

Courtesy

'The King,' he muttered, as if this could explain his deserting her. 'I am better going alone,' he said again. His face betrayed his shame as he worked his woollen hood between his fingers. 'You are well enough here, where they cannot find you.'

She raised a hand in protest, put it to her breast, and he slammed his heel on to the floor and made the house shake. 'Obey me!' he said, cowardice turned to anger.

Outside the house, a man was being killed with a sword. She knew the sounds – like damp wood being split.

He went to the servants' door; if he would not save her, she wanted him to writhe. 'For certain, what the King needs now is a poet,' she said.

'You whore,' he said, all his fear aimed at her.

'Blessed Virgin!' she said, desperate. 'Everyone here knows I am Flemish!' She found the English words easy enough – had lived in England since she was a child. But could still be killed for being foreign.

He pulled on his hood and began to button the throat. 'The Devil take you up, Philippa! What have you ever brought me but horns?' He turned from her, grabbed a stick and was through the servants' door before she could say anything else.

'Geoffrey!' she wailed, and hated herself for the desperation in her voice.

The door slammed.

Gone.

She stood by the hearth, unable to breathe.

I brought you my body, you coward. A body for which men yearn. A face that other poets write of, but never you. Men bleed red blood in the lists with my sleeves on their helmets, and you ask me what I brought you? I know every romance by heart and I quote them for you, you English bastard.

You will reconsider and come back. You must.

If I am not your wife, who am I?

She put money in her purse, put good shoes on her feet in case she had to run, put her childhood knife in her sleeve. She did these things, as she did so many difficult things, without actually thinking about what they meant.

He will come back for me. I will forgive him.

He will not come back and I will never forgive him.

She cast a cloak over her plainest gown and walked out of the door to the sound of distant summer thunder – a lull that ended when the blood-drunk prickers of the mob shouted along her street, strident and sudden. She stopped, transfixed. She knew the archbishop's head at once – even without the red silk mitre nailed to it, an intentional parody of the crown of thorns. A big man was holding it on a spear and laughing.

She thought of the bishop's clammy-handed flirting. Did a man deserve to die for clammy hands? Clumsy hypocrisy?

Foolish thought.

I endured that man's hands because Geoffrey needed his patronage.

Traitorous thoughts.

Ave Maria, she began. But no image of the gentle Mary could parry what her eyes thrust at her – the forest of heads on spears. *They've stormed the Tower*. A week ago she'd sung the bishop a song.

Good Kryste, if they kill all the court, where will I go?

She wrenched her eyes away from the spears, only to hear screams – Flemish screams.

A broken-toothed crowd of churls caught a girl just across the street and threw her to the ground. The girl's shriek, full-throated, cut across the crowd. Philippa's head snapped round against her will, and all she could see through a gap was one of the girl's feet – shoe, hose – twitching spasmodically. They were fighting to get on top of her.

Her gorge rose, and a man glanced at her. Her own hair, coiled carefully beneath her hood, was as golden as the Flemish girl's. He looked at her as if he knew it.

Her own hands were trembling – wrists, fingers, all the way to the shoulder.

Judica me, Deus, et

Discerne causam meam.

She clung to the prayer in her mind – but it was a broken shield. The language of home came instead, the language of love and war.

Mis cors trenble, poor ai grant.

De la poor qui or me prent,

Vois m'en, trop sui ci longuement.

Tristan and Iseult reminded her who she was. *Move*, she told herself, aware of what awaited her as soon as one of the churls turned his head and looked – at her clothes, her pattens, her posture – she would be the next.

Shouts – guttural English shouts.

She had the knife in her sleeve. It was small, sharp and clean. The bone scales of the handle comforted her. She didn't look back, but ran – long strides with her skirts kirtled well up.

Running was good – she was fast, and her pattens fell away from her shoes in two strides. The street behind her house was full of people and fear of the rabble hastened her hard along the street as the tall houses seemed to lean in to catch her.

He thinks I cannot save myself.

She ran harder.

She crossed Fleet Street without shortening her stride. Men looked at her – men always looked at her – and her skirts and her legs.

