

THE VALIANT HEART

by

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writing as

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Dedication

For my husband Mark.
Your unwavering support and unbounded
patience enabled me to reach for the stars
and fulfill my dreams.

"Through The Years," I'm still loving you.

Author's Notes

The language of the ninth century Norsemen is preserved and spoken today in Iceland. "Old Norse" (*Íslensk*) has changed so little through the millennium that school children can read the *Eddas* and sagas in their original form. Though *Íslensk* was handed down from mainly Norwegian colonizers, at the time of the settlements Scandinavians spoke easily among themselves, their dialects being a variation of an original tongue. For these reasons and with few exceptions, I have used Icelandic (*Íslensk*) throughout the book, feeling it to be a more authentic usage for my Danish-born Norsemen than modern Danish. The term *viking*, a relatively recent word, is avoided altogether. My special thanks go to Mr. Jón Sigurdsson who assisted me in translating the various dialogues.

Note on pronunciation: the character "ð" is pronounced like the th-sound in "the"; "þ" is pronounced like the th-sound in "thin"; and "æ" is pronounced "i" as in "like."

Normandy and its "dukes": In 911 A.D. the Frankish king granted the Norse chieftain, Rollo, lands and titles on condition he and his men receive Christian baptism and protect the kingdom from their marauding kinsmen. Rollo honored this agreement but continued to enlarge his new domain at the expense of his neighbors, claiming their lands along with their varied titles—'count' and 'marquis' named among them. Although the first Norman rulers did not yet bear the title of "duke," nor was Normandy yet deemed a "duchy," historians have found it more practical and less confusing to refer to them as such, recognizing Rollo as the first Duke of Normandy. I have followed that convention in this book.

Danish or Norwegian? – Rollo's origins are lost in the mists of time, still they continue to give rise to lively debate even today. Was he Danish or Norwegian? Rollo's grandson, Richard I (Normandy's third duke), summoned Dudo, dean of the collegiate church of Saint-Quentin, to his court shortly after 987 and tasked him with writing the history of Normandy. Dudo's writings, though not without criticism, are the earliest accounts that survive of the first Norman dukes. "Rollo," he tells us, was the Latinized version of "Hrolf" (sometimes written as "Rolf"), given at the time of Rollo's baptism. Dudo identifies him as being of the *Dani* (Danes). On the other hand, Icelandic sagas written several centuries later, claim Hrolf to be the son of a Norwegian *jarl* who fled his homeland for Scotland in the early 900s and later made his way to Francia via Iceland and England. The Norman Rollo/Hrolf is glimpsed in one historical record during his failed attack on Chartres in 911. He commanded a large force, mainly of Danes with some Anglo-Saxon mercenaries. After sifting through numerous arguments on the matter of Rollo's origins, I have decided to follow Dudo, giving Rollo a Danish origin—the same as his men. This may disappoint supporters for a Norwegian "Hrolf," but short of new revelations, we simply don't know. For further discussion on this, see *THE NORMANS*, by François Neveux (translated by Howard Curtis).

Prologue

Valsemé, France, 912 A.D.

THE TALL BLOND Norseman did not move as the Frankish emissaries quit the hall. Not until the great oaken door groaned shut behind them. Then, in two long strides, he mounted the dais and slammed his hands down full force on the table in front of him. His steel-blue eyes locked with a second pair that perfectly matched his own.

"Surely you do not intend to accept their offer."

"Calm yourself, Rurik." The older man settled back in the carved chair and emptied his drinking horn. "There are advantages to be gained with such a match."

"I tell you it reeks fair full of devilry."

Gruel Atli wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then squinted up from beneath a sagging lid. "Does it trouble you that I would take a wife so soon after your mother's death?"

"*Nei.*" Rurik released a long breath as he straightened to his full height. "But the king was quick enough to unearth this heiress and foist her upon you. She is probably a dragon of a woman, ancient and diseased. Why else would they shut her away for nearly a decade?"

Atli threw back his head and roared with laughter. "'Tis a Christian holy house, Rurik. Beaumanoir's daughter dwells in cloister at the Abbey of Levroux." He wiped tears of mirth from his eyes. "Ah, my son, you have been too long at sea."

Rurik grunted and crossed his arms over his chest. "Mayhap. But I know much of dealings, fair and foul. The king's terms are as transparent as they are unpalatable. What is to be gained by wedding Valsemé's displaced heiress? The barony is yours now."

Atli rose at that and beckoned Rurik to the narrow window of the keep.

'Tis a year past that I stood with Rollo at the river St.-Clair-sur-Epte when King Charles bestowed on him this fiefdom." He cast an eye upon his son. "Of course, we already controlled these lands through conquest, but Charles is shrewd. In exchange for our fealty, he granted us a homeland, buying himself a watchdog in the bargain to guard against those who would ravage his kingdom." Atli cracked a smile "Especially our own kind."

"Behold. Valsemé." He gestured toward the gently rolling contours of his domain. "Her good rich soil lies beneath our hands like a ready woman, waiting for man to plow her tender loins and plant his seed deep within." He brought his fist down against the stone sash. "But we be too few to do the deed. Charles drains me for his endless campaigns while time grows short. The land must be cultivated, and soon, if our storehouses are to stand full next winter. Most of the villeins fled at our coming, and I sorely need them back." He vented his frustration against the ledge once more, then pushed himself away and crossed to the dais.

"Do you know what these Franks call us? *Normanni*. Spring we of Danmark, Norge, Sverige, Zealand . . . it matters not. To them we are one and the same—Northmen—and they tremble before us. While that is to our advantage upon the battlefield, here 'tis an accursed burden."

Snatching up a cup and flagon of wine, he filled the vessel to its rim. "This heiress may prove the key," Atli rumbled, then tossed the contents down his throat. "Valsemé's villeins were fiercely loyal to Richard Beaumanoir while he lived. His daughter is perfect bait to lure them

home."

Rurik frowned. "Still, why would she agree to such a union? Surely 'tis bitter gall that her titles and holdings are forfeit. Perchance she desires only to slip a bit of cold steel between your ribs as she warms your bed."

Atli shrugged broadly, unconcerned. "Evidently, the woman is eager to recover her lands and position."

"Too eager and for her own gain, I'll wager." Rurik cocked a brow. " 'Twould take little time to journey by ship to Levroux and observe this bride firsthand. I could be back in a trice."

Atli held Rurik's gaze for several moments before he yielded. "Very well, but send your *broðir* in your stead. I have another task in mind for you." Refilling the cup, he offered it to his son. "And do not worry overlong on these terms the king has set. The Franks are not so clever as they think."

Atli barked laughter at some unspoken thought and pressed the flagon to his lips.

Levroux, France

'Tis a weed," Brienne protested as she considered the spindly plant dangling from her friend's hand.

"Nay, mugwort," Aleth insisted good-naturedly, "and a prize for Sister Ursuline's collection. 'Tis a powerful medicant, you know."

Brienne sighed and smiled indulgently. "Are all the good sister's lessons for naught? Mugwort does not grow here in the forest, dear Aleth. 'Tis but a weed."

"We shall see. Sister will know the truth of it."

"Aye, she will. And if you're ever to be a healer, you must learn to identify these herbs properly."

Aleth laughed. "I have. 'Tis mugwort!" she proclaimed with finality and deposited the wilting greens in the basket.

Brienne rolled her eyes heavenward. "May the Good Lord in all His mercy grant that I never need tending by your hands"—she flashed a mischievous smile—"or your precious weeds!"

A small shriek escaped Aleth as she caught up a handful of tender shoots and tossed them into Brienne's midnight hair. The two girls dissolved into a fit of laughter, tears filling their eyes as they collapsed breathless upon the forest floor.

Brienne clutched the stitch in her side and blinked the moisture from her lashes. Laughter was sweet salve to the soul and a blessed release, for when its merriment overtook her as now, all thought and shadow fled. Then, for a sliver of time, she could forget . . .

"Enough," she pleaded as she struggled to her feet and shook out her long tresses. "We've been overlong at this. I know of a little clearing ahead. Are you hungry yet?"

Aleth nodded heartily and stretched forth her hands.

Carefully, Brienne braced herself and pulled the small form upward, allowing Aleth to favor the thin rail of her right leg. A stab of pity passed through her and she quickly dropped her gaze to shield the look from Aleth.

Life was often unfair. There were many reasons for families to send their daughters to nunneries aside from love—or fear—of God, as well she knew. Aleth was a gentle maiden with pleasant features, honey-brown hair, and a sprinkling of freckles across a small, abbreviated nose. No doubt it was her infirmity that brought her to the doors of Levroux's abbey. A husband would be difficult to find for a disabled girl, and spinsters were a burden not to be had. Convents were a useful answer to so many problems.

Brienne pushed away her thoughts and caught up her basket. Offering an arm to Aleth, she guided them along a crooked path near to the forest's edge, then veered left to follow a faint trail. In short time the woodland opened onto a small sunlit glade, carpeted in the vibrant green of spring and bejeweled with violets and primroses.

Aleth's face brightened like that of a small child presented with a splendid gift. At times, Brienne wondered if the girl had ventured much beyond her solar before leaving her family's estate. Life was ever fresh and fascinating to Aleth, as though she were seeing it for the first

time.

Brienne unfastened her mantle and spread it over the soft new grass. After settling Aleth down, she joined her on the makeshift blanket and set the basket between them. Dipping under herbs, bandages, and little pots of curatives, she produced a small bundle wrapped in linen.

"Bless you, Sister Clothilde," she murmured, setting out a prize wedge of tangy cheese, crusty bread, and dried apples from last autumn's bounty. A small skin of wine completed the repast. They bowed reverently over the little feast, gave humble thanks, then eagerly attacked the fare.

