

On our walk from the inn, the town's oil lanterns provided scant illumination, dull light reflecting off the cobblestones our only guide. We negotiated the stairs to the Craftsman's Lane with care, the cathedral and stone wall over our shoulders. Between us and the underpass, a line of cottages led to the port, grey chimney smoke loitering against a starry night. Irksome droppings hadn't been swept into the river after our market day, so I stepped carefully. At last, I spoke.

'You heard for yourself, Lucien. Poldari used our names in his tale. Do you still think it's coincidence?'

'Louis. Show an interest in my friend,' said Madelaine, the two women behind us. 'Greet the notary's daughter. You've been almost wordless this evening.'

'By good grace, I will. Apologies'. I turned to them, and showed an open palm. Although their features were lost in that light, we stopped on the lane.

'This is our blacksmith's son, a peasant if ever there was. A young man found in the forests or at the hearth. Here is Giselle. Greet her well, Louis, as she is a gentlewoman.'

Her friend pulled back her capuche. Under moonlight, a rosy-cheeked face with small eyes, sharp cheeks, dark brown hair and a pleasing smile. She provided a slight bow. 'Sir, Madelaine speaks well of thee.'

'Grand times together in St Martin. He, myself and Madelaine.'

'Best it stay this way, lest our innkeeper takes too much interest in us.'

I gave Lucien a boyish shove, and the women laughed.

'What do you know of Poldari?' said Madelaine to her friend.

'He arrived last year. He has some wealth as you can tell by his Florentine dress. He bought and furnished his inn but disappeared for months, not long after. No one is knowledgeable of his travels, or his origins. Now he presents these stories. He is familiar with Langue d'Oc, Provence and far beyond, I'd say.'

Arriving at the cottage soon after, a cat passed beneath my feet.

‘Lady Giselle. Did you hear of his earlier tale of the blacksmith’s apprentice granted Five Wishes? From the night before.’

‘Bah,’ said Madelaine. ‘Watch out, m’lady. Our Louis is a dreamer.’

Madelaine farewelled me with a light kiss and went inside with Lucien. Together and alone, my new acquaintance puffed her lips to our friend’s comment. ‘I’m sure she means well. There is nothing wrong with ambition.’

‘Who can refute her word? I’m ambitious. But she is such a fine bread-maker, I dare not contradict her.’ She contained her mirth.

‘So let me accompany you to your door.’ And she accepted.

When Giselle and I met again, we strolled under the bridge, walked upstream and into the wood and scattered fields. Her Papa a Notary, and I, only an apprentice, though she did not take exception.

‘You did not tell me the apprentice’s five wishes.’

‘Gaining my apprenticeship first. Next, to be a blacksmith of the Guild, and my Master says if I stay another year, he might commend me.’

‘You mean after the next? Another two years is too long. Two, and I’m told your Papa taught you so much already.’

‘What has Madelaine been saying?’

‘That you were made well and able in St Martin.’

‘So I am. But in a market town we forge different implements. And the hearth burns hotter here.’

‘Glad for thee. To be a blacksmith makes you accomplished. Who is not amazed at craftsmen who transform rock to hammer, scythe and blades. Or a mason who builds castle and cathedrals; engineers who build bridges and carriages. It is the best.’

‘It is. see the hearth glow from red to yellow, to white; beat the bellows and harden cast iron in baths. Tis worthy work.’

‘But your master’s vague promises are confounding. What he says yesterday can be soon forgotten. I would make other plans, and inform him. If he fears your loss, your year will go well.’

Chastened at first, I conceded Giselle’s wisdom. Things said today, might disappear tomorrow. Like morning mist. So, I decided to meet with Giselle again, but talk of other places, other futures, and other blacksmiths, in front my beastly Master Guillaume. This notary’s daughter learnt from her Maman and Papa.

Next day outside the workshop I observed men load and unloaded their river craft for their journey south, a few rafts hauled-in that morning. After running the upstream rapids, tied to shore, the rivermen were wet from head to toe. Opposite, I spied the innkeeper taking sun at his inn’s entrance door. I acknowledged him with a hand signal.

He called me over, and having time after casting, I joined him. This fellow wore the elegant dress of a merchant, not the common Roman robes worn by most innkeepers. Long attire shortened to a coat, revealing tight trousers over the knee. His undershirt with lace fringe covered his thighs, and on occasions, he displayed a handsome cape. Though unacknowledged, merchants and large landholders of the upper town imitated him.

My hot work at the bloomery required no more than underclothes, heavy boots and a broad apron. When I left the hearth, I removed it and threw on my gown. Seeing me so dressed, Poldari grinned.

‘Master Louis, you dress workmanlike this day.’

‘I will come no closer, or I’ll spoil the cake.’

He laughed. ‘Sit with me awhile.’

I took comfort, as this fellow had an easy manner. Though his attire much better than any apprentice, I appreciated his ready acceptance. He did not beg or bow or pretend superiority over me, which most did. He showed no excessive honouring of his betters either. His

gameness impressed my young self, and though I came from humble family, I flattered myself that one day I might dress the same or equal.

‘Your father was a blacksmith, I hear.’

I nodded without hesitation.

‘To whom was he apprenticed? In what towns or city?’

So many questions, without a ready answer. ‘I know he wandered from worse times to better places. His skills are superior to any village craftsman. A grave and wise man, my Papa. He must have come from a larger place.’

‘If his early life is shrouded, it is no wonder. What son takes an interest in his father’s past?’

Poldari had divined this before me. I closed my eyes and took a breath.

‘Be cheered. You are no worse than any other young man. If you are twenty or so, I calculate he fled the disaster years. If you were born in seventy-eight, it places him in some city in the seventies. Let me think about what calamities befell those years. Pestilence, war, revolt. So many people scattered, expelled or torn from their homelands, from here and Lyon, Genoa and Toulouse. Surely, he came from no further.’

He had fathomed this much in a short while. I thought in terms of the year, he of decades. Each of my past years filled my head.

‘What of your family?’ I said, as it was polite to ask, and show consideration.

‘Small landowners. Free men, but nothing more.’ So overawed before a man of almost forty, silence followed. ‘They come from Italian lands. In our cities and countryside, we are not named by our place. We have a first name like you, but a second, family name.’

My jaw dropped. ‘Really?’

‘Famous ones like Medici, Borgias and Alamanni. None familiar to you, though if I write another name, friends of mine, would you know how to say it?’

He cleared a sandy patch at his feet, took a stick and inscribed in it.

‘What does it say?’

‘De ...’ I could not say, or decipher it.

He pointed. ‘A word is composed of letters, sounds written. To read, you must know them and speak aloud. Anyone keen on a notary’s daughter cannot be illiterate.’

I grimaced. How did he know my admiration for Giselle? Saying I was ignorant offended me. No young man wanted to be told his cherished thoughts transparent, and his chances of a match diminished by inability. Proud to be on my way to being a blacksmith of the Guild, I balked when he hinted I was insufficient to win her.

I rubbed my neck and bit my lip. I counted but could not read, and my only knowledge of earthy love came from Madelaine and Lucien. It opened a wound I would not abide.

‘Pay attention. It reads: “De Rovere”. Say it.’

‘DeR-ov-ere.’

I must have appeared lost or spelt. ‘Concentrate. Let us imagine this family in the land of Sardinia. Make a story from their lives. I’ll judge whether you can ever be a troubadour.’

‘Now?’

‘Of course.’

About this family? I thought: How did he divine my desire for telling stories? By what means does he understand me.

I rubbed my neck. I’d show him my talent, and scratched together a tale.