Dance and the hunt kept the body hard. She was north of Fleet Street and still breathing well. But she cursed every head that turned as she went by. Her exposed thighs drew stares. Her speed shouted her status – prey.

Men were shouting – pointing. A pie-faced lout and a short, leering, over-dressed merchant in a red pourpoint.

God and his angels. The red pourpoint started towards her, face as red as his coat.

‘Fleming!’ he called joyfully. ‘Flemish whore!’ he called, pointing.

Why do they always say ‘whore’?

Her heart overflowed into her legs; she stumbled as she tried to run too fast. She tried to imagine where she might run.

She shot back another look – there were more of them. A franklin, a ploughman, canaille with their work writ on their clothes. Franklin was so close behind her that she could hear the slapping of his shoes on the hard earth of the street.

Tote sui sole en ceste terre, she thought. *Like Iseult, I am completely alone in this country.*

He stood at a broken window and cursed his impotence.

He was watching them when they stabbed a foreign monk – almost under his window.

Good Kryste.

His mouth twitched in the semblance of a smile. His body gave a shake as if he had an ague.

I should do something.

He watched. Told himself that it was already too late for the monk.

It was, of course.

I am no better than they. I have done the same, or worse.

The corner of his mouth twitched – not a smile at all, but the way a man might move his mouth for a deep pain in his gut.

A cancer that will kill him, perhaps.

He was standing in the centre of his narrow cell, his sword hilt, as long as a woman's forearm, in his hand, the corded central ring under his left thumb. He hadn't picked it up on purpose, nor dressed in his arming coat. But there he was.

The monk shrieked out his last breaths.

The sword was solid. Two-edged.

Pour ce que l'espee tranche de deux pars, ainsi doivent garder et soustenir et maintenir justice. They said that when they knighted you.

His left hand clung to the sword – a thing he knew. *I am going mad*, he thought. *No, I am mad.*

There was a flask of cheap wine on the table. The wine was better in Italy.

He looked out of the window – the monk was silent. The crowd had grown. A forest of spears had appeared in the street beyond the priory.

‘By Saint Michael!’ he spat.

They had a bishop, his mitre tacked to his severed head. The head was still bleeding down the spear shaft. And behind it, another that he knew. Sir Robert Hales, the prior. ‘Good Kryste,’ he said again. Was a life of avarice, cheap wine and poor guest quarters punishable by death?

So it seemed.

But behind the spears and bills was a mob, and they bayed like hounds, faces thrust forward, hands reaching –

They had a woman. She was down – her long squeal of despair cut off like a pig’s – before he could react.

Again. *Twitch.*

I should do something. Suddenly it was obvious to him. *To guard, sustain and maintain justice.* His sanest thought since leaving Italy. *I will do something.*

He left his cell – left his saddle and his scrip. Walked down the stairs to the garden, where the dead monk was. Took the chamois gloves from his belt and put them on and tied the points of his arming coat. Carefully. Fastidiously. He hadn’t shaved, and his forked beard must have looked like the Devil’s.

The golden-haired girl was dead – her throat cut across, the usual amount of blood turning the street to black mud. He was, of course, too late for her.

He knew what that mud would feel like on his feet – he had cleaned it off armour, boots, weapons. Mud with blood in it was like no other substance. He thought Hell might be floored in it.

In his memory, the streets of Cesena were paved in it.

The cardinal, a small man even in armour, waved a fist at the town. 'Kill them all,' he roared at Sir John. 'All of them – every imp.'

Sir John made a face – the face of professional disagreement. He spat thoughtfully, turned his horse and rode the few paces to where his captains sat on their mounts. He shrugged. 'You heard him,' he said. 'Apparently, it is God's will.' Sir John had little time for God on the best of days. He pointed his baton towards the gates. 'Kill them all,' he said.

He stood in the nightmare streets of Cesena for a brief eternity. When he found himself in London, he blinked – the smell of smoke was the same, and the cries – a woman was being killed. He knew that sound so well.

We killed them, he thought. We knights, we defenders of justice.

