

Green
Jay Lake

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“Identity and role are so intertwined for human beings, but sometimes those are split apart, splintered. How anyone finds their way out of the forests of loss and longing is fascinating. To do that amid high politics and low sexuality can be terrific drama.”

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THE FIRST THING I can remember in this life is my father driving his white ox, Endurance, to the sky burial platforms. The ox’s wooden bell clicked in an echo of the slow clops of his hooves on the dusty track. The sun was warm on my face. My mother must have carried me, for she was alive then too, but all I remember is the clicking ox bell and the jangling silver bells of my grandmother’s shroud. She had died that morning and now took her last ride astride Endurance’s back.

The women of our village are given a swath of silk at birth, though mine is lost. It is usually two arm spans wide, and as long as the family can afford. Wisdom says that the longer the silk, the longer the life. The first skill a girl-child learns is to sew a tiny bell to her silk each day so that when she marries she will dance with the music of five thousand bells. Every day she sews a tiny bell so that when she dies, her soul will be carried out of this life on the music of twenty thousand bells.

None of this lore is in my memory of course, only the mournful echo of Endurance’s heavy wooden bell and the gentle shaking of my grandmother’s shroud, like rain on a temple roof to cry her soul away. That and my father flicking his lash and singing a death song for his mother.

And of course it was hot.

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A bit later in my life, Endurance stood watch over me as my father worked. I remember hiding in the shade of his belly, staring up at the fringe where the fur of each side met. The white of his back shaded to gray there, like the line of a storm off the sea. Endurance’s great brown eyes watched me unblinking as I ran in the rice paddies, climbed the swaying palms and bougainvilleas, hunted snakes in the stinking ditches.

If I strayed too far, his bell clopped as he shook his head and snorted to warn me back.

At night I sat before the fire in front of our hut and stitched another tiny bell to my silk under the watchful eye of my father. My mother was already gone, though I cannot remember her death. Endurance's breath whuffed from the dark of his pen. If I stared into the shadows, I could see the fire's fetch dance gleaming in the depths of his brown eyes.

One day my father came into the field where Endurance watched over me and called my name. Laughing, I ran from a stand of banana trees, a hard green crescent in each hand. My hair trailed behind me, tugged by sun and wind, and there was warm mud caked upon my feet.

He had a man with him, pale as a maggot and taller than a gatepost with hair like straw and eyes the color of a lime. Father bent and said some words to me that I can no longer recall. Then he placed my hand in the maggot man's hand, kissed my forehead, and walked quickly away.

The last thing I remember of that time in my life, like the first, is the clop of Endurance's wooden bell as the ox shook his head and snorted to warn me back.

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"You are coming to Copper Downs," the maggot man told me. After spending a day walking together, we were in a little house on a giant boat upon the sea. His words were thick and muddled, as if he had only just learned to talk. He smiled to make up for his poor mouth.

"Don't want to go to Copper Downs." I knew I was supposed to be nice, but that was difficult. "Want to go home."

His smile shrank. "Copper Downs is your home now."

I considered this. We had not brought my silk with my thousand bells. "Papa will be there, and Endurance, and my aunties?"

"Your new home."

At that lie I ran, ducking between his legs and out the door of the little house. I was fast, for a girl, and more strong than the maggot man knew. The floor of the boat was big, covered with ropes and boxes and tall trees hung with great white cloths, and most of all, shouting men. I raced through everything heading for the edge.

We could not be too far from my home.

But when I vaulted the little wall at the edge of the floor and dove for the sea, I saw there was no land nearby. Water was water, I could swim here as well as in a

ditch at home, but the other side was too far to reach.

Then I was in the sea. It was colder than I had thought, and stung my mouth terribly. The water was dark and gray. I found the surface and began to swim away from the boat.

Behind me they shouted. I rolled to my back and looked as I swam. Angry men lined the little wall at the side of the boat, pointing and yelling. I smiled at their discomfort even as one raised a great spear and aimed it at me.

It flashed and a silver arrow sped toward me. I started to scream as it passed above me. I turned again, almost slipping beneath the water, to see the dart fly into a great, toothed mouth that was open just behind me.

