



A Crack in the Wall

A story which reminds of 'Pyramus & Thisbe'
but with a surprisingly different plot

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Far away, somewhere, and ages ago, there were two farms bordering on each other. Both had been part of a Roman estate with a spacious and sumptuous villa, but as the times of the Empire were fading from living memory the surviving structures of the main buildings had become split up between two feuding families.

The source of their animosity – some minor quarrel about a waterhole – had long been forgotten, but they'd stayed aloof from each other ever since and told their children never to speak to 'them overthere' or take any notice and over generations it had grown from a habit into an iron rule – breaking it was unthinkable.

Both families had built walls on their property so as to better ignore the existence of the other and inside the ancient villa passages had been blocked up and common walls enforced with fresh layers of brick from the cellars up to the roof.

This internal barrier had been built long ago and as the area was prone to earth tremors, over time, cracks had appeared in its masonry.

On the one side of the wall lived a boy and on the other a girl being completely unaware of each other.

One sultry afternoon, when the boy was having a siesta in his upstairs room, he was woken from his slumbers by a sweet voice, which seemed reaching him from afar.

Going after the sound he found it came from one of the cracks that spidered the wall and by putting his ear to it he heard a woman's voice singing a sad song about two lovers desperately longing for each other but doomed by fate never to meet in life. It ended in tragedy.

When she had finished he was moved to tears and dying to know who the singer might be. Ignoring his upbringing he put his mouth to the crack and called her.

She was startled by the sudden sound of his voice and it took her a while ere she realized where it came from. Hesitatingly, she moved to her side of the wall and, at his constant pleading, at last answered his call. They talked for almost an hour and promised to be back at it the next day.

From then on, they were talking together every single day, never mentioning their secret to others, of course, for they both knew all too well the dire consequences should a rumour of their trespassing reach the ears of the pater familias.

The boy, Lysander by name, was on the brink of manhood and plunged headlong into the hot quagmire of his first serious love affair. Within a week of their first meeting he couldn't

sleep anymore, tossing and turning in his bed longing for her and when, at last, he dozed off, he dreamt of her, holding her, kissing her, or protecting her from lions, wolves or thugs.

– You must be in love, old boy, one of his cousins remarked teasingly, one night, when he was hardly touching his supper.

– Who's the happy wench?

He had declined to answer and retired to his room in a flush. The next day, at the crack, he poured out his heart to her and said he couldn't live without her any longer.

His sudden and definite outburst frightened her. She was several years his elder, more mature and she had been very careful not to let her emotions get away with her.

She enjoyed their secret conversations as much as he did, she even craved for his amorous advances as her life had been devoid of those, but she wasn't eager to put her way of life at risk, dull though it might be, at least, not yet.

– But you hardly know me, she ventured.

– I know you in my heart and I'll always love you.

– You only know my voice, she said. I may be as ugly as a bat.

– I'm hearing your voice in my dreams. It can't but come from a sweet, rosy mouth set in a lovely face. In my eyes you'll always look beautiful.

This made her pause. In describing herself in one of their earliest exchanges she had not been quite honest with him, and on purpose. He'd told her he was twenty-one, which she held for a white lie. By the way he talked..., sixteen seemed more likely.

He must still be a boy. Could she trust him to keep his mouth shut about their little affair?

The last thing she wanted was to be exposed as a traitor to her family's principles.

Her uncle would be furious. The Great Mother may know what he'd do to her.

So, when the boy asked her name and the way she looked the first things that had sprung to her mind were the name and looks of the slave girl she took to her bed when she felt in one of her dark and desolate moods.

That night, after supper, Lysander's father took him for a walk.

– What's ailing you, boy? he asked.

– Me? Nothing, sir.

– You're not eating well. Are you feeling sick or something?

– Oh no, sir, I'm feeling quite well.

– Hem, fine. I want you to do something for me.

– What ever you say, sir.

– My brother-in-law is in need of an extra hand. Tomorrow, at sunrise, bring out your horse and be off. It'll be for a week, I guess. And hand him this letter on your arrival. Tell him to read it straight away, and pulling a sealed envelope from his bosom he handed it to his son.

– Now, let's go inside, he said, it's getting late.

