

Exile of the Seas

Chronicles of Dasnaria

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I crept up to the *Valeria's* deck in the predawn dark to watch the sun rise. Though I felt safer, and smarter, keeping to the confines of my cabin, this one excursion had become a sort of habit. I clung to the small rituals, the basic routine I'd been able to establish. Otherwise, I was as unmoored and unanchored as the *Valeria* on her long ocean journey, sailing over unfathomable depths to unimaginable lands.

Perhaps this was the nature of exile: that all the thrust was in the escape, the moving away. After that, what did you have? If I am any example—and I'm the only example I had—then the answer was not much at all.

I did have my habits, though.

The *Valeria* was powerful in a way I wasn't and would likely never be. Ideally suited to her environment, an extension of the waves and master of them, she possessed a singular direction and purpose. The very things I lacked. Thus, I'd become oddly grateful and attached to the ship, inanimate though she was. As long as I was aboard the *Valeria*, she provided purpose and direction for me. I clung to her the way an infant burrowed into her mother's breast, murmuring fervent prayers of thankfulness that she hadn't shrugged me off to drown in the cold, uncaring sea.

Mostly I kept to my cabin. The servant boys and girls brought my meals and fresh water, took away my waste, and otherwise left me alone. It had been easy to adjust to being waited on, as I had been my whole life, and I would've been at a loss to put together more than the most basic meal for myself. I wouldn't let them come in otherwise, which was a new freedom and power I enjoyed flexing. No servants in the walls here, listening to my every movement. And I felt better with the door barred, even though

it was only one thin, wooden thing against the world. A world of a sailing ship on a vast, unknowable ocean.

I slept a lot. Which was good because my body began to heal more. And I danced, to relieve the boredom and to encourage flexibility, so I'd heal strong. Dancing felt familiar, too. Something I could do alone in the dim cabin, one of the few things left that remind me of who I'd been.

No matter how much I slept, though, I always awoke early. Well before they brought my breakfast at the seventh bell. In the darkness of my cabin, I marked time by the watch's bells, practicing the simple count from the longest toll at midnight to the dawn call. I woke. Listened for the six bells. Then unbarred my door, made sure the passage remained empty, and slipped out.

A sort of daily exercise in escape.

Moving silently down the passageway of closed doors, I allowed myself to exult in that ability, one I'd never expected to be what saved my life. All those years I practiced the traditional dances, particularly the ducerse, which required utmost skill to keep the many bells from making sound until the precisely timed moment. I'd thought I was preparing to dazzle my husband and make my emperor proud. Not teaching myself stealth.

But stealth had turned out to be far more useful. It let me keep to the shadows, unnoticed. In my brother Harlan's too-big clothes, my hair shorn into a short fluff, I looked nothing like Her Imperial Highness Princess Jenna of Dasnaria. If anyone on this foreign ship had ever heard of that doomed girl. Nevertheless, I wrapped myself in the thick wool cloak, pulling the cowl deep around my face. It made me feel safer, for no good reason, and I needed it for the chill. After a lifetime in the cloistered warmth of the seraglio, it seemed I'd never be warm again.

On deck, the sky shone with incipient day. I hadn't understood this before, that the sky lightens in color before the sun appears. The paintings never show it that way. They depict night or day, sometimes sunrise or sunset, but never those moments before or after. But predawn is different than night, and in its soft in-between-ness, I could see well enough.

Keeping to the edges like a cat might, I skirted the main paths the sailors traveled as they did their jobs. It meant I picked my way through the ropes, barrels, and other supplies lashed to the deck, but I viewed that as another way to improve my dexterity, especially in the clunky boots I couldn't seem to get used to. In my cabin, I went barefoot, which felt natural and right, but going on deck, I put on shoes like I wore the cloak. The more covering, the better.

It had been nearly a week, but I harbored no illusions about my ignorance of the world outside. I had no idea how long I would have to run, or how far I'd have to travel to escape my pursuers. I'd been unforgivably stupid about this in the past, so it seemed the only wise choice would be to assume that no amount of time or distance would be enough.

At least that gave me a guideline. Never and nowhere might be places without finite boundaries, but I could understand them.

