

The Orangery

K.D. Wentworth

The orangery was steamy, even in January, and on cloudless nights, drawn by something we could not name, my younger brother and sister and I would study the stars through the vast glass panes. The leaves of the orange trees were black lace against the night sky as we wove through them. It was close between the terra-cotta pots, which had been painted two different shades of green to mimic the inner and outer sides of an olive leaf, and we played our games fiercely, silently, afraid we'd be commanded back to bed if Nanny Roentage heard us. The woman, who had been old even when our parents were children, retired early each evening, after tucking us sternly in, then sat nodding before the tiny fire in her grate to drink hot toddies. Once we were certain she was so occupied, we would rise from our beds, like dryads freed from their trees, and creep down the stairs, then through the sepulchral house into the orangery which we had claimed for ourselves. By all reports, the narrow white addition to Marbury House had been built for Mother, upon the occasion of her marriage to our father, but she had since abandoned it for the green and gold hills of sun-drenched Italy, having found both England and parenthood not the least to her liking, once she'd birthed three lusty babes within five years. Father had made it quite clear that he'd never been interested in parenthood in the first place, his distaste for it inversely proportional to his enthusiasm for the act which brought it to be. As for us—Reg, Phyllida, and me, Sophia—early on we had found them not to our liking as well, so the current estrangement would have been an equitable arrangement if it had not been presided over by Nanny Roentage. She was an odd character, barely my height, though I was not yet full grown, with antiquated notions of child-raising and a faint underlying accent that betrayed her origin in some unnamed foreign clime. She had odd habits, little idiosyncracies of pronunciation and personal hygiene, which we found risible. The daytime was her province, filled with a rigid progression of lessons, baths, hair combing, constitutionals out on the grounds, and endless attempts to amend our sadly lacking deportment. The nights, though, were ours, when we threaded between the orangery's huge pots and breathed in the rich citrus of the trees, longing always for exotic far-off lands. It was seven year old Phylly who first noted the flash of red and gold brocade. Reg and I were fabricating some silly game of Knights and Kings, arguing over where we would locate our "castle," when she gasped and pointed a shaking finger. She had always been an excitable child, perhaps because she was the youngest and therefore the least touched by our emotionally distant parents. Her hair fell in dark-brown ringlets, difficult to tame, her spirit likewise. She was sitting on the floor, humming an odd little tune she had learnt from Nanny, then her head jerked up. "A man!" she said. "There, before the windows!" "Oh, come off it, Phylly," Reg said crossly. He was ten. And, though he had a sensitive, mobile face, he was already filled with the typical male authority of our age. "It's freezing out there." But then I saw it too, a sweep of red and gold, as though something quite thin and almost invisible had suddenly turned, so that I glimpsed it full on. And it was within the orangery, only a few feet away, not safely outside. "No," I said, my heart hammering. "There, don't you see?" Reg looked then, and I could tell by his sharp intake of breath that he saw it too. "Bloody hell!" he said in the vernacular he had been lately acquiring from the grounds staff. A man stood before us, his pointed beard gleaming with oil. He was clad in red and gold brocaded robes and was dragging a woman by her long black hair. Tiny yellow flowers were braided into her locks, and her arms, very white and round in the dimness, flailed as tears streamed down her elegant face. She wore an elaborate gown of pale green silk cut low across the bosom. She was not young, but neither was she old. "Let her go!" Phylly cried and lurched to her feet. I snatched her thin, childish body back and fenced her in with my arms. "No, Phylly,

