

KC KINGMAKER



DAUGHTER
OF
SHERWOOD

ROBIN HOOD
AND HER MERCILESS MEN

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← 1 →



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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Daughter of Sherwood \(Robin Hood and Her Merciless Men, #1\)](#)

[Author's Note:](#)

[“Three things that never come back: The spent arrow; the spoken word; the lost opportunity.” | –William George Plunkett](#)

[Chapter 1 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 2 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 3 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 4 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 5 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 6 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 7 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 8 | Little John](#)

[Chapter 9 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 10 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 11 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 12 | Little John](#)

[Chapter 13 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 14 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 15 | Will Scarlet](#)

[Chapter 16 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 17 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 18 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 19 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 20](#) | [Robin](#)
[Chapter 21](#) | [Friar Tuck](#)
[Chapter 22](#) | [Alan a Dale](#)
[Chapter 23](#) | [Robin](#)
[Chapter 24](#) | [Little John](#)
[Chapter 25](#) | [Will Scarlet](#)
[Chapter 26](#) | [Robin](#)
[Chapter 27](#) | [Robin](#)
[Chapter 28](#) | [Robin](#)
[Chapter 29](#) | [Robin](#)
[Chapter 30](#) | [Robin](#)
[Chapter 31](#) | [Robin](#)
[Chapter 32](#) | [Robin](#)
[Chapter 33](#) | [Robin](#)
[Chapter 34](#) | [Robin](#)
[Chapter 35](#) | [Robin](#)
[Chapter 36](#) | [Robin](#)
[Chapter 37](#) | [Friar Tuck](#)
[Chapter 38](#) | [Little John](#)
[Chapter 39](#) | [Will Scarlet](#)
[Chapter 40](#) | [Robin](#)
[Chapter 41](#) | [Alan a Dale](#)
[Chapter 42](#) | [Alan a Dale](#)
[Chapter 43](#) | [Robin](#)
[Chapter 44](#) | [Little John](#)
[Chapter 45](#) | [Robin](#)
[Chapter 46](#) | [Robin](#)
[Chapter 47](#) | [Little John](#)

[Chapter 48 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 49 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 50 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 51 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 52 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 53 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 54 | Little John](#)

[Chapter 55 | Robin](#)

[Chapter 56 | Robin](#)

[About the Author](#)

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Camelot Untold:

Realm of Sin

Realm of Ruin

Realm of Kings



Author's Note:



D *daughter of Sherwood* is a dark fantasy romance retelling of the legends of Robin Hood. Here, Robin is a woman. The Merry Men are merciless, morally grey, vicious, and they're obsessed with their fiery heiress.



Graphic scenes of violence and sex abound. Please read the copious trigger warnings below, as I would hate for someone to read this book without knowing what they're getting into! There are many heavy subjects involved.



Trigger Warnings: Abandonment, abduction, auditory hallucinations, BDSM, blackmail, blood, captivity, childhood trauma, choking, death, degradation, depression, domestic violence, dubious consent, extortion, gratuitous sex, gratuitous violence, group sex, mental illness, mentions of childhood molestation, misogyny, objectifying, PTSD, sexual assault, trauma.



I hope you enjoy the book!

-KC



“Three things that never come back: The spent arrow; the spoken word; the lost opportunity.”

–William George Plunkett





Chapter 1

Robin



“Her fever has broken. Finally.”

I let out a ragged sigh of relief and lifted the damp cloth from Mama’s brow. Across from the bed, the sun’s dying light shone through an aperture in the wall, basking my mother in a sickly glow. Every drop of perspiration dripping from her face was illuminated.

Father grunted a response behind me. He stood in the corner of the room, stiff-backed against the wall. Making sure not to get too close, lest the sickness seep into his pores and infect him.

Really? I thought. No “That’s good,” or praise be to God for leaving her with us for another night? Just a grunt.

Though the Almighty might call her up to Heaven soon, I would fight with everything I had to prolong her journey. I couldn’t imagine giving up, whereas my father apparently couldn’t imagine giving a shit.

It was the same as it ever was. He couldn’t be bothered—lost in his thoughts, staring at the polished wooden floorboards at his feet. However, he didn’t seem to mind if his daughter risked infection from his wife’s mysterious illness.

I was the fodder.

He folded his arms around his body, hugging himself tightly, chewing the inside of his cheek.

My brow furrowed. *Is that a rare showing of vulnerability and worry I see? It can’t be.*

Feeling my eyes on him, his gaze shot up to me, eyebrows raised. “Well? What are you looking at me for, girl? Keep at it.” His pointy chin tilted past me.

When I turned back to my mother, where Father couldn't see, I rolled my eyes. It was hard to believe a veteran knight in the king's service could be so rattled and frightened by something invisible and untouchable.

Perhaps that was why Father stared at the floor with a sense of defeat: Because this was not something he could kill with a sword.

I wanted to believe Father cared about Mama's wellbeing. Truly, I did. But the sheer distance he maintained from her, and his absence of affection, belied the truth of his love for Baroness Joan of Wilford.

Deep inside, I knew my father's love for his wife had always been hidden behind a thin veil of jealousy and resentment.

While I repeated the process with the cloth, dipping it into cold water, wringing it out, sliding it across my mother's sweaty brow, I tried to ignore his lack of decency and dignity when it came to Mama.

She deserved better treatment than this.

Her eyes jerked wildly under wrinkled eyelids; hands gripped the sheets around her like a vise. And all Father could muster was a halfhearted grunt when he learned his wife's fever had broken and she might recover.

As I grew angrier at the years of weighty baggage that comes with family, steps pounded on the floorboards in the hallway behind me. Lots of loud boots.

I looked over my shoulder as a bevy of people entered the room, crowding it in an instant. Three men, with one woman in a nun's habit.

My heart lurched and sank to the pit of my stomach at the sight of the nun, who made the sign of the cross before entering.

"Sh-She's not ready." Stammering, I gripped Mama's hand tight and shielded my body over hers.

The man at the front stared down his long beaked nose at me. “Beg pardon?”

I shook my head violently, whipping my neck back and forth. “She’s not ready for Heaven yet.”

The man quirked a small smile. “Ah. Don’t fear, ma’am.” He raised a leather bag at his side, as if that explained everything.

Father pushed himself off the wall, arms unfolding, and gave me a disgusted look like I was a nuisance for being so ignorant. “He’s a physician, girl, not the angel of death.” He stuck his hand out, and the doctor shook it while chuckling. “Best in Nottingham, so I hear.” Father gave his first smile of the evening to this stranger and his gaggle of minions. “Is that right, Doctor Ashby?”

The doctor bowed his head. “My reputation precedes me, Sir Thomas of Loxley. I will do everything in my power to help your wife, sir.”

“See that you do.”

“I’ll make sure the Queen of the Lace Market is ready for her showing this month,” Ashby added with a smile.

Father’s brow furrowed. “You know my wife?”

“Everyone knows Baroness Joan of Wilford, sir. Or, shall I say, every beautiful woman within a catapult’s shot of Nottingham knows her dresses.”

Father tried to hide his flash of disdain—the tightening of his face, the tic of his jaw. “Quite right.” With a curt nod, he headed for the door, glaring at me over his shoulder. “Robin, come.”

My mouth opened. My head shot from him to my poor mother. “But, Father, I can’t leave—”

“It wasn’t a question, girl. Let the good doctor do his work. You’ve done *quite* enough.”

He said it as if I had personally hexed Mama with the spell that diseased her.

What could I say against my frigid father? What could I say to a man people called Tom the Stiff behind his back, due to his well-known unyielding demeanor and his rigid, severe stature? Any kind of debate would end up with a hand across my face.

I'd read this book before. I'd seen how ugly it could get. So, tail between my legs, too cowardly to fight him, I hung my head and left the room and my ailing mother behind. Perhaps for the last time ever.

Outside the room, Father gripped my arm and pulled me aside. He was a tall man, and I wasn't a tall woman. It was difficult to match his stern authority when I only came up to his chest. I still tried, balling my hands into fists, narrowing my eyes as I stared up at him. I wanted him to know I was angry, I just didn't want to say it.

It wasn't worth it. The last bruise on my cheek had only recently faded. I preferred to keep my pale face untarnished.

He pretended not to notice my boiling anger for forcing me out of Mama's room to let quacks pry and probe her. "Your uncle is visiting tonight."

"And?" I sniped back.

His upper lip twitched. I walked an ice-thin line.

Father looked me up and down, contempt wrinkling his face. "And you'd better be presentable when he arrives. I don't want you embarrassing me with"—his palm made a circular motion at me—"whatever *this* is."

Of course. It's always about him, isn't it?

I tugged on my waistband. "They're called—"

"I hoped you'd outgrown this perverse fantasy of being a man by now, Robin. You've seen twenty summers. You're not a man. You'll never be one."

The frustration inside me pulsed, throbbing behind my eyes. I blinked to keep the burn away, and said nothing. Just stood there, defiant.

“Change out of those fucking pants,” he ordered, “and put on a dress like a lady.”

With that, he turned and marched down the hall toward the stairs.

I called out, “What will you and Uncle Gregory be discussing tonight, Father?”

He froze. Looked over his shoulder. “What do you think?”

I think that's not a goddamn answer.

His eyes flashed to the door of Mama's bedroom. Then he was gone, disappearing down the stairs.

I let out a huff of exasperation once I knew he couldn't hear me, and marched the other way to my small room. Inside, I waded through a chest in my closet, until I found the green hood my mother had gifted me a few years back. It was immaculately crafted, like all the garments my mother, the “Queen of the Lace Market,” worked on.

This one held more significance to me than any other garment I owned. Partly due to the deep emerald green of the forest, which she knew was my favorite color. Mostly because she made it for me herself.

While holding the hood, I looked into the blurry bronze mirror at my dressing table, and tucked my shoulder-length brown hair behind my ears. I attached the hood to my tunic and pulled it over my head, content with how I appeared.

Finally, I grabbed the shortbow hidden under my bed, and the quiver of old arrows. The same bow my brother gave me before leaving for the Crusades with King Richard. Another sentimental item, for much different reasons than the hood.

I swung the quiver and bow over my shoulder, opened the small cover on the side of the wall, and perched on the lip of the window, gazing outside.

I pulled the hood lower to shield me from the sun's rays, then swept across the roof of the manor and shimmied down the vine trellis on the side of the house.

Escaping my stuffy estate for my Realm of Solitude.



Chapter 2

Robin



I went southwest away from the manor, through the barley fields. Trying to stay inconspicuous. The serfs working our land gave me small nods as I passed. Two of them tried to hide their smirks and winks.

I'd always gotten along with the workers more than the nobility, likely because I treated them like actual humans, rather than servants.

Trudging past them, I was in no mood for smiling or conversing. I cut through the golden fields swaying in the late-afternoon breeze as my bow and quiver bounced on my back. Past the fields, a great meadow sloped uphill, where cattle grazed, watched by the shepherd. He paid me no mind as two hounds scurried around his robes.

At the end of the pasture, a fence demarcated our land from the royal forest beyond. The pine and oak trees reached high into the sky on the other side of the fence, calling to me. The greenwood was a glorious sight, making me smile for the first time all day.

I took in a deep lungful of crisp air, then carefully climbed over the fence and waded into the thicket.

This was my Realm of Solitude. The place where I could be free from the confines of my family, my duties, my reality. Where I could “pretend to be a man,” as my father put it.

The truth was not so simple. I didn't *want* to be a man. I wasn't even particularly fond of them. Only in the past few years had I begun to learn the nuances and soft pleasures of being a woman, and I quite enjoyed the things I'd learned about my own body while blossoming.

That softness vexed me, however; the innate weakness all women shared, which seemed impossible to overcome in the face of brutal, vicious men. It was a physical inferiority, and with that came societal inferiority.

Dressed in breeches and a hood, with my hair hidden and my lips perpetually downturned in a scowl, I felt liberated. Free from the hungry eyes that undressed me, the knowing smiles that licked chapped lips as I shuffled through town.

It didn't matter what I was doing—shopping, visiting friends, taking a stroll along the river. A woman couldn't escape the leers and jeers of the superior sex, who believed we owed them everything. Children, obedience, submission. Men saw me as prey to be feasted upon. Weak-willed and frail. They saw an object to own rather than a human to cherish, with thoughts and feelings and opinions of her own. They saw me as an opportunity, and weren't afraid to exploit, attack, and break my resolve if it meant getting what they wanted. It happened all the time in Nottingham. And beyond, I imagined.

Disguised as a man? I avoided all that. Avoided the headache of simply *existing*.

Thus was my reality. Constantly navigating the turbulent waters of young adulthood as an unwed heiress to a sizeable amount of land. Fending off the suitors and lordlings who pined after my flesh and fortune.

Inside the forest, I ran my hands along the well-worn bark of the nearest oak tree, as if it were an old lover. I glided through the clearings and thickets and breathed in the earth and pine and pollen. Noonbirds chirped and nested. Forest fauna darted past and rustled in the undergrowth. Sherwood Forest teemed with life in every direction. Natural, intoxicating, dangerous.

Everything I wanted to be.

The forest was protected by a royal charter, which meant you needed a license to hunt game here. The king himself visited these woods for sport. The woodland stretched for days in every direction, providing the land with bountiful beauty, if only we took the time to appreciate her like she deserved.

It housed meadows and pastures and villages. People I'd never met. I'd always been too afraid to go too deep into the woods, lest I get lost and hounded by trappers, hunters, or other dangerous men.

I was not a fool. Just like how the forest provided, it also took. Every year, over crackling flames at night, we heard the stories: Awful things happened to solitary girls in here.

I didn't see the forest as dangerous or sporting. I saw it as life-giving and essential for maintaining my sanity in this convoluted life I lived.

I'd always felt I'd been born in the wrong time. I was miniscule among the ancient oaks and gnarled branches of this place. Too rebellious to be locked into a life I never agreed to live.

There had to be something *more* out there for a woman like me. I was privileged and luckier than most, surely, yet I still felt trapped by my overbearing father, my demanding mother, and this line of hierarchy I couldn't escape.

I didn't want to be the Princess of Wilford.

I just wanted to be Robin. No more, no less.

In the greenwood, I could be.

Slinging my bow off my shoulder, I traipsed through the woods until I found him in a small meadow next to a babbling creek.

My brother.

He always met me here. I didn't come to the forest every day, yet when I did, he was waiting for me. Next to the shallow creek, close to the ancient oak.

I smiled at him. "Well met, Sir Robert."

He stared back.

"You should have seen Father today. Quite a state. Mother is doing better, though. Her fever finally broke."

"That is good, dear sister."

I smiled at him, cheeks crinkling. *See? That's all I needed. A simple "That is good." Is that so much to ask for, Father? To show an ounce of caring?*

I looked away through the clearing and tree limbs blocking my view. They went on forever. My eyes moved from forest floor to canopy. "Seen anything good to hunt in here today? Seems quite peaceful."

"Enough for you to practice on. You're too big for that shortbow, however."

I let out a "pah," waving a hand at him. "Nonsense. I'm comfortable with her."

"The longbow is more powerful and damaging. Your arms are stronger than they were years ago."

"Yet still not big and strong enough to wield a longbow, Robert. I'm not you. I'm not a soldier. I'm not ... a man." A scowl twisted my face. I hated when he talked to me like this.

Robert FitzThomas was the only man who gave me hope, and saw the capability inside me. He was my greatest supporter, yet he could be an ass just like the rest of them.

"If you want to continue this farce," he said, "you can't use a child's weapon forever. Learn to use the longbow and you could become the best archer in the land."

My upper lip peeled back in a snarl. What did he not understand about me *not being strong enough* to use one? "Don't you get it, brother? My arms haven't filled out enough to—"

A loud rustling in nearby bushes shut me up.

I pivoted, scanning the trees around me, and bent my knees while drawing an arrow from the quiver.

The undergrowth continued to shiver. Whatever was in there sounded big.

I lined my arrow between my fingers, pinching lightly, slowly lifting the bow along my sight.

Yes, it was illegal to hunt game in here, with steep penalties for doing so. *But is it illegal if no one ever finds out?*

Taking a deep breath, just as my brother taught me, I pulled back on the bowstring. Everything around me—the chattering animals, the blowing leaves, the cascading thoughts—drowned away, with only my quarry in my sights and mind.

At the last, I glanced out the corner of my eye to my brother.

It nearly cost me my life.

A great boar burst from the hedge, snuffling and snarling, tusks gleaming in the late-afternoon dapple of sunlight spotting the forest floor.

My breath blew out on a whoosh, eyes bulging.

It moved much too fast to react properly—charging right at me. I had less than a second to abandon my plan of attack in exchange for my safety.

I rolled to my right, all elbows and awkwardness, landing with a crunch in a heap of dried leaves and twigs. My bow tumbled out of my hand as I braced on my palms, skinning them with a wince. The arrow I'd nocked flew out of sight.

The wind of the giant hog streamed behind me, nearly blowing my hood off my head.

I popped up onto my knees, hands shaking, swiveling my neck like a turret to try and locate the beast.

It vanished into a bush on the opposite end of the clearing.

My breath came ragged and short, chest thumping with tingling blood.

With the mere seconds I had, mind whirling, I felt blindly on the ground until my fingers touched the well-worn yew of my bow. I abandoned the arrow on the ground and opted for one at my back.

Shit, there's only two in here! Other arrows must have fallen out when—

The boar snorted before showing itself in the corner of my eye. I spun left, still on my knees.

It barreled out of the foliage like a devil-drunk madman. I could see the crazed yellow of its eyes as it bore down on me, lowering its tusks.

“Brother, help me!” I screeched.

Why aren't you doing anything, Robert?!

I crawled on my hands and knees like a spider. Vicious memories played in my head, of my father scolding me for my stupidity, slapping me upside the head.

The boar rushed past again, its tusks missing the meat of my legs by a hair's breadth.

A whimper rolled out of my mouth.

Then calm settled over me as I found my spent arrow on the ground and lifted it to my bow, rising onto my knees once more.

Breathe. Like Robert taught. This must be a lesson of his.

It was a hell of a lesson to be taught at the hooves and tusks of a beast that weighed as much as a barley-loaded wagon.

I wasn't about to let awful memories of my father beating me be the last thing I recalled before I died.

The boar appeared again, right in front of me this time, sending leaves billowing into the air.

It charged.

And I pulled back the bowstring with trembling fingers. I aimed for the leathery spot above its eyes, my aim shaky and untrue.

My fingers snapped and the bowstring twanged.

The arrow whistled through the air and struck the hog in the forehead, tearing a gratified yelp from my lungs—

Which curved into a horrified gawk as the monster charged at me unheeded, as if the fletching of the arrow sticking out of

its head was little more than a pinprick.

I was going to get trampled and die.

I fell back on my hands, losing my bow, losing all hope, crawling back like a crab.

Ten feet away.

Quickly five.

Its yellowed, frenzied eyes grew bigger even as mine did, but I found I couldn't scream while watching my impending death barreling down on me.

Then a hiss of interrupted air split the sky.

A *thunk* as a massive arrowhead plunged into the hog's neck, impaling it through the other side.

Blood sprayed, the beast squealed, and was flung sideways off its trajectory.

I screamed as the hog somersaulted face-first into the ground, drawing deep grooves into the earth as it skidded, skidded—

And halted two feet to my right.

Dead.

A thin breath wheezed past my lips.

More rustling came from the left, softer this time, and my eyes veered in that direction—

Just as a man appeared from the foliage, longbow in hand.

I suppressed a shiver at the sight of him. One part savior, one part menace. His dark eyes roved over me and I saw a gleam of something there, before thick brows furrowed, and his nose wrinkled.

He was handsome. Undoubtedly so. More than that, tall as a pine and broad as an oak, with shoulders that looked climbable. He wore a simple leather tunic, darkened to camouflage into the woods.

My rescuer stood less than stone's throw from me on the other side of the clearing.

Still positioned with my hands behind me, I gripped dirt and leaves until I found an arrow he couldn't see from his vantage. Just in case.

I nearly lost my resolve and gushed with thanks when I looked into that concerned, attractive face, chiseled from hard granite, with a close-cropped beard hiding his strong chin, and short salt-and-pepper hair mussed near his ears.

Then I remembered myself. Where I was. *Who* I was.

My face twisted into a scowl, lips pursing.

I lowered my voice before speaking. "I had it handled."

A hint of a smile curled his lips. It was a sign of mischief, head slightly tilted to the side as he inspected me from foot to hood. "Is that how you thank the man who saves your life?"

"I shot it first," I answered, trying to keep my voice from cracking or liling. "It's my kill."

He broke out into a small chuckle.

It boiled my blood.

"That hog was fitting to gore you like a pincushion, lad." He threw his bow over his shoulder. "Fair enough, though. The kill is yours."

I opened my mouth but said nothing. For some reason, I expected more resistance. Why wouldn't I? He was a man. He was clearly a hunter of some kind, and if he lived in these woods he probably had other vagrants to feed. A boar of this size would go a long way.

Is it a trick? Why has he put his bow away? Is he really that unafraid of me?

Granted, I wasn't posing a mighty threat in my current state. I'd nearly wet myself during that boar's fateful charge. I was fairly certain I was still shaking like a leaf in the breeze.

The man didn't see the arrow I had at my back, either. He didn't know what I was capable of.

A moment of silence passed. Only the gentle breeze between us, the dying sunlight poking dots into the forest floor

through the canopies.

My heart skipped a beat as I played his words over in my mind. *He called me 'lad.' Good. My disguise is working.*

“You know,” he said, taking a step toward me. It was a leisurely, dangerous step. I knew that arrogant gait as well as I knew anything. “It isn’t safe for someone like you out here all alone.”

Now his eyes gleamed with actual danger. Malice, even.

Fuck. “Someone like me?” I croaked.

He made a show of looking me up and down again. “Someone of your ... stature. And age.”

Oh. So he thought me weak because I was small and young? The man was aged enough to be my father, but his warning angered me more than scared me.

I was half-tempted to lift my arrow and demand he retreat. Then I thought of something better.

“Lucky for me,” I said, “I’m not alone.”

He froze, ears perking as every one of his senses seemed to tense at the same time.

I resisted smiling at his sudden change in demeanor.

“Is that so?” he asked, voice clipped. “And who do you have hiding in the trees, boy?”

“Him,” I said, nudging my chin to his right, to the babbling creek and the ancient oak.

He pivoted, bow flying off his back in a heartbeat—

And lurched when he saw my brother.

“Fucking hell, man!” he yelled, and then stared aghast at me.

My smile widened, as sinister as I could muster.

“Fuck this,” he said, new understanding dawning on his lovely features. *Confusion and ... fear?*

He turned tail back the way he'd come, disappearing into the trees and foliage.

I sighed, rose to my feet, and dusted myself off. Then I gathered my spilled arrows and went to my brother.

I patted the human skull sitting on the stump next to the babbling creek and the ancient oak.

“Now look what you've done, brother. Scared off another one.”

My brother said nothing.

Because Robert wasn't here.

He was dead.



Chapter 3

Robin



It was a recent development, which I believed instigated my mother's illness. She wasn't dying from something curable like scabies or the sweating sickness. Her heart and body were failing from the intractable pain and grief of losing her son in King Richard's Crusade.

We'd learned about my elder brother's awful fate just last season. While summer erupted with flowers in bloom and rich life, I imagined my brother wallowed in a trench, broken, bloodied, dying.

The death of a firstborn did something to your soul. It implanted leprous warts on your insides, tearing you down until you broke.

That's what I imagined in the case of Mama Joan.

For me, losing Robert meant losing my one advocate in this world. My guiding star and single light. The only man whose shoulder I could cry on after taking a walloping from Father.

It was a sick twist of fate Robert had to die and not Sir Thomas, my father. Not to mention he'd been the heir to the Wilford estate, which meant my father had lost his legacy—all for glory and the perceived righteous retribution in the name of God, with which Robert went to war alongside King Richard in some far-off place called Jerusalem.

It was fucking awful. It made me despise the nobility and the warmongers and makers of this world.

Call me naïve and ignorant, but losing Robert to war begged the question: What was the point? Would I ever lay eyes on Jerusalem? See the spoils of his exploits? I doubted it. Would King Richard's idea of claiming the Holy Land ever be

realized? Likely not, if the reported fierceness of Jerusalem's defenders was anything to go by.

The skull sitting on the tree stump in Sherwood Forest was not my brother's skull. It was simply a gruesome ornament I'd found in the woods a couple months ago. The head of a stranger.

The skull spoke to me. Who was I to ignore him? Especially with Robert gone and no one to talk to who could help me alleviate and understand my problems.

I felt abandoned. My one champion was gone. So I tried to keep a piece of him with me, always.

The skull had entered my life before I learned of Robert's death. Once the soldiers came knocking with the news, its grim bleached bone and vacant dead eye sockets added a new poignancy to Robert's death. The skull came alive—spoke to me more frequently.

Even now, I thought while leaving the clearing, letting the dead boar gather flies, Robert protects me from threats.

He saved me from that villainous hunter, didn't he? Perhaps he really *was* still with me, looking over my shoulder like a guardian angel.

Just who was that hunter, anyway? I'd never seen him in town, and Nottingham wasn't some grand metropolis. Wilford was even smaller. *Why was he creeping through the woods so close to my home?*

As I exited the woods, hopped over the fence onto my property, and felt my jitters recede once I was in safe territory, my mind spun with the possibilities.

Could he have been a vagabond on the run from the law? Why else would he be in the woods away from civilization? Perhaps he's a lawman on the prowl for ne'er-do-wells. A knight in shining armor or a wolf in sheep's clothing?

He was exceedingly tall, burly, and handsome, which made my body twist inside, a knot of something I didn't recognize seeding deep in my belly.

The mystery, menace, and intrigue of the man made me recall the thoughts of my “womanly softness.” I found myself wanting to retreat to my room, to explore those vivacious urges I often felt alone in the quiet hours of morning or the looming hours of night.

Perhaps I can give myself some release before Uncle Gregory arrives. Even as I tried to dash the thought away, I found my desires rising. I was frustrated, pent-up, curious.

One thing was certain: The hunter had allowed me to forget my near-death experience with the boar, for a little while. Seeing the confusion on his face when he confronted my “brother” gave me a perverse sense of control and wickedness that had me feeling powerful. It wasn’t often I felt powerful.

The dynamic of my morbid curiosity, mixed with the sheer gallantry and danger the hunter represented, plus the blood-pumping experience of the boar, shot my lustful cravings to new heights.

While marching through the field, I imagined riding his face. Thighs parted, the stranger’s tongue lapping the wetness between my legs. Strong fingers embedding in my soft, pale flesh. Hurriedly yanking my pants down over the swell of my ass, taking me in a fit of uncontrollable passion below the husks of wheatgrass.

My face felt flush by the time I reached the trellis on the side of the manor. I struggled to climb it to the roof as my thoughts became more pervasive and penetrating.

Penetrating ... I wistfully repeated the word in my head once I slipped in through the open aperture, into the confines of my bedroom.

I chewed my lip, scanning the room, unsure what I was looking for. My blood pumped ravenously in my veins. The boar and the man had misaligned my humors, I was certain.

I found myself plopping onto the edge of the bed. Blinking at my murky reflection in the bronze mirror. Tapping my boots on the floor.

Glancing over my shoulder conspiratorially, I let out a heaving sigh. Watched as my breasts rose and fell in the reflection. I imagined myself fuller in the chest, cleavage pushed together by an elegant gown—something I owned but preferred not to wear. I pictured my body filled out, my thin arms lush with color, my thighs thick.

I envisioned the hunter on his knees, behind me on the bed, staring over my shoulder at our reflection. His hand cupped the thin column of my neck, hollowing my throat as he pressed and smiled deviously in the mirror.

I'd always had a vivid imagination. It helped me in certain situations.

When I looked down from the mirror and the potent mirage on his knees behind me, my pants were to my knees. I couldn't remember when I had pulled them down, or *if* I had.

My left hand cupped my breast through my tunic, pinching my hard nipple, twisting and teasing. My right hand skittered down past my soft belly. I was slick and wet and sticky with arousal. When my thumb brushed over my engorged clit, my lips folded into my mouth to hold back my moan.

I reclined on the bed, no longer needing the mirror to fuel my fantasies. Staring up at the ceiling, I rubbed the tight nerves and lightning tore through my insides. I lifted my feet from the floor, putting my boots on the bed as I bent my knees—decorum be damned. Two fingers curved inside my slick cunt and reveled in the warmth as I played with myself, while rubbing my clit in slow circles, as I'd taught myself.

The hunter peered down at me, upside down in my vision, smiling wickedly. He whispered sweet nothings into my ear, encouraging me, coaxing me. When I blinked he was at my legs, spreading them apart.

I was riding my hand now, urgent and desperate. My hips bucked as I fucked the air and imagined the tall man's thick cock replacing my thin fingers.

Another finger slipped inside and my eyes rolled as I tried to maintain my composure. The little death was arriving like a

tidal wave hellbent on breaking down the dam that protected me. My insides were the unsuspecting little hamlet and my climax the remorseless waves set to bring everything to destruction.

The man was lifting my legs now, onto his shoulders, ordering me to obey like a good girl. “*Give me every inch of your cunt and I might let you go,*” he told me. “*I might give you the freedom you crave.*”

I shook my head, whimpering behind tightly locked lips. Flaring my nostrils as another trill of desire and need sifted through me, clawing up my spine and blossoming in my belly.

My thighs shook. My legs kicked, obediently submitting to the hunter who could snap me like a twig.

I slammed my eyes shut and gave myself to the tidal wave as it crashed through every inch of my being, starting at the surface before diving deep inside me.

My lips tore open, a moan passed through them. “Oh God!” I cried. “Please let me go, sir, and I’ll let you do anything to me!”

The eruption shot light behind my lids, like a constellation of stars that quickly dimmed as I rode the orgasm to completion and felt my fluids coat my hand.

When I pulled my fingers out of my tender seam, my body trembled with aftershocks. I flopped over to my side, rolling into a fetal position as the final moments of my climax washed over. With my arousal came thoughts of death, life, and blood—the boar, killed before my eyes; the hunter, a monument of virility.

Perhaps I was damaged, thinking such awful things in such lewd ways. It wasn’t something I particularly felt like exploring at that moment—the drive to reduce myself to a beast and forgo all my earthly possessions and willpower for the sake of sheer pleasure.

To me, there was a difference between submission and acceptance. I didn’t accept the suitors my father sent my way, or men as a whole. The ones in my town were a

disappointment, as far as I was concerned. Children trapped in young men's bodies.

But that man in the woods? No, he was different.

Even from the few, gruff words, I knew he was a commanding man. Sure of himself. A man used to getting what he wanted.

I wondered how many other men were out there like him—nomadic travelers, corrupting young women like me. The notion of having a *gang* of such men at my beck and call lit a fire inside me, and made my body twitch with another surge.

It was something that would never happen to me. With Robert gone, I was preordained to lead this mundane life as the Heiress of Wilford. In abandoning me, he'd inadvertently aided in abandoning any hope I had of escaping this place.

My fate was sealed, like the tight seams of one of my mother's immaculate evening gowns.



Chapter 4

Robin



Footsteps woke me from my dazed reverie, pounding hard on the floorboards outside my room. With my heart jumping, I yanked my pants up from my knees.

A low murmur of voices carried through the door, coming from down the hall near my mother's room.

I crept to the door and put my ear to it. I made out the muffled sound of Doctor Ashby's high voice, conversing with my father.

"I'm sorry, sir. I've tried everything. I'm hoping the leeches will take hold and cure your wife of her ailments. I've never seen a case like this. Never seen such a stubborn imbalance."

"Of her humors?" Father asked.

"Yes. Her blood is tarnished, as if by a malevolent spirit. Her phlegm green and sickly."

"You know I don't believe in such ridiculousness as malevolent spirits, doctor."

A loud sigh. "Well, if the leeches don't take hold overnight, I suggest you take her out from the pollen of this stuffy, wooded land. Bring her to a crisper, fresher place with salt in the air that might fortify her."

My father grunted.

I slapped a hand to my mouth. I couldn't understand what I was hearing. *The esteemed doctor has ... failed? And that's it? He's giving up!*

I nearly bolted from my room to call this a disgrace. *Mama's fever has broken. Surely that means she's getting*

better!

My father's deep tone gave me pause. His voice, low and rumbling, yet without an ounce of care. Transactional. "I thank you for your time, doctor. Perhaps I will take up your opinion. What chance do you give her if I don't?"

"Slim, Sir Thomas. Quite slim."

"Right. Well then."

A bevy of footsteps receded down the hall—Ashby and his band of useless nuns and apprentices.

I clenched my jaw, enraged Mama was going to die simply because this man said so. I couldn't accept it.

More boots thudded, growing louder rather than quieter. My hand wrapped around the handle of the door to open it and give my father a piece of my mind—

And it swung inward, nearly smacking me in the face.

My father looked an absolute terror; a complete transformation from the calm, businesslike sound of his voice from moments before.

He stared down at me in disgust, eyes roving over my pants and tunic. His nostrils flared and he inhaled deeply, as if he could smell my sex and sweated sheets.

I stepped forward to meet him, mouth opening—

His backhand slapped my cheek and echoed. My head whipped to the left, white light shooting behind my lids. This wasn't the stars of pleasure, but the stars of a beating in the making.

"What did I *say* about changing out of that dreadful attire, girl!" he screamed at me, taking out all his anger from being unable to help his wife.

I fought back tears and stared up at him, even as my cheek stung.

He slapped me again—his palm this time—leaving an imprint on my cheek as my head whiplashed the other direction and I let out a cry of pain.

He was trying to break me, and succeeding.

He stepped into the room, not nearly done with his punishment.

“Father!” I yelled, lifting my palms in front of my face to defend myself.

His hands gripped my wrists, eyes widening with crazed fury. He looked more like the boar in the woods than a man. “What is this? Skinned hands? Have you been gallivanting through those fucking trees again?!”

I shook my head, trying to think of a lie.

I had no time.

His fist lashed out and caught me in the stomach, punching me where a bruise wouldn't be seen.

Doubling over, I coughed and wretched, grabbing my belly, which only moments before had felt so warm and lovely.

My arms curled over the back of my head as I bowed forward on my knees, submitting to him, begging for him to stop.

“You know what I've told you about going into those woods. You're asking for unseen horrors to take you, and I won't have it! Not from the Heiress of Wilford. What would the townspeople think if they knew what you were up to in there? They would punish you as a sorceress—and you'd deserve it!”

I seethed, snarling like a wolf as I glared up at him. “W-Whatever horrors lie in those woods can't be half as terrible as the horrors in this household!”

He scoffed incredulously. It made me angrier than the pain and my poor lot in life.

All this because a useless doctor, who banked his successes on the Lord's word, had failed at his duty. I was taking Doctor Ashby's punishment from my father, because Sir Thomas couldn't well attack another well-respected *man* in town.

His boot lifted from the ground, the point of it tilting my chin. His arms were folded over his chest, a look of sheer hate and authority etched on his cruel features.

He put the sole of his boot on my face, crunching my nose. Pushed me back as my face contorted. As if he wanted me to lick his boot.

My father had always gotten a twisted sense of satisfaction from this. He was savage, in all the wrong ways. Hell, Father's vile treatment of me was probably half the reason I rebelled and sought similar features in other men—albeit ones who pined for me rather than punishing me over nothing. Men who couldn't keep their hands off to rip my clothes off, rather than being unable to keep their hands off to beat me senseless.

My father's boot peeled off my face, back a few inches. I stared at the grooves under his outsole, expected him to kick me and knock me out. I balled my scraped hands into fists at the floor, preparing for the worst of it—

“Sir Thomas!” a voice cried from down the hall.

A flurry of shuffling feet whistled through the corridor and had my father spinning around.

“What is it, Emma? Can't you see I'm busy?”

The handmaid stood in the doorway, hands clasped in front of her. She eyed me with a flash of pity, brows curling helplessly, before locking eyes with Father.

Emma curtsied and bowed her head, her drab black hair falling off her shoulders. “It's your brother-in-law, my lord. Sir Gregory has arrived.”

“Already?”

Emma nodded diligently. “He's in the courtyard as we speak, sir, handing his steed to the stableboy.”

Father grunted. He uncrossed his arms and spat down at me, “Stay out of sight, girl. Understand?”

I understood. His temperament had gotten the better of him. Now I was bruised and shouldn't show my face.

Before I could say anything in response, he streamed past Emma without a second thought for my wellbeing or a second glance in my direction.

Once he was gone down the hall, Emma hurried into the room, crouching to help me up. “Oh, you poor thing.”

“Thank you, Emma,” I groaned.

“Come, young mistress,” she said while dusting me off. “Let us get you to some fresh air.”

My brow pinched as I stood on wobbly legs, swaying from a bout of dizziness. “But Uncle Gregory—”

“Is not here yet. I did see him on the horizon, however, cresting the eastern hill.”

A gasp ripped from my throat. “Emma! Father will have your hide!”

“I couldn’t stand to see your bright face sullied any longer, ma’am. Hoping you’ll forgive me.”

I cupped her cherry-red cheek, smiling fondly at the maid I thought of as a sister. “You’re too good for this manor, dear Emma. Still, my father will take terrible retribution on you once he goes into the courtyard and sees—”

“I’m hoping we won’t be here by then. If we disappear for long enough, and he converses with your uncle once he *does* arrive, perhaps he’ll forget my transgressions.”

Hanging my head as I followed her out of the room, I used her shoulder as an arm-rest until I could walk right. My stomach felt queasy. “Oh, dear Emma. My father never forgets when punishment is due.”



Chapter 5

Robin



Emma led me through the halls and secret tunnels of the vast manor, which she used to stay out of sight while doing her work around the estate.

I'd never seen Father hit Emma—because what use would a handmaid with broken bones be?—but he certainly didn't appreciate her. Not like I did. He saw the sweet orphan girl as an annoyance. Beneath him.

My mother hired her less than a year ago, originally to help with weaving and fulling. Since Mama's illness, Emma had taken on more household responsibilities. I'd gotten to know her quite well. She was my best and only friend.

Father did not approve, and would rage if he saw me accompanying her.

Emma's grip was firm on my elbow, until I shook my head of the cobwebs and pain. As we walked over thick rugs, passing closed rooms, I noticed her face was pinched.

I never would have expected my savior to come in the shape of a reed-thin bastard girl who worked tirelessly for my family. I saw her as an inspiration. At times, I wanted to be like her—gracious, accepting, kind. It was a difficult thing to accomplish when I lived under the heel of my father.

We reached the eastern wing of the house, took the stairs down to one of the kitchens. Past that, where two cooks paid us no attention, we came to a walk-in pantry that smelled of flour, oats, and barley. A small wooden door waited at the end, which led outside to the latrines and refuse pit.

Emma's idea of escape was wading through the smelliest section of the manor to get out.

Before we reached the door, she grabbed a lit candle in a metal frame from the kitchen, and brought the lantern with us. As her hand moved for the knob of the door, I stopped her. Slowly, she turned to me, dark eyes dancing as they met mine.

“Thank you, Emma,” I said lowly. “You truly saved me tonight. But I don’t want you getting into trouble for my sake. Please, I’ll take the lantern and be on my—”

“You already said your thanks, mistress. More is not needed.” She raised her chin defiantly and sniffed. “Come,” she ordered, and threw the door open.

I reeled as the nighttime breeze washed over me. Then I smirked at her brazenness, ordering around her superior.

I followed her outside.

Past the outhouses and pit, she pointed toward a hillside made purple from the moonlight. “The road to Nottingham is just beyond—”

“I know where the road is, Em,” I said with a smile. “I’ve snuck out the back of the pantry before.”

Her rosy cheeks darkened even more. “Oh. Right. Apologies, mistress.” She gave me a shy smile, and we walked hand-in-hand to the road.

For some reason, despite the darkness, I felt much safer with Emma beside me. Lord knew I felt safer with her, even in the treacherous night, than I did inside my own house.

As we strolled down the thin road, past white fences separating neighboring estates, up and down the rolling hillside, I glanced longingly to Sherwood Forest. The black trees silhouetted against the plum sky beckoned me like a lodestone.

Sometimes, I wished I could throw it all away and *live* there. Toss aside my responsibilities and return to a basic, feral creature. Like the she-wolves of legend, who lost their minds to madness and now called the forests of England their home.

We made our way north and cut east, skirting near the forest that surrounded the town like a blanket. The greenwoods inhabited huge swaths of land in England, with Sherwood being one of the largest. Certainly the largest in Nottinghamshire, reaching from Sheffield to the north to Birmingham to the south, and beyond. The River Trent, where our town of Nottingham sat, snaked through it and spider-webbed out, feeding the forest with water and life.

I had been told you could walk for a fortnight in any direction through Sherwood and never reach an exit from the trees. Many died traversing through it, getting lost. Or the she-wolves ripped you apart. Or the sirens.

The ways Sherwood Forest could kill you were apparently boundless.

Those were mostly tall tales, I figured, handed down from traveling minstrels to try and dissuade girls like me from pursuing the lustful draw to those woods.

The trek from Wilford to Nottingham didn't take long. A few small hillocks, bends in the road, and a bridge later, we walked in through the lightly guarded southern gate of the town.

Nottingham was formidable, with a monolithic castle drawing all eyes to its center. It was there that the Sheriff of Nottingham and the other governing bodies did their work—though what work they did, I did not know.

The houses in Nottingham were mostly wattle-and-daub structures this far on the rural outskirts. The wall itself was short, squat, and hardly manned. Deeper into the center of town, where the Town Square was located, and the famous Lace Market and St. Mary's Church, was dense and city-like, with larger structures and more people.

I dared not go to the city center, to avoid nosy noblemen who might recognize me and tattle to my father. Last thing I needed was to get chastised for being without a male chauffeur, after already getting beaten by the man who was supposed to protect me.

Emma wasn't leading me into the city. She stuck to the fringes, which made me wonder, "Where are you taking me, Em?"

Her lips pursed. She couldn't stay mum for long. As we passed an alley and a rundown tavern façade, she bowed her head in shame. "I admit I had an ulterior motive bringing you here, Mistress Robin. I had plans to—"

"Say no more, dear Emma. The reason is irrelevant." I didn't want to make her feel bad for helping me. *I might need it again someday.* With a wink, I leaned in and motioned to my masculine garb. "Here, I'm not Mistress Robin. I'm simply 'Rob.' Yes?"

She snickered, nodding while her eyes crinkled with delight. "Understood, ma—sir. Sir Rob? Like your brother?"

I shrugged extravagantly, hands on hips while I gazed off like a self-important nobleman surveying my land. "If it pleases you, miss."

She laughed again, then took my hand and led me on. "You're so peculiar, Rob. Most girls dream of being seen like a princess. And here you are trying to hide it!"

"It's not all it's cracked up to be, Em. Especially when you aren't *treated* like one."

We passed another alley between two closed storefronts. My eyes swiveled as I caught movement and laughter coming from the darkness. A flickering candle in a lantern told me people were in there.

As we walked past the mouth of the alley, Emma's hand squeezed harder on mine. She turned to look away, but I didn't. I heard a rattle of dice on the street, and saw three boys crouched, adjusting their caps and elbowing each other as they eyed us.

My curiosity got the better of me. I stopped in the dark, yawning mouth of the alley, accidentally halting Emma with a sudden jerk of her arm.

"Mistr—Rob, we shouldn't stop here," she hissed in my ear. "These gutter-rats aren't worth your—"

“Emma?” one of the boys called out. “That you?” He rose from his crouch, patting his hands over his ragtag tunic and grimy pants as he receded from the darkness. He had the face of a boy, young and clean, yet dirtied by a life on the streets. Despite his age, he was tall like a man. His face tilted peculiarly at the sight of Emma. “By God, boys, look at this. It’s Em!”

The other two hurried over. We were surrounded.

The boys smelled pungent. Stranger than that, they stared at Emma like she was a goddess, smiling and adoring.

“Don’t you look good, little Em, in that clean white dress of yours?” the tall one said.

“Well met, Rosco,” Emma replied with a timid nod. “Jimmy. Tick.”

“How’s the easy life treating you? Good enough to avoid this shithouse, eh?” He gestured vaguely around him.

These boys know Emma from her past life, before she came to Wilford, I realized. She was an orphan, and I imagined these boys were, too.

“Who’s this tiny lord?” asked the tall boy named Rosco, nudging his chin at me.

I cleared my throat, to lower my voice.

Emma cut in before I could say anything. “It’s nice seeing you all, boys. Alas, I’m afraid we have somewhere to be on urgent business. Can’t hold up the master, aye?”

I furrowed my brow, even as she made eyes at me. To her, this was highly awkward, reconnecting with people from her past.

Not to me, though. It was new and thrilling, chatting with the lower rungs of society. I saw these boys as a novelty ... which I would soon learn was a horrible worldview to have.

I found myself smiling at them. Then I remembered myself and etched my bright smile into a frown, pulling my hood tighter. For a moment, I forgot my head ached and my belly hurt.

“Not to worry, Lady Emma,” I grumbled.

The boys hooted and hollered, elbowing each other.

“He called her *Lady*! Can you believe it, Jimmy? Our little Em, all grown—”

“Your destination isn’t far, right?” I added.

“You mean *our* destination, Master Rob?” she urged, bulging her eyes at me.

I knew exactly what she was trying to tell me, but I was being a brat and didn’t want to leave in that moment.

“Rob, is it?” Rosco asked, crossing his arms to stare down at me. He was a full head taller. “Little small and scrawny, aren’t you? Sure they’re feeding you enough up in that ivory tower of yours?”

“Rosco!” Emma scolded with a hiss. “Don’t talk to the young master of Wilford that way.”

“Not a worry, Lady Em,” I said, chuckling in my comically low voice.

“See?” Rosco said, smiling. “He’s a sporting fellow. Aren’t you, Sir Rob?”

“Sure am.”

“How’s your hand at dice?”

I raised a brow. Quickly flattened it. I had no idea how my “hand at dice” was. Still, not to put them off, I said, “Atrociously impeccable, my good man.”

He blinked. “Huh?”

“I’m fucking great at dice.”

The other two boys cheered again.

The shortest one, who went by Tick, said, “You’ll wanna show us then, right? Sure you can afford it, Rob.”

Emma started shaking her head, even as the boys were pulling me toward the alley. “No, no. Rob, don’t let these miscreants take all your money.”

I didn't have much, so it didn't really matter if they did. Only a few spare shillings. The boys were playing with pence, a few coins strewn about their makeshift gambling hovel.

We crouched, and I waved a hand at Emma over my shoulder. "I've got it covered, Lady Em. You go on ahead. I'll be there expeditiously."

The bucktoothed boy named Jimmy bumped me. "You talk queer, Rob. Anyone ever tell you that?"

I let out an exaggerated sigh. "Such is the curse of nobility, good Jimmy."

"Come on, come on, enough chatter. Show us what you can do," Rosco said, grabbing the die from the ground. He handed them to me. His hand was blackened with soot and dirt.

I flared my nostrils, trying to hide my distaste. My heart was thrumming at such an exhilarating exchange—something I'd never known in my boring, mundane life at the manor.

When I turned around, Emma was gone. Surprisingly, she'd decided I was fine with these boys.

I pulled out a shilling and lifted it, drawing an "ahh" from the boys, and glittering eyes. "Can any of you handle *this*?"

"Fuckin' hell, man," Tick said, swiping his runny nose with a forearm. "You noble jackoffs aren't so bad, are ya?"

Rosco slapped him in the arm. "Don't be a cock to our new guest, Tick."

I chuckled, managing to keep it steady and low, rather than bubbly and high. I knew the truth of this situation: I was only allowed in this close-knit circle because of my disguise. The boys thought I was one of them, albeit of a higher social class. Another mark on my list of how it felt being the Heiress of Wilford.

A girl, regardless of my social standing, would never have fit in with these boys. But *Sir Rob* ... well, Sir Rob was free to do as he pleased.

I played dice with the boys for nearly half an hour, until, at the end, I noticed their shoulders slumping.

My luck had been extraordinary. As I smiled and got ready to pitch the bones against the wall, I hesitated, hand raised.

They eyed each other with small frowns. Bit their lips. Looked nervously at the die in my hand.

That's when I recognized I had inadvertently taken almost all their money. It was a swollen pile of pennies in front of me, with hardly a coin in front of the others.

Not wanting to beat them down more than they already felt, I scratched my head, placed the dice on the ground, and looked over my shoulder. "You know, guys, uh ... I think I'd better go look for Lady Emma. Been a while, hasn't it?"

They nodded glumly.

"Sure has ..." Rosco mumbled. "Been torturous, Rob." He scratched his cheek, looking dumbfounded that he'd lost his money to me.

I stood, my knees creaking. Then I started to walk away, waving. "Guess I'll be seeing you guys around—"

"What about your winnings, ya dolt?" Tick grumbled. He wasn't so encouraging or nice now. His chin dipped to the coins on the street.

I shrugged. "Split it amongst yourselves, boys. My treat." I smiled broadly.

To my surprise, their faces didn't break out into grins. They looked at each other skeptically.

Rosco stood to his full height. He towered over me. Now there was a hint of menace in his tone, on his boyish face. The cordialness had evaporated, replaced by a scowl that made my pulse spike.

"You trying to take pity on us, Sir Rob? That it?"

I shook my head, raising my hands.

Rosco frowned. "Think you're so much better than us? You can teem with the filth for a few, then be on your way

back to your ivory towers?”

“I-I don’t live in an ivory tower,” I stammered, baffled at this sudden shift in tension. It was the second time he’d said it. *Was* that what I’d been doing? Playing a game with these boys, not caring about the outcome?

“Yeah, well, wherever you live got to be a shit-lot better than these streets, ain’t it?”

I chewed my lip. Backpedaled away from Rosco, out of the alley where it was brighter on the main street.

Rosco grabbed my collar, and I sucked in a gasp. He nearly pulled me off my feet as he brought me close. “We don’t want or need your pity, mate. Understand?”

“Hoy!”

The voice came from behind me, across the street. It was a man’s voice. When I looked over my shoulder, Rosco was already unhanding me, raising his hands and dusting them off.

“Hands off him, guttersnipe,” the man said. He had shoulder-length blond hair and dressed like a nobleman.

He crossed the street in a hurry, apparently coming to my rescue. The young man was tall, stiff, and handsome. More filled-out than the bony ragamuffins.

Rosco and his boys receded into the alley, grinning at me and the new haughty man who had appeared.

My heart sank as Rosco started to disappear into the shadows. It sank because I felt more akin to him than I did this random savior I didn’t ask for.

I was grateful for his aid, surely, but I desperately wanted to talk to the boys and apologize for offending them. I didn’t know what it meant to live like them, but I realized they deserved dignity just as well as anyone.

“See ya ‘round, *Rob*,” Rosco rumbled, before his dirtied face vanished into the black of the alley—not before swooping all the coins off the ground.

The long-haired man turned to me, hand on my arm. His face wrinkled with concern. “You all right, lad?”

Flustered, I jerked out of his grip and backed up. Tears burned my eyes, surprising me. I shook my head at the young man. “I, erm, I’ve got to be going. So sorry.”

Without another word, I turned and sprinted away, down the street.

“Wait!” the young man said, but I was already turning a corner. Then another corner, avoiding a passing peasant who scowled at me as he shouldered me out of the way.

In the distance, I saw a flash of white—

Emma.

She was walking from one storefront to another. A disheveled two-story affair with a hanging gable and chipped door. She knocked on it and, a second later, it opened and she disappeared inside.

I ran to the door—it closed before I could get to her.

Doubling over to catch my breath, I glanced over my shoulder. No sign of the nobleman chasing me. I raised my fist to knock on the door, and stopped short.

I’ve already done quite enough today to disrupt the balance of things here.

I didn’t knock. Instead, I noticed thin alleys snaking down either side of the narrow building. I’d been running through the town square, where large congregations of people mingled, even as the evening dragged on. Merchants settled last-minute sales, carters loaded up, men chatted on street corners.

In the countryside of Wilford, it would be quiet and peaceful. Here, it was lively and loud. Chattering voices filtered out the window of a dimly lit tavern nearby.

Taking a deep breath, I opted to disappear for a while, not wanting to get seen by the nobleman or Rosco and his friends. Or anyone else for that matter.

I went down the left alley around the building Emma had walked into. I came to a window, its wooden slat partly open to let in a breeze. Poking my head up just enough so I could see in with one eye, I spotted Emma in a room, conversing with someone. I could only see the other person's shadow from my vantage.

Shaking from the cold, my blood thundering in my ears, my boots suctioned in the mud, I stayed put.

And eavesdropped ...



Chapter 6

Robin



“Please, just take it,” Emma said in a hushed voice.

I blinked, holding my breath as I stared through the window. Stacked crates along the wall blocked my view of her, yet I could just make out the soft alabaster sheen of her work dress.

“It’s too much,” said the man hidden in the shadows where I couldn’t see. His voice was cordial, deep, and kindly. “You don’t earn enough at the manor as it is, Emma. I don’t want to put you out.”

“All due respect, Father, you don’t know what I earn. I need to make sure my sister is safe.”

A gnawing pit grew in my stomach. I put a hand over my mouth so I wouldn’t make a sound. *Emma has a sister? How have I never known that? And what is she doing in a dingy place like this? I thought Emma was an orphan, but she’s calling this man “Father” ...*

The man chuckled. “Gotten a bit snippy since mingling with the gentry, haven’t you?”

“A-Apologies, Father—”

“What have I told you about calling me that? I’m no longer ordained.” He sounded stern as he interrupted Emma. “Haven’t been for years.”

“You’re still our chaplain, sir. The best man I know. The only one worthy of holding a holy title, as far as I’m concerned.”

With a soft sigh, the man’s voice leveled out. “If I’m the best you know, you don’t know enough good men.”

“That’s for damned sure.”

The man chuckled.

“You should see the way the master of the manor treats his daughter. Worse than I experienced here.”

His voice grew concerned. “Is that so?”

My body tightened with anxiety and heartsickness. I didn’t like Emma airing my home life. Worse, it hurt to hear how she thought of her time at the estate. It sounded like watching me getting battered by my father was as much torture for her as the actual beatings I took.

Emma lifted her hands, under the archway of a room I couldn’t see into. “Which is why I want Grace to live a life outside all this. I don’t want her hired as a servant to a rich overlord, or placed with a family where she might be in danger. If I can get her enough money to leave the almshouse, she can start a life elsewhere.”

A hand fell on Emma’s shoulder, lightly squeezing. The fingers were thick, with a band of silver around the man’s pinky. “You are a good girl, Emma. Always have been. How do you envision this going? If I’m seen playing favorites by the other orphans, with more meals for Grace or prettier clothes, they’ll riot. You know how they are.”

“Aye, I know better than most.” Emma thought for a second, resting her palm on the man’s knuckles on her shoulder. It was an intense sign of endearment, if not something more. “Then hold the money yourself, until a time of your choosing to give it to her. I trust you, sir.”

A pause stretched between them. I had to let out my held breath or I’d pass out. It came out slow and ragged. My bruised face and stomach began to hurt again.

“Very well,” said the man at last. “You’d better not be giving *all* your earnings to me. I’ll not have you work yourself into poverty just so you can end up here again.”

Emma chuckled. “Of course not. I’ve enough to live on.”

“Good. Then you’d best be gone, before others see you.”

“Right. I need to go find the mistress of the manor. She became enamored with Rosco and his boys.”

The man tutted. “Those mischievous scamps. Always getting others into trouble, aren’t they?”

From my profile view of Emma, I saw her face twist with a forlorn smile. “I miss them. And you.”

“I know, Emma. We all miss you, too. But you’ve got to make a better life for yourself. Show the girls and boys here it *is* possible. Understand?”

My handmaid nodded diligently. “I do, sir. Thank you.” After a quick bow, Emma disappeared down the hall, walking past the shadow of the man.

I began to duck away from the window. Then the man’s shadow grew larger, and I desperately wanted to see what he looked like.

He walked past my window, a few feet away. I cursed inwardly because he was wearing a hood, like me, shielding his face.

He stopped at the window, facing away. Didn’t look at it. His voice changed—gone was the kindly, father-like tenor he spoke with Emma. Now it was deep, brooding, dangerous.

“If I have to reach through this window and grab your scrawny neck, I’ll squeeze and not let go until your lips are blue. And if you’re one of *mine*, I’ll make sure you’re put on triple latrine duty. Understood?”

A yelp passed through my lips. My blood turned to ice and my nape broke out in bumps.

I scurried away, frightened.

The man’s voice carried through the window, though I had no idea how he’d seen or noticed me.

“I’ve no time for voyeurs! I have places to be!”

I stumbled out of the alley, into the town square. My heart hitched when I spotted Emma walking through the crowd, in

the direction of the alley where I'd played dice with Rosco, Jimmy, and Tick.

"Lady Em!" I called out, running to her.

She spun, eyebrows jumping. A smile crinkled her rosy face when she saw me barreling toward her.

I threw my arms around her in a fierce embrace, startling her. "Thank God I found you."

"Oh! Are you all right, Lady—er, Rob?"

I smiled. "No more disguises between us."

She nodded, sighed. "Thank the Almighty for that. I was having trouble keeping it all straight."

I laughed and looped my arm in hers. I felt safe again with her by my side. I had so many questions about her meeting with that man in the almshouse.

The questions could wait. For now, I relished her friendship and closeness. All I needed to know was what I saw: Emma paying for her poor sister, who hadn't gotten fostered or bought yet.

My handmaid was a much better person than I'd even realized. It made my heart soar to know there were selfless people like her in this world, even when it was infested by untrustworthy, dangerous people like Father, Rosco, the nobleman, and the hunter in the woods.

"How did it go with those boys, mistress?" she asked as we walked out of the southern gate and left Nottingham.

I hung my head. "I think I angered Rosco and his friends, sadly."

"That's not hard to do with those rascallions. Tell me."

I fidgeted, embarrassed. "I took all their money ..."

"Robin!"

With a sad chuckle, I added, "It wasn't intentional! I just got lucky."

She trailed a soft finger down my cheek, and I winced. There was pain in her eyes when I looked into them. “After a night like tonight, I’d say you were due some luck.”

“Perhaps. When I left, I was going to give it all back to them, plus the shilling I’d wagered. They didn’t like that much at all.”

Emma’s softness hardened, lines forming near her mouth. “Oh. I see now.”

“What did I do that was so worthy of their anger, Emma? I feel like a fool.”

“No, not a fool, mistress. Just too generous and naïve.”

“I thought we were having fun, playing a game.”

She stopped me on the trail, facing me. “You have to understand, mistress, it’s not a game to them. It’s their *lives*. Boys like Rosco have nothing but their pride and dignity. That’s all they can cling onto, so when they believe it’s been wounded, they get defensive. They’re so used to the gentry trampling them, that when honest goodness shows itself, they see underhanded mischief. Once you reach out a hand to help, all they’ve ever known is the hand biting them like a viper.”

She squeezed my arms for encouragement, to emphasize her point.

I blinked with wide eyes, my lips forming a small circle. With a nod, I muttered, “I think I understand, Emma. Thank you for showing me.” We continued walking, and I gave her a sardonic grin. “I suppose it’s as Chancellor Map wrote: *No good deed goes unpunished.*”

Emma’s brow threaded. “Chancellor Map, ma’am?”

I blinked. “Walter Map? Writer of *Courtiers’ Trifles*? It’s quite popular among—” I cut myself off, gulping loudly. Then I gave her a nervous smile. “Never mind.”

“Very well. Either way, the chancellor puts it well. Much more succinct than me, I daresay.”

We both chuckled. She didn’t sound offended, thankfully.

For a moment, I'd forgotten our relative stations in life. Of course Emma wouldn't know of Walter Map, or his satirical writings on courtly gossip and anecdotes that circulated the townships these days. She didn't have time for such trivial, leisurely pursuits as reading or history.

It was getting late by the time we reached Wilford. The moon was at its zenith in the sky, bright and full as it peered through wispy clouds. My nerves began to unsettle as we drew closer, knowing I might be walking into another beating.

I desperately wished Mama would get better soon. She could wrangle Father better than I could, and usually prevented him from pummeling me.

Usually.

Being bedridden, she was helpless and useless. The textile business she inherited from *her* father would undoubtedly go into dissolution under my father's watch.

Father was a retired soldier, not a businessman or master of commerce. Mother, however, had been raised as a noblewoman. She was skilled in the arts of negotiation, bookkeeping, accounting, and business. There was a reason people endearingly called her Queen of the Lace Market. Her garments were known and sold as far north as Glasgow, as far south as Cornwall.

Therein lied the crux of my father's rage, jealousy, and animosity, I imagined. Despite his years-long service to King Richard, and giving up his son and lineage to the same efforts, and despite his unwavering loyalty in battle, Sir Thomas of Loxley would never rise to the fame and fortune of his esteemed wife.

Because Sir Thomas of Loxley married into wealth. Robert and I had taken Wilford as our titles, rather than Loxley, because it was more respected. Thus erasing my father's heritage.

Since coming into womanhood, with my curiosity burgeoning, I had secretly studied the ledgers and documents

in St. Mary's Church. I'd learned there were stipulations surrounding Father's inheritance.

