



THE SLAP ACROSS THE SERVING GIRL'S backside cut through the din of many voices all talking over one another, and she nearly leapt out of her shoes at the sudden and unexpected blow.

Howls of laughter filled the common room of the inn, and drowned out the clatter of tankards, bowls, and cutlery. By some miracle she managed to maintain control of the tower of dirty dishes stacked high upon the tray she carried, though they swayed and rattled quite precariously. Heinrich's companions only laughed harder when she speared him with an indignant glare on her way back to the kitchens, which he avoided with a look of feigned innocence.

The inn was full that evening, though not quite bursting at its seams, and loud and boisterous enough that one's voice would not carry far from one's table. Heinrich rather enjoyed that aspect of such rustic establishments; the background rumble of so many voices speaking at once offered a measure of privacy often lacking in the more exclusive drinking halls popular amongst those of his

No Good Deed...

station. Nor did he need guard himself against anyone listening in; such folk were much more earnest than his peers, who were wont to extend one hand in friendship while concealing daggers behind their backs with the other.

Heinrich leaned back at ease in his chair, and cupped his tankard in both hands.

“...’tis a two day ride west of here, Peyr,” Ytel was saying, resuming the quarrel Heinrich interrupted with his swat at the serving girl’s backside. “We ought to be gone by first light if we want to make it in time.”

“And that is only because you know your own poor prospects,” Peyr retorted with an amused smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “Every woman in the town watched you fall off your horse and land on your fat arse in the mud. The best you can hope for now is some pitiable glances.”

Ytel’s face heated. He was certainly a rather heavysset fellow, though his features were not unpleasant to the eye. “My damned foot caught in the stirrup!”

“Because you are a lousy horseman, and no more graceful on your own two feet. A woman — even provincial rustics such as these — admires a man who can dance without stomping all over them, or tripping over himself.”

Heinrich snorted into his tankard. “And what would you know of it, Peyr? I have seen you cross yourself up strutting across a tavern floor, much less a dance floor. Even Ulrich, here, is more sure-footed, and he has been lame since his horse collapsed on him at tournament.”

“Well, I have certainly had no complaints,” Peyr said, his lip twisting petulantly.

No Good Deed...

“That, my friend, is merely charity,” Ulrich said. “And with a face like yours, you are certainly in need of it!”

“At least I need not ride on Heinrich’s coattails, and pick up the ones he leaves in his wake.”

Ulrich merely shrugged. “Given his leavings would ordinarily be well beyond my mark, I have no place to complain.”

Heinrich laughed. “Too true! Remember the daughter of the Count of Pfirt? I can just imagine her surprise the morning after when she discovered you were the fourth son of a lowly Ritter!”

“’Tis because you dress me so pretty when I ride in your company,” Ulrich said, and blew him a mocking kiss.

“And why would I not? Anyone riding in my company ought to look the part. And fourth son or not, when one has friends in high places, one ought to avail oneself of the benefits.”

“Speaking of high places,” Ytel interjected with a roll of his eyes. “Are you not forgetting that your Lordship has business to attend to? I don’t think it reflects well on you if you should be late.”

“’Tis my father’s business,” Heinrich said. “I am only here because he cannot be troubled with it, so someone must see it done or ’twill not be done at all. Especially given the dotards he employs for menial tasks such as this.”

Ytel opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted when the door to the inn creaked open, and everything fell silent. A lone figure, silhouetted by sunlight spearing into the dim lamp-lit common room stepped inside. The

No Good Deed...

awkward silence hanging like a pall over the inn was broken only by the distinct *clack* of pattens on the wooden floor as the stranger doffed a pair of gauntlets and approached the innkeeper. Then the tongues of those seated nearest to the door began to wag, and curious whispers became almost deafening while the patrons speculated about the newcomer.

Heinrich frowned at the sudden commotion, and peered intently at the stranger. Ytel twisted round in his chair for a better look, and Peyr and Ulrich craned their necks.

At first little could be made of the newcomer beyond her sex, for the stranger was, much to Heinrich's surprise, a woman. Her long coat of brown leather could not quite obscure the telltale swelling of her hips, but her face was shadowed by a black felt hat with a low, rounded crown, and broad brim pinned up at one side. Everyone, however, noted the slender longsword in the red leather scabbard slung rakishly low at her hip.

The woman disappeared upstairs after a word with the innkeeper and an exchange of coin, and the inn went back to its business.