Every man on the street looked at his beard – foreign, Italian – and the length of his sword.

He walked east. The Fleet bridge was packed with men – shouting, pushing. Going the other way, of course. He was *behind* the action.

Men shouted about the gates of Castle Baynard and the King.

Unbidden, his left hand began to tap a rhythm on the pommel of his sword.

It struck him that he didn't really want to kill a herd of Londoners, most of whom merely hated people they had every reason to hate. Better reasons, in fact, than he had to kill the people he had killed, most of his life. The French in France. Italians in Italy.

But they killed that Flemish girl, too.

His mouth twitched.

She turned down a street – a track, the bottom a hand's breadth deeper than the grass at the sides. *Holebourne*, she thought. *I've hawked here.*

They were laughing – so sure of catching her.

Houses were becoming sparse – soon she would be among farms. She spotted a low tower and a stone barn, to the east of Shoe Lane – and determined to gamble. To backtrack like a doe – if only she could round the barn before they saw her. She turned at the barn, the doors broken, the grain mostly gone. Took the corner and caught a stone in her shoe. The tower's roof was burnt away, and flames had marked the stone like stripes on a cat. She turned again without shortening her stride.

Turned again. Her pursuers were in full cry – Pie-Face passed in front of her as she rounded the last corner, his mates like competitors in a parish race at his heels, but they didn't see her.

One man – Red Pourpoint – lagged behind the others, and he saw her come around the barn. He was between her and the open road, and he reached for her

- laughing. He went for her as a man catches a weak and silly woman. His mouth was forming a kiss.

The knife went in and out of his gut and she was through his arms - a skill learned in the halls of old Edward's court, where to allow a man to put his arms around you might mean pregnancy and death.

Behind her, Red Pourpoint fell to his knees.

She grasped her gown in her fists and her legs flashed out. But Pie-Face hallooed and they were on her again. Failure stole her staunchness, and her lungs laboured.

There was only the road, and running - the stone in her shoe like the sins she didn't confess - and the panting of the pack.

She ran south. But she knew she was near the end, and she started to look for a place to turn at bay. And die.

He walked north. Men were watching him and his Florentine beard and his long sword, and he thought it would be a pity to kill Londoners by mischance, just because they took him for a foreigner.

He was in Shoe Lane - he knew that much, but the houses were unfamiliar - new, rich houses. And fire - across the river, the Fleet Prison was burning, and closer to hand, almost every outbuilding smouldered.

Would the rebels burn London?

We burned Cesena. After everyone was dead.

Twitch.

Off to his left was a burnt tower and a stone barn, and the street, which had been almost empty –

They had another Flemish girl. Two men had her arms – a long lad in a smock and a dyer with stained hands in a green hood – and a third, a franklin with blood flowing over his round face, swung his fist and hit her so hard that despite the two men holding her, she seemed to leap backwards.

More men were closing in. He knew what they intended.

The men nearest to him were eyeing him.

‘She killed a man, the whore,’ the closest allowed as a justification. But he was watching the sword and the beard with the suspicion of Londoners for gentry.

The knight changed his stance.

They began to surround the woman, who sagged against the arms of the men holding her.

Some of them were coming at him.

The woman was silent – her face, almost close enough to touch, already red from the blow, immobile. She had not screamed when struck.

She was brave. And she had gone away, somewhere else. He'd done the same.

They were pressing in around him – trying to crowd him close, menace him away.

Her eyes brushed his. They did not lock. There was no plea.

Franklin grabbed her gown and tried to rip it from her. The good Hainault wool held his full strength and he grunted and hit her again.

A big shipman in a filthy shirt and green hose – cudgel, knife around his neck – pushed at the knight past other men showing less courage or more care. ‘Want something, sire?’ he asked. Drunk and warming to his work.

Behind him stood a carpenter, a ploughman and a young apprentice. ‘Get from here!’ called the ploughman, his tone not quite angry enough. Hesitant. He glanced at his fellows.

The knight felt the hilt under his left hand. *Here it is, then.*

The thought fell into place like the locking of the faceplate of his basinet, back in Italy.

