

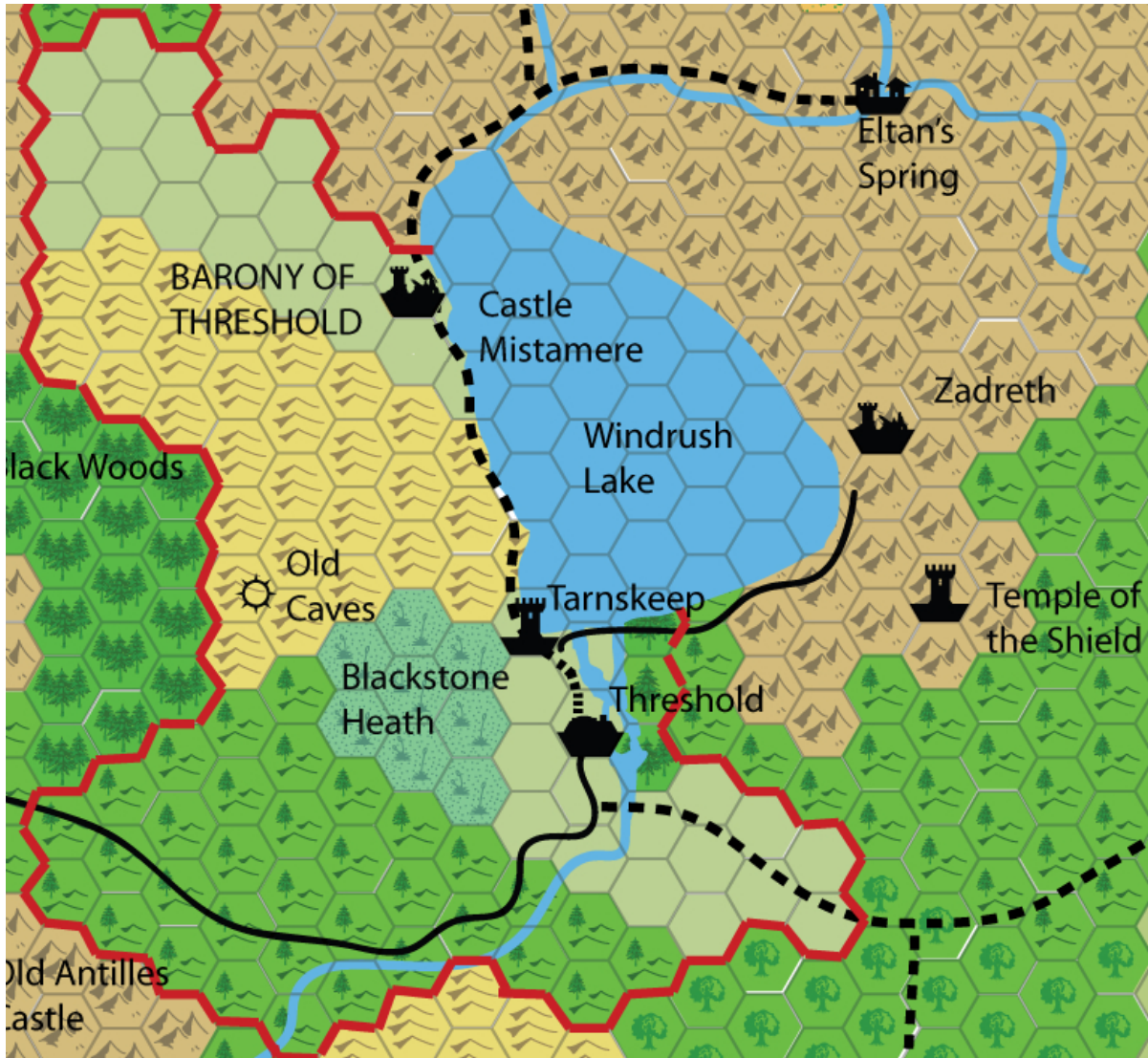


Tales from Thorn's Chronicle

# The Handmaidens of Petra

—First Quest: Temple of the Shield—

## Map 1: The Handmaidens' Barony (1 hex= 1 mile)



based on the [Threshold Area Map](#) by happylarry, from the Vaults of Pandius

# Forward

I never meant for any of this to happen. I only needed a teensy complication, to make the goings of Thorn & company in the dungeons beneath Mistamere not so much of a cake walk...

From that one “little complication” grew the group-NPC first known as “the girls.” But as I wrote them, they began developing individual voices, personalities. The strongest of these bubbled to the surface during the final hours beneath Gygar’s castle, and coalesced in the game of “Find the Maiden” Silva led Bargle’s men-at-arms through in the Black Woods.

But capturing Bargle the Infamous wasn’t enough for them; they clamored for their own adventure.

This compiles the [First Quest](#) story thread from [the Piazza](#), written between February and May of 2012, which is a retelling of Tim Beach’s historical/cultural romp through the Song of Halav, TSR2502: “Hail the Heroes.”

It was immense fun putting the *Thorn’s Chronicle* twist into this bit of Mystara’s history, and I hope you enjoy the tale as much as I enjoyed writing it. Please drop me a line to let me know what you think, either at the Piazza’s Mystara forum, or the [Thorn’s Chronicle blog](#) ([thornschronicle.blogspot.com](http://thornschronicle.blogspot.com)) or [Facebook Page](#) ([facebook.com/Thorns.Chronicle](https://facebook.com/Thorns.Chronicle)).

Thorn’s chronicler,

Rob  
RobJN at the Piazza  
*December, 2013*

# The Handmaidens of Petra and the Shield of Halav (or, “How I Spent My Winter Festival Holiday”)

## Prologue: A Wager

“You must be gentle with my broom, Little Flower, or you will wear the bristles down to nothing, and then what shall we do to keep the snows off these temple steps?”

Jasna looked up at the old patriarch’s admonishment. She hadn’t been sweeping that madly.

“It isn’t like anybody ever attends services here, anyway,” Jasna muttered. At the old patriarch’s sigh, she immediately regretted having actually spoken the words aloud.

“I beg forgiveness, Father.” She actually meant the words that time. “It’s just... Elder Licinius is an ass.”

“Jasna! You mustn’t speak of church elders in such a manner.”

The girl stood a bit straighter. “Elder Licinius is a pompous ass,” she said.

“That is much better,” the priest of Koritiku said with a grin and a nod. “‘If you are to speak a truth, you must speak the whole of the truth.’ So, what does the blowhard have to say that has you taking your anger out on my poor broom?”

“I sort of... overheard him... discussing something with Sir Stick-in-the-Mud, who was asking about the Song of Halav again. Honestly, they insisted on fixing it in writing six hundred years ago, you would think the Thyatians would actually take the time to learn it.” The girl swung at a clump of snow, sending the blob arcing away towards the temple promenade.

“Jasna, the broom...”

She clutched the broomstick tighter. “Elder Lecinius said that it was all a lie. A story, blown up by a scared people in the dark days before they made great cities and iron.”

“Jasna, my Little Flower, it is just a legend. Those events... if they did happen, happened thousands of years ago. Thousands, my dear. That is perhaps a hundred and fifty times the time you have even been alive. Twenty-five of my lifetimes ago. That is a very long time for a story to grow. You’ve been to the docks. You’ve heard the fishermen. And those are merely tales a few hours old.”

“So, you don’t believe in the Song, either?” The girl pushed at a clod of snow, nudging it closer to the edge of the step.

“I would be a bad Traladaran if I said I did not.”

“You cheated and stole before you became a priest,” Jasna said. “You are a bad Traladaran.”

The old man chuckled. “Yes, I suppose that is the whole truth.”

“It is true, though,” Jasna said, and the priest looked up at the fire in the girl’s voice. “Maybe not all of it, but the core of it.”

“Now you begin to sound like one of crazy old Sergyev’s Returnists.”

“It is true,” Jasna insisted. “And I’ll prove it to you!”

The old priest looked at the girl for a long time, until her breathing slowed and the color eased from her cheeks.

“Shall we make a wager, then?” he asked.

“What sort of wager?” the girl asked, her balance shifting, subtly, to the balls of her feet, taking her weight off the broomstick.

“Prove me wrong, and I will relieve you of snow-clearing for the rest of this winter.”

“And if I cannot?”

“Then you must tell that pompous ass Lucinius that he is in the right.”

Jasna’s hands tightened on the broom handle, the knuckles going white as the snows she was supposed to be clearing from the temple steps.

“Very well,” she said. She spit on her hand and held it out to the priest, who spit on his own and then clapped his bony hand in hers.

“With honor,” she intoned, as they shook

“With honor,” the priest said, his own tone solemn.

There was a beat of silence between them, and then they both laughed as they broke the handshake, wiping hands on robe and tunic.

The priest made his way slowly to his feet. He waved off the girl’s offer to help. “Just finish the steps, and then you may be off.”

He turned, and shuffled back into the temple, letting the heavy wooden door creak shut behind him.

“Do you really think she will be able to do it?” asked the figure in the shadows by the door.

The old priest smiled, and kept walking towards the low altar at the front of the sanctuary. “I think she stands a much better chance than that lot of fools you have chasing this errand.”

“They seem better able than the pack of fools the Knights of the Griffon have scratching around,” the figure said. “What makes this ‘Little Flower’ of yours so special, that a child could succeed where grown adventurers keep failing? You think it is her conviction? If this venture relied on crazed belief, then Sergyev would have found the artifact himself thirty years ago.”

The old priest turned, leaning heavily on his crooked staff. “My dear Aleksyev, my Little Flower is certain because she knows something you or I do not. After all, we shook and declared the deal in honor.”

“As if there is honor among thieves,” Aleksyev sneered.

The priest of Koritiku laughed. “That is precisely the point, my friend. Jasna will cheat, and I would expect nothing less of her.”

## Petra's Home for the Wayward and Orphaned

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"The timing is perfect!" Jasna whispered. "We can meet at Fiala's father's inn, and --"

"No, the inn is full to bursting," Fiala's voice sounded as if she sat on the bed right next to Jasna. Of course, she wasn't. She spoke to the small red stone pendant that Silva had given each of them, which carried her voice to the matching pendants. On this night, the eve of the eve of the new year, Jasna spoke to all of the other Handmaidens in town, as well as the two from Eltan's Spring, in the northern mountains.

"First," Fiala continued, "all those strangers are in town from the southlands, then the Goblin-Crushers from the Duke's Road Battalion showed up on that hush-hush Order of the Griffon business, and now the Baron's feast..."

"I wonder what is going on with that?" Anya asked. "They always quieted down when Mother and I brought them food or drink."

"That's what we have to meet about!" Jasna said. "I think I've figured it out. Just... get to the marketplace in town, and I'll contact you there." The stairs down the hall were creaking. The matron would be by any moment to check that the girls were asleep. Jasna wiped the bead of blood from the stone, and its golden-red light flickered and went out. Just in time, she flopped over on her back, tugging the thick goose-down comforter up to her chin, her eyes cracked wide enough to see the glow of the lantern come and go by the doorway as the matron made her rounds.

Jasna curled deeper under the blankets, smiling. Dawn could not come soon enough.

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She dreamt of terror and fire. Of standing on high walls, a bronze-bladed spear in her hands, slick with the blood of her grandfather, from whose hand she had pried the weapon. Her brothers has been called to fight with the new king, leaving the old men and mothers and children to guard the clanhold. But the Beast Men had swept around from the south, around the relief column, and they howled and milled about at the base of the hill, gathering up the courage for another charge at the fortifications. The Queen had called it a 'palisade.' It was a blessing from the Immortals, and she did not regret the blisters she'd gotten in helping to make the tall fence of wooden posts. Another blister broke open as she tightened her grip on the spear. The howls had grown different, bolder. They were forming up into lines again.

"Tauros steady my hand this battle. If not you then Tyche. And if my blood soak Terra's land, I pray, Cthonos to guide me."

The Beast Men howled anew, and Jasna screamed her defiance right back--

"Jasna!"

She blinked. She was on her back. Not on the ground, but on one of the hard bunks. The circle of faces around her did not have snouts or sharp, yellowed teeth, just wide round eyes, mouths open in shock, not hunger.

"You've been dreaming," one of the girls said.

“Loudly,” said another.

Jasna sat up. Her blankets were all over the floor. She shivered. Her nightgown was damp with sweat, and her hair stuck to her face and neck.

“Apologies,” she said. Her tongue felt swollen, her head stuffed with straw and cobwebs.

“Matron would have been by with the copper pan soon enough, anyway,” the first girl said. “We won’t have to rush to get down to the dining hall.”

“So glad my nightmare could be of some benefit,” Jasna said. She glanced down at her hand, which was still clenched as if she held the spear. She willed her fingers open, revealing the pendant, the red stone secured in the twining of gold.

“Well, isn’t that pretty?” sneered yet another girl. She was big, the eldest in their dorm. “If you don’t give me your share of porridge, I’ll tell Matron and she’ll make you give back that bauble from wherever you stole it.”

Jasna snapped her fingers closed. “I didn’t steal it! It was a gift.”

“What boy would possibly give you such a thing?” the bigger girl snapped.

“You’re just jealous because the only gift horses give comes out their hind end!”

Most of the girls giggled, and the elder one closed a thick fist. But the clanging of a wooden spoon against the big copper frying pan announced the presence of the matron on their floor.

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Jasna sat, kicking her feet under the table, watching the stack of bowls at the back of the dining hall. Just a few more, and Matron would release them to go about the morning shopping. She turned the square of parchment about in the empty space before her on the table. Further down the length of the table, Sula, the big dark-haired Traladaran girl, met Jasna’s eyes and made a deliberate show of tucking into the second bowl of porridge before her.

Let her think she’d won. Jasna did not even like porridge, and she could get anything she wanted to eat at the marketplace, anyway. If it served to keep the older girl from bullying her or calling ‘thief’ to the Matron, then the scales came out even in the end.

Another three girls approached the Matron’s station at the back of the room, where the old woman stirred the big cook pot.

Please, Jasna thought, be finished. Do not ask for a second helping. One bowl was filled, two more joined the stack. Suddenly, Jasna wished she hadn’t given the bowl to Sula. Then she could have finished hers, added her empty bowl to the stack, and be free to pursue her task. She turned the square of parchment over. And, eventually, do her part in the day’s shopping for the orphanage.

Finally, another of the girls finished, and the matron clapped her hands. “All right. Those finished, you have your allowances. Those finishing, be sure to see the steward for your shopping money. I will see the kitchen detail in the back. And remember,” she said as benches scraped and the murmur of voices began to grow, “back for the lesson at noontide.” At the groans of dismay, the matron wagged a finger. “Does Ixion stop the sun shining, just because of the festival holidays? If he can work, so can you.” With that, she turned and went through the big door by the great hearth, her voice rising as she began to give orders to the half dozen cooks.

## Merchant's Square

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Sollus had just crested the far ridges of the Altan Tepes by the time Jasna made her way to the gates of the temple quarter. It was nice to actually walk through them, rather than have to climb the scrubby lemon tree by the wall. She had to be extra careful in the winter, what with the branches being bare.

She was glad to be out of the stuffy dining hall, breathing the cold, crisp morning air. The sting of the cold against her cheeks was invigorating, and chased away the last of the stickiness clinging to her thoughts that the past night's dream had left. Surely, the dream was just a remnant of the memories in the tombs beneath Krakatos.

Jasna shook her head, and sucked in a deep, biting breath of air. It did no good to think of the fire and terrors beneath the ruins.

Beggar's Way was her first stop, and she counted the bundles of shelters before she came to the fifth. She pulled the flap of canvas aside, quietly, and deposited the handful of kopecs the steward had given her on the way out of the dining hall.

She rose, turning, to see one of the bundles rise, the elderly man blinking up at her.

"Two days until I can get to you, Yosef," she told the man. "And if you smell of wine, I'll give you nothing."

"You're an angel sent from Chardastes," the man mumbled. "Bless you, child."

Jasna smiled, but made her way quickly from the alley. If Chardastes really did watch out for those men and women, surely they would not be there, but would have homes and families, and livelihoods. She wiped at her eyes. If the Immortals would not look after them, somebody needed to.

She made her way to the market square, dodging carts and mules and men and woman pushing barrows or balancing bushels. Many of the stalls had already gone up, and Jasna slipped among them. Four apples. Two turnips. She filched another, since the late harvest was rather scrawny. She glanced again at the list. The drawing wasn't clear. There were letters next to it, but even when she strung them together, she didn't recognize the word.

Another of the matron's tests. It would mean she'd have to actually speak to some of the merchants. They would want coin, once they knew she was looking for something. It wouldn't do to go back to the Beggar's Way and take back a few of the kopecs. She bent her head against a stall canopy post, berating herself for not having done more than glance at the list before she left the orphanage.

It meant she'd have to steal money. For whatever reason, townspeople got more angry at that than theft of things like bread, or hotpies.

Her stomach grumbled. She knocked her head against the post again, this time for thinking of hotpies on an empty stomach. Hotpies, maybe with some clotted cream, and a leaf-baked yam.

She squeezed her eyes shut, wiping at her lips.

Khoronus, she prayed, give me patience. A patient thief was less likely to be caught, the old priest of Koritiku had taught her.

She opened her eyes, blinking in the sudden brightness. There, across the plaza. The young man's stance was all wrong. The way his eyes moved, she knew he wasn't a local. The locals knew where all their favorite stalls were set up. He was looking at all of them, indecisive. His boots, though scuffed, were certainly not travel-worn. The sleeves



of his undertunic still had creases in them. Most importantly, the purse at his belt was velvet, not canvas or leather, the drawstrings not even tied.

Who said the Immortals didn't answer the prayers of the needy?

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She had to time it just right. A trip, a nudge, and one or the other of them stumbling towards a cart would be enough distraction to get her hand near his belt. Jasna readied herself, paced the next cart coming down the Market Way.

"Jasna!" a familiar voice called from the driver's bench.

She didn't glance up, skipped a few steps ahead of the cart.

"Oi! Jasna!"

