

"Cold" section 3  
Journey to a Desert Kingdom

The journey to the new country was long and arduous. Fiammarosa wrapped herself in a white hooded cloak, to reflect the sunlight away from her, and wore less and less inside it, as they rode

*Elementals*

south, through dark forests, and out on to grassy plains. They embarked, in a port where neither of them spoke the language, in the Sasanian boat that had been waiting for them, and sailed for weeks across the sea, in breezy weather, in a sudden storm, through two days and nights of glassy calm. Sasan enjoyed the voyage. He had a bucket with a glass bottom which he would let down into the green water to watch the creatures that floated and swam in the depth. He wore no more than a wrap round his narrow hips, and during the calm, he went overboard and swam around and under the boat, calling out to Fiammarosa, who sat swathed in white, wilting a little, on the deck, and answered breathlessly. He would bring glasses and buckets of the sea water on deck, and study the bubbles and ripples. He liked also to look at the sleek sea-surface in the moonlight, the gloss on the little swellings and subsidings, the tracks of phosphorescence. Fiammarosa was happier in the moonlight. It was cooler. She sat in a thin gown in the night air and smiled as her husband displayed his drawings and discoveries of translucency and reflection. He played his strange flute, and she

## *Cold*

listened, rapt. They sailed on. Every day was a little warmer. Every day the air was a little thicker, a little hotter.

When they came to the major port of Sasania, which was also its capital city, they were welcomed into the harbour by a flotilla of small boats bearing drummers and flautists, singers and cymbal-clashers. Fiammarosa nearly fell when her foot touched land; the stone of the harbour-steps was burning to the touch, and the sun was huge and glaring in a cobalt-blue sky with no clouds and no movement of air. She made a joke about the earth moving, after the movement of the waves, but the thought she had was that her temperate summers, with their bright flowers and birdsong, had no connection to this hot blue arch in which a few kites wheeled, slowly. The people had prepared a curtained litter for their delicate new queen, and so she was able to subside, panting, on to cushions, wondering if she would survive.

The palace was white and glistening, as though it was moulded from sugar. It had domes and towers, plain and blind and geometrically simple

## *Elementals*

and beautiful. It was designed to keep out the sun, and inside it was a geometric maze of cool corridors, tiled in coloured glass, lit only by narrow slits of windows, which were glazed in beautiful colours, garnet, emerald, sapphire, which cast bright flames of coloured light on the floors. It was a little like a beehive, and inside its central dome a woven lattice-work of coloured light was spun by tiny loopholes and slits in the surface, shifting and changing as the sun moved in the dark bright sky outside. Optimism returned to Fiammarosa when she saw these dark corridors, these dim spaces. Icewomen like bright light, bright cold light, off-white; and darkness and confinement oppress them. But the molten heat outside oppressed her more. And there was so much in the palace to delight her senses. There was fruit on glass dishes, pearly and iridescent, smoky amber, translucent rose and indigo. There were meditative flute-players dropping strings of sound all day into the still air from little stools under the loopholes on the turns of the stairs. There were wonderful white jugs of latticino work, with frivolous frilled lips, containing pomegranate juices or lemonade, or

### *Cold*

swaying dark wine. Her own apartment had a circular window of stained glass, a white rose, fold on fold, on a peacock-blue ground. Within the heavy doors hung curtains of tiny glass beads of every conceivable colour, shimmering and twinkling. Round the walls were candleholders, all different, a bronze glass chimney, an amethyst dish full of floating squat candles, a candelabra dripping with glass icicles. And her loom was there, ready for her, and a basket of wools in all the subtle shades she loved.

