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THE SEVENTH CHAPTER

Rules were made to be broken, so the adage goes. But what about vows? A vow should never be broken--but observe how far they'll sometimes bend ...

The snow was falling harder now. Kassianos' mule, a good stubborn beast, kept slogging forward until it came to a drift that reached its belly. Then it stopped, looking reproachfully back over its shoulder at the priest.

"Oh, very well," he said, as if it could understand. "This must be as Phos wills. That town the herder spoke of can't be far ahead. We'll lay over in -- what did he call it? -- Develtos till the weather gets better. Are you satisfied, beast?"

The mule snorted and pressed ahead. Maybe it did understand, Kassianos thought. He had done enough talking at it, this past month on the road. He loved to talk, and had not had many people to talk to. Back in Videssos the city, his clerical colleagues told him he was mad to set out for Opsikion so late in the year. He hadn't listened; that wasn't nearly so much fun as talking.

"Unfortunately, they were right," he said. This time, the mule paid him no attention. It had reached the same conclusion a long time ago.

The wind howled out of the north. Kassianos drew his blue robe more tightly about himself, not that that did much good. Because the road from the capital of the Empire to Opsikion ran south of the Paristrian mountains, he had assumed they would shield him from the worst of the weather. Maybe they did. If so, though, the provinces on the other side of the mountains had winters straight from the ice of Skotos' hell.

Where was he? For that matter, where was the road? When it ran between leaf-bare trees, it had been easy enough to follow. Now, in more open country, the pesky thing had disappeared. In better weather, that would only have been a nuisance (in better weather, Kassianos reminded himself, it wouldn't have happened). In this blizzard, it was becoming serious. If he went by Develtos, he might freeze before he could find shelter.

He tugged on the reins. The mule positively scowled at him: what was he doing, halting in the cold middle of nowhere? "I need to find the town," he explained. The mule did not look convinced.

He paused a moment in thought. He had never been to Develtos, had nothing from it with him. That made worthless most of the simpler spells of finding he knew. He thought of one that might serve, then promptly rejected it: it involved keeping a candle lit for half an hour straight. "Not bloody likely, I'm afraid," he said.

He thought some more, then laughed out loud. "As inelegant an application of the law of similarity as ever there was," he declared, "but it will serve. Like does call to like."

He dismounted, tied the mule's reins to a bush so it would not wander off while he was incanting. Then, after suitable prayers and passes, he undid his robe and pissed -- quickly, because it was very cold.

His urine did not just form a puddle between his feet. Instead, impelled by his magic, it drew a steaming line in the snow toward more like itself, and thus, indirectly, toward the people who made it.

"That way, eh?" Kassianos said, eyeing the direction of the line. "I might have known the wind would make me drift south of where I should be." He climbed back onto his mule, urged it forward. It went eagerly, as if it sensed he knew where he was going again.

Sure enough, not a quarter of an hour later the priest saw the walls of Develtos looming tall and dark through the driving snow. He had to ride around a fair part of the circuit before he came to a gate. It was closed and barred. He shouted. Nothing happened. He shouted again, louder.

After a couple of minutes, a peephole opened. "Who ye be?" the man inside called, his accent rustic. "Show yerself to me and give me your name."

"I am Kassianos, eastbound from Videssos the city," the priest answered. He rode a couple of steps closer, lowered his hood so the guard could see not only his blue robe but also his shaven head. "May I have shelter before I am too far gone to need it?"

He did not hear anyone moving to unlatch the gate. Instead, the sentry asked sharply, "Just the one of you there?"

"Only myself. In Phos' holy name I swear it." Kassianos understood the gate-guard's caution. Winter could easily make a bandit band desperate enough to try to take a walled town, and falling snow give them the chance to approach unobserved. A quick rush once the gate was open, and who could say what horrors would follow?

But Kassianos must have convinced the guardsman. "We'll have you inside in a minute, holy sir." The fellow's voice grew muffled as he turned his face away from the peephole. "Come on, Phostis, Evagrios, give me a hand with this bloody bar." Kassianos heard it scrape against the iron-faced timbers of the gate.

One of the valves swung inward. The priest dug his heels into the mule's flanks. It trotted into Develtos. The sentries closed the gate after it, shoved the bar back into place. "Thank you, gentlemen," Kassianos said sincerely.

