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Chapter 1
A Question of Glass

The castle was small, as was the vale-bound duchy over which it ruled. It had only one tower, the other having been lost to a winter storm nearly a ceptuary ago. The keep and its wall were stone, unglazed and rough-lain. The motte and bailey were little more than a patch of dirt ringed by a ditch of icy green scum.

Still, it was a castle. Even without Fordenheim's architecture, Esfir would have known it from the way merchants looked up as they passed beneath the raised portcullis with its fringe of icicles. She would have known it from the ring of Helgande's hammer about the inner yard, and from the tread of hobnailed boots as karls marked the watch from the curtain wall.

Stone. It all came back to stone. That was what had first brought women to the arc from the flat aridity of Ashan. The search for what the desert could not provide had driven traders north, ever north, until the crest of each new ridge might have been the very edge of the--

"Parry!" Victrus brought down her spear. "Parry!"

Esfir flinched, and the flat of the knight's blade struck her hand. She felt the blow all the way to her shoulder. Her sword fell from her fingers, and Victrus lunged. Her spear's leather-hooded tip jabbed Esfir in the ribs.

"And you're dead."¹

¹ "I really want them to have Scottish accents."

"The whole point was to be less ethno- and androcentric. They cannot have fucking Scottish accents."

Esfir sighed. This was her fourth death todej, and third bell only halfway gone. She bent to retrieve her hjalm, but Victrus twitched the spear, forcing her back.

"Hey!"

Victrus advanced. "Dead girls do not say 'hey,'" she said. "Dead girls do not need sparring swords, either." Without warning, she reversed the spear in Hunting Bear. Its shaft became a sweeping blur.

Esfir ducked. The spear caught her on the left shoulder.

"My writing arm!"

"Dead girls do not write," Victrus said. She stepped forward and made Wolf's Bite, a gut thrust, lethal and quick. But pain had cleared Esfir's head, and instead of retreating she rolled aside, scooped up a handful of pebbles, and threw them sidearm at the karl's face.

Victrus blinked and her spear slit the air where Esfir had been. Esfir snatched her sword from the flagstones and swung blindly, hoping to get the backs of the huskarla's knees, or maybe one of her kidneys. She rarely became vengeful at these drubbings, but her hand and shoulder -- her *writing* hand and shoulder -- pulsed with agony, and she wanted to pay that pain forward.

Yet Victrus parried the sword almost before Esfir had thought to swing it. A glance at the karl showed her standing flat-footed, calm, looking bored as she swept the hjalm away.

Esfir had no time to marvel at her tutor's quickness. The spear-shaft rapped her knuckles -- it was her right hand, at least -- and sent her sprawling back into the snow.

"Shit!" Esfir said. "Proggng shit!" She had fallen in a pool of muddy slush and shivered as she hurried to rise. A lock of her braid had come out of its bun and blew against her face. She looked up at the huskarla. "Sorrow I call," she said. "I have lost my footprints, and my--"

"Cut that." Victrus gestured as though flicking away offal, then held out a hand. "You're dead again," she said, "and dead girls call no penance."

Esfir considered her options, then offered her right hand, wincing only slightly as Victrus helped her up. The captain said, "Dead girls also do not fight dirty."

Esfir said nothing at first. She didn't want another rebuke, even though she had a feeling Victrus's comment about penance had in truth been a sort of compliment. "I . . . I'm sorry, mistress?"

"Eight you are." Victrus swatted snow from Esfir's jerkin with all the affection of a hostler sweeping out stables. "You are slow, dess. You move slow, and you learn slow." Her look was unreadable. "But learn you do, at that." She touched a cut on her own cheek where Esfir's pebbles had done their work and then frowned at the spot of blood on her finger.

"Aye, mistress."

"When your enemy wants to winter your heat," Victrus said, "you do what you have to." She thumped the butt of her spear against the ground, shaking snow from its shaft, and then looked up. The sky was a blank white sheet, yet Victrus seemed to read the time there as though from a scroll.

"Bell is up," she said, and pointed with her spear to doors of the great hall. "Scamper to Fordenheim, and do not let me hear that you begged off lessons on account of Old Vicky's cruelty to your precious bones."

"Yes, mistress," Esfir said. "And, no, mistress." She bowed low and long, and then retrieved her sword before retreating into the welcome warmth of the keep.

#

"Eight in the Drop, girl! Were you raised by Crescentians?"

So sincere was the expression of mortification on Fordenheim's face that it might have comical on a better day. The blow to her writing hand, however,

had knocked out Esfir's good humor as surely as the keep's many braziers blunted the mountain cold.

"Your ancestors built this keep, child -- didn't any of them tell you that there's a dining hall downstairs?"

Esfir swallowed a lump of mince pie hot enough to make her eyes water and said, "Vic-- Sele Victrus kept me all bell. I had not time to stop and eat."

"So your solution was to sneak a pie off the cooling shelf and dribble half its contents across my floor?"

Esfir pouted. Normally, she remembered never to pout in front of Fordenheim. He would not cuff her, as Victrus might have done for such childishness, though he was clever as a crow and saw right through her. But it had been a cold and painful morning, and she had no intention of going all afterbell on an empty belly just because the captain was too strict to let her out in time for dinner.

"Felix let me have it," she said, indicating the remaining pie, "and I only ate on the way up because I didn't want to be late for lessons!"

"Pack up that druck, child," the skoldyr said. "And come in, unless you want to let all the heat out as well as feeding every chamber mouse in the tower with that spiced pork."

Esfir bowed her head in what she hoped looked like humility and stepped through the archway into the skoldyr's apartments. Fordenheim shut the door and ushered her towards the two desks, one large and one small, in the center of the room.

She had always loved the tower. It was short and fat, with a squat cone of slate tiles for its roof instead of a proper rooftop garden or astronomy deck as any tower in Ashan would have had. The one window in the room was un-glassed and looked southwest, to where the high southern hills of the vale stood shrouded in the perpetual snow and mist of the aetor. Esfir had once asked how he kept his apartments warm, with the window always open to the wind,

and he had only smiled and said that sometimes magic was more useful than it appeared.

Esfir would have enjoyed her time here even had it been cold. The castle stood upslope of the duchy town, nearly at the crest of the valley's long northeastern slope, which meant that Fordy's window offered one of the best views in the Gesture. It was as though Esfir had tipped a bucket from the window ledge and the whole world had spilled out before her eyes. Castle Pentaglance, for all its modesty, had its own little labyrinth of walls and yards; then came Glaceton, its rooftops steep-shingled against the snow; next, the patchwork fields and hedges of the outer farms; then the Gullet, slashed as though by Undine's own spear from east to west across the valley, its great gorge roaring with falls and screened with steam through which one could see the Gesture's southern end. Even from here, one could see the occasional glint of sun from steel or the winking yellow spark of a watchfire where the huskarla tower rose out of the smoke-laced thatch huts of Leapstone-at-the-Crossing. Beyond the ford lay only snowy fields, a few last freehold farms, and, finally, a dark smear of pine wood at the far end of the vale: the western wilds, where icy mist hid the aetor and where all maps ended.

Esfir looked with longing at the arched window as she took her seat. Magic or no, Fordenheim kept their two desks near the fireplace, far from where easily-distracted royals might spend time skygazing instead of memorizing the lineage of the queen or reciting the dates of the Crescentian Wars.

