

Kissing a Nightjar

The ferocious wind whipped the rain across the crest of the hill in slanting sheets, dancing through the stubborn stones that formed a crude outline to some ancient castle. Rivulets of water ran through the sodden turf around the foundations and licked the broken walls with their muddy fingers.

Joanne hovered the ball of her foot above the break as she peered despairingly through the rain and let the car coast along the track. Even the incessant sweeping of the wipers was unable to clear her vision and the headlights seemed to illuminate nothing but a solid wall of water. Her knuckles showed white through the pale skin as her hands clenched the wheel; it was hopeless. Desperately she tried to blink back tears as she looked out into the darkness.

Suddenly the sky was rent with an icy flash of lightning stretching for the ground, her heart leapt into her mouth as the ghostly hue illuminated the jagged remains of the castle. The dormant butterflies in her stomach awoke and stretched their stiff little wings.

The walls.

An enormous crash of thunder echoed across the clouds as she reached for the door, pushing with all her might against the wind she allowed the rain to burst through the tiny opening and stream down her face. All she could see were the walls. Stepping clear of the car the full impact of the wind struck and stumbling on the muddy ground she tried in vain to keep her feet, force a few hesitant steps towards the tip of the hill.

Something was calling her.

The walls.

At last she stood before the ruin and laid her palms upon the green mossy stone. Joanne screamed with ecstasy as a wave of electricity swept hungrily through her veins; the stones were calling her. Her head span as she tried desperately to keep her feet but the world before her was shifting. The walls were moving! Panic clouded her vision, losing all sense of balance her knees buckled and she tumbled forward striking her head against the black-stone of the castle.

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Isabel stepped back from the fire and stood mesmerized by a thin column of smoke that danced toward the ceiling. The chamber was cold, the white hot embers of the fire had

paled to gold and it would be some time before the fresh logs emitted heat. She was scared, so scared she could barely hold the heavy poker for shaking. Her ears were alert to the nearest pin drop, dreading the distant sound of approaching footsteps, fearing the inevitable onslaught. The castle felt cold and heavy upon her soft shoulders.

She sat for hours, was this a game he was playing? Would he purposefully keep her waiting, knowing only too well how the anxiety would play upon her mind?

But despite the distress, hiding behind the fear and worry stood Simon; she could picture his smooth face as if he was standing before her now. She could imagine the touch of his skin as the soft flesh of her palm slowly brushed across his chest and the teasing thrill of his moustache as he kissed the nape of her neck. Her breathing grew heavy, the hairs down her back rising as the vision enacted behind closed eyes. A solitary tear spilled over her lashes and traced down her cheek as she clenched her fists and prayed that one day Simon De Montford would actually hold her in his arms.

The door flew open with a crash and the King strode over to where his wife sat. Isabel started and tried to catch her breath, for a moment lost between the real world and her dream. The King noticed the dying desire that lingered in her eye and the soft gleam of sweat glistening on her brow. His eyes were cold and hard as he stared down at her, his cheeks quivering as he tried to suppress the anger.

“So,” he draws, Isabel could tell he had been drinking. “You and de Montford. Did you think you could fool me? Eh? Answer me when I ask you a question!” He shouted, raising a hand to strike. The young flames from the fire threw a grotesque cast across his face as Isabel stared nervously at the heavily jewelled hand hovering above her.

“You’re a damned whore that’s what you are! Queen? Pah!” He spat into the flames. “You should be bedding down in the rushes with the servants, opening your legs for mead and honey.”

“But sire,” she sobbed, finding her tongue at last. “You are wrong, nothing has ever happened. I have never even stood alone in the same room as Lord Montford, how could I have shared his bed?”

“In Christ’s name you expect me to believe that? The whole Castle saw the look in your eyes today, do you doubt their judgement to? I have known too many women to mistake what I saw.”

“No!” She screamed. “We are innocent.” The King brought his hand down heavily across her soft cheeks, a sense of satisfaction flowing through him as he felt her pale skin under his fist.

“Save your excuses for God. For Mark my words, you shall not live to see the next full moon, Queen or not!” With that he turned swiftly, leaving his wife upon the floor, a rosy red weal rising to colour her cheek.

Isabel sat at the open window and stared out into the night, allowing the cool breeze to billow into her face and ease the burning. A shiver of fear ran down her spine as the moon rose and began to creep across the sky. Four days she calculated, four days before it would cast its silvery light in full. Just four days left to live.