Namely, that he got none. A legal agreement kept the property out of his hands until Mama Joan's passing. Even then, it would pass to her children first. Unlike our neighboring noblemen and yeomen, where the barons lorded over their estates like sovereigns, my father didn't control ours.

It was my *mother's* side of the family that gave us this great, lavish manor. It was Baroness Joan who bought and paid for the laborers, the maids, the barns, the pastures, the walls. And it was Joan who paid our taxes and tithes.

After Mama's father died, and her elder brother abdicated the responsibility of running the textile business, she took charge. Mama Joan excelled in business and commerce where others doubted her. She *earned* her moniker as Queen of the Lace Market in Nottingham, and I couldn't be more proud of her.

It made me smile thinking about her showing those curmudgeonly men that women had minds just as capable as men's minds.

The king gave my father a suitable piece of land in Loxley for his service in the military, but it was nothing compared to the Wilford estate.

It must have irked my father so mightily. He had been outwitted by my mother from the onset, and the stipulations of the dowry must have pained him greatly.

What must the neighboring lords and ladies think?

I stared at the great manor sitting on our acreage of meadows and fields. Resting peacefully under the soft moonlight.

I could hear yelling coming from inside the house, even from a distance.

Emma and I shared worried looks as we approached. Then we hugged and parted ways, so we wouldn't be seen together. She went in through the front, while I climbed the trellis into

my room. *Funny, that I'm the one who has to creep around like a rat in my own house.*

In my room, I sat on the edge of the bed. It had been a long night, yet it wasn't over. The voices downstairs were louder now. My father argued with Uncle Gregory, Mama's brother.

Glancing at my hooded self in the mirror, I sighed then tore through my closet, deciding I would finally acquiesce to Father's demands and dress in something more ladylike since my uncle was present.

I was in such a haste to change, I didn't notice the figure outside spying on me through my open window, from the shadows of a faraway tree, watching me strip down naked to dress into my gown ...



Chapter 7

Robin



The floorboards creaked under my feet as I traipsed toward the staircase, dressed in a simple green gown. I felt stiff and awkward in the dress, no longer wearing the boots I preferred. Instead, I had on thin slippers that made me feel naked and frail.

Father had told me to stay out of sight, which only made me want to reveal myself even more. Uncle Gregory was a kinder man than my father. He deserved to see what his brother-in-law was doing in his sister's absence.

Call it the brat in me, but anytime a man ordered me to do something, I fought to do the opposite, on principle alone.

My uncle's gravelly voice carried up to the top of the stairs, growing more insistent. "If the doctors can't make her better, we have to seek alternatives, Thomas. It's harebrained to think she'll simply get better on her own!"

"Doctor Ashby is one of the most renowned physicians in the land, Gregory!" My father finished his emphatic shout with a slam of his fist on a table. It made me jump as I recalled that same fist waylaying into my stomach earlier.

"He's a quack, just like the priests and nuns who surround him," Gregory argued.

Father growled, "Don't blaspheme in my house, sir. Your hypocrisy is astounding. You actually think your *alternative* is any better? A fucking madman in a straw hovel?"

"Wulfric is a healer of great repute. I've *personally* seen him clear up a case of the pox. Overnight. Skin so marred you'd think leprosy had gotten hold of them, only to be clear as a river in spring the next day."

I tilted my head at Uncle Gregory's admission, and crouched with my elbows on my knees and my chin in my palms. *Might as well let them get it out in the open before I make my illustrious entrance. Who is this healer Uncle speaks of?*

Father had never put any sort of stock in unorthodoxy. He was a follower of Christ, to a fault.

"Absolute nonsense ..."

As he trailed off, Gregory changed his attack with a softer, more conciliatory tone. "What have we to lose, Tom? She's your wife. My sister. I can't let her wallow here in agony. It's a death sentence. Surely you would do anything to save her?"

Father let out a heavy sigh. His voice sounded transactional again. A bad sign. It was how he sounded when Doctor Ashby gave him the grave news.

"Don't be foolish. Of course I would. My fear is Joan would not make the trek so far north. She would die on the road."

"My sister is heartier than you give her credit for, Tom. It's only two days' ride."

"Two days through *Sherwood*, up to Barnsdale."

"Right. We will go slowly to make sure she's comfortable."

"There's nothing comfortable about the forest, Gregory. What about bandits and vagabonds?"

"I will take her myself, old friend, to guarantee her safety. I've brought guards with me."

I thought I'd seen a band of men stationed in the courtyard when I snuck through the fields to get to my wing of the manor.

To my utter amazement, it sounded like Father was actually considering the trek. He hardly ever left Wilford. Even more, he wasn't a brave man. He was a practical one. A healer named Wulfric who lived in the depths of the Barnsdale Forest up north in Yorkshire screamed anything *but* practical.

Father's voice lowered. I could hardly hear it now, so I crept halfway down the flight, putting my ear to the wall to listen closely.

"No," Father said, "I'll not trust anyone else with my wife besides myself."

Gregory sniffed. "Fine. Then accompany us. I won't let my sister out of my hands, either."

"I'll need to think on this overnight, Gregory."

"I don't know if Joan has that time, Thomas."

I scuttled down the rest of the steps, deciding now was as good a time as any. Swinging myself around the stairs, and popping out into the study where they talked, I blurted out, "I think we should take Mama to the healer, Father."

Their faces shot up from the candlelit table. Father's scowl pierced to my bones, while Uncle Gregory's face wrinkled with a wry smile.

Once he noticed the bruise on my cheek, his smile faltered. His brow furrowed before he glanced over at my father.

Thomas had his knuckles down on the table, squeezing tighter as he laid eyes on me. "No one asked you, Robin." He met Gregory's glance. "Can you believe the impudence of this girl?"

"She's young, Tom. Give her time to—"

"She's not *that* young!" He spread a hand toward me, incredulous. "Suitors line up at our door, and she denies each and every one of them the opportunity to even gaze upon her plain face! Do you not see the predicament it puts me in?"

"I'm not ready to marry yet," I chided. *Or ever, perhaps.* I'd rather be a lonely spinster all my life than grovel at the feet of the stuffy young noblemen scum Father introduced me to. *Or a she-wolf, devouring them all.*

"Let us not get sidetracked," Gregory said, diverting the subject with a flap of his hand. "How are you, dear niece?"

His eyes asked more than he was saying. I couldn't hide the bruise in the lantern light, and I didn't want to. I needed my uncle to *see*.

"Positively radiant, Uncle Gregory." I curtsied for him, and he laughed.

As his laugh died, he turned to my father. "You see? Robin is on my side."

"Of course she is," Father said. "The little hellion hates me."

God, I wonder why?

"Regardless," he continued with a flare of his nostrils, "this isn't a vote or a democracy. Joan is *my* wife."

"And my sister," Gregory warned.

"And my mother," I added.

"I will decide what is best for her," Father said with finality. "I'll not hear anymore on the subject. Robin, go to your room. I thought I told you to stay hidden so the adults could talk."

You mean so the men could talk. I crossed my arms defiantly. "You just said I'm not *that* young."

"Still too young and naïve to have a say in this matter." There was a threat in his eyes. I knew I'd be taking another beating if I didn't make myself scarce.

"Fine," I said, shaking my head. "But Uncle Gregory is right. What have we got to lose, Father? We need to do everything for Mama—"

"*To your room, girl!*" His sharp yell cut through the quiet of the house and made me jerk from fear.

With a quick nod, I frowned at Gregory, said, "Nice to see you, Uncle," and then vanished up the stairs.

I slipped into my mother's room to be with her for a while, in case these were the last precious hours we'd have together.

She coughed in her sleep, wet and ragged. It was like she was afflicted with a sleeping spell, and her eyes darted furiously under her pale lids.

I crawled on the bed, curling around Mama, and held her hand. In her ear, I whispered, “I wish you would wake up and tell us what to do, Mama. I’m so worried and lost. Father acts like he knows what he’s doing, but I can tell he’s just as confounded as Uncle Gregory.”

I tucked my head into the crook of her shoulder, listening to the sound of her weak breaths through her nose. I felt small and frail, like an infant who needed attachment—more helpless than I even had when Father attacked me.

Time passed and I closed my eyes. I wasn’t sure how long it was, but a croaking voice woke me.

“Get me away from here, daughter of mine.”

My eyes jolted open, heart racing. I popped up from the bed with a gasp. “M-Mama?!”

Her voice was weak, her eyes half-lidded as her head tilted in my direction. She gave me a tiny smile—only as much as she could manage. “If ... if I don’t leave this place, I’ll never leave this place.”

My mind spun from her words. Was she hallucinating? Was *I* hallucinating?

I put a hand to her shoulder. Her thin nightgown was soaked through. “What do you mean, Mama? Please, tell me.” I gently shook her. “I don’t understand!”

She couldn’t expand on her cryptic words. One moment she was there, speaking to me, and the next her eyes rolled and she fell back into a deep, comatose stupor.

Tears trickled down my cheeks. Even Father’s assault hadn’t made me so sad, but seeing my mother like this? A child weeps when her mother, who she’s seen as invincible and sturdy her entire life, falls sick and weak.

“Mama, please ...” I whined, gently shaking her.

It was no use. I played her words over in my head.

A minute later, I realized what she meant. *If Mother never gets out of Wilford, she will die here, sure as anything.*

She had confirmed Uncle Gregory's opinion. But who could I tell? Father would never believe that she'd spoken to me in a moment of strength.

I needed to do everything I could to persuade him to take Mama to this Wulfric fellow in Barnsdale.



Chapter 8

Little John



I sat in a corner of the tavern, sipping my ale. Alert, eyes darting around the stuffy confines of the place. I'd thrown back my hood so as not to appear suspicious, revealing black hair that was beginning to gray at the temples.

Revelers drank merrily in the alehouse, fragments of conversation and laughter carrying through the large room. It was packed full this evening, at least two men to every table. Barmaids slid gracefully from table to table, dropping off mugs and steins. Working ladies were on their heels, bobbing eyebrows, smirking coyly, and squeezing their breasts together as they leaned over tables to whisper in the ears of men.

This place would become a brothel as the night dragged on. Where drink, soldiers, and women were involved, it always did.

I sat alone in my small booth, which drew attention from the ladies of the night. More than one of them came over to ply their wares at me, showing milky thighs, heaving bosoms, and garish makeup.

The first girl who came up couldn't have seen more than fifteen winters. It sickened me to see such a youngling in a bawdy place like this, forced to work for her family afterhours because her father's trade likely didn't bring in enough revenue to support his lot.

Alas, these were the signs of the times. Desperate.

She made all the right moves, all the right gestures, yet I could see the nervousness in her face as she approached me—the lone stranger in the corner of the bar.

“Fancy a ride with an unbroken mare?” she asked, dipping forward to present her chest.

If she was unbroken, I was Jesus Christ. I averted my gaze, shaking my head. After another sip of ale, I said, “Not that kind of man, lass.”

“Perhaps I can turn you into a believer.”

“I believe just fine. I believe you should leave me alone.”

She scoffed. I heard her saying something about a dandy as she left to go to the next table.

A few minutes later, another worker came over, this one curvy and thick, falling out of her tight corset. “I think I know what you need, stallion. You need experience.” She stood with her hands on her hips, proud.

“What is it with you people and horses?”

Her lip curled on one side, eyes glinting. “You look like the kind of man who’s equipped like one.”

“What gave you that idea?”

“Stern face. Brutally handsome. Tall, broad, confident. And you’re wearing the garb of a man on the run.”

At that, my muscles tensed. I always had to be careful where I showed my face, because she wasn’t far off, even if she was taking a shot in the dark.

“I’m not on the run,” I said.

“Fine.” She shrugged. “Prove me wrong, then.”

“Excuse me?” I lifted my brow while trying to look past her.

“Show me your cock. Let me see how small it is, and I’ll never bother you again.”

With a heavy sigh, I shook my head. “Regardless of what you’re looking for, ma’am, I’m not interested, I’m afraid.”

Like the young waif before her, my words riled her. Readjusting her dress, she sat at my booth and scowled. “What is it, then? You take after boys, do you? Little ones, I’d wager ___”

My hand shot out and clamped down on her wrist. My voice went low as she struggled to get out of my iron grip. “Careful, whore. I didn’t tell you to sit. I was trying to be nice. Perhaps this is clearer: Get the fuck out of my face, or you’ll regret it.”

With a breathless sound, she rose in a hurry, flustered. Still, she pressed on. “Regret it? So he’s a woman beater, then.”

“Never,” I said, and released her arm with a push. “There are ways to make your life miserable without ever laying a finger on you, lass. Don’t forget it.”

She didn’t bother me after that, gazing at me like I was a madman.

I probably was. But I wasn’t here to dip my wick in the tavern’s latest honey pots. Once she was gone—hopefully telling the other streetgirls not to bother me—I returned my gaze to the prize in question, sitting across the tavern at the barkeep’s counter.

I had created a bit of a scene, unfortunately, with my temper getting the better of me. It was a shame I had been tasked with this, because I hated these kinds of places.

Sure, I could play the part. Act aloof. Yet I was growing too old to mingle in busy taverns like this one in Nottingham’s town square. I much preferred a lazy bonfire or calm night in the woods, or even a smaller tavern with minstrels and storytellers. Something to lead my mind away from darkness.

The woman I watched was an anomaly. She drew attention—so much so that I didn’t catch any other eyes looking my way. They focused on her.

She wore a formfitting blue gown, sashed by a yellow belt at her thin waist. Her red hair fell in curly tumbles down her shoulders. She hadn’t glanced this way yet—why would she, when I was positioned behind her?—so I assumed she didn’t know I watched her like a hawk.

Like me, she spurned the advances of everyone who approached her. And the flock was bountiful.

It was rare for a woman of her beauty and stature to be seen in a public house like this. These types of places were typically reserved for men. Peasants and yeomen who wanted to get away from their wives, or wanted to peruse the wares, or just get blind drunk until they couldn't walk. Anything to forget their shit lot in life for a while.

With the way the kingdom was headed, taverns and brothels were packed these days. More than in the past. The number of inhabitants in an alehouse directly correlated with the economic situation of a society. I knew that from firsthand experience.

The busier the tavern, the worse the situation outside its walls. When a tavern was dead, it meant the economy was booming. It was quite a backwards conundrum, since the majority of men in here couldn't afford to spend their modest earnings on drink and whores. Yet here they were.

The red-haired beauty stuck out like a beacon. Her dress was of fine fabric that looked expensive. She seemed a noblewoman more than a commoner.

After the fourth or fifth suitor approached her, she grew tired of the charades and stood from her stool, heading for the front door. Whistles and jeers followed her, as well as a few crude comments.

I stood once she reached the door. Adjusting my dusty leather shirt, I left my booth. As I passed a man who had thrown one of those crude comments at the lass, leaning back smugly on two legs of a chair, I promptly kicked one of the back legs.

The chair slid out from under him and he tumbled to the floor, to the laughter of his friends around the table.

He fumbled to his hands and knees, sputtering, "Who the fuck did that?!"

I was already past, headed for the door. The scene took all eyes off me and the girl.

And the other man who followed her. The man who had been eyeing the redhead like a meal the entire time I sat in my

booth. He was dressed in grimy leathers and a ragged tunic, his hair unkempt and face unshaven.

As I reached the door, I paused, waiting for that man to catch up from the other side of the bar. He had risen from his booth mere seconds before me.

I swept my arm out like a gentleman, letting him get to the door first. "After you, good sir."

He flashed a smile before the scowl returned to his grizzled face. "Obliged." He pulled his hood up as he exited the tavern.

The nighttime air greeted me outside, and I slowed my pace to give him a lead. He followed in the footsteps of the redheaded woman, who was oblivious she was being followed.

The noblewoman proved herself a fool when she turned into the mouth of an alley.

Everyone knew not to traipse down the dark, muddy alleyways of Nottingham at night. Especially if you were a beautiful, solitary woman.

Which told me this girl wasn't from Nottingham. Perhaps she was visiting from an estate out of town, thinking she could get the flavor of the area by going to a local alehouse. She didn't understand how much a simple night of fun endangered her life here. Besides dirtying her elegant heels in the mud of the alley, there were vile men around every corner.

Two such men followed her right now.

As she disappeared into the alley, with only a sliver of moonlight casting over the tall walls on either side of her, the man closed the gap.

I made it to the mouth of the alley just as the two of them were nearly halfway through it.

"Hoy, lass, slow down," the man said in a raspy, smug voice. "No need to run, beautiful."

She froze. Turned to face him.

Just as a third man appeared from behind a barrel, behind her.

This newcomer walked up beside her, confusing the stalker from the tavern, making him pull up short and tilt his head in confusion.

Because this new man was dressed in the dreary brown habit of a friar. He had his hands behind his back. The man looked pudgy, but his face spoke of something dark and menacing. His lips were pursed as he said, “This the one, fair maiden?”

The woman in the blue dress crossed her arms under her chest. She put on a smirk of her own. “I daresay he is.”

The stalker from the tavern backed up, reaching behind him to grab a knife ...

And he backpedaled right into my sturdy chest.

I towered over him with a frown. As his hand came out to pull his dagger, I caught it, twisted sharply, and forced him to drop it to the ground with a clang.

The man winced and stammered, rubbing his wrist. “W-What the fuck is going on here?”

“Like a frothing hound caught in a cage,” I murmured, pushing him forward between me, the girl, and the friar.

“You couldn’t contain yourself, could you, Gilroy?” the woman said, her voice deep and brooding.

He spun around. “How the fuck do you know my name?”

“Because we’ve been watching you, bastard.”

“You’re the man who raped Lizbeth,” the friar added, taking a step toward him, cracking his knuckles. “A girl from my orphanage.”

The man gasped. “I did no such—”

The friar’s hand lashed out and caught the man in the chin, snapping his head back. His pinky ring cut flesh and blood ran down the rapist’s neck.

Dazed, the man raised his hands in surrender. “Please, just let me go!”

I spun him around to face me. His eyes blinked wildly.

“I’m sure Lizbeth begged for the same thing before you defiled her,” the friar spat through gritted teeth, growing angrier by the second.

I held the man by the shoulders, to stop him from wobbling. “You’ve been judged and found guilty, Gilroy.”

“What ... what does that mean—”

I reached behind me and produced my quarterstaff in one fluid motion, swinging it across his face. It *cracked* and the man went down in a spurt of blood, teeth fragments, and broken facial bones.

He collapsed in a heap and didn’t get up.

The three of us looked down our noses at him. I put my staff away. We eyed each other.

The woman was on her knees in an instant, rifling through the man’s pockets. The friar, meanwhile, unbelted his habit, yanked the garb aside, and pulled his cock out. He started pissing on the man’s unconscious body.

I sighed and shook my head. “Really, Tuck?”

The woman on her knees wrinkled her nose and scowled up at him. “That close to my face?”

Friar Tuck’s eyes remained downcast as the constant stream of his piss splattered on the man’s slack, bleeding face. “He deserves this and much worse, for what he did to poor Lizbeth.”

“Then slit his throat and be done with it,” I said matter-of-factly.

“He needs to live with his burden. And the pain of a broken face.” Tuck finished up, wagging himself.

My people could get a bit overzealous at times, which often deviated to grotesque behavior.

I wasn't innocent of it, either.

The woman snatched the man's purse, tucking it away, and stayed on her knees. Her eyes veered over to Tuck's cock, and she smiled. "Is that the only relief that lovely thing is going to get tonight, Friar Tuck?"

"It doesn't have to be, ma'am." Tuck kept his eyes down on the woman's pale face, smiling.

She unceremoniously gripped her fingers around Tuck's girth. "Good." Her hand stroked the friar to thickness as she stood.

I scratched my forehead. "Jesus save me, Marian. You twisted bastards."

She popped her eyebrows at me. "That's Maid Marian to you."

"You're as much a maid as I am a prince."

Marian put her palms on the wall and messed with her dress, lifting it to show her shapely white legs. Tuck moved behind her, hurrying to get into position.

The man's unconscious body rested underneath them, practically between their legs.

Disgusted, I turned away, before my disgust could turn to something else.

Marian's low laugh reached my ears. "Don't look so ghostly. You're just jealous. However, you could always join us and prove that moniker of yours wrong, *Little John*."

Over my shoulder, I blinked at her. Tuck had her dress lifted over the swell of her bare ass, and was guiding himself to her cunt.

"I won't rise to your bait, devil-slut," I said.

She smiled and winked.

I left the alley as Maid Marian's moans began, and the fleshy sounds of Tuck's belly smacking into her ass joined the chorus and echoed through the corridor.



Chapter 9

Robin



Next morning, I popped out of bed by the time the sun cracked the horizon. By the time it showed its first warm smile, I'd wrapped my chest in a band to keep my breasts hidden—not that I had much to hide—and was in my leathers and pants.

Pulling my hood over my head, I looked in the mirror and saw the bruise on my cheek was well-set. It was a purplish-yellow mar just under my eyelid, puffy from where Father's knuckle had struck me.

Leaving my room, I winced the first few steps. My stomach ached like a brick in my belly from where I'd taken his fist.

Yet I was still optimistic. Uncle Gregory had presented us a *chance*. I desperately clung to it. I was hoping this Wulfric fellow was a miracle-worker.

Call it naivety, or blissful ignorance, but I knew Father had a lot on his plate. I tried to stuff down my disdain for him and come at things anew this morning.

His wife was dying. Our financial affairs were in turmoil given Mama's sickness. Her ailment didn't stop the wheel of commerce—our textile production still went on despite her being bedridden. The workers didn't get as much done without the taskmaster of my mother peering over their shoulders.

I bounded down the stairs with energy, trying not to let my physical pain show. Hearing my father's voice in the foyer, I banked left and headed in that direction.

A claw wrapped around my heart and pulled when I walked into the airy room and saw he was speaking harshly to

Emma. The girl had her head bowed, nodding with shame while he berated her.

Once he heard my footsteps shuffling in behind him, his ire shifted to me. He spun, anger contorting his face.

My stomach sank to my boots, all the hopeful, renewed energy of the morning washed away in an instant.

Father thrust a finger in my direction. “You think you’re so sneaky and cunning, don’t you, you little bitch?”

I reeled, head lurching back. “P-Pardon, sir?”

“I have eyes, girl. Even in Nottingham. A discerning young man arrived last night to tell me all about your little *exploits* in town. Said he spotted a thin lad playing vulgar games with the bottom feeders of society. He tried to rescue you from their grubby mitts, he said, but you spurned his aid.” His upper lip twitched, rage boiling.

My breath came shallow. *The lordling from last night. That fucking worm!* “Let me guess,” I said, unable to fend off my usual brazenness, “this bastion of hope was a tall nobleman with long blond hair?”

“His name is Peter, and he’s the noble son of the Fishers.” Father closed the gap between us. I had half a mind to bolt out the door I stood under, but I knew I’d only be prolonging the inevitable.

So I geared up for another beating. I knew this one would be bad, too, because I’d directly gone against his orders of staying in my room.

“What’s worse,” Father said, now mere feet from me, “is you were seen strolling through town with *her!*” He threw his hand back accusingly at Emma.

Baffled for the second time in as many minutes, I folded my arms over my chest. “So what if I was seen with Emma? Why are you embarrassed by her, Father?”

He shook his head like I was a fool for even asking, fingers pinching the bridge of his nose. “I’m not embarrassed by your mother’s handmaid, stupid girl. How can you be so dense? If

you're seen with the help, you'll be associated with the help. The people will see you *as* the help! It destroys this house's credibility. Why can't you simply carry yourself like the heiress you're meant to be?"

He began to unbuckle his belt, and I took a step back.

His eyes turned strangely helpless, brow arching. "Why must you continue to make me do this? Do you think I *want* to punish you?"

Every breath became a wheeze. My throat felt like it was closing, stealing all my air. "You don't ... have to, Father."

"It's the only thing that will make you learn your place, Robin."

Lot of good it did last night, bastard.

"While you're living under my roof, I can't have you making a fool of your sire. The neighboring estates will think I've grown weak and lost control of this house."

You never had control of this house. Don't you get it?

There was so much I wanted to say.

I couldn't eke out the words.

"So, get over here," he said, calmly. He sat on a chair and patted his knee, expecting me to voluntarily bend over his knee to take my belt whipping. "You must submit, daughter."

I swallowed hard, mind moving like a galloping horse. "You would beat me even while Uncle Gregory is here? What will he think of you?"

"He will understand. And, frankly, I don't care what he thinks. He's not your father. I am. Besides, Sir Gregory is in town, rounding up the carriages."

My brow rose. "On what business?"

Father lowered his belt onto his lap. "After weighing the options, I've decided to allow this healer Gregory spoke of to look at your mother. I will join your uncle to make sure everything goes swimmingly."

My heart soared. I clasped my hands together in prayer and took a step forward into the room. “Oh, Father, that’s excellent! You must let me come with you!”

“Absolutely not.”

Frustration flared inside me, burning my lungs. “But ... I can’t be separated from Mama.”

“You will have to be. It’s an inevitability of life, Robin. I need someone to watch over our affairs here.”

My brow furrowed, wrinkling my forehead. “You trust me to do that?”

He chuckled humorlessly. “Of course not. Which is why we’re bringing two carriages—one for your mother, one for our valuable belongings. That way, you won’t have anything to barter, trade, or steal, while I’m gone.”

God Almighty. My father really thinks that about me? That I’m an untrustworthy thief?

He preyed on the grief written on my face. “Perhaps if you stayed true to your word, even *once* ...”

You still wouldn’t let me go! I shook my head, unwilling to take no for an answer. Not for this. Perhaps if ... “If I allow you to whip me, and atone for my transgressions, will you let me go?”

I hated that it had come to this.

Unfortunately, my impulsive idea backfired. Father jolted up from his chair, snapping his belt with both hands, peeling his lip back in a snarl. “*Allow* me? In my own house? You’ve learned nothing, girl! Get your scrawny ass over here before I —”

“He’s back!” Emma yelled, her voice cracking. She pointed out a window into the courtyard. “Sir Gregory is back, sir!”

My heart tumbled in my chest. I had taken a beating already, and didn’t know how much more of this I could take.

For a moment, I thought my father would charge me anyway. Then his head spun toward the window, hesitant.

Tears burned my eyes. I couldn't understand why he was doing this to me, separating me from Mama. He didn't even care for her! But he knew I did.

Then, I realized: *This* was my punishment. He was ripping me away from Mama, with all likelihood I'd never see her again, unless Wulfric worked a miracle.

This betrayal and underhanded retribution was worse than any physical punishment I'd ever received from him.

When he turned back around, I was gone—sprinted out of the foyer. His enraged voice called to me, echoing through the house.

But I was already outside, running into the fields, letting my tears slide briskly off my cheeks.



Chapter 10

Robin



I burst through the foliage into the clearing, kicking up dirt and leaves as I stumbled through a low-hanging branch and smacked it out of my face.

The creek burred, drifting over wet stones. I ran to it, to the oak, and went on my knees in front of the skull and the stump.

“I want to kill him, brother!” I yelled.

“*What has he done this time?*” Robert asked.

“He’s taking Mama to a healer in Barnsdale Forest and won’t let me come. Can you believe it?”

“*What’s his rationale?*”

“Punishment. For disobeying him one too many times.”

Robert hummed in my ear, apparently thinking that over.

I leaned forward, putting my forehead against the smooth, cold forehead of the skull. Its empty black eye sockets stared back at me. “If you were here,” I said, sniffing, “none of this would be happening.”

“*I know. I’m sorry I died, dear sister. I didn’t plan on it.*”

Scowling, I popped up from the skull and squinted. “Are you getting wry with me now, too? God, I can’t even win against an inanimate skull!”

“*Is that all you think of me? That’s not a very nice way to speak of your brother.*”

My scowl became a pitying frown as guilt swept through me. I petted the bald pate of the skull and nodded. “You’re right. I’m sorry, Rob.” I sighed and peered up at the clear sky

through the weaving canopy above me, as if searching for a sign from God.

I leveled my gaze on my brother. “What should I do?”

“You’ll never see me again if you leave here.”

My hand flew to my chest. “How do you know that? No, it can’t be true.”

“I still think you should go. You’re cunning. You can find a way. You’re an adventurer at heart, sister. Always have been. It’s why I taught you the bow, because I knew you’d need it. You’re different than the girls in town—I see greater things in your future.”

My eyes welled with tears, but I forced them back with a loud, ugly snort. I didn’t want Robert to see me bawl, so I kept it together. “That’s nice of you to say. I don’t want to leave you though. Especially if you’re saying you’ll be gone when I get back.”

“I’m gone either way, Robin. You know that.”

“You’re the only one I have to talk to.”

“You have Emma.”

My head jolted up. “How do you know that?”

Oh, I thought with a flash of clarity, probably because you’re a figment of my imagination. Right.

“It’s not the same,” I said. My knees were starting to hurt from kneeling in front of the stump for so long, as if I was praying to an altar.

“You’ll always have me, Robin. In your heart. Put me in a new vessel, if you must. You won’t ever be alone.”

“But I *feel* so alone,” I whined.

“You don’t have to be.”

The voice came from behind me, and its abruptness startled me so badly a wave of dizziness tilted my world.

Blinking, gasping, I spun around and jumped up from my knees. I instinctively reached behind me for my bow and

quiver ... and found nothing.

In my haste to escape my beating, I'd forgotten my weapon at the manor.

"Show yourself!" I yelled, balling my hands into fists.

The man appeared from the trees like a wraith. He flipped his long golden hair off his shoulders and stared down his prominent nose at me. He wore the garb of a spotless squire.

Stopping ten feet away, he put his hands on his hips. "I was standing in those trees for a while, listening, wondering who you're talking to ... or if you're just a madman."

"*You!*" I snarled, thrusting a finger toward him.

He spread his arms wide. "Yes, it is I."

"Peter Fisher."

"That's *Sir* Peter Fisher."

"You're no knight, heathen," I spat through gritted teeth.

"Will be soon. My dubbing is next season. Besides, is that any way to talk to the man who saved you?"

"You told my father!" I accused. "He was ready to beat me."

His brow furrowed with concern. Feigned concern, I was sure. "That was not my intention," he mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck. Then a smirk cracked his lips. "I know your secret, you know."

"What are you doing here?" My whole body was tense, ready to explode. I formulated an escape route through the trees to my right, and was ready to bolt like a squirrel if I had to.

"First, tell me who you were talking to," he demanded, standing straight.

My body blocked the skull behind me. "No one. Myself."

"So you *are* a madman. Well, madwoman. Or would that make you a witch?"

He was toying with me, leisurely closing the gap between us. His boots dragged, and I wondered if I could lunge and snap his shin if he got too close. Lord knew I was ready to try. Ready to take all my pent-up anger and frustration out on this silly, stupid nobleboy.

“You are quite pretty, you know. Under all that faux bravado and resentment and anger. A bit frail and bony”—his head bobbed left to right—“but that can be fixed.”

My head lurched. “What the hell are you on about?”

“What do you think? I’m your suitor. I’ve come calling.”

I paused a beat.

Then barked a laugh. It was an ugly sound, punching high into the sky. It sent a flock of birds flying out of the canopies.

He didn’t like that so much. His face twisted with scorn. “You laugh at me, girl?”

“I laugh because you think it works like that. I’m not interested, Sir Fisher. So why don’t you leave me alone?”

With a click of his tongue, he took another step forward. Only five feet from me now, and I could make out every line of his fair face, every pore of the chin he so desperately wanted to fill with a beard, but couldn’t.

“No, no. Can’t do that. Not after what I saw in your window.”

“In my—what?!” I stepped back and bumped into the stump, nowhere to go.

“How do you think I found you, girl? Found your father?” He snorted. “I never even caught your name.”

“And you won’t get it.”

Taking one more step, his body seemed to deflate. He raised his hands, palms out in apparent surrender. “Look. I think we got started off on the wrong foot. Let’s just talk.”

My eyes darted, desperate for a rescuer. I only then realized the dead boar from yesterday was gone. The hunter

had taken it. *God, what I'd give to see that woodsman's rugged face again. That bowstring taut as he aims at this boy's throat.*

I needed a savior ... but I knew none was coming.

It was my lot in life. Anything that could go wrong *would* go wrong.

I bit my bottom lip, chewing on the skin until it pinched and bled. *I have to play it better than this. This boy, however stupid he is, towers over me. He looks strong.* He wasn't weak or malnourished like Rosco and his gang of street orphans. He was a nobleman's son, with a nobleman's diet.

And I had foolishly let him get this close to me.

My body flexed when he took a step and stopped two feet away. Gently, he reached out a hand, hesitating.

My head moved away from it—

And he took my chin in his fingers, darting faster than I'd expected.

I trembled as he pursed my lips together, puckering them and staring down at my face, licking his chops.

"There we go," he said with a fake smile. I could see the sinister glint in his eyes, and knew this young man was not safe. Like all noblemen. "Those are the lips of a woman, aren't they?"

"W-What are you doing?" I asked, curling in on myself with disgust.

"If you won't allow me to court you, girl, then I'll just have to ask for recompense another way."

"What?"

While he kept my chin between his fingers, his other hand roamed down my side, over the swell of my hip, down to my ass.

He squeezed.

I yelped.

“It’s okay, it’s okay.” He shushed me. “I won’t hurt you, sweet flower. So long as you pay me back for saving you last night, everything will be fine. I’ll make us feel exquisite ...” He trailed off, and my mind whirled.

I shivered from the man’s disgusting hands on me, feeling me, and froze with shock.

“*Robin,*” my brother said in my head.

Robert’s calming voice brought me out of my freeze, uprooting my legs.

Submission. Obedience. Pain.

I was sick of it all.

Or perhaps I was secretly addicted to it, and simply hated the particular men who sought it from me.

“Enough,” I said, low at first.

His lips brushed over my cheek, kissing. His hand wrapped around the back of my neck, holding me still.

“Hmm?” he murmured in my ear, and I shivered.

“Enough!” I yelled, shocking him with a start.

His light fingers squeezed harder on the back of my neck.

I growled. My knee came up and smashed between his legs.

His breath whooshed out and blew my hood off my face as he doubled over.

I turned to run—

His hand caught my ankle at the last second and tripped me. I fell over Robert’s skull and it rolled onto the dirt and grass.

With a gasp, I went down, body shielding it, skinning my hands again so I wouldn’t smash the skull.

The nobleboy growled behind me. “Little *bitch!*”

Just like my father calls me.

Fear rifled through me. He crawled like an animal toward me, his blond locks disheveled now and falling over his reddened face, veins protruding in his neck.

He was in pain, no longer looking like the suave squire from before. I tried to scramble back like a crab, on my elbows and forearms.

He groped and grabbed at me, crawling to me to put his weight down so he could force me into submission.

“No!” I squealed, and kicked wildly. My first kick smacked into his chin, snapping his head back.

But then he caught my boot on the next kick and twisted my ankle, forcing me onto my belly with a cry of pain.

I inched forward, inadvertently sending the skull rolling down a gentle slope toward the creek.

I reached out for it, realizing it was going to keep rolling and disappear into the brook and I’d never see Robert again.

Tears fell from my eyes as Peter Fisher grabbed the waistband of my pants and ripped down, forcing my ass free in the morning cold.

My hand futilely reached for the skull.

“You’ll never see me again if you leave here.” Robert’s promise.

“Just give up, you little minx! What’s so bad, eh? You were going to do the same thing with those three gutter-rats! *Give in!*”

When Peter’s awful hands dug into the flesh of my ass, trying to spread me apart so he could force himself on me, a burst of something deep inside ignited my spirit.

I surged forward with a frenzied yell, voice cracking, going raw, even as my pants dragged down to my knees.

My hand found purchase at the last second, and I gripped tight. Over my shoulder, I saw the nobleboy was too busy fumbling with his pants, finding his opportunity, and wasn’t looking at my face.

Gritting my teeth together, I spun, flopping from belly to side—

And swung Robert's skull with me at a devilish arc.

The skull smashed into the side of Peter Fisher's head with a sick *crack* and shattered into pieces.

Bone fragments exploded into dust and blew outward in every direction. I screwed my eyes shut so I wouldn't get any in my eyes.

Peter Fisher wasn't so lucky.

He let out a bloodcurdling howl, hands jumping from the pale flesh of my hips to his head. Blood seeped between his fingers.

I gasped and crawled back on my palms, my mouth falling open. I swiftly yanked my pants up past my hips and staggered to my feet, blood pumping in my veins.

He fell to his side and writhed, screaming wildly, smearing blood all over himself. I noticed a sharp splinter of bone jutting out of his eye. Pus and blood seeped out of the wound, and bile rose in my throat.

“Ahhh y-you fucking bitch! My eye! Help me, you awful cunt!” He flailed on the ground, billowing dirt into the air.

Terrified, I spun and ran. Out of the clearing and out of Sherwood Forest. Never looking back.

Earlier, I had run to the forest in tears, and now I ran *from* the forest in tears.

My spinning mind came to myriad conclusions as I sprinted until my lungs burned and my throat constricted. *I'll never see you again if I leave here, brother. You were right.*

But he wasn't right for the reason I'd imagined.

Even in your final moments, you protected me.

My sad smile quickly faded as I came to a stark, terrible realization.

Peter Fisher was a squire. A nobleboy. Women in Nottingham couldn't go around stabbing noblemen's eyes out. Not without *real* punishment. Consequences.

It didn't matter what he'd done. It was my word against his.

I knew well enough how that went.

Fuck, I thought, glancing over my shoulder to the woods in the distance.

There was no sign of the would-be rapist. Only the dying fumes of his cries lifting muffled into the sky.

Now I absolutely have to get out of here. If I don't ... my life is over, and so is my family's.

Whether he likes it or not, I thought drearily, I'm joining Father on that fucking trek!



Chapter 11

Robin



My heart was still slamming against my ribs by the time I returned to the edge of my estate. I hadn't been gone long. The carriages Uncle Gregory brought from town were sitting in the courtyard. They hadn't left yet.

Armed men—Gregory's guards, no doubt—loaded one of the carts with chests and dressers. It appeared Father was emptying the entire manor of its valuables.

As for my father himself, I couldn't see him.

I crept forward through the high stalks of the barleygrass, crouching low to keep the drooping tips above my hood. I stayed away from the serfs working the land, wading through the grass. When it thinned out at the edges, I poked my head up from the grass, kneeling, and watched across the narrow road to the circular courtyard of the estate.

From here, it was just a short hop to the carts sitting vacant. I'd have to cross the thin strip of a dirt road, and then the smooth cobblestones of the courtyard, to get to them.

The carriages were covered with white canvases, high walled. Ornate woodwork was etched into the wagon hulls, and the tall wheels were similarly decorated. Two pack horses led each cart, standing peacefully, letting out soft snorts.

Gregory hadn't been lying when he said he would make the journey comfortable. These carriages were fit for royalty, and looked like they'd move slowly compared to the smaller carts I saw around town, used by merchants and tradesmen. The wheels alone were half as tall as me. Not that that was saying much.

Two guards came out of the manor carrying a large chest between them. They set it down before heading back to the

manor to haul more things out.

My eyes widened. An opportunity had presented itself. There was still one guard outside, brushing one of the horses' manes at the front cart.

Before I could let my brain hesitate or stop me, I steeled myself and made a run for it. I darted across the road and cobbles, keeping my body low to the ground and parallel with the back of the cart so the guard would have to turn fully around to see me.

I made it to the heavy chest—longer than I was tall—recognizing it from my mother's chambers. Gently, I lifted the lid and cursed in my head as the hinges let out a soft squeal.

I stood there in the open for a split second, waiting to get caught, but the guard didn't turn. He was too busy whispering sweet nothings into the horse's ear.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. The distinct feeling of being watched settled over me. I lifted the lid all the way with slick palms, damning the consequences. A heap of Mama's clothes rested in the chest, filling it about halfway.

I stepped into the chest, backing in, and by the time I was halfway in, my heart caught in my throat.

A serf stood across the street, brow pinched together, staring at me. He was a young man, perhaps my age, with a bald head.

Eyes bulging, I put my finger to my lips, begging him to be quiet and not raise alarm. Some of the workers I considered acquaintances, but I didn't know this one. I'd never seen him before. He had no allegiance to me.

When the boy gave me a wry smile and tiny nod, I returned the smile.

I sank into the chest, flattening myself on the garments as I closed the lid over my head. Pitch blackness awaited me.

Voices carried from inside the house moments later, getting louder as they moved closer to the carriages.

Inside the clothing chest was incredibly cramped, stuffy, and warm. Taking in short, quick breaths, I tried not to use all my air. It wouldn't be long before I ran out of it in here, and I knew fear would set in soon after. The morbid sensation of being buried alive.

I closed my eyes, talking to myself in my head—doing anything to distract me from the precarious position I'd put myself in.

The chest abruptly pitched to one side, then the other. I put my hands out to balance myself, and felt weightless for a moment.

“Almighty above, think this bird has packed enough clothes?” a muffled voice said. “This thing is heavier than a head of cattle.”

Outside near my feet, another guard spoke. “The baroness is bedridden, dolt. She didn't pack a damn thing. It was the lord of the manor.”

“Why is he so paranoid someone's going to rob his manor blind while he's gone?”

Their voices became strained as they moved the chest. I rocked inside it like a whelp in a crib. It made me nauseous, not knowing which way I'd tumble.

“Wouldn't you be? Especially with these bandits circulating around town these days. Wilford might be home of royalty, but it's also close to the forest.”

With a *thud*, the chest landed on hardwood. The first guard scoffed. “Dark times we're living in, when a man's home isn't even safe from scumlord vagrants.”

“Careful, Ty. We're one bad month away from camping in the woods ourselves. Or working this lord's property.”

The guard let out a snort of disdain. “Speak for yourself, Morris. I'm good with my money. I've saved.”

“Ha! How much of a shilling a week are you putting away, Ty? Don't bullshit me now.”

“A shilling a week? I make more than that! I’m not a groom boy, you know.”

They ribbed each other as they wandered off, voices getting lower until it was quiet again.

I waited. And waited. Then I lifted the lid of the drawer. When I saw I was inside the carriage, surrounded by other boxes, knickknacks, and cases, I smiled.

Voices and thudding boots came from the manor, including my father and uncle’s voices. Gasping, I took a deep breath and lowered the lid, hiding myself.

“Hold her steady, boys,” Uncle Gregory grunted. “Drop her and it’ll be your head on a pike.”

They must be moving Mama. Poor thing.

“There. Good.” He answered a muffled voice I couldn’t hear. “Aye, put her in the first cart. She won’t fit with that mess of luggage in the second. Was all that really necessary, Sir Thomas?”

I could picture my father’s scowl. “Yes, Gregory, it was. You’ll see. Once we’re there, Joan will need a place to stay. She’ll want clothes if she starts to get better. You expect a purveyor of high fashion to dress in her sleeping gown for a fortnight?”

Gregory grunted. “Fair enough, mate. Let’s get going while the sun’s not blaring.”

“Agreed. Seen my wretch of a daughter?”

“Nay, Tom. Figured it hurt too bad to say bye to her mother.”

“Probably gallivanting in the woods like a witch, or stuck in an alley with guttersnipes. That girl, I swear.”

A few minutes later, the chest swayed. The carriage lurched to a start. The horses nickered and their hooves clopped on the cobblestones.

Trapped in complete darkness, I smiled as we made our way onto the road.



An hour later, I was getting desperate. Besides smelling musty and thick, I was starting to sweat in the tight confines of the clothing drawer. My breathing felt sickly and shallow. I couldn't hold out much longer.

Gently lifting the lid, I cringed when the hinges groaned. I popped my head up to take a deep lungful of air—

And found Uncle Gregory sitting on a crate across from me in the carriage, chewing on a stick of meat.

I sucked in a sharp breath and smacked my head on the lid of the chest as I jolted in shock.

“Was wondering when you'd finally come up for some air,” Uncle Gregory said. He sat back on his crate, arms spread wide across other luggage behind him. He wore a green cloak, a full hide of leather armor, and had a sword dangling from his hip.

I said nothing, hardly able to breathe.

“Come on,” he said, curling his fingers at me nonchalantly. “Sit up, niece. You look like shit.”

“Are you going to tell Father?” I croaked.

His brow furrowed. Gregory was thicker in the stomach and face than my tall father, but had a kinder mien. More laugh lines. Gentler eyes. A salty beard that reached his chest.

“No, lass. He's going to find out, you know, the moment he steps in here.”

“He's going to beat me when he finds out I've snuck on.”

My uncle shook his head and leaned forward. He stared directly into my face, making me uncomfortable, and his eyes narrowed. “That how you got that welt on your cheek, lass?”

Gulping, I nodded slowly.

Gregory sat back with a sigh. He patted his sword. “He won't lay a hand on you this time, Robin.”

My eyes widened as they were drawn to him patting his scabbard. *Is Uncle Gregory saying he'll kill my father to protect me? Because that's ... a bit extreme.*

"It won't come to that," he assured me. "It's too late now, right? He'll have to understand you simply couldn't be separated from your mother."

"It's true."

The man's lips curled with a soft smile. "I don't blame you. Here." He leaned forward to hand me the rest of his stick of salted beef. "Eat this. You look rattled and pale. Besides, you'll be eating a lot of it on the road, so might as well get used to it early."

I took the gift and ravenously bit into it. "Haven't eaten all morning," I said around the mouthful. It was only when I swallowed that I noticed how peculiar and off it tasted, as if it had been over-salted, sitting out for months.

Uncle Gregory chuckled when my face screwed up. "It's not the most pleasant feast. Not when you're used to Maid Emma's meals, or your mother's. But it will keep you alive."

I gave him a small nod and kept my head bowed. "Thank you, Uncle Gregory."

"It's nothing, lass."

I looked up at him. "How long did you know I was in here?"

"The whole time."

I scowled. "That fucking serf!"

"Language, young lady. No one told me a thing. It only takes a pair of discerning eyes to see when something is amiss with one's own wares, Robin."

I pouted. "My father didn't notice."

"I said *discerning* eyes, lass."

I stifled a chuckle, and couldn't help but smile.

He returned the gesture. “There she is. I remember when you used to smile all the time as a whelp.”

“Not much to smile about these days.” I recalled the situation in the woods, and the shard of bloody bone jutting from Peter Fisher’s eye. The thought made me shudder.

“No, I suppose not.” A faraway look glazed his eyes, as if he were looking past me. “Remember when you used to bounce on my knee, giggling happy as a lark in song?”

My smile returned. Now *I* felt far away. A different world entirely.

“Your brother would run in, yank you off my knee under your scrawny armpits, and whisk you through the air.”

“I thought I could fly,” I said, embarrassed. My cheeks flushed. “Childhood’s whimsy, I suppose.”

“You’re still young, Robin.”

My smile vanished. Cold crept through me. “If you’re going to propose accepting a suitor Father has in mind for me, it’s wasted breath, Uncle.”

“I’d never dare do such a thing,” he said, smirking. “All I’m saying is, you’re beautiful and young. Why do you hide yourself under that hood? Or wear trousers befitting a man?”

At least he had the decency to *ask*. My father would never stoop so low as to try and figure out the mind of his wild daughter. Much easier to just chide me and punish me for not conforming to the designated roles I was born into.

“Because I don’t want to be seen,” I said.

My uncle pursed his lips, then shook his head, unconvinced. “No, it can’t just be that. Otherwise you wouldn’t escape into town to mingle with the orphans, or converse with the serfs in the fields. You’d never leave your room at all, if that were the case. And I’ve never seen a woman more inclined to adventure than you, lass.”

I supposed he was right. I didn’t want to be invisible. “... Fine,” I said with a harrumph. “I don’t want to be seen *as myself*. Life’s so much easier as a boy, Uncle. I can go

anywhere I want. Converse with anyone. Gamble. Drink—not that I do!” I waved my hands frantically when I saw his concerned frown. “Tell me, do you think I could be sitting in this carriage—alone as you are—as a woman? No. I’d need a chaperone at all times.”

To his credit, Gregory took my words in. He stroked his beard, scrutinizing me with his gray eyes. Finally, with a nod, he clicked his tongue. “I don’t doubt you, girl. And I can’t disagree: Being a man is easier. But we all have expectations in life.”

“A woman’s is to bear babies for her man.”

“And a man’s is to protect his woman and said babies. You need a chaperone at all times? Well, that chaperone is expected to take a sword in the gut before harm comes to you.”

“I’d happily trade positions.”

He laughed lightly. “I don’t doubt it.” Gregory shook his head again, as if trying to come to an understanding. With another click of his tongue, he said, “What you need, dear niece, in my opinion, is a man to *love* you. Care for you. Grant you some measure of peace. I know you aren’t getting any of that staying at the Wilford manor.”

“Uncle Gregory,” I said flatly, staring into his eyes, “there aren’t enough men in the world to give me all the things I need.”

With a snort, he leaned back. “You’d be surprised to hear, lass, that there are good men aplenty in this world.”

“Then give them to me. All of them.”

His head tilted. “All of them?”

“Yes. Maybe each one of them can fix a different broken part of me.”



Chapter 12

Little John



I rose out of the river and flung my mop of wet hair off my face, sending water droplets flying. It suctioned to my scalp, and my beard hung lank from my chin, cascading a waterfall down my bare chest.

With a hefty sigh, I waded through the hip-high water and strolled up the mossy bank, searching for my nearby clothes. The sun beat hard today. I'd be dry before long, so I stood examining my grimy garb.

"You could probably use a rinse too, eh?" I asked the grimy clothes. We'd had a few gray days in a row. Who knew when the sun would be so welcoming again?

A snapping twig whipped my head to the right, up a small slope where a copse of trees bunched together. I crouched and reached for my quarterstaff, before a woman sifted through the green like a fairy.

With a frown I stood back to my full height, putting my hands on my hips. *More like a devil.*

Maid Marian adopted the same stance. There was a mischievous glint to her eyes. A quirk of her lips as she took me in, from my face to the scars on my chest, before unabashedly going further south.

"I knew the rumors weren't true," she announced.

I sighed and went back to what I was doing, gathering my clothes to sponge in the slow-moving river. "What rumors would those be, Maid Marian?"

"That your cock matches your moniker, Little John."

I stopped, the bundle in my arms, and gave her a look over my shoulder. *Does she ever have anything else on her mind?*

“No,” she continued, sternly shaking her head, “I daresay you have the biggest of the bunch.” She thought that over, tapping her chin. “Though Tuck’s is nice and thic—”

“I’d appreciate if you didn’t compare the cocks of me and my men in front of me, woman. Do it in your own time.”

Rather than getting angry at my interruption, she simply smiled like the devious minx she was. “Fair enough.” She ventured down the hill, closer, even as I put distance between us and dipped my clothes in the river.

With my back to her, she asked, “Why do you play hard to get? Would a quick shag in the river be so bad? You look glistening and clean.”

“I’m filthy, Marian,” I said, adding my own innuendo to the conversation. I was already growing bored of it.

“Sadly, I suppose I’ll never know.” She let out an exaggerated sigh. When I turned back around, she twirled a red flower in her fingers, plucked from a nearby bush. Her green eyes focused on mine. “I could make you feel things no other woman can.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, studying her. She looked exquisite in her tight blue dress, her crimson hair in those effortless curls.

I already knew how sullied that dress was, though.

“I’m going to tell you the same thing I told the whores in the tavern last night, Marian: I’m not interested. Leave me be.”

Her eyes crinkled, showing the first sign of a frown. “Why do you hate me, Little John? Tuck enjoys my company. Scarlet wants me to sit on his face. Even Alan-a-Dale glances at me out the corner of his eye when he thinks I’m not looking. But you ...”

“I don’t hate you, Marian.” I pinched my brow with exasperation. “Let’s be honest, yes? Tuck enjoys your cunt. Will Scarlet would let any wide-hipped entity sit on his face. And Alan-a-Dale isn’t as interested as you think. And therein lies the problem, woman. You’re a distraction to my band.

What I saw you do last night was ... shocking, to say the least.”

“I get my fun where I can,” she said as way of an explanation. With a casual shrug, she crushed the flower in her hand and tossed it to the grass. “I don’t see you chastising Friar Tuck for *pissing* on that poor fellow after you broke his face open. Double standards, sir.”

I frowned. “I’ll be sure to do that when he wakes up from his drunken stupor.”

“Do you also blame that on me? Did I force the booze into Tuck’s affable mouth?”

“You *did* keep us in the tavern for quite an hour. But no, that is on him, and the fact my men—”

“*Your* band, *your* men,” she cut in. “You fancy yourself the leader of this merry little troop, do you?”

It was an odd question. Scratching my scalp, I shrugged. “Someone has to do it.”

“Interesting.” Was it? “Well, you’ll be pleased to learn, I’m not like other whores.”

I wasn’t sure how we’d deviated back to this part of the conversation, almost like she wanted to avoid the leadership talk.

“I’m sure those girls at the tavern all think the same thing about themselves,” I said, feeling a bit rude. “What makes you so different in your mind, lass?”

“I don’t *have* to use my body to make ends meet. I’m useful.” Her smile returned. “And I have money.”

“Fantastic.” I didn’t like braggarts. “I’m happy for you. Perhaps you could spare some for the rest of us. If you’re going to compare the Merry Men in anything, compare us where we’re equal: We’re all fucking broke.”

“Then you’re in luck.” She whipped out a rolled scrap of parchment from between her cleavage.

My eyebrows shot up. “And here I thought you’d come just to harass me in my vulnerable state.”

Her smile widened, in both size and deviousness. “I have a feeling you’re less vulnerable in that state than even fully clothed. Raw, primal, virile—”

“Marian,” I said flatly, curling my fingers at her as she continued daydreaming in adjectives. “The note?”

“Oh. Right.” She hurried down the hill. When she was close, she “tripped” over a nonexistent root on the ground, letting out a whimsical yelp as she fell into my arms.

I stared down at her, hulking over the succubus. Her tits pressed against my chest, and her hands wrapped around my biceps with a small squeeze.

Admittedly, this close to a beautiful woman, my cock jerked to life. It had been a while since I’d had a gorgeous lass in my arms. I kept it at bay from there, though, gathering my senses.

She smiled coyly, gazing up into my dark eyes. “Oops. So clumsy.”

Grabbing her by the shoulders, I forced us apart, putting her at arm’s length. I knew her tricks, and wondered if she had felt my cock twitch against her stomach.

I snatched the note from her fingers, unrolling it to read the contents.

“It’s a new mission,” Marian said before I’d finished. “My connection has come through once more.”

Pursing my lips, I let out a frustrated growl. “Dammit, woman, why didn’t you lead with this? It’s short notice! We hardly have time to prepare before the mission passes us by.”

She folded her arms and pouted. “Is that any way to thank the woman who’s going to thrust you out of your poverty-ridden life, Little John?”

My lip twitched. She was playing with our lives like we were involved in one of her games. She was right, though. The

words on this parchment spelled a big payday. It was also a dangerous gambit.

“Thank you,” I mumbled.

She smugly bobbed her eyebrows. “Told you I was useful.”

Handing the note back to her, I glanced at my waterlogged clothes on the surface of the riverbank. My eyes trailed over to her. “Could you ... while I rouse the other—”

Maid Marian let out a loud cackle. She was already spinning around, headed back up the hill. “Ha!” she called out incredulously. “I’m not *that* kind of maid, Little John. If you expect me to wash your clothes for you, you’re going to have to do a lot more than fuck me!”

“Christ Almighty, woman.” I began pulling my tunic and pants from the water, squeezing them dry.

“I’ll wake the others, Little John. I think your friar friend could use a quick tumble in the bushes to get inspired, before you set off on this dangerous quest.”

Flustered, I called out to her, “Don’t do it, Marian. There’s no time to fool around!”

She had already vanished into the trees, leaving the leafy branches scared and shivering in her wake.



I trudged up the hill in my damp clothes minutes later, away from the River Meden where we’d temporarily set up our base of operations.

As outlaws, the Merry Men had to relocate often. Today we were here. Tomorrow we’d be somewhere else. Never staying in one place too long was how we’d amassed a reputation and longevity. I enjoyed the longevity aspect, but the reputation? It proved more of a nuisance than a benefit, in my opinion.

We generally stuck to the vast expanse of Sherwood Forest. It gave us bountiful feasts and plenty of places to hide

from authorities. We were particularly fond of infringing on the tyrannical Prince John's royal hunting grounds. We had become outlaws thrice, five, ten times over, simply by hunting his stags. We had long ago stopped caring. All of us, to a man, had done something to earn the Crown's ire.

My men and I knew this land in and out. Here, we felt safe, though we got squirrely if we overstayed our welcome, hence our proclivity to move around. We had become experts at setting up and tearing down a camp in minutes.

This morning, we would do it again. Go through the motions of uprooting pitons and tents, loading up our ponies and scraggly, stolen horses, and head east where the missive had reported our mission would pass us.

I marched down the circle of stones, past gnarled undergrowth and a fallen tree we used as a landmark, and into the glade where my companions were located.

Before entering the glade, I heard Maid Marian's soft moans coming from my left, hidden in the bushes. Right where she said she'd be. And apparently with a quarry, no less.

Curious and exasperated, I ducked past an overhanging branch and looked in through an open wreath.

Marian was bouncing her bare ass on a man's hard cock, hiking her dress up to her waist. The man she rode was on his back, flat on the grass. Near-dead, it appeared. He groaned as she vigorously used him for her own carnal delights.

I could tell by his portly nature who it was.

"Come on, friar," Marian urged, her voice lilting. "Pump your cum inside me and I'll let you get up."

"H-Heartless ... wench ..." Friar Tuck groaned. He didn't sound excited and drunk, like he did last night. Rather hungover, if I had to guess.

Still, his hands found her ample hips and pressed her pale ass down on his lap, cock hilting inside her.

I sighed and made myself known, yelling, "Get up, vagrants. You give perverts a bad name."

Marian scoffed as she flashed a rosy-cheeked look over her shoulder. “Says the voyeur.”

“I need my men ready and sharp, woman, not spent and wasted.”

“Almost finished, sir.” She smiled and slammed her ass down one more time on my chaplain.

As Tuck grunted and twitched, he looked around her hips at me. “Apologies, John. She’s incorrigible, this one.”

“Yes,” I drawled, “I’m sure you put up *such* a fight.”

He bared his cheery grin at me, cheeks flushing. “There are worse ways to wake up.”

I shook my head and turned away, having seen enough. Marian and Tuck were not a new occurrence. I hoped the friar knew what he was doing. I was of the mind Tuck was not Maid Marian’s only riding partner.

As I turned, I caught a glimpse of Marian standing from the friar’s prone body, with the friar’s cum dripping out of her, down her legs.

She waltzed by with a contented sigh, flattening her dress, and patted my shoulder. “I suppose it’s my turn to bathe in the river, sir.”

I watched her disappear into the foliage, before standing over Tuck and offering my hand.

Tuck, erm, *tucked* himself away, and took my hand.

I grunted as I took his weight and helped him stand. “You feel heavier, man. Gorging yourself on flesh and meat and mead will do that.”

“Many thanks, lad,” he said as he stumbled to his feet. Stretching, the friar yawned and lifted his arms over his head. “Can you blame a man, John? That succubus keeps me feeling young.”

“She keeps you in her pocket even more, Tuck. Be careful with that one.”

He smiled, arranging his habit and strolling past me. “You worry too much, old friend. I’ll be fine.”

We walked into the camp and spied from afar. A few men sat around an ashen campfire, making food. We watched as Will Scarlet, off to the side, sliced his sword at a bevy of branches—an interesting target for his righteous indignation—growling the entire time.

“No, it’s not me you have to concern yourself with, John. It’s that angry, tempestuous boy.” Tuck pointed at young Will in the distance. “Always wakes up like someone pissed in his soup.”

I tilted my head, watching in stupefaction. “What the fuck is he attacking, you think?”

“His own nightmares and insecurities, John. That boy needs Christ just as much as our oversexed maiden at the river.”

I snorted, smirking. “Don’t think that’ll go over well, Tuck. With either of them.”

“Well, I’ll pray for their eternal souls.”

Everything that came out of Friar Tuck’s mouth had to be taken with a fair dose of salt. How could a man stay holy and steadfast in his faith after urinating on a man’s unconscious body, robbing him blind, fucking a woman against the alley wall, and doing it again before his eyes had even opened this morning?

It took a certain amount of cold indifference and twisted understanding of himself. His confidence in his creed, his optimism in his worthiness and virtue, was something that always baffled me.

I suppose he justifies it by confessing his sins and ridding himself of them nightly.

On one hand, Tuck was unfathomably faulty. On the other, he was the backbone of Nottingham’s largest almshouse. An orphanage for homeless boys and girls. He treated those children like saints.

I would never understand the puzzle that was Friar Tuck, and I had long ago stopped trying. He never ceased to amaze me.

Taking the lead, I barged into the clearing and started kicking men's legs and arms, waking them from their slumber. They scowled and growled, but then saw who was rousing them, and fell in line.

I went to Will Scarlet last, putting a hand on the boy's shoulder—almost earning a slice from his sword as he wheeled around.

“The branch is dead, Will. You've won.”

He frowned at me. Then he blinked, like he didn't know where he was. “Sorry.”

I jumped onto a low branch of a nearby oak tree, to get higher than all the Merry Men. We had a dozen men here, and twice that number in other parts of the woods.

Holding onto a branch, the waking group turned to stare up at me, arms folded, wondering why I had woken them.

