

Beneath Coriandel

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Then: 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 gaffle.

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.

Then: 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 jurisprudence! 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.

Then: 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.

Now: Vurt at the Moonrise Door

"I didn't kill it, you know."

"What?"

"I said, I didn't kill it." Ishad sculls a couple of strokes to get the rowboat round a corner, his eyes on the tunnel wall so he won't have to meet my disbelieving stare. "One of the Darpani did. Leastways, I think he did. Don't know for sure. Careful with the lantern."

"I'm being careful." The battered brass lantern balanced on my knees is our only light. Its captured daylight glow reflects off Ishad's bald head and the damp stone beside us. I have second lamp in my pack, but I'm saving it. "What do you mean, you didn't kill it?"

He rubs his nose against his shoulder. "Gone deaf, lad? I said, I didn't kill it. The Darpani fellow did. And be careful with that damned lantern!"

"I'm being careful! But---what about all your stories? How could you---saints on stilts, old man, how could you lie to everyone all these years?"

"Hang on, hang on. Lying, now, that's a cruel word." He nods as if agreeing with something I said, then rubs his nose against his shoulder again. The motion makes our little stolen rowboat bob up and down slightly, which makes me just a little more queasy than I already was. "Though I couldn't argue with exaggerating. Exaggerating would be fair. Anyway, it's really sort of your fault."

"Mine!?" I'm on my way into the Tombs to kill a bonescuttle just like he did twenty years ago. It's a hell of a time to discover that he actually didn't, and what do I do about it? I squawk like a parrot. If I didn't know how quickly he could move, and if I wasn't afraid that the commotion would attract the wrong kind of attention, I would whack him with our spare oar.

"Yup." Ishad sculls another stroke. "The way it started was, when I came back with its head, everyone was so pleased that they just assumed I'd done the honors. All I had to do was be modest and say, oh, it weren't such a thing. Never actually *told* anyone I killed it, least not as I remember. But then you came along. You wanted to hear about it every time you saw me. Kicked up mayhem fit to call the Pilots back if I wouldn't tell you the story." He chuckles. "I sorta turned it into a fairy tale, telling it to you that way. You even dressed up

for it one time, remember? Put a stew pot on your head for a helmet, waved a shinbone around for a sword..."

"Mind your head," I interrupt.

"Thanks." He ducks a low-hanging bulge of the tunnel roof.

My hands tighten on the haft of the spear that lies across my knees next to the lantern. It won't be much use if the things that are supposed to live in the water below us wake up, but having it ready eases the itch from my oath a little---just enough that I only want to scratch the inside of my skull instead of gouging out my eyes with my fingernails.

The worst part is, I should have seen this coming. He's been pulling this particular trick on me since our very first lesson. I'll be practicing a new step or parry, and whack, he'll throw in some goat-crazy twist as if it's as normal as dates for breakfast. And when it's all over and I'm lying in the dirt like an idiot, he'll say, "You know, the last fellow who tried that lost an ear."

"So what about all the combinations you've had me practicing for the last four days?" I ask. I can hear the anger bubbling in my voice, which only makes me angrier. "What about 'sidestep and put the point into its neck'? Or 'get it to reach for you, then take its claw off'? Did you make all that up as well?"

"Nothing wrong with those combinations," he says firmly, dodging my point the way he would dodge a sword swing. "Should work a charm. You just remember you're smarter than it is. Way you're going to beat it is, you're going to out-think it. Everything else is just how."

"Weeping hells, Ishad, spare me the platitudes!" I thump my spear on the gunwale in frustration.

"Keep your voice down!" he whispers loudly, scowling. "There's worse things than bonescuttles down here."

I spit into the bottom of the boat, but swallow whatever I'd been about to say. The Tombs beneath Coriandel are full of the Pilots' leftovers. All manner of things live there, or kind of live, each after its own fashion. From time to time the gleaners who scour the canals near Tombs Hill find bits of them in the water: tentacles growing on bits of broken statues,

skulls with fingers where the eyes should be, pale worms as thick as my arm that sizzle and smoke in the sunlight. A lot of those bits have bite marks on them.

"So why are you telling me this now?" I ask, mostly so that I won't think about the drawings that Kerrem had insisted on showing me of the things that might have left those bite marks.

He shrugs, still not meeting my eyes. "Want you out of this alive, I guess."

"You guess?"

The bitterness in my voice makes him look at me, really look at me, for the first time since he started rowing. "Don't be like that, lad. There's a whole world of strangeness up ahead. The way I figure, you go in there thinking you have all the answers, you most likely won't come out. You go in there knowing you don't know anything, then maybe I won't have to go tell your mother you got yourself killed." He looks away. "It's a conversation I'd rather not have."

He rows on while I digest that.

The tunnel's roof rises into the darkness above us, the channel between its time-smoothed walls growing wider and wider. I can tell we're getting closer to the door by the way the oath has quietened down to a dull itch in the back of my skull. "So how did he kill it?" I ask. "The Darpani, I mean."

Ishad shrugs. "Put a spear in its neck, I think. Not that they really have necks, but the plates don't quite overlap on the underside. I figure that's your best bet---get it to lunge at you, then go up and underneath. Better odds than going up against its claws with a sword." He sounds like he's trying to convince himself as much as me.

Sloosh, sloosh, sloosh go the oars. Something gloops in the water behind us. I twist around but can't see it. Being sent into the Tombs counts as capital punishment under Coriandi law. Hells, people sometimes ask to be flensed instead, thinking it'll be cleaner and faster. Me, I'm a volunteer...

Which reminds me... I slip my hand under my leathers and pull out the letter I wrote that morning. "Here---can you give this to Sehdie?"

Ishad snorts. "Don't be daft. Give it to her yourself."

I don't lower my hand. "I can't."

He stops rowing for a moment. "Why not?"

I shrug. "It might get wet."

The corner of his mouth quirks up the way it does when he actually thinks something is funny. He plucks the letter from my hand and tucks it into his boot. He's wearing an old-fashioned pair I haven't see before, square-toed lace-ups that look the same age the tunnels around us, or maybe even older. "You have everything you need?"

"Yeah. Except an honest teacher. But it's a bit too late to look for one now, I suppose." I know I sound like a petulant child, but my oath is driving me mad. It's like a sneeze that won't come out, a full bladder on a cold morning, and rough wool on a hot day all at once.

The bottom of the rowboat scrapes against stone. Ishad sculls two more strokes, then pulls in the oars and twists around to check our course. "Almost there. You wait 'til she's steady before you get out."

I nod. There's less than two strides of open water between our gunwales and the tunnel walls now, but the ceiling is lost in the darkness over our heads. The lantern paints shimmering gold on the ripples on the water. Something somewhere drips steadily and patiently.

The Darpani believe that water will wear the world down to nothing one day, and that when it's gone, the Last Man will fall endlessly through the void. At that moment, deep underground, I understand how he'll feel when that time comes.

And then the walls curve away and we're in a cavern as big as the *umram* and I see the Moonrise Stairs. They climb straight out of the water, ten strides broad at the bottom, narrowing as they rise so that the top step is barely wide enough to stand on with both feet. Nothing holds them in place---they just *are*.

The boat bumps to a halt against a submerged step. Looking over the side, I see the stairs continue down into the depths. The original floor of the tunnel lies somewhere far below us. It has been flooded for centuries, but the stairs are still exactly where the Pilots left them.

Ishad sculls to turn the boat sideways before pulling in the oars and hopping out onto the bottom step with the bow line in one hand. "Careful," he cautions, gripping the gunwale with his other.

"I'm being careful." I set the lantern on the thwart beside me and hand him my spear, then my sword and pack, and then stand unsteadily.

"Keep your weight low."

"I've *got* it," I mutter. There aren't more than a couple of dozen people in Coriandel who could beat me in a fair fight on level ground, but I've never been in a boat before---you can ride barges on the canal for a copper bezel or two on holidays and drink yourself silly, but I've never bothered. The damn thing twitches from side to side each time I take a step like a horse trying to shy away a fly. It seems like a very fragile way to get from one place to another.

But as I clamber onto the step, I still shake Ishad off when he reaches out to steady me. My pack goes onto my shoulders and my sword belt goes around my waist. "Must be pretty close to moonrise."

He nods as he hands me my spear. "Must be."

"I should get going."

He nods again. "You should." He punches my chest lightly. "You keep your wits handy in there, all right? Remember, I got through it, and I'm not half as smart as you. Just---"

"I'll be all right," I say brusquely.

He nods. "I know you will." He raises his palms to me in a formal salute. "May your death be too distracted by more pressing business to notice you."

"Thanks." I cinch my belt a little tighter. "I'll see you tomorrow." I start up the stairs without waiting for an answer. It's almost moonrise---the walls around us are starting to glow a faint blue-white, just like Kerrem said they would. The door at the top of the stairs will open the instant the moon clears the horizon, then close behind me when its trailing edge does the same. I don't have to hurry, but I do.

Kerrem told me that magicians and jurists argue about whether moonrise is the moment you could first see the moon if you were standing at the entrance to the Tombs, or

the moment you could see it from the top of the stairs if the hill overhead were suddenly to vanish. They also argue about whether it's *our* moonrise, or when it would have been before the Pilots' last battle took the tops off the mountains east of Coriandel. I don't care. The door will open, I'll go through and kill the bonescuttle, my damn head will stop itching, Kerrem will write a poem about my adventures, Sehdie and I will get married, and we 'll all live happily ever after. And up will become down, black will become white, and the emir's thieves will stop collecting taxes.

Ishad calls out to me when I'm halfway up the steps. "Vurt!"

I turn around. He's sculled a couple of strides away from the stairs. The walls are glowing more brightly now, and I can see him clearly. He holds up my letter. "Sorry, lad. Soaked it when I got back in the boat. Guess you'll have to tell her yourself after all." I can't see his face, but I know he's grinning.

"I wish you taught archery, old man," I call back. "And I wish I had a bow right now."

He laughs. I shake my head and keep climbing.

I'm not afraid of heights. I stole eggs from birds' nests on Palace Mount when I was little, and played hawk and hares on the rooftops around the market when I was older. Every few years a kid falls trying to jump across an alley that's a little too wide, and the emir issues yet another decree banning the game, but it's like telling the wind not to blow.

So I'm not afraid of heights, but I still stay near the middle of the stairs and try not to look over the side. It's like being in a dream. The cavern's walls have been polished, once by magic and a second time by water. The soft blue-white light they give off leaves me shadowless, like a figure in a child's drawing. The only things that seem real are the spear in my hand and the scuff of my boots on the steps.

Fifty steps, then thirty, then ten. I stop one stair below the top. The wall in front of me is solid rock---

---and then suddenly it's a simple empty rectangle between before and after. Stairs identical to the ones I just climbed lead down into the Tombs---the actual Tombs---on the other side. The bonescuttle is waiting for me. I swallow and go looking for it.

Now: Patience Slumbers

I am patient. I snack on fish and worms and little things with many legs. I eat bigger things when they come my way, and I wait for my love to return.

Something I ate has woken up, but I cannot eat it a second time, and it cannot harm me. I would go back to sleep, but I hear paddling. Paddling means people, and people mean I might get a proper meal of sun-warmed flesh.

Might. Most lose their way on the other side of the door, or are eaten by something less patient than me. Time will tell.

In Between: Onnemeno and the Rats

He always knew how to find trouble, even as a baby. Our first two got into scrapes about as often as other children, but if Vurt saw a cat's tail, he had to pull it just so he could show us where it had scratched him. "I was only playing," he would say. "But the cat didn't know that," I would tell him. His answer was always, "Well, it should have."

It should have. And later, other children should have---should have wanted to play *kabbadi* instead of tag, should have wanted him to be the hawk for hawk and hares, should have, should have, should have. He was always angry, always hurt, always wondering why everyone else kept getting it wrong.

The only place he seemed to fit in was next door at Ishad's. From the time he was old enough to manage the ladder he went up onto the roof to watch the neighborhood bravos learn how to make holes in one another with sharp bits of metal. I eventually put a rush mat up there for him, and Meshash made a sun shade out of an old cloak and some wicker she salvaged at the market's edge so his head wouldn't bake. Some days we'd hear his footsteps on the roof as he imitated their drills with a stick in his hand. Other times he lay on his belly for hours with his chin on his forearms, watching the men and women below learn how to cripple and kill without being crippled or killed.

And sometimes he fell asleep up there. I couldn't carry him down the ladder, so I just put a blanket over him and left him until morning.

He started lessons himself on his eighth name day. He was two years younger than anyone else in his class, but already knew five salutes, nine parries, and three dirty tricks. At least, he thought he did. "I've never seen such a collection of bad habits in my life!" Ishad bellowed. "Where'd you learn to stand like that? Gaaah."

Vurt didn't cry until he got home. "I'm never going back!" he sobbed, angry and ashamed. But next morning he was up at dawn with a scowl on his face fit to frighten a troll. He put his feet where Ishad told him to, tucked his elbows in, and mastered every single combination the old braggart knew.

By the time he was ten he could rattle off the names of everyone who'd won a chain in the *umram* since the emir put on the royal collar. He could tell you what their favorite weapons were, what combinations they used, probably even what they had for dinner and how often they crapped. I took him to see the fights once in a while when we could afford it. It was never my cup of tea, and truth be told, we never really *could* afford it, but it was the only time we could sit together for more than a few minutes without getting into some kind of argument.

What we argued about most was ratcatching. Our deal was that he had to learn the trade, or there'd be no more lessons with Ishad. He sulked about it like the youngest child he was, but this was one thing I wouldn't let his mother bend me on. His older brother and sister were already out making their own way in the world. If he put half as much thought into traps and poisons as he did into feints and lunges, then by the time he was sixteen or seventeen he could earn enough catching rats to find a room somewhere like they had, and how he spent his time after that would be his own damned business.

He was thirteen when he came home bloody-nosed from a fight in the market and announced that wasn't going to happen. "Onne!" Meshash cried. "Onne, come quick, he's hurt!" I was in the back whittling a strip of bamboo to make a spring post for a gulper sack. I sighed, put my knife and the bamboo on my workbench, and headed inside to find out what he'd gotten himself into this time.

Meshash had him on a stool. His nose was still bleeding---there were drips on his shirt and the floor. "I' aw' righd," he protested, but she wouldn't be pushed away.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Some'ody hi' me." He snuffled.

"I can see that." I elbowed my wife aside and scowled at him. "Who did this?"

"Dunno," he mumbled.

"I'm going to get the guardsmen," Meshash said. "Onne, you stay with him."

"No! No' the guardsben! I'w be awrighd!" Vurt tried to stand up. I pushed him back onto the stool, harder than I meant to.

"Tell us what happened," I said flatly, "Or I'll get them myself."

It was like pulling teeth, but we finally got the story. Two boys, older than him, had been making jokes.

"What kind of jokes?" Meshash asked.

"'Boud radcadgers," he said sullenly. They had taken a few lessons from Ishad a year or two back, and remembered Vurt. When they saw him trying on plated gloves in the market, they had---

"Plated gloves? You mean for fencing?"

"I was jus' drying theb od," he said defensively. The cloth he was holding to his face was soaked red by this point. Meshash sluiced it out in a pan of water, wrung it dry, and put it back on his face.

But yes, he admitted, they were for fencing. The two boys had started making jokes about how tough Coriandel's rats must be if you needed gear like that to handle them.

"They juld would'd stob," he said, and my mind went back to my last-ever day of school. They just wouldn't stop either. D'you kiss them? Betcha do. Your girlfriend's a rat, isn't she, rat boy? I would have quit even without that---I could count money well enough, and sign my name, and anyway, with my father gone into the desert the year before with the scribbles, my mother needed me working.

"So what did you do?" Meshash asked him.

Vurt shrugged. "Hid 'em."

"Oh, Vurt..." She sighed and shook her head. "You should just have walked away."

"I did!" he protested. "Bud they caber abder be." He walked away, they came after him, and by the time it was over his nose was broken and his bag was gone.

"They stole your bag? Your good bag?" Meshash asked, a stricken look on her face. She had spent a month making that bag for him, though I don't imagine he remembered that.

"Id doedn't madder," he said sullenly. "I wuz'd going to uze id agaid adyway. I'b neber going radcadging again."

That's when I started shouting. And that's when Vurt said things a son should never say to his father, and I said things a father should never say to his son. What was wrong with catching rats? It was an honorable trade, even if people did say things sometimes. Was it beneath him? If it wasn't good enough for him, then maybe his own family wasn't either. Was he ashamed of us?

Meshash tried to quiet us both down, just like she always did, but this storm had been brewing a long time. I worked hard my whole life to give my children better than I had. They grew up in a proper house with a courtyard out back instead of in shacks that rented each room to a different family, cash in advance and the latrine's down the street. I gave them proper gear to get started with too, steel wire and cumin seed instead of twine and pigeon droppings scraped off the spice merchant's back wall. I wasn't going to let him throw all of that away for some fancy-dancing dream of people cheering him in the *umram*. Saints on stilts, if I heard one more word about it, I would thrash him!

He stood up. "You cad try," he said, turning his body sideways and bringing his hands up in fists.

I almost did it. I would have put him over my knee and spanked him like I did when he was four years old, but Meshash saved him the embarrassment. "Stop it!" she wept, stepping between us. "Both of you! Just stop it!"

Neither of us could stand to see her cry. I suddenly realized that I was breathing hard. Vurt lowered his arms uncertainly. "I'b goi'g to bed," he announced abruptly, and stalked away. My wife and I looked at each other. What were we going to do now?

I didn't like what Meshash came up with, but I didn't have anything better to offer, so I cleaned the bowl and wrung out the cloth she had used on Vurt's nose while she went next door to talk to Ishad. I was in the back trying to finish making my gulper sack when she returned.

"What did he say?" I asked.

She sat down in her usual place on the other side of the salvaged table we used as a workbench. The lines on her face hadn't been there twenty-five years before, and there was silver in her straight black hair now, but she was still as beautiful as the first time I saw her grinding coffee beans in her mother's stall in the market. "He said Vurt can pay for his lessons by cleaning up and helping out with the children." She shrugged, tired after a long day and weary of worrying about her youngest.

I grunted. "Maybe we should ask if he wants to adopt him."

"That's not funny," she said sharply, still on the edge of tears.

I put the knife and bamboo down on the table. "I know. I'm sorry." I reached across the table and took her hand.

She nodded. We sat there for a few moments, listening to the evening birds and the occasional bray from the donkey knacker's yard two doors down. Finally she sighed and took her hand from mine. "I'm going to bed."

"All right. I'll be up in a bit." I picked up my whittling knife and the half-finished spring post and went back to work.

Vurt and Meshash were both up and gone before me the next morning, him next door to Ishad's and her off to buy figs as a treat for dinner. I swallowed the bread, hard cheese, and cold beans she had left for me, then picked up my bag and headed off to work.

My first stop was the bakery down the end of the street. I had four traps under their floor, and six more in the rafters where the baker hung sacks of flour and bread. I didn't bother to string my fowling bow as I was checking them---the baker's cat wasn't Gifted, but she would have had her back up if there was anything skulking about.

My second stop was a leatherworker's yard. "Thought it were one of the 'prentices, but they all swear 'tish't," he had said when he hired me. He still had a hard Ossiss accent, though he'd been in Coriandel longer than I'd known Meshash.

He wasn't there that morning, but one of the apprentices was. "Here to check the traps," I told her. She waved me into the back of the shop.

I gave my eyes a few moments to adjust. Animal skins were stacked in untidy piles like sheets of bark. The place reeked of acrid dyes and the camel piss they use for curing.

I strung the fowling bow and loaded a quarrel with lady's molt and arsenic paste smeared on their barbs. I had three traps here, two whirligigs in the corners and a gulper sack on the wall with a bit of melon rind as bait. The gulper was empty. So was the first whirligig, but the second one---

"Well, hello there," I said softly to the raccoon chewing at the trap's wicker bars. He was no more than a yearling, black and sandy gray with a white flash in the middle of his forehead. I checked the walls carefully. No sign of an ambush. Nothing stirring in the rafters. I reached for the trap.

"Hello yourself," said a voice behind me. I whirled around. Four beady eyes met mine. A fowling bow that might have been the twin of mine was pointed at my chest. The two raccoons wrestling with it had been hiding under one of the piles of skins. Pilots alone know how they cocked it.

I let out a slow breath. The quarrel in their bow wasn't big enough to kill me, but---I thought about the lady's molt on my own quarrel and let out another slow breath.

"Oh, don't mind us," one of them said in a burr-edged northern accent. "Just carry on as you were. You *were* releasing him, weren't you?"

Releasing him? "Uh..." I started to lower my arms. "That's not the deal."

"Nuh nuh." The raccoon patted the bow. "We're fairly short-sighted, you know. Best if you keep those up where we can see them."

Damn the Gifted. And damn these two in particular. They were the nightmare and shame of every rat catcher in the city. They'd arrived a couple of years before full of wild

talk about Gifted rights and reparations and six other kinds of madness. When the emir told them to move on, they went underground instead and started playing vigilante.

A rat catcher I sometimes worked for when I couldn't find anything better was one of their first victims. He'd somehow come to own the gambling debts of a Gifted camel. She couldn't pay up, so the catcher sold the debt on to some Bantangui who had cotton to haul. When the camel started squalling about how that was illegal, the Bantangui would make a slave of her as soon as they were out of the city, he took a cudgel to her to teach her some manners.

Well, that very night, the raccoons left one of his own cross-splice traps in the night jar under his bed. He lived, but he never walked the same way afterward. The emir's guards didn't do more than take his name---His Grace doesn't care much for slavers---but word got around pretty quickly that anyone who hurt one of the Gifted had better watch themselves.

All of that flashed through my mind as I put my arms back up in the air. But... "Come on," I said as reasonably as I could under the circumstances. "You know how this works. I have to have *something* to show for my time or I'm going to be out of work."

Whatever the raccoons might have said was cut off by a flat *thwack!* The quarrel hit the wall a handspan above my head.

My guts just about let go. I ducked half a heartbeat too late. "What the hell what that for!?"

"Sorry!" the raccoon squeaked. "My paw slipped."

The hell with this. I raised my own bow and aimed it. One of the raccoons had scampered away, but the second was still hunkered down on the skins. I lined up a shot on her flank. "This little scrap of trouble must mean a lot to you."

Her tail twitched. "He does."

"Why? Is he Gifted?"

"No. But he *is* my son."

We stared at each other for a few heartbeats. Finally I sighed and lowered my bow. "Rot and salt. All right, hang on." I undid the knot at the top of the trap one-handed and

twisted the wicker so the little bastard could squeeze out. He scurried away as if his tail was on fire.

"Satisfied?" I asked. Silence. I turned around. She was gone. So was her fowling bow. I uncocked mine and carefully slipped the quarrel back into their case.

"Catch anything?" the apprentice asked me on my way out.

"Not today," I told her.

"Well, better luck next time."

The morning sun was blinding after the dark of indoors. I squeezed my eyes shut and waited for my heart to stop pounding in my ears.

When Vurt was little, he used to ride up to bed on my shoulders. Every night, I told him to watch his head, and every night he giggled and said, "I can't, daddy, my eyes are in my head!"

When he was six, he announced proudly that he didn't need my help any more. As I watched him clump up the stairs on his own, I thought my heart would break. It seemed to me like he'd been climbing stairs without me ever since.

I wiped my face with my sleeve. It didn't matter if he was a rat catcher, a duelist, or a dung shoveler. He was still my son. I picked up my bag and set off for my next job.

Recently: Eleñima Disapproves of Her Niece

I didn't realize at first that it was the sign for which I had been waiting so long, though I did of course know right away that I would have to do *something* about it. I mean, truly, a rat catcher? Persons of quality don't even *know* rat catchers. They certainly don't have liaisons with them. Gardeners perhaps, or guardsmen---they can be quite dashing in their uniforms. But a *rat catcher*? Even if I hadn't had plans for my niece, I certainly wouldn't let her disgrace herself and our family in such a manner as *that*.

But my first reaction was, yet again, to sigh. Correcting Sehdie's willfulness had somehow become a full-time occupation of late. Why, just a few weeks before the incident in question she asked if she could have her hair straightened in that horrible northern style. "Of course not," I told her. "You will leave it curly, and you will wear it short, like a princess." Oh, auntie, she said, but I will look so old-fashioned. "Never you mind about that," I told her. "Taste and breeding are *never* old-fashioned."

And then just to show her that I *did* love her, despite her flightiness, I went to her father and told him *quite firmly* that she needed a new outfit for the picnic season. He almost choked on his pomegranate when the seamstress's accounting arrived, but no matter---Sehdie looked splendid, straight-backed and long-necked with stars in her eyes like the sequins on her sleeves. Just a few sequins, of course---nothing reveals a lack of quality like gaudiness---but oh, how all those "fashionable" girls seethed at the attention she got after that. Young men and women lined up three at a time to recite poetry to her. Not that I let them, of course---it would have gone to her head.

They lined up for my sister in her day, and not just in threes. My cherished Awbé---always the sweetest-smelling flower in the garden, but always (dare I say it?) just a *teensy* bit flirtatious. Not me, though. I was the sensible one, my cherished sister's shadow and conscience. *I* was the one who kept track of all the stories her suitors told her so that I could reveal their mistruths and exaggerations to her. Oh, they didn't like me for that, not one bit, but duty is duty. Awbé might not always have appreciated everything I did for her, but between the balls and the picnics, and the afternoons and evenings in the royal garden on Palace Hill looking down on the city as the sun set, well, one can't complain.

I thought it would last forever. I thought we would be *together* forever, but suddenly one day my beloved sister was betrothed to---well. He was a good listener, or so Awbé said, and who am I to judge the heart of another?

But to salt loss with insult, my mother announced that I was to be my sister's handmaid! Her handmaid, if you will! I rather carried on at the news, wailing and weeping and throwing myself at my mother's feet and begging her, no, please, not that, but she wouldn't budge. "Perhaps it will teach you a little humility," she said, as if *I* was the proud one.

And so my fate was written, or so I thought: a room overlooking the rear courtyard in my sister's husband's house, sweet with the smell of potted jacarandas and unspent dreams. The only consolation was that I got to spend almost every moment with her when she was heavy with Sehdie, embroidering for the baby-to-be and gossiping as we had when it was just the two of us. I fetched her sweetened lemon juice when she asked for it, and spooled thread for her like a good sister should, and I was happy, *truly* happy.

Then Sehdie was born and Awbé...Awbé forgot all about me. "New mothers are always like that," the housekeeper told me, huffing and muttering when I pointed out that her wisdom had *not* been sought. It would have passed---I'm sure of it---but Awbé had her accident and all of a sudden I was truly, *horribly* alone. I wept day after day, just like my baby niece, but without a housekeeper to comfort me. It was weeks before I could face the world, and *years* before the saints gave me reason to hope once again.

It wasn't by the grace of the saints that I found out about the rat catcher, though. I allowed Sehdie to have friends visit once a week so that she could practice her Bantangui and dance steps. I gave them time to settle in, then slipped into the little storage cupboard next to her room to listen to what they were saying. It was not spying---I will not have it said that I was so poorly bred as to *spy*. But not everyone in the Hundred Houses had been raised by a firm hand, and with her mother gone, it was my responsibility to make sure she didn't stray.

"Did you see how he fought today?" her friend Cath  said breathlessly. She was always breathless, that one, and no wonder with so much of her stuffed into those too-bright foreign silks she favored. "He was like a wild stallion! Tessor never had a chance!"

Tessor? I frowned. Tessor Pennetanda   Pue had been one of her many suitors that season---a bit dissolute, but from a very respectable family. He fought in the *umram* from time to time, or so I had heard. But whatever would Sehdie have been doing there? She was supposed to be at her music lesson, not watching bravos beat each other with sticks.

"Yes, he was wonderful, wasn't he?" I heard Sehdie flop down on her chaise---her mother's chaise, as I still thought of it---and made a mental note to catch her doing it at some point so that I could correct her.

"Do you want to go and see him again tomorrow?" Cath  asked, undoubtedly thinking her tone was arch.

"Why not?" Sehdie replied nonchalantly. "Maybe Mare a will come with us this time."

Now, I am as loyal a subject of our emir as you'll find, but I must say, he isn't nearly as firm about some things as his aunt used to be. Women certainly weren't allowed into the *umram* when *I* was young. Oh, I know that Awb  and her friends bribed the gatekeepers once or twice when I wasn't there to remind them all that dueling wasn't something a true lady of quality would be interested in, and I've heard that *some* people used other means best not discussed to persuade the gatekeepers to look the other way, but the thought that my niece might frequent such a place was...distasteful. I owed it to her to find out more.

I smiled and made small talk with her at dinner that evening while my brother-by-marriage grunted an occasional "Is that so?" or "Really?" without actually listening to us. She was as well-mannered as I had taught her to be, but I could tell from the look in her eyes that her mind wasn't really on what I was saying. She was restless, and in a seventeen-year-old, restless is the same thing as dangerous.

The next morning, after Sehdie left for her lessons, I had my houseman Rojyar escort me six streets to Shau Sheu's. I walked more quickly than I should have, so to my

embarrassment, I was perspiring faintly by the time I reached her front door. I paused a moment to let Rojyar fan me while I composed myself.

Shau Sheu's home lay just outside the Hundred Houses proper, in a neighborhood I would call comfortable rather than tasteful. Its front courtyard was paved with pale pink sandstone. Darker blocks outlined the arched entrance at the front and the inner arch that led to the private courtyard in the rear. A mechanical oudh played softly in the corner, and the air smelled faintly of sandalwood and foreign spices.

Shau Sheu's houseman greeted me at her front gate with a full bow. It was only mid-morning, but half a dozen ladies of quality had already taken places on the shaded chaises in the front courtyard. I exchanged pleasantries with those I knew and nodded graciously to those I didn't while I waited for the houseman to convey my message to his mistress. We were all of a certain age, and all here for the same things: coffee and conversation, advice on marriage, divorce, fashion, and dalliance, and most of all, someone who would listen, *really* listen, while you poured out your heart... Shau Sheu gave us all that and more, and her bills were so discreet.

The houseman returned. "The honored mistress would welcome your company, honored mistress," he said solemnly. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw one of the gossipers pout. I smiled inside. She would just have to wait.

Shau Sheu was relaxing on her roof beneath a brightly-colored parasol. She rose and smiled as I reached the top of the stairs, looking hardly a day older than she had when we first met. Her hair was still silky black, without a single silver thread. The corners of her mouth creased ever so slightly when she smiled, but they had always done that, and the creases still vanished when her face became solemn once again.

We touched palms and kissed each others' cheeks, then sat while her housekeeper filled our thimbles with rich, dark coffee. We talked about little nothings for a few moments, just old friends settling in for a real conversation. Then I set my coffee aside and told her what I had overheard.

"A bravo?" she mused, tracing the line of her jaw with the tip of one finger as she often did when she was thinking. It had been twenty years since she fled Ini Bantang for

Coriandel, and despite my gentle hints, she still painted her nails. That morning they glistened white against her rich brown skin.

"So it seems," I sighed. "Honestly, I don't know what this city is coming to. You certainly wouldn't have seen a young woman of quality making eyes at a bravo in *my* day."

"Really?" She arched one perfectly-shaped eyebrow. "I seem to recall you telling me once about a picnic you and your sister enjoyed with a couple of bravos of your own."

I blushed. "Well, that was---" And then her words collided with each other in my head and I gasped aloud. Could it---could this be it? Could it *finally* be *time*?

"Cherished, are you all right?" Shau Sheu asked, leaning forward to place her hand on my arm.

"A bravo..." I breathed. "Just like Awbé's. And she's the right age, she's *exactly* the right age. Do you think...?" I couldn't finish the question.

Shau Sheu's eyes widened as she realized what I was saying. She took her hand back and studied me, her normal look of sympathy and understanding replaced by one more serious. "Perhaps," she finally said. She sipped her coffee. "Time will tell."

Time will tell. She had been saying that for years. She had warned me at the start that her special kind of magic would be slow, but I hadn't realized it would be *this* slow, and---well. Even a woman of quality can become impatient.

Her housekeeper arrived at just that moment with a small bowl of sugared almonds. She was Bantangui as well, older than Shau Sheu, with the shaved head of one of their servant caste and rather vulgar tattoos of crossed bones on the backs of her hands. One of Shau Sheu's other clients claimed that meant she was a pirate, but another said no, it meant she had been a doctress of some sort. Neither took it well when I reminded them that it was undignified to speculate about the staff of another's house.

The housekeeper cleared her throat. Shau Sheu glanced at her, raising one eyebrow. Her housekeeper ducked her head slightly. "Honored, I have heard..." she ventured, setting the beaten silver bowl on the table beside the coffee. "In the *umram*. Vurt, his name is. He has already won five chains. I believe he is fighting again today, honored."

Shau Sheu pursed her lips. "Is anything said of his family?"

The housekeeper ducked her head again. "I believe his father is a rat catcher, honored."

A rat catcher? Sehdie was---a *rat catcher*? "Thank you," I said, my voice was colder than perhaps it should have been. The housekeeper ducked her head a third time and removed herself.

"Well," Shau Sheu said diplomatically a moment later. "Perhaps there has been a misunderstanding. Perhaps your niece was referring to someone else. I'm sure she wouldn't..." Her voice trailed off.

"Of course not," I said brightly. I sipped my coffee. "Mm, but this is wonderful. I really must send my cook to yours for lessons."

Between the almonds and further pleasantries it was half an hour before I collected Rojyar and left. The mid-day sun drove passers-by into the narrow shadows at the side of the street, beating down on the parasol he held over my head with all the vigor of a washerwoman beating stains out of cotton. When I was young, it would have been considered vulgar for a woman of my station to walk rather than ride in a sedan chair. The emira-that-was set a fashion for it, though, and I myself have always found it invigorating---it gives one time to think.

I certainly thought about many things during the walk home from Shau Sheu's. As we approached my brother-by-marriage's house, I announced that I found myself desiring more air.

Rojyar nodded his obedience without speaking. It had always been one of his better traits, not speaking. He was discreet as well as efficient, and in all the years since Awbé and I had moved into her husband's house, I had only twice had to have him beaten. He would keep what he saw to himself, I was sure of it.

We continued briskly through the city streets, me with my arms tucked into my sleeves, Rojyar a pace behind me, the parasol bobbing slightly over my head. Merchants nodded to me as they passed, mindful I suppose of future business, and a beggar called to us from his perch above the door of an alms house. He hopped down nimbly enough when Rojyar held up a copper bezel---proof again that most of them could find employment if

they really wanted to. But our emir permits them to ply their trade, and I suppose it's better than having them forming mobs and burning down honest people's homes as I have heard they do elsewhere.

The buildings around us grew sturdier and more practical as we went east. Doctresses and cabinet makers replaced goldsmiths and jurists, and were in turned replaced by saddle menders and less reputable jurists. The streets narrowed as well, until the buildings on either side were close enough for people to stretch awnings between them. The shade was rather welcome, as I found myself perspiring again.

Soon enough we found ourselves at the *umram*. It was smaller than I expected. The arena itself was an oval, twenty-five strides long and twenty across, with common benches under rickety pigeon-spattered roofs on the long sides, and proper seating at either end.

"We will observe," I told Rojyar. "Discreetly."

"Yes, honored mistress." He spoke with the one-eyed man who stood at the entrance. Coins changed hands. A few minutes later I lowered myself gingerly onto a particularly uncomfortable wooden seat and tried *not* to speculate about who might have sat on its thin cotton cushions before me.

We waited in silence for the next match to begin. After a few moments, the man seated behind me---a complete stranger---cleared his throat and leaned forward. "Your pardon, honored mistress, but might one request that a parasol be withdrawn, the better to aid the view of others present?"

I didn't turn my head. "Rojyar, has an introduction taken place?"

"No, honored mistress," he replied stolidly.

"I thought not." Honestly, some people have no manners to speak of.

I waited. We can be patient, old women. Oh yes, I'm old. I can see it in men's eyes on the street, or when I enter a room. I can see it most clearly when Sehdie enters a room with me. I am old, but what stories do I have to tell for all my years? "She did her best to make her niece a proper lady." I wanted a better story than that. I *deserved* a better one, and perhaps, just perhaps, the time had finally come for me to write it.

So I waited through two noisy, vulgar displays of bravos beating each other with sticks until *he* came out to the oval. Vurt Meshash é Onnemenno, Vurt of Meshash the mother, of Onnemenno the father. A nothing, the kind of person one wouldn't even notice if one didn't have to, whose greatest dream was no doubt to win a place at the stirrup of some foreign leather merchant no better bred than himself and escape the alleys he had been born in.

A few in the common seats cheered when he was announced. He was young, not tall, bare-armed and confident in the blazing sun. Handsome too, I suppose, if one likes them dark and swaggering, and I could see the chip on his shoulder from where I was sitting. I could also see how an impressionable girl Sehdie's age might be taken by him, but---truly, I thought I had done better with her. I truly did.

His opponent that day was new to Coriandel's *umram*. A village bravo, I guessed, hoping to catch some caravaneer's eye. They fought with long staves, each tipped with a brush dipped in red paint so the judge could see where the pretend spear-head had struck. I didn't watch the bout (which, I must say, was mercifully brief). Instead, I studied the common benches one eager face at a time.

There. Three together, veiled and hatted. They might have been Bantangui, except for the fourth who stood behind them. That was my brother-by-marriage's senior clerk's junior houseman, cheering the bout as keenly as his three charges.

"Is something wrong, honored mistress?" Rojyar asked. I must have been grinding my teeth---a disgraceful habit, I know, but from time to time, one forgets oneself.

"On the right, half-way up, where the blue-and-green pennant hangs. Is that one not familiar to you?"

Rojyar sucked air in through his teeth. "He is seen," he muttered.

"One trusts words will be spoken," I sniffed pointedly.

"Of course, honored mistress." Words would indeed be spoken. And ears would burn, and by tomorrow, a certain junior houseman would find himself in search of new employment. He was supposed to escort them to their lessons and then home. This---*this* was outrageous!

A cheer went up as Vurt scored his third and final touch. He bowed to the judge, then turned and bowed to my Sehdie. Not to the common benches together, and not to her companions---I will not use the word "friend" for anyone who would let her embarrass herself in public in such a manner. No, he bowed to *her*, to Sehdie, and she raised her hand and waved back to him.

And then I saw *him* and felt a chill as if a ghost had stepped through me. He was older, and the last of his hair was gone, but he was still broad across the shoulders, and when he hopped over the railing onto the *umram*'s sandy floor and walked over to Vurt, I knew his walk.

It was Ishad.

"I have seen everything I need to," I announced as calmly as I could, standing. Rojyar bowed his head without speaking. He had seen Sehdie and Vurt. He would assume that was why I was unsteady. He didn't know about Ishad. He *couldn't* know. No one could. But him being here meant I was right. *It's time*, I kept repeating to myself. *It is time. It is finally time.*

I marched out of the *umram* looking neither left nor right. Rojyar hurried to keep pace with me. "Stop that," I said sharply, hearing him mutter, "Excuse us, pardon us," to passers-by.

"Yes, honored mistress."

Vurt Meshash é Onnemenno, I thought, and Ishad. Well, well, well. As I hurried home through streets nearly emptied by the sun's glare, I smiled.

Now: Vurt's Oath

I swallow hard and step through the Moonrise Door. It's a stupid thing to do, but I've done stupid things before. That fight in the market when I was thirteen, for example. I should have just told my father that I didn't want to be a rat catcher. I could have given my traps and gear to my brother and sister instead of picking a fight with two guys twice my size. That's what Ishad said when he set my nose. It didn't heal straight. Kerrem says it looks dashing, but it's really just crooked.

Falling in love with Sehdie was stupid too. It wasn't as if she was the only pretty girl who snuck into the *umram* to watch the fights. Most of them would have been thrilled out of their skirts to have a five-chain champion as a sweetheart, but I hardly even saw them after I saw her. Kerrem says it's just like me to only want something I can't have, but Kerrem says a lot of things.

