

Patience, a Womanly Virtue

‘Mother Valdese! Thank Her Radiance you’re here.’

Breathless, newly-vowed Lansa broke into a run along the path through the herb garden.

Valdese glanced through the open door of her workshop. ‘Peace, my daughter,’ she reproved mildly, continuing to grind astise seeds with her pestle.

‘Forgive me, my mother.’ On the threshold, Lansa shifted anxiously from one bare foot to the other. ‘Baron Shautier is worse.’

Valdese looked briefly upwards. ‘May Her mercy shine upon him.’

Lansa plucked at a loose thread hanging from her coarse devotee’s dress. ‘People don’t die of onionskin fever.’

Valdese hesitated before replying. ‘Sometimes they do, my daughter,’ she said regretfully.

‘But King Orete—’ Lansa bit her lip.

Valdese raised her brows. ‘What of him?’

‘Nothing, my mother.’ Lansa’s unattractive blush mottled cheeks already scarred by a disastrously pustulent adolescence.

Valdese concentrated on grinding the seeds. Lansa was new enough to the Sun Goddess’s Circle to be well aware what Baron Shautier’s death would mean. She, on the other hand, had spent nearly thirty years in sanctuary, vowed to Her Radiance as a child by pious parents. It wouldn’t do to betray any knowledge of politics beyond the encircling walls, still less any curiosity about the fate of the kingdom. Her realm was this herb garden and the medicines she made from its bounty.

‘What did you want, Lansa?’ she prompted.

The girl was slow-witted as well as ugly enough to curdle milk. No wonder her parents had persuaded her into the life of sanctuary. Saving the cost of her keep would swell the bridal purse her brother could offer, and no man with eyes in his head would offer a bent penny for Lansa. Not outside a brothel and the girl’s parents apparently cared enough to save her from that fate.

Lansa snapped off the loose thread. ‘Mother Frasete asked for scarlet sage tincture.’

‘His fever still hasn’t broken?’ Her brow furrowed with concern, Valdese turned to the cabinet where she stored her medicines. She decanted a pungent tincture into a smaller bottle. ‘Are you wrapping him in damp muslins?’

‘It does no good,’ Lansa said unhappily.

Valdese set the stoppered bottle of tincture on her table. ‘Let’s try rabbitsbane.’ She took a woven-straw box from a shelf. ‘Use half at sunset and the rest at midnight. Let the leaves steep in hot water till the steam stops rising, then add that to the cold water soaking the muslins.’

‘Will it break the fever?’ Lansa accepted the straw box and the tincture bottle with shaking hands.

‘We’ll know by tomorrow.’ Valdese shrugged. ‘We must commend the poor man to Her Radiance.’

‘Thank you, my mother.’ Fresh hope in her eyes, Lansa scurried away, ochre dress flapping around her bare calves.

The girl would take the death of her patient hard, Valdese reflected. But that was a lesson she must learn. Not everyone could be saved and no illness respected rank or virtue.

Even a man as rich and powerful as Baron Shautier could be struck down with a childhood ailment like onionskin fever, to sweat and thrash in a sickbed till the gossamer surface of his skin sloughed off leaving scarlet tenderness beneath, with days of weakness to follow.

But Baron Shautier wouldn’t recover. He would sink into the moonless night of death. Instead of rabbitsbane cooling his fever, marsh-tongue’s insidious malice would seep into his blood as he lay wrapped in the poisonous muslins. Lansa wouldn’t suffer more than a headache. She wasn’t dosed with scarlet sage. It was the combination that would inexorably slow Baron Shautier’s heart.

Valdese tipped the powdered astise seeds into a lidded pot and looked through the unglazed

window. The sky was still richly blue though the spring sun had slipped behind the high tower. The garden was fragrant as evening's cool approached, the many hues of leaves and flowers an intricate tapestry against the grey stone walls.

There he was, slipping through the gate from the outermost gardens, where the laundresses bustled each morning. Valdese shuttered the window and spread a woollen blanket on the dusty floorboards.

