

It was a troubled time in Burgundy, in the city of Dijon; not that there was a possible invasion threatening the population, however it was the population itself that was now restless, agitated, striving for some sort of change.

There were talks about revolutions, about overthrowing the monarchy, small uprisings from time to time, but there no unified movement, nothing that seemed to catch the eye of the authority in place, for the moment.

“Have you heard about the wedding of Lady Florente? It’s always refreshing to see such a cheerful event in the dark times we are living through” said a passing noble, looking at the ones that were accompanying him.

“Yes, it is quite the pleasant news indeed; with all these rebellions happening, it is a little gleam of light in a world gone mad” replied the other, looking around, trying to see if someone was spying on them, ignoring that someone was listening to them from a window.

Midnight Florente was used to people talking about that event like it was the most wonderful thing that could ever happen. She wasn’t a native of this region, so she couldn’t understand the people obsession with her wedding, nevertheless there was maybe a real reason behind it, one that she would be able to understand, one day.

She was the eldest of the Florente family, the reason why she was now being betrothed to another noble family; an alliance with a powerful family would serve all sort of interest, even she had to make small sacrifices for it. Not that it was something she would do in a heartbeat, but sometime, when the need was greater than her desire... But the seed of doubt was still present in her heart.

She basked in the sun for a moment, her black fur absorbing the sunlight; of wolfish ascendance, her gaze was hazel-green, as if a forest decided to gaze back at those that crossed it. She had a mark on her chest; it was of the purest white who could ever be seen and formed a pattern that resembled a letter trapped in a teardrop.

Nobody knew how that mark happened; some speculated that it was a mere tattoo, but these people were silenced rapidly. Some said that it was a birthmark, a sign of a family

lineage still going strong. There were even talks about it being a sign of a potential covenant with God; she could believe the second one, but the two others made her ears cringe. Why did people have to invent such strange reason to explain something simple?

She looked at the nobles walks away, sighting a bit; she wondered why she was here, promised to a stranger, someone who wasn't even a French man. Why did Father have to make such a decision? Could he choose someone else, or, even better, let her choose?

And there were talks about rebels going around; was this really a good time to conduct such a ceremony? Even so, there was something... intriguing about these people, about the ideas they proposed; perhaps they were on to something, perchance something that had a vision that was better than the one ruling right the country now...

She was so absorbed in the observation of the daily of the people that she didn't hears the single knock on her door; someone was trying to get her attention, but it was vain, for the sound produced wasn't strong enough to captivate her.

The knock came back on the door, with a vengeance; the strength displayed in the act in question made the door tremble, making turn her head, to see who wanted to be in her presence with such fury. She hesitated a moment; why should she give to such violence? Would it just send the message that she would do anything, if force was presented? But again, wasn't she just over analyzing this? Boredom was playing tricks on her mind, and she didn't enjoyed the fact that she wasn't sure if her action were good or not anymore.

She opened the door, for nothing could really happen to her; if a rogue would have decided to kidnap or mug her, it would have waited for the door to open and it would have done it in the middle of daylight anyway. It couldn't be her husband to be, since he was in another region, preparing the ceremony. Maybe it was a local noble trying to get in her good graces or a priest collecting for the poor's; both of them bore her, but at least she knew that the second one played a role that was somehow essential.

It surprised her that it was neither of these characters awaiting beyond the door, but someone who she knew. It was Guy, a free-lance mercenary tuxedo cat that offered his services to the Florente family. He was a pleasant lad to talk with, but his obsession with

honor and duty made him a bore sometime; he would have a more interesting companion if these traits weren't present, but that didn't make him a bad fellow. He was just too strict for her liking, making their personality clash from time to time.

Although, she found his nickname adorable; people called him ``Le chaton'', a nickname based on his appearance. Even as one that made a living selling his prowess with the blade and other weapons, his looks were still those of a boy, delicate and sensible. Maybe it was a weapon, one that could fool his foes for a moment before he would strike them; a deadly one it would be, but she wondered if it was really the way he was using it.

``My lady, I am glad to see that you are alright. I have traveled far in the region, explored further than the eye can see, to make sure that no danger would lie in the road ahead. As I return here, I can solemnly proclaim that my mission is thus accomplished, for the moment'' he told her, looking at the scenery by the window, making sure that no one was spying on them, a paw still on the handle of his rapier while the other one was passing around lazily the area where he was holding a revolver. She never saw the weapon in question and always wondered how he got one; he was constantly elusive about it, at no time letting her see it, but it wasn't something she was ready to investigate too much. The only information she had about it was that he got it from a merchant from a port, somewhere and that was all she needed to know, for the world needed mystery to make it more beautiful and attractive.

It did make his story more interesting; could he be more than a simple reformed bandit or peasant trying to make a living by fighting?

``We must make haste, my lady; Lord Dubois is waiting for your arrival and a proper lady cannot let such a thing happen'' he added, searching around the room for any items that could be useful, but being careful not to open anything; these were the private quarters of a Lady, after all and he didn't want to appear as a low-grade pervert.

She looked at him, wondering if it was really worth it to confront him on the thoughts that have been forming in her mind recently; it could be a good occasion to test her ideas, but the opposition she would face wouldn't back down until she would comply, thus the idea in itself was pointless.

She followed him in silence, trying to figure out a way to express her apprehension about the situation, searching a way to put words that could maybe convince him to give her some more time to think about it.

