

A Small Task
by Kathryn Jones

She cracked open the door and squinted into the dim chapel. Despite many of the candles being lit, it was still hard to see inside. The impending rain darkened the backs of the stained glass windows. It wouldn't be long before streamers of rain would course down the colored glass and make it hard to think. She could never think on rainy days. She much preferred to sit and watch the rain fall and let her mind drift with the winds. With a little more strength, she opened the door wider and slipped inside. She had a little bit of time, so she took a moment to find the best spot.

In front of the altar, she stopped a moment to bow and cross herself reverently. "Saint-Pere et Mere benie, me proteger en ce la je suis pret a faire." She stretched and stood on her tip toes to kiss the stone hem of the Virgin Mary's robes as that was all she could reach. Until this moment, she had been calm. But after her prayer for safe keeping to God and the Holy Mother, a chill ran through her. Protestantism wouldn't be enough today. "Paragons, I do your work, keep me safe". She scurried to the other end of the chapel and lifted the heavy cloth that covered the table where the bible rested. Once pressed beneath the table, the cloth fell down behind her and plunged her into darkness.

She squirmed and shifted a fair while before getting reasonably comfortable beneath the table. There wasn't much room for her and her hoops; it made her wish for just a moment that she was back home in France, in her far less restrictive clothing. But for now, she crammed herself into the tiny space no normal human being could fit in and waited though she knew it wouldn't be a long wait.

As she waited, a tickle came to her nose and with no warning, forced her to sneeze violently. She sniffled quickly and used her muckinger to wipe her eyes and rub her nose. Better now than later, she thought to herself as she exhaled.

No sooner had she let out her breath, than the door to the chapel opened. She could not see the light that she was sure was spilling in around the entering figure. The entering lady's shoes clicked slightly as she walked in and closed the door behind herself. She walks around the chapel for a bit, examining things. The woman's clacking footsteps and swishing skirts stopped. The girl beneath the table could hear a wooden thud then something jingling as Lady Katherine Tso picked up the collection box and shook the coins into her hand. "Some is good, more is better." She set the coins into a pouch on her belt and turned to face the opening door.

Another woman entered, dressed all in crimson, and bowed to Lady Tso. "My Lady."

Lady Tso stalked forward and the hidden girl flinched at the sound of flesh striking flesh. "I do not like to be kept waiting!"

"My apologies, My Lady." The girl held her cheek, which was now as red as her household livery.

"Well, speak! What have you?!"

The girl flinched, fearing she would be struck again if she did not tell Lady Tso everything instantly. "The queen's progress is being prepared - Bristol is on the route." Lady Tso sighed, not surprised, but not happy in the least. The servant continued, "The queen plans to take her household, including her fooles - Jane and the dwarf - her privie council - all of them - the papists - as many of them as she can tolerate- the maids of honor-"

"Enough! Am I on that list someplace or not?!"

"Aye, My Lady." The girl nodded a bit. "Some three hundred people or more."

"Very well. I shall deal with that when the time comes. Now, what of the paragons? Does the queen speak of them?"

"Nay, My Lady..."

Lady Tso scowled in displeasure, she needed to know what their plans were. She was sure she had sensed the paragons - or at least one of them - in the palace recently. "What of letters, does she receive any letters from them?"

"Not so far as I am aware."

Lady Tso scowled once more. "Very well. I am done with you for this instant. But keep your senses aware. Should you learn anything more..." She took a small silver ring with a tiny black stone from a pouch on her belt and gave it to the girl, "...rub the stone and I shall know immediately and we shall meet here." The girl took the ring, admiring it. "Now go, serve me, but do not betray me - remember what happened to your cousin." The girl slipped the ring on her right index finger and turned to go as she tried not to think of her cousin who had become a draco disciple after Lady Tso's coercion and then destroyed when Lady Tso thought she had been betrayed.

"My Lady..." The girl bowed and left, gently closing the door behind herself.

Lady Tso paced for a bit, extremely unhappy to be forced to pack up and follow along this stupid little trip. Though at least it would become a bit easier to slip away from court from time to time to try to find out what the paragons were planning. She sighed once more, "Well, if I must wait until the return to Bristol then I must. I shall bring the paragons to me and..." She licked her fingers and extinguished the four votive candles closest to her. "Hmm..." She grinned and laughed a little at the hissing sound they made. She licked her fingers again and extinguished two more candles, "Mayhap Thoren and Talia whilst I have the opportunity..." The thought made the grin spread across her face. "And mayhap all the little gypsy vermin whilst the moment is right!" She took a breath and blew out all the candles directly in front of her. Lady Tso laughed then turned on her heels and left the chapel.

The girl beneath the table waited for a few moments before finally slipping out from under the cloth. Her legs were stiff, having gotten cramped. She stretched her neck, which she had had to bed at an odd angle. After a moment, she staggered over to the collection box, despite her protesting legs, and dug through the coin purse she kept around her wrist today. She pulled out what she hoped was the right amount and replaced what Lady Tso took. The girl also relit the candles, feeling a bit superstitious - if those candles were to represent people, it was best that they stay lit. She stretched once more and stepped into the hallway; she needed to contact the paragons and let them know what she had heard. But how was the problem; she knew writing letters was not exactly the safest method, anyone could read them if they got their hands on them. She bounced along the corridor, lost in thought.

"Thomasina!" The girl froze at the sound of her name. She slowly turned around only to see no one in the halls; she blinked and looked both ways, confused. "Thomasina! Here, Dwarf, over here!"

Thomasina's face fell then set in irritation with her jaw clenched. "I am not a dog to be called!" She stalked over to the large torch on the wall that was talking to her and glowered at it. "How well would you like it should I have said, 'Here, Paragon. Here, cranky paragon. Who is a good, crabby paragon?' Hmm?" She pursed her lips, acting like she was calling a dog.

Ignis' temper flared and the torch burned brighter, a more angry orange. "Enough!" Thomasina smirked inside. "What have you?"

"A stiff leg and sore neck. What have you?"

The paragon growled, "Enough, Creature!" The torch's flame expanded for a moment. "What be the dark woman's intent?"

Most people would have backed away, Thomasina simply stared at the flame, unfazed. "She seeks to destroy you all." Her tone was bored and uncaring as if she were saying this for the 100th time. Ignis growled, getting angrier with Thomasina. Thomasina, however, simply sighed and repeated the whole conversation she had overheard.

"Who was she speaking to?"

"I know not, I was under a table."

"What did Tso give her?"

"I know not, I was beneath a table."

"Could you see anything?"

"Not e'en mine own hand 'afore my face."

"And the stone?"

"I am seeking a way to obtain it. It will take some time."

