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Merthin opened his eyes to bright daylight. He had slept late: the angle of the sun's rays shining through the bedroom window told him it was the middle of the morning. He recalled the events of the previous night like a bad dream, and for a moment he cherished the thought that they might not really have happened. But his chest hurt when he breathed, and the skin of his face was painfully scorched. The horror of Tilly's murder came back to him. And Sister Nellie, too—both innocent young women. How could God permit such things to happen?

He realised what had awakened him when his eye lit on Caris, putting a tray down on the small table near the bed. Her back was to him but he could tell, by the hunch of her shoulders and the set of her head, that she was angry. It was not surprising. She was grieving for Tilly, and enraged that the sanctity and safety of the nunnery had been violated.

Merthin got up. Caris pulled two stools to the table and they both sat down. He studied her face fondly. There were lines of strain around her eyes. He wondered if she had slept. There was a smear of ash on her left cheek, so he licked his thumb and gently wiped it off.

She had brought new bread with fresh butter and a jug of cider. Merthin found he was hungry and thirsty, and he tucked in. Caris, bottling up fury, ate nothing.

Through a mouthful of bread Merthin said: "How is Thomas this morning?"

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"He's lying down in the hospital. His head hurts, but he can talk coherently and answer questions, so there's probably no permanent damage to his brain."

"Good. There will have to be an inquest on Tilly and Nellie."

"I've sent a message to the sheriff of Shiring."

"They will probably blame it on Tam Hiding."

"Tam Hiding is dead."

He nodded. He knew what was coming. His spirits had been lifted by the breakfast, but now they sank again. He swallowed and pushed away his plate.

Caris went on: "Whoever it was that came here last night, he wanted to conceal his identity, so he told a lie—^I_Mnot knowing that Tam died in my hospital three months ago."

"Who do you think it could have been?"

"Someone we know—^I_Mhence the masks."

"Perhaps."

"Outlaws don't wear masks."

It was true. Living outside the law, they did not care who knew about them and the crimes they committed. Last night's intruders were different. The masks strongly suggested they were respected citizens who were afraid of being recognised.^z

Caris went on with merciless logic. "They killed Nellie to make Joan open up the treasury^I_Mbut they had no need to kill Tilly: they were already inside the treasury by then. They wanted her dead for some other reason. And they were not content to leave her to be suffocated by smoke and burned to death: they also stabbed her fatally. For some reason, they had to be sure she was dead."

"What does that tell you?"

Caris did not answer the question. "Tilly thought Ralph wanted to kill her."

"I know."

"One of the hooded men was about to do away with you, at one point." Her voice caught in her throat, and she had to stop. She took a sip of Merthin's cider, composing herself; then she went on. "But the leader stopped him. Why would he do that? They had already murdered a nun and a noblewoman—^I_M why scruple to kill a mere builder?"

"You think it was Ralph."

"Don't you?"

"Yes." Merthin sighed heavily. "Did you see his mitten?"

"I noticed he was wearing gloves."

Merthin shook his head. "Only one. On his left hand. Not a glove with fingers, but a mitten."

"To hide his injury."

"I can't be sure, and we certainly couldn't prove anything, but I have a dreadful conviction about it."

Caris stood up. "Let's inspect the damage."

They went to the nuns' cloisters. The novices and the orphans were cleaning the treasury, bringing sacks of charred wood and ashes up the spiral staircase, giving anything not completely destroyed to Sister Joan and carrying the detritus out to the dunghill.

Laid out on a refectory table Merthin saw the cathedral ornaments: gold and silver candlesticks, crucifixes and vessels, all finely wrought and studded with precious stones. He was surprised. "Didn't they take these?" he said.

"Yes—^I_M but they seem to have had second thoughts, and dumped them in a ditch

outside town. A peasant on his way in with eggs to sell found them this morning. Luckily he was honest.”

Merthin picked up ^a gold aquamanile, a jug for washing the hands, made in the shape of a cockerel, the feathers of its neck beautifully chased. “It’s hard to sell something like this. Only a few people could afford to buy it, and most of those would guess it had been stolen.”

“The thieves could have melted it down and sold the gold.”

“Obviously they decided that was too much trouble.”

“Perhaps.”

She was not convinced. Nor was Merthin: his own explanation did not quite fit. The robbery had been carefully planned, that was evident. So why would the thieves not have made up their minds in advance about the ornaments? Either to take them or leave them behind?

Caris and Merthin went down the steps and into the chamber, Merthin’s stomach clenching in fear as he was grimly reminded of last night’s ordeal. More novices were cleaning the walls and floor with mops and buckets.

Caris sent the novices away to take a break. When she and Merthin were alone, she picked up a length of wood from a shelf and used it to ²prise up one of the flagstones underfoot. Merthin had not previously noticed that the stone was not fitted as tightly as most, having a narrow gap all around it. Now he saw that underneath was a spacious vault containing a wooden box. Caris reached into the hole and pulled out the box. She opened it with a key from her belt. It was full of gold coins.

Merthin was surprised. “They missed that!”

“There are three more concealed vaults,” Caris told him. “Another in the floor and

two in the walls. They missed them all.”

“They can’t have looked very hard. Most treasuries have hiding-places. People know that.”

“Especially robbers.”

“So maybe the cash wasn’t their first priority.”

“Exactly.” Caris locked the chest and put it back in its vault.

“If they didn’t want the ornaments, and they weren’t sufficiently interested in cash to search the treasury thoroughly for hidden vaults, why did they come here at all?”

“To kill Tilly. The robbery was a cover.”

Merthin thought about that. “They didn’t need an elaborate cover story,” he said after a pause. “If all they wanted was to kill Tilly, they could have done it in the dormitory and been far away from here by the time the nuns got back from Matins. If they had done it carefully—suffocated her with a feather pillow, say—we would not even have been sure she had been murdered. It would have looked as if she had died in her sleep.”

“Then there’s no explanation for the attack. They ended up with next to nothing—a few gold coins.”

Merthin looked around the underground chamber. “Where are the charters?” he said.

“They must have burned. It doesn’t much matter. I’ve got copies of everything.”

“Parchment doesn’t burn very well.”

“I’ve never tried to light it.”

“It smoulders, shrinks and distorts, but it doesn’t catch fire.”

“Perhaps the charters have been retrieved from the debris.”

“Let’s check.”

They climbed back up the steps and left the vault. Outside in the cloisters, Caris asked Joan: "Have you found any parchment among the ashes?"

She shook her head. "Nothing at all."

"Could you have missed it?"

"I don't think so—^Inot unless it has burned to cinders."_M

"Merthin says it doesn't burn." She turned to him. "Who would want our charters? They're no use to anyone else."

Merthin followed the thread of his own logic, just to see where it might lead. "Suppose there's a document that you've got^I—or you might have, or they think you might have_M—and they want it."

"What could it be?"

Merthin frowned. "Documents are intended to be public. The whole point of writing something down is so that people can look at it in the future. A secret document is a strange thing_{|||}." Then he thought of something.

He drew Caris away from Joan, and walked casually around the cloisters with her until he was sure they could not be overheard. Then he said: "But, of course, we do know of one secret document."

"The letter Thomas buried in the forest."

"Yes."

"But why would anyone imagine it might be in the nunnery's treasury?"

"Well, think. Has anything happened lately that might arouse such a suspicion?"

A look of dismay came over Caris's face. "Oh, my soul," she exclaimed.

"There is something."

"I told you about Lynn Grange being given to us by Queen Isabella for accepting Thomas, all those years ago."

"Did you speak to anyone else about it?"

"Yes—the bailiff of Lynn. And Thomas was angry that I had done so, and said there would be dire consequences."

"So someone is afraid you might have got hold of Thomas's secret letter."

"Ralph?"

"I don't think Ralph is aware of the letter. I was the only one of us children who saw Thomas burying it. He's certainly never mentioned it. Ralph must be acting on behalf of someone else."

Caris looked scared. "Queen Isabella?"

"Or the king himself."

"Is it possible that the king ordered Ralph to invade a nunnery?"

"Not personally, no. He would have used an intermediary, someone loyal, ambitious, and with absolutely no scruples. I came across such men in Florence, hanging around the Doge's palace. They're the scum of the earth."

"I wonder who it was?"

"I think I can guess," said Merthin.

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STET

Gregory Longfellow met Ralph and Alan two days later at Wigleigh, in the small timber manor house. Wigleigh was more discreet than Tench. At Tench Hall there were too many people watching Ralph's every move: servants, followers, his parents. Here in Wigleigh the peasants had their own backbreaking business to do, and no one would question Ralph about

the contents of the sack Alan was carrying.

"I gather it went off as planned," Gregory said. News of the invasion of the nunnery had spread all over the county in no time.

"No trouble," Ralph said. He was a bit let down by Gregory's muted reaction. After all the trouble that had been taken to get the charters, Gregory might have shown some elation.

"The sheriff has announced an inquest, of course," Gregory said dourly.

"They'll blame it on outlaws."

"You were not recognised?"

"We wore hoods."

Gregory looked at Ralph strangely. "I did not know that your wife was at the nunnery."

"A useful coincidence," Ralph said. "It enabled me to kill two birds with one stone."

The strange look intensified. What was the lawyer thinking? Was he going to pretend to be shocked that Ralph had killed his wife? If so, Ralph was ready to point out that Gregory was complicit in everything that had happened at the nunnery—he had been the instigator. He had no right to judge. Ralph waited for Gregory to speak. But, after a long pause, all he said was: "Let's have a look at these charters."

They sent the housekeeper, Vira, on a lengthy errand, and Ralph made Alan stand at the door to keep out casual callers. Then Gregory tipped the charters out of the sack on to the table. He made himself comfortable and began to examine them. Some were rolled and tied with string, others bundled flat, a few sewn together in booklets. He opened one, read a few lines in the strong sunlight coming through the open windows, then threw the charter back

into the sack and picked up another.

Ralph had no idea what Gregory was looking for. He had only said that it might embarrass the king. Ralph could not imagine what kind of document Caris might possess that would embarrass a king.

He got bored watching Gregory read, but he was not going to leave. He had delivered what Gregory wanted, and he was going to sit here until Gregory confirmed his half of the deal.

The tall lawyer worked his way patiently through the documents. One caught his attention, and he read it all the way through, but then he threw it in the sack with the others.

Ralph and Alan had spent most of the last week in Bristol. It was not likely that they would be asked to account for their movements, but they had taken precautions anyway. They had caroused at taverns every evening except the night they went to Kingsbridge. Their companions would remember the free drinks, but probably would not recall that on one night of the week Ralph and Alan had been absent—or, if they did, they certainly would not know whether it was the fourth Wednesday after Easter or the Thursday but two before Whitsun.

At last the table was clear and the sack was full again. Ralph said: "Did you not find what you were looking for?"

Gregory did not answer the question. "You brought everything?"

"Everything."

"Good."

"So you haven't found it?"

Gregory chose his words carefully, as always. "The specific item is not here. However, I did come across a deed that may explain why this...issue...has arisen in recent

months.”

“So you’re satisfied,” Ralph persisted.

“Yes.”

“And the king need no longer be anxious.”

Gregory looked impatient. “You should not concern yourself with the king’s anxieties. I’ll do that.”

“Then I can expect my reward immediately.”

“Oh, yes,” said Gregory. “You shall be the earl of Shiring by harvest time.”

Ralph felt a glow of satisfaction. The earl of Shiring ^I_M at last. He had won the prize he had always longed for, and his father was still alive to hear the news. “Thank you,” he said.

“If I were you,” said Gregory, “I should go and woo Lady Philippa.”

“Woo her?” Ralph was astonished.

Gregory shrugged. “She has no real choice in the matter, of course. But still, the formalities should be observed. Tell her that the king has given you permission to ask for her hand in marriage, and say you hope she will learn to love you as much as you love her.”

“Oh,” said Ralph. “All right.”

“Take her a present,” said Gregory.

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On the morning of Tilly's burial, Caris and Merthin met on the roof of the cathedral at dawn.

The roof was a world apart. Calculating the acreage of slates was a perennial geometry exercise in the advanced mathematics class at the priory school. Workmen needed constant access for repairs and maintenance, so a network of walkways and ladders linked the slopes and ridges, corners and gulleys, turrets and pinnacles, gutters and gargoyles. The crossing tower had not yet been rebuilt, but the view from the top of the west façade was impressive.

The priory was already busy. This would be a big funeral. Tilly had been a nobody in life, but now she was the victim of a notorious murder, a noblewoman killed in a nunnery, and she would be mourned by people who had never spoken three words to her. Caris would have liked to discourage mourners, because of the risk of spreading the plague, but there was nothing she could do.

The bishop was already here, in the best room of the prior's palace^L_M—which was why Caris and Merthin had spent the night apart, she in the nuns' dormitory and he and Lolla at the Holly Bush. The grieving widower, Ralph, was in a private room upstairs at the hospital. His baby, Gerry, was being taken care of by the nuns. Lady Philippa and her daughter^{Odila}, the only other surviving relatives of the dead girl, were also staying at the hospital.

Neither Merthin nor Caris had spoken to Ralph when he arrived yesterday. There was nothing they could do, no way to get justice for Tilly, for they could prove nothing; but all the same they knew the truth. So far they had told no one what they believed: there was no point. During today's obsequies they would have to pretend something like normalcy with Ralph. It was going to be difficult.

While the important personages slept, the nuns and the priory employees were hard at work preparing the funeral dinner. Smoke was rising from the bakery, where dozens of long four-pound loaves of wheat bread were already in the oven. Two men were rolling a new barrel of wine across to the prior's house. Several novice nuns were setting up benches and a trestle table on the green for the common mourners.

As the sun rose beyond the river, throwing a slanting yellow light on the rooftops of Kingsbridge, Caris studied the marks made on the town by nine months of plague. From this height she could see gaps in the rows of houses, like bad teeth. Timber buildings collapsed all the time, of course—^I_Mbecause of fire, rain damage, incompetent construction, ^ror just old age. What was different now was that no one bothered to repair them. If your house fell down you ^rjust moved into one of the empty homes in the same street. The only person building anything was Merthin, and he was seen as a mad optimist with too much money.

Across the river, the gravediggers were already at work in another newly ^rconsecrated cemetery. The plague showed no signs of relenting. Where would it end? Would the houses just continue to fall down, one at a time, until there was nothing left, and the town was a wasteland of broken tiles and scorched timbers, with a deserted cathedral in the middle and a hundred-acre graveyard at its edge?

"I'm not going to let this happen," she said.

Merthin did not at first understand. "The funeral?" he said, frowning.

Caris made a sweeping gesture to take in the city and the world beyond it. "Everything. Drunks maiming one another. Parents abandoning their sick children on the doorstep of my hospital. Men queuing to fuck a drunken woman on a table outside the White Horse. Livestock dying in the pastures. Half-naked penitents whipping themselves then collecting pennies from bystanders. And, most of all, a young mother brutally murdered here in my nunnery. I don't care if we are all going to die of the plague. As long as we're still alive, I'm not going to let our world fall apart."

"What are you going to do?"

She smiled gratefully at Merthin. Most people would have told her she was powerless to fight the situation, but he was always ready to believe in her. She looked at the stone angels carved on a pinnacle, their faces blurred by ~~hundreds of~~ ^{two hundred} years of wind and rain, and she thought of the spirit that had moved the cathedral builders. "We're going to re-establish order and routine here. We're going to force Kingsbridge people to return to normal, whether they like it or not. We're going to rebuild this town and its life, despite the plague."

"All right," he said.

"This is the moment to do it."

"Because everyone is so angry about Tilly?"

"And because they're frightened at the thought that armed men can come into the town at night and murder whomever they will. They think no one's safe."

"What will you do?"