She darted a glance over her shoulder. Petra smiled and waved, pointing to a gap in her teeth. "Look! It finally fell out! Oi! Jasna--"

Jasna skipped further ahead. The skip turned into a running step. She'd have to make like she was going to dart out ahead of the cart to cross the way. One more step...

Her stomach growled again, and the tall young man turned at the sound. The velvet pouch slid to the side, and Jasna's fingers slid along a length of supple leather belt. The young man's eyes widened, going from her face down to her hand, then back to her eyes, his own narrowing. One hand closed -- painfully -- over her wrist, the other reached for the dagger across his other hip.

Jasna didn't even have time to swallow at the dread threatening to crawl up and out her throat. She felt the blush creeping up her cheeks.

"No plan is ever perfect. When one goes bad and you can't run, don't bother trying," the old priest had taught her.

She let her breath out as a shout.

"Guards! Somebody, please help me!"

**\*\*|||\*\***

Sergeant of the Guard Arthol Yurinov scowled at the three youths before him. Two of them he knew, one much better than the other. The other, a tall, dark-haired youth, he didn't think he'd ever seen. The hand-shaped welt across his cheek didn't help much in identifying him.

"So," the watch sergeant said, "let me get this straight. You, Mistress Morozovna, wish to charge this young man with assault with intent to draw blood. You," he pointed to the young man, "wish to charge her," he pointed back to Jasna, "with theft and assault, and this one," he pointed to the smaller, gap-toothed girl, "with assault? Is that right?"

The young man raised his hand, pointing towards the welt on his cheek. Red marks, with a noticeable gap, dotted the back of it. "That one slapped me, and she bit me!"

"I'll bite you again if you try to hurt my sister!"

"Threats!" the young man said, his voice rising. "You heard her. She threatened me. Threatening of a nobleman is a high crime."

"Yes, about that," Arthol said. "Where was it you said you hailed from again?"

"My father is-- is... a very important man in... Penhaligon!"

“You’re an awful long way from Penhaligon,” the sergeant said. He leaned to the side, looking around his small desk. “Let’s have a look at that cloak again.” He grunted as the young lord stood. The bottom hem showed a series of long, irregular cuts.

“Newly Sheared. You’re no longer a part of your father’s family. His influence can’t help you here.”

The young man’s face paled. He sat down heavily, clutching at his cloak. “It is a stupid tradition,” he grumbled. He sighed. “All right, then look through our possessions. See if what you find there won’t change your mind.”

Arthol opened one of the small boxes on his desk, rummaging around in it. “Well, I can see why she chose you as a mark. You must have half the Grand Duke’s mint in your coin purse.” He rummaged around again, came across the heavy gold ring on the chain.

“Are you certain you want me to take this... evidence... into account?” the sergeant asked. “Perhaps you’d like to take it up with the baron himself?”

The young man squirmed again. “I... no. No, I don’t think that necessary.”

Arthol lifted out the coin purse and shut the box with a hard snap. “Very well then. Guards!”

Two red cloaked guards peeked through the doorway. “Yes, Sarge?”

“Deposit this in the town treasury.”

One of them stepped forward, giving a surprised grunt as he took the purse.

“You can’t take that!” the young man said, rising to his feet.

“Entering town without surrendering your weapon to peacebonding is a fifty coin fine. Assault with that weapon is a Class 4 crime. You can keep your coin, if you like, and spend a year in the Baron’s dungeon instead.”

“A year?” The youth sat down hard. Then he pointed towards Jasna. “What about her? What punishment does she get?”

“You all three agree that she didn’t take any money. So what, precisely, did she steal?”

“Then what about this?” He pointed to his cheek again, and then at the smaller girl. “She bit me! That’s a... Class 1 crime. Unarmed assault!”

“I was merely defending myself, and Petra also acted in my defense. Sergeant Arthol,” Jasna said. “I believe you call those extenuating circumstances.”

The sergeant rubbed his eyes. “There is only one place a girl could learn those words,” he said with a sigh.

Jasna smiled brightly. “The Matron insists that education is a way of keeping us wayward girls out of trouble.”

“That wasn’t precisely to whom I was referring,” the man muttered.

A commotion in the outer office drew his eye towards the door. Two more blonde heads peeked around the guard attempting to block the doorway. The girls wore long brown skirts and cream colored serving aprons.

“Jasna! Petra! You weren’t answering our calls! We thought you might be in trouble. Thank the Heaven of Waters you’re all right!”

Arthol waved a hand at the two girls seated before him. “Off you two go.” He pushed two of the boxes towards the edge of the desk, and Jasna and Petra collected their few personal belongings, each slipping pendants bearing red stones over their heads.

“Those trinkets better not invite any more trouble for you girls,” the sergeant said, as

they made for the door. "Though, Ixion knows there are adventurers aplenty here in town this week, if you need rescuing again."

"Not today, Sergeant," Jasna said. "And these," she dangled her pendant on a bit of the chain, "are meant to keep us out of trouble."

"I see how well they work for that," the sergeant said with a roll of his eyes.

"What about me?" the young man said. "You took all my money! What am I to do now?"

"You can always run along home to your father," Arthol said, with a pleasant smile. The smile fell. "Perhaps you can explain to him why you were to draw steel on young girl, and how you forfeited your coin to pay the heavy fine because you couldn't be bothered to follow town law?"

"In the city, at court--" the young man began.

"This is not the city! And you are not at court! This is a peaceful town that abides the Grand Duke's laws. Now I suggest you get out of my sight and find some day work so you can pay your way out of here by tomorrow morning."

#### **\*\*IV\*\***

"This is it? Only four of us?" Jasna asked, as they walked up the Market Way from the garrison's house.

"Magda's pig is about to farrow," Anya said. "Irina is still snowed in at Verge. And Evelina thinks she can do more good by sticking close while the baron talks to those knights."

Jasna pursed her lips, nodding. "And I suppose it is a bit early to expect the girls from Eltan's Spring."

Petra tugged at the girl's sleeve. "He's following us!"

Jasna sighed, and stopped, turning around, her hands on her hips. The young man took three more steps before he finally stopped, still well out of arm's reach.

"Stop following us," Fiala said.

"W-we'll call the guard again," Anya said, glancing to the left and right. Save an old man and a donkey drawing a cart more than a block away, they were alone on the street.

"I am not following you. I have to return to the inn, so I can fetch my belongings. I have a few things I can sell. Unlike some people, I won't stoop to stealing."

"And just what do you mean by that?" Jasna asked.

"That chain is good gold. You can tell by the way it swings. And the stone... Well, those rubies might be on the small side, but they would probably still fetch a decent price."

Jasna closed her hand over the pendant at her neck, as did the other girls.

"I would never sell this!" she gasped.

"They aren't rubies," Petra said. "Silva says they're called 'dragonstones' and they are rarer than cockatrice teeth!"

"Petra!" the two serving girls pinched the younger girl's arms.

They turned, and started again up the Market Way, at a somewhat faster pace. The boot steps behind them were also noticeably quicker.

Jasna turned again. "What?"

The young man nearly ran into the girl. He stopped, his nose nearly brushing the top of her head.

"I--" he started, and swallowed.

"Yes?"

He stepped back, placing his hands behind his back, like the soldier Varis would sometimes stand.

"I would also... like to... apologize. Though you might have been a thief, you are still a... a lady. And a gentleman must never treat a lady with disrespect."

"All right," Jasna said. "And I am very sorry, too."

"You are forgiv--"

"I am very sorry that I got caught. We could have had a very nice lunch with what I planned to lift from your purse. Now I shall have to rely on the good graces of my friends."

As if on cue, her stomach growled. It was echoed by that of the young man.

His cheeks flushed, and he turned, straight-backed, and began to march down the Market Way.

Fiala frowned, and nudged Jasna. Anya did the same, from the other side. The other girl sighed. "Fine," she muttered.

"Oh, come back!" Jasna called after the young man. "It's unladylike to let a gentleman starve his first day in town."

**\*\*V\*\***

The four girls and the young man huddled around a small table in the corner of the kitchens at the Hook and Hatchet. As loud and crowded as the common room was, the kitchens were even louder. Extra serving boys and scullery maids dodged back and forth around the usual staff, all of them directed by the head chef, at the top of his lungs.

"Fiala," her father said, looking down at them, "this is not a charity house. I cannot have you bringing in strays that will eat me out of business."

"I'm small!" Petra said. "I don't eat much!"

"Dishes," the innkeeper said. "This strapping young buck probably eats three times what you do."

"I can work, goodman, to pay off anything I incur," the young man said, around a mouthful of bread.

"Those are not the hands of a serving boy," Fiala's father said. "And you don't much have the look of the working class about you."

"Horses," the young man said. "You have a stable. Many of these men staying here are knights. Their mounts will need a certain measure of care above what the normal draft horse might get. I happen to be familiar with just that sort of thing."

The innkeeper nodded after a moment's thought. "Don't talk very much like the working class, either. Very well. And you," he said, shifting his glare towards Jasna. "You will help here in the kitchens."

Jasna sat up straighter. "I can help Anya and Fiala at the tables--"

"No. Your fingers will go nowhere near the common room floor. When you finish your meal, there is a mop and a broom waiting for you."

The girl sat back, sulking. "Why do I always get stuck with sweeping?"

**\*\*VI\*\***

At the sounds of shouting and breaking crockery, Jasna was suddenly very glad to be away from the common room, sweeping up after the midmorning baking.

When the rapping at the wide delivery door went unanswered by any of the cooks, who huddled against the swinging doors into the common room, apparently placing bets, Jasna slid the bolt clear, and peeked out.

“Hullo, Jasna.”

“Brynne!” Jasna heaved the door open, stepping out to give the taller girl a hug.

Brynne coughed at the puff of flour that sprang up between them, patting the younger girl’s back.

“That sounds like quite a row,” she said. “If we hurry, we can get these barrels rolled in and--”

“You just leave setting things down to the Town Guards,” Katarin said, from her place at the back of the delivery wagon. “Although, they may need my help once the dust settles in there.”

“If I can’t have fun, you can’t either,” Brynne said. “Your Maga said no weaving without her present.”

Katarin stuck her tongue out, and the brewer’s daughter returned the sentiment.

“Those barrels are as big as we are,” Jasna said.

“It’s cake and pie,” Brynne told her. “We just lower these two beams.” She drew a long thick plank of wood from a slot along the bottom of the wagon, and then another, creating a long, gently angled ramp from the wagon’s deck to the cobblestones of the alleyway. “And then use the ropes up there to ease the barrels down. Katarin and I have been doing it ourselves all morning.”

“I’ve had to heal her blisters twice,” Katarin said.

Jasna raised an eyebrow. “No weaving?”

Brynne scowled, and made a show of pulling on a pair of heavy gloves.

The draft horses gave winnies, and cantered to one side as a man crashed headlong into the side of the delivery wagon. The girls screamed, and nearly lost control of the barrel they were inching down the makeshift ramp.

The man gave a shout of his own, though it was somewhat reedy, as he pushed himself away from the side of the wagon. He groaned, his fingers purpling. He clutched a big leather box to his chest.

“What’s this thing doing here?”

“You think the beer just rolls itself on over to the taproom?” Brynne asked.

“There wasn’t supposed to be a delivery today. This alleyway was supposed to be empty! Brefrick said we would be alone.” The man felt at his nose, wincing.

“He... may be detained,” Jasna said, glancing over at the open kitchen door. The brawl had quieted down, but she heard Arthos deep voice, inside.

“Maybe we can help you?” Katarin offered.

The man’s watering eyes widened. “Did Brefrick give you my payment?”

From up the street, there came a distant shout. The man looked back, hissing as he turned his neck too quickly. He leapt into the alley, inching along the wall between the cart and the building across from the inn.

Another shout went up from the far side of the alleyway, the gap crowded with three or four shadowed figures.

“There he is!”

The man by the wall froze, eyes darting one way then the other.

The group of men from up the street grew closer. They were dressed in breastplates and scarlet cloaks.

“Whatever trouble you’re in, sir, don’t worry, it looks like more guards are on the way,” Katarin said.

Brynne was busy watching the other group of men. Two strode up the alley towards them, hands on unbound sword hilts. Two more blocked the escape, holding crossbows loosely in their grips.

Jasna squinted at the guardsmen. She recognized most of them by sight, and none of these mens’ gait looked familiar to her. The old priest had made her spend weeks watching the various different patrol routs. This alleyway was not on a normal route, and there were too many men in the group for a regular foot patrol. Brown hair hung from beneath two of the helms, and another sported a patchy beard. Guardsmen in Threshold all wore their hair in the Thyatian military cut, and were either clean-shaven, or wore the short, well-tended beard in the style of the Emperor. There was no in-between. The two men in the lead closed hands over hilts. Sword hilts. Town guardsmen were armed with long, stout clubs, not swords.

“Give us the book, Gregor,” one of the ‘guards’ snarled.

“Hand those filthy Halavites the book and it will be the last thing you do, Gregor.” This from one of the men coming down the alleyway. His voice had a distinctly Glantrian lilt.

The man, Gregor, sidled a step further up the alley, just out of reach of the guardsmen beginning to crowd closer to the wagon.

“We will pay you double whatever the knight promised you,” the Glantrian said.

“Dead men spend no coin,” the guard growled. “Give us the book and we’ll actually let you live.”

The man glanced back and forth between the groups menacing him.

“Jasna! Jasna, they sent me to check on you and-- eep!”

Petra stopped short at the kitchen doorway stoop, eyes wide as she took in the scene. She sucked in a deep breath, but before she could voice a scream, one of the Glantrians reached out, grabbing a handful of the girl’s hair, dragging her from the doorway on tiptoes, a gloved hand clamping over her mouth.

## **\*\*VII\*\***

“Pull!” Brynne yelled.

Without thinking, Jasna and Katarin heaved at the ropes they’d been using to guide the barrel down to the street.

Brynne let her line go.

The barrel pivoted, the beer sloshing it further off balance, and it turned as it rolled down the ramp, right towards the two Glantrian men.

They shouted, leaping aside as the barrel crashed into the wall. Though it wasn’t going fast enough to break the wood, several of the seams split, and the beer began to

bubble away from the bottom of the barrel, washing over the cobblestones in a yellowish, sudsy wave.

The man holding Petra let the girl go, and she leapt towards the wagon, scrambling underneath it with a squeak.

Several of the guardsmen had lunged, and were struggling with Gregor, pulling at his arms and sleeve to get him to release the leather box.

A sharp crack-twang sounded from the far side of the alley, and Gregor screamed, suddenly releasing the box as a black-shafted bolt shattered against the wall near his head.

The guards stumbled backwards, the box suddenly freed, and it tumbled over their grasping hands.

“Close your eyes!” Katarin shouted, and Jasna and Brynne flung their arms over their eyes as a surge of wind howled down upon the alleyway. Winds buffeted the girls from all directions at once, and the air was filled with the flapping of loose papers and the surprised cries of guards, Glantrians, and girls alike.

### **\*\*VIII\*\***

There was another snap-crack of a boltsting as Katarin’s gust of wind died down, and one of the guards screamed.

Jasna looked up over her sleeve, to see the Glantrian snatch the leather box from the guardsman, and take off running up the alleyway.

Brynne made to leap down after the man, but Jasna hauled at her arm.

“They have crossbows! Do you want to be a pincushion?”

Katarin did not hesitate, but climbed awkwardly over the side of the cart, her long white gown snagging on the slats.

“Stop!” she called, as the other guards made to drag the wounded man away. “Do not move him!”

One of the guards reached for his sword.

“If you want your friend to die, then by all means, keep going,” Katarin said. “Draw your sword, if you think you can strike me down before I make the wind into a blade of my own.”

The four other men glanced uneasily at each other.

“Nobody will die here today, if you step back and let me work.”

Once the boltmen turned away from the alley, Jasna sprang from the back of the wagon, barely missing the growing flood of paper-strewn beer, charging down the alleyway after the man with the book.

Commotion in the direction of the inn yard left little doubt which way the men had gone, and she sprinted around the corner, only to skid to a halt, pressing herself against the wooden fence as the men raced by on horseback.

She peeked around the corner, to see the young man picking himself up, brushing dust and hay from his tunic. She dashed into the yard.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “Those men stole three horses under my care!”

“Well, what are you waiting for?” the girl asked. She grabbed the reins of the last horse still in the yard, a big broad white thing still decked out in the Order of Griffon blue

and white. She hauled on the reins, but the horse did not budge. "Come on you stupid horse! They're getting away!"

The young man took the reins from the girl. "It's a trained warhorse, it's not going anywhere without it's master." He swung up into the saddle with practiced ease.

Jasna frowned up at him. "You are definitely not a Knight of the Griffon," she said, hands on her hips. "And that means you are going to steal this horse." "And that means you are going to steal this horse."

"You were going to steal it!"

Jasna pointed at the open gate. "'Extenuating circumstances.' The longer we talk, the further away they get!"

"You will stay here. Those men were armed. It's too dangerous." The young man snapped the reins, catching the horse's ear as he did so.

"Hey!" Jasna cried, as the horse began to trot from the inn yard. "I could tell you a few things about 'dangerous!'" She jogged after, bounding up a short stack of bales, to leap astride the horse, nearly pulling the young man from the saddle as she locked her arms around his waist to keep from falling off herself.

"What are you doing?" he gasped.

"A theft like this is a Class 3 crime!" she shouted, as the horse began to pick up speed.

"You're going to turn me in?"

"Turn you in? I'm going to help you! Now hurry up, they're getting away!"

## Fogor Island

**\*\*|\*\***

"Go left!" Jasna shouted, over the ringing of hooves on cobblestones. "Left!" She reached up and hauled on the reins. The warhorse veered to the left, off the stretch of the Market Way they'd been galloping.

"Let go!" the young man called. "Are you trying to get us killed? This isn't the way they went. We're going to lose them!" The horse thundered down an alley barely wide enough for it to fit.

"Those men are from Glantri," the girl said. "Foreigners. They don't know this town any better than you do. I know a shortcut. Go right here. Right!"

The young man didn't need help this time, and the horse rounded onto another broad avenue that was clear of people.

"Temple Way," Jasna said. "Nobody ever goes to temple this early on Loshdain. Now make this horse go faster!"

