

Sword

By Kallie

The windswept hillside was still and calm as, while the morning dew was still clinging to the grass, Rosalie de Artois stepped out of her carriage and coolly surveyed the site of duel. The air was calm, the sky was a little overcast and full of white clouds, and they were a comfortable distance away from the prying eyes of the nearby town. As she looked across the hillside to the lonesome oak tree that marked the meeting spot, a short way distant from the stony road that wound up into the hills, she could see her rival was already there, waiting under the tree's branches along with another woman. Rosalie grinned. The mere sight of her rival was enough to fill her with the warm thrill of anticipation.

Rosalie started to walk, her eyes set on her destination and her opponent. As she walked, she was deeply aware of the comforting, familiar weight of her sword at her hip. She was itching to use it. The rest of her outfit was neat, fine, and functional, sufficient to keep her warm from the morning's chill without belying her nobility and status as a swordswoman. She wore a simple, steel cuirass over her fine, scarlet tunic, with a flared silk lace at her collar and a braided, gold cord leading to the lapels at her shoulders. Her long, pale hair was also braided, and ready for combat. Even at a distance, she could see that her rival's outfit was similar, but perfectly contrasting at the same time. Her rival's tunic was a rich, dark blue instead, and she wore a long overcoat that came down to her knees, and there were a number of personal touches too: a silver necklace instead of lace, and a brace of white flowers instead of a cord. Her rival's hair was dark instead of pale, and was worn in a bun rather than a braid. The two of them were a curious mirror image of one another, the differences between them only serving to highlight how similar they ultimately were. Rosalie was unsurprised by that. It made perfect sense, given how long they'd known each other.

"Good morning, Rosalie," her rival hailed her once they were close, her crisp, lightly accented voice always a delight in Rosalie's ears.

"Good morning, Delphine," Rosalie replied. She could see Delphine smile at her, and merriment dance in her rival's pretty, amber eyes. Delphine da Laurie, the light of her life.

"I don't suppose you've come here to plead her for mercy?" Delphine teased. She did a good job of making it sound serious.

"And why would I do that, when I'm so clearly going to beat you?" Rosalie retorted. Delphine's smile grew wider.

"What ridiculous slight are you two dueling about?" asked Fleur, the third woman there with them on the hillside. She rolled her eyes pointedly, but her smile was indulgent. She was a trusted friend to both, and was there to serve as their witness. Unlike the two combatants, she was wearing a simple dress.

"A few weeks ago," Delphine explained, "I was charged with protecting the young Duchess Florentine on her journey to attend her father's banquet. As feared, bandits were waiting in the woods to waylay us and kidnap the Duchess. I was able to fight them off, but-

"But I just so happened to be traveling the same way," Rosalie interrupted smoothly, grinning. "And I was able to intervene at a most fortuitous moment, leaving the Duchess very impressed and very, very grateful.

gratitude.” Fleur sighed. “I suppose you helped her find a very... intimate way of expressing that

firmly. “I cannot overlook such a dishonorable violation of my charge’s innocence,” Delphine said

“Oh?” Rosalie teased. “Did you have your eye on the Duchess’s innocence, Delphine?”

“Now that would have been extremely dishonorable,” Delphine replied. Her eyes were twinkling.

Fleur rolled her eyes again. “Well, if the two of you have agreed to duel again, I can’t stop you. I will fulfill my duty as witness, if only to make sure that you two idiots don’t hurt each any more than necessary. Are you both satisfied with the place of the duel, and with myself as the witness?”

“I am,” Delphine said.

“I am,” Rosalie echoed.

“And are you both satisfied that a duel to first blood will satisfy your honor in this matter?”

“I am.”

“I am.”

“Very well.” Fleur took a few steps backwards, giving Rosalie and Delphine plenty of room. “Prepare yourselves.”

Rosalie and Delphine each turned on their heels and took five precise, measured paces away from each other. They turned back. Each fixed the other with a steely glare, but both of their eyes were shining with glee. Rosalie never knew any rush, any joy, any pleasure like the pleasure of facing Delphine, and she knew Delphine felt the same. Their rivalry was their bond. They lived for it. Besides each other, they were unmatched duelists. For years, they had been pushing each other to become better, each of them needing to win like they needed air and water. Rosalie never felt as alive as when she was sparring with Delphine, be it with words or steel.

“Once you draw your swords, there is no going back. This is your last chance to back down.” Fleur announced, adding under her breath: “Not that either of you will.”

At the same moment, Rosalie and Delphine both drew their swords. The soft scrape of the steel against their scabbards seemed to echo across the quiet hillside. Rosalie lifted her blade, her sleek rapier pointed straight at her rivals throat. Delphine held hers closer to her body, ready to guard. Both of them were smiling. Rosalie could see that her opponent was already panting a little, simply from anticipation. She knew she should have been thinking about the duel ahead, mentally reviewing all she knew about how Delphine thought and deciding how best to counter her techniques. Instead, she was simply admiring how pretty and handsome her rival looked, standing there with her sword in her hand. A few locks of her hair were hanging free and blowing loosely in the wind. She was incredible beauty, and Rosalie always allowed herself to become distracted by beauty. Fortunately, in this case, she knew it wouldn’t matter. She had a secret weapon.

