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City of Woven Streets

Written by Emmi Itaranta

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Emmi Itäranta

CITY OF
WOVEN
STREETS

The City *of* Woven Streets

Emmi Itäranta was born in Tampere, Finland, where she also grew up. She holds an MA in Drama from the University of Tampere and an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Kent, UK, where she began writing her award-winning debut novel *Teemestarin kirja* (*The Tea Master's Book*) under the title *Memory of Water*. Itäranta wrote the full text in both Finnish and English. In 2011, *Teemestarin kirja* won the Sci-fi and Fantasy Literary Contest organised by the Finnish publishing house Teos, and in the following years *Memory of Water* was nominated for the Philip K. Dick Award, the 2014 James Tiptree, Jr Award, the Compton Crook Award, Golden Tentacle Award and Arthur C. Clarke Award. Itäranta's professional background includes stints as a columnist, theatre critic, dramaturge, scriptwriter and press officer. She lives in Canterbury, UK, and has recently entered the strange world of writing full time. She can be found on Twitter @emmi_elina

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Also by Emmi Itäranta

Memory of Water

The City
of
Woven Streets

Emmi Itäranta


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CHAPTER ONE

I still dream of the island.

I sometimes approach it across water, but more often through air, like a bird, with a great wind under my wings. The shores rise rain-coloured on the horizon of sleep, and in their quiet circle the buildings: the houses grown along the canals, the workshops of inkmasters, the low-ceilinged taverns. The House of Words looks inward behind its high walls. Threads knotted into mazes run in all directions from the House of Webs, and air gondolas are suspended on their cables, dead weights above the streets.

At the centre of the island stands the Tower, smooth and blind. A sun of stone glows grey light at the pinnacle, spreading its sharp ray-fingers. Fires like fish-scales flicker in the windows. Sea is all around, and the air will carry me no longer. I head towards the Tower.

As I draw closer, the lights in the windows fade, and I understand they were never more than a reflection. The Tower is empty and uninhabited, the whole island a mere hull, ready to be crushed like a seashell driven to sand and carved hollow by time.

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I also understand something else.

The air I am floating in is no air at all, but water, the landscape before me the seabed, deep as memory and long-buried things.

Yet I breathe, effortlessly. And I live.

Amber would sometimes wash ashore on the island; it was collected and shipped across the sea. As a child I once watched a jewel-smith polish it on the edge of the market square. It was like magic, one of the stories where ancient mages span yarn from mere mist or gave animals a human tongue. A sweet smell arose from the amber, the smith dipped the whetstone in water every once in a while, and in his hands the murky surface turned smooth and glass-clear. He handed the orange-yellow lump to me, and inside I saw an insect frozen in place, a mayfly smaller than the nail of my little finger. Its each limb, wing and antenna was so easy to imagine in movement that I believed it was still alive, ready to whirr and fly, when the hard shell would be broken.

Later I learned that creatures captured in amber cannot be freed. They are images of the past, fallen outside of time, and it is their only existence. When I turn the past before my eyes, I think of the mayfly. I think of the translucent brightness guarding it and distorting it. Its wings will not vibrate, it will never turn its antennae. Yet, when light pierces the stone from a new angle, the mayfly seems to morph into another. And in the posture stalled long ago is already written what will come later.

Likewise, this present already grows in my past that first night, when I see her.

She is lying on the smooth stones, face down, and it takes me a moment to understand she is not dead.

* * *

There is blood. Not everywhere, but a lot of it. She is still, like those who have stopped breathing are still. A red, glistening pool is spreading under her head; the ends of her hair are swimming in it. I see a rust-coloured streak on the hem of her dress and imagine the rest: a sticky trail running down the front of the garment, as warm as her mouth at first, before the air cools it down. The thought of the pain behind the blood twists my gut. I push it away, to where I am used to enclosing everything I cannot show.

There are not many of us yet. When the others move to make space for me, their glow-glass spheres tilt and hover in the dusk, and the pale light catches on the creases of their palms, on the coral amulets around their necks. Above the hands their faces are frightened or curious, I cannot tell which. Perhaps both. They are all younger than me, mostly first- and second-year weavers. I think of soft-bodied sea creatures, of how they slip away when something bigger comes too close.

‘Has anyone gone to find Alva?’ I ask.

No one says anything. I search among the faces, trying to find just one I can name, and fail. I kneel next to the girl on the ground and take her hand. It is soaked in blood, and so is mine, now. I do not mind; there will be time to wash it later. I see blood every month. Not only mine, but that of others, too. When hundreds of women live in the same house, someone is always bleeding. We do not get childbirths here, not often anyway, but we see enough of other varieties of bloodshed.

The girl’s skin feels cold, her arm limp and heavy. I know I should not touch her until the healer comes.

‘Go and find Alva,’ I say.

They shift, a restless cluster of silence. No one takes a step to go.

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Unexpectedly the girl moves under my hand. She turns over, raises her face and spits blood and strange-shaped sounds from her mouth. Bright red drops fall across my jacket. They make a pattern, like blood coral ornaments on a rich man's cloak.

'Go,' I order. 'Now!'