"Aye, you're about this far from being a snowman, aren't you, holy sir?" said the guard who had been at the peephole. Now Kassianos could see more of him than a suspicious eyeball: he was short and lean, with a knitted wool cap on his head and a sheepskin jacket closed tight over a chainmail shirt. His bow was a hunter's weapon, not a soldier's. He was, in other words, a typical small-town guardsman.

"Want I should take you to Branas' tavern, holy sir, let you warm yourself up outside and in?" asked one of the other guards. But for a back-and-breast of boiled leather and a light spear in place of a bow, he was as like the first as two peas in a pod. He glanced toward that man, who was evidently his superior. "Is it all right, Tzitas?"

"Aye, go on, Phostis, we'll manage here." Tzitas showed his teeth in a knowing grin. "Just don't spend too much time warming yourself up in there."

"Wouldn't think of it," Phostis said righteously.

"No, you wouldn't; you'd do it," said Evagrios, who'd been quiet till then. Tzitas snorted.

Phostis sent them both a rude gesture. He turned back to the priest. "You come with me, holy sir. Pay these scoffers no mind." He started off down the street. His boots left pockmarks in the snow. Still on muleback, Kassianos followed.

The tavern was less than a hundred yards away. (Nothing in Develtos, come to that, looked to be more than a quarter mile from anything else. The town barely rated a wall.) In that short journey, though, Phostis asked Kassianos about Videssos the city four different times, and told him twice of some distant cousin who had gone there to seek his fortune. "He must have found it, too," Phostis said wistfully, "for he never came back no more."

He might have starved trying, Kassianos thought, but the priest was too kind to say that out loud. Videssos' capital drew the restless and ambitious from all over the Empire, and in such fast company not all could flourish.

Even with Phostis', "Here we are, holy sir," Kassianos could have guessed which building was Branas' from the number of horses and donkeys tied up in front of it. He found space at the rail for his mule, then went in after the sentry.

He shut the door behind him so none of the blessed heat inside would escape. A few quick steps brought him to the fireplace. He sighed in pure animal pleasure as the warmth began driving the ice from his bones. When he put a hand to his face, he discovered he could feel the tip of his nose again. He'd almost forgotten he still owned it.

After roasting a bit longer in front of the flames, Kassianos felt restored enough to find a stool at a table close by. A barmaid came over, looked him up and down. "What'll it be?" she asked, matter-of-fact as if he were carpenter rather than priest.

"Hot red wine, spiced with cinnamon."

She nodded, saucily ran her hand over his shaved pate. "That'll do it for you, right enough." Her hips worked as she walked back to the tapman with his order; she looked over her shoulder at the priest, as if to make sure he was watching her.

His blood heated with a warmth that had nothing to do with the blaze crackling in the fireplace. He willed himself to take no notice of that new heat. Celibacy went with Phos' blue robe. He frowned a little. Even the most shameless tavern wenches knew that. Clerics were men too, and might forget their vows, but he still found an overture as blatant as this girl's startling. Even in the jaded capital, a lady of easy virtue would have been more discreet. The same should have gone double for this back-country town.

The barmaid returned with his steaming mug. As he fumbled in his beltpouch for coppers to pay the score, she told him, "You want to warm up the parts fire and wine don't reach, you let me know." Before he could answer, someone called to her from a table halfway across the room. She hurried off, but again smiled back at Kassianos as she went.

Before he lifted the cup to his lips, he raised his hands to heaven and intoned the usual Videssian prayer before food or drink: "We bless thee, Phos, lord with the great and good mind, by thy grace our protector, watchful beforehand that the great test of life may be decided in our favor." Then he spat in the rushes to show his rejection of Skotos. At last he drank. The cinnamon nipped his tongue like a playful lover. The figure of speech would not have occurred to him a moment before. Now it seemed only too appropriate.

When his mug was empty, he raised a finger. The girl hurried over. "Another, please," he said, setting more coppers on the table.

She scooped them up. "For some silver --" She paused expectantly.

"My vows do not allow me carnal union. What makes you think I take them lightly?" he asked. He kept his voice mild, but his eyes seized and held hers. He had overawed unrepentant clerics in the ecclesiastical courts of the capital; focusing his forensic talents on a chit of a barmaid reminded him of smashing some small crawling insect with an anvil. But she had roused his curiosity, if not his manhood.

