

XII

I woke on the morning of the Spring Fair, several days after Raoul's return, with the chill of a wraith walking by. I thought of Ava and grasped my pendant.

Raoul slept on, his throaty breathing steady. I caught Isa's wheezy breaths and Morgane's quiet ones, and down by the hearth, Merlin Lemarchand and Crispen snored loud enough to wake the Devil. All was well in my cot, and I couldn't imagine why Ava's spectre would haunt me on this morning of our greatest fair, celebrating the height of spring. Maybe it wasn't Ava, but the terrible deaths of Jehanne and her child still gnawing at my heart.

I shook off the shiver, disentangled myself from my husband's limbs and laced up my kirtle. I climbed down the loft ladder and washed my face in the basin of water.

Feeding in sticks, I fanned the fire's dwindled night embers, flame shadows soon dancing on the wall. Besides its warmth, we kept the fire going to make draughts, so the air was always smoky, but sweet-scented with the rosemary we kept burning to purify the air of any sickness ailing people might bring to our cot.

I opened the shutters, inhaled the scent of drenched earth and loam, and once I'd broken my fast I took the leather pails out into a morning wrapped in a fine mist. In the frail grey light, cottages, barns and trees looked like ghosts, and all who were tending livestock seemed anxious to finish their chores. The Spring Fair was a well-earned break from the harsh toil of our daily work and a bit of threatening weather wouldn't dampen anyone's spirits.

'This rain won't last, Midwife Héloïse,' one of the lepers called, as I lifted an arm in a wave to them. 'You'll see, we'll have as fine a Spring Fair as any yet.'

I smiled back, but sighed at the injustice. The lepers had never been allowed at the fair.

As I returned from the well with our water, Merlin sat up on the pallet shivering as I set the kettle on the trivet to heat.

'You're cold,' I said, 'I'll heat some pottage to warm you.'

‘Yes, cold.’ Merlin hugged his arms around himself. ‘... and hot too.’ He tried to stand, stumbled and fell back down. ‘Oh and ... and giddy.’

I touched a palm to his brow. ‘You’ve got a fever ... a touch of ague. Best you stay in bed today.’

Merlin looked startled. ‘No, no. I can’t miss the Spring Fair; can’t miss this opportunity to make a bit extra.’

The noise must’ve woken Crispen with a start, as the apprentice leapt from the pallet. Staring at Merlin, his eyes wide and filled with—was that fear?—he sprang away from the trader, towards the cot door.

‘Whatever is wrong, Crispen?’ I said.

‘N-nothing ... m-must’ve been in the m-middle of a nightmare.’

‘A terrible nightmare to make you stammer like that.’ I eyed him warily as I filled a beaker with boiled willow bark cordial.

‘Here Merlin,’ I said, ‘something to ease your fever.’

A fit of shivering gripped Merlin as he took the beaker with a trembling hand and drank thirstily, slopping the liquid onto the rushes around him.

‘*Merci*, Mistress.’ He slumped back onto the pallet. ‘I’ll be well soon, I’m sure ... can’t miss the fair.’

‘Well let’s hope it’s only a touch of the ague,’ I said, sprinkling fleabane and alder leaves over the rushes. Merlin was scratching at his flea bites again so I hung dried fleabane from a rafter too, for extra protection.

‘Odd, isn’t it,’ I said to the trader, as I clambered down from the stool, ‘how those little black soldiers find one person so flavoursome and another not at all?’

Merlin Lemarchand seemed in such a hurry to get to the fair, he wasn’t interested in talk of fleas or anything else as he threw on his breeches, splashed water over his face and gobbled down some bread and ale.

As Merlin scurried out through the door, Crispen, still staring wide-eyed, jumped aside, a palm over his heart, and I wondered what ever could have made the usually calm and happy lad so jumpy.

‘What’s wrong with Merlin?’ Isa said, lumbering down the loft ladder.

‘Just a touch of fever,’ I said, as she broke her fast on cheese, bread and ale while I started shelling the peas, setting aside the pods for Morgane to feed the pig.

Isa took her wolfsbane liniment from the lean-to where we kept our medicaments in clay jars, from which I replenished the laced bags in my work-basket. These moist spring mornings gnawed hard at her joints, and she eased herself onto a stool, her brow creasing as she massaged her hip.

I threw the peas into yesterday's stew along with garlic and began stirring as the liniment worked its magic to ease Isa's pain—the same magic it should have performed on Droган's father's knees during my eleventh summer. But instead the man had fallen down dead. The weaver might've died of a hundred other things but since a wise-woman's remedies were the usual target blame had naturally fallen on Isa. And that had sealed the weaver family's hatred of mine.

'I want to see everything!' Morgane said to her father, jigging about and adding to the frenzied air of fair excitement as townsfolk and outlanders flocked into the meadow. 'And remember the pie you promised ... I'm starving.' She pulled a face as if she'd not eaten for days.

'Thank you again for my beautiful cat,' Morgane called after Crispen as he loped off to join some other apprentices. She waved the wooden carving in the air, Crispen returning her wave, though the lad's charming and easy smile was still missing. Soon I would find out; I would make it my business to learn what he and Raoul were keeping from me.

'That lad will be a fine father one day,' I said, as Isa and I unpacked our baskets, spreading herbal decoctions, balms, ointments and cordials on an old woollen blanket.

'Yes, he'll make some girl a good husband,' Raoul said, 'as Toubie would have.'

A shadow darkened Raoul's face, his gaze darting away from me, and in his green eyes, which had always revealed to me the things my husband could not voice, his pain and grief for Toubie was clear.

But just as quickly his face brightened and our daughter squealed as he lifted her off the ground and twirled her in circles, her braids lashing about like sparks of fire. 'Don't worry, my little Flamelock, we'll see all the fair.'

Amidst the coloured booths and the flying pennants, small-time



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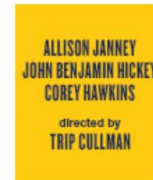
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ABOUT LIZA PERRAT

Liza grew up in Wollongong, Australia, where she worked as a general nurse and midwife for fifteen years.



When she met her French husband on a Bangkok bus, she moved to France, where she has been living with her family for twenty years. She works part-time as a French-English medical translator, and as a novelist.

Since completing a creative writing course ten years ago, several of her short stories [...more](#)

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if had we read
 further, more
 taste + smells

XII

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