Brienne sampled the wine and stretched out to study the lacy canopy of leaves unfurling above her. It had been a pleasant day that began with prayer and chores at the abbey. Then they accompanied several of the sisters to tend the sick of the village. Brienne visited a favorite little patient who nursed a broken leg and cheered him with the gift of a nice fat frog that she had captured along the way. Happily, she and Aleth had been allowed to part from the others and to seek herbs in the fringes of the forest—a rare freedom, given upon promises to not venture too far. Sister Ursuline would be so pleased with their findings.

Brienne rose from her grassy bed and moved about the glade, gathering delicate flowers on long, tender stems.

Aleth could only admire Brienne's effortless beauty. Her glossy black hair spilled down over her shoulders, framing a nearly perfect oval face except for its slightly pointed chin. Her startling violet eyes were set under long dark lashes, and her slim nose tilted pertly.

Aleth thought it odd that Brienne's father had not sought a wealthy match for her rather than cloistering her away. Brienne seldom spoke of it—rarely so after the deaths of her parents and only brother. Aleth had known Brienne for nigh on to eight years. Still, much about her closest friend remained in shadow.

Brienne settled down again near Aleth and shared out the fragrant blossoms to weave into chains. For a moment Aleth fumbled with a few stems, then, against better judgment, decided to broach the subject that plagued her.

"How is it you came to the Abbey of Levroux?"

Surprise touched Brienne's violet eyes, then died. She glanced away and focused upon the fluttering dance of a small white butterfly.

"I mean, 'tis not common for a family to cloister their eldest daughter," Aleth added quickly, then broke into a wide grin. "Tell me, did you do something terrible? Did you refuse to marry some rich, hideous toad your father desired for you?"

"Oh, nay, Aleth! Nothing like that," Brienne drew her knees up, under her chin, and considered a billowing cloud. "Though I've often thought, had my sister been sent in my stead, I would now be the wife of Robert Coustance, the Seigneur d'Esternay." She grimaced. "He is a brutal man, though Lisette loves him well."

"Then why?" Aleth pressed.

Brienne stared pensively into a thicket of trees, her brows gathering with memory. "I was the pure and holy offering," she said enigmatically, then fell silent.

The comment took Aleth aback but curiosity drove her on. "I don't understand."

Brienne broke away her gaze from the woodland and tossed Aleth a small, thoughtful smile. " 'Tis all right, Aleth. God is good. Life is far better here, away from men and their lust for battle and blood."

"You do not like men?" Aleth blinked.

A glint of pain touched Brienne's eyes, then was gone. "It matters not," she sighed softly."

'Tis my intent to take the veil."

Aleth dropped the flowers she had been carelessly weaving into a circlet. "But you cannot! Not now," she blurted, daring to say what Brienne would not admit. "You have rightful claim to the barony of Valsemé. And what of your mother's lands at Chaudrey? You are an heiress, Brienne, and ward of the king. Surely he will call you forth from Levroux and arrange a good marriage."

"Dear, sweet Aleth." Brienne shook her head sadly. "You do not know the way of it. I am heiress to a Norseman's acre. Valsemé is no more, and Chaudrey is entailed to Lord Robert. 'Twas part of my sister's dower."

Brienne turned away as tears blurred her vision. Valsemé. Her heart cried out through a mist of time and pain. But that was a world ago, shattered by the ravaging Northmen.

Out of their icy lairs they came, sweeping boldly up the rivers in their *drakken*, the dreaded dragon boats. As if from nowhere they appeared, plundering and killing for booty, raping for pleasure, kidnapping those they would sell as slaves, then vanishing back from whence they came. They were vaporous devils at best, and the barons were hard pressed to deal with them.

The Seine and Loire soon became favored among their watery highways, and it was at the mouths of those mighty rivers that the Norsemen wintered and entrenched themselves. No longer did they lust for booty and flesh alone, but now for the land itself. They rooted themselves in Frankish soil and the death bell knelled for Valsemé.

Brienne shut her eyes against the keen edge of memory. The barony lay along the river Toques, which flowed to the great Channel, *La Manche*, nearby, as did the Seine. So close, so close to the pirates' den.

Coming back to the moment, Brienne found herself gazing into Aleth's small, distressed face.

"He tried so hard, but to no avail," she explained aching, as though she had been sharing her thoughts all the while. "Valsemé lay too close to the Norsemen's lair."

"Who tried?" Aleth prodded.

"Father . . ." Her thoughts slipped away on a river of memory.

Richard Beaumanoir defended his lands tirelessly for many years until he, as other neighboring lords, was forced to abandon them. He withdrew with his family and retainers to his wife's dower lands at Chaudrey. The shame of failing to protect the barony festered in his soul like a rotting pustule.

He soon became a king's man, allying himself with the powerful, and pursuing the Northmen relentlessly in a private war of revenge to regain his forsaken lands. Then in his obsession he sought to win God's favor—and Brienne was his offering. A younger daughter would not suffice, only the firstborn, the unblemished lamb, a sacrifice pure and holy. Overnight, Brienne was dispatched from the heart of her family into cloister at Levroux.

Lisette's marriage was next arranged to gain the might and power of Esternay, that self-made knight, the king's own champion.

For a time, God smiled on Beaumanoir. He triumphed in the meanest of battles till his fame swelled throughout the realm.

Despite his success, Beaumanoir was bitterly disappointed that Brienne refused the veil, as though she would invite God's displeasure. She argued that many noble ladies lived in cloister without benefit of vows, and she was not yet prepared to make her profession. Angrily, he warned that such stubbornness would bring misfortune upon their house, and when the wheel of fate turned round, it was she whom he blamed.

Brienne's mother soon succumbed to a mysterious ailment. Shortly after her death, Brienne's

elder brother, Thomas, was cut down at their father's side by a Norse blade. Not a year had passed when Beaumanoir himself was felled before the walls of Poitiers in a daring ruse against the heathens.

"Brienne, Brienne," Aleth broke through her ruminations. "What do you mean, 'a Norseman's acre'? What of Valsemé?"

"Do you not know, Aleth?" She looked hard at her companion. Truly, the girl *had* never left her solar. "King Charles seeks to control the Norse menace. This year past he conceded lands to their chieftain, Rollo, in return for his homage and created him duke. My father's lands are part of the new duchy. They belong to the foreigner now."

Rollo, she thought bitterly, and his hated duchy of Normandy.

"I-I'm so sorry." Aleth groped for a comforting word.

"I am happy here at Levroux," Brienne reassured her. "And I feel safe, if that is possible. 'Tis a man's world, Aleth, and they threaten to tear it apart."

"The abbey seems set apart from our enemies, and I have not known such peace since I was a small child. Here, I am an equal with my sisters, not a man's piece of property. I have learned reading and ciphering, and have been taught the gift of healing."

Brienne sighed and managed a small smile. "The Lord is a gentle and loving master. To Him shall I pledge my troth."

Aleth abandoned the subject, grieved at the fresh pain she had caused her friend.



The soft pealing of bells, sounding distantly across the vale, roused Brienne from her drowsy state.

She suddenly became aware of the lengthening shadows of the trees and the low angle of the sun. With a sharp gasp she scrambled to her feet and gathered up the remains of the half-eaten meal.

"Aleth, hurry. We've overstayed and I was to help Sister Margaret in the scullery this eve."

Aleth stirred and rubbed her eyes. "No doubt you volunteered for that honor," she said through a yawn.

"Nay, not so. I do it for Lutigard. 'Tis spring and she suffers the rheum."

'Tis naught but her delicate hands that suffer from scrubbing pots! Ever she slips out of her duties, that one!" Aleth retorted.

"Come along or I'll have a sharper tongue wagging at me."

Their eyes locked in merriment. "Sister Margaret!" they chorused.

Progress toward the abbey was slowed by Aleth's frail leg. By the time they reached its high brooding walls, the light was falling rapidly. Brienne did not look forward to the scolding and lecture Mother Annice would surely deliver for their tardiness. Worse, she feared losing the privilege of ministering in the village. Perhaps if she revealed her intentions to take her vows, Mother's heart would soften.

As the girls approached the stony portal with its heavy iron gate, Brienne sensed something out of the ordinary. She detected movements and sounds uncommon to the hour. Her breath caught as the soft nickering of horses and low rumble of male voices drifted clearly above the courtyard beyond.

"Soldiers!" Brienne exclaimed in hushed tones.

It was not unusual for the abbey to offer its hospitality, as it was a place of rest and healing.

That men had been permitted past the outer wall pricked her curiosity mildly, but such was allowed when the escorts were small and composed of kindred to the noble ladies who resided within.

Levroux was an unusual abbey in that it had been built upon the site of a Roman fortress overrun by invading Franks centuries before. The ruins were incorporated into the present monastery and offered the advantage of two enclosure walls. The inner partition embraced the tight cluster of buildings and church comprising the heart of the abbey, while the outer wall encompassed a sizable tract of land boasting orchards, a fish pond, storage sheds, stables, livestock shelters, and quarters for the servants that attended the abbey's needs. It was here that the travelers would be lodged, though several cells were reserved near the abbess's chambers for the more important guests.

Normally, Brienne would have eagerly looked forward to the worldly news the visitors brought with them, yet after her disturbing reminiscences of the afternoon, her stomach knotted at the prospect of encountering men-at-arms.

"Perhaps we best use the side entrance, Aleth. I shouldn't like to walk through a courtyard of soldiers and war horses." She shuddered at the thought of the enormous steeds.

The two slipped around the corner of the abbey as quickly as they could manage and proceeded to a small gate toward the far end, where they set off a jangling of bells.