Back in his room, the boy went straight for the crack to tell his love he must needs be away for some time. When he listened, however, he was taken aback by hearing vague whispers and strange noises, like someone grunting and other indiscriminate sounds.

He durst not call and in the early morning, when yet he tried, there was no answer from her. So, when he rode, it was with a heavy heart.

After three days of silence the girl was becoming really worried about him. Had he been found out and punished? She prayed not. His tender words, his verbal caresses, she missed them dearly. Was she in love with him? How indeed could she be, if she'd never even seen him?

She was a girl who in youth had felt abandoned and lost. Both her parents had died when she was still a child and she'd been adopted into the family of her mother's brother. They all were nice to her, but she never quite belonged.

When she grew up and blossomed into a very pretty girl her uncle had arranged for her to be married to a landowner – one very rich but old enough to be her grandfather – who lived in the capital and owned a farmstead nearby.

At first, she had been outraged, but coming to an understanding that her uncle only sought her best interests, she'd swallowed her tears and her pride.

All, however, had come to nought.

On his way to the farm to meet his young bride the man fell from his litter and broke a hip. He died a cripple before the year was out.

It had been seven years since. She was now in her early twenties, still attractive, but too old for a lucrative marriage. She would age and die at this farm a spinster. The prospect hadn't bothered her too much, so far, as her uncle allowed her a comfortable life style. He wasn't a bad man after all and his occasional visits to her bedroom she took for granted. Being under his protection she was spared her cousins' more troublesome advances. They would fight over her.

All very well, but this boy from 'overthere' had stirred the old feelings of her younger self, her ideals and high hopes of finding a man worth her love.

Could he be that man? Oh, if only she got a chance of meeting him face-to-face.

After a fortnight the subject of her thoughts was on his way back from his uncle's farm and doing some hard thinking himself.

Had his father sent him on his way with some sort of Bellerophontic letter for a reason?

Which could this reason have been?

Had someone alluded to his dealings with a girl from 'overthere'?

Had his errand been meant as a punishment or as a mere distraction?

His uncle had been quite surprised at seeing him. He wasn't expecting him at all, so much was clear from his expression, but after reading the letter he had burst into laughter, slapped him on the back and said:

– Well, boy, you're very welcome indeed. I'll see to it you'll be put to good use with us.

And he didn't fall foul of his word. Every next day he'd set him a task of Herculean proportions. He'd worked like an ox, eaten like a wolf and slept like a log.

On the third day of his labours he'd got the knack of it and found he quite liked the challenge. He'd got stronger by the day and more decisive and after twelve days of hard work he'd become an image of young Hercules himself.

Then his uncle had granted him a day of rest – he'd slept until lunchtime and spent the afternoon with his first cousins, all girls, who felt his muscles and giggled a lot – and on the following day presented him with an antique gold coin for his efforts and sent him home with another sealed letter and a lumpy bag of provisions.

It was a very hot day. When he came to the stream that bordered the property of 'them overthere' he led his horse down the bank to drink and took a plunge to refresh himself. Floating in the shallows he noticed peals of laughter drifting from farther upstream and following the bank to the next bend he found a gaggle of girls playing with a ball and splashing around with abandon. On the opposite bank he saw two slaves in attendance. They were taking it easy, enjoying the spectacle, but had their cudgels at their fingertips. At once, he dived for cover and found himself a spot in the undergrowth from where he could feast his eyes unobserved.

Might 'she' be one of them?

There was this somewhat elder girl with a very nice figure, full breasts and a particularly fine face. It almost saddened him to admit she, being a brunette, didn't fit the description of his love and, on second thought, perhaps was a bit old for him. With the other girls, though deserving a second glance each on their own, she was beyond compare.

Besides, they also were brunettes. No sight of a blonde naiad amongst them.

Later, when the girls had climbed the bank and started to dress, he left his hiding place and went back to his steed. It was still where he'd left it, quietly grazing.

Within the hour he entered the gate of his homestead and was welcomed by his father who looked him up and down approvingly and embraced him.

– Well, well, was all he said.

While reading the letter from his brother-in-law the grin on his face grew ever broader and, at last, he laughed out loud and jovially punched his bewildered son in the chest.

– You've done well, boy, I'm proud of you, and they embraced once more, forcefully, as vigorous men do.