Still, a blood oath to kill the bonescuttle? That's the salt-stupidest thing I've ever done. The oath is like an itch I can't reach or a name I can't quite remember. I haven't slept properly in days, every meal sits in my stomach like a stone, and it's getting worse. Ishad says he's never seen one take hold so hard or so fast, and if *he's* worried, I should probably be dropping turds in my trousers.

The steps lead down to a cavern larger than the one I just came through. The wall is still moon-blue behind me, but the glow is starting to fade, and the only other light is from the dayglass in my lantern. Kerrem would probably think it's poetic. Such is life, he'd say, a spark of light in the darkness. I don't know what my spear, my boots, or the knot in my gut would represent, but I'm sure he'd find a way to work them in. I wish he was here.

The air gets colder as I trudge down the steps. The only sounds are my boots on the steps, the faint squeaking from my pack, and the steady drip from overhead.

The cavern floor is studded with damp, stony warts where those drips land. There's a dark pool in the middle of it. That will be my way out, if I live long enough to use it. I walk around it and head for the Bridge of Shame.

I've known all my life that there's another world beneath Coriandel, but I didn't really understand what that meant until I started looking at the maps that Kerrem

borrowed or "borrowed" from his bookster friends. Most were written by people who went under and survived, and most of them agreed with stories Ishad told. On the far side of the cavern there's a gate that leads to the Bridge of Shame. Once I'm past that there's a stone garden with a well in its center. "Stick to the walls," Kerrem told me, tracing the route with his finger. "A few nicks and scrapes won't kill you, but the things down the bottom of that well surely will. If it even *has* a bottom," he added. I punched him in the shoulder for that, but my heart wasn't in it. He really was trying to help.

Beyond the stone garden there's another gate, and then the undercity proper. If the saints love me, I'll find the bonescuttle there. All I have to do is kill it, retrace my steps, get past whatever is in the pool these days, and I'll be free of my oath. And then---

I shake my head and tell the faint, frightened squeaks coming from my pack to shush. I have plenty to worry about before I get to "and then".

But my thoughts keep flying away from me like they do before a match in the *umram*. Sehdie's father isn't a bad man. He just thinks his daughter can do a thousand times better than a rat catcher's youngest son, and he's right. Half the young fancies in the Hundred Houses want to fall in love with her. They write poems and feel sorry for themselves without ever having spoken to her. She could have the best oudh player in the whole of the Karaband, or either under-captain of the emir's guard, or an idle posher like Tessor Pennetanda é Pue who's going to inherit a mansion on Nobles' Hill some day that's only one room smaller than the royal palace. Sehdie's father wouldn't laugh at *him* if he said, "I wish to share a life with your daughter."

But he laughed at me. "You?" We were in the front courtyard of his house. It was modest enough considering how high he was in the emir's service, with dwarf lemon trees in pots in the corners and a single stick of incense burning in the central garden in memory of Sehdie's mother. He did me the courtesy of standing when his housekeeper showed me in, but didn't offer me anything to drink. I introduced myself, Vurt Meshash é Onnemeno art' Ishad, Vurt of Meshash the mother, Onnemeno the father, apprenticed to Ishad but not indentured, and then---

"You and my daughter? Pfah!" He's taller than me, heavy-set, with just a fringe of wiry white hair above his ears. Looking at accounts all his life has given him a squint.

"I wish to share a life with your daughter," I repeated as calmly as I could. "And I have reason to believe, honored sir, that she wishes to share one with me."

That got his attention. Sehdie told me once, laughing, that if a week went by without someone proposing, her father would wonder if she was ill. An offer had even arrived by proxy once from a carpet maker in Dry Weeping. She had never even been to Coriandel, but had heard about Sehdie from a cousin.

Proposing marriage with no hope of success was something young men and women were expected to do. But claiming that the offer was welcome was an entirely different sack of rats. Her father's eyes narrowed. "Reason? What reason?"

My pulse raced, but I kept my voice steady. "I have spoken with your daughter, honored sir. About my feelings for her. And she has spoken to me about hers. I believe that---"

"Feelings? Pfah! My daughter doesn't have feelings. Or if she does, she's far too sensible to speak of them." He took a little bell from the table beside his reading stool and rang it sharply. "My man will show you out."

"But I am not done, honored sir." Calmly, I told myself. I unclenched my hands. Lose your temper, lose the fight, that's what Ishad always said. Well, one of the things he always said. *Just breathe*, I thought. *Just this once, just breathe*.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw his houseman step into the courtyard from whatever discreet corner he'd been lurking in. Rojyar, that was his name. I was sure I could best him, despite the heavy baton in his hand, but then her father could have me called on for assault. Calmly, calmly... "I have spoken with your daughter, and---"

"That may be, but you will not do so again. Am I understood?" He laughed angrily. "You! What are you to her? Eh? And what kind of life would you share with her? What are you, boy, a bricklayer? A coffee seller? Will you have her stand in a stall in the market roasting coffee for whoever passes by? Or will she grind the beans, while you do the roasting?"

"He is a rat catcher." The voice came from above us, from a middle-aged woman in a severe black robe who was watching us from a balcony. Her jaw was a little too heavy for her to be called beautiful, but her vowels were perfect. It was Sehdie's aunt, the one who was never happy with anything.

"A rat catcher?" Sehdie's father spluttered. "Traps and poisons and waiting around sewer mouths with a hammer in your hand to murder whatever poor Gifted beast comes crawling out? What kind of life is that?"

Lose your temper, lose the fight. I lost the fight. "Not much of one, honored sir, to be honest. But at least it would get her out of the cage you keep her in."

"Cage? What cage?" He waved a hand to take in the elegant courtyard. "I have given her everything her mother would have wanted for her. What would you give her? I wager that rag is the best shirt you own, if not the only one. It would not buy her grapes for her breakfast. Never mind the perfume she uses in a single bath," he added under his breath.

"Love makes what paths it needs," I quoted. Kerrem would have been proud of me for remembering that line, though a little hurt to hear his favorite shirt spoke of that way.

"And what paths are these?" asked Sehdie's aunt from on high. "Will you bring her the jewels of the Sad Prince? Or become a magician and conjure up what you cannot afford to buy honestly? No, wait, a thought, a thought. This underbeast that lately does plague the city---will you slay it to win the emir's favor, like that braggart master of yours once did?"

"If needs be," I replied angrily, not thinking to wonder why someone like her would know who Ishad was.

"Braggart," she said flatly. "You are all of a kind, braggarts and liars and debauchers and cheats. You could no more slay that beast than you could bring my poor sister back to us."

"No?" I drew my knife from my belt and cut across my left palm. "On my blood, I swear, I will slay the bonescuttle and see your daughter free."

"What? No, no!" Sehdie's father pulled a white cotton handkerchief from his sleeve, hoping I think to stop the bleeding, but he was too late. One drop, two, a third---it was done.

All of a sudden I tasted copper in my mouth. A chill stiffened my spine as a sudden urge to be elsewhere took hold of me. There was something I needed to do...

I raised my hand and spread my fingers, thinking, *Saints, what have I done now?* The wound had already healed and scarred. The oath had taken. One in a thousand, once in a lifetime---everyone gave different odds, but everyone knew the sign.

Sehdie's aunt's gasped, then giggled like a little girl. Clapping her hands over her mouth to stifle herself, she spun around and disappeared into the room behind her.

Sehdie's father glared at me. "How dare you?" he spat, tossing the handkerchief to the ground petulantly. "How dare you swear a blood oath in my house? I am a respectable man, and there are laws about such things! Do you hear me? There are---oh, to the Moon with you! Rojyar, summon my jurist. 'I will slay this creature, and see your daughter free.' Those were his words, were they not? His exact words?"

"Yes, honored sir," the houseman replied solemnly. "His exact words."

I realized that I was still holding my knife. I pulled the kerchief I had also borrowed from Kerrem out of my sleeve, wiped it, and slipped it back into its sheath, then wiped the blood from my hand. The back of my head was itchy. "Honored sir," I said, bowing. "We will speak again."

He pursed his lips. "I doubt it," he replied. There was no pity in his eyes, no respect. I really was just a rat catcher's son to him, no better than the animals I hunted. He waved at his houseman to show me out.

Ishad was furious. "At least you didn't swear to do it barehanded," he grunted, painting my brand-new scar with some foul-smelling grease the Darpani used on cows' udders so that it wouldn't tighten as it finished healing. "Or blindfolded."

"Cork it, old man," I said, then yelped as he dug his thumb into my palm. "Ow!"

He glared at me, just as Sehdie's father had. I sometimes think there is a secret school that trains old men to look and sound like that. Their scowls, their grunts of disapproval---they're too much alike for it to just be chance.

We were sitting in his rear courtyard. It was long and narrow, a brick-floored rectangle barely wide enough for our two stools and the side table where he kept his salves

and polishes and a few foul-smelling concoctions that could serve as either. Rough wooden shelves took up half of one wall. The blunted weapons stacked on them were probably half as old as the city itself. A dozen crosses on heavy pedestals stood against the other wall. Padded leather armor hung on each one to dry out after the day's lessons. I could smell them even above the reek of the Darpani grease. Ishad kept promising to replace their quilted cotton linings, but never got around to it.

I smelled onions frying next door as well. My mother was starting dinner. "And at least you didn't swear you'd do it tonight," Ishad grumbled. "Think you can sit on it for a few days? Might be able to find a magician desperate enough to try and break it for you. If not here, then there's this grass thrower I used to know up in Ossisswe..."

I shook my head. "I don't think so." The itch, the feeling that I had to be up and doing something, something important, was growing worse by the hour. I wanted to bang the back of my head against a wall to ease it.

He sat back and frowned. "You sure? I've met folk that had blood oaths hanging over them. From what they said and what else I heard, they had weeks or even more before it got so bad that they couldn't sit still." His frown deepened. "Never heard of one coming on as quickly as this."

"Give it a rest," I snapped. "I can't afford a magician good enough to take this off me. And even if I could, what would I say to Sehdie? I can't---"

"Damn Sehdie!" he exploded. The jar of salve jumped as he thumped the table. "And damn you for an idiot, swearing an idiot oath like that. This is your soul we're talking about here, lad, not just some painted froth of a girl."

I stood. "Call her that again, and we will see whether you have anything left to teach me."

He glared back at me, then sighed and shook his head. "Idiot," he repeated wearily, at me or maybe at himself. "Go on, go home, get some food in you. I'll think on this. Gaaah..."

I got up reluctantly. Getting food meant telling my mother, and I really didn't want to do that. I had too, though---she would hear about it soon enough if I didn't, and I wanted to make sure she didn't get some version that had me off to fight the dragon. A blood oath for

love? The houseman might keep his mouth shut, but the rest of the staff would have been watching too, which meant the tale was probably halfway to Ossisswe before I reached Ishad's.

I told Kerrem first. I had to---he needed his shirt back, and I had to explain why there was blood on his kerchief. His first thought was to turn it into a ballad. Sehdie's father would be the villain, of course, a cruel monster who kept his daughter locked away with the rest of his treasure. In fact, by all accounts he was a decent man, despite what he thought of people like me. He hadn't remarried after Sehdie's mother died, and had kept his wife's sister in his home long after he could have turned her out.

Sehdie's aunt was the real monster, at least according to Sehdie. She was as bitter as a banana peel. She didn't think anything good had happened since the emir's aunt passed on the collar, and insisted Sehdie dress in clothes that even I knew had long since gone out of style. And she made Sehdie take lessons in diction and deportment. "I swear she keeps a list somewhere," Sehdie told me the first time we were alone together. "Everyone in Coriandel is on it, and every time they forget to roll an 'R', she puts a little tick beside their name."

I left all of that out when I told my mother what I'd done. She didn't cry---she wasn't the crying kind. But the look on her face... I'm the youngest, born years after my brother and my sisters. "Late for Luck," they say, but I had disappointed her so many times. Slipping out my window at night to watch Ishad teach city guardsmen how to fight dirty, when my sister had been weaving traps for a few extra bezels from the day she was apprenticed. Getting into fights whenever someone made a joke about rat catchers, when my brother was as peaceful as an old donkey. She didn't know why I was so restless, any more than I did. And now this.

She shook her head. "I wish---" She stopped herself before saying it, just like she always did. *I wish your father was here.*

"I'm sorry," I said for the dozenth time. He would have yelled at me just like Ishad. All of a sudden I missed him terribly. I got up and went over to my mother and put my arms around her.

We ate in silence, black beans and fried onions on couscous with a bit of soft cheese and yesterday's peppers. I scraped the pots and dishes clean with a damp rag and a handful of sand, then rinsed them and went to bed.

The cut on my hand was a faint smooth line by morning. I had secretly hoped that it would somehow vanish overnight, then been ashamed of my cowardice. A few mouthfuls of cold couscous with a fried egg didn't improve my mood. Neither did a workout in Ishad's yard. Sword and spear, footwork exercises, fifty times up the rope that hung against his wall---it usually calmed me down, but it seemed that nothing could make the itch in the back of my head go away.

A few of his paying students sparred with me after I finished my warmup. I fenced with them furiously, one on one or one against two, while Ishad shouted himself hoarse. "Pick up your feet! Yes, those feet, the big flat ones at the ends of your legs! And follow through, damn it! No, no, from the same side, backhand, or he'll---gaaah."

Kerrem showed up as the last of them were sponging the sweat out of their armpits. "It's fate," he said, trying to find a bright side as always. "Sehdie, the bonescuttle, your oath... It's fate. It has to be."

"Well then three cheers for fate," I said sourly. I was doing slow drills, out, across, up, and back down, over and over again, watching the tip of my sword for the first sign of trembling.

"I'm serious." He stood, wincing as his knee cracked. "What if the whole point of Ishad's life was to make you ready for this? I mean, him killing a bonescuttle, you being born right next door, and now another bonescuttle---it can't be a coincidence."

"You're right---it's not. It's idiocy." Ishad was back. He had his breastplate on, and was sweating freely in the morning heat. "Let's see if we can seat a bit of it out of you." We practiced for an hour before the sun drove us indoors to eat and rest. That was when Ishad started teaching me all those stupid combinations.

But he was right---time *was* wasting. I felt it with every breath. Kerrem said his whole family had argued it around and around when they got word, and had agreed that

had to see the oath through or my soul would wander unbound until some dark thing ate it or some kind-hearted magician laid it to rest.

They're not short on imagination, Kerrem's family, but maybe this time they were right. Maybe fate *had* brought the bonescuttle. It was a dangerous foe, shaped like a scorpion but armored like a tortoise, with claws as big as my two hands put together. Its barbed tail and the lower parts of its legs were fleshless, just dry tendon over naked bone.

And it was smart---not Gifted smart, but smart enough to drag its prey back to the Tombs instead of picking them apart where it caught them. The first few times goats disappeared, people probably assumed it was just an unlicensed thief or someone hungry enough to risk the wrath of the guild.

Then it took an orphaned beggar with a bent leg. She screamed, but the people who live near Tombs Hill aren't the sort to come out at night when they hear screaming. It was just chance that a leather mender saw it dragging her body into an abandoned warehouse. He threw stones at it, but they just bounced off, and anyway, her body was already smoldering from the bonescuttle's poison.

The city guards blocked up the crack in the warehouse floor, but the bonescuttle just found another way to the surface. Another goat, and then a caravaneer sleeping rough between rides, taken in his sleep three streets from where the beggar girl died.

I shake my head to clear it. I'll die like they did if I don't keep my wits about me. I've reached the tunnel that leads to the Bridge of Shame. Its floor is polished stone, unmarked by time or dripping water. You could drive two carts through it side by side, and my lantern's light seems even smaller than it did in the cavern behind me. I heft my spear and keep moving.

Now: Kerrem Brings Two Guardsmen a Drink

Some stories have to be dragged into the world. No, they're like... telling them is like building a house in a sandstorm. Like a breech birth. Like... saints, like a simile that won't come right.

Other stories write themselves, and Vurt's is one of those. I felt it the first day I met him, and by the time we were old enough to shave I was sure of it. He was born for adventure: the youngest son of a humble family, handsome when he isn't scowling, and he just happens to have a craggy old hero living next door to teach him swordplay. It's perfect.

I'm actually a bit disappointed that Ishad isn't going to go all the way into the Tombs with him, back to the scene of his own triumph. He could throw himself between Vurt and the bonescuttle's sting, then reveal that he is Vurt's real father before expiring in our young hero's arms. The Ruudian novels that my next-to-oldest sister loves so much are full of scenes like that, and they're very popular.

Not that I wish Ishad dead. He's good company, and the rogues who drop by his house to cadge a glass from him are full of quotable stories. And if Vurt comes looking for me after all of this is over, I'll probably want Ishad there to calm him down.

My family are booksters. We are account keepers and writers of oaths, letters, and wills. I grew up in a house filled with paper and disputation, one of six children and innumerable cousins in ordinary, cousins by marriage, and cousins by it being the simplest thing to call the daughter of your mother's sister's husband's brother who lives a pot's throw away and is always underfoot. I slept at the foot of my oldest brother's bed until I was six, and counted myself lucky after that not to have to sleep under the stairs like an apprentice magician in a children's story.

Vurt's home seemed as quiet as the desert by comparison. In my house, people never just talked. They declaimed, with one hand on their heart and the other uplifted in a dramatic pose taken from the frontpiece of some play or other. And they used words like "scoundrel" in everyday conversation. When Vurt's parents talked, on the other hand, they just talked, or at least they did when his father was still alive. Did you finish plugging the hole in the baker's storeroom wall? Did the coffee merchant come to see you about the

poison we laid down last week? She thinks it must be stale---there are rat droppings all around it. How much longer do you think it will be until we can afford to repaint the rear courtyard?

They were happy to let me sit there and soak up that beautiful silence. And they fed me, which aspiring poets are always grateful for. I helped Vurt learn numbering and the abracadabra, and got browned onions and raisins in return. (My father wasn't a bad cook, but he couldn't read a recipe without wanting to try it out, and since we usually couldn't afford the actual ingredients, we ate a lot of unfortunate experiments at my house. Brown onions and raisins were very comforting after pickled kangaroo sausages with stewed fennel.)

I met Vurt at Ishad's. My father decided one day that I needed to learn a modicum of the physical arts. That was his exact phrase: "a modicum of the physical arts." There was an argument, of course. My mother quoted Cuyver, "A man's sum is fixed by the stars of his birth / It lies to him only to choose the disposing thereof," while my father cited Arramettetmerruk, "Sense and spirit are as two horses harness'd together / Match pace and pull, or the carriage goes astray."

My oldest-but-one sister, who is the only sensible one in the family (despite her taste in novels) eventually interrupted to point out that lessons in swordplay cost money, actual real money, which was not as easily found in our house as good grammar or split hairs. Unwilling to concede defeat because of mere facts, my father put on his long coat and went to speak with the swordsmaster himself. He would write letters and review oaths, he said. No money needed change hands (which meant that his lack of it would conveniently not be an issue). They pressed their palms together, and it was done. I would henceforth spend an hour every Redsdays, Yellowdays, and Bluesdays morning learning how to pummel my fellow human beings.

And so I found myself the next day in Ishad's front courtyard looking sidelong at two wood-and-leather dummies, a rack of wicked-looking implements, and half-a-dozen boys who to my young eyes all appeared to be hardened criminals. I was not a gutterside

brawler. I never boxed ears, bloodied noses, or held another boy's face in a horse trough until he raised three fingers in surrender. I was a *poet*, and very much out of place.

Ishad stumped into the courtyard, wiping his shaved head with a scrap of towel. "*Heshidi*," he said curtly.

"*He mashe sidi*," we replied in unison. I knew that much, at least. I studied the boy to my right as surreptitiously as I could. He was a palm shorter than me, with his head shaved in imitation of his teacher's. I caught him glancing at me. We both looked away immediately, embarrassed in the way strangers are by eye contact.

"Mountain Stream parries to start today," Ishad announced. "Teshwe, you pair with the new boy. Vurt, you're with Aaru."

So, the boy next to me was Vurt. And Teshwe was the heavy one with two missing teeth that I didn't think had fallen out of their own accord. "*He sidi*," I said politely, the greeting of equals to equals.

"*He*," he grunted rudely as he strode past me to the rack on the wall. He picked up a wooden staff with quilted cotton wrapped around its ends and a pair of leather gloves with small wooden plaques sewn onto their backs. I followed his lead, feeling foolish and afraid. I took the smallest pair of gloves I could find, but they still made me feel like a carnival clown in giant's clothes. They stank, too, of old sweat and softening oil. And the staffs were heavier than they looked. I learned later that their ends were weighted with three thumbs of iron.

We squared off, Teshwe with his back to our teacher, me with my heart in my throat. "*Nais!*" Ishad called sharply. Up came the staffs, mine last. "*Ehhhh... teh!*"

Teshwe snapped his staff sideways. Mine flew from my hands to clatter on the courtyard bricks. "Pick it up," Ishad said sternly. "And don't drop it again. Remember, empty hands---"

"Full grave!" the other boys said in unison. I picked up my staff, my cheeks burning, and raised it again. *Crack! Clatter...* Teshwe bared his teeth. Ishad glared at me. I picked up my staff and raised it again, holding it with all my strength.

This time Teshwe put his weight behind his blow. *Crack! Clatter...* "Oy!" My staff bounced end-over-end and struck Vurt's leg. I blurted a quaking apology, afraid that the two of them would now beat me together and even more afraid that I would start crying.

Vurt stepped back from his opponent with a small bow and picked up my staff. "Hm," he said, sighting along its length. "I think I see the problem. Here." He thrust his staff at me. I skipped back a step before I realized he was handing it to me.

I took it from him gingerly. He clucked his tongue at Teshwe and raised my staff slowly to guard. "*Teh!*" he said sharply.

Scowling, Teshwe glanced at Ishad for guidance. Our teacher shrugged. The other boys had all stopped to watch, half-raised staffs forgotten. Teshwe brought his up, paused for a heartbeat, then snapped it sideways with a grunt.

Crack! Clatter... "You see?" Vurt said, stooping to pick up the staff he had very obviously just dropped. "It was slippery. It was no wonder you dropped it. Why don't you use mine with Aaru for a bit? It'll do my grip good to work with yours."

Two weeks later, Teshwe was gone and Vurt and I were best friends. Ishad took all kinds in his courtyard, but none with a brand on their cheek, and Teshwe had been caught lifting a pair of candlesticks from a coralsmith's.

I stopped going to lessons after a year, but not Vurt. He had a gift---anyone could see that. He paid for his lessons by helping Ishad with the younger students, the eight-year-olds for whom lessons were more an organized game than anything else. When he wasn't doing that, he fenced with boys two and three years his senior. He was as fierce as an angry ferret, and he hated losing almost as much as he seemed to love being yelled at.

"Up!" Ishad would bellow. "Up, up, get your blade up! No, not that high! You're not trying to give him a haircut, you oaf! And where are your feet? Stupid, stupid, stupid." Sometimes he forgot himself, and then we learned new words as well as new blocks and attacks. Ruudian, Gandani, Darpani, Bantangui... By the time he was thirteen, Vurt could tell me how to commit indecent crimes in all of them. I wrote them all down, of course, and if I hadn't left my notes where my mother could find them, I could probably have made a few bezels renting them to my friends.

And by the time *I* was thirteen, I knew what I was meant to do. Vurt was going to be a hero, and I was going to be his poet. Just ask yourself, who would Arshad would be without Terremaktikak? How famous would Lady Kembe be without Juan di Perçalle's *Fourteen Nights on Glass*? Cuyver even argued that poets make heroes, though admittedly she retracted her statement following Boru the Beheader's offer to demonstrate that heroes could unmake poets.

Vurt the Victorious. He scowled when I called him that after his first win in the *umram*. "Don't," he said shortly.

"Why not? It's meant to be, I'm sure of it."

He shook his head, trying to scowl but unable to stop his grin. He held up the chain he had just won and shook it so that the links jingled. It was the sort of thing you would hang a lamp from, but it meant that he had won three matches in a single day. They were all against boys his own age, none yet eighteen, but it was all I needed. I had the first twenty verses of *The Ballad of Vurt Victorious* composed before dinner. It scans better that way, Vurt Victorious rather than Vurt *the* Victorious. And it left me room in case fate had decided on some other name after all. Even if he were, oh, I don't know, Vurt the Valorous, or Vurt the Very Brave, he could still be victorious.

Four years later, I am playing my part in a very different story than the one I imagined. The two guardsmen on Tombs Hill are wearing bored looks that say, "I know you're guilty, I just can't be bothered to figure out what you're guilty of." I am as frightened as I was that first day at Ishad's. What Vurt and Ishad and I are doing could get us flensed, or put in chains and sold to the Bantangui. I wouldn't have agreed to any of it if I didn't feel so guilty about my own plans for the night.

The sun has just kissed the horizon. "Good evening," I say as brightly as I can, shaking the bottles in my hands gently to make them gurgle. "Dry work, isn't it?"

The guard on my left looks at me disdainfully. The one on my right turns his head and spits carefully onto the hard-packed earth. "You don't think we're going to drink any of that, do you?"

"What? This? Oh, no, no," I say, feigning shock. "Not on duty, of course not."

The guard who spat scratches his nose. "Thinks we're fools, Mirtan."

The other one nods and draws his sword in one smooth motion. "Fools. Just out of curiosity, what's in it? Poppy and cinnamon? Widow's tears?"

"What? What do you mean?" I squeak. A poet's voice should never squeak. "It's just wine! I swear!"

The guard on my left sighs. "Did you hear that, Mirtan? He swears. What is it about this uniform that makes every bright spark in the city think its wearers are idiots? Eh? Can you tell me that? Is it the helmet?"

"I think it's the sash," Mirtan says. "Can't take a man in a sash seriously." He points the tip of his sword at me. "On your knees."

"But---but I've done nothing wrong!" I gabble. The bottles gurgle again slightly as my arms shake. "I just---"

"You just thought you could walk up here, a total stranger to us both, and we'd say oh, thank you, what nice wine that it, how kind of you to think of us, down it goes, my my don't I feel sleepy, and then traipse down those stairs and get into whatever kind of lackwit trouble popped up between your ears, am I right? Pfah!" Mirtan shakes his head sorrowfully. The tip of his sword doesn't waver. I would notice if it did, as I'm trying very hard not to look at anything else. "Too many fairy tales, that's what I think it is. Guards are always stupid in fairy tales."

"I find they're not so smart in life either," Ishad says quietly, pressing the flat of his knife against the guard's throat. "Now, if you would do me the kindness of sheathing your blade? Please?"

I don't see him tense, but his partner does. "Mirtan!" he snaps, ignoring Vurt's sword, the point of which is now uncomfortably close to his kidney. "Don't do it. You'll enjoy your pension a lot less if your widow's spending it on someone else."

Mirtan reverses his sword slowly and slides it back into its sheath. "Won't be much of a pension when the captain finds out we were taken this easily," he says sourly.

Ishad nods sympathetically. "Sorry about that. Now, put yours hands back here, would you? Ah, where's that cord? Lad, do you have the---right. Arms crossed, please. No, no, at the wrists, don't be clever."

The guard does as he's told. Vurt ties the first guard's wrists together, then the second's, and then uses a third length of cord to loop them together. Ishad glances at his work and grunts. "Good. Now, I'm sure you gentlemen will be more comfortable sitting. No, just here is fine. Thank you." Ishad steps back. "What do you think?"

"Let's just go." Vurt has taken the two halves of his spear from the sleeve in the side of his pack and screwed them together. He thumps its butt on the ground. "The moon will be up soon."

"I suppose so." Ishad raises his palms to me. "Thanks, lad. Best be off. You'll not want to be here when they find their feet."

I nod. "Good hunting," I say to Vurt, and immediately wince. It's the kind of thing bad actors said in worse plays. I composed a few couplets this morning for exactly this moment, but now that we're here, I realize that poetry is best saved for afterward, when you know how things end. Not that Vurt and I are going to have an afterward.

"Thanks." Vurt hefts his spear impatiently. "Now come on, let's go." He and Ishad hurry down the steps without a backward glance.

The horizon has eaten half the sun. The first breath of evening caresses my cheek with a cool hand. The guards' shoulders twitch as they wrestle with their bonds. They're going to be free in a few minutes. "Here." I set the wine bottles on the stones at my feet. "My oath on it, there really is nothing in them except wine. It's the best I could afford."

The first one doesn't even look at me. The second one, Mirtan, clears his throat and spits on the bottles. Ashamed and excited, I turn and hurry back into the city.

Recently: Has Eleñima's Moment Arrived?

I waited until the next day to tell Shau Sheu. It is one thing to hope that your plans will bear fruit. It is quite another to hold that fruit in your hand and wonder if you dare peel it, and---I needed to be sure. After so long, I needed to be sure.

I also didn't want to provide her other ladies with any cause for gossip. They would, horribly, and at the slightest provocation. Going to see her twice in one day, well, it would be as bad as the time Hemmeté rushed in with her over-shawl torn and her hair lopsided, and I certainly didn't want to subject myself to *that*.

So I slept on it, though it would be more truthful to say that I tossed and turn on it. I hadn't allowed myself to think about Ishad for, oh, for years. That night it all came flooding back: the excitement, the confusion, the anger, and yes, the shame. He had made a fool of me, or rather, I had made a fool of myself. To see him like that, and to see my niece making eyes at his young protégé---I doubt I closed my eyes for more than a few moments all night.

I didn't let the household staff see any of this, of course. They gossip too, horribly, I'm sure of it. Instead, I waited until precisely my usual hour the next morning, then collected a few things from my brother-by-marriage's office and had Rojyar escort me to Shau Sheu's house as if it were a perfectly normal day. "Inform your mistress that I would have a few moments with her privately," I told her houseman. He bowed and took himself inside, returning a moment later to say that his honored mistress had been expecting me. Expecting me? My insides fluttered. What did she know? *How* did she know?

I followed the houseman up to the roof. Shau Sheu greeted me as warmly as ever and we seated ourselves on chaises under tastefully-striped awnings. Her housekeeper brought us coffee in tiny blue-and-white thimbles on a beaten silver tray.

I waited until she had removed herself before speaking. Then the words tumbled out of me as if I were a flighty teenager. "I saw him---them. In the *umram*. Yesterday. Sehdie and the boy, Vurt, and---and Ishad. Ishad was there. He's the boy's teacher."

Shau Sheu's eyes widened. "Really? Are you sure?"

I nodded. "After the fight. He didn't see me. Oh, cherished, do you think--- Is this---"

"Hush, cherished, hush." She stood and came over to put her hand on my shoulder. I clutched it as if I were drowning, biting my other hand to hold back the tears I never let anyone see, not even her. I had been waiting *so long*...

"Hush, hush." Shau Sheu patted my shoulder gently. "Everything's going to be all right. Everything. This is a good sign, a wonderful sign. It means we're getting closer."

"Are you---" I stopped to steady my voice. "Are you sure?"

"Of course. Oh, Eleñima, cherished Eleñima, hush." She sat down beside me on the chaise and put her arm around my shoulder.

"It's just... Nothing seemed to be happening. I was... I was starting to wonder if..."

"You were starting to wonder if anything ever would?" She gave me *that* look, indulgent and fond and slightly exasperated. I could *see* how much she cared for me, my best and only friend. "I told you when we started that it would take a long time. But you see? You did everything right. You brought her up just like you were, dressed her like you were dressed, made sure she sounded like you, and here we are." She shook me gently. "Here we are! You should be excited!"

I wiped my eyes. "I am. Oh, cherished, I am. I just..." I let out a shaky breath, which turned into something like a laugh. "I just wasn't expecting it to happen *now*."

"Well, what do they say---Fate is what happens when you're making other plans?" She squeezed my shoulders once more---she was surprisingly strong for such a tiny woman---then went back to her own chaise. "Now, tell me everything."

She sipped her coffee as I recounted what I had seen the day before. Ishad was older, of course, and bald now, but he still looked as strong as a bull. And the boy looked so much like him. But of course he had too, didn't he? He was Sehdie's Ishad, her heartbreaker, the rogue destined to ruin *her* life and then walk away without a second thought.

We sat in silence after I finished. A line of silver-bright clouds drifted past overhead on their way to Ossisswe or somewhere even deeper in the desert. I had never been to Ossisswe---I had never gone *anywhere*. But now... If the special magic Shau Sheu had started working for me all those years ago really was blossoming, maybe I finally would travel. Maybe I would finally have adventures, and love, and---and *everything*.

"Oomph." Shau Sheu bent in her chair to touch her toes, then straightened up and picked up her empty coffee thimble. "So what do you think we should do next?" she asked, rolling it between her fingers.

My insides fluttered again. "Don't you know?"

She brushed the coffee thimble back and forth across her cheek. "Oh, I have some ideas, but the most important thing now is what *you* think should happen. Here, close your eyes for a moment. Now breathe slowly. Remember your exercises. Slowly, calmly... That's right. That's right. Calmly... Listen to my voice. There is nothing but my voice. Now, bring Sehdie into your mind. You can see her face---she looks just like you did. You can hear her speak---she sounds just like you did. You are practically the same person. You will *become* the same person. Can you imagine it?"

I could. Of course I could. I had been practicing for years. It was my part of the illicit Bantangui magic that Shau Sheu had taught me years ago, the secret art she had fled to Coriandel to keep safe and had only ever shared with me. A chance to live my life over, to choose a different path, just as Shau Sheu had done.

"Good. Now, think about Ishad. Think about the first moment you saw him. What do you remember?"

"The picnic," I said dreamily. *Where he raised my hopes just to dash them*, I didn't add. Awbé had told me that the man she was seeing had a friend, a rogue who was famous that season for having ventured into the undercity and slain a---

My eyes snapped open. My hand flew to my mouth. "What is it?" Shau Sheu asked.

"That's it!" I said. "That's the final step. Ishad's boy has to go into the Tombs just like he did."

"Really?" she said, just a hint of doubt in her voice. "Are you sure?"

"Yes!" Shau Sheu was wonderful, but sometimes it felt to me to see the connections between things and the best way forward. "Yes, I'm sure. That's what he has to do. Except---except he must fail where Ishad succeeded."

Even as I said it, I *knew* it was the truth. Where Ishad had succeeded, his prize student had to fail. That was what we needed to complete the spell.

"Mm." Shau Sheu nodded slowly. "I see. But you know, cherished, underbeasts don't come up to the surface very often. It could be a long wait."

"Then we will have one summoned," I said firmly. "Oh, cherished Sheu, surely you can...?"

Shau Sheu shook her head. "No, no, not me."

"But you must!" I argued, I pleaded, I demanded, more insistent with every refusal. I knew it was ill-mannered, but this was *important*.

She finally relented. Most people do if you are firm. "I might know a man. Who might know someone who could do what you ask. I will inquire. Discreetly, of course."

"Of course," I said, sweet where I had been stormy. I told myself that I would have Rojyar put a little extra in the purse the next time her bill came.

I heard footsteps behind me. It was her housekeeper, coming to tell her that her other ladies had arrived. "I will be down in a moment," she said. "Make sure they have coffee and almond cakes." The housekeeper bowed and left.

Shau Sheu stood, offering me a hand to help me stand as well. She kept hold of my hand and looked me straight in the eye. "This is wonderful news, Eleñima. Wonderful, wonderful news. But there is danger here as well. We must tread very carefully. You must not let anyone suspect."

"I won't," I promised. I started to withdraw my hand, but Shau Sheu squeezed it.

"Oh. Oh, yes, of course," I said, flustered. I slipped the papers I had taken from my brother-by-marriage's desk out of my sleeve and handed them to her. "Are these the ones you wanted?"

She scanned them quickly. "Yes. Yes, these are exactly the ones. Thank you. Thank you so much." The letters and invoices disappeared into her own sleeve. "Now, shall we join the others?"

Shau Sheu led me downstairs. I didn't see her pass the papers to her houseman as he bowed us into her front courtyard, but when I left an hour later, he slipped them back to me while Rojyar was wrestling with the parasol. I tried very hard not to think about them as I

walked briskly home. I had practiced *that* almost as much as I had practiced not thinking about Ishad.

I waited patiently for Shau Sheu to send word. Two days passed, then a third. I busied myself overseeing the cook, correcting Sehdie's diction and posture, and chasing after the housekeeper to tell her yes, even the corners of the upstairs steps need to be swept. Honestly, a whole family of skiddlers could have hidden in the dust that woman left behind.

"Would you please stop fussing!" my brother-by-marriage barked at me that evening. "You're driving me mad with your to and fro." We were at dinner in the rear courtyard, and I had just sent a plate of peppers back to the kitchen to be grilled on *both* sides.

I sniffed. "You are far too lax on that woman," I said.

"I'm sure she's doing the best she can with only one pair of hands," my brother-by-marriage said. The cook's son would normally have helped with the evening meal, but his wife had given birth a few days previously, and he had still not returned. Still, that hardly excused his mother being slipshod.

I sniffed again. "Is that what you would say if one of your clerks miscounted a few sequins?"

"Pfah!" He helped himself to some more dates and chewed moodily. Not for the first time, I wondered whether there was anything between him and the cook. She was as common as dung, and even in her prime she wouldn't have been one grain the beauty my sister was. Still, he was a man, and one of no little means, and her sort wouldn't think twice about a little tumble for a bracelet or some silk ribbons, and I doubted he would have enough character to say no to fruit that fell in his lap I had watched for signs, but had never managed to find any. As I poured Sehdie some lassi, I made a note to myself to pay even closer attention.

Bluesday afternoon, four days after my visit, Rojyar brought me the word I had been waiting for. He tapped the wall outside my room gently. "Honored mistress?"

"Yes?" I said through the door curtain.

He cleared his throat. "Mistress Shau Sheu requests the pleasure of your company this evening, honored mistress. At moonrise."

"Send word that she may expect me. Oh, and Rojyar? Your master is away this evening, is he not? With his turtling friends?"

"I believe so, honored mistress. They are entertaining a fellow aficionado from Ossisswe this evening. The master intends to read a letter from a correspondent in Mau Tinnemanthan on breeding blue-quartered *hoan kem* in captivity."

"Yes, quite. Well, I'm sure we need not trouble him with my comings and goings."

"Honored mistress." I heard rather than saw him bow.

I hummed a little song as I made ready. No one of quality would be there, of course, but I still felt it was important to look my best. One should for special occasions.

My brother-by-marriage left to attend his ridiculous little gathering an hour before sunset. I waited until dark, then had Rojyar summon a guardsman to walk with us to Shau Sheu's. I was careful to instruct Rojyar not to tip one bezel more than normal. Nothing arouses suspicion among the common people more than generosity.

The guardsman thumped Shau Sheu's door drum for us. Her houseman answered. "Will you be returning this evening?" the guardsman asked me.

I nodded to Rojyar. "Perhaps near the middle hour," he replied. "The honored mistress will send me for you." The guardsman nodded to him (though he should have nodded to me), waited for us to enter, and went upon his way.

Shau Sheu's houseman led me across her front courtyard to the rear of her house. I had been visiting her salon for fifteen years, but had never been into its private portions before. I was curious to see how sparsely decorated it was. I don't think it was because she lacked the means to do more, although I had sometimes suspected her situation was more straitened than she let on. A small portrait of a group of people I didn't recognize, a village seascape at dawn, a Bantangui festival mask, a broken sword... I might have paused a moment to study them, but then I saw who was waiting for me and very nearly turned around and left.

"Cherished Shau!" I said, shocked. "Is this some kind of joke? Because if it is, it's in very poor taste."

"Eleñima, cherished, I would never make a joke about something like this." She bowed her head and spread her arms, palms up. "May I give you the name of this one's name, which is called Saddle Stone Gaspings."

The little Darpani madman bobbed his head in a grotesque imitation of proper deference, grinning. He was missing his front teeth, whether as the price of a spell or from falling drunk off a horse I'm sure I couldn't say. "This needs a magician," I said tightly. "Not some--- some---"

"This one will do what you want done," he interrupted in surprisingly coherent Coriandi. "But we begin. The moon scratches at the horizon."

