

PALACE

We were brought by stealth, through spiked gates and sunken courtyards, to the queen's favorite palace. He was a grandmaster whose head she had once saved from the block, by wrapping her brocade shawl around the executioner's ax. The ruse had not been entirely successful, but by degrees she had restored the dead man to health, feeding him a mash of basil leaves while the harem slaves dressed his wounds in poultices.

She has given him a sinecure now—as she does to keep him busy every summer, when she must repaint his head in turmeric and kohl. He maps the treacherous dunelands that shift ground behind the palace; they whisper as they shift, like courtiers, through the afternoons while the guardsmen doze beneath their canopies.

The queen thinks this will occupy her favorite through the day; in the evenings, he forgets the burden of air that his shoulders carry, when he attends the symposium of the palace librarians, who have gone blind through their minute scrutiny of the palmleaf manuscripts that have come down to them in an undeciphered script. Now they no longer read, but measure the hours in delicate quanta of opium. The poppy is their only talisman against a custom that obliges them to wear the spectacles that were the insignia of their office.

They have mumbled some chants over and over for forty years, trying to recall the one spell that works the rain. They fidget with the polished betel nuts secreted in their cummerbunds. Their milkstone eyes crinkle from habit. They leave nothing to chance, cling to a mnemonic belief in miracles.

That is all we know of what happens on the terrace where the librarians huddle around a fire in the icy desert darkness, though mute gondoliers are reported to sweep it with night-long oars. The gardeners never talk about the fallen waves that they shear away in the mornings.

These routines have never been breached, so that the grandmaster cannot believe it when rasping thunder interrupts, for the first time in forty years, the lull and drone of the recitation. For the first time, those eunuch mouths taste ant-hill dust on their rolled praises of lightning. And fall open. In the moment that they fall open, a peacock cries out and is heard for miles, even in mud-baked hamlets where no one knows that the king has been dead forty years, and they still worship him in effigy.