

### **Berilla's Wish -- a free story by Sierra Dafoe**

All day long the ponies thundered back and forth across the steppes at the base of the Styric mountains, where the Tribe gathered each spring. Berilla could hear them; a deep, muted rumble that grew and grew and peaked, shaking the ground and setting dust motes to dancing on the hot air inside the wagon. The curtains, drawn tight against the sun, dropped jewel-colored shadows across the floor, the cushions, the hand-painted tiles that ran beneath the enameled stove and up the wall behind. Berilla laid her cheek against their coolness, and sighed.

Sounds drifted to her; the women's voices, the crackle of the cookfires, the high, shrill shrieks of the children as they darted like fishes through the grass that tossed above their heads and rolled in windswept waves across the steppes. Not so long ago she had been one of them, hurtling through a green soft coolness, the wind brushing ceaselessly overhead, the smell of warm earth and warm grass around her like womb-scent; furtive, comforting, the secret world of the children. She was a child no longer.

They were a strong people, the Tribe. Like their ponies they were short and broad, sturdy of limb and not prone to sickness. Their lives were ruled by an iron law, passed from mouth to mouth and father to son, a law that kept them hardy and well-fed and fecund. And that law said this was the year for Berilla to marry.

So she, like the eight other girls of her birth year, waited in the wagons while outside the young men, wild with the season, whooped and shouted and spurred the ponies on. She did not, as the other girls did, peer through the curtains for a surreptitious glimpse. She could see it well enough in memory's eye; the wagons in a long curved line, their swirls and whorls and wheels and spokes painted with reds and blues and greens; the lithe, sun-browned bodies flashing past on the backs of the sweating ponies; the fathers, squatting silent by the fires, studying the riders as closely as the beasts, weighing, pondering, calculating.

Her father would be among them, Berilla knew, watching the races with his dark, heavy gaze, selecting studs for each of his mares. She remembered the slow, one-sided conversations across the fire in the long nights of winter. "Khyla, the brown." Her mother would nod, but say nothing. "Skittish," he'd say. And stir the fire, grunt, raise the wineskin. Then, finally, "She needs a steady mate."

For Khyla, then, Merkur's dappled stallion, perhaps; heavy-boned, placid, not a fast pony but able to stay the distance. And for her? What of her, she had wondered, watching her father's obdurate face, what of her needs? Did he even know what they were?

She picked up a brush, ran it through her thick black hair. A face rose in her mind; a laughing face, with high broad cheeks and skin like polished bronze. Tynan. A face she knew in many guises, from a chubby child who had chased her, chubby also, through the tall, cool shadows, laughing when he won, and laughing when she beat him, to a lanky boy with shaggy hair who rode a pony with the abandon of a god. Rode, and laughed. Pulled her braid, and laughed. Tynan.

All afternoon, as the sun shimmered across the steppes, the hoofbeats pounded like long slow surf, gathering, growing, breaking in a roar of sound. All afternoon she waited while her father watched the ponies, watched the riders. The light lengthened, chasing along the swaying grass in waves like liquid metal, first gold, then copper, then the fiery crimson of molten iron. And still the hoofbeats thundered.

The day lengthened into shadow; the shadows deepened. Torches flickered, ruddy and smoking, while above the sky blazed with crystal-white fire. A pony whinnied, somewhere in the darkness, wild and triumphant. Then the night was still.

She sat in the wagon, surrounded by a tension like that before a thunderstorm. A collective anticipation hung, palpable, over the night-shrouded camp. She knew how it went, had watched as a child, squatting by her mother's skirts; the young men, standing around the fires, slipping away one by one to walk to a wagon where a father waited, perched upon the driver's seat, exchange a few words and then return to the fires. They said nothing, gave no indication of success or failure, but somehow the whole Tribe knew. A mother would shriek, in delight and lamentation, or the other young men would scowl consolingly into the fire and spit. And then, after a little bit, another would slip into the darkness.

The formal offer was made in the morning, under the clear light of the sun. But the answers were known beforehand, covered in night and the illusion of secrecy, removing the shame of rejection and doubt. This was when her fate would be decided, Berilla knew. All the girls knew it.

Footsteps, a creaking. The wagon swayed lightly. That was her father, climbing to the seat. Something inside her clenched, almost panting. Her shoulders tightened, her hands curled into claws, she felt like an animal, trapped and frantic. For Berilla wanted something, had wanted it all her life, wanted it so desperately she was terrified, at times, of the thought of children; she was sure that, pressed in the womb by the weight of her longing, they would emerge stunted and twisted, deformed by her dream. Her dream was not, as the other girls' were, to sit beside a young man--not even Tynan--on the high broad seat of their own, new-made wagon. Her dream was so shameful, so secret, she barely dared name it, even to herself.

