

Shaare Emeth: Arrival

The door of the shuttle closed with a hiss of pressurized gases, leaving Batresh standing on soft ground.

Her eyes adjusted to a dim landscape.

Crumpled limestone and shards of glass lay scattered around her as if a bombing raid had destroyed a great structure.

Winds buffeted rusted beams above. Steel connectors creaked and groaned.

Tossed by wind, a bulb attached to a pole cast jagged shadows.

Wind whistled through the structure. To her right, on rusted tracks, sat a locomotive, resting like a beast, a relic from more prosperous times. Bleached by sunlight, rusted and fused onto metal rails, it cast a shadow northward.

Weeds blocked her way.

To the left was another set of rails, still in use. Free of brush, its shiny surface reflected pale light.

A gust struck her. The blast pulled her coat open. Cold wind felt like sand blasting her skin, like an icy Khamsin.

She looked towards the street. A green station wagon should be waiting. She turned, pulling her coat closed, and walked towards the railway.

Truck exhaust from a hundred meters away, fired like a cannon.

Standing motionless, she waited for her heartbeat to slow.

She looked back towards the shadows. Her shuttle was safely hidden.

She moved through brush, stepping between exposed metal rods of rebar, carefully negotiating crumpled limestone and broken slats. She reached a clearing. Looking ahead, she saw narrow slabs, steps leading up to the street.

She pushed a jewel on a wrist band. A light activated. Holding her wrist in front of her, she stepped over an old tire and twisted metal.

She reached the steps.

Ancient piping, a makeshift handrail, thrust up from the steps; she grabbed hold to steady her ascent. Reaching the top, she looked down 18th Street.

There was no vehicle.

Turning, she walked towards Market Street, pulling her coat closed again. When she reached the corner, no longer protected by the structure, the full force of wind hit her.

She had been warned but had never experienced cold. She felt as if ice shards cut into her exposed skin.

She looked across the street and saw statues, a man and a woman facing each other, the *Meeting of the Waters*, the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers. The man and woman were in position, arms outstretched, one awaiting the approach of the other. But, frozen in bronze, they would never meet. Each would always and forever anticipate the arrival of the other.

The fountain was turned off for winter.

She heard the honk of a car and turned. A dented station wagon pulled up.

She fumbled with the cold metal door handle and opened the door.

The driver, Sister Ahatu, was elderly, thin. She wore a cotton shift and plain, gray wool coat. Over short gray hair, she wore a modified veil, held in place by bobby pins. Her thin hands grabbed the steering wheel and turned sharply. "I'm breaking multiple laws here," she smiled as she made a U-turn, and headed west. "I don't think you are dressed for St. Louis winter," she added.

Reaching to the dials on the dashboard, she turned the heat up.

Batresh turned towards her. "I need a better coat."

"Welcome to winter weather," the sister responded, knowing Batresh had experienced only Egyptian heat and one Mississippi summer.

Batresh admired the nun's easy manner. She had been in the order for centuries and seemed completely human.

"Your audition is tomorrow at 4:00," the nun nodded, smiling. The skin around her eyes was creased and wrinkled. Judging from the dark spots on her hands, she spent too much time in the sun. "Will you need to practice?"

Batresh shifted on the seat, sitting forward. "Not really, I'll just warm up my voice," she responded. Looking to her right, she saw a yellow building that could have been a factory or warehouse.

The sister turned onto the highway.

"I'll drive you to Powell Hall tomorrow," the sister added.

Batresh looked at her, "I am supposed to be Jewish."

"Oh," Sister Ahatu responded. "I'll get one of the girls to drive you then...don't want to arouse suspicion." A park appeared on the right. Empty benches were fixed to the ground around a baseball diamond. To the left was an enormous parking lot circling a structure with what appeared to be sawed off minarets at the front corners. Over the building were large letters that read, *Checkerdome*.

Ahatu turned on the signal light and exited the highway. "You can stay at the dorm tonight and get a room at the Chase tomorrow." She looked over at Batresh and smiled, "It's an honor to meet, you, Matriarch."

She continued looking, her eyes moving up and down Batresh's body. "We have your clothes ready. I think we got the right size." She stopped the car at a signal light.

To the right was a diner with floor-to-ceiling windows, brightly lit from inside. "Of course, you can stay at the dorm the whole time, if you want."

They turned right, onto Big Bend Boulevard.

After a short distance, they turned again onto a small college campus, *Fontainebleau College for Women*.

Turning right into a U-shaped drive, Batresh saw three buildings, English, Science, and Art. The structures were vine covered, rough-hewn brown stone, the covered walkways between them protected by ceramic roof tiles.

Behind them was the library. Batresh saw a statue of a woman wearing ancient clothing -- a long toga. A drape covered her head, falling to her shoulders and down her back. Her palms faced upwards in traditional Tayamni greeting.

A flood light in front of the statue shone upwards onto an oval face.

It was the Queen of Heaven, the Blessed Mother, the Matriarch of the *First Ones*, the Goddess Auset.