There was a blue spark, and a shriek like a woman in pain. Then the mouth closed and sank beneath the water, dragging a rough gray head larger than Endurance with it. A dead black eye, ringed with flesh as pale as the maggot man's skin, glared at me. It lacked the wisdom of Endurance's brown eyes, but still I felt the sea-beast take my name among its secret hatreds.

The boat turned and came back for me. I was afraid to be on board again, but I was more afraid of the sea. At home, the water had held only snakes and turtles with knife-sharp beaks. The sea held every kind of throat to swallow me whole.

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Fortune's Flight, as they called the ship, had bells too. After weeks of sailing we came near land again at Copper Downs with all of them ringing. Bells floating in the water and more bells on the shore answered, as if a whole parade of women were on their way to the next world.

Copper Downs was greater than a thousand of my villages. Its buildings were taller than the burial platforms of home—those pillars are the highest things we make, in order to carry souls closer to the freedom of the sky. Copper Downs was, as Federo the maggot man said, a city. A city spread along the shore for an hour's walk or more in each direction. Temple roofs glinted with the metal that gave the place its name, and huge buildings by the docks took in men and cargo from the ships.

I had learned so much already on the voyage.

"You are too smart," Federo had said with a little smile. This was his true smile, not his talking-to-children smile. "The Factor will like you for it, but the women will not. Mark me," and he waggled his finger, "play the dullard a bit and you will live a happier life."

But despite his advice, he spoke to me and read to me and taught me letters

and even showed me what a map was. I became used to his muddy speech, and learned some of his own words, which sounded sharp and harsh to my ears. By the time we had landed, I felt almost like I belonged in Copper Downs even though that city's people were pale with fat red cheeks and hard blue eyes.

At the docks we were met by a carriage, a high-sided cart with windows like a little rolling room. Federo pushed me inside and told me to stay while the sailors loaded his gear from *Fortune's Flight*. I picked at useless little buttons set deep in the leather seats and smelled the oils someone had polished the carriage with—lemon, maybe, and the pressings of some vegetable I didn't know—until he returned.

Then we were away through the streets of Copper Downs in a ride rougher than any storm-tossed buffet of the ship. Should I have leapt into the sea as we arrived here, I wondered? There had been nowhere for me to swim to in the harbor. Even less so the street. Federo had told me of cobbles, but I had never seen a stone road before.

Despite the marvels, I still wanted to go home.

The Factor's house had high walls of blue stone, with streets around it on all sides. My village could have fit within those walls with room for rice and soy to grow. We passed through a main gate, then a second gate, to an inner court. The carriage stopped and Federo brought me out.

"From here you are among women," he said, kneeling to meet my eyes at a level. "I am the only man you will speak with, except for the Factor himself. Use your head, little one."

"I have a name," I whispered, thinking of Endurance's bell. Federo had never used it on the ship, not once, though I'd said it to him a hundred times.

He ruffled my hair. "Not until the Factor gives you a name."

Then the carriage rattled away and I stood alone next to a pomegranate tree that reminded me of my home. The inner court was cobbled like the streets outside, with the tree growing from a little round-walled patch of soil. The house around the court had a low porch, with a screened upper balcony topped by a copper roof with the blue walls towering beyond. I could see other trees above the copper, as if there were more courts around me.

Though I saw no one, I heard throaty laughter.

"*I am here,*" I called out in my own words. Then I said it again in Federo's words.

After a while a woman not much taller than I, but fat as any house duck with broad lips to match, waddled out from the shadowed porch. She was swathed in coarse black cloth, which covered even her head. "So you're the new one," she said, in Federo's words. "I'll have no more!"

I did not understand the rest. When I tried to ask what she meant, she slapped me hard upon the ear. I knew then that she intended me not to speak my own words.

I resolved to learn her words so well that eventually this duck woman could never order me about again.

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Years passed without me having a name. I sat in little rooms with fat, glowering women, all pale as Federo, who variously shouted and whispered at me. I learned to spin, weave and sew in ways that no one at home had ever imagined. I learned to cook, and to select good jewels from among cheap glass, and how a lady mounted a horse. They even taught me reading and mathematics, giving me old books of lore and treatises on natural science, though nothing that ever told me anything of Copper Downs or the Factor or what was to become of my life. A narrow-bodied woman of some completely different race, with silver-furred skin and slanted golden eyes, came once a week and taught me dance. After a while, she showed me other movements that she hinted could be used against people who might hurt me. She often made me dance on the backs of chairs and the edges of tables turned sideways, and made sure I knew how to throw all my strength into a kick or a leap.