A plump little figure garbed in black bustled across the grounds. "My lambs! Where have you been?" Sister Ursuline puffed excitedly, thrusting a massive key into the heavy lock. "Nothing is amiss? Come along. Come along," she jabbered. "Brienne, your hair! 'Tis sown with grass. Saints be with us! Hurry now. Mother Annice has been seeking you for ever so long. No, not you, Aleth, only Brienne."

"Yes, sister." Brienne held forth the basket, barely suppressing her amusement. "We brought herbs for your medicants."

Sister Ursuline peeked into the basket delightedly, then her eyebrows flew up in astonishment. Snatching up a bedraggled green, she exclaimed, "Good gracious! Wherever did you find *this*!"

"'Tis mugwort," Aleth proclaimed, tossing a little look of triumph at Brienne.

Sister struggled to compose herself. "My ladies, 'tis an aphrodisiac!"

Brienne and Aleth choked on the pronouncement as Sister Ursuline scuttled off toward the garderobe. An instant later she reappeared, rubbing her palms vigorously against the rough wool of her gown.

"We are well rid of *that*! Now, be off with you, my lady. Aleth, you may help me in the scullery. Lutigard fell victim to her rheum."

"I know," pouted Aleth. "Ever I pray for her deliverance!"



Brienne quickly plaited her hair as she darted across the cobbled pathway, past small stone buildings, and through a heavy archway. She hurried down the length of the refectory, rounded the corner, then halted abruptly, barely catching herself as she pitched forward.

At least twenty pairs of eyes greeted her own, now wide with surprise. The courtyard before her was filled with a colorful assemblage of grooms, squires, men-at-arms and their magnificent horses, all seemingly frozen at their tasks as they studied her with undisguised interest.

Brienne snatched the hood of her mantle up, over her head as heat suffused her cheeks. She

thought at first to retreat from the scene before her, then realized that this was the quickest way to Reverend Mother's quarters.

Swallowing hard, she stepped forward and gingerly began skirting the assemblage of men as their eyes raked her admiringly. At a few overly loud and suggestive remarks, she broke into a run and dashed across the remainder of the courtyard. Husky laughter followed her to the shelter of the portico.

Men! How dare they, Brienne raged silently. *This is a convent, not a brothel!* They would respect her more when she wore the habit. She hastened along the covered porchway, hoping for no further encounters, and at length stopped before Mother Annice's chambers.

With a last straightening of her tunic and mantle, Brienne drew in a deep breath and rapped softly upon the door. Almost at once, it drew open and a small nun motioned her inside.

The room was dimly lit and smelled of musty parchment and burning tallow. A simple table served as a desk, flanked by hard wooden chairs and a basket of scrolls. In the corner, a precious psalter lay open atop a waist-high stand adorned with a richly embroidered cloth.

Mother Annice stood silently before a crucifix affixed to the wall. She was a tall, lean woman of uncertain age. As she turned toward her, Brienne noted how drawn and weary the abbess appeared tonight, her face a pale testament to the burdens of her office.

"Sister Catherine, please leave us." Mother Annice nodded to the diminutive nun.

When the door swept closed, Brienne could no longer contain herself. "Reverend Mother, forgive my belatedness. I am remiss beyond doubt. After ministering to our sick, I stayed awhile in the forest, seeking herbs and meditating . . . and the Lord has blessed that time, truly He has, for I have come to a most important decision. I desire to take the veil, Reverend Mother. I wish to profess my vows." She caught her breath and smiled hesitantly, awaiting the abbess's response.

Mother Annice closed her eyes for a few moments, and when she opened them again they glistened with unshed tears. "Come, child. Let us pray for our Lord's guidance."

The aging nun gripped Brienne's hands and pulled her down to the hard stone floor before the crucifix, her touch chill and dry.

With eyes fixed upon the broken body of Christ, Mother Annice intoned the ancient prayer, "*Pater noster, qui es in cælis, santificétur nomen tuum* At length she pronounced, "Amen. So be it."

She pulled her gaze from the crucifix and looked deeply into Brienne's eyes. Brienne's breath caught at the abbess's pain-filled expression.

"Are you familiar with the Book of Isaiah, child? Look to the second chapter and remember it well: 'He will teach us what He wants us to do; we will walk in the paths He has chosen.'"

Silence fell like a pall over the room. Tears brimmed the old nun's eyes as she rose in a slow, fluid motion. Taking Brienne by the hands, she gently drew her to her feet then kissed her forehead.

"Come," Mother Annice whispered, and ushered her from the room.



A certain dread crept into Brienne's soul as she and the Reverend Mother walked silently down the covered passageway and traversed the courtyard. She barely noticed how it had emptied of horses and grooms. Only a few men now milled about in the dusk. She sensed only that something was amiss. Tendrils of apprehension spiraled through her.

A few moments later, Mother Annice swung wide the heavy oaken door to the refectory. Brienne paused cautiously upon the threshold.

The hall was filled with Frankish knights and men-at-arms. Some sat at table, devouring savory meat pasties and drinking heartily of cold cider that the good nuns proffered, while others stood about in small groups deep in their arguments and banter.

As the two women entered the hall, a hush rippled over the room. All eyes seemingly turned as one and settled upon Brienne. She fought not to tremble under their intense regard. There was something in those looks to which she could not put a name.

A tall dark figure broke away from a small cluster of men at the far end of the hall and strode confidently toward them. A moment passed before Brienne recognized the commanding frame of the Seigneur d'Esternay, Robert Coustance.

"My Lord." She dropped into a deep curtsy, overcome with surprise. "How unexpected to see you. I pray all is well."

Esternay paused a moment, drinking in her intoxicating beauty. Damn Beaumanoir, anyway. The girl's existence had been hidden from him until his betrothal was sealed with her sister, and then, only on the wedding day itself, was the elder daughter brought forth from cloister to celebrate the festivities.

Lisette was a comely enough wench and agreeable in all matters that concerned him, but she lacked the vividness and the spirit he witnessed in this beauty. Such a match they could have made. And now this cursed business that brought him to Levroux. Damn Beaumanoir again.

"Is all well with my sister, my lord?" Brienne met his gaze.

He rubbed the scar above his heavy brows. "*Oui, oui*. She is abed with child again. We fervently hope she will carry this babe to term." A trace of bitterness steeled his voice. Undoubtedly he could have sired several sons by now upon the healthy young woman before him, but her frail sister had miscarried all she had conceived thus far.

Uneasiness gnawed at Brienne under Lord Robert's persistent stare. He was not really a handsome man, with a long, slightly crooked nose, and heavily lidded eyes. Yet his bearing was impressive and imposing. His thick black hair was worn tapered to the shoulders and his beard was cropped close along the jaw, lending him a sinister air. Lisette once confided that the beard hid a most hideous scar acquired in his youth.

Brienne felt oddly entrapped of a sudden, much like a small winged creature entangled in a spider's web. "If you think me not too bold, how is it that you come to our fair abbey, my lord?"

Esternay's look darkened. "I come on the king's business, Lady Brienne, concerning your barony."

"Valsemé?" Her brows lifted in surprise. "Does our good king regret his generous gift to the Norse vermin so soon?"

"Nay, my lady. Rollo has thus far honored his oath to Charles. He even joins us against Flanders."

"Ah, the noble pagan," she scoffed.

Esternay smiled at her unbridled fire. "The *noble pagan* received baptism at the hand of Archbishop Franco himself, as have his men. Already he begins a cathedral at Rouen."

"Do you defend this glorified cur of Normandy, who has stripped me of my father's lands?" Her temper flared.

"'Twas the king's gift, not mine," he retorted. Indeed they would have been his to claim had Brienne been his bride. But Beaumanoir played him false, giving him the second-born daughter. When Beaumanoir fell in battle, Charles moved swiftly to place himself as protector over both

Brienne and her lands of Valsemé. By the Rood, he himself would wrest the lands free of the Norse claws given the chance.

"The king purposes to harness these Northmen and use them to our own benefit." He echoed Brienne's thoughts from earlier that day. "My mission here will bind them further to our side."

"How so, my lord? What has it to do with Levroux?"

"Not with Levroux, my dear. With you."

Brienne swayed momentarily under the weight of his words.

Esternay turned and began to pace, choosing his next words carefully.

"Rollo has proven to be quite astute in matters of state and fashions his duchy in the true Frankish manner. While he retains sole power as its duke, he has appointed his most loyal men and relatives to hold his lands in obeisance to him."

He measured the maid with a sharp gaze before delivering his next tidings. "Valsemé has been awarded to his sister's husband, a man named Gruel Atli."

Brienne stiffened, his words settling on her like a chilling mist.

"Atli sought to bring forth his wife from the northern climes to join him," he continued, his eyes never leaving hers, "but she fell ill and died before the journey commenced."

"And how does this news concern me, now that my lands are forfeit?" she asked tightly.

He swept the soft curves of her body with his gaze, and began to pace anew, circling his quarry.

"As I said, the king seeks ways to influence the affairs of the duchy as much as he dare without interfering directly."

Esternay drew behind her, his breath falling upon her neck. She flinched.

"The Normans brought few of their own women. In truth, they appear to prefer our own Frankish beauties." He lifted the heavy ebony plait from her shoulder and inhaled its fresh scent. Brienne bristled at his familiarity. "Their blood already begins to mingle with our own. In time, it will be so diluted they will be more Frank than Norse." He replaced the braid, allowing his fingers to brush the curve of her neck. "Of course, that will require several generations."

He moved to stand in front of her.

"Our king would hasten the process by returning our own villeins to the land. Most fled in the wake of the Norsemen. They are understandably afraid. But Charles is ardent in this matter and would grant them, shall we say, a *noble* example."

