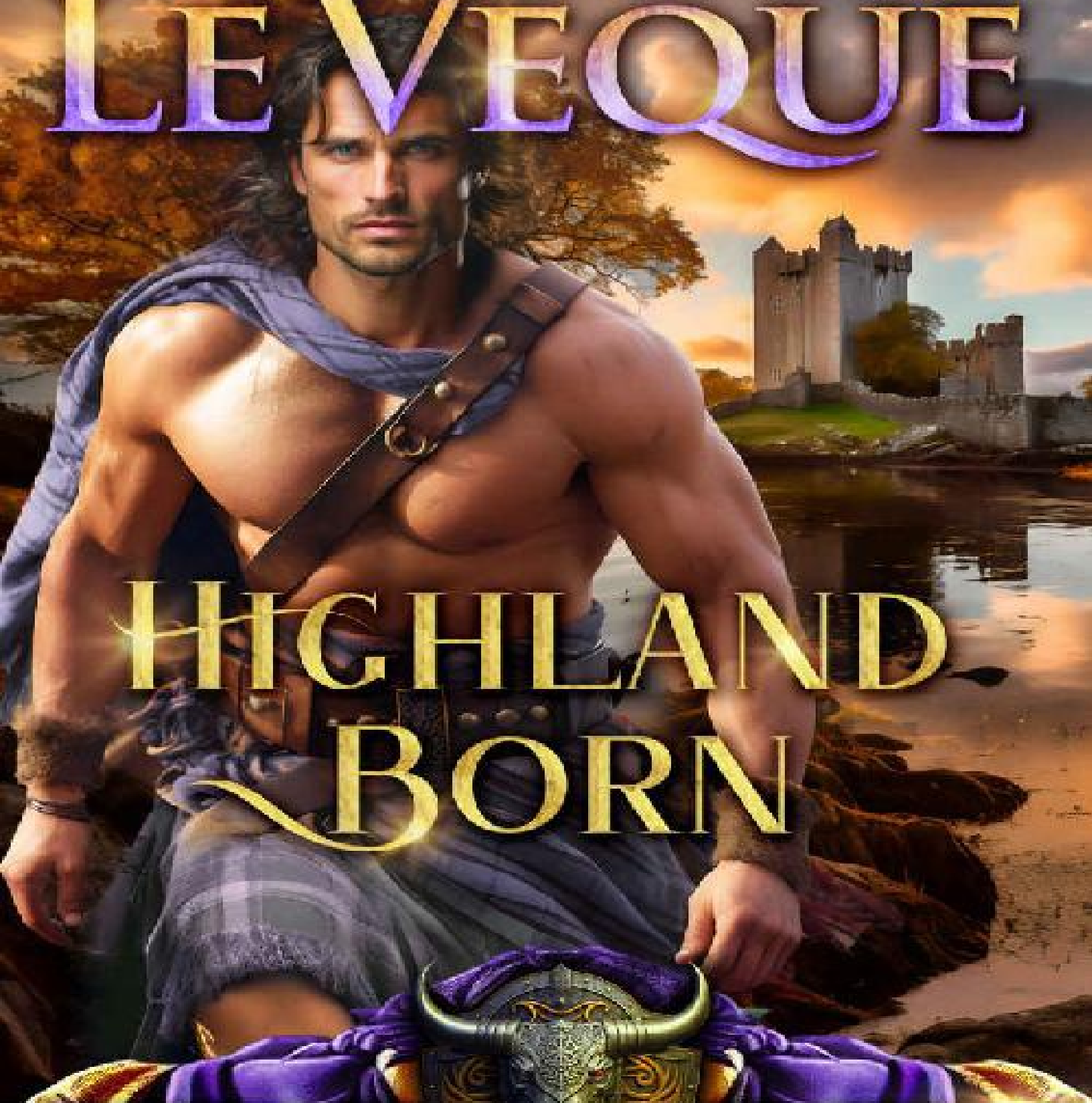


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KATHRYN



LE VEOQUE



HIGHLAND
BORN

HIGHLAND

LEGION



HIGHLAND BORN

A SCOTTISH MEDIEVAL ROMANCE

HIGHLAND LEGION SERIES

BY KATHRYN LE VEQUE



HIGHLAND BORN

A SCOTTISH MEDIEVAL ROMANCE

HIGHLAND LEGION SERIES

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Kindle Edition

Text by Kathryn Le Veque

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Every family has legends behind it, but no family more so than the Tarh clan.

Tucked deep in the Highlands of Scotland and relatives to the Mac clan, the family is said to have been spawned from the lost Roman leg elite Ninth Hispania. For generations, the family was known for the men, quick to temper, fierce fighters with comely looks. They were respected in the Highlands until Lares Rayan dun Tarh became the l the family, a former priest who had fallen from grace.

Lucifer, they called him.

And his sons were known as Lucifer's Highland Legion.

Aurelius dun Tarh is the eldest son of what many consider Lares' union. Highlander born but English trained because of his English i Aurelius is a man of two worlds. Enormous and powerful, he is the many handsome brothers, and it's no secret that there is probably mc one dun Tarh bastard roaming about the Highlands.

For all of his talent and power, however, Aurelius is a man of disc His English grandfather insists he fight in France for Edward III, so A finds himself fighting alongside men who should be his enemy, but : nonetheless shares an alliance with.

A man of two worlds, indeed.

As a reward for his performance at the Battle of Crécy, Aur presented with a bride from one of the great English warlords. The Wolsingham has no male heirs, and he wants Aurelius. Unable to Aurelius finds himself betrothed to one of the richest heiresses in Eng and absolutely hating it.

Valery de Leybourne, daughter of Wolsingham, doesn't like the being married to a Highlander, either. A spitfire of a woman, Aurelius that aspect of her the hard way. He further realizes that he may ve enjoy this marriage because Valery and her spark entertains him to : But before the marriage can take place, an explosive family secret is r

that might possibly ruin both families...

And it has nothing to do with Aurelius or Valery, but it could ve
mean their end.

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that might possibly ruin both families...

And it has nothing to do with Aurelius or Valery, but it could very well mean their end.

HOUSE OF DUN TARH MOTTO



Numquam vici, semper timui
Never conquered, always feared

HOUSE OF DUN TARH MOTTO



Numquam vici, semper timui
Never conquered, always feared

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is my first official Highlander/Scottish series and, I have to say, I'm pretty darn excited about it!

What took me so long, you ask? Nothing in particular—I simply loved the English knights, but I felt a calling to head to Scotland. My fascination is with the legendary lost legions—and there are a few—but none so far as the Ninth Hispania. I've incorporated their mascot, the bull, into the Tarh's family shield. In fact, "*tarbh*" is "bull" in Gaelic and the family name goes all the way back to that name back in the Dark Ages, but over the centuries, the spelling changed to Tarh—pronounced "Tar."

A reminder of the family's legendary origins.

Something else that is a reminder of their origins is the fact that all the men in the family tend to have Roman names. Some have Spanish names, but most tend to be Roman as a tribute to their origins. The lost Ninth Hispania legion has been an endless source of fascination for historians down to this day because no one is really sure what happened to it. It was a big, prestigious legion that went over the Antonine Wall and then... nothing. Most historians agree that they simply assimilated into the local populations, which is probably what happened. Or it might have been alien abductions or time warp. When speaking of the mysterious Scottish Highlands, anything is possible. (And I'm kidding about the aliens!)

So, let's talk a little about this book, because it's a big one.

The story is broken down into three parts because it's fairly complex. There are multifaceted storylines and more than one love story because the entire theme of this tale is true love. That's always the theme in my books (because I'm a romance writer!), some more strongly than others, but this one in particular is full of that theme because the emphasis is on the fact that there are many forms of true love. Man to wife, mother to child, grandparent to grandchild, friend to friend, etc.

Part of the tale involves the Battle of Crécy. We're in the mid-fourteenth century now, so we're about a hundred years, give or take, from the time of the de Wolfe Pack (William de Wolfe's series) and about a hundred a

years from the House of de Lohr (Christopher de Lohr's series). How have the north of England so crowded with houses and people inevitably, some of them are going to show up in this tale. Even though the hero is a Highlander, his lady love is not—she's English. There are several recognizable names in this story, including a mention of Drago himself—Tate de Lara.

Don't think the title is a misnomer—it implies this is a Scottish tale like my the hero is, indeed, Scottish. So are more than half the characters. The vast majority takes place in the Northern England/border area because n stems where the heroine is from, and, like any good groom, Aurelius goes to nou as he dun not the other way around. She's an heiress, and he's been forced ily took betrothal, as you'll see, so he goes to her great castle—and that's wh changed story happens and happens quickly.

And with that, let's go to our usual pronunciation guide:

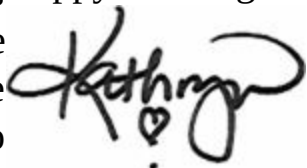
L of the	Lares—LAHR-ees
nes, but	Davina—Duh-VEE-nuh
hispania	Tarh—Tar (there's almost an "L" sound on the end of it, but not quite)
he ages	<i>Leannan</i> —a Scottish Gaelic term for sweetheart
stigious	

There's a family tree and a castle floor plan on the next pages—hand-drawn by me! I don't profess to be an artist, but I sometimes draw out the layouts to better help me when I'm writing, so I thought I'd share the changes with you as a peek into my process. I'm a visual thinker (and learner!) layouts go a long way in helping me flesh things out.

And now, let me introduce you to Aurelius and Valery. I think you're going to love them.

Happy Reading!

Happy Reading!
Happy Reading!
Happy Reading!



Happy Reading!
Happy Reading!
Happy Reading!

years from the House of de Lohr (Christopher de Lohr's series). However, I have the north of England so crowded with houses and people that, inevitably, some of them are going to show up in this tale. Even though our hero is a Highlander, his lady love is not—she's English. There will be several recognizable names in this story, including a mention of Dragonblade himself—Tate de Lara.

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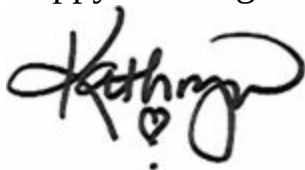
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Happy Reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kathryn". The signature is stylized with a large, flowing 'K' and a heart symbol integrated into the 'y'.

DUN TARH FAMILY TREE



*Children of Lares and Mabel**

Aurelius

Darien

Estevan "Stevan"

Lilliana

Caelus

Kaladin "Kal"

Lucan

Leandro

Cruz

Zora

- *Mabel is a descendant of Ajax de Velt through his son, Cole*

DUN TARH FAMILY TREE



*Children of Lares and Mabel**

Aurelius

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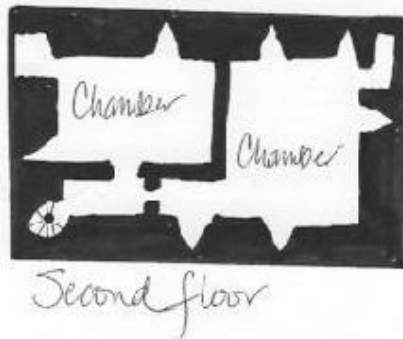
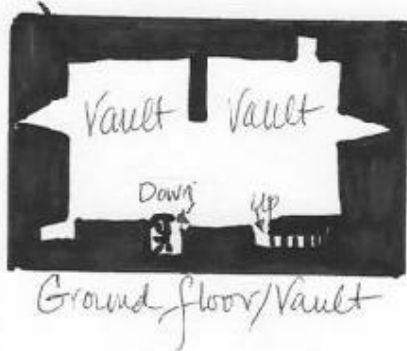
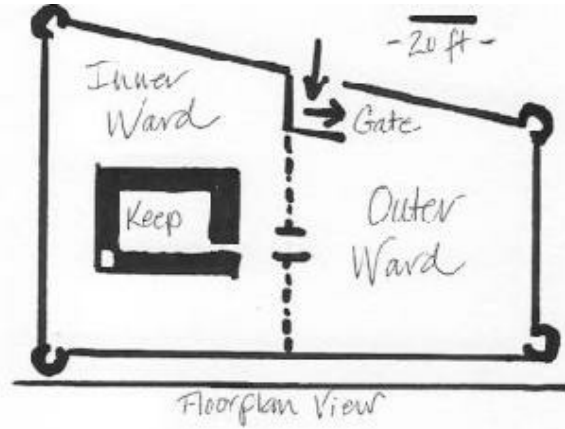
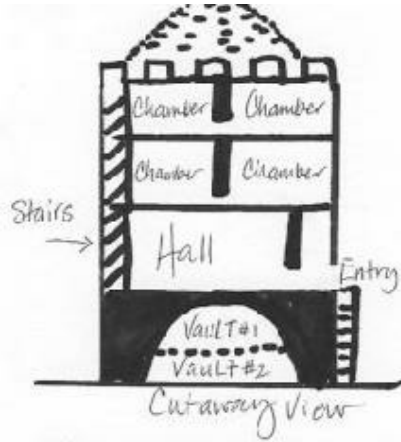
Leandro

Cruz

Zora

- *Mabel is a descendant of Ajax de Velt through his son, Cole*

CASTLE HYDRA FLOOR PLAN



"Castle Hydra"
also known as "The Hydra"

LYDGATE CASTLE FLOOR PLAN

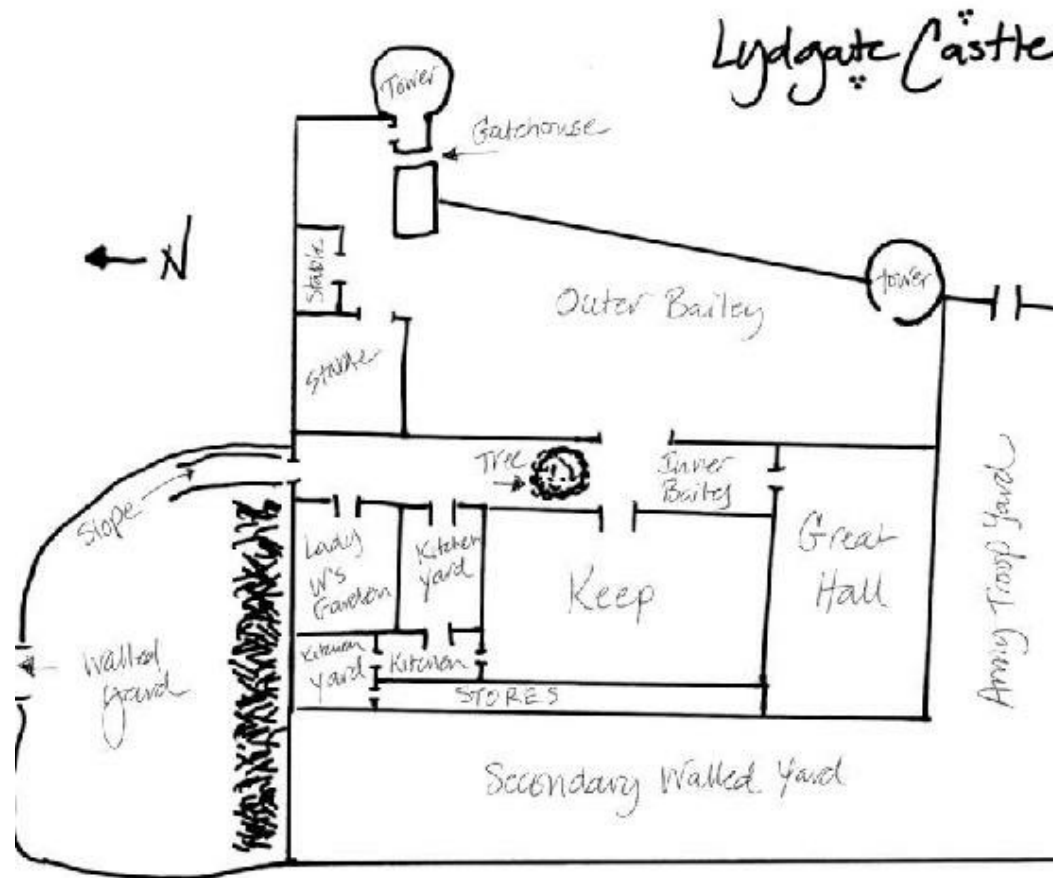


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About Kathryn Le Veque



PROLOGUE

*Year of Our Lord 1380
Castle Hydra, Scotland
The Highlands*

IT WAS A night made of diamonds.

In the black expanse above the gray-stoned castle lit by hundred torches, the heavens glittered as if someone had thrown handfuls of diamonds across darkness, and even when the diamonds fell back to earth, as diamonds sometimes do, another diamond took its place. Those diamonds glow and twinkled, bestowing the blessings of the universe upon the heads of the newlyweds at Castle Hydra.

It was rare when the place was filled with warmth and utter joy.

A place that was, quite possibly, the most cursed castle in Scotland.

But not tonight. Tonight the wine and ale flowed freely, the music played, and the night, and the guests were either drunk or dancing or both. When the people of the Highlands celebrated, it was a celebration like no other.

The Hydra, as the castle was referred to, was lit up like the surface of the sun. It was the joining of two great families, even if one of the families happened to be English. Still, they were great allies to the dun Tarh family, a family that had been in possession of the Hydra for centuries. They were the Earls of Torridon, a title given to one of the dun Tarh ancestors several generations back, a title held by Lares dun Tarh. The earldom of Torridon was a vast swath of land from Clan MacKenzie territories, something the MacKenzie accepted because Clan dun Tarh was related to them by marriage several times over. The land had come to dun Tarh through the first Earl of Torridon, who had married a Scottish clan chief's daughter.

As part of her dowry, she brought the land with her.

Lands and glens and mountains that belonged to perhaps one of the legendary families in the Highlands, and Castle Hydra came with it. Lar was sitting in the lord's hall, the largest chamber in the tower of Castle Hydra, but still smaller than the great hall, which was filled with soldiers and Highlanders on this night. They had every right to celebrate the wedding of one of Lar's granddaughters, as part of the family, because half of the soldiers were members of the clan. Highlanders were known to marry prolifically, and someone was always someone else's cousin or brother-in-law. Therefore, this was really a family celebration, as far as Lar was concerned.

He watched with great satisfaction.

"There you are." An older woman with graying red hair and green eyes found him as he sat in a window seat of the lord's hall. She sat down beside him, handing him a cup of something warm. "I had the cook warm up some wine for you, just the way you like it."

Lares smiled affectionately at his wife. "Ye do me proud, Mae," he said, taking the almost-hot cup from her. He hissed and set it down beside him. "Good Lord, lass, do ye mean to burn my fingers off?"

She shushed him, touching the cup to see how hot it really was. "Don't complain like an old woman," she said. "Drink it up before one of your boys comes over here and takes it from you."

"They've been known to do that."

"Aye, they have."

"They'd take food out of my mouth and watch me starve, too."

"You've raised a selfish lot, Lar's dun Tarh."

"They're yer sons, too."

"Only when they are being obedient."

He snorted before lifting the cup to his lips and drinking in the rich wine. "Ah," he said, smacking his lips. "'Tis good, it is. Ye're too good for me, Mae. I love ye for it."

Mabel fought off a grin, slapping weakly at him when he tried to touch her thigh. "Off with you, you devil," she said. "You'll not get frisky with me."

"Ye're my wife. I can get frisky with ye whenever I want."

She shook her head. "You'll give yerself heart failure if you try to frisk with me."

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Earl of

said. "I do not think your old bones could stand the excitement."

He just laughed at her, his lovely Mabel. The woman had given
ares, inten children, eight sons and two daughters, all of them having surviv
rtion of adulthood. She had eight of the most powerful, strapping sons a woma
ers and hope for. Highlanders of the most elite and worthiest kind. Consider
ding of was only half-Scots, and from the Lowlands as well, she proved that
of the just as much strength and honor in her as anyone alive. Mabel
o breed Douglas dun Tarh was a woman among women, but only a few kn
other or how deep that strength and honor ran.

es was But Lares did.

"Ye're a good lass, Mae," he said, taking her hand as he leaned in

"I dunna know what I would have done without ye all these years."

en eyes Mabel was looking across the hall to her granddaughter and h
next to husband as they tried to navigate the dun Tarh mob of brothers and
n some and cousins. "You would have withered away and died," she said. "Y
fortunate I have a soft spot for you."

el," he He laid his big head on her shoulder. "More than ye know," h
quickly kissing her shoulder even though it was covered by her sleeve. "It d
good that we can watch Gabriela marry. That we can share this momer

s. "You Mabel, who wasn't particularly soft or romantic in public, glanced
ur sons "We've watched our own children marry," she said. "Time is mov
Now, our grandchildren are marrying, one by one. They grow up
grow old."

He stopped leaning on her long enough to drink from his cup
"Ye'll never be old, lass," he said. "Ye're ageless."

"I do not know what you're up to with this flattery, but my shift s
tonight."

Lares burst out laughing, putting an arm around her and pulling
h, spicy him. She fought off a grin as her husband of many years gave her a v
good toon the cheek, finally breaking down in a smile as he kissed her again

looked at one another, smiling as only two people who have been in l
o pinch many years could do, when they heard a high-pitched, female voice.

cy with "Mamie! Nonno!"

They turned to see their granddaughter, the bride, heading i
direction. She was waving at them, finally climbing in between ther
y," she down on the stone bench as Lares set his cup aside and embrac

Gabriela dun Tarh was the daughter of his eldest son, Aurelius. Dress birth topale blue gown that had once belonged to her mother's mother, and red intowreath of flowers in her hair, she was sweet and affectionate and full o n could Lares adored her.

ing she "Are ye happy, lassie?" he asked her. "Must I speak to yer groom she hadhim what will happen if he mistreats ye?"

Coleby Gabriela grinned, looking very much like her grandmother in that g ew just "He knows," she said, with an accent somewhere between a Scots- English because she'd fostered at Northwood Castle on the Scots- border. "Da spoke to him, as did all of my brothers. Bas knows that i nto her.much as raises his voice to me, half of the Highlands will come do him."

er new Lares approved of that greatly. He hugged her again, handing her . unclesof warmed wine, which she drank from happily. She was on he You areswallow when Mabel reached out and took it away.

"Enough," she said softly, watching her granddaughter wipe her ie said,with the back of her hand. "You do not want to be swill-headed tonight oes me Gabriela laid her head on Mabel's shoulder. "I will not be, I pr it." she said. "I feel fine. I feel happy. Bas is a good man, Mamie. He com at him.a very fine family."

ing on. Mabel was looking over at the corner of the hall where the g and wefamily was. "A very *tall* family," she said, because the raven-haired and the men of his family were at least a head taller than anyone else o again.room. "The Pemburys have height and handsomeness to their credit. hope they have honor and brains as well."

tays on Gabriela giggled. "What a thing to say," she said. "I'll have you that Sebastian of Pembury is a very honorable man. He's been i ; her tobefore, so he knows how to treat a wife. I know he's a good deal olde vet kissam, but he's kind and handsome and I love him. We will be very n. Theytogether, you'll see."

ove for Mabel looked at her. "I am sure you will be," she said softly. "But children, Gabby. He's bringing children from a dead wife into this m and the best thing you can do for those children is to be kind to the n theiryoungest one needs a mother, but the older ones... I am certain they n to situse a friend. Let Bas be the parent. You will simply be someone who ed her.to them."

sed in a Gabriela nodded. It was no secret that Sebastian of Pembury was with aye years older than she was, a man who had lost his wife to childbirth, of fire. behind an infant and four older children. He had been serving at Nor Castle, a mighty bastion along the Scots border full of English l and tell Gabriela had met him when a Northwood contingent had come to one dun Tarh clan's Lowland castles for a conclave. Gabriela had only gesture. Ashkirk Castle because she'd begged and pleaded for her father to t and anwith him, because she was bored to tears at the Hydra and wanted to English So, he'd relented. And she'd met her husband.

if he so That was something Aurelius dun Tarh was grateful for, but he w own onslightly remorseful.

He'd made it no secret that he would miss his daughter.

his cup "I will be good to the children, I promise," Gabriela said, her r thirdsoftening. "I've had time to come to know them, and I like them already older children are fostering, of course, but the baby is very sweet mouthasleep upstairs, even now."

t." Mabel smiled. "I know," she said. "You'll be fortunate if you omise,"back. Nonno has taken quite a shine to her."

es from Hearing the name his grandchildren called him, Lares perked up. "this ye say?" he said. He'd been mulling over retreating to his bed, h groom'sfull of wine, but he thought on the last few words the women had groombetween them and smiled weakly. "Aye, the little one is a bonny l e in thehide her so ye canna leave with her."

Let us Gabriela chuckled. "I think my husband might have something about that."

u know "He'll have to fight me for her."

married Gabriela's laughter grew. "Nonno, he's much taller than you ar r than I said. "Have you not noticed?"

r happy Lares winked at her. "Taller doesna mean stronger or faster," he s simply means that the man will smack his head on the doorfram t he hasleaving a room."

arriage, Before Gabriela could reply, someone shouted at Mabel, who wav m. The stood up. One of her sons was calling for her, so like any good motl y couldwould go to him. As she headed off into the crowd of merry wedding is good Gabriela turned to Lares.

"Do you like him, Nonno?" she asked eagerly. "Bas has a qui

twentyabout him, but he's a good man. Please say that you like him. I w
leavingheartbroken if you did not."

thwood Lares nodded his head, patting her hands as they wound arou
knights.elbow. "Of course I do, lass."

e of the "Do you *really*?"

been at "I said I did," he said. "But I will admit that I am saddened to thin
ake hergoing to Northwood Castle. So far away."

o travel. Gabriela squeezed his arm. "Not so very far," she said. "It's not f

Lydgate Castle, where I was born. And Ashkirk is little more than a
was alsotwo away. You can visit me at Northwood when you travel to Ashkirk.

Lares shrugged. "Mayhap," he said. But his gaze grew intense. "

happy, lass? That's the most important thing in the world. Are ye *happ*

manner Gabriela's expression transformed into something warm and glow

dy. Thefrom the giddy girl so recently seen. "So very happy," she said softly.

. She'sBas, Nonno. He loves me. I know he has children from his first wif

love those children, too. You will never know such happy people as I

get herme. Two people who loved each other more have never existed,

mayhap Mama and Da. Or you and Mamie. You and Mamie love eac

'What'sso very much. I have always admired that."

is head Lares' expression seemed to soften as he reflected upon the dec

spokenmarriage to Mabel. Suddenly, he didn't seem so drunk. "Yer grandm

ass. I'llmore wonderful than ye know, lassie," he said softly. "She's a wo

exceptional honor and grace."

to say "I know she is."

His features continued to soften, his eyes taking on a distant

dunna mean to contradict ye, but ye dunna know what she is capable

e," shemurmured. "Ye said that two people more in love have never existed,

a way, ye're right. But there is a kind of love that becomes more than

said. "Itthe love of a man and a woman. It's a deeper love that only a few k

e whensomething that grows from yer bones and surrounds ye like a secur

Yer skin and the skin of yer husband or wife become part of one a

ved andTheir happiness means more to ye than yer own. I've been fortunate

er, sheto have experienced a love like that."

guests, Gabriela cocked her head. "A love where the happiness of your h

or wife is all that matters?" she said. "Isn't that what most married pec

let wayanyway?"

ould be A gleam came to his eye. “Do ye think so?”

 “I would hope so.”

ind his “I can tell ye a story that would tell ye that ye’re wrong. There a
 forms of true love, lass.”

 “Then tell me, Nonno.”

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ople do,

A gleam came to his eye. "Do ye think so?"

"I would hope so."

"I can tell ye a story that would tell ye that ye're wrong. There are other forms of true love, lass."

"Then tell me, Nonno."

He did.

PART ONE
LARES



PART ONE
LARES





CHAPTER ONE

*Year of Our Lord 1313
Mount Pleasant Castle
England/Scotland Border*

THE ONLY SOUNDS were those of the bailey.

In a castle the size of Mount Pleasant, one would have thought would have been a myriad of sounds from all over the compound. Se horses, dogs... even screaming children. But nothing penetrated the v the enormous, two-storied solar of Mount Pleasant's keep other tl muted sounds of the bailey coming in through the lancet windows.

They were, perhaps, accompanied by the sounds of his pounding h He thought it was going to pound right out of his chest.

"I will admit I have been waiting for this moment, Lares." A man in fine robes of silk and leather spoke quietly, sitting behind the tal Lares was standing in front of. "I have expected it every day sin arrived."

That was a whole week ago, Lares thought. Was there a slight comment? He wasn't sure, but it seemed to him that Ralph de Gilsa lord of Mount Pleasant, was laughing at him. The man wasn't smiling, but his eyes were glimmering... with something.

Lares wasn't sure what it was, but he wasn't sure he liked it.

"It isna that I dinna have the courage to speak to ye, m'laird," La with as much backbone as he could summon. "'Tis only that I wa make certain that Davina felt the same way. I wouldna offer for a who dinna love me in return."

"You love her, do you?"

“Aye, m’laird. And she loves me.”

Ralph’s gaze remained fixed on Lares for a moment before he rubbed his forehead and averted his gaze. Aye, he’d been expecting this. He’d been expecting it for a year. It wasn’t that he didn’t like the lad. He liked him a good deal. Lares dun Tarh was from a very old and noble family in the Highlands, the family that had their roots far back to the occupation of Britannia. It was said that Lares’ family descended from a Roman legion who had forged their way deep into the Highlands, and eventually marry into the native population. Even the mascot on the dun Tarh was the remnant of the mascot of that lost Roman legion—a bull. A fearsome, stubborn, and powerful animal represented everything about the dun Tarh family.

Including the young man standing in front of him.

Stubborn and proud, indeed.

Lares wasn’t a true Highlander in the sense that he’d spent his entire life in the Highlands, hardly venturing out of the hills. In fact, for a Highlander, he was very well traveled. Lares followed their tradition set by one of his ancestors that every eldest son of the Earls of Torridon fostered in an English household. Lares had trained in some of the finest households in North England, and he had also trained in the royal household of King Edward. That was also a longstanding tradition with the dun Tarh family, and every male, preferably the heir, was always sent into the royal household of an English king as a symbolic hostage. That was something Henry VIII established with a dun Tarh ancestor long ago.

That particular tradition meant the dun Tarh heirs could be more English than Scottish.

In any case, it certainly set up the heir to a lifetime of turmoil with his siblings and other family members, because the rest of the family did not receive the same training that the heir did. It was an odd and divisive tradition that the House of dun Tarh kept to religiously. Lares had two younger brothers, both of them as English as the very earth and the very sky. Lares knew those younger brothers, Arden and Florian, and they were a ruthless lot. So was their father.

Julius dun Tarh, the current Earl of Torridon, had arrived with his family a week ago, feasting and reaffirming the bonds with de Gilsland. But it was not to form an alliance, not because he was fond of Ralph, as Julius was a man of

and ambition. He didn't possess a warm bone in his body, a stern m
bbed athad only and always expected perfection from his sons. He, too, had
request.in the royal household and also in a couple of the northern castles, he
, for hethe allies of his clan, and he had a very English outlook on life in gene
wealthy Although his title was rooted in the Highlands, Julius didn't spen
Romantime there, but rather at Ashkirk Castle, which wasn't far from
n a lostPleasant on the English border. Julius considered himself far mor
only toLowlander than a Highlander because it was at the Scots/English
tandardwhere most of the action took place. He was a man with a head for p
l. Thatand he used that to his advantage, in spite of his adversarial relationsh
out thethe Lowland clans. As long as he had the support of the English and th
armies, he didn't care what his Lowland neighbors thought of him.

Ralph was well aware of this. He always thought Julius to be the
uninteresting man, and the fact that they were allies was simply b
tire lifeRalph appreciated Julius' political knowledge—and also the fact tha
lander,could produce a couple of thousand rabid Scotsmen on the field o
e of hisupon request. Ralph might have appreciated Julius to that extent, but
Englishnot want his daughter marrying into the family.

orthern He had greater aspirations for Davina.

Edward. But Lares didn't know that. Ralph was aware that Lares had been
at leaston Davina for years, but he'd only made that obvious over the past yea
d of thewhen they both became of age. Ralph suspected that Julius knew of hi

II hadintention and, more than likely, had encouraged it because a marriage
dun Tarh to the de Gilsland family would be quite a feather in Juliu
EnglishRalph found it odd that Julius hadn't come on behalf of his son, whi
the only reason he wondered if Julius knew of Lares' intention at all,
vith hisfact remained that Lares had finally asked that fateful question.

i't have *May I seek yer daughter's hand in marriage?*

on, but Truth be told, Ralph was already feeling bad about what he had to
roungerlad.

. Ralph "Sit down, Lares," he said after a moment's reflection, indic
less lot.nearby chair. "Sit down before you fall down. There's no reason to
troubled about this. Every man must face this day at some point in l
s son afacing the father of the woman he wishes to marry. It is a rite of passag
was for Lares smiled weakly. "It feels like an execution, m'laird."

f vision Ralph chuckled. But, then again, Lares always did something to

ian thathim, or others, laugh. He was a tall, muscular young man, with a cr
traineddark, curly hair and an easy smile. He was always joking, always la
omes tobut beneath that exterior was an incredibly sharp mind. Men son
ral. mistook his intelligence level because of his smiling manner, and th
d muchtheir undoing. The easy manner was only on the surface. Beneath i
Mountwas something dark.

re of a That darkness also had Ralph worried.

border “Not an execution,” he said after a moment, reaching over to p
olitics,man some wine because he looked like he needed it. “Simply
ip withexperience in life. If a man lives correctly and sets his cap on th
heir bigwoman, he only goes through it once.”

He regretted it almost as soon as he said it, because Lares focused
e ratherlast few words. “Does that go for me also, m’laird?” he asked. “Will
becausego through this once?”

t Julius *Damn*, Ralph thought. He hadn’t wanted to get into the meat of his
f battleso soon, but it seemed that they were headed in that direction. Sett
: he didpitcher aside, he handed Lares the cup full of rich red wine.

“I like you, Lares,” he said, watching Lares suck down about hal
cup in one swallow. “I like your father and I like your brothers, even
n sweetsare like a pack of wild dogs from time to time.”

ir or so, Lares wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, grinning. “
is son’sdispute ye,” he said. “I’ve called them worse.”

linking Ralph snorted. “But they’re excellent warriors,” he said. “I’d go
is’ cap.fight with them without reservation.”

ich was Lares nodded, not particularly wanting to talk about his younger b
but the“Respectfully, m’laird, ye’ve not answered my question,” he said. “
accept my offer for Davina?”

Ralph’s smile faded as he looked at the dark-eyed man. “You’re a
tell theLares,” he said. “You were knighted at the Lyceum, were you not?”

Lares nodded, not unaware that Ralph was still refusing to answe
ating a“By Thurston de Royans, m’laird,” he said. “I served at the Lyceum fo
o be soyears during my training.”

his life, “And your father is a friend of de Royans?”

ge.” “Aye, m’laird.”

“And your brothers are not knights?”

o make Lares shook his head. “Nay,” he said. “It is tradition that only the

own of male be knighted. But Arden and Florian are excellent warriors, as ye
ughing, Ralph nodded to what he already knew before standing up and
netimes away from the table, clearly pondering Lares' question. His ex
at wasslippers made soft sounds against a floor that was made from the fine
t, there just as all of Mount Pleasant was made from the finest stone with th
furnishings. De Gilsland had wealth and wasn't afraid to show it.

Lares watched closely as the man paced.

our the "What manner of life could you hope to give my daughter, Lares?"
a new asked. "What could you offer her that should make you the best prospe
ie right Lares stood up because he didn't want to address the man sitting d
will be the next Earl of Torridon," he said. "As it is, I hold the tit
l on the Albion. I have my own lands and I have income. But as the Earl of To
l I only Davina will be the Countess of Torridon and the mistress over the Hyc
the grandest in the Highlands. We have wealth and lands, and we will
refusal happy."

ing the Ralph looked at him. "The Hydra is grand," he said quietly. "I
disputing that. But your family's politics are... concerning, Lares."

f of the "I understand, m'laird."

if they "And your brothers and their activities are concerning."

Lares had suspected that might come up. "My brothers are Highlan
I'll not the bone, m'laird," he said. "I dunna condone what they do. I
participate in it. I—"

o into a Ralph cut him off, but he wasn't cruel. Simply factual. "Your b
have sided with the Bruce," he said. "They have created havoc for E
rothers. Lares. No doubt about it."

Will ye Lares averted his gaze. "I know, m'laird," he said. "But I dunna
their actions."

knight, Ralph simply shook his head as if baffled by a Highlander who
support the Scots king. "Your father walks a precipice in his loyaltie
er him. day of his life," he said. "Everyone knows that he was educated in E
or a few and that his wife is English, yet your father is a Scottish earl. Further
is no secret that Robert de Brus rails against the Edward, and he is sup
by most Scots."

"Most but not all, m'laird," Lares said quickly, nearly interruptin

When Ralph looked at him with a regretful expression, Lares could see
e eldest this was going. There was so much conflict between the Scots a

say.” English at this time that loyalties were being pulled apart all across moving country. And that left the dun Tarh clan with some difficulties. “My pensieve has always had loyalty to the English, from the time of Henry Curthorst pine, have English lands, as ye know. My father spent the majority of his years in the finest England even though he’s a Scots nobleman, as ye’ve said.”

“And you, Lares?” Ralph asked softly. “What of your loyalties? If they say they are with England, then you are a man without a country. That’s what I’ll hate you for it.”

“What?” Lares grunted. “They already hate me,” he said. Then he closed his eyes. “Ironically. “What are my loyalties? My loyalties are to a peaceful Scotland. You know I’ve been advising the Bruce on the English behavior. I know the English and how they think, and I’ve been advising them on their activities. I know the English and how they think, and I’ve been advising them on their activities. It is the Bruce on such things. But I will not take up arms against the Scots. I’ll be very English, m’laird.”

“Why not?”

“Because I canna take up arms against my brothers,” he said. “My father knows that the dun Tarh clan and our lands are... special. My da has an army of Highlanders, and he’ll use them for the Bruce if he must. But if he doesna, then the clans will turn against us and we’ll lose everything. I’m like my da. I’ve too much English in me from my years of living with them. Ye called me a man without a country. That’s true, but I’ll do what I can for my brothers than ye know.”

Ralph was listening with sorrow because it was leading into what he would say next. “And you want to take my daughter into that chaos?” he asked almost gently. “Lares, she does not deserve that.”

Lares stiffened. “She would be cherished, m’laird,” he said. “I’ll protect her with my life. I swear to ye, we would be rich in love, but she didn’t count for anything. She would be everything to me.”

Ralph sighed sharply, mostly because he truly hated denying Lares. “England and I have known each other for quite some time, have we not?”

“Aye, m’laird.”

“And you would expect me to be honest with you, would you not?”

“Aye, m’laird.”

Ralph looked him in the eye. “Then I will tell you that I was excited by this offer from you,” he said. “I know you understand that my concern is for Davina. I must ensure her safety and happiness. Would you agree?”

oss thethat?"

family Lares nodded, but he had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. "We would, m'laird."

mouth in "And you know that I would never want to hurt you, don't you?"

Lares sighed faintly. "I could not believe ye would do it deliberately if you m'laird."

the Scots "You are right," Ralph said, moving in his direction. "I would never hurt you deliberately. But what I must say will hurt you, however regretful. Davina must be safe, and that is all I am concerned with, and you know that I have already agreed to a betrothal with an English ally to take her away from the borders. She will be away from the English as they fight one another. Her future husband is an older man with wealth and status, and she will be treated like a queen. She will be satisfied. That is all I can wish for her, but unfortunately, that means I cannot grant your request. I am very sorry, lad."

laird, ye It was a kind refusal, perhaps the kindest refusal Lares had ever heard. Ralph was a kind man, and that was evident. But Lares had suspected the answer, and he was prepared. At least, as much as he could be. What he hadn't expected was that there was another betrothal for Davina, more even a hint of a rumor. Truth be told, that bit of news had his belly lurching.

After a moment, he hung his head.

he had "Then the woman I love will marry another," he muttered, struggling to keep his composure. "She'll belong to another man."

Ralph felt a good deal of pity for Lares. "For her health and happiness, I would think that would be best," he said. "If you think about it, Lares, I believe you will agree with me. If you truly love my daughter, then you will wish for her safety and happiness above your own. You will think about her before you think of yourself."

"Does Davina know?"

Ralph shook his head. "Nay," he said. "I've not yet told her because she knew she would tell you."

Lares looked at him then. "And you thought I would do something foolish, did ye?" he said. "Ye dinna trust me to do the right thing?"

is only He was growing agitated, and Ralph hastened to reassure him. "I am only with you simply that it was none of your affair," he said. "Lares, the under-

thing would have been to allow rumors to reach your ears to discourage each. “I from the offer I knew you were going to make. But that is dishonorable. I knew you were going to ask for Davina’s hand, and I wanted to tell you personally that she is betrothed to another. I wanted you to hear it from my own lips.”

Lares understood, sort of. But his composure continued to slip, and he hurtraked his fingers through his dark hair. “And so I have,” he said. “It doesn’t change the fact that I love yer daughter and she loves me. I should truly give yer miserable daughter over to a man who must compete with what will memory? You speak of preserving her health and happiness, but the truth is that ye simply dinna want her to marry me.”

“That’s not true.”

“Ye’re holding Davina up as the reason I should be selfless, but I cannot think only of her, when the truth is that ye’ve thought only of yerself.”

Realizing he was about to say something he would regret, Lares turned away from the solar door. “Ye speak of truth, m’laird, but ye’ve given me lies. I’m not as stupid as ye seem to think I am. I thank ye for yer time today, but it could be nothing. Davina loves me and I love her, and yer betrothal canna be broken. Davina, that.”

Ralph rushed after him, grabbing his arm before he could get to the door. “Lares, calm yourself,” he said steadily. “I’ve given you the complete picture. If you were not so swept up in what you want, you would see that. You’re doing exactly what you accuse me of doing—thinking only of yourself.”

Lares yanked the door open in spite of Ralph having a grip on his arm. “I’m thinking that ye couldna tell me that ye dinna think I was good enough for yer daughter,” he said, dark eyes flashing. “Ye painted a picture of her that suggested she’d be better off somewhere else. Why could ye not have told me ye dinna want me for her? I could have accepted that better than manipulative lies, trying to make me believe that you thought she’d be better off elsewhere and trying to coerce me into agreeing with ye. That was because I’m laird. I dinna deserve that.”

With that, he pulled his arm from Ralph’s grasp and stormed from the solar, into the keep entry, and headed out of the front door.

Ralph stood in the solar entry, watching the young man storm out. “It is thinking that nothing Lares had said was wrong. He knew the lad was a bit of a brat, but evidently, he was much sharper than he’d given him credit for.”

age you had, indeed, been trying to manipulate the conversation, hoping to control the conversation. Lares thought that everything was for Davina's benefit. He thought if he put it all your way, it would mean more to Lares, but the young man saw through my scheme. Lares was smarter than that.

Ralph had the feeling this would not be the last of it.
and he He had to find Julius.

"But it
Will ye
with my
truth is "LARES!"



Lares could hear his name being shouted as he marched across Pleasant's bailey, a small and compact area given the size of the keep. It was crammed with outbuildings and animals. He was heading of ye." stables, though he really didn't know why. All he knew was that he had a long distance between himself and Ralph de Gilsland. He was angry and had not as disheartened, a bad combination where Lares was concerned.

changes He'd been known to act out a time or two.
change "Lares!"

The shout came again, closer this time. He knew who it was because he recognized the voice. Coming to a halt, he turned to face Davina as truth. It toward him from the kitchen hard. She was dressed in green silk, perhaps a finer fabric than she should be wearing out in the dusty bailey, but she looked like a goddess. At least, he thought so.

his arm. His goddess.

enough But his no more.

are that "Well?" Davina said, her green eyes alight with anticipation. "What simply he say?"

er than Lares stared at her for a moment. Those beautiful eyes and that auburn hair spoke to him. He wanted to run his fingers through it, but unkind, as she was meant to be claimed. Davina could be silly and petty at times, but she had a woman's soul. A good soul. The more he stared at her, the more the grief he began to feel.

"He denied us," he said bluntly. Tact had never been his strong suit, and ye know that he already has another husband selected for ye?"

s sharp, The smile vanished from Davina's face. "Another... husband?" said Ralph.

convince startled. "Where did you hear this?"

It hit that "From yer father," Lares said, jabbing a finger at the keep. "I have to go through his come from him. Not only has he denied me, but he tells me that he has an English husband selected for ye, someone far away from the borders who will keep ye safe from the turmoil of these lands. He intends to send ye away and I'll never see ye again."

Davina gasped, and her hands flew to her mouth. "It's not true!"

Lares sighed heavily. "I'm afraid it is."

"But he's never said a word to me!"

"For good reason. He knew ye'd tell me."

Mount She was beginning to tear up. "But... but this is madness," she said, "I do not want another husband. I want *you!*"

For the "And I want ye. But yer father has other plans."

And to put "Then what shall we do?"

Hurt and She was obviously upset, and Lares moved to comfort her but it was not better of it. "I dunna know," he said quietly. "I... I must think."

Davina grasped his arm. "Then you'll not give up?" she said, but she pushed back the tears. "You'll try again?"

Because he "Why?" he said, and she shrank from him, fearful of his tone. He tried to steady himself because he didn't want to upset her more than she was perhaps aware. "He's set, Davi. His mind is made up. He must do as he feels best and I must follow." "I must I."

Davina eyed him fearfully. "What does that mean?" she asked. "Please do not tell me you are going to ride from here and never return. I could not live with it if I were never to see you again."

What did He shook his head, shushing her, but that bright mind was working on a solution to the problem. He glanced up, toward the keep, seeing Ralph emerge around the corner. He waved his hand around, clearly scouting for his daughter. Lares stepped back from the door, standing a few feet away. A proper distance. When Ralph caught sight of his daughter, he didn't want the man to be concerned because Lares was so close to her. "He's more too close."

"If I ride from here, ye're going with me," he said quietly. "Dunna tell anyone. It's a secret. Did ye hear, but yer da is watching us. Dunna show any rage or emotion, Davina. Stay calm."

He said, She looked up at him with big eyes, wanting to turn around but feeling the urge. "Is he looking at me?"

“He is.”

“What should I do?”

“Nothing,” Lares said. “Davi, I’ve made a decision.”

“What?”

“I’m leaving, and ye’re going with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“To the nearest church so we can be married.”

Davina’s features rippled with hope. “Now?”

Lares sighed again and looked around, pondering the situation. Rai was still looking at them at a distance. He had to throw the man off his scent. “I do truly intend to depart with the prize.

“Lass,” he said, his head turned away from her. “I’m going to look as if I’m angry with ye, but it’s only to confuse yer da. May willna watch ye so closely if he thinks I’m angry and want nothing to do with thoughtye. Can ye play the part?”

Davina wasn’t quite sure what he had in mind, but she nodded. “I’ll do what I can,” she said. “What do you want me to do?”

“Weep,” Lares said, turning to her and shaking a dramatic finger at her face. “Weep and carry on as if I’ve just told ye how disgusted I am with ye already and yer da. He’s watching, so make it good.”

Davina did. She wailed and put her hands over her face. “Like this?” she asked, muffled.

Lares waved his hands at her in an exaggerated gesture. “Perfect,” he said. “Now, listen closely. I’m going to the stable to gather my horse.”

“I’ll leave, I want ye to go to the keep, but at the feast tonight, ye’ll tell ye that ye should on the dunna feel well enough to attend.”

Davina shook her head dramatically, trying to play the role of an extremely upset young woman. “And I do not attend the feast?” she asked him. “Then what?”

Lares extended his big arms, pretending to gesture wildly. “Ye’re not to make sure no one is watching ye,” he said. “When it’s safe, ye’re to take Davina’s way to the postern gate. I’ll meet ye there. Now, wail again.”

Davina did, carrying on for a moment with her hands over her face and looking at him between splayed fingers. “We’ll leave when every one is fighting distracted with the feast?”

“We will.”

He was smiling even though her hands were covering her face. “To be there,” she said. “Oh, Lares... I can hardly believe it. We are married!”

“Wail,” he commanded softly, shaking another raging hand at her. She squealed. “If yer da is to ask what I said to ye, ye must tell him that I that we are finished. That I’m going away and never returning. Tell him I’m sorry I ever knew ye.”

“But you aren’t... are you?”

“Of course not,” he said. Then he waved his hands at her in a gesture of finality. “Go inside now. I’ll be waiting for ye tonight. And tell no one

With that, he stomped off, leaving Davina standing there with her hands over her face. Thinking she should probably run away from him to perhaps tell her father that their relationship was indeed ended, she whirled on her heel and rushed back toward the kitchen yard. There was a door that led

to the lower-level kitchens there, but she could get into the keep from that door. “I can,” she could think about was this evening and how Lares would be waiting

for her. She knew a church not far from Mount Pleasant where she could bring her father and priests to marry them. The sooner they were married, the better. Davina thanked her father for trying to marry her to some English fool.

Davina de Gilsland was going to take charge of her own life.

“Little did she know how much the situation was going to veer from control.”

“I can,” he
While I
for da ye

of an
he said.

is going
to make

before
you is

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Little did she know how much the situation was going to veer out of control.



CHAPTER TWO

“**A** SASSENACH HUSBAND?” Julius grumbled. “Did ye have to tell him th

Ralph cast Julius a frustrated look but refrained from arguing with him because he’d already done enough of that.

Julius knew why he’d done it.

He was simply being difficult.

It was midmorning on a bright, clear day. Ralph and Julius were on horseback with an escort of twenty men, some English and some Highlanders. Two scouts were spread out in front of them following the trail that Lares had taken from Mount Pleasant, and, presumably, Davina had followed him, because no one had seen either of them since yesterday. Davina had told her father the night before that she would be unable to attend the feast, and, being a sympathetic soul, Ralph had let her. He hadn’t even had anyone to check on her other than her mother, and that had been early in the morning. But Davina had been missing and her bed hadn’t been slept in.

That threw Ralph into a panic.

It was no great mystery where she had gone.

Or with whom.

For all of Lares’ intelligence, he evidently hadn’t realized, or didn’t want to, that the markings of his horse’s hooves were unique. They’d been able to study them in the stall where his horse had been stabled the day before that was how they’d been able to follow the hoofprints from Mount Pleasant. They were clearly heading to Carlisle, which had the nearest church where they already knew Lares’ intentions. No one had to tell him, least of all the father, who was upset that his heir had been denied the wife he wanted, and also upset that Lares had stolen the woman he’d been denied.

Julius was a man with a dilemma.

“Let us pray he has not married her,” Ralph said, shouting over the of the thundering horses. “If he has, there will be... trouble.”

Julius looked at him sharply. “What do ye intend to do?”

Ralph wouldn't look at him. “He did not have permission,” he said. “If he will have married someone else's betrothed. That is thievery, dun Tar has stolen what does not belong to him, he will be punished.”

Julius knew that. A man with his son's dark hair but the pale eye of his mother, he and Lares looked a good deal alike. They had the dun Tar beauty. They also thought alike in many ways, but their personalities were different. Julius was older and more cunning, while Lares was young and vivacious. But they both had an impulsive streak, something Julius had learned to control, but Lares hadn't. Not yet. But it was a streak that had cost Lares everything.

Much like Ralph, Julius could only pray they were in time to save their foolish son from doing something ridiculously foolish that might cost him a foolish life.

“Foolish, foolish, foolish!”

“He's a man who knows what he wants,” Julius said, making eye contact with Lares. “Ye knew he'd been sweet on Davina. Ye should have seen this coming.”

Ralph scowled. “Now it is my fault?” he said. “The fact that you have a disobedient son is your fault. Do not blame me for your failure, Julius.”

Those were dangerous words, but Julius knew he'd pushed the matter to the corner. He was trying to cast blame, to confuse the issue so perhaps he wouldn't be so hard on Lares, but the truth was that Lares was at fault. This was a dun Tarh problem, and there was no spin enough to change that.

God help him, he had to get to his son before he truly ruined everything.

“How far are we from Carlisle?” he asked, trying to shift the subject.

But Ralph was angry. He knew Julius was trying to deflect the blame, and that simply enraged him. His horse took a bad step on the road, and Julius was pleased to see the animal firm to keep himself from falling before answering.

“Not far,” he said. “My scouts are probably already there. The man's orders to go straight to the cathedral and locate them.”

“And then what?” Julius had to bite his tongue to keep from asking. “What will you do to Lares?” His eldest, his shining star, the only son who possessed half a brain and the strength to use it. What would happen

ie noiseLares if he married a woman meant for another?

God help the man.

God help them all.

id. “He

h. If he



s of hisTHE PRIESTS AT Carlisle Cathedral wouldn't even consider marrying an
rh malethe middle of the night.

es were That was what Lares had been told when he and Davina reach
ger andcathedral, a glorious, red-stoned structure that had been standing for hu
ius hadof years. The stone was marked and burned in places, a testament
t mightconflict the cathedral had seen over the years. Between the Scots :

English, the city of Carlisle, along with its castle and buildings, had
:top hisbeen a target.

him his It was a border city with a violent history.

Davina, not entirely strong and resilient, had been weary from the
the middle of the night to Carlisle. She was hungry and her backside h
xcuses.she wanted to be married quickly so they could find a tavern where sh
g.” eat and go to sleep. Never mind the fact that sleep was the last th
raised aLares' mind, but he tried to be patient and understanding with her.

” However, when the priests at the cathedral wouldn't entertain m
n into athem, no matter how much he begged or demanded, and no matter how
s RalphDavina cried, he was forced to seek shelter for the night. That was sor
: Juliushe didn't want to do, and he considered leaving for another town
stronganother church that would grant his request immediately, but Davina c
go another mile. Therefore, he'd been forced to find a bed for her
thing. night.

ct. It had been a dirty little inn tucked into the older part of Carlis
ne, andstones were filthy, the floor uneven, and it had a perpetual smell of r
he heldLares wanted to find other lodgings, but Davina refused. Therefore,
for her to stay in a tiny chamber with an old brazier in the corner and
y haveas he slept in the common room only a few feet away, listening to a p
minstrel play his out-of-tune citole all night long. It seemed to Lares
g. Thensong the man played was just for them.

he had

ppen to

I gave my heart to her. It was never mine to give again.

*For the love of her, I staked my claim,
To be her shadow, evermore.*

He came to hate that song.

Unfortunately, Davina had listened to it all night, too, and sang it way to the cathedral. He told her to shut her lips, but she wouldn't. She smiled as he grew more annoyed.

To be her shadow, evermore...

But here they were, back at Carlisle Cathedral about two hours before sunrise because Davina wasn't an early riser. Lares was fairly certain that his father and Ralph were heading to Carlisle because, surely, it wouldn't have been difficult to follow him. If Lares had been the one doing the following, he would have determined the shape of his horse's hooves and used that to follow their trail, and he was sure his father had done that. That was a standard trick when following a man on horseback, so he suspected that they were riding into Carlisle very shortly.

He had to hurry the marriage or all would be lost.

But Davina didn't seem to sense his urgency. She didn't have the instincts of a hunter, so to her, the very fact that they had escaped Mount Eborac seemed to be enough. She was certain her father couldn't find them. Nothing Lares said could convince her otherwise. After she rose and dressed, she wanted to break her fast, but Lares put his foot down and told her she could eat all she wanted after they were married. Truth be told, all he had to do was bed her to claim her as his wife, and he should have done that last night, but she wanted a ceremony at the door to the cathedral for the day he bedded her, so he acquiesced to her wants.

He was starting to wish he hadn't.

He should have gone with his instincts.

It was well into the morning when they returned to the cathedral. The door was open at this hour because of the morning prayers. The faithful were wandering in and out of the side entry, which opened up into the spacious, vaulted ceilinged transept. There were enormous, red-stoned pillars throughout the floor of hard, compact earth. For as large as it was, it was unfurnished for the altar in the nave. When Lares spied a priest near the altar, he grabbed Davina by the hand and moved quickly in the man's direction.

The priest had a group of acolytes, evidently lads who were learning

ways of the church. They were sweeping and polishing the p
candleholders used during mass. The priest was instructing a lad how
scratch the gold on the candlesticks as Lares approached.

“Yer grace,” he said, addressing the man respectfully. “My nam
: all the Lares duh Tarh. This is Lady Davina de Gilsland. We came last even
he only were turned away, so we have returned this morning. We wish to be i
right away.”

The priest didn’t seem too thrilled that he’d been interrupted dur
rs after instruction. He scratched his nose, looking Lares over before turning h
that his on Davina. He looked her over, with some disdain, before returning hi
l’t have to Lares.

lowing, “Come back later,” he said.

that to Already, Lares was annoyed. “I will *not*,” he said. “I was told t
was a night, so here I am. It is later. And we wish to be married.”

ey’d be The priest turned his back on him, telling one of the boys to go an
rag, but Lares would not be ignored.

“Father,” he said slowly. “I’m doing my best to be patient, but yer
mind of respect isna working in yer favor. I would appreciate a measure of
pleasant from ye, or this will not go well for any of us.”

m, and The priest caught on to his tone. With a sigh of impatience, he tu
washed him again, perhaps contemplating telling the couple to leave once m
wn and thinking better of it. The Scotsman was big and clearly powerful, :
be told, priest had no desire to have his neck snapped.

ve done “I have duties to attend to,” he said. “At this moment, that d
l before include your request. If you return later, I will be finished and better
serve you.”

“Forgive me, Father, but coming later is not possible. It must be no

There was something in those words that suggested the time was
, which bad things were going to happen. The priest was coming to understa
il were He opened his mouth to once again tell them to come back later,
roaring-realized a third time might provoke the Scotsman. It was with misgivi
it and a he realized he would have to deal with him, because the man wasn’
l except shoed away.

grabbed “You do not worship here,” he said after a moment. “I do not rec
you.”

ing the Lares shook his head. “Nay, you wouldna,” he said. “But I’m wi

recious pay well for a priest to say a blessing over us for our marriage. My not towards a blessing.”

The priest scratched his nose again, but the acolytes had his attention. He is Siragain, and he quickly instructed them, sending a couple of them away. Hearing but the children shuffled off, he turned his full attention to Lares.

married “It is not as simple as wanting a blessing,” he said. “What of the parents? Do they approve of this marriage? Since I do not know either, asking his these are questions I must ask. We do not want an irate father blaming his gaze a marriage he did not sanction.”

is focus Lares was rather shocked that the man seemed to know his situation exactly. But he knew that was impossible, since he didn’t know either of them, so Lares could only assume this kind of thing had happened. What last This was a church, after all, and the world was full of impetuous youth.

He proceeded carefully.

and find a “The lady does not have parents,” he said, a complete lie. “She is an orphan. Will ye marry us now?”

lack of The priest looked straight at Davina. “Your parents are dead, my lady.”
civility Davina’s eyes widened. “I...” she stammered, looking fearfully at the priest.
“That is... aye, they are. I do not have parents.”

needed to The priest pondered that stuttering answer. He could see that he’d been more bothered off guard with the question, which led him to believe they were and they lying. With a heavy sigh, he looked away from the pair.

“Then I must have permission from the lady’s... guardian,” he said. “My name is Benedict Nursia. I am not the priest in charge, but I have been here for many years. The acolytes and wards are my charges. I’ve not conducted a marriage mass in years. I would more than likely do it wrong. Therefore, I can see that you must return and speak with Father Briant. He will know how to do.”

and that. There he was, putting them off again, and Lares was close to losing his temper. He didn’t like being denied, and most especially by a priest. The acolytes didn’t seem to have any real sense of either urgency or compassion. That he was angry at being asked to perform a blessing and was doing everything he could to get out of it.

recognize “How difficult is it to say a prayer for us?” he asked. “All I am asking for you to say a prayer over us and bless our marriage. Surely you know how to pray?”

ly lady Benedict stood his ground. "I am certain I can pray better than you know," he said. "But you have lied to me and the lady has lied to me. I will not bless anyone who has told a lie to a priest. A *knowing* lie. You have committed a great sin, Scotsman."

That tipped Lares over the edge. "I willna be lectured by a man who has lied to the lady's where his heart should be," he growled. "It is clear ye have no understanding of our predicament. If ye did, I wouldna have to lie to you."

Benedict snorted. "So this is my fault, is it?" he said. Then he waved his hand. "Get out, the both of you. Go find someone else to marry you, but in this situation it will not be me or anyone else here. Go take your lies elsewhere."

Infuriated, Lares debated how to proceed. He could tear up the sarric cloth before, but that probably wouldn't get him what he wanted. He worried about the knights at Carlisle Castle, which wasn't far at all. If the priests summoned a garrison, it could go badly for him. Therefore, he had to do something destructive to convince the priest to at least say a blessing for the lady. Something that would frighten the man into it.

Something that would force him to surrender.

"Very well," Lares said, unsheathing the dagger at his side.

Lares gasped, positive he was going to charge the priest with it, but instead he was caught pushing his way to the altar and went to his knees in front of it. "If you will not give us your blessing, then mayhap I will summon someone who will." With that, he rammed his dagger into the packed earth right in front of the altar and began to draw something, carving it out of the hard earth. Concerned, Davina timidly moved toward him to see what he was doing. As the priest, while greatly annoyed, nonetheless peered at what Lares was doing, scratching on the ground. The man was drawing lines, a symbol of some kind, and he was nearly done with it when the priest realized what it was.

His eyes widened.

"Nay!" he shouted, rushing toward Lares. "What are you doing? At least whomad?"

Lares finished the last line on the pentangle, a star-shaped symbol used by the devil and his demons. It had been a symbol for centuries. "Ye wouldna pray for us," he said, leaving his dagger in the dirt as he lifted his arms toward the altar. "I call forth Lucifer in all forms, of Asmodeus, of Mammon, of the mighty Leviathan, of all demon lords to come forth and bless our marriage! Lucifer, I demand ye appear to me!"

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anyone Davina was gasping with fear as the priest rushed over and tried to force the pentangle, but Lares shoved him back, so forcefully that the man fell onto his backside. There were a few acolytes in the sanctuary, and they were running in all directions, calling for other priests in a panic. All the while Lares remained on his knees, his arms uplifted as he called upon the deity. “Ye had a chance to marry us, priest,” he said, watching Benedict scramble to his feet. “Now I call forth the devil himself to bless our union. Belphegor, do ye hear my plea? God will not bless our union, so may it be because will!”

The priest looked properly terrified, something that filled Lares with satisfaction. He was hoping the man would beg him to stop praying and agree to give his blessing. That was the hope, anyway. Lares preferred rather enjoying the expression of horror on that smug priest’s face. Damn that non-man for denying him.

He was going to pay the price.

But that satisfaction was short-lived when Lares heard Davina gasp behind him. Startled, he whirled around in time to see Ralph grab Davina as Julius charged toward Lares, reaching out to grab him by the head, he shouted, “What in the name of all the saints are ye doing?” Julius shouted, “Ye will summon the devil to his feet. I come in the door to see ye summoning demons? If ye have lost what little sense ye have?”

Lares realized, very quickly, that he was in a very bad way. Ralph was already dragging Davina from the cathedral, and he tried to follow, but he was doing nothing. Father and a few other Dun Tarh men held him back. He began shouting Davina’s name, and she screamed his name, causing a chaotic scene. Shouts and cries of some of the old stone walls as Benedict and his acolytes vanished in haste. The cathedral cleared out quickly as the two lovers were separated by the fathers. The last Lares saw of Davina, Ralph and another soldier had both arms and were dragging her out into the sunlight. Lares stood in horror, his arm outstretched as if to grab her, as his father and others hurriedly related the news.

There was nothing more he could do.

“Da,” Lares gasped, still straining against him. “Let me go! Let me go!”

“Never,” Julius said sternly. “Lares, ye’ve always been stubborn and proud, but this... I dinna believe ye were capable of such things.”

Lares looked at his father with tears in his eyes. “What thing
nan fell demanded. “I want to marry her. I *will* marry her!”

Julius reached out and slapped his son across the face because
while, nearly hysterical with the loss of Davina. “*Enough*,” he said. “Do ye t
emons. Gilsland is going to allow his daughter to marry a man who was
enedicts summoning the devil? In a church, no less? Lad, ye’ve been in trouble
union, but not like this. Never like this. Ye’ll be fortunate if the man doesna
hap ye with the local magistrate. They’ll put ye in Carlisle Castle’s vault and
the key in the moat!”

Lares’ left cheek was stinging from his father’s blow, but it l
g to the desired effect—he was thinking more clearly. And he was abs
res was distraught with what had just happened.

“Da, I love her,” he said, grasping his father desperately. “Bring he
Tell de Gilsland to bring her back to me, please.”

Julius could see that Lares was calmer, but it didn’t change facts.
scream never coming back,” he said, grabbing him by the arm and motioning
rab his men that were with him. “Come with me. We must see the priests.”

Lares was bigger, and stronger, than his father, but he didn’t resis
ranking man dragged him along. “Why?” he said. “What are ye going to do?”

Julius was beside himself. “After what I just saw, what do ye exp
to do?” he said. “Ye’ve always had a darkness about ye, Lares. Now
ph was why.”

“Why?”

Julius looked at him sharply. “Because ye have a demon inside of
echoed said. “Now I know. I’ve seen it for myself.”

Lares’ brow furrowed, and he suddenly dug his heels in, slow
y their father’s pace. “What have ye seen?” he said. “Da, ye saw me trying t
her by the priest into marrying us. He refused to do it, so I told him I would s
here in the devil. I was threatening him!”

Julius didn’t like that answer in the least. “Only a man possess
demon would do such a thing!” he said. “Either that or ye’re a madm
if ye are truly mad, then I’ll take ye back tae the Hydra and chain ye
ie go to vault. Ye’ll never see the light of day again.”

