



Marriage Made in Hell

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Category: Historical

Description: It's double the deception, double the danger, and double the romance as a dashing earl and a beautiful lady are forced to wed by King Edward—but neither is who they appear to be! Bestselling author Deborah Macgillivray spins a sensual and enchanting tale of two people who find love and passion in a union that was never meant to be—except by fate.

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Essence of the game now has a start.

And the object is not to lose your heart.

— Maeve Montgomerie

Castle Hellborne, Northern England, December 1296

Taking the stairs two at a time, Grantham de Verre hurried to answer the summons. He took the turn at the hallway, and then opened the chamber door without knocking. Realizing his slip, he pulled up short—the door open partway—regretting the impulse. Without doubt, his step-brother would chide him over such a presumption.

And one did not court the ire of Greyson de Verre, Earl of Hellborne. Not even a brother—and especial a mere half-brother.

Surprisingly, his older brother and liege lord looked up at his intrusion and said, “You have come. Good.”

Good? A rare greeting. As far as Grantham could recall, Greyson would soon as punch him in the mouth than give him a greeting of well-coming. This did not bode favorably.

“I am just back from Hellsgate. Your steward jumped me in the bailey, as I stepped from the stirrup, and spake you were packing to leave. He hurried me abovestairs, not even allowing time to shake the dirt from my boots or to quench my thirst. My horse, at this moment, is receiving better care than I. By the way—Chrysagon sends his

regards.”

Greyson snorted a short laugh. “Translation—Chrysagon wishes me to Hell. Stop trying to play peacemaker betwixt us. There is no mending our feud. We both have come to terms with that. Mayhap, in time, so shall you.”

Grantham was used to his half-brother leaving with barely a word of warning, oft gone fortnights or longer at a time. When you rode at the king’s left hand, your life was never your own. Thus, Greyson hurriedly gathering belongings was not unusual for him.

“Where does our monarch send you this time?”

“North. Far north.” The incisive, pale grey eyes glanced over several parchment maps, before he spread one atop another, and rolled them into a tube. With quick, precise movements, Greyson tied them with a thin cord of leather, and then stored them in an oilskin bag. “I dare not tarry. Skies are gloomy, which means the farther north I ride, the more likely the chance of running into snow this time of season. You can almost smell it in the air.”

“Not precisely what I meant—though I appreciate your direction so I can send a messenger if need.”

Greyson eyed him, whilst he tossed garments onto the bed. “Lack of being precise with words oft gets a man killed.”

“I shan’t harbor a wish to die yet, so I rephrase my question: who does Edward send you to kill this time?”

Greyson frowned. “Consider my sentiment well: you should find a young wife and put that wayward tongue to good use. I am sent to Scotland to hunt down some

brigand named William Wallace. In truth, Edward already dispatched Redam Maignart to handle the deed. I merely ride at his back to assure it done.”

“The Baron Raoullin?” Grantham dropped down in the high back chair before fireside. He was bone-weary from the long ride, cold and hungry. Food and drink would have to wait, but he could warm himself by the fire and rest his saddle-weary bones. “Silly nobles at court call him Redemption . Tell me, brother dear, do they have an ekename for you as well?”

Greyson regarded him, his expression impossible to read. Typical, since his half-brother was a master of keeping his emotions hidden away. “ Gallowglass .”

Propping his foot on the wooden stool, Grantham arched a brow, surprised that Greyson admitted it. “You are not Scot.”

“Truth only in part. You forget—my mother was Hebridean. And I am warrior class. Our line was not born to the nobility, but we choked the titles and estates that we hold out of life with our bare hands. So, I assume these highborn, soft-palmed men see jest in the fit.”

“But none speak so to your face, eh? Whatever amuses the lazy nobility at court, they are not foolish enough to dare the affront. Having a familial concern for your neck, and no wish to view your head upon a spike on London Bridge, I do wish you wouldst ween yourself away from Edward Longshanks. He is not a man to be trusted. They call him the Leopard because he changes his spots too oft, but then you already know that, eh? In one of his black rages I fear him turning on you when he lacks another venue which to vent upon.”

Greyson shrugged as he slid on the boiled-leather jack. “Oddly enough, your wish may soon be answered, though I know how it wouldst pain you. Of late, the king grows mistrustful of all men—especial the ones with Challon blood—and Redam was

raised by Michael Challon after his family was slaughtered. The king dispatched Redam to redeem Wallace, and even granted by your leave to the Challon bastard—Darian—to travel with him. Mayhap he shall get a worm in his brain that the time has come he can dispense with my services whilst I am so far away. This mistrust is why he sends me to follow in the steps of Redam. He is not entirely sure the Lord Raoullin will do as commanded—particularly since he travels north, near Julian Challon.”

“Maignart has some common thread to this William Wallace that he should break his bond with the Plantagenet?” Grantham slowly removed his leather gauntlets, and held them in one hand.

Greyson thought for a moment, then shrugged. “Nay, but I think once his tools are out of his sight, suspicions come to unravel the threads of our ruler’s quicksilver mind.”

“How does his suspicion over Maignart cast shadow upon you? What makes you think he will cut the leash? I fear I do not follow in the trail of your thoughts.”

Greyson gave him a smile, again, a rare occurrence. So odd, Grantham had a hard time recalling when last his brother smiled.

“Not surprising, since you have been away and the tides have not yet reached your ears. The king has decided it is time for me to marry.”

Grantham nearly jumped to his feet in surprise. “Bigod , you say? Edward commands this?”

“Of course he does. You are not mooncalf enough to think I voiced a plea for a bride? I have spake the wish never to marry on more than one occasion. I have no liking to a notion of being leg-shackled to some whining female.”

“But if the king commands this you have no recourse.”

His brother’s face took on a sly cast . “Actually ...I do. When I raised a protest he said—and these are his exact words: By Yuletide the lord of Hellborne shall be wedded and bedded, or there shall be Hell to pay .”

“And because of his exact words you find happiness in the deed you wish that wouldst never take place? I regret, my lord, I still find trouble if keeping up with such logics.”

“Edward demands contracts signed and banns read. After long deliberation, I concur—the lord of Hellborne shall wed by Yuletide. The bride—one Lady Elspeth de Sancerre—shall make herself ready to travel to Hellborne in plenty of time for the marriage to take place. The king jested Yule was the longest night of the year—a perfect time to marry and bed the bride.”

“But why? The king has always wanted you at his elbow.”

Greyson sighed. “Who can tell? Mayhap he thinks I grow old—which I do. Edward is currently happy playing maker of matches. I think he wants to put the English in places of power, replace old Scots nobility through marriage, mortaring his rule of the country. ’Tis cheaper than buying off the Scots and more assured for the long term. Seeding of Scotland , he has christened these schemes.”

“The name...de Sancerre...not one I would think of as Scottish.”

“Like many along the northern most Marches , they were Norman invaders—such as the Montgomeries. After centuries, they have forgotten their roots and now think and act more Scot than English.”

“But if you ride to the Highlands, there is no guarantee the weather will permit your

return in time.”

He gave a chuckle. “God willing.”

“This weaving of riddles grows tiresome to my saddle-weary mind. How can you be in two places at once?”

“Ah, you begin to come to the solution. I shan’t. I go northward, linger to my taste, and then return next spring when the thaws come,” he stated with a self-satisfied finality.

Grantham was trying to rein in his temper. Greyson and he had never been close, not as brothers nor friends. Only, he was exhausted from the long ride back from Hellsgate. “By damn, make sense, Greyson. You cannot be here at Hellborne for a wedding if you are running yourself ragged after some brigand named Wallace.”

“No, I cannot.” He held his hand up to stay more questions. “Since you fatigue—I shall make it simple. You—my dear devoted half-brother—are now the lord of Hellborne, and shall be until my return. I have signed documents naming you as my heir. Seems a reasonable step since I never plan to marry.”

“What about Tashian, Raine and Chrysagon? Shan’t they have some say in that since they are your full brothers?”

“They have their own honours , and they neither want nor need Hellborne. You, on the other hand, are my youngest sibling. When our dear departed father married your mother, a commoner, he asked me to settle an estate upon you when the time came. To raise you up. So I am.”

“But Hellborne?”

“The place is cursed. Nothing thrives here. The crops are meager, at best. The soil seems tainted, and its foulness seeps into everything here. It breeds naught. The land is barren. The women are barren. And the lords of Hellborne slowly turn to stone. They die alone, full of hatred and bitterness. No one—least of all my brothers—want to claim Hellborne. The place is aptly named—it was borne from Hell. So, do not give pretense that I am doing you a boon. You will be the Lord Hellborne until my demise, and then you shall inherit the earldom. In my absence, you will act as the lord and governor, and rule here. And—as lord of Hellborne, you shall wed the daughter of the Baron de Sancerre.”

“Are you mad? Edward will have your head! Mine, too!” Grantham scoffed.

“Nay. He said the lord of Hellborne will be wed, and wed he shall be. You will marry the bloody wench, spend the winter putting that tongue—” He glanced down to Grantham’s groin, “and other parts of your body to work. Swive the fool woman, get her large with child, and we all shall be happy. Edward wants me to make an heir—well, there—I create you the new lord of Hellborne.”

Grantham shook his head. His backside was too numb from being in the saddle for a week. Mayhap the deadness extended upward and into his brain. “What makes you think I have an inclination of obeying the king’s command?”

The corner of Greyson’s mouth twitched, as he suppressed a half-smile. “Not to labor the point—I am your liege, and despite being kin, you are obligated to obey my command.”

“Not if it sees my head on a pike alongside yours on London Bridge!” Grantham laughed.

Greyson returned to gathering his belongings. He took out two woolen mantles and a spare pair of boots from the chest at the foot of the bed. “I have considered matters

fully. Edward merely wants an heir to Hellborne, to know the line will hold and be loyal to him. He needs the baron's daughter married off to a powerful noble. One day you shall be an earl. That should satisfy any greedy father."

"And what are you planning on wedding me to—some bovine woman three score in years of age? Or worse, a mousey child of two-and-ten? Neither prospect does more than turn my stomach. Have you even seen this woman?"

"As a matter of fact, I have. Edward had her presented to me at court last summer. With hindsight, I now understand why. He was already playing his games. Fortunate for you, she is neither of the things you fear." Greyson rolled the mantles up and shoved them into the oiled-leather pack. "I judged her not a simpleton. She is pleasing to the eye, comely enough to stand out at court, so you shall not need to cover her head with a borel sack. I am not marrying you to a nag— or a cow . She is a bit older than a child of two-and-ten. Her father speaks she is headstrong and needs a resolute man to handle her spirit. She refuses all offers, wanting to make her own choice of a husband."

"If that be her bent, then what makes you think she will accept a marriage with the earl of Hellborne?"

Greyson gave an easy laugh. "Because the king commands it."

"Very well. Howbeit, if she was presented to you at court, then she has seen you. Do you expect this woman to not only marry on command, but to accept the wrong de Verre?"

"Yes, because I was told a secret—she cannot see well up close. Just keep near to her and she will not be able to tell aught about you."

"I am so glad you have put thought to the matter, but what about your brothers? They

might not like me being lord here. Even if temporary.”

“‘Tis not short-term. If I should die on the morrow, you will be earl of Hellborne. I made the same offer to Tashian, Raine and Chrysagon. They are no more eager to marry than I am. To be blunt, when I brought up the situation, they offered you up as sacrifice. They have long departed this cursed place, and swear nothing could drag them back. You are now The Marcher Lord of Hellborne, and you will marry this fool harridan. For which you will be highly compensated, more than you could ever hope as a fourth born son. Remember, I did not send you to the priesthood. You owe me. As first step to mortar your compliance—you receive the holding Hellsgate to hold as yours. Get her full with child before my return and I will see there is one thousand pound gold added to the deal. Once her father dies, which could be anytime soon, you inherit that barony, as well. And in my line of inquiry for the king, the risk of me surviving this journey northward could see me dead. In which case, you will be the earl.”

“What about the king? How will he take you not obeying him?”

Greyson picked up his sword. “You keep her well-loved, fill her with a child, and I will deal with the king. As a last resort, enough coin will sooth his umbrage. Kneel.”

Grantham was too stunned to make sense of these tides. Marry? He had never thought to wed, especially a titled wife. A holding of his own? Rank? As Greyson pointed out no fourth born son could ever hope to achieve these things. They were out of his reach, so he had never dreamt upon them. All that was left to one was to become a knight errant or enter the priesthood. Edward intended Greyson to marry. Still, it seemed a dangerous game. He would not be pleased with this switching of grooms. And how would the lady take finding out she had wed not the Earl de Verre? The deception would come down on their heads, likely sooner than later.

Greyson shrugged. “Come, come, kneel. Let us seal this pack for a marriage made in

Hell.”

“What if she should figure out she married the wrong de Verre?”

“Women are easily led. Pleasure her well in bed, get her with child, and she will bond to you. By the time the fog lifts and reality is made clear, she will little care. Eh?”

Still too dumbfounded to think, Grantham kneeled before his half-brother. Greyson tapped one shoulder, then the other with the flat of the blade. “Arise, Lord Grantham, master of Hellborne.”

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On the first day of Yuletide my love gave me,

a promise, a vow and a kiss under a snow-covered tree...

“I do not care if King Edward decrees it!” Elspeth de Sancerre said, tossing her brush at the door. “I will not— will not —marry that odious earl of Hellborne! They call him Gallowglass. Did you know that?”

Lesslyn de Sancerre bent over to retrieve the tossed brush and make sure it was not broken. Brushes were costly, and hard to come by. You simply did not destroy one in a fit of anger. Except mayhap her spoiled sister. “The earl is not odious. I have only seen him a couple of times when he was riding on his grey horse, but he strikes a handsome figure. He is tall, straight of spine, and with broad square shoulders. There is a power about him. A dark power. Most women wouldst find no disfavor in being his lady wife. Hellborne is rich in estates, and is close to the king. Wed him and you become his countess.”

“His eyes are cold. Just seeing him from a distance you have not looked into those grey eyes. They scare me! He has no heart, I tell you. The man is an assassin. He kills men just because Edward commands it.”

“Many men do that, if you think upon it. Elspeth, you are grasping at straws. Besides, you know you cannot see his eyes clearly when you are close.”

Her sister snatched back the brush, giving her a pouty sneer. “God gave you perfect eyesight. To me he bestowed the blessing of a beauty above all others.”

Lesslyn rolled her eyes. Well, without doubt her sister was indeed a beauty, with pale hair and huge blue eyes. Only, those eyes were weak so that perfect countenance was marred by her need to squint her eyes tight to make out things close up. She guessed God had a sense of humor.

“Sad He did not give you humility to go along with it,” Lesslyn muttered under her breath.

Her sister, picking up the polished plate, was suddenly entranced, smiling at her reflection. Then, she squinted to get a clearer view. Disgusted with her mole expression, she tossed the mirror aside. “What? Lesslyn, cease grumbling and speak up. I so swear, you scurry around like a dormouse, squeaking out who knows what.”

