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Kate McKean
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Dear Ms. McKean,

Please find attached the first three chapters of *Beneath Coriandel*, an 81,000-word fantasy novel which I wish to submit for your consideration. A young man descends into the crypts beneath the city to slay a monster; a woman plots to steal her niece's youth; a talking horse foils a robbery, a ghost remembers how he earned his name, a magician wonders why she can't get a particular nursery rhyme out of her head, and did I mention the pistachios? Swordplay, betrayal, forbidden love, a philosophically inclined pair of boots—*Beneath Coriandel* has them all, and should appeal to anyone who liked *The Innkeeper's Song*, *The Curse of Chalion*, or Max Gladstone's Craft Sequence.

I have previously published two children's books—*Sensible Adventures*, with Annick Press, and *Bottle of Light*, with Scholastic—and some short fantasy stories for adults. I have also written or edited several non-fiction books and over a hundred book reviews, scholarly articles, and popular science pieces for *The Independent*, *New Scientist*, and the like.

Many thanks for considering my work. If you would like to find out what happens next, please let me know—I would be very happy to send you the full manuscript.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Greg V. Wilson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Greg Wilson

Chapter 1: Ishad's Onions

"Once upon a time there was a young man." That's how stories usually start, but it's never the truth—not really. That young man must have had parents—why not start with how they met? Or how the village he grew up in was founded? And the crafty old magician who gave him three wishes because he saved her from pirates—how'd she wind up in a little boat all on her own out in the middle of the ocean? And what about the pirates? They must have had families and childhoods and wishes and all. Hell, the hero's boots probably have a story too if you only knew how to ask them.

So I guess that's why we say, "Once upon a time." It's like the first dab of paint on a wall, or the onion you chop up and fry when you're making a flat-pan stew. It isn't necessarily the most important part of what you eventually wind up with—it's just what you started with, because you have to start somewhere.

My first onion is the siege of Armaq. Coriandel and Ossisswe promised us all pensions when we signed up, but gratitude's a vaporous thing. Ten years after Armaq surrendered, you could stand at the Ordinary Gate of the emir's palace in Coriandel from dawn to dusk wearing a veteran's collar and have nothing more than pity for dinner at the end of the day.

So I found other employment, or it found me. It was exciting stuff—I got to see the world, and save a few bits of it—but was all very much pay-as-you-go. The third time I had to quit lodgings by the back door because someone remembered my face with something other than kindness, I decided to shuck it in and look for something better.

What I found was a saddle for my backside to polish driving cattle from Darp down to Coriandel. It was restful at first. Bandits, lions, an occasional gargoyle—they seemed like a fair price for fresh tortillas every morning, a night watch every other night, and nobody trying to open my throat.

But then that stupid calf went and wandered off. There's this stretch of ground a day's ride south of Dry Weeping that's littered with bits of carving all jumbled together. It's Pilot work, a statue garden or something stranger that's fallen to pieces. The trail only cuts across a corner, but that's still two gallops of marble arms and legs and things

that I hope to hell weren't meant to be faces, all cracked and weathered and never quite the same from one trip to the next.

We came through it just past when spring turns to summer, and I guess all the fresh green had made us a little head-lazy. When evening came 'round, the caravaneer counted horns by twos like she always did. All of a sudden she started squalling about how there was a calf missing, one of her best calves, though if you listened to her they were all her best calves.

I'd been slowest getting unsaddled, so I got to go look for it. Sure enough, I found a sand miser's pit about half a gallop behind us, just a couple of dozen strides off the trail. The calf was standing near the edge, listening to whatever it is sand misers say to cows but worried enough about being that far from his mother that he wasn't taking that long last step. All I heard was whispers about fresh water and fresher women, so I threw a couple of rocks into the pit to break its concentration and threw a rope around the calf's neck.

And wouldn't you know, the damn stupid thing went and kicked me in the face. I was an idiot for going 'round the back of him, but still, it wasn't much of a thank you for saving his life.

If it had been the caravaneer's first drive down from the Black Grass, she'd probably have given me the calf in debt for my broken tooth. But no, she'd seen civilization and learned that generosity isn't good business. I got a pat on the back and a thank you, and some herbs that didn't smother the pain nearly as much as I'd have liked, and then it was get your tent pegged and the fence up, I'm not paying you to sit and gaffe.

Which is how I wound up in Coriandel sucking the stump of a broken tooth at the end of another long ride. I should have been happy—the city was still celebrating the new emir's coronation, and I had a fresh string of silver in my pocket. On the other hand, getting the stump of that tooth pulled was going to eat half of what I'd just earned, and then where would I be? Right back where I'd started. Three months of hard work and I was right back where I'd puking well started—again.

So that's my first onion. My second is the caravaneer deciding that I couldn't keep the horse I'd been riding. She wasn't anything special, but she had a decent gait, and the way I was raised, if you rode a horse all the way from the Black Grass down through the desert, you could fairly expect to keep it at the end of the trip.

But not this time. "The horse?" said the caravaneer, smiling like something out of the kind of dream a sand miser would put in a young man's head. "She and he are never speak about the horse. But here, she is generous. He may have this." And she points at a nag that even a Thindi wouldn't have ridden. No idea where she found it—it sure as both hells hadn't come down from the Black Grass with us—but one of her nephews had already put my saddle on it, and three more of them had just casually drifted over to stand nearby in case I made a fuss.