"I'm going to tell them it must never happen again."

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"This must never happen again!" she cried, and her voice rang out across the graveyard and echoed off the ancient ~~grey~~ walls of the cathedral.

A woman could never speak out as part of a service in church, but the graveside ceremony was a ~~grey~~ area, a solemn moment that took place outside the church, a time when lay people such as the family of the deceased would sometimes make speeches or pray aloud.

All the same, Caris was sticking her neck out. Bishop Henri was officiating, backed up by Archdeacon Lloyd and Canon Claude. Lloyd had been diocesan clerk for decades, and Claude was a colleague of Henri's from France. In such distinguished clerical company, it was audacious for a nun to make an unscheduled speech.

Such considerations had never meant much to Caris, of course.

She spoke just as the small coffin was being lowered into the grave. Several of the congregation had begun to cry. The crowd was at least five hundred strong, but they fell silent at the sound of her voice.

"Armed men have come into our town at night and killed a young woman in the nunnery—and I will not stand for it," she said.

There was a rumble of assent from the crowd.

She raised her voice. "The priory will not stand for it—the bishop will not stand for it—and the men and women of Kingsbridge will not stand for it!"

The support became louder, the crowd shouting: "No!" and "Amen!"

"People say the plague is sent by God. I say that when God sends rain we take shelter. When God sends winter, we build up the fire. When God sends weeds, we pull them up by the roots. We must defend ourselves!"

She glanced at Bishop Henri. He was looking bemused. He had had no warning of

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this sermon, and if he had been asked for his permission he would have refused it; but he could tell that Caris had the people on her side, and he did not have the nerve to intervene.

“What can we do?”

She looked around. All faces were turned to her expectantly. They had no idea what to do, but they wanted a solution from her. They would cheer at anything she said, if only it gave them hope.

“We must rebuild the city wall!” she cried.

They roared their approval.

“A new wall that is taller, and stronger, and longer than the broken-down old one.”

She caught the eye of Ralph. “A wall that will keep murderers out!”

The crowd shouted: “Yes!” Ralph looked away.

“And we must elect a new constable, and a force of deputies and sentries, to uphold the law and enforce good behaviour.”

“Yes!”

“There will be a meeting of the parish guild tonight to work out the practical details, and the guild’s decisions will be announced in church next Sunday. Thank you and God bless you all.”

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At the funeral banquet, in the grand dining hall of the prior’s palace, Bishop Henri sat at the head of the table. On his right was Lady Philippa, the widowed countess of Shiring. Next to her was seated the chief mourner, Tilly’s widower, Sir Ralph Fitzgerald.

Ralph was delighted to be next to Philippa. He could stare at her breasts while she concentrated on her food, and every time she leaned forward he could peek down the square

neckline of her light summer dress. She did not know it yet, but the time was not far away when he would command her to take off her clothes and stand naked in front of him, and he would see those magnificent breasts in their entirety.

The dinner provided by Caris was ample but not extravagant, he noted. There were no gilded swans or towers of sugar, but there was plenty of roasted meat, boiled fish, new bread, beans, and spring berries. He helped Philippa to some soup made of ground chicken with almond milk.

She said to him gravely: "This is a terrible tragedy. You have my most profound sympathy."

People had been so compassionate that sometimes, for a few moments, Ralph thought of himself as the pitiable victim of a dreadful bereavement, and forgot that he was the one who had slid the knife into Tilly's young heart. "Thank you," he said solemnly. "Tilly was so young. But we soldiers get used to sudden death. One day a man will save your life, and swear eternal friendship and loyalty; and the next day he is struck down by a crossbow bolt through the heart, and you forget him."

She gave him an odd look that reminded him of the way Sir Gregory had regarded him, with a mixture of curiosity and distaste, and he wondered what it was about his attitude to Tilly's death that provoked this reaction.

Philippa said: "You have a baby boy."

"Gerry. The nuns are looking after him today, but I'll take him home to Tench Hall tomorrow. I've found a wet nurse." He saw an opportunity to drop a hint. "Of course, he needs someone to mother him properly."

"Yes."

He recalled her own bereavement. "But you know what it is to lose your spouse."

"I was fortunate to have my beloved William for twenty-five years."

"You must be lonely." This might not be the moment to propose, but he thought to edge the conversation towards the subject.

"Indeed. I lost my three men—William and our two sons. The castle seems so empty."

"But not for long, perhaps."

She stared at him as if she could not believe her ears, and he realised he had said something offensive. She turned away and spoke to Bishop Henri on her other side.

On Ralph's right was Philippa's daughter, Odila. "Would you like some of this pasty?" he said to her. "It's made with peacocks and hares." She nodded, and he cut her a slice. "How old are you?" he asked.

"I'll be fifteen this year."

She was tall, and had her mother's figure already, a full bosom and wide, womanly hips. "You seem older," he said, looking at her breasts.

He intended it as a compliment—young people generally wanted to seem older—but she blushed and looked away.

Ralph looked down at his trencher and speared a chunk of pork cooked with ginger. He ate it moodily. He was not very good at what Gregory called wooing.

Caris was seated on the left of Bishop Henri, with Merthin, as alderman, on her other side. Next to Merthin was Sir Gregory Longfellow, who had come for the funeral of Earl William three months ago and had not yet left the neighbourhood. Caris had to suppress her disgust at

being at a table with the murdering Ralph and the man who had, almost certainly, put him up to it. But she had work to do at this dinner. She had a plan for the revival of the town. Rebuilding the walls was only the first part. For the second, she had to get Bishop Henri on her side.

She poured the bishop a goblet of clear red Gascon wine, and he took a long draught. He wiped his mouth and said: "You preach a good sermon."

"Thank you," she said, noting the ironic reproof that underlay his compliment. "Life in this town is degenerating into disorder and debauchery, and if we're to put it right we need to inspire the townspeople. I'm sure you agree."

"It's a little late to ask whether I agree with you. However, I do." Henri was a pragmatist who did not re-fight lost battles. She had been counting on that.

She served herself some heron roasted with pepper and cloves, but did not begin to eat: she had too much to say. "There's more to my plan than the walls and the constabulary."

"I thought there might be."

"I believe that you, as the bishop of Kingsbridge, should have the tallest cathedral in England."

He raised his eyebrows. "I wasn't expecting that."

"Two hundred years ago this was one of England's most important priories. It should be so again. A new church tower would symbolise the revival and your eminence among bishops."

He smiled wryly, but he was pleased. He knew he was being flattered, and he liked it.

Caris said: "The tower would also serve the town. Being visible from a distance, it would help pilgrims and traders find their way here."

“How would you pay for it?”

“The priory is wealthy.”

He was surprised again. “Prior Godwyn complained of money problems.”

“He was a hopeless manager.”

“He struck me as rather competent.”

“He struck a lot of people that way, but he made all the wrong decisions. Right at the start he refused to repair the fulling mill, which would have brought him an income; but he spent money on this palace, which returned him nothing.”

“And how have things changed?”

“I’ve sacked most of the bailiffs and replaced them with younger men who are willing to make changes. I’ve converted about half the land to grazing, which is easier to manage in these times of labour shortage. The rest I’ve leased for cash rents with no customary obligations. And we’ve all benefited from inheritance taxes and from the legacies of people who died without heirs because of the plague. The monastery is now as rich as the nunnery.”

“So all the tenants are free?”

“Most. Instead of working one day a week on the demesne farm, and carting the landlord’s hay, and folding their sheep on the landlord’s field, and all those complicated services, they just pay money. They like it better and it certainly makes our life simpler.”

“A lot of landlords^I_M—abbots especially^I_M—revile that type of tenancy. They say it ruins the peasantry.”

Caris shrugged. “What have we lost? The power to impose petty variations, favouring some serfs and persecuting others, keeping them all subservient. Monks and nuns have no business tyrannising peasants. Farmers know what crops to sow and what they can sell at

market. They work better left to themselves.”

The bishop looked suspicious. “So you feel the priory can pay for a new tower?”

He had been expecting her to ask him for money, she guessed. “Yes—^I~~M~~—with some assistance from the town’s merchants. And that’s where you can help us.”

“I thought there must be something.”

“I’m not asking you for money. What I want from you is worth more than money.”

“I’m intrigued.”

“I want to apply to the king for a borough charter.” As she said the words, Caris felt her hands begin to shake. She was taken back to the battle she had fought with Godwyn, ten years ago, that had ended in her being accused of witchcraft. The issue then had been the borough charter, and she had nearly died fighting for it. Circumstances now were completely different, but the charter was no less important. She put down her eating^Tknife and clasped her hands together in her lap to keep them still.

“I see,” said Henri non^Icommittally.

Caris swallowed hard and went on. “It’s essential for the regeneration of the town’s commercial life. For a long time Kingsbridge has been held back by the dead hand of priory rule. Priors are cautious and conservative, and instinctively say ~~No~~ to any change or innovation. Merchants live by charge^I~~M~~—they’re always looking for new ways to make money, or at least the good ones are. If we want the men of Kingsbridge to help pay for our new tower, we must give them the freedom they need to prosper.”

“A borough charter.”

“The town would have its own court, set its own regulations, and be ruled by a proper guild, rather than the parish guild we have now, which has no real power.”

“But would the king grant it?”

“Kings like boroughs, which pay lots of taxes. But, in the past, the prior of Kingsbridge has always opposed a charter.”

“You think priors are too conservative.”

“Timid.”

“Well,” said the bishop with a laugh, “timidity is a thing you’ll never be accused of.”

Caris pressed her point. “I think a charter is essential if we’re to build the new tower.”

“Yes, I can see that.”

“So, do you agree?”

“To the tower, or the charter?”

“They go together.”

Henri seemed amused. “Are you making a deal with me, Mother Caris?”

“If you’re willing.”

“All right. Build me a tower, and I’ll help you get a charter.”

“No. It has to be the other way around. We need the charter first.”

“So I must trust you.”

“Is that difficult?”

“To be honest, no.”

“Good. Then we’re agreed.”

“Yes.”

Caris leaned forward and looked past Merthin. “Sir Gregory?”

“Yes, Mother Caris?”

She forced herself to be polite to him. “Have you tried this rabbit in sugar gravy? I

recommend it.”

Gregory accepted the bowl and took some. “Thank you.”

Caris said to him: “You will recall that Kingsbridge is not a borough.”

“I certainly do.” Gregory had used that fact, more than a decade ago, to outmanoeuvre

Caris in the royal court in the dispute over the fulling mill.

“The bishop thinks it’s time for us to ask the king for a charter.”

Gregory nodded. “I believe the king might look favourably on such a plea—especially if it were presented to him in the right way.”

Hoping that her distaste was not showing on her face, she said: “Perhaps you would be kind enough to advise us.”

“May we discuss this in more detail later?”

Gregory would require a bribe, of course, though he would undoubtedly call it a lawyer’s fee. “By all means,” she said, repressing a shudder.

The servants began clearing away the food. Caris looked down at her trencher. She had not eaten anything.

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“Our families are related,” Ralph was saying to Lady Philippa. “Not closely, of course,” he added hastily. “But my father is descended from that earl of Shiring who was the son of Lady Aliena and Jack Builder.” He looked across the table at his brother Merthin, the alderman. “I think I inherited the blood of the earls, and my brother that of the builders.”

He looked at Philippa’s face to see how she took that. She did not seem impressed.

“I was brought up in the household of your late father-in-law, Earl Roland,” he went on.

"I remember you as a squire."

"I served under the earl in the king's army in France. At the battle of Crécy, I saved the life of the Prince of Wales."

"My goodness, how splendid," she said politely.

He was trying to get her to see him as an equal, so that it would seem more natural when he told her that she was to be his wife. But he did not appear to be getting through to her. She just looked bored and a bit puzzled by the direction of his conversation.

The dessert was served: sugared strawberries, honey wafers, dates and raisins, and spiced wine. Ralph drained a cup of wine and poured more, hoping that the drink would help him relax with Philippa. He was not sure why he found it difficult to talk to her. Because this was his wife's funeral? Because Philippa was a countess? Or because he had been hopelessly in love with her for years, and could not believe that now, at last, she really was to be his wife?

"When you leave here, will you go back to Earls castle?" he asked her.

"Yes. We depart tomorrow."

"Will you stay there long?"

"Where else would I go?" She frowned. "Why do you ask?"

"I will come and visit you there, if I may."

Her response was frosty. "To what end?"

"I want to discuss with you a subject that it would not be appropriate to raise here and now."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I'll come and see you in the next few days."

She looked agitated. In a raised voice she said: "What could you possibly have to say to me?"

"As I said, it wouldn't be appropriate to speak of it today."

"Because this is your wife's funeral?"

He nodded.

She went pale. "Oh, my God," she said. "You can't mean to suggest |||."

"I told you, I don't want to discuss it now."

"But I must know!" she cried. "Are you planning to propose marriage to me?"

He hesitated, shrugged, and then nodded.

"But on what grounds?" she said. "Surely you need the king's permission!"

He looked at her and raised his eyebrows briefly.

She stood up suddenly. "No!" she said. Everyone around the table looked at her. She stared at Gregory. "Is this true?" she said. "Is the king going to marry me to him?" She jerked a thumb contemptuously at Ralph. ^{her}

Ralph felt stabbed. He had not expected her to display such revulsion. Was he so repellent?

Gregory looked reproachfully at Ralph. "This was not the moment to raise the matter."

Philippa cried: "So it's true! God save me!"

Ralph caught Odila's eye. She was staring at him in horror. What had he ever done to earn her dislike?

Philippa said: "I can't bear it."

"Why?" Ralph said. "What is so wrong? What right have you to look down on me and

my family?" He looked around at the company: his brother, his ally Gregory, the bishop, the prioress, minor noblemen and leading citizens. They were all silent, shocked and intrigued by Philippa's outburst.

Philippa ignored his question. Addressing Gregory, she said: "I will not do it! I will not, do you hear me?" She was white with rage, but tears ran down her cheeks. Ralph thought how beautiful she was, even while she was rejecting and humiliating him so painfully.

Gregory said coolly: "It is not your decision, Lady Philippa, and it certainly is not mine. The king will do as he pleases."

"You may force me into a wedding dress, and you may march me up the aisle," Philippa raged. She pointed at Bishop Henri. "But when the bishop asks me if I take Ralph Fitzgerald to be my husband I will not say yes! I will not! Never, never, never!"

She stormed out of the room, and Odila followed.

~~2#~~ * → STET

When the banquet was over, the townspeople returned to their homes, and the important guests went to their rooms to sleep off the feast. Caris supervised the clearing up. She felt sorry for Philippa, profoundly sorry, knowing ^I_M as Philippa did not ^I_M that Ralph had killed his first wife. But she was concerned about the fate of an entire town, not just one person. Her mind was on her scheme for Kingsbridge. Things had gone better than she ~~had~~ ^{had} imagined. The townspeople had cheered her, and the bishop had agreed to everything she proposed. Perhaps ²_X civilisation would return to Kingsbridge, despite the plague.

Outside the back door, where there was a pile of meat bones and crusts of bread, she saw Godwyn's cat, Archbishop, delicately picking at the carcass ^S_X of a duck. She shoed ^O_X it away. It scampered a few yards then slowed to a stiff walk, its white-tipped tail arrogantly

upstanding.

Deep in thought, she went up the stairs of the palace, thinking of how she would begin implementing the changes agreed to by Henri. Without pausing, she opened the door of the bedroom she shared with Merthin and stepped inside.

For a moment she was disoriented. Two men stood in the middle of the room, and she thought *I must be in the wrong house* and then *I must be in the wrong room* before she remembered that her room, being the best bedroom, had naturally been given to the bishop.

The two men were Henri and his assistant, Canon Claude. It took Caris a moment to realise that they were both naked, with their arms around one another, kissing.

