

By the time you reach chapters 11 and 12 in *The Leafstone Shield*, you will already have met Kyura and Meery, the two girls who will take center stage in the momentous events that are about to unfold. At this point, the author (that would be me) takes a step back to introduce two new characters, Alixia and Roma, who will also have central roles to play. Kyura and Meery sweep the floors and wash the sheets in the inn owned by Kyura's uncle. Alixia's situation is quite different — and she's about to discover that it's more different than she thought.

## **11: In Anticipation of Festivities**

The wedding dress was a glorious confection of white lace, pink satin sashes, and rows of buttons of soft pure gold shaped like tiny flowers. It reposed in ostentatious serenity on the dressmaker's dummy, which stood in the center of the fine hand-woven carpet near the window of Alixia's sitting room. Delicate links of silver and ivory formed the girdle of the dress. The wimple, held in its proper place by a hidden loop of wood where the dummy's head would have been if it had a head, was edged with a triple row of diamonds and pearls and surmounted by a finely wrought band of gold.

"I don't know if I'll be able to hold my head up wearing that," Alixia said. "The wimple, or any of it. I'll probably fall right over."

“Nonsense,” Madame Scraull said. “You’re young and strong. Now sit still while I finish.” Madame Scraull fussed around Alixia, primping her curls and straightening the bows in the ribbons on her sleeves. Inspecting herself in the mirror, Alixia decided Scraullie wasn’t too bad with hair. She knew she was pretty — everybody said so, not just her mother — but her luxuriant mane of blond hair was her best feature. Well, that and her smooth ivory complexion, because she was careful about her diet, and her wide-set blue-gray eyes. She didn’t usually use much makeup, but tonight was special. The eye shadow and eye liner looked just right, but the lip color was a deeper shade than she ever used, more rose than coral. She hoped it didn’t make her look cheap.

“I trust you’ve read today’s lessons in the book,” Madame Scraull said.

“Naturally.” The truth was, Alixia had barely glanced at the book, a leather-bound volume whose gold-embossed cover proclaimed it, in archaic hand-tooled letters, *The Holy Way of Potent Lathikni*. She had been given the book weeks ago, and she was supposed to be memorizing everything in it, about a thousand stupid lessons on how to walk, how to address your husband, how to chastise a disobedient servant — it was worse than boring, and Alixia was sure it wouldn’t take long after she was married to learn anything that was actually important. Before the wedding a priest and two of the married women would conduct an examination to make sure she understood the doctrine, but she figured she could

bluff her way through that. What were they going to do if she flubbed a question? Call off the wedding? No chance of that. There was to be some kind of pre-wedding ceremony, too, a ritual to welcome her into the worship of Lathikni. But if you were married to a high priest, or even the son of the high priest, there were bound to be lots of boring rituals. Anyway, the wedding was still seventeen days off, plenty of time to memorize whatever silly laws and customs her husband-to-be expected her to obey.

“You seem to be anticipating the changes in your life very calmly,” Madame Scraull said. “I’m glad to see you becoming more mature. You’re growing up, Alixia. To be honest, I’m surprised. More than surprised. I had expected that you might be — well, displeased.”

“It’s just a wedding,” Alixia said with a shrug. “I’ll have a husband. So what? Everybody gets married, or practically everybody. Roma says she’s never going to get married.”

“Your friend Roma has some quite peculiar ideas.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not taking after Roma. I don’t much like Ghirn Hyttop, he’s kind of a dead fish, but I guess I can get used to him. I know how important the match is for Daddy — he’s only told me about a million times. And Ghirn will be the high priest of Lathikni someday, when his father is gone. I guess there are worse things than being married to the high priest of the biggest, most important religion in Lorvondes.”

“Yes, dear. Only — are you sure you’ve read the book? There are some practices and prohibitions that I thought might concern you.” Madame Scraull’s eyes were troubled.