“We've got a new job, lads. This one should be juicy,” I announced.

“Juicier than the fucked heist where we lost Roger?” a grizzly old bastard called out.

I frowned. “Roger shouldn't have died. We can't be lucky forever, boys.”

Friar Tuck made the sign of the cross. “God rest his soul.”

“This one should be easy,” I said, nodding. “A quick in-and-out.”

“What's the job?” Will Scarlet asked, propped up against a tree. At least his swords were put away.

I smiled at the sea of curmudgeonly faces. “Carriage robbery, mates. Rich, noble bastards, who are just *begging* us to unburden them of their belongings.”

The men gave a halfhearted cheer.

A year ago, that cheer would have boomed through the forest. Times were tougher now than they were then.

So I tried to rally the troops—though I'd never been much of a motivational spokesman.

“They'll be passing not far from here in a few hours' time, if the missive reads true. Headed to Barnsdale. And we'll be waiting for them.”



Chapter 13

Robin



My father rampaged across the grass, face twisting as he muttered curses to himself. He turned and paced the other way, throwing up his arms.

If I didn't know better, I'd think he'd gone as mad as me.

He'd only discovered me half an hour ago, stowed away like a bundle of wool. We were finishing our first rest stop of the afternoon, buying some time in the shadows of a canopy as the sun pelted overhead.

“Duplicitous, dishonest, deceitful little brat!” he roared, spinning to me.

I knew he wanted to hit me. His face was red with rage, blue veins protruding along his neck. Perhaps he even wanted to slice me up and leave me for dead on the side of the road.

Uncle Gregory stayed close to me. Calm, unconcerned, watching as Sir Thomas made a fool of himself. His hand never strayed too far from the sword on his hip.

I was grateful Gregory took my side. It could have easily gone the other way, if he were a lesser man. He could have welcomed the beating, but he wasn't the type to enjoy watching young women get assaulted.

I had to imagine this little tantrum of my father's was eye-opening. It gave Gregory insight into how my home life had been for the past few years—ever since I grew large and fortified enough to take physical discipline without breaking. Granted, I was still thin, but I was old enough to take a beating.

Truth was, Father had broken me long ago. His fists and slaps fell on a shell of a girl. They didn't hold the same weight

they once did, though I obviously longed to be away from them.

Perhaps a suitor isn't the worst idea ... unless said suitor ends up being an extension of Father, with the same angry traits.

“Calm down, Tom,” Gregory urged, watching my father pace back and forth. “She misses her mother and wants to be with her through thick and thin.”

It was true. I desperately wished for another conversation with Mama, like the one I'd had last night. I needed her advice on what I was supposed to do if she died and left me. My final protector.

No Robert, no Mama ...

My future looked bleak.

“*You still have Uncle Gregory to protect you, sister,*” Robert said.

I whispered, “Yes. For now.”

My uncle's brow threaded together. He kept his eyes on my raging father a stone's throw away, and spoke out the corner of his mouth. “What was that? For now?”

I looked up with wide eyes, shaking my head. I didn't want Gregory to know I was crazy. “It's nothing. I was, erm, just thinking about my brother.”

His face crinkled with a fond smile. “Your brother was a good lad. Strong, true, kind. That last one's the hardest to come by.”

“I know. I'll never live up to him.” I hung my head with a sigh.

“No, you'll never live up to me, Robin. You'll surpass me.”

Robert's words brought tears to my eyes.

I couldn't think on it long, though, because I had more pressing matters. The present.

What about when I return home? When Gregory leaves, and I have no one? I had a new worry to contend with, too: returning to Wilford a criminal, after the wayward event with Peter Fisher. A sick part of me hoped he died of blood loss or shock in that forest, so I'd never get caught for what I'd done to him.

The thought disturbed me. I found myself furrowing my brow, wondering where it came from. *Am I so desensitized to violence and heartache that I wish the death of a man who once tried to help me?*

Of course, Squire Fisher only "helped" me from Rosco and his boys because he thought I would freely give him something in return. Something I'd never given *any* man. And once he couldn't have it, he tried to *take* it.

A fool and a blowhard, that one.

Father spun on Gregory, thrusting a shaking finger at him. "How long did you know she stayed in that chest like a pack rat? Did you two collude on this little misadventure?"

"No, Tom," Gregory said with a sigh. "I found out shortly before you did."

I raised my eyebrows. He'd known the whole cart ride. It was nice of Gregory to lie for me, even if it wouldn't make a lick of difference once he was gone. I was in for some debilitating punishment.

It can't be as bad as jail in Nottingham, right? Can't be as awful and unimaginable as losing my freedom—my ability to escape into the forest, or freely walk into town with Emma, or gamble with the guttersnipes ... can it?

"My estate will be in ruins by the time I return," Father lambasted, putting his hands on his head. "There is no one to run the shop while I'm gone."

I hated how he called it *his* estate. We all knew it was Mama Joan's. Gregory knew better than anyone, since he had given the workshop and estate over to his younger sister so he could go soldiering and live a different life away from stuffy royalty.

I envied him, in a way.

“You never trusted Robin to tend the estate as it was,” Gregory reminded him. “What has changed? Your maids will take control.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what they’ll do. Raise a coup and *take control!*”

Gregory bared his teeth. “You sound paranoid and foolish, Tom. That isn’t going to happen.”

I wished it would. I’d love for Emma to start a resistance against the tyrannical hand of my father. From everything I’d heard through the rumor mill in town, my father reflected the ideals of the wicked Prince John in spades. Like most nobility, he appreciated the prince’s significant taxes and levies because they filled his coffers.

The poor people—the peasants and lower-class yeomen and villeins—were getting fleeced. Living destitute lives, while the rich flourished more than they had in years. Prince John claimed the steep taxes were to help fund his brother’s holy quest in Jerusalem. To aid King Richard the Lionheart in retrieving the throne of Christianity.

The poor folk didn’t see it that way. What had started as a stir of unrest a few months ago seemed to be building into something darker as time dragged on and financial straits worsened.

I’d heard Emma speak of rebellion, in hushed voices with the other maids. Eavesdropped on shop owners, cobblers, and farmers as they spoke of Prince John’s vileness. Saw how they were forced to shutter their stores earlier and earlier, because no one had any money to buy their wares. The taverns were teeming with angry folk, filled to burst.

At least that’s what I reckoned. I couldn’t be too sure about anything, because those types of matters weren’t for women to concern themselves with.

Bullshit, that.

Father waved his hand at me. “What about when the girl begins to shed her blood around us? We’ll all grow sick and

die from her illness!”

Gregory blinked in shock. We were both stupefied. Father was reaching *far*.

“Thomas,” Gregory mumbled. “You’ve lived with your wife for years. I lived with mine. Did either of us ever grow sick and die when they were going through their monthly balance? No.”

“Because we stay away from them! Which will be impossible—”

“There are two carts. Robin can stay in the second, as she has been.”

I nodded to him. “That works with me.”

Father lunged. “Shut your mouth, little who—”

Gregory stepped in front of me, arms crossed. “That’s enough, Thomas. Men”—he gestured to the lazing soldiers around the cart, watching the scene embarrassingly unfold—“let’s get moving.”

Father finally gave up, retreating to the head carriage amid a tumble of curses and vulgarities. Gregory followed behind me as I escaped toward the cargo carriage.

It seemed battle lines had been drawn.

Before stepping onto the stair to pull himself in, Gregory called out to the other carriage. “For what it’s worth, Thomas, I never strayed from my Margo even *when* she bled. I stayed close, and we lived a long life together. And I never got sick.”

From my carriage, I couldn’t see my father outside, but I heard him stammer. I imagined what he wanted to say, because I knew what kind of petty man he was: “And now look at your sweet Margo, Gregory. You might not have gotten sick, but *she* did.”

Luckily for my father, he veered away from that. Because he knew as well as anyone, if there was ever a swift way to earn Sir Gregory’s sword through your throat, it was by speaking about his dead wife.

Instead, he said, “It’s no wonder you are the way you are, then, Gregory.”

With that cryptic message, the two men departed for their separate carriages.

Gregory and I sat in silence, his head bowed. The vein in his forehead pulsed.

As the carriages began moving, I asked, “What do you think my father meant by that, Uncle?”

He sighed and looked up at me. His eyes were red-rimmed, and he cleared his throat—likely to prevent sniffing. “I imagine he’s saying I’m cursed. That my proximity to Margo caused her death.”

I gasped, reeling. “No! That’s awful!”

He shrugged, a defeated look on his face. “I can never be too sure, girl. Half the time I don’t think Thomas himself knows what the fuck he’s talking about.”

We sat in silence, swaying as the carriage rolled over a bump. Then he broke into a wry smile, and I matched him, relieved he was able to see past my father’s wickedness.

Our smiles didn’t last for long.

“He’s a right bastard,” I snarled.

“Robin,” he chided. “That’s ... unladylike.”

“But true.”

A shrug. “Can’t argue with that.”

I chuckled again.

His voice grew serious and solemn as he reached out and put a hand on my knee. “I’m sorry you have to live with such a difficult man. If I had my way, it wouldn’t be like this.”

I sniffed, nodding, unable to form words.

It was too late for Gregory to adopt me. I was much too old, and too established in my life and roles.

But it was nice to dream.

He had always wanted a child. Margo had never been able to provide him one. It was another reason he wanted the Wilford estate to go to Mama, because he knew she'd continue the family legacy.

Sitting there, stewing in our communal sorrow and longing, I wondered, *What will my legacy look like?*

I don't want to be a landowner. I don't want to be a noblewoman. I don't want to be a seamstress or businesswoman or turn into a jaded spinster.

How can I forge a legacy different than my family's?

How can I do something that means something?

How can I make a difference at all?



Chapter 14

Robin



Father hadn't shown his face since retreating to the carriage after the first stop. I was fine with that, because it meant I didn't need to talk to him.

It was impossible to pass by the royal preserve of Sherwood Forest without delving into it. We began to pass numerous well-hidden villages and hamlets as the afternoon dragged on into dusk.

We passed the priory of Ravenshead, a popular destination for pilgrims, and straddled Sherwood Forest and the Forest of East Derybshire, while rising and falling with the lush green hillsides and thick woods.

Uncle Gregory woke from a midday nap as the carriage bumped over a rude stone in the road. He called for us to make our second stop of the afternoon after we passed a landmark hamlet he recognized.

I gazed out the window. The sun was about to set, painting the sky a beautiful orange hue. I asked my sleepy uncle, "Why stop here? We've just passed the hamlets. We're in the middle of nowhere."

Not that I could complain. I enjoyed the crisp outdoors of the forest. Yet we hardly had more than a clearing to work with.

Gregory frowned, strapping his belt and sword to his waist before standing as the carriage rolled to a stop alongside the road. "The middle of nowhere is precisely where we want to be, dear niece." He rested a hand on my shoulder. "You must understand something, Robin. There are bad people in this world."

"I'm well aware, Uncle."

His smile was mischievous. “Yes, I’ve no doubt.” Then his expression turned serious. “We are royalty, Robin, and we can’t escape it. Even I, who desperately tried to run away from his name, could not do it. As sad and cowardly as that may sound, I had my reasons.”

He sat down in front of me, on a crate of linens. “As an heiress of a grand estate, you are used to life being a certain way for you. In Nottingham, you are waited on and worshipped. In an unfamiliar place like this, somewhere between Derbyshire and Yorkshire, in the middle of the woods? Secrecy is our best friend. Our noble bloodline is not worshipped here. We are targets and prey.”

“Isn’t this where the bandits stay, though? Out in the woods, away from authority?”

“They typically make camp inside hamlets just like the ones we passed, where sheriffs and lawmen are scarce. They might have associates posted, watching for a regal arrival such as ours.”

I bit my lip nervously. “Maybe we shouldn’t have brought two lavish carriages on this trek, then.”

He chuckled. “It was your father’s idea.” He gestured at himself, in his rough leathers and worn-down boots. “Do I look like a man who cares about presentation?”

I smiled. “No, Uncle, I can’t say you do.”

It was another critique of Father. Not only did he claim everything under the sun, he also needed everyone to know about it. It put us in a precarious position, because now we had to camp outside of civilization.

“If our carts were seen rolling into nearby hamlets,” Gregory said, “ne’er-do-wells roving the town might tip off the bandits in these woods. I’d sooner avoid that altogether. Last thing we need is an ambush at daybreak, you see?”

I nodded slowly.

He gave my shoulder another light squeeze. “We always have to be cognizant of our surroundings, lass. For people like

us, doubly so, because the less fortunate folk want what we have.”

“Riches.”

“And a whole shitload of them in this very carriage,” Uncle Gregory finished with a wink.

I let out a shaky sigh.

My uncle noticed and tapped the scabbard hanging from his belt. “Never fear, lass. I have steel to protect you, as do the guards I brought. Just in case the fools get testy with us.”

His reassurance made me feel better about the situation.

Which, in hindsight, was foolish, because I would learn that pain and turmoil followed me everywhere I went. Almost unnaturally so.



The sun was fully set when they came. I sat on the stoop of the carriage, legs dangling off the stair that dropped to the grass. A small campfire flickered in the center of the clearing, circled by logs. Four guards sat at the fire, talking in hushed voices as they finished off a spit of smoky meat. I’d had my fill first, after the rabbit was cooked. Thus were the advantages of nobility.

Uncle Gregory was off to the side, near Mama’s carriage. My father stayed with her in that carriage, tending her. Their door was closed, and I hadn’t seen Father in hours, ever since he poked his head out to scowl at me.

A soldier stood between two trees to the north, keeping watch, peering into the black forest ahead. The sky shone purple and silver with moonlight, the canopies of the trees protecting our clearing.

The soldier turned with a sigh to face the campfire, rubbing his hands together in the chill.

I kicked my legs.

The soldier started laughing—or was that coughing?

My head shot up, brow rising.

The laugh-cough turned into a continuous gurgle as the soldier stumbled and swayed toward the fire, pointing at something behind him.

He stayed on his feet until he got to the edge of the firelight.

“What is it, Geoffrey?” Uncle Gregory asked aloud, his voice cutting through the whispered conversation of the guards at the fire.

I gasped when I noticed a glinting reflection—an arrowhead, punched through Geoffrey’s neck, protruding out. When he spoke in a bubbled gargle, blood rushed down his chin and throat.

Uncle Gregory shot up to his feet, tossing his scabbard aside as he drew his huge sword. “Enemies!”

The first guard who rose to his feet from the campfire took two arrows in the skull, both of them thudding into his head and turning him into a pincushion. He dropped in a breathless heap of limbs.

I screamed, unable to contain myself from the sudden, jarring violence, and the other three men at the fire grunted with alarm.

My heart plummeted to my boots and I jumped to my feet, wheeling from the open door of the carriage to try and find something to use as a weapon.

I didn’t have my shortbow, having left it at the Wilford estate to stow myself away. I managed to find a small cutting knife near one of the crates, which I quickly palmed and lurched toward the door.

“Stay inside!” Gregory commanded as I showed my face in the doorway. Fully armed and armored, he disappeared into the shadows away from the fire. “Men, apart!”

The remaining soldiers took my uncle’s command and scattered from the fire, into the darkness where I could hardly see them.

That's when I saw our enemy—the wraithlike bodies skirting through the trees, around the clearing; shadowy specters dropping down from branches, popping up from bushes with bows in their hands.

Two guards burst free from Father's carriage with their swords drawn.

One of them was met with a whizzing arrow that pelted into his chest and stopped his forward momentum. The second soldier took his falling body and used it as a shield as he rushed forward, toward the trajectory of the arrow.

We were being cut down right in front of me. I couldn't just stand and watch, regardless of Uncle Gregory's demand.

I also liked to think I wasn't a complete idiot, so I hesitated, waiting to pick my best move.

It was pure pandemonium from the onset. The guards from the campfire had bolted, assumedly to find the bastards shooting from the trees. The remaining soldier near my father's cart stayed there to watch it—though Father, a knight himself, hadn't yet shown his face.

Steel clashed in the distance, ringing out, rustling the leaves. Wind moaned through the branches and shook them—or were those enemies on the hunt?

My eyes darted left to right, scanning the whole scene, trying to make sense of it. I'd never been in actual combat before. What I imagined Robert went through, well, it wasn't *this*. There was more chivalry and heroism involved.

This was cowardly. Sniping and pinning us down, keeping us scared and locked in place. This was barbarous, savage. Feral bandits or mercenaries trying to slaughter an entire family.

I heard a scream. A guard I recognized came running out from the trees, missing an arm. A pursuer in forest-black garb followed him into the clearing, two swords raised.

I laid eyes on the enemy. They were not monsters or apparitions, but men. Stark, wicked men, who cared nothing for the lives of the people they tormented.

I charged from the doorway, unable to stop myself—

And an arrow smacked into the hull of the carriage next to me, freezing me in place as it landed a hand's breadth from my face.

My eyes bulged.

I looked out and saw nothing, turned, and gripped my knife with slick palms. Another glint of reflective light, and another arrow off to my right, smacking the wood and exploding chips near my face. It forced me to back up into the doorway of the carriage.

The ranger in the woods was toying with me. My fury flared. My people were getting cut down, and I was too scared and selfish to help them. I didn't want to die here, but it seemed like we were *all* on our way to that outcome.

The man in black with his two swords weaved through the darkness behind the armless soldier. My heart stopped as the soldier turned, begging for mercy with a raised hand, and lost that hand at the wrist.

Now limbless, in shock, he toppled backward, convulsed, and died.

The monster with the two swords stepped closer, his eyes glittering in the darkness. He wore a sash of something red—brighter than the rest of him—around his neck, and stepped closer to the firelight.

Our eyes locked. I sucked in a sharp breath, reflexively backing up into the carriage.

My heel hit the step and I tripped, falling on my ass.

Uncle Gregory burst free from the trees, flanking the swordsman.

Blades clanged and sparked as the two met.

Their melee was fierce, quick. The mercenary was younger and faster, but my uncle was no slouch. He managed to punch the man in the face, taking a slash across his arm at the same time.

Not a fair tradeoff.

Around them, more bandits snuck into the clearing.

I lost track of Gregory and lost sight of the guards as bodies filled the space.

I knew I was going to die. *Robert, why is this happening?!*

No one answered my cries.

After everything Gregory had said—that we were safer out here in the woods than inside the hamlets—and we were *still* going to die!

My uncle fought with everything he had.

Then another bandit joined the fray against him.

Where the hell is Father?!

Gritting my teeth, unwilling to give up, I steeled myself and pushed up from my ass. I grabbed the dagger and rushed outside.

If I was going to die, I was going to go down fighting. Not hiding like Sir Thomas the Stiff.

I made it ten feet before my nerves got the better of me. I knew I stood no chance rushing into a vicious melee. I found myself cocking my arm back, aiming at that dual-wielding bandit locked in combat with my uncle.

My dagger flew end over end.

My aim, thanks to my bow work, was excellent.

The man growled as it landed in his side with a satisfying thud, and he staggered onto one knee.

My uncle took the opportunity to try and end him by dislodging his head from his shoulders.

Something hard and wooden caught his blade and turned it aside.

A newcomer stood over the kneeling bandit, protecting him—taller, broader, scarier than the rest. He turned my uncle's blade aside with a shepherd's quarterstaff, bringing the other end of it crashing against Gregory's head.

My uncle toppled to the ground.

I yelped in horror, ready to cry out. Then the man who I'd thrown the dagger at stared menacingly over his shoulder. His face was enough to horrify me into silence.

He was alarmingly handsome. Boyish, even? Much younger than I'd expected.

The man who had cracked my uncle's skull faced me and passed by his friend. I backpedaled again, toward the carriage.

All was lost. Uncle Gregory was either dead or unconscious. Father was nowhere to be seen.

The giant of a man stepped into the edge of the campfire. For a second, I saw fire flicker across his face.

And my heart stopped.

"What do we have here?" he asked, tilting his head, rubbing his bearded chin.

I craned my neck to look up at him as he drew closer. My back slammed against the carriage wall. I had nowhere to go.

He repeated what he'd said the first time we'd crossed paths, this time with a dangerous smile: "It isn't safe for someone like you out here all alone."

His voice rumbled through my bones. I tried to look past him, to the younger man I had stabbed, but this man took up my whole vision, my whole imagination, my whole world.

The hunter, I thought fearfully. The same man who rescued me from a wild hog now loomed over me like a ruthless dragon.

The sash-wearer I'd nailed with my dagger sidestepped around the tall one and tried to rush me. The hunter's arm shot out, barring his lunge.

"He stabbed me!" he growled.

"You'll live," the tall man said. Obviously the ringleader. "This one is too peculiar to kill."

The door to the other carriage swung open.

All eyes veered in that direction. For a second I had a chance to escape from the distraction, yet I was too scared to move.

My heart soared as I imagined my father bursting out of the carriage with sword drawn, ready to face the enemy like a champion in shining armor. Like a gallant soldier of glory, ready to protect his wife, daughter, and brother-in-law to the bitter end.

My face sank when I saw his face. This was my father. A decidedly *ungallant* man. A man more concerned with his own status and wealth than anything else.

To his credit, he had warned Gregory about the dangers of such a trek. And now look at us.

When my father's thick brow jumped to his forehead, my heart plummeted. He was gazing right at me, mouth agape, and saw the two men pinning me to the wall of the carriage.

His head vanished into the carriage. The door slammed shut as other bandits hesitantly approached.

A *yip* sounded, then a whip snap, and the carriage lurched to move.

"No ..." I croaked to myself, curling my hands into fists so hard my palms bled.

All I'd ever known was abuse and torture at the hands of my father. He could have redeemed himself in one fell swoop. Instead, he ran, knowing his daughter was in danger. It hurt worse than any physical pain.

He truly didn't care for me.

He's doing it for Mama, I thought, trying to find a silver lining.

I was telling myself a lie, though, and I knew it. He was escaping this hellhole of a clearing for *himself*. No one else. Nothing was going to stop him.

A few bandits took chase. The cart and its horses moved too quickly, and before long it had rattled into the trees, onto the road, and was gone from my sight.

The lumbering giant in front of me scoffed. “Coward.”

A third man appeared from the trees, this one broad like the giant, yet not as tall. He was a rotund man in the middle. His face spoke of horrors and kindness. A stern look in his eyes, with laugh smiles around his mouth. A ruddier, rawer complexion than the beautiful youth with the two swords or the grizzled hunter towering over me.

“Yes, a coward he might be,” the man said, and there was a hint of familiarity in his tone, “but he’s left his most precious cargo behind.”

His eyes bore into my face. My cheeks went cold, blanching as he approached. Then he shook his head with a snort. “Not you, silly lad.” His hand reached out and I tensed, preparing for the worst.

His warm palm landed on my shoulder—

And he shoved me aside. I spotted a twinkle; a band of silver around his small finger.

Recognition hit me. *Emma’s secret partner from the almshouse!*

The large man gazed past me into the carriage, to the crates and barrels overflowing with linens. “*This.*”

“Always a one-track mind with you,” the tall hunter said.

“Hoy!” the dual-wielding youth growled. “I’m still stabbed, and *he* did it!” He pointed at me with a sword, tilting the flat of the blade under my chin. He took me in for the first time. “My, but he is a pretty one, isn’t he?”

The man’s youthful visage was blindingly attractive. Smooth, sharp jawline, chiseled chin, dreamlike blue eyes under a mop of curly dark hair.

“Alan will be happy,” he added.

I was too scared to move. If I swallowed too hard, the young man’s sword would cut into my neck. If I swallowed *at all*, he might’ve noticed I didn’t have the same bob of my throat that a boy did.

In the dark, my disguise was working. For at least a while, they thought I was a man. I prayed to God my disguise would see me through this. That my beliefs about the easiness of being a man over a woman would prove true.

I glanced to the deep track marks of my father's carriage. He was long gone. Gregory was possibly dead. Other men were starting to arrive in the clearing. None of them were the soldiers we had come here with.

I suspected our guards were all dead. Which meant I was alone. Well and truly alone, at last ... except I had never wanted it *like this*.

I suppressed a shudder.

Why is there excitement in that shudder? I was disturbed, again, at the direction of my thoughts.

The hunter slapped the younger one's sword down from my neck. He scowled, flaring his nostrils. "You were right the first time, Tuck," he said to the big man in the carriage. "This one is precious cargo. He comes with us."

"W-With you?" I stammered, trying to keep my voice from squeaking and cracking.

"Yes. We know who you are, Prince of Wilford."

Prince of Wilford? Someone is leading you astray, then. Or their intelligence is faulty. I knew to play the part, because I knew what happened to women in the wilderness when they were surrounded by savage men.

Hell, it happened in civilized places, too, if Peter Fisher was anything to go by.

"Don't be scared, lad," the bearded giant said. "We aren't so bad. We can actually be quite ... merry."



Chapter 15

Will Scarlet



“Oh, I think he should be *very* scared,” I said, giving the young man a sadistic smile. He looked so young, with nary a whisker on his face. Thin as a skeleton, yet undeniably pretty in a way I couldn’t put my finger on.

Little John frowned down his nose at me. “Don’t be a cock, Will. Can’t you see he’s shaking like a leaf?”

“Good.”

It wasn’t my problem to care for pompous lordlings in their time of need. What had the nobility ever done for me, Ma, or Pa? Even if this boy wasn’t a Plantagenet, he deserved no mercy or quarter. They were snakes, and deserved all the grief and pain they received.

“Don’t terrorize our captives,” John said.

“But it’s so fun and easy,” I drawled, sheathing my blades in the scabbards at my hips. Little John’s acceptance of people boiled my blood. He avoided shedding blood when he could. He was our *de facto* leader, though he didn’t always make the best decisions for the band.

Why would we not hang this nuisance from the highest tree to leave a warning to the rest of the noble shits rolling through these woods?

Little John gestured vaguely to the lordling pinned against the carriage then nudged his chin at the unconscious man he’d cracked with his staff near the fire. “Just bind the boy and help me rouse the old man so we can get things straight.”

I glanced over, inspecting the old sack on the ground. That one had been a fine fighter. He’d likely been even more

formidable in his glory days. I respected that. At least he didn't appear to come from nobility.

Still, my initial reaction was one of disappointment. As the bloodlust raged in my mind, I frowned at my tall companion. "You mean we're not killing him, either?"

"We don't kill defenseless old men."

I fingered the red silk around my neck. Its softness brought my blood down to a reasonable level. "He didn't seem all that defenseless when we fought."

Little John pinched the bridge of his nose. I always irked him. He should've been used to my prodding. "At least until we figure out his place in all this, he lives. Deal?"

"Fine."

John looked at the pretty boy in front of him. "I'm guessing he's your father, lad?"

The boy stayed mute, full lips pursed together in a thin line. When his eyes flicked left, to the wheel divots of the escaped carriage, I blinked and understood.

"Ah," John grunted. "*That* was your lovely father. Shameful."

"The lord saw you crack that old man like a viper," I said. "Wouldn't you run, too?"

"If it was my son in danger? No. I wouldn't."

I shrugged. If Little John was nothing else, he was noble of heart. Too bad he didn't have the ample coffers of the nobility, too. That would make our lives much easier.

I ran a hand through my hair, peering into the dark forest beyond, where the carriage had gone. "Should we give chase? Imagine the spoils in that wagon."

"We have enough here."

John and I spun to the voice of Friar Tuck. He exited the carriage with a shock of linens draped over both shoulders, smiling mischievously.

My mouth formed a circle. “By God, had I known *that* was in there ... It’s a good thing you don’t care for earthly possessions, Tuck.”

I rushed forward before he could argue, snatched the bundle off his body. My hands roamed through the soft fabrics, pinching and teasing to check for quality.

It was fine shit. Very fine. Made from an expert.

I was in Heaven.

John poked his head in. “There’s enough in here to dress the whole gang in new garb.” He shook his head. “Lord knows we could use it.”

Tuck joined him at the open door. “Or the orphanage, Little John.”

John tightened his lips, looking ashamed. “Right. Good idea.”

I spun and twisted the fabric around my body, losing myself to its softness. I stretched it overhead, so it would block out the silver moon. The light came through the thin sheets in a dappled, muffled glow. I smiled.

I’d always had an affinity for the nicer things in life. Probably because I never owned them myself. *We all want what we can’t have.*

“Good God, Scarlet,” Tuck said, “only you could get a hard-on from *clothes*, boy.”

I tied a sheet of yellow linen around my head like a bonnet. “I’m not aroused!” I looked down to make sure I was telling the truth. I felt defensive and snapped back, “And what about you, chaplain? Pleased with your beggar’s garb?”

Friar Tuck spread his arms wide and looked down at his brown, boring habit. “Suits me just fine.”

“Because you’re dull. Though you might need a bigger size soon if you keep eating the way you do.”

Tuck flared his nostrils and bunched his hands into fists, advancing on me.

John pushed me aside and stepped between us. I laughed, stumbling back from his strength.

The lordling between us stared wide-eyed, eyes darting with a confused crease to his brow. Clearly he'd never met anyone quite like the Merry Men.

John said, "That's enough, knaves. Don't want to sway the young lord's opinion of us, do we?"

Tuck and I both chuckled.

As if we gave a damn what a shitstain like this boy thought of us. We'd already killed his guards and knocked out the best of the bunch.

Whatever the boy thought, I hoped it filled him with fear and trepidation. I hoped he pissed himself when he slept tonight, wondering if his supple throat would be cut next.

If I got my way, it would.

John said, "We've got a pretty boy to make Alan-a-Dale happy when we return, and enough linens for you to swim in, Will. What's there for you, Tuck?" As he asked the question, he pulled out a length of rope and tossed it to me.

Friar Tuck shrugged. "The almshouse will be well-stocked if I get my way."

"And what about you, boss?" I asked John.

"A payday."

I grunted with agreement. "Victory's never bad, but a payday's always better."

We all chuckled, and then I grabbed the boy's wrists.

My laugh died when my fingers circled those thin sticks he called wrists. That first touch did something to me. My cock flared to life, and it had nothing to do with the finery I had tied around my head.

I tilted my head. "My, but aren't you *soft*?"

He swallowed, staying mute. His bright eyes locked with mine. It wasn't long before he turned away. I reached for the

hood covering his face and he reeled, struggling with his wrists to break my hold on him.

Noticing his bared teeth and snarl, like a feral child, a rare tinge of sympathy ran through me. I lifted my hand, letting him keep the hood pulled. “Fine, brat,” I murmured, feeling strange about myself. “You’re a queer lad, aren’t you?”

He said nothing.

My hands worked fast, tying his wrists and binding them together, before dragging him away from the carriage to the campfire.

Little John, Friar Tuck, and two fellow brothers were waking the stunned old man out of his haze. They tied his arms behind him as he groaned and wobbled upright.

Then his eyes found the lordling’s, and fear rifled through those orbs.

It was another peculiar moment. I wasn’t sure if the others caught it. *Perhaps the lordling is lying, and this really is his father. If that’s the case, who was that in the carriage?*

Perhaps I’d never know, since Little John had given the order to stand down. He was too soft at times.

We had to be happy with our prize. Lord knew I was—if I believed in that fucked-up menace they called God, that is.

John led our troop into the forest. I dashed out the fire before we left, in case other highwaymen wanted to get greedy.

This territory typically did not belong to the Merry Men. We were encroaching on Derbyshire’s forest, yet it was close enough to Sherwood that I didn’t suspect any problems. Still, you always had to be careful about who you crossed.

As John dragged the old bearded fellow through the woods, the knight finally spoke up. His voice was raspy and angry. “Let the lad go,” he said. “Take me instead.”

“I’d rather take both of you,” John said.

“Why? He’s worthless. I’m Sir Gregory of Wilford. Don’t you know who I am, cur?”

“Can’t say I do,” John said easily, tugging the old man’s leash harder. “I’ve heard of a Baroness Joan of Wilford, however. Given your proximity to the Queen of the Lace Market’s linens in that carriage, I take it you are related? Your wife, perhaps?”

The knight said nothing. A tough nut to break, maybe. But they always broke. Eventually.

At mention of Baroness Joan, the lordling I pulled along sucked in a sharp gasp. I didn’t miss it. My head swiveled over my shoulder, brow rising.

“Whatever your relation might be to the baroness,” John finished, “the way you looked at that lad when you woke up tells me he’s not worthless, either.”

“What do you want with me?”

The voice behind me was so low I barely heard it.

I turned to stare down at the hooded boy. I wasn’t particularly tall, but this one was shorter than me. A slow smile sliced across my face. “Ah. So he’s not mute after all. That’s good.”

The lordling said nothing more. He blinked, bowing deeper into his hood.

I reached over, tilted his chin, squeezing his supple flesh, forcing him to look up into my eyes as his lips puckered. “We want your blood.”

His face paled, mouth falling open.

“Short of that,” I said with a wink, “we want everything else you have to offer.”



Chapter 16

Robin



Just who the hell were these men? Because that's certainly what it felt like being led through the woods like a dog on a leash—that I was in some bizarre version of Hell.

They spoke whimsically of robbery, murder, and arousal, smiling and cheering like children at their triumph. Yet they spoke of these things with blood-covered faces, minutes after a slaughter.

Could these thugs be so desensitized to violence they didn't even realize the atrocities they'd just committed?

Those men guarding the carriages had been brothers, husbands, sons. They'd had families. And they'd been cut down without a second thought.

After seeing the extreme violence up close, I was shocked they hadn't killed Uncle Gregory, too. For sport, if nothing else. He was the only one who put up any meaningful fight against that vicious, youthful swordsman, and posed the greatest threat to these cretins.

When Gregory woke and saw I was alive, I'd noticed the flash of relief mixed with fear on his face. To see him brought to such a state—blood caked on the side of his head, eyes dazed—made my heart sink.

I had hoped he'd be able to hide his surprise and dismay, but alas. I was too important to him.

Luckily, even in his injured condition, he had seamlessly recognized the situation and continued to call me "lad" and made no correction when I was called "Prince" or "lordling."

My disguise wouldn't last forever. One night gave way to dawn, or my hood was thrown back, my feminine features

would be recognized: A face too heart-shaped; hips too wide, falling to thick, shapely thighs despite my thin waist; the slender column of my neck, devoid of the protrusion all men sported.

The sinister swordsman who wanted me dead had already recognized my too-soft skin, unmarred by labor or the leathery aftermath of too much sun. I had the features of a noble person—fine, refined, untarnished.

These men were tall, muscled, and frightening. They wore beards and sneers on their faces, with knowing smirks and cunning looks in their eyes. More barbarian than anything else.

Their garb was ragtag and threadbare. I didn't get a sense of uniformity within their ranks. They did not appear to be a dedicated mercenary force, which I'd expect from highwaymen and robbers. At the same time, they clearly weren't a unified militia.

So what do they fight for, or whom do they work for? What was their cause or purpose? Why would perfectly able-bodied men engage in such terrible violence and heart-stopping dangers to take what wasn't theirs from the higher rungs of society?

I didn't understand this life at all.

Surely it can't be for sport, or fun. I figured if I wasn't killed by night's end, I may deduce some things about them.

In some twisted way, Father had been trying to shield me from this degenerate section of life throughout my upbringing. He often warned me about the vermin who infested the streets of Nottingham as beggars, pickpockets, and other purveyors of skullduggery. His sternness and severity were warnings. His cruelty was only a hint of what cruelty others would wish to inflict upon me.

My boots splashed into a muddy puddle. I frowned as mud caked them. My arms ached from being yanked along by the rope binding my wrists together.

Was this what it felt like to be a slave? I'd only been in dire straits for an hour, and I already felt like breaking.

“Don’t do it, sister. Stay strong.”

Robert’s words gave me reassurance.

The curly-haired swordsman chuckled when he looked over his shoulder and saw me inspecting my muddy boots. He looked ridiculous with the yellow bonnet tied around his head. “You aren’t like most mollycoddled lordlings, are you?”

I said nothing. I wouldn’t give this cretin the satisfaction of seeing me wilt, beg, or shout in frustration. I *was* curious how he came to that conclusion, however. I glared, trying to urge the question into my eyes.

His chin dipped. “Noticed the grass threading your boot treads earlier. Dusty and grimy, even before stepping into that slop.” He abruptly yanked the rope, forcing my legs to wheel and stumble to keep up. “We’ve got an explorer on our hands, lads!”

The rest of the gang chuckled lightly. Six other men surrounded us. Two of them wheeled the linen carriage behind us. A few crept through the woods to my sides and behind, staying mostly quiet.

The massive hunter at the front, whom they had bafflingly called *Little John*, appeared to be the leader and eldest of the bunch.

The portly fellow they called *Friar Tuck* seemed a close friend of *Little John*’s. Though clean-shaven, he could have been the same age as the grizzled hunter. His title was certainly an ornamental delusion, given his chosen, godless occupation.

And Will—or as someone referred to him as *Scarlet*, assumedly because of that red sash he wore around his neck—was the youngest of the bunch. Perhaps he had the most to prove, which might’ve explained why he seemed so sadistic and wanted to immediately kill me.

Then again, I *had* thrown a dagger into his side, which wasn’t a good way to make friends. He hadn’t complained about that little incident after the initial outburst. The young man didn’t even walk with a limp or hold the bleeding wound,

as if all he needed to do was pretend it wasn't there and he could ignore it.

As we aimlessly wandered through the forest, ducking under low-hanging branches and dipping around thick boles, hopping over babbling creeks and slick stones, I wondered if this Will Scarlet character could have been the son of someone in the gang.

My imagination started coming up with silly stories and tales that led these men to the destitute positions they were in now.

Will Scarlet, for instance, had been born a prince. It explained his love for my mother's fabrics, and the silly way he wrapped that yellow cloth around his head. Somewhere along the way, things had gone wrong for the noble prince, and now he was capable of cutting a man's arms off and watching him convulse and bleed out, while jesting with his comrades a few minutes later.

I got tired of my game after that memory flashed back and made me shudder. I had to remember these were real people, real stakes. I likely wouldn't make it out of this situation alive. I couldn't afford to live in my fantasy world anymore.

I should have been much more terrified than I was.

"So, my little explorer, what have you been searching for?" Will Scarlet asked me, pulling me alongside him.

Grinding my teeth together, I averted my gaze so he couldn't see past the crease of my hood from his profile vantage.

Will opened his mouth to speak again—

"Don't speak to him, you mongrel," Uncle Gregory rasped from behind us. He limped at a distance, rope held by a beefy young man.

Will flared his perfect nose and spun. He dragged me with him as he went to take his rage out on Uncle Gregory. My heart skipped a beat when the young man raised his fist to hit my uncle.

But Gregory didn't flinch. He stared down the thuggish youth, frowning. "Direct your questions to me, boy. And your ire."

Will's fear tactics fell flat. It made me smile, which I quickly shuttered once Will saw the hint of a smirk on Gregory's eyes from us locking gazes.

My captor twirled on me and I flinched, ready for him to hit me instead of my uncle.

My brattiness had always gotten in my way. That's what my father told me.

Will Scarlet surprised me. He didn't raise his fist. His eyes flashed softer, brow arching. "You're too pretty to hit," he murmured, as if frustrated with himself. He stormed off, bringing me with him.

"Thank you," I mouthed out to Gregory, before I was turned and tugged in the opposite direction.

We crested a hill, and Little John stood at the top, using his hefty quarterstaff as a walking stick. "We're here," he said to the group.

My thighs and ass burned as I climbed the steep incline, made more difficult by not being able to use my hands for balance. Truth was, Will Scarlet might have called me his "little explorer," but I was not acclimated to this much hard walking and climbing.

I gawked when I reached the apex of the hill and stared down at the sight below.

Men huddled around campfires hidden by the surrounding trees and slopes. A hog was roasting over a bonfire. A winding river snaked through the area in the distance, and tents sat along its banks. Women were here, too, at least four of them being led into the camp from a different direction. A couple bandits rolled in barrels with the women, laughing and jostling each other.

Conversation was loud. The air was thick with revelry. While my uncle's guards lay dead and dying a few miles back,

this place—nestled deep in the crannies of the forest—was ready for a party.

An attractive cloaked man with soft blond hair blowing in the breeze crested the hill toward us, coming from the camp. A small lute bounced on his back, and when he peered up at us with a smile, I nearly wilted from the beauty of his serene face, framed lightly by a short-trimmed beard.

“We’ve prepared in anticipation of a successful raid, Little John,” he said in a happy voice as he met us. His hands flowed out toward the organized chaos below. “Whores, barrels of ale, a feast fit for kings.”

John crossed his arms over his chest. “This wasn’t part of the plan, Alan. We have to be moving soon.”

“Yes, yes, always moving.” The blond man flapped a hand at the taller hunter. “I knew you wouldn’t approve, so I took it upon myself—” He stopped short when his eyes met my face, mouth open in midsentence. “Oh my,” he purred, his full lips curling in a smile, “and who might this be?”

Little John gestured to me. “Alan-a-Dale, meet the Prince of Wilford and his gray-haired bodyguard.”

Alan-a-Dale swept into a low bow, extravagant and over-the-top. His dark cloak rustled as he made the gesture. “The pleasure is all mine, young master.”

My brow furrowed. *Why is he so proper and respectful?*

He glanced up at me with the familiar mischief in his eyes I’d come to expect from the rest of this crew. “Doesn’t seem I’ll be needing the whores tonight, after all.”

The implication unsettled me. I said lowly, “You don’t scare me, vagrant.”

He popped a high laugh. “Fantastic! That’s not my intention, young master.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Look at that,” Little John murmured, shaking his head. “You’ve gotten more words out of him than any of us in two miles.”

“I have that effect on people, dearest lumberjack.”

The rest of the raiding party scurried down the hill to join the fray, leaving four men with me and my uncle.

Little John eyed the celebration downwind, then the men standing at his side: Friar Tuck, Will Scarlet, Alan-a-Dale. He looked over at me, showing a hint of a smile.

“Let me be the first to introduce you to the Merry Men of Nottingham, little lordling.”



Chapter 17

Robin



Uncle Gregory and I were promptly tethered to the base of a large oak tree, on our asses, on opposite sides. If I craned my neck as far left as it would go, I could make out Gregory's shadow.

It seemed we wouldn't be enjoying the festivities.

A shame, because there was nothing like slaughter and robbery to get me excited for merrymaking.

Once Will Scarlet tied us to the tree, he said, "Don't fuss too badly and we might not have to break you two tonight."

"Do your worst, bastard boy," Gregory said in a gruff voice. "I won't bend to your sadistic whims."

An *oof* of expelled air and slammed leather made me jump with a start. "Uncle Gregory!"

I shut my mouth, not realizing my blurting tongue until it was too late. I'd just given them Gregory's relation to me.

"Don't call me that, old louse," Will snarled, and then kicked my uncle again, making him groan.

My admission seemed lost on Will Scarlet. I assumed he didn't mind being called "boy," because I'd heard others call him that. It must have been the "bastard" part he took exception to.

A clue, I thought, wondering what I could do with it.

"What about the skinny explorer?" Will hissed in Gregory's ear. "Think he's as unbreakable as you?"

"Leave him be," Gregory said. He swallowed his pride and added, "Please. Take your anger out on me."

“Oh, I plan to.” He stood to his full height. “After the party, perhaps.” With that, he trudged away to join the revelers at the campfires.

I bit my lip, anxious about Uncle Gregory’s future. He couldn’t keep antagonizing these vicious men, or trying to take on the brunt of the consequences, because I feared they would take him up on it.

Over the next hour, drink flowed and the Merry Men became rowdier. Some of the men started wrestling. Alan-a-Dale broke out in song, strumming his lute with beautiful melodies and a pristine voice that was mostly drowned out by the laughing, fighting, yelling audience.

Soon, it was drowned out by another sound—one that made me blush. The women stripped, and before long they sat on laps and danced around the fires like heathen worshippers, shaking their endowments and mesmerizing the crowd.

Men cajoled them loudly. I watched a man slap a jiggling ass that sent the girl skittering away with a yip. She returned, smiling lustily, and bent over to let the man play with her breasts. He stuck his face between her ample bosom and shook his head, earning a cheer and laugh from his audience.

I ducked my head to stare down between my legs, trying to look anywhere but at the promiscuity playing out in front of me. It was almost as if the Merry Men *wanted* me to see all this.

In the end, I failed. My body betrayed me. The longer I looked between my legs, the stickier I felt. Had my hands been free, I knew I would have explored myself then, and ridden my hand until a climax stole me. Even in such a dark, hedonistic environment, where everyone could see. I knew it wasn’t proper, but I’d never been proper enough to be called a noblewoman anyway.

My eyes slowly veered up from the ground, peering out from hooded eyes.

A man leaped up from an overturned log, yanked his pants down, and fisted his cock in front of everyone. People hooted.

He was thick, and one of the ladies went to her knees in front of him and wrapped her lips around his length. Men cheered as she fellated him with fervor, gripping his hips as her head bobbed.

The men were blinded by lust and ale.

It only got worse from there.

A long-haired fellow joined one of the naked women, bending her over a tree stump. He rammed his cock inside her and his hips pumped, fast and ruthless. When he came inside the woman, and his cum trickled down her thighs, another man pushed him aside and guided himself inside her.

My thighs grew warm. I struggled, writhing against the rope that bound my body to the tree and my hands behind my back. It stretched tight across the band under my tunic, which kept my breasts flattened and unnoticeable. My nipples pebbled and thrums of desire pulsed through me from the friction.

I thanked God that Uncle Gregory was positioned on the other side of the tree, so he couldn't see how I grew wetter, lustier, needier.

These men were unlike anything I'd ever witnessed. The orgy awakened something inside, even only watching. Out here in the forest, away from civility and prying eyes, men and women could do whatever they wanted.

Within minutes, the naked whore bent over the stump had been railed and filled by no less than five Merry Men.

Uncle Gregory said, "Look away, Robin," in a low voice. "You don't want to see this."

But I did. I lied and said, "Okay, Uncle," even as I stared, fantasized, and blushed.

Three men took one of the whores together, filling her holes. The girl appeared to love it, bouncing her large breasts while she slammed her ass back against two cocks—one curving up from below, the other behind her. She moaned, muffled by a man's cock in her mouth.

I blinked. My eyes burned from keeping my lids plastered open for so long. I vaguely heard Gregory talking to me in a low voice from around the tree, even as I lost myself to the bacchanalia and lust.

“I’m so sorry I failed you and your family,” he said.

“It’s not your fault.” My voice was a drone of disinterest. How could I listen to a sincere apology when a woman twenty feet from me was busy getting every hole gaped and filled by savage men?

I couldn’t lie to myself. I *wanted* what these people had. I wanted *this*—to be used, played with, and broken. No one here had anything but a smile on their faces. This wasn’t like the unwarranted, unwanted situation with Peter Fisher, where the squire tried to take what he didn’t deserve. This was consensual debauchery ... and I needed to feel the power these ladies felt.

“It *is* my fault,” Gregory urged, trying to take my mind off the spectacular entertainment. “If I hadn’t made the recommendation for Joan to see Wulfric, we wouldn’t be in this position.”

My cunt grew wetter, my clit throbbed. When my thighs rubbed together, I nearly came undone, toes curling.

Trying to keep him talking, so he didn’t get clued in to what was *really* going on in my mind, I said, “How will my father find this healer of yours without you, Uncle?”

“I wrote down a map for him, at his insistence. I don’t blame him for fleeing with your mother. She is too sick to be taken hostage.”

“But we’re strong,” I said. I knew it was a lie as it left my mouth. In this moment, I was weak. Weak-willed, wanting nothing more than that large grizzly hunter Little John to use me as his plaything. To teach me ways I’d never learned, and only heard about and seen.

I wanted to be the special one getting filled, and my lust made me weak. It made me impure, immoral, and improper. I knew that. I’d grown up knowing that.

“Yes,” Gregory said. “We are strong. We will survive this, Robin. I swear, I will get you out of this sinful cesspool.”

Please don't.

My brow furrowed. More intrusive thoughts, telling me how to feel. Warning me.

Would I rather go back to my father's wicked fists, instead?

Of course not. As ashamed as it made me, I wanted nothing more than to be free of him. Free of duty, responsibility, and dogged suitors who offered me nothing but a dishonest smile and a charming knife in the back.

Outside this forest, in society, I was a tool to be bartered. Here? I could be anything.

My eyes scanned the grounds. I realized four men weren't partaking in the festivities. Little John, Friar Tuck, Will Scarlet, and Alan-a-Dale stood off from the crowd. Oh, they watched, but more often than not, I saw them staring over at *me*.

Tiny bumps sprouted along my skin when I noticed their deep gazes falling on me. Their glances as they spoke in hushed whispers to one another.

What are they talking about? The best way to break me?

Amidst the moans and smells of wild sex in the clearing, Will Scarlet strolled over. When he stood over me, he put his hands on his hips and sneered. “We've decided to let you dip your wick in the molten honeypot, lordling. Let you *explore* some decadence you've likely never visited before. How does that tickle you?”

I gaped, mouth falling open. My eyes widened and fear ran through me. *They're going to find out!*

“No!” Uncle Gregory yelled, even as Will bent down and began untying my rope. “Unhand h—let go of the lord!”

Will snorted as he dropped my rope, gripped my bicep hard, and pulled me up to my feet. “He's no more a lord than I am out here. Save your breath.”

Gregory writhed, kicking his feet, trying to break his tight binding. “You fucking fiend! Don’t do this!”

Will Scarlet tilted his head. Stared from me to Gregory. “I’m surprised, old boy. I would’ve thought you’d be happy for the lad to break his chastity. Get some experience. Are you worried he’ll be sullied after such a thing? Unsuitable for the princess in a faraway kingdom?”

Gregory shook his head, raging. “No, it’s nothing like—”

“Then what is it? Why are you putting up such a fight on his behalf? *He* doesn’t seem too concerned. He can’t take his eyes off Elysa’s bouncing tits over there. There are huge and nice, aren’t they, lordling?”

I blink, blushing furiously.

Gregory said, “He should not fraternize with your bunch, Will Scarlet. Please, let him go.”

“Oh. Because he’s better than us?”

Gregory scoffed. “I said no such—”

“Come on,” Will cut in, yanking me away from the tree. “You can be the judge of that, lordling. You don’t have to let your old codger uncle make the decisions for you here.”

Shit, I thought as he dragged me away, *so he did hear me calling Gregory my uncle*. That didn’t bode well.

Will Scarlet pulled me to the woman in question, Elysa. She was older than me, creased in the face a bit, but with an enviable body. Curvy hips, thick blonde hair, and full, heavy breasts that sagged as she sat back on an overturned log. The firelight from a campfire licked shadows over her peaked nipples and smiling face.

From the side, Little John, Alan-a-Dale, and Friar Tuck watched curiously, as I stood in front of Elysa.

The woman leaned back, spreading her legs far, far apart. My eyes bulged when she reached down, pulling at her soft lips, opening herself to me. “Which hole will it be, lordling?”

My heart raced. The fire beat hard at my back, with Will holding me in place. Even with the heat, I shivered, knowing I was about to expose myself if my pants came down. Worse—knowing what else might happen if they learned my truth.

The Merry Men watched me hungrily. Not the bandits I'd never learned the names of, who were busy in their own nooks and crannies and shadows, fucking their women and drinking their ale.

No, it was only these four, the leaders who had introduced themselves to me, who took any interest in what I was doing.

Their focus shocked me. Their eyes never left my face. Never turned away from my frightened visage under my hood as I stared down at Elysa's pink, glistening cunt.

Will I break? Is this how they do it?

"No," I squeaked, shaking my head. I wasn't sure if I was telling myself I wouldn't break, or what I was saying. Everything was hazy and dreamlike.

Elysa's face contorted.

Will said, "What?"

"I said *no*." My voice was louder. "I-I don't want this. You can't make me."

Will scoffed in my ear. "Of course we can."

Little John stepped up, "But we won't."

I looked over, awed at his size and demeanor. He seemed softer and more apologetic than he'd been when he raided our carriages. Almost like he could see through me.

"The decision is yours, lordling," John added. "We simply figured you might enjoy a bit of this, seeing as how you squirmed and writhed against that tree over there."

"Well, um, thank you?" I tilted my head. "This isn't what I want. I enjoy ... calmer settings."

John slapped me on the shoulder, and it nearly made my knees buckle. "Say no more, lad. Exploring carnal delights in

such a fashion is not for everyone. Especially one so clearly lacking experience.”

His words made me bristle. Though he was rightly calling me a virgin, for some reason I wanted to defend my own dignity—prove to these men I wasn’t a coward.

I just didn’t want *her*.

“*You want him.*”

Robert’s voice shocked me.

Elysa snorted angrily, closing her legs and sitting up. “It’s not every day a hostage gets the chance to fuck a cunt as tight as mine—or any cunt at all, dandy.” She seethed at me, baring her teeth.

I stammered, “I-I apologize if I’ve offended you, miss—”

“Hoy,” Alan-a-Dale called out from the side. “I take offense to that word when you say it like that, Ely.”

Elysa stood up, body jiggling. “Shove it up your ass, peacock.”

Friar Tuck and Will Scarlet howled with laughter as she wandered off, to men who were *gladly* waiting to fill her.

Little John glanced down at me, and I noticed something in the way his brow twitched. Was that *pity* he felt for me? Regardless, he turned away and nudged his chin toward Tuck, thankfully taking the heat off me. “What of you, chaplain? Isn’t Marian waiting for you behind some bush?”

The friar shrugged. “I sent her away. I’m more captivated with *this* one.” He gazed into my face.

I ducked away, hiding my features, lest he look through me and see my fear for what it really was, and what it betrayed.

“Agreed, my good monk,” Alan-a-Dale said. “He is exquisite to look at, eh? Though I’ve never taken you for the kind to dive into lads over lasses.”

“I don’t.” Tuck made it clear with a nod of his head. “By God, man, get your mind out of the whorehouse. I simply said I’m charmed by him, not lust-stricken.”

The friar and minstrel continued to argue, with Will Scarlet jumping in.

Little John's bear-paw of a hand wrapped around my elbow and stole me away from the crew. "Come," he said in a low growl that made my body tingle, "I'll get you away from all this."

He brought me toward the tree where Uncle Gregory was tied. My body was on fire, and Little John's proximity and scent of firewood and worn oak didn't relieve my building lust.

"Why are you helping me?" I asked.

"Because I know how unpleasant it is to be forced into things, lad. I suppose we read the situation—and your gaze—wrong. Thought we could do you a favor before putting you on the chopping block."

I blinked with a sharp intake of breath. "The chopping block?!"

"Careful," he said, chuckling, "your voice cracked. Don't want to give yourself away now, do you?"

I clamped my mouth shut, fear taking hold of me. *What does he mean by that? Does he know I'm a girl?*

Oh God help me.

"Besides," he said, winking this time, "I'm not helping you." His chin dipped to the rope on the ground. "Assume the position, lad, so I can tie you up again."

My face fell into a frown.

"Don't pout."

I did anyway.

As he tied the rope around my body, he said, "Perhaps that's what I misread when looking over here."

My brow pinched together. "What do you mean?"

He smirked mischievously. "It's not what you *saw* that turned you on. It's being tied up that did it for you."



Chapter 18

Robin



My eyes fluttered open, grogginess making my mind hazy. My chin lifted from my chest, and I squinted against the sunlight bearing down on me.

It was morning. Already hot. I never knew a dozen men could make so much noise, yet at some point I must have managed to fall asleep.

I remained tied to the oak tree.

The clearing was mostly empty now, with only the aftermath of the Merry Men's debauchery on display. Toppled barrels. Logs cut in two, as if the drunkards had ended up playing some sort of game with axes. Cracked branches and fallen leaves where I imagined shadowy bodies had fornicated in the woods.

A few stragglers slept next to the smoking remnants of the fire pits. One man had two women cuddled next to him, with coarse woolen blankets draped over their naked bodies.

There was no sign of my four captors.

I rested my head against the trunk, staring up at the canopies and the chirping birds. "How are you holding up, Uncle?" I asked. "Had any brilliant ideas to get us out of here?"

No response.

My forehead creased with wrinkles and worry. "Uncle?"

Again, nothing.

My heart froze in my chest. I struggled against the rope, the hemp biting into my wrists and torso. Snarling, I twisted

and tried to crane my neck so I could see around the wide tree trunk.

I couldn't see Uncle Gregory. Only a pile of rope on the ground.

A frightened gasp ripped from my throat. "Uncle!"

Terror took over, quickening my pulse. My eyes darted across the clearing, every which way, trying to find Gregory.

He wasn't here. Not that I could see, anyway. *Maybe the Merry Men let him have his own lewd time with a whore, somewhere hidden?*

No, that made no sense. It wasn't like Uncle Gregory. He wouldn't abandon me, or his memory of his wife Margo.

A shadow appeared from around the tree, and I looked up to give whoever it was a piece of my mind.

Except I didn't recognize him. And he was nude.

The burly man put his hands on his hips and stood over me. His cock wagged close to my face as he examined me beneath him. "Hm."

"Who are you?" I growled, baring my teeth.

"Your mouth looks perfect to fuck," he answered.

I wrinkled my nose at the dangling appendage. "Put that thing anywhere near me and I'll bite it off."

He grabbed me by the hood, pulling me up and making me wince. "What was that, little lord?"

"Fuck you!" I cried out, clenching my eyes shut. "Let me go!"

"Not so high and mighty when your protectors aren't here, are you?"

"My *protectors*?"

"Little John, Will, Alan, Tuck."

"You mean the men who captured me?"

He let my head go. It smacked against the trunk and I grimaced in pain, a flash of white stars shooting behind my eyes.

“They’re also the ones who told us not to lay a hand on you while you slept here.”

That made no sense to me. I didn’t know how to answer it. *Could he be telling the truth? Why are these men protecting me?* “Who are you?” I asked.

“Doesn’t matter. I’m not about to get on Little John’s bad side, even if he’s struck stupid by you. What do they see in you, eh? You’re all skin and bones. Bratty. Annoying. Does your hole clench their cocks just right?”

My cheeks burned like the heat of the sun. I’d never had anyone speak to me so crudely. So vulgar, these people. Being highborn, I wasn’t used to it. The closest I got was gambling with Rosco and the gutter-rats. They were nothing compared to the debauchery I’d seen and heard here.

“Fine,” he said after I was stunned speechless for too long. “Keep your secrets, lad. Guess we’ll all find out soon enough.”

He walked around the side of the tree and, oddly, I felt the rope loosening around me. In seconds, it fell to the ground.

“What are you doing?”

He nudged his chin toward the small hill leading to the nearby river. “Boss wants you over there.”

Slowly, I stood. I hesitated, not sure if this was some kind of trick. My eyes swiveled from the big naked man to the hill, then past the hill, to the forest off to the side.

“Don’t try to run,” the man warned. “Or I’ll catch you. And I *will* take you however I want. Understand?”

I nodded and gulped. *Loud and clear, heathen.*

My wrists ached. My ass was sore from sitting in the same position for so long. No one should be made to sleep against the roughness of a tree. My stomach also growled something fierce.

Curious, I walked to the hill. At its base was a bushel of wildflowers and tall grass. Hearing a gently running river on the other side, I pushed through the foliage—

And froze on the bank of the river, boots rooted to the ground. The four men in question stood waist-high in the river. Together. Bare.

For a moment, they didn't notice me as they washed and scrubbed themselves, dipping under the surface to wet their hair and bodies.

I stood underneath the shade of a tree, fidgeting, and gawked at the men and their rough, brawny bodies. These weren't the soft, coddled frames of noblemen or boys of high status. These were wild men of the wilderness, sculpted with stacks of muscles, scars, and stories.

Will Scarlet was a slender young man underneath that red sash and the elegant garb he must have stolen from a man of higher station. His muscles were sinewy and corded, vascular. Sinfully attractive. His dark hair plastered tight against his head as he submerged into the water and reemerged glistening like a dark devil.

Friar Tuck, while portly in the belly, couldn't be considered soft. He was bulky, stout, and sturdy. His bald head shone under the morning sunlight.

Alan-a-Dale was tanned. Prim and proper with his hair and short-cropped beard. Middle-aged, though he obviously kept good care of himself. His body showed the least number of scars, and was completely shaved, it appeared. He looked slippery in a way that made me want to grab him to see if he'd slide through my grasp.

And Little John was a monster in every way. Huge, hulking, broader in shoulder than the others. He was powerfully built, rugged in his posture and appearance, and looked like he could snap me in two with a single big hand. I wanted to run my fingers through the forest of his dark chest hair.

Though the river was waist-high in most places, it varied in depth. When the men came closer to the bank it sloped off down to their knees.

Which gave me an eyeful of their endowments, which I shamefully gawked at to compare and contrast and daydream about. Each man was well-hung and impossibly potent and intimidating. To see so much huge, swinging masculinity, all at once, so close to one another, nearly broke my brain.

The men were unabashed in their nudity. In their proximity to each other. At one point, Alan-a-Dale even scrubbed a spot on Will Scarlet's back that the younger man couldn't get to.

If these men weren't lovers, they were surely brothers. Their camaraderie, even in something as simple as bathing, was evident and palpable. Their trust in each other hung in the air, thick as their cocks.

My initial thought was an alarming kneejerk reaction: *I want this.*

I wasn't sure what part of it I wanted—the camaraderie? The trust? The liberated way they lived their lives? Perhaps I just wanted what they had slapping between their muscled thighs.

