his head, smiling in a way that was equally obliging and unsettling.

“The question to which your answer, arbiter mine, will settle our dispute.” He drew one long finger around the rim of his glass; Ronoah half-expected the crystal to sing. When he next spoke, he spoke twice: once in Acharrioni, for the benefit of Ronoah's ears, and again in Chiropolene for that of Hexiphines'. “I love a convoluted political intrigue as much as the next pigeon, trust, but if we presume for a moment that all of these massively-inflated details are true, there is one simple outstanding inquiry that you simply cannot get around. If the shalledrim were so well-coordinated and had so many resources on-hand that they could orchestrate a cross-continent falsehood such

as the one that's been suggested, why in the name of Ophanre's tremendously irksome ghost would they bother orchestrating it at all? If they are so strong and cunning and prosperous as to be able to enlist an army of—what was it, ten thousand, you said?—ten thousand humans, and promise them riches and titles and all those things for which humans abandon their morals—why, then, they'd've been perfectly able to pick the Empire up where they left off.”

“Exactly!” Hexiphines was hitting the table for emphasis again. “That's what I'm saying! They *did* pick the Empire up where they left off—only they're doing it in secret.”

“No,” the man said slowly, “they are not. The point is that it is against a shalledra's nature to obscure itself—for all their thinking they're clever, they really make it quite obvious, obvious enough that even a race so blinded by its own egoism as humanity would have noticed. Shalledrim are terrible secret-keepers. Sooner or later, they always have to share.”

And Ronoah could not account for the shiver that swept through him at the words.

“So what do you say?” The man snatched his glass up and angled it towards Ronoah, a pre-emptive toast to his victory. “Do we think it reasonable to assume, if the shalledrim retained access to that much power and influence, that today we would be living under a very obvious shalledrim rule—Empire Plus, if you will?” he added, and his lips twisted into a smirk and Hexiphines scowled with scalding intensity and Ronoah had the strangest sense of betrayal, that it was going to be this easy, and had no inkling of who was betrayer and who betrayed.

“Of course it's reasonable,” he said, in measured Chiropolene. “But—”

“HAH,” barked the man, slapping his own hand down on the table at the same time that Hexiphines let loose a string of Chiropolene like a lash of livid wine, vivid with colour and sourness, and he didn't know what made him do it—the suddenness of their reactions, maybe, the way they startled him out of his inhibitions, or else his discomfort at disproving Hexiphines' theory without teaching him anything new to replace it—but rather than let himself get cut off, Ronoah raised his voice instead.

“But you don't *need* to resort to that kind of, of—that kind of *hypothesizing!*” They both stopped to look at him, perhaps because his voice had shot up half an octave in his indignation, perhaps because they hadn't expected him to know the word ‘hypothesizing’ in Chiropolene. It was an equal surprise to Ronoah. And it was about as impressive as his multilingualism was going to get, seeing as he had no idea how

to translate the rest. “You can...you can prove it based on facts,” he finished, rather lamely.

“Like what?” Hexiphines insisted, sweeping his mane of hair back with impatient fingers. He sounded forceful, but that might have been a consequence of his general boisterous nature; Ronoah thought he could detect some genuine curiosity beneath the belligerence. The man said nothing, just watched, waiting, a glimmer of something freshly kindled in his eyes—impatience, expectancy, renewed interest?

He realized that he’d made himself the focal point of the discussion. His throat tightened at the thought. Even in his first language he was known to stumble if he was too excited about something, if his feelings got ahead of his thoughts got ahead of his words, which was often bordering on always. And after hearing the swift fluidity of the man’s Acharrioni, Ronoah would find it oddly mortifying if he spoke with anything less than equal articulation.

Please, he prayed to Genoveffa—please let me get through this without making a fool of myself. He took a deep breath.

“Well, when you say ‘we’ve never seen a dead shalledra’—who’s *we*? Because the academics of Berena *have* seen dead shalledrim. It’s true that the majority of shalledrim bodies were destroyed before they could be examined or researched, yes—there were all kinds of superstitions about how to dispose of the bodies, back then they thought that if you didn’t burn or bury or divide the limbs or, or whatever the custom was in the region, then the shalledra would resurrect itself.