A second-year weaver turns and runs towards the other side of the square confined by stone buildings. The moments are slow, the whispers a surging sea around us. The wrist within my fingers is sinewy and narrow. More pale-blue spheres of light float through the dark towards us from the direction of dormitories and cells, more hands and faces behind them. A few weavers stop to fill their glow-glasses from the algae pool in the middle of the square; its shimmering surface vibrates and grows smooth again. Everyone must be awake by now. Eventually I see a woman in white approach across the square. She is carrying a stretcher under her arm. A tall figure I recognize as Weaver is walking at her heels. Light spills on the stones, catches in the folds of nightdresses and hair and limbs. Alva and Weaver order everyone to give way. When there is enough space, they place the stretcher down.

'I think you can let go of her hand,' Alva says.

I do. I get to my feet, withdraw into the crowd standing around us and watch as Alva and Weaver lift the girl onto the stretcher and begin to carry her towards the sick bay.

Somewhere, the bells of the city begin to toll sea-rise.

Some flooded nights I watch the city below from the hill. I follow the waters that rise high and wild, swell across courtyards, push aside chairs and tables stacked up in a futile attempt to make frail, treacherous bridges. But the

sea never reaches the House of Webs. Weavers turn over when the bells toll and do not grant it much thought.

This night is different. Sleep is thin in the house, because strange blood is drying on the stones of the square. Sand flows slow in hourglasses. Coughs, footsteps and words exchanged in secret fade away little by little. I see the girl before me every time I close my eyes. Although I know the attacker must be far away, every shadow on the walls is darker than usual.

I pull the last dormitory door of the night-watch round closed behind me. My brother tells me I should get more sleep, but being awake has its advantages. The corridors of the house are long, and someone must walk them all night, look into every dormitory, listen behind the door of each cell. Those are the Council's orders, and therefore also Weaver's. It is not a precaution against those coming from outside the House of Webs. We have all heard the drinking songs about wet weaver wenches circulating in the taverns and on the streets, but those are just words. In order to get into the house, you would have to climb the steepest hill on the island and find your way through the maze of wall-webs undetected, and you would risk serious sanctions in doing so. No: the night-watch is to keep an eye on those who already live within the walls.

The luminous ribbons of the glow-glass pipes throw cold sparks along the corridors, revealing the unevenness of the worn stone. The current in the canals is strong; it drives the swift movement in the pipes, and in fast water the algae wakes to shine bright. A draught blows past me, as if a door is opened somewhere, but I do not see anyone. I could return to my cell. I could sleep. Or stay awake in the fading shine of the glow-glass, wait for the morning.

I turn in the other direction and step outside.

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I like the air gondola port because you cannot see the Tower from there: its tall, dark figure is concealed behind the wall and the buildings of the House of Webs. Here I can imagine for a moment that I am beyond the reach of the Council's gaze. I like the port best at this hour, when the cables have not yet started creaking. The vessels are still, their weight hanging mid-air, or resting at the dock, or floating in the water of the canals. The gate cracks open without a sound. The wrought iron is cold against my skin, and the humidity gathered on its surface clings to my palms. The cable of the air route dives into the precipice, which begins at the rock landing of the port, and the city opens below. I walk along the landing close to the brink. It is steep as a broken bridge. Far below, the sharp edges of Halfway Canal cut through the guts of the island, outlining waters that always run dark, even in brightest summer light.

The sky has begun to fade into the colours of smoke and roses. The first light already clings to the rooftops and windows, to the glint of the Glass Grove a distance away. The flood has finally ceased to rise, and down in the city the water rests on streets and squares. Its surface is smooth and unbroken in the calm closeness of dawn: a strange mirror, like a dark sheet of glass enclosing a shadow double of the city.

My eyes are heavy and stung. I could catch an hour of sleep before the morning gong if I returned to my cell now. It is a short enough time. It would be safe enough.

I stay where I am.

The gate creaks behind me. I turn to look.

'The gate should be locked,' Weaver says.

'It was open when I came.'

'I was not reprimanding you,' she says. 'What happened there?'

She points towards the strip of sea on the horizon, north of the Glass Grove. I had not realized, because it is something you do not notice.

‘The air highway,’ I say.

The north side of the island is dominated by air gondola routes: light vessels travelling an intricate network in all directions and on many levels, cables crisscrossing between the trading harbours in the west and the inkmasters’ workshops in the northwest. But the skyline of the city above the rooftops has changed.

‘The largest cables are down,’ Weaver says. ‘There must have been an accident.’

‘The flood?’

‘Maybe.’

The floods do not usually damage the air routes. But if one of the supporting poles has fallen, it could affect the whole network.

‘I expect we will get word when the watergraph starts working again,’ Weaver says. She turns her face towards me. It is the colour of dark wood. ‘But that is not why I was looking for you.’ She pauses. ‘Alva would like to see us both.’

‘Alva?’ The request surprises me. ‘Did she say why?’

‘She believes we should go and meet the patient together. She has something to show us.’

The thought of seeing the girl again is a cold stone within me.

‘I had hoped to get some sleep before breakfast,’ I say.

Weaver’s gaze is deep in the growing daylight, full of thoughts.

‘Come,’ she says.

When the house-elder says so in the House of Webs, you obey.

* * *

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The first thing I sense is the surge of heat through the door. Then, a cluster of scents. In the House of Webs, the sick bay is the only place apart from the kitchen where live fire is allowed. Even laundry is washed in cold water most of the time. Alva stands by the stove, feeding wood into the spark-spitting metal maw. A steaming pot of water sits on the stove, and next to it another one with an inch of dark-brown liquid in it. I inhale, recognize liquorice and lavender, hops and passion-flower. The rest blurs into a blend of unfamiliar scents. On the table, next to scales, mortars and bags of herbs, I notice a neatly laid-out row of needles cooling down on a polished metal tray.

