

Beneath Coriandel

by Greg Wilson

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ISBN:

For Sadie

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Ishad's Onions

It's hard to know sometimes where a story actually starts. You can say, "Once upon a time there was a young man," but he didn't just appear out of nothing. He must have grown up somewhere—why not start with who his parents were? Or how his village was founded? Or that crafty old magician he saves from pirates—how'd she wind up in a little boat all on her own out in the middle of the ocean? And if you're going to tell her story, what about the pirates? They must have had families and childhoods and all. Hell, the hero's boots probably have a story too if you only knew how to ask them.

I guess that's why stories always start, "Once upon a time." It's like the first dab of paint when you're doing a portrait, or the first onion when you're making a stew. It doesn't necessarily mean it's the most important—it's just where you're going to start.

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 on, you could stand at the Ordinary Gate of the palace from dawn to dusk in full uniform and get nothing more than pity.

So I found other employment, or it found me. It was exciting stuff, and gave me a chance to travel, but was all very much a pay-as-you-go proposition, and didn't leave any weight in my purse for long. The third time I had to quit lodgings by the back door, I decided to shuck it in and find something better.

What I found instead was a saddle for my backside to polish driving cattle from Darp down to Coriandel. It was restful work at first, 'specially after some of the else I'd been doing. Thieves, lions, an occasional gargoyle—it all seemed a fair trade for fresh tortillas every morning and a two-hour watch every night.

But then that damn stupid calf went and got itself lost. Just past where the trail splits for Dry Weeping there's a stretch of ground that's littered with bits of carving all jumbled together. It was Pilots' work, a statue garden or something stranger, all fallen to pieces. The trail only cuts across a corner, but that's still two gallops of broken arms and fallen branches, all cracked and weathered and never quite the same from one trip to the next.

We came through it in the middle of the season, and I guess we'd gone a little head-lazy. When evening came round, the caravaner counted horns by twos like always. All of a sudden she started squalling about how

there was a calf missing, one of her prize calves, though if you listened to her they were all prize. 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 hundred strides off the trail. The calf was standing on the edge, worried enough about being that far from its mother that it wasn't taking that last step, but still listening to whatever it is sand misers say to cows. All I heard was whispering about fresh water and fresher women, so I threw a couple of rocks into the pit to break the damned thing's concentration and grabbed the calf to drag it back to the herd. Wouldn't you know, it kicked me in the jaw. My own idiot fault for letting it, but still, that's gratitude for you.

If it had been the caravaneer's first drive down from the Black Grass, she probably would 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 enough, 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 trek. I should have been happy—the city was still celebrating the new emir's coronation, and I had a string of silver in my pocket. On the other hand, mending that tooth was going to eat half of it, and then where would I be? Right back where I'd started. Three months of hard work—three dry, dusty months in the saddle—and I was right back where I'd puking well started.

My second onion is the damn caravaneer deciding that I couldn't keep the horse I'd been riding. She wasn't anything special, but she had decent hindquarters, and, well, time was you rode a horse the whole way down from Darp, you could fairly expect people to consider it yours.

Not this time. "A horse?" says the caravaneer, smiling like something a sand miser would put in a young boy's head. "There was no conversation about a horse. But this, you may have this." And she points at a nag that even a Thindi wouldn't have ridden. No idea where she found it—it certainly hadn't done the trek with us—but one of her nephews had already put my saddle on it, and three more of them were standing close by in case I made a fuss.

I didn't live through Armaq by being stupid. I smiled right back at her, 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, right there, the most beautiful horses you've ever seen, being led into a little paddock right next to the guard post at the Market Gate. Twin mares—twins, mind you—and a stallion, all sired by the old emire's champion. Take my eyes if I'm lying, they were something the Pilots might have made, and they both had white ribbons braided into their manes.

Folk around me were staring open-mouthed, and I'm not ashamed to say I did too. Two of the Black Grass Darpani who'd been riding with us even gave them a full honor, on their knees with their foreheads in the dirt. The shoulders they had, and the way they walked, all high-necked and proud... I hadn't seen their equal since what the emir of Armaq rode out on to his hanging.

I joined the crowd growing by 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, wool trousers that came halfway up to their ribs, and heavy sandals. The only sign that they weren't going to turn around and start back to Darp right away was that they'd braided their hair instead of just tying it back.

They were brothers, maybe, or cousins, or something we don't have a word for—you can't mind the Darpani when it comes to family. We'd gotten to know each other at arm's length, 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, then get some food," I mumbled around the swelling. "You two have plans?" Turned out they didn't—probably weren't even really sure how to go about getting a meal in the big city—so I told them how to find me and left them eyeing their new-found loves.

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

Tell you the truth I felt a bit like a kitten running between someone's legs going through the gate. Coriandel's not much once you've seen Haricot or Amprakash, but it was as busy as an anthill that morning. There were cattle drovers down from the high plains 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 pay it no mind now, but after five months with nothing but grass and the back ends of cows to look at it, the commotion half made me drunk. And after nothing but wood smoke and meat roasting and a whiff of patchouli off the Darpani, it stank.

The strangest part was being among buildings again. They use brick in Coriandel, then paint it 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 building 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 Jewel Of The Karaband." No one I've ever met knows whether it's part of an old spell or just for looking pretty, but they keep it as it is just in case.

I found the doctress I knew three streets along from the market. She was a little cargo-caste Bantangui woman with her hair up in a turban and twisting designs painted on the backs of her hands with henna. She gave me poppy in wine to keep me still, then dug the broken root of the tooth out of my jaw with a lot more arm than you'd guess someone her size would have. It hurt like hell, even with the poppy, but it was still better than having the tooth fester.

Once she had the tooth out I took myself along to the little bake-and-stew next door. I couldn't hardly taste my food, what with blood in my mouth and being dizzy from the poppy, but the stewed apricots and mushy rice were all I could manage until my jaw healed up a bit.

I had gulped down half the plate when the Darpani came in. They stood there until I pointed at the chairs across the table from me. When the old soldier who ran the place came to ask them what they wanted, they both looked at me. "Same as me," 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. "There is money," he said, sounding just a bit testy.

"Yeah, well, this one's my dig. Here." I pushed the bottle I'd bought over to him. "Wash away the dust."

And so we got to talking, and just like that, my onions were stewed. Some of it was the drink and the poppy, I won't argue that, 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 that look soldiers get when they've lost so many friends that they're lost as well. Never did find out...

But however it was, by the time the first bottle was done we had decided to ride those horses. Their white mane ribbons meant no one ever had, and it's powerful luck, being the first up on a horse like that—the kind of luck that's the Darpani and I needed.

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 Darpani can sit for hours and just listen, and me because the poppy had finally caught up with me. The locals talked mostly about the coronation a month before, and who was beating who in the *umram*, and about a bonescuttle that had come up from the Tombs below the city and was taking beggars off the street. It had torn up a couple of guardsmen too, one man said, and I winced. They're smart as well as ugly, bonescuttles, and the poison in their tails burns 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 haggled a bit, but she could tell I'd pay extra for a bit of forgetfulness, so I left with what I needed in my purse and nothing else.

I got back to the paddock just as the palace drums beat 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 gear and chewing on 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, four. The newcomer was ten years old, maybe more. He was heavy around the shoulders, with a scar on his rump, and definitely not gelded. I hunkered down on my haunches beside the Darpani and raised my eyebrows.

Cup pursed his lips. "A war mount," he said quietly. "From the Green Grass, but away many years. There have been many battles, but it 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 anyone who rides a horse like that is someone I'd rather not meet on business."

Cup shrugged again, not caring or just not caring. I wiped my hands on my trousers. "Keep an eye out. 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 any one person has a right to. Letting the cattle get a smell of you before you sign on, for example, that just makes sense. And not letting Hett travel with the caravan—everyone knows they're cursed.

But every caravaneer I ever traveled with had a different notion about what to do with you when your hire was done. Some didn'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 wanted you out of the way as soon as possible, on the principle that the most dangerous thief was the man who had set the traps.

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 (that man couldn't tie his own bootlaces without asking her something), 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 throbbing, and I felt squeamish from the blood I'd swallowed and what I'd been drinking, but it only took mew a few minutes to slip under the waves and start snoring. After the night raids and fire wights at Armaq, I could probably sleep through the Pilots' Return.

Strap woke me by pinching my toe. I'd laid my poncho over myself like a blanket instead of wrapping myself up in it, so I slipped it off without making any sound.

The horses were standing together at one end of the paddock, the three beauties in a clump with the old warhorse a few strides away. Two guards had been set to watch them, but were both in that not-really-here frame of mind you fall into when it's the middle of the night and drifting a bit has never meant waking up dead.

I soaked a couple of rags in what the doctress had given me. Cup and Strap each took one and faded into the night. I gave them a moment, then walked over to the guards with a smile on my face. This and that and a bit of the other, and the Darpani were lowering them to the ground, sound asleep.

We waited a heartbeat to make sure they'd stay that way. Strap kept an eye on them while Cup and I crept forward to the fence. The two mares were right there, head to tail, just out of reach. I was about to slip under the fence when the warhorse ambled over. He was a big fellow, gray with a black sock and a black dapple under his right eye.

"Sh," Cup hushed softly. "Sh, sh, sh. Nothing for you here, friend to the world. Nothing for you here." I kept my mouth shut—if it's horses, it's best left to a Darpani.

The stallion looked at him with big brown eyes. “Sh...” Cup soothed. “To be at peace, friend, companion. To find no cause for alarm here. No lions, no fire, no cause for alarm. To be at peace.”

The gray nodded its head, then shook itself, turned, and ambled back to the center of the paddock. Cup looked at me. I couldn’t see his mouth, but I could tell he was grinning. I grinned back. We slipped over the fence—

—and then the warhorse shouted, “Guards! Guards!” and as the Darpani would say, we were well and truly roasted.

Sweet in the Corral

...and they were well and truly roasted. Their lookout made to bolt, but the *real* guards up on the roof were on their feet by then, bows raised. The Karabandi, Ishad, didn't drop his knife until they put an arrow in the ground at his feet. I hope he could tell I was smiling at him.

My name is Sweet. It's not a horse name. Horses don't have their own language. Cats do, the Gifted ones, or so they claim. Of course, cats say all sorts, especially the big ones. I don't trust cats. They're shift.

I was born wild, somewhere up toward the high end of the Sprained River valley. Been away a lot longer than I was there, but magic me back with a blindfold on, and I'd know it from the smell of the 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 halters and hobbles in their hands. They split off a dozen of us, whooping and setting off firecrackers to drive us into a box wash with sides so steep we couldn't scramble out. Finger got a loop of rope around my neck and snagged the other end in a dwarf spruce. It just about took my head off when it went taut. I'd half-way bitten through it before she got a hobble around my ankles. I tried to bite her instead then, but she just laughed and danced away.

After we got to know each other, she told me that her band used half a dozen spots like that up and down the river for traps. Never the same one two years in a row, though, so the herd wouldn't learn they were dangerous. Humans make a big fuss about having thumbs and all, but I think the real reason they rule the world is that most of them can remember things like traps from one season to the next. Of course, that doesn't mean they always stay out of them.

Finger and her cousins sold the other horses they caught, but she kept me for herself because of my size. She thought I might have a little charger in my blood, maybe from a cavalry remount that wandered off during some war or other. She knew I was special right from the start because I learned so quickly. A week after she broke me to saddle, she could steer me with her knees. Two days after that, I knew all her whistles—kneel, back up, stand. Truth was, I liked learning. I'd been starving for it, not knowing that I hungered. And there she was, teaching me, and best of all, *talking* to me.

I don't know when her words started to join up in my head, but I do remember the first time I talked back. She had been trying to teach me to jump over a fire. I didn't want to, so I said, "No." That's what people said when they didn't want something, wasn't it? Finger was so surprised that she almost swallowed her tongue. Then she threw her arms around my neck and started crying. I remember being confused, and wondering what I'd done wrong.

After she wiped her eyes she took me to her ride chief. She tried for an hour to get me to say 'no' again, but I was so embarrassed by the commotion that I wouldn't until he offered me a crust of dried honey. Then I said, "Sweet." Everyone started to laugh. It was another full day before I would speak again. Kind of funny now, looking back on it, I suppose.

I met Oro five years later. Finger was dead by then. Wasn't riding me when it happened. Wouldn't have happened if she had been, but I was on my own on the other side of the herd getting a heavy-bellied cow back into line. A couple of hotheads from Smoke Rein Choking's band grasswhacked us, whooping and hollering, trying to stir up some confusion so they could steal a calf to brag over. One of them threw a bagful of bee burrs into the herd, and the whole mess stampeded. Finger and two others were trampled when their idiot ungifted mounts panicked.

I nearly broke a leg trying to get to her. It would have been the death of me if I'd fallen, but I wouldn't have minded. Not if it had bought her the half-dozen heartbeats she needed to get out of the way.

The pair who'd come thieving gave themselves up for slaves when they saw the funeral pyres. I held my temper a whole day before kicking one in the ribs and breaking the other's knee. A couple of days later I knocked over a cooking pot and splashed hot oil onto them.

That evening, the ride chief took me aside and told me that it might be an idea if I saw a bit of the world. It's bad manners to abuse a judgment slave, not to mention what he'd owe their families if I killed them after they'd turned themselves in. Truth was, I didn't mind the thought of leaving. Finger and I had talked endlessly about seeing the world. "Waves on the ocean," she'd say. "Waves on the ocean before we die." I figured I owed it to her to see them.

A week later, when one of the ride chief's nephews took salt with a caravan to Coriandel, I took my lick as well. As a scout, mind, not as a mount. No one but Finger had ever put a saddle on me. If I had stayed with the band, I doubt I would ever have worn one again.

As soon as we set out, I noticed this skinny Karabandi eyeing me. He wasn't being rude, but every time I looked over I caught him watching me. One evening I finally asked him if I was growing feathers. He laughed, apologized, said no, he was sorry, he was just trying to figure a polite way to ask me a question. "To still be in Darp?" I asked. He said yes. "Then to phrase it as an odd-stride trirain."

That shut him up. The Darpani aren't much for books—I still can't read, though I know my name when I see it. But poetry, that's grass, that's water, that's air and rain and the smell of honey to the Darpani. Stirrup rhymes and sondelays, half-lampoons and dirges—the Darpani know more ways to put words together 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 that didn't shut him up for long. Fifth day on the trail, evening meal, the whole troop around us, he came over to me, 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, I ask
How may best your rider serve you?*

I know it's nothing but words in Karabandi. You can't even tell it's odd-stride. But it isn't half bad in Darpani. It isn't 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. "To applaud," I said. "But to admit not knowing what someone is actually asking for." Which of course brought more laughter.

Well, it turned out that his name was Oro, and what he wanted was riding lessons. He was good in the saddle, I'd seen that, but he wasn't Darpani. Who better to teach him than a horse?

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

"To question whether assistance will be needed," I said haughtily. "Or how much assistance one of your station could offer." I had never seen a paved street, or a building more than two stories high, but I knew that Gifted animals were rare. I fancied myself the emire's parade mount, nothing less. I knew it would take me a while to meet people who knew the people who arranged such things, but I was sure I would get there eventually. He, on the other hand, looked like he hadn't 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. “To apologize for not having made a proper introduction,” he said, bowing slightly. “To be of the House of Iandel, its principal line.” I whinnied with surprise, which made him smile again. He was a damn emir-in-waiting of Coriandel.

We spent the next eight years together, driving cattle and carrying messages for people too cheap or too secretive to trust the post or magicians. We left a trail of pistachio shells behind us wherever we went. He couldn’t get enough of them—he didn’t drink much, and wasn’t a slave to coffee the way some humans were, but he’d go a week without meat for a bag of pistachios.

One of the messages we carried took us to Armaq, where we were trapped by the siege. Oro slept beside me every night for three long months with his sword in his hand. He used it too, more than once. Gifted or not, I would have been someone’s dinner if he hadn’t.

We managed to escape before Armaq fell, thanks to one of Lady Kembe’s agents. We saved his life, sort of, and somehow wound up doing her errands. It was mostly quiet work—help someone out a bit here, keep an eye on someone there—but what wasn’t quiet was bloody. Oro lost a couple of toes, and I got a piece taken out of my rump, and we both nearly had our souls stolen a couple of times.

Then Oro’s aunt decided it was time to retire and spend some time gardening. She summoned all of the in-waitings back to Coriandel and told them that the royal collar had made its choice. “You have been brave, and studious, and you have made beautiful things, each according to your nature,” she said. “You have made your city proud, all of you, but the collar can only be borne by one. Oro, you will wear it after me.”

Well, I had never heard him speak like he spoke to her that afternoon. He wasn’t yet thirty. It wasn’t fair. She had years left! Why couldn’t one of his sibs or cousins do it? Why couldn’t their uncle? He loved jurisprudence! And on, and on.

But he gave in eventually. The collar wouldn’t have picked him if he could have refused. “Duty,” she said, and that was that. It’s a hard word, even harder when someone says it to you as if you needed reminding.

His aunt relented a little in the end and gave him—us—two more years of freedom. We did so much in those years that I sometimes wondered if he was trying to get himself killed just to spite her. We tracked a wyrm to its lair in the Brumoso Mountains, drank moonlight on Year-Again Eve in

the Royal Palace of Ensworth... About the only place we didn't go was the Flying Mountain, and that was just because I don't like heights.

And yes, I finally got to see the ocean. Wave after wave, with the gulls overhead and that salt-fish smell in my nostrils... Horses can't cry, but we can mourn. I said a prayer for everything Finger never had a chance to see, then turned north and carried Oro to his duty.

Two years to the day, we were back in Coriandel. I was in his coronation parade, playing the parade mount I had once dreamed of being. I had gilt tassels in my mane, and a white linen ribbon around my neck to let the world know that I was a person, not just a beast.

The whole city turned out to cheer. They always cheer when someone new takes the throne. I sometimes wonder how it makes the one who's giving it up feel, but I guess most people don't dwell on that.

I was three paces behind him and a pace to his left when his aunt hung the royal collar of office around his neck. It looked like plain iron chain, no thicker than a strip of willow. 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 burst into tears when she took it off.

Oro didn't weep when she hung it round his neck. Some do, I'm told, but not him. He stood as straight and as proud as ever, but his back went stiff under the weight of the spell that kept Coriandel's emirs honest. His aunt and uncle bowed to him. Silk and linen rustled as the assembled nobles and dignitaries followed suit. As he settled onto the throne, his aunt turned and left the room with his uncle at her side, on their way to exile.

The new emir dealt with important matters first. He ordered the palace thieves to take a vacation, gave the markets a month's holiday from taxes, confirmed his aunt's ministers in their posts, and commissioned a coronation portrait to hang in the Long Hall. Every few moments he cocked his head to listen to a voice no one else could hear.

Then he called for me. I didn't kneel to him. He told me before the ceremony that he never wanted me to. But I did bow my head until he said, "Up, friend."

I heard a new weight in his voice. Some people say the royal collar makes its wearer's hair go white in an instant, but that's a lie. The changes are all inside. The Oro who did a handstand on my back in a courtyard in Ensworth to impress a girl he'd only just seen was gone.

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

He nodded and gestured at a lanky man standing a few strides away from me. "My Master of Stables tells me that I am sending four fine horses north to my peer the King in Seyferte. A wedding gift, I believe—two mares and a stallion, all out of Fleet Remembrance. It would please me if you would accompany them, and give my warm regards to my peer."

Exile. The new emir was tossing the old emir-in-waiting's disreputable companion away. "Of course, Your Highness," I said.

The corner of his mouth twitched when I gave him his proper title. "You would serve me also by remembering to His Majesty in Seyferte 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. Horses can't smile, but he knew what my ears were saying. "My life to serve you," I repeated.

I didn't 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 wouldn't understand. You can only see them through human eyes. The way they moved, the way their necks arched...

Oro's Master of Stables introduced me to my charges 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're smarter, even if they aren't smart enough themselves to know what "smart" actually means.

That's how I came to be in the paddock that afternoon when the Karabandi and the two Darpani were eyeing my wards. They would have known who I was if they'd been in the city long enough to hear stories, 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 didn't 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 bait was an old trick of Oro's, but putting the real guards on the roof was my idea.

And sure enough, not long past moonrise, the Karabandi's 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. “Nothing for you here, friend to the world. To find no cause for alarm here. No lions, no fire, no cause for alarm.”

No cause for alarm? Heh. I ambled back to the middle of the paddock, just in case they got any wild 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 ambuling over again. “To inquire,” I said to the first Darpani genially, “Whether there is now cause for alarm?”

He tried to rise. The guards pushed him back down onto his knees. “To be the cat that kisses the throats of your offspring one by one,” he spat.

I snorted and looked at the Karabandi. All of a sudden he laughed.

“What’s so funny?” I asked in Karabandi. He just shook his head.

The guards took them away, to the palace. I didn’t bother asking what would happen next. They had tried to steal from an emir—from *my* emir—and they deserved whatever punishment he chose for them. I went back to my post in the middle of the paddock and waited for sunrise.

Cup Rainbow Reaching Falls In With a Madman

The name of my name is Cup Rainbow Reaching. I was a coward once. 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 *lelosiñi*, 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 stripped.

We rode for two weeks to a place in the grass where Darpani and Karabandi meet to trade. The Karabandi had no names for their names. They needed riders to drive their bought cattle to market. They did not care that we were fugitives, so the bargain was quickly made.

Two months later, my mother's-side cousin and I knelt in fetters beside the Karabandi Ishad before the emir of Coriandel. I do not remember why we wanted to ride those horses so badly. I think we were drunk from despair as much as from wine. All those people, and the city, and our lives blown away from us like grass seeds in the wind. We might as easily have become monks or potters.

The emir was the Karabandi's age 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. He sat at a simple writing desk with a shelf of papers on his left and small windows set high in the wall behind his back. The room was paneled in dark wood carved with geometric reliefs. A fine latticework grille covered the window. Doves cooed outside.

Kneeling in front of him I could see that he wore house slippers 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 hardly a well-named act."

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, I suppose, but desperate times, Your Highness, 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 how life's treating the commoner, is it?"

Indeed, there was a silver tray of pomegranates on a small table at the emir's elbow, and music from a bass flute and oudh somewhere I could not see. What I could see full well was the emir's frown.

"And how is life treating the commoner?" he asked. His voice was still like a lion waiting to pounce is still.

"Oh, it's hard out there, Your Highness, harder than you know. Why, look at us. Two 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. Penniless I am, or near as. And it's not like my pension's going to help me."

"Your pension?"

The Karabandi nodded vigorously. "Armaq, Your Highness. Decorated twice. Not that anyone remembers that now. Disgraceful how gratitude evaporates, once people don't need you any more."

"Mm." The emir put his elbows on his desk and his chin on his steeped fingers. "And which side were you on, at Armaq?"