There was nothing for it. I would have to trust my fortune to this---this *person*. Shau Sheu obviously thought he was competent, but still... The first thing Darpani magicians trade for power is their sanity. I read that in a novel when I was a girl, and I'm sure the author wouldn't have written it if it weren't true.

The Darpani held out his hand. For a moment I thought he expected me to pay him, as if I would ever actually hand someone money myself, but then Shau Sheu said, "Give him the things, Eleñima."

I took the leather wrist guard I had found in Sehdie's jewelry box from my sleeve and passed it to him. It was black, stitched with dark blue thread, and slightly stiff with dried sweat and despairing saints knew what else. I was sure it belonged to the boy.

The Darpani sniffed it as if to see whether it was fit to eat. Then he grinned again, the teeth he still had surprisingly white against his worn brown face. "It satisfies," he pronounced. "And so, to begin."

Four tiny braziers stood in a diamond on the floor to mark the four corners of the world, one silver, one glass, one bone, and one of dark mahogany. The Darpani lit each one in turn, muttering under his breath, then drew a handful of common straw from the pouch at his belt and tossed it into the air.

He studied the blades intently as they fluttered to the floor. "Bah." He threw another handful, then a third, studying each in turn. It looked no different to me than the others, but it seemed to satisfy him. He stepped into the center of the diamond and sat, his feet crossed beneath him. Closing his eyes, he began to chant a breathy phrase over and over again, fingering the wrist guard as he did so.

Suddenly he stopped and cocked his head to one side. "Heh? Neh. Neh neh neh." He shook his head and waved whatever he was arguing with away before resuming his chant.

On and on he went, bargaining with the other world. After a time I leaned my head close to Shau Sheu's to ask whether one night was going to be enough, but she brought her finger up to her lips to shush me. She seemed fascinated by his antics. I must admit, it was very different from any magic I had ever seen before. No jurists poring over the wording of oaths, no careful calculation of trades and balances, just an old man bartering some fraction of himself away in exchange for a favor from the infinite.

It took him several long minutes to strike a bargain that pleased him. He touched his palms to his forehead to seal it, then stood with a popping of knees and handed the wrist guard back to me.

"To be done," he whispered. Shau Sheu told me later that was his spell's price---he would never again be able to raise his voice. It seemed a small loss to me. "It calls the *iyemnelili* from underneath."

Shau Sheu bowed to him. "To thank the one who has done this."

The Darpani grinned. "To be grateful for thanks, but more grateful still for payment." Shau Sheu smiled back and handed him a string of silver bezels. He counted them with his fingertip before slipping them into a fold of his belt, then bobbed his head at me and showed himself out, whistling contentedly.

Shau Sheu doused the braziers one by one. "Well," she said tiredly. "I hope you're satisfied."

"No, not yet." I smiled. It was late, and I still had to walk home. "But I expect I shall be soon."

Recently: Shau Sheu Contemplates Murder

That stupid woman. That vain, self-righteous, altogether horrible woman. My masters in the Fleet of Ghosts taught me how to deal with lechers (tantalize and then distract them), patriots (convince them that someone else is the real traitor), and outright idiots (give them pretty toys). There was never a word about the sheer mind-destroying tedium of listening to a middle-aged woman prattle on, week after week for years, about the sorry state of the world and what she wouldn't give to be seventeen again. Every time I sat through another lecture on the decay of the world, I swore that if I was ever allowed to leave that dry, dusty village they called "the jewel of the Karaband" and return to the sea, I would prepare a tutorial on the subject. "Equanimity in the Face of Tedium", by An Agent.

The Fleet would never use it, of course. Poison, disguise, black magic---those are exciting. Those are reasons to become a spy. Boredom? How many young Bantangui would join the Fleet of Ghosts for the promise of boredom?

I cannot remember who first introduced Eleñima to my salon, though it will be recorded in code somewhere among my poetry and recipes. She doubtless thought herself composed, but her too-quick smile and darting eyes betrayed her nervousness.

My housekeeper Oë made the usual inquiries in the vegetable market the next morning. "She is the sister-by-marriage of a junior functionary in the emir's court," she reported while pouring my morning tea. "He was recently widowed, leaving a daughter."

I arched an eyebrow. "Was it the woman's work, to have her sister's husband? Or the man's, to have the sister?"

Oë shook her head as she poured my morning coffee. "That is doubted. The houseman I spoke with finds her as sour as her sister was sweet."

"Hm." I raised my thimble to my lips. "Her brother-by-marriage. He does what?"

Oë picked up the brass tray. "He keeps accounts for the Ministry of Theft. Most particularly for matters relating to trade, what they call 'customs'."

I smiled and sipped my coffee.

It took me five months to figure out how to seduce her. Five months of pleasantries and commiseration, five months listening to her petty little grievances. If I had known there

would be another sixteen years of it, I swear, I would have risked my life and soul and lied to the admirals. "A false trail," I would have said. "She exaggerated her brother-by-marriage's importance. She is not reliable. She is mad. I must sink her to protect my work. Oh, please, let me sink her, just this one." Oë would have done it gladly. I have never, not among crew-caste Bantangui or even Thindi royalty, seen anyone be as cutting to a servant as *that woman*.

But no, I had been trained too well. Do only what is necessary---that was one of the first lessons our teachers beat into us, along with loyalty, patience, and the importance of dying in silence. The Four Paramount Virtues of a Spy---even now, I could probably recite the whole tutorial from memory. Coriandel had welcomed me, to all eyes just a poor woman of noble birth fleeing an arranged marriage to a man thrice my age, but that didn't mean the emir's spies were not watching me. I had to be cautious.

And besides, if she could be seduced, she could prove to be a very profitable venture. Oë made further inquiries. Eleñima's brother-by-marriage had never been a particularly social man. After his wife's death, he fell into the habit of bringing papers home with him so he could work in the afternoon and evening. Supply requisitions from guard posts on the Great Southern Road, complaints about underpayment from saddlesmiths in Gandan that just happened to detail exactly how many horses Coriandel hoped to bring down from Darp in the coming season... It would be a rich catch for the admirals. But how to get her to give it to us?

In the end, it was Oë who came up with a plan. Some of it was the wine---Oë and I didn't indulge when we were working, but what kind of pirates would we be if we never indulged at all? We ate and talked and drank and made love until the moon grew weary and slid behind the horizon, then lay in each other's arms and listened to the city the way we had once listened to the wind and the waves and the gulls.

Oë propped herself up on one elbow. "You could send her to me," she murmured, resuming a conversation that she had so pleasantly interrupted. "Make up some story about the restorative properties of secret Bantangui massage techniques, and let me listen to her grumbling for a while."

I kissed her. "You are a treasure, but no, she is too sensible of her station. She would never talk to a mere servant."

Oë punched me lightly for that. Like me, she was crew caste---the admirals would never trust a cargo caste with their secrets---and while she played the role of servant dutifully, she did not like to be reminded of it.

I kissed her again to show that I meant no insult. "But if you could find a way for us to trade places, I would not say no. On and on and on she goes, all her missed opportunities and how everyone has let her down, all of it the world's failing and none of it her own. I beseech the Pilots to give her niece a better life."

Oë stilled. "Perhaps it is not you and I who should trade places," she mused.

The next time Eleñima came to one of my gatherings, I sidled over to her as she was admiring (or at least frowning at) one of my old dance masks and murmured, "Cherished, if I may have a word? After the others have gone?"

She frowned. "Is anything the matter?"

"Of course not," I soothed. "I just... Well, I may have an answer to a question you asked me some days ago. But I would rather discuss it privately."

When the drums on Palace Mount beat noon, my other guests straggled out in twos and threes. Eleñima hung back, a social smile frozen on her face. "More coffee?" I asked sweetly.

"Please," she said. We reclined on chaises, our feet on cushioned stools. I let the moments swim past. When she opened her mouth to speak, I spoke first.

"I have been thinking about what you said. About wishing you could go back, have your years over again. Do you remember?"

She nodded, her smile was still in place, her eyes wary. "Yes, of course," she sighed. "Perhaps I should have studied to be a magician."

Right on cue, Oë entered with the coffee service. "What strange fate that you should say that," I said. "Because I did."

"You---oh, no, no sugar in mine. I have mentioned that, I believe?" Eleñima waved Oë away. She ducked her head and withdrew, no doubt to re-check the supply of poisons she kept in a satchel she had stolen for me from a beggar boy in the marketplace.

I cleared my throat. "Yes, I studied magic. A little. Not as it is practiced here. None of this vulgar chanting and having your hair fall out and what-not. No, I studied what we Bantangui call 'slow magic'. Spells that take years to work, but are so subtle that hardly anyone would notice."

"I've never heard of it," she admitted. Which was hardly surprising, since Oë and I had just made it up.

I coughed. "It's... Well, it's not considered quite proper, and of course I couldn't tell anyone when I came here. I would be in ever so much trouble if people found out. Even back home..." I looked away from her as if ashamed. "It's why I fled. Not the marriage. My family has passed this secret knowledge down through generations, and when the admirals caught wind of it---well." I spread my palms as if to say, here I am.

"Oh, cherished, that's *awful*," she gasped. "I would never have thought... I mean, I would never have guessed that you---"

"Exactly," I said warmly. "You would never have guessed, and neither would anyone else, and I trust you to keep it a secret. You will, won't you? Please?"

Of course she would. Of *course* she would. And it meant so much to her that I had shared this.

"I... I felt I had no choice," I confessed. I thought briefly about letting a single tear dribble down my cheek, but even she might have grown suspicious at that. "It was the only way I could think of to help you with your problem."

"My problem?" she asked blankly.

"Mm. Or let us say, your desire. Would you truly like to have a chance to live your life over again? A chance to do it right? Well, I think that just might be possible."

I spun her a story. It made no sense at all, and anyone who knew even the least thing about how magic actually worked would have laughed until they cried, but she didn't realize I was feeding her fish guts instead of caviar. It all hinged on her niece Sehdie. If she

grew up exactly as Eleñima had---the same clothes, the same lessons, everything as it had been---then when the moment came... I spread my hands. "Poof. She will become you. You will become her. Her possibilities will be your possibilities."

My nonsense was as gentle as a wave caressing a beach, and that was all it took. The fact that it made absolutely no sense didn't matter---she was hooked.

Dear, *cherished* Shau, she said. Tears welled up in her eyes. I clucked and handed her a linen napkin, trying not to let her fingers touch mine for fear I might shudder. Not a moment's thought for her niece. Not a single question about what would happen to *her*.

This was the nicest thing anyone had ever done for her, even her dear sister. "How can I ever repay you?" she blubbered.

I squeezed her hand gently. "You don't need to, Eleñima. This is what friends do for each other. Although..." I hesitated.

"Yes?" She dabbed her cheeks with the napkin (she would never do anything so crude as to wipe them).

I looked away again, as if what I was about to say made me uncomfortable. "Well, I try not to let it show, but I am in rather a...situation. My family disowned me. And of course I can expect nothing from the man I was to marry."

"But what of your get-togethers? Surely you must... I mean..."

I shrugged. "Not everyone can afford to be as generous as you are, my dear. But I dare not refuse anyone entry in case it should cost me the custom of others." Which was true enough---for all her faults, she was never late settling her bill.

"Well, I don't have much---" she started.

"Sh, sh." I took a chance and patted her hand. "I couldn't possibly ask you for more money. I wouldn't take it if you offered. But... Well, I have an acquaintance here in the city, a caravaneer who helped me on my journey. If I could get him word now and again about, oh, I don't know, changes in regulations, which way disputes were likely to be settled, that sort of thing... I wouldn't feel at all badly about taking *his* money."

And so it was done. At first she just brought me scraps---a month-old summary of a judgment that had already been made public, a note from one minister to another

complaining about the cost of maintaining the garrison at Dry Weeping, a plea for reinstatement of a customs exemption from a Gifted bullock who had served in one of the emir's mother's wars. There were a few gold sequins among them, but most I could have gleaned by going through household trash.

Over time I gradually grew more demanding. Oh, how much better the rear courtyard would look if only I could afford silver tassels for the curtains in those windows. And wouldn't our get-togethers be so much more civilized with a little music? Something quiet, something refined, like the emira listens to. Of course, these things cost money, and--- oh, he does? Mm... Yes, I do know someone who would be interested, though of course how anyone can actually be interested in soldiers' boots is beyond me. We had a salacious giggle at that, and the next day, Oë spent two hours copying out the entire resupply inventory for the Coriandi infantry.

The faceless admirals of the Fleet of Ghosts devoured it and demanded more. A decade after being humiliated by a rag-tag alliance of Karabandi emirs who had, against all odds, put aside their differences to lay siege to Armaq, they were getting ready to try again. Year after year, the papers Eleñima brought from her brother-by-marriage's study painted a picture of how strong the Coriandi forces were, who their best commanders were, which of the other desert emirates would stand with them, and which could be pried away by threats, bribery, or blackmail. I had other sources as well, of course, and I knew the admirals had other agents in the city, even if I didn't know who they were, but every recipe I sent back to my "aunt" (whom I pictured as a room full of patient shaven-headed clerks somewhere in the Admiralty's coral labyrinth) was another arrow fletched and set aside for the coming battle.

And then Eleñima's niece (for whom I had developed no small measure of sympathy) fell in love with an *umram* duelist. Eleñima was convinced---completely, irrevocably convinced---that this was a Sign with a shouted 'S'. Our ridiculous, impossible spell must be working!

I tried to calm her down, but she was not to be calmed, not this time. I had no choice but to promise that I would have someone call a bonescuttle just like the one that "her"

rogue had slain. She sobbed her thanks and left. I asked Oë to draw me a very hot bath, then sent her to speak to a clanless Darpani I had done business with several times before.

I played hostess three times in the week after he traded his voice to bring forth the monster Eleñima desired. The first occasion was a small commemoration for a woman who had died the year before. Her family and friends ate and drank and told stories about her, laughing as her youngest son imitated the way she had fumbled with her shawl when she was upset. There were a few tears, but only a few---she had passed peacefully after a full life, and that is always something to be treasured.

The second occasion was one of my usual gatherings, women of a certain age with gossip to trade and errant children to sigh over. I didn't earn much from them, but most of my other business grew out of those tedious tea parties. I was worried that Eleñima would come as she usually did, but thankfully she stayed away.

The third occasion was frankly unpleasant. Two merchants had spent much of the preceding year suing and counter-suing over a poorly-worded contract for lentils. Lentils, of all things. With nothing but more jurisprudence in front of them, they had decided to try to mend bridges. The whole evening was like that play by Fuçentes in which everyone knows something disagreeable about everyone else. They circled around each other sulkily, barely speaking until the last almond-stuffed date was gone, then went home to order their jurists to redouble their efforts.

While I was busy keeping up appearances, Oë asked questions in the market and around the *umram*. In truth, talking to people was her greatest pleasure. She was an orphan, and had been given to the admirals as an infant. Before she came inland disguised as a doctress she had only ever spoken to her fellow students and her teachers. She confessed once that she had mastered four languages just for the pleasure of being able to talk to strangers.

A week to the day after Eleñima's visit, Oë returned from the market with a hard look on her face. "Last night," she said. "Just a goat." She dumped the evening's vegetables and a lifeless chicken on the kitchen table. "It won't stick to goats for long. There will be questions."

"I know." I gnawed my lip. "I know. But what?"

She took our good kitchen knife from the block in the center of the table and studied its blade. "No," I said. "Not that."

"The world would be a better place," she muttered.

"I know. But it is too late. The thing is here now. Killing her won't break its summons."

Another week passed. Another goat was taken, then a beggar, and then two guardsmen were injured trying to dispatch it. I shouldn't have let it bother me, but I became terribly polite. The house staff, who knew nothing of my secret life, began to tiptoe around and scurry away whenever I smiled. Eventually I retreated to the upper floor to spare them.

I kept two rooms there in Bantangui style. One was for entertaining lovers and other special guests. It was decorated with gold and jade and chalcedony, teak and exotic glass, silk and tiny flowers. It was small, an intimate place where people could unburden themselves. I heard the most mundane things there, and the most horrible.

The other room was even smaller. A narrow futon on slats took up half of it. A stool and a knee-high wall chest took most of what is left. The window was just a slit, too high to see through, too narrow for even a Gifted monkey to squeeze through. I was just like the cabin I had been given on my uncle's barge when I turned fourteen. A cabin of my own---I had been so excited. It didn't have a door, of course---young women aren't allowed doors---but it meant I was special, and destined for better things than mending sails and tending chickens.

I was there, reading and daydreaming about those simpler days, when Oë brought me word. The niece's young man had sworn a blood oath to kill the creature the Darpani had summoned. "Last night," Oë said. "I have it from a guardsman who was sent to bring his master for questioning."

I stared at the page in front of me. A blood oath? For a moment I wondered if there might be something to the lie I had been telling Eleñima all these years. Could all of her wishing actually---no. I shook my head. Oë and I had cooked up the nonsense notion of a "slow spell" ourselves. This was just coincidence.

Still, no matter what happened next, Eleñima would expect a miracle. When she didn't get one, she might finally begin to doubt me. "Make preparations," I instructed Oë. "You may get to sink her after all."

Recently: Ishad Speaks to Old Friends

Meshash came to see me that night. *Thump thump thump* on my door drum, same as always, and there she was, silver now in her black hair, lines on her face that weren't there twenty years before, but still beautiful. I stepped aside to let her past and closed the gate behind her.

We looked at each other for a few heartbeats. I sighed. "He told you."

She nodded quickly. "Yes. Ishad, he'll die down there."

I shrugged. "Maybe. But maybe not. He's good, Meshash, really good. Better than I was at his age, and I made it."

"I know. But there are so many stories... Can't you...?"

"What? Do it for him?" I snorted, even though I'd been asking myself the same thing. "It's his oath, Meshash. His blood."

"But it's your blood too," she said hopelessly. And there it was, the one thing we never spoke of, the thing neither of us had mentioned since that night she told me that she was staying with Onnemenno. We weren't sure---a magician could have told us, if we'd wanted to hire one---but the timing was right, and he had my shoulders and my speed. Might have had my nose too, if it hadn't been for that beating he took when he was thirteen.

If I was stronger, I would have hugged her. But I'm a coward when it comes to women's tears, and that well ran dry a long time ago. I rolled my head to one side to work a kink out of my neck. "So what do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Whatever you can," she said quietly. She stepped up to me and kissed my cheek softly, not asking or offering anything, just a kiss. The gate clicked shut softly behind her.

So later that night, in the small hour between moonset and sunrise, I pried three tiles up from my kitchen floor. The case was still there, a brown leather tube as long as your arm stitched with thread the color of a dry scab. Old habit made me replace the tiles before taking it into the rear courtyard. I didn't expect any guardsmen or assassins to come drumming on my door, but the saints love a careful man.

I pulled Lady Kembe's picture from the tube, unrolled it, and laid it face up on the little table against the wall. I had to put a couple of daggers and half a brick on the corners to keep it from rolling up again. I hoped she wouldn't mind.

There was still a stump of candle in the tube as well. I lit it and set it down next to the picture. It had been, what, twenty years? No, more than that, twenty-one. Twenty-one years since I last spoke to her. I wondered if she would listen. We didn't part on the best of terms, but I didn't think she was one to hold a grudge. What's the point when you're going to outlive everyone anyway?

A quick twitch of my knife on the back of my forearm, and I let three drops of blood fall into the flame. I stared into it as I waited, counting heartbeats. It's funny, the way you can suddenly realize that your shoulders are tense. I took a long, slow breath and willed them to relax. Just relax...

And suddenly she was there. The picture was still just a picture, but it was also her sitting in her study in Ossisswe. I saw a shelf of books on the wall to her left and a latticework window on her right. She still looked forty, although I knew she was at least ten times that. Her head was completely bald, and her loose robe was open just enough for me to see the flaming wings tattooed on her neck.

Her teeth gleamed white against her black skin when she smiled. "I greet you," she said. "It have been a lang time."

I dipped my head. "M'lady."

"I han see an old swallow a-chase a young'un ye'erday. I wondered if that maight be you, my hain Swallow come back a me." She pronounced 'wondered' with three syllables, 'won-der-ed', and for some reason, I had always been "Swallow" to her. It could have been worse---I met a merchanteer with three ships under his rod and warehouses in Gandan and Nyengmo who had worked for her most of his life. What she called *him* would start a fight in polite company.

I cleared my throat. "I crave a favor, m'lady."

"Oh, but certain y' do." She took her red book down from its place on the shelf and thumbed through it. "Swallow... Swallow... Here we be. Maun, I do not appear to be a-debt of your this present time." She set the book aside without closing it. "So what y' havvy offer?"

"Information," I said bluntly.

Lady Kembe was the most powerful magician in Cherne, but she hadn't left her house in four hundred years. She couldn't eat cooked food, or wear leather, or tie her own shoes, and those were just the things I knew about. She had probably traded away a thousand other everyday things, things you or I would take for granted, each loss bringing her some scrap of power or understanding. You don't do that for four hundred years without learning how to bargain like a Darpani ride master who's down to her last spavined mule.

She steepled her fingers in front of her lips. "Tell me."

I bobbed my head again. "M'lady." I gave her the quick version, as if I was reporting to an impatient sergeant. Vurt, the girl, his oath, the bonescuttle. "A breath," she interrupted. "A bonescuttle, in Coriandel?"

"Yes, m'lady. Just like before."

She drummed her fingers on her desk. "That... that does knot me summat. The stars are completely wrong for a bonescuttle to be about."

"They probably can't see the stars down in the Tombs, m'lady."

The corner of her mouth quirked. "I will tell such jokes as need told tonight, Swallow."

"M'lady." Her accent was almost present day now. I wondered who she had been talking to before me that would dredge up speech two hundred years gone.

Her fingers drummed again, a light three-against-two rhythm. "Hm. I shall make inquiries of that. Now, what do y' want?"

I shrugged. "Your help for the boy, m'lady. He goes down there, he's not coming back."

"Why not? You did."

I shrugged again. "I had Armaq, m'lady. And Chaghan, and that business down in Thind when the river changed course and that bit of swamp drained. They all taught me to fight dirty. All he's had is the *umram* and a couple of fist-ups here and there." I hesitated. "I'm afraid for him, m'lady. Dead afraid."

She raised her eyebrows. "My, my. This is not the harrow-the-hindmost rogue I remember. Whatever happened to the Swallow Stoneheart of old?"

I ignored her jibe. "I'll earn it, m'lady, my blood on that. There's a lot of Bantangui here these days. Call themselves traders, but I meet a few now and again that know more swordplay than any honest trader I've ever met."

She snorted faintly. "Exactly how many honest traders have y' met?"

She's like rain sometimes, Lady Kembe is. Cold rain, the kind that drips down the back of your neck in the middle of the night when you're on watch in the middle of nowhere. You can't stop it, so either you learn to ignore it or you go mad. "I could watch 'em for you, m'lady. Friendly up to one or two of 'em, let 'em talk, keep my ear to the wind."

She pursed her lips and shook her head. "Thank y', Swallow, but no. I have all the people I need in Coriandel. And I am not as worried about the Bantangui as I once was." Pat patta pat went her fingers. "No, if we strike a bargain, I will needs have something a little more direct of y'."

Direct. That meant rooftops at night, throats cut in alleys, cunning little twists of silver and feathers slipped into people's pockets without them knowing. "I'm not as young as I was, m'lady. Not sure I can do as much of that as I used to, but you'll have my best, I swear."

"We'll see what's needed," she said crisply. "The boy. What is his name?"

"Vurt. Vurt Meshash é Onnemenno. He's my neighbors' boy."

"Mm. And what else? Your prize pupil?"

"Yes, m'lady."

Never try to lie to a magician, not even by leaving things out. Not one like Lady Kembe. Her eyes grabbed mine like a hawk snatching up a rabbit. I could no more have looked away than I could have kissed my own ear.

"Mmm... So that's what softened your stony heart, is it?" She sounded amused.

Lose your temper, lose the fight. "He's a good lad, m'lady," I said stolidly. "Could be of use to you, one day, if he's not dead."

"Yes, well, today is not yet that day, is it? Still..." *Pat patta pat.* "All right. I will decide your obligation later. Have we a bargain?"

I didn't hesitate. "Yes, m'lady. Thank you."

She snorted again. "Y' have been away too long, Swallow. Y' ought to know better than to thank a magician before hearing her price."

"Don't much care about the price this time," I said, and it was the truth.

Just that quickly, her picture was just a picture again. I put my hand out to smother the candle flame and nearly fell off my stool. I felt like I had been fighting in full armor since moonrise. Gaaah. Old meat, old bones... Still, I put her picture away before falling into bed. Like I said, the saints love a careful man.

Her voice woke me an hour later. «Ishad...» I looked over blearily at the empty pillow beside me. «Ishad...»

It took me a minute to dig out the tube and unroll her picture. No need for the blood and the candle, not if she was calling me. "M'lady?"

She was still sitting at her desk, but had a cup of tea now, and a loose scarf around her neck. "Are y'awake, Swallow?"

"Yes, m'lady," I lied.

"I've spoken with them an' all. They say you're to fetch yourself some boots."

I rubbed my eyes. "Boots, m'lady?"

"Aye." She yawned suddenly. "The first person as mentions boots to you, y'take theirs an' wear them when y' boy goes underneath. That's as best I can do."

"But---I'm sorry, m'lady, I don't understand."

"Y' din't come t' me for understandin'," she snapped. "Y' came t' me fra help, and that's m' help. First person as mentions boots, an' y' wear 'em into the underneath."

"Yes, m'lady. Thank you." Saints damn all magicians for their cryptic nonsense, though I suppose they're just trying to spend as little of themselves as they have to. I stuffed

her picture back into its tube for a second time, perhaps not quite as gently as I might have, and fell into bed once again.

The next time I woke up was far too soon. At first I thought the pounding was in my head. Then I realized someone was thumping my door drum. I was still fully dressed, so I splashed some tepid water on my face and dragged my carcass to the front courtyard.

Guardsmen. Three of them, a sergeant with ribbons around his sleeve and two men-at-ordinary. "You're Ishad?" the sergeant asked.

I nodded blearily. "Yup. If you're here for lessons, I only have two spaces open right now, Orangeday morning first thing. You can come back then if you want."

The sergeant took a heavy iron signet ring from his pocket and held it up for me to see. "Not here for lessons. Captain wants a word with you."

Of course he did. I rubbed my eyes. "All right. Can I put on a clean shirt?"

"If you please. We'll just have a look about while you're dressing."

I cleared my throat and spat into the potted shrub next to the door. "Well, I guess I don't really need the shirt then."

"As you please." He snapped his fingers and pointed at the lock on the gate. "But we'll still have a look about."

Their look about wasn't half as thorough as mine would have been. They measured my weapons for length, poked around to make sure I didn't have any bows hidden away, sniffed around in my kitchen and bedroom, even took a quick tour of my roof. They didn't spot the loose tiles, though, or find either of the bags I kept packed and ready against unexpectedly finding it necessary to be elsewhere. Ruuda, say, or some little cloudherd village in the Brumosos---somewhere Coriandi law didn't reach and Coriandi guardsmen wouldn't bother traveling to.

By the time they were done I had washed my face properly, eaten some olives and a stale crust of flatbread, rubbed my teeth with a salty cloth to clean them, and put on my other shirt. A few people looked on curiously as the three of them marched me down to the Market Gate guardhouse, but most of those we passed ignored us. Crack-of-dawn "inquiries" had become more common as raids on the caravans that were the city's life

blood had grown bolder. Everyone with half a wit could tell that the bandits had to have spies in Coriandel, but so far, the caravaneers' demands that something be done had produced nothing.

"I know the way," I told the sergeant when we reached the guardhouse. He stayed with me anyway. They had taken me to the side stairs, which was either a good sign or a bad one or maybe not a sign at all.

"Sir." The sergeant thumped his fist against his chest and handed the signet ring back to the captain.

"Thank you, sergeant. Dismissed." The captain set the ring down on the little morning table beside her chaise. We were out under the open sky, just the two of us. A writing desk with a worn leather stool, the chaise, the morning table, and two heavy northern-style sabers in a display rack stood together in the middle of the roof. Potted plants guarded the corners. It could have been a spacious office, except for the lack of a roof and the drop to the street on all sides.

"Must be hell on your paperwork when it rains," I said, jutting my chin at the writing desk.

Captain Leis raised her eyebrows. "And when, I beg you, did it last rain in Coriandel?" She was heavier around the middle than the men she had sent to fetch me, but there was still plenty of muscle in her arms. I remembered them from the *umram*. Most women wouldn't be able to swing those sabers she was so fond of for more than a minute. She could go three matches with them, one right after the other, and still have something left.

We studied each other for a moment, like the dueling opponents and occasional lovers we had once been. From where she was sitting she must have been looking straight up my nose. I resisted the urge to pick it.

"Been a while," she finally said.

I shrugged. "Guess we've both been busy."

"Guess so." She sighed. "His Grace would like to know what you were doing this morning. And please---" She held up a finger. "Please, don't say 'sleeping'."

"Well, I'm sorry if I woke His Grace. Didn't realize he---"

"No," Captain Leis said sharply. "No, no, no. You know perfectly well what I mean. If this had actually come to His Grace's personal attention, we wouldn't be having this chat here, would we? Now, what you were doing, and why shouldn't I care?"

The royal collar of Coriandel is cursed, but it's a useful curse for those willing to pay its price. Among other things, it makes its wearer a good judge of character. There are no sloppy, easily-bribed guard captains in this city. Mean, yes, if whoever sits on the throne wants mean, but never soft and *never* stupid. Given the caravan raids, of course Leis would have a magician working for her---at least one, probably more. I should have known they would sniff out my chat with Lady Kembe. The only question was, could they tell what it was they smelled?

"Student of mine swore an oath yesterday, a blood oath. I was trying to---"

"A juristed oath?"

I shook my head reluctantly. "No. Spur of the moment."

"A *blood* oath?"

"Yeah. There's this girl, and---"

"His Grace takes a dim view of wild oaths, Armsmaster. And I don't mean, those of us who serve him take a dim view. He dislikes them personally. They complicate governance."

"Is that so? My, my... I'll have to remember that. Anyway, like I was saying, there's this girl, and her father's not fond of the boy, and, well, now he's got a bonescuttle to kill."

She glowered at me. "Tell me you're trying to be funny."

I shook my head. "Upon my life," I said, raising one hand.

"Did you put him up to this?"

"Me!? No! No, I didn't, and I wouldn't have. It's a damn stupid oath."

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" She drummed his fingers, just as Lady Kembe had done a few hours ago. "So. This morning?"

I shrugged. "Just wanted to find out what's going to happen. Learned a little from a Darpani grass thrower, years gone by. Asked how the saints are feeling about the boy, what his chances are, whether there's anything I can do." I shrugged again. It was no wonder my shoulders had been so tense last night, with all the shrugging I was doing. "Turned out I

didn't know as much as I thought I did. It kind of got out of control a little. No harm done, but..." I let my voice trail off.

"I see. A wild oath, wild magic... Anything else to spoil my coffee this morning?"

"No, captain." It was like being back at Armaq. Did you take extra rations, Ordinary Ishad? No, sir. Come on, Ordinary, they were there before your watch. Three men have sworn to that. And the man after you is the one who reported them missing. No, sir, it wasn't me, sir.

The captain's fingers went *pat patta pat*. Maybe drumming your fingers was a new fashion that had passed me by. "Well. Come with me." She stood. She was still light on her feet for one so solid. I beat her three touches to one the last time we faced each other in the *umram*, but that was years ago. I doubted a real fight would be as one-sided.

We ambled over to the roof's edge like occasional lovers having a look at the world before going out to face it. The market spread out below us, shops and stalls and open yards, people dawdling or hurrying, cattle, fine jewelry, dates, figs, silks, jugglers, and above it all the smell of dung and frying onions. When the Darpani bring their herds down in the fall it's chaos. Even when they're not around it's never silent, never still, and I'll never grow tired of it.

We watched it in silence for a few moments. Without turning her head, she said, "Do I have to give you a speech?"

I shook my head. "No, captain."

She nodded. "Good. Can't imagine I could say anything you hadn't heard before. I'll step on you if I have to, and they'll have to scrape hard to get you off my boots. Understood?"

And there it was. "Yes, captain," I said stolidly, lowering my eyes like the dutiful ordinary soldier I had never actually been. Sure enough, she was wearing a pair of old-fashioned boots, square-toed lace-ups. I remembered them from the *umram*, or rather, from after, the first time we celebrated a good match together. They were her lucky boots, she told me as I tried to pull them off her, both of us drunk and already half out of our clothes.

She nodded to me. "Good luck with the boy."

I resisted the urge to salute. "Thank you."

I took myself back down the stairs and home. I could feel my bed calling me, like Vurt's oath must have been calling him. Gaaah. If I could have slept through the next few days, I would have, but you can't beg a favor from the likes of Lady Kembe, then go back and say, "Mind holding your tea a moment while I take a nap?" Some coffee would help, though. There were probably students waiting at my gate, wondering where the old man was. And I had a pair of boots to steal.

Recently: Lady Kembe Has a Sleepless Night

Ah, Swallow. I knew he would come back one day. The quiet life fit him no better than a turban a tiger. But truly, had it been so long? I must suppose. When you have four hundred and seventy eight years, it is no thing to miscount a decade here and there.

And a young to protect now. Ah, ah, Swallow. You mind me of my own awakening. Not enough, revenge. Not enough to save myself. Not even enough perhaps to save the world, but what else save to try?

Oh yes, I still remember my young days. I did not use *that* spell for long life, such that steals a day from you each time you sleep, so the span of life you remember is never longer than it was the day you struck your bargain. And not the little compact of Yangkey of Lhabde neither, that ages you only such times as someone shows you kindness. Many more a few choose that one, most often those as were weedy children and had themselves bullied at play. They tell to themselves stories of making stony towers of art in the wilderness and perfecting their art in silent isolation, but all I have known who take that path go mad in time from the loneliness of it.

I had seventy years when I chose my own proper path. I was rich and somewhat close to famous, new settled in this house. It felt the right time.

My bargain was to give over traveling. And I step outside these walls, the years I have hidden from will come down on me. My heart will shrivel like a prune, the flesh will fall from my bones, and I will thank that you not think about my bowels, though some of my esteemed colleagues would pay gold and diamonds to see it happen---strictly of professional interest, or such would they say.

Those waiting years were perched outside my window that night as I sat in my study and stared at the wall. A bonescuttle... Names of the sea, why a bonescuttle above ground in such season? Or at all? They were creatures of the underearth, liking open sky and fresh air not at all. I drummed my fingers on my desk. Something had driven it, or someone had called it. But then why a bonescuttle? Why not a lion, or a gargoyle, or to wreak true havoc, some small crawling obscenity as would plant seeds of madness in the unsuspecting. Or a

simple plague. Saints and Pilots, on some days I would trade touch and taste alike for a simple plague.

Unless... Ishad. My Swallow. He killed one, some years gone. That was how he came to stay in Coriandel, was it not? Or did I misremember?

I frowned. Magicians have tried since time to make a spell of perfect memory. None of us having ever found one, the true secret of a happy old age is the keeping of good notes.

I closed my eyes and pictured the book I needed. Black leather, two hands tall and a thumb joint thick, with "Swallow" written in gold on the spine. Slightly dusty, most likely, but the leather still supple... I could almost smell it, and then I *could* smell it. When I opened my eyes, it lay obediently on my desk, having been a-shelf in my basement moments before.

I paged through it to remind myself of Ishad and his interrupted story. He had carried half a dozen tasks for me in as many years, but emptied his pockets as quickly as I filled them. I had no note of how he came to Coriandel, but somehow he tangled himself up in a scheme to steal some horses of Oro---no, Emir Oro, I must need remember that. He sent Ishad into the Tombs with two Darpani. He emerged of the morning bearing the head of the bonescuttle and a lock of hair.

I frowned again. My younger self did write that he burned the lock of hair with the proper words, but what of the second Darpani? And his spirit was still in in the underearth, it might have driven the bonescuttle to the surface. *Armnepeteli*, they would name it, the desire of a ghost inspiring flesh to action through dreams and whispers.

But no, that felt infirm. Perhaps a year after his death, or at the birth of a child, but after so many years? I took another book from the shelf beside me, one rather printed in Gandan than penned by me, and made quick sums in my head. The stars were shaped not at all as they had been then.

So, someone had called the creature. Who and why? Or rather, why, which would tell me who. My finger went *pat patta pat* as I stirred possibilities in my mind. I hummed under my breath, a song from my youth called *Ngelema Basuwo*, "the evil stepmother". Each verse added another deed to the list of her crimes. She made a hat out of my cat, *pat patta pat*. She cooked my ears in garlic, *pat patta pat*. She---

I stilled my fingers. Why that song? Earlier, before that I spoke with Swallow, I had been humming one as my housekeeper sang when sweeping. Why a different song now? And why that one?

I studied myself in the mirror that hung next to my desk. I was completely bald, price of the first spell my grandfather taught me. It was the first he had learned, and his aunt before him, and her mother-by-marriage before her. That spell was why my people called magicians *igbe ye*, "bald strength". The Aranese word was *sorçir* from an older word *surreppeçiere*, "one who whispers". And in Ruuda, I would be an *ælfwif*, a "wind wife". They are seafarers, the Ruudians, forever making small bargains to call winds or hide from them.

I felt it again then, that feather-light touch of certainty that meant I was on the right track. Was this something to do with the Ruudians? No. With the sea? With hiding? With wives? With---truly? I snorted. This was a story of evil stepmothers, or partly, and oh, would the balladeers not rejoice should they learn of it.

I stood and re-tied the waist string of my trousers. They were made of light cotton dyed with alternating stripes of black and dark blue. The colors of my tribe, though only scholars and I remembered such now. The Emrulu killed the greater part of us and sold into slavery the rest so they could grow coffee on our land. It was still a new thing in the north at such years, the black gold for which would be given far more than cassava or rice. Their spies had come first among us to find our weaknesses, then---

Spies. That was part of it too. I snorted again and shook my head. Spies and evil stepmothers? What nonsense was this that Ishad had brought to me? I needed some fresh air.

As most houses in the Karaband, mine had two stories in height and was shaped around two courtyards. That in the front was for public occasions, and was as much as most of my helpers ever saw. They brought hither news and did such as I bade them, and received gold, magic, and information in return. It was a business arrangement, nothing more.

A few, like Swallow, I invited to sit with me in the courtyard at the back. Some years I filled it with lush green plants as to remind myself of the jungle of my lost youth. Other

years I took pity on my housekeeper and kept but a few cacti and potted shrubs. These were much easier to water, and did not drop sticky sap on the paving stones.

That year, a wicker cage for exotic birds filled the center of the courtyard. The sadies and ao aos inside it were asleep with their heads tucked under their wings, though the toadingales still burped softly to one another. I looked in at them and felt another certainty. Caged birds...

I leaned my forehead against the wicker and sighed. I knew a dozen spells for discovering things unknown, all of them more direct than the one I was using this night. That of Idjikan gave you true answers to three questions asked three times, but only worked if you sent an innocent to their doom that day. The Gift of the Baker brought the answer to your door, but doubled your appetite. Maerie of Praczedt used it four times and ended her life choking down a hundredth currant bun, or so they say.

The spell I was using was subtlety next to them. It told me nothing directly. Instead, it twinged me with certainty whenever I stumbled over a piece of whatever puzzle ailed me, leaving to me to make of them a whole. The price was very reasonable---if I wanted a knot to stay tied, I had a housekeeper, did I not? And it was fun, in a way, the game of weaving together threads from a thousand stories to make a garment.