"The monks hereabouts like me plenty well," she sniffed; she sounded offended he did not find her attractive. "And since you're a man from Videssos the city itself" (news traveled fast, Kassianos thought, unsurprised), "I reckoned you'd surely be freer yet."

Along with its famed riches, the capital also had a reputation in the provinces as a den of iniquity. Sometimes, Kassianos knew, it was deserved. But not in this ... "You are mistaken," the priest replied. "The monks like you well, you say?"

The girl's eyes showed she suddenly realized the hole she had dug for herself. "I'm not the only one," she said hastily. "There's a good many women they favor here in town, most of 'em a lot more than me."

She contradicted herself, Kassianos noted, but never mind that now. "Are there indeed?" he said, letting some iron come into his voice. "Perhaps you will be so good as to give me their names?"

"No. Why should I?" She had spirit; she could still defy him.

He dropped the anvil. "Because I am Kassianos, nomophylax -- chief counsel, you might say -- to the most holy ecumenical Patriarch Tarasios, prelate of Videssos the city and Videssos the Empire. I was summoned to Opsikion to deal with a troublesome case of false doctrine there, but I begin to think the good god Phos directed me here instead. Now speak to me further of these monks."

The barmaid fled instead. Eyes followed her from all over the taproom, then turned to Kassianos. The big man whose place was behind the bar slowly ambled over to his table. As if by chance, he held a stout club in his right fist.

"Don't know what you said to little Laskara, blue-robe," he said casually, "but she didn't much like it."

"And I, friend, did not much like her seeking to lead me astray from my vows,

and liked even less her telling me the monks hereabouts are accustomed to ignoring theirs," Kassianos answered. "I do not think the most holy Tarasios, Phos bless him, would like that either. Perhaps if I root out the evil, it will never have to come to his attention."

At the mention of that name, the tapman sat down heavily beside Kassianos, as if his legs no longer wanted to support him. The priest heard him drop the bludgeon among the dried rushes on the floor. "The --Patriarch?" the fellow said hoarsely.

"The very same." Kassianos' eyes twinkled. Most of the time, being nomophylax was nothing but drudgery. Sometimes, as now, it was fun. "Suppose you tell me about the lecherous monks you have here. Your Laskara thought I was of the same stripe as they, and tried to sell herself to me."

"Aye, we have a monastery here, dedicated to the holy Tralitzes, Phos bless his memory." The tapman drew the good god's sun-circle over his heart. Kassianos had never heard of the local saint, but that hardly signified: every little town had some patron to commemorate. The tapman went on, "But the monks, lecherous? No, holy sir -- they're good men, pious men, every one."

He sounded sincere, and too shaken to be lying so well. "Do they then conform to the rules set down by the holy Pakhomios, in whose memory all monks serve?" Kassianos asked.

"Holy sir, I'm no monk. Far as I know, they do, but I dunno what all these rules and things is." The fellow was sweating, and not from the fireplace's being near.

"Very well, then, hear the seventh chapter of Pakhomios' Rule, the chapter entitled 'On Women': 'To ensure the preservation of the contemplative life, no brother shall be permitted to entertain women.'"

"I dunno about any of that," the tapman insisted. With a sudden access of boldness, he went on, "And it's not me you should ought to be going after if you've got somewhat against our monks. You take that up with the abbot -- Menas, is name is."

"I shall," Kassianos promised. "Believe me, I shall."

The Holy Tralitzes' monastery lay a couple of miles outside Develtos. Monks working in the snowy fields and gardens looked up from their labors as Kassianos rode toward Phos' temple, the largest building of the monastery complex. It was further distinguished from the others by a spire topped with a gilded globe.

An elderly monk came out of the temple, bowed courteously to Kassianos. "Phos with you, holy sir," he said. "I am Pleuses, porter of the monastery. How may I serve you?"

Kassianos dismounted, returned the bow. "And with you, brother Pleuses. I have come to see your abbot -- Menas is his name, is it not? I am Kassianos, nomophylax to Tarasios. Would you announce me to the holy abbot?"

Pleuses' eyes widened. He bowed once more. "Certainly, holy sir. Menas will surely be honored to entertain such a distinguished guest." He shouted for a younger brother to take charge of Kassianos' mule, then, bowing a third time, said, "Will you come with me?"

