

*The beast raged; it punctured the air with its spite. But the girl was fiercer. She held no weapons but the diamonds glinting like stars above her brow, against hair like a dark mass of sky. She wore no armor save a beautiful hua of mahogany and amber spun from damask silk, a golden dragon embroidered down its length, its body half-hidden by her waist-wrap. She raised her arm, and I saw nothing. But the creature saw, and its wrath gentled, until it did little but whimper.*

*"Kneel," the girl ordered, and - against all expectations - the daeva obeyed. It sank to its knees, and bowed its head.*

*Seventeen, I thought. She could not be older than seventeen years. Seventeen could explain the poetry of her face, with her skin brown and unblemished. Seventeen explained the pertness of her nose, the determined tilt to her chin. But seventeen did not explain the oldness in her eyes, large twin pools of black from where no light could escape.*

*The girl stood beside the fiend. It was four times as tall and weighed a hundred tons, but it shrunk from the touch of her hand. It was an elephant-like beast, with a hide the color of dead trees and a mouth full of teeth as large as tusks, but it did not attack. It bore fangs like knives, each canine more jagged than the next, but it was afraid. They made for a bizarre sight: the girl and the monster on a beach of ash and silt, while waves crashed against the shore and sent up sprays of seawater and salt.*

*The beast watched her with its dull, white eyes. It whimpered again.*

*The girl smiled. She stroked at its misshapen jaw and leaned closer to the hideous yellowing teeth, like she had a secret to share.*

*"Die," she whispered.*

*The daeva sighed, a relieved sound. It toppled onto its side, raised its head beseechingly at her one last time, and died.*

*The girl rose to her feet, slipping a knife out from her sleeve. Her hand traveled past the beast's jaw and neck, searching. She paused at a spot halfway down its throat, and the blade sank into the roughened flesh, striking deep. Black liquid, slick as oil and thick as congealed syrup, bubbled up from the gaping wound.*

*I turned my face away. My last meal rose up in my throat unbidden, and I forced it back down with effort.*

*Blood and grime dripped down her fingers. From within the depths of the creature, the girl withdrew a perfectly round stone. It was as large as her hand, smooth and polished, and it glittered red, the color of giant rubies. As she did, the monster crumbled, reduced to a mountain of dust in an instant.*

*"A bezoar," she said, for my benefit. "The mark of every daeva. This creature is called an akvan, and its bezoar can sense all known magic. But it does not explain you here, in my domain."*

*Despite the masterful craftsmanship of her hua there was something unusual about the dragon woven on it - its snout was too long, and it too had tusks instead of sharp teeth and whiskers. It was an imperfection I was not accustomed to in such fineries.*

*The gown was slitted on one side, and I saw the long white scar that climbed her right thigh. She made no move to hide this flaw, and stood boldly, with her legs apart, so that the beaded dragon looked to have burst out onto her dress from the puckered skin. She wore her waist-wrap loosely, in defiance of tradition; like her hua it*

*was black, but with chrysanthemums stitched in gilded thread. One of the great atelier Arrakan's creations, I surmised; intricate gold embroidery was his specialty.*

*She wore a beautiful chain around her neck, and on it a heart-shaped pendant. I had my own heartsglass of the common apple-glossy red. I expected hers to be of a bright silver; a soft swirling mist contained within the tempered glass, as expected of an asha. Instead, it was as black as the night.*

*The akvan had not been the first death on that lonely shore. Bits of other bones lay scattered around the desolate beach, their skeletal remains victims of the relentless tides that sent them crashing at intervals against sharpened rocks. Large ribcages glistened despite the soot-ridden light. Empty skulls gaped back at me, silent and accusing.*

*The girl turned to face me, and I saw the grave behind her for the first time. It was a slab of headstone lying on the only patch of grass that flourished in the otherwise barren landscape of sand. It bore no inscription, and I wondered who lay buried within, who she mourned.*

*"They call you Tea, of the Embers," I said.*

*She said nothing, and waited.*

*"I collect stories," I continued, "I was born in Drycht, but was banished when I came of age, for my freethinking ways and for singing against the tyrant-kings. Since then I have made my living on tales and ballads. I have seen with my own eyes the endless wars of the Yadosha states. I have broken bread with the reindeer people, and have danced with the Gorvekan tribes on the Isteran steppes. I have seen princes poisoned, have watched a Faceless follower hanged, and have survived in a city that's*

*been swept out to sea. My name is known in many places; my reputation is more than modest.*

*But I know very little of the workings of the asha. I know of their dances and of their weapons and of their legends, but not of their quarrels and their gossip and their loves. And until today, I have never seen one slay a daeva."*

*She laughed; it sounded bitter. "I am no longer an asha, bard; they are beloved by the people, and I am not. My exile here, at the end of the world, is proof of that. They have another name for those like me. Call me a bone witch; it suits me better. But I have no need of you, and you are in my way. Give me one reason why I should not cut you down where you stand."*

*I am used to pleading for my life, and so I said, "You are an asha, and you must know how to discern truth from lies. Put me to the test."*

*The girl moved closer. From within the folds of her hua she took out another stone and placed it in my hand. I was no magic adept, but even I could feel the strength of the spells woven into her dress, though I did not know what they enhanced - her beauty, which such magic was commonly used for, or her power, which was formidable enough without them.*

*"If you speak the truth, it will flare a brighter blue," she said, "but tell me lies and it will shine the deepest black. Choose your words carefully, bard."*

*"I had a dream. I saw a bright blue moon in the sky. I followed it across the clouds, until it shone over a gray, empty beach littered with the bones of sea monsters of old. On it stood a young girl with her hands stained in blood, but who promised me a tale beyond anything I could ever imagine. 'If there is one thing people desire more*

*than a good story,' she said, 'it is when they speak their own.' And when I woke, I saw that same moon, as blue and as real as you and I, looking down. I trusted my instincts, and followed the road the way it had been mapped out for me in my dream. It is here I find that same beach, and that same girl. I have heard all the tales they speak of you. It would be my honor to hear yours. Give me leave to sing your story, and I will do it justice."*

*The waves lapped at the shore. Vultures circled overhead. The sapphire in my hand shone the purest blue.*

*She broke the silence with more laughter, the stillness shattering at the sound. "You are confident and curious. Some would say that is not always a healthy combination." She took back the bezoar, and turned away. "I leave in seven days. I will give you until then."*

*I followed her, my heartsglass heavy with questions. Of everything I had heard, I had not expected her to be so young. Seventeen did not explain why she stood on that strange graying beach, alone, with monsters' corpses for company.*