She stared at them in shock. "Oh!" she said.

They had not heard the door. Until she spoke, they did not realise they were observed. When they heard her gasp of surprise they both turned towards her. A look of horrified guilt came over Henri's face, and his mouth fell open.

"I'm sorry!" Caris said.

The men sprang apart, as if hoping they might be able to deny what was going on; then they remembered they were naked. Henri was plump, with a round belly and fat arms and legs, and grey hair on his chest. Claude was younger and slimmer, with very little body hair except for a blaze of chestnut at his groin. Caris had never before looked at two erect penises at the same time.

"I beg your pardon!" she said, mortified with embarrassment. "My mistake. I forgot." She realised that she was babbling and they were dumbstruck. It did not matter: nothing that anyone could say would make the situation any better.

Coming to her senses, she backed out of the room and slammed the door.

Merthin walked away from the banquet with Madge ~~Weaver~~. He was fond of this small, chunky woman, with her chin jutting out in front and her bottom jutting out behind. He admired the way she had carried on after her husband and children had died of the plague. She had continued the enterprise, weaving cloth and dyeing it red according to Caris's recipe. She said to him: "Good for Caris. She's right, as usual. We can't go on like this."

"You've continued normally, despite everything," he said.

"My only problem is finding the people to do the work."

"Everyone is the same. I can't get builders."

"Raw wool is cheap, but rich people will still pay high prices for good scarlet cloth,"

Madge said. "I could sell more if I could produce more."

Merthin said thoughtfully: "You know, I saw a faster type of loom in Florence ^T~~a~~_M treadle loom."

"Oh?" She looked at him with alert curiosity. "I never heard of that."

He wondered how to explain. "In any loom, you stretch a number of threads over the frame to form what you call the warp, then you weave another thread crossways through the warp, under one thread and over the next, under and over, from one side to the other and back again, to form the weft."

"That's how simple looms work, yes. Ours are better."

"I know. To make the process quicker, you attach every second warp thread to a movable bar, called a heddle, so that when you shift the heddle, half the threads are lifted away from the rest. Then, instead of going over and under, over and under, you can simply pass the weft thread straight through the gap in one easy movement. Then you drop the

heddle below the warp for the return pass.”

“Yes. By the way, the weft thread is wound on a bobbin.”

“Each time you pass the bobbin through the warp from left to right, you have to put it down, then use both hands to move the heddle, then pick up the bobbin again and bring it back from right to left.”

“Exactly.”

“In a treadle loom, you move the heddle with your feet. So you never have to put the bobbin down.”

“Really? My soul!”

“That would make a difference, wouldn’t it?”

“A huge difference. You could weave twice as much $\frac{1}{M}$ more!”

“That’s what I thought. Shall I build one for you to try?”

“Yes, please!”

“I don’t remember exactly how it was constructed. I think the treadle operated a system of pulleys and levers.!!” He frowned, thinking. “Anyway, I’m sure I can figure it out.”



STET

Late in the afternoon, as Caris was passing the library, she met Canon Claude coming out, carrying a small book. He caught her eye and stopped. They both immediately thought of the scene Caris had stumbled upon an hour ago. At first Claude looked embarrassed, but then a grin lifted the corners of his mouth. His put his hand to his face to cover it, obviously feeling it was wrong to be amused. Caris remembered how startled the two naked men had been and she, too, felt inappropriate laughter bubbling up inside her. On impulse, she said what was in

her mind: "The two of you did look funny!" Claude giggled despite himself, and Caris could not help chuckling too, and they made each other worse, until they fell into one another's arms, tears streaming down their cheeks, helpless with laughter.

No
comma

That evening, Caris took Merthin to the south-west corner of the priory grounds, where the vegetable garden grew alongside the river. The air was mild, and the moist earth gave up a fragrance of new growth. Caris could see spring onions and radishes. "So, your brother is to be the earl of Shiring," she said.

"Not if Lady Philippa has anything to do with it."

"A countess has to do what she is told by the king, doesn't she?"

"All women should be subservient to men, in theory," Merthin said with a grin.

"Some defy convention, though."

"I can't think who you mean."

Merthin's mood changed abruptly. "What a world," he said. "A man murders his wife, and the king elevates him to the highest rank of the nobility."

"We know these things happen," she said. "But it's shocking when it's your own family. Poor Tilly."

Merthin rubbed his eyes as if to erase visions. "Why have you brought me here?"

"To talk about the final element in my plan: the new hospital."

"Ah. I was wondering..."

"Could you build it here?"

Merthin looked around. "I don't see why not. It's a sloping site, but the entire priory is built on a slope, and we're not talking about putting up another cathedral. One storey or

two?"

"One. But I want the building divided into medium-sized rooms, each containing just four or six beds, so that diseases don't spread so quickly from one patient to everyone else in the place. It must have its own pharmacy—a large, well-lit room—for the preparation of medicines, with a herb garden outside. And a spacious, airy latrine with piped water, very easy to keep clean. In fact the whole building must have lots of light and space. But, most importantly, it has to be at least a hundred yards from the rest of the priory. We have to separate the sick from the well. That's the key feature."

"I'll do some drawings in the morning."

She glanced around and, seeing that they were not observed, she kissed him. "This is going to be the culmination of my life's work, do you realise that?"

"You're thirty-two— isn't it a little early to be talking about the culmination of your life's work?"

"It hasn't happened yet."

"It won't take long. I'll start on it while I'm digging the foundations for the new tower. Then, as soon as the hospital is built, I can switch my masons to work on the cathedral."

They started to walk back. She could tell that his real enthusiasm was for the tower.

"How tall will it be?"

"Four hundred and five feet."

"How high is Salisbury?"

"Four hundred and four."

"So it will be the highest building in England."

STET

“Until someone builds a higher one, yes.”

So he would achieve his ambition too, she thought. She put her arm through his as they walked to the prior's palace. She felt happy. That was strange, wasn't it? Thousands of Kingsbridge people had died of the plague, and Tilly had been murdered, but Caris felt hopeful. It was because she had a plan, of course. She always felt better when she had a plan. The new walls, the constabulary, the tower, the borough charter, and most of all the new hospital: how would she find time to organise it all?

Arm in arm with Merthin, she walked into the prior's house. Bishop Henri and Sir Gregory were there, deep in conversation with a third man who had his back to Caris. There was something unpleasantly familiar about the newcomer, even from behind, and Caris felt a tremor of unease. Then he turned around and she saw his face: sardonic, triumphant, sneering, and full of malice.

It was Philemon.

No
comma

74

(CN)

Bishop Henri and the other guests left Kingsbridge the next morning. Caris, who had been sleeping in the nuns' dormitory, returned to the prior's palace after breakfast and went upstairs to her room.

She found Philemon there.

It was the second time in two days that she had been startled by men in her bedroom. However, Philemon was alone and fully dressed, standing by the window looking at a book. Seeing him in profile, she realised that the trials of the last six months had left him thinner.

She said: "What are you doing here?"

He pretended to be surprised by the question. "This is the prior's house. Why should I not be here?"

"Because it's not your room!"

"I am the sub-prior of Kingsbridge. I have never been dismissed from that post. The prior is dead. Who else should live here?"

"Me, of course."

"You're not even a monk."

"Bishop Henri made me acting prior and last night, despite your return, he did not dismiss me from this post. I am your superior, and you must obey me."

"But you're a nun, and you must live with the nuns, not with the monks."

"I've been living here for months."

"Alone?"

Suddenly Caris saw that she was on shaky ground. Philemon knew that she and Merthin had been living more or less as man and wife. They had been discreet, not flaunting their relationship, but people guessed these things, and Philemon had a wild beast's instinct for weakness.

She considered. She could insist on Philemon's leaving the building immediately. If necessary, she could have him thrown out: Thomas and the novices would obey her, not Philemon. But what then? Philemon would do all he could to call attention to what Merthin and she were up to in the palace. He would create a controversy, and leading townspeople would take sides. Most would support Caris, almost whatever she did, such was her reputation; but there would be some who would censure her behaviour. The conflict would weaken her authority and undermine everything else she wanted to do. It would be better to admit defeat.

"You may have the bedroom," she said. "But not the hall. I use that for meetings with leading townspeople and visiting dignitaries. When you're not attending services in the church, you will be in the cloisters, not here. A sub-prior does not have a palace." She left without giving him a chance to argue. She had saved face, but he had won.

She had been reminded last night of how wily Philemon was. Questioned by Bishop Henri, he seemed to have a plausible explanation for everything dishonourable that he had done. How did he justify deserting his post at the priory and running away to St-John-in-the-Forest? The monastery had been in danger of extinction, and the only way to save it had been

to flee, in accordance with the saying: "Leave early, go far, and stay long." It was still, by general consent, the only sure way to avoid the plague. Their sole mistake had been to remain too long in Kingsbridge. Why, then, had no one informed the bishop of this plan? Philemon was sorry, but he and the other monks were only obeying the orders of Prior Godwyn. Then why had he run away from St John when the plague caught up with them there? He had been called by God to minister to the people of Monmouth, and Godwyn had given him permission to leave. How come Brother Thomas did not know about this permission, in fact denied firmly that it had ever been given? The other monks had not been told of Godwyn's decision for fear it would cause jealousy. Why, then, had Philemon left Monmouth? He had met Friar Murdo, who had told him that Kingsbridge Priory needed him, and he regarded this as a further message from God.

Caris concluded that Philemon had run from the plague until he had realised he must be one of those fortunate people who were not prone to catch it. Then he had learned from Murdo that Caris was sleeping with Merthin in the prior's palace, and he had immediately seen how he could exploit that situation to restore his own fortunes. God had nothing to do with it.

But Bishop Henri had believed Philemon's tale. Philemon was careful to appear humble to the point of obsequiousness. Henri did not know the man, and failed to see beneath the surface.

She left Philemon in the palace and walked to the cathedral. She climbed the long, narrow spiral staircase in the north-west tower and found Merthin in the mason's loft, drawing designs on the tracing floor in the light from the tall north-facing windows.

She looked with interest at what he had done. It was always difficult to read plans, she

found. The thin lines scratched in the mortar had to be transformed, in the viewer's imagination, into thick walls of stone with windows and doors.

Merthin regarded her expectantly as she studied his work. He was obviously anticipating a big reaction.

At first she was baffled by the drawing. It looked nothing like a hospital. She said: "But you've drawn... a cloister!"

"Exactly," he said. "Why should a hospital be a long narrow room like the nave of a church? You want the place to be light and airy. So, instead of cramming the rooms together, I've set them around a quadrangle."

She visualised it: the square of grass, the building around, the doors leading to rooms of four or six beds, the nuns moving from room to room in the shelter of the covered arcade. "It's inspired!" she said. "I would never have thought of it, but it will be perfect."

"You can grow herbs in the quadrangle, where the plants will have sunshine but be sheltered from the wind. There will be a fountain in the middle of the garden, for fresh water, and it can drain through the latrine wing to the south and into the river."

She kissed him exuberantly. "You're so clever!" Then she recalled the news she had to tell him.

He must have seen her face fall, for he said: "What's the matter?"

"We have to move out of the palace," she said. She told him about her conversation with Philemon, and why she had given in. "I foresee major conflicts with Philemon—I don't want this to be the one on which I make my stand."

"That makes sense," he said. His tone of voice was reasonable, but she knew by his face that he was angry. He stared at his drawing, though he was not really thinking about it.

"And there's something else," she said. "We're telling everyone they have to live as normally as possible—^Iorder in the streets, a return to real family life, no more drunken orgies. We ought to set an example."

He nodded. "A prioress living with her lover is about as abnormal as could be, I suppose," he said. Once again his equable tone was contradicted by his furious expression.

"I'm very sorry," she said.

"So am I."

"But we don't want to risk everything we both want—^Iyour tower, my hospital, the future of the town."

"No. But we're sacrificing our life together."

"Not entirely. We'll have to sleep separately, which is painful, but we'll have plenty of opportunities to be together."

"Where?"

She shrugged. "Here, for example." An imp of mischief possessed her. She walked away from him across the room, slowly lifting the skirt of her robe, and went to the doorway at the top of the stairs. "I don't see anyone coming," she said as she raised her dress to her waist.

"You can hear them, anyway," he said. "The door at the foot of the stairs makes a noise."

She bent over, pretending to look down the staircase. "Can you see anything unusual, from where you are?"

He chuckled. She could usually pull him out of an angry mood by being playful. "I can see something winking at me," he laughed.

She walked back towards him, still holding her robe up around her waist, smiling triumphantly. "You see, we don't have to give up everything."

He sat on a stool and pulled her towards him. She straddled his thighs and lowered herself on to his lap. "You'd better get a straw mattress up here," she said, her voice thick with desire.

He nuzzled her breasts. "How would I explain the need for a bed in a mason's loft?" he murmured.

"Just say that masons need somewhere soft to put their tools."

A week later Caris and Thomas Langley went to inspect the rebuilding of the city wall. It was a big job but simple and, once the line had been agreed, the actual stonework could be done by inexperienced young masons and apprentices. Caris was glad the project had begun so promptly. It was necessary that the town be able to defend itself in troubled times but she had a more important motive. Getting the townspeople to guard against disruption from outside would lead naturally, she hoped, to a new awareness of the need for order and good behaviour among themselves.

She found it deeply ironic that fate had cast her in this role. She had never been a rule keeper. She had always despised orthodoxy and flouted convention. She felt she had the right to make her own rules. Now here she was clamping down on merrymakers. It was a miracle that no one had yet called her a hypocrite.

The truth was that some people flourished in an atmosphere of anarchy, and others did not. Merthin was one of those who were better off without constraints. She recalled the carving he had made of the wise and foolish virgins. It was different from anything anyone

had seen before—^I_Mso Elfric had made that his excuse for destroying it. Regulation only served to handicap Merthin. But men such as Barney and Lou, the slaughterhouse workers, had to have laws to stop them maiming one another in drunken fights.

All the same her position was shaky. When you were trying to enforce law and order, it was difficult to explain that the rules did not actually apply to you personally.

She was mulling over this as she returned with Thomas to the priory. Outside the cathedral she found Sister Joan pacing up and down in a state of agitation. "I'm so angry with Philemon," she said. "He claims you have stolen his money, and I must give it back!"

"Just calm down," Caris said. She led Joan into the porch of the church, and they sat on a stone bench. "Take a deep breath and tell me what happened."

"Philemon came up to me after Tierce and said he needed ten shillings to buy candles for the shrine of St Adolphus. I said I would have to ask you."

"Quite right."

"He became very angry and shouted that it was the monks' money, and I had no right to refuse him. He demanded my keys, and I think he would have tried to snatch them from me, but I pointed out that they would be no use to him, as he didn't know where the treasury was."

"What a good idea it was to keep that secret," Caris said.

Thomas was standing beside them, listening. He said: "I notice he picked a time when I was off the premises—^I_Mthe coward."

Caris said: "Joan, you did absolutely right to refuse him, and I'm sorry he tried to bully you. Thomas, go and find him and bring him to me at the palace."

She left them and walked through the graveyard, deep in thought. Clearly, Philemon

was set on making trouble. But he was not the kind of blustering bully whom she could have overpowered with ease. He was a wily opponent, and she must watch her step.

When she opened the door of the prior's house, Philemon was there in the hall, sitting at the head of the long table.

She stopped in the doorway. "You shouldn't be here," she said. "I specifically told you—"

"I was looking for you," he said.

She realised she would have to lock the building. Otherwise he would always find a pretext for flouting her orders. She controlled her anger. "You looked for me in the wrong place," she said.

"I've found you now, though, haven't I?"