Alva closes the hatch of the stove and wipes her hands carefully with a steaming towel.

‘We’ll need a gondola,’ she says. ‘We cannot keep her here.’

‘I will send for a gondola to take her to the Hospital Quarters as soon as I can,’ Weaver says. ‘The watergraph pipes are too badly flooded.’

‘Again?’ Alva picks up a glass jar from the tall shelf that fills the space behind the table. I see dozens of teardrop-shaped wings stirring, hair-thin legs moving, and something round and black and bright. Eyes stare directly at me.

‘There is nothing we can do but wait,’ Weaver responds.

Alva turns towards us with the jar in her hand.

‘She’s awake,’ she says. ‘But she can’t talk.’

‘Why not?’ I ask.

‘It’s best if you see her now,’ Alva says. ‘She’ll need a new singing medusa in any case.’

Alva walks across the room to the medusa tank. It sits on robust legs of stone, as wide as the wall: a smooth,

oblong pool of glass rounded on the edges, covered by a lid with a slim opening at one end. The singing medusas float through the water without hurry, their translucent swimming bells pale green and blue, weightless in their water-space. Alva unscrews the lid of the jar and holds the jar upside down over the opening. Wings and limbs and eyes move, first behind the glass and then briefly in the air, as she shakes the jar.

The medusas reach their thin tentacles towards the insects raining into the water, close their round, murky bells around the black-green gleam of the beetles and flies. Alva lets the last sticky-limbed insect fall into the tank. Then she dips the glass jar in, collecting some water into it. She picks up a small hoop net from a hook on the wall and pushes it into the tank. The bloom of medusas opens and pulls away, their tentacles wavering like broken threads in a breeze, but Alva has already caught one. It is small and slippery and blue-green, and it seems to shrivel, to lose its colour and grace as soon as it is out of water.

Alva slips the medusa into the glass jar, where it opens again like a flower, but now constrained, without joy. As we watch, it begins to open and close, open and close, and in an echo of its movements, the bloom in the tank begins to do the same. A low, faint humming vibrates in the water, refracts from the glass walls, grows towards the ceiling until it seems to ring through our bones.

Alva hangs the hoop net back on the wall hook. The water dripping from it draws a dark trail on the wall towards the floor. She parts the curtains covering a wide doorway into the back room and steps through. Weaver and I follow. Slowly the singing recedes behind us and fades into a silence as dense as mourning, or farewells left unspoken.

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There are only six beds in the room, and despite the faint lighting I can see that five of them are empty. In the furthestmost bed by the back wall lays a narrow, motionless figure. She is covered by a rough blanket, but I can discern her form under it: long limbs, softness sheltering angular bones. The warmth from the iron stove spreads across the skin of my neck.

Our shadows fall deep and shapeless, interlacing where the fragile halos of the glow-glasses overlap, hemming in the bed we are approaching. There is no light on the back wall. Thick curtains cover the window.

Dimmed glow-glass globes hang on the walls. Weaver picks one, shakes it and places it on the girl's bedside table. A blue-tinted light wakes up within the sphere. Slowly it expands and falls on the girl's face. I notice there is also an empty cup on the table.

The girl is approximately my age, between twenty and twenty-five. There are still dry, rust-brown tangles in her red hair, but the garment she is wearing is clean. Or so I think at first, until I notice the burst of tiny speckles on the front. As if someone had tried to paint an impression of faraway stars on it, the sparkling Web of Worlds that holds the skies together.

She struggles to sit up on the mattress. Her eyes are grey and full of shadows in the glow-glass light, and her skin is very pale. Her lips are squeezed together so tightly it makes her face look older, shrivelled upon itself. I realize Alva has made her drink a calming herbal brew. Yet behind its artificial languor the girl is tense and all edge, like a dagger drowned in murky water, ready to cut the first skin that will brush it.

'In order to help you,' Weaver says, 'we need to know who you are.'

The girl nods slowly.

‘She is not island-born,’ Alva says.

The lines on Weaver’s face seem to sharpen. She looks at Alva.

‘Why didn’t you tell me earlier?’

‘I wanted to show you,’ Alva says. ‘May I?’

The girl’s eyes close and open again. The question seems to sink in letter by letter. Eventually, she moves her head slowly up and down. I do not know if this is because nodding hurts, or because she is too dazed to make faster movements.

Alva directs the girl to rotate her upper body slightly, face turned away from us. She gathers the girl’s hair gently in her hand and lifts it. The skin of the neck is bare: there is no trace of ink where the sun-shaped tattoo marking everyone born on the island should be. I glance at Weaver, catch a glimpse of the shadows on her brow. There are not many people on the island who were born elsewhere. Seamen and merchants come and go, but most islanders avoid mingling with them.

‘May I see your arms?’ Weaver asks.

Alva lets go of the girl’s hair and the girl turns her face back towards us, her movements still underwater-slow. She nods again.

‘I already checked,’ Alva said. ‘She must have moved to the island when she was very young.’

Weaver pulls up the sleeves of the girl’s garment. One of the arms is bare. Not from the Houses of Crafts, then. The other has a row of short, black lines on it, like wounds on the pale skin. Weaver counts them.

‘Twenty-one,’ she says. That is two less than I have.

Weaver lets go of the girl’s arms. The girl leans back into her pillows in a half-sitting posture.