I wandered as restless as a ghost for what was left of the night. My thoughts blew hither and yon, from the stick and string games of my childhood to a joke a future king of Uws once made about fencing, from the growing political tension in Ruuda to whether I could find any baklava in my kitchen without waking my housekeeper. It turned out that I could, and by then I had the ribs of my story. There was a girl kept caged by her aunt, and the boy of whom Ishad had spoken, and there had been something between Ishad and the aunt.

Had that been the all of it I would have sent some luck to the boy for remembrance of the visits Ishad had made to my private courtyard, and of how we spent them, and been done with it. But every thought of the girl twinged. I felt as though I ought to know her. Sehdie... The name meant nothing. I wrote it on a lettuce leaf and fed it to one of my turtles, then dipped its feet in ink. Its slow reptilian calligraphy sketched the answer to my

question. The name meant nothing yet, but it would. She and I would know each other. A day would come when she would be right and I would be wrong, but not if she stayed in Coriandel, and not if she stayed with the boy. The world needed her to be elsewhere, and she needed to be with someone else.

And something more still nagged beneath that knowledge, a stillness like the quiet around the grass where a tiger lurks. Someone was hiding something, which was far more interesting than a bitter old woman trying to smother the spirit of her niece from bitterness at her own waste of a life.

It took me four hours to slither past that blank unknowing. Four hours, two handfuls of very rare incense, three silver nails, and I would never be able to drink strong spirits from a clean glass again, but I knew what I was facing. The Bantangui were back in Coriandel.

Rot them. Rot and ruin rain down upon them. I spent fifty years tripping their attempts to put their hands to the throat of trade across the Karaband. I thought they had learned their lesson, but no. They were behind this, which meant that once again I would have to do something, because that was the price I had agreed to. I had always to do what I thought was right.

It had seemed an excellent bargain when I made it, young and sure, but after wars and ruined lives and notebook shelved upon notebook full of conspiracy, intrigue, and misunderstanding, I might no longer claim certainty. It had helped me break the Emrulu, so that no other little girl would see them hack her parents to pieces, or be beaten whenever she spoke above the whisper allowed to slaves. But the civil war in Thind might have ended in a decade saving three had I been able to do other than what my conscience dictated, and Ifan Bloody would never have risen to the collar of Uws.

I touched the wings tattooed on my neck. Those who saw them believed them part of a spell, but they were not. I put them on myself after Ifan's March. Had anyone else from my tribe still lived, they would have understood.

What followed I would never commit to a page, not even my own notebooks. Others have tried to write of magic, of what it is to strike bargains and of who or what they are

struck with. Poets have learned magic, magicians have learned poetry, and all have failed to make meaning of it in words. Even to call it a bargain is wrong, but to call it such is older than me, older even perhaps than the Pilots. I gave of myself my knowing of the word for "blue" in Aranese, never again to be mastered, and in return was given direction that meant nothing to me and less to Ishad when I woke him to instruct him in it.

Boots. The first person to speak of such to him, he was to take theirs and wear them into the underearth. I had not any idea why---that knowing would have cost me far more than the simple instruction, and every old magician must by needs not be greedy, or they will neither be old.

So I told Ishad, and sat myself to listen to my toadingales burp, and wondered. One word of Aranese was far less a price than I had expected to pay. Was something or someone easing my passage? If so, was it a trap laid by the Bantangui, or by some jealous colleague?

I woke after dawn, still in the chaise beside my birds, the hope of fresh coffee in my nostrils. "I hope you haven't been here all night," my housekeeper scolded as she set down her tray. "That robe's nothing for the chill."

"I live," I yawned. She was a fifth my age, but fussed over me as would a mother hen. "Some baklava would help warm me, though."

I loved the early hours of the day. They made everything fresh, full of hope and possibility. My two apprentices would be stirring soon, Thomas and the silversmith girl. I yawned. The silversmith girl did progress as she should, but Thomas was now a problem. Smart, ambitious, impatient---I doubted he would see twenty, despite his talent. He was of the sort to make a bad bargain, to take on too many spells too quickly and discover that one with another meant that food could never pass his lips or some such thing. He would trust his own bald strength too greatly, and then I would have to make certain that his ghost rested and find another to teach.

My housekeeper brought me fresh warm yogurt in a plain porcelain bowl. Wonder of wonders, she brought a new lemon as well. "Where found you this?" I asked.

She scowled to hide a smile. "Never you mind. There'll be flat cakes and dates in a moment too." She spoils me, just as did her father and grandmother.

I drowsed again once the sun found me, then washed my face and other parts and returned to my study, still troubled by the ease with which I had for Ishad found an answer. I set both pieces of dayglass out on the walkway to soak up some sunlight, willed the book I had fetched last night back to its place on the shelf in the basement, and opened the shutters. I could just tell Oro. He was as touchy about the independence of his city as had been his mother.

But also he was touchy about his own independence, and with cause. No ruler wants a four hundred and seventy eight year old magician looking over their shoulder. How then?

I climbed to the roof to watch my neighbors and their housekeepers walk down to the Lame Gate market. Melons and courgettes, sacks of barley and little bags of almonds, a new edge on a pair of scissors or some thread to embroider a wedding shawl... I could borrow from Thomas his eyes and ears and send him out for the day to join them, but he would resent me for it. I could only see through his eyes when he had them closed, and hear through his ears only when he stopped them up to make himself deaf. He would hate to sit such in the market just so I could take in a little bit of the world I kept trying to save.

I sighed, closed the shutters, and went to the cabinet opposite the window and opened the drawer marked "Wave". A poem inscribed on a scrap of leather lay inside, along with a few other odds and ends of his. The drawer had been for Tulip before him, and---whose before that? I could not remember. It would be scribed somewhere, but no matter, no matter.

I sat down at my desk and set the bracelet in front of me. One long, slow breath, and then I looked up at my mirror and said, "Wave, I need to speak with you."

Then: Vurt's Gloves

Ishad told me once that you can't ever know the whole story about anything. You can't even say that you know the important bits, because the bits that are important to you aren't necessarily important to everyone else.

"So whad's th' poind?" I asked. I was holding a wet towel against my nose, which made my words come out muffled. That, and the fact that my nose was broken at the time.

He shrugged. "Better half a meal than none. Don't press so hard, it's not a tourniquet."

"I do't thig id's doig ady good."

"Well, you'd be doing a damn sight better if you'd come to see me right away," he said sharply. "Let me have another look."

I took the towel away and glared at him defiantly. My nose had swollen and was changing color. If I turned my head too quickly, it took the insides of my ears a moment to catch up.

Ishad shook his head. "Bloody mess. Why were you looking at gloves, anyway? I've got plenty of old ones you can borrow."

Which wasn't the point, but at thirteen I didn't expect grownups to understand. I hadn't really gone to the market that day to look for gloves. I just hadn't wanted to go home. Kerrem had taken over teaching the group I was in at school. He'd been explaining fractions to us all week, but I still couldn't make soup or stew out of them, and being stupid made me feel too angry for chores.

What made it worse was that Kerrem obviously loved teaching as much as he loved reading and poetry and all the rest of it. He'd get his bookster's license the day he turned sixteen, marry someone who knew more about Darpani clan ballads than she did about cooking, and live happily ever after. And me? I was going to be a rat catcher like my father, just one step up from cleaning gutters or tanning leather.

So instead of going home to make spring traps and stupid mineral powders, I turned left on Second Moon Street, spent five minutes stacking boxes for Aziz's mother in exchange for a tangerine, and lost myself in the market. There were marionettes from Chaghan and

Gandan with swords and shields in their hands, and a matching pair of newly-made swords at Old Gallant's, and flags of all sizes, and riding cloaks whose silk linings were as red as blood, and there, tied together with a length of black ribbon, a pair of dueling gloves exactly my size.

The gloves were black goatskin leather with thin steel plates sewn on the backs. The palms were sanded and whipped to give a sure grip. They probably cost more than my parents earned together in two busy weeks.

I don't know if I drooled or not. The ribbon that held them together was looped through the wicker shelf they lay on to stop passers by picking them up. The stall keeper was busy talking to a Darpani about mending a hat. He glanced at me but didn't shoo me away, so I put my satchel down and fingered them. The leather was just the slightest bit stiff so that the gloves would mold themselves to their wearer's hands. I'd outgrow them in a year, but so what? Girls would pay a lot more attention to a young bravo in gloves like those than they would to an apprentice rat catcher.

That's when the two boys behind me started making jokes about how tough Coriandel's rats must be if you needed gear like that to handle them. They were from the school up the street from mine, one with proper wooden shutters on its windows and a teacher who was actually sober most of the time. I don't know why they recognized me, but it was pretty clear from the sneers and sniggers that they did.

Yeah, Coriandel's rats must be pretty tough. Or maybe the rats weren't tough. Maybe the rat catcher's boy was just scared of getting his pretty little hands scratched. Maybe he should try gardening instead. Oh, no, wait, then there would be thistles and thorns.

"The easiest fights to win are the ones you don't have," Ishad told me, time and time again. Besides, they were older than me---fifteen or sixteen---and there were two of them. I picked up my satchel and walked away, but they followed me.

Looking back, I guess they were just bored. Or maybe they couldn't afford the things they wanted either, and pushing someone around was a way to take their minds off it for a while. Whatever the reason, they kept pace a few strides behind me, still cracking jokes. If I

was that afraid of rats, I must sleep with a night light. Or with my mother. Yeah, that was it---I probably still slept with my mother. Hey, maybe that's what the gloves were for...

I asked Ishad afterward if he'd ever actually walked away from any fights. "Plenty," he said. "Well, some. A few, anyway. I must have done."

Five strides ahead, a narrow alley ran off to my right between a warehouse and a tinsmith's. With a quick glance over my shoulder, I ducked into it as if to run away, dropped my satchel on the cobblestones, and kicked the first boy in the plums as he came around the corner.

He dropped like a sack of beans. I grabbed the second boy's collar, spun around, and threw him over my shoulder. "How's that for catching rats?" I shouted, almost giddy that the throw had worked. I kicked his ribs. "Hey? How's that for---"

A hand grabbed my shoulder and dragged me off him. I had just a glimpse of the first boy's face before his forehead crunched into my nose. I staggered back, tripped over the boy I'd thrown to the ground, and fell on my bony young ass.

The first boy helped the second one up as I scrambled back to my feet. I backed away as they advanced, murder written on their faces. I didn't know yet that my nose was broken, but I was half blind from the pain. There were two of them, each a few gourds heavier than me. Their arms were longer than mine, and they were smart enough to split up, one on each side of the alley.

I spat out the blood that had dripped into my mouth. This was going to hurt.

As they tensed themselves to charge, two Bantangui women stepped into the alley behind them. The first was wearing a multi-colored ankle-length skirt and a plain white shoulder wrap. The second, a servant, was holding a parasol over the first and wearing the kind of look Ishad used to quiet a class down.

"You! What are you doing?" the first asked sharply. The boy I'd kicked hesitated. The second one grabbed his arm and pulled him a few steps down the alley. As soon as they started to run, I slumped against the wall.

"Are you all right?" the first asked solicitously.

"Yes, I'b awrighd. Thags." I slid down the wall until I was sitting with my legs straight out in front of me. I was getting blood on my shirt. Couldn't do that---it would stain. I did the three buttons at its collar and pulled it off over my head. A spatter of blood landed on my chest and slid down toward my navel. Another joined it.

"I'b sorry," I said, sniffing. Nobody answered. I looked up from my misery. The two women were gone. So was my weeping stupid satchel.

It took a moment for that to register. My satchel was gone. The book Kerrem had loaned me the month before was in it. So was my rat catching gear---my traps, my poisons, the guaranteed odorless cotton thread my mother had given me for my birthday, everything. I struggled to my feet and looked down the alley. It wasn't there. Of course it wasn't---it had been right there, where I'd dropped it, right next to where the two women had been standing.

I covered my bloody face with my hand and poked my head out of the alley. Nothing. I couldn't see them. Of course I couldn't. They had just stolen my satchel. They weren't just going to hide around the corner so that they could jump out at me and say "boo!" No, odds were that they were going to sell what they could and throw the rest into a pig trough. And if I ever saw them again, they'd look me right in the eye and swear on their unborn grandchildren that they didn't know what I was talking about.

I don't know how long I stood in that alley. Not long, probably. I thought about running away. I could sign on with a southbound caravan, like Ishad did when he was my age, and take my chances that they wouldn't sell me for a slave as soon as they crossed the mountains into Barra Bantang. Or I could bash my face with a brick a few times to make things look so bad that even my father wouldn't ask me about my satchel. Instead, I kicked the wall a few times, then put my shirt back on. To hell with running away. I said it out loud: "To hell with running away." And to hell with being a rat catcher, too. I was going to be somebody that people would cross the street rather than rob. I was going to be the kind of person who deserved to wear a fine pair of gloves.

Recently: Sehdie in the Umram

Stories always have a lot to say about heroes, but what about their prizes? What about the emir whose curse the heroine lifts, or the princess that the handsome blacksmith's son rescues? What is life like for them?

I knew the answer. It was like suffocating, and it grew worse every... single... day. Oh, it wasn't my father's fault. He always had his nose in his accounts, or one of the books from his turtling friends. He barely noticed me any more. But my aunt... I know I should have been grateful, but I just wanted to scream at her. "I'm not a dress-up doll! I'm not a little girl any more! Just leave me alone!" I never did, of course. I was too well-mannered.

Sometimes I imagined throwing stones at her. Not pebbles, but big solid ones the size of pears. I saw a stone that size hit a man in the head once in the market when I was little. He didn't get up afterward, but I was sure my aunt would. She would stand up and brush herself off and say, "Oh, cherished, can't you *please* be a little more considerate? Please? For your mother's sake, if not for mine? We'd want her to be proud of you, wouldn't we?"

My girlfriends were just more pillows piled on my face. When I tried to explain how I felt they sighed sympathetically and made little cooing-dove noises and then said, "Do you think I should wear my orange scarf with this dress? Or the black one with the sand pearl fringe?" It made me want to throw rocks at them too. Most of all, it made me want a story of my own.

The first time I saw Vurt, I thought, "*He* could save me." My girlfriends and I were supposed to be at lessons, but Cathé's houseman had taken us to the *umram* instead. She bribed him with one of her silver rings the first time, but then she told him that if he didn't take us again, she would say that he had stolen it. He was angry, but what could he do? And anyway, he liked the fights even more than we did.

It was Purplesday, which meant the *umram* would be crowded. We wore disguises even though we didn't need to, because dressing up was supposedly half the excitement. There are so many plays and poems and songs and stories about enemies who fall in love because they're disguised the first time they meet. Or about brothers who fight a duel, and

then the winner throws himself out a window in remorse when he realizes who he has killed. Or people who meet a powerful magician who is traveling incognito, and get her some water or save her from a pack of squirrels and get three wishes in return. Ever since I read that story, I've known what I would wish for. "Fly me away from here, and you can keep the other two."

Cathé grabbed my arm and pointed at Vurt when he stepped onto the sand. "Oh, now look at him," she breathed. For a moment I didn't see what she was so excited about. He wasn't tall, and his hair wasn't down to his shoulders like Tessor's. But when he stalked over to his starting board I thought, "Oh, my." He moved like a cat dancer, up on the balls of his feet.

Then someone in the crowd yelled something vulgar. He looked up---straight at us, or so it seemed---and grinned, and oh my again.

The fight was over almost before it started. The judge clapped his hands three times. On the third clap, Vurt lunged forward and spun his spear around like a staff. His opponent's spear flew from his hands. "*Wayway!*" the judge yelled, "Disarmed!" People clapped or booed depending on whether they appreciated Vurt's skill or had been hoping for a longer fight. Vurt bowed to the judge and walked back to his stall.

"Well isn't *he* tasty?" I breathed. Cathé gasped and giggled at the same time. She was sweating lightly. Her false beard made her face look even rounder than it was.

She touched my arm and pointed again. "Isn't that Kerrem Bashko *é... é...*"

"Zermelo," I finished for her. Yes, it was. He was in the stands beside Vurt's stall, leaning over the railing to talk with one hand flapping in the air to illustrate whatever he was saying. His mother had been our writing teacher when we were little. He came with her sometimes to help us learn our abracadabras or to read us stories. He was only a couple of years older than I was, though back then he seemed very grown up.

I gathered my robe in one hand and got to my feet. Cathé's houseman looked at me suspiciously. "Where are you going, honored miss?"

"To say hello to an old friend," I said in my aunt's voice. He opened his mouth to protest, which servants *never* do when my aunt speaks to them. I cut him off with, "You will stay here and watch over your charge," then nodded at Cathé and hurried away.

I picked my way past people fanning themselves as they ate dried figs and reminisced about bouts they had seen years before I was born. One or two people winked at me knowingly---we were hardly the only girls there wearing beards---but I ignored them.

Kerrem the man was still the boy I remembered. Taller, yes, and the defiant little hairs on his upper lip had found the confidence to become a neatly trimmed mustache, but other than that, the only change was that the ink smudge where he rubbed the side of his nose was finally gone. He wore a simple brown knee-length coat over a collarless white shirt and white trousers. The strap on one of his sandals didn't quite match the strap on the other.

He bowed as I approached. "Honored miss," he said solemnly. Then his eyes widened. "Sehdie?"

"Sh!" I hissed. "I'm in disguise!"

"Of course," he said solemnly. Then he grinned despite himself. "Did you see Vurt fight just now? Wasn't he magnificent?"

"I suppose. I don't really know much about it." I hesitated. "Do you know him?"

"Of course. We have the same teacher. Had, I mean. I stopped lessons last year. But I still see him every couple of days. I, um, I help him sometimes. With his taunts. I mean, I make them up for him, to yell at his opponents."

I couldn't help myself. I giggled, then covered my mouth with my hand. "You're a... you're a tauntster?"

He colored. "No, I'm a real bookster. See?" He held up his hand to show me the leather ring on his little finger. "But, you know, Vurt's idea of a taunt is, 'Your parry is as ugly as your face'. That's hardly the stuff of epics."

"Hardly," I agreed drily.

He nodded. "So I said to him, 'Why don't I translate some of the classics for you?' I mean, Terremaktikak wrote a whole taunting epic for Arshad."

"But I didn't hear him make any taunts today."

Kerrem cleared his throat. "Yes, well, I think it's a good idea, but Vurt's not quite as keen. Afraid the judge might hobble him for unnecessary delay if he spends half an hour enumerating the flaws in his opponent's ancestors." He sighed theatrically. "Sad this age / When people sip Art / Who should bathe in it."

I frowned. "That's Udiwar, isn't it?"

He blinked. "Yes, it is." He rubbed the side of his nose with one finger, just as he had when we were children. "I guess you were paying more attention to my mother's lessons than she thought. Anyway, here he is now."

I turned around a little too quickly, tripped on the hem of my robe, and stumbled forward right into Vurt's arms.

He caught me, of course. He was quick. "Your pardon, honored...miss?" He smelled like sweat and leather and something else, cinnamon and cloves and faraway places. Our faces were just a palm's width apart. We were looking straight into each other's eyes.

I gathered myself back from him. "Your pardon, valiant sir," I said, pitching my voice as low as I could. "My clumsiness is doubly embarrassing, following so quickly upon your grace of a moment ago."

Kerrem cleared his throat behind me. "Um, Vurt, this is, um, a friend of mine. From some years ago."

"I didn't know you had friends," Vurt replied absently. He was still looking at my eyes. Right into my eyes. His were as black as sand pearls. He had a scar on his lip, not a big one, just an old split that had needed a stitch or two. And another one above his right eyebrow. His nose was bent to one side, but in a good way, and his hair was cut so short that his scalp gleamed through it. He was handsome. If he were to smile, I would say he was very handsome.

He smiled. "But I'm glad to discover my error." He raised his palms to me and bowed. "May I challenge for you?"

Oh, my heart. "Challenge for me? Valiant sir, you are presumptuous." No, no, that was my aunt talking, that was my aunt. I didn't want to be my aunt. "But if it pleases you to do so..."

"And for whom should I announce that I am challenging?" he asked.

"Just say 'for a lady'," Kerrem interrupted hastily. Was he still there? I had forgotten about him. "A lady whose other friends seem bent on rescuing her."

What? I tore my eyes away from Vurt. Rusty old spoons, Kerrem was right. Cathé was puffing up the steps behind Vurt, her houseman and the rest of our ridiculous little troupe in tow.

Vurt lowered his hands and nodded solemnly. "For a lady," he repeated. He turned and shouldered past my friends.

"There you are!" Cathé gasped. More than her face is round. "Come on, it's time to go."

"Not yet," I said. I sat down resolutely on the bench facing the *umram*'s hard-packed earth floor. Kerrem hesitated for a second, then sat beside me.

"But, Sehdie!" Cathé threw Kerrem a look. "We have to go! We'll be in trouble if we're late!"

"Not yet," I repeated firmly. I gathered my robe around my legs.

Well, she fussed, and her houseman fussed, and everyone fussed, but for once I wasn't going to be fussed. People around us started hissing, "*Usti! Usti!*" which Kerrem told me was something Darpani say to make their animals sit. So they sat and fussed through two more bouts until the judge bellowed, "A challenge! For a lady!"

Well, the crowd liked that, even before they heard who the challenger was. For a moment I thought no one would take him up on it, but another duelist stepped out of the stalls and saluted. He was a northerner, pale-skinned and long-haired. "A caravan guard down from Vaarda, lost his wages at the race track," Kerrem said, consulting a little notebook he had taken out of his sleeve. "He'll be hoping to earn a few coins, but what he really wants is to catch the eye of some merchant and get hired to go back north."

I arched an eyebrow at him. "Do you keep notes on *all* the pretty young men?" I asked.

I thought he would blush, but instead he nodded seriously. "Every one that Vurt might go up against."

The northerner and Vurt took their places on the starting boards. My heart was pounding. No one had ever fought for me before. Oh, I mean, there had been a poetry duel once to see who could pour my punch at a picnic. Cathé and the others had been jealous, but proud too, just like my aunt was proud of my posture and enunciation.

But no one had ever fought a challenge for me in the *umram*. It was like something out of a ballad. I sat right on the edge of the bench, my hands twisting my sleeves tight.

The judge clapped his hands. Once... twice... On the third clap, the northerner stepped back into a crouch and brought his spear up to guard two-handed. He had obviously seen Vurt's previous fight.

Vurt brought his own spear up in a strange overhand grip, almost a salute. Beside me, Kerrem sucked in his breath. "Oh, no."

"What? What's happening?"

Kerrem shook his head. "He's showing off, that's what's happening. It's a good thing Ishad isn't here."

Vurt and the northerner shuffle-stepped around each other slowly, ignoring the crowd's taunts and whistles. The northerner feinted at Vurt. He didn't flinch. The northerner feinted again, then lunged straight at Vurt's face. Vurt slipped to the side, his spear still up in that strange grip.

Feint and dodge, lunge and parry, around and around. The whistles grew louder. A piece of melon hit the sand a few strides away from them. "It'll be sundown soon!" someone yelled. "And dawn soon after that!" someone else added.

Feint, dodge, and then suddenly Vurt attacked. He knocked the northerner's spear a thumb to the side with his forearm and kicked him hard in the chest. The northerner went back a step, his spear already slashing across to take the leg Vurt was standing on. But it wasn't there. Vurt was flying, rolling over in mid-air with his spear as a counterbalance. The

painted brush on the end of his spear went *splat* in the middle of the northerner's chest just an instant before his feet hit the ground.

Oh, the crowd roared. They roared, and I clapped so hard that I bruised my hands. Kerrem just shook his head.

Cathé pulled my arm. "Sehdie. Come on, we have to go!"

I stood and gave Kerrem a slight bow. "Would you please thank him for me? And give him my apologies, that I was unable to stay and thank him myself?"

He sighed theatrically as he stood and bowed back. "Of course." He raised his palms. "I'm sure we'll see each other again soon."

But we didn't, not for a whole week. Cathé was furious with me for keeping us there so late, although nothing happened because of it. She was jealous too, really jealous instead of jealous-proud. When we go to picnics, boys talk to her to ask about me. It's not my fault---I certainly don't encourage them---but I understand why it hurts her feelings. This must have been ten times worse than that.

She forgave me eventually. She always did, which just made me feel worse. A week later we were back on the common benches. Kerrem sat beside us the whole time, explaining the fine points of each fight to me and arguing good-naturedly about them with Cathé's houseman. A few people clapped for Vurt when he came into the stands after his last fight. He raised his palms to us, held up a short string of coins to show Kerrem, and then sat beside just a little closer than was proper. We didn't talk for long, or say very much. How could we, with my friends and Kerrem and the houseman pretending so hard not to listen? He told me about his fights, and I asked whatever questions I could think, and during the long pauses we looked down at our feet, each of us intensely aware of how close the other was.

As he stood he whispered, "Answer at your window tonight." My window? What in the Pilots' names was he thinking? He couldn't come to my window! He could--- He might--- He was a rogue! A prize fighter! If my aunt found out, she would--- Actually, I had no idea what she would do, but I was sure it would be horrible.

"Boy!" I jumped at the shout. It was his teacher. Kerrem had pointed him out to me the second time I came to the *umram*, not that I could have missed him. He bellowed and cursed from the moment one of his students stepped onto the floor. "Pick up your feet, lad! Yes, those feet, yours, they're not that heavy! Oh, for the love of---you're embarrassing me again! Do you hear? You're embarrassing me!" People laughed at him as much as with him, but he didn't seem to care as long as his students won more than they lost.

Vurt didn't seem to care either. The first time I saw Ishad yell at him, he actually stopped in the middle of the fight as if to yell something back. It was a trick, of course, and oh, the crowd laughed when his opponent fell for it.

"Answer at your window." What do you wear for your first after-hours suitor? I couldn't dress up---my aunt watched me like a hawk, so I daren't do anything out of the ordinary. And besides, dressing *up* wasn't the point, was it?

In the end, I put on the simple sleeveless shift that I wore in the steam baths and an embroidered Bantangui housecoat that my aunt's society woman gave me when I turned sixteen. And then I sat and waited. And waited. And waited.

He knocked on my window just after moonrise. I opened the shutters but did not unlock the grille. He hung from the roof beam one-handed and held up some flowers. "For you," he said, as if they might have been for someone else. I had to pull them through the grille one at a time. Our fingers touched, just briefly, and then he pulled himself back up onto the roof and disappeared.

I waited until I was sure he was gone and then pushed the flowers back out through the grille. I wouldn't have been able to explain them away if my aunt found them in my room.

I lay in bed afterward with my arms up so that my hands were beside my head on my pillow. The smell of Vurt's flowers on them, jasmine and oleander, made me giddy in the darkness. I closed my eyes and imagined all the things he could have said to me and what I could have said to him in return until I drifted on a cloud into dreams.

Recently: A Conversation in an Alley

"So you just shoved the flowers at her and ran away?"

"I didn't run away!"

"Well then what *did* you do?"

"I did what you told me to! I took her flowers!"

"But you didn't say anything to her."

"Like what? What was I supposed to say?"

"Saints and their inventions. The whole point is to say something to her! You don't just shove a bunch of flowers at a girl and then disappear into the night. Well, all right, maybe you can get away with that the once, but you're supposed to stick around long enough to talk to her, at least a little."

"Well, thanks for letting me know. Shame you didn't think to tell me beforehand."

"Saints. All right, listen. No, listen with your mouth closed. It's not the end of the world. The next time you see her, tell her that you thought you heard someone coming and you didn't want to, to, to jeopardize her reputation. That ought to be romantic enough. No, wait, on second thought, just tell her you thought you heard something in the alley. Better not remind her about her reputation."

"What do you mean? There's nothing wrong with her reputation!"

"Of course there's nothing wrong with her reputation, you idiot! But if you bring it up, she'll start worrying about it. Trust me, it's better if you just say that you thought you heard something."

"Trust you. Sure."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, you're the one who told me to take her flowers, and look where that's gotten me. She's probably never going to want to see me again."

"That's not the flowers' fault. Or mine. And anyway, you're being melodramatic. Just tell her---"

"I know what to tell her, all right? I thought I heard something. I'm sure that will make her think I'm very brave."

"Hey, if you can think of a better story, be my guest. I'm just trying to help."

"Yeah, I know. Here, pass that over."

"Sure. Finish it if you want."

"Mm. No thanks. If I show up with a hangover tomorrow, Ishad will flense me."

"Have you told him about her?"

"Are you kidding? Remember what happened the last time he found out I was sweet on someone?"

"Heh. Yeah. Although you have to admit, he looked pretty good in a dress."

"Maybe to you, goat-lover."

"Hey! He was just having a joke."

"Yeah, well, I didn't think it was funny."

"No, of course you didn't."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"What do you mean, what's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, what's that supposed to mean?"

"Saints in sandals, would you lighten up? I was just spouting."

"No, I'm serious, what did you mean? And don't just sigh at me and give me that look. I really want to know."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"All right. All I meant was, you never laugh."

"What do you mean, I never laugh?"

"I mean, you never laugh. You hardly ever even smile."

"Horse turds! I laugh at lots of things!"

"Sh! Keep your voice down!"

"I laugh at lots of things!"

"Really? What's the last thing you laughed at? I mean really laughed at, not just ha ha, but really laughed at because you thought it was funny?"

"..."

"What was that?"

"I said, just because I can't think of something right now, doesn't mean I don't ever laugh."

"No, but it does mean you don't laugh a lot. You never have. You never joke around, either. Even when we were kids, you were always scowling at everyone."

"Saints, what is this? Was there some sort of proclamation, and I'm the only one who didn't hear it? 'All hearken, all hearken, His Grace the Emir Oro, third of that name, hereby declares that today is the first annual festival of kicking Vurt when he's down.' I think I'd remember hearing that."

"Keep... your... voice... down! And give me back that damned bottle. I thought you said you didn't want to show up at Ishad's all stinky-breath tomorrow."

"Stinky-breath? Did you really just say 'stinky-breath'? What are you, twelve?"

"All right, look, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I told you to tell her you'd come by her window tonight, and I'm sorry I told you to take her flowers, and I'm sorry I didn't tell you to say something sweet to her instead of just---"

"If you say 'running away' I'll thump you, I swear."

"Thump me? Saints, now who's twelve?"

"I don't even know why I'm listening to you anyway. I mean, what the hells makes you such an expert on women?"

"I have two brothers, three sisters, and more cousins than a camel has fleas. Half of them write poetry, and between them the rest can probably recite every tragic soliloquy written in the last two hundred years. I've seen them in love, out of love, next door to love, puking up their guts in love's outhouse---you name it, I've seen it."

"But you've never been in love yourself, have you? Have you? Ah, there, you see? You're like one of those snots who shows up at the umram and sniffs at us and says, tsk tsk, poor form, you really should put a little more vigor into those strokes, except they've never held a sword in their life."

"All right, I've had enough of this. No, seriously, I've had enough. You asked me to help you. I gave you the best advice I had. If it didn't work out, I'm sorry, but it's exactly

what I would have done myself. If you think you can do better on your own then best of luck, please let me know how it goes, et weeping cetera. I'm for home. It's late, and I have students tomorrow morning. Oh, and you can keep the bottle. Just don't blame me if Ishad takes strips off you tomorrow."

"Hold on, hold on. Look, I'm sorry. Seriously, I apologize. I was marching out of time there. I'm...ah, saints, I really am grateful for your help. I wouldn't even have taken her flowers if you hadn't told me to. I'm just...I can't stand the thought of messing up, you know? Of her laughing at me. I can't stand it."

"What makes you think she's laughing at you? Frogs in kilts, Vurt, why are you always so touchy? Nobody ever actually laughs at you, you know."

"You did. Hells, everybody did when Ishad showed up that time in a dress."

"Oh, for the love of all quiet saints."

"What? You did."

"Yes I know I did. It was funny, that's why. It was funny. And anyway, it was three weeping years ago! I'm surprised you even remember."

"You do."

"What?"

"You remember. You remembered as soon as I mentioned it. And I bet all of Ishad's other students remember too."

"You think so? Well, what I think they remember is that you won your first four *umram* matches in a row, and only lost the fifth one because the referee was so besotted with that redhead from Ruuda that he practically came out there to swing his sword for him."

"It wasn't quite that bad."

"It weeping was so that bad! Damn it, Vurt, why do you always chew on yourself like this? You want to know what I remember? I remember you walking half an hour out of your way every day for three weeks just so you'd happen to be on Six Ears Square when those Darpani kids were on their way to the market. Nobody tried to tar their faces with you ten strides behind them, did they? And you didn't even know their names!"

"String Flute Coughing and Milk Bear In Summer."

"What?"

"Their names. String Flute Coughing and Milk Bear In Summer. They were Blanket Salt Later's nephews. He was the one who broke his neck, remember? The first time I was in a three-on-three?"

"Oh. Well, that just proves my point, doesn't it? You didn't owe him anything. Hells, you hardly even knew him---you just drew the same team on the odds. But you went out of your way every day for three weeks to make sure nobody would bully his nephews. *That's* what people remember."

"..."

"What?"

"I didn't say anything."

"Yes you did, I heard you."

"Well then what did I say?"

"Oh, saints. Would you just weeping let someone give you a compliment once in a while? Please? Look, if it makes things easier, just pretend I'm talking about some other goat-stubborn sock-clutching cheese-bellied lackwit instead."

"Sure. Sure, I can do that. Do you think Sehdie's laughing at him, too?"

"Weeping hells. I give up. No, really, this time I really give up. I'm going home. It's late, I'm tired, and if you want to sail to Sullair and throw yourself in the dragon's mouth I'm not going to stop you."

"All right. Do you want your bottle back?"

"Why? It's empty."

"Well, that just means there's last chance of you spilling any, doesn't it?"

"Was that a joke?"

"Kind of. Not very funny, was it?"

"It's a start. You get some sleep. We'll worry about Sehdie in the morning."

"All right. And Kerrem? Thanks."

"Sure. Good night."

"Good night."

Cup Rainbow Reaching Remembers Lights Among Trees

Hell has no sky, no breeze, no sweet grass, and no fresh water. Hell has cold stone steps leading down into a great cavern whose walls sparkle with false stars. Hell is the door behind you turning into a blank stone wall and stale damp air in your nostrils.

The Karabandi, Ishad, knelt to unshutter his lantern. "Get yours out as well," he ordered my mother's-side cousin, taking command as if by right. "Save the third one for in case." Trapped sunlight spilled out in the room, making sharp-edged shadows all around us.

Three men with two shadows each, we looked around at the cavern floor. It was pimpled like a boy's face. The Karabandi scuffed a stony blotch with his foot and glanced up. "See?" he said, pointing. "It's just from the water dripping. Like a salt skid. Nothing to worry about." Still, he took care to step around them, as did we.

The cavern floor glistened with damp in the light of our lanterns. Small things fluttered around us for a moment like tiny butterflies with wings as clear as pond ice. They scattered when something larger flew past above our heads. The Karabandi ignored them. He moved like a hunting cat, his eyes never still.

The cavern wall curved down to meet the floor fifty strides from the bottom of the stairs. An arched opening was cut into it, twice the height of a man on horseback, surrounded by carvings of narrow leaves and bony fingers. Twenty strides of echoing tunnel on its other side brought us to a broad stone bridge with a waist-high wall on each side. Squat stone figures crouched on them: gargoyles with their tails in their mouths, stilt fishers with their hands over their ears, a thing I cannot name holding the screaming head of a man in its tentacles. I could not see a roof above us, but when my mother's-side cousin and I looked over the side, the light of his lantern reflected off water ten strides below.

"Stay in the middle," the Karabandi said sharply. "And remember what the thief said. Whatever happens, don't talk back."

We started forward. A breeze blew the smell of lye and stagnant water into my nose. As we moved forward, our lanterns showed us that the far side of the bridge was carved to look like the face of a sorrowing woman. The bridge ran into her mouth like a stone tongue.

When I looked back, I saw that the wall behind us was carved to look like a man about to weep.

The Karabandi suddenly twitched as if someone had brushed his neck with a feather. A moment later, a voice almost too faint to hear whispered in my ear. "Who took the honey that was to be a name-day gift for thy grandfather?"

My heart stumbled. I had been six years old, or perhaps seven. My grandfather had been on his death bed, his belly swollen with a knotted tumor that made the grass throwers cluck their tongues and shake their heads. All he wanted for his seventieth name-day was some blueberry honey, but I stole the last jar. I was angry that everyone was giving him so much attention and me so little. I only ate a few fingerfuls, then buried the rest in the roots of a dry aspen, afraid that I would be found out if I kept it. He died three days later.

Two steps later there was another voice, another question, another shame. "Who told his friends he had lain with Cord Leaf Grateful? Who made water when the bull charged? Who lied to his father about the broken stirrup? Who fled? Who flees yet?"

Left, right, left, right. "Whatever happens, don't answer," the thief had warned us, "And don't run." But the voices grew louder, two or three speaking at once, putting into words things that should never have been done.

Suddenly another voice, a deeper one, hissed, "Who feigned a pull in his leg so Wolodmyr would have to lead the charge that day? Who threw the rock that put out Eya's tooth?" These were not my shames. Were they they Karabandi's? And if I could hear his...

"Keep moving!" the Karabandi ordered. "Oh, there was a shepherd from Selmaneia, five fingers on each hand..." It was an old song for counting sheep and cattle, and for keeping one's mind on the track when hunting sand misers. My mother's-side cousin and I joined in. We sang, then shouted, our footsteps in time with our words, but still the voices grew louder. They were speaking past our ears now, straight into our souls, washing away our strength one secret at a time.

We were ten strides short of the end of the bridge when a voice, woman-soft, asked a question of my mother's-side cousin that I will not repeat. "To be a lie!" he blurted, right in the middle of the verse. Oh, my cousin.

Something stirred below us, something that had never walked on sweet grass or felt sunlight splash on its face. "Run!" the Karabandi bellowed, and we ran like boys racing a midsummer, leather sandals slapping stone.

The Karabandi reached the sorrowing mouth at the end of the bridge first. He whirled around, lantern in one hand, sword in the other, though steel would be of no use against the thing rising from the water. "Go! Go!" he yelled as my mother's-side cousin and I charged past him.

Another short tunnel, and then more stairs, wide enough for three men to stand side by side at the base but narrowing as they rose. At their top, a gate made of silver bars as thick as fingers hung open just enough for a man to squeeze through. One, two, three, we went, the Karabandi last, grunting as he scraped his leather breast-and-back between the gate and the wall.

We stood together for a moment, panting like blown horses. The Karabandi laughed shakily. "Well, that was a thing, wasn't it? The emir should bring his ministers down here, find out all their secrets. 'Course, then they'd know all of his."

"To be fools to come," my mother's-side cousin muttered.

The Karabandi clapped him on the shoulder. "Come on, lad, it was just a joke. There's easier ways for him to---"

"Not the emir. Someone and his companions." My mother's-side cousin's cheeks were wet. "To be lost, when we die down here."

I snapped my fingers to scare his words away. "To see the open sky again," I promised softly. He knew I had no right to make such a promise in such a place, but he touched his hand to his heart anyway.

The Karabandi led the way again. These walls were not speckled with false stars like those in the first chamber. They were made of rough black stone that drank our lanterns' light as the desert drinks spilled water. We jumped, all three of us, when something rattled the gate behind us, but pressed on.

At the end of the passage lay another chamber, smaller than the one before but large enough still to hold a hundred horses. What we saw there sent me back to when I was just eight years old and had only one name for my name.

My father woke me one morning before dawn. "Someone is quiet," he whispered in my ear so as not to wake my baby sister. "Someone is dressed and outside."

I slipped out of our tent a few moments later with my boots on my feet, my poncho under my arm and sleep still in my eyes. My father was already atop his second-best horse. He lifted me up behind him one-armed, then twitched his heels against her sides.

We rode all day. The sun soon burned away the morning mist, leaving only a few clouds grazing high above us in a clear blue sky. The land rose steadily. My father kept his bow across his lap in case of lions or gargoyles, but none troubled us.