She studied him. He had shaved and cut his hair since his arrival, and he wore a new robe. He was every inch the priory official, calm and authoritative. She said: "I've been speaking to Sister Joan. She's very upset."

"So am I."

She realised he was sitting in the big chair, and she was standing in front of him, as if he were in charge and she a supplicant. How clever he was at manipulating these things. She said: "If you need money, you must ask me."

"I'm the sub-prior!"

"And I'm the acting prior, which makes me your superior." She raised her voice. "So the first thing you must do is stand up when you're speaking to me!"

He started, shocked by her tone; then he controlled himself. With insulting slowness he pulled himself out of the chair.

Caris sat down in his place and let him stand.

He seemed unabashed. "I understand you're using monastery money to pay for the new tower."

"By order of the bishop, yes."

A flash of annoyance crossed his face. He had hoped to ingratiate himself and make the bishop his ally against Caris. Even as a child he had toadied unendingly to people in authority. That was how he had gained admission to the monastery.

He said: "I must have access to the monastery's money. It's my right. The monks' assets should be in my charge."

"The last time you were in charge of the monks' assets, you stole them."

He went pale: that arrow had struck the bull's eye. "Ridiculous," he blustered, trying to cover his embarrassment. "Prior Godwyn took them for safekeeping."

"Well, nobody is going to take them for 'safekeeping' while I'm acting prior."

"You should at least give me the ornaments. They are sacred jewels, to be handled by priests, not women."

"Thomas has been dealing with them quite adequately, taking them out for services and restoring them to our treasury afterwards."

"It's not satisfactory—"

Caris remembered something, and interrupted him. "Besides, you haven't yet returned all that you took."

"The money—"

"The ornaments. There's a gold candlestick missing, a gift from the chandlers' guild.

What happened to that?"

His reaction surprised her. She was expecting another blustering denial. But he looked embarrassed and said: "That was always kept in the prior's room."

She frowned. "And...?"

"I kept it separate from the other ornaments."

She was astonished. "Are you telling me that you have had the candlestick all this time?"

"Godwyn asked me to look after it."

"And so you took it with you on your travels to Monmouth and elsewhere?"

"That was his wish."

This was a wildly implausible tale, and Philemon knew it. The fact was that he had stolen the candlestick. "Do you still have it?"

He nodded uncomfortably.

At that moment, Thomas came in. "There you are!" he said to Philemon.

Caris said: "Thomas, go upstairs and search Philemon's room."

"What am I looking for?"

"The lost gold candlestick."

Philemon said: "No need to search. You'll see it on the prie-dieu."

Thomas went upstairs and came down again carrying the candlestick. He handed it to Caris. It was heavy. She looked at it curiously. The base was engraved with the names of the twelve members of the chandlers' guild in tiny letters. Why had Philemon wanted it? Not to sell or melt down, obviously: he had had plenty of time to get rid of it but he had not done so. It seemed he had just wanted to have his own gold candlestick. Did he gaze at it and touch it when he was alone in his room?

She looked at him and saw tears in his eyes.

He said: "Are you going to take it from me?"

It was a stupid question. "Of course," she replied. "It belongs in the cathedral, not in your bedroom. The chandlers gave it for the glory of God and the beautification of church services, not the private pleasure of one monk."

He did not argue. He looked bereft, but not penitent. He did not understand that he had done wrong. His grief was not remorse for wrongdoing, but regret for what had been taken from him. He had no sense of shame, she realised.

"I think that ends our discussion about your access to the priory's valuables," she said to Philemon. "Now you may go." He went out.

She handed the candlestick back to Thomas. "Take it to Sister Joan and tell her to put it away," she said. "We'll inform the chandlers that it has been found, and use it next Sunday."

Thomas went off.

Caris stayed where she was, thinking. Philemon hated her. She wasted no time wondering why: he made enemies faster than a tinker made friends. But he was an implacable foe and completely without scruples. Clearly he was determined to make trouble for her at every opportunity. Things would never get better. Each time she overcame him in one of these little skirmishes, his malice would burn hotter. But if she let him win he would only be encouraged in his insubordination.

It was going to be a bloody battle, and she could not see how it would end.

~~STET~~ * STET

The flagellants came back on a Saturday evening in June.

No
comma

Caris was in the scriptorium, writing her book. She had decided to begin with the plague and how to deal with it, then go on to lesser ailments. She was describing the linen face masks she had introduced in the Kingsbridge hospital. It was hard to explain that the masks were effective but did not offer total immunity. The only certain safeguard was to leave town before the plague arrived and stay away until it had gone, but that was never going to be an option for the majority of people. Partial protection was a difficult concept for people who believed in miracle cures. The truth was that some masked nuns still caught the plague, but not as many as would otherwise have been expected. She decided to compare the masks to shields. A shield did not guarantee that a man would survive attack, but it certainly gave him valuable protection, and no knight would go into battle without one. She was writing this down, on a pristine sheet of blank parchment, when she heard the flagellants, and groaned in dismay.

The drums sounded like drunken footsteps, the bagpipes like a wild creature in pain, and the bells like a parody of a funeral. She went outside just as the procession entered the precincts. There were more of them this time, seventy or eighty, and they seemed wilder than before: their hair long and matted, their clothing a few shreds, their shrieks more lunatic. They had already been around the town and gathered a long tail of followers, some looking on in amusement, others joining in, tearing their clothes and lashing themselves.

She had not expected to see them again. The ~~Po~~pe, Clement VI, had condemned flagellants. But he was a long way away, at Avignon, and it was up to others to enforce his rulings.

Friar Murdo led them, as before. When he approached the west front of the cathedral, Caris saw to her astonishment that the great doors were open wide. She had not authorised

that. Thomas would not have done it without asking her. Philemon must be responsible. She recalled that Philemon on his travels had met up with Murdo. She guessed that Murdo had forewarned Philemon of this visit, and they had conspired together to get the flagellants into the church. No doubt Philemon would argue that he was the only ordained priest in the priory, therefore he had the right to decide what kind of services were conducted.

But what was Philemon's motive? Why did he care about Murdo and the flagellants?

Murdo led the procession through the tall central doorway and into the nave. The townspeople crowded in afterwards. Caris hesitated to join in such a display, but she felt the need to know what was going on, so she reluctantly followed the crowd inside.

Philemon was at the altar. Friar Murdo joined him. Philemon raised his hands for quiet, then said: "We come here today to confess our wickedness, repent our sins, and do penance in propitiation."

Philemon was no preacher, and his words drew a muted reaction; but the charismatic Murdo immediately took over. "We confess that our thoughts are lascivious and our deeds are filthy!" he cried, and they shouted their approval.

The proceedings took the same form as before. Worked into a frenzy by Murdo's preaching, people came to the front, cried out that they were sinners, and flogged themselves. The townspeople looked on, mesmerised by the violence and nudity. It was a performance, but the lashes were real, and Caris shuddered to see the weals and cuts on the backs of the penitents. Some of them had done this many times before, and were scarred. Others had recent wounds that were reopened by the fresh whipping.

Townspeople soon joined in. As they came forward, Philemon held out a collection bowl, and Caris realised that his motivation was money. Nobody got to confess and kiss

Murdo's feet until they put a coin in Philemon's bowl. Murdo was keeping an eye on the takings, and Caris assumed the two men would share out the coins afterwards.

There was a crescendo of drumming and piping as more and more townspeople came forward. Philemon's bowl filled up rapidly. Those who had been "forgiven" danced ecstatically to the mad music.

Eventually all the penitents were dancing and no more were coming forward. The music built to a climax and stopped suddenly, whereupon Caris noticed that Murdo and Philemon had disappeared. She assumed they had slipped out through the south transept to count their takings in the monks' cloisters.

The spectacle was over. The dancers lay down, exhausted. The spectators began to disperse, drifting out through the open doors into the clean air of the summer evening. Soon Murdo's followers found the strength to leave the church, and Caris did the same. She saw that most of the flagellants were heading for the Holly Bush.

She returned with relief to the cool hush of the nunnery. As dusk gathered in the cloisters, the nuns attended evensong and ate their supper. Before going to bed, Caris went to check on the hospital. The place was still full: the plague raged unabated.

She found little to criticise. Sister Oonagh followed Caris's principles: face masks, no bloodletting, fanatical cleanliness. Caris was about to go to bed when one of the flagellants was brought in.

It was a man who had fainted in the Holly Bush and cracked his head on a bench. His back was still bleeding, and Caris guessed that loss of blood was as much responsible as the blow to his head for the loss of consciousness.

Oonagh bathed his wounds with salt water while he was unconscious. To bring him

round, she set fire to the antler of a deer and wafted the pungent smoke under his nose. Then she made him drink two pints of water mixed with cinnamon and sugar, to replace the fluid his body had lost.

But he was only the first. Several more men and women were brought in suffering from some combination of loss of blood, excess of strong drink, and injuries received in accidents or fights. The orgy of flagellation increased the number of Saturday-night patients tenfold. There was also a man who had flogged himself so many times that his back was putrid. Finally, after midnight, a woman was brought in after having been tied up, flogged, and raped.

Fury ~~was~~ stoked up in Caris as she worked with the other nuns to tend these patients. All their injuries arose from the perverted notions of religion put about by men such as Murdo. They said the plague was God's punishment for sin, but people could avoid the plague by punishing themselves another way. It was as if God were a vengeful monster playing a game with insane rules. Caris believed that God's sense of justice must be more sophisticated than that of the twelve-year-old leader of a boys' gang.

She worked until Matins on Sunday morning, then went to sleep for a couple of hours. When she got up, she went to see Merthin.

He was now living in the grandest of the houses he had built on Leper Island. It was on the south shore, ~~and~~ and stood in a broad garden newly planted with apple and pear trees. He had hired a middle-aged couple to take care of Lolla and maintain the place. Their names were Arnaud and Emily, but they called one another Arn and Em. Caris found Em in the kitchen, and was directed to the garden.

Merthin was showing Lolla how her name was written, using a pointed stick to form

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the letters in a patch of bare earth, and he made her laugh by drawing a face in the "o". She was four years old, a pretty girl with olive skin and brown eyes.

Watching them, Caris suffered a pang of regret. She had been sleeping with Merthin for almost half a year. She did not want to have a baby, for it would mean the end of all her ambitions; yet a part of her was sorry that she had not become pregnant. She was torn, which was probably why she had taken the risk. But it had not happened. She wondered whether she had lost the ability to conceive. Perhaps the potion Mattie Wise had given her to abort her pregnancy a decade ago had harmed her womb in some way. As always, she wished she knew more about the body and its ills.

Merthin kissed her and they walked around the grounds, with Lolla running in front of them, playing in her imagination an elaborate and impenetrable game that involved talking to each tree. The garden looked raw, all the plants new, the soil carted in from elsewhere to enrich the island's stony ground. "I've come to talk to you about the flagellants," Caris said, and she told him about last night at the hospital. "I want to ban them from Kingsbridge," she finished.

"Good idea," Merthin said. "The whole performance is just another money maker for Murdo."

"And Philemon. He was holding the bowl. Will you talk to the parish guild?"

"Of course."

As acting prior, Caris was in the position of lord of the manor, and she could theoretically have banned the flagellants herself, without asking anyone else. However, her application for a borough charter was before the king, and she expected soon to hand over the government of the town to the guild, so she treated the current situation as a transition.

Besides, it was always smarter to win support before trying to enforce a rule.

She said: "I'd like to have the constable escort Murdo and his followers out of town before the midday service."

"Philemon will be furious."

"He shouldn't have opened the church to them without consulting anyone." Caris knew there would be trouble, but she could not allow fear of Philemon's reaction to prevent her doing the right thing for the town. "We've got the Pope on our side. If we handle this discreetly and move fast, we can solve the problem before Philemon's had breakfast."

"All right," said Merthin. "I'll try to get the guildsmen together at the Holly Bush."

"I'll meet you there in an hour."

The parish guild was badly depleted, like every other organisation in town, but a handful of leading merchants had survived the plague, including Madge Webber, Jake Chepstow, and Edward Slaughterhouse. The new constable, John's son Mungo, attended, and his deputies waited outside for their instructions.

The discussion did not last long. None of the leading citizens had taken part in the orgy, and they all disapproved of such public displays. The Pope's ruling clinched the matter. Formally, Caris as prior promulgated a by-law forbidding whipping in the streets and public nudity, violators to be expelled from the town by the constable on the instructions of any three guildsmen. The guild then passed a resolution supporting the new law.

Then Mungo went upstairs and roused Friar Murdo from his bed.

Murdo did not go quietly. Coming down the stairs he raved, he wept, he prayed, and he cursed. Two of Mungo's deputies took him by the arms and half-carried him out of the tavern. In the street he became louder. Mungo led the way, and the guildsmen followed.

No
common

Some of Murdo's adherents came to protest and were themselves put under escort. A few townspeople tagged along as the group headed down the main street towards Merthin's bridge. None of the citizens objected to what was being done, and Philemon did not appear. Even some who had flogged themselves yesterday said nothing today, looking a bit shamefaced about it all.

The crowd fell away as the group crossed the bridge. With a reduced audience, Murdo became quieter. His righteous indignation was replaced by smouldering malevolence. Released at the far end of the double bridge, he stumped away through the suburbs without looking back. A handful of disciples trailed after him uncertainly.

Caris had a feeling she would not see him again.

She thanked Mungo and his men, then returned to the nunnery.

In the hospital, Oonagh was releasing the overnight accident cases to make room for new plague victims. Caris worked in the hospital until midday, then left gratefully and led the procession into the church for the main Sunday service. She found she was looking forward to an hour or two of psalms and prayers and a boring sermon: it would seem restful.

Philemon had a thunderous look when he led Thomas and the novice monks in. He had obviously heard about the expulsion of Murdo. No doubt he had seen the flagellants as a source of income for himself independent of Caris. That hope had been dashed, and he was livid.

For a moment, Caris wondered what he would do in his anger. Then she thought: Let him do what he likes. If it were not this, it would be something else. Whatever she did, sooner or later Philemon would be angry with her. There was no point in worrying about it.

She nodded off during the prayers and woke up when he began to preach. The pulpit

seemed to heighten his charmlessness, and his sermons were poorly received, in general. However, today he grabbed the attention of his audience at the start by announcing that his subject would be fornication.

He took as his text a verse from St Paul's first letter to the early Christians at Corinth. He read it in Latin, then translated it in ringing tones: "Now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone who is a fornicator!"

He elaborated tediously on the meaning of keeping company. "Don't eat with them, don't drink with them, don't live with them, don't talk to them." But Caris was wondering anxiously where he was going with this. Surely he would not dare to attack her directly from the pulpit? She glanced across the choir to Thomas, on the other side with the novice monks, and caught a worried look from him.

She looked again at Philemon's face, dark with resentment, and realised he was capable of anything.

"Who does this refer to?" he asked rhetorically. "Not to outsiders, the saint specifically writes. It is for God to judge them. But, he says, you are judges within the fellowship." He pointed at the congregation. "You!" He looked down again at the book and read: "Put away from among yourselves that wicked person!"

The congregation was quiet. They sensed that this was not the usual generalised exhortation to better behaviour. Philemon had a message.

"We must look around ourselves," he said. "In our town in our church in our priory! Are there any fornicators? If so, they must be put out!"

There was no doubt now in Caris's mind that he was referring to her. And all the more astute townspeople would have come to the same conclusion. But what could she do? She

could hardly get up and contradict him. She could not even walk out of the church, for that would underline his point and make it obvious, to the stupidest member of the congregation, that she was the target of his tirade.

So she listened, mortified. Philemon was speaking well for the first time ever. He did not hesitate or stumble, he enunciated clearly and projected his voice, and he managed to vary his usual dull monotone. For him, hatred was inspirational.