"What was all of that about," Ytel said as he turned back in his seat. "You would think his Grace the Prince-Bishop himself just strolled through those doors with the way they carried on."

"I have not the slightest idea," Heinrich said.

"'Twas a woman, or so it seemed to me," Peyr said, and the others nodded their agreement. His features twisted

No Good Deed...

in distaste. "Tis an unnatural sight to see a woman so armed. Someone ought to go and take that blade away from her before she cuts herself."

"Tis probably all for show; something to keep outlaws and the like at bay upon the road at a glance. She will be down here shortly plying her trade among these ruffians soon enough."

"Peyr may actually have a chance for some company tonight after all," Ulrich said.

"Bah! The common whores who would work in places such as this are not worth a *pfennig*."

Ulrich smirked at him over the rim of his tankard. "You know what they say of beggars and choosers. It seems you are headed for another cold and lonely night."

A creak on the stairs just audible over the din in the common room announced the strange woman's return, and the sight of her knocked the breath from Heinrich's lungs, for this was indeed no common whore.

Hidden beneath that long jacket and hat (which she had left in her room along with her sword, gauntlets, and pattens) was an exquisite woman perhaps two or three years older than his nineteen. She was tall, and possessed a slender athleticism and fluid grace of movement. Her features were set in a fair heart-shaped face framed by hair the color of burnished copper, worn scandalously free and without cover, and trailing to just below her shoulder blades. She wore a sleeveless red velvet doublet over a blouse of linen, and a pair of woolen hose that fit so closely to her lower extremities that they left nothing of the shapely curve of her

No Good Deed...

backside or legs to the imagination. The slightly belled sleeves of her blouse — pulled close to her upper arms by ribbons running from her bicep to elbows, and with cuffs short enough they would not interfere with her hands — were the only real concession to femininity in her dress. When she turned at the stairs he spied a rondel in a red leather sheath matching her sword stuffed into her belt at the small of her back.

The vision scandalized most of the locals and tantalized the rest as she made for a table in a back corner, where she could put her back to the wall and watch the door. She kicked her feet up on the table, retrieved her rondel, and laid it on the table.

“What do you think of that, Heinrich?” Ytel said.

Heinrich took a long draught from his tankard of ale, and watched her closely from his table. He was not alone; almost every man in the inn was transfixed. An amused grin spread across Ulrich’s features. One of the serving girls placed a tankard of ale and a platter of food on the table for her, and the woman nursed her drink while watching the door.

“Tis like something out of a fairy story, is what I think,” he said. “I think I am bewitched!”

“Still think she is not worth a *pfennig*?” Ulrich said.

Peyr only gawked in silence.

“I think I should go introduce myself,” Heinrich finally said. He drained his tankard and thumped it down on the table. “Don’t wait up for me, my friends!”

No Good Deed...

And with that, he levered himself from the table onto unsteady legs, and wove past the serving girls bearing trays laden with drinks to the waiting guests and locals. He snatched a pair of cups from a tray on his way past one of the girls, and strutted up to the woman's table.

"Good evening," he said, flashing her his most charming smile. The woman looked up from her drink, but said nothing. "Do my eyes deceive me, or has the Lord of All sent an angel among us?"

She heaved an impatient sigh and rolled her eyes. "Love, I have not had nearly enough to drink for that to do you any good."

Heinrich pouted. "Tch, I see you here alone, and could not bear the thought of leaving you unaccompanied among such rabble."

She quirked a grin, and studied him closely with narrowed eyes. Were he sober he might have recognized the mocking twist of her lip.

"Ah, so 'tis a gallant knight to my rescue, then?"

Heinrich sketched a bow. He forgot the drinks in his hand, and ale sloshed out and spilled onto the floor.

"Heinrich von Goslar, son of Burkart, Landgrave of Goslar, at your service."

"Quite a long way from home for someone so young."

Heinrich puffed out his chest. "Don't let my youthful beauty deceive you; I am a man of nineteen, and more than capable of handling myself. And you, for that matter."

No Good Deed...

“I am sure you are,” she said, and took a draught from her tankard. “Now do run along and pester your nursemaid, love. I am here to meet someone.”

“A fortuitous coincidence, then, for you have indeed met someone!”

Heinrich circled the table and dropped onto the bench beside her without waiting for an invitation. The woman let her feet fall to the floor, and shifted in her seat to slide away from him. Heinrich scooted closer. He offered her one of his drinks, but she made a show of the one already clasped in her hands.