The young man dug his heels into the horse's flanks, it stretched to a full gallop.

"Fifth alley down, take another right. "No faster than a trot."

"They were four or five blocks ahead of us. We need to--"

"We need to listen to someone who knows their way around this town. Do you? Does the horse? No? Then who does that leave?"

The young man sighed.

"Why, yes, that does leave me," Jasna said. "Now turn here. You nearly missed it."

"Are you always this grumpy? Or is it that phase of the moon?"

Jasna ground her knuckles into the young man's ribs.



They emerged from the alleyway at a trot, on the western edge of the market square. The Glantrians struggled to weave their mounts through the throng of carts and foot traffic crowding the Southway Road.

"You see?" Jasna said. "Now we just need to--"

"I know what to do," the young man said, and he guided the horse with a few tugs of the reins and nudges with his knees.

They paced the foreigners along the western edge of the market, checking their progress down the long lanes of stalls.

"Hey!" one of the merchants shouted. "Hey, you can't bring that beast through here!"

The shouting drew the attention of one of the Glantrians, who motioned to the others. Two crossbows swung up.

The young man kicked the warhorse hard in the flanks, and it rose up, steel-shod hooves flashing.

The merchants cried out, diving into their stalls as crossbow bolts shattered against the paving stones.

"What are you doing?" Jasna shouted.

Rather than running either way to evade, the young man charged up the lane of stalls, as the boltmen hauled at the bowstrings.

He leaned to the side, snatching up a long post holding up a canopy, calling apologies over his shoulder. He clasped the end of the post between his arm and ribs, the tip wobbling as it projecting past the snout of the charging warhorse.

"You are not going to tilt them!" Jasna called.

"On my mark, lean front with all your weight," the young man said, his voice nearly lost amidst the cries of vendors and ringing of hooves.

"Stop this horse! I will not-- did you call me fat?"

**\*\*||\*\***

"Lean!" the young man called, and half-rose in the stirrups.

Jasna leaned as far forward as she dared, and it felt as if the makeshift lance struck a brick wall. There were screams a plenty, and a gurgling cry, nearly drowned out by the whinnying of horses.

"Hold on!"

"As if I had any choice!" Jasna could barely hear herself over the ringing in her ears.

The warhorse had continued on, down the lane of stalls opposite the Southway road. Through the stars wavering in her vision, Jasna saw shocked expression after expression flash by. The horse slowed, and the young man guided it around the next opening between lanes. He hissed as Jasna tightened her grip. She made to slip her leg over the horse's rump, but a hand tightened on her wrists.

"Oh, no you don't. We've still got three more to catch."

The horse's pace picked up, and then they turned onto the Southway Road. The fleeing thieves had cleared long swathes of the street, and the young man took full advantage of the open space.

"You're hurt!" Jasna said. Her arm was getting damp, the stain soaking into her tunic sleeve a deep red.

“My brother’s done worse to me on the training field,” the young man said. His words came out short, clipped, each breath a sharp intake. He wasn’t riding nearly as smoothly as he had been before the charge.

The Glantrians veered off to the right, onto the North Bridge Road.

“Hold on to your teeth,” the young man gritted. The warhorse leapt a low hedgerow and then another as he cut through a private garden. They gained another half-block on the men.

They thundered over the arch of stone and timber that spanned the waterway between the mainland and Fogor Island. Docks flashed by, and then the buildings to either side abruptly closed in, with barely enough room for two to ride abreast. The bright gray of the overcast morning dimmed to something closer to twilight in the wooden canyons of the buildings. They zigged and zagged, turning right, then left, then right again. Twice, Jasna nearly swallowed her tongue as they barely squeezed between an oncoming cart and the walls of buildings badly in need of paint. Or knocking down.

They rounded another corner, the young man brought the warhorse up short, nearly sitting the beast down in order to avoid smashing into the high stone wall. He turned the horse in a tight circle, to find the Glantrian with the crossbow covering them from a side-street. The two others sat opposite, bare swords across their knees.

“We are done with the playing chase, now, children,” one of the men said, and gestured with his sword for them to dismount.

**\*\*|||\*\***

“This is a fine pickle you’ve gotten us into,” the young man said.

“Me? Look, here, Lord Stableboy, I told you to stop that horse. You should be in this ‘pickle’ as you call it, by yourself. You got me into this.”

“You were chasing armed men. Somebody had to protect you.”

“I’m quite capable of protecting myself,” Jasna sniffed. “You, on the other hand, my Lord Stableboy--”

“Would you stop calling me that?”

“Besides, this is nothing. Why, just a few months ago, I got kidnapped by some crazy kobolds. They at least had the good sense to use chains, not rope.”

Jasna and the young man were bound hand and foot, and had been dropped through a trapdoor onto mouldering bales of hay and burst sacks of some sort of grain.

“So you’re saying kobolds are smarter than our captors?”

“At least they don’t have any ogres. You didn’t see any ogres, did you?”

“Ogres and kobolds are just fairy stories. We’re being held by foreign agents!”

“Foreign?” Jasna asked. “Those men aren’t foreigners. They’re just Glantrians. They’re practically neighbors. And I’m not telling fairy tales. Your cities might be nice and safe, but up here in the mountains, there are kobolds and ogres. And worse.”

“What could possibly be worse than an ogre?” the young man asked.

“Two of them,” Jasna said, her nose wrinkling. “Talk about a smell.”

The young man laughed.

“And what’s so funny?”

“It’s just-- you--” The young man sucked in a breath. “You were serious?”

Jasna nodded.

“You saw two ogres, and lived to tell of it?”

“Three,” the girl said.

The young man burst out laughing again.

Jasna lashed out with her feet, connecting with the his hip, sending the boy rolling from atop the pile of sacks. He flopped onto his back, gasping and spitting hay. “What was that for?”

“Don’t you call me a liar, Lord Stableboy.”

“I didn’t--”

“I’ve seen kobolds and ogres. Trees that walk. Aflame, yet unburnt. Ask anybody, here in town. I helped to save them. Ask the baron himself. He’ll tell you.”

“I’ll do that, first thing, once he rescues us.”

“If you’re hoping to sup with him, you might want to tighten your belt,” Jasna said.

“Well, his guards, then. Surely they would have followed us. They seem quite keen on stamping out trouble.”

“And you caused plenty of that at the marketplace with your lancing, Sir Stableboy.”

“You seem to cause quite a bit of that on your own,” he shot back. “And stop calling me that!”

“And how shall I address his Lordship?”

“Stop that. I’m no lord. Not anymore. Stupid tradition.”

“It is not.”

“It is!”

“And what is wrong with making your own way in the world? At least you have a family to go back to. Eventually.”

The young man sucked in a breath, then let it out, the tension flowing from his shoulders. “Apologies,” he said, the heat gone from his voice.

“I don’t want your pity.”

“I wasn’t--”

“You were,” Jasna said. “Everybody does. Except Silva. She understands.”

“Who?”

“Silva. My sister.”

“But... you said you didn’t--”

“Never mind. It would take too long to explain.”

The boy looked around. “I don’t exactly think we’ll be going anywhere any time soon.”

#### **\*\*IV\*\***

“That,” the young man said, “is probably the best story I have heard in quite some time.”

Jasna struggled to turn herself around. “It is not a story!”

“Keep your voice down!” the young man hissed. “They’ve stopped moving about up there. I think they’ve gone to sleep.”

The weak sunlight that had been drifting through the slats in the floor had given way to the warm glow of lanterns. Now that light was dim, nearly gone, and touched more with the dim silvery glow of waning Matera,

“This is a fine way to spend the turning of the new year,” Jasna muttered. “Not at all what I’d planned.”

“Yes, you were supposed to’ve had lunch and then afternoon dress shopping at my expense.”

Jasna made a face, barely visible in the gloom. “I already have two dresses, and that’s two too many. Why should I want another one?”

The young man tried to shrug. He sucked in a sharp breath instead. “That’s just-- what girls do.”

“Maybe in Penhalligon, but not at Petra’s Home for the Wayward and Orphaned. Do you know how hard it is to run in a dress?” After a moment’s thought, she said “No, I suppose you wouldn’t.”

“Perhaps my sister could give you lessons,” the young man said. “She spends quite a bit of time running from suitors. And chasing a certain knight.” He paused. “Knights, actually. I--” he bit back on a scream.

“What?” Jasna asked.

“Something.... just... crawled over my fingers. And--” he stifled another shriek. “Vanya’s garters, get it away! Get it away!”

Jasna craned her neck. Something hulked in the darkness behind the young man, and she heard the telltale gnashing of small teeth. Or what would have been small teeth, on a regular sized at. Moonlight reflected off two reddish eyes, gleamed off the ends of whiskers nearly as long as Jasna's hands, stretched full.

“You don’t believe in giant rats, do you?”

“Giant what?”

“Rats. The size of dogs?”

The young man made a strangled groan and tried to shimmy away.

“No! Sit still!” Jasna hissed. “It’s probably not hungry enough to eat you, anyway. Sit still and it might loose interest and go away.”

“Might?” the boy’s voice cracked.

**\*\*V\*\***

The young man may as well have been cast in stone, so still did he keep himself. Except for the panting. And whimpering. He flinched, as the creature’s teeth nipped the flesh at the base of his thumb. Not hard enough to break skin. The boy’s sudden movement caused the bindings around his wrists to snap, most of the rope having been chewed through.

He turned to swing at the beast, but it danced out of reach, chittering and hissing, before scuttling away into the darkness.

“And don’t come back!” he whispered harshly after it.

Only after he was sure the creature wasn’t going to return did he work at the knots at his ankles, and then turn his attention to the ropes binding the girl. She politely ignored how much his hands shook.

They climbed to the top of the pile of hay and grain below the trap door, but it was well out of reach. After a second tumble when the boy tried to lift Jasna onto his shoulders, they lay, panting, staring up at the faint square outline of light.

“Why don’t we try finding where that rat disappeared to?” Jasna asked.

“How about we try one more time to boost you up?”

Jasna hauled herself to her feet, placing her boot in the young man’s cupped hands, her hands on his shoulders.

“Ready?” he asked.

There came a sudden flurry of squeaking, and the young man glanced feverishly about in the gloom. But the squeaking came from above them.

Lantern light flooded the cellar, and Jasna squinted up into familiar face.

“Brynne! Fancy meeting you here.”

“Hullo, Jasna. Oh, is this a bad time? I didn’t mean to interrupt anything.”

The young man blushed, and leapt away from the younger girl.

“I didn’t-- I would never--” he sputtered.

Jasna frowned at him. “So I’m ugly, as well as fat?”

## **\*\*VI\*\***

“Hurry up, already!” another voice called from above. “I can’t hold this shield up all night.”

The young man leapt at the knotted rope that Brynne had lowered. “Allow me to assist you!” he called, as he hauled himself up.

Jasna swarming up after him.

They emerged into what looked to be an inn or taven kitchen, long since boarded up and disused. While most of the surfaces were clear of dust, the cobwebs and grime had simply been pushed to the corners, rather than truly cleaned up.

“Brynne!” The other girl’s voice called from the front room. “It’s slipping!”

They rushed into the common room, lit by two oil lamps on either end of the single long table. A group of adults sat in a circle, their backs to each other, hands bound, with wads of what looked like their own cloaks stuffed in their mouths.

One man, with wavy red hair and coppery skin, glared around a mouthful of his yellow longcoat. A slender woman with long blonde hair slumped next to the man, her own glare just as withering.

Their attention was directed at another blonde girl, who stood with her hand outstretched, unfazed by the scrutiny of the captives. She wore a simple flowing white dress, the sleeves long and billowing. The cuffs, like the bottom of her dress, was embroidered with seven colored bands.

The young man blinked. “I don’t understand. There is no armor here...”

Brynne pushed past him, snatching up a polished oaken staff another six inches taller than her. With a practiced twirl, she brought one end down on the red-haired man’s head, and then did the same to the woman. Both slouched, their features going slack.

“You just beat defenseless prisoners!” The young man made to grab for Brynne’s wrist, but she stepped back, batting his hands away with another twirl of the staff.

“And they are hardly defenseless,” the girl in the dress said. She spoke as if she’d just spent the past hour hauling water up and down flights of stairs.

Jasna ignored them, kneeling on the bench, looking over the sheaf of papers that covered half the table. She pushed several aside, revealing a stained and age-spotted calfskin.

“Ah! Finally something without so many words on it!”

The girl in the dress breezed past the young man, and then stopped. “Show me your hands,” she said, her tone sharp. When the boy did -- without hesitation -- her gaze

flicked to his right side. He gave a shiver, tried to snatch his hands back, but the girl tightened her grip.

“Hold still, it won’t take but a moment.”

“Don’t you dare use your witchery on me!” the young man gasped. He sucked in a hissing breath, and the crease in his brow lessened. He took another breath, and another. The snarl faded into slack-jawed amazement, which just as quickly crumpled into suspicion. “What did you do? Why doesn’t it hurt any more?”

“I just mended your third rib, which was badly cracked. I also soothed the two torn muscles in your shoulder, as well as the bruises that would have made for some very painful fists in a few hours time. Oh, and dear Petra’s little bite from this morning, as well.”

“Little?” the young man said, wrenching his hand free. “Look what she--” He stared. The gap-toothed marks were gone, as if they’d never been there. Again, the amazement warred with suspicion. “You--” he began.

The girl held out her hand. “You may call me Katarin,” she said. “Company healer.”

The boy took her fingertips, bowing over them. He looked up. “Company?”

“Yes, we are the ‘Company of Maidens.’”

“No, no no,” Jasna said, looking up from the calfskin map, waving her hands. “We are called the ‘Handmaidens of Petra.’”

“I thought we were going to be the ‘Defenders of Threshold,’” Brynne said.

## \*\*VII\*\*

“That is Brynne, our Sergeant at Arms,” Jasna said. “Our treasurer is snowed in at Verge. The secretary-- where is Petra?”

The two other girls glanced at each other, and then through the slats of one of the windows, where Matera’s waning moonlight painted dim silvery lines through the dancing dust motes and on the floor.

“It’s her ... time of the month,” Katarin said.

The young man rubbed his hand. “No wonder her temper was so short.”

All three girls stared at him.

“There’s no going near my sister during the new moon.”

“That’s not precisely--” Katarin began, but Brynne gave her a nudge in the ribs with her staff.

Jasna frowned. “Well, we’ll just gather all this up for her to go through in the morning.”

“You could try reading some of it,” Brynne said.

The girl at the table pouted. “But there are so many words! Look at this: page after page of them! What could possibly take so many words to say?”

“If you bothered to read them, you would know, Jasna.”

“I’m supposed to be the wise one,” Katarin said. Brynne stuck her tongue out at the girl.

“Um, excuse me...” the young man said.

Jasna looked up at him. “We recognize Lord Stableboy of Penhaligon. What is it?”

His cheeks colored, but he took a deep breath, his lips moving, as if counting to himself.

"I told you. I am no lord. My name is just... Justin. Justin Promethian." He bowed. "At your service."

Jasna's eyes narrowed slightly at the slight hesitations at giving his name. But she smiled brightly nonetheless.

"Very well, Lord Stableboy. You can start by herding all of them into the wagon outside." She pointed past him, to the group of bound Glantrians.

Sergeant Arthol looked up at the ringing of the bell by the guardhouse's front door. It had been a long day -- first the business with the orphan and the young lord, and then the debacle they caused in the market square. He was not yet halfway through the vendor's petitions for recompense to the baron, and the moon was well past its zenith. It was most definitely not how he meant to spend his Year's End eve.

The bell rang again, sounding as if the ringer was using the bell pull for a skipping rope.

He snatched up a truncheon as he made his way through the front guard room. It never hurt to be too careful at this time of night-- unless you were on the receiving end of the club, that is. The sergeant chuckled at his private joke, and unbolted the door. He nearly tripped over the tangle of bodies on the stoop.

He reached down, and picked up a note, written with charcoal on a scrap of old paper. The neat, courtly lettering read:

"Happy New Year. A present from the" -- here, several different groups of words were crossed out: "Company of the Maidens" and "Defenders of Threshold" -- the words "Handmaidens of Petra" was spelled out in a different hand, much bigger, the letter 'e' having been scribed in reverse. It was signed "With Apologies, Lord Justin, et. al."

## Lake Windrush

**\*\*|\*\***

"These pages smell like beer," Jasna said, wrinkling her nose. Half the page was stained a yellowish-brown, the lettering smeared, barely legible. Not that she was having much luck deciphering the words anyway.

"That's because somebody blew all the papers into the big puddle from the broken cask," Petra said, glaring across the table. "While you were off racing, I saved as many as I could."

Brynne and Katarin both blushed, and bent their noses to the pages in front of them.

"This 'Perrantin' fellow uses too many big words," Jasna complained. "I want another page. This one is too hard to read." She reached for the stack of papers by the younger girl's elbow.

Petra swatted her hand away. "I've already gone through those and made my notes."

"How is it that an itinerant woodcutter's daughter can read and write better than a girl who receives daily instruction from the clergy?" Justin asked, looking up from his own sheet of beer-stained paper.

"She only attends one of every three or four lessons," Brynne said.

“One of the men in the camp used to be a druid. He knows all sorts of letters. He’s teaching me Elvish!” Petra said.

Jasna rolled her eyes. “Yes, because there are sooo many elves up here in the mountains.”

“I still don’t quite understand what we’re looking for,” Justin said. “These pages are all out of order, written in different hands...”

Petra cleared her throat, and glanced over at Katarin.

“Next time, I’ll just let them use you for target practice, then,” the healer said. She turned to the young man. “We’re looking for whatever those men were looking for. If they were willing to kill to get their hands on this material, we need to find out what secrets it holds.”

“I keep seeing this name... ‘Zadreth.’ And ‘Lugsid,’” the young man said. “Those are not Thyatian.”

“They are Old Traldar,” Brynne said. “Lugsid, Lavv, They are towns, estates from Halav’s day. They are mentioned in the Song. Only Krakatos and Achelos have kept their old names since the Thyatians invaded. But this.. Zadreth. I have never heard of it.”