Lares was starting to struggle with his father. “I am *not* mad,” h
orn and “Da, listen to me. I dinna mean any of it. Are ye listening?”

They had reached the small doorway where Benedict and his acoly

gs?” he disappeared. Julius came to a halt and had his men kick out the Lares’ legs so he fell to his knees, subdued by six burly Highlanders he was Julian had brought with him from the Hydra. These men had known him most of his life, and he considered them friends, but they’d all seen him caught trying to summon Lucifer, and now they were looking back at him in stages of shock and fear. They were confused but doing as they were ordered. They were subduing Lares.

“Now,” Julius said, his features hard as he faced his son. “I am going to find a priest, and we’ll find a way to subdue this demon.”

Lares shook his head. “There is *no* demon,” he said, beseeching his father. “Da, *look* at me—there is no demon. I told ye why I did it. I wanted was to marry Davina.”

Julius was shaken as well as angry. He pointed toward the altar. “When I came in, I saw what ye were doing,” he said. “I saw ye push the priest back. She’s ground. I heard ye bellowing for the demon lords. I *heard* it!”

Lares was growing desperate. “I told ye why,” he said. “All I wanted was to marry Davina.”

“Be silent,” Julius said, cutting him off. “Silence yer tongue or I’ll throw ye out of ye. Ye’ve always been stubborn, but taking Davina with the intention of marrying her was beyond what I thought ye were capable of. I know it damaged my alliance with de Gilsland at the very least, and we followed ye to Carlisle only to find ye summoning demons. Ye’ve gone too far, lad. Time... ye’ve gone too far.”

“Da, listen to me!” Lares begged. “Since when do ye not listen to me?”

“Since ye nearly ruined yerself and Lady Davina along with ye!” Julius nearly shouted. “Do ye not understand, Lares? If I dunna do somethin’ to scare ye if I dunna put ye out of de Gilsland’s reach, then there is the very real possibility that he will punish ye for stealing Davina. And if the word spread that ye worship Lucifer, that will be the end of ye. No marriage by a future, and no hope. Are ye comprehending what I’m telling ye?”

Lares did. It was the worst-case scenario in the situation of his life, but he did. Slowly, he nodded. “Aye,” he said. “Then ye believe me when I tell ye that I wasna summoning the devil? Not really?”

Julius wouldn’t go so far as to agree. He simply shook his head. “No, I don’t believe ye, but I know what I saw,” he said. “But I also know what others saw, what de Cottes had saw. I know what ye did. And I must do something about it.”

“What are ye going tae do?”
Julius didn’t have an answer for him, not right away. Without
Laresword, he went through the door where he’d seen the priest go as
as he remained on his knees, held down by his father’s men. Truth be told
was beside himself with shock, with distress. He couldn’t believe his
ordered. wasn’t willing to listen to him. He also couldn’t believe that his attempt
coerce the priest had blown back in his face spectacularly. He’d lost
and now his father was convinced he was possessed by a demon.

It was a horrific situation, any angle he looked at it.
He’d gambled. And he’d lost.
Canon Bernard Briant, the man in charge of Carlisle Cathedral, was
enough to listen to a panicked father who explained that he was terrified
When his son’s soul, that the devil surely had him within his grasp. That as
it to the was confirmed by Benedict, who was still shaken up by what he’d
Julius was convinced that the only hope for his son was to commit himself
to the nearest abbey, where he could live a pious life and purge any darkness
from his soul.

Julius didn’t mention, of course, that it was the one place Ravens
couldn’t get at his son should he and Davina’s betrothed die.
Ye’ve punish him. Nay, he didn’t mention that at all. The story of the
possessed yehim exactly what he wanted. Before the day was out, Lares was on his
feet. This a remote abbey run by the Cistercian priests of Carlisle, and his
quest to marry Lady Davina was officially ended for good.

But the legend of Lucifer’s spawn, for Lares dun Tarh, was born.

Julius
big now,
every real
rumors
age, no

his own
eve me

I know
Gilsland

“What are ye going tae do?”

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Canon Bernard Briant, the man in charge of Carlisle Cathedral, was kind enough to listen to a panicked father who explained that he was terrified for his son's soul, that the devil surely had him within his grasp. That assertion was confirmed by Benedict, who was still shaken up by what he'd seen. Julius was convinced that the only hope for his son was to commit him to the nearest abbey, where he could live a pious life and purge any darkness from his soul.

Julius didn't mention, of course, that it was the one place Ralph de Gilsland couldn't get at his son should he and Davina's betrothed decide to punish him. Nay, he didn't mention that at all. The story of possession got him exactly what he wanted. Before the day was out, Lares was on his way to a remote abbey run by the Cistercian priests of Carlisle, and his quest to marry Lady Davina was officially ended for good.

But the legend of Lucifer's spawn, for Lares dun Tarh, was born.



CHAPTER THREE

Camerton Abbey
Two years later

PRETTY AND PERFECT, with golden-red hair and eyes of green, Lady Coleby Douglas-de Waverton peered from the window of the first carriage she and her mother were riding in, spying the rambling, rather dilapidated abbey in the distance. It was early morning on a fine day after weeks of rain and the sky above the abbey was streaked with purplish, bruised clouds. Against the backdrop of the sky and the bright sunlight, it made for dramatic scenery.

“Is that it, Mama?” she asked, pointing to the monastery on the hillside. “Camerton?”

Mabel’s mother, Lady Irene, leaned over to see what her daughter was pointing at. “Aye,” she said after a moment. “That must be the one where your brother is somewhere in that monastery, and we must bring him home.”

Mabel didn’t ask why. She didn’t ask questions. She knew her brother, George, had ended up at the monastery because he’d been too far from where he’d told his parents he would be and ended up breaking his fall when his horse spooked. He’d been in a remote area of Cumbria, southwest of Carlisle, and he’d been taken in by the priests at Camerton Abbey. A physic had been summoned, the same physic who had sent for Lord and Lady de Waverton on George’s mishap. George, in fact, had not sent them word at all, and Mabel had heard her father raging about her wayward brother with no sense of responsibility. He was so angry that he sent for her and daughter, one hundred soldiers, and two wagons to fetch George.

And that was why they were here.

Truly, Mabel was glad for the adventure. Nothing much happened in her rather sheltered life, and her father wasn't a social man, so few visitors were infrequent at their home of Wigton. That was in great contrast to her brother, who loved to visit and loved to travel. George the Elder, her father, didn't even like to venture out of his home, so that was why he never visited his wife and daughter. It hadn't been because he was too angry to come, but simply that he could not come.

But George the Elder's refusal to travel was Mabel's gain. And it was probably better for her brother, whom she loved. He was sweet and kind, but thoughtful, but her father was correct—he had no sense of responsibility. He was bright, but he didn't want the stress and troubles of the lordship he was to inherit someday. That meant he traveled around, visited friends and family, and spent his father's money wherever he went. George the Elder paid for his son's debts begrudgingly and threatened not to pay anything more if his son incurred more.

But he always did.

This was simply another one of George's follies in a long line of them.

Mabel and her mother hadn't spoken much on the journey from Wigton to Camerton. It had been an overnight journey, and they'd spent the previous night in a tavern where everyone seemed to either be drunk or fighting. Mabel thought it was all great fun, but her mother wasn't under that impression. In fact, it had put the woman in a sour mood, so there hadn't been much conversation in general.

As the carriage lurched over the muddy road that was more puddle than actual road, the rain began to fall again from those purple clouds. It wasn't just enough to dampen the men, who peered at the sky with discontent. The carriage hit a particularly deep rut and got stuck, but Lady de Wigton refused to get out of the carriage because it was so muddy, and she said Mabel remained in the carriage as the soldiers managed to free them from the hole.

After that, the dirty carriage lurched and bumped all the way to the top of the rise. "Mama," Mabel said, a little green because of all of the swaying and violent bumps. "May I please get out and walk the rest of the way? It doesn't seem to be so muddy here at the top of the rise. All of the water should have run down the road."

Irene caught a glimpse of the big abbey ahead. They had already

l in her what looked like a small village area, with small cottages and fields and cabbages and turnips. She could see it along the side of the road along with men working them, more than likely pledges or wards of the abbey.

er, their “I do not think so,” she said, peering at the edge of the road. “It e’d sent quite muddy.”

me, but Thinking she might become sick, Mabel hiked up her skirt to show her mother the boots she was wearing. “I am properly attired,” she said, taking a deep breath. “I really must walk before I become ill.”

ind and With that, she pushed her shoulder into the door of the cab, and it opened. She was out of the carriage before her mother could stop her. She would be in a heavy wool traveling dress, one that came with breeches underneath for protection and comfort, and they were tucked into her boots. Mabel walked, holding her skirt up to keep it out of the mud as she headed across a field on a diagonal toward the abbey.

“Mabel!” her mother called after her. “Go straight to the abbey! Don’t stray!”

em. There weren’t many places for her to stray to. Mabel simply walked away from her mother off, trudging across the field, trying to shake off the motion sickness. The soldiers didn’t follow her because they could see her clearly through the field of cabbages. They simply followed the carriage. Mabel crossed the field toward the abbey. Fortunately, it wasn’t too muddy here because it was at the top of a rise. Off to her left, a few men were working the cabbages, harvesting them because they were quite large. The wind was starting to pick up a little, blustery after the rains, and Mabel held her skirts to keep them from blowing around. She was paying attention to her dress, not where she was stepping, and she ended up slipping on a spot and going down on her arse, twisting her ankle.

she and “Damnation,” she said.

rom the Hand to her aching ankle, she looked off toward the road only to see that it must have angled away from the abbey before coming around again. The escort was moving away from her. Realizing there was going to be no help from her father’s men, she tried to get to her feet, but her ankle doesn’t hurt a great deal. Still, she managed to stand, putting most of her weight on her good ankle, as a deep voice spoke from behind.

“I saw ye fall, m’lady,” he said. “Did ye hurt yerself?”

entered Startled, Mabel turned to see a big man with shoulder-length dark

elds of and dark eyes. He wasn't much older than she was, and she realized
ng with twinge of interest that he was quite handsome. But he was dressed in c
better suited to a peasant and carrying a farming implement in one h
is still fact, that twinge of interest turned into one of suspicion, because he'
up behind her and she'd never heard a sound.

ow her That made her leery.

aking a "If you think to assault me, know that all I have to do is scream and
have a hundred furious soldiers down upon you," she said. "Put the
: swung down."

he was He did, immediately. "I dinna mean tae startle ye," he said. "'T
eath for that I saw ye fall. I thought ye might need help."

l began She tried to take a step and almost went down again. "It would see
ded off she said. "I have evidently hurt my ankle."

The man moved close to her, going to one knee as he lifted her skin
Do not a look at her ankle. Before Mabel could protest, he put his big hands
her booted ankle and gave a gentle squeeze.

ved her Mabel yelped.

ckness. "Ah," he said, peering up at her. "I think ye have, indeed. Can ye
as she weight on it?"

riage as She shook her head. "I do not think so," she said, trying to use the
terribly joint, but she ended up nearly tumbling onto him as she walked. "Dar
en were Utter *damnation!*"

ge. The He grinned at her, a charming gesture. "I've never heard a lady u
l fought language."

ttention She frowned at him. "And you probably never will," she
a slick "Unfortunately, I have a mouth like my father, and he swears constantl

That made his grin broaden. "'Tis nothing to be ashamed of, m'la
said as he stood up. "It simply means ye're passionate about the thir
see that mean something to ye."

n to the She eyed him, finally breaking down in a reluctant smile. "It me
going to mother is constantly admonishing me," she said. "She does not sha
r ankle view."

ight on His eyes were twinkling at her. "I know something about a par
sharing a child's view," he said, his smile fading. "My father dinn
mine, either. And if it wouldna be too bold, I'll introduce myself. My
ark hair Lares."

with a That was indeed a bold move, as he suggested. Introductions were clothing with mutual acquaintances or friends or family, but since there was no land. In that position around, perhaps it wasn't bold as it was necessary, so did come they would know whom they were speaking with.

"My name is Mabel de Waverton," she said, looking him over. "Scots?"

and you'll "Aye."

shovel "Are you a farmer?"

He shook his head. "Not by trade," he said. "But by circumstances."

his only She wasn't sure what he meant. "What circumstances?"

He gestured toward the church. "I live there," he said. "Everyone here has a task. This is mine."

She thought she understood. "Then you are a priest," she said. "I don't even get to speak with a woman?"

around He was shaking his head before the words were out of her mouth. "I'm not a priest," he said. "I'm a ward, although the spineless bastards were very happy to see me take my vows."

put any His eyes widened when he realized he had sworn in front of her, and he giggled. "You have a mouth like my father, too," she said.

injured He put up his hands in apology. "Forgive me, m'lady," he said. "I suppose we have that in common—we speak passionately about things."

She was smiling openly at him. "I do not think that is a bad thing," she said. "More people should say what they feel. The world might be better for it."

He said. He chuckled. "You think so, do ye?" he said. "I think if the Scots were what they thought, we'd have constant wars, all across Scotland."

dy," he She giggled again. "I suppose you are right," she said. "Isn't it saying what they feel that starts wars in the first place?"

"That is my belief."

ans my Distant shouting caught their attention, and they both turned to see where the de Waverton carriage had made its way to the front of the abbey. The carriage had climbed out and was shouting at her daughter, waving an arm.

ent not Mabel waved back.

a share "That is my mother," she said, not entirely happily. "She is waiting for me."

Lares could see that. "Have ye come on business?"

She made She shook her head, trying to put weight on the ankle again but fa
one ofHe grabbed her arm so she wouldn't fall, bracing his other arm arou
at leastwaist to keep her upright as she tried to walk.

"Thank you," she said in reference to his help. "To answer your q
'You'rewe are not here on business. We are here to collect my brother, Geor
you know him?"

Lares held her as she took another step and ended up hopping beca
couldn't put any weight on her leg. "George?" he said curiously. "
." "priest?"

"Nay," she said, coming to a halt because she couldn't walk any
ie must"He broke his leg and the priests have tended him. We've come to
him."

Are you That brought recognition. "Ah," he said. "That George. The lac
dormitory. Aye, I've spoken to him, but he calls himself Georgie. He
l. "I amlively, which is something that vexes the priests, I think. But I've e
ould behind."

Mabel appreciated the kind words about her brother. "He's a
and sheman," she said, but her smile soon faded. "I hate to trouble you, bu
you tell my mother I need help? She'll send a couple of soldiers to assi

"But I Lares' response was to bend over and swiftly pick her up. Abrupt
s." in the man's arms, Mabel grasped his neck for support, realizing very
g," shethat their faces were quite close together. Now she could see him up
tter forand he was a prize specimen. She had been startled by his action at fi
now that she was in his arms, something else was happening.

ots said A sweet little flutter, deep in her belly.

She rather liked it.

it men "No need for the soldiers, m'lady," he said as he continued acr
field. "'Tis my pleasure to help Georgie's sister, though I will adr
sorry ye've come to take him home. He was a bright spot in an ot
see thatlonely life."

y. Irene "I'm sorry we must, but he should go home."

"Of course he should," Lares said. "I simply meant I'll miss spea
him. But I suppose it doesna matter, because I'm going home as well."

ting for "Are you?" Mabel said, trying to ignore the giddy trembling in he
"When do you leave?"

"Soon," Lares said. "The priests know they must release me now t

altering. da has died. I've been called home."

and her "Is that so?" Mabel said with some concern. "I'm sorry that it was a sad homecoming for you."

question, They were nearing the edge of the field, and Lares could see Marge. Domothers waving frantically to a few soldiers, pointing to her daughter. They started heading in their direction.

use she "Not a sad homecoming," he said quietly, eyeing the soldiers who were still some distance away, but by nature he had an aversion to English soldiers.

"Truthfully, I'm glad to be rid of this place. I'm glad to have the opportunity to live a normal life again and not exist at this wretched purgatory."

collect "Has it been so awful?"

He looked to the abbey and its dark, tall walls with moss growing all over them on the north side of the building. "Awful enough," he said. "But, then again, it's a much better return to my family's home, which is a much better place."

enjoyed "Where is it?"

"Far to the north, in the Highlands," he said. "A place called Hydra."

it could She was curious. "That's quite a name," she said. "Why is it called Hydra?"

He shrugged. "No one really knows," he said. "It has always been called Hydra. The home we live in has been there for hundreds of years, but quickly that, there was a wooden fort built by the tribes who used to inhabit the area. It sits on the edge of an inlet that leads out to sea, and my father thought it was a sea serpent. He called it the Hydra because there really was a sea serpent in the inlet long past. He thinks the original building on the site used to be a temple to the serpent. But who truly knows how things get their name? Men are creatures sometimes."

Mabel nodded. "True enough," she said. "Then your home has existed for many years?"

He nodded, looking at her with those dark, twinkling eyes. "My ancestors are Romans," he said. "Ye've heard tale that the Romans once conquered the English? They tried to come to Scotland, but we ran them off or forced them to live among us. Those are my ancestors. They built the temple to the serpent. And they settled the land and married into the tribes."

She smiled faintly. "I had a tutor who spoke of the Romans and the Greeks," she said. "But I do not remember much about them."

He was forced to turn away from her so that he could watch where

going now that they were near the end of the field. "'Tis nothing for
ill be abred lass to know," he said. "The Romans were conquerors. They came
shores of England and Scotland, back in the old days, and they forced
Mabel's serve their empire."

r. They "Sounds fearsome."

He gave her a half-grin. "We are."

io were "Is that where you get your name? I've never heard it before."

oldiers. He nodded. "All men in my family are given Roman or Aragon r
ortunityhe said. "The Romans we descend from were men from Aragon. The
our son will have a name of my choosing. Possibly after a Roman kin
Aragon prince."

g on the Her eyes widened, and she couldn't help the snort that escaped h
i, I will "Our son?" she said. "Are we having a son together, then?"

All he did was cast her a sidelong glance, grinning, and Mabel
nearly beat right out of her chest. Something about that expression su
Castlehe meant what he'd said, and, strangely, she believed him. She was
why, but she did. Few were actually men of their word, but Mabel su
that?" Lares was one of them. Out in the middle of a lightly traveled
n calledCumbria, working in a field of cabbages, was a man who spoke the tru
before He meant every word.

ie land. Pondering that very thing, Mabel was prevented from answering b
ks theythe soldiers were upon them at this point. Her father's heavily armed n
in dayscome to collect her, and she batted them away.

mples to "Leave me alone," she scolded them. "He's perfectly capable of
strangeme."

The soldiers weren't happy about it. Irene wasn't happy about
been inMabel tightened her arms around Lares' neck and grinned at him as a
of soldiers stood by, unsure what to do. By this time, there were a
cestorspriests who had come forth to greet the visitors, and they were all w
red thewith various expressions of concern and outrage as Lares carried Ma
d themof the field and headed toward her mother.

to the Lares wasn't unaware of the battery of condescending stares, either

He knew he was going to get an earful.

and the "I fear our acquaintance is coming to a close, m'lady," he said, h
on the mother in particular. "'Twas an honor to meet ye, and I'll miss
he waswhen he leaves. Should I wish to call upon ye, where do ye live?"

a finely Mabel looked at him. She found that she was quite sorry they would be parted. "Slow your walk," she said quietly. When he looked at her curiously, she smiled. "The faster you walk, the faster you must come down."

A smile spread across his lips, and he immediately slowed. "That's a bold suggestion, m'lady."

"Then walk quickly if you do not agree."

"James," His dark eyes studied her. "I slowed down, didn't I?"

Therefore, Mabel chuckled. "You did," she said. "But my mother will be furious if you or an I've spoken to a farmer. Look at her—she is already having fits."

"Would she have fits if you spoke with an earl?"

Her lips. Mabel wasn't sure what he meant. "Of course not," she said. "But it's different. A man of higher standing and she'd probably throw me in the stocks or hurt herself."

Suggested The smile on his lips grew. "I said I was not a priest," he said. "Not a farmer, but that is my task here at Camerton. I was sent here by the lord because... Well, it doesn't matter why. But know that I'm not a priest or a farmer. I was born my father's heir."

He said. "What does that mean?"

He told her.

because
men had



helping "HE'S A WHAT?"

Irene was close to being irate as she watched the tall, handsome man in peasant clothing carry her daughter toward the abbey entry. She'd decided to try to know who he was, but a few words from the priest had her turning the pair of men in shock.

Watching "Say that again," she demanded. "He's the *what*?"

Mabel said "He is the Earl of Torrison." The priest, a thin man with bad teeth, was looking at her rather fearfully. "That young man who has been working your fields."

Irene's mouth popped open, briefly, in astonishment. "The Earl of Torrison is working your fields?"

George The priest seemed nervous as he spoke. "Lares dun Tarh has on

ld soon become the Earl of Torridon,” he clarified. “We received word two days ago that his father has passed away, and Lares was his heir. He is now in Torridon, and as such, is preparing to return home.”

Irene’s astonishment took on a hint of interest. She returned her gaze to the tall, dark-haired man emerging from the field of cabbages with her daughter in his arms, and she could see all manner of possibilities. Maybe she wasn’t selective about whom her daughter should marry, but Mabel had been difficult when it came to finding her a husband. At her age, she would not be betrothed at the very least, but she wasn’t. Any man that came to court her, either by his own initiative or by invitation, had been found wanting in Mabel’s eyes. She was bright and stubborn, and had a very strong idea of the man she wished to marry.

Irene, however, wasn’t so selective. If she could garner a titled lord for her daughter—an earl, no less—then she would do it. She would do it if it took.

Even if the earl was Scots.

“Tell me about him,” she said to the priest just as Lares and her daughter came out of the field. “Why was he here at the abbey? Does he mean to marry a priest?”

The priest shook his head. “Nay, my lady,” he said. “As I said, his lordship had him sent here after the lad was caught trying to marry a lady without permission, but also...”

He trailed off, causing Irene to look at him curiously. “Also *what?*”

The priest was hesitant as he lowered his voice. “He was sent here because of a man in his soul,” he muttered. “He was caught summoning demons, and his lordship sent him here to purge the demons from him. Since his arrival two years ago, he’s slept little, read the Bible for hours every day, and worked tirelessly to purge the devil from him. God shall prevail in the end.”

Irene’s expression had a hint of horror to it as she listened. “None of that, was she finally scoffed. “There are no demons in that man.”

“We have worked hard to ensure that there are none, my lady.”

“He looks perfectly normal to me.”

“I hope so, my lady.”

Irene wasn’t sure what more to say to that. Her daughter and the lordly question, now an earl, were coming closer, and as they drew near, Irene stepped out to meet them.

ays ago “What happened?” she said to her daughter. “Did you fall? You the earlchild, I told you to be careful. I knew you would hurt yourself.”

Mabel had little patience with her mother. “I slipped in the mocus totwisted my ankle a little,” she said. “But I assure you, I’m perfectly well with her “If you are well, then let me see you stand.”

Not that “I’m not that well.”

bel had Irene growled in frustration. “First your brother, now you,” she shoulddramatically. “We are here to bring your brother home because he br ill uponleg, and now you are injured as well. Your father will be quite angry!”

ting in Annoyed, Mabel squirmed with the intention of climbing out of a aboutarms, so he lowered her to the ground carefully. She stood on both f the truth was that she was mostly balancing on her left foot.

lord for “See?” she said. “I can stand. I will be completely well by the t what itreturn home, so you needn’t worry about Papa. Right now, we sh more worried about George. Have you asked to see him?”

Irene hadn’t. She’d been so concerned with her headstrong daugh aughterthe very reason they were here had completely slipped her mind.

to be a But she wasn’t going to admit that.

“Of course I have,” she said, turning to the priest. “Why have y s fathertaken me to my son yet? I demand that you take me to George immedi without

The priest had no idea what she meant, and he looked at her with s first and then fear. “My lady?” he stammered. “Your... your son?”

Irene threw an imperious finger toward the abbey. “I *told* you,” sl to savethough she knew full well that she hadn’t. “We’ve come for the you s fatherwho has broken his leg. I am Lady Irene de Waverton, and my son is ars ago,the abbey. Take me to him immediately.”

e fields The priest darted inside with Irene following. Mabel was left s there, or rather balancing there, as everyone seemed to be moving i sense,”abbey. As her father’s soldiers wandered back over to the escort, she at Lares.

“I do believe they have left us alone,” she said.

The corners of his mouth twitched. “It would seem so, m’lady,”

“Would you be so kind as to help me inside?” she said. “I hate to a man inI fear that I lied to my mother when I told her that I was well. My ank re wenta great deal.”

Lares had suspected as much. “We should tend to your ankle b

foolish grows worse," he said. "If ye'll allow, I can help."

Mabel smiled at his kindness. "You've helped quite a lot already and said. "But mayhap you can help me inside. I should like to see my brother."

Without a word, he bent over and picked her up again, carrying her into the dark, cool innards of Camerton. It smelled of cold earth and dust, the incense the priests were so fond of that came from mysterious lands he said across the sea. While Lares was fairly certain he could become quite useful, he took his arms around Mabel, she was thinking that she could become quite useful being carried around. By him. As he followed the voices into the dormitory where Lares' where George was exclaiming his delight at seeing his mother, Mabel met, but her gaze lingering on Lares, only to flush and turn away when he caught her staring at him.

It was a game they played more than once. She would look, he would catch her, and before they entered the dormitory, he was looking at her. Caught him. Lares had gone from a simple rescue mission to a game that interested her fairly quickly.

And so had Mabel.

But no more interested than Lady Irene. She didn't even care when she entered the dormitory carrying her daughter for a second time. Not at all. "I didn't mind at all because before the day was through, she'd come to surprise Lares and Tarh and the tale of his remote, but evidently rich, earldom.

the next morning—for they did remain at the abbey overnight—she was taken home with two very important things: her son for one and a betrothal to another. Lares and Tarh had surrendered without a fight.

When their first son, Aurelius, was born a year later, it was the beginning of the legend of Lucifer's Highland Legion.

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When their first son, Aurelius, was born a year later, it was the beginning of the legend of Lucifer’s Highland Legion.

PART TWO
AURELIUS



PART TWO
AURELIUS





CHAPTER FOUR

Year of Our Lord 1346

August

Crécy en Ponthieu, France

THE AIR SMELLED of death.

Everything smelled of blood and death, mud and smoke, and in every inch of every nostril after the battle to end all battles. It had been at Crécy that the English had defeated the French, that Edward III had defeated Philip VI, in a smug attack against the English that the French were sure they were going to win.

Instead, they'd left piles of the dead and dying.

It was nighttime now after the decisive victory. The English had moved their encampment to the north of the battlefield, east of the Maye River, which ran from north to south. The deluge that had constituted much of the battle had died down, leaving a sea of bloody mud in its wake. On the rise over the battlefield and the town of Crécy-en-Ponthieu, the victory fires of the English burned bright into the clear night sky.

The encampment was a mixed bag of the jovial and the brutal reality of the battle. The men who had survived the battle relatively unscathed gathered around the numerous campfires, talking and drinking and showing signs of levity. But the truth was that they all had a certain glassy-eyed expression so common to men who had suffered through the rigors of battle. There was something in that hollow gaze that suggested the horror they would never be able to fully verbalize. It was the type of experience that men often kept buried, unable to relive the death of so many friends and colleagues.

Un jour de mort.

A day of death.

That was what the men would call the battle of Crécy in the years to come.

The English had collected into groups of allies as the evening drew in. At the center were the royal knights and soldiers under Edward III and his son, Edward of Woodstock, and then men who served under the Earl of Northampton. At the extreme north of the encampment were the men under the command of the Earl of Wolsingham, a powerful man with allies from the north that included the House of de Wolfe and the House of de Nerra. Wolsingham also had an entire contingent of Highlanders from far to the north of Scotland who had been attached to the de Wolfe group. De Wolfe was the largest family in Northumbria, holding most of the major castles, with tens of thousands of men at their disposal.

Including Scots.

Even now, the leader of those Scots was heading back to his encampment. He'd been with the wounded, checking on some of his men who unfortunately refused to accept the fact that they had, in fact, been wounded. That was typical of the Highlanders he knew. He'd been summoned by one of the barber-surgeons attached to Wolsingham's command because the man needed to amputate the fingers of a Highlander who simply refused to let him.

That was when the man had sent for Aurelius dun Tarh.

Aurelius was the kind of man that his own men called *cumhachd*... quiet power. It was something greatly admired by those who knew him, and he had a reputation for being a man of such quiet power that legions of Highlanders would follow him into battle with a mere wave of his hand. *Cumhachd sàmhach* was more of a trait, an inherent character that was woven into the very fabric of a man, that couldn't be bought. It couldn't really be taught. It was something a man had or he didn't.

And Aurelius had it.

So, he was sent for when a stubborn Highlander refused to let his smashed fingers be amputated. They were pulverized and would soon be infected, but still, the man refused. Aurelius knew the soldier, an old man with one eye who came from Clan MacKenzie, a clan related to the de Wolfe clan, and he'd sat with him and reasoned with him as to why having

couple of fingers on one hand was possibly better than having five fingers was all a strong man would need. It had been a nearly years to argument, but Aurelius had managed to convince the seasoned Highlander that, indeed, two fingers on one hand was all a great man needed.

The surgeon was able to do what he needed to do.

Now, Aurelius was heading back to his own campfire, passing out

On the way, smiling wearily to the men who called to him by name. He had become a popular figure in the force of Edward III, mostly because Aurelius and his Highlanders were always on the front lines. While the English and their archers did severe damage to the calvary of the French and their knights, Aurelius and his men had gone in on foot to kill those who were wounded. They stripped those who were dead, and to generally wreak havoc on anyone who was the misfortune to be on foot. They even slashed the legs of mounted knights, cutting a few tendons while they were at it. No one long survived.

Aurelius and his marauders. They'd proven themselves more than worthy to the king.

But now... now, it was time for a celebration. "Aurelius!" came a shout. "What are ye doing, man? Come over here and join us!"

Aurelius could see his brother, Darien, waving him over. Darien was known as Darien the White—he was called so because of a big white streak of hair right at the top of his forehead. Aurelius had, in fact, brought four brothers with him to the field of battle—Darien, Estevan, Caelus, and Kaladin.

Aurelius had eight brothers total, but his mother wouldn't let the younger boys travel with him from home, so only the older brothers were allowed to go. The youngest in the group, Kaladin, was nearly a grown man, and the truth was that his mother tried to keep him behind, but he'd snuck out and followed the others. He finally met up with his brothers and Wolsingham's group in Dover. Aurelius knew that if he were to return home without Kaladin, his family wouldn't even probably never recover. Such was the burden of the older brothers—protecting the younger—and mostly annoying—siblings. But the truth was that he didn't mind.

If his mother was his heart, his brothers were his soul.

The bond of the Dun Tarh brothers was legendary.

"I'm coming," he said, wandering toward the enormous fire where the Dun Tarh were all gathered as someone shoved a cup of wine at him. "'Tis a fine drink, only a little. There is much to be grateful for."

e. Two A dozen cups were lifted in agreement, men saluting Aurelius, s foolishtheir victory. As Aurelius had said, there were many things to be grate hlanderHe took a seat on an upturned log next to Darien, who was already a fe into his drink with another half-full cup in his hand. He held his cup Aurelius, who knocked his own cup into his brother's. Together, they thers asdeeply until Darien nearly fell over backward because his head was e was aback.

and his With a grin, Aurelius steadied him.

Welsh "Ye fought well, all of ye," he said, looking at the men gathered : allies,the fire. "Today was the measure of a man, I must say. I've fough ided, to battles, but I've never seen one quite like this one."

Who had "Indeed, nor have I." A knight across the fire nodded, his featu ren andnearly as gleeful as some of the men around them. "My family ha againstfighting wars for generations. I've been fighting since I could hold a thy. But this battle... this was legendary in its brutality."

Aurelius nodded to the statement of Thaddeus de Wolfe, who was ere andwith his brother, Atticus, and his cousins, Rhorl and Bretton, who v

Bret. Their fathers were the grandsons of the great William de Wolfe, *in geal*, Warenton, the man who had almost single-handedly tamed the north. of hairWolfe family had intermarried into several northern families—c rothersincluded—so they were distantly related to the dun Tarh clan l He hadAurelius' mother was a de Velt. Therefore, Aurelius and his entire el so farlooked upon de Wolfe as cousins, and, at the moment, Aurelius was g igest ofthe de Wolfe knights had survived, though Bret had taken a beating; hat hishe'd been unhorsed. But still, he was alive.

l. He'd They were all alive.

er, and That was what mattered.

mother "But ye survived," Aurelius reminded them quietly. "We all su rother,which is more than I can say for the French troops."

ith was Bret de Wolfe was standing behind his brother, a young knight serious air about him and his left arm secured to his body with a bi bandage. His gaze turned toward the darkness, toward the sounds of agony.

re they "You can hear them out there, still," he muttered. "The French are e night,to remove their dead, but I do not see how they possibly can. The mu way they were piled on one another... How do you find men wh

saluting become part of the earth like that?"

ful for. Bret, son of Ronan de Wolfe, was facing his first major battle, and now cups been quite an introduction. It was true that he'd been born to battle, like the other males of his family, but facing reivers on the Scots border and the massive French army in bloody chaos were quite different. He'd never experienced destruction like this—quite frankly, none of them really had. Not like this.

Beneath the celebration for victory lay the nasty underbelly they were unwilling to acknowledge except in moments like this.

around There was no ignoring it.

t many "The story of mankind is full of battles where men become part of the earth."

ires not Another man, a few feet away from Aurelius, spoke quietly. He was as been than the rest of them, his father having been a great English mercenary in the day. Austen de Nerra glanced up at the younger knights around him, watching their faces as they were licked by the light from the flame.

s sitting "What do you think happens when a man dies?" Austen continued. "He fades into the earth and becomes part of it. He becomes part of the fabric of the world, the air we breathe. Sometimes, the earth claims her fair share of the dead during a battle. You think you are only fighting one enemy out there, but the earth is there to digest the folly of men. The mud was simply a way of doing that."

family His words had the younger knights spooked and trying not to show it. At that distance, they could hear the groans of the wounded as pinpricks of pain moved in the distance while the French searched for their dead and dying. One would chase them off and no one would help them.

It was time to show mercy.

irvived, mood. He looked to Austen and his cousin, Sir Matthew Astor, who had performed well today, *Sassenach*. "Ye showed the younger knights a thing or two out there."

ig linen Austen swallowed the drink in his mouth. "We showed them how to avoid the mud," he said, fighting off a grin at his own joke. "I think the most impressive part of the day was watching you and your Highlanders search for the enemy beneath the cavalry and cut legs and saddle cinches. You move like a Highlander."

d... the Aurelius. I know you are a trained knight, but you fight like a Highlander. Aurelius glanced over at his brothers. "That is because I lead them like a Highlander."

Highlanders in all of Scotland,” he said, watching his younger brother and it had their cups in agreement. “Estevan and Caelus and Kal havena seen a bull like this all of this size before, but they performed admirably.”

When the “Because they were scared out of their wits,” Darien said, also looking over seen his younger brothers. He and Aurelius were a little more than a year like this age, while Estevan, Caelus, and Kaladin were a few years younger. He mostly pointed at Kaladin, his seventeen-year-old brother, who was bigger than almost any man there. “Kal is a baby bull. Did ye see him tucking under the horses of the French and ramming the horses behind the knees of the would falter?”

Aurelius snorted. “I’m surprised he could fit,” he said, watching the older brother frown. “Dunna scowl at me. We called ye a baby bull, did we not? Why back have called ye a squealing piglet.”

And him, “Or a stupid whelp,” Thaddeus said, smiling wearily. “I’ve got your own brothers of my own. Four of them, including Atticus. ’Tis an older brother. He’s right to call the younger brothers what we want, and they can do a good deal about it. Atticus, you are very much a weak little pup. What do you have of mensay to that?”

“Nay,” Atticus and Kaladin looked at each other, possibly considering properly her that particular dictum, but they both realized at the same time that any argument would not be well met, so they shrugged at each other and kept their mouths shut. That brought some laughter from the men, including Aurelius. He was of light like Thaddeus de Wolfe, a big man who looked a good deal like his younger brother, Titus de Wolfe. Titus, and his brothers and cousins of the same generation had been too old to come on the battle march to France, leaving the way for the younger knights to gain experience. Perhaps Atticus and Kaladin were a little like whelps and pups and baby bulls, but what they had done today was enough. “Ye respect of the more seasoned knights. Frankly, Aurelius was simply getting his leg or were in one piece.

For him, that was the best possible outcome of all.

How to “Call them what ye will,” he said after a moment. “But today, you’ve most earned the right to sit here with us and drink to victory. And tomorrow low tomorrow we will see about heading home.”

A ghost, “Is it really over, Bear?” Estevan asked quietly. “Do ye think we can go home now?”

The finest He’d addressed Aurelius by the family nickname that had come

ers lift Darien himself. Unable to pronounce his brother's name as a small
attle of Darien referred to him as "brother," which ended up sounding like "b
and, finally, just "bear." Aurelius could hear the yearning in Estevan's
king at and he had to admit that he felt the same longing for home. They'd be
apart in for almost a year, a very long time to be away from a family they v
ger. He close to.

er than It was a hunger for the Highlands that was in their very blood.

erneath Highlands they were born to.

so they "I dunna know," he said honestly, looking at his brothers. "The
seems to be over, but permission to return home must come
Kaladin Wolsingham himself."

e could "Will you at least ask him?"

Aurelius held up a hand, quieting his brother. The lad hadn't yet
young not to speak of such things at the end of a battle. It was considered b
rother's because a lot of things could happen, even after a battle was conclu
nothing prevent them from heading home. As he waved him off and lifted
have to with the intention of draining it, they heard a voice approach fr
darkness.

testing "I thought I'd hear more laughter and revelry from this group."

protest They knew the voice, and everyone who wasn't already s
mouths immediately rose to their feet. The entire group turned to face the
e rather Wolsingham, Adams de Leybourne, as he joined their circle.

father, "M'lord," Aurelius greeted him, quickly handing the earl a cup o
eration, provided by Austen. "Congratulations on yer brilliant victory on this
ay open will be remembered for generations to come."

in were The men saluted him, heaping on praise, and Adams lifted a hand
arn the thank them and quiet them. He was good to his men, and, in turn, he w
ad they liked and respected. When some warlords could be brutal and apatheti
it came to their armies, Adams was considered quite congenial and f
was a gray-haired man with a deep voice, not particularly handsome,
they've wife was lovely and rich. Since he had married later in life, she was
row... good deal younger than he was, but they'd been married for more th
decades and only had one child, a daughter, that no one had ever met.

an truly Ever the gentleman, Wolsingham tended to keep his personal life,
family, well removed from anything that had to do with warfare
ie from armies, but he had a reputation for being attached to his wife and da

A child, and most of the seasoned knights, Aurelius included, wondered if he "a-bear" want to quickly return to England now that the battle seemed to have a voice, conclusively decided. Estevan's question about going home could have gone possibly have an answer soon enough.

Wolsingham didn't keep them waiting.

"Today's battle was fought by all of us, not simply me," he said, looking to the men around him. "This group—this great group of knights—helped secure today's victory. I would bring particular attention to Rhett and Bret de Wolfe, along with their cousins, Thaddeus and Atticus. I've seen them fight in battle, and they would have been very proud of you today."

Attention turned to the de Wolfe men, who seemed pleased with the acknowledgement. Men began to congratulate them, speaking on behalf of the learned knights of the past, but Wolsingham held up his hands for quiet.

"A moment, please," he said as the conversation abruptly died down. "I will address the army as a whole shortly, but I wanted to address this first. I have a specific purpose in doing so. However, there is one of them in particular, that I should like to address first."

Thaddeus, who was closest to him, cocked his head curiously. "Wolfe?" he asked.

Wolsingham didn't answer him directly. He looked at the faces of the men until he came to Aurelius. "Bear, may I speak with you privately?" he said.

Aurelius didn't hesitate. "Of course, m'laird," he said. "Shall we go to the tent?"

Wolsingham simply shook his head, motioning for Aurelius to follow him a few feet away from the campfire, far enough so their conversation could not be overheard. With the sounds of muted conversation, laughter, and the cries of the wounded as a backdrop, Aurelius faced his liege.

"I am sorry if this seems mysterious," Wolsingham said, a weary smile on his lips. "But I wanted to speak to you without that group of jesters coming also on the issue. I realize they are your cousins and brothers, but once they have started, it is difficult to silence them."

Aurelius fought off a grin. "That is true," he agreed. "There are times when I like to gag the lot of them."

Wolsingham chuckled. "Well, can I believe it," he said, but his laughter sobered. "Bear, I wanted to applaud you on how well you fought today."

It would be a prideful thing for me to watch.”

Wolsingham was one of the few men outside of the family that had quite permitted to address Aurelius by his nickname. The dun Tarh clan had fought under Wolsingham’s command in various battles for the past twenty years when Lares dun Tarh fought for the man. There was a long-standing respect and friendship there, so Aurelius was touched by the man’s words.

“Ye honor me, m’laird,” he said. “I believe my men performed well for you and Even Estevan.”

Wolsingham grinned. “He’s very young,” he said. “And very easy to control. If you can control that strength, I do believe you’ll have the warrior on your hands. But that is not what I wanted to speak with you about.”

Aurelius cocked his head. “Oh?”

“I intend to reward you for your performance. You have earned it.”

Aurelius’ eyebrows lifted. “That is kind, m’laird, but a reward for me is unnecessary,” he said. “Allowing us to return home soon would be enough.”

Wolsingham shook his head. “It is a very special reward,” he said. “I thought long about this particular reward. You’re a fine knight, Bear. You’re well liked by the men. They will follow you anywhere, and that is a great gift. I had always hoped to have a son just like you, but that was not to be. Do not misunderstand me—I am quite content with my wife and daughter. I would care for the sun to my moon. But a man... Well, a man wishes for a son. My father had eight of them. I envy his good fortune when it comes to sons.”

Aurelius’ eyes glimmered. “I’m sure he’d sell ye my youngest brother for a good price.”

“Cruz is at an age where one wishes he’d been drowned at birth. Leandro is such a wretched creature that we regularly tie him to a tree so that the hope wild animals will claim him.”

Wolsingham chuckled. “I think your father would have something to say about that,” he said. “But it is not Cruz or Leandro that I want. It is you I want.”

“I dunna think my da will let ye buy me.”

“I wasn’t thinking about purchase. I was thinking about marriage.”

“I’m flattered, but ye’re already married, m’laird.”

He’d meant it as a jest, but Wolsingham wasn’t smiling. His daughter’s eyes were intense as he fixed them on Aurelius. “I am a man without a name today. It is Aurelius,” he said quietly. “I have an enormous empire without any name.”

lead it when I am gone. I want that leader to be you.”

That was Aurelius was coming to realize what the man was saying, and all had been humor drained from his face. “Ye... ye want me to...?”

7 years, “I have already spoken to your father,” Wolsingham said quickly, alliance hoping to get it out before Aurelius exploded. “A year ago, I wrote and proposed a betrothal between you and my daughter. He has all, also, Aurelius. Consider the betrothal a reward for your performance here at but also because I believe you will make an astonishing and righteous leader and Wolsingham. Most happily, for me, is that you will marry my daughter and a fine official become my son. God did not give me a male child of my blood with you I believe he has brought me to you. I have been wanting to tell you for months, but it never seemed the right time. But now... now, it is the time. You are the only man worthy of my legacy and my Valery.”

Aurelius was dumbfounded. “Valery?”

It is not “My daughter, Valery.”

reward Aurelius was staring at the man, trying not to appear too shocked and appalled. It was obvious that Wolsingham’s offer had taken him by surprise. “I’ve but he was even more surprised about his father’s involvement.

You are “My... my father knows of this?” he managed to stammer.

unique Wolsingham nodded. “He knows and he approves,” he said. “Lad become. Do not only be the Earl of Torridon, but the Earl of Wolsingham as well. My father. They be an immensely powerful man in both Scotland and England, and a great one. Your children will be those who forge nations and unite worlds. Men of greatness should have such responsibility, Aurelius. You need no other,” anything about it now, because I know it is a surprise, but you can mention it, and why I did not wish to say this in front of the men. You are betrothed to my daughter, and when we return home, we shall go to Lydgate Castle, where you can meet your future bride. Valery is a kind and intelligent woman, and she is also beautiful, and I speak without bias when I say that. I swear to you that she will make you a wife worthy of the Earl of Torridon and Wolsingham.”

Aurelius had no idea what to say. He felt as if he’d been kicked in the head by a horse, because he was in a daze. Nothing seemed to be clear for one thing...

dark eyes This had been planned for quite some time.

an heir, “Then I have been a betrothed man for months and ye’ve not both told me?” he said incredulously. “I was not even offered a say in this matter.”

Wolsingham shook his head. "That is something you must as
l of the father," he said. "He spoke for you, and I will not explain why becau
not know. But the fact remains that you must marry someday. I have
y, as if you a prestigious marriage to my daughter. My grandchildren will l
to him children. I cannot think of a better legacy for the House of de Leybo
agreed, the dun Tarh clan."

Crécy, Aurelius let his gaze linger on Wolsingham, decidedly unhap
Earl of didn't care about legacies at the moment. He didn't even ca
ter and Wolsingham was delighted. He was simply reeling with the fact tha
od, but this had gone on and he didn't even have a voice in his own future.

you for "Does yer daughter know about this?" he asked.

ie right "She does not."

"Then mayhap she doesna want an arranged marriage."

Wolsingham lifted his shoulders. "What other kind of marriage is
he said. "Lad, I know you are shocked and, quite possibly, unsure at
l or too situation, but I assure you that this will be a good thing. Valery is of
urprise, As I said, she will make a fine wife. Do not insult me by sug
otherwise."

There was a threat there, something that Aurelius should hav
, you'll coming. He'd known Adams long enough to know that the man alw
You'll what he wanted. *Always*. He was particularly good at negotiatio
id your Aurelius suspected that Lares might have fallen victim to some
of your manipulation from an assertive earl, but that didn't matter now. It wa
not say and Aurelius could see that he was simply going to have to accept it.

ow see Anything else could, indeed, be deemed an insult.

l to my "I dunna know anything about yer daughter," he said after a mome
, where one has ever met her. I've only seen yer wife once in all the years we'
an. She allied. Ye keep the womenfolk well away from the men ye associate w

ou that Wolsingham nodded. "I know," he said. "They are women. They
am." need to be involved with my allies or my men, in any fashion, so they
l in the their tasks and I keep to mine. I was not lying when I said that Vale
except beautiful. She is quite beautiful, and I do not need some fool setting
for her. She's far too good for any man, but you are an exception. Wh
see her, you will understand why I've kept her protected. I hope you
ered to the same when you are her husband."

atter?" Aurelius thought that might be more manipulation, but he had to

ask your that it had him intrigued. *Valery de Leybourne*. He'd never even caught a glimpse of her, not a shadow. He'd never even heard rumors. This shadow offered a woman, this wraith, was now his betrothed. Truthfully, he hadn't even known if she actually existed until this moment.

urne or But she did.

And she was his.

py. He "I would protect any woman who belonged to me," he said. "Any woman who is part of my family—my mother, my sisters, or my wife. Ye don't want all of yerr worry about yer daughter, m'laird. I'm certain ye wouldna have solicited a betrothal if ye dinna trust me."

Wolsingham smiled, a gesture that conveyed the fact that he was about to realize that Aurelius wasn't going to rip his head off after a Highlander had gone from shock to suspicion and now to resignation. "The matter of a few moments. He seemed to be accepting the treachery that had gone on behind his back, to force a wife upon him. But the truth was a different matter. Wolsingham had his eye on Aurelius for quite some time. This was suggesting something that had simply happened. It was something that had been planned.

re seen He wanted his daughter, and his legacy, well protected.

ays got He'd wanted Aurelius, and he was going to have him.

ns, and "I trust you above all else," he finally said. But he wasn't going to end the conversation without acknowledging the moment. He hoped it would make the situation more palatable in the end. "Bear, I know this is not what you expected or even hoped for. I know a marriage is not something you probably considered at your age, but both your father and I feel this is the right thing for you and the right thing for my daughter. You must both have been after all, and I swear to you that my daughter is not the disagreeable girl." "I would not do that to you. But she is spirited. If you will only give her a chance, you might even come to like her."

keep to Aurelius couldn't decide if the man was trying to force him to accept the idea of the betrothal or if he truly meant what he said—that *Valery de Leybourne* was a spirited beauty. Women like that were few and far between, but it didn't matter now.

will do It was done.

"I will give her the same chance that she gives me," he said honestly. "But I would ask a favor, m'laird."

ought a “What is it?”

idow of “That ye not tell anyone,” Aurelius said, growing serious. “I will
't even in my own time, and in my own way. I dunna wish for my brothers to
from someone else.”

Wolsingham nodded. “As you wish.”

With nothing more to be said, Aurelius simply nodded and turned
woman heading back toward the men who were packed around the campfire
needn't they saw Aurelius, Darien asked him what Wolsingham had want
ited the Aurelius managed to distract him with an answer that wasn't exact
truth, but wasn't exactly a lie, either. The truth was that he simply
coming willing to tell his brother, or anyone, yet. He knew that such an off
ll. The Wolsingham would provoke some envy, given that he was to be the
n all in son-in-law and heir. A very wealthy heir. That was his predominant
ery that at the moment—not the wife, but the wealth. The title. Nay, he didn
vas that anyone to know yet.

wasn't Not until they were headed home.

d been God help him, his life had just taken a turn for the unexpected.
And he wasn't sure how he felt about it.

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onestly.

“What is it?”

“That ye not tell anyone,” Aurelius said, growing serious. “I will do that in my own time, and in my own way. I dunna wish for my brothers to hear it from someone else.”

Wolsingham nodded. “As you wish.”

With nothing more to be said, Aurelius simply nodded and turned away, heading back toward the men who were packed around the campfire. When they saw Aurelius, Darien asked him what Wolsingham had wanted, but Aurelius managed to distract him with an answer that wasn’t exactly the truth, but wasn’t exactly a lie, either. The truth was that he simply wasn’t willing to tell his brother, or anyone, yet. He knew that such an offer from Wolsingham would provoke some envy, given that he was to be the man’s son-in-law and heir. A very wealthy heir. That was his predominant thought at the moment—not the wife, but the wealth. The title. Nay, he didn’t want anyone to know yet.

Not until they were headed home.

God help him, his life had just taken a turn for the unexpected.

And he wasn’t sure how he felt about it.



CHAPTER FIVE

*Three Months Later
Lydgate Castle, Yorkshire
Dun Tarh.*

LADY WOLSINGHAM READ the missive three times, and each time, the words written upon the parchment remained the same.

Our daughter is to marry Aurelius dun Tarh.

She could hardly believe it.

“Mama?” a young woman called, pushing through the old, creaking door without even knocking. “There you are. Did you not hear me calling?”

Lady Wolsingham hadn’t. That was the truth. She’d been to the castle reading the missive that had been sent ahead by her husband, the Duke of Torridon, the victor of the Battle of Crécy and the fact that their only daughter was betrothed to the future Earl of Torridon. A Scotsman. More Scotsman, but a Highlander. Here at Lydgate Castle, they were so close to the Scots border that they were practically Scottish themselves, but not quite.

That was about to change.

“I did not hear you,” Lady Wolsingham said, smiling weakly. “I just received a missive from your father. He is on his way home. I suppose I’ve been dreaming of the moment he would finally return. Think on it, Valery. Your father is coming *home!*”

Those were the magic words. Valery de Leybourne gasped as she ran toward her mother, thrilled with the news. Before her mother could stop her, however, she snatched the vellum out of her mother’s hands and ran over to the window for more light so she could read the words herself. Lady Wolsingham was forced to pursue her daughter, trying to take the

back before she read the part about the new husband that was being foisted on her. Perhaps foisted wasn't the right word, but Valery might see it that way.

Or would she see it that way.

With Valery, it was difficult to know.

"Wait, my dearest," Lady Wolsingham said, pulling the missive from her daughter's hands. "You must wait before you read your father's missive in full."

Valery was grasping for the missive even as her mother pulled it away. "But why?" she said. "I want to read of his homecoming in his own words."

Lady Wolsingham had to put out a hand to stop her daughter's fingers. "Wait," she said, softly but firmly. "Stop and listen to me. I am more concerned in his missive that I do not wish for you to read. It was addressed to me, after all. You should have asked permission before taking it."

Valery gave her mother an impatient look. "When does Papa read something that I cannot read?" she said. "His library belongs to me. The book in this castle belongs to me. Some are my very own books."

Lady Wolsingham knew that, but she shot her daughter an impatient look of her own. "Your papa is my husband," she said. "Need I explain to you that there are times when a husband writes something personal for his wife? Everything is meant for you, Val."

Valery understood, sort of. "Love poetry," she said, moving away from her mother and plopping in an old wooden chair with an overstuffed seat on its seat. "The sweet strains of love and passion? Ha! Papa would swallow frogs alive than write sickly-sweet love poetry."

Lady Wolsingham cast her daughter a long look before turning to her chair. "You think you know him that well, do you?" she said. "I... I would be wrong if that is what you think."

Valery made a face, a normal face that any child would make when thinking of passion between parents. "I do not want to know anything," she said. "Very well, Mama. What does Papa say in his missive that I should hear?"

Before Lady Wolsingham could reply, the sound of grunting was carried on the landing outside of the lady's solar. It was rhythmic, but there was to be an echo to it. Both women knew immediately what the sound was. Lady Wolsingham eyed the door as Valery sat forward in her chair.

foisted “Come along, darlings,” she said sweetly. “You may come in.”

it that More grunting, which turned into honking. Two of the biggest geese of England waddled in through the door, heading for Valery as she held her hand to them. They came quickly when they saw her, nibbling her hand and waddling around the chair as she sat back and dangled her hand over the side of the chair, petting feathery white heads as they milled around her chair.

missive Lady Wolsingham sighed as she turned her focus to the missive.

“You know I do not like them in my solar,” she said, knowing it was futile even as she said it. “They are destructive.”

ords.” Valery picked up the nearest enormous goose and put it on her lap. “Please keep them with me,” she assured her mother. “They will not wander.”

There is “They belong outside.”

l to me, “Philip and Edward would be lost without me.”

Lady Wolsingham shook her head in disapproval. “I thought you would write to rename them.”

. Every Valery fought off a grin as she stroked the white back. “I *did* rename them after Papa left for France.”

nt look Lady Wolsingham looked at her irritably. “Aye, you did,” she said. “You named them after the kings of France and England. Do you think that is a life? Not please your father?”

Valery burst out laughing. “By calling them Philip and Edward, you are in order about them,” she said. “Both men are silly geese, anyway. Why would I name my pets after them?”

sooner Lady Wolsingham was not amused. “You will not call them that. Not after the names of your father.”

reclaim Valery was trying not to laugh at her mother’s seriousness. “I will not. You name them what Papa named them,” she said firmly. “I will not call my geese Shite-brain and Dumb Arse.”

e when It was Lady Wolsingham’s turn to fight off a grin. “Call them Thunder and Lightning for all I care,” she said, turning back to the missive. “But I *can* call them back to their original names of Sunny and Moonie. But no more Philip and Edward.”

s heard Valery simply shrugged and turned away, absently stroking the goose on her lap while her mother returned her attention to the missive she’d picked up, and already read a half-dozen times. She knew her parents were devoted to their geese, but, honestly, it had always seemed as if her father was far

devoted to her mother than the other way around. Of course, her
se in all showed great respect and admiration for her father, and there was a
ld out a between them, but Valery always felt as if her mother might be
fingers, sometimes when it came to her father. Adams de Leybourne was
the army years older than his wife, and Valery knew he'd been married once be
ir. a very young age, but his wife had died in childbirth. He'd been e
remarry and found an equally eager cohort in the form of
; it was Wolsingham's father, Ralph de Gilsland.

That had been many years ago.

“I will Valery was aware that her father and mother had hardly know
another when they married. It had been hastily arranged long ago. Ada
Lydgate Castle near the Scots border, but he also had property near
that had been left to him by his mother's family. Brentford was an en
agreed manor house on the north side of the River Thames, a property that spr
nearly a mile along the river's edge. Her father had preferred Brentfor
re name younger years because it was close to London and he adored the lar
but as he grew older, he retreated more and more to Lydgate Castle
l. “You Revelstoke Castle, a smaller castle near Middlesborough that ha
at will belonged to his mother's family. Both Lydgate and Revelstoke mine
and the land was full of it, making Adams de Leybourne extremely we
l, I can But there was more. Lady Wolsingham's father was still alive, bu
/hy no he passed on, his property of Mount Pleasant Castle would becom
Leybourne property purely by marriage. Ralph de Gilsland had no sc
in front had Adams de Leybourne, so two vast empires rested solely on Valery
her duty to marry and produce sons, or the dynasties of de Gilsland
not call Leybourne might very well end or, at the very least, fade away and l
babies part of someone else's empire.

That fact wasn't lost on Valery.

Thunder And now, her father was coming home from a long and costly ca
“Or go in France. Because her father had the money, and the army, Edward I
ilip and called upon him for his military needs, but the truth was that her fat
becoming older. He shouldn't even be fighting any longer at his a
ose on Valery suspected her mother was going to tell him he could no longer
robably his army. Widowhood wasn't something that appealed to Lady Wolsin
to one There were enough war widows in England as it was.

ir more “What else did Papa say in his missive that you can tell me?”

mother asked, her hand on the smooth feathers of the goose's back. "That is affection missive for him to only say that he is coming home."

she aloof Lady Wolsingham was looking at the missive, her manner thoughtful. Almost... sad. She was definitely subdued, and it took her a few moments before, at respond.

Valery to "I know it has been some time since we last spoke on marriage for Lady she said, lifting her gaze to her daughter. "We used to speak of it frequently before your father went to France."

It was a change in subject, but Valery didn't read anything into it. She simply nodded. "I know," she said. "I assume we shall speak more of it when he returns. Why do you ask?"

London "I want to know how you feel about marriage. Has it changed?"

Valery set the goose to the floor when it tried to jump off her lap. "I still want to marry. I always have. I do not wish to be married in his maid."

Lady Wolsingham snorted softly. "You shan't, I assure you," she said. "But will you trust your father's judgment in such matters?"

Valery shrugged. "I do," she said. "But nothing has changed since he left. It is the same as before he left."

"And what is that?"

"That I want to have a voice in whom I marry."

"Your father has told you that he will not allow you to choose."

Valery frowned. "I do not want to choose," she said. "Not truly. But I do want to at least approve of whom Papa wishes for me to marry. And deare you asking me these questions?"

Lady Wolsingham looked back to the yellowed parchment in her hand. "You know that I did not choose your father," she said. "My father did not see the wisdom of it at the time. In fact, I was quite avergent. In time, I understood his reasons. He was right, after all."

Valery watched her mother. There was a pregnant pause as she began to process what her mother was saying. The wheels of thought were turning, and now she was starting to realize that this was no random subject. After a moment, she stood up and took a few steps in her mother's direction, pointing to the missive.

"What does Papa say about a marriage for me?" she asked quietly. Valery must have said something, or you would not be trying very hard *no*

is a longme.”

Lady Wolsingham wouldn't look at her. "I had not planned to tell you anything, all," she said truthfully. "I was going to let your father tell you."

She turned to Valery and said, "Tell me what?"

"That he has selected a husband for you."

"For you?" Valery didn't lash out in response. She didn't react angrily. No shouting, no denials. Truthfully, given the fact that she wanted to marry someday,

there was no reason for her to. But she hadn't expected that her father, on his own, would do it. She suspected it was another warlord or a knight, someone her father had been involved closely with. Someone he admired. Her gaze lingered on her mother's face for a moment before she turned away.

"Nay," Valery said. "Does he say who it is?" she asked.

Lady Wolsingham watched her daughter carefully. "The heir to the earldom of Torridon," she said. "He is Scots."

That brought a reaction. Valery turned to her sharply. "A Scotsman? A Highlander?"

Valery's eyebrows lifted. "A *Highlander*?" Now she was starting to show some emotion. "He is turning Wolsingham over to a Scotsman? Why would he do such a thing?"

"He must think that it is an appropriate match or he would not have chosen it," Lady Wolsingham said. "The Scotsman—the Highlander—is from the Dun Tarh family. That is a very old, very prestigious family in the Highlands."

Valery frowned. "How would you know that?"

Lady Wolsingham set the missive aside. "Do not forget that I grew up in Mount Pleasant, which is on the Scots border," she said. "I knew someone from the Dun Tarh family long ago. Very long ago. I... I do not know who became of him, but my father was allied with the family."

Valery was still agitated about a Scotsman as a future husband, but her mother's words had her interest. "Then you know something about the Dun Tarh family?" she said. "What are they like? And where is this Torridon?"

"Far to the north," Lady Wolsingham said, averting her gaze. Valery's daughter wouldn't notice the distant glimmer in her eyes as she remembered something she'd put out of her heart and her mind long ago. "They are related to the MacKenzie clan, as I recall, but the origins of their family was r

to have come from a lost Roman legion. The family is steeped in mystical legend.”

That was interesting to Valery. A learned woman, she knew about Romans in Britannia and Caledonia. She’d had a tutor, a former priest who knew all about the ancient history of England, when the Romans came routing, been a devotee of Roman military history, among other things, so she’d thought that had bored Valery but thrilled Adams. Just because he didn’t have a battle didn’t mean his daughter couldn’t learn what a son would have learned. Therefore, Valery knew more about ancient history than most young women should have.

“I suppose every family has their origins,” she said, sounding as if she was torn between interest and apathy. “But there are only three things about.”

“What is that?”

“If he is a good man and if he is educated,” Valery replied. “Surely he knows he must be up to my standards. I cannot have a dullard for a husband.”

“What is the third thing?”

“That he is handsome, of course.”

Lady Wolsingham couldn’t help the smile, shaking her head at her daughter’s sense of priorities. “If he is a dun Tarh, then he is handsome,” she said. “The family is full of men who would fit that description.”

“You seem to know a good deal about them.”

“Not really.”

She didn’t seem willing to elaborate, and Valery let the subject drop. Frankly, she was unwilling to reply more than she already had because she was already sounding superficial in her demands. He must be a good man, educated, and handsome. In her world, that was what mattered. She had to know what her friends marry, and those three things were literally the only criteria she had. Sometimes young girls prioritized the frivolous over the important, but Valery tried not to be so foolish, but it was difficult. Since her family spent so much time in London, or at least they had in the past, most of her friends were well-bred women from noble families, and all that had ever been expected of them in life was to be pretty and charming and accomplished when it came to entertaining a gentleman suitor or running a household. That was what Valery had grown up around. Because her family had been in Brentford was in a section of London that had several other towns

ery and nearby, she had shared a nurse with other families with young girls. This was a common sight. This had been when she was very young, and the nurse had taken her out the way to a governess, a tutor who taught the young girls to recite poetry, to paint, to dance and to play an instrument, at which Valery had never been able. He'd be good. Even though that sort of training ended on the cusp of womanhood, something Valery's father had insisted she continue in her education, and he had hired a son who taught her everything from astronomy to Roman military history. He'd earned. While her friends were going to feasts and pining for men, Valery had been women been schooled by a man known affectionately as Trout because that was what he looked like—a fish. Trout's actual name was Father Bruno, but she never used it, and he didn't seem to care. Trout was serious and scholarly, but as I care he was also strangely warm and encouraging. Valery had taken to her lessons eagerly, learning and absorbing from Trout while her mother sat in a chair and sewed. Lady Wolsingham had probably learned as much as Valery had from Papa from Trout, because she never missed a lesson. As the chaperone for her virgin daughter, she wasn't about to leave Valery alone with a man, a priest named Trout.

But the education with Trout had made Valery a little different from her friends. She was still invited to feasts and parties, and she still saw her friends in London when she could, but she had come to the age where now she was being invited to their weddings, and all they wanted to know was when she would be married, too. Perhaps that was why she hadn't raged when her mother told her about the betrothal. Perhaps there was some relief in that she could tell her friends that she, too, was going to be married. She would use she would no longer be an outcast among them because she didn't need a man, husband yet. Truth be told, that had always bothered her a little, because she had seen married friends had different lives than she did. They had husbands, and they managed their households, while Valery still lived with her parents, unmarried, and unattached, young woman.

But that was soon to change.

Nay, she wasn't upset about it at all.

In truth, she was a little grateful.

Over in the corner, one of the geese found something to eat, or at least something to eat, and Valery was distracted from her train of thought when her friend gasped. By the time she turned around, she could see that the geese had gotten hold of some bread that had been placed on a table along with fish.

hat was wine. They didn't want the fruit or the wine, but they certainly wanted givenbread, so Valery got up to make sure they didn't make a mess. As she tried to get over to the geese, who were playing tug of war with the bread, there had been any knock on the solar door.

hood, "My lady?"

a priest Sir Sterling St. John stood in the opening, addressing Lady Wolsingham.

Sterling had been with the House of de Leybourne as long as Valery had been alive, a stalwart and dedicated knight who had given his life over to the service of the de Leybourne empire. When Adams had gone to France, he had left no one behind because someone needed to be in command of Lydgard. Naturally, but that person was, by default, him. Though the man had missed the active lessons in France, he didn't particularly mind, but his son, Maxwell, had taken a corner in France. That made Sterling a father in waiting, and perhaps a little nervous. Lady Wolsingham answered him politely.

of her "What is it, Sterling?" she said, glancing up from the missive she held in her hands.