"You speak in riddles, Lord Robert." Fire snapped in her eyes though her face had gone pale. "Be out with it. I would have an end to this and think no more upon the Norse pox that infests our fair lands."

Esternay smiled grimly. The girl was strong-willed and unpredictable like her father. It did not bode well. With a heavy sigh, he withdrew a parchment from his vest and held it forth, displaying the king's great seal.

"As your sovereign king and lord protector, His Highness Charles III decrees that you are to set henceforth for Valsemé, the land of your father, and thereupon pledge your troth in marriage to the new lord baron of that holding, Gruel Atli, that your blood may mix with his in the future heir of Valsemé, and that in your presence you may intercede in behalf of your people."

"Nay!" The word burst from her lips and she whirled to clutch the nun's sleeve. "What madness is this? Reverend Mother, tell him," she pleaded, her voice breaking. "Tell him I am to take the veil! I am pledged to God!"

"Is this true?" Esternay glared at the nun. A chit of a girl must not be allowed to thwart these tenuous negotiations, however distasteful.

Mother Annice smoothed Brienne's hair. "She revealed these intentions to me only moments ago."

"You did not tell her of this?" He waved the parchment menacingly.

"Nay, 'twas God's own inspiration."

Esternay began to pace like a great caged panther, then pivoted abruptly. "No matter. Charles was not advised of his ward's wishes, nor has he given consent to such. This is the course he has deigned and so it shall stand."

A scream tore from Brienne's throat as she hurtled herself at the black knight and pummeled his chest with her fists. "What manner of man are you, to deliver your kin to the bed of the heathens that slayed my father and brother and stole my lands? You have no honor!"

Esternay's hand struck without warning and Brienne reeled, the light shattering before her eyes. She fell against the wall, tasting blood at the corner of her mouth.

Esternay retreated a few steps. He had not wanted to harm the girl, but she pricked him sorely. He would tolerate no slur upon that which he held above all else, his honor.

"Prepare yourself, my lady, for in two days hence we depart for Valsemé."

Brienne crumpled at the feet of Reverend Mother and sobbed uncontrollably. There must be a way. By all that was holy, she would find an escape. She sought solace then in the labyrinth of her mind, scarcely aware when the kind hands of Mother Annice guided her from the room.

The abbey bells tolled in the crisp early morn, signaling Prime and the call to devotions.

Brienne rose stiffly from her pallet and quickly began her ablutions. She flinched as her fingertips grazed her tender mouth, and the memory of the night before flooded back.

Brienne flung open a small wooden trunk and slid her hands deftly among the folds of clothing until they closed about a prized disk of polished steel.

She examined the ugly discoloration spread along her jaw. No doubt it would turn a sickly purplish-yellow in several days' time, and she wondered briefly how the Normans would receive a battered bride. Perhaps she should goad Lord Robert into beating her till her entire face was swollen and misshapen. Then, with luck, Gruel Atli would reject her.

Brienne sighed at her foolishness and stood to pull on a chemise of soft ivory linen. Nothing deterred men such as he, or Lord Robert, or even the king. Power was what they were born to, suckled upon, and bred to wield ruthlessly in attaining their precious ambitions. What match a mere maid? Somehow she must elude their mad schemes.

Donning a shorter, rose-colored tunic, she folded back the wide sleeves to reveal the creamy undergarment. A simple belt of metal links girdled the gown, its clasp embossed with a falcon, her father's personal emblem. Her emblem now.

Coiling her hair loosely at the nape of her neck and catching up her woolen mantle, Brienne stepped forth from the small cell into the fresh morning air and set off to join the community for first devotions. Her footsteps froze as she realized that a soldier kept pace with her a short distance away.

She studied him through narrowed eyes. This was no escort granted as courtesy due a lady. Did Lord Robert fear she would slip from his grasp? Had he the gall to set a guard to her heels, here, within the abbey walls? In truth, she had found little time to formulate an escape, and it nettled her all the more that he could so easily hold her prisoner. Squaring her shoulders, Brienne walked briskly toward the church, heaping curses upon her brother-by-marriage through gritted teeth.

The Seigneur d'Esternay awaited her, leaning casually against the side of the steep, aged steps. Brienne met him with an icy silence. How she longed to wipe the smugness from his face.

Throughout the service the dark knight held close to her, keeping her separate from the other women. When they broke their fast in the guest refectory a short while later, she became thoroughly vexed, for Lord Robert was never more than an arm's length away.

She tasted her wine in small, agitated sips, flashing daggered looks at him over the goblet's rim.

"How impressive that so noble a lord rises early to join our humble community in prayer," she taunted. "Perhaps 'tis repentance you seek for some foul deed."

Esternay observed her dispassionately.

"Of course, 'tis more surprising still that I am granted this day of grace to pack my meager possessions before being sacrificed to the Nordic gods."

Esternay lifted a dark brow and wiped his hands on the folds of cloth that hung from the

table.

"In truth, we wait upon two monks, missionaries to the Northmen. They will serve as my interpreters and remain in the duchy to tend its 'flock.' One is reportedly a Dane." He smiled, taking in Brienne's surprise. "'Tis said that he atones for the sins of his wayward brothers by zealously evangelizing them." Esternay drained his cup and rose. "Attend to yourself, my lady. We leave once the churchmen arrive and are suitably refreshed."

The crust Brienne nibbled caught in her throat. The man was insufferable! Doubtless, had the monks accompanied him and his party to Levroux, he would not have granted her time to use even the garderobe before departing.

Brienne was shadowed with fervor throughout the day. If she ventured near the abbey's gates or stables, she instantly found unbidden company at her elbow. When she thought to pray in the chapel and plead her case before God, she discovered herself surrounded by questionably devout soldiers.

Sanctuary might well be her only hope, but if Lord Robert and his men feared she would gain it, Brienne only despaired of having the chance to try. A sense of hopelessness began to poison her resolve. Naught would assuage the dull ache that now spread from temple to crown, born of the day's tensions.

At length she sought refuge in the privacy of her room, but here, too, she found no peace. A coffer of elegant clothing awaited her, a wedding gift and peace offering from the king. It contained a rich array of gaily colored gowns, transparent veils, fur-trimmed mantles, and jeweled girdles.

The beautiful clothes served only to inflame Brienne's ire and mounting frustration. How typically male! She would not be bought with finery to kindle the passions of a Norseman. In a furor she flung the garments about the tiny cell until they covered the floor and hung askew from the solitary chair that graced the room.

Angrily, she stripped off her tunic and chemise, then donned her meanest garb, a worn and faded gown of a dull greenish-brown.

Flinging open the cell door, she stalked past the two startled soldiers hovering nearby and headed for the stables. There she found a length of rope and tied it about her hips, creating a coarse girdle of sorts.

Good, she thought. 'Tis fitting raiment for one condemned.

Pivoting on her heel, she marched stiffly toward the scullery, determined to engross herself in the most noxious task available till she awoke from this nightmare.



A shrouded figure moved across the stable rushes and paused in the shadows of the door. His icy blue gaze followed her with keen interest.

"The maid was to be willing, yet she bears the mark of a heavy hand."

An older man emerged from the stall where he had just quartered an undersized palfrey, and frowned from beneath a thatch of bushy brows after Brienne.

"Patience, my son. We will soon know the truth of it."



Brienne's ever-present escorts followed hurriedly behind her clipped steps. Much to her

relief, they remained outside the small stone building as she whisked inside.

Brienne halted abruptly on the threshold. A dozen women worked furiously sanding pots and implements, all seemingly driven by the same madness.

Red-rimmed eyes lifted to greet her. As she spied Aleth, Lutigard, Sisters Ursuline, Clothilde, and Margaret, she realized that these women ached for her.

Suddenly, the crushing reality of the king's directive overwhelmed her, and she slumped against the wall, burying her face in her hands. What had she done to merit this misbegotten lot? She bitterly regretted not having taken the veil when her father had pressed her to do so. She would be safely tucked away from the world and forgotten now. As a nun, she would be considered dead to it.

Aleth limped forward with a stricken look, tenderly stretching out her arms. Brienne clung to her dearest friend and the floodgates opened anew. No words could express the depths of her grief.

As Aleth's own tears spilled unchecked, she stroked Brienne's hair. "Shhh. Do not cry, *chère amie*. I will help you. Upon my word, somehow I will find a way to help you."

"What goes here!" A deep voice thundered across the room as Esternay's dark frame filled the doorway.

Brienne spun around, fearing that he had overheard Aleth, but then she realized his gaze was fixed upon her shabby gown.

"Why do you dress yourself as a beggar and waste your time at these chores?" he demanded.

Brienne lifted her chin and met his gaze evenly. "I do penance, my lord, for surely my sins are great to have warranted such a fate as the one set before me."

Esternay growled and quickly surveyed the room. "You are to cease these petty tasks and ready yourself for our departure on the morrow. 'Tis the will of the king."

"The king? And what is your will, my lord?"

"I am sworn to Charles. My will must need comply with that of my overlord . . . for honor's sake," he challenged.

"Then what is your gain? Land? Gold? Thirty pieces of silver?"

Esternay winced at the reference to the traitorous apostle. "Nay, my lady, I take no bribe. Charles is set on this course and deems me the proper escort as your closest kinsman. You may think upon your forthcoming union as your family's restoration to Valsemé."

"*Certes*, to Esternay's advantage! Is that it?" she snapped, stepping closer. "You tie the swine's loyalty to your shield through the bonds of my marriage. Then will he keep his Norse brethren from your door, and join you upon the battlefield? Is that it? You would use the heathens' bloodlust to strengthen the ranks and power of Esternay?"

