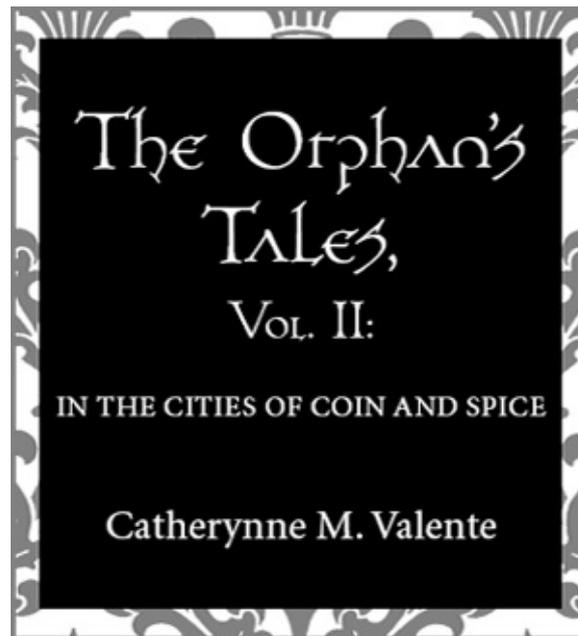


The Orphan's Tales, Vol. II
In the Cities of Coin and Spice

Catherynne Valente



BANTAM BOOKS

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For Sarah, who,
when she was older,
wanted the World.



The Book
of the
Storm

In the Garden

THE PATHS OF THE GARDEN WERE WET WITH FALLEN APPLES AND red with their ruptured skin. Rag-cloth winds trailed over grass blanched of green; scarlet swallowed up the thrashing trees until all the market groves stood in long rows like bouquets of bloody flowers with long, black stalks.

It was the girl's favorite time—food was never so easy to find, and the air was filled all through day and night with the flapping and fluttering of wings as crows circled south and geese fled even farther into the warm belly of the world. In the autumn her skirt was always full of pomegranates and grackles' eggs, and though the air was colder, the leaves' color did not lie, and they warmed her like a fire beneath a squat iron pot.

It was from the blazing boughs of a cinnamon tree that she saw through the high windows of the women's quarters in the palace. Her palms were henna-dusted by the perfumed bark, and she sucked the last of the morning's golden yolk from her fingers, now flavored with spice. She kept well behind the skein of leaves as she looked through the arched window, at the woman sitting within, her back straight as an ax-handle, and so still, though hands flashed over her and voices clicked and hushed in her pretty ears. A dozen maids held the woman's long black hair out taut, and slowly, with infinite patience, threaded tiny white pearls onto the inky strands, one by one, as though the woman were a necklace in a jeweler's workshop.

Dinarzad was to be wed.

Surely one or two of the Sultan's daughters were married every year, and the girl paid them much less attention than she did the family of doves that returned to the same birch trees each spring—but she could not help knowing of this one. Gardener and groundskeeper talked of nothing else: Flowers were coaxed and coddled long past their blooming, trees trained to canopies, fruits culled in great piles, like many-colored snowdrifts, and sent wagon by wagon to the kitchens, only to return to the courtyard as pies and pastries and jams and cakes—for Dinarzad wished to be married in the Garden.

It was unseemly, to be married without a roof over one's head, but she had insisted, even wept, and finally it was decided that a roof of trees was not in its nature different from a roof of wood, and the delicate copse of chestnuts before the great courtyard had had their branches lashed and tied and dragged into the shape of a small, narrow chapel. As they climbed their ladders to wheedle and prune the trees into holiness, the gardeners grumbled to the girl that she ought to be especially careful not to be seen, since the Palace was leaking out of its walls for the pleasure of a spoiled *amira*.