"I was in your mother's service, of course," the Karabandi said, as if affronted by the question. "Third Regiment Ordinary, start to finish."

"Mm." The emir nodded as if agreeing. "I was there too. Start to finish, as you say. With the Sadine Regiment. As was my companion-in-wandering, whom I believe you met last night."

"The Sadine? But they were—"

"Fighting for the Armaqi. Yes, I know. My mother was not pleased when she found out."

The guard behind me made a sound in his throat at that, just a small sound, but enough to earn a quick glance from the emir. Suddenly the Karabandi laughed, a true laugh, what the poets call a laugh of awakening.

The emir raised his eyebrows. "You are amused?"

The Karabandi nodded. "I— I— Oh, forgive me, m'lord, but like the Bantangui say, im awa pfa ta."

"Oh no, not this again?" the emir translated. The Karabandi kept chuckling.

“Well, I rejoice in your amusement,” the emir said dryly. “Now, as to the matter of sentencing. By nature, I am a lenient man. Being new to the royal collar, however, I am counseled to show sternness, and those horses are a gift to a fellow monarch. I am therefore instructing my Master of Juristry that only your right arms are to be flensed. 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 had a moment of clarity then, a moment in which I saw why Fate had brought us to this city and this lunatic Karabandi. The magic that takes skin whole from a living person to heal the wounds of another might have saved the man who died in the tent that my mother’s-side cousin and I set alight. We had run from judgment, only to find judgment waiting for us.

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?”

The Karabandi nodded. “Yup.”

“And why was that?”

“Because you cared more about playing by the rules than you did about winning.” He shifted his weight on the polished stone floor. “You were like one of those high-bred idiots that takes 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. Anything came along you didn’t recognize, you kicked it out of your way instead of asking yourself how you could use it. Gaaah. You deserved what you got.”

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 your lot could have done that you didn’t. And a lot you didn’t do that you should have. You played it too cautious, start to finish. Never took any chances. An army doesn’t take any chances, it’s bound to lose the battle. An emir doesn’t take any chances, well...” The Karabandi shrugged expressively.

It was a dangerous game. The emir knew full well he was being played, and 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, again, I did not.

“Now take us, for example,” the Karabandi continued, rushing his words as the emir opened his mouth to speak. “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, m’lord,” the Karabandi said earnestly. “We did no harm. Not for lack of trying, I admit, but we actually did naught. Let us earn it out.”

“Healing the worthy wounded seems a fair way to me to ‘earn it out,’” the emir observed. “In fact, two of my mother’s—of my guards could use your assistance even now.”

“Ah.” The Karabandi nodded wisely. “These’d be the two that the bonescuttle carved up?”

I have met madmen. Many grass throwers are mad, or make themselves mad in order to gain power. The Karabandi’s madness was new to me. Bonescuttles are *iyemnelili*, mis-made and evil. Better an arm off than dealing with such. Even the Karabandi must have known that.

But no, he was still talking, curse his name and memory. “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 took the collar. Not much for luck, that. Probably go down well in the market, you giving some down-and-outs a chance to make amends by sorting that out for you. And of course, you showing mercy on them afterwards, kind of a thank-you for their good deed, well...” He shrugged.

The emir steepled his fingers again. A faint smile played across his lips. “Are you seriously proposing that I send you and your companions to destroy this creature, and then set you free?”

“No, no,” The Karabandi shook his head. “You’ve heard every word I’ve said, and I never said that, did I? 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. You tried to be my horses’ first riders. 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.”

“To not flee.” My mother’s-side cousin spoke. I will not curse him for it, though I will not wish his memory well for it either.

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 flee again?”

“To not flee,” my mother’s-side cousin repeated firmly. “To be done with flight.”

“Mm.” The emir drummed the desk with his fingers in time with the music. Suddenly he nodded. “Very well. But I can’t afford a dozen men 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, 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 counsel you on the nature and ways of that which lies beneath us. If you kill the bonescuttle, you may keep your skins. If not...” He shrugged slightly. “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. “M’lord, 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 of his companions at such a time. Perhaps it was *innetene’* a moment that reveals a man’s soul. Whatever it was, it angered the emir. “Do not presume to 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 tip of one finger, then bent his head to his papers and waved a hand at our guards.

The guards took us by our collars and led us away like calves to branding. The Tombs... The Darpani know that the world will eventually be worn away by the rivers and the rain. The emptiness that will be left will not be hell. It will just be...what comes after everything else is done.

No, hell is a place with no sky, no breeze, no sweet grass and no fresh water. Hell is dark and full of mis-made things. Hell is the Tombs of Coriandel.

The guards took us back to the prison yard where we had spent the night. 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 my mother's-side cousin or me. 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—guards! Guards!" he cried. 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 actually know much more about the Tombs than any street-corner story teller," 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 Fate's 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 should 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. "No one knows what wanders around down there between moonset and moonrise, but that's because no one's ever survived to talk about it. Smells like you'll have enough in your bowl without trying to be the first."

"Thank you, mother," the Karabandi said as she stood. "If you see Master Armiger, 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 song is as long as it is. Evening comes at sundown, every day. Chewing on fingernails and muttering under your breath does not make these things happen sooner. It was a pity the Karabandi did not know this.

One of the emir's servants 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 an armload of 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 is galloping, you ride it. 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 gleams at mid-day. It can be seen from dozens of gallops away, long before the rest of the city.

The second is called the Hundred Houses Hill. Nobles and wealthy merchants live there, flank-by-flank with the emir's ministers and ambassadors from far-off 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 the outflow. Somehow the bonescuttle 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 hill. Children paused their games for a moment to watch us pass. Their mothers stood with folded arms, scowling at the guardsmen who marched beside us. Then we were past the buildings and into the dusty ruins left behind by the Pilots.

A small crowd had followed in our wake to the steps that led down into the Tombs. As the emir's 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 the trapped daylight for real need. Down and down, to a passage as wide as a street beneath an arched roof. The air smelled wet. I heard water ahead.

They are a wonder, the tunnels beneath Coriandel. They were ancient, and had seen much. I could tell that even when I was alive.

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 sat in the stern to bring the boat back. A gentle current carried us into a narrow passage whose walls glistened damply. Small things splashed in the water. Once, something too quick to see flapped overhead. I sat and watched the Karabandi row.

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

They waited until the walls began to glow before leaving us. 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.

Vurt at the Moonrise Door

“I didn’t kill it, you know.”

“What?”

“I said, I didn’t kill it.” Ishad sculled a stroke to get the rowboat round a corner, his eyes on the tunnel wall so he wouldn’t have to meet my disbelieving stare. “One of the Darpani did. At least, 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 was our only light. Its yellow light glistened on Ishad’s bald head, and on the damp stone beside us. I had another one in my pack, but I wanted to save the light. “What do you mean, you didn’t kill it?”

He rubbed 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—frogs 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 nodded as if agreeing with something I’d said, then rubbed his nose against his shoulder again. The motion made our little stolen boat bob up and down slightly. “Though I couldn’t argue with ‘exaggerating’. ‘Exaggerating’ would be fair. Anyway, it’s really sort of your fault.”

“Mine!?” There I was, on my way into the Tombs to kill a bonescuttle just like he had twenty years before, only to discover that he hadn’t, and I was squawking like a parrot. If the idiotic oath I’d sworn hadn’t been nagging me, and if I hadn’t known exactly how quickly he could move, I would have whacked him with our spare oar.

“Yup.” Ishad pulled on the oars. “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’d done the killing. But then you came along. You wanted to hear about it every time your mother brought you over. Kicked up a mayhem fit to wake the dead if I wouldn’t tell you the story.” He chuckled. “I sort of turned it into a fairy tale, telling it to you that way. You even used to dress up for it, remember? Put a stew pot on your head for a helmet, waved a shinbone around for a sword...”

“Mind your head,” I said automatically.

“Thanks.” He ducked a low-hanging bulge of the tunnel roof.

My hands tightened on the haft of the spear that lay across my knees beside the lantern. It wouldn't have been much use if the things that lived in the water took a fancy to us, but having it ready eased the itch that made me want to scratch the inside of my head with my fingernails. A bit, anyway.

The worst part was, I should have expected him to say something like that. After all, he'd been playing that particular trick on me since our very first lesson. I'd be practicing a new step or parry, and bap, he'd throw in some goat-crazy twist as if it was as normal as dates for breakfast. And then, when it was all over, he'd say, "Huh. You know, the last fellow who tried that lost an ear."

"So what about all the passes you've had me practicing for the last four days?" I asked. I could hear the anger bubbling in my voice. "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 passes," he said firmly. "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."

"Sacking hells, Ishad, spare me the platitudes!" I thumped the butt of my spear against the gunwale in frustration.

"Keep your voice down!" he whispered loudly, scowling. "There's worse things than it down here, you know."

I spat into the bottom of the boat, but swallowed what I'd been about to say. The Tombs beneath Coriandel were filled with leftover Pilot magic. All manner of things lived down there in one fashion or another. From time to time the gleaners who scoured the canals near Tombs Hill found things in the water: tentacles hanging from bat wings, skulls with fingers where the eyes should be, pale worms as thick as my arm that sizzled and smoked in the sunlight.

"So why are you telling me this now?" I asked to take my mind off some of the pictures Kerrem had shown me.

He shrugged without missing a stroke. "Want you out of this alive, I guess."

"You guess?"

The bitterness in my voice made him glance up. "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'll most likely wind up dead. You go in there knowing you don't know anything, you might come out alive. Maybe."

He rowed on while I digested that.

The tunnel's roof rose into the darkness above us, the channel between its rough-hewn walls growing wider and wider. I could tell we were getting closer to the door—the oath-itch inside my skull was down to a dull scratch. “So how did he kill it?” I asked. “The Darpani, I mean.”

Ishad shrugged. “Put a spear in its neck. Not that they really have necks, but on the underside, here, the plates don’t quite overlap. He got his spear in there. I figure it’s your best bet, too. Get it to lunge at you, then go up and underneath. Better odds than going up against its claws with a sword.” He sounded like he was trying to convince himself as much as me.

Sloosh, sloosh, sloosh went the oars. Something glooped in the water behind us. I twisted around but couldn’t see anything. Being sent into the Tombs was technically a death sentence under Coriandi law. Hells, people given that sentence sometimes pleaded to be beheaded instead, thinking it would be cleaner and faster. Me, I volunteered...

Which reminded me... I slipped my hand under my leathers and pulled out the letter I had written that morning. “Here—can you give this to Sehdie?”

Ishad snorted. “Don’t be daft. Give it to her yourself.”

I didn’t lower my hand. “I can’t.”

He stopped rowing for a moment. “Why not?”

I shrugged. “It might get wet.”

The corner of his mouth quirked up. He plucked the letter from my hand and tucked it into the top of his boot. “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 sounded like a petulant child, but my oath was driving me mad. It was like a sneeze that wouldn’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 scraped against stone. Ishad rowed two more strokes, then pulled in the oars and twisted around to check our course. “Almost there. You wait ’til she’s steady before you get out.”

I nodded. There was a full stride of open water between our boat and the tunnel walls. The ceiling was lost in the darkness over our heads. The lantern painted the ripples on the water with shimmering silver. Something dripped, patiently and steadily. The Darpani believe that water will wear the world down to nothing one day, so the Last Man will fall endlessly through the void. At that moment, deep underground, I understood how He would feel when that time came.

And then the walls curved away to create a cavern as big as the *umram* and I saw the Moonrise Stairs. They climbed straight out of the water, ten strides broad at the bottom, narrowing as they rose so that the top step was barely wide enough for two booted feet. Nothing held them in place – they just *were*.

The boat bumped to a halt against a submerged step. Looking over the side, I saw the stairs continue down into the depths below us. Ishad sculled to turn the boat sideways before pulling in the oars and hopping out onto the bottom step with the bow line in his hand. “Careful,” he said, gripping the gunwale with his other hand.

“I’ll be careful.” I handed him my spear, then my sword and pack, then stood unsteadily.

“Keep your weight low.”

“I’ve got it,” I muttered, irritated. There weren’t more than a couple of dozen people in Coriandel who could beat me in a fair fight on level ground, but I had never been in a boat before—you could ride a little raft on the canal for a copper bezel or two on holidays, but I’d never bothered. The damn thing twitched from side to side each time I took a step like a horse trying to shy a fly away. It seemed like a very fragile way to get from one place to another.

Still, I shook Ishad off when he reached out to steady me as I clambered over the gunwale. I shrugged my pack onto my shoulders and buckled my sword around my waist. “Must be pretty close to moonrise.”

He nodded as he handed me my spear. “Must be.”

“I should get going.”

He nodded again. “You should.” He punched my chest lightly. “You keep your wits down there, all right? Remember, I got through, and I’m not half as smart as you. Just—”

“I’ll be all right,” I said brusquely. How could he have lied to everyone all those years?

He nodded. “I know you will.” He raised his palms to me in a formal salute. “May Death be too distracted by more pressing business to give you Her attention.”

“Thanks.” I cinched my sword belt a little tighter. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” I turned and started up the stairs without waiting for an answer. It was almost moonrise—the walls around us were starting to glow a faint blue-white, just like Kerrem had said they would. The door at the top of the stairs would open the instant the moon peeked over the horizon, then close just as abruptly when its trailing edge pulled free. I only had a minute to get there.

Kerrem told me that magicians and jurists argued about exactly when the door opened. What exactly did “moonrise” mean underground? Was it the moment the moon could first be seen if you were standing at the entrance to the Tombs? Or the moment it would be seen from the top of the stairs if the stone overhead were suddenly to vanish? Or should moonrise be measured as it would have been in ages past, before the Mutiny had taken the tops off the mountains east of Coriandel?

I didn’t care. The door would open, I would go through and kill the bonescuttle, Kerrem would write a poem about it, my damn head would stop itching, Sehdie’s father would let me marry her, and we would all live happily ever after. And up would become down, black would become white, and the emir’s thieves would stop collecting taxes.

IsHAD called out to me when I was halfway up the steps. “Vurt! Vurt!”

I turned around. He had sculled a couple of strides away from the stairs. I could see him clearly in the soft glow now coming from the cavern walls. He held up my letter. “Sorry, lad. Soaked it when I got out of the boat. Guess you’ll have to tell her yourself.” I couldn’t see his face, but I knew he was grinning.

“I wish you taught archery, old man,” I called back. “And I wish I had a bow right now.”

He laughed. I shook my head and kept climbing.

I’m not afraid of heights. Like most children in Coriandel, I stole eggs from birds’ nests on Palace Mount when I was little, and played Hawk and Hares on the rooftops around the market. Every few years someone fell trying to jump across an alley that was a little too wide, and the emir issued yet another decree banning the game, but it was like telling the wind not to blow.

I’m not afraid of heights, but I still stayed near the middle of the stairs and tried not to look over the side. It was like being in a dream. The cavern’s walls had been polished once by magic, and a second time by water. The soft blue-white light they gave off left me shadowless, like a figure in a child’s drawing or someone standing beneath an overcast sky. The only things that seemed real were the spear in my hand and the sound of my boots scuffing the steps beneath my feet.

Fifty steps, then thirty, then ten. I stopped one step below the top. The wall in front of me was completely indistinguishable from the rest. I reached out to touch the light—

—and suddenly it was an open door, a simple empty rectangle between before and after. Stairs identical to the ones I had just climbed descended

into the Tombs on the other side. The bonescuttle was somewhere down there. I swallowed and went looking for it.

Patience Slumbers

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

Something woke me that day, but I could not eat it again, and it could not harm me. I would have ignored it and gone back to sleep, but then I heard the paddling.

Paddling meant people. People meant I might get a proper meal, but probably not. Most lost their way on the other side of that door, or were eaten by something less patient than me. Time would tell.

Onnemeno and the Rats

He was always angry, even as a baby. Our first two fussed and got into scrapes about as much 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 moment he was old enough to manage the ladder on his own he went up onto the roof to watch the bravos at their lessons. I put a rush mat up there for him eventually, and Meshash made a sun shade out of an old cloak and some wicker she found at the market's edge. Some days we could hear his feet on the roof as he imitated their drills with a stick in his hand. Others he lay on his belly in the shade for hours with his chin on his forearms, watching the men learn how to cripple and kill. 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 wailed. But next morning he was back 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 trick the old braggart showed him. By the time he was ten he could rattle off the names of everyone who had won a chain in the *umram* in the last ten years. He could tell you what their favorite weapon was, what passes they used, probably even what they had for dinner. I took him there once in a while, when we could afford it. It never made my heart race the way it did his, but it was the only way he would sit with me for more than five minutes.

He still came out rat catching with me in the afternoons, at least for the first few years. I was firm—he had to learn the trade, or there'd be no more

lessons. He sulked and argued like the ten-year-old he was, but this was one thing I wouldn't let his mother bend me on. His older brother and sister were already making a respectable living. 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 four days a week to have the other two free for whatever he wanted.

He was thirteen when he announced that wasn't going to happen, and bloody-nosed from a fight in the market. "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 set my knife and the bamboo on the table and followed her voice to the front of the house.

Meshash had him on a stool. His nose wasn't bleeding, not any more, but it was swollen and his eyes were already bruising. "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 pushed my wife's hands away. "Who did this?" I demanded.

"Dunno," he mumbled.

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

"No! No' the guard! I'll 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 the guard 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 rad cadgers," he said sullenly. They had taken lessons from Ishad for a year or two before giving up, but still 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 was soaked red by this point. Meshash sluiced it in a pan of water, wrung it out, and put it back on his face.

But yes, he admitted, they were for fencing, so the two boys 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 could count money

well enough, and sign my name, and anyway, with my own father trampled the year before, my mother needed me working.

“So what did you do?” Meshash asked him.

Vurt shrugged. “Hid ’em.”

“Oh, Vurt...” She closed her eyes for a moment, shaking 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 suppose he remembered that.

“Id doedn’t madder,” he said sullenly. “I wuz’d going to uze id agaid adyway.”

That’s when the shouting started. 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? Was he ashamed of doing it? Was he ashamed of *me*? I’d been catching rats since before he was born. If it wasn’t good enough for him, then maybe his own family wasn’t either.

Meshash tried to quiet us both down as 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 instead of shacks that rented each room to a different family, cash in advance and the latrine’s down the street. They had proper gear too, steel wire and cumin seed instead of twine and dried pigeon droppings. 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 to guard.

I almost did it. I almost made to turn him over my knee and spank him as if he were four years old, but Meshash saved me the embarrassment that would have followed. “Stop it!” she wept, stepping between us. “Both of you! Just... 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. He picked up the blood-soaked cloth from where it

had fallen and stalked away. My wife and I looked at each other. What were we going to do now?

The answer turned out to be “nothing”. Meshash went next door to have a talk with Ishad while I cleaned the bowl and wrung out the first cloth she had used on Vurt’s nose. I was in the back muttering to myself when she returned, trying to finish off that gulper sack.

“What did he say?” I asked.

She sat down in her usual place on the other side of the 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 curly black hair now, but she was still as beautiful as the day 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, obviously weary.

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

“That’s not funny,” she said sharply.

I put the knife and bamboo down on the table. She was still on the edge of tears.

“I know. I’m sorry.” I reached across the table and took her hand. “I was just trying to make a joke.”

She nodded. We sat there without speaking 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. The light was gone, but I had whittled posts in darkness before.

Vurt and Meshash were both up before me the next morning. He’d gone next door to Ishad’s, and she was off buying figs and sausages as a treat for that evening’s 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 that day was the local bakery. We had four traps under their floor, and six more in the rafters where they hung sacks of flour and bread that was waiting to be picked up. I didn’t bother to string my fowling bow as I was checking them—the baker’s cat was simple, but would have had her back up if any trouble was lurking in the shadows.

My second stop was a leatherworker’s yard. “Thought it were one of the apprentices, but they all swear ’t isn’t,” he had said when he hired me. He still had an Ossiss accent, though he had been living 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 with canvas covers on top of them. The place reeked of dye and the "camel water" they use for curing.

I strung the fowling bow and loaded it with a pair of darts that had lady's molt and arsenic paste smeared on their barbs. I'd set 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—

"Hello there," I said softly to the raccoon jawing on the trap's wicker bars. He was no more than a year old, 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," a tiny voice squeaked. "Fancy meeting you here." 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 little rotters had been hiding under the canvas on top of one of the piles of skins. They must have dragged the bow up during the night, though the Pilots alone know how they cocked it. Maybe they had a trained monkey.

"Hello, ladies," I said nonchalantly. Stay relaxed, that was the key. The darts in their bow weren't big enough to kill me, but they wouldn't have gone to all this trouble without thinking of that. Rats have a lot of experience with poison...

"Now, don't mind us," one of them squeaked. "Just carry on as you were. You were releasing him, weren't you?"

"Of course," I lied. Damn the Gifted. And damn these two in particular. They were the nightmare and shame of every rat catcher on the east side. They'd arrived from somewhere up north a few years before full of wild talk about Gifted rights and reparations owed. When Her Majesty as was didn't listen, they went underground. Tripwires and razor blades and all manner of cunning little traps, those were their specialties, and good night to anyone who laid stripes on a Gifted's back.

A mate of mine found that out the hard way. He had a badger down out of Ensworth. The halfwit creature said it was done with the desert heat and wanted to retire back home. My mate locked it up with nothing but a water drip to teach it some sense. Two days on, the raccoons dragged one of his own cross-splice traps halfway across the city and left in the chamber pot under his bed. It was a month before he could sit down.

All of that flashed through my mind as I turned toward the trap and reached for the knot that held it closed. I closed my eyes, just for a moment. I would feel the darts hit, *thunk thunk* into my neck. I might make it back to the front of the shop before my muscles started cramping, but not much further. I wondered if my guts would let go. I'd seen that happen to birds sometimes. I didn't want to die that way.

Thwack! Thwack! The rats' darts hit the wall a hand's width above my head. "Hey!"

"Sorry!" a little voice squeaked. "Paw slipped. Sorry."

I turned and brought my bow up. One of the raccoons had already scampered away, but the second was still crouched in front of me. I aimed at her and asked, "Is he worth dying for?"

Her tail twitched. "I think so."

"Why? Is he Gifted?"

"No. He's just my son."

We stared at each other for a few heartbeats. Finally I sighed and lowered my bow. "Rot and salty tears. All right, hang on a moment." I undid the knot at the top of the trap one-handed and twisted the wicker so the little beast could escape. 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 carefully and slipped the darts back into their case.

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

"Not today," I told her.

"Well, better luck next time." I raised a palm to her and let myself out.

The morning sun was blinding after being inside. I squeezed my eyes shut and waited for my hands to stop shaking. Some rats are as hard on their simple kin as people are, but not all.

I let out a ragged breath. 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.

