

# Susurrus

(excerpt)

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## Prologue

The wind whispers to her. In its hot, harsh voice, it whispers soft, cool lies. Oh, how it lies. Above the hiss of sand, the murmur of dunes, the wind lies about Shade, and Green, and, most of all, Water.

She can smell it sometimes, the fresh clean scent of water, of trees, sometimes even flowers. Once, there was the sharp tang of citrus. But about her now is only desert, an endless landscape of smooth, shifting sand, of dunes that grow and move and change, but always stay the same. A landscape where her magics of permanence and youth can find no footing, except to keep her alive, day after endless day.

One night, one day, they said. Come back then, and all we have is yours — our magic and our lives. Of lives and men she had enough and more to spare. But magic she must have, ever more and ever new, and so set out into the desert, assured and safe.

One night, one day. But it's a week that she's been out here, or a month, or a year. It's hard to tell; it seems forever. Once, though, she was somewhere else. Once, she was a witch, a queen, a power. A girl from the mountains, who conquered valleys and plains, took on magics of forest and field, of winter and of water. Of water! She took them all — the art of air, the craft of creatures, the wizardry of war. Nothing could evade her.

Until, at last, she found this hapless, pointless land of sand and gold and desert druids. She came to take their simple magic of illusion and misdirection, to add it to her store. They put up no resistance, welcomed her hard soldiers

into their tented camps, fed them fruit and nuts, watered them from the fetid mudholes that were their pride.

We accept, they said, your majesty and sovereignty, your power and possession. But the desert must accept you too, for the desert is our master. If we should have a mistress, you must be his as well. And if he takes you, he will teach you such magic as we have.

One night, one day, they said. She remembers it, vaguely, sharp contours of memory eroded by the swirling sand around her.

She remembers water, though, and the clean, cutting smell of fruit. Yellow, green, there were different kinds, but they were fresh and moist, all of them. Juicy. It's a concept that's hard to hold onto, but she hugs it close. Liquid running down her chin, sticky, sweet, refreshing. Liquid.

She licks her lips, but it's no more than habit, a rote movement she no longer notices. Her stiff, dry tongue does no more than shift the dust on cracked and shrunken lips. It hurts, but so does everything else. She will not die, cannot die, but her enchantments can only hide the pain from others, not keep it from herself.

She pauses now, in her constant, drifting journey. Two more steps and she'll crest this latest dune, a swell of sand like any other. Up here, the wind is cleaner, stronger. But its lies differ only in scale, not in nature.

She looks behind at the steep slope she has conquered, trudging, climbing, crawling. It tells her nothing, its slope a constant, maddening dance of a myriad myriad grains, already settling to fill and hide her footsteps, to erase the little progress she has made. And at the bottom,... She thinks for a moment that she has seen something, a speck of green, a flash of palm. But it's gone, no more real than her memories, of no more value than her dreams.

She still has dreams. When she sleeps, curled tight against the cold of desert night, or dug deep in sand against the desert day, she dreams. But where before she dreamed of power or of wealth, now she dreams of treasure. She dreams of Lake, sometimes, and River, of pitchers of cool wetness that quench her endless thirst. But often, now, the dreams

turn bad. The servants that bring her water turn away, slipping into a clear, inviting pool, disappearing in its depths. And when she can drag herself to follow, to drink from that sweet source, it turns against her, its freshness and its bounty turning to salt and sea, and leaving her choking, gasping, thirstier than before.

She sinks to her knees, exhausted by another day of effort and agony. How many dunes has she climbed today? One? A dozen? A thousand? There is no way to tell, when they are all the same.

She digs her hands into fine, dense sand, disconcertingly slick as it scours away flaking layers of skin. Skin that once was smooth as water, hands as soft as... She can't remember now, can't remember anything soft. But there was Soft once, and her hands were like it. Men came from far off countries once to tell her so, to beg for the touch of those hands, to kiss them.

She lived in a castle then, a castle on a hill. She scoops up sand in a heap, shapes it roughly round, smooths the top. But when she forms the keep, its tall central tower slips away, slides down to leave a mound upon a mound, her home no more than tiny treacherous grains.