In her deep blue cushions, Dinarzad stared into the mirror as she was strung with pearls for the engagement feast, implacable, canvas-blank—and the girl stared into the princess. Still as an owl, she

watched the women whose hands were full of the white jewels, watched the decorated Dinarzad like a tall mirror, until the pearl-keepers led their charge away down the stone stairs, her hair trailing behind her like a shred of sky glittering with stars. The girl touched her own hair without meaning to, hair not less black than the other woman's, but tangled and strung through with hazel-husks.

Below her, the tree shook suddenly, and she was shaken from her contemplation of Dinarzad's unmovable face. She glanced down to the apple-smattered path, and saw the boy staring up at her. He grinned sidelong at her, but his mouth was tired at the edges, like a slice of orange beginning to turn brown. She scrambled lightly down the trunk and gave him a smile small as a secret. The boy was dressed for the feast and obviously uncomfortable in stiff gold fabric and green silks, uncomfortable especially, with the thin band of porphyry circling his wrist, which marked him to anyone who cared for such codes as the heir to the Sultanate.

The girl did not care. But she allowed that it was a lovely shade of purple.

"How did you get away?" she asked softly. "Surely everyone will want to squeeze your arms and tell you what a fine man you're growing up to be."

The boy snorted like a half-grown bull. "At a wedding, the girl on the dais is the only thing anyone cares to squeeze. It's the same at every dinner until the wedding."

"Who is marrying her?" She did not want to be interested. She told herself she was not.

"How should I know?" He kicked at a rotted apple near his slippered toe. "Some prince or soldier or prince who was a soldier or soldier who became a prince. I can't even remember their names. They all came with chests of opals and baskets of trained songbirds tied together by ribbons of her favorite color and mechanical golden roosters that crowed when you wound their tails—I rather liked that one—and someone chose, though I'm sure it wasn't her. I do know she's not to be his first wife; he has two already, but no children at all. He must have brought something very nice in his barrels—I don't know; he wasn't the one with the roosters."

The boy frowned into the wind and scratched at his collar. "I have to dress like a doll just to watch her eat," he mumbled. "And this thing has no pockets at all—I couldn't even bring you anything."

"That was never necessary, you know," the girl demurred. "I have enough, I've always had enough, even if my enough and yours are as different as an elephant and a minaret."

Her black-rimmed eyes flickered to the earth and back to the boy, and she took him gently by the hand, away from the open paths and into the interior Gardens, past the marble benches and fountains, past the over-picked orchards and the over-pressed grapevines to a clutch of stones so thick with moss that they seemed to be the bodies of long-dead tigers or leopards, whose fur still grew and grew after they had perished. In their long shadows the children were spared the winds, though the girl breathed into her hands to warm her bloodless fingers and the boy's hems were soaked through with dew and old rain. But he did not seem to notice them—he was plucking at his rich vest and looking curiously at the girl.

"You know," he said shyly, "I think I could bring you a dress."

The girl laughed again.

“I have dozens of sisters with hundreds of dresses—they would never notice one gone missing, I know it. It would be warm, and softer than that old rag.”

The girl glanced at the frayed fabric that fashioned her skirt, and shook her head. “What would I do with a dress like theirs? You might as well sew my hair with pearls. No, if I am cold, I have blankets of leaves and my birds. I am not one of them, and it would be silly to dress up a camel in lace and bells and jewels. You would do it only to laugh at the poor beast.”

They said nothing for a moment, and the boy was ashamed—but he saw the gooseflesh on her shoulders, and the bruised color of her frozen toes. The sky was deepening toward evening, gray and yellow against the wild colors of the Garden, light slowly wandering away from the clouds—and he knew enough of proud young girls not to argue about the dress.

“Is there...is there more?” the boy finally blurted, fidgeting with his bracelet.

“Oh, yes.” The girl laughed. “There is always more.”

The girl leaned her head against the springy moss and closed her eyes, the stains on them showing full and dark as ever. She began to speak in a half-whisper, like breath leaving a glass flute.

“I will tell you a story from the crease of my right eye.

