

Tornbridge

An Epistolary Game of Love and Letters

Jacqueline Bryk



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Other suggested media:

Bluebeard's Bride from Magpie Games

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Content Notes:

This is a game about femmes supporting femmes in resisting patriarchy. While Ilena and Elspeth are referred to with she/her and they/them pronouns in this text, they can have whatever gender and pronouns resonate with you, Potential themes include ableism, queerphobia, femmephobia, rape culture, misogyny, misogynoir, abuse, and violence.

Read the safety section first and establish clear boundaries before starting play.

This game was written by a trauma survivor, based on a story by a fellow trauma survivor

Safety

Before play begins, establish [lines and veils](#). If you need to establish or remove them in play, simply write an OOC note at the bottom of your next letter. Keep your lines in veils in a shared document (such as GoogleDocs or DropBox) or other place easily accessed by both players.

Don't be afraid to communicate if you want more or less of something. Simply make an OOC note at the bottom of your next letter. This game is about empowering communication. Take the opportunity to ask for things you may not otherwise ask for ~ and don't be afraid to say no if someone asks for something you can't or won't deliver.

Remember to take some time to breathe between letters. Tornbridge runs at a 1:1 speed, so every day is a day in game, every week is a week in game, etc. Take some time to take care of yourself and do other things and decompress.

You are more important than this game, or any game.

Player Characters

His eyes narrow with suspicion and the hands which have failed to release me now tighten with fresh strength. "Ilena, is there a reason you're alone with Elspeth?"

Ilena and Elspeth are friends, lovers, half-siblings, or something else. This can also change throughout the game, so long as both players agree. The important thing is that Ilena and Elspeth love and trust each other enough to exchange secret messages without expecting betrayal.

Ilena is a noble of the keep. They are unmarried, and learning how to cast high magic ~ elemental spells and the like. While this is routine training for a noble, Ilena's family keeps a close watch on her. An unmarried femme with high magic is dangerous.

Elspeth is a scullion and the child of a washerwoman. She is unmarried and learned from her mother how to cast domestic spells, especially kitchen witchcraft. Elspeth is a bastard by an unknown nobleman, and a common bastard with "low" magic is dangerous.

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Tornbridge Castle

No one is looking for us in a crisis... our fate-should we disregard the emergency evacuation routes drilled into us-is on our own foolish heads.

High in the southern mountains, Tornbridge Castle looms over its attached town, all travertine and pale bluestone. In times of invasion, the populace crowds into the castle's keep, a large, ugly tower meant to be impregnable to all assaults. In practice, the castle's defenders ~ a mix of mercenaries, trained guards, and farm boys looking for glory or acceptance ~ determine whether or not the nobles and commoners covering within the keep fall to enemy forces.

Apart from the keep, the castle also contains luxurious apartments and public living spaces for the nobles, dormitories for the serving class, kitchens, a forge, an archery range, a space for certamen (magical combat) and ritual practice, and workshops for carpentry, glass-blowing, tailoring, pottery, and other trades. Tornbridge is full of people and small magical creatures. Familiars follow their mages and witches. Alarm sprites wait in the walls, and wail through the halls when danger approaches the castle. Ilena and Elspeth both grew up within the walls of Tornbridge Castle, though in very different circumstances. Decide where they met, where they frequent, where they avoid, etc.



Tornbridge

Sample Tornbridge NPCs

- Will Daniel, a shy blacksmith
- Clarisse Souldern, a strict governess
- John Atfield, a too-friendly farrier
- Alice Cobel, a former famulus and wife of the castellan
- Matilda Crickolade, a former kitchen witch who took a blow to the head
- William Gamelyn, an incompetent wizard
- Edith Rogers, a domestic mage who survived being thrown into a well
- Simon Freestone, an arrogant archer
- Sir Ortalio, knight, mage, and overbearing brother to the lord

The Holy Heart

Either our menfolk will repel the invaders, in which case we'll be safe here in the castle, or they'll die at the hands of intruders and we will become spoil.

The Holy Heart army is unlike any Tornbridge Castle has ever seen. They claim to want to eradicate the “sin” of magic from the world, but they use magics that aren't in any grimoire. The Holy Heart summons strange beings from the ether and bind no familiars.

They hide their faces and march in lockstep. *Tornbridge* starts as the Holy Heart are marching to raze Tornbridge Castle.



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How to Play

“Soon.” I squeeze her hand again and pull her to run faster. “Think of the kiss we’ll share when we get there. You and me.”

