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# THE BLACKSMITH PRINCE

BERYLL & OSIRIS  
BRACKHAUS

THE  
BLACKSMITH  
PRINCE

BERYLL & OSIRIS  
BRACKHAUS

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TO THE CLIFFS  
OF PETIT HOUX

CASTELFORT

BERONSAC

JEHAN'S HUT

TO SARLAT

LA MORANGIASSE





## CHAPTER ONE - THE SCENT OF WHITE OLEANDER

Afternoon sunlight flooded the market square of La Morangiasse, gilding the stone houses that clung to the cliffside like swallows' nests. It struck sparks on the languid waves of the river, where mosquitoes played over the embankment, and the lengthening shadows brought the first relief after a scorchingly hot, late summer day.

It was the time of day when the cats came out of their hiding places, still drowsy after having spent the entire day sleeping through the worst of the heat, looking around the market stalls for the occasional bite of food to steal or beg from the sellers. Of course, the fishmonger's stall was the first place they turned to, and as always, Jehan had kept enough scraps for each of them to get a bite or two.

All around the marketplace, the merchants were packing up their stalls, filling the square with amicable chatter over the last few bartered deals and bits of gossip. Someone in the entourage of Comte Rainaud had ordered an entire bolt of orange silk, the smith's wife had broken a toe, and

brigands had been sighted on the road to Bergerac. So nothing out of the ordinary had happened since market day last week.

A gaggle of young men passed Jehan's stall, laughing and chatting. Apprentices and journeymen from the various shops, mostly, happy that the day's work was finally over.

"Are you coming with us, Jehan?" one of them asked. "We're going down to the river, for a swim."

Some had already taken off their shirts, their skin glistening with a sheen of sweat where it wasn't covered in dust.

Jehan took off his frazzled straw hat, fanned himself and ruffled his close-cropped brown hair. It had been a long day, and he wasn't much looking forward to spending time with healthy young men, bathing and laughing and jumping off the rocks into the river, as naked as they could possibly be. Or rather, he was looking forward to something like that way too much.

"You just go ahead, I still have to pack up. You know Marianne, my niece? It's her birthday today, and I wanted to pass by their house for dinner and say hello."

The group accepted his answer with a nod and walked on, still chatting, drifting across the market square towards the river. Jehan already had his eyes back on his crates of smoked trout when a shadow fell onto his wares.

"Really? Not even for a little while? You're the best swimmer of all of us, and you've been sweating all day, just like the rest."

Jehan looked up with a bittersweet smile. Giraud, the smith's son, stood right in front of him, the lower third of his long trousers covered in soot and speckled with burns up to where his leather apron usually started protecting them. Only now, he was wearing nothing but those trousers – his belly and chest clean, tanned skin over sinuous muscle. His arms, neck and shoulders were covered with soot and striped with sweat. Around his neck, his simple cast-iron necklace had left lighter areas where

it touched his skin. Giraud's face was black with soot, almost as dark as his hair, but his green eyes sparkled like the back of a dragonfly over the water.

Boys like Giraud were the reason Jehan preferred not to join the crowd, even after a day like this.

"Really not."

Giraud cocked his head and put on a tiny frown.

"Nothing I can do to convince you?" he asked, his smile revealing teeth as white as salt. Not quite as tall as Jehan, yet, but Giraud seemed to grow more and more handsome with every year.

Jehan looked down to hide the colour rising to his cheeks, but the only thing he could look at was the trail of fine black hair rising from Giraud's trousers towards his belly button. He closed his eyes firmly.

Don't stare, he reminded himself. Don't stare, don't stammer, don't blush.

"No," he replied. "I have work to do."

"Is it anything I can help with?"

"No. Thank you."

"Jehan, we all have work to do," Giraud countered amiably. "Yet we all find time to have a little fun now and then. So why don't you?"

"Maybe I am just different."

"Course you are. But did you ever wonder if maybe that's a good thing...?"

Jehan looked up in surprise, just catching Giraud giving him a lopsided smile, all good cheer and friendship. Little wonder the other boys in town looked up to Giraud the way they did. He was just the smith's son, but for all the townsfolk cared, he was a young hero in the making. He even looked the part these days, with his dark locks and the fashionable moustache and narrow goatee he was growing of late. He was lithe and agile where Jehan felt just tall and angular, running and laughing where Jehan just tried to stay out of trouble.