“I’m going to beat you, Rosalie,” Delphine called out, her rich voice cocksure and full of confidence. “Just like the last time.”

Rosalie laughed. “Do your talking with your sword, then.”

“We’ll see what you have to say when I’ve got you on your knees,” was Delphine’s retort. Rosalie couldn’t help but grin with sheer joy. She felt so alive.

“Are you both ready?” Fleur asked, sounding ever so slightly impatient with the pair’s posturing.

“Ready.”

“Ready.”

“Then... begin!”

Nobody moved, and silence hung in the air. After a couple of seconds, Delphine tilted her head to one side. “What’s wrong, Rosalie? You always attack me right away. You have no patience.”

“I’m waiting,” Rosalie answered.

“Waiting for what?”

“The sun,” Rosalie explained, smiling. “The sun is peeking through the clouds behind you. It’s in my eyes. I’m waiting for it to go away.”

“What?” Delphine laughed derisively. “No it isn’t. I can’t see any sun on the ground, nor any blue in the sky.”

Rosalie shrugged, not lowering her sword. “Well, that’s what I’m waiting for you. Turn and look, if you don’t believe me.”

For a moment, Delphine stared at her in disbelief. Then, she laughed again, louder than before. “So that’s your ploy! I can’t believe you. You must truly know that you can’t win. Come on, Rosalie, this is beneath you! This is the kind of thing schoolyard children fall for.”

“It’s not a ploy,” Rosalie insisted, still smiling. “The sun really is in my eyes.”

Delphine rolled her eyes, and then relaxed her guard just a hair. “Fine. As you please. I suppose we will just have to wait.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“No.”

“I really don’t know why you’re being so suspicious,” Rosalie sighed. “Look, can’t you see it on my sword?”

“What?”

“The light, reflecting off my sword,” Rosalie tilted her sword slightly one way and then other to illustrate. “Can’t you see it? Isn’t it obvious that it’s reflecting the sun?”

Delphine peered across the distance between them, squinting slightly to try and see. “Of course it’s reflecting something, Rosalie. It’s metal.”

“I don’t think you’re looking closely enough,” Rosalie admonished. “Look. Look properly. I’ll make it easy for you.” She dropped the tip of her rapier a little, showing her rival the flat of her blade. “You

must be able to see it. The way the light glints on the metal. It's so bright. I'm shocked that you couldn't see it at first. It's so eye-catching. Almost dazzling, in fact."

"Well, I suppose..." Delphine said. She didn't sound convinced, but she was still looking.

"Let me show you again." Rosalie started to move her rapier from side to side, tilting it as she did. She could see Delphine's eyes follow the bright gleam on the surface of the blade. Rosalie wanted to laugh, but she was careful to keep her face sincere. It was working! "You can see it, can't you? Especially when I move my sword left and right like this. Left, and right. It just makes the reflection of the light stand out so much more, doesn't it? You probably can't help but notice it, can't help but follow it with your eyes. It's only natural. Especially for a skilled duelist like you. You've been training to always keep your eye on your opponent's sword, haven't you? At this point, it must be second nature for you."

Delphine nodded, although she barely seemed aware of it.

"Exactly," Rosalie continued eagerly. She started to soften her voice, making her speech nice and calming and rhythmic. "Look at it. It's so bright! It's impossible to ignore. Far too eye-catching. So, we just have to wait a little bit. Wait, and watch."

"Is this... a trick...?" Delphine asked, but her voice was already slowing. Rosalie could tell she didn't know what was happening. She couldn't see the trick. It was perfect.

"Of course not, Delphine," Rosalie reassured her. "How could it be a trick? I'm just asking you to wait a little, and stare at my sword. What kind of trick would that be? That's just silly, really."

Delphine seemed to droop slightly. "Yes... silly."

"Yes," Rosalie confirmed. "So you see, you can simply wait, and watch my sword. Just keep watching. Don't drop your guard. We wouldn't want that, would we? We both want a fair duel." She noticed Delphine grip her sword a little tighter, seemingly without noticing that she'd started to lower it. She smiled. Her rival was becoming so suggestible. "If you're really see eager to do something, why don't you focus on your breathing for a moment? Breathing is so important, Delphine. You know that. And you wouldn't want to let me distract you from it. Why don't you take some nice deep breaths, and make sure you're calm and in your rhythm."

Rosalie could see Delphine's chest start to rise and fall, her breathing becoming more pronounced. Instead of filling her body with strength, the influx of air was clearly making her relaxed and light-headed.

"That's good," Rosalie said softly. "Now, watch the sword. Remember? That's what you're supposed to be doing. Watch the sword. Watch that glint of light, as it catches on the ridge down the center of the blade. See how I can make it flip from side to side, just by turning it a little? Doesn't it just help you see how bright it is?"