I drank them in within twenty seconds, and it wasn't long before Little John's head whipped over to me under the patch of tree shade.

It took effort to peel my gaze away from the slab of his massive cock swaying between his legs, half-submerged in the water. I wondered what something like that would feel like as it plowed into me—what *any* of these barbarians would be like ravaging me.

Shame and guilt riddled me. In less than a full day, I'd become a whore, hungry for attention. Aching for something these men couldn't give me, because they only saw me as a bartering tool. I knew I would never find love in a place like this ... but what I *might* find here seemed a lot better than the alternative back in Wilford.

When I ripped my eyes up from John's hips, and saw him looking at me, my cheeks flamed worse than ever.

"There he is. Our little hooded star." He smiled wryly at me, slapping the surface of the water. "Get your skinny ass over here, lad."

My head was already shaking. "W-What? No."

Why am I stammering so much around these hard men? I've never quailed before men before, except my father.

Likely because I've never seen any men like this, or been treated in such a way. Demeaned yet somehow respected? It was difficult to understand how I felt about these vagabonds.

"Unlike the highborns living in their keeps and towers, we aren't savages," John continued. "We bathe near daily."

I inhaled through my mouth and breathed out through my nose. Long and steady. Trying to contain the desire thrumming at the pit of my stomach, making me slick between the legs. "I see," I said, managing to compose my voice and speak lowly. "I'll wash after you're all done, then."

John barked a laugh. "Don't be shy, lad." He gestured at his comrades. "No one here cares how small your cock is."

Alan-a-Dale raised a finger from the water. "I do."

"I told you he wouldn't join," Will Scarlet said. "He's too scared of us big, bad men."

"You aren't big," I snarled at him, eyeing the young man up and down. I tried to act tough, alluding that he wasn't as impressive as the others. The truth was, what he lacked in height compared to the others, he made up for with that long, fat snake that gave him no reason to be timid.

He bristled at my goading, wading through the water toward me, anger twisting his features. "You fucking brat."

My heart seized in my chest, throat constricting. *Shit. I've woken the angry bear cub.*

When he got close to the bank, I backed up against the tree. I wouldn't stand down and run away—not with the other

bandit over the hill promising sick things if I tried escaping.

Will stopped short, barred by Little John's arm. "Let him be, Will. He'll learn soon enough that we don't bite."

"I do," Alan-a-Dale chirped again, from behind the others, paying little attention to Will Scarlet's advance on me. It seemed this wasn't an unusual thing for the temperamental young man to go through.

"He's not part of the brotherhood," Friar Tuck added. "Why would he listen to you two, hmm? Why would he oblige your requests, John? All we've done is stolen him from his family."

"He'll oblige our requests because he's scared of us," Will Scarlet said. "And because he knows not to try our patience, lest he end up like his uncle's guards."

John sighed. "We aren't threatening our wealthy hostage again, Will." He glanced at me. "At least will you lower that hood? Let us see your face a bit more?"

I shook my head adamantly, and ended up tightening it and pulling it lower.

There was something about my reaction—the way I hugged myself, becoming small and vulnerable—that made Will Scarlet slant his head.

"Wait a minute ..." he murmured, trailing off. "He refused to fuck Elysa, unlike any proper man. He won't bathe in front of us ..."

Oh no. I tried to take another step back, but couldn't. There was only tree, hemming me in. Realization dawned on his face and my heart beat faster the more he unraveled.

Abruptly, Will broke free from Little John's lax hold, made easier by the fact they were both wet and slippery. Water splashed all around them, and John yelled, "Scarlet!" as the younger man lunged to the bank of the river.

I squealed, as Will Scarlet's hands grabbed hold of my tunic. The sound was high—not the low, measured tone I'd been perfecting.

High and feminine.

And Will Scarlet tore my tunic with a harsh ripping sound, manhandling me like he owned me, not willing to let go until the tight cloth band over my breasts showed clear as day.

“You’re no man at all!” he exclaimed, presenting me to the others like I was a trophy.

For a moment, everyone was still and silent. Mouths fell open, understanding reaching their faces.

Tears filled my eyes. I hugged myself tighter, trying to hide. I felt violated and used.

Alan-a-Dale tilted his head. “No woman, either,” he mumbled, eyes scanning me up and down with a pout.

“Alan, you ass!” Tuck scolded him.

He shrugged. “What? I’ve seen bigger tits on a—”

“That’s enough!” Little John roared.

Birds cawed into the sky, frightened from the tree behind me. The breeze whistled, as if John’s angry outburst caused the leaves to shiver.

The huge man stormed onto the bank and shoved Will Scarlet, hard, in the chest. Will went stumbling back, nearly falling over. “You have no right to violate the poor girl or blame her for not wanting to get into a river with a bunch of strange men. And we *are* strange men, Scarlet. When do you think this highborn lass has *ever* locked step with men like us?”

Will flared his nostrils. “You say that like you’re ashamed of us.”

“I’m ashamed of your actions and impulsiveness. We’re better than that.”

“We aren’t, John,” Friar Tuck said behind him. His voice was sad. “You saw what we did to those carriage guards last night. So did she. We are vicious bastards, one and all. It’s folly to pretend otherwise.”

John let out a grunt, keeping his body in front of mine as I pulled my tunic closed. Not that it was any use now.

“We can learn to be better, then. And we can start by not assaulting the one young woman in our charge.” His words sounded valiant, and made me swell with hope. But then he added, “Besides, if we harm our property, she won’t be worth anything in a trade.”

Will Scarlet crossed his arms over his chest. He examined John suspiciously, eyes narrowing. “How long have you known?”

The big man was taken aback. “What?”

“How long have you known the boy was a girl?”

John averted his eyes and rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ve had my suspicions from the start,” he mumbled.

Will let out an incredulous scoff. “And you couldn’t trust us with that? What is this, Jo—”

“I know how feral and ugly you can become, Will Scarlet, perhaps better than anyone. As the captain of this little operation—”

“You’re not our leader, John!” Will yelled, throwing his hands up. “You’re just the biggest!”

Little John stepped forward. Muscles flexing, body looming like a monolith. “Want to brawl me for the distinction, lad?”

The shorter man stepped down from the challenge, his chest deflating. He put a palm to his forehead and squeezed his brow. “That’s not what I’m trying to say, dammit ...”

“Look,” Friar Tuck butted in. He pointed a thick finger at me. “This changes everything, the girl being, well, a girl.”

“How?” Alan-a-Dale asked.

Tuck raised his fingers to count them off. “First off, she’s not as useful. She carries no claim of succession.”

“I’m the heir of my estate,” I said stupidly, “because my brother is dead.” I wasn’t sure why I said it, other than feeling

affronted at being called useless.

“Robin, what the hell are you doing—bargaining for your own captivity?”

Robert was right. I was being an idiot, so I folded my lips into my mouth to stay quiet and see where this went.

“Her virginity will fetch a high price, still,” Will Scarlet said. When I gasped, he shrugged nonchalantly at the terror on my face. “What? It’s the truth. You’re pure, aren’t you?”

Embarrassed, bowing my head, I nodded curtly.

“Her father will care about that.”

Little John put his arms out. “We’re getting ahead of ourselves. Before we decide what we’re going to do with ... fucking hell, lass. I don’t even have your name.”

“You never asked.” I raised my chin defiantly.

“Well?”

“It’s Robin.”

A small smile curled his lip, twitching his dark beard. “Lovely.” He turned away, beginning again. “And—”

Then he double took. His head snapped over so fast I thought I heard his neck crack.

It was the defiant chin-tilt. The sun beaming over his shoulder, basking me in a morning glow. My hood had half-fallen off my head, revealing my face in full.

Little John’s features twisted with something like rage and confusion, his brow working over to try and understand what he was seeing. His hand lashed out and he gripped my chin lightning-quick, before I could react. I let out a small yelp as he steadied me, lightly squeezing my chin and cheeks, puckering my lips. His voice was a low rumble, threatening the promise of pain.

“Who did this to you?” He tilted my head left and right, inspecting the yellowing bruise under my eye. Rage simmered just under the surface, his body tensing. “Was it one of my men? Because I’ll kill—”

“No,” I squeaked, shaking my head. “It wasn’t one of your men, Little John.”

“Give me a name.”

It wasn’t a question. It was a demand that brooked no argument. There was no way I was escaping this.

The beating I’d taken from my father. The pain, hate, and abandonment churning inside me when I thought of him. He’d given me up like I meant nothing to him.

I had managed to keep him out of my thoughts the entire time I’d been here, entranced by the strange lives of these Merry Men.

Now, Little John didn’t look so merry and understanding. He looked positively furious, close to murder, and I knew I wasn’t getting out of this without giving him what he wanted.

But he is my father! As much as I hate him, I can’t deny that simple fact.

“Give me a *name*, Robin,” he ordered again through gritted teeth. “I won’t ask again.”

I gulped. Settled my thundering brain and pounding heart, and came to a decision.

“His name is Peter Fisher.”



Chapter 19

Robin



“Peter Fisher,” Little John repeated, rolling the name over in his mouth. He paused for a beat. Looked over my shoulder at the Merry Men behind me.

He was frightening—on-edge and tense. Dangerous with the tilt of his chin, the way his dark eyes drilled into mine.

“Any relation to Sir James Fisher?” he asked.

My shoulders bobbed. “Peter Fisher is a noble boy. A squire. He could be related to the man you mention.”

“And this *noble boy*,” he spit the words out like they tasted sour. “What was the justification, in his mind, for attacking you?”

Anger clawed at me. “Does it matter? You—”

“No, it doesn’t matter,” John interjected. “He will pay.”

I gulped. That wasn’t what I was trying to say. He didn’t hear my point, so I tried again. “*You* attacked me, too!” My hand flew to the left. “Will Scarlet ripped my tunic in half! He violated me.”

Will Scarlet did not look ashamed. His eyes gleamed darkly. “And I’d do it again, little thorn. We don’t take kindly to liars.”

“Well ...” Alan-a-Dale started to say.

John put his hand up. “There is a difference. We do not hurt women and children. Will Scarlet did not know you were either of those.”

“Or *both* of those,” Alan-a-Dale said.

My neck whipped over to the musician. “Are you simply here for biting commentary, minstrel, or do you have anything

useful to say?”

The men ... chuckled. Alan loudest of all. A crooked smile tilted his beautiful face. “Your bite is most enjoyable, little songbird. I find your backbone refreshing. Not many noble lasses have it. Or lads.”

“If only the feeling were mutual,” I snapped back.

My words only made him smile wider. For some reason, he appreciated the vitriol coming from my lips. All these men did.

Little John wasn't wrong: These Merry Men were a strange bunch. First they abducted me, tore me from my family, and now they were busy deciding how to defend my honor. I couldn't make sense of it.

I tried to reclaim my train of thought, steering us back to the conversation at hand. The way these men stared at me made me forget myself, which was something I'd never contended with before.

“Peter Fisher didn't know I was a girl, either. At first.” I became uncomfortable as I remembered the woods. How he reacted ...

Little John lifted his palm again. “Say no more, lass. I understand. And ... *did* he?”

“Did he get what he bargained for?” I said angrily. “You could say that. He didn't get *me*, but he got something else unforgettable.” I straightened my posture, standing tall, trying to take myself seriously in this huddle of nude men. “The man is missing an eye.”

Little John's severe face broke into a smirk. “Excellent. That's a good girl.”

My heart slammed in the wrong direction, like it was beating into my spine. I'd never been called ... *that*. It made me feel warm. Full. Special.

Opening my mouth to fill the silent void, no words came out. I clamped my lips shut to try again.

John beat me to it. He pointed at Alan-a-Dale and Friar Tuck. “You two, with me. You know what we have to do.”

The men nodded curtly.

My eyes followed them. “Wait—what?” Fear enveloped me. I pointed at Will Scarlet, whose gaze didn’t leave my face. “You’re going somewhere? And leaving me with *him*?”

Friar Tuck hummed. “She makes a good point.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, chaplain?” Will snarled.

“You know exactly what it means, lad,” Tuck said. He wasn’t scared of Will in the slightest, crossing his arms over his burly chest. “You’re too excitable and volatile to be left alone with the girl. As John said, we can’t damage our property.”

“You think I would?”

“I don’t want to find out.” Before Will could retort, Tuck added, “Besides, I shouldn’t show myself around Nottingham, and possibly tarnish my reputation with the almshouse.”

“True,” Little John. “Will, you’re off whelp-sitting duty.”

Will stepped up to the tall leader and puffed his chest out. If I didn’t know better, it sounded like he *wanted* to watch over me, which made me shudder down to the bone.

Half of me wanted to watch Little John and Will Scarlet fight it out. Clearly they were at odds about things. *Just brawl already.*

There was a sadistic thrill in my mind, the idea of watching those flexed muscles and sweaty limbs flying about like they were my personal gladiators.

Lord knew it would be a sight to see, even if it was a bit macabre of me to think.

Have these men already corrupted my way of thinking? Or perhaps I’d been corrupt all along, and they just knew how to nurture my deepest, darkest thoughts. They encouraged it—evidenced by them being happy I had marred Peter Fisher after what he tried to do to me.

“Enough, enough, boys,” Alan-a-Dale cut in, finally inserting himself into the situation as it seemed to be growing out of hand. “Tensions are high. Let’s put some clothes on, eh? I daresay we’re exciting our little songbird past the point of no return.”

My mouth fell open as all eyes turned to me. “W-What do you mean?”

The minstrel smiled. “Those cheeks are a shade of rose I’ve seen before, girl. From adoring fans eager to rip my clothes off.”

I blinked with a start. “You’re not wearing any clothes.”

“Precisely my point.”

My head tilted. “Huh?”

Alan winked, leaving me thoroughly confused, and put a hand on the shoulder of Little John and Will Scarlet. “Tuck and I will stay with the girl. We’re the most sensible. You two have things to work out. John, take Will with you, yes?”

Now it sounded like *he* was the leader. It made me reappraise the entire situation, wondering if they even had a leader in the traditional sense, or if Little John was simply the biggest and most outspoken, as Will Scarlet had said earlier.

“A snake without a head won’t get far,” Robert said to me.

I nodded to my brother. “True.”

The Merry Men looked at me.

“What?” Little John asked.

“Erm.” I pursed my lips. “Never mind. I don’t understand what you’re planning on doing.”

John told Will, “You’re too angry for a job like this.”

“And you’re not?” Will pushed back.

The four men walked away, up the hill as they talked, and I hurried to follow them.

“It will take restraint,” John said.

What will?

“I have that in spades.”

John scoffed. “I suppose you’ll have a chance to prove it.”

Will said, “At least you’re finally doing something I believe in. Like hell you’re going to stop me.”

And what’s that—protecting me?

When we got to the top of the hill, I scanned the clearing and looked at the tree where I’d been tied up, now empty and —

Shit! My jaw clenched with frustration. *These savages made me forget what I wanted to mention, distracting me with their ... everything.*

“You dubious shits,” I grumbled.

Eyes swung to me, brows raised.

I pointed down at the tree and the two piles of rope. “What did you do to Uncle Gregory? I swear, if you’ve killed him—”

“What?” Will pressed. “What will you do about it if we did?”

“Murderers!” I shrieked, earning some surprised expressions from the waking Merry Men at the base of the hill.

Little John put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed.

Admittedly, it nearly calmed me.

Nearly.

“Vagrant cock-swinging sword-stabbing killers!” I yelled, violently shrugging his hand and pushing myself away from the group. My finger thrust accusingly at their chests, one by one. Their glorious, muscled, stupid chests. “You won’t get away with this!”

Angry tears welled in my eyes.

John said, “Don’t listen to the boy, lass. We didn’t kill your uncle.”

“Then where is he?”

“Can’t tell you.”

I ground my teeth so hard I thought they'd crack. My frustration boiled over. I balled my hands into fists. "*Tell me!*"

I rushed Little John and punched him in his glorious, muscled, stupid chest.

He didn't move. Like a stone wall.

"Tell me!" I wailed again, tears falling down my cheeks now.

After the third punch, he caught my wrists. "No."

"No?" I gazed up at him, held immobile by the giant. He could control my body any way he wanted. There wasn't a thing I could do to stop it.

Surprisingly, he let my hands go. Giving me another chance to lunge at him.

But I was too tired to do it. Too hungry. "Why won't you tell me what you've done to my poor uncle?"

"Because we can't lose our leverage, lass." John spoke matter-of-factly, hand sweeping down to the clearing, where the rest of the band was starting to make breakfast on the fires. "It's not just the four of us we're in service to, Robin. It's all the Merry Men. You offer us a way *out*. Understand?"

I swallowed. My chin trembled. Sadness hit me in the gut. I was still their prisoner—their leverage and prize.

A bartering tool ... as I'd been all my life.

I wasn't sure why it hurt so much to hear. Why the pain dug deep into my belly and made me bow my head in disappointment and sorrow.

His hand reached out and he tilted my chin with a single finger, so I was forced to look up into his stormy eyes through my blurring vision. "I won't tell you what happened to your uncle, lass, because it might jeopardize all of us. You just have to trust me when I say he's not dead."

I quickly shook my head away from the calluses of his rough finger. "I *can't* trust you," I said, my voice defeated.

“How could I? I don’t even know you. All you’ve done is proven you’re proper bastards and criminals.”

Little John let out a heavy sigh. He studied my face for a beat longer. “Then I suppose we’ll just have to work to change your mind.”

It was the first earnest, honest look I’d gotten from the huge man yet. Not the stoic expression, or the dangerous one, but a pained one. It crept into his dark eyes, a cosmos full of stars and comets I was willing to let crash into me if it meant believing him.

I found myself *wanting* to trust Little John and the Merry Men.

Tucking my head away from his finger, I dropped my chin to avoid his gaze. *I can’t do it. All I’ve ever known is disappointment and abandonment and loss. How can I possibly trust anyone—and men like this, no less?*

“Merry fucking Men,” a voice said at the base of the hill, earning everyone’s attention.

A woman in a tight corset and locks of tumbling red hair stood with her hip pumped out in a pose, her arms folded over her breasts.

She gained the hill, glancing behind her at my uncle’s carriage in the clearing. “I see the job was a success.” She popped a single eyebrow at the naked men above her. “Even more so, I suppose, judging by the way you’re following around this shrill waif like lost dogs. Did you gang her in the river already, boys? Or is there another explanation for you being bare and ready for a tumble?”

“Woman, calm yourself!” Little John yelled, flustered and startled. He raised his palms in surrender—the first look of discomfort I’d seen from him.

John’s reaction alone made me pause at the middle of the hill, eyeing this woman as she walked up with a sigh.

She was tall, dressed like a nightlady. Could have been friends with the four who came yesterday. Yet she carried herself with more strength and swagger. Her blue dress flowed

around her, ruffled and full. She had an air of superiority and confidence, though I knew she wasn't noble born.

“Who are you?” I asked.

Her ruby-red lips pursed tight around her pale face, then stretched into a knowing smile. “I'm Maid Marian, girl. I'm the one who found them the job that destroyed your life.”



Chapter 20

Robin



Maid Marian, as she called herself, frowned and patted my shoulder when I gawked at her admission. “Well, snatching a titleless young thing wasn’t part of it.”

I spluttered, “I have ti—”

“Ransacking your carriages was, though.” She turned to the others. “Who is she?”

“Heiress of an estate in Nottingham,” Little John said.

Marian’s head tilted left to right, her curls bobbing on her shoulders. “Dangerous game you’re playing, sir.”

“Aye.”

“One might say you’re asking for trouble.”

“Aye.”

She paused. Then she grabbed my arm and started dragging me back up the hill, but not before eyeing the men from head to heel one last time, eyes stopping between their legs. “You scoundrels best find some garb, before I decide to take you all at once.”

The men became flustered in an instant, and it was then that I recognized the power this woman had over them.

Another clue, I thought, which might help me in the future. Especially if I’m stuck with them for a time. At this point, I didn’t expect the men to kill me. I was too valuable. But I also didn’t believe them about Uncle Gregory.

I wasn’t a fool. What good could come of letting a powerful military man—with connections—leave here alive? Gregory served no purpose other than providing a barrier between me and these ruthless barbarians.

“Where do you think you’re going with her?” John asked, folding his arms over his barrel chest.

“I take it she didn’t bathe with you,” Marian replied. “Else she’d be limping out of here.”

John looked embarrassed. “Er. No. She didn’t.”

“Then that’s what we’re doing. As ladies.” Marian flapped her free hand at John’s suspicious expression. “Don’t worry, Giant John.” Her eyes dipped lower. “I won’t let her escape your torrid imprisonment.”

With that, she gripped my arm and took me up the slope.

“Oh,” she said, stopping at the top and turning around. “Tuck, I wouldn’t mind limping out of here myself. Come back in fifteen minutes.”

The friar frowned, hesitated, and inclined his chin. “Ma’am.”

Maid Marian dragged me to the river. I’d been getting dragged along a lot lately, and I didn’t much like it. However, I couldn’t deny my curiosity about this flamboyant firebrand of a woman, so I went with her willingly.

Anything to be away from the stuffy, overbearing, masculine nature of those beastly men for a bit.

Perhaps I can learn from her. She’s unabashed in the way she speaks and carries herself. She has a comfortable familiarity with these men, it seems. And, judging by how she speaks, she clearly isn’t afraid to use her body to get what she wants.

At the bank of the river, she stopped and stepped out of her flat shoes. Her toes wriggled in the muddy grass near mossy stones. “Strip, girl.”

I fervently shook my head. “Why does everyone want me to get naked around here? Is there no decency among you people?”

“Decency doesn’t exist in the wilderness, lass. We all want you to get naked because you stink to high heaven, and, I assume, because the men want to get a gander at your goods.

Bathing is a crucial step in how the Merry Men comport ourselves.”

I looked her up and down, from her curve-hugging dress and corset to her pristine, ghostly face. “Are you a Merry Man?”

She snorted, hands on hips. “Do I *look* merry? Or like a man? I’m an associate.”

“You sound like an accomplice, if anything.” It was hard not to act bratty around this silver-tongued woman. My natural inclination was defiance.

She studied me, eyes narrowing. Then she began unstrapping her dress in front of me, and turned around so I would help with the laces of her corset.

I obliged, staying quiet. My fingers worked sluggishly.

Once she was out of the confines of her dress, wearing only the thin sheen of her undergown, she said, “I’m going to teach you something, girl. If you’ll listen.”

Before I could answer, she pulled her gown over her head and stepped out of it, dropping the garment to the ground. She stood naked in front of me, her pale breasts heavy, her nipples hard against the breeze.

She cupped her bosom and squeezed together. “*This* is your only currency here.”

I gulped and clasped my hands in front of my belly. My eyes moved away from her nakedness—her wide hips, the slight swell of her belly, the heaving breasts. “I don’t have ... *that*.”

She chuckled. “I called you titless, and I’m sorry for that. But you do seem to have *something* under that band holding you back.” She gingerly stepped into the river, ankle-deep, and shivered. “It’s not the tits I’m talking about. It’s the whole package. The attitude, the bat of your eyelashes, the sway of your hips. The mysterious appeal of a woman’s body that all men are entranced by.”

“Alan-a-Dale didn’t seem too entranced.”

She laughed again. “You’re funny. Most men don’t like queer girls, but I think these ones might find the appeal. Alan-a-Dale is a special case.” She curved her hand toward me as she waded deeper into the water. “Come, girl. I won’t bite.”

“That’s what they said, too.”

“And did they?”

“No.” I tapped my chin. “Well, Alan said he would.”

She smiled, bobbing her eyebrows.

I sighed and slowly started disrobing. Since my tunic had been ripped in half by that tempestuous brute Will Scarlet, I didn’t have much to take off. Just my hood, boots, trousers, and the cloth band wrapped tight around my middle.

Once I was free of it all, I barred my breasts with my arm and put a hand between my legs to hide my modesty. I took a deep lungful of air. God, but that thing was tight. The hem of the band had bitten into my skin.

“There she is,” Marian said. Her eyes glittered with mischief. “More woman than you pretend to be.”

I blushed as I stepped into the water. It was frigid, chilling me to my core, yet I couldn’t deny the thrill of it washing over my skin.

Once I was waist-high, I bent my knees and ducked lower to submerge myself up to my neck. I didn’t enjoy strangers staring at me, and Maid Marian was nothing if not a stranger.

She went behind me and wet my hair, dragging her fingers through it. “Men are easy to control if you know which buttons to push, girl.”

“My name is Robin.”

“I didn’t ask.” She cleared her throat. “Don’t want to get too attached to the Merry Men’s property, you see?”

I gasped. “Why?”

“Because you won’t be here long. They never are.” She yanked a tangle out of my hair, cutting off my response as I winced. “God, when was the last time you washed this mop?”

“Why do you say I won’t be here long?”

Her hands moved from my hair to my shoulders, gently rubbing water over them. “You want to call me a bitch, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Go on, it’s okay,” she urged. “I’ve been called worse. I’ve been called worse *today*.”

I frowned, sinking lower into the water to wash my face.

“You won’t be here long because you don’t have staying power. You don’t have the fortitude to become a proper cunt. You don’t have the drive to do the things necessary to stay.”

“You know nothing about me, Maid Marian.”

“I’ve seen enough. It doesn’t matter what I know about you—it’s not about *you*. The hostages always get traded for loot. It’s what keeps this operation running.”

I twisted away from her hands to face her. “What makes you think I want to stay? Like you said, I’m a hostage. These men are awful.”

Her face softened, in the way a cat’s might before it clawed your face. “Oh, honey, everyone wants to stay with the Merry Men. Lad and lass alike. You saw what I saw. But no one has been able to manage it. Except me.”

“You have staying power.”

“Precisely.” She inclined her chin, and moved on to wash her own enviable body.

I didn’t want to delve too deeply into the assertion that just because the men were wildly attractive and bestial in a way I’d never seen before, a noble girl like me wouldn’t be able to resist their charms ... or their cocks.

Maybe I *did* want them to ravage and destroy me. Perhaps Maid Marian wasn’t wrong. I would never admit the depths of my depraved mind when left to my own devices.

“Fine,” I said defiantly, “let’s say you’re right, and I wanted to stay with these brutes. You said I can’t do it. But

you also said you would teach me.”

Her red lips curled into a smile. “Oh, I can teach you to look innocent and willing. I can teach you to fuck. I can’t, however, teach you to become someone you’re not. Sooner or later, they’ll see past your façade. And then you’ll be finished.”

She was making a lot of assumptions about me. I didn’t appreciate it. That being said, she was probably right about all of it.

“If you really want,” she said, noting the disappointment on my face, “you can be my ward. Shadow me, if it tickles your fancy.”

It didn’t. This woman was too full of herself. I couldn’t help but try and get back at her for her initial comments about me. I was nothing if not petty.

I said, “Be the ward of a whore? Seems a bit of a step down from my natural place as a noblewoman.”

Her face froze. The haughty expression tilted into something fierce and dangerous, like a female version of the men when they stared hungrily at me.

I thought she would lash out at me with her nails.

Then she burst out laughing. “Oh!” She clapped. “But you *are* funny.”

I smiled at her, more scared than I cared to admit.

A voice came from the bank, “I see you two are enjoying one’s company.”

I splashed down into the water before turning to Friar Tuck, submerging to my neck.

“Good, you’re learning already,” Marian muttered to me, winking. “Never give the boys a free show.”

She stepped higher up the slope of the river, toward the bank, baring more of herself as she walked toward Tuck.

“But you are!” I cried out.

She shrugged. “It’s nothing my wicked friar hasn’t seen before. Besides, I could use a good holy cock to start my day.”

She stood with hands on hips, a few feet from Friar Tuck. I stared at her large, round buttocks, water trickling down her thighs.

“Well? Plan to swing that thick thing out, or shall I do the honors?” She nudged her chin between Friar Tuck’s brown habit.

He looked over her shoulder at me. His eyes became hooded, his head shaking. “No, Marian, I’m afraid not. We have work to do.”

I would have paid to see Marian’s face. I saw the flex of her ass, and heard the incredulous scoff. Her head snapped back like a snake ready to strike. “Excuse me?”

Tuck pointed past her, at me. “Not you, Marian. Robin, join me on the other side of the hill. I’d like your help with something.”

My eyes widened.

Slowly, Marian turned to regard me. The sheer shock on her face, which morphed into thinly veiled anger, was impossible to ignore. Her neck had hollowed. Her whole body seemed tense, ready to snap.

“I’ll, erm, meet you over there,” I told Tuck. “I’m not about to walk out of this water with your eyes all over me.”

The friar nodded. “I’d expect nothing less. Don’t be long.” He turned and left.

With him gone, I waded through the water, past Maid Marian—

Her hand sprang out and wrapped around my elbow. “Seems you’re further along than I realized, dear Robin.”

I blinked at her, confused.

She leaned closer, her whisper grating in the shell of my ear. “There’s one thing you never want to do, girl: Don’t try and take my Merry Men from me ... or I’ll make sure you

leave here with each limb in a different fucking box. Understand?”

She stepped back with an innocent smile.

I inhaled sharply, nodding profusely, and hurried to drag my ruined clothes on. Then I jogged up the hill, not sparing her another glance.

I had hoped I could turn Maid Marian to my side. To make an ally in this heavily fortified camp of brutish men.

However, it seemed I'd inadvertently made my first enemy.



Chapter 21

Friar Tuck



I clawed through the linens in the carriage we stole, finding the best pieces. Grumbling to myself, I tried not to think too hard about what I'd seen over that ridge, because it took my mind to lascivious places.

The sun hadn't even reached its zenith yet and I needed a stiff drink.

Maid Marian, in the nude—that was one thing. I'd seen it dozens of times. Heaven save me, that succubus drank from my cock like it was her mother's milk.

But our fair prisoner, Robin? The lass I'd only just learned was, well, a lass? There was something about her. Something that drew me to her. It seemed her fire drew all of us to her, like moths. Little John had known her less than a day and already seemed hopelessly obsessed with her. His new fixation.

I prayed it didn't end like the last one with John.

He'd sworn to himself: Never again. Yet here he was, coddling and protecting this spry young flower like she had a thorny vine noosed around his neck. He was already off on some daredevil adventure to liberate and reclaim her honor.

The man, for all his blessed attributes and faults, was hopeless when it came to a woman who needed saving. Even one he had just forcibly ripped from her family.

The sad truth? I was stuck in the same place as Little John. Thinking about her, wondering how I could unveil her mysteries without scaring her. Even now, as I cycled through the clothing and separated it into piles, I focused more on Robin than my task at hand.

When I stood on that bank, Marian baring her luscious body to me, my cock stirred. True enough. It hadn't been from her, though. Glimpsing Robin's bare shoulders in that river was enough to get my mind whirling. Spinning with possibilities and more than a few lewd thoughts.

Yes, I certainly needed a drink. *Does this fixation simply stem from her being the newest flavor at camp? Will we negotiate her trade, sell her off, and forget about her, like so many others?*

Will she end up broken and traumatized like so many we've stolen, broken, and tossed aside?

I dared to say no.

Though slight in stature, the girl wasn't slight in courage. If I had to wager—as I enjoyed doing—I'd say she'd survive this ordeal. If she made it out in one piece, with all her faculties attached, all the better.

I liked a good dark horse story. But she needed guidance, surely. A father figure, perhaps? Since we had taken her from hers.

As a drunkard and a lout, I wasn't up to the task. The best I could do would be to steer her in the right direction. Just as Little John wanted to protect her—unfathomably and against all logic—Maid Marian would work to corrupt her. She would succeed, too, if left alone with young Robin long enough.

I had nothing against Marian. On the contrary, I enjoyed stuffing her with my cock. She often woke me from my nighttime slumber bouncing on my lap, bringing me one step closer to Heaven.

Yet I found myself abruptly disinterested in the cunning whore now that we had this fresh new face in camp. Someone who actually *needed* help and didn't just play coy to get her holes and coffers filled.

I was no good. A fraud of a holy man. A womanizer, a whore, a gambler, a drunk. Despite all that, my life had been guided by *purpose*. Whether that be finding it, running toward it, or losing it.

Finding purpose began with my priestly days. Serving the Almighty. Taking confessions. Guiding men and women away from their misdeeds and sins so they could become better versions of themselves.

Serving God was also the thing that *stole* my purpose.

Now, just maybe, I'd found a new one. A new target. The idea thrilled me. It excited me so much that my first inclination was to reach under my habit, grip my length, and daydream—

“I'm here.”

My eyes blurred as the world shook around me. I unhand myself before spinning around with a flustered sound.

Robin stood with hands clasped behind her like a soldier ready to be drilled.

Yes, drilled ...

I shook my head before that thought could finish, and flared my nostrils. “God above, girl, we need to find you some better clothes.”

She had tied the ragged ends of her tunic together in a bow, to hide herself. All it ended up doing was baring her belly and showing the top of her cleavage, and I struggled to look away.

“You can blame Will Scarlet for my state.” Before I could respond, she added, “Why did you want to see me?”

I swept my arm out at the pile of fine fabrics I'd been mindlessly combing through while sorting through my wayward mind. “You're going to help me sew. As the daughter of a tailor, I assume you know how?”

“Of course I do. Why, though?”

“Because I had the bright idea to redistribute the goods we stole from you.”

Her head tilted. “That's quite industrious of you, Friar Tuck.”

I chuckled, cheeks lightly flushing. “I have a half-decent idea every once in a while.”

She wouldn’t take her eyes off my face. It made me nervous. I couldn’t believe it. A girl half my age, half my *size*, sinking those big eyes at me like she could see the sin seeping from my pores.

The damned girl had me in knots.

“Well, er, let’s get to it, then,” I blubbered, and made space on a nearby log for her to sit on. “We have needle and thread. The linens and silk have already been dyed, fulled, and hammered. We just need to reshape the textiles into ... smaller pieces.”

She furrowed her brow curiously. “Smaller pieces? For what?”

“You ask a lot of questions, girl.”

A small smile played on her full lips. *How did I mistake her for a lad before? She is beautiful.*

“Are you going to beat me for asking questions?”

I reeled, eyes widening. “W-What? No! Are you mad, you little heathen? What kind of question is that?”

“A proper one, given my history and experiences.”

I frowned. Unreasonable rage flared inside me, close to the surface. I had to keep it stuffed down, for her sake, yet she deserved an answer. “There’s a reason Little John has left to find the man who bruised your face, lass. And it isn’t to share a drink with him and wax poetic about Prince John’s taxes.”

She swallowed, nervous. “Oh.”

“Don’t fear, little heathen.” I patted her knee across from me. “I won’t harm you. Ever. In fact, I’ll kill anyone who does.”

“Father!” she yelped. “You’re a holy man.”

I snorted. “Don’t let the outfit fool you. I’m much more vengeful than a holy man ... and that’s saying something.”

Her shocked face scrunched with a chuckle, and I smiled at her and winked.

Once she had the needle in her hands, I watched her work—unhooking seams, effortlessly plying them back together. She was a much better seamstress than me. I recognized her value immediately. She worked with an intensity I typically reserved for drinking.

“You still never told me why we’re making tiny shirts and dresses,” she said at one point, well into an hour of working in companionable silence. “But I can guess.”

“Take aim, then.”

“The orphans. I’ve seen you in Nottingham. You help operate the almshouse there.”

I nodded slowly, opting to focus on the piece of fabric in my lap, which was being a bitch to string together. “I’ve tried to keep a low profile, lest the whelps find out the gospel truth about me.”

Robin saw my struggles and took the garment from me, using her deft skills to do what I couldn’t. “And what gospel truth would that be?”

I grunted, deigning not to respond. She would learn.

A moment later, against the clacking of needles and clattering of Merry Men working around the clearing, she spoke in a low voice. “Your truth has been hidden well, Friar Tuck. It was me in the window you caught the other day, eavesdropping on you.”

My eyes lifted from my work. I tried to recall ... *Ah, yes, when young Emma came to see me.* I gave Robin a small smile. “Sneaky brat, aren’t you?”

“The sneakiest,” she replied, matching me with a roguish smile of her own. “I had an ulterior motive being there.”

“Oh? And what would that be?”

“Escape.”

My hands paused on the threads. “Escape from what?”

“Peter Fisher. He tried to ‘rescue’ me from a group of orphan boys—Rosco, Jimmy, and Tick.”

“I know the lads.” *Practically raised them, for all the good it did.*

“Thing is, I didn’t need rescuing. I much preferred their company to the squire’s.”

I tried, again, to hide my burgeoning anger. “What were you doing with those three ragamuffins?”

“Gambling in the alley.”

My needle slipped and stabbed into the meat of my palm, drawing a bead of blood. At the same time, I barked a laugh, startling poor Robin. She looked frightened, like she might have said something wrong.

“You surprise me more and more with every word that comes out of your mouth, little heathen.”

The demure smile returned to her struck face. “Oh. I guess that’s a good thing?”

“Aye. It surely is.”

Another hour passed. We had a fine stack of clothes to gift to the almshouse. Not all the fabric would go to the orphanage, of course—the Merry Men needed to sell the silk and the pricier items in order to survive. But contraband was a tough sell, and people would recognize garments made by the Queen of the Lace Market, sure as anything. Those pieces needed to be redesigned as well.

Near the end of the afternoon, Robin asked, “Why do you do this, Friar Tuck?”

I glanced at her from under the ridge of my brow. I knew what she was asking, but I played dumb. “The almshouse won’t function on its own, lass. We’ve been hard-pressed for funding lately. With the exorbitant taxes levied by the Sheriff of Nottingham on behalf of Prince John, people are keeping their coins tightly guarded. Donations are rare these days.”

She nodded along, studying my face and putting down the needle. “That’s all well and good, sir ... but you know that’s

not what I'm talking about."

"Aye. I know."

A shame I didn't have anymore garments to work on to occupy myself. Her intense scrutinizing made me uncomfortable. My hands were beginning to tremble from lack of drink. It made this tedious work difficult.

"You don't seem as awful as the other men here," she said softly. "Even *kind*, perhaps."

I scoffed and shook my head. "I'm just as bad, girl. Twice as much, because I come from a place of servitude and righteousness. The holy fall the worst, Robin. Sure and true. My soul is damned, but I've learned to live with that fact."

"That's quite dramatic, Father."

"If you were truly listening through that window, you'd know not to call me that."

"Apologies." She bowed her head.

I could tell she wouldn't let it go. I sighed and sat back, putting my palms on my knees. "If it means feeding, clothing, and housing another poor soul, then my miserable life being doomed to damnation is worth it. Understand?"

"Yes, and that's exactly what I mean. Are you ... *atoning* for your sins? Is that it?"

I thought about that for a moment. Then I gave her a stern shake of my head. "No. I'm exacting revenge upon those who would smite the poor."

Her eyes widened. Then a mischievous look overcame her. "*More vengeful than a holy man*," she repeated.

I inclined my chin. "... And that's saying something," I finished.

"But you *do* still believe? Because those are some of the harshest words I've ever heard from a man of the cloth."

"Of course I do. If I don't have faith in a grander design than this cesspool of a world, what do I have to look forward to?" I laughed at my words—dramatic, as Robin had put it.

“Just because men stripped me of my holy investiture does not mean the Almighty has forgotten me. His sinful child. I have not abandoned my faith—just the men who pretend to orchestrate it. I still teach Scripture to the whelps at the poorhouse.”

“There you go, proving me right again.”

There was a fondness in her eyes as she stared at me. It was something I hadn't seen in ages, and it kept me talking. “Besides, I've always considered the church a means of swindling the masses. Even when I aided in that venture.”

“A tool of control,” she murmured, bowing her head as if deep in thought. I wondered if Maid Marian hadn't espoused some words about *control* while they bathed together. I couldn't put it past my favorite whore.

“Aye, lass.”

She paused for a moment, thinking, stroking her pointed chin. Then she looked up with an odd expression on her face. “Were you excommunicated solely because of your ... fleshly desires?”

I snorted a laugh. She wanted to know if the drinking, whoring, and gambling was enough to get me ousted from the church?

My mind flashed back to a moment in time, when I was a younger lad. Walking in on—no, *interrupting*—a priestly colleague of mine with his hand shoved in a young altar boy's trousers. I would never forget the way the shadows curved from the corner of the nave, slicing across the boy's face and hiding half of it in darkness, while illuminating the other half in holy light.

Illuminating his unmitigated terror and confusion.

I would also never forget the way the priest screamed the next morning, as I hacked his hands off with an axe. The way the blood spurted from the stumps of his wrists, oozing across the scroll he'd been writing.

I would never fail to recall the way those hands *crunched* as the nails cracked through the bones of his palms, giving

resistance when I pinned them to the doors of the church.

And, of course, I wouldn't forget the aftermath. Though the clergy never found evidence of my wrongdoing—or found the rest of the priest's burned, crispy body—they concocted enough lies and excuses to exile me from the flock.

Since then, I'd become the most debauched of the Merry Men, I daresay, while trying my damndest to make sure nothing like that ever happened to another child in my charge.

“Friar Tuck?” Robin asked in a meek voice, a helpless tilt to her brow as she watched my faraway gaze.

I turned my eyes to hers, iron coals in my sockets.

“Aye, Robin. My fleshly desires. That's all it was.”

Silence fell between us, thick as a morning fog in Nottingham.

A twig nearby snapped and my head swiveled to find Alan-a-Dale standing off to the side of our little stack of tunics, pants, and dresses.

The dandy popped his eyebrows at me, ruining that pretty face of his with a frown. “You've had her all afternoon to yourself, Tuck. It's my turn with her, while there's still an hour or two of sunlight left.”

Robin threw her arms up, glaring at him. “I'm not just an object you can pass around!”

Alan let out a high laugh. “Of course you are. That's what property *is*.” He brought out a longbow from behind his back, wagging it in the air. “Join me, little songbird. I have something more fun in store than needling dresses and droning on with this old hag.”

I watched Robin's face, and when she noticed the bow, her eyes gleamed.



Chapter 22

Alan a Dale



This girl had stones bigger than mine. That, or she was incredibly naïve and innocent. I didn't believe that, though. Not with how she had comported herself at the river, or in front of our dear chaplain.

Yes, she'd fumbled her words and blushed like a nun in a whorehouse when she stumbled upon the four of us naked in the river, bathing. Yet she stood her ground. Took the measure of us. I hoped we hadn't fallen short of her expectations.

Robin was not worried about staking out into the woods with me, alone, for a hunt. She knew next to nothing about me—only that I was undeniably handsome, could sing, play a lute, and had a weapon.

I told her on the way out the clearing, "Try to run from me and I won't hesitate to put one of these in your pretty ass." My hand patted the quiver on my back.

She snapped back, "That's if you can catch me," giving me a wry smirk as she skipped ahead.

I raised a brow at her insolence. "Sounds like you're itching for a challenge, brat princess."

She held her head high.

The girl came up to my chest. She appeared small and pliable. Were I a lesser man, I could wrestle her to the ground and take her in the bushes we passed.

Little John had decreed we not touch her. Beyond that, I *wasn't* that kind of man. None of us were, as far as I knew. We fought fiercely and terrified anyone passing through the trade roads, yet we also had a code of conduct. An unwritten one, but a code nonetheless.

We were not to behave aggressively or violently to women or children. Will Scarlet might have already violated that section of the code.

As I'd said in the river, Robin could qualify as both woman *and* child ... or at least I believed that before seeing the way she tied and molded her ripped tunic into a fashion piece, baring her belly and squishing her chest together.

Now I recognized her innate attractiveness. It took one to know one. I could see us getting along famously if it weren't for our current circumstances.

I had to wonder if she knew how she affected us. Even me—one who wasn't naturally inclined toward the fairer sex. Truthfully, I would have taken her as a lad just as quickly as her true self. She was beautiful in both versions.

We paraded through the woods, keeping our eyes peeled on the outskirts of the thin trail we walked.

Her first question came as we arrived at a bend in the river and a long, overturned log that ran across it like a bridge.

“Are we in Sherwood Forest?”

I eyed her. “Yes. We caught you in Derbyshire's wood but brought you back to Sherwood. The lines are blurred around these parts.”

“Then isn't this ... illegal? Hunting, I mean. Sherwood is a royal charter.”

I scoffed. “Little girl, does it look like we give a fuck about Prince John's laws?”

I turned my attention back to the log-bridge. The river ran fast underneath it, sloping down an incline. It could be dangerous. I nodded at the other side of the river, across the long slab of lumber. “Think you can handle it? Watch how I balance across. I'll go ...”

She jumped onto the log, shimmying with her arms stretched wide for balance, putting her body in a T.

“... first.” I frowned as she hopped off the other side with a pirouette and an annoying bow in my direction.

I rolled my eyes. “You’re more of a showman than I am.”

I made my way across, inching over the log. It flaked underneath my feet, bowing in the middle as I negotiated my weight. Being heavier and taller than the girl, I had to take it slower.

“Careful,” she said wryly when my leg almost slipped, “the middle part is nearly rotted. One wrong step might cause it to ... snap.”

I glared at her and hurried the rest of the way across, plopping down on hard earth at the end. “Wipe that smirk off your face, songbird. You’re annoying me.”

She giggled and spun around, taking the lead again.

Yes, this girl clearly had stones. She was an adventurous spirit, and I envied her. I used to be the same, before the Merry Men. Before my life fell apart like a house of cards.

A rustling sound to our left made her freeze.

I nearly ran into her, shuffling to a stop.

She held up her fist. Robin’s gaze went to a shivering bush near a copse of birch trees. A brown-spotted hare popped out, nose scrunching as it went on hind legs.

I inhaled sharply and fumbled the bow off my back, pulling an arrow from the quiver along with it.

Robin watched me take aim. I closed my left eye to mark my target down the shaft of the arrow.

The hare’s head tilted curiously as it watched us, then it skittered left—and my arrow loosed with a whistle.

It struck the thin bole of a birch tree.

“Shit,” I grumbled.

“Give me that.” Robin snatched the bow out of my hands before I could react.

My eyes bulged.

She took off, yanking the arrow out of the tree. Then she crouched low, gazed at the ground, and disappeared.

My heart sped up as I followed her, struggling to keep up. She moved swiftly through the forest, over gnarled roots, under hanging branches, making sure not to disturb anything as she passed.

When I came to a thinner section of the woods, she was kneeling, bow poised high, aiming.

I couldn't even see what she was looking at from my vantage. All I could do was hurry up alongside her.

She let out a hiss as she pulled back on the bowstring. It twanged out of her fingers and the arrow flew.

“Did you get it?” I asked in a whisper.

She ran off.

“Fucking hell,” I groaned, and chased.

She was too damned fast. Too sprightly and quick through these woods—through terrain I expected her to be unfamiliar with and unaccustomed to.

I rounded a bend, wrapped my arm across a tree when I heard a snap to the right, and spun in that direction.

I'd lost sight of her.

Foliage seemed to rustle all around me, and I came to a clearing.

She wasn't there.

My heart sank. *Fuck.* My anxiety bloomed, making me feel a fool. *This squirrelly little bitch! I've lost her. The others will hang me by my entrails if they find out! She lulled me with her naivety and vanished the first moment she got.*

I wanted to call out her name, but I also didn't want to disrupt nature and give away my position. I reached to my waist for the dagger I had hanging there.

A dark blot filled the corner of my eye to the east as something popped up out of the undergrowth.

I held my dagger by the blade, ready to toss it—

And was met by Robin's cheery, smiling face, a heap of leaves caught in her shoulder-length brown hair. She raised her hand and wagged the dead hare next to her face. "Got it!"

An arrow was impaled through its neck.

I let out a ragged breath, my tense body loosening as I lowered the blade. "Christ Almighty, girl, I almost threw this dagger at your head!"

Her head tilted. "What, thought I'd run away?"

"It crossed my mind."

She chuckled and rose to her feet, then draped the hare over her shoulder. The girl was a surprise and a revelation.

"So you're a noblewoman ... and a woodswoman?"

She shrugged as we backtracked to the trail. "When I saw you miss, I figured I'd take my chance."

I bowed my head in shame for being outclassed by this pretty little thing. "I'm not a natural-born archer. Still trying to learn the mechanics. The others give me shit for it. 'What kind of Merry Man can you be if you can't shoot a damn bow?' they say."

Robin snorted. "You don't say."

I looked down at her, glowering, not half as chipper as she looked. "Fuck you, little songbird."

The girl let out another high snicker, and it was enough to wash away any anger I had toward her. "Don't keep a frown on that pretty face of yours, Alan-a-Dale. It'll stick and ruin your beauty."

I said nothing, letting my "fuck you" hang in the air, since it seemed like she wanted to hear it twice.

Robin bounced happily on her heels as we waded through a thicker part of the woods. "I'm guessing most Merry Men aren't adept archers, if you haven't been trained."

"That's what you get with farmers and cobblers. I take it you have?"

Her head bobbed. “By my brother, Robert. He was a knight. Taught me as a young lass when I showed interest in swordplay and archery. He said I’d be better suited to the bow, because of my stature. He said it would help keep my enemies far away from me, where I’d prefer them. This big thing, though?” She lifted the bow and scrunched her nose. It was as tall as she was. “Too unwieldy for my taste. I prefer a shortbow, like the one my brother made me. Easier to pull.”

“Yes, I imagine so ...”

I was fascinated hearing about her experience with archery. Not many girls had such training. It also made me curious about her brother, Sir Robert, though I didn’t want to pry. If she cared to speak of him, she would. I didn’t need to rush things or seem so desperate to know more about her.

I *was* piqued and bewitched, though.

“You need to lead your target. Not shoot blindly at it, like you did with the hare.” She dug the knife in deeper with that prod, and it made me reappraise my opinion of the girl once more.

I rolled my eyes. “Thank you, madam huntress.”

She smiled at my sarcasm and bowed her head. “You’re welcome, sir minstrel.”

We walked for some time without much affair, and she managed to snag us another rabbit to take back to camp. We needed at least two more for the men, and the sun was sharpening its descent below the trees.

“We ought to be getting back,” I said.

She ignored me. “I’ve asked Friar Tuck, so I’ll pose the same question to you, Alan-a-Dale: What’s a dandy minstrel such as yourself doing with such rowdy men?”

I smirked. “Rowdy men are my specialty, love.”

She snorted in a very unladylike fashion. I loved it.

“You know what I mean,” she said.

I slapped some tickling leaves out of my face. “We all have histories, songbird. Some of us keep them close to our chest.”

She mulled those words over and, to my surprise, didn’t pry. Just like I hadn’t with her brother.

We continued on.

Minutes later, my curiosity became too much. “My turn. Your eyes sparkled when I invited you to hunt. Why did you jump at the opportunity to join a stranger in the woods? Alone. Armed. Do I really pose that little of a threat to you—a man twice your size?”

“Because my ass hurt from sitting so long.”

An unexpected laugh broke past my lips. “I thought that’s all that noblewomen did all day? Sit on carriages, sit on chairs, sit on cocks. Pump out babies.”

She wasn’t offended by my language. She laughed. “I suppose you’ve never been much of a noblewoman.”

“I’ve tried.” That earned another laugh, and I smiled. “I’ve certainly played for them. And with them.”

Her lips pursed at that. She fell silent. The mirth siphoned out of her features, and I worried I’d said the wrong thing—gotten too arrogant with the way I spoke.

“Why did you ask me to join you?” When she posed the question, I wondered where her sudden reticence stemmed from. Jealousy?

No. It can’t be. “Because you’re interesting,” I said matter-of-factly as we passed under some branches. I scanned the area and recognized a boulder I knew as a landmark. “Much more than the dull bunch at camp. Also, you’re new. I like to learn about my prey before pouncing.”

Her eyes widened, cheeks flushing as she stared straight ahead.

My wicked smile returned. *What I would pay to read her thoughts this very moment.* “And to see how you’d react,” I added, changing the subject for her sake.

“How am I faring so far?”

It took a moment for me to come up with a reasonable response. We hopped over a burbling creek and came upon a deeply forested hill. It would be hard to navigate down the hill, so I made to turn us around, but she didn't budge.

“I'd say you're faring fine. You can actually carry a conversation. You aren't the sniveling, highborn nance I originally took you for,” I said. “Many a lad and lady would strip themselves bare and kneel at my feet the first second they could.”

“Ah, so you're handsome *and* humble, I see.”

I smirked. “Humility never benefited the storyteller, little songbird.”

She crouched and peered down the hill for a route to the trail below. The undergrowth here was thick, close to the ground, dusted white from spider webs.

I didn't enjoy spiders, so I searched for an alternate route. My head twisted left and right. The air became thick with pollen and a heady smell of earth.

Robin's brow furrowed, her view fixated on a single point at the base of the hill.

“What is it?” I asked.

She nudged her chin down there, staying quiet.

I crouched next to her and hissed. Rounding a bend, stepping into our view about fifty feet down the steep, lush slope, three men trudged through the undergrowth. They moved slowly. We were too high up and hidden for them to see us.

I recognized their garb.

“Fuck.” I clenched my jaw.

“What is it?” she whispered.

I grabbed her arm, turned us around, and led us back the way we'd come. Her feet churned fast to keep up with my

longer strides. All the levity and chirpiness was gone as my mind whirled.

“Slow down, Alan!” she cried as we passed the landmark boulder. “You’re hurting my arm!”

“Don’t care,” I growled. *It’s for your safety, songbird.*

In less than fifteen minutes we made it over the log-bridge, past the clearings, and neared camp. I managed to retrace our steps in a quarter the time it originally took us to travel them.

We arrived in the clearing as the sun finished settling beneath the horizon, sending a brilliant emerald flash overhead.

Friar Tuck was the first to see me—first to see my pale face as I pulled Robin into the glade.

“Alan, what is it?” the chaplain asked.

“We have to move, Tuck. Now.”

He winced, thick eyebrows jumping.

“Gisborne’s scouts are hot on our trail.”



Chapter 23

Robin



“Who is Gisborne?” I asked, as shadows fell over the faces of Friar Tuck and Alan-a-Dale.

I rather liked both of them. Unlike Little John and Will Scarlet, these two were easier to get along with. If beggars couldn't be choosers, at least my prison guards weren't sick sadists.

Now, the air was stuffy with tension. Both men, usually sarcastic and wry with their words, had pinched lips and tense bodies.

Gisborne must be bad news. My next logical thought: Except for me, perhaps? Could he be part of the search team sent by Father to find me?

I still needed to find out what happened to Uncle Gregory. I would trick these men into trusting me—play the innocent fool—if it meant learning about my poor uncle's fate.

I had already started to develop a plan.

Friar Tuck gave orders to the men. “You heard the bard, friends. We have foxes on our tail, and we need to outpace them. Get to it.”

The flurry of action in the camp startled me. No longer were the men lazy and sitting around idly, or doing chores. The whores from last night were long gone.

The camp became a machine of organized chaos. Tent stakes were uprooted. Weapons and supplies were thrown into sacks. Boot, hoof, and wheel prints were smoothed over and stamped out. A few men walked in random directions with heavy tread, to mislead and divert our pursuers.

I walked with Alan to his section of the camp, near the river. He took the bow from me, threw his lute across his other shoulder, and swept everything else into a small sack—salted beef, wood carvings, bedding. When he folded his tent and squeezed it into the bag, it was like he'd never been there.

“Who is Gisborne, Alan?” I asked again.

The minstrel huffed and puffed, exerted from the work. “Sir Guy of Gisborne. The Sheriff of Nottingham’s lackey. And a damned good one.”

I tapped my chin in thought. “Could he defeat the Merry Men?”

Alan continued finishing up around his space. “Not alone. However, the man has the power of the law on his hands. It’s not a quarrel we want.”

“You sound scared of him.”

He wheeled on me and bared his teeth, the first angry expression I’d seen across his beautiful face. “You would be too, if you were us.”

“But I’m not. I’m your hostage.”

“Astute observation, little songbird.”

I said nothing, letting him work out my meaning. It took him a few moments before my words made him pause midstride. “If you think he’s your means of escape, dear Robin, you are sorely mistaken. He’s worse than we are.”

“I can be the judge of that.”

“No. You can’t. We won’t let you go.”

My nose wrinkled in a scowl. “What if he’s been sent by my father to find me?”

“Too soon. There hasn’t been enough time for your father to round up a man like Guy. Also, I doubt your dear ol’ da has the pull to summon him.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, defiant, and raised my chin. “You don’t know that.”

“You’re right. And we’re not going to be here to find out. Sir Guy of Gisborne is not the man the Sheriff sends for ... negotiations.”

The word sounded ominous as he said it.

“No,” Alan continued, shaking his head adamantly, as if analyzing my words, trying to uncover the likelihood of my search-and-rescue claim. “Guy has had it out for us for a long time. Call it a personal vendetta.”

“What did you do to him?”

The minstrel let out another annoyed scoff. “Besides rob the merchants, traders, and locals who fill the Sheriff’s coffers? I can’t think of anything.”

Fine. He wasn’t of a mind to humor me any longer. It soured my mood, pairing perfectly with his. “That doesn’t sound very *personal*. It sounds like, you know, an ordinary vendetta. An everyday vendetta, if you will.”

“A mundane vendetta?”

“Exactly.”

“Ask Little John.”

We made it to the camp, which had been completely transformed in the five minutes we were gone. Men were now saddling the few scraggly, skinny mules and horses they had, and preparing my carriage.

“Speaking of Little John,” I said, “where are we going? How will he find us?”

“That’s on a need-to-know basis.”

Friar Tuck walked over, tightening a belt keeping his habit together. He looked like a warrior monk. “We’re going southwest, to the well camp.”

“Dammit, Tuck,” Alan hissed. “I’m trying to be ominous.”

“What’s the well camp?” I asked the friar.

“It’s the camp that surrounds an abandoned well, little heathen. Keep up.” He patted me on the back and wandered

off to yell at a few men who weren't preparing a saddle right. "Not like that, you dolts!"

I glowered at his broad back, while Alan laughed at me. When I spun my glower to him, he kept smiling, giddy as a squirrel full of nuts. "I'm glad my ignorance is making you so happy, Alan-a-Dale."

"I think you're getting too close, dear Robin."

"What do you mean?"

"Where are *we* going? How will he find *us*? If I didn't know better, I'd say you thought you were part of the Merry Men."

I threw my hands up, flustered as he walked off. I yelled at him, "Well I *am* your prisoner, aren't I?! I'm just trying to understand—"

Alan spun around and I crashed into him. His arms came out to steady me, holding my shoulders, and his firm touch sent a trill of excitement and fear down my spine.

"Little John and the angry lad will know where to find us, girl. This isn't our first time breaking camp, in case you hadn't noticed. We have a network in these woods. Sherwood Forest is as much our home as Wilford is yours. Got it?"

I blinked, stunned. He spoke fast and stern, yet the whole time I could only focus on those imminently kissable lips of his. They were so full and plush for a man. I gulped and nodded dumbly. "G-Got it."

"Good." He moved his hands, and I couldn't deny the pang of disappointment once he didn't have hold of me. I had felt safe with him there, as silly and backwards as it sounded.

"Please don't get any ideas," he said, and his face softened. It smoothed back to the high-cheeked, cordial man I'd met on the hunt. He patted the quiver on his back and donned a roguish smirk. "I wouldn't want to have to put one of these in your ass."

A smile slowly curled my lips, realizing he was teasing me. "If you could catch me," I said, echoing earlier, "*or* hit

me!”

He clapped his hands, turning away from me. “All right, all right. I’ll admit you’re a better shot than me. Let’s go, little ranger.”

I followed him to the carriage, where men loaded the stacks of newly sewn clothes Tuck and I had worked on. “Am I your songbird, or your ranger?”

“You can be anything and everything you want with me, Robin of Wilford.” He stretched his arms wide, smiling. “That’s the beauty of the wild forest.” As I joined him in the plush carriage, he sat on a bench and crossed one knee over the other, humming to himself. He pulled his lute from his shoulder. “Hmm. I like that. The beauty of the wild forest. I think I’ll write a song about it as we venture south.”

I hid my smile. “A song based on your own nonsense? Your humbleness is *truly* awe-inspiring, Alan-a-Dale.”

“What did I tell you?”

With an eye-roll, I quoted him from earlier, lowering my voice to mock him. “Humility never benefited the storyteller, little songbird.”

He plucked a string lightly and winked at me. “Good girl.”

My insides twisted with heat. My blood quickened. Before I could open my mouth to respond, two Merry Men sat the bench at the front of the carriage and we jerked to a start.

Alan and I fell into silence, regaining our companionable rivalry. I felt good about that. It was much easier to be civil with my captors than at each other’s throats.

I listened to him formulate the dreamy song as we moved through the night. He was really quite good. More than that, it gave me wistful sounds to add to the moaning wind and sinister creakiness of the woods.

I stared out the aperture of the carriage and breathed in the chill night air. Alan wasn’t wrong: It was freeing being out here in the forest, on a grand adventure.

If I thought about it honestly ... I didn't want to go home yet. No, this excitement was much more preferable to the dull, painful existence I had in Wilford.

I missed Mama. I missed Uncle Gregory. I wasn't sure I'd ever see them again, though I dared to hope I would. These men—Alan and Tuck in particular—didn't seem horrid. I doubted they'd kill me.

But that was half the thrill, wasn't it? The fear of being in danger every waking moment. Not knowing what awaited us under the canopies of the swaying trees.

Yes, I decided this wasn't so bad after all. Because I couldn't stand to miss it. I needed to know what happened next.