The first thing Lysander did on entering his room was to call her by name through the crack, but there came no answer. She wasn't in.

Supper took longer than usual, as everybody was curious to hear about his exertions and how their kin were doing. When they were finally satisfied and retired he ran up the stairs to his room, two steps at a time, anxious to hear her voice again.

She was lying on her bed unable to sleep. During the first week she'd still been expecting him to call any day, but now, after a fortnight had passed, she'd given up hope of hearing from him ever again. He must have been found out, disgraced, perhaps even incarcerated or sent into exile.

A tear ran down her cheek and she groaned in agony when, suddenly, there came a voice:

– Xanthe? Are you there? Xanthe, it's me. I'm back.

A wild joy sprang up in her belly and spread her whole body. The next moment she was at the crack.

– Oh, my love, how I've missed you, and she started to laugh and to cry in the same instant.

They talked for hours deep into the night and kissed the wall between them when, at last, they parted. They'd reached a conclusion, they must see each other, come what may.

However, that proved easier said than done. Every plan they discussed over the week after met with the same objections. She couldn't think of a viable pretext for leaving the premises on her own. She had to ask her uncle's permission and he would never let her go without an escort. Nagging him about it would only raise suspicion.

– But you could quietly walk away, couldn't you? It can't be that hard to get away unseen even by day.

– Perhaps it ain't, she replied, but it will be my absence that'll cause trouble, afterwards.

– At night, when everybody's asleep, there will be none the wiser. Besides, why care about trouble afterwards? It won't be your trouble.

– How do you mean?

– Because you won't be around anymore. You'll be with me and I'll take you far away from here.

His words struck her by total surprise.

– **But you...** can't do that, she almost exclaimed, lowering her voice to a whisper after the first two syllables.

– You bet I can, he laughed with youthful boldness, I've got a horse and some money to spare. We'll be long gone ere they will even know of your disappearance.

It was not how she had envisioned their first encounter. Though she loved hearing his voice and was anxious to see his face, she balked at so drastic an action. She wasn't prepared to throw her fate to the winds before she was absolutely sure he was worth it. And suppose, at seeing her, he would have second thoughts and not follow up on his words...

– Please, love, let's take one step at a time. Let's see us first and plan our next move after.

– But you love me, do you?

– Of course I do.

– Then, why not run for it and be together? Tomorrow night, if you like.

– One night we'll be together, I promise, but spare me some time. I'll have preparations to make.

Lysander had been trying to sound out his father about chances of her becoming part of their family.

- Why do we never speak of them overthere, sir?
- Why you're asking?
- I was just wondering. Are they our enemies?
- Hem, sort of.
- Did they ever bring us harm?
- They must have.
- Did you ever have to have word with them about anything, sir?
- Did you?
- Oh no, sir, I wouldn't dare.
- Keep it so! They're a pain in the arse, the lot of them. The less we hear of them the better. I won't have anything to do with them, anything, you hear! and he had cursed for good measure.

This summed it up for him. If 'them overthere' held the same opinions of his family – and there was no reason to believe otherwise – their liaison was for ever doomed.

If they wanted to be together, which he craved, running away was their only option.

In their latest exchange she'd thwarted his straightforward ambition, but lying on his bed after, he'd come to the conclusion that the best way of action was eloping with her on the first occasion. Why wait any longer? Her idea of a series of rendezvous was far too risky. They would get caught. Be it at the tenth or the first, either would be equally miserable. If she objected, he would simply abduct her, yelling or fighting, he didn't care. He felt sure she would comply in the end and be grateful. Love is a wonderful solace.

With his new determination he turned on his side and slept with a smile on his face.

Unaware of his intentions she devised a plan of her own, which she kept to herself too.

First, she took up a habit of making a round of the courtyard, every night after supper.

To the curious she explained she slept the better for it, but her true reasons were to observe the routine of the night watch and to decide the most advantageous exit point in the dark.

After a week she took Xanthe, the slave girl, with her for company.

This girl really was a gem, blonde, agile and quick-witted. She had been born to the house, her mother being heavy with her when they'd bought her from raiders. Her father must have been one of those, a blue-eyed brute of a northern tribe. Since her own childhood she'd always had a feel for this golden child who could pass for a princess, if fate would have it.