She tastes them sometimes, just to taste salt and home and youth once more. The white grains look like salt, but they taste no different than the brown, or the black. Some are clear, some opaque, but none of them are salt. They're just tiny stones, a desert trick to taunt her, to make her mouth water with desire. But now even that is gone. She wonders if perhaps there is salt now among the grains, her mouth too dry to dissolve it, her tongue too numb to taste. That grain, perhaps, that big one. That could be salt. It has the look, the translucent, slightly cloudy surface, the square, sharp-edged sides. With trembling fingers she searches it out, loses it in a tumble of beige and brown and grey. If she could cry, she would.

The desert has won, she knows, though still cannot accept. Queen! Empress! Mistress of magic! Defeated by a desert. Her, whom no army could conquer, no ruler could

challenge. Brought down by nothing more than wind and sun and broken stone.

She sinks her face into her empire, into its shifting, unrelenting surface, each grain too small to measure, each dune too large to move. Dry sand pushes past her tired lips, a mockery of food. The hard grains scrape against fragile teeth, teeth weary of fighting brown specks that are not seeds, white specks that are not salt. Her mouth almost waters at the thought, but not quite, for her mouth is dry as the sand around her, hot as the sun that beats her down onto the unforgiving surface.

She does not forgive herself.

One night, one day. She has been out here now for an age. She wonders, sometimes, if the world still turns outside this empty land. Perhaps there is no other world, and never has been. Perhaps these dunes are all there ever was, her kingdom, her palaces, her woods and gardens no more than fever dreams, the product of light and heat, and no more real than salt and rain.

She smells it, though, still. Mixed in with the lies the wind tells, she smells water and palms and safety and hope. She drinks it in, building her will for one more try, one more dune, one more conquest. Her body is still tired, but she gathers up her strength, and, with the determination that won her empire, forces her body to a crawl.

Around her, the wind swirls with promises and lies. And in the valley just beyond this shifting dune, an oasis cloaks itself in a mirage of sand and sun.

# I

## Home is Where the Hunger Is

The House was empty. Its doorway loomed black and vacant between crumbling drystone walls, the summer door of reeds already gone to some other home. Inside, there was nothing but the buzz of flies, circling around a still life in skin and bone. They settled now on the drying, cracking glaze of eyes, laid their eggs in the still-moist cavern of the mouth. A dusty few gathered below, tasting a thin dry crust the parched soil floor had not managed to soak up.

The House was empty, and Father had gone. He'd left behind a sculpture, a facsimile, exact to the details of hollowed belly, knobby knees, and a curiously shortened hand. She'd unwound the bandage, when the crying was done, to see what he'd kept hidden. There was nothing, only stumps where fingers had once been. Fingers had that flowed gently through her short, six-year old hair, teasing out knots, removing twigs. And now just curious stumps. She ran her own fingers through her hair, but it wasn't the same.

She was hungry. Hungrier; she was always hungry. Even Father had been hungry. She had seen it in him, though he never said. She recalled how he'd watched her, last night. Watched as she ate a thin soup, spoon by careful spoon. A special soup, he'd said, when she got to the bones. A special soup that meant it was okay to eat some little creature, even though he'd told her that was wrong, that all life was sacred. She'd been disgusted. He'd been angry, had made her eat, had directed his temper at her for the first and

only time. She recalled the drops running from his eyes, how she'd thought of salt, that magical substance that appeared in tears and sweat. She'd asked him to cry into the soup, as a joke. He'd laughed and turned away, clutching the bandaged hand he'd hurt somehow while she was out.

She'd found him this afternoon, or his sculpture, leaning in the corner where the wind didn't reach. The little fire had burned out, the precious tin pot still half full of water, and moss, and the three small bones of another tiny creature. She'd tried to eat it, but without his urging, it became just death, and death was evil. She ate some of the moss, but it was just moss — the same moss she'd eaten out on the mountain while she gathered twigs for the fire. Twigs from the stunted trees that grew so reluctantly, the moss so abundant. And the rest only stone. Stone and water and sky.