He drew.

The round pommel of his sword took Shipman in the bridge of the nose and he fell back into his mates. The drawn sword rose like a falcon from a lady’s wrist – *reverso sottano*, the back-cut flashing from his waist.

Carpenter fell on Shipman, already dead.

Now her eyes were on him.

He had both hands on the sword, cocked up on his right shoulder, and his feet wide apart. Carefully, without undue haste, he cut *mandritto mezzano* with the power of both arms, the point just at waist height, and back, *reverso mezzano*.

Swordsmanship happened in Italian. There were no English words for it.

Ploughman was kneeling in the mud, his guts in his lap. Apprentice stumbled away.

He stepped over Ploughman and thrust the tip of his sword into the neck of the man who'd struck her. Franklin fell without a word, probably still convulsed with rage and lust.

Straight to Hell, the knight thought. *Into the mud and the blood in the very commission of sin.*

A young man in an extravagant liri pipe took a hesitant swing at him with a long club. The knight deflected it – caught the head on his cross guard, put his left hand on the youth's right elbow, stepped through his attack, his movements an unwitting parody of her technique with rough suitors – and grabbed the point of his own weapon with his left hand, standing for an instant *behind* his victim, and sawed his throat while using his body as a shield against Green Hood's thrown sword.

He did it so well that he laughed aloud, alive in the moment. Invincible.

Green Hood got his arms around her, a ballock dagger in his right fist. He squealed something as Liri pipe's body fell bonelessly away.

The sword cut *reverso fendente*, high left to low right, through Hood's brainpan and his jaw – and she flinched as the sword took the lobe off her right ear.

He leaped forward, leg across leg, and cut – fast, flicking cuts like a swift of steel in the air, just brushing their spines as they turned to run. And past them to

where two louts with swords stood in the doomed purgatory between fleeing and fighting.

They had swords, but they hadn't decided to use them, and then they were offal.

He turned in time to see her ram the ballock dagger into the apprentice. Her face was set, intent, her hands bloody to the elbows, her ear running red into the white of her underclothes.

He had cut her – badly. A sloppy cut. Hurried. Too proud of his pretty attack.

He took two steps towards her and she flinched.

'I am sorry I cut you,' he said. He realised that his sword was between them. Her mouth, open and round.

The smell, like that of butchered hogs, and the sight, which always lasted longer in memory. Ploughman still knelt in his guts, and the knight spiked him through the temple – mercy or caution, no need to consider which – and he scooped the man's long cloak off his corpse with his left hand.

She caught the cloak. He shook his head, looking at the cut to her ear and the side of her cheek.

As gently as he could, he said, 'We should – run.'

Twelve. Twelve men turned to carcasses in the street.

He was old – grey in the fork of his beard, grey in his hair. He had cut a boy’s throat and laughed. She was cold and her knees felt as if they might not support her. Her golden hair was free – her coif gone. The ends of her hair and her hands were all blood, so that she couldn’t pull her hair out of her face.

He knelt, his right knee not quite touching the ground, and wiped his sword on a shirt. His eyes never left the street to the south – there were men there. He used a fingernail under the corpse’s shirt to clean the crevice where the blade met the hilt.

How many men must you kill to learn that habit? she wondered.

And threw up.

Just like that. Suddenly she was retching, and it all came out, and then her mouth was as foul as her hands.

He held her hair. She liked him better for it, but not much. He had gloves on.

‘Your pardon,’ she cried – simple courtesy. A reflex.

‘Ever at your service,’ he answered her – good Northern French, like hers. He said it with a twitch of his lips. ‘We need to start moving, ma dame.’

She took refuge in her usual armours – erect carriage, deep breath. Poetry.

Her right eye was swelling, her left cheek was cut and her ear trailed blood like a liquid jewel. Tall and fit. Someone from court, he thought. Rich and not rich – beautiful. Even with one side of her face cut and swelling.

Silk hose. An accent – good French, like the old queen. Thus – a Hainaulter.