The sun was making my eyes water. I wiped them with my arm and straightened up. It didn't matter if he was a rat catcher, a duelist, or a dung shoveler, he was still my son. Even if he never knew it, I did. Even if I had nothing else, I had that.

I picked up my bag and set off for my next job.

Eleñima Disapproves of Her Niece

I knew right away that I would have to do something. Not that it wouldn't have served her father right, his daughter marrying a rat catcher. Not after the way he treated me *despite* all I had done to raise her with a modicum of manners and deportment. There wouldn't have been half as many young bulls pawing the ground at picnics if I hadn't taught her to sit up straight, but small thanks I ever got from either of them.

My sister will thank me one day. I'm sure of that. When I'm done with this life I'm *sure* she will be there, and she'll say, "Thank you for looking after my precious Sehdie," and I'll say, "Not at all, she was the joy of my days." A trial too, as young women always are, but we are meant for trials, aren't we? When everyone else was straightening their hair in that horrible northern style, I was the one who told her, "No, you leave it curly, and you wear it short, like a princess." Oh, auntie, she said, but everyone's doing it, and it will make me look so old-fashioned. "Just never you mind about fashion," I told her. Then I went to her father and told him *quite firmly* that his daughter needed another new gown for the picnic season. He just about choked on his morning pomegranate, but I wouldn't let up until my little jewel had what she needed.

He really did choke when the seamstress's accounting arrived, but no matter. Sehdie looked splendid, straight-backed and long-necked with sequins on her arms and in her hair. Just a few, of course, there's nothing that reveals poor breeding like gaudiness, but oh, how all those "fashionable" girls seethed at the attention she got. She was only fifteen, but men lined up in tens for a chance to recite poetry to her. Not that I let them, of course. Not at fifteen. It would have swelled her head.

They lined up for my sister too, in her day. My dear Awbé.. Always the sweetest-smelling flower in the garden, always (dare I say it?) just a little flirtatious. Not me, though. I was always the sensible one, my dear sister's shadow and conscience. I was the one who kept track of all the stories men told her, so I could trap them in their own mistruths and exaggerations. Oh, they didn't like me half as much as they liked her. Still, there were balls and picnics, afternoons and evenings in the royal garden on Palace Hill, looking down on the city as the sun set. We thought it would last forever...

But the next thing I knew, my beloved sister was wed. And to salt loss with insult, I was to be her handmaid! Her handmaid, if you will! I wailed, I wept, I threw myself at my mother's feet and begged her, no, no, a

thousand times no, but she wouldn't budge. "Perhaps it will teach you a little humility," she said, as if *I* was the proud one.

So there it was: a room in her husband's house, upstairs overlooking the rear courtyard. It may have been smaller than hers, but it caught the sweet breeze in the morning. We spent almost every moment together when she was heavy with Sehdie, embroidering for the baby and sharing gossip as we always had. I fetched her sweetened lemon juice when she asked, and spooled her thread for her, just like a sister is supposed to. They were the best days of my life. Why, I almost *resented* Sehdie when she arrived, can you believe it? Such a vulgar emotion, resentment...

I found out about Sehdie's boy by chance. I allowed her to have friends over after lessons so that she could practice her Bantangui and dance steps. I gave them time to settle, then listened to them from the little storage cupboard next to her room. It was not spying—I will not have it said that I was so ill-mannered as to spy on my own niece. But not everyone in the Hundred Houses had been raised as well as she had, and with her mother gone, well, I had a responsibility, didn't I?

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

Tessor? Tessor Penne é Pue I frowned. Her friend had definitely said 'Tessor'. He was one of her many suitors, a bit dissolute but from a very respectable family. He competed 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 a music lesson, not watching bravos whack each other with sticks. And how would either of them know what a wild stallion looked like?

"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.

"Do you want to go and see him again tomorrow?"

"Why not?" Sehdie yawned. "Let's see if we can talk Mareña into coming 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 had been. Women certainly weren't allowed into the *umram* when *I* was young. Oh, a few snuck in occasionally—put their hair up under felt hats so they could pass for Bantangui traders, and learned enough trade-talk to sign "please" and "thank you" and "out of my way, you brainless oaf"—but it was off limits for ladies of quality. My sister thought it was stupid, but even when I was

young I understood that it simply wasn't a suitable place for a well-bred woman.

The thought that my niece might be frequenting such places was distasteful enough. But—could she really be interested in some bravo? That could be disastrous. I needed to find out more.

I smiled and made small talk with her at dinner that evening while her father shoveled food into his mouth in silence. She was as loving as always, but I could tell from the look in her eyes that her mind wasn't really on what she was saying. Women know each other better than men ever can. She felt restless, and at seventeen, restless is the same as dangerous.

So I did what her mother would have done if she hadn't left us so early. The next morning, after Sehdie went to her lessons, I had my houseman Nednan walk me down the street to Shau Sheu's. It wasn't the most fashionable salon in the city, but Shau Sheu was more than just a friend. I was one of her first customers after she arrived in Coriandel, and, well, I'm not sure what would have happened to me after my sister died if not for her. I walked more quickly than I should have, thinking about what Sehdie's restlessness might mean, so I was perspiring faintly by the time I reached her front door.

Shau Sheu's home was built by a family of coffee merchants some years before I was born. It lay just off Hundred Houses Hill, in a neighborhood known more for opulence than taste. The 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 endlessly in the corner, and the air always smelled faintly of sandalwood.

Shau Sheu's houseman greeted me at her front gate with a full bow. It was only mid-morning, but half a dozen ladies from the hill had already taken their places on the padded 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... We got all that and more from Shau Sheu, and her bills were so discreet.

The houseman returned. "My 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 her turn.

Shau Sheu was on her roof, relaxing 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. Her tiny nose and almond eyes wrinkled when she smiled, but they had always done that, and the wrinkles still vanished with the smile.

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. "Hmm..." She traced 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 left Ini Bantang for Coriandel, and she still painted her nails. That morning they glistened white against her rich brown skin.

"Do you think...?" I couldn't finish the question.

She sighed and let her hand drop back into her lap. "Perhaps," she shrugged. She sipped her coffee. "Time will tell."

Time will tell. She had been saying that for years, but it had never yet spoken. She had warned me at the start that the spell would take time, but not *this* long. Not years and years.

The matter would have ended there had her housekeeper not arrived just at that moment with a small bowl of sugared almonds. She was Bantangui as well, older than Shau Sheu, but still black-haired and graceful. I had never learned her name.

She cleared her throat. Shau Sheu glanced at her, raising one eyebrow. Her housekeeper ducked her head slightly. "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. His father is a rat catcher. I believe he is fighting again today."

A rat catcher? Sehdi was interested in a *rat catcher*? "Thank you," I said, nodding my dismissal. I'm afraid my voice was colder than it should have been. The housekeeper ducked her head again 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 housekeeper to yours for lessons."

Between the almonds and further pleasantries it was half an hour before I collected Nednan and left. The sky above us was burnt blue by the mid-day sun. It beat at the parasol Nednan held over my head and drove servants running errands into the narrow shadows at the side of the street.

When I was young, it would have been considered vulgar for a woman of my station to walk rather than ride. The emir's mother set a fashion for it, though, and I myself have always found it invigorating. I do so love the sights and sounds of the city, and it gives one time to think.

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

Nednan nodded his obedience without speaking. I've always been fond of him for that trait. He is discreet as well as efficient, and in all the years I have lived in that house, I have only twice had to have him beaten. Not like his wife, our housekeeper. If I were truly her mistress, I would—ah, but if wishes were tears, the whole world would be an ocean.

We walked briskly through the city streets, me with my arms tucked into my sleeves, Nednan a pace behind me, the parasol he held 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 Nednan held up a copper—honestly, 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.

We skirted the edge of Hundred Houses Hill. The buildings around us grew sturdier and more practical. Doctresses and cabinet makers replaced goldsmiths and jurists, and were in turned replaced by saddle menders and jurists of less reputable character. The streets narrowed as well, until the buildings on either side were close enough for people to stretch awnings between them for shade.

Soon enough we found ourselves at the *umram*. It was smaller than I expected. The arena itself was an oval, twenty-five paces 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 Nednan. "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 chaise. I tried not to speculate about who might have sat on its thin cotton cushions before me.

We sat in silence as we waited for the next match to begin. After a few moments, the man on the chaise 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. “Nednan, 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 Sehdié 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.” Bah. I wanted a better story than that. I *deserved* a better story than that. Was it so wrong of me to make certain...?

So I waited through two noisy matches, until *he* came out to the oval. Vurt Meshash é Onnemen, Vurt of Meshash the mother, of Onnemeno 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 in the city guard and leave the alleys he had been born in behind.

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 sullen and swaggering. I could see how a girl Sehdié’s age might be taken by him. She wouldn’t know enough to look for the things that *I* could see. He had a chip on his shoulder as big as Palace Hill, and was just daring the world to knock it off.

His opponent that day was new to Coriandel’s *umram*. A village bravo, I guessed, hoping to catch some wealthy 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 Bantanguí, except for the fourth who stood behind them. That was my brother-by-marriage’s senior clerk’s junior houseman, watching the bout as eagerly as his three charges.

“Is something wrong, honored mistress?” Nednan asked. I must have been grinding my teeth—a shameful habit, I know, but from time to time, one forgets oneself.

“The third bench, on the right, half-way up, where the blue-and-green pennant hangs. Is that one not familiar to you?”

Nednan sucked air in through his teeth. “This likes me not,” he muttered.

“One trusts words will be spoken,” I sniffed pointedly.

“Of course, honored mistress.” Words would indeed be spoken to the senior houseman at a certain house. 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!

The boy, Vurt, bowed to the judge, then turned and bowed to my Sehdie. Not just to the common benches, though someone duller than me might have thought so. And not to her companions (I will not call them “friends”, who would let her make a fool of herself in so public a place). No, he bowed to *her*, to Sehdie, and she raised her hand and waved back to him.

And then I saw *him*, and with a shock I realized that my moment had finally come. This was what I had been waiting for. This was what Shau Sheu had promised me. I give you an oath, I felt chilled, as though I had been blessed by a ghost. He was older, balding but still broad across the shoulders. He hopped over the railing onto the *umram*’s sandy floor and walked over to Vurt. I knew his walk. I knew his face.

It was Ishad.

“We are done here,” I announced as calmly as I could, standing. Nednan 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. He *mustn’t* know.

I marched out of the *umram* looking neither left nor right. Nednan had to hurry 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 Onnemeno, I thought, and Ishad. Well, well, well. As I hurried home through streets nearly emptied by the sun’s pitiless glare, a smile struggled to find a home on my lips.

Vurt's Oath

I swallowed and stepped through the Moonrise Door. It was a stupid thing to do, but I had done plenty of stupid things before. That fight in the market when I was thirteen, for example. I should have just told my father I didn't want to be a rat catcher and given my traps and gear to my brother and sister instead of picking a fight with two boys twice my size. Ishad set my nose, but it didn't heal straight. I pretended it looked dashing, but it was 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. If I'd asked Kerrem, he would have said it was just like me to only want something that was hard to get, so I didn't ask.

But swearing in blood that I'd kill the bonescuttle or die trying was the salt-stupidest thing I had ever done. The oath was like an itch I couldn't reach or a name that I couldn't remember. I hadn't slept properly in a week. Every meal I ate sat in my stomach like a handful of stones, and it was getting worse every day.

The steps led down into a cavern larger than the one I had just left. The wall still glowed blue behind me, but that was fading, and the only other light was what came from the dayglass in my lantern. Kerre would have liked the image. Such is life, he would have said, a brief spark in the darkness. I don't know what my spear, my boots, or my jangling nerves would have represented, but I'm sure he would have worked them in.

The air grew colder as I made my way down to the cavern floor. The only sounds were my boots on the steps, the faint squeaking from my pack, and the steady drip from overhead.

The floor was studded with damp, stony warts where those drips landed. In their midst lay a still, silvery pool. That would be my way out, if I lived long enough to use it. I skirted its edge and headed for the Bridge of Shame.

I had known all my life that there was another world beneath Coriandel, but I had never really understood what that meant until I started trying to memorize the maps that Kerrem borrowed for me from his friends. Most of them were in books written by those who had entered and survived, or about those who had only entered. On the far side of the first cavern there was a gate, which led to the Bridge of Shame. On the other side of the bridge was a stone garden. In its center lay a well. "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 that well surely will.”

Beyond the garden lay another gate, and then the undercity proper. If Fate was feeling generous, I would find the bonescuttle there. All I had to do was kill it, retrace my steps, and get past whatever was lurking in the pool, and I’d be free of my oath. And then—

I shook my head and tried to ignore the faint, frightened squeaks coming from my pack. I had plenty to worry about before I got that far.

But my thoughts kept flying away from me like they did before a match in the *umram*. Sehdie’s father wasn’t a bad man. He just thought his daughter could do better than a rat catcher’s youngest son. And he was right. Half the young men in the Hundred Houses wanted to fall in love with her. They wrote poems and bloodied each other’s noses without ever having spoken to her. She could have the best oudh player in the whole Karaband, or either under-captain of the Emir’s Guard, or an idle posher like Tessor Penne é Pue, who would one day inherit a mansion on Nobles’ Hill that was only one room smaller than the royal palace. I doubt Sehdie’s father would have laughed at him if he had said, “I wish to share a life with your daughter.”

But he laughed at me. “You?” he said incredulously. We were in the public courtyard of his house. It was modest enough, considering how high he was in the emir’s service. Dwarf lemon trees in pots stood in the corners. He had done me the courtesy of standing when his housekeeper showed me in, but hadn’t offered me anything to drink. I had introduced myself, Vurt Meshash é Onnemeno tin ara Ishad Vurt of Meshash the mother, Onnemeno the father, apprenticed but not indentured to Ishad.

“You and my daughter? Pfah!” He was taller than me, heavy-set, sharp-eyed, with just a fringe of wiry white hair above his ears.

“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 asking to marry her, her father would wonder if she was ill. A proposal had even arrived by proxy once from a carpet maker in Dry Weeping. She had never been to Coriandel, but had heard about Sehdie from a cousin.

Proposing marriage with no hope of success was something young men were expected to do. But claiming that the offer would be welcomed was different. Her father’s eyes narrowed. “What reason is this?”

My pulse was racing, 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. I couldn't count how many times Ishad had told me that. *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. Nednan, 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 and orange 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 had to be Sehdie's aunt, the one who was never happy with anything.

"A rat catcher?" Sehdie's father snorted. "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."

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

“And what ‘paths’ are these?” asked Sehdie’s aunt. “Will you bring her the treasure of the Sorrowful Prince? Or turn 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 steadily.

“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 niece’s daughter 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 this creature, and see your daughter set free from this place.”

“What? No, no!” Sehdie’s father snatched a linen napkin from the little table beside his chaise, hoping I think to stop my bleeding, but he was too late. One drop, two, a third... It was done. I tasted copper in my mouth. A chill stiffened my spine as a sudden restlessness took hold of me, an urge to be elsewhere, to be doing something that only I could do.

I raised my hand and spread my fingers to show the wound already healed. The oath had taken. One in a hundred, one in a thousand, once in a lifetime—everyone gave different odds, but everyone knew the sign.

Sehdie’s aunt’s hands flew to her mouth. She gasped, then of all things she giggled before spinning around and disappearing into the room behind her.

Sehdie’s father glared at me. “How dare you?” he spat, tossing the napkin to the ground petulantly. “How dare you swear a wild 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! Nednan, summon my jurist. ‘I will slay this creature, and see your daughter set free from this place.’ 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 a kerchief from my pocket to wipe it, slipped it back into its sheath, then wiped the blood from my arm. 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 Gifted 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 wound with some dark, foul-smelling grease that Darpani used on cows’ udders. “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 where they train old men to look and sound like that. Their scowls, their grunts of disapproval... They are too much alike for happenstance.

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 foul-smelling concoctions that could serve as either. Rough-made wooden shelves took up half of one wall. Blunted weapons, some of them looking half as old as the city itself, were stacked on them haphazardly. A dozen crosses on heavy pedestals stood against the other wall. A suit of leather armor hung on each one, drying out after the day’s lessons. I could smell them even above the reek of the Darpani grease. Ishad kept promising to tear out their quilted cotton linings and put in fresh ones, but never actually got around to it.

I smelled onions frying next door, too. My mother was starting dinner. “And at least you didn’t swear when you’d do it,” Ishad grumbled. “Think you can hold it off a while? Might be able to find a magician desperate enough to try and break it for you. If not here, then maybe 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, had grown worse by the hour. I kept fighting the urge to try to bang the back of my head against the wall behind me to ease it.

“Well, no, no, think on it a moment.” Ishad raised a finger. “You said you would slay the creature, and see the girl free. Right? Not, ‘and see her set free.’ So, you’ve two tasks, not one. We can worry about the ‘free’ bit later. Hells, maybe we can find a magician to bend the oath on that. I bet—”

“Give it a rest, Ishad. I can’t afford a magician good enough to fix this. 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 sanity 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. “Go on, go home. Get some food in you. I’ll think on this. Gaaah...”

I had to tell my mother. She would have heard soon enough anyway. A blood oath for love? The houseman might have kept his mouth shut, but the rest of the staff had undoubtedly been watching and listening, which meant the tale had probably been told three times before I reached Ishad's.

And of course I had told Kerrem why there was blood on his shirt, which would have roughly the same effect as hiring a troupe of balladeers. Sehdie's father would be the villain, of course. Her friends would tell each other that he was a heartless man whose only desire was to keep his daughter locked away with the rest of his treasure. In fact, he was by all accounts decent enough, if a bit pompous. He hadn't remarried after Sehdie's mother died, and had kept his wife's sister in his home long after custom and law would have allowed him to turn her out.

Not that Sehdie's aunt ever acknowledged his generosity, or anything else that anyone ever did for her. She was a sour lemon, that one. She didn't think any change in the last twenty years had been for the better, and insisted Sehdie dress as though the emir's mother was still on the throne. She even forced Sehdie to take lessons in diction and deportment. "I swear she keeps a list somewhere," Sehdie told me once. "Everyone in Coriandel is on it, and every time they forget to roll an 'R', she puts a little tick beside their name." The aunt might not have had anything to do with my oath, but that wouldn't stop people from appointing her deputy villain in their version of the story.

I left Sehdie out of the story when I told my mother what I had 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," as they say, which made me her favorite, but I had disappointed her so many times. Getting into fights whenever someone made a joke about rat catchers, when my brother had been as peaceful as an old donkey. Slipping out my window at night to watch Ishad teach city guardsmen how to fight dirty, when my sister had set herself to weaving and lettering from the day she was apprenticed. She didn't know why I was so restless, any more than I did. And now this.

She shook her head sadly. "At least your father isn't here to see it."

"I'm sorry," I replied shortly. It had been three years. He would have yelled at me the same way Ishad had. All of a sudden I missed him terribly. I got up and went over to my mother and put my arms around her while she cried.

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 wet rag and a handful of sand, then rinsed them and went to bed.

The cut on my hand was a faint silver line by morning. I had secretly hoped that it would somehow vanish in the night, then despised 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 not then. Not with that damn itch in the back of my head.

A few of his students sparred with me after half-morning. 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 stink of 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."

"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, just as you and Sehdie declare yourselves for one another. That can't be a coincidence."

"You're right—it's not a coincidence. It's idiocy." Ishad was back. He had his armor on, and was sweating freely in the morning heat. "Now come on with you. Time's wasting." We would be able to practice for another hour at most before the mid-day sun drove us indoors to eat and rest.

Time *was* wasting. I felt it with every breath. It wouldn't have been so bad if I had said, "Kill the underbeast and see her free from here, Fate willing," but no, this was a do-or-be-damned oath. Kerrem said his whole family had argued it around and around when they got word. They all agreed: I had to see it through or my soul would wander unbound until some dark thing devoured it or some kind-hearted magician laid it to rest.

But maybe Kerrem was 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 pale bone overlaid with dry tendons.

And it was smart—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 assumed it was a thief or a rat. But then it took a child, 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.

By chance a drunken leather mender saw it dragging her body into an abandoned warehouse. He threw stones at it, but they just bounced off. He told the emir's guard that there was nothing more he could do, that the little girl's body had already been smoldering from the bonescuttle's poison. They found a crack in the warehouse floor and blocked it up, but the bonescuttle just found another secret way to the surface. Another goat, and then another beggar, full-grown, taken in his sleep in an alley three streets from where the little girl died.

I could die like they had if I didn't keep my wits about me, cooked in my own skin by the bonescuttle's poison. I shook my head to clear it. I had reached the tunnel that led to the Bridge of Shame. Its floor was polished stone, unmarred by time or dripping water. Five men with their arms outstretched would not have spanned it, and it was as high as it was wide. The Pilots might have looked like men, but they built for giants. My lantern's light seemed even smaller than it had. I hefted my spear and pushed on.

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... like a simile that won't come right.

Other stories write themselves. Vurt's was 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. Think of it: he was the youngest son of a humble family, handsome when he wasn't scowling, and he just happened to have a craggy old hero living next door to teach him swordplay. It was perfect.

I was actually disappointed that Ishad wasn't going to go all the way into the Tombs with him, back to the scene of his own triumph. He could have taken a poisoned blow throwing himself between Vurt and the sting of some foul underbeast, then confessed that he was Vurt's real father before rolling up his eyes and expiring. It would have been straight out of a Bantangui puppet play, or one of those Ruudian novels my next-to-oldest sister loved so much.

Not that I wished Ishad dead. He was good company, and the rogues who dropped by his house to cadge a glass from him were full of material. But if Vurt survived, and came looking for me, well, my chances would be a lot better if Ishad wasn't there to think for him...

My family are booksters. We are account keepers and writers of letters, oaths, 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 lived only a pot's throw away and was always underfoot. I slept at the foot of my oldest brother's bed until I was six, and counted myself lucky not to have to sleep under the stairs.

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 that hole in the baker's storeroom wall? Did Iadema 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, too, for which aspiring poets are always grateful. I helped Vurt learn numbering and the abracadabra, and got browned onions and raisins in return.

His brother and sister were ten years older than him. They left home before he turned eight. He had a room to himself after that, which seemed an unthinkable luxury to me. It wasn't much more than a storage cupboard, really, but it had a door and a window that let in enough light to read by.

We met at Ishad's. My father decided one day that I needed to learn a modicum of the physical arts. That was his 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 was 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 over so mundane a concern, my father put on his long coat and took himself to speak with the swordsmaster himself. He would write letters and review oaths, he said. No money need change hands (which meant that no taxes need be paid). They pressed their palms together, and it was done. Redsdays, Yellowsdays, and Bluesdays mornings, I would spend an hour and a half learning how to pummel my fellow human beings into submission.