“The way will be long, but not very arduous, Lady Florente. To avoid the turmoil of the masses, I decided to take a path that will cross some farmlands on your way toward Chalon-sur-Saône, where we will stop a moment before heading toward our destination” he said, taking a few and looking behind him, wondering if she was following him or not.

“You know, maybe we could stop at the cathedral before we leave, you know, so I could give my last regard to the local priest before I leave? He was always a kind person, present when I needed his help” she replied, hoping that it could buy her some time; it wasn’t the best excuse she found, but it would give her enough time to think over and debate.

“Normally, my mission is to bring you the fastest possible, but I suppose a visit to the cathedral is a harmless pleasure, one that won’t hurt this trip” he replied, changing the direction of his pace, showing no displeasure by this sudden desire.

She followed him, wondering why they walking in the streets without even trying to blend in with the population; there were all sort of people and it wasn’t the time to attract the attention of those that could harm them. After all, there were these rumours of turmoil across the land; she didn’t wanted to be part of it...

The smell of food and wine invaded her, making her mouth water for a moment. The delicate scent of wine was too much mixed to permit to determine which one it was, but she knew that the food was one of the local specialties, something called coq au vin. If she had time, she would gladly taste it, but this wasn’t the moment; she had to focus on what the short moment of freedom that awaited soon enough.

The road to the cathedral was strangely calm, as if the population wasn’t preoccupied with faith these days; of course, a lot of the people had a lot more things to worry about than Church, but she still wondered why they didn’t meet anybody inside. It was like as if somebody laid a trap inside the building, waiting for them.

“Will you wait for me outside, Guy? I know you are supposed to protect me, but I would like to talk to the priest in private before we leave. I would feel... uncomfortable with you listening to your conversation, spying on our exchange. You don't want to make a lady uncomfortable, now don't you?” she asked him, knowing that she was leading him into a paradox; if he accepted, he would breach his own duty, but if he refused, then he would be insulting his code of honor.

He didn't enjoy the word trick she played on him; he was nothing more than a puppet now, but he had to play along, for any rushed decision could ruin everything. He would have to comply, for now, not that he was in the mood to let her have her way, but there was nothing he could do against such a thing.

“It pains me to do such a thing, but I will let you follow your own path, for now; I will make sure that no one will try to harm you by protecting the entrance, for your security and life are more important than my well-being” he told her, standing near the door, opening it for her while making sure that his weapons were still close to his grasp.

It insulted her to hear such a thing; wasn't she strong and independent enough to take care of herself? She didn't know how to use weapons perhaps, but still, it wasn't a reason to treat her like a child; she was able to survive without someone watching over her. She had knowledge and other skills that could help her...

The inside of the cathedral was as impressive as the outdoor, made to lift up the spirits of the travelers before they left again. However she wasn't here to admire the architecture or the fine art that covered the walls; the resident priest was her target, even if she knew that he was more than a mere priest. He was an archbishop, someone with more power than she could imagine, nevertheless she didn't need his influence, for now; perhaps, one day, she could maybe ask for some... help.

He didn't seemed present in the building; maybe he was in the back, preparing some important matter for the Church, or he was away on a mission of his own, having his personal objectives to fulfill and succeed.

She heard steps coming closer, as if someone was walking toward her; it was probably the priest, hearing the discussion she had with Guy, that was now heading toward her, to make sure that everything was alright. She waited a moment, but the person she saw wasn't the one she awaited.

It wasn't the large clergy member who greeted her, but a thinner looking fellow. It was a river otter, his dark, curled brown hair absorbing the sunlight; the short beard and moustache he possessed gave him a refined look, but that look was betrayed by the clothes he was wearing.

His clothes were tattered, dusty and even patched in some areas, giving him the look of an adventurer, a thief or a bum. Either of these choices made her uncomfortable; what if that lonely man wanted to assault her? Even he if took refuge in the house of God didn't mean he was a saint; he could desire her body, her wealth, her life...

Maybe she was indulging herself in some sort of useless fear, judging the action of that man solemnly based on his appearance; what if he was indeed a saint, or at least a good person? She was condemning someone because he didn't have enough to dress himself with the same fashion sense then she did, a thought that made her shiver...

She looked at him walk past her, his green eyes fixed on her for a moment while he was reaching the exit. He opened the doors for a moment, before closing them behind him without leaving, jamming a piece of wood in front of them. This was enough to make her panic; he trapped her in the building, cutting her from Guy, who was the only one-armed around here.

She tried to run, but where could she run? Maybe she could hide in the priest corner, but there was no exit in there, unless she desired to cross the catacombs, but in there, she could forever be lost, the tombs of the dead priests and other servants being the last thing she would see, the light of the day being taken away from her.

``There is no point in running away, milady; to the back only reside emptiness and the dead. The sole exit you know about is the one I blocked; you could try to run off and scream, but would really want to attract attention to yourself, especially with the rebels

outside? I might be a thief or a bandit, but I will not harm you, not like those that are steering the rebellions outside right now, for your sight would enrage them'' he told her, not even drawing a weapon.

``How can I be sure you are not lying to me? You are nothing then a scoundrel; why should I trust your words? You are probably lying to me, to trap me and kidnap me; but I will have no part in your insidious plan. I hear neither cries nor people panicking; I will leave this building and you cannot stop me'' she told him, astonished by her own audacity. What if the rogue in question didn't like her attitude? She could end up in a dark alley, her body disfigured beyond recognition, nobody finding her...