In the long days that followed, Fiammarosa found that her husband worked hard, and was no sedentary or sportive prince. Sasania was, he told her, a poor country. The people lived on fish which they caught in the sea, and vegetables irrigated in little plots from the river whose mouth had formed the harbour of the city. Beyond the city, and a few other towns on the coastal strip, Sasan told her, there was nothing but desert – he described dunes and oases, sandstorms and dancing mirages with the passion of a lover describing the woman he loved. Ah, the space of the bare sand, under the

### *Elementals*

sun, under the stars, said Sasan. The taste of dates, of water from deep cool wells. The brilliance of the shimmering unreal cities in the distance, which had given him many ideas for cityscapes and fantastic palaces of glass. Fiammarosa stretched her imagination to conceive what he was describing, and could not. She connected the distant shimmering to her imaginations of lost glaciers and untrodden snowfields. Sasan explained, enthusiastically (they were talking more easily now, though still like two tentative children, not the man and woman whose bodies tangled and fought at night) – Sasan explained the connection of the desert with the glass, which Sasania despatched in trading ships and caravans to the corners of the known world. Glass, Sasan said, was made of the things which they had in abundance – the sand of the desert, three parts, lime, and soda which they made from the wracks, or seaweeds, which clung to the rocks round their coasts. The most difficult, the most precious part, he said, was the wood, which was needed both for the furnaces and for potash. The coastal woods of the country all belonged to the King, and were cared for by rangers. Glass,

## *Cold*

according to legend, had been found by the first Prince Sasan, who had been no more than an itinerant merchant with a camel train, and had found some lumps and slivers of shining stuff in the cinders of his fire on the seashore. And yet another Sasan had discovered how to blow the molten glass into transparent bottles and bowls, and yet another had discovered how to fuse different colours onto each other. In our country, Sasan said to his wife, princes are glassmakers and glassmakers are princes, and the line of artists runs true in the line of kings.

Every day he brought back from his dark work-room gifts for his bride. He brought crystal balls full of the fused scraps of coloured canes left over from his day's lamp-work. Once, Fiammarosa ventured to the mouth of the cavern where he worked, and peered in. Men stripped to their waists and pouring sweat were feeding the great furnaces, or bending over hot lamps, working on tiny scraps of molten glass with magnifying glasses and sharp tweezers. Others were turning the sullen, cooling red glass with large metal pincers on clattering

## *Elementals*

wheels, and one had a long tube raised to his mouth like a trumpet of doom, blowing his breath into the flaming, molten gob at the end of it which flared and smoked, orange and scarlet, and swelled and swelled. Its hot liquid bursting put the pale princess in mind of the ferocity of her love-making and she opened her mouth, in pleasure and pain, to take in such a blast of hot, sparking wind, that she fell back, and could barely stagger to her room. After that, she spent the long hot days lying on her bed, breathing slowly. Sasan came in the cool of the evening; she took pleasure, then, in food, candle-flames, transparency and shadows. Then they made love. She put it to herself that she was delighting in extremity; that she was living a life pared down to extreme sensations. Dying is an ancient metaphor for the bliss of love, and Fiammarosa died a little, daily. But she was also dying in cold fact. Or in warm fact, to be more precise. She thought she was learning to live for love and beauty, through the power of the will. She was to find that in the end these things are subject to the weather – the weather in the world, and the tourbillons and sluggish meanders of the

blood and lymph under the skin.

There was another, growing reason for the sickness against which she threw all her forces. When she understood this, she had a moment of despair and wrote to Hugh, begging him to reconsider his decision. I am not well, she wrote, and the days, as you knew they would be, are long and hot, and I am driven by necessity to languish in inactivity in the dark. I believe I am with child, dear Hugh, and am afraid, in this strange place amongst these strange people, however kind and loving they are. I need your cool head, your wisdom; I need our conversations about history and science. I am *not unhappy*, but I am not well, and I need your counsel, your familiar voice, your good sense. You foresaw that it would be hard – the heat, I mean, the merciless sun, and the confinement which is my only alternative. Could you, best of friends, at least come on a visit?

