

OVERWATCH[®]

STONE BY STONE



A SHORT STORY BY CHRISTIE GOLDEN

STONE BY STONE



STORY

CHRISTIE GOLDEN

ILLUSTRATIONS

NESSKAIN

*MARAMMAT SYMMETRA SKIN
& ORIGINAL CONCEPTS*

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MARAMMAT SYMMETRA SKIN MODEL

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SYMMETRA ORIGINAL MODEL

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STONE BY STONE

“I don’t suppose,” Sanjay Korpai asked hopefully, “that there was a convenient earthquake?”

For a moment, Satya Vaswani wondered if it was a metaphor, but no. Sanjay, one of Vishkar Corporation’s finest negotiators, was speaking literally.

“No seismic activity whatsoever,” said Harita Patel, their head geologist. “That’s why we broke ground where we did. You’ll remember I did warn you—”

“*Could* there have been a convenient earthquake?”

Harita looked increasingly distressed. “Unfortunately, it’s clear cause and effect. Our development was aggressive; too much, too soon. The vibrations from the concentrated construction are directly responsible for the damage. Everyone is, ah...very angry, sir.”

Sanjay sighed. “For so long, we’ve tried to get a foothold over there. We didn’t need this inconvenience so soon after Rio.”

“We” was, of course, Vishkar Corporation. “Over there” referred to the city of Roshani’s largely undeveloped section across the river, and “inconvenience” referred to the image Satya now regarded.

A small hologram hovered over the table. The image shifted back and forth from what it had been—a stone omnic, seated cross-legged upon a lotus blossom, hands pressed together in front of the chest—to chunks of stone surrounding a headless lower torso.

“Oh, it’s more than an inconvenience,” PR rep Tamir Chada said. “This could jeopardize the entire contract. It’s not just physical damage. Sanjay’s right—the entire event will be perceived as an insult. If we don’t fix this, and fix it perfectly, we can kiss any further development in this area goodbye.”

“Fortunately,” Sanjay said, turning to Satya, “we have the premiere hard-light architect in the world right here at Vishkar. You were born in a small village like Suravasa, Satya. Of course you’d volunteer to help, right?” It was a rhetorical question, and Satya knew it. “If we don’t put you on this quickly—”

“Immediately,” Tamir interjected. “*Yesterday.*”

“We’re going to lose this window. We’ve got to give Suravasa something important to show how upset we are that we accidentally damaged something so precious to them.”

We are not upset about that, Satya thought, but did not say. She had gotten used to this at Vishkar.

“We’ll send you over now,” Sanjay said. “Find out what they want. A retreat center, a nice lump sum for repairs—we’ll even rebuild the temple ourselves. Whatever it costs, it’s a drop in the bucket compared to the loss of development rights.”

“Drop in the bucket” was one of those phrases that, like “kissing” development good-bye, had confused Satya when she was younger. There was no bucket, no drop, and certainly no kissing. Now, though, she had learned to...what was the saying? “Roll with the punches.”

“Who was the figure of?” Satya asked, looking again at the hologram. At the broken neck and severed head. She looked away. Disorder.

“Uh...” Sanjay looked to Tamir.

“Aurora,” Tamir said, consulting his notes.

Aurora. The first sentient omnic, who sacrificed herself in order to grant sentience to all others. “She was more than simply a famous omnic,” Satya said. “They will not want money. We must offer something better.”

“It’s your job to find that and make it happen, Satya,” Sanjay said. He gave her one of his warm smiles, his eyes kind. “I know you can. Do whatever it takes.”





“We want nothing to do with Vishkar Corporation,” said Sarpanch Ranesh Grewal, the head of the local government of Suravasa. “You’ve done enough.”

Word had somehow gotten out about Satya’s arrival and mission, and Grewal, along with a small, scowling crowd, had gathered to confront her. While the coral-painted stone walls threw shadows in other areas, the villagers and the interloper stood in the sunken, checkerboard-tiled courtyard outside one of the temple’s entrances. Here, the sun beat down mercilessly, and the golden domes of the temple gleamed so brightly one couldn’t look at them directly. Grewal’s face was drawn in lines of anger, an emotion reflected in the other faces. There were a few omnic towards the back. At least *they*

were not shouting at her.