Besides, Giraud just wanted to be nice – a friend – as he was to almost all the young men in La Morangiasse. How could he be expected to understand that Jehan had good reasons to keep a certain distance from everyone?

The silence between them grew awkward until Giraud gave a little sound, that half-chuckle, half-scoff he did so well.

“Whatever it is that you are, I’ll be down at the river.” He turned to leave, but not without a friendly nod of his head. “If you change your mind, you know where to find us.”

“Thank you,” Jehan forced out, even managing to add a credible smile. “Maybe another time.”

But Giraud was already on his way towards the river where the other boys were shouting and laughing by the shore. For a heartbeat, Jehan thought he smelled white oleander flowers in the air, even though there were no shrubs nearby, but the impression was gone in an instant. Lost in thought, he allowed himself to watch Giraud cross the square with lithe steps and pass the road along the riverside. He skipped down the few steps to the water where he was greeted with more shouts and some handfuls of mud thrown from several directions. When Giraud undid his belt to slip out of his trousers, Jehan turned his eyes back to his trouts as if he had been stung.

Don’t stare, don’t blush.

Being different could get a man killed, and there were more than enough ways he wasn’t like the other men in town.

Inside their crate, the trouts looked up at him with dead eyes, one next to the other, indifferent to his worries.

“You know, he has a point there,” a mumbling voice almost made him jump out of his skin. “Hiding yourself like that isn’t healthy.”

“Grandma!” Jehan turned around, staring at the old woman on her stool, half hidden by the shadow of the house behind them. She hadn’t said a word all afternoon, and he had all but forgotten about her. “You can’t seriously suggest that I – “

“What?” She laughed, showing her last tooth, her wrinkled face lighting up with mirth. “Of course I can. I am old, no one gives a wet rat about my thoughts.”

“I care what you think.”

“Yeah, you do, don’t you? And yet you don’t hear what I am saying.” With a sigh that was half insult and half resignation, she leaned against the wall behind her and turned her attention back to the cat she had been nursing in her lap, gently muttering to the small creature.

Only, it wasn’t a cat.

“Grandma. There’s a *lutin* in your lap.”

“It’s been here all afternoon, just like I have been.” The old woman continued scratching the head of the little humanoid creature that held its red woollen cap in both hands and stared at Jehan balefully. “And no one has noticed either of us.”

“You can’t just – “

“Don’t tell me what I can or cannot do, Jehan *le Pêcheur*,” she snarled at him, and for a heartbeat, her grey eyes didn’t seem as blind as usual. “Others have tried and failed miserably. And besides, it is not as if anyone but us will ever notice.”

Jehan gave a defeated sigh. There was little sense in arguing with his grandmother when she was in this kind of a mood. And in a way, she was right. They were the only villagers with the second sight, the ability to see and talk to all the creatures that weren’t quite human, to the spirits and fae and ghosts they shared this world with. And it had served them well – while not exactly among the rich or powerful in town, his family was happy and healthy and well respected all around. So he gave a polite nod to the little fae in his grandmother’s lap, and continued stacking what remained of his wares without a second thought.

From the narrow street that led up towards the houses built higher into the cliffside, *Père Ancel* appeared and began to make his customary round. The priest inquired about the families that lived farther away from the village and reminding everyone that the weekly market was over now. His church was situated up on the last street before the cliff got too steep, and his face was slick with sweat from the exertion of hauling his belly all the way down here. But he carried himself with good humour, as always. He was a kind man, if mostly clueless to what happened around him.

At the far end of the market, in the direction of the castle, Jehan saw the captain of Comte Rainaud's guard approaching for pretty much the same reason as the priest, trailed by two of his men in the Guard's black and green colours.

The little creature in his grandmother's lap made a satisfied little grunt, straightened his strawlike hair and gave a deep, almost courteous bow before putting his cap back on and hopped down. He threw a last baleful glance at Jehan, put up his chin and walked off around the corner of the nearest house. Jehan followed him with his eyes, lost in thought.

"How do you know we are the only ones able to see them?" he asked.

"Huh?" His grandmother made a few mumbling sounds. "Everyone can see them. They just prefer to believe they don't."