‘He does not mean it,’ she tried to reassure herself. ‘He has been this angry before, once he swore to lock me up until I starved, he never did. His bed soon grew lonely without a woman who knew how to please him’. But the thoughts were cold comfort, something in the set of his face had told her he was sincere.

Slowly the hours drifted by, a servant entered and left her food before locking the door behind her. Isabel burst into tears as she heard the key turn and click into place, the salty water tumbling down her face to soothe the tender blue skin. At first she was unaware of the companion that silently joined her on the window ledge: he looked on quizzically. When she opened her eyes she gasped at the sight of him. Slowly, careful not to make any sudden movements she crossed the room and picked up the plate of food left by the servant and offered some crumbs in an outstretched hand. The bird was wary at first and stood its ground. Isabel edged nearer. Still the bird didn’t move.

Nearer.

At last it relinquished, with a beat of its wings it bridged the space between them and took the food from her palm.

“There see,” she said softly. “I won’t hurt you, I’m your friend. You can trust me.” Gently she rubbed her finger lightly across the top of its head and down its back. When her hand was empty he took to the air and came to land upon the chair positioned in front of the fire.

“That’s right, you get yourself warmed up.” Lovingly, Isabel watched in silence as it began to preen its feathers.

“I never did anything you know,” she said eventually. “Oh I wanted to, Simon is the most handsome man I have ever met and I can tell that he likes me but that is all. I swear we never touched. I am to be punished like Adam in the garden of Eden and yet the Apple remains whole and untouched before me.” She smiled. ‘That was rather clever’ she reflected. “I don’t know why I’m telling you this, you can’t help me. I guess it makes things easier when you talk.” The bird was growing restless.

“You will come back to see me?” Called Isabel into the night as it took to the air. Sadly she looked out into the blackness and let the air of depression and envelop her once more; she was alone again.

The bird returned the next night. Then on the third evening, two days before the full moon she was sitting by the fire looking toward the window, waiting expectantly for her little friend to visit. The hours slipped by and it didn't show, before long her eyelids grew heavy and her head tipped forward in sleep.

She woke suddenly at a noise. The candles had burned out and the room was in darkness. Holding her breath she scanned the silence for the cause of the noise; nothing.

There it was again, a soft scraping. Where was it coming from? Isabel suddenly became aware of the sound of labored breathing.

“Who is it?” She called defiantly, though her voice quivered with fear. There was no reply, slowly her eyes became accustomed to the darkness and she could make out the shape of the window and the stars outside. Suddenly something covered the window, the stars disappeared and the room was thrown back into blackness. Isabel screamed. Within seconds she felt a hand cover her mouth to stifle the noise and a strong arm embrace her shoulders.

She became aware of the smell of lavender oil and her heart began to beat fast in her chest as hot lips caressed her. Isabel arched back her head as the hand slipped from her mouth and encircled her smooth neck, the tips of the fingers drawing a sigh from her throat as they travel to her breasts. Generally they brushed her hardened nipples as she turned and sought his tongue with hers. His strong arms lifted her off her feet and lowered her gently on to the soft sheets. She lay helpless as he carefully lifted her gown over her head and felt his hot body against her skin, hungrily she slipped her arms around him and pulled him close

“Oh Simon...,” she whispered.

Moonlight slanted through the window as Isabel opened her eyes and saw the bird perched upon the end of the bed.

“You're back!” She cried excitedly.

“What's that? Who's there?” Exclaimed Simon as her voice wrenched him from sleep. She laughed, the girlish giggle betraying her tender 18 summers, and pointed to the bird.”

“A Nightjar?”

“My friend,” she replied, a little surprised he knew its name. “Look! He has a moustache just like you,” pointing to the little feathers above its beak. “Now I have two friends that come to me at night. Two nightjars.” For a moment Simon shared her happiness.

“Isabel,” he said finally, his face becoming serious. “There’s something I must tell you. The king has announced that you are to die on the moon day.” Trying desperately not to cry Isabel held her head aloft and nodded.

“I know,” she said. Lighting a candle she looked for the first time at his face and saw that he wore the black stubble of a young beard, his clothes upon the floor were muddy and torn.

“He has put a price upon my head,” said Simon in answer to the puzzled look in her eye. “I have been hiding in the woods to the West.”

“Then you should not be here. If the guards find you....”

“Sssshh. They will not find me. I have come for you.” Excitement stirred within her. “Not tonight. We would not get far, the King has ordered a great feast, the streets will be crowded way into the night.” For the first time Isabel became aware of the commotion coming from outside the tower.

“Then when?”