“It is because of what happened that I offer my aid,” Satya said.

“To do what? Build a skyscraper of glittering blue hard-light? You think that’s what we want?”

“I do not *know* what you want,” Satya said simply.

“Of course you don’t!” someone cried.

“Vishkar doesn’t care!” yelled someone else.

“*I* care,” Satya said. The thought of the shattered statue, broken and headless, was embedded in her thoughts. “May I at least enter the temple?” When the sarpanch hesitated, she added, “I thought that all were welcome here.”

One of the omnic in the back, clad in a simple robe, extended an arm toward the temple. Satya nodded her appreciation and stepped through the open wooden doors, still feeling the eyes of the angry crowd boring into her back.

Inside the temple was lit only by candlelight, and noticeably cooler. The walls were not painted with the same warm coral hue as the exteriors, instead decorated with bas-relief carvings of fish and tigers. There were places where the stones had broken, shaken by quakes, and settled; cracks that marred the walls, ceilings, and stones.

A faint smell permeated the area, as if the stones had absorbed the scent. *Incense*. The fragrance evoked the one good thing about her childhood: the occasional visits to peaceful temples. They had been so rare, she had all but forgotten them.

“It is true that you do not know what we want.” The voice was metallic, and definitely not human. Part of it was jarring, like nails on chalkboard. But the undertone was soothing. The omnic who fell into step beside her was the same one who had granted permission to enter. “*No one* knows what another wants without getting to know them first.”

“Are you a priest here?” Satya inquired.

“Only a pilgrim. My name is Zenyatta. Vishkar taking responsibility is a gracious thing. But it means nothing if the help is not actually...helpful.”

“I would certainly like it to be.” They continued down the corridor.

“If you wish, I can assist you in understanding our people, our faith, and our community. You are welcome to stay with us.”

“Stay?” The word came out more harshly than Satya intended. “Here?” Thoughts of the desperate poverty of her childhood splattered across her mind’s eye. The stench, the press of people, the empty bellies, the murky drinking water.

The helplessness of her parents to do anything about it. “At the temple,” Zenyatta said. “As pilgrims do.”

“I am not a pilgrim,” Satya replied. “I am an architect.” She was here to do a job; it was important that they understand this.

Zenyatta lifted his metallic arms in a shrug. “What is a pilgrim, but someone who has embarked on a journey to a holy place? The word itself does not matter. Will *you*, Satya Vaswani, stay?”

The invitation made Satya anxious. She had set routines, which ensured there was always order and calm in some part of her life. Even in hotels, Satya had time alone and cleaved to her routines as much as possible.

Zenyatta continued. “You have a reputation of designing appropriately for a building’s purpose. There is no shame in not understanding this temple’s purpose, Ms. Vaswani. Everyone begins in ignorance.”

Satya couldn’t argue with his reasoning. She knew about Aurora, but not the way the omnic did. When Sanjay had suggested a retreat center, or simply money, she had known instinctively that wouldn’t work. It seemed declining this invitation wouldn’t work, either.

“I...will try,” she said.

“The birth of all ventures is the willingness to try,” Zenyatta said.

The corridor opened onto a pleasant winding path. Trees provided welcome shade. An omnic priest approached, nodding politely to Satya, then bowing to Zenyatta.

“Peace, Tekhartha,” he said, then continued.

Satya regarded Zenyatta. “Only a pilgrim,” she said. “One might think you were in charge.”

“No one is ever truly ‘in charge’”—he responded with a reverberating chuckle—“of anything. I returned here recently, intending to meditate on the teachings of my master, Tekhartha Mondatta. But in meeting you, I see there was another purpose awaiting me.”

“I know about Mondatta. He was killed,” Satya recalled.

“Yes,” Zenyatta replied, seemingly untroubled by her blunt statement.

“Before that, I did not realize omnic could die. You are machines; I had assumed you could replace parts.”