I didn't live through the siege of Armaq by being stupid about odds. I smiled back at her as well as I could, gave the biggest of her nephews a nod, and turned around to go and find a doctress for my tooth and a bottle of something I'd regret for afterward.

And there they were, not thirty strides away, the most beautiful horses you've ever seen. Twin mares—twins, mind you—and a stallion being led into a little paddock hard by the guard post at the Market Gate. Take my eyes if I'm lying, they looked like something the Pilots might have made, proud-necked and high-stepping and all three of them with white ribbons braided into their manes.

Some of the folk around me were staring at them like kids staring at a bowl of sweet ice, and I'm not ashamed to say my jaw dropped too. The two Brown Grass Darpani who'd joined up with us a month back got down on their knees and pressed their foreheads into the dirt to give them a full honor. The shoulders they had—the horses, I mean, not the Darpani—and the way they walked... I hadn't seen their equal since the emir of Armaq rode out to be hanged.

I joined the crowd gathering at the paddock fence and nodded to the two Darpani as they dusted off their knees. They were wearing the same clothes they'd worn the whole trip—leather vests with lace-up sides, wool trousers that came halfway up to their ribs, and heavy sandals. They were brothers, maybe, or cousins, or something we don't have a word for—you can't beat the Darpani when it comes to making family

complicated. We'd gotten to know each other the way you do when there's no one else to talk to except your horse, and they'd been steady in a couple of tricky spots.

The taller one looked over at the nag I'd been given, then back at me. I shrugged *what can you do?* "More worried now about getting this tooth done," I mumbled around my swollen jaw. "You two have plans?" Turned out they didn't—probably didn't even know how to *make* plans somewhere that had buildings taller than a man on horseback—so I told them where I'd be and how to get there without getting lost and left them to admire their new-found loves.

It was a hot day, with just a couple of runaway clouds in a baking blue sky. A dry wind caught the dust kicked up by the cattle and kicked it around some more. I blew the grit out of my nose, gave the bored guardsman at the Market Gate a sequin, got a dab of dye on the back of my hand in return, and headed into the city.

Truth told, after five months getting up to the Black Grass and back, I felt a bit like a kitten running between someone's legs going through the gate. Coriandel wouldn't have been more than a small neighborhood in a city like Haricot or Amprakash, but it was as busy as an anthill that morning. There were cattle drovers down from the high grass of Darp, spice merchants and silversmiths up from Thind, and some Hett clustered around a smithy-wagon arguing over the saints alone knew what, all in the first fifty strides. I hardly notice it now, but after having nothing but the back ends of cows to look at it for so long, the commotion half made me drunk. And after nothing but wood smoke and fresh turds and a whiff of patchouli off the Darpani, it stank.

The strangest part was being among buildings again. They're all brick in Coriandel, painted white to keep off the heat. It's as blinding as a salt pan when the sun's high, and the only way to tell one house from the next is the doors—a red fish with a human head on one, a hand in the middle of a spider web on the next. Their roof tiles are different colors too. You can't see it from the street, but from up on Palace Hill they spell out, "May Fate Smile Upon Coriandel The Jewl Of The Karaband." No one I've ever met knows why it's misspelled, or whether it's part of an old spell or just left over from some long-ago coronation, but the Coriandi keep it as it is just in case.

I found the doctress I needed three streets along from the market. She was a little cargo-caste Bantangui woman with her hair up in a turban and crossed bones tattooed on the backs of her hands. She painted some poppy syrup on my tongue to keep me still, then dug the broken root of the tooth out of my jaw with a stronger arm than you'd guess someone her size would have. It hurt like hell, even with the poppy, but as she kept reminding me, it was better than letting it fester.

Once she was done I took myself along to the little brew-and-stew next door where I'd taken an upstairs room once or twice. I couldn't hardly taste my food, what with blood in my mouth and being dizzy from the poppy, but on the other hand, boiled apricots and mushy rice weren't something I'd particularly liked even as a baby.

I'd forced down half the plate by the time the Darpani came in. They stood there until I pointed at the chairs across the table from me, Cup on the left, Strap on the right, the same way they rode and slept and everything else. When the old soldier who ran the place came to ask them what they wanted, they both looked at me. "Give 'em some goat kebabs," I said around my swollen jaw, the poppy, and a mouthful of rice. "On my count."

They exchanged glances. The taller one was Cup—Cup Rainbow Reaching. I never knew the full name of the other one's name, but he called himself Strap. "They have money," he said proudly.

"Yeah, well, this one's my dig. Here." I wiped the mouth of the bottle I'd bought and slid it across to him. "Wash away the dust."

And so we got to talking, and just like that, my onions were stewed. Sure, some of it was the drink and the poppy, but some part of me had decided that if I was going to get kicked in the head, it might as well be for something better than a pauper's pyre. Never did find out what their reasons were—I'd have said high spirits for most young men, but they had the look soldiers get when they've lost so many friends that they've lost themselves as well. Never did find out what their story was—wish that I had.

Whatever it was, by the time the bottle was done we had decided to ride those horses. Those white ribbons in their manes meant no one ever had, and it's powerful

luck to be the first one up on a horse like that—the kind of luck that the Darpani and I both felt we could use right then.

So we ate and talked and drank until the sun went down, then sat and listened for a bit to the conversations around us, them because sitting and listening is practically a sport for the Darpani, and me because the poppy had finally caught up with me. The locals talked mostly about how glorious the coronation had been, and who was beating who in the *umram*, and about a bonescuttle that had come up from the Tombs and taken a couple of beggars off the street. It had torn up a couple of guardsmen too, one man said.