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‘Were you born on the continent?’ Weaver asks her.

The girl nods.

‘Are your parents from the island?’

Now she hesitates. Weaver sighs. A mixed marriage, perhaps. They are rare, but not impossible. Or perhaps she does not know her parents. But foundlings have their own mark in place of the birth tattoo, and she does not have one.

‘Never mind,’ Weaver says. ‘We can talk about that later. I brought pen and paper.’ She pulls a slim notebook from her pocket. The covers are well-worn, stained leather, and the pages are yellowed on the edges. She places the book on the girl’s lap and a pen on top of it. ‘If you know how to read,’ Weaver says, ‘please, write down your name.’

The girl stares at the blank page. We wait. After a long moment, she shakes her head, slowly and painfully.

None of us is surprised. Word-skill is only taught in the House of Words, and women are not allowed there. Most women on the island are illiterate.

‘Whereabouts in the city are you from?’ Weaver tries. ‘Can you draw that for us?’

The girl’s face changes slowly like shadows on a wall. Eventually she draws an elongated lump that bears a vague resemblance to a fish.

‘The island?’ Weaver asks.

The girl nods. Her hand shakes a little, as if the pen is too heavy between her fingers. She marks a cross in the northwest corner of the lump.

‘The Ink Quarters?’ Weaver says. I have only been there a couple of times. I remember narrow streets thick with pungent smells, canals where water ran strange-coloured, and tall, vast buildings with darkened windows you could not see through. Gondolas carrying blood coral in large

cages to be ground in the ink factories, and red-dye transported from the factories to the harbours in big glass bottles.

The girl nods again.

‘Are you able to tell us anything about the person who attacked you?’ Weaver asks.

The girl lifts two fingers.

‘Do you mean there were two of them?’

The girl begins to nod, but pain cuts across her face and stops the movement short.

Weaver looks like she is about to say something else, but a few red drops fall onto the page from between the girl’s lips. A narrow trickle of blood follows. Alva’s face is taut. She pushes Weaver and me to the side. The glass jar in her hand is still holding the medusa, which lies motionless, like a plucked petal.

‘Open,’ Alva orders.

I only realize now why the girl cannot talk. I only catch a brief glance at her mouth, but that is enough. Where the tongue should be, there is only a dark, marred mass of muscle, still a bleeding, open wound. I have to turn away for a moment. Alva holds a towel under the girl’s chin, fishes the medusa out from the glass jar and slides it into the girl’s mouth. Relief spreads on the girl’s face.

‘She is in a lot of pain,’ Alva says. ‘She must rest. But there is one more thing.’

She places the jar on the night table and picks up the glow-glass. She turns to look at me.

‘Are you certain you don’t know her?’

The question makes no sense. I look at the girl again, just to be certain, although I do not need to. She has closed her eyes and her breathing is turning even. Her muscles twitch slightly. She does not open her eyes.

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‘Of course I’m certain,’ I say.

Weaver stares at Alva, then at me, then at Alva again.

‘Why do you ask such a thing?’ she says.

Alva steps right next to the girl. She does not react when Alva takes her hand and gently coaxes open the fingers closed in a loose fist.

‘Because of this,’ Alva says and turns the palm upwards. The light from the glow-glass falls on it. Bright marks begin to glow on the skin, the letters forming a word I recognize immediately.

Eliana.

My name.

CHAPTER TWO

The girl's hand is narrow in the grip of Alva's fingers, the angles of her bones sharp around the dent of her palm. I am aware of Alva's and Weaver's attention, a tense net around me. But I have done this countless times before. I turn the perception inside out, as if I am focusing my eyes on something close by and letting the background soften into a haze where all boundaries are unclear. I look at the letters as if they are mere contours and colours in a landscape, akin to cracks in the walls of houses, or the black and green algae growing in the canals.

I turn to look at Weaver, taking care not to let my face reveal a thing.

'What does it say?' I ask.

Weaver does not answer immediately. Her gaze perseveres in the dusk, but I do not shiver under it.

'Has your brother not taught you anything?' she asks.

'He never thought it necessary,' I respond.

Weaver is still looking at me when Alva says, 'Eliana, someone tattooed your name on this girl's palm in invisible ink.'

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I let my face and body react as they should. They adjust to the situation. I know what Weaver reads on them: surprise, confusion, just the right amount of alarm.

‘I don’t know her,’ I say. ‘I’ve never seen her before.’

‘Eliana is not a common name,’ Weaver says.

It is true. I am the only one in the House of Webs, although there must be others on the island.

‘Maybe it’s her name,’ I suggest. ‘Have you asked?’

Alva sighs.

‘Of course I did. And no, it’s not her name. Or so she claims, at least.’

‘Quite a coincidence,’ Weaver says. She turns to Alva. ‘This is no ordinary tattoo.’

‘No,’ Alva says.

She covers the glow-glass with a towel, reaches for the window and parts the curtain slightly. The early-morning light floats into the room, settles on the girl’s skin. The letters turn invisible. Her palm looks no different than mine; only a few lines and callouses are discernible on it.

‘Interesting,’ Weaver says. ‘I have not seen one of those before.’

‘Neither have I,’ Alva says.

She lets the curtain fall back to cover the window and removes the towel from the top of the glow-glass. My gaze turns towards the letters as their outlines slowly grow visible. They run across the narrow lines on the girl’s palm, towards the fingers closed around my name, as if to keep it safe. Alva places the girl’s hand back on the blanket.