“In theory, yes. But replacement parts have yet to be found for a soul, be it human...or omnic.”

Did omnics have souls? That was a very large question, and Satya needed time to think about it. She returned to the subject of Mondatta. “He was assassinated,” she continued. “I did not understand why. He was not inciting violence.”

“Mondatta deplored violence. Many, including myself, believe he was killed by those who disapprove of building bridges between humans and omnics.”

“Building...? Oh,” Satya said. “The first bridge that came into my head was a literal one.”

“I too was quite literal, at first. Although omnics share sentience with humans, I found them so perplexing. They would say things such as, ‘lend a hand,’ or ‘cat’s got your tongue.’ But their hands were flesh, not metal; how could they lend one? How might a cat obtain their tongues? Were tongues detachable? I had some very interesting pictures in my head for a long time!”

Satya laughed, confiding, “That still happens to me sometimes.”

He bent his shining head close to hers and whispered, conspiratorially, “Me, too.”

The path culminated at a set of steps leading to a large, domed area that was clearly the main shrine.

The dais upon which the statue had sat was ringed with a small pool, with pathways leading directly to the figure. Other pilgrims—some human, most omnics—sat on pillows, their bodies in the same position as the statue’s. Or, rather, as the statue’s had been.

Satya felt uneasy as she regarded the debris. It was one thing to have seen a small, holographic depiction of it in the clean, almost sterile Vishkar Corporation boardroom. It was another to see it writ large—very large indeed—and in front of her eyes. She took in the shattered arms, the broken head. Satya realized that Vishkar had sent her here so quickly that a complete cleanup had not yet occurred.



“It must distress you,” she said. “To see your deity broken like this.”

“Aurora was not a deity,” Zenyatta corrected gently. “She was just like us... except she was the first.”

Satya tried to focus on the statue’s face and not the damage and dust around it. “You do not pray to her?”

“No,” Zenyatta replied. “We reflect on her life...and death. We offer gratitude for her sacrifice, and the gift she gave us. The statue was a good likeness of her. But it did not capture who she *was*. Aurora was curious. She wanted to learn— about the world, and its people.”

“To understand what makes humans...human,” Satya said.

Zenyatta nodded. “The first of us to struggle with that. And we still struggle, from time to time. All omnic see a bit of ourselves in her.”

So do I, Satya thought, but did not say. What would it be like to be the first omnic, to abruptly have self-awareness thrust upon her? Trying to make sense of...*everything*?

“It must have been nearly impossible, with no precedent to follow. Her way— your way—of thinking must be so very different from ours.”

“People do not need to understand how someone thinks in order to respect or even love them,” Zenyatta noted. “Or simply to be a friend. The temple was a place where Aurora was welcomed and accepted as she was, with no judgment.”

“But...she did not stay.”

“No.” The reverberating, metallic voice was sad, and Zenyatta’s head drooped slightly. “Aurora had another destiny; another journey—one that many others have taken since. Did you know that this temple is now the first stop on a pilgrimage inspired by her?”

“I did not.”

“Aurora grew with each place she visited; each person she met. Her physical journey took her to Nepal; her spiritual one, to a place of such selflessness that she would sacrifice herself on the mere chance that we, too, could also experience sentience.”

“Wait...she did not know it would work?” Satya was surprised. Self-sacrifice for others was always noble. Choosing the path without certainty—knowing that, fail or succeed, she would be lost—made Aurora perhaps the most courageous individual Satya had heard of.

Zenyatta shook his head. “No one could be sure. It was possible she could die in the attempt...and any chance of omniscient sentience would die with her. So perhaps now you better understand why we were so devastated when her statue was destroyed by your company’s development.”

“Vishkar wants to make things better for everyone.” The words came quickly, automatically. “I have worked on many projects that have improved lives by providing houses, clean drinking water, clinics.” *Luxury retreats. Exclusive clubs. Condominiums with prices as high as the skyscrapers that contained them...*

“I’m certain you have,” Zenyatta replied. “But helping people can take many forms.”