“Once, there was a long, lonely shore, gray as it is possible for gray to dream of, and the lonely shore ringed a lonely lake, whose water was black as it is possible for white to fear. And in this lake was a dim, wooded island, far off from the shore. There was a ramshackle dock on the shoals, and a ferry, little more than a raft of ash-wood and a long pole, which was dragged back and forth through the silent water by a tall man in a coarse brown cloak—or he might have been tall, if he were not afflicted with a stooping hunch, which the cloak served to hide. To this ferry, and this dock, and this lake, and this island, and this long, lonely shore came a troubled young man who had but one thin and fallow-elbowed arm, and he was the seventh son of a seventh son, so naturally, he was named Seven...”

THE TALE OF THE CROSSING

THE PEBBLED BEACH WAS WET AND COLD, EACH gray stone slick with rain and lake and mist. Nothing grew save a thin green mold at the water's edge, no sandpipers pecked at the shore for mites or worms, no cattails knocked against the bitter and scentless wind. Two figures were black against the heavy woolen sky, which leaked a slow, sullen light like wrung sweat. The shapes were featureless save for their curved backs—the one hunched and bone-twisted, the other bent under his satchel. Slowly the one approached the other, until from a distance there was but one great black shape where the two met and spoke.

The younger man looked up at the ferryman, whose face was scored with lines like a constellation chart, though his eyes and hair were as black as if he had been born only a winter past. Even with his warped spine, he was still a massive creature, leaning against his saw-hewn pole and frowning at shadows moving on the brackish water.

“If you want to cross, it'll have to be now, son. The storm comes through three times a day, and the last gale of the evening is due through sooner than you'd like to know.”

The young man frowned and reached into his sleeve with his right hand—for the left sleeve was empty. With his good fingers he pulled a patched purse from the sleeve and clumsily extracted a single coin. He held it against the pad of his hand with a bitten thumb, held it as though it weighed heavier than iron: a small, pale coin, yellowed by many handlings, with a seal stamped onto it something like a seven-pointed star writhing with spiders. He moved his thumb over it, and sniffed the cold mist. He held it out to the ferryman, staring at him flatly, as though daring him to refuse.

The ferryman did not reach for it. His eyes flickered from the boy's face to his empty sleeve to his fare. Finally, he sighed, a light, rasping sound, like a bird's wings rubbing together. “I know what that is, boy.”

Seven snorted. “Is it enough, old man?”

“It is worlds more than enough, and nowhere close to it. But I will take it.”



Seven slowly relinquished his coin, rubbing it again with his thumb before handing it over, and climbed onto the ferry, balancing himself as the boards adjusted to his weight. As he settled himself down, he glanced at the hulking figure pulling the pole from its anchor. The ferryman's shabby cloak shifted with his motions, and Seven thought he saw—only for a moment, of course—a green-black glint of claw flash in and out beneath the frayed fabric, which barely served to cover the man's chest. Seven shook his head and called himself a fool of the fog, leaning back against the makeshift mast whose sail was so torn and ruined that the ferryman had seemingly given up on it and lashed it to the shaft, useless as a two-legged horse.

The pole guided them smoothly through the vast lake, though it must have been very deep, and the staff seemed not at all equal to its work. For a time they sat in silence, pilot and passenger. Finally, the ferryman swallowed thickly and spoke:

“Where did you get that coin? It is not a thing you should own, a young thing like you.”

The lake slid around the pole like old oil. Seven chuckled, and his chuckle was not unlike his rasping cough. His stare was blank and tired. “I am not so young as all that.”

“The lake is wider than you think,” the ferryman said. “The water warps the distance like a folded mirror. We have time together, you and I, and I am neither mute nor deaf. I am called Idyll, by those who have gotten into the habit of calling me things—and I would know where a boy no grander taller than any partridge-farmer got hold of *dhheiba*.” He spat the last word like a lump of tooth from his mouth, and it lay between them, glinting and garish.