“But there *are* shalledrim that were recovered by academic associations across the continent, and there’s an extensive record collection in the Trans-Bereni libraries devoted to everything from their diet to their bone density to their skin and eye markings, complete with anatomical drawings of everything down to the toenails. There were four of them: Yael, in 4190, from Khebeg; Melailah in 4232, in what’s now known as western ka-Khasta; Shannonai, also in 4232, but from down in Tyro; and Gehelenine, recovered from south-central ka-Khasta in 4251.” The names and dates eased out of him naturally, flowed like he was decanting them from his font of fact. He could rattle this off in his sleep. “Those aren’t their real names, they’re the names of famous—infamous, I guess—infamous shalledrim from the same regions, from back in ancient times. We don’t know their real names, but we gave them nicknames so researchers could call them by something other than their reference numbers. ‘Shannonai’ floats off the tongue; ‘KP-4232-46-3’ ties it in knots.”



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When the man got to that part of the translation, Ronoah heard the laugh in his voice, saw the smile curve his lips, and his heart skipped with something like gratitude, like relief.

“So what,” Hexiphines said, “you’re saying if people go to one of these libraries, they can see shalledrim bodies?”

“No, because the sort of experiments the bodies were subject to wound up spoiling them.” Ronoah rushed into the explanation before the boy could get a word in against him: “The research wasn’t done for curiosity’s sake, it was out of a need to pinpoint weaknesses in shalledrim physiology. The hunts were still ongoing, and the shalledrim were still a real danger; they needed to extract as much information as possible, as quickly as possible. Conservation wasn’t exactly high on the priority list. There—there might be pieces left.” His pulse quickened, signal of his strange mix of revulsion and reverence. He’d heard tell that Padjenne still had a skein of Shannonai’s hair, which only the most trusted and respected scholars were permitted access to, and, even more wondrous rumour, that the library in the Kingdom of ka-Khasta had managed to preserve a whole swath of Melailah’s skin, cured and stretched over a frame like ghastrly, fascinating canvas. “Maybe. But they could just be rumour. They’re certainly not on public display.”

“That seems convenient,” Hexiphines retorted.

“But that’s not the point!” Ronoah spread his hands in exasperation. “It doesn’t matter whether the bodies survived or whether you can go see them yourself. The point is there are humans other than hunters, humans with—with different interests, different motives, who have verified and documented the existence of slain shalledrim. And I don’t think the shalledrim bribed *them*, because, well, I don’t see an aristocracy comprised of biologists and historians anywhere, do you?”

It was in the silence that followed, as Hexiphines brooded on this point, that Ronoah realized he had stopped relying on the man to translate their exchange. He had just understood Hexiphines, and had replied in Chiropolene in turn, impulsively, without thinking. He reached for his glass of coffee; he’d left it so long it had gone cold.

“You remain stubbornly unconvinced,” the man pointed out, observing Hexiphines’ face.

“Better stubborn than hoodwinked.”

“A reminder, little one, that you got your elaborate conspiracy theory from the man at the table over there.”

“Wh—” Hexiphines’ liquid black eyes went wide. “I never told you that! How’d you know?”

Ronoah didn't understand most of the reply, but watched as Hexiphines' face grew progressively more incredulous. He twisted in his seat to face the man, about to ask, but the translation was already on the way: "An additional reminder that when you first barged in here today you found me quite happily situated in a corner, soaking up all the controversial gossip whizzing through the air. I know what everyone's talking about—and more importantly, I know *how* everyone talks. For all the bright ideas been thrown around in here, you people don't do much paraphrasing, do you? Terrible habit, passing along an idea without delivering it in your own words is like giving someone a hat without checking it for lice first—'publicly oppressing their slave race'," he said, with a roll of his eyes and a magnificently lazy half-shrug. "That's how I know."

And at that, Ronoah was quite as stunned as Hexiphines.

"So." The man continued on as if the interruption hadn't happened, switching languages as necessary. "You got your information from some disgruntled anarchist, someone who has not read the hunting manuals or discussed his opinions with anybody of credence, someone who in all likelihood got the idea from some *other* disgruntled anarchist as they were sitting down to drinks and getting their gripe on about increased taxation. And you." The weight of the man's gaze settled on Ronoah; his skin responded in turn, a prickling so distinct it stung, like a handful of sand scattered across his arms. It was a look like the moons, ancient and exacting and profoundly arresting, full of thoughtfulness bordering on intimacy. A look born to pull the tides, to make the hunting dogs howl. "Where *did* you learn all this?" the man asked, and his voice was mere murmur but Ronoah heard it clear as if it were coming from inside his own head.

