

LENOBIA'S VOW

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To my sister-in-law, Danielle Cast, also known as my French expert.

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A big thank-you to my sister-in-law, for saving me from my pathetic French. Any mistakes that end up in the text are mine and mine alone (sorry to my French readers!).

Christine—I heart you totally.

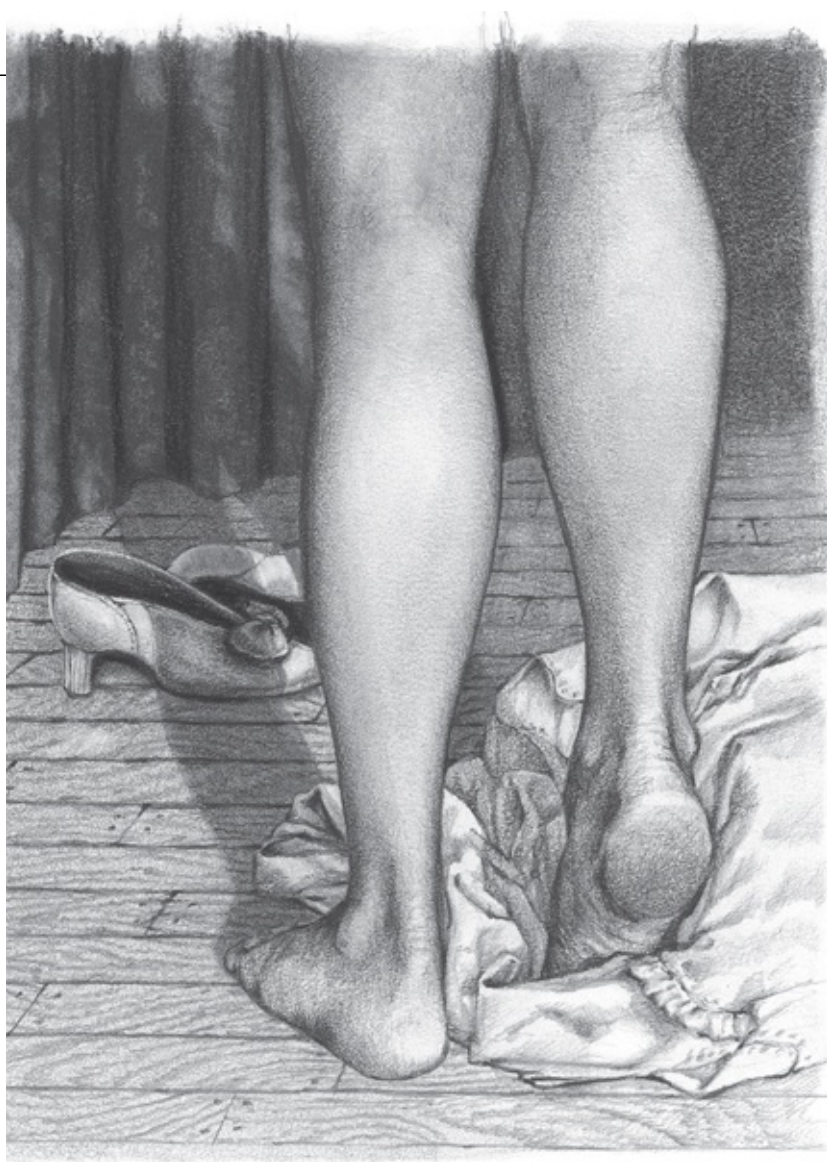
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CHAPTER ONE

February 1788, France

“Elle est morte!”

Lenobia’s world exploded with the sound of a scream and three small words.

“She is dead?” Jeanne, the scullery maid working beside her, paused in her kneading of the plum fragrant bread dough.

“*Oui*, may the Holy Mother have mercy on Cecile’s soul.”

Lenobia looked up to see her mother standing in the arched doorway to the kitchen. Her pretty face was unusually pale and her hand clutched the worn rosary beads that were always looped around her neck.

Lenobia shook her head in disbelief. “But just days ago she was laughing and singing. I heard her. I saw her!”

“She was beautiful, but never strong, that poor girl,” Jeanne said, shaking her head sadly. “Always so pale. Half of the château caught that same ague, my sister and brother included. They recovered easily.”

“Death, he strikes quickly and terribly,” Lenobia’s mother said. “Lord or servant, he eventually comes for each of us.”

Forever after, the yeasty scent of fresh bread would remind Lenobia of death and sicken her stomach.

Jeanne shuddered and crossed herself with a flour-whitened hand, leaving a crescent-shaped spot in the middle of her forehead. “May the Mother protect us.”

Automatically, Lenobia genuflected, though her eyes never left her mother’s face.

“Come with me, Lenobia. I need your help more than Jeanne does.”

Lenobia would never forget the feeling of dread that engulfed her with her mother’s words.

“But there will be guests—mourners—we must have bread,” Lenobia stammered. Her mother’s gray eyes, so like her own, turned to storm clouds. “That was not a request,” she said, switching smoothly from French to English.

“When your *mère* speaks in the barbaric English, you know she must be obeyed.” Jeanne shrugged and her round shoulders and got back to her dough kneading.

Lenobia wiped her hands on a linen towel and forced herself to hurry to her mother. Elizabeth Whitehall nodded at her daughter and then turned, motioning for Lenobia to follow her.

They made their way quickly through the wide, graceful halls of the Château de Navarre. The

were nobles who had more money than the Baron of Bouillon—he was not one of King Louis's confidants or courtiers, but he did have a family that could be traced back hundreds of years, and a country estate that was the envy of many lords who were richer, though not as well-bred.