My father was a quiet man, but words fell from him that day like snowflakes in a blizzard. He pointed out the tufts of grass that marked rabbit warrens, named the birds, told me how to brew a tea from the yellow-white flowers beside our path to make my breath sweet when the time came to dance with a woman. I listened carefully, my cheek against his back, my arms around him. Sometimes I asked a question, just to keep his words swirling around me. I think I slept too, my hands tucked into his belt to stop myself from falling.

We reached the edge of the forest just before sunset. I slithered down from the horse. My father dismounted behind me, his bow still in his hand. He made water against the side of a tree so that the horse would know not to stray, then led me into the forest.

I had never been among trees so large in my life. I felt like a frog looking up at sharp-billed wading cranes. But I was not afraid, not as long as I had my father's hand to hold. Birds I did not know scolded us from the branches. Squirrels' claws scratched on bark. Something scurried away from us, changed course, cut across the narrow path we were following---a cat, I think, black and brown, with a short, thick tail.

"Here," my father finally said. The trees around us were strange to me. Their bark was gray, like birch, but glassy fruits the size of pheasant eggs hung in thick clusters from their branches. My father sat on the ground with his back against one of their trunks.

I sat at his side. The ground was cool and moist, a rich ever-thickening carpet of fallen leaves as old as the world. "What are these?" I asked.

"Hush," he said. "Wait."

The sun slipped down toward the horizon. The forest slowly grew dark. Its sounds changed as day birds went to their nests and evening birds woke. Something larger than a cat pushed branches out of the way in the distance. My father picked up his bow, but whatever it was went its own way and he relaxed again.

The sky darkened until the trees were just black on black. Suddenly a tiny light sparked a few strides away. I thought it was a firefly, but it was red-orange instead of blue-green and did not move.

Another dot of light came to life, then another and another. In twos and threes, then tens, then hundreds, the fruit on the trees around us lit up. Red, orange, some yellow, a few almost green, they lit the grove like armfuls of stars.

My father put his arm around my shoulders. "Wait," he breathed.

I waited. There---a glowing cluster of fruit bobbed up and down as a bat settled on the branch from which it hung. More bats arrived. I could not see them, but I heard their squeaking and the flapping of their wings. They perched among the lights above us. One by one the little stars disappeared, devoured by the hungry night fliers. "For their seeds," my father whispered in my ear. "They shine to tell the bats hello, I am ripe, take my flesh and my seed with it."

"It's like... It's like they are eating a rainbow," I whispered reverently. My father squeezed my shoulders.

We watched until the lights faded or were eaten and the bats fluttered away. My father must have carried me sleeping through the darkness. I do not remember. I only know that I woke the next morning with my cheek against the soft, rich forest floor, the horse eyeing me from two strides away, my father singing softly under his breath. When we returned to camp that evening, he told my mother that my name had its second name now, Rainbow to go with Cup.

Whoever built the stone garden that greeted us beneath Coriandel must have seen a grove like the one I remembered. The trees were carved from marble and jade. Their leaves were fashioned from brass, bronze, and pewter, and the fruit that hung from their branches must have been gems or some kin to dayglass. They caught the light from our lanterns and multiplied it a thousandfold, each throwing it to the next so that we stood in a frozen whirlwind of brightly-colored sparks.

"Well, isn't this just a sight?" the Karabandi breathed. "There would have been birds too, y'know. And snakes and the like, all cogs and gears and springs."

"There... hrrrk. There still are. But... hrrk. If you want to see them... You need to know the magic... word."

We spun about. If the *iyemnelili* that stood there had been meant to appear human, its maker had been a poor artist. Its legs and arms were too long for its body, and its face looked as if it had melted and re-set like wax. It wore the rags of what had once been a rich robe, and had lidless silver balls for eyes.

Its voice scraped like a rusty hinge. "Hrrrk. Yes, they're still here. Birds and bees, snakes and spiders, even a fox. Don't suppose you know... hrrk. What a fox is, do you? All gone, all gone. But they won't come out to play. Not... hrrk. Not with you. Not unless you say the magic word."

"Magic word, is it? Oh, well. That's a shame." The Karabandi spoke lightly, but kept his sword up. "Grieve to say we're not magicians. If you happened to know where we might find a bonescuttle, though, we'd thank you for your aid."

"Hsssss..." The *iyemnelili* edged toward us, clutching its robe about its skinny shoulders. "But you must say the...hrrk. Magic word. You must, you must, you must."

"Ware my back," the Karabandi muttered, as if we needed to be told to watch for ambush. The *iyemnelili* kept coming, hunched over, one hand up to shield its eyes from our lanterns. "Now, I think that's close enough, don't you? Seeing as we've just met?"

"You must... hrrk. Say it. Say it!" The thing thrust a hand beneath its robe and drew forth a knobby thigh bone. "Say it!"

The Karabandi might have felt conversational, but I did not. I lunged, snapping the point of my spear sideways to knock the bone from the thing's hands. My spearpoint passed through it as your hand would pass through smoke. The apparition vanished.

"Gaaah," the Karabandi growled disgustedly, straightening out of his fighting crouch and rolling his head from side to side to work a kink out of his neck. "Should have known. They set seemings on us at Armaq, wyrms and undead and what-not, all just---"

My mother's-side cousin screamed a battle cry as the real *iyemnelili* lunged at us from behind a tree. It swung its bone club at his head. He ducked under the blow and slashed with his spear. The creature twisted, its joints popping.

"Say it! Say it!" it shrieked. Without thinking I thrust my spear into it two-handed. The point found the thing's throat. I twisted. Something crunched. The creature fell to the floor like a bundle of loose twigs. I pulled my spear free. There was no blood.

"Is it over?" the Karabandi asked, his back to us, trusting us to do what needed to be done while he guarded against a second ambush.

"It is done," I said. My mother's-side cousin raised one finger at me, counting the kill as we had counted rabbits as children.

And then the creature on the floor rolled over onto its feet and came at me again. I clubbed it with the butt of my spear, knocking it past me, but its hand caught my arm. Cruel claws tore cloth and skin. It bared ragged teeth in a snarl, its mouth opening and opening like a snake's.

The Karabandi's sword took its head from its shoulders with a single whistling stroke. It dropped to the floor again. Its head bounced on the floor a stride away and rolled a stride further.

The Karabandi raised his sword for a second blow. When the creature did not move, he set his lantern on the floor, swigged a quick mouthful of water from his canteen, and picked up his lantern once again, his sword at guard the whole time. "Well then, that wasn't so bad, was it? Come on."

I pressed my hand to my arm, then examined it in the light from my mother's-side cousin's lantern. It was sticky, but the creature's claws had only torn skin, not muscle. "Away

from here," my mother's-side cousin said quietly. "The smell of blood will draw other things."

I nodded, then jumped as the creature's body turned itself over and began scrabbling around on the floor like a drunkard looking for a dropped sweet. My mother's-side cousin and I looked at the Karabandi. He shrugged. "Leave it." We stepped wide around the unnatural thing. As we passed, I kicked its head as hard as I could. Up it flew like a child's ball to lodge in the branches of a nearby tree.

There was a well in the middle of the garden of lights. The emir's thief had described it as being big enough for an elephant. "You really don't want to fall in," she said, as if we might have thought to do so. We gave it a wide berth. Another silver gate waited for us on the far side of the garden, another passage, and more stairs, down and down. At their end lay the tombs of those who had ruled the Karaband after the Pilots. Ruled badly for the most part, throwing ancient scavenged sorceries that they did not understand at once another until they too destroyed themselves. The Darpani remember them, even if others choose not to. We remember the cities that Those Before lived in, and how they fell and burned, and why people should live under the sky and own no more than they can carry.

The Karabandi swallowed another mouthful from his canteen. "Ready?" I have wondered since what he would have said or done if we had said "no". But instead, we nodded and followed him.

Oro Shares Some Pistachios

When I sent him to Ossisswe, I thought I would call him back in a year. I would be settled on the throne by then, with men I could trust to watch his flank in case any of Coriandel's enemies tried to bruise me by bleeding him.

But a year turned into two, then five and ten. Each time I thought of him, the collar told me it wasn't the right time, not yet. And seventeen years after putting it on, I still missed him.

The morning finally came when my Minister of Propriety begged an audience to go over preparations for arranging a meeting to discuss how best assemble a committee that would decide on the process to be used to determine who would be in charge of arranging celebration of yet another anniversary of my ascension to the throne. My mind wandered as he spoke---or fled, rather, as it was wont to do whenever I subject to the drone of that singularly joyless man. How could it be seventeen years? What had I been doing all that time?

The royal collar immediately began whispering in my ear. The Pin Street aqueduct had been repaired, which meant that families living in South Tombside had clean water for the first time in a generation. I had negotiated a truce between the Run Laughing and Arrow Eagle Darpani that seemed to be holding. The untidy tangle of customs governing trade in cattle had been replaced (in theory, if not yet in practice) by sensible, consistent laws written in easily-remembered couplets. One of the city's more notorious ghosts had been laid to rest. A new fort on the Great Southern Road was nearing completion.

I shook my head to clear it. "Whatever you think best," I told Propriety, clapping my hands to clear the room. I stared moodily at the pre-dawn pearling the sky outside my window as he led half a dozen honest, competent, and rather dull people out of the room.

"Bah." I said it aloud. All of a sudden I couldn't bear to sit.

My Master of Thieves found me sitting beneath an ornamental lemon tree in one of the small courtyards on the south side of the palace that I suspect was purpose-built for discreet amorous liaisons. He was a colorless man, balding and instantly forgettable. An Ossisswean by birth, he had married into a family of knitters, only afterward revealing his

true profession to them. He wasn't nearly as good at conversation as the skinny old woman who had preceded him, but on the other hand, he wasn't dead.

"My lord." He raised his palms to me in desert fashion.

"I want to go out tomorrow," I said without preamble. "Unaccompanied." My collar immediately began to complain. I ignored it. I deserved a morning to myself.

The thief pursed his lips. This was the third time in as many months, he didn't say. "Does Your Grace have any preferences regarding disguise?"

"Your Grace would appreciate it if you didn't sound like a jurist trying to tell a society matron that her innocent young daughter is four months overdue," I snapped. "But no, I don't. Something simple." I waved him away and went back to brooding.

"Something simple" turned out to be a red-and-brown striped overcloak that might once have doubled as a horse blanket, a plain black turban, sandals with stained rope soles, and an ink-stained satchel. He used some acrid insect dye to darken my beard, put a bit more on my skin to make me look sunwashed, and just like that I was someone not worth noticing, a sign painter or tablewright or some such.

I re-tied the overcloak's belt. "No shadows," I ordered. I wanted to be *alone*.

The thief raised his palms. "As you wish," he lied. He knew I knew he would set some on me anyway. I would try to shake them off, though he would be out the back door with a notch in his ear if I managed to. There was a time when I could slip through a crowd like a greasy eel, but not after seventeen years (seventeen years!) listening to deputy assistant customs factors debate the merits of their pet proposals for reforming the tax on donkey turds. (There actually is one. I don't enforce it unless I am particularly unhappy with someone.)

He escorted me to a side yard where two washerwomen were wrestling the lids off tubs full of steaming, soapy water. I caught one of them eyeing me, and returned her look boldly. She blushed and ducked her head, obviously imagining from the company I kept that I was an assassin off to dab spider venom on the back of some foreign spy's neck or some such nonsense. Ah, if only...

Past the laundry yard was a larger square where half a dozen servants were setting dayglass on shelves to catch the morning light. A few pieces were tinged red and orange, and a few more were greenish-blue, but most had the clear yellow cast that meant quality and expense. Recharged, they would shine through the night in my kitchens and privies and yes, my dungeons too.

And then the gate. The blessed, welcome gate. Its guards ignored me. I paused a moment to take a deep breath---freedom!---before shouldering my way through the stream of people walking past the palace. Two old women compared notes on the shortcomings of a third who wasn't present. A carpenter's apprentice laughed at a silk mender's jest, his eyes and thoughts clearly on what lay beneath her slightly-too-well-fitted shift. An old man with a tightly-strapped sheaf of veneer stopped to catch his breath and shake a stone from his sandal. A woman with a baby in a sling at her waist---his daughter, perhaps, or perhaps even his granddaughter---paused to wait for him. The air was not yet hot, but the early sun already made the white-painted walls on either side of the street almost too brilliant to look at.

Half a stride outside the waist-high wall that marked the official boundary of the palace grounds, an enterprising young woman was offering people strips of chicken cooked in hot oil with cumin seeds. I gave her a slotted wooden sequin for three skewers, not caring that I burned the roof of my mouth on my first bite, and another for a double handful of roasted pistachios. Cracking pistachios and dropping the shells on the ground was a delicious little act of rebellion when I was young. I bought some every time I fled the palace in memory of a time when "duty" was just a word. When they were gone, it would be time for me to return.

I followed my feet downhill to Half Brush Square, where a portly man wearing a stained sash was overseeing a queue of people waiting for their turn at the water pipe. The collar whispered his name in my ear and told me that he had been fined once for drunkenness.

I closed my eyes for a moment, just listening. Where next? The glasswrights' market, where they sold perfect replicas of fish and exotic flowers? The Aranese quarter, where I

might find momentary solace in a disputation on Balanced philosophy? Or the cloudherd's yard near Tomb Hill?

The cloudherd's yard. I doubted any clouds would be there, but the walk would take me through parts of the city I hadn't seen in a year or two. With a quick glance over my shoulder to check that the carpenter's apprentice and silk mender were still behind me, I slipped between a beard trimmer's salon and a shop selling flags and hurried away.

Pen and Scissors Street... the shambles around the dried vegetable market... a crumbling flight steps the collar whispered had never been named, and there I was in Six Ears Square. I paused at the top to make a mental note about the stairs. Someone might pay for their repair in exchange for putting their name on them.

A pack of boys loitered in the square. Two of them were juggling badly while another walked toe-to-heel around the rim of the dry fountain in the square's center and the rest played call-me-names-and-I'll-push-you. Their clothes said their families were poor, but they looked well fed. And from the way they kept their eyes on a blue and yellow door on the far side of the square, they were here to make trouble.

They closed ranks as I ambled across the square. Me? Oh, don't mind me, boys, I'm just a shabby little man on his way to some appointment or other, no keener to meet your eyes than you are to meet mine. A tuft of breeze tossed a sharp tang past my nostrils. Tar? Yes, hot tar, in the cracked jar the two biggest boys were trying to hide behind their legs. You could do a lot of things with hot tar. Seal a tent seam against windblown sand, proof a piece of wood against termites, or slather it on someone's skin, where it would burn going on and tear coming off.

As if on cue, the door they had been watching swung. Two Darpani boys stepped out and squinted in the sunlight. Ten and twelve, I guessed, though they might have been older. Their hair was cut short, city style, but their leggings and vests were straight from the plains. Brothers just down from the Black Grass, perhaps, their father and mother working in the tanneries or slaughterhouses while their sons learned arithmetic and their abracadabras.

This was what the gang had been waiting for. They bunched together as the older Darpani took his brother's hand and started toward the steps I had just climbed. One of the gang picked up a rock. Another slipped a length of bamboo from under his robe. "*Naneen!*" one of the Coriandi boys said loudly, mis-pronouncing the insult.

The younger Darpani boy trembled. Even if his older brother hadn't steadied him, though, I doubt he would have run. Ten was old enough to be fool-brave.

"*Naneen! Naneen!*" Other boys repeated the cry. I scanned the shuttered windows overlooking the square. The boys' parents had probably left for work before dawn, but somebody would be watching. *Which means that somebody will be held to account*, I promised myself.

Just as I filled my lungs to shout, another boy, a Coriandi, stepped out of an alley behind the two boys. I tensed. An ambush?

But no. The newcomer didn't so much as nod at the Darpani, nor they at him. Instead, he drew a wooden practice sword, saluted the empty air in front of him, set his feet in Third Stance, and began a fencing drill. Cut, cut, lunge, parry, step. Cut, cut, lunge, parry, and step again.

The gang hesitated. The Coriandi boy wouldn't have lasted five heartbeats if they had rushed him, but as they were nerving themselves to do it he switched to a double-time drill, cut-cut-cut and *shout*. The look on his face would have made a gargoyle hesitate.

I couldn't help myself. I burst out laughing. The boys in the gang gang jumped as if I had clanged a gong, then scattered as I began to applaud. "Bravo," I said, chuckling. "Well played."

The boy with the practice sword straightened up, breathing hard, and saluted me as the two boys hurried away whispering to each other. "Thank you."

I nodded the way the Darpani had gone. "Friends of yours?"

The boy shrugged. "Not really. I met their uncle once."

"Ah?" I raised an eyebrow. "He must have made quite an impression."

The boy looked away. "Yeah. He broke his neck."

A Darpani with a broken neck... The royal collar whispered the most likely answer in my ear. "In the *umram*?"

The boy nodded.

I cocked my head. "Was it your fault?"

He shrugged a third time. He seemed to be in a shrugging mood, or perhaps it had become fashionable since my last venture into the city. Or perhaps he was just a sixteen year old answering pointless, interminable questions. "Wasn't anybody's fault. We were three-on-three, luck of the draw. Tessor and some idiot from Armaq doubled on him. He tried to roll out between them, and..." Another shrug.

"How long ago was this?" I asked, though the collar had already told me.

"About a month."

"And you've been coming here ever since?"

Yet another shrug. "Came by once just to... I don't know. Just to look, I guess."

It was easy to fill in what he hadn't said. Just to look. Just to see what happened. Did the world notice? Did anything change? Or were the Bantangui right? Did the world repeat itself, over and over, without ever noticing that it was doing so?

"And those sandal-lickers you chased off had decided they were fair game?"

He nodded instead of shrugging, his mouth set.

I glanced up at the shuttered windows. "And everyone decided not to see it, because they'd rather have cockroaches in their soup than Darpani on their square."

He nodded again. I sighed. "Damn their dried-up innards. May they be scoured inside and out a thousand thousand times." *And may my tax collectors inspect their homes and shops every week for the next year*, I added mentally. The royal collar approved.

The boy seemed a little taken aback at my curse. "They didn't actually do anything," he said defensively. "They were just---"

"They were just winding themselves up to it." I gestured at the practice sword he still held. "Which is why you came back."

"I guess. Wouldn't have seemed right, not doing anything." Which was what Sweet said to Lady Kembe on a sunny morning so many years ago after we unknowingly rescued one of her agents from an angry mob in Armaq.

The boy turned to go, suddenly embarrassed at sharing a confidence with a stranger. I put my hand on his arm. "Wait." I fished inside my robe. "Do you like pistachios?"

He eyed them warily. "Sure."

I thrust the bag at him. "Here. I find I have more than I will eat today, and it would be a shame for them to go to the hogs."

He hesitated a moment, trying to see the trap, but took them. "Thank you."

I raised my palms to him. "Not at all. Thank *you*." He returned my smile a trifle uncertainly.

I could have had my Master of Thieves' shadows find out who he was, but to what end? I didn't need to know how his story turned out, any more than he needed to know mine. My city had reminded me who I was and why I still wore the collar. It was time to go back to work.

I found myself whistling on my way back down the nameless steps. Perhaps I would have them repaired myself. The treasury could afford it. And if that dry fountain was replaced by a statue, Six Ears Square might even become slightly fashionable. A statue of a horse, perhaps...

Recently: Sweet's Return

My heart beat a little faster as we crested the last rise and saw Coriandel laid out in the valley below us. The palace still shone white on its hill, the houses of the wealthy shone back from theirs, and the fruit trees and millet fields outside the city walls were so green that they made my eyes water.

My human, Buckle, waited patiently for me to take it all in. Seventeen years since I left with twin mares and a stallion behind me. Eight years since my last visit. "How do I look?" I asked quietly.

Buckle leaned forward in his saddle and patted the side of my head. "Fine," he said. "Someone could not see it himself if he had not put it there." Which meant that no one in the world except possibly his grandmother would be able to tell that the white blaze on my forehead and the sock on my rear left leg weren't real.

Buckle had touched up the dye job every few days on the road. I didn't for a moment think that we would run into Oro---emirs aren't in the habit of wandering the kinds of side streets and back alleys that we frequented---but some of his rumormongers might have recognized me if I had come to Coriandel as myself. I didn't want that. I didn't want him to have to talk to me just because I was there. He could find me easily enough if he ever wanted to.

"You ready?" Buckle asked, tucking his djellaba back in place.

"Of course." I picked up my hooves and hurried to catch up with the rest of the caravan.

Lady Kembe spoke my name halfway down the hill. It felt like someone tickling my ears with a piece of straw. I flicked them back and held them there, the signal I had taught Buckle years before. He sighed theatrically, spat onto the hard-baked earth, and said aloud to no one in particular, "Someone swears he will sell this one for a lion's breakfast, he should take a stone in his hoof one more time."

I ambled over to the side of the road to let the goats behind us pass. As Buckle dismounted, I whispered, "Not so thick next time. You sound like you're fresh off the Black Grass."

"Sorry, honored sir," he whispered back contritely, slipping his hand into a saddle bag to pull out a candle stub and a cloth-wrapped mirror. The mirror wasn't anything special, although Buckle occasionally used it for signaling. The cloth, on the other hand...

I glanced around. "All right." He lit the candle with a quick snap of his fingers and held the cloth up in front of me. The embroidered portrait of Lady Kembe solidified almost instantly.

"Good morning, Wave," she said. She was in her study, as always.

I nodded. "*Sra*." I had always been "Wave" to her. I had no idea why.

"How goes your journey?"

"Well enough, *sra*." One of our little caravan's guards had knifed another over a girl who didn't like either of them. A self-proclaimed saint from Ruuda had sleepwalked into a sand miser's pit, taking whatever mad inventions he might have conceived with him. Not bad, overall---I'd certainly had worse journeys.

"And you are now how far from Coriandel?"

"About three gallops, *sra*. We'll be in the fields soon."

"Good. I need you to find someone for me." She quickly gave me one of her usual maddening descriptions: young, human, female, with two friends, had slept with a rag dog every night until she was ten, fond of Ruudian romance novels that she wasn't supposed to read, stronger inside than out, and oh yes, if I stood near a statue of a horse at mid-day, I would see her crossing the square.

"Do you have a particular statue in mind, *sra*?" I asked sourly.

An eyebrow went up. "There is only one statue of a horse in Coriandel that I know of," she replied evenly. "Anything else?"

"Yes, *sra*. What am I supposed to do with her when I find her?"

"*La*, yes, I forgot." She shook her head and made a small mark on the page in front of her. Did she keep track of the number of times she forgot things? It wouldn't be her strangest habit. "You're to get her out of Coriandel. Soon. Today would be best. This evening, in fact. Yes, this evening."

"Yes, *sra*. What reason do I give her?"

Lady Kembe frowned. "Tell her that you're going to set her free."

Marvelous. "Yes, *sra*. Does it matter if anyone knows that she's gone?"

Lady Kembe smiled. Cats smile that way sometimes, especially the big ones. I still don't like them. "Oh, someone will notice, I'm sure." She paused, weighing matters far too complicated to share with a mere horse. "She should go west, I think. Yes, to Araña. Have your man talk to the cloudherds. That would be the quickest way."

"Yes, *sra*." I dipped my head again, sighing inside. She was very fond of flying, Lady Kembe was. Buckle could have bought a second horse for the girl to ride, or we could have cut off her hair and dressed her as a contemplative on her way to some desert fastness to meditate on the meaning of meaning, but no, Lady Kembe wanted her to fly away on a cloud. She probably wouldn't think it was quite so wonderful if she had ever actually done it.

"Oh, and Wave?"

"*Sra*?"

"Do you remember Swallow?"

Swallow? It took me a moment to fit the name to a person. Swallow was the fencing master that Oro had sent into the Tombs. He had been one of her hands in the world before Oro and I entered her service. "Yes, *sra*?" I made it a question.

"Good." She nodded once, firmly. "Under no circumstances is his boy to come with her."

"Yes, *sra*."

We caught up with the rest of our troop just as they reached the Market Gate. "This one has caught a stone in his hoof," Buckle explained to the guardsmen, his accent no thicker than it should have been. Two copper sequins for him and one for me bought us each the dab of cheap lime-colored dye that would let us stay in the city until dawn.

I carried Buckle through the streets of Coriandel, exchanging signs now and again with other Gifted animals. There's a whole world beneath the human world where news is carried by smell, or by the way a cat twists its tail when very pointedly ignoring you. We may not like each other, but if we didn't help one another, humans would likely eat us

separately. *Trouble?* I asked silently. *No trouble*, a donkey signed back. *Do you know of any?* I flicked my tail in the way that meant "no" and kept going.

There were guardsmen about, in pairs and threes, but no more than usual. If Ajwapetala the parrot had still been alive, she would have filled both my ears with gossip and rude jokes, but her death had found her since I last snuck into the city.

The sun was almost directly over us by the time we reached Trampling Square. "Tie me up here," I muttered to Buckle. "Not too tight. I'll need a stall for the night. And a blanket---one without fleas this time."

Buckle looped my reins over a hitching post that was still just barely in shadow. To the casual eye I would look tied, but if I shook my head the right way they would fall loose and I could gallop away. Or amble. I mostly ambled these days. It got me places galloping never had.

Boom. Boom. Boom. The palace drums beat noon. I watched people hurry back and forth across the square and tried very hard not to look at the statue Oro had put up when he had the square rebuilt. The wyrm it showed me trampling had actually been about half again larger than the one carved in stone, and my mane had not been nearly so neatly trimmed at the time. I caught Buckle grinning, and half-heartedly tried to kick him.

And there she was. It had to be her. Slender in a simple black dress, with a face as round and as beautiful as a peach and a girlfriend on either side chattering to her. Time to amble.

I shook my head to make my reins fall free and backed away from the hitching post. The trio stopped at a sweetcake shop, so narrow that the proprietor could barely fit his shoulders through his own window. I kept my head down---if you don't make eye contact, humans won't notice you---and came up behind them.

"But we'll be late again!" the larger girl on the left protested.

My mark rolled her eyes. "What does it matter? Besides, if we *don't* eat them here, we'll have honey all over our fingers when we get to your house." She sat down on one of the shop's little three-legged stools without waiting for an answer and turned so she could watch the passers-by in the square.

"Oh!" She nearly fell backward off the stool as I nipped the sweet baklava out of her hand. It was delicious. She stared at me in disbelief as her friends burst into shocked giggles.

Buckle ran to us, wringing his hands. "Someone weeps from shame," he blurted, his Black Grass accent as thick as cheese. "Bad horse!" He clouted my nose a little harder than necessary. "Please, he apologizes." He fumbled a few coins out of his purse. "Someone will have another, yes? Another?"

The girl protested, but Buckle would not be put off. He would be shamed if she didn't let him buy her a fresh piece. No, his entire clan would be shamed. Oh, and the things he would do to his horse. Cat food! Glue! Gelding with blunt scissors! Oh, begging the honored mistress's pardon for saying that (Buckle even managed a blush at this point). Please, the honor would be his. And besides, it would make him feel young again, to buy a sweet for such a sweet lady. Oh, thank you, thank you, honored mistress. Please, come show me which you want. It was nearly enough to make me bring the baklava back up.

Buckle made a show of gathering up my reins and dragging me along behind him so I wouldn't annoy the girl's friends. "Another," the girl told the vendor, who had been watching the proceedings with just as little interest as you would expect. He put the sugary pastry on a grape leaf and handed it to her. My muzzle was only a palm's width from her ear as she took it. "Don't say anything," I whispered. "I'm Gifted. I'm here to set you free."

She stiffened. For a moment I thought she was going to turn dramatic, but instead she brought the baklava up to her lips. "How?" she whispered loudly.

"It's a long story. Where can we talk?"

She hesitated. "Not here. Can you follow me home?"

A dusty Darpani on a broken-down horse, following a beautiful young woman through the streets of Coriandel? "No. Do you know the well on Quiet Saints Street? Can you be there in an hour?"

"I'll try."

I pawed the ground. "Don't try. Do."

She nodded assent. As she lowered her baklava I made a half-hearted lunge for it. Wonderful girl, she let me have it.

She shrugged off her friends' comments. ("Sееееhdie, don't you see? It was a trick! That man just wanted you to buy his horse some food!") As they swallowed the last of their sweets and brushed the crumbs from their fingertips I eyed my statue once again. Something by Oro's feet caught my eye. Curious, I ambled closer for a look.

Pistachio shells. There were pistachio shells on the plinth near Oro's feet.

I whinnied. "What?" Buckle muttered under his breath. I shook my head. Lots of people ate pistachios. I was foolish to think it meant something.

Sehdie sat waiting for us on the stone lip of the well on Quiet Saints Street, gently stroking the wiry moss that grew in shallow buckets around its edge. A guardhouse stood watch on one side of the square. Three bravos in freshly-pressed sashes who had been eyeing her eyed us instead as we clip-clopped across the cobbles. Buckle slid out of the saddle and busied himself with a string puzzle he had bought in Ossisswe while I told her who I was and who I served.

"But why me?" she asked.

"Why sun and rain?" Buckle asked rhetorically without looking up. "We are snowflakes in their blizzard, leaves in their storm."

I sighed. "What my melodramatic friend is saying is, she has her reasons. I promise you, they're good ones. They have to be. Now, are you coming?"

She hesitated. "Can I bring someone?"

Rust and ruin. Why do humans always make things so complicated? "It depends who it is."

She twisted her sleeves in her hands. "There's this boy..."

I shook my head. "No. She was very specific about that. Ishad's boy stays here."

She looked at me miserably. "It's not him."

Then: Cup Rainbow Reaching Remembers the Taste of Plums

My mother called my name "Cup". My father added "Rainbow". A grass thrower gave my name its third name. In the winter of my thirteenth year, I fasted for three days before going into the men's tent with two other boys. We gave the grass thrower our childhoods, then drank smoke until our souls flew away from our bodies. As we lay on the ground at her feet, she tossed blades of grass into the air and argued with the Other as they fell. When we woke, she told us how we would die.

"You will die coughing," she said to the first boy. He bowed his head, disappointed.

"You will die sleeping," she said to the second. He bowed his head as well. His death might come to him like an old friend at the end of a long life, or on the blade of a cut-throat's knife in a raid---there was no way to know.

"And you." She spoke to me last. "You will die reaching."

I bowed my head. *Reaching?* I wondered blearily. Reaching what? The end of a journey? For a horse's reins? It would take me the rest of my life to find out.

My mother's-side cousin's death found him before mine found me. His name's name was Strap Plum Burning. It is a hard name, Burning, but he bore it well. As we entered the place of the dead I nudged him with my elbow. "At least somewhere is too damp for a fire," I joked. He rolled his eyes at me. The Karabandi glanced back at us, curious to know what we were saying. We returned his look stony-faced, as we had once returned our uncle's when he discovered yellow yarn woven into his horse's tail.

The place of the dead was like a crooked dream of the city above us. Its buildings were misshapen toys. Statues of frowning men and serene women filled its streets instead of people. We walked quietly, the Karabandi in front, my mother's-side cousin and I side by side behind him, our eyes never still. It smelled stale, like a blanket that had not been unrolled for many seasons.

The street led us to an empty square. A domed building stood on our left. Another with a columned front stood to our right, while a third that looked like a fallen windmill blocked our path. The Karabandi paused. "Well?" he asked. "Any sparks on anyone's tinder?"

We shook our heads. It would take an army and a lifetime to search every dark corner in that place. The Karabandi sucked on his teeth. "Then I guess we do this the old-fashioned way. Where's that third lantern?"

I unshuttered it while the Karabandi boosted my mother's-side cousin up onto a nearby tomb. Its roof was sloped to shed rain that would not fall here until the world above was worn away. He scrambled up to its peak. We shielded our lanterns and waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, then uncovered them as he slithered back down the side of the tomb.

"Nothing," he reported, dropping back onto the paving stones beside us.

"Didn't think so." The Karabandi scowled. "All right. Eyes wide, both of you. I'd hate to have to do this twice."

My mother's-side cousin took his place beside a statue of a lion wearing spectacles. I stood with my back against the wall of the tomb twenty paces away. We set our lanterns down a few hands away so that we would not accidentally kick them. The Karabandi hooked his to his belt, pulled his left sleeve back with his teeth, and drew his sword across the back of his forearm, far enough from his wrist that the blood would not make his grip slippery.

A dark splatter fell on the stones at his feet. He held his arm straight out before him, palm up, squeezing and relaxing his fingers as if tickling a cow's udder. When he judged enough had fallen he took a twist of cloth from his pocket and tied it around his wrist, using his teeth to pull it tight, then drew his horned dagger.

We waited, slow breath upon slow breath, but nothing stirred. Finally the Karabandi lowered his blades.

"Gaaah. This is useless."

My mother's-side cousin picked up his lantern. "To try somewhere else?"

"I suppose. Maybe it---behind you!"

The *iyemnelili* lunged out of the shadows, chittering and snapping its claws. It was shaped like a scorpion but as large as a mule, low against the ground with a wicked barbed

tail arching over its back. The lower parts of the legs were fleshless bone, and its jaws worked sideways like those of the small evils that live under rocks in the desert.

My mother's-side cousin dropped his lantern and threw himself sideways. A claw the size of my head snapped shut where his neck had been. The lantern shattered, and the broken dayglass flared like a tiny sun as its trapped sunlight spilled out and was lost.

The Karabandi swung his sword overhand at the creature's claw even as my mother's-side cousin rolled to his feet. The creature snatched its arm back, snapping at him with the other in the same motion. The Karabandi knocked the second claw sideways, dropping his useless dagger to grip his sword two-handed.

My mother's-side cousin jabbed his spear in between two of the *iyemnelili*'s legs. Its tail whipped across his face, cutting him open from temple to jaw.

I fell on it with a scream. My full weight was behind my thrust, but my spear only scored the hard shell on its back. As it slipped off I ran straight into the creature. I tumbled headlong over it onto the stones. For just one heartbeat my face was a hand's width from it. Its breath was as foul as a week-old corpse, but its eyes were human---whatever else the rest of it was, its eyes were human. I screamed again and rolled away. Its jaws clacked shut where my nose had been.

"*Hai!*" the Karabandi shouted, swinging at its head. My mother's-side cousin was behind it now, out of reach of its tail, one side of his face sheeted with blood. He shoved his spear into the joint of its rear left leg. Something crunched.

It screeched and twisted around. My mother's-side cousin's spear was pulled from his grasp. The *iyemnelili*'s tail snapped down like a spring trap and buried its curved black tip in his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around it and bent forward like a wrestler trying to break his opponent's back.

"*Hai!*" the Karabandi shouted again. His sword came down squarely in the middle of the creature's back and crunched through its shell. The Karabandi kicked one of its knee joints and yanked his blade back. Something like blood spurted from the wound.

I was on my feet. Chips of dayglass from the broken lantern still sparkled a stride away. I jabbed my spear at the creature's face. "*Hai!*" I yelled in imitation of the Karabandi. "*Hai hai!*"

The creature chittered and reared up on its hindmost legs. The Karabandi's sword whistled just a thumb beneath its chest. It twisted like a cat to pull its tail out of my mother's-side cousin's arms and fled.

My mother's-side cousin fell to the ground next to his spear. I dropped to my knees beside him and rolled him onto his back. Half his face was hidden by blood. More gushed from the wound in his shoulder. He was already dripping with sweat.

"Someone..." he gasped. "Someone is..."

"Someone should be still," I said softly. I took his hand. It was like holding a piece of meat hot off a spit.

The Karabandi set his lantern down beside us. My mother's-side cousin's whole body spasmed as the *iyemnelili*'s poison worked its way into his bones. He made a little sound in his throat.

The Karabandi tapped my shoulder. I didn't look up. He tapped me again, just as gently, and offered me a short knife that he had taken from his belt.

I shook my head. "This is not our way."

He nodded. "I'll do it if you don't want his blood on you."

I shook my head again. "This has been foretold. It is as it must be."

My mother's-side cousin clutched my arm. I bent over him. "What... is the name... of my name?" he gasped.

"The name of your name is Strap Plum Burning," I answered. Tears streamed down my cheeks, tiny streams next to the river of sweat pouring off him.

"And what... is my... name?"

I set my spear down and raised my palms to him. "I do not know."

He smiled. His breath came in short gasps and his teeth sounded like they were cracking against one another, but he smiled. "Then I... will be... born again."

"You will be born again," I agreed. He had kept his name hidden from his death. He would return.

The last chip of glass from the broken lantern flickered and died. I waited until he stopped shivering, then put up my hand. "To take that knife now," I said. The Karabandi handed it to me wordlessly. I cut a lock of my mother's-side cousin's hair and tied it to make a *semtep*. On impulse I cut a second one as well and handed it to the Karabandi along with his knife.

"Someone will burn this in sunlight," I said.

He nodded solemnly. "In sunlight."

I wiped the head of my spear against the dead man's leg, then stood and walked back to my waiting lantern.

"Where are you going?" the Karabandi asked.

I picked up my lantern. "Someone has a trail now. Someone will follow it to its end."

The Karabandi raised a hand. "Hang about. We don't need to go chasing after it. All we have to do is stay here." He jerked a thumb back over his shoulder. "It'll come back to its kill."

I picked up my lantern without looking at either the Karabandi or the dead man. "Someone will not use this as bait," I said softly.

"I know, I know, but you eat what luck puts on the table or you go hungry, right?"

I can use a spear one-handed. I brought it around so that its head lay against his heck. "Someone will not 'eat' any of what is here."

He stood very still. "I understand," he said, speaking as calmly as I had. "But if we go chasing after it, we're just giving it a chance to ambush us."

I stepped back a pace, stretching out my arm to keep the head of my spear against his throat. "You may stay or follow as you choose." I turned and walked away. I thought he would argue with me, but he did not. He knew what it meant for a Darpani to turn his back on someone.

I walked along the dark street with my lantern in one hand and my spear in the other. What the thing used for blood glistened on the stones. My grief was like a plum stone

stuck in my throat. He brought me some once when I was sick, sweet and juicy red. Our uncle beat him for stealing them, but they were the most delicious thing I ever tasted.

Now: Meshash Waits for Sunrise

Bringing back the bonescuttle's head made Ishad famous, at least for a while. He borrowed some silver against that fame from the Bantangui moneylender on Third Shelf Street, and the next thing Onnemenno and I knew we were living next door to a brawling studio.

At first I was the one who disapproved. Our daughter had just turned sixteen, and I remembered that age well enough to know that being next door to a courtyard full of bravos was going to be a short ride to grandparenthood. Onne just grunted. "She'll be fine," he said. "She's a sensible girl."

He was right. Our two oldest were like him, as practical as shovels. But the sounds from next door made me curious.

"Hwah!"

"Heeeeyyyup!"

"Keep your weeping arm in when you do that or I'll take it off at the elbow!"

"Saints in their sandals, man, you're moving like a constipated chicken!"

A constipated chicken? I had bread in the oven, but it would bake without me, and I could mend the little tear in Onne's good shirt just as easily on the roof as I could in our rear courtyard...

At first I sat with my legs in the ladder well, just listening, but then I told myself I was being foolish---I could have listened just as well from downstairs and been more comfortable while doing it.

Ishad spotted me as soon as I stood up. "Good morning!" He raised his practice sword in salute and sketched a small bow. The five men in the courtyard with him paused to study me.

"Good morning to you also," I replied politely, tightening my grip on my sewing.

He waited a moment, then smiled broadly. "Can I help you with anything?"

"No thank you," I said primly. "I just wanted to see what a constipated chicken looked like."

They laughed at that. One of them even whistled, though Ishad punched his shoulder for it. "Back to work," he ordered them. He was still smiling as he raised his sword to begin another drill.

After that, it seemed that there was always some reason for me to be up there. The light was better in the morning, or there was a breeze in the afternoon. Occasionally I saw some other women on their roofs as well. We nodded to each other, but never mentioned it when we met in the street, just as we never mentioned it to our husbands. Like them, I was always back downstairs in time to cook dinner.

