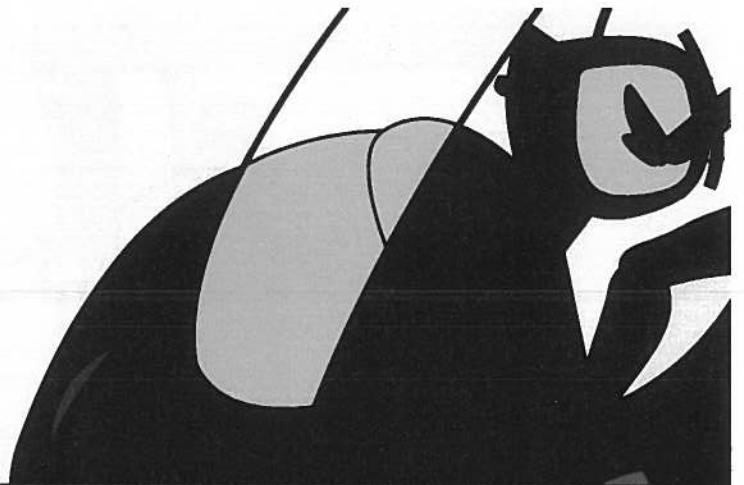


THE RUSH

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I am stranded and the hour of change is nearly upon me.

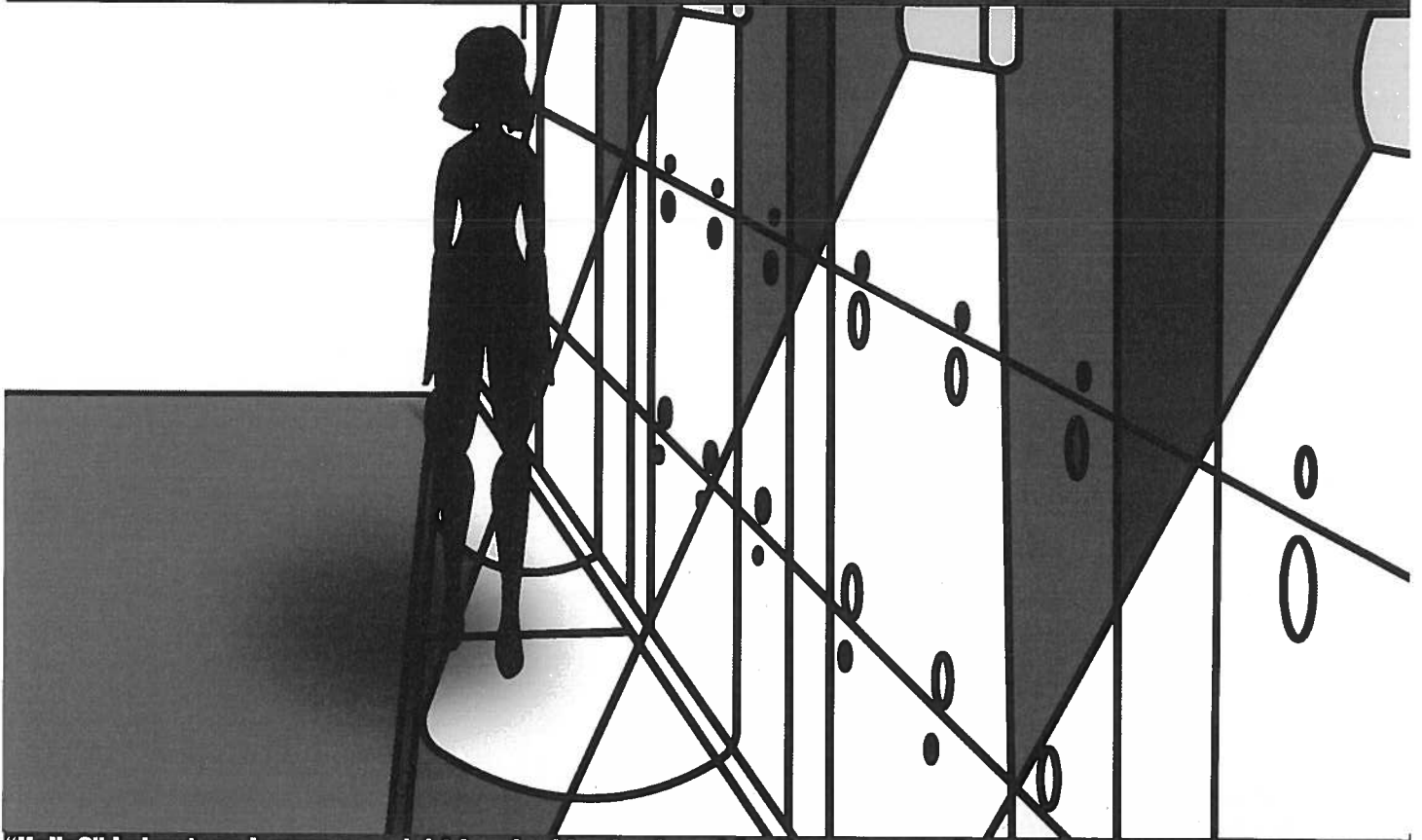
I had a feeling that my time was running out, but I needed to continue my research. I am twenty three years old and am nearly of age to begin. Mother has been pressing for my plan lately, and to be truthful, I do not possess one. I just want to show her I am taking this seriously.