be quiet!" I didn't know why, but I was desperately afraid for this phantasm to hear us. Reg was staring, on his hands and knees, his mouth agape in the most ill-bred fashion. Several more men appeared, also dressed richly in long robes of some foreign cut, one in maroon, the other in deep midnight blue, though neither so grand as the first. A moon-faced boy in servant's drab stood behind them. They seemed to speak to one another, but we heard not a sound. And all the time the woman wailed silently, imprisoned securely by the man's grip on her heavy black fall of hair. "Are they ghosts?" Phylly whispered against my cheek. "No," I found myself saying. Icy perspiration glued my nightdress to my back. "No one like *that* can ever have lived in Surrey, much less this house, and the orangery was only built a few years ago. I don't see how it could be haunted already." The images flickered then, like a reflection on the water, and disappeared. "No!" Freeing herself from my grasp, Phylly ran to the space before the windows. "Make them come back!" She knelt to pick up a crushed yellow flower that was like nothing ever grown at Marbury House, even in season. ? ? ? None of us slept well that night, after we retreated to our beds, and Nanny, though not the sharpest of observers, made note of our slack-jawed inattention the next day. "Bed early for you three," she said, when Phylly burst into tears over Reg's teasing and I had failed to produce the correct answer in my tiresome geography lesson three times over. We made no protest, which was cause for suspicion in and of itself. Her withered lips pursed as she studied us across the nursery table, but she said no more, perhaps enjoying our inability to speak up for ourselves for once, since we were normally so lively. That night, we waited until we heard her singing that same odd tune softly off-key to herself, a sure sign the toddy had done its work. The minimal staff of servants currently in residence had of course retreated to their rooms at the first opportunity, doing whatever it was servants liked to do on their own time. Flanked by my brother and sister, I opened the orangery door and was enveloped in warm sweet-scented air. Even at this season, when there was no fruit, the trees exuded fragrant oils that brought to mind visions of more temperate lands. Phylly, crackling with excitement, clutched my hand. "Do you see anything?" I whispered to Reg. "You mean do I see *anyone*?" he whispered back. "Do you think he hurt her?" Phylly asked, her voice clear and unhushed. "The woman?" Reg turned to look at her. "Of course he did. She probably said something stupid, so he had to teach her a lesson." "No, she didn't!" Without warning, Phylly was on the edge of tears, and I saw that she had brought the faded yellow flower she'd rescued the night before. "Be quiet, both of you!" I crouched behind a pot and waited. "Oh, they won't be able to hear us," Reg said with maddening practicality, "or we should have heard them last night." He hunkered down between the trees, and Phylly settled beside him, examining the flower's petals and humming under her breath. A figure stirred then in the shadows, limned from behind by a blue-tinted light. It was the woman again, but alone this time, weeping, her gleaming black hair disheveled and bare of flowers. She wore a mauve gown tonight, cut in quite a different fashion, and wrung her hands in distress. Phylly darted forward. "Don't cry." The woman looked down, and her tear-stained face changed, as though she saw her. I stood up. "Phylly!" Reg ran to take his little sister's hand, an uncommon move for him, then stared mutely up at the apparition. A strain of music began from somewhere, very faint. I swallowed hard. Was that Nanny, descending the stairs to see what all the noise was about? "Both of you, come away from there!" I said in a low urgent voice. The woman smiled, and I realized she had a bruise on her cheek. She wiped at her tears with the back of one hand. "Niños," she said, "how have you come here?" A foreign accent flavored her words, as exotic as the fruit of orangery in its season. "This is our house," Phylly said with the fearlessness of the very young. Her cheeks flushed. "We should be asking how *you* have come here." "Mirnas is in a fearful temper tonight," the woman said, glancing over her shoulder. The planes of her face were sharp but elegantly sculpted. "His mark pains him more and more with each passing day. Best you go back to where you came from." The music grew louder, skirling with strange harmonies that wove in and out of each other, and I knew then it couldn't be Nanny, though I did not recognize the instruments. I emerged from the artificial forest to stand behind my brother and sister. An elegant divan covered in striped cream and blue silk was faintly

visible out of the corner of my eye. I crossed my arms over my chest as though I could protect myself. "Where is this?" I asked, my heart thudding. She smiled sadly. "No place you ever want to go, little one. Return home and travel like this no more." "But we aren't traveling," Reg said, his brow wrinkled. "You are." "That's what I thought when I first came here," she said. "I wasn't much older than you." She smiled at me. "Thirteen?" "Twelve and a half," I said, feeling more afraid than I ever had in my life. A small creature slithered from under the divan. It possessed the shape of a snake, but its elongated head was that of a bird, and its body was covered in jewel-toned green feathers instead of scales. I stumbled back. Phylly gave a shriek of excitement and picked it up, nuzzling the lithe body against her cheek. "Oh, I want it!" I stared in horror. "Put that down!" "What is it?" Reg said, his brown eyes unnaturally wide. "It is a *strega*," the woman said. "They are a rare breed, even here in this dark place. Be very careful with it." Trembling, I prized the beast from Phylly's small white hand and knelt to release it back on the floor. In spite of the foreign furniture, it was the same floor as that of our orangery, tiny white tiles bordered with blue and gold.