The skoldyr threw one more disapproving look at Esfir's mince pie as he went to one of his bookshelves. He selected a volume, opened it, inspected a page, and then returned it to its place before pulling out another.

Esfir watched him. Usually, she became impatient with adults who took a long time to do things -- and it seemed to her that a great many adults did this, all the time. She never minded when Fordenheim went slowly, however. For

one thing, his lessons were always worth the wait. For another, his deliberation gave her the chance to look around.

Toden, the long trestle tables across from the hearth were nearly empty. The astronomy instruments stood in their niche beside the window, the telescope off its tripod, the astrolabe dusty. Seeing them reminded Esfir of the skoldyr' perennial impatience for sowing, when rain and wind would rinse clear the sky and reunite him with the stars. Above the niche and to both sides of the window, bookshelves curved out and up, following the onion dome shape of the tower's top as they went. Esfir did not know if was engineering or saethre that kept so many books in place as their shelves climbed at what looked like an impossible angle towards the shadowy apex of the ceiling. This far from Ashan, any paper was a luxury, and books more valuable still. Yet here Fordenheim had auchtreds, shelf upon shelf of them. Even Esfir's own lady mother had not so many.

Most of her sistren and brothers in the vigfregna were more interested in the lance than in letters, but Esfir had always loved sitting here, looking up at the way firelight gave each leather spine or scroll-case its own secret gleam. So much paper gave off an irreproducible smell: musty, pleasant, redolent of peaceful age. She liked, too, the brown and somber colors of these library stacks: the yellow of forgotten bone, the burgundy of old blood, that spectral grey born only from what once was black. It was all Esfir could do not to abandon her purloined pie and run around the room, trailing her fingertips on the spines of the books, writing her own small trail in the dust of ages.

As she dejdreamed, her eyes made the journey around the walls in her stead, and she saw something gleam upon Fordenheim's desk. She froze, her hands half-wiped on the hem of her shirt, and then leaned forward to take a closer look.

A little scale of brass, perhaps only a hand from stirrup to stirrup, stood on the desktop. In one pan the scale held a crystal, spidery and

branching, shining like ice. It was this glint that had caught Esfir's eye, but now, as she craned her neck to see, it was the object in the opposite pan that made her stare.

It was a chip of -- of what? Against the polished brass of the pan, the very darkness of the thing was jarring. It was curved along one edge but jagged on another, as though part of what had been some shapely whole. It made her think of a marble, and indeed it had a marble's glassy depth. It reminded her of the summertime long ago when her father had put her on his shoulders and walked with her that way all the way to the toy shop down Glaceton. Once there, he had deposited her on the ground just inside the door thrown one arm around the shoulders of the shopkeeper, who had seemed unable to stop bowing, and bade her pick out anything she liked. Esfir had chosen a cloth bag of marbles, fascinated by the tiny clouds of brilliant dye that the toymaker had somehow injected into each little ball. They had looked delicious. Her lady mother had returned home from the Court of the Queen some days later to find the heir to the duchy playing with, and occasionally trying to eat, her favorite new toys before the hearth in the great hall. Esfir had few memories from that age, but the wintry silence of her mother at the next few family suppers was one of them.

The bauble on Fordenheim's scales reminded her of those long-gone marbles because its unbroken side suggested a smooth, translucent sphere, and because it held a spark of color at its heart. The size of the fragment, however, made clear that the orb from which it must have come would be large, almost too big to pick up in one hand. Its surface was not clear but a deep, velvety violet that to Esfir recalled the evening sky. The color at its core was yellow or orange, like flame captured in glass.

And there was more. Esfir leaned closer. If she looked carefully, the frozen fire at the center of the fragment seemed almost to move. Her lips parted in the beginnings of wonder as she stared at it.

"Child?"

A hand fell on her shoulder. Esfir gasped and sat back. Her breath left her in a whoosh. She turned and saw the tall skoldyr looking down at her, his expression curious.

Tall? she thought. *He's more than tall. He's almost gaunt. Has he always been so thin?*

Esfir didn't think so, but she couldn't be certain. Captain Victrus was ever reminding her to be more observant of her surroundings. Old Vicky seemed convinced that her royal pupil's failings in this area alone would lead to an early death which, it had been made clear, was likely to involve some combination of wolves, deserters, and one or more avalanches.

"Sorrow I call," she said. "I just couldn't help but notice . . ." She gestured at the scales on the desk.

Fordenheim looked from them to Esfir and back again. His eyes held a light she could not read -- *Like a bit of fire, caught in crystal*, she thought -- and then he went over to his desk. The tome he had chosen at such painstaking length he laid aside without a look.

"What did you notice, child? Tell me your observations."

Esfir swallowed. If by asking about the things on the scales she had overstepped, it would not be the first time. But Fordenheim had asked for observations, one of his favorite didacticisms. She began with the easiest.

"The object on the rightmost pan is a crystal of some sort," she said, "or perhaps some other material that has been crystallized. Its structure is that of a--" she hesitated, struggling to recall her geology. After a moment, she snapped her fingers. "A dendrite. It resembles a dendritic crystal. But--" she peered more closely-- "be there some material inside, within the crystal branches of the object. It looks like . . . wood."

Fordenheim was nodding, though in confirmation or merely in appreciation of her method, Esfir could not tell. She was striving for the objective tone

that he had taught her and which he always used. State only useful information, and state it plainly; pare away the dross. But what business had a piece of wood -- something like the needled leaf of a juniper or archer pine -- being sheathed in some sort of crystal?

Esfir snapped her fingers and looked up suddenly. "Ice! Be it a piece of frozen branch from the Fallingwood, be'int?"

"Very good, child." Fordenheim favored her with his pallid smile and indicated the scales. "And the other?"

She squinted in concentration. "Be it glass," she said, and then frowned. "But the color at its center -- is it painted glass? Like the old monuments along the Arcsedge or the ruins rumored to be hidden in the aetormere at Vale's End?"

The skoldyr still smiled, but he was shaking his head. "Those artefacts are ancient," he said, "and they are also not real glass. We merely call them glass, because they seem closer to that material than to any other." He held up a finger. "But things are not always as they seem."

This last statement was another of his favorites, and Esfir smiled to hear it. Among his strongest beliefs was that the educated citizen should be skeptical of appearances, that summer truth was never the only truth at hand. Only bumpkins and provincials, he had told her, believed what they saw without first asking the right questions.

"And which questions are the right questions, like?" Esfir had asked him, hoping in her too-clever heart that this question itself would qualify.

"That," he had said, "is what we shall discover together, child."

Now here he stood in his patched coat -- a soldier's coat, it had always seemed to Esfir, too short and practical to be a scholar's robe at all -- with his finger and eyebrows raised. Esfir knew that, were she to fail him, he would not voice any disappointment -- but he would feel it, and that knowledge was enough to spur her on.

"It could be . . . stained glass? Like the panes in Johanna's solar." Even as she spoke, she already knew this was not quite right. Fordenheim had taught her enough architecture for her to know that glass was too delicate, that this odd fragment on the scales was, despite its ruin, somehow much stronger than glass, which in any case was a rarity in the Gesture.

"Child?"

Esfir flinched. Here was the disappointment she had feared: not in her failure to come up with the right answer but in her failure to stay on the path towards it. "Sorrow I call," she said. "I kenjure this cannot be stained glass."