“Listen to this,” Katarin said. She smoothed the scroll she’d been looking through, and read: “The sun glinted off the lake to the north, and there was a most interesting arrangement of peaks to the west making it look as if a snake were poking its head up. Just to the left was a natural formation that looked like rabbit’s ears perked up in alarm at the snake . . .” She looked over at Brynne. “Does that sound familiar?”

The other girl’s brow furrowed as she thought. “The Standoff Peaks?”

Katarin touched her finger to Brynne’s nose, smiling. “That’s what I thought of, too. The lake can only be Windrush. And here, there is more, on another page.” She picked up another scroll, carefully unrolling it. “Few know this road once continued a few leagues to the east across the river and into the mountains. If one looked sharply one can find the almost hidden road to a grouping of foundations that make a long-abandoned village. Unlike ruins on the west shore of the lake, these cluster around a central square.”

This time, it was Petra who nodded. “Along the southern edge of the lake, there are some old, flat stones here and there. We never followed them for long, since the timber there is too young. We weren’t allowed to go far from the camps near the lake shore. It’s much too dangerous. They say the northern woods along the lake and the mountains are haunted.” She made the closed-circle sign against evil with her thumb and pinky fingers against her heart.

“That just sounds like superstitious nonsense to me,” Justin said.

“No,” Petra shook her head. “You don’t understand. The woods there don’t... feel right. They don’t look right, or smell right. It just feels....”

“Not right?” Justin finished.

“You--” Petra started, her cheeks coloring. Then she sighed. “You would understand if you’ve been there.”

“Then let us go,” the young man said. “My eyes grow weary of scouring these pages.”

Brynne stood up, smiling. “I agree. Less reading and more... doing anything else!”



Jasna knocked on the tabletop. "Now wait just a moment. I'm in charge. Since when do the Handmaidens of Petra take orders from a boy?"

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"I wish we could go with you," Fiala said, as she handed the satchel over to Jasna. "But with the feast at sundown..." She flinched as her father called her, from within the kitchens. "Petra go with you," she said, squeezing the girl's hand.

"I am!" the younger girl said, from over Jasna's shoulder.

"You know what I mean!" Fiala stuck her tongue out, and then eased the delivery door shut as her father shouted again.

"Well," Jasna said, "That takes care of provisions." She turned to the rest of the group. Brynne and Katarin had added the fur linings to their sturdy woolen cloaks. Brynne took the bag from Jasna, and slung it from the end of her quarterstaff.

"You're going to hike through the woods in that?" Jasna asked, with a gesture towards the bands of color peeking from beneath Katarin's cloak. "What's wrong with breeches?"

"An initiate must wear the proper attire," the novice weaver sniffed. "Everybody knows what this dress means, and I am treated accordingly."

"It just means the bear will catch you first," Jasna muttered. She started up the alleyway, peeking out from around the corner. "Where did Lord Stableboy say he was staying?"

"The Two Sheaves," Petra said.

"He has a name, you know," Katarin said.

Jasna clucked her tongue. "He hasn't given his real one, so I'll just keep calling him whatever I like."

"Do you think he's really the son of a knight?" Petra asked.

"Not from Penhaligon. He'd have seen kobolds and ogres if he was from the north. Which means he's probably from the coast."

"Specularum," all the girls said at once.

Katarin sucked in a sharp breath, her eyes lighting up. "You don't suppose he's--"

"Please," Jasna said. "Don't start fawning over him. It'll only make his head bigger."

"But he's--"

"Sheared," Brynne said.

"Oh, don't go getting jealous." Katarin patted Brynne's arm. "We'll let Jasna have him."

"As if he has anything I'd want."

"Gold enough to pay off a peace-bond violation and a Class 4 crime," Petra reminded her. "And that was just as a purse full of kopecs to him."

"I meant besides that," Jasna said.

"He's brave," Katarin said. "Charging those men like that in the marketplace..."

Jasna rolled her eyes. "You didn't hear him squeal at the mention of rats."

Petra giggled.

\*\*||\*\*

"You sound like a Darine caravan," Jasna said.

Lord Justin pulled his cloak tighter about his shoulders, muffling some of the jangling of his chainmail jack. The lantern, hanging from a strap on his backpack, still creaked and rattled as it bounced off his hip. A sword -- the handle wound 'round and bound to the scabbard with red cloth, rattled and bounce at at his other hip.

"We're going on an adventure. It pays to be prepared."

"We're going for an afternoon hike, not delving the depths of Mistamere," Brynne said, giving the lantern a poke.

"That one -- " he pointed at Petra, "said where we were going was dangerous." Justin tried to straighten his back a bit more, but winced, and readjusted his pack instead.

Jasna glanced over at Katarin. "Maybe you won't be the one to get eaten by the bear."

The girls waited, after they'd rounded the bend onto the North Bridge Road. Lord Justin jangled and rattled as he huffed back down the North Road.

"The gate is that way," he panted, pointing up the street.

"Yes, and the North Road gate has been locked and warded by the baron himself," Jasna said.

"But that is the roadway that leads to the other side of the lake, is it not?"

Jasna nodded. "Yes, but it is out of bounds. Nobody has traveled it since the... accident... at Tarnskeep."

The young man's eyes widened. "So the stories of the White Witch's wrath are true? That she killed an entire company of men by herself, and their ghosts haunt the shores of the lake, hungry for vengeance against her?"

Petra's back stiffened, and she made to say something, but Jasna trod on her foot. "Now is not the time," the older girl said.

They turned, and followed the avenue, across the bridge onto Fogor Island, keeping to the wider streets, until they drew near the Old Mill. The newly-hewn wood of the ferry wharf stood out against the age-darkened wooden quays and warehouses.

Before they could make their way to the stone steps leading down to the ferry landing, Petra gave a sharp hiss, and motioned towards the shadows opposite their position. Figures roused themselves, stepping into the gray morning light.

Three men, tall, broad of shoulder, their armor gleaming from beneath heavy blue woolen cloaks.

"Children?" one of the men asked. The one in front raised a gloved hand, silencing the knight who'd spoken, before settling the hand at the thick sword belt at his waist.

"And why are you not at the Square, playing at the entertainments the baron has brought to town for the new year?" The man stared down his nose at the group.

"We have been sent back across the river on an errand by my father," Brynne said.

The big knight crossed his arms. "It takes five of you for such an errand?"

"Not even my drunkard of a father would send a girl alone into this part of town," Brynne said.

"And I suppose this one is your bodyguard, then?" one of the other knights quipped, nodding towards Justin.

"He likes to think he's a knight," Jasna said to the man, in a loud whisper, her tone of voice indicating that it didn't much matter if the boy heard or not. "He insisted that he be prepared for anything before we left."

"You don't expect us to do all the heavy lifting, do you?" Brynne asked.

The two knights behind the leader exchanged smirks.

"Just be sure you keep well away from the lake shore," one of them said, a bit louder and slower than before.

"We know the rules," Katarin snapped. She took Justin's hand, patting it. "And we'll keep him out of trouble."

Again, the lead knight made a brief, silencing gesture towards the other knight who'd spoken. He inclined his head.

"Very well. Keep a sharp eye," he said to Justin. "The celebrations have attracted some rather unsavory elements."

The knights turned, settling back to their watch of the ferry.

"We were not to let anybody across," one of the knights said in a murmur.

"They are children," the leader rumbled. "I hardly think the Church or the Cult would stoop to using children for their ends."

"I wouldn't put anything past those cultists," the third knight muttered.

The rest of their conversation was lost as the girls made their way to the riverside, Justin clanking and jangling as he followed behind.

#### **\*\*IV\*\***

"That wasn't very funny," Justin said, as they hiked towards the logging settlement a bit upstream from the ferry landing opposite Fogor Island. "Did you hear how they spoke to me? Like I was a simpleton! And don't. Say. It."

"Say what?" Jasna asked. To her credit, she kept a straight face.

"Say that he is--" Brynne clapped a hand over Petra's mouth. The two engaged in a staring match, only broken when Katarin waved a hand between them.

"You were going to show us the ruined roadway?" the novice weaver reminded the girl.

They hiked up the well worn footpath alongside the logging sluice. After perhaps a half mile, waist-high posts driven into the ground, with a thick, heavy rope slung between blocked the path. More posts, placed perhaps every ten or fifteen feet, stretched into the woods to the east. Across the sluiceway, a similar boundary had been erected along Fisherman's Isle. Strips of weathered red cloth had been tied along the rope, and fluttered in the weak morning breeze off the lake.

The Fisherman's Bridge was barely visible, another three hundred yards up the path towards the lake shore, shrouded in a thick fog.

"Windrush is a cold spring-fed lake," Justin said. "How is it that such a fog could come about with the weather still this cold?"

"The only gold you brought was to pay the ferryman, right?" Jasna asked.

"Just the one royal, yes."

She nodded. "Good." Then she ducked beneath the rope barrier.

"Where are you going?"

"We need to get closer, to see if we can find this road along the shore."

"But this cordon... Surely it's a warning."

"Maybe for other people," Brynne said, as she slipped under the rope, then took it from Jasna to hold it up for the others to pass under.

“But that’s just for everybody else,” Petra said with a fierce grin.

“What was this about knowing the rules,” Justin asked, as he ducked under the rope next to Katarin.

She gave him a smile of her own. “I said we knew them. I never said we’d obey them.”

He shook his head. “You’re as bad as the tiny one.”

“I heard that!” Jasna said, from where she led them further up the path.

**\*\*V\*\***

There was a brief squawk, and thud, somewhere ahead in the mists.

“Never mind!” Petra called. “Katarin found it! The next one is over here!”

The pathway had been constructed hundreds of years ago, and it was obvious that the shoreline had been a handful of yards further out in the past. The few places the paving stones were clearly visible, they were an arm’s length under the water. Others, still along the shoreline, were barely visible corners, or just depressions along the sandy shoreline, the paving stones only visible after scooping away armfuls of pebbly sand and old silt deposits.

Only Petra seemed to find the activity any kind of fun, and only then because she poked through the pile of moved earth to pluck out an old kopec or corona, dashing down to the shore to wash it off in the waters of the lake.

Brynne finally grabbed the girl’s wrist as she was about to make another trip to the lake. “Will you stop doing that? What if one of those turns out to be gold?”

The two girls stared out into the fog, at the flickering blue lights in the depths, unsure just how far off they might be.

“Now come on, let’s see where this leads.” Brynne did not let go of Petra’s sleeve until they were well past the closest of the piles by the excavations.

The group slowed some ten minutes later, coming to the edge of the woods. A stretch of pebbly beach perhaps as wide as Lord Justin’s height was all that stood between the first rank of trees and the water’s edge.

“What... what is wrong with them?” Katarin asked.

Petra was right: they did not look... right: The trees grew gnarled, knotty, some with long strips of bark hanging off in curls. Rather than gray-green or green, the needles bore a purplish coloring, those that weren’t already brown and dead.

“How far does this go?” Katarin asked.

Petra shrugged. “Maybe half the distance between here and the baron’s border. We weren’t allowed to go more than a little ways into this part of the woods.”

“I can certainly see why,” Brynne said. She reached up with her staff, poking at one of the pinecones. Part of it crumbled away at the touch, showering the group with its gritty dust.

“Well, we’ll have to go through this if we want to follow this old road,” Lord Justin said.

“Who said we were going to do that?” Jasna asked. “We came out here to look at the old stones, and see the woods. We’re done here. Now we can go back to town and celebrate the new year with our friends.”

“Where is your sense of adventure?”

“In town, waiting for me after tomorrow’s breakfast,” Jasna said.

Lord Justin made to respond, but Petra quieted him with a hiss and an upraised finger.

"Somebody's coming," she whispered. She glanced around. Save the woods, there was no cover.

"Into the trees!" Brynne whispered. "There's a couple fallen trees we can hide behind in there."

"I don't hear anything," Justin said. But the girls pulled and pushed him along into the woods.

Several moments later, the rhythmic jangling of armor and weapons drifted through the fog.

"Are you sure they went this way?" a man's voice asked. The accent was distinctly Traladaran.

"What other way could they go?" came another man's voice. "And look. See there? They've found the Old Road. They can't be very far ahead of us."

"You mean to follow, then?"

The second voice chuckled. "Follow? No, we wait. If they do not return, then we can be content that the traps or guardians have served their purpose. If they return, we either take the treasure, or their heads. Golithar pays the same, either way."

## **\*\*VI\*\***

The jangle and creaking of armor and leather subsided, though it was difficult to tell in the fog if it was lost in the distance, or simply swallowed by the mists.

Jasna glanced over at Petra, who closed her eyes, cocking her head one way and the other. After a few moments, she opened her eyes, shrugging. The two girls flashed several hand signals back and forth, before they both nodded.

Petra rose, her eyes intent on the forest floor. She moved slowly, placing her feet gently, arms outstretched for balance. Jasna followed, her following where the other girl's feet had fallen. Before she took another step, she pointed at the young man, and then at the spots where she'd already stepped. He nodded, rising slowly, clutching at his sword and the lantern, making the two steps with surprisingly little wobble in his step. When Jasna's eyes widened slightly, he stuck his tongue out at her.

Every four or five steps, Petra would pause, listening, and then move on. It took nearly half an hour to make another half mile's progress, but they made it with a minimal amount of noise, and did not hear any sounds of pursuit.

It was eerie, creeping through the woods -- there were no sounds of wildlife, just the rustling they made with their progress and a dry rattle of what little breeze made it through the tendrils of fog curling amongst the twisted trees. The land began to rise steadily, and the mists faded. Shortly thereafter, the trees straightened, growing healthier the more the ground climbed away from the shoreline.

Ridges of black granite rose abruptly, like some great wall. They had to follow it back in the direction of the lake to find the fissure that the Old Road cut through, a fold in the rock wide enough for a large cart or small wagon. The sounds of Justin's mail and sword echoed loudly in confines of the narrow pass.

The roadway still gradually rose, and they emerged to find a stretch of the road unbroken, weathered but sheltered from too much erosion by the small copse of pines

that it cut through. Tracks through the accumulation of needles and swathes of mud showed that they were not the first to come along the road recently.

They followed the sound of a trickling brook for another half hour before the snorting and shuffling caused the group to freeze just before the bend in the trail. The sounds came more urgently, and the irritated snorting grew to a startled whinny giving way to a chorus of jabbering, shrill voices.

Jasna moved, to dash around the bend in the wooded trail, but Petra grabbed her wrist, shaking her head.

"What do you think you're doing? Those are goblin voices!" she whispered.

## **\*\*VII\*\***

She should have grabbed Justin's arm as well.

"Come back here, Stableboy!" Jasna called after him. She wrenched free of the other girl, jogging after the young man.

"They're only goblins," he said, but the smile on his face dissolved as he rounded the twist in the trail.

"And goblins always travel in packs," Jasna told him, as the dozen squat, gray-skinned figures looked up from ransacking the campsite. Yellowed eyes, narrowed in the sunlight, narrowed further at the intrusion. More eyes gleamed from the shadows under the trees.

Jasna swallowed, her mouth going drier the higher she counted, tallying opponents.

"Now would be a very good time to draw that sword," she whispered to the young man.

"W-would it not be a better idea to flee?" he asked.

"I begin to see what you mean about his bravery," Katarin said. The young man spared her a glance, his brow furrowing at the sing-song quality of her voice.

"How can you be so calm? There must be... dozens of them!"

"Only twenty," Jasna said.

"Twenty-six," Petra corrected. "You forgot to look up."

"Twenty-nine," Brynne added. "There won't be any running back the way we came."

## **\*\*VIII\*\***

"Did your Magia teach you how to make light, like she did in the catacombs?" Petra asked.

Katarin nodded, slowly. "Yes, but... it doesn't exactly--"

"Make some. Now. As bright as you can."

"But I--"

Petra wasn't listening. She stepped forward, throwing her hands wide, speaking words that sounded more like a series of hisses and belches than language. She pointed -- dramatically -- to Katarin.

Jasna elbowed the weaver. "Ight-lay!" she whispered.

Katarin drew in a deep breath, and her fingers danced, curling and moving ever so slightly. She brought up her right hand, and a watery, rippling sphere of light wobbled a

few inches above her palm. The girl's breathing quickened, the corner of one eye twitching.

The goblins croaked in surprise, shuffling back a few steps. The few nearest the group raised an arm to shield their eyes.

Petra made another series of gulping croaks and barks. The goblins drew back another step, muttering amongst themselves and looking towards the largest among them -- a goblin only half a head shorter than Jasna.

It drew itself up to full height, squinting up at Petra. It gestured around the campsite, then pounded its chest as it burred something to the girl.

She laughed, not taking her eyes from the goblin, pointing over her shoulder her at Justin.

The goblin peered at the group, the young man in particular for a long moment, then gave a gurgling sigh, shaking its head. It turned, barking something to the others, but from its body language, its message was obvious. Those goblins that grumbled or muttered, or loitered around were silenced or prodded into motion by a few well placed punches from the leader. The goblin pack took off at a shambling, loping run, disappearing northwards into the woods.

Katarin let out an explosive gasp, dropping her arm as the ball of light gave a final wobble and flopped over, winking out.

"Well," Justin said, adjusting his sword belt. "I suppose none of them wanted to face my sword."

Petra choked down laughter. "Sword?" she finally managed.

"You offered me as your champion against their leader, if I followed your exchange correctly," he said.

"I guess 'offered' is the right word," the girl mused. "As champion? No. That would have been Brynne."

## **\*\*IX\*\***

"Stop!"

The group halted at Petra's call. She rummaged around in a bag at her waist, pulling out one of the pages they'd pored over the day before.

"This is it," she said, glancing up from the page, at the mountains in the distance. "See? There is the snake and the rabbit. Which means...." She turned a slow circle.

"There!" Jasna said, and took two running steps across the broken paving stone. She jumped, trying to reach the branches of a scrubby shrub that clung to an outcropping of rock. Justin went to her side, reaching up, tugging at the branch. As it creaked aside, they saw the cluster of rounded folds of rock that looked like eggs sitting in a nest.

