

CIRRUS

BY YIU-ON LI

“I’VE NEVER SEEN THE OCEAN:”

Xeog looked out the window, his back to me. Yesterday’s evening rain persisted in small puddles on the flat, gray rooftops below. The sun reflected upward in them so that the whole of the world shone.

“Do you know what it’s like?” he asked.

His short auburn hair had tangled itself into chaos, as it so often did in the morning. Might a bird have perched on his head and laid eggs while I wasn’t looking? Possibly. Equally possible was the prospect of baby chicks sprouting above his forehead at any time, and I laughed at the thought.

I stopped when he turned around, and for a moment I thought of his hair a different way. Then I remembered why I was there. I stepped forward and closed the door behind me. My feet squeaked on the linoleum.

“I didn’t mean to laugh,” I said simply. Xeog gave no response—only looked at me.

I grabbed a bare metal stool from the corner of the room and sat a few paces away from him.

I fiddled with my own hair, less impressive than his, which stretched a bit beyond my shoulders. “We should get to it. The Ambit has—”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

He had been following me with his eyes all the while. And now he had seized my train of thought, as was typical of him.

“The...your question?” I regained my composure.

“The ocean,” he said. There was not even the hint of a smile on his face. “Do you know what it’s like?”

I stared at him and he stared back. He sat directly in front of the window, and by now the sun was well on its way up the sky. His body glowed in the light.

All it did was give me a headache. I had the feeling that he picked his seating like this on purpose—either to throw me off or to annoy me. Likely both. More likely the latter.

We were like this for a while, staring at each other, but I looked away first. He always won at these kinds of things.

“Yes,” I began, “but I don’t...”

“Tell me,” Xeog said.

How does one describe the ocean?

I imagined a shifting mass of royal blue with specks of white, the chilly air, grains between my toes. But whatever I said would only cheapen the majesty of soft thunder against sand, so I said nothing.

"A real way with words you've got," he said, and for a moment annoyance, like a diver gasping for air, broke through my face. "Well, I guess it's no use."

"Excellent," I said. "Let's return, then, to the purpose of my visitation, which is to—"

"So why don't you show me instead?"

It took me a moment to process what he said. I had put on a smile—a light sense of joy—as the Grand Ambit had imprinted upon me.

But how easily this man scrapes off the plaster.

"I...what?" I suddenly could not meet his eyes.

"Fimi," he said. His voice was calm but determined. His hair seemed to straighten. "Show me. Show me the ocean. With your hands."

So Xeog remembered still. He remembered my hands. He remembered the movements between them, the movements only I could see if I stared for long enough—movements which became shape and color, which then became landscapes and faces.

"You know I can't—" I looked at the door behind me and made sure it was closed. I'd locked it, right? I lowered my voice. "You know I can't do that."

He waved an arm in annoyance. "Can't, or won't?" he asked.

These movements had been very useful to the Ambit.

Tracking. Spying. And then killing. That is, if I knew where to look. Yes, very useful, the Grand Ambit had said to me, her voice bright honey, unbearably bright, searing my mind. Upon that memory I convulsed slightly. The window was unbearably bright. Xeog's face was a shadow.

"Can't," I insisted, without thunder. "It's been years. Besides, you know how the Ambit takes to—" I caught myself at the last moment, twisting my face, "—to these kinds of things."

"And that's why they put us in here, isn't it." A question, blunted by certainty. "It's why you're not here with us."

An uneasy silence, an uneasy understanding, as it had so many times before, settled between us.

"I'm doing this for you." My voice was a whisper. "I'm doing this for us."

He said nothing. By this time I had mustered the courage to glance at his head. He wasn't looking at me anymore—just out the window again—at the birds soaring through the bright clouds.

"They keep you safe because I work for them," I continued. "The things I do, the things they make me do—"

My jaw clenched.

"You're safe. Nothing else matters."

Still silence.

"But they're getting impatient."

I moved my stool closer. The light threw shadows about us.

"The answer is no," he said.

I ignored him. "Work for the Ambit. They won't lay a finger on you."

"I said no."

"You'd be free," I said. "You'd see the ocean."

In a flash he stood up, his hair dancing like rattlesnakes.



“And for what? You think I want to help them put more of us in here?” His voice, like his hair, was unbounded. “You think I want to help you?”

I looked at his face. There was a time I held his face, and his face—bare, unplastered—had known a smile that would have put the sea to shame.

At that moment I wished I could fly through the window and take me with him. We would fly with the birds. We would see the ocean together and taste the air. We would clasp ourselves to each other and never let go.

I wished because the more I wished, the more likely it would stay that way—a wish, nothing more.

I held my ground and kept staring. This time it was he who looked away first. He relaxed and sat back down.

“Oh, Fimi,” he said. His eyes traveled the ground, and I thought I saw a wetness in them. “I don’t know you anymore.”

The sun knocked on the window. It burned. It burned so much. The window was melting. The sun wanted in. I gasped. I needed to go.

I got up stumbling. That was better. My head was clearing. “I can’t keep them off of you forever, Xeog,” I tried to keep my voice steady. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

I did not look back when I walked out the room. Perhaps I should have.

Because when I came back tomorrow, the guards had already broken down the door. A breeze greeted me from the shattered window, where a long rope of hair led down to the streets below.



I backed out of the room as the guards chatted over the damage and, in a quiet corner of the hallway, looked at my hands. Between my fingers I could see him—weaving between busybodies and nobodies beneath the tall buildings—running in the direction of the shore. ▲