The *strega* wrapped its tail around my left wrist and would not let go. Its touch was soft and cool, and it smelled oddly astringent, like just-pressed olives. "Peace, caro," the woman said, bending over my wrist, her dark eyes on the creature. Her voice was soft. "This small one does not understand." Its mouth opened in a hiss and its feathers rose in a ruff behind its head. Within its throat, I saw concentric rows of glimmering green, as though it had swallowed emeralds. Then it struck, fastening upon my hand. Oddly, I felt no pain, but rather a flooding warmth that rocketed through my veins. The woman took it then, easing its coils from around my wrist. Her tongue clucked as her long black hair fell over her face, and she held the writhing *strega* up to peer into its tiny glittering eyes. "Badly done, caro, badly done! You have not wrought well this night." Her body flickered like lightening, then we were alone. Phylly and Reg stared at me. "Are you all right?" my brother whispered, for once, appearing less than his years, rather than more. "I—don't know," I said. I sat down hard. The ceramic tiles were chill beneath my spread fingers. Outside, the stars gleamed down on us, bleak and bright. Phylly took my bitten hand and turned it up. Three concentric green welts were apparent, and the warmth cascading through my body had transmuted to something else, a sort of burning. The scent of oranges was strong as I cradled the hand to my breast and wept, aching for something I could not name. ? ? ? I concealed my hand the next day in the folds of my skirt so that Nanny, always a bit fragile in the morning from her libations of the night before, did not notice. Reg and Phylly were unnaturally subdued and prone to give me searching glances from their seats in the schoolroom, but at length we got through our morning lessons, and, since the afternoon was fine, though very cold, were sent out to walk in Marbury's vast gardens. "Does it hurt?" Reg asked in a low voice as we turned down a cobbled path with no attendants in sight. "It feels—strange," I said, having no words for the feelings my wound engendered. I pulled my afflicted hand out of my pocket and we all stared at the concentric green welts. Phylly seized my hand so that she could kiss it, not at all in character for my small, fey sister. Her lips were quick and dry. "Maybe she'll tell us more tonight," she said in a husky whisper. I realized then there was no question that we would return to the orangery, no doubt among the three of us that we would see the woman again. When we returned to the schoolroom, Nanny was gazing at us with disapproval, as though she had walked behind us the whole way and heard every word. "Wicked children," she said. "I know what you've been up to!" We hung our heads, not daring to look her in the eye. "You've been in the orangery!" She seized my chin and pulled my face up. "Hallings saw you in there last night. Admit it!" "Just to smell the trees," I said, my heart beating wildly against my ribs. "The sun brings out their scent, and it's so lovely—at this time of year." Her fingers tightened painfully. "You have no leave to go in there, do you understand?" "Yes, Nanny." My throat constricted, and I almost could not get the words out. "I'm sorry." Reg bit his lip. "Sorry, Nanny." Tears were running down Phylly's suddenly pale cheeks. "Those are valuable trees!" She thrust me away so that I reeled in my seat. "What your parents would say if any of them were damaged, I can't even begin to imagine!" Her eyes, with their odd foreign cant, were chill, and radiated more than a hint of fear. "We

were—careful,” I said. “You’re not to go in there—ever again!” She straightened her back. “Do you understand?” The welts on my hand throbbed, and I concealed it beneath my unaffected one as we nodded, each in turn when she held our gaze. ? ? ? That night, the nursery door was locked; Nanny did not trust us to keep our promise. As we would not, had we any choice, but it was sobering to realize Nanny was cognizant of that. She understood so little else about us. Reg gave the knob one last desperate turn, then slid to the floor, his back against the solid oak. “We can’t get out,” he said, his eyes glazed in the dimness of the night-nursery. “The lady will go away, won’t she?” Phylly looked from him to me, her body pitifully thin in her flannel nightdress. “She’ll come, but we won’t be there, and then we’ll never see her again.” I clutched my hand to my breast. It was filled with a strange thrilling, not pain, exactly, but a sensation akin to that of a limb in which the circulation has been cut off and is now beginning to return. It felt as though I must move, must translate myself at once to that other place we had glimpsed down in the orangery. I put my palms on the door, reaching with senses I couldn’t even name for what lay on the other side. *Urgency* beat at me, threaded with *need*. “I have to get out,” I said with quiet desperation. “They won’t wait!” “Who won’t—the lady?” Phylly said. Unable to answer, I threw myself on my cot and curled up, knees to forehead. The sensation of need was already past enduring. I didn’t know how I would go on bearing it night after night, since Nanny would never again leave us unguarded. I was certain of that. “We could climb out the window,” Reg said. He padded over to the icy pane and looked out. “Then down the roof to the corner where there is a lattice for the roses. I’ve done it before—well, once.” “But then we would be locked outside,” I said, trying to keep my teeth from chattering. “We’d have no way to get back in.” Then I thought I heard the music from the night before, wild and oriental, as though it carried all the way from the orangery on the other side of the house. I started up from my bed, heart pounding. “Your hand!” Phylly darted forward to take my wrist and gaze down at the back of my hand. The three circular welts, one inside the other, were outlined in green fire in the dimness. She shivered. “Does it hurt?” I pulled free of her, cradling it against my breast, rocking on my knees. I was damp with perspiration, and the ache within was like the need for air when one was suffocating, or the need for food when one was starved. I didn’t know what it was I craved, only that I might die of it, were the need not satisfied. “Both of you, stay here,” Reg suddenly ordered, as though we had a choice in the matter. He was very pale under his shock of dark brown hair. “I’ll come back for you.” With a heave of his young shoulders, he threw open the nursery window, inundating us with frigid night air, then disappeared out onto the roof. I knelt in front of it, welcoming the coolness on my feverish skin. Phylly pulled blankets off my cot, draping one around my shoulders, which I immediately shrugged off. The stars glittered down, hard and uncaring, as they were most nights when the weather was fine. I studied their diamond facets above the dark plain of the rooftop, wondering if our parents gave them any thought over in drowsy Italy. Fifteen minutes later, our door creaked open, and Reg, panting, smudged, and triumphant, wordlessly beckoned us out. Barefoot, we slipped past Nanny’s room. She was still singing, but her voice was hoarse, as though she had been at it for hours. Then we pattered down the steps single-file. Phylly was shivering, and I realized belatedly that I should have made her wear her robe and slippers. “How did you get in?” I asked Reg as we threaded through room after room of dark furniture. “I knocked on Cook’s window,” he said. “Told her I’d gotten carried away, pretending I was a pirate, and had climbed down off the roof after you two had gone to bed and couldn’t get back up.” “And she let you in?” Phylly’s eyes were wide with amazement. “Well, she did give me a proper scolding, but I asked her not to tell, and she said she wouldn’t, just this once,” Reg said. “She doesn’t like Nanny, you know. Says ‘that foreign woman’ is always sending meals back, saying they don’t ‘suit,’ so then Cook has to throw something else together at the last minute. Says she’s taken on ‘airs,’ since our parents went away, thinks she’s better than the other servants.” We entered the hall and were quiet then until we reached the orangery door and tried the knob. It was locked. I stared at it hopelessly, my hand cradled to my breast. Through the panes of glass in the door, I could see a faint glow on the other side of the trees, in front of the long bank of floor to ceiling windows. Phylly stood on her toes, peering

