

The Damsel's Tale: Chapter 2

Contributed by Geoff Buss - aka CitadelSix
Monday, 23 June 2008
Last Updated Tuesday, 24 June 2008

The second chapter of The Damsel's Tale, a collaborative writing endeavour between Sir Guy des Bontemps and Damsel Elise.

Chapter Two

It should never have been assumed that Elise was a cold-hearted person by nature; nor could it have been assumed that her relationship with Sir Guy was that simple.

She had been only three when it happened…As with all children of that nature. Those who turned milk sour, or resurrected dead flowers in windowsill vases; those who inspired fear amongst the folk that knew no better than to shun them for what they were…Wherever they were, whatever their background, those children would be found.

And, without fail, they would be taken.

In truth, her memories of that world were far more abundant than her memories of this one – even if that place was far beyond a description that any human could ever comprehend. The only other beings who could come close to understanding such sacredness could only be the Grail Knights, after all. The Lady’s realm – everything within her sight - was a paragon of purity…

No. It was not that Elise was a cold-hearted person: it was simply that her loyalty to the Lady came before all other things.

“Damoiselle…?”

The damsel broke from her train of thought as a horse pulled up alongside hers – the knight raising his visor and squinting

against the light drizzle. Elise looked at him, raising her eyebrows a little.

“Laroque…?”

Nicodeme Laroque, Baron of Orason, cleared his throat against the damp chill and spoke – meeting her gaze even as the rain beaded thicker on his eyelashes and eyebrows.

“With all due respect…Have we much further to go?”

Elise’s expression turned decidedly flat at the question. “Are you five, Laroque?”

“Not that we wouldn’t all follow you into the teeth of hell and back, Elise,” the knight retorted bluntly. “But it’s damned cold; the men have been walking for nearly two days straight without a full rest, now, and it might not be too long until they consider knocking you out just to get in a few hours’ sleep.”

Despite his candid retort, Elise gave no sign of offense; far too used to the man’s unsweetened way of speaking for it to affect her.

“It’s taken them that long? They must be getting more tolerant,” she deadpanned.

“Elise,” Laroque growled.

The damsel huffed curtly. “We’ll rest at the next fork in the road.”

“How do you know there is a next fork in the road?”

"Because I simply do, Laroque," Elise said, a note of finality in her tone. "I've travelled this way before."

Laroque fell mutinously silent and grumbled something about women and directions under his breath. Elise sanctimoniously ignored him.

"Our party will split at Saint Journard," she said eventually, her voice far more serious and hushed now than it had been previously.

Laroque gave a soft grunt of acknowledgement, knowing the plan. "What are you intending to have them do once we're gone?"

"Well, they'll be on pilgrimage, of course," she replied, keeping her eyes ahead.

The knight glanced at her and snorted. "An indefinite pilgrimage to Saint Journard? They'll definitely want to knock you out."

"Desperate times, Laroque," she replied mildly. "At any rate, it'll draw any suspicions away from our real route as long as it appears I'm there and not anywhere else."

"Fully occupied with lighting candles and blessing brats...?" Laroque noted in amusement.

Elise smiled enigmatically. "That's the general idea. What else have we Damsels to do with our time, after all?"

Laroque grinned, his handsome features wolfish. "It's almost a shame people don't know how devious you are..."

"Laroque, that's a disgusting word for a holy man to use," the Damsel chided.

He looked blank for a moment. "Shame?"

"Don't be ridiculous — that one isn't even applicable to you," Elise said flatly.

The rain seemed to worsen as they rode, though it never actually grew any heavier: remaining at a chill, dismal drizzle that soaked straight through cloth and skin. Elise's robes were quickly becoming sodden, and despite herself she shivered faintly — drawing a glance from Laroque. Letting go of his reigns for a moment, he reached to his shoulders and unfastened his cloak — reaching across to the Damsel and placing it about hers instead.

"Don't ever say I'm not a gentleman," Laroque grumbled at Elise's vaguely surprised expression — looking ahead again.

She recalled few things about him from their childhood, she'd been taken away so young. But, as playmates of the same age, that surly, strangely endearing scowl was one of them, and she smiled slightly: shrugging the mantle closer about her and saying nothing, knowing that thanks would embarrass him.