“It is important that you are happy.” She floated Sanjay’s suggestions, just to make sure. “Perhaps a retreat center. Or a new temple entirely.”

“We welcome all visitors, of course,” Zenyatta said, his gaze not on her, but on the ruined statue. “But in my life’s journey, I have seen too many things of beauty, of true spirit, become more tourist attraction than sacred space. Those who are meant to come here, will. Their path will be laid for them, stone by stone, as they walk it.

As for a new temple...this one still serves. While there is energy in the new, there is power in the ancient, Satya, even if it is fragile. When we are deep in meditation, we can almost hear the whispers of the myriad voices spoken within its walls over the last thousand and more years.”

Smell the incense, offered with love from many hands.

A soft chime interrupted her train of thought. “Ah!” said Zenyatta. “Time for the midday meal. A good place to begin your stay.” He cocked his head, reading her expression accurately. “I regret that my solution—having you stay here—distresses you. We find great comfort and purpose in our routines.”

“I do, too,” Satya said, adding as politely as she could, “my own, that is.”

“It means much that you are willing to undergo discomfort to fully embrace this project. Perhaps you will resonate with our routines? They are not difficult, and they occupy the body while filling the heart and mind. But first...let us fill your stomach.”

Upon entering the dining area, Satya paused. The scent of tamarind and turmeric, cumin and cardamom—these and other spices, along with the incense permeating the temple, combined into a powerfully nostalgic perfume. The food was simple but delicious vegetarian fare: rice, legumes, vegetables, cheeses, and milk. The omnic of course, could not eat, yet the food was wonderful.

“How did you manage to cook something so delicious without the ability to taste it?” she asked Zenyatta.

“We learned that in some traditions, priests were forbidden to taste the food as they cooked. Instead, they meditated on what to serve and how best to prepare it. We realized we had adopted that tradition. Our omnic priests study local ingredients to understand how humans perceive them. And then we, too, ask for guidance in their use.”

“Given that, frankly, I am amazed it is not terrible.”

“So were our first guests,” Zenyatta said, and laughed. She liked his laugh; that he was able to do so freely, at himself or at the absurdity of other things.

“Tell me more about your faith.”

He inclined his head. “As you now know, Aurora wished to discover the world, and how she might fit into it. To discover who she *was*.”

“Many faiths center around the search for enlightenment,” Satya said.

“That search lies at the heart of ours. When Aurora sacrificed herself, she transcended this existence, this way of being, and we strive to emulate her experience through meditation.”

“What happened to her?”

Zenyatta hesitated for a moment. “Only the handful of people in her physical presence bore witness to what occurred, and over time, of course, the mystery has only grown deeper. It is said she was engulfed in a great, golden light. She *expanded*. We strive to reach that place, that level of being, which we call the Iris. There, we are all one.”

“It is all very confusing. I want to understand more.”

“And so you shall. Once you have finished eating, I will show you more.”

After Satya was done, Zenyatta led her to another part of the temple. There, lit by the flickering of many candles, was a bas-relief of the moment of Aurora’s Transcendence.

Satya peered at it. Unlike the original statue, this figure was depicted as having eight arms. Two hands pressed together over the heart, a symbol in many cultures of love and respect for oneself and the universe. The other hands seemed to be reaching for small orbs. Behind the figure was a much larger sphere. Satya trailed her fingers over the cool, rough stone, curious.

The omnic monk leaned forward to tap Aurora’s image gently. “From one, many.” He indicated the arms. “We are all so much more than one simple thing. But also—many...” and he brought his finger back to the seated figure, “can become one.”

“You are all one in the Iris,” Satya said, softly.

“Exactly.”



***“WE ARE ALL SO
MUCH MORE THAN
ONE SIMPLE THING.”***

When Satya retired, she was directed to one of the small outlying buildings, open to the air and near a large pool filled with lotuses. There, she was given a simple sleeping mat and a folded temple robe. She regarded it for a long moment. There was already so much that was different; she wanted to control what she could. She should honor the temple traditions but was deeply reluctant to change her appearance. And she had told Zenyatta that she had not come as a pilgrim.