I found myself the next morning in Ishad's front courtyard in a crowd consisting of two wood- and-leather dummies, a rack of wicked-looking implements, and half-a-dozen boys who all appeared to be hardened criminals. I was not a gutterside brawler. I had never boxed ears, bloodied noses, or held another boy's face in a horse trough until he raised three fingers in surrender. I was born to be a *poet*.

Ishad stumped into the courtyard flat-footed, 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 looked sidelong at the boy to my right. He was a palm shorter than me, with his head shaved in imitation of his teacher. 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 a scar running through his eyebrow and two missing teeth. “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...* “Ow!” 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.

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. This staff—it’s slippery. Here.” He thrust his own 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. “Your staff was slippery. It was no wonder you dropped it.” He stooped and picked it up. “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 candlesticks from a brass smith’s.

I stopped going for 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 a hawk, and he hated losing—hated it. “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 passes. The ones Vurt didn’t know, I looked up in my parents’ books. Ruudian, Enswer, Darpani, Bantangui... By the time I was thirteen, I could tell you to commit indecent crimes in all of them.

And by thirteen, I knew what Fate had written for me. 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, a point which is not weakened by her retracting her point when Hans the Elder offered to shorten her by a head to prove 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. “Luck might hear.”

“So what? If Fate has already decided...”

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 scanned 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, almost to the day, I walked up to a pair of guardsmen on Tombs Hill with two bottles in my hands. They were standing at the mouth to the undercity, wearing a bored look that said, "I know you're guilty, I just can't be bothered to figure out what you're guilty of." I was as frightened as I had been that first day at Ishad's. What Vurt and Ishad and I were doing could get us all 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 what else I had planned for that night.

The sun had just kissed the horizon. I took care not to step on the guardsmen's shadows, not wishing to give offense. "Good evening," I said, as brightly as I could. I shook the bottles gently to make them gurgle. "Dry work, isn't it?"

The guard on my left turned his head and spat carefully into the hard-packed earth. The one on my right looked at me coolly. "You don't think we're going to drink any of that, do you?"

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

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

The other one nodded and drew 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?" Damn me, my voice squeaked. A poet's voice should never squeak. "It's just wine! I swear!"

The guard on my left sighed. "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 said. "Can't take a man in a sash seriously." He pointed the tip of his sword at me. "On your knees."

"But—but I've done nothing wrong!" I gabbled. The bottles gurgled again slightly as my arms shook. "I just—"

"You just thought you could walk up here, a total stranger to us both, and we'd 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 sleep, and then traipse down those stairs and get into whatever kind of lackwit trouble popped up between your ears, am I right? Pfah!" Mirtan shook his head sorrowfully. The tip of his sword didn't waver. I would have noticed if it did, as I was 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 said quietly in his ear. He pressed the flat of his knife against the guard's throat. "Now, if you would do me the kindness of sheathing your blade? Please?"

I didn't see him tense, but his partner did. "Mirtan!" he snapped, ignoring Vurt's knife, which was lying along his own neck. "Don't do it. You'll enjoy your pension a lot less if your widow's spending it on someone else."

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

"Captain?" Ishad chuckled. "I don't see any captain. Not of a mind to go looking for one, either, if that eases you. Now, put yours hands back here, would you? Ah, where's that cord? Lad, do you have the—no, here it is. Arms crossed, if you please. No, no, behind you, don't be clever."

The guard did as he was told. "This is going to be awkward to explain," he said as Ishad snugged the braided leather around his wrists. "If the captain comes by, I mean, or our sergeant."

"Saints bless our sergeant," the other guard muttered under his breath.

Ishad clucked. "Oh, I'm sure it won't take you very long to get free. You done with that one, lad? You sure? Good. Over here, please, back to back." He ran a loop of cord through the bonds around the guards' wrists.

"There. Now, I'm sure you'd be more comfortable sitting. No, no, just here is fine. Thank you." Ishad stepped back and eyed his handiwork critically. "What do you think, lad? Will it do?"

"Let's just go." Vurt had taken the two halves of his spear from the sleeves sewn into the side of his pack and screwed them together. He thumped its butt on the ground. "It'll be moonrise soon."

"I suppose it will at that." Ishad threw a look my way. "Thanks, lad. Best be off. You'll not want to be here when they find their feet."

I nodded. "Good hunting," I said to Vurt, and immediately winced. It was the sort of thing bad actors said in worse plays. I had composed a few couplets that morning (the better parts of them cribbed from Jeanne the Seyfertoise, to be honest) but... I think poems are best afterward, when you know how things have ended. Not that Vurt and I would have an end after what I had planned.

I swallowed hard. This was madness, what he was doing, sheer bloody stupid oath-bound madness. My best friend was probably going to be dead in a few hours. What was poetry, next to that?

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

The horizon had eaten half the sun. The first breath of evening caressed my cheek with a cool hand. The guards' shoulders twitched as they wrestled with their bonds. Suddenly I remembered where I was. "Here," I said, setting the bottles on the stones at my feet. "My oath on it, there really is nothing in them save what the vintner put there."

The first one didn't look up. The second one, Mirtan, cleared his throat and spat on the nearest of the bottles. Wordless, ashamed, and very frightened by what I was about to do, I turned and hurried away.

Has Eleñima's Moment Arrived?

I waited until the next day to tell Shau Sheu. It is one thing to dream of the fruit you hope your plans will bear. It is quite another to hold that fruit in your hand and wonder if you dare to peel it.

I also didn't want to give her other ladies cause to gossip. They would, horribly, given the slightest excuse. Going to see her twice in one day, well, it would be as bad as the time Hemmeté came rushing in with her over-shawl torn, and I certainly didn't want to be on the receiving end of *that*.

I waited until a little before my usual hour the next morning, then collected a few things and had Nednan escort me to Shau Sheu's house as usual. "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 the stairs to the roof. Shau Sheu greeted me warmly, as she always did. We seated ourselves on chaises under tastefully-striped awnings. Her housekeeper brought us coffee in tiny blue-and-white thimble cups 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 Sheu, do you think— Is this—"

"Hush, dear, 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, and now I was so afraid.

"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, dear 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 Sheu, 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 all about it."

She sipped her coffee as I recounted everything 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 heart-breaker, the rogue who would ruin *her* life without a second thought.

We sat in silence for a few moments after I finished. A line of silver-bright clouds drifted past overhead, on their way to Ossisswe or somewhere deeper in the desert. I had never been—not to Ossisswe, not to anywhere. But now... If the slow spell Shau Sheu and I had started all those years ago really was working, maybe I would finally get to travel. To love. To *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?"

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. And when you open your eyes, 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 magic that Shau Sheu and I had started years ago.

“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? Are you sure?”

“Yes!” Shau Sheu was wonderful, but sometimes she wasn’t quite as quick as she could have been. “Yes, I’m sure. That’s what he has to do. Except—except he must fail where Ishad succeeded.”

The moment I said it, I knew it was the truth. I was as sure of it as I was of my own name. Where Ishad had succeeded, his prize student had to fail. That was what the spell needed.

“Mm.” Shau Sheu nodded slowly. “I see. But you know, 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 know it might seem rude, but this was too important for superficial politeness. This was my life!

She finally relented. “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 sweetly. I told myself that I would have Nednan 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 mistress that more ladies had arrived downstairs. “I will be down in a moment,” she said. “Make sure they all 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?"

Shau Sheu 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 slip the papers to her houseman as he bowed us into her front courtyard, but when I left an hour later, he passed them back to me while Nednan 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 opening my eyes and seeing the world through Sehdi's.

I waited patiently for Shau Sheu to send word. Two days passed, then a third. I busied myself overseeing the cook, correcting Sehdi's 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 she 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. 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.

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 grilling the peppers on only one side.

"I'm sure she's doing the best she can with only one pair of hands," my brother-by-marriage said.

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. I had watched for signs, but had never seen anything definite. As I poured Sehdi some lassi, I made a note to myself to pay even closer attention.

Bluesday afternoon, four days after my visit, Nednan brought me the word I had been waiting for. He patted 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 Nednan? 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 kiem in captivity."

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

"Honored mistress." I couldn't see him bow, but I'm sure he did. He wasn't a quick study, but what he learned, he knew.

I hummed a little song as I made ready. No one of society would be there, of course, not tonight, but I still felt it was important to look my best. One should for special occasions.

My brother-by-marriage left for his readery an hour before sunset. I waited until dark, then had Nednan summon a guardsman to walk with us to Shau Sheu's. I was careful to instruct Nednan not to tip one bezel more generously than he normally would. Nothing arouses suspicion among 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 Nednan. "Perhaps near the middle hour," he told the guardsman. "The honored mistress will send me for you." The guardsman nodded to him (when he should have nodded to me), waited for us to enter, then went upon his way.

Shau Sheu's houseman led me across her front courtyard and into the back of her house. I had been visiting her salon for fifteen years, but had never been into its private portions. 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 did suspect her situation was more straitened than she would want anyone to know. A few small portraits of men I certainly didn't recognize, a landscape of the Glass Sea at dawn, a Bantangui festival mask, a broken sword... I might have paused a moment to study them, but the moon was about to rise.

I almost turned around and left when I saw who was waiting for me. “Shau Sheu!” I said, shocked. “Is this some kind of joke? Because if it is, it’s in very poor taste.”

“Eleñima, dear, I would never make a joke of 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 Gasping.”

The little Darpani madman bobbed his head in a grotesque imitation of her grace, grinning. He was missing his front two teeth, whether as the price of a spell or from falling drunk off a horse I don’t know. “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 to begin soon. To hear the moon scratching 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... Darpani magicians are all mad. The first thing they give up for power is their good sense. I read that in one of Pleiement’s books when I was a girl, and I’m sure he wouldn’t have written it if it weren’t true.

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

I took the leather wrist guard I had found in Sehdi’s jewelry box from my sleeve and passed it to him. It was black, stitched with dark blue thread, 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, his teeth surprisingly white against his worn brown face. “To satisfy,” he pronounced. “And so, to begin.”

Four tiny braziers stood in a diamond on the floor. One silver, one glass, one bone, and one of dark mahogany, to mark the four corners of the world. The Darpani lit each one in turn, muttering under his breath, then drew a handful of straw—yes, straw, 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. I saw nothing special in the third, but it seemed to satisfy him. He stepped into the center of the diamond and sat with his feet crossed beneath him as a cushion. Closing his eyes, he began to chant the same breathy phrase over and over again, turning the wrist guard over and over in his hands 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 beginning his chant again.

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 what he was doing. 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 other side.

It was an hour at least before he struck a bargain that pleased him. He touched his forehead to the floor to seal it, then stood with a popping of knees and dropped the wrist guard into the brazier in front of him.

“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 above a whisper. It seemed a small loss to me. “To call this iyemnelili from underneath.”

Shau Sheu folded her arms across her chest, each hand touching the opposite shoulder. “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 ran his finger along them to count them before slipping them into a fold of his belt. He bobbed his head at me, touching the heel of his hand to his forehead, and showed himself out.

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.”

Shau Sheu Frets

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), with patriots (convince them that someone else is the real traitor), and even with 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 and on, week after week for years, about the sorry state of the world, and what she wouldn't give to be fifteen again. Every time I had to sit through another lecture on the decay of the world, I swore that if I was ever allowed to leave that dry, dusty village 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, when you are young. Those are reasons to become a spy. Boredom? How many young Bantangui would join the Fleet of Ghosts if they knew about the boredom?

I cannot remember who first brought Eleñima to me, though it will be written in code somewhere among my poetry and recipes. She doubtless thought herself composed, but her too-quick smile and darting eyes gave her away.

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. According to one, she is as sour as her sister was sweet."

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

Oë picked up the brass tray "Taxation. Most particularly, that relating to trade, what they call 'customs'."

I smiled and sipped my coffee.

It took me five months to figure out how to crack her open. Five months of pleasantries and commiseration, five months of 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, please, let me." Oë would gladly have put the necessary holes in her. I have never, not even among crew-caste Bantanguì, seen anyone be as cutting to a servant as *that woman*.

But no, I had been trained too well. Do no more than 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—I believe there is even a tutorial with that title. Coriandel had welcomed me, a poor woman of noble birth who had supposedly fled an arranged marriage to a man thrice my age, but that didn't mean the emir's own spies were not watching me. I had to be... quiet.

And besides, if she could be cracked, she could prove to be a very tasty nut indeed. Her 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 at mid-day so he could work in the afternoon and evening. Supply requisitions from the Coriandi guard posts on the Great Southern Road, complaints about underpayment from the steelworks in Ensworth, which just happened to detail exactly how many swords and helmets Coriandel had purchased from them... 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. We fell to talking one night, and just like that, Eleñima's onions were stewed. Some of it was the drink, I admit—Oë and I didn't indulge when we were working, but what kind of pirates would we be if we never drank? We ate and talked and drank until the sun went down, then sat and listened for a bit like our sailor forebears would have listened to the sea.

The next time Eleñima came to one of my coffee and gossip gatherings, I wandered over to where she was admiring (or at least studying) one of my old dance masks, and murmured, "Dear, if I may have a word? After the others have gone?"

She frowned. "Is anything the matter?"

"No, of course not," I soothed. "I just... Well, I may have an answer for 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 sat on chaises, our feet up 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, though her eyes were 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 a coincidence 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. My housekeeper ducked her head and withdrew, no doubt to re-check her supply of poisons.

I cleared my throat. "Yes, I studied magic. A little. Not like it's practiced here, of course. None of this 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."

"I understand. But I never thought... I mean, I would never have guessed that you—"

"Exactly," I said warmly. "You would never have guessed, and neither would anyone else. Slow and subtle. And powerful, too. Which brings us to your problem."

"My problem?"

"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 I can make it happen for you."

She demurred, of course, but she was mine. A sympathetic spell would be best, I announced grandly, certain at last that she wouldn'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 lie was as gentle as a wave caressing a beach, and that was all it took. I had her. Dear, *cherished* Shau, she said. This was—this was the nicest thing anyone had ever done for her, even her dear sister. 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.

"Oh, 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. This is what friends are for. 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, 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, you know... They have 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 is as prompt in settling their bills as you are, my dear. But I dare not refuse them entry in case it should cost me the custom of others." Which was true enough—for all her faults, she was much better about her bills than most of my clientele.

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

"Sh, sh." I took a chance and patted her hand. "I couldn't ask you for money. I wouldn't take it if you offered. But... Well, I have a few friends here in the city, caravaners and the like. If I could get them 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 their 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 customs exemption from a Gifted bullock who had served in one of the emir's mother's wars. There were a few small gems 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 emir's mother used to listen 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 giggle at that, and the next day, I

had two hours to copy out the entire resupply inventory for the Coriandi cavalry.

The faceless admirals of the Fleet of Ghosts devoured it and demanded more. A generation after being humiliated by a rag-tag of Karabandi emirs who had, against all odds, put aside their differences to lay siege to Armaq, they were ready to try again. Year after year, the papers Eleñima borrowed 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'm sure the admirals had other agents in the city, but every time I wrote out a few recipes to send back to my "aunt" (whom I pictured as a room full of patient shaven-headed scholars somewhere in the Admiralty's coral labyrinth), I knew that I was the mosquito sucking at Coriandel's jugular vein.

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 spell must be working!

I tried to calm her down, but she was not for calming, not this time. And so, foolishly, I promised that I would do what she asked. I would have someone call a bonescuttle just like the one that "her" rogue had slain. She sobbed her thanks and left. I ordered Oë to draw me a hot bath, then sent her speak to a Darpani grass thrower I had used several times before.

I played hostess three times in the week after he traded his voice to summon a monster. 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 she had passed peacefully after a full life.

The second occasion was my usual gathering, 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 that gathering. I was afraid Eleñima would come—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. Before she came inland disguised as a doctress she had only ever spoken to members of her own family, other cargo-caste slaves, and her teachers. She would probably have become a spy just to hear new voices.

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 headless chicken on the kitchen table. "Mistress, we have to do something. 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's 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 kill it. I shouldn't have let it bother me, but I became terribly polite. The regular house staff knew nothing about what was going on, but they began tiptoeing around, afraid of my smile. Eventually I retreated to my rooms to spare them.

I kept two rooms 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 a small room, intimate, a place where people could unburden themselves. I heard the most mundane things there, and the most horrible.

My 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 child to squeeze through. I was so excited when I turned fourteen and was given a room like that of my own on my uncle's barge. A room of my own! Without 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, when Oë brought me word. The niece's young man had sworn a blood oath to kill the creature I had caused to be

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 have—no. I shook my head. Oë and I had stewed the notion of a “slow spell” ourselves. This was just coincidence. It had to be.

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.”

Ishad Speaks to Old Friends

I went to Lady Kembe for help when Vurt told me what he'd sworn to do. Might not have when I was his age, but I learned the hard way that there's no shame asking for a hand when you're overmanned. A real fight's not a round in the *umram*, with rules and judges and a spear tip that's just a brush dipped in red paint. Plus, we might not have parted on the best of terms, but I knew the lady wasn't one to hold a grudge. What's the point, when you're going to outlive everyone anyway?

Meshash came to see me that night. *Thump thump thump* went my door drum, 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 said, 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 Onnemeno. 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.

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 Luck loves 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.

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.

I stared into the candle flame, 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 five 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. "Hello," she said. "It's been a long time."

I dipped my head. "M'lady."

"I seen han old swallow a-chase a young'un ye'erday. I wondered if that might be you." She still pronounced 'wondered' with three syllables, 'wonder-ed', and still called me Swallow. I never knew why, but it could have been worse. There was a merchanteer with three ships under his rod and warehouses in Seyferte and Ensworth who had worked for her for years. She called *him* things that would start a fight in polite company.

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

"Oh, but certain you 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 have you offer?"

"Information," I said bluntly.

Lady Kembe was the most powerful magician in Ossisswe, maybe the most powerful in Cherne. She hadn't left her house in two 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 two hundred years without learning how to bargain like a Darpani ride master who's down to his 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 somewhat. 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, thank you."

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

Her fingers drummed again, a light three-against-two rhythm. "Hm. I shall make inquiries of that. Now, what do you 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 Ensworth, and that thing down in Thind. 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 most strongly is not the harrow-the-hindmost rogue I remember. Whatever happened to the Swallow Stone-heart of old?"

I ignored her jibe. "I'll earn it, m'lady, my blood on that. There's a lot of Bantangu 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 you 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 you, 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."

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 be as much help as I used to be."

"We'll see," 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, able to breathe again. "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. Bring me his boots. I will decide what I want in exchange later. Have we a bargain?"

"His boots, m'lady?" That earned me a raised eyebrow. "Yes, m'lady. Thank you."

She snorted again. "You've been away too long, Swallow. You 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. I put my hand out and smothered the candle flame. Her picture was suddenly a picture again. I 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. I don't think the emir's guard would have flensed me for talking to her, but like I said, Luck loves a careful man.

I woke 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 a little 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 gold 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 have a look about in any case."

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. Ensworth, say, or some little cloudbird village in the Brumosos, somewhere Coriandel law didn't reach.

By the time they were done I had washed my face, 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 knew the bandits had to have spies in Coriandel itself, 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 depending on who was on the roof.

"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 his 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 his eyebrows. "And when, I beg you, did it last rain in Coriandel?" He was heavier around the middle than the men he had sent to fetch me, but there was still plenty of muscle in his arms. I remembered them from the *umram*. Most men wouldn't be able to swing those sabers he was so fond of for more than a minute. He 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 we had once been. From where he was sitting he must have been looking straight up my nose. I resisted the urge to pick it.

"Been a while," he finally said.

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

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

"Well, I'm sorry if I woke His Highness. 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 Highness's personal attention, we wouldn't be having this chat here, would we? Now, what you were doing, and why shouldn't I care?"

Muscle beneath the fat and teeth in his smile. 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 stupid and *never* soft. Leis had at least one magician working for him, probably more. Should have known they'd sniff out my little chat with Lady Kembe. 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 Highness 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 what they do? 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."

He 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?"

"Gaaah." I counted to three slowly. "No. Didn't, and wouldn't have. It's a damn stupid oath."

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" He 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 Luck how she's 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. An unjuristed oath, unlicensed 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 it was a new fashion that had passed me by. "Well. Come with me." He stood. He was still light on his feet for one so heavy. I beat him three touches to none the last time we faced each other in the *umram*. I doubted a real fight would be as one-sided.

We ambled over to the roof's edge, for all the world like two old comrades in arms out for an early-morning stroll. 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 brings their herds down in the fall it's the most chaotic place in the world. Even when they're not around, it's never silent, never still. I'll never grow tired of it.

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

I shook my head. "No, captain."

He 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 boot. Understood?"

"Yes, captain."

He nodded. "Good luck with the boy."

I resisted the urge to thump my chest. "Thank you, sir."

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.

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 two 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 but 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 Markham of Capligan's little trick 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 pushed around at play. They tell to themselves stories 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 forty 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 up 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 out of professional interest.

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? They were of the underearth, liking open sky and fresh air not at all. I drummed my fingers on my desk. Something had driven it into the upper air, or someone had called it. But then why a bonescuttle? If for murder, then better a lion or gargoye.

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 real 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. I opened my eyes. It lay on my desk, having been a-shelf in my basement.

I paged through it to remind myself of Ishad’s interrupted story. He had made half a dozen jobs 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 of Oro’s horses. Oro—no, Emir Oro, I ought to remember that—sent him into the Tombs with two Darpani. He emerged of the morning bearing the bonescuttle’s head and a lock of hair from one of his companions.

I frowned again. He burned the lock of hair with the proper words, my younger self had written, but what of the other Darpani? And his spirit was still down there, it might have driven the bonescuttle to the surface. *Armnepeteli*, they would name it, a ghost’s desire riding out in flesh.

But no, that felt infirm. Perhaps a year after his death, or at the birth of a child, but after so years? I made quick sums in my head. The stars were nothing like 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 the one my housekeeper sang as she swept. Why a different song now? Why *that* song?

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 Seyfertoise 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, full of small spells for calling winds or hiding 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—yes. This was a story of evil stepmothers, or partly.

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. My tribe's colors, though only scholars and I remembered that. The Mrulu killed most of us and sold the rest into slavery so they could grow coffee on our land. It was still a new thing in the north at such years, the black gold that brought far more of the metal kind 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 and shook my head. Spies and evil stepmothers? What was this that Ishad had dropped into my stew? I needed some fresh air.

As most houses in the Karaband, mine was two stories tall and shaped like a figure eight. The front courtyard was for public occasions, and was all most of my helpers ever saw. They brought me hither news and did what 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 to remind myself of the lost jungle of my youth. Other years I took pity on my housekeeper and kept just 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 full of 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. Idjifikan's Device gave you true answers to three questions asked three times, but only worked if you sent an innocent to their doom that day. The Baker's Gift brought the answer to your door, but doubled your appetite. Maerie of Ensworth used it four times and ended her day choking on a 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 the puzzle, leaving to me to tie them together. 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 whole garment.