"There!" Petra said, pointing. Brynne turned, and saw the boot print in the drying mud. What they had taken for simply more overgrowth had apparently once been some sort of decorative hedging that ran along the front of the temple described in the manuscripts.

As Brynne pushed the tangle of brambles aside with her staff, they saw the beaklike overhang of rock. Beneath it was a fissure, leading down and into the hillside.

"Well," Justin said, "I suppose it's a good thing I brought this lamp."

"But Katarin can--"

Brynne elbowed Jasna in the side. "Let the boy be of some use," she whispered. Loudly. "After all, he came all this way."

## The Temple of the Shield

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"Stop pushing!"

"There's nothing here. It's just a slimy old hole in the rock."

"I told you this is a waste of time. We could have been eating sweetmeat pies. But nooo, you had to--"

The girls crashed to a halt against Justin's backpack.

"Why did you stop?" Jasna wheezed. She peeked around the young man's cloak.

"Is it a dead end?" Brynne asked.

"No," Justin breathed, raising his lantern higher. "Far, far from it."

The rough walls, streaked with moisture, abruptly gave way to block-and-mortar stonework. A half-step down the worked-stone corridor was an archway, flanked by to bas-relief carvings of a young woman's face, framed by flowing hair held back by a thin circlet.

All four girls gasped.

"It can't be," Brynne murmured.

"Who else could it be?" Katarin asked her.

"It's true," Jasna said. "She was there. She was a Handmaiden. And if there were Handmaidens..."

"There was a Queen and King," Petra smiled. "The legends, the Song. It's true."

The girls crowded around Justin.

"Hold that light higher," Brynne told him.

"My arm is only so long," he said. "If you'd get your head out of the way, you could see--"

The corridor was suddenly filled with an odd, thrumming hum.

The carvings to either side of the archway blinked, and then began to speak with Silva's voice. Slightly out of phase with each other, the words partially echoed in the girls' minds, the meanings in Traladaran overlaying the actual alien, spoken words. Just as they had whenever Silva spoke with them.

"Seek ye learning in our hall  
First avoid a harmful fall.  
To enter here and learn our lore  
Kneel and knock upon the door."

The girls went to one knee.

"You see, there, now you can all see just -- what in Ixion's name are you doing?"

"Kneel and knock," Petra said. "Didn't you hear the instructions?"



Justin crossed his arms, the lantern's light bobbing madly as he did so. "I am a court lord. Court Lords do not bend knee on the order of some... commoner. And what instructions? Those faces spoke... gibberish. Not a proper language at all."

The floor vanished beneath them before the argument could even start.

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"Is everybody all right? Is anyone hurt?" Katarin asked.

"Okay here," Brynne said, using her staff to get to her feet.

"I'm fine," Jasna said.

"Me too," Petra said. "I landed on something sort of soft."

"You landed on me," Justin groaned.

Brynne and Jasna untangled the two, Justin jangling and clattering to his feet.

"It's dark as Alphaks' pit in here. Can't you get your lantern lit again?"

"Don't you smell that?" Petra asked. "We've got lamp oil all over us. I think he landed on it when we fell. I don't think open flames would be a very good idea right now."

"Katarin?" Brynne reached out, towards where she thought the other girl stood. "Can you make that light again?"

The weaver shook her head. "No," she said, when she realized that nobody would see the movement. "It took nearly everything I had to create it the first time 'round."

"What sort of magia are you, if you can't even make a little bit of light?" Justin asked.

Brynne whirled, but Katarin squeezed the girl's hand before she could lash out at the young man.

They grew silent at Jasna's short gasp. A moment later, a muted red glow flickered to light against one wall of the pit. It was barely enough to illuminate the girl's features as she held her dragonstone pendant before her.

"Of course," Petra whispered. "They glow when we use them." She rummaged in a pouch at her belt, sucked in a sharp breath herself, and then her pendant took light. She held out a long, thin needle towards Brynne.

The other girl took it, wiping it on her cloak before pricking one of her fingers, touching the bead of blood to the gold-clasped stone dangling from her necklace. There was nearly enough light for them to see each other clearly.

It was light enough for them to see the three piles of bones moldering along the far wall of the pit.

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"Don't touch them!" Justin said.

Too late. Jasna was already squatting over the bones, picking through them. Remains of leathers and scraps of cloth crumbled away under her fingertips.

"We might find something useful on them," she said.

"Useful?" the young lord asked. He prodded another of the skeletons with the toe of his boot. "There is nothing there but bones and rust and--"

Something gleamed reddish in the light of the dragonstones, and Jasna reached through the crumbling hole the boy's boot had opened in the remains of the chainmail.

"Ah ha!" she said, a gleaming dagger in her hand. "You see? Something useful."

"It's just a knife," Justin grumbled.

"No, if it was just a knife, it would have been rusted like all the rest of this," Jasna said, prodding the chainmail. The metal crumbled further, revealing more of the skeleton's ribs.

"Do you think it's magical?" Brynne asked.

Jasna ran her thumb along the blade. "It's still sharp, like it was honed yesterday."

"Careful you don't cut yourself," Katarin said.

"Yes," Justin said, "best give that to me, so you don't hurt someone."

Jasna fished the scabbard from beneath the pile of bones, slipping the knife home. She clipped it onto her belt. "I found it, I keep it. That's the rule." She adjusted the blade on her hip, resting her palm on the hilt. "If you want it so badly, you can try to take it."

The young lord licked his lips, then gave a sniff. "Fine. Keep it. I've got a perfectly good sword, anyway."

"Not that he knows how to use it," Brynne muttered to Katarin.

"Do you think maybe we could try to get out of this pit, now?" Petra asked.

Brynne hefted her staff, holding it up above her head. The tip barely poked over the rim of the pit.

"Maybe... three and a half strides," she said.

"And about five from one end to the other," Jasna murmured. She glanced up at the top of the pit, then behind her. "Step to one side," she said. "I'll need room to run."

"Run?" Justin asked. "Where do you think you're going to--"

Brynne yanked on his backpack, pulling him against the lefthand wall of the pit as Jasna dashed towards him.

She leapt, springing off the walls, zigzagging her way up with the momentum of her short run. She caught herself on the rim, scrabbling for purchase with her feet, and hauled herself up just before her fingers gave. She sprawled on her back, panting, her hair hanging over the edge.

"Okay, throw me some rope," she called down.

All eyes turned to Justin, who shuffled his feet.

"You didn't pack any," Petra said.

"Who packs rope to explore a dungeon?" the young man asked. "Honestly, it's about as useful as... spikes. Or a ten foot pole!"

"Both of which would be very helpful in getting us out of this pit!" Brynne snapped.

#### **\*\*IV\*\***

"Never mind," Jasna called. "I can fetch the rope from that campsite. Don't go anywhere while I'm gone!"

The others watched her leap from the far edge of the pit, to the open archway, and from within the archway to the other edge.

"Don't go anywhere," the young man mimicked, scowling and crossing his arms. "Just where does she expect us to go?"

"Up," Petra said, pointing. "Give me a boost."

"Now, see here, you can't just order me around like that," he said.

Petra sighed. "Fine. Brynne?"

The other girl grinned, and interlaced her fingers into a stirrup.

As had Jasna, Petra backed up to the far side of the pit to give herself a running start. As her boot settled into Brynne's hands, the other girl gave a heave. Petra gave a sharp gasp as she caught the edge of the pit with her gut, the short slide a sickening jolt as she caught herself with her arms.

She sucked in a few short breaths, and made to wriggle her way out when something with sharp, bristly hairs brushed against her face, mussing through her hair.

The girl gave a shriek, and lost her purchase against the side of the pit. She scrabbled against the wall enough that she didn't crash to the floor, but still hit hard, rolling as best she could.

Katarin caught the girl, holding her down. "Stay still. You might have broken something."

"Something-- up-- there," Petra wheezed. "Think it-- was-- an ant."

"For the love of Valerias," Justin scoffed. "An ant? And you call me a flighty-mouse!"

"I would never-- be so insulting--" Petra started, then broke into a cough.

The young man nodded. "That's a much more civil attitude to have towards your betters," he said.

"I was talking--" Petra gasped, "about-- the mouse."

**\*\*V\*\***

"Oh, good, you're all still here."

"It wasn't any funnier the first time," Justin called up to the girl.

Jasna frowned down at the young man. "Maybe you'll all be in brighter spirits once I get you out of that hole."

She disappeared from the edge of the pit, and then made the leap to the archway halfway along the pit's wider edge.

"Careful of the ants," Justin cautioned, with a smirk.

Jasna's head appeared at the edge of the pit. The reddish light from her pendant bobbed as the stone swung on its golden chain. "Ants?"

"I almost got out," Petra explained. "But then an ant made me fall."

Jasna glanced to her left, briefly, then gave a snort of amusement. She vanished, to reappear a few moments later, wedging something against the corner of the floor and the archway. She dropped the length of rope, which dangled a foot or so above the bottom of the pit.

"Stableboy first," the girl said.

"Oh no," he said. "I must insist that the others go ahead of me. A court lord must--"

"Must do as he is told," Jasna finished.

"But--"

"This wood is very old. It might hold long enough for one of you to get out, but not all of you."

"She just called us fat!" Brynne muttered.

"Why does he get to go first?" Petra asked. "I'm lightest. I should go!"

"And do you think the two of us could hoist Lord Rustypants out of there?" Jasna asked her. "This is a case of brawn versus brains."

Justin pulled at the rope, and the table leg it was tied to creaked.

"Just climb!" she called. "Quickly!"

The young man shrugged off his pack, and then began to gather the bottom of his chainmail jack. Brynne and Katarin helped him out of the bulky armor.

“How can you move in this?” the taller of the girls asked.

“Walking isn’t much of a problem. But climbing would be,” he said. He looked up. “See? I can use my brains as well as my brawn.” He frowned, when the girl above didn’t answer. “Jasna?”

They all shared a brief, panicked glance, and then he struggled up the rope as fast as his arms would carry him.

## **\*\*VI\*\***

Jasna looked up from the ruined shelving in the far corner of the room.

“You--” the young man panted. “I thought-- something--”

“Something what? Ate me?” She gestured around the small room, which appeared to be some sort of office. “Maybe some ants?” She wiggled her fingers, casting long, fluttering shadows across the walls. The gesture turned into a shoo-ing motion. “Now help the rest of them out of that hole in the floor.”

“I am a--”

Jasna stalked up to the boy, staring up at his chin. “Let’s set some things straight right now,” she said. She poked him in the chest. “You are no more a court lord right now than I am. You’ve been Sheared, so you are like me. You have no family. Father will not come riding along to pull your bacon from the cook fire. You want to be a gentleman? Then you will own up to your mistake. You will get my friends out of that pit that you dropped them into. And you will jump like a frog on a hot paving stone if any of us should say ‘hop.’ Do I make myself clear?”

She’d prodded him in the chest with each point she made,, backing him up a half step at a time, and by the time Jasna finished, one of the young lord’s heels hung over the three-span drop back to the bone-filled pit.

“You can’t speak to me like that!” he finally managed to sputter.

“I just did,” Jasna said. “And if you don’t like it, then you can just jump right back down into that hole.”

## **\*\*VII\*\***

“Yeah, Jasna can be like that, sometimes,” Petra said, as Justin hefted her from the pit. She patted his hand, then joined the other girl in the corner by the bookshelf, picking through what few papers were left in readable condition.

“You might want to wipe a little more at your cheeks,” Katarin whispered, as he hauled her over the edge. “It won’t do for Jasna to see you crying.”

“I’m not--” the young man said. He sniffed, wiping at his eyes again.

Brynne just clucked her tongue at him, shaking her head. She helped him haul up his armor and pack, which she’d secured to the line before she climbed from the pit.

No sooner had the rope been pulled up over the edge of the pit, than the strange, thrumming hum floated through the air again, and the floor winked back into being outside the small room. Brynne prodded at it with her staff, then slapped it with her hand, finally stepping out into the hallway and jumping up and down.

The thrum began again, and the two carved representations of Silva spoke their command again. Brynne immediately dropped to one knee, and raised her hand,

looking rather embarrassed as she closed her fist and rapped at the empty air of the archway.

To everyone's surprise, three ghostly knocks echoed through the small room.

Yellow-orange light flickered from the corner of the room, and Jasna gave a triumphant cry. The lantern sputtered to light, the glow streaked where the glass had cracked in the fall.

"Ah ha! It wasn't completely broken," she said.

Justin and Petra both shied away from the girl, their cloaks and trousers still damp with oil.

One after the other, the girls wiped the drying blood from their pendants, and the stones went dark.

The corridor split just past the office, continuing ahead, or branching off to their left.

"Rustling from both directions," Petra whispered, with a worried frown. Her hand strayed to her hair.

"We'll go left," Jasna said, and started down the side corridor.

"Yeah, she can be like that," Justin said, as passed Petra to follow the other girl.

Perhaps ten paces down the hallway, they came to another carving. As before, its stone-like eyes opened, and then its mouth began to move. The thrumming hum filled the air, barely heard above the odd, spidery tongue the statue spoke. The girls each heard the meaning, echoing in their minds.

"If it is the knowledge that you yearn

Then enter here to learn.

If you journey here to teach,

Please remember not to preach."

Justin dropped to one knee, and Petra giggled.

"On your feet," Brynne said. "I don't think this one is trapped."

Jasna gave the door behind them a dark look. "It said something about learning. That's certainly a trap."

"Only to those who can't sit still for a lesson or two," Katarin said. She lifted the latch on the door, and pushed, bumping into the panels.

"It's stuck," she said.

Justin stepped up next to her, giving the door a push of his own.

"Swollen in the frame," he said. "This happens at the castle all the time in damp weather. This long winter has been terrible on the guards' shoulder spaulders." To illustrate his point, he slammed his shoulder into the door, staggering into the room when the door popped free of the frame.

He caught himself against a rickety desk, one of several lining the length of the room.

"See? I told you," Jasna said. "This is a classroom if I ever saw one."

"I'm amazed you know what one looks like, as often as you skip your lessons," Brynne said.

The smaller girl snapped her mouth shut, blushing.

"Some people just aren't cut out for this kind of learning," Petra said, poking through the clutter along the floor. She fished out a thin square of slate, blowing it off, and coughing at the dust that billowed into the air. "Druid Misha's lessons aren't so..."

orderly.” She wrinkled her nose, though if it was in disdain for the four rows of desks or the dust in the air was difficult to tell.

Petra set the square of slate down on one of the desks, making her way over to the door on the far wall.

“Do you hear that?” she asked. She leaned against the door, pressing her ear to the wood.

They all heard, distantly, a muffled shout, and familiar clattering of metal that could only be armor of some sort. Petra reached for the door’s latch.

“No!” Justin called. “It might not be safe.” He glanced over to Jasna. “Let me go first.”

The girl backed away from the door, two short sticks appearing as if by magic in her hands. Jasna crouched beside the door, opposite the hinges, the gleaming dagger held low against her leg.

Katarin stepped behind the young man, her fingers spread, as if she were going to play a game of ryadkyiv. She drew several deep breaths, her shoulders relaxing, and her blue eyes went distant. She nodded.

Brynne stood beside the weaver, raising her quarterstaff to waist-height, projecting it before the both of them.

“Go!” Jasna hissed, and Justin threw open the door, bringing his sword up in a high guard as he charged into the room beyond.

### **\*\*VIII\*\***

Jasna and Petra dashed in after the young lord, dagger and batons at the ready. Brynne covered the doorway, staff at the ready.

Justin was halfway across the room before Jasna kicked at a pile of wood that could have once been a chair.

“There’s nobody here!”

Shhhh!

Jasna spun in a circle. “Don’t you shush me!”

Justin leapt back. Jasna hadn’t sheathed the dagger. “I didn’t say--”

Shhhhh!

The voice echoed out of nowhere, and they all glanced over one shoulder, then the other.

“Okay, that is spooky,” Petra whispered.

They tensed, waiting to be rebuked into silence again.

“This must be a library,” Katarin whispered. Her eyes had lost their haziness, and she was looking from shelf to shelf along the bookcases that lined the room’s walls.

“What was your first clue?” Brynne asked. “Maybe all these books?”

“No, don’t touch them!”

Too late, Brynne snatched her hand back from the scroll, as the bottom half of it crumbled away.

Shhhhhhhhh!

“Oh, all right already!” Jasna shouted at the empty air.

Shhhhhhhhhhh!

This time, the ghostly voice was joined by those of the other Handmaidens.

A loud ‘thud’ and clattering of armor came from beyond the door opposite the one the group charged through.

Justin hefted his sword. "Again?"  
Jasna nodded, and they all took positions.  
"Everybody ready?" the young man asked. "On three. One, two.. three!"  
He leaned against the latch, and promptly ran headlong into the door as it refused to budge.

**\*\*IX\*\***

"Stop squiriming!" Katarin hissed.  
"But it--"  
*Shhhhhhhh!* came the ghostly admonition.  
"I thig it's brogen!" Justin whimpered.  
"If you don't sit still, I will clonk you one," Brynne muttered, slapping her staff into the palm of one hand. "Then she'll have to do even more healing on you."  
The weaver held the young lord's head tighter between her hands. She pressed her thumbs to either side of his nose, and gave a sharp twitch.  
He nearly kicked himself out of the rickety chair. He sucked in a shivering breath, jerking his head from the girl's grip.  
"That--" he started, and felt at his nose. He blinked. "... doesn't hurt," he finished. He made to stand up, but Brynne and Katarin both pushed on his shoulders.  
"Not so quick," the taller of the girls cautioned.  
"I feel just--" He clutched at the edges of the chair, as if it were about to topple over. Katarin stepped back as he bent over his knees, making sick.  
*Shhhhhhhhhhhh!*

**\*\*X\*\***

"That'll be five kopecs," Petra said.  
"He didn't fall over," Jasna grumbled.  
"But he was sick. Five kopecs."  
"I'll buy you a meatpie at the next Festival of Lights," Jasna whispered.  
"When have you ever actually bought anything at a festival?" Petra asked, glancing up from where she knelt in front of the library's far door.  
"Any luck with that lock?" Jasna asked, avoiding the question.  
The younger girl poked her tongue out as she focused again on the kinked iron rods in the keyhole. She listened as she gave first one, then the other a series of twists and wiggles, and there came a distinct 'chak' of the mechanism unlatching.  
Jasna flipped the dagger, catching it point-downward. "Ready?" she asked the other girl.  
Petra shook her head. "I think we should wait for Lord Justin. Something doesn't feel right."  
"Don't be such a mouse!" Jasna teased, then swallowed her chuckle. "Um, you know how I meant that..."  
Petra waved a hand at her, then frowned. She wafted her hand in front of the lock again, wrinkling her nose.  
"You don't smell that?" she asked.  
Jasna bent down, taking in a deep breath through her nose. "All I can smell is lamp oil."