Today the château's halls were hushed and the curved, mullioned windows that usually allowed plentiful sunlight to spill against the clean marble floors were already being draped with heavy black velvet by a legion of silent servant girls. Lenobia thought that the house itself seemed muffled with grief and shock.

Then Lenobia realized they were hurrying away from the central part of the manor and toward one of the rear exits that would empty out near the stables.

“Maman, où allons-nous?”

“In English! You know I loathe the sound of French,” her mother snapped.

Lenobia suppressed a sigh of irritation and switched to her mother's birth language. “Where are you going?”

Her mother glanced around them, then grabbed her daughter's hand and, in a low, tight voice said, “You must trust me and do exactly as I say.”

“Of-of course I trust you, Mother,” Lenobia said, frightened by the wild look in her mother's eyes.

Elizabeth's expression softened and she touched her daughter's cheek. “You are a good girl. You always have been. Your circumstances are my fault, my sin alone.”

Lenobia began to shake her head. “No, it wasn't your sin! The Baron takes whomever he wants as his mistress. You were too beautiful not to catch his eye. That was not your fault.”

Elizabeth smiled, which allowed some of her past loveliness to surface. “Ah, but I was not beautiful enough to keep his eye, and because I was only the daughter of an English farmer, the Baron cast me aside, though I suppose I must eternally be grateful he found a place for me, and for you, in his household.”

Lenobia felt the old bitterness burn within her. “He took you from England—stole you from your family. And I am his daughter. He should find a place for me, and for my mother.”

“You are his bastard daughter,” Elizabeth corrected her. “And only one of many—though by far the prettiest. As pretty even as his legitimate daughter, the poor, dead Cecile.”

Lenobia looked away from her mother. It was an uncomfortable truth that she and her half sister did look very much alike, enough alike to have caused rumors and whispers as both girls began to bloom into young women. Over the past two years Lenobia had learned it was best to avoid her sister and the rest of the Baron's family, who all seemed to detest the very sight of her. She had found it easier to escape to the stables—somewhere Cecile, the Baroness, and her three brothers rarely went. The thought crossed her mind that her life would either be much easier now that the sister who looked so much like her—but who would not acknowledge her—was dead, or the dark looks and the sharp words from the Baroness and her boys would get even worse.

“I am sorry Cecile is dead,” Lenobia said aloud, trying to reason through the jumble of her thoughts.

“I would not wish ill on the child, but if she was fated to die, I am grateful that it happened now, this moment.” Elizabeth took her daughter’s chin and forced her to meet her gaze. “Cecile’s death will mean life for you.”

“Life? For me? But I already have a life.”

“Yes, the life of a bastard servant in a household that despises the fact that their lord scatters his seed aimlessly and then enjoys flaunting the fruits of his transgressions as if that proves his manhood over and over again. That is not the life I wish for my only child.”

“But, I do not under—”

“Come, and you will understand,” her mother interrupted, taking her hand again and pulling her along the hallway until they came to a small room near one of the rear doors of the château. Elizabeth opened the door and led Lenobia into the poorly lit room. She moved purposefully to a large basket like those used to carry the linens to wash. There was, indeed, a sheet draped over the top of it. Her mother pulled it away to expose a gown that shimmered with blue and ivory and gray, even in the dim light.

Lenobia stared as her mother began lifting the gown and the expensive undergarments from the basket, shaking them out, smoothing their wrinkles, brushing off the delicate velvet slippers. She glanced at her daughter. “You must hurry. If we are to be successful, we have very little time.”

“Mother? I—”

“You are going to put on these clothes, and with them you will also put on the identity of another. Today you will become Cecile Marson de La Tour d’Auvergne, the legitimate daughter of the Baron of Bouillon.”

Lenobia wondered if her mother had gone utterly mad. “Mother, everyone knows Cecile is dead.”

“No, my child. Everyone at the Château de Navarre knows she is dead. No one on the coach that will be here within the hour to transport Cecile to the port of Le Havre, or on the ship awaiting her there, knows she is dead. Nor will they, because Cecile is going to meet that coach and take that ship to the New World, the new husband, and the new life that awaits her in New Orleans as a legitimate daughter of a French baron.”

“I cannot!”

Her mother dropped the gown and grasped both of her daughter’s hands, squeezing them so hard Lenobia would have flinched had she not been so shocked. “You must! Do you know what awaits you here? You are almost sixteen. You have been fully a woman for two summers. You hide in the stable—you hide in the kitchen—but you cannot hide forever. I saw how the Marquis looked at you last month, and then again last week.” Her mother shook her head, and Lenobia was shocked to realize she was fighting back tears as she continued to speak. “You and I have not spoken of it, but you must know that the true reason we have not attended Mass at Évreux these past weeks is not because my duties have overtired me.”

“I wondered ... but I did not want to know!” Lenobia pressed her trembling lips together, afraid of what else she might say.

“You must face the truth.”

Lenobia drew a deep breath, yet still a shudder of fear moved through her body. “The Bishop of Évreux—I could almost feel the heat of his eyes when he stared at me.”

“I have heard he does much more than stare at young girls,” her mother said. “There is something unholy about that man—something more than the sin of his corporeal desires. Lenobia, Daughter, cannot protect you from him or any other man because the Baron will not protect you. Becoming someone else and escaping the life sentence that it means to be a bastard is your only answer.”

Lenobia gripped her mother’s hands as if they were a lifeline and stared into the eyes so much like her own. *My mother is right. I know she is right.* “I have to be brave enough to do this.” Lenobia spoke her thought aloud.