I winced. I'd never had the misfortune to run into a bonescuttle myself, but I'd heard stories. They were as smart as they were ugly, and the poison in their tails would burn you from the inside out.

Eventually the owner realized we'd stopped buying and pushed us out the door. The Darpani headed back to the paddock to give it an eye while I went back to the doctress and spent what was left of my pay. I tried haggling, but she could tell I'd pay extra for a bit of forgetting, so I left with what I needed in my pocket and nothing else.

I got back to the paddock just as the palace drums started beating evening curfew. Cup and Strap were waiting for me. Not actually waiting, you understand, not standing about like pillars in the desert for everyone to see. No, they were just mending their gear and chewing on bits of coconut rind, minding their own business with one eye on the sun and the other on the paddock where four horses stood together beneath a plain yellow awning.

Four, not three. The newcomer was heavy around the shoulders, with a nasty scar on his rump, and definitely not gelded—no white ribbons for this one. I hunkered down on my haunches beside the Darpani and raised my eyebrows.

Cup pursed his lips. "A war mount," he said quietly, as sure about the horse as he had been bewildered by the city's streets. "From the Green Grass, but away some years, maybe ten. He has many battles, but is not in the desert some months."

I accepted a piece of coconut from Strap with a nod of thanks. "Well then, let's hope he's being sold for stud, because I'd rather not meet anyone who rides a horse like that on business."

Cup shrugged again, not worried or just not caring. I wiped my hands on my trousers. "I'll be back just after the third hour." I clapped him on the shoulder and went off to find the caravaneer.

Caravaneers have twice as many rules as anyone I've ever met. Some of them make sense, like letting the cattle get a smell of you before deciding whether to take you on. And not letting Hett travel with you more than three days at a time—well, everyone knows they're cursed.

But they all have different notions about what to do with you when your hire was done. Some don't mind you hanging about for a bit, especially if you did well for them and they might like to take you on again. Others want you out of the way as soon as possible, on the principle that the hardest thief to guard against is the one who built your fence.

This one scowled a bit when I asked if I could sleep alongside that night, but then her husband came at her with yet another question—he couldn't tie his own bootlaces without asking her whether it was left over right or right over left—so she just waved me away. I set my roll far enough away from the Darpani that it wouldn't look like we were together and closed my eyes. My jaw was still throbbing, and I felt squeamish from the blood I'd swallowed and the gargoyle piss I'd been drinking, but it only took me a few minutes to slip under the waves. I've always been a good sleeper—I could probably snore my way through the Pilots' Return.

Strap woke me by pinching my toe. I'd laid my poncho loose over myself for a blanket, so I slipped out from under it without making a sound.

The horses were at one end of the paddock, the three beauties together with the warhorse a few strides away. Two guards had been set to watch them, but sure enough, they were both in the not-really-here frame of mind that creeps over you when it's the middle of the night and drifting a bit won't necessarily mean waking up dead.

I soaked a couple of rags in what the doctress had given me. Cup and Strap took one each and disappeared into the night. I gave them a hundred heartbeats to work their way around back of the paddock, then walked over to the guards with a smile on my face. This and that and a bit of the other, and the Darpani lowered them to the ground, fast asleep.

We waited a dozen heartbeats to make sure they'd stay that way, grinning at each other like naughty kids, then crept forward to the fence. The three beauties were right there, head to tail to head just out of reach.

I was about to haul myself over the fence when the warhorse ambled over. He was a big fellow, gray with a black sock and a black dapple on his neck.

"Sh," Cup hushed softly beside me. "Sh, sh, sh. Nothing to claw at you here, friend to the world. Nothing to claw at you here." I kept my mouth shut—you'd have to be three kinds of fool to get in the way when a Darpani is dealing with a horse.

The stallion looked at him with big brown eyes. "Sh..." Cup soothed. "Peace, friend, companion. No lions, no fire, nothing to claw at you here. Sh, sh, sh."

The gray nodded his head, then whinnied and ambled back to the center of the paddock. Cup and Strap and I exchanged grins. We slipped over the fence—

—and the warhorse bellowed, "Guards! Guards!" and just like that, my onions were well and truly stewed.

Chapter 2: Sweet in the Corral

La, they were well and truly stewed. Their lookout made to bolt, but the guards—the real ones on the roof—were on their feet in an instant, their bows raised. The Karabandi, Ishad, dropped not his knife until they put an arrow in the ground at his feet. I smiled at him, though I do not know if he recognized it for such—most humans are not as good at understanding the expressions of animals as they think.

My name is Sweet. It is not a horse name—horses do not give themselves names. Cats do, the Gifted ones, or so they say. Of course, cats say all manner of things. I do not trust them, especially not the big ones. I find them to be shift.

I was born wild, up along the high end of the Sprained River valley. I have been away more years than I was there, but were you to magic me back blindfolded, I would know where I was in a heartbeat from the particular smell of its grass and the sound of frogs in the rushes.

I was eight months old when Finger Paper Rolling and her cousins snuck up on my herd in the middle of the night with bee burrs and hobbles. They split half a dozen of us from the rest, whooping and whistling to drive us into a box wash with sides so steep that we could not scramble out. Finger set a loop of rope around my neck and snagged the other on a dwarf spruce. It almost took my head off when it went taut.

I had bitten half-way through the rope before she managed to set a hobble around my ankles. I tried to bite her then, but she just laughed and danced away.