Chapter 24

Little John



My fist cracked on the large oak double-door of the Wilford estate, and I frowned, examining the thick wood. How ancient had the oak tree been when it was cut down to craft this ostentatious door?

It was a damned shame. The people treated Mother Nature like she was their enemy; a constant well of resources that would never run dry.

But she *would* run dry. Though Sherwood Forest and the other woodlands across England were vast, making up most the countryside, deforestation was becoming rampant. Despots only thought with greed, and Prince John was no different.

It was a travesty King Richard was off in the Holy Land, trying to rescue a kingdom I'd never cared about. Could the Lionheart even name a single town bordering Jerusalem? His courage and gallantry wasn't in question. It was his shortsightedness and sensibility I raised a brow at. Though, if I asked the king, I'm sure he'd say the Crusade was the antithesis of shortsightedness.

In his wake, Richard's vile brother, John, had stepped into power and brought society to its knees. His tyrannical taxes and tariffs were what made the Merry Men.

When people had nowhere else to go, giving up two-thirds of their earnings and crops to the Crown, they turned to desperate violence and outlawry to make ends meet.

I couldn't deny my own involvement in the process. Deforestation, for example—the act of being *industrious*, whatever the fuck that meant. I'd cut down my fair share of trees. Yet I'd never fashion a door out of a beautiful old oak, just so people could see how I prospered.

No, I'd turn it into a wagon or two, instead. Something useful, which could carry a cartful of food or clothes to my less-fortunate neighbors.

I sighed and knocked again, louder this time.

My mind traveled to Robin. She'd lived here all her life. Pampered, no doubt. Gifted with luxury and pretty things like they were owed to her. I hoped living with the Merry Men for a time would show her how normal people struggled outside the picket fences of this grand manor and the ones next to it. Just beyond the borders of this pretentious house was an entire world beyond her imagining. One of desperation, adventure, and danger.

She had gotten a hint of it, so far. At least the *danger* bit. I wasn't sure if she had the tenacity to withstand the horrors of watching a child die of starvation in the wilderness; a mother frozen to death, lost in the woods, blanketed with snow as she clutched a babe to her chest.

No, likely not. Yet if she stayed long enough with us, she would learn.

I can't do that to her. This needs to work, so I can let her go.

An itch at the back of my mind had me furrowing my brow. Why was my natural inclination to *resist* letting her go? She was like any other hostage we'd taken. Expendable and worth only as much as the number of coin purses we could get for her.

Right?

My heart said no. She *wasn't* like the others. There was something special about this one, and it wasn't just that she had deceived the Merry Men into thinking she was a man for an entire evening.

I didn't want to let her go.

The door creaked open and ripped me back to the present. I stared through the crack and saw nothing ... until my chin lowered and I laid eyes on a small young woman whose gaze landed below my chest.

“Evening, lass,” I said with a soft smile.

“C-Can I help you, sir?”

She sounded scared. I opted not to get to her level, eye to eye, lest I frighten her even more with my size and stature. “What’s your name, ma’am?”

“Emma.”

“Emma, could you please fetch your, erm ... master, for an audience with me?”

“You wish to speak with Lord Thomas? He hasn’t come out of his room all day, sir.”

“All the more reason for him to get some fresh air,” I said, trying on a more disarming smile.

At least he was here. The first leg of my journey had taken me north this morning, to a hamlet where the townsfolk told me they’d seen a beautiful carriage careen into town and promptly turn around.

I suspected he had fled for home after the ordeal of last night. I’d ridden hard, all day, to be here. I wasn’t turning around until I spoke with the bastard.

“Whom should I say is calling, sir?” Emma asked.

“The Sheriff of Nottingham.”

Her eyes widened and she scurried away, closing the door after her.

Minutes later, I heard heavy footsteps falling from inside. I crossed my arms over my chest and waited, backing up into the courtyard so I wouldn’t seem menacing up close.

I could change my distance, but I couldn’t change my height or the clamped jaw I sported. Any man who abandoned his only daughter to marauders, even at the risk of death, didn’t deserve my respect or pity.

The door swung open.

Sir Thomas was dressed in a nightgown, a silly floppy hat atop his head. His face went from pale and alarmed to

scrunched and suspicious in a matter of seconds.

“You’re not Sir George of Nottingham.”

“No, I am not the Sheriff. Have you sent for him?”

He moved to slam the door in my face.

“You’ll want to hear what I have to say, sir.”

He scowled at me with one eye through the slit opening of the door. “I have a sick wife to tend to.”

Anger stabbed through me like a spear. “Is there not another who has ... slipped through the cracks?”

The man had the gall to look confused.

My muscles clenched. I had half a mind to barrel into the door, grab this man, and beat him over the head with my quarterstaff until his skull turned into a mushy pulp. “Another member of your *family*, Sir Thomas?”

“Oh. Robin.”

The way he said it made me sick. An afterthought, as if her name brought a rancid taste to his tongue.

I was caught off-guard. I had expected a disheveled man, distraught with worry. Even if his wife was ill, this man was not worried. He was ready for bed.

“Yes. We uncovered her secret late last night.” I let my eyes twinkle, to drive the point home.

Still, Sir Thomas looked confused. He scratched his scraggly cheek. “Ah,” he said, embarrassment crossing his face. “Her attempts to become a man. Right. If your barbaric lot was fooled by that ruse, you’re bigger idiots than I imagined.”

My nostrils flared. “The Merry Men have your daughter, Sir Thomas, and we expect fair compensation for her safe return.”

He gained a more relaxed posture in the doorway, the shitbag. Clearly unaware I was two seconds away from

snapping his neck like old kindling. “So this is an extortion call, is it?”

I nodded curtly. Glanced around. “Where are all your guards?”

“You killed them all, you hellhound.”

Oh. A damned shame, that. “You took all of them with you on your journey? Shit, we should have just robbed your house while you were gone instead.”

His neck tightened, hollowing with anger. “I brought the valuables with us, expecting just such an occasion.”

Incredibly stupid? Or stupidly lucky?

“How much has Robin spilled to you?” he asked. “The dumb little cunt.”

My legs moved before my brain could tell them to stop. “Don’t call her—” I lunged forward and he closed the door tighter, back to a sliver of opening.

Sir Thomas let out a cruel *tsk*. “Ah. I see. She has you wrapped around her little finger already, does she? Not good for negotiating, is it?”

“She’s your *daughter*, madman,” I said through clenched teeth.

“Keep her,” Thomas snapped. “She’s your problem now, cur. The girl is better off in the forest, where she can frolic and get lost all day long, uncaring about her duties. She was shit at them anyway, and already spent more time in Sherwood than I care to admit.” For a moment, his lips twitched with sadness. “When we lost Robert, we lost her, too.”

There were so many things I wanted to say, wanted to *do*, to this bastard. I wanted to castigate him for his cruelty; break his head open like a ripe melon; tell him all the amazing things about his daughter I’d learned in a single night, when he’d had his entire life to try and learn, if he’d only *attempted*. “You’re going to regret this, Sir Thomas.”

That’s all I said. My voice was low—a menacing tone I reserved for the vilest people, such as the rapist in the alley I

cracked with Tuck and Marian.

“I’ll get past it,” he said with an easy shrug.

Ready to write off his daughter completely.

Unless he has an alternate plan ...

This was too easy for him. No man could be *this* callous when it came to his flesh and blood ... could he? “Making an enemy of Robin is unwise,” I said. “You’ll hate yourself.”

“I’ll forgive myself.” He shooed me with his weak little hand. “Now get going, vagrant, before the *real* Sheriff shows up.”

I bared my teeth in a scowl. Thick oak or not, I could bust this fucking door down if I wanted to.

But it wasn’t my fight. Now I knew why Robin was so eager—not frightened of the Merry Men. How could we scare her when she had *this* terror waiting at home?

With baffling surprise, I found my mind made up as I dashed toward the shadows of the courtyard. *I will not let Robin go.* If she wanted to stay with the Merry Men to get away from this lavish hellhole, I would welcome her with open arms.

The thought excited me. Energized me. I froze at a silly carved fountain of a naked angel in the courtyard, feeling Sir Thomas’ eyes on me as I made my escape.

I called over my shoulder. “You call it a disguise, Thomas of Wilford ... but Robin is twice the man you’ll ever be.”



Chapter 25

Will Scarlet



“Hoy, lads,” I called, strolling to the shadow of the alley.

Three scarecrow strays were crouched at the mouth, rolling dice.

A smile quirked my lips. They reminded me of me. Maybe a handful of years younger, but not by much. Disheveled, grimy, smelling of filth, probably starving.

Ah, the good old days.

I leaned against the wall, watching their street games, flipping a shilling and grabbing it out of the air, again and again. My eyes landed on the tallest of the bunch when he stood. The leader, obviously. He was gangly, all elbows and awkward arms that were too long for his body. Taller than me, but without any of the danger behind his movements.

“Hoy back to you, penny-snatcher,” the boy said. “What is it?”

“Got a job for you lot.”

“Not interested. I’m winning hand over fist here with Tick and Jimmy.”

“Up your ass, Ros,” one of the shorter boys behind him said.

I chuckled. “Ros, is it? I promise this will be more fun.”

“Rosco,” he corrected me. “What’s it to you? I’m tittled.”

“Tittled?”

“My curiosity, mate.”

“Titillated?”

His thick brow furrowed. “That’s what I said, ain’t it? Why you flashing your silver penny at us?”

“I’m looking for a man. Goes by Peter Fisher.”

The boy laughed, turning back to his friends. “Peter Fisher, guys. All formal like.”

I was quickly growing tired of these youths. *Was I this annoying when I was their age just a few short years ago?* Living in dire straits in the woods changed a man. Made him more serious and feral. Lord knew it had to me.

I looked up at the bruised night sky. It reminded me of Robin’s bruised face, and I snarled to myself. It made Rosco jerk back a step.

“Late night for you three to be tossing dice, aye?”

Rosco shrugged and straightened the lapel of his dirty overcoat. “Ain’t got nowhere to be. What you want to know about the squire, eh?”

“I want to find him.”

“By that look in your eye, I take it you don’t want to gab.”

“Right you are, Rosco.” I leveled my gaze at him. “So, can you help me?”

“Well, I like a good brawl.” He shrugged. “Give me that coin and we’ll see.”

I caught the shilling again and waved it at him. “If I give you this coin, you’ll talk until the orphanage rings its morning breakfast bell if you have to. Aye?”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.”

He wanted to act tough for his friends, but I had his measure. He understood I wasn’t a man to fool around with. I was like him—cunning—but also twisted.

Certainly more twisted than this young fool.

I put the coin into his palm, and made ready to snatch him by the collar if he bolted.

He didn't. He shoved it into a pocket and nodded his chin over my shoulder. "Squire Fisher's been saucing proper the last couple days, over at the tavern in the square. Shows up past sundown, same time every night. Usually carries himself like he's the neighborhood guard dog. Not recently, though. Seems down." Rosco chuckled. "You stay here long enough, shill, you'll see him pass this alley on his way."

"Will you be here to see him?"

Another shrug. "Maybe. Maybe not."

I'd already given this boy more than a week's pay just for uttering a few sentences. I wasn't about to give him more for making himself scarce.

I had a better idea.

"What will it take for you to stand watch over yonder?" I motioned vaguely behind me. "Call me when you see him? I don't know what he looks like."

Rosco snorted. "You can't miss him, mate. He's wearing a big eye patch these days. Looks like someone finally scuffed him up good."

I smiled wickedly. It filled me with pride to know my little thorn had taken half his eyesight away. I suspected poking eyes out was typically beyond Robin's purview.

"Still," I said, "two more pence to have you stand watch. Tell me if the law comes waltzing by."

"They won't, this late."

I sighed. "Dammit, lad, I'm trying to help you here."

Rosco looked confused. His two friends stood up next to him.

"Three pennies," the littlest one said. He had buckteeth. "One for each o' us. We don't like that fucker any, either. Have a quarrel with him, right Ros?"

"Right, Tick."

"Fine," I said. I reached into my shirt and produced the coins from a small pouch. It pained me to part ways with

money that could be used for the gang, but I wanted to do this right.

Twenty minutes later, I was still standing in the shadow of the alley, under an awning that drowned me in darkness. It was a good place to play dice for the gutter-rats. I could just make out their silhouettes in the distance, highlighted by silvery moonlight.

A couple people waltzed down the street in either direction, heading to or from the tavern and the square ahead. The ones from the tavern stumbled and swayed. The ones heading toward it had some fire in their step.

Every time a man passed, I'd look over to the boys. They made no signs, so I continued waiting, growing impatient.

It dawned on me that, at any moment, they could turn tail and run down the street. I'd never catch them. Not only were they too far away now, but I didn't know these streets like they did. I hadn't grown up in Nottingham.

A tall lad with swinging blond hair walked gingerly down the road, chest puffed out, chin raised. I couldn't make out his face from my angle.

Rosco cawed like a goddamn crow.

I shot a *what-the-fuck-was-that?* look in his direction, and his bony shoulders bobbed with a shrug. We hadn't planned a signal.

Stupid, on my part.

The stately blond lad froze, his hackles rising.

Dammit.

I emerged from the alley. "Sir Peter Fisher."

These hoity bastards loved when you called them "sir." Even though he knew as well as I did that he was no knight. Just a page with a dream.

He spun to me, hand going toward his belt where he had a sword. "Who goes there?"

I raised my hands in surrender, though I knew I looked menacing stepping out of a fucking alley. “Just a messenger, sir.”

“Messenger from whom?”

I took a couple steps closer, and he stiffened.

I stopped, to disarm him a bit. About five feet from the strapping young lad. “The Princess of Wilford.”

His guard fell as confusion crinkled his fine features. Well, fine except for the patch over his eye, and what I imagined was a gaping hole underneath.

Good job, little thorn.

Peter’s hand stayed near his sword. Lazily. “The Princess of ... Wilford?”

I pursed my lips. “Aye. Use your head, sir. She wanted to offer you this as way of apology for, erm ...” I trailed off and pointed at my own eye.

He gasped with a wince. Then he took a step toward me. “That bitch heiress?!”

I took out the little bag of pence, jingling it around. Like a shiny lure to a squirrel.

He took another step toward me. Angry this time. “She thinks she can buy her way—”

I closed the gap with two quick steps, dropped the bag on the ground, and hugged Peter Fisher when his eyes dropped to it—

While plunging my dagger in his side with my other hand.

He groaned in my ear, weight falling into me.

“Oof,” I muttered wryly, patting his shoulder, taking on his weight to keep him standing. “I know, I know, you’ve just had a horrid couple days, haven’t you?”

In the distance, shocked gasps from the gutter-rats, and when I looked over they were gone.

Hoisting my shoulder under his arm, I dragged Peter toward the alley. “Let me just tell you, friend”—he croaked, shocked, face paling—“it’s going to get a lot worse.”

I smiled as I patted his cheek, and then hid the two of us in the alley. I sat him down. “Don’t worry, mate, you won’t die from that. Just won’t be able to walk too good, either.”

I hadn’t really thought this part through, admittedly.

Peering around at the empty street, I clicked my tongue. “Now where is Little John? I could use those big fucking arms of his to help drag your ass out of here.”



Chapter 26

Robin



“Careful with these lot, dear sister. You can’t trust wicked men with your secrets.”

I nodded glumly to Robert. “I know, brother. I don’t have much choice *but* to trust them, do I? I’m not sure how long I can keep things bottled down.”

He hummed. “*You always have a choice, Robin.*”

Something tapped my knee and I woke with a start, my chin popping up from my chest. I blinked bleary eyes up at Alan-a-Dale.

He reached down with his hand, to my face, and cupped my cheek. His touch was warm, soft. He might have had the softest hands in the world. I closed my eyes, falling into his touch, and wondered if I was still dreaming.

Then the pad of his thumb swiped over my chin, catching an errant strand of drool. “Looks like my melancholic tunes lulled you to sleep at last,” he said with a wry smile.

I blinked. “Where are we?” Daylight filtered in through the small window of the carriage. I’d been sleeping on silk dresses—the best sleep I’d had in ages. “How long was I out?”

“We’re at the next hideaway, and it’s morning. You were out for a few hours as we traveled.”

I nodded, swallowing hard. My throat was dry and my stomach grumbled. I rubbed my belly with a groan.

“Hungry, little songbird?”

“Ravenously.”

He reached out for my hand. I gingerly accepted the help. The calluses on his fingers were different than the ones on

Little John's. They weren't battle-hardened—rather hardened from plucking strings. Instead of stealing life with his fingers, this man invigorated life with his.

Outside the carriage, I carded my hand through my hair. It was already greasy, though I'd just bathed yesterday. Being in the wilderness was dirty business.

I recalled yesterday—with the naked Merry Men, followed by a naked Maid Marian—and felt strangely warm and lustful. *Is it my humors acting up for morning, or my lack of food? I feel ravenous in more ways than one.*

Fires outside were nearly invisible in the afternoon light. The sun came down in spots, hidden by overhanging branches and leafy trees that told me we were still in the forest, just a different part of it.

The new camp didn't appear much different than the last. It was shaped around its water source, an abandoned well that had become overgrown with gnarled vines and knotty roots. A few men busied themselves by clearing the well of weeds.

When I stepped out of the carriage, Alan-a-Dale handed me a burnt piece of hare on a spit, with a self-defeated smile. "I'm not as good a cook as Tuck, but he was busy. It'll have to suffice."

I took the skewer without complaint and chomped into the food in a hurry. "Thank you," I said around the mouthful. "What's Tuck busy doing?"

"Preparing to go to Nottingham, to distribute the clothes you helped sew to the almshouse."

My eyes flashed wide. A sneaky idea came to me, and I tried to hide the roguish expression from Alan by wandering through the camp.

A glade of birch and beech trees spread out from the stone waterhole, which I saw drew its source from a nearby pond. Sweet chestnut grew in spiny groves around the glade, alongside wildflowers. *A good spot for foraging*, I thought.

The area was hemmed by foliage more than the last, with a couple hillsides for lookout points. White smoke spiraled into

the canopies from at least three pits in the glade. The Merry Men had swiftly made this place their home, setting up their tents and accoutrements.

Admittedly, the outlaws were expert nomads. They'd moved their home with nary a second thought, once Alan and I came back with reports of danger nearby.

Alan saw me staring at the grizzled faces of the men, and the slack, dirtied mugs of the younger fellows. Though no one smiled, they didn't appear discontent, either.

The minstrel stood next to me. "Our homes are not where we are, Robin. Our homes are who we're with."

I glanced over at him. "Sage words, sir."

He chuckled. "I have my moments." After a beat of silence, he clapped my back. "Now then! It's time to bathe. Off to the pond we—"

"Ohhh no," I said, flapping my hands in front of me. "I remember how that went last time."

"Yes, your eyes nearly popped out of your head. Too awestruck, I suppose."

"Aye, humble minstrel. It's too early to go through that anxiety again."

He snorted. "Fine. Suit yourself." He tossed a thumb over his shoulder. "You know where to find me if you change your mind. Don't be scared to be adventurous." With a wink, he wandered off.

Leaving me there ... alone. Unwatched. I looked left and right, behind and forward, and though a few Merry Men worked on things, none of them paid me any attention.

Before he got out of eyesight near a hill, I said, "You trust me out here by my lonesome?"

He laughed, not bothering to look over his shoulder as he called back, "Where would you go, dear Robin? You're lost!"

I flared my nostrils and opened my mouth to blurt a retort, but then he was gone. A bit frustrated, hands balling into fists,

I spun around and tried to find something to occupy myself with.

Out the corner of my eye, the carriage called to me. I hummed to myself, trying to be discreet, and slipped into the open door, closing it behind me.

It seemed *this* had become my own personal home in the wilderness. A lavish, creaky carriage filled with pillows, finery, silks, and ornamented chests—though much fewer now than earlier.

I frowned when I sat. It certainly didn't make me feel part of the Merry Men. It made me feel ... superior.

And I hated that. I debated leaving the carriage, so I could find a stranger and find a chore to do. Make myself useful.

I thought, *This was part of my plan, though. Stow myself away in a chest again once Tuck leaves. Get back to Nottingham so I can see Mama and look for clues about Uncle Gregory's whereabouts.*

In the meantime, I needed to bide my time. So I waited. And waited ... and my thoughts drifted.

They went to Alan first, and his soft hands. His elegant stride, his cheery tone. The man's voice was cinnamon. He was a shit archer, but a good man.

Likewise went for Friar Tuck. A good man in a shit circumstance. Oddly, I tried to imagine what his body would feel like under that habit of his. The thought alarmed me, because I could see Friar Tuck as a father figure ... so why was I thinking such torrid things?

"Because you're alone and wanting," Robert said.

I shook his voice away and daydreamed about Little John and Will Scarlet. What were those devious vagrants up to? They'd left quickly after I lied and told them Peter Fisher had punched me in the face. Fisher *had* assaulted me, but it had been Father who struck me.

I'd never seen men angrier than in that moment when I told my lie. Unlike with Father, my words had *consequences*

with these men. The men had been so filled with potent rage and vengeful eyes.

Vengeful eyes ... for me. Protective champions with hate in their hearts for anyone who lays their hands on me.

A girl couldn't ask for more than that. Even if I didn't trust it to last. They had said as much: I was their property, and anyone who harmed what belonged to them needed to be dealt with.

Can I really consider the Merry Men my captors and protectors? The thought was baffling, yet strangely arousing.

Biting my lip, I curled up on the bench. My legs lifted, knees bending, and I placed my feet on the edge of the bench. My chin dipped and I watched as my hand trailed down my belly, under the waistband of my pants, and between my legs.

I was wet and warm in the middle. Stifling a whimper, I glanced fearfully out the window and dipped two fingers inside my cunt at the same time. The heel of my palm worked my clit, rubbing slow circles that brought a thrum of excitement and relief shooting through me.

This isn't so bad, I told myself, closing my eyes. *Being at the mercy of men like John, Will, Alan, and Tuck might not be the worst thing for me.*

I already liked it better than being at home. At least this was exhilarating.

The idea of excitement made my body jerk. My fingers came away sticky, a strand of my arousal stretching from my fingertips to my seam.

I gasped and shook my head. This was so wrong. Men were cutting wood, chatting around campfires just outside, while I was stuffed in here like a pampered princess, fucking my hand and—

Three fingers curved in this time. My body jolted and I smacked the back of my head against the wall of the carriage. Wincing, the pain only made the pleasure that much grander.

My eyes clenched shut. I was losing track of my thoughts. In, out, in, out. My fingers were moving fast now while my hips bucked against my palm and wrist.

With my free hand, I lifted my shirt and pinched my pert nipple, cupping my breast, fondling myself. I bit my lower lip harder, harder, grinding, exploring my depths. I wished I had one of those men's callused hands doing this to me, teaching me, showing me absolute pleasure, but I didn't know how to ask them because I had no experience and—

I unraveled, the slow pressure mounting and building like a horrible tidal wave. Cresting high through my body, ready to crash on my grand estate and fucking destroy it and I'd *love* for Wilford to just be washed away in a heap of snapped timber and floating tapestries!

The door to the carriage flew open.

I squealed—"Ah!"—as I came around my fingers at the same time, scrunching my body and falling over sideways, jerking, spraying fluids across the backs of my thighs and knees.

"Christ Almighty!" Friar Tuck gasped, head reeling as he watched me come undone in front of him, writhing on the bench and blushing with sheer mortification.

His jaw dropped.

I tried to make myself small, invisible. There was no hiding from what the chaplain had just seen me do. What he'd just walked in on. "Oh God," I whimpered.

"We leave you alone for ten minutes and you fuck yourself into a near stupor, little heathen?" His voice was raspy, choked. The man's glittering eyes couldn't stop roving over my body, even as my shirt fell back down and I tugged my pants up. "I'm impressed," he added.

"I'm s-sorry," I whined. Droplets of me trickled down my leg and onto the hardwood floor of the carriage with stark loudness. I buried my head between my arms and knees. "Oh God, I don't know what came over me. I'm so humiliated."

“Aye, I suspect I would be too if you walked in on me stroking my cock to nothing but my filthy dreams.”

“You’re not helping!” My head whipped up from between my knees.

He laughed heartily, his belly rumbling with the effort. His whole body jiggled, and again I found myself wondering what he felt like underneath those plain robes. I was sure he wouldn’t be as soft as I imagined.

Tuck winked. “Your secret is safe with me. Afraid you’ve got to clean up and get out of the carriage, however.”

“Why?”

“Why?” He fumbled. “Well, I suppose *I* could help you clean up. Can’t say I’m against that—”

“No. No! Why do I have to leave the carriage?”

“Because I’m taking it, and you can’t be in it.”

I frowned, bowing my head. Then I bat my eyelashes at him like Maid Marian told me to do. “I was, erm, hoping I could join you? Into Nottingham? I miss my mother.”

He examined me, eyes narrowing. Then he sighed. “Don’t try to look like Maid Marian. It’s unbecoming of you. No, I’m afraid not. You’re still our prisoner, little heathen, and I can’t make that decision.”

My face pinched, my voice straining. “You’re the only one here to *make* the decision! Please, I promise I’ll come back.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. Looked behind him to see if anyone was watching. “Lass, you’re too important to our merry band of fuck-ups to let go. Little John would hang me.”

I scoffed and flopped back in the carriage, onto the silky cargo. “That’s what everyone says! Alan was scared of him too. He’s just one man. Why do you all listen to him?”

Tuck’s face grew serious as he stepped into the carriage. Clearly, I’d said the wrong thing. “We all owe our lives to Little John. Without him, we’d be destitute, broken, and

without a family. He *gave* us that. Don't you see? I won't turn my back on him. Even for a pretty thing like you."

My shoulders sagged. "I wish I could command that kind of loyalty and trust."

"Maybe you will someday. For now, I'll not ask again: Get out of the cart, before I have to carry you out."

A sly look chased across my face. I spread my arms and legs out against the silks, lying back. "Shame. My legs suddenly feel like iron weights."

Tuck rolled his eyes. "You really are impossible, you know that, brat princess?"

"I'm starting to like that name."

He charged into the carriage and hoisted me off the pile like I weighed no more than a bag of feathers. I snickered as he carried me in his arms like I was his bride, one arm crooked against my back, the other under my knees.

I felt safe and secure in his arms. Even if I had to extort him to get here, I couldn't help but smile. His arms were stone pillars keeping me airborne.

Yes, now I knew sure and true: Friar Tuck was not as soft as he looked.



Alan-a-Dale kept close watch on me as the day dragged into night. Friar Tuck was gone. So was the carriage and my escape plan. I'd have to make another scheme. Granted, I didn't even know if I *wanted* to escape.

I kept flipping on the idea. Every time I thought of Mama or Uncle Gregory, I did. Then I'd think of Little John watching over me, or Friar Tuck lifting me, or Alan-a-Dale infuriating me, and I'd doubt myself.

The locusts and crickets in the trees were loud and annoying. I sat next to Alan and a couple other men, circled around a campfire to keep warm. I didn't have the safe confines of my carriage until Tuck returned.

I'd seen the direction he took the carriage. I could read the stars well, thanks to my brother. Alan had taken me on a hunt yesterday. Riding over from our last hideaway to this one, I'd marked the roads and trees we passed, noting a few landmarks like a big boulder here, a bend in the road there. Things were starting to come into sharper focus.

The longer I stayed with these men, the more I'd learn. Eventually, I'd have a reasonable understanding of the ebbs and flows of the forest. Before long, I'd know this region of Sherwood Forest as well as I knew the area close to my home.

At least that was my hope.

If I ran now, I'd get lost. But if we changed locations a couple more times, and I could triangulate this spot with the last and the next, maybe it would be different.

These men didn't know the extent to which I'd lived my life in the woods near my estate. They thought of me as a pampered young noblewoman, who had never gotten her hands dirty.

That couldn't be further from the truth. I could track. I could hunt. I could forage. If it came down to it, I *could* survive out here, I believed.

As I stared into the crackling flames, my confidence began to build. I wondered, too, if Sir Guy being hot on our trail was my fault.

What if leaving here ended up benefiting the Merry Men? I could do it to protect *them*. Or at least I could justify my reason for escaping that way.

Trees rustled nearby.

The Merry Men hopped up from their fires, going to their bows, spears, and swords.

I lurched up to my feet, fear running through me.

Two horses parted the way, clomping into the glade.

My heart soared.

Little John and Will Scarlet sat atop the steeds like gallant knights in shining armor.

My heart caught in my throat when I saw what they had between them, draped over the back of Will's horse.

A body.

The two men dismounted.

The body hanging over Will Scarlet's horse twitched.

"Well met, lads," John said. His eyes found me and punched holes into my soul. "We come bearing a gift, little star."

Will and John hoisted the body from the horse on either end, setting him down on his knees. A bag was over his face.

Will tore the sack off. "Lo and behold, lordling."

Peter Fisher's blond locks flopped and he gasped, sitting back on his tied hands and heels.

His single eye lifted to me, staring with abject horror into my shadowed face, as if he looked upon a winged angel of death—Satan herself, backlit by the campfires and awash in the flames of Hell.



Chapter 27

Robin



Fear and confusion warred with each other in Peter Fisher's single eye when the bag was ripped off his head. Once he focused on me, noticing who I was, that wide-eyed expression turned to rage. His slack-jawed face tightened, lines creasing near his patch.

For a moment, I had seen the boy this man truly was. The scared child who believed he deserved everything he wanted, and could just take, take, take.

Now, he tried hiding it over his mask of unbridled rage. He went from victim to oppressor in the blink of an eye. He spat on the ground at my feet. "You," he snarled. His chin twitched and his lip trembled as he noticed the other Merry Men standing around him. "Why are you doing this to me, girl?"

Part of me felt sorry for him. Guilty he was even here, bound on his knees in front of me, at the mercy of my whims.

I felt bad for the *boy* inside.

The other half of me wanted revenge for what he had tried to do. Were it not for that symbol of my brother's protection—the skull in the woods—he would have gotten everything he wanted from me. Peter Fisher might have even killed me in his attack, because the best victim was a dead victim.

I couldn't reconcile or forgive him for that.

I knew I was at an inflection point in my life—a moment that might spell out my future journey.

Only dark thoughts filled my head.

Inside, I prayed God would show me strength. I'd never put any effort or power behind prayer, but what could it hurt?

“Why am I doing this to you?” I repeated, folding my arms over my chest. “It wasn’t my decision, Squire Fisher. You did this to yourself.”

He scoffed. “That doesn’t even make any—”

“Besides,” I cut in, not caring to hear what he had to say, “I could ask you the same question. Why did you do this to me?”

I hoped he would understand my question deeper than face value. It’s why I had cut him off: Of course he hadn’t *physically* abducted himself. It was the consequence of his actions that led him here. *Can’t he understand that?*

Apparently ... no.

“I did nothing to you,” he chided, baring his teeth.

“You tried.”

Little John’s eyes flicked over to me, doubt creasing the edges. The other Merry Men glanced over, unsure what I was saying.

I suppose I need to be out with it. Doing that seals Peter Fisher’s fate surer than anything else. I know that.

The darkness—my vengeful nature—won out.

I could have seen Peter Fisher released. Could have called it all a big mistake and made the Merry Men untie him and send him on his way.

Instead, I said, “Peter Fisher didn’t give me this bruise on my face. That was a lie. He did something much worse.”

“Robin ...” John choked out, stepping toward me.

“He tried to rape me. He tried to steal my dignity and peace.”

A rasp of metal sounded behind me as Will Scarlet slid a dagger out. “Son of a fucking bitch.”

John’s arm shot wide, stopping the impulsive young man’s advance on Peter Fisher.

I fought back tears burning behind my eyes, summoning the wrath of all my years of pent-up hatred.

Something caught the corner of my eye, and when I looked over I saw Will was handing me the dagger by the handle.

I gulped. Slowly took the weapon and curled my fingers around the cold leather hilt. I stepped in front of Peter Fisher, closer, and his eyes reverted back to the scared child. The boy who didn't want to die, and wished he could take back what he'd done. Maybe he even regretted other things in his life and was busy flashing through them—men like this were rarely a one-off. I doubted I was his first prey.

This time, he had simply fucked with the wrong girl.

I held the dagger-point to his neck, the soft flesh giving way and indenting where I lightly pressed. A bead of blood trickled down his throat.

A thrill clawed up my spine at the sight of the blood.

He whimpered. Stuttered. “You d-don't have to do this, Maid Robin. I-I can redeem you. Yes, you've been made an outlaw by the authorities at Nottingham for how you've marred me, but I can retract my claim! I can say it was all lies I fabricated—and I will! Just let me g-go. You can have y-your ... honor back.”

I heard a trickling sound as he pissed himself.

I wanted to believe him. I knew I couldn't, but I so desperately wanted to. It was a heavy blow to learn I'd been made an outlaw in my own town. I knew the possibility had been likely, yet it still pained me to hear.

What will Father think? Or, more importantly, Mama Joan?

My knuckles whitened on the hilt of the dagger. *With a flick of my wrist, I could plunge this blade into his soft throat and be done with him.*

Darkness, creeping ever closer. Edging my vision, closing around me, wishing me to end Peter Fisher's life.

Then a voice in my head spoke, clear as day: *“It’s not who you are, Robin,”* Robert said. *“As much as I hate to admit it, he’s right: You don’t have to do this. But he’s not right for the reasons he says. No, if you do this, you’ll taint your soul. Perhaps beyond repairing. The Merry Men will have you completely in their grips, molded to their liking.”*

“It is the Merry Men who have tried to create this heartless beast inside you. They, who have brought Peter Fisher to your feet, to see how you will react. It is a test. Killing this man is a passing score to the men, yet a failing mark for your everlasting soul.”

My breath caught in my throat, shallow as Robert’s words fluttered through my mind. He spoke so clearly, as if standing behind me, whispering in my ear. Telling his little sister how life worked.

He would never know what a woman such as myself went through. He couldn’t understand the experience—the humiliation, terror, and rage that accompanied such an attack.

Yet I couldn’t shake his words.

My fingers loosened on the dagger hilt. Color came flooding back to my knuckles and fingers.

Peter Fisher smiled like he was born-again, seeing the light for the first time. Instead of the fires of vengeance behind me, he saw the radiance of the pearly gates.

My breath let out on a wheeze, not realizing I’d been holding it so long.

I turned and pushed the dagger flat against Will Scarlet’s chest. He took it and furrowed his brow.

“I can’t do it,” I said, and began walking away.

A moment of flickering silence passed as my boots broke leaves and twigs.

Peter Fisher let out a loud, grateful sigh of relief. “You won’t regret it, Robin of Wilford. You’ve shown your true nature, girl, and—”

Little John's voice cut him off with a growl, so animal and inhuman it made me turn around to make sure he was still the same flesh-and-blood man I'd come to know.

"She might be too good for such an unholy act, squire, but I don't share her goodness ... or her reservations." He snagged the dagger from Will's hands and stood in front of Peter Fisher, crouching to get eye level with him. "Tell the devil I'll be seeing him soon," he said in a low growl of fire and brimstone.

My hand flew to my mouth as my stomach dropped and ice chilled my veins.

Little John plunged the dagger into Peter Fisher's stomach before the younger man could respond.

Peter coughed, blood bubbling past his lips. His eyes screwed up with pure agony and shock.

Then John sawed the dagger up and up, through belly, cartilage, bone, and chest. He eviscerated the young squire right in front of everyone.

Peter looked down and watched his own slippery entrails spill out of him in a steaming, bloody heap. He jerked, and his eyes rolled back as he went into shock, collapsing sideways onto the dirt.

His eyes remained open—glassy and afraid. I noted his panting breath, the shallow rise of his chest, and morbidly realized he was still alive for at least ten more seconds before his glassy eyes turned dull and gray.

My body went into shock. I backpedaled when Little John stood to his full, monstrous height, facing me like a lumbering giant.

He frowned at me, tossing the bloody dagger onto the ground. "No one is allowed to harm you, little star. I need you to understand that. Men like Peter Fisher don't deserve your mercy."

I couldn't speak. Could hardly breathe. My throat was constricting around a thick, leathery tongue.

This brutal man had done something I couldn't do, so easily. But that didn't make it any easier for me to stomach. No, in fact, I felt queasy and more frightened than ever.

So I turned and ran, stumbling toward the pond at the edge of camp.



Chapter 28

Robin



I made it to the pond and the swampy, slick stones encircling it, and toppled onto my hands and knees. A sob ripped from my throat and I clenched my teeth.

I felt weak. I wasn't crying because of Peter Fisher's fate, but because I'd had another man do it for me. Little John did what I should have. I felt guilty for an entirely different reason by forcing blood on his hands.

Long minutes passed. The darkness in my vision swam away, replaced by a defeated, sorrowful sensation pulling at my heart.

I sat and scooted against the tallest boulder and put my back against it, facing away from the camp—hiding from the world—with my boots touching the edge of the still pond. A frog croaked nearby and jumped onto a lily pad in the water.

Moments later, heavy footsteps parted the rushes leading to the pond. A huge shadow loomed over me.

“May I sit here?”

I didn't look up at Little John. I stared at the silver reflection of the moon rippling on the surface of the water from the frog jumping in. I stared past the pond, to the dark trees beyond.

Then I gave a tiny nod.

With a groan, he plopped down next to me against the stone. Both of us hidden from prying eyes beyond.

The silence that dragged through the glade deafened me. I was worried he could hear my heart rattling in my chest. I was fixated on how dangerously close he sat next to me.

Finally, he spoke, in a slow, measured tone. His voice was deep, contemplative, bereft of the anger from minutes ago. “Men like Peter Fisher need to be punished, lass. As a warning to others. If nothing else, so they can’t harm other innocents. If it wasn’t me, it would have been someone else, likely years down the road. And how many more people would he have assaulted and hurt between now and then?”

I knew he was right. I was just shocked at the sheer violence of the lives these men lived. So different than my own back home.

I truly didn’t know if I *had* a home any longer, and that notion doubled my pain. I had been thrust into something unknown with these ruthless men. It was *still* admittedly better than what I’d had in Wilford.

What did that say about me? Were these men truly corrupting me ... or saving me?

“Sometimes I wish I had never come to Wilford,” I muttered to myself, shaking my head. “Maybe then I could have avoided all this misery. Though it wasn’t my choice, of course.”

He cocked his head. “You don’t hail from Wilford?”

“No. I was born in a little town called Loxley. There was no future for my family there—not in my mother’s opinion—so we came to Wilford when I was a child.”

He nodded slowly, mulling that over. An awkward silence dragged between us, and I stared down at the ground between my legs, ruffling the grass.

“I wanted to apologize, Robin,” John said, stealing my thoughts back to his baritone voice.

I glanced over.

His beard twitched when he pursed his lips. He sighed, heavy and crestfallen. “I met your father.”

My heart skipped a beat. “Oh.” I tried to act indifferent. “He’s a hard man to love, isn’t he?” I shook my head. “No matter what you learned, I don’t want your pity, John.”

“And you won’t have it.” He sounded stern, forceful. “I don’t pity you, little star, and I’ll never insult you by showering you with it. No. I admire you.”

My face whipped over to him fully. I was caught in the dark ocean of his eyes, the same color as the trees on the other side of the pond. “Admire me? For what?”

“For your resilience, resolve, and courage. For escaping and pushing forward. I take it your father didn’t want you near those carriages when they left Wilford?”

“No.”

A smile creased between his whiskers. “Yet you took matters into your own hands. Had you not, I never would have been graced by your presence.”

An incredulous snort popped out of my mouth. “You make it sound like it was fate that put me in the hands of the Merry Men.”

“Wasn’t it?” Little John asked, completely serious. “What else can you call this?”

“Dumb luck.”

Now it was his turn to scoff. “So you *don’t* hate us, then, if you call this lucky?”

“Okay. Dumb omen, then.” *Semantics*. “I’ll admit, the Merry Men are growing on me.”

“Good. Because I don’t plan on letting you go.”

I inhaled sharply. Cleared my throat, and it still cracked. “You would ... hold me prisoner forever?”

“No. You misunderstand. Your father will not part with his coin for your safe return, Robin. I’m sorry. But I won’t sell you to the highest bidder, either. In fact, I probably wouldn’t have sold you back to your own father, after meeting him.” He reached down and put his big hand on my knee. “You are free to leave anytime you wish. The moment you feel endangered around us, I’m begging you to leave. I hope you won’t feel that, however, because the Merry Men and I will protect you.”

He chuckled, rubbing his forehead with his palm. “Except I doubt you need our protection, either.”

I had been looking down at his hand the entire time, lightly settled on my knee as he spoke circles around himself. Now I craned my neck to look up into his face. “So ... what are you saying, Little John?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted with a bark of a laugh. “You have me twisted and tongue-tied. Have since I first met you. I haven’t felt this way in ... a long time.”

“Since the last girl you lost.”

His face hardened. “Who told you about that?”

“No one. It was a guess. Everyone here has lost something precious, it seems. Your guarded efforts around me tipped me off.”

He shook his head, squeezing my knee tighter. It did something unholy to my insides, and I resisted squirming. “You’re infuriatingly wise and perceptive for your age, girl. You know that?”

I smiled. When it faltered, I glanced away, back to the pond. “Apologies. I’m sure you don’t want to talk about it, so we don’t have to. We can just sit here in silence, enjoying the pond as we watch Peter Fisher’s blood trickle off your fingertips into the water.”

He eyed the hand opposite my knee. “Shit ...” he grumbled, then hid it by placing it behind him.

Another breathless pause passed between us. I wondered how long he was going to leave his hand on me. Did he even realize he was doing it?

“Answer my question,” he said abruptly, “and I’ll answer yours. Something your father said stuck with me, and I have to know.”

“Oh, fantastic,” I drawled.

“He said, ‘When we lost Robert, we lost her, too.’ It was the only sincere moment from him during our entire short conversation. That was your brother, I take it?”

“Yes.” My voice came out short and clipped. I’d never spoken about Robert to anyone. Not even my father or mother to any great degree—likely one of the reasons I had such a distant relationship with them.

“And that skull in the woods you seemed to be praying to when we first crossed paths ...”

“*Don’t tell him!*” Robert yelled in my mind. “*Keep your secrets, sister, or you’ll have no leverage against these bloodthirsty men. You’ll regret it.*”

I swallowed hard and bit my lip. Then I chuckled grimly, ignoring my brother’s warning, and realized what John was asking. “You think I would have any trouble gutting Peter Fisher if I was walking around with my dead brother’s *skull* in my backyard, Little John?”

His eyes widened.

“It was a symbol,” I explained, and then grew quieter and more withdrawn. “I, erm ... talk to him sometimes. Robert has kept me feeling safe, even when I’m at my worst. He protected me in my direst time, too, during Peter’s attack. That skull is the reason the squire was missing an eye.”

“Good lad,” John muttered.

“You don’t have to placate me, Little John. I know I’m mad.”

His hand shot out, grabbed my chin so quickly I didn’t have time to breathe, and tilted my face to look up at him. “You aren’t crazed, Robin. Believe me. I’ve held onto keepsakes much longer than I should have, simply so I could clutch to the memories of someone I loved for a bit longer.”

I wanted to kiss him, gazing into those dark pools. He could be so peaceful, yet so forceful at the same time. The way his finger delicately held my chin was a heady mixture that made me confused and aroused.

“Hell,” he continued, “we all have. Will Scarlet and his red sash? Alan and his lute? Tuck and his orphans? We do the things necessary to keep ourselves sane—to make sure our hearts don’t shatter completely—even if those things make us

look *insane* in the process. Trust me,” he finished with a nod, “I understand.”

Alan was considered the poet, the wordsmith, yet Little John was giving him a run for his money.

I smiled coyly. “I’ve answered your question,” I said, his finger falling from my chin. “So ...”

“Her name was Imogen.” He paused, studied the pond, and skipped a rock across its filmy surface. We both watched the stone hop, and the ripples it created.

“When I was a younger lad, many moons ago, I was a serf for an affluent estate. I was bound to the land, working off a debt. Imogen was the young heiress.”

Sounds familiar.

“She was a beautiful spirit. Just my dumb luck—or omen, as you said—but she fancied me.” He glanced over at me and smiled sadly. “If you’ve heard this story before, stop me.”

I understood the jest. It wasn’t an uncommon tale in fables, and it reminded me of my own circumstance. But I was mesmerized by him, rapt with attention.

He donned a faraway gaze, staring at the night sky. “Lady Imogen and I fell for each other. We were young and stupid.” His smile fell. “Her father caught us in the act, in the stable. I was whipped, of course, but he was angrier with Imogen. He beat her senseless for debasing herself with the help, sullyng her for the pool of suitors he’d arranged.” Little John’s teeth ground together. “She died of her wounds three days later.”

I let out a strangled sound. Before I knew what I was doing, I took his lingering hand in mine, threading our fingers together and squeezing. “Oh, John.”

“I went mad with rage and grief.” He bowed his head, closing his eyes. “The scars I bear on my body from Imogen’s death aren’t half as bad as the ones I bear on my heart.” He paused, composing himself by clearing his throat, and glanced over at me with cold malice in his eyes. “So I hanged the lord from the gable of his manse and burned down his estate and crops. Then I left. And I was made an outlaw.”

My eyes bulged as he finished the story so matter-of-factly. For a long while, neither of us spoke. We commiserated, and I found my finger rubbing over the knuckles of his large hand. With my palm in his, mine looked like a child's—soft, pale, spindly fingers compared to his scarred, tanned, thick ones.

“The baron of that estate was the brother of Sir George, the Sheriff of Nottingham,” he said at last. “I killed George’s brother and, in his mind, his niece.”

I sighed. “... Which is why the Sheriff’s huntsman, Guy of Gisborne, searches tirelessly for the Merry Men.”

A small nod.

More silence. For every question answered, two more seemed to sprout in its wake. My head spun.

So I tried to forget it all.

I murmured in a soft voice, “It seems we’re two wounded souls, swimming toward the same thing.”

“And what’s that, little star?”

“Hope.” I gazed into his eyes once more. “That there’s something else out there for us.”

He clicked his tongue. “Well, when everything is taken from you, all you can do is keep searching for new reasons to stay alive. New reasons to feel happiness. And, dare I say ... new reasons to love again.”

I blinked, lips parting. “And have you found ... new reasons, John?”

Our gazes locked. Mine, imploring. His, hungry.

Both of us searching.

Then he dipped his chin, grabbed the back of my neck, and pulled me in to kiss me.



Chapter 29

Robin



I could taste the fervor on John's lips. His towering presence became a shield—a barrier that protected me from all outsiders. Only we were allowed inside the bubble, and I grasped onto him with everything I had.

My hands instinctively fell on his brawny biceps when he wrapped his hand around the back of my neck and brought my face to his. His muscles felt so powerful and virile.

He claimed me with the kiss. Against all the alarm bells blaring in my head, telling me this was *wrong*, it felt so right to part my lips for this mammoth of a man and let him have me.

Our lips collided, our tongues danced. Our noses swiped, foreheads bumping in the night. I swallowed up the sound of his low groan, and it became a vibrating rumble in my mouth and throat.

Yes, we were two wounded souls. Peter Fisher's death had reopened the injuries that festered in both of us. We sought only feel and touch as a means to get away from it for a moment. As a way to explain to the other, without words, that we *understood*.

I'd never felt a kindred spirit with an outlaw before. A criminal capable of doing horrendous things. The closest person I'd had was my brother, and he was now quiet in my mind. Likely disapproving of what he saw.

I couldn't help it. I couldn't stop myself from biting John's lip until it drew blood. Moaning in his mouth as he palmed my chest and brought me closer to him.

When he moved his hand to the front of my neck, wrapping lightly around my throat, I pulled back slightly.

Strands of saliva stretched from our lips, connecting us.

My eyes looked into his brooding oceans. A tinge of fear swept through me, having that bear-sized paw on the thin, fragile column of my neck.

“Don’t fear, little star,” he whispered in the shell of my ear. “I won’t hurt you. Never that.”

I shivered, nodded. Then I leaned to his ear. “What if I want you to?” When his brow fluttered, I added, “What if I want you to break me, so I don’t have to be this person anymore? No longer an heiress, no longer a noblewoman. Just ... Robin.”

His voice became raspy. “Then I will gladly do what you wish, and ruin you.”

A smile quirked the corner of my lip. It brought something animalistic out of him. A guttural sound halfway between man and beast.

“Just know, little one,” he rumbled, “I’ve never been one to give up on a job. I can’t guarantee my ability to resist—to stop once I’ve started.”

My grin became wicked. “I’d expect nothing less, Little John.”

His hand tightened on my throat. The air squeezed out, past my lips, and he ravaged my mouth again with his, stealing the very breath from my lungs.

He pulled me onto him, and I looped my leg over his to straddle him. To bring him close. I wanted to be in his skin.

But Little John’s lap was too wide. I couldn’t get a good angle, so I ended up plopping down on a single knee, my legs resting on either side of his right thigh.

As I settled there and got comfortable, the pressure between my legs, caused by the friction of his knee against my slick heat, nearly forced a whimper from my lips. My eyes fluttered, and I saw the moment in his eyes when he realized what was happening.

John moved his knee, slowly at first. Rubbing my most sensitive area with his thigh and kneecap, between the fabrics of our clothes.

I pushed down on him, grinding my ass and cunt into his leg, while he choked the air from my throat and kissed me like he owned me.

My hands fell on his shoulders and squeezed, trying to find leverage to ride him. Without even penetrating me—without me playing with myself at all—his thigh did all the work and massaged my throbbing clit.

I hugged him when the sensation became too intense, wrapping my arms around his broad body, putting my forehead to his collar.

He returned the embrace, keeping me tight against him, letting me ride his leg and lose my mind. I was starting to unravel, seeing stars behind the lids of my clenched eyes as I lost air and the power to breathe.

Then his hand loosened, and with it came a whoosh of heady feelings—a river of lust and blinding light.

“Oh God,” I eked out against his chest, my voice muffled. “I-It’s coming, sir. *I’m* coming!”

The protrusion between his legs grew against my left thigh, even as my toes curled in my boots and I climaxed on his leg.

His hands fell under my arms to hold me up as I quivered from the orgasm. The little death, as they called it, because it was a sensation so explicit and unknown. It felt like traveling to a different plane of existence, if only for a few seconds.

When I blinked my eyes open, he was staring down at me, heat rolling off him in waves. I was damp between the legs, sticky when my ass lifted from his thigh.

“It’s not enough, little star. Not for you. That was too easy,” he told me. “You need something much harder to wrap your body around. Let me provide that for you. Let me show you the true meaning of pleasure.”

I nodded wordlessly, growing flustered. My cheeks burned and I licked my lips, eager but embarrassed. I glanced away from his delectable face. “I’ve never ... my maidenhead has never been stained by a man—”

“Shh,” he said, putting a finger to my lips. “It’s not a stain, my star. It’s a blessing.” He tilted my chin to stare into his eyes, two thick fingers pinching to pucker my lips. “If you wish, I can withstand. Difficult as it is when I stare into your beautiful face, we haven’t gotten far enough for me to—”

“No,” I said, strongly as I could. “I want it. Please. Give it to me. Show me what I’ve been missing all my life.”

A smile quirked his lips. “I must warn you, lass, once you start, you might never stop. There’s no going back. And I dare say you may become ... addicted.”

I leaned forward and kissed him. “Then turn me into an addict, you savage.”

My low words ignited the fire inside Little John’s powerful body. He grunted with a nod, continued to lift me by my sides, and settled me between his legs.

The man could hoist me and use me like I was his own personal doll. It made me feel filthy and excited.

My corruption was nearly complete, and I was begging for it. My hands roamed over his body, into his shirt, as he leaned back against the flat stone behind him.

My feet landed on the tops of his thighs, my knees bent, and I crouched on him, staring down as he felt around in his pants.

Little John heaved himself out of the tight, stretched confines. My breath hitched at the sight of him—the base of him thick and imposing. I helped pull his pants down as he shifted his weight.

When his pants went to his knees, his freed cock swung out like a catapult, swinging against his stomach with a loud, fleshy *slap*.

I gawked at the glistening head, a wide ridge that looked impossible to accommodate with any hole on my body. I knew what came next, but I was scared.

The man was massive. I'd already known that, but he was so much bigger than when I'd seen him soft and relaxed in the river. Now he was enormous and throbbing.

I quickly shimmied out of my clothes then balanced on his thighs, rising to the balls of my feet.

He guided me by my waist, hands wrapping around me. His fingertips nearly met in the middle. His palms fell to my hips, wider and billowing as I lowered, watching with a wide-eyed expression the whole time.

My wetness trickled onto the head of his giant cock and down the sides of his ridge like a volcano. My legs were parted, I was crouched on him, yet he was long enough to reach my aching entrance.

"You're going to be a good girl and take my cock, aren't you, little star?" he asked in a deep, dark voice.

I nodded diligently.

His cockhead pushed up into me, spreading my lips as he lowered me onto him. The whimper in my mouth became a long mewl. I continued to watch between my legs as I was stretched, stuffed, and filled.

"Christ save me," I gasped, my voice hoarse, "you're too big, John. Please, it's stretching me too wide!"

I didn't know what to do. Was I going to die? There was resistance. I'd never done this before. Having my first time be with someone so well-endowed started to make me doubt myself.

But Little John petted me softly, calming me with his soothing baritone voice that rumbled deep to my belly. "You can take it, lass. You're stronger than you think. Start slow, work your way onto it, and take your time."

"And what will you do?" I asked, his words encouraging me.

His eyes flared like embers. “I will watch you work, Robin. I will watch your beautiful body bounce on mine at your own speed.”

“Then what?”

“... And then I’ll take over. When you’re ready. I’ll take over, and I promise I won’t give you the benefit of deciding the pace.”

I gasped again. What a heathen. A pure barbarian, speaking to me like that. “You promise?”

I wanted it. So badly. The pain that began when his cock surged the first few inches into me was subsiding. My wetness made me able to slide lower onto his shaft. Not *too* low, because his size was ridiculous to comprehend, but enough that the pleasure won out.

And the pleasure *really* won out—shooting through me like spurts of lightning striking through my body. Hitting me in my deepest, most tender spots. Starting at my belly and roiling through me.

I felt my eyes roll when I had half of him hilted, and knew I could go no further.

“Yes,” he said, and I wasn’t sure how much time had passed, or what he was talking about. I was addled. “Yes, I promise to fuck you into a mindless mess, little star.”

My jaw dropped.

He bucked his hips—as a teaser—and his cock slammed inside me, stretching my tunnel even wider. My eyelids fluttered and I let out a sharp moan.

My hands shot out to hold onto his shoulders, as leverage. Then I started sliding up and down. Rising to Heaven and descending on his hellish cock.

I moved faster once I had him sheathed inside me with nowhere to go. It became fun, exciting, and a smile curved my lips. “Do you worst, sir. I dare you.”

“A dangerous game you play.”

My smile caught when he thrust up into me again.

A choked squeal left my throat.

His hands squeezed on my hips, taking control of my body, and he moved in earnest. It was a continuous hammer striking into me, impaling me on his iron, and there was nothing I could do but hold my body up and try to take it.

My thoughts stopped coming. I couldn't imagine anything other than the feeling of Little John's huge cock railing inside me, destroying me like I asked.

I would never be the same woman after this. The feeling was so sensational I knew he was right: I was going to get addicted to this. I already wanted to do it again.

Again, again, again, my mind screamed with every hard thrust of John's hips.

My calves shook. My toes curled on his knees, legs spread to make me look like a spider on him. Soon I was going to slide off. If *that* happened, I'd be at his mercy. His entire cock would likely hilt into me, down to his balls, and kill me.

So I stayed on him, trying to steady myself and ride the wave. It was nearly impossible.

My ass and thighs jiggled. He reached under my thighs, between my legs, and clutched my ass with both hands to guide me down onto him.

John was beginning to lose his grip, and I was beginning to lose my mind.

My moans became louder, heavier. My panting breaths ragged and shallow as my heart raced. The wetness of my cunt squelched with every vicious thrust from my savage captor.

Then he was throbbing, pulsing inside me. One of my hands came off his shoulder so I could rub my clit with mad abandon and lose myself to the tidal wave cresting below me, rising, rising, rising.

John ground his teeth together, growling through them: "I'm going to paint you with my cum, little star, so you never forget who you belong to."

“W-Who do I belong to?!” I wailed.

My voice was louder now, my moans incessant. I knew our torrid sounds were carrying past the barrier of the boulder and over to the rest of the camp.

Anyone who had ears could hear us.

“The Merry Men!” he yelled in my face, his speed escalating until my head was bobbing and the whole world was blurring around me. “You belong to the Merry Men ... and *ME!*”

The wave crashed, breaking the dam, and I screamed as I came. At the same time, he let out a roar and lifted me off his cock, holding me aloft in the air by the bottoms of my thighs like I was his trophy.

His cockhead expanded, his huge balls tightened, and white-hot cum shot from his widened slit, splattering onto my thighs, my belly, and as high as the low swell of my breasts.

I writhed in his grasp, unable to stop the intense climax that racked my body. It was torturous pleasure, and the fluids that squirted out of me coated the giant of a man, cascading down on him like a waterfall.

All he did was laugh—

And shove his face against my tender, yawning hole so he could feast on me and taste me and lick me clean.

His tongue was so intense that I came again. I rocked back in his huge palms, framed my legs on either side of his head and shoulders, and put my boots to the stone behind him so I could ground myself and didn't float away as he slurped up my nectar with unabashed frenzy.

When he pulled me away from him and set me down between his lap, his lips were glistening and he licked and smacked them together. “The most delectable honey I've ever tasted,” he said, smiling ravenously.

My eyes rimmed black, and I nearly passed out from the intensity of my double climax.

He brought me close, hugging me. “That’s a good girl. There we go. You did so well, little star. You took me so ...”

His voice faded away as he continued to pet me and I lost my way and drifted off in his strong, powerful chest.



Chapter 30

Robin



I could hear the gentle rhythm of Little John's heart against my cheek. I was enfolded in his arms, his claim on me still strong even though night had passed and a gray morning cut into my red-rimmed eyes.

We had both been out all night.

I felt relaxed. At peace. When I moved, I grimaced from an achy, sore body.

For some reason, I recalled Maid Marian's words from the river, when she told me about the control I had over these men. When she explained the things I would need to show to have "staying power."

Looking up into John's bearded face, I felt I had exhibited those things with aplomb. I smiled up at him and ran a gentle knuckle over his grizzled cheek.

His eyes fluttered open.

And Marian's other words came crashing down around me: "*Don't steal the Merry Men from me.*"

My smile faltered into a frown.

"What's wrong, little star?" John asked, voice gravelly. "Regretting your choice already?"

I tried to twist the frown into a smile. "Of course not. I feel like a whole new person."

"Is this new person someone you like?"

My brow stitched together. "I'm ... not sure yet."

He let out a hum and started to move his big body, which in turn moved me. He rose and lifted me with him, and then took me to the pond in front of us.

We sank to our knees and he began to wash the night—and himself—off my body. I closed my eyes and gave in to the chill of the water, waking me from my dazed sleep much quicker than I would have liked. My smile returned in earnest, my back to Little John, and he cared for me in that moment more than I thought possible from the big brute.

I wasn't sure if he'd broken me. Or if this new Robin was someone I liked. In fact, I wasn't sure of anything. Confusion rippled through me.

Robert's voice clawed at me. "*You've made a mistake, sister. You've undone yourself, opening yourself to pain and disappointment.*"

I believed him. In that moment, with John's rough hands caring for me, bathing me, showing me a side of him I hadn't known, I believed my brother.

Because I knew this couldn't last. The dreamlike morning was a fantasy. Once my logical mind returned, I saw this for what it was: a farce.

I'd fallen hard and quick. Little John and I had escaped into each other's warmth to avoid the dastardly things we'd done. The horrors we had to live with.

I remembered he had killed a man not ten minutes before coming to me. Before claiming me, he had gutted Peter Fisher before my eyes. The squire's blood still stained the backs of my thighs where John had held me aloft. Or was that *my* blood, from severing my maidenhood?

I was quiet as we bathed. We both were—lost in our thoughts. I wondered if his thoughts were cheerier; if he finally thought he had snagged me and found someone he could entrust and care for like he had with Imogen.

He'd told me he never loved a woman again after Imogen's terrible death years ago. *Is that still true?*

Abruptly, my heartbeat quickened. My lungs burned, and I felt panicked. The trees around the pond spun.

So I walked away. Out of Little John's reach, even as he coddled and washed me.

“Robin?” he asked in a queer tone. “Where are you going?”

I made it to the bank and kept walking, grabbing my clothes from the ground, quickly throwing them on. When I turned to him, leaving him looking stunning and confused with the water dripping from his body, I shook my head. “I don’t know,” I said. “I need to think. Get some air.” *Why do I feel so smothered suddenly?*

He opened his mouth to reply, but then closed it and nodded firmly. He didn’t try to talk me out of it. Instead, he let me go.

I had felt free coming to the forest. Even captured by the Merry Men, they had shown me things I never would have seen living my stale, mundane life in Wilford.