She, finally, had made up her mind on how to arrange her meeting with Lysander. Her girl – without knowing it yet – was to play a major part in the plot.

They would go to the meeting place, the two of them. She would hide herself at the closest range and when he called her name – the girl's name! – she'd send her ahead to meet him.

The girl should pretend to be her, his secret lover, and act accordingly. That shouldn't be too difficult.

From her hiding place she herself would have ample opportunity to observe his manner and appearance and if she liked what she saw, she would come forward; if not, the girl should

follow the script till the end, without letting him go too far – she would stand ready to intervene, if necessary – and, eventually, find a way to get rid of him.

It was a bold scheme, but she trusted the girl with its execution as, more than once, she had witnessed her ability to extricate herself unharmed from awkward situations. Being a slave and a girl she couldn't do without guile, or call it finesse.

Like herself, by the way! All this to prevent her from getting entangled in a relationship with a man whom, in the end, she might not approve of, however sweet his tongue.

In the meantime, Lysander had become rather restless. Every afternoon he had pleaded with her not to delay any longer and, at last, she consented.

– Tomorrow night we can meet, my love. It'll be full moon, so, at least, we may catch a glimpse of each other. Does it suit you?

– How can you ask! Suit me? I've been begging you for over a month now!

– Less than two weeks, dearest. And I've not been sitting idle on any of these days. I was thinking of the sacred grove on our common border for a meeting place. It's neither too close nor too far.

– Good thinking! It's crossed my mind too. It can't be seen from the house and there's ample cover on the way to. A half hour walk, at most. Oh, I can hardly wait. What time shall we meet?

– Three hours after moonrise?

– Three hours? Why not two?

– Because it may take two hours for our household to retire after supper and for my escape I'll need some..., say, wiggling room?

They both laughed.

– Well, three hours it is, he said. Oh love, I'm so excited.

– You can't be more than me.

After their conversation he couldn't contain himself. He had to do something. Pacing his room he decided to have a look at the meeting place in advance. He brought out his horse and cantered off.

In the grove, all seemed peace and quiet, except for the birdsong, which was deafening.

Within a rough circle of age-old trees there was a natural clearing with herbs and tall grasses, the plumes of which tickled the horse's belly.

– No lack of bedding and soft, he couldn't help thinking.

He crossed the glade past a solitary ash of great antiquity, a lonely beacon in a sea of grass. Beneath its shadow growth was thinner allowing mosses to cover the crooked and twisted roots, with patches of tiny pink flowers in between. There was a sweet smell on the air.

– A fitting place for our tryst, he told himself with conviction, as if he had been a connoisseur of trysting places all his life. He would tell Xanthe of it, tomorrow afternoon, at their last meeting at the crack.

Making his round of the glade he noticed a raven taking wing from the edge of the wood. Approaching the spot he happened on the carcass of a roe deer. It hadn't been there for long, two or three nights, he guessed, and it was lacerated.

– Damn'd wolves, he muttered under his breath, should bring a cudgel, tomorrow night.

That same night, after finishing their tour of the courtyard, she took Xanthe with her to her bed. When the girl moved to give her satisfaction, as she was wont to, her mistress embraced her and, for the first time, they made love to each other equally.

– I've to tell you a secret, the mistress whispered after a long silence. You can keep secrets, can't you, Xanthe?

The girl, being still in a reverie, just nodded.

– Then, promise me, dearest, you will never ever speak of anything to anybody of what I'm going to tell you.

She promised.

– Will you swear by the Great Mother to keep for ever silent about it?

She took the oath.

Then her mistress explained to her everything she needed to know and what she wanted her to do.

– Will you do it for me? she pleaded.

– Oh yes, mistress, sighed she, for you I'll do anything and involuntarily stretching her body pushed her groin hard against hers.

The elder girl felt the thrill running through her and, for a moment, was tempted, but she controlled herself and sent the girl to her own bed. She mustn't be reckless and now not at all.

The next day, after supper, while making their usual round of the courtyard she told the girl of the meeting place, the glade in the sacred grove and the solitary ash.

She had been talking to Lysander in the afternoon and he'd sounded so elated at the prospect of their coming together that she'd warned him not to be too conspicuous by his happiness lest his family grow suspicious. The young fool had laughed it off.