I wandered as restless as a ghost for what was left of the night. My thoughts ranged blew hither and yon, from the stick and string games of my childhood to a joke a future king of Ensworth 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 beam of my story. There was a girl kept caged by her aunt, and Ishad's boy, and there had been something between Ishad and the aunt.

Had that been the all of it I would have spelled the boy's boots for remembrance of the time Ishad spent in my private courtyard and been done with it. But every thought of the girl twinged. I felt as though I ought to know her. Sehdié... 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 and I needed her to be elsewhere, and 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 steal her niece's life away.

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 up 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 of my greatest spell. 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 was no longer sure. That spell had helped me break the Mrulu, 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 a century ago if not for my unyielding. Occam the Bloody might never have become king.

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

Occam's Bath. If anyone else from my tribe had still been alive, they would have understood.

I woke after dawn in a 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'm fine," I yawned. She was a fifth my age, but fussed over me like 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's boy. I yawned. The silversmith's boy was coming along fine, but Thomas was 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 bald strength too greatly, and then I would have to find another apprentice.

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 slept again once the sun found me, then washed my face and other parts and returned to my study. 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 Coriandel's independence as his mother had been.

But too he was touchy about his own independence, and with cause. No ruler wants a two 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 Thomas's 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. It had been Tulip’s drawer before him, and—whose before that? I couldn’t remember. I knew I had it written down somewhere, though.

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

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 what's the point?" I asked. I was holding a wet towel against my nose, so my words came out muffled.

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

"I don't think it's doing any good."

"Would have if you'd come to see me right away," he said sharply. "Here, let me have another look."

I took the towel away and looked at him defiantly. My nose was starting to swell. 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. What were you doing looking at gloves, anyway? I've got plenty of old gloves 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 after school. Kerrem had just been put in charge of the group I was in. He'd been trying to teach us fractions all week, but I couldn't make soup or stew out of them. Being stupid made me feel angry.

What was worse, 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 selling coffee.

So instead of going home to work on spring traps and 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 Ensworth and Colway 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 the right size for my hands.

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 in two busy weeks.

I studied them hungrily. 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 the top glove. 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 in that year to a young bravo in gloves like those than they would to an apprentice rat catcher.

That's when the two boys who'd been walking by started making jokes about how tough Coriandel's rats must be if you needed gear like that to handle them. Or maybe the rats weren't tough. Maybe the rat catcher's boy was just scared of getting nipped or 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—fourteen or fifteen—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 were like me. Maybe they couldn't afford any of the things they wanted either, and pushing someone like me around was just 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...

That's when I discovered that sometimes walking away isn't the right thing to do. Kerrem put it into words for me later. "Sometimes," he said, trying his best to look profound, "Sometimes violence does less harm to your soul than silence."

I didn't know anything about souls. All I knew was that I'd had enough. 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, and fell.

The first boy helped the second one up as I scrambled back up. 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 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 all 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's mouth. 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 stow away with a northbound caravan, like Ishad did when he was my age. Or I could bash my face with a brick a few times to make things look so bad that my parents wouldn't even ask 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.

Sehdië 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 reading circle. 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, darling, 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 scream. 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—we didn't strictly need to any more, but dressing up was 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 spells in return. Ever since I was a little, 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 when Vurt 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.

"He's... 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 the abracadabra or 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 stood up. 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 or reminiscing about bouts they had seen years before I was born. I tried to appear dignified as I made my way to the other end of the stands. 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.

"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 starts his bouts with a half-hour recitation." He sighed theatrically. "Sad times / 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 a bit to one side, but in a good way, and his hair was cut so short that his scalp gleamed through it. He was very handsome. If he smiled, I would— 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 others 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, Sehdié!" 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 my other friends fussed, but I wasn't going to be fussed, not then. People around us started hissing, "Usti! Usti!" which Kerrem explained is what Darpani say to make their animals sit. So they sat and fretted through two more fights 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 mercenary or perhaps a caravan guard hoping to earn a few coins or find a new employer. He 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 fistfights to see who could pour my punch at picnics—Cathé and the others had told me all about it. They were jealous, but proud too, just like my aunt was proud of my posture and enunciation. Saints, my enunciation. I felt like a featherless parrot sometimes, reciting poetry over and over while she corrected the trill of my R's and the shush of my Th's.

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. He'd take strips off him."

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. His feet hit the ground, and the tip of his spear went *splat* in the middle of the northerner's chest.

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. "Sehddie. Come on, we have to go!"

I stood up as gracefully as I could. My heart was pounding so hard I was afraid my ribs might break. "Would you please thank him for me?" I said to Kerrem. "And give him my apologies, that I was unable to stay and thank him myself?"

He stood and sighed theatrically. "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. I think she was jealous, 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, like she always did. A week later we were back on the common benches. Kerrem sat beside us, and spent the whole time explaining the fine points of each fight to me, and then 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 down just a little closer to me than he should have. 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 be listening? He told me about his fights, and I asked questions, 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? Oh Luck and Fate and all their dark children, what was he going to do? He couldn't come to my window! He could— He might— He was a rogue, a prize fighter, no more respectable than his teacher.

Who was, I must say, hardly respectable at all. Once Kerrem described him, I remembered seeing him at other matches, a bottle and a glass on the bench beside him, bellowing and cursing 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.

Vurt didn't seem to either, the first time I saw Ishad do it to 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 booed when his opponent fell for it.

What do you wear for your first after-hours suitor? I couldn't dress up. If my aunt suspected for even a heartbeat that—no, I couldn't dress up. 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.

A Conversation in an Alley

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

"I didn't run away!"

"Well 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 all their mercies. 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 endanger 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 ‘I’m so tired’ 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 royal highness the Emir Oro, third of that name, hereby declares that today is Coriandel’s 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?”

“Don’t even know why I’m listening to you. 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 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? Aah, 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’ll 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 Colway that he practically came out there to help him.”

“It wasn’t quite that bad.”

“It weeping was so that bad!”

“Sh, keep your voice down!”

“I will not! 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 keep his nephews out of trouble. 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 say something nice about you 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 is a place with no sky, no breeze, no sweet grass, and no fresh water. Hell begins with 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 dank, 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 it were his 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 damply in our lanterns' light. Small things fluttered about 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 moved quickly, lightly, 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. Narrow leaves and bony fingers were etched into the stone around it. Twenty strides of echoing tunnel brought us to a broad stone bridge with waist-high walls on each side. Squat stone figures crouched on them: manticores with their tails in their mouths, devils 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 wall, his lantern reflected off water ten strides below.

"Stay in the middle," the Karabandi said. "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, we saw that the wall opposite us 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 the face of a cackling crone.

Suddenly the Karabandi 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 thy grandfather's name-day gift?"

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 paying him so much attention and me so little. It was so sweet that I could only eat a few fingerfuls. I buried the rest in the roots of a dry aspen, afraid that I might 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 Laughing? 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 emir's thief had warned us, "And don't run. Not unless you really, really have to." But the voices grew louder, two or three speaking at once, putting to word things that should never have been done.

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

"Keep moving!" the Karabandi said roughly. "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 track when killing sand misers. I joined in, and my mother's-side cousin as well. We sang, then shouted, hurrying in time with our words, but still the voices grew louder. They were speaking past our ears now, straight into our souls, sucking 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 old, 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 below us. "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? Should tell the emir to 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 sighed. "It was just a joke, lad. There's easier ways for him to—"

"Not the emir. This one 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 like those in the first chamber. Instead, 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 first but still large enough 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. "To be quiet," he whispered in my ear so as not to wake my baby sister. "To be 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 that day words fell from him 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 me 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 so many trees in my life. I felt like a small 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 nest and evening birds woke. Something larger than a cat pushed branches out of the way in the distance. My father picked up his bow then, but whatever it was went its own way and he relaxed again.

The sky darkened and 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're 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 back 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 chalcedony. 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. The *iyemnelili* that stood there might have been human once. Or it might have been made of human blood mixed with fouler things. Its legs and arms were too long for its short 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... hrrrk. What a fox is, do you? 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 Darpani 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 at it, 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, then straightened out of his fighting crouch and grinned. “Should have known. They set seemings on us at Armaq, wyrms and undead and what-not, all just—”

My mother’s-side cousin screamed his battle scream as the real *iyemnelili* lunged at him 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.

“To be 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 opened wider than should have been possible.

The Karabandi’s sword took its head from its shoulders. Its body dropped to the floor again. Its head landed 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 cut skin, not flesh. "To be away from here," my mother's-side cousin urged quietly. "To fear 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 coin. My mother's-side cousin and I looked at the Karabandi. He shrugged. "Leave it." We stepped wide around the twisted 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 described it to us as big enough for an elephant. "You really don't want to fall in," she said, as if we might have thought to do so.

Another silver gate waited for us on the far side of the garden, another black passage, and more stairs, down and down. At their end lay the tombs of those who had ruled the Karaband after the Mutiny. Ruled badly, for the most part, wielding ancient scavenged sorceries that they did not understand until they too destroyed themselves. We remember, even when those who live in cities forget or pretend to forget.

The Karabandi drank another mouthful from his canteen. "Ready?" he asked us once again. I have wondered since what he would have said or done if we had told him "no". But instead, we nodded and followed him.

Oro Shares Some Pistachios

Seventeen years after putting on the royal collar, I still missed him. Every day. When I sent him to Seyferte, I really did mean to 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, I told myself it wasn't the right time. Not yet.

The morning finally came when my Minister of Propriety begged an audience to go over preparations for arranging a meeting to discuss how best to celebrate yet another anniversary of my ascension to the throne. Seventeen years... 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. 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, and it even 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 guard post on the Great Southern Road was nearing completion.

I shook my head to clear it. "Yes, whenever 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 she 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 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 complaining. I ignored it. I deserved a morning to myself.

The thief pursed his lips. Third time in as many months, he didn't say. "Does my lord have any preferences regarding disguise?"

"My lord would appreciate it if you didn't speak to him 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 spit.

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 some foreign spy or some such nonsense. Ah, if only...

Past the laundry yard was a larger one where half a dozen servants were setting pieces of dayglass on shelves to catch the morning light. Some were tinged with red and orange, and a few 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 up to the palace from the city below. 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 on what lay beneath her slightly-too-well-fitted shift. An old man with a case of veneer samples stopped to catch his

breath and shake a stone from his sandal. A woman with a baby in a sling at her waist paused to wait for him. The air was still cool, but the early sun 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 Ossisswean was offering people strips of chicken cooked in hot oil with cumin seeds from a rickety fry stall. I gave her a slotted wooden penny for three skewers, not caring that I burned the roof of my mouth on my first bite, and another for a double handful of pistachios. Cracking pistachios and dropping the shells on the ground was a delicious little act of rebellion when I was young. Now, I bought some every time I fled the palace. When they were gone, it was 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, to listen to a disputation on Balanced philosophy? Or the cloudbird's yard near Tomb Hill?

The cloudbird'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 on the one-eyed beggar who'd been following me since the fryer's stall, 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 flight of crumbling steps that had no name I'd ever learned, and I was in Six Ears Square. I paused at the top to make a mental note about the stairs. Someone might pay for the stairs' 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 dump it over someone's head. That would burn going on and tear skin coming off.

As if cued by my thought, the door they had been watching swung. Two Darpani boys stepped out and squinted in the sunlight. Twelve and fourteen, 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 the abracadabra.

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. Twelve 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. Somebody would be held responsible.

Just as I filled my lungs to shout, another boy, a Coriandi, stepped onto the square. He must have been waiting behind the old lemon tree in the corner. 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, and 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 said that if he started, he wouldn't stop until someone dropped him.

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.

I clapped. "Bravo," I said, chuckling. "Well played."

The boy with the practice sword straightened up, breathing hard. "As you say." He would have been sixteen.

"Wait." I strode over, patting the air to stop him from leaving. "I meant what I said. That was very well played." I nodded the way the two Darpani boys had gone. "Are they 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?"

"About a month."

"And you've been coming here ever since?"

He nodded. "Came by once just to... I don't know. Just to look."

It was easy to fill in what he hadn't said. Just to look. Just to see what happened after you died. Did the world notice? Did anything change? Or were the Bantangui right? Did the world just repeat itself, over and over, without ever noticing that it was doing so?

"And those sandal-lickers you chased off were on them like gargoyles on a dead sheep?"

His nodded, his mouth set.

I scanned the shuttered windows again. "And everyone else 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 nerving themselves up to it." I gestured at his practice sword he still had in his hand. "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. “No, thank you.” He returned my smile a trifle uncertainly.

I sighed as he walked away. I could have had my Master of Thieves’ shadows follow him, 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 and why I was, as it always did. 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...

Sweet's Return

Felt strange, going back to Coriandel. My heart beat a little faster as we crested the last rise and saw the city. 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 almost hurt my eyes.

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. "Couldn't see it myself if I hadn't 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, 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 Oro to have to talk to me just because I was there. He could find me easily enough if he wanted to talk to me. I no longer hoped that he would.

"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 troop.

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, "To sell this one for a lion's breakfast, it should take a stone in its 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 fresh off the blackgrass."

"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 twist 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. "Lady." I had always been "Wave" to her. I had no idea why.

"How goes your journey?"

"Well enough, lady." One of our little caravan's guards had knifed another over a girl who didn't like either of them. A would-be saint from Ruuda had sleepwalked into a sand miser's pit. Not bad, considering.

"And you are now how far from Coriandel?"

"About three gallops, lady. We'll be in the fields soon."

"Good. I need you to find someone for me." She quickly gave me one of her usual half-useful descriptions: young, human, female, with two friends, one of them fat, had slept with a rag dog every night until she was ten, fond of Ruudian romance novels but not supposed to read them, 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?" I asked sourly.

An eyebrow went up. "There is only one in Coriandel that I know of," she replied evenly. "Anything else?"

"Yes. 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."

"What do I tell her?"

Lady Kembe frowned. "Tell her that you're going to free her."

Marvelous. "Does it matter if anyone knows she's gone?"

Lady Kembe smiled lazily. "Oh, someone will notice, I'm sure." She paused, weighed matters far too complicated to share with a mere horse. "Ensworth, I think. Yes, Ensworth. Have your man talk to the cloudherds. That would be the quickest way."

"Lady." 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 had to fly her away on a cloud. I didn't imagine she would think it was all that wonderful if she had ever actually done it. I certainly didn't.

"Oh, and Wave?"

“Lady?”

“Do you remember Swallow?”

Swallow? It took me a moment to remember who she meant. Swallow was Ishad, the fencing master Oro had sent into the Tombs. “Yes, lady?” I made it a question.

“Good.” She nodded once, firmly. “Under no circumstances is his boy to come with her.”

“Yes, lady.”

We caught up with the rest of our troop just as they reached the Market Gate. “To have caught a stone in his hoof,” Buckle explained to the guardsmen, his accent no thicker than it should have been. Two copper pennies for him, and one for me, bought us each the dab of lime-colored dye that would let us stay in the city until dawn.

I carried Buckle through the streets of Coriandel, exchanging glances 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 not talking to you. We may not like each other, but if we didn’t hang together, humans would likely eat us separately. *Trouble?* I asked silently. *No trouble*, a donkey signed back. *Do you know of any?* There were guardsmen about, in pairs and threes, but no more than usual. If Elijene the parrot had still been alive, she could have filled both my ears with gossip and rude jokes, but her death had found her since my last visit to Coriandel.

The sun was almost directly above our heads by the time we reached the Dubious Fiddler. “Tie me up here,” I muttered to Buckle. “Not too tight. I’ll need a stall for the night. And a blanket—and shake it out this time.”

Buckle looped my reins over the hitching post outside the Fiddler. 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 ambled more these days than I had when I was young. 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 a couple of years before. The wyrm it showed me trampling had actually been about half again larger, and my mane had been quite 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, with a face as round and as beautiful as the moon, in a simple black dress, girls on either side

chattering to her. And yes, one of them was the solid that Buckle was fond of. Time to amble.

I shook my head 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, people won't see you—and came up silently behind them.

"But we'll be late again!" the solid one protested.

My mark rolled her eyes. "Who cares? By the time we get back to your house, we'll have honey all over our fingers." 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 giggles.

Right on cue, Buckle came running over. "To weep from shame," he blurted, his blackgrass accent as thick as cheese. "Bad horse!" He clouted my nose a little harder than our little play called for. "Please, to apologize." He fumbled a few coins out of his purse. "To choose, yes? To choose?"

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 spend a little money on such a beautiful—oh, thank you, thank you, honored mistress. Please, come show me which you want.

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 baklava," the girl told the vendor, who had been watching the proceedings with about as much 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 from behind her sweet.

"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 wealthiest districts of Coriandel? “No. Do you know the old 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 clip-clopped closer for a look.

Pistachio shells. The sculptor had detailed a dozen pistachio shells on the ground near Oro’s feet.

I whinnied. Buckle was there in a heartbeat. “What’s wrong?”

I nodded at the replica of Oro. “What’s that in his hand?”

Buckle squinted for a moment. “Looks like nuts.”

“That’s what I thought.” He sure as hell hadn’t had any nuts in his hands when we were fighting the wyrm.

Sehdie sat waiting for us on the stone lip of the well on Quiet Saints Street, petting 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 Ensworth while I told her who I was and who I served.

“But why me?” she asked.

“Magician’s ways,” Buckle said 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 good ones. Now, are you coming?”

She hesitated. “Can I bring someone?”

“No.”

Her face set. “Then no in return.”

Rust and ruin. Why do humans always make things so complicated? “All right. Maybe. Who?”

She twisted her sleeves in her hands. “There’s this boy...”

I shook my head. “Nope. She was very specific about that. Ishad’s boy stays here.”

She looked at me miserably. “It’s not him.”

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 dark 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 studied how they fell about us. 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.

“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 first. 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. “To be too damp here for anything to catch 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 has not been unrolled for a season.

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 hard way. Where’s that third lantern?”

I unshuttered it while the Karabandi boosted my mother's-side cousin up to the roof of a nearby tomb. It 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 wrist.

A dark splatter of blood 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 he drew his dagger, the horned one he called a swordbreaker, and waited.

We waited, breath after breath, but nothing came. Finally the Karabandi lowered his sword and dagger.

"Gaaah. This is useless."

My mother's-side cousin picked up his lantern. "To try somewhere else?"

"I suppose. Maybe it—behind you!"

The bonescuttle lunged out of the shadows, chittering and snapping its claws. It was shaped like a scorpion but as large as a small horse, low against the ground with a wicked barbed tail arching over its back. The lower parts of the legs were fleshless bone, and its head had sideways jaws like the small evils you find 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 glass shattered. The broken dayglass flared like a tiny sun as trapped light rushed out.

The Karabandi was on the thing even before my cousin rolled to his feet. He bellowed and swung his sword overhand at its claw. 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 take his sword two-handed.

My mother's-side cousin jabbed his spear in between two of the bonescuttle's legs. Its tail snapped across his face, cutting him open from temple to jaw. I was on it then, screaming.

My full weight was behind that thrust. My spear scored the hard shell on its back but did not break through. As it slipped off I ran straight into the creature, tripping over it as my knees hit its side. I tumbled headlong onto the stones beyond it. 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 masked in 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 bonescuttle's tail snapped down like a spring trap and buried its curved black tip in his shoulder. My mother's-side cousin 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 chattered and reared back on its rearmost legs. The Karabandi's sword whistled beneath it just a thumb away from 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.

"To be..." he gasped. "To be..."

"To be quiet," 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 bonescuttle'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. "To not be our way."

I felt rather than saw him nod. "I'll do it if you don't want his blood on you."

I shook my head again. "To have been foretold. To be 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, small streams beside the river of sweat coming from 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 was coming 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.

"To burn this in sunlight," I said.

He nodded. "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. "To have a trail now. To 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. "They always come back to their kills."

I picked up my lantern without looking at either the Karabandi or the dead man. "To not use this as bait," I said softly.

“I know, I know, but you eat what Luck puts in front of you or you go hungry, right?”

I can use a spear one-handed. I brought it around so that its barbed head lay against his throat. “To 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. “To 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.

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 a moneylender on Third Shelf Street, and the next thing Onnemen and I knew we were living next door to a fencing 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 a courtyard full of bravos next door was going to be a short ride to grandparenthood. Onne just grunted. "She's a sensible girl," he said. "She'll be all right."

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 sew the buttons back on 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. If I just wanted to listen, I could have stayed downstairs. And anyway, if they were doing something improper, well, the sooner I found out about it, the better.

Ishad caught sight of 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," 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 waved at each other, but we never mentioned it when we met each other in the street, just as we never mentioned it to our husbands. Like them, I was always back downstairs in time to cook dinner.

One day he was waiting for me on the roof. He had leaned a ladder against his courtyard wall and was sitting with his back to me, and his legs dangling in the air. "Quite a view," he said over his shoulder. "I can see why you like it so much."

I had a choice then. 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. There were so many things I wanted him to say to me that I knew he never would, but when I lay in bed later that night, silent tears on my face, he put his arm over me and mumbled in my ear without ever waking up. He was a good man, as good as he knew how to be.

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 wondered afterward if that was when my youngest son fell in love with the sound of swordplay. Oh please, Luck, if you have ever loved anyone, love him. Please, love him.

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. A spell on Vurt's boots to guide him, thank you very much, that's wonderful. But wait—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, thank you very much, I *would* like to be there to help him when he comes through.

Too weeping bad those mysteries didn't remind her to tell me the rest of it.

After the door disappeared behind Vurt I rowed back to where we'd started, half-expecting to find a squad of the emir's finest waiting for me. I secured the boat to an old iron ring set in the stone, then shuttered my lantern and sat alone in the darkness. It was peaceful, even when something went *gloop* a dozen strides away. Didn't really expect to see sunlight again just then. Hated the thought. Hated 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. It was time to go to work.

Lady Kembe's secret path was a series of handholds in the far wall. Each one appeared to be nothing more than a timeworn crack in the rock, but if you knew to look, you could see that each was within reach—barely—of the next. I shouldered my pack, hung my lantern on my belt, and started climbing.

Up and up again, then across. What had seemed like just another shadow on the wall turned out to be a narrow cleft. I moved like a sailor topping a mast in high seas, three points secure while a single hand or foot moved. The handholds soon grew slime-slippery with condensation. I stopped cursing Lady Kembe, the bonescuttle, and the day I was born, and concentrated on wedging my hands and feet into the cracks as firmly as I could.

A narrow ledge gave me a few moments to catch my breath. My heart was pounding, and damn me for an old man, my arms were shaking.

The ledge disappeared two strides in front of me, just where the cleft narrowed. There were no more handholds—that would have been too easy—so it was time for some back-and-brace work.

