

THE  
LIVING  
SHAH



A SHORT BY  
BEN KREIS

# The Living Shah

by

Ben Kreis

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Shah. Shah.

I heard the sound long before I knew it was rhythmic repeating voices.  
I passed through a narrow gap in the cavern and the whole scene came into view.

Shah. Shah.

A thousand people on their faces at the base of a wide stone pillar, their voices united. On the pillar above them stood a metal man. He seemed to have a robe of many strands running down his back, winding around the platform then ascending high up into a gap in the ceiling above.

Shah. Shah.

On the narrow steps leading up the side of the pillar crouched an emaciated man. He was naked except for a rag wrap about his waist and a high turban on his head. There were golden bracelets about his wrists and ankles.

His head was bowed and in his outstretched arms was an infant still wet from birth. The babies face was stretched wide in a cry but the sound of it was lost in the chanting of the crowd.

Shah. Shah.

The metal man took the child by the head and held it aloft for the bowing masses. The chanting rose to a high pitched scream.

SHAH! SHAH!

It opened it's mouth wide and lowered the child...

SHAH! SHAH!

I clamped my hands over my ears and squeezed my eyes shut to cut of the wicked vision. How long I stood like this I do not know. But when I looked again the chant had ceased and all eyes were on me.

The metal man was pointing to me, blood running down its chin. The Priest in the turban took off like a shot, weaving his way through the crowd and up the incline to me.

I was terrified but unable to flee.

Gripping my arm with an unexpected strength, the Priest drug me to the base of the pillar.

“Bow before the Living Shah!” He hissed, pushing me down.

But I did not avert my gaze as the others did. My curiosity overcame my fear.

I could see now the form of the creature more clearly. Its body was an intricate working of steel and piston, gear and cog. Braided cords connected to its back and neck running in a tangled mass to the floor and then rising upward to the ceiling above.

Its voice sounded hollow and electric.

“Come.”

I was pulled up the steps onto the flat top of the pillar.

The robot turned, trailing his braided robe. I could hear the mechanical whir of its muscles flexing. It seated itself on a wide square stool in the center of the pillar. The pillar shuddered and began to ascend leaving the crowd far below.

There was a dull light in the robots eyes. It regarded me with an unreadable look.

The pillar reached the ceiling, sliding through the gap like a key in a lock. The upward motion ceased. We were inside of a dimly lit chamber lined with red curtains.

The hollow voice rang in the chamber, “Why do you not bow in my presence, man?”

Even in my trembling I could not keep myself from speaking plainly.

“You are obviously the invention of man.” I said, “I need not fear a machine.”

The Priest at my side struck me hard across the back of the head. For a moment my vision blurred.

“My body is the work of men, true. But my life is the work of no man.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You speak expecting me to understand. And understand I do for I am Living and active. My jaws are sharper than a two-edged sword dividing meat from bone.”

“No! NO! I cannot believe it. It isn’t possible for a metal man to have life as we have it.” I leaned away from the Priest, “What we have is given to us by our Maker. By God himself.”

The robot chuckled. The Priest raised his hand, but the robot held up a hand and the priest lowered it again.

“Your ancestor is the ape or the soup of ages long past. Do not look to your origins for an imprint of meaning. I am the apex of man’s pursuit to crown itself. I am man’s glory and man’s god.”

The robot rose from its throne and advanced upon me ominous and dangerous. Its jaw was twitching slightly still stained by the blood of the child.

It gripped a hand-full of my hair pulling me upward. My feet left the ground. My hands grappled for a hand hold to lessen the pain of my scalp. My right hand found the monster’s wrist, my left a thick cord running out of its neck.

“My body is stronger than a man’s. My mind is more intelligent. I cannot hunger. I cannot die. I cannot fail.”

Suddenly the cord I gripped loosened and snapped free under the strain of my hand.

The monster froze, its head dropping slightly, the light in its eyes fading. Its hand loosened dropping me and its arms fell to its sides.

For a moment the Priest was stunned. Then he threw himself down to the floor and began the vigorous chant.

Shah. Shah.

I regarded the cord in my hand. The terror had passed for I had killed the robot god. Now I wanted nothing less than the truth.

The cords ran around the room in wide concentric circles then up to a hook on the ceiling then down to the floor again, disappearing finally under the curtains at the back of the room.

I went and pulled the curtain upwards. And there I perceived the source of the robot’s life.

In a small chair sat an old man encircled by monitors. At his hands a hundred controls and levers. He regarded me with something of horror. His skin was wrinkled and pale. His form thin. His

face was bedecked by unkempt hair and beard.

Raising a shaky finger, he gestured for me to lower the curtain, his furtive glance taking in the bowing Priest.

I saw his game instantly and devised to thwart it.

“Look!” I shouted over my shoulder. “Behold your god!”

The Priest raised his head slightly, his chant dropping to a whisper.

His eyes took in the whole scene, his mind processing what was before him. Then his expression changed and I knew he understood. Rage filled his face.

He jumped up and ran to me. With a tremendous strength he pushed me and I fell onto my back. The curtain fell concealing him and the old man. I heard the old man cry out.

I struggled to get up but my arms and legs were instantly entangled in the cords.

Just as I extricated myself, the curtain lifted and the Priest reappeared. Behind him I glimpsed the form of the old man lying on the floor, his body still, at his throat the Priests handprints. He was dead.

The pillar shuddered and began to descend.

The Priest went to the robot. Regarding it with wet eyes, he kissed it. Then he took of his turban and golden bands and laid them at the feet of the machine.

Without warning the Priest leapt from the platform.

Below a hundred voices cried out.

I ran to the edge of the pillar. The Priest’s crumpled form lay amidst the crowd, a pool of red spreading on the dirt under him.

The pillar came to its resting place. The faces of the crowd turned upward to me standing there beside their dead god.

It was then that I knew my peril. What would they do once they realized I had killed their god. And would they blame me for the death of their Priest?

But no one made a move. I took my chance and fled down the stairs, through the crowd and back up the incline.

Just as I reached the narrow gap, I heard it again.

Shah. Shah.

Turning I glimpsed the crowd on their faces before their god. They did not know that the Living Shah was dead.

THE END