The rogue chuckled, as if her outburst was nothing more than a childish outburst, something he could ignore and carry on with his purpose.

``Oh, by all mean, do go on and exit this cathedral; I am certain the rebel's troops would be glad to see you. I am confident they would have a special committee just for you, to remind you of your title and place in society. If you don't believe me, why don't listen to the sounds by the door?'' he told her, moving away from the entrance, not afraid that she would run off.

This was her chance; the entry was now clear, permitting her to run away. However, something was wrong. Why would she be able to reach this exit without any obstacle, even if the bandit in question wanted to capture her? There was something he was planning... or something he knew, that was going against her plans.

She approached the door and waited a moment, sure that nothing would happen, that it was only a lie concocted by the vagrant in front of her. It didn't take long before she started hearing screams and cries of people calling for rebellion, firearms being shot and people running away, the cause losing all interest when their lives were threatened.

So the thief was right, but she couldn't bear to tell him that; it would give too much pleasure, to have an acknowledgement of his own success. It was simply a bad timing from her part; if she would have left later, then nothing would have happened. On the

other hand, if she would have listened to Guy and left the city without that trip, that story would have never happened.

What happened to Guy? As soon as the name of her protector crossed her mind, the situation stopped having so much importance for her; he was outside, facing the horde of protestors and revolutionaries, armed to the teeth, which could very well make this his last day on earth. He was a competent fighter, but could he really handle such a crowd, without facing his doom? She had her doubts with him, but she didn't wish his demise at the hands of an enraged crowd...

"I want to know; what happened to the gentleman who was standing in front of these doors? I will not move before I know what happened to him" she told the thief, wondering if a mere thug could even dignify her demand with an answer or he would chuckle, threaten her with a weapon and force her to move toward a new destination.

The rogue stayed silent for a moment, as if the information was something he didn't to share with his captive. Or maybe he had no clue, needing the time to invent a new tale, one that wouldn't raise any suspicions at all. He was hard to read, a methodic person that seemed to be of few words; maybe it was because he was still on the job, for a closer person would be treated differently...

"I saw someone in front, but he didn't stay there very long; when he saw the rioting people approaching the cathedral, he had to retreat, for the royal troops were also on the move and they clearly made him move away. If you care about him, he is still alive, but you won't see him again, not where you're going" he told her, taking a light knife from his belt. He wasn't threatening her with the weapon, but it was a reminder that he was armed and that she shouldn't try anything funny.

She decided to stay quiet; at least, she knew that he was dead, so it was a good thing to hear, but now, she had to face her captor and whatever plan he had in mind. She was afraid he was going to perform all sort of devious acts on her, taking advantage of her, but nothing happened; all that he did was to walk toward the back of the cathedral, making a sign to her to get her to follow him.

She took her time to go to the back of the building, being repulsed by the fact that she was obeying a criminal. It was a low act, but she couldn't do anything else; if she decided to run outside, then the mob would go after her. If she resisted, he could force her to go forward, with the weapon he was carrying.

“Now, do you see the trap door on the floor? All you have to do is to pull on it for a moment and wait for me. I hope that you will be able to succeed, even if it requires performing an act that you probably never did before” he told her, keeping the same cold attitude toward her; it was curious he wasn't snickering or expressing some disdain at her, but maybe he had something else in mind, something that mattered more than this situation.

She didn't respond to his insult, sensing that he had a point; she led a pampered life, away from manual labor. It was an element she was raised to ignore, to leave to those that were less fortunate than her; she didn't complain about that fact, but to hear the bandit remind her that she could be powerless in certain situations made realize the folly of her mentality. Could she survive in the world without being able to do basic work? Maybe the situation was making her panic, letting her mind derail for no good reason; after all, why would she need to sully her hands with such lowly work? It was the deal of peasant and rubble to occupy themselves with these duties, not those of noble birth; it was an insult to her family and honor to consider such a possibility.

It took more than she thought to open the trap door, for rust and dust crusted the entrance, stopping the mechanism from being used normally. She wished that someone could have labored for her, but it gave her a sense of self-satisfaction, as the entrance for the catacombs was revealed to her eyes.

A stench assaulted her, leaving her gagging for a moment; she never thought that an isolated area could smell so bad, but she was wrong. And she had to cross it, to face the horrors that could lurk in the shadows and the darkness. The foul monstrosities that could await her in the gloom make her shiver for a moment, but didn't seem to impress her captor, who advances toward the entrance.

“What are you waiting for? There is nothing that can harm you in these corridors, even if the light is not really your friend in there. There are things that you do not want to see, but again, they will not hurt you, for you are bigger and more impressive than they are. For now, follow my lead and don’t try to run away in the tunnels; many people lost their lives, wandering in them, ever searching an exit but being unable to find one” he told hold, making her shake for a moment. He enjoyed silencing her criticism; she wasn’t a bad person, but being part of nobility had that tendency to... corrupt the vision of those that were part of it, to the point that reality wasn’t the same for them anymore. Although, he had the feeling that she was different from the other one he had to deal with before; maybe this one wouldn’t so bad to work it, until his job was done... Or maybe there is more he could do; maybe he could get more than he anticipated, if his plan would work. But for now, there something more important he had to take care before, which was the crossing of these tombs.

