

Of the Sky, Of the Sea, and of the Stones
Chapter 2 - Of the Sky
Part 11 - A Warning

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As a thirst for knowledge plagued my drowsy mind, I knew I had to rouse myself from this stupor, lest it cause me to waste precious daylight. Though, upon making my way to the galley to grab something to eat, I was accosted and almost literally dragged up to the deck by Karcharia.

“Could whatever you want to discuss wait until I’ve had something to eat?” I complained, pulling my arm free from the muscular woman’s grasp. Though, it was clear she purposely released my arm, for the mighty first mate was not the kind of person whose grasp could be broken easily.

“No, too many people in the galley,” she whispered. In itself, this was highly unnatural, as Karcharia never whispered. Every thought she had and wanted to be heard was spoken loudly and proudly, to the point of being close to terrifying. Her hushed tone put me on edge. She looked like she wanted to say more, but subtly gestured towards the bow, which held the least amount of sailors.

When we were clear of potentially prying ears, I inquired, “Is there something wrong?” I briefly looked at the mast’s splintered remains, worried that the Captain was unsuccessful in acquiring resources to repair the ship, despite the Grand Adviser’s promise.

“No,” she started, following my gaze towards the mast briefly, before looking back at me, “the captain’s made an order for some lumber, which should be arriving soon.” She then picked her pointed teeth to clear it of a piece of crab shell. After licking her fingers she continued, “things are not right in this city. Early this morning, just before dawn, our lookout spotted those rainbow sky serpents in the distance. The people of the flying city are acting weird too. Sluggish and clumsy. Like they’re all drunk.” Karcharia then stretched her arms above her head before resting them on a nearby railing and stared at the water of the docking bay. “More important than any of that is how the captain feels. He told me his senses are on edge, like something is about to happen. And his gut is never wrong. I don’t want to spook the crew, so keep your mouth shut about this, got it?” She ended with a glare.

I flinched from her intensity, and swallowed hard before nodding. “Did...the captain mention what was troubling him?” I cautiously probed.

“He says he feels like there’s a storm coming, but not an actual storm. Like the world is inhaling, or like the lull and dip in the sea before a crashing tidal wave appears,” Karcharia responded as she returned to gazing at the water. Her uncharacteristically poetic remark set me even more on edge than her whispering or her warning.

“I assume you’re telling me this because I’m about to head into the city soon,” I implied.

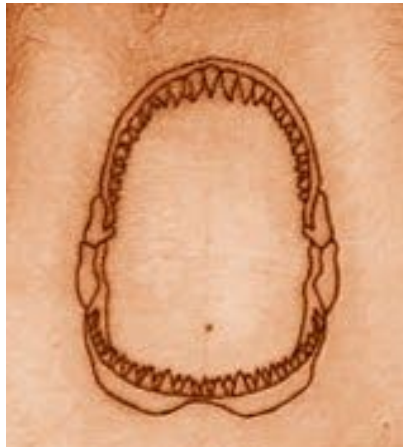


Figure 18. One of Karcharia's many shark-themed tattoos

“Let me be straight with you, nerd, I don’t care about you OR your studies,” she growled. “But Captain Roac takes every job, contract, and mission very seriously. Like he’s bound to his word by some curse. Eternally loyal to the words he speaks and writes. And I to him. Therefore, I must do the same. Don’t get caught up in anything...troublesome. The moment the ship is repaired, I want the Bitterwind, and her crew, OUT of this queer place. Before any more sky serpents or sea monsters assault us. Read quickly, or whatever it is you do off-deck, so that when the ship is ready we can be off without delay.” Without waiting for me to respond she glared at me once more, though this time with jagged teeth bared, to sink in her points in more ways than one. She then walked along the deck, barking commands at nearby sailors, paying me no more attention.

With a deep sigh and a growling stomach, I popped into the galley and grabbed a piece of bread smeared in savoury sea anemone jam before making my way towards the Central Library. Though, as I did so, I scrutinized those I passed, remembering Karcharia’s words. The cyan-skinned folk of Temptes Equit did seem very sluggish. Many were slouching, while walking or seated. Bags under many eyes indicated a great sleeplessness in much of the population. Some even stumbled and fell while nothing was in their way.

Hoping the oddness was not an actual cause for concern, I brushed off the feeling while walking up the lovely garden leading to the grand house of knowledge before me then. I planned to keep my eyes and ears peeled, but I thought that within the walls of the library I would surely be safer than those elsewhere. Though, as I thought this, a shadow appeared in the sky above. Racing across the skyline of Temptes Equit was a flash of dark wings, which almost careened into the ground near to a raised area boasting a draconic fountain a fair distance away from the Central

Library's entrance. I paused and observed, as did all of the cyan folk in the area. Many gasped, and some began chatting fearfully.

Near the large fountain, which was twice as tall as I, was now an equally huge creature with leathery gray wings and ears like that of substantial, indented trowels. From their back dismounted a humanoid figure, though. One garbed in a robe made entirely of huge, multicoloured feathers that hurt the eyes to look at directly. Not unlike the integument of the children of Ziz, the rainbow sky serpents, which greeted us with their painful beauty when the Bitterwind entered the city not so long ago.