Lesslyn picked up her sister’s gown, carelessly tossed across the bed. Her hand caressed the rich brocade of deep green, then folded it and carefully placed it in the chest at the foot of the bed. She had never worn such a beautiful garment. Oh, as a small child, when her mother was still alive, she had pretty things. Only, she had died in childbirth when Lesslyn was not yet seven. Then, things changed.

She was only a step-daughter to Roye de Sancerre. He had kept her, given her his name to please her mother, but he never spared an ounce of caring. Elspeth was the product of her mother’s second marriage to Baron de Sancerre. The sun rose and set with his fair daughter.

The baron never missed a chance to remind Lesslyn that she sadly took after her father’s looks. And as she aged, she had slowly been pushed into the role of serving her half-sister. There were always fine bolts of material for Elspeth, or ribbons for her hair, but with an absentminded wave of his hand, the baron insisted he lacked coin for such things for Lesslyn. She quickly learnt not to expect such indulgences to be bestowed upon her. Defiantly, she never asked.

It was not in her nature to be jealous of Elspeth. Such emotions served no purpose. Only, at times, when she was afforded a private moment, she daydreamed that a handsome knight— well, reasonably handsome —would come riding to Castle Sancerre and declare he wanted not Elspeth, but Lesslyn for his bride. She could live her life without the velvet gowns, gold buckles or silk under tunics. Those were just things. She was good at weaving and sewing, so she could make her own serviceable kirtles. Howbeit, she did wonder what it would feel like to marry, to have a husband to share a life with. Hoping to escape this life of disenchantment, she longed for an offer of marriage. She yearned of having her own home that she could run, where she would find happiness. De Sancerre had pushed aside any notion of finding a marriage for her. As the years passed, Lesslyn recognized such imaginings were just wisps of fantasies that would never be.

She glanced down at the plain brown kirtle she wore. De Sancerre had not presented her at court, so there had been no need to waste coin upon expensive fabrics for kirtles for her. The baron was not an evil man, but a pinch-coin with a shriveled heart. He resented Lesslyn's father for reasons she never learnt. He almost seemed to take delight in reminding her that to get a good marriage cost coinage for a dower. Whilst a man might accept a lesser amount for the hand of Elspeth because of her beauty, such would never be the circumstances for Lesslyn. "I have not enough silver to dower you. Your father should have left provisions. He did not. The matter is at end. You are blessed that I kept you here at Sancerre after your mother died in childbirth, instead of sending you to a convent."

Lesslyn pulled her mind from such dispiriting thoughts, and returned to the topic of the king's demand Elspeth marry. She said in a calm, resigned—and mayhap a wistful tone, "'Tis the king's will, Elspeth. None can stand against him."

"Fie, I wouldst spit in the eye of the king! Why do men always think they know best and that women should have no say in these matters? They marry us off to some old lord...why, we are naught but a cow to be bartered off!"

“The Earl Hellborne is not old,” Lesslyn said, almost defending him. She had never liked the pretty faced courtiers that followed in Elspeth’s wake. They hardly seemed more than boys. Hellborne was a knight, hardened by battle. He was... a man —not a fey faced child.

“Mayhap to someone of your advanced years—”

In a strange mood this night, she cut off her sister’s prattle. “I am only five years older than you. You near a score years, Elspeth. Past the proper age of marriage—”

This time it was Elspeth’s turn to silence a thought. With a screech. She sounded like the Bansidhe . Lesslyn curled her fingers into her palms to stop herself from sticking them in her ears—or slapping Elspeth senseless.

“Enough!” Lesslyn finally cried.

The door flung open and the elderly baron rushed in, his canes tapping on the floor. “God’s breath! What goes on here?”

“Elspeth merely expresses her displeasure at the announcement of her coming banns.” Lesslyn bit down on her lower lip to keep from saying more. Or laughing .

The baron glared at his favored child—likely for the first time in her life. Elspeth blinked in shock. “Cease this childish lament. Fix your mind to the marriage with the Earl Hellborne. It shall be.”

“I wouldst rather marry someone younger,” Elspeth whimpered.

The baron eyed her with mistrust. “Like the caitiff son of the Comte di Conti?” Elspeth opened her mouth to express her wishes in the matter, but for once, the baron’s will was of iron resolve. “Do not bother with feigned innocence, daughter. I

saw he wore your colors on his sleeve when they held the joust two fortnights ago. 'Tis what pushed me to seek out a husband that will breed some warrior blood back into this line. Your child will one day hold Sancerre. Have a care to marrying someone that will breed upon you sons that do not sit around composing poetry! You shall marry the Earl Hellborne, and that is the end of that!"

The baron spun on his heels and stormed out of the room, leaving Elspeth with her mouth hanging open. Never had he said a harsh word to her, so she was unsure how to react to this severer version of the man who had always coddled her.

"Ooooo ... I shan't marry Hellborne!" She threatened, "I will starve myself first. I will throw myself from the tower. I will run away and die of exposure in the wood."

"Dearling, you cannot do all three." Lesslyn could not resist the jest.

"I want to marry Aristide di Conti!" She stomped her foot petulantly. Whilst Elspeth in a temper was amusing, it was quickly wearing thin.

"Matters naught, Elspeth. 'Tis the way of the world. Railing at this shall change naught. You will only make yourself sick with anger," Lesslyn cautioned.

"Well, why should I not be angry? I am not a cow. I do not make mooing sounds, do I?"

Elspeth tended to carry on at the injustices of being a woman. Whilst Lesslyn held similar views, she had learnt the world was not kind to females daring to push outside the boundaries afforded them. Elspeth had not reached that same point of acceptance. Lesslyn sighed wearily, having heard it all before. Every slight, each hurt done to poor Elspeth. She knew the next words coming out of her half-sister's mouth.

"My mother died when I was but two—"

Lesslyn gave her a sad smile and said softly, “She was my mother, too.”

At least, Elspeth had a father that loved her. Rarely had Lesslyn left Sancerre. She was just a step-daughter consigned to the shadows. Too tall, not as pretty, someone to fetch things, merely a companion—nay, servant—for the precious daughter of Roye de Sancerre.

“What?” Elspeth’s head whipped around, her eyes trying to focus on Lesslyn as if she was just now seeing her standing there. Mayhap, like she truly saw her older sibling for the first time. Of course, since she could not see her too clearly, she squinted her eyes. “You know...if you wouldst fix your hair and wear something bright and colorful you would not appear such a wren. Brown hair, brown eyes, brown kirtle...that tends to wash away the color from your face.”

Lesslyn gnawed the inside of her cheek to keep the words back. She did not choose to be... well, brown . Life seemed to have made the pick for her.

“I believe my hair was in a crisponette when I was presented to the earl.” Elspeth spun to her wardrobe, and began searching the shelves until she found what she wanted. “Yes, I do recall— this was it. I loved the gold netting on the pockets, but was disappointed because it did not show to the best advantage on my pale locks. On your brown hair, the gold wouldst stand out more.”

Lesslyn eyed her sister, suspicions rising. Her face was innocent, but a devious glint flashed in her unfocused blue eyes. “You want me to wear your crisponette because you plan to toss yourself out the window?”

“Nay, I ponder upon other paths our lives might take...” Elspeth’s words trailed off, as her brow crinkled into a frown of contemplation.

Lesslyn could not resist tweaking her nose. “You scowl like that for very long, the

creases will set and you will get wrinkles.”

“Sister dearest, I do believe you are pulling my big toe! Refrain from such urges. We needs must cypher upon what to do... what...to...do ...” Elspeth finally gave a nod.

“Sit, and let me try the head piece on you—”

“Whyever for? Have your senses taken leave?”

Elspeth put both hands on Lesslyn’s shoulders and gave her a determined shove until she was seated. “Men are deceivers and users. I think mayhap they fear females, so they seek to keep us under their thumb and see we are dependent upon them for our every wish. They barter us off for position or coin, without a by your leave , no care to what would bring us happiness.”

“Are you going to rally the females of Sancerre to revolt against such worldly bonds?” Lesslyn had no idea what her sister was up to, and wondered if the stress of being told she had to wed a stranger was taking its toll.

“In a manner of speaking...mayhap just a small rebellion.”

“Elspeth, cease the mummery.” Lesslyn reached up and snatched the crisponette away from her sister, as she tried to stuff her long brown hair into the side pockets.

“What are you about?”

She gave Lesslyn a sidelong glance and sat down in the facing chair. Spying the open door, she popped up and rushed to close it. She leaned against it. Clutching her hands to her chest, she smiled wistfully. “I am in love, Lesslyn!”

Lesslyn drew in a slow breath. “Aristide?”

“Oh, yea! He makes my heart rattle inside my chest. When he asked if he could wear

my colors, I thought I could not draw breath! Even his name makes me sigh. Aristide.” She exhaled dreamily.

“He is not titled, Elspeth. Only a second son—”

Her face darkened for a moment. “But his elder brother is a Templar. Do they not take some vow of chastity and poverty? If the man refuses to father a child to carry on the title, and renounces his earthly goods, then Aristide would become Comte di Conti. Is that title not like an earl? Oh, he talks about how beautiful Italy is! ’Tis warm, not like dreary England with its perpetual rain. Flowers grow there, cascading over the hillsides. You do not have to spend your days warming your backside by hearth. He speaks of Venice—one of the most prosperous cities in all the world. Do you not think a comte in Venice would be worth more coin than a master of a holding out in the middle of some foggy fen?”

Lesslyn was growing concerned. “This is a lot of speaking of Venice, flowers and the weather. What are the intentions of this second son of an Italian nobleman? You yourself said men were deceivers.” Mistrust was rippling up her spine, so she slowly rose to her feet. “Elspeth, you have not done something stupid, have you?”

“His intentions are with honor, Sister. He tried to speak to father, but...Oooooo...he spurned Aristide’s offer. Would not even hear him out.” Full of excitement, she nearly bounced to Lesslyn’s side. “I love him—”

Lesslyn gave her a doubting glare. “You thought you loved that French marquis last summer. And before that, it was the nephew of that Scottish baron. You tend to fall in and out of love with the changing of the seasons. What makes you think this is different?”

“I know you believe I am a senseless girl with a flighty heart, but each time I started to fall in love, something held me back. The thought of going north to some remote

island off the coast of Scotland—where 'tis cold, and oft the snow drifts higher than a horse—well, left me chilled. You are cut off from the world for half of the year! I wouldst die. Truly. Soon, it will be Yuletide. I will freeze and grow ill. There will be naught to do, and I will take sick of staring at the walls of this bloody fortress—or another just like it. I shall grow old without ever traveling farther than court. I want to go someplace where the sun shines hot. Where flowers grow nearly year-round, and so big, their fragrance fills the air. Oh, why should men go off to faraway places like the Holy Lands, when we are forced to stay behind and suffer cold blains?”

“What about your father? To do that, you wouldst have to leave him behind.”

A trace of selfishness molded the corners of Elspeth’s mouth, which hardened into determination. “He is not well, you know this. He will not live much longer.”

“Elspeth! You should not say such things. ’Tis like an ill wish.” Lesslyn chided.

Her beauty vanished, as harsh shadows settled upon her countenance. “Sometimes, Lesslyn, I feel like I am the older sister and you are the na?ve one. You may be content to waste the years of your youth going through days of drudgery, but I want to see Rome, Venice, mayhap even go see the deserts of the Holy Lands. There is so much more to life than dismal England. Father will die here. The cold weather saps his strength. Each year, he grows more feeble. It hurts him to walk now. Mayhap if I married and went to live in Venice, then he would be forced to come see me, and find the warmer clime granting him a few years more. So many possibilities are before us both— if we but open our eyes and seize control of our paths.”

“Our paths?”

Elspeth pulled her chair closer. “Do sit, Sister. We needs must talk and be frank.”

Guardedly, Lesslyn sat back down. Immediately, Elspeth leaned forward so she could

see Lesslyn's face. "Please, do not do that. You make my eyes want to cross."

"'Tis the only way I can see your reaction to what I say. I am determined to marry Aristide. I love him. He wants me to go back to Venice as his lady wife. I speak in seriousness: I shall die if I have to marry Hellborne and live out my days in rainy, cold England."

"And what does that have to do with my path?" Lesslyn was mistrustful of her sister's sudden worry about her fate. It had never before bothered her.

Elsbeth flashed a smile. "Well, you are ever the left hand, whilst I am the right. You love rain. I see how happy you are on rainy days. You get this dream-filled look upon your face, and your eyes are faraway, as if you go to another place, another life. You wish for a home, and the things that go with it. A husband, children."

Lesslyn looked down at her hands, trying to hide the yearning from flooding her face. "You know your father will not arrange a marriage for me."

"Again, men deciding what must be. Because he is a pinch-coin he will not permit you the choice of finding a husband and a life of your own. Do you really wish to spend your days here, turning more brown with each passing year? Never to know love? Never to hold your child? Or..." Elspeth prodded, "wouldst you like to wed a man who strikes a handsome figure? One that is tall, with a straight spine and broad, square shoulders? A man with a power about him?"

Lesslyn jumped to her feet nearly knocking over Elspeth. "God have mercy! You are plotting for me to marry Hellborne —so you can dash off free as a bird with a second son of an Italian nobleman!"

"Oh, you can go all mooncalf eyes over Hellborne when I am to be bartered off to him, but when you might be the bride, suddenly you look panic stricken." Elspeth

argued.

“Hellborne is close to Edward. A man of influence. He has bargained for you to be his bride, not me. He wouldst be angry to find himself tricked.”

Elspeth’s cheeks burned red with fury. “Think, Lesslyn! The man has seen me once, nearly a year ago. My hair was bound in the crisponette so I truly doubt he could tell much about me. We barely spoke. If anything, he seemed impatient to be away from my presence. I hold true doubt he could pick me out of a roomful of females even if his life depended upon it. You could go to him, present yourself as me, and marry him. You could have the life you want at Hellborne. You wouldst be happy there. And I shall be happy in Venice.”

“Such trickery could never pass! Your father—”

“Stays here at Sancerre because the weather is too bitter for him to travel. He will not leave the fireside. Never leaves the hearth anymore. He will expect us to travel on the day after morrow. We shall. Only, after I send word to Aristide, he will be waiting with his guard. I shall go with you partway, and then you will travel on to Hellborne.”

“’Tis dangerous. ’Tis...” Lesslyn floundered for words.

“A way for us both to be happy?” Elspeth smiled triumphantly.

What Elspeth dangled before her eyes was tempting, so much so it was hard to think of the reasonings to explain her misgivings. Elspeth lured her with her deepest desires, the very things she hoped for but never dreamt could be made real. Could she risk such? Beauty faded. Mayhap, he could come to see he had a wife that could offer more? On the other hand, Hellborne might end up hating her instead. Howbeit, when she thought of her endless days at Sancerre, little more than a servant, her spirit cried out for something more.

The cloudy mood banishing from Elspeth, she rushed to the trunk and threw back the lid. “We have much to do. There is not enough time to make you new gowns. I am smaller than you, but some of my kirtles will work. The side-lacings will adjust to fit your own fuller figure. You can use your under tunics which will give enough length...”

Clearly, Elspeth, used to getting her way in all, thought the matter settled.

. ? .