Or a blow.

All the time they called me "Girl." If I said any of my own words, they beat me with sand-filled silk tubes that left no marks. If I was late, or thought to be disrespectful, or simply forgetful, they beat me for that as well.

Though I learned from my dance teacher how to hit back hard, I held my hands in check. Federo had taken me from my father with words, not fists. I would take myself from these maggot women with words, not fists.

The only constant was the duck woman, whom I was instructed to call "Mistress Tirelle." Though Endurance had first taught me patience, Mistress Tirelle made that lesson my way of life. The slap of her sandals on the wooden floors of my rooms was like the bell of the white ox. Her coarse, labored breathing was Endurance's snorting to call me home.

Federo came now and again to see me. He was the reason they beat me with silk, I realized, because he often checked my skin for blemishes. "How do you like it here?" he would always ask, as if I had a choice.

“The rain is cold, and the sun is too small in the sky,” I would always answer. It was as close as I could come to saying I wished to go home without earning a beating from Mistress Tirelle who listened from the doorways.

Then we would talk of small things, and what I had learned. Federo would sample my cooking, or feel the texture of my weaving, or watch me dance, then leave again for a month or a season, and once, almost an entire year.

There were other girls. I knew there had to be. The Factor’s blue-walled house had many pomegranate trees above the roofs, which meant many inner courts. The women who taught me, and beat me, came and went to other errands that implied they had responsibilities, schedules, things required of them. Their careless bits of gossip told me more of these other girls who must be my rivals, how one was a mistress of spice and flame in the kitchen, while another had calligraphy to match the angels of heaven.

If they had good to say of me, I never heard it.

In my first year, I tried to make another belled silk, to count the days of my life and ring me into womanhood, but Mistress Tirelle caught me at it and beat me senseless with a wool spindle from the sewing room. The second time I tried, using pomegranate seeds for bells, she found the silk hidden in the rafters of the dancing hall and made me burn it under a full moon before she fed me a stew of the ashes.

Still I held my fists. Free as they were with their punishments, these maggot people lived and died by words. I could do no less. Every night in my hard, narrow bed, I told myself stories in my own words, mouthing silently the language of my birth for which I had no name, always remembering Endurance and the sound of bells.

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One morning when my bones were aching from sleep itself—because I was growing, the silver-furred woman had told me—Mistress Tirelle swept into my room, her rounded face the color of a pomegranate and sheened with sweat.

“Up, you lazy girl,” she shouted, slapping the covers away from me. “The Factor will be here within minutes. You must present yourself to him!”

I kept calm against her fear. “Then I will wear the green silk shift,” I said. It was the color of Federo’s eyes, which would lend me comfort, and set off my dark brown skin to great advantage.

“I’ll not have you play the slut with him,” Mistress Tirelle breathed, her fat face close to mine, though she now had to look up to meet my eye.

“This will not be so different from Federo’s visits.” My voice held more confidence than my heart.

She pinched my cheek between her callused fingers. “You listen, Girl. The Factor is very different from that fop. We would none of us have food to eat or shelter to sleep if not for him. His word is your life. Federo!” She snorted, as close as I’d ever heard her come to laughing. “A peacock who flies the world bargaining for future beauty.”

Then we were in a flurry of dressing, oiling of my hair, the lightest touch of paint pots on my face, smelling of herbs and dyes. Though I had not yet grown into my womanhood, that time would be soon according to my teachers. The green silk shift was tailored with a hint of bodice to signal the coming change. My face would lead me where my body had still to go.

Working to ready me, I realized that through the hard words and the unkindnesses and the beatings, Mistress Tirelle and I were as family to each other. I tried to imagine her wrapped in bells, atop Endurance’s back for the slow, hot trip to the temple platforms and the union of her soul with the wide world.

The image would not come, though a smile slipped unbidden to my lips.

“Do not smirk at the Factor,” she hissed, then pushed me out into the court before hiding in the shadows of the porch to spy.

I stood beside the pomegranate, distressed to find I could not remember what I had worn on my arrival here. I had come nearly the full circle round. Perhaps the Factor would take me to the harbor, and we would board *Fortune’s Flight* for a trip across the sea to the hot land of my birth. Clad in white, picking up bells as I walked down the road, I would return to my father and Endurance.