Now that I had rolled in the dirt with Little John, I wasn’t sure if that freedom still existed. *Could it be as short-lived as that? Have I sacrificed the liberty and self-realization I so desperately sought in exchange for protection and the lustful embrace of Little John?*

I didn’t want that. I hadn’t yet explored my new life enough to be tied down so quickly to a man. God above, I’d *never* been tied down to a man. Now I wasn’t sure I ever wanted to.

The regrets hit me hard and fast, as quickly as the morning sun began to burn through the gray clouds. At the camp, I caught eyes from the Merry Men—faceless people I didn’t know.

I searched around desperately for a familiar face.

And I found her when I glanced over to the carriage I once called my stowaway. Maid Marian was walking out of the carriage, readjusting her corset and dress. Dusting herself off with a sigh.

She didn’t see me watching her from the patch of wildflowers. She marched off in the opposite direction, through the trees toward another area of the campsite.

I furrowed my brow, following her in a haze. I had nothing better to do and—

Something bumped into my leg as I passed a fire. Jolting, I looked down to see a hand reaching up, offering a stick of salted meat. “Here, ma’am,” said the young man holding it, “sounded like you might be wanting this after the night you had.”

The other three men at the campfire snickered. I snatched the meat, voiced a humiliated thanks, and continued into the trees. I quietly ate the stick of jerky, which helped satiate my grumbling stomach.

Through the trees, I caught up to Marian, keeping a safe distance. She didn’t look back once. I walked around a few birch trees, finishing my sad meal, and came to a small glade surrounded by bushels of berries and undergrowth.

Will Scarlet stood shirtless in the center of the glade, swinging two swords in focused measures. He was a marvel to watch, adopting different stances, attacking invisible enemies until it seemed he had cut them down. His corded, sinewy muscles glistened with sweat. I found myself unblinking as he showed his stuff.

He had such a different build than Little John. Half the size and half the age. Curly-headed and youthful, with dark, fine features where John’s were broader. He was closer to my age than John, and the shape he kept himself in had me feeling slightly annoyed and envious.

All Will Scarlet had ever done was attack me and be a snarky little shit. I had *no* reason to fawn over him.

But as Maid Marian watched hidden from a tree in the glade, and I watched her from a further tree, a pang of jealousy ripped through me.

It was ridiculous. I almost scoffed from the incredulity of it all.

Once Will Scarlet finished a spin, slicing his swords in a blur, he stood to his full height with a deep breath that expanded his hairless chest.

Maid Marian lightly clapped.

Will's face swiveled to her.

She said, "My, but you *are* strapping, aren't you, boy?"

Will's perpetually scowling face deepened with an even worse frown. "I'm not a boy, whore."

Marian snorted. "And if you think that's all *I* am, then I suppose we're both wrong."

"What is it you need, Marian?" Will sheathed his swords.

I tucked myself away further behind the tree, to eavesdrop. I was somewhat of an expert at it, and I'd long ago stopped feeling guilty about it. If I wanted to learn who I was staying with, what better way than to listen to their conversations?

Marian's shoulders bobbed in a shrug. "Nothing from you, Will Scarlet. I was simply admiring the view as I passed through."

"Oh? Somehow I doubt that."

She laughed. "Why must you always see and attack enemies that aren't there? And I'm not talking about when you're practicing with your pretty little swords."

Will tilted his head. "I see enemies everywhere because it keeps me safe. If I let my guard down, I have a tendency to take a knife in the back."

"Like when the girl Robin threw one into your shoulder when the band was stealing her?"

Will scratched behind his neck.

"I heard about it from the others," Marian added, gesturing behind her.

I ducked away, feeling awkward now that the conversation had shifted to me.

Will said, "She didn't mean anything by it. She was only trying to protect her people, as we all are."

"Is that why you got so angry you wanted to run her through with your blades? Because it was an *accident*? The

way I hear it—”

“Yes, yes,” Will interjected, “I lost my temper and almost took her life. It’s what I do. I know everyone talks about it and shames me for it.”

“I wouldn’t shame you for it,” Marian said. “Anger is useful.”

“Not *all the time*.”

He was more self-aware than I’d previously known.

“True enough. But I’m sure I could find a way to lessen the rage. Find a way to ... settle your nerves?”

Will Scarlet frowned. “What are you asking of me, woman? Speak plainly.”

“I’m telling you to fuck me,” Marian drawled, putting her hands on her hips.

A pause. My heart hammered, though I couldn’t explain why.

“I’m not interested,” Will said. “Besides, Friar Tuck seems to have you rather tied up.”

Marian sighed. “Tuck hasn’t tied me up in many days now, sadly. You seemed *quite* interested just a week ago.”

“That was a week ago.”

“What’s changed since then?”

Will glanced away from her piercing gaze, saying nothing. *Is that a tint of pink to his cheeks?*

Marian took charge, dominant woman that she was. “I see. The girl has you wrapped up in her pretty cunt. Like everyone else in this godforsaken camp.”

I put a hand to my mouth to resist gasping and giving myself away.

“No one has me wrapped around them, Marian. Least of all that little thorn in my ass. She hates me. I prefer if she keeps it that way.”

My forehead creased with wrinkles. *What an odd thing to say. Why does he want me to hate him?*

“Aye, well, you can’t hide the flush of your cheeks when I mention her, either, boy. You can deny yourself all you want, but you can’t lie to me. I know the truth.”

“Will all due respect, Marian, I sincerely doubt you know much of anything, other than how to use what’s between your legs to your advantage.”

She laughed, high and mighty, and shook her head. “You’re an incorrigible, spiteful little child, Will Scarlet. I’ll take my leave of you, so you can practice”—she made a circular motion with her hand in front of her—“whatever the hell this is.”

“Much obliged, Maid Marian.”

With that, Marian shook her head, turned around, and headed toward the trees.

I ducked completely behind the trunk, hiding myself fully, and listened to her mutter to herself as she passed.

I wasn’t sure when or how it happened, but halfway through that dialogue my jealousy had dissipated and been replaced by ... a competitive spirit? The want for Will Scarlet to get one over on that hostile harlot?

It was hard to understand. My emotions were all over the place.

“You can come out now, little thorn.”

I froze, body tensing.

“Yes, you, Robin,” Will Scarlet called out. “Behind the tree.”

Cursing myself, I slowly poked my head out. I gave him a sickly smile.

He shook his head, not returning the smile. “You’re not half as sneaky as you think you are, girl.”

“You’re, uh, not the first to tell me that.”

“Why were you eavesdropping on me?”

I stepped out from behind the tree and fidgeted in front of my belly, ashamed and embarrassed. “I don’t know,” I said, hanging my head. “Curiosity, I suppose.”

I couldn’t look at his bare chest. Not in my disheveled, rattled state. *By God, John was right. I’m becoming addicted to this feeling! That didn’t take long at all.* I wondered how I could stopper it. At least for a while.

Will folded his arms over his chest. He examined me, and it made me uncomfortable. “Does Little John think he can keep you all to himself?”

With a gasp, my eyes darted up to his. “Why would you say such a thing?”

He smirked, and it only humiliated me more. “I don’t know. Curiosity, I suppose.”

I let out a huff of exasperation at his mocking banter. “Maid Marian was right about one thing, sir: You are incorrigible.”

“I get that a lot.” He stepped toward me, and my initial reaction was to backpedal. To flee.

But I didn’t. I stood my ground. I felt like it was something Marian would tell me to do—to fight back from his advances, because once he knew I was scared of him, he could do anything to me.

Will Scarlet circled me like a wolf.

I stayed unmoving, staring straight ahead, hands clasped in front of my belly. Inside, I was shivering and nervous, but outside I tried to act strong.

This man was entirely too unpredictable to feel safe around. There wasn’t anyone else near to hear us, which frightened me.

“We share in this community, little thorn,” he said. “John knows that better than anyone, because he never partakes. Until you.”

“Until me?”

“Everyone in camp heard you two frolicking last night. A bit perverted, aren’t you, fucking the leader of the gang a few scant minutes after he killed that sad squire boy?”

“You mean the squire *you* brought here?”

He shrugged. “We don’t let others harm our property. You know that.”

“I’ve told you, dammit, I’m no one’s prop—”

“Tell it to Little John. I’m not interested in your reluctance to accept your place.”

I swallowed hard. Steeled myself. “What are you interested in, then?”

“You. Seeing what’s underneath.”

I let out an exasperated breath. My middle was growing hot again. I felt betrayed, having this happen in this spoiled man’s presence. “You said you want me to hate you.”

He made another round in front of me. “That way I don’t have to think about you. If you’re repulsed by me, you’re not an option.”

“Do you hate *me*, Will Scarlet?”

He paused in front of me, tilting his head. Pursed his lips. “I want to fuck you like I hate you.”

My cheeks flushed, yet I continued to feel confident against his brazen, outlandish words. “Who says I would ever stoop so low to be with a man like you?” I snarled, my voice firm. “You’re angry and mean. Callous. You tore my clothes from my body!”

“And you loved it.” His voice came from behind me.

I spun around to confront him, my jaw dropping. “Don’t say that! Don’t pretend to know me.”

His smile widened. “I know you’re not the innocent highborn princess you want everyone to believe you are. You have a dark side, little thorn. Like the rest of us. You wanted

Peter Fisher dead more than any of us did. Otherwise you wouldn't have lied about him putting that bruise on your face. You knew how to get us to react. You exploited John's gallantry and valor to get what you wanted."

My head reeled. I stuttered, opening and closing my mouth, trying to respond. But every response was a reaction, and I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing me flounder. Plus, he wasn't entirely wrong. I wasn't sure how to voice that without betraying myself.

I *had* wanted Peter Fisher dead.

I'd imagined his blood on my hands in that moment, though, and realized I wasn't a killer. I wasn't able to do it because I wasn't strong enough.

Will Scarlet stepped close to me. His presence was an invasion of my space, yet I suddenly yearned for him to be near me. I couldn't help but think, *Last night really changed me.*

"What are you doing?" I demanded, slowly scooting back to find my footing.

Just like he wanted. A sheep to a wolf, giving him the headway to advance on me. Just like I'd resisted doing in the beginning. Now I couldn't keep up my posturing, my unbothered attitude, any longer.

Yes, this young man scared me. But he also enticed me. The way he talked about me to Maid Marian—defending my honor, even. The fact he apparently hadn't slept with another woman since I'd shown up? What was that about?

"Studying you," he answered.

He saw fear in my eyes. I knew that, because I saw perverse satisfaction in his, gleaming in those gray-brown orbs.

He saw fear ... so I would turn it on him. Because it was how I could protect myself—projecting—and keep the shell around my vulnerability intact.

“Maybe you’re right,” I said. “Maybe I am as depraved as the lot of you.”

That caught him off-guard. His superior smirk faltered. His eyes narrowed.

Then he frowned, relegated back to his sullen self. No longer holding the high ground. His hand snapped out and he took my wrist, clenching it tight.

I resisted yelping—again to play the game and not give him the satisfaction of seeing me whimper.

I said, “What in the world, Will—”

“Come with me, little thorn.” His throaty voice brooked no argument. “I have an errand to run. You want to know why I am the way I am? Then observe, and don’t close your fucking eyes, princess.”



Chapter 31

Robin



Will Scarlet brought me to the main camp. The low din of conversation and the crack of axes cutting through timber filled the space as morning began in earnest.

My family's carriage was nowhere to be seen, which I found odd. It had just been there when I followed Marian into the grove to spy on Will Scarlet.

Maid Marian was also strangely vacant.

In the carriage's place, near the divots of the wheels, stood Little John. He was caught in a conversation with Alan-a-Dale.

Will stopped by his tent, throwing on a tunic, a suit of worn leather, and wrapping his red sash around his neck. It was sad to see his beautiful body hidden under the garments.

Then he beelined for the two men at the carriage site. "I'm taking the girl into Ravenshead."

Little John glanced at me, frowning. "Is that what you want, Robin?"

Will scoffed. "Since when do we ask our captives what they want?"

John's eyes narrowed on the shorter man.

These two were always at each other's throats. I was curious to know why.

Will's mention of Ravenshead made my ears perk up. My family had passed near the hamlet on our ill-fated trip to find the healer, Wulfric, in Barnsdale. I knew of the village but had never stepped foot inside. It gave me a clue where we were located: northeast of Nottingham.

I inserted myself before their argument could begin. “It’s fine, Little John. I’m all right to go.”

There was a tinge of hurt splayed across Little John’s face. He didn’t appear to hold my vanishing act from earlier this morning against me, which was good. *Not anger. Disappointment, perhaps.* Maybe he understood I needed to get my mind right before I threw both feet into the fire.

“Very well,” he said, nodding curtly. “Alan, go with them.”

Will rolled his eyes. “We don’t need a watch hound—”

“It wasn’t a request,” John snapped. “I won’t leave you alone with her. We know how you can get.”

I bit my lip, anxiety running through me.

Alan said, “Enchanted. I’ve not spent enough time with our little songbird.”

“You spent all day yesterday hunting with her,” Will pointed out.

“And it was not enough time.”

I gestured where he and John stood. “Where’s my family’s carriage?”

“Friar Tuck took it to scout our next location,” Little John said. “Then to Nottingham to look after the almshouse.”

“I urged him not to go,” Alan added, shaking his head. “What with everything going on right now.”

I assumed he meant with Sir Guy of Gisborne seemingly on our trail. “I find it admirable.”

“Aye. Admirable. And stupid. He cares for those whelps more than he does his own life.”

I smiled at that. Alan-a-Dale couldn’t convince me Tuck was not a good man. Reckless, perhaps, but that only reminded me of myself.

We agreed to return by nightfall, because John was planning another move later this evening under the cover of

darkness. He said the Merry Men had to keep rotating their base of operation to stay one step ahead of Guy.

It made sense to me.

As we left camp, heading east through the thinning forest, I found myself wondering about our pursuer. And about my place in his pursuit. With Alan and Will flanking me on either side of the trail, I asked the angrier man, “Do you practice with those swords so zealously every morning?”

Will nodded. “It’s routine.”

“Why?”

“That’s a silly question, little thorn. To help defend the Merry Men.”

“From people like Sir Guy of Gisborne?”

“Precisely.”

Alan smiled wistfully. “Our resident wildman is nothing if not dedicated.”

I chuckled. It faltered when I recalled my heartfelt conversation with John last night. “I learned why Sir Guy is after the Merry Men.”

“Oh?” Will chirped, sounding disinterested.

“Little John said it’s his fault.”

“We don’t fault him for it.”

“You seem to fault him for quite a lot, Will Scarlet.”

Annoyance flashed across his face. “He’s not the same man he once was.”

Alan said, “That’s not fair, lad.”

“Why is he not the same?” I asked. “Because he’s more caring than you? Do you think that makes him weak?”

I wanted to get to the bottom of Will’s disagreements with the de facto leader of the Merry Men. I wasn’t sure why, but it hurt to see them close to punches every time they spoke to one another.

Will stopped walking, which stopped me and Alan alongside him. “Little John is the strongest man I know,” he announced. “I’m not talking about his size or physical strength. In recent years, however, he’s seemed despondent.” He continued walking through the woods, and I shuffled to keep up. “... Until you showed up.”

A thrill of desire swelled in my belly. I didn’t know what to say, so we continued, past the birch trees, over a small creek, and alongside a swooping cliffside.

I thought about the mysterious man known as Sir Guy of Gisborne. The Sheriff of Nottingham’s lackey, as John had put it. I wondered why I was so curious about him, or Will and John’s relationship—*any* of it, honestly.

“*These are not your affairs to meddle in,*” Robert said, and I had to agree.

Why would I conflate my own problems with the Merry Men’s? Our issues were entirely separate. If anything, this Guy of Gisborne could help me. So why did I see him as an enemy?

He was the enemy of my captors, which meant I should consider him a friend. And yet, I didn’t. His ominous purpose in these woods frightened me.

A thought crossed my mind, dark and foreboding.

Could the Merry Men be purposefully distracting me with everything? The river, the sewing, the hunting, the sex? The camaraderie and sad stories of where these men came from?

I hadn’t thought to question them on Uncle Gregory’s disappearance in awhile. Shamefully, I hadn’t even *thought* about him.

That worried me. It added to the confusion and made my entire existence here more convoluted.

Another reason I can’t stay, even if I wanted, I thought. I’m too curious and hesitant to trust these men. At the end of the day, they are my captors. If up to them, I’d be getting shipped back to Nottingham with Tuck’s textiles, if it meant he returned with a fat purse jangling from his hip.

But John had said something different. He told me he wouldn't have sold me back to Father even if the price was right, after speaking with him.

God, it's all so baffling!

"Get a hold of yourself, sister. Keep your wits about you with the Merry Men, lest you fall into an even deeper pit of sin."

"Here we are," Will said.

I looked up from the ground, brought back from my wandering thoughts. We were cresting a small hill, and on the other side of it was a sloping landscape surrounded by trees, humans, and life. Small hovels and some sturdy cabins sat in the wide expanse beyond.

Ravenshead. A village hidden in Sherwood Forest. One of many. This huge forested territory was littered by small hamlets like this one.

Before we walked in, Will took my arm. "Remember what I said, little thorn."

I nodded. "Watch and keep my eyes open."

"Good girl."

With that sendoff, he strode down the hill.

People watched us arrive through the thickets. They were like any other people I'd seen in Nottingham—poor, dressed in tattered clothes, grimy from years of hard labor. In this case, living in the wilderness.

A large wooden priory sat in the middle of the village. Small houses and hovels surrounded it, with makeshift walkways and trails between them. Some merchants had brought in carts to sell their wares. Men bartered near the carts, the voices loud and boisterous.

The soil here was sandy and grainy. I saw no sign of any crops growing—not that Ravenshead was large enough to set up fields to begin with. It seemed this place operated on trade, importing, and some exporting.

I saw what their export was soon enough—smelled it in the air and heard it buzzing under every shady tree we passed under.

Beehives. Dozens of them. Wherever I squinted hard enough, I could see them and their droves of yellow bees swarming nearby.

It made for a precarious trek through the village.

“What are we doing here?” Alan asked Will.

Will snorted. “Don’t play dumb, dandelion. I’ve heard word that it’s gotten worse.”

The minstrel flared his nostrils but didn’t respond.

What’s gotten worse? I hated being kept in the dark. I was certainly curious.

Scooting up to Will, I asked in a whisper, “Why do you call Alan that?”

He hummed. “Dandelion? Because he has the heart of a lion, despite having the character of a dandy.”

A small smile came to my lips, but he continued scowling, trudging through the main road. People stepped out of his way as he held his head high. They gave him wary glances, whispering to one another.

I was worried—wondering if Will saw the reaction of the peasantry to his arrival. It was clear these people knew him, judging by the looks we were getting.

They were not *friendly* looks, by any means.

He brought us to a small cabin on a plot of land near the outskirts of the village. Though small, it was bigger than most of the hovels. A honey farm buzzed with activity off to the side of the cabin. Two men in masks worked it, digging for sweet nectar in the rows of hives.

Will went to the door and opened it without knocking. Alan and I stayed outside, and I peered in.

“Father, I’ve come,” Will said. His voice went lower, softer. It was the first time I’d heard such a pitch change in the

young man.

“Meredith?” came a strained voice from another room. “My sweet, is that you?”

Will sighed as a hunched old man shuffled into the main room. He had a wrinkled face and stringy white hair pointed at all ends. The elder was disheveled and looked confused, his eyes gray and wet.

“No, Pa, it’s your son. Will Scarlet.”

The man’s face twisted with a scowl, more wrinkles stretching across his cheeks as his nose flared. “Scarlet?” he spat. “I have no son with—”

Will put a hand on the man’s shoulder. Gently. He bent lower to speak eye to eye with him. “It’s William, Father.”

The old man stopped. He rubbed his hands together and his face lit up. “Ah! My son!”

He fell into Will’s embrace. My heart hurt to see it. The man was clearly addled. God-touched, struggling to retain his mind.

“Do you remember, Pa?” Will asked softly, taking the elder man by the arm to a small table so they could sit. “You called for me.”

“Aye. It’s been years since I’ve laid eyes on my boy.”

“Father, I was here not two months ago.”

“Oh?” The old man’s face sank. “Oh. You know how I get, son.”

“Aye,” Will said, patting his father’s back. “Aye, I do. What is going on here? Is trade thriving?”

His father’s face twisted angrily, and I saw a hint of Will in that mien. “It’s the Barnaby twins, William. They’re out to get me. Keep stealing my honey!”

Will leaned back in his seat. The softness on his face—which was a revelation to me—slowly evaporated. “Is that so ...” he muttered, stroking his chin. Then he tossed a thumb

over his shoulder. “The workers you have in the field right now?”

Will’s father nodded. He gained that faraway stare in his eyes again. Blank, unfocused. He turned to Will. “Boy, are you my guest?”

Will stood from his chair. “Aye, Pa. I am. And I’m going to make things right.” With that, he strode out of the house, through a side exit.

Alan and I hustled around the other side of the house. Will was already yelling at the two men who worked the hives. They were masked, but I could see in their body language that they were indeed twins.

I could also see they were scared.

Will drew one of his swords and pointed it at the men. “Pa says you’re taking advantage of him, Michael. What have you to say about that?”

The man pulled down his mask and raised his hands. “Lies, Will Younger. He accuses us fortnightly, yet always calls us back to work his hives!”

“We’re the two best in Ravenshead,” his brother said, advancing on Will.

Will drew his other sword. “Not a step closer, Paul. I have one for each of you. Why would my father make up lies?”

“Because he’s mad, boy. Why else? He’s losing his mind. Everyone in the village knows it.”

Alan and I watched with worried glances. Knowing Will Scarlet, this could get out of hand in a hurry.

I saw Alan’s hand inch toward his hip, where he kept a small sword. He slid the bow from his shoulder and handed it to me, along with two arrows.

Two arrows for three men. Clearly not enough, if Will got rowdy.

We stood in a patch of tall grass around the side of the cabin. The tension was as thick as the sweet smell on the air.

“Everyone knows it,” Will echoed, “so they take advantage of his beleaguered state, do they?”

In that moment, I saw Will Scarlet as more of an enforcer than a son. He wanted to do right by his elderly, ailing father, yet he couldn't contain himself.

This was why Little John had told Alan to join us. Not because he was worried what Will might do to me, but because he knew what Will might do to others.

William Elder stepped out the side door of his cabin. He thrust a shaky finger at the workers. “Thieves! Pinchers! Get off my land, curs, or I'll set my knight-errant on you!”

“Knight-errant?” Michael scoffed. He threw down his gloves. “Rich, calling us thieves. Coming from a Merry Man.”

Will took a step toward him. “Say it again.”

Paul pulled his brother's arm, trying to keep him back. “It's not worth it, Michael. Let's just go.”

I didn't know who to believe, and it wasn't my place to speculate.

Then Alan hummed.

I quirked my brow and saw him looking at the ground through the grass. “What is it?”

He bent down, disappearing near the lower slats of William Elder's house. He lifted something that had been tucked away in the grass. When he stood, he clicked his tongue, shaking a small clay jug. Taking the lid off, he inhaled loudly. “Smells sweet.”

My eyes widened.

Will and the twins turned to us.

“Fuck,” Michael said.

Will gave them a sinister grin that chilled me to the bone. “Funny place to be finding a pot of honey, isn't it, Alan-a-Dale?”

“Sure is, Will Scarlet.”

My heart raced. I saw disaster flashing before my eyes—so I rushed forward, even as Will did the same to the twins with his swords drawn.

“Wait!” I yelled. Over my shoulder, other citizens of Ravenshead watched the goings-on, muttering to each other.

This was a bad look.

Will pulled his arm back to thrust at one of the men.

I looped my arm in his, holding him back. “Hold, Will! Please.”

He growled, bared his teeth, and tried to shrug me off. “They’re proven thieves, little thorn. Get off!”

Alan ran up, looking past us. “You twins had best vacate the premises. And don’t come back.”

The Barnabys turned and fled, boots flattening the grass.

Will shoved me away. “What the *fuck* was that?” His swords shook in his hands, his anger palpable.

I looked from him, to his father, to Alan. Then to the jar. “Bloodshed won’t get you what you want, Will.”

“She’s right,” Alan said. “It will only make exporting your father’s goods more difficult. You might not want to see it, but you can’t deny it.”

The peasants watching the scene were starting to disperse. They had hoped for blood, or at least a brawl, and were disappointed.

“Now you’ve told every person here that it’s all right to exploit and cheat my father,” Will said, throwing his arm out wide. “You fucking fools.”

“No,” I said. I grabbed his face in my hands, trying to regain control of him. My heart raced when I stared into his dark eyes. I saw an inferno in them. “We’ve shown that your father is to be respected. You kill those men, he’ll never get the help he needs. It sets a precedent. People here don’t watch you because they love you, Will. They do it because they fear

you. If you get them *on your side*, your father's business will flourish."

I knew this from years of working with my mother. Mama Joan taught me that finding help was easy, but finding *good* help was not.

Moments later, two men walked up to us. They'd been watching the altercation. "We'll work for William Elder," one of them said. "He's a fixture in Ravenshead. Least we could do in his ailing years. Don't want his years of dedication and hard work to be in vain, aye?"

The other one thrust his chin toward Will. "Long as you aren't gonna be here to oversee."

Will's jaw clamped shut, still angry. The shadow over his face slowly vanished. "As long as you're honest, I have no reason to regulate."

"Honest as they come, sir," the first man said, thumping his chest with a fist. "Just ask anyone in town. The Barnabys work for cheap because they're swindlers at heart. Untrustworthy lot, that whole family."

Will scoffed. He turned away, clearly still conflicted about what was happening. He asked his father in the doorway, "What do you think, Pa?"

The old man blinked. He had that distant gaze, and had probably forgotten what was happening.

Finally, Will Scarlet looked to me. His eyes scrutinizing and narrowing. He gave me a tiny nod, sheathed his swords, and turned away.

I smiled at the two men offering their labor.

"When can you start, gentlemen?"



Chapter 32

Robin



“If you’re expecting thanks for what you did back there, keep expecting,” Will chided. “That goes for both of you.”

Alan and I glanced at each other and smirked. We knew we’d done well for Will’s father, even if his angry son didn’t want to admit it.

I felt good about myself for helping stop unnecessary bloodshed. Did the Barnaby twins deserve punishment for what they’d done to that poor old man, stealing his honey right from under his nose? Of course they did.

But Will Scarlet wasn’t a judge or executioner. He couldn’t go around killing every person who offended him. *Probably how he got in this outlaw mess in the first place.*

“Hoy,” Alan said, “this girl just rescued you from making a bigger shit-storm than you already were. Think of the band. We don’t need those eyes scrutinizing us.”

“I’ll gladly spill blood for my family, Alan-a-Dale. You know that.”

“Aye. That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Will’s family values surprised me. He’d shown more tenderness and patience with his ailing father than I thought possible from him. I began reappraising my opinion about him while we made our way back to camp and the sun fell around us.

What I was *not* surprised about was his penchant for violence. His bloodthirstiness. He had told me to keep my eyes open to see why he was the way he was. I’d done that and was

no closer to understanding his violent short temper. He still had some explaining to do to get on my good side.

As we retraced our steps, a chill breeze moaned through the trees. The leaves shivered around us. I felt foreboding dread, eyes darting around, thinking I was seeing shadows on the outskirts of the trail.

Will and Alan became quiet, leading me to believe they felt the same thing.

“Hold,” Will whispered after an hour of trekking. He crouched, parted some crushed leaves and sprigs from the ground, and studied a boot print stamped in the dirt. He looked over his shoulder. “This one isn’t ours.”

The chill on my skin dug deep, wrapping around my bones. I hugged myself and my stomach dropped. “What does that mean?”

He only gave me a frown as an answer.

Then he was on his feet, dashing off the trail.

I gasped, shared a worried look with Alan, and we rushed after him, neither of us wanting to be left behind.

We pushed through foliage and thick undergrowth off the path. I nearly tripped over a root and Alan caught my arm. Will scurried through the forest like a sly fox.

White puffs showed with every breath. My lungs burned from running. The thin silver birches gave way to thick oak with gnarled, overlapping branches, making it harder to follow our comrade. Needles from pines stabbed me and broad canopies from beeches obscured my vision. I was losing him, losing my sense of direction from the blurring trees and setting sun—

And then he stopped up ahead. Froze still, put up his fist so we wouldn’t come crashing through the flora.

Will crouched behind a copse of pines and peered over an outlook—the lip of a small hillock that sloped dramatically down to the forest floor. Even before I arrived next to him, I saw the thin tendril of smoke rising up to our perch.

We gazed down at the tops of three heads settled around a campfire. Meat sizzled in the flames. The men wore tough leather armor—black—helping them blend into the dark green surroundings.

I held my breath. Will and Alan said nothing as we watched.

Their voices were too low to hear from our vantage.

After watching the men for a few minutes, Will nodded to us and we slowly backed away. This time he moved more cautiously, like a hunter on the prowl. His voice was a whisper on the wind. “Those were scouts.”

“Not a thousand feet from our camp,” Alan said.

“We must warn the others and be on the move, swiftly,” Will said.

“Little John already said he planned to move the group during nightfall,” I added.

Will grunted. “Then let’s hope they’re ready upon our return.”

We all agreed, and made our way back to the trail that led in the direction we needed to be going. We rounded a twisting part of the road, Will in the lead—

And he nearly ran into a person coming the opposite way.

For a moment, their dark eyes locked together, growing wide. They were five feet from one another. The world seemed to stand still.

A stranger in black armor. A hood over his head. A scar on his face. Heading toward the group at the fire, and away from our camp.

“Fuck!” the man yelled.

What happened next was a flurry of limbs and movement. The man fumbled with the sword at his waist and the shield on his back. Will drew his swords out in an X, much quicker than the scout.

The man’s shield came out before his sword.

Will batted it away with a quick flick of his wrist, lunging at his opponent. Sparks flew and the man dropped the weighty thing on the ground while backpedaling.

Fear settled in the scout's eyes and he turned and ran before his sword was halfway out its scabbard.

Will Scarlet gave chase without thinking twice.

“Will!” I shouted into the whipping wind.

Alan and I ran after him.

Will was a phantom in the forest. He seemed to know every inch and heartbeat of this place, yet he had gotten distracted by the men at the fire and missed this last one, so badly that they almost ran into each other.

Now Will ran him down.

I let out a groan as Will sprinted to the man, leaped into the air, and buried his blade into the scout's back.

They both fell forward—the scout with a strangled cry. Blood sprayed across a branch hanging over the trail.

Will dropped a sword, climbed atop him on his hands and knees, and straddled his hips.

Then he lifted the sword out of the shallow wound, grabbing the hilt with both hands as the scout struggled and scabbled for purchase with his hands, trying to crawl forward.

Will growled and brought his blade high.

I clenched my eyes shut and spun away.

I heard the gruesome sounds of steel punching through bone and spine. The splatter of wet blood. The choked cry of a dying man.

Alan hugged me close, and when I looked up from under his arm I saw Will Scarlet struggling to haul his sword out of the dead man's back. It took effort to yank it out after stabbing so deep.

A pool of blood circled the man, arms and legs flung out wildly.

“Help me with him,” Will grunted when he faced us. He wiped the blood off his sword, picked up the other one on the ground, and sheathed them.

Alan-a-Dale sighed, went to the man’s legs, and hoisted him up while Will grabbed his arms.

They carried him off the trail and threw him into a shallow ravine.

I watched with unblinking eyes as the two Merry Men committed murder and then disposed of the evidence—at least long enough to make it difficult for the other scouts in his party to find him.

Yes, I thought, swallowing over a parched throat, Will Scarlet certainly has a lot to show me before I’m convinced he’s on the right side.



Chapter 33

Robin



At camp, the Merry Men were on the move even before Will Scarlet warned them Sir Guy of Gisborne's scouts had been spotted *very* close to our location.

He left out the bit about stabbing the scout in the back in cold blood.

Men packed up tents and supplies. They swept away footprints and covered our tracks with undergrowth.

Friar Tuck had returned from Nottingham. He told Little John he planned to return tomorrow, to sell the rest of the textiles he hadn't gifted to the children in the orphanage.

Men grumbled about something. They acted sour, and I caught more than a few eyes in my direction.

I went to Little John to figure it out. "What is going on?" I asked in a hushed voice, standing next to the carriage while he inspected the clearing of the camp.

"A few Merry Men voiced their disgruntled opinions on what their leadership has been doing," he said. His gaze darted over to a fire being stamped out.

"You mean ... you?"

"Aye. And Will, Tuck, and Alan. They're concerned we're exposing ourselves by going into Nottingham and other villages to do our work. Even though it's always been our way, to see to our families."

"Then there's something else bothering them."

"Yes, there is," said a gruff voice behind me.

We spun to find a tall man I recognized, arms folded over his barrel chest, shoulder-length locks whipping in the wind.

He was nearly as large as Little John, and that was saying something.

I recalled his name as Brandon, but the Merry Men called him Stump because of his stout, tree-like stature.

He scowled at John, thrust a finger at me. “Let’s not honeycoat it, eh, boss? The four of you are lost to this girl—our prisoner—and putting the rest of us in danger with your antics.”

Will Scarlet noticed the argument and sauntered over to listen, placing himself to my right, while Little John took my left. Despite Stump’s anger, I felt safe with the two of them around.

“It’s one thing to want to pry her cunt open and enjoy what’s inside—”

“Careful, Brandon,” Little John said. Calling him by his real name was as much of a threat as anything.

Stump flared his nostrils. A few others joined the fracas—this time on his side. He started over, speaking louder so everyone in camp could hear. “Bringing the half-dead squire here was foolhardy and stupid. All it did was invite the law to our doorstep.” He jabbed his thumb into his own chest. “A man like us goes missing? It’s buried under the rug. But a noble-born brat like him? Or *her*?” His chin nudged in my direction. “It’s careless.”

It was hard to argue against what he was saying.

I feared the worst. The voices behind Stump grumbled, getting louder, their faces growing angrier.

Then I felt bodies behind me, heat washing in from all directions. Friar Tuck and Alan-a-Dale joined Will, John, and me.

My racing heart slowed. For the first time, ensconced by the four gang leaders, I felt completely protected. Shielded from whatever might happen here.

Tensions were high.

Stump pointed at each man in turn, skipping over me. “Little John, you are our tactician. We rely on your expertise in the forest. Will Scarlet, you are our brawn. Angry and short as you might be, nobody doubts your bravery or strength. Friar Tuck, you are our heart. We need to remember why we do the things we do—*who* we do it for. Alan-a-Dale, you are our soul, providing entertainment and high spirits when we’re at our lowest. You are integral men to our operation.”

My heart fluttered. *But ...*

“But who is our fucking *brain*, eh? We’ve cheated death more than we deserve. How long will our luck last without a plan?”

Loud voices agreed with Brandon Stump.

Even *I* did, to some degree. The problem was, I knew where this was all going—who was going to be blamed for their lapse in judgment.

The one lady in the group. The new girl.

Little John stepped forward. He was never one to shy away from conflict, from what I’d seen, and he wasn’t about to start now.

He set his broad body in front of me. “Is this a coup, old friend? A challenge?”

Stump’s head shot back with confusion. “Hrm? No—”

“Do you think you could lead the Merry Men better, son?”

Stump opened his mouth to say something. It stayed open for a long time, and then he seemed to think better of it and shook his head slowly. “No, boss. I don’t. I just want to know what we’re doing. We all deserve that.”

“We’re trying to stay out of harm’s way, men,” Little John said loudly. “If we’ve not been meeting you on that promise, then I am sorry.” He stepped away from our group to speak to the rest of the Merry Men. “Our way of life requires high risk for high rewards. We all know that. We can only do so much to avoid the authorities.”

Little John paced in front of the dozen other men, who stared at him with various degrees of curiosity, anger, and questions.

I soon saw what made him the leader of the Merry Men.

“Chance, you could go back to being a farmer, right?” he asked, pointing at a short man with reddish hair and big teeth.

Chance bowed his head. “Nay, sir. You know the score. Mama won’t take me back after I stole our neighbor’s cattle. Calls me a disgrace.”

Little John grunted and moved onto another man, pointing with his beard. “How about you, Benny? Can you reclaim your land, open your blacksmithing shop?”

“Not after the Plantagenet scum burned it down to make way for their own smithy. I haven’t the coin to do it, boss. You know that.”

“Aye, I do.” Little John cleared his throat and studied his soldiers. “I know the histories of every one of you. I know you like brothers. We didn’t *choose* this life, lads, we were forced into it. And the authorities, the nobility, they make our lives as hard as possible. It’s always been that way.”

“Then why make it easier for ‘em by holding one of their own hostage?” Stump asked.

“Because she is leverage, mate—”

“She’s more than that.”

I spun to the voice with a sharp inhale.

Will Scarlet strode forward, a scowl on his face. He swept a hand to me. “Robin of Wilford is the only reason there wasn’t bloodshed today in Ravenshead, men. She controlled me ... against my wishes.”

A smattering of chuckles broke through the crowd.

My heart soared at Will’s announcement. Especially after saying I wasn’t going to earn his thanks for today, this was even better, more heartfelt. He’d stood up for me. Never in my wildest dreams—

“Aye, and she’s a better shot than me with a bow,” Alan-a-Dale chirped. “Caught us our supper last eve.”

“That’s not saying much, minstrel,” Stump said with a low laugh. Others joined in.

Alan smiled. “True enough. I’d wager she’s a finer shot than any of you sorry bastards, too.”

That drew a unified, incredulous gasp.

Friar Tuck said, “She helped move a needle when I needed hands, which provided countless younglings with better clothes on their backs. Could anyone here have sewn a dress?”

That shut the gasps down. The men looked around shamelessly, some of them finding interesting things to look at on the ground.

Little John nodded along. “Aye, I misspoke. We aren’t holding Robin because she’s leverage against the Sheriff or anyone else, or even because she’s an asset. Most importantly, men, she *wants to be here*.”

He spun on me, eyes imploring. Painting me a target.

My body tensed.

“Her life hasn’t been all fluffed pillows and silver platters, lads. She’s earned her place with the Merry Men ... if she wants it.”

My lips and throat were dry. I tried swallowing anyway. My eyes darted around the crowd, begging for an answer to come to me.

“*Don’t do it, sister*,” Robert warned me.

I chewed my lip incessantly.

“Little thorn?” Will blurted.

I nodded once, twice, thrice. My voice came out shaky. “Y-Yes. Yes, I think I, erm, I do.”

Incredulous, Stump waved a hand at me. “The whores are one thing, Little John, but we’ve never had a woman as a full-fledged member!”

Little John scowled at the big man, stepping closer to him with menace on his face. “We aren’t a guild, Brandon. We don’t have *members*. She’s under my protection, so if you want to get to her, you have to go through me.”

“And me,” Friar Tuck said.

“Goddammit, me too,” Alan groaned.

Will waited the longest. All eyes on him. “I’ll skewer you like a stuck pig before I let you lay a hand on what’s mine, Stump.”

My eyes bulged at his threat.

Stump backed down, nodding. To his credit, he accepted the vote—not that he had much alternative.

I’ll need to keep a close watch over my shoulder now.

“Fair enough,” Stump said. “It’s decided. If that’s the case, then can we *please* come up with a plan moving forward? It’s all I’m asking, boss.”

Little John nodded, but it was Friar Tuck who stepped forward. “I might have something to satiate you greedy assholes.”

Everyone chuckled. They were all ears.

“Learned about a tournament coming up during my time in Nottingham today. An archery competition. The prize is massive—enough to open your smithy shop, Benny, or buy out your mother’s cattle, Chance.”

A few of the men scoffed, flapping their hands and going back to packing their things.

John muttered, “Sir Guy of Gisborne will undoubtedly be there.”

“Aye, John,” Tuck said. “I suspect the best archer in all of Nottinghamshire will make an appearance, to try and fill the Sheriff’s coffers to bursting.”

Will scoffed. “Then we have to beat him. Win the prize. Get rich and leave Sherwood for a time, even.”

Tuck shrugged. “Then I guess we’d better start training, eh, boys?”

A half-hearted cheer rose up among the men. My infiltration of their commune had been forgotten. At least for now.

Little John said, “That’s all well and fine, Tuck. But we need to move camp, first. Let’s head over to the witch’s cabin.”



I didn’t need to ask why it was called the witch’s cabin, yet I did anyway.

“It’s surrounded by a structure built into the very fabric of the forest, lass,” John told me. “Built by an ancient society, we think.”

“And it was housed ... by a witch?”

He chuckled. “That’s more of a tall tale than anything. Good scary image though, aye?”

I rolled my eyes.

We’d been moving east for a few hours, away from the abandoned well location. My legs were sore from so much walking—and likely from the bruising I took from Little John last night.

I would wake up bruised every morning with a smile on my face if it meant feeling what I felt with him.

After a lull in my conversation with John, I stepped back to join Will Scarlet along the trail. He hoisted a large backpack on his shoulders and eyed me warily.

“Thank you,” I said. “For standing up for me with the others.”

“Still expecting thanks from me, little thorn? Because—”

“I know. I should keep expecting.”

A wry smile flashed across his face—wicked as they came.

“Can I ask why you did it?”

“I think I made my point clear,” he said.

“You think I belong to you.”

“You belong to the Merry Men, whether you like it or not. Whether you think you do or not.”

I mulled that over with a small hum. I decided not to argue with him on that point. I was tired and didn't feel like getting into it with the infuriating young man.

Instead, I said, “You didn't show me why you're such an ass today, Will Scarlet, like you promised. All you did was show me that you *can* be kind, contrary to what everyone thinks about you.”

He let out a noncommittal grunt, as if he didn't agree with my assessment.

“So?” I coaxed, leaning forward, batting my lashes and smiling.

It took another minute of silent walking for him to relent. He toyed with his red sash. “My mother was trampled to death by a Plantagenet horseman, and I was there to see it. Those French-bred bastards deserve my ire. My father is ill and not long for this world, and people take advantage of his weakness—caused through no fault of his own.”

“I'm so sorry, Will.” I looked down, ashamed. I should have known better than to ask. Everyone here had a sad story to tell.

He didn't need to say more. I understood his pent-up rage much better now.

But he did. His voice became severe, low enough so only I could hear. “My bloodline is important to me, Robin, and we've been stepped on at every turn. I've inherited nothing in this world but grief, betrayal, and this silly fucking red sash from my mother's crumpled body. So I continue to fight, to spite them all.

“Luckily, I've found the Merry Men. Likeminded people, aye? Even if I bicker with my brothers, family is everything.”

I thought about his words long after they were out of his mouth. Long after Will had continued to walk on, and I slowed my pace to walk by myself for a bit.

“*Well, he’s right about that, at least,*” Robert said.

I agreed. Will *was* right, and he made me see the truth. Made me realize what I had to do.

I went to Little John at the front of the group once I’d made my decision. It had been nagging at me all day and night, and Will Scarlet of all people put it into focus.

John said one word when I marched up alongside him, able to see the determination on my face.

“When?”

“Tomorrow. With Friar Tuck. In the carriage.”

He sighed, long and drawn-out. “I had hoped our words tonight would resonate with you, little star.”

“They have, John. More than you know.”

“Yet you still don’t trust us? Still don’t trust *me*?”

I fought back my worry and doubt, forcing my voice to stay steady. “You said I could leave when I wanted. That you wouldn’t keep me prisoner or try to stop me. Can I hold you to that promise?”

“Of course.”

“I have to find out if Uncle Gregory is alive.” I put my hand up when he tried to speak, because I knew he was going to mention our trust issues again. “*For myself,*” I clarified. “And my mother, more than anything. Even my awful fucking father. They’re my family, Little John. You must understand that. They’re all I have.”

He stopped me, grabbing my shoulders and nearly shaking me. “They’re *not* all you have, lass. That’s what I’ve been trying to say!”

I stared up at him, slack-jawed. When I found the strength, I said, “Will you hold this against me?”

His severe face broke, softness tilting his features. He cradled my chin with his fingers and rubbed my cheek with his rough knuckles. His smile was fond and pained. “No, I won’t. I can only hope you find what you need, and come back to us. Because I’m starting to think you’re just as much of a Merry Man as the rest of us sorry lot ... and you might just be the thing that keeps us whole.”

His words stole the breath from my lungs. I didn’t know what to say.

And he wasn’t done.

His dark orbs pierced into mine. “Just remember, Robin. Your family isn’t just something you’re born into. It can also be something you forge.”



Chapter 34

Robin



I slept in the carriage, among the silks and dresses. The men allowed me that comfort. An owl hooted nearby, joining the chorus of the nighttime animals and sounds.

It was late when the door to the carriage creaked open. The owl stopped hooting, its silence a foreboding sign when I craned my neck to the side and saw the silhouette standing in front of the moon's silver light.

Will Scarlet's face was halved by that moonlight as he stepped into the carriage and shut the door behind him, showing the good and the bad in him.

My heart jumped to my throat. He neared me at the end of the carriage, blanketed by a green dress I'd helped Friar Tuck sew.

"W-What are you doing here?" I stammered in a whisper.

He crouched before me, his rough tunic and pants rustling as his face sank toward mine. "If you're leaving tomorrow, then I need you tonight."

I blinked at him, wide-eyed, in shock. "What—"

"You might never come back." His head tilted, a sinister grin on his face. Or was that my vision playing with me in the darkness, and a softer smile than I realized?

His face was inches from mine. I lay on my side, but slowly rolled onto my back, bracing my elbows behind me. I stared into his brooding, dark eyes; his sharp chin and gaunt face. He was a beautiful man. I'd seen what he had underneath it all, too. Besides the corded muscles and immaculate physique, he held wrath at bay, coursing in his veins.

I could see that wrath, even now.

Yet my body reacted to his low hum of a voice, the possessive way he stared at me.

“I can’t get your pristine face out of my damned mind, no matter how hard I try,” Will said. “You haunt my dreams, even when I’m awake.”

My brow furrowed. “What am I supposed to do with that?” My voice was strained.

I hated feeling timid. As much as Will Scarlet could scare me at times, I knew he wasn’t an awful man. To others? Perhaps. To anyone on his bad side, or anyone who decided to hurt his family—William Elder or Merry Man alike? Absolutely.

But to me ... he stared at me with adoration.

“You know what you’re supposed to do with it,” he answered.

His voice chilled me to the bone. I couldn’t fight off the spark of heat that bloomed in my belly, snuffing out the cold.

“You don’t even like me,” I said.

“*Like* has nothing to do with it. I *need* you. Don’t you see? You’ve changed me, and I can’t stand it. Can’t stand the way you pout and bite your lip, even now. The way your eyes flutter and search my face for signs of deceit and treachery. You see *through* me. I can’t stand you, my twisted little thorn.”

My jaw went slack. I wasn’t sure if that was supposed to be a compliment. Perhaps it was the closest I was going to get to one.

The brat inside me came out as the heat blossomed through my body. “You want to fuck me like you hate me.”

“As I said before.”

“Even though you don’t.” I cleared my throat. “Hate me, that is.”

“Twist it any way you want, brat princess. Just let me have you, or else I won’t be able to let you go tomorrow. Little John

had you last night, so it's my turn tonight. I must know what he's found."

My breath came shallow and weak, even as my pulse pumped with anticipation. I licked my lips, and he watched the whole time, readjusting himself in his awkward crouch, hand going south between his legs.

This young man, no older than I, had been my biggest detractor since coming here. He'd paid me little attention, and now he was admitting that he'd fallen for me ... and I hadn't even noticed?

I couldn't believe him. Couldn't believe I had this kind of power over him. It made me feel unruly and wild—feral, for this hateful man who wanted nothing more than to shut me up and make me his.

He clicked his tongue. His smirk felt more dangerous than mine. "Let me thank you properly for earlier today. I need to expel all the anger and indignation ... inside you."

Expel his ... "Christ save me," I huffed.

"Christ can't save you from me, little thorn. No one can, living or otherwise."

Robert said, "*That's not true. I can save you, Robin.*"

But he couldn't. My brother wasn't here—he was only in my mind. He wanted to control my thoughts, while Will Scarlet wanted to control my body.

One was not like the other.

I could lose myself. I had been losing my mind for ages, since Robert's death. Now I could lose my body, and let this savage man claim it for his own.

Fight me and fight *for* me.

"It's not true, sister—you're not mad! Don't play into his schemes! This is not a good man!"

"I know that," I said on a whisper.

Will thought I was replying to his blasphemous words. His smile curled wider, and I swallowed hard.

Before the pillar of my neck could relax, his hand lashed out like a viper and wrapped just under my chin. I gasped and tensed.

His fingers dug into my throat. His head shot forward and he slammed his lips over mine. He squeezed my neck harder than Little John had. Blinding stars shot behind my lids as I tasted his tongue and inhaled his essence. Will Scarlet smelled of steel and whetstones.

I tried to move my tongue with his, but he batted mine away. While he choked me and claimed my mouth, his other hand roamed underneath my blanket, between my legs.

I could have closed my legs and he would have stopped. Such was the control I had over him in that moment.

But I didn't. I parted them. I gave in to what he wanted, and it felt righteous.

I wore no pants while I slept. His hand met my center and his fingers roughly slid over my seam. I inhaled sharply and stiffened again, while his knuckles pressed into my clit.

Heat swam and made me dizzy. The warmth emanated off him, yet none of it was blazing as much as the juncture between my thighs.

I was wet in seconds, mind-addled by the loss of air to my brain and lungs. I hissed in his mouth when two fingers curved into my sopping wet cunt and found my sweetest spot.

My hips bucked and he chuckled in my mouth. "You want this just as much as I do, Robin. Except I'm not afraid to admit it."

His hand on my neck loosened, just slightly enough to let me breathe and answer him in a husky voice, my tone smoldering. "I'm not afraid to admit it either, Will Scarlet. So take what you want and take it fast ... because your little thorn won't be here forever."

His upper lip peeled back and he let out a growl like an animal. "Oh, you will be here forever, girl, because I'll cage your cunt and keep you. I'll make you come until you can't

think straight, and my cock is imprinted on your mind as the only thing that matters to you.”

My neck hollowed from the whimper I let out. Then his hand was around me again, like the tightest necklace.

“Is that a promise?” I eked out.

He kissed me again, hard. I rode his hand, sliding my hips into him as he palmed my wetness and dug his fingers deeper inside me.

His fingers slid out of me. I was soiled between my legs. I gasped again, my lower half shaking, as I watched him tear himself out of his pants.

His cock swung low between his legs where he crouched, skimming the wooden floorboards of the carriage. He stroked his fat appendage once and it hopped, seemingly gaining sentience as it jumped, grew, and stiffened outward, jutting toward me.

Will released my neck and pushed me back against the linens. He crawled over me, dragging that long, dripping cock along my thighs and belly, before settling back so its heat throbbed next to mine.

I parted my legs, staring down at the imposing sight. He might not have been the tallest Merry Man, but his cock scared me all the same. It looked just as angry as he did, thick veins running along its top and sides. The ridge throbbed like an iron bell that had been struck and forced to ring out.

Will wasted no time to surge inside me. He didn't give me a chance to reconsider, and he didn't ask if I was comfortable. Such was his dominance and pure need.

When the head pushed past my lips, I clenched my teeth together and snarled at him, barking low like a hound.

He grinned, pushed me onto my back, and framed my face with his vascular arms. His hips thrust, hard, railing his cock deep inside me.

I lost all thought until he receded—

And he thrust again. Hard, firm, confident.

I reached up and pulled his head down by the back of his neck, forcing his forehead against mine as he fucked me. “I’ll scream if you’re not careful. Everyone will hear us.”

He murmured, “Then this will help,” and grabbed a loose piece of linen next to my bedding. He crumpled it in his fist and shoved it into my gawking mouth. “Not that I give a fuck if anyone hears.”

I choked on the fine gag. He pushed his palm over it and over my lips, daring me to scream as he punished my poor cunt with his ruthless cock.

So I did. I screamed and moaned and wailed, but the sound was muffled nonsense behind his palm and the gag he’d forced into my mouth.

His hips swung into a rhythm that was relentless and fast. Even as he increased his pace, the firmness of his thrusts remained. His narrow hips smacked into the soft flesh of my ass every time he hilted himself inside me.

My thighs rippled from his efforts. I locked and squeezed my legs around his narrow waist. My heels fell on his taut ass, bouncing every time he rammed into me.

Bliss ran through me like a thief snatching my soul. He stared down with his severe face, studying my writhing body, lips stretched in a scowl as he brought me to climax.

I moaned into his palm again when my toes curled around his ass and I urged him deeper, deeper inside me. The silk gag was falling into my throat, my airway becoming clogged. My eyes widened in fear and sudden panic. They rolled wildly as he fucked me through my orgasm and continued to pelt into me.

I was losing consciousness, drifting into a dark abyss where I knew I had no chance against him—

And he pulled his hand back suddenly, bringing the fabric with it.

I choked and coughed, retching from the sudden *whoosh* of air that ripped from my lungs. “Y-You fucking heathen!”

He buried his face against mine, kissed me to quiet me. Before I could part my lips to take him, he was pulling back, hands moving, dragging over my waist.

Then Will Scarlet flipped me onto my stomach. I yelped at the abruptness, staring up at the back wall of the carriage. My legs stretched past his slender body. He hooked his hands under the tops of my thighs, holding me like I was a wheelbarrow.

My ass squeezed together and Will used it as a guiding post for his huge cock, sliding along my crack before dipping low and penetrating my cunt again.

His size made me groan as it stretched me from behind. I kicked my legs up, heels hitting his elbows, and he simply continued his ministrations like a well-oiled machine. Alternating between fast and slow. Holding me hostage—holding my drenched cunt captive against the force of his blows.

Twenty minutes ago, I had been soft asleep abed a pillow of clouds. Now, he was fucking the feeling out of my body and the thoughts out of my head. He was crawling over me again so he could rail me in a different angle. The wagon creaked and groaned every time he thrust. My hips smacked into the sitting bench where I'd been sleeping, loud enough to wake the whole camp.

Searing pleasure rolled through me in waves, drilling from core to belly to chest. My nipples rubbed against the coarse floorboards and the friction hardened them into sensitive nubs that only made me hornier and wetter.

His strong bicep hooked around my neck from above and wrapped around my throat, pulling me back and folding me. My neck craned, my spine bowed, forcing the air out of my lungs.

The wall in front of me blurred as he growled, ravaged my stuffed hole, and barreled into me from above and behind. My fingers dug fruitlessly into the linens, fisting them so I could stay grounded and not float away.

I came again, unable to stop myself or find any decency in the way I moaned and cried out. “Oh Will! Wi—fuck!”

I couldn't keep my voice down. He couldn't either, and the growl that ripped free from his lungs was animalistic and primal.

He clamped his bicep harder around my throat.

Darkness rimmed my vision, closing in around me. The intensity of the climax, mixed with the asphyxiation, made me drool and sputter nonsense.

His cock flew out of me and a flood of my fluids followed, spilling onto the hardwood. Ropes of scalding-hot warmth painted my ass, back, and spine as he held tight onto my body and showered me in his cum.

I blacked out. When I awoke, he was finishing, seconds later, and released my neck.

I flopped forward helplessly with a whimper. My body twitched. My legs quivered and a small aftershock rippled through me as I came for a third time. My mind was a heady mix of ecstasy and confusion. Broken, mind-rattled, lost.

“Just how you were meant to look, little thorn,” he growled in my ear. “Awash with my cum painting you like the most beautiful mural. You are art, Robin.”

I breathed raggedly and glared over my shoulder.

He kneeled above me, between my legs, and smiled cruelly down at me. Beads of sweat covered his body. “You're so pretty when you scowl at me like that. Like a hooded menace that wants to stab me through the throat and thank me at the same time.”

“T-Thank you?”

“For claiming you, Robin. We belong to each other. More importantly, you belong to the Merry Men. Now I can guarantee you'll return.”

I tried to laugh at him, but it came out as a wheeze. Another quiver speared through me and I tensed to fight off

the orgasmic aftershock. “You’re a barbarian, Will Scarlet. An absolute peril to my life.”

“Thank you, little thorn.”

Finally. The first thanks I’d gotten from him ... and it came when I called him a savage and a danger to my safety. *This fucking man. Absolutely unhinged—his soul unsalvageable. I thought he had a hint of decency in him when I saw him interacting with his father. Now I know I was mistaken. This is the true Will Scarlet. This gloriously dark, wicked, siege machine of a man.*

And I absolutely loved every bit of it.



Chapter 35

Robin



I promptly fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. Will Scarlet had fucked the nightmares and dreams out of my head. I woke in the early morning feeling well-rested, sore—again—and content.

I rolled onto my back and stretched my arms over my head with a squeak. At least he'd had the decency to drape the dress over my body, because Friar Tuck barged into the carriage a moment later.

I yipped and curled into a ball, hiding my naked bits from the chaplain.

He frowned, folding his arms over his chest, standing below the step outside. "Naked again. At least you weren't *arriving* this time when I came in."

"You need to learn to knock!" My cheeks turned cherry-red.

"I didn't know you were sleeping in here, honestly." He shrugged, then tilted his head with a small smile as his eyes ate me up. "My, but you *do* seem to have the most exciting mornings."

"It's my nights that are exciting," I groaned. "Not the mornings."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Ah." Clapping his hands, he reached into the carriage to grab my strewn-about clothes, and unceremoniously tossed them at my face. "Had we more time, perhaps I could corrupt your morning routine, too, little heathen. Alas, we have places to be, things to do."

"And you call *me* the heathen."

"Oh, did I say corrupt? I meant enlighten."

Was I a madwoman for feeling a twinge of sadness? I *had* been wondering what a man of the cloth might be—

“You’re losing your grip on your sanity and sanctity, sister,” Robert said in my mind, killing the moment.

My sanity has been in question ever since I started chatting with you, brother. My sanctity? After Little John stole my chastity and Will Scarlet bludgeoned it to death, I’m not sure I have anymore sanctity left in me.

Perhaps Friar Tuck can rediscover the holiness inside me?

“No!” Robert yelled. *“Quit your prodding, woman. Find Mother and Father and Uncle—”*

Only teasing, dear Robert. I smiled wickedly. *But you are so easy to rile up, you know.*

A moment later, his words sank in and my face turned serious, lips thinning into a frown.

“What’s that look for?” Tuck asked.

“Just remembering what I have to do today.”

His expression turned pitying, as if he wanted to say more—tell me how my parents would be happy to see me again, or some other such nonsense.

I hated his pity. I cut him off before he could feed me any false hope or tender words. “Out. I’ll change, and then we’ll be on our way.”

He exited with a sad nod, gently shutting the door behind him.

If nothing else, the Merry Men had steeled me to the rigors of life in a way no one else had before them.

I hoped, as much as Little John, that I’d be able to find my way back to them, so they could teach me more and awaken the slumbering giantess resting inside me.



The “witch’s cabin” was set deep in the woods under an earthy hillside. The cabin itself looked like ruins from antiquity,

rotted, cracked, and twisted with vines and roots from the tree that grew in the middle of it.

I didn't have long to explore our new base because Friar Tuck and I left camp before the sun had even peeked over the horizon. The rest of the men—save the night watchmen—were asleep.

Will, John, and Alan did not say goodbye to me before we left, which made me sad.

“They expect you to return.” Tuck noticed my dejection as the carriage rolled onto the dirt trail. “They aren't sentimental types. At least they don't want to appear to be. They'd rather save all that nonsense.”

“Yes, well, even hard men can be soft for the girl they like,” I muttered, staring at the receding camp. I sat on the front bench with Tuck, exposed to the elements. He held the reins of the two horses pulling us along.

“These men are soft for no one, unfortunately.”

I glowered. “Then you don't know Little John half as well as you think.”

That quieted him. We stayed silent for most the trip to Nottingham, which took less than a handful of hours.

I noticed familiar landmarks on the way in, and perked up in my seat. An oak tree I had always called the Jolly Ogre because of the way its trunk seemed to smile at you. The three flat stones—the Old Wise Trio—perfectly balanced on one another next to the snaking bend of the River Trent that signified the northeastern area of town and ran through the center of it.

A chilly midmorning gave way to a gray afternoon as our cart wheeled toward the narrow gate. It was the smallest gate into Nottingham, yet Friar Tuck still stopped the carriage and ordered me into the bay.

“You might be an outlaw,” he explained when I voiced complaint. “Better safe than sorry.”

“It wasn't *me* who killed Peter Fisher,” I hissed.

“But you maimed him, lass. I have a sneaking suspicion you were criminalized well before Will and John took matters into their own hands.”

“I didn’t ask them to do that.”

“And still ...” He trailed off.

With a huff, I hopped into the cart. Then I poked my head out as Tuck whistled to the steeds and we started moving. “What makes you any different?!” I called out, incredulous. Friar Tuck was twice-over the outlaw I was.

He shot me a smile over his shoulder. “Connections, dear girl. I’m a man of the cloth, after all.”

“Excommunicated!” I wailed, before pulling my head into the cart and sitting there in sullen silence.

I crossed my arms haughtily, and thought of the night before. Will Scarlet had debased me on this very seating bench. *God* had it been raucous. I’d slept with two of the Merry Men now. The others were surely starting to think me a whore. They all must have heard my ceaseless moans, deep in the night.

The thought flushed my cheeks. I lowered my chin, trying to hide from myself, and the carriage hopped as we rolled over a misplaced cobblestone.

Wincing, I opened my mouth to complain to Tuck, but then thought better of it when I saw where we were by peeking out the window of the carriage.