“You are brave enough to do this. You have the blood of courageous Englishmen pounding through your veins. Remember that, and it will strengthen you.”

“I will remember.”

“Very well, then.” Her mother nodded resolutely. “Take those servant’s rags off and we will dress you anew.” She squeezed her daughter’s hands before releasing them and turning back to the pile of shimmering cloth.

When Lenobia’s trembling hands faltered, her mother’s took over, swiftly divesting her of the simple but familiar clothing. Elizabeth didn’t even leave Lenobia her homespun shift, and for a dizzying moment it seemed she was even shedding her old skin for new. She didn’t pause until her daughter was totally naked. Then, in complete silence, Elizabeth dressed Lenobia carefully, layer upon layer: shift, pockets, panniers, under petticoat, over petticoat, stays, stomacher, and the lovely silk robe *à la polonoise*. It was only after she had helped her on with the slippers, fussed with her hair, and then swirled a fur-trimmed, hooded pelisse around her shoulders that she finally stepped back, curtsayed deeply, and said, “*Bonjour, Mademoiselle Cecile, votre carrosse attend.*”

“Maman, no! This plan—I understand why you must send me away, but how can you bear it?” Lenobia pressed her hand over her mouth, trying to silence the sob that was building there.

Elizabeth Whitehall simply rose, took her daughter’s shoulders, and said, “I can bear it because of the great love I bear for you.” Slowly, she turned Lenobia so that she could see her reflection in the large, cracked mirror that rested on the floor behind them, waiting to be replaced.

“Look, child.”

Lenobia gasped and reached toward the reflection, too startled to do anything except stare.

“Except for your eyes and the lightness of your hair, you are the image of her. Know it. Believe it. Become her.”

Lenobia’s gaze went from the mirror to her mother. “No! I cannot be her. God rest her soul, but Cecile was not a kind girl. Mother, you know she cursed me every time she saw me, even though we share the same blood. Please, Maman, do not make me do this. Do not make me become her.”

Elizabeth touched her daughter’s cheek. “My sweet, strong girl. You could never become like Cecile, and I would never ask it of you. Take only her name. Inside, in here.” Her touch went from

Lenobia's face to the spot on her breast under which her heart beat tremulously. "In here you will always be Lenobia Whitehall. Know that. Believe that. And in doing so you will become more than her."

Lenobia swallowed the dryness in her throat and the terrible pounding of her heart. "I hear you believe you. I will take on her name but not become her."

"Good. It is settled then." Her mother reached behind the laundry basket and lifted a small, box-shaped case. "Here, take this. The rest of her trunks were sent to the port days ago."

"*La casquette de Cecile.*" Lenobia took it hesitantly.

"Do not use the vulgar French word for it. They make it sound like a casket. It is a travel case. This is all. It is meant as the beginning of a new life—not the ending of an old one."

"It has her jewelry in it. I heard Nicole and Anne talking." The other servants had gossiped incessantly about how the Baron had ignored Cecile for sixteen years, but now that she was being sent away he lavished jewelry and attention on her as the Baroness wept about losing her only daughter. "Why did the Baron agree to send Cecile to the New World?"

Her mother snorted in disdain. "His latest mistress, that opera singer, has almost bankrupted him. The King is paying handsomely for titled, virtuous daughters willing to marry the nobility of New Orleans."

"The Baron sold his daughter?"

"He did. His excess has purchased you a new life. Now, let us go so that you might claim it." Her mother cracked the door and peered into the hallway. She turned back to Lenobia. "No one is about. Put your hood over your hair. Follow me. Quickly."

"But the coach will be stopped by the liverymen. The drivers will be told about Cecile."

"Yes, if the coach was allowed to enter the estate they would be told. That is why we shall meet outside the grand gates. You will board it there."

There was no time to argue with her mother. It was almost mid-morning, and there should have been servants and tradesmen and visitors coming and going from the busy estate. But today there was a pall over everything. Even the sun's face was veiled as mist and low, murky clouds swirled over the château.

She was certain they would be stopped, would be found out, but sooner than it seemed possible the huge iron gate loomed out of the mist. Her mother opened the smaller walkway exit, and they hurried into the road.

"You will tell the coach driver that there is an ague at the château, so the Baron sent you out so that no one would be contaminated. Remember, you are the daughter of nobility. Expect to be obeyed."

"Yes, Mother."

"Good. You have always seemed older than your years, and now I understand why. You cannot be a child any longer, my beautiful, brave daughter. You must become a woman."

"But, Maman, I—" Lenobia began, but her mother's words silenced her.

"Listen to me and know that I am telling you the truth. I believe in you. I believe in your strength."

Lenobia. I also believe in your goodness.” Her mother paused and then slowly took the old rosary beads from around her neck and lifted them, placing them over her daughter’s head, and tucking them under the lace stomacher so that they were pressed against her skin, invisible to everyone. “Take these. Remember that I believe in you, and know that even though we must be apart, I will always be a part of you.”

It was only then that the true realization hit Lenobia. She would never see her mother again.

“No.” Her voice sounded strange, too high, too fast, and she was having trouble catching her breath. “Maman! You must come with me!”

Elizabeth Whitehall took her daughter in her arms. “I cannot. The *filles du roi* are not allowed to have servants. There is little room on the ship.” She hugged Lenobia tightly, speaking quickly as, in the distance, the sound of a coach echoed through the mist. “I know that I have been hard on you, but that was only because you had to grow brave and strong. I have always loved you, Lenobia. You are the best, the finest thing in my life. I will think of you and miss you every day, for as long as I live.”