Ignis' frustration sounded more like the flame was hissing at her. "What use be you?!"

"Ample, otherwise your brother would not have asked of me to do this."

Ignis hissed again between his teeth in irritation. He did not like the idea of having Thomasina be their in court spy to watch Lady Tso's movements. He had trusted enough women and had that backfire. But for now, he knew he had no choice. "I shall tell the others of what you have heard; they shall be grateful for it. For now, continue as you were and alert us as soon as you have learned more." The flame flickered with the rhythm of Ignis' speaking. "Continue then."

Thomasina nodded. "I will see thee upon my arrival in Bristol."

The flames suddenly shrunk and she knew Ignis was gone. Thomasina moved to return to the queen's rooms, but stopped at an archway that lead outside so that she could watch the now falling rain. She carefully pulled herself onto a small bench within the covered walkway and settled in to watch the rain. Though there was far more of it here, the rain reminded her of home. There was more water at home - the entire English Channel - but it did not rain as often at home as it did here.

"Thomasina," the gentle yet excited voice came from almost directly above her. She looked up into the slowly lightening clouds as Aria's face appeared.

Thomasina's eyes widened in shock as she leaned back on the bench a bit, "Good Heavens!"

Aria giggled. "Close, but not entirely correct."

"Are you all going to start talking to me constantly now?"

"Nay." Aria giggled a little again. "Ignis told me you shall be coming to Bristol."

"Oui. The queen's progress shall be arriving some time in July - early July. Mayhap around the tenth. Unless Her Majesty does decide to stay with a noble longer or mayhap unexpectedly go to an entirely different noble's home altogether as she has been known to do 'afore. I would say me we shall arrive on the tenth of July though her privie councilors are saying the third and vowing to keep her on track, but they shall need much help with such."

"Then I shall look forward to seeing you upon the tenth day of July."

Thomasina simply nodded, "Until then." Thomasina watched as the clouds' shape changed to the shape of a bird and drifted away with the blowing wind. She smiled to herself as she closed her eyes and simply listened to the rain as it fell from branches, leaves, even the edge of the overhang above her that kept her dry. They each made their own, unique sound and Thomasina tried to drink in all of them.

After a while, a familiar, unwanted footstep echoed from behind Thomasina. The dwarf spun around and looked up at the tall, half Cathaian woman who towered over herself. She was gorgeous and no one could contest that. Her hair was elegantly braided with two decorative chopsticks seeming to keep it all in place. The red and black dress she wore seemed to suit her completion perfectly - along with her personality. The dress was beautiful like the owner, but probably concealed some dangerous weapons, though Thomasina was convinced that Lady Tso was dangerous without a weapon.

Lady Tso looked down at Thomasina for a moment before smiling. The dwarf often made her smile or laugh at some of her unexpected antics, but there was something about the girl that told her to be wary. She didn't understand dwarves; they were somewhat misshapen creatures, but despite this one's deformity, she was happy - frequently. Why? This one also seemed to affect her powers a bit. Lady Tso knew that dwarves had a connection to the mystical and magical, but this one's was different. She couldn't sense when she was around most of the time and when she did, it was incredibly strong - almost too strong to be her. It was as if she were a paragon somehow, which Lady Tso didn't understand. Yet she had sensed a paragon and traced it out here - to the dwarf. "Mistress Thomasina."

"Lady Tso." Thomasina watched as Lady Tso gave her a curt reverence. Though she was of lower rank than Lady Tso, being queen's favorite had its perks - like having Lady Tso bow to her even if it was an insincere gesture - it was still humbling for a moment. "Come to watch the rain...?" She looked from the tall woman to the tapering rain. "I am saddened to say that you have missed the best part of it... It was quite a down pour earlier."

"Ah... No... I was simply looking for my servant. I sent her off some time ago to fetch me something, but she has not yet returned."

"My apologies for not having seen her, but should I, I shall alert her to your search of her."

"I thank you." Thomasina nodded as Lady Tso glanced around, searching for some sign of the paragons she was sure she had sensed. "Well, then..." She tried to contain how awkward she felt looking down into the dwarf's large, honest, innocent-looking eyes. "I shall continue my search..."

Thomasina nodded, purposefully keeping her eyes open a little more to maintain that innocent look as she sensed Lady Tso's awkward feeling. "Bon chance." She waved as Lady Tso retreated to the dry inside. Thomasina watched her go thinking that it was a shame that her inside did not match the beauty of her outside, though if her outside reflected the beauty of her inside, she would be far more deformed than Thomasina; she then thought of how if perhaps Lady Tso had an ugly outside, her inside may not be so ugly. And then her head started spinning as she'd talked herself in circles. Thomasina shook her head to clear her mind and caught sight of a puddle. She walked over and looked at the reflection. It was not a beautiful face that greeted her, but she did not mind as she knew there was a good soul behind it.

As she continued to stare into the puddle, she remembered how nearly a month ago she had been standing in a garden of Whitehall Palace, looking down at a similar puddle.

She wanted to see what the clouds looked like without getting wet, so she leaned over a ways to see the reflection. The water rippled as if a raindrop hit it, but instead of it settling down, the water seemed to quiver until it formed a face of a young woman.

"Thomasina." The watery woman smiled slightly, but Thomasina retreated from the puddle in fear, confused by what was happening. "Thomasina." The voice was calm and soothing and reminded Thomasina of a gently babbling brook. The dwarf backed away further as the face

raised and formed a body from the puddle.

Thomasina stared incredulously at the shape, starting to recognize it. "Nais...?"

"At least you recognize me." The watery shape finished forming and there stood the water paragon, about Thomasina's height as the puddle wasn't terribly large, made entirely of water.

"Thomasina, we are in need of assistance."

"From me? Wherefore?"

"We have sensed within you a different kind of power." A green figure took form next to Nais. His deeper voice rustled with the leaves that formed him. "We must needs ask a great boon of you though we know it shall not be an easy task."

"A boon of me? What could the paragons want with me...?"

"We are in need of someone to keep an eye on Lady Tso and inform us of her every movement. Would you do this for us?"

"Were I to watch her every movement, she would become quite suspicious of me." The paragons smiled at each other at what sounded like Thomasina's consent. "But would not one of the guardians be better suited for this task? What of Skylana or Ryder or even Illyria or Nanus? They have been trained."

"But not in the ways of court and its intrigue." Terranus gently pointed out to her. "And they would ne'er be allowed into court."

Nais cut in, "Not to mention she now knows their faces given that they are now guardians of the egg."

Thomasina sighed, realizing the water paragon was right. She let out a few words that only sailors should utter as she realized she was the best choice. Terranus raised an eyebrow at the words. Thomasina rolled her eyes at him. "As if you have not uttered such words e'er."