He glanced back – a new pack was forming. It would take them time to convince themselves to come and get him. But not much time.

She was in shock. The blow to her head had shaken her – he wondered if she'd ever taken a blow before. But brave. She was moving. Many would have stopped.

Hedges replaced houses on either side. He turned them west, glancing back past her as he pushed her through a gap. Men were looking at the bodies. Or searching them. A woman, keening.

He picked his way across a pigsty. She walked the walls, disdainful of his hand.

She doesn't want me to touch her.

Up a dyke and past a fishpond. The fish were dead and rotting. Then a wider path, almost a street. Tall houses, some of stone. He looked back – men to the south – men with staves or swords. Quickly over a gate, into a closed lane. He paused, looked back again. When he turned, she was glaring at him.

'I need to drink water,' she said in English. She spoke slowly and clearly, as if he was a fool. 'Wash my mouth.'

'I don't know where to find water,' he admitted. He passed her and started down the lane, watching the fields on either side of the wall. Looking for water. Annoyed at himself.

They passed one house and then another – this one walled. She climbed up on the wall, walked along it, then crouched and jumped down.

Opened the gate for him.

There was a well, with rope and winch. It had a marble pediment, perhaps Roman, with rope weals burnt deep in the stone by long use.

‘Here,’ he said clumsily, wishing he had seen it. ‘My pardon, ma dame. Let me fetch you water.’

She shrugged. ‘I can raise water,’ she said. Then slumped. ‘Yes – please help me.’

He threw down the bucket and pulled it back up, letting the rope travel in one of the ancient weals, savouring the smooth feeling of the marble on the hemp.

‘Turn your back, please,’ she said. No thanks for the bucket.

He turned away, red like a boy, angry in a way he’d have been hard put to explain.

The sound of the bucket, the water moving in it, the splash of water on the dusty ground. He was suddenly thirsty – so thirsty he almost turned.

‘I cut you badly,’ he said. ‘I should clean it.’

Nothing but the splash of water. ‘So you keep saying,’ she said.

Her tone stung him. ‘I crave your pardon,’ he said.

‘You have it,’ she said. ‘Now be silent, for the love of Mary.’

He winced.

She cursed in French, and her tone turned him around.

She was kneeling on a stone by the bucket. Her face was white, and her underclothes were red. She hadn't seen the blood before.

He held her hair again. This time he used a piece of his shirt to wipe her mouth and gave her water.

'I cry your pardon,' she said, eyes downcast. What he heard was anger.

'Bah,' he said. Not the language of courtesy, but she flicked her glance at him – like a fly cast on a pool. 'I have seen a woman sick.'

She drank and then he drank – straight from the bucket, and water ran over her shift and his jupon by turns.

'There is linen on the line,' he said. Pointed at the cottage beyond the well.

He walked over and took a shift off the line. The linen was fine, the sewing precise and careful. He handed it to her, and she took it, looked at it.

He turned his back, and his sword bobbed against his hip and the pommel made a noise against his dagger while he searched his purse. He found a silver groat – a day's wages. The worth of a good shift – better than nothing, and what the owner would make of Bernabo Visconti he'd never know, but some Genoese would give it fair value –

If there was a Genoese left in the city. He left the money inside the door.

She was back in the cloak, a pad of her former shift against her cheek, looking at her reflection in the bottom of the bucket. 'I am accounted a great beauty,' she said, in French.

Was that humour? Merriment? Accusation?

'I crave your pardon for the sword cut –' he returned, in the same language.

'Kryste and his angels! You and your sword cut. You don't want my forgiveness – you want me to praise you!' She dabbed her ear. 'Men. I'm sure you are a fair swordsman. I have seen one or two.'

He gave her a brief bow. 'This day, your beauty might be held to be the equal of my swordsmanship,' he shot back.

She made a motion with her eyes that might have been a smile.

'Are there people in the house?' she asked. 'Did you leave them alive?'

'No,' he answered, surprised. 'What?' He blinked, stepped back.

Twitch.

'Hard to know,' she snapped. She went past him to the door, knocked and stepped under the low lintel.