through the glass. "Is she there?" "Stay here," I whispered to them, then padded back down the dark hallway until I came to one of the small sitting rooms. On the mantel, I found a brass candleholder and carried it back with me. "Let me," Reg said, immediately divining my intent. "No." I motioned to the pair of them. "Stand well back." I wrapped the brass in the hem of my nightgown and broke out the pane just above the knob, then reached through and released the latch. The door swung open, enveloping us with the redolent tang of oranges. Phylly squeezed through in front of me, heedless of the broken glass, and raced toward the outer bank of windows. At my side, Reg craned his head. "Can you see her?" Mindful of my bare feet, I stepped over the shards of glass and followed. The tiles were cool, but the air retained some of the sun's heat from earlier in the day. I could hear Phylly talking in a low voice. Reg darted ahead through the carefully situated pots of trees. My afflicted hand trembled, as though it possessed a mind separate from my own and had business here. Phylly's voice grew louder and I tacked toward it. I found Phylly and Reg standing together, staring up at someone as tall as any man I'd ever seen. I stopped well back surrounded still by orange trees and could not make myself go on. Reg looked over his shoulder. "That's our sister," he said, "Sophia." The man had black eyes with no discernible iris and his hair was black too, limned with moonlight, though there was no moon tonight in our world. His teeth glittered in a strange, feral smile. "Sooo-pee-aa." He stretched the word out, giving each syllable more than its due. "Come and let us take a look at you." My feet obeyed, though my heart feared to do so. As I moved into his sphere, my senses swam, and then it seemed we stood in another place, not the orangery at all. Rich cinnamon-colored drapes hung from windows that looked out over a strange garden glittering in the light of a full moon. Out in that garden, banks of glimmering red blooms danced like living flame. The floor was layered with purple and black carpets worked in fanciful patterns, and I smelled the odor of something sharp and sweet, as though someone nearby were cooking. Phylly retreated to stand at my side. "Are you Mirnas?" "Be still, Phylly," I said. Oddly, the floor beneath her feet was still the orangery's white tile bordered in gold and blue, while I stood on carpet. I had somehow traveled farther than she in the few steps it had taken to get here. "You are a pretty pair, are you not, quite dear and tender." The man cocked his immense head. "Yes, fledgling, I am Mirnas." I could feel Reg behind me, watching. "How—do you come here?" I asked. "Actually, it is you who have come here," he said. "Opening the doorway is a small knack, greatly assisted by the venom of the helpful *strega*." "Where is the lady?" Phylly asked, looking around the strangely appointed room. "She was very pretty." "Her name is Bella," he said. "I'm afraid I was quite cross with her today. She may not feel like attending me tonight." Phylly blinked solemnly. "Was she bad?" "That depends on how you look at it," he said. "Often, good is bad, and bad is good. Strange, isn't it?" He laughed, but it was a hollow, chilling sound. I took Phylly's hand in mine, and it felt reassuringly warm, as though sunny Italy herself lived inside her skin. "We have to go now." "So soon?" He dropped onto a low divan and stretched like a tomcat, all feline grace despite his height. "We'll be missed," I said and turned to go, but saw only a wall lined with chairs of some oddly fluted design, rather than the orangery. "Phylly," I said in a strangled voice. "Do you see the trees?" She nodded, her hand limp in mine. "Then, you lead the way," I said. "I'll follow." She stepped forward, through the furniture, disappearing into the wall. I tried to follow but was brought up short by its apparent solidity and lost hold of my sister's hand. Phylly returned, gazing up at me apprehensively. Her hazel eyes widened. "Aren't you coming?" My heart raced and my hand throbbed with that strange not-quite-pain. "All I can see is a wall." Mirnas chuckled. I heard him rise from the divan, but I feared to turn around. Phylly took my hand again. "Don't look," she whispered and tugged me after her. "Nay, child, both of you, stay a while," Mirnas said with cool amusement. "The night is still young, the moon very bright, and there is much I might teach you, since it seems poor Bella is determined to be indisposed." I closed my eyes and plunged after Phylly, feeling the ghosts of wall and furniture like an unnerving itch as my body passed through them. When Phylly stopped, I opened my eyes again and found we stood among the dark glossy leaves of the orange trees. The breath rasped in and out of my chest as though we had been