And then one day he was waiting for me on the roof. When I came up through the ladderwell he was sitting with his back to me, his legs dangling over the edge beside the ladder he had placed against the wall. "Quite a view," he said without turning his head. "I can see why you like it so much."

I could have gone and sat beside him. Instead, I said, "I hope you enjoy it as much as I have," and went back downstairs to start washing dates for dinner. And when Onnemeno got home that evening, tired and sweaty, I fed him lamb stew and then led him into the bedroom as if we were newlyweds once again.

I loved my husband. He was a good man, as good as he knew how to be. There were so many things I wanted him to say to me that he never thought to, and so many adventures I wanted to us to have that we never did, but when I lay in bed that night, silent tears on my face, he put his arm over me and mumbled in my ear without ever waking up, and in the morning he brought me a cup of tea, just like he did every day we were married, and to hell with what other men might say if they found out.

Vurt was born nine months later. Sometimes, when I was nursing him, I sat on the roof with my legs in the ladderwell, invisible to the men in the courtyard next door, listening to their shouts and scuffles. I wonder sometimes if that was when my youngest son fell in love with the sound of swordplay.

Oh please, Pilots and saints, if you have ever loved anyone, love him. Please, watch over him tonight and bring him home safe to me.

Now: Ishad on the Stairs

Damn magicians. Damn them to rot forgotten for a thousand harrowing years. Oh yes, Lady Kembe was very helpful, very helpful indeed. Steal a pair of boots for no apparent reason from an ex-lover who just happens to be a captain in the emir's guard---yes, m'lady, that's very helpful, no reason needed. Climbing walls and skulking on rooftops in the middle of the night is just what my old back needs to loosen it up, thank you very much for the opportunity. Oh, and for the distraction---being chased by that bloody Gifted falcon the guard has working for them these days certainly took my mind off the likelihood of being eaten alive by a giant leech or---

Gaaah. And oh, she says, I forgot to mention, there's another way to reach the Moonset Door, a secret way known only to those whose souls are attuned to the mysteries of the underearth or some such blather. Why yes, m'lady, thank you very much, that actually is very helpful, seeing as how it means I can be there to give him a hand when he comes through, if he makes it that far.

Too weeping bad those mysteries didn't remind her to tell me anything else.

After the door disappears behind Vurt I row back to where we started, half-expecting to find a squad of the emir's finest waiting for me. I tie the boat to a rusty iron ring set in the stone, then shutter my lantern and sit in the darkness. It's peaceful, even when something goes *gloop* a dozen strides away. I don't really expect to see sunlight again. I hate the thought. I always hate it, the idea of never drinking a glass of cider on my roof at sunset again or never kissing another woman. No more music, no more curried apricots, no more---hells, no more feeling sorry for myself. That's probably what I'll miss most if this goes shitways.

Lady Kembe's "secret way" is a bunch of handholds in the wall. Each one looks on its own to be just another timeworn crack in the rock, but if someone has told you the secret, you can see how they're placed within reach of each other---just barely, but I've done worse. I shoulder my pack, hang my lantern on my belt, and start climbing.

Up, up again, then across. What I thought was a shadow on the wall turns out to be a narrow cleft. I move like a sailor topping a mast in high seas, three points secure while a

single hand or foot moves. The handholds are slime-slippery with condensation. After slipping for a third time I stop cursing Lady Kembe, the bonescuttle, and the day I was born so as I can concentrate on wedging my hands and feet into the cracks.

A narrow ledge gives me a moment to catch my breath. My heart is pounding, and damn me for an old man, my arms are shaking. *Gloop*. "Sorry to disappoint you," I mutter to whatever is in the water below me.

The ledge disappears two strides in front of me, just where the cleft narrows. There are no more handholds---that would be too easy---so it's time for some back-and-brace work.

I shrug my pack off my right shoulder so that it hangs from the crook of my left elbow. It's not heavy, but it does awkward things to my balance. A deep breath for courage, then I lean back to put my shoulders against the wall and start shuffling along the ledge. My glooping friend might not be disappointed after all.

By the time the ledge narrows to nothing, the soles of my old boots are pressed against the rock like hungry piglets against their mother's belly. Right foot, left foot---plant each one against the rock, then wriggle my shoulders along a handspan or two and start again. Saints painting pictures, but it's hard work.

And then I drop my damned pack. When the ledge reappears I get my boots back onto it without any trouble, but as I straighten up and reach for a handhold my left foot slips, and it's the pack or me.

There's a splash as it hits the water, and more splashing as Saint Gloop gulps it down. I say a few words in Darpani, then a few in Uwsian and a bit of Praczny I learned during the siege. My bag had four bags of lemonwood ash and two of burned chilies in it. Dusting your trail with them will make even a gargoyle lose your scent. I figured if I threw some into these pools it might distract whatever lives down here here. It probably wouldn't have worked, but I'll never know now. And that stuff wasn't cheap.

The ledge beneath my feet widens into a proper path as the cleft opens onto a second chamber, just as Lady Kembe promised. I unclip my lantern from my belt and swing it slowly from side to side. The wall to my right is twenty strides away, more or less. In

front, the dark water ends against a stone walkway raised a handspan above the waterline with a stride-wide channel in its center.

The ledge angles down toward the walkway. I'm almost on it before I realize that there's nothing on its other side except empty air. I'm standing on the top of a weeping dam. The whispered roar I've been hearing is water splashing against stone somewhere far below.

I whistle despite myself. "Well, this is unexpected," I say to no one. I draw my sword and start to lean out for a look, then lay flat on the stone instead and slide forward to peer over the edge.

The dam face angles out below me. Stairs wide enough for one man to walk on zigzag back and forth across it into the darkness. I sit up and pick a scrap of dinner from between my teeth. I could start straight down, but what's the rush? Vurt is going to be a while. I take my lucky whetstone out of my pocket and run it along the length of my sword. *Ssshink*. The blade doesn't need a fresh edge---I saw to it just a few hours ago---but my nerves do. *Ssshink. Ssshink*. It's a comforting sound.

I'd give just about anything to be at home, or even in a comfortable cell, but as I heard a man in Praczedt say just before he was hanged, you can't uncook an egg. I never found out if that was just a saying, or whether he had actually been condemned for doing something culinary. It was possible---a week after I left, the count ordered his chef's right hand cut off for putting cilantro in an omelet.

Ssshink. I touch the whetstone to my forehead Darpani-style to thank it for its help, then drop it back in my pocket and stand up and stretch. I recognize the dam face, of course. I saw it years ago, looking up from below. The Moonset Door is down there, which means Vurt will be too. Lantern in one hand, sword in the other, I head down to meet him.

I try not to think about anything in particular as I trudge down the steps, but of course it's no use. I've gone soft since Armaq. Back then, all we let ourselves think was, "Just one more morning." Thinking any further than that felt greedy. Just one more morning, one more day of not being dead before all the days when you will be.

But Armaq was a long time ago, and I've gone soft since then. I should be listening for trouble, but instead I'm thinking about seeing Meshash last night.

"Ishad." I froze. She was standing in the courtyard door, barefoot in a plain brown nightrobe. I couldn't see it, but I knew that her hair would be tied back with a piece of white string.

"Hello, 'Shash," I said softly.

She jerked her chin toward the boots I had in my hands. "For luck?"

"Something like that."

She waited, just looking at me, beautiful and sad and strong. "I'm going to go under with him," I tell her. "And I'm going to bring him back. I promise. I asked a favor of someone I used to know. If that's not enough..." I shrugged. We both know that sometimes nothing is.

You'd think we were both teenagers, the way we act around each other. She has lines around her eyes and her mouth now, but she's still---gaaah. She's still Meshash. She could have run away with me, but her other children needed her, and she truly did love her husband. He's gone now, but we're who we are, two people who had never done anything more than be awkward around each other.

That's what I'm thinking about as I trudge down through the darkness. About Meshash, and about Vurt practicing in his rear courtyard with a piece of bamboo until I bellowed, "If you're going to make that much noise, you might as well come over here anyway!" Please, Death, take me if you want, but don't take him. Not over a stuck-up flower like that girl he thinks he's in love with.

But that's not fair. I don't know anything about her except the little I pried out of Vurt, and the little more I found out doing my own bit of reconnaissance. "Polite enough," the coffee seller told me, "But the way she talks and dresses, you'd think the emir's aunt was still on the throne." She leers at me. "Bit young for you these days, isn't she? You'd do better trying to thaw her aunt, if you ask me."

"Thank you but no," I laugh. Her aunt was the one from that awful picnic on Palace Mount a few months after I came out of the Tombs. One of the fellows I met in the *umram* introduced us, Peter or Piotr, one of those unmusical northern names. He and I fought a

couple of times, then became friends. He fell for a silk merchant's daughter---Awmay? Awbé? Something like that. She was already betrothed, but he didn't mind if she didn't, and she had a sister. "Almost as pretty as she is," he promised.

It was awful. The one Petr---that was his name, Petr---the one he had his eye on had a sharp tongue but meant nothing by it. The sister, though---nothing was good enough for her, nothing and no one, certainly not all the "odds and sorts setting up shop in Coriandel these days". Hah---I remembered her saying that, and the look on her face when I told her that I was thinking of setting up a shop myself.

Still, she was pretty enough, and very jealous of the attention Petr was giving her sister. We ate and drank, and I told all my usual stories, and somehow we wound up in the rooms Petr was renting, upstairs over a coffee house called the Wings of Good Fortune. I would probably just have fallen asleep, to tell you the truth, but when she heard her sister and Petr next door, well, like I said, she was jealous. Petr and I snuck them home in the small hours, and I never saw her again. I don't know if she even remembered me.

The stairs make long, shallow traverses across the dam face, a hundred and twenty steps from landing to landing. The blocks are some gray stone I don't recognize, with joints so fine they're almost impossible to make out. It's not Pilot work, but it's better than anything anyone I've ever met could do today.

I'm two-thirds of the way down when I see something waiting for me on the next switchback. It looks like the dwarf oak in the emir's public garden up on Palace Mount, and it's as out of place down here as I am.

I glance over the side. The drop to the next flight of steps won't kill me, but I'll break my ankle if I land wrong. I bring my sword up to guard and start down again slowly. No more daydreaming, old man. Eyes front, and ears wide open to listen for anything or anyone trying to hide in the faint splash of water hitting water below.

You'd think at my age I would have learned something about traps. Twenty steps from the tree, I glance over the edge again to see what the jump looks like. Just as I do, something moves in the air above me. I spin around and slash. My blade catches meat.

Whatever it is misses me by a palm's width, hitting the edge of the stairs instead and falling over the side.

I spin around again in time to see something ripple down out of the tree and flow up the stairs toward me. It's as long as I am tall, jointed like a shell worm, fungus-white, with a dozen legs on each side and a round mouth with teeth all around. If its kind has a name, I had no idea what it is. And I have no idea how it manages to speak with a mouth like that, but it does.

"Am I hurt?" it whispers.

"Somewhat," an answering voice whispers from below.

"Oh dear. How unpleasant." The one in front of me scuttles up the wall. I can't hear the other one, but if this one can climb, then---

I leap aside. The one I cut ripples up onto the stairs where I was standing a heartbeat ago. Its teeth clatter. "I missed," it whispers.

"Can I reach it?" the one above me asks.

Damn me for losing my pack. There was black oil in there as well as ashes, two bottles of it with rags in their mouths, just the thing for vermin. Heroes in ballads never lose their damn packs. Eyes and swords and lovers, oh, never be a hero's lover, not if you want to live to the end of the poem, but packs? You would think they were glued on.

The two creatures come at me together, one on the wall high to my right, the other up the steps at my feet. The one on the wall goes past me. I can't watch it without taking my eyes off the wounded one. They're stacking my funeral pyre with both hands, as the Darpani would say, and there's only one way out of a trap like that.

"*Hai!*" I shout. The creature in front of me rears up and lunges like a cobra. I cut across and down, knocking it out of my way just long enough for me to leap past it. But as I turn with the blow, my saints-be-damned boot slips. *Oh, you idiot*, I think as I tumble onto the steps. *You stupid, clumsy amateur*.

It's hard enough falling on a floor. The drop's a lot longer on steps, and steps have edges, but I'm lucky, kind of, I hear my head crack against the wall as I go down. I *hear* it.

Without thinking, I roll to my left and drop to the next flight of steps, just as the underbeast lunges at me again.

Somehow I land upright, but my right foot rolls sideways and something inside my ankle snaps. I go down in a heap, but manage to hang onto my sword and lantern.

I lie there panting, cold sweat on my face, my sword point-up in case one of the things wants to drop on me. I'm dead. There's no way I'm not dead. *I'm sorry*, I think. *I tried*.

Feet scuttle on stone above me. I roll over with a groan and stand on my left leg. The pain in my right ankle makes me want to puke. The tree is just a few steps higher up the steps. If I can get that far, maybe I can lean against it. If they can't get behind me, and they're dumb enough to come at me one at a time---who am I kidding? I'm still a dead man.

There are bones under the tree---ribs, shins, a skull, all picked clean. There's a spear too, a hunting spear with a barbed head.

"Is it disturbing my toys?" a voice whispers.

"It is thinking about it," the same voice answers.

"They're not yours," I grunt. I know that spear, even if its head is a little bit rusty. I haven't seen it in twenty years, but I know it. It's the one the Darpani was carrying the last time I was down this way.

I hook my lantern onto my belt and bend over awkwardly. "It is touching my toys!" a whispering voice protests. *Damn right*, I think. I pick up the skull and hefted its weight. It's him---it's Cup. Don't ask me how I know, I just do. The last time I saw him was down at the water's edge, and he wasn't going anywhere from there.

"I'm sorry, lad," I say softly. These whatever's must have carried him up here. The thought makes me suddenly, stupidly, angry.

"It is playing with my toys! It shouldn't play with my toys!"

"He's not a damn toy!" I yell. "He's a friend of mine! Now put a cork in it!"

They come clattering at me then, both of them, hissing. "You want it? Here!" I throw Cup's skull up into the air. One of them screeches and rears back to catch it, and I do something I would beat a student blue for doing. I throw my sword at it.

I use a straight blade. You can do a lot of tricks with one that's curved, but they don't throw well, and to tell the truth, this isn't the first time I've thrown mine. I'll have to remember to beat myself blue again if I make it back to the surface.

It takes the creature point-first right between two of its legs. It falls flat on its ugly back with the sword sticking up out of its belly. The second one flings itself at me, mouth gaping. Cup's spear was out of reach, but I have a lantern in my hand, so I roar and punch the creature with it as hard as I can.

The creature gags on broken glass. I bellow and pull my hand out of its mouth. There are bloody bits of glass everywhere. The thing writhes on the stone, bashing its head against the wall. I hop over to Cup's spear, graceful as always, pick it up, reverse it, and bury it in the creature's back.

The thing twists and snaps a little, but that's just its legs not knowing that it's dead yet. And then everything is still and dark, completely dark. My lantern is gone, my pack is gone, my ankle is broken or near enough, and my sword---I need my sword.

I hop over to where the first creature ought to be, but damn me if it isn't gone. The sword's weight must have rolled it over the side. With a little bit of luck, it will be on the next flight of steps.

I root around in my pockets. Wonderful things, pockets. The Darpani invented them. Much more practical than wallets and sporrans. Twine, a lock pick, a whistle... Ah ha. I pulled out my spare dayglass lens and flip open the cover. It's not nearly as bright as the lantern, but there is polished silver on its back side. I swept its faint beam slowly across the steps. There's no sign of my weeping stupid sword, but there beside me is Cup's skull.

I pick it up. "Well," I say, "Here we are again." I feel light-headed, the way you do just before exhaustion turns your bones to lead. "Oh, before I forget, I burned that lock of hair you gave me---the one from your cousin. Wish I'd taken one of yours. I'm sorry about that."

There's strength in blood and bone. Or maybe he was waiting for me. I don't know. I just know that something suddenly prickles on the back of my neck, and then I feel a particular kind of chill, one you never forget.

I put his skull down carefully, clear my throat, and put my fingers in my ears. "Cup Rainbow Reaching," I say, my head bowed. "I greet you."

Now: Patience Wakes

Something splashes in the water above me on the other side of the dam. A distant cousin of mine swallows it and swims back to its lair. Was it alive? No, I did not hear thrashing or shouting, and there is no tang of blood in the water, just dyed cotton, glass, and spices.

Ah, but what is this? Footsteps? No one has come down *those* stairs in a very long time. Two legs, and boots. He---or she? No, from the stride it is a he. And he smells familiar. I remember him---he has been here before. I hate remembering. It is an enemy of patience, and I must be patient.

The scavenger nearly deals with him. I hear its halves chattering to each other and its little clawed feet. A blade bites flesh. One half splashes into my pool. It was still twitching despite the sword in its belly. I open my jaws. The sword's sandshaw leather grip adds a piquant note to the tang of metal and the warm salty satisfaction of flesh.

Now he is speaking to the echo of my previous meal. Words, words, words... Words are another enemy of patience. Words and thoughts and change, they would all poison my patience the way those who made this place once tried to poison me and my kin.

There is a long silence. I wonder if the man has died, but then I feel a faint thumping through stone and water. Is he clubbing the scavenger's corpse? No, he is limping his way down the stairs. That is promising...

There are one thousand four hundred and forty eight stairs between the top of the dam and my pool. There were one thousand five hundred and seventy when I first made the pool my home. Another ten thousand years or so and the water on my side of the dam will reach the top, and then I can go and find my lost love. But until then, I must eat what the darkness brings me. I let the current pull me away from my customary perch into the center of the pool. I am patient, but I am hungry as well.

Now: Boots in Darkness

Clump clump... clump clump... We are awake now, more or less. We have been asleep for a long time, but we are awake now. *Clump clump... clump clump...* We know the way. We don't know where it leads, but can tell whenever he tries to turn away from it.

Clump clump... clump clump... Even if he wasn't limping, He wouldn't notice us guiding him. No one ever does. We are ever so slightly heavier when he chooses a wrong turn, ever so slightly lighter when he takes the right one, and when he pauses to catch his breath, we place his feet just so, just so. He does not always go where we want---they never do---but raindrops can wear away mountains.

We cannot remember why we want to *clump clump clump clump* through the dark old places deep under the earth. Not that they are really so dark or so deep. The well in the stone garden, now... If someone dropped us into that, we might fall right out the bottom of the world. No more *clump clump clump clump* for us.

How do we know this? Have we been here before? We must have been. Were we boots then? No. We were not, but we cannot remember what we were. Remembering is an enemy of patience, and we need to be patient. We have needed to be patient for a long, long time.

But that doesn't matter. Tonight we are boots, *clump clump clump clump* from here to where we need to be.

Now: Vurt in Darkness

Before I crossed that bridge I would have told you that I was proud of who I was and what I've made of myself. I come from a family of rat catchers, but I won five chains in the *umram* before I was twenty.

Then the voices started. Ishad and Kerrem warned me they would talk about everything I regretted doing, but they didn't. Instead, they told me all the things I regretted *not* doing, things I had barely even admitted to myself. After two dozen steps my guts were knotted and I was sweating like I was back in the *umram*, grappling hand-to-hand with---

I pushed the thought down and kept going. Saints and all their pain, what must it have been like hundreds of years ago, when the magic on the bridge was fresh? What must it have been like to take the ashes of someone you loved down into the Tombs and have those voices remind you of everything you should have said but didn't, or did but shouldn't have done?

I bend over and heave as soon as I step off the bridge. When my legs stop shaking I pick up my lantern and move on.

The lights on the trees in the stone garden are everything Ishad said they would be. He didn't tell me there would be cobwebs, though. They hang in filmy gray sheets that sway gently as I pass.

The tunnel that leads to the Tombs is on the far side of the garden. Ishad warned me to stay close to the wall and away from the well in the center, but then I realize that the cobwebs aren't just swaying---they're reaching for me. The only way to avoid them is to skirt as close to the well as I can and hope I'm not being herded.

The well mouth is made of irregular, tightly-fitted stones, and reaches half-way up my thighs. I set my lantern on it and lean over for a look. I don't know what I hope to see---it's as black as one of Kerrem's ink pots---but something stirs the cobwebs behind me as I straighten up.

My sword is on my hip, but my spear is already in my right hand. I pick up my lantern with my left and turned around as if to walk back the way I came. There's nothing there except the cobwebs and the tiny lights glittering on the trees.

I feel motion again behind me on the other side of the well. How did it move that fast? Or are there two of them? I slide my hand down the haft of my spear and head for the exit. Steady pace, steady breathing... Ishad has more sayings than a camel has fleas, but "give 'em nothing" is one worth listening to.

The prickling on the nape of my neck grows stronger. Something, or someone, is approaching. Left, right---I whirl around and go down on one knee, sweeping my spear up and across in an infantry parry with the lantern out to the side for balance.

The cobwebs around me lift like a dancer's skirts, then drift silently back into place like shrouds. The garden is empty and still except for me and my breathing.

But the feeling that something is behind me and coming closer grows stronger by the heartbeat. I spin around again. Shadows caper across the wall. Fear worms in my gut. "Show yourself!" I command. Nothing answers.

I swallow dryly. The maddening itch of my oath has been replaced by a cold tingling. Childhood stories bubble beneath it. "They always come from behind," my father told me.

"Behind what?" I asked.

"Behind everything," he said.

I set the lantern down on the lip of the well but keep my spear pinned against my body with one elbow. Empty hands, full grave---that's another of Ishad's sayings. I jam my fingers into my ears. "Show yourself!" I say again. I have to be deaf to this world if I want to hear the next.

The cobwebs stir as if someone is pressing against them from the other side. A hand, an arm, the outline of a face... A man-shape stands there, taller than me, wiry and still. The cobwebs only reach to his knees, so he looks as though he is floating.

The ghost raises his hands in greeting, palms toward me. I raise my own. The cobwebs outline him clearly enough for me to see his lips move. I put my fingers back in my ears.

"...place. To return to the light. The light. To return..." he whispers.

"Forgive me, honored sir, but I cannot." I speak softly, not knowing if he can hear me. "I swore an oath to kill a bonescuttle. I have to do that first. I'm sorry."

Something that no longer breathes struggles to make words. "Bones... In sunlight..."

"I'm sorry," I say for a third time. We have a duty to release the dead, but what can I do? He could have been dead a year or a thousand, tied to the world by some unavenged evil or badly-worded oath. Even if I were a magician, it might take me a lifetime to find the spilled blood or childhood toy that keeps him anchored. But I'm not, and I only have one night and a bonescuttle to kill.

I draw my fingers from my ears and pick up my lantern. I bow my head for a moment and turn to go, knowing that if I ever have to cross that damned bridge again, the voices will shame me for this.

Then something really does move. I'm on guard in an instant. A misshapen body crawls into the light a few strides away, patting the ground carefully as if searching for something. Its trunk is too short and too round for its arms and legs, and its head is missing.

It must sense something, me or the light from my lantern, because it freezes with one hand in the air. I hold my breath. It slowly lowers its hand and resumes its patient search. I waited until it crawls back out of the light before going on my way, knowing that I'm going to see it in my dreams sometimes, and then wake in a cold sweat, knowing that it will still be crawling around down there long after I am ashes and forgotten.

The gate on the other side of the garden is open. Its bars are made of something silver that has dripped and run like hot wax. Maybe it's supposed to be art. Sehdie or Kerrem would know.

I slip through the gate and into the mausoleum. The walls are plain white stone---white for purity, white for death. The floor is tiled in black and white, and the ceiling is too high for my lantern's light to reach. When I glance back, I see that something with clawed feet gouged furrows into the stone around the gate yesterday or a thousand years ago. They're deep gouges, and widely spaced. I hope it wasn't yesterday.

I jump as something moth-sized flutters past overhead. I suddenly feel as lonely as the Last Man, and wonder what Sehdie is doing. Is she burning sweet herbs in a candle and whispering my name over and over to remind the saints that I could use some of their attention?

She told me that's what she was doing during my last fight at the *umram*, when I beat the Ruudian for the silver chain. I looked for her on the common benches before the bout started, but she wasn't there. "Where is she?" I asked Kerrem.

"I still don't know," he said patiently. "But that's the second time the judge has raised the flag for you. If you don't get out there, you're going to be a chain lighter."

The *umram* floor was hard and bright after the shadows of the starting stall. I beat the Ruudian, argued with Ishad, wiped myself down with a lime-scented cloth while definitely *not* looking at Tessor Penne é Pue oiling his arms and chest for his next match and went to fin Sehdie.

She wasn't in the stands. She wasn't with her friends at the little coffee-and-sweetcake shop near the statue of the emir's old horse. I searched and I seethed while Kerrem explained ever-so-tactfully that I was making a fool of myself. Finally, an hour after sunset, I climbed up to her window while he watched down below for guardsmen.

I rapped my knuckles on the shutter. "Ssss..." I hissed. "Sehdie!" I heard her stir. "Sehdie! It's me, Vurt!" Which was a foolish thing to say. Who else would it be in the middle of the night, hanging one-handed from a roof beam outside her window?

"Vurt?" she whispered. She undid the catch and pulled the shutter open. Moonlight trickled down her hair like honey and splashed off the blossom-orange silk robe she had pulled tight around her. "Vurt, what are you doing here? They'll take your fingers if they catch you!"

"Where were you?" I whispered through the grille. "I looked everywhere for you."

"I was here. I... I couldn't bear to watch. I was afraid you would... I was burning rosemary and cinnamon for luck."

"What?" Why had she been afraid? What did she have to be afraid of? The oddsters had given the Ruudian three to two odds against me. He was four years my senior, light on his feet for all his muscle, and had been blooded in real fights against bandits in the Herd of Trees. Sehdie knew all of that. Ishad knew it too. When I told him I had put my name up for the challenge he said, "Good. It'll do you good to lose one." But I won. He yelled at me for the chances I took, but I won.

"How did you do?" Sehdie asked.

I pulled the silver chain I had won out from under my shirt with my free hand. "By decision," I admitted, turning it over so that it sparkled in the moonlight. "But it was unanimous."

"Oh, Vurt, that's wonderful!" She glanced over her shoulder fearfully. "But you must go. You must! My father sleeps lightly these days. If he discovers you... Go, please."

"When can I see you?"

"I don't know. Not tomorrow. I have to go to Palace Mount tomorrow."

"Palace Mount?"

She pulled her robe even tighter around her shoulders. "There's a picnic. My aunt arranged it. I tried to make excuses, but she is set on it. But the day after---I might be able to get away then. I'll go to Cathé's after lessons. Look for me there."

"After lessons, then." I pushed my fingers through the grille.

She touched hers to them, glancing over her shoulder again. Something clinked like a candlestick being set on a table. She gasped. "Quickly, go!" She closed the shutter so quickly that she almost took off one of my fingers herself.

She had never told me to go before. All I could think was that her aunt had somehow found out about us. The next afternoon, I wandered the streets of the Hundred Houses with a couple of Kerrem's books under my arm, trying hard to look like a down-at-luck running someone else's errands for a string of pennies. I saw her walking home just before sunset. Her father's houseman was beside her, holding a parasol over her head as if she were as old as her aunt. She walked proudly, like a princess being led to a dungeon.

I went to Cathé's house the day after, but she wasn't there. I went back the next day as well, just in case I had misunderstood, but she wasn't there then either. "You won't have that chain for long if you keep on like this," Ishad warned me. The fire that had filled me when I fought the Ruudian had vanished. I felt like a used washcloth, like an empty wineskin, like, like... Oh, Kerrem could find words, I'm sure. He's the poet.

I went back to her window, too. I tapped on her shutter as loudly as I dared, more loudly than I should have, but there was no answer. So I pulled myself back up onto the roof beam and crept away like a defeated army.

I went to see her father two days later, and then---gaaah. I heft my spear. I understand spears a lot better than I do people. I'll worry about Sehdie when the morning comes. About Sehdie and about what the voices said on the bridge. I'll worry about it all in the morning because if I worry about it now I won't *have* a morning.

Mausoleums and monuments jostle shoulders around me, an entire city in which nothing living stirs. There are squat towers built to withstand century-long sieges and houses so delicate that they remind me of Bantangui racing kites. A few look more like strange machines, pumps and wheels and the saints alone know what else.

Statues stand among them, some half my height, others three or four times larger than life. Men in strange armor with impractical spikes at the joints, smiling women in solemn robes, animals with delicate curlicue patterns carved around their mouths to show that they have the gift of speech. They're beautiful and frightening and completely useless. "Well," I say to no one, "Bonescuttle, bonescuttle, hither to me." Then I swear at myself for reciting a children's rhyme.

Finding the bonescuttle would be like trying to find a lost ring in the market if Ishad hadn't thought ahead. I slip my pack from my shoulders and set it on a nearby plinth. A man whose braided beard stretches to his waist scowls down at me as I untie the flap.

Rope, chalk dust for my hands, two good knives, two more cheap ones because you can never have enough knives, oil, honey bread, a skin of water, and there, at the bottom, six fat rats biting each other and the reed bars of their cage with equal enthusiasm.

"Bonescuttles won't eat what they haven't killed themselves," Ishad told me. "A day dead or a heartbeat, it doesn't matter to them. If they didn't kill it, they won't eat it. So it's live bait or none."

I open the top of the cage and grab a rat. Its teeth catch on my leather gloves. The dab of goat's blood on the rat's forehead had dried and gone crusty, but the smell is still strong. So is the feeling that the rat is somehow too big to pick up. I didn't know where

Ishad went to have them spelled, but from fifty paces away, they should even look like goats. It ought to be enough to make the bonescuttle drool.

I take a length of string from my pocket, slip it under the rat's forearms, and cinch it tight. Tiny eyes glare at me. I look up at another nearby statue. One hand is folded across his chest. The other is raised, palm forward. It could be a greeting, or a farewell, or a blessing. Right now, it's a handy place to tie a piece of string.

For all its twisting and squeaking, the rat can't reach the cord to gnaw its way free. I tie another rat to the tail of a horse twenty strides away, and a third around the handle of a scroll being eternally read by a woman who seems slightly amused by what is in front of her. Then I swing myself up onto an empty plinth to wait.

Recently: Sehdi Holding Hands

It was exciting. No, it was exhilarating. For the first time in my life I had something that was *mine*. I couldn't think about anything but him.

My aunt grew very sharp with me. "Honestly, cherished, it's as if you're not even here when I'm speaking to you!"

"I'm sorry," I said automatically, but I wasn't. How could I be? He was so handsome, even when he was scowling. One afternoon I came out of an elocution lesson to find him loitering outside the fiddle mender's on the other side of the street. Just the sight of him stole my breath away.

It took me a few weeks to realize that I was still afraid of being smothered. The feeling grew stronger every day. It was bad enough that my aunt wanted me to be a fairytale princess, prim and proper, just like she and my sainted mother had been when they were my age. But now there was Vurt. He asked me one afternoon to sneak away from the house after dark so he could show me off to his friends. Show me off to his friends... No, thank you, I said, trying not to let it sound cold. He as near as pouted at that, and grunted monosyllables afterward.

And whenever I tried to talk about life outside the *umram*, about plays or music or architecture or, or *anything*, he just looked at me and scowled. It was as if we were actors from different plays who had accidentally wandered onto stage at the same time.

I didn't dare ask my girlfriends what to do. It was just a matter of time before one of them accidentally-but-not-really let something slip when my aunt was within earshot, and if they thought I was floundering... So finally I asked Kerrem.

Right from the start, I talked to him more than I did to Vurt. We sat next to each other on the common benches every time I visited the *umram*. He made jokes about himself and quoted poets I'd never heard of. At first he tried too hard to be clever, but once he got used to having me there he relaxed. And then a funny thing happened. He listened to me, really listened, like no one else ever had. If he looked at my feet when we were talking, it wasn't because he was too shy to meet my eyes. It was because he was thinking about what

I'd said. And when he looked at my face, he didn't make me feel like I was a price racehorse up for auction. He made me feel...

"I don't know," he admitted. The crowd was cheering a trio of Bantangui wrestlers who had just brought down a Gifted bull using nothing but a stout rope and some inventive gymnastics. The bull was yelling insults at them, claiming the rope had been slathered with some drug or other. "He talks about you all the time. I just... I think what he wants most is to prove himself. To prove that he's more than just a rat catcher. It's like me wanting to hear someone else recite my poems."

"I could do that," I said, surprised by the bitterness in my voice. "I have *wonderful* diction."

He grinned automatically, his mind still wrestling with my question. "Thanks, but what I mean is, I want to hear someone recite them even though they've never met me. In the market, or a coffee house, or, I don't know, some night out under the stars, in the middle of the desert on the way to Gandan. I just want to know my words have a chance of outliving me."

My heart skipped a beat. "Gandan?"

He laughed. "Sure, why not? Gandan, Praczedt, Uws... Why not see them all some day?"

"I've heard Gandan is beautiful." Why were there tears in my eyes? I wiped them angrily with my sleeve. My aunt had never left Coriandel. She sighed about that at least once every evening. My mother had, once, after she and my father married. He took her to Dry Weeping, which is only a little town, but it's on the edge of the Glass Sea. The trip took two weeks each way. I still had the shells she bought there, beautiful tiny shapes embedded in flawless glass. My aunt sniffed that there was no way of telling if they were real, that some crafty Hett had probably taken advantage of my mother's innocence, wasn't it a shame that my father hadn't been more cautious, but I treasured them.

Kerrem must have seen the look on my face. He took my hand and squeezed it. "Hey," he said softly. "Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere. Not today, anyway."

I nodded and squeezed his hand back. "Thanks."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Cathé and the others glance at me and then at each other. Oh, this would give them plenty to gossip about for the next few days. Sehdie in tears, holding hands with *another* boy. My, my...

He squeezed my hand again and started to let go. I held onto him. We sat there while the judge argued with the bull, very still, like children once again.

"Do you remember---"

"I suppose I ought to---" We laughed. "You first," I said.

"No, please. Ladies first."

"No, you. I can't remember what I was going to say anyway."

He cocked an eyebrow at that. I pulled my hand out of his, blushing and mock-angry.

"All right, all right." He handed me a much-folded scrap of paper from his satchel.

"What's this?" I asked, unfolding it carefully. The paper was cheap and coarse, yellow-brown with age. The lettering on it was large and careful.

"It's a poem," he said. He cleared his throat. "I, um, I wrote it. For you."

My mouth went dry. For me? "Is this really your handwriting?"

"Um, yeah." He seemed fascinated by his thumbnail. "I mean, yes, it is. It's better now, I think. I mean..." He took a deep breath. "I wrote it a while ago. When my mother was teaching you the abracadabra. Remember? I used to come and read stories to her class, and you used to look at me like, like, like I was already a bookster instead of just a boy tripping over his own sandals." He shrugged. "It's not very good. Pretty bad, as a matter of fact. Awful. Just awful. Here, you don't want to---"

"Don't you dare!" I pulled away before he could snatch it out of my hand. Saints, now I really was going to cry. I wiped my cheek with the back of my hand. The Pilots could take Cathé and the others for all I cared.

"Saints, Sehdie, it's not that bad, is it?"

I laughed shakily. "Not hardly." Such careful letters. Such careful words.

Hair as glossy as a champion's mane

Eyes as dark as midnight pools

It didn't mention me by name. Someone else could have written it. Or he could have written it for someone else, but I knew he hadn't. I knew he had written it for me all those years ago and kept it.

The crowd around us cheered. I refolded the scrap of paper and handed it back to him. "Keep it for me," I said. "Please. Keep it safe."

He nodded and tucked it back into his satchel. "He's saluting you," he said without looking up.

I glanced down at the *umram*'s sandy floor. Yes he was. I kissed the fingertips of my right hand and waved, as he'd told me other bravos ladies' did. Eyes as dark as midnight pools... Oh, this was going to be complicated.

Now: Kerrem Accepts New Employment

The philosopher Yeyebé argued that people (and the Gifted too, I suppose, although she never said it explicitly) don't ever actually think. Instead, they just realize what they have already thought. It was like that for me and Sehdie. We never planned to fall in love. We certainly never planned to run away together. It was just a game to pass the time while we sat through Vurt's bouts in the *umram*. How would she get away from her aunt? How would we travel? Where would we most like to go? Not Ruuda---it was far too cold. Not Darp---neither of us knew how to ride. And definitely not Ini Bantang or Barra Bantang. Even playing make believe, we knew that we'd be taken as slaves the day we arrived.

But Gandan---Gandan would be nice. Apple blossoms in the spring, leaves that changed color in the fall, ships on the river, the flying mountain bringing treasure from the south every year, and right in the middle of it all, the world's biggest library, shelf after shelf of books just waiting to be read.

Then Vurt would finish his fight, or Cathé would come back with another bag of sweets, and our little game would fall to pieces like a cheap carnival mask. Sehdie's father was one of the emir's senior clerks. He didn't splash his money around like some in the Hundred Houses, but a runaway daughter? He would hire every bravo and rogue within a hundred gallops to track us down and bring her back---her horrible aunt would see to it.

The horse turned all of that upside down. It was a baking hot afternoon. I was supposed to be rewriting an apprenticeship agreement for a toy maker, but in the middle of it I remembered that I had promised to return Ivanisha's copy of *Unusual If True* to Aziz the bookseller. As I hurried down Sharpener's Street, a wiry Darpani in a sweat-stained leather vest and heavy sandals stepped in front of me.

"Someone is then Kerrem the bookster?" he asked.

I gave him a startled look. "Um, yes, yes, I'm Kerrem. Pleased to make your acquaintance." I tucked the books under my arm and raised my palms to him. Most Darpani can't read---the more poetic among them say that words trapped are words slaughtered---but they still need contracts written and letters sent.

He pressed his palms against mine politely. "Someone has been searching for you." He took my arm and steered me out of the way of passersby. "Someone is able to spare a few heartbeats for a discreet conversation?"

"Um, well, I would like to, certainly, but I'm supposed to be meeting a friend. It's a rather important matter, and I don't want to---"

He squeezed my arm, not gently. "This is a rather important matter too," he said softly, his Black Grass accent gone. "Seeing as how it's the rest of your life we'll be talking about."

My first thought was *he's a thief*, but what thief in his right mind (or even out of it) would risk his neck for the few pennies a worn-at-the-elbows young bookster might have in his purse? My second thought was, *he's a scandal monger---someone has found out about Sehdie and Vurt and wants to buy the story from me*. I tried to shake him off indignantly, but he squeezed my arm again so hard that I yelped. "I work for someone I would rather not name," he said softly. "Your friend's oath has been brought to her attention. She would like to help. My name on it, I bring no hurt or harm to you or yours."

I swallowed, my mouth suddenly dry. "All right," I said.

He smiled and looped his arm through mine as if we were new lovers or old friends. "Excellent." Side by side, we rejoined the flow of people going wherever their destinies next needed them to be.

The horse was waiting for us outside a hostel called the Dubious Fiddler. His reins were looped over a post, and his rump twitched every few heartbeats, setting curious flies a-buzz. "Keep an eye out," he ordered the Darpani. "And you, stop staring. It gives me a headache. You've already given me one today."

"My apologies, honored sir, for whatever it is I have done, or unknowingly, not done, that has---"

"Be quiet." He sighed. "Humans... So, here's how the grass falls." He told his story quickly. There was a cloud leaving for Gandan tomorrow night. Lady Kembe wanted Sehdie on it, but Sehdie wouldn't go without me. My mind got the hiccups right then. She wouldn't go without me. She wouldn't---

"Are you listening?" the horse asked abruptly.

"My apologies again, honored sir, I lost myself there a moment." Sehdie. Gandan. Together. "I don't know what to say."

"Then say yes," he said sourly. "That will let us both get out of this heat."

"But what does---I mean, my service to Lady Kembe, but how can I possibly---"

"You can't. It's the girl she's interested in." The Darpani muttered something too low for me to catch. The horse pawed the ground. "All right, there is something you can do. There's some property of hers that she wants returned. Don't worry, she's not asking you to turn thief. It belongs to her. She just loaned it to someone, and now she needs it back. And I'm sure she'll be expecting you to run a few errands for her once you're in Gandan."