We were well into Nottingham proper. My whimsical teasing and whining fluttered away as a sorrowful feeling washed over me like a cloak of darkness.

My home. Finally, I was back. It didn’t bring me any joyful thoughts. It made me nervous, thinking about what awaited me. *Would* Father and Mama be pleased to see me?

The thought of Father’s fist crashing into my stomach made me recoil and grimace. At least the bruise on my face had faded, but that only gave me a fresh canvas for him to plant a new one on.

Wilford was south of here, on the other side of the river. The city bustled this early in the morning. Much as I wished to take in the sights out the window, I resisted.

I had a mission. Getting caught sightseeing before I even made it to Wilford would be awful—in case Friar Tuck was right and I really *was* an outlaw in my own hometown.

If I was, my future looked bleak. What did that say about me? Where would I go if the Merry Men got bored of me or were hunted down like animals by Guy of Gisborne? Could I sustain this life on the run with them?

More importantly, what was I going to say to *them*—my parents? I hadn't planned this out at all.

A part of me wanted to investigate and spy through a window of our estate, to make sure everything was okay. But another part of me wanted to barge in, regale them with my adventures in Sherwood Forest, and hold them tight. To apologize to Father for stowing away on the carriage in the first place and causing this whole mess.

Despite Little John's words about Sir Guy chasing him for years, I had a feeling the Sheriff's lackey was searching for me, not him. It gave me a sense of dread, for obvious reasons, and also a sense of hope—that Father had seen it fitting to hire a search party.

Perhaps my life at home was salvageable?

My thoughts brought us to the bridge I knew better than any in the land. It was an arching stone bridge with six-hundred-twenty-eight cobbles making up its surface. I'd counted them as a whelp, when I was bored and dreaming of an illustrious future.

Lord, but I was a strange child.

I smiled at the bridge in the distance, separating Nottingham from Wilford's higher-tier estates. I felt free enough to look out the window—

Then Friar Tuck veered to the left, bringing the cart alongside the river. With a vexed sound, I sat back on the bench. *Damn detours!*

We traveled for another quarter-hour, until the carriage rolled to a stop. My ass ached when I stood, from all the bumpy stones in the city's streets.

We were still in Nottingham proper. I glanced out the window, saw we were in the town square where the almshouse was nestled between a few aging shops—a leather maker and a tailor's store. This part of town near the tannery reeked of urine and rotting flesh.

Tuck grunted as he dismounted from the bench. He propped his head in the window. "Hand me those and stay here, lass. I won't be long."

I started passing the piles of clothes through the narrow, open slat. "I thought you were selling this lot, not giving it to the orphans?"

"I am." He nudged his chin to the tailor's shop next door. "An acquaintance set up a meeting with other unscrupulous characters who won't hesitate to buy stolen goods from the Queen of the Lace Market. They'll give us pennies on the pound—certainly not what these fine garments are worth—but at least it's something."

"Ah. So you plan to accompany me to Wilford?"

"Of course, little heathen."

I frowned. "I don't need a watch hound."

He laughed. "Careful! You're starting to sound like Will Scarlet."

I blushed. *Dammit.*

Once he had a giant bundle in his arms, he said, "Now be a good girl and stay here. Don't cause trouble."

I would never get tired of these ruthless men calling me that, so I just nodded dumbly.

He waddled away from the cart and veered toward the tailor's shop. The door opened a moment later.

Before it even closed after him, I was bolting out of the carriage.

I don't need anyone to guard or chauffeur me to my own home.

Lord, how I wished I knew how wrong I was.



Chapter 36

Robin



I snuck into the barley fields. I knew the hollowed, jointed stems of this grass better than my own room. The estate lay along the sloped hill ahead, but I wanted to do some reconnaissance first.

Workers tilled a flat, empty section of the field off to the side, a stone's throw away. I recognized the bald boy who hadn't betrayed my secrecy when he caught me hiding in the clothes chest when I first left here.

I rustled through the grass away from him, not wanting to test my luck a second time. Circling the estate, I didn't notice any guards in the courtyard or hiding among the walls. In fact, the whole place seemed eerily quiet except for the workers in the field.

I took a deep breath at the edge of the field and then barreled toward the manor, dashing across the road and making my way to my wing of the house.

I scaled the wall using the trellis and handholds, remembering each one. Those handholds would never fade from my mind because I'd used them so much in my life. Any time I needed to escape my father, and keep him thinking I was locked away in my room, I took to the window, the wall, and Sherwood Forest at the edge of our property.

My Realm of Solitude.

I crested the roof, scampered across to my window, and saw it was barred shut by wooden slats. Of course, I knew how to jostle them to get them open.

Less than a minute later, I was in my room. After the wide adventure I'd had in the open world, it felt stale, stuffy, and small. Confining.

If nothing else, the Merry Men had shown me what freedom looked like ... and it wasn't this.

I tiptoed across the room, grabbing an eating knife I had hidden behind my bed, stuffing it in my right boot. Under the bed, I pulled out the shortbow I had stowed away. I held it like a holy relic, nearly shedding tears as I stared down at the simple tool in my hands. I found my quiver of arrows next, shrugged them over my shoulders, and left the room after ransacking it.

I traipsed through the hall on the balls of my feet, trying to muster all the stealth I could. I couldn't hear my father's voice, which was odd, because its booming cadence was *always* carrying through the house, especially in the middle of the day.

Down the hall, at mother's room, I gently pried the door open and crept inside. "Mama?"

Her bed was empty.

My heart sank.

I left the room, confused, and made my way down the stairs to the first level.

Strangely enough, I hadn't seen Emma, whose presence could usually be felt from the other wing of the house. My father worked our maid to the bone.

In the high-ceilinged living room, I gazed around aimlessly. I could feel the abandonment in the walls.

I threw caution to the wind, calling out, "Emma? Father?"

A moment passed as my voice echoed, bouncing off the tapestries and chandeliers.

"They aren't here, lass."

Boots clomped behind me, exiting from my father's study.

I spun around on a gasp.

Uncle Gregory stood in the doorway, hands clasped behind his back. His gray beard was cut short. The stocky man looked better than when I'd last seen him. His face was etched with a deep frown.

“U-Uncle?” I stuttered.

“What are you doing here, dear niece?”

I threw my arms out wide. “What does it look like? Looking for Father and Mama! What are *you* doing here, Uncle Gregory?”

Alarm bells went off in my head. My skin crawled with apprehension as he took a step toward me. “They aren’t here,” he said, ignoring my question.

But Little John said he met my father here!

“You already said that.” My face twisted into a suspicious scowl. “Answer my question, if you please.”

With a sigh, his stern, straight-backed demeanor flattened. He seemed to sag and grow ten years older in the span of two seconds. “Join me, Robin.” He motioned for me to follow him into the study.

Against my better judgment, and the gut-feeling of danger he radiated, I did as he said. How could I not? My uncle had never wronged me before. *This is highly peculiar, though.*

In the cramped room, he rounded my father’s oak writing table and stood over it, palms down. A small, crumpled rag used for writing was stretched across the surface. He stared down at it. “I don’t know where your parents are, Robin. That’s why I’m here.”

For the first time in my life, I didn’t believe him. I raised a brow. “Is that so? And what about Emma?”

“She’s gone into town.”

More lies, I thought.

The pain of being lied to nearly dragged me down to the depths of despair—nearly gave me away. But I kept a stern face, keeping my brow high on my forehead. “How did you get here, Uncle? How did you escape the Merry Men?” My voice came out strained.

He looked up from the table, stared into my face. His eyebrows arched helplessly, and he looked like his old self

again—the caring, kind man I knew. “I didn’t escape, love. They let me go.”

My jaw clenched. “They wouldn’t.”

“They did.”

“And ... and you left ... without me?” I sniffed as I finished, emotions already running rampant. My nose burned. I wrinkled it to keep from crying.

He shook his head sternly. “No, no, don’t lose yourself, Robin. I made a deal with those bastards. They promised not to harm you if I left ... and I see they kept their end of the bargain. You look fine, if not a bit feral.” He quirked a sad smile.

My face contorted with sudden rage. “They would never make that bargain, Uncle! They would kill you!”

Another headshake. “The man calling himself Little John said he was keeping me alive for your sake. Because he knew how much you loved me.”

“And I do!” The tears burned my eyes now, streaks falling down my cheeks. “But you abandoned me, just like everyone else!” My voice ricocheted off the walls of the small study room, blaring.

“I didn’t!” he cried with a wince, and lifted the paper rag to shake in the air. “I didn’t keep *my* end of the bargain with them, Robin. I’ve been searching for you for days. I’ve only recently been gifted this ... this *map*.”

I stumbled to the table when he laid it flat on the surface. His fingers traced lines across it, and I realized he was right: It was a map.

Of Sherwood Forest.

“This was where we were located when they tied us to that tree. He pointed at a circled location north of Nottingham. “When I returned there the other day, there was no sign of you or the Merry Men.”

“We moved.”

“Where?”

I reeled back. Now that I saw him closer, I noticed the plethora of new wrinkles on his face. The tiredness rimming his reddened eyes.

The man hadn't been sleeping.

My scale of betrayal began to weigh in the other direction. I ran a finger across the map, along a line, to another circled point. “Here,” I said.

Then it all hit me at once.

There were at least eight circles on the small map, with lines leading from one to the other. Another line I noticed led to our current location, the witch's cabin, which I was not about to point out.

I struggled to keep my mouth from falling open—to hide my shock. *This is a map of the Merry Men's routes and hideaways!*

My stomach dropped to my boots as the revelation sank in. I stared up at Uncle Gregory's face. He was looking down, still speaking, yet his words were drowned away.

“Where did you get this map?” I blurted.

His lips stopped moving midsentence. They closed and folded into a thin line. “Maid Emma, of all people. Where *she* received this map, I cannot say, Robin. I'm sorry.”

Emma? But how would she get this? “You must! Uncle, the Merry Men have a traitor in their midst!”

At that, his head slanted with utter bafflement.

My voice ended on a wheeze. *I've just admitted ... too much. Oh, God, what have I done?*

“And?” he snarled. “Why would a *prisoner* care if her captors are being betrayed? You should be overjoyed, lass.” His hand darted out and closed around my wrist. “Stay here, Robin. You've finally returned to me. I can keep you safe. We can hunt those bastards down together!”

“U-Uncle!” I wailed, and ripped my wrist free of his hold. He sounded God-touched, stark-raving mad.

I backpedaled, retreating—but not before sweeping low and snagging the map from the table while he stared blindly at me.

My uncle looked struck. Like I was betraying *him*.

“I’m ... I’m sorry, Uncle Gregory. It wasn’t supposed to be like this.” I stuffed the map in my tunic.

“Explain yourself, young lady. Just what have these cretins done to my poor niece, to turn her against me?”

“Nothing!”

He knew it was a lie before it flew from my lips.

So did I.

“I wish I could say more,” I croaked, sniffing, wiping my tears with a forearm. “I have to go warn the Merry Men—someone could be after them.”

“Someone *is* after them, Robin. *Me!*”

I choked a sob down and shook my head adamantly, continuing to retreat out of the study. “Uncle, please—who else has seen this map?”

“Does it matter?”

A pause as my stomach roiled.

Then I ran.

I turned, fled, and wailed, “I’m sorry!” on the way out the manor.

Uncle Gregory’s voice carried in the distance: “Wait—Robin!”

I was already gone. Out the huge oaken front door, through the winding garden and courtyard in the front, dashing toward the road—

Where I saw a tall, black-cloaked man speaking to the bald-headed boy in the fields.

I pulled to a stop, gasping, not recognizing the tall man. His back was to me. The boy's eyes widened in shock as he saw me over the man's shoulder.

Then his eyes shifted, as if to hide spotting me, but the damage was done.

The man turned around. He wore a dark bycock hat with a feather off to the side. His face was sleek and malicious. His eyes narrowed.

I locked gazes with the boy. "*Run!*"

And the man spun around, flicked his wrist.

The boy backpedaled—

And gurgled, clutching his neck as blood sprayed. He fell in the empty field, loyal to the last, and the other serfs screeched and scattered.

I screamed, trembling hands going to my mouth.

Loud footfalls echoed on the road to my right, coming from the bridge—already across it, turning from loud clacks to dull thuds as they landed on dirt.

Three men sprinted toward me, black cloaks billowing behind them.

I darted across the street and into the barley fields, weaving my way through it.

They gave chase. Their strides were long, fast, and they gained on me. I had no chance to hide in the fields because there were too many of them, closing in.

So I ran like all hell. Away from my manor, away from the bloodshed, away from my uncle. *He's betrayed me! These men were sent by him to make sure I couldn't leave!*

I came to an empty part of the field, breath hammering, and froze to gather my bearings.

The stable was a field away, where we kept some horses. I would never make it back to Friar Tuck and the carriage past the bridge with those three bloodhound soldiers barring my way.

So I veered toward the stable—

As a huge body careened out of the field and barreled into me, knocking me down.

I cried out and my bow went flying off my shoulder, into the grass, out of my reach.

I slithered from his grip, using my smaller frame to get away and back onto my feet, grabbing a spilled arrow from the ground.

The man had jarring yellow teeth and a sneer as he bared them to me. His hand went toward his sword. “You’re coming with us, gi—*gahk*.”

A metallic *clank* as a crossbow bolt pierced through his throat and stuck out the other side, dripping blood down his chest.

He stared down, confused, and toppled forward.

Far behind him, Uncle Gregory dropped the crossbow and ran toward me, drawing his sword. “Get your hands off my niece, you fucking fiends!” His voice bellowed across the field, carrying into the sky.

Wait—these aren’t his men, then?!

The other three cloaked soldiers appeared in the clearing, drawing their weapons when they spotted their dead comrade at my feet.

They looked up, encircled me.

I backed away, then remembered the scared look on that boy’s face as one of these men slashed his throat.

I roared like a banshee and clutched the arrow in my small fist.

One of the men rushed me.

Spinning away, I slammed the arrow into the man’s thigh. He groaned in pain and limped to one knee.

The other two lunged.

I narrowly avoided the first slice, meant to behead me, and ducked under the second, as my pulse quickened and the rest of the world seemed to fall away.

I was going to die here. There was no way I could take on three armed, grown men—soldiers, no less—even if one of them was wounded and limping.

The grass rattled and shook behind the men, and their attention was diverted for a breath.

I took the chance to back up, realigning my stance.

“Flee, sister!” Robert screamed in my head. *“You cannot kill them all!”*

I’d never killed a man in my life. Robert knew best: I couldn’t kill them all, much less one of them.

But I was tired of fleeing and giving up. These bastards had encroached on my land and killed one of my workers.

“You still must find Father and Mother!” Robert reminded me.

I hesitated—

Just long enough for the men to charge at me again, two of them at once this time.

I gasped, ducking, spinning, dodging, but my forearm split with agony. I pulled my bleeding arm back, inspecting the slice, studying their sneers and smirks—

A shadowy blur burst into the clearing, greatsword drawn in both hands.

Uncle Gregory roared like a man possessed, swinging his blade, keeping the men at bay.

They lost interest in me once they saw the greater threat: my fiery uncle in the glory of battle-lust.

“Run, Robin!” His eyes were redder than ever. He swung his sword in sweeping arcs to keep the men far. His body shielded mine, the armor he always wore clanking and creaking with every movement.

“No, I won’t!” I cried. “They’ll kill you!”

Then my uncle put a hand on my chest and shoved me behind him. Hard.

I stumbled back, nearly falling to the edge of the grass. He fixed me with a deadly expression—which momentarily softened with a small smile.

It was a parting smile. The kind a man gives when he knows he isn’t going to see you again.

Tears trickled down my cheeks.

“Get to the stables and *fly*, my princess. Do what you have to do and finish your mission. Understand?”

I sobbed, nodded, and turned.

And ran like a coward into the field.

Looked over my shoulder to see the three men crowding him, drawing closer, circling him, pouncing at once—

And the barleygrass closed behind me, so I could see nothing and only hear the sounds of metal clanging, the cries of fierce battle.

I fled to the stables to get a horse, trailing blood behind me, my forearm going numb.

All while my uncle, who I had thought betrayed me—lied to me, abandoned me, and stolen my parents’ land for himself—fought to protect my escape.

“Do what you have to do and finish your mission.”

His words played over in my head as I flew like the wind itself.



Chapter 37

Friar Tuck



I counted the coins, letting them jingle on the table as they landed. Frowning, I said, “This is less than we agreed on, Scratch.”

The sniveling, skinny lad called Scratch showed me a toothless smile. “Times are tough, mate. You know how the Sheriff’s taxes pinch us.”

“Then why are you smiling about it?”

“I always smile.”

“Because you know you’re getting the better bargain.”

Scratch laughed, high and annoying. “I always get the better bargain, Father. But I also take the better risk—I’m the one has to unload these, after all, aye?”

With a sigh, I wrinkled my nose and swept the coins into a leather pouch. I didn’t have time to dally with this mongrel. Shady middlemen always made their way in this world, even as it collapsed around honest folk.

It was part of the trade. The Merry Men had connections with people like Scratch, but that didn’t automatically give us excellent terms. Not to mention, he wasn’t wrong: The debilitating taxes put on us by Prince John and his thugs had made times tight for everyone—illegal fences included.

I was lucky to get rid of the clothes at all. Disperse them so they weren’t tied back to the Merry Men and the Wilford robbery. The heat was on Scratch’s neck now, and he knew it. At least I’d gotten *something* for coming all the way down here.

Little John and the others wouldn’t be pleased. Half of them hadn’t liked my plan of sewing clothes for the orphans in

the first place. I'd told them it was necessary to save our mortal souls—to offset the damage we did outside Nottingham.

Begrudgingly, they had accepted that.

Before I left the tailor's shop, whose proprietor was nowhere to be seen so Scratch and I could meet, I studied the thin-necked man. "Say, what do you know about this tournament coming up? Archery, is it?"

"Aye," he said, nodding. "Lots of money to be made. Even if you're not the winner."

He was talking of the incessant gambling that would take place. I looked down at the bag of coins and pursed my lips, hesitating. Wondering ...

No, I thought, shaking my head. I can't use the Merry Men's coin on my vices. They'd kill me if I returned empty-handed.

It was a struggle to resist. I was proud of myself for doing it. Had I even a drop of drink in me, the outcome might not have been the same.

I glanced over my shoulder, out the shuttered window. The carriage still sat peacefully outside, the two horses shaking their heads and manes. Nothing seemed to be amiss, and Robin was keeping strangely quiet in there. Not her usual mischievous self.

"How many entrants in this contest? When is it?"

A bony shrug. "Less than a month away. No one has the final tally yet. If you'd like to throw in, the going bet for participants is sixty. I think that's underselling it—I'm guessing eighty."

Already gambling on the match before it's even begun. The underbelly of Nottingham seemed to be growing worse with the trying times. "And the payout for the winner?"

"Word is the winner gets a bag of ten pounds."

My brow flew up my head. "Ten *pounds*?" I quickly did the arithmetic in my head—twenty shillings per pound, two-

hundred-forty pence per shilling. That meant the winner would gain two-hundred shillings, or nearly fifty-thousand pence. “That’s as much as a petty baron makes in a year!”

“Aye. Big business. Prince John himself is throwing it. No idea why Nottingham is his choice of venue. Maybe it’s his closeness with Sheriff George—knows he can keep the riffraff under control.”

Sixty to eighty participants, with a purse of nearly fifty-thousand pence. These were high numbers. Lots of competition. *A tourney like this will bring the finest archers in the land.*

“So?” Scratch asked, drumming his spindly fingers on the table. “Care to place a wager, monk?”

I stuffed my pouch away in my habit, frowning. “You won’t get me to part with the coins you’ve just given me, guttersnipe.”

He smiled again, showing the gaps in his teeth. “Always worth a shot with you, Friar Tuck. What’s changed? Not the betting whore you used to be?”

I glanced over my shoulder at the carriage outside. “Everything has changed, Scratch.”

He grunted, and I made to leave, pounding my fist on the table. “Good doing business with you, cheat.”

“And you, baldy.”

I smiled and left, exiting the door, thinking about the contest. I was so absentminded walking toward the carriage that I missed the girl who bumped into me.

I started, my hand reflexively going to my chest to make sure the pouch was still tucked away. It was. “Oh my, apologies, ma’am.” I looked down at the girl.

Her face pinched in a sad smile. “Hail, Father Tuck.”

I tilted my head. “Little Emma?” My gaze went over the short girl’s shoulders, to see if anyone was following her. She had come out from the almshouse, it seemed. “What are you doing here?”

Her eyes darted. She looked scared. “Looking for you, sir.”

“Me? What’s going on?” She was wearing one of the green dresses I’d sewn. But Emma wasn’t living at the orphanage anymore—she worked in Wilford. I hadn’t given her a dress.

“I was visiting my sister.” She leaned closer. We were in the middle of the town square, people passing us on every side. Hardly a private place, and she was acting squirrely. “Gracie gave me this dress because she was worried.”

“Worried?” I put a hand on her shoulder to lead her toward the carriage so we could speak quieter. “What about, dear lass?”

Once near the carriage, under the shadow of an awning, she reached into the cuff of her dress. Slowly, she pulled out a thin strip of hemp, rolled like a scroll.

She unrolled it and presented it to me. “This was sewn into the sleeve of this dress, sir. I knew you gifted the clothes to the almshouse, so I thought it was peculiar. What do you make of it?”

I studied the crude drawing, eyes scanning the paper. My lips pursed, wondering what those blotches were, and the circles and lines connecting—

I inhaled sharply, nostrils flaring, hearing Emma’s words for the first time. I snatched the drawing. “You said it was sewn *into* the seams of the dress?”

The handmaid looked shy, like she’d done something wrong. She nodded profusely. “W-What is it, sir?”

It was a map of Sherwood Forest ... and all the locations the Merry Men called home. I scratched my forehead. My heart sank when I glanced over at the closed window of the carriage.

The betrayal didn’t make me angry so much as it pained me that Robin had lied to us. Put up a false front, playing with our emotions the entire time.

I was somewhat impressed. *Shouldn’t have had her help with sewing the garments. Can’t be surprised, though, can I?*

What captive wouldn't want to relay her whereabouts to people who could save her? Cunning, lass. So fucking cunning ... and reckless, putting all the Merry Men in danger.

“Who else has seen this?” I asked Emma, tucking it away next to the pouch of coins.

“Only the master of the estate, sir.”

My eyes widened. “Sir Thomas?”

Her head shook, brow furrowing. “No, sir. He’s been absent. I’m talking about Baroness Joan’s brother, Sir Gregory.”

My brain broke with confusion. A wave of dizziness swam through me, and I put my palm forward. “Hold. Sir *Gregory* is watching over the Wilford estate? And Sir Thomas and Baroness Joan are gone?”

“Aye, Father. Sir Gregory copied the map for his own and gave this back to me. I’m so sorry—did I make a mistake? I just want to help the poor mistress who’s been missing. Lady Robin.”

Fuck. I glanced to the carriage again, furrowing my brow. Then I took Emma with me, gave her a kind smile, and said, “Then you’ll be ecstatic to see what I have to show you, lass.”

Can't hurt to show her Robin's face, right? We're headed to the estate anyway. Emma can ride with us. They can catch up. So long as Emma knows Robin is coming back with me.

I pulled back the slat of the carriage window with an emphatic flourish of my hand.

Emma’s face contorted with confusion. “... Sir?”

I looked in.

And of course Robin wasn’t there.

“Fucking hell,” I grumbled.

“Language, Father!”

I glared at her. “Get your bony ass in the cart, Emma. We ride.”



All was quiet at Wilford. I stopped the carriage before the courtyard, in the road, and hustled out. Emma joined me.

I walked hesitantly toward the courtyard, calling out, “Little heathen?”

Then Emma gasped. “Oh God!”

I spun. She pointed at the fields behind us, hand clasped over her mouth. A boy was in a pool of his own blood, lying in the soil of an empty field.

My heart squeezed. I ran toward him.

Emma went the opposite direction, to the manor, yelling, “Sir Gregory?!”

“Emma!” I shouted, but she was gone.

At the field, I kneeled in front of the dead youth. His throat had been savagely cut, and blood had spilled down his chin, cheeks, and neck. His sightless eyes gazed up at the sky. I closed them and made the sign of the cross.

Anguish rifled inside me, filling me with rage.

I stood and examined the field, and—

There. Flattened barleygrass. A trail of it.

I jogged through the fields, parting the grass, following the trail. There were numerous paths—twisted, stamped on, broken, as if a gang of people had gone running through here.

I came to a clearing. It stank of copper.

Corpses were strewn about the area. Men in black cloaks, black armor. Bloodied and dead. The blood was fresh. This couldn’t have happened more than thirty minutes ago.

I cursed myself for letting Robin out of my sight.

Then I saw the shortbow on the ground. The broken quiver and arrows surrounding it. *Damn my foolishness, not keeping an eye on that roguish little heathen. And now she’s gotten herself taken!*

I checked the pulses of the men, found nothing helpful, and yelled at God. My mind spun, no idea what to do or where she might have been taken.

Then I saw a blur out the corner of my eye—

A young lad running through the fields, headed in the direction of the estate, away from a barn.

He was yelling, “Darren? Brother!” and his face looked similar to the dead boy’s at the front of the field.

Chest hurting, I crossed the field to intercept him. He froze when he saw my brown habit and I raised my arms. “Boy, what’s happened here?”

“God only knows, Father!” Tears rolled down his cheeks. “Has you seen my brother?”

“Nay, son, I don’t know who your brother is. Have you seen a young lady, a handful of years your elder?”

He nodded briskly. Pointed back at the barn. “Came careening in like a hound on fire, she did. Lady Robin took a horse and took off! Who was I to stop her?”

My heart soared. *She wasn’t taken!* I clamped my jaw. “Where did she go, lad? Which direction?”

He pointed again. “South, Father.”

I nodded curtly. “Bless you, lad.” I couldn’t bring myself to tell him about his brother, so I simply said, “Check the tilled field near the estate, son.”

We ran in the same direction back toward the estate, parting ways before we came to the edge of the field.

As I hopped onto the carriage bench and snagged the reins, the boy’s blood-curdling scream wrenched into the late afternoon sky.



Robin had gone south. The quickest route out of Wilford and into Sherwood Forest. But our camp lay northeast. *Perhaps she plans on wrapping around Nottingham, outside of it, to point northward.*

The alternative—that she was headed south and had no intention of returning to the Merry Men—was too painful to think about.

So I followed her. Yipped the horses into moving and continued the road south, toward the outskirts of Wilford. I leaned low in the bench, as if my hectic, air-friendly posture could make the carriage move faster.

I debated cutting the cart loose and taking a horse, to ride faster, but I knew the Merry Men would need this cargo-carrier. They were already going to fume about the paltry bag of coins I got for our Wilford haul.

I quieted my mind of possibilities, trying not to jump to conclusions. I didn't know Robin's intention, what she knew, or where she was going.

I had to trust her. Trust she would return to the people who could protect her. *How did she escape those cloaked men? How did they end up dead? Surely she couldn't have ended them all ...* No, I needed to stop thinking. Just ride.

The carriage bumped over an uneven stone and nearly sent me flying. The wind slashed against me from my breakneck speed. I tore through the road wildly, the horses huffing and snorting as they galloped.

A gate stood ahead. The edge of the town proper.

Three men stepped out from behind the stone pillars of the open fence. Cloaked in black.

“Fuck,” I growled.

They stopped in the middle of the road, staring at me barreling toward them. There was no way around them. To the left off the trail was thick mud, to the right was a dry riverbed. Both would send me careening.

Whistling, I slowed the horses. “Whoa, now.” I patted their hindquarters.

The men sauntered toward the carriage, sneers on their faces as they studied me.

The one in front said, “Afternoon, Father.”

“Hail, soldier.” I tried to make my voice cheery.

This was an obstacle I didn’t need. These men looked like the dead ones from the field. Not soldiers, exactly, but with rough-and-tumble garb and expressions that said they’d seen battle. *Mercenaries and bounty hunters, perhaps.*

I was a warrior at heart, yet I doubted I could take three at once. I held the reins loosely in my grip, sitting straight-backed. “Can I help you men?”

“Aye. Been sightings of an outlaw on the loose. A fugitive. We’ve been tasked with bringing her in.”

“Her?” I said, tilting my head in mock confusion. With a small smile, I added, “A lass doing criminal deeds? Color me surprised. Times must really be tough if a girl is doing the dirty work.”

“Aye, Father,” the man said with a bark of a laugh. “Vagrants these days, eh?”

I smiled tightly at him.

“Goin’ to have to ask you to step down, sir.”

My smile faltered. “What’s that?”

“Goin’ to have to check your carriage bay, Father.”

I chuckled. “There’s no fiery lasses in there, sir. I assure you that.” I gestured at my habit, as if to make the point that a monk would not typically be accompanied by a woman, much less a criminal.

It didn’t work.

His gaze narrowed on me. “Even so.”

With a sigh, I slowly dismounted. “Here, I can show—”

“I’ll do the showing, Father. Just step over here.” He pointed to the front of the carriage, next to the horses’ heads.

I did as he said, tucking my hands into the sewn pockets of my habit. My fingers ghosted over iron bands, which I called Atonement and Discipline. They were knuckle-guards—

handholds I could wrap around my palms, with an iron cross stretched sideways over the knuckles of each hand.

I didn't wear my holy symbol around my neck, like most men of the cloth. I wore it on my fists.

My eyes flicked to the two men behind me, watching their captain inch toward the door of the cart.

I tapped my foot impatiently, eager to get back on the road. Being a traveling monk, I never had problems in these situations. It was a useful disguise, especially in the face of highwaymen or the authorities. It was one of the reasons I could appear in Nottingham—somewhat protected by my status as a benefactor for the homeless—and not get arrested.

There was a bounty on each one of the Merry Men, but no one had deduced *I* was the bald-headed man in their crude drawings. To them, he was just another criminal. Certainly not a friar.

“Really, sirs, I'm late for a confessional in—”

The captain swung the door of the carriage open.

The bottom half of his head exploded as a crossbow bolt slammed into his mouth from an arm's length away, shearing off his jaw, sending teeth, brain, and bone blasting into the air behind him.

I jumped, mind tilting from being startled by the loud, grotesque sound and visual of plopping brain matter and raining blood.

I was just as confused and shocked as anyone else.

Before the captain had collapsed to the ground, one of the mercenaries shouted, “Christ above!” and their swords rasped out of their scabbards behind me.

I spun, wrapping my fists around Atonement and Discipline, pulling the metal knuckles out of my pockets.

The first man swung his sword and I punched it wide in a shower of sparks. The second soldier attacked my other flank and I punched low, slapping it out of the air at the same time.

I spun, using my fists like shields—protected by the cross-covered iron band wrapped over my knuckles.

“What kind of fucking monk are you?!” the leftmost mercenary cried. “You killed Captain!”

“I did no such thing!” I wondered *who* was sitting in the cargo bay of the carriage.

The men were skilled, and I backpedaled to keep them in front of me. When one mercenary tried to flank me, I pivoted, closed the gap, and smacked his sword thrust harmlessly past me with a flick of my wrist.

I closed the gap—much faster than a portly man of my stature should have been able to—and stepped into his guard, looping my arm over his.

He twisted, trying to break free, and I smashed Discipline into his bicep, flattening the muscle and making him drop his sword.

He screamed.

The second mercenary came in quick, stabbing viciously at my side—

And I couldn't turn fast enough while grappling the first man. Pain seared through me as the sword sliced past my thick habit and nicked my side.

I growled, winced, and finished off the first man by slamming my free fist into his face with a sharp *crack* of bone, indenting his forehead with a sideways cross from the force of my punch.

His eyes rolled and he fell backward, convulsing on the ground as his brain scrambled.

The second soldier reeled back to stab me again—

And his arm was taken off at the elbow by a massive sword that severed cleanly through his bone and muscle.

His arm dropped to the ground, still clutching his weapon. It took a second for him to notice what had happened. Then he

shrieked, spurting blood from his dislodged shoulder, and turned to face his killer.

Sir Gregory swung his blade in an overhand sweep, beheading the man and silencing his cries. The man's head thudded to the ground, and his body followed.

My eyes widened. The old man we had captured with Robin ... he didn't seem so elderly right now, or weak. The old dog held a grimace of angry pain, teeth bared and gritted together. This was a soldier who believed he'd aged out of battle and could live a peaceful life, only to be thrust back into it against his will.

A man never forgets his training.

"Jesus in a fog," I grumbled, looking at the three dead men in the road. "Are you a phantom, materializing in my carriage like that?"

"No, Friar."

I realized then what I'd missed. *He must have been watching from the fields and snuck into the carriage when I went looking for Robin.*

Gregory took another step closer. Death was written on his face. Blood covered his armor, and I couldn't tell how much of it was his.

I imagine he's the answer to my question about who killed the men in the fields. Sighing, I said, "Well, regardless, thank you for helping me."

"I'm not."

"Not what?"

"Helping you."

His greatsword lifted from the ground, leveled with both hands, and he rested the tip against my throat.

I swallowed and raised my hands in surrender, even as I imagined fending him off with Atonement and Discipline, framing my face in the air.

But I hesitated. One wrong move would end me—and this clearly wasn't a man who was fucking about.

I winced, a bead of blood dripping down my neck from the sword point. “What are you doing, Sir Gregory?”

His frown encompassed his entire bearded face. “I’m changing the terms of our agreement, Friar Tuck.”



Chapter 38

Little John



I wanted to go riding after Robin and Tuck. The sun was falling fast. I kept glancing up at the twilight sky. My knee bounced incessantly where I sat on an overturned log at the witch's cabin.

This part of the forest always seemed supernatural to me. Perhaps it was the ruin—cracked, brittle stone held up by the roots of a massive oak tree. I wondered about the story of this place, and its eerie presence.

Men had lost their minds here. When we arrived during the last cycle of our relocation, a mad hermit had been camping out in the hollow of the tree inside the ruins. We were too unnerved to push him out so the Merry Men could take residence, so *we* ended up continuing on to the next hideaway.

Funny, how one man had frightened dozens. That was the power of this place. You had to be wary of its call. A lunatic nomad like that had a much closer relationship with the spirits of the ruins than we did.

Though I wasn't pagan, I didn't want to run my luck against them. Best let bygones be bygones.

Alan-a-Dale sat across from me, whittling something out of a long tree branch. Taking his mind off our missing star, even as I lost mine like that hermit.

"They should be back by now," I said, my voice clipped. "It doesn't take that long to sell linens. We're close enough to Nottingham that the trek shouldn't have taken more—"

"You know they weren't just going to sell silk garments, dear man. Our songbird had her own plans."

“That’s what I’m worried about. Trouble seems to follow that girl everywhere she goes.”

Alan looked up from the work on his lap, tilting his head. “Like us? Her life won’t become *less* chaotic by accompanying the Merry Men, old friend. No matter what we think.”

“You think I don’t know that?” I snapped.

He bowed his head to return to his shavings, smartly not responding.

I was growing frustrated as well as restless. My eyes scanned the camp past the huddle of stumps and logs around me and Alan. The landscape spread out in an alluvial shape, sweeping down from the ridge of the ruins. Trees blocked line-of-sight in thick bunches at every corner, though the ruin itself was nestled against a rocky cliff that hung over the foundation of the site.

The strategic layout here allowed us to put our backs to the wall, which could be advantageous to prevent getting surrounded ... but it also forced our backs against a wall.

I couldn’t think about that right now. The men were lighting fires to start the night, resting, and gathering kindling. Will Scarlet was laboring to busy his mind, shirtless and slamming an axe into logs.

Robin had robbed my mind of all logic and decency. So much had changed since she’d arrived.

I thought I was adamant in my life’s choices—that I could never care for someone like I did Imogen all those years ago. My life had become rather pointless, other than to make sure my people stayed safe. I felt responsible for the Merry Men.

Now I felt responsible for so much more. Robin had infiltrated me like a hooded snake, wrapping tight around my heart and squeezing. She forced me to reconsider my emotions—everything I’d ever done and felt—and made me realize it *was* possible to love again after Imogen.

The damned girl had imprinted herself on my mind, body, and soul. I was helpless to stop her. She was infuriating with

her brattiness, her pretty little smirks, her insatiable appetite for stirring the pot. She was also cunning, beautiful, and stubbornly determined. She was caring, even to people who didn't deserve her kindness, such as her family.

She was *mine*. Ours. I was incensed thinking of being apart from her. When I thought of her father, I raged harder. I should have ended that man for how he spoke about his daughter. Yet I couldn't. It wasn't my place.

I should have never let Robin leave. Even with Tuck there to protect her, *I* should have been the sentinel to lay my life down for her. She'd already been through so much—more than any highborn lass I could think of. I couldn't stand to think of anything going wrong for Robin in Nottingham.

How will her father react to seeing her? Her ailing mother? The townsfolk, especially those who know she's a wanted woman?

I had told Tuck to get in and get out. Don't dally in Nottingham. Begrudgingly, I had let them go because I'd made an oath to Robin, and I never broke my oaths.

For the first time since I could remember, I *cared* for something. For someone. What began as a typical abduction had blossomed into something so much more. Something so real, visceral, and close.

I loved that woman.

With a gasp, my eyes widened. I looked up from the mossy ground to see Alan staring peculiarly at me, as if he could hear my thoughts aloud. My pulse drummed in my veins.

That word had not been on my lips, or in my mind, in ages. Since I was a young man.

I didn't partake in whoring like other Merry Men, because I didn't want to taint Imogen's pristine memory. I wanted her to live forever inside me.

Now, I recognized Robin had taken her place. Somehow, that skinny young thing with the brown shoulder-length hair had stolen me from the one memory I kept sacred.

Robin of Wilford was more of a bandit than I could ever hope to be.

“You’ve truly waded in neck-deep, haven’t you?” Alan asked with a frown, his voice serious.

I gave him a small nod, bowing my head again. My fingers threaded together between my knees.

“That helpless look in your eyes, lost in thought—”

“You’ve made your point, Alan. Leave me be.”

“Worrying will get you no—”

“I said leave me be!”

Heads veered over from the camp. Will and the ogreish Stump stood with their arms crossed near the cutting block, exchanging words. Their eyes glanced over at me intermittently. Their exchange looked fiery. The brazen young man only came up to Stump’s barrel chest, yet he would never back down from a fight.

Honestly, Will Scarlet could take any of us in a sword fight. What did he have to be scared of? So what if he was pushing back against a viking of a man.

He wandered over with his chopping axe, reaching our circle of logs and debris in front of the ruins.

Will thrust the axe toward me, and I raised my brow.

“Here,” he said, “get up and get working, John. You can’t be wallowing. The others are noticing.”

“Noticing?”

“Aye.” He sounded vexed. “Do something to keep your mind off it. You think I’m not wrapped up in my head about our little thorn?”

“Really, boys?” a sultry voice said behind us, coming from inside the crumbling walls of the ruins. Maid Marian stood up out of nowhere. Eavesdropping. She shook her head and rested her hands on her hips, striking a pose. “The silly girl has you this scrambled? You men are turning into lost little boys. I’m disappointed in your lack of focus.”

I ignored her, frowning at Will. “We react differently, Scarlet. You react by challenging big men. I react by sitting and thinking.”

“And Alan-a-Dale sculpts pretty little gifts for his pretty little girl,” Marian said, wrinkling her nose.

I blinked at her. “No one asked for your help, Marian. Will you fuck off?”

She let out a haughty scoff. “Little John!”

I flapped my hand at her, imitating the same shooing motion she loved to do. “Please. Sit back in the shadows, or wherever you came from.”

Affronted, she shook her head and wandered off.

Will said, “Lying around makes you look weak, Little John. Is that what you want? We can’t have our leader in such a helpless state. You still have others to look after.”

“I thought you didn’t consider me your leader, boy.”

He thrust the handle of the axe into my palm. “I’m not your boy,” he snarled. “And you’re the only one who wants the job.” He turned to walk away once I held the axe, the wood comfortable in my grip, like an old lover.

Like Robin. Seconds later, I shook my head. *Jesus, these two are right. I’m lost.*

With a groan, I stood. Stray leaves trickled down from the sky, brown and red in the soft breeze. I stared up at the trees hanging over the high cliff, wondering if the seasonal fall was a sign. Sticks and sprigs snapped in the distance, past the thick, impenetrable tree line beyond. It was dark and—

I froze. *Leaves rustling in the breeze ... except the breeze hasn’t picked up.* My eyes narrowed.

Alan said, “What’s wrong, boss?”

I held my breath, concentrating—

A dark blur crossed the threshold between two trees.

Shadow? Animal?

“Men!” I called out.

The Merry Men faced me as one. I quickly realized my mistake as they put their backs to the woods.

Blacksmith Benny, who had taken over for Will’s log-cutting duties, furrowed his brow. “Sir?”

Then an arrow whistled into Benny’s neck from the side, his voice cutting off on a wet gurgle.

“Fuck,” I whispered.

The trees came alive.

The Merry Men jumped into action—half of them yelling the dead man’s name, frightened and confused. The other half reached for the closest weapons.

One ginger-bearded man I’d known for ten years, named Rory, stood from a campfire and reached for his sword and shield.

He took four arrows in the chest before he was to his feet, dancing like a marionette on a string before dropping.

Our backup cook spun around from where he roasted a rabbit stew over a fire and fell from an onslaught of arrows. One went through his thigh, another through his eye.

Will Scarlet jumped into action before anyone else, picking up his swords from the ground after just throwing his shirt and sash on. He rolled in the mossy undergrowth as arrows pelted the area around him.

Stump was quick behind him, roaring like a monster and throwing half-chopped logs at the tree line, creating cover for himself while he found his own weapon.

Alan flipped over the log where he sat, belly-crawling to his nearby sword. I flung the axe toward the tree line to keep the shadows at bay, and sidestepped behind a tree. Drawing my quarterstaff, I surveyed the scene.

It was chaos. Our enemies were picking us off like fucking squirrels, hopping out from the foliage and bushes with arrows

drawn before sinking back in, black garb keeping them well-hidden in the night's darkness.

I saw where the ambush's efforts were being focused—where the trees rattled loudest—and careened out from behind the other side of the tree I hid behind.

With my staff held behind me, I disappeared into the thick foliage, hiding as I crouch-ran, making myself low.

A man popped out from a bush, longbow drawn as he aimed in front of him at the camp and didn't see me flanking him—until the last second, when he turned.

Spinning my quarterstaff out from behind me, I cracked it over his wrists, breaking both. He squealed and dropped his bow, sending the nocked arrow harmlessly skidding.

His mouth opened to sound the alarm, but I spun my long cudgel sideways and batted him across the cheek, breaking the bones in his face. He flopped down and I ran on, seeking my next target.

The soldier heard me coming—I was a big man, after all—and he spun to pull back his bowstring.

Inhaling sharply, I twirled out of the way, behind branches, creating cover in the dense woods.

The arrow twanged and smacked into a branch near my forehead.

I rolled low and came up with my staff drawn, jamming the hard end at him.

He swatted my attack away with his bow, backing up out of the bush where he stood. He stumbled, and I pounced, swinging over-handed with full force—

Crack!

My staff snapped his bow down the middle as he lifted it, and the momentum and force of my strike slammed the staff into his head, caving his skull.

Enemies were privy to my location now. More arrows whizzed by, thudded into the trees near me.

I had pressed my luck enough, charging this far into the fray. Begrudgingly, I growled and turned to get back to my men—

Only to run up on a swordsman in my face.

He lunged to gut me—

And Will Scarlet's sword came crashing down on it, smacking it low. The young lad spun, crunching his elbow into the man's nose, sending him collapsing to the ground in a spray of blood.

“Go!” Will said, wild-eyed.

I knew better than to argue with him in that moment. He took my place as the spearhead of our counterattack, and I watched carefully as he shimmied through trees, hardly with a rustle, and materialized in front of our enemies like a living specter.

I watched in awe as Will cut down three men in rapid succession, swords blurring with silver glints in the choppy moonlight. The red sash around his neck swung in the wind, its color muted in the darkness.

Then he was gone from my view, pressing further into the enemy's disheveled line.

I shook my head, retreating back to the witch's camp.

Four of my men lay dead. Others were congregating, shoulder to shoulder, awaiting command.

Alan took charge in my absence, yelling and pointing into the fray where he could see Will wreaking havoc on the enemy lines.

The Merry Men charged, hopping over fallen boles and branches. Swords clanged and sparked in the night.

I joined them, standing next to Stump as he bellowed a battle-cry and tore into the enemies.

Their moment of surprise was finished. They had caused untold destruction, yet the Merry Men now fought back, valiantly defending our camp.

How did it come to this? I wondered amidst the madness. How were we found so quickly? Who are these men?

Stump waved a longaxe like a berserker, keeping our dark-clad adversaries at bay. He challenged anyone and everyone. I spun my staff next to him, and we charged the two nearest men together. Brothers in arms.

Glimpsing past the first line of archers, which was quickly breaking in our favor, my stomach sank.

More shadows danced in the distance, and it wasn't Will Scarlet's dance of death.

No, it was at least a dozen enemy reinforcements, illuminated by the moon's slashing light.

"Fuck," I muttered, and knew we were doomed if I didn't order a retreat soon.



Chapter 39

Will Scarlet



“Fucking *vermin!*” I shouted, hand slicing left.

Shlick—

A man’s hand, cut off at the wrist, flying through the air as I pulled my bloody sword back and darted to the next man in line.

“He thinks he cares more than *me?!?*”

My head thumped, blood rushing in my ears. Some blood dripped into my eyes, and I blinked the burn away as I sighted the next man.

“Ahhh-*grkk!*” he groaned, my blade dragging across his throat, opening up a geyser of red.

“He *has* to know how much that feisty little vixen means to me! What, he thinks he’s the only one who can feel things? *I can feel things too, Little John!*”

I had never been good at expressing my emotions with anything other than rage. Good for me, then, that I had an outlet with which to expel my thoughts.

An archer hopped up from a hedge with a cry of dismay, seeing his two friends flailing about—one with a slit throat and the other with a spurting nub at his wrist.

The archer fled, trying to weasel his way through the trees. I sidestepped—gaining a clear shot without branches in the way—dropped my sword, whipped a dagger out, and launched it through the air.

The dagger sank into the man’s spine. His back bowed and he crumpled forward in a tumble of leaves.

I laughed at the fool then ducked to pick up my sword—

But a foot fell on top of it, pinning it there.

I glanced up, eyebrows lifting, wondering how someone had snuck up on me. “Shit,” I sighed at the man standing over me, smirking that shitty little smirk with his thin mustache twisting.

I hopped back just in time to avoid his eviscerating chop at my belly, surrendering my blade on the ground.

His hand moved fast, keeping me at a distance. I changed my battle stance with my single sword, wrapping my free hand under my first at the hilt, tilting the sword forward as my back foot slid behind me.

The man’s smug expression only tilted one side of his thin lips. His black hair was reminiscent of mine yet longer, past his shoulders. His studded leather armor reflected moonlight. He was a pale reaper—one I wished to never see again.

“William Scadlock,” he purred with a grim smile, “it’s been too long. How is dear Jonathan?” He roved to the sides like a shark, to test my stance. He didn’t get close enough to strike, so I remained frozen where I stood, narrowed eyes darting to follow him.

I was not about to underestimate *this* asshole.

“Not long enough, Guy of Jizzborne,” I breathed, suppressing the shiver at my nape.

He chuckled. “Jizzborne. Adorable. I see you haven’t grown up.”

“What’s the point? Sounds boring. I’d rather just make your life hell, mate.”

His smile flickered, nose twitching.

It was a tell, and I was ready. “Gotten any better at swordplay since last we met?” I asked.

He lunged, lightning-fast, wielding his longsword like a saber and thrusting at my chest.

I swept away and took a graze across my tunic as I leaped off my feet. My boot caught the tree trunk at my flank and I

pushed off it like a springboard, launching into the air and bringing my sword down on his head.

Guy glanced up, unmoving but undoubtedly surprised, and lowered himself into a somersault at the last second, rolling away.

I charged at him as he popped up to his feet. Our blades whirred and clanged together. I gave him no quarter, pressing my attack, gritting my teeth, sweating through my clothes as my muscles burned and I went on a full offensive. I looked for a weakness in his defenses but found none.

For all my chirping about Guy of Gisborne, the man was a masterful swordsman. Perhaps the best in the land, as well as the best archer, reportedly.

He parried every strike effortlessly. His face never broke from his shitty little smirk, never gave away his inner thoughts. When I had him on his heels, he backed into a birch tree and quickly noticed his disadvantage. He pirouetted around it as my sword sliced for his head.

My blade stuck knuckle-deep into the tree trunk and Guy smiled and stabbed at me.

I released my hold on the sword to duck low, then jumped to my full height, kicked out to keep him at bay. My hand closed around the hilt of my blade and I yanked it out of the trunk before Guy was back on me, pressing his attack.

He went on the offensive. I staved off most of his attacks. *Most* of them. One nicked me in the leg. Another caught my arm somehow. I hadn't even seen that one, but it opened and spilled blood on the forest floor.

With an angry huff, I backed up at double speed to put some distance between us.

I would never admit it, but I couldn't beat Guy of Gisborne in a straight duel. Not with only one sword.

I scanned the ground. Couldn't see my other blade anywhere in the underbrush. Guy had me dead to rights.

Then I noticed shadows behind him, closing in. They weren't coming from the direction of the witch's cabin, which meant they weren't Merry Men.

My eyes blew wide.

Guy smiled, likely thinking he had caused my unnerved expression.

A roar echoed through the trees to our right.

Our heads whipped over, surprised—

As Stump came barreling into the space with his axe, bare-chested and fucking huge. He swung his curved blade in wide arcs, both hands gripped on the haft. His muscles bulged when he flexed against Guy of Gisborne.

Guy was momentarily caught off-guard. The quick snake of a man slithered back to safer grounds. His eyes watched both of us.

Stump put himself in front of me. "Too many of them, lad. Get out of here."

"Like fucking hell I—"

Stump's fist flew off his axe handle and slammed me in the jaw.

I staggered back, seeing white behind my eyes, and thudded to the ground. Staring up at him wide-eyed, I cradled my throbbing jaw.

"No time to argue this time," he said with a smirk. "You're too young to die here. I'm too fucking tired."

And I'm the madman?

He winked. "That sweet little tart of yours would kill me in my sleep if she knew I let you die."

"Stump, you ignorant fucking idiot—"

"I'll hold them off. Get John and get the fuck out of here."

He swung his axe over his head, screaming at the enemies as they advanced toward us—an entire second wing of reinforcements. The Merry Men had decimated the first group

after taking some losses of our own during their surprise ambush.

I flared my nostrils, gritting my teeth, and hopped to my feet.

Sir Guy said, “How noble of you, barbarian,” as he slashed his sword in the air and stepped toward Stump.

“Brandon,” I said. “His name is Brandon.” *As much as we’ve bickered and quarreled over the years, he’s my fucking brother.*

My heart thundered in my chest. Blood pounded in my ears, down my arm, leg. I was wounded. Up against all odds. An unwinnable position.

So I did as Stump asked. Only because he demanded it of me. What kind of a brother would I be to deny him his glory?

Vikings loved that shit.

But me? ... I wanted to stay alive.

I had a little thorn I needed to pluck free.

I sprinted toward camp, away from the iron wall that was Stump.

Then I heard Guy’s voice: “Two shillings to whoever cuts down the giant.”

He was *enjoying* this.

I growled, stopped at a tree, and watched for a few seconds. Stump was quickly surrounded. He swung in vicious arcs that kept people at bay, until the spears started to show up.

One man got too close and his head flew from his shoulders. But Brandon earned three quick stabs from another man while beheading that first one.

The others drew in.

Brandon Stump bellowed, shaking the trees and the very foundation of the earth. He fought like an einherjar—one of the warriors of his people he’d told me about over a campfire. The elite warriors who fought for Odin.

“Those who fight alone,” he had translated.

Now I understood. Stump was never a fit for the Merry Men. We were a band, he was a solitary warrior. A lone wolf who fought to the tune of his own howl.

I watched as he cut down another man. His body slowed as blood dripped from his many wounds.

I forced myself to keep watching. Up until the point four men circled him, with Guy of Gisborne in the lead, that shitty little smirk on his face.

They overwhelmed Stump, tackling him until I could no longer see my friend.

I turned tail to find Little John and try to recover what we could from this dismal day.



Chapter 40

Robin



Somehow I'd gotten turned around. I should have left Nottingham through the same gate Tuck and I used to arrive. But I would've had to go through the entire city, increasing my chances of capture from the black-cloaked men. Who knew how many of them waited for me on the other side of the arched bridge?

So I'd gone south, through the exit I was familiar with. I'd rounded the outskirts of Wilford and Nottingham in the countryside to push north.

Now, I was surrounded on all sides by thick trees. I recognized none of the landmarks. I thought I knew Sherwood Forest well ... but I only knew the little section of it close to my estate. I had overestimated my knowledge and now I was paying for it by losing time.

I have to get back to the Merry Men before they're attacked! If anyone else has access to this map ...

My tears had dried. I had succumbed to the notion that Uncle Gregory was dead, valiantly protecting my escape, even when my distrust for him had reached a fever pitch. *I'm sorry for doubting you, Uncle.*

The cut across my arm was worse than I realized. As the sun began to set, dizziness hit me. I had to slow my horse, lest I pass out and get thrown from my saddle.

The map, I thought. Blood loss had affected my focus. I have all the answers tucked away in my shirt.

Pulling up on the reins of the brown mare, I whispered in her ear and patted her neck, slowing her to a trot and then a walk. "Where do you think we are, girl?" I asked, and she snorted in response. We'd been traveling north for hours now.

Had I taken the wrong trail to get to the witch's cabin? Was I even going there? I couldn't remember if Little John had said we were staying overnight in the new location, or if it was time to move already, to keep Sir Guy of Gisborne behind us.

I dismounted to catch my breath. Checking the back of my forearm, near my elbow, I winced at the vicious slice. The wound was dark and grimy with dirt. The blood had stopped running, yet now it was caked with filth from my mad rush to get out of Wilford.

I needed to wash it so it wouldn't fester.

There's no time!

"You won't be saving anyone if you can't save yourself first, sister," Robert reminded me.

"I know that."

Closing my eyes, I let the dizziness envelop me for a moment, hoping to fight it off by regulating my breathing. I listened for sounds of running water. Heard nothing. Just the chirping of insects and nighttime critters in the forest around me.

If I kept traveling the way I was going, I'd eventually run into a water source. There, I could clean my wound and wet my dry throat and parched lips. Maybe shake this confusion from my head.

I led the mare by the bit and pulled the crumpled map out. After studying it, I frowned. I knew well enough where the witch's cabin was, since it was circled, but the problem was I didn't know where *I* was. I had been blindly riding northeast, assuming I was going the right direction, only thinking of escape and rescue.

The Merry Men needed to know why they were having trouble avoiding Guy of Gisborne. They needed to know someone in their ranks had betrayed them by making this map and sending it into Nottingham to be discovered, meant to get into the law's hands.

After shuffling down the trail with my head bowed for a few minutes, I sighed. *Perhaps if I can find one of these other*

landmarks on the map, I can double back to the one where I'm supposed to be.

I looked up at my surroundings. Still nothing recognizable.

Then I heard the faint trickling of running water nearby, and my heart leaped to my throat. "Come on!" I yelled to the mare, and dragged her with me off the trail. We slid down a small slope, through a thicket of weeds and bushes, and came to a clear creek.

I went to my knees and cupped my hands into the frigid water. My steed bowed her head and drank. The taste was crisp and rejuvenating.

Before I could splash any on the jagged cut across my arm, a low growl to my left froze me.

Slowly, I glanced over. My stomach dropped.

Three wolves sat on their haunches less than a stone's throw away from me, sipping from the tiny creek. Watching me.

My eyes widened and I stumbled to my feet, balling my hands into fists. One of the wolves stood on all fours—a massive gray creature with yellow eyes that glimmered in the early moonlight.

Shit, shit, shit! I'd dropped my bow during the scuffle with the three men in the field.

The other two wolves pushed up from their hind legs. I backed up into the mare's flank, and she whinnied, stepping haphazardly around me.

"Don't fear," said a voice on the other side of the creek. "They won't harm you."

My head whipped over to the scratchy voice.

A man appeared from between low-hanging branches of a sagging tree. I could smell his earthy, sour scent from here, wafting on the breeze. He was shorter than me, and wore his hair in gray braids that reached down to his chest. They were gnarled and thick like roots. His dark skin, nearly black,

created an immaculate frame for his blindingly white teeth. His smile wrinkled his aged face.

Had he not appeared through the trees, I would have never spotted him. He blended in perfectly with the landscape. Almost as if he was *part* of the terrain.

“Who are you?” I asked hesitantly.

“A simple nomad, ma’am.”

“Those wolves are ... yours?”

He chuckled in a high-pitched tone. “The creatures of nature belong to no man, anymore than that beautiful steed belongs to you.”

I blinked.

“But they won’t attack you, because I feed them well.” He shrugged. “We can’t control the spirits of the forest, but we can bribe them.”

My brow furrowed.

He said, “Where are you headed in such a hurry, if you don’t mind my asking?”

For all his ragged, strange appearance, he seemed sane and eloquent. If he was mad—as his words suggested—he hid it well.

“I do mind,” I said defensively. Then I recognized it wasn’t in my best interest to disregard or anger this man. Not if he could “bribe” the wolves to eat me. “Apologies.”

He crouched in front of the river across from me, legs bowing awkwardly to his sides. “It’s no matter, ma’am. I am heading south. I was called for work.”

“Work?”

“I am something of a healer.” His chin jutted toward my arm. “Which it seems you might be in need of.”

I glanced at my arm. It was bleeding again, cracked from when I bent it to drink the water. The red droplets were

dripping into the clear water, slowly evaporating into murky red dots on its surface.

“You seem to be heading north, hastily,” he said, nodding sagely to himself.

The wolves off to the side were ignoring me, their protective aggression gone so they could sip from the creek some more.

“Aye,” I said, and rubbed the back of my neck. “I am going to—” *Wait*, I thought. *I just said I didn't want this odd man knowing where I was going.* “You’re a healer, you said?”

“Some would say. I simply speak to the forest and she heeds my call. Sometimes. You never have to look far for ointments and potions if you live surrounded by their ingredients.” His white smile shone through his dark face as he gestured wide at the woodlands.

My curiosity piqued. Rubbing water over my wound, and wincing, I said, “Might I ask your name, sir?”

“It is Wulfric, ma’am.”

Slowly, a laugh rolled out of me. I threw my head back. I felt I was cracking, going hysterical.

“It *is* quite a funny name, isn’t it?” he said, chuckling.

“No, I’m sorry, sir. The irony is simply incredible.”

“Irony, ma’am?”

“My family was supposed to go looking for you up in Barnsdale. To help my mother. That was many moons ago, and we never made it. And now you’re here.”

Another smile. “Aye. Perhaps to find your mother, south?”

“If you are, you won’t find her in Wilford. At least I didn’t.” My voice was clipped, frustrated.

“Ah. Well, perhaps I can help *you* instead.”

I glanced up from the creek.

He reached into the heavy coat he wore, amidst clanking and rustling. He came out with a small bottle, reached into it,

and dragged a finger through some goop. I could smell the sticky substance from here. It was sharply unpleasant, making my nose wrinkle.

“Let me see your arm,” he said, motioning for me.

Hesitantly, I reached across the stream. His rough hands fell on my pale skin and he lathered my wound in the greenish paste. I hissed from a sudden burn.

“There,” he said once finished, “that should stave off infection.”

I pouted. *That easily?* “Thank you, Wulfric.”

The burn subsided into a warm, numb sensation across my arm. It truly felt magical. If this man could speak with wolves and command them to do his bidding, perhaps he *was* magical.

I felt safer after speaking with him for a time. “Sir, do you happen to know of a place called the witch’s cabin? It’s an ancient ruin with a tree growing in—”

His smile cut me off. He pointed over my shoulder. “You went too far east. Head west less than a mile, cut south along the trail—taking the leftmost path in the fork—and you’ll run into it tucked against the hillside.”

My blood pumped. I balled my hand into a fist and punched my palm. “Excellent. Thank you, sir. Are you certain?”

“Traveler, I’ve called those ruins home on and off for years. It’s my usual dwelling when I come this far south through Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. Alas, I felt its energy waning on the wind this time when I traveled, so I avoided the area. It’s inhabited by dark spirits.”

I bit my lip nervously. “Those would be my people.”

“Then you’d best go find them. These three wolves might not harm you, but as night drags on, I can’t guarantee another pack won’t find you.”

I gasped.

Wulfric laughed. “It won’t be your skinny hide they’re after. It will be your beautiful mare’s.”

“Shit,” I muttered. “Even worse. I can’t let her die after saving me like she did.”

His head tilted and he closed his eyes. His smile returned. “You have greatness inside you. I can sense it. Follow your heart, and no matter if you stray from your path, know that there is always a route back to the ones who will keep you true to yourself. Hold to your convictions and you may become great. Good luck, Robin of Loxley.”

With that, he stood on creaking knees and shuffled back toward the trees, with the wolves hopping over the creek to follow in his wake.