The gold and rust colors appealed to her, though, and the texture was pleasing. Satya knew what she had to do.

The next morning, Zenyatta greeted her warmly when she entered the shrine to begin her full day at the temple. "I am glad you chose to wear the robe," he said.

"I did not want to," Satya told him, "but I felt that I needed to show you I truly do wish to help."

"Ah," Zenyatta said, "that, I never doubted."

The days unfolded in a pattern that Satya initially found difficult. Upon rising, she and the pilgrims helped the priests tidy the main shrine, picking up smaller pieces of stone, then sweeping the area. Satya was told that a team of workers would be arriving in a few days, and the larger, much heavier pieces would be removed.

What pieces remained were cleansed with water, and flowers were scattered all around. The pilgrims broke their fast, then settled on pillows. When Satya first followed their lead, she was anticipating the priests would ask her to meditate. It was a practice she had attempted in the past but had found challenging. She was surprised when they gave the pilgrims each a metallic sphere that fit in the palms of their hands.

"These are the spheres we ourselves meditate upon," Zenyatta told her.

"Like those in the bas-relief."

He nodded. "I think for you...the Orb of Perception."

"So that I might best perceive what you need."

"Mmm," he said, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. "Move the orb from one hand to the other. Focus on its weight; how it feels. How it moves."

Soon the midday meal was served, then more chores, more meditation with the orbs, and finally sleep.

At some point during the first few days, Satya realized her body had adapted to the thin mat on the stone floor. The robe had become comfortable, familiar, and she liked the smoothness of it against her skin. When she felt anxious, wanting to shift position or do something with her hands, she rolled the orb back and forth. She wondered at her unusually strong appetite, and asked Zenyatta about it.

“You are paying active attention to it,” he said. “Just as you are paying attention to the rituals, the orb meditations, the temple chores.” He chuckled. “Our conversations.”

On the fourth day, she accompanied the priests into the center of the village, where they would prepare meals for anyone who was hungry. While ladling lentils over fragrant rice, Satya observed how Zenyatta and the other omnics interacted with the villagers. They seemed genuinely delighted to see the priests. There were many conversations: about the temple, about the Iris, about how their friends—as the people clearly viewed all the priests—were doing. There were also initially frowning, angry looks thrown Satya’s way; mutters that were clearly meant to be overheard.

Zenyatta, upon overhearing these mutters, stepped beside Satya. He said nothing, simply taking another spoon and serving alongside her. Some of the looks softened. Satya was not offended by the reactions but appreciated Zenyatta’s silent support.

Later, after the evening’s meditation on the orbs, Zenyatta asked Satya to stay after the others left. She shifted uneasily on the pillow. Every time she saw the ruined chunks of the statue, she wanted to do something about it.

“Did you enjoy our work today?” Zenyatta asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Although it is distressing to see so many still hungry.” She thought again of her childhood.

Zenyatta nodded somberly, and sighed. “And what happened after they ate? And during?”

“They talked. And shared. And...laughed.” She knew that there was so much to fear. To resent. To be angry about. And yet, they laughed.

“The food is made with care and offered freely. They do not have to give us money, or even share our faith. It doesn’t matter. We connect.” He gestured to the statue. “We have been doing this since Aurora stopped here, so many years ago.”

“They...are nourished,” Satya said. Her fingers shifted the Orb of Perception from one hand to the other, trying to keep up with her flying thoughts. “Not just by food.”

“There are many ways to feed that which hungers, Satya.”

“Food is the most important,” she said, practically.

“It is indeed,” he agreed. “If you tend to the body, the mind is freer. Open. Ready to change and learn.”

The orb was smooth in her hands, and she looked down at it. “For hard-light architects...We gather what we sense and bring it into being. Most of us use very precise movements. Exact. I can appreciate that. But at the same time...I’ve always found it hard to sit still.” The orb rolled from hand to the other. “But when I create...I use Kathak dance movements. As a child, when I felt agitated, dancing calmed me. I find the meditations with this,” she indicated the orb, “calm me, too.”