She avoided his gaze and plunged in the darkness, hesitating for a moment; she wasn’t sure if this was a good thing, but again, she had no choice. She couldn’t see anything in front of her, but she knew at least that she didn’t need to move until he was going down. She was going to wait for him, not having the desire to get lost in the penumbra, each sounds making her jump, for she couldn’t be sure of where they were coming from.

It didn’t take him long to rejoin her in the tunnel, the darkness surrounding them both. It was a mystery; did he now the way, would he really on experience or would test his luck, trying to find the way without getting lost? Or did he have something else, something that could change the entire situation?

“Did you really think I would have made us cross this entire underground complex without any lights? I’m not foolish enough to try my luck, even though I am sure some would have tested their audacity with such a thing. This lantern served me well before and it will serve me well again in this situation” said the brigand, taking out the instrument out of his tattered coat, setting the flame in it before moving on.

He moved forward, trying to remember the way to the other side, but he didn’t make too far; his steps were alone, a fact that displeased him. He was supposed to be followed, not

dragging her along. But there she was, waiting at the entrance, her arms crossed, visibly not in the mood to move forward.

“Oi, we are supposed to get a move on, not stand here and have a pleasant chat about the mundane life in the ‘‘beaux quartiers’’. It might be a bit dark in here, a bit dusty, but I’m sure you will be able to cross it without any problems’’ he told her, pointing toward the darkness, trying to make move.

“I am not going in this place; I do not want to be close to a corpse; don’t you have any respect for the dead? Or do you like to plunder graves while you are not kidnapping people?’’ she asked him, not moving from her spot.

The bandit chuckled; it was an irrational fear, something that clearly came from a lack of experience and contact with the outside world, but he could understand it; after all, the unknown was always a frightening universe of possibility, especially to those that lived a sheltered life.

“Oh, these tombs are more ancient than the cathedral itself; passing near them is nothing more than passing in a cemetery while visiting a relative. Unless you want to dig in the walls, there is no fuss to make about such a thing, so I suggest we move on, before the revolutionary decide to investigate the church, find the opened trap door and follow us down here’’ he told her, trying to break her resistance to that simple act; there was nothing he saw in walking near these tombs, but again, it wasn’t his mind. He wasn’t going to try to read her thoughts either.

He had to move forward and he knew that she wasn’t going to stay behind, alone in the darkness. He started to advance, the light of the lantern fading from her sight. It was the only thing able to make her move, for she sure wasn’t going to stand there, alone in the shadows, waiting for something to happen, while another force could grab her.

She ran toward him with, cursing under her breath; she didn’t appreciate the obvious choice she had to make, but the solution was something she couldn’t bargain with. She could maybe deal with the devil later, but this wasn’t the time to play with her life; she couldn’t take the risk and stay alone, behind the only armed one. He would be useful,

even though he kidnapped her; at least he would provide protection and support, for a while.

The catacombs were quiet, as one could expect; who would want to disturb such a place? Even the local grave robbers ignored this area, for they would have to face the Church and the retribution of their actions, something that they wanted to avoid when performing their dubious art.

The air was stale, their presence being one of the rare ones since a long time; the priest in charge of the Cathedral not even concerned with this complex, not caring about the well-being of the dead under him. It wasn't his duty to care about them, since the Lord already passed it's on them and he was just a mere executant of his will.

They advanced without a word, trying not to get lost; even though it wasn't the first time he was adventuring in such a place, the layout of the tunnels and chambers remained a mystery to be resolved each time. Alone, he wouldn't have cared about such a thing; getting lost would only provide him with more knowledge on the situation and the local geography.

But he wasn't alone this time; he couldn't take the risk of losing them both; the risk was just too much for him to bear, for he it wasn't only his life that was in peril this time. He had to take care of someone else, someone who had little knowledge of the world and that was still afraid of things that couldn't really hurt her.

But, in a way, he envied her; he wanted that fear back, one of innocence, to be able to live a life without bravado or walking without the little magic that made people spines chill from fear or terror. Maybe, he would find a way to relive these sensations, he would be able to live longer, without putting his life in constant danger.

The travel was quite boring; there were nothing that stood in their way; one could have imagined that some imaginary fierce creature could have stood in their path, waiting for them to be lost in his trap, but everybody knew that monsters didn't exist. Even the priests couldn't scare the people anymore with the tell tales of beasts and demons that wanted to harvest theirs souls; of course, there were always a fool or two to believe it, but

it was in his conviction that these people would soon vanish, their vision of the world antiquated and obsolete.

The tunnel was reaching its end; the trip, as memorable as it could be, would soon be forgotten, for she wanted to repress the fact that she walked near death, smelled the sweet aroma of rotting corpse while having the possibilities of seeing the grim visage of those that faced the Reaper without making it out alive.

He thought it would be the end, that he would finally be free from the darkness and the stench, able to now enjoy the air outside for a bit before they would have to move again, to the destination he had in mind.

“Halt right there! You didn’t think you could cross this catacomb that easily? Hand over your gold and possession and we will let your live” said a voice in front of them, the darkness still covering the potential body that could produce it. They could see the glimmer of a blade and the dull reflection of a firearm, pointed at them.

