

The rhythm of resolve thrummed softly in the back of Eshonai's mind as she reached the plateau at the center of the Shattered Plains. Neurock. Exile. Home.

She ripped the helm of the shard plate from her head, taking a deep breath of cool air. Plate ventilated wonderfully, but even it grew stuffy over time. Other soldiers landed behind her. She had taken about fifteen hundred on this run. It had been an easy one; they'd arrived soon before the humans and had harvested the gemheart with minimal fighting. Devi carried it; he'd earned the privilege by being the one to spot the chrysalis from afar. Almost she wished it had not been so simple a run. Almost.

*Where are you Blackthorn?* She thought, looking westward. *Why have you not come to face me again?* Nearby her soldiers passed, raising hands in farewell as they went their separate ways. Most softly sung or hummed a song to the mourning rhythm. These days few sung to excitement or even to resolve. Step by step, storm by storm, her people were sinking into a mire of depression.

She turned back and strode towards the ruins that dominated Neurock. After so many years there still wasn't much left of them. Ruins of ruins one might call them. The touch of men and Parshendi alike did not last long before the might of the high storms. That peaked rock formation ahead? That had probably once been a spire. Over the decades it had grown a patina of crem from the raging storms. That soft crem had seeped into cracks, lines between stones and filled windows, then slowly hardened. The spire now looked like an enormous stalagmite, rounded point towards the sky, sides knobbed with rock that looked as if it had been melted. The spire must have had a strong core to survive the winds so long.

Other specks of ancient engineering had not fared so well. Eshonai passed lumps and mounds, remnants of fallen building that had slowly been consumed by the shattered planes. The storms were unpredictable; at times huge sections of rock would break free from formations leaving jagged lips and gouges. Other times spires would stand for centuries, growing, not shrinking as the winds weathered them.

Eshonai herself had discovered these ruins years ago, just before her expedition that had first encountered humans. Only five years ago now, but also an eternity. She remembered what it had felt like, striking out, exploring a wide world she had thought infinite. And now... now she spent her life trapped on this one plateau.

The wilderness called to her, sung that she should gather up a few weapons, and a pack and strike out alone. See what the world had to offer as she'd always promised herself that she would. That would not be her fate, not any longer. Increasingly it seemed that her fate, and that of every Parshendi, would be to die upon the swords of the humans.

She passed in the shadow of a lump of rock that she had always imagined looked like a kind of city gate. From what little they'd learned from their spies over the years, the humans did not know, did not understand. They marched over the uneven surface of the plateaus and saw

only natural rock, never knowing that they stepped on the tomb of a city long dead. Eshonai shivered and attuned the rhythm of the lost. It was a soft beat, yet still violent with sharp separated notes. She did not attune it for long; remembering the fallen was important, but working to protect the living was more so.

She attuned back to resolve and entered Neurock. Here they had built the best home they could during the years of war. Rocky shelves had become barracks, carapace from greatshells forming walls and roof. Mounds that had once been buildings now grew rock buds for food on the leeward side. All the Shattered Plains had once been populated, but the largest congestion of buildings had been here at the center. And so the ruins of her people made their home in the ruins of the old city. They named it Neurock, exile, for it was where they had come to be separated from their gods.

Parshendi, both malen and femalen raised hands to her as she passed. She felt inexperienced to be their general, but with the casualties their forces had taken during the years fighting on the Shattered Plains they were lucky to have any officers left, let alone Shardbearers. The humans were relentless in their search for vengeance. She didn't blame them; she'd probably have been the same in their position.

She turned toward the Hall of Art. It was nearby. and she hadn't put in an appearance there for days. Inside, the soldiers did a horrible job of painting. Eshonai strode among them, still wearing her shardplate, helm under her arm. The long building had no roof and walls, particularly the stormward one, were thick with long hardened crem. They had discussed covering the ceiling with a carapace roof, but doing so was difficult and the truth was that none of the art inside was worth protecting from highstorms. In truth most of it was better off being ruined. Still they tried. Paper was beyond their capabilities to make out here on the Plains so they used shell as canvas.

Using thick bristled brushes the soldiers tried their best to paint copies of the arrangement of rock bud flowers on the pedestal at the center. Eshonai did a round of the artists looking their products. And they were awful. Splotches of garish color, off center petals. Eshonai paused beside Vranis, one of her lieutenants. He held the brush delicately between armored fingers, a hulking form before a canvas. Plates of chitin armor grew from his arms, shoulders head and even chest. They were matched by her own.

