



Oasis

In a land where the rainy season lasts four moons and drought rules nine, the tiny paradise possesses both abundant water and fertile soil. Cradled by rugged mountains to the west and north and east, with a vast desert lapping her southern fringe, the oasis and her six hundred citizens are loosely allied to the city of Tropolis, a hundred miles to the north.

A wall of stone twenty-feet-high and four-feet-thick encloses the oasis entirely, save for a breach in the containment at the southeast corner where waters of the marsh flow into the desert. This great wall was completed fifty years ago in the aftermath of a terrible war; and though the ramparts have yet to be tested by any foe, the people of the oasis are glad for the illusion of security and the very real barrier the wall provides against the fierce desert winds.

Nearly all the land of the oasis—three square miles—is cultivated. Only the seventy-acre marsh and four massive granite outcroppings are kept free of human interference for the benefit of insects and rodents and tortoises and birds.



Conjurer

Anza the conjurer is fifty-nine, handsome and lean, a masterful guitarist, his brown hair turning gray. He is a widower and lives alone, his daughters Serena and Luno having left the oasis five years ago to seek their fortunes as singers in Tropolis. Luno has a child named Desai, a boy much loved by his grandfather. Serena has yet to give birth.

Anza's commodious house overlooks his three acres of ground. One acre is wild, a haven for lizards and snakes and bees. One acre is given to grapes that Anza trades to Tul for the making of wine. And one acre is given to fruit and nut trees—apricots, apples, almonds, walnuts, and plums—and to a garden of vegetables and flowers and amaranth. Anza also keeps quail and rabbits for eggs and meat and pelts.

The conjurer's supreme wish is for Serena, Luno, and Desai to come live with him in the oasis.



Figs

One morning in the first days of the dry time, old man Chesha, short and stout and stiff-legged, mounts his skinny donkey and rides from his home at the northern end of the oasis to visit Anza in the south. Chesha intends to hire the conjuror to cure his fig trees of an invisible malady. To pay for the conjuring, he will give Anza three ounces of black tea, a rare and valuable offering. Chesha is renowned for his stinginess. Thus giving Anza three ounces of black tea will be a most painful sacrifice for the old miser.

“Stone and lumber,” mutters Chesha, frowning at Anza’s house of oak and brick. “They say his house stays cool on the hottest days, while my hovel of twigs cooks me cruelly. I might as well have no house at all. See how rich he grows from conjuring. I work from morning until night to make ends meet, while he waves his hand and gifts rain down on him.”

A black cat sits in a patch of sunlight on Anza’s threshold,

gazing curiously at the old man on the donkey.

“Anza,” shouts Chesha, disdainful of those who keep pets. “I have tea for you, but I will only pay if...”

“Welcome, my friend,” says Anza, appearing in his doorway. “What brings you so far?”

“I think you know,” says Chesha, fearing to look at the conjuror. “My fig trees. The fruit is late. Very late. You knew I was coming, didn’t you?”

“I’m a conjuror,” says Anza, smiling at the old man. “Not a seer.”

“Will you conjure for me?” asks Chesha, whimpering. “If my trees won’t fruit I’m ruined.”

“I will come at dusk,” says Anza, gazing at the cloudless sky. “But before I arrive, you must water your orchard and leave a cup of wine under each of the trees.”

“Seventeen cups?” cries Chesha. “Are you mad? I am not rich. I live in a hovel. I work from morning until night to make...”

“A cup of wine for each tree,” says Anza, closing his eyes. “And water them deeply else the cure will fail.”



Chesha rides home in a fury, whipping his donkey with a bamboo stick. “Seventeen cups. Seventeen! I have but two cups in my house. Where am I to get fifteen more cups in which to pour the wine? I have the wine, but it’s meant for me, not to be wasted on trees.”

The truth, however, trumps the old man’s outrage, for Chesha is the second wealthiest citizen of the oasis, a notorious glutton, and a guzzler of three and four bottles of wine every day—his fortune derived from the sale of his fabulous figs. No other fig trees in the oasis bear so heavily or produce such delicious fruit, though Chesha has never watered or fed them. And no one knows how old his trees are, for none among the

living was alive when the magnificent trees were planted.

Chesha inherited his house and five acres from his Aunt Bysar when he was thirty, a bequest that made him rich beyond his wildest imaginings. He never married, and no one, save for Anza, calls him friend. His figs bring buyers from near and far. Thus his days are filled with bargaining and selling and counting his gains, so he is rarely lonely.

But now the fruit is late emerging, very late, and for the first time in his life Chesha faces the prospect of poverty. So the old miser purchases fifteen clay cups from Uma the potter and irrigates his orchard, though it pains him to spend water he might otherwise sell to his neighbors.

When at last Chesha has placed a cup of wine near each of his trees, he shakes his gnarly fist at the golden horizon and grumbles, "There. I have done what the conjuror demanded. Now he must work his magic and bring me greater gains than ever before."



Tambourines and drums announce the coming of Anza at the head of a procession of seventeen people.

"What is this?" splutters Chesha, sneering at the conjuror. "I hired you, Anza. Not these others. This is no wedding. My trees are dying."

"I have come to conjure," says Anza, bowing to the fig trees. "These good people are my helpers, one for each of your trees."

And the people go into the orchard and take up the cups.

"What are they doing?" cries Chesha, stamping his feet. "How dare they drink my wine?"

Anza raises his hand to silence the old man. "If my conjuring is to succeed, your trees must all drink in the same moment."

"If these people pour my wine into the ground and my trees do not fruit," says Chesha, glowering at Anza, "I will give you nothing."

“And if the fruit emerges?” asks Anza, smiling slyly. “Then what will you give?”

“Three ounces of black tea,” says Chesha, gritting his teeth. “We bargained so this morning. You agreed to come for that price and that is what you will get, but only if...”

“I agreed to come,” says Anza, nodding slowly. “But I will require more than three ounces of tea to ease the malady of these trees.”

“How much?” cries Chesha, wringing his hands. “I am a poor man. Without my figs, I will starve.”

“But if your trees give forth their bounty, you will be rich. So I ask you, my friend, to give one of every four of your figs to these people who are not so fortunate as you to own land, and and give them a quarter of your harvest for the rest of your life.”

“These people?” says Chesha, glancing furtively at the men and women. “Who are they that I should give them my figs?”

“Your brothers and sisters,” says Anza, raising his hands to the sky. “Now I will conjure. Are we agreed on the price?”

“Brothers and sisters? They lie! I have no brothers or sisters. I...”

“Then we will go,” says Anza, beckoning to his helpers. “We will leave you to your cups of wine and your barren trees.”

“Wait!” cries Chesha, terrified. “I agree. One of every four figs to these people. For the rest of my life. Now conjure and save my trees.”

Anza gestures for his helpers to give the wine to the trees, and as the precious liquid seeps into the ground, Anza falls to his knees and kisses the ground.

Now the trees begin to shiver and rattle as if swept by a powerful wind, and thousands of tiny green orbs emerge on the branches, and the air grows sweet with the scent of divinity.

Anza weeps convulsively, for he has conjured the terrible

sorrow of the ancient trees, abused by Chesha for fifty years, though they never failed to give him their fruit.