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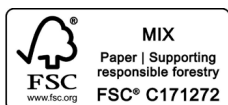
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## Fresh Off the Boat

*On the ship, as it tacked in past the sea wall, she was in her coffin of a cabin trying, by stub of candle and sequin of mirror, to make herself presentable. Clean shirt, clean face, uniform darned and done up. What does the mirror show her? By the time she's done, and the drum of feet overhead has the character of unloading and disembarking, not just seamanship, all that's visible is a bobbing phantom, a paleness like the face of a drowned woman sinking into dark water. When she makes the deck, evening is shading into night. Of the wonders of Alkhalend – "Oh you must view it from the sea, the waters, the palaces!" – there is nothing. Even the moon has taken the night off. She steps off the gangplank into darkness. And now this.*

Loret had spent the voyage braced for pirates. The war with the Loruthi was done but all the boats and fleets and whole pillage-happy coastal fiefdoms were still out there, and hungry as ever. She'd thought she'd be past the threat of them when she stepped onto shore, except what she stepped onto wasn't even the shore. Someone had put a shifting maze of jetties and rafts and boats between her ship and dry land, and then hung it with an inadequate quantity of lanterns that made every step a flirtation with drowning. And she could swim, as even the meanest child of the Archipelago could, but not in a space where great floating weights of wood clashed together like nautical teeth.

The city was only in evidence from its own lamps, and these

were strung upwards as though the whole of Alkhalend had been arrested in the midst of being lifted into the heavens by divine fiat. Not an image that should come readily to a good, god-denying Pallesen girl, but desperation was the prybar that opened foolish minds to divinity, as they'd said back in the phalanstery.

They'd said a lot of things in the phalanstery, in the classes she'd sat through with her mind on her belly, or anything else. Now she wished she'd listened rather better because this place wasn't anywhere she'd wanted to end up.

Alkhalend, the Jewel of the Waters, capital of Usmai, greatest of the Successor States that had once been part of the... she couldn't even remember the name of whatever dead empire had once claimed this part of the world, and then petrified into a little kernel of tombs centuries ago, a receding tide that had left places like Usmai to grapple with their neighbours over who got to wield the big stick. Usmai, Alkhalend; yes, such beauty, yes, so exotic. She'd never wanted to be here. If she'd been curious she could have read a book or something.

And dark, so the beauty and exoticism just became a lot of unfamiliar and unpleasant noises that sounded terrifying.

Then the man, appearing at her elbow. The enormous, tattooed, scarred, terrifying man. Was this what an Usmiat looked like? She rather thought it wasn't. He was seven feet tall and bare chested except for a leather harness. He addressed her in a language she didn't know – one she didn't even know anything *like* – and then in Usmiri, bringing his face down close to hers and making the words slowly. Not like a man who wasn't happy with the language but like a man who thought she was very stupid. And she did speak Usmiri. Or she spoke *some* Usmiri. And had not been practising from her primer on the voyage because someone had assured her that Pel and Usmiri shared a lot of vocabulary and so 'you'll pick it up really quickly'. The man spoke to her now, and she caught only a word that sounded a lot like 'lost'.

She had nodded before realising that, as a lone foreign woman

in a shifting maze of docks, admitting to being lost wasn't the wisest thing in the world.

In about nine heartbeats she was on his ship. Or on *a* ship that he felt comfortable just strolling onto. In a room with about a dozen men and women who all looked similarly terrifying. They wore too few clothes and were all of them leanly muscled as though they spent each spare moment cracking nuts with every part of their anatomy. The man who'd found her told everyone who she was in that first language, that seemed gesture as much as word; the language that wasn't *even* the language she had failed at honing over the voyage. They all laughed, probably at her. One woman had teeth that were filed sharp. Some of them were wearing even sharper teeth around their necks. They had great wild mops of hair, unlike the man who'd found her whose head was shaved bald and intricately inked. Then a woman with a dense interweaving of abstract piscine forms tattooed all over her cleavage came in, and she had a tatty Pallesen uniform coat over her shoulders. Which did not, Loret understood, suggest any kind of national sympathy, but instead meant they certainly killed and probably even ate Pallesen nationals. And then wore their clothing and possibly their skins.

The pirates were very real, she understood. These were just very lazy pirates who didn't even go to sea to do their raiding. They waited for stupid foreigners to get off the boat, and grabbed them.

"I have," she said – in Pel because every word of Usmiri had gone from her head, "diplomatic credentials. I am the new aide. For the Pallesen Resident. It is very – very important I reach the Residence." The Residence had a name and she couldn't remember it. "There will be a reward." Making large with money she didn't have.

The man who had found her leaned forwards over the little round table, that was scattered with wooden cups. The woman with the jacket poured something nasty into most of them, and put one in Loret's hands.

“Drink,” she said. Usmiri, but Loret knew that word.

She hadn’t enjoyed being on the ship, on the ocean. She got sick, and everything smelled, and she’d been terrified that someone on board would know too much or get too curious. But she understood now that being on that ship was the zenith of her later life. Because it had been better than being on the Archipelago and waiting for the jaws to close on her, better than the camps. And it had been better than being in a cabin crowded with ferocious pirates about to kill, strip and devour her.

