



SHIMA'A

An ancient woman knelt by the shallow grave she had prepared for herself, her breath faint as the rustle of dried leaves. Shima'a knew it was time. She had lived her long life on this great river. From the hushed moment when she entered the world with a birth veil covering her face, her people had treated her differently. As a child, she saw what others did not see, heard what others were unable to hear, and knew what could not be known by mind alone. Her people respected her guidance, yet when she spoke as she had last night, they kept their distance.

Shima'a thought back to her final words to her people. With her frail shoulders draped in fox pelts, she stood on trembling legs to speak through the spiraling smoke of the evening circle. The men had completed their talk, and all was quiet. She searched the faces of her people, but not one would return her gaze. As smoke drifted across her eyes, clouding her sight to this world, Shima'a cried for the earth's future one last time.

I see rivers that hold only death in their waters and children who cannot breathe the air. Fire will blacken great mountains and wide valleys, leaving the earth parched and angry.

With a hushed voice she continued.

One by one, our plant, fish, and animal brethren will slip away and disappear forever. Even the seed of our people will no longer make life.

When at last her sight returned to the fire circle, Shima'a saw only confusion and concern in the faces of her people—not for the future she foretold, but for her. With a heavy heart, she motioned to be led back to the sleeping lodge, but sleep would not come. She feared her words would wander unheard and prayed for a way to reach through time to touch the hearts of women.

In the dark of night, lit only by a sliver of moon, Shima'a slipped out to the river while her people slept. She followed the path along the riverbank until she came to the circle of stones she had hidden in leaves, knowing this time would come. She waited until she knew the crackling of footsteps around her arose from woodland animals and not from her people. She must not be disturbed.

Alone now by her grave beside the great river, Shima'a brushed aside the raven feathers she had woven into her hair and went over preparations for her last breath. All was complete: an oblong depression within a circle of river stones, a long band of white doeskin, and the acorn she held in her hand.

Shima'a had searched many days for this very acorn—a smooth, dark amber shell that contained the strength of an oak tree—one whose spirit could travel for generations. Now, under cover of darkness, she sang to the acorn, her voice rising and falling like the earth's heartbeat even as her own heart slowed its fragile rhythm. When she had infused the acorn with the power of what it must do, Shima'a wrapped it securely into the middle of the doeskin band and tied the band around her chest so the acorn rested over her heart.

As the night wind caressed her cheeks, pale and cold, Shima'a lay down within her earthen bed and closed her eyes, feeling a deep murmur grow beneath her as if the earth was shifting to welcome her home. She folded her frail fingers around the acorn bound securely over her heart, then, slipping out with the last exhalation of the new moon, she offered her final prayer.

*Mother Earth,
Let me be as mist floating above the river of time.
Let me guide distant generations to
Listen to the silence,
Hold the earth in their hands,
Gather the women,
Then do what must be done.*



AMISHA

2075

San Francisco, California

San Franciscans were surprised by water falling from the sky. Most water crept in at them from the sea. On Tuesday, September 24, 2075, the shift in the weather came fast and unexpected.

Unanticipated rain today! Nib.news streamed into Amisha's dreams through the miniscule implant behind her right ear, rousing her with its 7:00 a.m. newsfeed. She scrunched the thin blue quilt close to her neck and rolled over.

Get your buckets out! continued Nib.news, glibly ignoring its failure to predict the downpour that now deluged the city.

Orion tugged the quilt back over his bare shoulder. He appeared to sleep, but Amisha knew he was deep into his own newsfeed—street closures, soccer schedule, power quotas, outbursts, followed predictably by a round or two of gaming. She waited until he got the weather.

“What the . . . ?”

She nodded to the rain pelting the bedroom window and, with a right-flick of her eyes, queried her Nib: *Didn't it already rain twice this year?*

Last rain: April 14, 2075. Four point six inches of precip in one hour temporarily raised the Bay five inches. Seawall was moved back two feet. Your closest umbrella stand is corner of Grove and . . . Amisha halted her Nib feed with a left-flick of her eyes.

“No solar. You won’t make it across the bridge today,” she said. “You should get home and cover your truck bed.”