Once back in her room she told the girl to undress, which she seemed only too eager to do.

– Stupid slave, she bitched, there's no time for that now. Here, put this on.

She'd found her a passable tunic of her own and an old hooded cloak of dark wool.

Hardly, she could send the girl to her lover in her slave rags!

– Now, sit down on the stool and let me do your hair.

After brushing the golden strands and making two thin plaits running down from her temples, which she connected at the back of her head, she inspected her stand-in and didn't find her wanting. In the moonlight she could pass for a goddess.

– Now listen, Xanthe, she said, herself surprised at the metamorphosis, from now on, you're me. You're not a slave, but a young lady. So, behave like one when you meet this man. Be nice to him, let him have his way, but not all the way, you understand?

The girl nodded solemnly. Already, she was feeling a different person. The rich clothes, her hair, she felt like treading on air.

– I shall be close by. If I like his demeanour, if I like his face, I'll come forward to relieve you. It will take five, ten minutes, at the most. If I don't show up, rebuke him, tell him to get lost. I know you can do that.

The girl smiled. She knew it too.

– And if he insists? she asked meekly.

– Don't you worry. I don't think he will, but if you can't keep him off, I'll be there to protect you. Just call for me. The both of us will be more than he can handle.

For a moment they stood staring at each other. Then her mistress embraced her and said:

– It's time. Oh Xanthe, I'm so grateful to you, knowing the risk you're taking on my behalf. Please, please, don't get caught, and she kissed her passionately.

– You go first. Don't let anybody see you. Go to the meeting place and wait for me. I shall follow you in a quarter of an hour. We must never be seen together, and with a heavy heart she loosened her grip on the girl and showed her out.

Standing at her window, she feared for an outcry any minute, but there was only silence. When she was about to don her cloak and leave, her door was opened from the outside. She swung round at the sound in terror and saw her uncle enter the room. He had been drinking and was in a boisterous mood. He kept her engaged for quite some time.

How easy it was to beat the night watch if you knew their beat. In her dark cloak and hood Xanthe reached the first clump of shrubs beyond the pale without difficulty. There she waited until, on their round, they'd passed her again and from then on could follow the path to the grove unseen. She knew her way well, as the family with their freedmen and slaves, at the turning of the seasons, used to go to the glade in procession in celebration of the Great Mother.

On those occasions, however, she had always been in the company of many, bearing torches and singing, now she was out in the dark on her own surrounded by the eerie noises of the night. The full moon was already half way up the sky and lighted her path, but on some stretches the canopy of trees was so dense as to block the pale light completely and she had to feel her way in inky blackness.

Once, she was startled almost to death by a loud crack nearby when, at the next moment, a huge shadow crossed her path, perhaps a buck she had frightened, but what agonized her most was the distant sound of wolves howling at the moon.

After nearly an hour she came to the clearing. The moonlight playing with the still plumes of the grass created a magical atmosphere which she felt shy to disturb. Gathering herself she entered the sea of grass and waded to the giant ash. In the coolness of the light it seemed cast of silver.

Standing at the mighty trunk, she glanced around. Amid the strange beauty of the place she felt uneasy and forlorn. She climbed the tree and perched on one of its lower branches awaited the arrival of her mistress.

Lysander had been delayed. Much to his chagrin, late this very afternoon some guests had arrived from the market town to the south. Supper had been prolonged by more than an hour and before the household had retired and it was safe for him to try his luck, the moon was approaching its zenith.

He slipped out to the stables and, when the night watch was patrolling at the far end of the compound, brought out his steed and led it into cover. He waited for them to pass out of earshot again, mounted and took his way over soft turf to muffle the sound of the hooves. Once over the top of the gentle slope beyond the pale, he kicked his horse into a gallop. He was late, but he hoped his love would have the good sense of granting him some leeway.

In the meantime, Xanthe was close to despair. She had been waiting for over an hour and her mistress hadn't shown up, neither had anyone else. She was anxiously watching the way she had come, marked by a small dip in the line of trees at the end of the trail her passage had left in the grass. She never noticed the rider coming from a different direction slightly behind her back and approaching the tree. When he'd halted under it and called out her name she almost dropped from her perch.