“That was quite the brilliant idea you had, to wait here, with the rumours of rebellions and uprising in the city, some nobles would have surely used this tunnel to run away to safety, to avoid losing their head. A little less than expected but still, it’s an excellent plan to make easy money” added another voice, a little away from the first one.

The figures moved out of the shadow, revealing two cloaked figures; they seemed to be of the same height, but one of them had an injury to his left leg, making him drag it a bit. They could maybe out run him, but the fact that he had a long-range weapon in his arm made him a dangerous foe, one that they couldn’t ignore.

“You didn’t tell me that we would have to face a low life... wait a minute, aren’t you Richard Dubois, the wanted brigand for the theft of the jewels of the countess of Oxford? My, this will be our lucky day; when we will bring you for the bounty, I can’t imagine how much they are going to pay use” said the first rogue, pointing his blade toward them, making sure that they wouldn’t try anything.

She realized that she could use the moment to run away, the attention focused on Richard; he had a bounty on his head, he was worth much more than her. By the time

they would realize she was away, the distance between her and their original point would be greatly halved. But it would be futile; she didn't want to be lost in the darkness and her clothes didn't permit her to run too far without having the chance to fall.

“Oh, look there is brood behind him, and not any brood either; it's one these fancy nobles, from these high, ancient families. Really, today is a lucky day; not only we have the money for the bounty but now, we can kidnap this woman and reclaim even more money! Sometime, my genius surprises me” said the other one, approaching the scene, limping toward them, his wounded leg making him slower. It wasn't painful for him, but it was visible that any blow to it could send him down easily.

“Oh fine gentlemen; you think that I will let myself be captured by the like of you? I have so much to do, so much to capture... so much to charm; it would be a pity to let myself in the hand of brutes and uncultured swine that would ruin my good image. Perhaps, one day, when I will grow tired of my act, I will leave you a chance, but for now, I will have to refuse your generous offer” Richard replied, grinning, pushing his captive aside; he didn't want her to be in the line of fire, for he had to act fast...

The bandits were dumfounded for a moment, as if the news were not something they were expecting; one could have thought that they would have exploded in anger, turning their weapon toward the insolent otter and getting rid of him, but nothing of the sort happened. They chuckled for a moment, as if the insult they heard were nothing more than a mere tease, something that reminded them that they were still alive.

“Oh Dubois, you believe that your little banter would distract us enough to make us drop our guard? We are not foolish to let a good speaker ensnare us into a verbal trap; now drop your weapon, without any resistance, and there will be no violence. After all, we won't get paid as much if you are dead” said the first rogue, still pointing his blade toward him, not having the desire to let his bounty flee.

Richard looked at them, wondering he could be doing; he would strike one, the other one would take the opportunity to either stab him or shoot him, making his tentative quite risky. He had to time himself, to make the plan he forming in his mind work, for without a perfect timing, it wouldn't work...

It took by surprise when he saw a rock fly in front of his eyes, hitting one of the bandits in the face; he took the opportunity to strike the other one, sending him on the floor, taking his weapon.

Where could this mysterious, flying rock could have come from, he asked himself, as he turned around, to see his captive trying to remove the dirt from her hand. He was surprised that she could do such a thing, but he was happy that her action saved them both, providing the distraction he needed to strike with efficiency.

But he had to repress himself for a moment, looking at her trying to rub the dirt out of her hands, as if the earth was something that didn't belong on or near her at all. It was an amusing behavior to observe, but he knew that he would soon to make her snap out of it, for they still had to advance. This need to advance was also conditional to the fact that these thugs on the ground could wake up soon, trying to attack them again and this time, this wouldn't be the same situation to deal with...

“Thank you for the help; without you, we will be in a situation that I wouldn't be describing right now, for I do not want you to hear such a vulgar and terrible situation” he told her, avoiding her gaze, walking toward the exit, trying to find the good way.

She was confused; did he just thank her for the action she performed? A mere rogue wouldn't have cared for it, nor would have taking neither the time nor the effort to do such a thing; why did he do it? Was it a plot to make her trust him? Or was it really a genuine effort from his part to do something for her?

It left her confused; why would a lowly criminal care about her? His goal was simple, wasn't it? He wanted money, or power, or something else; there were nothing else that he could be aiming for...

She followed him, trying to understand the deeper motives of his actions, but failed; there was something that escaped her grasp, something that defied her logic. Maybe there was no reason for his action, but if it was true, then it would mean that she would have misjudged his character a bit.

The path was soon lighted, as the an opening greeted them; it was a small, un-keep opened trap that served them, but it was valiant, permitting them to pass through, to the land they were supposed to go. As moldy as it was, it supported their weight, permitting them to go forward.

“Where are we now?” she asked him, not recognizing the location she was now seeing; it was quite possible that it was still near the city, but near a space she never explored before, but it seemed so foreign for her.

“Outside of Dijon, but still in Burgundy, for now; we will have to travel to the east, until we reach the border. When we will reach the Empire, we will go south, toward Rome; it’s a long travel, but it’s the price for tranquility. Now is the time to walk” he told her, showing the lead and taking a firm pace.

Rome... he was an odd one; who would travel that far? But again, it was one of these rare lands where war wasn’t present. Why was he caring about such a thing, anyway? He was supposed to trade her for a reward, not bring her on a honeymoon.