No one was going to put her out of the priory, of course. Even if she had been an incompetent prioress, the bishop would have kept her on, simply because the scarcity of clergy was chronic. Churches and monasteries all over the country were closing because there was no one to hold services or sing psalms. Bishops were desperate to appoint more priests, monks, and nuns, not sack them. Anyway, the townspeople would have revolted against any bishop who tried to get rid of Caris.

All the same, Philemon's sermon was damaging. It would now be more difficult for the town's leaders to turn a blind eye to Caris's liaison with Merthin. This kind of thing undermined people's respect. They would forgive a man for a sexual peccadillo more readily than a woman. And, as she was painfully aware, her position invited the accusation of hypocrisy.

She sat grinding her teeth through the peroration, which was the same message shouted louder, and the remainder of the service. As soon as the nuns and monks had processed out of the church, she went to her pharmacy and sat down to compose a letter to Bishop Henri, asking him to move Philemon to another monastery.

Instead, Henri promoted him.

No
comma

~~Henri~~

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2

STET

It was two weeks after the expulsion of Friar Murdo. They were in the north transept of the cathedral. The summer day was hot, but the interior of the church was always cool. The bishop sat on a carved wooden chair, and the others on benches: Philemon, Caris, Archdeacon Lloyd and Canon Claude.

"I'm appointing you prior of Kingsbridge," Henri said to Philemon.

Philemon smirked with delight and shot a triumphant look at Caris.

She was appalled. Two weeks ago she had given him a long list of sound reasons why Philemon could not be permitted to continue in a responsible position here—starting with his theft of a gold candlestick. But it seemed her letter had had the opposite effect.

She opened her mouth to protest, but Henri glared at her and raised his hand, and she decided to remain silent and find out what else he had to say. He continued to address Philemon. "I'm doing this despite, not because of, your behaviour since you returned here. You've been a malicious troublemaker, and if the church were not desperate for people I wouldn't promote you in a hundred years."

Then why do it now? Caris wondered.

"But we have to have a prior, and it simply is not satisfactory for the prioress to play that role, despite her undoubted ability."

Caris would have preferred him to appoint Thomas. But Thomas would have refused, she knew. He had been scarred by the bitter struggle over who was to succeed Prior Anthony, twelve years ago, and had sworn then never again to get involved in a priory election. In fact the bishop might well have spoken to Thomas, without Caris's knowledge, and learned this.

"However, your appointment is fenced about with provisos," Henri said to Philemon.

"First, you will not be confirmed in the role until Kingsbridge has obtained its borough

charter. You are not capable of running the town and I won't put you in that position. In the interim, therefore, Mother Caris will continue as acting prior, and you will live in the monks' dormitory. The palace will be locked up. If you misbehave in the waiting period, I will rescind the appointment."

Philemon looked angry and wounded by this, but he kept his mouth shut tight. He knew he had won and he was not going to argue about the conditions.

"Secondly, you will have your own treasury, but Brother Thomas is to be the treasurer, and no money will be spent nor precious objects removed without his knowledge and consent. Furthermore, I have ordered the building of a new tower, and I have authorised payments according to a schedule prepared by Merthin Bridger. The priory will make these payments from the monks' funds, and neither Philemon nor anyone else shall have the power to alter this arrangement. I don't want half a tower."

Merthin would get his wish, at least, Caris thought gratefully.

Henri turned to Caris. "I have one more command to issue, and it is for you, Mother Prioress."

Now what? she thought.

"There has been an accusation of fornication."

Caris stared at the bishop, thinking about the time she had surprised him and Claude naked. How did he dare to raise this subject?

He went on: "I say nothing about the past. But for the future, it is not possible that the prioress of Kingsbridge should have a relationship with a man."

She wanted to say: But you live with your lover! However, she suddenly noticed the expression on Henri's face. It was a pleading look. He was begging her not to make the

accusation that, he well knew, would show him up as a hypocrite. He knew that what he was doing was unjust, she realised, but he had no choice. Philemon had forced him into this position.

She was tempted, all the same, to sting him with a rebuke. But she restrained herself. It would do no good. Henri's back was to the wall and he was doing his best. Caris clamped her mouth shut.

Henri said: "May I have your assurance, Mother Prioress, that from this moment on there will be absolutely no grounds for the accusation?"

Caris looked at the floor. She had been here before. Once again her choice was to give up everything she had worked for—the hospital, the borough charter, the tower—or to part with Merthin. And, once again, she chose her work.

She raised her head and looked him in the eye. "Yes, my lord bishop," she said. "You have my word."

She spoke to Merthin in the hospital, surrounded by other people. She was trembling and close to tears, but she could not see him in private. She knew that if they were alone her resolve would weaken, and she would throw her arms around him and tell him that she loved him, and promise to leave the nunnery and marry him. So she sent a message, and greeted him at the door of the hospital, then spoke to him in a matter-of-fact voice, her arms folded tightly across her chest so that she would not be tempted to reach out with a fond gesture and touch the body she loved so much.

When she had finished telling him about the bishop's ultimatum and her decision, he looked at her as if he could kill her. "This is the last time," he said.

“What do you mean?”

“If you do this, it’s permanent. I’m not going to wait around any more, hoping that one day you will be my wife.”

She felt as if he had hit her.

He went on, delivering another blow with each sentence. “If you mean what you’re saying, I’m going to try to forget you now. I’m thirty-three years old. I don’t have forever—^T_M my father is dying at the age of fifty-eight. I’ll marry someone else and have more children and be happy in my garden.”

The picture he painted tortured her. She bit her lip, trying to control her grief, but hot tears ran down her face.

He was remorseless. “I’m not going to waste my life loving you,” he said, and she felt as if he had stabbed her. “Leave the nunnery now, or stay there for ever.”

She tried to look steadily at him. “I won’t forget you. I will always love you.”

“But not enough.”

She was silent for a long moment. It wasn’t like that, she knew. Her love was not weak or inadequate. It just presented her with impossible choices. But there seemed no point in arguing. “Is that what you really believe?” she said.

“It seems obvious.”

She nodded, though she did not really agree. “I’m sorry,” she said. “More sorry than I have ever been in my whole life.”

“So am I,” he said, and he turned away and walked out of the building.

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Sir Gregory Longfellow at last went back to London, but he returned surprisingly quickly, as if he had bounced off the wall of that great city like a football. He showed up at Tench Hall at supper time looking harassed, breathing hard through his flared nostrils, his long grey hair matted with perspiration. He walked in with something less than his usual air of being in command of all men and beasts that crossed his path. Ralph and Alan were standing by a window, looking at a new broad-bladed style of dagger called a basilard. Without speaking, Gregory threw his tall figure into Ralph's big carved chair: whatever might have happened, he was still too grand to wait for an invitation to sit.

Ralph and Alan stared at him expectantly. Ralph's mother sniffed censoriously: she disliked bad manners.

Finally Gregory said: "The king does not like to be disobeyed."

That scared Ralph.

He looked anxiously at Gregory, and asked himself what he had done that could possibly be interpreted as disobedient by the king. He could think of nothing. Nervously he said: "I'm sorry his majesty is displeased—I hope it's not with me."

"You're involved," Gregory said with annoying vagueness. "And so am I. The king feels that when his wishes are frustrated it sets a bad precedent."

"I quite agree."

"That is why you and I are going to leave here tomorrow, ride to Earls castle, see the Lady Philippa, and make her marry you."

So that was it. Ralph was mainly relieved. He could not be held responsible for Philippa's recalcitrance, in all fairness ^L_M not that fairness made much difference to kings. But, reading between the lines, he guessed that the person taking the blame was Gregory, and so Gregory was now determined to rescue the king's plan and redeem himself.

There was fury and malice in Gregory's expression. He said: "By the time I have finished with her, I promise you, she will beg you to marry her."

Ralph could not imagine how this was to be achieved. As Philippa herself had pointed out, you could lead a woman up the aisle but you could not force her to say "I do." He said to Gregory: "Someone told me that a widow's right to refuse marriage is actually guaranteed by Magna Carta."

Gregory gave him a malevolent look. "Don't remind me. I made the mistake of mentioning that to His Majesty."

Ralph wondered, in that case, what threats or promises Gregory planned to use to bend Philippa to his will. Himself, he could think of no way to marry her short of abducting her by force and carrying her off to some isolated church where a generously bribed priest would turn a deaf ear to her cries of "No, never!"

They set off early next morning with a small entourage. It was harvest time and, in the North Field, the men were reaping tall stalks of rye while the women followed behind, binding the sheaves.

Lately Ralph had spent more time worrying about the harvest than about Philippa.

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This was not because of the weather, which was fine, but the plague. He had too few tenants and almost no labourers. Many had been stolen from him by unscrupulous landlords such as Prioress Caris, who seduced other lords' men by offering high wages and attractive tenancies. In desperation, Ralph had given some of his serfs ~~what they called~~ free tenancies, which meant they had no obligation to work on ^{his} ~~their lord's~~ land ^I ~~an~~ arrangement that left Ralph denuded of labour at harvest time. In consequence, it was likely that some of his crops would rot in the fields.

However, he felt his troubles would be over if he could marry Philippa. He would have ten times the land he now controlled, plus income from a dozen other sources, including courts, forests, markets and mills. And his family would be restored to its rightful place in the nobility. Sir Gerald would be the father of an earl before he died.

He wondered again what Gregory had in mind. Philippa had set herself a challenging task, in defying the formidable will and powerful connections of Gregory. Ralph would not have wished to be standing in her beaded silk shoes.

They arrived at Earls castle shortly before noon. The sound of the rooks quarrelling on the battlements always reminded Ralph of the time he had spent here as a squire in the service of Earl Roland ^M ~~the~~ happiest days of his life, he sometimes thought. But the place was very quiet now, without an earl. There were no squires playing violent games in the lower compound, no warhorses snorting and stamping as they were groomed and exercised outside the stables, no men-at-arms throwing dice on the steps of the keep.

Philippa was in the old-fashioned hall with Odila and a handful of female attendants. Mother and daughter were working on a tapestry together, sitting side by side on a bench in front of the loom. The picture looked as if it would show a forest scene, when finished.

Philippa was weaving brown thread for the tree trunks and Odila bright green for the leaves.

“Very nice, but it needs more life,” Ralph said, making his voice cheerful and friendly. “A few birds and rabbits, and maybe some dogs chasing a deer.”

Philippa was as immune to his charm as ever. She stood up and stepped back, away from him. The girl did the same. Ralph noticed that mother and daughter were equal in height. Philippa said: “Why have you come here?”

Have it your way, Ralph thought resentfully. He half-turned away from her. “Sir Gregory here has something to say to you,” he said, and he went to a window and looked out, as if bored.

Gregory greeted the two women formally, and said he hoped he was not intruding on them. It was rubbish—he did not give a hoot for their privacy—but the courtesy seemed to mollify Philippa, who invited him to sit down. Then he said: “The king is annoyed with you, countess.”

Philippa bowed her head. “I am very sorry indeed to have displeased His Majesty.”

“He wishes to reward his loyal servant, Sir Ralph, by making him earl of Shiring. At the same time, he will be providing a young, vigorous husband for you, and a good stepfather for your daughter.” Philippa shuddered, but Gregory ignored that. “He is mystified by your stubborn defiance.”

Philippa looked scared, as well she might. Things would have been different if she had had a brother or an uncle to stick up for her, but the plague had wiped out her family. As a woman without male relations, she had no one to defend her from the king’s wrath. “What will he do?” she said apprehensively.

“He has not mentioned the word ‘treason’ yet.”

Ralph was not sure Philippa could legally be accused of treason, but all the same the threat caused her to turn pale.

Gregory went on: "He has asked me, in the first instance, to reason with you."

Philippa said: "Of course, the king sees marriage as a political matter—"

"It is political," Gregory interrupted. "If your beautiful daughter, here, were to fancy herself in love with the charming son of a scullery maid, you would say to her, as I say to you, that noblewomen may not marry whomever they fancy; and you would lock her in her room and have the boy flogged outside her window until he renounced her for ever."

Philippa looked affronted. She did not like being lectured on the duties of her station by a mere lawyer. "I understand the obligations of an aristocratic widow," she said haughtily. "I am a countess, my grandmother was a countess, and my sister was a countess until she died of the plague. But marriage is not just politics. It is also a matter of the heart. We women throw ourselves on the mercy of the men who are our lords and masters, and who have the duty of wisely deciding our fate; and we beg that what we feel in our hearts be not entirely ignored. Such pleas are usually heard."

She was upset, Ralph could see, but still in control, still full of contempt. That word "wisely" had a sarcastic sting.

"In normal times, perhaps you would be right, but these are strange days," Gregory replied. "Usually, when the king looks around him for someone worthy of an earldom, he sees a dozen wise, strong, vigorous men, loyal to him and keen to serve him in any way they can, any of whom he could appoint to the title with confidence. But now that so many of the best men have been struck down by the plague, the king is like a housewife who goes to the fishmonger at the end of the afternoon—forced to take whatever is left on the slab."

Ralph saw the force of the argument, but also felt insulted. However, he pretended not to notice.

Philippa changed her tack. She waved a servant over and said: "Bring us a jug of the best Gascon wine, please. And Sir Gregory will be having dinner here, so let's have some of this season's lamb, cooked with garlic and rosemary."

"Yes, my lady."

Gregory said: "You're most kind, countess."

Philippa was incapable of coquetry. To pretend that she was simply being hospitable, with no ulterior motive, was beyond her. She returned straight to the subject. "Sir Gregory, I have to tell you that my heart, my soul, and my entire being revolt against the prospect of marrying Sir Ralph Fitzgerald."

"But why?" said Gregory. "He's a man like any other."

"No, he's not," she said.

They were speaking about Ralph as if he were not there, in a way that he found deeply offensive. But Philippa was desperate, and would say anything; and he was curious to know just what it was about him that she disliked so much.

She paused, collecting her thoughts. "If I say rapist, torturer, murderer... the words just seem too abstract."

Ralph was taken aback. He did not think of himself that way. Of course, he had tortured people in the king's service, and he had raped Annet, and he had murdered several men, women, and children in his days as an outlaw... At least, he consoled himself, Philippa did not appear to have guessed that he was the hooded figure who had killed Tilly, his own wife.

Philippa went on: "Human beings have within them something that prevents them from doing such things. It is the ability ~~|||~~ no, the compulsion to feel another's pain. We can't help it. You, Sir Gregory, could not rape a woman, because you would feel her grief and agony, you would suffer with her, and this would compel you to relent. You could not torture or murder for the same reason. One who lacks the faculty to feel another's pain is not a man, even though he may walk on two legs and speak English." She leaned forward, lowering her voice, but even so Ralph heard her clearly. "And I will not lie in bed with an animal."

Ralph burst out: "I am not an animal!"

He expected Gregory to back him up. Instead, Gregory seemed to give in. "Is that your final word, Lady Philippa?"

Ralph was astonished. Was Gregory going to let that pass, as if it might be even half true?

Philippa said to Gregory: "I need you to go back to the king and tell him that I am his loyal and obedient subject, and that I long to win his favour, but that I could not marry Ralph if the Archangel Gabriel commanded me."

"I see." Gregory stood up. "We will not stay to dinner."

Was that all? Ralph had been waiting for Gregory to produce his surprise, a secret weapon, some irresistible bribe or threat. Did the clever court lawyer really have nothing up his costly brocade sleeve?

Philippa seemed equally startled to find the argument so suddenly terminated.

Gregory went to the door, and Ralph had no choice but to follow. Philippa and Odila stared at the two of them, unsure what to make of this cool walkout. The ladies-in-waiting fell silent.

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Philippa said: "Please, beg the king to be merciful."

