

A Red Wash

Red was a dominant colour in the fine arts.

From the sky above, to the rivers beneath, to the blood that ran in your veins – it was the very shade of life itself, of the physical form and the vital essences that kept you breathing.

Teias bit his lip, a twitch in his eye. The stench of his pigments were starting to blend together with the rusted air of the sloshing fluids below, creating an aroma best described as a corpse oozing pus placed right above your musty bed. The circumstances weren't the best for a painter seeking inspiration.

What he wouldn't give to see a bloody different shade of color in the sky for once. It didn't matter which city he was in, the drape of red hung over the heavens followed him everywhere. What's the point of taking a trip if all the damn scenery was dyed in the same shades of red?

As he put brush to canvas, the boat beneath him rocked, the shouts of men rattling the inside of the boat like a pagan instrument. His view tilted and his brush streaked across the canvas, a blue crevasse through the egg-yolk fields of flowers he had finely detailed earlier that trip.

Dabbing at the sweat on his forehead, the painter pushed aside a lock of his umber curls, trying to make his singular horn look bigger.

"Careful now – I don't want my canvas falling into the damn Capillary. I'm making a painting, not a dyed sheet!"

The ferrymen stopped what they were doing, the brief moment of turbulence forgotten. One of them chimed in.

"Methinks the canvas would be better off made into an executioner's hood – it sure smells like one!"

They laughed. Teias turned back to his painting, his lack of engagement prompting the workers back to their duties. He tried to focus on the whites of the canvas, but red seeped through the corners of his eyes, reminding him right where he was.

Bloody hell, he hated red. It was everywhere, right down to the curses in his words.

With any luck though, he'd not have to scrap this painting – the streak of blue can be a river. A blue river. Hah. This was shaping up to be quite an interesting experiment in the abstract.

He smiled. One had to be flexible in an unpredictable world, especially when louts had nothing better to do but to introduce chaos to the equation.

He noticed the captain, shouting commands from the front of the boat. It seemed that there had been a rope across the Capillary, snagging the boat for the briefest of seconds before it snapped. But that wasn't the interesting part – the captain was. A nice head of tawny blonde, tied into a ponytail. Likely someone of middling-to-high grade blood, given his more pronounced features – why, in a different world, the man would look like a beast of burden!

Perhaps there was some irony in how the man ran a ferry service, considering his resemblance to the fabled winged steeds of yore. Or perhaps his flared nostrils would make him closer to a greenhouse bull?

Teias smiled to himself. Chiselling away the ambiguities of a blank canvas, a figure sitting by the riverside began to emerge – inspired not by the captain, but by a friend. Their shared commonality

of course, was their eyes – an oft-seen symbol of the Echori elite. Multiple sets, arranged differently depending on bloodline.

Teias traced a finger over the bags under his eyes. A second set should have been there, were he more fortunate upon his birth. But the idea of it seemed despicable to him. Had anyone scratched in a second pair of eyes on a portrait of him, he'd want to rip their eyes out as recompense.

The captain wouldn't ever know this feeling – of being disgusted by his birthright. More likely than not, the man had taken some pride in it, as it was the very symbol seared into the sanctified wood itself. Any insults Teias could come up with would slide right off. Would a shepherd of lambs take the opinion of a pig seriously?

Tch. Of course, they had zero sympathy for a bloodclot. As far as they were concerned, a man like Teias was barely worth talking to, his blood as thin as the crimson waters beneath the boat. He once had known a boatswain, a man his age, mask covering his face. Why couldn't this boat have been run by him instead? He'd take that fellow's lectures about the importance of *The Laws* over the jeering crowd making his painting difficult.

The Laws played back in his head, abbreviated.

Only the laws governing each ship – and the fact that any corpses would simply drift into full view of the next town, caught by the nets – made it so that people wouldn't just push him overboard for fun. Of course, that boatswain was a much nicer man. What other kind of boatman would serve their passengers home-made pies?

Certainly not these louts.

When the crewmates weren't looking, he shot a sneer toward them.

He painted on, a measure of calm returning to the boat. The scene confirmed to his vision, delicate flicks with the tip of his brush restoring partially painted-over petals of yellow. Another dab of colour, this time viridian. A darker shade than the vivid shade that the flowers rested on, given to a great tree in the back. He'd seen green foliage in reality before, on a particularly daring trip into a Mirajin temple once, but the people there did not take kindly to Echori like him, even if he was thin of blood. That costed him another painting – but even the merest glimpse had paid dividends for his creativity, even now.

That visit... his thoughts drifted back to it. Would the Mirajin allow any other people through their temple gates? There was so much inspiration in the world, locked away simply for being what he was. Whether highblood or lowblood – doors closed no matter who you were.

Thankfully, he was at least not a dullblood. Poor saps. The only one he saw on board had huddled up downstairs, staying in his designated room the whole ride. Though he hid his face with a cloak, one cannot hide their posture, the air of oppression around them.

In a flash of sympathy, he added a second figure sitting under the tree's shade. A nice, golden shade of hair – and the faintest tinge of green to her complexion.

Perhaps she and the first figure by the river were lovers? Ah, a classic dynamic – the dullblooded and the noble. Shame that such a relationship was increasingly found only in the world of fiction.