"You're getting better." Eshonai said to him, speaking to the rhythm of praise. He looked at her and hummed softly to skepticism. Eshonai chuckled, resting a hand on his shoulder. She leaned in. "It actually looks like flowers, Vranis, I mean it."

"It looks like some muddy water on a brown plateau," he said, "maybe with some brown leaves floating in it. Why do colors turn brown when they mix? Three beautiful colors put together and they become the least beautiful color. It makes no sense general."

General. At times she felt as awkward in the position as these men did trying to paint pictures. She wore war form, as she needed the armor for battle, but she preferred work form, more limber, more rugged. It wasn't that she disliked leading these men, but doing the same thing every day, drills, plateau runs. That numbed her mind. She wanted to be seeing new things, going new places. Instead she joined her people in a long funeral vigil as one by one they died.

*No, we will find a way out of it*, she thought. The art was a piece of that, she hoped. By her order each man or woman took a turn in the Hall of Art, on schedule at their appointed time. And they tried, they tried hard. So far it had been about as successful as trying to leap a chasm when the other side was out of sight. "No spren?" she asked.

"Not a one." He spoke it to the rhythm of mourning. She heard that rhythm far too often these days.

"Keep trying," she said, "We will not lose this battle for lack of effort."

"But general," Vranis said, "hat is the point? Having artists won't save us from the swords of the humans." Nearby other soldiers turned towards her.

"Artists won't help" she said to the rhythm of peace, "but my sister is confident that she is close to discovering new forms. We need to know the process of change. If we can discover how to create artists then it might help with her research."

Vranis nodded. He was a good soldier, not all of them were. War form did not magically make one more obedient. Unfortunately it did hamper one's artistic skill. Eshonai had tried painting. She couldn't think the right way, couldn't grasp the abstractions needed to create art. War form was a good form, versatile. It didn't impede thought like mating form did. You were yourself when you were war form, same with work form. But each had their quirks. A worker had difficulty committing violence, there was a block in the mind somewhere. It was one of the reasons she liked the form, it forced her to think differently in order to get around problems. Neither form could create art. Well, not well at least.

Mating form was better, but it came with a whole host of other problems. Keeping those types focused on anything productive was almost impossible. There were two other forms, though the first, dull form, was rarely used. It was not a keen minded form, instead it was a relic of the past before they'd rediscovered something better. That left only thin form, a general form that was lithe and careful. They used it for nurturing young and for doing the kinds of work that required more nimbleness than brawn. Few could be spared for that form, though it was the best of the four at art.

The old songs spoke of hundreds of forms, now they knew only five. Well, six if you

counted slave form, the form with no spren, no soul, and no song. The form the humans were accustomed too, the one they called parshmen. It wasn't a form however, but a lack of a form.

Eshonai left the hall of art helm under her arm and passed through the watering square. Here a large pool had been created by workers in nimble, sculpting crem that caught rain during the riddens of the storm, thick with nourishment. Workers carried buckets. Their forms were strong although they had thinner fingers and no armour. Many nodded to her, though. as a general she had no authority over them. Still, she was one of the last Shardbearers they had, and that afforded her some respect. A group of three mating forms, two females, one male, played in the water, splashing at one another. “

You three,” Eshonai snapped at them, “shouldn't you be doing something?” They stood up straight, barely clothed they dripped with what others would be drinking. Plump, fatty, and vapid, they grinned at Eshonai.

“Come in,” one called, “its fun.”

“Out,” Eshonai said, pointing. The three muttered to the rhythm of irritation as they climbed from the water. Nearby several workers shook their heads as they passed. One sang to praise in appreciation to Eshonai. Workers did not like confrontation. It was an excuse, of course, just as those who took on mating form used that as an excuse for their inane activities. Eshonai had been a worker, she preferred it and had trained herself to confront when needed. She had also been a mate at one point, everyone tried it if just out of curiosity. In her case, it had been a disaster. Regardless, she had seen firsthand that one could indeed focus as a mate, could be productive despite distractions. People relied too much on their forms to construct how they should act. However, with depressing inevitability hanging over the city she saw more and more that people were giving up on decisions. They were allowing the easy answers to guide them, the instincts given by their forms. It frightened her.