exerting ourselves and tears dampened my cheeks. I turned back to the bank of windows; the scene with Mirnas, his furniture and drapes and bizarre glowing garden, had disappeared. But there was also no sign of my brother. “Phylly—” My fingers tightened on my sister’s small hand so that I felt the bones give. “Where’s Reg?” She pulled away and didn’t answer. ? ? ?

After searching the orangery twice without finding any trace of Reg, we swept up the shards of broken glass. Afterwards, I locked Phylly back in our room, leaving the key in the lock just as Nanny had, and went outside to climb the trellis and retrace Reg’s journey across the roof back to our window. Mrs. Reece, the housekeeper, would find the side door unlocked in the morning. I only hoped she would attribute it to her own carelessness. The stars seemed to sing hard bright songs up there in the sky and I paused on the roof to stare up at them. Were they shining down on Reg wherever he was? Remembering the full moon, I shuddered. That was a different place, apparently with its own separate rules and geography. Phylly was in her bed when I climbed through the window, the covers pulled up to her chin, eyes staring at the ceiling. “Where is he?” she whispered as I closed the window behind me. “In that other place,” I said. She shifted over on her side, clutching the bedclothes. “Can we get him back?” “I don’t know.” I slipped back into my own bed, half-numb with cold and dread. The darkness seemed to vibrate and I could see the strange garden of flaming flowers behind my eyes as though their image had been seared into my brain. ? ? ?

When I closed my eyes, I thought I could not sleep, but Nanny woke me the next morning as though nothing untoward had happened, going on to Phylly, then stopping at Reg’s cot. “What’s this?” she said as I sat up, rubbing my eyes. “His bed hasn’t been slept in.” She turned back to us. “Where, pray tell, is your brother?” Phylly buried her face in her pillow and began to cry. I slipped out of bed and went to her, wrapping my arms around her shaking body. Nanny folded her hands, staring at us like a turtle who had just popped its head out of its shell and found something disagreeable. “I see.” Just exactly what she thought she saw, I do not know. Nothing of the truth could have been obvious from the scene before her. “See to your morning ablutions,” she said and left, slamming the door with a most ungentle ferocity and locking us in again. We did not see her for several hours, and though the maid came round with our breakfast things, evidently the key was no longer in the lock. She was forced to leave the laden tray on the floor just outside. Phylly sat in her accustomed chair at the nursery table, gazing down at her hands, while I paced the circumference of the room, unable to remain still for any length of time. “She won’t find him,” my sister said in a small, stifled voice. “No,” I said, “she won’t. Would God that she could!” I tried to think about the scene last night, the last time I saw Reg. What had he been doing? Why hadn’t he come with us? But even the memory of that strange place seemed unreal and untrustworthy, distorted as though glimpsed underwater. None of it made any more sense than dreams ever did. The key rasped in the lock, then the nursery door opened. Nanny stood framed in the doorway, her gray hair untidy, gazing at us as though she’d discovered two serpents in our place. “Someone smashed the glass in the orangery door,” she said. “Cook reports Master Reginald was outside last night and begged leave of her around ten to be let back in.” Her mouth pursed in a most disagreeable fashion. “You will tell me at once what you know about this!” Phylly sobbed as I put one hand, my unmarked one, on her shoulder and squeezed. “We were up here, locked in, Nanny,” I said, my voice almost steady. “What *could* we know about it?”

Her head craned to one side. “If you know you were locked in, then you must have tried the door!” “When Reg didn’t come back, we wanted to inform you,” I said, amazing myself with the ease of the lie tumbling from my lips. “But we couldn’t, since you’d locked us in.” “I see.”

By the ramrod straightness of her back and the flush in her withered cheeks, it was apparent she did not believe me, and my marked hand began to throb again with that nameless sensation that was not-quite-pain. I thrust it into the pocket of my dress. I had put on ivory trimmed with rose ribbons for the day, as innocent a color as my wardrobe possessed. “What about you, Phyllida?” Nanny demanded. “What have you to say about this incident? Where has your brother gone?” Tears were streaming down Phylly’s cheeks. Nanny pulled her from the chair by one arm and made her look up into her furious face. “I’m sure he meant to come back, Nanny,” she said in a hoarse whisper. “Reg

wouldn't vex you on purpose." "I know what you are up to!" Nanny gave Phylly a little shake so that her head bobbed. "There's nothing in the orangery to entertain such quarrelsome, indolent children as you three, so someone must have drawn you. Who was it?" For a heart-stopping second, I thought Phylly would blurt out the whole improbable story, then she hung her head and sobbed harder.

