

Commerce

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She was a new girl. I had seen her sometimes, strolling through the market, taking her time, enjoying the booths and the people. I never saw her actually purchase anything but she always had a smile for those trying to get a sale out of her, before gently refusing and moving on. My poor booth never drew her attention until today when she stopped in front of me, offering an impish smile of greeting to my well worn whiskery face. My display is tattered and torn, like the faded posters of food you see in Chinatown, in the windows of tired sushi restaurants. My wares are not shiny and useless like those of most, though the value of my goods varies with each customer. I sell soft diamonds that are brilliant and rare, that warm quickly to a lover's touch, not like those cold stones in fashion today. (She holds these for a short time and I note her wistful and naughty smile is drawing me to her like the spring flowering draws honey bees.) A butterfly sculpture with wings made from memories of chocolate; delicate and smooth, they melt if you look at them too long. (She giggles at me, a sound that strokes my soul, and asks me if the memories are mine? "Of course they are mine," I reply, trying to sound gruff, "Whose else would they be?") A handwritten notebook from an unknown author, a man who knew Death and tried to tell Death's secrets with words one is better off not knowing. (I move this one into my well worn satchel before it can fully catch her interest.) A gilt frame without a picture that glows golden when one weeps, then fills itself with images of dear loved ones from one's past. (She keeps returning to this, asking me question after question concerning the manufacturer.) A set of mason jars with small pieces of clouds and blue skies inside each one, from a bright summer's day when I collected them walking with my grandmother. ("Delightful," she says, her eyes alight with wonder, "but you should not consider parting with these.") One of my best sellers; a photograph of the girl or boy you never got to meet in your past, the one who visited your adolescent dreams and stirred your heart with tender first yearnings. (This she immediately set aside for purchase.) A child's jack-in-the-box with a happy clown that pops out, always and ever for the very first time, and thus is constantly brand new to you. (A giggle and a grin from that softly sensuous mouth, but alas, no sale ensues.) Two thin books written by elves I acquired during a long ago adventure in the Wood. "Good luck understanding the elves," I tell her. ("Oh, I don't believe in elves," she says, and the books grow suddenly smaller in size.) A darkly opaque piece of a volcano whose heart is red with earthly anger, dark black smoke curling inside and hot ash that singes your pockets. ("Why would I want that?" she asks me with a suddenly serious face, her rosy lips pouting.) Here is a small jewelry box that when

opened slowly releases the sounds of bullfrogs and crickets from a quiet summer night. (Another delightful smile, but alas, she passes this one by, too.) One of my favorite items; from India I think, a child's kaleidoscope that shows the universe being born. ("Very entertaining," she said after sampling, "but it is awfully heavy for such a small tube.") A nice sketching of the tree that grows out of the ocean that my eldest wife drew while on a visit to the salty seaside bluff that overlooks the tree's impossible perch. ("Actually, that one I won't sell, for it livens my display," I tell her as she studies it.) She finally decides on her purchases and asks for my price. "We must first determine the currency to use," I say. So we barter and banter and in the end I know what I want of her. I ask for a kiss from her bright red lips, a buss that will never end, a fair price I think. "Too high a price!" she protests, and bluebell eyes twinkle in the light of her merriment. I settle for the conjured soft sound of her sleeping, the quilted warm smell of her body, for application when winter winds blow and the lonely snow is deep and drifting outside my chilly country cabin. I also negotiate a promise that when she returns to market she will visit and share with me oversized cups of heated herbal tea that never gets tepid. I believe I got the better of her in the bargaining for she visits the market often now. Part II Day after day she returns to my booth, her smile demure and lighting up this dreary marketplace with her sweetness. Each day she asks of me questions on my craft. Each day I try to explain that which cannot be taught. "I do not know why things work here the way they do," I say, "Any more than I know why we waken, day after day, after all our sleeps but one." "Wishful thinking" is the essence of it to me, I reveal to her; a desired result seen in the back of one's mind that is brought forth from nothingness to hereabouts. No mechanism that I can decipher clicks the parts into place, No assembly to it that I can see; it simply goes from wasn't here, to then it is. Her eyes of wondrous blue watch me try to explain it, with slightly different words on different days. My hands weave the air while weaving my words, hoping that somehow she completes her journey to comprehension. By way of an example I think to add music to my tattered booth, music that flows from within a visitor depending on their mood. She watches closely as I bring the music from within her, a softly sexy melody, and before she leaves she wears a smile as if she knows a secret thing. The next day she fails to come to market, and the next, and the next, and I note that a grey pallor colors these days though the sun shines still. Today she returns and the smile on her challenges the sun for shining. Her gait coltish and prancing as she totes a worn beach bag under a protective arm. Long legs akimbo at my booth she produces her works one at a time, offering them for my perusal with a laugh and a twinkle in each blue bonnet eye. The first is a sand dollar, larger than the palm of my hand, with a perfect rendition of the tree that grows in the ocean carved onto one side. I suspect from the craftsmanship that this is the work of elves, or of fairy folk, but I stay silent on it. "It's beautiful," says I, hiding from her a sadness in my voice, for even though this etching demonstrates craft and precision, it is art, after all, and not magic. "Yes," she says, "Your tales of the tree sparked in me the desire to see it for myself, and I give you this gift for the tales you've told me and the friendship that we share." Something in me withers at the mention of the word, "friendship", but I remind myself of our obvious difference in age and the miles I have trod, and curse myself for being a damned fool. "But there's more," she laughs, and opens her bag, searching through a fine mess of lion's paws, star fish, shells of nautilus and seaweed-encased

mother-of-pearl helmets of subtle colorings and textures. A fighting conch of great length is produced, and she holds it to my ear; the sound of children's laughter on a windy wave-tossed beach that tickles my heart to hear it. My face beams at her, for this one does have a bit of the mystical trick to it, and the look on her face is that of a proud child first learning to spell. "And another, this one is only for your ears," she whispers, and produces a larger conch of pure pale alabaster, with reddened ruby lips that seem to pout. I hold it to my ear and hear the vague sound of the sea, nothing else, and she waits for the puzzled look to cross my face before she speaks. "Think of me and concentrate, old goat. I know you missed me while I was gone, deep inside me I felt you missing me, close your eyes and remember those thoughts of me while I was gone." I obey her, for how can I not, and the shell makes a soft noise, feminine, that breathes slowly and then more rapid and rhythmic; enraptured sighs that become heavy and plaintive with longing and need. I keep my eyes closed and listen to this most intimate of songs that a lively young woman sings, that song of want and need and the foreshadowing of the eventual release to pleasure. There's no doubting now the gift she has received, and the magic she possesses. My eyes open and sparkle with the same joy I see beam from her face, and she adopts a posture seen often in the marketplace, a posture of challenge and confidence. "Now then," she purrs, "let us sit for a while and barter, old goat...."