“Stop fussing, Scraullie. You worry too much.” The best way to handle Madame Scraull, Alixia had found, was to ignore her. Until she was fourteen, Alixia had had both a governess and a lady’s maid, both of whom were very satisfactory. The maid was full of spicy stories about back alley life in the city, and the governess was easily hoodwinked, so Alixia could do pretty much whatever she wanted, as long as she was careful not to let her parents find out. Her parents had sent the maid and governess packing when they found that the maid had taught their daughter not only how to play seven-card euchre but also the vulgar terms for the winning plays, and that the governess knew about it and had done nothing to stop it. Regnar C’Voy decided the time had come to rescue Tinilise Scraull from the unpleasant and undignified poverty into which, through no fault of her own, she had sunk. Scraull was a sort of second cousin, and it pleased C’Voy no end that he could demonstrate a charitable concern for his poor relations and punish his daughter at the same time.

Madame Scraull knew nothing about life in the back alleys, and her pinch-faced stubbornness was hard for a strong-willed, impulsive girl to manipulate. Scraull was rail-thin, always dressed in somber grays and blacks, and never used makeup or perfume. At least she knew how to give instructions to the laundress. As a chaperon she was endlessly

vexing — Alixia hadn't been able to sneak out of the house unescorted for the last three years. In another two weeks, though, she wouldn't need a chaperon, because she'd have a husband. And there was nothing whatever that she could do about it. She had been betrothed to Ghirn Hyttop at the age of twelve, for reasons to do with her father's political ambitions, and opposing her father's wishes in such an important matter just wasn't an option.

After she was married, she could always take a lover. Lots of women did that. Alixia was a little hazy about how exactly you would take a lover, but when the time came she was sure she'd have no trouble figuring it out, or finding a suitable one. Maybe two or three.

On the good side of the ledger, at least when she was married she would be rid of Scraullie. Surely her husband would provide a proper lady's maid. Or maybe two maids. One just to draw her bath, polish the jewelry, and see to her hair, that would be nice.

After a timid tap on the door, Bestima C'Voy tiptoed in. Bestima was a tiny woman, not yet as round as a butterball but headed in that direction. Eggshell-blue eyes and hot dabs of rouge on her cheeks provided the only color in a face that was over-powdered into masklike smoothness. Dressed in frills and finery as gaudy as her daughter's, she managed somehow to make the gown look fussy and frumpy. She gazed at Alixia with nervous fondness. "Are you ready, dear? Stand up — let's have a look at you. Turn around. Oh, you're lovely.

I'm sure your husband will always treasure the memory of how you look tonight. Of course, their customs are not ours, but he could hardly fail to be thrilled. Please don't slouch. And stop making faces. That's better. Isn't she lovely, Tinilise?"

Alixia knew that women among the Lathiknians dressed plainly. Once married, they were never seen in public but in plain brown dresses, with ugly square shoes and their hair fully covered by a wimple. That was one of the customs she meant to change, and soon!

"Come in, girls," Bestima said. "See how lovely your sister looks."

Alixia's little sisters glided in and made noises of appreciation. Both were dressed for the banquet, though not so elaborately as to outshine Alixia. Avogia was fourteen, and had enough of a figure to fill out a green satin gown with an almost daring square neckline. Amalia was only nine, and gawky in pink tulle.

Avogia said, "I heard Roma's footman downstairs delivering another note."

Alixia frowned. "Another note?" Usually she and Roma exchanged written notes at least twice a week whenever they were too busy for a visit, but she realized suddenly that she hadn't heard from Roma for a while.

"It was, like, the fourth one in two days."

Bestima said, “Now, Avogia. No need to bother your sister about that. She has more important things to be concerned with.”

Alixia said, “If Toad has been stealing my mail—”

“Alixia, you know you’re not to call your brother that wretched name.”

“If he did, I swear I’ll use one of Daddy’s spells to give him warts. On the insides of his eyelids.”

Willum was eleven now. Alixia called him Toad not because his skin was green — it wasn’t — but because of certain disgusting things that he liked doing with his tongue when nobody but her was watching. He really ought to be green, she felt. She had once gone to the trouble of snooping to find the spell that unlocked the big strongbox in her father’s study, after which she spent three days flipping through his dusty old books in the hope of finding a spell that would turn someone’s skin green. She had learned a few things about casting spells, including some things she wished she hadn’t learned, but had found nothing she could use on Willum.

“I’m sure Willum had nothing to do with it,” Bestima said. “I’m sure the messages were just mislaid. And not important, after all. Your friend Roma — well, she’s not a steady influence, is she?”

