

# The Cinder Sweeper

**I**n the lower quarter of the city,  
where ash drifted like gray snow,  
stood the Hall of Glassblowers.

She had never expected to matter there.

She was steady.  
That was the word the Masters used.

She mended bent tongs,  
hauled coal,  
and swept cinders  
while others shaped molten glass  
into vaulted forms  
and singing vessels.

When the kiln burst,  
she was alone in the east chamber.

It began as a tremor.  
Then a crack like frost splitting wood.  
Then heat — sudden and lunging — pouring from the side.

The chamber filled with fire.  
Masters shouted.  
Sparks leapt into rafters.  
The flue howled.

She did not think.

Later she would try to remember  
what had gone through her mind.

But in the moment there was no thinking —  
only doing.

The fire folded and unfurled.  
It reached and recoiled.

She saw — not with her eyes alone —  
where the air bent wrong.

She seized a pole  
and struck a support beam.

Hard.  
Once.  
Twice.

The beam gave way.  
A panel fell.  
Air rushed in from the side  
instead of the front.

The flame turned inward.

Sand flew.  
Wet cloth smothered.  
The roar collapsed into smoke.

Silence settled.

She stood breathing  
as if she had run for miles.

Only then  
did her hands begin to shake.

The Masters stared.

“She moved as if she knew the kiln’s bones,”  
one said later.

It took three days  
for the smoke to clear  
and to complete the repairs.

The Hall reopened.  
Work resumed.

She returned  
to sweeping cinders.

At first she waited  
for something to change.

A summons.  
A new instruction.

None came.

One Master watched her more closely.  
Another avoided her gaze.

She tried once  
to call back the silence.

She stood before a training flame  
and willed herself  
into that widening.

Nothing.

Yet the old coat of smallness  
would not hang properly  
on her shoulders.

When a younger apprentice  
fumbled a gather,  
she corrected him without hesitation.

The firmness of her voice  
surprised them both.

When a Master spoke sharply,  
she did not shrink —  
the words passed through her.

She did not become bold.

She became —  
uncontained.

Weeks later,  
a smaller blaze flared  
in the annealing oven.

Smoke curled.  
Straw smoldered.

All eyes turned to her.

For a heartbeat,  
something widened —  
the edge of that same silence —  
and then it closed.

She moved competently —  
no more than that.

She damped the straw.  
Opened the vent.  
Called for water.

The fire died without drama.

A few faces fell.

That night she walked  
along the canal  
where ash congealed  
in the reeds.

The city felt narrower than before.

She missed, unexpectedly,  
the simplicity of being small.

Now she lived  
with the knowledge  
that there was a depth in her  
she could neither name nor command.

She did not know  
whether it would open again.

She only knew  
she could not return  
to the shape she had been.

In the days that followed,  
she noticed other things.

A Master paused  
before issuing an order,  
as if listening inward.

A brash apprentice  
closed his eyes  
before relighting a flame.

The Hall of Glassblowers,  
once simple in her mind,  
now seemed layered —

as if beneath every gesture  
ran another current,  
and beneath that,  
another still.

She worked as before:  
mending tools,  
sweeping cinders,  
hauling coal.

In the night watch  
she stood before the kiln  
and watched  
the low, patient burn of the fire.

Not a craft denied her.  
Not a skill withheld.

But a threshold.

And she did not know  
whether she stood before it —  
or lived within it.

— *William Zeitler*  
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