Satya avoided his gaze; she did not often discuss how personal the craft was to her. “Well,” she amended, “I use what I *remember* of the dance motions. My movements are far from perfect.”

“And yet, you dance to weave light,” Zenyatta said. “You bend reality, Satya, to produce art that has purpose. Perfect art is sterile. True art is like any kind of true thing...flawed, and glorious because of those flaws. Just as we are.”

He continued, his metallic voice warm. “There is a Japanese aesthetic philosophy called *wabi-sabi*. Essentially, it means that imperfections should be embraced and appreciated. Nature is not perfect. Certainly art should not be. There is even an art form that embodies this philosophy: *kintsugi*. It means, ‘golden joinery.’ When ceramics are broken, the pieces are gathered together and mended with gold.” Zenyatta turned his eyes to her.

“*Kintsugi* urges us to think differently. Instead of hiding something broken, celebrate it. Your passion for what you do elevates architecture beyond simple construction. Without blemishes, a house is just a building. Flaws and joys are what make it a home. Your dancing may be imperfect, but imagination, creativity—these things are not unharmonious with faith. They are *expressions* of it. As a matter of fact, there is a story that the universe itself...was *danced* into being.”

Satya had not been old enough to really understand faith and religion before she had been selected by Vishkar Corporation and trained as a hard-light architect. This...oh, how she wished she had heard it before now.

“How beautiful, Satya,” Zenyatta said, very softly, almost reverently. “How fitting, that you chose to come here, to help heal a holy place. You already touch the sacred.”

Satya had never felt so understood. So vulnerable, and yet so strong. She wanted to shout, laugh, dance, cry, sing, but did none of those things. Instead, she blinked back the tears, nodded her thanks at Zenyatta, and turned her eyes to the pieces of the broken statue, the Orb of Perception flowing between her hands. Now, she understood why Zenyatta had selected this particular orb. Perception did mean understanding...but it was understanding through the senses. The smoothness of the orb. The smell of incense. The taste of food mindfully prepared. The sound of soft voices, and the sight of something beautiful.

“I believe,” she said quietly, “I know what to do. But I am not sure there is enough time. We must begin at once.”

“We?”

“Yes. Union,” she said, and realized...she was smiling.



It had taken almost every waking hour of the days that remained of Satya’s stay, but she was ready for what Sanjay called the “unveiling,” although there was no veil. When Satya began to dress for the big event, she automatically reached for

the purple and white corporate uniform she had first arrived in. Then she paused, regarding instead the gold and rust robe she had worn during her stay.

Zenyatta was waiting to accompany her to the courtyard. When she emerged, he seemed surprised.

“But...you are not a pilgrim,” he said, referring to the temple robe she wore.

“What is a pilgrim, but someone who has embarked on a journey to a holy place?” she said, quoting his own words. “It is true that I did not intend to become one. Yet...here I am. This,” and she indicated the robe, “is the woman who learned about Aurora. So this is who I wish to be when I present my work to the world. Perhaps I will be her more often going forward, too. You have taught me that much in the world is sacred, even if it first seems ordinary. And there is always more to learn, especially from good teachers.”

Satya did not think she would ever learn to read the subtle changes that conveyed omniscient emotions. But she *felt*—there was no other word for it—that Zenyatta was deeply moved.

She and Zenyatta now stood in the same courtyard where the sarpanch, Ranesh Grewal, had admonished Satya a week ago. He was here now, too, along with temple priests, pilgrims, villagers, and others. He still looked like he didn't trust her.

“So,” came an amiable voice. “No retreat center, then.” Satya turned, surprised that Sanjay had come in person to the event.

“You will see,” she said.

He peered at her but nodded. “All right. Tamir from PR is standing by for damage control.”

“I do not think we will need it.”

“*Someone* is going to have a problem with *something*; they always do, you know that.”

He wasn't wrong, but Satya was not worried. “I have done my research, and I am confident in my design choice.” She turned to face the group. “Please follow me,” was all she said.