I shrugged my pack off my right shoulder so that it hung from the crook of my left elbow. It wasn't heavy, but it did awkward things to my

balance. A deep breath for courage, then I leaned back to put my shoulders against the wall and began shuffling along the ledge, trying very hard not to think about what might be lurking in the water below.

By the time the ledge narrowed to nothing, the soles of my boots were pressed against the rock like hungry piglets against their mother's belly. Right foot, left foot, each one planted against the rock, then wriggle my shoulders along a handspan or two and start again. Saints painting pictures, but it was hard work.

And then I dropped my damned pack. When the ledge reappeared I got my boots back onto it without any trouble, but when I straightened up and reached for a handhold my left foot slipped, and it was the pack or me.

There was a splash as it hit the water, and more splashing as whatever had been waiting for me gulped it down. "May you choke," I said bitterly. The bag had held four bags of lemonwood ash and two of burned chilies. Throwing them on your trail would kill your scent, so I figured if I threw some into these pools, maybe it would distract whatever was down there. It probably wouldn't have worked, but I'd never know now.

The ledge beneath my feet widened into a proper path as the cleft opened onto a second chamber. I swung my lantern slowly from side to side. The wall to my right was perhaps twenty strides away. In front, the dark water ended against a stone walkway raised a handspan above the waterline with a stride-wide channel in its center.

The ledge angled down toward the walkway. I was almost on it before I realized there was nothing on its other side except empty air. I was standing on the top of a dam. The whispered roar I had been hearing was water splashing against stone an unguessable distance below.

I whistled despite myself. "Well, this is unexpected," I said to no one. I drew my sword and started to lean out for a look, then lay flat on the stone instead and slid forward to peer over the edge.

The dam face angled out below me. Stairs wide enough for one man to walk on comfortably zigzagged back and forth across it into the darkness below.

I sat up and picked a scrap of dinner from between my teeth. I could have started straight down, but what was the rush? Vurt was going to be a while. I took my lucky whetstone out of my pocket and ran it along the length of my sword. *Sssshink*. The blade didn't need sharpening—I'd seen to it that afternoon—but my nerves did. *Sssshink. Sssshink.* It was a comforting sound.

I would have given just about anything right then to be at home, or even in a comfortable cell, but as I heard a man in Praczedt say just before they hanged him, you can't uncook a piece of meat. I never found out whether that was just a colorful saying, or whether he had actually been condemned for some obscure culinary offence. It was possible—the count who ruled that particular corner of the world had ordered his chef's right hand cut off for putting cilantro in an omelet, and might have had equally strong views about overdone roasts.

Sssshink. I touched the whetstone to my forehead Darpani-style to thank it for its help, then dropped it back in my pocket and stood up. I'd recognized the dam face, of course. I'd seen it years ago, looking up from below. The Moonset Door was down there, which meant Vurt would be too. Lantern in one hand, sword in the other, I started down to meet him.

I tried not to think about anything in particular as I went, but it was no use. I'd gone soft since Armaq. Back then, all we let ourselves think was, "Just one more morning." We never thought any further than that, in case Luck thought we were being greedy. Just one more morning, one more chance.

But Armaq was a long time ago, and I'd gone soft since then. I should have been listening for movement, but instead I was remembering the night before when I slipped into the house next to mine, quiet as a ghost, to put Vurt's boots back in their place by the door.

"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, Meshash," I said softly.

She jerked her chin toward the boots I had just set down. "For Luck?"

"Something like that." She waited, just looking at me.

"I'm going to take him down to the Tombs," I said reluctantly. "And I'm going to bring him back. I asked a favor of someone I used to know. If that's not enough, nothing would be."

You'd think we were both teenagers, the way we acted around each other. She had lines around her eyes and her mouth now, but was still the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She should have run away with me, but her other children needed her, and she truly did love her husband. He was gone now, but we were who we were, two people who had never done anything more than be awkward around each other.

That's what I was thinking about as I trudged down the steps on the face of the dam. About Meshash, and about Vurt pushing himself harder than a child ought to, practicing in his rear courtyard 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 stiff-necked stuck-up like that girl he thought he was in love with.

But that wasn't fair. I didn't know anything about her except the little I'd pried out of Vurt, and the little more I'd found out doing my own reconnaissance. "Polite enough," the coffee seller told me, "But the way she talks and dresses, you'd think the emir's grandfather was still on the throne." She leered. "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 laughed. Her aunt was the one from that awful picnic on Palace Mount, the equinox after I came out of the Tombs. An Answer lad had introduced us, Peter or Piotr, one of those unmusical northern names. He and I fought a couple of times in the *umram*, then became friends. He fell for a silk merchant's daughter—Awmé? Awbé? Something like that. She was already betrothed, but he didn't mind. And she had a sister. "Almost as pretty as she is," he said.

It was awful. The one Peter was in love with 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 Peter was giving her sister. We ate and drank, and I told all my usual stories, and somehow we wound up in the rooms Peter 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 Peter next door, well, like I said, she was jealous. Peter and I walked them home around midnight, and I never saw her again.

I had forgotten completely about her until Vurt met Sehdie. It could just be coincidence, but how could you ever know? You'd have to get everyone in the world to tell you everything they knew, and even then, you wouldn't have all of it unless you could get the stones and the ocean to speak as well. All you can ever do is pick a few pieces and stitch them together however makes best sense.

The stairs made long, shallow traverses across the dam face, a hundred and twenty steps from landing to landing. The blocks were some gray stone I didn't recognize, and the joints so well made they were almost impossible to see.

I was two-thirds of the way down from the seventh landing when I saw something waiting for me on the eighth. It looked like the dwarf oak in the emir's public garden up on Palace Mount. What in the saints' names was it doing down here?

I glanced over the side. The drop to the next flight of steps wouldn't kill me, but I would break my ankle if I landed wrong. I would have taken the chance when I was young.

I started down again slowly. I kept my sword at guard, listening for any sounds trying to hide in the faint splash of water hitting water below.

You think at my age I would have learned something about traps. Twenty steps above the tree, I glanced over the edge again to see what the jump looked like. Just as I did so, something moved in the air above me. I spun around and slashed. My blade caught meat. Whatever it was missed me by a palm's width, hitting the edge of the stairs instead and falling over the side.

I spun around again, just in time to see another one ripple down out of the tree and flow up the stairs toward me. It was 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 had a name, I had no idea what it was. And I have no idea how it managed to speak, but it did.

"Am I hurt?" it whispered.

"Somewhat," another voice whispered from below.

"Oh dear. How unpleasant." The one in front of me scuttled up the wall. I couldn't hear the other one, but if this one could climb, then—

I leaped to one side. The one I had cut rippled up onto the stairs where I had been standing. Its teeth clacked. "I missed," it whispered.

"Can I reach it?" the one above me asked.

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 song, but packs? You would think they were glued on.

The two creatures came at me together, one on the wall high to my right, the other up the steps at my feet. The one on the wall went past me. I couldn't watch it without taking my eyes off the wounded one. They were 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 shouted. The creature in front of me reared up and lunged like a snake. I cut across and down, knocking it out of my way just long

enough for me to leap past it. But as I turned with the blow, I missed my footing. *Oh, you idiot*, I thought as I fell. *You stupid, clumsy amateur*.

It's hard enough falling on a floor. The drop's a lot longer on steps, and steps have edges. If I hadn't bounced against the wall as I went down, it would have been all over. As it was, I heard my head crack against stone. I heard it. Without thinking, I rolled to my left and dropped to the next flight, just as the underbeast lunged at me again.

Somehow I landed upright, but my right foot rolled sideways, and something inside my ankle snapped. I went down in a heap, but hung onto my sword and lantern.

I lay there panting, cold sweat on my face, my sword point-up in case one of the things dropped on me. I was dead. I knew I was dead. *I'm sorry*, I thought. *I did my best*.

Feet scuttled on stone above me. I rolled over with a groan and stood on my left leg. My right ankle made me want to puke. The tree was just a few steps higher up the steps. If I could reach it, I could lean against it.

Bones lay underneath it—ribs, shins, a skull, all picked clean. There was a spear there too, a hunting spear with a barbed head.

"Is it disturbing my toys?" a voice whispered.

"It is thinking about it," the same voice answered.

"They're not yours," I said loudly. I knew that spear, even if its head was rusty. I hadn't seen it in twenty years, but I knew it. It was the Darpani's.

I hooked my lantern onto my belt and bent over awkwardly. "It is touching my toys!" a whispering voice protested. *Damn right*, I thought. I picked up the skull and hefted its weight. It was Cup's. Don't ask me how I knew, I just did. And don't ask me how his bones climbed three flights of stairs. The last time I had seen him was down at the water's edge, and he wasn't going anywhere from there.

"I'm sorry, lad," I said softly. "I truly am."

"It is playing with my toys! It shouldn't play with my toys!"

"It's not a damn toy!" I yelled. "It's a friend of mine! Now put a cork in it!"

They came clattering at me then, both of them, hissing. "You want it? Here!" I threw Cup's skull up into the air. One of them screeched and reared back to catch it, and I did something I would beat a student blue for doing. I threw 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 wasn't the first time

I'd thrown mine. I'd have to remember to beat myself blue if I made it back to the surface.

It took the creature point-first right between a pair of legs. It fell flat on its ugly back with the sword sticking up out of its belly. The second one threw itself at me, mouth gaping. Cup's spear was out of reach, but I already had my lantern in my hand. I punched with it as hard as I could.

The creature gagged on broken glass. I bellowed and pulled my hand out of its mouth. Bloody bits of gleaming glass flew everywhere. The thing writhed on the stone, bashing its head against the wall. I hopped over to Cup's spear, picked it up, reversed it, and buried it in the creature's back.

The thing twisted and snapped a little, but that was just its limbs not knowing that it was dead yet. And then everything was still and dark, completely dark. My lantern was gone, my pack was gone, my ankle was broken or near enough, and my sword—I needed my sword.

I hopped two steps toward where the first creature had fallen, but damn me if it wasn't gone. The sword's weight must have rolled it over the side. If Luck loved me, it would be on the next flight of steps.

I rooted 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 flipped open the cover. It wasn't nearly as bright as the lantern, but the polished silver on its back bounced the light back to the front. I swept the beam slowly across the steps. There was still no weeping sword, but there beside me was Cup's skull.

I picked it up. "Well," I said, "Here we are again." I felt light-headed, the way you do just before exhaustion turns your bones to lead. "Forgot to tell you, I burned your friend's lock of hair. Wish I'd taken one of yours. I'm sorry about that."

There's strength in blood and bone. Or maybe he had been waiting for me. I don't know. I just know that something suddenly prickled on the back of my neck. For a moment I thought it was the underbeasts' mother coming to finish what its children had begun, but then I felt a particular kind of chill, one you never forget.

I put his skull down carefully and cleared my throat. "Cup Rainbow Reaching," I said. I raised my hands in the darkness, palms out, and bowed my head. "I greet you."

Patience Wakes

Something splashed in the water high above me on the other side of the dam. A distant cousin of mine swallowed it whole and swam back to its lair. Something alive? No, I had not heard it wriggling, and there was no tang of blood in the water falling into my pool, just dyed cotton, metal, glass, and oil.

Ah, but what was this? Footsteps? No one had come down the stairs in a very long time. Two legs, and boots. He—or she? No, from the stride it was a he. And he smelled familiar. He had been here before. I remembered him. I hate remembering. It is the enemy of patience.

He stopped to speak to the echo of my previous meal, words words words, then more steps. 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 few dozen centuries and the water on my side of the dam would reach the top, and then I could go and look for my lost love.

The scavengers nearly dealt with him. I heard their chatter and their little clawed feet, A blade bit flesh and one of them splashed into my pool. It was still twitching despite the sword in its belly. I opened my jaws. The sword's sandshaw leather grip added a piquant note to the taste of metal and flesh.

There was a long silence. I wondered if they had killed each other, the second scavenger and the man, but then I felt a strange thumping. Was he clubbing the scavenger's corpse? No, that was him. He was too badly injured to walk. Better and better, with the best yet to come.

The patient prepare. As the man slowly made his way down the steps, I let the current pull me away from my perch into the center of the pool.

Boots in Darkness

Clump clump clump clump. We are awake now, vaguely. 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. He doesn't notice us guiding him. We are heavier when he chooses a wrong turn, lighter when he takes the right one. When he shifts his weight from leg to leg we turn him ever so slightly.

We are supposed 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.

It doesn't matter. Tonight we are boots, *clump clump clump clump* from here to where we need to be.

Vurt in Darkness

Before I crossed that bridge I would have told you that I was proud of who I was—of what I had made of myself. I came from a family of rat catchers, but I had won five chains in the *umram* before I was twenty.

Then the voices started. Ishad and Kerrem warned me they would remind me of 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 with those voices reminding you of everything you should have said but didn't, or did but shouldn't have done?

I bent over and dry heaved as soon as I stepped off the bridge. When I legs stopped shaking I picked up my lantern and moved on.

The lights on the trees in the stone garden were everything Ishad said they would be. He didn't tell me there would be cobwebs, though. They hung in filmy gray sheets that swayed gently as I passed.

The tunnel that led to the Tombs was on the far side of the garden. Ishad warned me to stay close to the wall, but somehow I found my feet taking me toward the well in the garden's center instead.

The well's mouth was made of irregular, tightly-fitted stones, and reached half-way up my thighs. I set my lantern on it and leaned over for a look. I don't know what I hoped to see—it was as black as one of Kerrem's ink pots.

Something stirred the cobwebs behind me as I straightened up. I hesitated. My sword was on my hip, but I had my spear in my right hand. I picked up my lantern with my left and turned around casually as if to walk back the way I had come. There was nothing there except the cobwebs and the tiny lights glittering on the trees.

I felt the stir again behind me on the other side of the well. How had it moved that fast? Or were there two of them? I slid my hand down the haft of my spear and started walking toward the exit.

The prickling on the nape of my neck grew stronger. Something, or someone, was approaching. Suddenly I whirled and went 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 lifted like the skirts of a Hett dancer, then drifted silently back into place like shrouds. The garden was empty and still except for me and my panting.

The feeling that something was behind me, coming closer, grew stronger by the heartbeat. I spun around again. Shadows capered across the wall. Fear squirmed like cold jelly in my gut. "Show yourself!" I said boldly. No one answered.

I swallowed dryly. The back of my neck still tingled as if a cold breeze had slipped its fingers down under my collar. Childhood stories welled up inside me. "They always come from behind," my father had told me.

"Behind what?" I asked.

"Behind everything," he said.

I set the lantern down on the lip of the well but kept my spear pinned against my body with one elbow. Empty hands, full grave, that was what Ishad said. I jammed my fingers into my ears. "Show yourself!" I said again. I had to be deaf to this world if I wanted to hear the next.

The cobwebs stirred as if someone was pressing themselves against them from the other side. A hand, an arm, the outline of a face... A man-shape stood there, taller than me, wiry and still. The cobweb only reached to his knees, so he looked as though he was floating.

The ghost raised its hands in greeting, palms toward me. I raised my own. The cobweb drew it clearly enough for me to see its lips move. I put my fingers back in my ears.

"...place. To return to the light. The light. To return..." it whispered.

"Forgive me, honored sir, but I cannot." I spoke softly, not knowing if it could hear me. "I am oath-sworn to destroy an underbeast that plagues the world above, a bonescuttle. I cannot return until I am done this."

Something that no longer breathed struggled to shape breath in my ears. "Bones... In sunlight..."

"I'm sorry," I said. We have a duty to release the dead, but what could I do? It could have been dead a year or a thousand, tied to the world by some unavenged evil or loosely-worded oath. Even if I were a magician, it might take me a lifetime to find the spilled blood or childhood toy that was its anchor. But I wasn't, and I only had one night, and a bonescuttle to kill.

I drew my fingers from my ears and picked up my lantern. I bowed my head for a moment, then let my feet carry me away.

Then something really did move. I was on guard in an instant. A misshapen body crawled into the light a few strides away, patting the ground carefully as if searching for something. Its trunk was too short and too round for its arms and legs, and its head—its head was missing.

It must have sensed something, me or the light from my lantern, because it froze with one hand in the air. I held my breath. It slowly lowered its hand and resumed its patient search. I waited until it crawled back out of the light before going on my way. I still 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 was open. Its bars were made of silver that had dripped and run like hot wax. Maybe it was supposed to be art. Sehdié or Kerrem might have known.

I checked my lantern. It seemed just as bright as ever. Six hours until sunrise. Six hours to find the bonescutter, kill it, and be gone. At least my oath didn't itch as much as it had.

I slipped through the gate and into the mausoleum. The walls were plain white stone—white for purity, white for death. The ceiling was too high for my lantern's light to reach, and the floor was tiled in black and white. Something with clawed feet had gouged deep furrows long ago across them near the entrance.

Something moth-sized fluttered past overhead. I suddenly felt as lonely as the Last Man, and wondered what Sehdié was doing at that moment. Was she burning sweet herbs in a candle and whispering my name over and over to remind Luck that I needed aid?

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. I looked and looked, 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 looking for Sehdié.

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 beyond. "Sehdie! It's me, Vurt!" Which was a foolish thing to say. Who else would it be in the middle of the night, hanging by one hand from a roof beam outside her bedroom window?

"Vurt?" she whispered through the window. 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 window 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 near 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 then 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—never. 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 hefted my spear. Spears I understood. I would worry about Sehdie when the morning came. About Sehdie and—and what the voices had said. Right now, I had work to do.

Mausoleums and monuments crowded together around me, an entire city in which nothing living stirred. There were squat towers built to withstand century-long sieges and houses so delicate that they reminded me of the Bantangi racing kites I had seen in puppet shows. A few looked more like strange machines, pumps and wheels and I know not what.

Statues stood 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 had been Gifted with speech.

“Well,” I said to no one, “Bonescuttle, bonescuttle, hither to me,” and immediately I felt embarrassed for reciting a children’s rhyme in that solemn place.

Finding the bonescuttle would have been like trying to find a lost ring in the market if Ishad hadn’t thought ahead. I slipped my pack from my

shoulders and set it on a nearby pedestal. A man whose braided beard stretched to his waist scowled down at me as I untied the flap.

Rope, chalk dust for my hands, two good 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 opened the top of the cage and snatched out a rat. Its teeth caught on my leather gloves. The dab of goat's blood on the rat's forehead had dried and gone crusty, but the smell was still unnaturally strong. So was the feeling that the rat ought to have been too big to pick up. I didn't know where Ishad had gone to have them spelled, but the magic felt strong enough to me. From fifty paces away, they would even look like goats. It ought to be enough to make the bonescuttle drool.

I took a length of string from my pocket, slipped it under the struggling creature's forearms, and cinched it tight. Tiny eyes glared at me. I looked up at another nearby statue. One hand was folded across his chest. The other was raised, palm forward. It could have been a greeting, or a farewell, or a blessing. Just then, it was a handy place to tie the other end of the string.

Twist and squeak as it would, the rat could not reach the cord to gnaw its way free. I tied another rat to the tail of a horse twenty strides away, and a third around the handle of a scroll that was being eternally read by a woman who seemed slightly amused by the words before her. Then I swung myself up onto an empty pedestal to wait.

Sehdie 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, darling, it's as if you're not even here when I'm speaking to you any longer!"

"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 afraid. Afraid of being smothered, even more than before. The feeling grew stronger every day. It was bad enough that my aunt wanted me to be a fairytale princess, prim and proper, like she had been when she was 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 when I asked about his life outside the *umram*, about his family or what plays he liked, he looked at me as if I had suddenly started speaking Ruudian. It was as if we were actors from different plays who had accidentally wound up on stage at the same time.

There was no way I could talk to him about this. He probably wouldn't even have understood the question. And I didn't dare ask my girlfriends. So I finally 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 started listening to me, really listening, 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 prize 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 rope and courage. The bull was yelling insults at them, claiming the rope had been slathered with some obscure drug. "He talks

about you a lot. 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. "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 Ensworth. I just want to know my words have a chance of outliving me."

My heart skipped a beat. "Ensworth?"

He laughed. "Sure, why not? Ensworth, Leyselle, Uws... Why not see them all some day?"

"I've heard Ensworth 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.

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...

"Just thanks," I said. 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? “Tsk tsk. Such handwriting.”

“Oh, that.” He seemed fascinated by his thumbnail. “Yes. It’s improved a lot since, I hope. I, um...” 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 one of the characters from the story instead of just a bookster 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. To ruin with Cathé and the others.

“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’d 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 back of my right hand, as he’d told me other bravos ladies’ did, then lowered it slowly to my lap. Eyes as dark as midnight pools... Oh, this was going to be complicated.

Kerrem Accepts New Employment

The philosopher Yeyebé argued that people (and the Gifted too, I suppose, although he never said it explicitly) don't ever actually think. Instead, they just realize that they have already thought. It was like that with me and Sehdié. 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 waited for 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 both be someone's property the evening of the day we arrived.

But Ensworth—Ensworth would be nice. Apple blossoms in the spring, leaves that changed color in the fall, ships bigger than houses in the harbor, and right in the middle of it all, the world's biggest library, shelf after shelf of books just crying out 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. Her father might not live on Palace Mount, but he was still one of the emir's ministers. He would hire men to track us down and bring her back—her horrible aunt would see to it. They would have the law on their side, too. In Coriandel, children owe their parents a debt for raising them. My parents forgave mine when I turned sixteen, but her father hadn't forgiven hers. "Not until you marry," her aunt had said with a sniff. "It wouldn't be proper."

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.

"To be Kerrem the bookster, then?" 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.

He pressed his against them. "To have been searching for you." He took his elbow and steered me over against the wall. "To find somewhere around here for 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 blackgrass 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 elbow 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, you will not be harmed if you bring no harm.”

I swallowed, my mouth suddenly dry. It is one thing to write about rogues. It is another to have one stare you down. “All right,” I said. He nodded, took his hand from my elbow, and waved me ahead of him.

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 Ensworth 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, I lost myself there a moment.” Sehdie. Ensworth. 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. Now, don’t worry, she’s not asking you to turn thief.

It is hers, it just—well, it's complicated. And I'm sure she'll be expecting you to run a few errands for her once you're in Ensworth."

"What kinds of errands?" I asked cautiously. Being a magician's fetch never ends well in stories—never.

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 thousands of times, 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 beautiful prize to be won. She deserved better than that.

Amazing, isn't it, what we can justify when we want to?

I walked down Candlemenders' Road thinking, "I may never see this again." My family wouldn't mind as long as I wrote regularly. My oldest brother went to Dry Weeping eight years ago, and my sister (not the one whose engagement was broken off) had gone caravaneering to Darp and never returned. She sent us letters twice a year, full of gossip about horses and quirks of contracts. My father sent copies back to her with minor corrections written in the margins. It was his way of saying that he loved her, I suppose.