Sterling's weather-worn face seemed to have a hint of joy to it. "Good news, my lady," he said. "Lord Wolsingham's army has been sighted less than a day away. They should be here by morning."

she was That bit of news caught Valery's attention. "Papa is almost here?" When she heard Sterling smiled at her, the young woman he very much wanted to see her own son. "Aye, my lady," he said. "That means Maxwell is nearly home now, in my wife will be most grateful to see him once again."

ied and The comment about his son was a leading one, because he'd been interested in Valery in Maxwell for nearly four years. Valery liked Maxwell because he was her friend, but he was the gentle, obedient sort—and for a woman like Valery, who needed an equal partner in all things, that kind of temperament simply wouldn't do. More than that, Maxwell didn't want a wife. He preferred the company of men. But even if he was seeking a wife, he still wouldn't have been right for Valery, because as Adams had once said, a man like Maxwell would spend his life worshipping at Valery's feet, and she would spend her life bored to tears.

east try Lady Wolsingham knew that, and she wouldn't give Sterling the chance to try to engage Valery in a conversation of Maxwell's return. She'd spent the last year trying to avoid that very subject. Quickly, she stood up.

ruit and "Then we must prepare," she said. "We must ensure that we are ready."

ited thereceive my husband and his army. Sterling, you will do what need headeddone to ensure the comfort and safety of the returning army. Val, come was ame. We will go to the kitchens and prepare a magnificent meal for t return home to.”

When Lady Wolsingham gave orders, everyone moved. Even Val ngham. Sterling headed off to prepare for his liege’s arrival, and his son’s, ad beenfollowed her mother from the solar, encouraging her geese to come AdamsLady Wolsingham was well on her way to the kitchens as Valery stoo e’d leftdoorway, trying to coax the geese, but they ended up spilling the wine ate, andtable in their quest to find more bread.

on over Scurrying back into the chamber, Valery herded the geese out gone towould shepherd a gang of unruly sheep. But first, she quickly cleaned vious. wine so her mother wouldn’t know that Edward and Philip—or Su Moonie, as they were mostly known—had left damage in their wake in herLady Wolsingham said they would. Valery had to protect her pets at all even from her unhappy mother.

“Good But thoughts of her mother led to thoughts of her father and the b ed lesshe had evidently secured. As Valery followed her mother’s path kitchens, with the geese in tow, she couldn’t help but feel more an pleased at the fact that she would, indeed, be marrying. It made h for hismature, perhaps even more womanly, to think that she, too, would h ne, too.own husband and house someday.

Even if both were from Scotland. n trying But that couldn’t be helped. She was to be a countess, and it didn’t axwell,if she had to marry a Scotsman in order to achieve it. That was bett womanany of her friends had achieved. She would be a fine lady someday kind ofover wealthy lands, having great feasts and a gaggle of children. She want atthey would be happy. But there was only one thing that concerned her.

a bride, That he had the same dreams as she did.

ce said, That he wanted a wife, too.

et, and It was with some apprehension that she looked forward to the futur

chance
the past

eady to

receive my husband and his army. Sterling, you will do what needs to be done to ensure the comfort and safety of the returning army. Val, come with me. We will go to the kitchens and prepare a magnificent meal for them to return home to.”

When Lady Wolsingham gave orders, everyone moved. Even Valery. As Sterling headed off to prepare for his liege’s arrival, and his son’s, Valery followed her mother from the solar, encouraging her geese to come along. Lady Wolsingham was well on her way to the kitchens as Valery stood in the doorway, trying to coax the geese, but they ended up spilling the wine on the table in their quest to find more bread.

Scurrying back into the chamber, Valery herded the geese out as one would shepherd a gang of unruly sheep. But first, she quickly cleaned up the wine so her mother wouldn’t know that Edward and Philip—or Sunny or Moonie, as they were mostly known—had left damage in their wake just as Lady Wolsingham said they would. Valery had to protect her pets at all costs, even from her unhappy mother.

But thoughts of her mother led to thoughts of her father and the betrothal he had evidently secured. As Valery followed her mother’s path to the kitchens, with the geese in tow, she couldn’t help but feel more and more pleased at the fact that she would, indeed, be marrying. It made her feel mature, perhaps even more womanly, to think that she, too, would have her own husband and house someday.

Even if both were from Scotland.

But that couldn’t be helped. She was to be a countess, and it didn’t matter if she had to marry a Scotsman in order to achieve it. That was better than any of her friends had achieved. She would be a fine lady someday, ruling over wealthy lands, having great feasts and a gaggle of children. She hoped they would be happy. But there was only one thing that concerned her.

That he had the same dreams as she did.

That he wanted a wife, too.

It was with some apprehension that she looked forward to the future.



CHAPTER SIX

VALERY WAS STILL in bed the next morning when the sentries took up t
Her father's army had been sighted.

Her eyes suddenly bugged wide open and she threw back the c
propelling herself out of bed and rushing, off balance, to the lancet v
that overlooked part of the bailey. She couldn't see the army yet, b
was a good deal of excitement going on down below. About a hundre
ago, her great-grandfather had allowed a sycamore tree to spring up
bailey, near the keep, and the tree was so tall now that it nearly bloc
view of the gatehouse, but not entirely. She could still see throu
branches. When the colder months would come, it would lose its lea
her view would be clearer, but at the moment, it still had its lovely
foliage. It was rare for castles to allow trees to spring up in the
because they could be used by an enemy if one breached the gatehou
the Lydgate sycamore was an exception.

Faunus was his name.

Valery had given the tree that name after the Roman god of
Faunus' yellow leaves were filling her vision, and the more she he
sentries shout, the more excited she became. The geese, who slept in a
of her room in their own little pen—much to her mother's dismay
starting to rise at the sound of their mistress' excited yelp. Valery pette
both quickly and threw open the chamber door so they could waddle c
the kitchens to be fed, and so her maids could come in and clean
animal mess from the night before. As if on cue, two maids rushe
mother and daughter—as Valery went to her giant wardrobe and yank
the doors.

“Your papa has come home, m'lady,” the older woman said as she

to sweep up the straw that the geese had slept on. “I heard the soldiers’ army was just down the road.”

“Good,” Valery said, yanking out a clean shift and a lovely linen with gold silk embroidery on it in diamond-shaped patterns. “He’ll surprise us, but *I* am going to surprise him.”

The servants had a woven basket between them, using it to collect straw, but the older woman looked at Valery curiously.

“What will you do?” she asked.

Valery grinned at the woman before dashing into a small alcove, behind a painted screen, where she stripped off her sleeping shift and began to wash in the icy-cold rosewater that was there for just that purpose.

“Never you mind, Sela,” she said. “Papa and I have always played a game with one another—appearing where we are least expected. Papa leapt out of the hay loft over the stables. He startled me so badly that he hit me with a shovel.”

Old Sela fought off a grin. “You two like to surprise one another,” she said. “One of these days, you are going to surprise your father and he’ll seize. He’ll fall over in a heap.”

Valery laughed softly. “I hope not,” she said. “But in the war of wits, who can startle one another more, I do believe I have the edge.”

Sela and her daughter, Beryl, looked at each other and shook their heads. They continued sweeping up the straw and giving the floor underneath a good scrub with vinegar as Valery dressed in the lovely linen garment.

She scurried out from behind the painted screen, brushing her hair and pointing her finger to the ties on her back. Sela left the sweeping duties to help Beryl with her fastens, making sure she was presentable to scare the life out of her father.

Valery rushed back to the alcove where her dressing things were—she was finishing brushing out the ends of her wavy hair and putting a gold headband over her head to push the front of her hair back. It was a headband that held her hair out of her eyes, a pretty piece that had yellow stones affixed to it. Giving herself one final look, and grinning at the thought of hearing her father shout when she surprised him, she dashed from her bedchamber and headed down the stairs.

By the time she reached the entry level, the servants were abuzz with news that the army was just coming through the gates. That didn’t even begin to describe the excitement.

say his Valery much time. She had a plan—her father was very fond of his war
a big white beast that was older than Valery was, and he always saw
surcoat animal's comfort personally when returning from a campaign. Therefo
links to was going to hide in the stables and wait for him to bring his horse
before leaping out and giving the man a shock.

lect the Not wanting him to see her, because the keep entry was in view
outer bailey and the incoming army, she took the small servants' s
down to the kitchens on the ground level. The kitchens comprised
ehind a smaller chambers, and they were running at full force on this l
quickly morning. Valery was hit in the face with the heat from the ovens, whic
conveniently built inside the keep and not out in the kitchen yard,
red that traced through the chambers, grabbing a piece of bread as she went. Th
a once yelled at her, something about the porridge that was cooking, but
I struck didn't stop. She continued out into the sunny kitchen yard, noting t
geese were scratching around there, chasing down bugs and other th
er," sheat.

is heart Blowing kisses to the geese, who were too busy scrounging ar
notice her, she ran to the end of the kitchen yard, shoved all of the bre
seeing her mouth, and entered the south side of the stables through a se
entrance. Chewing the bread, which was difficult considering she'd st
heads all into her mouth, she quickly mounted the ladder to the hayloft above
ath it a And then she waited.

nt. She Her father didn't come right away. Bread chewed and swallowed,
inting alay on her belly, peering through the slats in the hayloft so she could
Valery main entry to the stables. She could see servants rushing around and
t of her being brought in, and she saw clearly when men she didn't recognize l
more horses into the corral. Since her father never let her meet any
s were, allied men from other armies, she had no idea who they were, but s
l circlet quite curious about them. There were two older ones and three young
at kept with the younger ones mostly tending the horses while the older ones
d to it. to be deep in conversation. And then she heard it.

ing her A Scots accent.

ber and Puzzled, and increasingly curious, she edged toward the end
hayloft, closer to the door. She could hear the men talking and she co
with them, though mostly in profile, and at one point, they both entered th
it give and lowered their voices. But they weren't low enough so that she did

horse, them.

In fact, Valery got an earful.

They were speaking of a forced marriage. They spoke of her father as Wolsingham's only child. They spoke of someone

Aurelius who had been forced into a marriage he didn't want. Apparently she was hideous because no one had ever seen her, and Aurelius was well-marrying her for the wealth and title. From what the two men were said, Aurelius was some kind of godlike hero who belonged on Mt. Olympus rather than he belonged on the field of battle.

Aye, that was far more than she'd wanted to hear.

The excitement of her father returning took a dousing as Valery listened to the pair talk. It was mean and cruel and insensitive. Even if they knew Valery was listening, if they spoke of her unfavorably in her own hearing, she could only imagine what was said about her on the journey home to France.

And what her betrothed—Aurelius—thought about her.

Any hope or even excitement she'd had about the marriage was crushed into a lump in her throat, Valery listened to the men as they finished speaking on the subject. One man, the one with the English accent, seemed less irate about the situation than the man with the Scots accent. In fact, the English knight was trying to calm down the other man.

Apparently, the English knight was trying to calm down the other man, who evidently had some relationship to Aurelius. Whatever the situation, Valery's relationship, the Scotsman was clearly unhappy, but the conversation eventually calmed to the point where they both seemed to agree that the marriage was a good one for Aurelius.

Aurelius.

That was the name of her soon-to-be husband.

Valery could see the men from where she was hiding, and when the older ones wandered off, leaving the younger men behind to tend the horses, she climbed out of the loft and slipped out the way she'd come in. She didn't

felt like surprising her father. In fact, she wasn't sure what she felt in that moment, knowing that her father was viewed as having forced this Aurelius on the person into a marriage, and she was viewed as something horrific and horrible. After having not seen her father in about a year, this was what he'd look like when he came home with him.

Well, she didn't want any part of it.

The postern gate was off to her right, a passageway cut into the Lydgate. In fact, it was two gates, one on the exterior of the wall and one on the interior, both of them wooden gates that were heavily fortified. The passageway between them, in fact, even had murder holes from the wall above. As Valery headed for the gate, she could hear her geese coming up behind her, honking loudly at the sight of her, as they usually saying, She waited for them to catch up to her, and when they did, she went through the gates with them in tow.

The postern gate dumped out into a path that led down the slope of the fortified area beyond. Lydgate was built on the rise of a hill, so she trudged down the hill as the geese waddled after her, out into the open that was walled in. Sometimes, it was used for additional troops or a home, army, where they could pitch their encampment in a walled area that was reasonably protected. There was a heavy iron portcullis with a gate cut into it that led to the wilds beyond, so she unbolted the gate and stepped through. With the geese behind her, she headed down the slope and into some brush, eventually emerging on the other side.

Before her spread a pond, created by a dammed-up brook. It was a good place to swim in the summer when the temperatures became too warm. Sometimes, it was a place for her father and his men to fish. While her father was gone, Sterling had come down to this pond often and caught fish for Valery's table. It was cool and gentle, with a breeze blowing through the trees and small ripples upon the clear water.

Valery took up a seat on the edge of the pond as her geese wandered around it, hunting for bugs and drinking the crystal water. When they were finished drinking and pecking around for surface insects, they began to swim in the pond, bathing themselves.

Valery loved to watch them frolic.

In fact, watching them splash water on themselves and then shake it off longer the water gave her a moment's respite from what she'd just heard in the castle but too soon those thoughts returned, stronger than before. She was tired of trying to talk herself out of being so upset about the situation, of how she was viewed by men who knew her betrothed, but no matter how she tried to distract herself, it came back to the fact that the man she was contracted to marry was trapped. He was only in it for the money. Valery had been viewed as something positive, that she would finally be married like

wall of her friends, never dreaming that her betrothed wasn't seeing it the
one on More than anything, she felt ashamed. Embarrassed and ashamed.

d. The Perhaps she didn't want the betrothal either.

all walk Perhaps she needed to find her father and tell him just that.

panions Two could play at this game.

illy did.

passed



pe to a IT WAS RIDICULOUS, as far as he was concerned.

Valery Positively ridiculous.

en area On a bright and windswept morning, Darien and Rhori were
visiting down some of the horses in the stable block of Lydgate Castle with t
and beef Caelus and Kaladin. It had been a relatively short ride from Dari
t into it where they'd spent the night before, but it had been a long ride over
hrough London. Interestingly enough, whilst there had been a good deal of
e trees, France, England seemed to be relatively dry, which meant the road
passable and the army had made excellent time, but it had been a ter
a place for Aurelius and Darien.

irm, or That was where the ridiculous part came in.

Adams Aurelius had finally confided in his brother about the betro
fish for Wolsingham's daughter, and Darien hadn't been pleased in the least.
ugh the even though he was the younger brother of the two, had always bee
protective of Aurelius. He viewed Aurelius as a strong and powerfu
red into brother, and sometimes almost godlike in a sense, and he had always
inished need to protect his brother when Aurelius clearly did not need protec
out into was something Aurelius tolerated from Darien, though sometimes i
become quite annoying.

Darien was well aware.

ing off But that didn't stop him from being dutiful and dedicated to hi
ie barn, brother, and that included voicing his dissatisfaction when Aurelius t
ying to about the betrothal. Even though both of them were in their third decac
s being Aurelius having seen thirty-one years and Darien almost thirty, the sul
to spin marriage wasn't something they discussed. Darien had no real inte
rry felt marrying so young, and, quite frankly, he enjoyed the company of d
ing the women. There was something about only one woman for a man that
ce most

at way,unnatural to him, though Aurelius seemed ambivalent about that. A could attract any woman he wanted, a trait that all of the dun Tarh t seemed to have, but marriage wasn't something he'd ever really sho interest in.

Until now.

Evidently, he had little choice.

As Aurelius explained it, both their father and Wolsingham had co to create a betrothal between him and Wolsingham's daughter. Dari under the same impression as nearly everyone else under Wolsin command, and that was the fact that Wolsingham's wife and daught settlingkept far from allies and soldiers alike. No one had ever even se he helpdaughter, and some speculated that she didn't exist, but that speculati lington,dashed with Aurelius' revelation. Not only did Wolsingham have a da ill frombut she was to be Aurelius' wife.

rain in For some reason, that infuriated Darien.

ls were He didn't like the fact that his brother was being forced into sor ise ridethat he had no say in. He didn't like the fact that their father had see gone behind Aurelius' back to secure a betrothal. But, perhaps most

Darien didn't like the fact that his brother would soon have a wife who thal toclearly take a place of importance in Aurelius' life. Darien and his Darien,were quite close, and Darien wasn't sure what that meant fo n quiterelationship, but he knew he didn't like it.

il older He was also upset that Aurelius hadn't put up more of a fight.

felt the As he'd said, the entire thing was ridiculous.

rting. It Upon reaching Lydgate Castle, however, it began to occur to Dari t couldhis brother hadn't put up a fight. Lydgate was absolutely magnific enormous bastion north of Richmond located at the base of the I mountains. In fact, the vast majority of its property encompassed s oldermountains, and beyond that was Carlisle and the Scots border, so the old himan enormous amount of land that Aurelius would inherit when he r le, withWolsingham's daughter.

bject of Aurelius had to know that.

erest in So perhaps it was greed that convinced Aurelius to be complac iffereenthe betrothal that was thrust upon him. To Darien, that was the only : seemedHe'd never known his brother to be greedy, and in a sense he did not him, but Darien was simply opposed to the marriage in general.

Aurelius A marriage that would take his brother away from him.

brothers Those feelings only grew more intense when the army entered I
wn anyCastle, flooding into an enormous, rectangular bailey that could
accommodate a thousand men. While Aurelius and Wolsingham b
walk about on a tour of the place, Darien was part of the contingent
settle the men along with Wolsingham's knight, Sterling St. John. The
nspiredof Maxwell St. John, a knight who had been part of their army for t
en wasseveral months, Sterling had remained behind to take command
gham'sWolsingham properties with Adams away. He was older, seasoned,
er werecrippled from years of wear and tear, but he was strong enough.

een the In fact, Darien knew Sterling and liked him, but now that his brotl
on wasbeing forced into a marriage that involved Sterling's liege, Darien
ughter,quite so friendly to him. As the old knight reunited with his sor
emotional scene, Darien ignored them both and took charge of the du
Highlanders, instructing Estevan to ensure they were properly bedde
nethingwhile Darien took the horses, along with his younger brothers, to the
minglyto ensure they were properly tended.

t of all, But much was boiling up in Darien's chest as Rhori joined him
wouldstables with the de Wolfe horses. Rhori had remained behind with the
brotherthe de Wolfe army after Thaddeus, Atticus, and Bretton had ridden
r theirreturning home with news and missives and other things for the de
warlords. De Nerra and Aston had departed for home as soon as they
in London, so it was just Rhori at Lydgate at this time, a stopover be
continued on. The contingent that Wolsingham had taken to Fran
en whydisbanding, spreading news of the king's victories.

ent, an But the fact that they were closer to home meant that Rhori's mo
?enninegood, and he chatted up a storm while Darien brooded. Seeing the ric
d thosewasn't sitting well with him as he checked the knees and hooves
ere waswarhorses for any stress from the ride. Beside him, Rhori continued
marriedas he took care of the de Wolfe horses, and when they finally
warhorses in the corral to eat and drink and rest, Darien began to g
aloud.

nt with "He doesna need or want any of this," he muttered, putting his hor
answer.the corral as Rhori climbed over the railing to get out. "He was lur
t blamethis. Look at it. How can he resist?"

Rhori was still sitting on the top of the rail. "Who can resist?" I

“What are you talking about?”

Darien was very aware that Aurelius hadn't told anyone about the betrothal. He led the horses to the trough and headed for the railing where Caelus and Kaladin came into the corral with brushes and buckets to help. Disgruntled, Darien leaned against the railing, watching his younger brother work.

“Dunna mind me,” he finally said. “I suppose I've heard some news of the I'm not happy with.”

Rhori looked at him curiously. “What news?”

Darien knew he shouldn't tell. He knew damn well he shouldn't say her word. But he couldn't help it. He was upset, and sometimes, that clouded his judgment. Crooking a finger at Rhori to follow him, he wandered in toward the stable, standing in the mouth of the structure, away from the main Tarhof of his younger brothers. Rhori joined him, now quite curious about what Darien had to say.

“Ye know that Wolsingham has a daughter,” Darien said quietly.

Rhori nodded. “Of course,” he said. “I do not know anyone who has a girl, but we know he has a daughter. His only child.”

Darien grunted, looking out to the enormous keep that dominated the castle complex. “And ye see this place?” he said. “See how grand it is?”

“Quite grand.”

“Wolsingham's daughter is an heiress. A *rich* heiress.”

“And?”

Darien looked at him. “And Wolsingham and my father have finalized the betrothal on Aurelius,” he said. Then he waved his hand at the keep and the castle in general. “Aurelius gets all of this if he marries the lass. They hand the castle over to him.”

Rhori's eyes widened. “They *did*?” he gasped. “They gave him a choice?”

“None at all.”

Rhori couldn't decide if he was horrified about that or impressed. Aurelius had been offered such a rich bride. “How does he feel about it?” Darien waved him off. “He will not complain,” he said. “Ye know your brother. He'll silently bear it, no matter how he feels. He's a good soldier. He does what he's told.”

“And you do not agree?”

Darien scowled. "I think it's a tragedy that he's been pushed out the marriage that he's not asked for," he said. "The only reason he hasna put himself as fight is because he'll be the next Earl of Wolsingham. The man already has lands in Torridon—he doesna need an English land. Let Wolsingham find another pasty-faced English lord for his daughter. Why does he need Aurelius?"

Rhori wasn't quite sure how to answer that. "I think if he did not know that to do it, he would have said so," he said. "This is Bear's fight, Darien, not yours. You probably should not tell anyone what you told me. It could cause... problems."

Darien knew that. He sighed sharply. "I've only told ye," he said, "but I've said ye're not to tell anyone else. Aurelius hasn't told anyone at all, so he'd backdecide when he wants to announce it. But I just couldna keep it to myself. My brother is being forced to marry a lass that, more than likely, no one else would want if it weren't for her money."

"Why do you say that?"

Darien looked at him as if he were daft. "Because no one has ever seen her," he said. "She's probably hideous and Wolsingham is afraid to tell anyone know. Why else would he keep her hidden away?"

He had a point. Rhori scratched his head, thinking on an heir he'd indeed, had been kept hidden away, so it was possible that Darien was wrong. Though it was equally possible he was.

"It is a dilemma, to be sure," he said. "But Aurelius is a prize woman. He brings Torridon with him, and her wealth. If you think about it, then I'm sure you'll see it is a good match."

Darien rolled his eyes. "It is a good match," he said. "It is a good match forced on the surface. But ye know and I know that Aurelius has never had a shortage of women. Ye saw him in France—if there's a woman around him, he finds her. He's had his share. He even thinks he has a bastard in Edinburgh, though he hasna told my da that. But mayhap my da already knows. My da is not wise—and it's not as if he's innocent himself. He's got a reputation, too."

Rhori cracked a smile. "You mean Lucifer?" he said, chuckling. "That's the rumor. We all do. Your father is no more Lucifer than my father is."

Darien shrugged. "That's not what they say in the Highlands," he said. "My da worshipped the devil, they say. My grandfather banished Camerton Abbey because legend says it sits upon the gates of hell. When he was there, he communed with his true father daily."

into a Rhori's smile grew. "I would believe that you are Satan's spawn
out up asaid. "Aurelius, possibly. But not Lares."

ady has "Why not?"

another "Because he doesn't have the dark streak in him that you and
" brothers do."

want to Darien's eyebrows lifted. "Then mayhap it was my mother who
en. Notwith the devil," he said. "Mayhap she's the one who birthed
t might progeny."

Rhori snorted and slapped him on the shoulder. "Mabel is a saint
d. "But said. "I will run you through if you say such terrible things about her."

let him Darien eyed him. Then he broke down into snorts of humor. "Ye o
elf. Myher because she gave ye candied fruit as a child," he said. "Admit it."

ne else "I admit it completely and fully."

"She did that with any child who visited the Hydra. That way,
always remember her."

er seen "She is a very intelligent woman."

l to let Darien continued to grin at him before finally sighing heavily and
his hand through his dark, dirty locks. "I know," he muttered, sagging
ss that, against the corral rails. "She's put up with my da and her eight unq
wasn't sons long enough. And as for Aurelius... I only want the best for
simply makes me angry that he's been forced into something he did
for anyfor."

out this Rhori knew that. He knew that Darien was devoted to his brother.
does he say about it?"

l match Darien shook his head. "Not much," he said. "What *can* he say?"

ad any "Does he seem distressed?"

nd, she "Resigned is more like it."

nburgh, Rhori folded his big arms across his chest, thinking on the situati
ly da is whole. "Then mayhap you should be as well," he said quietly. "If he
io." choice, your rage will not help him. He needs your support now. N
'I know anger at a situation neither one of you can change."

." Darien looked at him, prepared to argue, but thought better of it
re said. was really nothing he could say that he hadn't already said. After a m
him to he nodded.

hilst he "Ye're correct," he said, displaying some of that resignation that A
had shown. "But thank ye for listening. I had a lot to say, and I dinna

vn,” hesay it to Bear.”

Rhori slapped him on the shoulder again. “I understand,” he said rather than rage about something you cannot change, mayhap you did your appreciate what your brother will be acquiring. Marriage is me acquisition, is it not? He has done very well for himself.”

paired With that, Rhori headed out of the stable, back to where the horse Satan’s scorralled. Caelus and Kaladin were brushing the de Wolfe horses, t

Rhori leaned against the railing and instructed them on how to treat int,” he the larger mounts. Then the horse kicked, Kaladin caught a hoof shoulder, and, as the lad went down, Darien came out of the stable. nly like thoughts shifted from Aurelius to Kaladin at that point because, as his told him and Aurelius, if one of the younger brothers came back from in broken pieces, there would be hell to pay.

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With that, Rhori headed out of the stable, back to where the horses were corralled. Caelus and Kaladin were brushing the de Wolfe horses, too, and Rhori leaned against the railing and instructed them on how to treat one of the larger mounts. Then the horse kicked, Kaladin caught a hoof in the shoulder, and, as the lad went down, Darien came out of the stable. His thoughts shifted from Aurelius to Kaladin at that point because, as his mother told him and Aurelius, if one of the younger brothers came back from France in broken pieces, there would be hell to pay.

Coming from his saint of a mother, Darien believed that completely.



CHAPTER SEVEN

“... AND THAT’S why the castle is shaped the way it is,” Adams was saying. “You notice the rise it sits upon, it is long and slender. My ancestors built the castle to suit the land.”

He was speaking to Aurelius as the two of them stood on the wall, looking at the length of the castle. Aurelius, who counted mathematical architecture among his strengths, leaned over the wall to get a look at the base of it.

“And that is why it appears so massive when approached,” he gestured to the gatehouse. “’Tis a brilliant bit of planning. One looks at the place and thinks it’s positively enormous.”

Adams looked around. “It is still quite large,” he said. “But because of the land it is built upon, it’s somewhat narrow. Long and narrow.”

Aurelius understood that. “Ye had an ancestor who was most ingenious in the way he thought,” he said. “He used this rock to his advantage.”

“Indeed, he did.”

“Has the castle seen much action?”

Adams nodded. “To the northwest is Carlisle and Scotland,” he said. “There is one main road that leads through the mountains to Carlisle, and the Scots have been known to take it. There’s also a nasty bishop in Spennithorne who likes to raid villages from time to time, so the villagers come to the castle for protection.”

Aurelius looked at him curiously. “Ye have a prince of the Scots violating his flock?”

Adams snorted. “If it were only that simple,” he said. “This prince of the Scots had his position purchased for him by his father, a very powerful French *duc*. The bishop is French, and he views the English as nothing more than a nuisance.”

than vermin. Unfortunately, he also has a French army given to him father, and there have been times when he's harassed us. He's done Bowes Castle, too, but will not go as far as Richmond. He'd rather Bowes and I trouble."

Aurelius shook his head at the thought of a petulant bishop. "I can't see I'm looking forward to meeting such a man."

Adams grinned. "Hopefully, you will not," he said. "But now that we're on the subject of meetings, I would like you to meet my daughter. Shall we go to the keep?"

ing. "If Aurelius scratched his head. "I'd rather we waited," he said. "Can we meet tonight? I assume we shall feast?"

"We shall," Adams said, but he was frowning. "Why should you not walk to meet her now?"

ics and Aurelius lifted his arms. "Because I've not bathed in weeks, and I look as if half the dust on the roads between London and Lydg covering me," he said. "I'd rather wait until this evening, after I've said, up."

cs upon Adams nodded. "If you wish," he said. "I can have a bath sent to you. Or ye can tell me where the nearest lake is."

e of the Adams chuckled. "You'd rather swim in cold water than bathe in a tub?"

ressive Aurelius frowned. "A tub is for women," he said. "I've been swimming myself in the water as God intended since I was a wee bairn. Where shall we bathe?"

ie said. Adams pointed in a northwesterly direction. "If you go through the kitchen yards, there is a postern gate," he said. "Keep walking. You'll find a pond."

nymoor Aurelius nodded his thanks, heading for the tower with the stairs. "It will not be long," he said. "Where can we pitch our shelters?"

"You do not wish to stay in the keep?"

church Aurelius glanced at it as he reached the stairwell. "Are your women to stay in the keep?"

e of the "Naturally."

owerful "Then I'll stay with my men."

g more "As you wish."

With that, he headed down the narrow spiral stairs that took him from the tower to the keep.

by his wall walk down to the long, rectangular bailey below. It was full of
ne it to this point, and he could see Darien as he organized the men they'd l
er givewith them. He went to his brother, mentioning the area where they wer
up their encampment, but he also asked where he had put his sadd
nna say Darien motioned to one of two wagons the Highlanders had broug
them, so Aurelius went over to the small wagons that had been bui
we are heavy pieces of wood to form a solid, sturdy conveyance. They coul
hall we anything over any terrain. He had to dig around a little to find his sadd
but once he located them, he dipped into one of them until he loca
we not soap.

Aurelius may have been accustomed to washing in what he
ot wish "God's bathtubs," which were really just lakes or ponds or even strea
he wasn't so much of a barbarian that he didn't use soap to ensure tha
'm sure time he did bathe, he actually emerged clean. To him, there was sor
ate are confining about a bathtub that he didn't particularly like. It was unnat
cleaned a man to bathe in a tub when God himself had created such beautiful
bathtubs. He liked bathing beneath the sky because it made him feel a
ou." and at one with nature. For a man who had spent his life warring one
the other, peace was hard to come by.

proper He relished it.

After pulling forth a white, lumpy bar of soap that was made wit
washing oil from Aragon and smelled of rosemary and lavender, he also gra
e can I clean tunic and a clean pair of leather breeches and headed in the d
that Adams had indicated. The breeches weren't typical of the Scots,
igh the preferred them to the long tunics and trappings that they usually wor
u'll run was the English-trained knight in him, requiring something to cover h
He felt more comfortable that way. Not strangely, his brothers had pic
well. "I on the habit, too, and tended to wear breeches as well.

Something decidedly different from the usual Highlander.

Passing through the bailey with clothes in one hand and soap in th
nenfolk he found himself looking around at the castle. He'd seen it from the w
now he was down in the thick of it, noting the soaring keep, which see
have a separate bailey all its own. They were in what seemed to be th
bailey, a place that was vaster than he'd given it credit for. He coul
small stone building at one end of it, more than likely some type of a h
rom the closer to the keep was the great hall, long and slender just like the s

men at the bailey.

brought Somewhere in between the keep and the great hall were the stables and the kitchen. They were at the northernmost area of the castle, and he passed the stables, noting that the corral had several dun Tarh horses in it. He saw his younger brothers brushing some of the animals, while still from horses already had blankets across their backs. He lifted a hand to carry his brothers as he passed from the stables and into the kitchen yard, which was quite cluttered.

He saw The kitchen yard had several outbuildings in it, including a butter house and a smokehouse. Most castles didn't have an entire building dedicated to smoking meats, but Lydgate evidently did. He could see the wood piles, but to it and holes in the roof for the smoke to escape. He suspected that but every Lydgate bordered a mountain range that was covered in forests, that nothing was no shortage of game. He imagined that the smokehouse was kept busy year round, which was good for him when he became lord of Lydgate because he rather liked smoked meats.

Another feature for a castle he was coming to appreciate.

Crossing the somewhat dusty and cluttered kitchen yard, Aurelius saw the postern gate ahead. There were two gates built into the thick wall, and both were unlocked, which was normal at most castles throughout the day because those wishing to conduct business with the kitchens preferred to enter through the postern gates rather than the gatehouse. Passing through the gates, he started down the slope that led down to a grassy, walled area, but he was taken with dramatic scenery on this side of the castle with the mountains in the background. That was a backdrop.

Beyond that was Scotland.

Aurelius hadn't been this close to Scotland in over a year, and he admitted that he was feeling some longing for the land of his birth. He missed his parents and his sisters, but mostly, he simply missed his home. France, which seemed so far away as he gazed at the mountains covered with a dark forest of trees. Where he came from in the Highlands, there were mountains, usually dark and desolate unless it was springtime and the mountains were covered with carpets of purple heather. France had been muddy and cold, and sometimes hot, but always miserable, and to him the land didn't have the charm that Scotland had.

Wherever he went, the Highlands always called him back home.

And here he was, in England, and so close to the Scottish border he could almost smell it. He could smell the moors after a rain or the flowers when they bloomed in the spring. He could see the brilliant blue sky as he could touch the mountains, as if they were always in competition for who was the most beautiful. He could hear the water from the brook as it trickled down to his feet on its way to the sea, and he could see the dust of the road as he walked upon them, watching his feet as they left imprints upon the landscape he loved.

Not to get too poetic, but that was the way he thought when he envisioned his home. There was something lyrical about the land that always brought out his poet's heart. Not that he was much of a poet, frankly, because the truth was that he was terrible when it came to putting his feelings into words, but it was enough that he could feel them in his heart. Somewhere during the long years that he had been away from his home, that way of thinking had to carry with him.

With thoughts of Scotland on his mind, Aurelius made his way across the walled area and saw that there was a portcullis cut into the stone. It was not a gate in that sense, but he walked through it and immediately he crossed a pond ahead of him. In fact, it was quite a lovely pond, surrounded by trees and grass, and already he could feel that cold water washing over him as it would his very *weary* body. He had been riding hard and fast since they left England and it would feel good to relax, even if it was with English water. His pace picked up the closer he drew. When he came to about halfway up the mountains from the water's edge, he briefly stopped to drop his clean clothes on the ground, but then he kept going. With every step he took, he loosened something from his body, and by the time he hit the water, all that was left were his breeches, and those came off very quickly. Soap in his hand missed into the icy pond.

All of it *Bliss!*

It was a silent, cold world that he found himself in, and he lingered for just a few moments. There was no sound, no fighting, no travel, nothing to distract him. Simply cold and silence. But he had to breathe and surfaced. With soap in one hand, he began to lather up his head, scrubbing the dark hair that he'd inherited from his father. It was brown, but a very dark brown with a hint of auburn in the sunlight. He scrubbed and rubbed until he could scrub no more, and then he went under again, rinsing out his hair.

that he the strands came clean of the slimy soap.
flowers It was then that he realized he had company.
cy as it Two very big geese were swimming alongside him, eyeing him cur-
was the They were mostly white, with gray and white wings and big orange be-
through treaded water for a moment, wondering where they came from and
ls as he hadn't seen them until now, but he continued swimming after a m-
id he so heading out into deeper water. There was a dam at the western edge
pond, and he moved in that direction.
ever he The geese followed.
always It didn't matter where he went. He'd go under the water and co-
because only to find the geese closer than they had been before. As he nea-
gs into dam, he went deep under, looking up at the geese as they swam abo-
et times, He tried to get away from them, but the moment he came up for a
s all he spied him and quickly moved in his direction. He swam left; they mov-
He swam right and they moved right. All the while, they were inching
ross the and closer. Snorting at the nosy intruders, he was considering getting
as more the pond altogether when he heard a voice behind him.
ould see "They think you have something to eat."
oy trees Startled, he turned to see a woman sitting on the shore. She ha-
s body hidden from his view when he entered the water by a copse of tre-
: Crécý, wouldn't have even noticed her unless she spoke, so now he found
looking at a woman from a distance.
ten feet A young woman.
; to the "I have nothing to eat," he said. "Clearly, nothing at all."
ened or She cocked her head. "You're Scots."
all that "Was it my French accent that gave me away?"
and, he He was jesting. He thought he heard her snort, but he was too far a-
really see her face or much about her other than the color of her hair-
blonde—and the shape of her as she sat there.
ed in it "I think it was most definitely your French accent," she said. "Wh-
rel, and you come from?"
e, so he He gestured toward the castle. "Lydgate."
rubbing "I live at Lydgate. You do not live there."
ry dark "I dinna say I lived there," he said. "Ye asked me where I came fro-
until he that is where I came from. I just arrived with Wolsingham's army."
air until She nodded but didn't say anything for a moment, and he began

closer to her as the geese came up behind him. When he saw them flanking him, he wondered if he was about to have his eyes pecked ravenously by hungry geese.

He asked, "If ye know these beasties, will ye send them away?" he said. "I don't see any disadvantage in the water like this."

At that moment, she seemed to be pondering his request, or so he thought, until she spoke. "Who are you?" she asked.

He was moving closer to her, trying to get away from the geese. "My name is Aurelius Dun Tarh," he said. "Who are ye?"

She came up and sat up a little straighter, seemingly studying him. There was a long pause before she answered.

"So it is you," she muttered. "You're the one marrying Wolsin's daughter."

He'd come close enough that he could touch the bottom, so he stepped closer. The water level still at his shoulders as he looked at her more closely. She was an exquisite creature with lush blonde hair, pulled back with a sort of bejeweled circlet, revealing a beautiful oval face with a firm nose, prominent cheekbones, and full lips. Her eyes were big and lovely, though he couldn't see the color. Surprisingly, he had to admit that this was indeed the most beautiful English lass he'd ever laid eyes on. Out in the middle of the wilds of the north of England, he found a maiden no one else could compare to.

And then something Adams said came back to him.

I was not lying when I said that Valery was quite beautiful.

He began to grow suspicious.

"What would ye know about a marriage involving Wolsin's daughter?" he asked.

"Honey," she sat forward, her hair spilling over one shoulder in a waterfall of glorious waves. "I told you that I live at Lydgate."

"Where did you live?" "Lots of people live at Lydgate, I would wager. It doesn't mean I know about a betrothal."

She conceded the point. "True."

"I gave ye my name. It would be polite to give me yours."

"I am, and I'm not," she averted her gaze, brushing the grass off her skirt. "Surely you know who I am," she said. "Imagine the most hideous creature at Lydgate and that would be me. The awful monster who has somehow trapped Aurelius."

the birds Tarh into marriage.”

out by Suspicious confirmed, it became clear to him, very quickly, who she
“Trapped me into...?” he repeated, bewildered. “Who said anything
’m at abeing trapped?”

Her eyes widened. “Ha!” she said sharply. “Do you deny this?”
he spoke. “I dunna know what to confirm or deny, to be perfectly honest.”

That wasn’t what she wanted to hear. “Until I was told about
e. “My betrothal, I did not even know you existed,” she said. “If you’ve gone
telling your men that I somehow forced this betrothal, then you could
a great possibly be more wrong.”

Her indignant stance was gaining steam. “Lady Valery, I’ve said it
gham’s of the kind.”

He acknowledged her name, and evidently, that meant the battle
ood up, were drawn. He knew her and she knew him, and she was going to take
y now. to task.

h some “Haven’t you?” she said angrily as she leapt to her feet. “I am your
m jaw, nightmare, so take a good look, Scotsman. It shall be your last, because
oo, but I am finished telling my father what your men said about me, you
is more lucky if he doesn’t run you out of Lydgate with a knife at your back.”

here in She started to storm off, and he hastened after her. “Wait, I
that no please,” he said, sloshing through the water as he followed. “Will ye
tell me what happened?”

She whistled to the geese, who had been following Aurelius. “Sur
know,” she said. “I heard your men in the stables talking about it.”

He shook his wet head. “Talking about *what*?” he said. “I was
gham’s Will ye tell me what ye heard? And from whom?”

She stopped, fists on her hips as he came to waist-deep water. “H
r fall of you ask me that?” she said. “They were only repeating what they’d heard
from you.”

an they “M’lady, I swear to ye, I never slandered ye. I swear this upon my
She scowled. “What oath?”

“I’m a knight.”

Her scowl deepened. “You are Scots.”

u know He nodded patiently. “I am a Scots knight,” he said. “I fought
and that Berwick Castle and at Winchester Castle. I was knighted by the
ius dun Warenton, so I *have* taken an oath of chivalry.”

Her scowl left her, replaced by an expression of confusion. “War he was, she repeated. “De Wolfe?”

g about “Aye.”

That almost seemed to change her mind about him. *Almost*. But no All it managed to do was calm her down, just a little, but she w rightfully enraged.

out the “Very well,” she said impatiently. “You want to know what I hear around will tell you. I was in the stables when I heard a man who sounded ver uld not like you speaking to an English knight and telling him that Aureli pushed into a marriage by his father and my father, and that yo nothing resigned to marry a pasty-faced English wench because you would greatly when you did. He said you hadn’t argued the betrothal beca le lines were a good soldier and you did what you were told.”

ike him Aurelius knew those words. He’d heard them from Darien before.

grunt of deep regret, and also of great anger, he closed his eyes briefly ir worst relayed words that he knew damn well his brother had spoken. Dar e when been opposed to the union from the start, as if it was his very own m will be and now Darien’s big mouth had gotten him into trouble with th woman he was supposed to marry. He was going to throttle his brot m’ lady, next time he saw him.

o please But first, he had to try to salvage the situation.

“M’ lady,” he said steadily. “Please believe me when I tell ye that ely you said such words. What ye heard was my brother... He thinks tha defending me, but I never asked him to. And I never said such things.”

a there. She wasn’t in a forgiving mood. He could just see by the expres her face. The geese had come out of the water and were starting ow can around her, but he was still there, waist-deep, unable and unwilling to eard—further, because they really *would* have a problem if he did. He wasn’ to show his naked arse to the woman, at least not until after the oath.” married, and then he hoped to show it to her often.

That was, if they even made it to the marriage.

At this point, it didn’t look good.

“My father does not know what I have heard,” she said. “If you ered at control the mouth of your own brother, then I have doubts about you Earl o to command Wolsingham. Mayhap you can explain that to him.”

“I would rather explain it to ye.”

enton?" "I do not want to hear it."

"Why? Because I might be telling the truth and ye canna admit it?"

She looked at him coldly. "That is a rude thing to say."

He figured he had nothing to lose at this point. She believed w
as still believed, and he could see that there was no changing her mind.

Unless he did something drastic.

He came out of the water.

"Mayhap it is rude," he said, rising from the pond like Venus risir
us wasthe waves. "But I am the man ye are to marry, according to yer fatl
u weremine. I had nothing to do with it either. I am simply doing as I am
inheritnever once protested. Now, if ye think ye can find someone better tha
ise youa man who would never lie to ye, who would always treat ye with

and who would hold ye on cold nights with the body that stands befo

With athen go tell yer father yer version of the truth. I willna stop ye. But ye
as sheget a look at what ye're going to be missing."

Aurelius stood in front of her, as naked as the day he was bo
arriage, watched her reaction closely.

It wasn't long in coming.

Surprisingly, she didn't run. And never once did she look below hi
which both insulted and impressed him. She met his gaze steadily
looking at his neck, his shoulders, and then back to his eyes. Aureli
I neverwaiting for her to take a good look at his manhood, which, by all ac
t he iswas quite impressive, but she never did.

She kept her eyes on his.

"Are you attempting to seduce me?" she finally asked.

The rage was gone from her voice, which was a good sign. But she
go anyseem the least bit impressed by his muscular frame, enormous arr
't aboutwaist, and the family jewels. Aurelius was now leaning toward bein
y wereinsulted by her lack of response to his male beauty.

"If I was trying to seduce ye, ye'd know it," he said. "I'm simpl
honest with ye. I'm showing ye what will soon be yers."

"You act as if I'm inspecting a stallion."

"There is one thing a stallion and I have in common."

"What's that?"

"If ye look below my waist, ye'll see it."

She nodded as if he'd just said something interesting. Not allu

shocking, or outright bawdy, but interesting. As if they were speaking the damn weather. Was it possible the woman was actually blind and couldn't see him for what he was? This woman of uncanny beauty had that shepower to *resist* him?

He was flabbergasted.

As Aurelius stood there and wondered what his next move should be, Valery leaned down to the geese still milling around her feet. "Babies," she said sweetly. "My babies? *Bite!*" That seemed to be some magical word that those two feathered creatures understood. She said it again—*bite!*—and pointed at Aurelius. Suddenly, geese were running toward him, honking and hissing, and he turned on his heel and dived right back into the pond, swimming as fast as he could. From the geese who were now entering the water. Given that he should be swimming for his life, he didn't see Valery as she stood there and gazed after him, watching him outswim the geese, who were determined to bite him. He deserved it, as far as she was concerned.

Aurelius was well out in the pond when she turned around, prepared to head back to the castle, and saw his clothes on the ground. A trail of threads led to a pile that looked clean enough. She hadn't seen him enter the pond before where she was sitting, which was why she hadn't known he was nude. She'd kept getting into waist-deep water, and then she suspected as much. When he'd gotten out of the pond... Well, it had taken everything in her not to look down. But she'd wanted to.

That saucy, cheeky Scotsman.

Bending over, she picked up his clothes. All of them. With a flourish she didn't whistle, she called the geese away from him as he swam at the other end of the pond, and she headed back toward the castle with all of his clothing tucked under her arms.

Every last stitch.

And that was the way she left her future husband.

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But she'd wanted to.

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Every last stitch.

And that was the way she left her future husband.



CHAPTER EIGHT

DARIEN HAD A black eye.

Truthfully, he wasn't all that surprised that he had one. He assumed at some point, that his brother would hear what he had said about his marriage and confront him. What he hadn't expected was that his brother would do it naked.

Darien was with the Highlanders in the field adjacent to Lydgate, the one that was surrounded by walls, as they set up their encampment on soft, damp grass. Everything was proceeding efficiently until Aurelius appeared. His appearance in and of itself wasn't unusual, but his dress was. The man was as naked as the day he was born, using a leafy branch that had a heavy smattering of leaves on it to preserve his modesty. He didn't even care that his backside was completely exposed. He seemed concerned with covering up his manhood, as he probably should have been, and he'd come through the small opening in the wall and march straight for his brother when he caught sight of him.

After that, Darien ended up on his backside.

With a stinging left eye, he picked himself up and demanded to know why his brother had hit him, even though he could already guess. Aurelius was absolutely livid, shouting at his brother in front of their men, raking his hand up one side and down the other. For a man who didn't normally raise his voice, not even in the heat of battle, it was quite rare to see Aurelius shout. But by the time he was finished, everyone understood why, and Darien was humiliated.

Not that he didn't deserve it.

When Aurelius was finished ripping on his brother, he dropped the leafy branch and proceeded to parade, nude, over to the provisions wagon

his possessions were. Considering the lady had taken all of his clothing from her, he had nothing left, so he stole his brother's clothing. It was the best clothing, leather breeches and a linen tunic, so Aurelius looked primed and polished once he'd put everything on, and he dared Darien to say anything about it. But Darien didn't. He knew he'd been wrong and had tried to warn him, but he'd run off at the mouth anyway. Now, Aurelius knew.

Everyone knew.

Darien wondered who else knew.

More of Wolsingham's troops began to flood into the walled area where the dun Tarh men had set up camp, mostly troops that had been on loan from allies. Now that Adams was home, he would send the troops back to compensate those who had given him the men with money, or more in the form of even livestock, depending on what had been agreed upon. As the day and sunset approached, the grassy area was filling up and the gate in the Castle, the one that led to the pond, was closed up for the night. Campfires started to glow from fires spread out all over the compound. The smell of state of grew heavy in the cooling evening air.

And Darien watched it all, nursing a bruised ego and a swollen modesty. Aurelius had retreated to his tent, and he remained there even now as he only oversaw the operations. Estevan and Caelus and Kaladin had returned to the stables some time ago and were working alongside the men to head up tents and make sure there was food to eat and wine to drink, provisions had purchased in France before they departed for home.

Over his shoulder, Darien could hear Caelus and Kaladin squabbling about something and Estevan's slow, steady voice trying to shut them down. Aurelius the younger brothers wouldn't be put off, so Estevan slapped Caelus on the side of the head simply because he was frustrated. Giving up on the boys, he left them to their argument and approached Darien.

"The whelps want to know when they are returning home," Estevan said. "Caelus says he's going to walk home if we dunna send him back to the castle and soon."

Darien turned to Estevan, looking at Caelus and Kaladin over his shoulder and watching the boys pretend they weren't interested in the conversation where they were.

ng with “I suppose I understand the impatience,” Darien said. “But the Darien’s that I dunna know. This betrothal was not expected, so I dunna know I rather intends to keep us here with him for a time or if he intends to send Darien to home.”

;. Rhoiri “Shall I ask him?”

Aurelius Darien shook his head. “I will,” he said. “Meanwhile, I suspect expect all of us to attend tonight’s feast in Lydgate’s hall, so make the piglets wash and change into cleaner clothing. We dunna want A erupting if we bring mud babies into the hall.”

a where “Not to mention Mam erupting if she finds out we let filthy lads in from hall of an ally.”

ck and “Precisely,” Darien said. “See to it.”

men, or Estevan turned back to his bickering younger brothers as Darien lagged for Aurelius’ tent. Pausing a moment to timidly touch his left eye against the wall, Aurelius didn’t throw another punch at his face, he stepped inside.

rang up “Bear,” he said quietly. “Do ye expect all of us to attend ye in the evening tonight?”

smoke Aurelius was seated on a portable chair, bent over a traveling table. He placed his writing kit upon it and was scratching something out on a yellowed piece of vellum by the light of a single taper.

Darien “Aye,” he said, not looking up. “On the morrow, I want ye to be a messenger to the Hydra. Da doesna know I’ve accepted the betrothal and we’re secure we’re here at Lydgate Castle for the wedding, so send a messenger to the Hydra as they due haste.”

“I will,” Darien said, peering at what his brother was writing. “What are ye abblingye telling him?”

up. But Aurelius dipped his quill in the ink, tapped off the excess, and continued on to write. “That I’ve accepted the betrothal to Wolsingham’s heiress, so I pair, he intended, and that ye tried to ruin it,” he said frankly. Then he paused and looked at his brother. “Dunna think I’ve forgiven ye. I’ve never known ye said. be petty or stupid, Darien, but ye proved to be both today.”

o Mam, Darien sighed heavily. “I said that I was sorry,” he said. “I dunna know what more ye want me to do. Sometimes I say things and then they cover his unsaid. Ye know that about me.”

ir older Aurelius grunted. “Ye’re going to speak with my future wife,” he said, returning to the vellum. “Ye’re going to tell her that I said none of the

truth is ye created in yer mind. Those were all yer own stupid opinions. Not m
if Bear Darien knew he didn't have a choice, but he wholeheartedly didn
d us all to confess his sins to a woman he'd never even met. "If ye make me
she'll think we're a family of birds," he said, wriggling his fingers
head. "Silly, flighty birds with sand for brains."

he will "Ye're the only bird I see."

ose two "She'll think we're all mad!"

urelius Aurelius looked at him again. "'Tis better than her thinking I've
lamenting this betrothal and telling everyone that a hideous creature
into theme into marriage," he said. "If ye speak to her tonight, I'll not tell I
ye've done."

That was a bargain Darien couldn't refuse. He didn't want to be
turned father's bad side. "Very well," he said begrudgingly. "When do ye w
id hopeto do it?"

"As soon as ye're introduced, ye'll ask for a private word wit
the hall Aurelius said. "Sit at the end of a feasting table and speak with her
make sure it is a conversation with just the two of ye. Apologize for v
e. He'd said and assure her I never said such things. And when ye're done w
allowed ye can apologize to her father. He's the one I worry over."

Darien watched him for a moment, seeing the way he seeme
send adetermined to right whatever situation was between him and his be
ind that To Darien, it didn't seem a normal concern after a misunderstanding
with all was more behind it. After a moment, he frowned.

"Why are ye so concerned over this?" he asked seriously. "Th
hat are woman ye've never even met before. Why do ye care what she thinks?"

Aurelius paused. "Ye've not seen this woman."

ntinued The way he said it made the inference obvious, and he instan
s, as he Darien's attention. "What about her?" he said. "She's not a l
sed and creature?"

n ye to Aurelius shook his head firmly. "The lass is an angel."

"Beautiful?"

a know "I've never seen finer."

anna be "And ye want to marry her because she's beautiful?"

"That's as good a reason as any."

ie said, Now Aurelius' attitude was starting to make some sense. "And y
e things me to tell her ye never said a word against her because ye dunna

ine.” beautiful woman to get away,” Darien said. “Ye want me to smooch ye, but ye don’t wantway.”

do that, Aurelius looked him in the eye. “I want ye to repair what ye’ve done at his ruin,” he said. “Her reaction to me was yer fault, Darien. Ye and yer father are responsible for this. I’ll have yer lips.”

Darien put up his hands in surrender because he didn’t want to get into a fight again with his brother. They’d already had words, and flying fists, and he’d been the subject.

trapped “Very well,” Darien said to placate him. “I’ll speak with her tonight. I’ll do what I can.”

Da what “See that ye do,” Aurelius said, returning his attention to his raven. “And once ye have, ye’ll apologize to her father. I dunna care what excuse ye use on his make up for yer behavior—tell him yer fatigue has infected yer brain. I want me what ye must. But ye’ll make up for what ye said or I’ll send ye back to the stocks and he can decide what’s to be done with ye.”

h her,” There was a threat in that, one Darien was unwilling to tempt fate. He only simply nodded his head. “I’ll do everything I can,” he said. “But I’ll do what ye dunna accept my apology, I dunna know what more I can do. Ye’ll have to deal with her, take yer pound of flesh then.”

“I willna. Da will.”

d quite “So ye’ve said.”

trothed. With that, Aurelius turned back for his missive, and Darien quit trying to argue. There He struggled not to feel insulted or ashamed by what Aurelius had said. It was difficult. He was a man with considerable pride. He knew what he was doing was wrong, but there was part of him that stood by it. Aurelius had been forced into a marriage. That wasn’t a lie. But Aurelius had accepted it with much more grace than Darien had.

tly had And it wasn’t even his marriage.

hideous With a heavy sigh, Darien focused on what he needed to do that evening—apologize to the woman who was about to ruin Aurelius’ life. Or maybe he wouldn’t do it at all. But then again... he didn’t want another black eye. Therefore, if the opportunity presented itself, he’d do it.

And hate every bloody minute of it.



ye want
want a

oth the SHE WAS READY for him.

Valery had been given most of the afternoon to think about that tried-to-be cheeky Highlander, and she had a plan in mind. He deserved to be punished for his behavior, in her opinion, and she was going to show him what a woman he was to marry. She'd already made up her mind that she was going to marry him. She would have the most handsome husband out of all her friends, and that was something she simply couldn't pass up. Even if he spoke like a Scots and probably had the intelligence of a goat, that didn't matter. Once she saw him, nothing really mattered.

She wanted him.

For an entirely self-serving reason.

Did she believe him when he told her that he hadn't said those things about her? Truthfully, she did. There was something sincere about the man. Even after he told her he had been knighted by the Earl of Winton, so he himself, she believed everything he told her. He just didn't seem like the lying kind, but, then again, she didn't know the man. He could be a smooth prevaricator for all she knew.

But something in those intense eyes told her otherwise.

All she could think about, all afternoon, was Aurelius. She didn't even know where to start when describing the man—he had pale hair, though she wasn't sure what color they were. They looked like the color of the sea on a warm summer's day. He had a granite-square jaw, straight nose, and full lips embraced by the scrub of a beard. His hair was quite short, shoulder length, so barbaric looking but also quite alluring.

But that body...

She'd really only seen him from the waist up. Once he'd come out of the water, she had refused to look below his chest. She knew he wanted her, but she wasn't going to do what he wanted her to. The man had a thick, maybe impossible broad shoulders, enormous arms, and a powerful chest covered by a faint matting of dark hair. Beyond that... she didn't know, but she was certain the rest of him was as titillating. Even to think on it made her fantasize.

Damn that cheeky Scotsman!

Therefore, she dressed very carefully for the evening's feast. She knew her parents would want her to look her very best, so she donned a white gown with silver thread woven throughout, a gown that embraced her figure. She was a maiden, of course, but Valery wasn't one to shy away from

anything that had to do with men or marriage or the relations between saucy, and women. She had plenty of married friends who were more than wivish describe sexual intercourse and how pleasurable it was after the initial kind of one's virginity. Valery had always wondered what it would feel like, to *woulda* a man's body in hers. It seemed strange and alien, but clearly, many of her women had been doing such things since the beginning of time.

When he did She, too, would do it eventually.

It didn't With Aurelius.

She had to fan herself again at the very thought.

Beryl, the servant girl, helped her dress and helped her with her hair, which was left long and flowing but pulled away from her face with a terrible circlet. The gown had somewhat of a plunging neckline, displaying the outline of her breasts, and she wore a silver cross with rubies as an adornment. In fact, she wore silver everywhere—ears, wrists, and fingers. It was not like the flashy as gold, nor as precious, but she looked like a silver goddess.

It was a very That was her intention.

As the day gave way to evening and the fires were lit all around the house, her mother came to see her to ensure that she was properly dressed for the evening. Lady Wolsingham seemed oddly subdued, and Valery attributed it to the fact that her daughter was about to meet her betrothed. Her mother was usually so color of to be quiet anyway, so Valery didn't give it much thought as she won't at nose, her with a kiss and headed down to the kitchens to ensure the meal was ready soon. That left Valery mostly alone, putting on the finishing touches for the evening, which included rose-scented perfume and one very sharp thorn.

It was of the The latter was meant for her future husband.

It was her to, Smelling like a floral garden, looking like an angel, and wielding a sharp thorn she'd taken off one of the vines in the walled garden her mother had ordered by Valery finally made her way down to the great hall. The inner balcony was Lydgate, where Faunus the Tree lived out its life, was rather small and quite hot. packed, with the great hall being built along the north side. It was built against the keep, and they shared a common wall, making the hall look like a slender, but still large enough to hold hundreds of people.

It was quite silk By the time she entered the warm, fragrant hall, it was about half past five. A group of curvymen who had just returned from France. Valery had come in through the servants' entrance, not the main one, because her father always adm

minds. Adams bobbed his head faintly. "He is," he said, lifting his eyes from his "I wanted to introduce you when we arrived, but he insisted on bathing girl. He should be here momentarily."

ut they "Tell me what kind of man he is."

en than It was an expected question. In fact, Valery had decided early on that she was going to pretend that she'd never heard the terrible words spoken to her, and she'd never met Aurelius Dun Tarh. It might give her a little leverage over the man if he knew she had withheld something that could potentially get him into a good deal of trouble—that he'd stood in front of her and said more than his brother had said terrible things about her. It wasn't that she was manipulative or sneaky. It was simply that such power, over a man she didn't even know, would be a good thing because she was proceeding into uncharted territory.

er much. It was always good to have a little ammunition.

"He is a magnificent warrior," Adams said, cutting into her thoughts. "Every man in the army respects him greatly. Aurelius Dun Tarh is fearless, brave, and talented. He can read an enemy's mind, and he knows how to deal with subversion and surprise tactics."

Valery frowned. "That's the kind of warrior he is," she said. "But what kind of *man* is he? Is he kind? Is he eccentric? What is he *like*, Papa?"

lo, but I Adams shrugged. "He is stoic for a Highlander," he said. "He never raised a deraises his voice, even in battle. He had his share of camp women following him about, but... Forgive me. I should not have said that. He may have had a few tips that women pining after him, but I never heard of him taking one to the God's Bones... I more than likely should not have said that, either. I'm sorry, Val. That was not what I intended to say about him."

Valery was listening with amusement. "You needn't be ashamed of me," she said. "You are not speaking to a child. I know the ways of men and women."

on the Adams grunted, letting go of her hands so he could collect his wine. "It is all of that reading you do," he said. "I do not know how he'd permitted such things."

Valery started to laugh. "Because reading is as natural as breathing," she said, reaching to collect her own wine. "You could not stop me."

"Your "I could have!"

"How?"

Adams sputtered. "I... I cannot think now, but I could have," he said.

to hers. watching his daughter laugh. "I could have gouged your eyes out."
ing first. She winced. "Too painful," she said. "And gory. Speaking of b
must tell you of a book I found in Newcastle."

"When did you go to Newcastle?"

that she "When Mama wanted to find some new fabric for dresses she wa
against have made," Valery said before sipping at her wine. "There
verage apothecary's shop there, and it had things I've never seen before. M
entially things from far away. It also had some very old books, and the man so
ked and all to me."

is being "All of them?"

e didn't Valery nodded. "Indeed," she said. "Two are written in a langua
known not understand. When I asked the priest what it was, he told me that
written by demons. But the other two books are written in Latin."

"What kind of books are they?"

rain of A smile played on her lips as she sat back against her chair. "C
Tarh is book on ancient poetry," she said. "It is very beautiful, written by
knows Roman philosopher. But the other book is called *The Golden Ass*.
ancient tale of a Roman boy named Lucius."

ut what "Oh?" Adams said, only truly half interested because books bore
He lifted his cup to his lips. "What is it about?"

e rarely Valery was still trying not to grin at him. "Lucius' adventures," sl
llowing "He's turned into a donkey by an evil witch. He even beds a woman w
ave hadis in the form of a donkey."

his bed. Adams spat out the wine in his mouth, spraying it all over the tabl
Forgive daughter's shocking statement. As Valery laughed uproariously,
wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as he looked at his daug
d," she horror.

men." "Is that what you have been doing in my absence?" he said,
cup of "Reading about things so unseemly that not even noblemen will sp
why I them? Valery, how could you do such a thing?"

She waved her father off. "Do not be troubled, Papa, truly," she s
hing to is only a book. And I do not speak to anyone of it, so the secret is safe
ie." was quite an adventure Lucius had."

Adams was still disgusted by it all. "Not another word, Valery," I

"You will never speak of that again lest you greatly embarrass me an
ie said, shame to this family."

Valery thought he was overreacting, but she didn't argue with him. "As you wish," she said. "Now, tell me—when am I to meet my future husband?"

She was diverting the subject, but Adams was still lingering on the subject of having relations with a woman. "As I told you, he shall be here in the evening," he said. "And, for pity's sake, do not bring up this horrible magical you have read. He will think you a deviant."

If you only knew how the Scotsman appeared nude to me, she thought. Maybe there was a bit of deviant on both sides.

But she fell silent, drinking her wine and watching the hall fill with guests. When Sterling came to the dais to speak with Adams. He'd already spent the afternoon with the man, even though the knight had wanted to speak with his son but, like a good soldier, he gave his liege his full attention. Maxwell, in fact, was dead asleep in the quarters he shared with his partner. His room is a small cottage in the outer bailey where the lad had practically grown up. Sterling's wife, thrilled to have her son home, begged his father to sit next to him in sleep, so Maxwell was passed out while others gathered for the feast.

Valery wondered if Sterling knew about her betrothal yet. If he died soon would, and she knew that would make him very unhappy. As the feast progressed and her father huddled in their own private conversation, Valery casually moved from the chair she was sitting in and moved to the one next to it. She ached while her father would like to have her betrothed sit next to him, so she was clearing the way.

While her father wasn't watching, however, she removed the thorn from Adams' small silver purse on her wrist and worked it into the cushion of the chair. Each chair at the dais had a cushion at the insistence of her mother, and she rammed the thorn up through the bottom of the cushion and wedged it in. Aghast, good. All the Highlander had to do was sit down and he'd end up with a sharp peak of thorn in his backside. Perhaps he'd think twice before exposing himself to the same pain he had earlier in the day.

At least until they were married.

Until then, however, he deserved to be punished.

As Valery gleefully anticipated the moment when Aurelius would find himself with a thorn in his arse, Lady Wolsingham joined the feast and brought after having made sure the meal was well in hand. She arrived with Sterling's wife at her side because Lady St. John, Cedrica, was also

m. She Wolsingham's lady-in-waiting. The thin, dark-haired woman had managed to pull herself away from her sleeping son to tend to her lady, and everyone was taking their seats. Sterling sat on the other side of the table, over a wondering aloud why she'd left the seat next to Adams empty, but she didn't reply. Her attention was on the hall entry.

The Highlanders had arrived.

There were five of them, entering with other English knights, Scots in particular pushed through the crowd and headed for the dais.

Valery was quite ready to play her joke on Aurelius, the sight of the man, with menfully clothed, momentarily stumped her. He was clad in leather breeches and a pale linen tunic that was a shade too small and showed off his impressive muscles, and she found herself looking at perhaps the most handsome man she'd ever seen. Witnessing him wet in the pond hadn't done him any favors, but now that he was dried and combed and shaved, she could see just how handsome a specimen he was.

And he wouldn't even look at her.

"M'laird," he said as he came to the dais, focused on Adams. "I brought my brothers with me. I hope that doesn't displease ye."

Adams shook his head as he stood up, extending a hand to Valery. "I'll rise, but I should like to introduce you to my daughter, Lady Valery. I know you've already been eager to meet her. Valery, this is Aurelius dun Tarh."

At that moment, he turned to look at Valery, who had risen to her feet. He drew his eyes like a moth to flame. But then his eyes returned to her, and she gazed as intense as it was when he'd stood naked in front of her. There was something searing about the man's eyes, something that threatened to pierce her, but Valery stood her ground.