"He will be, my lady," said Gregory. "He has authorised² me to tell you that, in the light of your obstinacy, he will not force you to marry a man you loathe."

"Thank you!" she said. "You have saved my life."

Ralph opened his mouth to protest. He had been promised! He had committed sacrilege and murder for this reward. Surely it could not be taken from him now?

But Gregory spoke first. "Instead," he said, "it is the king's command that Ralph will marry your daughter." He paused, and pointed at the tall fifteen-year-old girl standing beside her mother. "Odila," he said, as if there were any need to emphasize who he was talking about.

Philippa gasped and Odila screamed.

Gregory bowed. "Good day to you both."

Philippa cried: "Wait!"

Gregory took no notice, and went out.

Stunned, Ralph followed.

Gwenda was weary when she woke up. It was harvest time, and she was spending every hour of the long August days in the fields. Wulfric would swing the scythe tirelessly from sunrise to nightfall, mowing down the corn. Gwenda's job was to bundle the sheaves. All day long she bent down and scooped up the mown stalks, bent and scooped, bent and scooped until her back seemed to burn with pain. When it was too dark to see, she staggered home and fell into bed, leaving the family to feed themselves with whatever they could find in the cupboard.

Wulfric woke at dawn, and his movements penetrated Gwenda's deep slumber. She

struggled to her feet. They all needed a good breakfast, and she put cold mutton, bread, butter, and strong beer on the table. Sam, the ten-year-old, got up, but Davy, who was only eight, had to be shaken awake and pulled to his feet.

“This holding was never farmed by one man and his wife,” Gwenda said grumpily as they ate.

Wulfric was irritatingly positive. “You and I got the harvest in on our own, the year the bridge collapsed,” he said cheerfully.

“I was twelve years younger then.”

“But you’re more beautiful now.”

She was in no mood for gallantry. “Even when your father and brother were alive, you took on hired labour at harvest time.”

“Never mind. It’s our land, and we planted the crops, so we’ll benefit from the harvest, instead of earning just a penny a day wages. The more we work, the more we get. That’s what you always wanted, isn’t it?”

“I always wanted to be independent and self-sufficient, if that’s what you mean.” She went to the door. “A west wind, and a few clouds in the sky.”

Wulfric looked worried. “We need the rain to hold off for another two or three days.”

“I think it will. Come on, boys, time to go to the field. You can eat walking along.” She was bundling the bread and meat into a sack for their dinner when Nate Reeve hobbled in through the door. “Oh, no!” she said. “Not today—we’ve almost got our harvest in!”

“The lord has a harvest to get in, too,” said the bailiff.

Nate was followed in by his ten-year-old son, Jonathan, known as Jonno, who immediately started making faces at Sam.

Gwenda said: "Give us three more days on our own land."

"Don't bother to dispute with me about this," Nate said. "You owe the lord one day a week, and two days at harvest time. Today and tomorrow you will reap his barley in Brook Field."

"The second day is normally forgiven. That's been the practice for a long time."

"It was, in times of plentiful labour. The lord is desperate now. So many people have negotiated free tenancies that he has hardly anyone to bring in his harvest."

"So those who negotiated with you, and demanded to be freed of their customary duties, are rewarded, while people like us, who accepted the old terms, are punished with twice as much work on the lord's land." She looked accusingly at Wulfric, remembering how he had ignored her when she told him to argue terms with Nate.

"Something like that," Nate said carelessly.

"Hell," Gwenda said.

"Don't curse," said Nate. "You'll get a free dinner. There will be wheat bread, and a new barrel of ale. Isn't that something to look forward to?"

"Sir Ralph feeds oats to the horses he means to ride hard."

"Don't be long, now!" Nate went out.

His son, Jonno, poked out his tongue at Sam. Sam made a grab for him, but Jonno slipped out of his grasp and ran after his father.

Wearily, Gwenda and her family trudged across the fields to where Ralph's barley stood waving in the breeze. They got down to work. Wulfric reaped and Gwenda bundled. Sam, aged ten, followed behind, picking up the stray stalks she missed, gathering them until he had enough for a sheaf, then passing them to her to be tied. David, eight, had small,

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nimble fingers, and he plaited straws into tough cords for tying the sheaves. Those other families still working under old-style tenancies laboured alongside them, while the cleverer serfs reaped their own crops.

When the sun was at its highest, Nate drove up in a cart with a barrel on the back. True to his word, he provided each family with a big loaf of delicious new wheat bread. Everyone ate their fill, then the adults lay down in the shade to rest while the children played.

Gwenda was dozing off when she heard an outbreak of childish screaming. She knew immediately, from the voice, that neither of her boys was making the noise, but all the same she leaped to her feet. She saw her son Sam fighting with Jonno Reeve. Although they were roughly the same age and size, Sam had Jonno on the ground and was punching and kicking him mercilessly. Gwenda moved towards the boys, but Wulfric was quicker, and he grabbed Sam with one hand and hauled him off.

Gwenda looked at Jonno in dismay. The boy was bleeding from his nose and mouth, and his face around one eye was inflamed and already beginning to swell. He was holding his stomach, moaning and crying. Gwenda had seen plenty of scraps between boys, but this was different. Jonno had been beaten up.

Gwenda stared at her ten-year-old son. His face was unmarked: it looked as if Jonno had not landed a single blow. Sam showed no sign of remorse at what he had done. Rather, he looked smugly triumphant. It was a vaguely familiar expression, and Gwenda searched her memory for its likeness. She did not take long to recall who she had seen looking like that after giving someone a beating.

She had seen the same expression on the face of Ralph Fitzgerald, Sam's real father.

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Two days after Ralph and Gregory visited Earlscastle, Lady Philippa came to Tench Hall.

Ralph had been considering the prospect of marrying Odila. She was a beautiful young girl, but you could buy beautiful young girls for a few pennies in London. Ralph had already had the experience of being married to someone who was little more than a child. After the initial excitement wore off, he had been bored and irritated by her.

He wondered for a while whether he might marry Odila and get Philippa too. The idea of marrying the daughter and keeping the mother as his mistress intrigued him. He might even have them together. He had once had sex with a mother-daughter pair of prostitutes in Calais, and the element of incest had created an exciting sense of depravity.

But, on reflection, he knew that was not going to happen. Philippa would never consent to such an arrangement. He might look for ways to coerce her, but she was not easily bullied. "I don't want to marry Odila," he had said to Gregory as they rode home from Earlscastle.

"You won't have to," Gregory had said, but he refused to elaborate.

Philippa arrived with a lady-in-waiting and a bodyguard but without Odila. As she entered Tench Hall, for once she did not look proud. She did not even look beautiful, Ralph thought: clearly she had not slept for two nights.

They had just sat down to dinner: Ralph, Alan, Gregory, a handful of squires, and a bailiff. Philippa was the only woman in the room.

She walked up to Gregory.

The courtesy he had shown her ~~yesterday~~ ^{previously} was forgotten. He did not stand, but rudely looked her up and down, as if she were a servant girl with a grievance. "Well?" he said at last.

It was two days ago

No
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"I will marry Ralph."

"Oh!" he said in mock surprise. "Will you, now?"

"Yes. Rather than sacrifice my daughter to him, I will marry him myself."

"My lady," he said sarcastically, "you seem to think that the king has led you to a table laden with dishes, and asked you to choose which you like best. You are mistaken. The king does not ask what is your pleasure. He commands. You disobeyed one command, so he issued another. He did not give you a choice."

She looked down. "I am very sorry for my behaviour. Please spare my daughter."

"If it were up to me, I would decline your request, as punishment for your intransigence. But perhaps you should plead with Sir Ralph."

She looked at Ralph. He saw rage and despair in her eyes. He felt excited. She was the most haughty woman he had ever met, and he had broken her pride. He wanted to lie with her now, right away.

But it was not yet over.

He said: "You have something to say to me?"

"I apologise."

"Come here." Ralph was sitting at the head of the table, and she approached and stood by him. He caressed the head of a lion carved into the arm of his chair. "Go on," he said.

"I am sorry that I spurned you ~~yesterday~~ ^{before}. I would like to withdraw everything I said. I accept your proposal. I will marry you."

"But I have not renewed my proposal. The king orders me to marry Odila."

"If you ask the king to revert to his original plan, surely he will grant your plea."

"And that is what you are asking me to do."

“Yes.” She looked him in the eye and swallowed her final humiliation. “I am asking you... I am begging you. Please, Sir Ralph, make me your wife.”

Ralph stood up, pushing his chair back. “Kiss me, then.”

She closed her eyes.

He put his left arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him. He kissed her lips. She submitted unresponsively. With his right hand, he squeezed her breast. It was as firm and heavy as he had always imagined. He ran his hand down her body and between her legs. She flinched, but remained unresistingly in his embrace, and he pressed his palm against the fork of her thighs. He grasped her mound, cupping its triangular fatness in his hand.

Then, holding that position, he broke the kiss and looked around the room at his friends.

76

At the same time as Ralph was created earl of Shiring, a young man called David Caerleon became earl of Monmouth. He was only seventeen, and related rather distantly to the dead man, but all nearer heirs to the title had been wiped out by the plague.

A few days before Christmas that year, Bishop Henri held a service in Kingsbridge Cathedral to bless the two new earls. Afterwards David and Ralph were guests of honour at a banquet given by Merthin in the guild hall. The merchants were also celebrating the granting of a borough charter to Kingsbridge.

Ralph considered David to have been extraordinarily lucky. The boy had never been outside the kingdom, nor had he ever fought in battle, yet he was an earl at seventeen. Ralph had marched all through Normandy with King Edward, risked his life in battle after battle, lost three fingers, and committed countless sins in the king's service, yet he had had to wait until the age of thirty-two.

However, he had made it at last, and sat next to Bishop Henri at the table, wearing a costly brocade coat woven with gold and silver threads. People who knew him pointed him out to strangers, wealthy merchants made way for him and bowed their heads respectfully as he passed, and the maidservant's hand shook with nervousness as she poured wine into his cup. His father, Sir Gerald, confined to bed now but hanging on tenaciously to life, had said:

"I'm the descendant of an earl, and the father of an earl. I'm satisfied." It was all profoundly gratifying.

Ralph was keen to talk to David about the problem of labourers. It had eased temporarily now that the harvest was in and the autumn ploughing was finished: at this time of year the days were short and the weather was cold, so not much work could be done in the fields. Unfortunately, as soon as the spring ploughing began and the ground was soft enough for the serfs to sow seeds, the trouble would start again: labourers would recommence agitating for higher wages, and if refused would illegally run off to more extravagant employers.

The only way to stop this was for the nobility collectively to stand firm, resist demands for higher pay, and refuse to hire runaways. This was what Ralph wanted to say to David.

However, the new earl of Monmouth showed no inclination to talk to Ralph. He was more interested in Ralph's stepdaughter, Odila, who was near his own age. They had met before, Ralph gathered: Philippa and her first husband, William, had often been guests at the castle when David had been a squire in the service of the old earl. Whatever their history, they were friends now: David was talking animatedly and Odila was hanging on every word—agreeing with his opinions, gasping at his stories, and laughing at his jokes.

Ralph had always envied men who could fascinate women. His brother had the ability, and consequently was able to attract the most beautiful women, despite being a short, plain man with red hair.

All the same, Ralph felt sorry for Merthin. Ever since the day that Earl Roland had made Ralph a squire and condemned Merthin to be a carpenter's apprentice, Merthin had

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been doomed. Even though he was the elder, it was Ralph who was destined to become the earl. Merthin, now sitting on the other side of Earl David, had to console himself with being a mere alderman—and having charm.

Ralph could not even charm his own wife. She hardly spoke to him. She had more to say to his dog.

How was it possible, Ralph asked himself, for a man to want something as badly as he had wanted Philippa, and then to be so dissatisfied when he got it? He had yearned for her since he was a squire of nineteen. Now, after three months of marriage, he wished with all his heart that he could get rid of her.

Yet it was hard for him to complain. Philippa did everything a wife was obliged to do. She ran the castle efficiently, as she had been doing ever since her first husband had been made earl after the battle of Crécy. Supplies were ordered, bills were paid, clothes were sewn, fires were lit, and food and wine arrived on the table unfailingly. And she submitted to Ralph's sexual attentions. He could do anything he liked: tear her clothes, thrust his fingers ungently inside her, take her standing up or from behind—she never complained.

But she did not reciprocate his caresses. Her lips never moved against his, her tongue never slipped into his mouth, she never stroked his skin. She kept a vial of almond oil handy, and lubricated her unresponsive body with it whenever he wanted sex. She lay as still as a corpse while he grunted on top of her. The moment he rolled off, she went to wash herself.

The only good thing about the marriage was that Odila was fond of little Gerry. The baby brought out her nascent maternal instinct. She loved to talk to him, sing him songs, and rock him to sleep. She gave him the kind of affectionate mothering he would never really get from a paid nurse.

All the same, Ralph was regretful. Philippa's voluptuous body, which he had stared at with longing for so many years, was now revolting to him. He had not touched her for weeks, and he probably never would again. He looked at her heavy breasts and round hips, and wished for the slender limbs and girlish skin of Tilly. Tilly, whom he had stabbed with a long, sharp knife that went up under her ribs and into her beating heart. That was a sin he did not dare to confess. How long, he wondered wretchedly, would he suffer for it in purgatory?

The bishop and his colleagues were staying in the prior's palace, and the Monmouth entourage filled the priory's guest rooms, so Ralph and Philippa and their servants were lodging at an inn. Ralph had chosen the Bell, the rebuilt tavern owned by his brother. It was the only three-storey house in Kingsbridge, with a big open room at ground level, male and female dormitories above, and a top floor with six expensive individual guest rooms. When the banquet was over, Ralph and his men removed to the tavern, where they installed themselves in front of the fire, called for more wine, and began to play at dice. Philippa remained behind, talking to Caris and chaperoning Odila with earl David.

Ralph and his companions attracted a crowd of admiring young men and women such as always gathered around free-spending noblemen. Ralph gradually forgot his troubles in the euphoria of drink and the thrill of gambling.

He noticed a young fair-haired woman watching him with a yearning expression as he cheerfully lost stacks of silver pennies on the throw of the dice. He beckoned her to sit beside him on the bench, and she told him her name was Ella. At moments of tension she grabbed his thigh, as if captured by the suspense, though she probably knew exactly what she was doing—women usually did.

He gradually lost interest in the game and transferred his attention to her. His men

carried on betting while he got to know Ella. She was everything Philippa was not: happy, sexy, and fascinated by Ralph. She touched him and herself a lot—she would push her hair off her face, then pat his arm, then hold her hand to her throat, then push his shoulder playfully. She seemed very interested in his experiences in France.

To Ralph's annoyance, Merthin came into the tavern and sat down with him. Merthin was not running the Bell himself—he had rented it to the youngest daughter of Betty Baxter—but he was keen that the tenant should make a success of it, and he asked Ralph if everything was to his satisfaction. Ralph introduced his companion, and Merthin said "Yes, I know Ella," in a dismissive tone that was uncharacteristically discourteous.

Today was only the third or fourth time the two brothers had met since the death of Tilly. On previous occasions, such as Ralph's wedding to Philippa, there had hardly been time to talk. All the same Ralph knew, from the way his brother looked at him, that Merthin suspected him of being Tilly's killer. The unspoken thought was a looming presence, never addressed but impossible to ignore, like the cow in the cramped one-room hovel of a poor peasant. If it was mentioned, Ralph felt that would be the last time they ever spoke.

So tonight, as if by mutual consent, they once again exchanged a few meaningless platitudes, then Merthin left, saying he had work to do. Ralph wondered briefly what work he was going to do at dusk on a December evening. He really had no idea how Merthin spent his time. He did not hunt, or hold court, or attend on the king. Was it possible to spend all day, every day, making drawings and supervising builders? Such a life would have driven Ralph mad. And he was baffled by how much money Merthin seemed to make from his enterprises. Ralph himself had been short of money even when he had been Lord of Tench. Merthin never seemed to lack it.

