

She is dusty from the road, her bare feet stained with the deep blue of phthalo berries; indelible proof of a childhood spent in the dye-pits of Palx. It is her first day in the city and she has seen wonders. But she fails to see that passers-by avoid the derelict lot, with its mossy half-wall and decaying iron fence. They ignore the willow that grows there and the sign of a pomegranate, painted on the charred stones of the wall. Stacked wooden cages obscure part of that tainted fruit and the pedestrians sidle past, without a glance for the feathered captives that flap and chitter within them. They pass and do not let their eyes follow the strung garlands of ribbons, bells and shards of coloured glass that festoon the space between willow and fence. No others marvel at the glimpses of brilliant light that tantalise from behind the willow's wide, green skirts.

Some, the regulars in this irregular place, nod acknowledgement to the figure seated in the deep shadows that pool where the willow and the scorched wall brush against each other. At first, Meline does not notice the figure. The chair, incongruous as it is, is of a dark wood, and the watcher who sits there is still.

Meline's vision is full of the cages that hang in the willow. They are gloriously wrought palaces and follies, built of silver wire, wood and metal. There is one, a scarlet-lacquered pagoda, which houses a tiny goldenrod wren. Another, made of copper and fashioned like the gemmed lanterns of Casabul, holds two coral-faced finches on a swing. Four milkspars trill and flap against the bars of a black citadel while, from inside an orb made of wire-bound bones, a psitta betrays its clownish plumage and watches the girl with dark, solemn eyes.

She feels drawn to the place, although her blue-stained feet have stopped short of it, and she is unaware that her neck and shoulders have tensed, as if expecting a blow. There is something true here, she knows, in this little note of verdant green set in the city's sombre symphony of grey stone and black smoke. Something true and something more. Some enchantment bound here, decorated with lures of sparkling garlands.

A shoulder jostles her out of her musing. She clutches her meagre bundle of possessions and looks around. A food peddler is forcing his cart, stacked high with steaming bamboo dishes, through the eddying crowd. One of the throng, cloaked despite the heat, pauses beside her and speaks in a low growl. "Stand there gawpin', little dyer, and you're nowt but fresh meat." His breath is predator hot against her cheek, and she catches a glimpse of grizzled, russet fur and sharp canines, in the shadows of his hood. Meline steps back, alarmed, but he has already

moved on. She hesitates, uncertain of her path, and her hand inches towards the dyer's luck-knot that her mother stitched onto a bright satin patch on her skirt. "Meline yellow," Mama had said, smiling. "Your namesake colour, for good luck."

The watcher by the willow, draws a little bone flute, brown with age, from his pocket. He sets it against his lower lip and blows three notes on it. Of course Meline cannot hear the tiny sounds – the city is cacophonous, and the lane is seething with brawlers and bawlers, balladeers and brats who demand a pfennig to see the little winged mouse they have trapped in a jar. The shrill notes are lost, but heads turn in the swarming mass of the lane and the watcher is, for a moment, a shadowy cynosure. Meline's hand stops short of the knot and she stares. The watcher nods and beckons her nearer.

Her indigo feet move forward, before she has time to consider the wisdom of crossing from the lane to the lot. As she draws closer, she sees that the watcher is a young man, no more than ten summers her senior. Hair clings to his face, in the fashion of men who do not care for the having of a beard, but only for their disinclination to rid themselves of one. A study in sepia, he has lank brown hair and brown eyes, as bland and treacherous as mud, with a flat brown cap pulled low over them. He wears a coat, cut in a military style, with torn threads and small jagged scars where the frogging and buttons have been roughly removed. Meline sees at once that it has been inexpertly dyed - the walnut hulls were not boiled for long enough, and the vinegar fixative was too weak. The once-scarlet coat is a streaked and patchy maelstrom of dark sorrel and rusty, liver brown.

His seat is a high-backed, carved reading chair, and crouched beside him, half hidden by the chair, is an urchin. Unkempt and unlovely, with a thin mouth and glassy eyes spaced too far apart, she looks more like a clockwork doll than a girl. Oversized boots encase her gaunt legs, and her knees jut at the hem of a dismal dress she has long outgrown.

Meline is conscious of her own gaudy, patchwork skirts and her bare feet. She wishes for the girl's boots as fervently as she imagines the urchin must covet her skirts, for all that they are dusty and travel-marked. Pieced from scraps of the Empire's loveliest fabrics, they are a riot of sumptuous, decadent hues. She knows every colour and every cloth, as she chose, named and stitched them with her mother.

"What is this place?" Meline asks, feeling the weight of every mile that separates her from home.

“Be you lookin’ for Murklin’s Nidifice, girl?” the watcher replies. “‘*Purveyors of Rimestock, Grimoires and Quality Compendiums.*’ Be you here to buy the book that holds your dream, your heart’s desire, secret knowledge, or the world’s own truth? Did you hear a whisper, back home or on the road, that this be where to find it?”