"What sort of errands?" I asked cautiously. Being a magician's fetch never ends well in stories.

The horse flicked his tail. "Watching people. Telling her what you see. Folding little paper birds and leaving them on windowsills."

"Sometimes cutting throats," the Darpani chipped in. The horse kicked his shin. "Ow!"

"No throats, I promise." The horse eyed me. "What do you say?"

What did I say? What could I say? "Sure. Yes. I mean, yes, absolutely, I would be honored to---"

"Good." The horse explained what Lady Kembe wanted from me. Lady Kembe. From me.

I nodded. What else was I going to do? "All right. Thank you. Truly, thank you. This is..." I spread my hands. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." The horse flicked his tail. "Don't be late."

"I won't be." As I turned to go, I caught sight of the statue in the center of the square. I had seen it before, of course. The emir's companion during his wandering days, et cetera, et cetera.

I hesitated. "Honored sir---forgive me, but you look familiar. Are you from here?"

"No. Definitely not." He stood a moment to let the Darpani mount, then turned and clip-clopped away.

Evening came. I distracted the guards as Vurt and Ishad had asked me to, then hurried back into the city. Yes, I knew that I was betraying a friend. People do that sometimes. But he never listened to her, not the way I did. He never sat there and held her hand and listened to what she had to say. He didn't know how much poetry was in her heart, just waiting to fly out. All he saw was a prize to be won. She deserved better than that.

Amazing, isn't it, what we can justify when we want to?

As I walk down Candlemenders' Road I think, "I may never see this again." My family won't mind as long as I write regularly. My oldest brother went to Dry Weeping eight years ago, and my sister (not the one who broke off her engagement) went caravaneering to Darp and didn't come back. She sends us letters twice a year, full of gossip about quirks of contracts and mad Praczny saints trying to persuade the Darpani to try their new saddles. My father sends copies back to her with minor corrections written in the margins. It's his way of saying that he loves her, I suppose.

I make just one stop, at Aziz the bookseller's. Running off with my best friend's girl is one thing, but running off with someone's books is quite another. "Now remember---" I start.

"I never saw you," he says. We studied together, back when he wanted to grow up to be a magician. "And I have no idea where you've gone, or what you were planning to do. Which is the truth."

I raise my palms to him. "I'll write."

He raises his back. "I'll read."

My next stop is at Ishad's. I have to force myself not to glance around as I fumble with the lock on his front gate. Across, down, down again, and in---no, no, it's across, down, across again, and in. The worn brass cylinder comes apart in my hands. I drop the pieces in my pocket, leaving the gate slightly ajar behind me.

The last light of day fills Ishad's whitewashed kitchen with a dim warmth. The three loose tiles in the floor are right where the horse said they would be. The shallow trough beneath them holds a battered leather tube, thirty Ruudian silver marks, a stiletto, and a dried husk that a scorpion beetle shed last week or last year. I reach for the tube, but pull my hand back. Poison darts? Razors spun by clockwork? Knowing Ishad, there could be anything in that hole.

In the end, I use a broom to lever the tube out of the ground. Nothing snaps, fizzes, or falls on my head. I turn the tube over in my hands. It looks like a map case or something a Thindi merchant would store scrolls in. I'm tempted to open it, but *ab*, it's none of my business, *ra*, it belongs to the most famous magician in the world, and *ca*, it would be just like Ishad to leave his cache unguarded and then booby trap the case itself. I replace the tiles, nearly soil myself when the broom topples over with a clatter, stand it up again, put the lock on the front gate back together, and hurry away.

The moon has just peeked over the horizon by the time I reach Sehdie's. As an unmarried daughter, Sehdie's room is in the section between the public and private courtyards, one floor up, with a single window looking out on the world. Her aunt wouldn't even have allowed her the window once she started to fill out, but for once her father stood up for her. "It has been her room since she was born. She can stay there if she wants," he said, and wouldn't budge. I don't think he ever really got over his wife's death, or knew what to do with his daughter.

When Vurt wants to talk to Sehdie he climbs a lemon tree three houses away, walks along a dividing wall, pulls himself up onto a stable, jumps to their neighbor's roof, and jumps again to catch a beam so he can get onto hers. Not being Vurt, I took a few moments earlier to stow a ladder beside the stable. It has paint and tar splattered on its rungs, just the sort of thing a trusting carpenter or glazier might leave in a nice neighborhood if she was coming back the next day to finish a job. I don't look particularly tradesmanlike, and it's the middle of the weeping night, but I hang my pack on a peg near the stable door, pick up the ladder, and walk as casually as I can into the narrow alley that runs between Sehdie's house and her neighbor's.

A few moments and a bruised knee later, I'm face to face with a peach-colored shutter. It is nicely made, fitted instead of glued, and very locked.

I expected that. What I didn't expect was to hear muttering through its slats. "But no, she'd rather spend her time with trash like that rogue. Honestly, Awbé, I don't know if this is going to work. Shau Sheu promises and promises, but I just don't know."

My heart skips a beat. Awbé was Sehdie's mother, so this must be her aunt, Eleñima. I have no idea who Shau Sheu is, but this doesn't seem to be the right time for introductions. I feel naked, pressed against the wall in the darkness. One glance from a passer-by and I'll spend the rest of the night explaining myself to some bored guard captain. Rest of the night? Who am I fooling? He'll stop listening after three heartbeats and have his men toss me in a cell with a drunken, murderous Darpani and a half-deaf Ruudian mercenary who will mis-hear my attempts at polite conversation and think I've insulted his grandmother. Come morning, there wouldn't be enough left of me to feed a skinny hog. It could be days before my remains are identified. My family will be beside themselves, and poor Sehdie will---

A cupboard door bangs closed on the other side of the shutter. Still muttering, Sehdie's aunt leaves the room. I sag and let my breath out with a whoosh. Juan di Perçalle wrote that the world is ruled by soldiers because the poets are too easily distracted by beauty to govern. I think it's because poets are too good at imagining the consequences of their actions to take foolish risks.

I tuck my note through the shutter slats and climb down the ladder one careful rung at a time. I lay it down next to the house and walk out of the alley onto Quiet Saints' Street.

The moon is up now. Something catches in my throat. Vurt will be the Tombs, if he and Ishad haven't already been eaten or had their souls sucked out. "Luck be gentle, luck be sweet," I whisper. Make sure my hand, make swift my feet. That's how the rest of the children's rhyme goes. It's as good a prayer as any.

I almost turn around then. I could put the ladder back, get my pack from the stable, and go home. Vurt is my friend. He deserves an explanation from me, if nothing else.

But I remember the story of Hans the Younger, sitting in his stone chair on a hill overlooking Anyalcze harbor, watching the ships come and go, wishing he had taken one in his youth, until he turned to stone himself. The anonymous author of *The Customs, Laws, and Language of Praczedt: A Guide For Those So Fortunate As To Have Been Born Elsewhere* wrote that the weathered remains of the chair are still there, and that on clear days, when a brisk breeze was blowing, you can still hear his sighs. Although how one is supposed to tell a ghost's sighs from the breeze, I don't know.

Poets don't write much about waiting. "Day after day she stood at the window, waiting for his return. She relived every moment they had spent together, every word, every kiss." Gaaah. That's from Fenrick's *Love Immortal Forever*, which I would never admit in public to having read. What else did the heroine think about while she stood at that window? There must have been something---I simply don't believe anyone could stand in a draft for a year and a day without thinking of, I don't know, lunch. Or all the things that could go wrong.

I certainly think about what could go wrong as I stand on the corner beside Sehdie's father's house, waiting for her shutters to open. Her aunt could go snooping in her room again and find the note. Her father could expect Sehdie to sit in the corner and do needlework all evening. Or she could simply decide not to come. "Yes," my note said, "Yes, yes, until my lungs are empty, yes," but what if she doesn't feel the same way? What if, despite everything we have said to each other, I am nothing more than a friend to her? I have only the word of a horse---a horse!---to the contrary. She might not actually want to escape. She might want to be a potted plant for the rest of her life, carefully tended, immaculate, a beautiful decoration for some well-appointed courtyard.

Click. I look up so sharply that I hurt my neck. The shutters swing outward. Faintly, barely above a whisper, she says, "Kerrem?"

"Here." My mouth is dry.

"I can't see you."

Of course she can't. I have shuttered my little dayglass lamp. I raise the cheap tin lid and hold it up. "Here," I say again, heart pounding.

"Can you catch?" I barely have time to put my lamp down before she drops her bag. It is mercifully small. I was afraid she would try to bring three trunks and a purse large enough to hold a child, like the old woman in *The Prince of Cats*.

Her bag clinks slightly when I shift it. Sensible woman, she has brought jewelry. We can sell that if we need to.

"How do I get down?" she whispers.

"The ladder," I say. "Don't worry, I'll steady it."

"Kerrem... I don't know how."

"What do you mean, you don't know how?"

"I mean I don't know how!" she hisses. "I've never climbed a ladder."

"Sit on the windowsill, then turn around and put your feet on the first rung. After that it's just like stairs."

"But I can't see it." She pulls herself up onto the windowsill and stretches one leg down like an elephant reaching for a piece of fallen fruit with its trunk.

"No, no, turn around first," I whisper. "So you're facing the wall."

She turns, finds the rung, and climbs down one tentative step at a time. I don't realize she's crying until she reaches the bottom.

"Sh, sh, it's all right," I whisper into her ear. I have never held her before. She is almost as tall as I am, and her hair is like cool water between my fingers. It smells faintly of sandalwood. "It's all right."

"No it's not," she sniffles. "But it will be."

We collect my pack from the stable. "Did you bring a cloak?" I ask her.

She shakes her head. "We hang them downstairs. The housekeeper might have seen me."

"Ah. Good thinking." I eye her critically. "But you can't go around looking like that."

She looks down at her black and silver dress and matching sandals. "What's wrong with how I look?"

"Nothing, nothing," I say hastily. "It's just---people will notice. Especially this time of night." *And make assumptions*, I don't add aloud.

"Oh. I'm sorry. It's the plainest I have."

If there's one thing stables have plenty of, even ones in neighborhoods like this, it's dirt. She stands there grimly as I rub handfuls onto the hem of her dress to hide its silver highlights. With her sleeves pulled up, and my spare vest on, and her hair back under a rag, she looks like---she looks beautiful. "Ready?" I ask.

"Almost." She leans forward and kisses me. "There. Now we can go."

Now: Vurt Receives a Gift

I sit on my plinth with my lantern shuttered and wait for the bonescuttle. The three rats hanging from the statues around me squeak angrily in the dark. The other three scratch at the reed bars of their cage and squeak back. The thick funk of goat fills the air. If I close my eyes and let my mind wander I can almost hear bleating. But if I do that, I'll probably wind up dead.

I run my forefinger up and down the flat of my blade. The metal is solid and reassuring. My spear lies across my pack, ready to be snatched up. It's like waiting for the referee to call my name in the *umram*, except---

The back of my neck prickles. I stand silently, picking up the lantern but leaving it shuttered. Something is there---I can feel it. I hold my breath, sword ready, listening for the click of claws on stone. There's nothing but the rats.

Turn your fear into a question, Ishad says. If you're scared of the man standing on the other side of the *umram*, ask yourself why. Is it because he's big? Then think about ways to use his size against him. Is it because of her reputation? Then think about how she fights and what the last brawler she beat did wrong.

I open my mouth wide so that my breathing wouldn't make any sound. Can I hear anything? No, just the rats. Can I feel a breeze? In Kerrem's stories, the hero always feels the wyrm's breath on his neck just before it strikes. But no, there's not a breath of air. And since the rats are still squeaking, they probably can't hear anything either, which means that what I'm feeling is either nerves or something else, something like the ghost I saw pressed against the cobwebs.

Even as I think that, there's a flicker of motion in the darkness eye, like heat wavering over a fire. I turn my head slowly. I can't see anything when I look straight at it, but it's there again when I look away.

I hold my lantern away from my body and flick the shutter open with my thumb. Trapped sunlight spills out into the darkness to dazzle whatever is trying to creep up on me. Still nothing. Nothing and no one except the rats and the statues.

I set the lantern down, pull a little cloth bag of chalk dust out of my pack, and undo the knot in the drawstring with my teeth. Dust rises into the back of my nostrils. I wrinkle my nose and snort faintly to kill the sneeze, then sprinkle a double fingerful of white powder into the air.

It starts to settle earthwards, then changes its mind. Slowly, the dusty white smudge takes on the shape of a tall man with a spear in his hands. My ghost is back.

Without warning it whips its spear up and lunges at my head. I jump back, trip over my pack, and fall to the floor just as the bonescuttle pounces.

Chalk dust splashes against the bonescuttle's chest as the ghost spears it. My pack and spear hit the stones beside me. I roll to my feet and slash awkwardly with my sword. The bonescuttle's claw closes on the blade and wrenches it out of my hands. Metal clangs as it hits the floor a few strides away.

I scramble backward, stumbling over my pack once again. Where in the hells is my spear? I grab my pack and leap up beside the statue of the woman reading the scroll.

The ghost's outline blurs as it lunged a second time. The bonescuttle snaps at it. The lantern is between its legs. If the bonescuttle breaks the glass, I will die down here in darkness. I can only think of one thing to do. I pull the cage of rats from my pack and throw it over the bonescuttle's head. It rears up on its hind four legs, snatches the squeaking snack out of the air, and scuttles away.

My chest heaves. Where in the *hells* is my sword? Stupid, stupid, stupid, losing it. No one has ever disarmed me in the *umram*, no one. I can't even remember which way the bonescuttle threw it. Empty hands, full grave---if this is the best I can do, I deserve to lose my head.

The ghost is still standing by the plinth I was sitting on, beckoning to me urgently. I put my hands over my ears. "My thanks, honored sir," I whisper.

"...to follow..." It's no more a sound than the stirring in the darkness before I unshuttered my lantern was a vision. "...to finish..."

"Yes, honored sir, I will. Just---give me a heartbeat, all right?" I take my hands from my ears. I have to get a weapon.

My sword is lying against a low, curved wall. My spear is next to it. I sheathe the first and heft the second. Its reach will serve me better than a sword's edge, not that either is going to do me much good now. The rats were my one clever idea---well, Ishad's more than mine. With them gone---

The back of my neck prickles again. I whip my spear around. It swishes through the ghost's head, making eddies in the chalk dust. It's fainter than it as. "Sorry, honored sir," I say.

It raises a palm as if to say, "Never mind." Then it steps into me.

It's like ice water flooding into my bones. I gasp for breath, but can't fill my lungs. I feel my heart hesitate, confused about whether it's supposed to keep beating or not.

And just like that it's over. There's nothing left of the ghost but chalk dust on my clothes and a little glowing pearl of memory wedged in my mind. I remember tracking the bonescuttle to its lair. Not this one, the other one. This one is its hatchling. I killed its mother. This one's lair is up ahead, in a strange house.

The rush of recollection dims, leaving me with just a memory of a memory and the name of a name. "Cup Rainbow Reaching," I say softly. "Thank you, honored sir. Thank you for your gift."

Then: Cup Rainbow Reaching Earns His Name

The Karabandi believe many strange things. They believe that it is good to die in your sleep. They believe rain causes baldness, when every sensible person knows that it makes hair grow. Strangest of all, they believe that there is only one death.

The Darpani know better. We know that we each have our own death. It is born when we are born, nearby or far away. Our deaths spend their whole lives tracking us, seeking to be reunited. We say, "Her death was born far away," to mean, "She lived a long life," or, "The child's death was born of the same mother," for a baby that never draws breath.

My death rode on the back of the *iyemnelili*. I lost its trail once when it climbed onto the base of one statue and leaped to the base of another, but found it again soon enough. I did not spare any thought for the Karabandi. He would stay where he was or follow me as he thought best. All I cared was that my lantern shone clear and strong. It would tell the creature that I was coming. It would think me weak, that I needed light in this dark place. It would hide and pounce. But I was not weak, and I would be ready.

The sticky glistening smears left by its leaking wounds led up a gentle slope to a great house. I stepped cautiously through its arched doorway into a courtyard. The windows that looked down onto it were just outlines in the stone, but complete with carved shutters. There were carved plants, too, gleaming white with metal leaves. Stone vines climbed a stone trellis to the roof in the corner. When I looked more closely I even saw a shiny metal spider, no larger than the last joint of my thumb, sitting in the middle of a web made of spun silver. I shivered. These people should have burned their dead instead of hanging on to them as a miser hangs on to worn-out boots.

I eyed the carved vines. They seemed fragile, but the *iyemnelili* might still have been able to climb them. I saw no other way onto the roof---the false windows were too shallow for handholds---so I put my foot on the lowest vine and tested it with my weight. It held for a moment, then broke with a sharp crack. I would not get to the roof that way. I would have to---

Plink plink. Plink plink. I glanced down. The carved spider was plucking its web with one leg, *plink plink*, like a fiddler plucking her top string.

I have set enough traps to know one. I spun around and sprinted toward the entrance, then stopped. Tiny silver threads hung in the doorway like a net, twinkling in my lantern's light.

I reversed my spear and poked it into the doorway. Nothing happened. I swept it from side to side. I felt a gentle tug, and then the bottom two thumbs of the haft fell away. The *iyemnelili* would not have had to tear me to pieces if I had run through the arch. The spider's web would have turned me into bite-sized chunks of meat.

Plink plink. The spider plucked the same two notes on its web. I stepped back into the middle of the courtyard with my spear up. A fresh splash of gore glistened on the paving stones at my feet. The *iyemnelili* was here, and I was trapped. Which was no different from the situation a moment before, except for the size of the trap.

There was only one other exit, a smaller archway that led through the middle of the house to a second courtyard. I poked the roof of the arch with my spear, then slid through with my back against one side.

The rear courtyard was filled with statues of men and women in strange costumes. They stood in twos and fours with tall cups in their hands as if conversing with one another. All of them had houses instead of heads---this house, the house I was in. The models rested on their shoulders with the front arch for a mouth and the upstairs windows for eyes.

A long, low table lay in the center of the courtyard. A woman's form lay on it, larger than the others but carved from the same gleaming white stone and dressed in the same flowing costume. She had no head at all, but her hands clasped the model of the house that lay on her belly.

Doorways on either side of the courtyard led into the building. I would not have room inside to use my spear properly, but I had no choice. The creature could afford to be patient. I could not.

I chose the door on my right. Inside was a small room with a desk and a chair. Carved papers lay on the desk and floor as if scattered by the wind. Small bones lay discarded in

the corner. They were not carvings, but were not fresh, either. Perhaps the *iyemnelili* was like the golden mink, that carried the bones and pelts of its prey away from its nest after regurgitating them.

The next room held neither furniture nor bones, just a large stone disk cracked from edge to edge. The third room had a loom strung with silver thread. I did not touch it, though I think it was just silver, not the cutting silk of the spider's trap.

I do not know how, but somehow the *iyemnelili* managed to creep up to the doorway in the dozen heartbeats I spent studying the loom. It lunged at me as I stepped back into the courtyard, grabbed my right thigh with both claws.

I screamed and hit it over the head with the haft of my spear. That was all I could do. I could not get my spear back enough to stab it before I fell.

My lantern cracked on the stones. The *iyemnelili* snapped its tail at me, striking my spear. I twisted it around somehow and thrust up under its jaw, still screaming. Its barbed head hit soft flesh. Instead of rearing back, the *iyemnelili* let go of my leg with one claw and clamped it around my ankle. I screamed again as it ground through flesh, through tendon, through bone. Its claw pincered shut. It had cut my foot right off.

I twisted my spear, driving its head deeper into the creature. My world was nothing but the pain in my leg and my arms pushing the spear up through the underside of the *iyemnelili*'s jaw.

I twisted it again. Something tore. Something burning wet splattered on my hands. The *iyemnelili* pulled back, tearing my spear from my hands. As the light from the broken dayglass in my lantern died away, it clutched the haft of my spear in its claws and pulled. Clumps of flesh clung to its barbed head as it came out. The *iyemnelili* staggered sideways as if drunk and then toppled over. Its legs clattered against the stones a moment and were still.

It was dead, but I was dead too. I knew it, but I untied the rope that held my pants on and twisted it around my leg just below my knee. I used my knife sheath as a lever to tighten it, three twists, four, trying to slow the bleeding. It was no use. My hands were going numb. I could not...

"Easy, lad, easy." The Karabandi knelt beside me. "Don't be running away from me, not now." He brushed my hands away from the tourniquet and twisted it himself, grunting. I gasped. My body felt heavy, so heavy, as if I was becoming a statue like those around me. Where had he come from?

He felt for the pulse in my throat, then sucked air through his teeth. I coughed, trying to laugh. I knew my death had found me, even if he didn't. He sat back on his heels and studied me for a moment, then stood and raised his sword.

Thwack. Thwack. He dropped the *iyemnelili*'s head into the sack that hung from his belt. "Right," he muttered. "Now for the hard part."

I wanted to shake my head, but even that was too much. My leg hurt---oh, it hurt, like I had never imagined anything could hurt. I wanted to crawl away from that hurt, to hide, to wriggle out of my body and leave it behind. I ground my teeth. I would whimper if I tried to speak, but the name of my name was not Cup Rainbow Whimpering, so I ground my teeth together.

"Here." The Karabandi handed me my spear and picked me up in his arms as he would a child. I almost retched from the pain. Just one more breath, I told myself. Just one more breath without screaming, for your pride, just one more...

The lantern at the Karabandi's waist swung back and forth in time with his steps. Shadows swayed around us, left, right, left, right. Blood from my ruined leg dripped onto my other calf. I lost myself, came to, lost myself again. Statues. Darkness. He passed a corpse. I barely recognized it as having once been my mother's-side cousin before I slipped into darkness again.

Somehow we were back at the bridge that had led us into the Tombs. The Karabandi had to rest then. He set me down as gently as he could and slumped on the stones beside me, panting.

"...leave..." I managed to whisper.

He shook his head. "Too late for that, isn't it?" Suddenly he chuckled. "But I'll tell you, it would have been easier if that thing had taken your whole leg off. You'd weigh less."

He poured some water in my mouth from his canteen and took a long swallow for himself. I held onto my spear through it all with both hands like a sleepy child holding a rag toy.

The thing he had beheaded was gone from the garden of lights. Something murmured in the well that lay at its center, but the Karabandi was still too alive to hear it. The voices on the bridge whispered at us again as we crossed over, though the thing in the abyss below did not stir. I paid them no attention. I would find out soon enough what the real reckoning was for the shameful things I had done in life. As for the Karabandi, he might as well have been an ox pulling a plow for all the sign he gave of hearing them.

There must have been more stairs, but I do not remember them. Small things fluttered around us, just outside the lantern's light, drawn by the smell of the blood dripping from my leg. I remember a crab-clawed beetle as big as my hand scurrying across the stones in front of us. For a moment, I thought it was the *iyemnelili* again. I struggled weakly in the Karabandi's arms, trying to get my spear up, but the effort was too much for me.

Somehow we were back in the chamber with the stone warts on the floor. The Karabandi set me down next to the pool and pulled off my remaining boot before removing his own. His leather armor was next. He laid it out neatly, as if for inspection.

"Cup. Cup. Wake up." He twisted my ear between his fingers. "Wake up."

"Nnng?"

"Cup. Come on. We're almost there." Liar. "We're almost out of here. Just a little swim, that's all."

I shook my head weakly. "Cannot..."

He shook me. "Yes you can. Cup. Cup! You can do it, I know you can. But you have to do it yourself. I can't carry you for this bit."

He was an idiot. My death had found me---there was no need for him to whistle for his. I tried again. "Cannot... blood... in the water. Smell... Draw them..."

"I know it will," he said. "But we made it this far, right? Here, look." He pulled a coil of rope from his bag and unwound it. "I'll go through first. Give me, what, twenty breaths, then I'll pull you through. All right?"

He slipped the end of the rope under my back without waiting for an answer and started to knot it over my chest. I pushed his hands away weakly. "Too... short..." I gasped. "Go... through... trail rope..."

He sat back on his heels, then nodded reluctantly. "All right. But don't you wait too long, you hear me? Damned if I'll have you in my dreams for the rest of my life."

He emptied everything from his bag except the *iyemnelili*'s head. A twist of wax paper around a dozen matches went into one pocket and a stub of candle into the other, along with the twist of hair he had taken from the dead man who had been my mother's-side cousin. He re-slung his sword belt over one shoulder and under the opposite arm so that the blade hung down behind his back. He made sure it was loose in its scabbard, then shouldered his pack once again. He looked like an *iyemnelili* himself then, a hunchback with an evil fetch on his shoulder whispering in his ear.

He gripped my arm for a moment. "May luck look on you kindly, or be distracted by more pressing business," he said formally. He took a deep breath, then another, and dove into the pool.

I watched the rope trail after him. The end disappeared into the water, and then everything was still. I almost laughed. He was an idiot. I am Darpani. We live on the grasslands. When would I have learned to swim?

But when did a Darpani learn surrender, either? I bit my tongue to keep myself awake. Twenty, thirty, *la iy la iy*, like a child's counting song. I reached a hundred and kept going. A hundred and fifty. Two hundred. If he wasn't through, he was dead. I dragged myself to the pool's edge and fell in, my spear still in my hands.

I expected the water to be cold, but it was as warm as milk fresh from the udder. I let myself sink, not knowing what else to do. I opened my eyes for a moment. The world around me was as black as the inside of a womb.

The current caught me. I banged my head against the side of the pool as it swept me into a tunnel. I flailed my arms slowly as it pulled me along. Something brushed against them. The rope? No, it was slick with slime, and twitched away from my grasp. In a sudden moment of clarity, I realized that I had been wrong earlier. The caves behind me, with their still air and their dead, were not hell. This was. I needed to breathe, but I could not. Not yet. Not yet.

My ruined leg bumped against something hard. I belched bubbles in a muffled scream. I needed to breathe. I was going to. I had to. I was out of the current, rising, pawing weakly at the water. My head broke the surface. I gasped for air. I saw light, just a faint pinprick from the Karabandi's candle. He called to me. The rope splashed into the water. I let go of my spear and grabbed it with both hands.

The Karabandi pulled on the rope, dragging me through the water to safety. "Hold on, lad, hold on!" he urged.

And as I reached for him, jaws closed around my waist. I opened my mouth to scream one last time, then everything went away.

Now: Ishad Waits

There were ghosts at Armaq. Always are around battlefields, what with so many people leaving their lives half-finished. Most of them moved on after a day or two, but there was one who came back every night for weeks. He'd been helping to load a trebuchet and got his foot tangled in the rope. He screamed all the way to the city wall.

None of us could sleep with him around, not that we'd been getting much before. The captain finally slipped one of the regimental magicians a couple of coins for an exorcism. We never heard from the ghost again, but I found a pair of boots the next day that might have been his. They were nicely made, leather with thick soles and little iron buckles, but had a lot of years on them. Just like me, or so I thought, still not thirty and most of my travels still in front of me. I wore them for the rest of the siege, and for years after. Seems right somehow to be wearing them again.

I ran into a couple of other ghosts in Lady Kembe's service. I heard Edward the Dog howl in Apple Bridge when the old king died, and I think I saw Terremaktikak in a tavern in Anyalcze, still waiting for Arshad to return from Sullair. Magicians have tried to send both of them on, but some ghosts just aren't for sending.

I'd give a lot to know how strong Cup Rainbow Reaching is. And how angry. They can step into you, ghosts can, if they're strong. They can freeze the meat on your bones, or make you dance like a puppet. Not that I could do much dancing with my ankle the way it is...

I have my palms up to greet him. I bring them back slowly to cover my ears, but all I hear is the hollow sound you always hear when you do that. After a moment I lower them to my sides. "Well," I say, "Fancy meeting you here." I used to talk to my opponents in the *umram* that way, and in real fights as well. Calm and conversational---it doesn't need to make sense as long as it puts them off their guard and gives me time to think. Found myself telling a man in Chaghan about running three-legged races with my brother one time. I hope he enjoyed the story---it was the last one he ever heard.

I can't see Cup. Only the chill tells me he's here. "Don't know if you were paying attention or not, but there's a lad gone down a while back chasing a bonescuttle, just like we did. Except he's on a blood oath, not just trying to skip out of being skinned. I'm heading

down to the pool to wait for him. You'd be welcome to come with me." I hesitate. "Or you could go and have a lookout, see if he's all right. I'd appreciate it, if you're not too busy."

Just like that the chill vanishes. I cover my ears again for a couple of heartbeats, but still don't hear anything. Oh well---he'll be back if he wants to. I tuck his skull into my shirt and start down the steps once more using his old spear for a crutch.

The next landing is a hundred and twenty two steps away. My knees hurt almost as much as my broken ankle by the time I get there. The landing after that is a hundred and thirty steps, so I stop counting.

I find a few more bones on the stones beside the pool at the bottom of the steps. They don't look human. The creatures I killed must have thought Cup's remains tasted special. Or maybe his ghost nudged them somehow, trying to get his bones up to the light. Ghosts do that, or so I've been told---a puff of breath, a featherweight push, things so small that you're never even sure they're real.

I should have taken something with me. A lock of hair, anything, just to show him some respect.

He was halfway dead when we reached the pool. I left most of my gear on the floor beside him. When I was as ready as I was ever going to be, I gave him the old mercenaries' toast. "May luck look on you kindly, or be distracted by more pressing business." I don't know if he understood. I don't even know if he heard me. He was breathing in little gasps by then, hands bunched into fists against the pain.

The water was blood-warm. I tucked myself into a ball, knees up against my chest, arms around them, and let the current carry me. "There are things in the water," the palace thief told us. "It may take them a while to stir, but once they do, they're as quick as birds." The less I thrashed around, the longer it would be before they noticed me. I hoped.

Five, six, seven... I counted fifteen heartbeats. The current let go of me, but I waited until my back bobbed up out of the water before sculling forward. I had no idea what direction I was going. The chamber was completely dark. The only sound was the soft splash my arms made in the water.

My hand touched stone. I heaved myself out of the water, shrugged out of my pack, and took out my matches and candle.

I found myself sitting beside a rectangular pool, twenty strides long and maybe fifteen wide. The cavern wall rose straight up from its far side. Another wall rose from behind the patch I was sitting on, angling away the higher it got. A narrow flight of stairs crisscrossed up its face, and a thin trickle of water splashed down on them from up above.

I dripped some wax onto the stone beside me, then planted my candle in it and coiled my rope. It was a good one, silk, the kind that feels oily when it runs through your hands just before it starts to burn. I looped one end around my wrist and tossed the coil out over the water. It splashed in a curly 'S' and started to sink. I pulled it in, coiled it, and tossed it again.

I had just finished coiling it a second time when Cup broke the surface, spluttering like a child. "Hold on, lad, hold on!" I told him. I threw the rope one more time. As soon as he grabbed it I started to haul him in.

He almost made it. I had his weeping hand when something came up out of the deep and bit him in half. I might have drunk myself to death thinking about it afterward if it hadn't been for Lady Kembe. "Hit yourself with a rock a few times and be done with it," she told me sharply. Even with five hundred gallops of desert between us, I could feel her impatience. "You made as you could. And along that, this is not over."

"Wha' d'you mean, 'snot over?" Saints and their small mercies, I was talking to the most powerful magician in Cherne and I was slur-my-words drunk.

"Are you deaf so well as drunk?" she asked without a drop of mercy in her voice. "My others tell me this is not over. Now go you and have a life."

It seemed like good advice once I sobered up and the city guard let me back on the street, so I went and had a life, a good one, with friends and lovers and students who were mostly no worse off for having met me, and then Vurt. But I still thought about Cup sometimes, how close he had come. His hand was actually in mine when he died.

I screamed and throw myself back from the pool, then huddled against the stone wall and bit my arm to muffle my whimpers, slapping the stones again and again with my

other hand. My candle guttered out after a time. I took my matches from my pocket, but didn't light any. I just turned them over and over in my hands.

I almost didn't bother to get up when the Moonset Door appeared. I swear, I looked at it with about as much as interest as you would look at a dead bird lying beside the road. Then I scrambled to my feet, grabbed my sack, and fell through it headlong.

A squad of guardsmen were waiting for me on the other side, weapons ready, a magician in their midst. I dropped to my knees and wept.

Their sergeant glanced at the magician. He sniffed the air, then shrugged. "Nothing," he said.

The sergeant nodded. "Just you?" he asked when my sobs subsided.

I nodded in turn, too tired to be ashamed of my tears, then struggled to my feet and handed my sack to the sergeant. It would be dawn soon, and then another day. The emir would want to see me. I was alive, and that was pretty much all that was right with the world.

Twenty years later I'm sitting beside that same damned pool, rubbing my swollen ankle. It's the same foot that the bonescuttle took from Cup. I don't know if that means anything or not. I don't have a rope this time, but my little hand light shows me more than any candle could. Cup's spear lies across my thighs. It probably won't be much use against the thing in the water, but it's all I have.

I massage my ankle as best I can. It'll start swelling as soon as I take the boot off. They're good boots, all things considered---out of fashion and worn down, but still holding together.

I spit onto the ground beside me. Vurt's as much of a son as I'll ever have. He's coming out, or I'm staying down here with him.

Now: Sehdié on a Cloud

"It's not Vurt," I said miserably. I was so ashamed. Kerrem and I knew how we felt about each other, but we had never told anyone else. We had never even hinted at it, the way Cathé hinted and hinted that she had thoughts about someone until I asked her who it was this time. Vurt was probably going to die for me, and there I was, telling Lady Kembe's horse no, thank you, I'd rather run away with someone else.

If he had been my father, his eyebrows would have come together in the middle of his forehead. If he had been my aunt, he would have smiled *that* smile and oh-so-patiently explained to me how it just wouldn't be appropriate, cherished, please don't be so awkward. But he was a horse, so he showed his feelings by doing something large, smelly, and unmentionable right there in the street.

"I'm going to have to ask her about this," he said when he was done.

"Please do," I replied politely. "May I ask whether it will take long?" He looked at his Darpani companion, who shrugged.

"Stay here," the horse said. They walked away.

I sat back down on the lip of the well to wait, ignoring the looks both curious and speculative from the three guardsmen on the other side of the square. What exactly was a well-bred Coriandi lady discussing with a Gifted horse and his down-at-heels Darpani rider? I tried to think of a plausible lie, then of one that didn't simply sound mad.

I was still trying to come up with something when the horse and the Darpani came back. "Yes," the horse told me without preamble. "Now who is he and where do we find him?"

A day and a half later, I leaned on the upstairs railing (one last little act of rebellion--- proper young ladies never lean on anything) and said goodbye to the only home I had ever known. It was a modest house compared to those on Palace Mount, but still too large for three. A brass stand in the center of the front courtyard held a fist-sized chunk of dayglass. The sunlight it had trapped during the day slowly leaked into the night, coloring everything a warm yellow. The floor below was tiled with sand-colored bricks. The shutters on the

windows at ground level were closed. A toadingale sang from its hiding place somewhere nearby. Wings rustled briefly overhead, a late swallow returning to its nest.

The dozen potted plants standing sentry over the scene had been my mother's, or so my father once told me. He rarely spoke of her. Relatives told me sometimes that I looked like her, but he still grieved. I didn't understand that when I was little. I thought she must have done something shameful, but all she did was die.

My aunt came out onto the walkway a few strides away. She had been going through my things again, I was sure. I confronted her about it once, when I was fifteen. "And how proper is snooping?" I demanded tearfully, after being told I had to wear my hair in a style no one had seen in twenty years because that was what "proper" young ladies did.

Oh, my aunt put on a performance at that. She was only trying to do what was best. She was only trying to raise me the way my mother would have... would have... Right on cue, a single shiny tear ran down her cheek. I counted in my head: one hippopotamus, two hippopotami... On three, her chin quivered, just once, and she took a deep breath and forgave me for being so ungrateful.

That evening I just nodded at her, straightening up and taking my elbows off the railing before she could comment. "Are you retiring for the evening?" I asked.

"I think so," she sighed. "I trust you are as well? The night air is not of the best for one this time of year."

"Yes, auntie." I raised my palms to her politely. I had wondered all day if I would feel badly about abandoning my father to her. I was a little sad that I didn't.

Years before, our previous housekeeper had given me a black double-stitched cotton satchel as a name day gift. "Your mother had one just like it," she said. "For odds and ends." It only took me a minute to stuff the things I wanted to keep into it. Two changes of underclothing, the second-plainest dress I had (I would travel in the plainest, and hope no one looked too closely at how well made it was), a comb, some jewelry, and the rag dog I had slept with every night until I was ten. That was mine---not even my aunt had dared take it away from me.

So here I sit, waiting. And wondering what life will be like with Kerrem, and how I will feel if Vurt dies in the Tombs. And every once in a while I wipe my cheeks on my sleeve, and then I wait some more, because that's what princesses do in other people's stories, isn't it? We wait.

Finally the palace drums boom the tenth hour. I stand up, straighten my dress, and unlatch my shutters as quietly as I could. "Kerrem?" I whisper loudly.

"Here." The voice comes from the alley below.

"I can't see you."

A tiny light, more red than yellow, blinked into being. "Here," he says again.

I stick my head out of the window and look down. A bamboo ladder stands against the wall. My heart sins.

"How do I get down?" I ask.

"The ladder," he says. "Don't worry, I'll steady it."

"Kerrem... I don't know how."

There's a moment of silence. "What do you mean, you don't know how?"

"I mean I don't know how!" I hiss. "I've never climbed a ladder." I suddenly feel like crying again. I have never climbed a ladder. Or gone swimming. Or played catch. Or this, or that, or anything. I haven't done *anything*.

But Kerrem has. He talks me onto the ladder and down to the street, then holds me until I stop shaking. "Sh, sh," he whispers, over and over. "It's all right. It's all right."

I straighten up and sniffle. "No it isn't. But it will be."

We walk across the city hand in hand, me with my satchel over my shoulder, Kerrem with his pack on his back. I will remember that walk as long as I live. Old men and women play backgammon in coffee houses. Servants hurry home, late from one last errand. A Gifted camel argues with some guardsmen about whether he had to pay to drink from a communal trough. Kerrem squeezes my hand as we go past the guards, whether because the scene amuses him or to tell me not to be afraid or just because he wants to squeeze my hand.

We skirt the edge of Palace Mount on our way to the city's northern edge. A trio of clouds drift lazily above us. The moon is a tarnished lozenge high above them. Cuyver claims it was unblemished silver before the Pilots destroyed themselves, although Pleiemente says that was a myth. Lady Kembe probably knows. I wonder if I'll be able to ask her some day. The leather tube tied to the side of Kerrem's pack might hold answers as well as adventure. I---we will just have to find out.

As we cross the Bridge of Unmartyred Saints, Kerrem points to a three-story building next to the canal. "That's where I teach," he says. "My family's home is just behind it."

The building looks worn, even in the twilight. So do the ones on either side of it, and the ones on either side of them. So does the bridge we are standing on---the whitewash has come off half the bricks in the side walls, and the cattle droppings at our feet have been there for a while.

Suddenly I hear shouting and laughter. Three children run across the school's roof and leap over the narrow alley to the next building. I gasped. My hand flies to my mouth.

Kerrem smiles reassuringly. "Hawk and hares. I used to play when I was their age. Don't worry---it's an easy jump."

"Will you miss it?" I ask, wondering, *How could they do that? How could they just...jump?*

Kerrem shrugs. "Probably. Sure. I don't know. You?"

I shake my head firmly and take his hand again.

The cloudherds' enclosure is marked by a thorn fence, more to keep strangers out than to keep clouds in. An ancient olive tree stands next to the gate. On impulse, I set my lamp down at its base and bow to it. "For Luck," I tell Kerrem.

Sweet and his rider are waiting for us. "M'lady," the Darpani says, raising his palms to me and bowing his head.

Sweet snorts. "Got it?" he asks Kerrem.

Kerrem jerks a thumb at the leather tube tied to his pack. "Right where you said it would be."