I made just one stop, at Aziz's. Stealing my best friend's girl was one thing, but stealing books was quite another. "Now remember—" I started.

"I never saw you," he said. We studied together, back when he wanted to grow up to be a magician. "And I have no idea where you went, or what you were planning to do. Which is the truth."

I raised my palms to him. "I'll write."

He raised his back. "I'll read."

My next stop was at Ishad's. I had to force myself not to glance around as I fumbled with the lock on his front gate. Across, down, down again, and in—no, no, it was across, down, across again, and in. The worn brass cylinder came apart in my hands. I dropped the pieces in my pocket, leaving the gate slightly ajar behind me.

Cool moonlight turned Ishad's whitewashed kitchen blue. The three loose tiles in the floor were right where the horse had said they would be. The shallow trough beneath them held a battered leather tube, thirty Ruudian silver marks, a stiletto, and a dried husk a scorpion beetle had shed last week or last year. I reached for the tube, but pulled my hand back. Poison darts? Razors spun by clockwork? If half of Vurt's bragging about Ishad was true, there could be anything in that hole.

In the end, I used a broom to lever the tube out of the ground. Nothing snapped, fizzed, or fell on my head. I turned the tube over in my hands. It looked like a map case, or something a Thindi merchant would store scrolls in. I was tempted to open it, but *ab*, there wasn't time, *ra*, it belonged to a magician, and *ca*, it would be just like Ishad to leave his cache unguarded and then booby trap the case itself. I replaced the tiles, nearly soiled myself when the broom toppled over with a clatter, stood it up again, put the lock on the front gate back together, and hurried away.

The evening had turned to night by the time I reached Sehdie's. As an unmarried daughter, Sehdie's room was 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's 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. He wanted things to stay just as they had been, forever.

When Vurt wanted to talk to Sehdie he climbed a lemon tree three houses away, walked along a dividing wall, pulled himself up onto a stable, jumped to their neighbor's roof, and jumped again to catch a beam so he could get onto hers. Not being Vurt, I had taken a few moments earlier to stow a ladder beside the stable. It had paint and tar splattered on

its rungs, just the sort of thing a trusting tradesman might leave lying around in a nice neighborhood. I didn't look particularly tradesmanlike (at least, I hoped I didn't), but I hung my pack on a peg near the stable door, picked up the ladder, and walked as confidently as I could into the narrow alley that ran between Sehdie's house and her neighbor's.

A few moments and a bruised knee later, I was face to face with a peach-colored shutter. It was nicely made, fitted instead of glued, nicely stained, and very locked.

I had expected that. What I hadn't expected 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 skipped a beat. Awbé was Sehdie's mother, so this must be her aunt, Eleñima. I had no idea who Shau Sheu was. At that moment I didn't actually care so long as the conversation ended quickly. I felt very exposed, pressed against the wall in the gathering darkness. One glance from a passer-by and I'd spend the rest of the night explaining myself to some bored guard captain. Rest of the night? Who was I fooling? He'd 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'd mis-hear my cries for help and think I'd insulted his grandmother. Come morning, there wouldn't be enough left of me to feed a skinny hog. It would be days before my remains were identified. My family would be beside themselves, and poor Sehdie would—

A cupboard door banged closed on the other side of the shutter. Still muttering, Sehdie's aunt left the room. I sagged 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 tucked my note through the shutter slats and climbed down the ladder one careful rung at a time. I laid it down next to the house and walked out of the alley onto Quiet Saints' Street.

To the east, the edge of the moon was a bright white line on the horizon. Something caught in my throat. Vurt would be the Tombs by now. "Luck be gentle, Luck be sweet," I whispered. Make sure my hand, make swift my feet. That's how the rest of the children's rhyme went. It was as good a prayer as any.

I almost turned around then. I could have put the ladder back, picked up my pack from the stable, and gone home. Vurt was my friend. He deserved an explanation from me, if nothing else.

But I remembered the story of Hans the Younger, sitting in his stone chair on a hill overlooking Ryewall 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* claimed that the weathered remains of the chair were still there, and that on clear days, when a brisk breeze was blowing, you could still hear his sighs. Although how one was 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 thought about what could go wrong as I stood 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 didn't feel the same way? What if, despite everything we had said to each other, I was nothing more than a friend to her? I had 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 herself, carefully tended, immaculate, a beautiful decoration for some well-appointed courtyard.

Click. I looked up so sharply that I hurt my neck. The shutters swung outward. Faintly, barely above a whisper, she said, "Kerrem?"

"Here." My mouth was dry.

"I can't see you."

Of course she couldn't. I had covered my little dayglass lamp. I unscrewed the cheap tin lid and held it up. "Here," I said again.

"Can you catch?" I barely had time to put my lamp down before she dropped her bag. It was mercifully small. I had been 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*.

It clinked slightly, too. Sensible woman, she had brought jewelry. We could sell that if we needed to.

"How do I get down?" she whispered.

"The ladder," I said. "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 hissed. "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 pulled herself up onto the windowsill and stretched one leg down like an elephant reaching for a piece of fallen fruit with its trunk.

"No, no, turn around first," I whispered. "So you're facing the wall."

She turned, found the rung, and climbed down one tentative step at a time. I didn't realize she was crying until she reached the bottom.

"Sh, sh, it's all right," I whispered into her ear. I had never held her before. She was almost as tall as I was, and her hair was like cool water between my fingers. It smelled faintly of sandalwood. "It's all right."

"No it's not," she said. Suddenly she smiled. "But it will be."

We collected my pack from the stable. "Did you bring a cloak?" I asked Sehdié.

She shook her head. "We hang them downstairs. The housekeeper might have seen me."

"Ah. Good thinking." I eyed her critically. "But you can't go around looking like that."

She looked down at her black and silver dress and matching boots. "What's wrong with how I look?"

"Nothing, nothing," I said hastily. "It's just—people will notice. Especially this time of night." *And make assumptions*, I didn't add aloud.

"Oh. I'm sorry. It's the plainest I have."

If there's one thing stables have plenty of, even empty ones, it's dirt. She stood there grimly as I rubbed handfuls onto her boots, and then onto the hem of her dress to hide the silver highlights. With her sleeves pulled up, and my spare vest on, and her hair back under a rag, she looked like—she looked beautiful. "Good enough?" I asked.

She scowled at me. "Not quite." She leaned forward and kissed me. "There. Now we can go."

Vurt Receives a Gift

I sat on my pedestal with my lantern shuttered, waiting for the bonescuffle. The three rats hanging from the statues around me squeaked angrily in the dark. The other three scratched at the reed bars of their cage and squeaked back. The thick, meaty smell of goat filled the air. If I closed my eyes and let my mind wander, I could almost hear bleating. But of course if I did that, I'd probably wind up dead.

I ran my forefinger up and down the flat of my blade. The metal was solid and reassuring. My spear lay across my pack, ready to be snatched up. It was like waiting for the referee to call my name in the *umram*, except—

The back of my neck prickled. I stood silently, picking up the lantern but leaving it shuttered. Something was there—I could feel it. I held my breath, sword ready, listening for the click of claws on stone. Nothing. Nothing but the rats.

Turn fear into questions. Ishad taught me that. 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 his reputation? Then think about that reputation, about how he fights and what the last guy he beat did wrong.

I opened my mouth wide, so that my breathing wouldn't make any sound. Could I hear anything? No, just the rats. Could I feel a breeze? In Kerrem's stories, the hero always feels the wrym's breath on his neck just before it strikes. But no, no breath of air. And since the rats were still squeaking, I guessed they couldn't hear anything either.

I saw motion in the darkness out of the corner of my eye, like heat wavering over a fire. I turned my head slowly. I couldn't see anything when I looked straight at it, but it was there again when I looked away.

I held my lantern away from my body and flicked the shutter open with my thumb. Trapped sunlight spilled out into the darkness to dazzle whatever was creeping up on me. Nothing. Nothing and no one except the rats and the statues.

I set the lantern down and pulled a little cloth bag of chalk dust out of my pack, undoing the knot in the drawstring with my teeth. Dust rose into the back of my nostrils. I wrinkled my nose and snorted faintly to kill the sneeze, then sprinkled a double fingerful of chalk into the air.

The white powder started to settle earthwards, but changed its mind. Slowly, the white smudge took on the shape of a tall man with a spear in his hands. My ghost was back.

Without warning it whipped its spear up and lunged at my head. I jumped back, tripped over my pack, and fell off the pedestal just as the bonescuttle pounced.

Chalk dust splashed against the bonescuttle's chest as the ghost speared it. My pack and spear hit the stones beside me. I rolled to my feet and slashed awkwardly with my sword. The bonescuttle's claw closed on the blade and wrenched it from my hands. Metal clanged as it landed in the darkness a few strides away.

I scrambled backward, stumbling over my pack once again. Where in the hells was my spear? I grabbed my pack and leaped up beside the statue of the woman reading the scroll.

The ghost's outline blurred as it lunged a second time. The bonescuttle snapped at it. The lantern was between its legs. If the bonescuttle broke the glass, I would die down here in darkness. I could only think of one thing to do. I pulled the cage of rats from my pack and threw it over the bonescuttle's head.

It reared up on its hind four legs, twisted like a cat, and went after an easier supper. Luck must have felt guilty for having gotten me into this mess.

My chest heaved. Where was my sword? Stupid, stupid, stupid, losing it. No one had ever disarmed me in the *umram*, no one. I couldn't even remember which way the bonescuttle had thrown it. Empty hands, full grave—if that was the best I could do, I deserved to lose.

The ghost was still standing by the pedestal, beckoning to me urgently. I put my hands over my ears. "My thanks, honored sir," I whispered.

"...to follow..." It was no more a sound than the stirring in the darkness before I unshuttered my lantern had been a vision. "...to finish..."

"Yes, honored sir, I will. Just give me a heartbeat, all right?" I took my hands from my ears. I had to get my weapons.

I found my sword lying against a low, curved wall. My spear was a few strides away. I sheathed the first and hefted the second. Its reach would serve me better than a sword's edge, not that either was going to do me much good now. The rats had been my one clever idea. Now—

The back of my neck prickled again. I whipped my spear around. It swished through the ghost's head, making eddies in the chalk dust. It was fainter than it had been. "Sorry, honored sir," I said.

It raised a palm to me as if to say, “Never mind.” Then it stepped into me.

It was like ice water flooding into my bones. I gasped for breath, but couldn’t fill my lungs. I actually felt my heart hesitate, confused about whether it was supposed to keep beating or not.

And just as suddenly it was over. There was nothing left of the ghost but chalk dust on my clothes and a little glowing pearl of memory wedged in my mind. I remembered tracking the bonescuttle to its lair once before. Not this one, the other one. This one was its hatchling. I had killed its mother. This one’s lair was up ahead, in a strange house.

The rush of recollection dimmed, leaving me with just a memory of a memory. And the name of a name. “Cup Rainbow Reaching,” I said softly. “Thank you, honored sir. Thank you for your gift.”

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.

We 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 in the same tent,” to mean a baby never drew breath.

The *iyemnelili* was my death. I lost its trail once when it climbed onto the base of one statue and leaped to the base of another, but I found it again soon enough. I did not spare any thoughts 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 would not be weak. I would be ready.

The sticky green smears led up a gentle hill to a great house with an arched doorway. I stepped cautiously through the arch into its front courtyard. The windows that looked down onto it were just outlines in the stone, 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 bonescuttle 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 slowly from side to side. There was a gentle tug. The bottom two thumbs of the haft fell away. The bonescuttle would not have had to tear me to pieces if I had tried to run through the arch. Those threads 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 sticky patch glistened on the paving stones at my feet. The bonescuttle 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 another courtyard at its rear. I poked the roof of the arch with my spear. There were no corners or crannies for anything to hide in. I slid through it 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 a model of the house that lay on her belly.

Doorways on either side of the courtyard led into the house. I would not have room inside to use my spear properly, but I had no choice. The creature could afford to wait. 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 bonescuttle 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, and not enchanted spider silk.

I do not know where the bonescuttle hid, but somehow it 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, and cut me to the bone.

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 shattered on the stones. The bonescuttle lashed 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 bonescuttle 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 pincer shut. It had cut my foot right off.

I twisted my spear, driving its head deeper into the bonescuttle. My world was nothing but the pain in my leg and my arms pushing the spearhead up through the underside of the bonescuttle's jaw. I twisted it again. Something tore. Something burning wet splattered on my hands.

Suddenly the bonescuttle pulled back, tearing my spear from my hands. As the light from the shattered dayglass in my lantern died away, it clutched the haft in its claws and pulled it out. Clumps of flesh clung to its barbed head. The bonescuttle 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 bonescuttle'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, and I did not want to die whimpering.

"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. The silver spider web was gone. Darkness. He passed a body. I barely recognized the dead man as 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.

"To... leave..." I whispered.

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 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 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 bonescuttle 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. Did he really think I would turn coward now that my death had found me? I tried again. “Cannot... blood... in the water. Smell... Draw them...”

He sighed. “I know it will. 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. You give me, what, twenty breaths, then you tug on this. 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. “Too... short...” I gasped. I pushed his hands away weakly. “To go... through... Trail rope... behind...”

He sat back on his heels, then nodded slowly. “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 bonescuttle’s head. A stopped glass jar with a dozen matches went into one pocket, a candle wrapped in waxed paper 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 the blade was loose in the scabbard, then shouldered his pack once again. He might have been something from the depths himself then, something hunchbacked with an evil familiar on his shoulder whispering in his ear.

He gripped my shoulder 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 once again. 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.

A 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 of light from the Karabandi's candle. He called to me. The rope splashed into the water an arm's length away. I grabbed it with one hand, still holding my spear with the other.

The Karabandi pulled on the rope, dragging me through the water to safety. "Hold on, lad, hold on!" he urged, as if I might let go.

As I reached for his hand, jaws closed around my waist. I opened my mouth to scream one last time, then everything went away.

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 had been helping to load a trebuchet when his foot got tangled in the wrong 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 regimentals a couple of coins for an exorcism. We never heard from the ghost again, but I did find a boot the next day that might have been his. It was nicely made, Enswer leather with a thick sole and a little iron buckle. I threw it on the fire, just in case.

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 Normous Berth, still waiting for Arshad to return from Sullair. Magicians have tried to send both of them on, but some just aren't for sending.

I would have given a lot to know how strong Cup Rainbow Reaching was. And how angry. They can step into you, ghosts can, if they're strong. They can turn your flesh to ice, or make you dance like a puppet. Not that I could do much dancing with my ankle the way it was...

I had my palms up to greet him. I brought them back slowly to cover my ears, but only heard the hollow sound you always hear when you do that. After a moment I lowered them to my sides. "Well," I said, "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 didn't need to make much sense as long as it put them off their guard and gave me time to think. Found myself telling a man in Seyferte once about running three-legged races with my brother. I hope he enjoyed the story, because it was the last one he ever heard.

I couldn't see Cup. Only the chill told me he was there. "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 was just heading down to the pool to wait for him. You would be welcome to come with me." I hesitated. "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 vanished. I covered my ears with my palms for a couple of heartbeats, but still heard nothing. I tucked his skull into my shirt and started down the steps once more using the spear for a crutch.

The next landing was a hundred and twenty two steps away. My knees hurt almost as much as my broken ankle by the time I got there. The last landing was a hundred and thirty steps. I stopped counting after that.

I found a few more bones on the stones beside the pool at the bottom of the steps. Somehow I knew that they weren't Cup's. The creatures I'd killed must have thought his remains tasted special. Or maybe his ghost had nudged them somehow, trying to get his bones up to the light. I should have done that. I should have taken what was left of him 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 cold stone 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 let my momentum carry me forward another arm's length, then pulled myself out of the water. I shrugged out of my pack and took out my matches and candle.

I found myself sitting beside a rectangular pool, twenty strides long and perhaps fifteen wide. The cavern wall rose straight up from its far side. Another wall rose at a slight angle from behind the patch I was sitting on. A narrow flight of stairs crisscrossed up its face, while a thin trickle of water splashed down on them from somewhere high above.

I dripped some wax onto the stone beside me, then planted my candle in it and stood with the rope in my hands. It was good silk climbing rope, the kind that feels oily when it runs through your hands. 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 called. I threw the rope toward him. As soon as he grabbed it I started hauling it in.

He almost made it. He was reaching for my hand when something in the water 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 hundreds of gallops between us, I could feel her impatience. "You did what you could. Anyway, it's 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.

"I mean it's not over," she repeated. "It doesn't feel over. Now go have a life."

So I went and had a life, a good one, with friends of sorts, and students who were never any worse off for having met me, and then Vurt. But I still thought about it sometimes, how close he had come. His hand was actually in mine. I was pulling him up out of the water when whatever it was came up from the depths and bit through him like he was a stick of soft candy.

I screamed and let go of him. I 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 glinted open. 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 curled up into a ball in front of them and wept.

Their sergeant glanced at the magician. He sniffed the air, then shrugged. "Nothing," he said.

The sergeant nodded. My sobs subsided. "Just you?" he asked.

I nodded back, too tired to be ashamed of my tears. I 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 sat beside that same damned pool, rubbing my swollen ankle. It was the same foot that Cup had lost, I realized. I didn't know whether that meant anything or not. I didn't have a rope this time, but my little hand light cast more light than my candle had. Cup's spear lay across my thighs. It probably wouldn't be much use against the thing in the water, but it was all I had. Vurt was as much of a son as I would ever have. He was coming out, or I was staying with him.

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 gave in and asked her who it was. And 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. 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 I was done.

"Please do," I replied, the soul of courtesy. "May I ask whether it will take long?" He looked at his Darpani companion, who shrugged eloquently.

"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 thinking when the horse and the Darpani came back. "Yes," the horse told me without preamble. "Now how 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 not him.

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, my 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.

Then I sat. And waited. And wondered how I'd feel if Vurt died down in the Tombs. When I realized I was crying I wiped my cheeks on my sleeve.

Finally the palace drums boomed the tenth hour. I stood up, straightened my dress, and unlatched my shutters as quietly as I could. "Kerrem?" I said softly.

"Here." The voice came from the alley below.

"I can't see you."

A tiny light, more red than yellow, blinked into being. "Here," he said again.

I stuck my head out the window and looked down. A bamboo ladder stood against the wall. My heart sank.

"How do I get down?" I asked.

"The ladder," he said. "Don't worry, I'll steady it."

“Kerrem... I don’t know how.”

There was a moment of silence. “What do you mean, you don’t know how?”

“I mean I don’t know how!” I hissed. “I’ve never climbed a ladder.” I suddenly felt like crying again. I had never climbed a ladder. Or gone swimming. Or played catch. Or this, or that, or anything. I hadn’t done *anything*.

But Kerrem had. He talked me onto the ladder and down to the street, then held me until I stopped shaking. “Sh, sh,” he whispered, over and over. “It’s all right. It’s all right.”

I straightened up and sniffled. “No it isn’t. But it will be.”

We walked 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, and pray sometimes that I may remember it afterward as well. Old men and women played backgammon in coffee houses. Servants hurried home late from one last errand. A Gifted camel argued with some guardsmen about whether he had to pay to drink from a communal trough. Kerrem squeezed my hand as we went past the guards, whether because the scene amused or to tell me not to be afraid I do not know.

We skirted the edge of Palace Mount on our way to the city’s northern edge. A trio of clouds drifted lazily above us. The moon was a tarnished lozenge high above them. Cuyver claimed it had been unblemished silver before the Pilots destroyed themselves, although Pleiemente said that was a myth. Lady Kembe probably knew. I wondered if I could ask her some day. The leather tube tied to the side of Kerrem’s pack might hold answers as well as adventure. I would just have to find out.

As we crossed the Bridge of Unmartyred Saints, Kerrem pointed to a three-story building overlooking the canal. “That’s where I teach,” he said. “My family’s home is just behind it.”

The building looked worn, even in the gathering darkness. So did the ones on either side of it, and the ones on either side of them. So did the bridge we were standing on—the whitewash had come off half the bricks in the side walls, and the cattle droppings at our feet had obviously been there for more than a day or two.

Suddenly I heard shouting and laughter. Three children ran across the school’s roof and leaped over the narrow alley to the next building. I gasped. My hand flew to my mouth.

Kerrem smiled 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 asked, wondering, *How could they do that? How could they just...jump?*

Kerrem shrugged. “A little. You?”

I shook my head firmly and took his hand again.

The cloudherds’ enclosure was marked by a thorn fence. An ancient olive tree stood by the gate. On impulse, I set my lamp down at its base and bowed to it. “For Luck,” I told Kerrem.

Sweet and his rider were waiting for us. “M’lady,” the Darpani said, raising his palms to me and bowing his head.

Sweet snorted. “Got it?” he asked Kerrem.

Kerrem jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the leather tube. “Right where you said it would be.”

“Course it was,” the horse said sourly. “She’s never wrong about the little stuff.” He looked me up and down with his big brown eyes and snorted again.

A cloudherd came to join us. He was taller than I had expected, raw-boned with wavy brown hair and a sharp nose. He closed his eyes, moving his lips silently. One of the clouds circling above us began to descend.

Kerrem squeezed my hand. I squeezed back. We were going to Ensworth. We were really going. On a cloud. Time enough later to decide if Lady Kembe’s price had been too high. Time enough to find out if we wanted to be spies, or to learn how to slur my R’s. We had time enough for everything now.

The cloud shrank as it descended, pulling itself into a dense clump. The air turned cool and damp as it settled into the trench in front of us. The cloudherd propped a ladder against its side. “After you,” he said to me.

Kerrem glanced at me. I squeezed his hand. “It’s all right,” I said softly. “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 the moment I climbed up that ladder onto that cloud over and over again. It was soft and springy beneath our feet, and slightly slippery to the touch. Kerrem came up behind me, and the cloudherd behind him. I nestled against Kerrem’s side. Silently, we rose into the night.

Vurt Learns Something About Courage

The tomb looked like the kind of house you would find on the lower slopes of Palace Mount. Its arched entrance was wide enough for three people to pass through side by side, and the public courtyard beyond it was filled with plants carved from stone. A creeping vine carved from the same stone covered one whole corner of the courtyard. A few leaves of beaten silver lay scattered on the ground. There was even a statue of a gardener, a wizened old woman with a shaved head and cropped ears, trimming the vine back with silver shears.

The memory of the ghost's memory made the scene seem strange to me. It was like meeting someone who reminded you of someone else, but being unable to remember who. I shook my head to clear it. The bonescuttle had been in the rear courtyard. I remembered finding it there. And for some reason, I shouldn't touch the vines. I *really* shouldn't touch the vines.

I skirted around them carefully, keeping one eye on the stone gardener in case she suddenly came to life and attacked me with her shears. The arch that led to the rear courtyard was narrower than the first, though just as tall.