She knocked back the cup, all of it in one go. It was... on one level it was horrible. Unlike anything she’d ever drunk and simultaneously horrible in a way she’d never even imagined. Not taste-horrible but actually existential. On the other hand it set her brain on fire in a way that burned away all the fear and uncertainty and apparently even uncovered the rough foundations of her Usmiri because suddenly she remembered how to say, “Show me the way to the embassy if you please,” and said it quite loud and without much gap in between any of the words. For a second and a half, something was lit in her, as though she was one of those fish from the deep depths, that set itself on cold fire to stave off the dark.

The pirates found this hilarious. And, she realised, quite impressive. Whatever she’d just drunk didn’t normally get knocked back in such a cavalier way by visiting foreigners straight off the boat. The man grinned at her. He had a terrifying grin. Three of his teeth were made of greenstone, intricately carved and then varnished over with some kind of clear lacquer, presumably so they didn’t just start to fester with ingrained bits of all the people he ate. She realised she was staring.

He put a hand on her shoulder, and all the way around her shoulder because her shoulders were slender and his hands were enormous.

“Islerwoman,” he said, like it was a title of honour, “I shall take you to Slate House. If that is where you need to be.”

And that was the name of the Residence, and he had spoken

in Pel. Not good Pel, and the accent was horrible, but the thing about Pel was that it had been constructed to be easy to learn, and so it tended to turn up everywhere any people of two different lands needed to make a deal. Even the Loruthi, Pallesand's great rivals across the world, had used Pel to give orders to their mercenary legions when fighting against Pallesand.

They gave her another cup of the sharp, savage stuff. It tasted of fish, but it seemed to her that they'd used better fish to make the second shot, because it wasn't as objectionable as the first. By then a small part of her wondered whether she shouldn't just stick around and see if the third cup would be squeezed from an almost passable grade of fish, and where else the pirates had tattoos. That kind of go-with-the-flow thinking was why she'd had to get off the Archipelago, though. Easily led, that was her. When the bald man was lifting her up by her elbow to lead her out, it was probably a good thing.

She remembered very little of the trek through Alkhalend. The dark kept its secrets, and she had a disjointed, fish-beer-smeared impression of a lot of boats, and then a lot of plain buildings, big and small, and then after a while she was labouring up a path far too steep. By then the fish had worn off, and the heat had begun to work on her. Even with the sun down, her shirt was clinging to her like a drowner, and her uniform jacket must be a mess of spreading stains. The idea of just swanning about with nothing but a few leather straps above the waist seemed entirely appropriate.

"There," he told her. There still weren't enough lamps, but they seemed to be in a street of tall, ornately carved buildings. Obviously fancy, yet crammed in together without gaps or gardens, speaking eloquently of some intermediate social stratum. "Slate House. Good weather, Islerwoman."

She felt she'd received rather more help than the ability to down a cup of fish should really have earned her. The fact that, straight off the boat, she looked like someone pirates should offer hospitality was alarming, and something of that

must have communicated itself to him. He laughed at her and jabbed the pad of his thumb into her forehead hard enough to rock her back on her heels. "You are my niece," he said, in clear Pel. She was not under any circumstances his niece. She was a child of the orphanages, no living family and, in any event, none of them had been a huge bald pirate. For a brief, fish-tainted moment she thought it might have been nice if one of them had.

On another level she knew exactly what he meant and she'd fled here to get away from that and somehow found it waiting for her. A saying, bobbing unwelcome to the surface of her mind. *All seas are the same sea*. Meaning, as far as she was concerned, run as far as you want, you can't escape the trouble that is *you*.

Then he was gone. She barely saw him go. The night ate him, and there was just an echo of his laugh left over.

She knocked at the door, waiting for the neatly buttoned Palleseen functionary to open up and look down his nose at her. A return to normalcy. An opportunity to proffer her papers and get settled in. To sleep in a bed that wasn't slung between two walls and got rolled up every morning. Except the woman who answered, after a pause, wasn't neat or buttoned or Palleseen. Loret recognised Usmiat clothes, sure enough. A woman with a floaty shawl over her shoulders, with a tight vest fastened to the side, with baggy trousers and pointy little boots. And a hostile, foreign expression.

"Slate House," said Loret, in Pel and then Usmiri. "This is Slate House." Because she'd been trusting some random pirate to know where the Palleseen Residence was and that suddenly seemed foolish. She'd been proffering her papers and the woman snatched them from her. Loret was suddenly terrified she'd never get them back.

She got as far as "Please," when the woman hissed annoyance between her teeth and then said, "You'd better come in. Your timing's immaculate." She had vanished inside even as she

spoke. Loret dithered at the threshold for a second and then followed her.