The abbot's residence lay beyond the dormitory that housed the rest of the monks. "Wait here a moment, will you?" Pleuses said at the doorway. He went in and, as promised, quickly returned. "He will see you now."

Kassianos was expecting a leering voluptuary. The sight of Menas came as something of a shock. He was a thin, pleasant-faced man of about forty-five, with laugh lines crinkling the comers of his eyes. Among the codices and scrolls on bookshelves behind him were many, both religious and secular, that Kassianos also esteemed.

The abbot rose, bowed, hurried up to clasp Kassianos' hand. "Phos bless you, holy sir, and welcome, welcome. Will you take wine?"

"Thank you, father abbot."

Menas poured with his own hands. While he was doing so, he asked, "May I be permitted to wonder why such an illustrious cleric has chosen to honor our humble monastery with his presence?"

Kassianos' eyes flicked to Pleuses. Menas followed his glance, and dismissed the porter with a few murmured words. The abbot was no fool, Kassianos thought. Well, abbots were not chosen to be fools. The two men performed the usual Videssian ritual over wine, then Menas returned to his own seat and waved Kassianos to the other, more comfortable, chair in the room. The abbot's question still hung in the air.

"Father abbot," Kassianos began, more carefully than he had intended before meeting Menas, "I came to Develtos by chance a few days ago, compelled by the blizzard to take shelter here. In Branas' tavern, a chance remark led me to believe the monks practiced illegal, immoral cohabitation with women, contrary to the strictures of the seventh chapter of the holy Pakhomios' Rule."

"That is not so," Menas said quietly. "We follow the Rule in all its particulars."

"I am glad to hear you say that." Kassianos nodded. "But I must tell you that my inquiries since I came here made me think otherwise. And, father abbot, they make me believe this not only of your flock but of yourself."

"Having once said that I adhere to Pakhomios' Rule, I do not suppose that mere repetition will persuade you I speak truly," Menas said after a moment's thought. He grinned wryly; shaven head and gray-streaked beard or no, it made him look very young. "And, having now once said something you do not believe, I cannot hope you will accept my oath." He spread his hands. "You see my difficulty."

"I do." Kassianos nodded again. He thought better of Menas for not gabbling oaths that, as the abbot pointed out, had to be thought untrustworthy. He had not expected or wanted to think better of Menas. He had wanted to get on with the business of reforming the monastery. Things did not seem as simple as he'd thought. Well, as nomophylax he'd had that happen to him often enough.

"I will follow any suggestion you may have on resolving this difficulty," Menas said, as if reading his thoughts.

"Very well, then: I know a decoction under whose influence you will speak truth. Are you willing to drink it down and then answer my questions?"

"So long as you are asking about these alleged misdeeds, certainly."

Menas showed no hesitation. If he was an actor, he was a good one, Kassianos thought. But no one could dissemble under the influence of this potion, no matter how he schooled himself beforehand.

"I shall compound the drug this evening and return to administer it tomorrow morning," the nomophylax said. Menas nodded agreement. Kassianos wondered how brash he would be once his lascivious secrets were laid bare.

The abbot peered curiously at the small glass flask. He held it to his nose, sniffed. "Not a prize vintage," he observed with a chuckle. He tossed the drug down, screwed up his face at the taste.

Kassianos admired his effrontery, if nothing else. He waited for a few minutes, watched the abbot's expression go from its usual amused alertness to a fixed, vacant stare. The nomophylax rose, passed a hand in front of Menas' face. Menas' eyes did not follow the motion. Kassianos nodded to himself. Sure enough, the decoction had taken hold.

"Can you hear me?" he asked.

"Aye." Menas' voice was distant, abstracted.

"Tell me, then, of all the violation, of the holy Pakhomios' Rule that have occurred among the monks of this monastery over the past half a year."

Menas immediately began to obey: the drug robbed him of his own will and left him perfectly receptive to Kassianos' question. The nomophylax settled back in his chair and listened as Menas spoke of this monk's quarrel with that one, of the time when three brothers got drunk together, of the monk who missed evening prayers four days running, of the one who had refused to pull weeds until he was disciplined, of the one who had sworn at an old man in Develtos, of the monk who had stolen a book but tried to put the blame on another, and on and on, all the petty squabbles to which monasteries, being made up of men, were prone.