Barely, but she did.

"My lord," she said evenly. "It is an honor to finally meet you."

That gave Aurelius pause. She could tell that he was confused by her words—but she could also tell when he quickly realized she hadn't told her father about their earlier meeting. If she had, she would have said so at the dais obviously. And Adams probably would not have been so hospitable to Sterling's whim.

Lady Valery That knowledge seemed to bring some relief to his features.

aged to “The honor is mine, m’lady,” he said, bowing elegantly. “Yer father
soon, me that ye were quite beautiful. He dinna exaggerate.”

Valery, Valery smiled modestly. “You flatter me, my lord.”

Valery “I never say anything I dunna mean, m’lady.”

 “Come and sit,” Adams said quickly, indicating the empty chair
him. “Sit between my daughter and I so that we may become
but the acquainted.”

Though The moment was upon her. That enormous thorn poking up thro
ie man, cushion was about to ram itself right into his tender buttocks when
hes and down. Valery waited with great anticipation as Aurelius came arou
ressivetable, making his way to the chair Adams had indicated. She even
ne man pleasantly at him when their eyes met, and he smiled back, enough t
justice. her the big dimples in each cheek. The man was possibly more ha
what a when he smiled. Adams even pulled out the chair for him so he could
seat more comfortably, and Valery remained on her feet, watching h
as he sank down into the chair.

s. “I’ve The reaction wasn’t long in coming.

 Aurelius’ smile vanished and his eyes closed for a brief, sharp r
ry. “Of before reopening slowly. But he didn’t move. He didn’t jump up or y
y table. simply sat there and took it. But his gaze moved to Valery. Someh
ow you knew she had done something. When she smiled knowingly, his sus
were confirmed.

feet and She’d gored him.

er dress “I am honored to be at yer table, m’laird,” Aurelius said, soun
ers, his normal as he possibly could. “I believe ye’ve hosted my father bef
ere was spoke of yer impressive hall and fine food.”

to melt Adams had no idea that the man was in such pain or that his daugh
surprised by Aurelius’ lack of reaction. Pleased at his guest’s kind
Adams began waving the servants forward with food and drink.

 “Your father has been a guest in my hall more than once,” h
by her “Lucifer can eat more than any sane man I’ve ever seen.”

old her *Lucifer.*

o, quite The mention of the name brought a smile to Aurelius’ lips, even if
toward struggling with a spear to his buttocks. “Ye’re one of the only c
permits to call him that to his face,” he said.

 “Call him what?”

er told “That old and dark name.”

Adams knew what he meant. A jesting glance told Aurelius the thing. *Lucifer* was a name that Lares dun Tarh had been called since the beginning of his marriage to Lady Mabel. It was common for allies and enemies alike to refer to him as such. It was more of an affectionate nickname, something betterlike Adams used as a term of endearment. Aurelius was well aware that he believed his father was a fallen priest, a man who had been caught through the worshipping the great fallen angel of Lucifer himself, and Lares had since then made an effort to clear up that rumor because he felt that the mystery and the created stronger allegiances and more fearful enemies.

smiled There was a benefit to men thinking he was akin to the devil. To show “Mayhap it is old and dark,” Adams said after a moment. “But you know, some is old and dark, so it suits him.”

take his Aurelius grinned. “He is, indeed,” he said. Then he sat back, took his face, took the weight off the thorn in his right buttock, as he looked to the man on his right. “I’m sure that old and dark man will be quite eager to meet Lady Valery’s acquaintance, as I certainly was. M’lady, I’m quite sure that tales of your beauty are not on every man’s lips from London to Edinburgh. A woman like you should be legendary.”

low, he Valery had been listening to the conversation between her father and Aurelius, stumped because her betrothed seemed not to mind that he had stuck a thorn up his ass. She was torn between confusion and frustration that her father’s prank hadn’t brought more of a reaction from him.

ding as Perhaps he needed a little prodding.

ore. He “There are many beautiful women in England,” she said. “But there are many thorns among the roses, as well. I’m sure you would know more than I. I’m sure you would about the *thorns*, my lord.”

words, The inference was obvious, at least to Aurelius. Now he knew why she was drawing blood on his backside.

ie said. Thinly, he smiled.

“When a man finds true beauty, the thorns dunna matter,” he said. “In fact, I’ve not yet met yer mother, but I dunna need to be introduced to her. I know she is, in fact, yer mother. I can see that ye get yer beauty from her. I know that. That compliment changed Valery’s expression somewhat as she passed past her father to where her mother was sitting. “That is a kind observation,” she said. “And I agree with you. My mother is very beautiful.”

“Will ye introduce me, m’lady?”

That drew Valery and Adams’ attention off him and onto Wolsingham, on the other side of her husband. But Aurelius had asked Valery that question with a purpose. The very second she stood up to introduce the woman to her future husband, Aurelius leaned off the thorn, putting his hand down to the seat to feel for a sturdy, very sharp thorn. It was moving slightly and he grabbed it, giving a good yank and loosening it but unable to pull it free. By this time, Valery and Adams was introducing the woman to Aurelius abruptly stood up and lifted his cup to her.

“Lady Wolsingham,” he said. “May I toast a truly lovely lady?”

It was very flattering. Valery had her hands on her mother’s shoulder and Adams lifted his cup to his wife, encouraging the entire table to pay attention to Lady Wolsingham, and as the compliments rained down on a woman who didn’t seem particularly happy to make attention, Aurelius set his cup down and reached down to adjust the cushion he’d been sitting on. To anyone looking, it was a natural action. He simply fluffed it. But what he’d really done was give another good yank to pull the thorn free of the cushion itself.

The tables were about to turn.

Politely, he fluffed Lady Valery’s cushion, secretly embedding that thorn into it. He was swift, and his back was to Valery and her father so that they looked at him, they couldn’t see what he was doing. As he pushed the cushion down, thorn pointed up, Valery came away from her mother.

Aurelius sat down quickly in his own chair.

“That was kind of you to speak so generously about my mother,” she said. “She told me that she knew a dun Tarh, once. She was raised out there on the borders.”

Aurelius was calm and collected, giving her no hint of what awaited as she moved to take her seat. “I dinna know that,” he said, watching the woman perch her bottom right over the seat. “I look forward to speaking to her about it. Mayhap she knew a cousin or even an uncle.”

Valery’s buttocks came down on the seat, and, before she could respond to his statement, she screeched and bolted off the chair. The entire dais turned in surprise, and nearly half the hall as well, at least those closest to the dais. Valery’s gaze was on Aurelius accusingly, but when she

everyone was looking at her, she smiled weakly and calmly picked up the cushion.

I asked “My apologies,” she said, calming those who looked concerned. “I do not go too hard and pinch my skin. There is no trouble.”

My husband, Aurelius, turned back to his meal and conversation, but I discreetly threw the cushion on the floor. Short of inspecting it, which he didn't want to do, there wasn't much else to be done if she didn't want to try again. The thorn that Aurelius had somehow put in her chair, who

Truth be told, she was impressed at his cleverness.

Slowly, she sat down and collected her wine.

“That was unnecessary, Highlander,” she said quietly, not looking at Aurelius, who, too, was looking at his cup and not at her. “I dunna know what ye mean.”

“I'm quite sure that you do,” she said. “But remember one thing.”

at the “What is that?”

cushion “No one rejoices in revenge more than a woman.”

He was He fought off a grin, falling silent as a servant brought trenchers, a tankard, and Valery and then for him. When the servant wandered away, he sat down and focused on his meal.

“Then the thorn was revenge, was it?” he muttered. “Next time I'll use a different method of revenge that one canna use against ye.”

even if “You deserved that thorn.”

put the “Did I?”

“You are fortunate that I told my father nothing of what you did to me.”

“For that, I am grateful.”

er,” she “Then why did you put the thorn back in my chair?”

on the He did look at her then. “To remind ye that anything ye can do, I can do better.”

ted her, She sat forward, her gaze fixed on him. “That sounds like a challenge.”

ing the The corners of his mouth twitched with a smile as he turned back to his meal. “Not at all,” he said. “It simply means that ye may have had your way with others, but ye'll not have yer way with me. I'll match ye sin for sin.”

with others, but ye'll not have yer way with me. I'll match ye sin for sin. Therefore, it would be best if we try to get on with one another. 'Tis what yer father wants. 'Tis what I want, too.”

t to the Valery watched him pick up a knife and stab a big hunk of beef. She realized it was steaming and succulent. Thinking on what he said, she turned to her husband.

up the food, even if her attention was mostly on him.

Now he had her curiosity.

... I sat “Then you are agreeable to this betrothal?” she asked. Before he answered, she continued as if the question had been stupid. “Of course you are, Valery. Why wouldn’t you be? You will inherit Wolsingham. It is a great fortune, and of course you would be agreeable.”

not to sit His mouth was full as he spoke. “Lady, there is no richness or inheritance in all the world that could convince me to take it if the price to pay is too high,” he said. When she looked puzzled, he clarified. “What I mean is that there are no riches that could attract me if the price to pay for it was more than I am worth at this time. I am not someone who was not worth the price.”

what “And I am worth the price?”

He smiled then, still chewing. “I have a feeling you’re worth the price more than some,” he said. “Any lady who would try to teach me a lesson by running off with my clothes and then put thorns in my cushion to punish me in my place must surely be worth a great deal.”

first for He swallowed and grinned, which made her want to grin, too. “That’s forward and ridiculous,” she said, though she was smiling. “How can you ever be that?”

use a He tapped his head. “Because it shows me that you’re intelligent, cunning, and have spirit,” he said. “I like those qualities in a lass.”

“God’s Bones, why?”

“Because you’ll let no man get the best of you. Am I wrong?”

day.” He was smiling so openly at her that Valery could do nothing more than shake her head. “You are not wrong,” she said, realizing her squawking and quivering with a giddy feeling because of the way he was grinning at her. “I’m no one to be trifled with.”

He cocked a dark eyebrow. “I’ve come to realize that,” he said, so seriously. “Now that we know where we stand, tell me what you’re passionate about. Singing? Horses? Gardens?”

ever way “Do you truly wish to know?”

sin and “I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t.”

mother. She appeared thoughtful, as if debating what to tell him. Debating how much she should reveal herself to him. But she finally relented. “It was books,” she said simply. “I like to read books.”

er own He looked at her, surprised. “Is that so?” he said. “What do you

read?"

She shrugged. "Anything," she said. "I was telling my father earlier that I could purchase new books while he was away. Well, they're new to me, but the ones you are are very old books."

Of course. "What kind of books?"

"A book of Roman poetry," she said. "Another is an ancient Roman inheritance of a boy who was transformed into an ass by an evil witch, but I promised my father that I would not speak of it."

It is that "Why not?"

Carrying "Because it is a very naughty book."

He had more food in his mouth but swallowed before continuing. "Intrigued," he said. "Will ye not tell me about the story?"

Ice and "Do you like to read?"

Reason by "I do."

It me in Somehow, those two words caused most of the animosity to drain from Valery right then and there. The man liked to read. She'd met so many men who didn't or thought it was a fool's hobby. Even her father's knight, Sir Roland, didn't like to read or write. He had a scribe, a former priest, do all his missives and accounting. That wasn't unusual for knights who were intelligent, focused on warfare and command than on scholarly skills that most considered weak, but Aurelius didn't seem to share that opinion.

The first strains of genuine interest in the man began to clutch at her. "Do you truly?" she asked.

More than He nodded. "I never say anything I dunna mean."

Tomach "But what do you like to read?"

At her. He was well into his meal, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He thought on her question. "When I was young, there was a priest in a small village who taught me to read from the Bible," he said. "That was the first thing I ever read, but when I went to foster, I discovered the skalds."

Valery knew exactly what he was talking about. "Northmen poets?"

He nodded. "I fostered at Berwick Castle," he said. "A great-grandfather of a former lord of Berwick was a Northman prince, so there were a lot of skalds at Berwick. Have ye ever read one?"

He elented. Valery shook her head. "I have not," she said. "I've never had the opportunity."

He like to He took a gulp of wine before continuing. "Do ye know anything

Northman poetry?”

er that I “Not too much. Only that it comes from their god, Odin.”

ut they Aurelius held up a finger. “True,” he said. “But there is a legend
it.”

“What legend?”

ian tale “That Odin had to change himself into a great eagle to steal the r
sed mypoetry, a drink that was brewed from the blood of the god Kvasir,” I

“All great skalds must drink of the mead in order to write their fine po

Without even realizing it, Aurelius had Valery completely captiva
was communicating with her on her level, on something that was dea
g. “I’mheart. She was leaning closer to him, interested in every word.

“I have heard that,” she said seriously. “Not all of it, but I have h
the mead of poetry.”

Aurelius looked away from her long enough to take another bite.
r out ofwhat I was taught, skalds were almost like priests,” he said, return
ny thatattention to that enraptured face. “They worked their entire lives c
terling,talent, but it wasna as if they were making up beautiful prose or c
l of histales. Skalds almost always spoke of events or heroic deeds. They
e moretales of their people. There is one verse that I can remember where th
t somespeaks of bloodied shields and stained spears, and leaving the dead
wolves. When the skald speaks of things like that... I understand.”

er. He seemed to lose some of his humor a little, and Valery thou
knew why. “Do you speak of the battles in France?” she asked
“Where you just came from?”

“That, and others.”

hand as “May I ask you a question?”

t in the He looked at her then. “Ye may always ask me a question, m’la
he firstsaid, his voice tinged with softness. “I’d not deny ye anything. I l
prove that to ye.”

” There was something seductive in that statement, a tone that Vale
t-great-unfamiliar with. Looking at Aurelius as he spoke softly to her m
e booksuneasiness in her belly feel like a runaway wagon. Everything was
and quivering.

rad the She cleared her throat quietly, feeling the least bit unsteady.

“Was... was it terrible in France?” she asked. “I could ask my fatl
g abouthe seems happy to be home. I do not want to dampen his joy. But I

you might tell me what it was like.”

He'd opened his mouth to reply when Adams suddenly turned to behind of them, putting a hand on Aurelius' shoulder. "Bear," he said, com interrupting their conversation. "I forgot to tell you that I sent a missiv your father this afternoon. I have invited your mother and father to I need of for the wedding. Of course, we will not hear anything from them fo re said. some time because it will take the messenger many days to reach the etry." but I am hoping to see your mother and father by the time we celeb ted. He Festival of Christ. We could arrange the marriage when they arrive, if r to her agreeable to such a thing."

Aurelius didn't know what to say. Although he'd just shared a p eard of conversation with Valery, it had been a short one. He still wasn't sure introduction or early relationship was even on good terms. He wa "From agreeable to a wedding because even in the short time he'd known ing his realized there was something about Valery that he found quite attract on their he had no idea what she was feeling.

reating That was key.

tell the Therefore, he did the only thing he could—he deferred to the lady.

ie skald "I will be agreeable to whatever Lady Valery wishes," he said. ' for the only just met one another. Mayhap we should have more time to l acquainted before we speak of wedding dates."

ght she "The Festival of Christ is agreeable to me, Papa," Valery said quietly. Aurelius was even finished speaking. "I see no reason not to set a date.

Aurelius tried not to look too terribly pleased at her sudden ap That wasn't the same lady who put a thorn in his chair and then thro him with the glee of revenge. Frankly, he was surprised. Surpris dy," he perhaps even a bit confused.

lope to ... or even suspicious.

In any case, he simply nodded in agreement as Adams appear ery was pleased. He was also a little drunk, having imbibed two cups of hi ade the wine in short order. Standing up, he shouted for silence in the hall rolling proceeding to announce the betrothal between his daughter and Aurel Tarh.

The men in the hall went mad with approval, shouting congratula her, but Aurelius. Since many of them had never seen Valery, and all of ther thought Aurelius, the congratulations went to Aurelius and to Adams as if the

the happy couple. Even when Aurelius turned to Valery and extended the two hands to her, pulling her to her feet, the congratulatory shouts were still completely at him. Valery was an afterthought.

He went off to — But not to him.

At Wydgate Aurelius didn't realize how pleased he would feel with such a public announcement. Across the table and down several seats, he could see

Hydra, Estevan, Caelus, and Kaladin. They were all clapping, too—only, at a moderate rate the case, with a little less enthusiasm. Caelus and Kaladin appeared particularly pleased. You are bewildered. But Aurelius was fixed on Darien, pleased that his brother's mouth hadn't ruined a moment that would propel him into his future.

It was pleasant — His destiny.

But if their — But he wouldn't have it were it not for Valery. When he turned to his seat, it was quite empty, he was faced with an empty chair and no lady. Even Lady Wolsey was missing, and Aurelius never saw her leave. Something told him that the absence of his betrothed was not a good thing, not even when Adams had asked him to sit and celebrate with drink. All of the Dun Tarh brothers joined in as well as the de Wolfe and de Nerra men, all of them celebrating Aurelius's good fortune.

"We've — *Am I worth the price?*"

Valery had asked him that question, and he had assured her that she was very much worth the price. But he realized, as the men in the room congratulated him, that he hadn't shown her how worthy she was. For himself to be overwhelmed with men who only wanted to commend him for his approval, good fortune.

With a woman like Valery, he could only imagine how she might be threatened — and that against him.

He had to prove to her that she was, indeed, worth the price.

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But not to him.

Aurelius didn't realize how pleased he would feel with such an announcement. Across the table and down several seats, he could see Darien, Estevan, Caelus, and Kaladin. They were all clapping, too—only, in their case, with a little less enthusiasm. Caelus and Kaladin appeared positively bewildered. But Aurelius was fixed on Darien, pleased that his brother's big mouth hadn't ruined a moment that would propel him into his future.

His destiny.

But he wouldn't have it were it not for Valery. When he turned to tell her so, he was faced with an empty chair and no lady. Even Lady Wolsingham was missing, and Aurelius never saw her leave. Something told him that the absence of his betrothed was not a good thing, not even when Adams invited him to sit and celebrate with drink. All of the dun Tarh brothers joined in, as well as the de Wolfe and de Nerra men, all of them celebrating Aurelius' good fortune.

Am I worth the price?

Valery had asked him that question, and he had assured her that she was very much worth the price. But he realized, as the men in the hall congratulated him, that he hadn't shown her how worthy she was. He'd let himself be overwhelmed with men who only wanted to commend him on his good fortune.

With a woman like Valery, he could only imagine how she might hold that against him.

He had to prove to her that she was, indeed, worth the price.



CHAPTER NINE

“MY LORD, MAY I have a word?”

Sterling was standing at the entry to Adams’ solar at dawn. Ada been up for an hour or two, ever since a groom summoned him because his favorite horse, the one he’d ridden all the way back from France, seemed to have turned up with a fever of unknown origin. Sterling had been on duty at the changing of the guards, spying his liege as the man moved around the stables, but the truth was that he’d been up all night.

He had something to say to Adams de Leybourne.

And Adams knew it. After the betrothal announcement last night, he was surprised it had taken Sterling this long to approach him. He’d just stepped into the foyer of the keep, removing his cloak as Sterling stood stiffly by the door. Pushing through the heavy oak panel, which was already open, he tossed the cloak onto the nearest stool as he made his way to the hearth.

“Was it a quiet night, Sterling?” he asked, trying to pretend like he didn’t know why Sterling had come. “I would assume most nights have been quiet since I’ve been away?”

Sterling had followed him inside the solar, shutting the door behind him. “There was no trouble, if that is what you mean, my lord,” he said. “But Bowes saw some action about three months ago.”

Adams had made it to his table, the one that generations of his family had conducted business on. “What kind of action?” he asked.

“Spennymoor, my lord,” Sterling said. “The usual harassment, or at least the time it was regarding sheep. He accused de Royans of Bowes Castle of thievery when it came to a flock of sheep.”

Adams snorted softly. “De Royans is no more a thief than I am,” he said, refamiliarizing himself with the maps and documents on his desk,

hadn't been touched since his departure. "Was there any resolution?"

"De Royans rode for Spennymoor the next day and burned it ground."

Adams' head shot up, and he looked at Sterling in surprise. "De the bishop?"

"As de Royans put it, he put forth his hand to smite the bishop fi earth."

Adams grinned. "Well done to de Royans," he said with approval. "surely there must be some reprisal?"

Sterling shrugged. "Not yet, but de Royans asked for your support the French *duc* send troops to Bowes."

ms had "De Royans has our support, without question."

use his "That is what I told him, my lord."

imed to Adams nodded and refocused on his papers, sitting heavily on th
he wall that was next to the table. He was preoccupied with everything he was
ound in knowing he had to reacquaint himself with much.

"I asked to have my saddlebags brought in," he said. "Have yo them?"

he was Sterling nodded, pointing to a chair near the heart. "Over there, my
entered he said. "As you requested."

re solar "Good," Adams said. "Please bring them to me."

Adams Sterling collected the saddlebags, bringing them over to the tal
l. setting them down carefully as Adams went to open them. Sterling v
e didn't the man as he rummaged around. His expression, usually one o
n quiet obedience when Adams was present, was unnaturally hard. For certai
was much on his mind.

quietly There had been ever since the betrothal announcement last night.

rd," he "I wanted to ask you how my son performed on campaign, my lc
said. "Did Maxwell live up to your expectations?"

aily had Adams was pulling forth small scrolls, rolled vellum with muster
and other accounting. "Maxwell is a good lad," he said. "He perform
nly this for the most part."

astle of Sterling's brow furrowed. "There were times when he was lacki
lord?"

he said, Adams shrugged. "He is young."

which "Would you please tell me how he failed to perform?" Sterling pe

“If he has shamed the family name, then I have a right to know.”

to the Adams looked at him then. “Nothing so dramatic,” he assured him there were two times, specifically, he refused to wait for a comm destroyed proceed. Knights at his age always think they know everything, and no exception. He will outgrow such urges if they do not kill him first.” from the Sterling digested the comment, but his expression had cool suspected there was an insult in what Adams had said, and he didn’t t al. “Butwell, not when he and his father before him had served the earl Wolsingham flawlessly for many years. He had intended that such shouldwould pave the way for Maxwell’s marriage to the Wolsingham heir as of last night, he knew that was not to be—and he could not help th the disappointment, building in his heart.

“I suppose that gives me the answer I have been seeking, then,” he chairquietly.

seeing, Adams unrolled one of the vellum scrolls, peering at it. “Your ans what?”

ou seen “Why you betrothed Lady Valery to someone other than my son.”

Adams paused to look at him. The subject had finally come up, y lord,” wouldn’t pretend he didn’t know what Sterling meant. Setting the down, he leaned back in his seat, regarding the father of a fine young k Just not fine enough for his daughter.

ble and “Sterling,” he said quietly. “I know you have long had ambition vatchedMaxwell to my daughter, but you also know that never, at any tim f eageregive you any hope that such an arrangement would take place.”

n, there That was true, but it didn’t stop Sterling from feeling affronted. “I you give me any clear answer that it was not to be, my lord,” he said never told me that Maxwell was not a prime candidate.”

ord,” he Adams could hear a rebuke in that statement. “What makes you th he was ever a prime candidate?” he said, feeling annoyed. “Furth r sheetsMaxwell has never, at any time, shown the least bit of interest in Val ed wellany other woman, for that matter.”

Sterling stiffened. “I see no need to insult my son, my lord.”

ng, my Adams rolled his eyes and stood up. “Sterling, I have spent a solid France with your son,” he said. “Max is bright and ambitious. He is and well educated. But we must face facts, my friend. He is not intere rsisted.women. A marriage between Valery and Maxwell, even if I had a min

it, would only make them both miserable.”

n. “But Sterling’s fair features were beginning to turn red with anger. “You stand to yourself,” he said. “He is young. He will soon realize that he must marry a woman, and whatever he has done in the past, and with whom, will fade from memory. The follies of youth.”

ed. He Adams could see how upset Sterling was becoming with the conversation, but facts were facts. All of Lydgate knew that Maxwell St. John had a male lover since he was about eighteen years of age, a fellow knight who had been sent away at Sterling’s request.

ess, but But that hadn’t stopped true love.

ie rage, “Sterling, I am going to tell you something,” Adams said. “I know you do not wish to hear it, but I am going to tell you anyway. You requested that Gaspard de Jourdain be sent from Lydgate because you did not want your son having a close male friend. A man with whom he shared everything. For your service to Lydgate, I granted your request and sent Gaspard to Northwood Castle. You are aware that Northwood Castle sent men and knights into France, are you not? Gaspard was in command of the Northwood contingent. Max and Gaspard have spent an entire year together, and I have never seen your son happier.”

night. Sterling’s jaw was twitching furiously at the news. “And you are suggesting this?” he hissed. “Knowing how I felt about... about Gaspard, you are suggesting to wed him to serve with my son?”

e, did I Adams shrugged. “Gaspard is an excellent knight,” he said. “Maxwell is an excellent knight, and I was heading into combat. I am not going to send a skilled warrior away because you want me to. Sterling, you must face reality. “You that your son loves a man. I have told you this before, and it is unfair to pretend that love does not exist.”

ink that Sterling’s lip flickered into a snarl. “You will not tell me how I should feel or not feel,” he growled. “Whatever my son seems to think is right or worthy is not something I wish for him.”

“I do not think that is fair.”

“Had you betrothed him to Valery, he would have forgotten the last year in Gaspard!”

skilled “Raise your voice to me again and I will send you away from Lydgate permanently.”

id to do The tension in the solar was thick enough to cut. Adams had been

for the most part, but now Sterling's anger was rousing his own. But he said it knew he'd crossed the line, so he struggled to calm down. Given the marriage was difficult, and the fact that Maxwell and his friend Gaspard had spent an entire year together ate at him. Clawed at him.

He thought he'd ended that relationship.

Gaspard and Maxwell had fostered together and were the best of friends until they grew older and stronger feelings developed. The truth was who had Sterling liked Gaspard a great deal. He always had. Gaspard had been another son to him—until the rumors reached his ears that Maxwell and Gaspard were more than friends. Sterling had refused to believe it until you do caught a glimpse of the truth one day when neither Maxwell nor Sterling had known he was around. A beautiful, tender kiss, from lover to lover, something Sterling had witnessed in the stables one morning.

Because Gaspard had been gone the next day.

But the memory of that kiss still lingered.

"Forgive me, my lord," Sterling finally said. "I am emotional when my son is concerned."

Adams knew that. "I understand," he said. "But I, too, have a daughter. I want the best for her, just as you want the best for Maxwell. Ultimately I want her to be happy. I should think you would want the same for Maxwell and in his case, marrying him to a woman—any woman—will make him miserable. I cannot believe that is what you truly want."

Sterling sighed heavily. "I want him to have what all men have," he said. "A wife, children, property, and prestige. I want him to have a destiny."

"Mayhap Max has different ideas about his destiny."

"That is not for him to choose."

Adams grunted. "I cannot say that you are wrong because I have a daughter. I should know my daughter's destiny," he said. "But that was never going to happen with Maxwell, Sterling. I am sorry if that disappoints you."

Sterling's rage had cooled into something that weakened him. It made him feel lethargic. All he could think about was his talented son about with no future. No wife, no children to carry on his name.

"Is one's happiness worth the loss of a legacy?" he muttered. "I do not want my son to be happy. I do. But I want him to have a destiny. That is something all men deserve."

"Then mayhap that is something you must speak to Maxwell."

Sterling Adams said. "I cannot answer for him. But from one father to another subject, your son choose what makes him happy. If you do not, he will grow old just you for it."

Sterling glanced at him. "Did you let Valery choose?"

Adams shook his head. "She is a woman," he said. "Women friends expected to choose their own happiness. But I chose someone I felt was that give her the best opportunity for a lifetime of it."

Then like "Dun Tarh?"

Well and "I think so. I hope so."

Until he Sterling didn't have much to say after that. He simply nodded his head and resigned to what had happened. He felt so incredibly desolate—for the first time, he was a bride for his son, but also for the realization that the relationship he had tried to prevent had not been prevented at all.

More than likely, it had thrived.

At that moment, he felt as if he'd lost everything.

There my *Mayhap it would have been better had Maxwell died in France.*

As Sterling lost himself in horrible thoughts, Adams spoke quietly. "I have decided to have a feast in celebration of Valery's betrothal. I know you do not want to hear it, nor do you wish to celebrate it. As my knight, you must find the courage to do both. I shall write him necessary missives today to local allies and friends alike and invite them to a feast in honor of Valery and Aurelius' betrothal. You will ensure that the invitations are delivered."

It was like another stab to the gut for Sterling. Duty above all, no matter how he personally felt. That had always been his mantra, but, at the moment, he'd never felt less like performing his duties.

Yet he had no choice.

"As you wish, my lord," he said with quiet resignation. "How many guests will there be?"

"At least twelve families locally."

"Then I will make sure the messengers are prepared."

With that, he silently quit the chamber. Adams watched him go, knowing his son was hurt and thinking on a father who had always had great ambitions for his son and a son who didn't conform to the rules that men lived by.

Adams, he didn't care who a man loved so long as his character was good about," but there was a reason for that. He had a younger brother, now a priest.

r... Lethad also favored men, and their father's answer was to commit him t
to hateof piety.

Adams had always pitied his brother because of it.

In any case, it was a world where most men were judged by their
are notand appetites—and in Maxwell's case, anyone who served with him k
: wouldonly had eyes for one person. Adams had never seen him judged, not
dun Tarhs or the de Wolfes or the de Nerras, or any other alli
happened to know the truth. They, too, judged Maxwell on his merits,
preferences. But Adams knew that Maxwell wouldn't find that l
is head,tolerance everywhere.

loss of He'd seen it before.

'd tried It could ruin a man.

With thoughts of Sterling and Maxwell on his mind, Adams retu
his table and the accounting he now had to go through for a tally
expenditures in France, in both lives and money. But he couldn't s
forget his conversation with Sterling. However, he knew one th
certain.

ial," he It wouldn't be the last time that subject came up.

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had also favored men, and their father's answer was to commit him to a life of piety.

Adams had always pitied his brother because of it.

In any case, it was a world where most men were judged by their actions and appetites—and in Maxwell's case, anyone who served with him knew he only had eyes for one person. Adams had never seen him judged, not by the dun Tarhs or the de Wolfes or the de Nerras, or any other allies who happened to know the truth. They, too, judged Maxwell on his merits, not his preferences. But Adams knew that Maxwell wouldn't find that kind of tolerance everywhere.

He'd seen it before.

It could ruin a man.

With thoughts of Sterling and Maxwell on his mind, Adams returned to his table and the accounting he now had to go through for a tally of his expenditures in France, in both lives and money. But he couldn't seem to forget his conversation with Sterling. However, he knew one thing for certain.

It wouldn't be the last time that subject came up.

For Maxwell's sake, he was sorry.



CHAPTER TEN

AMELIA DE HETTON's laughter always sounded like screaming for a reason. Even a giggle sounded like a howl. That was what woke Valery the morning after the announcement of her betrothal.

Amelia's screaming.

It was right in her ear because Amelia had flopped on her bed to wake her up. What she really did was nearly startle Valery right out of her bed. Suddenly, Amelia was on the bed with her, hugging her and laughing in her ear, and Valery was so surprised that she ended up falling out of bed.

That made Amelia laugh even harder.

"You silly goose!" she cried. "Get off the floor! I've come to see you."

Valery picked herself up, rubbing her eyes as she looked at Amelia across her bed.

"God's Bones, Amelia," she said. "What are you doing here?"

Amelia was dressed in her finest traveling clothes—silks and ribbons and furs. She sat up on the bed, smoothing out the rabbit trim of her sleeve.

"I'm going to visit my husband in Liverpool," she said. "He has been there for the past two months, tending to his ill mother and leaving me home. Can you imagine? Leaving his new wife at *home*."

Valery frowned. "That is positively beastly," she said. "How could he do such a thing?"

Amelia threw up her hands. "That is what I said to myself," she said. "How could he do such a thing? So I have spent my time punishing him."

Yawning, Valery sat on the bed next to her. "Punishing him?" she said. "How?"

Amelia batted her eyes devilishly. "How do you think?" she said. "I've invited his friends over to sup, and I've flirted with them. I've gone in

village, to the tavern, and I've flirted with every man worth my attention.

Valery stopped yawning and frowned. "Why would you do that?"

"Because the rumors will reach his ears, silly," Amelia declared. "He will know it is not safe to leave me alone. He will never do it again!"

Valery looked at her friend in disbelief as the woman stood up and came to pet the geese. She was one of the only people whom the geese tolerated near. As she crooned to the fowl and fed them bits of stale bread off the table, Valery was trying to overcome her shock at what Amelia was telling her. She had only had the woman visited unexpectedly, but she was evidently engaged in something unsavory.

"God's Bones," she muttered, wiping a hand over her face. "At least let me wake up a little and get dressed before you tell me of your life since you last saw me. You seemed so happy at your wedding."

She was up, staggering over to the alcove where she kept her things, as Amelia continued to pet the geese.

"There is nothing more to tell," Amelia said. "You know everything that has happened. Alphonso and I were married all of four weeks before he received word of his mother's ill health and off he went."

Valery was at her wardrobe, selecting her clothing for the day. "I do not understand," she said. "Why would he not take you with him?"

Amelia shrugged. "His mother did not want him to marry, you know," she said. "It was his father's doing."

"But Alphonso had seen almost forty-five years!"

"I know," Amelia said. "That does not mean he is old. It means he is experienced."

"Experienced in what?"

Amelia looked at her in surprise before breaking down in giggles. "That's what you would expect him to be experienced in," she said. "I've never seen you since my wedding night. Do you remember we used to speak of what our husbands would be like and how it would feel?"

Valery was behind the painted screen now, pulling off her sleeping gown. "Of course I do," she said. "I remember everything we would speak of and me and Elyse and Alisabeth. Do you remember how Elyse the woman became with child by having a man spit in her mouth?"

They both burst into laughter. "She learned quickly that is not what happens," Amelia said. "She has three children now."

on.” “That is a lot of spitting.”

More laughter. Valery began splashing rosewater on her, washing
“Thensleep on her face and body.

” “Speaking of marriage,” she said, having some good news of her
nd went “Have you seen my mother yet?”

allowed Finished with the geese, Amelia began looking around for food on
e table, “Not yet,” she said. “Have your servants not brought you food yet?”

ier. Not Valery dried off her face. “How could they?” she said. “You were
aged in before they did. You probably broke through the gatehouse, charged
way into the keep, and kicked my door down. Who let you in, anyway?”

east let Amelia smirked as she went to the chamber door, opening it and
ce I last for food. There were always servants lurking nearby, especially S

Beryl, who hated to let Valery out of their sight. Confident her request
toiletory heard, Amelia shut the door and headed over to Valery’s wardrobe.

“The gatehouse guards recognized me,” she said. “I can convince them
ing that do anything for me, and you know it. I did not see Sterling, though
fore he many standards and men that I did not recognize once my escort entered
bailey. Who are all of the men?”

but I do Finished drying her face, neck, and torso, Valery pulled a soft shawl
her head. “Papa returned from France yesterday,” she said. “He told me
know,” about a thousand men with him, including an entire band of Highlanders.

Amelia’s brow furrowed, though Valery couldn’t see it. “I did not know
your father was allied with Highlanders,” she said. “Alphonso does not
is he is good things to say about them. Nor did my father.”

“What do you think of them?”

“I do not care. A man is a man.”

s. “Just “Then know that I am betrothed to one of them. Papa announced
ot seen night.”

that our That seemed to change Amelia’s opinion of Highlanders immediately
because she let out a squeal. “You are to be married?” she cried happily,
ig shift, rushing behind the painted screen to hug her friend. “Val, I’m so very
of. You for you! Tell me all about him! Have you met him yet? What does he
ought alike?”

Valery laughed at Amelia’s eagerness. “Aye, I’ve met him,” she said.
how it “Now that you are here, you shall meet him too.”

“What does he look like? Is he handsome?”

Valery pulled the dress over her head and stepped out from behind the panel so Amelia could help her secure the garment. "I do not mean to offend Alphonso, or Elyse's husband or Alisabeth's husband, but I shall have my own, most handsome husband of all of you," she said. "He is... Well, I've never seen a more handsome man."

The humor left Amelia's face as she looked at Valery in surprise. "Truly?"

Valery nodded. "You will see for yourself."

She pointed to the back of her dress, and Amelia went to lace her back. "Tell me," she demanded. "I want to know *now!*"

Valery fought off a grin as Amelia laced the garment up the back as tightly and roughly, as if to punish her for having a handsome best friend. "He's tall," she said, grunting as Amelia yanked. "Very tall. And young."

Amelia stopped lacing and suddenly stood in front of Valery, looking as if she wanted to cry. "He's not an older warlord?"

"Nay."

"But your father knows so many."

"I know."

"But I was certain it would be one of those old bores!"

Valery jabbed a thumb at the half-done laces. "Finish and I'll tell you what you don't knowrest," she said. As Amelia went back to finishing the lacing with her hands, she molded into a deep grimace, Valery continued. "His name is Aurelius Tarh, and his father is the Earl of Torridon. Aurelius is his father's name. Not only will I be the Countess of Wolsingham someday, I'll also be the Countess of Torridon."

The more Valery talked, the more unhappy Amelia became until she finally laced up the last of the garment and tied it so tightly that she immediately broke the ties themselves.

"That's just not fair," she said, pouting. "You were already going to be a happy countess, and now you shall have two earldoms? I do not even have one yet!"

Valery shot her a long look. "If you tell me that you are jealous, I will give you a smack," she said. "You have great wealth and power, and I am a noble. How can you begrudge me the same thing?"

Amelia sighed sharply. "I did not mean it the way it sounded," she said. "I simply meant... Oh, Val, I've been so unhappy. Marriage is nothing."

and the hoped, and I feel so alone. My husband spends more time with his mother than he does with me, and I have no one at all. Wealth and power have never warmed my bed.”

The tone of the conversation grew serious as Valery went to her room, looking into the woman’s face and seeing her distress.

“I am sorry to hear this,” she said softly. “Have you truly been so alone?”

Amelia nodded. “Why do you think I came here?” she said. “Traveling with my husband was just an excuse. I have not seen you in so long, and I missed you. I need someone to talk to. I thought I married someone to help me, but his mother calls and he flies to her side. What can I do?”

Valery could see that the marriage between Amelia and Alphonso had some cracks in it. She found herself looking at a disilluminated woman surprisingly so. She was concerned to realize that the marital situation was killing all joy and laughter.

“But when you were married, there seemed to be happiness on both sides,” she said, taking Amelia’s hand. “At least, Alphonso seemed to. He seemed very attentive.”

Amelia was close to weeping. “He was,” she said. “He was up until the time his mother summoned him. I asked him not to go, but he said that you were old and would die soon and he needed to be with her. She can’t wait long enough for me.”

Valery shushed her softly. “You do not want to wish such terrible things on your dear, so she said, squeezing her hand. “Everything will be well again, you will see. Alphonso shall return to you and you shall have all of his attention. I know he was mad about you. Everyone could see it.”

Amelia took some comfort from her friend’s words. “I know,” she said, almost smiling. “But that all changed when his mother snapped her fingers.”

“Mayhap he loves his mother and is sad that she is ill.”

Amelia didn’t want to address what was more than likely a valid concern. She was still wallowing in self-pity and trying to justify her trip to Liverpool. Therefore, she simply shrugged and tugged Valery over to her dressing room where combs and ribbons and pins were strewn.

“Sit down,” she told Valery, pushing her into the chair. “Let me do your hair beautifully so that your Highland husband will see how fortunate you are as I’m dis.”

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do not Amelia. It was clear she didn't want to discuss the subject of her
husband further than they already had, so Valery simply sat stil
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Perhaps she'd better make that clear to Aurelius dun Tarh.

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Valery let the woman push her around. That was usual when it came to Amelia. It was clear she didn't want to discuss the subject of her absent husband further than they already had, so Valery simply sat still while Amelia began to brush her hair. She was quiet and depressed, characteristics completely foreign to Amelia. That told Valery the situation must be dire, indeed. Amelia was lonely, flirting with men she invited into her husband's home, hoping it would get back to him so he would return to her.

Or denounce her for being a whore.

Such a scenario wasn't out of the realm of possibility. Valery thought Amelia was asking for trouble with her behavior, but she didn't say so. She simply sat there while Amelia worked on her hair, braiding it, wrapping it around her head, and creating a masterpiece. Amelia had always been good at that sort of thing.

But as Valery sat and watched, listening to Amelia as she began to talk about the down-and-dirty details of being bedded by her husband—which only turned out to be thrice in the entire time they'd been married—her thoughts wandered to the Highlander she was betrothed to. Yesterday had been a rude introduction, to be sure, but they'd managed to have a somewhat decent conversation at sup—before the announcement of the betrothal and the shouts of congratulations, which weren't meant for her. Only for him.

It reminded her of Amelia's husband, who would rather spend time with his mother than his wife.

Was that the kind of life she was in for? A man who took all of the glory himself, with none left for her? Was she doomed to a marriage with a man whom she didn't know, from a culture she didn't understand? God, she hoped not. She really hoped not. She didn't want to end up like Amelia, lonely and engaging in questionable tactics to get her husband's attention. Well, she wouldn't stand for it.

Perhaps she'd better make that clear to Aurelius dun Tarh.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

HE LOOKED JUST like him.

Lares.

It was true that, over the years, Davina had thought on Lares occasionally and wondered if he was at least content with the way his life had gone. She had hoped he would be happy, because she knew he'd never be happy in an abbey, but she hoped he was at least content. Perhaps he'd even come to terms with his life. Perhaps he'd found a skill he was particularly good at, and he'd used that skill for the abbey, working hard and living a productive life. Even if he was a monk.

But, clearly, that had not happened.

Lares had married.

Evidence of that marriage had been sitting at her dinner table last night. Five dun Tarh brothers, all of them looking like Lares to some degree, could hardly believe it. But the features were unmistakable, just as she remembered him. The eldest, in particular, had a flowing mane that was very much like his father's, while the second eldest had a big white patch of hair over his forehead, stark against his dark hair. She'd been introduced to the five dun Tarh brothers but was told there were eight total, plus two sisters.

Lares had ten children.

That was a far cry from being a monk.

Odd how Davina hadn't known about her husband's alliance with the Tarh clan, but not so odd considering she never paid any attention to his affairs and deliberately kept away from his men or allies. As it had been explained to her last night, the dun Tarh clan came through Castle Quince, the House of de Wolfe, because de Wolfe was allied with—and kin to—the

House of de Velt. Evidently, Lares had married a de Velt woman, family tree of an old and distinguished English house branched off in Scotland's oldest and most legendary families. Adams had told her when the feast was over and everyone had gone to bed. Then he'd sleep next to her, snoring long into the night as she lay there and pondered the news.

The sons of the man she'd once been madly in love with.

And her daughter was to marry the eldest one.

There was incredible irony in that realization.

The autumn day after the feast dawned bright and pleasant, and she took her sewing down into the garden to sit in the sunlight, as she often did on pleasant days. There was a small, walled garden on the north side of the castle, one exclusively for her use, and she retreated to it to ponder things. Not of Lares' death and the fact that he'd peripherally entered her life again. As she sat on a wooden bench with her needlework laid out beside her on the seat, she wondered how to tell Adams that she knew Aurelius' secret. Clearly, she would see Lares when their children were married, she wondered if it would be better if she told Adams that she'd known the truth many years ago and be honest about it.

Well... perhaps not completely honest.

She wouldn't mention that terrible day at Carlisle Cathedral when the night—ended.

Adams didn't need to know that Lares was the man she had been in love with from when her father pledged her to the Wolsingham heir. She'd met him immediately after the situation with Lares, and he'd known there had been a match of "undesirable suitor," courtesy of her father, but nothing beyond that. She'd never asked her, she'd never told him all of it, and for all of these years, the secret simply wasn't something they'd ever spoken of.

But now... now she had to face it.

Davina wasn't even certain if, after all these years, it mattered anymore. She and Adams had lived a good life together, and they had learned to live in each other's company. He wasn't the love of her life, but he was a good man. There had never been once, in all that time, that the mysterious "undesirable" suitor ever came up. Truthfully, that was the only secret Davina had ever kept from her husband, and she really didn't consider it a secret as much as it was simply something in her past that didn't matter.

so the longer.

But that could all change if Lares was suddenly back in her life, even if it was as the father of her daughter's husband. Frankly, Davina found it shocking that Lares had married at all, because the last time she saw him had been surrounded by Highlanders and his own father, who had determined to punish him. She thought back to that violent, terrible scene, something she'd had to push out of her mind long ago, because those reflections had driven her to the brink of madness when she thought of Lares' fate. She simply had to forget about him.

Davina And she had, until now.

Now there was Aurelius.

As handsome as Lares had been, his son had a reflection of his father's beauty and then some. All of the dun Tarh lads had that male beauty that was fierce and startling. Tonight would be another feast with them, and on her side she'd have the opportunity to speak with one or more of them, but her father thought of holding a conversation with Lares' sons did strange things to her heart. She wondered if it was going to hurt to speak to men that should have been hers and Lares. She wondered if old feelings would resurface.

God, she hoped not.

She wondered if she'd be strong enough to handle them.

Overhead, birds flew by, brushing the flowers in the garden, looking for a morning meal. Davina's attention moved to the birds, to her flowers and small trees in her garden. She didn't tend them personally, as many women did, but rather let the servants do it. She simply enjoyed her garden. There was something magical about it, and she found satisfaction in it. He'd been beauty without having to get her hands dirty. As she leaned over to inspect a rose that was just beginning to bloom, she caught movement over the garden gate. A shadow appeared, and as she watched, that shadow became a man.

The very man she'd been pondering.

Aurelius dun Tarh had made an appearance.

a good

serious

secret

"AN ESCORT ARRIVED this morning," Estevan said. "Do ye know who it is after any



He was speaking to anyone who could answer him, but mostly even if it looking at Aurelius and Darien. In the main tent belonging to Dun T. it quite older brothers were breaking their fast around a small, portable table to him, he seen better days. They had watered ale, bread and cheese, and a big l d be cold meat they'd procured from the kitchens of Lydgate. The young day. It hadn't eaten yet because they had duties to attend to, so Aurelius and o many were making sure they ate almost everything. It wasn't unusual for t ight on just leave scraps for their brothers.

Such was the privilege of the older, bigger brothers.

It taught the younger men self-reliance.

"I dunna know," Darien said, chewing. "But they came early. I saw father's when I went to the kitchen for the meat."

That was Estevan pulled a stool up to the table. "Do ye want to know perhaps heard?"

but the Aurelius eyed him but didn't respond. He was too busy eating bread s to her cheese. But Darien wasn't too busy.

ld have He glanced at his brother.

"What did ye hear, little man?" he asked.

Estevan hated it when they called him that. He hadn't reached his spurt yet and was, indeed, shorter than his brothers. Unhappily so.

ing for a And they never let him forget it.

, to the "I heard it was an old friend who is trying to lure Lady Valery ny fine traveling with her," he said. "This lady evidently has a husband who garden. brother who has been trying to woo Lady Valery."

with the Aurelius' head jerked in Estevan's direction. "Is that so?" h spect a suddenly interested in what Estevan had to say. "And ye know t by the certain?"

came a Estevan shook his head. "Of course not," he said. "But that's what of the men have been saying."

Aurelius was immediately in a foul mood. He was already uncertain because of the way his conversation ended with Valery th before, and now she had a friend who had come, possibly to lure her i clutches of another man. Aurelius had an ironclad betrothal with the v so it wasn't as if he had a chance of losing her, at least legally and n is?" But he didn't know her, and he didn't know her past, or her thou feelings, and that was where he was uncertain.

he was He was in uncharted territory.

arh, his “Get out,” he growled to Estevan. “Go about your business. An
hat hadhear any more foolish stories, come and tell me right away.”

runk of Estevan wasn’t pleased at being sent away, but he did as he w
er menOnce he was clear of the tent, Aurelius stood up and went over
Dariensaddlebags.

hem to “Another man already, is there?” he rumbled. “We’ll see about tha
Darien watched his brother rummage through his bags. “They
rumors,” he said. “I wouldna worry over them.”

Aurelius paused to look at him. “That’s where ye’d be mistaken,” l
w them“I know nothing about this woman other than what her father had tol
dunna know what’s in her heart. I dunna even know if she has someor
what Ifond of. Her father was gone an entire year and he betrothed her, not k
how she even felt about it. What if there *is* someone else?”

ead and “Did ye ask her?”

Aurelius scowled. “Of course I dinna *ask* her,” he said. “I’ve on
met the lass, and I’m supposed to ask her if she fancies someone else?”

“Do ye want *me* to ask her?”

growth Aurelius rolled his eyes and turned back to his saddlebags, pullin
comb. “Nay,” he said flatly. “That is the last thing I want. I dunna n
meddling, Darien. Ye’ve caused enough trouble already.”

ry into Darien scratched his head and looked away. “I told ye I was sor
o has asaid. “I’ll not say it again.”

“I’m not asking ye to. I’m simply telling ye the situation.”

e said, Darien wasn’t going to stand by and be scolded for a second c
his forstood up, yawning. “Then I’ll leave ye to yer worrying and go ab
business,” he said. “De Wolfe is leaving today, I think. I’ll go see i
at someand the others need help.”

“Good.”

feeling Darien headed to the tent opening, but paused before stepping tl
e nightHe glanced at his brother, who was combing his long, dark hair, tr
into thework through a knot. It wasn’t like Aurelius to comb his hair unless th
woman,some special occasion, so that told Darien his brother was more inve
norally.the situation than he let on. Yesterday, there had been something sup
ghts orto the betrothal, the initial meeting and announcement. But now, a da
reality was settling. Aurelius was to have a wife, and that was the truth

Hesitantly, Darien spoke.

"Much like Estevan, I heard something last night that ye might wa aware of," he said. "There was a table of soldiers next to us, and the as told.talking. Mayhap ye've already heard it."

Aurelius was combing furiously at a tangle. "I willna know until me."

Darien was still hesitant, given the trouble he had indeed caused, 're justdecided to come out with it. "It seems that Maxwell's father has been p for a betrothal between his son and Lady Valery," he said. "Ye he said.Maxwell, Bear."

Aurelius' irritation faded as he looked at his brother. "St. John?" "Aye."

Aurelius thought about that a moment before returning to the tangl hair that he'd nearly combed out. "Of course I know him," he said "We've spent the better part of a year fighting alongside the man. Anc nly justhis father wanted *him* for the lady?"

"That's what I heard."

Aurelius finally combed through the tangle. He was quiet a momen g out adeliberated that bit of news before finally speaking. "Either his father eed yerknow his own son or he's blind to the man," he muttered. "St. John Jourdain aren't meant to be separated. They'll grow old together."

"I know," Darien said. "Surely the man's father must know that will never marry a woman."

"Mayhap he hopes time will change him."

"I just thought ye should know what the men were saying."

Finished with his hair, Aurelius tossed the comb aside. "If f RhoriWolsingham must know that such a match isna possible," he said. "If going to make a match between his daughter and St. John, he wou already done so."

"Probably."

Aurelius scratched his head, thinking of the powerful knight ere waspowerful sword who only had eyes for another knight. After a morn ested inshook his head.

"Pity," he muttered. "'Tis a pity that St. John... Well, 'tis a pity."

"What do ye mean?"

Aurelius shrugged. "I was thinking that it is a pity that St. John

marry a person of his choosing,” he said. “He calls de Jourdain his friend, but he won’t befriend, and that’s all he’ll ever be able to call him. St. John is a good man, but he’s a different kind of man. I suppose I meant that I find it a pity when a man like that can’t be happy on his own terms.”

“Ye tell me,” Aurelius said. “And a pity when a father canna accept a son as he is.”

“Mayhap he’s simply afraid for him,” Aurelius said. “Men like St. John, but heard de Jourdain can be punished. Ye know that.”

Darien did, in fact, know that. He’d been around men and armies for long enough to know that there were men who loved other men, as a man would love a woman, but those men kept to the shadows because of the punishment should their tastes be brought into the forefront. It was something that others were aware of, but it was never openly spoken of. In fact, Darien had served with Maxwell and Gaspard for an entire year, and he’d never spoken of what was clearly a strong attraction between them. The truth was that in their younger years, they’d had a kinsman who preferred the company of men. He’d been a bright lad, generous and kind, and one day he’d simply disappeared. No one had ever seen him again, and no one knew what happened, but the clan elders admonished those who asked questions. *Put him from yer minds, lad. ’Tis safer that way.*

That was something they never spoke of, either.

Therefore, there was a natural sense of protectiveness and apprehension on the part of his son when it came to Maxwell St. John. Perhaps there was something in Aurelius’s mind—that the man’s father was more concerned for his son’s safety than anything else.

That wasn’t an unreasonable fear.

“Even with lingering thoughts of Maxwell, Darien continued to stand at the door as he was opening as Aurelius moved to join him, both of them looking out over the landscape. It was a bright morning, with trees in the distance turning colors as the weather grew colder.

“Where are ye going now?” Darien said, pushing Maxwell from the door with his hand. “Mayhap to find a certain young lass?”

Aurelius cast him a long look. “Would ye think otherwise?”

“I wouldna. Ye dunna comb yer hair for no reason.”

Aurelius lifted up the dark ends. “How does it look?”

“Like ye’re wearing a dead cat on yer head.”

Aurelius scowled at his brother. “Opinions like that are why no one canna

his bestye.”

old man, Darien fought off a grin. “Then why’d ye ask?”

anna be Aurelius sighed heavily, looking out to the wall and the d
landscape beyond. “I’ve not had a good start with the woman I’m to
and I intend to rectify the situation,” he said. “I’ll do it today.”

st. John “Ye dunna want company?” Darien asked.

“Nay,” Aurelius nearly barked. He stepped out of the tent openi
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Darien fought off a grin. “Then why’d ye ask?”

Aurelius sighed heavily, looking out to the wall and the dramatic landscape beyond. “I’ve not had a good start with the woman I’m to marry, and I intend to rectify the situation,” he said. “I’ll do it today.”

“Ye dunna want company?” Darien asked.

“Nay,” Aurelius nearly barked. He stepped out of the tent opening and waved a hand at his brother. “Go find the de Wolfe cubs and help them prepare for their journey. Leave me to my own affairs.”

Darien did grin then, watching his brother head out of their encampment. But his smile soon faded at his knowing that Aurelius did have a job ahead of him. Lady Valery was a beautiful lass, no doubt, and Aurelius seemed keen to make the situation work. Whatever that would take.

And it would. When Aurelius wanted something, he usually got it.

But in this case... he was in for an uphill battle.



CHAPTER TWELVE

AURELIUS HAD TAKEN the wrong gate.

Coming into the castle proper, he thought he'd turned into the yard, but he was actually in a small, walled garden. A woman was upon a wooden bench, sewing something that was quite elaborate, and seemed startled to see him. Aurelius immediately recognized Wolsingham.

"M'lady," he said, coming to an immediate halt. "Forgive me. I thought this was the kitchen yard."

Lady Wolsingham was on her feet, sewing still in her hands as she looked at him. "The gates are next to one another," she said. "It is an easy mistake if you are unfamiliar with Lydgate."

Aurelius looked up, at the top of the wall, at the keep that soared five stories behind it. "I hope to become familiar with it very soon, m'lady," he said. "Again, forgive me for disturbing ye. I'll leave ye to your solitude."

He started to back out, but Lady Wolsingham stopped him. "Wait," she said. "Please... do not go. We were introduced briefly last night, but I have the opportunity to be more than just a name. You are most welcome here, my lady, and I have a proper title that we should use when addressing you?"

Aurelius was standing in the opening, his hand on the iron gate. "The courtesy title for the heir to the Earl of Torridon is Lord Albion," he said. "The title belongs to me."

Lady Wolsingham nodded respectfully. "Then you shall be addressed as Lord Albion," she said. "I hope your stay at Lydgate has been pleasant so far."

Aurelius nodded. "Very pleasant, m'lady," he said. "Lydgate is a

place.”

Lady Wolsingham smiled faintly, lifting her head to look at the walls as much as her tight wimple would allow. “I was quite intimidated when I first came here,” she said. “I grew up at a great border castle when I married my husband, we lived in London in the early years. I do not truly come here until much later.”

“I will admit that the only time I’ve been to London is to pass through London,” Aurelius said. “I should like to go someday to visit. I hear there are many sights to see.”

Lady Wolsingham nodded. “Quite a few,” she said. Then she paused and indicated the bench she was sitting on. “Would you like to sit for a moment in the kitchen, Lord Albion?”

Aurelius hadn’t been called by his actual title in years, but the king and she were quite formal about such things, he knew. And he was quite agreeable to sit and talk with Lady Wolsingham, his betrothed’s mother.

Perhaps she might give him a little insight into the woman he thought he should marry.

“Thank ye, m’lady,” he said, coming in and taking a seat at one end of the bench while she sat on the other. Her elaborate sewing was between them and he picked up one end of it so he wouldn’t sit on it, handing it back to her.

“Ye have a great talent for sewing.”

Lady Wolsingham smiled appreciatively. “You are very kind,” she said quickly. “Do you appreciate such skill?”

He nodded. “My mother has great talent, too,” he said. “It’s not unusual for a great lady to sew clothing, but she likes to do it. She makes clothing for her sisters.”

“Oh?” Lady Wolsingham seemed very interested. “How clever she is, Lord Albion.”

“She is, m’lady.”

“The king said, ‘Where is your mother from?’”

He grinned. “England,” he said. “She married a man who could outmatch more Scots if he tried. The greatest Scots married the king’s daughter, an Englishwoman.”

“And they had ten children.”

He snorted softly. “They were prolific together, ’tis true.”

“Where was your mother born?”

“Pelinom Castle, m’lady,” Aurelius said. “It is—”
“North of the River Tweed,” Lady Wolsingham said, finishing f
“Your mother is a de Velt?”
He nodded. “She is, m’lady,” he said. “Do ye know Pelinom, then?
“I know it well,” Lady Wolsingham said. “I, too, was born and rai
border castle.”

“Where were ye born?”
“Mount Pleasant Castle,” she said. “Have you heard of it?”
Aurelius nodded immediately. “Aye,” he said. “My family owns a
Castle, which isna far from it. Do ye know it?”
“I do,” Lady Wolsingham said. Then she smiled weakly. “It see
we know the same castles in the same area. How remarkable.”

Aurelius returned her smile, displaying his big white teeth. The ma
able to smile that could light up a room. “I’ve never been to Mount Pleasant,
my father says we were once allied with de Gilsland,” he said. “There
was to falling out years ago, though I dunna know what it was. But I am ce
and I will have no falling out, Lady Wolsingham?”

She shook her head firmly. “We will not, Lord Albion,” she said.
n them, make sure of it. But it is good to talk to someone who knows of th
to her places I do.”

Aurelius was warming to the conversation because Lady Wols
ie said. was welcoming and kind. He appreciated that, given the surprising na
his betrothal to her daughter. She seemed genuinely curious about hi
sual forthat brought a subject to mind that he was most interested in...

Her daughter.
“I would be happy to talk about the borders and the places we mig
ie must remember,” he said, his smile fading. “But I was wondering, m’lad
wouldna be too much trouble—if I might ask ye about yer daughter.”

A gleam came to Lady Wolsingham’s eye as she looked at hi
course you may ask,” she said. “I cannot promise you that I will answe
ldna be question, but I will answer what I can.”

He knew what she meant. As Valery’s mother, her loyalty was
daughter. He smiled sheepishly.

“I understand completely,” he said. “I suppose what I wanted to
was if I had offended her last night. If I did, then I’d like to know
should ask forgiveness. Is yer daughter the forgiving kind? Or should

her a gift as a token of sincerity?”

or him. Lady Wolsingham was trying very hard not to grin at a man who clearly nervous when discussing a woman he didn't know, but perhaps much wanted to know. It was endearing, really.

sed at a “You sound like a husband already,” she quipped softly.

Aurelius' eyes widened. “Do I?” he said. “I dunna mean to. What is... God's Teeth, I dunna know *what* I mean. I only meant to ask if s offended last evening when the men were congratulating me on the be AshkirkThey dinna congratulate her.”

Lady Wolsingham's expression was sympathetic. “You are astoni ms thatthoughtful, my lord,” she said. “I do not think I've ever heard apologize for what a lady might or might not be feeling.”

n had a He averted his gaze, now somewhat embarrassed. “I have a moth thoughtinsists that I am polite toward women,” he said. “She doesna allow any e was asons to be disrespectful.”

rtain ye “She sounds like an extraordinary woman,” Lady Wolsingha quietly. “I... I do hope your mother and father plan to come for the w “I willI should like to meet your mother.”

ie same He looked at her then. “If ye were born at Mount Pleasant, may already do,” he said. “She spent time there, in her youth. Her name is inghamDouglas. Her mother was a de Velt, her father from the Dou; ature ofGalloway.”

im. But Lady Wolsingham seemed to think on that. “I do not recall knowir she said. “I spent my youth fostering at Prudhoe and Lincoln Castle gone for many years.”

ght both “Then she'll be happy to know ye when she comes for the weddi y—if itsaid. “If I know my mother, and I do, she'll be on the road south the v she receives Wolsingham's announcement. Nothing can keep her away

m. “Of Lady Wolsingham smiled. “I shall consider it an honor to meet h r everysaid, sounding particularly soft and sincere. “She seems to have raised son.”

to her Aurelius chuckled. “I was her first,” he said. “I do believe she ma her mistakes and triumphs on me before she raised the rest of the broo o knowwill confess I'm very much my da's lad. He's the one person I ca r how Iwithout.”

I bring Lady Wolsingham's smile faded as she looked to the sewing in he

folding it up and collecting her things. "Speaking of the one person I cannot do without," she said. "Unless you have any further questions, perhaps we should go in search of my daughter? I've not seen her this morning, but that is not unusual. I am going to confess something to you. I probably should not, but she is not an early riser."

I mean Aurelius glanced up at the keep as if to see the very subject of the conversation. "She had a visitor this morning," he said. "I was told a messenger had arrived to see her, so surely she must be awake now."

"Oh?" Lady Wolsingham said curiously. "Who has come?"

shingly "Ye dinna see an escort in the bailey when ye came into the garden?"
a man Lady Wolsingham shook her head. "I came through the kitchen yard and avoided the bailey," she said. "No one told me that we had a visitor."

ier who Aurelius gestured in the direction of the bailey. "I was only told in passing by my friend, but I dunna know who it is," he said. "Would ye like to find out?"
"I would."

m said "Then let me help ye."

edding. Aurelius stood up and held out his hands so he could help her with the long piece of sewing she had, which was more like a tapestry than a simple piece. He picked it up, being polite, and when Lady Wolsingham handed it to Mabel what he was doing, she looked at him with genuine appreciation.

glas of "You are very kind to assist me," she said, putting the last of her things into a basket and standing up. For a moment, she simply looked at him, her eyes glimmering before she spoke again. "Lord Albion, I feel as if we have become friends in this short time."

"I hope so, m'lady."

ng," he "May I be so bold as to give you some advice?"

ery day "I would appreciate anything ye can tell me, Lady Wolsingham."

l." She was careful with her words. "My daughter," she began. "She is my only child, and my husband was not a disciplinarian. She has been raised to believe she can learn anything, do anything, and say anything. She is well educated, and there are times when she believes she knows best. She has many friends that she has had since childhood, silly girls with silly ideas. But I who might have made her feel... unusual because of it. Most women do not read Homer or Ovid. My advice to you would be to accept her for what she is."

r hand, "And who is that, m'lady?"

on you A smile tugged at Lady Wolsingham's mouth. "A young woman, I believe, would rather read a book than dance, or tend an injured horse than sing. I believe my daughter is a woman of substance, Lord Albion. I believe you are much more than the foolish women who pine for men and care only for wealth and appearance because, deep down, she wants to be accepted and appreciated. If she ever shows apathy or disinterest, it is because a friend protects those tender feelings. She has a tender heart. Do you understand what I am trying to tell you?"

Aurelius had been listening carefully. This was the most he'd been told about his future wife since he'd been informed of the betrothal, and he'd absorbed it eagerly. "I think so," he said. "She is not the usual flighty lady."

Lady Wolsingham laughed softly. "Nay, she is not," she said. "This is a betrothal with respect and she will never leave your side. This I swear."

Aurelius liked hearing that. In fact, he needed to hear it. It wasn't what he was looking for a wife to worship him. He'd had women worship him, but he'd grown bored very quickly. What he wanted was a woman who could match him with the wits, a woman with a bright mind and a good spirit to match. Beyond that, he simply wasn't sure what more he wanted, but he knew one thing for certain: he'd realized Wolsingham's words had given him hope that Lady Valery wasn't just another beautiful face. Was he to be so fortunate, purely by happenstance, to find in that he'd found a woman who had much more?

He had all the hope in the world that it was true.

"Thank ye," he said sincerely. "If she returns the respect I give her, I will never leave her side either."

Lady Wolsingham nodded, appreciating his response, but also knowing there was nothing more she could say on the subject. *Should* say Aurelius was going to have to learn about Valery on his own and not from her mother's perspective.

She'd done all she could.

"Shall we go into the keep, then?" Lady Wolsingham said, gesturing toward the stone edifice. "If you wait in the solar, I'll make sure your dreams come to you. You can ask her yourself if you offended her last night."

Aurelius grinned, still holding her sewing as she began to walk out of the garden. He felt good about the conversation, and he rather liked Lady Wolsingham. As she'd said, they'd become friends. He truly felt that because the truth was that she reminded him of his own mother,

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The inner bailey was bustling at this hour as they came out of the garden and headed toward the keep, but as they drew closer to it, two young women appeared and Aurelius recognized one of them. At least, he thought he did, but she didn't look anything like she had the previous night. Valery looked quite... different.