"Ne'er." Terranus vowed.

Thomasina's eyes narrowed, seeing his lie instantly. "I do believe the Lord of Light did claim lying to be a sin."

Terranus swallowed slightly, never having had a human catch him in a lie before. Nais grinned, "Wonderous! This is why we do wish to have you with us! With you, we stand a chance of -"

"Are there any things in specific I should be looking for?" Thomasina only felt slightly remorseful at cutting off the water paragon, but the sooner they were done talking, the sooner she could start and then the sooner she would be done.

"Secret, separate meetings with anyone," Terranus began listing things off, "letters passed -"

"Anything unusual, what you have listed so far is obvious." The dwarf was starting to get a little annoyed. The paragons exchanged a glance that said 'As impatient as Ignis' and they smiled at each other a little. "Very well, I will keep watch for you, but you shall do me something in turn."

The paragons blinked in surprise that the dwarf would make demands. "Should anything happen to me, you will watch o'er my queen and you will provide for my parents back in France."

Nais bit her cheek to keep herself from chuckling at how much Thomasina's stubbornness reminded her of Terranus. "We shall do what we can."

"No! You WILL do this."

The paragons nodded after a moment, needing the girl on their side. "So be it."

Thomasina relaxed. "Now, be there anything of the unordinary for which I should watch? Anything which you would mayhap wish to obtain from her?"

Nais and Terranus exchanged glances, wondering how she knew. "Aye, indeed. There be the gemstone of souls in which she has captured the spirit of the dragon Bloodtharken."

Thomasina nodded, having heard of a few of the past summer's events. "The stone is a large dark

crystal, large enough to fit in one hand, mayhap both of yours..." Terranus cut himself off, realizing Thomasina wasn't listening any further. "Mistress...?"

"Dark...? And large enough to fit in both of my hands...?"

"Aye..." He looked at Nais, wondering where Thomasina was going with her questions.

"Upon returning to London, she did gift the queen with a large, dark jewel made of glass and perfectly smooth. Lady Marjorie nearly stopped breathing. It is far too large to set in anything, but it was shiny, that was all that mattered to Lady Marjorie."

"She gifted it to the queen...?!" The paragons' heads looked ready to explode in shock.

Thomasina nodded as she still stared off into space. "The queen did give it me to hold as I sat in her lap... I looked at it and could have sworn I saw a face within."

"Where is it now?!" Nais' watery form hurried forward to redirect Thomasina's attention.

"Locked away with the many other jewels."

The paragons turned to each other. "She must have given it to the queen to keep it safe..."

"...And keep it out of our hands."

"There be no better - stronger, safer, more protected hands than that of the queen's hands..."

"You must fetch it for us."

"Are you mad?! I shall ne'er go near that thing!"

"Wherefore not?" Nais watched the panic rising in the girl much the same way she had seen storms rise up unexpectedly.

"I would rather not touch that thing again now that I do know what it is! I might get mine own soul trapped within it! I have things I need to do! My soul is a bit busy right now! It has not the time to rest within a stone for some unknown length of time! And I should truly rather not reside within it whilst there is an enraged dragon residing in it at the same time!"

"One has to will your soul into the stone whilst they hold it." Terranus tried to calm the building storm.

"So Lady Tso does find me with it and traps me within! Wonderous!"

"Then I shall tend to your family as we agreed upon." Nais' voice suddenly that of a strong captain who knew exactly how to calm her panicking crew.

Thomasina stopped mid-step and turned to look the watery Nais in the face. "You do swear it...?"

"Your father has been on the water so often, how could I not?"

The dwarf panted, calming quickly, but still looking like a wild horse calming after a long run.

"You will watch over me as I do you work...?"

The paragons nodded, "We shall do for you if you do for us." Thomasina eyed Terranus, not liking him for having lied to her.

"Thomasina!" A woman's voice reverberated through the halls. "Thomasina, Dearest, 'tis time for supper..." The voice drew closer as the woman searched for Thomasina.

"Oooh!" Instantly, Thomasina abandoned her conversation. Her head spun to face the hallway and her body quickly followed. "I hope there is pudding...!" With that, she trotted inside and left the miniature paragons struggling not to laugh.

"Aria!" The leafy Terranus shook and rustled in laughter as he disassembled and the watery Nais returned to her original puddle form with a rippling laugh.

Now, barely a month later, she was no closer to obtaining the stone of souls. But with the preparations for progress beginning, she just might get her opportunity. As the light of the day faded, Thomasina turned to go to supper. "I hope there is pudding..."

The paragons sat in the camp of the band of the twisted claw with Thoren and Talia. They struggled to plot their next move.

"We need that stone." Thoren growled.

"And we shall get it," Talia soothed. "What else can we do but wait?"

"Wait until the egg hatches, wait until the stone comes to us, wait for our doom!" Thoren growled again, his breath issuing from him in an angry cloud of heat despite how close he sat to the fire. It was unusually cold for this time of year.

The stars were shining brightly and the half moon was high. Raven had just left for his egg watch and the small group expected Adria back from her watch at any moment. The rest of the meager camp had drifted to their beds after one of Talia's stories.

A cracking branch and a jingle announced Adria's arrival. Thoren spun to meet her.

"Anything...?!"

Adria shook her head, the small bits of metal jingling and ringing as she did so. "All she says is soon."

The whole group sighed, but did not say a word. There was no point in trying to rush a dragon. For weeks, the band felt like they were getting no where. Yet for some reason, Aria hummed to herself joyfully tonight. Ignis glared at her a little; he didn't understand why she was so cheerful and despite his thick cloak, his human form could feel the cold and he didn't like that either. Aria stopped humming suddenly and looked up from her most recent invention. "The winds just changed...!"

The rest of the camp looked around, instantly on edge.

A mix of a yell and a scream filled the air. The whole group was on their feet immediately, bounding for the source of the sound. Aria arrived on the wind first to see Gaia in her bed clutching her blankets, panting as she tried to calm herself from what she'd just seen. Adria arrived next and quickly took her cloak from her shoulders and wrapped it around Gaia so she wouldn't look so indecent as the others arrived.

"What is it, Gaia?" Thoren huffed, his voice had a little bit of its usual growl still there. "Did you see something?"

"Aye, Master Thoren, I did." She held Adria's cloak close around her. "I saw... the woman-child... killed... by a tall man in white and black..." Gaia breathed a bit more evenly now, but she shuddered slightly as the image from her dream reappeared in her mind.

"It will be alright, Love," Adria cooed gently to soothe the shaking Gaia.

"Fetch Vashta, Gaia needs a tonic." Talia sent Thoren off, having sensed Gaia's feeling awkward at so many men staring at her.