"At—!" He realized he'd stopped breathing. The resulting gasp for air left him stumbling, dizzy and embarrassed. "At the, I, it was—I studied it," he finally managed. "At the academy in Padjenne, down south in Lavola." He hesitated, his voice gone quieter, tighter. "I was accepted as a researcher, for a time."

"Were you, now." He had this way of inflecting questions like they weren't questions—like they meant something beyond their words, something private, like he was communicating some secret significance to himself and Ronoah was just an unwitting spectator to the act. He thought he caught the man's eyes narrowing, fraction of a fraction, reaction to an element of Ronoah that had gone unnoticed until now. Time dipped and swayed, stretched, snapped. "Well I hate to be an

intellectual elitist," he said, and his flippancy as he turned to plant an elbow on the table jarred Ronoah right out of the moment, "they can be ever so conceited, especially considering on average they're about as informed as the urchin down the street when you ask them about things like the shalledrim—but as much as I prefer to side with the fringe theorists, this time I'm afraid I'm going to have to throw my lot in with *learned society*." He smirked as he said it. "My dear Hexiphines, you're pitting one Chiropolene plebeian against an international network of hundreds of dedicated researchers. And, of course, me. Are you quite certain stubbornness is going to win you this one?"

It didn't seem like he was. Hexiphines looked between them, frowning, ostensibly searching for a response. The slimmest shadow of doubt crossed his face, and from the corner of his eye Ronoah caught the shift in the man's shoulders, preparatory, predatory. It was like watching an extremely self-satisfied lion stalk its prey.

"Tell me one thing," the man said, leaning back against his chair, flicking his hair out of his eyes with a toss of his head, "just one thing. Where, oh *where*, is this secret shalledrim cabal of yours *hiding*?"

Hexiphines said nothing, but he shifted in his seat and crossed his arms and looked suddenly rather uncomfortable.

"You're talking about the ka-Khastan royalty, aren't you."

A slantwise glare, a defeated mumble: "Yes."

And there it was, living breathing prime exhibit of public knowledge about the shalledrim. Ronoah had to resist the urge to plant his face into both hands, feeling both horrified and vindicated.

"You sound embarrassed you're even saying it," the man chirped.

"Fine," Hexiphines shot back, "then it's the Shattering! The Shattering's where they're living, same as they always have."

Ronoah only realized he'd snorted when Hexiphines turned to look at him. "No it's not," he said.

"How do you know?"

"Because I've seen it." Funny, how such a simple sentence could hold so much power, could halt an argument in its tracks, could turn a boy to stone. Hexiphines froze, frowned, looked at Ronoah with something like awe in his eyes, and all Ronoah could find it in himself to do was duck his head in respect for the thing he was saying, in sudden disbelief that he was able to say it honest. "I've seen it. I went to Tyro and I...I saw it."

Day four of his stay. A stomach emptied by anxiety; an ear crowded with unfamiliar sounds. A walk to the edge of the wasteland, to the foot

of the mountains, a long trek up to the summit. These were the things he remembered. He inhaled and for an instant he was there again, the smell of roast coffee evaporating in his nose, replaced by imprints, echoes—fleshy, briny sea-smell and sun-on-stone and the scoured-out sourness of a mountain scraped bald by the wind. He closed his eyes, saw the drop, the way the land pulled away from the cliffs so sudden, saw the waters of the Shattered Sea, the waves jagged gleaming grey, serrated edge of a god's carving knife. And there, for three priceless seconds, as the waters pared and parted—there, balanced on the edge of the horizon, thinner than thought, the far-off shell of the Shattering.

It had been land, once.

It had all been land: the Shattering and the sea and the abandoned islets rising like antlers from the waves, the compass rose of countries now known as the Shatterlands, Tyro and Symbex in the east, Phares in the west, Chiropole in the north and Acharrio in the south. It had all been connected. The Bereni Supercontinent, they called it—the lithest limb of the planet, a world stretched pole to pole. A land fit for an empire. The shalledrim had controlled the whole thing, had ruled it ironfisted absolute until one day, nearly five thousand years ago, when something went wrong. The shalledrim lost control. They made a mistake, and it cost them their kingdom, and it left the world ruptured, reeling.