'Valdese.' He was already hoarse with passion when he arrived.

She bolted the door securely. 'Elif.'

One hand sliding around her waist, urgently kissing her face, her hair, he grabbed at her skirt. As he pulled up the coarse wool and her linen shift, she tugged at the string around her waist. Kicking away her drawers, she sank onto the blanket and lay back. He pushed up her clothing, exposing her thighs, her belly, her breasts. His breath was hot on her skin, the brush of his beard tantalising.

'My love.' She wove her fingers into his curly hair.

His reply was stifled by her nipple in his mouth. Anticipation had hardened his ardour; he barely unlaced his breeches before he thrust into her. Valdese arched her back and matched him move for move. Normally she would take her own pleasure. But today, the quicker, the better.

He soon collapsed against her, spent. Through his shirt, she felt his heart hammering. Could he feel her racing blood? No matter. He'd think her passion was for him.

'Did you get it?' she breathed into his neck.

'I did.' Elif withdrew to kneel between her thighs.

She could still see the fearful wonder in his eyes; that he was slaking his lusts in the heart of Her Radiance's sanctuary. That this holy woman had gifted him with her virginity, spurning sanctioned marriage to an acolyte of the Moon God.

In truth, King Orete's henchmen had stolen her innocence, leaving her bleeding in agony even before that vile apothecary violated her with his pastes and probes. Not even old enough to wed, by the time they were done, she would never bear a child.

Or rather, Princess Utralda would never bear a child cursed with royal blood. Utralda, thrown into that distant sanctuary between pest-ridden marshes and the deadly chill of the mountains. Orete wouldn't risk Her Radiance's punishment for outright murder, so he trusted deprivation and disease would soon kill the girl, like the rest of her cousins.

It was all in the past. Now that desecration merely meant she could buy Elif's services with her body without fear of bearing his brat.

'Did you get it?' She raised herself onto her elbows.

Grinning at his own daring, Elif hauled up his breeches to find a pocket. A golden pendant slipped down the finely-wrought chain looped over his hand. 'Does that repay the sanctuary for all the medicines spent on him?'

'Is it the least of his trinkets?' Valdese had been specific. Even with Baron Shautier's attendants distracted, his belongings left unguarded, this had been her most hideous risk. Even though no one would take a sneak-thief's word over her own, if Elif had been beaten into betraying her.

'No one will miss it.' Elif tucked in his shirt.

'But the poor will see their bellies filled and that's fair recompense for his nursing.' Valdese closed her fist around the pendant. It bore Baron Shautier's crest, as she had requested. 'Still, we must wait half a season till you turn it into coin.'

'As you think best.' Elif shrugged, unconcerned.

It was thieving that gave him a thrill, not the spoils. Valdese had seen that the first time she caught him breaking into her workshop. Any town apothecary could offer more potent euphorics than she distilled. The challenge was getting in and out of the sanctuary. So she'd given him spurious justification for his adventures and bound him ever more closely to her.

‘How long will he be sick?’ Elif wondered, tidying himself.

‘Another ten days or so.’ Valdese rose to her feet and opened her cabinet.

‘It’s not the best of omens,’ he observed.

‘A glass of cordial?’ She filled two little glasses, filling the workshop with the heady scent of plums.

‘He’s been named as King Orete’s successor.’ Elif persisted.

Valdese savoured the richness on her tongue. ‘I pay no heed to the crown’s affairs.’

That was all the prompt Elif needed. ‘There was a great ceremony. The king swore to treat him as a son, before the Horned One’s very altar.’

Valdese let him ramble on about the Moon God’s acolytes, stern-faced beneath their crescent headdresses as they demanded binding oaths. These men took their right to rule so seriously, with their rituals and pledges. While women saw everyone fed and clothed, nursed and nurtured, thanks to Her Radiance’s bounty.

