

Prologue

The raucous bar was booming through the night, full of the sound of music and joy. Inside the crowd shared drinks, sweat, and saliva. They blended and bashed, mixed and matched, as the light of the night smiled down from the arc above.

Temara was moving in her own dance behind the bar, weaving between the others also struggling to serve the crowd. Each glass she filled was empty before it could leave her hand. She was carrying eight glasses in her hands, one finger woven around the handle of each. She flicked the spout of a barrel open to fill each glass. As each filled to the top, she turned the tap off with the base of the glass held in her pinky. Turning to the front, a newer server hastily pushed through, bumping into Temara's full hands and sending a cascade of beer and glass to the ground. Another glass hit the ground after as the server dropped her own glass, holding her mouth in shame. Temara grabbed a rag from her waist and began drying up the ground and picking out the glass.

"mara I'm so sorry," the server shouted down to her.

"It's fine. Just get another eight glasses for the group at the end," Temara shouts back.

Shoveling the glass carefully into her palm, Temara carries the mess to the back door and tosses it out into the sand. With the tide how it has been lately, the glass will rejoin the beach properly within the month. Returning to the front, she pauses before turning the corner, shuts her eyes, and takes a deep breath. The air tastes of the sea and the commotion inside, but for this one moment, she's at peace. As she entered the back of the bar, someone was waiting for her. The man was both larger and smaller than most men but assuredly out of place. Other than towering over most of the usuals that came in, he also had more clothes on. While most settled for the same rags they wore the whole day, likely because it was all they had, this man stood in a clean white linen shirt with and black linen jacket too wide at the shoulders and hiding his thumbs. The only men Temara had seen in such clothes before were the men that owned the trade companies and their jackets did not hide their thumbs. Despite his clothing, his sharp jaw and messy tree-top hair were endearing Temara until he opened his mouth.

"Hi, uh, can I have a glass of Glaendier?"

Temara scoffed, "The fuck kind of bar do you think this is?"

The man's light blue eyes widened and he reeled, "Gods I'm sorry. I have never been to a bar before."

Temara looked back at the man quizzically, but a smile slowly drew on her face.

"Okay first timer, then what kinda drink would you like? Hopefully something that I have this time."

The man thought for a moment, "What's your favorite drink?"

Temara shot back with one of the easier drinks she knew to make, “A rum lemonty.”

“Perfect. One of those then!”

Temara grabbed a fresh glass from underneath the bar, turned around, filled half the glass with spiced tea before grabbing a bottle of cheaper rum, adding two splashes, then returning to the man with his drink. She reached into a box under the counter where they left the candied fruits, grabbed a slice of lemon, and dropped it into the man’s glass. Her finger smoothly pushed the glass toward him

“One glass of rum lemonty for the first timer. That’ll be five, love.”

The man reaches into a pocket on the inside of his too-large jacket and reveals five small gold squares. Temara quickly reaches out and pushes the man’s hand into his surprisingly strong chest.

“Are you kidding?” Temara slowly surveyed around them, “Five *pez*, not reagues. Gods, half the people in here would be lucky to see one of those in a quarter, if they even get paid in real money.”

The man dons an apologetic face as he puts the coins back in his pocket and searches for other coins, “Do the people here not get paid properly?”

“If they do, it’s in company money they can only spend at the company shop on the company dock. We take the company money because of how close we are to port, but also because we can get most of what we need at those shops anyway.” The man produces five small steel triangles and sets them in Temara’s palm. Temara tosses the coins into the money box under the counter before wiping her hands on a second rag tucked into her pants.

“That’s a shame. I never knew they kept the divide that large.” The man sips from his cup, pausing after the first contemplatively. If it was to think over the taste or the revelation, Temara wasn’t sure.

“What’s your name, love?” Temara asks, “And what are you doing in a place like this?”

The man takes another small sip from his glass before setting it down, “My name is Quentyn LeGytt and quite honestly? I’m not sure.”

“Really? People like you don’t just end up on small port islands by accident.”

“No no, it’s nothing like that. Seven days ago I had never been this far south, much less stepped foot off solid ground, ,” Quentyn says, “But something told me I should climb aboard and join that specific crew.”

Temara took another look at Quentyn, making more sense of this young man out of place in front of her before drawing more sense.

"You," she pauses, "You're leaving on the Kentraza Zero tomorrow, aren't you?"

Quentyn sighs, taking another sip from his glass, "I sure am."

"You can't be any older than me – why sign your life away so young?"

"Well the journey is long and, as a young scholar, there's nothing more thrilling than discovering a new world."

"Do you think you'll even make it?"

"I hope," Quentyn takes a long drink, quickly regretting it and shivering as the sweet alcohol slides down, "And if I do, it will make a great story."

Temara lets out a laugh, "A story? Would I be in it? The last chapter before you set off on your great journey?"