Ralph turned his attention back to Ella. "My brother's a bit grumpy," he said apologetically.

"It's because he hasn't had a woman for half a year." She giggled. "He used to shag the prioress, but she had to throw him out after Philemon came back."

Ralph pretended to be shocked. "Nuns aren't supposed to be shagged."

"Mother Caris is a wonderful woman—but she's got the itch, you can tell by the way she walks."

Ralph was aroused by such frank talk from a woman. "It's very bad for a man," he said, playing along. "To go for so long without a woman."

"I think so too."

"It leads to...swelling."

She put her head on one side and raised her eyebrows. He glanced down at his own lap. She followed his gaze. "Oh, dear," she said. "That looks uncomfortable." She put her hand on his erect penis.

At that moment, Philippa appeared

Ralph froze. He felt guilty and scared, and at the same time he was furious with himself for caring whether Philippa saw what he was doing or not.

She said: "I'm going upstairs—oh."

Ella did not release her hold. In fact she squeezed Ralph's penis gently, while looking up at Philippa and smiling triumphantly.

Philippa flushed red, her face registering shame and distaste.

Ralph opened his mouth to speak, then did not know what to say. He was not willing to apologise to his virago of a wife, feeling that she had brought this humiliation on herself.

But he also felt somewhat foolish, sitting there with a tavern tart holding his prick while his wife, the countess, stood in front of them looking embarrassed.

The tableau lasted only a moment. Ralph made a strangled sound, Ella giggled, and Philippa said "Oh!" in a tone of exasperation and disgust. Then Philippa turned and walked away, head held unnaturally high. She approached the broad staircase and went up, as graceful as a deer on a hillside, and disappeared without looking back.

Ralph felt both angry and ashamed, though he reasoned that he had no need to feel either. However, his interest in Ella diminished visibly, and he took her hand away.

"Have some more wine," she said, pouring from the jug on the table, but Ralph felt the onset of a headache, and pushed the wooden cup away.

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Ella put a restraining hand on his arm and said in a low, warm voice: "Don't leave me in the lurch now that you've got me all, you know, excited."

He shook her off and stood up.

Her face hardened and she said: "Well, you'd better give me something by way of compensation."

dipped

He ~~put his hand~~ dipped into his purse and took out a handful of silver pennies. Without looking at Ella, he dumped the money on the table, not caring whether it was too much or too little.

She began to scoop up the coins hastily.

Ralph left her and went upstairs.

Philippa was on the bed, sitting upright with her back against the headboard. She had taken off her shoes but was otherwise fully dressed. She stared accusingly at Ralph as he walked in.

To avoid repetition

He said: "You have no right to be angry with me!"

"I'm not angry," she said. "But you are."

She could always twist words around so that she was in the right and he in the wrong.

Before he could think of a reply, she said: "Wouldn't you like me to leave you?"

He stared at her, astonished. This was the last thing he had expected. "Where would you go?"

"Here," she said. "I won't become a nun, but I could live in the convent nevertheless. I would bring just a few servants: a maid, a clerk, and my confessor. I've already spoken to Mother Caris, and she is willing."

"My last wife did that. What will people think?"

"A lot of noblewomen retire to nunneries, either temporarily or permanently, at some point in their lives. People will think you've rejected me because I'm past the age for conceiving children^T_M—which I probably am. Anyway, do you care what people say?"

The thought briefly flashed across his mind that he would be sorry to see Gerry lose Odila. But the prospect of being free of Philippa's proud, disapproving presence was irresistible. "All right, what's stopping you? Tilly never asked permission."

"I want to see Odila married first."

"Who to?"

She looked at him as if he were stupid.

"Oh," he said. "Young David, I suppose."

"He is in love with her, and I think they would be well suited."

"He's under age^T_M—he'll have to ask the king."

"That's why I've raised it with you. Will you go with him to see the king, and speak

in support of the marriage? If you do this for me, I swear I will never ask you for anything ever again. I will leave you in peace.”

She was not asking him to make any sacrifices. An alliance with Monmouth could do Ralph nothing but good. “And you’ll leave Earls castle, and move into the nunnery?”

“Yes, as soon as Odila is married.”

It was the end of a dream, Ralph realised², but a dream that had turned into a sour, bleak reality. He might as well acknowledge the failure and start again.

“All right,” he said, feeling regret mingled with liberation. “It’s a bargain.”

77

Easter came early in the year 1350, and there was a big fire blazing in Merthin's hearth on the evening of Good Friday. The table was laid with a cold supper: smoked fish, soft cheese, new bread, pears, and a flagon of Rhenish wine. Merthin was wearing clean underclothes and a new yellow robe. The house had been swept, and there were daffodils in a jug on the sideboard.

Merthin was alone. Lolla was with his servants, Arn and Em. Their cottage was at the end of the garden, but Lolla, who was five, loved to stay there overnight. She called it going on pilgrimage, and took a travelling bag containing her hair brush and a favourite doll.

Merthin opened a window and looked out. A cold breeze blew across the river from the meadow on the south side. The last of the evening was fading, the light seeming to fall out of the sky and sink into the water, where it disappeared in the blackness.

He visualised a hooded figure emerging from the nunnery. He saw it tread a worn diagonal across the cathedral green, hurry past the lights of the Bell, and descend the muddy main street, the face shadowed, speaking to no one. He imagined it reaching the foreshore. Did it glance sideways into the cold black river, and remember a moment of despair so great as to give rise to thoughts of self-destruction? If so, the recollection was quickly dismissed, and it stepped forward on to the cobbled roadbed of his bridge. It crossed the span and made

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landfall again on Leper Island. There it diverted from the main road and passed through low shrubbery, across scrubby grass cropped by rabbits, and around the ruins of the old lazaret house until it came to the south-west shore. Then it tapped on Merthin's door.

He closed the window and waited. No tap came. He was wishfully a little ahead of schedule.

He was tempted to drink some wine, but he did not: a ritual had developed, and he did not want to change the order of events.

The knock came a few moments later. He opened the door. She stepped inside, threw back her hood, and dropped the heavy grey cloak from her shoulders.

She was taller than he by an inch or more, and a decade older. Her face was proud, and could be haughty, although now her smile radiated warmth like the sun. She wore a robe of bright Kingsbridge scarlet. He put his arms around her, pressing her voluptuous body to his own, and kissed her wide mouth. "My darling," he said. "Philippa."

They made love immediately, there on the floor, hardly undressing. He was hungry for her, and she was if anything more eager. He spread her cloak on the straw, and she lifted the skirt of her robe and lay down. She clung to him like one drowning, her legs wrapped around his, her arms crushing him to her soft body, her face buried in his neck.

She had told him that ~~that~~ after she left Ralph and moved into the priory, she had thought no one would ever touch her again until the nuns laid out her cold body for burial. The thought almost made Merthin cry.

For his part, he had loved Caris so much that he felt no other woman would ever arouse his affection. For him as well as Philippa, this love had come as an unexpected gift, a spring of cold water bubbling up in a baking-hot desert, and they both drank from it as if they

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were dying of thirst.

Afterwards they lay entwined by the fire, panting, and he recalled the first time. Soon after she moved to the priory she had taken an interest in the building of the new tower. A practical woman, she had trouble filling the long hours that were supposed to be spent in prayer and meditation. She enjoyed the library but could not read all day. She came to see him in the mason's loft, and he showed her the plans. She quickly got into the habit of visiting every day, talking to him while he worked. He had always admired her intelligence and strength, and in the intimacy of the loft he came to know the warm, generous spirit beneath her stately manner. He discovered that she had a lively sense of humour, and he learned how to make her laugh. She responded with a rich, throaty chuckle that, somehow, led him to think of making love to her. One day she had paid him a compliment. "You're a kind man," she had said. "There aren't enough of them." Her sincerity had touched him, and he had kissed her hand. It was a gesture of affection, but one she could reject, if she wished, without drama: she simply had to withdraw her hand and take a step back, and he would have known he had gone a little too far. But she had not rejected it. On the contrary, she had held his hand and looked at him with something like love in her eyes, and he had wrapped his arms around her and kissed her lips.

They had made love on the mattress in the loft, and he had not remembered until afterwards that Caris had encouraged him to put the mattress there, with a joke about masons needing a soft place for their tools.

Caris did not know about him and Philippa. No one did except Philippa's maid and Arn and Em. She went to bed in her private room on the upper floor of the hospital soon after nightfall, at the same time as the nuns retired to their dormitory. She slipped out while they

were asleep, using the outside steps that permitted important guests to come and go without passing through the common people's quarters. She returned by the same route before dawn, while the nuns were singing Matins, and appeared at breakfast as if she had been in her room all night.

He was surprised to find that he could love another woman less than a year after Caris had left him for the final time. He certainly had not forgotten Caris. On the contrary, he thought about her every day. He felt the urge to tell her about something amusing that had happened, or he wanted her opinion on a knotty problem, or he found himself performing some task the way she would want it done, such as carefully bathing Lolla's grazed knee with warm wine. And then he saw her most days. The new hospital was almost finished, but the cathedral tower was barely begun, and Caris kept a close eye on both building projects. The priory had lost its power to control the town merchants, but nevertheless Caris took an interest in the work Merthin and the guild were doing to create all the institutions of a borough—establishing new courts, planning a wool exchange, and encouraging the craft guilds to codify standards and measures. But his thoughts about her always had an unpleasant aftertaste, like the bitterness left at the back of the throat by sour beer. He had loved her totally, and she had, in the end, rejected him. It was like remembering a happy day that had ended with a fight.

"Do you think I'm peculiarly attracted to women who aren't free?" he said idly to Philippa.

"No, why?"

"It does seem odd that after twelve years of loving a nun, and nine months of celibacy, I should fall for my brother's wife."

"Don't call me that," she said quickly. "It was no marriage. I was wedded against my will, I shared his bed for no more than a few days, and he will be happy if he never sees me again."

He patted her shoulder apologetically. "But still, we have to be secretive, just as I did with Caris." What he was not saying was that a man was entitled, by law, to kill his wife if he caught her committing adultery. Merthin had never known it ^{to} happen, ^{he} certainly ^{not} among the nobility, but Ralph's pride was a terrible thing. Merthin knew, and had told Philippa, that Ralph had killed his first wife, Tilly.

She said: "Your father loved your mother hopelessly for a long time, didn't he?"

"So he did!" Merthin had almost forgotten that old story.

"And you fell for a nun."

"And my brother spent years pining for you, the happily married wife of a nobleman. As the priests say, the sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons. But enough of this. Do you want some supper?"

"In a moment."

"There's something you want to do first?"

"You know."

He did know. He knelt between her legs and kissed her belly and her thighs. It was a peculiarity of hers that she always wanted to come twice. He began to tease her with his tongue. She groaned, and pressed the back of his head. "Yes," she said. "You know how I like that, especially when I'm full of your seed."

He lifted his head. "I do," he said. Then he bent again to his task.

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STET

The spring brought a respite in the plague. People were still dying, but fewer were falling ill. On Easter Sunday, Bishop Henri announced that the Fleece Fair would take place as usual this year.

At the same service, six novices took their vows and so became full-fledged monks. They had all had an extraordinarily short novitiate, but Henri was keen to raise the number of monks at Kingsbridge, and he said the same thing was going on all over the country. In addition five priests were ordained—[↑]they, too, benefiting from an accelerated training programme—[↑]and sent to replace plague victims in the surrounding countryside. And two Kingsbridge monks came down from university, having received their degrees as physicians in three years instead of the usual five or seven.

The new doctors were Austin and Sime. Caris remembered both of them rather vaguely: she had been guest master when they left, three years ago, to go to Kingsbridge College in Oxford. On the afternoon of Easter Monday she showed them around the almost-[↑]completed new hospital. No builders were at work as it was a holiday.

Both had the bumptious self-confidence that the university seemed to instil[↑] in its graduates along with medical theories and a taste for Gascon wine. However, years of dealing with patients had given Caris a confidence of her own, and she described the hospital's facilities and the way she planned to run it with brisk assurance.

Austin was a slim, intense young man with thinning fair hair. He was impressed with the innovative new cloister[↑]-like layout of the rooms. Sime, a little older and round-faced, did not seem eager to learn from Caris's experience: she noticed that he always looked away when she was talking.

"I believe a hospital should always be clean," she said.

“On what grounds?” Sime inquired in a condescending tone, as if asking a little girl why Dolly had to be spanked.

“Cleanliness is a virtue.”

“Ah. So it has nothing to do with the balance of humours in the body.”

“I have no idea. We don’t pay too much attention to the humours. That approach has failed spectacularly against the plague.”

“And sweeping the floor has succeeded?”

“At a minimum, a clean room lifts patients’ spirits.”

Austin put in: “You must admit, Sime, that some of the masters at Oxford share the ~~Mother Prioress’s~~ new ideas.”

“A small group of the heterodox.”

Caris said: “The main point is to take patients suffering from the type of illnesses that are transmitted from the sick to the well and isolate them from the rest.”

“To what end?” said Sime.

“To restrict the spread of such diseases.”

“And how is it that they are transmitted?”

“No one knows.”

A little smile of triumph twitched Sime’s mouth. “Then how do you know by what means to restrict their spread, may I ask?”

He thought he had trumped her in argument—it was the main thing they learned at Oxford—but she knew better. “From experience,” she said. “A shepherd doesn’t understand the miracle by which lambs grow in the womb of a ewe, but he knows it won’t happen if he keeps the ram out of the field.”

“Hm.”

Caris disliked the way he said: “Hm.” He was clever, she thought, but his cleverness never touched the world. She was struck by the contrast between this kind of intellectual and Merthin’s kind. Merthin’s learning was wide, and the power of his mind to grasp complexities was remarkable—but his wisdom never strayed far from the realities of the material world, for he knew that if he went wrong his buildings would fall down. Her father, Edmund, had been like that, clever but practical. Sime, like Godwyn and Anthony, would cling to his faith in the humours of the body regardless of whether his patients lived or died.

Austin was smiling broadly. “She’s got you there, Sime,” he said, evidently amused that his smug friend had failed to overwhelm this uneducated woman. “We may not know exactly how illnesses spread, but it can’t do any harm to separate the sick from the well.”

Sister Joan, the nuns’ treasurer, interrupted their conversation. “The bailiff of Outhenby is asking for you, Mother Caris.”

“Did he bring a herd of calves?” Outhenby was obliged to supply the nuns with twelve one-year-old calves every Easter.

“Yes.”

“Pen the beasts and ask the bailiff to come here, please.”

Sime and Austin took their leave and Caris went to inspect the tiled floor in the latrines. The bailiff found her there. It was Harry Ploughman. She had sacked the old bailiff, who was too slow to respond to change, and she had promoted the brightest young man in the village.

He shook her hand, which was over-familiar of him, but Caris liked him and did not mind.

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She said: "It must be a nuisance, your having to drive a herd all the way here, especially when the spring ploughing is under way."

"It is that," he said. Like most ploughmen, he was broad-shouldered and strong-armed. Strength as well as skill was required for driving the communal eight-ox team as they pulled the heavy plough through wet clay soil. He seemed to carry with him the air of the healthy outdoors.

"Wouldn't you rather make a money payment?" Caris said. "Most manorial dues are paid in cash these days."

"It would be more convenient." His eyes narrowed with peasant shrewdness. "But how much?"

"A year-old calf normally fetches ten to twelve shillings at market, though prices are down this season."

"They are ^Dby half. You can buy twelve calves for three pounds."