Orion grunted and pulled her across his chest so they were eye to eye. “*Should* go home.” He gave a playful tug to the long, sand-colored braid draped over her breast. “But let’s stay, try again?”

“Hey,” she walked her fingers across the tanned chest of the only person she allowed close enough to touch. “You’ve cum twice this month. Let the sleeping dog lie.” The truth was, Amisha didn’t want him to waste himself on her. Healthy, strong, hardly twenty-eight, he could still be a father. When’s the last time her Nib gave a fertility nudge? One year, five years ago? It didn’t take long to notice that, childless when she turned twenty-four, Nib nudge images of cuddly babies ceased. She turned to Orion, but he was already lost in his game.

Propped up on an elbow, she studied Orion’s face as his eyes darted back and forth beneath the lids. He was still the same Orion she met when she moved across the street from him three years ago. Bald, muscled, taller even than she, he had appeared out of nowhere to help haul boxes up to her apartment. The first time he draped his arm around her shoulder, it felt like the brother she wished she’d had. Orion was different—she didn’t recoil from his touch.

Maybe she didn’t try hard enough to get pregnant. The first time they came together, it didn’t feel like mating, not in the *we’re-trying-to-make-a-baby* way. It was easy, like an antistress infusion from her Med.pak. Conceiving proved harder. She tossed the quilt around her shoulders and slipped from the bed. Anyway, her life was filled with children at the medical center, though by the time they got to her they were in rough shape. How the hell was she supposed to keep children alive, as her Nib reminded her every morning, when the list of foods they could tolerate kept getting shorter?

Her up-energy tune, “Gotcha,” streamed in her head. A minor earthquake temblor passed beneath her feet. A thread of a dream floated up then disappeared.

While she slipped on a white work tunic over her long pants and pressed the “Dr. Hoplin” sticki-label onto her top pocket, she listened to her day’s schedule: **In Person office hours 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.**

Food break. Update on Pharm.food advances at 3 p.m. Various recommended hologrammies 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. Sleep at 10 p.m.

Amisha liked being called “doctor,” liked being an authority. While Nib.med analyzed children’s symptoms; prescribed and monitored treatments with scans, Med.paks, and Pharm.food; the non-responsive cases were given “I.P.” time with doctors. Her training was virtual, bodies were not, and the prospect of touching patients made her chronically tense jaw clench even tighter. At least she wasn’t expected to embed Nibs behind newborns’ ears.

Outside the bedroom window, rain pounded on the sidewalk, overflowed the gutters, and spread over the street in sheets of precious water. A distant wave, like the unrest in last night’s dream, pushed against her chest. Amisha rounded her rigid shoulders and waited for her Med.pak to infuse her heart with its blessed relief. Deep breath in, out, in, out.

“Orion!” she called from the bathroom. Of course, he was still gaming. She sent him a mental message but got no response to her ment. Breathe in . . . out . . . in . . . out. Where did she learn to do this? Certainly not her training. She left Orion an urgent ment to contact her.

I.P. hours in thirty minutes, reminded her Nib. A pedi.cab is passing in eight minutes. Amisha dropped a handful of general-purpose Pharm.food packages into her aquamarine crocheted bag for her midday food, then checked her route for shootings and outbursts and decided it was safe enough to walk. She needed to clear her head from last night’s dream.

Grove Street was clogged with people holding buckets up to capture the rain. Like the rare, clear nights when hundreds flowed from their homes to witness the sight of stars, people were fascinated by water falling from above. Ignoring the “Disperse and Be Safe” warnings that flashed above every corner, pedestrians collected like drops into a slow-moving sea of faces turned upward to the wet sky. Cautiously weaving through the crowd with her long legs, Amisha turned onto Ashbury and headed toward the park. At the curb, an elderly woman wrapped in a ragged shawl tugged at Amisha’s

soaking wet tunic and pointed her cane at the falling rain. *Milagro*, she croaked. Amisha stared at the old woman, then moved on.

A string of pedi.cabs drawn by thick-legged young men passed by. Amisha shook the muddy spray from her pants and mented Haily that she'd be late. Her efficient assistant mented back the records of her first patient, Ravena, to review on the walk over, but Amisha closed them down with a quick left-flick of her eyes. She preferred to feel the rain and think about stars.

Come . . .

What?