She spoke to reprimand to the mating forms, her words so passionate that she actually attracted spren. Angerspren, like lightening moving away from her across the ground, as if the stone were electrified. That put the fear of the gods into them, thankfully, and they ran off to report to the Hall of Art as she'd instructed. Hopefully, they'd actually arrive. More likely they'd end up in an alcove along the way. Her stomach churned at the thought. She'd never been able to fathom people who wanted to remain in mating form. Most people, in order to have families, would lock themselves away with the specific mate and enter the form, then be out of it by the next highstorm, and gladly. Who would want to go about in public like that? The humans did it. That had baffled her when she'd first encountered them, during those early days, learning their language, trading with them. Humans not only did not change forms, but they were always ready to mate, always distracted by those urges. It was normal to them.

What she wouldn't have given to be able to go among them unnoticed, to adopt their monochrome skin for a year and walk their roadways, see their grand cities, explore. There

were so many new things to see. She wanted to investigate them all, experience them all. Instead, she and the others had ordered the murder of their king in a desperate gambit to stop the Parshendi gods from returning. Well, that hadn't worked out.

She finally reached her home, at least the rock formation she called home. It had once been a dome, though much smaller than the ones the humans had claimed as their warcamps. Her people lived in those before abandoning them for the security of the Shattered Plains with its chasms the humans couldn't jump. During the early days of living here, her sister had used greatshell carapace to augment the dome, building actual walls to divide chambers, crafting a roof to fill the fallen-in hole above. The carapace was screwed together carefully, though screws were a rare commodity. There was no ore to mine out here and smelting down weapons for screws, well, even with fewer and fewer soldiers to use those weapons, it seemed imprudent.

Still, it was amazing what Venley had created. A home that, for the most part, weathered highstorms with little need for repairs. Over five years, Venley had used crem spread across the roof, letting it harden to create further protection. Eshonai set her helm on the table just inside the dome but left the rest of her armor on. Shardplate felt right to her, she liked the feeling of strength. It let her know that something was still solid in the world

She ducked through a few rooms, nodding to the people inside. Venley's associates, scholars, though they did not know the proper form for that. Again there were songs, but they did not know the right spren to bond. Still, nimble form worked for now, not impeding their minds and giving the delicate fingers need for recording their findings.

Eshonai found her sister beside the window of the furthest chamber. Demid, her once-mate, sat next to her. Venley had held this form for three years, as long as they'd known it. Though in Eshonai's mind's eye, she still saw her sister as a worker, with thicker arms and stouter torso. That was the past. Now Venley was a slender woman with a thin face, her marblings delicate, with swirling patterns of red and white. Nimble form grew long hair-strands, with no carapace helm to block it. Venley kept hers down to her waist, tied in three places. It was a deep, dark red. She wore a robe, tied tight at the waist, that showed a hint of breasts. She was femalen, not a mating form, so they were small.

Venley and her once-mate were close, though their time as actual mates had produced no children. Had they gone to the battlefield, they'd have been a warpair. Instead, they were a reasearch pair, or something. The things they spent their days doing were very unParshendi-like. That was the point. They as a people could not afford to simply be what they had been in the past. The days of lounging on these plateaus, isolated, singing songs to one another were gone.

"Well?" Venley asked to curiosity as she noticed her sister.

"We won," Eshonai said, leaning back against the wall and folding her arms with a clink

of Shardplate. "The gemheart is ours, we will continue to eat."

"That is well," Venley said, "And your human?"

"Dalinar Kholin. He did not come to this battle."

"He will not," Venley said. "You nearly killed him last time." She sang it to the rhythm of amusement as she rose, picking up a piece of paper, they made it from dried pulp following a harvest, and handing it to her once-mate. He nodded, looking it over, then took it and began making notes on his own sheet.

That paper required precious time and resources to make, but Venley insisted the reward would be worth the effort. *She better be right. Not that we have many other choices*, Eshonai thought. *Either Venley finds what she's been seeking or...*

Venley turned to regard her. She had keen eyes, all glassy and dark, like all Parshendi. Yet hers always seemed to have a depth to them, a knowledge. In the right light, they had a violet cast to them.

"What would you do, sister," Venley asked, "if you and this Kholin were able to actually stop killing one another long enough to have a conversation?"

"I'd sue for peace."

"We killed his brother," Venley said. "We murdered the man in the night when he invited us into his home. This is not something the humans will simply forget."

Eshonai unfolded her arms and flexed her gauntleted hands. That night, a desperate plan made between herself and four others. She had been part of it, despite her youth, because of her knowledge of the humans. All had voted the same. Kill the man, kill him and risk destruction. For if he had lived to do what he had told him that night, all would have been lost. The other four who had made that decision were dead now, three in battle, one by a common accident.

"I have discovered the secret of storm form," Venley said.