"I am here," Vashta announced herself a short moment later, having woken at Gaia's cry just as most of the camp did. Vashta sensed she would be needed and grabbed her bag. She nearly ran into Thoren when he came to get her. "Vashta is here, Gaia." Aria surrendered her spot to the potion woman. Gaia took the tonic and the paragons and Thoren returned to the camp fire. Other gypsies drifted over, curious as to what was going on.

"Gaia has foreseen a death," Thoren told the assembling clan members. "Whose, when, and how, we do not know..." He opened his mouth to say more, but there was nothing more to say.

The paragons sat at a pair of tables - Nais and Terranus at one table and Aria and Ignis at another. They faced each other, but still refused to sit together. "What is a woman-child...?" Ignis looked at Aria. His thick accent tended to get a little thicker when he was worried. Aria shrugged.

Terranus repeated the words over and over in his mind, knowing he had heard the phrase before,

but he could not figure out where he had heard it.

Nais struggled to think of what man in white and black would harm someone. That answer came all too quickly. All summer, the sheriff and his men had stalked around and terrorized the citizens of Bristol. While he had been beaten by Robin Hood, he was still in power as the queen had not yet appointed a new sheriff. He was not the kindest of men, but he did not beat people up in the streets any more. "It is Barnabus...! Barnabus Blye is going to kill someone!"

The paragons looked up at her. "But who?" Aria countered. Nais shook her head, not knowing. "When we can riddle out what a woman-child is, we will know I think me." Terranus sighed, still unable to determine why the phrase was so familiar.

Vashta and Adria wandered over after a while. "She sleeps now." Vashta told Thoren.

"Good. The rest of us should try to do the same now." He stood after emptying the remains of his pipe. He bid the paragons good night and went off to bed. Though he knew he probably would be unable to sleep, he knew that he needed to try.

The next morning, Gaia dressed and made her way to the fire burning in the middle of the camp. It was foggy, which made the fire seem larger as its light was cast further while it reflected on the low, wispy clouds. Vashta and Talia hurried forward to help Gaia. "Nay, I shall walk on mine own two feet." Gaia insisted, but Talia and Vashta stayed close all the same. Canis gave up his seat for her and Gaia gratefully took it. Canis left to take his turn at egg watch.

"What did you see, Gaia?" Thoren wanted to be gentle, but if there was a preventable death coming, he wanted to know all they could.

Gaia closed her eyes and summoned the dream forward from her memory. "A woman-child with hair of gold... A tall, strong man in white and black driven by darkness... They argue... They fight... She fights valiantly, biting and scratching... He draws a knife and stabs her... She falls and bleeds... She speaks, but I cannot understand her words..." Gaia held the spot on herself where her neck met her body, holding the hollow carefully. She opened her eyes and looked at her hand as if she could see the blood all over it.

"The paragons have said the man is Blye." Talia notified those who had not heard.

"But what is a woman-child...?" Thoren countered.

Most of the clan just stared at the fire or the ground. The paragons had gone to search for an answer. The clan present all did their best to figure it out.

Gaia closed her eyes, trying to remember more of her vision. Adria played with some of the trinkets on her clothes as she thought. Isabella twisted a tassel of her head scarf around a finger. Lilith picked at something on her clothes as she thought over the two words.

Woman-child. Who is someone who is a woman and yet a child...? Someone who was a woman yet still behaved like a child...? Someone who was a child but behaved like a grown up...? The sheriff had nearly killed Lilith a few times, but she was always able to get out of it. But what about a woman the size of a child...?! "A DWARF!!" Lilith exploded, suddenly breaking the silence. "A dwarf is a woman - or a man - the size of a child!"

The band all turned and looked at the girl. It took a few moments, but finally dawned on them, making them realize she was right.

"Tso had Blye wrapped around her little finger. She could get him to do whate'er she wants..." Adria murmured.

"The paragons said the queen and her court are due to arrive here in early July." Thoren stated.

"We will set up guards to watch Mistress Thomasina as soon as she enters the gates of the town."

"Mistress Thomasina...?" Raven walked up, returning from his watch, Canis on duty now.

"What of Mistress Thomasina...?" He sat beside Isabella and smiled at her slightly before

looking up at Thoren.

"Gaia had a vision night past... of Blye killing her..."

"You truly think he would be so foolish as to kill the queen's dwarf...?" Talia asked, trying to keep her mind open to all possibilities.

"Know you of any other dwarves?" Thoren countered. Talia shook her head. "We have nigh on over nine months to plan for Mistress Thomasina's protection." Talia let her brother finish before standing to tell the paragons that Lilith had solved the riddle.

Gaia sat huddled in her cloak, trying to pull the faces in the vision forward, something still did not feel right.

Elizabeth sat at the review stand, watching the next jousters line up and run at each other. They connected with a thud as the lance of one knight exploded. The crowd cheered as the knight who had been struck did not fall from his horse, but won as he had not broken his lance. Sir Robert won against Sir Francis with a score of three lances to one. The field was cleared and Elizabeth glanced over at the dwarf who squirmed in her seat to get a better look at the two new knights on the field.

Thomasina watched as the blue and silver Sir William took his position on the left side of the field and the black and white Sir Thomas took his position on the right side of the field. Simply put, Thomasina did not like Sir Thomas as a person. He was mean, ill tempered, and went through women faster than Thomasina went through jokes. She hated that they even had the same name. But she had to admit that he was a fantastic rider. He was always able to stay on his horse and rarely broke a lance. He won his match with ease, though he came in second at the end of the day.

Sir Thomas fumed at coming in second. He should have won. He never fell off his horse, he broke fewer lances than most, and he rode the best. He would never admit that Sir Dominic's ability to unhorse more competitors meant he deserved to win. He took care of his horse and huffed and puffed in anger all the way to the tavern.

Thomas got himself a pint and nursed his misery with it. He hadn't been sitting there long when a buxom young woman carefully sat across from him at his table.

"You look upset, Sir Thomas..." Her voice was higher than he expected.

He raised an eyebrow, "You know who I am...?"

"Of course." The woman motioned to his clothes from the joust that he was too upset to change out of. "Black for the rage in your heart," she indicated the all black color save for the line of white diamonds that ran down the length of his left side. "And white for the innocent lives you have shattered."

Sir Thomas's eyebrow raised even further. No one knew what the colors on his tabard stood for and yet somehow this woman in black and red guessed perfectly. "And you are...?"

"I am simply called Ruby."

Thomas nodded, noting that her lips were a deep ruby color. "And what would you need of me, Mistress Ruby?"