I sigh and try once more to start up my transportation. I will myself to press and hold the start pad instead of frantically slapping it for I know that will not work. On top of that I have continually noticed the sun falling further and further down the afternoon sky and am acutely aware as shadows begin to form, signaling the onset of dusk.



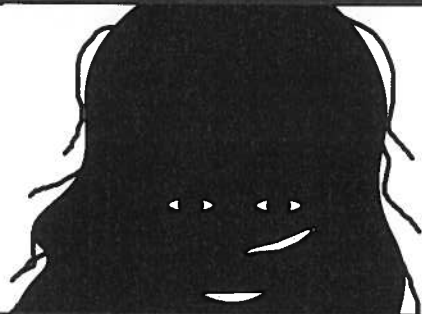
Perhaps someone is still out? I can feel my pulse quicken as I begin my descent down the sidewalk and away from my transportation.

My palms tighten into fists at my side and I move nearly ten yards away from my vehicle. Finally out of the corner of my eye I spot a figure. Its shadowy form slowly materializes into that of a young woman.



"Hello?" I shout, as I wave my right hand whips back and forth across my face.

She mimics my motion and begins a clear path towards myself. Exhaling as I try to slow my rapid breathe, I extend my hand. I am truly elated someone is as foolish as me and remains out.



As the space closes between us I begin to scan her features. She possess dark tangled hair that falls just below her soft jaw line. I can also make out her dark pupils that seem to fill her small oval eyes so much so that the whiteness of her iris can barely be seen. She is smiling which makes her eyes narrow further but also puffs out her already rounded cheeks. Her cheeks though. There is nothing there. Nothing except a curved scar which outline the curve of her cheek bone. She is not decorated with our golden designs, she is not of us.

I withdraw my hand as quickly as she moves to connect, palm to palm. I bite the fullness of my lip and step back. It is too early for them. The sun, though waning, is still present and should be keeping them out.

Her features drop as she too withdraws her hand, though significantly slower than myself.



"I see you've noticed. I am an inventor and it seems you are of the givers."

I nod slightly, seemingly holding my breath as I wait for her next move. I have never seen an inventor face to face. Only in presentations by those who watch and maintain their community and from those I gather they are not friendly.

"What is your name and why are you here in the hour of change?"

"Never mind my name." I say. I can feel my lips and hands tighten.

"Fine. Then why are you here?"