"You know what I mean." He turned over the wide straw basket that had held the perches and slapped it onto the cobblestone ground to clean out the last scales. "I am just worried that – you know what happens when people notice we talk to ... them."

"What wouldn't I give to have another one who could do my job. I won't live forever, you know?" She fiddled with something in her lap and reached out to Jehan. "Here, for you."

Jehan put down the boards that had served as a makeshift table for the day. The thing in her bony hands turned out to be a small, grass-woven satchel, tied with a length of vine. Inside, he found over a dozen small berries, their wrinkled black skins waxy and dull, but their scent unmistakable.

“Juniper berries?” he asked, incredulous. Those were a precious spice down here, especially after the droughts of the last years, and priceless for smoking fish. “How did you...?”

“A generous payment for an afternoon of head-scratching.” She shrugged. “Need to earn my gruel, after all.”

“You have earned your keep for many years to come, Grandma.”

She merely scoffed. “Still need someone to replace me when I am gone.”

Jehan rolled his eyes. It wasn’t as if they were having this talk for the first time, today. “But I thought Alienee was doing such a good job. You even said so yourself.”

“As a midwife, yes.”

He just gritted his teeth and took down the last racks and boards that made up the bulk of his family’s stall. Last was the faded awning, and he folded it up with a few practised motions.

“You know I wasn’t talking about replacing me as a midwife, do you, Jehan?”

“Yes, Grandmother.”

“And?”

Now it was Jehan who gave a sigh. He surveyed his pile of crates and boards and declared his work finished, stretched and sat down on the cobblestones next to his grandmother.

“I am not a ... ‘midwife’.”

“Are not or do not want to be?”

“Both, I guess?”

She put her hand on his shoulder, like she had always done when Jehan had still been a little child, and he leaned his head against her leg.

"You don't have to be a woman to be 'not a midwife'."

"And how is that supposed to work? As soon as anyone gets even a little suspicious, I'll end up hanged. They might even burn me at the stake, just for good measure."

"And how's that different? Do you think that is even a cat's whisker more of a risk for you than for a woman?" Her cool hand patted his shoulder. "You wouldn't even need a husband to justify your every movement. I'd say it would be a lot easier for a man to do my job."

Whatever reply he might have had, Jehan swallowed it. There was just no point in arguing.

"Though, on the other hand," she continued as if talking to herself, chuckling under her breath, "a strapping husband might do you a world of good in other ways."

"Grandma! No."

She took a deep breath, patted his shoulder again and leaned back against the wall. Silent, they waited for one of Jehan's nephews to come downtown with the donkey and pick up the stall and what little wares hadn't been sold today.

Of course she knew he wasn't looking at girls the same way as other boys. She might be blind, but her senses were sharper than those of most seeing people. And Jehan didn't mind – neither her knowing, nor him being different in yet another way. He would have vastly preferred living someplace where being different wasn't a bad thing, yes, but that was something he took like the weather, something to prepare for, but nothing to fret about.

Most of the other merchants had left the marketplace by now, only a small group remaining to argue with the captain of the Guard and *Père* Ancel about yet another brigand attack somewhere in another town on the far side of Castelfort.

There hadn't been any brigands near La Morangiassse in the last two years, but there were still plenty around in the region, at least enough to make for decent gossip.

Gently, Jehan's grandmother placed her hand onto his head and began stroking his hair. A loud splash from the river reached them, followed by a burst of renewed laughter. He didn't look. Moments later, a stray cat joined Jehan, a beautiful gold-and-red striped creature that dropped to the ground next to his knee, demanding his attention with loud purrs. Jehan started scratching between her ears, closed his eyes and lost himself entirely in the moment. Like so often, he wondered why life couldn't just always be as peaceful as this.

"*Grand-mère Matrone*, Jehan, a good day to you," a man's deep voice yanked him out of his reverie. It was *Capitaine* LaForge standing in front of them, politely reaching for the tip of his wide-brimmed hat. His expression was mostly obscured by a formidable dark beard that also hid his deeply scarred jaw, but his eyes were bright with genuine kindness. "As always – the one family in La Morangiassse that I don't need to worry about."

"Is that you, Bertrand? My eyes aren't so good any more..."

