

In the heart of the castle

The traveler was enthusiastic. She didn't count on finding a castle so close to where she was staying. She had been told that it was no big deal, just a pile of stones that for some reason insisted on holding on even though its owners had long abandoned it. But the traveler was deaf to those words. She knew very well that a place was much more than the people who had inhabited it.

It didn't take her long to find the ruins of the castle, but it did take a little longer than planned. In spite of the fact that he was moving around a lot, orientation didn't charm her. After all, she moved by instinct, guided by everything that interested her instead of following signs and routes that had already been laid out. It was not that she was completely unarmed: she used maps, had a compass that she made less use of than she should have and even a sextant that she did not know how to use. She was counting on someone to teach her sooner or later. For now, she was getting by. Her biggest help was her smile. She would talk to people, to plants and rocks, and they would tell her which way to go. There is nothing that makes a day better than seeing someone genuinely excited about something. It is a concrete expression, a spark of illusion in the eyes and a smile from ear to ear. It is the absent-mindedness of someone who is still thinking about what they want to do, planning every detail and imagining how it will happen while listening to you half way through. And the moment their interest is aligned with what you tell them, suddenly all their attention is focused on you, examining you and longing to hear more.

This is the kind of person who was the traveler and is the reason she always got where she needed to go. Maybe it was late, maybe she came in from somewhere that definitely wasn't meant to be an entrance, but she did get there. And this was no exception. She was convinced that she was lost and would have to turn around to find another way, but at the last moment she saw it. It wasn't big, as she had imagined. Imposing? Of course it was. It was indeed a pile of rocks, but what a pile of rocks! Not a single wall was intact, but the facade had survived quite well. She approached it by taking little steps on the grass, with some shyness but a big smile on her face. Quietly, she said good morning to the castle and came a little closer, until she touched it. There was not a stone like any other, neither in color nor in shape. Some still bore the marks of those who had chosen them to help in the creation of the building. She passed her hand through them, full of tenderness.

It took a lot of people to erect a building like this. Many people were involved in the creation and beyond those who had lived within its walls; the heart of the castle was not there. At least, not completely. It lived in the hearts of all those who had intervened to create it, in the overturned illusion and the delicacy used. Each stone was carefully chosen and placed, some still bearing the mark of its creator. Each wall designed to withstand a gale and resist the passage of time. And it may not look as good now as it did in the beginning, but at some point it had been someone's home. It had been a refuge, a home, a fortress. There were people who

had felt safe amidst what were now ruins, and it seemed to her that the castle needed a little love.

Humans tended to abandon their creations once they strayed from their original aesthetics or purpose. They looked like God in that way, but she was not surprised. The Goddess was more charitable, but even she ended up forgetting her children. And humans weren't half as focused, so it was just... natural.

She turned around, circling the place. From behind it was even worse, only the perimeter and some bits of wall had survived. Whether there had been several floors or a roof was no longer known. Someone had been diligent and had taken most of the remains... unfortunately. She hoped they would have reused them instead of throwing them away, but what could she expect? The traveler caressed the stone lovingly, murmuring words of encouragement. It was the smallest castle she had ever seen, but it was certainly beautiful.

As much as she would like to, she had no way of returning it to its former glory. But there was beauty in his present state, and she would have given much to make the people who lived three steps away from it see it the same way. Even the ruins need some love and care from time to time. They carry so many memories, good and bad. Without proper attention, loneliness takes over and they end up being prisoners of the wind and nostalgia. They reject the visitors instead of waiting for them with illusion.

But the traveler had been given a wonderful welcome and she knew just by looking at it that it was not too late. Someone had been looking after the castle and she was beginning to wonder who it was when she heard some delicate footsteps behind her.

She turned around and when she saw the newcomer, the green eyes of the traveler shone brighter than usual.

A Shifter. Of course. Someone like her would understand the needs of the place. After all, the Shifters were Atalandes, children of the Goddess. Curiously, they used to be more intuitive than their mother. Some of them, at least. She gave her a smile that was briefly reciprocated before she lost sight of her within the few remaining walls. She followed in her footsteps without hesitation, ready to make a new friendship. The newcomer seemed human at first sight; small, brown eyes, very dark. Delicate forms and a small body hidden by a long white dress that she dragged through the grass. Rings and necklaces of fine silver, so subtle that they could only be seen when they shone in the light. But to expert eyes like those of the traveler she could not deceive them. Her hair gave her away. Black, smooth and long, even beyond her waist. There was wind around both of them, but her hair hardly changed. And if you looked closely, more closely, if you changed your vision for a moment and really saw what was there, you would realize that it was not hair... but feathers. An intricate tapestry designed to deceive everyone who lived in ignorance, to protect strangers from something they might not understand and her from their reactions. But the traveler could see it and knew what it meant. It had been a long time since she had encountered a Shifter, however. She used to get lost in often inhospitable places and her kind liked to mingle with humans.

-It's a beautiful day.- She said politely. The Shifter turned to her, smiling again.

-Indeed. You're not from around here, are you? You are welcome.

-Thank you. It's a beautiful castle, I'm glad I came.

The Shifter caressed one of the walls with the same affection that the traveler had dedicated to it. She knew It just couldn't do it, but from the way the atmosphere changed one could swear the castle had just purred. Clearly the place was attached to the woman.

-I'm glad to know there's someone looking after this place. It leaves me much more relieved.