Finger and her cousins sold the other horses they caught, but she kept me for herself—for my good looks, she told me afterward, though I am no more handsome than I should be. She thought I might have a little charger in my blood, perhaps from a cavalry remount who had wandered off during some war or other.

She knew that I was special right away because I learned so quickly. A week after she first set a saddle on me, she could steer me with her knees. Two days after that, I knew all of her whistles—kneel, back up, stand. The truth was that I liked learning, that I had been starving for it without knowing what I craved, and there she was, teaching me and best of all *talking* to me.

I do not remember when or how her words first began to join together in my head, but I do remember the first time I talked back. She had been trying to get me to jump over a fire. I did not want to, so I said, "No." That was what you said when you did not want something, was it not? Finger was so surprised that she almost swallowed her tongue. Then she threw her arms around my neck and began to cry. I was so upset by this—already so in love with her—that I began to cry as well.

After she wiped her eyes she took me to her ride chief. She tried for an hour to get me to speak again, but I was so embarrassed by the commotion that I would not speak until he gave me a crust of clotted honey. Then I said, "Sweet." Everyone laughed and cheered, so it was another full day before she could get me to say anything more. It is funny now, but I had no idea then that being being Gifted meant I was one in a thousand, or how lucky I was that I had been found by people that treasured animals who could speak instead of thinking us cursed.

I met Oro five years later. Finger was dead by then. Two hotheads from Smoke Rein Choking her band had grasswhacked us, whooping and hollering and throwing bee burrs left and right to stampede our herd so that they could steal a calf to brag over. I was only a few strides away from her when a panicked cow knocked her over. I stood over her, screaming at her ride-mates as the herd thundered past to come and help her up, please, help her, and then at my death to come take me when I realized that hers had taken her.

Smoke Rein Choking brought us the pair who had come thieving when she saw the smoke from the funeral pyre. I waited a whole day before kicking one in the teeth. The next day I knocked over a cooking pot and splashed hot oil onto the other. That evening, the ride chief took me aside and told me as gently as she could that it would be best if I went and saw a bit of the world. It is bad manners to abuse a judgment slave, and she would owe their families lives in return if I killed them.

She thought I would argue, but in truth I did not mind the thought of leaving. Finger had always dreamed about seeing the rest of everything. "Waves on the ocean," she would say. "Waves on the ocean before we die." With her gone, I could think of no purpose except to go and see them for her.

A week later, when the ride chief her nephew took salt and service with a caravan to Coriandel, I took a lick as well. As a scout, not as a mount—no one but Finger had ever been astride me, and if I had stayed with the band, I doubt I would ever have borne another rider.

But as soon as we were on the trail, I noticed a skinny Karabandi eyeing me. He did not stare—you do not stare at a Darpani unless you want a fight, and horse or not, I was Darpani—but every time I looked over I caught him looking back. By the second evening out it was making my withers itch, so I asked him if I was growing feathers. He laughed, apologized, said no, he was sorry, he was just trying to find a polite way to ask me a question. "Is it a question, or a favor?" I asked. He admitted it was the latter. "Then someone should make of it an odd-stride trirain."

That shut him up. The Darpani love nothing so much as poetry. That is grass and water to us, air and rain and the smell of honey. Stirrup rhymes and sondelays, half-lampoons and dirges—we know more ways to make words dance than the rest of Cherne put together. Of all those ways, trirains are the hardest to get right, and odd-stride trirains will tie you up like knotgrass.

But he did it. Come the evening of our fifth day, with the whole troop around us, he went down on one knee and recited:

Oh thou, proud stallion, swift wind made flesh

Humbly, seeking only to better the lot of your kind, someone asks

How may best your rider serve you?

It is just words in Karabandi. You cannot even tell that it is odd-stride. But it is not half bad in Darpani. It is not half bad at all.

The whole troop whistled and snapped their fingers. He kept his head down to hide his grin. I pawed the ground. "There is applause," I said, just in case he could not tell what I was doing "But there is still confusion about what someone is actually asking for." Which of course brought more laughter.

It turned out that his name was Oro, and what he wanted was riding lessons. He was good in the saddle, but he was not Darpani. Who better to teach him than a horse?

If he had offered me money, I would have emptied my rump on the boots he wore. Instead, he offered to teach me Karabandi. And to help me find a position when we reached Coriandel.

"There is doubt that such assistance will be needed," I said haughtily. "And questions about how much assistance one of your station could offer." Oh, I was proud then. I had never seen a paved street or a building taller than a man on horseback, but I knew that Gifted animals were rare. I fancied myself a parade mount for the emira herself, nothing less. I vaguely knew that it might take me a while to arrange such a thing, but I was sure that the details would all somehow take care of themselves. He, on the other hand, looked like he had not eaten a good meal since he was old enough to shave. How much help could he be?

The Karabandi paid no more attention to my rudeness than he would have to a spring shower. "An apology is given for not having made a proper introduction," he said, bowing slightly. "Who stands before you is of the House of Iandel, its principal line." I whinnied with surprise, and heard exclamations in the crowd around us. He was a damned emir-in-waiting of Coriandel.

We spent six years together, driving cattle and carrying messages for people too frightened or too suspicious to trust the post, leaving a trail of pistachio shells behind us. He only drank sparingly, and was not a slave to coffee or chocolate the way some humans were, but he would go a week without meat for a bag of pistachios.

One of the messages we carried took us to Armaq, where we got caught up in the siege. Oro slept beside me every night for weeks with sword in hand. He used it too, and more than once—people grew desperate toward the end, and Gifted or not, I would have been a meal.

