opening extract from

riding tycho

written by

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Part One

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The mainland was so far below the horizon there was no way of knowing that it existed at all. It was 40 kilometres away, people said, but it might have been a hundred kilometres, a million. Still, the mail-boats and freighters must come to the High Island from somewhere, and return there. Those occasional passengers who arrived on the mail-boats, under guard, must also have come from somewhere, although they never went back. Otherwise the mainland could have been a myth, like other stories of strange creatures and distant worlds.

The Low Island, though, was no myth. They could see it all the time, like a ship moored hull down, with just its spars and riding lights showing above the skyline. By day the watchtowers stood dark against the sunrise and caught the last rays of the sunset, when they seemed to blaze like hot wires. In between, depending on the weather, the structures merged with

the clouds or appeared fleetingly as if they had risen out of the sea. On clear nights the lights clustered like hovering stars; when the overcast was low, a sullen glow hung above the island.

They always knew when an escape had been attempted. The hours of their days were measured by hooters, whistles, bells, sounding across the strait. The High Islanders relied on them as much as they did on their own clocks, for timekeeping. Escapes took place at night. The Low Island would explode with light, the Banshee set up its swooping howl over the waters, and at that signal their own lighthouse would be instantly extinguished. Sooner or later there would be shots. Only when the Banshee fell silent could the lighthouse keepers rekindle their lantern.

From where she lay in bed, Demetria could see the upraised finger of the lighthouse, bisecting her window, a column of starlessness. On escape nights, lying awake while the Banshee whooped, she would press her thumbs into her ears and watch for the light to swing into life again. She did not want to hear the shots. Only once, in her eleven years, had the Banshee wailed all night and the lighthouse remained dark until dawn. Nothing had been said. Nothing was ever said, but everybody understood that on that occasion the fleeing man had drowned or got away. No one would ever know for certain, one way or the other. It was safer not to know.

The keepers of the light came from the mainland,

men who did not resent the order to douse the one lamp that showed after curfew, the beacon that might give hope to a desperate man alone and fighting for his life in the black sea among the striving currents and undertows. Whether the prisoners chose to live out their lives on the Low Island or end it in the strait, they were all killers and saboteurs. Did they tell themselves that they were escaping or did they know that they were going to their deaths?

On the High Island there were no prisoners, only Politicals, sent out of harm's way to a rock where all communications had been cut, except for written letters delivered in strongboxes.

Demetria could not remember exactly when the Politicals had started to arrive. The prison island and the Banshee, the shots in the dark, were part of her earliest memories because they were the answers to her earliest questions. But another early memory was of a disused packing shed down by the harbour. Between one week's end and the next the place had undergone repairs, the crumbling split-stone roof replaced with sheet metal, a wall built round it with an iron gate. Then the soldiers had moved in and, soon afterwards, the first of the silent, pallid men had been escorted off the mail-boat, which in those days carried letters and parcels in loosely strapped canvas sacks.

He had been billeted with the lighthouse keeper, but not long after that the lighthouse keeper and

his family had left the island, to be replaced by the two mainlanders. Anjelica, the lighthouse-keeper's daughter, had been Demetria's particular friend, and for weeks afterwards – it seemed a long while at the time – Demetria had expected a letter. Neither of them could write very well then, but whenever the mail-boat put in she had waited confidently for a message from Anjelica, who never would have gone away without telling her why.

About the time of her seventh birthday, Demetria had been so sure that Anjelica would remember her that she had gone down to the dock to see the boat unloaded, and that was when she discovered that things had changed. That instead of being slung ashore in their easy-going sacks, the letters were sealed in steel boxes, given into the charge of one of the soldiers from the barracks that had been a wool-packing shed.

Had that been the moment when she knew that she would never hear from Anjelica again? Also on that boat had been another of those dazed silent men, this one sent to live at the schoolhouse. Gradually, all over the town, people found their empty rooms and out-buildings requisitioned, and their families increased by one. There was a small payment in return for having a Political in the household since the family was responsible for his food and laundry. You got a bonus, apparently, if you *offered* to take one, with all the extra inconvenience, but Demetria's mother had

never offered, and they had never had their own Political – until last week.

The soldiers did not have to wait for mail – they must have some other way of keeping in touch with the mainland – for the day before the mail-boat was due, one of them, a sergeant, had come up the winding street from the quayside and handed Mam a printed letter informing her that she was required to provide lodging and board for a guest. The Political had been brought to them the next day, by which time the shed at the end of the garden had been cleared out by Mam and Demetria, a bed hauled across from the house, a table set up, and a chair. In the corner were a basin on a tripod and a slop bucket.

'Where will he keep his things?' Demetria had asked.

'He will have no things,' Mam said, as if she knew, but she told Bevis to fix hooks behind the door. Even a Political would want to hang up his clothes.