She followed him, not sure of the purpose he was following, but as long as he going to such a place, maybe she could enjoy it; after all, Rome was a beautiful city, one that could make any lay dream of romance and intrigue. Should she feel ashamed that she was enjoying her treatment, that she wasn’t outraged that this bandit wasn’t treated like the monster he was? Maybe, just maybe there was a reason to her action, but she didn’t want to think about it; all she wanted to think about for now was to think about the trip ahead and nothing else...

“What do you mean, they will not be arriving in time?” said a voice booming, echoing in the room. It was originating from a noble in the back, standing in front of a fireplace, a glass still in his paw.

The wolf was quite impressive to the sight, taller than the majority of people. The fact that he was broad-shouldered and well-toned made the combination quite the impressive

one, making the noble in question a foe that no one wanted to engage that easily. But it wasn't the height that impressed the people.

His fur and hairs were the same colour as a raging inferno; red, orange, crimson, ochre; he was as if a demon decided to incarnate itself in a mortal body, to roam this plane of existence, to torment those that couldn't stop him. It terrified the local clergy, who wanted to perform an exorcist each time they saw him; they had no power to do so and he enjoyed that they leave him alone.

“My lord, we have received terrible news; your bride, Lady Florence, have been kidnapped by some unknown assailant. We are trying to locate her and the rogue that captured her, but we received no demand for ransom, for now. It is a possibility that it was addressed to the father of your future bride, my Lord” said a butler, near the door. He knew his master wasn't the type to let anger take over his judgement, but with the help of spirits, he could very well be someone else, for a moment...

“Kidnapped? What about the knight that was supposed to guard her?... What his is name?” asked the noble, raking his memory to find the name, for the information in question wasn't something important for him.

“My lord, I believe that his name is Guy “Le Chaton”; he heard about his whereabouts not so long ago, as he succeeded from escaping the revolutionary troops. A messenger has already been sent, to refocus him on his mission; he will be trying to bring her back, but he is a wild card. Should we use our own resources, my Lord, even though the rebels could take such a move as a provocation?” asked the butler, unsure of what his Lord desired.

“The rebels? You mean those filthy, ignorant, ungrateful peasants that dare attack those that made their life better? Curses be upon them; they are nothing more than rogues and bandits, trying to steal from those that kept on helping them. I hope that they will be crushed soon, for it cannot last forever” replied his master, not turning away from the fireplace. His mind was filled with diverse plan, but he had nothing to make them happen...

The butler shook his head for a moment; there were a lot his Lord was ignoring about the region, especially about the power of the rebels. Maybe it could in his interest to ally with them, so he could move forward and make sure that his dynasty would survive the passage of time. Allying with the old regime could spell their demise, but he wasn't in charge; he had to follow the will of his employer, for now. There was always a possibility that he could join them, giving them some information he gathered with the years in exchange with a higher position in the society they wanted to build.

But more he thought about it, more it could a difficult thing to accomplish; of course they would value the information that he could bring, but they really gave a position higher, or, in their fury against the social classes, would they use in as a tool, than discard him, for he would be considered like anybody else, not important nor memorable, having served his duty.

There was another option; he could always run to Britain and take shelter over there, with the enemies of his Lord. He knew that they would gladly accept any information on him and would be willing to pay a good price for it. But again, it would be a long travel to get there, and there was always a chance that he would be used and eliminated after.

The options were not risk proof, but to stay at the side of his Master wasn't safe for long either, for he followed the evolution of the rebels; they were growing in power and would be a force to reckon with...

“But my Lord, there are plenty of reports that these people are supported by the populace; the starving people see in them a brighter future. They were already angered by the royalty and now their anger is being focused by some clever tacticians; we cannot ignore them. If we were to feed the people, who don't have bread anymore, we could gain a considerable advantage...” said the butler, trying to make a point.

“If the people can't eat bread, let them eat cake! We shouldn't have to bow down to another jacquerie, even if there is more people this time. They will meet the same fate as last time” his lord replied, filling his glass with brandy; he wanted to forget that he had to deal with this situation, but again, what could he do against the population, except wait?

But maybe he should get himself an escape plan, in case his butler was right; he didn't want to lose his head to a bunch of angry peasants, after all. He could always retreat back to the empire, back to his home state of Prussia. It was his destination anyway, but he go there sooner, if the social tensions would get worse; they wouldn't follow him over there and there would always be a possibility that they could use the support of the nobles over there to strike back, so they could expand the Prussian Empire.

“My Lord, what do you want to happen next? The orders are already in to let Guy chase the bandit, but do you want to let some of your troops pursue them? To serve as backup for this mercenary? Or do you trust him enough?” asked the butler, taking the lord out his thinking, much to his desolation.

“Mhhh... send some of my elites guards with him; if we send too much, it will attract attention, but he we send nothing, there is a chance that this Guy individual will not succeed his mission. This will permit the utter success without costing too much resource, I suppose” replied the lord, thinking about the fact he had to support a mercenary. Shouldn't he be able to do the job by himself? Such a shame...

“It will be done, my Lord...” replied the butler, whispering “Count yourself lucky I am still here to cover for your mistakes... enjoy it, for now, for one day, you will crash and burn...”

This was the first time she was actually travelling on the road; she heard tales of travelers, read about wondrous stories, but never had the chance to experience it on her own. She always had the fear that it would filled with monsters, bandits and others things that could make her life terrible, but nothing of the sort filled her sight.