“Not that,” Petra said. “It’s... bad.”

She swatted Jasna’s hand when the girl reached for the latch. “Next time, I’ll bite you,” she warned.

Jasna sighed, sheathing her dagger and crossing her arms. “Fine. We’ll wait for Lord Stableboy.”

## **\*\*XI\*\***

“Try not to run into the door this time,” Jasna whispered.

“Kick rocks,” the young man said, flexing his fingers around the grip on his sword. “Everybody ready?”

“Let’s go already,” Brynne said.

“I really think we should find another way around,” Petra said. “There was that whole other corridor to explore.”

Justin raised the latch, pushed on the door, then threw his weight into it when it stuck in the doorframe.

They rushed into a large bedchamber, and nearly tripped over the bodies laying on the floor. Worse, though, was the eye-watering sickly-sweet smell of death that hung in the air.

Brynne tried to pull Katarin back into the library, but the weaver pushed around the others, kneeling to inspect the two armored men collapsed on the floor. They were dressed in the polished plate and blue-and-white colors of the Knights of the Griffon.

“They’re dead,” she whispered, sliding her fingers away from their necks. “It can’t have happened too long ago, but... they’re cold as ice.”

“Look at their armor,” the young man said, pointing to long, parallel furrows, the metal blackened and tarnished along the rents. “What could do such a thing to hardened steel?”

“Um, I think we’re about to find out,” Petra squeaked.

The curtains surrounding the large four-poster bed in the room’s far corner billowed, and an age-blackened gauntlet thrust from between the drapes.

## **\*\*XII\*\***

The stench of death grew thicker as the thick curtains parted. A figure, robed and hooded in tatters of brown and gray cloth, stepped down from the mold-ridden mattress and bedclothes. The hood swiveled as it took in the intruders, and each of the girls shivered as the cold glare washed over them. Lord Justin’s sword rattled in his grip, though he did not lower the blade.

“More intruders?” The voice was barely more than a rattling hiss of air through a long-dead throat, but the words coalesced in the fetid air, clearly audible nonetheless. “Cunning enough to avoid the tests of the unworthy. Why do you disturb the sanctity of this place, and awaken me from my long slumber?”

“You killed them,” Katarin said, still crouched beside the bodies.

“They proved... unworthy,” the rag-clad figure rasped. “I ask again, why do you disturb the sanctity of this place?”

“W-we found papers. Pages, that described a temple that holds a relic of one of our greatest heroes,” Petra said. “Men would have killed to learn of this place, and we want to know why.”



“And who are you, who disturb my rest?”

“The Champions of Threshold,” Brynne said, finally finding her tongue.

“We are the Company of the Maidens,” Katarin said, louder than the other girl.

Jasna sighed. “If I only had a kopec for every time I’ve told you: We are the Handmaidens of Petra.”

The hooded head stirred, and the figure bent slightly. “Threshold? Another to mention that place...”

“You... might know the place as ‘Lugsid,’ across the lake,” Petra chimed in.

The ragged hood bobbed. “Yes... yes, Lugsid is known to me. It seems that many years have passed since I took to my slumber.”

“Quite a few,” Brynne said, taking shallow breaths.

The voice wheezed and rattled. It might have been a chuckle. “You are much more courteous than those others.”

“The Matron encourages us to always speak politely to our elders,” Jasna said.

“And... you... definitely qualify.”

### **\*\*XIII\*\***

“They were discourteous?” Katarin asked. “That is why you killed them?”

“They proved unworthy,” the hooded figure repeated.

“Unworthy? Of what?” Katarin was on her feet, hands on her hips.

“They were not worthy of approaching the sacred relic.”

“Those men were knights,” Justin said. “Sworn to the service of the Church of Karameikos.”

“Karameikos? Yes, that is the name from which they thought to draw their power. It did them little good.” The hood leaned closer to the young man, and the tip of his sword twitched, shaking harder.

“You have much the same smell about you,” the figure rasped. “Tell me, boy, do you serve this ‘Karameikos’ as well?”

The young man straightened his back, lifting his chin. “Of course I do. I am a loyal subject of the Grand Duke. And as a court lord, I attend services of the church, in order that I should set a good example for my inferiors.” He glanced towards the girls, then wrenched his eyes front as the figure’s hands began to rise.

“You do not follow the faith of the tribes of Traladara, then?”

“That pack of superstitions? Certainly not!”

The figure closed one gauntlet over the other, sliding the rusty metal-lined glove from a terribly emaciated hand. The knuckles were swollen and gnarled, the nails overly long, though ragged and blackened.

“You dare to speak of the memory of the Three in such a manner? You will be punished!” The thing lunged at the young man, hand outstretched.

### **\*\*XIV\*\***

Brynne was faster, lashing out with her staff, bringing it down across the back of the withered hand.

“You dare to--”

Brynne rapped the figure’s hand again. “I dare,” she said. “I think we’ve seen the handiwork of your touch. You won’t be laying hands on our Stableboy.”

"You, too, now?" Justin asked, his voice cracking.

"He does not believe." The creature's breath rattled faster. "He is not fully a son of Traladara. His blood is tainted."

"So you take the lives of those whose blood is not pure?" Petra asked. She stepped in front of the young man, placing herself between him and the raggedly-hooded figure, shaking Brynne's hand from her shoulder when the other girl tried to restrain her.

"That was a classroom back there," Petra said, pointing towards the door through which they'd come. "Were you not a teacher here?"

Breath wheezed, in what might have been a sigh. "I remember giving instruction, yes. Those memories are very dim..."

Jasna cleared her throat. "And speaking of dim, it's not the stableboy's fault that he is ignorant of the Song of Halav."

"And who are you to decide if he is worthy?" Petra thrust her chin up at the shadowed figure.

"Yes, what is your measure of worthiness?" Katarin asked.

"Let the tests of the Halls of Knowledge decide," the thing rasped. "His demise by my hands would have at least been painless. And would have spared the rest of you from sharing in his fate." It slid the gauntlet back over its hand. "Now go, and let me return to my rest."

## \*\*XV\*\*

"I could have fought him," Justin grumbled.

"That thing was not..." Katarin started.

"Alive?" asked Brynne.

"Dead," said Jasna.

"Natural." Petra shuddered. "Didn't you feel how cold it was?" she asked the young man.

"I still would have--"

"If we would have fought that... thing," Katarin said, "we would have ended up like those knights."

Justin stopped. "The knights!" He turned, making ready to go back through the library. "We must--"

"We must leave that thing to its rest," Brynne said, tugging at the young lord's shoulder.

His hand tightened on the hilt of his sword. "We should put that thing to eternal rest," he muttered.

"He was resting just fine until we got here," Petra said.

"Now let's go," Jasna said, tapping her foot.

They retraced their steps to the intersection with the main corridor. Petra swallowed, audibly, adjusting the grip on one of her oaken batons. At Jasna's questioning glance, the other girl nodded. "They're there, but further away."

Justin snorted, hefting his pack and lifting the lantern. He led the way down the hallway, stopping short as the group drew near a pair of wooden doors.

One hung from a single hinge, the other laying flat inside the chamber beyond, the surface showing signs of taking several impacts. As the young man bent to inspect the doorway, the telltale hum of another speaking carving began.

He straightened, looking to the girls, then at the floor, but they just shook their heads.

"It was a greeting," Brynne said.

Justin shook his head. "I don't see how you can make sense of that. It's no language I've ever heard, and at court--"

Jasna gave an exaggerated sigh, and rolled her eyes. Petra dug an elbow into the girl's ribs.

"I don't think anybody 'at court' would be speaking that language," Jasna said, mimicking the young man's enunciation of the words. "It's been dead for thousands of years."

Justin barked a laugh. "And you four just happen to be able to understand it? You can barely even read, for Ixion's sake."

Jasna's hands closed into fists. "Some of us are a bit too busy trying to scratch out a living to be cozied up in the library.... reading!" She said the word as if it were a curse. "We don't all have a private tutor to spoon-feed us our lessons."

Petra half-raised a hand. "Actually, Druid Misha is sort of a--"

"You shush!" Jasna snapped.

The taller girl scowled. "Don't you shush me! I'll--" She stopped, her eyes darting towards the doorway.

At the edge of the lantern's illumination, glints of light cascaded across several sets of multifaceted eyes.

## **\*\*XVI\*\***

"Don't you dare say those are 'just ants,'" Petra whispered.

"They're..." Justin swallowed.

"Hungry!" Brynne said, as one of them scuttled into the light. It was longer than Justin was tall, standing taller than Jasna's waist. The mandibles looked to be able to snap the girl in half.

The brewer's daughter lashed out with her staff, wielding it overhand like a spear. The tip thudded off the ant's carapace, but it did not pause in its advance.

The ring of steel echoed loudly in the corridor, and the lantern's light waved back and forth as Justin thrust the lantern at Jasna.

"Hold this!" he said, and lunged at the thing.

"What are you doing? That's not a dueling sword!"

The blade's broad tip slid across the ant's head, not even scoring it.

While he didn't wound it, the young man succeeded in drawing the thing's attention, and it turned, antennae waving in his face, mandibles clacking.

He gave a cry, and danced back, but there wasn't much room to retreat in the hallway.

"What's wrong?" Jasna asked. "It's only a little ant!" She thrust the lantern back at Justin, and dove around the thing's head, rolling, bringing the dagger up as she rose, the blade biting deep behind the creature's eye. Dark ichor spattered across the room.

The thing wrenched its head around, the mandibles snapping less than a hand's breadth from the girl as she danced away.

"Now you've just made it mad!" Brynne said. She darted forward, jabbing at the thing with the tip of her staff.

But it would not be distracted from the smaller girl. It scuttled after her, backing Jasna further from the doorway, towards one of the corners of the chamber. And more ants were crowding forward, intent on aiding their wounded.

“Sticks aren’t working!” Petra said. She’d drummed at the thing’s back and legs with her batons, only to be forced away as the hairy appendages kicked her away.

“What else do you plan on using?” Justin spat. “Your teeth?”

Petra sucked in a deep breath, looking over at Brynne, who shook her head.

“No!” Katarin warned. “Matera has less than this night left. What if you lose control?”

Jasna lashed again with the dagger, the silvery blade’s gleam muted by the ichor as she opened gash across the front of the ant’s head.

“Her knife will work just as well on me if it comes to that,” Petra said. She began unfastening the ties along the neck of her tunic. “Now stand away.”

### **\*\*XVII\*\***

“A gentleman at least turns his back when a lady is disrobing,” Brynne said.

Justin blinked. “Is she-- But we’re-- The fight....”

Petra yanked her cloak about herself, turning her back on the young lord.

There was a crashing of wood from the other room, and Jasna gave a sharp cry.

“If you’re going to do it, do it!” Brynne shouted. She swung her staff again, managing to capture the attention of one of the ants.

“I’ve never done it in front of anyone,” the younger girl cried. “Especially not a boy!”

“I’m closing my eyes!” the young lord said. His cheeks were even brighter. He tried to ignore the breeches the girl had kicked away.

“Get in here and put that sword to some use!” Brynne called.

Petra huddled on the floor, clutching her cloak tighter.

“You don’t have to do this,” Katarin said, kneeling next to the girl. “We’ll find--”

In the room beyond, Brynne voiced an unladylike curse, and there was the sound of more wood splintering.

Petra looked away from the other girl, towards the room. Her sobs had quieted, but her shoulders still heaved as she drew short, sharp breaths. She began to shake, and Katarin drew back, as the undulations beneath the cloak grew beyond mere shivers. She closed her eyes, tried to blot out the popping and creaking of bone and sinew. To the younger girl’s credit, she did not cry out, but gave voice to the pain through a sharp and constant whine, pushed through the clenched teeth of an elongating jawline.

In moments, the cloak collapsed, and a gray-furred rat the size of a small dog dashed from beneath the folds, charging across the fallen door, into the chamber beyond.

Katarin couldn’t help but smile at the sound of Lord Justin’s cry.

### **\*\*XVIII\*\***

“Oh, for pity’s sake!” Brynne said, rapping at the head of the giant ant she’d been distracting. “Get this thing away from me!”

The young man tore his eyes away from the streak of gray that disappeared amidst the forest of ant legs, and thumped the ant on the abdomen with the flat of his blade.

The thing kicked at him, but turned away from Brynne, giving her enough room to start spinning her staff. She thrust it forward, the length drumming along the ant’s

antennae, and the creature reared back, scuttling backwards, nearly bowling Justin over.

In the corner of the room, Jasna and the giant rat harried the other ants, striking when the other would distract the beasts, slowly driving them back.

Katarin huddled in the doorway, Petra's clothes bundled in her arms. Brynne called for her to save her magic for after the fight, when the girl had made to cast a weave into the fray.

Finally, Brynne and Justin managed to fight their way over to Jasna's corner. A lucky stroke had severed one of the ants' antennae, and the creature hobbled away, shaking its head and stumbling over the rotting wooden pews of the great room.

"They're not giving up!" Jasna shouted, turning the jaws aside with a two-handed swing of her knife. She reversed her stroke, driving the blade, and her arms up to the elbows, into the thing's eye. It gave a great shudder, and collapsed to the floor, legs scrabbling, weaker with every scratch.

"Of course not, they're ants!" Brynne said. The ant was trying to shift the wood between its mandibles, but the girl kept it from getting any kind of grip on the staff by wrenching it this way and that.

"Twist it to your left!" Justin called, and Brynne hauled on her staff, turning the ant's great head towards the young man.

He brought his sword up in a backhanded swing, lopping the antennae off the creature. It flailed its head left and right, throwing Brynne into the wall, sending her staff clattering across the floor.

Katarin screamed, and made to charge in to the room, but Brynne waved her off.

"No," she gasped. "I'm-- fine. Look!"

The creature did not press its attack, instead stumbling in a circle, lashing blindly this way and that. Justin drew its attention away with a few jabs of his sword, and Katarin dashed through the opening, going to Brynne's side.

"Don't move! You might have broken something."

"We're going to have to move," Justin said. "More are coming through a hole in the wall."

## **\*\*XIX\*\***

"Through here!" Justin said, shouldering open a door behind Jasna. He swung his sword in a broad arc, smacking at the waving antennae of the approaching ants, the only tactic that seemed to work in slowing their advance.

"Quickly!"

Katarin hauled Brynne to her feet, one of the girl's arms over her shoulders, though Brynne struggled to walk on her own.

Jasna hesitated, her eyes darting this way and that as she scanned the room.

"What are you waiting for?" Justin asked.

"Where is Petra? We were fighting, and she was surrounded, and then--"

"Who cares about that ratling? Do you want to join her as ant-chow? Get through the door!"

Jasna ignored the young man. "Petra!"

An ant ducked under Justin's swing, mandibles closing on Jasna's cloak as she scurried backwards. They tussled, briefly, before Justin brought his sword down,

shearing through the fabric. As Jasna stumbled backwards, he scooped her up, racing for the doorway. Ants crowded after him, jamming one against the other in the door's frame.

"There are too many in the way to shut the door," he said, waving at the hallway that opened around the corner. "Just... go that way!"

The hallway turned a corner, and broadened. Torches leapt to light as they stepped around the bend, the sizzle and sharp scent of burning dust and cobwebs filling the air. At the far end of the hall, a good stone's throw away, they saw another engraved representation of Silva. Two more faced each other midway down the hall, and the thrumming hum sprang up as they drew near them. The two faces began to speak, meaning once again echoing in the girls' minds as the carvings' spoke their long-dead tongue.

*"Soon you shall be on your way  
As you begin so once did they  
Immortals went to ancient Lavv  
Show us what they taught Halav"*

"What did they say?" Justin asked.

"Put me down!" Jasna landed a kick on the young man's knee, and his leg buckled, sending him to his hands and knees. Jasna rolled free, and made it two steps back down the corridor before she stopped. Half a dozen ants were feeling their way around the bend in the hallway.

"Jasna, no!" Katarin hissed, grabbing the girl's arm. "There's no way we can fight all those!"

"What they taught Halav..." Brynne mused. "He was a warrior. But before that... He was a smith. They taught him to work bronze! Show them something bronze!"

"Don't look at me," Justin said. "All I've got is steel."

Katarin and Jasna both shook their heads.

The corridor gave a shudder, and from above, there was a deep cracking sound. Several trickles of dust sifted down from the ceiling.

The carvings animated again, repeating the rhyme.

"We don't have anything made of bronze." Brynne said, as more dust showered down from above. "We know the answer, isn't that enough?"

"I don't think they listen," Jasna shouted. "Run!"

The ceiling gave another groan, and the rain of dust became a trickle of loose stones. Cracks began to open between the stones lining the ceiling.

Katarin raised her hands, her fingers moving as if at a loom, or playing at the children's string game, ryadkyiv.

The two other girls and Justin all screamed, but the stones glanced off the air above Katarin's head, tumbling into the hallway behind them. The dust billowed, but stopped short, climbing and curling along an invisible wall.

Katarin paled, sweat beading across her forehead, and she groaned through gritted teeth.

"Go, go go!" Brynne called, regaining her senses, and pushing at the young man and Jasna, urging them further up the corridor.

The stones piling in the air over Katarin's head began to shift, tipping over some invisible edge, less than an arm's length from where the girl stood.

