

An extract from *The Breath of the Rose* by Andrea H Japp

On the road to Alençon, Perche, September 1304

Nicolas Florin was adamant that Agnès de Souarcy should be installed in the stout wooden wagon that gave the impression of a tomb on wheels. Minute arrow slits on each side allowed the occupants a limited view of the outside world. These were covered by leather curtains so that in the event of an attack no arrow could pierce the narrow openings. Four Perche horses were needed to draw the wagon.

The five men-at-arms requested by Nicolas Florin sat beside the driver or were jostled about on a cart trundling along behind. Agnès's belongings were contained in a small chest while, in an astonishing display of extravagance for an inquisitor, those of Nicolas filled an enormous trunk. An escort of five men-at-arms for one woman seemed an exaggerated precaution, but the Dominican was fond of such excesses. He saw them as visible proof of his newly acquired power.

His eyes were glued to Agnès, watching for the slightest sigh, the merest tensing of her jaw. Indeed, it was the reason he had given the order for her to travel with him in the wagon instead of in the cart. Did she regard the gesture as a mark of respect for her social status? Florin could not tell, and the thought had irritated him from the outset of their journey. Things were not going according to plan and had not been since the day of their first encounter when he had gone to notify her of the beginning of her period of grace. Did she really think she could get the better of him? Or that he would show her mercy? If this were the case, she would soon be disappointed. He lifted the leather flap and peered out at the sky. Night was falling. Since sext they had been advancing at the horses' slow but steady pace. She had not once raised her eyes from her hands clasped upon her lap, or uttered a single word, or even asked for water or a halt in order to relieve herself – something Nicolas would have been only too glad to agree to in the hope that she might be humiliated into wetting her shoes or the hem of her skirts in the presence of one of his guards.

A vague feeling of unease crept into the Grand Inquisitor's irritation. Had his victim received guarantees of protection? If so, from whom? From Comte Artus d'Authon or the Abbess of Clairets or someone more highly placed? But who could be more powerful than the man behind the imposing figure who had paid him a visit at the Inquisition headquarters in Alençon? No. He was behaving like a scared child. The bastard was adopting the haughty air of the sort of lady she aspired to be, nothing more.

She raised her blue-grey eyes from her hands, which were joined in prayer, and stared at Nicolas. He felt an unpleasant warmth suffusing his face and diverted his gaze, cursing himself as he did so. There was something peculiar about this woman – something he had not taken the time or had been unwilling to see. He tried now to analyse what he felt, but without much success. At times he had experienced the thrill of terrifying her, just as he did the others. But then all of a sudden another woman appeared, like a secret door leading to a mysterious underground passageway. And that other woman was not afraid of him. For some reason, Florin was quite sure that Agnès had no control over these transformations. Had he been an unthinking fanatic like some of his brothers, he would no doubt have seen it as proof of demonic possession. But Florin did not believe in the devil. And as for God, well, he had little time for Him. The pleasures life had to offer to those who knew how to take them were of greater concern to the Grand Inquisitor. Among the many he had condemned to death for sorcery or possession, Florin had never come across any convincing proof of the existence of miracle

workers or witches.

His annoyance got the better of his cunning and he blurted out:

'As I am sure you are aware, Madame, the inquisitorial procedure permits no other counsel than the accused himself.'

'Indeed.'

'Indeed?'

'I am aware of that particularity,' she said in a voice whose confident tone humiliated the inquisitor.

He stifled the anger welling up in him and the accompanying urge to slap her. He knew he should have held his tongue, but the desire to watch her face turn pale was too overpowering, and he continued, forcing himself to speak softly:

'It is not customary to reveal the identity of the witnesses for the prosecution, any more than the content of their accusations . . . However, because you are a lady, I may grant you this privilege . . .'

'I have no doubt that you will do all that is necessary and correct, Monsieur. If you do not mind, I should like to take a short nap. The long days ahead require me to be rested.'

She leaned her head against the back of the wooden bench and closed her eyes.

Florin's eyes filled with tears of rage, and he pursed his lips for fear he might utter an oath that would reveal his agitation to Agnès. He was vaguely consoled by the words of one of the most celebrated canonists: 'The aim of trying and sentencing the accused to death is not to save his soul but to uphold public morals and strike fear into the hearts of the people . . . When an innocent refuses to confess, I resort to torture in order to send him to the stake.'

Agnès had no wish to sleep. She was reflecting. Had she won a first victory in the long battle for which she was preparing herself? She sensed this man's puzzling hostility towards her and his exasperation. Is it your still-innocent soul that protects me even now, Clément? Thanks to him Agnès knew that Florin was using the first of many tricks in the inquisitor's arsenal.