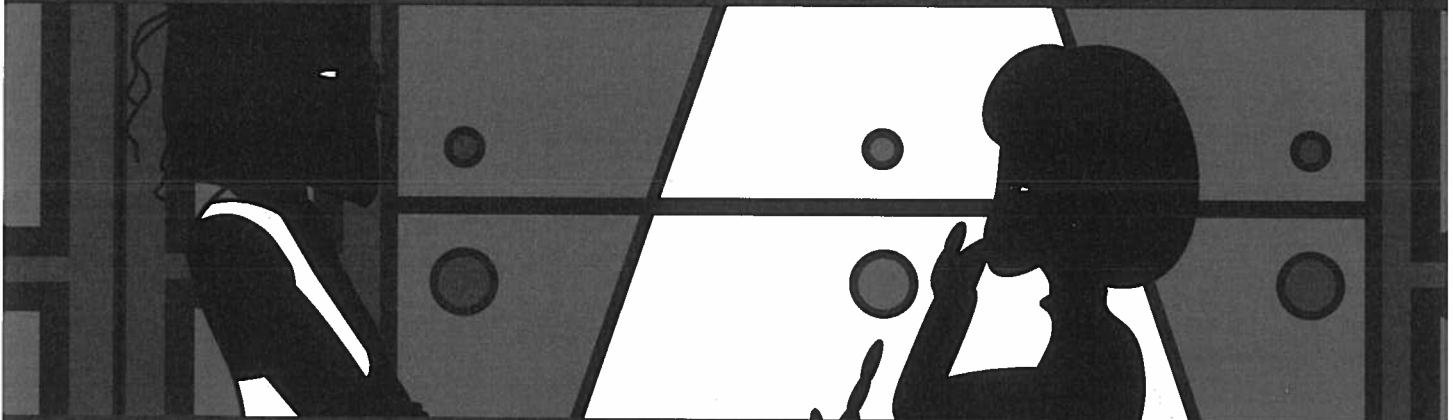
"My transportation has failed." I gesture behind me, towards my stranded vehicle. My eyes never once shifting from her face.



"Let's go then." She sighs and takes a step towards me.

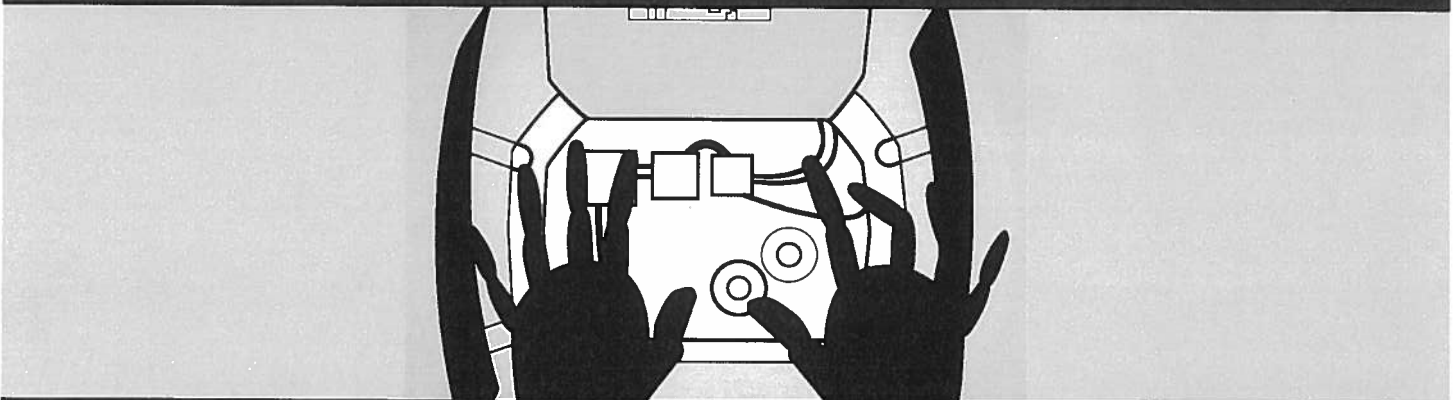
"What?" I stumble backwards trying to maintain a safe distance from her.

"I will fix your transportation. I am an inventor after all."



I nod. I don't want her to help me, but I need to leave before masses of inventors arrive. We move towards it. I allow her to lead since I am wary of turning my back to her.