North Star will come onto the horizon at 10 p.m. this evening, her Nib filled in.

Something about her dream welled up again, distant, uneasy. Within seconds, a surge of well-being spread through her body, and Nib.know launched its predictable commentary for this intersection: **Entering Golden Gate Park. Once called "The Panhandle," Golden Gate Park is a nine-block strip east of the original Golden Gate Park's entrance, and the location of the famous "Human Be-In" and "Summer of Love" of 1967.**

Amisha tried not to think about the original park, but it was too late; her Nib continued: **The original Golden Gate Park, built in 1871, was three miles long and a half mile wide.** A vitru.pan popped up showing the original park—miles of green rolling hills, museums, lakes, shaded trees, and open meadows—even a moving ring of bobbing animals, children, and music.

"Now, nearly two hundred years later," Amisha recited out loud with the Nib, "its three-mile-long tent city generously houses Oceania's Pacific Rim immigrants."

"Because," Amisha added, "most of Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia are under water."

Set my pace to be at work by ten, she directed her Nib, then matched her stride to the internal clicks and quickly moved away from the tent city. Perched on the hill across the park, the University Hospital sat humped like a headless Mount Rushmore. Rubble from both Great Quakes was piled high behind it, ready to be hauled down to the Embarcadero Seawall to keep the encroaching saltwater at bay.

Half the city's rubble had already been dropped into the Financial District's Seawall to no avail. The sea slipped in like a thief in the night.

Amisha stepped around a pedestrian waiting for his directions to download. *Raindrops are like falling stars*, she mused. She'd seen stars before. Night skies full of them.

Order an imprint of *The Starry Night*, one of the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh's most famous paintings . . .

No! With a sweep of her eyes, she L-flicked the image away. Where had she seen stars? She couldn't remember.

Perhaps you're seeking vintage films. *Star Wars? Star Trek?*

No!

Movie stars? Tom Hanks in *Forrest Gump*?

No!

The Green Mile?

No! Wait, it had been a while since she viewed that one. OK then, tonight, after food. She picked up her pace so she didn't dawdle in the old Haight-Ashbury district with its broken windows still boarded against a bygone era.

Was it at Gramma Claire's? Stars and green hills . . . She tried to focus on her memories, but the Nib imposed its own version of everything green.

"Green, oh shit." She retrieved Ravena's report with an R-flick, then overlapped it with the other reports of Herbie with his newly dyed black hair, Allie with her sweet, crooked smile, and frail little Christophe. There it was in plain sight: a new intolerance—this time to chlorophyll. With a quick L-flick, she closed the records and squeezed her lids tight, preparing for the wave of anxiety to spread across her chest. *Closest bench?* she queried her Nib, then sat down as the light-headedness came on.

"Dr. Hoplin?" The pedi.cab driver stood by his open passenger door. "Dr. Hoplin?" he repeated. Amisha accepted the ride without a word and crawled onto the plastix seat and closed her eyes.

Hailey stood waiting by the front door of the University's Pediatric Clinic. She took her boss's bag and guided her upstairs past the exam room where Ravena and her parents waited, to her office

across the hall. With her white plastix spectacles conveying more authority than she possessed, Hailey smoothed back her curtain of black bangs and gave her boss a brief but penetrating look.

“I sent the pedi.cab when I detected you hadn’t moved for a while. When you didn’t reply, I figured you were either hypnotized by the rain or having another spell.”

“Good call, thanks.” Since the last big quake, everyone was tied into the Omni-Alert System. Amisha knew there was no place where she couldn’t be helped.

“Give me a few minutes.” Amisha closed the door to her private office, swept aside a stack of small paper notes, and propped her head in her hands. It was so obvious—why hadn’t chlorophyll intolerance already been picked up? From her pants pocket, she retrieved a string of cobalt blue beads and untied the loose knot. Antique Turkish worry beads slid one by one into the metal bowl on her desk, ready to be restrung for the zillionth time. They rattled in unison as a small earthquake temblor shuddered the earth.

Amisha pulled the silk cord through the eye of the largest bead. What the hell am I supposed to do? Ravena’s parents are waiting for me to wave a magic wand, but I haven’t been given one yet.

You’d like to order the newest fantasy wand? Amisha rolled her eyes and deleted with an L-flick.

