

“YOU said Jecht sent you here.” Her words are resentful, her eyes edged with red, her hands curled loosely at her sides. Her gaze drifts over his face, and he wishes yet again that he could hide the scar where there was once an eye, just as he wishes every time he has to walk the streets of Zanarkand.

“That’s right,” he says. His voice has changed too; not like his face, but enough to remind him that things are different now. He lacks the cadence of youth, the rise of emotion – his voice is flat, as if somebody drove a nail through it and let out all the conviction that he once tried to express. It is as if someone is telling him, again and again: you died. You are a dead man.

It is a voice he tries not to use more often than he has to.

She is older than him, probably, but she seems like a young girl, one of those girls who lose their way as they grow up and forget what it means to have an identity. She is the sort of woman who would usually decorate her face with a little makeup, he imagines, and yet now she faces him with bare skin, pale and pitted. It is like something he is not supposed to see. He is sure she would not let him, if the circumstances were different.

“He sent you – to take care of us,” she insists, and he notes a tinge of hope in her voice, and he wants to say: No. You are mistaken. He sent me for the boy. He thought a grown woman would look after herself. But those words would be too cruel. He curses Jecht for his ignorance: Jecht, who was so selective

in his interpretation of other people. How could he not have seen that his wife would decline like this?

She places her hands carefully on his sleeves, just below the shoulders, and they are so small against his arms. She clings on with minimal force, as if she is afraid – as if she knows that if she presses too tightly, the truth will out in an explosion of pyreflies. But she has no such knowledge. “I need it,” she says.

She cranes her neck to approach his face, and he is thinking: *No*. This is unjust, and it will not help at all, and if I tell you what I saw of your husband, you will see that. But he knows that revelation will harm her, more than she has been harmed already.

Her lips clash with his, hot and soft and weak, like the mouth of someone who is used to kissing Jecht. He knows it. He wonders if she will read the same into his own, and drop her hands and run away. But she does not pick up on it. She moves a hand to the back of his head, to lift the base of his ponytail, and he remembers Jecht doing the same, yanking his head back in fervour, when his hair was still jet black. He remembers his moans of pleasure, the passion in Jecht’s smile, the sweat binding two muscled bodies together.

He will walk away, when she releases him. He will refuse politely, and leave.

She draws back, and he follows her into the bedroom and watches her sit on the bed and dab at her face with a handkerchief, and turn a picture of Jecht so it is face-down, and steer

him so he is sitting there with her. She traces a finger over the scar on his face, and it feels like somebody has reached right into him to poke about in his insides; he can only just keep himself from retching. Her eyes are closed, and he knows she is thinking of another man, with a different patterning of scars: ones that made him merely a handsome rogue, not a disgrace who has failed his people and his faith, and his friends worst of all.

She disrobes him. He wonders if he should be reciprocating, but his hands would only get in the way, and he isn't yet used to making fine movements with half his sight gone. She pulls down his sleeves, lifts off the breastplate that he cannot yet bring himself to stop wearing, and he thinks for a moment that he will become pyreflies, reveal his true form once it is no longer held together by clothing. But he remains solid and human, and she says, "Yes. You're just like him."

I am nothing like him, he thinks. His skin was darker than mine, his eyes a different shade of brown; his hair was wild and dishevelled, not meticulously gathered back. He was taller; lying next to him always made that obvious. He was a terrible father, but a principled man – a man who was able to give his life for a belief that he had never really held. Not a man who did hold that belief, but refused to accept such a sacrifice still thinking he might be able to change things, and died a death that was far more unnecessary, and even then was still doomed to live.

He has never lain with a woman before. He has never wanted to. He still does not want to. She removes her own clothes and he feels no interest. She seems not to be put off by his lack of response; maybe it is something she has experienced before. She moves forward to rub against him, and the work of her hands coaxes an erection from him, because his body is crude and brutish and it does not discriminate, even though his mind and heart are resisting, and even though he is dead.

She crouches on all fours, and he is grateful that he will not have to see her face and her breasts. Jecht told him once that his wife liked it from behind, and he groaned and told him not to talk about women while they were lying together, and – he has ended up here. It will be difficult to pretend that her slender back belongs to a man. She has a tiny tattoo on her spine that is the same shape as Jecht's. He thinks of Jecht as he enters her; he thinks of Jecht as she whimpers and grips the bedsheet; he thinks desperately of Jecht as he thrusts mechanically back and forth, and eventually empties himself into her. The euphoria his body feels is the same as ever, and for a moment he is satisfied with what he has done. He has kept his promise, so far. He has come here to watch the boy, and he has provided another service. Here in Jecht's home, with Jecht's wife, he can do his best to pretend Jecht is still around. That is what she wants, and what he wants. Perhaps it will keep her from slipping away, and afford him a few moments

to forget.