Tonight her dream died. If anything so impossible could be said to have lived. Nevertheless it was over, and soon she would sit in her rightful place, next to her husband while he worked the reins. It was right, Berilla told herself. It was necessary. It was the law of the Tribe.

Let it be Tynan, she whispered fiercely. Let it be Tynan and smiles and laughter, at least, at least that! Please, Father! She thought the words in a shrill at her father as a voice lifted outside, a deep voice. A man's voice. She pressed her cheek against the wall and listened. Her father answered, the words a slow rumble, she could not make them out. Then the first voice again--was it Tynan? Had he come for her? Had her father said yes?

How was this necessary, that she sit choking on her ignorance, alone in the wagon through the whole entire night? She could not stand it! Outside, the voices continued. She strained, holding her breath, to hear.

A shriek, in the distance. Her mother! She knew it. She had to know, had to see... Berilla sprang for the window, raised the curtain, peered out.

Tynan! It must be, she knew those broad shoulders. She could picture him, straining to wipe the grin from his face, biting down laughter. How they would laugh tomorrow, together, the two of them! He reached the fire, squatted silent among the others. A stray flame flared up, revealing his face...

No. No. Not Korthal. Not Korthal, who rode every race and won none. Not Korthal, who watched her with sullen, dark eyes. Not Korthal, who never cried "Hai!" to his ponies, or laughed, or sang as he rode for the sheer joy of it. Not Korthal.

But her father was climbing down off the wagon.

Berilla tilted her head against the cool glass, straining her vision the other way to where tents were pitched for the families tonight. She saw her mother, weeping and clapping her hands, surrounded by women with mouths full of smiles. There would be no more smiles for her. It was true. It was Korthal. No more smiles, no more laughter. No more dream. Nothing.

She sat unmoving as the night wore on. Occasionally footsteps passed outside, nervous and purposeful, on their way to other wagons, other fathers. Other girls. It occurred to her dimly that she had been first; an honor, to be the first sought. A horror, to be so given away. She heard another woman cry out, and knew that somewhere a girl let out a breath. As the hours passed, the tension seeped away. Young man after young man returned to the fire. The pauses between their disappearances lengthened. One year, she remembered, old Merkur had waited almost until dawn before abandoning hope for his third, plainest daughter.

Why hadn't she, Berilla, been plain?

The night, this last night of her girlhood, seemed endless. She could feel the Tribe settling slowly into sleep. She herself was preternaturally awake, her mind racing, her muscles clenched.

Korthal! No! She wanted to scream, to fly at the walls. Her whole world was collapsing inward, suffocating, she couldn't bear it, she had to get out! Her hand, without her knowing, was on the door's handle. But she mustn't, it was the law, she must stay and wait, inside, concealed, until her father called her forth. The law be damned!

She stood in the moonlight, clinging to the edge of the wagon. Around her the camp slumbered; moonlight shone on the tents where children slept in warm heaps by their parents, where the young men, disappointed or successful, dreamed of tomorrow, or the following year.

Only the wagons still radiated life. From them, from the girls inside, Berilla could feel a certain glowing, a soft fertile heat which was womanhood taking them, making them ready for the morrow. The wagon-maker would have half a hundred ponies staked behind his wagon by sunset, payment for nine new wagons, due in as many months' time.

Eight. Eight new wagons.

Berilla stopped, shocked. Her heart expanded once, painfully, against her ribs. What was she thinking? She crouched beside the wagon, the iron-shod wheel towering over her, and listened. Far in the darkness, a pony whuffled in its sleep.

It had happened before. She'd heard stories. Girls, disappeared, never to be found. This, then, was the reason for the night in the wagon, alone, unwatched! Why else but for this, that a girl desperate enough, unhappy enough with her father's choice, might have the chance to flee?

She stood a moment, rocked by realization. A sudden pride blazed through her, pride in her people who created in their wisdom a law which foresaw even this, and made allowance. The she crept slowly past the wagons, past the glowing remnants of the fires, and slipped like a shadow into the long, wild grass.

Girls did not ride. Boys of the Tribe were plopped on a pony's back almost before they could walk, but not girls. Nor had she ever heard of one who wanted to. But Berilla did, wanted it so badly she'd feared she might choke, straining to contain the longing. And here, under her questing hand, was a leg. Thick, solid, fragrant with horse-scent. Slowly, careful not to spook the pony, she stood.

Moonlight glowed on its ebon flank. She knew this pony. She'd seen it wriggle, flailing stick legs, out of its birth-sac. It was one of Korthal's.