The road itself was quite plain, nothing out of the ordinary; there were trees, some minor constructions and the numerous footsteps, the sign that countless people crossed it over the years, seeking either a better future or accomplishing their destiny.

All she saw were people walking, traveling toward a destination; some seemed to be armed, some not, while others were taking the time to spread the word of the Lord. It was a really a diversity of people she was seeing, something she wasn't expecting at all. Maybe being sheltered that much that good, she thought, as she watched a troop of traveling comedians pass by her, talking about their next performances.

"If we are lucky, we might be able to catch their performance before their path split from ours" said Richard, pointing at the troop, adding "I heard that they have quite the hilarious act; it is something that cannot be missed".

She was surprised that he would propose such a thing; he kidnapped her, but at the same time, protected her from the bandits, acknowledged her importance and now, wanted to take time to show her some comedy. What sort of rogue was he anyway? He wasn't like the image she had in mind, the one of a brutish, sluggish individual that was more interested in either the money or her body. He seemed interested by neither, seeking something else; what could he be searching with such passion?

"It would quite interesting to see it, in fact; but wouldn't we have to expose ourselves to the authorities, thus having a greater chance of being caught?" she asked him, wondering if he would even pay attention to such a thing, or it would escape him. Not that it would be a bad thing; if he was caught, then she would be free, thus she would be able to follow the ceremony.

But a part of her didn't like that, didn't want to simply follow the ceremony; what was the point of marrying someone who she didn't know or never met in the first place? She understood the notion of strengthening the bonds between the families, but why would she have to pay such a price for it? Especially when there was a handsome, mysterious man close to...

She shook her head for a moment; these kinds of thoughts weren't the ones that she wanted in her mind, not in this situation. She was kidnapped, not in a romantic escapade with a lover; although there was always the thrill of the unknown, of the fact that this criminal could have his way with her, without her being able to...

This wasn't the time to fantasize about such things; she could be planning her escape, a way to alert the authorities, but the only thing that her mind was able to do was to focus on her captor, trying to undress him.

Sure, he was a criminal, but he wasn't the monster that she imagined at first; he was more caring than the men that surrounded her. It was a breath of fresh air, but it cost her one of the few things she could cherish, her freedom. But maybe it was worth it; was she truly free before? She was in a golden cage, trapped in beauty and luxury, but unable to see the world that surrounded her. Now, she was able to see and feel, even if this came from a harder experience than she wishes it would be.

“It is a small risk, but they would have to fight the crowd to get to us, which would give us plenty of time to escape” he replied, confused as why she was taking in interest in such an activity.

Sure, it could be a ruse; she could try to lower his defense, so, in the right moment, she would escape and alert the guards, leaving him at their mercy. But why would she do something like that now? Why not before? What could be stopping her from running away, screaming that he kidnapped her? The people would turn on him and he wouldn't stand a chance against the crowd, but she didn't do anything of the sort.

Maybe it was something else... What could she be planning? What could such a lovely lady be hiding, behind this demeanor? Sure, the more he looked at her, the less he wanted to give her back for a potential reward; she was the reward herself, to be discovered and won, after so much tribulation.

He couldn't just try his luck with her after what happened; he had to take his time, to make his only tentative a success. What was he thinking? Why would he even think such an absurd plan? He didn't break the law just to have the chance to romance her; he did it for the money, the fame, not the beauty of her eyes, the delicious curve of her body...

He couldn't believe that this was the way he was thinking about her; she was a potential source of revenue, not someone he should consider. This was a plan he worked on for months, planed for so long; he couldn't toss it away for something as trivial as love. But,

the more he looked at her, the less money seemed important and the more he wanted to hold her against him, to feel her body against his own while they would whisper pleasantries to each other...

But this wasn't the time to focus on such things; he would be captured, if he would continue to waste time standing around, losing his mind about so many possibilities, while he could move forward...

“We will have to wait until tomorrow to see the show, for they will not perform today; may I suggest that we reach the city ourselves and find a temporary shelter for the night?” said Richard, taking her hand. It was a bold move on his part; he wasn't as high in society as she was, but he had to dare, to leave an impression.

The contact surprised her; his hand was warm, soft but firm, a touch she did not expect from someone who made a trade from activities that required handling weapons. He must take care of his body more than she thought; she chased image away, trying to focus on the road ahead, but it seemed so bland, so... unattractive. And her feet were in pain; she's been walking for so long without a break, could one really blame her?

“Can we stop for a moment? I am afraid I cannot advance further” she said, wondering if her plead would be listened or ignored. They would stop at an inn, that was a sure thing, but would they take a break right now, only because she asked?

Without a word, he changed direction, going toward the fields; she followed him, going deeper in the wilderness, until they reached a shaded spot under an aged oak, hidden from the passerby's. It was indeed a nice place to take a rest away from the distraction of the others, away from the noises and the sight of the population.

He took out his coat and placed it on the ground, at the base of the tree, to make sure that she wouldn't sit on the dirt. The gesture made her speechless; she didn't expect him to be a gentleman, but she didn't him either to remove his coat that easily in front of her. The undergarment he was wearing was quite revealing, giving her a sight she didn't wished for, but didn't want it to stop.