It was all he could do not to burst out laughing at the sight of her.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IT WAS A monstrosity.

God help her, it was.

Amelia had outdone herself on the hairstyle she'd created on her hair and it was horrific. When Valery found herself looking at the style in the mirror, that was the only way to describe it. Amelia had always been so proud of her hair that seeing what she'd done took Valery's breath away, and in a not good way. Then it occurred to her that Amelia had perhaps done it intentionally. It was clear she'd been jealous that Valery was betrothed to a younger, more handsome man. Perhaps this was Amelia's way of making Valery look less attractive to her attractive suitor.

And Valery had fallen for it.

She tried to unwind some of the elaborate braiding, but Amelia insisted that this was the latest fashion and was quite lovely. Valery pointed out that Amelia wasn't wearing her hair in such a fashion, to which Amelia explained that it was impossible for her to do such a hairstyle on herself. Amelia pushed her out of her chamber because she wanted to meet Aurelius, and, suddenly they were out of the keep when Valery didn't want to go anywhere with her hair so elaborate. She paused just as they quit the keep and turned to glance back inside, but Amelia insisted she looked lovely. In fact, she had her hand on Valery's shoulder by now, dragging her.

And then the worst happened.

Who should be approaching but Lady Wolsingham and Aurelius, both of them looking at Valery with great curiosity. Amelia had a malicious expression on her face as she looked between Valery and her mother and then finally at Aurelius, whose square jaw was set and his expression emotionless. Valery was looking at Valery without any reaction at all, but all Valery wanted to

turn and run inside. Amelia, however, waved to Lady Wolsingham in obvious manner.

“Lady Wolsingham!” she cried. “How delightful to see you! I do not mind that I have come for a visit!”

Lady Wolsingham wasn’t looking at Amelia. She was looking at Valery’s hair. She knew that Valery would never have dressed her hair in such a fashion, so she could only assume it was Amelia’s doing. Silly Amelia. Who would probably like nothing better than to embarrass her smarter and prettier friend.

It wouldn’t be the first time.

“Nay, I do not mind,” Lady Wolsingham said, looking at her daughter. “Valery... are you well, child? Did you sleep well?”

“Doesn’t she look beautiful?” Amelia said gleefully, yanking Valery closer to her mother and the tall, handsome man at Lady Wolsingham’s side. “Her hair is the latest fashion. I did it myself, so that she would look beautiful for her betrothed. She told me that she is to be married.”

She was looking straight at Aurelius as she spoke, batting her eyelashes in a flirtatious fashion. That told Lady Wolsingham everything she needed to know. Perhaps she had displayed gentleness with Aurelius only moments earlier, but that gentleness fled in the face of Amelia’s blatant attempt at sabotage.

She’d never liked Amelia much anyway.

“You did this?” Lady Wolsingham said to Amelia. “You made her look like... like *this*?”

Amelia was grinning, clinging companionably to Valery’s arm, but there was a very snide hint to her manner. “Everyone is wearing their hair like this in London,” she said. “My maid told me so.”

Smack!

Lady Wolsingham’s hand flew straight into Amelia’s backside.

“You dare to come to my home and make a fool of my daughter?” Lady Wolsingham said. The smacking hand slapped Amelia’s buttocks again. “You vicious girl! You did this on purpose to shame her!”

Amelia screamed, putting her hand over her buttocks because Lady Wolsingham struck her again. As Amelia took off on a run with Valery, Lady Wolsingham charging after her, Aurelius watched it all with a great deal of surprise and amusement. Amused that the gentle woman he’d just

a most speaking with evidently had a fiery side. He was about to say something to Valery, but she was fleeing back into the keep.

He went in pursuit.

“M’lady?” he called, hearing her run up the stairs. “M’lady, wait!” He could hear sniffing and running feet. Making the split-second decision to follow, he took the stairs two at a time, following the sound of petty distress, and ended up running straight into Valery’s bedchamber as she tried to hide from him. Realizing he was in a maiden’s bower, he rushed to the door and remained there, unwilling to go any further. But he could hear her sniffing behind a painted screen, and somewhere in the chamber he could hear the sounds of geese.

Those damnable geese were around.

“M’lady, truly, ’tis not so terrible,” he said, looking around her chamber and trying to see where the geese were. “Ye needn’t hide. I promise. It’s not so terrible.”

“You do not have to pretend, my lord,” she said, weeping softly. “I did not like it, but she... Oh, I should *not* have gone outside. I should have made her brush it out. I am very sorry you had to see it.”

Aurelius could hear the hurt in her voice. “Ye have nothing to apologize for,” he said, somewhat gently. “I am happy to see ye, no matter what your hair looks like.”

It was sort of a compliment, and Valery sniffled, trying to regain her hair composure. “You are kind to say so,” she said. “If you will allow me to be myself presentable, I would be delighted to speak to you downstairs.”

“Would ye let me remain outside yer door? We can talk through the window like this panel.”

“Why would you want to do that?”

“Because I’ve waited all morning to speak to ye,” he said quietly. “I dunna send me away. I promise I’ll not look inside yer chamber with ye.”

Valery fell silent for a few moments, thinking on his offer. It had been kindly presented, trying to convince her that the rat’s nest on her head was no difference. Perhaps to him it didn’t, but to her, it did. Still, he was her best to convince her otherwise.

She could feel herself relenting.

“You really should not be here, you know,” she said.

hing to She sounded more in control of herself, and he smiled faintly. “I
he said. “But ye and I must build trust between us at some point. We c
now. I promise to stay right on this landing and not look into yer chan
fact, I’ll stay right on the top step. We can converse while ye fix yer ha
-second She fell silent again. Aurelius was still standing in the doorway, k
unds ofshe was considering his words, hoping she might agree to them. Wl
he trieddidn’t answer quickly enough, he stepped out onto the landing.
back to “See?” he said. “I’ll stand right here. I canna see ye, so ye can cc
ld hearfrom behind the panel. Moreover, if ye dunna like my behavior, ye ca
ber, heyer guards to bite me.”

He meant the geese, but he hoped she wouldn’t take him up on tha
a moment, he could hear soft footsteps inside the chamber as she
hamberaround. She hadn’t sent him away, which was a good sign, and nor l
.. truly,ordered the geese to charge him, so he waited patiently while she
herself together. He felt that this was a somewhat important moment, l
“I toldif she sent him away, then he knew he had an uphill battle in tr
shouldestablish a relationship between them. A surprise betrothal, especially
wasn’t wanted, could turn her against him.

ologize But if she didn’t send him away...

hat yer “I saw you with my mother,” she finally said. “Did you requ
assistance with something?”

ain her “Nay,” Aurelius said. “I was coming to find ye and happened to se
o makeher garden.”

“Why did you go to her garden?”

re open “I dinna do it intentionally. I got lost.”

“Ah,” Valery said. “It is easy to do here. There are many doors i
walls.”

“Please “Seems like a labyrinth.”

hilst ye “It is, in a way,” she said. Then she grunted, as if something had h
“God’s Bones, what did she do to me?”

ad been “M’lady?”

d made More grunting and hissing. Aurelius leaned toward the door and
s tryingagain.

“M’lady, is something amiss?”

He could hear her sigh heavily. “I do not know what she has don
hair,” she said, sounding as if she was verging on tears again. “She

know,” pins and ribbons and braids, and I cannot seem to find a way to unwind it. Can you see any servants that can assist me?”

Aurelius looked down the stairwell and even poked his head into the empty chamber. “Nay, m’lady,” he finally called to her. “I dunna see any servants now. May I be of assistance?”

“Not unless you know anything about hair.”

“I do, in fact. I combed an enormous tangle out of my own hair this morning.”

“I do not think that is the same.”

“Won’t you let me try?”

She gasped. “Are you *mad*?” she said, sniffing. Then she grunted. “I do not think I will ever get this out.”

Aurelius stopped asking if he could assist her. He simply went into the chamber, where she was seated at a table that had a big, polished mirror propped on it. When Valery saw him, she gasped and tried to get away again, but he grabbed her by the arm and pushed her back onto the chair when she’d been sitting on. The geese, now near the window, began to hiss at him, but he braved the threat.

He had a point to make.

“I know I promised to stay outside, but ye’re clearly in distress,” he said, trying to get a look at her hair even as she put her hands over it to hide her face. He peeled one hand off only to have it replaced by another. “Only let me get a look, I promise I’ll untangle ye. Or would ye rather send me away while I go hunt for a servant?”

He pushed her hands out of the way, and she ended up covering her face in embarrassment. “I want you to go away,” she said firmly. “I do not want you to see me like this.”

He dropped his hands and stepped back, realizing he’d overreacted. Now she was doing what he’d hoped she wouldn’t—sending him away. He was disappointed to realize it was his own fault.

“If that is yer wish,” he said. “I will find a servant to help ye. I’m not called I embarrassed ye.”

She still had her hands over her face. “Please go.”

Saddened, Aurelius didn’t push. He simply retreated to the door. Something made him pause, looking over at the woman with the bird perched on her head as she sat there with her hands over her face in shame.

d it. Do “Before I go, I want ye to know something,” he said softly. “I’ve been in many places in my life. I’ve known many people and I’ve seen many women. That makes me an expert, I suppose, so I can say without a doubt that you’re the most beautiful woman in England no matter what yer hair looks like. I dunna care that yer friend put it in a bunch on yer head. I was glad to see ye this morning, not yer hair. I didn’t even notice it. All I noticed was ye.”

With that, he turned away and headed toward the stairs. He’d put his foot on the first step when he heard her calling to him.

“Wait,” she said. “Come back.”

He did, trying not to appear too eager. He only stood in the doorway, looking at her as her hands came away from her face and she turned to look at him. For a moment, she simply looked at him, studying him, unsure of what to say. He wasn’t entirely sure why she’d called him back if she was only looking for a bronze to stare at him, but he had hope that there was something brewing in her sharp mind.

he stool *Treat her with respect and she’ll never leave your side.*

nk and There were many ways to show respect.

Perhaps he needed to take the first step.

“I swear to ye that all I want to do is help,” he said softly. “If ye don’t want to do this, I’ll simply to shame ye, ye can tell her that it dinna work. Ye’re beautiful, and nothing she can do will change that.”

If ye’ll As he watched, she sighed faintly, perhaps with some resignation. She turned back toward the mirror. “Be cautious removing the pins,” she said. “It feels as if she’s wound them into my hair.”

er face Fighting off a smile, Aurelius came back into the chamber and waited behind her, his eyes meeting hers in the mirror before he glanced over his shoulder at the geese, who seemed to be settling back down by the window. At least the geese weren’t hissing at him. Confident they’d stay away, at least for the moment, he washed his hands and looked down at the blonde mass on the top of her head, inspecting it carefully before he spied a hairpin and removed it. It pulled some hair out, but not too badly.

One out, an unknown number to go.

Truthfully, Aurelius had never been so careful about anything in his life. The iron pins really were jammed into the mass of hair, and, more than anything else, Valery put her hands up to hold her hair steady while he pulled.

It was an odd bonding experience, but a powerful one.

ve been Bonding over something... personal.
 women. "You've done this before," Valery finally said.
 ye'd be He was focused on a pin at the back of her head. "Nay, I've not,"
 s like. I "This is the first. The question is, will it be the last?"
 o see ye Valery's lips twitched with a smile. "Probably not," she said. "If
 " any good at this, I shall make you fashion my hair every day."
 his foot He snorted, grinning. "It is too much work," he said, glancing at
 the mirror to see that she, too, was smiling. "How do women do thi
 day? I'm exhausted, and I'm not even finished yet."
 orway, Valery chuckled, displaying a smile he'd not yet seen and found
 him. enchanting. "We do it because society tells us that we must be beaut
 what tomen," she said. "We must be well groomed and pleasing."
 y going "And that means taking great lengths with one's hair?"
 in that "Of course," she said, sighing with relief when he took out the
 and the braids started falling away. "You'd not like it much if every
 had an unbrushed mass of hair. We'd look like Christ after he'd been
 the wilderness for forty days."
 He laughed softly, pulling on ribbons that were now easily coming
 r friendhardly comb my hair, and I've never had any trouble attracting wom
 're stillsaid. "But I will admit that for ye, I did comb it."
 "The big tangle you boasted about earlier?"
 on, and "The same."
 said. "It "Child's play," she scoffed, though there was humor to it. "No
 you've seen what a woman's hair can look like, you can see that we
 lked upmuch worse."
 r at the He handed her two ribbons he'd pulled free. "I would agree with th
 ist theysaid. "And I'm sorry."
 oment, "About what?"
 cting it "That foolish men make ye feel as if ye must beautify yerself in el
 air, butways."
 "And you do not think so?"
 "As I said, ye'd be beautiful no matter what ye did."
 his life. He could see her smiling in the reflection of the bronze mirror, f
 n once,by his words. It was about time she was, because he wasn't usually
 flatterer—but with Valery, it seemed to come so easily.
 "Do you know what I think?" she said after a moment.

“I’d like to.”

She snorted at his cheeky reply before continuing. “I think that you he said say such things because we are betrothed,” she said, turning around and gazing up at him as he stood behind her. “Let us be clear, Highlander, you’re not need to be flattered. I would prefer the truth above all else. compliments mean nothing to me. Do you understand?”

He looked down at her, at that exquisite face, so flawless and lovely, but his eyes were also hard and determined.

“I understand,” he said quietly. “But let us be clear on something. I will never say anything I dunna mean. Ever. I will tell ye the truth, always, truthful for it isna something ye want to hear. I wouldna be showing ye any respect, dinna, and above all, the woman I marry will have my respect unless she has something to destroy it. Do ye understand?”

She was still looking up at him, now nodding her head. “I do,” she said. “I appreciate your candor.”

“And I yers.”

Lowering her gaze, Valery turned back around, facing the mirror. She resumed releasing her braids from the ribbons. She was watching him in the mirror, how carefully he was handling her hair.

This man she was to marry.

Truthfully, she hadn’t been sure about his being in her chamber handling her hair until this very moment. He seemed sincere enough now that he’d said all of the right things, but gazing into his eyes as he pleaded to have it always tell her the truth was a pivotal moment for her. Perhaps he didn’t sound like she did when he spoke, or perhaps he didn’t share the same concerns with her family or friends with her, but Valery knew sincerity when she saw it, and she knew honesty. At least, she hoped she did.

She believed him.

“Was it terrible in France?” she asked. When he looked at her, she lifted her shoulders. “That was my question to you last night before my father interrupted us. If you do not want to answer my question, simply say so. I have heard that men who have suffered through battle do not discuss it.”

He appeared thoughtful as he refocused on her hair. “There is no discussion willna discuss with ye if yer question is sincere,” he said. “But it will be something ye’ll understand.”

One of the blonde braids had fallen over her shoulder, and she pulled it up, unweaving the strands. "Mayhap not," she said. "But I do understand a little."

"From wielding a sword?"

He had a smirk on his lips, teasing her, and she didn't take offense. "Nay," she said. "My father has a collection of rare books, and several of those books speak of war. There is one in particular, copied from a manuscript of a Roman general, that speaks of the horror of war."

"So ye've learned of war through books?"

"How else am I to learn?"

He removed the final ribbon that had been laced through her hair, and he handed it over to her as she set it on the table in front of her. But he didn't stop. She had a head full of braids, and he took one, unweaving the strands she was doing.

"Have ye never been part of a siege here at home?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Not really," she said. "We've had some trouble in the land there, but nothing lasting. Sometimes the Scots come through the mountains and try to steal our sheep, but they've never made it back to Scotland with them. My father's men make quick work of them. Whether you are lord of Lydgate, will you make short work of your countrymen? Or will you let them take the sheep?"

Aurelius could have taken offense at that question, but he didn't let it. It wasn't an unreasonable one. He was Scots, and for all she knew, that was where his loyalties lay. He would forgive his countrymen anything. It wasn't the case, and he needed to make that clear.

"Let me ask ye a question, m'lady," he said. "If some Englishmen were to break into Lydgate and steal your possessions, would you let them be surprised, or would you stop them?"

"I would stop them, of course. They are my belongings."

"And I will stop the Scots for exactly the same reason."

She smiled faintly, catching his eye in the mirror. "I simply want to know."

He smiled in return, but he was mostly focused on the braid in his hand. "I know," he said. "Ye and I have much to learn about one another. I want to make sure you know everything so ye dunna think ye're to marry a man who doesn't know his own land."

icked it would be disloyal to the English side of his family. Any man who stand afeared from me, or hurt me or my family, no matter if he is Scots or English, anything else, becomes my enemy.”

That satisfied Valery for the most part. “And that is good, but you have not told me about France.”

She has They’d veered back to the subject of the French battles, and his face faded. “Why do you want to know?”

He speaks “Because I want to understand.”

“Understand what?”

She thought on that for a moment. “Hardship,” she said. “I want to know what you have experienced and I have not. I read a great deal about war, but what I read is poetic. There is truth to it, but no substance.”

He understood, sort of. “Then you seek substance?”

“I will always seek substance, not the paltry picture men will paint of their women.”

My daughter is a woman of substance.

That was what Lady Wolsingham had told him. Valery was always seeking to learn, which he found fascinating. That wasn’t an uncommon trait in that most women he knew possessed. He could see that she wasn’t being nosy. She truly wanted to know.

Perhaps if he told her the truth, she might understand what, exactly, he was asking.

“Very well,” he said after a moment. “If you want to know, I’ll tell you what I saw on a day of fighting that was unlike any I’ve ever seen. It was a battle, but that day the field was so muddy that the horses were up to their knees in mud, and those who fell would drown in the mud. They called it the Bloody Meadow.”

Valery was working another braid, unraveling it, but her fingers trembled. “That’s a terrible thing,” she said. “Where was this?”

“Crécy.”

“And many men died?”

He, too, had another braid in his hand, unwinding it but also feeling the softness of the strands. Since he’d started this endeavor, he hadn’t had time to feel the texture of her hair, but now he was. He was being selfish and greedy about it, running the hair between his fingers and resisting the urge to lift it to his nostrils.

This woman he was going to marry.

tries to A woman he was quickly becoming enamored with.
glish or “Many died,” he confirmed quietly. “It was midday on the field o
when I found a lad who had been wounded, and I carried him awa
ou stilltended. As I headed back into the fighting, a man walked toward
English soldier. He had taken an ax to the face, and the ax was still the
s smileblade had carved into his jaw, from his ear, down the left side of his fa
it was partially embedded in his neck. How he was still alive was a n
but he came toward me, staggering, and I steadied him. His tongue ha
partially severed and his jaw was hanging from his face, but he man
o knowtell me that his name was Radegund, and he spoke of his wife and dau
t battle,He wanted to make sure they knew that he had fought bravely. I assur
that they would. Then he continued walking toward the rear of the batt
where the surgeons undoubtedly couldna save him. There was no v
aint forhim to survive. That is the battle ye are asking about, m’lady, and if
wishes to speak of it, that is why. We witnessed courage ye couldna p
comprehend.”

curious, By the time he was finished, Valery’s expression was one of horr
attitudestopped unwinding her hair and turned to look at him. “My Go
simplywhispered. “The poor man.”

Because she’d turned around, she’d pulled her hair from his
tly, sheRather than stand there without anything to do, he moved away fro
finding a chair next to the table and sitting upon it.

ye. I’ll “Aye,” he agreed softly as he looked her in the eye. “A poor m
raining,was so brave and so terribly injured, but still, he thought only of his
it. MenNot of himself, but of those he would leave behind. Still, he did his du
’

He left Valery with a disturbing mental image. She lingered
slowed.finishing the braid that was in her hand until her entire head was finall
and free of Amelia’s crippling hairstyle. Collecting a horsehair bru
began to smooth out the strands.

“Your fame is well known wherever men journey,” she murmured.
ling the He had been watching her brush her hair, and was now looking
ken thewith a gleam in his eye. “I know that,” he said. “I’ve heard it before.”

ecretive “It is from *Beowulf*,” she said. “You have now told me of the her
ing theRadegund, however cruel and stark it was. He has been well remer
When I tell that story to someone else, he will be remembered yet a
that not what Hrothgar meant when speaking of heroism to Beowulf?”

“That is exactly what he meant,” Aurelius said. He sat back in the chair, his gaze surprisingly warm. “When ye told me that ye wanted to know how to be a knight, I told ye the story of Rade Gund so you would know the honor of the name. An what ye are asking. But ye’ve reminded me that stories of heroism are to be kept. The keep the memories of those men alive.”

Valery turned to look at him. “I wanted to know so that I might understand what my father had been through,” she said. “And you... I had been know you, but when we speak as we are, I am coming to know you a little more. I want to understand what you have been through, too. I believe your experiences will help me understand the kind of man you are.”

He grinned. “And what do ye know so far?”

With a smile on her lips, she turned back to her mirror. “That ye are a bit cheeky and bold,” she said, casting him a side-eye. “What more should I know?”

He laughed low in his throat. “I would say that is sufficient for now. I have a bit of mystery in my relationship. And I like to keep a bit of mystery.”

She was trying not to laugh. “Is that so?” she said. “And what have you learned about me? I’m not so mysterious.”

He shook his head, his laughter fading. “I’ve learned that ye have a strong sense of honor, who can attack on command,” he said, nodding his head toward the knights who were basking in rays of sunlight streaming in through the window. “I have also learned that ye’re a woman of substance. And I look forward to learning much, much more.”

Valery couldn’t help the blush that crept onto her face. “You’re a bit cheeky again.”

“Not nearly as cheeky as I’m going to be, lass.”

She looked at him then, realizing the blush was growing worse. “A man sitting in the chamber of a maiden, that is terribly bold talk,” she said. “You should demand you leave this instant.”

He shrugged, a lazy smile on his lips. “Yer wish is my command. I will go if ye want me to go, I will. I’ll not argue with ye.”

“If you do not stop being cheeky, I will indeed ask you to leave.”

“Do ye *want* me to behave, then?”

The way he asked her made her laugh. She couldn’t help it and he couldn’t stop it. It was a naughty thing to say, and they both knew it,

the chair, started laughing, and he laughed right along with her. They laughed about laughed until the tears came, and then they laughed some more. I couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed so hard and so long, and I really didn't even know why.

Nor did Aurelius.

I could see that she never answered his question.

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said. "I

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started laughing, and he laughed right along with her. They laughed and laughed until the tears came, and then they laughed some more. Valery couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed so hard and so long, and she really didn't even know why.

Nor did Aurelius.

Needless to say, she never answered his question.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

AMELIA WAS HAVING a difficult time sitting down.

After Lady Wolsingham was finished with her that morning, her back was stinging and she'd received a scolding, the likes of which she received since she'd been a child. But Lady Wolsingham didn't hold back and, truthfully, Amelia knew she deserved it. She'd done everything Wolsingham said she did.

It was time for the evening meal, and the great hall of Lydgate was full of men. Smoke sputtered from the enormous hearth, rising to the ceiling. Conversation and music flowed. A man with a citole, a single stringed minstrel, was sitting next to the hearth, and he was trying to sing above the buzz of conversation, but it was difficult. The hall was loud. This time Amelia was relegated to the end of the dais, mostly sitting by herself across from her sat four young men she didn't know until Lady Wolsingham introduced them.

These are the dun Tarh brothers, Amelia. Behave yourself.

Suddenly, the visit to Lydgate wasn't so fun after all.

The three weren't of any interest to her because they were a little young for her taste, even if they were older than she was, but there was a strong, young Highlander with a patch of white in his dark hair directly across from her who was probably ten years older than she was and was quite handsome, she thought.

Maybe this visit would be salvageable after all.

"Were you in France with Lord Wolsingham too?" she asked, raising her voice to be heard over the noise.

The man was eating heartily of his meal of mutton and gravy, but he was polite. "Aye, m'lady," he said. "I was fighting in France, too, and my

Darien. I heard Lady Wolsingham call ye Amelia.”

“That is my name,” she said. “Amelia de Hetton. Lady Valery and I have been friends since we were infants.”

“It’s good to have friends from long ago.”

“I think so.”

There was a lull in the conversation as Darien looked to Estevan but the man was muttering in his ear, but Amelia didn’t take kindly to have her attention diverted.

“How long will you be remaining at Lydgate, my lord?” she asked loudly. “They usually have a big hunt closer to the Epiphany. My father used to hunt with them, and he always had great fun.”

Darien looked at her. “It has been a long time since I have hunted. I hadn’t said. “I would probably spear one of my brothers accidentally.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

He shrugged. “And I’m equally sure that it is,” he said. “Do you really want to m’lady?”

Amelia shook her head. “I do not,” she said. “No one has ever taught me the time to teach me.”

It was a leading statement, as she’d intended it to be, but Darien was prevented from answering by a big body suddenly in their midst. A man with big arms and a handsome face approached Darien, holding out a hand in greeting, and Darien rose to accept it.

“Ah, Max,” he said. “I dinna see ye last night or today. Where have you been?”

Maxwell St. John had made an appearance. A fair man with curly hair and a handsome face, he looked like the depictions of the archbishop. There was something pure and shining about him, and quite likable. He smiled broadly at Darien’s question.

“You’ll not believe it,” he said. “I fell asleep yesterday when we were sitting home, and I only awoke this afternoon. My mother thought I was dead.”

He chuckled as Darien grinned. “I will admit that I slept like the dead last night also,” he said. “I slept better than I’ve slept in an entire year.”

The smile faded from Maxwell’s face. “Completely understandable,” he said. Then he indicated the table. “May I sit?”

Darien nodded, pointing to the seat at the end of the table, which he would be between Darien and Amelia. Perhaps that was on purpose.

Darien didn't have much interest in Amelia, but she seemed to have had a deal in him. Maxwell took the seat, noticing Amelia and acknowledging her.

"My lady," he said, though his tone wasn't nearly as friendly as been with Darien. "I heard you arrived today."

Because Amelia was grossly unhappy to see Maxwell, who was interrupting his conversation with Darien. She'd tried to charm him years ago, but he had no interest in her. She'd taken offense at that, of course, and there had been a rather animosity between them ever since, though it was more on her side than used his. Maxwell simply didn't care about the small-minded lass who had been Valery's friend since childhood. In fact, no one at Lydgate much cared," he Amelia except Valery, and even that was a mystery. But Valery was nothing else, loyal—even when the person she was loyal to wasn't worth

"Greetings, Maxwell," Amelia said with equal coldness. "I see the hunt, have returned from France."

"God has spared me."

When the "I am certain your father is delighted."

It was the extent of their conversation. Maxwell returned his attention was Darien, and when Amelia saw that she was soon to be cut out, she went away quickly.

to him "Darien and I were just speaking of the hunt that Lord Wolsingham every year around this time," she said. "I was telling him I do not know have yet to hunt because no one has ever taught me."

Darien caught Maxwell's rather droll expression before answering blond "Surely yer father has taught ye something," he said. "Or yer husband? angels. "Alas, there is no husband to teach me," Amelia said, looking rather pale. He "But a teacher does not have to be a husband or a father or even a lord. I'm sure you've learned much in the Highlands when it comes to hunting. returned Mayhap you will be kind enough to teach me."

"Darien glanced again at Maxwell, who discreetly rolled his head last Amelia's boldness. That told Darien that Amelia was perhaps quite fond to every man. Not just him.

ple," he He forced a smile.

"If I have time during my stay here, mayhap I shall," he said. "But I meant defer to whatever my brother has planned for me. He is marrying me, since Valery, after all. Lydgate will be his one day. He may have duties in n

a greatme.”

politely That wasn't the answer Amelia wanted. She was smiling at him turned into something of a grimace. “And Lady Valery is my dear t s it hadshe said. “I am certain she would be disappointed to hear that her betr brother would not assist a woman who asked for his help, don't you th ing her There was a threat in that statement. Darien had no idea how the e'd hadgot there, but he didn't like being threatened. Especially not by a lac ad beenthus far, hadn't proven to be a charming or even remotely entertaining than oncompanion. He'd opened his mouth to reply when a cheer rose up am ad beenmen and they all turned to see Lord Wolsingham entering the hall alo h likedAurelius. Men were trying to talk to Wolsingham, and to Aurelius, was, ifheaded toward the dais, but everyone saw quite clearly when A rth it. abruptly came to a halt and headed back to the entry door because Val hat youjust coming through.

He waited for her so that they could walk to the dais together.

Now the evening was about to get interesting.

tion to
e spoke



WHEN THE HALL was full, Valery rarely came in through the main entry. am has But Aurelius had insisted, and her father hadn't fought him on it, ow howshe was, emerging into a hall full of the men her father had always k from. Aurelius had waited for her in a gentlemanly gesture, one that wering.appreciated, but she wasn't used to the crowded hall, so she ended ” Aurelius' left side, the one closer to the wall and away from the cla ier coy.men. Aurelius stayed right by her side even though he was speaking rother.men as he walked along, but she simply wanted to get to the dais unting.stopped talking and escorted her straight to the table where her paren waiting. So were Amelia, Maxwell, Sterling, and the dun Tarh b eyes atAurelius waited until Valery sat down before taking his own seat b friendlyValery and her father. Once they were seated, the servants began to with the food.

And there was food aplenty.

t I must The music struck back up, as did the hum of conversation. Valeri g Ladyhad essentially spent the morning talking to Aurelius and coming to ind for

him, was on the side of the table with Amelia, Maxwell, Darien, and
ly, but it of the dun Tarh lads. She hadn't seen Amelia since the hairstyle incident
friend," now she faced the woman with her hair softly curled, perhaps a little
othed's from the braids, but nonetheless more of her natural style.

ink?" Amelia shifted her chair more in Valery's direction.

ey even "Where did you disappear to?" she asked. "I've not seen you since
ly who, morning."

dinner That was a deliberate move on Valery's part. She had come
ong the conclusion that Amelia had indeed been trying to shame her with
ng with ridiculous hairstyle. She'd known the woman her entire life and seen
as they such things to other women. Amelia was a bully disguised in sil
ure lie use everyone knew it. Valery had remained friends with her throughout th
ery was because they'd known the same people and fostered together. There
time when Amelia had been a comfort to her in those years away from
and that was why they remained friends. But after this morning's c
Valery was starting to rethink that friendship, as difficult as it was fo
let something of length and substance go. The truth was that she didn
to take the chance that Amelia might try something like that again. A
time she'd spent with Aurelius that day, she didn't want the man's
turned against her.

so here Something had happened that afternoon.

cept her He'd been attentive and interested. They'd laughed at silly thing
Valery was something Valery had never experienced before. He'd spoken
l up on about his brothers, the younger ones in particular, mischievous scam
moring would fart in the faces of sleeping siblings and then hide and giggle
; to their reactions. He told the story of Darien trapping a younger brother, Cr
, so he cover let that he had farted in and then laughing when the boy cough
ts were cried so much that he vomited. That had brought their mother's
rothers, unfortunately, but that afternoon, Valery had had a taste of the antics
etween brothers.

emerge It was glorious, farts and all.

After her hair was back to normal, with his considerable help, a
sat talking in her chamber with the door wide open for propriety's sak
y, who Wolsingham had joined them in the early afternoon, and Aureli
o know reluctantly taken his leave, but the conversation still lingered. It

Valery could think about. She'd dressed carefully for sup in a bl

the restsurcoat with a voluminous white silk shift underneath, hoping a present, and presentation would make up for the hair debacle earlier in the day. The frizzy never seemed to care about her hair. As he'd told her, he'd only notice

She was coming to believe him.

When it was finally time for the evening's feast, Valery was certain she never looked forward to a meal more in her entire life. Her mother already gone to the hall, as was usual, so she accompanied her father to the Aurelius into the hall. As Aurelius was caught up in polite conversation with that Adams, Valery found herself facing the woman who had tried to embarrass her doher. Perhaps she might have let it go in the past, but not tonight.

She wasn't in a forgiving mood.

"I was busy returning my hair to its normal state after your comment was a nearly ruined it," she said after a moment. "How long must you be home, Amelia?"

Amelia was a little taken aback at the tone. That wasn't something she usually heard from Valery. Although she knew very well why, and it wasn't wrong in her reaction to a ridiculous hairstyle that had been more of a setup than an actual prank, Amelia wasn't in the habit of confessing her opinion. She simply pretended none of it had happened.

"I was hoping to stay a few days, at least," she said, collecting her thoughts. "There's far more entertainment here. Isn't your father due to have his hunt soon?"

Valery looked over Amelia's head to Maxwell, who lifted an eyebrow. Valery knew that Maxwell and Amelia didn't get along, at least because he'd spurned her advances a few years ago, and now Valery was starting to understand the man's dislike for her. Somehow, in the matter of a day, Valery had developed a dislike for her also.

It was a visit no longer welcome.

"That will not be for a few weeks yet," she said, turning for her wine. "Surely you must get to your husband and his mother soon. Where were you going, isn't it?"

Amelia looked stricken at the comment, revealing something she had tried to keep hidden from Darien, but before she could reply, Darien spoke to her.

"Then ye *are* married," he said, shaking his head. "Ye dinna make a silkman's wife. If ye want to learn to hunt, ye must ask yer husband."

pleasant Amelia was positively aghast at his insinuation, right as it was. “I
But henothing untoward when I asked you to teach me,” she said defensiv
d her. you thought so, then it is your own lewd mind that created that inf
You did not get that from me.”

n she’d Darien was unable to answer before Maxwell leapt to his defense.
ier hadnot true,” he said. “I heard you clearly. You were flirting with the m
her andwhen he asked you if you had a husband, you did not answer him dire
on withyou *are* married now? I had not heard that, but for shame, Amelia. Tha
ibarrasshow a married woman behaves.”

Amelia was most definitely on the defensive now as her sins were
parade. “And how would you know?” she snarled. “What do you know
creationwomen, Maxwell St. John? I notice that *you’re* not married yet.”

u stay, Maxwell snorted. “Just because I rebuffed your attempts at se
does not mean I do not know about women,” he said. “It simply mea
ing shenot want to know about *you*.”

Valery Amelia shrieked, deeply insulted, and turned to Valery. “Are you g
ore of alet a mere knight speak to me like that?” she demanded. “Tell your fat
er sins.he has said terrible things to me. I want him punished!”

“I’ve seen cows with better manners than her,” Darien mutt
r wine.Maxwell from across the table, loud enough for Amelia to hear. “She
annualseduce ye, too?”

“She did.”

nhappy “God was on yer side when ye refused her, lad.”

mostly “God had nothing to do with it. It was pure aversion and nothing m
ry was As Darien nodded fervently, Amelia shrieked again, and Valery p
ter of ahand to prevent the woman from starting a brawl.

“Be silent,” she hissed at Amelia. “I will not have you disrupt
father’s table.”

er own “But—!”

That is Valery wouldn’t let the woman talk. “You came to Lydgate univ
she pointed out. “You came and created your usual chaos, so I would :
’d triedyou have overstayed your welcome. Go back to your chamber and be
up. the morning. Your presence is no longer welcome, Amelia. I mean it.”

ike that Amelia could not believe what she was hearing. “Why should y
anotherstuch terrible things to me?” she half hissed, half cried. “You are mea
nasty. I’m going to tell your mother!”

I meant She started to get up, but Valery was faster. She ended up y
ely. “If Amelia right out of her chair and then began to drag her in the direc
ference. Lady Wolsingham, who was seated on the other side of her husband.

“Mama?” Valery called out. “Mama, Amelia thinks that I am me
“That’s nasty because she was scolded for lying to Sir Aurelius’ brother about
an, and married. Now she wants to complain about it.”

ctly. So Lady Wolsingham was on her feet. “Is that so?” she said. “Pleas
at is not Amelia. Do complain. I would like to hear it.”

Amelia was afraid of Lady Wolsingham. After the spanking
: put on endured earlier in the day, she could see that she was on the verge of a
n about Pulling her arm free of Valery’s grip, she began to back away.

“I... I had no complaint, my lady,” she said. “But I do want to tha
duction for your hospitality. I... I must be on my way in the morning.”

ins I do She was nearly to the end of the dais by now, nearly tripping on t
that led to the floor of the great hall. As she hastened to turn away, M
going to picked up a piece of bread and threw it at her discreetly. Darien saw h
her that did the same thing, hitting her in the side of the head. More bread wa
at Amelia as she made haste to leave the hall. It was Estevan, who ha
ered to all of the conversations, who finally picked up a boiled turnip fr
tried to trencher, mushy and wet, and threw it right into her back. It stuck
screached.

Half of the hall erupted in laughter.

Even Valery was laughing as she watched her former friend try to
ore.” the turnip from between her shoulder blades. Lady Wolsingham, :
out up a playing on her lips, began to follow Amelia simply to make sure the
made it back to her chamber as she’d indicated.

ing my “I’ll see to her,” she told her daughter as she walked past. “Return
guests, my love. You needn’t worry over Amelia de Hetton any longe
make sure she is gone in the morning—for good.”

rvited,” Grinning, Valery watched her mother wander after Amelia, w
say that scurrying away at the sight of the countess following her. As she we
gone into her chair, she felt strong, warm fingers wrapping around her left

Surprised, she looked up to see Aurelius smiling at her.

ou say “Well done, m’lady,” he said in a voice that sent a chill up her spi
in. And one rejoices in revenge more than a woman.”

Valery’s smile was back when she heard her own words coming

Ranking his mouth. "You remembered."

tion of "I remember everything."

"Then remember that it is a mantra I live by."

ean and He chuckled softly, lifting her hand to his lips for a gentle kiss that it being not go unnoticed by those at their end of the table. But it startled Valery so much that she very nearly missed the chair when she tried to sit down.

se, dear But startled in the best way possible.

"Careful," Aurelius said, grabbing her with both hands so she wouldn't fall off the chair. "I dinna mean to distract ye. Only congratulate ye."

mother. Valery had to grab for the seat to ensure she was actually sitting because she couldn't seem to take her eyes off Aurelius. He put a cup of wine in front of her, which she accepted gratefully. She still wasn't over the embarrassment of nearly falling off the chair, however.

he step Nor was she over his kiss to her hand.

faxwell "Truly, my lord," she said before sipping at the wine and eyeing him and "You must show more control. Kissing my hand for all to see is a bit flying improper."

d heard Aurelius' expression was warm. "It was nothing more than a gesture of appreciation," he said. "But I willna do it again if it disturbs ye."

as she She took another sip of wine, only it was more like a gulp to ease her rattled nerves. "I did not say it disturbed me," she said. "But maybe I should simply show more control until we are married."

remove His eyebrows flew up. "I must restrain myself until then?" he asked with a smile incredulous. Then he shook his head and sat back in his chair. "Ye are a woman much, m'lady. A glorious creature like ye and I'm not allowed to show appreciation?"

to your Valery's cheeks turned a flaming red. She took another drink of wine. I will tongue-tied, and Aurelius noticed. When their eyes met, all she could do was grin and look away. He leaned in her direction and lowered his voice.

ho was "Must I really wait?" he said, smiling. "Please tell me that ye dinn't back it. I swear to ye, I cannot wait that long. Such a lovely hand deserves to be kissed, and kissed often."

ne. "No yourself, my lord."

Aurelius leaned closer. "I've not forgotten myself," he said, lowering his voice even more. "I've never been more truthful in my life. But if ye

want me to, then I willna. I'll do whatever ye wish."

Valery was swept away by his gentle flirting, something she wasn't used to. It wasn't that she hadn't had many suitors—it was simply that the ones that she had had been sent away by her mother over the past year because her father had been absent. That didn't leave much opportunity for courtship or flirting, even as her friends married and she remained a maiden. Before her father hadn't been keen on anyone courting his only child, so she had buried herself in her books.

But now... now she had a suitor who was quite charming.

Of course she didn't want him to stop.

"I simply said you must control yourself," she said. "That means I must be discreet."

He smiled broadly, big dimples in each cheek and those big white teeth on display. "Thank ye, m'lady," he said. "I promise I will be much more discreet from now on. But may I ask a favor of ye?"

"What is it?"

"Will ye at least call me Aurelius when we are speaking in private?" he said. "I would like to think we're moving past the formalities. I'd like to be called Aurelius much if ye would."

She looked at him, realizing he was quite close to her. God, he was handsome and handsome, with a manliness that seemed to overwhelm her in a way she didn't understand. It was the smell and the warmth of him, the gleam in his eyes when he looked at her. He made her heart race and her palms sweat. She loved every minute of it. Like now. She was flushed and giddy, but it was the best feeling in the world, as far as she was concerned.

It was difficult not to become swept up in it.

"If you wish," she said. "You may address me as Valery if you wish, as long as Papa does not hear us. He might not want us to be so familiar with one another so soon."

"Valery," he said, low and sweet as he rolled it off his tongue. "I've never heard a more beautiful name."

She was back to flushing again, laughing softly. "You flatter me too much," she insisted weakly. "Not everything about me is beautiful."

He frowned. "How do ye know?" he said. "I see nothing but beauty when I look at ye. I would hope ye'd want yer future husband to see just that."

She shrugged in agreement. "That is true," she said. "I would hope so."

future husband would find something agreeable about me.”

He rolled his eyes and sat back in his chair. “Agreeable?” he said. “There isn’t anything about ye that is not completely and utterly agreeable. If there is, I look forward to finding out what it is, because from where I’m sitting, ye’re as close to perfect as I’ve ever seen.”

Flattered to the point of feeling lightheaded, Valery had to look away so she’d risk making a fool of herself. Her entire body was giddy with delight. She happened to catch Maxwell’s gaze as he sat at the end of the table, and he smiled at her, nodding his head with approval. He’d heard nearly everything, no matter how Aurelius had tried to keep his voice down, and he liked being...he’d heard.

Valery smiled timidly in return.

“I apologize that I’ve not had the opportunity to properly greet you, my lady,” Maxwell said. “It seems that I’ve done nothing but sleep since I returned. My father thinks I’ve grown lazy since I’ve been away.”

“Ye’ve not grown lazy,” Aurelius replied. “Ye can tell yer father for me, can’t ye? I spent the past year eating and sleeping and fighting alongside ye, Maxwell. It’s not as if ye’re the most un-lazy person I’ve ever known.”

Maxwell’s attention shifted from Valery to Aurelius. “You honor me, Maxwell,” Aurelius said, lifting his cup. “May that be the finest thing said about an honor guard, especially you.”

Aurelius lifted his cup in Maxwell’s direction. “I’ll drink to that,” he said, and before taking a big swallow and smacking his lips. But his focus remained on Maxwell. “We’ve seen quite a bit together, haven’t we?”

Maxwell’s smile faded. “We have,” he said. “But your heroism and bravery is something I shall never forget.”

That had Valery’s attention. “What heroism?” she asked, looking at Aurelius. “What did you do?”

Maxwell knew that Aurelius would downplay whatever happened, but he never hastened to answer her. “You may not know this, Val, but you are to be a man of greatness,” he said. “Never mind the fact that when Aurelius gives a command, all men follow. Nay, that has nothing to do with it. He is not a man to sit back and let others suffer. He is a man that will suffer with them.”

Valery’s gaze was still lingering on Aurelius even as she continued to speak to Maxwell. “Tell me,” she said.

Maxwell lifted his cup for more wine as a serving wench with a . “Lass, walked by. “There are too many incidents to list, but I can tell you le. And certain,” he said, making sure the wench filled his cup to the rim. “I ere I’m mind that he was not mounted in the heat of the fighting on that bloody meadow. He was on foot. I saw him carrying out lads who had away or men who could not get to safety, but Aurelius took them away fr ht. She fighting only to return and continue to fight. But there was a man w and he taken a sword across his belly. I was fighting off two Frenchmen or l ything, have helped him, but Aurelius saw him and went to his aid. Unfortu ed what the man was nearly cut in half. Moving him would have killed him in I watched as Aurelius knelt beside him, holding his hand and fight anyone who came close. He stayed with the man until he passed ou, my carrying him away so his body would not be swallowed by the mud. T since Ilady, is heroic.”

Valery was still looking at Maxwell as he finished speaking, thin or me. I what Aurelius had told her earlier about the man with the ax to h ax, and Clearly, many terrible things had happened at the Battle of Crécy, an only told her about one. Now she was hearing about another. Things me,” he man would say about himself.

y man, That gave her some insight into the character of the man she marry.

he said It was a way for her to understand, and relate, to him.

ined on “You stayed with him so he would not be alone,” she said, loo Aurelius. “That is astonishingly brave.”

t Crécy Aurelius wasn’t happy that Maxwell had brought up that parti difficult moment in his life, but it was out in the open now. It wasn’t king at could tell Maxwell to take it back and the very idea would be erased. I her gaze for a moment before looking to his wine.

l, so he “He was an old man who had fought for my father, long ago,” I marry a “He was big and gruff and bad-tempered, but he could swing a mace in Tarh one ye have ever seen. We needed him. He was the first man into ba t. He is the last one out. I dunna know how he fell, only that he did, and I saw r along he lay in the mud, trying to get up, but... everything was cut. He co move.”

nued to “I saw him.”

From across the table, the youngest dun Tarh lad, Kaladin, spoke

pitcherdark eyes were aglow at the memory of what they were speaking of, but one of them had been there. The younger Englishmen, as squires for the fully equipped knights, stayed on the peripheral of the battle and dragged the wounded as muddy as they could, so Kaladin and Caelus had seen everything from the fallen, messy meadow. All eyes turned to Kaladin, and he shoved Caelus away from the man tried to quiet him.

“I saw it,” he insisted, looking at Aurelius and Maxwell and even Valery. “He was lying on his back and his guts were hanging out. They were hanging out and he was trying to put them back in so he could get up and walk, but he couldn’t do it. Bear found him and sat with him, telling him he was off very brave and that he had already won the battle for the English. That before was still trying to fight because men were fighting all around him.”

Valery was somewhat taken aback at the stark image the young man was painting, but something else the lad had said stuck with her. “He called me a bear,” she said. “I heard someone else refer to you by that term. What does that mean?”

Aurelius was trying to push the memory of that gory old man out of her thoughts, and her question caught him off guard. “It is a name Darius gave me when we were young,” he said. “He couldn’t say ‘brother’ very well, so it came out as ‘bro-bear.’ Bear is what the family calls me.”

Valery understood. She thought it was rather sweet. But her thoughts drifted back to what Kaladin had said. “What you did for the man,” she said. “That must have been very dangerous. Very noble, but very dangerous.”

So much for trying to forget about the old Highlander. Now those memories were back. Valery was praising him for his noble actions and bearing as if he were an avenging angel and single-handedly fought off the French. He held off the French. But it was so much more than that. Dangerous was very dangerous—deadly was where it ended. Truthfully, he was surprised he had been cut down with all of the swords around him as he knelt in the mud like nobleside the old man and held his hand until he stopped breathing.

“I wasn’t the brave one,” he finally said. “The brave one was the one who died in the mud. They were all brave, those men who fought and died in that muck. ’Twas not a dignified way for a man to die.”

Valery could see that he wasn’t comfortable with the subject, so she didn’t press him. She’d already done that in the morning, when they spoke of the battles in France, but this situation was something he didn’t have

because fondness remembering.

pledged “I’m glad Kaladin told me,” she said quietly, for his benefit. “I’d out if remembering the old man well this evening. That is never a bad thing, bloody, He smiled weakly. “Nay,” he said. “But I’d rather speak on other things when you wish.” “As you wish,” she said, allowing him to change the subject, even if heroism was something she was interested in. “Was there something you wished to speak on?”

spilling That was a good question for Aurelius, because there was something he’d had on his mind since he left her with her mother earlier than he was. They’d spoken about many things, but nothing too deep or serious. The man intentional on his part. It all went back to what he’d been thinking yesterday about the fact that Adams hadn’t seen his daughter in a year, and many things could happen in a year, including a young lady with a suitor on her mind. He hadn’t brought it up, nor had he even caught rumor of any suitors for her, does it Valery except for what Estevan had told him, but the more he came to think about her, the more he felt that he truly *needed* to know. Not that he thought of his attention was elsewhere, but it was better to be certain. He’d been chosen as a man of kind, but if a woman’s heart was wrapped up in someone else’s, it would be a difficult road ahead for him. He was nearly to the point of return with her, as quickly as that had come, and he didn’t want any other thoughts now that his focus was on her.

he said. Now that he could see her as his destiny.

.” Simply to clear the air, he felt that he had to ask.

images “There *is* something I’d like to speak on,” he said. “I feel that I should say it before we go any further.”

fighting “Further with what?”

where it He gestured to the two of them. “With us,” he said. “Your father would have been glad to become acquainted, and we are. I suspect he’d be quite happy if you were to become acquainted with each other agreeable.”

She grunted softly. “He’d be bloody thrilled if we actually liked each other.”

died in Aurelius chuckled. “I’m sure he would,” he said. “And if I may say so, I do like you. I’ve not found anything about you that I don’t like. But the thing is, so that you don’t know me until yesterday, and for a woman as beautiful as you are, surely you had other suitors before me. What I want to say is that if I’ve disrupted something, someone that you wanted, you have my apologies.”

betrothal was between my da and yer da, and I dinna know of it myself. We areshort time ago.”

is it?” Her smile faded as she listened to him. “Then you’re unhappy with things.” He shook his head quickly. “I am happy,” he said. “Very happy. n if hismay not feel the same way.”

specific “And you are concerned for my feelings?”

“I will always be concerned for yer feelings.”

ing that Valery gazed at him a moment, wondering if the man was sim at day, good to be true. He was brave, heroic, and not self-absorbed? She fou hat was astonishing. But he was asking her personal questions now, trying to c sterday, know her and the situation he now found himself involved in, and sh / things understand that. That cheeky, saucy Scotsman she’d met only yester nd. She suddenly become a very real part of what was now her life. He v or Lady betrothed, to be her husband, and she felt shockingly comfortable v o know situation.

ght her That was, in large part, Aurelius’ doing.

arming “I am happy with it also,” she finally said. “And nay, there is no arms, it that I am pining for. I’ve never really had one, to be truthful. But you t of noother hand...”

stacles He frowned. “Me *what*?”

“You said you had no trouble attracting women,” she said. “You t that this morning. Is there a special lass in Scotland that I am steali from?”

should He smiled, a reluctant gesture. “Nay,” he said. “There have been that have tried to pull me into marriage, and I could have married wanted to, but somehow, they didn’t seem right. Not that the lass e ants us lacking, but it was more a feeling I had. That they weren’t right for me

we find “And you do not have that same feeling when you look at me?”

He thought on that briefly before shaking his head. “Nay,” he ed one canna explain it, but I dunna have the same feeling, and I’ve known far less a time than I’ve known other women. You intrigue me, lady. A ay so, I not often intrigued.”

truth is She fought off a grin. “We cannot build a marriage on intrigue.”

il as ye He lifted his eyebrows. “I hope we build it on respect and laugh : if I’ve the trust I’m trying to build,” he said. “But I needed to know if the es. The any... obstacles.”

“There are none.”

He beamed. “Can I kiss yer hand again?”

She looked around nervously. “Nay,” she said. “You must wait until ye appropriate.”

“When will that be?”

Valery opened her mouth to reply, but her father suddenly stood and began shouting for silence. Seeing this, both Aurelius and Maxwell stopped shouting as well. Between the three of them, they silenced an entire hall in a matter of moments very quickly, enough so that Adams was able to be heard from one end to the other.

“Good men,” he said. “As I announced last night, my daughter will be marrying Aurelius this month.”

Cheers and whistles went up all around, but Adams held up his hand with the silence before continuing.

“Aye, it is quite exciting,” he said. “I agree with your enthusiasm.

It is my privilege to introduce Aurelius to my local allies, so we will have a great feast to celebrate the betrothal next month. We shall have a drink and feast for days. For those of you who are here as part of the contingent I brought home from France, I hope you will return home to your lords and tell them of this great feast. They are all invited, of course. I would have every neighbor and close ally celebrate this great event on the evening of next month. That is a special day because it is my daughter’s day of celebration.

A fitting celebration for my lovely Valery.”

The men roared as all attention turned to the lady in blue on the floor. Valery was so unused to attention from men in the hall that she was embarrassed by it, shaking her head when her father told her to stand and accept the applause. She refused, trying to shrink away from the attention. Adams, seeing how uncomfortable she was, stood up in her stead.

“On behalf of my future wife, I thank ye for yer kind attention,” he said. “Although she’s too much of a lady to speak to the likes of ye, know that I’m appreciative.”

The men roared with laughter and went back to their drinks. Aurelius and Adams sat down. Adams leaned in Valery’s direction. “You have my permission to say a polite word to the men, Val,” he said. “They were simply showing their happiness for yer betrothal.”

Valery rolled her eyes. “Papa, how could you embarrass me like

she said. "I would sooner jump off the wall and into the moat than see the hall full of your men. Aurelius, thank you for stepping in to save me until it is very grateful."

As Aurelius smiled at her, Adams interrupted the moment. "I really kept you away from my army for most of your life, but in moments like this you have my permission to acknowledge their praise."

Good up, Valery frowned and stood up. "I do not want to acknowledge the hall full praise," she said. "I want to go to bed."

From one Adams wasn't sure why she was so irritated, but he waved her to the hall. He had drink and food to keep him busy. But Aurelius didn't, and he stood still soon next to her.

"May I escort ye to the keep?" he asked. "Ye might need protection from this rabid crowd."

But Valery shook her head. "No need," she said. "I will go in through the kitchen. I will be quite safe."

will be "I would like to escort ye, very much."

unt and She looked at him, realizing he simply wanted to be with her. Possibly of the alone with her. Here in the hall, they were surrounded by men, but to you escorted her outside... alone... Well, the very thought made her heart flutter and she would smile spread over her lips.

seventh "Very well," she said. "But nothing inappropriate."

of birth. "Not even a kiss to yer hand?"

"You'd better not try."

ie dais. He nodded, grinning, as she wagged a finger at him. When she was quite away from the dais, he tried not to look too eager as he followed.

for the subtlety was good, especially when the woman's father was around. Aurelius, was thinking of that lovely little bailey that surrounded the keep, the one behind the big tree that hid most of the bailey from the prying eyes of those who he said. wall. A lovely little bailey where he might sneak in more than a kiss to her hand. Even though she told him not to try.

He could hope, anyway.

as both But little did he know that wasn't what lay in store for them in that little bailey.

he said.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THEY'D PICKED UP a tail.

Aurelius and Valery were only halfway out of the hall when A realized it. Maxwell was behind them, following them all the way across the big bailey, and then the smaller inner bailey. When they c the enormous tree, Aurelius stopped and turned to Maxwell.

"I dunna need any help, laddie," he said, a glimmer of humor in l "If ye think to protect the lady's honor, I assure ye that no one can pi better than I."

Maxwell was fighting off a grin. "Do not be ridiculous," he said. you know I did this so Wolsingham wouldn't be suspicious?"

"Suspicious of what?"

"Of whatever you intend to do."

"That is *our* business."

Maxwell looked at Valery over Aurelius' shoulder. "I suppose it said. "Valery, dearest, if you need me, just scream. I'll come running."

With that, he winked at Aurelius and headed out of the smaller leaving Aurelius shaking his head and Valery giggling.

"I have missed him," she said. "I'd forgotten how much."

Aurelius looked at her. "He's a good man," he said. "Annoying good man."

Her gaze lingered on him for a moment. "You *do* know that h competition," she said. "What we were discussing earlier about su Maxwell's father wanted me for his son, but my father did not. Max like my brother. And I do not think he shall ever marry."

Aurelius moved toward her in the moonlight. "I served with hi year," he said quietly. "I think I know the man fairly well."

Valery didn't elaborate on that conversation. She didn't know Aurelius well enough to do that, to be completely honest about Maxwell, but she suspected Aurelius already knew. If he did, there was nothing more she could do. But if he didn't, she didn't feel comfortable being the one to tell him. As protective of Maxwell, someone she'd known her entire life, she would never betray him so.

"His parents missed him terribly while he was away," she said, leaning on the bench that had been built underneath the tree. "Have you ever seen your father, Sterling?"

Aurelius nodded. "Briefly," he said. "We were introduced last year. I noticed he didn't eat with us tonight."

Valery gestured to the wall. "He has been known to take the night air outside," she said. "Also... I suspect he was not happy with the betrothal announcement. He had high hopes for Maxwell and me."

"Sometimes things don't always go as we hope."

"True," she said. "But sometimes things happen that you never hoped for."

He smiled at her in the darkness. "Those are the best things of all."

"Don't you think so?"

"I do."

Valery was quite sure they were speaking of the same thing—the betrothal—and she was struggling not to get caught up in the magic of it. Life wasn't magic, and neither were relationships. Having never been enamored with anyone, and never having even been fond of a man in a romantic sense, this was new to her, and as levelheaded as she was, it was difficult not to become enamored with all of it.

Enamored with Aurelius.

But there was something inherently terrifying in that.

"Do you truly think this will work?" she finally asked. "Aurelius speaks plainly. Our worlds are so different. Until yesterday, we did not know one another, and now we speak of battle and books as if it is the most natural of things. We pretend that everything is well and good and these will be of sunshine and roses for us. But is that really true?"

He averted his gaze in a pensive gesture, moving to the bench tucked under the sycamore. Sitting down, he finally looked up at her.

"Who's to say?" he said. "Life has no promises, Valery. If you are in love, you must believe."

surely for promises and certainty, then your first lesson will be that there is nothing but shething. Life will be what we make of it.”

to say. “But what do you *want* to make of it?”

. Being He shrugged. “I would imagine I want what you want,” he said. “I’d never marry. So must you. It would be good to marry someone we can speak of in books and battles, and other things. It would be good to learn to laugh at the turnings of someone who finds a cheeky bastard hilarious. I know I’m a cheeky bastard, but I’m your cheeky bastard, according to your father and mine.”

She smiled faintly. “I know,” she said. “But this all seems so strange to me. I doesn’t it? Yesterday, I was sending my geese to bite you, and today we are laughing together.”

watch,” “What are you afraid of?”

retrothal Valery thought hard on that question. She went to sit on the bench in front of him, a foot or so away, pondering the answers she might give. But she could only come up with one.

er even “I’m afraid of disappointment,” she said honestly. “I’m afraid of losing you.”
“Losing me?”

She half nodded, half shrugged. “In a sense,” she said. “I am the easiest person to get along with. I’m opinionated and stubborn. I’m right about things. I do not capitulate easily. That could be very tiresome for you—*they* you.”

of it all. He chuckled. “I like a challenge.”

courted, “I could prove to be a big one.”

was all He cocked his head thoughtfully. “I’m not the easiest to get along with, but I’ll become either,” he said. “Ye canna always be right because *I’m* always right.

next Earl of Torridon, with a long legacy behind me that gives me the confidence to know there is nothing I canna do if I put my mind to it. I have seven brothers and two sisters, all of whom will marry, and I will be the head of the family, let us of our family. That is a big responsibility. Now, I will also be the head of the family at Wolsingham, a Highland-born English earl. The enormity of what I’m facing is quite real. I couldna do it if I dinna have a partner in it who can be as strong as I was in all things. Mayhap I’ve only known ye a day, Valery, but I know good character when I see it. I see it in ye.”

at was “And you are sure of this?”

He grinned. “Ye’re asking about certainty again.”

looking She looked away. “I know,” she said. “But this world we are facing is a hard one.”

no such quite new to me. Until yesterday, I was simply the daughter of an earl
were no immediate expectations upon me. But now..."

"Now there is the expectation of two earldoms upon ye."

"I must "Exactly."

ask to of "What if there wasn't?"

ugh with "What do you mean?"

bastard, "Just that," he said, leaning forward so he could see her face more
in the darkness. "What if I had no earldom and you were the daugh
sudden, simple knight? What if it were just the two of us, facing a betrotha
y... we simple people whose fathers decided we should marry. Would ye
through with it, knowing ye'd be getting nothing out of the marria
me?"

next to Valery considered the question. She thought about the laughter
e could shared, the conversations that led her to believe he was more than a v
more than a Highlander. He had intelligence not readily seen in me
ss." days. He also had a sense of humor that was both endearing and n

There were many things about Aurelius dun Tarh she found intriguing
not the attractive, more than any man she'd ever met.

always A smile tugged at her lips.

ome for "I suspect you would be quite enough," she said after a moment.
than enough, actually."

He smiled broadly and reached out to take her hand. "I'll tell ye a
he said. "The first five minutes I knew ye, I knew I wanted to marry y
on with we not already been betrothed, I would have begged yer father
I'm the agreement."

me the His big, calloused hand was searing against her flesh, and Valery
l've got began to race again. "Even after I sent the geese to bite you?"

he head "Even after," he confirmed softly. "By the way—where are the
Earl offeathered monsters?"

it I am She laughed softly. "Asleep in my chamber," she said. "They hav
ould be in a cozy corner."

lery de His eyebrows lifted. "And they do this every night?"

"Aye."

He scratched his head with his free hand. "Do ye mean I, too, mu
with the beasties after we're married?"

acing is She tried not to grin at the horror in his voice. "They're really quit

l. Therewhen you get to know them,” she said. “They’ve been with me since small girl. When I went to foster, my mother tended to them, but returned, they came to me as if I’d never been away. They are my pets

He could see that he was defeated. “Very well,” he said with resignation. “As long as they dunna try to bite me in my own bedchamber, I’ll be alongside them. But ye should know that I dunna share very well.”

clearly “Share what?”
ter of a “Ye.”

l? Two The flush was back to her cheeks as she turned away bashfully, still golifted her hand to gently kiss it. That brought giggles, which made him age butSoon, they were laughing at each other in a most delightful way. In that sweet moment, one of hope and discovery, but they were rudely interrupted by a shadow in the darkness.

warrior, “How sweet. How touching.”

n these It was a male voice, back near the corner of the keep, and Aurelius instantly on his feet, pulling Valery behind him.

ing and “Show yerself,” he said steadily.

The figure moved. It had been blending in with the shadows of the branches, and was now moving in their direction. As it came closer, Valery recognized the figure. She’d been seeing it every day for many years, but it came out from behind Aurelius when she realized who it was.

secret,” “Sterling,” she said, sighing with relief. “You startled us.”

ye. Had Sterling came into the light, illuminated by the moon and the torches for anthe inner wall. The lighting was faint, but it was enough to show his

Both Valery and Aurelius quickly realized that he didn’t look like him. “Something was off.”

“Sterling?” Valery said curiously. “What is the matter?”

se two He was looking at her, his focus seemingly dazed. The night shifted, and suddenly, they could smell alcohol. Alcohol and piss.

e a bed He was drunk.

Very drunk.

Valery looked at Aurelius with concern, but he was fixed on Sterling who was clad in mail with weapons at his side, including a broadsword. “The man was armed.”

“M’lord,” Aurelius said evenly. “Is there something ye need? Something I can help ye with?”

I was a Sterling shook his head slowly, nearly throwing himself off balance when Idid so. “Nay,” he said. “I just wanted to see the man who has taken my wife. I wanted to look you in the eye and ask you why you feel you are much better than Maxwell. He’s an English knight, after all. One of the best of his generation. What makes you better than he?”

“I am not better than Maxwell,” Aurelius said. “I served with the man for the past year. He’s an excellent knight, and I consider him a friend.”

“Then why did Wolsingham pick *you*?”

and he “Ye would have to ask him.”

laugh. “I did,” Sterling spat, growing agitated. “He gave me lies. Loyalty was a disloyalty. I’ve served the man for many years, as my father served his lord. And what do I get for that loyalty? My son is denied his right. His right is disrupted. And what do I get for that loyalty? My son is denied his right. His right is disrupted.”

“I am not Maxwell’s right,” Valery said, putting herself in front of Aurelius because she was afraid Sterling might actually attack the man. Aurelius washedome, Sterling. You’re drunk. Go home and I will not tell my father this... this encounter.”

Sterling looked down at her, torn between obeying her and defying her. He took a step back, unsteadily.

Valery “*Why?*” he said, suddenly begging her. “Why could you not have stayed and she up for Maxwell? Why could you not have told your father that he should have your husband?”

“I told you to go home,” Valery said in a steely voice. “I will forgive you because you are drunk, but any further conversation and I might not be in a forgiving mood.”

self. Sterling drew in a long, deep breath through his nose and took a step back, and then another. What he was doing wasn’t clear—either he was trying to regain his composure or he was gearing up for an attack. He could feel Aurelius trying to gently pull her behind him, but she was moving.

She went on the offensive.

“Sterling, I am sorry you are disappointed,” she said sternly. “Either way, I know I had nothing to do with my father’s decision. He made the decision that he felt best for Wolsingham, not the decision he felt best for you or for Maxwell.”

You are my father’s knight. You are not a member of the family. You should not expect that in matters such as this, my father would marry me to you who has nothing to bring to a marriage. He has no land, no title. I

... as the daughter of an earl—I must marry someone of my station, and that is my son's Maxwell. I know you understand that, but you've created this world in which I am so you've been slandered, and there is simply no truth to it. You've made the best of it up in your mind. Now... go to bed."

Sterling didn't like the truth. He knew she was right, but he didn't want to be any part of it. He jabbed a weaving finger at her.

"This is *your* fault," he said. "You could have shown interest in Maxwell. If you had, your father would not have denied you."

Valery eyed the man because he seemed to be quite unsteady on his feet and "Maxwell is my friend and I adore him, but as my husband, we would have made each other miserable," she said. "Why do you try to force Maxwell to be something he is not? That is not fair to him."

In front of "You will not tell me about my son!" Sterling boomed. "Speak to me. Goword and I will cut your tongue out, you harlot!"

In front of "Get out of my sight," Aurelius growled, suddenly in front of Valery, advancing on Sterling. "Another word to her and she'll not be the one cutting her. Get away from me, old man. I've had enough of ye."