“No, Maman,” Lenobia sobbed. “I cannot say good-bye to you. I cannot do this.”

“You will do this for me. You will live the life I could not give you. Be brave, my beautiful child. Remember who you are.”

“How do I remember who I am if I am pretending to be someone else?” Lenobia cried. Elizabeth stepped back and gently wiped the wetness from her daughter’s cheeks. “You will remember here. Once more, her mother pressed the palm of her hand against Lenobia’s chest over her heart. “You shall stay true to me, and to yourself, here. In your heart you will always know, always remember. As long as I am in mine, I will always know, always remember you.”

Then the coach burst into the road beside them, causing mother and daughter to stumble back out of the way.

“Whoa!” The driver of the coach pulled his team up and shouted at Lenobia and her mother. “What are you doing there, you women? Do you want to be killed?”

“You will not speak to the Mademoiselle Cecile Marson de La Tour d’Auvergne in such a voice!” her mother yelled at the coachman. His gaze skittered to Lenobia, who brushed the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand, lifted her chin, and glared at the driver.

“Mademoiselle d’Auvergne? But why are you out here?”

“There is a sickness at the château. My father, the Baron, has kept me separate from it so that I am not contagious.” Lenobia’s hand went to her chest and she pressed against the lacy fabric there so that her mother’s rosary beads bit into her skin, grounding her, giving her strength. But still she could not help reaching out and clinging to her mother’s hand for security.

“Are you daft, man? Do you not see the mademoiselle has waited here for you for far too long already? Help her inside the coach and out of this horrid dampness before she does fall ill,” her mother snapped at the servant.

The driver scrambled down immediately, opening the door to the coach and offering his hand.

Lenobia felt as if all of the air had been knocked from her body. She looked wildly at her mother.

Tears were washing down her mother's face, but she simply curtseyed deeply and said, "*Bon voyage* to you, child."

Lenobia ignored the gaping coachman and pulled her mother up, hugging her so tightly the rosary beads dug painfully into her skin. "Tell my mother I love her and will remember her and miss her every day of my life," she said in a shaky voice.

"And my prayer, to the Holy Mother of us all, is that she let this sin be attributed to me. Let the curse be on my head, not yours," Elizabeth whispered against her daughter's cheek.

Then she broke Lenobia's embrace, curtseyed again, and turned away, walking with no hesitation back the way they'd come.

"Mademoiselle d'Auvergne?" Lenobia looked at the coachman. "Shall I take the *casquette* for you?"

"No," she said woodenly, surprised that her voice still worked. "I'll keep my *casquette* with me." He gave her an odd look but held out his hand for her. She saw her hand being placed in his, and his legs carried her up and into the coach. He bowed briefly and then clambered back to his position as driver. As the coach lurched forward, Lenobia turned to look back at the gates of the Château of Navarre and saw her mother collapsed to the ground, weeping with both hands covering her mouth to stifle her wails of grief.

Hand pressed against the expensive glass of the carriage window, Lenobia sobbed, watching her mother and her world fade into mist and memory.



CHAPTER TWO

With a swirl of skirts and throaty, low laughter, Laetitia disappeared around a marble wall carved with images of saints, leaving only the scent of her perfume and the remnants of unsatisfied desire in his wake.

Charles cursed, “*Ah, ventrebleu!*” and adjusted his velvet robes.

“Father?” the acolyte repeated, calling down the inner hallway that ran behind the chancel of the cathedral. “Did you hear me? It is the Archbishop! He is here and asking for you.”

“I heard you!” Father Charles glared at the boy. As the priest approached him, he lifted his hand and made a shooing motion. Charles noted that the child flinched like a skittish colt, which made the priest smile.

Charles’s smile was not a pleasant thing to behold, and the boy backed quickly down the steps that led up to the chancel, putting more space between the two of them.

“Where is de Juigne?” Charles asked.

“Not far from here, just inside the main entrance to the cathedral, Father.”

“I trust he has not been waiting long?”

“Not too long, Father. But you were, uh—” The boy broke off, his face filled with consternation.

“I was deep in prayer, and you did not wish to disturb me,” Charles finished for him, staring hard at the boy.

“Y-yes, Father.”

The boy was unable to look away from him. He’d begun to sweat, and his face had turned an alarming shade of pink. Charles couldn’t tell if the child was going to cry or explode. Either would have amused the priest.

“Ah, but we have no time for amusement,” he mused aloud, breaking his gaze with the boy as he walked quickly past him. “We have an unexpected guest.” Enjoying the fact that the boy flattened himself against the screening wall so that his priestly robes didn’t so much as brush his skin, Charles felt his mood lighten. He shouldn’t allow small things to distress him. He would simply call for Laetitia as soon as he could free himself of the Archbishop, and they would resume where they’d left off—which would put her willing and bent before him.

Charles was thinking of Laetitia’s shapely bare bottom when he greeted the old priest. “It is a great pleasure to see you, Father Antoine. I am honored to welcome you to the Cathédrale Notre Dame d’Évreux,” Charles de Beaumont, Bishop of Évreux, lied smoothly.

“*Merci beaucoup*, Father Charles.” The archbishop of Paris, Antoine le Clerc de Juigne, kissed his

chastely on one cheek and then the other.

Charles thought the old fool's lips felt dry and dead.

"To what do my cathedral and I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

"Your cathedral, Father? Surely it is more accurate to say that this is God's house."