“N-n-no.” Meline stumbles over the denial. She has never heard of such a place. Chance alone has drawn her here, but she cannot deny that she seeks truth.

“Good, for you be too late. Time past, this lane be full of bookstores, incunabularists and librarians, but it be right well known that our lord loves not books nor their keepers. Taken by scathefire, be the Nidifice, and all the Murklins with it, barrin’ one.” His gaze travels over the urchin and returns to Meline. “Lucky for little Lanius Murklin that I be willin’ to avunculise, and lucky for me that there be space enow.” He pats one hand on the nearest stack of cages, and Meline sees the crescents of filth trapped beneath his nails. “Lucky for us both that there be always someone willin’ to pay the price for what their heart desires.”

As the birds flap, Meline remembers her Nona’s stories. There was one about a witch who would give you your heart’s desire in return for your soul – a tiny bright bird she then kept forever in a cage. Meline clutches at her skirts, gathering them together.

“Don’t tell me that each of these poor birds is a soul!” she cries.

The watcher gives a short bark of what may be laughter and spits into the grass. “Who be fillin’ your head with such stuff?” he asks. “Be that how they pass the winter nights in Palx?” He cuts her with his scorn and the truth. But what would he know of the winters in Palx, smug in his ugly, brown coat in this steaming city? What would he know of waking early to break the frost in the dye-pit? Or of the winds, and their ceaseless howling?

“Then what are they?” she flings back at him, smoothing her skirts.

“They be birds, girl. Birds I be trappin’ in the hollows and the fens. Song birds and pie birds, fenchits and flirt-tails, windhovers and willy gows.”

“But what good are they?”

He rolls his eyes at her ignorance and gets to his feet, pointing to cages as he names them.

“These be the gentle callin’ birds that will bleed out the last of their lives on some heedless

god's altar. That be a shrewd, black-headed shrike such as the hieromancers prize. Here be a cuckoo that will sell to the Magisters, if it be their will to prolong the summer, and there be caged a malle-mucke. Powerful foul it be, bringin' up the fen oil when it feeds, so the apothecaries will want it, for the oil be a sure cure for even the red fever, as all know." He waits a moment, but Meline does not agree, and he turns back to the cages.

"Warblers, limey pips and bronze wagtails," he says, stabbing a grimy finger at each. "And here be a little wild wood quest, whose feathers be in demand at the far end of the lane. Folk say they will curse the pillow into which they be stuffed and make a man's dyin' hard." He winks down at Meline and chuckles. "That's as may be. I wouldn't know. I be Daup, but a simple fowler, and folk here call this Fowler's Cut." His hand sweeps out in an expansive gesture that encompasses the cages, the willow and the dangling garlands.

"But how can birds be anyone's heart's desire?" she says, and lets a full measure of scorn sound in her voice. "They're just birds."

"Nowt be *just* anythin', here in the lane. Ben't you listenin'?" He spits again and adds in a sullen mutter, "Nowt be just in this city."

"So you have nothing true?" she says. "And all your knowledge is about birds?"

Daup's greasy gaze slides over the urchin again. The pointed tip of her tongue runs from left to right, separating Lanius Murklin's thin lips, and she speaks in a hoarse croak.

"I sell truth," she says. "Truth and knowledge. For gold."

Meline stares, then sighs.

"I don't have any gold."

The urchin's lips pinch together, and her gaze drifts up to the willow.

"Palx?" she croaks, and Meline nods, although Lanius is no longer looking at her.

"Knowledge, then," Lanius concedes. "An exchange."

She unfolds from her crouch and pushes aside the willow branches. Past the screen of leaves, Meline sees that the trunk of the tree is bound in strips of bolted iron, caged like the birds, or like a treasure chest. Beyond is a clearing enclosed by the willow, the neighbouring

buildings, and the broken, brick walls that are all that remain of the Nidifice. Charred timbers jut from them, like great rotten stumps of teeth, sticking up against the sky.

The space is paved and clusters of dainty chairs and low tables stand about, as if in a parlour. The floor and walls all show the mark of the fire, except where a large piece of rotting carpet obscures the flagstones, and where parts of the walls have been roughly plastered over. Set into the plaster are the broken remains of dozens of tea cups.

Meline stares at this parody of a room, and feels a tug of painful longing for the comfort of the tiny home she left behind in Palx. It was too small for them all, but it was safe and she knew its truths. She turns, as if she might leave, and sees that here the willow holds, not cages, but ribbons of white paper.

Her breath catches, and she stares. Others may see them as mere decoration, but to Meline the ribbons glow with truth, brighter than candles in the gloom. The gift of suresaying is what has brought her to the city, along with her family's desperate hope that she might somehow find someone to train her talent, and that someday she will return with that skill.

Lanius speaks from behind her. "Knowledge, then," she rasps.