"Would you like to be?"

"Would you believe I have never been with a woman before?" Quentyn says softly as he faces Temara.

"From how you struggled finding me, yes I can," Temara kisses the tip of his nose as they lay, the first rays of orange light finding their way into the room, "But I love taking the lead."

Temara joins Quentyn at the port, the sun rising over them. Sitting in port were a handful of simple cargo vessels, but one ship stood out from the rest. Its seven golden sails flapped in the warm sea breeze. Its bow pointed to a sharp point: a golden bird with red wooden accents and a sharp spear-like beak.

"A Finnean sea heron," Quentyn says, "Around to nest for one month and then never seen until the following year. Some say that month is the only time they aren't flying"

"Quite fitting for the journey then."

"Yes, except it will be nine years before we can come back."

"You're saying I have to wait nine years before you can give me more bird facts?"

Quentyn reaches into his satchel and removes a large leatherbound journal with various colored ribbons poking from between the pages, "This is full of bird facts and information about our world. There's even some star charts if you find yourself abroad." He hands the notebook to Temara, "It has all of my notes from all of my classes from the last six years."

"Quentyn, love, I can barely read," Temara says sorrowfully, "What am I going to do with this?"

“Learning is my life. Sharing what I learn is my love. This book holds everything I know and I want you to keep it.” Quentyn leans down and kisses Temara, “You are more capable than you think yourself. I believe in you.”

From the deck of the Kentraza Zero, a brass bell lets out five loud rings that linger in the morning sky around them. Uncoupling, Quentyn holds his face close to Temara. She takes a final smell of the light vanilla scent on his shirt and what remained of their night together.

“I’ll be here when you get back.” Temara whispers to him, surprised by the words and her feelings for a wonderful stranger.

“Be here, but don’t stay here,” Quentyn says back, “This world – this life – has too much to offer to not experience it. Go live and, should you have me when I return, perhaps we can live together.”

Temara stands on the dock as Quentyn climbs up the wooden ramp onto the Kentraza Zero, his messy hair flapping in the breeze like the sails behind him. The ramps rise behind him as he stands on the railing of the deck, watching her below. Around her, Temara notices the others around her, likely family members and lovers of others heading out on a journey to lands beyond. While she felt their sadness, she felt a happiness – a joy for having been able to enjoy a night with a lovely anomaly of a person. As the ship sails away, she joins the others in waving at all the other men aboard. Temara sees Quentyn with them, as he towers over most of the crew. He steps back to give them more time to see their loved ones and disappears behind the crowd.

When the ship passes the shining buoys at the edge of the port, a low rumble shakes the dock as two more golden sails extend from the sides of the ship. The stern slowly lowers into the water as the bow raises toward the sky. Catching the wind, the ship begins rising above the water as the ship’s primary thruster violently splashes the water behind it before the Kentraza Zero sails up beyond the clouds and into the unknown.

With nothing but a few precious memories of a single night and a handwritten book, Temara set out to rewrite her own life. Pulling from the barrel of coins she had been saving in her small shack, she went to the smallest section of the general store on the island – children – and purchased a small wooden book with soft sanded edges. The kind woman running the store explained to her it was for teaching children basic letterings and words of the language spoken on the mainland; the one the company men and sailors spoke between cups of grog. The saleswoman was excited about the sale and Temara’s new motherhood before she explained her situation. Slightly diminished, the saleswoman was still excited Temara was learning.

The book was less helpful than she had thought. Each page contained a color image with something she imagined was more common for people that didn’t live along the Southern Reach. She flipped through the pages looking for one she knew before stopping near the end of the book. In adorable soft colors sat three boats, a rowboat, a single-sailed catamaran, and a galleon all with big toothy smiles. The rowboat was even missing a tooth up front. Temara

looked closely at the word on the page opposite the drawing. The four symbols together began to look familiar.

“So that’s ‘boat,’” Temara read to herself. She spent her days looking through the book while she still had daylight to acquire more words. With her new bank of letters, she would wander around town looking for signs, fliers, posters, anything she could read. She went back to the general store to get more books along with ink and stationery.

“If you ever need help, your welcome to come ask me, miss,” the saleswoman told Temara. Immediately Temara pulled Quentyn’s notebook from her bag and flipped to the first page. The saleswoman quickly skimmed through a few pages before slamming the notebook shut and handing back to Temara.

“You musn’t let anyone from the empire see you with this,” the woman warned, “this kind of knowledge isn’t allowed in The Reach.”

“Why not?” Temara asked, “I was told it was just notes from classes.”

“That’s precisely what they are, but they’re so thorough. I doubt any of those men want anyone here knowing more than they must about the world off these islands, much less a young woman like you.”

Temara looked at the woman with a newfound tenacity.

“Teach me everything.”