"Why kenjure so?"

"Be it too thick, for one," she said. "Even for such a small piece, be it not so thin as glass needs to be if it is to take proper treatment, like. For another, the blend of color is all wrong. But mosten . . ." she searched for the right word. "Mosten, be it too lively."

Fordenheim started. When Esfir looked around at him, he was already regaining his composure -- yet from the corner of her eye, she thought she had seen a peculiar expression cross his face. So alien had it been that Esfir was at first unsure of what she had seen.

"Lively," the skoldyr said. There was a sudden lightness to his tone. "Whatever do you mean, child?"

"Well, it just that it seems, well, shifty, like. Same as the colors in a fireplace, only much slower aflicker -- like molasses running from the tap in a tree." She shook her head again. "I don't know. But be there a spark to it -- be'int there? As in a slow fire, like. Or an eye."

Fordenheim studied her for a long moment, his expression now as closed as the castle portcullis at eighth bell. "Like a slow fire," he repeated, as though to himself. "Like an eye." He turned to regard the objects on the scale.

"It is *isilfir*," he said at last. He appeared to rouse himself with a shake of his shoulders. "What we would call duskglass."

"Duskglass," Esfir said. She both liked and disliked the word. It had a heady, romantic sound, but it felt put together all wrong: too many close-packed sounds all mashed together in the middle. She frowned. "Why haven't you taught me of such before?"

Fordenheim dismissed the question with a wave of his hand. "The complexities of certain materials are not for the young." He opened a drawer, picked up the scale, and tilted it so that both fragments, light and dark, fell inside. He closed the drawer and went back around the desk, where he opened the book he had taken down earlier from the shelf. "Toden's lesson is more prosaic, I'm afraid."

Esfir's frown deepened. Fordenheim had taught her basic chemistry, and in the course of that study had shown her scores of materials and substances. He had always encouraged questions and rewarded curiosity, but now, it seemed, she had happened upon something which he had no interest in discussing with her -- something mysterious and intriguing, no less. It seemed monstrously unfair.

She wanted to protest further, but the skoldyr was already turning pages, gathering momentum as he started in on the prevailing weather habits of the Lesser Pylons. Weather -- as Esfir felt certain Fordenheim knew -- was one of the few subjects for which she could muster little enthusiasm, and why he would start with such a thing toden, she had no idea. If she hadn't known better, she would have thought he wanted her to ddream of more interesting things.

Like the crystal wood, she thought, and the duskglass. The isilfir.

"... generating greater destructive potential than any other naturally-occurring event known to whomenkind. It's surprising, isn't it?"

Esfir nodded. A furtive dart of the eyes told her that Fordenheim wasn't really looking for an answer; he was leaning against the mantelpiece, lost in the raptures of lecture. The pylons, the strange, empty highlands between Ashan

and the Northern Arc, were renowned for what Fordy called "bizarre meteorological phenomena." The way Fordy said it, the phrase alone sounded like a sleeping spell. Did he know a sleeping spell? Did Johanna? It seemed like the sort of thing a White Sister would know.

"—lack of empirical evidence that the grove rituals on the table mesas atop each pylon contributed in any meaningful way—"

Esfir's mind drifted. Somewhere far to the south, beyond the farthest pylon, her mother would be on the return trail from a season spent in the flowered courts of Ashan. Esfir flexed her swollen hand, knowing Fordy was likely to ask her to copy down passages from the Aegensean almanac on something truly boring. Her eyes watched a sliver of the furling sky, and her mind watched her mother's progress across the wide intermountain steppes, and somewhere, high in the tower of her thought, the word *isilfir* gleamed like slow fire.

Chapter 2

Rumors and Relations

As was usual for afterbells at end of winter, the clouds over Pentaglace had worn thin by the time fourth bell spread its timid warmth across the land. The mountains ran down the flanks of the vale like pillars for the sky, whose vault so far north seemed to enclose all calm and all silence. Amid this torpor ran the Gullet within its curtain of restive mist. The sun broke through the mist now and then to light upon distant, snow-shod fields. This drift of light and shadow stamped the greater stillness indelibly on the eye.

In the yard below the sky-struck tower, the sun had found the row of archery dummies lined like condemned prisoners against the curtain wall. Esfir could see the blink of sun on iron from the old helmets that served the dummies as heads.

"He just put it away?" said Thomas.

"And in a drawer, like," Esfir said. "Not even a locked cabinet or a chest with silver clasps." She brushed a crust of snow from the weathered stones of the merlon before her and watched it fall. It opened in a white fan on the wind and flew away. "No saethre, no words of power, nothing."

"Shit," said Thomas. He spoke the word slowly, luxuriating in it. "Just like that old whitebeard to hold out on you, eh?" He stood at the gap in the crenelated wall, held out his fist over the drop, and popped up his thumb. He squinted down his arm as though he were a trebuchet crew chief on the Crescentian front instead of a smithson with a magazine of snowballs.

"I heard that," Isha called. She stood three stride away, leaning against what remained of the spiral stair that had led upward. It was the only place where she could be out of the wind and keep Esfir in her sight.

Thomas lowered his arm, then stepped forward and threw. His body made a single motion, all sinew and power. Esfir had seen him at the anvil, and knew what that power could do to a heated piece of iron. But Thomas' strength had always been just that, a raw measure of power that, if generous, had been unleavened by finesse for as long as Esfir had known him. The accuracy he put into the hammer and tongs seemed to evaporate once he came out of the smithy into the open air. Esfir watched as his snowball struck the bailey wall more than a stride from the nearest dummy.

"Shit," he said again. "If I had a bow and bag of good arrows." He had lowered his voice, and Esfir glanced down the walkway at Isha, who appeared too busy hiding from the wind to have noticed Thomas' language.

Isha's dislike of the cold had always seemed odd to Esfir. That one of them should take so readily to these winter lands and the other not - and when Isha, whose life would always be that of a soldier, was the one who so disliked the elements - it seemed an unfriendly irony to Esfir, who often caught herself making a habit of seeking omens.

"Dashkla!"

Esfir jumped and looked around just in time to duck the snowball Thomas had tossed in her direction. Laughing, the smithson picked up another snowball from his armory and brought it to her. He offered it to her with a bow. "Your grace," he said. "By your leave."

Esfir considered smashing the snowball against his face, but decided that she probably did not want to risk startling him into falling off the ramparts. She stepped up beside one of the merlons and aimed at the dummies in the yard instead. The wind gusted, and she stutter-stepped to hold her balance.

With a cry of warning, Isha rose to her feet. She had her hand on the grip of her *hjal*m, as though ready to fight the very elements, should they show sufficient bad judgment to endanger her mistress.

"Be it well," Esfir called. "It's just a little wind. We get that here, you know." She didn't feel like grinning -- *dashk*la wasn't as bad as *your grace*, which wasn't even a ducal form of address but one for a whole stupid *queen* -- but she grinned anyway. Her father had taught her that class-teasing ran both ways, and that she must learn to endure much and give only little in return. Like Fordenheim's refusal to indulge her curiosity over the trinkets on his scales, this imbalance seemed incredibly unfair to Esfir; yet she understood, and on a level much deeper than snowballs, that the real unfairness was anyone's but her own to bear.