"I..." Delphine began, but then she forgot what she had been about to say. "Yes," she finally agreed, her shoulders slumping. She suddenly seemed so drained and weak.

"That's good," Rosalie repeated. She kept moving her sword from side to side, tilting and swinging it like a pendulum. "Not long now, I'm sure. But I know waiting is hard. Especially when we're both carrying such heavy swords." As she spoke, the tip of Delphine's sword dropped a little more. "They're getting so heavy, aren't they? I can barely keep mine aloft. I will, of course. I need to keep showing you this reflection. You're still looking at it, aren't you? But I'm sure yours is just as heavy. Wouldn't it be nice to just put it down for a moment?"

“N...” Delphine made a kind of weak growling sound. Sensing resistance, Rosalie made her voice even more soothing. It was hard for her to keep her excitement under control. She was practically trembling at the sight of her beloved rival, so vulnerable and defenseless.

“Just for a moment,” Rosalie said. “After all, we still need to duel, don’t we? And you don’t want to lose all your strength before we clash blades. Would it be so bad for you to just put it down for a moment? I know you. The moment I made a move, it would be back in your hand in a moment. You’re so quick, so skilled. What’s the harm?”

Delphine said nothing, but Rosalie could see her rival was wavering. Her eyes were wide and unfocused, but her head was still turning from side to side as it tracked the motion of Rosalie’s sword. She looked like she could barely understand what Rosalie was saying. Rosalie would never have believed that Delphine could look any more beautiful than she always did, but something about seeing her like this, blank and mindless, was unspeakably erotic.

“So heavy,” Rosalie cooed. “It would be such a relief to just put it down for a moment, wouldn’t it? I can see how heavy your arms are feeling. Mine feel the same way. You’re losing all your strength, before we’ve even begun. That just won’t do. You need to rest.”

Delphine’s only response was to murmur something indistinct. She was still following Rosalie’s sword with her eyes, but she was obviously struggling to keep her eyelids open. Rosalie could tell she was ready for the final push.

“Why don’t we just take a break?” Rosalie suggested. “We can do that. No-one can stop us. We can simply have our duel another time. Whenever you like.” It wasn’t true. As Fleur had said, the duel had begun. There was no going back. But Rosalie was willing to bet that Delphine’s mind was far too addled to remember that. “What do you say to that, Delphine? Doesn’t that sound nice? You can put down your sword. You can rest. You can relax. Just put it down.”

After an agonizingly tense moment, Delphine let her sword drop to the ground. It clattered awkwardly, slipping through her unresisting fingers like it had become the heaviest thing in the world. Delphine didn’t seem to notice or care. She was utterly mesmerized. Her eyes were still open, but they were no longer fixed on Rosalie’s sword. They were simply staring into the distance, seeing nothing. Rosalie couldn’t believe it. A surge of adrenaline had her shivering. She licked her lips. Suddenly, her mouth was dry. She couldn’t believe it had worked.

“Now, how did you do that?” Fleur asked, looking bemused.

“Hypnosis,” Rosalie answered. She knew there was no longer any danger in giving the game away. Delphine wasn’t really listening anymore. “Something I picked up on one of my recent misadventures.”

“Fascinating,” Fleur murmured. “She won’t be happy with this, you know.”

Rosalie grinned. “I’m counting on it.”

Walking slowly to savor the satisfaction of her victory, Rosalie crossed the distance between her and her helpless, hypnotized, defeated rival. Delphine didn’t move a hair. She was completely entranced. Rosalie was able to get so close to her that she could smell her rival’s scent. It was intoxicating. Rosalie couldn’t help but think about all the things she could do to Delphine in this state. Seeing her so vulnerable was irresistibly provocative. But in the end, Rosalie settled for something simple: stealing a kiss from a rival’s lips. Despite the hypnosis, she found Delphine’s lips eager and responsive. Rosalie was grinning from ear to ear. The kiss was even sweeter than the victory.

“Delphine, kneel,” she commanded.

It was time to make her victory official. Slowly and deliberately, Delphine settled herself on the ground, on her knees. Rosalie had never seen her rival looking so submissive. She carefully leveled the tip of her rapier at Delphine's throat, and made a tiny cut. First blood. A single, crimson droplet spilled from the cut, and Delphine awoke. She blinked a few times, stirring, but then froze solid when she saw Rosalie looming over her.

"You... how?" Delphine demanded.

Rosalie winked at her. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Delphine's mouth flapped impotently for a moment, struggling to form a hundred protests against what had happened. But in the end, it compressed into a thin line, and she gazed up at Rosalie with steel and fire in her eyes. "I cannot overlook such a gross offense against my honor. You win, I accept it. But I challenge you to another duel!"

Rosalie laughed. She'd never felt so alive. "I accept, my love."

Special thanks to these wonderful patrons, who helped to make this possible:

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