“And ’tis a good thing too,” he said, and leaned in conspiratorially. “A woman of your beauty, alone among such ruffians as these? ’Tis scandalous what thoughts they would entertain.”

“Oh, I am certain I could imagine. Your concern and gallantry is misplaced, love. I am more than capable of handling myself.”

“And do you often? Handle yourself, that is?” A self-satisfied grin pulled at one corner of his lips over the innuendo.

“More often than you realize,” she said. Had he not been so deep into his cups, he might have recognized the growing irritation in her tone.

“Truly? May I say I had many a thought of handling you myself when I first saw you. I promise, I am good for it.”

No Good Deed...

“You seem to have mistaken me for some common alehouse bawd. I suggest you go back to your companions before you make any bigger fool of yourself.”

He clicked his tongue in rebuke, “I don’t mistake you at all. You are anything but common!”

“On that we can agree, but I shall reiterate as you seem to be missing my point: I am not for sale, now be off with you, and leave me be!”

Heinrich’s face heated in indignation.

“Now see here! Do you know whom you are addressing?”

“You made it quite clear, love, and I am not the least bit impressed.”

He reached out with one hand and laid it upon her knee. The woman flinched under his touch, and her jaw tightened.

“You will be, come the morning.”

Her eyes narrowed, and the lethal threat in her glare set the finer hairs on his neck on end.

“I warn you fairly: Remove your hand now and go back to your friends, and I’ll forget the impropriety.”

But he did not remove his hand. Instead, he slipped it further along the length of her thigh, and leaned towards her.

“I have been nothing if not polite thus far,” he said. “The least you could offer is some appreciation!”

No Good Deed...

The woman seized him by the hair and slammed his head down onto the table. Stars exploded across his vision and the inn spun around him. Then he was flying across the table, scattering tankards and platters in all directions, before he struck the floor on the far side and lay there for a moment in a daze.

Heinrich staggered to his feet again with an effort, and felt every eye in the deathly silent common room on him. His head swam — whether from the blow or the drink he was not quite certain — and blood trickled from his nose. He now wore the woman's supper down the front of his doublet, and he was wet from head to toe from the tankards of ale he had scattered on his flight across the table.

Howling laughter erupted among the patrons, and even his own companions mirthfully beat their fists on the table. Heinrich spun around on the woman. She leaned over her table, and her green eyes watched him with a mixture of pity and no small measure of annoyance. His face heated.

“Insolent quim!” he snarled, and stormed back to her table. He pressed his hands against the table, leaned over it, and put his face in hers. “If you were not a woman I...”

His words trailed off in an impotent growl. But she only narrowed her eyes dangerously.

“If I were not a woman you would what?”

“I would teach you some respect, is what!”

“My sword is right upstairs, love,” she said evenly, and Heinrich was taken aback by the coolness of her tone. “Don't let what I have 'twixt my thighs hold you back.”

No Good Deed...

At first he could only stare at her in disbelief. And then he laughed incredulously. “Me? Fight a woman? You are not only impudent, you are mad!”

“So I see you are not only a disgusting pig, you are also a craven one.”

Heinrich slammed his fist down on the table. The woman’s rondel bounced into the air and landed again with a *thud*.

“No one accuses Heinrich von Goslar of cowardice! Ÿtel! My sword!”

“Sire?” Ÿtel said, his voice bewildered by the unexpected demand.

Heinrich spun on him and speared him with a glare. “My sword! Bring it here at once! This harpy needs a lesson in manners. Go!”



HEINRICH STRIPPED OFF HIS SOILED DOUBLET AND tossed it to Ÿtel. His second caught it, neatly folded it, and hung it from his shoulder. A small crowd gathered in the courtyard outside the inn, buzzing in excitement over what was about to transpire. Duels happened, even in such a rustic corner of the Empire as this, but no one had ever seen a *woman* fight.

He paced anxiously, like an animal trammelled within a cage. It ought to have been a pleasant evening; it was a warm

No Good Deed...

summer's eve but not too hot. The sun was bright enough to give plenty of light to see by, but there was no glare to distract the combatants. The shadows stretched out with long and searching fingers as the afternoon waned, and the sky darkened in the east.