"I would have nothing of you." Thomas's ego took a bit of a blow. "But my lady would have speech with you." With that, she stood and headed for the door, not bothering to check if Thomas was following her.

Sir Thomas downed the rest of his drink as fast as he could and hurried after Ruby despite how much his head was a bit fuzzy now. He followed her into an alley where a tall figure waited in shadows to talk to him.

* * *

For days, Thomasina watched for an opportunity to grab the crystal. Fortunately for her, Lady Marjorie was a bit airheaded often. And she trusted Thomasina who walked into the jewelry room as Thomasina called it, while Lady Marjorie was taking stock of what pieces were in good condition to travel, and which ones needed attention. The two women smiled at each other and Thomasina sat down to begin playing with one of her dolls. Lady Marjorie smiled at her. She knew Thomasina hadn't had any dolls to play with in Calais, so she didn't say anything about it. As she played, Thomasina waited for a glimpse of the gemstone of souls. It felt like she sat there forever, but finally she saw the pointed bottom as it sat upside down in a box, mostly covered by strands of pearls and a few loose gems. Thomasina waited still, needing only a moment - the right moment. And then it came. Lady Marjorie turned to hand a servant a chest of jewels that needed repair; both had their backs to Thomasina whose little hand suddenly reached out and plunged into the box beside her and extracted the large, dark gem. She turned the doll upside down and let the jewel rest in the doll's large skirts then pinched them closed. Thomasina stood after a few moments and bounced out of the room after playfully kissing the back of Lady Marjorie's hand.

Thomasina hurried through the halls, wishing desperately that one of the paragons would contact her as she had no idea how to contact them. She didn't notice that she nearly ran right over Sir Thomas who was admiring a new silver ring with a black jewel that he wore on his right index finger.

* * *

Talis Riverwind gaped at what he was hearing. "But my Lord Ignis...! I am not a noble! What can I do...?"

"You will watch o'er the dwarf. You have befriended her. She will not notice you are keeping watch."

"Not notice...? I am not to tell her...?"

"Nay. There was... Enlisting her assistance was complicated. Should she be told we wish to remove the situation from her, I fear it will end poorly. And if she is to get us the stone, we must needs ensure she is safe.

Talis sighed. He did not dare go against the fire paragon, but he felt awkward spying on his friend. "Just until the progress leaves London...?"

"Aye. Then other guardians will keep watch o'er her on the way to Bristol where she shall not have a choice but to be guarded."

Talis reluctantly nodded. "As the paragons wish it." With that, the candle he was speaking to extinguished itself. He packed up a small bag and slung it on his shoulder then made his way to the palace, having a meeting scheduled before the fire paragon appeared to him.

When he reached the palace, a woman in the queen's household crimson met him at the front gate. "Master Riverwind?"

"Aye...?"

"Mistress Thomasina waits. Follow me." She nodded to the guards who let them in. She motioned for him to walk with her.

"Gramercy." He pulled his bag close and followed the young woman. He noticed a silver ring with a black stone on her right index finger. " 'Tis a pretty ring you wear."

"Gramercy. 'Tis my newest prized possession." The girl smiled kindly as they entered a garden where Thomasina sat on a bench, waiting.

On seeing Talis, she slipped off the bench and waddled over to him. "Talis..."

"Mistress Thomasina." He bowed. "You are well?"

Her whole face suddenly brightened. "Far better than I could have expected."

"Oh...?" Talis noticed a happy gleam in her eyes. "May I inquire as to the cause of such...?"

"Walk with me and I shall tell you." She turned and started down a path into the gardens despite the chill in the air. The household girl followed closely. " 'Tis a nice day." Talis glanced at the grey sky and the low clouds. "Do these STONES not shine well from the fog?" She motioned to the red path they walked over. The stones shimmered a little from the morning's earlier rain. Talis looked over at the queen's dwarf, starting to think she was losing her mind. "It does make me feel as though my SOUL could fly, rather than be bound to the earth. But there are other things we should discuss other than FREED SOULS and shinning STONES."

Talis just looked at her, wondering why she was speaking so strangely. "Are you well, Mistress?"

"Quite well."

Talis eyed her, starting to wonder if she wasn't delusional from a fever of some sort. "What shall we speak on then...?"

"I have tried to choose a topic, yet you seem unable to follow it." Thomasina eyed him, a bit disappointed that her friend did not listen fully.

"Forgive me, Mistress, the twins did give my wife and I a late night last evening."

" 'Tis understandable and forgivable."

They walked along in silence for a bit. Talis mulled over Thomasina's earlier words, wondering why she kept emphasizing the words 'soul' and 'stone'. His eyes widened and he turned to look at her. She just blinked very slowly and smiled but said nothing more. Talis could not believe the good luck that Thomasina had somehow obtained the stone. They walked together a little longer, speaking little.

"I should let you return to your wife and children. Do thank them for me for letting me borrow you for a time."

"Of course, Mistress." He bowed and turned, strolling out of the gates, walking out with more of a bounce in his step than when he arrived.

Thomasina turned to the girl who had been following the whole time. "Come, Elizabeth, let us go see Elizabeth, Elizabeth, and Katherine." Thomasina turned to go see the queen.

Elizabeth the servant, however, turned and hurried off as soon as she was able. She rubbed the ring on her finger and hurried for the chapel.

Lady Tso was already there. "Well...?"

"Talis Riverwind came to visit this morn." Elizabeth recounted the interaction and the minimal dialogue.

Tso listened patiently, but did not like what she heard. The dwarf was speaking in code she was sure, but what exactly about, she did not know.

"She did frequently emphasize the words 'soul' and 'stone'."

Tso's eyes bored into the girl. She spun around quickly and went to find Lady Marjorie. When she did, she smiled sweetly at her. "I have a gift for you, Lady Marjorie."

The baroness looked up quickly. "For me...?"

"Indeed." She held out a small lacquered box, which Lady Marjorie took carefully and opened. Inside was a silver ring with a black stone. "My Dear, it is lovely, you should not have done such. My husband does give me plenty of shinnies."

"I wanted to. You were so kind to me when you hosted us all at your home in Bristol. I wished to express my thanks. Now put it on so that I might ensure it fits. If not, I shall have to have it

resized."

Lady Marjorie gleefully took it from the box and slid it onto her right index finger where it seemed to rest perfectly. She swayed for a moment and looked ready to collapse; her eyes suddenly looked empty. Lady Tso snapped her fingers sharply in front of Barroness Norris' face. "Lady Norris, take me to see the queen's jewels." Lady Norris stood and walked down the hall, up the stairs, and down another hall before arriving. The guards let both women in without question and Lady Norris stood to the side so that Lady Tso could see everything. "Show me where you do keep the glass gem I gifted to the queen." Lady Marjorie walked over to a decorated black box, opened it and stepped aside. Lady Tso stepped forward and rooted around for the gemstone of souls. She roared in fury when she couldn't find it and turned on Lady Norris. "You are SURE it is in this box?"