– Xanthe...? Xanthe, are you still here?

She jerked her head sideways to have a look at him, but the bulk of the trunk blocked her view. After a while, rounding the tree, he moved into sight. Again he called for her, though softer now, his hope of finding her already fading..., until he noticed her dangling legs.

– By the Great Mother, he cried ecstatically, at last, I have found you!

He had indeed. Her mistress was nowhere around. Of that she felt sure. She'd have to face him on her own. It couldn't be helped.

She climbed down the tree and approached the rider. By a trick of the goddess the full moon rode right behind his head and what she saw filled her with awe, the haloed silhouette of a young demigod. Her jaw dropped...

He looked down on her moonlit face and was equally stunned, what an adorable girl!

Quickly he slid from his horse. For a moment they stood facing each other, speechless, then he took her in his arms.

– Oh my love, how I have longed for you all this time, how I've craved this very moment.

Of course, she couldn't say the same, but remembering she was a representation of her mistress, who had made love to her only the night before, her imagination was quick to fill the void.

But who cared for words? They liked each other at first sight and felt a strong, physical rapport. She stroked his broad chest and felt the strong muscles of his arms. He stroked her pointed breasts and hard nipples and the next moment, pretending to run away, she flung her cloak into his face and dared him to chase her through the high grass. When he'd caught hold of her, they fell down laughing and embraced without restraint. They came with abandon, several times, and her ecstatic convulsions drained his resources to the last drop. Spent, they lay on their backs for a while, side by side on the flattened stalks, never breaking contact, and staring at the starry expanse of the heavens above. At last, he bent over and kissed her.

– We must leave, my precious, he said looking at the moon, if we stay any longer they will find us.

– Oh no, not yet, she pleaded, clinging to him, but he rose, regardless, dragging her up with him and putting her on her feet.

For a few moments, they stood in a close embrace, as if melted into one body, but he broke the spell.

– Come on, girl, he said, there's no more time to waste. There will come other times... While he rearranged the sacks on the back of his horse, she gathered her tunic and cloak and put them on. With a sinking feeling she watched him mount, expecting him to leave her behind to make her way back through the wood to the farm, to the drudgery of her everyday life and the quirks of her masters. Tears sprang from her eyes.

– What are you waiting for? he laughed, come on, let me ride you home.

– But you can't do that, she exclaimed between sobs.

– You bet I can, he retorted with a vague notion of *déjà vu*.

He brought up his horse next to her and lifted her by her armpits as easily as if she were a child. He settled her in front of him, side-saddle, and kicked the horse into a walk. After some time, she looked up to him.

– You're going the wrong way.

– Don't worry, I'll take you home.

– But my home is that way.

– And our home is this way.

She let that sink in. She chose not to object. Instead, she put her arms around his waist and snuggled her head into his shoulder. Appreciatively, he kissed her brow and thus they rode into the night.

Not long after their departure, the other girl entered the clearing. When her uncle had finally left her, she'd been at a loss for what to do. She'd called Lysander at the crack, but got no answer. He must still have been out. And the girl? She'd sneaked down the stairs to the slave quarters and found them all asleep, except for her. Her cot had been empty. What had become of her? Perhaps, she was on her way back, right that moment. She'd damned her bad luck, she'd damned her uncle, she'd damned herself. She could have waited, of course, but in her agitation had donned her cloak and rushed for the gate. The watch had been no problem, they were fast asleep.

Now, at the edge of the wood she stood searching the glade. The moon was still riding high, but had proceeded with the constellations and shone from a different angle. The ash was no longer silver. Lighted from behind it had transformed into a dark mass with a spooky aura at its outline. Its bulk dominated the scene and lent it an ominous aspect.

It made her shudder involuntarily.

Following the trail Xanthe had left earlier, she came to the tree and the first thing she noticed was a pile of fresh horse dung.

So, he at least had been here. But the girl? Had they met or had she stayed in hiding? Might she still be around, hereabouts? She called their names, several times, but nothing stirred. Farther down in the woods, however, the sound of her voice caused some sharp ears to be pricked.

Walking around the place for a final inspection, she happened on the spot of trampled grass where they had lain together. So indeed they had met! For an obscure reason, imagining what must have passed here, made her furious. It shouldn't have been thus.