Kassianos kept pen poised over parchment, ready to note down every transgression of chapter seven of the Rule. Menas talked and talked and talked. The pen stayed poised. Kassianos wrote nothing, for the abbot gave him nothing to write.

Menas, at length, ran dry. Kassianos scowled, ran a hand over his smooth pate. "Do you recall nothing more?" he demanded harshly.

"Nothing, holy sir." Menas' voice was calm; it would not have changed had Kassianos held his hand to the flame flickering in the lamp on the table beside him. The nomophylax knew he was deeply under the influence of the potion. He also knew the monks of the monastery of the holy Tralitzes had illicit congress with a great many women of Develtos. His inquiries in the town had left him as certain of that as he was of Phos' eventual victory over Skotos.

Kassianos hesitated before asking his next question. But, having failed with a general inquiry, he saw no choice but to probe specifically at the rot he knew existed: "Tell me of every occasion when the monks of this monastery have transgressed against the seventh chapter of the holy Pakhomios' Rule, the chapter which forbids the brethren to entertain women."

Menas was silent. Kassianos wondered if the abbot could somehow be struggling against the decoction. He shook his head -- he knew perfectly well it was irresistible. "Why do you not speak?" the nomophylax snapped.

"Because I know of no occasion when the monks of this monastery have transgressed against the seventh chapter of the holy Pakhomios' Rule, the chapter which forbids the brethren to entertain women."

The rotelike repetition of his words and the tone of the abbot's voice convinced Kassianos that Menas was still drugged. So did the reason he gave for staying quiet before. If someone under this potion had nothing to say in response to a question, he would keep right on saying nothing until jogged by a new one. Which, depressingly, was just what Menas had done.

Kassianos sighed. He neither liked nor approved of paradoxes. Knowing that because of the decoction he was only being redundant, he nevertheless asked, "Do you swear by Phos you have told me the truth?"

"I swear by Phos I have told you the truth," Menas replied.

The nomophylax ground his teeth. If Menas swore under the drug that the monks of the monastery of the holy Tralitzes were obeying Pakhomios' Rule, then they were, and that was all there was to it. So act as though you believe it, Kassianos told himself. He could not.

He was tempted to walk out of Menas' study and let the abbot try to deal with the monastery's affairs while still in the grip of the potion. He had played that sort of practical joke while a student at the Sorcerers' Collegium. Regretfully, he decided it was beneath the dignity of the Patriarch's nomophylax. He sat and waited until he was sure Menas had come around.

"Remarkable," the abbot said when he was himself again. "I felt quite beside myself. Had we been guilty of any transgressions of the sort you were seeking, I would not have been able to keep them from you."

"That, father abbot, was the idea," Kassianos said tightly. He knew he should have been more courteous, but could not manage it, not with the feeling something was wrong still gnawing at him. But, not having anything on which to focus his suspicions, he could only rise abruptly and go out into the cold for the ride to Develtos.

He kept asking questions when he got back into town. The answers he got set him stewing all over again. They were not given under the influence of his decoction, but they were detailed and consistent from one person to the next. They all painted the monks of the monastery of the holy Tralitzes as the lechers he had already been led to believe them.

How, then, had Menas truthfully asserted that he and his flock followed Pakhomios' Rule?

The question nagged at Kassianos like the beginnings of a toothache for the rest of the day. By this time the snowstorm had long since blown itself out; he could have gone on to Opsikion. It never occurred to him. After taking his evening

meal in Branas' taproom, he went up to the cubicle he had rented over it.

There he sat and thought and fumed. Maybe Menas had found an antidote to his potion. But if he had, it was one that had eluded all the savants at the Sorcerers' Collegium for all the centuries of Videssos' history. That was possible, but not likely. Was it likelier than a deliberate campaign of slander against the abbot's monks? The nomophylax could not be sure, but he thought both ideas most improbable. And they were the best ones he had.

He pounded a fist against his knee. "What can Menas be up to, anyway?" he said out loud. Then he blinked, surprised at himself. "Why don't I find out?"

Normally, he would have dismissed the thought with the same automatic discipline he used to suppress the longing of his flesh for women. Spying sorcerously on a man who had proven himself innocent under drugged interrogation went against every instinct Kassianos had. On the other hand, so did believing Menas.