“Where does any man find money?” Seven sighed, looking out over the gray water and the tips of bare trees in the distance. “Ask where an Ajan three-piece comes from, the answer is obvious. Ask where Shaduki silver was minted—you have answered your own question in the asking. Ask after my *dhheiba*—it must be plain what I will answer. I have been to the city of Marrow, and I have come out again...”

THE TALE OF THE TWELVE COINS

MY BROTHERS WERE ALL GROWN, BULL-BROAD and earnest as grass, when I was born. I hardly knew them—but my mother held me to her breast as though she had never had another son, as though so many other mouths had not pulled at her, as though twelve other little red hands had not clutched at her hair. My father gave me a number instead of a name and returned to his cups.

Of course, as a boy I understood nothing but that my mother loved me and my father did not—my little heart could not begin to grasp that both her embraces and his wine-sopped silence were rooted in the same day, a day that sunk ahead of them like a pit in soft earth. I could not know that for nine months they had prayed for a girl, eaten mashed snake-innards and washed my mother's belly with hidden springs. But another son came, and my parents were always pilgrim-pious and honest as ants.

Among my people a seventh-seventh son is a mark of grace, and grace must be answered; grace must be paid for. On the boy's seventh birthday, he is laid out on the hillside, lashed to the earth by five white-wood pegs, and left to the favor of the Stars. The seventh son pays for the eighth, and the ninth, and the first grandson, and the fifth granddaughter. A fair trade, don't you think? One child for dozens, dozens, all lined up and waiting to be born while that little boy lies on the mound, shivering under the rain.

It is always done this way, and if any hut full of dirt-farmers were to withhold the sky's due, it would not have been mine.

So my mother kissed me and my father refused to look at me and she had to tie me down all by herself, far off from our fields, her hands shaking as she put the stakes into the soft earth and knotted the ropes as tight as she dared, and I told her she didn't have to, we could tell everyone there had been another son before me, stillborn, and that was good enough for the Stars, one gray, dead baby was good enough, and I wasn't a seventh son at all, I was an eighth boy, and a good boy, and she didn't have to leave me there, where it was so dark, so dark and cold. She cried when she kissed my forehead for the last time, awkwardly lying over my splayed body, trying to hold me. Her tears rolled down my face, onto my lips, and they were all the water I had. She told me that no one knew what happened to the seventh sons—maybe it was something wonderful, something special. But her eyes were dead, and I couldn't look at her while she lied.

After a while, she left, and I looked up into the Stars, which I did not believe were alive—how could I? It was ridiculous. What sort of Stars wanted boys to eat? Or if they did not want us for dinner, to pull their oxcarts or pick their cherries or whatever chores a Star might have to do. The Stars, the living Stars, were children's stories, and I was no child. No one would do this to a child, so I must have been a man. And men are brave, even in the dark, and the cold.

I think I fell asleep—I must have, because I remember waking up, and the smell of burning lambs and burning grass was all around me, and there was a light, a light already fading into a memory silver, and my ropes were untied, lying limp on the grass beside me. I sat up and rubbed my numb rain-soaked ankles and legs until, painfully, they prickled into life again, and I was able to stand.

I did not make it to my feet.

A great wind blew through the little valley, and it knocked me to the earth again, a wind so stiff and quick that it slapped my eyes shut like snow-stuck windows, made them water behind the lids, whipped every drop of sweat from my skin until I was dry as a page. I could not open my eyes, I could not see, but hands seemed to clutch at me in the dark, tear at my clothes, carry me up into arms I could not begin to guess at. Dark moved through dark and time passed without speaking to me.

And, though a man would not sleep at such a time, I woke with a raw throat and another child's arm flopped over my face. It was thin and bony, all elbow. As I swam up into myself, I realized I was lying over another body, not less thin than the first. I looked up through a net of limbs, and beyond the limbs were thick bars of glass frosted over with ice. The wind had dwindled somewhat, much as a sirocco will dwindle into a sandstorm, but dwindle nonetheless. It curled and snapped through the cage and every angled limb.