‘We must let her sleep.’ Alva’s voice is firm.

Weaver turns to face me.

‘You may return to your room,’ she says. ‘I will let the City Guard know about this as soon as the watergraph is working again.’

I bow my head slightly in acknowledgement of the order. 'And keep me up to date about her condition,' Weaver says to Alva.

The girl's eyes crack open and close again. Her breathing flows calm and even. The pain seems to be gone for now, and the bleeding has stopped. Very gently Alva coaxes the girl's mouth open, holds the towel and the glass jar against her skin and pulls the medusa out. Its lifeless weight drops into the jar, where the bright-red blood tendrils begin to spread through the water cradling its dead body.

Alva picks up the cup from the night table. We turn to go.

After the warmth of the sick bay, the morning is cold around us. Weaver stops a few footsteps ahead of me.

'I don't expect you in the Halls of Weaving until this afternoon,' she says.

I am grateful that she remembers. It is nearly time for the morning gong. I bow. Weaver nods at me and continues towards the building where the Halls of Weaving are located. I suspect she sleeps even less than I do. The incoming day is unfolding on the horizon, and for a moment I am alone under the sky of the house.

The cell is cool and silent. The thick curtain lets in a thread-slender rectangle of light around the edges of the window. I turn the key in the lock and shake the glow-glass on the table. As the water inside the globe moves and wakes up the algae, the shine begins to grow. In the dim light I examine my skin from head to toe more carefully than usual. The back is always the most difficult; there is no mirror. I find nothing apart from the perpetual callouses on my fingertips and soles. I look for clean clothes to wear and fold the dirty ones into a pile I will carry

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into the laundry room later. I can sense the faint scent of Alva's brew on them: herbs that bring sleep and rest. Perhaps I should have asked Alva to mix me a similar potion. She would have said no at first, but then done it anyway.

I sit on the bed until the morning gong begins to echo in the stone walls and vibrate on the webs.

I walk together with the weavers who are on unravelling duty and on their way to work in the web-maze today. It is said on the island that the district of the House of Webs is mapless, a shapeshifter: careless travellers never find their way out if they wander too deep. Yet the weavers know the way. The three solid buildings of the house are surrounded by a zone where the streets and buildings are formed only by woven webs hung between stone pillars, seemingly arbitrary narrow alleys and dead ends. It is here that strangers will lose their way, and sometimes weavers too, when they have not yet learned how the routes are shaped and transformed. Here, walls are unravelled as soon as they are completed and woven anew somewhere else when they have ceased to be. Everything follows a predetermined order, yet you must hold the exact keys to it in order to perceive it.

As I draw further from the heart of the House of Webs, stone fences grow onto the landscape almost unnoticeably. The city no longer flits and filters light everywhere, but takes a more solid shape. Amidst the soft view of yarn frayed on the edges rise stairways covered in dark algae, walls eaten by humidity and whole houses with no woven parts. Eventually all of the maze is left behind: a city of stone where the work of weavers does not belong swallows the walker. The canals flow brown in the chasms among

the buildings, and gondolas rise and fall between water and air. None of the other weavers come to the city with me.

The banks of Halfway Canal are still burst and rippling. The pavements have been claimed by water, and I have to climb up steps cut on the outer wall of a tall building to one of the rope bridges that are lowered from rooftops during floods. The bridge wobbles under my footsteps. There is a small crowd standing at the far end, waiting for their turn to cross. Below, people are wading in water, some of them in high-leg oiled leather boots, others bare-foot. They are all scooping up something limp and leaf-like, placing armfuls of it in half-drowned wheelbarrows and small boats and large baskets. At first I think it is just seaweed, not the web-thin algae used in glow-glasses, but a leafy variety that grows deeper. Floods often throw large amounts of it across the island.

The bridge comes to an end and I begin to climb towards the next one. I have to cross a high rooftop, and there I stop. Usually this would cause pushing and shoving and protests, a rush that tries everyone's patience. But today there are others beside me who have stopped on the roof to stare at the sea and the rising tide that is slowly swallowing the shores.

At first it looks as if the waves are bubbling, or growing soft scales, translucent and circular. Their surfaces turn coarser, their density different. When the first wave carrying the dead weight crashes onto the rocks, I am not certain. When the second one does, I could not be wrong if I wanted to, and I understand the people with their baskets and boats, the scooping movements of their hands.

The sea is carrying dead singing medusas to the island, throwing them to the shores and driving them into the canals. Their bodies lie quiet and lifeless, only cradled by

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the movement of the water. There are thousands, tens of thousands of them, each one as alone as the others, each one as unable to sing ever again.

I think of the medusas in Alva's tank, of their soft rippling. I wonder if they know, if they sing their farewells to the lost ones.

I climb down the other side of the rooftop and fit my steps to the unsteady planks of the next rope bridge.

The rooftops are crowded and the flooding streets too, as always on the Ink-marking days. The sound of a seashell horn soars above the rooftops from the Tower, inviting city-dwellers to gather. A steady stream of people moves towards the museum. I choose a circuitous route I know to be more quiet. On the way I must cross a square bordered by porticos on each side. The ground is a little higher here, the stones humid only from fog and drizzle. A small group of black-clad people is gathered in the square. There are maybe five or six of them. They stand there as a dark and silent front, like rain on the horizon. I recognize the mourning garb immediately. Many families of Dreamers hide their shame, but some wish to remember those they have lost.