If the abbot is blameless, Kassianos told himself, I'll perform an act of penance to make up for the sin I commit in spying on him like this. Having salved his conscience, the nomophylax set about preparing the spell he would need.

The law of similarity was useless to him here, but the law of contagion applied: once in contact, always in contact. Kassianos scraped a bit of skin from the palm of his right hand with a small sharp knife -- because that hand had clasped Menas', it still held an affinity for the abbot.

As Kassianos' incantation built, a cloud of smoke grew in his cubicle. It was no ordinary cloud, though, for it formed a rectangle with edges so precise they might have been defined by an invisible picture frame. The analogy pleased Kassianos, for when he spoke a final word of command, the smoke would indeed yield a picture of what Menas was about.

He spoke the word. The trapped smoke before him rolled, grew still. Color began seeping into it, here and there. The first thing the nomophylax clearly made out was the roaring fire in one corner of his magical image. He frowned; the blaze was bigger than any the hearth in the abbot's dwelling could contain.

Of itself, of course, that meant nothing. Menas could have any number of legitimate reasons for not being in his own quarters. Kassianos waited for more of the picture to emerge.

Blue ... Surely that was the abbot's robe. But it lay on the floor, crumpled and forgotten. Where was Menas, and why had he thrown aside his vestments?

Within moments, Kassianos had his answer. He felt a hot flush rise, not just to his cheeks, but to the very crown of his shaven head. He turned away from the image he had conjured up, yet still he saw body conjoined with body, saw that the man straining atop his eager partner was the abbot Menas.

Kassianos spoke another word, felt his sorcery dissolve. His face remained hot, now with fury rather than embarrassment. So Menas thought he could play him for a fool, eh? He imagined the abbot telling his paramour how he had fooled the fellow from the capital, and both of them laughing as they coupled. That thought only made the nomophylax's rage bum hotter.

Then he caught himself wishing he had not turned his back quite so soon. He had not thought he could be any angrier, but found he was wrong. Before, his anger's flame had extended only to Menas and his still unknown lover. Now it reached out and burned him too.

Kassianos stamped grimly through the snow toward the monastery of the holy Tralitzes. He had left his mule behind on purpose, accepting the walk as the beginning of the penance he would pay for failing to root out the corruption in the monastery at the first try. His footprints left an emphatic trail behind him.

The pale, fitful sun gleamed off the gilded dome topping Phos' temple ahead. Kassianos turned aside before he was halfway there. Scanning the landscape ahead with a hunter's alertness, he spotted a blue-robe strolling toward a small wooden house several hundred yards to one side of the monastery. He was not sure whether hunter's instinct or sorcerer's told him it was Menas, but he knew.

The nomophylax's breath burst from him in an outraged steaming cloud. "Phos grant us mercy! Not content with making a mockery of his vows, the sinner goes to show off his stamina," Kassianos exclaimed, though there was no one to hear him.

The abbot disappeared into the little house. Some men might have hesitated before disturbing the occupants of a trysting-place, but not Kassianos. He strode resolutely up to pound on the door, crying, "Menas, you are a disgrace to the robes you wear! Open at once!"

"Oh, dear," Menas said as Kassianos withered him with a glare. "You do take this seriously, don't you?" Now the abbot did not look amused, as he had so often back in his study. He looked frightened. So did the woman around whose shoulder he flung a protective arm.

The night before, her features slack with pleasure, she had seemed only a symbol

of Menas' depravity. Now Kassianos had to confront her as a person. She was, he realized slowly, not a whore after all. Perhaps ten years younger than the abbot, she had an open, pretty face, and wore an embroidered linen blouse over a heavy wool skirt: peasant garb, not a courtesan's jewels and clinging silks.

Even without what his magic had let him witness, the way her hand reached up and clutched for Menas' would have told Kassianos everything he needed to know. It told him other things as well, things he had not thought to learn. It had never occurred to him that the cleric's illicit lover might feel all the same things for her man as another woman would for a proper partner.

Because the woman confused him, Kassianos swung his attention back to Menas. "Should I not take your perjury seriously?" he said heavily. "It only adds to the burden of your other sins."

"Perjury? I gave you my oath on Phos, holy sir, under the influence of your own drug, that I truly obey my vows. I do; I am not forsworn."