We reach it in a matter of minutes and she drops to her knees and begins her work. She is touching the start pad and fiddling with some knobs of whose purpose I am unsure of. As I watch her work I can't help but to linger on the scar on her face.



"Still looking at my scar?"

"No." Perhaps she can feel my eyes on her. I shift my gaze back to her hands.

"It's fine. I know it's quite large and misshapen."

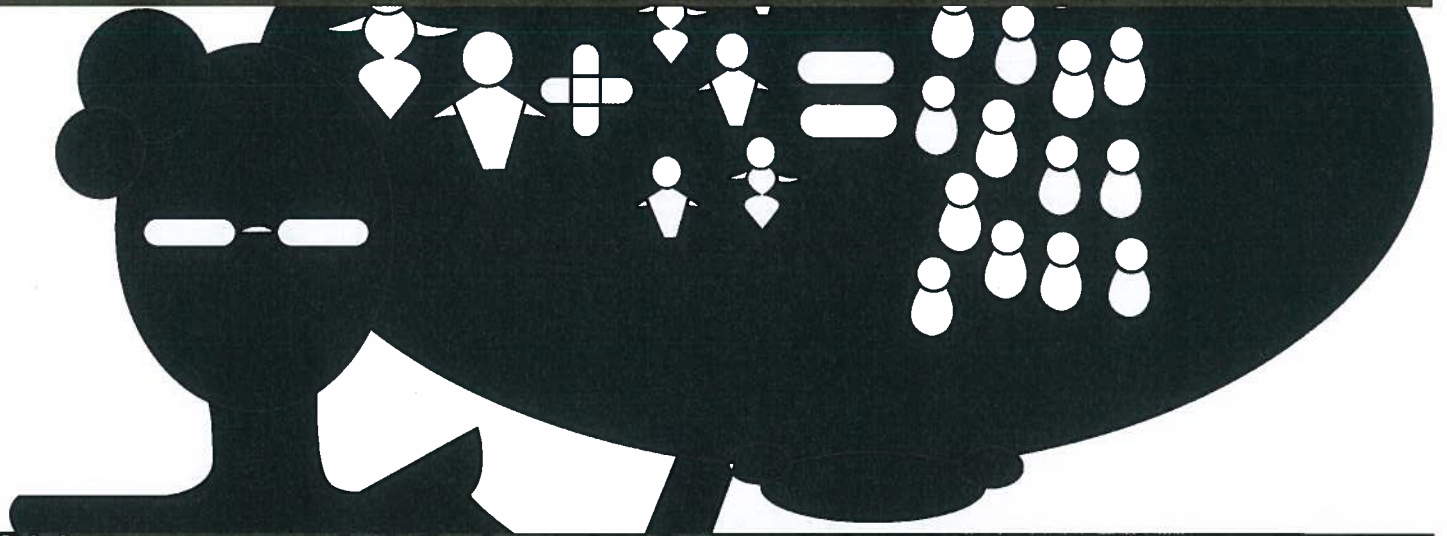
"What happened?" I venture after a few moments. I cannot contain my curiosity. In our presentations no scars were mentioned.

"You're in your early twenties, right?"

"Yes."

"Well then your nearing your Rush years. I entered The Rush like you are too soon. What do you know of it?"