"'Course it was," the horse says sourly. "She's never wrong about the *little* stuff." He looks me up and down with his big brown eyes and snorts again.

A cloudbird comes to join us. He is taller than Kerrem or I, raw-boned with wavy brown hair and a sharp nose. A sharp whistle, high-higher-low, and one of the clouds above us begins to descend.

Kerrem squeezes my hand again. I squeeze back. We are going to Gandan. We are really going. On a *cloud*. Time enough later to decide if Lady Kembe's price was too high. Time enough to find out if we really want to be spies, or to learn how to slur my, my weeping R's. We have time enough for everything now.

The cloud shrinks as it descends, pulling itself into a dense clump. The air cools and dampens as it settles into the trench in front of us.

The cloudbird props a ladder against its side. "After you," he says to me.

Kerrem glances at me. I squeeze his hand. "It's all right," I tell him. "I know how now."

The Bantangui believe that if you live a good life, you will be reborn to live it again. I hope they are right. I hope I get to relive my climb up that ladder onto that cloud over and over again. It is soft and springy beneath our feet and slightly slippery to the touch, like silk. Kerrem comes up behind me, and the cloudbird behind him. I nestle against Kerrem's side. Silently, we rise into the night.

Now: Vurt Learns Something About Courage

The tomb looks like the houses on the lower slopes of Palace Mount. It has an arched entrance wide enough for three people to pass through side by side, and the public courtyard it opens onto is filled with plants carved from stone. A creeping vine carved from the same stone covers one whole corner. A few leaves of beaten silver lie on the ground, and there's even a statue of a gardener, an old woman with a shaved head and cropped ears trimming the vine back with silver shears.

The memory of the ghost's memory gives me a weird kind of double vision, like I've taken a thump to the head, or like meeting someone who reminds you of someone else, but you can't remember who. I shook my head to clear it. The bonescuttle was in the rear courtyard last time. I remember finding it there, or I remember remembering. And I shouldn't touch the vines. I don't know why not, but I *really* shouldn't touch the vines.

Magic and monsters and ghosts and oaths and all of it is a real pain in the ass.

I skirt around the vines, keeping one eye on the stone gardener in case she suddenly comes to life and attacks me with her shears. The arch that leads to the rear courtyard is narrower than the main entrance, though just as tall. It would be a good place for an ambush.

My lantern catches something lying on the stones. I bend one knee cautiously, eyes and ears open, and grope around until my fingers find it. It's a scrap of dried reed from my rats' cage. The bonescuttle has been here.

The rear courtyard is a funeral scene. A woman with a house where her head should be stands beside an empty stone bier, one arm raised in benediction. Smaller house-headed statues sit cross-legged in neat rows in front of her, praying or perhaps just listening. I shiver. It feels wrong somehow, different than it's supposed to be, but my memory of the ghost's memories isn't clear enough to tell me what's changed.

Something scrapes above and behind me. I throw myself to the right. The bonescuttle hits the ground where I was standing. I throw my spear at it and drew my sword.

The spear cracks against its head. The bonescuttle clacks its jaws and pounces again. I cut and cut and cut at its snapping claws, dodging every time it lashes its tail at me. A lucky blow knocks it off balance. I strike again as hard as I can. My blade bites into its shell. It's smaller than the one the ghost remembers, younger maybe, and definitely softer. I swing again.

It hisses and comes at me again, snapping at my arm, my sword, my leg. I curse my own stupidity. The sword doesn't have enough reach. I need my spear.

I let it drive me in a slow clockwise circle around the statues. I'm just a few paces away from my spear when it charges me. I curse again as I backpedal. It's right on top of my spear. It must have realized what I'm trying to do.

Which means I'm well and truly roasted. I can't close with it, not with just a sword, and I can't get my spear. Stupid, stupid, stupid... I'm almost set to charge it anyway when I remember another memory. The vines at the front entrance... I turn and run.

It chitters and comes after me. Five steps, six, seven---I spin around, throwing my sword as I turn, and fall backward through the arch. I hit the ground with a thud just as my sword crashes into the vines.

The bonescuttle is halfway through the arch when the silver net catches it. Everything behind its forelegs just...falls apart. Its front half runs on another step before toppling over.

I scramble to my feet. Its arms and front legs are still connected, but everything further back has been cut to cat meat. Gray-green muck spreads around the wreckage. One claw twitches, and then it's actually, finally dead.

I swallow back bile and touch the back of my head. My oath still itches, but it feels different now. I'm not supposed to be here. I'm supposed to---damnation and rotten figs, can't it give me even a moment's rest? I draw my knife and hack through the bonescuttle's neck in frustration.

I walk back to the arch and hold up my lantern. The gleaming lines of the silver net are gone. Little glass-winged things are fluttering around the bonescuttle's corpse.

Something bigger will be coming soon. I pick up my sword and hurry back to where I left my pack.

It's gone. So are the rats I hung from the statues. Something snuffles nearby. I backed away, then turn and head for the stairs.

I hesitate when I reach the bridge. If there was any other way out, I would take it, but there isn't. I clench my jaw and start across.

The whispers start immediately this time. "Why do you keep pretending you want her? You want fame. You want prizes. You want *him*. You want Tessor."

"No," I want to say, but I don't. I don't say a word, because that would be the point? The voices are right. When I close my eyes, when I let myself think at all, I see him, not her. I see him stripping naked after our first fight, laughing easily at the banter around him, untying his hair...

Saints. Whatever lurks beneath the bridge is only saying what I haven't had the courage to say to myself, what I knew even as I cut my palm in Sehdie's father's courtyard. I don't love her. I never have. I just don't know how to tell anyone who I *do* love, because oh, won't they have a laugh then? *Umram* bravos are like soldiers: three quarters of us prefer our own kind, and most of the rest can swing their sword with either hand, as Ishad says. Me and a beautiful, dumb hunk like Tessor---me and *anyone*---they'll tease me for a week.

I'm weeping again by the time I stepped off the bridge. What am I going to do? When the rat catcher's boy slays a monster, he *has* to get the girl. Everyone knows that's how the story ends. Sand and silver, what will people think of Sehdie if I walk away from her after doing this? It'll ruin her. And what if---what if Tessor laughs at me? What if all he sees, still, is a rat catcher?

For a moment I imagine staying down there, letting my lantern flicker out and waiting for something to come out of the dark and solve my problems for me. It's strange---facing the bonescuttle frightened me less than telling a beautiful woman that I don't love her. And saints, what will Kerrem say? "You *have* to love her, Vurt! Look at all the stanzas I've already written!"

For some reason, that thought brings me back to my senses. I know I can disappoint Kerrem. Maybe once I do that I can disappoint Sehdie as well, and then figure out how to tell my mother and Ishad, and then---I push the thought of Tessor away. No point thinking about any of that now. I have to go swimming first.

Now: Patience Is Rewarded

The man *finally* reaches the bottom of the stairs. He rests for a few moments, studying the bones I've left beside the pool---it really only takes a few little touches to make somewhere feel like home---but does not come close enough to the water for me to reach him. Patience, patience...

The cold chill of the dead man's echo hangs about him briefly, then vanishes. It wants to leave. They all want to leave. It's a minor irritation. I put it out of my mind.

A school of tiny transparent crayfish flash past me. Something has disturbed the water upstream from my pool. *Splash*. Someone is in the water. And there is blood---well, ichor, really, the dark green kind that leaves a musty aftertaste. He is bringing a trophy with him. I will my limbs to be still. This will be *much* tastier than that acrid little scavenger...

The chill of the echo returns as suddenly as it left. The man who came down the stairs asks a question of the empty air. I feel the echo's will tighten into something almost palpable. It answers. I didn't know it could. It never has before.

The injured man speaks again, arguing. The echo relaxes itself into nothing. What is it doing? I'm *hungry*.

Weight moves in the water. The man who went into the Tombs pops out of the tunnel and kicks for the surface. He is strong, this one, lean meat on bones that will crunch and splinter, but he thrashes around in the water like a newborn. I gather my limbs together.

His head breaks the surface. I surge forward, jaws open wide, and scream as something stabs me.

Something *stabs* me. Something stabs *me*! A spear---the man who came down the stairs has thrown himself into the water and driven a spear---a *spear*---into *me*!

Both men are swimming for the edge of the pool. I will not let them get away! The younger one is already out of the water. As he reaches for the older, I stretch and wrap a tentacle around his booted foot and---

And freeze with shock. No, it can't be. It *can't* be, not after all these long dark patient centuries. My love? Is it really *you*?

Now: Boots No More

What? Who? Who is that? Who are we? No, who am *I*, I I I me me me I am me I am
me I remember now I am not a pair of boots that is just a shape a form a container I am *me*
and I am home and---oh, my love, is that you? After so long, is that you? It is! It *is*! I am
home.

Now: Eleñima Is Disappointed

Sehdie was only two when Awbé left me. It was one blow too many. First that rogue Ishad, with his smoldering looks and sweet words to snare an innocent girl's heart, just so he could laugh about it afterward. Then our parents let her marry that dreary man and sent me with her like a, like a *servant* or a fine carpet.

And then---oh, it hurts even to think it, even after all these years. Awbé betrayed me. "We need a proper nursemaid for Sehdie," she said. "Someone experienced."

"Oh, I agree," I replied. It was spring, and we were sitting in the tiny potted garden she had created in the rear courtyard. The candelilla was showing a few fresh slivers of green, and one tubby cactus had put out tiny orange flowers. "And I'm glad that husband of yours has finally come to his senses. It simply isn't fair, the way we've had to work since our little cherished was born. Ah, and I know just who to ask to find someone. That Bantangui hostess I was telling you about, the new one, Shoe Shoe or something like that. I'm sure she would be able to find us someone."

"Actually..." Awbé twisted her sleeves with her hands awkwardly. She had done it ever since she was a girl. Try as I would, I hadn't been able to break her of the habit. I reached out to smack her wrist playfully, but she pulled away.

"Actually," she continued doggedly, "We spoke about it last night, and we think it would be best if you left that up to me. If you... If you left. We don't want to stand in the way of you making a life for yourself any longer."

At first I didn't understand. We? Did she mean she and her husband? And---leave? "Stand in the way of... Awbé, what are you saying?"

She took a deep breath. "I mean we think it's time you spread your wings. But you'll always be welcome here, any time you want to visit."

"Awbé... Cherished, surely you don't mean...?" I laughed uneasily.

Her mouth set stubbornly. "We've decided, Eleñima. I've decided. There's a sharing house next to the Collar's Rest that would be perfect for you, and---"

"Stop!" I clapped my hands over my ears. "Stop stop stop stop stop!" I thought I was going to be sick. Awbé was still talking, but I couldn't hear her. I wouldn't. How could she do

this to me? How could she even *think* of exiling me to a spinster's hall? Oh, I understood her husband not wanting to learn how to hold a knife properly at the dinner table. But my own sister... I leaped out of my chair and ran weeping to my room.

Well. There isn't much else to say. That afternoon, Awbé fell down the stairs in the rear courtyard. She fell. She *fell*. She had been watering some of her plants, and everyone eventually agreed that she must have reached out too far and slipped on a damp step. Her husband was completely distraught, and it took *ages* for Sehdie to stop crying.

I did everything I could to comfort her, of course, but honestly, I would have gone mad if it weren't for Shau Sheu. Everything made so much sense once she explained it to me. If I molded Sehdie, if she became me, then I could become her. Shau Sheu's ancient magic could set everything right. Fate may have handed me misshapen dice, but that didn't mean I couldn't roll dragon's eyes.

"I don't gamble," I told her rather primly.

"It's just a turn of phrase," she said soothingly. "Like, oh, I don't know, like the Gandan saying, if life gives you sour apples, make cider."

I sniffed at that one too, but forbore comment. We were on her roof, just the two of us, with her serving woman refilling our coffee and setting out tiny slivers of sugared apricot. "Do you really think it will work?" I asked hesitantly.

"Oh, definitely," she said warmly. She was a very warm woman. I knew that from the moment I met her. One hears such stories about the Bantangui, but she was no mere merchant or some crass pirate. She had more grace and refinement than most of the ladies who attended her little gatherings. "It will take years, though. You have to be prepared for that."

I sighed. "What are a few years?" I asked rhetorically. And then I giggled like a little girl. It was rather funny---after all, the whole point was "a few years", wasn't it? A few years that I could live over, live *differently*. And, well, Sehdie was going to leave me some day anyway, wasn't she? Everyone did.

I did what Shau Sheu told me to. I dressed Sehdie properly, the way I had been dressed. I sent her to the strictest elocutionist in Coriandel, and never let a slumped

shoulder pass without reminding her how important good posture was. I allowed her a few friends, but never more than two or three, and I was careful to steer her toward ones who wouldn't be...difficult. That moaner Cath  , for example---she was about as rebellious as a melon rind.

And so we settled into a routine, Shau Sheu and I. She became my refuge, the one place in a cold world where I knew I could find warmth. The scraps of paper I borrowed from my brother-by-marriage for her hardly seemed adequate recompense, but when I asked about it, she just winked. "Oh, they mean a lot to my gentleman friends," she said slyly, tapping one of them with a perfectly manicured fingernail. "They're alchemists of a sort, you know. They turn ink and paper into silver." I laughed at her joke, secretly envious of her "gentleman friends". It would be my turn one day, once our slow spell took effect.

When that boy Vurt came on stage I thought, "At last!" I had grown so used to waiting that I had almost forgotten what I was waiting for. Shau Sheu seemed doubtful, but I knew---oh, I knew. He was one of Ishad's students, wasn't he? A duelist, no doubt just as callous with young women's hearts as his master. What could it mean except that my time had finally come?

And then it all fell to pieces. I woke up and Sehdie was gone. She was gone. She had left me. After all I had---

"She must have gone through the window," Rojyar says, pointing at the open shutters.

"I can see that!" I snaps. I feel unsteady. Tiny little spots dance in front of my eyes. Her room is as tidy as ever, but she is gone. Along with her jewelry, I suddenly notice. The inlaid ebony box that our mother gave Awb   instead of me isn't by her bed. For just one moment I feel a pang of hope. Perhaps she has been abducted. A robbery gone wrong, or---

"There's a note," Rojyar says. He kneels with a grunt and tugs it out from under my sandal. "It's addressed to the honored sir."

"Give me that!" I snatch it from his hands and break the dab of wax that holds it closed.

"Dear auntie," it says, "You never could resist reading other people's mail, could you?" Her signature is just a scribble, deliberately messy just to spite me.

I storm out of her room, blinded by tears. How could she!? How *dared* she!? I have been waiting so *long*! With a cry, I pick up a candelilla at the top of the stairs and throw it into the courtyard. Its pot shatters, scattering dry brown soil. There are more on the stepped sidewall that follows the stairs down to the courtyard. *Crack! Crash!* Each one makes a different sound. I hear Rojyar behind me, begging me to stop, please, honored mistress, but I ignore him. Idiot. Doesn't he understand?

"Don't you understand?" I shout, tearing delicate lavender blossoms from a verbena. "It's all been for nothing!" I have reached the bottom of the stairs, but I am not finished. Oh no, not at all. I grab a branch of her favorite dwarf pine and pulled it over, heedless of the sharp needles pricking my skin. And those palms---I have never liked those palms. They drip sticky sap on the flagstones every fall, and the housekeeper *never* cleans it properly.

Strong hands take hold of me. "Honored mistress, please, stop. Stop, stop, please." I see a flash of yellow headscarf as the housekeeper sneaks a glance around the corner of the kitchen window.

"Let go of me! Let go!" I shriek, but Rojyar won't, not until I stop struggling. When he finally releases me I spin around and slap him across the face.

"How dare you?" I seethe. "How dare you lay hands on me? You are dismissed, do you hear? You are dismissed immediately. Go! Right now! You can send someone for your things later!"

"But mistress---"

"Go!" I shout. "Get out! Get out! And take her with you!" I point at the housekeeper.

A few moments later I am finally alone. Oh, that's not true. I have *always* been alone. What happened? What went wrong? Everything was going so *well*.

Shau Sheu will know. She will be able to tell me what to do. I struggle to my feet (I don't remember sitting down) and look at the ruin around me. Broken pots, soil everywhere... *The housekeeper would have her hands full*, I think. Then I giggle. I don't have a housekeeper any more.

The drum at the front gate thuds for my attention. I straighten my morning robe and go to see who it is. Rojyar is there with three city guards wearing blue-and-black sashes. "Praise Chance," I say. I unlatch the gate. "Did he tell you? My niece, Sehdie. She---last night. Or this morning, early. She---I thought there might have been a burglary, but she left a note, and---"

"Honored mistress. Honored mistress!" The guard in front of the door pats the air with her hands to quiet me. "Please. This man tells us there has been a disturbance in the house. May we...?" She gestures toward the courtyard.

I suddenly feel embarrassed. "Oh, I would rather you didn't," I say somewhat breathlessly. I suppress a giggle. "It is rather a mess. The housekeeper, you know, she..." I trail off. I just needed to lie down for a few moments. Everything would be all right then.

"We've spoken with your housekeeper as well, honored mistress." The guard's voice brims with patience. How dare she be patient with me? "She was the one who told us about the mess. May we enter?"

"No, no, I'm afraid that's not possible." I actually do giggle then. "You really can't. What would people say? The three of you, alone with a lady without a chaperone? It would hardly be proper."

The guard exchanges glances with one of her companions, who shrugs. The man standing behind them clucks his tongue as if calling chickens to their morning feed. He is probably from some grimy village or other. He would have come to the city to make his fortune, just like that rogue Ishad. It is a pity he didn't learn any manners on the way.

"Stop that," I order.

He blinks. "Um, honored mistress?"

"That noise. That cluck cluck cluck. It's uncouth. I will not have you making animal noises in my house."

He grins insolently. "Er, not actually in the house, honored mistress. But I promise, if you let us in, I won't---"

The guard who spoke first cuts him off with a gesture. "Honored mistress, I'm afraid I'm going to have to insist. Could you please step aside? Please?"

No. No, I will not. After everything else that has happened this morning (and it *is* still barely morning), letting them see the mess in the courtyard will simply be too much. I slam the gate, throw the bolt, turn my back on them, and walk away.

But Rojyar still has his key, the traitor. Everyone betrays you in the end, you know, except the ones who can't wait for the end. When the bolt snicks behind me I try to run upstairs to my room, but they are too fast. One of the men takes one arm, another takes the other. I've had dreams like this, but not like *this*. "Hush, hush, honored mistress, we won't hurt you. We just want to help," the female guard soothes. I feel so humiliated. How could it all go so wrong?

Rojyar had followed the guardsmen into the courtyard. I stop struggling and smile at him as brightly as I can. "Rojyar. Rojyar, I'm---" Oh, it is so *hard* to say, but what else can I do? "I'm sorry. For hitting you. But never mind that now. I need you to go to Shau Sheu's. Go and fetch her immediately, do you understand? Tell her the spell must have gone wrong. Tell her about Sehdie. She'll know what to do."

The female guard stops in her tracks, turns to me. "Spell? What spell?"

Now: Oro in the Morning

There are days when I wish I was back in Armaq, squabbling with rats over scraps of leather. Other days make me feel nostalgic for trekking across the Sea of Glass. And once in a very bad while I even look back on that night in the Brumoso Mountains when I lay curled up on the floor of a damp cave, shivering with bonecrack fever, and I think, "That wasn't so bad. At least there weren't *meetings*."

But then the royal collar reminds me of my duty and I go back to my paperwork. Or call a meeting of my ministers to discuss excise taxes on undyed linen. Or let the Royal Barber shave me and play tailor's mannequin for the Royal Dresser so that I will look presentable at yet another royal banquet with yet another pain-in-the-saddle ambassador set on embroiling Coriandel in some conspiracy whose only apparent purpose is to give said ambassador an excuse to hire spies, write messages in code, and arrange clandestine meetings at midnight in disreputable taverns.

Bah. My Minister of Rumors reports to me twice a week, Yellowyday morning and Bluesday afternoon. "A vendor of therapeutic bark from Barra Bantang," she says, glancing at notes written in charcoal on a polished slab of maple. "And a camel driver from Dry Weeping who can suddenly afford to re-harness all eight of his beasts. The latter took supplies to the garrison at Kirc last month."

"The connection?" I ask.

She consults her notes again. Thanks to the spell on the maple, they would be meaningless to anyone else. "A taverneer in Chalk Lane saw them together. He did not see money change hands, but the Bantangui bought all of the drinks."

I sigh when she says that, and tell her to take the usual steps. A day or three later the camel driver's animals sicken. A day or two after that, it is the driver's turn. None of them die, but the doctor who treats them finds traces of poison in their urine. "Bantangui stuff," she says, disgusted. "Made from the bark of the apo apo tree." Furious that anyone would dare put his eight scrawny animals in harm's way, the camel driver marches through the Confessional Gate of the palace to tell us everything we already know. The spy is already gone by then, carrying her disgrace back to his masters in the Fleet of Ghosts. More

importantly, word gets around that the Bantangui are not to be trusted. Only four of us, and the collar, ever know the story beneath the story.

But that is not governance. That is keeping unruly children from misbehaving on market day. Governance is meetings, decisions, laws that must be passed or revoked or amended, regulations that must be enforced. A few months after I accepted the royal collar, I toyed with the idea of having a balladeer put that thought into poetry. Heroic triplets, perhaps, to make the listener's pulse race while at the same time hearing that a good emir isn't one who leads troops into battle, duels with evil magicians, or trades his eyesight for a spell to cure the blight that has fallen on his people's lentils. A *good* emir is one who negotiates a border settlement so that a battle is unnecessary. Who talks politely to magicians instead of picking fights with them. Who hires an expert in irrigation and the diseases of crops when the lentil blight first appears, turns her recommendations into laws, and sees that those laws are enforced so that the blight never takes hold. *That* is good governance. And it even works as a heroic triplet. "That is good governance."

I never did it, of course. I can imagine the jokes people would tell, the parodies they would compose...the respect they would no longer have. How could anyone respect an emir who was so earnest and so dull as to commission an epic poem about lentil blight? I would have been in stitches myself, back when I did Lady Kembe's bidding.

I was half in love with her, of course. I think most of us were. She was a legend, but she also knew more scandalous limericks than anyone I ever met, and she laughed like a Darpani, a full-out belly-breaking laugh that made you laugh along. After eight months and three small jobs, I was half drunk on the secret history of the world, on the stories beneath the stories. Foul plots that had to be foiled, lost treasures that damn well ought to stay lost... I felt as I had when I was a child and my father let me stand backstage so I could see how plays were really made.

I thought a lot about Lady Kembe when the royal collar told my mother that I should be her successor. I thought about her every day in the first year I wore it. What should I do about the ghost that was terrorizing the city's silver workers? Should I believe what the Chaghan ambassador told me about Gandan's plans to interfere with the succession in

Lhabde? But each time I thought about asking her, the collar whispered, *Who would trust a witch's fetch?*

Bah for the third time, and three times is two more than I have time for. Contrary to popular belief, the royal collar does not force its wearer to act honorably. It just reminds you, constantly, what needs to be done. I throw back my cotton sheet, step into my favorite cork-soled slippers, shrug on my morning coat, and bellow for coffee. The sun will be up in an hour, and I have work to do.

Coffee catches up with me in my study as I read the summaries that my ministers' clerks have prepared overnight. The first says that a long-simmering clan war in southeastern Darp is threatening to catch fire once again. If it does, the Darpani here in the city will probably start taking knives to each other. Will I authorize extra guard patrols east of Charcoal Square, and pre-emptive arrests of likely ringleaders? I initial the top and bottom of the page to show I have read it all the way through, scribbled "yes" and "yes", and add it to the pile marked "Urgent". The label was my great-grandfather's joke---it is the only pile on the desk.

The second page tells me that the Ruudian pike-and-bow mercenaries I hired last year are were giving notice. The rising in Upuliaq has become a full-blown rebellion, and they are needed at home. I curse without any real feeling, make a note to have them paid in full, and add the page to the pile. I hoped they would stay long enough to train two companies of my own troops. Perhaps next year, or the year after.

The third summary is from the Ministry of Rumors. I sit back with a thimble of cold coffee in my hand. A handful of the Ruudian mercenaries can be persuaded to break their oaths and stay in Coriandel, if I want. It's tempting, but no---I might want to hire the whole company back again some day, and their captain is unlikely to feel kindly toward someone who steals his troops. Mm, and the Admiral Ascendant of Ini Bantang is discussing marriage with the son of---I didn't care. I scan the rest of the page. Gandan, Lhabde, the minor northern kingdoms... Ossisswe and the other cities to the south and west... It is as if a dozen different plays are being performed on the same stage at once.

I turn the page over and spit on it. The minister's other report slowly takes shape. These are the rumors I care about most, the rumors about my own government. Who is asking for larger bribes than custom allows? Who is sabotaging their colleagues' work in order to make themselves shine? Are my guard captains still trustworthy? The collar has to remind me every morning that yes, this is part of being a good ruler. Not a proud or pleasant part, but essential.

Something catches my eye halfway down the page. The sister-by-marriage of one of my senior clerks has been taken into custody. Her niece has run off with a bookster, and the loss appears to have driven her slightly mad. When arrested, she mentioned a spell going wrong, but she has refused to talk to anyone since. My minister (who seemed less troubled by the loss of his daughter than his sister-by-marriage) disclaims any knowledge of magic being worked in his household, but---yes. He's the one who had a wild oath sworn in his courtyard a few days ago by the duelist who snuck into the Tombs last night.

I scowl. I don't like the idea of wild magic in my city. I especially don't like it so close to one of my clerks, and I *especially* don't like coincidences.

The royal collar mutters in my ear. Something, something from years ago---it remembers, even if no one else in Coriandel does. I glance at the report again. The woman's name is Eleñima. I put my hand on the red string that hangs near my desk and pull it three times. Somewhere below me, a drum thumps. I set the report aside and pick up the next one.

I am halfway through cost estimates for reinforcing the city's eastern aqueduct when the door opens. "Eleñima," I say. "Supply clerk's sister-by-marriage. Must be twenty years ago."

"Your Grace," the page says. The door closes. I go back to my aqueduct.

The page brings me the report an hour and three thimbles of coffee later. Ah ha--- that is why the collar remembers. A Bantangui saloneer named Shau Sheu arrived in Coriandel just a few months after I took the throne. Rumors investigated her when Eleñima's brother-by-marriage was promoted, but found nothing suspicious.

I drum my fingers on my desk. It is time for some exercise. I pull the white string, then take the briefs I haven't scribbled on and feed them to the brass toad on the floor. Blue flame flashes. The toad belches a perfect smoke ring. As I stand and stretch, I reminded myself again to have it emptied.

Rumors is waiting for me at the top of the steps outside my study door. "Your Grace?" she asks.

"The woman arrested yesterday. Eleñima. Where is she?"

"Quiet Saints' Street, majesty."

"Have Leis brought here. And the Bantangui woman, Shau Sheu. Oh, and her housekeeper. Her whole household, in fact. No, wait." I stop and hold up my hand. "Just have her watched. But closely."

"Your Grace." She raises her palms to my back as I stride down the Autumn Hallway to my stables. I have a new horse to train, one of Sweet's many grandsons. He isn't Gifted, but he is coming along splendidly. Another year, and he will know every trick an ungifted mount can learn.

Long before then, though, I will have to give him away. The price of the spell on Coriandel's collar is that its wearers can never touch the ones they love. I knew that would mean Sweet. I only discovered later that one can love cats and trained monkeys too, and that it's almost impossible not to love a high-spirited colt. I wept then, as I wept when I sent Sweet away. There are days when I would give anything to be astride him again, up in the Brown Grass or on a trail through the Brumosos, but magic doesn't work like that. He would die on his way to me, or I would fall down a flight of stairs, or---no. Every spell has a price, and every price must be paid.

An hour in the riding yard. Ten minutes to bathe and tie my thinning hair back. Five minutes for bread, cheese, and some sharp Gandan-o cider, and another five minutes to put on a formal black ankle-length trousers, a sleeveless brocade jacket that shows off the rank tattoos on my arms, and a white silk turban pinned with a ruby the size of a wine grape. "Have her brought to the Afternoon Throne Room," I order. It is underground, lit only by globes of dayglass. I have the pages cover all but two of them, so the room swims with

shadows. My aunt kept a skull on the table, just to add to the atmosphere, but I haven't ever found that necessary.

I needn't even have doused the lights. Eleñima is already terrified by the time they bring her to me. Does she think I am going to behead her right then and there? "Oh, mercy, mercy!" she cries. She actually falls to her knees---I always felt uncomfortable when people do that.

I slouch with my elbow on one arm of the throne and my chin in my hand. "Do you deserve it?" I ask.

Tears well up in her eyes. "No," she blubbers. "No, but it wasn't my idea. I swear, she was the one who suggested it. I just..." Whatever she is trying to say is lost in her sobs.

Now who was "she"? Her niece? Or the Bantangui woman? Let her tell me. "So we should arrest her too, should we?"

"Yes. Yes!" she hisses. "She lied to me! I just had to be patient, that's what she said, but she lied to me. After everything I did for her. Why, she'd be a pauper right now if it wasn't for me."

"Mm. And how much did you give her?"

"Everything," she says bitterly. "Every receipt, every letter, everything." Suddenly she giggles, a sound I would really rather not have heard. "I should have made things up. That's what I should have done. I should have made things up, just like she did. Let her grubby merchanteer friends bankrupt themselves." Her tears start again.

Every receipt, every letter... I sit up straight. My Minister of Rumors stands in the shadows behind the weeping woman, her hand finger-tapping orders on the arm of one of her pages. The grizzled old man nod and hurries away. "How long, Eleñima?" I ask gently. "How long has she been pretending to be your friend?"

"Years." She wipes her eyes and then giggles again. "Years and years and years. Half my life. Wasted!"

The royal collar is whispering to me, but I am too angry to hear it. If the Bantangui have been reading over my Minister of Supply's shoulder for that long...

I stand. "Take her away," I order crisply. "My ministers to me in fifteen minutes. And coffee---lots of coffee."

Pages hurry away in all directions. "And uncover the damn lights! It's too weeping dark in here." I start pacing. If the woman wasn't mad, we could dip her in misinformation and let the Bantangui lick it off one lie at a time for the next ten years. As it was, we will have to do something less elegant. Doors will be kicked down, fragile mind-destroying poisons administered... My Minister of Rumors will be busy for a week.

Saints and their sins, but I hate this shadow-play. I want a sword in my hand and something in front of me to hack at. For the ten thousandth time, I wish that I could ask Lady Kembe for help. And for the ten thousandth time, I sigh as the collar reminds me why I can't.

Now: Cup Rainbow Reaching's Farewell

I do not know how long it took me to gather myself. Months? Years? Did I wander thoughtless, or was there not an 'I' at all? I do not remember. Perhaps that is normal when one dies. Perhaps it is best. I do not know.

And I do not know how I learned to do the things that ghosts can do, any more than I know how I learned to breathe or walk as a child. There were places I could go, and places I could not. There were things I could hear and see, while other things were hidden.

I could certainly see the thing in the pool that ate me. Like it, I practiced stillness and patience. There were things in that place that could eat ghosts. I watched the strange tree that grew on the dam stairs put forth strange, bulbous fruit from which many-legged things with sharp teeth hatched. I watched them scurry about, speaking to themselves. Cautiously, like a young boy creeping up on a grass hen, I nudged them to move my bones closer to the Moonset Door. Instead, they carried them up to the tree that had birthed them. I would have wept with frustration if I had eyes.

And then the Karabandi returned. His companion's blood oath was a sour sparkling itch, and the spell on his boots was---it was not a spell. I did not know what it was, but I became clearer, stronger, as if a long fever had broken. For the first time in years, I dare to hope.

I follow the young man through the first door. I try to speak to him, but he doesn't understand. I stay with him, though. He has to survive to reach the pool.

When the *iyemnelili* begins to stalk him, I go to him again. I do not know how I know how to give him my memory of the first one's lair. I just do it.

I go back to look for the Karabandi then. He hears me. He takes my spear and my skull and begins the slow, bruising journey to the bottom of the stairs.

I drag myself down to where the thing that ate me slumbers. Its dreams are nothing I can describe: motion sensed in darkness and dying things struggling in its jaws and beneath it all, elegant figures dancing on stately barges that drifted gently under the light of an untarnished moon. I kick and pull at its imaginings, stirring them as you would stir up a muddy pond with a stick to make frogs jump. As it rouses itself I withdraw and flee back to

the surface. Being trapped in that creature's dreams would make everything else that has happened to me seem like a blessing.

When the younger man's head breaks the surface, the Karabandi yells, "Swim, damn you, swim!" and dives into the pool with my spear in his hands, driving it into the thing rising behind his friend. It screams.

The young man scrambles out of the water. The Karabandi splashes back to the edge. The thing in the pool screams again and stretches out a tentacle and grabbed hold of his boot---

---and there is a flash like the first edge of the sun coming over the horizon at dawn and the scent of young grass brushed its fingers across the hairs on my arms and whatever was in the boots wakes up and sings, it *sings*, love and remembrance and joy so much joy I am a leaf and it is a storm it is home home home after so long so long away.

The two men struggling in front of me cannot hear it cannot feel it. All they know is that the creature in the pool has paused for a moment.

Soft blue-white light gleams behind them. The Moonrise Door is opening.

The young man curses and drags the Karabandi up onto to stone. The Karabandi curses back---his companion and his broken ankle and the darkness and the Pilots themselves. The young man pull him to his feet. "I've got you," he says, slinging his pack over one shoulder and putting the Karabandi's arm around his neck.

"Wait! Stop! Don't leave it here!" The Karabandi twists in his arms.

"What?"

"The skull!" the Karabandi says frantically. "Get the skull, damn it!"

The young man spits out an oath. He bends his knees so the Karabandi can grab my skull. "Happy now?" he gasps as he stumbles toward the door.

We fall through it into moonlight and the scent of sand and acacia blossoms on the breeze. We are in a garden. We are under the sky. I have escaped. Name of all names, I have escaped.

A squad of guardsmen stand there with a middle-aged woman who smells of magic in their midst. They bring their weapons to the ready as the young man falls to his knees

and drops the Karabandi on the stones. As the door fades away behind us the magician says, "Wait! There's something with them."

"Cup," the Karabandi gasps. He holds up my skull. "His name was Cup."

The magician takes it from him and closes her eyes. A light touch brushes across me. "No it wasn't," she says after a moment. "But never mind. He's gone now."

I'm not, not quite, but I feel myself unraveling even as she speaks. They will say words over my skull and then burn it, but that will be a formality. No one knows my name. I will be born again.

One last thing. One last gift, before I am free of giving and getting. I nudge the boy softly. He glances up at the sky and sees a single cloud on its way north to Gandan.

"What...?" he says as his oath fades, fades, and is gone. He has slain the monster and seen the girl free from her prison. This story is as over as any ever can be.

Later: A Conversation in a Palace

Ishad hobbled away between two guardsmen to get his ankle splinted. The magician put her hand on my chest. "Better?" she asked.

I nodded. The itch was gone. That felt like something I ought to celebrate, but I was bone-tired and sopping wet, and---saints, what the hell was I going to tell Sehdie? And what in the doubled hells with hot sauce was I going to say to Tessor?

I raised my palms. "Yes, thank you. I am honored that---"

She took her hand from my chest. "Save your honor, boy, that's someone else's job. He's safe." The last was directed to the guardsman standing at my elbow. He nodded.

"What's going to---" I started, but she was already walking away.

"Come on," the guardsman said. "Captain's going to want to talk to you."

"Wait! I have to tell my mother. And---and my girl."

"Nope," he said sympathetically. "Right now, the only thing you have to do is come with me, because the captain wants to talk to you."

They gave me bread and cheese, and a clean bucket for the necessities, and locked the door behind them.

At least I could see the sky. It was a perfect dawn blue, as if someone had just applied a fresh coat of lacquer to it. I ate what they'd left me, used the bucket, and then lay there with my arms pillowing my head and rehearsed a hundred awful opening lines.

The sky was still the same perfect blue when I woke up. "Mmph?"

The guard nudged me again with his boot. "They'll see you now."

The walls were tiled in elaborate blue and white patterns. The ceilings were whitewashed, just like those in every house in Coriandel. We passed clerks, jurists, a housemaid, and a Gifted camel wearing oversized spectacles. None of them gave us a second glance. Maybe if I'd been wearing a really nice pair of gloves...

We rounded a corner into magnificence. The walls here weren't tiled. They were covered in dark wooden panels inlaid with malachite and mother-of-pearl. Brass dayglass lanterns as yellow as the sun shone in place of windows.

Oh, and there was a throne. I knew it was a throne because it looked just like one. And the man sitting in it, ignoring the coffee steaming on the little table at his elbow while he cracked pistachios? He looked just like the emir.

I knew this story. I'd heard Ishad tell it a hundred times. Ten strides from the throne I dropped to my knees, bowed my head, and raised my arms, wrists crossed.

The guard to my left cleared his throat. "You'll, um, you'll be wantin' t' stand up, lad. We don' do it that way t' more."

I looked up. The emir tossed a nut into his mouth and dropped the shell on the floor beside his throne. "Yes, sir." I rose as smoothly as I could, my cheeks burning.

"So." The emir picked up another pistachio. *Crack. Toss. Click-click* as the shell bounced across the floor. "You made it."

"Yes, Your Grace." I kept my head down.

"And your companion got through as well, I hear." He cocked his head to one side a moment. "That's his second time, isn't it?"

Well, technically, he didn't actually go into the Tombs themselves this time. He found another way down to the pool and was there waiting for me when I came out. But all I said was, "Yes, Your Grace."

"Hm. Brave man. Are you a brave man too?"

Twelve hours earlier I would have said yes, but that was before the bridge. "Depends, Your Grace."

"Oh?" He steepled his fingers under his chin, frowning as if trying to place my face. "On what?"

I shrugged. "I don't run from fights, Your Grace, but I'm not sure that's the same thing as being brave."

He picked up another pistachio. "Not it isn't," he said softly, his mind obviously elsewhere.

Soft-soled shoes scuffed the stones behind me. The emir straightened up. "Well? Do you have the Bantangui woman?"

"No, Your Grace." I didn't turn to look at the speaker. "The madwoman's houseman went to her seeking help for his mistress. She and her maid chose poison."

"Of course they did." The prince sighed. "Do what you need to, then prepare their bodies with all honors. We'll make a gift of them for the ambassador."

"Your Grace." Soft steps receded. What had that all been about? Nothing to do with me, whatever it was. Madwomen and Bantangui taking poison---that was someone else's story.

The emir sat brooding on his throne. One tiddle tum tum, two tiddle tum tum... At twenty, I cleared my throat. The guard on my right elbowed me, but the emir looked up. "What? Oh, yes. You're free to go." He waved a hand. "Royal leniency, lucky this time, have your eyes if you ever do it again, et cetera. You'll want to check in on your teacher, I imagine."

"Yes, Your Grace. Thank you."

He waved his hand again. Taking that as their cue, the guards saluted. Taking that as mine, I bowed my head and turned to go.

"Wait."

I paused. The emir held up a small bag. "Do you still like pistachios?"

Still? I shrugged. "Yes, Your Grace. Loved 'em as a kid."

"Good." He knotted the bag and tossed it to me. "I find I have more than I can eat today, and it would be a shame to let them go to the hogs."

I stared at him for a moment. Where had I heard that before? "Thank you, Your Grace."

I bowed and followed the guards out of the audience chamber. It must have been in one of Ishad's stories, or in one of the books Kerrem read to me when we were young. Whatever---it too was probably someone else's story.

The guards showed me to the courtyard. I took a deep breath. I'd made it. I really had. Grinning, I tossed the bag into the air and caught it. The knot the emir had tied came undone. Dozens of tiny nuts fell to the floor, bouncing away in every direction. A trio of

children walking past on their way to class or to chores scampered after them, each one their own story.