"Yes, it's me, *Grand-mère Matrone*, little Bertrand," LaForge replied, giving Jehan an amused eye roll. They both knew that her hearing was still so acute that she could identify anyone she wanted. If she wanted. "How are you feeling today?"

"Oh, I am fine. A bit tired, from the heat, but no pain in my bones, so there won't be a thunderstorm tonight." She muttered something unintelligible, then added: "And your wife, Bertrand, how is she? Is she better?"

"Yes, very much. The tea you gave her seems to have cleared up whatever she suffered from. Once again, we are in your debt."

There it was – that tiny note of unease in a man’s voice when speaking to Jehan’s grandmother about another woman’s ailments. Jehan had grown up with those moments, and those hushed talks about things ‘men should never know’. And just like he had done as a child, he now pretended not to have noticed anything, and just smiled politely, scratching the cat at his feet.

Jehan understood the ways of fish rather well, and the changing of the weather. Spirits of the wild were easy to understand, and the High Fae were predictably unpredictable. He could look at most of the plants around and have a rough idea whether they were helpful or harmful. Humans, on the other hand, were a complete mystery to him more often than not.

“I am happy I could be of help,” his grandmother replied, maybe mumbling a little more than she had to. “Just tell her that she should come over and talk to me if anything else is amiss.”

“I will, *Grand-mère Matrone*, I will. And how is Ugs? Is his leg still acting up?”

Ugs was Jehan’s elder brother, and the nominal head of their family since their parents had died in a sudden flood six winters ago. Despite having a stiff leg since his childhood, he had managed to win the hand of the most beautiful woman in town – Alienee, a stunning beauty from far away Sarlat, the apprentice to their grandmother and new midwife of La Morangiasse. The two of them had a small army of children, and together with Jehan they covered the entire fishing business here in town.

“He is fine, he is always fine.” Grandmother gestured wildly in the general direction of their mutual home. “That little brat has been complaining all his life, and I think he’d feel bored out of his mind if he wasn’t yapping about this or that for a day. I can still remember when he was about this tall, and he came hobbling home, crying about this frog, you know?”

Jehan was just about to remind his grandmother that poor *Capitaine* LaForge really didn't have to hear the story about that frog yet again when he heard the familiar snort of their faithful donkey.

"Sorry, Grandma, but I'm afraid it's time to go home," he said and jumped to his feet. "You'll have to tell the story another time."

She muttered a few choice words, but Jehan chose to ignore it. Instead, he gave a friendly wave to Lucartz, his little nephew, who led the donkey onto the market place with an expression of deep, adult gravity. Little Luc waved back and quickened his steps, which was harder than expected with a donkey in tow that absolutely wouldn't hurry anything.

Jehan and LaForge shared a silent smile.

"*Grand-mère Matrone*," LaForge offered with another tip to his hat, "I'll bid you a good evening. Please send my regards to Ugs and Alienee, yes?"

"Thank you, captain," she replied, nodding in his vague direction. "Have a good day as well, Bertrand, and my greetings to your wife."

He gave a silent nod to Jehan and scanned the square. It didn't take him long to spot his two guardsmen in front of the '*Plume d'Or*', where they were busy chatting up a barmaid on the steps of the inn, so he jutted out his chin and strode off.

"So, Luc, how's it going at home?" Jehan asked when his nephew came up to them. "Everyone gathered for dinner already?"

The boy nodded eagerly. "As if anyone's ever going to miss dinner." He grinned widely, and when Jehan gave him a friendly nudge to the shoulder, he took that as the opener to an impromptu wrestling match with his uncle. Jehan didn't have children of his own, but he loved his brother's milling brood without reservations.

Packing their stuff onto the donkey was a well-trained task for both of them, and done in a matter of moments. Jehan checked the straps one last time before he handed the leading rope back to Luc and nodded him towards their family's home. Jehan himself helped Grandmother back onto her feet, took her stool and offered her his arm to steady her on the way back.