Ilena and Elspeth have radically different positions within the hierarchy of Tornbridge Castle, and that manifests in both war and peacetime. They can’t spend all of their time together without arousing suspicion, so they write each other letters. Through bribed servants, clever ruses, and simply handing off letters in the hall, they stay close.

Elspeth and Ilena will never knowingly betray each other. While a servant might squeal, or one of the women might let something slip, or a male relative might get suspicious, neither deliberately tries to get the other in trouble.

Each letter moves time forward. For convenience, unless you enjoy using alternate calendars for immersion, assume that time in the game world moves the same as time in the real world. To play a longer game, send a letter once or twice a week. For a hectic, short-term game, exchange a couple of letters a day.

Add detail. The descriptions of Tornbridge and the Holy Heart are deliberately vague to allow you to fill in details. What are the mountains like around Tornbridge? Who else are you friends or enemies with? What do the Holy Heart’s banners look like? The world is there for Elspeth and Ilena to explore. See the prompts section for suggestions.

Yes, and? If your partner gives you a prompt, work with it or leave an OOC note as to why you can’t. If Ilena writes to Elspeth about kissing under the manchineel tree, Elspeth should roll with that unless that wasn’t part of the previously-established relationship.

Center their experiences. Ilena and Elspeth are in a castle full of people in the middle of a war, but their relationship is the most important part of this game. Don’t focus on troop movements or resource counts, instead talk about how frightened or angry (or excited!) they are about another siege or how hungry everyone seems. Focus on the two femme characters in a hostile environment.

Spells

Ilena and Elspeth can embed one of five spells into their letters, by including ritual phrases within the text of their letters. These can only be used once per player. Spells allow Ilena and Elspeth to get out of difficult situations, create diversions, or care for themselves when no one else will. Each spell The five ritual phrases are:

- Fire for light, water to wash, air to dry, earth to grow.
- Thrice by thrice, the cord is wound.
- The light has been broken, the spell has begun.
- A snake came crawling, it bit a man.
- Out, little spear, if there is one here within.

If Ilena or Elspeth sends a spell, her counterpart must write about how she used it in the response letter, or the spell fades. Ilena and Elspeth cannot horde spells. The player who receives the spell decides how it plays out for their character, based on which spell they received.

Game Time

Again, *Tornbridge* runs at a 1:1 speed, so every day is a day in game, every week is a week in game, etc. *Tornbridge* can be played over many months or a single weekend. It all depends on if you want to tell the story of a prolonged siege or a blitz attack.

Prolonged siege games take place over weeks or months. The mood in the castle starts cheerful, but eventually sours as food and resources dry up. Mistrust and suspicion set in. Ilena and Elspeth have a harder and harder time getting letters to each other. The game should end with them escaping or succumbing to illness or hunger ~ or perhaps another ending that you think is more appropriate.

Blitz attack games take place over a single weekend, perhaps at a convention or other gathering. The Holy Heart overwhelms the castle, and the predominant mood is panic. How do Ilena and Elspeth handle this sudden change of familiar, paternalistic norms ~ and what does the castle look like now?

Logistics

Tornbridge can be played through email, snail mail, or actually physically passing notes. So long as you can feel your character's sense of urgency and being watched (femme people spending time in groups or talking to each other is suspect, after all) and both players are centering femme experiences, you're playing *Tornbridge* right.

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Suggested Prompts

- Describe a place you remember loving before the war, and how it has changed with the Holy Heart invasion.
- Tell your counterpart about a dream you had.
- Explain how someone has restarted their abusive behaviors, and how frightened you are of them.
- Talk about a spell going wrong or seeing someone die.
- Express your longing for your counterpart.
- Express your fear, resentment, contempt, or rage at seeing someone else being treated poorly.
- Complain about your parents trying to marry you off.
- Wonder about the future.
- Describe part of the castle or the surrounding countryside.
- Complain about a woman doing someone else's bidding.
- Doodle in your letter.
- Express fear that someone may have intercepted and read your letter.
- Share castle gossip.
- Wonder if the Holy Heart wouldn't be a better option.
- Talk about a man using you to show his power.
- Speculate about building a life together with no one looming over the two of you.
- Answer an unspoken question in your counterpart's letter.
- Inquire about their family.
- Compliment your counterpart's appearance or personality.
- Ask a difficult question.
- Refuse to give a straight answer.
- Suggest that the end of the war is drawing near.
- Ask OOC where your counterpart player wants the game to go.
- Sign your letter "All my love, [name]".