Brynne hooked an arm through Katarin's and hauled, leaping and pulling the girl with her. The invisible support gone, the stones crashed into the hallway, and the cloud of rock dust rolled over them, sending them into fits of coughing and choking.

**\*\*XX\*\***

Jasna tried to draw another breath, the effort ending in more dry coughing as she got another lungful of powdered rock and dust. She blinked. The torches had gone out, as had Justin's lantern, but the hallway was lit with a fitful reddish light. She blinked again, at a fiery burning in the corner of one of her eyes. She rubbed at it, and her hand came away stained red.

"It was clever of you to use the rockfall trap to crush the ants."

The familiar voice echoed in Jasna's thoughts. A single voice, not the odd echo of twin carvings. A warmer sound, as if spoken from flesh, rather than stone.

"Silva?" The girl looked to her left, and right, but only saw the shapes of stone, looming through the red-tinged clouds of dust. Two more points of brighter red light were barely enough to illuminate the features of the other two girls: Brynne was curled over Katarin, the girl's head cradled protectively in her arms. If not for the streaks of blood, Jasna would have thought the two asleep.

"I suppose you could say they are," Silva's voice said. It sounded as if she stood in the space between the three girls, yet there was nothing there but rocks. And Justin. Jasna supposed that amounted to the same thing, as well, and Silva's short laugh did not ripple through her mind, needing no translation.

"They're not..?"

"They live. And are in considerably better condition than you. As is the Son of Karamaikos."

"Petra!"

"Be at ease, Little Sister."

"I'm not little!"

"Be at ease." Silva's voice came a little firmer.

Jasna blinked. The two points of red light blurred, and the shadows doubled. She rubbed at her eyes.

"Why can't I see you?"

"Four dragonstones must be aligned to manifest a holoprojection."

"A hollow what?"

"An... illusion."

Jasna swallowed at the sudden lump in her throat. "We would have had the fourth if Lord Stableboy hadn't--"

"The Daughter of Chaos yet lives. "

"She is not--"

"She is," came Silva's voice. "It is through no fault of her own. She knows what she will become, as do you. She has accepted it. But that does not mean she has given in to it."

"Is she hurt?"

"If she was, what could you do? Your own injuries are not slight. No-- do not try to sit up. The bones will shift, and the Thief of Essences will not be able to repair the damage you would do."

Jasna suddenly realized that beyond a few pricklings, she could not feel her feet. Her legs.

"No," Silva's voice came firmer. "You mustn't move."

"What am I going to do?" Jasna asked. Her eyes burned again, but it had nothing to do with the thin trickle of blood. "I got them into this, and now I can't get them out."

"Patience, Little Sister. I am with you. You are not alone. Never alone, even unto the end of all things, that was our promise, remember? In Gygar's ruins?"

"Aurora says you cannot make promises -- that you can take no vows, speak no oaths..." Jasna's thoughts were beginning to wander, the shadows were growing darker. Were they moving?

"The Progeny are foresworn, this is true."

Jasna sucked in a sudden breath. "Then... you aren't--" The coughing cut her off, and stars were bursting in her vision, blooming white, then withering to deeper darkness.

"Hush, now, Little Sister. Let me sing do you, while we wait for the others to awaken."

\*\*XXI\*\*

Katarin's healing was like taking a dip in Lake Windrush, and being stuck in Ian's forge in the Garrison quarter at the same time. Jasna's every muscle stiffened, as the threads of the healing weave did their work, and Justin had his hands full trying to keep the girl's head and shoulders from moving.

It was no less trying on the weaver, her hands shaking more with every passing moment, color steadily draining from her lips. She shook off Brynne's insistence that she stop, or rest.

"These are more than just some scratches and a sprain," Katarin said. "Wounds such as these cannot go untreated or they will grow worse."

"You're at your limit," Brynne said. "Don't think I haven't learned what to look for. You aren't the only one your Magia is teaching, you know. You must stop!"

"Just... another moment, while the bones fuse," Katarin murmured. She blinked sweat and grit from her eyes.

Jasna's body went limp, and Katarin sat back, gulping in air, shivering. She winced as she rubbed at her temples.

"She is fine, now," Katarin told the young man. "She needs to rest for a little while."

"You need to rest," Brynne said.

Katarin turned towards her friend, reaching out to lay a hand on the other girl's cheek. Brynne snatched her wrist.

"I just need to check once more--"

"No," Brynne said. "No more checking. We're fine. We'll all rest and then carry on. No more weaving."

"But you're still bleeding."

"It's just a scratch. It's not worth tipping the balance any further."

"I won't--"



“When you think you can push just a little further, that is when you need to stop,” Brynne said, repeating Magia Saoirse’s lesson. “The Sphere retakes its balance from the weaver. What balances healing?”

“I just want to make sure you’re safe,” Katarin pouted.

“And I want the same for you,” Brynne said, resting her forehead against Katarin’s. “Don’t think I won’t clonk you on the head to get you to rest.”

## \*\*XXII\*\*

“She was here. Well... not... here, but...” Jasna scratched her head. The pain there was mostly gone. Had she dreamt it?

To her other side, Justin twirled a finger at his temple, and Brynne did her best not to laugh. Katarin merely scowled.

“Do you hear Silva now?” Katarin asked. She bent down, taking Jasna’s chin in one hand. She held up three fingers in front of the girl. “How many fingers do you see?”

“You’re going to see five of mine up close if you don’t let go of me. I’m fine!”

The flame sputtered in the lantern, throwing their shadows along the walls and Justin gave it another shake.

“I can’t believe that thing still works,” Brynne said.

“Must be made of the same stuff as the little one’s head,” Justin muttered.

“I heard that!”

Justin raised the lantern. The corridor had gone dark, the torches blown out in the surge of air when the ceiling collapsed behind them. It continued another five or so paces to a split, corridors leading off to the left and right. The light also revealed another carved face. The young man groaned.

“Pits, falling rocks. What’s next? Perhaps a nice swinging blade?” Justin asked.

“Shush, she’s going to speak,” Brynne said. The air about them began to hum as they approached. The statue’s carved eyes appeared to open, and glanced at each of them as its lips of stone moved:

*“When humans were a younger race  
dire perils did they face  
Imagine setting out from Lavv  
and slay the foes of King Halav”*

Brynne translated the rhyme for Justin.

“That’s easy,” he said. He raised his arm, and swung it, as if wielding a sword.

“It can’t be that easy.” Jasna made a slashing motion of her own. Brynne and Katarin did as well.

They all tensed, waiting, but the carving did not speak again.

“Will it be left or right?” Brynne asked.

Jasna fished a kopec from her belt pouch, spinning it in the air. She caught it, clapped one hand to the back of the other.

“Words, we go left, wolf we go right,” the girl said.

“You’re going to trust our fate to the toss of a coin?” Justin asked.

“And how would you select which way we go?” Katarin asked him. “Catch a dragon by the toe?”

“Well-- I--”

“Wolf it is,” Jasna said, showing the great wolf stamped on the face of the coin.

They rounded the bend in the corridor, and the humming started even before Justin had crowded around behind the girls.

“Vanya’s garters, is there no corner free of her?”

The carving of Silva animated, and spoke yet another rhyme, the words unraveling in the girls’ minds in the Traladaran language:

*“The Huntsman was a hero true  
Like Halav, one of the treasured few.  
And now we are all in his debt.  
Show me one of Zirchev’s pets”*

“Pets?” Brynne frowned. “He didn’t keep pets.”

“Horses,” Katarin said. “He showed Men how to use them for riding.”

“But that’s not--”

“And he was always followed by wolves,” Jasna said. She dug in her belt pouch again, waving the kopec in front of the carving. “This is close enough, isn’t it?”

Again, there was no reply, and no ominous rumblings or creaking.

Brynne frowned at the carving as they passed it. “They weren’t pets,” she muttered.

The corridor split again, to the left and right, another speaking carving adorning the wall between the two halls. Justin sighed as the air began to thrum, tapping his foot as the voice spoke, the words a spidery tumble in his head. Silva’s gifts translated the verse:

*“King Halav fought against mighty foes  
And through his wisdom mankind grows  
Before the greatness of this king  
Kneel, and to his glory, sing.”*

They went to their knees, and Justin followed quickly.

“Which verse?” Katarin asked.

“To his glory sing,” Brynne repeated. “The Verse of Ascension? The Verse of Battle?”

“What could be more glorious than his battle with the Beast Man king?” Justin asked. “Sing that one.”

“The Calling,” Jasna said. “Halav did not have to take up sword and shield. He chose to.”

“That is noble, not glorious,” Justin sniffed. “Death in battle. That is glorious.”

“That is stupid,” Jasna said. “Halav died, and everything he worked for fell apart.”

“Jasna!” Katarin gasped. “You can’t speak of an Immortal like that.”

“I can speak of an Immortal any way I like. It’s not like any of them listen, anyway.”

“Of course they do!” Brynne said. “Why do you think we bother praying?”

“Immortals lend no aid to he who will not act,” Jasna said.

“And nobody likes helping himself more than a disciple of Koritiku,” Justin murmured.

Jasna rose to her feet, settling back into a fighting stance when the wall gave a shudder. There came a light cracking noise, and half a dozen long blades leapt from the gap that opened between a seam between the stones at shoulder-height to a grown man.

Three of the blades swept the space above Justin and the girls, and three more scythed less than a hand's breadth from the top of Jasna's head.

"See what happens when you displease Halav?" Brynne asked.

"See what happens when the Immortals don't grant my wish to be made taller?" Jasna shot back.

At Jasna's insistence, they again took the righthand corridor, she leading the way as the others huddled beneath the still-scything blades. The corridor turned upon itself after another dozen paces or so. A tapestry hung from the wall past the sweep of the blade trap, depicting a dark haired woman bent over a potter's wheel, and again at work at a loom. Another carving of Silva adorned the wall facing the group, and the corridor turned back on itself, another tapestry lining that wall, depicting the same dark-haired woman working at a mortar and pestle, as well as drawing a bow.

"This is--" Katarin began, but the corridor's thrumming stopped her as she listened to the carving speak:

*"Mighty she was in her day  
Evil foes she held at bay  
To pass this way you must be keen  
Where was lovely Petra queen?"*

"It's like she's not even trying any more," Jasna complained.

"Krakatos," Brynne said to the carving.

They waited, but there was no crackling from the stone. In fact, as they answered, the grinding of metal on stone of the trap behind them stopped.

"Can we go now?" Justin asked.

"Shh!" Jasna said. "Do you hear that?"

"Is Silva speaking to you again?" Katarin asked.

Jasna gave the taller girl a dark look. "No! Listen! It's..." She'd thought it merely the ringing of the silence in the wake of the blades' quieting. But it was the wrong pitch, higher, tinkling, rather than grinding.

"Is that... water?" Brynne frowned, closing her eyes and cupping a hand behind one of her ears, turning this way and that. "It's coming from behind the tapestry."

"Be careful, it is very old!" Katarin said, as Justin reached for one edge of the time-faded cloth, revealing a recessed wooden door.

He tried the latch, but like the other doors, it had swollen in its frame, and the young man bounced off the door twice before it finally gave way, sending him tumbling into a short hallway ending in another door.

Jasna had her knife out, Katarin's fingers spread and ready to weave. At Brynne's nod, the young man tried the other door. It took both him and Brynne to force it open, the two of them skittering into a long room. Had they been moving any faster, they would have careened into the pool in the middle of the chamber. Righting each other,

their shadows shrinking along the wall as Katarin approached with the lantern, Justin drew his sword as the light revealed a shadowed figure huddling in the corner.

At the approach of the light, the figure stirred, and the young lord moved slightly ahead of Brynne, raising his sword.

“Stay back,” he warned. “It could be-- hey!”

There was a flash of gold and pale skin and then everything went dark. The girls screamed.

“I can’t see!” Justin cried. He dared not let go of his sword to clear his vision.

“That’s the idea,” Brynne said, her voice at his shoulder. She tightened her hands over his eyes.

“But--”

“Just wait.”

He listened. The others were not screaming. Just the steady dripping of water into the long pool and Katarin and Jasna’s voices tumbling one over the other. No sounds of battle. The rustling of cloth could be heard between breaks in the quick, quiet conversation going on in the corner of the room.

“You left my hose.” It was Petra’s voice, at a sulk.

“It was dark,” Katarin said.

“You can go fetch them if you like,” Jasna whispered. That was met with silence, and another rustling of thicker cloth.

“No, the other one.”

“Oh, just hurry and put it on!” Katarin hissed.

“I never put that one on first,” Petra insisted. “It’s bad luck. Give me the other.”

A sigh. More rustling. Finally, Brynne’s hands fell away from the young lord’s eyes.

He blinked, watching Petra come into focus as she worked the clasp of her cloak, pulling her curls from beneath it, tapping the toes of one boot and then the other on the stone floor to settle her feet.

“Hullo, Petra,” Brynne said, from her place behind the young lord. “Feeling all right?”

The younger girl nodded.

“You survived,” Justin said.

Petra nodded again, slowly. She adjusted the satchel slung back across one shoulder. “I suppose you’ll be telling the Baron when we get back,” she said.

“He does not already know?”

“He’s a Thyatian,” Petra said. “Everybody knows how Thyatians feel about us. They’re almost as bad as Alphatians.” She shivered.

“Us?” Justin repeated. He swallowed. “Ratfolk.”

The word hung in the room between them, punctuated by the steady drip of water from the ceiling.

“If you were to go to the Baron,” the young lord said, carefully, “he may be able to cure you.”

Petra stared at her shoes.

Justin glanced around the room at the other girls. His grip tightened on his sword.

“It’s natural,” he said. “You’re not afflicted.”

“I don’t know,” the younger girl murmured. “I don’t remember ever not being like this.”

“But, your parents--”

“Are dead,” Petra finished. “My real parents, that is. Drowned, washed away down the Waterolde. My ma and da found me, after their baby went away to Petra. So they named me after her. ‘Petra’s Gift.’” She hitched a laugh, or maybe it was a sob.

“I’m sorry,” the young lord said.

“No you’re not,” the girl said, her voice tight. “I’m not. I don’t even remember them. I don’t know them, what they were.”

“But... if the Baron knew, he could--”

“He could what?” Petra asked, stamping her foot. “Work his miracle? Cleanse my blood of this curse?”

“And what happens if it doesn’t work?” Katarin asked, softly.

“Then that means she’s a--” The young lord did not voice the end of his thought.

“Harder to think about when she’s standing right in front of you, isn’t it?” Brynne asked.

“You’ve all kept this from the Baron? She could be--”

“She’s our friend!” Jasna spat. “It doesn’t matter what she ‘could be.’”

Justin glanced down at his hand. “Ixion’s fire, she bit me!” His grip tightened on the hilt, as he looked up at the girl.

Brynne’s hand closed over his wrist. Jasna stepped in front of Petra, her own hand resting on the hilt of the silvery blade at her hip.

“How can you defend a--”

“A friend?” Jasna’s fingers closed over the blade.

“Stop this, all of you,” Katarin said.

“He started it!”

“Take your hands off your weapons,” Katarin ordered. “We are not orcs, this will not be settled with blood.”

“You would prefer using your witchery?” Justin asked.

“I can hit him pretty good from here,” Brynne said.

Katarin sighed. “I couldn’t weave if I wanted to. What little power I have left to me I must conserve. I will not spend it mending wounds either of you inflict on each other.”

Jasna and Justin stared at each other a moment longer, then the girl’s fingers slowly uncurled from around the hilt of her knife. Justin’s fingers did the same from his sword hilt.

“We will not survive this dungeon if we don’t all work together,” Katarin said.

“Agreed?”

Heads nodded.

“So, here is what we will do. We will table this... discussion... until we make our way back to the shores of the lake. We will carry on until we find... whatever the artifact is that is hidden here.”

“It’s supposed to be Halav’s shield or sword,” Petra said.

“There will be no hostilities between us,” Katarin said, glancing at each of her friends. “Are we so agreed? I do swear this upon my medallion, may Petra take her vengeance upon me if I do so break this oath.”

“I do so swear,” Brynne said, her hand not moving from the young lord’s wrist.

“As do I,” Jasna said, fishing her own medallion out from beneath her tunic.

“As do I,” Petra said, her own hand clenched around her medallion. She itched at her palm as she released the silver disk, deepening the red mark left on her skin by the contact with the metal.

“Look at that,” Justin said. “How can you... How can I trust her?”

“My hands do the same when I touch itchweed,” Katarin said. “It’s a reaction to the metal, not the oath itself. Do we have your word that you will keep truce against Petra?”

Justin sighed. “You do.” He stood up straighter, holding a hand over his heart. “I do swear it upon my honor.”

“How do we know we can trust you?” Jasna asked.

“The corridor is that way,” Justin said, pointing towards the doorway through which they’d stumbled.

Petra looked up from where she squatted on the floor, two pieces of paper laid next to each other. Rather than words, each had inked lines and symbols on them, a crude layout of the temple. She looked from one to the other, and again at the wall, opposite the corner where she’d been huddled.

“It should be here, somewhere,” she said.

“No, it’s there,” the young lord said, pointing again.

“Not that.” She waved her hand dismissively, then poked at the two maps. “This. Here. Look, we’re here. See this? This is the chapel, with all the ants in it. And here is the Corridor of Knowledge.” She traced her finger down a long corridor, crossed by two long breaks.

“That must be where the ceiling fell in,” Brynne said, pointing at the top of the long hallway.

Petra looked up. “The ceiling?”

“It sort of... fell on us,” Jasna said.

“Fell on you,” Katarin said.

“Well, if you hadn’t dropped it--”

“And they worry about us going at each other?” Justin asked the youngest girl.

Petra snickered. “Why didn’t you show her the little bronze shield in my satchel? I picked it up from the library. It’s the first of the eight tests.”

“Tests?” Brynne asked.

“It’s called the ‘Corridor of Knowledge’ for a reason,” Petra said. “I marked the pieces of parchment that had the description. Didn’t you read it?”

Brynne and Katarin looked at each other, and then to Jasna. She blushed. “There were... too many big words!”

“So.. if this hallway continues, and there are eight tests,” Justin said, “that leaves three we’ve yet to face?”

