

Jennet

by Francesca Ryan

This morning, I laid out her deep crimson kirtle, the one with the gold French lacing. She always liked that gown; it looked so fine against her chestnut hair, and that eggshell white skin. The Spanish leather slippers went beside it. So dainty. It might lift her spirits, I thought. Although I'd have to lace her tight, or it would hang off her, she's become so thin recently. That lovely proud face so drawn now; something has bitten deep into her beauty. She needs to turn my Lord's eye towards her. They haven't slept in the same chamber for weeks now. But when she saw the dress, she screamed at me to take it away, hurling a slipper at me as I hurried out with it.

Later she was calmer, took my hands between hers, rubbing them as she spoke. There now my bird, she said, my little Jennet. All's well, all's well. But she isn't well. Her hands felt cold, and those haunted dark eyes of hers couldn't meet mine. Then she burst out laughing, but not in the way she used to. How often she could make a whole table laugh with that quick wit of hers, biting though it often was. It could be very funny if you weren't on the end of it; and of course she had charm with it. Such charm. She knew how to use it.

Many of the others say she is a cold one. She was always kind to me though, from the first. I came into her service as a motherless nine-year-old. I know she lost her own mother very young, so perhaps she felt a kind of pity for me. Although she never showed any to herself. No, not even when she lost her beloved little one to the fever. Or when the bloody courses on her linen betrayed the hopes for another, after we'd all held our breath for four months. I cried for her, but I never saw her weep. Yet when I too had that terrible fever, she nursed me herself. She sponged me with cool water, brought me milksops when I was able to take a little food again. We'll fatten you up and find you a good husband, she said, and I giggled when she winked at me. Come on, my little Jennet she'd say sometimes, let's make some mischief. We'd go off on some prank or other. My Lord was away a lot in those days, but that's just how it is for a soldier's wife, even if he is a nobleman. No children of her own; she was lonely, I think.

Last night, the moon really did shine as bright as day. The loveliness of it moved me, despite my heavy heart. From the castle, you could see the silver frost stretching far off into the woods beyond. It was magical.

For a moment you might almost let yourself breathe out and find a little sliver of peace. Almost. Back in the great hall the fire burned low. We all huddled round it against the frost. These days, nobody spins a tall tale or two to pass the time. I miss the stories. The sputters and pops of the dying embers are the only entertainment since the musicians left. Fat Susan from the kitchen says they moved on because they hadn't been paid, but I know better. He can't abide music any longer.

I'm frightened every day now. I have almost forgot what it's like not having the taste of fear on my tongue; it has the same taste as when I hid that penny I found in my mouth. Master Robert our physician came to watch over my Lady with me. I had asked him to because the full moon makes her worse. Dear God, it was cold. Both of us had rather be in our own beds, but I dare not leave her alone. There was the usual restless moaning in her sleep, then she got up, eyes open but not awake; she's looking into the shadows, at something we can't see. She's rubbing her hands down the front of her nightgown, over and over. Pulling at her fingers, looking at her hands as if they didn't belong to her. Muttering to herself. Master Robert wants me to tell him what she's saying, but I would sooner throw myself off the ramparts along with those secrets. I'm a dead woman if I repeat them. I am the only one that's heard; I wouldn't be missed. You don't want to know, I said. Lord knows I wish I didn't.

Master Robert says there is nothing that can be done for her, she needs a priest not a doctor. A priest, here? I said that'd be a fine day. The last one left white as a sheet after talking with her, and never came back. Master Robert shook his head. You should leave here, he says. But where would I go? Dunsinane has been my home these last ten years. And besides, I love her.