She despatched this letter, along with her regular letter to her parents, and almost at once regretted it, at least partly. It was a sign of weakness, an appeal for help she should not need. It was as though, by writing down her moment of

weakness and discontent, she had made it into a thing, unavoidable. She felt herself becoming weaker and fought against a more and more powerful demon of discontent. Sasan was making her a series of delicate latticino vases. The first was pencil-slender, and took one rose. It was white. The next was cloudy, tinged with pink, and curved slightly outwards. The third was pinker and rounder, the fourth blushed rosy and had a fine blown bowl beneath its narrow neck. When the series of nine was completed, cherry-pink, rose-red, clear-red, deep crimson and almost black with a fiery heart, he arranged them on the table in front of her, and she saw that they were women, each more proudly swollen, with delicate white arms. She smiled, and kissed him, and ignored the fiery choking in her throat.

The next day a letter came from Hugh. It had crossed with her own – she could by no means yet expect an answer. It began with the hope that she would, far away as she was, share his joy, at least in spirit. He had married Hortense, the chamberlain's daughter, and was living in a state of comfort and contentment he had never imagined or hoped for.

## *Cold*

There followed, in a riddling form, the only love-letter Fiammarosa had ever had from Hugh. I cannot, he said, hope to live at the extremes of experience, as you can. No one who has ever seen you dance on the untrodden snow, or gather ice-flowers from bare branches, will ever be entirely able to forget this perfect beauty and live with what is pleasant and daily. I see now, said Hugh, that extreme desires extreme, and that beings of pure fire and pure ice may know delights we ordinary mortals must glimpse and forgo. I cannot live in any of your worlds, Princess, and I am happy in my new house, with my pretty woman, who loves me, and my good chair and sprouting garden. But I shall never be *quite* contented, Princess, because I saw you dance in the snow, and the sight took away the possibility of my settling into this life. Be happy in your way, at the furthest edge, and remember, when you can, Hugh, who would be quite happy in his – if he had never seen you.

Fiammarosa wept over this letter. She thought he would not have written so, if it was not meant to be his last letter. She thought, her own letter would cause him pain, and possibly cause him to despise

## *Elementals*

her, that she could so easily and peremptorily summon him, when things were hard. And then she began to weep, because he was not there, and would not come, and she was alone and sick in a strange land, where even the cool air in the dark corridors was warm enough to melt her a little, like a caress given to a snow figure. When she had wept some time, she stood up, and began to walk somewhat drunkenly through the long halls and out across a courtyard full of bright, dazzling air in which the heat currents could be seen to boil up and weave their sinuous way down, and up again, like dry fountains. She went slowly and bravely, straight across, not seeking the shadow of the walls, and went into the huge, echoing, cave-like place where Sasan and his men were at work. Dimly, dazzled, she saw the half-naked men, the spinning cocoons, like blazing tulips, on the end of the pontils, the iron tweezers. Sasan was sitting at a bench, his dark face illuminated by the red-hot glow from a still-molten sphere of glass he was smoothing and turning. Beside him, another sphere was turning brown, like a dying leaf. One hand to her belly, Fiammarosa advanced into the

### *Cold*

heat and darkness. As she reached Sasan, one of the men, his arms and shoulders running with sweat, his brow dripping, swung open the door of the furnace. Fiammarosa had time to see shelves of forms, red and gold, transparent and burning, before the great sun-like rose of heat and light hit her, and she saw darkness and felt dreadful pain. She was melting, she thought in confusion, as she fell, slowly, slowly, bending and crumpling in the blast, becoming hot and liquid, a white scrap, moaning in a sea of red blood, lit by flames. Sasan was at her side in an instant, his sweat and tears dripping on to the white, cold little face. Before she lost consciousness Fiammarosa heard his small voice, in her head. 'There will be another child, one who would never otherwise have lived; you must think of *that* child.' And then, all was black. There was even an illusion of cold, of shivering.