“Tomorrow.” Silently he rose and pulled on his clothes. Isabel watched, his naked body once again stoking her desire. “I must go, have faith, I will be back for you.” She watched in horror as he lowered himself through the window and began to climb down the wall. Terrified that someone would look up and see him, she held her breath until he was safely on the ground and mixing with the crowds; she sighed.

The key turned in the lock. Isabel froze and looked to the door expectantly. Simon was leaving it late, already it was midday and it would not be long before the full moon began to rise.

Panic flowed through her veins as her husband entered the chamber.

“I trust you are well,” he mocked. “I have been reminded by some members of my Council of my Christian duty. Would you like an audience with a priest?” She shook her head, it was not God she was relying on.

“A Bard then? One arrived today and offered his services on your behalf. He claims he can see your soul through the lines on your Palm,” he grunted derisively. It suddenly dawned on Isabel that may be the king would order her sentence right away, she must stall for time.

“Yes, yes I think I would like to see him, thank you,” she said hurriedly. The King was surprised, and opening the door he shouted to the Bard. The old man entered in a shuffle, his back was arched with age and he lent carefully on a staff for support. Isabel was quick to offer him the seat before the fire and he took it gladly. His face was hidden by his cloak and it was a few moments before he spoke. The King watched from the corner of the room, unable to hide a smile.

“Your hand,” crowed the Bard. His grip was firm upon her arm though the brushing of his fingertips was as light as snow.

“I see your pain,” he continued. “The hurt has burned deep into your soul, you are like a bird with clipped wings, a fire without a spark. You must free yourself.”

“How?” She whispered. The Bard reached into his gown and pulled out a small package wrapped in crimson silk. Isabel stared at his hands, they looked so smooth and young. She tried to pierce the dark void of his hood but his features were obscured from sight.

Unwrapping the silk the Bard revealed a beautiful jeweled medallion. Isabel gasped with pleasure. Its eyes were tiny diamonds that sparkled life, the head and neck were of gleaming gold that danced under the reflection of the fire. The wings were extended in flight, every golden feather rippling with freedom as it dangled on the end of the chain.

“A Nightjar,” explained the Bard. Isabel was unable to stifle her gasp, the King raised an eyebrow and edged nearer. The Bard leant forward and placed the medallion around her neck. As he neared the faint aroma of lavender oil hung in the air; her heart was in her mouth as everything became clear.

Once again Simon took hold of her hand.

“Oh it is a shame to leave behind these lovely children.”

“Children!” Bellowed the King. “What are you talking about you fool?”

“I see from the lines of the Queen’s hand she has three children.” The king rushed to his side and snatched Isabel’s hand.

“I see nothing but meaningless lines, now get out before I send for the guards!”

Suddenly Simon leapt to his feet, in a flash he drew the dirk from his cloak and before the King could react he lunged forward, the cold steel piercing the skin and sinking to its hilt. A scream gurgled in the King’s throat. Isabel looked on terrified as his eyes bulged in their sockets and a thin trickle of blood ran from the crease of his mouth. Within seconds he lay dead on the floor.

“Quick, onto my back,” instructed Simon as they stood by the window.

"I can't," she said nervously as she looked at the ground far below them. "Is there no other way?"

"Of course not, now quick before the place is swarming with guards, this is our only chance. Hurry!" The descent was slow, every muscle in Simon's body ached and screamed with pain but finally their feet touch solid ground. Hunting around the bushes at the base of the tower he retrieved a thick course gown and draped it across Isabel's head.

"Whatever you do, don't say a word." Cautiously they approached the gate.

"A bit late to be traveling isn't it?" Asked one of the guards suspiciously.

"Oh a Bard cannot let the daylight control his world. I am needed elsewhere." The guard shrugged his shoulders and pulled the great wooden doors ajar. As they stepped free of the castle grounds Isabel waited nervously for the sound of alarm. None came. Finally, when they were far enough away she realized they had succeeded.

She was alive; she was free; she was with Simon.

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Joanne lifted her throbbing head from the wet ground. The rain continued to fall, her hair matted across her shoulders as she rose to her feet. The weight of the medallion pulled at her neck, she could feel the cold grip of its golden wings licking at her breasts and imagined the scent of lavender oil about her. Hesitantly she put her hand inside her shirt to grasp the bird and feel its warmth but there was nothing there; only the blood drenched lace of her lingerie.

Dizzy and confused she stumbled from the ruins and saw in the distance the headlights of her car shining through the night. Keeping her sight fixed upon the beams she left the castle behind her.



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