There was one lit chamber inside, the shadow of the Usmiat woman occluding the lamps briefly as she ducked inside. Loret scurried after, finding a well-appointed room. Well- and Pal-appointed, she noted. The furniture and some of the wall hangings were local, but there was the Charter of the Temporary Commission of Ends and Means up on one wall; the thing they made everyone learn by rote at the phal even before you knew what most of it meant. There was a map of the Archipelago, and a copy of that famous picture of the Liberation of Jarokir. Slate House, then, but instead of courteous and efficient Pal staff there was this woman – this woman even now buckling a *sword* about her waist, Loret noticed. And there was a man, an Usmiat man with a big cloak thrown over the back of his chair. A bearded man with a high forehead and a crystal goblet in his hand, looking at her quizzically.

“Excuse me,” Loret said, “may I speak to the Resident please?” She was acutely aware that the woman still had her papers.

“Cohort-Invigilator Loret,” the woman read there.

“Yes, I am. I am a Cohort-Invigilator of Correct Appreciation, Outreach department, sent here as aide to the Resident. It is very important that I present those credentials to the Resident. To Sage-Invigilator Angilly. She is a very important woman, and she will be very displeased if I am prevented from seeing her.”

The Usmiat woman gave her a long, arch stare, and then settled the sword about her hip. “Do you know duelling etiquette?” she asked.

“No,” Loret said. “Why would I know duelling etiquette?”

“They didn’t teach you that in the phal?”

Loret blinked, but presumably this woman was on the Resident’s staff somehow, and so had learned about Pal things. Certainly her Pel was very good, barely a trace of an Usmiat accent. But impudent. “They had more important subjects to



teach us there,” Loret said, trying for haughty but aware she was coming off more as petulant. And honestly she hadn’t gone to the sort of place where duelling was on the curriculum. A bad start to life that she’d backed with a whole load of bad decisions.

“Well you’ll do,” the woman decided, and then turned to the man. “I suppose I have my second.”

He stared at her. He hadn’t really looked anywhere else, certainly not at Loret. “I am asking you, once more, not to do this.”

“I don’t see he’s left me any choice,” the woman said, with a shrug. “I don’t *want* to. But... *he* wants it. Because he’s got nothing left, otherwise. He’s ruined. I ruined him.”

“Not just you,” said the man. He had more of an accent but, as appropriate for a servant here, his Pel was also very good.

The woman said nothing for a moment. Shrugged again. “Mostly me,” she decided. “So he goes home with my blood on his blade, or he doesn’t go home. It’s not an ideal situation, but you know how they are, with personal honour and duty and all that. He’s in a corner and, the way he sees it, he cuts his way out or not at all.”

“Excuse me,” Loret put in. “I’d really like to speak to the Resident now.” *Have they killed her?* she thought suddenly. Maybe these two well-spoken Usmiats were *not* servants at all. Maybe they were villains who’d broken into Slate House. Maybe the Resident’s corpse was cooling on the floor of an upstairs room. And right about now she should back away, except she didn’t have anywhere she could go. A foreign city, at night. Even the pirates were somewhere back through a maze of twists and turns she could never have replicated. *Duels. Swords. What have I got myself into?*

“Come on,” the woman decided, and grabbed her arm. The man stood. A moment of stillness.

“Not you,” said the woman.

“I’m supposed to just return to the House of Tranquillity?”

Return to my bed. Wake refreshed in the morning and wait for them to bring news of whether you live or die?”

“Yes,” she said. “Because I am about to do something both spectacularly illegal, culturally offensive and diplomatically inadvisable, and of all the people who cannot possibly be there to see it, you head the list. Also, you wound me. I thought you had more confidence in my form.” She flashed her teeth in something between grin and grimace. A predator’s look.

“I would make an offering in your name, but all the gods hate your people,” the man said, gathering his cloak about him.

“With good reason,” the woman admitted.

“Gil. Live.” He put a hand where her neck and shoulder met, thumb on her cheek. Loret saw the woman bite her lip, all that insouciance falling from her for a moment. The man’s hand trembled. Between them was a whole skein of tugging emotions that she felt she shouldn’t be a witness to. Private things only exposed because the pair were being pulled away from one another.

“Excuse me,” she said, her voice dry. “I do not wish to be a second in a duel. I am a Cohort-Invigilator of the Pallesen Sway and I must speak to the Resident. Please will you take me to the Resident. It is very important.”

“You can let yourself out,” the woman said to her friend. “Just don’t get yourself stopped within three streets of here. Whoever’s blood gets shed tonight, you can’t let it get on you.”

The man withdrew his hand. The woman turned to Loret. “Come on, then. If you’re coming.”

“I’m—No, I’m not coming,” Loret said. She felt as though the words she was speaking and those the woman was hearing didn’t line up. “I’m—”

“Cohort-Invigilator Loret, reporting for duty,” the woman agreed. “Good for you. Welcome to the staff.” And something shifted in the way Loret saw her, as though the light of the lamps hit the woman’s face differently. So that she saw not an Usmiat woman, but a fellow Pal with the pallor of the

Archipelago scorched off her by years in a hot land. "I'm Sage-Invigilator Angilly. Consider this your first formal duty. I need a second and you're it. Commendation for arriving in the nick of time."