Later that night, Lesslyn shifted in her small bed, unable to sleep. She would like to throw back the faded tapestry over the window and allow the moonlight in, but it was cold outside. So bitter, the fireplace was having a hard time banishing the chill of the room. Getting up, she crossed to the fire, and added two arm-sized logs to the flames.

Restless, she tugged her gown’s hem under her, folding her legs to sit down on the hearthstone to enjoy the heat. She liked the smell of the hardwood. Elspeth was right about her—she enjoyed simple things. The scent of wood burning. The way the heat caressed her face. And she so loved rain. Even falling snow seemed to bring a magical joy to her heart. Also, her sister understood that she yearned for a life of her own, not one of a poor relation who felt obliged to earn her keep.

She thought back on the times she had seen the Earl Hellborne. Searching her mind, she tried to recall his name. Greyson. She remembered because his name reminded her of his eyes. She cast her mind back to an early morn last spring. Unable to sleep, she had gone for a walk at dawn, enjoying the thick fog. Hellborne had been leading his grey stallion out of the stables. He had mounted with a fluid grace, which bespoke that he and the animal were one. The horse pranced out of the portcullis and away from the fortress. The second time she had encountered him, she had been hurrying to get back to the room she was sharing with Elspeth. As she turned the corridor, she slammed into the chest of a man. Hellborne. With strong hands, he caught her upper

arms and prevented her from falling. With barely a glance he begged her pardon, and then moved on down the shadowy hallway.

Yes, her heart had pounded and she felt drawing a breath hard. Lesslyn stared into the flames wondering if she dared to take this bold step.

Wondering if she dared not.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:18 am

On the second day of Yuletide my love gave to me,

a home, a blanket and a fireside to warm me...

On the long road to Hellborne, Lesslyn had time to live within her thoughts—and fears. Dressed in one of Elspeth's kirtles—a pale blue, with a matching wool mantel trimmed with grey wolf fur—never had she worn anything so fine. She felt like a fairy princess. Mayhap that lent her flights of fancy, filling the hours of riding through the snow-covered countryside. To pass the time, she conjured twenty different meetings between the earl and her. Some brought a secret smile to her lips. Others sent a pitter of dread to her heart, fearing he would spot her for the liar she was with only a stare from his eyes—the color of fog.

The worry was almost enough to make her turn the chestnut horse around and flee back to Sancerre. One time she even glanced back, her mind torn. But then, she recalled Elspeth was already with Aristide di Conti. She would have to return to Sancerre with tides of Elspeth bolting from the arranged marriage, and soon to flee the country. Regardless of their differences over the years, she could not do that to her. After seeing Aristide and hearing his assurances to cherish and protect her sister, she had to admit the two did seem in love and suited. The young man impressed her by insisting that half of his guard ride on to Hellborne to assure Lesslyn arrived safely.

Knowing this was the day that the earl should meet up with their party, she had chosen the lovely blue gown, hoping to look her best. She feared the effort was ruined by her chattering teeth. The morn had held a hint of warmth on the rising breeze and a promise of a beautiful day. But then the wind shifted, the sky turned

dark and snow began to fall. And fall. Had she anticipated the sudden storm, she would have dressed in more serviceable clothing. It was hard to stay warm when one was covered in thick, wet snow.

Lesslyn turned in the saddle to glance back at the cart carrying poor Ena. The wain hit a dip in the roadway and the cart bounced from side-to-side, causing the woman to fall upon her hands and knees in straw strewn on the cart floor. The hood of her heavy brown mantle—one of Lesslyn's—fell over her forehead and face. Awkwardly, she tried to push it back, but lost her balance and fell forward. The hood dropped down again. Finally, shoving it off her head, Ena look to the sky as if asking what she had done to deserve such a punishment.

Over the years, Ena had been her only friend. Sadness had touched Lesslyn when she considered that she would have to leave Ena behind. Then, Elspeth had felt it necessary to send Lesslyn off with a personal maidservant , saying it would be expected of the daughter of a baron. When her sister brought up the lacking detail, Lesslyn jumped at a chance of taking Ena with her.

In many ways, though her station was low-born, they had commonality. Both were orphaned at an early age, but had been taken in by less than caring family. If she were grasping at a new life, why should Ena not be given the same chance? When she proposed the change, Ena had said not a word, but went away hurriedly. She came back with a small pack of her meager belongings, and smiled. “I be ready, my lady.”

Currently, she appeared to be having second thoughts about the trip, now she had jostled around in the rickety two-wheeled cart for three days. Precisely why Lesslyn had elected to ride instead of bouncing about in the wain.

William, head of the guard, pulled his mount alongside hers. “My lady, I wonder—should we not call halt and shelter up ahead in that stand of pines? The limbs will provide a break against the snowfall and the wind. The needles will be dry

and full of pine sap so we can start a fire to warm you.”

She knew William spoke the rightness of the situation. Howbeit, as tired and cold as she was, she pondered if stopping were a good idea. “I admit I am chilled. Only, wouldst not the pause delay meeting up with the earl as arranged? How far are we from Hellborne?”

William frowned. “In this weather? I cannot say for certain. The earl sent word he would meet us on this road and escort us the rest of the way. Howbeit, what if he is of the same mind and has held up and shelters against this storm? Also to consider—we have to fear brigands seeing us as exposed to attack.”

“Surely, none wouldst dare to attack a cadre bound for Hellborne?” she opined. “I assumed men feared the earl too much for such an affront.”

William’s mouth compressed before he answered. Disapproval molded his face. “In this land, I suppose three men are feared above all others: Julian Challon, Redam Maignart—and the third being the Earl of Hellborne, Greyson de Verre. How they travel through life creates enemies, my lady. Men willing to risk much—or with naught left to lose—might seek to settle a score. They mayhap could also be lured by the notion of gaining a fat purse for a ransom. These are troubled times. One cannot be too careful.”

Laughter bubbled forth from Lesslyn before she could stop it. “Ransom? For me? I fear no man wouldst bother.”

William gave her a soft smile. “You fail to see your value, my lady.”

Lesslyn was surprised by his words, so much so she was unsure how to respond. Men never paid her much mind when she stood in the shadow of her golden sister. Surely, a colorful kirtle and mantle did not magically transform the brown wren?

She had no chance to give a response as screams split the air. They seemed to come from all directions at once. Her guards were turning every which way, heads whipping around, trying to locate from where the threat would come. The hushed landscape suddenly saw movement as men ran from the shelter of the trees and shrubs on both sides.

William called for more riders to move up before them. Poor Ena pulled her hood up and huddled in the corner of the wain, hoping to make herself as small a target as possible.

Snatching up the rein on her horse, William dragged the animal under low hanging boughs of the tall trees. Pulling back a limb on one, he motioned for her to ride into the space between two close pines. "Stay here. I will return for you when all is clear," he barked, before leaving her hidden in the shadows.

The limbs dipped low from the weight of the heavy wet snow, so she had to lean forward over her horse's neck to try and see what was happening. Shouts and cries echoed all around the road. Horses from her cadre flew by as the men, with swords drawn, clashed with horsemen now coming down the trail. Enemies on foot rushed forward, trying to drag the mounted knights from their destriers. Having only the narrow view of what was ensuing, she had no way to tell how many men were attacking them, or under whose banner they fought.

Something went flying past her head. Startled, she gasped as she turned to see an arrow lodged in the tree trunk, still vibrating. Shaken, unsure what to do, she watched as bodies were falling to the snow-covered ground. Horses reared, fighting, screaming as they lashed out with teeth and hooves. Swords clanged as they crashed together. The stomach-churning sounds of men dying in agony.

Lesslyn wanted to put her hands over her ears to blot out the too-real nightmare. Never had she been exposed to any sort of fighting before, leaving her unprepared for

facing an all-out battle, the ugliness of men sliced half open by the swing of a sword, or hear the sickening sound as arrows found purchase and lodged in a chest. She hated staying hidden, yet knew she risked harm should she venture out. The palfrey was getting nervous, the scent of blood spooking it, causing the beast to shift from hoof-to-hoof. She patted its neck, trying to calm the fidgeting. Her mind remained frozen, unable to decide what she needed to do.

One man in ragged clothes, directly in front of her, yelled out to be heard above the din, "Riders coming!" He and the others afoot fled as horsemen came in from the north.

Her hands trembled, but she struggled not to convey her fear to the animal. It was getting harder to keep it calm as men shouted in fear, in agony.

A straggler, running down the roadway, jerked up short in the face of the oncoming cavalry. In panic, he looked around. He turned and came crashing through the tree limbs. Eyes wild, blood flowed from the side of his face, down his neck, and into the edge of the boiled jack. He seemed shocked to find her hiding there. He raised his sword.

"Get off the horse! Now!" he demanded, reaching out for the bridle. Stupidly, he jerked on the leather lead. "Get down, wench! The Devil hisself comes!"

Too startled to think, let alone move, she sat on the palfrey and gaped. She looked about to see if any of her guard were close to call for help. Again, he yanked on the tether. The horse started a deep throated rumble and backed up three steps. Lesslyn grabbed the high, square cantle, in effort not to lose her seat in the sidesaddle. Her right hand went to her waist, and she removed the dagger from the small sheath. Like everything else in life, it was up to her to protect herself.

The half-crazed man reached up to drag her from the horse. Lesslyn did not hesitate,

but drove the knife into his lower arm. His howl blended together with her scream as he refused to let go. The mare bounced on its front hooves, and then took off. The instant the animal hit bowing limbs, he ducked down to fly under them. She could not get low enough. A thigh-sized bough caught her in the head, sending her backward and out of the saddle.

Lesslyn hit the ground hard, knocking the air from her lungs. She lay there, struggling to draw a breath and finding it impossible. Worse, the pain in her head was nearly blinding her vision. She frantically struggled to focus. Only, she could not move, no matter how fear drove her.

“You stupid bitch!” the man snarled.

She blinked and her sight began to come into focus, enough so she could see the savage warrior had his sword drawn back and was ready to kill her.

Lesslyn lay there in the snow, the sounds of battle receding to mute. The snow was falling heavily. Big fluffy flakes hit her face.

And she was going to die.

She almost laughed at the injustice of it all. To finally stop being a shadow— a brown wren —and reach out for a life with both hands, only to end up dying on the road to Hellborne.

She saw the sword start to descend, and closed her eyes.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:18 am

On the third day of Yuletide my love gave to me,

a red garnet, a girdle of gold, and a snow white palfrey. . .

Lesslyn's eyes did not stay closed for but a heartbeat. The strident sound of iron meeting metal that was harder caused her eyelids to fly open. She stared up at the weapon of the bleeding man blocked by a shining sword of tempered and hardened steel. The older blade had sounded flat, dull.

The man's eyes widened as they fixed upon where the two swords had crossed. The singing vibration traveled back through the iron, clearly making it hard for him to keep his grip. The two blades were locked. Now, it became not a battle of weapons, but the strength of two men.

As his blade was slowly forced closer to his face, the desperate man's wild eyes traveled up the gleaming blade to the newcomer—a tall man dressed in a hooded mantle of blue, so deep it was nearly black.

The warrior did a small, graceful duck of his body, and then spun underneath the pinnacle of the two swords, the great cape swirling about him. He used the momentum of his turn to spin the enemy's blade out of his hands and sent it sailing away and into the trees. Before the attacker had a chance to blink, the broadsword's tip was placed to the man's throat.

“Move, and I shall carve a cross from your scrawny neck down to your belly, and have you staked out, leaving you for the wolves and ravens. A gut death is so painful...and slow. But then, the wolves roam hungry this winter. Mayhap they shan't

leave it for long.” He sang out, “Hellborne! To me!”

Still unable to draw breath, Lesslyn’s panicked heart pounded even more erratic. This was Greyson De Verre—the man she was to wed! What a way to be presented to your future spouse. At present, his face was in total shadows. He was nothing more than a wraith of dark blue.

Men melted from the trees, rushing to their lord’s summons. Two came to take hold of the man, and bind his hands behind him. Once that was done, the wraith lowered the gleaming sword. He turned away from the captive and hurried to her.

“Are you hurt?” he demanded.

Lesslyn could not breathe, let alone answer. Her head ached from where the limb slammed into it, and the prolonged lack of coming air was now scaring her. She was not sure she could even blink. Tears filled her eyes. She tried to bat them away to focus on the man towering over her.

“Where are you hurt?” the hooded man persisted. When she gave no reply, he knelt before her. He leaned over her body, but the large hood blocked the filtered light from reaching his face. “Bloody hell. You are not breathing.”

A shriek came from behind him. He turned as the screaming woman came running toward them. “Oh, Saints above! Is she alive? Mother of Mercy! She cannot be dead!” Coming to her side, Ena knelt in the snow. “Surely, the Fates could not be so cruel.”

Weakly, Lesslyn lifted her right lower arm, struggling to reach out to her friend. Ena caught her wrist and squeezed it between her hands.

The wraith pushed back his hood to where Lesslyn could see his face. He was clean

shaven. When she had seen him last year, he had worn a close-cropped beard. The lack of facial hair made him seem younger. And even more handsome than she recalled. His long sooty lashes batted over the pale grey eyes as he looked at her. His chin was square, framed by a strong jawline. His handsome face offered her a worried smile.

Passing off his sword to one of his men, he reached and took her left hand in his. “Can you understand me?”

Somehow, she managed a faint nod. A tear trickled from the corner of one eye. She was scared.

“You have lost your air. It was knocked out of you when you hit the ground. It comes back. Scary when it is happening, but things will be fine shortly. Let me make sure nothing was broken when you fell. Then, we will get you up on your feet.” Hellborne flung aside the edges of her cape.

If she had been able to breathe, she likely would have stopped when he put his hands on her hips. Strong hands, with long fingers. Never had any man touched her in such an intimate manner. Her eyelids flew wide, as he molded his grip over their hips, and then slid them down to her thighs.

Ena gave him a cross glare and then began slapping at his lower arms. “Oh, no! Stop that! Earl or no’ you will no’ be takin’ liberties with my lady.”

“John.” Hellborne tilted his head toward Ena. “Take her in hand.”

The auburn-haired knight passed off his sword and Hellborne’s to a squire, then grabbed Ena by the arms and pulled them gently behind her back. She haphazardly kicked out at Hellborne, and when John gave her a small shake, she tried to kick backward to strike him, too. She only hit the metal greaves protecting his lower legs.

He smiled at her scrappy nature.

“Your fearless protection of your lady speaks highly for you. I merely check to see if she broke any bones.” Hellborne gave Ena an easy, unrepentant grin.

“Well, you just be aware, my lord. I am watchin’ you,” Ena warned, as she backed off from her attack.

Hellborne continued moving his hands down until he reached her ankles. “Nothing broken or out of place. Let’s get her on her feet.” He rose, and then stood hesitating.”

“Well, Ena—there is no courtly way to do this. You will simply have to bear with me to handle your lady.” So saying, Hellborne stepped so he was astride her body.

Lesslyn stared, her eyes traveling up the long, strong thighs, encased in soft leathern hose, exposed since he wore no surcoat. The short black habergeon only came to his narrow hips. Growing lightheaded, the whole incident was taking on a bizarre dream quality. She tried to swallow, as she stared up at his muscular legs. If it were a fantasy, then it must be one born of her darkest desires. How ironic to meet her bridegroom in such a fashion.