Teias looked past his canvas briefly, toward the bow of the ship. In the distance, past the thin pink mist that seems to cling to every surface he could see an outline of civilisation, like a silhouette a deity had painted onto the skyline. His stomach rumbled – he'd at least be able to find some decent food there. It wasn't worth purchasing the slop they called food on board this ship.

If things had been different though – maybe he wouldn't have to live like this. Painting was often neglected, having just barely missed the mark to be qualified as one of the Three Arts of the Orthodoxy – all three of which he was terrible at.

He sculpted like a blind man, sung like a rusty door hinge and wrote like he was being strangled as he put pen to paper. What's the point of having bloodline powers tied to Arts you weren't even good at?

Flesh didn't move, bones didn't rattle, and blood wasn't roused by his works.

Why NOT go for something esoteric, then?

Painting offered more expression, intuition.

They oft said that an artist puts himself into his works – but it would be considered odd, to relate to an artform itself as an encompassing whole.

The one looked down upon by the others, for holding little power. The one that held beauty, even while scorned. And the one that could capture a unique truth, where others reinforced convention and bias.

Painting didn't hold much power for an Echori, no. But there were more reasons to paint than that alone. Teias peered into the hazy red distance, where the outline of the next port grew closer and closer.

Money. That was one reason. At least people still bought paintings. If anything, it was a rare skill for an Echori to have – most of the other painters are of the other three lineages. Perhaps that could be a selling point for him?

But before he could consider how much his latest creation would fetch on the market, the deck beneath him groaned like a primeval creature waking from its slumber.

Smoke billowed out from the floorboards, a thick choking plume that forced a cough from his throat. The ship rumbled, the assembled cans of paint at Teias' side spilling out across the board of the ship, some cans rolling off the side of the deck and spilling their contents into the Capillary.

Barely processing the loss of his art supplies, he staggered out of the smoke, pulling aside a deckhand, teeth gritted.

"What's the commotion? What in the bloody hell is going on?"

One of the deckhands emerges from below the deck, his voice an awkward lilt.

"Er... some of the cargo caught alight."

The painter's grip loosened and the first deckhand scrambles away.

"How?! We're in the middle of a damn Capillary, there's water all around us!"

"A lamp burst after a guest broke it and things got out of hand and-"

He heard shouting, but the words overlapped and mingled with the young deckhand's mutterings.

There's the captain again. His multiple eyes were red and teary, the voluminous smoke billowing out from below.

"You two! Get away from that spot now! We've been transporting black powder and it's caught alight!"

The young deckhand dived onto the deck.

Teias gawked.

The blast was deafening.

He soared, the tough planks beneath him flying outward rather than splintering, bending rather than breaking. Canvas, paint and artist fell overboard and Teias found him unable to yell out for help.

If he got caught up in the river current – more likely than not, he'd pass out.

But some of the paint had spilled out over the deck, had it not?

He had one shot at this.

Teias aimed for the swirling paint that pooled on top of the river, slowly being carried away by the current.

He fell into the splatter. The memory was fresh – but he concentrated on a specific sensation. The smell of smoke and how it invaded his lungs. The smoke that was billowing from the deck itself.

Plumes of red surrounded his vision. For a moment, he smelt nothing, felt nothing – saw nothing but the cloying, encompassing swathes of red. Then, as the fields of red sweeping by him seemed to end, he was spat out back on board, tumbling across the ruined deck. Red streaks of paint followed his rolling body, as if he was a mere morbid illustration, his vital essence spilled out over its pages.

Teias came to a stop, his eyes toward the sky.

I'm so bloody glad I know how to paint.

Voices rang around him.

"Did we lose anyone?"

"Passengers are already secured, captain."

"Pull the ship in for emergency repairs. We were lucky this happened this close to dock."

He was approached by a stomping of boots.

"You, painter. You alright?"

Teias sat up, the captain's hand holding him upright.

"A few splinters here and there... but I'm alright."

He hoped that the captain wouldn't notice all the paint staining his one good travel coat.

"...Didn't someone just fall overboard? Did you see anything like that?"

The painter made a show of looking over the side of the boat, his hand chopping against his forehead in mock salute as he peered out over the painted waters.

"Nope. Seems the only thing that was knocked overboard was my spare paint."

He grimaced. Artefact paints cost a damn fortune and they were the only medium worth using!

“...You’re going to reimburse me for this, are you?”

The captain narrowed his eyes.

“Did you purchase the insurance policy before you boarded?”

Teias bit his lip. No, of course not. Who buys an insurance policy for a trip that barely crosses a quarter of the Body?

He groaned. Just his luck.

Trudging back over to the side of the boat, ignoring the smouldering gap where his canvas and art supplies used to be, he stared at his remaining assets mixing with the red water and debris.

The way the paint spilled over the edge, the colours swirling in the waters as the ship stalled...

Perhaps there was a bit more to red than he imagined.

He instinctively reached for his brush, coming up empty-handed.

Of course. The one time he finds inspiration, it’s when his brushes and tones are settling on the bed of the river.

An expression of placid acceptance snaked its way across his lips, sealing it tight.

He still couldn’t stand the colour red.