She did not hate him. He was gentle enough, in his way. She'd been nine when she'd watched this one's birth, watched Korthal ease the foal to its legs, soothing its mother as it searched for the teat. It was the first that was his, he'd told her, his black sullen gaze resting possessively on the foal. He had not smiled. But as the years passed Korthal, who seemed always to be there when she snuck near the ponies, had started watching her with the same sullen gaze.

No. She would not stand it. She would not be his wife, shackled under those brooding eyes for the rest of her life! She stroked her hand down the pony's neck, held her fingers before its nostrils, letting it get the scent of her. She waited till it rumbled, a sleepy, comfortable sound. Then she vaulted to its back.

The pony sprang awake with a whinny and shot into the darkness. Reflexively she clamped her knees around it, clung to the mane that whipped her face. Around her, the herd startled into motion, flashing past, brushing against her; she was afloat in a sea of heaving, moonlit backs.

A cry behind her. Torches sprang to life. Looking back, Berilla felt her right leg slip. She clamped down harder. All around the grass tossed in her wake. Silver light rolled across the endless steppes, and the ponies fled through it. She was flying in an ocean of horsehooves and snorting, borne aloft by the wind, flying in an exultation she'd never imagined in her wildest dreams. She was riding!

Someone galloped behind her, bare-chested on a quick yellow pony that glowed white in the moonlight. She shook back her hair and tightened her knees, grinning, she couldn't help it. The wind was so strong it dried her teeth. They sprang side by side, the white and the black, until suddenly the other pony swerved into her. The black pony reared. Berilla tumbled over its tail.

She rolled onto her back, still full of exultation. The young man swung from his pony, strode toward her. Tynan! She clapped her hands, pushed the tangle of her hair back. She reached for him, delirious. "Oh, Tynan!" Laughing, happy he was here to laugh with her.

He wasn't laughing. Berilla's grin faded, the wild joy inside her slipping into uneasiness. She reached out again, a restive, fluttering movement, like a dove seeking a place to settle. He ducked back from her hands as if they would burn him.

"Tynan?"

He looked at her again, spat, and turned away.

Humiliation flooded through her. Tynan! All these years. His laughter, his playfulness... She was sure, so sure, he'd understand! The steppes swam, suddenly liquid, before her. Her cheeks burned under the tears that spilled down them as she began the long trudge back to the wagons.

If she could even go there. She was worse than plain, now. Tynan had made it clear enough; she was untouchable.

What if she reached her father's wagon and he would not let her in? The vastness of the steppes, which had not frightened her in the least before, now breathed around her; vast, trackless, hungry. She would die in them if her father abandoned her.

And what of Korthal? Sullen Korthal, whom she'd blithely risked death to escape?

It hardly mattered. He would not want her now.

A leaden shame settled into her belly. She could feel it coating her, lusterless, corroding, could feel herself grow ugly even as she walked. She flinched from the harsh light of the torches, shrank from the watchful, judging eyes.

Her father stood waiting by the wagon. She stopped, dropped her head, and studied his boots. The colorful stitching was frayed where his legs rubbed together. Deep gouges marred the blacking. The toes were scuffed. The heels were worn, the arches sagging. Still he said nothing. Finally, greatly daring, she raised her head.

Light exploded behind her eyes as her father's hand flashed against her face. A whimper burst out of her, and she clapped a hurried hand across her mouth.

Silently, he opened the door of the wagon. Silently, he shut it behind her, and left. Berilla huddled in numb relief, grateful for the close, familiar darkness of the wagon. Here she would remain, in silence, in her degradation. She would not complain. Had she merely walked away, they would have let her go. But she hadn't.

No, she would not complain. She would be silent, and grateful, and stay in the darkness that would now never end.

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Outside, the Tribe bustled into morning. There would be eight weddings this day, and Berilla could hear the cookfires already roaring. Behind the curtains, the sky lightened. Rose and amber dusted the walls, the cookstove, the cast-iron pans. Not knowing what else to do, she began cleaning. She plumped the cushions, scrubbed the stove tiles, polished the walls of her haven till they gleamed. To herself she gave not a thought,

ignoring the snarls in her hair, uncaring of the dirt that clung to her dress.

The sun rose toward zenith. The wagon grew hot. Still nobody appeared. They were all making ready. She heard the commotion outside without envy; she was lucky just to be here, and she knew it.

A reed flute trilled, somewhere nearby, and Berilla smiled, thinking of the girls she'd grown up with, resplendent now in their crimson underskirts and flushed, happy faces. She was happy for them. They deserved to be happy. She pushed the lank, black mass of her hair from her face, thinking of what she could make them for presents.