His eyes glittered and she knew she had struck the mark. Yet there was something more guarded within the depths of those impenetrable eyes. Something dark, deadly. She sucked in her breath sharply and fell back a pace.

"What else? What plans have you laid that not even Charles foresees?" she hissed, ice splintering through her.

"You are distraught, my dear, no doubt from the shock of your impending nuptials," he replied evenly, outwardly unfazed. "Do not allow your fears to twist your reasoning."

"Do they? And does Lisette quite agree with your *mission* here, my lord?"

"She will not be told till the child is born. 'Twould be unwise to distress her overmuch at this time."

Brienne decried his words with a laugh. "Oh, a most noble lord indeed! And I thought my

enemies all lay without, yet I find a viper hiding in my sister's bed!"

Esternay drew back his hand to strike her, then slowly lowered it. She would not get the better of him again. Damn, but the wench didn't know when to hold her tongue. She deserved a thorough thrashing, but he would not oblige her in front of so many, particularly not those of the cloth.

Grabbing her by the arm, he dragged her from the building and back across the courtyard toward her cell. Throwing open the door, he quickly surveyed the room's disarray, then drove his fingers into her flesh and yanked her to him, holding her a breath away.

"I suggest you accept your fate and prepare yourself, for we face a most arduous journey."

"Never," she breathed between clenched teeth.

Esternay shoved her roughly through the door and she stumbled to the floor, the stone biting her hip.

"Heed me well, vixen. Willingly or not, we leave on the morrow. You may ride of your own accord or trussed in hemp, but ride you will."

Esternay retreated across the courtyard, stiff backed, as his men assumed their posts. Brienne was left to sob upon the gowns and furs that littered her chamber floor.



Tints of lavender and rose threaded the awakening skies as an assortment of birds trebled noisily from their lofty perches, unconcerned with the affairs of humankind.

Brienne paused mutely upon the portal of her cell, still dressed in the drab brown dress of the day before. The sleepless night had been spent in prayer with an unexpected visitor, Mother Annice. Now she waited numbly, exhaustion threatening to overtake her, the mean garb her last silent protest.

She stared vacantly about the familiar surroundings that had served as her home for eight years and could not fathom that she was to be so callously torn away and given over to her enemy. There was naught to hope for. Her royal protector had betrayed her as had her sister's own husband. She was but a pawn in a game of power between men.

Brienne turned back into her chamber. The rich clothes had been returned to their coffer and her own simpler garments added to it. All was in readiness, save her own person, but ready, willing, or accepting she would never be. Though subjected physically to the ordeal, her hatred for the Northmen was the armor of her heart.

Gathering her mantle about her shoulders, she returned to the doorway and spied Esternay moving across the courtyard, his long strides rapidly eating up the distance between them. She straightened her shoulders and braced herself to be rebuffed for her mean attire.

He halted before her and, after measuring her appearance for a brief moment, grunted and offered his arm. Brienne lifted her cool gaze and, with a faint smile, brushed past it.

In silence they proceeded to the abbey church where a mass was to be celebrated and a final blessing bestowed before the retinue departed.

Aleth waited by the stone staircase looking pale and drawn. She limped forward and grasped her friend's hands. In a familiar gesture, Brienne braced Aleth's arm and they mounted the stairs in slow, measured steps.

The bleakness inside the church matched Brienne's dismal mood. Faint shafts of light filtered through small windows arched high above as candles sputtered in their sockets after the night's long vigil. She hugged herself against the perpetual cold that plagued the stony house of the

Lord.

Brienne felt, more than saw, the eyes that embraced her. Lifting her gaze, she found crystal-blue eyes and a pale halo of hair glinting from deep within a monk's hood.

She dropped her lashes and nervously bit her lower lip. The Dane! A Norseman, and so near. She fought to control her watery knees. But he was a holy man now, a Christian, if such a thing were possible. Stealing a small glance, she found him bent to prayer, a silhouette of coarse brown robes.

A second monk entered the sanctuary and ascended the altar steps. Sturdy in stature, with an undisciplined swath of iron gray hair beneath his tonsured crown, Brienne knew him at once to be Brother Bernard. Reverend Mother spoke of him earlier in rather shocked tones. The other she named as Brother Lyting, and confided only that he kept the Rule of Silence to atone for the crimes of his pagan kinsmen.

As the service progressed and the celebrant droned on in sonorous Latin, Brienne wondered if she supported Aleth or if, in truth, 'twas the other way round.

After the words of consecration were pronounced, Brother Bernard descended the altar stairs, his chalice clasped chest high, and passed through the gates that separated the sanctuary from the faithful. He assumed his station and began dispensing the Host to the communicants.

Aleth hobbled forward, clutching tightly to Brienne's arm. Brienne first took the Host, closing her eyes and tilting her head back as she received the wafer upon her tongue. She then braced Aleth as her friend repeated the ritual, and the two moved aside, allowing Lord Robert forward.

From the corner of her eye, Brienne glimpsed Esternay lowering his lids and tilting back his large head. Suddenly, Aleth shoved Brienne hard toward the gates of the sanctuary with a desperate look that told all. Brienne quickened her pace as a shout exploded from behind, followed by a squeal, then the sound of bodies thudding on the floor.

She glanced back to see that Aleth had thrown herself in Esternay's path and the knight now lay sprawled over the slight form, cursing vividly.

Brienne darted forward, the thunder of footsteps on stone closing in on her. A hand shot out and grasped her mantle, but the garment broke free of its clasp and in the next instant she slipped through the gate and gained the altar. She sank upon the marble steps, heaving for breath.

Esternay rose in pursuit, intent on dragging her from the altar.

Brother Bernard fumbled in the folds of his robes and a moment later blocked the knight's way, brandishing a small sword in one hand while still gripping the chalice in the other.

"By all that is holy, you shall not violate sanctuary!" the monk bellowed in his deep, gravelly voice.

Esternay's face contorted with rage and three of his men sought to restrain him.

"Give heed!" the monk warned. "Such sacrilege is committed on pain of excommunication!"

Esternay struggled for composure. A few seconds later, he barked out orders posting several of his men within the church to guard the girl and seize her should she leave the altar area, then stalked from the building.

Brother Bernard hastily concluded services. Not trusting Esternay, he vowed that he and his companion would alternately keep vigil and assure no offense was committed in the house of God.

Mother Annice, in turn, instructed several of her nuns to remain at their devotions and keep watch over the others, most especially Brienne.

Brienne groaned now at the furor she had created and fell to silent prayer upon the altar steps.

Throughout the day, Esternay returned glowering and seething as he paced about, inspecting the building over and over, noting carefully all exits and passageways, particularly those in the rear of the church where a small maze of chambers lay. At times he strode boldly to the gate to hurl threats at Brienne, one time vowing he would bring the Norsemen themselves to lay waste to the abbey if she did not relent.

It was early evening when Brother Bernard entered the sanctuary with a small parcel of food and settled himself on a step next to Brienne. She stared curiously at the sword that had been resheathed in its rich and unusual scabbard.

Brother Bernard chuckled at her inspection. "We made quite a display for them, did we not?"

'Twas you who were the spectacle, I think, good brother," she replied with a wan smile.

He patted his weapon. "Aye, my lady. But if you have not heard, I've spent considerable time among the heathenous Northmen. It gives me good comfort to keep my friend at my hip while I wield the Word of God upon my tongue!"

Brienne's laughter tinkled brightly in the gloomy church, dispelling the melancholy that had shrouded her moments before.

'Tis a most unusual friend, and foreign born by its look, yet quite handsome."

It was the monk's turn to smile as he proudly shifted the scabbard onto his lap to display its fine workmanship. Brienne's eyes widened at the delicate ribbons of silver and gold, inlaid in intricate, interlocking patterns, convoluting gracefully and sprouting into stylized heads of fearsome animals.

"Rollo's gift," Brother Bernard said simply.

Brienne lifted her gaze hesitantly. "You know the man?"

"Aye, indeed, since his early days as *sækungur*, 'sea king' in their language. I return to labor in his duchy. There is much work to be done in Normandy, and the harvest is promising."

Brienne frowned, "Have you come, then, to persuade me to leave sanctuary?"

"Nay, child. Only to see if you have set the matter before God."

Brienne nodded as sea-green eyes regarded her. "Ever since I learned I was to be given over to Gruel Atli, I have beseeched our Lord for deliverance and He has seen fit to do so."

"Has He, my lady?"

Panic, confusion and frustration clogged her heart all at once. "What do you mean?"

"Only that you have told God what *you* want. But have you sought out His will for your life?"

"This *is* His will. It must be!"

"You want it to be."

Brienne fell silent and brooded.

"Listen, my child. Whether it be God's will or not, I cannot say. But do not deny that He may call you forth from cloister to serve Him in a greater way."

"In a Norman's bed? I cannot believe it," she protested.

"Is that all you see? Think, Brienne. The Normans swore fealty to Charles and embraced our faith, though that needs careful nurturing, to be sure. They bring few of their own women. Not even a half dozen have I witnessed. 'Tis our Frankish maids they take to wife. Do you not understand what sway our women hold, first with their husbands and then over their children, the next generation of Normans? They may not realize their own power.

"Our peoples must meld, Brienne," he continued. "Together, they must become one. Men can do so only through words, alliances, and loyalties, but women bring it about through their very flesh. I know 'tis not an easy task, nor is mine, to change the heart and mind of a heathen, but we

are all God's children. *All*. As the Baronne de Valsemé, you can wield exceptional influence for the sake of our people and the future of their offspring."