Esfir loosed. The sun shone out from behind a cloud as the snowball flew, and for an instant it became a glittering point of fire, bright as (a *marble*) a star on the wind. Then it struck the first dummy in the helmet, knocking it clean off. The old kettle helm bounced off the flagstones with an echoing clang.

Thomas scowled at Esfir, then looked over her shoulder so he could exchange scowls with Isha. Esfir looked from one to the other. It seemed toden was not her *dej* for approval. "Come on," she said to the smithson. "It's not your fault you can't throw like a girl." She turned to Isha. "And you! I'm allowed to throw a 'din-damned snowball. You can put down your *hjal*m for a chime and kill a few practice dummies with us."

The squire's expression didn't change, but she went over to the snowball pile, selected one, and began to pack it between her hands.

"The thing is," Esfir said to Thomas while the squire lined up her shot, "it wasn't like Fordenheim at all. He's usually so encouraging with new materials or lessons. He never holds out, not ever."

Thomas shrugged, as though to indicate the inconstancy of adult behavior. "Maybe he's changed. Maybe his last snows are finally melting."

Isha threw. "You should not speak of Professor Fordenheim that way," she said. From far below came the sound of her snowball striking one of the dummies. "He has been a servant of the queen longer than all our lives put together."

"Bein' around for a ceptuary don't make him holy," said Thomas. He picked a snowball from the pile, stepped into the gap, and threw. "Besides, sounds like her grace knows it's true."

"Spring true, maybe," Isha said. She watched as Thomas' throw went wide and Esfir saw the corner of her mouth twitch. Then she seemed to remember that the smithson was being irreverent, and her scowl returned. "The only ones who think someone so learned as that can go soft are soft themselves."

Esfir was only half-listening as Thomas replied and the argument went on. Both the smithson and Isha were dear to Esfir, but sometimes letting her mind wander was the only way to survive the pair of them. In any case, Isha was probably right; the odds of Fordenheim going senile seemed about as likely as Esfir's being named Armatrix at the next Bodth Wareve. And yet Thomas was not entirely wrong; it was strange behavior for the skoldyr. Adults acted inexplicably all the time -- to Esfir it almost seemed the rule rather than the exception -- but Fordenheim was far cleverer than most people, cleverer perhaps even than her father if not her lady mother. And the skoldyr was nothing if not methodical. Toden he had just been distracted, that was all.

Thomas nudged her, and Esfir saw it was her turn at the gap. She picked up a snowball, packed it against her palm, and threw, but the shot went wide. She stepped aside to let Isha throw.

"Maybe it's the illness," Esfir said.

Isha, about to throw, had made sun's verdict: throwing arm cocked, other arm extended, her hand a flat spear pointing at her mark. Now she lowered her arms and looked at Esfir. Thomas looked from one girl to the other.

"It's a scary thought, I know," Esfir said. "They haven't had a proper physic down Glaceton since Bottlebrew died last turn, and I overheard Otterback say that the herbess on the arboretum has yet to return from the Fells." When Thomas frowned, she added, "She closes her shop every baring and goes to the aetormere to collect supplies. She says everything grows bigger on the rim."

Isha was nodding. "You think Fordenheim has been called to tend the sick in the arboretum district," she said, "and maybe that is why he has been acting distracted of late."

Esfir nodded. "There have been more and more houses going under the cross of the White Sisters this month. Fath-- the duchy is responsible for the townsfolk. He knows that, that . . . what the druck is her name?"

"Esclebea," said Thomas. He was blushing slightly, and Esfir recalled that the herbess, a stout woman of middle turns, had a reputation for beauty as well as medicine.

"Right, Esclebea. The duke knows she is late in returning this turn."

"And Templain Johanna is away with your lady mother, of course," said Thomas.

"As always," Esfir said, and pretended not to see Isha look at her. "And without her, or Esclebea, or Bottlebrew, Fordenheim is the only one who knows enough medicine to contain the sighing sickness."

"Or magic," said Isha, frowning.

"Fordenheim's healing isn't really saethre," Esfir said. "It's mostly medicine. Chemick and physick and the like."

"Hmm."

Esfir rolled her eyes. "It's a perfectly lovely dej," she said. "Don't go getting all Deschorian on me. Magic is mostly chemick and physick and such, anyway. Understanding of the natural laws."

"Yes, dashkla."

"If old whitebeard is physicking the sick wards down Glaceton," said Thomas, "that would explain why he keeps going out alone at night."

Both girls turned to look at him.

The smithson shrugged. "Father has me stoke the evening forge so the dark bell of the watch can bring their spare gear in for repairs. We've got lots o' cracked iron, just lately, what with the late freeze and all. Some nights, be I up halfway to second bell." He pointed to the main yard, where the postern gate was hidden between the barracks and the stables along the outer wall. "I seen a robed figure come and go, right across the yard, holding a hooded lantern. I kenjure it had to be him. Who else but a skoldyr or a mage would risk the dark alone?"

Who else, indeed, Esfir thought, and shuddered. She liked to think of herself as educated -- Fordenheim himself was seeing to it, wasn't he? -- but even the learned avoided midnight strolls as baring deepened towards winter and the nights grew long. In the hazy light of midafterbell, it was easy to dismiss tales of skrell or bandits creeping forth from the dark. Even the wolves who roamed the hills upslope of the castle could be dangerous in times when the elk or moose were not plentiful. If nothing else, going out alone after dark was a good way to get lost.

"Glaceton be not so bad," Isha said, but she looked questioningly at Esfir as she spoke. Esfir pretended not to notice. The other castle children rarely asked her outright for news from her parents, but Esfir always felt the pressure of their curiosity. She didn't like to think that any part of her friendship with Isha or Thomas, with Magna or Sindri, was due to position instead of personality. It was hard, however, not to feel the gulf between

their classes and her own, and Esfir thought again of her father's advice about teasing.

"Father might know something," she said. "I could ask him about the sickness among the climbers down Glaceton at supper tonight." She saw Thomas duck his head a little when she mentioned class, and she added quickly, "He might even know if Fordenheim is the one leaving the castle to tend the townsfolk."

Thomas and Isha looked at one another. "Good," said Thomas. "That would be good, dashkla."

"Din den," Isha said.² She looked both relieved and sheepish. "Some of the other karls have family in town. I would not want to ask--"

"Be it well." Esfir put a hand on Isha's arm. She could feel the steel mesh of the brynjar beneath the other girl's tunic. "I'm happy to find out what I can."

There was still a considerable pile of snowballs, and they threw until all four of the archery dummies were drenched, but Esfir felt as if the distance between herself and the others had somehow grown. When evening came windy and grey from the rimward wilds, forcing a retreat back to the warmth of the keep, they descended the blasted stair in unaccustomed silence.

#

"You shouldn't worry about such things," Duke Arlan said.

Esfir sighed and looked down at her roast lamb. It had been dressed with sweet onions and a fragrant brown gravy speckled with pepper and beads of oil. All Esfir could think about was how cute the doomed thing had probably been before it became a slab of meat. She took a small bite and reflected on how sad it was that something so cute had to be so delicious.

² A shortening of "Undine dejn," which itself is a shortening of "Undine grant you fair dejn." A colloquial phrase of agreement or favorable greeting.