She led them through the corridor, hearing a soft murmuring as the crowd noticed the striations of gold in the walls and ceiling where gaping cracks or holes had once been. The missing chunks, the fractures, the fissures. The wounded places. All repaired, cemented with honey-hued light. Not hidden, but plain for all to see.

Kintsugi. Golden joinery.

There is energy in the new, but there is power in the ancient.

Blood in the veins. Electrical currents. Sinews that tie things together.

The group was quiet as they walked the path to the shrine's entrance. Satya paused at the step and took a deep breath.

"Vishkar Corporation accepts responsibility for the damage we unintentionally inflicted upon this temple," she said. "I was invited by Tekhartha Zenyatta to stay and learn about omnic history and their faith. About Aurora. You have seen how I have offered care to the temple itself. Now, I will show you my perception of omnics, the people of Suravasa, Aurora, and her temple."

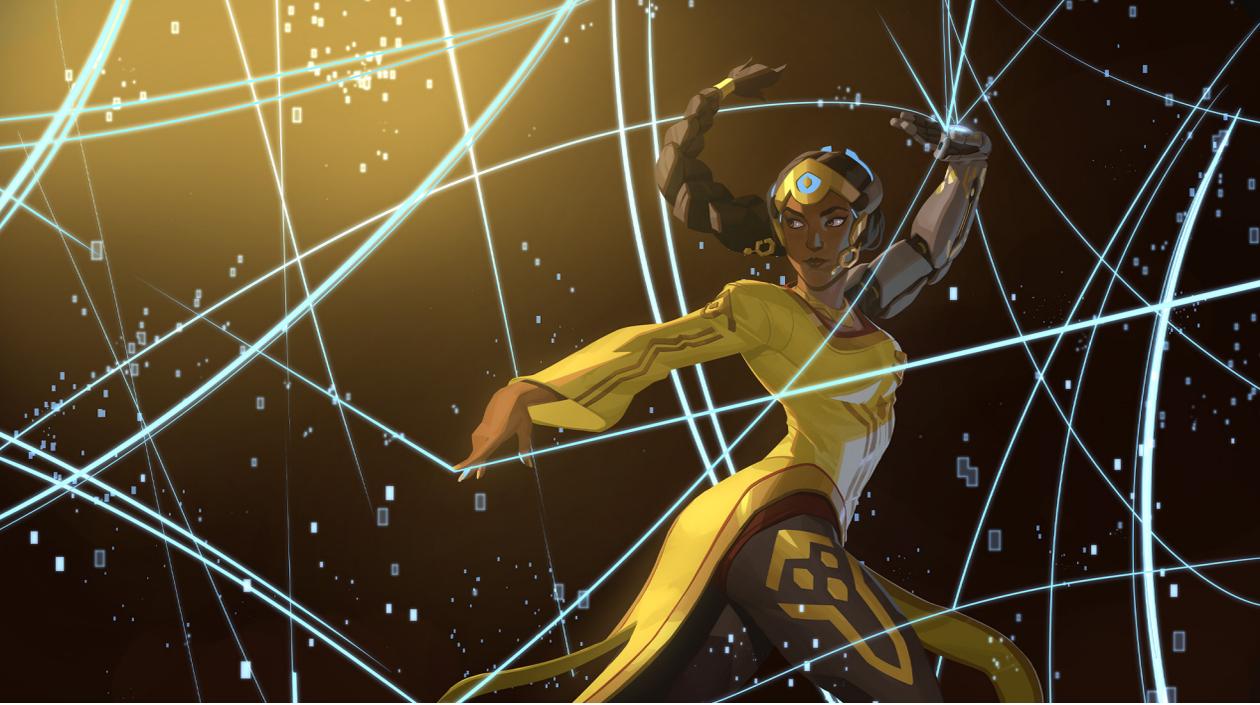
How I see Mondatta. Art.

How I see...myself.

We are all one in the Iris. She had been one with others, too, in a way, over the last few days. Aurora's statue had not been restored by her efforts alone. Satya had spoken with the laborers who had come intending to remove huge stone chunks, inviting them to instead help reassemble them. They, the priests, and the pilgrims had all worked beside her while her hard-light mended what had been broken.