He leaned down and locked his hands behind the small of her back. “Can you link your arms around my neck?”

She was too weak to nod again, instead, she just did as he asked.

He lifted her, until Lesslyn was on her feet—and pressed up against him! Her body was flush against his very masculine frame; heat off him rolled over her in a wave. So flooded with the sense of this man, her heart slammed against her ribs. The unusual, luring scent of his skin was surprisingly intoxicating. Lesslyn leaned into him, reveling in the tantalizing fragrance.

“Your breath will come. Trust me.” His head dipped closer so he could whisper in her ear. “You might pass out. Never fear, I shall catch you and keep you safe.”

Lesslyn felt faint, her legs rubbery. She started to sway. Suddenly, air returned and she could draw breath again. Still dizzy, her legs buckled, but as he promised he caught her and held her close.

“See, I told two truths. Your breath came back, and I did not allow you to fall.” He gave a grin that nearly stopped her heart.

Lesslyn wheezed, her throat still burning.

“Breathe slowly. Keep your breaths shallow. Soon, all will be normal.”

Lesslyn tried to offer him a reassuring smile, but her body was focused on blessed air. She had never understood the necessary function, or how something so natural could be taken from you. Instead, she gave him a small nod, and lowered her eyes, unable to meet his penetrating stare.

The fear was subsiding, only to be replaced by other powerful emotions. She was aware of this man, on a level that had never touched her before. Aware she was offering him a life of lies. It made her ashamed.

He kissed her cheek, ever so faintly, the touch so light she could almost believe she imagined it. The moment was spoiled as a chunk of snow fell high from the tree, hitting them both. Hellborne laughed. It was a deep, rumbling sound that suddenly made her feel happy.

His eyes narrowed and he tilted her head back, his brow flexing into a frown as he checked her forehead. His thumb faintly brushed over the sore spot. “You grow a lump. Did he hit you?” He turned his head, watching as they led the man past. If eyes

had the power to kill, the enemy warrior would drop to his death on the spot.

She swallowed hard to push words out. “Nay...horse...knocked me off.”

The attacker looked worried. “I was no’ goin’ to harm her. Wanted the beast, ’tis all...to get away...she stabbed me, she did.” He raised his bleeding lower arm to show the wound.

“Not harm her? You forget I blocked your swing as you stood over her. She was knocked breathless, unable to move. What? You lifted your sword against a woman who was flat on her back?” Fury rode on every word Hellborne spoke.

One of the knights guarding the man held up the knife. “Your lady is a fighter, I’d say.”

Greyson stepped away from her, though he kept his left hand on her back. “Knave, want to save your life? Tell me under whose banner you fought? Why did you attack this party?”

The man glanced from Hellborne, then to Lesslyn, and then back, buying time before he answered. Resignation finally lit his eyes. “No banner, my lord. We were paid coin—I know not who. I canno’ give you a name even if I wanted to.”

“What were your orders?”

“Just to attack the party and take the woman,” he replied. At the darkening of Hellborne’s face, he quickly tacked on. “The command was no’ to harm a hair on her head. Just take her.”

Hellborne barked, “Take her where?”

“Again, I know not.”

Hellborne held out his right hand for his sword, and his squire quickly passed it to him. He did not raise it. Just the threat of the weapon in his hand saw the man backing up—or trying. The guard jerked the upper arm he was holding.

“I’d tell you, if I knew. I swear, my lord, please! The man leading us was Welsh. Not young, not old. He wore an eye patch, and had a white streak at the side of his head. He said we attack and spirit the lass away—and we’d lose our hands if we so much as bruised the woman.”

“Tie him and dump him in the cart—” Hellborne commanded.

Ena called out, “I ain’t ridin’ with that killin’ scum!”

“Sir John, will you take our complaining maid to ride behind you?”

“Aye, Lord Hellborne.”

Ena backed up a step. “Me? On a horse? That bloody beastie will likely kill me!”

The auburn-haired knight held out his hand. “Come, Lady Ena. I will make sure you do not fall off.”

“Lady?” she squeaked. “I ain’t no lady. Lawd.”

The gentle push from Hellborne’s hand steered Lesslyn toward the road and the waiting horses. “Your mount has fled, I fear. You can ride with me. With that bump on your pate ’tis probably best you do not ride alone.” He slid his sword into the sheath attached to the side of the saddle, and then quickly mounted. Kicking his booted foot out of the stirrup, he held out his hand to her.

She looked up at his ungloved hand. It held a power, yet it was graceful for a man, belying the years of wielding a broadsword. Though she knew him not, she saw a hand that would be lifted to protect her, but also one to reach for her in gentleness. In her mind's eye, she could see that hand on her throat, the thumb stroking along the muscle on the side of her neck.

His offering it to her—a simple gesture to aid her in mounting—but she felt if she took that hand she was placing her fate into his keeping.

Mayhap she should have tasted reticence, even guilt. Only, as she stared up into his handsome face, she experienced a glowing tranquility inside, a sense she had never known.

She reached out and took his hand.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:18 am

Gather ye bayberry, blessed thistle, evergreen,

holly, sacred mistletoe, oak and pine...

“Elspeth...you needs must open your eyes...”

The words floated through her mind, making little sense. She had no idea where she was, or why someone was telling Elspeth to keep her eyes open. The only thing Lesslyn could recall was being cold, so cold she feared she might never feel warm again. Then slowly, a radiant heat surrounded her, filled her. So delicious, she just wanted to sleep forever.

Gradually, flashes of images came to her. Her hand reaching out to Hellborne, his fingers closing around hers, as she had put her foot into a stirrup. One of his men caught her elbow and balanced her, until she turned and was seated crosswise on the earl's lap. Almost like great wings, he had enfolded the heavy mantle about them, shielding her from the wintry storm. Clearly, she remembered trembling, but not from the cold. Hellborne made her quake inside. And not in fear.

The inner sense awakening, awareness of him on this deeper level seemed strange. All her life she had been alone. When she was around men she had felt unmoved. Oh, she had heard the bards speaking of love, had seen men and women exchange smoldering glances. While she oft thought of having a husband and a home of her own, she never could put a face to the shadowy figure in her dreams. In a fantasy, the spectral figure leaned close, peering at her face. Filtered sunlight played across his countenance.

Hellborne .

He gave her a wistful smile, and then said, “You needs must open your eyes.”

Pain in her head caused her whole body to jerk, as the flashes in her mind and reality collided. She raised a hand to the lump on her forehead. Touching it carefully. It almost felt like a quail egg under the skin.

“Easy, lass.” Hellborne cautioned. He balanced her to prevent Lesslyn from falling.

“I went to sleep?” she asked, confused.

He gave a nod. “Only for a moment or so. I will not permit you to slumber. ’Tis not understood by healers. Howbeit, men in battle quickly learn that a blow to the head somehow muddles the mind. Sometimes, they will go to sleep and never awaken. So you, my fair maid, shall spend a big portion of the day awake, and mayhap even part of the night. I shall see to that.”

Lesslyn looked up at his strong face. She was sure Elspeth wouldst prefer the soft-faced Aristide. She almost chuckled at the comparison. She, on the other hand, thought Greyson de Verre so handsome! As she had told her sister, he had a power about him. What surprised her was the gentleness he was displaying toward her. She had not expected him to be so solicitous of her, concern clear in his eyes.

The corners of his mouth tightened in a hint of a grimace. “I regret I did not meet up with your party sooner. There were a few things I had to attend to first. I am to blame for the attack. Had you been under my banner, I doubt these mercenary scum wouldst dare the affront.”

Seeing the pennon flapping in the wind, carried by a banneret riding before them, she studied the dark red material. A silver griffin passant , holding a sword in the uplifted

paw, was the device. “I have never seen a pennon like that.” Lesslyn felt ashamed for admitting such, since she truly lacked knowledge of heraldry, having been kept at Sancerre, and rarely traveled outside of their walls most of her life. “I am sorry. It just struck me odd. That shade of red...” Her words trailed off, fearful she might anger him.

“That looks like blood?” he asked, his brows lifting faintly.

She nodded. “Are griffins real?”

He chuckled. “Not to my knowledge.”

“This Welshman...with the eyepatch and a streak of white in his hair? Is he known to you?” Lesslyn watched his face to study his reaction.

He gave a shake to his head. “Nay. I think it likely he might be someone my brother wouldst recognize. I will send word to him of what happened.”

’Twas puzzling. He did not lie to her. She would swear on it. Yet, she had a sense he was not telling her the whole truth. Unsure whether to challenge it, she let the matter pass.

It was his turn to voice questions. “These foreign troops that ride with us—are they some sort of honor guard at Sancerre? Are they to stay at Hellborne now?”

She had nearly forgotten about the cavalry Aristide had sent for protection. “Nay. They are part of the cadre belonging to Aristide di Conti. Second son of an Italian nobleman. My sister goes to wed with him. He insisted part of his troop ride as escort. You may feed them and send them back on the morrow. I am sure they will wish to be gone, in case the weather worsens. How long before we reach Hellborne?”

“Not much farther. I needs must warn you. Hellborne lacks some of the finery that Sancerre likely displayed. There has been no mistress of the keep for far too long.”

“You have never been to Sancerre. My ste—” Lesslyn caught herself before the slip escaped. “My lord father felt no need to spend coin on eye comforts . To be blunt—he was a coin-pinch.”

He laughed aloud. “An unusual way to put it. Well, I do not pinch gold or silver. You shall have an allowance to make your eyes as comfortable as you wish.”

“Where is Ena?” Lesslyn tried to look back to see if she could spot her.

“She rides with John.” He answered, then called, “John! To me!”

The knight brought his steed to ride on the right side of Hellborne. Poor Ena was perched upon the haunches of the stallion, her body pressed up against the warrior’s back. Her arms were around his waist and locked. Her hood fell back as she turned her head to look at Lesslyn. She rolled her eyes toward the knight before her and gave Lesslyn a sly grin. She cautiously reached for the hood with her left hand, but rocked from the movement. With an awkward desperation, she grabbed hold of the knight’s belt again.

“Satisfied your maidservant fairs well?” Hellborne asked.

Once again, she found herself watching his face to judge his answers. “Is your knight wed?”

A chuckle moved his chest. She could feel the vibration against her, and found the sensation pleasing. “Playing maker of matches?”

“Merely being cautious. Ena is a friend as much as my maid.” My only friend, she

added silently. “I will not have her treated without honor and respect.”

He smiled. “Your care for her welfare speaks well of you. Have no fear. John is a good man. And no—he is not married. Like me, he is past time for being made a husband.”

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A horn blowing, announced the arrival of their party. The gate was raised and the cadre moved under the Portcullis, through the gatehouse, and on into the inner ballium. Hellborne Keep was imposing. Surrounded by four towers, outer buildings, all enclosed by a stone wall—clearly, it was a mix of a much older holding with newer additions to fortify it. The word severe came to mind when staring at it. The only thing that softened its stark appearance, high up on the fourth level of the keep, was a double-arched, tracery window.

Lads ran out to take hold of the horses in the inner ward. They waited as the riders dismounted, and then began leading the mounts away toward the stables.

Sir John raised his right leg, and brought it over the neck of his charger, dismounting and landing on both feet. He turned to reach up and take Ena by the waist, and then lift her down. She wobbled, needing a breath to regain solid footing. He released his grip on her waist, but held out his hand to help her climb the tall stairs, leading up to the keep.

Hellborne swung his leg back over the pommel, and stepped down. Placing his hand on Lesslyn’s waist he easily swung her to the ground. He handed off his destrier to a young lad with red hair who stared at him with adoring eyes.

Lesslyn’s gaze roved around, taking in the place that would be her new home. She did not know what she had expected. The buildings appeared sturdy, well-built.

Everything was kept neat, no animals scurrying about. Nothing more, nothing less than you might find in most strongholds. She noticed the banner flew from the central tower. The blood-red field with the silver griffin flapped in the snowy wind, announcing the lord of Hellborne was in residence.

“Well-come to Hellborne,” he said, leading her up the stairs, with Sir John and Ena trailing just behind them. “You are wet. I will get you settled by fireside, and then see all your belongings fetched to you.”

She thought of the trunk containing the half-a-score gowns that she and Elspeth had fixed for her, which contained a few personal belongings. Another held material her sister had given her, so Ena and she could make better clothing, more befitting a countess. “There is not much—just the two trunks and Ena’s possessions.” She saw a flicker of question lighting his grey eyes, but he said nothing. They were strangers, but already she was coming to read his mind. Yes, only two trunks spoke of the emptiness of her lifetime.

Inside, he escorted them to the Great Hall. The room was large, two levels high. Rushes covered the stone floor, and appeared to have been changed recently so there were no food scraps to attract rats. A lord’s table sat on a raised dais, and below four long tables had been arranged in rows of two for the soldiers and villeins.

A man fed small tinder to the fireplace to raise the heat, whilst several maids were placing bread on the lower tables. Torches were not lit, nor were the candles burning in wheel chaundelers, suspended by ropes from the ceiling. Thus, the room was only illuminated by the firelight, leaving it dark and gloomy.

A handful of servants silently rushed about, though most spared a moment to look upon the new lady. Lesslyn wondered what they thought about her. Did they feel she would make a good countess? Or judged Hellborne was marrying beneath him? She suddenly felt scared. How long could she hope to hide the truth? Though their faces

were blank of emotions, they kept looking to each other. Hellborne's hand at her back stayed her from bolting from the Hall.

She glanced to Hellborne to find him watching her face. Her hands trembled from the daunting challenge before her. He likely thought her just cold. Her stomach nearly rolled at having to lie to him. "'Tis a large Great Hall, my lord," was all that she could summon.

He gave her a tentative smile. "Yes, it has size in its favor. Long has it lacked a woman's touch, and it shows, I fear. Come. Sit by fireside. I will have a squire build the fire in your rooms so you can get out of the wet clothing before you take ill."

"Thank you. I fear it may take 'til spring before my bones warm again."

He motioned, and two young boys moved chairs close to the fire, so she and Ena could sit and warm themselves. He took her wet mantle and handed it off to the lad. A maidservant stood waiting with woven tartan blankets. Hellborne took one and folded it around her shoulders. "Please sit. You ladies must be chilled."

"Before you go—what happened to my knife?" Lesslyn asked. "It was my father's." She caught herself almost saying it was all she had left of him. She needs must ever be mindful of telling slips.

Sir John pulled the dagger from his belt, then stepped forward and passed it to her. "I wiped it clean, my lady. 'Tis a beautifully crafted weapon. Well balanced in the hand."

"Thank you."

He went back to settling Ena in a chair with a cover. Once he did that, he gave a small bow and departed.

A squire carried a tray with two golden cups. He flashed a nervous grin and held it out before her. "My lord said I was to fetch hot drink to you. It will warm your innards."

She took the cup, which felt good to her cold hands. "What is it?"

"Honeyed wine and cider," he replied, passing the second cup to Ena.

Lesslyn sipped the brew, liking the flavor. She had never tasted such before. She looked down into the dark liquid in contemplation. Things had seemed rather simple when Elspeth and she had planned this Devil's Bargain . Now, she was afraid.