"The thing is," the duke was saying, "these maladies come and go. We don't see the worst of it up here, remote as we are, but facing perennial illness is just a part of governing in the modern world. Trade routes are more expansive, travel is easier and faster than ever before, and all it takes is one croupy caravaner or a visiting dignitary with a sniffle to ignite a whole spate of such things." He waved his fork to convey the ease of said ignition. Esfir thought this easy bureaucratic attitude probably concealed a much more complicated and worrisome reality, and she wondered if her father might not be putting on a show of nonchalance for the servants and the others at table. She felt keenly aware of Isha, standing at rest against the wall, vigilant as ever. Like the duke's lyfskjold, Thaga, Isha was ostensibly out of earshot, her eyes watchful, her body alive with that stillness Esfir had only ever seen in a lyfskjold or in Captain Victrus herself.

"Yes, father. But if the illness is of so little consequence, why would we bother sending Professor Fordenheim out at evening to see to the townsfolk?" She cut a strip of lamb and took a bite, careful both to avoid looking at her father and to avoid looking like she was avoiding him.

"Because he's the only--" Her father froze, and then after a moment laid down his knife and fork. "Your mother used to do that, you know," he said. He sounded irritated and affectionate at the same time.

"She used to tend the sick, father?"

Duke Arlan put his elbows on the table, folded his hands together over his plate, and looked at her.

After a moment, Esfir looked down. "Sorrow I call," she said. "I have lost my footprints, and my way is vanished in the wind." She glanced up, recalling suddenly how Captain Victrus had cut her off this morning when she tried to call her penance. But the duke merely sat and looked at her. After another moment, she looked back at her plate. "I have scattered the wisdom of

those before me, and I have broken the trust of those who come after. Their paths are perished for my shame, and they will never know home again."

"If your shame is what will perish us," said the duke, "then I suspect we shall all live forever."

Esfir looked up, anxious for another reprimand, but her father was smiling behind his clasped hands. He took up his napkin, dabbed his mustache, and waved at the footwem, who whisked the course away. As they returned with a stew of morels and spiced asparagus, the duke said, "I asked Fordenheim to go out among the sick as much for our sake as for theirs."

Esfir wrinkled her nose at the soup. "What do you mean? How does his going help us here, when we're safe behind the castle walls?"

"You tell me."

"Because . . ." Esfir tapped her fingers on the tablecloth. "Because sending out the court sorcerer on behalf of the virgaters shows them we care for their well-being." She knew that the skoldyr wasn't really a sorcerer, of course, but that didn't stop many in Glaceton from thinking him a wizard of high and enigmatic powers. "It maintains goodwill, so that come wareve they'll be less likely to sack the keep and put all our heads on pikes."

Her father lowered his spoon and sighed. "They don't even have pikes, you know."

"Probably for the best," she said. "So, if it wasn't that, it must be -- it must be that the sickness is actually an evil spell, cast on us by a rogue Dthradite who-- what?"

Her father had started and spilled his second spoonful of soup. Now, without turning his head, he looked about the room, where the footwem and huskarla stood attentive in the shadows. He said quietly, "Some things are better in our heads than on our tongues." He raised his voice. "I'm sure nobody in service of the duchy is so unlettered as to believe rumors about such saethre, but there may be poor souls in the village who would hear those

stories and not only believe them but spread them besides." He swallowed a spoonful of soup and added, "I am also sure that anyone caught spreading such tales would be excellent candidates for next winter's caravan to the frontier posts."

They had almost made it through the second course when Atalansa came downstairs. Her presence was announced not by sight but by the aroma -- the word 'smell' being insufficient for something so complex and aggressive -- of her perfume. Despite the alacrity of the footwem in serving her, Atalansa managed to convey displeasure, mostly through throat-clearing and a great frequency of frowns.³

Esfir rolled her eyes. But before she could speak her father caught her eye and gave the barest shake of his head. "Din den, dashkla," he said. "We were worried you would not be able to join us this evening."

Atalansa appeared to preen at the honor of the title, which really, Esfir knew, was hers alone. Ata then turned to her bowl of soup and her glass of mulled wine. She seemed to find neither satisfactory, and appeared to be restraining herself from complaint only through great effort of will. Looking around the room as though in hope of escape, seeming to find nothing else of worth upon which to fasten her gaze, she looked at last the duke. "Good even, uncle," she said. "I meant to be down sooner, truly. I didn't want to leave you to fend for yourself without the benefit of good conversation."

Esfir frowned.

"But I just couldn't get the proper fit for these boots," Atalansa went on. "They're the absolute eye of culture in Ashan, you know, and I have it on great authority that the ladies in the golden circle wear them on every occasion of state. But, you see, the toes are most artfully exaggerated, and it

³ It is the most grave responsibility of the Aegensian ambassador to the scribing circle to remind future readers that the correct taxonomical expression is "a misery of frowns."

takes quite the skill to walk in them, just so." She picked up her fork and spoon and walked them across the tablecloth to demonstrate.

"I see," said the duke. "I'm sure you'll master them, in time. All skills take great investment and focus if they are to be improved, which Captain Victrus was kind enough to point out to me during this afterbell's circle." He turned to Esfir. "How fare your lessons in the yard, my dear?"

She held up her left hand, the knuckles of which were bruised and swollen. "Captain Victrus says I'm slow," she said. "She gave me this to correct me." She heard the sulkiness in her voice but couldn't quash it; it had been wrong after all, for the captain to injure her hand. How could she do that, knowing as she did that Esfir had to go to writing lessons straightaway from her torturous training in the yard? It was unconscionable! This was a word she had learned from one of Fordenheim's old grammar tomes just last month, and she still enjoyed the sound it made in her mind. The sound *shun* was at the center of it, buried like a stone in a snowball, and that was just what she wanted to do to Captain Victrus: shun. When Esfir was duchess and sat at the head of the circle, she would promote Isha to captain and send Victrus north. She would bring out her spear, the spear of Duchess Esfir, and break off the leaf-shaped blade and thrust it point-down into the table before her high chair of office. And over that quivering blade she would make the sign of banishment with her left hand, and Victrus would go. Let *her* go on a long caravan to the frontier posts, eating cold salt pork and shivering awake nights around a wind-beaten watchfire.

Esfir frowned. There was one problem with this fantasy: she would never earn a spearhead, or the spear to go with it, unless she broke the line in her water trial.

And yet, why should she even take the trial? Did folk not say there was more to the royal class than arms? Hadn't her own lady mother, whose grim

exploits in the southern wars had made even the Wind Queen bow her head in praise, said to Esfir that governing was more about mind than might?

"Captain Victrus is right to correct you," her father said, cutting across her reverie. He broke a hunk of bread from the half-loaf beside his plate and dipped it in the gravy from his lamb. "She stands in place of your lady mother, you know. Hers is a sacred duty."

"If mother wants me trained," Esfir said to her bowl, "she should stay home and train me herself."

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

"She said that if her mother wants-- Ow!" Atalansa glared at Esfir. "Why did you kick me?"

"I'm sorry, *dashkla*," Esfir said. "I just can't seem to get the angle of these boots right."

Atalansa sneered. "One *dej*, when you're older, you'll appreciate the importance of good fashion," she said. "But if you can't even whack an old woman with a practice sword, I would hate to think of you trying the Wanderer's Waltz in a seven-tiered skirt."