He looked directly into her eyes. "Before you say nay, set the matter before God and most earnestly seek His direction. Will you do that, my child?"

Brienne lowered her gaze, and with her heart sinking somewhat, she nodded in agreement.

The next hours followed, fraught with anxiety and fresh fear. Most desperately, Brienne would have it that her destiny lay in the arms of the Church, not those of her enemy. But then she fretted at the prospect of spending years in sanctuary. Such was known to happen. What future there? More, she feared the wrath of Esternay should she dare leave its protection. What matter the day or hour? He would be waiting to appease his bruised pride and she had no champion to aid her cause. And what of the king's own anger, or that of Gruel Atli? Father in Heaven, what had she done?

If her resolve wavered throughout the night, it was quickly restored at the mere thought of the despicable Normans. They were Danes, mostly, or so she was told, though no one seemed certain of Rollo's origins. She had seen such men once from the tower in the bailey when they laid siege to Valsemé. She shuddered as she recalled the ferocity with which those heathens fought. That day was nearly lost, and it was shortly thereafter that her family withdrew to Chaudrey.

Brienne hugged herself against the chill of night. Once again she felt the scrutiny of the shrouded monk, Brother Lyting. Feigning prayer, she glanced at him surreptitiously from beneath her lashes.

He studied her intently, of that she was sure, though his features remained heavily concealed within the folds of his cowl. He would prove tall should he unfold himself from his cramped posture. The startling breadth of his shoulders strained the limits of his robes, suggesting a physique hardened more by the rigorous training of sword and shield than by cross and gospel.

Brienne knew she should hate this man for the very blood that flowed through his veins. Yet he was a man of God. Could she condemn where the Father forgave?

As the night deepened and melted into early morn, Brienne lay exhausted upon the cold stone floor, prostrate in prayer before the altar. Divine guidance had shed no light on the path she should choose, and now she fell into a light, restless sleep.

She was a child of twelve summers once again, standing tiptoe upon an uneven stool and peering out the narrow slit of a window in the tower wall. Below, her father's army was retreating inside the defense works. Anxiously, she scanned the fields beyond where the enemy pursued a few straggling Franks, racing for the protection of the motte and bailey.

They were huge men, red and golden of hair, wearing conical helmets with noseguards that concealed their features. Her eyes fixed upon a black-haired heathen, the only one of his kind, as he closed in upon a fleeing soldier. Whirling his battle-ax round in a mighty arc, he cleaved the Frank in two from head to shoulder. Brienne screamed at the sight, deafening her own ears as watched in horror. As though the Norseman had heard her, he lifted his battle-fevered gaze to the high window above and smiled, chilling Brienne to her immortal soul. He hefted his bloodied ax upon his broad shoulder and continued in his pursuit of her kinsmen.

Brienne bolted upright, fully awake. Sheer terror washed through her and she began to shake violently. Never could she be a bride to a bloodthirsty spawn of the Devil!

Throwing herself down again onto the stone floor, she frantically beseeched the Almighty, fear strangling every fiber of her being. "Lord, set aside this bitter cup, I beg of thee."

Drink. The word was instantly impressed in her mind.

Brienne's head jerked upward. Had someone spoken? She lifted herself and surveyed the small gathering in the church. Sisters Basina and Lioba knelt in silent prayer, as did Brother Lyting. Two of Esternay's soldiers whispered quietly together at the rear of the church, while a third appeared to doze near a side door.

Brienne turned back to her prayers, sure that the anxieties of the past days were fast overcoming her.

"Grant, O Lord, that this cup may pass."

Drink. The word was strongly impressed once more. *Live the love that is within you.*

"Nay!" Brienne gasped, pressing her cheek to the cold floor. "Merciful Father, do not ask it of me, I beg Thee." Hot tears flooded her eyes. "I am so afraid."

Scripture poured into her mind. *Perfect love casts out all fear.*

Pressing both hands to her temples, she fought to still the flow of thoughts. "Nay, I am but one, only one"—her breath came in shallow gulps—"and I am all alone."

In that moment, she was flooded with a presence, suffusing her with warmth and wrapping her in a tender, loving embrace.

I am with you always.

The presence lingered awhile, casting away all doubt and objection, and soothing her heart's distress.

As the first golden threads of dawn spun through the lofty windows and spilled down over the altar, Brienne rose to her feet. Smoothing away the tears, she bowed reverently toward the altar.

"Thy will be mine."

Turning, she took scant notice the wide-eyed stares or gaping mouths of her companions, but descended the altar steps and walked purposely through the gate and out of the sanctuary.



In short order, the Seigneur d'Esternay was apprised of the turn of events, and a flurry of activity swept through the abbey as the escort prepared its departure.

Brienne's "experience" was recounted by the witnesses in glowing terms, recalling how she had pleaded and cried out upon the altar, then, uttering a few words, quit the sanctuary.

Esternay would have liked to throttle the girl outright for the embarrassment she caused him, but he quickly discovered that the soldiers who held vigil with her now zealously watched over her like three clucking hens.

It was rumored about that the Heavenly Father had called the maid forth from sanctuary. Esternay scoffed at this but fought down his yearning to punish the girl. It would be unwise to harm one so obviously sheltered under the "Divine Wing."

Instead, he dispersed Brienne's new champions, sending two, Blanchard and Leveque, ahead to coordinate their rendezvous with the Norman escort. Brother Lyting, though strangely reluctant to leave, agreed to accompany them and interpret the mediations. The men were strictly instructed to make no mention of the girl's initial aversion to the marriage or of her flight into sanctuary. Mortain, the third bemused soldier, remained to attend to the girl's needs.

Esternay kicked back his chair as he envisioned the chit in the Norman's arms. Had he not witnessed her raw fear of their kind? If God protected her, then He also provided a fitting chastisement for the troublesome wench. Aye, the Norseman would tame her with his brand. The image should have placated his craving for vengeance, but it cheered him not at all.



Brienne carefully selected an ensemble for her initial encounter with the Norman host and folded it neatly into her coffer. Knowing it would take several days to reach the borders of Normandy, she chose a gown more suitable to traveling on horseback, nutmeg in hue and devoid of elaborate trimmings.

She wove her thick locks into two plaits and coiled them into a crown atop her head. Then she covered her hair with a *couvre-chef*, a long, flowing scarf. She arranged the ends modestly across her throat rather than allowing them to fall freely as she was usually wont to do.

For so many years she had lived in community with other women, equal in all things. Now, in one short hour, she would return to the world of men, surrounded first by Frankish soldiers, then delivered to a cortege of Norman warriors. A small tremor passed through her and she adjusted her *couvre-chef* once more.

A soft rapping sounded at the door and Aleth peeked in. The two clasped each other warmly.

Aleth stammered momentarily and stared hard at the floor. "I want to come with you, Brienne."

"Aleth! Do you know what you say?"

"*Oui*. I have thought on it long and well, and would not have you face this fate alone. You will need a friend."

"Oh, Aleth, your companionship would be most welcome, but I fear for your safety among these foreigners."

Aleth studied the toe of her leather shoe. "Surely they will have no cause to harm a cripple . . . or the personal maid of the Baronne de Valsemé."

Brienne smiled wide at this last bit of reasoning and realized for the first time that her position did yield some power. She embraced her friend heartily. "Come, then, Aleth. I shall need a friend such as you."

It was midday before the entourage was finally assembled in the courtyard. Brienne was astonished to be gifted with a magnificent white palfrey outfitted in rich Frankish trappings, yet another of Charles's bridal offerings. The sovereign seemed most desirous of this union.

The nuns sent exquisitely embroidered altar linens and vestments for the long-inactive church of Valsemé. To Brienne, they presented the precious gift of a small mongrel puppy which rode in a wicker basket attached to her palfrey's saddle.

A tearful moment passed as the women exchanged their last farewells. Sister Ursuline sniffed noisily while many of the ladies dabbed at their eyes, chins aquiver. Mother Annice pressed a smooth hollow reed into Brienne's hand, containing a small, tightly rolled parchment.

"Isaiah. Remember, child." Reverend Mother smiled through her own tears, then clutched Brienne to her with surprising strength. "Godspeed."

The gates swung open, and the column of soldiers, attendants, and carts moved slowly out of the abbey. Brienne and Aleth assumed their positions in the center of the escort, with Brother Bernard trailing behind on his stout little mare.

No one was prepared for the greeting they received as they emerged from the age-old enclosure walls. It appeared that every villager for miles around was assembled there waving bright cloths, throwing flower petals, and uttering their blessings as they hailed the maid that God called forth from Levroux. Surely, Heaven was at long last attentive to their prayers.

Esternay scowled at the delirious scene, wondering how word of Brienne's "holy encounter" had spread so rapidly, then dismissed it. The abbey employed many workers from the village.

Since the escort would be traveling the old Roman roads afar of the villages, there was little chance that the spectacle would be repeated. With that consoling thought he commanded the troops forward.

Brienne strained to look back as the gathering faded into specks of color and the silhouette of the abbey melted into the horizon. The last visual tie severed, she turned forward in her saddle to face the uncertain future that awaited her.

The furry little puppy licked the last droplets of water from Brienne's cupped palm. She took up the skin from her saddle again, soaking a small scarf, and wiped at her face and neck. She contemplated the soiled cloth with disgust, feeling utterly incrustated with the grime of four days' travel.

The pup whimpered to be out of his basket, and Brienne scratched his ears comfortingly. "Patience, little one."

The pup cocked its head sideways.

"What shall I call you?" She stole a glance at Aleth riding several arm lengths away on a small brown palfrey. "Mugwort! Now, there's a fine name."

"You wouldn't!" Aleth exclaimed.