After the loss of the child, Fiammarosa was ill for a long time. Women covered her brow with cloths soaked in ice-water, changing them assiduously. She lay in the cool and the dark, drifting in and out of a minimal life. Sasan was there, often, sitting

### *Elementals*

silently by her bed. Once, she saw him packing the nine glasses he had made for her in wood-shavings. With care, she recovered, at least enough to become much as she had been in her early days as a girl in her own country, milky, limp and listless. She rose very late, and sat in her chamber, sipping juice, and making no move to weave, or to read, or to write. After some months, she began to think she had lost her husband's love. He did not come to her bedroom, ever again, after the bloody happening in the furnace-room. He did not speak of this, or explain it, and she could not. She felt she had become a milk-jelly, a blancmange, a Form of a woman, tasteless and unappetising. Because of her metabolism, grief made her fleshier and slower. She wept over the plump rolls of creamy fat around her eyelids, over the bland expanse of her cheeks. Sasan went away on long journeys, and did not say where he was going, or when he would return. She could not write to Hugh, and could not confide in her dark, beautiful attendants. She turned her white face to the dark blue wall, wrapped her soft arms round her body, and wished to die.

Sasan returned suddenly from one of his journeys. It was autumn, or would have been, if there had been any other season than immutable high summer in that land. He came to his wife, and told her to make ready for a journey. They were going to make a journey together, to the interior of his country, he told her, across the desert. Fiammarosa stirred a little in her lethargy.

'I am an icewoman, Sasan,' she said, flatly. 'I cannot survive a journey in the desert.'

'We will travel by night,' he replied. 'We will make shelters for you, in the heat of the day. You will be pleasantly surprised, I trust. Deserts are cold at night. I think you may find it tolerable.'

So they set out, one evening, from the gate of the walled city, as the first star rose in the velvet blue sky. They travelled in a long train of camels and horses. Fiammarosa set out in a litter, slung between mules. As the night deepened, and the fields and the sparse woodlands were left behind, she snuffed a rush of cool air, very pure, coming in from stone and sand, where there was no life, no humidity, no decay. Something lost stirred in her. Sasan rode past, and looked in on her. He told her

that they were coming to the dunes, and beyond the first dunes was the true desert. Fiammarosa said she felt well enough to ride beside him, if she might. But he said, not yet, and rode away, in a cloud of dust, white in the moonlight.

And so began a long journey, a journey that took weeks, always by night, under a moon that grew from a pared crescent to a huge silver globe as they travelled. The days were terrible, although Fiammarosa was sheltered by ingenious tents, fanned by servants, cooled with precious water. The nights were clear, empty, and cold. After the first days, Sasan would come for her at dusk, and help her on to a horse, riding beside her, wrapped in a great camel-hair cloak. Fiammarosa shed her layers of protective veiling and rode in a pair of wide white trousers and a flowing shift, feeling the delicious cold run over her skin, bringing it to life, bringing power. She did not ask where they were going. Sasan would tell her when and if he chose to tell her. She did not even wonder why he still did not come to her bed, for the heat of the day made everything, beyond mere survival, impossible. But he spoke to her of the hot desert, of how it was his



### *Cold*

place. These are the things I am made of, he said, grains of burning sand, and breath of air, and the blaze of light. Like glass. Only here do we see with such clarity. Fiammarosa stared out, sometimes, at the sand as it shimmered in the molten sunlight, and at her husband standing there in the pure heat and emptiness, bathing himself in it. Sometimes, when she looked, there were mirages. Sand and stones appeared to be great lagoons of clear water, great rivers of ice with ice-floes, great forests of conifers. They could have lived together happily, she reflected, by day and night, in these vanishing frozen palaces shining in the hot desert, which became more and more liquid and vanished in strips. But the mirages came and went, and Sasan stood, staring intently at hot emptiness, and Fiammarosa breathed the night air in the cooling sand and plains.

Sometimes, on the horizon, through the rippling glassy air, Fiammarosa saw a mirage which resembled a series of mountain peaks, crowned with white streaks of snow, or feathers of cloud. As they progressed, this vision became more and more steady, less and less shimmering and

### *Elementals*

dissolving. She understood that the mountains were solid, and that their caravan was moving towards them. Those, said Sasan, when she asked, are the Mountains of the Moon. My country has a flat coast, a vast space of desert, and a mountain range which forms the limit of the kingdom. They are barren, inhospitable mountains; not much lives up there; a few eagles, a few rabbits, a kind of ptarmigan. In the past, we were forbidden to go there. It was thought the mountains were the homes of demons. But I have travelled there, many times. He did not say why he was taking Fiammarosa there, and she did not ask.