As I am crossing the square, one of them detaches herself from the group and walks towards me. I turn my gaze downwards, trying to ignore her. She walks past me, so close it is more a push than a brush. She drops something to the ground. I hear a faint clink and before I know it, I have stepped on the item without even looking.

A guard is there in an instant. I had not noticed him. Neither had the woman, probably taking a bigger risk than she had intended. But he has seen the sea-green coat of the House of Webs on me, he has seen the woman's

black garb. He will have drawn his own conclusions. The guard grabs the woman by the arm, his fingers hard and tight.

‘You’re not going anywhere,’ he tells her. Then he turns to me. ‘Did she bother you in any way? Try to give you anything, say anything inappropriate?’

I stare at the woman. Her face is expressionless, mask-like. If I say yes, she will be in trouble. Perhaps all of them will be, the group standing behind me, wordless and unmoving. Their eyes are on us. If I say no and the guard notices the item she dropped, I may be in trouble, whether I am from the House of Webs or not. I can feel a flat surface through the thin sole of my shoe. The item is small enough to be hidden from sight until I move. I do not even know what it is.

‘No,’ I say. ‘She did nothing. I wasn’t looking where I was going and walked into her.’ I direct my next words at the woman. ‘It was entirely my fault. I apologize.’

The woman nods. If she is surprised, she hides it well. The guard relaxes his grip on the woman’s arm.

‘Be more careful next time,’ he tells her. ‘Your kind have no business bothering folk from the Houses of Crafts.’ The woman does not move. ‘On your way then,’ the guard orders.

The woman begins to walk towards the group, slowly at first, then accelerating her steps. The guard looks after her.

‘If you ask me, her sort should be thrown into the House of the Tainted along with their family members,’ he says. ‘Who knows if they are clean, either.’ He glances at me. ‘Good day to you, Miss Weaver.’

I nod at the guard. He nods back, then turns away. I wait until he is close to the other side of the square, taking his post in the shadows between the pillars.

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I tug at the string that ties a small leather pouch to my belt. The pouch falls. The coins inside clink against each other. I deliberately avoid glancing in the direction of the guard. If he is looking at me, he will simply see me pick up my coin pouch which I had tied in place carelessly. He will not see me move my foot and take the item from under my shoe. I have time to feel cold metal in my fingers before I slip it into the pouch with the coins. The guard will find me clumsy. He will find me unsuspecting.

The group in mourning on the edge of the square will see something else, but they will not tell. Not if I do not.

The Museum of Pure Sleep has always reminded me of a sea monster, the kind described in children's tales. The statues standing on its roof rise tentacle-like against the sky, ready to reach and grab and pull down into the abyss anything that comes their way. The round windows gleam orange and blue, and sometimes shadows close to cover them like eyelids, to let the sleep in. But never the dreams.

I plunge into the stream of people. The steps are slippery and wide under my feet, their edges rounded and worn hollow by the weight of all who have climbed them. The throng is already suffocating me. I sense the warmth and movements of human bodies forced too close together, their smells and impatience. Before me, I see other museum visitors disappear into a portico. The columns in front of the entrance shine pale as teeth against the dark stone-skin of the building.

I walk into the monster's mouth.

It is always dim at first. I join one of the four long queues. They all trickle towards checkpoints where men in uniforms guard the gates. The light only begins

beyond the iron bars dropping down vertically from the tall ceiling. There, I can see a group of visitors that has stopped on the landing halfway up the coral-red staircase. The skylight casts brightness upon them, separating them from us.

My eyes focus on the bars again. They look like the weft of an enormous wall-web. I imagine a giant hand passing a warp through them.

When my turn finally comes, I show the guard my birth tattoo. A cold draught brushes the hair of my neck. Although I checked my skin this morning, my breath runs tight as I pull up my sleeves and wait. Every year I fear that the guard will find more on my skin than the lines tattooed on my arm. Yet he counts the tattoos with the customary bored expression on his face and nods. He checks the house-tattoo on my other arm, finds my name on a list and draws a mark next to it. He opens the gate to let me through and closes it again before beginning to examine the next citizen. Two new groups are already gathering around the guides at the bottom of the staircase. I join the group appointed for me.

Blood coral, amber and tapestries woven from dyed yarn glow around us, making the light pouring from the skylight grow and burst into flames. We wait until the previous group has disappeared into a room at the top of the stairs. The guide asks us to follow. We all know where to go.

We walk across the entrance hall and climb halfway up the staircase, where we stop. The guide begins to talk and gestures towards the large mural on the wall above the top landing. Our gazes are turned to it, but I might as well be looking through a window, not noticing the unevenness of its surface or the stains left on it by weather. I

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have seen the mural too many times. Even as a child I did not like it. The tall Tower in the middle frightened me, as did the eight masked figures standing in front of it. I told my mother they were ghosts. She placed a hand over my mouth and ordered me to be quiet. I still remember the looks the guide and the other visitors gave me.

It was only later that I understood how afraid my mother was then. My words could easily have been interpreted as an indication that it was common in my family to speak of the Council in blasphemous tones. But the image had come of its own volition and had not originated from my parents' conversations. With their black cloaks and featureless, blood-coloured masks, the mural-Council looked like an image of death in my child's eyes.