Avogia snickered. “Remember when she—”

“That will be enough, Avogia. Come, girls. It’s time to go.”

## 12: Banquet, Interrupted

When Regnar C’Voy’s wife and daughters emerged from the house, carefully descending the stairs to the driveway in their finery, he and his son were waiting beneath the carriage portico in the slanting sunlight of a waning afternoon. No taller than middle height, C’Voy had a thinning shock of blond hair and mild, almost delicate features, whose subdued keenness gave him the look of a well-fed fox. His evening attire, from the gold-buckled shoes to the concise little peaked hat by way of knee-length stockings and a short, close-fitting purple cape, was the height of fashion, and understated rather than ostentatious. Willum’s suit was a smaller version of his father’s, but with a sky-blue cape and a stiff red feather in his hat.

As usual on public occasions, C’Voy was carrying his cane, a slim shaft of polished black mahogany with a silver ram’s head. Alixia always shuddered a little when she saw the cane. He only carried it in public, and it wasn’t just a cane. It was his second most powerful scepter. He kept an even more powerful one locked in the strongbox in the study, except when he was using it. Even while prowling through the strongbox, she had known better than to touch the scepter.

The cane was the one he carried in public. The things he could do to people with that cane and a few magic words she didn’t even want to think about. And because he was the Presiding Countenance of the Guild of Wizards in Lorvondes,



there was nothing to stop him if he chose to use the cane. Even the king would hesitate before crossing Regnar C'Voy.

“Ah, my girls. You all look lovely. Are you ready, Alixia?”

She curtseyed. “Yes, Daddy.”

“And you’re planning to be on your very best behavior tonight?”

“Yes, Daddy.” Unless she could find something more fun to do, she added silently. She hoped her friends Chulie and Iavath would be there. Roma too. She had made sure they were invited. Ghirn Hyttop’s family had some funny ideas about who should attend the Banquet of Bride-Welcome. They had a lot of funny ideas, actually. But the banquet was a hallowed custom not just among the worshipers of Lathikni but throughout the city. The groom’s family couldn’t expect to have everything their own way, could they?

During the carriage ride, Alixia and her sisters sat across from Willum and their parents. Willum played with his hat and Amalia squirmed. Avogia poked Amalia a few times and glared at her disapprovingly. Alixia mainly stared out the window or at her shoes. They were very nice shoes, with high heels, pointed toes, and hundreds of tiny beads stitched in swirls and curlicues, but they were new, and they pinched.

Her father provided a low-voiced litany of names of dignitaries who would be in attendance, all of whom Alixia was to impress with her beauty (too easy to worry about) and her fine manners (that, at least, was his theory). She let him drone on, murmured meaningless reassurances, and paid not

the least attention. She was afraid he might start in again about the wheel. Some kind of prophecy he had heard a couple of days before. She was supposed to have her hand on a wheel, and he was convinced she knew what that meant. She hadn't the least idea, but it was clear he didn't believe her. It was so unusual to have Daddy ask her anything at all, rather than just instructing her how to behave, that his questions left her a little uneasy. He had asked her sisters about it too; they had told her afterward. But tonight he didn't ask. Maybe by now he had given up, or forgotten.

The carriage crossed the broad oily sheet of the Zille River on an arched stone bridge, and the street wound uphill. The houses here were surrounded by spacious grounds, with no ugly shops or factories to mar the expanse of carefully tended trees and shrubs. The sun had slid down into the west, and dozens of colored lanterns glowed from atop the walls of the Hyttop estate. Carriages were drawn up along both sides of the street, coachmen lounging in little groups or tending to their teams of horses. The C'Voy carriage entered at the gate and drew up at the foot of the broad staircase that swept up to the front door. The door stood open, light and music spilling out. Alixia let her sisters and brother step down first. Carefully holding her skirt, she descended, and a footman offered her his arm. The footman was stiffly dignified, but quite cute. She suppressed a wild urge to pinch him.