"Captain Victrus is not an old woman!" Esfir pointed her soup spoon at her cousin. "She's a storied knight, and it's not just a matter of whacking one another with swords. There's more footwork involved in sparring than in any dance, and even padded practice armor is cumbersome. It takes coordination, and foresight, and . . ." Even as she spoke, she sensed her father's watchfulness at the head of the table. She realized she must have taken more away from her time with Captain Victrus than she'd known. She certainly never thought she'd be defending the *huskarla* from criticism.

Atalansa spoke into Esfir's pause with an airy flourish of her wine cup. "I can't see how all that is anything close to as important as displaying oneself properly in court. If you can't make a serious impression on your

peers, how can you ever influence policy? Fighting! Hmph! War is men's work." She waved a hand as though shooing away something small and distasteful. "The real progress of the queendom is done in dress."

"Real progress? A serious impression?" Esfir said. She stood, upsetting her place and tipping back her chair. One of the footwem stepped forward nimbly to catch it before it could fall. "You haven't had a serious thought in your head since coming here, you . . . you progger! My mother carried the spear at the Red Pylons, and you sit there saying that a bunch of stupid lace and, and corsets are more important than--"

Atalansa began to laugh. For an instant, this reaction made Esfir so furious that she thought she would leap over the table and strangle her cousin where she sat, but then she felt the dampness on her legs. She looked down and saw that her third course, asparagus pie, was now a great green smear on the tablecloth. A good deal of it had spilled off the edge and found its way onto her trousers, which now clung to her thighs and crotch as only wet wool could. She might still have attacked Atalansa had her father not chosen that moment to intervene.

"Ladies," he said, "I think our spirited debate over the virtues of royalty has gone far enough for one evening." He eyed Esfir's stained clothing. "I also believe that Dashkla Felaryon is finished with her supper and shall want to retire to the comforts of her chamber for the remainder of the evening."

Esfir stared at him in disbelief. There Atalansa sat, tittering like some kind of idiot songbird after having insulted the armsmistress of the castle, having nearly insulted the duchess herself, and Esfir's father was . . . was sending her, Esfir, to her room?

"Yes, my dear," her cousin said sweetly, "perhaps the practice yard isn't the only place where you need correction. The pie is supposed to go in you, not all over you."

"I also think," the duke said loudly, "that we all need to practice our society behavior. Perhaps all the young ladies of the house shall meet tomorrow at second bell to oversee the repairs on the western rampart and take guidance from Sele Grimnir."

For a moment, Esfir's outrage grew, but then she realized what her father had said: *all the ladies of the house*. As much as the idea of slaving under Sele Grimnir and her masons depressed her, at least her cousin would be alongside her on the morrow. As she watched Atalansa's smirk melt into a look of outraged horror, all that had gone wrong with the *dej* seemed suddenly worth the trouble.

Chapter 3

The Mason's Tale

The western rampart of Castle Pentaglace had fallen prey to the same fitful arcland weather that had claimed the observatory tower. Unlike that done to the tower, however, the damage to the ramparts was recent. A deal of stone had been dislodged from the parapet above the well-gate during a storm. So far, the only resultant casualty had been one of the karls, who, unfortunate enough to draw the duty of retrieving the ancient bricks from the moat, was laid up in her barracks bunk with a fever.

Esfir, Atalansa, and Isha went with Magna and Sindri to meet Sele Grimmir on the stairs out of the great hall. The master builder of Duchy Pentaglace was tall and improbably thin for someone whose life was written in stone. Sele Grimmir went about in a black bearskin cloak, which according to rumor had been a gift from the queen herself, who had taken Gwenagwyn Grimmir⁴ to bed in what must have been prehistoric times. Esfir had always found the idea preposterous, not because the queen was known for her probity but because it was very difficult to imagine Sele Grimmir as anyone's lover.

Now, peering at the master builder over her cousin's shoulder, Esfir felt quite the same as she always had; Sele Grimmir's hair was as dark as her cloak but lay loose against her neck, and her mouth looked carved in lines of

⁴ Records recovered from the ruins of Pentaglace by Nighten Rangers in the second ceptuary EC indicate that formal titles were yet one more cultural import from Ashan itself. The Golden Circle, having so long ruled the known civilized world, had by the fourth or fifth ceptuary EA become so swollen with ladies and lords that new systems of classification were necessary. Most popular were military ranks, when applicable, as with Captain Lucretia Victrus; madame, lin, sera, and atris were also popular among highborn women – or even men, especially the housebonds of powerful nobles.

By slight contrast, "sele," taken from Ashanese *emselhe* or "amicable, well-born woman," came to be appended to ladies of middle to lower rank. It also found use among well-born artisans who were lucky or skilled enough to own a place in a royal household — as was the case with Duchy Mason Sele Gwenagwyn Grimmir.

disapproval. Trying to imagine her as affectionate or desirable, even as a maid of ten or twelve winters,⁵ was like trying to imagine a cuddly vulture.

Atalansa bowed low, simultaneously shoving Esfir back with one elbow.
 "Good morning, sele."

Esfir scrambled to catch her footing on the steps and then made her own bow. She felt clumsy and foolish, while Atalansa, even in workwoman's breeches and a plain woolen shirt, made her manners with charm. Esfir knew she must look boorish by comparison. She had never been as courtly as her cousin. Like so much else, it wasn't fair.

"Good morning, sele." Isha put one hand on Esfir's arm, either to steady her or because she had sensed that Esfir was about to say something impertinent. Her other hand went to her brow in a class salute. Magna and Sindri repeated the gesture.

Sele Grimmir offered a bow apiece for Atalansa and Esfir, no more than the barest inclination of head and shoulder, and two knuckles to her brow for each of the others. "A good morning for stonework," she said, "but not for children without winter coats." She cast a critical eye over the group of girls. "Perhaps I should delay the repairs to her grace's ramparts so that forgetful dessai can dress properly for baring."

Atalansa fidgeted. Esfir opened her mouth -- to say what, she didn't know -- but again Isha put a hand on her arm. Esfir looked at her, and Isha shook her head once before looking up at the builder.

"With respect, sele," she said, "Professor Fordenheim was generous enough to lend us each a salamandrine for the dej's work."

Sele Grimmir raised her eyebrows.

Esfir reached into her sanchan and produced a little gold coin. It looked somewhat like a mistral, but Esfir knew it was worth an auchtredfold more.

⁵ The Mynish Ashanese turn is equivalent to 1.4 Earth Solar Years, meaning that Mynish children enter adolescence between their tenth and eleventh year; in most regions, children came of majority at thirteen.

Instead of the seal of the Wind Queen and the holy writ inscribed beneath it in Ashanese, the coin bore only a curved serpent with six webbed feet: the avatar of Morobo, Eighth of Flame. Esfir held the coin up for the master builder's inspection.

Sele Grimmir looked at the salamandrine but did not reach for it. It was warm to Esfir's hand, and she guessed that the sele could feel that warmth even from where she stood. It seemed a simple saethre, yet magical heat was no small thing, here in the rimward north. Esfir knew the strength of the enchantment depended upon the strength of its creator. As Fordenheim had often told her, he was no true mage, but even a humble skoldyr could piece together enough aetomancy to keep a few girls warm against the winter wind.

"Very well," Sele Grimmir said, "but I hope you all brought gloves."