The dulling of his wits from the day's drinking had passed, and Heinrich's belly churned. He felt the eyes of the rough peasants crowding the courtyard on him, and he suddenly became aware of the ignominy that awaited him if, however unlikely, he should by some cruel stroke of fate *fall* to the sword of a woman. His father would certainly denounce him on the spot, and his friends would surely find great amusement at his expense. Heinrich tightened his jaw. He could not withdraw from the fight now, either. Too many had witnessed the challenge, and worse than the prospect of dying at her hands was the thought of being labeled craven.

If she ever showed herself.

Heinrich paced. He flexed his hands around the hilt of his sword, and sketched the occasional flourish to loosen the muscles in his back and arms. At least the crowd appreciated the deft spinning of his blade through his fingers. But whenever he looked to the door of the inn, it did not so much as budge, and the woman did not appear.

The crowd grew restless. A low murmur worked from one end to the other as they questioned whether all of this would be for nothing. Heinrich mused that perhaps he had worried himself for nothing; she was a woman, after all, and there was no face for her to lose by slipping out the back door while they watched the front.

No Good Deed...

However, the creaking of the door roused him from his private thoughts as she stepped out into the dying sunlight.

Lovely as she was under the lamps of the inn, he admitted with some chagrin that she was even more striking in the light of day, and Heinrich lamented at separating her pretty head from her slender neck. The cause for her delay was soon evident; she had taken the time to plait her long copper tresses, and pile them neatly atop her head to keep her hair from her face and prevent it from being used as a ready hand-hold by her adversary. Heinrich twisted his lip in consternation, for his hair fell into his eyes throughout his flourishing. She tugged on her gauntlets, and in this light he could see that her black leather boots were soft and supple, with thin and flexible soles well-suited to the frenetic footwork of the duel.

The woman cradled her naked longsword in her arms, and upon the sight of it, Heinrich recognized the work of a true master of his craft. The slender blade was a good four and a half spans from its hilt to the tip. Its convex profile tapered to a formidable awl-like point, and the sun glinted along the prominent rib of its hollowed diamond flats. The guard was straight and made of steel, and a matching scent-stopper pommel at the end of the waisted, red leather grip counterbalanced the blade. It made up for in the lethal elegance of its lines what it lacked in ornamentation. His own sword, with its fittings of bronze and gold and enamel, seemed suddenly gaudy by comparison, and he blushed in furious envy that she should carry so fine a blade.

The woman stepped out into the courtyard dressed in her doublet, and Heinrich scowled.

No Good Deed...

“Your doublet,” he said.

“Pardon?” she said innocently.

“Off with it!”

The woman clicked her tongue.

“Really, now. Here we are on the field of battle and you still think to sneak a peek?”

Heinrich clenched his jaw at her cheek.

“If I am fighting naked in my undershirt, so do you. Now off with it!”

“Tch. Fine then,” she muttered.

The woman undid the silver hooks fastening her doublet closed, and casually shrugged out of it. She tossed it aside without further complaint. When it struck the ground, the distinct rattle of metal plates echoed across the courtyard. Heinrich glared, and his face heated indignantly. A low murmur broke the silence.

“Better?” she said, with a teasing lilt to her voice, and made a show of turning in a circle so he might inspect her garb.

Heinrich fought not to think of the close fit of her hose around her bottom when she turned her back to him.

“Are you quite finished?” he said instead. “I don’t relish the thought of slaughtering a woman, so I would rather get it done!”

“Well, if it weighs that heavily on your conscience, you can still back out by offering your apology for your boorishness.”

No Good Deed...

He raised his sword above his head into *vom tag* and tightened his hands. "I'll not be taken for a coward!"

She sighed in annoyance and rolled her eyes. "Of course you shan't, instead you would rather die needlessly over your fool honor."

Heinrich smiled maliciously. "I don't intend to die here. My father taught me to fence from the day I took my first steps, and he was personally taught by Russdorffer himself."

The sardonic click of her tongue echoed across the square as she dropped into *alber*, her sword loose in her hands with the hilts at her hips and the blade pointed at the ground. "That base showman. Well, at least you will offer the spectators a mildly entertaining show."

"Enough talk!" he snarled, his temper flaring at the show of disrespect. "Lay on!"

Tense silence filled the courtyard while they circled one another, and shifted from guard to guard as they sought an opening. The woman moved lightly and smoothly, and trepidation tempered his wrath. She stepped with precision and without wasted motion. Through all his bluster, Heinrich never considered she might *actually* know what she was doing, and his palms grew cold as he tightened his hands round his sword hilt. If his adversary noted his new disquiet, it did not tell upon her features.