At the head of the stairs, she was announced and applauded. The applause, she had to admit, was pleasant. The

crowd was mixed: Lathiknians in their sober garb and the social elite from other temples and guilds arrayed in glittering finery. She didn't see Iavath or Chulie anywhere, but she did spot Roma, so maybe the evening wouldn't be totally dull. Roma's father was the assistant archive secretary of the Guild of Wizards, so of course the groom's father couldn't avoid sending an invitation. Roma was standing a little apart, by a pillar, gazing at Alixia in a steady, worried way. No, more than worried — perplexed. But Alixia had no time just now to wonder what that might mean. It must be something in the messages Willum had stolen.

The hubbub of her arrival having subsided, she was escorted by her father to where her husband-to-be stood waiting, flanked by his father, his mother, his brothers, and the brothers' wives. The head of the family, High Priest Gueln Hyttop, greeted Regnar C'Voy in a friendly, yet formal way, clasping both of his hands. The high priest was a little stooped with age, and had a sharp, hawklike nose and tangled eyebrows. He looked at Alixia in an avid, creepy way. She thought he might be about to start drooling, but he didn't.

Ghirn Hyttop, Alixia's intended, was taller than his father, and stood stiffly erect, but he lacked his father's piercing gaze. Ghirn was either unflappably poised or simply inert, depending on who you talked to. He had limp mouse-colored hair, slightly protruding front teeth, and a closely trimmed mustache that looked, Alixia always thought, pasted on — as if he had bought it in a shop and not combed it out properly

before applying the stickum. He and his brothers all wore formal capes and breeches cut like Regnar C’Voy’s, but in gloomy dark gray. Their father wore his priestly vestments; the deep red cloak, whose hem grazed the floor, was the only spot of color on any of the Lathiknians in the great hall.

Ghirn took Alixia’s hands — his were cold and damp — and said, “I am enchanted, my darling, by your peerless vivacity,” without smiling or looking her in the eye. It sounded less like an endearment than like a phrase he had read in a book, and memorized. A spasm of unexpected yearning lurched up in her. Why couldn’t she have been betrothed to a man who adored her? Or how about a handsome stranger who would steal her away in the night? But no, that wasn’t going to happen. Her doom was sealed.

Her parents dragged her away from the Hyttop family to present her to various honored guests. She had more or less expected Ghirn to be glued to her elbow, but he wandered off somewhere. She managed to snag a canapé from a passing tray, nibbled it delicately, and then, when she was sure nobody was watching, wolfed it down. Everybody else seemed to be drinking bubbly wine, but for some reason nobody offered her any.

At a gap in the social melee, Roma angled toward her, moving rapidly. Roma’s dark hair was elaborately curled and held in place by silver combs, and her gown shimmered with a shifting rainbow of color that could only have been produced

by magic. In a low, urgent voice, Roma said, “Did you get my notes?”

“No, I—”

“We have to talk. I found out some things.”

“What do you mean?”

Roma fixed her eyes on Alixia’s. “It’s not all in the book,” she said harshly. “There are things they don’t tell you. They don’t want you to—”

Alixia’s mother inserted herself with surprising force between Alixia and Roma. “Now, really,” she said. “This is not the time for schoolgirl mischief.” She seized Alixia’s elbow and dragged her away. Roma looked after them anxiously, but made no move to follow.

Dinner was not to be served for at least an hour, and after half an hour Alixia’s new shoes were agony. She made a discreet inquiry, followed by a beeline for the ladies’ lounge. Her mother made to follow her, but she said, “No, that’s all right, Mummy. I’ll be fine.”

The lounge was far from luxurious, but that was hardly surprising; the worshipers of Lathikni didn’t go in for gaudy finery. Simple cushioned chairs with rounded backs stood along one wall, opposite the plain marble basins. Mounted on the wall by the doorway back to the hall was a single narrow full-length mirror, evidently for you to check your appearance on the way out. Alixia sank gratefully into a chair, wrestled her shoes off, and wriggled her toes. Ah, glorious freedom! She set

the shoes on the next chair and went to check her hair in the mirror.

Two of the Lathiknian women entered. Evidently they were wearing their party clothes: the plain brown skirts, vests, and wimples were edged with narrow strips of white embroidery, and their ugly square shoes were new and polished.

They passed Alixia. She ignored them. Then behind her she heard a gasp. “Oh, no, no, no! No, you mustn’t!”

In the mirror she saw one of the women diving toward her. She was propelled sideways and slammed back into the chair.

“Hey! What are you—?”