"Nay. He's not so forlorn-looking as that." She laughed at Aleth's withering look.

Brienne studied the uneven splotches that adorned the little fellow's coat and decided upon "Patch." The puppy yapped excitedly as though he approved.

She shifted her attention to the beautiful white palfrey beneath her. "You are more difficult." She stroked the shimmering coat. "*Etoile*, perhaps. Star"

"That would be *asta* in Greek," Brother Bernard said, reining in his horse next to Brienne's, "or *stella* in Latin. Of course, there be *candra*, also Latin. It means 'shining.'"

"Candra. *Mais oui*." She tousled the white mane playfully. "It suits her well, do you not agree?"

Brother Bernard smiled, nodding, then watched Brienne's gaiety fade as she squinted into the distance.

"How much longer?"

"On the morrow, my lady. Blanchard and Leveque returned last evening with the details. Brother Lyting awaits us at Valsemé. Did you not know?"

She shook her head.

"Esterney," he said flatly, not expanding on the comment. He had developed an acute distaste for the man from the first when he and his companion were pressed to depart the abbey no sooner than they had arrived. Absurd. He was not a young man anymore, to be jostled about the realm on a broken-down palfrey at the whim of some overbearing knight. He said as much. Years among the heathens had given him pluck, by God!

"We meet late morn inside the boundaries of the duchy, my lady, at the site of a Roman ruin. The precise location is marked by an ancient oak. These Norse believe spirits dwell in trees and mounds and such. Hold them sacred. Yet 'tis an odd place to meet a bride. Mayhap they think it home to some fertility goddess," he mused with a shrug. "Sorry, my dear. Ah, well, Blanchard and Leveque will direct us."

"I vow, you are a most irregular churchman with your sword and colorful jests," she chided.

"I have a colorful past." His eyes twinkled.

"Pray tell me what to expect when we meet these Normans. Will Lord Robert leave us to them?"

"Nay, child. Both escorts will accompany us to Valsemé. As the king's representative, the Seigneur d'Esternay must see you safely there and wed before he returns to court."

Brienne fidgeted a moment with Candra's reins, lacing them between her fingers.

"Having second thoughts, my child? Regrets?"

"I am only apprehensive, and in truth, somewhat nervous now that I shall come face to face with my—"

"Enemy?" the monk supplied. "You must try not to think of them as such. They are men, the same flesh and blood as you and I—"

"But not the same heart," she interjected.

"That is why we are here." He reached over and patted her hands.

"What are they like?" Color faintly tinged her cheeks. "I would know how they treat their women."

"Do not worry overlong on it. Generally, they are good to their families, though I would warn you of one thing—the *More Danico*."

He rubbed a bristly chin. "You see, in their homeland, a man may take as many wives as he can afford. They are a rather polygamous lot by nature. Even when they embrace our Christian faith, they are reluctant to lay aside this custom, and simply keep handfast wives alongside their legal ones."

"Paramours?"

"In essence. But fear not. Any issue of your union with Atli will be his legitimate heir to Valsemé. You must face the possibility, however, that he may keep other women as well."

"Do not concern yourself for my sake. I almost welcome it. Perhaps he will desire their favors over mine and not bother me overmuch."

Brother Bernard knew that any full-blooded male could not soon forget the exquisite creature that rode next to him. He diverted the conversation into a lighter vein.

"Would it amuse you to learn a few words in the Norse tongue, perhaps a simple greeting that you can share on the morrow?"

The ensuing hours slipped pleasantly by as Brienne contorted her tongue around an impossible combination of sounds, laughing at her ineptitude.

Later, with the camp settled for the night and the coarse provisions eaten, Brienne made her only request of the journey, water for a bath.

She had to content herself with a scrubbing from a large basin set inside her tent. Aleth worked long soaping and rinsing Brienne's hair till it squeaked clean. It took several more hours to dry the silken mass before the campfire.



Esternay watched intently from a distance. Thus far, he had avoided Brienne altogether during the journey, lest she stir his wrath anew. Now he found that it was not his ire that she kindled, but his naked desire.

The simple gown she had donned after bathing clung to her damp, lush curves, and her delicately boned features were pleasantly flushed by the warmth of the fire. As she combed out her glorious black mane, he craved to wrap it about his arm and trap her softness beneath him. She'd infected his blood, turning his veins to fire.

He growled deep in his throat, damning Richard Beaumanoir in his grave once again. The girl should have been his. His! And despite her troublesome nature, he meant to have her.

He stroked his beard thoughtfully, reassessing his carefully laid plans, plans that would one day assure him control of Valsemé itself, right in the midst of the Normans. Brienne was the key to those designs.

He continued to watch the maid, deciding upon his course and how best to press his advantage. Most likely, she would be as desirous of the liaison as he. His offer, of course, was irresistible. Freedom from the Norman yoke, and rule of the barony.

He smiled, skimming a glance over her inviting curves once again. Of course, there was a price, but he held no doubt that she would prefer his touch to those of a Norse jackal. Indeed, her terror of the Norsemen would serve him well. Esternay measured Brienne closely, confidently, as she chatted with the little cripple, her laughter a soft melody against the night. She was a delectable morsel, and one he intended to savor for many years to come.



At length, Brienne returned to her tent. She collapsed on her pallet, refreshed and tingling to the tips of her toes, and quickly nodded off.

As the night skies lifted their heavy veils, Brienne nudged Aleth awake to begin preparations for the new day.

Dashing her face with cool water, she wondered briefly of Gruel Atli and whether he would be present among his men. No mention of it had been made. Still, she must leave nothing to chance.

In a few short hours, the escort would pass into Normandy and her life would change forevermore. Brienne knew if she was to succeed in influencing these people, she must establish herself at the outset. Today, she represented her kingdom as Frank met Norman, but even more, she embodied the very essence of Valsemé. She was part of a yesterday that once was, a part that would triumph again in that joining.

God grant her strength. Despite the nobility of the cause, the reality truly repulsed her.

Time slipped swiftly away and the call to mount their steeds sounded. Esternay strode boldly to the women's tent smiling inwardly to himself as he envisioned Brienne recoiling before her new masters when he presented her to them later that day. He would seize the moment and salve her fears, offering her fresh hope, and more, oh, so much more.

Moments later he swallowed that smugness as Brienne stepped forth from her tent.

She was stunningly gowned in a rich tunic, deeply cut and the color of a fine crimson wine. Unlike the voluminous garments currently favored, the gown molded her contours snugly then fell gracefully to her knees over an ivory chemise. Both were lavishly embroidered about the neck, sleeves, and hem with wide borders of purest gold thread. An exquisite girdle, studded with garnets and pearls, lay atop her hips, accentuating her tiny waist.

Brienne's ebony tresses cascaded luxuriantly past her shoulders like a midnight waterfall, crowned with a circlet of gold. The band was set with a single gemstone, a large ruby, centered above her brows. To the back, the circlet secured a sheer golden veil that fell in misty layers nearly to the ground.

Esternay stared greedily at the vision before him. *Soon, my dove, soon.*



The entourage abandoned the old Roman road, which it had followed for nearly a week,

proceeding now along a much narrower route that wound through lush meadowland and open orchards.

Brother Bernard joined the women, who were still ensconced in the center of the escort, offering his encouragement and briefly reviewing the greeting Brienne had prepared in the Norse tongue.

A short while later, the retinue entered a little valley where its steeply sloping sides cradled the ruins of a once palatial Roman villa.

As the horses and carts cautiously descended the rutted road, Brienne spied a great gnarled tree near the ruins, incredible in size, impossibly massive in its girth.

"Yggdrasil," she marveled softly.

Brother Bernard had taught her a smattering of the Norse religious beliefs to break the monotony of their journey. This mammoth oak recalled his tales of the great World Ash of Asgard, Yggdrasil, a gigantic tree bearing up the universe. Among its numerous fascinations were two wells located beneath its roots.

Mimir watched over the Well of Wisdom, and it was to him that Odin sacrificed an eye for a draught of the magical pool. The Norns dwelt by the Well of Fate and tended men's destinies. Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld by name, they personified the Past, Present, and Future.

How appropriate, Brienne reflected, for undoubtedly this was the rendezvous. What mischief did the Fates weave for her?

She quickly scanned the grounds below and caught sight of a large host of men mounting their steeds near the crumbling walls and reassembling beneath the mighty oak, Normans to be sure, red and golden of hair. An icy finger of memory traced down her spine.

As the Frankish column neared the bottom of the valley, the road straightened and Brienne could no longer see ahead past the hulking soldiers. Shortly, the retinue came to a standstill and waited to be signaled forward. She surmised that Esternay was now advancing with his select retainers to meet the Norman complement in the open field.

Brienne bit her lower lip. The moment was at hand and she did not know if she could still hear her pounding heart.

Time weighed heavily upon their idleness. The men's saddles creaked as they strained to see, and they mumbled among themselves. Ghostly images of a smiling, black-haired heathen floated before her mind's eye, and she fought down her rising panic as the aromas of grasses, horses, and leather bombarded her senses.

Leveque suddenly appeared at her side, his pride and concern for her reflected clearly in his hazel eyes.

"We have spoken with the Normans, my lady. You are bid forward to make your presence known."

Brienne froze momentarily, unable to move. She watched dazedly as the troops parted on command to either side of the road, creating a pathway before her. Aleth squeezed her hand, then extracted the whining pup from its basket. Leveque nodded solemnly for her to begin.

Swallowing hard, she pressed Candra forward, feeling much like a lamb approaching a den of hungry wolves.