We managed to escape before Armaq fell, thanks to an agent of Lady Kembe. We saved the life of the agent, sort of, and somehow thereby wound up doing the errands of Lady Kembe. The work was mostly quieter than stories would have you believe—help someone out a bit here, keep an eye on someone there—but what was not quiet was bloody. Oro lost a couple of toes, I had a bite taken out of my rump, and we both nearly had our souls stolen a couple of times.

Then the emira decided it was time to take up gardening and leave the running of the city to someone else. She summoned the in-waitings back to Coriandel and told them that the royal collar had made its choice. "You have been brave, and studious, and made beautiful things, each according to your nature," she said. "Your city is proud of you, but the collar can only be worn by one. Oro shall take the burden after me."

Well, I had never heard him speak like he spoke to her that afternoon. It was not fair—there was so much he still wanted to do! Why could one of his sibs or cousins not do it? Why not their uncle? He loved juristry! And on and on like he was a child rather than a road-worn hand-in-the-shadow for the most powerful magician in the world.

He gave in eventually, of course. The collar would not have picked him if there was any chance of him doing otherwise. "Duty," she said, and that was that. It is a hard word to hear, even harder when someone says it to you as if you need reminding.

But his aunt relented a little and gave him—us—one more year of freedom. We did so much in that year that I began to wonder if he was trying to get killed just to spite her. We hunted statues in Praczedt, drank moonlight on Year-Again Eve in the royal palace in Gandan... About the only place we did not go was the Flying Mountain, and that was only because he took pity on me—horses are not overly fond of heights.

And yes, I finally got to see the ocean. Wave after wave, with the gulls overhead and that salt-rot smell in my nostrils... Horses cannot cry, but we can mourn. I waded in up to my knees and said a prayer for Finger, then turned north and carried Oro to his duty.

A year to the day, we returned to Coriandel. I was in his coronation parade, the royal mount I had dreamed of being. I had gilt tassels in my mane and a fine bronze chain around my neck to show that I was a person, not some dumb beast, and I would have given the world to be anywhere else.

The whole city turned out to cheer. They always cheer when someone new takes the throne. They never think how it makes the person who is leaving it feel.

I was three paces behind him and a pace to his left when his aunt fastened the royal collar around his neck. It looked like square plates of plain iron, hinged to be flexible and lined on the inner side with plain white cotton. Eighteen years she had worn

it. Eighteen years of unrelenting duty, of the collar whispering in her ear night and day, of never really trusting another human being. It was no wonder she wept when she took it off.

Oro did not weep when she hung it round his neck. Some do, but not him. He stood straight and proud like always, but the look on his face... The spell that keeps the emirs of Coriandel honest was forged in the time of the Pilots. They were not people, and even the dregs of their magic is hard for mere people to bear.

His aunt and uncle bowed to him. Silk and linen rustled as the nobles and ambassadors and what-not behind them followed suit. As he settled himself on the throne, his aunt turned and left the room with her husbands on either side of her, three people suddenly unneeded by the city they had served for so long.

He dealt with important matters first. He confirmed ministers in their posts, ordered the palace thieves to take a vacation, declared a one-month holiday on market gate fees, and commissioned a coronation portrait to hang in the Long Hall. Every few moments he cocked his head to listen to the collar whisper in a voice no one else could hear.

Then he called for me. I did not kneel. He told me before the ceremony that he never wanted me to do that. But I did bow my head until he said, "Rise, friend."

I heard a new weight in his voice. Some people say the royal collar makes the hair of its wearer go white in an instant, but that is a lie. The changes are all inside. The Oro who did a handstand in Gandan as I galloped through the streets to impress a girl he had not yet even spoken to was gone.

"My life to serve you, my emir," I said.

He nodded and gestured at a lanky man standing nearby. "My Master of Stables tells me that I am sending three horses to Ossisswe as a gift. Two mares and a stallion, I believe—it would please me if you would accompany them, and congratulate my cousin on his wedding."

Exile. The new emir was setting aside the disreputable companion of the old emir-in-waiting. "Of course, Your Grace," I said.

The corner of his mouth twitched. "You would serve me also by remembering to my royal cousin in Ossisswe that the first colt out of each mare is mine, as are any fortunate enough to be born Gifted. It would please me if you would return with them when they are of age."

My heart started beating again. Not exile, then, just separation while he settled into his new role. Horses cannot smile, but he knew what my ears were saying. "My life to serve you," I repeated.

I did not really think about the mares until I met them the next day. Then I could think about nothing else. They were beautiful. No, they were *wonderful*. You would not understand. You can only see them through human eyes. The way they moved, the way their necks arched—they were not just a gift to the emir his cousin. They were a gift to *me*.

The Master of Stables introduced me to them in the riding ring behind the palace. They were happy to see me, of course. So was the stallion after I made it clear who was in charge. The ungifted are always happier with a Gifted around. They can tell we are smarter than they are, even if they are not smart enough to understand what "smarter" actually means.

That is how I came to be in the paddock that afternoon when the Karabandi and the two Darpani started eyeing my wards. They would have heard who I was if they had been in the city more than a day or two, but they still had road dust in their hair. The Darpani looked clanless, probably on the run from a slave judgment.

The Karabandi moved like a big cat. He did not sneak around—he just drifted like a piece of wood minding its own business in the middle of a stream. I could almost smell the trouble boiling off him, so I had a quiet word with the Master of Stables. Putting a couple of half-wits in uniform as decoys was one of Oro his old tricks—it tickled me to use it.