“His knowledge of numerics is better than his Traladaran history,” Brynne said.

“How did you know we would need bronze to pass the first test?” Katarin asked.

“It was written in the pages I gave to Jasna.”

“So you know what the final three tests will be,” Justin said. “Why are we sitting here?”

“Because... I don’t know what the last three will be. The pages we found only listed the first four. The fifth was there, but I couldn’t read it, since it was all faded from soaking in beer.”

Brynne crossed her arms. "I'm not apologizing. That move got you away from those cut-throats."

Katarin cleared her throat. "What are we looking for, if not the answers to the final tests?"

"There are two rooms after the Corridor of Knowledge," Petra said, pointing to the two large boxes at the bottom of the maps. "Look how where we are lines up with the Guardian Chamber."

"They're next to each other. So...?"

"So, if I were a priest, I'd want to take the shortest route possible from chapel to shrine."

"As if a ratling could take the vows," Justin muttered.

"Only in the Church of Karamaikos," Petra said.

"I will thump both of you," Brynne warned.

"So..." Petra repeated, "I think they hid a door between this room and this one." She tapped the line between the two chambers on the map.

"If the pattern of the tests continues, it looks as if we would skip two of them," Katarin said, regarding the maps.

Jasna was already on her feet, running her fingers over the mortar between the stones of the wall. "What?" she asked. "I'm not taking any test I don't have to!"

It took nearly half an hour of poking, prodding, and pushing at the stones before Petra found the loose block just above her eye level. It wiggled, and then grated back into the surface of the wall, a section of which shuddered and gave a sharp 'crack!' Brynne nearly landed on the floor as the section of wall she was leaning on fell away, the doorway pivoting around a central balance.

She stumbled into the chamber, bumping against one of the statues standing close to that wall. Justin came through with his lantern, followed by the rest of the girls, the light revealing a chamber as wide as the other was long, the walls behind and before them lined with three statues apiece.

All six were carved of ivory, rather than the grayish-black granite of the rest of the temple, identical in their depiction of a girl a little taller than Katarin with flowing hair held back with a circlet. Lantern light glinted off silvery workings of metal around the wrists and lower arms of the statues along the wall with the secret door in it, while those opposite sported identical traceries of gold. Those with the golden bands clutched long-bladed swords, the tips resting between carved bare feet.

"Silva and Aurora?" Katarin asked.

Jasna squinted up at the statue along the far wall, rubbing at her head. "Does anyone else hear that?"

"Hear what? I don't hear anything," Justin said.

Katarin cocked her head, her brow furrowing as she concentrated. She stepped closer to one of the silver-adorned statues. "I can't quite..." she murmured. She reached out, placing her hand on the statue's shoulder, and her eyes widened even as she flinched away.

"It's warm!" she gasped.

"But did you hear it?" Jasna pressed. "The words are all a jumble in my head."

“Who cares about the statues?” Justin asked. “Look, there’s the final test.” He started towards the dressed stone archway along the room’s righthand wall.

“Wait!” Brynne called. She, too, had her hand on one of the statues, her dragonstone pendant clutched in her other hand. “It’s... Old Traladaran.” She paused, listening again. “Justin, don’t--”

Too late, the carving above the archway animated, but this time, the expression was neither serene, nor placid. The brows came together, the eyes below them gleaming with a dim, reddish light.

“He who has not passed the Tests of Faith shall go no further!”

Jasna gave a sharp cry, clutching her head. The dragonstone pendant at her neck shone a brilliant orange, the golden veins blazing at full brightness through the red gem. She staggered back, as the gold-adorned statues each gave a shiver, stone flaking from the swords as they swung up to the statues’ shoulders, eyes aglow with a dull greenish light.

All of the girls’ pendants had taken to light, and they all stumbled back and away from the statues, as all six flowed to life. The eyes had opened on the statues, revealing brilliant green gemstones as the eyes of the gold-adorned statues, while those of the silver shone with gold-flecked blue deeper than sapphires.

But the statues were not interested in any of the girls -- they strode past them with eerily silent strides, fanning out in a semicircle to block the doorway to the shrine. Their shining eyes all rested on the young Karamaikan, who stared back at the statues with wide eyes.

“What-- what sort of sorcery brings stone to life?” he sputtered.

“The same kind that makes it speak?” Katarin asked.

“Well-- speaking is one thing,” Justin managed. “But this? How are we supposed to get past them?”

“I don’t think we are,” Brynne said.

Justin took a step forward, and the emerald-eyed statues shifted their stance, the blades swinging into a high guard, tips leveled at the young man’s chest.

“He who has not passed the Tests of Faith shall go no further!” the carving above the doorway said, again.

“All right, we get it already!” Jasna groaned. She blinked, trying to clear her vision. It felt as if a white-hot lance had been lodged in her head. The quiet burr and hum of conversation kept flickering at the edge of her hearing.

“You are nearly as pale as those statues!” Katarin said, going to the smaller girl’s side. Her hands were firm on the girl’s shoulders. “No, do not straighten up. Sit.”

Jasna blinked at the other girl. The voices rose and fell, rose and fell. She glanced down, at the blurry redness at the other girl’s throat. Her pendant had slipped from beneath the neckline of her dress, and swung back and forth.

“That’s it!” Jasna gasped.

“Justin, come away, unless you want to be spitted three ways from Soldain,” Brynne said.

He took a reluctant step back. The statues relaxed their guard, but did not stop watching him.



“Well, now we see what sidestepping the tests has cost us,” Justin said, crossing his arms as he stared down at Jasna.

“Brynne, Petra, come here,” the girl said, ignoring the young lord. “I want to try something.”

The four stones brightened as they grew closer, and Jasna was forced to squint.

“Silva!” Jasna called, and they all waited, holding their breath.

Nothing happened.

“Blood!” Petra said. “Red stones require blood to function.” She fumbled in her satchel, producing a long needle from a leather bundle. The girl pricked her finger, and touched the bead of blood to the stone about her neck. The glow flickered once, then brightened, taking on a warmer tone. Jasna did the same with her silvery knife, and the other two girls pricked their fingers on the blade as well.

There was a subtle shifting of the red-tinged shadows along the wall, as the swaying of the stones ebbed ever so slightly until the stones all swung in perfect union.

“Silva?” Jasna asked.

The light between the four girls thickened, as did the shadows, swirling and twisting until they formed the faintest of outlines. Lord Justin gasped, glancing over his shoulder at the face carved above the doorway, at the three sapphire-eyed ivory statues.

“Ah, so my Little Sisters have been reunited. For this, I am glad.”

Justin’s expression fell back into a scowl. “Still can’t speak a proper word of Thyatian,” he grumbled.

The hazy image’s shoulders wavered. “You may tell His Lordship that I know his words, even if I cannot make them. And I work with friend Thorn to correct this.”

“I know she’s talking about me,” the young lord said.

“She thinks you are handsome,” Jasna said.

Justin blinked.

“Aw, he’s blushing!” Brynne teased.

“I-- no, it’s the light!” he stammered. “All... red and--”

“Little Sisters, what is it you wish of me?”

“We’re sort of... trapped,” Petra said. “We sort of... skipped a few tests and now we can’t get through to the Sanctuary.”

The image blurred, and when it came back together, the face that peered back at the girls was similar, the hair noticeably longer.

“Hullo, Aurora,” Brynne said.

“What are you doing in Perrantin’s Tomb?”

“Just... sort of... looking around,” Petra said.

“Well, stop. That place is laced with deadly traps. Leave there, immediately, and do not go back. There is nothing you could possibly want there.”

“We want answers,” Petra said. “Men were set on killing each other to gain the information that led us here.”

“And we all know how sensible men are, don’t we?” Aurora asked.

“I heard that!” Justin said.

“You must leave that place,” Aurora insisted.

“I think it’s a bit too late for that,” Jasna said. “We’re stuck here.”

Silva’s face appeared, in profile, as she whispered something in her twin’s ear. Aurora’s eyes widened, and then she sighed.

“Do you know how long it took to balance the stones above that corridor just so?”  
“A lot longer than it took for them to fall?” Jasna guessed.

“There is another doorway concealed behind Zirchev’s second test,” Aurora said. “It will take you to the priests’ living quarters. You can make your way back to the entrance from there.”

“But what of Halav’s sword and shield?” Justin asked. “We came all this way. We don’t want to take them, just look.”

“Absolutely not,” the shrike’s image said. “By not passing the tests, you have no doubt activated the Guardians. They will not allow you to pass. Turn around, go back to the Baron’s town, and do not return to that place.”

“They’re just statues,” Justin said. “How difficult can they be to get past? I bet a few good whacks will snap those stone swords in two.”

“They are relics not so easily defeated by muscle and steel.”

“So there is a way to defeat them?” Petra asked.

Aurora’s features blurred momentarily, sharpening again into another frown. “Yes,” she admitted. “But you do not possess the means to do so. They are not as my sister and I. You can not reason with them. They will not stop until the threat before them is eliminated, one way or another. Turn around. Go back. Do not under any circumstances provoke them. They do not know mercy. They will not accept a yield. They will kill you. Do you--”

The grating ring of steel on stone cut off the shrike’s warning.

“Oh, Hells,” Brynne groaned.

“Voketh’s teeth!” Aurora swore. “Save the boy if you can, but you must leave that room! There is no more time for talk.” The hazy reddish image vanished, the light from the girls’ dragonstones dimming to a faint glimmer of red and gold.

Justin barely ducked under one of the statue’s swords, catching another on his own blade, sending it skirling down the length in a shower of sparks.

“Well, at least I won’t need to worry about dulling it!” he called.

“Idiot!” Jasna shouted. “We have to get out of here, stableboy!”

“I just wanted--” Justin danced back, a stone sword barely missing his belly, “-- to see the shield!” He braced his sword in both hands, wrenching another stone blade’s swing off to one side.

“Still think they’re ‘just statues?’” Petra said, suddenly beside the young man, deflecting another statue’s attack with both batons, gritting her teeth against the jarring impact.

“On your right!” Brynne called.

Too late, Justin turned for the block.

Jasna hit the boy just behind the knees, sending him to the floor. Swords whistled over his head.

One of the statues lifted its arm for another attack, but Petra caught the downswing with a swing of her own, the combined momentum nearly turning the statue completely around.

“Quickly, before they can surround us!” she called, and Jasna hauled at the straps of Justin’s pack.

He skittered back, like some mail-clad crab, just as the swords crashed to the floor, leaving deep grooves where he’d been moments before.

Petra gave a yelp, dancing away a fraction of a breath too late, red blooming from a gash in her sleeve.

Justin’s sword spat sparks as he deflected another attack, and the stone blade slashed across his thigh rather than his chest.

“Katarin!” Jasna called. “Can’t you do something? Hold them with air!”

“They are too many for that. Too strong!”

The small girl groaned as Justin collapsed against her, his leg unable to hold his weight.

“Leave the pack!” she wheezed, letting him stagger back as a statue’s sword whispered through the air just before the boy’s nose.

Brynne was not so lucky, flinching aside, clutching at her forehead. Blood gleamed between her fingers.

“Brynne!” Katarin shouted. She glanced about, helpless, then clenched her fist around the stone at her neck.

“We wish to retreat!” she called, to the statues, to the carving in the doorway behind them. “Why won’t you let us go?”

A spinning baton clipped the statue’s sword as it attacked Brynne again, and the tip grazed the girl’s shoulder rather than opening her throat.

“You will let us go!” Katarin shouted. Red-gold flames wreathed the girl’s hand, and she stabbed a finger towards the statue attacking Brynne. A bolt of golden flame burst from her fingertip, followed by a surge of red flames rushing along the path traced in gold.

It struck the statue full in the face, stone blistering and flying away in molten red-orange gobbets. The golden light pierced one of the emerald eyes, scattering as it entered the gemstone.

The stone, and the rest of the statue exploded with a thunderous roar, but rather than fading, the sound climbed in pitch, until it became a shrill whistling.

The girls huddled, hair and cloaks flapping first one direction with the blast, and then another as the explosion seemed to rush in upon itself amidst the howling wail of the wind. Their screams were torn to shreds in the whirling maelstrom of wind and stone and fire that filled the room.

There was a moment of intense brilliance, a flash of eldritch emerald amidst the flame and chaos, and then the world went dark and silent.

The Handmaidens’ adventure continues in the second installment: *“Twilight of the Golden Age”*

## Appendix 1: The Defenders of Threshold The Company of Maidens The Handmaidens of Petra

As they rested beneath Mistamere, the half-fey girl known as Silva marked each of the ten girls that Bargle had captured in his search for the secrets of the Ebon Eye of Traldar. The purpose of this mark and blessing is as yet unknown.

Before departing Karameikos, Silva gifted each girl with a small red *dragonstone* pendant. The stone acts as a *linguistic bridge* between Traladaran and the Ancient Thonian that is the girl's nearly-decipherable native tongue -- a language dead and drowned some three thousand years ago. No matter the distance, the ten girls can communicate with Silva and with each other, so long as they are beneath the gaze of one of the nine remaining Thrones above.

### Jasna Morozovna

1st Level Human Female Thief

STR: 7 -2      AC: 7(Unarmored, Dex.)

INT: 10      hp: 3

WIS: 9

DEX: 16 +2

CON: 8 -1

CHA: 15 +1



Jasna was orphaned six years ago when her parents were killed in a bandit raid south of Verge. She managed to make her way to Threshold, where she was caught stealing food for herself and the group of other orphans with whom she had found shelter. The entire group was taken in by the clerics of the temple quarter, given food and shelter in return for basic upkeep of the various temples and grounds.

Jasna took to keeping around the small and neglected shrine to Korotiku, and it was there that she first made contact with elements of the Kingdom of Thieves and began honing her natural talents. She has snuck away from the orphanage on several occasions, exploring the Old Caves and the upper works of the ruins of Castle Mistamere. She is also making a map of Threshold and its surrounding area. It is her dream to someday find the Temple of the Shield.

Jasna has shoulder-length blonde hair, which she is constantly brushing out of her deep blue eyes. She stands 4'9" and weighs perhaps 85 pounds.

Jasna is deathly afraid of spiders.

**General Skills:** Cheating, Cartography, Deception, Singing

**Weapon Mastery:** Jasna is Skilled with daggers, making the most of her extended throwing range.

[P=H] 15/25/35 Dmg 1d6 H: -1AC/1 Double damage (20)

Jasna appears as an NPC in the adventure module **TC1: The Baron's Favor**



### Katarin Pevnoruk

1st Level Human Female Weaver (Sundsvall Initiate)

STR: 8 -1 AC: 9 (unarmored)

INT: 15 +1 hp: 4

WIS: 13 --

DEX: 12

CON: 9 --

CHA: 14 +1

**General Skills:** Healing, Veterinary Healing, Singing, Concentration, Weavesight

**Weapon Mastery:** Katarin has older brothers, and is no stranger to scuffles. She is Skilled in the use of the club: [P=M] 1d6+1 A: -1AC/2 Deflect (1)

**Affinities:** Entropy

**Talents:** Healing

**Weave Pool:** 3\*\*(\*\*Rule/weave used from "Under the Dragon's Banner" netbook.)

**Weaves Known:** Delve\*, Heal, Heal the Mind, Renew, Light, Flaming bolt (\*Weaver has affinity with all related Spheres. Weave costs one level less to cast.)

Katarin is the daughter of the Wisdom of Eltan's Spring. While she is no stranger to poultices and simples, she is only just recently awakened to her ability to access the Powers of the Spheres, and has much more confidence in potions and compounds than she does her abilities with threads of Entropy.

Katarin is 5'3" tall, a slender 95lbs. As with all of Silva's army, she has blonde hair worn past her shoulders, and blue eyes.

### Bryenne Ohnrus

1st Level Human Female Fighter

STR: 12 AC: 7 (Leather, 6 with Dex.)

INT: 11 hp: 6

WIS: 11

DEX: 15 +1

CON: 9

CHA: 14 +1

Bryenne hails from the mountain village of Eltan's Spring, a ways to the north of Threshold. The only daughter of the village's brewer, her father raised her as he would have a son, so Bryenne has always been something of a tomboy. Fascinated with stories of heroes and knights, she dreamed of the chance to live out her own story, play-acting with the village's Wisdom's daughter, Katarin. They had their chance to be damsels and rescuers when both bought Bargle's charmed pendants, and were lured to Mistamere.



She stands 5'4" and weighs perhaps 110 pounds, and has the blonde hair and blue eyes of all of Silva's Army.

**General Skills:** Craft: Brewing, Knowledge (Song of Halav), Singing +1

**Weapon Mastery:** Bryenne is Skilled with the staff and club.

[P=A] d6+2 A: -1AC/2 Deflect (1)

[P=M] 1d6+1 A: -1AC/2 Deflect (1)



## Petra Ladolentz

1st Level Human Female Thief/Wererat Whelp  
STR: 12      AC: 9, 8 +Dex. (7 as animal, 6+ dex )  
INT: 11      hp: 10 (12 in animal form)  
WIS: 9  
DEX: 15 +1  
CON: 12 (13)  
CHA: 14 +1 (13)

Petra is the youngest of Silva's Army, tall for her 9 years, at 5'2" and 90lbs. She is the second (adopted) daughter of one of the seasonal logging families that live along the western bank of Lake Windrush, across the river from Threshold. It is revealed during the events leading up to the rediscovery of Halav's Shield that she is a wererat, though unsure if of the Greater- or Lesser- variety.

In her animal form, she is a giant, light gray-haired rat that stands 2 1/2' tall at the shoulder, with a 3 foot long tail. She takes half damage from normal weapons while in this form, which she must take during the three nights of the full moon. She is also able to assume her animal form on any night the moon is visible.

**General Skills:** Craft: Woodcarving, Hiding (Woodlands), Singing, Self Control

**Weapon Mastery:** Petra is Skilled with the sling and club. She typically dual-wields two sturdy oaken baton-like weapons of Ierendi make called "ton-fas".

[P=H] 40/80/160 d6 H: -1AC/2, Stun (s/m)

[P=M] 1d6+1 A: -1AC/2 Deflect (1)