Charles's anger began to build. Automatically, his long fingers began to stroke the huge ruby cross that always hung from a thick chain around his throat. The flames of the lit votive candles at the feet of the nearby statue of the beheaded Saint Denis fluttered spasmodically.

"To say this is my cathedral is simply a term of endearment and not one of possession," Charles said. "Shall we retire to my offices to share wine and break bread?"

"Indeed, my journey was long, and though in February I should be thankful it is rain and not snow falling from the gray skies, the damp weather is tiring."

"Have the wine and a decent meal brought immediately to my offices." Charles motioned impatiently to one of the nearby acolytes, who jumped nervously before scurrying away to do his bidding. When Charles's gaze returned to the older priest, he saw that de Juigne was studying the retreating acolyte with an expression that was his first warning that something was amiss with this unannounced visit. "Come, Antoine, you do look weary. My offices are warm and welcoming. You will be comfortable there." Charles led the old priest away from the nave, across the cathedral through the pleasant little garden, and to the opulent offices that adjoined his spacious private chambers. All the while the archbishop gazed around them, silent and contemplative.

It wasn't until they were finally settled in front of Charles's marble fireplace, a goblet of excellent red wine in his hand and a sumptuous repast placed before him, that de Juigne deigned to speak.

"The climate of the world is changing, Father Charles."

Charles raised his brows and wondered if the old man was as daft as he appeared. He'd traveled all the way from Paris to talk of the weather? "Indeed, it seems this winter is warmer and wetter than any in my memory," Charles said, wishing this useless conversation to be over soon.

Antoine le Clerc de Juigne's blue eyes, which had appeared watery and unfocused just seconds before, sharpened. His gaze skewered Charles. "Idiot! Why would I be speaking of the weather? It is the climate of the people that concerns me."

"Ah, of course." For the moment, Charles was too surprised by the sharpness in the old man's voice even to feel anger. "The people."

"There is talk of a revolution."

"There is always talk of a revolution," Charles said, choosing a succulent piece of pork to go with the smooth goat cheese he'd sliced for his bread.

"It is more than simple talk," said the old priest.

"Perhaps," Charles said through a full mouth.

"The world changes around us. We draw near a new century, though I will pass into Grace before it arrives and younger men, men like yourself, will be left to lead the church through the tumult that approaches."

Charles fervently wished the old priest had expired before he'd made this visit, but he hid his feelings, chewed, and nodded sagely, saying only, "I will pray that I am worthy of such a weighty responsibility."

"I am pleased that you are in agreement about the need to take responsibility for your actions," said de Juigne.

Charles narrowed his eyes. "My actions? We were speaking of the people and the change within them."

"Yes, and that is why your actions have come to the attention of His Holiness."

Charles's mouth suddenly went dry and he had to gulp wine to swallow. He tried to speak, but de Juigne continued, not allowing him to talk.

"In times of upheaval, especially as the tide of popular attitude sways toward bourgeois beliefs, it has become increasingly important that the church does not drown in the wake of change." The priest paused to sip delicately at his wine.

"Forgive me, Father. I am at a loss to understand you."

"Oh, I doubt that very much. You could not believe your behavior would be ignored forever. You weaken the church, and that cannot be ignored."

"My behavior? Weaken the church?" Charles was too astounded to be truly angry. He swept a well-manicured hand around them. "Does my church appear weakened to you? I am loved by my parishioners. They show their devotion by tithing with the generosity that fills this table."

"You are feared by your parishioners. They fill your table and your coffers because they are more afraid of the fire of your rage than the burning of their empty stomachs."

Charles's own stomach lurched. *How could the old bastard know? And if he knows, does that mean the Pope does as well?* Charles forced himself to remain calm. He even managed a dry chuckle. "Absurd! If it is fires they fear, it is brought on by the weight of their own sins and the possibility of eternal damnation. So they give generously to me to alleviate those fears, and I duly absolve them."

The Archbishop continued as if Charles had never spoken. "You should have kept to the whores. No one notices what happens to them. Isabelle Varlot was the daughter of a marquis."

Charles's stomach continued to churn. "That girl was the victim of a horrible accident. She passed too close to a torch. A spark lit her dress afire. She burned before anyone could save her."

"She burned after spurning your advances."

"That is ridiculous! I did not—"

"You should also have kept your cruelty in check," the Archbishop interrupted. "Too many of the novices come from noble families. There has been talk."

"Talk!" Charles sputtered.

"Yes, talk supported by the scars of burns. Jean du Bellay returned to his father's barony minus the robes of a priest and instead carrying scars that will disfigure him for the rest of his life."

"It is a shame his faith was not as great as his clumsiness. He almost burned my stables to the ground. It has naught to do with me that after an injury of his own causing he renounced his charge"

our priesthood and retreated home to the wealth of his family.”

“Jean tells a very different story. He says he confronted you about your cruel treatment of his fellow novices and your anger was so great that you set him, and the stables around him, afire.”

Charles felt the rage begin to burn within him, and as he spoke, the flames of the candles in the ornate silver holders that sat at either end of the dining table flickered wildly, growing brighter with each word. “You will not come into my church and make accusations against me.”

The old priest’s eyes widened as he stared at the growing flames. “It is true what they are saying about you. I did not believe it until now.” But instead of retreating or reacting in fear, as Charles had come to expect, de Juigne reached into his robes and pulled out a folded parchment, holding it before him like a warrior’s shield.

Charles stroked the ruby cross that sat hot and heavy on his chest. He had actually begun to move his other hand—to flick his fingers toward the nearest candle flame, which writhed brighter and brighter, as if beckoning his touch—but the thick leaden seal on the parchment sent ice through his veins.