He stood in the well-yard, watching the way they had come, listening to the sounds of the rabble to the south.

'I'd like to keep walking,' he said aloud.

She came to the door. Handed him a piece of sausage. Chewed on one of her own.

'Food,' she said. Cocked her head to one side, like a girl watching a cat.

'You should eat.'

He took the sausage. It was gone in four bites.

She handed him a chunk of bread smeared in fat. He ate that, too.

He noticed that she had a plain woollen gown on her arm – locally woven stuff. Brown. ‘We should go,’ he said.

‘I need a moment,’ she said, and walked into the house.

He gulped more water and relieved himself against the wall, still watching the south. He caught the moment in which she gathered herself together in the doorway. Forced a smile on to her face.

‘We leave them better than we found them,’ she said, voice bright as polished armour. ‘And we got sausage.’

He noticed the leather water bottle over her shoulder.

‘You are quite the forager,’ he said.

‘So many compliments.’ She shrugged and managed a smile, though he could see it hurt her. ‘Perhaps we might make introductions? Since we travel together?’

He offered her an Italianate bow. ‘William Gold,’ he said. ‘Knight,’ he added hesitantly.

She caught the hesitation and her smile was broken only by the pain it evidently caused her. ‘Philippa,’ she said. Her own hesitation – he saw it. ‘Lady of the Court,’ she added. ‘Philippa de Roet,’ she said, trying to identify herself for a third time.

He had no idea who she was, which was nothing but a relief. And she hadn't used her family name in fifteen years – from whence had that come?

Her head had begun to throb. The cut to her ear seemed to bleed endlessly and her habitual smile, the toast of a hundred courtiers, hurt her mouth and cheek all the way to her ear. Her jaw ached.

Behind them, the smoke rose over London.

'Like France,' he said. 'I never thought to see it here.'

Her face hurt too much to talk, so she didn't.

The muffled thunder of the mob – a deep sound.

It rose in occasional crescendos.

'Dogs,' she muttered. She hadn't meant to. The word came out as if she had vomited it. She didn't want to talk about them. About the day. About killing –

Kryste on the cross.

He looked at her and shook his head, pinch-faced and disapproving.

'They are men,' he said. 'No better nor worse than other men.'

She shrugged, a woman who was used to letting men speak their foolishness. Smiled, in fact. 'Just as you like,' she said.

He glared at her. 'I've been out of England – twenty years.' He walked on. 'What they've done – Good Kryste, the ruin they have made.' He looked at her. 'The court. Your court, lady.'

'Oh, it was all me,' she said. 'Dresses, caroles, poets, gold cups. The old king spent money like water,' she said. 'Jewels, his mistresses...' She paused, and

looked him in the eye. 'And his wars,' she said in her accented English. 'And his Italian schemes.' She said the last slowly, meaning to cut, and he looked at her.

'The Flemings bleed us blind,' he said after a long silence.

'Who is the more to blame - the careless groom or the horse that won't stop eating?' she asked.

They walked a while in silence.

Past Holebourne there were others on the street - town folk returning home, and ploughmen with royal pardons pinned to their smocks like pilgrim badges. They walked in clumps, proud as Pontius Pilates in a passion play. And watching them warily were many more that were fleeing London.

At Gray's Inn, there was a wagon across the road, and a pyre of legal documents that lit the June evening. Men stood on the wagon with brown iron bills, and behind them were bowmen. He pulled her through by the hand, but in the open fields beyond the fire he let it drop.

'My pardon, ma dame,' he said in French.

'It is all we seem to do - begging each other's pardons,' she said, with forced cheer.

'French is the language of courtesy,' he said.

'You speak it, I think,' she allowed.

'I am one of them,' he said, pointing behind them. 'I know all the terms for war and armour and hunting. Of love talk I know but little.' He shrugged.

She took refuge in her tower, with Iseult. But Iseult could not stop the pain in her thighs and feet. 'Where are we going?' she asked after an hour. It was growing dark, and she stumbled on the ruts.