They were at school when the guest arrived. From the kitchen Demetria could see the shed, the louvred window in the stone wall, but her own room faced another way, towards the lighthouse. For six days the guest was unseen; it was still dark when they left for school and growing dark again when they returned. Mam said nothing about him and Demetria knew better than to ask.

She noticed that there was an extra handful of meal in the morning porridge pot, but there was no fourth

fish in the pan at supper. The Political was given his dinner at noon, whatever it was. When he chose to eat it was his own affair.

On the seventh day of the the week there was a market down on the quayside and the school was closed. Mam left early on market days to get her goods laid out. The sun was still below the sea when she shook Demetria awake.

'You'll have to take him his breakfast.'

The guest had no name yet.

Demetria did not argue with her mother; even Bevis, three years older, was only just beginning to. But Demetria argued now.

'Can't he have it early?'

Mam was already going downstairs. 'When you hear the work bell from the Low Island, take it across. Not before. There's nowhere to leave it and it's raining. You don't stop to talk, just hand in the tray and come away.'

The street door closed behind her. Demetria looked out at the lighthouse in the blue dusk of daybreak. She could tell by the glow against its flanks that although heavy rain was falling over the High Island, there would be a sunrise out at sea. It happened so often; their peak trapped the clouds and they slopped about in drizzle or a driving downpour, while all around the sunlight skipped and sparkled on wave crests. The only consolation was the promise of a rainbow over the mountain.

She went down the stairs to the kitchen and looked along the wet garden to the shed, its stones beginning to gleam in the rising light. On the table stood the breakfast bowls and mugs and a wooden tray to carry out to the guest. The porridge pot was on the stove, steaming, a bubble rising to the surface now and again. The coffee can, with enough in it to keep them going all day, stood beside it. All she had to do was turn a ladle full of porridge into the bowl and pour the coffee – did the guest put milk in his? Some people did. Mam could have told her that much at least.

She could go and ask him.

She did not want to ask him, did not want to speak to him at all nor even to see him. Why must she wait for the bell across the strait? If she put the bowl and mug outside the shed and balanced the tray over them that would keep the rain out long enough for her to rap on the door and run back to the safety of the house before he opened it.

Better still, why couldn't Bevis go? Ah, but he was a man; men needed their sleep. She did not understand why Bevis needed more sleep than she did, or Mam, but it was one of the things that everyone knew.

She dressed, ladled out her own porridge and the guest's, poured her coffee and his, opened the kitchen door and paused on the step, carrying the tray. What she hoped to hear was the morning work bell from the Low Island, but there was only the sound of the

rain on roofs, in gutters and puddles. She put her head down, held the tray before her and scurried along the path to the shed. There was no light behind the louvres; still, her knock would wake him. She put the mug and the bowl on the flagstone before the door, propped the tray across to make a roof, knocked sharply and fled back to the house.

As she slammed the kitchen door behind her she realized that when he opened the door of the shed the tray would fall inwards and might upset the mug. Fearfully she went to the window and looked out. It was lighter now, she could see the shed quite plainly, and the tray leaning against the door. The door remained shut.

Hadn't he heard her knock? He was a man, and therefore needed his sleep, but he must be a hungry man. The feeding arrangements told her that much. Wouldn't he have been waiting for that knock? Then she heard footsteps passing in the street. The high garden gate opened and one of the soldiers came in. Demetria shrank against the wall. Was he coming to the house?

The soldier was fumbling with keys. He went down the path to the shed, to the shed door, and finding the tray in the way he kicked it aside before bending to put the key in the lock. He had not seen the crockery under the tray, until it went rolling across the step, but instead of picking it up he turned the key and booted the door open. Then he stood to one side, with his

weapon drawn. From the darkness of the doorway stepped the guest, tousled, shambling, the way men were in the early morning. He stood outside, bare-headed in the rain, while the soldier went in. He must have a torch of some kind – she saw the beam sweep around the interior as if he were searching it. Then he came out again, without looking at the guest, walked back up the path and through the gate. As it closed behind him the sun rose and a second or two later she heard the bell ringing across the strait from the Low Island.

The man stood in the doorway looking at the ground, slowly taking in what had happened to his breakfast. He stooped and gathered up the empty bowl, running his finger round the inside of it before putting it on the tray. The porridge was splashed across the stones at his feet and the rain was already washing it away. He reached for the mug which had broken, and laid the pieces regretfully beside the bowl; then he went back into his shed and closed the door.

Demetria peeled herself away from the window, already trembling with fear. Now she knew why she ought to have waited till the bell rang. There were two guilts on her conscience. The guest had no food and she had a broken mug to account for. The one she had filled for herself, she saw now, had been meant for him. It was made of metal.

Why did he not come to the door and ask for more

food? Perhaps it was forbidden, but who would know? Who would tell? Perhaps he thought that she would, if he knew she existed. Had he watched her through the louvres, her craven dash through the rain? Had he known what the soldier would do when he came to unlock the door and search the room before the guest could be allowed out after his cold and lonely night in the dark?

Oh, and what did *she* know now?