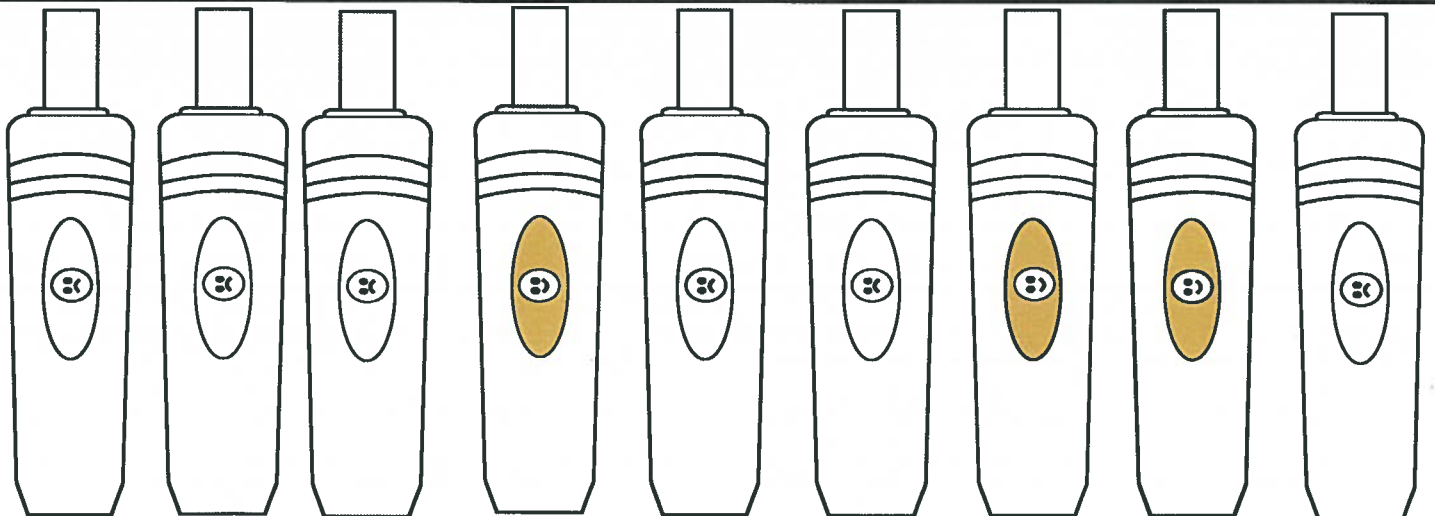
"The Rush." I say, stalling. I am attempting to recall all of the information we've learned in our years of schooling and preparation for said event.



"It is how we prove our value in the giver society. From twenty five to thirty our bodies are considered to be the most ready and capable to produce a child. From what I have learned, there was a sharp decrease in the birth rate for our world which sent our population to the verge of distinction. Now the government mandates people's performance in repopulating our society."

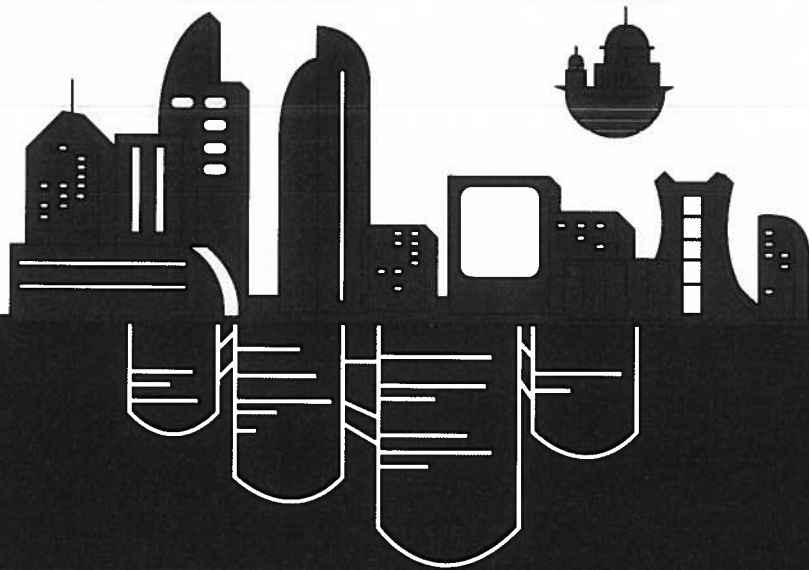
I pause in my recitation, waiting for nod or sound of satisfaction. One does not come.

"Infertility also continues to effect all genders but men at a disproportional rate to others. And so, given that, we all are given five years to produce as many children with as many different partners as possible."



"What if you are unsuccessful?" She asks, her eyes locked onto mine.