My lantern caught something lying on the otherwise immaculate stone. I bent one knee and cautiously picked it up. It was a scrap of dried reed from my rats' cage. The bonescuttle was here.

The rear courtyard was a funeral scene. A woman with a house where her head should have been stood beside an empty stone bier, one arm raised in benediction. Smaller house-headed statues sat cross-legged in neat rows in front of her, praying or perhaps just listening. I shivered. It felt wrong again.

Something scraped above and behind me. I threw myself to the right. The bonescuttle hit the ground where I had been standing. I threw my spear at it and drew my sword.

The spear cracked against its head. The bonescuttle clacked its jaws and pounced again. I cut and cut and cut at its snapping claws, dodging every time it lashed its tail at me. A lucky blow knocked it off balance. I struck again as hard as I could. My blade bit into its shell.

It hissed and came at me again, snapping at my arm, my sword, my leg. I cursed myself. The sword didn't give me enough reach. I needed my spear.

I let it drive me in a slow clockwise circle around the statues in the middle of the courtyard. I was just a few paces away from where my spear had fallen when the damned thing charged me. I cursed as I backpedaled. It was right on top of my spear. It must have realized what I was trying to do.

I was well and truly roasted. I couldn't close with it, not with just a sword, and I couldn't get my spear. Stupid, stupid, stupid... I was almost set to charge it anyway when I remembered another memory. The vines at the front entrance... Yes. I turned and ran.

It chittered and came after me. Five steps, six, seven—I spun around, throwing my sword as I turned, and fell backward through the arch. I hit the ground with a thud just as my sword crashed into the vines.

The bonescuttle was halfway through the arch when the silver net caught it. Everything behind its forelegs just fell apart. Its front half ran on another step before toppling over.

I scrambled to my feet. Its arms and front legs were still connected, but everything further back had been cut to cat meat. Gray-green muck spread around the wreckage. One claw twitched, and then it was dead.

I swallowed back bile. My oath still itched, but it felt different now. I wasn't supposed to be here. I was supposed to—damnation and rotten figs, couldn't it give me even a moment's rest? I drew my knife and sawed through the bonescuttle's neck in savage frustration.

I walked back to the arch and held up my lantern. The gleaming lines of the silver net were gone. I thought about retrieving my sword, but little glass-winged things were already fluttering around the bonescuttle's corpse. Something bigger would be coming soon.

I hurried back to where I had left my pack. It was gone. So were the rats I had hung from the statues. Something snuffled nearby. I backed away, then turned and ran for the stairs.

I hesitated when I reached the bridge. If there had been any other way out, I would have taken it, but there wasn't. I clenched my jaw and started across.

The whispers came immediately this time. "Why do you keep pretending? Why do you keep pretending you want her? You want him. You want Tessor."

"No," I wanted to say, but I didn't. I didn't say a word. What would be the point? The voices were right. When I closed my eyes, when I let myself think at all, I saw him, not her. I saw him stripping naked after our first fight, laughing easily at the banter around him, untying his hair...

Saints. Whatever lurked beneath the bridge had only said what I hadn't had the courage to say to myself, what I had known even as I cut my palm in Sehdie's father's courtyard. I didn't love her. I never had. I just didn't know how to tell anyone what I *did* love.

I was weeping again by the time I stepped off the bridge. What was 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 would people think of Sehdie if I walked away from her after going through something like this? And what if—what if Tessor laughed at me? What if all he saw, still, was a rat catcher?

For a moment I imagined staying down there, letting my lantern flicker out and waiting for something to come out of the dark and devour me. It was strange—facing the bonescuttle had frightened me less than telling a beautiful woman that I didn't love her. And saints, what would Kerrem say? "You have to love her, Vurt! Look at all the stanzas I've already written!"

For some reason, that thought brought me back to my senses. I knew I could disappoint Kerrem. Maybe once I had done that I could disappoint Sehdie as well, and then figure out how to tell my mother and Ishad. I could already hear the jokes *he* would make...

But first, I had to go swimming.

Patience Is Rewarded

The man finally reached the bottom of the stairs. He rested for a few moments, studying the bones that lay beside the pool, but did not come close enough to the water for me to reach him easily. Patience, patience... The cold chill of the echo hung about him briefly, then vanished. What could it want?

A school of tiny transparent crayfish flashed past me. Something had disturbed the water upstream from my pool. *Splash*. Someone was in the water. And there was blood—not human. He was bringing a trophy with him. I willed my limbs to be still. This would be *much* tastier than the acrid little scavenger...

The chill of the echo returned as suddenly as it had left. The man who had come down the stairs caught his breath. He asked a question of the empty air. I felt the echo's will tighten into something almost palpable. It answered. I hadn't known it could. It never had before.

The injured man spoke again, arguing incredulously. The echo relaxed itself into nothing. What was it doing?

Weight moved in the water. The man who had gone into the Tombs popped out of the tunnel and kicked for the surface. He was strong, this one, lean meat on bones that would crunch and splinter. I gathered my limbs together.

His head broke the surface. I surged forward, jaws open wide, and screamed as something stabbed me.

Something *stabbed* me. Something stabbed *me*! A spear—the man who had come down the stairs had thrown himself into the pool and driven a spear—a *spear*—into *me*!

Both men were swimming for the edge of the pool. I would not let them get away! The older one was already out of the water. As he reached for the younger one, I stretched out and wrapped a tentacle around his booted foot and—

My love? Is it really you?

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*.

Oh, my love, I am *home*.

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 as if I mattered no more than a fine carpet.

And then—oh, it hurts to say 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. We were sitting in the tiny potted garden she had created in the rear courtyard. It was spring. 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 darling 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, “I think it would be best if you left that up to me. I—Eleñima, we spoke about it last night. We don’t want to stand in the way of you making a life for yourself any longer.”

At first I didn’t understand. “Stand in the way of... Awbé, what are you saying?”

“I mean we think it’s time you spread your wings,” she continued doggedly. “But you’ll always be welcome here, any time you want to visit.”

“Awbé... Darling, surely you don’t mean...?” I laughed uneasily.

Her mouth set stubbornly. “We’ve decided, Eleñima. I’ve decided. There’s a sharing house on Collar’s Seat 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 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.

Honestly, I would have gone mad if it weren't for Shau Sheu. It made so much sense once she explained it to me. Fate may have handed me misshapen dice, but that didn't mean I couldn't still roll dragon's eyes.

"I don't gamble," I told her, rather primly I'm afraid.

"It's just a saying," she said soothingly. "Like, oh, I don't know, like the Enswer saying, if life gives you sour apples, make cider."

I sniffed at that one too, but forbore comment. We were in her rear courtyard, 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 could 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 Bantanguí, but she was no bloodthirsty 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 if that meant fewer for Sehdie, well, she was going to leave me some day...

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 day go by 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 plump moaner Cathé, 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, I knew, I knew. He was one of Ishad’s students, wasn’t he? A duelist, no doubt just as callous 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,” Nednan said, pointing at the open shutters.

“I can see that!” I snapped. I felt unsteady. Tiny little spots danced in front of my eyes. Her room was as tidy as ever, but she was gone. Along with her jewelry, I suddenly noticed. The inlaid ebony box that our mother had given Awbé wasn’t by her bed. For just one moment I felt a pang of hope. Perhaps she had been abducted. A robbery gone wrong, or—

“There’s a note,” Nednan said. He knelt with a grunt and tugged it out from under my sandal. “It’s addressed to the honored sir.”

“Give me that!” I snatched it from his hands and broke the dab of wax that held it closed.

“Dear auntie,” it said, “You never could resist reading other people’s mail, could you?” Her signature was just a scribble, and I knew she had been messy deliberately just to spite me.

I stormed out of her room, blinded by tears. How could she!? How *dared* she!? I had been waiting so *long*! With a cry, I picked up a candelilla at the top of the stairs and threw it into the courtyard. Its pot shattered, scattering dry brown soil. There were more on the stepped sidewall that followed the stairs down to the courtyard. *Crack! Crash!* Each one made a different sound. I heard Nednan behind me, begging me to stop, please, honored mistress, but I ignored him. Idiot. Didn’t he understand?

“Don’t you understand?” I shouted, tearing delicate lavender blossoms from a verbena. “She’s gone! It’s all been for nothing!” I had reached the bottom of the stairs, but I wasn’t finished. Oh no, not at all. I grabbed a branch of her favorite dwarf pine and pulled it over, heedless of the sharp needles pricking my skin. And those palms—I had never liked those palms. They dripped sticky sap on the flagstones every fall, and the housekeeper *never* cleaned it properly.

Strong hands took hold of me. “Honored mistress, please, stop. Stop, stop, please.” I saw a flash of yellow headscarf as the housekeeper snuck a glance around the corner of the kitchen window.

“Let go of me! Let go!” I shrieked, but Nednan wouldn’t, not until I stopped struggling. When he finally released me I spun around and slapped him across the face.

“How dare you?” I seethed. “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 shouted. “Get out! Get out! And take her with you!” I pointed at the housekeeper.

A few moments later I was finally alone. Oh, that’s not true. I had *always* been alone. What had happened? What had gone wrong? Everything had been going so well.

Shau Sheu would know. She would be able to tell me what to do. I struggled to my feet (I didn’t remember sitting down) and looked at the ruin around me. Broken pots, soil everywhere... The housekeeper would have her hands full, I thought. Then I giggled. I didn’t have a housekeeper any more. That was funny.

Someone thumped the drum by the front gate. I straightened my morning robe and hurried to the gate. It was Nednan, with three city guards wearing blue-and-black sashes. “Praise Chance,” I said. I unlatched 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 guardsman in front of the door patted the air to quiet me. “Please. This man tells us there has been a disturbance in the house. May we...?” He gestured toward the courtyard.

I suddenly felt embarrassed. “Oh, I would rather you didn’t,” I said somewhat breathlessly. I suppressed a giggle. “It is rather a mess. The housekeeper, you know, she...” I trailed 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 brimmed with patience. “She told us about the...mess. May we enter?”

“No, no, I’m afraid that’s not possible.” I did giggle then. “You really can’t. What would people say? Three young gentlemen, alone with a lady? It would hardly be proper.”

The guard exchanged glances with one of his companions. The other man shrugged. The third clucked his tongue as if calling chickens to their morning seed. He was doubtless from some grimy village or other. He would have come to the city to make his fortune, just like that rogue Ishad. It was a pity he hadn't learned any manners on the way.

"Stop that," I said to him sharply.

He blinked. "Um, honored mistress?"

"That noise. That cluck cluck cluck. It's uncouth. I will not have you making animal noises in my house."

He grinned insolently. "Er, not actually in the house, honored mistress. But I promise, if you let us in, I won't—"

The guard who had spoken first cut him off with a gesture. "Honored mistress, I'm afraid I'm going to have to insist. Could you please step aside? Please?"

Well, I wouldn't. After everything else that had happened that morning (and it *was* still barely morning), letting them see the mess in the courtyard would have been just too much. I slammed the gate closed, threw the bolt, turned my back on them, and walked away.

Of course, I forgot that Nednan still had his key, the traitor. Everyone betrays you in the end, you know, except the ones who can't wait that long. When the bolt snicked behind me I tried to run upstairs to my room, but they were too fast. One of the guardsmen took one arm, another took the other. "Hush, hush, honored mistress, we won't hurt you. We just want to help." I felt so humiliated. How could it all have gone so wrong? There was only one person I could trust.

Nednan had followed the guardsmen into the courtyard. I stopped struggling and smiled at him as brightly as I could. "Nednan. Nednan, I'm—" Oh, it was so *hard* to say, but what else could 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."

A burly hand tightened around my upper arm. "Spell? What spell?"

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 really so bad.”

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, Yellowday 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 is suddenly able 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 half a dozen people 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 saying that a good emir is one who doesn't lead troops into battle, duel with evil magicians, or trade his eyes and three poppy seeds 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 works as a heroic triplet, too. "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. I think most of us were. There were legends about her, but she had forgotten more scandalous limericks than I ever knew, 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 behind 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 Leyselloise ambassador told me about Seyferte's plans to interfere with the succession in Ensworth? But each time I thought about asking her, the collar whispered, *Who would trust a witch-ridden emir?*

Bah for the third time, and three times was two more than I had 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 threw back the cotton sheet that covered me, stepped into my favorite

cork-soled slippers, shrugged on my morning coat, and bellowed for coffee. The sun would be up in an hour, and I had work to do.

Coffee caught up with me in my study as I read the summaries that my ministers' clerks had prepared overnight. The first said that a long-simmering clan war in southeastern Darp was threatening to catch fire once again. If it did, the Darpani here in the city would likely start taking knives to each other. Would I authorize extra guard patrols east of Charcoal Square, and pre-emptive arrests of likely ringleaders? I scribbled "yes" and "yes", initialed the top and bottom of the page to show I had read it all the way through, and added it to the pile marked "Urgent". The label had been my great-grandfather's joke—it was the only pile on the desk.

The second page told me that the Ruudian pike-and-bow mercenaries I had hired four months before were giving notice. The rising in Upuliaq had become a full-blown rebellion, and they were needed at home. I cursed without any real feeling, made a note to have them paid in full, and added the page to the pile. I had hoped they would stay long enough to train two companies of my own troops. Perhaps next year, or the year after.

The third summary was from the Ministry of Rumors. I sat back with a thimble of cold coffee in my hand. A handful of the Ruudian mercenaries could be persuaded to break their oaths and stay in Coriandel, if I wanted. No—I might want to hire the whole company back again some day. The Admiral Ascendant of Ini Bantang was discussing marriage with the son of—I didn't care. I scanned the rest of the page. Ensworth, Seyferte, the minor northern kingdoms... Ossisswe and the other cities to the south... It was as if a dozen different plays were all being performed on the same stage at once.

I turned the page over and spat on it. The minister's other report slowly took shape. These were the rumors I cared about most, the rumors about my own government. Who was asking for larger bribes than custom allowed? Who was sabotaging his colleagues' work in order to make himself shine? Were my guard captains still trustworthy? The collar had to remind me every morning that yes, this was part of being a good ruler. Not a proud or pleasant part, but an essential part nonetheless.

Something caught my eye halfway down the page. The sister-by-marriage of my Minister of Supply had been taken into custody the previous morning. Her niece had run off with a young bookster, and the loss appeared to have driven her slightly mad. When arrested, she had mentioned a spell going wrong, but had refused to talk to anyone since.

My minister (who seemed less troubled by the loss of his daughter than his sister-by-marriage was) disclaimed any knowledge of magic being worked in his household.

I scowled. I didn't like the idea of wild magic in my city. I especially didn't like it so close to one of my ministers.

The royal collar was muttering in my ear. Something, something from years ago—it remembered, even if no one else in Coriandel did. I glanced at the report again. The woman's name was Eleñima. I put my hand on the red string that hung near my desk and pulled it three times. Somewhere below me, a drum thumped. I set the report aside and picked up the next one.

I was half way through cost estimates for reinforcing the city's eastern aqueduct when the door opened behind me. "Eleñima," I said. "Supply's sister-by-marriage. Must be twenty years ago."

"Majesty," the page said. The door closed. I went back to my aqueduct.

The page brought me the report less than an hour later. Ah ha—that was why I remembered. A Bantangui saloneer named Shau Sheu had arrived in Coriandel just a few months after I took on the royal collar. Rumors investigated her when Eleñima's brother by-marriage was promoted, but found nothing suspicious.

I drummed my fingers on my desk. It was time for some exercise. I pulled the white string, then took the briefs I hadn't scribbled on and slipped them into the mouth of the brass toad on the floor. Blue flame flashed, and the toad belched a perfect smoke ring. As I stood and stretched, I reminded myself again to have it emptied.

Rumors stood waiting for me at the top of the steps outside my study door. "Majesty?" she asked.

"The woman arrested yesterday. Eleñima. Where is she?"

"Quiet Saints' Street, majesty."

"Have her brought here. And the Bantangui woman, Shau Sheu. Oh, and her housekeeper. Her whole household, in fact. No, wait." I stopped and held up my hand. "Just have her watched. But closely."

"Majesty." I heard rather than saw her raise her palms behind me as I strode down the Autumn Hallway to my stables. I had a new horse to train, one of Sweet's many grandsons. He wasn't Gifted, but he was coming along splendidly. Another year, and he'd know every trick an ungifted mount could.

Long before then, though, I would 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 had not wept when I sent Sweet away.

An hour in the riding yard. Ten minutes to bathe and tie my thinning hair back. Five minutes for bread, cheese, and some sharp Leyselloise cider, and another five minutes to put on a formal black ankle-length trousers, a sleeveless brocade jacket that showed 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 ordered. It was underground, lit only by globes of dayglass. I had the pages cover all but two of them, so the room swam with shadows.

I needn't have bothered. Eleñima was already terrified by the time they brought her to me. Did she think I was going to behead her myself, right then and there? "Oh, mercy, mercy!" she cried. She actually fell to her knees—I always felt uncomfortable when people did that.

I slouched with my elbow on one arm of the throne and my chin in my hand. "Do you deserve it?" I asked.

Tears welled up in her eyes. "No," she blubbered. "No, but it wasn't my idea. I swear, she was the one who suggested it. I just..." Whatever she was trying to say was 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 hissed. "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 said bitterly. "Every receipt, every letter, everything." Suddenly she laughed, 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 started again.

Every receipt, every letter... I sat up straight. My Minister of Rumors stood in the shadows behind the weeping woman, her hand finger-tapping orders on the arm of one of her spy captains. The grizzled old man nodded and hurried away. "How long, Eleñima?" I asked gently. "How long has she been pretending to be your friend?"

"Years." She wiped her eyes with a bitter laugh. "Years and years and years. Half my life. Wasted!"

The royal collar was whispering to me, but I was too angry to hear it. If the Bantangi had been reading over my Minister of Supply's shoulder for that long...

I stood. "Take her away," I ordered crisply. "My ministers to me in fifteen minutes. And coffee—lots of coffee."

Pages flew away in all directions. "And uncover the damn lights! It's too weeping dark in here." I started pacing. If the woman hadn't been mad, we could have dipped her in misinformation and let the Bantangi lick it off one lie at a time for the next ten years. As it was, we'd have to do something less elegant. Doors would be kicked down, fragile mind-destroying poisons administered... My Minister of Rumors would be busy for a week.

Saints and their sins. I hated this shadow-play. I wanted a sword in my hand and something in front of me to hack at. For the ten thousandth time, I wished that I could ask Lady Kembe for help. And for the ten thousandth time, I sighed as the collar reminded me why I couldn't ask.

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. 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 to weep with.

And then the Karabandi returned. His companion's blood oath was a sour sparkling pressure, and the spell on his boots was—was not a spell. I did not know what it was. I became clearer then, stronger, as if a long fever had broken. For the first time in twenty years, I dared to hope.

I followed the young man through the first door. I tried to speak to him, but he didn't understand. I stayed with him, though. He had to survive to reach the pool.

When the *iyemnelili* began to stalk him, I went to him again. I do not know how I knew to give him my memory of the first one's lair. I just did it.

I went back to look for the Karabandi then. He heard me. He took my spear and my skull and began the slow, bruising journey to the bottom of the stairs.

I dragged myself down to where the thing that ate me slumbered. Its dreams were 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 moonlight. I kicked and pulled at its imaginings, stirring them up as you would stir up a muddy pond with a stick to make frogs jump. As it roused itself I withdrew and fled back to the surface. Being trapped in that creature's dreams would make everything else that had happened to me seem blessed.

When the younger man's head broke the surface, the Karabandi yelled, "Swim, damn you, swim!" and dove into the pool with my spear in his hands, driving it into the thing rising behind his friend. It screamed.

The Karabandi splashed back to the edge. The thing in the pool screamed again and stretched out a tentacle and grabbed hold of the younger man's boot—

—and there was 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 woke up and sang, it *sang*, love and remembrance and joy so much joy I was a leaf and it was a storm it was home home home after so long so long away.

The two men struggling in front of me couldn't hear it couldn't feel it. All they knew was that the creature had paused for a moment. Soft blue-white light gleamed behind them. The door was opening.

The Karabandi bellowed and heaved his companion back out of the creature's slack grasp and collapsed on the stones, cursing his broken ankle. The younger man scrambled to his feet. "I've got you," he said, slinging his pack over one shoulder and lifting the Karabandi in his arms as you would a child.

"Wait! Stop! Don't leave it here!" The Karabandi twisted in his arms. "What?"

"The skull!" the Karabandi said frantically. "Get the skull, damn it!"

The young man spat out an oath. He bent his knees so the Karabandi could grab my skull. "Happy now?" he gasped as he stumbled toward the door.

We fell through it into moonlight. Moonlight, and the scent of sand and acacia blossoms on the breeze. We were in a garden. We were above.

A full squad of guardsmen stood guard there, a middle-aged woman who smelled of magic in their midst. They brought their weapons to the ready as the young man fell to his knees and dropped the Karabandi on the stones. As the door faded away behind us the magician said, "Wait! There's something with them."

"Cup," the Karabandi gasped. He held up my skull. "His name was Cup."

The magician took it from him, closed her eyes, and drew a deep breath. "No it wasn't," she said after a moment. "But never mind. He's gone now."

I wasn't, not quite, but I felt myself unraveling as she spoke. They would say words over my skull and then burn it, but that would be a formality.

One last thing. One last gift, before I was free of giving and getting. I nudged the boy softly. He glanced up at the sky and saw a single cloud on its way north to Ensworth. He had slain the monster and seen the girl free from her prison. This story was as over as any ever would be.

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. I was bone-tired and sopping wet, but I felt like dancing.

I raised my palms. "Yes, thank you. My name is—"

She took her hand from my chest. "I don't weeping care what your name is, boy, that's someone else's job. He's safe." The last was directed to the guardsman standing at my elbow. He saluted.

"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 perfect, 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 tried to think of what I'd say to Sehdi.

The sky was still the same perfect blue when I woke up. "Mmph?"

The guard nudged me again with the toe of 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 thousand 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 wanting to stand up, lad. We don't do it that way any more."

I looked up. The emir tossed a nut into his mouth and dropped the shell on the floor beside his throne and smiled coldly. "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 Highness." I kept my head down.

"And your companion made it 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 Highness."

"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 Highness."

"Oh?" He steeped his fingers under his chin, frowning as if trying to place my face. "On what?"

I shrugged. "I don't run from fights, Your Highness, 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?" he barked. "Do you have her?"

"No, Highness." 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."

"Highness." Soft steps receded. What had that all been about? Nothing to do with me, whatever it was. Madwomen and 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, highness. 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, m’lord, I suppose.”

“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 Highness.”

I ducked my head 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 was, it didn’t matter.

As we passed an open window, 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, each to its own story.