Though I could remember the brown eyes of the ox as clearly as if he stood before me, the only image I could bring to mind of my father was a dark-haired man with skin the color of my own hurrying away through the rice paddies as Federo tugged at my hand.

Then there was a clattering of arms and men. Horses snorted as soldiers swirled into the court followed by a coach. I was astonished to see that each rider was blindfolded, though they had swords and spears aplenty in their hands.

Federo had said that of men only he and the Factor would lay eyes upon me.

The coach creaked to a stop, swaying slightly on the leather straps of its suspension. I noted the bridework on the horses, the silver leaf and chasings on the carriage’s lacquered body, the blindfolded coachman whose whip trembled in his

hand.

The man within owned me, owned my life. It was by his will that Federo had taken me from the hot lands of the sun and brought me here. My hands tensed as the dancing mistress had taught me, but I forced them to loosen.

Surely I deserved a word from this man.

When he stepped from the coach, I was first struck by how ordinary he appeared. The Factor was of middling height, with brown hair and ruddy skin and gold-flecked gray eyes. He'd run to fat in the middle and in his cheeks, and there was a spill of tobacco on his ruffled silk shirt.

Even so, he possessed a presence I had never imagined a person could have. The breeze stilled and the birds on the rooftops fell quiet. For a moment, the sun seemed to stutter in its passage through the sky.

Then the Factor took my chin in his hand and tilted my head back and forth. He swept my hair from my ears and inspected them. He spread my fingers and examined each nail. He walked around me twice, then stopped behind me. I was just wondering what the Factor was about when there was a tearing noise as he cut my shift away.

He never spoke. He just looked a while, then his fingers tested the softness of my waist, the firmness of my buttocks. Finally he walked around me once more and nodded toward Mistress Tirelle standing in the shadows. As he stepped into his coach, the Factor turned back to meet my eyes.

I stood cold, the morning air pimply my bare skin, torn between anger and a deep embarrassment, but hiding both. As he looked at me, I returned the stare, thinking of the dead gray eye of the ocean leviathan that had nearly taken me off the shores of my home.

That was what had bothered me. The Factor's eyes were no more alive than the sea monster's had been—filmy, quiescent. Dead.

“Emerald,” he said, clearly and distinctly.

Then he was gone in a swirl of men and horses and clattering weapons.

After a while Mistress Tirelle waddled out to me. She almost looked pleased. “Well, Emerald, you passed.”

“Emerald.” I did not know the word for emerald in the language of my birth, so instead I would use that tongue to call myself Green in my innermost thoughts. “What becomes of me now?”

“That depends on whether the Duke fancies a consort in a couple of years.” She poked me in the chest, her rough nail snagging at the skin. “Otherwise you’ll fetch a spice trader’s ransom anywhere in these fair kingdoms.”

Somehow I had thought myself in waiting for the Factor. Factor of what I had never understood, but now I did.

The blue-walled house manufactured women fit for thrones.

I should always have known this.

Federo did not buy me for a man. He bought me for a market. My father, my father, he sold me for a whore.

Words, I thought. They were all words. Emerald marked me as a jewel in the Factor’s case. Blinking away a sting of some emotion I dared not name, I followed Mistress Tirelle back to the rooms that boxed my life.

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Late that night I made my way to the kitchen where I had learned to cook with saffron and vanilla and other spices worth more than their weight in gold. There was salt there too, and nutmeg, and other common additions to the pot, along with a drawer full of knives.

I found the small, sharp cutter I used to separate meat from bone. It was already honed, so I needed not risk a noise to set an edge. Instead I went outside to sit beneath the pomegranate tree in the failing moonlight and stare at the blade in my hand.

Now I was Emerald, marked by beauty, trained to grace. This place, this blue-walled prison, was far more comfortable than the hut of my youth. But I missed my belled silk and my father’s white ox. I missed the water snakes and the hot winds and the silly lizards pushing themselves always closer to the brassy sun with their forelegs, as if they could ever reach it.

I could no more throw away the training of the Factor’s house than I could throw away time itself. With this blade, however, I could throw away beauty.

Endurance’s brown eye glinted in the dark as I reached to slash my right cheek. The pain was sharp and terrible, but I had stood through many beatings without crying out. Then my left, echoing and balancing the hurt I had done myself. Then I reached back and cut a single notch in the cartilage of each ear.

