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Opening extract from **Book of a Thousand Days**

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Day 1

My lady and I are being shut up in a tower for seven years.

Lady Saren is sitting on the floor, staring at the wall, and hasn't moved even to scratch for an hour or more. Poor thing. It's a shame I don't have fresh yak dung or anything strong-smelling to scare the misery out of her.

The men are bricking up the door, and I hear them muttering and scraping cement. Only a small square of unbricked sky and light still gape at me. I smile back at its mean grin to show I'm not scared. Isn't it something, all the trouble they're going to for us? I feel like a jewel in a treasure box, though my lady is the—

My lady suddenly awoke from her stupor and sprang at the door, clawing at the bricks, trying to shove her way out. How she screamed! Like an angry piglet.

"Stay in!" we heard her honored father say. He

must have been standing near the opening. "Stay until your heart softens like long-boiled potatoes. And if you try to break your way out, I've told the guards to kill you on sight. You have seven years to think about disobedience. Until you are meek with regret, your face turns my stomach."

I nearly warned him that such words would bring him bad luck and canker his own heart. Thank the Ancestors that my lady's fit stopped me from speaking out of turn. When I pulled her back, her hands were red from beating at the bricks and streaked with wet cement. This isn't exactly a happy-celebration morning, but I don't see what good it does to thrash about.

"Easy, my lady," I said, the way I'd speak to a feisty ram. It wasn't too hard to hold my lady back, even squirming as she was. I'm fifteen years, and though skinny as a skinned hare, I'm strong as a yak, or so my mama used to say. I sang the calming song, the one that goes, "Oh, moth on a wind, oh, leaf on a stream," and invites the hearer into dreaming. I feared my lady was so angry she wouldn't heed the song. But she must've been eager to sleep, because now she's snoring on my lap. Happily the brush and ink are at hand so I can keep writing. When you can't move, there isn't

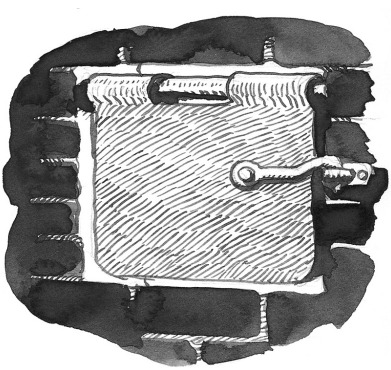
much to do but think, and I don't much want to think right now.

Sticky sobs shake my lady even while she sleeps. My own eyes are heavy. Perhaps it's the darkness making us so drowsy. Goda, goddess of sleep, keep us tonight.

Day 2

It's quiet and as dark as night, our only light a quivering candle. The door is bricked solid. From time to time I hear voices, so I suppose the guards remain outside.

Goda heard my prayer last night and did let us sleep until morning. I know it's morning because I peeked through the dump hole. That's a tiny metal flap that opens just enough to empty our chamber pot and wash water on the ground outside. It looks like this.



When I push it open, a lip of brick wall prevents me from looking straight out, but I can see the ground five handspans down. Very thoughtful of her honored father, I think, to design our prison such, so we have a way to throw out our waste and don't have to breathe foul air for seven years.

This tower used to be a lookout tower, standing as it does on the border between Titor's Garden, which is her honored father's land, and Thoughts of Under, which is the realm to the east. The upper story was the lookout, but the windows are bricked blind now. Too easy to escape from, I suppose, or else her honored father hopes to crush her spirits with darkness. The upper floor is my lady's chamber. The air is best there because tiny slits in the bricks let fresh air slink in. If I press my face to a certain slit, I think I can see blue that is the sky. Or maybe I'm just seeing shadows.

The middle story is our kitchen, with hearth, pots, table, and one chair. Stacks and stacks of wood line the walls, and my own straw mattress keeps the floor company. A ladder descends into the cellar. It looks something like this.



And here's the bit that makes me tremble with delight—in our cellar there is a mountain of food! Barrels and bags and crates of it. And we have a fine well dug right in the cellar floor. My lady is napping in her chamber, so I just came down here to look at the food. Seven years' worth. Such a thing I never imagined. Even though I can't see the sky, it's hard not to want to dance about, knowing that for seven years at least I won't starve. That's paradise for a mucker like me. How my mama would laugh.

Day 6

I've been much occupied these past days, learning the ways of our tower, counting sacks of flour and

rice, barrels of dried and salted mutton, figuring how much we may eat each day and last for seven years. It's useful knowing my letters and numbers so I can write down the figuring. We've boxes of candles and a stack of parchment, surely enough to keep me writing for seven years.

These are the meals I've cooked these last days:

Breakfast—warmed milk with sugar, eaten with flat barley cakes. Each morning the guards knock on the metal flap and hand up a horn of fresh mare's milk. First thing, I splash a drop of milk in the north corner, facing the direction of the Sacred Mountain, and say my prayers. By tradition, I should dribble the milk on soil, not stones, but it'll have to do since the metal flap faces south.

Dinner—dung cakes. That's what we muckers call them, though I don't use that crude term around my lady, of course. They're made of salted meat (simmered long to soften) and onions, wrapped in dough and cooked on coals. That's how we used to eat them with Mama, only here I get to add spices—cinnamon and peppercorns! Two times before the tower I'd eaten spiced food, but never had I reached my own hand into a barrel and touched the raw powders and seeds. Someday when I leave this life and my soul climbs the Sacred Mountain, I imagine

the Ancestors will be too beautiful and bright to look at, but their skin and breath will smell of peppercorns and cinnamon, anise, cardamom, and fennel. Heavenly, it is.

Supper—rice and dried peas, boiled with milk and raisins, and sweetened with a pinch of sugar. Delicious. My lady says she's used to eating the large meal at night instead of midday, but that makes no sense to me. She didn't order me to change the dinner and supper order, so I'll keep it the same.

These past meals have been as hearty as I ever had, and if being a lady's maid means I get to eat the same food as my lady—with spices even!—then you'll never hear me complain.

Sometimes to get her through a long day, I give my lady a mess of dried fruit or a slap of cheese. Even so, she swears she's starving. The mouth grumbles more than the stomach, my mama used to say. My lady can't really be hungry—I think she's just sad to be imprisoned away from her love and hoping that the food will fill her up where her heart breaks.

But so much food! Each day we eat three times, and I roll around on my mattress at night and laugh into my arm and pray to my mama so she knows I'm doing fine.