And sure enough, not long past moonrise, the Karabandi his snoring suddenly stopped. A couple of minutes later there was a bit of grunting as the Darpani put the two chuckleheads to sleep.

I ambled over to the Darpani, as innocent as could be. "Sh," he said soothingly. "Peace, friend, companion. No lions, no fire, nothing here to claw at you. Sh, sh, sh."

No cause for alarm? Heh. No cause for *me*, perhaps. I ambled back to the middle of the paddock, just in case they got any ideas with those knives of theirs, then shouted for help.

I waited until the real guards had the three of them on their knees before coming over to taunt them. Finger taught me how to taunt—it is practically another kind of poetry up on the grass. "He asks," I said to the first Darpani genially, "Who now claws at who?"

He tried to get up. The guards pushed him back onto his knees, and suddenly he laughed.

"What is so funny?" I asked.

"Life," he said, the last dregs of the laugh still in his voice. "What can you do about it?"

The guards took them away to the palace. I did not bother to ask what would happen next—they had tried to steal from the emir, and Oro was never by nature a forgiving man. I went back to my post in the middle of the paddock and waited for sunrise.

Chapter 3: Cup Rainbow Reaching Follows a Madman into Hell

The name of my name is Cup Rainbow Reaching. I was a coward. Only once, but it was enough to damn me. Now I am a ghost.

My mother's-side cousin and I thought to earn better names for our names by taking horses from our neighbors. We set fire to a tent as a distraction, not knowing a man was asleep inside it. He died. His band and ours asked a grass thrower for judgment. She said the man would have lived thirty more years, so my mother's-side cousin and I were set fifteen years of slavery each. Fifteen years with no names for our names. Fifteen years as *lelosini*, flesh without meaning. We were little older than that ourselves.

To our shame we fled, riding south in the night. Our families did not pursue us. Our cowardice made us dead to them. If we ever returned, we would be staked and burned as is right to do with the walking dead.

We rode for two weeks to a place where the people of the grass meet with the people of houses to trade. There we met Karabandi who needed riders to help drive their cattle to market. They did not care that we were cowards and clanless, so the bargain was quickly made.

A day and a night after that ride ended, my mother's-side cousin and I knelt in chains with the Karabandi Ishad before the emir of Coriandel. I do not remember why we wanted to ride those horses. They were beautiful, but there are many beautiful horses in the world to ride. I think in truth that we were drunk from despair as much as from wine. All those people, and the city, and our lives blown away from us like seeds in the wind. We might have become monks or beggars thinking only of their next puff of red smoke. Instead, we tried to steal horses from royalty.

The emir was young in body but heavy in spirit. His skin was as black as the Karabandi's, and he had a narrow jaw and knife-straight nose. His throne was a high-backed chair made of dark wood. There was a small table for tea and papers on his left and small windows high in the wall behind him. Doves cooed outside and tapped the latticework with their bills.

Kneeling in front of him I could see that he wore sandals instead of boots and that his toenails were neatly trimmed. He did not look up from his papers. "The collar is displeased," he said as he turned over a page. "To do this to a gift is...disrespectful."

My mother's-side cousin and I did not speak. What was there to say?

But the Karabandi had words. He *always* had words. "Well, yes, that's one way of looking at it, Your Grace, but desperate times make desperate men."

The emir looked up. "Indeed?" he said, raising his eyebrows slightly. "I had not realized the times were desperate."

"Well, no, but you wouldn't, would you? Living in a palace, eating pomegranates off a silver tray for breakfast, music to soothe you day and night. Never had a broken tooth in your life, I'd wager. Hardly the best lookout for seeing what the common life is like, if you don't mind me saying so."

There was indeed a silver tray of pomegranates on the table beside his tea, and music from a bass flute and oudh coming from somewhere I could not see. What I *could* see was the emir's frown.

"And what *is* the common life like these days?" he asked, a lion trying to decide if a rabbit is worth chasing or not.

"Oh, it's hard, Your Grace, harder than you know. Why, look at us. Months we spent, driving cattle down from Darp, and what do we get? Look here." He turned his head and screwed up his face so the emir could see the gap in his teeth. "'ou 'ee? Lost that tooth in service, and there's my pay gone getting the stump dug out. And it's not like my pension's going to help me."

"Your pension," the emir sighed, not letting it be a question.

The Karabandi nodded vigorously. "Armaq, Your Grace, not that anyone cares about that now. Disgraceful how gratitude evaporates once people don't need you any more."

"Mm." The emir steepled his fingers. "And which side were you on at Armaq?"

"I was in your mother's service, of course," the Karabandi said, affronted. "Third Regiment Ordinary."

"Mm." The emir nodded as if agreeing. "I was there too. Start to finish, as you say. An irregular attached to the Sadine Free Company. Along with my companion-in-wandering, whom I believe you met last night."

"The Sadines? But they were—"

"Fighting for the Armaqi. Yes, I know. My mother was not pleased by my choice."

There was a heartbeat of silence and then the Karabandi laughed, short and strong, as he had when we were captured. The emir raised his eyebrows. "Forgive me, Your Grace," the Karabandi said, still chuckling. "But like the Bantangui say, *im awa pfa ta*."

"Oh no, not this again?" the emir translated. The Karabandi nodded, his what-can-you-do-about-the-world smile still on his face.