"I want, that is, I need to know where, or who, or what..." Meline stammers as she turns. It has taken so much to get her here. There are so many wishes that she has carried all the way from Palx, she struggles beneath the weight of them. "I want..."

"Quiet," the girl commands. Meline is almost sure that the urchin is at least two summers younger than herself, but she obeys.

"Sit," the girl says, and Meline sinks onto a mouldering footstool.

"Don't move." She stays still, as the last of the Murklins walks around her three times. Then, with a dismissive sniff, Lanius splays out her overlong, bone-thin fingers and places her fingertips around Meline's face. She hisses her disapproval when Meline flinches, then she looks away, up at the ribbons, and her pale eyes become milky; her thin mouth stretches, and stretches, into a smile that is sharp as a sickle.

"Suresayer," she breathes.

Lanius tilts her head and her fingertips press against Meline's skin, probing at the bone beneath. A sudden froth of words spill from the urchin's mouth.

"Pigments, tannin, weld, woad and nutgall, crottle, catch, solvents and alum." Her fingers twitch as she goes on. "Cerulean, sapphire, jacinthe and jade, citrine, cinnabar, vermilion, verdigris, sage, cyan..." She draws in a great breath and her hands pull away. Her chin drops forward, her smile slips off, and her eyes clear.

Meline is reminded again of a doll, a hesitant puppet whose new master struggles to control the strings. Now the little marionette is breathing hard. More words, formal and archaic, tumble from between her thin lips.

"Meline Dyer, wilt thou exchange, of thine own free will, what thou knowest of Palx, for true knowledge of the city, that thou may be a Suresayer?"

"Yes," Meline agrees. It is everything that she wants. Lanius slips away, behind the brick wall, and returns with a tea tray, on which she has set a kettle and a mismatched cup and saucer. She places them on a table by Meline. Reaching up to the willow, she caresses its branches and selects three paper ribbons, laying them across her hand. She strokes the ribbons, speaking to them in a hoarse whisper. Meline is uncertain how, but a delicate, folded, paper flower emerges, covered in cramped, brown writing. Lanius drops it into the teacup, whispering to it as she pours. It begins to unfurl, and the ink bleeds, staining the water.

"Blow," Lanius urges. "Blow away Palx."

Meline blows, and forgets the hard phthalo berries slipping and bursting under her feet, forgets the stink of the evaporating madder pits. She almost laughs. Blows again, and loses the bitter taste of hazel bark; the ceaseless dripping of the dye cloths; old Nona sending her to gather in flimsy lengths of pearlescent filoselle before the ochre winds from the east ruin them. Gone. The paper is swelling, rising out of the cup. She blows, and feels the colours pull away from her; loses the subtlety of their shades, their beautiful names that her mother taught her, sloughing from her mind and lifting from her vision. The world shrinks and greys, as the cloth of her memories is bleached clean.

Meline blows, and feels the dyers' truths tear from deep within her. The paper ball floats, its surface milky. She feels them pass out of her in one ragged breath – mixes, mordants, colours, ingredients, fabrics, Mama's gentle smile, her brown stained hands stitching, sorting, and smoothing Meline's hair; Papa's strength and sacrifice; Opa's ropey, dyed arms swinging her high; Nona's crippled pain and ceaseless good humour; all their hopes, their dreams, their love, all their love.

The ball of paper splits, unfurling into a long ribbon and Lanius snatches it up. "Drink now," she insists, and Meline drinks, although tears are pouring down her face and she cannot remember why.

The willow tea is hot and bitter. It does not fill the broken place inside her. Instead, she finds that she knows of a woman who has a cheap room she might rent, near the tower of the Suresayers. She knows who she must see about receiving training. She knows the unsavoury secrets of a man who is blood-kin to a prominent Suresayer, and how he can be made to help ensure that she gains a position. She cannot recall why she wants to be a Suresayer, but she knows it is important to someone. Someone important to her. She teeters there, on the edge of a ragged darkness, which threatens to consume her.

"Smash the cup," says Lanius, and Meline swings the delicate china at the table and watches it shatter. She stands and looks from the shards to the plastered wall. "Thank you for my tea," she says. "I must go now." She has to shield her eyes against the glare of the paper ribbons, their truths burn like scathefire when the rest of the world is drab and grey. "Don't forget me," Lanius says, running a long, achingly white ribbon between her fingers.

"I don't forget my friends," Meline says with a nod, and the words are true in her head, but in her mouth they taste sour as lies.

Daup is busy, as she leaves Fowler's Cut, haggling with a fat man over the price of calling birds. As Meline crosses the lane, her hand rubs absently at a patch on her skirt and the feel of the smooth stitching makes her weep. She leans against a wall, knowing what she needs to do in this bleak city, but not why; knowing she has lost something precious, but not what it is. Still, there is a dull certainty there, along with the ache, and it is a truth that many newcomers to the city never learn, or learn too late: here, everything has a price and sometimes that price is your soul.