

Lesson 1: The City of Tligol

Soon after I'd turned twenty-one, I found myself in a city where they sold delicate almond pastries at public executions and ignored the time-warping trains. I didn't like that, but I liked the city and didn't want to leave, and I'd just got a nifty job in a hotel. I waited on tables, washed huge pots, and, when the Boss exploded and raged, scrubbed everything in sight.

I met Sam at the execution. When Martha told me we were going, all I could think of was that my luck was turning, that there were a few of us and we were going somewhere. And then I was jealous of her friends and angry at how Martha always spoke faster when she was around them. And then it was him being led to the block.

Sam was being led to the block, and I didn't know his name was Sam. I barely knew it was an execution. We were at the central square, below the glass dome, and the giant columns were lit up by the sun. The Leaders' portraits flapped in the air. The priest started a quiet chant, and the Tligolian words danced among the crowd. Then the giant puppets were brought, and I was happy for having been there. Then the bell. 'Only one,' Martha said. 'There were three last time.' The sound of the bell lasted for as long as he walked and contained the whole place, the golden columns, the waving banners, the Leaders' faces. The prisoner knelt beside the block to say his prayers. Then he looked up, and it was like all of me, the whole of me – the fear and pain of being me rushing at me, drowning me – and then the drums.

I tasted vomit. I heard the start of a group prayer. The light flipped. Martha's hand was on my shoulder. Water. The water was alive. My hands were like live beasts.

‘Snap out of it.’ Martha was saying something. We had to go. ‘Jenny, get up.’ We were pushed out of the square into the party area on the green. The glass dome opened to let the birds in. ‘The first time is always bad. Eat something.’

Almond pastries were served at the stall, and I studied the stripes on the candy canes, and strangers’ shoes. My thoughts flung open and raced, and in a few seconds, it seemed, I would work it all out. I needed to do something with time. It would be as simple as going out of that domed square and coming back again. It would require as much effort as conjugating irregular Tligolian verbs. I was in shock, of course, but I was also in love (though it took me a while to figure it out), and I was also right – about time that is, and how easy it was to handle in that place.