And so, the statue had not been replaced. It had been transformed.

Sunlight bathed it in liquid gold. The enormous fragments that had toppled due to Vishkar's negligence were united by rivulets of aureate light. A necklace of seeming gold marked the joining of bowed head and throat. Hard-light also graced the once-fractured folds of clothing, bound articulated fingers again to hands that pressed together in devotion.



Satya had been moved by the Iris's concept of unity. But Aurora's story of transcendence touched her even more deeply. Satya's work here was not yet done. She lifted her arms, settled herself, and began to weave.

She reached into empty air, fingertips sensing, grasping, pulling.

Shifting the orb back and forth, back and forth.

Shifting perception.

Stretching the thin strand of golden-hued light between her fingers, gathering radiant threads into a ball, Satya thought of the wonder Aurora must have known; of her confusion and discomfort, and the great love that enabled the first omnic to surrender her unique, precious life for others. Now Satya too, surrendered, to her art, her passion—to the dance of creation.

She moved rapidly now. Eight small orbs appeared, one for each of the coalescing, delicate arms that looked like shadows of gold and two above the statue's head on either side. One set of arms reached down. *To lift others.* The middle set was spread wide. *To bless and welcome seekers.* And the final two hands pressed their palms together over the head, echoing the position of those over the heart. *Unity.*

One last thing.

For the final time, she began to weave light into threads so thin that, as she directed them to whirl around the statue, they were almost transparent; so thin as to slip beneath the statue's heavy base. Rings of seeming fire laid upon themselves, encircling the statue in a large, radiant orb. Satya raised her hands. There was an audible gasp in the shrine as the heavy statue began to rise from its lotus flower base, borne aloft by the translucent, golden sphere of hard-light.

Satya exhaled a deep breath and lowered her arms.

Utter silence...and then, soft murmuring. Slowly, people moved toward the hovering statue encased in the hard-light orb, their upturned faces bathed with its light.

"Ms. Vaswani?" She turned at the voice. Sarpanch Grewal stood beside her, smiling. "Forgive me. I misjudged you. This couldn't be more perfect."

"Yes, it could," Satya said. "That is precisely the point."

Grewal looked after her, bemused, as she nodded politely and threaded her way through the crowd. It was already starting to feel too close for her.

Zenyatta awaited her outside. He handed her a small box. "To remember us by." A scent wafted up—incense.

"Thank you," she said. "Nothing could be better."

"You are always welcome here," he said. To the approaching Sanjay, he remarked, "Every dawn brings a new chance to choose our paths. I hope Vishkar Corporation sees that now." He bowed, then turned, heading back to the courtyard.

Sanjay's gaze followed him. "Your choice," Sanjay said, turning back to Satya. "Not what I expected."

"Are you disappointed?"

He shook his head, his brow furrowed, but not in anger. In...puzzlement? "Actually, no. I said give them whatever they wanted, and...you did. It's beautiful, Satya. Exactly right. Although, why did you choose yellow light, and not blue?"

"It is how the moment was described to me," she said. "Also...blue is a beautiful color, but it is cold. This is a temple dedicated to remembering the ultimate act of love: self-sacrifice. And love...is *warm*."



People were now looking in her direction and smiling; it did not escape Sanjay's notice.

"Seems you've left a bit of yourself here. Will you miss this place?"

"I will miss being with people who think almost the same way I do," Satya admitted. "But I have learned that we do not need to understand how someone thinks in order to respect them." *Or even*, she thought, *be their friend*. "It is enough for me to know this temple is here. Like this."

Their path will be laid for them, stone by stone, as they walk it.

She turned to face Sanjay. "This should be how we interact. With respect. As welcomed friends. Trying to understand...and be understood. There is much that Vishkar can do here...but it must perceive *how* to do it."

Sanjay seemed perplexed, turning back to look at the shining statue that was the same as it had been, yet so very different.

"I think," said Sanjay Korpai in a voice that was soft, almost surprised, "you may be right."







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