She watched Hellborne giving orders to the servants. He was more than she expected. Yes, there was the fearsome power that rode upon his shoulders, telling all this was a man that stood out amongst the many. His face was handsome, his body tall and strong...and she found herself liking him.

Very much.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:18 am

On the fourth day of Yuletide my love gave to me,

knowledge, wisdom and secrets shared truly...

“I wouldst speak with my bride.” Grantham informed the wolfhound of a maid glaring at him.

Ena stood, the door barely cracked and one hand on the frame, blocking his path as though she was barring entry to the Devil himself. Grantham suppressed a smile. Mayhap she was.

This night, he was possessed of a strange mood. Life had been turned up on end for him. Just a sennight ago, he had been a fourth-born son with no hopes to better his station in life. Now, he was lord of Hellborne, and was soon to be a husband. Both daunting prospects saw him shaken. Emotions and yearnings that had been long held in shadow now were rising, and he was finding a liking to this newly promised life.

“My lady be otherwise occupied, Lord Hellborne. Shall I send you word when ’tis fittin’ for her to receive you?” she spoke as if an end to the matter.

Grantham wondered how Greyson would handle this rebellious maidservant. Silly question. His brother would have her quaking in a corner for daring to refuse him entry within his own fortress. Whilst he was finding being lord of Hellborne pleasing, he would not push matters that far.

Still, he did want to see Elspeth. He had witnessed the disappointment in her eyes when she entered the gloomy fortress. He wanted to give her something to bring her

glad spirits, to present her the promise of a hope that things could change.

“By damn, woman! You think to bar the way in my own holding? You and what twenty men?” Grantham tried to sound thunderous, but it was almost spoiled by his joyous sense of him being lord here. “I give oath that I am not going to ravish her. I come with a Bride’s Gift.”

At the mention of a gift, her hazel eyes flickered, uncertain. Even so, she still held on to the edge of the door. Grantham gently pushed against it, causing her to back up. Strange, she was terrified of him, but yet not fully cowered. Likely, her confusion stemmed from Greyson’s fearsome reputation being mollified by his own natural charm. She had heard of Gallowglass, and that caused her to be scared. Only, deep down she did not hold a real fear that he would do her or her lady harm.

He took a step into the room, and she suddenly backed up two. He took another. She took three. And it continued that way until she reached the bed. From the plane, she snatched up a plaide cover, and still walking backward, spun the fabric to fly across half of the tub, to cover Elspeth from foot to chin. Her defiant glower dared him to command her to remove it.

Grantham was having a hard time not breaking out in laughter. Ena was determined to defend her lady to the last measure. He admired her intelligence and devotion. With that red hair and shifting green-brown eyes, he had a feeling she would lead John on a merry chase.

“You may go,” he said in dismissal.

Grantham gave a sideways glance to see how Elspeth was taking this small battle of wills. She had grabbed the blue and grey tartan and pulled it to her chest. Nonetheless, she did not seem perturbed he was demanding entrance to her bed chambers. Why he told Greyson he had little taste for a woman that was barely more

than a child. This was a woman, clearly a virgin, and yet not terrified of the fate life had in store for her. She seemed modest, but not overly so.

Grantham took a step toward Elspeth. Ena nearly threw her body between the tub and him. “John!” he called out.

The knight stepped into the room, wearing a predator’s grin. “You called, Lord Hellborne?”

“Remove this woman,” he ordered.

“Yes, my lord.”

Ena’s head whipped back and forth—from him, to Elspeth, to John and then back to Grantham. “What is he doing here?”

Grantham smiled. “He is removing a bothersome obstacle. I promise no harm shall befall your lady— my betrothed. I merely wish to speak to her and present her with a small gift.”

“’Tis no’ proper, I say.” Ena refused to yield her high moral ground.

“I know little of these proper matters. Now, step aside.” Grantham tilted his head toward the woman, and John moved forward.

Ena refused to step away, at least until John drew within reach. Then suddenly, she gave a small mouse sound, and scurried behind the chair before fireside. John stepped to one side, Ena to the other. Moving quicker, the knight switched directions, almost catching her. Ena used the chair, a shield to block him. John’s brows lowered as he leaned forward taking hold of its arms. With another squeak, she grabbed the high back, keeping it betwixt them. John gave a small jerk to the side in a feint, but Ena

traveled with the chair, spinning it around.

A chuckle rumbled in his chest, but Grantham pressed it back down. “Enough!” his bark filled the chamber.

Elsbeth spoke up. “Lord Hellborne is lord here—and within his rights. Ena, thank you, but your concerns are for naught. He is an honorable man.” When the maid bit the corner of her mouth in question, she added, “Truly. ’Tis fine. I have looked into his soul and see the nobility there.”

Ena blinked, surprised by the statement—or disbelieving it. But it was enough for John to catch her distracted attention off-guard. He snatched the chair from her grasp, and then scooped up the maid and neatly tossed her over his shoulder before Ena could protest.

“Oh, you reivin’ miscreant!” She half-heartedly beat on the back of his shoulder.

John winked at Grantham. “Miscreant? A big word for such a lowly maidservant.”

“I have words and more for you,” Ena threatened.

“That is what you get with a redhead—freckles and a temper.” The knight gave a nod and strode through the door, pausing to close it behind him.

Ena was heard on the other side, “I do no’ have freckles!”

Grantham turned his attention back to Elspeth. Her dark hair had been tied to one side; the long tresses hung over her shoulder, and fell across one breast. The ends trailed into the water. “What you spake—that you looked into my soul—be that the truth? I have heard of the Witches of Clan Ogilvie. Tales spread far and wide that they possess this gift. Tides say Julian Challon wed one. Did your lady mother have

Ogilvie blood?”

“Nay, I do not have the gift of The Kenning . I told Ena that to calm her fears. This is a big change for us, coming so far away to a new home.” She tilted her head, her eyes roving over his face in a judging fashion. “Howbeit, in some strange fae way, I do sense a deep streak of honor within you. Men seem to fear you. Women—” Her bare shoulder shrugged.

Grantham was curious about her thoughts on the man she was marrying. “Women what?”

She did not drop the material gathered to her chest, but her grip relaxed. “I am not going to feed your arrogance, my lord.”

“Ah, but I beg you to do so. We are to wed in two days. We shall, methinks, proceed on a good footing if we do so in honesty, eh?” As soon as the words were out, Grantham almost cringed, knowing he was going to wed her in a Devil’s Bargain . Well, the honour was named Hellborne; he supposed that a marriage forged in Hell might have a few bumps to its start.

Oddly, she wore an expression that mirrored his. The look of guilt slowly became one of doubt. “You are regretting the betrothal?” she asked in a small voice.

“I might ask the same of you.”

She nodded, her brown eyes shadowed with sadness. “You might. I shall answer you. But since I asked, I think it only right you speak your mind first.”

“When tides reached me that Edward commanded the lord of Hellborne to wed Elspeth de Sancerre by Yule, I admit I had hesitation at the idea. I had no plans of marrying, and to be ordered leg-shackled to a complete stranger was not a notion that

brought immediate joy to my mind. Still, the king commands the deed done, so I have little choice. Same as you . Whilst we have just met, I feel we will suit. We can make a good life if we set our wills to it. So, oddly, I am finding the reservation now fades, and I see the possibilities ahead of us.”

His words seemed to ease her fears, for the tenseness around her mouth disappeared. “I do not regret this marriage forged in Hell . And I, also, see visions of a future of harmony. I have long dreamt of having a husband.”

“Truly? I was told you turned down several offers.”

“A woman marries once—for most, anyway. I could not see spending a lifetime with some boy-faced courtier. They can be amusing, but I sought something more for a lord husband. I wanted a man, one I could draw comfort from, knowing he would stand beside me, before me, one I could respect. One, hopefully, who found respect for me. I will be a good wife, and try to obey a husband that offers well-come to me as his wife.” Her words held a challenge.

He huffed a small laugh . “Try?” He gave her credit. This lady was not shy. She met his stare, bold and unblinking. She was offering her bond to a stranger, taking the chance they could build something good together. He had to admire her. Yes, this woman was no cowering female. “I can accept that.”

Her lip quivered. Not from fear of him, but fearing to hope their bond could be a pack of value. “I promise to do my best to make you not regret being given a bride without choice.”

“Tales from the Highlands speak of the Black Dragon—Julian Challon. Do you know him?” Grantham asked. There was so much he did not know about this woman. Well, they had the long winter to learn.

She shook her head no. “All have heard of the king’s champion.”

“No longer. Edward sent him north to claim the lands of Clan Ogilvie, along with the Earldom of Kinmarch. He wed the youngest daughter of Hadrian MacShane on command. I saw them at court in Berwick this past summer. Though Challon tried to hide it from the king, I believe he is very much in love with the Lady Tamlyn.”

“Why wouldst he strive to hide that he cares for his wife?” she asked, confused.

“Being at court can be dangerous. Intrigues can catch you off-guard, and any perceived weakness can be turned into a weapon to be used against you. In an odd way, Challon protects her by pretending to be indifferent before the king.”

“Rather sad to deny love. I think life would be better without intrigues, and for people to be more caring.”

“Likely so, but I think man is not oft given to kindness.” He glanced about the rooms. They were Greyson’s quarters. He had never stayed in them, but maintained a room on the floor below. He looked out the double windows, seeing the snow fly through the night air. “The rooms please you? I know they are sparsely furnished, but we can change that.”

“The windows are lovely. We had nothing like that at Sancerre.” She gave him a soft smile. “Please, you have no need to apologize about the state of Hellborne Keep. I am not used to fancy things.”

“This is not fancy, but I think you might like it. This necklace belonged to my mother. When she died, I wanted it buried with her. My father refused. He said he had given it to her in love, and she would want it to go to me, so that one day, I could pass it on to the woman I chose to marry. I never found a woman I wanted to give it to.”

She lowered her gaze, a poignant expression molding her lovely countenance. “You still do not have a bride of your choosing. You are commanded to marry by a powerful king, no one will oppose.”

“’Tis truth King Edward decreed the lord of Hellborne wed.” This time he was more careful in the words he used. “Only, we can choose to forge a life together. The days to come will be what we make them. That much is our choice.”

He held out his hand and allowed the gold chain to unfurl from his fingers, the large garnet dangling at the end. “There is a flaw in the stone. Almost at the center is a dark spot.” He held it up so the firelight illuminated the thumb-size jewel, the blood red of the gem the same color as the pennon of Hellborne. “Though an imperfection, my father picked it for her because the blackness is almost a heart. Why I think he truly loved her. He said that she carried his heart in the stone and it was in her safe keeping. See?”

“How wonderful he spake such words to her.” She tried to focus on the stone twinkling from the warmth of the flames. “I fear I cannot see it well.”

“Yes, I was told you do not see clearly up close to things.” Grantham was puzzled by the odd expression that flooded her face.

“Nay, ’tis where I hit my head. Things are slightly blurred. When I see something, I see a ghost image.”

Stepping behind her, he undid the hook on the chain, and then placed it about her neck. She lifted her chestnut hair away from her shoulder so it did not get tangled in the thick strands. By firelight, the heavy mass picked up the glimmers of dark red, making him think of making love to her. His mind conjured her astride him, her pale body illuminated by the moonlight coming through the tracery windows.

He drew in a steadying breath, as she reached up, her hand cupping the garnet, where it rested just at the dip between her breasts. She was hidden in the water, and the tartan thrown by Ena across the tub lent deep shadows. Still, he had held her in his arms and recognized she had a woman's figure. He smiled, recalling she had no wish for a boy-faced courtier, a thought similar to his repugnance at marrying a child of twelve summers. At each turn, they were finding points of commonality.

He exhaled in a ragged breath. 'Twas most strange. He never envisioned desiring his bride to be. And he did. Very much. There was a surge of power, the male in him responding to a woman. But not just any woman. It was Elspeth. Put her in a room of perfumed ladies at court and he would spot her, like an arrow seeking a target. There was something good, something genuine, in Elspeth de Sancerre that told him Fate had smiled upon him.

Knowing it was time to rein in the rising heat in his blood, he stepped back. The necklace looked perfect on her. "I shall send Ena in to help you dry. Then, you can join me for supper. I shall have it brought up here. I wouldst think your head might prefer a quieter spot."

"My lord, thank you for the gift of the necklace. It comes with a beautiful history. I hope to be worthy of wearing it."

Grantham stared at the exquisite woman. This female little fit Greyson's description of an overly willful termagant. Even her name seemed off. He had a hard time calling her Elspeth. The name just was not suited for one so comely. "You are most awelcome."

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:18 am

One the fifth day of Yuletide my love gave to me,

his troth, a golden ring and to be cherished for eternity...

Lesslyn opened the lid of the trunk and stood staring down at the garments folded within. Odd, her sister's cast offs had seemed so beautiful, clothing so fine that she never hoped to wear. Yet, oddly, it made her feel uneasy in a way she could not define. She was dressed in her chemise and a serviceable white under tunic, debating what to put on over it. Elspeth's gowns were a hand and a half width too short for her, but her longer garment underneath would make it work. The second trunk was full of beautiful velvets, brocades, silks and satins. Soon, she would sew gowns for herself.

Curiously, a premonition, a foreboding, made her fear she had not seen the last of her selfish sibling. Pushing the notion aside, she tried to decide what to wear.

The beautiful blue cotehardie and mantle was likely ruined from the snow and the mud. This morn, she wanted to wear something colorful. No more brown wren. It was a special day: the first one in her new home. Greyson had said he wanted to take her out for a short spell to see a bit of Hellborne's stronghold, so she should dress warmly. She craved to wear the green brocade, only she had no mantle other than the serviceable brown wool one. She glared at the cloak—a reminder of her past brown life. The sudden urge possessed her: she wanted to burn the ugly thing!

“My lady, what troubles you?” Ena asked, folding the blankets and placing them in a chair.

Lesslyn picked up the green kirtle and shook it out. “I will not hear my lady from

you. We grew up as friends. We remain friends. I did not bring you here to be a servant. This is my chance to have a life—a real life. All these years, I feel as though I have lived as a half-invisible, shadow wraith. I know Hellborne Keep is austere, yet it feels like I have stepped out in the bright sunshine by coming to this place. I want you to have a chance, too. You are my companion, my friend, not a servant, Ena.”

Tears flooded Ena’s eyes, the hazel color neither green nor brown. She reached out and hugged her. “Bless you. It hurt me to watch that hateful sister use you, no regard to aught but her feelings, her wants. You deserved better.”

“You do, too.” Lesslyn handed Ena her kerchief to dab at her eyes. “Mayhap ’tis Yuletide magic, but I sense we shall find that here.”

“So, what shall you wear your first morn here? I cannot wait until we have a place to start cutting and sewing new garments for you.”

“And you,” Lesslyn added.

Ena’s eyes went wide. “I do no’ think there is material enough for me. I took some of the best pieces from Elspeth’s trunk. She was leaving the lot at Sancerre, so I figured she was not planning on using it.”

“We shall buy more fabric. I am sure she thinks Aristide will provide her with a seamstress.”