There was sincerity in her words, but it was precisely that which put the Changeling on guard. She came a little closer, looking at the stranger with attention. She was clearly human, at least at first sight. And the Shifter had an eye for such things. She didn't seem to be hiding anything, but her eyes were too alert to be just any human. Though of course, how could she ask? Luckily for her, she didn't have to. The traveler gave herself away while putting a lock of hair behind her ear, with some shyness.

-I didn't know there were any Shifters in the area. It explains why everything is so well taken care of.

-And I wasn't aware that anyone of your class was able to see these kinds of things.

Brave words for someone who lived among humans, but prejudices were commonplace and this was definitely not the first time the traveler had faced them. She wasn't sure she understood it all, but if she was disguised and sure to fool everyone, she wouldn't want to be discovered as if nothing had happened either.

-We are not. We are not. There was an... incident, a long time ago. Since then, I can... see. Really see.

She didn't remember who she was before, but she hadn't made much of an effort to do so either. When she first opened her eyes after the incident, everything around her seemed to have changed. It was the same and at the same time it wasn't. The colors were more vivid, the sounds clearer. There was information everywhere, waiting to be discovered. It seemed to her that somehow everything was breathing. Since it had happened she had encountered all kinds of beings that she could not believe existed, but they were there. Within reach, living in this world like any human. Some mixed, others retreated to the woods and other to remote places. Others built their own cities, well hidden.

It had not taken her long to decide what she wanted to do. She abandoned everything to give herself up to the roads. She did not write, she did not photograph, she did not collect any evidence of her findings. But she made friends and got up every day with an indomitable energy. Her thirst for knowledge was insatiable and that is why her feet never stopped. She had no way to stop, but... neither did she want to. The Shifter, however, looked at her with pity.

-Who gave you such a terrible gift?

The traveler blinked, confused. Terrible? It was the best thing that had ever happened to her.

-I do not know. I do not remember. But it's not a bad thing, it's... it's my life, now. I wouldn't want it any other way.

The Shifter came closer and put her hand on her cheek, caressing her. She could see her crow's feathers placidly gathered behind her.

-You and your kind are not made for this. It is too much. Sooner or later, it consumes you. There are strong ones, of course, but... - their eyes wandered up and down the body of the traveler - it does not seem to be your case.

-W-What? -Why do you say that?

-Oh, look at you. You're a walking ball of nerves. You can't stop, can you? You need to know everything and everything you already know becomes tasteless instantly. I've seen it before. It's been a while, though. And you are so alien to your condition that you have confused me at first. So cheerful, so carefree... you didn't realize how fast you were going, did you?

She went to answer, but she was not able to. She started to go over in her head the steps she had traced to get there. What was the last place she had visited? Some loose images appeared in her mind. A green city, hidden in the treetops. Two children with horns fighting for a little wooden train. They soon became blurred. She remembered the faces of the people she had met on her travels. Were the ones she could focus on kind or condescending? Had she misunderstood everything? At what point had she left? Wait, where did she come from?

-Oh, little one... I didn't mean to scare you. I'm afraid there's nothing you can do, it's not worth getting upset about. Come, you are very... anxious.

Taking her firmly by the shoulders, she managed to get the traveler to sit next to her on one of the stones that made up the castle. She was hyperventilating, which although normal was undoubtedly counterproductive for her.

-Is this... real? -What should I do?

-Nothing, I just told you. Assume it. Make peace with it. You could wait for it to happen here in the castle; I'm sure it won't object to some eternal company.

The last sentence seemed to finish scaring the traveler, who stood up and walked away from the Shifter with panic in her eyes. She looked at the façade of the castle and the crow woman could see her heart breaking. She was not able to accept, of course.

-It's all right, my dear. I will continue to take care of it.

She nodded first, before slowly beginning to deny with her head. As soon as she managed to take her eyes off the building, her feet took on a life of their own and made her walk away. She ran until she was out of sight while the Shifter looked at her unperturbed. Once there was nothing more to see, she stood up and after smoothing her dress she caressed the front of the building again. Unlike the human, she did have a real reason to be there.

-It doesn't look like it will last much longer, does it? - I'll have to warn someone in town, or the coyotes will come for her first. There's no reason to let that happen.

She stayed there a while longer, comforting the place and checking that it was in good condition. Or at least, in all the good condition that some ruins could be. She picked up the trash on the ground, put up the sign that said its name and counted every stone to make sure no one had stolen any. By the time she was done, the place seemed to glow with happiness of its own and she knew she could leave.

After saying goodbye, she walked calmly through the grass. This had not been her strangest encounter; the castle used to attract all kinds of people and stories. However, she had been quite curious.

It had been at least three hundred years since she had known anyone who had been punished in this way. She couldn't help but wonder what the little traveler would have done to deserve it. What was behind such irritating happiness and naivety: anger? greed? passion? She would have liked to find out.

However, she knew very well that there was no longer a way. In the forest, far from the castle, the woman's steps had stopped. She was sweating and was not able to control her breathing. Everything was spinning around her, everything she had learned in the last few weeks was echoing in her head while the trees were shining around her, making her dizzy.

It was not long before she hit the ground with her body; still a hand on her chest, still trying to keep her heart going. But she had committed a crime and now she had to pay the price. Far from there, in a little room someone was toasting to her death, rejoicing in the triumph.

Even the children of the Goddess could be spiteful and vengeful when their pride was broken. And to the misfortune of the poor traveler, she had learned this information too late.