The guide's story about how the Council ended the Reverie Revolution, purged the island of Dreamers and restored peace and prosperity to our city is the same every year. I know parts of it by heart. *And thus dream-plague was banished from our midst, with those spreading it sent to colonies or enclosed within walls where their disease could be contained. Night-maeres ceased to roam free and fled to the dark places they had come from, never to emerge again except for the cursed few who carried them within their blood.*

The group keeps their eyes fixed on the mural while the guide speaks. I take quick glances at the people around me. There is a young mother with two children. I wonder which one of them is here for the Ink-marking. I hope it is not one of the children; although if not today, they will have to endure the pain when their time comes. There is an old man in a grey waistcoat and brown jacket, with a powdery white stain on his dark trousers. A baker, perhaps. Another man is clearly from the Ink Quarters: his hands are

tarnished with black and red dye. Several young women are among the group, wearing bonnets and dresses made from slightly finer fabric, and skilfully polished bone coral pendants. Daughters of merchants, I think.

I notice a man glancing down to the entrance hall over his shoulder, as if searching for something. He is not young any more, and there is nothing about his looks that gives away his craft. Grey trousers, a brown hooded jacket, worn boots. No stains on fingers. Hair tied neatly to the nape of the neck with a leather ribbon, his hands clasped behind his back. He returns his gaze to the mural. The sky above shifts, the light falling from the glass ceiling burns deeper and hits the man's hand mere steps away from me.

The hollow of his palm bears a strange, gondola-shaped scar. It is wider in the middle, narrowing towards the ends.

I raise my gaze before anyone sees me staring.

As we walk up the staircase and proceed to the next room, I notice the man looking around again with the same searching face. I also notice something else: he is careful about the way he does it. Before looking away, he pays close attention to the guide and only turns his gaze for the briefest moment when he believes he will not be seen.

A guard with a short spear stands beside one of the walls. His uniform carries the sun-emblem of the Council and the City Guard. The man's eyes stop on him, then return to the pictures on the walls the guide is talking about. These too are words I have heard before. *Once the island was a tangle of forest with wild beasts inhabiting it: a cruel and dangerous place where a man could easily be lost and never found again. But our ancestors brought their torches and swords to drive the beasts away, and*

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with heroic courage and suffering great losses they laid the first foundations of the city we know today. From the cradle of the sea they harvested silkweed and blood coral, and they took their ships across wide waters and established the first trading routes, which you can see on these maps.

We continue to walk through rooms filled with images of the past: weavers and scribes at work, the building of the Tower, codices spread on the square for the annual Word-incineration. I keep an eye on the man with the scarred palm. In each room he glances around as soon as he has entered, before turning his focus on the guide.

We reach the room I have always liked the least. Glow-glasses hanging from the ceiling light the windowless space. The guide points to a picture on the wall, showing the bodies of those dead from dream-plague being burned. But there are more than paintings here. Glass cases hold medical instruments made from coral, both bone white and blood red. Their points and blades are sharp, their jaws wide and hard. Thick, spread-open books lie next to them under the glass. The illustrations show skin lesions and bulbous growths where the limbs meet the torso, like darkness boiling under the skin.

The man with the scarred palm has stopped in front of a painting portraying a young woman. She is lying on a bed with her eyes closed, a hand fallen towards the floor over the edge of the bed. Her lips are cracked open in an anxious arc. A dark shadow sits upon her chest with hands reaching for the woman's neck: a night-maere visiting a Dreamer. The man pulls his hand out of his pocket and scratches his head.

That is when I see it. It is a mere glimpse, but I am certain that it is there.

A tattoo glows white on his palm, where the scar was. I do not have time to discern any details, but the shape is similar to the scar's: elongated, pointy at each end.

He pushes the hand back into his pocket.

The image rises within me like water: the injured girl's hand holding the letters of my name.

As in all the other rooms, there is a guard in here, too. When the guide urges us to move on, the guard steps closer to the group and speaks.

'You,' he says to the man. 'Halt.'

The man freezes. An alarmed expression appears on his face. He opens his mouth, but no sound comes out.

'You may continue,' the guard tells the guide. 'This man will join you after I have had a word with him.'

The guide gives a bow. We walk after him to the next room. I glance behind. The guard is speaking to the man in a low voice and quick words I cannot hear, his face less stern than I would have expected. They both notice me looking. The guard's lips stop moving. The room begins to fill with new visitors. I turn my head and follow the group.

No one speaks after we exit the final room and walk down the staircase. This is the way the tour is designed. First the monster swallows you, then it digests you and eventually you come out of the other end feeling filthy.

The exit hall resembles the entrance. We have to queue for the gates in the iron-bar wall again. Only here the queue is slower and stretches all the way outside. I look at the others who have come to receive their annual tattoos. Many of them have brought families and friends, and some of them will be throwing parties today. But even they must first come to the Ink-marking. No one on the island avoids that.

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As I scan the space, I spot the man with a scar on his hand again. He has taken his place in another queue a little ahead of me. Dozens of glow-glass globes hanging from the ceiling paint the space blue. The man clasps his hands behind his back. His palm turns up. I expect to see his tattoo again.

It is not there.

The distance is long enough that I may not discern the scarring, but I am certain that I would see the glowing tattoo. He was not standing further away from me in the room where I first noticed it. But now his palm is bare, his skin without any markings.

I almost move to join the same queue with him, try to find a reason to talk to him. But the queue proceeds and people flow between us, a whole open sea, impossible to cross. I lose sight of him.