"You don't understand what you are playing with!" she said. I pulled my sister away from Nanny's cruel grip, then folded her in my arms. "It's all right," I murmured into her dark curls. "He'll come back. I know he will." With an exclamation, Nanny seized my left hand and held it up close to her face, examining the strange concentric circles of glittering emerald beneath the skin. Her eyes finally raised to meet mine. "Foolish child, you will regret this, once you understand what you have done!" She thrust me away from her, as though the touch of my skin burned. "We'll get him back, if you allow us to go to the orangery tonight," I said, an odd coolness possessing me. "Then everything will be as it was. Our parents need never know about any of this." The mention of her employers seemed to galvanize her. With a choked exclamation, she left us then, retreating to her own room where I heard the scrape of the key in the lock from within. I went out into the hallway to retrieve our

breakfast tray with its cold toast and congealed porridge. "Shall we go down to Cook, Phylly?" I said, setting the tray on the nursery table. "I'm certain she'll give us something warm, if we ask nicely." She wiped at her cheeks with the back of one hand and nodded. ? ? ? We did not see Nanny the rest of the day, but my hand made me restless, the mark demanding that I be in continual motion. I walked the gardens out in the thin winter light, which was further diminished that day by dark, low-hanging clouds. The scent was dry and dusty, and dead leaves skittered along the paths, propelled by a cruel north wind. Phylly trotted along beside me, her hands thrust into a little white muff she'd received from our parents by post the previous Christmas. We entered the orangery at various moments throughout the day, but it had remained stubbornly only what it seemed to be, a vast echoing room, filled with citrus trees in their pots placed in their precise patterns, the sun's wan heat magnified by the glass windows. We wandered the tile enclosure, noting that the missing glass in the door had been temporarily replaced by a piece of wood. Nanny did not come to us for tea, or later for the evening meal. There was a plate provided for both her and Reg, and the two of us stared at them silently, fearing to speak aloud that which consumed our every thought. As the short day faded, I watched Nanny's door, but she made no offer to interfere with us. I waited until ten, our usual time for entertaining ourselves down in the orangery, then motioned to Phylly to take my hand. She stood, smoothing the wrinkles from her pinafore, then laced her small fingers through mine. Her touch was cold.

The door to the orangery was not locked this time, saving us the bother of breaking more glass. That was for the best as I would not have let anything stop this assignation, no matter how much damage I might have to accomplish. As usual, it was dark in amongst the oversized pots. The leaves rustled as we brushed against them, and I could hear our breathing accelerate. I put my arm around Phylly and we settled together on the cool tile, close to the windows where we had seen that other place both times before. We waited silently, though that might have made no difference, for all that we knew. An hour passed, then another until I despaired and considered retreating back upstairs to our beds. Phylly's head sagged as she hummed to herself, then, finally, a faint blueness glimmered in the air midway between floor and ceiling. She gasped and I pulled her closer. The air of the orangery seemed to burn away, starting from that single point and radiating outward. A scene formed before us, a room in some other place, a palace perhaps. The furnishings and draperies were certainly rich enough.

The woman, Bella, was there, seated on the striped divan, her black hair alive with blue highlights. She was dressed tonight in gold and wore earrings to match that dangled almost to her shapely shoulders. The bruise on her face was gone. And Reg sat beside her, wearing breeches of copper-colored satin that ended just below the knees and a floor-length white coat with silver buttons. A turban covered his brown hair. His face was as pale as I'd ever seen it. Phylly lurched to her feet and I reeled with the sudden throb of my marked hand. "Reg!" she called and pulled free before I could stop her. "Are you all right? Nanny was ever so angry!" The woman looked up, then took Reg's unresisting hand in hers. "See? I told you they would come again someday." "I didn't wish them