‘Now everyone’s wondering who he’ll wed and when—’

As Elif drew a breath, she interrupted.

‘You must go, my love.’

He drew her close. ‘Can I call again tomorrow?’

She turned her cheek for his kiss, not her lips. ‘At dusk.’

As usual, when everyone else was heading for the refectory in the sanctuary’s central hall. Only the senior devotees could arrive late unchallenged, on the assumption their duties delayed them.

‘Till tomorrow.’ She unbolted the door and confirmed he could make his escape unseen.

Valdese watched him go with mild regret. He had been a considerate lover and the most useful of all the helpers she’d manipulated over the years. But Elif would be dead before dawn, struck down apparent apoplexy. Unusual in a young man but not unheard of. A merciful death; he wouldn’t expect it, any more than he had suspected she would offer him poisoned wine. But now she had set her long-cherished plans in motion, she couldn’t risk any inconvenient slip of his tongue.

The bronze bell in the gatehouse tolled the day’s final knell. Valdese dropped the pendant in the jar of astise, reclaimed her undergarments and locked the workshop door behind her. Her pace composed but brisk, she followed the spiral path in through the concentric walls of the sanctuary.

The last junior devotees were filing meekly into the pillared refectory that occupied the ground floor of the central hall. Valdese took her place in the line and accepted her bowl of lentils and hunk of coarse bread with dutiful thanks for the cooks.

As she took a stool at one of the tables encircling a pillar, the girls barely glanced in her direction. Comfortably dressed, they weren’t devotees but noble maidens sent here for safe and chaste education.

‘He’s not the king’s son. So how could the curse—’

‘But the Icicle Witch’s prophecy—’

‘Such delusions are snares for the foolish.’ Valdese raised her voice just enough to be heard at neighbouring tables. All around girls blushed guiltily and applied themselves to their food.

Once out of earshot though, they would gossip and speculate as long as Baron Shautier lay sick. When he died they would send urgent letters to their families. The replies would be full of conjecture. Differing interpretations of prophecy were all the more tempting for being forbidden.

Inventing spurious predictions had been petty revenge at first, as Valdese moved from sanctuary to sanctuary. Then gradually over the years, she heard her spite echoing back. Those fallacious rumours of the Icicle Witch had taken on a life of their own.

People were far more willing to believe in some oracle, instead of assessing the true likelihood of King Orete’s sons being slain in his interminable border wars. They weren’t inclined to note how often women died in childbed when they married their cousins, as the king’s daughters had done, like their own parents and grandparents before. Some mysterious fate unfolding was far more intriguing.

So as the king’s choice of successor steadily narrowed, Valdese had deliberately concocted

dread omens. She had spread them through these credulous girls by means of tartly explaining precisely why they shouldn't be believed.

Who could think this sworn daughter of humble peasants had any ulterior motive? No one living knew the real Valdese was buried under Princess Utralda's headstone, thanks to those distant mothers deciding to free their brutalised charge of her birthright's burden.

She scraped the lentils from her bowl and softened her bread with the broth. Grateful though she was to those holy women, now passed away beyond the north wind, that hadn't been their decision to make. Young as she had been, she had sworn she would never forget her true name. She would see justice for her slain family. So young. So foolish.

Swallowing her last mouthful, Valdese took her bowl and spoon to the scullions' basket by the door. All around, devotees were returning to their duties while the schoolgirls anticipated an evening's leisure.

What should she do now? She wasn't going near the infirmary. Baron Shautier would die without her ever laying eyes on him, still less tending him herself. She wouldn't risk drawing the most fleeting glance of suspicion.

It had taken so much time to establish herself here; a respected senior devotee in this sanctuary that controlled the river crossing that the baron must naturally seek out, travelling between his own estates and the capital. Because she had guessed long ago that Baron Shautier would be left standing, his loyalty unquestioned, when paranoia had driven King Orete to lop every other branch off his family tree.