One sure sacrifice of service to the Lady was the altered passing of time, after all; a greater pain to the heart than it might first have seemed. Sir Guy des Beautemps was in his sixties, Nicodeme Laroque in his late thirties.

To the joy and despair of both, however, Elise would forever be blessed - and cursed - with an un-ageing face in its early twenties.

~*~

The Damsel made good her word to Laroque, and the party rested at — sure enough — the next fork in the road, after which they proceeded to take the North West road toward Parravon and Saint Journard.

The town sat on mud planes flooded shallowly by the Upper Grismerie, rising like a man-made mountain towards the heavens – the cathedral with its shrine sitting at its very pinnacle. Boots and iron-shod hooves alike clattered across the cobblestone causeway leading across the silt flats; reflections of the lights of Saint Journard flaring brightly on the surface of the water as the night rain continued to fall in a steady drizzle, dragging down the dark bellies of the clouds.

Elise looked up from under the hood of Laroque's mantle as they passed through the citadel gates – the spiralling streets of the city rising above her, all skewed, cramped buildings of wet stone and sputtering torches.

Back on the causeway, the standard bearers for Sir Perilous, Sir Jasperre and her own banner had headed to the fore of the party and, now into the citadel proper, paraded ahead to clear the milling townspeople: announcing their lords and lady in loud, oratory voices. Crowds of curious spectators quickly formed along either side of the street, and Laroque wore an expression of open amusement behind his lowered visor.

"Maybe we should have sent someone ahead to request flower-scatterers and heavenly trumpets, as well…"

"That would have been ideal; why do you never tell me when you think of these things?" Elise asked. "No one must be unaware of our presence here – it's absolutely vital we make as much fuss about it as possible. The greater the fuss, the easier the road will be hereafter."

Laroque cast her a sidelong glance, though it was hidden by his helmet. "…Absolutely vital", my teeth," he muttered. "You're just enjoying making a grand entrance, aren't you?"

"Let me have my fun, Laroque," she replied, perfectly poker-faced for the crowds as they climbed slowly towards the town's summit in the wake of the standard bearers.

~*~

Word having been sent ahead, quarters had been prepared for the travellers and while the Damsel, Sir Perilous and Jasperre had formalities to observe, the rest of their entourage headed straight for their beds – foot-weary and exhausted.

Laroque, however, remained awake – the cloister's candlelight throwing his face into half-shadow as he leant against a pillar, immersed in thought. His eyes rested on a rough piece of wood and a knife in his hands, and he slowly shaved away at the block, curls of it falling to the flagstones by his boots.

"A late hour for such a pastime, is it not?" came a nearby voice. "They say that monks grow blind as bats from working in poor light..."

Laroque started and looked up. A well-groomed man dressed in modest finery was walking towards him down the hallway – young features bearing a charming smile. The baron grunted in acknowledgement of his words, but didn't cease his carving.

"If I were working in fine detail, maybe," he said.

The man's smile was disarmingly enigmatic as he came to a stop a few paces from him. "But detail is everything, surely, don't you agree?"

Laroque glanced him up and down warily.

"...You're not a taxman, are you?" he asked.

The young man laughed. "Guilty conscience, my lord?"

"I square my debts and sleep soundly for it every night, thank you," Laroque told him flatly.

It was his turn to be given the once-over. "With your fists, no doubt?"

"What can I say? I'm a diplomatic sort of man."

His acquaintance smiled in amusement, but didn't respond. Laroque went back to his carving.

"You are here on pilgrimage, are you not?" the man said at length – walking to an archway to glance out at the moon.

"My lady's," Laroque corrected him.

The young noble glanced back at him in surprise. "You're not a man of religion yourself?"

"My devotion to the Lady I carry with me at all times: here," Laroque replied, meeting his gaze steadily as he tapped the flat of his knife to his chest. "I have no need of traipsing half-way across the kingdom to prove it."

"Some would say your words border on sacrilege, my lord - let alone on insult to your mistress," the young man remarked. "Especially when spoken in a holy place such as this..."

"The Lady takes me as her faithful servant for what I am; as does milady Elise," the baron said bluntly, a note of finality in his tone.

The young man fell silent, but continued to watch Laroque with unreadable eyes.

"...Would it be impolite of me to enquire as to why you did not follow the King to Araby?"