"I did set it in the box myself. It was there yesterday afternoon when I did last come in here."

"Who else mayest to access the jewels? Who was with you yesterden?"

"Mistresses Catherine and Alice of the queen's household. Thomasina came in for a bit and chatted and played."

"Mistress Thomasina...?" Lady Tso's painted eyebrow arched high. She sneered, starting to piece things together. Somehow the nasty little creature stole her gemstone, but why was the next question. What was she planning to do with it? Was she dumb enough to think it was just glass as Lady Tso had told the queen and Thomasina now thought she could play with it? Or did she know what it truly was and had plans of some sort for it...? No matter what, she needed it back. "Follow me out." The pair of ladies left and Lady Norris had the guards lock the room. Down the hall, Lady Tso took the ring from Lady Marjorie's finger. "You will remember none of what did just occur," Lady Tso commanded of Lady Marjorie while the ring's magic still worked. She left the baroness standing in the hallway, wondering how she got there.

* * *

Sir Thomas strode the halls towards the gardens. It did not take long to locate his target. Everyone knew Mistress Thomasina went to the gardens when the queen was meeting with her privie council. And from the yelling he had just heard inside, he knew the dwarf would be outside for some time yet. She sat on a bench, gently running her hand over a bush next to her, admiring the changing colors around her. Sir Thomas slid onto the bench beside her. Thomasina heard him and looked over. Her contented look turned to one of repulsion, her lip curled up slightly as her eyes narrowed.

The knight turned and presented the girl with a small bouquet of bright yellow chrysanthemums.

"I know you do like flowers."

The dwarf looked at the flowers that in French culture symbolized death. She stood to leave.

"Next time you choose a woman to whom you wish to give flowers, do ensure the flowers do not say you wish her dead." She took the mums and shoved them in his face, up his nose the best she could and then stormed further into the garden.

Thomas spluttered and tried to pull the petals out of his nose the best he could as he ran after her.

"Mistress Thomasina!" He ran into the hedge maze, searching for her. "I will search for you as the hunter searched for Diana. That is what you are to me – the glorious Diana."

Thomasina hid in the maze, nearly repulsed at how forward and unexpected his advances were.

"Next time you choose a metaphor, do take mind to choose one that has not been used on the queen – frequently. You shall sound more original and she will feel more special and will likely appreciate you more for it."

He did his best to follow her voice to find her, “Very well, you are Mercury! Trickster and guide as you lead me through this maze.”

“Now I am suddenly a man...?!” She ducked through a low opening in the hedges, still trying to get away.

“Only a man could have such power o’er me.”

“Were I a man, that would make you a heretic – you have been with too many women to be that kind of heretic.”

Thomas hurried through an archway. “Wherefore do you evade me?”

“Wherefore do you pursue me?”

“What reason be there but affection?”

Thomasina crashed through a hedge. “Wherefore would you have affection for me...?” She rounded a corner and slammed to a halt – there he was in front of her.

“You make me smile when no one else can. And I know there is more to you than just laughter. You have a family in France you miss. There is more to me than just fighting.”

“And the women.”

He sighed, “E’en good men are led astray by the temptations of the flesh. Elsewise they would not be called temptations.” Thomas stayed where he was, not wanting to scare her and make her run again. “But if you would have me do so, I swear off women until you are ready for me.” She glared up at him, hiding how stunned she was to hear this. Thomas had turned around to leave. He scuffed the ground once, his shoulders sagged as he barely watched where he was going. He looked defeated. Thomasina nearly pitied him; nearly.

She sat in the hedge maze for sometime, stunned and extremely doubtful of what just happened. No man had ever displayed affection of any kind for her. Now suddenly one of the vilest men in court was professing what he called love for none but her. It was too sudden, too out of the blue. Something was not right with the whole situation, Thomasina could sense it. She didn’t believe a word of what he said.

* * *

Sir Thomas rubbed the stone on his ring finger as he headed for a far corridor of the palace, knowing the stairs there were seldom used. He waited patiently in the middle of the flight of stairs and relaxed when he heard familiar footsteps ascending towards him. “Lady Katherine.” He bowed slightly.

She nodded slightly. “What have you for me...?”

“I have disarmed the dwarf a little, confused her. Just a little longer and I shall get her to tell me where she has hidden your treasure.” He grinned, proud of himself for having manipulated Thomasina so well he thought. He was sure he had her wrapped around his finger.

“You have not much time. As soon as I find my other prizes, I will need the stone. It must not be passed into the paragons’ hands.”

“Then I shall get it.” He smirked a bit as his eyes ran over her figure again.

“Later,” Lady Tso grinned.

* * *

Thomasina was still a bit dazed as she spoke with the leafy shape of Terranus who had finally appeared to her. “I have hidden it where none shall find it, but I should quite like to be rid of it soon. Send one of yourselves here as quickly as you are able.”

“We cannot come this instant, but we will be there within the week.”

“Absolutely no longer than that!”

“Very well.” With that, Terranus’ form fell apart and the leaves were scattered by the wind.

* * *

Sir Thomas eyed the black blade he had been handed. He ran his thumb over it, feeling the sharpness of the true edge.

“Careful,” warned Lady Tso’s charming voice. “The moment it tastes blood, it will begin to release its poison into your body.”

“What sort of poison?” He flicked the blade and listened to the sharp ping it made.

“A poison Ruby distilled from the blood of an enraged dragon. The creatures you might face are like gods. You need to be prepared.”

“God like...?” He looked over. He’d sent plenty of people to see God, but never faced anyone strong enough to be god like.

“Aye, with power o’er the elements.”

“And then shall I dispatch the woman on the throne...?”

“Nay, not yet. She has done me naught of offense and may yet prove useful.” Despite Thomas’ scowl at the restraint, Lady Tso had no qualm with the queen. Not yet anyways. She partly admired Elizabeth for being a woman in a man’s world and so far she seemed to be winning in sense over the men’s attempted domination of her. Lady Tso couldn’t help but to admire a woman like that. She smiled sweetly up at Thomas, “Now, go find me my stone and you shall have your reward in plenty.” She let her fingers run over his cheek for a moment then let his imagination run wild with promise. Sir Thomas grinned for a moment at the feeling of the soft skin against his cheek then nodded, leaving to search the kitchens for the stone.