"Then. Then you must prove your value in another way. You will leave the society of the givers and move to the inventors. Where some will create useful items for our lives here."

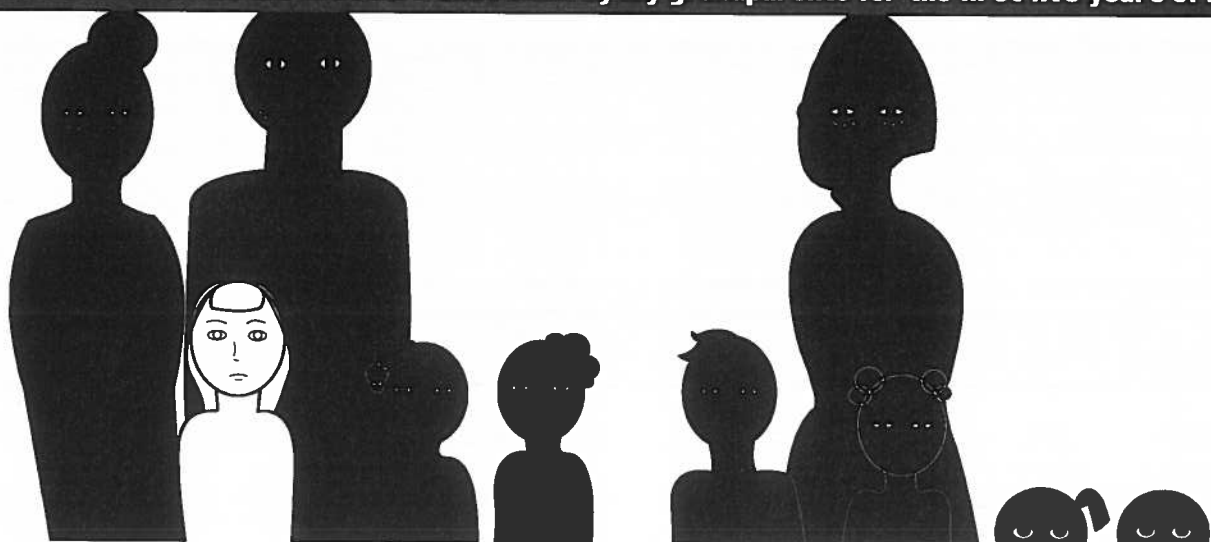


"Perfect. It seems you are well educated on this topic."

"Um, yes. My mother is a top performer in her Rush years. Producing seven children, including myself for her contribution to society."

"And she even kept you?" She smiles, not out of kindness, but perhaps in a mocking fashion.

"Yes. I know we are many and she could have given us to the center to raise us. But she came for us after her time concluded. I was the first born and raised by my grandparents for the first five years of my life.



"That's unusual for a group of your size. Regardless, your mother is clearly of far more value than myself. And I am sure her cheeks are quite ornate in decoration of her earned gold markings."

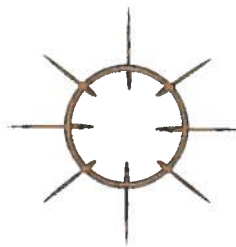


"Yes. She has the most beautiful designs carved into her skin. I hope to provide similar worth as my mother during my years. Though I know that is a large undertaking." Stating my goal in this manner only serves to make me more nervous. Not only in the presence of an inventor, but for my own lack of capability in becoming a top performer in my years.

"Yes well, I too longed to be prove my worthiness to the givers and so I tried. Unlike your mother, however, in my five years I only was successfully impregnated once."

Her hand movements slow but she does not pause in her work. She takes a long inhale and meets my eyes. "I carried it fully to term. I even received my first golden marking."

Here she pauses. She lifts her right hand and with a rigid index finger begins to draw shapes into the empty air.



She curls her fingers inwards creating a fist high in the air. Her fingers tighten, clenching down for only a few moments before relaxing her hold and allowing her arm to fall away. As soon as she releases she turns back to finish her work.