The exit opens to a square on the other side of which the Tower rises larger than I remember, a storm-grey column against a blue sky. The sun glistens dimly on its stone surface and the mist has dissipated on the streets. The queues trickle towards the checkpoints and the inkmasters' tables behind which they meld into the billowing crowd.

I look where I cannot help looking, none of us can.

The Dreamers stand in the middle of the square on a dais, four women and four men. None of them is young. One of the women wears an eyepatch and one of the men is missing a hand. They are barefoot and grey-clad, and the mark of the Tainted is clearly visible on each of their foreheads. A City Guard with a hand on spear-haft has taken a place at each corner of the dais, and at the foot of the dais an entire front of them stands in formation.

The queues reach and move. The autumn-dampened sun pours lukewarm light on faces. The prisoners stand

silent, still, have been standing for hours. No one offers them water or food.

Eventually it is my turn to sit in front of an inkmaster. He wipes his tattoo needle and dips it in an ink jar. I pull my sleeve up to bare my arm above the dark lines.

The song of the seashell horn pauses. A wave passes through the crowd, another. It is finally time for what everyone has gathered to wait for. On the upper balcony of the Tower the wide doors open, and the Council steps out through them. Their coral masks glint in the sun like freshly shed blood against stone-coloured cloaks. The noise growing from the crowd resembles the whistling of the wind.

The inkmaster brings the needle onto my skin and begins to tap its handle with a stone in order to pierce the skin, drawing another mark right next to the crook of my arm. I look away and clench my hand into a fist. My eyes water from the pain. Weaving will hurt for a week at least, and the itch left by the needle where the ink has entered under the skin never quite goes away.

The ringing of the bell is crisp and sharp as the edges of the afternoon shadows.

I turn to look at the dais again. A man wearing a loose coat bearing the sun emblem leaves the foot of the Tower, approaches the dais with unrushed footsteps and climbs onto it. He holds an opaque glass bowl in which eight wooden sticks have been arranged. The man stops before the first Dreamer.

I have wondered many times which stick I would wish to draw from the bowl if I were to stand on the dais one day. I change my mind every year.

The Dreamer woman draws from the bowl a wooden stick approximately the length of her palm. I do not discern

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her expression clearly from this far away, but I notice she turns her head in order to see how the Dreamer next to her will choose. When the man carrying the bowl moves to stand before the third Dreamer, I see the first two holding wooden sticks of similar length in their hands. I cannot tell if their faces are disappointed or relieved.

I shiver. The inkmaster wipes the droplets of blood from my skin with a cloth that does not look very clean. I pull my sleeve back down to cover the twenty-four lines on my arm. I am officially one year older. My skin smarts when the fabric touches it. I get up and move into the crowd through the checkpoint gate.

The bowl-bearing man has proceeded to the second-to-last Dreamer. The other six are holding sticks of similar length in their hands. The breathing of the audience has quieted, and no one speaks. Somewhere, a child bursts into tears.

The Dreamer pushes his only hand into the bowl and slowly draws out one of the two wooden sticks. It is twice as long as the others. A howl-like scream rises from the audience and people begin to clap and stomp, when the man lifts the stick high in the air for everyone to see. Something resembling a smile visits his face, wide and stiff as if it were painted on. For form's sake the last Dreamer draws the remaining short stick.

The bowl-bearing man turns to the audience.

'In their great fairness the Council have pardoned this Dreamer,' he says. 'He is free to walk the world and leave the island at dawn. In the name of the Council!'

'In the name of the Council!' the crowd yells in return. The words leave my lips too before I even know I have formed them.

'And now we shall together swear an oath of loyalty

to the Council, who in their wisdom pilot the island through all storms,' the bowl-bearer says.

The words of the oath begin to flow from me with the choir of voices. *They who raised the Tower with their own hands and watch the city from atop of it, to them I am faithful.*

The Dreamer who drew the long stick is walked down from the dais and led away from sight behind the museum. The guards guide the seven other Dreamers into a cage on wheels, which they begin to transport towards the large black gondola of the House of the Tainted. The oath pours past me like water.

They who feed us and clothe us and make us strong, to them I am faithful.

The wheels of the cage clatter on the stones of the square.

They who drove sickness away from the island and purged our sleep forever, to them I am faithful.

One of the Dreamers in the cage throws herself against the bars, the old woman with an eyepatch.

'Lies!' she shouts. 'It's all lies!'

If the stones of the streets crumbled from under me and the canals escaped their confines, I would place my life in their hands and be faithful to them.

Two guards wrench the door of the cage open and tear the woman out.

'Lies!' she yells again. 'Ask yourselves why—'

One of the guards hits the woman so hard she goes quiet and begins to weep with pain. The guard ties a scarf to cover the woman's mouth. I see a red stain spreading on the scarf.

If the sea climbed over my doorstep, I would let their ships carry me to safety and I would be faithful to them.

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The City Guards drag the woman into the crowd and I do not see her again. Somewhere another gondola is waiting, a narrower and more enclosed one, and aboard it is a cage covered with black fabric. I think of the woman inside it. I think of the longer stick that she might have drawn from the bowl, and of the man who did draw it: of the ship he will be taken to in the faint light of dawn that will carry him somewhere with a strange language and jobs different from those he is used to. I think of the man looking back towards the island from aboard the ship for the last time, knowing he can never return.

Above everything the Council stands quiet, does not raise a hand, does not move.

The oath comes to an end and my lips are still moving, but my voice has faded away.