Seeing Aurelius advance had Sterling unsheathing his broadsword. Valery screamed and jumped out of the way as he swung it at Aurelius. Somehow he managed to dodge it. He was running at Sterling, grabbed the man's wrist as he held his broadsword and squeezing until Sterling cried out in pain. Valery screamed again as the broadsword clattered to the ground. Suddenly, Sterling produced a dagger. Valery could see it flashing in the darkness.

"I will... kill you!" Sterling grunted as he struggled with Aurelius. "He was filthy... beastly... Scotsman! I will kill you! I will kill you both!"

Valery The dagger flashed again as Aurelius and Sterling were in a life-or-death battle. Valery was terrified, but she gathered her wits enough to run forward and grab the broadsword that had fallen to the ground. She pulled it across her back.

Sterling screamed threats and obscenities at Aurelius, who wasn't at all afraid of the man as much as he was simply trying to prevent Sterling from attacking him. As the struggle ensued in the small bailey, another figure darted from the outer bailey.

Maxwell had returned.

He had been almost to the great hall when he'd heard Valery's scream. That had brought him running all the way back to the inner bailey.

It is nowhere he was faced with a most unexpected sight.

In which His father and Aurelius were in a struggle.

He did it all “Papa!” he gasped. “Papa, stop this! Aurelius, stop fighting!”

“Your father threatened to cut me!” Valery shouted, wanting Maxwell to know that Aurelius was not at fault. “He has daggers and he is trying to kill Aurelius!”

Maxwell. Horrified, Maxwell watched the struggle. “Papa, *stop!*” he begged. “Drop your weapon! *Please!*”

On his feet. Sterling wasn’t listening. He was in a fight for his life. Unable to stop the fight, Maxwell came up behind his father and grabbed him, trying to keep Maxwell’s arms and hands away from Aurelius. Thinking he was being attacked

from behind, Sterling panicked and slashed his son’s hand, drawing streams of another blood, but Maxwell didn’t falter. He begged his father to stop fighting.

Sterling wasn’t listening. He slashed again at Aurelius, who grabbed his hand to deflect the dagger. But Sterling went mad, panicking because he was the one who was strapped by two men. He began to kick and twist, trying to turn himself sideways. Anything to break free.

With his sword. But it was to no avail. He was being held fast. That terrified him, and in his terror, he twisted hard enough that he accidentally deflected the dagger, aiming for Aurelius straight into his own chest instead.

He cried out. Immediately, the man collapsed.

And, but “Oh, God,” Maxwell said, lowering his father to the ground. “Oh, Papa, *nay!*”

Aurelius was helping him lower Sterling, shocked and dismayed. “You what had happened. “I was trying to disarm him,” he said, breathless from the fight. “I was trying to force him to drop the weapon, but he wouldn’t do it.”

Or-death Maxwell was beside himself. “Why?” he pleaded, almost in tears. “Why did he do this? Why did he go on the attack?”

Anyway as Valery was kneeling beside Sterling, greatly concerned. “He is not attacking,” she said, trying to be of some comfort to Maxwell. “He was not himself. It was the wine that made him behave this way.”

He in from “It should have been... *you,*” Sterling said, spitting up blood. “You should be Valery’s husband, not this Scots dog. *Not him!*”

He distant With that brief, horrific speech, Maxwell understood everything. He had spoken to his father about the betrothal since his return, but he knew that

would not have taken it well. Now, he knew just how badly that was.

He could hardly believe what he was hearing.

“My God,” he breathed. “You did *not* do this, Papa. Tell me you will challenge Aurelius.”

to kill Sterling coughed, and blood sprayed on Valery’s neck and chest, splattered onto Maxwell’s face. “It should have dropped you,” he said, more blood spilling out of his mouth. “A man must have a legacy. This was yours. She was yours! I was trying to make both understand that all of this belongs to *you!*”

Aurelius gently pulled Valery out of the way, as he was familiar from experienced in tending battle wounds, and she was blocking him. She stood up and moved aside, her hands over her mouth, watching in complete devastation as a man’s life drained away.

“I was never meant for Valery, Papa,” Maxwell said, tears finding his way onto his cheeks. “You *know* this. You hoped and dreamed, but it is *not* to be.”

Sterling looked up at his boy, grasping at him. “But why?” He sounded, insounding as if he were begging. “What did I do wrong that we should share the same dream? How did I fail you?”

Maxwell broke down. “You did not fail me, Papa,” he said. “Nothing you did. I am my own man. I am who I am. God made me the way I am.”

“But I must have failed you.”

“All you did was love me. You wanted the best for me. I understand that.”

Sterling grabbed hold of his son’s hand as Aurelius continued. “Why back layers of mail and fabric, trying to see how deeply the dirk was

But Maxwell only had eyes for his father as the man squeezed his hand, “weakly.”

“If I have failed you, I am sorry,” Sterling whispered, coughing again, gurgling up blood. “I only wanted happiness for you. I want you to be as happy as I did.”

Maxwell put his free hand on his father’s forehead. “Forgive me. I want my own happiness and not the happiness you think I should have. I hope you will accept that, even if it is not what you wanted for me.”

By this time, men were starting to spill into the inner bailey. Valery's screams and the sounds of a struggle had drawn them. Someone had tried to run for Adams, but mostly the men were gathered around, looking at Sterling with a dagger in his chest while his son comforted him and Aurelius tried to tend the wound. Valery knelt down next to Aurelius.

"What can I do?" she asked, her voice trembling. "Do you need hot water or something?"

Aurelius had his hand on the dagger, but he turned to Valery, who was very close to his.

"If I remove this, he will bleed to death in front of us," he whispered. Valery said, "There is nothing to be done. Let Maxwell and his father have their rest. There is nothing left to do."

She looked at him in horror. "You... you cannot help him?"

"He is beyond help, lass. I am sorry."

Valery nodded, but her lower lip was trembling. As Aurelius watched her face crumpled and she looked away, weeping softly. He reached out to comfort her, putting a gentle hand on her blonde head as she put her head over her face and wept. He'd seen so much death over the past year and was numb to it, but she wasn't. In front of him, a man was losing his life and it was his fault, even if it had been in self-defense.

He wasn't immune to the suffering he'd caused, inadvertent though it may have been. He remembered Maxwell speaking on his father, a determined and resolute man who was very firm in his principles. It must have been devastating for him to lose out on what he felt was his son's destiny. He was willing to fight and kill for it in the end. To Aurelius, that only made Sterling a man of strong beliefs, not a drunk who had picked a futile fight and been buried. Sterling St. John was a warrior who deserved a warrior's end.

"Behold, I see those I love, and my relatives who have died before me. Aurelius murmured, his gaze on Sterling. "I see my father seated in the golden halls with an empty seat beside him. I see the greatest warrior I have ever lived, surrounding my father, calling to me."

Maxwell heard him. He looked at Aurelius, tears all over his face. He knew what the man was saying. It was a warrior's prayer, long repeated, "Behold, I see those I love, and my relatives who have died before me. I see the greatest warrior I have ever lived, surrounding my father, calling to me." He had heard it often, but never so close over him forever. His eyes met Aurelius', and the Highlander nodded briefly, as if to encourage him to pray along with him.

Valery's As heartbreaking as it was, Maxwell did.

gone on "Death is not the end, but the beginning, for a true warrior never d
king at said in unison with Aurelius. As they spoke, others around them joi
Aurelius "He takes his place of greatness among those who are worthy. Mourn
glorious dead but rejoice in their legacy. They wait for me, not in this l
rags or in the next, where their legends shall live forever."

Just as they finished, Sterling gave one final cough and fell still. A
ose face knew he was dead even if Maxwell didn't want to acknowledge it. S

Aurelius removed the dagger in Sterling's chest, and, as he'd predicted
ispered, spilled out, all down the man. Valery, at Sterling's feet, was still v
moment, softly when Aurelius put his hand on Maxwell's shoulder.

"Yer voice was the last he heard in this life," he murmured. "If
son, that is what I would want. To hear my son's voice at the last. Y
him a great honor, Max. Ye transitioned him from this life to the ne
red, her the honor he deserved. That is a great ending for any man."

out to Maxwell was still holding his father's hand. "God," he muttere
r hand true? Is this really the end? I only just came home from battle. I'd n
that he had the chance to really speak with my father yet. And now this?"

father, Aurelius wasn't sure what to say to the man. He removed his h
remained next to him as Maxwell reconciled himself to the horrible ev
ough it the night. They were all struggling for composure when Adams su
dicated came into the small bailey. He pushed men out of the way until he c
indeed, the terrible scene, and even then, all he could do was stand there and g
iny. He "What is this?" he demanded, pointing frantically to Sterling.
y made happened?"

ght. "He tried to attack me, Papa," Valery said, sniffing as she stood
faced her father. "He was drunk, and he blamed me for the betro
re me," Aurelius. He blamed you. He said it should have been Maxwell, and
in the angry."

ors who Even beneath the silver moonlight, Adams went ashen. "He said th
said. "My God... He confronted you about it?"

, but he "He did."

ed, long "Is *that* what this is all about?"

about to Valery nodded. "He told me that he was going to cut my tongue c
nodded Aurelius defended me," she said, wiping at her eyes. "Aurelius was ur
Papa. Sterling used his broadsword, and when Aurelius disarmed l

unsheathed a dagger. He was accidentally stabbed in the ensuing fight. Adams couldn't believe what he was hearing. He put a hand on his forehead in astonishment, looking down at Aurelius and Maxwell, who were kneeling down by Sterling's body. The more he looked, the more astonished he became.

"Oh... God," he finally mumbled. "Nay... oh, nay, I cannot believe Aurelius would do this. Why would he do such a thing? Has the man gone mad?" Aurelius said. "Not mad. He was drunk. Sometimes men do things they would not normally do when there is drink in their veins. He was weeping about the betrothal."

"It's true," Maxwell said, choked with emotion. "He was furious. I had to hit him."

Although no one was blaming him, at least not openly, Adams could feel the distinct creep of guilt. He had made the decision for the betrothal. But if he had to do it over again, he would still make the same decision. "Is it?" Aurelius asked. "Nothing would change. Clearly, Sterling had not accepted that decision. He did not even attack Valery because of it was beyond Adams' comprehension."

"Maxwell," he said, watching Maxwell lift his tear-stained face. "I do not understand why I did not betroth you to my daughter. You know."

Maxwell nodded. "I do," he said. "This is not your fault, my lord. My father suddenly wanted things that can never be."

That seemed to give Adams some peace. "And I am sorry for your loss," he said. "But your father loved you. He loved you very much."

"What?" Aurelius asked. "I know, my lord."

Adams hesitated to say anything more. This simply wasn't the time or place, at least for more personal things, but there were a few things that needed to be addressed immediately now that Sterling was lying dead. Business, to a certain extent, had to go on.

"Have some men help you take your father to the vault," he said. "Wrap him tightly, and we will store him there until you speak to your mother and decide what's to be done with him."

Maxwell nodded wearily. "Aye, my lord."

"And you," Adams said, looking him in the eye. "You are not just a soldier, and commander, Max. I am sorry to demand this of you so soon, but with your father gone, the duty now falls on you. Do you understand?"

"I do, my lord."

” “You will have a great legacy here if you want it. I believe you
ver his would want it, too.”

io were Maxwell could only nod. All he could really think of was his father
onished dead at his feet and not some legacy post that he and his father
grandfather had held. He didn’t care, honestly, but he had a duty to f
ieve he the moment.

?” A duty to his father.

o things As he motioned for some men to help him lift his father, Aurelius
as very up on the other side. He put his big arms underneath Sterling, but be
lifted, he looked up at Maxwell.

s about “I’ll understand if ye dunna want me to help ye,” he said. “But I’d
just the same.”

uld feel Maxwell’s eyes were full of grief. “It was not your fault,” he said
al, after “It could just as easily be you lying here. You are not to blame.”

ecision. “May... may I help, too?”

on. But Valery asked the question softly, crouching down at Sterling’s he
eyes red-rimmed from weeping. Maxwell didn’t have the heart to de
: “You so he instructed her to put her hands under Sterling’s head. When th
men were in position, they all lifted on Maxwell’s command, in
rd. My Valery. She only had Sterling’s head, but she took very good care of
held it firmly, gazing at the man who, only minutes earlier, had bee
u, lad,” and well. A man she’d grown up knowing as a kind, dutiful man w
devoted to his family.

It was strange, really.

e or the She’d asked Aurelius about the battles in France. She’d asked if
ns that been bad, wanting to understand what her father and Aurelius had

Perhaps she wanted to feel closer to them, to see life through thei
She’d learned quickly that they’d faced death. Men like Radegund v
quietly. ax in his face, and the unnamed Highlander who’d had his guts cut out
to your moment, she was facing death, too. Now, she had an inkling of what
all dealt with, but more than that, she watched how Maxwell han
father’s body.

ow my The two had a complex relationship and always had, but at the m
th your none of that mattered. The only thing that was apparent to Valery w
much Maxwell loved his father. Love, true love, took many forms, ar
she witnessed was the true love between a son and his father, ever

r fathermoment of death. *Especially* in the moment of death.

er lying Valery de Leybourne grew up that night, just a little.

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moment of death. *Especially* in the moment of death.

Valery de Leybourne grew up that night, just a little.

And Aurelius had the privilege to watch it.

PART THREE
VALERY, DAVINA, AND MABEL



PART THREE
VALERY, DAVINA, AND MABEL





CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Six weeks later

THEY WERE MOVING with stealth.

On a secret mission, Valery was following Maxwell, but she wasn't sure where they were going. All she knew was that he had come to her. She was in the small bailey with her geese, back to their original names Sunny and Moonie, and he'd put his fingers to his lips to silently beckon. She'd followed.

They left the small bailey, beneath the branches of Faunus the Trees were nearly empty of leaves at this time of year, and through the small gate into the kitchen yard. Beyond that was the walled area where the Tarh men had set up their encampment, and they were still there, following Maxwell through that open field. He'd even reached back for her hand, running with her all the way across the winter-dead grass through the small gate that opened out into the pond.

That was where Aurelius was waiting.

Maxwell ran her right up to Aurelius, practically flinging her into the man's arms. But the truth was that he didn't have to do much of anything because at that point, Valery was running faster than he was. So Aurelius and she flew to the man, leaping into his arms and nearly toppling him.

They'd finally come together.

"There," Maxwell said, panting from having run so fast. "Keep her. I'll be back later to fetch her."

Aurelius and Valery were already deep into a series of passionate kisses, but Aurelius pulled away long enough to address Maxwell.

"Not too soon," he said. "I've not seen her since last night, so g

time.”

Valery clamped her mouth over his, suckling his lips. “Give *us* time said between heated kisses. “If my father comes looking for me, t you’ve not seen me.”

Maxwell frowned. “He’ll know I’ve seen you,” he said, gesturing enormous castle behind him. “Hundreds of men just saw us together He’ll *know*.”

Valery turned to look at him with Aurelius kissing any bit of flesh could come into contact with. “Then if that is the case, come fetch m said. “We’ll be here, out of sight.”

Maxwell shook his head at the pair of lovers. “You had better nar firstborn after me for this,” he said. “I am risking everything so you t be alone.”

“Thank you, Max,” Valery said as Aurelius suckled on her ear. i’t quite r whilst you for it.”

He grunted. “If you hear a loud whistle, that means danger appro on her. he said. “Do you understand me?”

Aurelius and Valery were locking lips again, lost in one another ree that Maxwell rolled his eyes, grinning as he walked away. He had become rrvants’ and good friend to Aurelius, going so far as to sneak Valery to hir the dun days. The death of Sterling was in the past, something that had, str so she bonded the men more closely than they ever had been before. The to grab understanding there, and there was, above all, trust. With the w ass and drawing closer, and the celebratory feast just a few days away, Ada keeping a very tight rein on his daughter, who had fallen madly in lo her betrothed.

And he’d fallen madly in love with her. nto the flinging

Even now, she was in his arms, her legs wrapped around his narrow he saw as he carried her into the trees clustered around the pond. This had be g him. secret meeting place for the past few weeks, ever since Adams decide er here. was solely up to him to preserve his daughter’s purity until her wedd loved Aurelius like a son, but he could see the passion brewing betw pair, and he wanted his daughter to go to her marital bed a virgin. kisses, strongly about it, perhaps fearful that if Aurelius took her innocence they were legally wed, it might change his opinion of her. Perhaps he give me feel there was no mystery left.

Adams seemed intent on preserving it.

ie,” she But the reality was that Valery and Aurelius had done nearly everything to engage in the act of intercourse. Valery was an eager student

Aurelius was more than happy to teach her how to pleasure a man. To her surprise, he had shown her his skill in pleasuring a woman, so moments like these were very precious to them. Full of love and discovery.

Finally, alone.

his lips Aurelius had an old horse blanket already spread out amongst the trees,” she Valery immediately pulled him down onto it, climbing on top of him, fully clothed, and leaning over him for a moment simply to gaze into his handsome face. She stroked his cheeks, his hair, as she studied him.

wo can “You’ve not fallen in love with someone else since the last I saw you, have you?” she asked.

“I love He pretended to think. “Only two or three women,” he said. “Not worry over.”

aches,” “Just two or three?”

“That was all I could work in between last night’s feast and this morning.”

a close “You’re becoming lazy in your old age.”

n these He laughed, low in his throat. “Lazy for want of ye, lass,” he said, pulling her down to his mouth. “Only for ye.”

ere was His lips slanted over hers, and Valery gave in to his strength, his strength. A little time, she was on her back, and he untied the top of her garment, which she was wearing things these days that could be easily removed. When his hands with breasts sprang free, he feasted, suckling her nipples as she sighed and groaned. That only fed his lust, and he tossed up her skirts, sliding his hands between her legs. Gently, he inserted them into her tender body as he kissed her breasts.

en their With the top of her garment wide open and her skirts pushed up to her waist, Valery was lost in a haze of passion. Aurelius suckled her breasts. He fondled her until he could stand it no longer, and then, he put his hands between her legs and pleased her with his tongue. Valery was quiet. He felt climax when he did that to her, but today, she didn’t have the patience to wait. She grabbed hold of his dark hair and pulled his head up.

ould “Not today,” she said, panting as she looked at the man between her legs. “Today, we are going to do something different.”

“What?”

“Today, I want all of you.”

He smiled seductively. “And I’d like nothing better,” he said. “He, in made yer father a promise.”

She sighed sharply. “And how is he to know if I break that promise asked. “Are you going to tell him?”

“Of course not.”

Her hands in his hair loosened, and she began to caress him of him, “Aurelius, we are to be married before the end of the year,” she said. “into his if we can, but I do not want to wait until my wedding night to know you. You were my husband the moment we were betrothed. You became my dear love shortly thereafter. We’ve been teasing and toying with another ever since. I want to know you as my husband. What is the difference if we do it now or when we are married? We shall do it every night the rest of my life if I want to. Don’t you?”

She was breaking him down, which wasn’t hard to do. Did he want this, as a husband bedded a wife? Of course he did. He couldn’t remember when he didn’t. But he was trying to obey Adams’ wishes, which was a thing to do in hindsight. He’d never loved anyone or anything more pure, entire life than he loved Valery. She was his all for living, everything he ever wished for.

Did he want to feel his body in hers?

God, he did.

So very much.

“Are ye sure?” he said after a moment. “Because once we do it, I’ll fingerstake it back.”

Valery sat up so quickly that she smacked him on the side of the head with her right thigh when he didn’t move quickly enough.

“Of course I am,” she said, rising to her knees as she ripped her shift over her head. “I would never want to take back something of such value. Something that makes me yours for all eternity.”

As he watched, she tossed the surcoat aside and pulled her shift over her head too. Very quickly, she was nude in front of him, and Aurelius hesitated. That was all the coaxing he needed. He was already intimately acquainted with a body he couldn’t live without, so this moment was something he’d dreamed about. He was ready for it. Therefore, he yanked

his own tunic and stood up to remove his breeches. His manhood, near aroused, sprang free. He barely had his boots and breeches off his feet 'But ye Valery grasped his manroot with her hot little hands. Her mouth we him, as he'd taught her, and he was very nearly lost.

e?" she "Wait," he whispered tightly. "If ye do that, we'll not get any Take yer hands off. *Off.*"

Disappointed, she did, watching him toss his clothing aside. Then s face.to his knees, pushing her onto her back, and his big body covered hers.

'Sooner After that, passion consumed them.

v all of They didn't usually remove all of their clothing in encounters like me mythis was something new and exciting. Valery relished the feel of l ith oneheavy body on top of her, instinctively opening her legs for him. A ferencefeasted on her breasts, her neck, her mouth, before putting his hand b for thetheir bodies. Valery could feel him touching her, rubbing the head enormous phallus against her virginal opening.

t to bed "I've hoped to prepare ye for this moment," he murmured, looking nemberinto her eyes. "It'll be more than ye could have imagined. For us s a sillythink. Just know... know that I love ye with all that I am, Valery. Wha e in hisnow demonstrates that love. *My* love. For the rest of time, I'll love ye he hadother, I swear it."

Valery wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing his mouth with lips. "And I'll love you and no other," she whispered. "Give me all Aurelius. Make me your wife, my dearest love, in every sense."

He didn't keep her waiting. The foreplay had made her hot and sli I cannaeven though she was a virgin, he'd been preparing her for this mome his fingers. He'd spent weeks acquainting her with the feel of a mar ie headher. Therefore, when he finally slid into her, there was no pain.

pleasure. It only took him two thrusts to seat himself fully, and all surcoatcould do was lie there and gasp. Her legs wrapped around his hips beauty.pelvis arched up to him—her body responding to the primal mating rit

He was lost.

ver her Aurelius kept his thrusts gentle at first, keeping in mind that she w s didn'tto this, but her gasps and groans broke his concentration. He realiz imatelyquickly that she had the ability to arouse him like no one else ever h nt wassoft breasts against his bare chest ignited his entire body with l ked offgathered her against him, thrusting harder, trying to be careful ab

ly fullynewness. The last thing he wanted to do was frighten her. He wanted t beforelove this as much as he, and by the sounds she was making, he suspec nt overwas. Her legs were still wrapped around his hips, holding him fast, unwrapped them and raised himself, holding her legs open as he conti further.pound into her sweet and submissive body.

He wanted to watch her as he made love to her.

he fell God, what a sight.

Valery had a sensuous figure. Her breasts were full, the nipples ha her long torso was slender. She had rounded hips that drew his lust this, sohim imagine the children she would bear from them. *His* children. H is big,women before, many times, but he'd used the age-old trick of re ureliushimself just before he climaxed to prevent any bastards. But with Va etweenhad no intention of pulling out.

l of his He wanted to spill himself into her.

He wanted to brand her with his seed.

, deeply Valery, however, was already so aroused that she cried out with l both, Itrue womanly climax before he could slow his pace and perhaps ext t we dopleasure. But it didn't matter. He was rapidly approaching his own rel and nomuch as he wanted this moment to last forever. He was so aroused by that he lowered himself onto her again and slanted his mouth ove her softkissing her deeply as he spilled himself into her.

of you, And even then, he didn't slow down. He continued to thrust, feelir he'd put into her. Feeling her body against his, surrounding him, givin ck, andhome he'd never had before. Giving him a woman that belonged only i

nt with With her, he was home.

i inside "How do ye feel?" he asked softly, his face in the side of her head. Simplyhurt ye?"

Valery Valery shifted slightly, putting her hands between their bodies, fee and hersemi-flaccid member as it remained half buried in her. "I feel... ual. know," she said. "I feel warm. I feel loved. I feel as if this momen most important moment of my life. It belongs only to you and to me. ras newour moment, Aurelius."

ed very He closed his eyes, feeling her gentle hands on his tender member. ad. Herhe whispered, kissing her forehead. "Ye belong to me as no one el ust. Hehas."

out her She was still stroking him, touching her body as well, feeling whe

l her to had joined, but that wasn't unusual with her. Valery was, if nothing
ted she curious about everything. Sometimes she had an almost analytical, de
but her manner about it, but he knew it was because she was quite brilliant
nued to wanted to learn about everything. Even the mating between men and w

“I *am* yours,” she murmured, removing her hands but reaching around
hips to grab both buttocks as he remained buried in her. “Can we
again?”

ard, and He laughed softly. “I’d be happy to, but you must give me time to
t, made a little,” he said. “It takes a man a bit of time to build up again.”

he’d had Valery nodded thoughtfully at that, but when he tried to withdraw
moving wouldn’t let him. She kept her hands on his buttocks and her pelvis s
lery, he against his.

“Not yet,” she begged softly. “I’ve waited my entire life for this moment.
Do not end it yet.”

He kissed her, sweetly at first, but the passion that was so easily
her first between them roared to life, and in a short amount of time, he was thrust
end her into her again, grinding his pelvis against hers, taking his time with
ease, as there was no frenzied thrusting this time, simply a slow and purposeful

Valery movement that had Valery climaxing again very shortly. He was a
er hers, pick up the pace because he could feel himself building to another
when she suddenly reached between their bodies to touch him. That was
big what took for him to release himself so hard that he bit his own lip.

g him a Valery’s hands were all over his buttocks and in between their
to him, touching his male member, feeling him as his climax died down. It was

most wildly intimate thing he’d ever experienced. Putting a hand on
her breast, he’d moved to fondle her gently, to work them both through
powerful passion they were feeling, when a distant whistle suddenly
ling his the air.

I don’t *If you hear a loud whistle, that means danger approaches.*

It is the Aurelius was on his feet before he took another breath.

This is “Quickly,” he said, tossing her the shift. “Get dressed, *mo leannan*.
Hurry!”

“It is,” *Mo leannan*. It meant “my sweetheart.” Dazed from their encounter
se ever not senseless, Valery yanked on her shift, followed by the surcoat. A

already had his breeches on, followed by the tunic, and he was yanking
where they boots on even as he headed for the trees. Valery didn’t say a word

ing else, simply motioned for him to hide, and he blew her a kiss as he ran in the direction of the detached bramble. As he disappeared, Valery quickly smoothed her hair, slipped on her shoes, and plopped down on the horse blanket. She looked around for any signs that Aurelius had been there, and, satisfied, she picked up a handful of sticks lying on the ground. The pond was a good distance away, so she started tossing the sticks into the pond as if wiling away the day. It was all quite casual.

recovered Until Adams appeared.

The man was huffing and puffing. It was clear he'd run down to the pond, sheor at least went as quickly as he was capable of running, fully expecting to find his daughter and her betrothed in an indelicate situation.

But he only found his daughter.

moment. "What are you doing out here?" he demanded. "And where is Aurelius?"

Valery looked puzzled. "I do not know," she said. "Where is he supposed to be?"

Adams scowled. "Max was seen running out here with you," he said. "I can only assume he was bringing you to Aurelius, whom no one has seen in a long while. And do not tell me that you've been out here with Shite-bronze about to Dumb-arse, because they are in the kitchen yard. I have seen them. What have you to say to that?"

as all it "What do you want me to say?"

"Are you going to tell me that you've not been with Aurelius?"

bodies, Valery frowned and stood up, brushing the dried grass off her robe. "If you recall, you forbade us from being alone until we were married," she said. "Didn't you?"

igh the Adams put his hand on his hips. "I did," he said. "Proprieties were pierced, but you do not seem to realize that."

Valery sighed heavily. "Papa," she said. "We are in love. Why are you trying to keep two people who love one another, and are soon to be married, from spending time alone? I do not understand you. Don't you have grandchildren?"

Adams nearly choked on the bawdy suggestion. "After you are married, of course I do."

Aurelius "I want to be married to him now," she said. "We are having the wedding feast in a few days. Let that be a wedding celebration and not a celebration of the betrothal."

nto the Adams' harsh stance eased a little. "We are not certain when A
ped onparents will arrive," he said. "We received word from them more th
ound toweeks ago that they were coming south, but it could be another week
atisfied,It is winter. The weather might not be in their favor."

sn't too "Yet you are having a betrothal feast without them."

way the "That was planned when I returned from France to introduce Aur
our allies."

"But you have waited more than a month before having it."

e pond, Adams sighed faintly. "You know that was because of Sterling's
cting tohe said. "I did not feel it appropriate to have a celebration so soon after

Valery took some pity on him. "I know," she said. "But you are tr
control things now that do not need to be controlled."

lius?" "What do you mean?"

pposed She went to him, wrapping her hands around his elbow in an affec
gesture. "I mean you and Aurelius' father created our betrothal," s
said. "Iquietly. "You hoped that we would at least tolerate one another, but i
een in awe have fallen in love. Now you are trying to keep us apart. You wa
ain andto be together, didn't you?"

. Well? He was stoic. "I want you to be a pure bride," he said. "If you
then I have failed as a father to protect you."

Valery laughed softly. "Papa, I have fallen in love with the most a
man," she said. "You do not need to protect me from him. He will ta
umpledof me, and love me, for the rest of my life. Isn't that what you hoped fo
arried," He was trying not to look at her, knowing she had a point, but he c

quite manage it. "Of course it is," he said. "But I'm still your father
must behave a right to protect you. Even from your amorous betrothed."

Valery continued to smile at him. "But you do not need to," sh
are you"More than likely, he needs to be protected from me. I will surely lure
narried,his doom."

u want Adams was struggling not to chuckle, shaking his head at his r
daughter. "Enough with that," he said. "But I am not immune to being
narried,with someone and wanting to be with her."

"You and Mama?"

ie great "Nay, me and the Virgin Mary. Of course me and your mother."

mply a Valery burst out laughing. "Papa, you are a fool," she said. "But
my fool, and I love you dearly. Will you *please* let Aurelius and I spen

Aurelius' time together, alone? *Please?*"

Adams cast her a long look. "I suppose that if I do not, you will snore here to the pond."

"That would be a fair assumption."

He shook his head in defeat and looked away. "I do not have a choice to this, do I?"

"You do not."

He grunted unhappily. "Very well," he said. "If it means that no death," you."

"It does," she said, standing on tiptoes to kiss his cheek. "It truly is a thank you very much."

Adams felt as if he'd been manipulated, but he really didn't mind.

He was glad that his daughter had found love. He was glad that everything was working out as he'd hoped and that Wolsingham had a future. His name and title would continue to live on through his daughter.

Aye, there was much to be grateful for.

"Aurelius?" he suddenly shouted into the trees. "Did you hear that? I permit you and my daughter to be alone from time to time!"

"But not too much," Valery quipped, grinning when he looked at her.

"But not too much!" Adams shouted.

Valery started laughing, which finally broke him down. He laughed carefree, happy that his daughter was happy. That she would marry the man she loved and they would be happy together. Truly, it was all he ever wanted.

With Valery on his arm, Adams headed back to Lydgate.

I still

he said.

him to

naughty

in love

you are

id some

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Three days.

IN THREE DAYS, the celebratory feast for the betrothal of Valery de Ley, daughter of the Earl of Wolsingham, and Aurelius dun Tarh, son of the Earl of Torridon, would begin. No one knew when it would end.

That was the truth.

Much had happened in the days leading up to the feast. It all started as a few family groups began to show up, all of them revolving around one castle or another. It was as if the allied castles of the north had opened their gates and spilled forth hundreds of people, all of them heading straight for Lydgate and a celebration that was costing Adams a great deal of money. He'd had some time to stockpile barrels of wine and ale, and two days before the feast, he'd taken a group of people out hunting to procure meat.

Valery had been with the hunting party.

Aurelius and Darien had also gone, along with Estevan, Cael, Kaladin, Adams, Maxwell, and about twenty soldiers. It had been a brilliant day as the first day of winter closed in, and breath hung in the air all day long. The first kill had been by Valery, who brought down a three-point buck with tremendous skill as Aurelius and her father carefully advised her. She had a steady hand and a dead eye. Down the animal went, and Valery was congratulated by all.

Especially Aurelius.

He couldn't have been prouder of her. He'd been part of numerous hunting parties over the years, and there had been a few where women would come along to clean and prepare the kill, but he'd never been part of a hunting party where a woman actually did the hunting.

He found he rather liked it when that woman was Valery.

He was falling more in love with her by the day.

The hunting party had been out from dawn to dusk, and Valery had proven her ability to ride at length and shoot with a bow and arrow, and she wasn't afraid to collect her kill. Of course, she couldn't move the buck, but her kind and considerate betrothed did it for her, along with his brother. Even Darien was starting to see what caliber of woman his brother had married, and, reluctantly, admitted his initial thoughts of her trapping him in a terrible marriage were incorrect. Like everyone else, Darien could see that completely enamored Aurelius was with Valery.

And for good reason.

In truth, the past several weeks since the arrival home from France had been quite pleasant for everyone, the death of Sterling notwithstanding. The incident had only slightly marred what was essentially a positive season with Aurelius and Valery's betrothal, and that was because Adams had spread the rumor that Sterling had been protecting Valery from an assassin who killed him and then slipped off into the night, never to be seen again. No one questioned the earl, and life moved on with Sterling having died a hero.

And that was the way Adams and Aurelius and Valery wanted it.

But the hunt was a major event in the days leading up to their celebration feast, and all of Lydgate was preparing for the onslaught of guests from Berwick, Bowes, Kyoel, Alnwick, Richmond, and Carlisle Castles. These were the primary castles, and the primary lords, that Adams wanted to introduce Aurelius to, so everything at Lydgate was bustling as the hunting party brought back three bucks, two does, and a plethora of smaller big game mammals. Servants worked into the night cleaning the carcasses and hanging them in the smokehouse, which was working to capacity.

Aurelius loved the smell of the smoking meat.

The Earl of Carlisle, Tate de Lara, was one of the first arrivals. The red and blue de Lara pendant announced the man the day after the hunting party, and Adams went out to meet him. Tate was the bastard son of Edward, a man who had forged his own path and was an icon in England as a warrior. Kings could tear each other up and the nobility of England could go against one another, but one word from Tate de Lara was all it usually took for men to stand down and listen. For the man they called Dragonblade, England would take note.

Aurelius was quite happy to meet him.

After Carlisle arrived came Richmond Castle. In fact, on the third day had after the hunt, Valery awoke to more guests crowding into Lydgate and shebailey. Beryl and Sela had pulled her out of bed, preparing her toilette rack, but day, as she stumbled over to the window to watch the parade down the commons. Banners were flying, armies were setting up encampments in the commons grounds, and she even caught a glimpse of her father down below in the courtyard. She had welcomed yet another favored ally.

See how Finally, the event they'd been waiting for was happening.

The day had arrived.

"This is so exciting," Valery said, yawning. "Who else has arrived this morning? Do we know?"

1g. The Sela was warming water over the fire as the geese rose from the courtyard over near the hearth and began to waddle toward the open chamber. With Sunny and Moonie heading out to conduct their geese business this day, Beryl began sweeping up the straw they'd been lying on.

ain. No "Bamburgh has arrived," Sela said, trying not to burn herself here. She shifted the coals around. "That is the House of Herringthorpe. C

Richmond, and Northwood are here. Did you know your father invited the Earl of Teviot from Northwood Castle?"

ts from Valery yawned again. "Nay," she said. "He did not tell me who was invited, but he told Aurelius. Where *is* Aurelius?"

nted to Sela finally had the wood where she wanted it, and a steady fire continued to heat up the big iron pot of water. "I've not seen him," she said, brushing off her hands as she stood up. "Mayhap he's in the smoking range again?"

Valery giggled. It was well known that Aurelius couldn't keep out of the smokehouse with all of that lovely meat smoking in it. "He came to the silver night smelling like a wildfire," she said. "It was even in his hair."

g party, Sela chuckled as she began to pull out brushes and a comb. "Tell me, and I, alikes his smoked meat," she said. "And what of his brothers? I hear they're all here, too."

to war Valery moved away from the window, going to sit down so Sela could start on her hair. She'd rolled it up the previous night in bits of rag so that in the morning, she would have a head full of lovely curls. Sela began to brush her hair from the pieces of rag as Valery used a small iron instrument to

out her nails.

ird day “I think we are going to have to go hunt again if we can’t keep the e’s vastout of the smokehouse,” she said, inspecting her nails. “Honestly, I for thespent a lot of time around the brothers because Aurelius occupies mos below.waking hours, but they all seem quite likable. Even Darien seen walledenough, surprisingly.”

as he Sela looked over at her. “Did you not like him, m’lady?”

Valery thought back to the day Aurelius and his brothers had arriv she heard Darien talking about her in the stable. It seemed like a lifetin

“It does not matter any longer,” she said, willing to let bygoc red thisbygones. “It’s strange, really. I never had any siblings. Now, I am i nine.”

Sela nodded. “Your father seems to like to have them around,” sl eir nest r door.handing the hair rags to Beryl once she unrolled them. “But I suppo for theman likes to have mischievous boys around to remind him of his da boy.”

as she Valery glanced at her in the reflection of the bronze mirror. “Why Carlisle,you say that?”

ited the “Because those are days of no responsibility and only play.”

Valery nodded and went back to her nails. “That is true,” she sai rom hesure Papa wishes I would have a dozen boys, all of them to ca Wolsingham, if not in name, then in spirit.”

Sela began to brush out the curls. “Do you think you will live in Sc he said,then?” she asked. “Will you raise your children in the Highlands?”

Valery shrugged. “I do not know yet,” she said. “I’ve never eve Castle Hydra, but Aurelius is the heir. That is his seat. But Lydgate w t of thebe his seat, as the Earl of Wolsingham.”

“Have you not discussed it?”

Valery shook her head. “Nay,” she said. “But it is of little matter. I he manfeel strongly one way or the other. Whatever Aurelius prefers hey do,agreeable with me.”

Sela watched that warm, giddy expression wash over Valery’s fa a couldsame expression that occurred every time she spoke of Aurelius. Bery hat thistoo, and snickered softly as she went to put away the strips of rag t unwindbeen rolled up in Valery’s hair.

“Of course it will, m’lady,” Sela said, vigorously brushing out s

the tighter curls and shaping them around her hand. "Sir Aurelius is
use five men. A handsome man. And he'll make you a wonderful husband.
I've not everything is ready for the celebration. The hall is prepared. The kitchen
is all ready. The servants even have clean tunics that Lady Wolsingham pre-
pares for them."

"Except for the sick," Beryl said quietly. "The cook has a few
servants, and it has been a great deal of work for her to prepare the
feast and without them."

One ago. Sela brushed her off. "Pah," she said. "It is nothing. I saw two
ones beworking in the kitchens this morning, preparing food, so there
is no sickness."

Valery had looked up from her nails, listening to Beryl and Sela
she said, ill servants. "You are certain the cook has enough help?" she asked.

Use any Sela nodded. "If she doesn't, you know she will not keep it to
herself as she said. "Have no worry, m'lady. Lydgate is running at full mea-
sure for your celebration."

It would Satisfied, Valery returned to cleaning her nails, but she'd hardly
moved before her chamber door was flying open and Aurelius stood
in the open panel.

He said. "I'm "Val!" he gasped, holding up a piece of vellum. "What do ye
suppose I have in my hand?"

Valery had no idea. Fortunately, she was clad in a heavy sleeping
gown, she was at least somewhat presentable as he burst into the chamber,
but it didn't ease her irritation at him.

When seen "Did you lose a hand?" she demanded.

Will also He stopped in his excitement and frowned. "Clearly, I have not,"
he said, holding up both hands. "Why do ye ask?"

"Because I thought you must have, since you did not knock," she
said. "You're fortunate that I am adequately dressed."

Will be That was Sela and Beryl's cue to depart, and quickly, for Lady
Wolsingham was quick to temper, and they didn't want to be witness to a verbal
duel, for the poor, sweet Highlander.

I saw it Even if he did deserve it.

That had Sela had Beryl by the hand, pulling her from the chamber and
standing behind Aurelius so they could make it out the door. Once clear
of the chamber, they shut the panel quietly and headed to the small chamber

a goodthe hall where things such as coverlets and brooms were kept. Beryl
In fact, hair rags in her hands, and she began to put them in a basket on the flo
ens are “We’ll wait here,” Sela whispered loudly. Then she leaned her hea
rovideddirection of Valery’s chamber. “I do not hear any shouting. Hopefull
will be no shouting, not today.”

ow sick Beryl shook her head. “You needn’t worry so,” she said. “Sir Aur
e mealsgoing to have to learn how to deal with his own wife. He’d better learn
“True,” Sela said. But then she frowned. “Speaking of his wife, v
of themyou mention the sick kitchen servants? There was no need.”

is no Beryl looked at her mother with exasperation. “Mama, several a
and one died early this morning,” she said. “I heard someone say it
peak ofblue death.”

Sela sighed heavily. “Pah,” she scoffed. “Even if it is, Lady Wols
erself,” will know what to do about it. She will not let it affect the celebration
ure forguests. It is only a few servants, after all.”

She seemed dismissive of Beryl’s concerns, so Beryl simply
made atalking about it. The servants in the kitchens and stables often came
l in thewith ailments that quickly passed, and rarely was it transmitted to the
servants or the soldiers or even the family, because the kitchen and
ppose Iservants had duties that mostly kept them isolated from everyone. The
her mother was probably right. There was nothing to worry about.

shift, so At least, Beryl hoped not.
but that



he said, “WHY DID THOSE two run off so quickly?” Aurelius wanted to know, p
to the shut door. “Every time I come around, they flee as if the devil
colded.made an appearance.”

“The devil has,” Valery said, grinning. “You frighten people, my
ValeryDoes that not make you proud and happy?”

beating She was jesting with him, and he rolled his eyes, grinning, but tha
stop his excitement. He’d burst into his betrothed’s chamber for a reas
he held up that reason again.

slipping He shook the vellum.

of the “This is from my da,” he said. “They have just crossed over into E
t across

had the My mother wanted to stop and see her kin at Wigton Castle, so they
or. delayed a day or two, but we should be seeing them before the end
d in the week.”

ly there Valery stood up and took the vellum from him, reading his father’s
for herself. “How lovely,” she said, feeling his excitement. “I’m
elius is excited to meet them.”

now.” He pulled her into an embrace, gazing down into that lovely face
why did come to cherish. “And I’m terribly excited for them to meet ye as well
said. “I know they’ll love ye.”

re sick “I hope so,” Valery said. “I have a gift for your mother, but what
was the think I should give your father? I still cannot decide. My mother and
him a cap for when the weather turns colder, but I think that may
ingham grand enough. I feel as if I must make a larger gesture.”

or the Aurelius grinned, kissing her soundly. “My da’s greatest gift will
ye to love me,” he said. “That is all he’ll care about. And if ye decide
stopped him the cap, he’ll love that too.”

e down Valery handed him the vellum and returned to her table, sitting down
e house she picked up her hairbrush. “My mother and I have made your mother
l stable lovely robe,” she said. “You know the one? My mother had already
efore, making it, but I helped her finish it with some of the pelts from the
hunt. But I’m concerned because your mother is such a talented seamstress
may not be fine enough for her.”

He shook his head at her. “Ye worry too much, love,” he said. “She
love anything ye give her because she knows ye made it yerself. It will
a great deal to her.”

ointing Valery was having a rare moment of self-doubt. “Do you really think
has just “I do.”

Slowly, she began to brush her hair again, the mass of blonde curls
darling. Sela had tried to tame. “I hope you are correct,” she said. “I truly do.
want to make a good impression on her.”

t didn’t Aurelius wasn’t sure he could say any more to her that might give
on, and confidence that other assurances hadn’t. He went to her, bending over
kissing her on the top of her head as she continued to brush her hair. Then
lifted the vellum again, reading his father’s words, before the chamber
ngland. opened and Lady Wolsingham stood in the opening.

Her eyebrows lifted.

will be “What’s this?” she demanded lightly. “I find you two alone in Val of the chamber? How very shocking.”

Aurelius grinned at the woman and went to her, putting his hands on her shoulders and planting a chaste kiss on her forehead. He truly adored his future mother-in-law, a woman who had been so kind to him in the beginning and who continued to be kind and understanding.

“I swear to ye that nothing untoward has happened,” he said. “Well,” he hesitantly told Val that his father had sent a missive. They should be home by the end of the week.”

Lady Wolsingham’s features lit up. “Is that so?” she said. “How lovely I made hear. I will house them in the keep, of course. They can have the room on the first floor, near the solar. Or do you think they would rather be on the top floor? There are a lot of stairs to climb, but the chambers are larger and more comfortable.” Aurelius found it amusing that Lady Wolsingham turned into the bundle of nerves that Valery did when discussing his parents.

“I think they’ll be happy wherever ye house them,” he said. “I don’t think they’ll not care a bit. My parents aren’t picky people, I swear it.”

Lady Wolsingham wasn’t quite willing to take his word for it. “Nevertheless, they shall be treated impeccably,” she said. “Now, I know that my daughter is not dressed yet, so you will go to the great hall, where the ladies are. It is breaking his fast with some of his guests. I know he would introduce you to them, so go down and join them whilst I help my daughter dress.”

Aurelius did as he was told. He kissed Valery politely on the cheek, then kissed Lady Wolsingham on the cheek, quite wholesomely, before winked at her. “Thank you both as he quit the chamber. While Valery smirked, Lady Wolsingham went to shut the door behind him and bolt it.

“He is a cheeky rascal,” she said with feigned disapproval. “What do you see in him, I wonder?”

Valery laughed softly. “Everything,” she said. “I see everything you see. Don’t you?”

Lady Wolsingham nodded. “Indeed, I do,” she said. “He is very much like his father... Well, very much like a cheeky Scot. Now, what did you wear today? Let us make it something fine and lovely. You will have many guests by this evening.”

Valery paused in her hair brushing and looked at her mother. “

Valery's moment," she said. "What were you going to say just now? About Aurelius?"

Lady Wolsingham was moving to her daughter's wardrobe. "I don't know where he is," she said. "What was I going to say?"

Valery watched her mother open the doors to the large wardrobe and begin fishing around. "It sounded as if you were going to say that Aurelius was very much like his father," she said. "Is that what you were going to say?"

Lady Wolsingham faltered. She stood at the wardrobe, looking up at the things that were hanging on pegs. She started to shake her head and reached for an amber-colored silk, but she paused again.

Valery saw her take a deep breath.

"I think you must have imagined it," she said.

Valery was coming to suspect that her mother wasn't being truthful.

"Nay, I did not," she said. "I did not imagine that you were about to say that Aurelius was like his father. Why would you assume that? Do you know your father and have neglected to tell us?"

"Truly, no," she said. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I am certainly not being ridiculous," Valery said. "Did you know your father? You were raised on the border, and the dun Tarh clan has a good presence on the border. It's possible you knew him in your youth."

Lady Wolsingham didn't reply. She was still fingering the garments like towers hanging on pegs, and as Valery watched, the woman's shoulders slumped.

"I was not going to say anything," she said softly. "It is not even worth mentioning, truly."

"Then you *did* know him?"

Lady Wolsingham nodded. "A very long time ago," she said. "Some time ago that I've not even told your father. I doubt Lares dun Tarh would ever recognize me."

Valery's eyes widened. "Truly?" she said. "But why haven't you mentioned him before? Why didn't you tell Aurelius?"

Lady Wolsingham waved her off. "Because it was so insignificant," she said. "It was not worth mentioning, truly. It was so long ago."

Valery shrugged. "But that would still be a lovely recollection, even if it was a hall from childhood," she said, turning back to her mirror. "Did you know your father from your time at Mount Pleasant?"

"Wait a moment," she said. "Aye," Lady Wolsingham said, removing the amber silk and

elius?" matching shift. "Ashkirk Castle was an ally at that time."

do not She brought the dress over to the bed and laid it out alongside the shift as Valery continued to brush out the tight curls.

nd start "Do you remember much about him?" Valery asked. "How well could you know him?"

y?" Lady Wolsingham faltered again. At least, she fell silent enough at the Valery paused in her brushing to look at her. "What is wrong?" she asked as she mother. "Did you know him well?"

Lady Wolsingham remained silent. She looked over the ambler's surcoat, picking at imaginary threads, before finally speaking.

"If I tell you the story, you must swear to me that you will never repeat it," she said. "Not to Aurelius and not to your father. Not to anyone. Can you swear this to me?"

ow his Valery stood up from her table. Her mother sounded... odd. Valery truly had no idea why until she went to the bed and saw her mother with tears in her eyes. Concerned, she sat down on the bed and took her mother's hand.

arrison "Of course I will not repeat it," she said softly. "I will take it to the grave. But what is your story?"

nts that Lady Wolsingham blinked quickly as if to compose herself. The olders looked at her daughter before letting out a hiss. "I have never repeated this to anyone," she said. "For years, I've put Lares' name out of my mind. I hadn't thought of him until your father sent that missive saying that he had betrothed you to Aurelius' son. I did not know it was Lares' son. I saw him. Then... then I knew. He looked just like him."

so long Valery was listening intently. "But what do you know about Lares?" she asked. "I know that the last time I saw him, he was being taken away by your father and several men," Lady Wolsingham said. "The last I heard, he had been forcibly committed to an abbey in some remote area of Scotland. I have no idea he had somehow been released and married."

it," she Valery looked at her in surprise. "He was a priest?" she said. "A priest? I never told me that."

ven if it Lady Wolsingham shook her head. "It is possible he does not know his name," she said. "That is why you must not repeat this story, Valery. I may know that Lares has chosen to keep buried. You must never tell Aurelius what you know, and you must never tell anyone else."

“I will not, I swear it,” Valery said, taking her mother’s hand. “But he fine all there is to it? That you knew him and he was committed to an abbey?”

Lady Wolsingham looked at her hesitantly. “Nay,” she said. “Lares and I did you were madly in love with one another. As much as you love Aurelius, how much I loved Lares. We wanted to be married, but my father deni gh that Imagine if you were unable to marry Aurelius, Valery. Imagine that p ked her would feel. It would be horrible.”

Valery was looking at her mother in shock. “Positively wretche er silksaid, squeezing her hand. “But why did Grandfather deny you?”

Lady Wolsingham closed her eyes as she returned to that terrib r repeat “I’ve not thought of this in so long,” she whispered. “It is so pai an you remember, but Lares and I decided we would not obey my father. W

with my father and his father in pursuit. Julius dun Tarh and Ra ry odd. Gilsland tracked us all the way to Carlisle Cathedral, but the priest wo mother marry us. Lares was a passionate man back then, Valery. Passion: ook her reckless. He told the priest that he would pray to the devil if the pries

not marry us, but unfortunately, our fathers heard his threat. That is e grave. was sent to an abbey and I was taken away and given over to Ad

Leybourne. Adams had just lost his wife in childbirth and was eager ien she gain, so my father paid him an enormous dowry and we were married l this to Valery’s mouth was hanging open in response to the tragic tale.

mind. I Mama,” she gasped. “You and Lares were separated so cruelly?”

at he’d Lady Wolsingham had to take a deep breath. “We were,” she sai i until I were so in love with one another... I surely thought my life was prayed for death. But death did not come. Your father did. And my ?” never told him about Lares, for obvious reasons. No man wants to r

by his woman who has run off with another man. I vowed never to tell him, he had but now Lares is coming to Lydgate and I had to tell someone of r d. I had with him. I feel as if I will burst if I do not. It is a secret too heavy to b

Had Valery not loved Aurelius as she did, her mother’s story mi aurelius have had such an impact. But she did love Aurelius, desperately, a couldn’t imagine being separated from him. She put her arms arou w,” she mother and hugged her tightly.

7 things “I’m so sorry, Mama,” she murmured. “I’m so sorry you were at I tell your love.”

Lady Wolsingham sighed heavily. “I was denied,” she muttered. “

It is that wound, one that gradually healed, but I fear Lares' appearance may have weakened her. Do you still feel it?"

Valery released her mother, looking at the woman in the face. "It is not meant to be reclaimed, but rather left to memory. It is not meant to be reclaimed, but rather left to memory." "You will not weaken. You and Papa have had a good marriage, and from what Aurelius has said, his parents have had a good marriage as well. Do... do you love Papa as you loved Lares?"

Lady Wolsingham hesitated for a moment before finally shaking her head. "Nay," she murmured. "Your father is a good man. He has been a good husband. But the kind of love I felt for Lares... That is a love a woman feels once in her lifetime. He was *my* once in a lifetime."

"Do you still feel it?"

"Nay," she said. "It was part of the wound I spoke of. It healed long ago. It is not meant to be reclaimed, but rather left to memory."

Valery nodded in understanding. "When Lord and Lady Torridon return, you will greet them both pleasantly and kindly," she said. "Would you acknowledge that you recognize Lares?"

Lady Wolsingham shrugged. "I think that I should," she said. "But I do not want to hurt him. We knew each other long ago, and that is where our association lies. There is nothing left of it."

Valery took her mother's hands again, looking at her strained face. "Oh... She could see how difficult it had been for her mother to tell her that, and she was sympathetic. But it also broke her heart to know that her mother had loved so deeply and was denied.

She felt that to her bones.

"Thank you," she said softly. "For telling me the story. I'm very grateful. And it will stay with me, and only me, forever."

Lady Wolsingham forced a smile, touching her daughter's cheek. "I'm glad I told you," she said. "Now, maybe you understand a bit more of your mother's past. I knew love, a true love, once. And now you know the value of it. Know how precious it is, Val. What you and Aurelius have is very precious. It was not meant to last for Lares and me, but it *will* last for you and Aurelius."

Valery smiled at her mother, knowing that it must have been difficult for her to say such a thing. Somehow, she was seeing her mother through her eyes now—a woman who had been forced into a marriage with a man she didn't love, but a woman who had remained faithful in spite of it. No

weaken was greatly in support of her daughter loving the son of the man she could not have.

will not True love took many forms.

a good This was one of them.

a good "Thank you, Mama," Valery whispered, leaning forward to kiss the cheek. "I will remember that forever."

ing her Lady Wolsingham kissed her only child in return, giving her a smile before pulling her off the bed and helping her dress for the day. Guests were arriving, guests who would want to greet the bride, so Lady Wolsingham determined to make her daughter shine as she had never shone before. She was going to marry a duke, something that had been denied to Davina long ago.

But it truly didn't matter to Davina.

arrive, Valery would be happy, and that was all she was concerned with.

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“Thank you, Mama,” Valery whispered, leaning forward to kiss her on the cheek. “I will remember that forever.”

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But it truly didn't matter to Davina.

Valery would be happy, and that was all she was concerned with.

Finally happy.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

HE WAS DARK and suave and handsome, with sharp cheekbones and beard. Gaspard de Jordain had ridden escort for the Earl of Tevic Northwood Castle, a man by the name of John de Longley. John a pleasant red-haired man who had married well, and he'd had six daughters before finally having a son. The lad was fostering at Bamburgh Castle and one would have thought he was the Christ child from the way de Longley spoke of him.

And Gaspard listened to it all.

He'd gone to serve de Longley when Sterling St. John had left Wolsingham to find another position for him. Gaspard had never regretted the reasons behind his dismissal, but he'd regretted being stationed far from the man who was closest to his heart. He'd come to Lydgate hoping to catch a glimpse of Maxwell, but he got much more than that. Maxwell had met him at the gate like the long-lost friend he was, reaching out a hand to welcome him but going no further than that. Gaspard was greeted by friendly soldiers at the gatehouse, men who knew him and liked him, so he felt as if he was coming home in so many ways.

And this evening, he found himself feasting with Maxwell and several other knights.

It was like a dream come true.

He *was* home.

"Honestly, I never thought I would see the day when Lady Valery would marry," he said to the knights at his end of the table. "I thought she was good for any man until I met Aurelius dun Tarh. It is a fine match."

The knights at the table just below the dais were from several different houses, men who had served and fought together for many years. R

Wolfe had returned, representing the House of de Wolfe as a who Welton de Royans had brought the contingent from Bowes Richmond, which was a royal outpost at this time, had sent Devin de N a royal representative in the north, while the Earl of Carlisle had brought premier knight, Alex Summerlin. Grandson of the man Edward I used “the Legend,” Alex was big and blond and was a master with a broadsword. He’d also served in France and was at the Battle of Crécy. It was, then, a tightly knit group that looked to the dais, where Aurelius was seated next to a beautiful woman resplendent in amber silk.

“I’ve never even seen Wolsingham’s daughter before,” Welton said. “I’ve fought in many skirmishes for the man, and I’ve been a guest at his table several times, but I’ve never seen her.”

“He kept her hidden, and for good reason,” Gaspard said. “You knights never let his womenfolk near the soldiers or allies.”

“True,” Welton said, his gaze on the dais. “But seeing her now, I can’t blame him. A woman like this is not meant for the masses. She’s exquisite.”

“Aurelius thinks so,” Maxwell said, his eyes twinkling at the couple. “I am pleased to say that they are mad for one another. It’s rare for betrothal turns out to be a love match.”

“Is it truly?” Gaspard said. “I find that astonishing.”

Maxwell looked at him. “Why?”

Gaspard shrugged. “Because I know them both,” he said. “Do not greet me that I served Wolsingham for a few years. Even if Wolsingham would allow his daughter around his army, he would allow her around the king and the other nobles, so I know her. She is stubborn, educated, and always, inevitably, correct about any given situation. And so is Aurelius. I would think they would love one another.”

Maxwell grinned. “Untrue,” he said. “Aurelius worships her, and she is that quite charming.”

“Well,” Rhori said, lifting the cup to his lips. “I wish them well. Aurelius deserves some happiness.”

“He’s a worthy man,” Alex said. “Where is Darien, by the way? I was too hoping to see him.”

Maxwell craned his neck back, looking to one of the tables at the dais, across from them. “Over there,” he said. “He’s with Carlisle, isn’t he? Rhori de Teviot is with him also.”

le, and They could see Darien with the earls, but the younger brother
Castle.nowhere to be found in this gathering of important men. Alex, too, cra
Nerra asneck to see Darien amongst the warlords, deep into their wi
ight hisconversation.

l to call “Ah,” Alex finally said. “There he is. Has he been here since the
sword.from France?”

efore, a Maxwell nodded. “Aurelius sent some of his foot soldiers back
l with aHighlands, but kept his brothers here,” he said. “He told me that his
and father are due here in a day or two. Lares dun Tarh is about to n
d. “I’veappearance, lads.”

lydgate They all knew what that meant. The legendary Highland earl, t
who probably single-handedly gave the dun Tarh clan most of its mys
now hereputation, was due any day. There wasn’t one of them who didn’t
healthy respect for the Earl of Torridon, descendant of Romans, supp
do notthe English wars, and conjurer of demons. So it was said, anyway.
isite.” Devin de Nerra who finally lifted his cup in tribute.

happy “Lucifer appears,” he said. “I’ve always wanted to see what the
when aspawn looks like.”

“He’s just a man,” Alex said frankly. “I do not give those leger
credence.”

Devin looked at him. “You do not believe that Lares dun Tarh
t forgetspawn of the devil?” he said. “You do not believe that he was
ouldn’tsummoning the devil those years ago and then sent to Camerton Al
nights,penitence, an abbey that is said to sit upon one of the seven gates c
correctYou do not think that is something of a coincidence? That may b
uld killdownfall, lad.”

The others started chuckling at de Nerra, who was a big man wi
l I findeyes and a brooding manner. He could make anything sound frighteni
Alex shook his head at him.

I truly “I do not believe any of it,” he said flatly. “Unless the man walks
smelling of brimstone and sporting cloven hooves, everything they sa
? I washim is rubbish. If you really want to know, ask Aurelius. But that
make him the son of the devil, and you might not like his answer
base ofcareful if you do.”

le. See More laughter as it turned against Devin. He brushed them all off,
up a pitcher in the center of the table and topping off Alex and W

as were cups. When he came to Rhuri, however, he noticed that the man was
ined hison the table, his head in his hand.

ne and “What’s the matter with you?” he said, pouring more drink into h
“You have been quiet all evening. Do you not believe in the devil’s
e return either?”

Rhuri grunted. “I do *not*,” he said. “But I am weary, I suppose. I
to the feel much like eating.”

mother “Then drink,” Devin said. “You do not need to eat with such
ake and drink.”

Rhuri smiled weakly and took a long drink of wine. Gaspard, sitti
the oneto him, peered more closely at him.

sterious “You were well this morning when we arrived,” he said. “But you
have a look particularly well now.”

order of Rhuri made a face at him. “Always a man with kind words,”
It was sarcastically. But then he burped loudly and stood up. “I hate to dis
you, lads, but I think I am going to find my bed. I’m feeling my age to
devil’s

Gaspard snorted. “You are the youngest one here.”

Rhuri waved them off, wandering away from the table as the
ids anywatched him go. Gaspard’s gaze lingered on him before he shook h
and turned back to his drink.

is the “He ate like a horse this morning when we arrived,” he said.
caughtpushed any lingering concern aside and reached into his purse, pulling
bby in silk sack that produced a pair of dice. “Who wants to play a game of F
of hell? Let me see your coin.”

oe your That wasn’t an uncommon game with them, and was a chance
some money and have a good time, so they began pulling out their pu
th darkthe men around them noticed what they were doing and wanted to join
ng. Butbut Maxwell. He didn’t want to play, and stood up from the table, pr
to make his rounds through the hall. When Gaspard saw this, he han
in here dice and control of the game over to Devin, who took it with gusto. As
y aboutbegan issuing the rules to those who wanted to play, Gaspard stood
wouldwent to Maxwell before the man could get away from the table.

, so be “Since when do you not play dice?” Gaspard said, a smile on his
was hoping to win money from you tonight.”

picking Maxwell grinned. “Mayhap later,” he said. “I still have duties, eve
elton’s feast. Lydgate is my command now, and all of this is my responsibility

leaning Gaspard's smile faded. "I know," he said. "I heard about your father. I wanted to write to you and tell you how sorry I was, but... I did not. I miss you."

spawn Maxwell made sure they were a couple of feet apart, nothing too close, nothing suggestive. He reverted to the behavior they'd always had when they were not served together. Nothing that would suggest they were anything other than friends and colleagues.

quality Nothing that suggested there was love involved.

"There is nothing to forgive," he said quietly. "He always thought you were a fine knight, Gaspard. In spite of everything, he never spoke ill of me. I hope you know that."

I do not Gaspard nodded. "I would like to think so," he said. "Your father was always kind to me. I admired him."

he said Maxwell smiled weakly. "And that is a fine thing to be said about a man."

night." Gaspard smiled in return, but it was brief in case anyone was watching. "What now?" he said. "I don't suppose..."

others "Suppose what?"

is head Gaspard was hesitant to continue, but he did. "As much as I love Northwood Castle, it is not my home," he said. "Do you think Wolsingham will let me return to Lydgate? With your father gone..."

forth a Maxwell understood what he was trying to say. Without Sterling Wolsingham was no longer any reason for Gaspard to stay away. He'd only been away because Sterling requested it, and now that barrier was removed.

to win And Maxwell had been highly aware of that for some time now.

urses as "I have been thinking the same thing," he finally said. "But I find it difficult to ask Wolsingham so soon after my father's death might make it look like I'm being an opportunist. Let a proper amount of time pass before I speak with him. It will seem more respectful that way."

s Devin Gaspard nodded, but he was disappointed. "I understand," he said. "I do not wish to be disrespectful to your father's memory."

lips. "I know," Maxwell said. "Nor do I. But it would be good to see you together again."

"Agreed," Gaspard said, but he wouldn't say anything more on the subject. In fact, he thought it best to change the subject before they ventured into a sentimental conversation. "How is your mother?"

father. I Maxwell looked to the dais where his mother was sitting with Forgive Wolsingham. "I think she would like it if you were to greet her," he

"She was always very fond of you."

close, Gaspard looked to the dais too, seeing Lady St. John as she sat next to Lady Wolsingham. Conversation was going on all around her, but she didn't seem to be participating much. She simply sat there, looking alone.

"I adore your mother, you know that," Gaspard said. "But she doesn't look as if she is ready for a great feast so soon after your father's passing of you." Maxwell shook his head. "She is not," he said. "She loved my father a great deal. She has taken his death hard."

"Then I will go and speak to her."

"Good," Maxwell said. "And when you are done, you can join me out anywhere."

Gaspard nodded and took a step in the direction of the dais, pausing. He looked at Maxwell, a hint of warmth in his eyes.

"I have missed you," he muttered. "You are in my thoughts even when you know."

I like Maxwell smiled faintly. "As you are in mine."

ingham And with that, they parted. There was nothing more to say, or at least they should say in a room full of men who didn't understand the logic, there had for one another. They were friends, and brothers, but more than that. There was nothing that could separate them permanently—not a society that frowned upon the feelings they harbored. They could have been kept apart for fifty years, but upon seeing one another after those years, it would be as if they'd never been separated.

ok as if Bonds like that weren't made to be broken.

bring it Even Valery knew that.

She'd been watching Maxwell and Gaspard from a distance. As a casual observer, they were simply having a conversation, but she knew more than a conversation to them. They'd been separated ever since they returned from France, so it surely must have been exciting to see one another again. She only knew how she would feel if she'd been separated from Aurelius for that length of time. Now that she understood what it was like to be someone, it made Maxwell and Gaspard's situation all the more tragic.

Sitting next to Aurelius, she slipped her hand into his.

h Lady He'd been speaking with Adams and the lord of Bamburgh Castle
ie said. Herringthorpe. It had been a lively conversation because Herringthorp
lively man, a great orator, and he made men laugh readily. He was als
quietly handsome, and kept trying to convince Aurelius to surrender Valery.
but she not been so charming about it, and clearly not serious, Aurelius mig
g quite had to gut the man, but instead, he laughed right along with him as
flushed modestly. But now, with her hand in his, Aurelius turned his a
oes not to her.

ng.” “Are ye enjoying yerself, *leannan*?” he asked. “’Tis a lively gather
father a She nodded, cozying up to him. “It seems like a dream,” she said
never had a celebration like this, just for me. If it is a dream, may
wake up.”

for my He grinned. “Nor I,” he said. “I’m excited for my da and mam to
I’ve not seen them in over a year.”

before “That’s a very long time,” Valery agreed. Her gaze moved to
seated with a pair of earls. “Darien seems to be enjoying himself. Bu
ry day, are the younger brothers?”