The goats mewed at me from their pen next to the chickens as I passed, making the sounds so oddly like the newborn kittens in the seraglio of the Imperial Palace, where I grew up. I stopped to scratch the little horns on their heads, their fur soft and scraggly against my fingers. We'd become friends on this journey. Goats and the *Valeria*—they kept me alive and kept my secrets.

I found my spot along the rail behind the goat pen, where I was out of the way and no one paid me much attention, and turned my face to where I thought the sun might rise. It turns out that this is no certain thing, despite the stories. I knew that the sunrise seemed to change position because the *Valeria* pointed in different directions, depending on the wind and other factors, but I'd begun to entertain the fancy that the sun liked to surprise me. That she knew how much I savored her daily reappearance, and that I played the game of guessing where she might rise. Of course, after a certain point, the glow gave her position away, but sometimes clouds or fog obscured it longer. The trick was to see how well I could predict where that would be, as the general lightening coalesces into a nimbus of bright color, and then to a sphere of fire.

I picked where I thought she'd rise—no cheating and adjusting once she gave herself away—and rubbed my fingers along the rail. The ship's sails billowed, creaking as they caught and held the wind that also blew the cloak around me, the cowl flapping around my chilled face. As I waited, I talked quietly with the *Valeria*. The sea spray made my fingertips skid along her rail, her comforting, ever-moving bulk beneath my feet.

I thanked her for her protection, her direction, how she sang with the wind and the waves. My morning litany, as I no longer prayed to Sól, the one god—as much as I ever did—nor did I give thoughts to my father, the emperor, divine or not. Neither of them had taken care of me as the *Valeria* did. Don't mistake me—I might have been foolish and ignorant, but I understood that the *Valeria* was a construction, a human-made vessel, and no goddess. Still, she listened, and expected nothing of me.

The sunrise glow condensed, the sky growing bluer with it, so I wound up my self-made version of prayers by sending a fervent wish into the

waves for my brother Harlan, that he might also escape and live. And to my sisters, Inga and Helva, that they might find happiness, though I hadn't developed the ability to hope well enough to imagine what form that might take for them, still sequestered in the seraglio.

It turns out that being able to hope requires exercise and practice, too. Like a young girl learning her first dances, I worked on a few simple hopes. Once I felt surefooted with those, I might try hoping for more.

The sun edged over the horizon, growing larger as she seemed to emerge from the water, burning my eyes. I always looked as long as I could, then dropped my eyes to the surging water, before looking again. I even liked the shining gold-red bubbles the scorching sun left in my vision after I looked away. They sometimes lasted for hours and served as a comfort to me, a reminder that I could see the sun any time I liked.

I had years of not seeing her to make up for.

A low song impinged on my awareness. A throaty voice humming something winding and lovely and foreign, just audible above the waves and the *Valeria's* soft chatter spoken with wood and canvas. I edged away and found myself blockaded by a crate that had been moved since the previous morning. Between it, the goats' pen, and the ocean, I had only one easy egress.

Occupied by a person. I studied them without looking directly.

A woman, I decided. That helped ease my reflexive panic. Women are naturally more familiar to me, and they lack the immense bulk and musculature of men, that they seem to enjoy employing against the physically slighter. It took me a moment, however, to determine her gender, as she looked so terribly odd.

She wore men's clothing, tightly fitted to her body, which seemed amazingly muscled for a woman. The closeness of the fit revealed the curve of hips and the definite rise of breasts, so I felt sure she must be female, despite the way she dressed. It looked like the sort of thing one might wear to fight in, made of leather and with metal pieces at vulnerable places—but nothing like Dasnarian armor. It seemed a man in armor with a sword could take out a woman like this with one swing, so perhaps the outfit meant something else, something ceremonial, as she seemed to be engaged in prayer. First bowing, then going to one knee, then straightening, she drew circles in the air around the rising sun, singing her song all the while.

I shrank back into my corner, ducking my face away to leave her to whatever ritual that might be. Perhaps she would leave without noticing or bothering me. I could escape by scaling the crate or climbing over the flimsy walls penning the goats, but that would draw attention.

Better to see if I could get by without extreme measures, and tomorrow I'd find a different spot to watch the sun rise.