As I struggled up through the mass, some sleeping children moaned and turned over, some wakened ones moved to the side—all were nearly naked, clothed in scraps which might once have been suits and dresses, and none reached up to draw a rag over their nakedness when my movement brushed the clothing aside. I reached the top of the pile of bodies—I thought there were about twenty of us there—shoved into the cage like stacked cow-ribs—and peered out into a world of wreckage.

Please be patient with me—I am trying to describe a place you will never see.

Wind-sprung tears streaked my face as I looked across a kind of central square. There were houses at its pale edges, fountains, even a bell tower, but I could see no wood or stone. Everything in the place was made of what the wind had managed to accumulate—paper and fish-bones and the bodies of unfortunate birds, scraps of fur and broken plaster and apple peels, lemon rinds, date seeds, old dresses, shoes without soles, soles without shoes, frayed rope and shattered pulleys. But most of the detritus of the city, most of the city of detritus, was paper. The fountains shot folios and scriptures and broadsheets into the air, and they were drafted by the gales into construction: endless pages sealed together as walls and stairs and peaked roofs by the unceasing wind. At the smallest break in the storm, I suspected, the whole place would drift into nothing.

The glass cage swung from an iron frame on a dais in the square. Canopies hung in patches over us, shredded cloth stretched through their frames, threads slipping almost to the ground. There were holes and rifts and cuts everywhere, but under their doubtful care, the wind behaved like a willful infant, cowed, but determined to get its own back the minute any back is turned. Folk moved over the rustling courtyard, poring over barrels and boxes and trays—tottering creatures with slender, wispy arms and legs, necks like those of swans, curving up to heads high above their shoulders, and great, distended bellies, swollen as a mother's mound on a woman already full of too much meat and wine. Occasionally, one would peel a blown page from its spidery calves. The moon shone dully through the

torn canopies like a bone through punctured skin.

We were ignored in our cage, shivering, clutching each other in a blind search for warmth, for hours. Sometime near dawn I grabbed at an arm for purchase and heard the smallest of cries—and saw her, for the first time. A little older than I, but much thinner, thinner than a fawn at the bottom of a winter's well, and she looked up at me with enormous black eyes, her dark hair cut roughly, like a penitent's, close to her head, in uneven patches and bald spots. Her lips were pale, cracked, as though she had not drunk water in days. Her tiny wrist twisted painfully in my hand. Her gaze slid to the wandering creatures in the square and back to me. I let her go as though she had burned me—and she had burned me, of course she had—those black, black eyes had burned me as surely as a brand. I held out my hand to pull her up out of the well of legs and arms, but she shook her head and cringed back into them. I rested my head against her gingerly; she coughed a little. These were the first times I touched her, and the first sounds I heard from her mouth.

Finally, the sun came gray and dingy through the high and wind-worried clouds, and one of the long-necked things came sidling up to the dais. In one quick motion it unlocked the door of the cage and stepped aside to avoid the pile of children that tumbled out. Soundlessly, it prodded us, squeezed us, and, with a strength I would not have suspected, pulled us apart, sorting us onto either side of the dais, where others of the city's folk guided us into two shivering lines. The creature's skin was pale and silvery, as though water moved just beneath the surface; its touch was cool and dry.