“Asleep, I think,” Aurelius said. “Darien said they weren’t feelin
so he told them to go to bed.”

nothing “All three of them?”

ve they “From what he said.”

in even “How old are those three?”

fathers, “Old enough to fight battles and swing swords. Estevan is especial
ld have at it.”

e years, “Yet they go to bed when they are told?”

Aurelius chuckled at her. “Of course they do,” he said. “Th
following orders.”

“I suppose,” Valery said. Then something down the cluttered table
To the her attention. “Look—there’s my mother. She’s coming this way.”

v it was Lady Wolsingham was walking along the dais, behind the diners, l
ce they in her daughter’s direction. Aurelius stood up when she came near, r
another out a hand to politely help her as she maneuvered behind the chairs. S
d from his hand gratefully, smiling at him before turning her focus to her daug

to love “Lady St. John has Gaspard to keep her company,” she said. “I an
to retire for the night.”

Valery stood up also. “Why?” she said. “The night is still young.”

, Asher Lady Wolsingham smiled weakly. "I am feeling a little tired as evening," she said. "My belly feels unwell, so I am going to go to bed. So quite you must stay and make sure our guests are entertained. Will you do that?" Had he Valery nodded. "Of course," she said. "Are you sure you are well? You must have to make it to your chamber? Aurelius can escort you."

Valery Lady Wolsingham shot her a long look. "And take him away from my attention," she said. "I would not dare. You two remain here, alongside Adar, and ensure that everyone is entertained. I will see you in the morning."

ing." Valery kissed her mother on the cheek and the woman continued. "I've departed the great hall through the servants' entrance. Aurelius was never sitting down, but Valery remained on her feet, her gaze lingering on the doorway her mother had just disappeared through.

arrive. Aurelius tugged gently on her.

"Sit down," he said. "Would ye like more wine?"

Darien Valery sat, but she was still preoccupied. "You said your father told me where brothers didn't feel well?" she asked.

He nodded, reaching for the pitcher on the table. "You know how they are, they are," he said. "They are ill one night and perfectly well in the morning."

"And now my mother feels ill."

"What of it?"

She looked at him. "This morning, Beryl mentioned that some of the servants had been ill," she said. "Do you think there is something contagious good around?"

Aurelius shrugged. "That happens all the time in a place like this," he said. "People contract illnesses all the time, but it runs its course."

They are She conceded the point. "That is true," she said, reaching for her drink.

"But I will still look in on my mother later. And you should look in on the other caught brothers."

"If ye wish."

reading Satisfied, Valery turned to her drink and to the food that had been laid out before her—luscious chunks of beef and carrots in a thick gravy that she took sopped up with bread that Aurelius cut for her. There were also platters of fish with smoked venison and wild pheasant. Tate de Lara joined those at the table, and between him and Herringthorpe, the conversation was quite lively.

Mostly, they discussed politics, but de Lara had several children, and the conversation would always veer the subject back to them, which Valery thought was

ed this sweet. She wondered if Aurelius would be that kind of father, sitting
ed. Buttable of warlords and making sure he told them stories about his children
at?" If they had any.

enough She certainly hoped they did.

Once her belly was full and she sat back in her chair, satisfied
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Clearly, that was the worst death of all.

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As Valery sat and contemplated life and death, the evening continued
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If they had any.

She certainly hoped they did.

Once her belly was full and she sat back in her chair, satisfied, and Aurelius engaged in conversation with men who were to be his allies, Valery found herself watching Lady St. John, as she and Gaspard were deep in conversation. Gaspard was holding her hand, and it was clear that she was upset, still grieving the loss of her husband, and it was difficult for Valery to not feel some guilt over that. It wasn't as if she'd had a hand in Sterling's death, but that wasn't the point. She had been involved, even if she had been innocent. She found it difficult to look at Lady St. John because all she could see was agony over the death of someone she loved.

Clearly, that was the worst death of all.

It gave her a good deal to think on.

As Valery sat and contemplated life and death, the evening continued flawlessly. Men drank and ate, sang, played games, and generally enjoyed themselves. It was truly an evening to remember, and she was looking forward to the next few evenings with more feasting and more stories. She wanted her betrothal celebration to be something she would remember for the rest of her life as something lovely and exciting, as any young woman would wish for, and it truly was. She went to bed that night with a smile on her face, thinking of Aurelius and how proud and handsome he looked.

The man she was to marry.

As she told him, it all felt like a dream.

By morning, however, that dream had turned into a nightmare.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

“**W**HO ELSE IS down?”

It was early on the morning after the celebratory feast, a cold night with mist clinging to the ground and the smell of smoke heavy in the air. The question had come from Aurelius, standing in Adams’ solar, and Maxwell had an entire list of people who were suffering the same terrible stomach and bowel issues. It had started the night before with only a few people, so mostly unnoticed, but a couple of hours before dawn, it hit many of the guests, nobles and soldiers alike, including Lord and Lady Wolsingham. Now, as the sun rose, Lydgate was a castle with a very big problem.

It was clear that something very bad was spreading.

“In addition to Lord and Lady Wolsingham, all four of your brothers are ill,” Maxwell said, telling Aurelius what he already knew. “The Earl of Carlisle is showing symptoms, as well as Rhor and Gaspard. There are also countless soldiers who are ill, and about half of Lydgate’s servants.”

“What of the other knights?”

“De Nerra, de Royans, and Summerlin are all well enough,” Maxwell said. “In fact, de Nerra and de Royans departed this morning before dawn. They wanted to get away from whatever is happening, and I cannot blame them. Summerlin wants to stay, but de Lara has told him to take his army back to Carlisle for the same reason. He is departing as we speak.”

Aurelius had been up most of the night, as had Maxwell, assessing the growing problem. He absorbed Maxwell’s report, contemplating the developing situation as he turned to the lancet windows that overlooked the bailey. It was strangely quiet out there this morning, in direct contrast to yesterday morning. Yesterday, the bailey had been full of people preparing for a celebration.

Today, there was tense silence.

“Valery mentioned last night that some servants had been ill over the few days,” he finally said. “She even wondered if something contagious was happening, but I assured her that it was nothing terrible. How wrong I was.”

“What do you mean?”

Aurelius sighed wearily. “We found out early this morning that the servants had died and no one bothered to tell Lady Wolsingham,” he said. “The servants were so consumed with preparing for the celebration that they were afraid to tell her.”

Maxwell nodded faintly, regret in his manner. “I know,” he said. “I’ve heard.”

Aurelius shook his head with exasperation. “Did ye know that the Earl forced some of the sick servants to work in the kitchens?” he said. “To make the food that went to the guests. That is why we have so many sick right now. That damnable fool of a woman may have condemned us all.”

Maxwell knew the old cook. He had for many years. She was a tough old bird, and sickness, to her, was not real. She accused her ill workers of being lazy. He could well understand how the woman forced the servants back to work, neglecting to tell Lady Wolsingham what was going on because she didn’t want to disrupt the celebration.

And now, they were seeing the results of that behavior.

The illness was spreading.

“I am certain the cook is regretting that decision bitterly this morning,” Maxwell said. “But the fact of the matter is that we now have many servants down with what some believe to be the blue death. If that is really true, we have a very big problem, Bear. The blue death *will* kill.”

Aurelius hated hearing that, but he had to face facts. With Adams gone, he’d been forced to take charge, and he intended to do a damn good job of it. He took to command easily as it was, but now, he had to think bigger.

He was no longer commanding a Highland regiment. He was in command of the English castle—a very big English castle that was facing a serious problem. He had some decisions to make.

“Then we must ensure no one else becomes ill,” he finally said. “I don’t want to suggest ye tell our remaining guests not to leave. Whatever this is, we don’t want it spreading when they flee home.”

“Agreed.”

“Tell them to keep to their encampments, not to come into the castle past not to leave.”

“I will.”

“Do we have any local physics to call upon?”

Maxwell nodded. “Aye,” he said. “There are physics in Willingham and two in Durham.”

“What about the physic we took with us to France?”

“Old Myron?” Maxwell said. “If you recall, we picked him up in London.”

When we returned home, he went back to London. I could send for him if you said. “Of course, but it would take weeks.”

Aurelius shook his head. “No time,” he said. “Send for Willingham and the cook in Durham. We need someone to tell us what we’re facing. We need help touching the walls.”

Aurelius turned away from the window and looked at him. “Valery is tending to her parents,” he said quietly. “Wolsingham was quite unwell this morning, but Lady Wolsingham seems to be not as severe. How is Gaspar?”

Maxwell smiled weakly. “He has my mother to tend to him, and she is sick with want for nothing, I assure you,” he said. “But if I may make a suggestion, we should put all of the sick in the great hall, where they can be more easily tended. I do not mean Lord and Lady Wolsingham, of course, but everyone else should be moved. Those of us doing the tending will not be so thin if they are all in one place. And someone should be in charge.”

Aurelius ran his fingers through his dark hair in a pensive gesture. “Who are you asking?”

“My thoughts also, but my mother is quite knowledgeable as well.”

“Then put her in charge now,” Aurelius said, thinking it was a better idea. “I fear that Valery is consumed with her parents at the moment, so your job of it may be better able to organize the sick more quickly.”

Maxwell nodded. “I’ll go to her now,” he said. “Is there anything else?”

Aurelius drew in a long, deep breath. “Aye,” he said. “Send for a physician.”

Maxwell seemed to sober, thinking he meant for those who might be affected. “I will do it right away,” he said. “It will be a comfort to those who are feeling... poorly.”

Aurelius shook his head. “Nay,” he muttered. “Not for that. To be with Valery and me.”

Maxwell’s brow furrowed. “Now?”

stle, but “Now,” Aurelius confirmed. “We’re to be married anyway, and honestly, I dunna want to wait any longer. We are facing something potentially deadly, and I want to face it with her as my wife. We will together, come what may.”

ton and Maxwell understood. Uncertain times were ahead, and Aurelius something he’d been very much looking forward to. He wanted Valery wife. He wanted that comfort and confidence.

London. “Very well,” Maxwell said quietly. “I will send for the priest to him, of physics. Then I will be in the hall, should you need me.”

Aurelius nodded. “Thanks to ye, Max,” he said. “I appreciate yer help.”

ton and “You shall have it.”

.” “How are ye feeling?”

.” “Quite well.”

alery is “Good. Off with ye.”

ell this Aurelius followed him out of the solar, only he headed for the “spard?” above while Maxwell headed out into the misty morning. The keep would be lland damp at this early hour, and as he mounted the stairs to the third floor, we caught sight of Sela, the servant, as she rushed into Valery’s chamber on the easily second floor. He’d heard that her daughter, Beryl, was one of the sick. Every time he reached the third floor, where Lord and Lady Wolsingham’s chamber read so was, he could hear the soft buzz of conversation coming from their comfortable bower. Making his way to the door, he stood in the open “I will knocked softly on the doorjamb.

Lady Wolsingham was wrapped up in a robe, sitting by the fire. Adams was flat on his back in the enormous, carved bed. Sunny and her idea were on either side of him, taking up his bed, while Valery was bent over her mother father, offering him a cup of something. When Aurelius knocked, ever the chamber looked to the door and Adams started to wave him over.

lse?” “Come!” he said, sounding weak but loud. “Come in, lad. Tell me what’s happening. My daughter will not let me get out of bed!”

perish. He sounded agitated, and Aurelius came into the chamber, eyeing who are who simply rolled her eyes at her petulant father. But he managed to see her as she walked past him.

o marry She pinched him on the arse.

.” “I’ve come with a report, m’laird,” he said, grunting at her spiteful affectionate pinch. “It seems that several people have come down v

d quitesame ailment. Max is sending for physics from Willington and Durha
nethingwe are instructing the guests to stay in their encampment and not lea
l face itdunna want this spreading.”

“Nay,” Adams said, pushing the geese aside as he tried to sit up. ‘
wanteda terrible, terrible thing. For it to happen at my daughter’s celebra
y as hisunforgivable. I must apologize to my friends and allies for exposing t
an illness.”

and the Sunny and Moonie didn’t take kindly to being shoved around, i
plopped off the bed and waddled underneath it as Aurelius approach
elp.” end of the bedframe. Adams looked terribly pale to him, and his lip
bluish, indicative of the severity of whatever had him in its grip.

The man simply didn’t look good.

“If ye will allow me to speak to them, I’ll do it on yer behalf,” A
said. “Carlisle seems to be the only warlord who may have contrac
e floorsillness. I’ll go and see him this morning.”

as cold Adams nodded, but he was weary and listless. “And my men?” I
loor, he“Who has come down with this terrible affliction?”

on the “About half yer army,” Aurelius said. “Max is well, but Gasp
By thecome down with it. So have all my brothers and Rhori de Wolfe.”

hamber Adams looked at him with concern. “Not your dear brothers!” he
r large, “Aurelius, I am so sorry, lad. And your father is due soon!”

ing and Aurelius moved closer to the man. “My father thought they would
by the end of the week,” he said. “That is only in a day or two, so v

, whilepermission, I’d like to ride north. I want to intercept my father be
Mooniearrives. Obviously, I dunna want my parents to come down with this il

ver her “Of course not,” Adams said, waving him onward. “Go. Go no
yone inthem not to come.”

“And what of the rest of Lydgate?” Lady Wolsingham asked fr
what isposition near the heart. “Aurelius, what of the kitchens and the ha
given orders to destroy all of the food in the kitchen and to wash eve
Valery,down. Have they done that yet?”

smile at Aurelius turned to her. “I dunna know, m’lady, but I shall find c
said. “Maxwell and I have decided to move the sick into the great ha
yer permission. It will be easier to tend them if they are all together.”

arp but Lady Wolsingham was pale this morning, her dark blonde hair fre
with thewimple and braided down her back. “A wise decision,” she said. “

um, and Lady St. John?"

ve. We "Well, m'lady," he said. "She will help us move the sick into the
will leave Valery here to tend the two of ye."

'This is Lady Wolsingham shook her head and wearily stood up. "I can
ation is with the help of Sela," she said quietly. Then she looked at her da
them to "You are needed elsewhere, my dear. Take care of our people and our
I will tend your father."

so they Valery frowned. "But you are ill, too," she said. "I must help you."
hed the Lady Wolsingham waved her off. "You can come to me when yo
os were the time," she said. "But I feel your duty is with our friends and allie
will need your help. You may return to us when you have the time."

Valery was uncertain. She didn't want to leave her parents, l
Aurelius mother seemed certain that she could handle both herself and her h
ted the who was appearing increasingly pale. After a moment, Valery lo
Aurelius to see what he thought of her mother's directive, and he
re said. shrugged.

"If yer mother feels she can tend yer father, then mayhap ye shoul
ard hasto her," he said softly. "We have many sick and not many to skillful
them."

gaped. "Like Aurelius' brothers," Lady Wolsingham said. "Go to his b
Valery. See what you can do for them."

d arrive Valery didn't have much choice with her mother practically push
with yer out of the door. She had a damp cloth in her hand, and, with a si
fore he handed it over to her mother.

ness." "Very well," she said. "I will see what I can do. But I am coming b
w. Tell Lady Wolsingham nodded patiently. "I know."

"You must rest, too."

om her "I will, I promise."

ll? I've "Shall I take Sunny and Moonie with me?"

rything Lady Wolsingham looked at the pair, now settled under the bed.
them," she said. "If they want to depart, they will."

out," he After that, there wasn't much to say. Valery went over to the d
ll, with and called to Sela, who appeared after a few moments. Her hands were
rags and other things, and Valery explained that she was to remain
e of its keep and help her parents. Confident that her mother and father w
How is well tended, Valery looked to Aurelius.

“Take me to your brothers, then,” she said. “I will do what I can do in the hall. I’ll do my best for them.”

Aurelius smiled, holding out an elbow to her, which she took gratefully. He leaned down, kissing her on the forehead.

“I’m so very sorry that your celebration has taken such a toll on the guests,” he murmured, kissing her forehead again. “You deserved so much better.”

She smiled at him. The man was so sweet to her, always concerned for her. It was something she never knew she was missing in her life, but now she was something she was so very grateful for. It was something that made her feel safe. They know she could never live without him.

“There will be other celebrations,” she said. “At the moment, I’m more concerned for my parents and the other people who are ill. Are your brothers terribly bad?”

He shook his head. “I’m not sure,” he said. “I don’t think so. Caladin and Darien seem to be too terrible, but Darien seems to have been worse than the rest.”

“Then let us go to them right away.”

Aurelius took her to her chamber first so she could collect her thoughts against the damp morning. They continued out of the keep and out into the mist, but Valery could feel the change in the air just as Aurelius had. The courtyard before had been full of excitement and celebration, and now evening seemed tense and still. The only sound she could hear were the soldiers marching along the wall, going about their duties in the murky soup. No chatter, no songs. Just... quiet.

“It seems so... cold out here,” she said, taking Aurelius’ hand. They headed toward the dun Tarh encampment. “Cold and damp. We should move your brothers into the keep. It will be better for them there.”

Aurelius led her through the gate in the wall with the dun Tarh encampment down the incline. “We can move them into the great hall,” he said. “There’s no need to move them to private chambers.”

“They’re your brothers,” Valery pointed out. “You are the next of kin. Lydgate, so they enjoy special privileges. There are two small chambers full of the solar on the entry level. We can put them there.”

He knew better than to argue with her once her mind was set. “I could be wrong, but I don’t think it would be too much trouble.”

“Don’t be silly. Of course it will not. I will tend to them myself.”

can for He squeezed her hand as they headed down the slope, finally entering a cluster of dun Tarh tents. It was quiet here, too, with a smoldering campfire struggling against the mist. Aurelius took her to a large tent, and they even entered, they could hear the younger men shouting. Aurelius ran through the opening, watching Estevan and Caelus arguing as Kaladin lay on his pallet and wiped away tears as fast as they would fall.

ned for “What is going on here?” Aurelius demanded. “Kal, why is he now it weeping?”

ade her “Because he’s sick and hungry and Estevan willna let him eat,” she said, frowning. “We want some bread, and he will not let us have any more.”

n more Valery looked at Aurelius, and the two of them passed expressions of both concern and sympathy. Valery turned to the younger brothers, who were really young men. Even the youngest one, Kaladin, was just a year older than she was, but she got the sense that there was some immense pain hidden behind their eyes. Even though they’d just come back from a year at battle, they still needed to be taken care of a little.

r cloak “A physic will be coming soon,” she said as Kaladin quickly wiped away the tears, embarrassed that he’d been caught. “I do not want to give you anything that may upset your belly, at least until the physic comes. But I will bring you something to drink. That will help.”

liers on Kaladin couldn’t even answer her, so ashamed was he, and Caelus just shrugged. Both of the younger brothers had dark circles around their eyes, and the entire tent smelled of sewage. Valery noticed that their pallets were stained and the place just seemed generally dank and dirty. But she didn’t move to comment, instead moving to Darien, who was on his back as Aurelius lay over him. Valery gazed down at the man, who seemed unusually pale.

n Tarh “I hear that you’re not feeling well,” she said. “What are all your symptoms?”

Darien let out a long, heavy sigh. “Everything I ate last night has come out of me, one way or the other,” he said. “It started early this morning.” Valery put a hand on his forehead. “No fever,” she said. “It seems like you have what everyone else has.”

“If you’ve been told.”

“We are going to move you and your brothers into the keep,” she said, smiling kindly at him. “It will be warmer there, and I can tend to you.”

ring the better.”

Looking Darien was gazing up at her with big, dark eyes. “You will be before me?”

is came “Why not?”

1 sat up Darien didn’t seem to have an answer. In fact, he seemed indignant. “Are... are ye sure ye want to?”

are ye Valery frowned. “Why wouldn’t I?” she said. “You are soon to be my family, Darien. Of course I will tend you.”

Caelus She moved to pull his blanket down, but he grabbed her hand catching her. “Valery thought he didn’t want her moving his cover, but he simply held his hands offhand still as he looked up at her. There was something working behind his dark eyes on this brother with the white patch of hair at the front of his head. Darien was the firebrand, the destroyer. He was unafraid to do or say what he needed to be done or said.

1. Even But he appeared anything but unafraid at the moment.

to grow “If I die, I want ye to know something,” he said, his voice quiet. “When ye and my brother were first betrothed, I said... I thought... things I should have told ye. I want ye to know... I was wrong, Valery. Ye’ve been good to ye brother. He loves ye, and that must make ye a worthy woman, indeed. I’m sorry I said otherwise.”

It was the apology he was supposed to have made at the first funeral he simply attended at Lydgate but never had the chance. Valery wasn’t aware of his eyes, of course, but she well remembered what she’d heard when her father’s words were first returned from France. Perhaps Darien was aware that she’d know he didn’t perhaps he could only really guess at it, but he was an intelligent man. He stood he knew that something would have gotten back to her. Castles with their small knit groups could spread rumors like wildfire. With a twinkle in her eye she put her free hand on his forehead.

“There is an old saying,” she said. “No one rejoices in revenge more than a woman. I should punch you in the nose for everything you have said to me.” “I will not. That is one revenge I would not rejoice in. I think, given the circumstances, I would have drawn the same conclusions you did. And for the time being, I did. But something unfriendly has turned into something friendly. Don’t you think so?”

he said, A smile tugged at Darien’s pale lips. “I do.”

r needs “So do I,” Valery said. “And I think we are truly family now, th

and the bad of it. Agreed?”

tending “Agreed.”

With a wink, she removed her hand from his forehead and looked at the eye. “Now,” she said. “Because we’re practically family, I’m going to be perfectly honest with you. It might be a good idea for you and your brothers to bathe so that when you come into the keep, you will be comfortable.”

Darien wasn’t following her. “Why?”

quickly. “Because ye smell like shite,” Aurelius said bluntly. He’d been liv- ing herto his brother’s apology and Valery’s reply with a heart full of joy, but those wouldn’t show it. He never wanted Darien to know that *he’d* so easily been his head, so his manner turned sharp. “All of ye smell like it. This entire camp smells of it. Ye’ve been living like animals out here, and it shows. Ye’re going to take that smell with ye into the keep, where decent folk live. Go out to the pond and wash off that smell and any shite ye might have on ye.” “When Even if this illness is loosening yer bowels, ye dunna have to wear yer pants. I couldnashite.”

for my He was pointing out toward the pond, which was quite cold this morning. I’m As Darien looked miserable at the mere suggestion, Aurelius went over to his possessions and pulled out a bar of lumpy white soap. He went to the tent, at least he Darien, shoved it into his hand, and then tugged the man into a crouching position. Very slowly, Darien rose, but he was unsteady. Even Valery’s army see that. She went over to Aurelius and lowered her voice.

own, or “Mayhap you should go and help them bathe,” she said. “Darien doesn’t Surely look well at all. You do not want him drowning.”

1 close- Aurelius shook his head. “Nay, I dunna,” he said, looking at Elyse, she Caelus, and Kaladin as they picked themselves up slowly. “This whole camp might drown if I’m not there to watch out for them.”

ore than Valery patted his arm in agreement. “Go with them,” she said. “I’ll be there, but I return to the keep and make sure those rooms are prepared for them. I’ll even have these about having something for them to drink when they arrive. It’s a short important.”

g quite He looked at her curiously. “Why?”

She moved for the tent opening to get out of the way of the hunchbacked brothers. “Because when I was younger, I had something that I thought was the good everything in my body to come out from the top and from the bottom.

said, trying to be discreet as she gestured. “A physic from Auckland t
mother that whenever that sort of thing happens, the liquid in a body i
him inreplaced or the person will suffer greatly. He gave me very salty ale a
ig to bebroth to drink, and it helped a great deal. In fact, that’s what I was giv
rothersparents—watered, salty ale. That is what I will give your brothers.”

more... He grasped her hand, lifting it for a gentle kiss. “They are very fc
to have ye to tend them,” he said. “I know my mother will be very grat

Valery toyed with his fingers. “Are you really going to ride off
steningthem?”

but he Aurelius looked at Estevan helping Darien walk. “I am,” he said. “
forgiveBut meanwhile, we must take care of this lot.”

ire tent Valery let go of his hand and stepped out of the tent. “Bring them :
e’re notkeep once they’ve washed off,” she said. “I shall be ready for them.”

, so get He called to her before she could get away. “What about yer m
: on ye.instructions about cleaning the kitchen?”

er own “I will make sure it is done.”

With that, she headed off, back into the mist, as Aurelius help
orning.walking wounded brothers over to the pond, where icy water awaite
r to hisBut there was little choice—the illness had them soiled, and Valery
back tothem clean before they came into the keep, probably for their own h
sittingwell as to reduce the smell, and that was exactly what he would ensure
y could

As his brothers leapt into the pond, hooting at the shock of the colc

Aurelius found himself following them in. As he’d told Valery, he wa
loes notmake sure no one drowned and everyone soaped up, but there w

concern there. He’d spent the entire year protecting his younger b
stevan,making sure no harm befell them, and he wasn’t about to relinquish co
role lotan illness that seemed to be taking hold. They may be his annoying b

but they were *his*.

“I will And he loved them.

And I’ll As always, Aurelius dun Tarh would take control.

That is



ed-overTHE KITCHENS HAD been scoured.

caused The cook, who was also ill thanks to her bad decisions, was un
n,” she

old my complete Lady Wolsingham's instructions, so the only two kitchen servants remaining had carried them out. All of the bread and meat and vegetables and salty had been served at the feast had been piled into the kitchen and either being my or buried, and the kitchens themselves had been scrubbed with vinegar from apples because it was all they had. Floors, tables, pots—everything unfortunate been cleaned, rinsed with hot water, and cleaned again.

eful.” Valery could smell the vinegar before she entered the kitchen, and to find she finally did, the smell was overwhelming. The two women who had done the cleaning were fearful that they hadn't done enough, but Valery told them that they had done a fine job with it. But the fact that they'd thrown most of the prepared food meant they had to start from the beginning. There were sick people to feed.

Valery instructed the two servants to make an enormous pot of broth and another pot of gruel, something she also remembered that the physician Auckland had given her. The servants, fortunately, knew how to cook. They took bones and meat from several chickens that had been killed before and put those into a pot along with carrots, onions, and garlic. Filling the pot with water, they set it to boiling over the hearth while another pot was prepared with cracked wheat and water. Valery instructed the servants to make both concoctions very salty.

The wheels were in motion. With food being prepared, which was going to take a few hours at the very least, Valery also had the servants prepare boiled water with fruit and fruit rind in it, along with breaking out fresh casks of ale, which were cut with the boiled water. While that was being done, Valery went in to check on the servants who were still well enough to help her with the beds for the brothers. She found three women who were trying to get about their duties of sweeping and tending the keep and had them prepare the rooms for the brothers. Satisfied that everything was proceeding as planned, she headed for the stairs with the intention of checking on her parents when she heard someone call her name.

Maxwell was standing in the keep entry.

“Max?” she said, veering away from the stairs and heading toward the brothers. “Aurelius gave a report to my father a short time ago. I was just going to see him again. Is there anything new I should tell him?”

Maxwell shook his head. “Nay,” he said, his manner bordering on

servants impatient. "Where is Aurelius?"

bles that Valery gestured toward the north. "He is with his brothers," she
burned "Why? Is something amiss?"

ir made Maxwell sighed sharply. "Not exactly," he said. "But some of the
ing had departed against my orders. I was unable to stop them."

Valery frowned. "Why should you stop them?"

d when "In case they are ill so they do not spread it wherever they go."

ad done "I see," she said. "Do we know if they were ill?"

assured Maxwell shook his head in disgust. "I think a few were," he
own out "Richmond, Bowes, and a few others have already gone, and I knew that
they had no one that was ill. Bamburgh also departed, and I take care
with them, but some of the smaller houses with ill soldiers left even
oth and told them not to. Northwood and Carlisle are the only ones left."

ic from "What of the physics you have sent for?"

ook, so "They will not arrive for some time," Maxwell said. "We will have
the day our best until they come."

2. After Valery nodded, seeing that they would be on their own until help
second "Not to worry," she said. "The kitchens have been cleaned out of all
hem to that might have made people ill, and I had them prepare broth and give
the sick. We can hold fast until the physics arrive, I think."

Maxwell looked at her. The Valery he knew before the advent of A
s at the dun Tarh had been a bright and concerned young lady, but there had
bit juice been something cold about her. Analytical. She had compassion, but it
ould be been readily evident. There was something about finding love that
search softened her usually rigid edges. He could see it now.

urelius' He could see a grown-up woman before him.

ir usual She would make a fine countess someday.

oms for "I think we can hold fast, too," he said, a twinkle in his eye. "I think
he was you'll make sure of it, no matter what."

hen she Valery caught the twinkle and fought off a grin. This was the M
she'd known all her life, the one so ready to both tease her and praise
was the closest thing she'd ever had to a brother.

rd him. "I shall do my best," she said. "But I will need your help."

g to see "You have it, my lady," Maxwell said. "You will always have it."

Her smile broke through. "I know," she said. "And we are better
ing on Max... I want to say something to you. I want to say that I hope you

here forever. I know your father and grandfather did, but it never seemed to me that your heart was here. If I can convince Papa to let Gaspard return, will you remain forever? I do want you to be happy here.”

Her concern touched him. She knew that his situation wasn't easy. Turmoil and loneliness seemed to settle on him more than most. But she knew that she had always supported him, even when Gaspard was sent away. It had been Valery who went to Sterling to plead for leniency. Sterling had been swayed by her, but at least she had tried. That was something Maxwell would never forget.

“I have never been unhappy here,” he said. “I intend to make a good issue of my legacy, as my father wished. At least I can do something he wanted me to do after he is gone.”

Valery's smile faded because she knew what he meant. Sterling's death had been heavy upon him the weeks since his father's death. Maxwell had been questioning everything—his life, his loves, his father's wants—but he hesitated to speak openly of it. But she wanted him to know how she felt. “You can do something for your father by remaining,” she said. “Nothing more. But having Gaspard serve with you... That is something for yourself. I am sure your father will allow him to come back. He has sorely missed Gaspard. He's told me so.”

The conversation was turning serious, skirting that subject that Maxwell almost spoke of. But Maxwell had something to say about it.

“I want you to know something, Valery,” he said. “Your father had been unkind to me when it came to Gaspard. In fact, I know he tried to change my father's stance on at least one occasion, because I heard him. When your father asked that Gaspard be sent away, I stood outside your father's door and he told my father that he felt he was being needlessly cruel. Your father is a man with a great capacity to understand.”

“Do you know why?” Valery asked softly.

Maxwell shook his head. “Nay,” he said. “Why?”

Valery reflected on her father and his younger brother. “Because your younger brother had the same preference that you do,” she said. “My grandfather's answer was to commit him to an abbey, to save his immortal soul. He became a priest, an Augustinian hermit, so he spent his life in solitude and prayer. No contact with the world and hardly any contact with his fellow monks. My father loved his brother and felt this was a terrible thing to do to him.”

ed as if for him. That is why my father has been understanding of you and G
will you. Because of a long-dead uncle I never met.”

Maxwell seemed subdued at the revelation. “I did not know,” he
sy, that “How very tragic for your uncle. I am sorry for him.”

he also Valery shrugged. “It is not something my father ever speaks of,” she
t away. “Please do not bring it up to him, because it remains a painful thing. E
; hadn’t you know.”

Maxwell Maxwell nodded, pondering the hermit uncle and a lifetime of lon

“I suppose that I am fortunate my father did not consign me to the sam
e it my father said. “In any case, your father’s generosity toward me is something
I will never forget. Why would I ever want to serve anyone else?”

Valery put her hand on his arm, squeezing him in encourage
s ghost support. “I am glad to hear that,” she said. “I know that Aurelius thin
well had highly of you and Gaspard. You make an elite pair of knights that
—so she prouder to have.”

Maxwell smiled, modest though it might be, and removed her hand
quietly from his arm. “Stop being so sentimental,” he teased. “And do not touch m
elf. I am sure my future husband might see, and he will try to cut me in half.”

Valery laughed. “I sincerely doubt that,” she said. “But I must see
parents now, and I’m sure you have tasks to attend to.”

Maxwell gestured toward the gatehouse. “I do,” he said. “I must
riders out to stop any guests who have not yet reached Lydgate. They
is never turned away. I will also wait for the physics and the priest.”

“A priest?” Valery said. “That is an excellent suggestion. He will
when my comfort for the ill.”

Maxwell eyed her strangely, realizing she didn’t know that Aurelius
her is asked for the priest so they could be married. He didn’t want to sur
prise, so he passed over her comment and pointed to the stairs.

“Go and tell your father that we have things well in hand,” he said.
send word with the physics arrive.”

Nodding, Valery headed up the stairs while Maxwell quit the ke
l. “My father hustled her way up three flights of stairs, coming to the landing out
n mortal parents’ chamber door just as Sela was emerging. When the old woman
days in Valery, she pointed frantically inside the chamber.

“M’lady,” she gasped. “You’d better hurry.”

Seized with concern, Valery rushed into the chamber only

Gasparid confronted with a nightmare.

The day, for her, had just grown exponentially worse.

He said.

He said.

But now

elness.

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confronted with a nightmare.

The day, for her, had just grown exponentially worse.



CHAPTER TWENTY

“**W**HERE ARE WE?”

The question came from a woman riding comfortably on a fat white mare she'd ridden all the way from the Highlands and into the north of England. Normally, she would have taken the fortified carriage her husband had made for her many years ago when the children were younger and she liked to travel to her family home of Mount Pleasant in the Lowlands of Scotland, but the carriage was very heavy, and with the roads compromised by the winter season, it would only slow them down to a conveyance like that.

So they were on horseback.

All of them.

Mabel de Waverton dun Tarh wasn't used to riding so much. She had done it in years, but she still managed to make it down from the Highlands and into her beloved England without a hitch. Although the landscape of the Lowlands of Scotland and the landscape of Northern England was the same, the feel was different for her.

She was home.

She'd actually been home for a few days. A brief visit to her husband at Wigton Castle had introduced her younger children to her brother, George, who had a wife and four sons who were exactly as he'd been in his day. Too much money, too much drink—the de Waverton lads had quite a reputation. George told her all about it on the night they'd spent at Wigton. But in the morning, they had to continue south, and it was with sadness that Mabel bade her brother farewell.

Onward they went.

Zora, Cruz, Leandro, and Lucan were the younger siblings that

accompanied their parents south to their eldest brother's wedding. The only other sibling who didn't come was Lilliana, because she was married and had a home of her own. Mabel and Lares were determined to bring their entire brood together for the sake of Aurelius' wedding. The betrothal that Lares had never told his wife of because he honestly wasn't sure it would ever take place, so the missive announcing Aurelius' marriage to the Earl of Wolsingham's daughter had come as a complete surprise.

Mabel had brained her husband with a heavy cushion when she found out.

So, with fifty Highlanders, they headed south. About ten of them were from Aurelius' group, men who had spent a year in France, but most of them Aurelius had sent north after the stopover at Lydgate Castle. Lares and Mabel had run into the men heading north, and a small contingent broke off to head north of them back south. Since they had already been to Lydgate, they knew the route.

and she and she Lares let them lead the way.

ands of Now, they were in a small village north of Lydgate. According to the man who had already been to Lydgate, the castle was about half-day's ride north. The village was hardly anything more than cottages and a workshop. There was a small tavern on the south end of the main road that provided food and rented chambers. It had a painted pig over the doorway, indicating it was a public house. They had started traveling before dawn on this day.

hadn't Lares called a halt when the tavern came into view.

ghlands "Down with ye," Lares said, motioning to his wife and children. "Everyone down. We'll stop here and eat something."

e in the e same, Mabel dismounted stiffly. "You did not answer me," she said. "What do you want?"

Lares took her hand to help her off the saddle. "I'm not certain," he said, looking around. "Some tiny Sassenach village full of tiny Sassenachs."

George, He said it with disdain, and Mabel struggled not to smile. "You know that you're married to a Sassenach," she said. "These are my countrymen."

youth. He frowned. "Are ye a Sassenach?" he said, eyeing her. "Ye dinna know that before we married."

Wigton. "Didn't I?" she said, removing her hand from his so she could stretch her traveling dress. "I was certain that I did."

"Ye dinna."

at had "That is your misfortune."

he only He tried to kiss her, but she pushed him away by the face. He laugh
already he always did with Mabel. Their entire marriage had been full of
ined to laughter and teasing, and it was something he treasured. He knew that
ding, a fortunate man.

wasn't Running into her in that field all those years ago was the best thing
marriage ever happened.

Off to their right, the children began to gather. Leandro was the eldest
and out the group, a strong lad who was already taller than his father, with dark
brown hair he kept short. He was a natural leader, much like Aurelius, even
from that young age. Next to him was Lucan, barely a man, with his long, red
hair like Mabel's blond hair and a quick wit. The youngest son was Cruz, with curly, flaxen
hair and escorted locks and the temperament to match. He was only a couple of years
younger than Zora, the youngest daughter Tarh child at nine years of age. She
was a beautiful child with dark hair and was tough as nails.

It was Zora who took charge of the group.

he men "Are we going inside, Da?" she asked. "I'm hungry."

he to the Lares simply nodded and pointed to the door. Zora, her cloak well
tucked around her, charged forward with her brothers in tow. The tavern
door opened, and they could hear Zora announcing that she was hungry
and demanding they bring her food. Lares shook his head, snorting
at the boldness of his youngest child, while Mabel collected herself.

"I shall go in with them," she said. "I could use something to eat as
children." "Go," Lares said. "I'll join ye soon. I want to see the horses
first."

here are Mabel acknowledged her husband and followed her children into
the tavern, where Zora was making more demands of the tavernkeeper.
he said, could still hear her voice, and he grinned because the lass would have
been a spectacular warrior had she been born a male. But she was female, though
not forgetful powerful one. Truth be told, it was going to be difficult to marry
her." because not many husbands would tolerate a lass so bold. Secretly, he
told her she would stay with him forever and spend the rest of her life bossing
the men around.

eighten His baby.

"M'laird?"

Lares was addressed by one of the men who had gone to France. A
man who carried the lines of a hard life on his face, he was none

shed, as strong and resilient. He approached Lares as some of the other men crowded the horses and began to lead them across the road to the livery on the roadside.

“Make sure the horses are properly tended,” Lares said, pointing toward the herd. “If Lydgate is as close as ye say it is, then we can spend an hour here and still make it to the castle by nightfall.”

But the soldier shook his head. “Nay, m’laird,” he said. “That is a kirk have come to tell you. I just saw a few soldiers from Lydgate on the road at his town. They’re riding out to tell everyone that there is disease at Lydgate. They’re not to go to the castle.”

Lares’ expression darkened. “What do ye mean?” he said. “We’ve ridden hundreds of miles for this. I’ll not stay away from Aurelius’ wedding.”

The soldier was firm. “The Lydgate soldiers said that the celebration started last night and by morning, more than half the guests were ill,”

“He said that some had even died. Ye dunna want to take yer wif and children into a castle that is stricken with a plague, do ye?”

Lares was growing increasingly upset. “God’s Bones,” he muttered, realizing the news was serious, indeed. “Is it true?”

“It seems to be, m’laird.”

“And they’ve come to tell everyone to stay away?”

“That’s what they said, m’laird.”

Lares thought on that a moment, understanding that something very bad was at the end of his journey. Frankly, he was shocked.

“Then what does this mean?” he said, though it was a rhetorical question. “What does this mean for the wedding? And my lads... Aurelius is the son of Darien and Estevan and Caelus and Kaladin. My sons are all there and they’re not to stay away.”

The old soldier could see that Lares would not be kept away. He thought it better than to fight him on it. “Then mayhap only ye should go,” he said. “Leave the family here, and ye go and find out what ye can. I’ll go with ye if ye wish.”

That was something Lares could agree with. He didn’t like the sound of a castle full of sickness, but he liked it even less that five of his sons were there. No directive, no matter how severe, was going to keep him from his duty.

“I willna go in,” he said. “But I will go to the gates. I’ll demand to see Aurelius. He can tell me what is happening.”

“That is wise, m’laird,” the soldier said. Then the man eyed the

collected because they were still hearing Zora's voice inside. "Are ye going to the other Lady Torridon what has happened?"

Lares half shrugged, half nodded. "I must, I suppose," he said. "Otherwise, she'll wonder why I'm going to the castle without her."

The soldier nodded. "I'll gather a fresh horse from the livery," he said. "I'll be ready after ye've told Lady Torridon."

There was a sense of urgency in the air, something that hadn't been felt before. As the man split off, shouting to a few other soldiers to accompany him, Lares squared his shoulders and headed into the tavern. Truthfully, he felt a little dazed by what he'd just been told. But he had to get to the castle to see what was happening at Lydgate, especially since some of his sons were there. It was confusing and disturbing.

Once inside the dark, low-ceilinged tavern, he spied his family in a corner, by a window. As he approached the table, Zora was talking to the tavernkeep that they wanted a lot of food. Lares grabbed the man's shoulder and told him to bring enough food to sufficiently fill up a table for children and one adult. As the man scurried away, happy not to have to attend to a nine-year-old's demands, Lares reached down and grasped Mabel's elbow.

"I must speak with ye," he said quietly.

Without hesitation, Mabel stood up, admonishing Zora to behave herself, and followed her husband back outside. The mist from the morning had lifted, leaving everything damp, but clouds were beginning to gather overhead. There was rain on the wind.

"I do hope it does not rain until we reach Lydgate," she said, looking up at the sky. Then she looked at her husband. "What did you need to talk to me about?"

Lares wasn't quite sure how to be tactful, so he simply came out and said, "Lydgate soldiers came into the village," he said. "They told my men to stay here. Lydgate has a plague and we are not to go there, but I am going to ride out to the gatehouse and demand answers. I want to see my sons. I want to know what part of it is happening. I dunna know how long it will take, so you and the children will plan on staying here for the night. I'll leave ye with my purse so ye can speak have enough money for anything ye need, but I *must* go to Lydgate."

Mabel was listening seriously. "Sweet Mary," she muttered. "A plague? And we do not know what kind?"

to tell Lares shook his head. "Nay," he said. "But ye can understand that want ye and the children going there."

he said. "Of course," Mabel said. "But they may need help. If there are deal of sick, I can help."

he said. He held up a hand to stop her. "Let me find out what has happened he said. "I'll return as soon as I can."

in there Mabel nodded quickly. "Aye, you must find out if our sons are safe company said, trying not to worry. "We've not seen them for over a year and naturally, he She trailed off, unable to continue. Lares could see in her eyes that bottom was fearing the worst, and he put a hand to her shoulder to comfort her were at "We'll see them very soon," he assured her softly. "Now, go back and eat with the youngers. I'll return as soon as I know something in the promise."

ing the Mabel nodded, her throat tight with fear as Lares kissed her on the cheek by the and continued across the street, where his men had a fresh horse saddle up for him. There were five of them, all ready to ride with him to Lydgate, so listen mounted up quickly before spurring the horse onward, charging down the road that led to Lydgate.

All Mabel could do was stand there and pray.

herself,
ng had



gather HE'D SIMPLY STOPPED breathing.

Valery was still coming to grips with the fact that her father had king up stopped breathing. His lips and his face had been blue, and no amount of speaking or shouting could force him to take another breath. Ad-

Leybourne, Earl of Wolsingham, had died while his daughter pounded with it. chest and begged him to breathe.

men that But he didn't.

he to the It had happened that morning, and several hours later, Valery was with her father's empty side of the bed because Aurelius and Maxw children taken him away, down to the vault, where he would be stored until so ye'll decided when to bury him. Lady Wolsingham's illness had worsened, her unable to truly react to her husband's death, while Valery had sobbed plague? Her father was dead.

I dunna She simply couldn't believe it.

The disease, whatever it was, seemed to be progressing quickly on a good and not on others. The Earl of Carlisle seemed to be feeling much better while Rhori de Wolfe seemed worse. Carlisle and Northwood reached first," camped around Lydgate, outside of the walls and far enough from the castle.

Watching... waiting for the disease to grow worse or stabilize. But word had spread that the Earl of Wolsingham had died, which was a jolt of terror through Lydgate. He'd died shockingly fast, and what shephysic from Willington finally arrived, he took one look at Lady Wolsingham and declared that the blue death was indeed upon the castle.

But the physic had come to fight. At least, they'd thought so.

He was an older man by the name of Lydon who made a point of telling Aurelius and Valery that he had lived in Rome, among other places. He'd only returned to Willington because he'd married a woman who was from here, but Lydon knew of the blue death and was prepared to combat it. Although it was too late for Lord Wolsingham, it wasn't too late for Lady Wolsingham. He promised a distraught Valery that he would do his best.

Unfortunately, she didn't know what that meant until it was too late. As the afternoon progressed and most of the sick had been moved to the hall, Valery made the mistake of leaving the physic alone with her mother. She was struggling with her grief over her father's death, splitting her head just between the two Tarh brothers, who were holding their own, and meeting out of hall with the help of Lady St. John. By the time Valery returned to her mother's chamber, she was mortified to realize that Lydon was bleeding the poison from her mother's blood into a small bowl and Lady Wolsingham was unconscious. That brought screams from Valery, and those screams were answered by Aurelius and Maxwell running.

Weeping hysterically as she tried to rouse her mother, Aurelius and Maxwell threw Lydon down the stairs. The physic swore that bleeding the poison was the only cure for what Lady Wolsingham had and insisted that every sick person needed to be bled for that very reason. But Aurelius thought the man was mad. He'd seen enough illness and injury, especially in France, to know that bloodletting wasn't the answer. At least, he didn't believe in it. He'd

do far more harm than good. He tossed Lydon out into the bailey, n someMaxwell finished the job for him and purged the man right thro better,gatehouse.

Lydon was sent on his way, which left Lydgate with no phy castle. hundreds ill. As Aurelius and Maxwell stood at the gatehouse, w Lydon ride off on his small pony, Aurelius caught sight of incoming 1 sent aThinking that it was perhaps the second physic, he remained in the gat en thewatching curiously as the party drew closer. Then he realized that on inghamriders was very familiar to him.

His father had arrived.

Struck with shock, Aurelius couldn't believe it. He suddenly fel five-year-old boy again, and he wanted to dash to his father and feel t tellingfatherly hug. He'd had to be the father, for all intents and purposes, w s. He'dwas in France with his younger brothers, and although he was as borncapable, the fact was that he had a father whom he adored. A man wh at it, hethedecisions and gave comfort. He'd missed him dreadfully.

It was all he could do to keep from running to the man.

“Da,” he muttered, heading toward the first of the double port with Maxwell trailing after him. “Do ye see him? It’s my father.”

Maxwell had only met Lares dun Tarh once, so he wasn't sure into theman, out of the group of Scots wearing long tunics and leather boo mother.Aurelius' father.

“He’s here?” he said incredulously. “But I sent out riders to n in theguests from arriving. Did he not receive the message?”

Aurelius was at the portcullis, which was down, and the soldie woman.securing the man-sized gate that the physic had just passed through.

He began to shout.

“Da!” he cried. “Da, dunna come any closer! Please!”

Lares heard his son's voice, and he was so overcome by the sound nearly fell off his horse as he dismounted it.

“Aurelius?” he called. “*Bear!* Ye’re alive!”

“Of course I’m alive,” Aurelius said. “What made ye think I w patientbe?”

Lares took several steps in the direction of the portcullis. “Beaus ow thattold that Lydgate was in the grip of a plague,” he said. “Men are dyir seen itand I thought... I hoped it wasna ye or yer brothers. Where are they?”

where
ugh the sized gate. “In the keep,” Aurelius said, gesturing for the soldiers to unlock the
“They’re ill, but they’re alive. Where’s Mam?”

“I left her back at a village to the north,” Lares said. “It had a pig
sick and sign. I dunna know the name.”

atching “At least she’s not here,” Aurelius said. “Thank God for that.”

riders. With that, the gate finally opened and he came through it, about thi
house, from his father. Lares took one look at his eldest son, tall and stro
e of the proud, and put his hand over his heart. The man looked as if he wanted

“My son,” he whispered tightly. “Ye look fine, lad. So very fine.”

Aurelius had to admit that he had a lump in his throat too. “’Tis
t like a see ye, Da,” he said. “I’ve missed ye. How’s Mam?”

hat big, “Well,” Lares said. “Very well. I left her in a village to the north
when he with the younger bairns while I came to discover what is happenin
clearly What can ye tell me?”

o made The warmth on Aurelius’ face faded. “It started a few days ago,”

“Some servants were ill with a stomach ailment, only no one told the
Lydgate. Sick servants were forced to work in the kitchens, spreadin
cullis disease to the people who came for the celebration. Last night a
morning, many have come down with the illness. The physic says i
which blue death.”

ts, was Lares gasped. He couldn’t help it. “My God,” he muttered. “And
yer brothers have it?”

prevent Aurelius nodded. “Estevan, Caelus, and Kal have it, but they
terribly sick,” he said. “But Darien... He’s not well, Da. Not at all.”

rs were “And ye?”

“I’m well, so far.”

Lares was clearly distressed. He looked at the keep soaring over th
knowing his sons were in there. They were ill. It was bad enough th
that he been separated from them for a year. Now, he was so close that it l
heart to realize he wasn’t going to see them. But thinking of them
without seeing him, without a parent by their side, didn’t sit well wi
ouldna He knew what he had to do.

He turned to the men behind him.

e I was “Tell Lady Torridon that I will stay here with my sons,” he said. “
ig here, the five are ill, and I must be with them. Tell her to stay at the tavern
send her word as they improve. But tell her that under no circumsta

ie man-she to come to Lydgate. Do ye understand?”

The old soldier who had originally told him about the plague at I
g on the was the one who was receiving the orders. The man didn't seem too
return to Lady Torridon with that message, but he understood. Relucta
noded his head as Lares turned for the gate. He came closer and clos
irty feet Aurelius, who didn't know of his father's intentions, put out his hands
ng and him.

l to cry. “Da,” he said. “Come no closer. Do ye hear me? Come no—”

Too late. Lares walked right into Aurelius and put his arms aro
good to man, hugging him fiercely. Aurelius resisted for a split second
wrapping his father up in his big arms, returning the hug. After a year
of here having seen one another, a year of battles and death and major life cha
g here. was one of the most satisfying hugs either one of them had ever exper

It was joy personified.

he said. Aurelius finally loosened his grip.

lady of “Why did ye do that, ye crazy old man?” he demanded affectiona
ig their told ye not to come any closer.”

nd this “Shut yer yap,” Lares said, still holding on to his son. “I would be
t is the father indeed if I dinna come to my sons when they needed me. Tak
them.”

ye say Aurelius didn't have much choice. His father had him by the arm,
him through the man-sized gate in the portcullis. When Lares
are not something, he got it, so Aurelius simply went with him. They co
through the gatehouse and out into the enormous outer bailey that
oddly uncrowded. For a castle this size, there should have been a h
men in the bailey at any given time. Lares could have counted the nu
ie wall, men he saw on both hands.

at he'd The castle was barren.

hurt his “Before we continue, I should tell ye everything,” Aurelius said
passing Wolsingham died this morning, and Lady Wolsingham is not doir
th him. well. We may lose her, too, before the day is out.”

Lares slowed his pace, glancing at his son. “Forgive me for not
about anyone else,” he said. “I was only concerned with my lads. A
Four of lady? Valery? How is she?”

and I'll “Well,” Aurelius said, coming to a halt just shy of the entry to th
nces is bailey. “I've sent for a priest so we can be married. I dunna want to w

She's my wife in my heart and in my soul, and I want to make her my Lydgate the eyes of God. She's a remarkable woman."

Lares peered at him strangely. "Is she?" he said. "Ye... ye care not for a hethen?"

Aurelius smiled at his father's surprise. "Ye'll be happy to know I did not stop ye because ye brokered a betrothal behind my back," he said. "I care more than care for Valery, Da. I love her, with everything I am."

Lares was shocked. "Truly?"

"Truly."

That had Lares bursting into loud, happy laughter. "Praise the saints for not declaring. I thought for certain we were going to have a go-around at betrothal, but it seems not. Do ye *really* love her, lad?"

Aurelius laughed softly. "I really do, I swear," he said. "I am glad to prove it by marrying her as soon as the priest arrives."

Lares was beside himself with joy. He patted his son on the cheek. "I wish ye well," he said. "I wish ye all the happiness in the world."

"Thank ye, Da," Aurelius said, softening at the sight of his overjoyed father. "This is yer doing. I'll forever be grateful."

Lares clapped him on the shoulder. "Ye can thank me by introducing her," he said. "Where is she?"

Aurelius sobered dramatically. "With her mother," he said. "We wanted a physician that tried to bleed the woman, and she's already weak. It's continued tragedy because she's a wonderful woman. Lady Wolsingham has been so well since I first came to Lydgate. I dunna know what I would have done without her."

Lares was sympathetic. "That's good to hear," he said. "I'm glad to hear ye are kind to ye. I've known Adams for years, but I've never met his wife."

Aurelius gestured toward the keep and started walking again. "I'll be glad to. "Lord will," he said. "Her family is from Mount Pleasant, which isn't far from the very Ashkirk. Mayhap ye know the family—de Gilsland?"

Lares was walking with his son, but he suddenly came to an unasked halt. He was looking at Aurelius rather strangely. "De Gilsland?" he repeated. "From Mount Pleasant?"

"Aye," Aurelius said. "Do ye know them?"

Lares nodded hesitantly. "I... I do. At least, I did."

"I thought ye might."

wife in “What is Lady Wolsingham’s name? Her first name?”

 “Davina.”

for her, Aurelius thought his father’s eyeballs might actually pop from hi

 Lares stared at his son with his mouth hanging open, and Aurelius
l willnaidea why. He looked at his father curiously.

‘I more “What’s wrong with ye?” he asked.

 Lares couldn’t seem to speak. He started to, then stopped, then
again, then stopped. He put up a hand as if to beg for patience w
composed himself, but that hand came down on Aurelius’ shoulder
its!” he hung his head, looking at his feet.

out the “Da?” Aurelius said, concerned. “What’s wrong? Do ye know her?”

 Lares lifted his head. “Did she know ye were my son?” he aske
oing tooddy hoarse voice.

 “She knows. Of course she knows.”

. “Then “And she never mentioned... me?”

 Aurelius shook his head. “Nay,” he said. “Why?”

erjoyed Lares seemed surprised by that answer, but he merely shook his h
doesna matter,” he said, gesturing to the keep. “I... It doesna matte
ing me Take me to yer brothers now, and let’s get on with this.”

 But Aurelius didn’t move. “Why did you ask about Lady Wolsing
e had ahe said. “Why did ye look so strange when I told ye her name? Ye di
truly aher, didn’t ye?”

een my Lares looked at him with an expression Aurelius had never seen
e done So... uncertain. There was turmoil there, which was completely un
father. The mood between them, which had been full of concern an
she was now turned oddly tense as Lares struggled to answer.

 It was clear that he wasn’t sure how.

rope ye “If she’s not said anything, I’m not sure I should,” he finally said
ar from leave it at that.”

 Aurelius dug in. “I will *not* leave it at that,” he said firmly. “I
nstead moving until ye tell me how ye know the woman, so ye might
peated. confess.”

 Lares wasn’t prepared for this. He shuffled and coughed, trying t
of a way to begin the story, but there wasn’t any other way *but* the beg
It was something he’d not thought of in many years, ever since he
Mabel. Frankly, there was no reason for him to think of Davina a

married Mabel, because he loved her. He loved his wife and he wasn't
habit of betraying her, even by thinking of a past love, so thoughts of
s skull. de Gilsland had long been pushed out of his mind. He'd never even
had no after her to find out if she had married. He assumed she had, given that
father wanted a suitable husband for her, and he evidently found
Adams de Leybourne. An ally of de Wolfe, who was allied with the de
started clan. That was how they had become allies.

While he Allies with Davina's husband.

and he The irony was unfathomable.

"Ye're not to repeat what I tell ye," he finally said, his voice low.
"Understand me?"

Aurelius' brow furrowed. "Of course I do," he said. "But why?"

"Because yer mother doesna know," Lares said. "I never told her."

"Told her what?"

"That Davina de Gilsland and I were madly in love, once," he said.
"We were so in love that we wanted to be married, but her father denied me
thead. "It fled to Carlisle with the hope of finding a priest who would marry us."

Now it was Aurelius' turn to look shocked. His eyes widened.

"Wolsingham?" he said, astonished. "Before my mother?"

"Well before."

"Ye tried to *force* Lady Wolsingham into marriage?"

Lares waved him off. "It wasna like that," he said. "Davina wanted
before. marry me and I wanted to marry her, but the priests at Carlisle wouldn't
like his perform the mass. God... The memories are those I've not entertained
id love, years. Not in many, many years. The love I had for Davina was something
thought I'd never feel again. It was scorching, like the surface of the sun."

The new information was startling to Aurelius, and simply
". "Let's see expression on his father's face, he could see that it was true. The man's
face was taut with the strength of a love he'd once known.

"It had been something powerful."

"Astonishing," Aurelius finally muttered. "I never knew. Ye never
of any woman other than my mother."

Lares lifted his eyebrows. "I'd be a terrible man if I did," he said.
inning. there was a woman before yer mother, one that I loved so much that
married willing to defy her father. I took her to Carlisle Cathedral, and the
after here refused to marry us. I knew we would be pursued, so time was

't in theTherefore, I did something I shouldna have done."

Davina "What?"

1 asked Lares appeared sheepish. "I tried to scare them into complia that herpretending to summon the devil," he said. "That's when yer grandfat one inDavina's father found us. Ye wondered where the legend of Lucife in Tarhfrom? That is where it started. Davina's father spread the rumor a because of what he saw. He tried to turn men against me, and my fathe the alliance between Ashkirk and Mount Pleasant because of it."

Aurelius' mouth was hanging open in shock. "Are ye serious?" I "Do ye"*That* is how it all came about?"

Lares nodded. "Aye," he said. "I was sent to Camerton Abb worked like a horse for two years until I met yer mother, quite by a By then, yer grandfather had passed on and I was the new Earl of Tor married yer mother, and I've been happy ever since. There was re d. "Wereason to mention Davina de Gilsland, but now..."

, so we Aurelius understood. "Now, Mam is going to meet her," h "Hopefully she survives, but if she does, Mam is going to meet her."

"Lady "Exactly," Lares said. "And I'm telling ye so ye know the story- did know Lady Wolsingham and I loved her. I wanted to marry her was not to be."

Aurelius was a little stunned, to be truthful. He scratched his head nted toto digest everything he'd been told.

wouldna "I dunna see any reason for Lady Wolsingham to bring up that sh ined inye," he said. "She never even told me that she knew ye, so she n ething Imention it at all. Mayhap she's forgotten."

in." Lares shook his head. "Ye dunna forget a man ye were in love w by thesaid. "Ye dunna forget being dragged out of a church, screaming. Ye s entireforget a love so powerful that ye breathe it and taste it every single day even the smallest separation is torture. Nay, she's not forgotten. But she hasn't told ye tells me that she may harbor ill will toward me. M r spokeshe grew to hate me."

Aurelius shook his head. "She's a kind woman," he said. "I canna d. "Buthating anyone. Mayhap she simply didn't see any need to tell me. I w it I wasValery knows."

priests Lares shrugged. "Ye can always ask her."

critical. Aurelius looked up at the keep, knowing the life-and-death struggl

on there, and eventually shook his head. “Nay,” he said. “If she kn
wanted to tell me, she would have. We’ll let it lie.”

nce by “’Tis probably for the best.”

her and “But thank ye for telling me. It explains a good deal.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“THAT’S WHAT HE told me, Lady Torridon,” the old soldier said. “They are ill and he is going to stay with them. He said to tell ye to stay away until he’ll send word when he can.”

Mabel was standing in the entry of the pig-sign tavern, mulling over the old soldier’s words. Not that she didn’t believe him, because she did, but she was trying to grasp the larger picture. Her older sons were ill and Lares was going to stay with them.

Nay, she didn’t like that at all.

“What happened at Lydgate?” she asked. “Do we know more?”

The old soldier nodded. “We know that it had been a servants’ dispute a few days,” he said. “But those same servants prepared the feast for the celebration and the guests were made ill. The physic thinks it’s the cause of death.”

Mabel knew what that was, and her stomach lurched at the mere thought. “I see,” she said fearfully. “And now Lares is exposed to it.”

“He wouldna leave his sons, m’lady.”

Mabel understood. She simply wished that she had been the one to stay at Lydgate and not her husband. Behind her, in the tavern common room, Cruz and Zed were playing a game that Cruz was winning because Zed was unhappy about it. She could hear her daughter complaining. But it reminded Mabel that her place was here, with her younger children. Lares could do what he could for the older boys.

But her heart was aching for them.

“Very well,” she said. “I have a feeling we may be here for some time. Get the men settled in the field next to the livery yard. I will speak to the tavernkeep about long-term accommodations.”

“Aye, m’lady.”

With her thoughts lingering heavily on her ill sons, Mabel made her way back into the tavern, hunting for the tavernkeep. They were baking bread back in the kitchens, filling the entire tavern with the sharp smell of bread. She finally found the tavernkeeper in a storage room, opening another barrel of ale, but he stopped hammering when he saw her at the door.

“M’lady?” he asked, wiping the sweat on his forehead with the back of his hand. “Do you need something?”

Mabel nodded. “I have just been informed that we will be remaining here for some time,” she said. “Since I have four children with me, it might be better if we were to move to a cottage. A tavern is no place for children to live. Do you know whom I can speak to about finding appropriate housing?”

The tavernkeep cocked his head thoughtfully. “A cottage, you say?” he said, wiping his hands on his apron. “How large?”

Mabel shrugged. “Large enough for me and my four children.”

The tavernkeep threw a thumb in the direction of the yard behind the tavern. “I have a cottage myself back there,” he said. “’Tis just me and my daughter, but we can move into the tavern and you and your offspring can take the cottage.”

“That is very kind of you,” Mabel said. “However, I do not wish to leave you and your daughter. Is there anything else you might know of?”

The tavernkeep shook his shaggy head. “Nay,” he said. “Not in this village. My cottage has four rooms. It was big enough for me and my wife and my four children, but just my daughter and I are left. It would not be a trouble to let it to you.”

“You’re certain?”

“Verily.”

Mabel wasn’t going to argue with him because it sounded like an excellent arrangement. “I would also need lodging for my husband’s men,” she said. “If they could remain encamped in the field next to the tavern, they would be grateful.”

The tavernkeep nodded. “They can camp there,” he said. “The men would be a pence a day.”

“I will gladly pay it.”

“How long will you need it?”

Mabel shook her head. “I do not know,” she said honestly. “At

week or two.”

er way “Then I’ll have my daughter sweep it clean and you can sta
g breadtonight.”

of fresh Mabel thanked the man and paid him for a week in advance. La
ing upgiven her his entire purse when he went to Lydgate, so she had pl
e door. money. And now, she had a cottage for the children to stay in. S
back ofsettled. But God only knew for how long.

All she could do now was wait.

ng here Wait for her sons to live...

ight be Or wait for them to die.

dren to Time would tell.

sing?”

ay?” he



VALERY HEARD THE soft rapping on the chamber door.

ind the She’d been sitting next to her mother, watching the woman sle
and mydaydreaming herself. She kept seeing her father lying on his side of t
ing canShe kept imagining that she was hearing his voice, but then she
around only to be met with silence. Adams had only been there this m
uprootalive and speaking.

Now, he was lying cold in a vault.

in this It didn’t seem possible.

ay wife The rapping on the door had jolted her out of her daze, and she tu
be anysee Lady St. John poking her head into the chamber. When Valery saw
was, she waved the woman in.

“Come,” she said softly. “She is sleeping now.”

Lady St. John tiptoed in, peering at Davina as she slept like the de
like anexpression of sorrow crossed her features as her gaze fell upon her fr
s men,” many years.

ivery, I “How is she?” she asked.

Valery’s gaze moved to her mother. “She seems to be stable,” sl
cottage“But she has not drunk anything since last night. She refuses whenever

“Would you like for me to sit with her so that you may rest?” L

John asked, turning her focus to the very tired young woman at her n
bedside. “I will try to get her to drink when she awakens.”

least a

Valery knew the woman meant well, but she shook her head. “Na
y theresaid. “But thank you. I will stay here in case she needs anything. I’ve
brought a book to read to her—*The Golden Ass*—because, if nothin
res hadreading that book will rouse her from sheer anger. She very
enty ofdisapproved of it.”

he was She was smiling weakly as she said it, but being unable to re
having no concept of the story, Cedrica St. John wasn’t in on the
didn’t matter, however. Cedrica was truly a kind woman, quiet and g
in sharp contrast to her husband, who hadn’t been either of those thin
their marriage had been a solid one in spite of their differences.

She put a soft hand on Valery’s shoulder.

“Then read her the book if it will help at all,” she whispered. “If yo
me, I will be in the hall.”

Valery stood up as the woman moved to quit the chamber and fo
her out onto the landing. Quietly, she closed the door behind her and
ep, andto Cedrica.

he bed. “I wanted to ask about the situation in the hall,” she said, her voi
’d look“How is Gaspard?”

orning, Cedrica smiled. “He seems to be doing much better,” she said. “I t
has only had a brush with this terrible illness. He is able to drink br
ale without it coming out of him in unsubtle ways.”