Together, they slowly marched down the street that led out of town. Luc told them of the many special treats his mother was preparing for tonight, of the bread and the snails and the roasted goose, about the cabbage and the rabbit and the walnut cake. Step by step, they followed the curve of the river until they reached the sturdy little house where Jehan had been born and where his brother now lived. It stood right on the riverfront in a large bend, and like every late afternoon in summer, the sun reflected off the river and painted glittering golden lines across its yellow stones. Right next to it, under the old walnut tree, a large table had been set up, white linens fluttering in the breeze. Ugs was already sitting there on a bench, his leg stretched out, smoking his long clay pipe, while his children chased geese around the table.

It would be a beautiful evening.

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The sun had already set behind the cliffs when Jehan finally reached the old bridge of Beronsac.

A riot of red and purple clouds dotted the lavender sky, starkly offset by the black silhouettes of slender oaks that lined the horizon. Some last swallows zipped low across the river to his left, crickets were deafeningly loud all around and, overhead, the first bats came out of their holes in the castle ruins and started hunting for an early supper.

Normally, Jehan enjoyed his evening walks home. He liked being on his own, he liked the rugged, unbridled beauty of nature and the silence that never was actually quiet. Only tonight, he was tired. The rack on his back grew heavier with each step even though it weighed only half of what he had carried into town this morning, and most of it was from things he was really looking forward to – fresh bread, some figs, carrots and beets and a full dozen eggs. The evening among the whirling throng of his family had left him happily exhausted, and longing for the solitude of his hut.

But that solitude was a lengthy walk from town – almost a mile downriver to the old bridge of Beronsac, then across the bridge and back upriver again for half a mile more. Normally nothing worth mentioning, but tonight Jehan felt like taking a break and a little nap on the side of the road, just for a moment. Dinner had been good, and plentiful, as had been the wine. It looked to be a good year, with enough food to get everyone through the winter and then some. He had already seen more than enough famines in his lifetime.

Jehan was so focussed on setting one foot in front of the other that he didn't notice the man standing on the crossing that led to the bridge. Only when he caught the soft whinny of a horse did he look up and froze.

Was it some creature of the night? He was used to various kinds walking up to him every now and then – but not here. For whatever reason, they avoided the area around the old castle ruins of Beronsac, and this crossing that led to the bridge was right at the foot of the cliffs crowned by those crumbling walls.

Maybe it was a brigand ambush? There shouldn't be any brigands this side of town, there hadn't been any since... The man on the road moved, his shape separating from that of his horse, and Jehan breathed with relief. That sinuous form could only belong to one person.

"Giraud?" Jehan asked. "Is that you?"

"You really took your time tonight," the smith's son answered jovially. "I was already afraid I missed you."

He walked over to Jehan and tipped his forehead in greeting. Jehan noticed that he had changed into a clean white shirt with billowing sleeves, the lacing over his chest almost completely undone. It looked good on him, as did his tight suede pants. Without the soot, he looked all dashing and handsome, Jehan found, his tanned face with the high cheekbones just right between roguish and sweet.

But even Giraud's green eyes couldn't distract from the obvious questions.

"You were waiting here for me? Why?"

"My, you're slow tonight. Yes, I waited here for you." Giraud hesitated for a moment, wringing his hands as if not entirely sure how to proceed. A strand of dark hair had come loose from his short ponytail, and dangled over his eyes. "I need to ask you a favour."

"Couldn't you have done that in the market today?" Jehan's question came out a little grumpier than he would have wanted. Whatever Giraud wanted of him, it would be something weird, he could already feel it in the air. "My apologies. If you came here all the way, it must be important to you. So please, what is it?"

"It's ... difficult, and I didn't want anyone overhearing us." Again, Giraud hesitated. "Is it a bad time? Should I come by your hut tomorrow?"

"No! I mean, no, that really isn't necessary." With a huff, Jehan took off his rack and sat it down next to the road. "You're here, I am here, so let's talk. What is wrong?"

"I... I need your help."

"Yes...?"

"I ... think they have been cursed. My parents, I mean."

Suddenly, Jehan was wide awake, his entire body tingling with alarm right down to his toes. "If you think so, you should talk to *Père Ancel*. I am just a fisherman."

“Well, you know... I don’t think the priest is the right person for the job.” Giraud smiled winningly, his white teeth all but gleaming in the low light. “He isn’t talking to the little folks, like your grandmother does. Or you.”

“What in heaven or hell makes you think I talk to fairies?”