"Or six pounds in a good year."

He grinned, enjoying the negotiation. "There's your problem."

"But you would prefer to pay cash."

"If we can agree the amount."

"Make it eight shillings."

"But then, if the price of a calf is only five shillings, where do we villagers get the extra money?"

"I tell you what. In future, Outhenby can pay the nunnery either five pounds or twelve calves ^D—the choice is yours."

Harry considered that, looking for snags, but could find none. "All right," he said.

“Shall we seal the bargain?”

“How should we do that?”

To her surprise, he kissed her.

He held her slender shoulders in his rough hands, bent his head, and pressed his lips to hers. If Brother Sime had done this, she would have recoiled. But Harry was different, and perhaps she had been titillated by his air of vigorous masculinity. Whatever the reason, she submitted to the kiss, letting him pull her unresisting body to his own, and moving her lips against his bearded mouth. He pressed up against her so that she could feel his erection. She realised that he would cheerfully take her here on the newly-laid tiles of the latrine floor, and that thought brought her to her senses. She broke the kiss and pushed him away. “Stop!” she said. “What do you think you’re doing?”

He was unabashed. “Kissing you, my dear,” he said.

She realised that she had a problem. No doubt gossip about her and Merthin was widespread: they were probably the two best-known people in Shiring. While Harry surely did not know the truth, the rumours had been enough to embolden him. This kind of thing could undermine her authority. She must squash it now. “You must never do anything like that again,” she said as severely as she could.

“You seemed to like it!”

“Then your sin is all the greater, for you have tempted a weak woman to perjure her holy vows.”

“But I love you.”

It was true, she realised, and she could guess why. She had swept into his village, reorganised everything, and bent the peasants to her will. She had recognised Harry’s

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potential and elevated him above his fellows. He must think of her as a goddess. It was not surprising that he had fallen in love with her. He had better fall out of love as soon as possible. "If you ever speak to me like that again, I'll have to get another bailiff in Outhenby."

"Oh," he said. That stopped him short more effectively than the accusation of sin.

"Now, go home."

"Very well, Mother Caris."

"And find yourself another woman—preferably one who has not taken a vow of chastity."

"Never," he said, but she did not believe him.

He left, but she stayed where she was. She felt restless and lustful. If she could have felt sure of being alone for a while, she would have touched herself. This was the first time in nine months that she had been bothered by physical desire. After finally splitting up with Merthin, she had fallen into a kind of neutered state, in which she did not think about sex. Her relationships with other nuns gave her warmth and affection: she was fond of both Joan and Oonagh, though neither loved her in the physical way Mair had. Her heart beat with other passions: the new hospital, the tower, and the rebirth of the town.

Thinking of the tower, she left the hospital and walked across the green to the cathedral. Merthin had dug four enormous holes, the deepest anyone had ever seen, outside the church, around the foundations of the old tower. He had built great cranes to lift the earth out. Throughout the wet autumn months, ox-carts had lumbered all day long down the main street and across the first span of the bridge to dump the mud on rocky Leper Island. There they had picked up building stones from Merthin's wharf, then climbed the street again, to

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stack the stones around the grounds of the church in ever-growing piles.

As soon as the winter frost was over, his masons had begun laying the foundations. Caris went to the north side of the cathedral and looked into the hole in the angle formed by the outside wall of the nave and the outside wall of the north transept. It was dizzyingly deep. The bottom was already covered with neat masonry, the squared-off stones laid in straight lines and joined by thin layers of mortar. Because the old foundations were inadequate, the tower was being built on its own new, independent foundations. It would rise outside the existing walls of the church, so no demolition would be needed over and above what Elfric had already done in taking down the upper levels of the old tower. Only when it was finished would Merthin remove the temporary roof Elfric had built over the crossing. It was a typical Merthin design: simple yet radical, a brilliant solution to the unique problems of the site.

As at the hospital, no builders were at work on Easter Monday, but she saw movement in the hole and realised someone was walking around on the foundations. A moment later she recognised Merthin. She went to one of the surprisingly flimsy rope-and-branch ladders the masons used, and clambered shakily down.

She was glad to reach the bottom. Merthin helped her off the ladder, smiling. "You look a little pale," he said.

"It's a long way down. How are you getting on?"

"Fine. It will take many years."

"Why? The hospital seems more complicated, and that's finished."

"Two reasons. The higher we go, the fewer masons will be able to work on it. Right now I've got twelve men laying the foundations. But as it rises it will get narrower, and there just won't be room for them all. The other reason is that mortar takes so long to set. We have

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to let it harden over a winter before we put too much weight on it.”

She was hardly listening. Watching his face, she was remembering making love to him in the prior’s palace, between Matins and Lauds, with the first gleam of daylight coming in through the open window and falling over their naked bodies like a blessing.

She patted his arm. “Well, I’m glad the hospital isn’t taking so long.”

“You should be able to move in by Whitsun.”

“I’m glad. Although we’re having a slight respite from the plague: fewer people are dying.”

“Thank God,” he said fervently. “Perhaps it may be coming to an end.”

She shook her head bleakly. “We thought it was over once before, remember? About this time last year. Then it came back worse.”

“Heaven forbid.”

She touched his cheek with her palm, feeling his wiry beard. “At least you’re safe.”

He looked faintly displeased. “As soon as the hospital is finished we can start on the wool exchange.”

“I hope you’re right to think that business must pick up soon.”

“If it doesn’t, we’ll all be dead anyway.”

“Don’t say that.” She kissed his cheek.

“We have to act on the assumption that we’re going to live.” He said it irritably, as if she had annoyed him. “But the truth is that we don’t know.”

“Let’s not think about the worst.” She put her arms around his waist and hugged him, pressing her breasts against his thin body, feeling his hard bones against her yielding flesh.

He pushed her away violently. She stumbled backwards and almost fell. “Don’t do

that!" he shouted.

She was as shocked as if he had slapped her. "What's the matter?"

"Stop touching me!"

"I only ~~|||~~."

"Just don't do it! You ended our relationship nine months ago. I said it was the last time, and I meant it."

She could not understand his anger. "But I only hugged you."

"Well, don't. I'm not your lover. You have no right."

"I have no right to touch you?"

"No!"

"I didn't think I needed some kind of permission."

"Of course you knew. You don't let people touch you."

"You're not people. We're not strangers." But as she said these things she knew she was wrong and he was right. She had rejected him, but she had not accepted the consequences. The encounter with Harry from Outhenby had fired her lust, and she had come to Merthin looking for release. She had told herself she was touching him in affectionate friendship, but that was a lie. She had treated him as if he were still available to her, as a rich and idle lady might put down a book and pick it up again. Having denied him the right to touch her all this time, it was wrong of her to try to reinstate the privilege just because a muscular young ploughman had kissed her.

All the same, she would have expected Merthin to point this out in a gentle and affectionate way. But he had been hostile and brutal. Had she thrown away his friendship as well as his love? Tears came to her eyes. She turned away from him and went back to the

ladder.

She found it hard to climb up. It was tiring, and she seemed to have lost her energy. She stopped for a rest, and looked down. Merthin was standing on the bottom of the ladder, steadying it with his weight.

When she was almost at the top, she looked down again. He was still there. It occurred to her that her unhappiness would be over if she fell. It was a long drop to those unforgiving stones. She would die instantly.

Merthin seemed to sense what she was thinking, for he gave an impatient wave, indicating that she should hurry up and get off the ladder. She thought of how devastated he would be if she killed herself, and for a moment she enjoyed imagining his misery and guilt. She felt sure God would not punish her in the afterlife, if there was an afterlife.

Then she climbed the last few rungs and stood on solid ground. How foolish she had been, just for a moment. She was not going to end her life. She had too much to do.

She returned to the nunnery. It was time for Evensong, and she led the procession into the cathedral. As a young novice she had resented the time wasted in services. In fact Mother Cecilia had taken care to give her work that permitted her to be excused for much of the time. Now she welcomed the chance to rest and reflect.

This afternoon had been a low moment, she decided, but she would recover. All the same she found herself fighting back tears as she ^a sang the psalms.

For supper the nuns had smoked eel. Chewy and strongly flavoured, it was not Caris's favourite dish. Tonight she was not hungry, anyway. She ate some bread.

After the meal she retired to her pharmacy. Two novices were there, copying out Caris's book. She had finished it soon after Christmas. Many people had asked for copies:

apothecaries, prioresses, barbers, even one or two physicians. Copying the book had become part of the training of nuns who wanted to work in the hospital. The copies were cheap—the book was short, and there were no elaborate drawings or costly inks—and the demand seemed never-ending.

Three people made the room feel crowded. Caris was looking forward to the space and light of the pharmacy in the new hospital.

She wanted to be alone, so she sent the novices away. However, she was not destined to get her wish. A few moments later Lady Philippa came in.

Caris had never warmed to the reserved countess, but sympathised with her plight, and was glad to give sanctuary to any woman fleeing from a husband such as Ralph. Philippa was an easy guest, making few demands, spending a lot of time in her room. She had only a limited interest in sharing the nuns' life of prayer and self-denial—but Caris of all people could understand that.

Caris invited her to sit on a stool at the bench.

Philippa was a remarkably direct woman, despite her courtly manners. Without preamble, she said: "I want you to leave Merthin alone."

"What?" Caris was astonished and offended.

"Of course you have to talk to him, but you should not kiss or touch him."

"How dare you?" What did Philippa know—and why did she care?

"He's not your lover any more. Stop bothering him."

Merthin must have told her about their quarrel this afternoon. "But why would he tell you...?" Before the question was out of her mouth, she guessed the answer.

Philippa confirmed it with her next utterance. "He's not yours, now—he's mine."

"Oh, my soul!" Caris was flabbergasted. "You and Merthin?"

"Yes."

"Are you... have you actually..."

"Yes."

"I had no idea!" She felt betrayed, though she knew she had no right. When had this happened? "But how... where...?"

"You don't need to know the details."

"Of course not." At his house on Leper Island, she supposed. At night, probably.

"How long...?"

"It doesn't matter."

Caris could work it out. Philippa had been here less than a month. "You moved fast."

It was an unworthy jibe, and Philippa had the grace to ignore it. "He would have done anything to keep you. But you threw him over. Now let him go. It's been difficult for him to love anyone else, after you—^I_Mbut he has managed it. Don't you dare interfere."

Caris wanted to rebuff her furiously, tell her angrily that she had no right to give orders and make moral demands—^I_Mbut the trouble was that Philippa was in the right. Caris had to let Merthin go, for ever.

She did not want to show her heartbreak in front of Philippa. "Would you leave me now, please?" she said with an attempt at Philippa's style of dignity. "I would like to be alone."

Philippa was not easily pushed around. "Will you do as I say?" she persisted.

Caris did not like to be cornered, but she had no spirit left. "Yes, of course," she said.

"Thank you." Philippa left.

When she was sure Philippa was out of earshot, Caris began to cry.

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Philemon as prior was no better than Godwyn. He was overwhelmed by the challenge of managing the assets of the priory. Caris had made a list, during her spell as acting prior, of the monks' main sources of income:

1. *Rents*
2. *A share of profits from commerce and industry (tithing)*
3. *Agricultural profits on land not rented out*
4. *Profits from grain mills and other, industrial mills*
5. *Waterway tolls and a share of all fish landed*
6. *Stallage in markets*
7. *Proceeds of justice* ^I ~~fees and fines from courts~~ _M
8. *Pious gifts from pilgrims and others*
9. *Sale of books, holy water, candles, etc.*

She had given the list to Philemon, and he had thrown it back at her as if insulted. Godwyn, better than Philemon only in that he had a certain superficial charm, would have thanked her and quietly ignored her list.

In the nunnery, she had introduced a new method of keeping accounts, one she had learned from Buonaventura ^{Caroli} ~~Dicarlo~~ when she was working for her father. The old method

was simply to write in a parchment roll a short note of every transaction, so that you could always go back and check. The Italian system was to record income on the left-hand side and expenditure on the right, and add them up at the foot of the page. The difference between the two totals showed whether the institution was gaining or losing money. Sister Joan had taken this up with enthusiasm, but when she offered to explain it to Philemon he refused curtly. He regarded offers of help as insults to his competence.

He had only one talent, and it was the same as Godwyn's: a flair for manipulating people. He had shrewdly weeded the new intake of monks, sending the modern-minded physician, Brother ^{Austin} Augustine, and two other bright young men to St-John-in-the-Forest, where they would be too far away to challenge his authority.

But Philemon was the bishop's problem now. Henri had appointed him and Henri would have to deal with him. The town was independent, and Caris had her new hospital.

The hospital was to be consecrated by the bishop on Whit Sunday, which was always seven weeks after Easter. A few days beforehand, Caris moved her equipment and supplies into the new pharmacy. There was plenty of room for two people to work at the bench, preparing medicines, and a third to sit at a writing desk.

Caris was preparing an emetic, Oonagh was grinding dried herbs, and a novice, Greta, was copying out Caris's book, when a novice monk came in with a small wooden chest. It was Josiah, a teenage boy usually called Joshie. He was embarrassed to be in the presence of three women. "Where shall I put this?" he said.

Caris looked at him. "What is it?"

"A chest."

"I can see that," she said patiently. The fact that someone was capable of learning to

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read and write did not, unfortunately, make him intelligent. "What does the chest contain?"

"Books."

"And why have you brought me a chest of books?"

"I was told to." Realising, after a moment, that this answer was insufficiently informative, he added: "By Brother Sime."

Caris raised her eyebrows. "Is Sime making me a gift of books?" She opened the chest.

Joshie made his escape without answering the question.

The books were medical texts, all in Latin. Caris looked through them. They were the classics: Avicenna's Poem on Medicine, Hippocrates' Diet and Hygiene, Galen's On the Parts of Medicine, and De Urinis by Isaac Judaeus. All had been written more than three hundred years ago.

Joshie reappeared with another chest.

"What now?" said Caris.

"Medical instruments. Brother Sime says you are not to touch them. He will come and put them in their proper places."

Caris was dismayed. "Sime wants to keep his books and instruments here? Is he planning to work here?"

Joshie did not know anything about Sime's intentions, of course.

Before Caris could say any more, Sime appeared, accompanied by Philemon. Sime looked around the room, then, without explanation, began unpacking his things. He moved some of Caris's vessels from a shelf and replaced them with his books. He took out sharp knives for opening veins, and the teardrop-shaped glass flasks used for examining urine

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samples.

Caris said neutrally: "Are you planning to spend a great deal of time here in the hospital, Brother Sime?"

Philemon answered for him, clearly having anticipated the question with relish. "Where else?" he said. His tone was indignant, as if Caris had challenged him already. "This is the hospital, is it not? And Sime is the only physician in the priory. How shall people be treated, if not by him?"

Suddenly the pharmacy did not seem so spacious any more.

Before Caris could say anything a stranger appeared. "Brother Thomas told me to come here," he said. "I am Jonas Powderer, from London."

The visitor was a man of about fifty dressed in an embroidered coat and a fur hat. Caris noted his ready smile and affable manner, and guessed that he made his living by selling things. He shook hands, then looked around the room, nodding with apparent approval at Caris's neat rows of labelled jars and vials. "Remarkable," he said. "I have never seen such a sophisticated pharmacy outside London."

"Are you a physician, sir?" Philemon asked. His tone was cautious: he was not sure of Jonas's status.

"Apothecary. I have a shop in Smithfield, next to St Bartholomew's Hospital. I shouldn't boast, but it is the largest such business in the city."

Philemon relaxed. An apothecary was a mere merchant, well below a prior in the pecking order. With a hint of a sneer he said: "And what brings the biggest apothecary in London all the way down here?"

"I was hoping to acquire a copy of The Kingsbridge Panacea."