“That is good,” Valery said. “What about the Earl of Carlisle? O
rned tode Wolfe? Are they better?”

7 who it That brought Cedrica some pause. “The earl seems to be doing we
said. “Rhoris is another matter. He cannot take any broth or ale wi
coming back up again. He sleeps a great deal.”

ead. An Valery was saddened to hear it. “Mayhap tomorrow will see a bet
riend offor him,” she said. “We can hope, anyway. Did the physic from I
arrive?”

Cedrica nodded. “He did, indeed,” she said. “And a priest is her
ne said.Durham, also. He is tending to the sick alongside the physic
: I try.” commended you on preparing the broth and gruel and ale. He h
ady St.brought something with him, something quite foul-smelling, that he is
mother’sto the sick. An ancient recipe, he says, called rotten brew. He claims
with almost any illness.”

Valery eyed her dubiously. “After the last physic, I am disincline

ly,” she another try something radical on the sick,” she said. “Mayhap I should even Aurelius to speak with him.”

ing else, “There is no need to bother Aurelius,” Cedrica said. “But I can assure much that the physic has been giving it to Carlisle, among others, and I do think they are improving.”

had and Valery still wasn’t convinced, but Cedrica seemed to be. In fact, it was a joke. It hadn’t seen the woman so engaged or interested in anything since the death of gentle—of Sterling. It seemed that tending the sick of Lydgate gave her a distraction from her mourning. Valery was glad of it, not only because she had seen Cedrica’s grief would improve, but also because they needed the help of her own mother down, quality help for the ill was limited. Moreover, Valery needed was spending her time going back and forth between her mother and Aurelius’ brothers, although she hadn’t visited the brothers in a few months followed because of her mother’s deteriorating condition.

turned “Would you please send the physic up to visit my mother?” she asked. “Mayhap she needs some of the brew he’s giving the others.”

ce low. Cedrica nodded. “Of course I shall,” she said. “I shall do it right away. Is there anything else you need?”

think he “Food.”

oth and The reply came from the stairwell, and they turned to see Aurelius coming up the stairs. He’d heard Cedrica’s question and answered for Rhoir Valery’s behalf. He could see her in the weak light of the landing. She was a beautiful, spirited woman he’d fallen in love with. She was still beautiful, but she looked so very tired. She’d lost one parent and was without the precipice of losing another. Aurelius was determined to take care of her, though she was taking care of others. He only knew he couldn’t bear to see her after day became ill also.

Durham “Greetings, Aurelius,” Cedrica said politely. “I was just coming to see if Valery needed any assistance.”

re from Aurelius smiled weakly. “You are kind,” he said. “I know you have more than your share of work in the great hall, so thank you for taking the time to also think of Valery and her mother. I think Valery could use some help, but giving however. I do not know when she has last eaten.”

it helps He looked at Valery, who merely shrugged. “Nor do I,” she said. “When do you? When have you last eaten?”

d to let Frankly, Aurelius couldn’t answer either. He smiled at her, as expected.

ld sendas she was, and reached out to take her hand in a comforting g

Meanwhile, Cedrica was looking between the pair, seeing the affecti
ure you concern, and even the sorrow. It was touching to see.

believe “These are dark and sorrowful days,” Cedrica said quietly. “We r
take care of each other now.”

ict, she “That is true,” Aurelius said, squeezing Valery’s hand as he tur
e death attention to Cedrica. “How is Gaspard?”

traction “I was just telling Valery that he seems much better.”

l hoped “Praise Christ and his saints. And the others?”

p. With “Most are holding their own or feeling a little better,” Cedrica sa
Valeryshe didn’t linger, knowing that Aurelius more than likely wanted to b
er and with Valery, so she excused herself. “In fact, I have been gone overlor
v hours must return. I will send the physic up to see to your mother, Valery.”

With that, she scurried back down the darkened stairwell, leaving
ie said. leaning wearily against the wall as Aurelius lifted her hand and k
gently.

way. Is “And ye, *leannan*?” he asked softly. “How do ye feel?”

Valery was so tired and grief-stricken that his sweet question l
breaking down into quiet tears. “She only sleeps,” she sobbed softl
Aurelius will not eat. She will not speak to me. All she does is sleep, and I
red on know what more I can do for her.”

ig, that Aurelius grunted softly, with great sorrow, and pulled her into h
iful and embrace. “Ye have been so very brave, lass,” he murmured into her ha
on them must continue to be brave. Yer mother needs ye. We all need ye.”

er even Valery was overwrought with sorrow and fatigue. “She cannot he
it if she she wept. “I do not know if I am doing any good simply sitting with he

She was collapsing against him, overcome and exhausted, so he sv
o see if down and picked her up, cradling her against his broad chest.

“I’ll sit with yer mother,” he murmured. “Ye need to rest for a littl
re more or you’ll be no good to anyone.”

time to “But I don’t want to rest!”

e food, “Ye must.”

“I don’t want to, and you cannot make me!”

l. “And He smiled as she argued with him but made no move to actual
herself from his arms. All she did was wrap her arms around his neck
hausted as he carried her down to her bedchamber on the floor below, putting

gesture. her bed and removing her shoes. She continued to protest until he pushed her over onto her side and tucked the coverlet around her tightly. As he did, he heard soft grunting, and suddenly, he was faced with two geese as they thrust all their heads over the edge of the mattress. Evidently, they'd been under the bed. Those nosy, intrusive little beasts.

Aurelius never thought he'd be glad to see that pair.

"Look," he told her. "Yer friends are here. They'll stay with ye while ye rest. I'll go sit with yer mother while ye do."

The fat geese were jumping on the bed already. They didn't seem to mind. Buttoward Aurelius, simply more interested in lying down next to Valery. The geese plopped down in her face and she had to pull back a little, putting her arm around the big, solid bird. But the appearance of them seemed to help her down, as Aurelius had hoped, and he was grateful.

Valery "What about your brothers?" Valery asked, no longer weeping, just sniffing now. "Someone needs to tend them."

Aurelius knew that if he told her about his father's appearance, she would want to meet him, so he refrained from telling her. "Not to worry, I'll take care of them. Someone is with them."

She "Who?"

"I told ye not to worry," he said, going for the door. "Rest, *leannar* your eyes. I'll come for ye in a while."

She didn't argue. When all was said and done, she was too tired to argue. Her last sighting of Aurelius had been of her closing her eyes as he lay on either side of her. Relieved, he shut the door softly and headed for the stairs to Lady Wolsingham's chamber.

The chamber was dim because the sun was beginning to set, and he lit a wooden flint and stone, lighting the taper next to her bed. When he glanced at

Wolsingham, he was surprised to see her eyes open. She was looking at him while but her eyes weren't moving. She was just staring into space.

Curiously, he moved closer to the bed.

"Lady Wolsingham?" he said softly. "Can ye hear me?"

She blinked. "I can," she said, so faint he could barely hear her. "I can hear you, also. What are you doing here?"

Aurelius pulled up the three-legged stool that Valery had been sitting on and perched his bulk on it. "I forced yer daughter to rest," he said. "She hasn't been awake since last night, and it is starting to wear on her, so I told her I

hed her watch over ye. If ye'd rather have Lady St. John, I can fetch her for ye
d so, he Davina shook her head with as much strength as she could muster.
7 poked she said hoarsely. "You'll do."

der the He grinned. "I'm glad."

"Aurelius?"

"Aye, m'lady?"

hile ye "How are your brothers?"

His smile faded. "The younger three are doing well enough," but
hostile "Darien is having a more difficult time of it."

One of Her features tightened. "I am sorry to hear that," she rasped. "You
ing her go to him, then. I will not keep you here."

to calm "He already has someone to sit with him."

"Who?"

ing but Aurelius hesitated, but only briefly. Knowing what he knew about
father and Lady Wolsingham, perhaps it was better if he didn't keep
; she'd her. He honestly saw no reason to. She knew he was Lares and Tarl
he told yet she'd never said a word about his father. Perhaps he didn't want to
that he knew what she knew by pretending his father's presence was
secret.

Close He supposed she'd find out soon enough anyway.

"My father," he said quietly. "He arrived today. He's come to talk
to. The brothers."

er geese Davina didn't react at first, but as his words sank in, her muddled
back up began to realize just what he was saying. She blinked as if startled. Then
saw her breathing quicken.

He found "Your... your father is here?" she said. "At Lydgate?"

at Lady "Aye, m'lady."

at him, "Are your brothers in the keep?"

"They are, in the rooms near the solar."

"Then your father is downstairs."

"He is."

can see Her breathing was still quick, perhaps a little unsteady now. Aurelius
watched her, wondering if she was going to continue the ruse that she
ting on, know Lares or if she was going to finally admit it. According to his father
's been and Davina had shared a deep and abiding love. They had wanted
I would married.

.” *Ye dunna forget a love so powerful that ye breathe it and taste it*
“Nay,” *single day.*

Would she admit it? Aurelius found himself hoping she would, she would acknowledge a love his father seemed to think was so special. But perhaps the years had softened her memory of it. Perhaps even erased it completely. Aurelius felt as if he was holding back some and overwhelming secret, but he wasn’t going to say anything if she didn’t say. *Are ye going to tell me that ye knew him?* he thought. But all she could do was lie there and breathe.

“Does your father know that Adams has passed away?” she finally asked.
“He does,” Aurelius said. “He also knows that ye are ill.”
“You told him about me?”

“I told him about Davina de Gilsland. He said he knew ye in his youth.”
Aurelius didn’t know why he had said that. It just came spilling out of his mouth. He hoped it wouldn’t upset her or drive her into a frenzy, or worse. He didn’t want to be the one to tell her. He averted his gaze, as she lay there on the bed and stared at the ceiling.
When she finally spoke, it was hardly a whisper.

“Did he tell you everything?” she asked.
“He did, m’lady.”

Davina blinked, and tears trickled down her temples. “He remembered,” she murmured.

There was pain in those words, like an old and rusty dagger that had plunged in deep but long forgotten. It didn’t hurt as long as no one touched it. But Aurelius had touched it.

He remembered.

Such painful words.

Aurelius reached out, taking her cold and paper-thin hand in his. “He remembers ye most fondly, m’lady,” he said, trying to assure her there was no animosity. “He told me the story. I wondered why ye didn’t tell me ye knew him when you found out I was Lares dun Tarh’s son.”

There was no strength in her hand as she squeezed his. “What do ye say?” she said as more tears ran down her temples. “I suppose I am glad that the secret is out. When I first met you, you looked so much like him that even if you hadn’t told me he was your father, I would have known. How could I tell you that your father and I loved one another so madly and wanted to be married those many years ago? That would

it every been a terrible thing to say to a man I had only just met. But those days of the past, and that is where they belong.”

hoping Aurelius put his free hand over hers as he held it. “I understand,” he said gently. “I suppose it would have been strange to confess something like this to someone you had just met. But my father told me about the priest at Carlisle who would not marry ye. He told me about conjuring Lucifer.”

“And he paid the price,” Davina said hoarsely. “His father told me he was away, and that was the last I ever saw of him. My last memory of you was of him being dragged away by his father and his men. He was not asked. He came out for me, calling to me, and there was nothing I could do to help him. My own father had me, taking me home, where he locked me up for four years. Truth be told, I never followed it again.”

“Those were brutal words for Aurelius to hear. He genuinely adored you. God, Wolsingham, and to hear her confess that was difficult for him.”

“I am sorry ye were separated,” he said. “I cannot imagine being separated from Valery. I’d rather die than live without her.”

Davina turned her head, slowly, to look at him. When their eyes met, they both smiled, trying to be of some comfort, and she weakly squeezed his hand again.

“You and Valery are fortunate,” she murmured. “Your fathers were keeping you apart. You are free to marry and live your life and have a good many children as God will bless you with. But in seeing the two of you together, I know that my separation from Lares was for a purpose. *This* purpose was so you and Valery could be together, so you could go on to do great things together. The truth is that I am honored to sacrifice my happiness so that my daughter can know love—*true* love. That is what you are to her, Aurelius. You are her true love. Had your father and I married, this would have never happened.”

Aurelius thought that was about the saddest thing he’d ever heard of. His mother was so glad to sacrifice her own happiness for the sake of her children that he could not lift his hand and kiss it gently, smiling at a woman who seemed to be fading and growing weaker by the moment.

“Then I owe ye everything,” he said softly. “I’ve known many great men in my life, Lady Wolsingham. Great men who accomplished great deeds. But never another like this is the first time I’ve ever met a hero. You *are* heroic in my eyes, lady. I would have given anything to have you. He was rewarded by a very weak smile. “You are kind,” she said.

s are in “Ridiculous, but kind. Any parent will tell you what I just did
willingness to sacrifice everything for your children. And now... now
he said coming to the end of my life. But I am where I was all those years ago
like that Lares in the same building with me. We are about to be separated again
iests at Aurelius cocked his head curiously. “Separated again?”

Her eyes took on a faint glimmer. “By death,” she murmured. “Th
ok him by death. You see, your father was my one true love. Adams was kind
r father my husband, I was fond of him, but Lares was the only man I ever
eaching Still, we were never meant to be together. I know that now. But he t
im. My love those years ago and he never gave it back. He has it even now. B
llowing happy to give it to him because I hope it helped him find a new lo
your mother. I hope my love made him eager to receive love again,
:d Lady experienced it once before.”

Aurelius had to admit that he had a lump in his throat. “My mot
parated wonderful woman,” he said. “I hope you can meet her for yourself. S
want to know you.”

met, he Davina closed her eyes and turned her head away. “I wish her all
is hand in the world,” she whispered. “I love her because she loved Lares. E
she made him happy. But I shall not meet her. Not now.”

are not Aurelius stood up from the stool, leaning over her. “Are you
s many worse, m’lady?” he asked. “Shall I fetch Valery?”

gether, I “Nay,” she said, her eyes still closed. “Let her rest. When I die, I
. It was die alone. I do not want her here.”

t things *When I die, I would die alone.*

that my Those were horrible words, but she stopped talking and drifted o
urelius. what Aurelius assumed to be sleep. But perhaps she’d lost consciousn
e never didn’t really know. But he didn’t want a great lady like Lady Wolsing
die alone. That was the worst thing he could think of.

heard. A He had an idea.

uild. He

d to be



eat men “WHAT DO YE mean ye want me to go to her?” Lares said, bewildered.
ds. But whom?”

idy.” “Lady Wolsingham.”

ie said.

—of a “That’s what I thought ye said.”

As I am Aurelius was standing just outside the chamber where Davina was sleeping. He’d just come down from Davina’s chamber and rapped softly on the door because he knew his father was inside. After several long impatient moments, at least on Aurelius’ behalf, Lares finally opened the door. Aurelius’ hand had shot out and he pulled the man out into the hallway, relaying his request for Lady Wolsingham.

“Ye loved. But the request to sit with a dying woman had Lares confused.

“She’s upstairs,” Aurelius said with quiet urgency. “Will ye not go with me? She’s ill. She may be dying. She has no one by her side with her mother gone. Will ye sit with her, at least?”

“Why?”

“Because ye loved her once.”

Lares’ expression twisted into disbelief. “Nay, I’ll not go,” he said. “How could ye ask me such a thing? I’ve not seen the woman in thirty-five years.”

Aurelius took a deep breath, trying to still his sense of urgency because the joy was clearly upsetting his father. “I just spoke with her,” he said. “Because of things she said... She sounded like ye when ye told me about her. She remembers ye. She said ye took her heart with her, and she hoped it would give her the strength to love another.”

Lares was still frowning. “It was so long ago,” he said. “Another day would do.”

“Was it truly?”

“Of course it was!”

“She says ye’re the only man she’s ever loved.”

Aurelius had said that on purpose, hoping it would force his father to think more compassionately. But all it did was increase Lares’ sense of angst and confusion.

The angst was winning out.

“Well, she’s not the only woman *I* ever loved,” he said, agitated. “My mother was the first, I’ll admit it. But yer mother was the last.”

“I know, but if ye could only come and talk to her,” Aurelius said. “Go to her and plead. I know it would give her comfort.”

Lares looked at him in disbelief. “Ye want me to sit at the bedside of a dying woman?” he said. “Ye want me to betray yer mother like that?”

Aurelius frowned. “That is not what I’m asking at all,” he said, p

to the ceiling where, two floors above, Davina lay. "I'm simply asking you to show some mercy and sit with a woman you used to love. To give her a little comfort in her last hours."

and "I willna do it!"

and the "She's dying alone!"

and the Aurelius nearly shouted the words. He'd never shouted at his father in his life, so he had to step back and compose himself. When he spoke again, he was with measured calm.

and to her, "I'm not asking you to sit with her and tell her you love her," he said. "I would remind you that Lady Wolsingham has always been my ally. She is a fine, gentle, kind woman, and I know she wouldna expect you to be disappointed in my mother. But if you have even a tiny bit of compassion, if you have even the smallest bit of fondness for the memory of Davina de Gilsland, then please. How asking you to go sit with Valery's mother and give her some comfort in her last hours of her life. She remembers you fondly. I canna believe you'd disappoint her in her last moments."

and Da, the Lares was increasingly indecisive as Aurelius tried to persuade her. She thought the last few words out of his son's mouth had his eyes narrowing.

and gave you "Did she ask you to fetch me?" he demanded.

and Aurelius rolled his eyes. "Of course not," he snapped. "The lady would hardly speak as it is. This is my idea."

"And it's a terrible one," Lares said. "Nay, I'll not go. I willna betray my mother by sitting with another woman. I canna believe you would ask me."

With that, he went back into Darien's chamber and shut the door, leaving Aurelius in the corridor, wondering if he had really asked such an awful question of his father. Was he really asking the man to betray his mother? Was there really a sense of deception that he wasn't aware of? He thought he was being kind and compassionate by asking his father to be the same to a woman he had loved, long ago. He wanted to do it for Valery as well as for Lady Wolsingham, but evidently, he'd overstepped himself. Or perhaps he had been trying to do the right thing, but he knew someone who would know.

and de of a

and jointing

to the ceiling where, two floors above, Davina lay. “I’m simply asking ye to show some mercy and sit with a woman ye used to love. To give her some comfort in her last hours.”

“I willna do it!”

“She’s dying alone!”

Aurelius nearly shouted the words. He’d never shouted at his father in his life, so he had to step back and compose himself. When he spoke again, it was with measured calm.

“I’m not asking ye to sit with her and tell her ye love her,” he said. “But I would remind ye that Lady Wolsingham has always been my ally. She is a fine, gentle, kind woman, and I know she wouldna expect ye to be disloyal to my mother. But if ye have even a tiny bit of compassion, if ye even have the smallest bit of fondness for the memory of Davina de Gilsland, then I’m asking ye to go sit with Valery’s mother and give her some comfort in the last hours of her life. She remembers ye fondly. I canna believe ye’d disappoint her in her last moments.”

Lares was increasingly indecisive as Aurelius tried to persuade him, but the last few words out of his son’s mouth had his eyes narrowing.

“Did she ask ye to fetch me?” he demanded.

Aurelius rolled his eyes. “Of course not,” he snapped. “The lady can hardly speak as it is. This is my idea.”

“And it’s a terrible one,” Lares said. “Nay, I’ll not go. I willna betray yer mother by sitting with another woman. I canna believe ye would ask this of me.”

With that, he went back into Darien’s chamber and shut the door, leaving Aurelius in the corridor, wondering if he had really asked such an awful thing of his father. Was he really asking the man to betray his mother? Was there really a sense of deception that he wasn’t aware of? He thought he was being kind and compassionate by asking his father to be the same to a woman he had loved, long ago. He wanted to do it for Valery as well as for Lady Wolsingham, but evidently, he’d overstepped himself. Or perhaps he hadn’t.

But he knew someone who would know.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THERE WAS KNOCKING on the cottage door. Nay, not knocking.

Pounding.

Someone was pounding on the door.

Clad in her sleeping shift and robe, Mabel left the chamber she was sleeping in, taper in hand, and crossed the darkened front room of the cottage to the door. There were windows, but they were shuttered for the night, and she didn't want to open the shutters to see who was out there.

"Mam!" came a voice. "Mam, it's Aurelius! Open the door!"

With a shriek, Mabel flew to the door and unbolted it, throwing it open to see her eldest son standing in the darkness several feet away.

It was like a dream.

"Aurelius!" she gasped. "My dearest boy, is it really you?"

Aurelius was nearly moved to tears by the sight of his beloved mother. He'd just ridden hard from Lydgate, beneath a cloudy sky, with nothing more than torches to light the way. He'd brought a few Irish soldiers with him, at least those who were well enough, and they'd held their torches up against the dark of night, illuminating the road as they headed for the small village that was, in fact, called Castleside. Aurelius had learned that. His father had told him that his mother and siblings were in the only tavern in town with a pig above the door, but the tavernkeeper had told him that his mother was in the cottage behind the tavern.

And that was where he found her.

"Aye, 'tis me," he said, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. "Mam, I could hug ye, I would, but I dunna dare get any closer. Ye know the illness at Lydgate."

Mabel wasn't so adept at hiding her feelings. She wiped at the

tears. "I know," she said. "Your father told me. Why are you here? Please not tell me something has happened to one of my sons."

Aurelius shook his head. "Nay," he said. "Estevan and Caelus and I are doing much better. Darien is, too, I think. Da is with him. He'll take care of him. But I must speak to ye. I'm sorry to drag ye out of bed."

Knowing that her sons and husband weren't on the edge of death, Mabel sank down tremendously. Stepping out into the darkened yard, she closed the door behind her as she faced her eldest son.

"It must be important," she said. "Please tell me what it is."

Aurelius looked at her. She didn't look any older since the last time he saw her, the first woman he had ever loved. She had instilled so much in him that he valued—a sense of compassion, of empathy, and of humor. His mother had a good deal of humor. She was the rock of their family. He'd been no one could do without her. He truly wished he could give her a house with a cottage that was out of the question.

He was here on a mission.

"I'm going to tell ye something that I shouldna, but I think it's important," he said. "I'm going to tell ye something about Da that he's never told ye."

That had her attention. "And what is that?"

Aurelius knew this was not what his father wanted, but he had a purpose. That purpose was the woman he loved with all his heart and the woman who would probably not survive the night. He wanted to give Lady Wolsingham some comfort, to give Valerius some comfort, but he was doing it at his father's expense.

He only hoped his father would forgive him.

"Many years ago, before Da met you, he... he was in love with a woman," he said. "He wanted to marry her, but her father denied them. He tried to run away with her, but they were caught and Da was sent to an abbey. That's where ye met him."

"Ah... *that*," Mabel said, nodding her head. "You mean his first love?"

That wasn't the reaction that Aurelius had expected. In fact, she said it so casually that it completely flummoxed him. "First love?" he said in a low voice. "What do ye mean, his first love?"

Mabel shrugged. "Isn't that what you were referring to?" she said. "The woman he ran off to Carlisle with?"

ease do Aurelius' jaw dropped. "He said ye dinna know!"

Mabel chuckled. "He does not remember that he told me," she said. "Kal are became quite drunk one night, right after we were married, and told me the goodentire sordid tale. I heard about the devil worship and the lady he loved all his heart but could not marry. I know about it."

calmed Aurelius clapped a disbelieving hand on his forehead. "God's Blessing shut themuttered. "Ye seem not to be bothered by it, I must say."

Mabel pulled her robe more tightly around her body against the evening. "It used to bother me, I will admit it," she said. "I was haunted by the faceless lady whom my husband had once loved, but that was so long ago in him Aurelius. I have not thought of her in thirty years, and, quite honestly, I doubt he would have chosen a better marriage with her, and I'm quite certain if she were to return to me tomorrow, he would not go with her. Sometimes I wish he would, but he is devoted to me."

She was jesting with her last sentence, conveying a complete lack of concern where Lares' first love was concerned, but Aurelius wondered if she would hold up after what he had to say.

He took a deep breath.

"Mam, I dunna know how to tell ye all of this, so I'll just come out with the purpose of it," he said. "Lady Wolsingham is Valery's mother. She contracted the disease that has swept Lydgate, and I believe she is dying. I want ye to know that when I first came to Lydgate to meet Valery, Lady Wolsingham was kindly and considerate to me. She was my ally from the start, and I have great admiration for her. Valery is heartbroken to see her mother so ill. You know that Lord Wolsingham died this morning, do ye not?"

another Mabel was listening with great sympathy. "Nay, I did not know of it," she said. "Oh, Aurelius... I am so sorry to hear this. Your lady has been troubled by the disease at the abbey so much."

Aurelius nodded. "I know," he said. "So what I am about to ask ye is to help her. I am doing it for my Valery. Mam, Lady Wolsingham is Da's first wife. We've only found it out by accident. Her name used to be Davina. It's a shock. Gilsland. But with her husband dead, the woman is lying in her bed alone, and that is something she doesna deserve. I've asked Da to sit with her. He's to give her some comfort, as any man of reason and compassion would do, but he refuses. He says he willna betray ye so. But I dunna believe

betrayal to be kind to a woman he used to love as she lies dying. I believe I should show a great kindness. If ye think I've asked too much of him, then I will beg for ye their forgiveness. But if ye dunna think I've asked too much, maybe ye could write Da a missive and encourage him to sit with her. It seems like so much to ask."

"By the time he was finished, Mabel was listening to him with a neutral expression on her face. She didn't say anything for a moment, and Aurelius was starting to think that he had, indeed, overstepped himself. It was corrected by the expression on her face, but he knew he didn't like it. He wanted to apologize, but his mother suddenly turned for the cottage door. "Wait here," she said.

With that, she was gone, and Aurelius was left with the horrible realization that he'd upset her. He hadn't intended to, but he evidently had his answer. The question of overstepping. Clearly, he was guilty, and now his mother was upset with him.

That had not been his intention.

Since she told him to wait, he knew he'd be in more trouble if he didn't so he stood there in the damp darkness, alone because the men who had ridden escort with him were inside the tavern. He waited patiently, and wondered if she was inside writing a missive to Lares that would accuse Aurelius of terrible suggestions. Of trying to upset their marriage. That latter fear was a foolish one, he knew, but he couldn't help it. He'd upset his mother, and that was the last thing he wanted to do. Just when the waiting became excessive, the cottage door opened and Mabel appeared.

She was fully dressed.

Leandro, the eldest of the younger children, was standing in the doorway, grinning at his brother. Aurelius was glad to see the lad, and he walked through him, but he was more distracted by the fact that his mother was completely dressed in a traveling ensemble and cloak.

He looked at her warily.

"Where are ye going?" he asked.

Mabel was pulling on her fine leather gloves. "With you," she said, "I'm going back to Lydgate. If you tell me not to come, I will go anyway, and it's best if you simply escort me there."

Aurelius stood there, gaping. "But there is sickness there," he said. "I cannot go."

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“I can and I will.”

She was set. Aurelius could see it. In desperation, he pointed to the cottage. “But what about the youngsters?” he said. “Ye canna simply leave them. What will they do without their mother?”

Mabel glanced at Leandro. “Your brother knows what to do,” she said. “He is responsible and competent. He knows not to let Zora get out of hand.”

Aurelius looked at Leandro, who grinned. “If ye come back and find me tied up with a fire at my feet, then ye know Zora did it,” he said. “It’s all yer fault, Aurelius.”

The young man didn’t seem upset by his mother leaving to go into a disease-ridden castle. Aurelius was going to point that out, but there was no reason to. Leandro didn’t control their mother any more than he did. Therefore, he simply sighed in exasperation.

There was nothing more he could do.

“I’m sure it is my fault,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Everything is, I’m coming to think.”

Mabel finished with her gloves. “Now, Aurelius,” she said. “Take me to Lydgate immediately.”

Aurelius didn’t argue with her. Much like when Valery gave an order, he didn’t question it. He knew when to move.

Beneath a cloudy night sky, they headed to Lydgate.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

DARIEN SEEMED BETTER.

Lares had given his son salty broth, in small portions, and it seemed staying down. Nothing was coming out of the bottom end, either. Darien was sleeping soundly, as were the other lads in the next room. All four of them were peaceful, which did Lares' heart good. He had just settled down to get a few minutes of sleep when the door to the chamber opened and Aurelius appeared.

"Da," he whispered. "Da, wake up."

Lares had nearly been asleep, but his eyes flew open and he sat up. "What is it?"

Aurelius simply motioned to him. Yawning, Lares staggered out of bed and out into the corridor beyond. As Aurelius shut the door, he turned to question him again, but as he did so, he caught sight of a figure a few feet away.

Mabel lowered the hood of her cloak.

"Mae!" Lares said. "What are ye doing here?"

Mabel's features were hard as she faced him. "Never mind that," she said. "What is this I hear? You will not give Lady Wolsingham comfort as she is dying?"

Lares' eyes widened and he looked accusingly at Aurelius, but Mabel clapped her hands softly to get his attention.

"You will not be angry with Aurelius," she snapped quietly. "You must answer me. Why will you not sit with Lady Wolsingham?"

Lares wasn't sure what to say. He was so bloody furious with Aurelius that he wanted to throttle the man, but Aurelius turned away and headed down the stairs, leaving his parents alone in the darkened entry of Lydgate's

As Lares watched his son walk away, having no idea what he'd told his mother, Mabel went to her husband and grasped his chin between her thumb and forefinger. She forced him to look at her.

"Listen to me and listen well, Lares dun Tarh," she said in a low voice. "I have come of my own volition. Aurelius is only my escort, so remove all thoughts of anger toward him from your mind. You and I have something to discuss."

Lares looked into those lovely eyes, into the face of a woman stronger than the mountains of Scotland. All of them combined. She was an immovable rock, the one constant in his life, the one thing he could count on without. She was demanding answers, and Lares had a suspicion as to what the subject would be.

"Aurelius told ye, did he?" he finally said.

Mabel's eyes narrowed. "He did," he said. "But only of his sons. Wolsingham's failing condition. If you think he told me about the fact that she was your first love, that was something you yourself told me in a conversation that fit many years ago. I knew you loved someone before me. I knew you loved someone you wanted desperately to marry. This was not news to me. What do you understand?"

Lares tried not to appear too stricken by her revelation. "I told ye?" Mabel nodded. "You did," she said. "I know you do not remember to be truthful, it was not something I felt the need to bring up. You did not figure out the life of a priest before I met you, Lares. I would have been worried if you had."

Lares held her eyes a moment longer before averting his gaze, unwilling to look at her. "I... I'm sorry, Mae," he said remorsefully. "I dinna know what I told ye, I dunna remember any of it. I'm ashamed."

"Why?" Mabel said. "Because you loved a woman? Did you think you were the only man I had ever loved before we met?"

Mabel He looked at her sharply. "I wasn't?"

"Bodily, you were," she said. "But I gave my heart to another lover. Fortunately, he did not take all of it. I had some left to give to you."

He frowned. "Then... ye dinna love me with all yer heart? Ye did."

She snorted softly. "Of course I do, you old goat," she said. "I do not want to keep you from loving the man I fell in love with when I had seen but fourteen summer

old his was very long ago. But if I were to see him now and he were in need of a hand, my thumb would help him. I have nothing more than a fond memory of him. But

I am concerned why you are so adamant to not see Lady Wolsingham. It is possible there is still something left for her in your heart and you do not want to face it?"

He looked at her, wounded. "Of course not," he said softly. "I did not want to see her because I felt it would be disrespectful to her. You're the one who was a woman in my heart, Mae. What Davina and I shared was youthful passion. What I share with you is deeper than the ocean."

Mabel believed him. Truthfully, she never believed there was anything lingering for Lady Wolsingham, but she had to make him believe upon it, too. He had to look inside himself and figure out why he was resistant to seeing an old love. Mabel went to him, putting her hands on Lady's broad shoulders.

"Lady Wolsingham taught you how to love," she said quietly. "You should always be grateful to her for that. Aurelius says she is a kind and gentle woman. She has lost her husband, and she now lies alone, dying. Be sure you understand the love she had for you, and because I love you very much, I insist that you go to her, Lares. I want you to go to her and hold her hand, tell her that you remember your love for her. Tell her that it is something you have always cherished. Tell her that you hope she found love, too, and that you will live until she sees her love again, you will stay with her."

Lares was looking at her with sorrow in his eyes. "You truly want me to go?" Mabel nodded firmly, forcing a smile. "What you say to her does not matter," she said. "If you see her again and find that the love for her is still there. If I left you, then I hope you are honest with her. I hope you are honest with yourself. My love for you does not end because of it. My love for you is unconditional."

He shook his head with wonder, cupping her face as he gazed into her eyes. "You're a remarkable woman, Lady Torridon," he said. "That young girl you met this for a woman you've never met is astonishing."

Mabel's smile turned soft. "Keep your time with her private if you wish," she said. "I will not ask you what you said to her or what you were thinking."

But I hope you will do the love you once felt for her justice. For the brief shining hours she remains on this earth, I give you permission to give her what she needs. That of you, because I think, deep down, that you want to. That does not mean

of me, I love you any less. It only means that you are willing to revisit something that was important to you, once, and I am willing to relinquish your home. Is it this brief time. Meanwhile, I will be here, tending our sons in your absence until you are ready to return to me.”

Lares simply stared at her. The depths of her compassion and understanding were beyond his comprehension. He was still holding her only when he pulled her to him, kissing her deeply, the way he used to when they were young and full of passion. It was a passion that had calmed over the years, but at this moment, he'd never loved her more.

as any A woman who was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice.

reflect Without another word, he headed up the stairs.

was so

is on his



“I will “WHERE DID YOU go?” Valery asked. “When I came to my mother’s room a short time ago, Sela was here with her. She said you had left.”

because I Aurelius entered Lady Wolsingham’s vast chamber, going to Valery and kissing her on the top of her head.

and and “My mother is staying nearby,” he said. “I went to see her.”

ing you Valery had been prepared to be irritated with him because he'd promised to watch over her mother while she slept, but she couldn't become a friend with him after hearing why he'd left.

ie to?” “Is your mother well?” she asked.

oes not He nodded as he went to a nearby table, looking it over for signs of life or never food but seeing nothing.

st with “She is,” he said. “Have ye eaten anything? All I see is broth.”

you is Valery shook her head. “Nay,” she said. “I’m not hungry.”

He looked at her. “I’m going to bring ye food myself,” he said. “Ye need to keep up yer strength, and ye canna do that if ye starve yerself.”

ye’d do “I’m not starving,” she insisted weakly, leaning forward to watch her sleeping mother’s brow. “You needn’t worry over me.”

to wish,” That brought some frustration from him. “Of course I’m going to take care of ye,” he said. “Would ye not worry over me if I wasna sleeping and eating?”

to her all She glanced at him sheepishly. “Of course I would, but—”

mean that

nothing “No more refusals,” he snapped quietly, cutting her off. “I’ll bear for food myself, and ye’re going to eat every bite of it.”

instead, She frowned. “You cannot force me.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Do ye want to wager money on that?”

and For lack of a better response, she stuck her tongue out at him. Fighting a grin, he pretended to storm over to her and then grabbed her by the neck, trying to kiss her mouth and that tongue she’d so recently displayed. She never resisted him, giggling, trying to pull away from him, but he had her face. She was trying desperately to stay quiet because of her condition, but Aurelius ended up picking her up and swinging her across the chamber, all the while kissing her face, head, neck, and anything could come into contact with. They were over by the hearth when there was a soft knock on the chamber door. Still up in Aurelius’ arms, Valery handed over his face to stop his kisses so she could answer.

and “Come,” she said.

Aurelius was in the process of setting her on her feet, grinning, when the door panel opened. His smile vanished when he saw his father in the doorway.

Immediately, he was concerned.

“Da?” he said. “What’s amiss?”

Lares shook his head. “Nothing,” he assured him, but his gaze annoyed Valery. “But I hope this is yer betrothed. I’d hate to think ye’d kiss a woman with that manner of passion that ye weren’t pledged to.”

Aurelius’ grin was back. “Aye, this is Valery,” he said. Taking her by the hand, he led her over in his father’s direction. “This is my father, Val. Lares dun Tarh.”

Valery found herself looking at a man who resembled her future husband very much. Lares was a little shorter, perhaps not so big, but the resemblance was unmistakable. She could see, quite clearly, what her mother saw in those years ago.

Faintly, she smiled.

“It is an honor to meet you, my lord,” she said. “Aurelius has spoken to me so much that I feel as if I already know you.”

Lares returned her smile, taking the hand of a truly beautiful woman. He could see Davina in her face, around the eyes and the shape of her nose. In truth, he could see a young Davina in Valery, and all the resistance he had about seeing her mother again fled. In Valery, he could

ring yethe humanity of what he was about to face.

He could see everything.

“Even if I knew nothing about ye, lass, I would know simply by l
at ye that ye’re Davina’s daughter,” he said quietly. “Yer mother
ting offbeautiful and spirited lass those years ago.”

e head, Valery’s smile grew. “I know you knew her in your youth,” sh
Valery“She told me everything. I... I’m very glad you came.”

by the Lares nodded, vaguely, as his gaze trailed over to the bed where an
mother’sfaced woman was flat on her back, buried in coverlets.

ross the “Would it be acceptable if I sat with yer mother for a while?” he
else hesaid, looking back to Valery. “She’s an old friend, and... and I would
y heardif she were to be alone at a time like this. What I mean to say is that
put hereye’re a great comfort to her, but I’d like to sit with an old friend. If y
me.”

That brought Valery to tears. “Of course,” she whispered. “She h
hen theasleep for many hours, and, to be truthful, I am not sure she will ever a
ay. but if you were to sit with her and talk to her, mayhap it would be en
rouse her.”

Lares felt her burden of sorrow. It was written all over her face, a
was onwoman who had lost one parent this day and faced losing another. I
anotherher cheek, he left her by the door as he went over to the bed, gazing c
a woman he once knew very well.

r by the *Davina*.

This is It was a poignant moment.

The last time he saw her, she was being taken away by her fat
usbandwould never forget that moment as Ralph de Gilsland and a soldier c
nblanceDavina out of the cathedral by both arms. Memories he’d tried so
in himforget swamped him, and he remembered begging his father to bring h
to him. But Julius hadn’t been forgiving. He’d been shamed by h
doubly shamed to catch his son worshipping the devil in the midst of
oken ofCathedral.

It wasn’t a great memory.

young But now, before him, lay the very woman who had been taken awa
hape ofhim all those years ago. She looked so small and pale on the bed, swa
of thatlinens that were the same color as her skin. But the truth was that he
uld seeexactly sure how he felt now that he was standing over her. Did he f

over something that never happened? Over a marriage that never was? he only remember the good things between them, the love and the la looking Those last moments he'd spent with her came back to him, and he was aaround for something to sit on, spying the stool near the bed. Pullin she sat down, his focus never leaving Davina's face.

he said. "Davi?" he said softly. "'Tis me, lass. Lares. Yer daughter has gi permission to sit with ye, if ye'll allow it also. I thought we could s ashen-the things we both knew from our youth. Of Mount Pleasant and A

There aren't many who remember them as they were. It's been a lo finallysince we last spoke, but I hope ye dunna mind."

l be sad Davina didn't move. Lares knew it was foolish that he sho I knowdisappointed about it, but there was a small part of him that had been ye'll letshe might hear his voice and awaken. He looked over his shoulder, at and Aurelius, both of them standing anxiously, waiting and watch as beenDavina to open her eyes.

awaken, "I'll sit with her a while if ye want to rest," he murmured to Valer ough tomother and I have old times to talk over. I'll watch out for her."

Valery sensed he wanted to be alone with her mother. She lo youngAurelius, who nodded his approval. With some reluctance, she headed Kissingthe chamber with Aurelius on her heels. When they were gone, and th low n atsoftly shut, Lares returned his attention to Davina.

"They're gone," he said. "I assume they wanted to make sure I going to ravage ye. Considering I've not even ravaged my wife in years, I think their fears are unfounded. But I understand. They want t her. Heye'll awaken when ye hear my voice. Do ye hear it, lass? Can ye hear r dragged Davina remained still, her breathing shallow but steady. Strugglin hard tofeel defeated, Lares reached out and took her small, cold hand in his.

er back "My wife told me to come to ye," he said. "Mabel's a fine lady, his son,know ye would like her if ye knew her. We've been married many yea Carlisleand we've ten children, but ye probably already know that. Aureliu eldest. What a fine lad he turned out to be. Yer daughter could not find man anywhere in the world. I'll fight anyone who says otherwise. Y ay fromwho would say otherwise? Yer father. Ralph de Gilsland was a contra uthed inif I ever knew one. Do ye know how I know this? Because he turned wasn'tmy suit for ye, and I was going to be an earl. A bloody earl! He told feel sadwanted someone finer for ye, and now I find out ye married an earl at

' Or didHow can I not be angry with Ralph?"

ughter? Lares was on a roll. He went on about Davina's father, the man's s
lookedhonor, and other things that had bothered him. Things he'd not thought
g it up,in years. He spoke of his own father, or "the big charlatan," as he call

Not that Julius had ever really done anything to earn that title, but
ven mecommitted his son to an abbey in the middle of nowhere because he
peak ofhe'd tried to summon the devil. Lares found that a difficult thing to c
shkirk,given what Julius had seen, but he was disappointed his father
ng timebelieved his story.

And then came the story of Camerton Abbey.

ould be For that, he had to stand up because his voice was growing louder
hopingmovements more animated. Even though he knew that his fath
Valerycommitted him to Camerton to mostly keep him from Ralph de Gil
ing forreach should the man decide to press charges for stealing his daugh

truth was that Camerton Abbey had been a horrific experience. It had
y. "Yerplace where the priests beat a man for no reason at all. Well, perhaps t

have a reason—in Lares' case, because he disputed them or told them
oked terrible men they were—but still, Lares felt that they were cruel
l out ofwhen it came to the treatment of those serving the abbey. He told the s
he doora young pledge who had dropped his bowl of gruel and was punished

being given a meal for three days in a row. Lares had smuggled th
wasnasome bread, and, when he was discovered, one of the priests tried t
a fewhim. But Lares wouldn't stand for the punishment, snatched the wh
o see ifthe priest, and beat him instead. That had earned him about a m
me?" solitary confinement.

g not to Camerton was a hellish place, indeed.

About two hours into his vigil, Davina had yet to awaken, and
Davi. Istopped talking. He had exhausted every subject he could think of, b
rs now,long stopped hoping she would open her eyes for him. He'd paced aro
s is thechamber, telling his stories as only he could, until he finally stoked
l a finerand came back to the little stool next to the bed. He sat, watching D
e knowface, feeling sorry that they hadn't been able to have a conversation. I
iry manhe really had hoped for that, to speak to the woman whom he hoped
d downthink he'd failed her those years ago.

l me he "I heard what happened to yer husband," he said quietly. "I knew
nyway?He was a good man, a decent man. I saw him at gatherings over the

never imagining that he was yer husband. The only thing I knew ab
sense of husband was what my father told me—that ye'd been given over to
it about who had a home in the south. Yer father wanted ye away from the tur
ed him, the north... and away from me. I suppose I dunna blame him. No one
he had their daughter married to a man who summons the devil.”

thought An ironic smile creased his lips, and he looked away, thinking o
dispute, and how resolute the man had been. Given that Lares had two daugh
hadn't understood Ralph's decision. He understood it the first time Lilliana'
came to him to ask for her hand.

“I have two daughters myself,” he muttered. Then he chuckled icro
and his “My eldest, Lilli, is a sweet lass, but she's got her mother in her. Lil
er had encased in silk. She married a few years ago. I have grandchildren no
Island's ye believe that? And my youngest daughter is also my youngest child.
ter, the her name. God help the man that marries her. He's in for a tempest.”

been a “Congratulations.”

hey *did* He barely heard the murmur, but it was unmistakable. His head s
m what and he looked to the bed to see Davina's eyes slowly opening.

masters “Davina?” he said in surprise, standing up so he could look her in t
story of “It's Lares. Can ye hear me, lass?”

l by not Davina turned her head slightly, and her muddled eyes beheld Lar
ie childhood next to her bed. He seemed rather anxious to see her. Her gaze
o whip over him. He was completely recognizable to her. He simply looked
ip from older version of himself. A few gray hairs, a few lines, but it was him.

onth in Her eyes took on a glimmer.

“I heard you'd come to Lydgate,” she said weakly. “I hoped I wo
you. I'm only sorry that it was under these circumstances.”

l Lares Lares smiled. A truly delighted smile. “Why would ye say that?” l
ut he'd “Ye look as he did thirty-five years ago. Still that lovely lass from
und the Pleasant.”

the fire That drew a smile from her. “Still that silver-tongued Highlande
avina's said, watching him laugh. “Has it been so many years?”

perhaps He nodded, reaching out to take her hand as he sat on the edge of l
l didn't “I'm sorry to say that it has,” he said. “Things have changed, but
terribly.”

Adams. Her hand was so cold in his big, warm mitt, but she squeezed him
e years, “I fear they have indeed changed,” she said. “But we meet again

out yersurprising but joyful way, I should like to think. Our children are
a manmarried.”

moil of Lares nodded, caressing her hand as friends sometimes warm
e wants “Aurelius is a most fortunate man,” he said. “He loves Valery. I can s
everything about him. He’ll be good to her, I promise.”

f Ralph Davina reached up with her other hand, so very weak, and he
ters, heholding both of her hands between his own. “And she will be good to
s suitorshe said. “I will assure you of that. Valery is a good lass, Lares. You
worry.”

nically. “If she’s your daughter, I’ll not worry one bit. They are meant
ke steelanother.”

w. Can A ripple of a smile moved across Davina’s lips. “And that is why y
Zora isI could not marry.”

“What do ye mean?”

“I mean that if we had, there would be no Valery and no Aureliu
shot up,said. “Do you remember the day we fled to Carlisle? And we stayed
terrible inn that smelled of rot?”

the eye. He smirked. “And the minstrel who played the terrible song?” I
remembering that dark day without the sorrow he’d felt in the past. “Y
es as heit the next day, over and over.”

drifted She came as close to a laugh as she could. “I gave my heart to h
like anmuttered, repeating the words. “It was never mine to give again. For t
of her, I staked my claim, to be her shadow, evermore.”

“That’s the one. Ye remember it.”

ould see “Because it reminds me of the time when I had hope for the futu
said. “At the time, I hoped the song was about us. But it was not.”

he said. He sobered, realizing she remembered the song fondly when he th
Mounthead been stupid. “If I could have sang it to ye, I would have,” he said.

I did, it would have been meaningly.”

er,” she Davina nodded faintly. “I know,” she said. “But thinking of th
now, mayhap it was about our children. They have a greater purpose t
ier bed.did, Lares. They are meant to be together, and they are meant to be
not soTheir children will go on to do great deeds, mayhap forge great nation
was always God’s will. I see that now.”

feebly. His eyes, which had been glowing so warmly at her, began to fac
in in eye?” he asked. “Because I was never certain why God dinna let us r

getting will admit that I cursed him. When I was at Camerton Abbey, I cursed more. Then I met my Mabel and I began to realize that had been His Ily did along. I was meant for Mabel. And ye were meant for Adams.”

see it in “Nay,” Davina said, closing her eyes as a single tear popped from her right eye. “Adams and I were not a love match. He was not my heart. I took it, was a good man, and we had a daughter together, a lass who will carry on for him,” she said. “I dun Tarh name as I never could. It was her destiny to be a Highlander and not mine. But it was my destiny—nay, my privilege—to know you, and I will always remember you as my one and only love.”

for one Lares squeezed her hands carefully. “What an honor it is,” he said, feeling the warmth back in his eyes. “A true honor that I’d be remembered for by you and loved by you once, Davi. I truly did. But my Mabel said something to me that makes a good deal of sense.”

“What did she say?”

is,” she said. “She said that she will always be grateful to ye for teaching me about love,” he said. “She’s the one who told me to come and sit with ye. To be on your side while ye were ill so you wouldna be alone. She dinna want ye to be alone.”

he sang As he watched, Davina’s eyes filled with tears that spilled over. “Mabel sounds like a most kind and considerate woman,” she said. “But I’m not alone, truly. I have great memories of you, Lares. That is something I will keep with me, always. The truth is that I feel the life draining from me, but I am not afraid. I am not afraid because I know that Valery will be well cared for, by Aurelius and by you and Mabel. She will have the family name she never had, the dun Tarh name that was denied me. That gives me more comfort than you can ever know.”

ought it “I’m glad.”

“And if you have any more questions, ask me.”

“Anything, Davi.”

at song “In the years to come... mayhap you will tell our grandchildren about us,” she whispered. “Tell them about a fiery English lass who believed that she could move mountains, because I truly did. Mayhap those mountains will move for me, but they moved for you. And they will move for Valery and Aurelius.”

le. “Do not worry,” Lares smiled a brave smile. He could see the woman that Aurelius had spoken of, the one who had been his ally since the beginning. This

ed him like the Davina he'd known those years ago. That Davina hadn't matured
will all but the one before him had, in so many ways.

It was both heartbreaking and wonderful to see.

om the "I will tell them," he said, his throat tight with emotion. "I will ma
But he they know ye."

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's wife, "Indeed, I will."

Lares. I Davina smiled, taking a deep breath, or as deep as she could, before
smile soon faded. "Then I am content," she whispered. "And you v
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With tears streaming down his face, Lares leaned over Davina and
her on the forehead. It was a final goodbye to the first woman he ever
and as he promised, he held her hand, tightly and warmly.

Until the very end.

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It was both heartbreaking and wonderful to see.

"I will tell them," he said, his throat tight with emotion. "I will make sure they know ye."

"Adams, too."

"Indeed, I will."

Davina smiled, taking a deep breath, or as deep as she could, before her smile soon faded. "Then I am content," she whispered. "And you will tell Mabel something for me."

"What is that?"

"Although I do not know her, tell her that I love her for sharing you with me when it mattered most," she said. "What a great woman you have married, Lares. I wish I could have known her."

Tears filled Lares' eyes. "I'm a fortunate man, Davi," he said. "I've known two great ladies in my life. I couldna want for more."

Davina's lips curved with a smile, but she didn't have the energy for it. Lares could feel her hands weakening as her strength drained away. Her lips were blue and her breathing was becoming labored. The tears in his eyes spilled over as he realized death was upon the lovely English lass he used to know. Finally, it had come.

"Davi?" he murmured.

"Aye?"

"Would ye like me to hold yer hand until the end?"

"I would."

With tears streaming down his face, Lares leaned over Davina and kissed her on the forehead. It was a final goodbye to the first woman he ever loved, and as he promised, he held her hand, tightly and warmly.

Until the very end.



EPILOGUE

*Year of Our Lord 1380
Castle Hydra, Scotland
The Highlands*

“**W**E BURIED DAVINA alongside Adams at the cathedral in Durham, said. “But that was the last death at Lydgate, at least from the c Everyone else recovered. Gaspard came to serve with Maxwell at L but ye know that because ye’ve seen them every day since ye were b ye’ve been raised there. The Earl of Carlisle survived and went home, did Rhorì de Wolfe. Yer Uncle Darien obviously survived. Even L John went on to marry a widower later in life, and she was very happ him. And ye know what became of yer mother and father—they were i the same day we buried Davina and Adams.”

Gabriela was sitting next to him, sobbing into her kerchief. “Oh, N she said, sniffing. “That’s such a tragic story.”

“Aye, it is,” he said quietly, putting his arm around her. “But w think about it, it was a beautiful story, too.”

Gabriela wiped at her eyes. “You always told me what a fine lac was,” she said. “You and Mama told us how much she would have lov always felt as if I knew her, but now I know why. You promised her t would tell us.”

“I did, indeed,” he said. “And Adams, too.”

Gabriela nodded. “Both of them,” she said. “Grandparents I nev but I *know* them. Because of you, I know them. But Mamie... What for Davi. That is the most selfless thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Yer Mamie is an extraordinary woman.”

“More than I realized.”

Lares gave her a squeeze, kissing the top of her head as she wept over that particularly emotional story. It was something he’d never spoken to any of his children or his grandchildren. Mabel knew, and he knew Aurelius and Valery knew to a certain extent, but they didn’t know everything. No one but him and Davina and Mabel knew what was inside Davina’s bedchamber as she lay dying.

But now, Gabriela knew.

“The point of my story was to tell ye that there are many forms of love,” he said. “A man and his wife, a mother or a father to their child. Even friend to friend, or grandfather to granddaughter. Mamie loved me because she had been important to me, once. Davina gave me an experience from a perspective that canna be taught. Davina loved Mamie because she was good to me. And I loved them all for different reasons, but the love was strong and true. As ye grow older, ye’ll come to understand that true love is different for everyone.”

” Lares
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Gabriela wiped away the last of her tears. “Thank you for telling me the story. I’m honored that you trusted me enough to tell me the story.”

He smiled at his pale-eyed granddaughter. “’Tis our secret.”

Jonno,”

Gabriela smiled, nodded, and kissed him on the cheek. Sliding into her seat, she headed off to find her new husband as Lares watched her go. He was so caught up in watching his granddaughter that he failed to see Aurelius coming up beside him. He only realized it when there was a cup of wine shoved in his face and he looked up to see his son offering it.

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“Ye’re a thousand miles away,” Aurelius said. “Ye should be here eating some of this fine food and drink ye helped pay for. Look at the table there—beef and venison and chicken.”

Lares took the wine. “But no roast goose,” he said. “Ye never let me eat any roast goose.”

Aurelius waggled his brows. “Ye know Valery willna allow it,” he said. “Sunny and Moonie have been dead and gone for many years, but even when she sees a roast goose, she bursts into tears.”

er met,
she did.

Even Lares remembered those geese from years ago, pets that lived into the first several years of Aurelius and Valery’s marriage. But that was no way to stop an old man from pouting.

“I miss the taste of goose,” he said. “I hope she’ll allow it someday.”

“Is that what ye were thinking of?”

“What do ye mean?”

“When I walked up, ye were a thousand miles away. What were ye thinking?”

Lares took a sip of his wine. It wasn't hot like the other wine he'd had, but it was good enough. “I was thinking of Lydgate back in the year when ye first met Valery.”

Aurelius looked at him curiously. “What brought that about?”

“Because Gabby was telling me what she knew of true love, but I think I know what true love really is.”

Aurelius wasn't sure what he meant. “What did ye tell her?”

“About the last time I saw Davina.”

Now, Aurelius knew. “I've not thought of that in many years, but I've been quietly. “Gabriela's middle name is Davina, ye know.”

“I know.”

“She's also wearing Davina's wedding dress today, the one she wore when she married me,” she said.

“She looks lovely in it.”

Aurelius turned to watch his daughter, so young and pretty. He could have been prouder of the woman she'd become, and the truth was he wasn't even sure, when Valery had been pregnant with her, that Aurelius would know life at all. It had been a difficult pregnancy and a difficult delivery, easily one of the most terrifying times of Aurelius' life. But when they'd been speaking of Davina, the reflection on Gabriela's birth had brought about another memory he'd almost forgotten.

“I dunna know if I ever told ye,” he said, “but when Val was laboring to bring Gabriela forth, she swore she saw her mother standing at the end of the bed. Val knew just by seeing her that everything would be well. Gabriela was born a few moments later.”

Lares smiled faintly. “Nay, ye never told me that,” he said. “But I promise ye that Davina was there. She was watching over her granddaughter, like a guardian angel.”

Aurelius lifted his cup to his lips, taking a drink. “That is what Valery said. “She also said that her mother sang a song to her. Something like ‘to be her shadow, evermore.’ Keep in mind that the physic had given her something for the pain at that point, so she was seeing butterfly”

rainbows, too. Of course she would see her dead mother. But it gave her a little comfort to think so.”

“Those words rang a bell in Lares’ head. Off in the distance, he could see Mabel, who had been pulled into a dance by two of her sons. He watched her and her wife, enjoying herself as the music played, and it occurred to him that he had heard that phrase—to be her shadow, evermore—before. A very long time ago.”

At that terrible inn in Carlisle.

A surprising sense of wonder filled him.

“Bear,” he said to his son. “Fetch your wife for me, please.”

Aurelius wandered off without question. Valery was across the room talking to a few of the guests, but Aurelius took her by the hand and pulled her back over to his father, who was still sitting in the window seat. Resplendent in a yellow silk gown, her blonde hair attractively arranged, Valery looked lovely when she saw Lares in the window.

“Why are you here?” she said, pointing to the dancing floor. “Your wife is having an enormously good time. You should be with her.”

Lares chuckled softly. “She’ll have more fun without me,” he said. “I couldn’t get two left feet, and both of them are clumsy.”

Valery extended a hand to him. “Will you dance with me, then?”

Lares took her hand, but only to pull her onto the seat next to him. “Difficult,” he told her. “I want to speak to you.”

“What about?”

Lares pointed in the direction of Gabriela, who had found her excellent tall husband and was pulling him into the middle of the room with the other young women to the dancers. “Gabriela,” he said. “Aurelius tells me that you believed in the words of your mother when you were giving birth to her.”

Valery cocked her head, curious at the odd change in subject. “I did not,” she said. “Why do you ask?”

“He said she sang a song to you.”

Valery nodded. “She did,” she said. “At least, I think she did. I had a potion for the pain, but I remember hearing pieces of a song. Someone says, ‘about ‘to be her shadow, evermore.’ Why?”

Lares had to smile. It was an ironic sort of smile, but one he was proud of. “I gave my heart to her. I never gave mine to give again. For the love of her, I staked my claim, to

ave her shadow, evermore'?"

Valery still wasn't clear. "I am not certain," she said, shrugging. "I could see long time ago. Eighteen years ago. I've never heard that song before." Lares chuckled. "I have," he said. "The night before Davina and I separated in Carlisle, we were forced to stay at an inn. It was a strange place, full of thieves and half-wits, but there was a minstrel and that was the only song he knew. He played it over and over again. I wouldn't have believed that Davina's ghost appeared to me had you not mentioned that song and those words... they mean something to her."

Valery was looking at him with some shock. "They *do*?" she said in a hushed tone. "Are you certain?"

Lares said, "Quite certain, lass."

Valery was speechless for a moment as she processed what Lares had said. She smiled saying, "Lares, you cannot be serious," she said in a quiet tone, almost scolding. "Are you telling me that she really *did* appear to me?"

Lares shrugged. "It's possible," he said. "I thought it was an awful coincidence, but she didn't. She told me the song meant hope to her. She'd hoped it would be a song just for us, but as it happens, she later believed it was a song for Davina and Aurelius. A promise for the future, I suppose. Gabriela is our first daughter. Isn't she?"

Valery looked to her daughter being twirled around by her husband. Gabriela bore her mother's name, and there were times she looked like her mother. She behaved, like Davina. She was even wearing Davina's wedding dress because she wanted to honor a woman she'd never met.

"*To be her shadow, evermore,*" Valery whispered. "Gabby was her shadow. You saw granddaughter. Mayhap she was telling me that she would always be her shadow."

"Her guardian angel?" Lares asked.

Valery nodded. "Mayhap that is my mother's legacy after all."

"'Tis a nice thought, *leannan,*" Aurelius said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Lady Wolsingham would have liked that."

Valery smiled at him, but it was tremulous. "I was not emotional before, but now I am."

Gabriela in my mother's dress until this moment," she said. "Now, I feel it everywhere. I did not before, but I do now. How proud she must be of me and you, and our children, and Lares and Mabel. We're happy. It was her wish that she be her shadow, that must make her very happy, indeed."

Aurelius kissed her before gently pulling her with him, heading
It was at the people dancing, including Gabriela as her husband lifted her up
everyone. The crowd cheered as Gabriela shrieked, being frighte
I were heights. Given she'd married an extremely tall man, there was som
lovely there. Her brothers began to good-naturedly tease her about it u
was the husband set her on her feet and turned to the brothers, who understa
ia have fled.

ong, but That set everyone to laughing.

Including Lares.

id with As he watched his older grandsons flee the groom, who was stalkin
with good-natured malice, he realized what a rich life he'd had. Seeing
break up the groom's pursuit filled his heart with more joy and love
he was than he could possibly have imagined.

st like a He'd been blessed when it came to love.

Perhaps he hadn't married the first woman he'd ever loved, b
il song, certainly married the final woman he'd loved, and they'd had a ma
t would life together. A woman who had shown him the true meaning of lo
g for yesacrifice, an example he'd been proud to pass on to his childr
uture...grandchildren. Of course, there was the little promise he'd made
those years ago. It was a promise he'd always kept.

usband. *Tell them about a fiery English lass who believed love could
ed, and mountains.*

because He had.

And he was a richer man for it.

er first
Gabby's

❧ THE END ❧

Aurelius and Valery's children

Alvarez "Al" b. 1350

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Benedict "Ben" b. 1353

Cristopher b. 1355

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Dominguez "Dom" b. 1358

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Eduard b. 1360

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Frederic b. 1361

Gabriela b. 1362

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Hernando "Nando" b. 1367
Isabel b. 1370

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Hernando "Nando" b. 1367

Isabel b. 1370

AUTHOR'S AFTERWORD

I sincerely hope you enjoyed Aurelius and Valery's story, but it turned out to be almost an equal measure of Lares and Davina/Mabel's story, too. I think that's why we see generational love stories. It gives the characters and families much more depth!

So—what is the blue death? Simple—it's cholera. Cholera and dysentery, among other diseases, were very common in Medieval times, and they spread like wildfire. While dysentery was caused by bacteria in water, cholera was spread by human feces—by unwashed hands and bad sanitation among others.

Because it caused terrible diarrhea and—not to get too graphic—was difficult to sanitize against those bodily fluids properly, it could reappear around. It made for a terrible combination with a big gathering of people because it had a fairly short incubation period. Cholera outbreaks were feared, and it was called the blue death because people tended to turn blue when they were extremely dehydrated. If you've ever seen *Downton Abbey*, the dowager countess commented once about a ball held in Paris where cholera broke out. As she said, "Half the guests were dead before they even got to the ball."

Also, as you noticed, "rotten brew" or "rotten tea" once again made it into a book. That really was a "thing"—surgeons and physicians in the Middle Ages had figured out its healing properties and used it for wounds and illnesses. Basically, it was an antibiotic, made from the blue mold on bread—another thing—so that was definitely something in use during Medieval times. How often, or by whom, or how they really brewed it, is a mystery, but knowledge was there. Treatment for cholera is, in fact, antibiotics.

Lastly—and this is a fun fact—you've heard the story *The Golden Ass* mentioned a couple of times in this book. It is by a Roman author named Apuleius, and it really is a tale of a man named Lucius who is turned into an ass by an evil witch. The tale itself is full of adultery and scandal and—say it—bestiality, when a maiden falls in love with the ass (not knowing he's really a man) and seduces the animal. The Romans have some truly unusual and wild pieces of literature. And yes, you can buy *The Golden Ass* if you want.

on Amazon. No kidding!

I hope this is a great kick-off for the dun Tarh family—with so
more stories to come.

Thank you for reading!

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Thank you for reading!

KATHRYN LE VEQUE NOVELS

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Gothic Regency Romance:

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Contemporary Romance:

Kathlyn Trent/Marcus Burton Series:

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Other non-connected Contemporary Romance:

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[Darkling, I Listen](#)

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[River's End](#)

[The Fountain](#)

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[The Immortal Sea](#)

Pirates of Britannia Series (with Eliza Knight):

[Savage of the Sea](#) by Eliza Knight

[Leader of Titans](#) by Kathryn Le Veque

[The Sea Devil](#) by Eliza Knight

[Sea Wolfe](#) by Kathryn Le Veque

Note: All Kathryn's novels are designed to be read as stand-alones, although many have c characters or cross-over family groups. Novels that are grouped together have related cha family groups. You will notice that some series have the same books; that is because they overs. A hero in one book may be the secondary character in another.

There is NO reading order except by chronology, but even in that case, you can still read the stand-alones. No novel is connected to another by a cliff hanger, and every book has an HEA.

Series are clearly marked. All series contain the same characters or family groups except the Heroes Series, which is an anthology with unrelated characters.

For more information, find it in [A Reader's Guide to the Medieval World of Le Veque](#).

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ABOUT KATHRYN LE VEQUE

Bringing the Medieval to Romance



KATHRYN LE VEQUE is a critically acclaimed, multiple USA Today Bestselling author, an Indie Reader bestseller, a charter Amazon #1 author, and a #1 bestselling, award-winning, multi-published author in the Medieval Historical Romance with over 100 published novels.

Kathryn is a multiple award nominee and winner, including the winner of the Uncaged Book Reviews Magazine 2017 and 2018 “Raven Award” for Favorite Medieval Romance. Kathryn is also a multiple RONE nominee (InD’Tale Magazine), holding a record for the number of nominations. In 2018, her novel WARWOLFE was the winner in the Romance category, the Book Excellence Award and in 2019, her novel A WOLFE AMONG DRAGONS won the prestigious RONE award for best pre-16th century romance.

Kathryn is considered one of the top Indie authors in the world with over 2M copies in circulation, and her novels have been translated into multiple languages. Kathryn recently signed with Sourcebooks Casablanca for the Medieval Fight Club series, first published in 2020.

In addition to her own published works, Kathryn is also the President/CEO of Dragonblade Publishing, a boutique publishing house specializing in Historical Romance. Dragonblade’s success has seen it

the ranks to become Amazon's #1 e-book publisher of Historical Romance (K-Lytics report July 2020).

Kathryn loves to hear from her readers. Please find Kathryn on Facebook at Kathryn Le Veque, Author, or join her on Twitter [@kathrynleveque](https://twitter.com/kathrynleveque) up for Kathryn's blog at www.kathrynleveque.com for the latest news and sales.

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