Heinrich found an opening to his liking first, and struck a powerful falling blow at her left shoulder. His adversary casually stepped into the strike and snapped her sword up into *ochs* to deflect, then followed with a stiff

No Good Deed...

thrust at his face. He wound around her blade into *ochs* himself to displace her counter, and thrust down towards her hip. She hung her point to divert his strike, then snapped her sword around for a short-edged cut at the top of his head. The movement came so quickly Heinrich could not cover in time. And yet rather than the expected bite of her steel into his scalp, she instead tapped him upon the head with the flat of her sword, and lightly darted back out of range again, with her sword held in *pflug*.

He stumbled back a pace, astonished, and touched his fingertips to his head. They came away without blood, and when he caught the playful smirk tugging at her lips he realized the strike was meant only to humiliate him.

His blood boiled at her insolence, and he attacked again with renewed determination. And again she responded with quick precision, her sword dancing through her slender hands without a single wasted motion. She stepped lightly around him, toying with him like a cat playing with a hapless mouse. She was good. Very good. Heinrich did not know if she was truly *better*, but her speed and directness quickly took advantage of the showmanship that dazzled his audiences on the tournament field. Every strike he threw was met by her sword. Yet she did not press her advantage, no matter how many times she opened him for a fatal counter.

Heinrich's breath came in ragged gasps. Sweat poured down his face and slickened his palms. His chest burned; he had not fought such a prolonged bout since drilling in the yard in Goslar. Yet still she did not make a move to end the fight. If she was winded by her exertion it did not tell upon her features, and not a hair was disturbed from the plaits

No Good Deed...

piled atop her head. Her expression did not slip once from that confident smirk while she played with him. And the longer the fight dragged on, the louder and more exuberant the crowd became. Shouts of encouragement mingled with the ringing of steel, and echoed across the square.

Finally, she bored of the game. He struck another falling blow at her shoulder, and she countered with a wrathful strike from above. As their blades met she exploded towards him and snaked a leg behind his. One hand jumped out onto her blade, and she hooked him round the neck with her pommel. A quick twist of her hips and shifting of her weight was all it took to throw him backwards over her hip.

Heinrich landed hard on his back, striking with enough force to drive the air from his lungs. His sword clattered from his hand, and a collective groan erupted in the square. His head bounced off the ground and his vision blurred. When it finally cleared again he found the woman's sword-point leveled at his throat.

He did not move. He dared not even scramble back from her. Instead, he rose up on his elbows and met her eyes with resignation. The playful sparkle was gone now, replaced with cold and deadly intent. His heart hammered against his breastbone, and ice formed a ball in his gut. An expectant hush settled over the crowd surrounding the square in anticipation for the final, fatal stroke to decide the contest.

And yet it did not come.

Heinrich twisted his lip impatiently. "What are you waiting for?" he said, his voice ragged from his exertion,

No Good Deed...

and the prospect of death staring him in the face. "Finish it!"

"Had I wanted to kill you, love, I would have in the first exchange," she said coldly. And though she had yet to strike, there was no mistaking the lethal threat in her voice. "I offer you one last chance to apologize."

The gathering watched him expectantly. The woman's sword-point hovered so close to his throat he could nearly feel its awl-like point pricking his vulnerable flesh. Self-preservation and pride warred with one another in his head.

"Well?" she said.

"All right! All right!" he pleaded.

"You were a pig."

"Yes, I was a pig!" he said, not quite able to keep the irritation at being so coerced out of his voice.

"Tch. Apologize like you mean it, love."

Heinrich closed his eyes. He gritted his teeth and tightened his hands into fists. In the darkness shutting out the woman, her sword, and the crowd around him he drew a deep, steadying breath. Then he opened them again, and looked up solemnly upon his adversary.

"My behavior was unacceptable, and I most humbly offer you my sincerest apologies for my assaults upon your person."

He let the words hang between them. The audience watched and waited, and the woman's green eyes peered deeply into his, as if searching him down to his very soul.

No Good Deed...

And then she lifted her point away from him, and that smirk — and now he admitted it was every bit as alluring as it was aggravating — returned to her lips.

“Apology accepted,” she said, and started back towards the inn.

“Wait!” he called from his back, still unable to find his legs as the relief of his life being returned washed over him. She paused and turned back. “May I at least have your name?”

She tilted her head back proudly, and she curled a corner of her lips into a smile.

“The name is Elisabeth Soesten, love. I suggest you remember it.