He had already looked in the throne room, the halls immediately outside the throne room, and the stables. He had a few hundred rooms left to check. Today it would be the kitchens, the servants’ quarters, and the courtyards and perhaps a garden if there was still light left by then. Everywhere he went, he searched everything waist high or lower, knowing Thomasina could not reach any higher. Despite all his searching, Sir Thomas found nothing. He searched for three days and had only the queen’s rooms, a few very high ranking nobles’ rooms, and the chapel left to search. He had bribed his way or broken into the rest of the rooms; and he knew he would never get into the queen’s nor the high nobles’ rooms, so he headed for the chapel where the closest thing he found was a dead mouse.

* * *

Lady Tso was at her wits’ end. She NEEDED that stone back. She berated herself for having let go of it in the first place. She lashed out at Ruby for letting her give up the stone. Ruby simply stood and took Katherine’s entire tirade without a blink of an eye. Ruby had done her best to talk Lady Tso out of hiding the stone in the first place and remembered the whole conversation.

“The paragons will be after me to get the stone. But if I hide it, they shall not be able to get to it. Then, e’en should they find me, they shall still need me to retrieve it. I then have time to stall them until I have the scrolls. Have you any news in finding the scrolls?”

“Nay, My Lady.”

“Very well, then I shall gift the stone to the queen and retrieve it at any time.”

Ruby watched her childhood friend and companion pace and debate. She thought Katherine was starting to look as if she was going mad. “But what if someone should take it?”

“Who would take it? I shall simply tell them it is a gemstone made of glass. Wherefore would a courtier want a large chunk of glass?”

“Then wherefore would it be an acceptable gift for the queen were it a chunk of glass?”

Katherine ignored her minion and began to wrap the stone in silk. “It shall be locked away and

safe.”

“My Lady, you have said how badly you needed the dragon’s soul, now you are willing to relinquish it...?”

“Only until I find the scrolls. Once I have those, I shall retrieve my stone and go to the Dark Queen’s gate. For now, it poses more danger to have the stone until I find the scrolls.”

Ruby could see she was getting no where. “Aye, My Lady.”

“Now get back to finding those scrolls. I must needs have them.”

A month later, Ruby watched Tso’s tirade, knowing better than to say, ‘I told you so’. Instead, she put on her cloak. “I shall resume my search for the scrolls.” She revered Lady Tso and left.

* * *

Early in the morning, before much of court could wake, Thomasina got dressed with a household woman’s help and hurried to the throne room as she had done the rest of the week so far. She scurried past the servants who bowed to her as she passed them in the corridors. When she reached the throne room, she hurried inside before anyone saw her.

Before her sat the throne of England. She turned to face it and bowed lower than usual as if in apology for what she was about to do. Upon reaching the foot of the throne, she revered again before suddenly climbing onto the throne, onto the arm, and steadied herself with a tall, pillar candlestick as she leaned towards the drapes behind the throne. From there, she pulled herself onto the back of the throne and stretched up to the top of the curtains, which she still clung to for balance. Up in the corner of the curtains’ supports, a part of the stone wall jutted out, into the curtains. She shifted around the material and reached out. When she felt what she needed, she closed her hand around it and pulled the gemstone of souls from the little ledge she had discovered years ago when she came to court and needed to hide something. Thomasina steadied herself, lifted the brim of her hat, and slipped the stone onto the top of her head and ensured that it was well hidden by the hat. She then carefully lowered herself to the floor and hurried back out the door.

She ran as fast as she could, heading for the garden, which was bright with sunlight though it had not been for a while. Thomasina desperately searched the whole garden and quietly called out for a paragon – any paragon.

Someone arrived, though it was not a paragon. Sir Thomas followed her out, having seen her running through the halls. “Mistress Thomasina... Are you well? Wherefore are you up and about so early? In the gardens? And without an escort?”

The girl looked up at the knight, instantly wary. “One of the queen’s dogs was sleeping in her room and go out. I am attempting to find it. Pardon me.” She moved past him determinedly.

“Francois!” She called out.

“I shall assist you in your search.”

“I am quite well by myself, but I thank you for your kind offer.”

“But it is not right for a lady to go about unattended.” He flashed her a charming smile that made most women go weak in the knees. Thomasina just blinked and tried to cover her slightly nervous swallow. Sir Thomas was a handsome man, and Thomasina certainly did not mind

having someone as handsome as him paying attention to her. But she did not like who he was as a person more than what he looked like, even if he swore off all of the other women for her. Something told Thomasina that this wasn't right; and she knew better than to ignore that something.

"I am grateful for your offer, but I am never alone, for the Lord is always with me." She turned, trying to leave Thomas behind.

Thomas tried to scurry after her. "But what if someone should intend you harm? If you were to go about alone, there would be no man to protect you."

"I should have to trust my God to protect me." She could feel Thomas get extremely close. Her whole body tensed.

"But God has much to do, he cannot do everything at once." Thomas hardly minded being alone with Thomasina. Now he just needed to figure out how to get her to reveal where she hid the stone. He walked with her insistently.

The only person Thomasina feared potential harm from was the one next to her. No matter what she did, he would not go away, and he was getting quite close to stepping on her dress.

"If I did wish to give the queen a gift for New Year's, what would you suggest I give her? What are some of the things she has gotten in the past?"

"If? If you wish to keep your head on your shoulders, 'if' should not be said. She has received many things from the grand to the miniscule. Gloves, jewelry, coinage, such are the usual gifts. She distractedly searched for the lost dog that never ran away; she was desperate for him to go away.

"What if I do wish to be unusual?" Thomas turned, trying to steer her into a corner of the garden.

"She does like horses or archery, mayhap something like that." She noticed he had tried to change her path. She stopped and noticed how far from the palace she now was. If something happened, no one would be able to hear her call for help. "The little mutt could freeze for all I care!" She spun on her heels and turned to go back inside.

"But it mayest to get hungry. What of it then...?"

"If it wishes to have food, it does know where to find food. It shall then return." She had had enough of this dance and all kinds of bad feelings were screaming in her head. She had to get within earshot of someone else and quickly.

"What if it is injured?" He reached out to stop her, accidentally stepping firmly on the hem of her skirts, sending Thomasina lurching backwards and crashing into his legs, knocking him over. Her hat bounced off when she hit her head on his arm and sent the stone flying until it hit the grass with a soft thud. Both of them were still for a moment in shock before scrambling after the stone.

His trying to sit up launched her forwards a little and let her get to the stone before he did. She cradled it close in one hand and crawled forwards a bit until she was out of his reach. He grabbed her skirts and pulled her towards himself. Thomasina yelped in shock and tossed the stone lightly then turned and poked him in the eye.