I was relieved that the girl was sorted into the same line as I, which was much shorter than the second. We stood side by side, she and I, waiting. The children opposite us were tied together, wrist to wrist, with a rope paler than skin. They looked at us helplessly, teeth chattering, toes blue. Then, the thin-armed guardian towed them over to our side and gave the lead to the last child in our line. It had to prod him roughly, and finally it just put the rope into his hand and closed his fingers around it. The creature who had opened the cage then took the hand of the child at the front of the line and led us away. By instinct we locked hands together, as if going to a picnic behind our mother's skirts. The girl squeezed my hand gently. We walked out of the courtyard and into the howl, through streets made of little more than rooster bones and petrified branches. It cracked under our feet, and the cracking was the only sound, until we stopped before a tall edifice with a solid, well-made door set into the rubbish walls. It might have been a church, once, a basilica with tall towers. Now, like most of the architecture of the city, the factory—for that is what it was, I came to learn—was mostly paper. I could read many of the printed letters, but they folded into each other or thatched over each other to make an arcane gibberish:



HERE BEGINS THE BOOK OF CLOWN, BURGLAR, CRIMINAL PROSPERITY TO MARROW AND ALL HER MARKET
CLOSED BY ORDER GOATFLESH—TWO PORTIONS FOR GOBLETS UNAVAILABLE IN BLUE, YELLOW, RED SILK
MEASURED BY PROPRIETOR'S ARM NOT CUSTOMER'S WOLF SOUP HOT AND TASTY CARAT WEIGHT THUS WAS
BURIED ONCE THERE WAS A CHILD, WHOSE FACE WARNING: SALE OF INFESTED WHEAT ALL WEALTH TO THE
CHRYSTOPRASE THIEVES WILL BE PROSECUTED TO THE FULLEST EXTENT—

On and on it wound, around the lintel and over the walls like a frieze, parchment and vellum and plain
paper and linen, white and gold and black and gray and even scarlet, bright green mold glinting
angles. The children passed through the door—and it seemed so strange to me then, that a real door
should have been shoved into the pages here but nowhere else—first the unbound, then the bound. The
silence pressed down like piled stones on our shoulders; it was too much to bear. Just as the last of the
knotted ones passed over the threshold, I slipped my place in line, hauling the girl with me, and
dashed out, down the steps and onto the wind-racked street of bones and branches.

One of the creatures caught us easily—they are so fast on those thready legs, like terrible ostriches.
In a gale-shaded alley it gripped me by the hair. It motioned back toward the factory and tried to guide
us with its gaunt fingers. I stood my ground, and my friend moved closer to me.

“Where are we?” I hissed. But my hiss was like a shout in the hushed, empty alley. The thing looked
startled.

“You are not supposed to talk to me,” it said haltingly.

“We can’t obey rules no one tells us about,” I insisted.

“You know now. Go inside and don’t make trouble.”

“We shouldn’t have to obey rules we haven’t agreed to. You aren’t our parents,” the girl said, and thus I heard her voice for the first time. It was low and thick and firm as a forest floor.

“She’s right,” I said. “Tell us where we are. And what is that place where you sent the others?”

It stood, confused, looking from the door, where its companions had already disappeared with the last of the children, to us and back again. It rocked from one stiltlike leg to the other. “I’ll be punished,” it whined finally.

The girl rubbed her shaved skull. “Look,” she said, “has any other child tried to talk to you?”

“Never.”

“Then you can’t really know you’ll be punished. But you’ll certainly be punished if I scream and I runs off. If you tell us these things, we will be good, and afterward we’ll go where you want us to go. She looked at me, her dark eyes burning like blades. “We promise.”

The thing took a deep breath and pulled its meager coat closer over its huge stomach. Its mouth was very wide, almost ear to ear, and strings of bluish hair tumbled down over its cheeks.

It cleared its long throat. “All...all right...”

THE FOREMAN'S TALE

IF IT PLEASES YOU TO KNOW IT, I AM VHUMMIM of Marrow, third daughter of Orris, who was the grand niece of the seventeenth Chrysopraxe, which is how our rulers were titled in the days before the Wasting. From the degenerated wealth of that long-dead personage, Orris-My-Benefactor inherited an apple cart and a fetish stand. In my turn I took proprietorship of these things, and added to them a meat-pit. Among wealth I was not wealthy, but beyond the rolls of the Asaad, the Great Market, would be envied for the gold at my throat and the silk at my feet. So were we all, envied and envying in the glory of Marrow-That-Was.