"Well, I rejoice in your amusement," the emir said dryly. "And by nature, I am a lenient man. Being new to the royal collar, however, I am counseled to show sternness, and as those horses are a gift to a fellow monarch, I am instructing my Master of Juristry to flense your right arms. I will further instruct him that you then be shown to the city's gates. After all, if times are as hard as you say, the city can hardly afford to feed three more crippled beggars." He nodded at the guards behind us, and turned his attention once more to the papers on his desk.

I understood then, or thought I did, why Fate had brought us to this city. The flensing that takes skin whole from a living person to heal the wounds of another might have saved the man that my mother's-side cousin and I killed. For us to be punished with this was just. My mother's-side cousin and I exchanged brief nods. This was just.

But then the Karabandi, a curse be upon his name, spoke again. "Huh. Now I understand why your lot lost Armaq."

The emir's pen stopped moving. "Indeed?"

"Yup." He shifted his weight on the polished stone floor. "You were like those fine-bred idiots that take fencing classes because they're fashionable. Step step here, step step there, not a foot out of place until you look down and your guts are all over the floor. You cared more about good form than you did about winning."

The emir set his pen down carefully. "Indeed? And would you rather we had sent plague and soulsuckers among you? Some did counsel that."

"Course not, 'course not." The Karabandi shook his head. "But there was a lot you could have done that you didn't. Sooner or later, an army that doesn't take any chances is going to lose. And if you'll forgive me saying so, I'm guessing the same is true for emirs." The Karabandi shrugged expressively.

It was a dangerous game. The emir knew the Karabandi was trying to herd him, just as the Karabandi knew there were worse punishments than having an arm flensed. I should have spoken. I should have told the emir that my mother's-side cousin and I would take the punishment we were due and be done with it, but I did not, coward that I was.

"Now take us, for example," the Karabandi continued, rushing his words before the emir could say anything. "Three men who know which end of a knife to hold, and you're just going to throw us away. What's the sense in that? If we were smugglers, would you burn our goods or sell them?"

The emir took the piece of paper he had signed a moment before from the pile on his left and studied it. "You are Ishad?"

The Karabandi nodded. "I am."

"Mm. So what would you have me do, Ishad? Since you seem to have appointed yourself one of my ministers."

"Use us, Your Grace," the Karabandi said earnestly. "We did no harm. Didn't do any good either, I admit that, but let us earn it out."

"Healing the worthy wounded seems a fair way to me to earn it out, as you put it" the emir observed. "In fact, two of my mother's—of *my* guards could use your assistance even now."

"Ah." The Karabandi nodded wisely. "The two the bonescuttle carved up?"

I felt a chill, as if someone had said my true name. Bonescuttles are *iyemnelili*, mis-made and evil. Better an arm stripped of skin than dealing with such. Even the Karabandi must have known that.

But he was still talking. "Been nipping at you for a while now, hasn't it? Heard folk talking last night. They say it took a beggar child the day after you put your collar on. Not much for luck, that. Probably go down well in the market, you giving some down-and-outs a chance to make amends by bringing you its head."

The emir steepled his fingers again. "Are you proposing that I send you and your companions to destroy this creature, and then set you free?"

The Karabandi shook his head vigorously. "I haven't proposed anything, Your Grace. But since you mention it—"

The emir brought the palm of his hand down flat on his desk. Wisely, oh just that once wisely, the Karabandi darkened his mouth. "This is not a fairy tale," the emir said quietly. "This is a judgment. I would be within the law to have you quartered—count yourself lucky that I will only have you flensed. If I were to set you to slaying this creature, I would have to set a dozen of my men to watching you to make sure you did not flee. I hope you will agree, they would be better set to chasing it themselves."

"No one will flee." My mother's-side cousin spoke for the first time.

The emir cocked his head to one side, listening to a voice from the royal collar that only he could hear. "But you have fled before, have you not?" he finally asked, almost gently. "How then should I trust you not to do so again?"

"No one will flee," my mother's-side cousin repeated firmly, raising his eyes to meet the emir's. "They are done with running away."

"Mm." The emir drummed the desk with his fingers, then nodded. "Very well. But I'm not going to put a dozen men in harm's way just to hold you to your word." He scribbled on our piece of paper, beckoning to one of the guards with his other hand as he did so. "I will therefore amend your sentence. In accordance with Coriandel's ancient law and the prerogatives of my station, I command that you be sent down into the Tombs, to receive there whatever Fate has chosen for you. Uh uh—let me finish, Ordinary Ishad of the Third Regiment. My Master of Arms shall give you what weapons and provisions he deems appropriate, and my Master of Thieves will share with you what knowledge she has of the beneath. If you kill the bonescuttle, your debt to the city

will be paid. If not..." He shrugged. "Perhaps the creature will leave my people be for a day or two if it has you three to gnaw on."

"Underground!?" the Karabandi protested. "Your Grace, these two are grasslanders! You can't send them underground—they'll go mad!"

Perhaps it was a ploy, to impress the emir that he would think first of his companions at such a time. Perhaps it was *innetené*, a moment that reveals a man's soul. Whatever it was, it angered the emir. "Do not tell me what I can and cannot do," he snapped. "I have this for that." He tapped the collar that hung around his neck with a finger, then bent his head to his papers and waved a hand at our guards. They led us away like calves to branding.

The Tombs... Every Darpani knows that hell has no sky, no breeze, no sweet grass and no fresh water, dark and full of *iyemnelili*. Hell is the Tombs of Coriandel.