Giraud laughed again. “Because you do? All these little gestures, the nods and smiles, they look harmless enough if one doesn’t see that there’s actually someone on the other end, smiling back. When you stop to scratch your chin in the middle of the road, it looks just like that – unless someone sees the swamp cat you allow to pass the street in front of you, just to be polite.”

“What the hell are you –”

“Please.” Giraud sighed. For a heartbeat, the crickets in the shrubs on the cliffside were the loudest thing to be heard. When Giraud spoke up again, his voice was little more than a whisper. “I know you see them. I know because I see them as well.”

Silence spread between them like ripples on a pond. That was something so unexpected Jehan had to let it sink in first.

“Oh.” The little sound was not even coming close to what he was feeling right now, but Jehan just didn’t have any words for it. Fear and worry and fascination mixed with the pure surprise of this revelation. “How come?”

“I have no idea at all.” Giraud shrugged. “Must be something I have inherited from my father’s side. My real father’s side.”

Jehan nodded. Giraud didn’t like to speak of it, but everyone in town knew that he wasn’t the smith’s son, but his nephew. His mother had been the smith’s sister, who had suddenly fallen pregnant and refused to name the father. Despite everything, she had carried the child to term, only to fling herself off the cliff a few days after giving birth – either in shame or from a broken heart, the town was still arguing about that even to this day. But her brother Segui and his wife had been hoping for a child for years already,

so they had taken in Giraud as their own. And as far as Jehan could see, they were a happy family together, with Giraud bringing nothing but honour to their name.

"And you think someone cursed them? Why? Everyone I know likes them, or at least respects them."

"I don't know." Suddenly, Giraud looked rather sombre. "I am not good enough in those things, I can barely spot a spell when it bites me in the face. With all the things going wrong of late, with Mama falling ill, this isn't natural. I can only feel something evil is hanging onto them, and it's because of me."

Jehan gave him a sidelong glance. He was rather sure Giraud wasn't telling him the entire truth. "Why should it be about you? Did you anger someone important?"

"Well, apparently, I did." Giraud laughed again, but it didn't have his usual mirth. "I must have, I guess. Can you have a look at them for me, please?"

Again, a deep sense of warning tingled all over the back of Jehan's neck. He really should keep his fingers out of this one.

"I don't know. Maybe you really should talk to *Père Ancel*."

"Oh forget that chubby old fool, this is real magic." Giraud looked genuinely heartbroken, and it made Jehan's chest flutter as if he had a caged bird inside. "Please?"

"I am not trained for such things, I really – "

"You're much more trained than I am, or anyone else I know. And – I can even pay! I have a few *sous* I could give you."

"I really don't want money, Giraud, it's just that I – "

"If it's not money you want, I could pay with something else," the journeyman smith offered eagerly and utterly without guile. "Do you need a year's supply of fishing hooks? Or new door hinges, I am getting really good at those."

"No, no door hinges either, please – "

“What else? Just name it. My parents mean everything to me. If you help me, I’d do anything for you!”

“I...”

Jehan’s rebuke died in a mumble when his mind flooded him with unsolicited images of what he actually would want of Giraud. Touching his hair, his face, the side of his neck. Maybe even a kiss... Those images drowned every other thought in his head.

“My goodness,” Giraud remarked into the silence. “You’re blushing like a girl.”

Jehan was too embarrassed to do anything but turn away.

“So there *is* something you want.” Giraud hesitated for a moment and then walked around Jehan until he faced him again. “When the girls in town blush like that, they usually want something from me. Something like the neckerchief I am wearing, or a kiss...”

Jehan opened his mouth to deny, but right then Giraud bit his lips – a tiny, thoughtful gesture that managed to blot out all the words in Jehan’s mind.

“Is it a kiss you want, as payment for your help?”

“I ... don’t...”

Inside Jehan’s head, there were several voices screaming at him, to say yes, to say no, to run for his life. But he didn’t do any of that. He was completely absorbed by feeling trapped, and being unable to decide which unwelcome solution to this would be less painful in the long run.

But apparently, Giraud didn’t have any of those concerns.

“Alright then,” he said lightly, “I am a good kisser, I am told. Never kissed a guy, though. But I shouldn’t be surprised, you witchy folks got a reputation for being naughty.” He gave a little laugh, somewhere between amused and daunted, and stepped forward to close the distance between himself and Jehan. “Kind of looking forward to this, you know?”