But where were they now? If, after their romp, they had returned home, she should have encountered the girl on her way back, but she hadn't. Would she have taken a different route? Not likely...

Suddenly, a disturbing thought crossed her mind, something Lysander had said some weeks ago, which, by then, had greatly upset her. No, he couldn't have been so rash as to... he wouldn't..., would he? The girl would be in her bed by now. She must be. She had to make sure.

Without giving the place any further consideration she started to run through the grass and down the path through the wood. She was too preoccupied to notice the silvery shadows, which fled between the trees on parallel trails to hers. On a stretch of more open space they attacked. She was granted one instant for a piercing scream, which carried far and wide and made some at both farms turn in their sleep uneasily. Then a fierce wolf bit her throat and silenced her forever.

The next day, what remained of her was found by a shepherd. He had seen a gathering of birds and thought one of the sheep must have died in the open. When he discovered the bloodied shreds of her clothes he sank to his knees and let out a heartrending wail. Ever since early morning the household had been in great consternation at her absence. On hearing the distant lament, fear struck their hearts that something terrible must have occurred and when the shepherd turned up with a bloodied rag everybody broke into tears and a great shout of grief rose up in the courtyard.

On the other side of the wall the shepherd's cry hadn't gone unnoticed either and had the family seriously worried. They were missing a man and his horse. For whatever reason he must have ridden in the night and hadn't returned yet. Might some mishap, or worse have befallen him? His father became restless. He was already contemplating a search, but at the burst of lamentation at 'them overthere' he decided, firstly, he must know what was going on and he did the unheard of.

Ordering his two eldest sons to follow him, he circumvented the nearest wall and entered the courtyard of his neighbour. The place was in utter confusion, people standing or kneeling all around, crying and wailing.

Heading for the main entrance he found his counterpart, the master of the house, huddling together with his kin in the portico.

– Please, sir, he said raising his voice over the clamour, allow me. I've come to you in an hour of great grief. I'm your neighbour and I myself have reason for grief too. Regarding our common plight I'd like to have word with you.

Gradually, then suddenly a deadly silence descended upon the courtyard, as all tearful eyes focussed on the daring trio standing before the master.

He seemed dumbstruck at first. He still couldn't fathom how his favourite niece, whom he had held in his arms only hours ago, could have come to such a horrible end in the woods. Perhaps, this man could shed light on the matter. He stepped forward and, for a while, they stood facing each other in silence. The man didn't resemble the ogre he had imagined him to be from his youth. He seemed quite a reasonable fellow. Slowly, he stretched out his hands, which the other grasped thankfully.

– Follow me, sir, he said and led him inside.

Both were practical men, prepared to cut corners as they saw fit. They organized a search of the surrounding woods in which all able-bodied men of both households were involved.

Overcoming their mutual embarrassment, in the end, the former strangers appeared to get along rather well. The results of the search, though, were meagre. Apart from a pile of horse dung, a cold comfort indeed, there wasn't much to go by.

It led to several speculations, but none of them could account for the disappearance of the rider. If he and the girl had met in secret, as some supposed, why had he failed to return?

The slave girl was another complication. She must have accompanied her mistress, like she did every night in the courtyard. Had she perished by wolves elsewhere? Of her they hadn't found any trace.

The next day, a pyre was built in a field off the premises. At sundown, the sorry remains of the poor girl were burned in attendance of the whole household and their neighbours.

Later that year, both families partook in the procession to the sacred grove in celebration of the Great Mother. The occasion was particularly festive, as under the giant ash two couples pledged their marriage vows, the eldest son of the one family with the eldest daughter of the other and vice versa.

The separating walls were slighted and the remaining cracks plastered over. It took less than a year for the age-long feud to become a vague memory, a folly of past generations.

To his family Lysander's disappearance always remained a mystery. They never heard of him again.

Yet, over the years, he must have fared rather well, as his name appears on the register of the kingdom as a holder of a beneficium in a remote part of it.

His wife's name is mentioned also. Apparently, at their wedding, she'd called herself after her former mistress. She was smart enough never to disclose anything of her true identity to anybody, not even to her husband and thus, as a mistress, honoured the oath she once took as a slave.

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Did you enjoy the tale?

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