to come," he said in a disdainful voice very unlike our comradely brother. "Of course, you did," she said. "NiÑas, come forward and kiss your brother." Phylly emerged from the pots, her steps hesitant, as insubstantial as a bit of thistledown just before the wind whirls it aloft. "Does Reg have a different name now?" With a burst of blue, as though a door somewhere unimaginably faraway had opened, one of the two men we had seen previously appeared. He still sported the pointed beard, but now it was shot through with silver where before it had been uniformly black. "So, Bella," he said, bracing his side with one hand as though it pained him. "They've come back. You should have called me." An undercurrent of satisfaction permeated his tone and I shivered, despite the air's lingering warmth there in the orangery. She bowed her head and I saw a thin line of dried blood along a cut on her jaw. "I was just about to call you, Mirnas," she said lightly. Her fingers played over the striped silk. "They are funny little things, are they not? One has already met our clever *strega*." "Has she, now?" Gazing back through the potted trees as though they concealed me not at all, Mirnas raised his chin and motioned to me with all the imperiousness of a foreign chieftain. "Come here, girl!" I stepped a bit closer, parting the leaves with one shoulder so that I stood half-revealed. "I am not a common servant," I said. "It is not for you to summon me like one." "A little queen, eh?" He laughed, but it was not a merry sound. "And just where do you think you are?" "I'm in my own home," I said, "in the orangery my mother had built not long before the occasion of my birth. Where, sir, are you?" "In my viewing room," he said, stroking his beard. Phylly darted forward and seized Reg's hand, but he shook her off so that she fell to the floor. A tiny green feathered head peered out from his collar. My hand throbbed at the very sight of it. I wanted, no, *needed*, something, but could not say what. "This is another world," Bella said. "Another place, not the one of your birth at all." She tried to smile, but it looked out of place on her strained face. Phylly picked herself up. "Aren't you coming with us?" she asked Reg. He stood up from the divan, and I realized he was taller than he'd been just the night before. His face had lost its roundness, his bones become heavier, as though he'd grown—older. "What? So I can put myself under that Nanny creature's tiresome authority again?" His lip curled. "I think not." "But—" Phylly hovered on the brink of tears. "You're our brother. You belong with us." Reg turned to gaze out the windows, which were remarkably similar to those of the orangery. Out in the darkness of this foreign night, I could see the glowing colors again, like flowers composed of fire instead of petals. "I shall never go back, so there's no use in pestering me about it." The *strega* slithered out of his collar to coil about his neck like a jeweled green collar. Mirnas laughed. "I think you should go back," he said, "at least for a time. It might be amusing." Reg whirled on him. "You know that's impossible!" He was older than even I was, now, I realized numbly. Time didn't pass at the same rate in this other place, and in the space of a single night he had become the eldest. "Come back," I said, "please." "Yes, go." Mirnas waved him off. "I command you." Bella fell at Reg's feet, head bowed, satiny black hair cascading down to hide her face. "Caro, try, please! You know it's no use. He'll have his way in the end." One hand stole up to caress his ankle as though stroking a cat. "He always does!" Reg flinched from her touch, trembling. How old was he now, I wondered. Fifteen? Sixteen? "It needn't be forever," I said in a calm voice that belied my eagerness. I reached out to him. "Just for tonight. You can come back here tomorrow, or whenever you like." The *strega* around his neck hissed, the feathers standing up in a ruff around its head like the hood of a cobra. *Need* pulsed through me, an appetite for something unnameable. I jerked back and cradled my marked hand against my breast. His shirt slipped down, revealing a similar mark at the tender juncture where neck and shoulder met, three concentric circles of emerald that glowed as though illuminated beneath the skin. These were older than mine and much more healed, resembling an odd green birthmark rather than a wound. He saw me looking and laughed. "Yes, it burns, doesn't it?" "It's just a bite," I said, though my hand was shaking and I attempted to conceal it in the folds of my skirts. "It will fade in time." "Not this bite," Reg said, "though some bear its stigmata better than others." He looked over his shoulder at the man. "Isn't that right, Mirnas?" The man scowled and turned away, his face flushed. "Anyway, we just want Phylly now to have a complete set." Reg eased the *strega* from around his

neck and held the slim green creature out to her. "As I recall, on that night so long ago, you were first to pick him up. It should have been you all along." Phylly stared, her eyes wide, either in fascination or horror, I could not tell which. "Don't!" I reached to pull her back. Mirnas was at my side in two quick strides and prevented me from reaching my sister. His fingers dug into the tender flesh of my arms. "It is the price of coming here," he said into my ear with a hot exhalation of tobacco-breath. "You, all of you, chose this place." I tried to free myself, but could not. "She doesn't know what she's doing! She's just a child!" "As are you," he said. "As were we all, each and each, when this dark land first called to us." I didn't feel like a child. I felt old and worn, far beyond my years. Fear streaked through my veins. "Phyllida Regina Hamilton Darcy," I said, mimicking Nanny's fussy tone as nearly as possible, "go upstairs to bed this instant!" She looked at me then, hazel eyes huge in her pale little face. I could see the logic assembling itself in her seven-year-old brain: Reg and I both bore the *strega's* mysterious mark, and in all her short life, she'd never consented to being left out of anything.