Ena laughed. “He better. The fool woman canno’ sew a lick to save herself. Just think. In a day, you shall be a countess. You needs must dress like one. You plan to wear the green kirtle? It will be lovely on you.”

Lesslyn hesitated. “I only have my woolen mantle. ’Tis warm, but so old.”

Ena's face brightened, as she spun about and dashed out of the chambers. Hellborne had Ena placed in a room just down the hall, so she could be close. Gone only a few heartbeats, she returned with her arms full of pale grey material. "I think this will be fit for a new countess. I was sewing this for your Yule gift. The grey is such a pretty shade. 'Tis almost silver. Nearly the color of his eyes."

Lesslyn took the grey mantle, and allowed it to unfold. It was a soft spun wool, so fine it was supple instead of the courser, heavier yarn usually found in mantles. "Ena, 'tis gorgeous! This is much too beautiful for—"

"A countess?" Ena's brows lifted in challenge. "Wear the green kirtle. With the silver mantle you will look like the lady of Yule. Come, let us get you ready to greet the day and your betrothed."

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Grantham laid his mantle across the back of the lord's chair. He then picked up the leather pouch on the table and weighed its heaviness in his hand. He hoped she would like it.

Elspeth. His mind whispered the name. He supposed he would grow used to it. 'Twas not that the name was unappealing. Somehow, it did not fit her. He could imagine it belonging to the woman Greyson had described—the shrew, used to getting her way for far too long. Only, the woman whom he held in the snow simply did not seem like an Elspeth. She was a strong person, one who would fight for her life against an attacker, instead of standing there screaming. Nonetheless, her gentleness called to his soul.

Greyson would laugh at him, most likely. His cold brother would find spending good coin on her gifts frivolous. One Bride's Gift should be enough for any woman—he could almost hear Greyson's voice chiding him. After seeing how meager her

belongings were, he knew he had done right. He witnessed her expression when he had presented her with his mother's necklace. He would give her the world to see her lovely face lit with happiness for the remainder of their lives. He desired to stand before her as her protector, and to share the coming days. Strange, he had been so resistant to the tides of his taking Greyson's place in this marriage. Now, he breathed in eagerness.

"Mayhap the tap on the head changed her mien," he muttered to himself, as he opened the bag to examine the fine chain of gold.

"Did you say something, Grantham?" John asked, coming up on his right side.

He looked up at his knight and flinched at hearing his own name. "Merely talking to myself."

"Having second thoughts?" his friend asked.

He shook his head. "Nay, just to hear my name at present makes my heart stutter."

John regarded him in all seriousness. "Do you think you can carry out this deception for long? I fear the priest and the cleric were disapproving when Greyson sign papers making you his heir. What about the marriage—will it be legal if you speak vows using your brother's name?"

"Greyson covered all arising problems. The priest assured him, if you stand before God and plight your troth, it is a true bond—no matter what name you say, because God knows who you truly are." Now that he had met Elspeth, and was coming to care for her, the deception put a dark tinge on the looming marriage. He hoped when they were old and grey they would laugh at the unlikely circumstances that had forged the links to their bond. Tamping down the guilt, he knew he could not tell her the truth and risk losing her.

“You seem quite taken with the lady,” John commented, a grin forming his face.

Grantham dropped the chain back into the brown pouch, and pulled the string shut. “Yes, I am. I did not expect to be. Still, from that first moment when I saw her lying in the snow...I felt...” He reached for the words to explain, but was at a loss. “I am not a bard to wax poetic about such things. As soon as I looked at her, I simply felt a rightness . From that point on, that a king commanded the marriage held no significance. Had we met as strangers on that snowy road, I would have pursued her, offered for her. All this...is a grand change in my course in life, but one I am embracing.”

“A big change for me, too. We both know you should have never knighted me. I cannot afford the horse flesh, armor, and a living to support that rank,” John sat down on the bench.

Grantham studied the auburn-haired knight. Third son of a minor baron, John had come to service at Hellsgate. Together, they had been squires for his Uncle Garrick de Verre, at the remote holding on the northern most point of The Marches . When they saved Garrick’s life on a field of battle in Wales, his uncle had knighted him, and given John release to serve Grantham. They had ridden beside each other for too many years. His friend deserved rewarding for that loyalty.

“Think not upon those concerns. Horses and weapons are things, which I now have aplenty. I have need of a man I can trust. Running Hellborne and Hellsgate shall be an encompassing and continual task. I cannot think of anyone I wouldst rather have at my side than you.” Grantham accepted a goblet of wine from the page, holding out a tray, and waited until John took one as well. “Let us raise our cups to the coming nuptials and the bright prospects for us both—”

His words died as he saw Elspeth and Ena coming into the Great Hall. She was dressed in a gown of deep green, which showed her womanly shape to an advantage.

The low, square neck set off the garnet necklace, twinkling at the top of the shadowed valley between her high, rounded breasts. Her long hair had been braided with silver and fell over her left shoulder and down to her waist.

Yes, this was a woman he would pursue—to the ends of the earth, if need.

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Lesslyn hesitated. Hellborne was staring at her so intently; she wondered if she had done something wrong. Her newfound spirit of sureness almost flagged, until his mouth spread into a grin. Ena, two steps behind, held out the hooded grey cape to her.

“Before you don that, I have a gift for you,” Hellborne said. He was dressed in a dark grey surcoat, the deep color emphasizing the paleness of his eyes.

Her hand went to the garnet, hanging just between her breasts. “But you already gave me this lovely treasure.”

“That was my Bride’s Gift. I had this made for Yuletide.” He pulled the drawstring open, and allowed the shimmer of gold to fall into his palm. Allowing the length to unfurl, he worked the clasp. Reaching for her, he looped the chain about her waist and fastened it, so the long lengths fell below her knees. “There. You look every measure a countess now.”

Lesslyn shivered. Partially from his closeness, but more so from that foreboding that had raised its head earlier. Life was never kind to her. She had grown up not expecting it to be. Now, by this strange twist of fate, she was being offered all she ever wanted. Dreams did not travel in this direction for her. A specter of iniquity hovered in the shadows, waiting to snatch this beautiful dream away from her.

He looked perplexed. “You do not like it?”

On impulse, she took his hand. There was such strength in it that she was startled by the sense of power. "'Tis beautiful. I never hoped to own anything so special. Your generosity leaves me without words. I give thanks, my lord."

Hellborne took the mantle from Ena and laid it upon her shoulders. "We must hurry. There is much to see and do this day, and little time. Dark shall be upon us before we know it." He glanced back to Ena. "You are not coming with us?"

Ena shrugged. "I fear my mantle is still soaking wet, my lord."

"You can use my brown one," Lesslyn reminded.

John jumped to his feet. "Use mine, Lady Ena," he said, picking up his from the bench. "I can fetch another."

Ena blushed, as he tugged the black cape about her. "I needs must remind you, Sir Knight, I am no' a lady."

Hellborne snugged up Lesslyn's hood, and fastened the catches at her neck. "I fear the snow is still coming down. But we will not be out long. Come."

Lesslyn allowed him to lead her from the Keep and down the steps, which had been swept of the snow. At the bottom waited horses. One caught her eye, a palfrey of pure white, so white it appeared as if it had materialized from the storm.

"You like her?" Hellborne asked, as they stopped before the animal.

Lesslyn petted the mare's velvety nose. "She's beautiful. So beautiful I expect one of the Fae will be along to collect her."

"Her name is Eira. She's Welsh bred and trained. And she is yours." His eyes were

bright as he watched her.

“Mine?” She put her arms around the horse’s neck and hugged her. “Eira.” At her name, the horse murmured deep in its throat. “What does it mean?”

“She is aptly named. ’Tis Welsh for snowfall.” He laughed softly. “You hugged the horse. What about me. Do I not get one?”

Stepping to him, she slid her hands around his waist and leaned into his embrace. His great cape closed about her, buffering her against the falling snow. The moment spun out as her eyes lifted to meet his, a shard of time so precious that would remain pure and clear in her heart forever.

Lesslyn felt a strange compulsion to laugh and cry in the same breath. Everything was too perfect. She had never felt such happiness, yet in the same instant, she was growing panicked that it would all be stolen away.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:18 am

On the sixth day of Yuletide my love gave to me,

a darkest night, love, and kisses for tears I cried...

Lesslyn thought the day had been so short, but wonderful. The most wonderful day of her whole life.

The snow fell, covering everything with a blanket of white. A fairyland of magic and joy... and love, for she was falling in love with Greyson de Verre. As unlikely as it should seem, she could not hide from the burning spark in her heart, which glowed brighter with each touch of his hand, each time their eyes met.

As her happiness bloomed, there was a nagging suspicion that the lie could not continue. Guilt gnawed at her insides. She was lying to him. How could she continue to deceive the man she was coming to love? There would be no living the rest of her life with this malignant untruth between them. Could he care about her? Enough to withstand the damning words? Or would she destroy this beautiful chance, condemning her hopes for a better life?

They had overseen the gathering of holly and pine boughs, dried thistles and sacred mistletoe from an oak tree to fetch back to the Keep to decorate for Yule. The men selected a large red oak to sacrifice as the Yule tree. They chopped it down, cut away all the limbs, and fashioned it into a huge log to fill the fireplace, which would burn throughout the night.

When they returned, it was to hot mulled wine, and a flurry of activities. The men had brought down a roe deer, and Cook had set about to roast it. Servants scurried around,

setting up the Great Hall for the coming celebration. Lesslyn had to admit the green boughs, red berries of the holly, and white ones of mistletoe brightened up the spirit of the Keep.

Greyson materialized at her elbow, and held up a sprig of mistletoe over her head. “I never learnt much of the traditions of Yule, but I do believe you are allowed to claim a kiss from someone under a Druid’s twig . If I recall, you take a berry, toss it into the fire, and you get a kiss in return. You may continue until all the berries are gone.”

She smiled when he brushed a kiss to her lips—before all! Watching them, servants were laughing and poking each other with their elbows. “That sprig has a lot of berries on it,” she pointed out. “I never understood the custom. The name mistletoe comes from two Anglo-Saxon words, which means dung on a stick . Clearly, they little revered it. Strange, what some people consider of small value has great honor and purpose to others.” She bit back the words, like me.

His face darkened with concern. “Are you not happy with this coming union, Elspeth?”

Elspeth! Each time he called her that it was a shard to her heart. She wanted him to speak her name, Lesslyn, to hear him say that he wanted her for his wife. It was growing clear, this farce would never last a fortnight, let alone a lifetime.

“Nay, this day was wonderful, a most joyous time in my life. I see great hope here, a place where I could belong,” she answered fighting not to cry.

His fingers caressed her right cheek. “I see your eyes sparkle with happiness. Then, a dark cloud comes over them. What is it that troubles your mind? Tell me? Do I needs must slay a dragon to win your heart?”

Nay, never. She realized in that instant her heart had been his for the taking from

when he had knelt over her in the snow. And it would break if he turned away from her if she told him the truth. She could only keep him by living a lie. And she would do that if she needs must. Howbeit, she not only loved him she respected him. How could she awaken each day knowing she would continue to give him these dangerous untruths?

His gaze moved past her and into the hallway. “Oh, good, the priest is ready for us.”

“Us? She almost strangled. “He means to marry us now?”

He laughed. “I might take offence to such a stricken look upon your face, if I thought about it. Nay, we do not wed until morn. We go to the tally room where he placed the betrothal contracts for us to sign. There is a decree from Edward, and a list of the items that come to me. I shall become overlord of Sancerre, and needs must protect the fief. Come, the priest will inform us all that we forge into our marriage.”

Lesslyn allowed him to take her hand and lead her from the Great Hall. Each step took her closer to being his countess. Each breath saw another lie.

. ? .

“The cleric should be here for the signing. Only, he took it into his mind to ride off on some mysterious and urgent mission—a madman in this weather, if I might say—so we needs must carry on without his august presence. You sign here, Lord de Verre. ’Tis saying, you will rule as overlord of Sancerre until the baron’s demise. Then, you shall inherit that title, as well.” Friar Berinon informed him, unrolling a small scroll and holding it in place for Greyson to sign.

After seating Lesslyn at the corner of the table, Greyson sat down in the chair at the head. His pale eyes ran over the writing, and he then reached for the quill, pushed before him by the baldheaded man. Cold dread bubbling in her stomach, she watched

him sign his name with bold, broad strokes. Then, he took off his sigil ring, and affixed the seal of de Verre.

“And this is the betrothal document. Do you wish to read it?” The priest asked of them, unrolling the parchment. “There are numerous provisions due to the...” the little man’s mouth almost grimaced, before continuing, “... ah ...circumstances.”

Puzzled by the man’s reaction, she glanced to Greyson to see his expression. Little paying attention, he pulled the document closer to read. Lesslyn stared at the long roll, daunted by the black ink, which seemed to swirl and flow across the surface.

She had wanted to learn to read, but the baron deemed women gaining such skills was a waste of time and coin. There had been no one to show her where to start, and few items of writing to study and try to learn on her own. The steward had taken pity on her curiosity, and taught her to read and write a few words. He, too, was unsure if he approved of a female having such a power, and disliked going against his lord’s wishes. Howbeit, he found it easier for Lesslyn to learn to keep the tally books. Thus, she could read some words— wheat, flour, sage, sheep, cows —items and marks to be able to keep track of the household goods and their costs. Reading simple words on a list was completely different than reading a marriage agreement. She tried to pick out a single one that seemed familiar to her, but she supposed flour, sage and pigs were not part of a bargain for a wife.

Lesslyn looked at the quill and inkwell as if they were a snake. Her hands shook uncontrollably, so she folded them in her lap under the small table.

Finally, Greyson looked to her, questions rising in his eyes. He moved to stand beside her, towering over her where she sat in the chair in the small tally room. “Can you read? ’Tis naught to be ashamed of. Many men cannot. Fewer women. ’Tis why we have scribes, eh, Sir Priest?”

“And rightly so.” Off to the side of the room, pretending he was not warming his backside by the fire, the priest harrumphed his displeasure at females wishing such learnings.

She gave a frown to the small man. “Yes, women have little need of such tools,” she said sarcastically, wondering if he would catch the true meaning of her words.

Greyson laughed, and then pulled the lord’s chair closer to hers and sat again. “That sounds suspiciously as if you mock another’s thought. Am I wrong?”

She sighed and rolled her eyes. “The baron did not approve. I can read a few words and keep the tally book. But I fail to see the number of tallow cups, or how many barrels of wine kept in the cellars on this long page.”

“Can you sign your name?” Greyson asked.

Lesslyn shook her head, toying with the quill. “Nay. The steward went against the baron’s wishes to teach me what little he did.”

Greyson shifted chairs to where he could now push part of the way into her seat. Curling his arm around her, he took her hand. “Here. Let me help you.” He looked to the priest, who was frowning. “That wouldst suffice? If she signs her name with my help. You can see the lady is desirous of the marriage.”

The man sighed in deep resignation. “Yes, yes ...as long as she avows she wishes the betrothal, I suppose you may aid her. I rarely see a woman able to put ink to paper and form her name. They usually sign with an X and the priest countersigns as witness for her. But if it be your wish that her name is scribbled by her on the documents, then by all means...carry on.”