#

All of the girls had brought gloves, but only because Isha and Magna had spent several months working as masonry apprentices as part of their vigregna. Magna had led them to Helgande's forge in the corner of the yard.

"Old Sele Grimmir got you up on the ramparts, 'as she?" the smith said, handing over a pile of old gloves with a smile. "Well, never let it sore 'ee, nay; many's the dess or lad who came out of youth's crucible 'thout ever feelin' the fire o' hard work."

Thomas elbowed Esfir and whispered, "Builds character, it does."

"Builds character, it does," Helgande said, turning to rummage in a stinking pile of half-cured skins that were waiting for the slush pit. "I had some old deerskin coats around here . . ."

"Be it well," Atalansa said quickly. "Fordenheim lent us salamandrines."

Helgande straightened and turned to peer at Esfir through the ember-lit gloom of the shop. He had looked from her to Atalansa and then to Isha, as if waiting for one or the other of them to contradict what Ata had said. When no one did, Thomas cleared his throat and said, "I think the braziers in the

guardhouse need fresh coals," and hurried out into the yard. Esfir watched him go, wondering if all smiths were mistrustful of magic or if were just Helgande.

#

Sele Grimnir was waiting for them on the western battlement, where her masons were already hard at work preparing the dej's mortar. They had rigged a winch atop the walkway to bring up stone and supplies, and beside it they had laid a builder's spot to mix what looked like two kinds of sand. Esfir knew one of them was probably limestone, from the duchy quarries in the foothills of the Fjallarheim.

"Ugh," said Atalansa, covering her face with her sleeve. "What is that?"

"Wind ray fat," Sele Grimnir said. She smiled without humor. "It's one of the finest adhesive additives for mortar anywhere in the Arc, though there are precious few places where it can be procured." She turned to Esfir. "They say the average lifespan of a wind ray hunter is a kelldred turns, you know."

"Yes, sele," Esfir said, trying to look like she understood.

"Why is that?" Atalansa said. Her voice was muffled by her sleeve and she was still peering at the mixture in the builder's spot as though the smell coming from it had been designed as a personal insult to her.

"Because that's how long you fall," Grimnir said, "when you tumble off the edge of the world." She turned back to the masons without waiting to see the effect of her wit on her guests.

Esfir looked along the battlement. The walkway was gritty with the detritus of construction: stone dust, splashes of old mortar, and spare pieces of scaffolding lay about in a way that looked haphazard but, knowing Sele Grimnir, probably wasn't. Beyond the builder's spot with its freight of fresh mortar, the breach in the crenellated wall stood open to the slopes of the vale. Most of Glaceton lay southwest of the castle, and so this western view took in the lower slopes of the mountains that marked the rimward edge of the vale. Esfir saw snowy fields where in spring there might have been new-sown

rows of corn and sorghum, potatoes and gansil. Beyond the fields rose the first of the foothills. Esfir knew from Victrus' training and Fordy's maps that it was only a brief trek through those hills and through the peaks beyond until one reached the aetor. It was there, in the wild fog of the aetormere, that the wind rays could make a woman's life a kelldred turns long.

As though she knew that Esfir was thinking of her, Sele Grimmir turned around and clapped her hands briskly. "Enough gawking, ladies," she said. "Time to earn your keep." She pointed at the mortar mix and then gestured to one of the masons, a lanky man with leathery arms and the rune of a high journeyman on his cheek. "Grab some trowels and Irdmore will show you how to lay the mortar for the base of our new wall."

Speaking of a kelldred turns, Esfir thought, I wonder how long this dej is going to feel. She sighed and went to select a trowel.

#

Half past sixth bell, Esfir trudged down into the keep behind Isha, who alone among the five vigfregna girls seemed unaffected by the dej's labor. She had worn her hjalm all dej, and even now seemed not to notice its weight. Esfir knew that to resent Victrus' training and to be jealous of how well Isha bore that training made her a hypocrite, but at the moment she was far too tired to care.

Yet despite the rough work, she was in good spirits. As she saw it, three nice things had come of the dej. The first was that Isha's advice about gloves had quite literally saved Esfir's skin; her hands were chapped raw from lifting and setting the big stone bricks that made up the parapet, and she didn't want to think of what they might look like had she gone without gloves. The second was Atalansa's discomfort; for all Esfir's pain, her cousin seemed to feel it double. Ata's ceaseless complaints, normally the bane of Esfir's ears, had todej been delightful as spring sparrowsong.

Best of all, however, had been the mason Irdmore's unexpected good company. At first, the man had been intimidating, what with his scarecrow frame and bald head. Also, Esfir had assumed that anyone who worked with Sele Grimmir must of necessity be as cheerless as old cheese. But Irdmore had surprised her; as soon as Grimmir descended from the wall to haggle with merchant who had just drawn her wayn into the yard, the tall mason and his companions became garrulous. Irdmore had appeared totally unperturbed by whatever disruption to his work the girls represented, as though he hosted unskilled amateurs at his work every dej. He had warmed to his task as teacher, showing them how to mix the mortar, how to apply it with the spade trowel, and how to straighten the new bricks with a mason's line and blocks. He even made a game of scraping the extra mortar away from the new joints, showing the girls how a cleanly-jointed wall was not only more sightly than otherwise but more functional as well.

"The heat can't get in and pry the bricks apart, you see," he had said in his soft, deep voice. "Nor can the wet catch hold and drive the foundation out of true." He had coached them one at a time as they worked laid the stones. Esfir had surprised herself by enjoying the work. At lunch, Irdmore had pronounced Esfir's row of bricks the straightest he'd seen in an attadej.

There had been further pleasure in the man's company, for after the meal he had regaled the three girls with stories of his work. If asked that morning, Esfir would have said no mason's story could possibly hold her interest, but Irdmore had done so. He had tales of unearthing the Bardalian Wall in the high passes of the Maiden's Mouth; of erecting the bloodstone baileys, where every brick was mortared not with lime and wind ray fat but with the ground bones of slaves mixed with marrow and blood.

"That's impossible," Atalansa said. "You can't make buildings out of . . . out of blood and bones!" Her certainty seemed to come not from knowledge, which Esfir was sure she didn't have, but from sheer affront.

"Ah, but pardon, my lady, for ye can." Irdmore mortared a stone up one side, across the bottom, and down the other in a single sweep. "Goes on like fresh butter, so it does, blood mortar. My da' and I made it out of cows' bones and used it to lay our field walls when I'as just a farm lad down Gesture way." He had waved vaguely to the east, where the headlands of the Rel lay hidden among uncharted pine forests.

The most interesting of Irdmore's stories had been that of his time in Talla. The trading town, Irdmore said, had grown from a watchpost atop the rimward side of the northernmost pylon. Because of its location and impregnability, Talla had become ever more prosperous.

"Too 'ermote to build a forterss atop, y'see," said Irdmore. "Them nor'tren pylons be summat akin a kelldred stride above the plain. No haulin' yer castle-worthy stone up them switchbacks, ye kennit?"

Esfir kenned it. Talla had come to be called the "market in the sky," and was famous even in Pentaglance for its exotic goods; countless times had Esfir heard Ata talk of its Crescentian silks, of its casks of spices from the secret Highmark hill-groves, of the fish pies wide across as a woman is tall, baked while the fearsome Skull Sea choughs were still alive and flapping beneath the crust.