She stood now, outside, uncertain, looking back at the House. Only the door was gone, the neighbours too frightened, too foolish to enter when death was still in evidence. She'd left it there, in the pot. Let it simmer on the cold hearthstone, surrounded by ashes and darkness. There'd been love there as well, but she'd taken it with her, along with the blanket she'd shared with Father just last night. The blanket was thin, inadequate even in summer. "Love will keep us warm," he'd said, and snuggled her with all the heat a man of bone could offer.

There was nothing else. Soon, even the sculpture would be gone, taken piece by piece to hollows and caves by life that was sacred. The rest was long gone, traded to others for a pittance of grain, or a peel of fruit, or, once, a withered turnip from the valley below. She remembered the feel of it, the squish of dense fiber that hurt her teeth to chew, but was so full of flavor that she chewed until the pieces were too small to feel, and then kept chewing, just in case.

The doorway was dark against the grey stone of the hovel's wall. Above it a short roof of slate ran into the earthen cliff behind, the cliff that sagged and sogged when it rained, that threatened always to break through, but whose flinty mud they used to patch gaps in the front wall and keep the wind out. Today, though, the sky was clear — a cheerful blue

with tiny wisps of white, mimicking the thick streamers of grey mist that filled the valley below, their tendrils reaching longingly up toward the House.

To the sides, the peaks of the Spears reached up, impossibly tall, and crowding in close, except here in the pass, this narrow rift of soil and boulders between giants of stone and ice. Forward and back were her choices. Down and down. Alusia or Heroton. "Six of one," Father had said, though six of what had never been clear. He'd been born in Alusia, in its teeming, stinking cities. He'd worked in Heroton, some work that marked his back with scars, his leg with a brand of twisted curves, his arms with curious knobs halfway down the forearm, and a pain halfway through the night.

She turned away, at last. The House was empty, was just a house now. Father was gone. She was alone, as he had told her she would be. Before her, a thin trail led down the crumbling slope of flint, past boulders and outcrops to the village. "You'll have no luck there," he'd warned her. "They can't feed their own, no more than I can." They'd stood on top of the rise above the House, where you could see in both directions, to the hills and valleys and deserts of Alusia, and to the broad, grassy plains of Heroton. "Alusia," he'd said. "Try Alusia." He'd bitten his lip, been uncharacteristically silent. "There's more food in Heroton," he'd admitted at last. "But for you..." he'd run his fingers through her hair again, kissed her head with his cracked grey lips. "Try Alusia."

She'd played along, though it wasn't fun now. She'd gone along, in another of the imagination games he played with her, like figures and letters. "I can only teach you what I know," he'd said, which was the few letters of his own name, Karc. They included some of her own. "I called you Sparkle," he'd said. "Iskra", in one of the old languages. Here, see how these three letters are the same as mine? That's because you come from me, because I'll always be part of you." Just this week, he'd given her the rest. "I got these letters from the peddler," he'd said, and shown her 'I' and 's'. "He's part magician, and he had extra." She wrote them now, scratched them on a piece of flint with a jagged stone. *Iskra*, she wrote.

Part of him and part of the peddler. And part of the mother who'd died in childbirth, Ine. Ine, Karc, and an itinerant peddler. Those were her parts.

She propped the flint against the wall of the house. *Here I am*, it said. *Here I was*. She left it there, and scrambled down the slope to the path. At the clear space, she turned left, past Oreg's drystone hovel with a new summer door of twigs she'd woven herself, past the firepit where travelers stopped to camp, past the little pool where the rill was dammed up.

They watched her pass. She felt their gaze, understood their guilt, their anger, their relief. They weren't bad people. Father had said so. Just poor. Almost as poor as he had been. "And even we," he'd said, "have shelter. Food – well, let's see if we can't do without." And sent her off again to look for mushrooms or leaves, or moss and lichen when there was nothing else. There had been more, before the accident, when his foot had been whole and he could walk and work. But after, there was only her, and the foul smell of suppurating tissue. After winter, the neighbours stopped coming, stopped helping. "They've got nothing left," he'd said. "No more than we do. Now how about some mushrooms, hey?" And chased her off into the sunshine.