Accordingly, she discreetly applied herself to learning all she could about the baron; his virtues and vices and crucially, what ailments he had, and had not, suffered. As she plotted how she might kill him before he begot any heirs.

Valdese headed for the stairs to the round hall's upper levels. With onionskin fever within the walls, no one would remark on her visiting the foundlings' dormitory.

The little ones were already abed, drowsing in the shadows of the shuttered lanterns. She walked between the narrow cots, smiling fondly at those few still wakeful. All the children adored Valdese. Strict, she was scrupulously fair. Demanding their best efforts, she never set impossible challenges.

She picked out two particular faces. The son of that woman who had sought treatment at the paupers' gate, not knowing she was dying of silk palsy. So Valdese had numbed her pain and promised her child would be cared for till she recovered. Pliant under the euphoric medicine, the woman agreed to sneak into the baron's lodgings, when he paused on his way to be honoured by King Orete. Who gave a maidservant a second glance?

She had tucked the kerchief that Valdese gave her inside his tidily folded nightshirt. The kerchief that Valdese had used to mop the brow of every onionskin fever patient this past year. The journey was just long enough for the disease to seize the baron on the road home, as Valdese knew it would be. Where else would he seek treatment but within this circle of sanctuary?

The second boy caught her eye and sat up. 'Mother Valdese—'

'Go to sleep,' she said firmly.

A heartbeat and he thought better of protesting, snuggling back into his blankets.

Yes, he would do very well. He was bright and biddable and of all the foundlings left in the outer wall's covered cradle these past few years, he most resembled Baron Shautier. He could even be some bastard slip from the baron's stock.

No one would dispute her word, when she went to Sanctuary Mother with the token that had been left with the child. That's to say, with the pendant Elif had just stolen, and the pitiful note she would forge, from the unknown mother beseeching Her Radiance's protection for the baby.

Naturally Valdese would do penance for concealing the child's origins. It would hardly be severe. Sanctuary Mother knew how ruthlessly the baron would have dealt with any bastard who could challenge his later, legitimate heirs.

Quietly content, Valdese walked to the far door and sought her own modest cubby in the devotees' dormitory. Kneeling by her hard bed, she recited her evening devotions and contemplated the future.

She would give it four or five years. Baron Shautier's claim to succeed King Orete clearly outstripped all the rest but with him dead, no one had an advantage. The kingdom would be locked in fruitless bickering. As the nobles squabbled, perhaps even taking up arms against each other, the surrounding countries would steadily encroach upon the borders.

The Moon God's acolytes would call that calamity, regarding their carefully drawn maps as sacred as holy writ. The barons were nearly as obsessed, their heavy boots measuring every pace of their domains. So the acolytes would rebuke and cajole and desperately seek compromise which the barons despised as weakness.

That meant the acolytes would be the first to welcome an unknown heir promising renewal of Baron Shautier's line. It was the stuff of heroic fable, and more importantly, the child had been reared in the disciplines of sanctuary. If not quite one of their own, the boy was close enough. Senior acolytes would bring all their influence to bear.

After another year of murders and stealthier assassinations, Valdese reckoned the surviving barons would be sufficiently weary to accept a fresh start with a youthful king. They'd see the potential advantages of seats on a Regents' Council and begin jostling for positions of influence.

Let them dream. By then, she would be that child's most adored attendant. His nurse, his confidante, his spiritual advisor. Valdese would be with him when he woke, when he retired to bed, and close at hand throughout the day, preparing his food and tending to all his needs and comforts.

Standing up, Valdese pulled her coarse dress over her head and hung it on its peg. She would continue to wear it, she decided, as she guided the young king's decisions without anyone being the wiser.

Because women had no power in the kingdom. Silent, demure, they served Her Radiance or the men of their families, as ornaments, as bargaining chips, as mothers of valued sons and of daughters whose only worth was measured by their marriage.

Would that be justice for her family, for her sufferings? Slipping into her bed, Valdese dismissed the question. She would rule, and that would suffice.

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