“A papal bull!” Charles felt his breath leave him with his words, as if the seal had, indeed, been a shield that had been hurled against his body.

“Yes, His Holiness sent me. His Holiness knows I am here and, as you may read for yourself, if I or any in my party meet with an unfortunate fiery accident, his mercy will turn to retribution and his vengeance against you will be swift. Had you not been so distracted with defiling the chancel you would have noticed my escort was not made up of priests. The Pope sent his own personal guard with me.”

With hands that trembled, Charles took the bull and broke the seal. As he read, the Archbishop’s voice filled the chamber around him as if narrating the younger priest’s doom.

“You have been watched closely for almost one year. Reports have been made to His Holiness, who has come to the decision that your predilection for fire may not be the manifestation of demonic influence, as many of us believe. His Holiness is willing to give you an opportunity to use your unusual affinity in service of the church by protecting those who are most vulnerable. And nowhere is the church more vulnerable than in New France.”

Charles came to the end of the bull and looked up at the Archbishop. “The Pope is sending me to New Orleans.”

“He is.”

“I will not go. I will not leave my cathedral.”

“That is your decision to make, Father Charles. But know that if you choose not to obey, His Holiness has commanded that you be seized by his guards, excommunicated, found guilty of sorcery, and then we shall all see if your love of fire is as great when you are bound to a stake and set ablaze yourself.”

“Then I have no choice at all.”

The Archbishop shrugged and then stood. “It is more of a choice than I advised you be given.”

“When do I leave?”

“You must leave here immediately. It is a two-day carriage ride to Le Havre. In three days the *Minerva* sets sail. His Holiness charges that your protection of the Catholic Church begins the moment you step upon the soil of the New World, where you will take up the seat of Bishop of the Cathedral of Saint Louis.” Antoine’s smile was disdainful. “You will not find New Orleans as generous as Évreux, but you may find that the parishioners in the New World are more forgiving of your, shall we say, eccentricities.” The Archbishop began to shuffle toward the door, but he paused and looked back at Charles. “What are you? Tell me truly and I will say nothing to His Holiness.”

“I am a humble servant of the church. Anything else has been exaggerated by the jealousy and superstition of others.”

The Archbishop shook his head and said no more before leaving the room. As the door closed, Charles fisted both of his hands and smashed them into the table, causing the cutlery and plates to tremble and the flames of the candles to writhe and spill wax down their sides as if they wept with pain.

* * *

For the two-day journey from the Château de Navarre to the port of Le Havre, mist and rain wrapped Lenobia’s carriage in a veil of gray that was so thick and impenetrable, it seemed to Lenobia that she had been carried from the world she knew and the mother she loved to an unending purgatory. She spoke to no one during the day. The coach paused briefly only for her to attend to the most basic of bodily functions, and then they continued until dark. Each of the two nights, the driver stopped at lovely roadside inns where the madams of the establishments would take charge of Cecile Marson and La Tour d’Auvergne, clucking about her being so young and unchaperoned and, almost beyond hearing, gossip with the serving girls about how *atroce* and *effrayant* it must be to be on her way to marry a faceless stranger in another world.

“Terrible ... frightening...” Lenobia would repeat. Then she’d hold her mother’s rosary beads and pray, “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women...” over and over again, just as her mother had for as long as she could remember, until the sounds of the servant’s whispering were drowned out by the memory of her mother’s voice.

On the third morning they arrived in the port city of Le Havre and, for a fleeting moment, the rain stopped and the mist parted. The scent of fish and the sea permeated everything. When the driver finally stopped and Lenobia stepped from the carriage down to the dock, a brisk, cool breeze chased away the last of the clouds and the sun beamed as if in welcome, flashing on a lavishly painted frigate that bobbed restlessly at anchor nearby in the bay.

Lenobia stared at the ship in awe. All across the top of the hull was a band of blue on which intricate gold filigree was painted that reminded her of flowers and ivy. She could see orange and black and yellow decorating other parts of the hull, as well as the deck. And facing her was the figurehead of a goddess, arms outstretched, gown flowing fiercely in carved and captured wind. She

was helmeted as if for war. Lenobia had no idea why, but the sight of the goddess had her breath catching and her heart fluttering.

“*Mademoiselle d’Auvergne? Mademoiselle? Excusez-moi, êtes vous Cecile Marson de La Tour d’Auvergne?*”

The flapping of the nun’s brown habit caught Lenobia’s attention before her words were truly understandable. *Am I Cecile?* With a jolt Lenobia realized that the Sister had been calling to her from across the dock, and in getting no response, the nun had broken from a group of richly dressed young women and approached her, concern clear in her expression as well as her voice.

“It—it is beautiful!” Lenobia blurted the first thought that fully formed in her mind.

The nun smiled. “It is, indeed. And if you are Cecile Marson de La Tour d’Auvergne you will be pleased to know that it is more than just beautiful. It is the means by which you will embark upon an entirely new life.”

Lenobia drew a deep breath, pressed her hand to her breast so that she could feel the pressure of her mother’s rosary beads, and said, “Yes, I am Cecile Marson de La Tour d’Auvergne.”

“Oh, I am so glad! I am Sister Marie Madeleine Hachard, and you are the last of the mademoiselles. Now that you are here we can board.” The nun’s brown eyes were kind. “Is it not a lovely omen that you brought the sun with your arrival?”

“I hope so, Sister Marie Madeleine,” Lenobia said, and then had to walk quickly to catch up with the nun as she hurried, with a flutter of her robes, back to the waiting, staring girls.