They didn't say anything, watching the horizon for a moment, feeling each other hands in the soft grass, feeling the hard ground under them. They wanted to talk, to look at each other, but there was something that stopped them. One move could break the silence, could make the tension go away, but... would it even happen?

She turned her head toward him, not saying a word; she gazed at him and without thinking, embraced him, forgetting everything, losing herself in the embrace. He tasted of adventure, freedom and passion; she wanted more, she wanted all and it was with regret her lips departed his.

He grabbed her, gently pressing against the ground as he kissed her again; her hands explored his chest and his back, caressing everything they could touch, always desiring more. His body felt so good under her hands, his chest begging to be explored. The more she touched, the more she craved about the rest she could discover, the wonder that his clothes were hiding.

She felt his hand under her clothes, one exploring her body while the other was fighting with her clothing, not letting anything stand in its way. When she felt the wind on her chest, she wanted to cover herself, blushing; a part of her didn't him to see her nude, to let him see her body. But at the same time she wanted it, it was a need burning in her, tormenting her mind.

He moved her hands, letting her breast in sight; the marvelous wonders made him smile, before he started caressing them, making her moan. The touch was soft, experienced... tender. There weren't a place he did not explore, replacing his hands with his tongue and his mouth, kissing his way on her body.

She pushed his head away a bit, focusing on his chest; the clothes didn't stand a chance, as they flew away, revealing what her mind and fantasy agreed to shape into an object of desire. It was the first time she was seeing the chest of a man and the sight was pleasant to her, for even if he wasn't curvy like her, his shape made it impossible to stare away.

He moved away, giving her the pleasure of exploration; she took her time to let her hands pass on his chest, playing with fur as he did with hers. He wasn't as sensible as she was,

but she still enjoyed the sensations, nibbling a bit on neck, trying to make him live the same sensation he gave her.

As she passed her hands, she felt a large bump in her road; as she turned her head, she could clearly see it, the reason why her hand wasn't able to pass easily. And it piqued her interest furthermore; with a malicious grin, she moved toward the pant, removing the belt that was in her way before taking them off.

There is stood, his manhood, proud, begging to caressed and stroked, a demand she fulfilled, wrapping her hand around it, stroking softly. It wasn't how she imagined a man, but this was much more fascinating and interesting; it was so warm, so good to the touch... how could she have miss such a thing?

He pushed aside, taking the moment of confusion to remove what clothes she had left, making her shiver for a moment. She had to resist the impulse to place a hand on her sex, her shyness still trying to take over, but the sight of the nude male just beside her made her realize how ridiculous it was.

He didn't give her time to get back to her exploration as he moved his head between her legs, determined to savor her. She gasped as she felt his tongue invade her vagina, probing and prodding her sensible walls. It was more skillful than her fingers, when she used to caress herself, thinking about a potential man who would take her; this beyond what her fingers could provide her. It was delicate, yet determined; she could give in to the advances and the caresses, feel the pleasure overwhelm her...

But the tongue left her, making her regret its absence the moment it departed, but when she felt him pin her to the ground, his member rub against her, she realized that it was going to be much more pleasant.

He took his time to tease her, rubbing his member against her, prodding the entrance; she wanted it in her and more he seemed to hesitate, more she wanted to impale herself on it, to show him. When he penetrated her, it took her by surprise, a sensation soon replaced by a short pain. She didn't imagine it be painful, but since it was her first time, she didn't

expect it to be pleasant either; she did heard, after all, that the first time was a little painful.

He stopped a moment and embraced her; it took her mind away from the pain, as his hand caressed her body while he resumed, thrusting in her slowly. She closed her eyes, now enjoying the act, her hands on his chest, caressing it.

He kissed her against, increasing the pace, pressing against her breasts; the sensations, as new as they were, made her moan like she did before, an unknown pleasure invading her senses, robbing her of her self-control. Deeper he went, louder she was, much to her shame; it was a guilty pleasure, but she wanted to restrain herself a bit.

He increase the pace once again, biting her in the neck while doing so; the pain and the pleasure mixed together, making her tremble. The pleasure was too much to bare, but she wanted to feel it for so long, to feel until the end; when she climaxed, a bit of remorse peaked in her mind, thinking it was finished.

But he wasn't finished, still thrusting in her, going faster and deeper; in his frenzy, his breath was getting shorter, harder. Without warning, his thrusts stopped as he cum into her; the sensation of the fluid now circulating in her pleased her, but it was disappointing that they did reached it the same time. Maybe, one day, they could try again and have that luck...

She placed her head on his chest, as he caressed her back; they didn't need any words to express how they were feeling in the moment and the silence was an element that permitted than to enjoy each other more.

She took her time to put on her clothes, letting him caress her; there was no reason to panic nor hurry, for the moment, and it wasn't like these clothes were as comfortable as the state she was a moment ago.

“Lady Florente! There you are! I have been searching you everywhere; it must have been quite the traumatic experience to have been taken away by bandits but now, you are safe” said a voice she recognized.

It was Guy, going toward her; she wasn't the only that heard him, for Richard also heard him. Making signs toward him, she tried to tell to get away, signs he didn't need; without a word, he vanished in the wilderness, leaving her with the knight.

``Now that I'm here, you will be safe; we will have a lot of traveling to reach the destination, but count on me to reach it safely'' said Guy, looking around.

She barely heard what Guy said, still thinking about Richard; was she going to see him again?