When I was a child, the Asaad was the heart of my heart, and in this I was not unique. How high the canopies flew, how bright those draping oranges, those greens, those deep blues! Frankincense bubbled thick and brown in high-rimmed cauldrons, black-faced sheep babbled in their pens, gold was measured out into black purses great and small. How sweet was the sound of creaking cart wheels, the sound of bartering, the sound of coins solid in the palm! The blessed sky over the Asaad was always blue, the polished stones of the square ever shining. For my own part, I was eager to sell our apples and our little figurines, and so proud to acquire the flame-pit and roasting tongs, to add to my family economy. All citizens took part in the Asaad, or one of the smaller satellite markets, if one could not afford the stall rent demanded in the city center. To shirk one's duty to economy was a crime punishable by scalding irons applied to the arches of the feet. So it was that each morning the entire city—the city that mattered, anyway—crowded under canopies to play out the grand procession of commerce.



My apples were crisp between hundreds upon hundreds of teeth; my jade and onyx and garnet fetishes bought themselves thrice over in luck: bears and snakes and spiders and storks, elephants and crows, and an endless, grotesque variety of Stars. I oiled my hair, the pride of my beauty, with the most expensive attar of emerald—a very intricate process, to press oil from gems, but once, in that place, we knew how to do it. My scalp shone green and black. My neck was short, my thighs round, I was even a bit fat, not an easy thing to avoid in the Asaad, where any taste is answered by twelve more rarified. I preferred date-stuffed serpents with a drizzle of rose-glâce, in my day. The juice of pepper-crusted dormice and honey-mashed snail shell ground finer than diamond dust ran down my sister's cheeks. Little songbirds basted in raspberry sugar and bees' wings made sticky my brothers' fingers. In the fruit-sellers' quarter, pomegranate skins were packed with the tiniest of edible rubies, so small they melted on the tongue like cubes of sugar. Even more complex is the process by which foodstuff is made from the raw material of wealth, but we had mastered this, too, in the days when we knew all the things. Once I ate a topaz the size of my father's fist, and its skin split under my teeth like my own apples. The sun was so warm, that day, I thought it would shine through me. My father encouraged me gently, pushed the golden thing to my lips. It tasted of summer-baked wheat and the palest of peaches.

In the Asaad we ate everything we could buy and we could buy anything. Nothing did not answer our hunger, nothing did not have its price.

I first heard of it during the third luncheon shift—the whole market could not cease because we are inclined to be hungry in the middle of the day. We ate in shifts so that commerce never truly paused. That day I reclined on a red sofa beneath a violet canopy spangled with silver crescents, drinking spiced chocolate in a cup of plain gold. I was young then; I could not have expected more. A rind of citrine floated in my drink, and I prodded it with one long, frost-painted fingernail as the quince-seller whispered:

“Have you heard? It's all the way up to the Rhukmini shops now.”

A particularly corpulent merchant, who had a few years earlier developed an astonishing and popular hybrid of plum and amethyst, yawned and slapped iridescent blue flies from his own cheeks. “So? They'll block off the street and we'll go about our business. Rhukmini was a fishmongers' slum anyway, you old melon-wort, a pale and piecemeal shadow of the Asaad—I call it a blessing. No more lifting one's pant leg to avoid the squid ink and ice-chunked cod blood.”

The plum-breeder had taken to the latest fashion of grafting various extraneous limbs to his body—his face was gray, contorting slowly into a small elephant's trunk which sloped over his mustache. He was quite proud of the infant appendage, and made sure all in the Asaad knew it would surely grow much larger by the end of the season. He was a man of considerable size, after all.

“What's happened?” I asked, curious. I smoothed a shimmering strand of hair over my forehead—the heat pooled sweat and gem oil together, and a few green trickles warmed my neck. The quince-seller's cart-woman turned to me, her nose rings glittering.