“It is Mademoiselle d’Auvergne, and we are now all arrived.” The nun motioned imperiously to several dockhands who were standing about doing nothing more than sneaking curious looks at the group of girls. “*Allons-y!* Take us to the *Minerva*, and be careful and quick about it. Commodore Cornwallis is eager to sail with the tide.” As the men were scrambling to do her bidding and get the rowboat ready to transport them to the ship, the nun turned back to the girls. With a sweep of her hand she said, “Mademoiselles, let us step into the future!”

Lenobia joined the group, quickly scanning the girls’ faces, holding her breath and hoping that none of them would be familiar to her. She breathed a long, shaky sigh of relief when all she recognized was the similarity of their fearful expressions. Even so, she purposefully remained on the outskirts of the women, focusing her gaze and her attention on the ship and the rowboat that would take them to it.

“*Bonjour, Cecile.*” A girl who looked as if she could not be older than thirteen spoke to Lenobia with a soft, shy voice. “*Je m’appelle Simonette LaVigne.*”

“*Bonjour,*” Lenobia said, trying to smile.

The girl moved closer to her. “Are you very, very afraid?”

Lenobia studied her. She was certainly beautiful, with long, dark hair curling over her shoulders and a smooth, guileless face the color of new cream, her complexion marred only by two bright pink spots on her cheeks. She was terrified, Lenobia realized.

Lenobia glanced at the rest of the girls in the group, this time really seeing them. They were all attractive, well dressed, and about her age. They were also wide-eyed and trembling. A few of the

were weeping softly. One of the little blondes was shaking her head over and over and clutching a diamond-encrusted crucifix that hung from her neck on a thick gold chain. *They are all afraid* Lenobia thought.

She smiled at Simonette, and this time actually managed more than a grimace. “No, I am not afraid,” Lenobia heard herself say in a voice that sounded much stronger than she felt. “I think the ship is beautiful.”

“B-but I c-cannot swim!” stammered the trembling little blonde.

Swim? I am worried about being discovered as an impostor, never seeing my mother again, and facing life in a strange, foreign land. How could she be worried about swimming? The burst of laughter that escaped Lenobia drew the attention of all the girls, as well as Sister Marie Madeleine.

“Do you laugh at me, mademoiselle?” the girl asked her.

Lenobia cleared her throat and said, “No, of course not. I was only thinking how funny we would all look trying to swim to the New World. We would be like floating flowers.” She laughed again, this time less hysterically. “But is it not better that we have this magnificent ship to swim us there instead?”

“What is this talk of swimming?” said Sister Marie Madeleine. “None of us need know how to swim. Mademoiselle Cecile was right to laugh at such a thought.” The nun walked to the edge of the dock, where the sailors were waiting impatiently for the girls to begin boarding. “Now, come along. We need to get settled into our quarters so the *Minerva* can get under way.” Without so much as a backward glance, Sister Marie Madeleine took the hand of the nearest sailor and stepped awkwardly but enthusiastically into the bobbing rowboat. She had taken a seat and was rearranging her voluminous brown habit before she noticed none of the girls had followed her.

Lenobia noted that several of the mademoiselles had taken steps backward, and tears seemed to be spreading like a pestilence through the group.

This isn't as terrifying as leaving my mother, Lenobia told herself firmly. Nor is it as frightening as being the bastard daughter of an uncaring baron. With no more hesitation, Lenobia strode to the edge of the dock. She held out her hand, as if she were accustomed to servants automatically being there to help her, and before she had time to rethink her boldness, she was in the little boat taking a seat on the bench beside Sister Marie Madeleine. The nun reached over and squeezed her hand briefly but firmly.

“That was well done,” said the Sister.

Lenobia lifted her chin and met Simonette’s gaze. “Come on, little flower! You have nothing to fear.”

“*Oui!*” Simonette said, picking up her skirts and hurrying forward to take the sailor’s offered hand. “If you can do it, I can do it.”

And that broke the dam of resistance. Soon all of the girls were being handed into the boat. Tears turned to smiles as the confidence of the group built and their terror evaporated, leaving relieved sighs and even some hesitant laughter.

Lenobia wasn’t sure when her own smile changed from something inauthentic that she’d forced

honest pleasure, but as the last girl clambered aboard she realized the tightness in her chest had eased as if the ache in her heart might actually become bearable.

The sailors had rowed them almost all the way to the ship, and Simonette had been chattering about how even though she was almost sixteen years old, she had never before seen the ocean and perhaps she was just a little bit excited, when a gilded carriage pulled up and a tall, purple-robed man exited. He walked to the edge of the dock and glared from the group of girls to the waiting ship. Everything about him—from his stance to the dark look on his face—appeared angry, aggressive, and familiar. Sickeningly familiar ...