The singing stopped and I waited a circumspect amount of time, making sure my sleeves covered my hands. I'd once been given the advice not to let anyone see my hands, and though I wasn't sure what it was about them that gave me away, I hadn't received so much well-meant advice that I'd squander it. Hearing nothing beyond the shouts of sailors and the *Valeria's* usual noises, I peeked over, sliding it as a subtle glance. Another of my dubiously useful skills, but I'd been taught by masters of spying via peripheral vision.

The woman was leaning against the rail, facing me, studying me with frank curiosity.

I ducked my gaze away, kicking myself, wishing I'd climbed the crate when I could. My heart battered against my ribs, as if it could effect the escape I'd taken too long to decide upon. She still shouldn't have noticed that I'd looked, so I pretended to ignore her. Climb or brazen past her as if I hadn't seen her? The latter could be more easily explained. Except that doing anything brazenly was not in my skill set.

Well, not until I'd thumbed my nose at the entire Dasnarian Empire.

No such luck. The woman spoke to me, saying something in a tongue I didn't understand. I simply shook my head from the depths of my cowl. None of the servants on the ship seemed to know Dasnarian. The captain had, when I'd paid my way in dark of night to slink aboard, but his had been quite broken. Barely adequate. The woman spoke again, a different tongue, by the sound of it.

Again, I shook my head. Hopefully she'd soon run out of languages to try and leave me alone. How many languages did people know in the greater world? I knew only one, and not much of that. Dasnarian men used words I'd never heard, and talked about counting and calculations. And they could read and write, a mystery to me. I possessed so few tools. A cold sweat trickled down my spine. I wanted to go back to my cabin.

The woman said something else, in yet another language, this one less fluid, spikier-sounding. I shook my head more emphatically. Then, unable to make myself stay trapped a moment longer, I decided on brazen. There was enough space. I could do this. Keeping my head bowed, shaking it still, I moved to slide past her.

She grabbed my arm through the cloak. With a gasp, terror ratcheting through me, I wrenched away. Spinning and leaping, I scrambled up the large crate, clumsy in the boots. The thick toes clunked uselessly against the wood, giving me no purchase, and my arms began to weaken.

The woman was talking, saying one word after another, a hail of arrows at my back. Then, “Peace!”

Hearing the Dasnarian word, I stilled, hanging foolishly on the crate, kicking at it with my booted toes, like a child still learning to climb a date palm.

“Speak Dasnarian?” she asked, her accent thick. “I mean no harm. Be not afraid.”

My hands stung with splinters and my arm muscles screamed. I should have gone with the goats.

“Please,” she said. “I won’t touch you again.”

She could be lying. I’d learned that the people most intent on inflicting harm liked to first offer guarantees that they wouldn’t. But I couldn’t go over the top of the crate. And, it occurred to me, quite belatedly, she hadn’t held on to my arm. I’d pulled away easily from a lax grip.

I let myself drop back to the deck, *Valeria* solid under my feet, and quickly tucked my hands inside my sleeves. I had gloves, but they were even more obvious, sewn with pearls and diamonds. I’d started the task of removing them all, but in the unlit cabin and without sewing tools I risked making holes I couldn’t repair.

“I don’t have the words,” the woman said. “I am unhappy I frightened you.”

I nodded, keeping my head bowed. Surely she would grow tired of this one-sided conversation soon.

“I am Kaja,” she said. Her voice held a note of expectation. Even in the greater world, which lacked the precise and elaborate manners I’d grown up with, people observed certain protocols. Offer a name, get a name in return. Only, I could not give my true name. So I used the name Harlan had picked as an alias, the one I’d given the captain.

“I am Brian,” I replied, lowering my voice to sound manly, at least like a young man. Though Harlan had been only fourteen, and his voice had already gone to a deep bass.

“Brian?” Kaja repeated. “Are you not Dasnarian? I thought you came aboard in Sjør.”