They would accept a wedding gift from her, still, surely?

Footsteps approached the wagon. Her mother, perhaps. Berilla would be glad for the sight of her, even her frowns, even her anger. But the footsteps passed the door without stopping.

The wagon swayed. The broad seat in front creaked. Her father, then. Was he moving the wagon? Was her shame so complete she must be removed like a plague? She bit the inside of her cheek and listened. No, she heard no jingle of harness, no shifting of hooves. What, then?

More footsteps. Her mother? Berilla glanced toward the door, then, realizing, raised a hand to her hair. Shame indeed! She would not shame her mother further. She lunged for the brush, ignoring the flares of pain as she yanked it through her hair.

But the voice outside, when it spoke, was male.

Berilla sprang upright. Tynan! He had forgiven her! She waited, her heart hammering a harvest dance in her chest, as he spoke the formal offer. "I am going to the wagon-maker's. I ask Berilla to go with me."

Tears streamed from her eyes, streaking the grime on her cheeks. Tynan. Oh, Tynan. She could not go out to him, not like this!

She must. Her father was calling. She must open that door, and step out, and see...

Korthal. He stood stolid as an ox, his heavy shoulders square. Berilla dropped her eyes to avoid the look in his, swiped futilely at her creased, filthy skirt. What did he think of his bargain now?

She kept her head down as his hand closed around her elbow. The Tribe stared as he led her down the long line of wagons to where the wagon-maker's rested, at the very

southern end. Berilla looked once, as they passed a knot of young men passing a flask back and forth. Tynan was with them. He shot her a look of such hatred that she cowered back against Korthal's arm, grateful for its firm clasp. She heard the young men spit on the ground behind her.

Korthal strode beside her, silent, determined. This man, at least, didn't think her unfit to touch. Grateful. Yes. She would be grateful.

Ahead, the eight other couples waited outside the wagon-maker's. One bridegroom squatted, making sketches in the dirt of the wagon he wanted. His bride hovered at his shoulder, watching, waiting for the wagon-maker to turn and ask the ritual question, "And what would you like for your wife?"

Korthal pulled Berilla forward. In shock, the other couples drew back. One girl, Varya, who'd played with her all the years of her life, lifted aside her red marriage skirts as if Berilla might ruin them with a single touch. Berilla flushed. Then she felt--could it be?--Korthal's hand on her arm, steady, giving comfort. She glanced, surprised, at his face.

In profile, it was strong, if not handsome; flat cheeks, a smooth, heavy brow over dark, brooding eyes. They turned toward her as he felt her gaze on him, and in them Berilla saw a question, briefly, like a high wisp of cloud swiftly obscured by a lower, darker one. It was gone before she could begin to guess what it was.

Without preamble, he squatted in the dust and began drawing. The wagon-maker frowned. "And for your wife?" he asked. Korthal said nothing. Berilla kept silent. She would ask for nothing. He had given her enough. What courage had it taken, to walk past those faces? To know they would despise him, many of them, for what she'd done?

She stared down at the broad, sturdy shoulders. He was strong. Oh, he was strong! Why had she not seen it? She watched him with a sudden, hot sense of possession, this man, her husband, drawing in the dirt, ignoring the glares and hurtful whispers.

The wagon-maker shook his head, irritated at something in Korthal's sketch. "That is not right." He reached over, but Korthal shoved his hand away. The wagon-maker drew back, squared his shoulders. "No. I will not build it this way."

"You will build it the way I want." Korthal's gaze rose to the wagon-maker's, heavy and sullen. Then he went back to drawing.

Curious, Berilla drew closer, studying the lines her husband had sketched in the dirt. And then she saw it. The driver's seat. He'd drawn it half the width of any she'd seen.

It's his right, she told herself sternly, it's his right! Should he always be shamed at the

feel of me beside him? But a pain she could not help tore through her chest.

"No. I do not care, Korthal, I will say it." The wagon-maker drew himself up. "To make your wife ride always in the wagon, in the heat, in the dust! No!" He stamped his foot. "If she is good enough to bear your children, she is good enough to sit beside you. If you will not let her sit beside you, then you shall not marry her. I forbid!"

Korthal looked up again, his dark eyes smoldering. The wagon-maker checked, his face suddenly still.

"She will not sit beside me." Korthal turned back to his drawing. "She will ride the ponies."

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All that winter as the snows deepened and her belly grew round, Berilla sat in the wagon making boots for her father, stitching their sides in whorls and swirls and curlicues and stars, red and gold and blue and white and purple and emerald green.

When she wasn't riding the ponies, that is.