The woman who had tackled her leaned over her, holding her down in the chair. Alixia tried to wriggle out from under, but the woman was strong, and using her full weight. “This is forbidden!” the woman cried. “Forbidden, the feet ever to touch the ground! How could you, how dare you?”

The other woman had grabbed the too-small shoes and knelt. She was trying to jam the shoes back onto Alixia’s feet. Alixia started kicking. What they were doing was not only absurd and insulting, it hurt! When managing both shoes at once proved impossible, the woman dropped one shoe, clamped Alixia’s bare ankle in an iron grip, and concentrated on the other shoe. Alixia started using a few of the vulgar words her maid had taught her, but this only made matters worse. The woman holding her down pushed one hand across her mouth to stifle her. She had a shoe on now, so she used it

to kick the kneeling woman good and hard. The woman fell backward and skidded across the polished floor on her rump. Alixia got her teeth around the standing woman's fingers and bit. The woman on the floor scrambled into the fray again.

Somehow, in the maelstrom of flailing limbs, the second woman lost her wimple. It tilted off to one side and fell to the floor. When she saw that, Alixia's arms stopped windmilling. She stared, transfixed.

Beneath the wimple, the woman's head was shaved. She was entirely bald.

The woman tried to get her wimple back on with one hand while still aiming the remaining shoe at Alixia's free foot with the other. It should have been a comic performance, but the fact that the woman was weeping made it terrifying. The standing woman was cradling her bitten hand in the other hand, watching Alixia with a fixed expression that was less hurt than appalled.

In the midst of this bizarre encounter, Roma swirled into the lounge. "Alixia, have you—" When she saw the tableau, she stopped in her tracks.

"They went crazy," Alixia said by way of explanation.

"Hold still," Roma said. "Let her put your shoe back on."

"No! What if I don't want—"

"Be quiet. You're in big, big trouble."

"Me? What do you mean, *I'm* in trouble? They went crazy! They attacked me! I'm the bride!"

“And they’re trying to save your life,” Roma said. “You didn’t get my notes, did you? You don’t know.”

“I know my feet hurt,” Alixia said sulkily. “What are you talking about?”

One of the women, the one she had bitten, said, “You would have been given the Holy Way. How could you not have been?”

“The book? *The Holy Way of Potent Lathikni*? What about it?”

“You did not read it?”

“I read bits of it. I’m going to read the rest next week.”

The two women exchanged harried glances. The second one finished adjusting her wimple. “Not to know is *worse* than to know and defy. The punishment—” Whatever the woman was about to say collapsed in a half-choked sob.

Roma said to the women, “Do us all a favor: Don’t mention this to anyone.”

“We do not gossip,” said the other woman. “It is not permitted.”

“Good. If there’s gossip it will be worse for everybody. I’ll try to explain things to my thick-headed friend here. She’s stupid and lazy, but she hasn’t been sealed yet, so there’s not a sacrilege problem, is there? And she’ll pay you reparations for biting your hand, but you may want to have a healer put something on it.”

Alixia sputtered when Roma called her stupid and lazy, but the others ignored her. The women scurried out, trailing a



cloud of fidgety backward glances. When they were gone, Roma looked at Alixia and shook her head sadly. “You looked so happy when you came in. That’s how I knew you’d be in a screaming match or a fistfight before the evening was over.”

Alixia slid one shoe off again and disgustedly inspected a brand new stinging red scrape along the side of her foot.

“What are you talking about?”

“I asked my mom. She wouldn’t tell me anything, but the way she told me it was none of my business made me wonder, so I asked around. That’s how I found out. Did you read the book?”

“Well, sort of.”

“Uh-huh. That means no, you didn’t. That doesn’t matter, because the really nasty stuff isn’t in the book.”

“It says you have to obey your husband, I read that part. But that woman was bald! Her head was shaved!”

“And yours will be too, before the wedding.”

“What? No, you’re crazy! I won’t let them.”

“They’re not going to give you a choice.”

“Well, I guess it will grow back.”

“No, it won’t. For the rest of your life, shaved head.”