Nobody knew what had caused the Shattering. Nobody even knew what the Shattering was, what it contained; for centuries explorers had been charting courses to the islets surrounding the centre, circling ever closer but never quite coming to shore. Nobody who made it to shore ever came back. All they knew of the Shattering was this: it spanned tens, maybe hundreds of leagues across, and it seemed all of it to be made of glass.

Ronoah had seen it, that day on the headlands of Tyro, had caught the silent surprise of it, and he'd been invaded by the quiet, creeping force of knowing he had borne witness to a ghost. And the ghost had seen him looking, had reached out and marked him, imprinted itself upon the soft wax of his soul. He had felt claimed, and the feeling resurfaced whenever he brought the image to the backs of his eyelids. A gleam against the grey; the wicked wink of history.

"So you have." Ronoah looked around, the mirage of memory evanescent from his eyes, and saw the man staring as if he could see it, the impression that place had left in him, as if he were tracing the shape of it with his eye. "So you have."

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Ronoah swallowed. He nodded. And something changed in the man's demeanour, refocused a hundred different ways, and a sensation stirred itself up deep in his body—a noiseless frisson of energy, a yawning open of space, an almost painful contradiction of movement and stillness.

Who *are* you?

“Gods,” Hexiphines said, “you’ve actually seen it for yourself?” Ronoah shook himself and nodded at the boy, whose defensiveness had all but disappeared, conquered by his curiosity. His posture was open, excited, inviting Ronoah to continue with a sweep of his hands. “Well, come on, what’s it like? Tell us!”

“It...it’s wasteland, just like they say.” Ronoah looked down at his glass, touched the lip of it with his fingertips. “It’s glass all the way through, from the shore to the horizon. I guess whatever happened back then melted the sands.” He lingered on the image in his head a moment longer, then pulled away back to the present. “It’s inhospitable, in any case,” he said with a shake of his head. “There’s nothing living there, no shalledrim, no anything.”

Hexiphines blinked as if only just remembering why they were talking about this; Ronoah watched him return to his theory, take hold of it in his hands and try to stretch it into something that could encompass this conclusive, definitive fact and remain itself. He couldn’t do it. Slowly, the boy’s shoulders slumped. “I guess it’s hard to argue with that,” he said to the edge of the table. “So the shalledrim really are gone? All of them?”

He seemed quite deflated. Ronoah bit his lip as a guilty pang resounded in his chest, chased down by a second guilty pang about feeling guilty in the first place. He didn’t want to upset Hexiphines, but it needed to be remembered that the thing the boy was disappointed about was the fact that *the shalledrim were extinct*. That wasn’t okay. To begin with, it was offensive to the memory of the millions of humans who had suffered and died as slaves under shalledrim rule, to the millions more who had lived in terror of shalledrim retribution post-Shattering. But beyond that—wishing the shalledrim back into existence wasn’t only disrespectful, it was thoughtless. Shallow. Shalledrim weren’t some glamorous mythical creatures that would make life more interesting if they were still around; they were nothing like the hyped-up, watered-down, romanticized fabrications of contemporary culture. The real things had been narcissists at best and bloodthirsty tyrants at worst and anybody who knew a single true thing about them would know their nonexistence was a gift, not a disappointment.

He could have said all this; he could have asked the man to translate. But he didn't.

"Yes," was all he said. "They're all gone."

Ronoah knew the truth about the shalledrim.

Which made it even more unacceptable that he understood where Hexiphines was coming from. Sometimes he wished them back, too.

"Well they're certainly not *running* the place, in any case," the man said cheerily. "No clandestine shalledrim dictatorship for you. Sorry to break the news."

For another long minute, Hexiphines looked crestfallen. Ronoah tried not to feel too personally responsible, and failed. "Well...but at least the idea got us talking?" the boy asked, a tentative lilt of hope in his voice. "If it wasn't for this, well, I mean—now I know someone who's seen the *Shattering*, how amazing is that?"

"Quite the rarity, I agree."

"Not even my father can say that and he's been *everywhere* on the seas."

"Then this goes to show that even the most—of conversations can yield interesting returns, if you know how to entertain them right. Cheer up, I'll wave us over some tea—no, I'll pay, consider it—for destroying your—and where do you think *you're* going?" the man asked, in Acharrioni, and Ronoah froze where he was, halfway through pushing in his chair.

Ronoah had been planning on getting out of their way.