They came to the foothills, which were all loose scree, and stunted thorn trees. There was a winding narrow path, almost cut into the hills, and they climbed up, and up, partly by day now, for the beasts of burden needed to see their way. Fiammarosa stared upwards with parted lips at the snow on the distant peaks beyond them, as her flesh clung to her damp clothes in the heat. And then suddenly, round a rock, came the entrance to a wide tunnel in the mountainside. They lit torches and lanterns, and went in. Behind them the

*Cold*

daylight diminished to a great O and then to a pinprick. It was cooler inside the stone, but not comfortable, for it was airless, and the sense of the weight of the stone above was oppressive. They were travelling inwards and upwards, inwards and upwards, trudging steadily, breathing quietly. And they came, in time, to a great timbered door, on massive hinges. And Sasan put his mouth to a hole beside the keyhole, and blew softly, and everyone could hear a clear musical note, echoed and echoed again, tossed from bell to bell of some unseen carillon. Then the door swung open, lightly and easily, and they went into a place like nowhere Fiammarosa had ever seen.

It was a palace built of glass in the heart of the mountain. They were in a forest of tall glass tubes with branching arms, arranged in colonnades, thickets, circular balustrades. There was a delicate sound in the air, of glass bells, tubular bells, distant waterfalls, or so it seemed. All the glass pillars were hollow, and were filled with columns of liquid – wine-coloured, sapphire, amber, emerald and quicksilver. If you touched the finer ones, the liquid shot up, and then steadied. Other columns

*Elementals*

held floating glass bubbles, in water, rising and falling, each with a golden numbered weight hanging from its balloon. In the dark antechambers, fantastic candles flowered in glass buds, or shimmered behind shades of figured glass set on ledges and crevices. As they moved onwards through the glass stems, all infinitesimally in motion, they came to a very high chamber miraculously lit by daylight through clear glass in a high funnelled window, far, far above their heads. Here, too, the strange pipes rose upwards, some of them formed like rose bushes, some like carved pillars, some fantastically twined with glass grapes on glass vines. And in this room, there were real waterfalls, sheets of cold water dropping over great slabs of glass, like ice-floes, into glassy pools where it ran away into hidden channels, water falling in sheer fine spray from the rock itself into a huge glass basin, midnight-blue and full of dancing cobalt lights, with a rainbow fountain rising to meet the dancing, descending mare's-tail. All the miracles of invention that glittered and glimmered and trembled could not be taken in at one glance. But Fiammarosa took in one thing. The air was cold.

## *Cold*

By water, by stone, by ice from the mountain top, the air had been chilled to a temperature in which her icewoman's blood stirred to life and her eyes shone.

Sasan showed her further miracles. He showed her her bedchamber, cut into the rock, with its own high porthole window, shaped like a many-coloured rose and with real snow resting on it, far above, so that the light was grainy. Her bed was surrounded by curtains of spun glass, with white birds, snow birds, snowflowers and snow-crystals woven into them. She had her own cooling waterfall, with a controlling gate, to make it greater or smaller, and her own forest of glass trees, with their visible phloem rising and falling. Sasan explained to her the uses of these beautiful inventions, which measured, he said, the weight, the heat, the changes of the ocean of elementary air in which they moved. The rising and falling glass bubbles, each filled to a different weight, measured the heat of the column of water that supported them. The quicksilver columns, in the fine tubes within tubes, were made by immersing the end of the tube in a vessel of mercury, and stopping it with a finger, and then