She mented Hailey to bring her hard-copy records of today’s patients. No, she didn’t have authorization to print. Do it anyway. Half an hour later, with a look of exasperation, Hailey dropped the papers onto her desk.

“Next time, send me to the moon.”

Amisha spread the records out side by side. She first detected Herbie’s and Allie’s intolerances to soy ingredients when they were two months old, Christophe at four months, and Ravena at six months. Ravena’s mother was allowed to breastfeed her for six months, as her milk had tested low for toxic accumulations. When switched to Pharm.milk after six months, Ravena’s troubles began. Amisha prescribed each of them the Red Pharm.food regimen for soy intolerance. A year later she prescribed the Pharm.food regimen for wheat intolerance, with its bright gold wrappers. Ravena became uncontrollably

irritable. Her only relief came from the Med.pak cartridge inserted in the right lower quadrant of her abdomen that continually infused smooth muscle relaxants into her irritable intestines.

Intolerance to corn, rye, lactose, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat, gluten, glucose, lysine, and tryptophan followed in turn, accompanied by shredded intestinal mucosa; angry, blistered skin; massive headaches; gradual deafness; and sores that didn't heal. With each emerging intolerance, Pharm.food developed a new regimen in a unique color-coded package, as well as an expanded array of related Med.pak cartridges. But for chlorophyll, they had nothing. And chlorophyll was present in most everything that was still safe to eat. With a quick stoop before the hallway mirror to see that her name tag was on straight, Amisha entered the exam room.

"Hail, Ravena!" She held up her palm in mock salute but backed off when she saw the eight-year-old child propped between her parents. "Whoa," she softened her voice. "What's with my little girl?"

Mr. Belange cleared his throat. "Nib.med instructed us to give her nothing but Soothing Pink Pharm.food, but she won't eat. *Can't eat.*" He cleared his throat again. "Look at her."

Eyes listless and sunken, Ravena tried to follow Dr. Hoplin's instructions to move her arms or turn her head, but her muscles couldn't obey.

"Lips coated with minute pustules," Amisha mented her observations then, after using a tongue blade to inspect Ravena's oral cavity, added, "pustules coat oral mucosa and presumably the length of her intestinal track."

"How often does Nib.med track her?"

"Every day," her mother said. "But when the results come back, it tells us to continue as prescribed."

The flatness in Mrs. Belange's voice bothered Amisha, as if she already knew her daughter wasn't going to make it. On the wall behind Mrs. Belange, a verdant green poster with a spinning earth touted Pharm.food's mission—*To Feed the World.*

Yeah, but how can you feed the children when you can't keep them alive, Amisha wondered. She wished at once she could retract the thought, but it was too late.

“Shit.” Amisha slumped against the wall to wait out the light-headedness.

“You OK?” Hailey mented.

“Yes,” she mented back.

“No, you’re not.”

The door to the exam room flung open and Hailey rushed over. She was used to answering Nib.alerts when her boss was having an episode, but this time, her armful of Pharm.food samples fell to the floor like mice skittering for cover.

“Number three this week,” she said under her breath as she whisked the Belanges out the door. She felt the back of Dr. Hoplin’s neck. “You’ve gone dry again.”

Amisha turned her head.

“I’m getting you water,” Hailey said out loud for emphasis and slid her card into the Water.well’s receptor.

“Not from your allocation.” Amisha nodded to her purse hanging on the wall. “Mine’s in there.”

“Forget it,” Hailey said. “I’ve drunk enough today, and unless you get enough water in you, your episodes won’t stop.” She set her boss’s amber measuring glass under the spigot and filled it with the murky, menthol-enhanced water from one of the few sources available to San Francisco: a mixture of water reclaimed from old fracking wells and low-salt sea water.

Amisha kneaded the clamped muscles around her jaw while waiting for the restless particles to settle into circular grooves along the bottom of the glass. After drinking the top two-thirds, she handed Ravena’s report to Hailey. “Another one.”

Hailey scanned the rows of numbers and words with glazed eyes.

Amisha snatched back the report. “Here, look, bottom of the page . . . Chlorophyll Intolerance.”

“Chlorophyll?”