It wasn't that he didn't want to stay. Quite the opposite—after spending the whole day alone in an unfamiliar land, with nothing but his own mutinous mind for company, this had been an oasis of reprieve. He had been praying his gratitude for the conversation from the moment he'd recovered from the shock of having been asked to join it. But he had been asked to join for a purpose. He had been invited in order to solve a dispute, and now the dispute was solved, and his part in the thing was over, and it was time to disappear back to his corner and leave them in peace. That was how it worked; it was such a simple thought process, such a fundamental belief, that he hadn't paused to take note of the fact that he didn't want to leave. He'd resigned himself to it automatically. Habitually.

"I, I didn't want, it's just, you two were—I didn't want to impose," he finally said, and even now his voice was shrinking, fading in volume, subdued as summer breeze through palm leaves and still too big for his throat, unwieldy, obtrusive. The man arched an eyebrow. Ronoah tried for a smile. It came out as a wince.

## THE HERETIC'S GUIDE TO HOMECOMING

He didn't want to impose, but he didn't want to go.

"Where are you going?" Hexiphines asked, the crease at the bridge of his nose reappearing as he looked between the man and Ronoah. He hadn't understood their exchange. Ronoah looked back at Hexiphines, saw the concern on his face, and he didn't know why but it made his throat go tight, too full of silent plea to make a sound.

"He's not going anywhere." The man planted the sole of his boot against the edge of Ronoah's chair still in his grip, pushed against it so Ronoah stumbled and had to regain his balance. "I said I'm paying for tea, and he is Acharrioni. They are as afraid of refusing hospitality as they are of demanding it."

"I'm not a very good Acharrioni." It came out before he could stop it. Hexiphines' frown grew more pronounced. Ronoah tried for another smile. It was even more painful than the first.

"But you like our company—unsurprising, seeing's we're the first to treat you like a person since you got here, but I also like to think it's because we're rather charming, aren't we?—and you don't want to be alone, not after how much time you've wasted in your own head, goodness, could you ever use a break from that—and you have nowhere else to go anyway, and you're getting anxious just thinking about it, and if you stick it out another round of tea then I can solve you that problem easy because this lovable little hooligan does not look like he needs much convincing to bring you home."

It was, thank Nataglio, spoken in Acharrioni. Ronoah stared, agape, amazed, exposed. His heart was stammering flabbergasted in his chest: what, where, how—?

The man tapped the seat with his outstretched heel, twice. "Sit." He waved for one of the coffeehouse's servers, then settled back in his chair, inspecting his hand for dirt. He smudged something off a pale knuckle. "I'm not quite done with you, fellow stranger." He looked up. His eyes were a universe unto themselves—calculated impulse, unappeased appetite, inquisition, evaluation, invitation. Introduction. "Not quite yet."

So Ronoah sat.







AUTHOR PHOTOGRAPH: GINNY CÔTÉ

## About the Author

Sienna Tristen is a writer and artist based out of Toronto. She earned her BA in Linguistics from York University while working as an editor and layout designer for Pro Tem, the Glendon campus' bilingual newspaper. A proud multipotentialite, Sienna enjoys researching as much as she does writing, and can talk your ear off about everything from Ancient Egyptian mathematics to Zen Buddhism.

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## About the Project

The Shale Project is a multimedia storytelling initiative roughly in the shape of a planet. It's about three things: top-notch worldbuilding, daring and exploratory fiction, and the philosophy that art is medicine. You can discover what else it has to offer at [www.welcometoshale.com](http://www.welcometoshale.com)




*“Life is transformation;  
you change or you die.”*

Ashamed of his past and overwhelmed by his future, Ronoah Genoveffa Elizzi-denna Pilanovani feels too small for his own name. After a graceless exit from his homeland in the Acharrioni desert, his anxiety has sabotaged every attempt at redemption. Asides from a fiery devotion to his godling, the one piece of home he brought with him, he has nothing.

That is, until he meets Reilin. Beguiling, bewildering Reilin, who whisks Ronoah up into a cross-continental pilgrimage to the most sacred place on the planet. The people they encounter on the way—children of the sea, a priestess and her band of storytellers, the lonely ghosts of monsters—are grim and whimsical in equal measure. Each has their part to play in rewriting Ronoah’s personal narrative.

One part fantasy travelogue, one part emotional underworld journey, *The Heretic’s Guide to Homecoming* is a sumptuous, slow-burning story about stories and the way they shape our lives.



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**APRIL 25, 2018**

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