The guards took us back to the prison yard where we had spent the hours after our capture. Its brick walls were three times a man's height, and leaned inward so they could not be climbed. A stinking bucket stood in the corner. The Karabandi had used it, but not me or my mother's-side cousin. We had our pride.

There were no bars across the skylight in the roof. The Karabandi had said there was no need. "Spider silk," he told us. "Strong as steel. Cut you into stew meat if you try to go through it."

The guards untied our bonds, pushed us inside, and slammed the barred door closed behind us. My mother's-side cousin and I immediately fell upon the Karabandi. "Wait! What are you—oy, get off me!"

In the time it took the guards to unlock the door again I split the Karabandi's lip and got a black eye in return. They pulled us off him and chained us to the wall. We spent the rest of the morning glaring at each other from opposite sides of the yard.

Noon brought a skinny old woman with sharp eyes who declared herself the emir's Master of Thieves. "Don't know much more about the Tombs than your average storymonger," she admitted cheerfully, offering us bits of coconut rind to chew. "They'll put you through the first door at moonrise, and wait for you at the other. You could just

sit and wait, take your beating when you get out and count yourself lucky. No? Well, all right then, here's how it lies."

She sketched on the floor with a piece of charcoal while she and the Karabandi talked. My mother's-side cousin listened. I closed my eyes. We weren't coming out. I knew that. I felt it in my bones. Evil creatures would devour us. Others would take our souls. This was punishment for our flight. It was bitter, but I would eat what was set before me.

I slipped in and out of sleep, as if in the saddle on a long journey. The old woman's words salted my dreams. There was a bridge; I must not reply to those who spoke to me as I crossed it. And a garden of lights. And then the way out.

"...beside the inside stairs. Probably didn't used to be under water, but it is now. Dive in there, and the current will carry you through to a little pool. The other door will open there at moonset. Should be about dawn tomorrow. If you aren't there in time, well..." The elderly thief shrugged. "Nobody knows what wanders around down there between one moonrise and the next, but that's because no one's ever come out to talk about it."

"Thank you, mother," the Karabandi said as she stood. "If you see Master Armorer, could you send him along? And maybe ask your friends at the gate about lunch? I'm as flat as an empty wineskin."

The thief smiled at his cockiness, bowed slightly, and left. The Karabandi studied the lines she had drawn on the floor, trying to memorize the rough map.

I did not need to die to learn patience. To be Darpani is to be patient. Grass grows. A journey is as long as it is. Evening comes at sundown, every day. Chewing on fingernails and muttering under your breath like the Karabandi did does not make things happen sooner.

A servant brought us bread, water, cheese, and dates. The armorer showed up a few mouthfuls later. He made us stand, stretch, squeeze his forearm, and toss a heavy stick from hand to hand. He went away, then returned with steel. My mother's-side cousin and I took knives and short barbed spears, weapons a man would use to hunt. The Karabandi took a helmet, a leather breastplate and greaves, a straight sword as long

as his arm, and a dagger with a horned cross-piece. Brass dayglass lanterns with shutters, some twine, an extra knife each, a rough hemp bag for any trophies we might take... My heart began to beat more quickly, but we spoke little. What would we have said? If your horse gallops, you hold on. The Karabandi whistled a little tune as he swung the sword in slow arcs to test its weight. He stopped after I glared at him.

Coriandel is built on three hills. The emir's palace stands on the highest. Its central tower can be seen from dozens of gallops away, long before the rest of the city.

The second is the Hundred Houses Hill. Nobles and wealthy merchants live there beside the emir's ministers and ambassadors from other lands.

The Tombs lie beneath the third hill, the lowest of the three. It lies west of the palace, so that we walked straight into the setting sun to reach it. The river that is Coriandel's life flows out of a crack in its side. Heavy bars and spider-silk nets lie across it to stop the worst of the underneath from coming to the surface. Somehow the *iyemnelili* had found a way past them, or knew some other path to the surface.

The buildings around us grew smaller and poorer as we climbed the stairs to its low peak. Children paused their games to watch us pass. Their mothers stood with folded arms, scowling at the guardsmen who marched beside us.

By the time we reached the steps that led down into the tombs, a small crowd had formed behind us. As the guards undid our bonds someone called out, "Your luck with you," in Darpani. The Karabandi waved. My mother's-side cousin and I did not.

Down we went into the cool darkness, into hell. The guards' lanterns shone yellow-bright. We kept ours shuttered, saving their trapped daylight for later need. Down and down, to a passage as wide as a street beneath an arched roof. The air smelled wet, and I heard water ahead.

The passage ended at a round pool. We boarded a small rowboat. The Karabandi took the oars. My brother and I sat in the middle, and two guardsmen took places in the stern to bring the boat back. A gentle current carried us into a narrow tunnel whose walls glistened damply. Small things splashed in the water. Once, something too quick to see flitted overhead. I sat and watched the Karabandi row.

He was the first out when we reached the stairs, steadying the boat as my mother's-side cousin and I disembarked. The guards passed us our weapons. "Luck," one said curtly. The Karabandi knocked fists with him and pushed the boat back into the current.

They waited until the walls began to glow before rowing away. We were halfway up the stairs by then, the Karabandi in the lead.

Like an eye blinking open, the wall became a door. The Karabandi pulled his long braids back and knotted them into a club. "Eyes and ears," he said crisply, drawing his sword. "And if you ever want to see sunshine again, don't drop your damn lanterns. Ready?" We nodded and followed him to our deaths.