“Yes,” I answered, hoping that would serve to answer all her questions. I might have lied, but the captain and sailors knew I’d boarded there. All those days in my cabin that I’d been napping and dancing, I should have been thinking up a plausible story to explain who I was. The big problem with that, however, was that I had little idea of what might be a reasonable tale for a young man—or worse, a woman!—traveling alone in the greater world. I only knew my own story and those of the ballads. I did know

something about taking control of curiosity in conversation, though. In the seraglio, information was power. Seeking out secrets and preventing others from having them were skills I'd learned early and employed frequently. This strange woman would not have any of mine. I went on the attack. "Were you praying?"

She dipped her head at the rising sun. Her hair—short for a woman, but I couldn't compare silks there—fell in waves to her shoulders, black as midnight, the sections at her temples pulled away from her face in braids that glinted with golden metal that matched the bits on her clothes.

"I was...speaking prayers, yes, to Glorianna, though I follow Danu. Do you know these names?"

Though the name of the goddess of love, hearth and home had a strange, singsong twist in the foreigner's mouth, I did know of Glorianna. Though what she had to do with the rising sun, I had no idea. This Danu, however, I'd never heard of.

"Tell me of this Glorianna and why you pray to Her at sunrise. And who is Danu?"

Kaja tilted her head, one braid sliding forward so it dangled over her breast. That hair must be much longer than the rest. How odd. Perhaps she'd experienced some accident—or punishment—that most of her hair had been cut short, and she now grew it out again.

"My Dasnarian is not so good," she said. "So next time, more slowly, please. I think you ask, why Glorianna at sunrise?" When I nodded, she continued. "Sunrise belongs to Glorianna. Also sunset." She held up each hand, from east to west. "Beginning and end. Birth and death. Mother."

I chewed my lip, holding back then intense curiosity at such heresy. A goddess owning the sun? Not possible.

"Danu is the warrior," Kaja said, when I didn't reply. She pointed up. "High noon, bright stars, are Hers." She pulled out a sharp dagger and spun it, the blade flashing in the sunlight, and smiled with a similarly lethal edge. "Also the blade and..." She frowned, thinking. "Not *hlyti*," she said, using the Dasnarian word for fate, "more my eye for your eye?"

"Justice," I offered, drawn in despite myself. "Law."

"Yes." Her smile widened. She offered me the hilt of the dagger. "Strength."

I didn't take it, though my fingers itched to. Harlan had shown me how to grip a knife in my fist and go for the eye. And I still had the little eating knife I'd taken from the inn when I fled Dasnaria. Not much to it, but maybe enough for an eye. In my full view, even with my head bowed and shrouded, I could study the blade at leisure. Big, and shaped like a long

leaf, with sharp edges on both sides, one serrated, the other razor smooth. A deep groove ran down the middle, from the hilt to the tip.

“A beautiful blade,” I praised, hoping that would satisfy her.

“Try it,” Kaja prompted, edging closer. I backed up, my heel hitting the goats’ pen. The caramel-colored one mewed at me, nudging my hip for pets.

“No, thank you,” I replied, bending at the waist a little to appease her. “It is a lovely weapon and does your beauty credit, but I’m afraid I’m unable to accept your generous offer.”

Kaja grinned. She spun the blade again and I studied the motion, fascinated. She slipped it into a sheath on her belt, then held up her hands again in that gesture of peace. “I understood a small part, but I hear ‘no’ very well.”

I nodded, then edged toward escape. Thankfully, Kaja stepped out of the way, sweeping a hand to indicate free passage. “Talk more at lunch?” she asked.

I shook my head and kept going. To my horror, I glimpsed her walking beside me, her rolling gait easily accommodating the *Valeria’s* little tricks.

“You can teach Dasnarian,” she said, as if I’d agreed. “And I teach using blade.”

I stopped, tempted and uncertain, studying her boots. Unlike my clumsy ones, hers fitted to the form of her foot, with metal tips at the pointed toe.

“A woman on a ship alone needs a blade,” Kaja said in a lower tone, one that could not be overheard except by perhaps the most zealous listener hiding in the walls. But that was in the seraglio, I reminded myself. On the *Valeria’s* bosom, there were only sailors and sea to overhear, and the sailors didn’t understand the words we spoke. “The world is an unsettled place. Not all bad, but some are. You need a blade and a friend.”

She was likely right, but that she’d seen my true nature frightened me. I shook my head yet again, and fled. This time, she didn’t follow.