Alixia goggled at her friend. “That’s insane. That’s a bucket of nightsoil!”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you? There’s other things, too. I’m betting I didn’t find out all of them, maybe only the Lathiknians know all of them. It’s all very hush-hush. But I found out enough. Your bare feet aren’t ever allowed to touch

the floor, much less the ground. I don't know what the punishment is for that, but I'll bet it's bad. If you disobey your husband, you get a rash and blisters all over. It's part of the magic they put on you. Oh, and if you lie to a priest when he's examining your sins, they always know. They have some way of finding out you lied, and then they make you hold a bar of hot metal so it burns clear through to the bone. Tonight I saw a couple of women wearing white gloves. That's why."

"You're lying to me," Alixia said. "My father would never — my mother wouldn't let him." But even as she was saying it, the words turned to paste in her mouth. Her father would — and her mother would never stand in his way. The awfulness of her predicament was beginning to sink in. "You're lying, right? This is all a big joke. Inside you're laughing at me."

Roma shook her head slowly, her eyes wide, lips pressed together. "It's no joke."

"Well, why don't the women just — you know, make them stop?"

"That's the really bad part. There's no way out. Once they put that magic on you, it's for life."

"For life? *Forever*? Roma, what am I going to do?"

"Well, there's always suicide. There are lots of ways to kill yourself, and some of them probably aren't too painful."

"Thanks," Alixia said bitterly. "I knew I could count on you."

Roma shrugged. "Okay, suicide is out. Here's a better idea. You could run away. Now, tonight."

“My father would find me and bring me back. If he hasn’t already cast some kind of awful spell so I can’t run away even if I try.”

“That’s the trouble with having a father who’s a wizard. Tell me about it. The thing is, you have to get out of here now, tonight, before the ceremony.”

“You mean the banquet?”

“The banquet is first. Then they take you over to the temple and make you kneel before the altar for the sealing ceremony. It’s a magic thing. The altar has some kind of super-powerful magic in it, and it seals you into the worship of Lathikni. They won’t actually shave your head until right before the wedding, but once you’re sealed, it’s all over. You won’t just have your father after you, you’ll have Lathikni himself on your trail — at least if there is any such god. Who knows? Maybe it’s not a god, just magic the priests do, but that won’t matter. Either way, you’re burnt biscuits. I know you. You won’t last a week.”

Alixia said, “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“That might work,” Roma said, nodding. “If you stick a finger down your throat and throw up, they might let you go home. Maybe. Or maybe they’ll just clean you up and drag you down there.”

“I don’t know if I could make myself throw up.”

Roma smiled, a tiny satisfied smile, and opened the little purse at her hip. “You don’t have to. When I didn’t hear from you I figured you might not know what you were in for, so I

came prepared.” She held out between her thumb and forefinger a tiny blue pill. “Here, take this. Open. Swallow.”

“What is it?”

“Don’t worry about what it is. It will make you really, really sick. It won’t kill you, but for a couple of days you’ll wish it had. It won’t start working for about ten minutes, so you’d better take it right now. You’ll be barfing all over yourself, and worse than barfing. No way they’ll do the sealing ceremony while you’re making a mess all over the floor.”

Alixia cupped the little pill in the palm of her hand and stared at it, appalled.

“Take it or don’t,” Roma said. “Your choice. But if I were you I’d take it. It won’t solve the problem, but it will postpone the sealing ceremony for a few days while you think what to do.”

For about half a second Alixia wondered if this was all some kind of horrible practical joke Roma had cooked up to make her look like a complete fool at her banquet of bride-welcome. But the woman’s shaved head had been real, and the women hadn’t been kidding when they reacted to her bare feet.

“Thanks, Roma. You’re a true friend.”

Roma shrugged. “I wish I could do more, but I don’t dare. Taking that is only going to delay the inevitable. They’re still going to make you go through with the ceremony in a couple of days. And knowing you, blisters and white gloves will only be the start of your troubles.”

Alixia popped the pill into her mouth and swallowed. She almost gagged on it, but she got it down.

“That’s a good girl,” Roma said, patting her arm. “Now, don’t leave for a minute after I do. I don’t want anybody to see us together. I’m taking an awful chance here. If your father finds out I helped you, he could have my father expelled from the Guild. But first he’d give me boils and make my teeth fall out.” After a lingering backward glance, her eyes glistening with what looked like tears, Roma slipped out of the lounge.