"Yes," Laroque responded. "But it doesn't put my nose out of joint to answer you. The duties that keep me here are far greater than those that would lead me in his Majesty's wake."

"These are indeed strange days if Bretonnia's knights no longer swear fealty to the King above all else," the man observed.

"I am the champion of a handmaiden of the Lady herself," Laroque said then, losing patience with the man's attempts to rile him. "I am of greater service protecting her than I would be as one more of hundreds killing heretics."

Rather than challenging him, the young man looked amused again. "Indeed; tell me, my lord, your name, for the name of such a singular man would surely be worth hearing."

Laroque fixed him with wolfish hazel-green eyes before answering: "Nicodeme Laroque; Baron of Orason. And yours? I'm sure the name of such an obnoxious man would be just as worthy of note."

His jibe was met with blithe laughter. "Gaspard D'soudé at your service, sir knight. I am the manservant of Milord Caïn Degare — a member of his Majesty's royal court."

One of Laroque's eyebrows rose in utter indifference. "Enchanté."

"I am here on behalf of his lordship to pay his respects at Saint Bedoier's shrine," Gaspard elaborated, apparently missing the sarcasm in Laroque's voice. "He was most aggrieved he could not make the journey to visit it in person, but matters of state saw that he was forced to remain at court."

"What a shame," Laroque said, his total disinterest barely contained. "Good thing he has enough money to have people pay heart-felt homage for him."

"Isn't it?" Gaspard agreed. Laroque didn't know if he was being ironic or stupid.

Snorting, the knight turned back to his carving to shave off several more curls of wood before yawning hugely and flipping the knife in his hand.

"Well, as enlightening as this conversation has been, devoutness is an energetic affair and I expect milady will be adamant on attending the dawn mass tomorrow," he said, and swung about so that his back was turned to Gaspard.

"In which case, I wish you a restful night of sleep, my lord," Gaspard called. "Blessings of the Lady be upon you! I hope we shall meet again..."

Already walking away, Laroque gave a quiet snort of amusement. "I don't..."

~*~

The horses' breath curled whitely in the chill air as they champed at their bits — the grey dawn light just starting to break across the horizon.

There were seven figures in total: five of them moving silently about checking saddlebags and tack while the other two watched, occasionally glancing about to ensure their activities remained unobserved.

"That's everything, milady," someone finally murmured, and Elise turned to Sir Perilous and Jasperre — eyes grey and face colourless in the half-light.

"We will take our leave of you now, then," she said softly.

Jasperre nodded.

"Sir Perilous and I shall remain here under the guise of Her Majesty's wishes until a full fortnight has passed and carry out our part," he said. "After that, Lady willing, we shall meet with you to stand against the enemy."

Elise inclined her head. "As you say, sir knight."

There was a brief pause, and Jasperre looked at her — the slightest hint of curiosity playing on his face.

"You truly intend to keep your part in things undisclosed until the end, then...?"

"I do," the Damsel replied evenly. "Do I not have your trust in this matter, Sir Jasperre...?"

Jasperre nodded again. "Of course."

"Then where lies the need to know?" she smiled calmly. "Besides... I think the truth might age you prematurely; and I couldn't possibly take responsibility for devastating the ladies at court if you were to lose your boyish charms."

The knight looked torn between embarrassment and amusement — settling for a curt nod. "Go safely, then. Lady's blessings be upon you, Handmaiden."

"And you also," Elise replied, her gaze shifting from Jasperre to the visored Perilous who nodded in response.

Turning from them, the Damsel stepped up to her horse and accepted a wordlessly offered hand from Laroque – climbing into the saddle. Around them, the three knights appointed to accompany the lady and her champion had readied themselves for departure, too, and their heavy, cowed cloaks hid their armour – deadening the telltale glint of moon and torchlight on metal.

As they turned and rode from the monastery courtyard, hoof-falls muffled by some spell of the Damsel’s, Jasperre frowned slightly – his expression troubled.

“...She journeys to a place of pilgrimage,” he murmured slowly. “Yet forgoes the abundance of relics and proficiency in holy arts open to her disposal...What greater force could there be against the Undead than that of holy might?”

Silence fell again, lightless and thoughtful. Then, behind him, the deep voice of Perilous spoke.

“...That of their own.”