

Prologue

“Hold still, girl. Almost got the last of it off.”

I flinched at each swift scratch against my stopped eyelids. They itched maddeningly, and it took the tensing of every vein of restraint in my body to stop myself from rubbing them with my palms. The raven-voiced elder kept on reassuring me that he would have the varnish off my eyes soon. The scraping and picking of his fingernails, and the wretched sound thereof, made my teeth ache dully.

I had woken upon what I had determined to be a threadbare rug over wooden boards. The air was cold and still, and I felt dust lining my tongue and the insides of my cheeks. My eyes would not open. When I put my fingers to them, I found that they had each been occluded by a disc of smooth enamel, flush with the contours of my face. I tried to peel it off, but found that I was just tugging at my own skin. When I picked at it, my unnailed fingers slid frictionlessly off the substance. My scalp prickled at the chill, and when my hand went to the back of my head, I discovered that I was hairless. Not even stubble. I was not, however, bare- some kind of coarse shift covered me down to my knees and sleeved me to just below my shoulder. I was feeling for any other absences when I heard a shifting and scuffing on the floorboards, and it shames me to admit that I gave a clipped yelp when the man spoke.

“They finally sent you, eh, girl? Days are not a currency we can afford to squander yet those spendthrifts bid me wait full months.” I fancy I could hear his bones creaking as he lowered himself before me, his hot, sour breath upon my face. “It’s as it ever is, I suppose.”

A dozen desperate questions bubbled up from my throat and rolled across my tongue, only to crash and break against my closed lips. They were not sealed as my eyes were- they merely would not part. “The time for our parlay will come later, girl. For now, sit pretty and let me work on your eyes.”

So I found myself cross-legged on the floor, trying not to squirm as the man with a voice like a desert wind picked at the substance adhered to my eyes. Finally, enough had been removed that I could crack open my left eyelid. A flake of enamel fell into my eye with no lashes to catch it, and I had to blink to force it out, but at last I could make sense of the scene I had found myself caught in.

He, too, was hairless. Grey, papery skin wrapped tightly around an angular skull, a sharp nose, and two fierce orange eyes buried deep in the sockets of his eyes. Specks of yellow detritus dotted the skin around those sockets, matching the pile of yellow flakes gathering on the floor between us. Unlike me, he had fingernails- long, sharp ones which tapped and scooped at my unopened eye.

The carpet I had felt was a sun-bleached pale blue, torn in places to reveal the dark wood planks beneath. These same planks made up the room’s ceiling, from which a single lantern hung on a short line. Behind the cadaverous man crouched before me I could make out part of a bay window, behind which all was dark. The walls were papered yellow, but the paper was peeling itself free, revealing more dark wood beneath. I saw no doors, no portals besides the window, and no furniture save for a low cabinet of three drawers.

I wrenched my right eye open. The man heaved himself off the ground with a snapping of joints and brushed the yellow chips from his fingers. I think the expression he made next was an attempt at

a smile, but the corners of his mouth trembled at the exertion of stretching his lips so wide, and quickly snapped back into place. “Try to stand, girl. Try to speak.”

I accomplished the first; my knees snapped as I straightened my legs and my left leg almost went out from under me, but I managed to place my feet apart in a wide stance. The second took longer. My lips could open now, but the first attempts at words came out as no more than a rasp. It was surely obvious what I was trying to ask, for the man glanced around and swept his arm in a stiff arc before him.

“This is a used-up place. A vessel that never made it to port, although we steered it well as we could.” Webs of cobalt lightning split the flat darkness behind the window, but they did not vanish, instead remaining as if the glass itself were cracked. “They’ve done all they needed to here. They won’t return. They won’t find us. Now come along, girl, we have a great many tasks before us here.”

He brushed past me, causing me to spin unsteadily. The room did have a door after all- it had been to my back before. Like every other surface of the room, the door was a plain, dark wood. The man yanked the metal bolt and pulled the door open.

I gazed wonderingly at the obsidian sky etched with frozen bolts of every colour. Even as I looked on, more branching forks of lightning appeared and hung in midair, illuminating in technicolour the dry, dead grass and skeletal trees surrounding me. The room I had found myself in turned out to be the whole interior of a cabin which stood alone atop a hill. And above the shack- above all of this left-behind place- hung a shifting, miasmic ball the colour of a long-festering wound.

The fierce-eyed man, who had marched ahead some ways, came back to stand beside me. “We salvaged as much as we could, but always there remain the dregs.” It almost sounded as though he were trying to reassure me. “They probably kept burning a while after we vacated, long enough for the passengers to say goodbye to their works, and ours.” A hand on my shoulder, indicating that I should follow. “It’s not a mercy.”

At long last, words burst from my mouth. “I don’t understand any of this! Why am I here? And who are you? And how did you bring me here?”

The man froze, turned to me once again, and hunkered down to look me in the eyes. The expression in his own was a mixture of panic and rage. He buried his face in his hands and pressed his palms against his eyes.

“They’ve sent the wrong- oh, this cannot be. All the planning, all the calculating... *months!* Months here, putting everything in order when we have not days to spare, and they sent the wrong pilot!” He fixed his eyes upon mine once again. “How much do you know? Did the Tenblooded reach out to you? Or Corillian? Oh, what am I thinking? Plainly, you know nothing.”

He clasped me roughly by the arm and practically dragged me back into the cabin. My head spun, and the sound of my own heart drowned out the man’s hoarse ravings. He threw me to the ground and fumbled with the door’s bolt. I tried to regain my footing but he drove his bare foot into the side of my head. My vision blurred, but I watched as he took a black pot from the cabinet and thrust two fingers into it. His fingers came out yellow. He pinned me by the throat with his other hand and daubed the stuff over my right eye.

Before my left eye was once again sealed, I saw that his expression had changed. He was not incensed anymore; instead, his eyes betrayed an overwhelming sense of defeat.

That was my first peek behind the curtain. The incepting vision of the rigging, and of the sailors desperately worrying at it. I now know why the tongue of the Diraantil renders “world” as *chalx*. I

have navigated the horizonless oceans of Day and Night, and I have alighted on the Last Port. And all from a mistake- a mismeasurement in a plan laid an incomprehensible multiplicity of lifetimes before my birth. Even now, as I shield my eyes against the gathering fleets coming into port in my wake, the thought plays and replays in my mind: would we have arrived on these shores, were it not for that careless mistake? Would we have floundered eternally in one gyre or another, or drifted into sargassum and suffocated as one vessel had long before us? I could not say.