Greyson leaned his head to hers and whispered against her hair, “I think the dear friar

does not approve of us.”

She watched as Greyson’s fingers guided hers to form an L . She knew that shape because of the tally lists— lard, linen, lead . But then, he moved the tip to the middle of the letter, intending to change it. L for Lesslyn . But he was altering it to a letter for Elspeth’s name.

“Stop!” With a strength she did not know she possessed, she raised his hand.

Both Friar Berinon and Greyson’s heads turned to stare at her. She did not know what to say to them, but she could not allow Elspeth’s name to be affixed to the document. This moment had been at the back of her mind all day. That point where she could no longer swallow the deceit, to trick this kind man into wedding a woman of lesser value.

The friar glared at her in censure. “You have a bride’s panic? Remember, the king commands this. He wills the deed done by Yuletide. He charged me with this task and I dare not fail Edward Plantagenet.”

Lesslyn forced back the lump in her throat. “I wouldst speak with the earl—alone.”

“Females, daring to dictate —” The priest seemed ready to deliver a sermon on women and their place in the world.

Greyson abruptly rose to his feet, his eyes flashing daggers at the smaller man. The priest backed up two steps, clearly alarmed. “Go—now!”

The friar seemed torn between obeying Greyson and leaving the documents. “Shall I take them, my lord?”

“Be gone! Leave the papers.” Flinging his arm out, he pointed to the egress.

The bald man harrumphed again and then scurried to the door. Likely, he had never moved so fast in his life. With a parting glare at them both, he quit the room.

Greyson waited to see if he tried to come back, but the door stayed firmly shut. “The odious man has left us, Elspeth. What is wrong?”

“Elspeth is wrong.” Lesslyn hung her head, unable to meet his stare.

“That makes little sense, you know.”

Chewing on her lower lip, she nodded. “Less than you realize.”

He sat down on the table so he could face her. “You wish not to wed me?”

She shook her head. “Nay, I want most in the world to be your wife.”

“Yet, something is preventing you from signing your name?” he prodded.

She stood up, pushing the chair back. “Wouldst you kiss me?”

Taken off guard, he laughed aloud. “You want to be my wife, you refuse to sign the betrothal contract, and yet you beg me to kiss you? Kissing you is no hardship—quite the contrary. Still, I wish to understand what plagues your mind.” He reached out for her, and pulled her between his thighs. They were on eye-to-eye level, and he clearly was not going to let her turn away.

“I will tell you all. But first, I wouldst like a kiss—that is all—something I can treasure in my heart.”

“I will kiss you ten score times over—”

She put two fingers to his lips to silence his declaration. “Just a kiss—as a man wouldst kiss the woman he loves and one who loves him. Then, I will answer all.”

Lesslyn was trying to keep back the tears. She wanted this one shard of time to remember, a precious memento to take out on snowy nights, and think upon how close she came to having her dream.

She stared at his handsome face. The brown hair worn longer than the Norman-style lay in careless waves. His eyes were the color of fog high in the passes on an October morn, so intelligent, so caring. The lines of his face were formed so that she could never tire just looking upon his countenance. He was more than she could ever wish for... and he would never be hers. Not after she pulled back the cover on her box of lies.

Instead of quibbling more, he leaned forward and tilted his head, so he could brush his lips against hers. At the mere touch, her heart slammed against her ribs, bouncing wildly all about inside her. His mouth was warm, and tasted of the mulled wine he had drunk just a short time ago. His lips were soft, moving over hers, molding hers. 'Twas most odd—she was assaulted by so many sensations. Her heart rocked out a rhythm that made it hard to breathe. She grew lightheaded, so dizzy she was not sure her legs could hold her. He did. With his strong arms, his muscles flexed on her back and her waist to draw her closer, as he slid to the edge of the table. Widening his stance, he pulled her flush against him.

The power in his body was shocking. She knew men had more strength than females, but never had she experienced such a warrior's strength coiled about her. Her blood seemed to boil, as he deepened the kiss. Heat rose off her body. Rose off his. That tantalizing scent which whispered his name and none other filled her mind.

His hand slid to her hips and set her back to arm's length. “Sweet mercy. I call quit, else we shall have a wedding night before the vows.”

Lesslyn put her fingers to her lips, still reveling in the magic of his kiss.

“So...now you have had your kiss, please tell me what you mean Elspeth is wrong .” His hand slid up to the curve of her right breast and his thumb stroked the outer swell. “She feels very right to me.”

Lesslyn gave him a poignant smile. “You feel right to me, as well. Only, mayhap you will change your mind after listening to me. I am coming to care for you, respect you, so I cannot continue to lie to you. ’Tis one of the biggest wrongs I could ever make in my life. Above all, I owe you the truth.”

“What truth?” His face darkened with concern.

She closed her eyes, trying to summon the strength to set the deed right. “I am not Elspeth.”

“Then who are you?” He seemed puzzled, but not overly upset.

“Lesslyn. I am her older half-sister,” she confessed, waiting for his rage to explode.

Instead, he laughed, so loudly the room rang with the sound. He almost stopped laughing for a heartbeat, but then he began again. Finally, he pointed out, “I told you this marriage was made in Hell. And the Devil now laughs with me. So... please ...regale me with tales of how you come to be here and—I assume Elspeth is elsewhere with plans of her own?”

“My sister is very beautiful. All eyes move to her when she enters a room. She is smaller of build, with pale blonde hair and vivid blue eyes.”

“And let me guess—she suffers bad eyesight up close?” Greyson asked, his thoughts clearly turning inward and just realizing something.

Lesslyn frowned. “How did you know—”

“Let us say, someone told me she could not see well when near.”

“The world bows at her feet, so I fear she has allowed it to go to her head. Her father has granted Elspeth her every whim. She has dreams of her own, and rebels at being forced to wed someone not of her choosing. She was most distraught at the decree from King Edward.”

Understanding dawned in his grey eyes. “So, she made a pact with you to trade places? You came to Hellborne, whilst she went where...?”

“She wishes to wed Aristide di Conti—second son of the Comte di Conti. He met our party after we left Sancerre.”

“And they are off to Italy, I wouldst assume, whilst you are sent onward to Hellborne. Why you had the Italian guard with you. Elspeth feared going against the command of the king of England, eh, and thus cyphered to fell two pigeons with one arrow? So, how did she convince you to take her place? What did she offer you to save her from a fate worse than death?

“Naught, my lord—other than to come and be your bride.” She reached out with a shaky hand and touched his cheek. “You see, I, too, have dreams of my own. I was weak and stupid enough to think I could find them in deceit. When you have spent most of your life wishing for something forever out of reach, you become imprudent and reckless enough to snatch at what is dangled before you. A bright shining moment of hope.”

“I never thought you should be called Elspeth. It simply did not fit you. Lesslyn.” He spoke the name as if testing its sound. “Aye, Lesslyn names you well. So, Elspeth is off to wed a second-son of an Italian nobleman, whilst you willingly came here to

marry the Earl de Verre? This is your dream?”

“I dreamt of having someone to care for, a home...mayhap a child. It little mattered about you being an earl.”

“Why should you not have these things? I do not understand that your father—”

She corrected, “Step-father. My mother married him after my father died. I was but a babe when he passed. I do not know how she came to marry a second time to Elspeth’s father. My step-father was not cruel, but he was uncaring toward me. I think he must have hated my father, for he seemed to take great pleasure in telling me that my sire had left no provisions for me and my future. He said I wouldst never marry, because whilst he had enough coin to dower Elspeth, I need not hope for the same. That no man could accept me as a bride without coin.”

He reached up and took her hand from his face. He linked their fingers. “He must have a shriveled heart, for he lied. You wished to marry me—with or without an earldom. So you took the risk and played a fool’s game. If you want this life so badly, why do you now cry halt?”

One tear slipped from her eye and trickled down her cheek. “I meant what I said: I respect you too much to give you a lie.”

“Oh, what the Devil weaves, when he plans deceit.” He laughed softly, mockingly to himself. “Lesslyn, oh, Lesslyn ...the mischief of half-siblings could see one undone if we permit it.”

Lesslyn was not sure what to expect. He might throw her out into the snow and tell her find her way back to Sancerre, though she doubted this man would treat her thusly. It was a mounting puzzle why he wanted questions answered, but his only response was to laugh at what she was telling him. Never would she expect him to

view the deceit a thing of mirth.

“I do prefer calling you Lesslyn. I could not envision me speaking Elspeth in the deepest night.” He brought her hand to his lips and brushed a kiss to her knuckles. “But I could see us—before the window in the lord’s chamber—so strong is the vision I wouldst think it a memory— or a foretelling.”

He placed her hand that he had been holding on his shoulder, and then took hold of her hips again, pulling her to him. Lesslyn was too stunned to resist. She did not want to resist. He gently kissed her eyes, her cheeks, the tears that had fallen. She blinked, fighting the jumble of emotions crashing in on her. The feelings had a sharp edge, sending her along the perilous quest betwixt hope and despair. Not knowing what this man wanted, she realized she would give it to him a hundred times over if he only asked.

His mouth brushed the hair covering her ear. “I could see that so vividly last night, when I watched you bathing. My hands skimming over your curves.” His left hand slid up her waist, then up to the top of her sleeve. He kissed the side of her neck, sending bumps to crawl under her skin. His fingers pushed aside the material, past the seam, until his hand could slide into the bodice of her gown.

His fingers moved softly to caress her bare breast. “You wouldst permit me to do this if we were married?” A smile spread across his much too sensual mouth. She could feel it.

Lesslyn was so startled by all the sensations storming through her body, vibrations she had no idea could be conjured within her, that it never occurred to her to stop him. “Yes...”

He removed his hand and pulled her to him, crushing her body against his unyielding one. “You wouldst allow me to do more, Lesslyn? If I marry you wouldst you allow

me to touch you where I want...kiss you where I wish...as often as I will?"

"Yes, Greyson..."

He nuzzled her hair at the side of her face. "And wouldst you call me Grantham as I caress you? When I am one with you?"

Grantham? Lesslyn blinked several times, trying to shake the potent spell he wove over her. She leaned back to judge what played behind those pale grey eyes. She was missing something, but her besotted mind could not fix upon the rub.

"Yes."

"Very well, I shall take you to wife." He pronounced with a smugness that made her want to slap the arrogant grin off his face.

Stepping back, she fisted her hands on her hips. "So, that is all it takes for a woman to convince you to marry them?"

He reached out and tapped the tip of her nose with his finger. "Nay, 'tis what it takes for you to sway me."

She was confused, befuddled with her emotions and his mummery. "What about Sancerre? You will not inherit the barony."

He shrugged. "Matters little. You see, my brother did not want your shrew sister as a wife, any more than she wanted him."

"Brother?"

"Half-brother, actually."

“And he wouldst be Greyson? Thus, you are Grantham?” Things were coming into focus to her mind. “You are not earl here?”

“I am lord of Hellborne. Greyson made me his heir a fortnight ago. Upon his death—unless he marries at some point in the future and sires a son—I shall become the earl,” he explained. “He also gave me the small holding of Hellsgate. He really did not wish to marry with your sister.”

She took a moment to absorb the details. “So...Greyson made you his heir and gave you another holding to marry Elspeth. Only, Elspeth sent me in her stead. If he is angered by this deception, will he not take away the things he gave you as payment to wed her? Then, you wouldst get neither holding, and nor will you possess a claim to Sancerre. By marrying me, shall you not lose all?”

“Greyson is an honorable man. He knows by raising me to heir of Hellborne, Edward can rest assured the vast holding is tied to him, remaining loyal, which was the main point of his command.” Grantham smiled. “He also gave me a thousand pounds gold in the bargain. I do not want you to think I hid part of this marriage from you.”

“Truly? That much? I have never seen such a sum, but it sounds a lot. Baron Sancerre always said he could not afford coin enough to give me away.” She began laughing for the whole situation seemed so comical. “In a roundabout way, I suppose your brother paid my Bride’s Price .”

“I think I drove a weak bargain. In truth, Greyson was so eager to escape marriage to your sister that he wouldst have paid thrice that.” He took her hand, and got down on one knee. “So, shall you accept this fourth born son, who might one day be Earl of Hellborne? Who wishes you and only you for his wife?”

Her hand trembled. She might be sad or upset that Greyson de Verre had so wished not to marry her— well, Elspeth —that he willingly paid a small fortune, or even be

distressed that her sister had devised her part of the deceit. Only, had neither of them taken those steps, then Grantham would not be on his knee before her. Life had traveled in circular paths for them both, due to their siblings' machinations, propelling them to this point—and to each other.

“Please say yes, or I shall be forced to lock you in the lord’s chambers and spend the winter making you change your mind,” he teased. When she hesitated, thinking, he got up from his knee. “Sorry, the floor is too hard for me to stay like that while you work that beautiful mind. Why do you hesitate?”

“Ena,” she replied, still considering.

His brows lifted, “Ena? I am down on the floor, groveling for your marriage consent, and you are thinking of your maid?”

“Yes. I think it wouldst be nice if we gave Ena and John a hundred pounds of my dower as a wedding gift. What say you?”

“Done! So that is a yes from you, Lesslyn?”

She gave a nod. “Oh, aye, wed with you I shall, Grantham de Verre. Though I come to you with little more than the clothes on my back, it seems you got a bride worth a small fortune. I must remember to thank your brother when we see him next.”

Grantham took her into his embrace. “A kiss to seal the Yuletide bargain? Sorry, I did not bring the mistletoe.”

Just as his lips touched hers, the door flung open, and the priest and another man came rushing in, both wearing worried expressions. The second man was younger, taller, and with thick black hair cut in the Norman style.

“Lord Grantham! Lord Grantham! Do not sign the betrothal agreement! Please do not sign that parchment. This must stop! ’Tis wrong!” Friar Berinon was nearly breathless from the protestations. He finally turned to her with a sneer and said, “That is the truth—he is not Greyson de Verre, but his youngest brother. I never held it was right to do that. You will not be wedding an earl. So there—you can just take your worthless tail back to Sancerre and try your tricks on someone less careful.”

Grantham stepped half before her, the warrior in him at ready to defend his lady. Her heart fluttered at the fine fit of a man he was. She took hold of his left arm and leaned to it.

“You overstep the bounds, Friar Berinon. Do not cast language of insult at my lady. She already knows about me not being Greyson, and accepts that. It makes no difference.” Grantham informed him.

“No doubt she is willing.” In spite of the warning from Grantham, the little man leaned slightly to make eye contact with Lesslyn, shooting her a dark glare. “I know you.” Then, he whipped around and barked at the cleric, “Tell him. Tell him who she is. Or more to the point of the matter—who she is not.”

Grantham started to speak, “I al—”

“My lord,” The scribe started unrolling small parchments, “I prepared the contracts for Lord Greyson, naming you as heir and baron of Hellsgate. Whilst I was working on the betrothal agreement, one of the other scribes happened to hear it was for the daughter of Baron Sancerre.”

“You tell us what we already know.” Grantham glowered at the two men. “Get on with it. You are delaying my wedding.”