“It's gone,” she said triumphantly. “The entire Rhukmini.” Second only to our goods is our

command of gossip—and she had the upper hand in this other economy. Her short hair was slicked back in a dark garnet, and she never sweat.

“Gone?” I was never a conversationalist.

“Well,” the plum-breeder cut in, stroking his lazuli-coated mustache with his thumb and his fledgling trunk with his forefinger, “not entirely. There’s bits of it left, blowing around. But I daresay no one will be bashing out octopus skulls there anytime soon.”

I must have gaped—who would not have gaped? My agate-tattooed teeth (but one art in a city which contained all possible arts) showed behind my thick painted lips. I could see the plum-breeder naked and calculate whether my teeth trumped his trunk in the hierarchy of opulence, which shifted and slid with each new process, alchemy, or mechanick the Asaad supplied. He seemed to decide his little grassy appendage was safely superior.

“Why don’t you go down Rhuk-side and see for yourself? I’ll have my boys watch your cart; they’re as honest as a skulk of foxes, which is to say not particularly, but they sell as well as they steal, and what more can anyone ask of the young?”

I frowned. True, they would steal, but his sons had quick tongues and I was young enough to be curious about the city beyond the canopies, young enough to think the stinking alley full of empty crates, claws and squabbling gulls flapping in off the river might be worth the loss of a few apples and a few knuckles of meat.

I went—who would not have gone?

In the Garden

THE BOY SHIVERED.

“I don’t like this story,” he whispered. A low wind blew through the Garden, throwing old flowers up into dervishes and clattering one branch against another. “I liked the pirates better.”

The girl shrugged. “I cannot change what is written on my skin, any more than I can change my skin itself.”

The evening was now full of mist and blue, rolling through the Garden paths like a regiment clothed in starlight. The girl picked at the deep moss and looked toward the Palace, which was as full of light as ever, light and voices. Her fingertips were colorless. She spoke as if from a long way off, and hidden behind a wall of marble and glass.

“If I had not these marks on me, if I were not a raccoon-demon scampering over a Garden rich in scraps, I might have been called Dinarzad, and had pearls strung onto my hair, and married a man who owned golden roosters. It is very strange to think about.”

The boy furrowed his clear brow.

“I do not think you would like the man with the roosters.”

The girl grinned like a hare who knows it has escaped. “I am not a fool. Most of the time, I am glad not to be called Dinarzad. But the cold is sometimes like dying, and then I think it would not be so bad.”

The boy started as though he were a young cat seizing upon a mouse for the first time. “What is your name, my friend? I am ashamed I did not ask it before!”

The girl looked down toward the moss and her freezing hand on it like a blight. She made her face very still, still as water, still as stars, so that he would not see her bitterness, hard as hawthorn bark. “How should I know my name? Who was there to call me so, to call me anything but demon, urchin, raccoon? If I have a name I do not own it—someone else must have it folded away in some strange purse, and my eyes will never see it.”

Chagrined, the boy followed her gaze to the Palace and they sat in silence for a time. It did not seem

right for him to offer his own name when she had nothing to give him in return. He did not want to show her once more all the things he possessed that she did not.



The first dead leaves left their trees and floated down, their stems noiseless against the wet stone. Somewhere behind her, the girl could hear the slow rippling of the pond where the boy had caught her bathing, had caught her under the moon. There were low, wild roses around their cairn of rocks, but they had lost their color to rain and wind, and lay ruined at the children's feet like torn pages.

“If you want me to stop—”

“No!” the boy said quickly, his dark eyes wide. “I do not like it, but I could not bear it if I did not hear it out. Tell me about that awful place.”

The girl moved her hand over her eyes, touching that black, soft place where all these things had long ago been written. Not for the first time, she thought she could feel the shape of the letters burning into her. At length she began again, her voice echoing on the green rocks like water splashed into an empty well.

“Vhummim the gem-eater went into the old fishmarket, and the smell there was of old scallops and shattered shells...”

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