They watched her go, and she knew that they were thinking of one less scavenger searching the sere, stony pass. Knew they were watching her, and thinking of the thin, patched tin pot she wasn't carrying. Already, she sensed movement behind, heard the scrape and slither of bare feet climbing the slope. *Take it*, she thought. *Take the pot and the death it holds. You aren't bad. But may it do you no good.*

It took her less than a day to catch up with the peddler, the magician with so many letters that he had some to spare. She slept under a rocky overhang, approached him as he heated water for a morning drink of boiled leaves.

"What have we here?" he asked, jovial, as he searched behind her for a parent, a companion. None came, and he returned his gaze to her. "Are you alone, then?" he said at last. "Out here?"

"Yes," she said.

He frowned and stood, and called out, and wandered up the trail a piece, keeping her carefully in one corner of his eye, and taking his pack with him.

“Alone,” he said, returning. “But why?”

“I want to learn magic,” she answered. For he was part magician, and Father had told her stories of magic and its uses. “I want to be a *soserrus*.”

“A *susurrus*?” he asked, deliberately misunderstanding. “Not a creak? Not a thunder? Not a babble?” He smiled, and his smile was warm, for all he mocked her. “You’re a small girl, to be such a big word. How old are you? Three, four?”

“I’m six,” she answered, indignant.

He frowned. “Are you sure? You seem quite small.”

“I can *count*,” she insisted. If she didn’t know the figures of figures, still she could use them in her head. Father had taught her how, in his games of memory and imagination. “It may help,” he’d said. “It can’t hurt.”

“Very small. And distressingly thin.” His lips tightened, and he set his pack down again. The pot was still on the coals, the leaves dark and few in the water. He looked at her, then dug in his pack for a small handful of grain, and added it to the pot. He dug again, found a wooden spoon, stirred. The smell was rich, smooth, like boiled grain husks, but fuller, sweeter. Her mouth watered, but food was food; you didn’t take from another. She looked at him when he pushed the pot toward her, out of the fire. “Take it,” he said, offering the spoon.

Taking was one thing; a gift was another. They’d received some, after she was born, after Father’s accident. He had told her about them, shown her how to behave.

“Thank you,” she said with a nod. She took the spoon, sat before the fire. The gruel was hot, steaming, though she blew on the spoon. It was thick, sticky, and didn’t give way like soup, but stuck to itself, even mounding up a little above the spoon itself, the fat grains defying gravity with their tenacious grip on each other. They held the heat, scorching her tongue and the roof of her mouth. Through the pain, she could taste sweetness and a flavour she could hardly define.

Like husks, but complex, with notes of bark and even flowers. The feel was soft and slimy, like the juice from the thick, fleshy plants one could find in autumn. But with the thick, dense feel of moss. Moss that parted instantly before her teeth, that didn't hurt to chew, but still was something to work at and enjoy.

She treasured the bite, extended it as long as she could, licked the spoon clean, then handed it back politely, sending her tongue lovingly round her teeth to collect stray bits of flavor.

He didn't take the spoon. "Go on, then. Eat it all."

She pondered the words. *Eat it all*. Father had said that. But Father was Father, and stranger was stranger. "People don't share," Father had said. "They can't. Not much." Yet, *eat it all*. And here she was, spoon in hand. The peddler magician was fat, she realized. Not fat like Father described the overlords in Heroton, but full-fleshed. You could hardly see the bones in his arms. Probably if he took his shirt off, his chest would be smooth, the ribs hard to count. That's how Father had described lowlanders, though it seemed unlikely. But perhaps he *could* share. Perhaps he really wanted her to eat more. At least one more bite, her mouth insisted, its burnt flesh watering for another taste.

She took another slow bite, watching him watching her. He only smiled. More deeply the more she ate, until the small pot was empty, and her stomach fuller than it had been for weeks. It ached with satiety, groaned with stretched pleasure.