Irdmore had nothing to say about silks or pies, but he did speak of the Three Towers of Talla. They had been built in the Ashanese style to reflect the town's status as a trade center and shared the aspect that was at once the finest and most flawed all Ashanese work: they were beautiful to the point of impracticality. Each had been topped with a simple onion minaret, mimicking the style of the Old Places where peoples older even than the queendom had left palaces and outposts untenanted against the turns.

"Like Pentaglance!" Esfir said.

"Aye, dess, be it well."

Ata rolled her eyes, for a moment making herself and Esfir bear a startling resemblance to each other. Isha frowned at Ata, and something in Isha's pose made Esfir look up, but by the time she had done so the other girls were staring with determined disinterest at the horizon past each other's shoulders. Esfir looked at Isha, but when the lyfskjold looked back she merely nodded and seemed to watch Esfir for a sign or signal. Esfir decided she must have imagined whatever it hadn't been.

Irdmore's knowledge of the towers came from very close experience. One of the three onion domes had been damaged - Esfir felt the urge to cry, *Like Pentaglance!* again and suppressed it with a slight blush - and Irdmore, then the head builder of his own small team, had bid for and won the contract from the Talla County steward.

"Was an auchtred stride up, so it were," he said, "and there we hung, bare as plucked chickens, an auchtred stee-ride above the desert sands." He gestured as though to illustrate the sway of ropes or scaffolding in the wind. "'Alf the minaret was in need of fresh tiling and mortar, and three of them big keyhole windows they like down south 'ere laid bare, like, an' as we were to be shelving fresh brick around their ledges and frames, you see, I, ah, happened to be seein' inside the top floor o' the tower.

"Now, I weren't spying. Not Irdmore, not the son o' Mathashla, she o' the red hair." Here he paused, a brick as large as Esfir's skull poised in his callused hand as easily as though it were a fistful of wool. "Not spying," he repeated, his voice soft and grave, and as he spoke Esfir thought his eyes darkened, just for a moment. She blinked and the change was gone, if it had ever been. "But that's when I did see it, so it were," Irdmore said. His voice had fallen until it was little more than a whisper.

"Saw what?" Esfir said. She found herself speaking quietly. Magna and Sindri were lining the next tier of bricks a few stride away, but Isha and Atalansa, already close, leaned in to hear over the incessant wind.

The mason's eyes were on Esfir, but he was not seeing her. She guessed he was seeing a tower on a plateau that itself towered above a sweeping plain, seeing it all from the incredible height such work would have required. In that moment, Irdmore was back in the chill, pine-scented breeze high above Talla, hanging by hempen rope over the sleek side of the broken tower and looking into the keyhole window, his very gaze the key that unlocks memory. Looking at--

"The crystal."

Esfir started. But before she could recover herself to speak--

"Crystal?" Atalansa's tone implied that she had expected a much more exciting finale to the story. "What's so special about a crystal in a tower? We have crystal here in the castle -- loads of it."

Magna and Sindri had joined them, no doubt curious what was keeping everyone else in their part of the ramparts from work. Magna was nodding as Ata spoke. She said, "My mother used to say most crystal's far less valuable even than common glass."

Esfir chafed at the interruption but held her peace.

Irdmore was shaking his head. "Not this crystal, lady," he said. "This were a *dark* crystal, a great, er, orb, like, of deepest, ah . . ." He blinked, seeming to cast about for a word; his eyes settled finally on the sky. "Violet," he said at last, and pointed to the horizon. "Violet as yon mountains come evening."

All five girls leaned in towards the mason, as though to share in the circle of his remembrance.

"Violet," Isha said.

"Aye, and shining, though not with light," Irdmore said, and then frowned. He looked suddenly unsure of himself, almost afraid. "It shone with a golden spark at its heart, like a . . . like a flickerfly trapped under a glass."

The cold seemed all at once to find its way under Esfir's tunic. In her mind, she saw Fordenheim's chamber, and there, on the scales atop the desk, balanced against an icewood sample from Fallingwood, shone the object whose nature the skoldyr had been so unwilling to reveal.

Irdmore was asking the girls if they kenjured fairy bugs, which thrived only in warm, wooded realms and thus were unknown to many of the younger folk in the vale, but Esfir barely heard him.

We would call it duskglass, said Fordy's voice in her mind, *but the complexities of certain materials are not for the young.* His condescension had been so out of character, and that, perhaps, was why she kept thinking about it. That, and the mystery of the violet glass with its heart of fire. How could someone so wise not know that forbidding a subject was the surest way to ensure its fascinator power?

Atalansa made a dismissive noise. "I still don't see what made it so interesting," she said. "Probably it was just a gemcutter trinket on display in someone's royal solar. Such things are common. Templain Johanna says the average Ashanese noble wouldn't know saethre from sham if it walked up and--"

"What!" Esfir said. "Johanna's only been south of the Pylons, how much? Twice in her life? Didn't you tell me so last forging? How would she know anything about it?"

For the third time that long dej, Isha put a hand on Esfir's arm, but this time Esfir paid it no heed. There was too much at stake. She wanted to hear all there was to tell of the duskglass the mason had seen in far-off Talla, and she'd be progged if she was going to let Atalansa spoil the story. She shook Isha off and glared at her cousin.

Her cousin huffed, sticking out her lower lip to blow an errant lock of hair away from her brow. "Well," she said at last, "there's no call to be rude." She looked at Irdmore. "I'm sure whatever you saw, it was very pretty." She gave him a patronizing pat on the shoulder, then turned back to Esfir,

raising her brows as though to say, *See, there, at least one of us is capable of being civilized.*

Esfir imagined an iron key turning in her jaw, sealing her mouth shut. She felt it was the only way she could keep from not just shouting at Ata but probably tackling her and throwing her from the battlements in the bargain. The worst of it was that, as Esfir knew, Atalansa detested anyone from the climbing class, whether they be masons, smiths, haberdashers, or pure virgater peasants. She had always been scornful of people who, as Esfir had once heard her put it, had to befoul their fingers for a living. She even liked to complain about the word 'climber,' insinuating as it did that the lowly had the power to move upward in the world.

That doesn't keep her from making doe's eyes at Thomas every chance she gets, Esfir thought. She ground her teeth and looked away.

Irdmore had nothing more to tell of the orb he had seen. It had simply sat there on a kind of small table or altar, looking ominous with its heart of flame. This last detail most interested Esfir, who remembered the same spark in the fragment of duskglass on Fordenheim's desk. Had that spark been gold, or had it been the deep orange of dej's last fire? She could not remember.

The rest of Irdmore's adventures in Talla involved large quantities of palesweep ale and a rather-disreputable lodging house named the Swirling Skirt. It was clear from the reactions of the others, even Atalansa, that his storytelling was easing the dej's hard labor, but Esfir barely listened. She was thinking about the duskglass, and was quite sure she would be doing so every dej until the small mystery it presented had been solved.

But the long dej led to leaden sleep, and baring seemed to gain speed as true winter felt its way across the mountains. Each morning in the yard with Captain Victrus was painful, and each afterbell in the skoldyr's tower was interesting, but none gave her an opportunity to learn more about the strange trinket on the scales.

And so Esfir forgot about it all until the tinkers came.