## *Elementals*

letting the column of quicksilver find its level, at which point the weight of the air could be read off the height of the column in the tube. And this column, he said, varied, with the vapours, the winds, the clouds in the outer atmosphere, with the height above the sea, or the depth of the cavern. You may measure such things also with alcohol, which can be coloured for effect. Fiammarosa had never seen him so animated, nor heard him speak so long. He showed her yet another instrument, which measured the wetness of the incumbent air with the beard of an oat or, in other cases, with a stretched hair. And he had made a system of vents and pulleys, channels and pipes, taps and cisterns, which brought the mountain snow and the deep mountain springs in greater and lesser force into the place, as the barometers and thermometers and hygrometers indicated a need to adjust the air and the temperature. With all these devices, Sasan said, he had made an artificial world, in which he hoped his wife could live, and could breathe, and could be herself, for he could neither bear to keep her in the hot sunny city, nor could he bear to lose her. And Fiammarosa embraced him amongst the sighing

### *Cold*

spun glass and the whispering water. She could be happy, she said, in all this practical beauty. But what would they live on? How could they survive, on glass, and stone, and water? And Sasan laughed, and took her by the hand, and showed her great chambers in the rock where all sorts of plants were growing, under windows which had been cut to let in the sun, and glazed to adjust his warmth, and where runnels of water ran between fruit trees and seedlings, pumpkin plants and herbs. There was even a cave for a flock of goats, hardy and silky, who went out to graze on the meagre pastures and came in at night. He himself must come and go, Sasan said, for he had his work, and his land to look to. But she would be safe here, she could breathe, she could live in her own way, or almost, he said, looking anxiously at her. And she assured him that she would be more than happy there. 'We can make air, water, light, into something both of us can live in,' said Sasan. 'All I know, and some things I have had to invent, has gone into building this place for you.'

But the best was to come. When it was night, and the whole place was sleeping, with its cold air

### *Elementals*

currents moving lazily between the glass stems, Sasan came to Fiammarosa's room, carrying a lamp, and a narrow package, and said, 'Come with me.' So she followed him, and he led her to a rocky stairway that went up, and round, and up, and round, until it opened on the side of the mountain itself, above the snow-line. Fiammarosa stepped out under a black velvet sky, full of burning cold silver stars, like globes of mercury, on to a field of untouched snow, such as she had never thought to see again. And she took off her slippers and stepped out on to the sparkling crust, feeling the delicious crackle beneath her toes, the soft sinking, the voluptuous cold. Sasan opened his packet, which contained the strange flute he had played when he wooed her. He looked at his wife, and began to play, a lilting, swaying tune that ran away over the snowfields and whispered into the edges of silence. And Fiammarosa took off her dress, and her shawls and her petticoat, stood naked in the snow, shook out her pale hair and began to dance. As she danced, a whirling white shape, her skin of ice-crystals, that she had believed she would never feel again, began to form along her

*Cold*

veins, over her breasts, humming round her navel. She was lissom and sparkling, she was cold to the bone and full of life. The moon glossed the snow with gold and silver. When, finally, Sasan stopped playing, the icewoman darted over to him, laughing with delight, and discovered that his lips and fingers were blue with cold; he had stopped because he could play no more. So she rubbed his hands with her cold hands, and kissed his mouth with her cold lips, and with friction and passion brought his blood back to some movement. They went back to the bedchamber with the spun-glass curtains, and opened and closed a few channels and conduits, and lay down to make love in a mixture of currents of air, first warm, then cooling, which brought both of them to life.

In a year, or so, twin children were born, a dark boy, who resembled his mother at birth, and became, like her, pale and golden, and a pale, flower-like girl, whose first days were white and hairless, but who grew a mane of dark hair like her father's and had a glass-blower's, flute-player's mouth. And if Fiammarosa was sometimes lonely in her glass palace, and sometimes wished both

*Elementals*

that Sasan would come more often, and that she could roam amongst fjords and ice-fells, this was not unusual, for no one has everything she can desire. But she was resourceful and hopeful, and made a study of the vegetation of the Sasanian snow-line, and a further study of which plants could thrive in mountain air under glass windows, and corresponded – at long intervals – with authorities all over the world on these matters. Her greatest discovery was a sweet blueberry, that grew in the snow, but in the glass garden became twice the size, and almost as delicate in flavour.

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