It was Thomas' turn to yelp in shock as well as pain as his eye welled up with tears. He blinked a

few time before he could function, but by the time he could see well enough to move, he could also see that the dwarf was a few feet ahead of him, scooping up the stone and trying to get to her feet. Thomas wobbled on his feet and hurried towards the girl. By the time he got to her, she was on her feet, stone in hand and scrambling for the palace. He grabbed the first thing he could reach, which turned out to be her caul. The decorative pouch that held her hair fluttered to the ground as Thomas dropped it. He reached out again and this time caught hold of her hair and pulled.

The girl cried out in pain and stumbled backwards as she tried to stay on her feet. As retribution, she turned and kicked the knight in the shin as hard as she could, but the man didn't let go. Thomasina was grateful her hair was long enough that she could turn around. She grabbed hold of his arm with one hand and sunk her teeth into the wrist of the hand that held her hair. She kept her bite tight as he growled and attempted to shake her off. But she held fast even though a coppery taste began to fill her mouth.

The knight finally let go of the girl's hair. He cocked back a fist and punched her, leaving her cheekbone red and possibly cracked. He surveyed the damage done to his wrist and snarled at Thomasina.

She scrambled to her feet, the warning bells in her head ringing as loudly as they could. She turned and ran for the palace, the stone clutched tightly in one hand and her other hand was clamped over the side of her face. The whole left side of her face hurt and things looked a bit blurred. But Thomasina could hear heavy footsteps coming up behind her quickly. She screamed for help as she ran, but her cries fell on deaf stone.

Thomas ran up and grabbed her from behind and lifted her up. "Now be a good little freak and give me the stone." Thomasina flailed and writhed. Without meaning to, nor being sure how she did it, she hit Thomas in the side of the head with the stone. He growled and dropped her. The knight held his head for a brief moment before lunging at the dwarf. He grabbed her throat and began to squeeze as she lay on her back on the green grass. "Give it me and I shall let go."

Thomasina gagged as she tried to do her best to save her breath that was quickly running out. She looked up at the knight, blurry though he was. She was, however, able to see where exactly she was, so she wriggled a moment to change her position and with both legs kicked up with all the strength she could muster.

The knight's response was instantaneous. He let go and reeled backwards, unable to see straight from the pain inflicted. He collapsed to his knees and doubled over. Nothing would soothe the intense hurt.

Seeing that her kick had connected with its intended target, Thomasina rolled over and began to drag herself away though her face and breathing still hurt. She pulled herself away the best she could to where the gemstone of souls had been tossed to. After a moment of resting next to the stone, the girl got to her feet though the whole world spun suddenly. She clutched the stone to her stomach and fought to run for the palace and safety. But every time she tried to run for the palace, it seemed to move on her; she still couldn't see perfectly from the punch to the face, the side of her eye was beginning to swell shut. Though she knew she was not running in a straight

line, she just kept running. She did not look back to see where the evil man was, she was more concerned with staying away from him.

Thomas was incapacitated for quite a bit, but not long enough. He growled in fury as he struggled to his feet, still hurting immensely. He had had enough. Without fully thinking, he drew the black-blade dagger from its sheath and hurried after the dwarf. When he reached her, he brought the dagger down, into the side of the base of Thomasina's neck.

Thomasina's eyes opened wide in shock and pain. Her mouth opened, but no sound came out. The pain was instantaneous with the feeling of liquid fire being poured into her body and coursing through her veins. She fell backwards to the ground and stared up at the sweet, light blue sky. The poison surged through her, racing through her system. She kept her hand clutched around the stone though it was too big for her hand.

The knight pulled the dagger out and wiped it off on her cheek. Her blood flowed freely now, trailing down to stain the neck of her chemise and the neck of her bodice, and finally the still brilliant green grass. He walked over and stepped on her wrist to force her to release the gemstone. She cringed in pain, but kept her hold. Thomas shifted and dug his heel into her wrist then reached down and wrenched the stone from the clutched hand. "Where are your paragons now...?" He grinned and turned to where he saw Lady Tso waiting; she had watched the entire fight. The knight grinned and with a slight limp strode over to her. "So much for your gods." He handed back the dagger. "Now, how about my reward, hmm...?"

Lady Tso grinned as she pretended to think about it for a moment. "Hmm... Oh, very well..." "I did a lot for you. You had better make this good and lasting." Thomas grinned as he reached for his belt.

"Lasting? Very well then." Lady Tso slinked closer and without flinching, stabbed Thomas in the heart with the black dagger. "Is eternal damnation lasting enough?" She pulled the dagger back and stabbed him in the stomach. For the second time, Lady Tso pulled back the blade, but this time she slashed across the knight's throat, ignoring the blood that sprayed on her and the gurgling sound he made as he tried to stay alive. She wiped the blood off on his cheek and smiled at the gesture; she then looked down at her dress, clicking her tongue disapprovingly at the new bloodstains now covering her dress, and turned to go change.

Talis hustled through the garden, a feeling was gnawing at his stomach, telling him that something was not right. Thomasina's servant always met him at the gates. Today, he got in only because the guard remembered him. He ran to the garden where they usually met. But today, Thomasina was no where to be found. And this made the queasy feeling worse. She never missed one of their meetings, Talis hurriedly moved through the gardens, keeping an eye out for anything out of the ordinary.

Finally, his eyes caught hold of a red blotch on the ground. It was blood, he noted. Not only that, but it came with a trail. His heart sped up as he followed the blood trail from when Thomasina had bit the knight. Talis chased after the trail as if it were going to disappear were he not careful. He stopped suddenly and struggled to find his breath as he saw his friend lying on the ground, her hair splayed out around her and laying in the growing pool of her own blood. He could see

that her eyes were open, but if there was life in them, he could not tell.

The mage ran over, relaxing a little when he saw Thomasina blink. He knelt beside her. She smiled at the sight of her friend. Talis thought that were it not for the pain in her eyes and the blood trailing from the corner of her mouth, Thomasina looked serene and almost pretty. “Oh, God!” Talis gaped, trying to think of what to do. “My Lady...”

“Mistress,” she croaked out, always arguing with him over her title. “Remind... Remind the paragons... They did promise me... mes parents... Make them keep...” She grunted as the poison forced its path through her insides. “Keep it...”

“All will be well,” Talis tried to encourage her. She smirked slightly, seeing through his lie. “It shall.” He insisted. He pulled out his potions, searching for the right one. The young mage retrieved a clear vial with a clear liquid. He laughed a little as if he were already assured victory. Without delay, he opened it and poured the potion into Thomasina’s mouth and began to chant, and pray. He never saw Thomasina’s eyes roll into the back of her head and close, but he could feel her body go limp. Talis clenched his eyes shut tighter and prayed harder.

Fin