“I am Green,” I shouted at the moon in the language of my birth. Blood

coursed hot down my face as I sobbed, until Mistress Tirelle came following the fuss and found me bleeding down the white cotton of my sleep shift.

When she began to scream I broke her neck with a kick the dancing mistress had taught me. I cursed myself for failing to master her with words, but words would not have shut her up so fast. Though I hated Mistress Tirelle, I had not meant to kill her.

Or had I?

My dancing mistress had taught me the blows, and I had accepted her lessons. The responsibility was mine.

No time now, I told myself, except to keep moving. I climbed the posts of the balcony to the copper roof of our courtyard, and from there made my way to the blue stone walls. There was already shouting and the crashing of gongs behind me when I dove tumbling from the parapet to the cobbled street below.

Weak from my cuts and the climbing, I missed my fall and landed hard on my back. I lay there winded until a silver-furred face leaned close.

“Come with me now,” my dancing mistress said, “and you might live to see dawn.”

I rose and stumbled after her, grumbling in my own language, though I knew Endurance and my grandmother’s ghost would both be ashamed of me.

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“You are a fool,” Federo told me the next afternoon.

We sat in the loft of a dusty warehouse near the docks. Federo, the dancing mistress and I were gathered around a makeshift table of several old crates. Odd bits of looms and other mechanical devices bulked around us, covered with dust and grime. The ceiling was low, with a shallow angle to the distant eaves. There was only some small light that struggled through the round window at the end of the attic, though it was eclipsed with generations of filth.

My cheeks itched terribly. I wanted to rub them, but the scabs were better than fresh blood. “*She was a cow,*” I said in my language.

He sounded tired. “In two more years we could have had you inside the Duke’s palace.”

The dancing mistress sighed. “We should have known.”

“*Known what?*”

Federo stared at me. “Stop talking like a barbarian. This is Copper Downs.”

“*You are the*” I didn’t have a word for barbarian in my language. I settled on, “*Animals.*”

“That could have been changed,” he said. “With your help.”

The dancing mistress gave me a long look. “Please, Emerald, speak so I can understand you. Or we won’t get far.”

I begrudged her the words, but I realized this probably wasn’t her language either. “My name is not ‘Emerald.’ You may call me Green.”

“Well, Green,” the dancing mistress said, “Federo thought you might have the heart-fire to hold your own against the Factor’s training. You—”

“And you did,” Federo interrupted.

“Too much heart, perhaps,” the dancing mistress went on.

“What of it? Was I to be your tool instead of the Factor’s?”

“You read nothing more recent than *Lacodemus’ Commentaries*,” Federo said.

“Correct.” Lacodemus had been fascinated with men risen from the grave and people who lived on their heads, speaking by the motions of their feet. I hadn’t taken him seriously.

“Then know this little bit of recent history here in Copper Downs.” He leaned forward and laid his hands flat upon the splintered tabletop. “There has not been a Ducal succession in over three centuries.”

I thought of the Factor’s dead eye, sullen and fatal as that sea creature’s. Lacodemus had been right, in a sense. “This city is ruled by immortals.”

The dancing mistress laughed. “Immortal, no. Undying? Well, so far.”

“You meant me to kill the Duke,” I breathed, barely sounding the words.

“That was one hope, yes,” said Federo. “There were other hopes.”

“And now?”

They both stared me down. Dust flecks floated between us. Eventually Federo grimaced. "If you can survive the patrols and the substantial bounty that has been placed upon your head," he said, "you are free to flee the city and find a life of your own."

The dancing mistress brushed a finger across her own furred cheek. "But you have made yourself distinctive, I fear."

I thought of Endurance's brown eyes, and my grandmother's bells ringing for the last time in the hot sun. What had she wanted? What had my father wanted?

What did I want?

Never to see a child sold to these terrible people again.

I did not know who was more guilty, Federo or my father, but it was the Duke and the Factor who had set the machinery of their guilt in motion. I had been mistaken to flee, when I could have stood and fought, my beauty as my weapon.

"There must be another way," I said. "Or we would not be speaking now."

"Allow yourself to be captured," said Federo, his words in a rush as if he did not quite believe them himself. "Tell them of a plot against the Duke. Tell them of us. You will most likely be taken before him for a hearing. There, if you can."