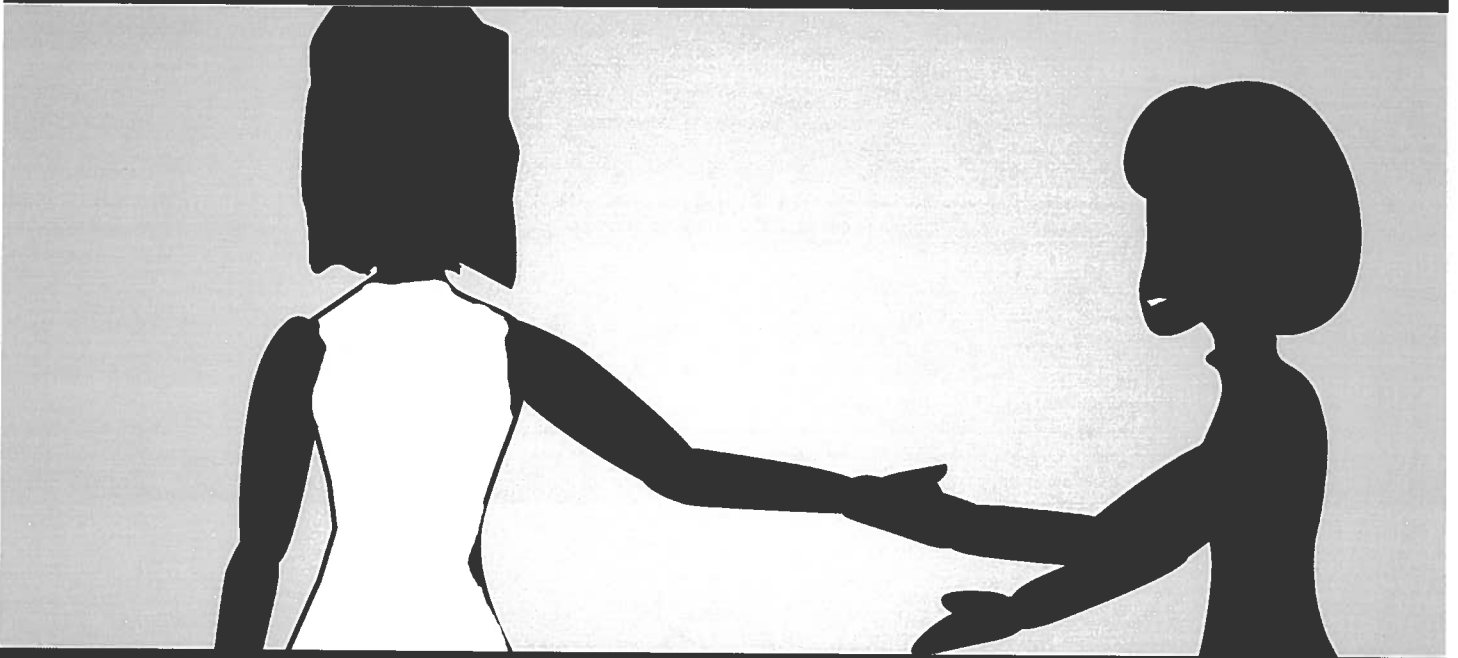
"It was beautiful." she said.

"When I delivered it, they found it had never taken a breathe. I performed a still birth. And within the hour my marking was pulled from my skin."

I do not speak but watch as she screws the last few knobs back into their proper position. She stands and turns to face me. Her eyes are dry but she looks all together glazed over.

"And so that is how I find myself among the inventors. All that time I spent carrying it to term wasted what was left of my Rush years."

"Now instead of leisure, I find myself working constantly. It seems all inventors are constantly working to prove our value to a group that will never see it. Although I must say I work among some of the strongest men and women to exist in either realm."



With that, she nods and side steps away from my transportation. We exchange glances for several moments before she breaks eye contact. She moves to leave.

Before she can get more than three steps past me, I reach out and grasp the smooth fabric of her coat sleeve. My hand slides down from the middle of her sleeve to her calloused palm. With our hands grasped together, I raise and lower them a few times.

"My name, is Kira Kulkarni."