Amisha sighed. Every time she got close to improving a child’s symptoms, something new got in the way.

“Isn’t chlorophyll green? I mean, aren’t plants green?” Hailey retrieved a food sample from the floor. “Gluten, Soy, Lactose,

Fiber, Sugar, and Nut-Free. “Will Pharm.food make one for chlorophyll?”

“My hands are tied until they do.” An image of S-M leather popped up.

Are you fit to be tied? ran the subtitle. Disgusted, Amisha whisked it away.

“It’s all there in the reports—this manufactured food is killing our kids.”

Hailey put her finger to her lips to silence Amisha. “What are you gonna do?” Hailey returned to menting as she collected the rest of the samples and stacked them next to the canister of bamboo pencils.

“Wait to see what they’re going to come up with next.” Prepared now for the familiar pressure that swelled beneath her breastbone whenever she questioned Pharm.food’s practices, she exhaled with pursed lips, inhaled, exhaled again, waiting for Med.pak to do its trick. Nothing.

Empty rebalancing cartridges can be refilled tomorrow at 7:00 a.m., her Nib informed.

“No! I need it now!” Amisha shot back an Urgi.ment. The reply was obscured with static. Options? She’d popped her last nitro tab years ago, and what were probably the last two aspirins in the world were in her medicine cabinet at home. She L-flicked away the offer for a perfusion of nanobot scavengers and refused to zombie-out on the Pharm.pain regimen. But it wasn’t just pain. A deep foreboding rose up like waves washing over half-built seawalls.

“I’m calling a pedi.cab,” Hailey said. “You’re going home.”

Amisha raised her hand in protest, then dropped it as Hailey grabbed her crocheted bag and guided her downstairs to the waiting pedi.cab.

“Reschedule Ravena for tomorrow,” she wheezed.

“No,” Hailey snapped. “You’re taking tomorrow off, and I’m getting Dr. Bruno to order a work-up for you.”

“Nonsense.” Amisha waved her off.

As the pedi.cab pulled onto 7th Avenue—clogged with a steady stream of cyclists, high-speed pedi.cabs, and occasional

solar-paneled sun autos—Amisha settled back into the open-air seat and mented the cyclist to take the back route to 1228 Grove Street. “They must have moved the seawall back again today,” she said as he pushed through a crowd burdened with their worldly belongings.

The cyclist grunted and changed gears.

“Why do people wait ’til saltwater licks their front door before they evacuate?”

“Dunno.” He extended his left hand to signal his turn through the maze of travelers then pulled up to her faded pink Victorian, paused for a temblor to pass, then helped her up the steps to her front door.

Simple and functional, her second-floor apartment offered a reprieve from the world, with water and food prep in one corner, a double futon bed in the other, a five-drawer dresser against the wall, and, in the center, a table and two chairs for when Orion came over. Behind a narrow door was her bathroom with its dry compost toilet and sink, and a mirrored medicine cabinet mounted so low she rarely saw above her chin unless she stooped. Decorating with what bits of color she had, she hung her aquamarine bag on a wall hook, propped Gramma’s old red vase between two books on her dresser, and covered her bed with great-grandma’s faded blue quilt.

From the front window, Amisha noticed that Orion’s truck hadn’t moved, meaning he was still home. Too weary to even ment him, she finished off yesterday’s nut butter sandwich, stripped off her clothes, pulled the quilt over her head, and dropped into an exhausted sleep.

The old vase on her dresser was shimmering red the next morning when Amisha raised her head from the pillow. Most days started this way. Though the rising sun was rarely seen, its warmth caused micrometal particles suspended in the air to scintillate in a vague morning glow, casting a sense of dawn across the city.

“Red, first to show. White, last to go.” Memories of Gramma’s deep raspy singsong circled up like smoke rising from last night’s dream. She’d been there, wandering among the flowers at the old place, searching for dawn’s first red petals. Another world.

Seven a.m., rise and shine. A new day. New children to keep alive.

Dreams and distant memories rose like mist before her eyes, nudging her back to the other world.

Your schedule is . . .

Amisha dropped her feet onto the bare floor as Nib.news relayed her schedule. Her chest felt better. Sleep must have done her good. An old place in the mountains. Had she visited? Or was this wishful thinking? She'd been very young.