"Kill him?" I asked. "*I am but a girl,*" I added in my own language. Then, once more in their tongue: "I can kick old women to death, but not a man on a throne surrounded by guards."

The dancing mistress shifted her weight. I knew her well enough to see that she was measuring words, so I watched her in open-eyed silence.

Finally she spoke. "There is another way."

"It was you who taught me to kill."

"His, well, agelessness, is bound by spells wrested from my people," she said slowly. "There are other spells that release those bindings, things that need to be said to him in close confidence to have their power. But they cannot be spoken in this tongue. The Duke has bound the very words to himself, as well."

"Can they be spoken in my language?" I asked. "*Like this?*"

She looked unhappy. "I do not know if the forces will heed you. This is not my soulpath, to understand spells. Since the Duke took his power, my people have folded away their own power like an old cloak. I can teach you some words, by

writing them in the dust, though neither of us can say them. If you say them in your tongue who knows?"

My decision was easy. Where else would I go? I could not swim the seas to home. "I will do this thing," I said. "Teach me the words." I looked at Federo. "Bring me seven yards of silk, needle and thread, and four thousand tiny bells like those used for dancing shoes."

My grandmother would approve, as would the ox.

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The dancing mistress drew certain words in the dust of the tabletop, then covered them again after I had seen them. They were simple words, almost a conversation with the powers of the land, but they were—or should be—the ravel that would unweave the spells that bound the Duke to life and his throne.

It took the three of us two days to sew the bells to the silk. I had lost the number of the days of my life after crossing the sea with Federo, but I knew I was about twelve years old. Old enough to marry in my village at home, if my monthly bleeding had come. Old enough here, in two more years, to serve as consort to the Duke. Monthlies or no monthlies, I suspected.

The needle pricked my finger over and over as the fear pricked my heart. Even with all her cruelty, I realized that Mistress Tirelle had always prepared me for some kind of greatness. I had been spared the jaws of the leviathan. Endurance had watched over me with a purpose.

But I was still afraid.

Everybody died. That was fearsome, too, but this was more. Everybody hurt. This fear I felt was still more than that.

I finally decided I was afraid for my soul.

"Do your people," I asked the dancing mistress, "have souls?" Maybe her answer would tell me about mine.

She thought for a while, glancing at me as she worked. A candle guttered between us, Federo having gone out in darkness for food and water. Finally she spoke. "We bind the soul with flowers and food when a child is born. And the community feasts to share the soul. That way it is not lost if there is an accident, or disease, but kept alive within the hearts of many."

"What about your names?" The dancing mistress had never told me hers.

She smiled. "Those are for our hearts alone." Then she shook the silk at me, which jingled with the hundreds of bells we had already sewn onto it. "Here is your soul, Green."

Then it pained me terribly that I could not remember my own name in the language of my birth. In all the stories I'd told myself in the Factor's house, somehow I had forgotten to use it.

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I walked down Coronation Avenue between the olive trees, wrapped in my cloak of bells. Beneath I wore dark tights and shirt as if I had planned to go dancing. I carried no weapon and held my head high.

Look at me, I thought. Here is your bounty. The Duke's Emerald comes.

The Ducal Palace loomed before me. The building's face was an enormous sweep of marble, with more windows that I could have imagined any building having. There was a great copper dome in the center, and smaller copper domes on each wing.

I was not sure of the distance, having spent my life behind walls, but it did not seem a long walk. Carts and carriages clattered by. Tradesmen and servants stared. A pair of mounted guardsmen did not even glance at me.

Where was the hue and cry Federo and the dancing mistress had implied?

As I approached the palace, the street became emptier. Quieter. My bells rang louder. What could have been my wedding, in a sense, was going to be my funeral.

From one moment to the next I was surrounded by guardsmen with swords drawn and angry faces. They forced me to my knees, then down on the pavement, kicked me a few times, before someone leaned against my neck with a sword's point while a runner sprinted away.

"May's well be comfy, chit," he whispered in my ear, his hot breath prickly on the scabbed-over notch. "You ain't got much left to live for."

"Conspiracy," I said to the cobbles. "Against the Duke."

"Sun rose in the east, dinn't?" he asked, laughing. "Course there's conspiracy."