Lenobia was staring at him with a growing feeling of disbelief and dismay. *No, please, let it not be him!*

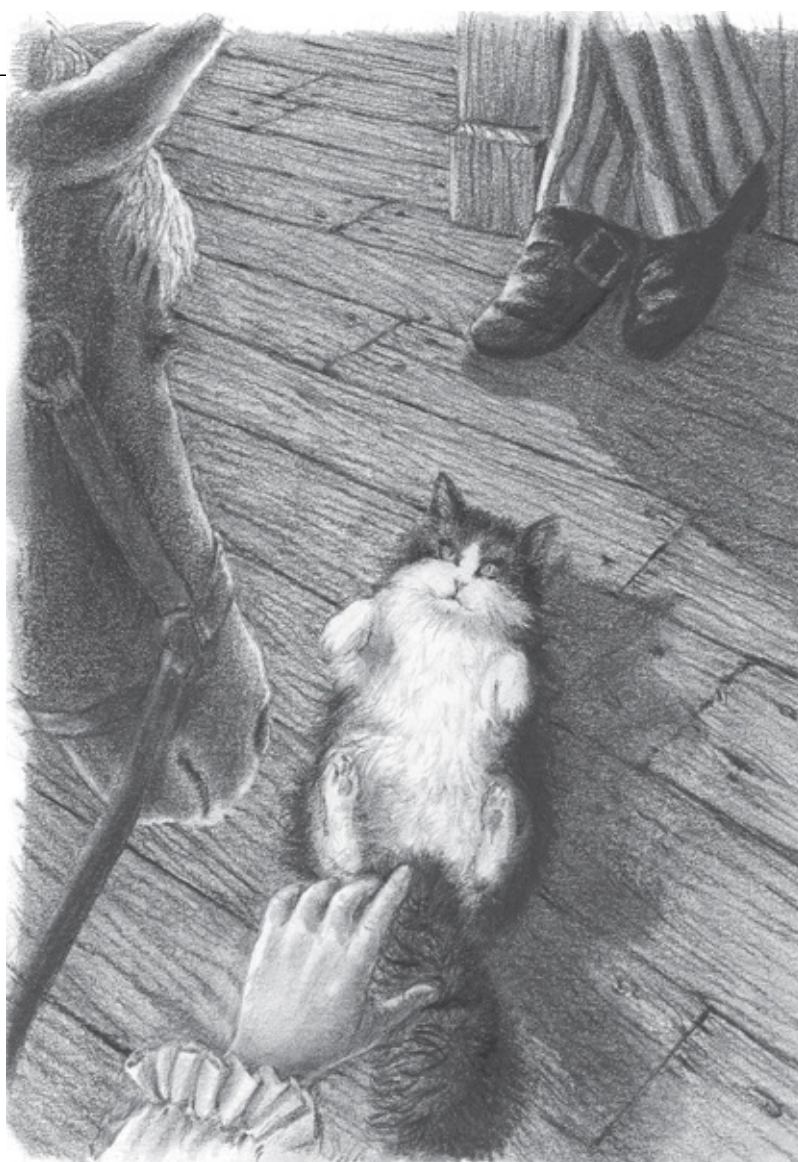
“His face frightens me.” Simonette spoke softly. She, too, was staring at the man on the distant dock.

Sister Marie Madeleine patted her hand reassuringly and responded. “I was notified just this morning that the lovely Cathedral of Saint Louis will be gaining a new bishop. That must be him.” The nun smiled kindly at Simonette. “There is no reason for you to be frightened. It is a blessing to have the good bishop traveling with us to New Orleans.”

“Do you know which parish he is from?” Lenobia asked, even though she knew the answer before the nun confirmed her dread.

“Why, yes, Cecile. He is Charles de Beaumont, the Bishop of Évreux. But do you not recognize him? I believe Évreux is quite near your home, is it not?”

Feeling as if she were going to be violently ill, Lenobia said, “Yes, Sister. Yes, it is.”



CHAPTER THREE

As soon as Lenobia boarded the *Minerva*, she pulled the thick hood of her fur-lined cloak over her head. Forcing herself to ignore the distractions of the brightly painted deck and the bustling energy of everything from crates of flour, bags of salt, and barrels of cured meat, to horses being loaded onto the ship, Lenobia ducked her chin and tried to disappear. *Horses! There are horses coming with us, too? Simonette wanted to stare around her and take it all in, but the rowboat had already begun its return trip to the docks, where it would be picking up their fellow traveler, the Bishop of Évreux. I must get below. I must not let the Bishop see me. Most of all, I must be brave ... be brave ... be brave ...*

“Cecile? Are you well?” Simonette was peering up into her hooded face, sounding so concerned that she drew Sister Marie Madeleine’s attention.

“Mademoiselle Cecile, is—”

“I am feeling a little ill, Sister,” Lenobia interrupted, trying to speak softly and not call any more attention to herself.

“Aye! ’Tis the way of it. Some people are sick from the moment they set foot on deck.” The man striding toward them, voice booming, had a huge barrel chest and a florid, meaty face that contrasted dramatically with his dark blue coat and golden epaulets. “I am sorry to say it, but your reaction bodes ill for how you will fare during the voyage, mademoiselle. I can tell you that though I have lost many passengers to the sea, I have never lost one to seasickness.”

“I—I think I will be better if I can get below,” Lenobia said quickly, hyperaware that with each moment the Bishop was getting closer and closer to boarding.

“Oh, poor Cecile,” Sister Marie Madeleine murmured. Then added, “Girls, this is our captain, Commodore William Cornwallis. He is a great patriot and will keep us quite safe during our long journey.”

“That is very kind of you to say, good Sister.” The Commodore motioned at a plainly dressed young mulatto man who was standing nearby. “Martin, show the ladies to their quarters.”

“*Merci beaucoup*, Commodore,” said Sister Marie Madeleine.

“I hope to see you all at dinner this evening.” The big man gave Lenobia a little wink. “At least those of you with the stomach to attend! Excuse me, ladies.” He strode away, bellowing at a group of crew members who were struggling awkwardly with a large crate.

“Mademoiselles, madame, if you would follow me,” Martin said.

Lenobia was the first to fall in line behind the broad-shouldered form of Martin as he nimbly led them through a door in the rear of the deck and down a rather treacherously narrow stairwell that led

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