Kassianos' eyes narrowed. "No? You dare say that, in the company you keep? Hear once again, then, wretch, the seventh chapter of the holy Pakhomios' Rule. As you know, it is entitled 'On Women.' I hope you will trust my memory as I quote it: 'To ensure the preservation of the contemplative life, no brother shall be permitted to entertain women.' Standing where you are, with the person whose house this must be, how can you tell me you are no oathbreaker?"

To the amazement of the nomophylax, Menas' "companion" burst into laughter. Kassianos stared, thunderstruck. The woman said, "As you guessed, holy sir, this house was my husband's till he died six years ago, and belongs to me now. And so my dear Menas cannot entertain me here. I entertain him, or at least I hope I shall." She smiled smokily up at the worried abbot, stroked his bearded cheek.

Kassianos felt his jaw drop. He became aware that he had not blinked for some time, either. In fact, he realized his expression had to resemble nothing so much as a fresh-caught perch's. Pulling himself together with a distinct effort of will, he said slowly, "That is the most outlandish piece of casuistry I've heard in a lifetime of theological study."

He waited for his pompous wrath to burst forth in a great, furious shout. What came out instead was laughter. And once free, it would not let itself be restrained. Kassianos laughed until tears ran down his face into his beard, laughed until he doubled over. Now Menas and the woman ' were staring at him rather than the other way around.

Slowly the fit passed. Kassianos straightened, felt the sudden pain of a stitch

in his side, ignored it. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve, then, more or less in control of himself, asked Menas, "Your monks are all, hmm, entertained themselves, and do no entertaining?"

"Of course, holy sir." The abbot sounded genuinely shocked. "Did we act otherwise, we would violate our vows."

"Hmm," Kassianos said again. "How long has this, ah, custom existed at the monastery of the holy Tralitzes?"

"Truly, holy sir, I do not know. Since before I entered as a novice, certainly, and before the novitiate of the oldest brothers there at that time, for they knew no different way."

"I see." And, curiously enough, Kassianos did. Develtos was just the sort of back-country town where a spurious practice like this could quietly come into being and then flourish for Phos only knew how long before anyone from the outside world noticed it was there.

Menas must have been thinking along with him, for he asked, "Holy sir, is it not the same everywhere?"

"Hardly." Kassianos' voice was dry. "In fact, I daresay you've found a loophole to appall the holy Pakhomios -- and one untold generations of monks have prayed for in vain. I suppose I should congratulate you. Oh, my." He wiped his eyes again.

"Perhaps you should, but I doubt you will," Menas' ladylove observed. "What will you do?"

The nomophylax eyed her with respect: no fool here. "Well, an inquisitor's court might fight its way through your logic," he said. Both the woman and Menas looked alarmed. Kassianos went on, "I doubt that will happen, though."

"What then?" Menas asked.

"First, I'd guess, a synod will convene in Videssos the city to revise the holy Pakhomios' Rule so no further, ah, misunderstandings of the seventh chapter will occur. That being accomplished, word of the corrected Rule will be sent to all monasteries in the Empire --including, I am comfortably certain, this one."

"And what will they do to us for having contravened their interpretation of the Rule?" Menas asked; Kassianos noted the slight emphasis the abbot put on "interpretation." He smiled to himself. In Menas' sandals, he would have tried to appear as virtuous as possible, too.

He answered, "While I cannot speak for the synod, I would expect it to decree no punishments for what is here a long-established, even if erroneous, custom. I would also expect, however, that an epoptes -- a supervising monk -- will come out from the capital to make certain the monastery of the holy Tralitzes diligently adheres to the seventh chapter as redefined."

Neither Menas nor his companion looked very happy at that. The nomophylax had not thought they would. He went on, "I mean what I say. If you continue to flout the Rule after it is changed to mean in letter what it does in spirit, you will not enjoy the consequences."

He had intended to impress them further with the seriousness of the situation. But the woman said, "Then we will just have to make the most of the time we have left." She shut the door in Kassianos' face.

He knew he should be angry. Instead, to his own discomfiture, he found himself admiring her. He realized with sudden regret that he had never learned her name. He raised his hand to knock on that closed door and ask. After a moment, he thought better of it.

Shaking his head, he turned and slowly started walking back to Develtos.