Ten to noon, meet with Dr. . . .

She'd lost track of the place since Luke. All she had left was Gramma's chipped red vase with nothing to fill it.

I.P. hours now 2 to 4 p.m. due to unscheduled power save.

Another temblor rippled across the room. Would the after-shocks ever end?

Avoid corner of Hayes and Filmore, shooter outburst, six injured and . . .

Amisha reached for the plastix sandals she left on the floor. Something changed the year she turned twenty-five. Not just her fertility. Like something was . . .

Your role now is not to have children, but to . . .

Amisha tried to close down her report.

. . . keep them alive.

Something swelled from beneath the Nib drivel. Something wandering through her memories, calling, stirring up fragments, like tendrils of dreams beckoning her down. Some she knew, others—well, it wasn't unusual to cross over anymore. Last week she awoke thinking she was in Orion's dream, shared it with him, scared him. Was her Nib beginning to fragment already?

She slipped a work tunic over her head and dropped her braid down the outside. Her pants lay crumpled on the floor where she had tossed them yesterday . . . something uneasy about yesterday. She reached down . . . Ravena . . . chlorophyll.

"Shit!" She flung her pants across the room. "Shit!" The red vase tottered. She lunged, arm stretched out, stop, please, shit! Pants collided with glass, glass collided with floor, shock waves exploded the vase into a thousand pieces, a distant echo shattered free, so faint she almost didn't hear.

It's time.

Sharp glass pierced the soles of her feet.

Come home.

“I am home.”

May we offer you the comforts of homecare cuisine? Delivered to your home in . . .

“Shut up!” she clapped her hands over her ears. “Leave me alone!”

It's time . . . Come.

Amisha collapsed to the floor. “I can’t!”

Come home.

She rocked. Pain splintered her knees.

Floating homes are now available in the freshly renovated City Harbor. No need to ever evacuate again.

Amisha pounded her fist into the mound behind her ear as if she could break it.

Never evacuate again, again. . . . Static emissions continued.

“I am home!”

Your home is 1228 Grove Street, San Francisco, California.

“Stop! I’m trying to hear . . .”

Hearing tests are available free to medical staff, you have only to . . .

Amisha grabbed a sharp glass taper and stabbed at the mound behind her ear. Red dribbled. Deeper. Pain frizzed through her neck, down her arms. She dug at her Nib from below, from above, circling around the edges, lifting, leveraging it open like a manhole. Her left arm twitched. She couldn’t see her bed across the room.

Code Red, Code Red!

She was going to die. Not the long, slow walk into the waiting sea she’d imagined. This might be easier.

Unable to stop, she tunneled the shard deeper beneath the pulsing Nib, prying at the thin bioelectric-gel rootlets until they snapped in an unbearable firestorm of pain. Her stomach contorted. Partly digested nut butter heaved onto the floor. She dug until she could no longer feel, until she no longer cared that this was the end. With the last of her will, she twisted the taper into the quivering circuitry

and popped out her Nib. It slid across the floor in a slick trail of blood and settled beneath the chair. She was too weak to pursue it.

Frozen in a vacuous silence, she drifted for hours, possibly days. A voice wondered if she was alive, could she move, where she was? No, not a voice, threads of thoughts—her own thoughts. She heard what she thought. She was inside. What was outside? Her finger wiggled against the floor. Someone had lit a searing fire against her neck. Then nothing. Again, that voice thinking thoughts in her head. What's today? No calendar appeared. Disconnected, deaf inside, underpants wet.

She should move. Breathe in. Breathe out. Deeper. She lifted her lids, a hairline of light, morning shimmer. She raised her hand before her face. Fingers appeared then faded. She heard her voice outside her now. "One, two, three, four, five." Then nothing. A knocking outside, over there, her door. Louder, then gone. She mented Orion, but something was very wrong. She covered her eyes and tried to cry.

It's time.

Amisha squeezed her lids shut. Please, no more! Blood oozed down her neck. She rocked, unable to stop. Then she saw them. Long, birdlike bones and blue veins hovered over her curly blond ringlets, then reached down through the shimmering green to gather her tiny fingers.

Come home.

"I don't know how." She curled in tighter.

We're waiting.

"Then help me."