"You were such an ugly little boy," a voice hazed with cracks said from the darkness back by the orangery door. "I always knew you would come to no good end." I turned, but Mirnas would not release me. "Nanny?" "He had a monkey, you know," she said, making her way through the maze of potted trees, allowing none of the leaves to brush her clothing. "A vile, dirty creature. I warned his father, Lord Alderoy, that no good would come of allowing vermin in the nursery. In the end, I found them, beast and child, to be much of a kind." Bella looked up from her knees. "Oh, Nanny!" she said, and her voice was filled with longing. "It's been such a long time." "And, you," Nanny said, coming into the light of that other room. She held a cut-glass tumbler half-filled with clear liquid in one hand and gazed down at the beautiful Bella. "You had such promise, for a foreign child. As long as you kept your mouth closed, no one would have known you were not English. You might have made a very good marriage, had you employed your assets to their best advantage." Bella bit her lip and looked away. "What is it about this dreary place that calls children so strongly?" Nanny gazed about at the draperies and silk, the expensive carpets piled one upon the other. "I couldn't wait to escape, when I was your age, to live in the clean, bright sun of a world that knew seasons. You always have the best of everything in your own world, and yet, one after the other, you inevitably abandon it all to come *here!*" "How did you do it?" Mirnas gazed at her with a terrible hunger in his black eyes. "How did you cross the barrier? Tell us the secret!" "It's a little trick I learned," she said, "a subtle shading of the heart." She sipped from her glass. "But you have to possess a heart, and as was evident to all who knew you, even in the nursery, you have none." Mirnas dragged me back. "See to your puling infants, madam!" he said to Nanny over his shoulder. "You're not wanted here!"

"It's too late, isn't it?" She ran a hand over the orange tree leaves so that they rustled. "You're all quite, quite lost, aren't you?" "Not Phylly!" I said as Mirnas threw me onto the divan. "She can still go back!" "No!" Phylly cried. "I want to stay with you!" "And we must have our Phylly," Reg said with the quirk of one eyebrow. He raised the *strega* again. "What ever would we do without her?" I put a hand to my bruised arm. A few feet away, Phylly was stretching her hand out, strangely mesmerized, as the creature hissed. I felt the surge of my mark's hunger again, terrifying in its unquantifiableness. It was unnatural, wrong, tainting. The *strega's* neck feathers flared. I could see the glitter in its tiny black eyes and struggled up from the divan, reaching Reg's side in two quick strides. Bella watched from the floor as I seized the loathsome beast with both hands and broke its back with a strong twist. It writhed, lashing its tail, then went limp. "No!" Mirnas struck me to the carpet. My fingers dug into the purple and black pile as I struggled to rise. Only a stride away, I could see that Phylly's feet still stood on white tile bordered in blue and gold. The orangery faded, along with Nanny and my sister. I was left alone with Mirnas, Bella, Reg, and the *strega's* broken body.

Its feathers were falling away, two and three at a time, like autumn leaves from a tree. Its eyes dulled, and green ichor trailed from its open mouth. "Now—" said Bella brokenly. "Now—"

But she never completed the thought. Much later, though, I would understand she actually had. ? ? ? Sometimes, when I can bring myself to hum Nanny's wretched tune, I see the orangery and Phylly, wandering the avenues between the trees, her face stricken. Time is different there.

To her, I know we've only just gone, while here, the better part of a year has already passed. It's always night in this eerie land, though it possesses five moons of various sizes, and their combined light allows the vegetation, such as it is, to grow and bear. But I find it strange never to see the sun rise, never to feel its heat on my face or see the seasons turn. It's as though we are mired in some strange eternal twilight and never quite awake. We live in what can only be termed a palace, full of rich furniture and servants with an oddly feral cast to their features, and we're served exotic meals, strawberries and cream, truffles, along with other delicacies which do not exist in our world, though I have no idea who supports such extravagance. The flowers in these gardens are made of living flame, as I first thought, beautiful to gaze upon, heavy with fragrance, but strangely without warmth. If you touch them, they burn your skin with a cold that eats away at your heart. I have learnt to take great care in approaching them. In the dark skies overhead, bizarre elongated beasts fly, crying out. I think perhaps they are kin to that dreadful *strega*. And though many fruits grow here, tart as well as sweet, always I crave oranges, of which there are none. Reg, who has grown so tall and serious, walks the gardens with me occasionally, but seldom can be prevailed upon to speak. Having been here longer, he knows more about this place than I do, but seems to blame me for our exile. That brute Mirnas has gone for now, reportedly traveling the foreign reaches of this world in search of another *strega*, but there are many others in residence here, men and women, children, some from our world, some from others, all lured here at some point by some agency I have never met and cannot imagine. Nanny evidently numbered among them at one time, the product of a liaison between two residents, but then found her way into our world. I wonder where the *strega* marked her and how she managed to conceal it all those years. My own mark's hunger grows ever more savage, and it seems, like Mirnas, I am one of those who does not "bear it well," as Reg says. I believe it's the hunger for our former lives, which we can never again possess, unless we learn the fashion of Nanny's escape, and so far, she is the only one ever to do so. And for her, it was different. She was born here as we were not. For the rest of us, I am told if we surrender our desire to return to what we once were, the mark loses its ability to torment. I think, to some measure, in the years since Reg translated to this realm, he has achieved that state of mind. I fear I never will.