"Now," he said, taking back at last the pot that she had scraped, had run her fingers along, had licked clean wherever she could reach. "Now, let's hear about you."

She told him what there was — that Father had gone, that there was nothing left. He frowned as she described the neighbours, their inability to take her in.

"We'll see about that," he said, and after he packed, they started the slow trek back up to the pass. They reached it on the second day, and she waited in a sunny niche between rocks while he visited the few homes of the tiny

village. Her belly was full again, with another breakfast on top of a dinner, and she dozed in the warm light.

"Come on," he said, waking her. By the shadows, several hours had passed. "Come on," he repeated, and walked on. His voice was hard and angry, but she gathered up her blanket and followed. "I want to get out of this... this inhuman hell before dark."

"It's not their fault," she said. It was what Father would have said. "They don't have extra."

He stopped to stare at her, his face rigid, teeth clenched. As he looked down at her, his gaze softened. "Maybe not. And clearly you've had little enough so far." He smiled, and his leathery face turned briefly handsome. "To turn away a hungry child..." But the anger was gone.

They walked on, retracing the steps they had each already taken twice. As they emerged from the pass proper, he stopped to gaze out over the hazy valleys below, and the flatter lands in the distance. "Another child in crowded Alusia." He shook his head. "I don't know what to do with you."

She took his hand, as she would have taken Father's, before it grew shorter. "Teach me magic."

He laughed. "Teach you magic! That's all it takes? Teach you magic, and all will be well?" He tousled her matted hair. "And wouldn't I have to learn magic first, then?"

She felt a moment of worry, then. But Father had called him a magician, so magician he must be. "Teach me what you know," she said simply. What more could she ask?

"What I know." He knelt down to look into her eyes, and his voice grew warmer. "What I know. What I know is that I'm old and tired, and you're young and starved, and Alusia has no need of either of us. What I know is that I can barely feed one mouth, let alone two. We'll be hungry, soon enough."

She looked back calmly at his full flesh, his warm brown eyes and smiling cheeks. Of course they would be hungry. Hunger was a fact of life, a constant. You couldn't avoid hunger like you could rain, couldn't shelter in your flesh. It sought you out if you left it behind. Was part of you.

"It's a gift," Father had said. "A reminder of our mortality." She hadn't forgotten.

He sighed at last, patted her awkwardly on the shoulder. "Maybe Frando can help," he muttered, straightening up. "For now, let's find a place to sleep, eh?"

It took them most of a week to wend their way down from the pass, through canyons and clefts to the wider valleys below. The air grew thick and warm, the vegetation tall and lush. Food was everywhere. At first, she gathered fat leaves and grasses as they went, saving them for dinner, though there were so many that she began to eat as she walked. When they stopped that evening, he only laughed. She looked down at her double handful of green, moist grass, rich with flavor and sustenance. Now, for the first time, he sounded cruel. This was a feast, and her blanket was full of wide, fat leaves of yellow and orange, promising a soup of earthy, tasty color. She had even found a mushroom, that rare creature, a chewy ridge of pale amber scraped from the side of a tree, and waiting to be toasted or boiled as the climax to a banquet of plenty. Her father would have sung out if she had brought back a meal like this, but the peddler only shrugged.

"You can eat that if you like," he said. "But I'm not eating leaves, no matter how hungry I get."

It was clear to her then that he had never *been* hungry, and when he had eaten his share of a soup of beans, she added her bounty to make a thick stew. She ate until she was full, then ate more, until she could eat no more, felt sick at the thought of one more mouthful. And yet there was food left uneaten!

"Breakfast," he said at last, with a smile, and covered the pot.

"Breakfast," she agreed, amazing herself with the thought of two meals in a row, with no scrambling, searching forage in between. As she stretched herself on her blanket, her stomach comfortably uncomfortable, she congratulated herself on finding the peddler. And Father, who had told her to choose crowded Alusia over harsh Heroton. For hadn't the peddler shown her magic already? The magic of a full belly,

of predictable meals, of so much food that one could save some for the morrow. Magic, she thought sleepily, and the best kind.