The younger man nearly quailed before Grantham’s ominous expression, his hands

shaking as he laid out documents. “The other scribe raised some valid questions about the legitimacy of Sancerre. Let me say—the claim of Roye de Sancerre to be baron does not stand. It would have been around the time King Henry died, and Edward took the throne. I suppose in the confusion with the funeral, and then coronation, no one noticed until now. The man, a cousin of some sort, seems to have assumed the title upon marriage to Marjorie de Sancerre.”

“My mother,” Lesslyn whispered, wondering where this might be leading.

The scribe spared her a nervous glance. “Yes, your lady mother. She was originally wed to Reynold de Sancerre, baron of that holding, the charter going back to King Edward’s father, granted after the battle of Lewes. Upon Sir Reynold’s death, Lady Marjorie wed Roye de Sancerre, and he took up the title without Edward approving the marriage. Somehow it never came to notice, likely because the surnames were the same. Roye de Sancerre rarely came to court—understandably, considering his deceit. He remained away from court for so long. Roye de Sancerre is not baron there—no matter what he calls himself. So you cannot proceed with the wedding. He cannot—simply cannot—offer the barony as part of her dower since it is not his. His daughter Elspeth is not the heir to Sancerre.”

Grantham looked to Lesslyn, with a question in his eyes. She shook her head to the sides, saying she knew nothing of this revelation. “Then who is heir?” he asked.

“Mayhap I should have said heiress. Her name—” he glanced down at the parchment, “is Lesslyn de Sancerre, daughter of Reynold de Sancerre.”

Grantham threw back his head in laughter.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:18 am

On the seventh day of Yuletide my love gave to me.

his heart...the most important and precious gift of all.

Lesslyn felt so warm. All her life she had huddled and shivered 'neath the covers during winter nights. No more. Grantham's body put off a heat that would keep her snug, even in the deepest of winter. Her husband rested peacefully, his body molded to her back and his arm lay over her hip. His hand was curved to her belly.

She was drowsy and could drift back into a cocoon of delicious heat, but she wanted a moment of quiet to relish this new-found life. She cast her mind back to the simple ceremony. Since Hellborne had no chapel, and the storm had stopped all travel, they spake their vows before fireside in the Great Hall, the whole of the Keep witnessing Lord Grantham de Verre taking Lesslyn, baroness of Sancerre, as lady wife. The wedding feast was merged with the Yuletide celebration, and all had a grand time.

Grantham was so handsome, as he had held the wedding cup for her to take a drink. She did not think there was a man in all the kingdom that could compare! She smiled a cat's smile of contentment, as she curled her fingers over his hand. And he was hers! No longer would she pine for a life shared. She was Lady de Verre, who might— or might not —be a countess one day. His countess.

Grantham shifted. Leaning to her, he kissed her ear. "I think my other arm is numb from sleeping on it. Sharing a bed will take a bit of getting used to. But let me show you something I discovered during the night."

Lesslyn started to roll to him, but his hand tightened, snugging her in place. "I

thought I was the one making discoveries.”

His body rumbled with a low chuckle. “Aye, I had the pleasure of leading you to such mysteries. This one pales beside those—and more to come—but it helps keep my arm from growing numb.” He slid his arm under the curve formed by her hip and waist. “It is a perfect fit, eh?”

“’Tis most strange...a day ago I was a nothing...a shadow wraith—now I am a married woman,” she mused.

He echoed, “Shadow wraith —pray tell what is that?”

“A figment of my mind. Elspeth was always reminding me I was brown —brown hair, brown eyes, brown clothing—that I blended into the shadows, almost becoming one of them,” she explained.

He raised up on his elbow to place a kiss on her upper arm. “You are no such thing. You are the baroness of Sancerre. For that matter, you are the baroness of Hellsgate. Precious Elspeth be naught but the daughter of a usurper.”

Pulling the cover up, she turned in his embrace so she could watch his face. She found she could do that for hours on end. “I was but a baby when my father died. Of course, I had no memory of him. Only that knife my mother gave to me, saying it was his. She rarely spoke of him or their marriage. I had a sense she was saddened to talk of him, but also fearful the baron—Roye—misliked that she kept his memory alive for me. As a child I grew up, accepting, without too many questions. When one intruded on her personal grief, I stopped the asking. Then, she died when I was nearly seven. What will the king do now?”

He sighed. “’Tis a muddle. I suppose your step-father will have to go before Edward and stand accused of assuming the title and control of your lands. Edward could

dismiss the offences. But you never know with his quicksilver moods.”

“He is an old man now, walks with canes. He spake the last time he took Elspeth to court that he wouldst never live to put eyes on London again.” Lesslyn pondered what would happen to Elspeth’s father. “I suppose it was best for my sister that she was off to Italy before this was uncovered.”

Grantham nodded. “There are mysteries to unriddle. Do not fret, dear wife. We shall face what comes together. I promise I will not rest until we have all the answers to why Roye de Sancerre assumed the title, and wed your mother.”

Lesslyn wanted the questions answered, but was aware that time’s passage would make getting answers very hard. “We might never know those things.”

He ran his hand down her arm. “What I know is that I love waking up with my wife named Lesslyn beside me in bed.” Grantham tugged the fur aside slowly until her hip was exposed to the cool air. His first finger began tracing invisible marks on her skin.

She shivered, from the cold, but also from his touch. “You are making me chilled.”

He leaned to her and bit down on her earlobe gently. “I promise to warm you, wife.”

“What are you doing?”

“I am giving you a first lesson in letters.” His tongue traced the swirl of her ear, raising more bumps to crawl over her skin. “Now, you must pay heed. I use my finger as the quill, your skin the parchment.” He made his play marks upon her skin. “Know you the letter I just made?”

Being playful, she asked, “What do I get if I can answer correctly?”

“For every letter you are right, you shall win a kiss. And for each letter you are wrong, I shall collect a kiss of my choosing.”

She laughed. “It seems we both win, even if we lose.”

“Ah, the object of the game. Now, tell me what letter I made.”

She sighed, “I fear you have to collect your kiss, for I do not know.”

“‘Tis an I.” He kissed the side of her neck, and then drew another symbol.”

She smiled. “That one I know . L— that is the first letter of my name.”

“True. But this time, I am spelling out something else. So where do you want your kiss, baroness?”

She thought for a moment. “Upon my breast. I do like it when you kiss me there.”

“Ah, yes...I gathered that. But if I humbly obey your request, then our lesson of letters will be forgotten,” he warned.

Lesslyn brought her leg to rub along his. “Wouldst that be so bad?”

He made a face of dismay. “Oh, very well. If you insist—” Grantham slid the wolf fur down, until her breasts were exposed to the cool morning air. “Trouble arises. You did not say which breast, so I am forced to kiss them both—”

A scream split the silence of the Keep, followed by the sound of voices growing louder. Evidently, someone was raising a fuss, with others joining in—and all were headed their way. Grantham quickly flipped the fur throw over them, as there was pounding on the door.

The wooden door flew open, and Elspeth sailed in, shrieking at the top of her lungs. “You cannot marry her! Stop this now!”

Grantham tucked the fur against his backside, then glanced to Lesslyn. “Elspeth?”

Lesslyn nodded in dismay.

“My lord,” One of the squires said, whilst he and another were trying to grab Elspeth’s arms, but she kept beating at them with her muff. “we tried to stop her.”

“Grayson de Verre, you cannot marry that woman—why, she is a liar!” Elspeth proclaimed in mock astonishment.

Grantham exhaled his disgust. “She is your sister—baroness of Sancerre, and now also baroness of Hellsgate...and my lady wife. So, I would hold thy tongue if you have come here to hurl insults. Or you might lose it.”

Elspeth finally stopped her caterwauling, long enough to take in the scene before her. Her brow crinkled as if she doubted what she saw. “You are in bed with him? And my... oh my —I do not recall you...looking so... beautiful , my lord.” She blinked several times, and then moved closer to the bed.

Grantham yelled, “John!”

Elspeth launched into her attack again. “My lord, that woman is indeed my sister. My half- sister. I do not know what lies she has told you, but I am the true heir to Sancerre. My father—”

“Your father is a usurper. He stole the fief from Lesslyn’s sire.” He wagged a finger at a shocked Elspeth, and then seemed to look around for his sword. “John! To me!”

Elspeth put a hand to her chest, as though she might fall to the floor. “I know not why she wouldst tell such stories—”

“Not stories. King Edward’s scribe discovered the deceit. John! Blast you! Get in here now!”

The squires again made an attempt to catch Elspeth, but she soundly rapped them on the heads with the white fur muff. As she was struggling with them, a barefooted John came rushing into the chambers, followed by two guards, all looking around for a horde of Viking invaders. What they found was one Elspeth, absurdly beating upon two young lads.

“About time you came.” Grantham roared. “Take that... female out of here!”

John tried to duck as the muff came sailing toward his face. He grabbed hold of Elspeth’s shoulders and was struggling to maintain the grip, as she kept trying to hit him. “What shall I do with her?”

“Toss her into the oubliette , for all I care. Confine her somewhere, whilst Lesslyn and I dress in privacy.” Grantham commanded. “If she keeps screaming like that, stuff a cloth in her mouth. It does not have to be clean, either.”

It took all three men and the two squires to remove the fighting woman, and finally pull the door closed.

Lesslyn and Grantham exchanged looks, and then broke out laughing.

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Hours later, as dark once more prowled the snowy land, Grantham enjoyed the peaceful fireside with his wife. As a start to a marriage it was memorable, to say the

least. Elspeth was off in a huff, hotly demanding to return to Sancerre without haste. And frankly, he was pleased to see her gone. He felt sorry for her guard, having to turn around and go out again, but he wished the woman out from under his roof without delay.

“Small wonder Greyson did not want to wed that—Devil’s spawn. Even Hell would not want to claim her,” he railed. He had been in a sour mood after having his first morn with Lesslyn interrupted.

Lesslyn unbraided her hair, and shook it free. “I do not know about Hell, but Hellborne has no need of her. Truly, your brother was lucky not to get himself leg-shackled to Elspeth.”

Warmth flooded Grantham’s blood, as he watched the firelight play across his beautiful wife’s form. “Come here, my lady. I have need of you to sooth my furrowed brow.”

“In a moment, my lord husband.” She went to toss a small log onto the fire. “I wouldst give an apology for my sister disturbing us this morn, but I fear that nonsense should be on her head and hers alone.”

“So, her love for said Aristide died a quick death when tides came that his older brother had forsaken his Templar vows of chastity and poverty. How dare he return—with a wife and son—to claim his rightful place as heir to the Comte di Conti’s holdings? Did she really think she could rush back here, pretend she was the victim of your scheming, and get me—um, Greyson—to marry her instead?”

Lesslyn shrugged. “I fear that is precisely what she hoped. She is so beautiful, how could you deny her? No one rejects Elspeth. Of course, now she has discovered you are not Greyson, and that he remains unmarried, she believes the king’s decree still sees them betrothed.”

Grantham reached out and snagged her hand. “Well, she is away, the priest and the scribe with her. So, who knows? If she does decide to hunt Greyson down, she will have to head north— far north . He is in Scotland, vowing not to come back ’til the spring thaw.”

She fell into his lap with a smile. He had thought her so beautiful, lying in the snow, that first morn. But it was nothing compared to how lovely she was now. There was a glow of happiness which lit her eyes. And it made him satisfied that he was the one to put that expression upon her countenance.

“Are you sure that you are content with this wife? My sister is very beautiful. I have heard bards speak of Helen of Troy, whose beauty launched a thousand ships. Surely, my sister would compare to Helen.”

“Your half -sister.” He placed his hand on her thigh and began ruching the material of the kirtle upward. “If Helen were of the same nature as your sister, those ships were launched fleeing her!”

Lesslyn leaned back against his chest. “What are you doing, husband?”

He nibbled at her ear, then answered, “Returning to our spelling lesson—which was rudely interrupted.” He traced out letters on the soft flesh of her upper leg. “You recall the first letter I made?”

“You said it was an I.”

He grinned and kissed the column of her throat, allowing his left hand to slide up to her breast, cupping the fullness. “You are an apt learner. The second letter was the start of your name.” He traced two more letters.

“That is an E . I will not say why I know that letter.”

He traced three more. “Any guess what these are?”

She shook her head. Her breathing was changing as he fondled her breast. Lesslyn was so responsive. A willing learner in the games of love as well.

“I traced out I-L-O-V-E-Y-O-U.” He whispered against her temple, “I...love...you , Lesslyn.”

She turned in the embrace to see him full faced. “And do you?” she asked, almost fearful of his answer.

He kissed her, letting loose his full passion. He could feel her tears falling on his face, so he lifted his head to see why she cried. “That I love you makes you cry?”

“Tears of joy, my love...tears of joy.” She arched to bring her mouth to his, kissing him with all her love.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:18 am

Essence of the game has run its course,
object of the game achieved—love was won and nothing lost.

— Maeve Montgomerie

Night was quickly approaching, turning the snow blanketing the landscape to purple and blue. Lesslyn stood watching the winter scape beyond the double windows of the lord's chamber. Married for only a sennight, she loved her new life and could not imagine being happier.

Her husband's laughter drew her back from reliving how they met. Remembering their first kiss beneath a snow-covered tree. Giving a sigh of contentment, Lesslyn moved to light the candles about their rooms.

A messenger had fetched a letter to Grantham only moments ago; thus, she was curious what words had moved him to laughter. "Pray tell, what brings such mirth to you, husband?" Lesslyn smiled, dropping into his lap.

Grantham chuckled again. Shaking his head, he tossed the missive down on the table. "Sometimes Fate plays strange tricks upon us and our destinies."

"Not having second thoughts about our marriage, are you?" she teased, knowing that was not the truth. Grantham was as happy as she. She had no doubts over that. She plucked up the piece of parchment and tried to read it. "Whilst I am making good progress with letters, I fear this is still beyond me."

He brushed a kiss to her lips, and then a smile slowly spread over his sensual mouth. “Actually, this message is for Greyson—though I am not sure where he is, or even if he will care. It seems, my love, this is a ransom note.”

“Ransom? Good lord! Who has been snatched for a ransom? Who demands it?”

He leaned back in the chair so he could watch her face. “You recall the Welshman who attacked your cadre on the way here?”

“That I do. Such would be hard to forget. You speculated at the time that Greyson might know who the man is.”

He nodded his head. “And obviously, he does. It seems this Welshman has abducted Elspeth on the road back to Sancerre.”

“You jest?” she gasped.

He held up his hand, palm flat, as if swearing to the truth. “He has her—according to his missive—and he will trade her for a thousand pounds gold to be delivered by Greyson. They are to meet at Borely Abby on Twelfth Night to make the exchange. I am assuming the one writing lacks any notion that the day has already passed. Besides, Greyson is just perverse enough to tell him to keep her. In truth, she is not worth that price.”

“Oh, dear, what shall we do?”

Grantham’s hand caressed her throat. “What say you—we make my brother happy and let this Welshman keep her.”

This time, it was Lesslyn’s turn to break into laughter. “Oh, poor man!”

Grantham pulled her close and nuzzled her hair. “Yes...poor man!”