This close, Jehan noticed that Giraud was now almost as tall as himself, if still missing a few inches, and that despite his extensive bath this afternoon in the river, he still smelled of smoke and rust. But he also radiated warmth, and under all that smoke there was another scent hidden, exotic and yet familiar, like sweet flowers blooming in the night, like starlight and campfire tales of ancient heroes.

He should have stepped back, should have told Giraud that he was completely misreading him, that a kiss was the very last thing that he wanted. He really should have.

But instead, he just stood there when Giraud laid a hand on his neck and pulled him close. He just closed his eyes when Giraud rose to the tips of his toes and leaned in. Their lips touched, and Jehan allowed himself to drown in that moment, this singular heartbeat of a dream that would never come again.

It was the worst decision he had ever made, and the best one at the very same time.

Sensations chased through him like a flock of birds, chaotic, unsorted, uncontrollable. How strong and firm Giraud's body felt against his own, how Giraud's moustache tickled against his own stubble. Jehan's hands went up and pulled him closer into their embrace. He placed one of his hands behind Giraud's neck, entwining them further, pulling him tight, suddenly kissing him rather than allowing himself to be kissed.

Giraud gave a startled little breath and relaxed, his body melting against Jehan's, still kissing, searching. Feeling him suddenly lean against him, all supple and eager, fanned a hunger in Jehan he had never expected to be there. He kissed him with renewed fervour, with desire for things he couldn't even name, but was sure he needed to survive. Blood hammered through his veins, and he felt his heart beat in his chest. It felt good, it felt right and perfect and everything he had ever wanted.

Suddenly realising what he was actually doing there, he let go and plucked Giraud off him like a burdock.

The young smith gave a breathless, startled little laugh and staggered to the side.

“Are you alright?” Jehan asked, mildly worried.

“Huh?” Giraud blinked at him, twice, before his eyes focussed again. “All the Saints, that was...”

“I am sorry, I really shouldn’t have – ”

“Good Lord. Now I know why those girls always want ‘just a kiss’.” Giraud laughed, a bright, carefree sound that made Jehan’s heart ring like a bell. “Oh my. I’ll be fine, just a moment.”

“Right...” Jehan took another, cautious step away from Giraud.

What the hell had he been thinking? How could he have let this happen? How could he have lost all control? And worst of all – Giraud seemed positively flushed, excited, happy.

“Yeah. It is getting late,” Giraud finally said, giddy and insecure at the same time. He fiddled with the waistband of his pants and blushed, breathless. “So you’ll help me with my parents, yes?”

Jehan wanted to say ‘no’. But with a sinking heart, he realised he had already accepted payment for his help. And in a kind he would not be able to return. How could he have been this stupid?

“I will have a look at them,” he replied instead. “Next time I am in town.”

“Thank you.” Giraud hesitated, then turned abruptly and climbed onto his horse, turning it back to La Moran-giasse. When they passed Jehan, he stopped, adding: “You know, that kiss ... consider it a down payment, yes? Your help surely is worth more than that. And I don’t think I would mind paying up to my promises.”

He finished with a sparkly-eyed smile that was at the same time insecure and excited, gave Jehan a parting nod and rode off into the early night.

What in all the Saints' names had just happened?

Jehan sat down on the milestone that marked the border between La Morangiasse and the neighbouring town, Castelfort, on the other side of the river. Above him, bats zipped across the night sky, catching the moths that played in the warm air above the massive stone bridge. His mind felt as direly in need of repair as the old bridge – still functional, but only barely so.

He had given his word to help Giraud, and had even accepted payment, so he knew he would feel obligated to at least have a look at things. Yet he had the worst feeling about this. And what if Giraud told anyone about what had happened here? Or worse, what if he wanted more? And all that for what?

For that feeling of his body against yours, a voice in his head reminded him. For the feeling of his hair under your fingers, and for that tingling on your lips.

Unthinking, Jehan's fingers touched his mouth, retracing those sensations that still lingered inside him like embers among the ashes.

It had been a godawful idea back to front. It would probably lead to a wagonload of problems for both of them.

But that one kiss...

There had been magic in it.

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