Then, except for the sword in my neck, they were almost normal, telling jokes about someone's wife and asking after a sick horse.

After a while the runner came back, there was a whispered conference, they tied one of their dusty cloaks over my head, threw me over an armored shoulder and hauled me away.

The Palace, I hoped. So far, this was according to plan.

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When they set me down, they were almost gentle. Someone took my hand and led me stumbling along hallways of stone, always to the ringing of my bells. Soon my feet were on carpet. I smelled furniture oil and incense, and the distant scent of baking. Doors opened and closed around me.

No one said a word.

Finally, I was stopped. I smelled more incense, and something musty. The cloak was removed.

The Factor sat in a small wooden chair behind a wide table. Two other dead-eyed men stood behind him, to his left. There was no sign of the Duke.

My shoulders slumped as the breath left me. Our plan was lost, the game blown.

“Emerald.” The Factor’s voice was calm, quiet, ordinary as his face except for those eyes.

“Green,” I said. “You may call me Green.”

A tiny smile flickered across his mouth. “Emerald. A valuable servant is dead. An extremely valuable possession mutilated. You may make a statement before we cast you from the rim of the dome.”

His voice was as dead as his eyes.

I wasn’t bound. I wasn’t restrained in any way. Whoever had walked me through the halls to this place had vanished with the cloak. I shifted my weight, testing the balls of my feet. The Duke was not here, but three of his fellow immortals were.

I could do something. I tensed my muscles to kick, my cloak jingling as I moved.

The Factor raised a hand, not toward me, but at his two companions. “She may try it,” he said, “but she will not succeed.”

“If you are, certain, Your Grace,” one of them answered.

Your Grace. How many dead men could there be in this city? I had found the Duke after all.

I did not think he bluffed, either. I relaxed. What of the words of power? The dancing mistress had been uncertain, almost afraid of them. I did not know if their power would hold.

“You were wrong,” I said.

“Wrong?” His smile flickered again. “To lift you from poverty, raise you in privilege, teach you every skill of womanhood. Perhaps you would prefer picking rice in the tropics, bound in marriage to some sweaty farmer with little sense and less ambition? You were more than that.”

He was right, I realized, at least to a point.

The bells of my cloak jingled again.

Words, I thought in the language of my birth. *He wins once more through words.*

What would my grandmother do? What would Endurance do? I could hear the snorting breath of the ox as he warned me back.

I flipped the cloak of bells from me to fling it at the Factor’s companions even while I danced to my left, away from them.

He threw the table over as he jumped to his feet, roaring words I did not—or could not—understand.

I jumped to balance on the edge of the table as I had been taught and practiced for so long. I swung into a kick from which the Factor ducked, then leaped to grab him around the neck.

“The life that is shared,” I whispered in his ear in the language of my birth, *“goes on forever. The life that is hoarded is never lived at all.”*

It was as close as I could come to the dancing mistress’s words.

Then he bore me down under his far greater weight, and his two companions grabbed me by the wrists.

“You,” said the Factor, but he couldn’t seem to find his next thought.

I watched as his hair began to twist. Ripples of gray, then white, shot through it.

“You!” He looked surprised.

“You may call me Green,” I said. “Green.”

There was a great eruption of wind and dust. After a short time I was alone in the room.

* * * *

The hallways were empty. Many doors stood open. Papers and small things were scattered on the floor.

People had fled the palace quickly, I realized.

It took a little while, but I found my way to an exit. I gathered coins and other small valuables as I went, in case I survived long enough to need money. I did not know the name of the street outside, but it was full of people. They seemed to be a mob rather than a waiting Ducal army, so I stepped out the door and ran into the crowd.

A man grabbed me. My heart skipped, chilled. “Is it still happening in there?” he shouted.

“I don’t know.”

“The Duke is dead,” he said. “Long live the Duke. Go home, girl.”

“Green,” I whispered.

I had done it.

I headed for the docks to take his advice, though. There was nothing more for me here. Perhaps I could return to what I had been—not a girl under the belly of her father’s ox, certainly, but to what that girl might have become.

By the time I found the ships, there was smoke rising from the center of Copper Downs, and rumors of riot.

Luckily for me, home was the other way. Telling myself stories in the language of my birth, I went to find a captain who would know a port from which I could hear the sound of Endurance’s wooden bell.