'I don't know, for certain.' He was at once apologetic and defensive. 'I am hoping to get clear of the wickedness, and then—'

She nodded expectantly.

He could hear her stumble in the cart ruts. He waited for her to say she was tired. In truth, his own legs were done in.

'Windsor, perhaps,' he said.

And then it was night. The twilight had been full of other walkers, careful folk who kept their distances, but now they were gone. They pulled their cloaks about them and crept under the hedges that lined the road.

South and east, the bells of St Mary's Clerkenwell sounded the call to prayer.

She hadn't said anything for a long time.

'We should stop,' he said.

She grunted, no more.

He found a gate, led her through it. The farm was well off the road, and hay was neatly racked - a dozen big stacks spaced like sentries across the field.

The field still had furrows from some prior year, and she stumbled and stumbled and he felt wretched.

'Your pardon,' he asked, several times, but if she replied or pardoned him at all, he didn't hear it. At last, he reached the hayrick furthest from the house and the road.

'Crave your pardon, ma dame.' He extended a hand.

Her face was a pale blur. 'Oh?' she asked. 'You need a rest, I assume?' she said.

He could imagine the look on her face. 'By Mary, I do,' he said, with a laugh. He took her hand and lifted her into the hay without asking her leave.

She favoured him with a smile – a very slight one. Bent by the moonlight and the pain in her face. She lay back with a sound like a cat, and pulled her cloak about her.

His jupon was soaked with sweat and cold like fear. He considered his options and settled for sitting against her hayrick.

I am not in Italy, he thought.

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She waited for him to climb in with her. Wondered if the wound to her face made him hesitate. Made a noise in her throat that corresponded to the darkness in her head.

My husband left me to die, she thought. And yet I am alive.

The barriers between what she allowed herself to think and what she forbade herself to think were pierced too many times by the events of the day. *I am alive.*

Who will I be, now? Alone?

She shivered. Very much against her will, she began to cry – a whimper, and then a wave like nausea, a dark sea of tears she could not push out of her swollen face fast enough, so that she choked on them and coughed.

Her sobs snapped him awake.

She was loud. Loud enough to be heard on the road.

‘Ma dame? You must be quiet,’ he said, as gently as he could.

He waited. Aware of her, the way he was aware of opponents in a fight. He knew in the dark where her hip was, and her shoulder.

She shuddered and was quiet.

If she’d been a young archer or a camp girl, he’d have put his arms around her and squeezed, and then made a joke.

He felt a fool climbing in beside her. What might she say?

She curled into him.

The stars turned in the heavens.

‘My husband abandoned me this morning,’ she said.

‘He’s a fool, then,’ he said. Smiled at himself.

‘Left me to die,’ she muttered in French.

‘May I put my arm under your head?’ he asked in the same language. His voice rose in pitch.

'As you like,' she muttered. Took a breath. 'Yes, of course,' she said, more gently.

She put her head on his shoulder. Shifted. On his chest.

He thought of how much her face must hurt, and offered the crook of his arm – touched it in the dark to the back of her head.

She pushed her hair under her head and lay back on it. Made a pleased sound.

'We were married fifteen years,' she said.

'I never wed,' he muttered.

'A fortunate choice,' she said, in French.

'Who for?' he asked, and drew her chuckle. Like swordplay.

He laughed quietly, knowing that he did it a-purpose – hoping that she would speak again. Moved his arm to get the thick wool padding against her face.

'Bless you for your gentle courtesy,' she said, her voice dreamy. 'You are a parfit, gentil knight.'

He didn't know where that had come from and took it for irony.

'No,' he said.

He thought that her hair smelled – like a woman's hair. The scent of it worked all the thoughts from his mind, like wringing water from wet linen. At one point, he turned his head, to be sure she was real. She was.

*

She slept, and then she woke, and her face hurt, and she didn't know where she was, or with whom she slept. He smelled like blood and sweat.

The dark velvet of his arming coat reminded her. She wondered if he had any sense of humour at all. Thought that he might. Smiled into the velvet despite the pain.

Fell asleep considering who she might choose to be.