For the love of God, for the love of my people, she chanted silently, over and over. *Dear God, do not abandon me.*

As she approached the front of the Frankish lines, Brienne gained her first close look at the men of the North. Larger than the Franks and powerful in build, they were not wholly unpleasant to look upon. They were a fair-haired lot for the most part, and not a few favored scarlet mantles.

Brienne continued toward Esternay and Brother Bernard who sat astride a roan and a gray, conversing with the Norse leader, entirely blocking her view of the man. She wondered wildly if this was Gruel Atli.

Her pulse quickened and her mind raced, barely capable of coherent thought. She dropped her gaze, feeling stripped bare under the curious stares and open assessment of the Norman host.

With a start, she realized that Esternay and Brother Bernard had reined their mounts aside. She was left face-to-face . . . with whom?

Slowly, Brienne lifted her eyes but for a moment could go no further than the powerful stallion, as satiny black as Candra was silken white. Then, inhaling deeply, she willed her eyes upward over the expansive chest and astonishingly wide shoulders to look fully upon the Norseman's countenance.

She could not breathe for several seconds, only stare speechless. Never had she seen such a man. Like some glorified hero acclaimed in the legends of old, he was a magnificent golden warrior. Dear God, why did he have to be a Norman!

His steel-blue eyes locked with hers and an energy passed between them, igniting ripples of warmth through her trembling limbs. She wondered breathlessly if this was the man who held her future.

He released his gaze then swept an appreciative glance downward to her feet and back again, like a gentle caress. She flushed warmly as he paused at her breasts. Shockingly, they grew taut under his intimate appraisal. His eyes widened a fraction, and for a moment Brienne wondered if it were possible to die of acute embarrassment.

How dare he examine her like some prize bauble! Did males never see more to a woman than a passive plaything to warm their beds? Well, passive she was not. She was fully capable of returning like for like. When his eyes captured hers again, she smiled winsomely and initiated her own bold perusal of his splendid frame.

Briefly, she traced over the finely hewn features and square set of his jaw, lingering at the enticing cleft of his chin. She moistened her lips then allowed her gaze to slip lower, skimming over the sleeveless suede jerkin of dove-gray to explore thickly muscled arms wrapped in the spiral embrace of silver arm bracelets.

As her eyes roamed across the flat abdomen, Esternay cleared his throat sharply. Her eyes flew upward and were claimed at once by the Norman's captivating smile and a quizzically arched brow. Brienne bestowed a full smile upon the golden man, catching in her side vision the ominous scowl that now darkened Esternay's mien.

"Velkominn." The voice was beautifully rich.

Brother Bernard hastened to make the introductions. "My lady, may I present to you Rurik, eldest son of Gruel Atli. He bids you welcome."

Disappointment crushed down on her, but she fought to not betray her feelings. How could she have been so childish to hope for even an instant that this man was her betrothed? She puzzled at the strong, physical response he evoked from her, causing her to forget that he was a Northman and deserving of all her hatred. Yet he was a man all the same. Flesh and blood, was that not what the good monk said?

"My lady, he bids you welcome," Brother Bernard prompted, urging with his look that she should begin her speech.

A thousand thoughts swirled through Brienne's mind. Her lips parted then closed, the strands of memories demanding a new course. She lifted her chin and met his gaze directly.

"I am Brienne Beaumanoir, by birthright Baronne de Valsemé. 'Tis I who bid you welcome

to my ancestral homeland and to those lands your people now claim. May the Norman rule prove wise and worthy of my forefathers."

Brother Bernard's eyes rounded. "My lady, we dare not provoke—"

"Tell him exactly." Her tone brooked no argument.

Brother Bernard grumbled to himself, then began conveying her message in the odd tongue. A gleam lit in Rurik's eyes, and his reply set the monk to sputtering.

"My lady, Rurik thanks you for your generous greeting. He asks that you would settle a question that plagues him overmuch."

Brienne nodded.

"Forgive me, my lady, these Normans are rather blunt—"

Brienne frowned, impatient.

"He wonders why a woman so beautiful and, ahem . . . obviously desirable as yourself was locked away in a house of virgins."

Brienne's mouth dropped open, but she quickly recovered herself as a surge of mischievousness bubbled up. "My father sought to save me from the Northmen."

As the reply was translated, Rurik smiled broadly, showing even white teeth, then issued a rejoinder. Brother Bernard blustered incoherently for a moment.

"My lady, he says, to the contrary; 'twould seem your father saved you *for* the Northmen."

Esternay sliced through the repartee, barely suppressing the fury that consumed him. The chit slavered over the heathen like a bitch in heat!

"Enough of your bantering, Lady Brienne. You are dismissed. Return to your position in the column at once."

His words stunned Brienne. "My lord, if I have offended any—"

"Offended?" Esternay snapped. "You are either amazingly naive or appallingly wanton. If you continue to encourage the man, you'll next find him between your thighs!"

Brienne recoiled at his crassness, astounded. Had the man gone utterly mad?

Brother Bernard gasped, his eyes darting nervously over the towering Normans. "My lord, 'tis unwise—"

"Silence!" Esternay hissed, emboldened since the foreigners could not understand his Frankish tongue. He glowered at Brienne. "We shall finish this matter later. Your years in cloister have left you surprisingly lacking in the finer points of gentility." He signaled brusquely for one of his men-at-arms to remove her.

Rurik suddenly spurred his mount forward between the maid and menacing knight, catching up Candra's reins and swiftly drawing Brienne aside.

Esternay's hand flew to his sword hilt, but the monk stayed him.

Rurik glared coldly at the Frank, the blue tinge of his eyes draining to a flinty gray. When next he spoke, Brienne detected a dangerous undercurrent to his incomprehensible words.

"Sire, we are to depart at once." Brother Bernard mopped his brow. "The Lady Brienne is to ride with Rurik and an escort equal in number of Normans and Franks. He bids you choose ten."

"Tell this arrogant bastard that I represent the king," Esternay snarled. "The lady is my charge and shall remain under my protection until she is wed. I'll share her with no cockscomb of a Northman till then."

Rurik's eyes glinted like polished steel. Before another word could be uttered, he bellowed a string of commands.

Two dozen of his men promptly encircled the small group of Franks that stood in the open field, hands poised, ready to unsheath their blades.

Brienne wavered at the sight and searched Rurik's stony face.
The monk hastily signed himself. "Seigneur, 'twas no request. We are in Normandy now."

End of Sample

Author Biography



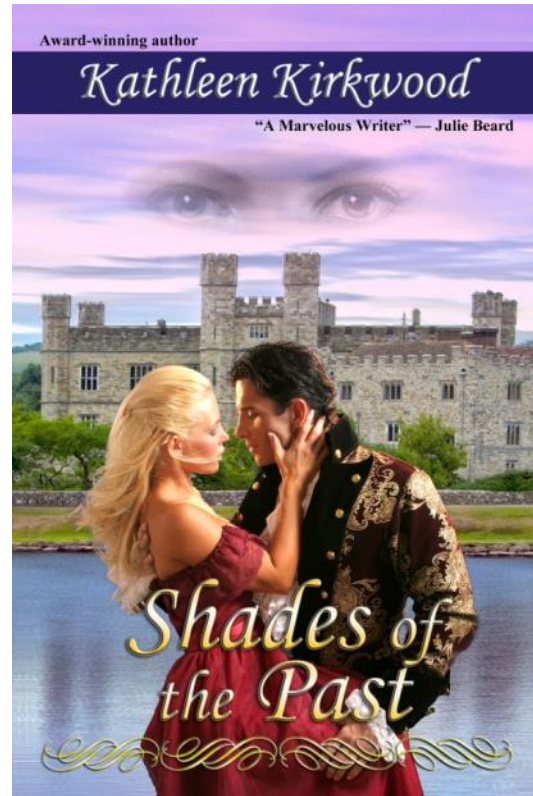
Kathleen Kirkwood is the pseudonym for award-winning, best-selling author Anita Gordon. Having an abiding love for history, she enjoys setting her stories in distant times and places long past. To date they include Medieval adventures and Late Victorian paranormal romances. After forty years of travels and raising children in various locations, Kirkwood and her husband have returned to the Southwest where they first met. Currently, she is dusting off and revising her backlist for release in digital and print format. She is also working on a new novel, a haunting tale set on the Chesapeake Bay and the shores of historic Southern Maryland. Look for ***Pirates' Moon*** in late 2013. Visit her at:

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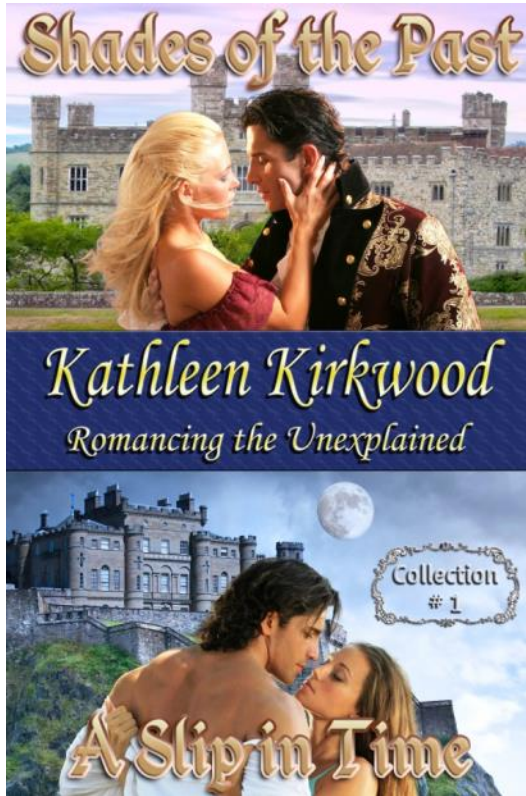


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