It only occurred to me a few minutes after Wulfric was gone that I had never given him my name.



I tied Mercy—what I named the mare—in a small valley of trees, then pulled my hood over my head and crouched. I knew where I was now. The trees were recognizable. Just beyond the grove ahead, I could make out a sliver of the witch’s ruins through the branches.

I was arriving from a different direction than I had originally come with the Merry Men. My heart pounded at the thought of seeing them again.

Returned, as Little John had hoped.

But something was wrong. It was eerily quiet.

I stuck to the shadows—easy at night. The pain in my arm was practically gone. That strange naturalist had done wonders. I imagined he could do the same thing for my mother, if given the opportunity.

The time I spent in the woods as a youth had given me confidence to skulk through them. I didn’t crunch so much as a dry leaf or twig underfoot. My feet slid outward so I didn’t pad along and give myself away.

I stayed low to the ground and surveyed the scene ahead. Still, like a boulder. Watching.

The breeze moaned softly through the leaves and reached my nose.

And I smelled blood on the wind. When I squinted, I noticed the first signs of battle: boot prints dug into the grass and dirt, churning it into mud.

I saw no bodies, yet I recognized the long divots in the ground near the ruins, where it seemed people had been dragged through.

My breath came shallow. I fought off the ache and tiredness in my head, wishing for another sign. Wishing I knew what had happened. I had half a mind to shirk my stealth and barge into the clearing to demand answers.

From what I could see, no Merry Men were here. Our camp had been ransacked. Strangely, all the tents and accoutrements still stood.

My sign came in the form of a low rasp deeper in the trees, not ten paces from where I watched. The rasp was followed by a groan, and I located it past a glade ahead.

I stayed under the branches. My breath caught in my throat when I appeared in a small, cleared area.

Brandon, the man they called Stump, was on his back in the middle of the clearing. Trickling blood from a dozen wounds. His massive chest rose and fell with struggling, painful breaths. Blood trickled out the corner of his mouth. His head twisted when I neared him.

He didn't have long to live. Even a man like Wulfric wouldn't be able to heal him of his copious, deep wounds and blood loss.

"Stump," I whispered sadly, resting a hand on his brawny bicep.

He smiled weakly at me, coughed, and gurgled another bubble of blood. "Am ..."

"Am? You are *what*, friend? What happened here?"

His eyes jerked toward the ruins. I leaned in to listen to his rattling breath. “Ambush,” he hissed. “Waiting. F-Fly away, little starling.”

My shoulders sank, face twisted with sadness. “What of Little John and the others? I can’t abandon them.”

“R-Rescue yourself ... to rescue t-them ...”

His eyes closed. His head slunk to the side.

I wondered how long he’d been keeping himself alive just to relay his message.

I scanned the trees and the ridge of the ruins with a new objective in mind. With Stump’s newfound knowledge, I saw the telltale signs of men hiding in the outpost: Chopped wood set up to create little walls to obstruct views; tree limbs unnaturally placed around the campfires; slight rustlings in the bushes that were mistimed with the breeze.

I put my hand in Stump’s bloody paw, threading my fingers into his, and squeezed. He was cold, yet the blood was thick and warm. “Thank you, friend.”

He said nothing.

I looked down.

His chest rose and fell no more. His eyes were open. Glassy and sightless.

I sniffed and then slowly, quietly backed away in my crouch, away from the trail leading to the witch’s cabin.

The Merry Men weren’t here. All that awaited was the result of whatever fierce battle had taken place here—the victors. *My* guys had been overrun.

I couldn’t believe they were dead. I wouldn’t do it.

Can I go to the next location on the map and find them?

The thought unnerved me. If this map had gotten out to others—namely the Sheriff of Nottingham or Sir Guy of Gisborne—then nowhere in Sherwood Forest was safe for the Merry Men.

They *had* to know that, but now I had no way of warning them.

I was too late. Nothing I could do would stop this.

Worst of all, I worried I'd lost the Merry Men for good.



Chapter 41

Alan a Dale



We licked our wounds three miles southeast of the witch's cabin. Our pursuers had pushed us closer to the Lincolnshire border. If the plan was to leave Sherwood Forest until the heat died down, we were doing a fine job, nearing the edge of the tree line that stretched for miles of open grasslands before giving way to sparsely packed woodmeadows and more forest near Lincoln.

The escape from Sir Guy of Gisborne and his relentless men had been hectic. East was the only way we could run, initially, since John and Will reported enemy reinforcements closing in from every other direction. Eventually, we found a route that brought us south, trying to cover our tracks along the way.

We had lost five men, assuming Stump was dead. It was a pity because he was one of our finest fighters.

These days, I couldn't get too attached to my individual comrades. The Merry Men were getting picked off like flies on the back of a hand. Had Will or John died, my grief would have been much worse.

With Tuck absent in Nottingham, there were only seven of us. Six, if you excluded Maid Marian, which I did because she was an accompaniment to the band, not a member. We hardly had the numbers to carry out a job. Not that any were falling into our laps.

I sat on a log, whiling away, listening to the conversations around me, as I was wont to do. I carved my branch, playing aloof, and peeked out with a frown. I'd managed to escape with my lute, much to the dismay of the others, who thought it more pertinent to bring a weapon.

I told them to talk to me later this evening, when we were wallowing about our lost comrades, crying in our porridge around a campfire with no music to take the pain away.

This was a rough life. Men like Sir Guy hunted us because we were trophies, each of us with a sizeable bounty on our heads. Worst of all, more than Friar Tuck's absence or Stump's death, was that my little songbird was missing. My muse. The girl who I thought of while lamenting, who could bring me out of a depressed stupor.

My Robin. Whom I'd known less than a fortnight and had already changed my life. All of our lives. That little highborn brat had punched us in the gut and shown us a different side to living we hadn't known existed. Or had *forgotten* existed, becoming jaded, gruff, hard men over the years.

Robin rejuvenated us. Her youthful vigor, the glint for adventure in her eyes. The smirks and haughty stances. The arguing, the fear, and the passion with which she lived life.

John and Will had tasted her already. I was supremely jealous about that. I had my reasons for trying to keep my distance, however fruitless my efforts might have been.

Robin was a good person. We were not. I worried about corrupting the girl, if the damage wasn't already done. I didn't want the stink of wickedness surrounding the Merry Men like a thundercloud to rain down on her.

Time would tell. If she returned to us, her corruption would be complete. Anyone who returned to their devious captors after having a chance to escape had clearly made their decision. They also lacked a couple scruples upstairs.

I didn't want to influence her decision either way, which was why I had stayed out of it when she'd spoken with John, Will, and Tuck. *She* needed to be given the choice ... not the illusion of making one by coaxing from the others.

If she came back, all bets were off. She would be ours. I would no longer hesitate around my little songbird, and she would know it.

I would take her as soon as she'd have me.

I hadn't had this kind of visceral reaction to a lass in many years. Will Scarlet? Sure, I fancied the youthful angry lad, and he hadn't seemed so disagreeable in the past. That trio of three young recruits talking around the campfire next to the pond? I had fucked at least two of them. I wasn't sure when we'd picked up the third, but if he was anything like the others then he wouldn't be able to resist my charms for long.

Except I wasn't interested anymore. In any of it, any of *them*. Robin dominated my mind, my passion, my lust.

I finished my carving and sighed contentedly, nodding to myself as I stared down at it in my lap. Then I heard what the three boys were talking about around the fire.

"Wasn't worth the hassle, you ask me," the one on the far left said. I'd forgotten his name, but I recalled how his lips had felt around my cock a few months back, and that was more important, in my opinion.

"If we'd'a known robbing the girl's carts was gonna bring this kind'a squeeze down on us, I'd say we wouldn't'a done it," said his friend, the new boy.

"Dunno," said the fine cocksucker, "Little John's been wrapped up in her since the beginning."

The third one snickered. "I'd say she's been more *wrapped up* on him, you get my meaning."

I rolled my eyes. Fucking younglings.

They weren't wrong, though. I had to wonder if taking Robin was worth more than her price.

Then I shook my head, scoffing. *Any price would have been worth it.*

I ignored the youths for a while, because whelps like that tended to be insubordinate and rebellious for the sake of it, and there were no two ways about it.

John and Will were off on a hill to my left, speaking a more mature conversation under the night shade of a leafy beech tree.

I leaned back, pretending I was still woodworking, to listen in.

“Skellingthorpe’s not far,” Will Scarlet said. “We have friends there. Can fortify our numbers.”

“For what?” John said with an angry scoff. He paced in front of Will. “Just so they can die, too, once Guy finds us again?”

“What makes you think he’s going to find us again?”

“Call it a hunch.” John shook his head, turned, and continued his rounds. “No, we’d best keep our younglings out of the fold for now, to keep them safe.”

Will’s head lurched. “What are you saying, Little John? You think we’re pariahs?”

John’s eyes lifted from the ground, and I could see the glare in them. “That’s exactly what we are, mate. Until Guy is gone, none of us are safe.”

“Then we have to take him out.”

“We can’t. He has too many mercenaries in his employ.”

“Which is why we need more men! We’re talking in circles, man.” Will slapped his forehead with his palm and started down the hill to me and the little nook of shrubbery I sat near. “What say you, dandelion?”

“Hmm?” I craned my neck to the side, acting surprised as they both walked in my direction.

“Oh, fuck off,” Will drawled, “I know you were listening to us. Especially after you finished your little art project there.” He gestured to my lap.

Well, I suppose I’m not the slyest eavesdropper in the world. I thought about their argument. I was never the leader of this outfit. I was just along for the ride—both the adventure and the ride from the boys—and of course the money.

I had my reasons for sticking around.

“Moving so frequently has thrown off our typical relocation schedule,” I said, tapping my chin, “which makes it

difficult to rendezvous with other Merry Men.”

“See?” Will said, sweeping a hand toward John. “He thinks we need to make a stand.”

“I never suggested that.” I frowned at the boy. “You’re always too eager to get in a fight, Will Scarlet. Even ones you can’t win.”

“Exactly,” John murmured.

“And you’re too hesitant to get in one,” I told the huge man, “because you think it makes you more irredeemable than you already are.”

“I do not hesitate!” John barked, offended.

“You make him sound like Tuck,” Will said with a small snicker. “Damned for eternity, so he tries to make up for it by giving scraps to the poorest peasants.”

“You mean the peasants like your *father*?” I scolded.

Will’s nostrils flared with anger. “Get the name of my father out of your mouth, dandelion. No one cares for him more than me—”

“I know that, lad. What I’m saying is you can’t pick and choose who you help. If you’re going to give to the poor, make it *all* the poor. Not just the ones you’re related to.”

Will closed the gap between us. I didn’t bother standing. I already knew he could kill me in a swordfight, so what was the point of getting blustery with the young windbag? He’d miss my music if he cut into me.

“We’re getting off-track,” John tried to butt in. “We need to find Tuck. He’s smarter than the rest of us.”

“Debatable,” I blurted. “Besides, he’ll know where to find us if he avoids Guy and sees our abandoned witch’s cabin. Otherwise, I’m afraid our dear chaplain is dead.”

Will’s eyes narrowed on me, arms folding over his chest. “Why aren’t you being your usual snarky self?”

I sighed and leaned back, staring up at the starry sky through the canopies. “Because I don’t find much to be joyful

about right now, Will. Because we're missing the one person who would bring the music and sardonic glee out of me. And it's not Friar Tuck."

"Robin?" John asked, incredulous. "But she's safe in Nottingham."

"Safe? Based on what theory?" I asked. "She went to find her mother and father, who we already know aren't the finest weeds in the grass, by your own admission, Little John."

He threw his arms up, abruptly getting flustered. "She left us on her own!"

"And what if she was found and captured by someone *else*? What if she's being beaten by her hateful father as we speak? What if she came back to the witch's cabin on her own volition, only to find Sir Guy of Gisborne there but not know it because she doesn't know what he fucking looks like?" Spit flew from my lips as my anger soared, and I stood. The thing on my lap fell to the ground. "The point is, we *don't know*. And it's fucking killing me. I know it's killing you, too."

That shut them both up. They shared a look and a long moment of silence.

Then Will said, "Dammit, Alan-a-Dale. You're right. We have to find her."

"Then we'll set up a search party," John said, nodding diligently. "We'll scour every inch of these woods until we find her."

"With what men?" Will snapped, bringing the whole thing back to his original point.

From the top of the hill behind them, under the shadow of the beech tree, I saw Maid Marian's envious silhouette and heard her scoff and wander off in the other direction.

I pouted, impressed with Will's rhetoric, and nodded. "Fair game, Will Scarlet. I think we have to round up more Merry Men, as you initially deduced."

"We have some other things to worry about right now, boys."

The familiar voice whipped our heads to the far end of the pond. The three jittery lads at the fire jumped to their feet and drew their weapons.

Friar Tuck walked in from the shadows. He wasn't smiling. He waddled slowly in an awkward way.

"Tuck!" I yelled with a smile. "I hope you didn't hear all the awful things we were saying about you."

He stood stock-still, rigid at the lip of the pond.

My smile vanished. That's when I saw the second shadow behind him—*directly* behind him—and the old weathered face of a knight pop out, undoubtedly with a sword pressed to Friar Tuck's spine.

Sir Gregory frowned at us. "Hold your swords, lads. We have some things to discuss."



Chapter 42

Alan a Dale



The nine of us encircled the pond, eyeing one another. An hour had passed—nearly the last five minutes of it in silence. It was me, Will, John, Tuck, the three younger lads, Maid Marian, and Sir Gregory of Wilford.

“*This* is how Sir Guy knows how to find us,” John muttered, staring at the ragged map Tuck held.

“Aye,” Tuck said. “Which means we aren’t safe here, either. We need to keep moving.”

Will growled, “Goddammit all. We aren’t safe *anywhere*.”

“Don’t blame God, Scarlet. Blame one of us.”

We stepped nervously from side to side.

“What?” Will asked, confused.

Tuck flapped the map in the air. “This was sewn into one of the dresses I took to the almshouse. Which meant it came from here.”

Sir Gregory nodded. “The orphan girl who received the dress showed the map to her sister, Emma, who brought the map to me. I copied it. Emma wasn’t sure what to do with it, bless her heart.”

“Brought it to you where?” Will asked.

“In the Wilford estate, where I’ve taken up residence since Sir Thomas and Baroness Joan have disappeared.”

“*Disappeared?*” Little John said. “I just saw that bastard Thomas the other night!”

Gregory shrugged. He hadn’t lifted his dagger from Tuck’s side, even as we spoke, making sure we understood our chaplain was his captive. It was the only leverage he had and

the only thing keeping us from killing him, so I couldn't fault the old man.

He had some balls even coming back here.

"Robin has my copy," Gregory added.

Heads snapped over to him.

"How?" I asked.

"Long story. I saved her from Guy's men. She thought I had ordered them to find her and your band."

John stroked his bushy beard. He towered over the rest of us, his huge shoulders slumped. "So she knows Guy is after her. And after us. Which also means she might run into Guy at the witch's cabin. If she's not careful ..."

"I say it again," Will cut in, "we need to find her!" He sounded desperate.

We had too many conflicting opinions on our next plan of action, and no real leader to make the choice. Voices rose in unison, arguing.

Maid Marian raised her hand. "Hold, hold. Aren't you louts forgetting something?"

"What?" John asked. She dampened everyone's nervous excitement with a single motion.

"Oh, I don't know," Marian continued, sighing loudly as if she couldn't believe how stupid we all were. "Maybe wondering *who made this fucking map?* There's a traitor in our midst. None of us will be safe until they're discovered. We will always be on the run."

"Us? We?" Will said snidely.

As much as I agreed with him for criticizing her, Maid Marian was right. The voices died and I could only hear the chirring of bugs in the bushes. Suspicion fell over our faces as we glanced at each other, making sure not to lock eyes. *One of us has betrayed the Merry Men. Perhaps it was someone killed during Guy's ambush. If so, he got what he deserved.*

A full minute passed.

Marian sighed again. “You people can’t be this blind or foolish ...”

I tilted my head at her.

“It isn’t Tuck. That makes no sense. He’s the only one of you who doesn’t have a bounty on his head due to his shadowy connection to the church. He has no need for secrecy: Tuck goes into Nottingham whenever he pleases, and could easily hand-deliver this thing.

“... But who sewed the dresses *with* him? Who has the motive—the only one among us—to call for help? Maybe the fucking *hostage*? Can it be mere coincidence the map landed in the arms of her handmaid?”

I hated what she was saying. I also couldn’t argue with the logic of it. The others shook their heads. For as much of a fantasist as I was, I could only see the threads connecting. The logic in what Maid Marian was spouting.

Will, John, and Tuck were vocally doubtful, muttering unintelligibly. The other three lads looked confused and suspicious.

Marian put her hands on her hips. “Robin is your culprit, and you all know it.”

“No,” John growled.

Marian frowned at him. “You can’t argue with—”

“*NO*,” he repeated, emphatic, furious. “I’ll not stand for you besmirching her like this, Maid Marian.”

“You say that because you care for her,” Marian replied calmly. “I understand the heartache this causes, John. How could someone who seemed so invested in you—so *attached*—rip your heart out like this?”

She was right, again. It was tearing my heart into pieces with every word she said. *Robin ... our betrayer?* I could hardly fathom it.

Will Scarlet said as much a moment later. “That’s not our little thorn. She wouldn’t do that.”

Marian opened her mouth to speak again, to shut him down, but Friar Tuck interrupted first. “Wait,” he said, shouldering Sir Gregory next to him. “You said you protected her *from* Sir Guy. That you fought off his men to allow her to escape. That makes no sense if she was seeking his aid to find us.”

Gregory frowned. “I can’t be positive it was Sir Guy’s men. I simply saw danger for my niece and raised my sword, as I was trained to do.”

Marian idly pointed at Gregory. “It’s easily explainable, yet a bit morbid. With you dead, Gregory, the line of ascension to the Wilford estate shrinks even further. Upon her mother and father’s deaths—”

“I already abdicated the estate *years* ago, and Robin knows that!”

She gave an easy shrug. “Then it’s what you said: She didn’t know the men were Guy’s. *We* don’t even know that. She was simply living on the whimsies of a young, impressionable girl. If there’s ever been a more perfect example of her impressionability, it’s from *you* lot, you hungry devils—”

“Enough,” John announced. His voice was low, clipped.

Marian smirked at him. “I’m only teasing, Giant John. Trying to make levity in a dire circumstance. Can you blame the girl? I’d say she’s cunning. My respect for her has grown in spite of all this. If she got her cunning from you men, then she has you to thank for it.”

“No,” John said, rolling over her spiel. “Enough from *you*, Marian.” He faced the lass and glared at her. “You’ve had it out for Robin since day one. Your jealousy is blinding. She wouldn’t do this. Leave us? Perhaps. But—”

“Harm the people who tried to kill her family? Not as farfetched when you put it in plain terms.”

John paused. Then he pointed in a random direction—east. “Get out.”

Marian looked struck. Her head snapped back on her neck. “W-What?”

“You’re no longer welcome here, Maid Marian. I’ve heard enough out of you.”

Her jaw dropped. “Little John, you can’t be serious.”

“That’s the second time you’ve asked that in as many minutes, whore.” John’s voice was deadly serious.

My eyes widened a fraction. I glanced over at Will, and he simply shrugged. Tears were close to falling in Marian’s eyes. She might have been right, but her mistake was not knowing her place in the hierarchy here. Speaking when no one asked. Marian had always been a woman who wanted her opinion to be known.

True or not, badmouthing our little songbird had been a step too far—too much for John to handle.

She spun on the rest of us. “Alan? Will?” She gasped at the friar. “*Tuck?* Will no one stand up for me the way you blindly stand up for this young highborn waif?”

Tuck sighed, bowing his head. “It’s harsh, John, but ...” He faced Marian, clenching his jaw. “You heard the man, Marian. I’m sorry.”

“No!”

“He’s our leader.”

“He’s not an emperor! Is his say the only one that matters around here?” She backed up, stumbling away from the pond, looking at us like we were horrible visions in a bad nightmare.

Once she was a fair distance away—out of sword-reach—she steeled herself and scowled, baring her teeth. “The girl has rotted your minds, robbed you of your wits, and unmanned you.”

John’s winced with sadness. “You’re right about one thing, Marian: She’s robbed us ... of our hearts.”

She scoffed, as if it was the most ridiculous admission of all. A woman like Maid Marian did not believe in love. Even *I*

knew that.

“Where will I go?” she asked. “Alone in the wilderness.”

“Anywhere but here, Maid Marian. The town of Skellingthorpe is less than three miles east of here.”

Her lips scowled. “You’ll regret this,” she said through gritted teeth.

“I doubt it.” John showed his back to her.

Slowly, she sauntered away, head hung low.

I watched her go. Pitying her. She had wanted excitement, adventure, and coin from the Merry Men. It’s all *anyone* wanted with us—even our own members.

Except Robin. She was different. She didn’t care about our money, or what kind of adventure we could lead her on. I liked to believe she cared only about *us*, even if it was a fantasy. It’s why John chose her over Marian. And the simple fact he didn’t like Marian much.

I hoped John wasn’t making a drastic mistake. For all her faults, Marian’s accusations rang true.

“What now?” Will asked once she was gone.

Sir Gregory spoke up. “Let’s talk about finding my niece. We can strike a deal. I have loyal men who will follow me. You lot have your own merry gang of bandits and thieves.”

“Your men are soldiers to the Crown,” Will said. “Why would you help us?”

Gregory’s eyes sank. “Because I’m like you now. An outlaw. I have the blood of lawmen on my hands ... and the men from my warring days aren’t as honorable as I am. They’ll help me because I’ll pay them to.”

Will gave him an impressed frown. “Fair enough, old man.” He turned to John. “What say you, boss? Let the old codger swing his big sword one more time to find his beloved niece?”

John nodded. “We’ll need the help.”

“Can you take your dagger out of my gut now, mate?” Tuck asked.

“No,” Gregory said. “Because when we find her, she’s coming with me.”

“Not if she doesn’t want to, she isn’t,” John shot back.

“Fine. She can make the choice—but I *will* convince her. She knows her duty. Her family misses her. Do we have a deal?”

John glanced at the rest of us. I shrugged at Tuck across the pond. What alternative did we have?

Gregory nodded. “I’ll give you the soldiers to take on Guy of Gisborne in exchange for Robin’s safety. To bring her back home where she belongs.”



Chapter 43

Robin



I wish I had never left the Merry Men.

However, my decision had been made, and I needed to live with it. I didn't have time to weep and moan about my choices. I needed to keep pushing forward.

I didn't know where to go. After managing to escape the witch's cabin undetected—thanks to Stump's dying warning—I stalked through the woods, untied Mercy, and headed south.

I wandered Sherwood Forest aimlessly, racking my brain. Trying to stuff down my trepidation so I could make another tough decision. *I can't be hesitant. I just need to pick a direction and go.*

The Merry Men had taught me about sticking to my convictions. They taught me about trust, allowing me to leave for Nottingham with Friar Tuck even though I knew it pained them to watch me go.

It pained me, too.

I found a small pond in a shallow valley not far from the witch's cabin, and took a rest to drink and let Mercy graze. Whatever route I took, we'd need our strength. I was hungry, so I foraged and found some berries. It was a shame I didn't have my bow to hunt.

While waiting for Mercy to recover, I inspected my wound. It was yellowed and gross, yet no longer aching. Wulfric's ointment had worked fast.

I thought about my options, knowing the next few hours were crucial and might decide my fate.

First and foremost, I needed to stay away from Sir Guy of Gisborne and his trackers. Which meant I needed to leave the

pond. If I was going to live through the night, they needed to stay firmly behind me.

Sitting cross-legged at the water's edge, I studied the map, trying to commit it to memory.

I could go to the next circled spot on the map, close to the eastern edge of Sherwood Forest. It crept into Lincolnshire. Perhaps the Merry Men had gone there.

I'd been too late to warn them of Guy's trap at the witch's cabin. *What will be any different about the next spot on the list? Guy could just as easily set up an ambush there, too, hoping to close around me like a pincer.*

I wondered if my unseen adversary knew of my relationship with the Merry Men. If he knew I *wanted* to seek them out, and would use that against me.

I desperately needed to know more about him—his motivation, drive, and mission. I knew Little John was a driving factor behind Guy's motives. According to John, he had killed the Sheriff of Nottingham's brother years ago, which put him in the Sheriff's sights. That gave way to an endless search by the Sheriff's huntsman, Guy.

That didn't fit neatly on the puzzle board, however. Why would Sir Guy of Gisborne set up an ambush at the ruins after already routing Little John and his people?

It must be because he was waiting for someone else to arrive.

... Me.

My heart twisted at the thought. It made me nauseous. It also led to my next logical idea: Had my father employed Sir Guy of Gisborne to retrieve me, as I'd originally imagined?

For a short time, I thought Guy could have been an ally. Hunting for me out of obligation for the paid commission from Father. Then I learned of his history with Little John, and I ran into those black-cloaked men in Wilford, who were surely part of his company, and I tossed that notion aside.

I leaned back to stare up at the night sky. My mind was going in so many directions. It made this whole decision-making thing difficult.

Then Robert said in my ear, *“You’re halfway there, sister. Don’t give up. You didn’t find what you were looking for in Nottingham. Your mission is not complete. Find the people who actually mean something to you, Robin.”*

I abruptly sat up. Robert was right.

What else had Little John taught me? *Never give up on a job once I set my mind to it.*

As much as I wanted to find the guys, I had to hope they were fine. Maybe, against all odds, they’d find *me* once they learned I hadn’t stayed with Tuck in Nottingham.

That is if they’re still alive!

The idea that Guy of Gisborne could have slaughtered the gang I’d come to care so much about make my skin crawl. Those divots in the grass that I’d seen, as if bodies had been dragged through the dirt to the ruins ... they unnerved me.

I can’t think about that right now.

I wished I’d had more time with Brandon before he’d died. Maybe he could have told me where the Merry Men would go next, or what happened to them.

I stood from the pond’s edge, and noticed I’d been absentmindedly twirling a leaf in my fingers. I let the leaf drop and it fluttered onto the surface of the pond.

No great epiphany came to me from watching the leaf. But it did calm my racing mind, my thundering heart. I recalled the words from that strange soothsayer, Wulfric. *“Follow your heart, and no matter if you stray from your path, know that there is always a route back to the ones who will keep you true to yourself. Hold on to your convictions and you may become great. Good luck, Robin of Loxley.”*

The man hadn’t known my fucking name. Could he have possibly been a figment of my fracturing mind, in the way Robert was?

I blinked, staring at the leaf as the pond started to flood over it, creeping in toward its center, sinking it below the surface.

I can't go to the next location on the map because of Guy's incessant forest-wide search. I probably can't stay in Sherwood at all, or I'll be captured. Which means I can't search for the Merry Men, as much as my heart is begging me to.

No. I had to finish the job I started in Nottingham and Wilford, like Robert suggested. I needed to find my parents after their mysterious vanishing act from Wilford. I owed it to my uncle, at least, as his dying wish when he barged through the barleygrass to save me like a knight in shining armor.

Even more, I owed it to *myself*. I hadn't seen my mother in days. I needed to confront my damned father, once and for all. If he was responsible for the hunt put on by Sir Guy, I needed to make him call off the dogs.

Even if I never got to see the Merry Men again, and became trapped in my own house under the firm heel of my father, it was something I needed to do. A sacrifice I had to make for the sake of keeping the Merry Men safe.

When I turned around and took Mercy's worn leather reins in my hand, I sighed and nodded.

Real or not, unintentional or not, Wulfric's mystical words had given me a clue.

There was only one place I could think of that didn't have the rot of Sir Guy, or the Sheriff of Nottingham, or even Sherwood Forest staining it.

And, suddenly, as if it had been staring me in the face all along, I knew where I needed to go.



Chapter 44

Little John



We tucked ourselves away under the thorny cover of a bramble, to wear the night out. As dawn approached, our gang made ready to leave. We were constantly on the run, and I couldn't envision that stopping anytime soon.

Maybe Will was right. For all his anger and arrogance—his penchant for violence—perhaps I *was* growing soft in my older age. I wasn't as daring as I used to be; not as committed to the old games, the sly jobs, the robberies and pilfering.

I wonder why that is? I thought as I dragged my leather armor on over my coarse tunic, staring out from the unenviable confines of our prickly hideaway.

It was Robin. I knew it sure and true. I had grown softer, more hesitant, because I actually *cared* about someone now. When your life was a freewheeling stop from one place to the next, without any concrete purpose, you tended to grow detached.

Now, I had a vested interest. It was personal. If anything made Robin unsafe, I'd second-guess myself. *I should've second-guessed myself when she asked to leave for Nottingham. Oath or not, that was foolish of me to allow her to go, knowing Guy was on our trail. It blew up in my face.*

“Erm, boss?”

I turned to Alan-a-Dale as he smacked nettles out of his face. “One of the horses is gone.” I had forbidden him from playing music last night over our meager supper, lest he alert the nearby ambushers to our whereabouts, and he still looked sad about that.

“Shit,” I muttered, strapping on the loose harness that kept my quarterstaff slanted across my back.

“We think Maid Marian doubled back once we fell asleep, and stole him. I’m inclined to agree.”

“Sounds probable.”

“If we’re swift enough, maybe we can catch her.”

“That is if she went into Skellingthorpe like I suggested.” I chuckled humorlessly. “I doubt that woman will be taking my suggestions after I ousted her.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you on that.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. Alan was an agreeable fellow, and knew how to skate on a thin line. That was the second time he’d used that phrase. Last night he tried to play mediator by agreeing—and then disagreeing—with both Will and me. Alan didn’t want to ruffle feathers, whereas Will was *born* to ruffle feathers.

“Well,” I said, stepping out from under the low-hanging tree I’d slept under. I smacked thorny stems out of my face, sputtering and then spitting on the ground. “We were headed to Skellingthorpe anyway. Might as well take a look around, long as we’re quick about it.”

Alan joined me as we walked through camp and gathered the men. The next few days would be a mad dash to find Robin before Guy did. I prayed we would do it, and even asked Tuck to speak to God about it.

He did. We all lowered our heads around the pond.

“God,” Tuck began, “let Robin’s feet be swift, and her mind swifter. Let her outrun the dangers nipping at her heels. We beseech you, Almighty God, to smother her in the bosom of your protection.”

I glanced up under the ridge of my brow and saw Will smirking.

Tuck sighed at his immaturity. “We are sinners, God, yet she is pure—”

“Bullshit, mate,” Will said this time, head reeling up. He was the least faithful of us, and I couldn’t blame him.

Tuck snapped at the younger lad. “Would you like to lead this prayer, Will Scarlet? Or will you let me finish?”

Will frowned, lowering his chin.

“Good. Where was I? Ah, right. God, we are sinners, yet she is pure, and we ask you to place a beacon over her heart and soul. We might not be worthy of her love, as we are certainly not worthy of yours, but she deserves peace. Amen.”

We echoed Tuck before he looked up and smiled.

Then we rounded up the rest of our horses—two to lead the carriage, two more now that Marian had taken one. Sir Gregory stayed with his hostage, Tuck, in the cargo bay, and we allowed him that illusion.

I supposed it didn’t cross the knight’s mind that we could have easily killed him in his sleep. That wasn’t our way, though, and we needed all the help we could get. He was a formidable warrior. Truth was we might need his sword and experience. Plus, he had a connection with Robin that went beyond ours.

Did I think Robin would go home with him once we found her? Not if I knew my little star. But she was nothing if not unpredictable, so who really knew?

I was tense with worry as I looked over the horse’s saddles. “Two horses, and two are needed to pull the carriage. We can’t bring everyone into Skellingthorpe.”

Tuck tapped his chin. “We can double our efforts. I’ll bring the cart to Broadholme Priory, west of Skellingthorpe. Perhaps I can plead for favors from the White Canons there. The lasses are right with me.”

Will’s brow lifted. “Lasses?”

“Aye,” Tuck said, stepping into the carriage after Sir Gregory. “The priory is run by canonesses—one of only two in the country, that I’m aware of.”

Will’s eyes widened. “I *have* to see that.”

“No, you don’t,” I said, tugging Will’s collar in my direction, shoving him toward a horse. “There’s no time to

dally, lad.” He was showing his age.

Tuck chuckled. “The nuns live akin to Cistercians. We should get along. Perhaps they know something of Maid Marian’s whereabouts, or even Robin.”

“Doubtful, but worth a peek,” I said. “We’ll reconvene by midday at our lookout point next to Newton on Trent. You all know the spot?”

The men nodded curtly. Will mumbled to himself, looping his leg over the steed. I mounted the second.

Frowning, I looked to Alan. “We don’t have the horses, mate. Join Tuck at the priory.”

“Why does he get to?” Will whined.

I rolled my eyes. “Because if I keep you close, I can keep an eye on you.”

Will grumbled again but gave no more argument.

With my command in place, we took our spots. The three younger lads joined the procession going to Broadholme, while Will and I galloped toward Skellingthorpe.



What began as a sunny day became covered with thick clouds and a low fog on the valley near the thorps. Many of these locations were mired by moorlands, which made the going tough.

Will and I learned nothing of Robin’s whereabouts in Skellingthorpe, nor Maid Marian’s and our missing horse. Neither woman had come through here.

After thanking our connection and getting two men to join our band, we left for Newton on Trent, where we learned Tuck and Alan had faced a similar outcome.

Convening along the lookout above the River Trent’s wide shores, Tuck crossed his arms over his chest and frowned. “Little luck at Broadholme,” he said. “Seems I overestimated my capabilities with the nuns there. I think my name is starting to gain somewhat of a reputation as a miser and whore.”

I laughed humorlessly. “We’re wasting time.”

I had no clue where Robin would have gone. I made the decision to circle back to other villages in Sherwood. They would eventually bring us west, which would distance us from Guy of Gisborne’s trackers.

We went from spot to spot, using the rest of the sunlight to do it. The day was a failure in our overall mission, yet we managed to recover nearly ten Merry Men we had positioned inside the villages and hamlets along the roads to build our spy network.

Even as our ranks swelled, I didn’t consider us safe from Guy. He was as tricky as they came. We couldn’t face his militia in the open field. We’d be slaughtered like mice to a feline massacre.

The problem was Sir Guy of Gisborne knew this forest as well as I did. He had lived the majority of his life inside these woods. We were playing a dangerous game of cat and mouse, and I was anxious to find out who would win the chase.

As the sun began to sink on that first day, I felt defeated. I sat around the campfire with the others, and even though the camp was livelier than it had been in weeks, I couldn’t bring myself out of my cold sweat.

We were located further west from Guy now, so I permitted Alan to play a few tunes over supper, to bolster our morale. It worked, and we woke up early next morning to do it all over again. We went from hideout to hideaway, scouring the land for any signs of our star.

And we came up empty.

It was when we doubled back to the “abandoned well” locale that lush memories sprang on me. Robin sitting on my lap after witnessing me gut Peter Fisher like a fish. The way she smashed her hips into mine, bounced on my cock, and lost her mind to the pleasure.

God, I need that again.

My brow furrowed as I remembered a snippet of conversation before our torrid after-session took place.

I sat straight, gaining the attention of the others. “Shit,” I breathed, biting into a stick of meat. When everyone looked at me, I imagined the wide-eyed expression on my face. By the looks of it, their leader was cracking under the pressure. I stood from the bonfire. “I have an idea, men.”

They gazed up, fire flickering in their orbs.

I stamped the end of my quarterstaff on the ground. “If I’m wrong, we may never see Robin again, because the distance would put us on the western side of the forest, and north. It would put us out of our trajectory.”

“So?” Will said. “We have to make our own luck. You can’t shoulder all the burden, Little John. Tell us.”

“You’re right,” I said with a stern nod, appreciating his opinion. “I have a gut feeling.”

“Your instinct is typically your strongest quality, Little John,” Alan said as way of encouragement.

Tuck nodded from the stair of the carriage, the door open across the way. “You know we’re with you until the end. Alan, Will, and I want the girl just as badly as you do. Tell us what you’re thinking.”

I stared into Tuck’s friendly face. “I’m thinking I might know where Robin ran off to ...”



Chapter 45

Robin



I was back where it all began.

I'd ridden Mercy hard to get here, and feared I'd irreparably damaged the poor beast. Breathing heavily, she practically limped across the final stone bridge leading to the quaint, hilly countryside village, swaddled in forest growth and greenery.

There were no black-cloaked men or scary guards waiting for me here. No one who knew of my presence.

As Mercy's hooves clomped across the rough cobbles, I glanced out at the rocky banks, littered with weeds, and the stones in the water shaping the flow of the soft current. The peaceful river we crossed over shared the same name with the village itself.

Loxley. The place of my birth.

Robert and I weren't born in Wilford. Moving to that upscale province of Nottingham had been part of the marriage agreement between Sir Thomas and Baroness Joan, after Father realized how much land, property, and commerce Mama was due to acquire from the death of her father and abdication of her brother.

Joan became a wealthy baroness. In turn, Thomas reaped the spoils as well. While my father went off fighting wars in King Henry II's name, and battling political opponents and neighboring landowners to keep our Wilford estate established and respectable, Mama toiled to increase the recognition of her fine garments, ultimately becoming a master of the textile trade.

Mama operated numerous tailoring, weaving, and spinning shops. She dominated the merchant markets and trade bazaars.

She expanded her business with a savvy export model. Word had it her dresses and lacework were seen in the court of King Henry himself, wrapped around the elegant bodies of the nobility.

Most of this had come before my time. I knew these things through third-hand accountings. Even when she wasn't ill, Mama didn't talk much of her trade. I learned to sew from a young age before I became more interested in the unladylike pursuits of archery and swordplay from Robert, much to Mama's chagrin.

After King Henry's death, the court and outlook of the country changed. Mother's wares became less noticed. As a tiny whelp, I remembered my uncle whispering about the Great Revolt—an ugly, violent time when King Henry's own sons rebelled against him, vying for power and land among the provinces.

Such is the case when you have five sons, I suppose.

Though the rebellion failed, it caused a fracture among the royal family. Pacifying the greedy youths was difficult. Prince Richard and his brothers John, Henry, William, and Geoffrey waited on the wings, salivating for Henry's death.

Fifteen years after the revolt, when I had seen close to twenty summers, the sons got their wish. Henry died, Richard became king. Within a year of his coronation, Richard raised enough money to fund his great Crusade, levying the taxes on the rest of us. My mother's business had been hit hard. With Richard gone to unknown lands, Prince John thrust himself into the figurehead position as England's high ruler, and exacerbated those taxes and tariffs.

Now, people were destitute. My family would always be fine because people needed clothes, but I remembered a time when I was young when we lived in splendor and glory, with no less than ten maids on-hand. It was like a dream to me, now.

Others had sunk lower. People who had been on the cusp of respectable lives before fell by the wayside, forgotten. The poorest folk mired in outright poverty. Rebellion sprouted

across the provinces all over again, aimed again at the aristocracy of this country.

Thus the Merry Men. Thus the multitudes of other secret gatherings of rebels and revolutionaries across England.

It was a solemn thought to have, thinking about the truncated history of my people while shuffling across that stone bridge.

Not *everything* had been bad. I'd still lived better than most, spoiled and entitled beyond my understanding as a child. Yet I recalled—from youth to adulthood—a gradual, consistent downward spiral to my quality of life.

My brother Robert dying in a nameless, pointless war broke the family. Mama became sick with grief—an ailment she'd yet to recover from. Father became angrier, sterner, and more prone to violent outbursts. Those outbursts were usually targeted at me because he had no other outlet. He couldn't well maim or injure his servants and maids, because then they wouldn't be able to perform their duties.

After being robbed and abducted by the Merry Men, I knew the worst of it all. And, surprisingly, against all expectations ... I knew the best of it, too.

I missed those callous men. I missed my blood family. Especially my mother. I hoped to find something here to show me I was on the right path.

It had taken me nearly an entire day of traveling to get here, and I hoped for some kind of payoff for my efforts. If nothing else, I felt I was at least free of the cloying talons of Sir Guy of Gisborne. He had no reason to follow me here because it wasn't on his map of locations. Most people had no clue the quaint village of Loxley was associated with my family—that my father owned a small plot of land here, far to the north of Nottingham in Yorkshire.

I imagined I was free, not understanding that I'd never been free, whether I was living as a prisoner in my own home or a prisoner to the Merry Men.

Loxley was a prison of its own—a soft mirage on a rolling river, framed by the charming landscape of a countryside shire as the bars of its jail cell.



Night had fallen. I was exhausted, yet I couldn't sleep. I needed to discover if my hunch was correct. The yearning for knowledge drove me forward.

Forward, to my father's small land. Past a meadow slick with dew, tucked away on a hillside away from prying eyes. The moon cut perfect slivers over the hedgerows surrounding my father's plot, casting the picturesque cottage from my childhood in dim light.

I veered off the path once the cottage came into view up the hill. There, in a mess of trees and shrubs, I tied Mercy away, gave her mane a hearty rub, and put my forehead to hers. "Thank you for riding so swiftly, Mercy. I'm sorry I pushed you so hard."

She looked at me with those dull black eyes, neighed tiredly, and went to grazing at her feet.

I made my way back onto the road, low under the hedges, keeping out of sight. Peering up over them every once in a while to make sure I knew where I was going.

Memories of my past barreled into me as I climbed the winding, gentle hill. Thoughts of me and Robert, running through these very shrubs, playing games as children. Laughing at our easy life, before it became so much more complicated in Wilford. It was here he first taught me to use a bow, playing target practice with hay bales.

"And remember what I taught you when you first wanted to use a sword? No more than five winters old, hand barely able to wrap around the hilt?"

I smiled fondly at Robert's words. "You told me to stick with the bow, because I was small. To keep my enemies far from me, where I'd have an advantage."

“*Aye.*” His voice in my head was quieter now, lower. Sad, even. “*Yet you’ve been eager to let those enemies get close to you. You’ve welcomed it, in fact. And look how dangerous your life has become because of it.*”

I frowned and shook my head. I was tired of Robert—my conscience—chiding me about the Merry Men. I was also too exhausted to fight him. “You don’t understand, Robert. The way I feel around them ...”

“*Of course I do. It’s the devil’s lure, trying to convince you he’s your friend. Do you think I was never in love, sister?*”

My eyes widened. “Love?”

I scoffed. No, that was ridiculous. I didn’t *love* Little John, Will Scarlet, Friar Tuck, and Alan-a-Dale ...

Right? How could I? I had only just met them, and Robert was correct about one thing: My life had become a lot more dangerous since meeting them.

Has it, though? I asked myself. Are they anymore dangerous than Father beating me? Than being abandoned by my brother and having no one to protect me from Father’s angry fists?

I shouldn’t have to live like that.

I flared my nostrils, balling my hands into fists, staring at the dirt path leading up the hill. I noticed divots in the ground—hoof prints. They looked fresh.

Glancing up, I saw my conversation with myself had brought me to the plateau of the hill, where it leveled off. The cabin rested peacefully in the middle of a garden. I saw a dim orange glow emanating from a nearby aperture on the side of the house.

Candlelight.

Someone was inside.

My heart squeezed in my chest. My blood quickened. My suspicion was correct. I would have never thought to come here had the strange healer Wulfric not called me by a name I hadn’t heard in years: Robin of Loxley.

Crouching, hood pulled up, I inched alongside the shrubs, toward the cottage. I stayed mouse-quiet. Hopped over slick stones in the garden, slithered around a row of wildflowers and tall vine trellises.

Low voices carried from inside. My giddiness made me dizzy. Hiding in the trellises, concealed among the colorful flora, I crept below the lip of the window so I could listen in on them. Based on what I recalled of the cottage's layout, the people were situated in the small main room directly above my window.

The voices rose in volume. I held my breath as my stomach jumped to my throat, my whole body tensing.

Because the voices, both of them, were so painfully familiar.

"I've been in their good graces for years, and I won't let this little ... *dalliance* of ours fuck that up," spat the woman, her voice rising to a near-screach.

No, I thought morosely, as the recognizable timbre of betrayal bloomed inside me. *It can't be ...*

I'd never heard her voice like that before—never seen her lose her temper in such a way.

"*Dalliance?*" cried the next voice, incredulous. Its deep boom made my skin crawl. My father's voice would always make my skin crawl. "Is that all this is to you, Marian? I did this for *us*! So we can have land of our own, have children, and start anew!"

A gasp wanted to rip from my throat. I wondered what they could have possibly been talking about. What devious conversation I had stumbled upon.

Deep down, I already knew.

Somehow, I wasn't surprised. I had felt abandoned and betrayed for years now. I had defended myself from the hurt, with the help of Robert's voice, yet it now threatened to spill out. Even never letting my guard down, it still broke my heart to hear it laid out in full.

Maid Marian and Father's words came in a flurry, dazing me until I felt as if I weren't even there, but rather floating alongside my body, the last vestige of my spirit drifting away from my being.

"Are you mad, man? 'Did that for us'?" Marian called out with a scoff, and I heard her heeled boots stomp on the floorboards. "You *poisoned your wife*, Thomas!"

Tears welled in my eyes. I tried to fight back the pain so I wouldn't make a sound. Always silent, never making a sound. Keeping quiet, even during my beatings.

And now ... this?

"And you took the job, woman!" Father railed back. The heavy tread of his boots joined the chorus in the room. "What do these vicious rogues possibly have over you, for you to cry loyalty after they've shown you none? This was how it was supposed to be!"

I furrowed my brow. *Took the job?*

"I didn't expect so much death," Marian said, sighing. "I didn't expect ... *her*."

SLAP—

My father's hand smacking flesh. Marian crying out. A clatter of things falling off a table as Marian staggered.

The slap startled me. Not from the sound, but from the memory of its brutal sting needling across my skin.

I had half a mind to jump through this window and help Maid Marian from my wicked father.

But I needed to learn more. I had to know the truth, as much as it pained me to hear. *Please, Mama, don't let it be like this. I just want to see you again!*

"She is nothing," Father growled. "She means nothing."

Marian's voice was flat and unaffected, despite just being slapped. Cool, collected. "Just as your wife means nothing, Thomas?"

Unlike her, my father was a tempest of unpredictable rage. “Do you want the back of my hand too, whore?”

Marian laughed.

She *laughed*.

“I’ve always loved when you put your hands on me, Tom the *Stiff*.” Her voice was low and throaty now. Filled with something else entirely—something removed from the pain. Something akin to experience, and what she was known for.

My brow twisted with contempt. *Just what is going on?*

My father let out a low chuckle, a similar darkness to Marian’s. “I do give that silly little moniker some credence, don’t I?”

The soft steps of their boots lingered. Closer, closer. The rustling of clothes, a light whimper from Marian.

I slid down the wall, pulling my knees to my chest, wrapping my arms around them. Trying to drown out their lewd sounds even as I listened to their heinous words. *These two*, I realized, *are perfect for each other*.

Then my father’s words ripped my heart out of my chest in a way I’d never recover from.

“Those two names mean nothing anymore, love,” he drawled, voice thick and gruff. When he was rewarded with another whimper from Marian, and I heard a wet squelch, I closed my eyes shut. “One of them is gone already. And now that my dear daughter has joined her mother in Hell—”

“Robin isn’t dead yet,” Marian cut in. “The little bitch is slippery. Even after—*mmph*, yes, right there, love. Even after giving Sir Guy the map to her location, the viper moved too slowly.”

“The details don’t matter,” Father assured her. “It’s only matter of time until that *viper* finds them and rids us of her. For now, she’s still an outlaw for what she did to that stupid noble boy’s eye.”

Marian laughed, then moaned, and within moments carried on the conversation like nothing had happened. “I always

wondered if the debacle with Peter Fisher was your staging, as well. Wily that you are.”

“Just a happy mishap, my love.”

“Hmm, call me that again, Thomas. Tell me how much you want my sweet cunt wrapped around that hard cock of yours. Tell me the devious things you plan to do with me ...”

Tears trickled down my cheeks as Maid Marian and my father engaged in their grotesque, twisted infidelity.

A wall in the house shook and Marian let out a yelp of surprise as her body landed on something—planted on her ass, it sounded like.

“With Robin an outlaw,” Father said, “her claim on the Wilford estate is forfeit. It goes to me. And you.”

“Lovely.”

“With your connections, I can challenge the Lord of Wilford himself and take his seat. We will be *filthy* rich.”

Another slam, grunt, and shake of the house.

“So filthy, you wicked man. Harder, dear.”

My father’s voice was a growl now, tense and heated with passion. “You did well, my lovely succubus. Your only error was not killing Robin.”

Marian’s words were thick honey, a purr. “It’s never too late, Sir Thomas.”

I shook my head trying to bury the truth of this revelation. Trying not to sniffle and cry out in agony, for fear of being discovered.

“You’re just as wicked as I am, aren’t you, whore?” Father groaned.

Mama was dead. The last time I got to see her, shortly before being raided by the Merry Men, was the *final* time I’d get to see her.

My own father poisoned her.

That was her sickness, then? Painful, drawn-out, long-lasting, bedridden months of anguish, caused by the very man who gave me life and supposedly loved me.

How could a person be so cruel?

It was all too much to take.

The sounds of their fornicating, just over my head, were too much to bear. They spoke of Mama Joan as if she were a nuisance, and me as if I were a forgotten detail. Easily fixed.

“Twice as wicked,” Marian hummed, “and you love it, sir. I know how much you want someone to dine with you in Hell.”

“Oh, but I do, my vixen.”

My breath came shallow, my lungs tightening. I stared at the ground, drowning every sound out—the thudding of the walls, the clapping of flesh, the moans, the evil words and promises.

I shut it all out and drowned in my own sorrow, not sure how I would ever recover from this. Not sure how I would ever pull myself out of this bottomless swamp of torment, sorrow, and rage.

Closing everything out meant I didn’t hear the footsteps that approached me from around the side of the house.

A shadow blocked the moonlight overhead. A dark whisper spilled down on me, breaking the nightmare I was experiencing and *becoming* my new nightmare.

“You know, it’s not nice to snoop on your elders, little mouse. Awfully inappropriate when they’re in such a compromised state.”

Gasping, my gaze ripped up to the black-cloaked man standing over me—tall, long dark hair, a gaunt face that looked like a healthy skeleton, and a rictus grin slicing across his pale, mustachioed face in the darkness.

I tried to crawl away—to flee between his long legs.

He laughed, wheeled round, and snatched me by my hood.
Pulled me off my feet, even as I kicked and dangled in the air.

“Hoy!” my father’s voice carried out from the window.
“What’s all that ruckus out there?”

“Caught a little mouse sniffing around for crumbs in the
wildflowers, Sir Thomas. One you might want to see.”



Chapter 46

Robin



The man's grip was iron-strong. I writhed as he dragged me through the flowerbeds, over the stones. "Let go of me, you bastard!"

"Quite a tongue on you, little mouse," he murmured. "Careful, or I'll cut it out."

My father rushed to the front door of the cottage as the man dragged me to it. I could hear the clanking of Father's belt, the rustling of his pants being drawn up. He yelled at Marian, "You brought him *here*?"

"I did no such thing," she answered.

"I follow the job wherever it goes," my captor said. "And it brought me here."

The door flew open. I couldn't see my father yet, since I was being dragged behind this dark monster.

Father couldn't see me, either, because of the hood I wore. "Who do you have, eh?"

"I daresay it's your long-lost brood, Sir Thomas the *Stiff*." He let out a wicked chuckle and unceremoniously tossed me at my father's feet.

I looked up, eyes bulging. My father stared down. A sneer crossed his lips, disgusted at seeing me.

Then he cleared his throat and glanced at the man who'd found me. Father's body language became stilted, awkward. "Erm, I apologize, Sir Guy, for what you might have heard spoken about you. Just know it was my frustrations talking and not—"

“Your silver is worth the same, with or without insults. I don’t take it personally.”

My father swallowed hard. “Yes, well, I’d be remiss if you didn’t accept—”

“I accept your apology, soldier. Now, what do you want to do with this one?”

Why is Father acting so squeamish and subordinate to this shitstain? It dawned on me moments later. Because he’s the Sheriff of Nottingham’s man. The wolf in the night. And he scares everyone.

“Would you be a gentleman and bring my wayward offspring inside, sir?” Father asked.

“With pleasure.”

Guy’s hand wrapped around the nape of my neck and squeezed. I let out a squeal and ground my teeth together, throwing my arms and elbows around like a child in a tantrum.

Sir Guy of Gisborne laughed at me. He took me inside, and Father shut the door behind him.

“I take it you brought men with you?” Father asked, once we were inside the stuffy confines of the cottage.

“Of course. Watching the perimeter of the hill.”

It wasn’t candlelight I’d seen, but a fire pit near the back wall of the room. The licking flames silhouetted my father and Guy of Gisborne from behind, making them look menacing and hellish. Maid Marian stood off to the side, rearranging her corset and fluffing her dress, her red hair disheveled and messy. She stared daggers at me, and for a moment I thought I saw a hint of pity there.

The pity angered me more than her betrayal of the Merry Men.

I had nowhere to run. All I could do was crawl back against the wall, under the window I’d been listening in from. I faced my father with scared eyes, trying to muster courage inside me but failing.

I had never been able to be brave around him, because bravery meant a swift hand across the face, or a fist in the stomach. The trauma of my life under Father's heel spilled over, and the tears joined them.

"Don't snivel, girl," he sneered. "This is most serendipitous, wouldn't you say? My daughter returned to me, at long last."

"Murderer!" I blurted, finally able to steel myself in the face of death. I knew he wanted me dead, and if this was my final moment, I would learn everything from him. I would bring his words to the grave, to Hell, and I would hunt him and haunt him for the rest of his miserable days once he joined me in pandemonium.

Father's head tilted, calmness set in his features. "What's that?"

"How long?" I growled through gritted teeth.

"How long?" he repeated, feigning innocence.

"How long has Mama been dead, you lying, conniving hellhound?"

Father pursed his lips. He glanced over at Guy, who lounged in the corner of the room against the door, ankles crossed, staring down at his gloved hand. He showed complete disinterest in this familial spat.

"Sir Guy," Father said, "would you please hit her for me?"

Guy blinked at him. Then at me. He said, "I am not being paid to injure her."

"You are being paid to *end* her," Father snapped, his rage taking over. "Yet you won't hurt her?"

"There's a difference, Sir Thomas. A thin line you might not understand. If I am going to hurt someone, I am going to enjoy it. This is not the place for that."

When he looked at me, his expression chilled my blood. He smiled as if he wanted to flay the skin from my bones.

"I'll pay you more silver," Thomas said.

With a sigh and a shrug, Guy shook his head. “You truly are as wicked as the whore says you are.”

With that, Guy stomped over and I crab-crawled away from him, but I wasn’t fast enough. He lunged and kicked me in the side, and the air shot from my lungs. Pain lanced through my ribs. I toppled over and shriveled up into a ball of agony, shaking on the floor.

My father said, “Your mother succumbed to the heartbreak of Robert’s death the day after the Merry Men raided our carriages and stole you, Robin. God rest her soul, Joan was not strong enough for that trip. Just as I warned your uncle.”

I clenched my jaw, staring up at him from the floor. “E-Everything you took with us. The chests and clothes—” I coughed. “You were never planning on going back to Wilford.”

“Not until I got my affairs in order. No. It was Joan’s damned brother I had to appease. He wouldn’t let it go—*swore* this heathen healer could save her.” He scoffed at the ridiculousness of it. “Of course she was well on her way out by that time.”

I moaned as the pain in my side became a dull ache. Crawling so I could sit up, I implored my father with wide, bleary eyes. “But *why?!?*”

He crept closer to me, a predator in full. The fire crackled behind him, filling the room. He crouched in front of me. I was close enough to spit on him, and I would have if I thought it would’ve made a difference.

“Do you understand, dear daughter, how humiliating it was to live by the side of your monumental mother? Her asinine narcissism? Her vanity and neglect of me? How the other noblemen saw me as a man lifted unto greatness, but born into none of it my own? A second-class lord. As if Joan was doing me a *favor?*”

“No, of course you don’t understand, because you were *born* into her favor. Into her wealth and influence, with your

whole life laid out for you. Yet you couldn't even do that right!"

"The wrong child died," I croaked, sniffing.

"Amen." He stood, pacing in front of me while he talked. "Once Robert died, *you* were locked into the future of the Wilford estate. A stupid girl who would rather gallivant in the woods and play soldier than do her duty as an heiress. A girl who couldn't understand the weight of what that decree meant. I had to do something about the backwardness of it all."

"So you act on nothing but impulse, greed, and opportunity," I spat. "The worst traits in a man."

He raised a finger. "Opportunity, yes. The opportunity to make a life for myself, without the constraints of your mother holding me down. The opportunity to start anew and build something for myself and my children."

I scoffed. "Build something off the back of the woman who built *everything* for you!"

He shrugged nonchalantly. "She built *nothing* for me. It was all for you and Robert. Such are the times, Robin. Your mother refused to listen to me. Refused to amend her writs of inheritance and succession. Wouldn't take any of my ideas for her business seriously. We were supposed to be a team, and she treated me as an inferior. A subordinate. Not as a husband."

"You *are* inferior to her, Father. You're just too blind—"

His foot lashed out and cracked across my face. A rainbow of stars exploded behind my lids as my head whipped back and I landed on the floor, staring up dizzily at the ceiling.

He stood over me. "Don't speak unless you are told, Robin. I thought I taught you that."

Coppery blood trickled out the corner of my mouth. I choked before turning my head over to spit.

"At last," Father said, cheery, "I found a woman who had all the things your mother lacked. She has passion, cunning,

and a drive to match my own.” He swept his hands out with a smile, to the corner of the room.

Maid Marian sauntered forward. She crossed her arms under her ample chest. “Your mistake was trying to steal them from me, girl. You could have had an ally.” Shaking her head, she added, “You should have escaped the Merry Men and never returned.”

“I ... tried.” A bloody smile curved across my face, splitting my lips. “My conscience wouldn’t let me stay away. It’s not my fault they saw you as a tool to be discarded. Untrustworthy and pitiful.”

“Says the girl lying in a pool of her own blood.”

“Why else would you be here?” I added, ignoring her barb. “Taking the hand of the next best thing—my miserable excuse of a father? You two are made for—”

“Silence!” Marian snarled, and I finally got the satisfaction of seeing her pure, alabaster demeanor break into the mien of a grotesque witch. “You would let her speak to me in such a way, Thomas?”

He sighed. “Does it matter? She won’t be with us long. Ignore her childlike jabs. She has nothing else.”

“You won’t get away with this,” I eked out through my bloodstained teeth.

Marian said, “Yes we will.” She walked over to me, and I expected her heel in my side, because why not? Everyone else seemed to be enjoying it.

But she had a different sort of torment for me. A deeper, more visceral one, which she knew would cut deeper than physical pain because she was smarter than these dastardly men. Because she had probably felt it too, in her life, at some point.

She crouched before me and I trembled back, still hurting from my father and Sir Guy’s ministrations.

Her hand lashed out, caught the corner of the map that peeked out from my half-opened shirt, and ripped it from me.

Then she wagged the map in the air and her voice lilted in a mocking way. “Who has the motive to call for help? Maybe the fucking hostage?” Oh, you should have seen it, dear girl. A masterful display.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The map. The Merry Men, as they learned you sewed this beacon of their location into the dress. Poor Little John was too enamored and doe-eyed to even notice you scheming right under his nose, little bitch.”

“No!” I screamed. Tears blurred my eyes. “You lie. You know I had nothing—” I cut myself off, furrowing my brow. A fracture of a memory came to me: Maid Marian, walking out of Friar Tuck’s carriage full of linens early in the morning after my smoldering night with Little John. Before Tuck left with the dresses to Nottingham. Marian, readjusting her dress, glancing around. Suspiciously. Conspiratorially.

I hadn’t realized it until now. What *had* she been doing in that carriage? Now, the answer slapped me right in the face. “... You. In the carriage that morning.”

“I simply required fine, soft bedding to lay on while Friar Tuck plowed into me, if you must know.” She winked and grinned at me.

Anguish sprang through me. I didn’t believe her—couldn’t. I didn’t want to think of Friar Tuck with another woman.

My father’s body stiffened. “Careful, Marian,” he muttered, because he was a weak, jealous man, and didn’t want even a fabricated story to make a cuckold of him.

“The fools didn’t put the easy part together: That you couldn’t have drawn the map because you’d only been to a handful of their hideaways. How would you know where the others were located?” She laughed, shaking her head. “No, they did not immediately believe me when I explained the depths of your betrayal. I never expected them to given how obsessed and blinded they are by you. It’s such an *easy* thing to turn against silly men. So you see, Robin? The Merry

fucking Men aren't coming for you, because I've already planted the seed of doubt. That's all they need to—”

The door to the cottage blew open.

A man stood in the doorway, black cloak rippling. He spotted me on the ground, brow furrowing, before wheeling his eyes to Sir Guy next to me. “Captain, we've spotted movement just past the perimeter at the base of the hill. Shadows—could be stray cattle—but I'm requesting permission to extend the watch line.”

Guy grunted. “Do it.”

The man saluted, his body stiffening.

Then he coughed, and blood sprayed out of his mouth on a confused gurgle, slashing across Marian's face closest to him.

She screeched, hands raised in disgust as the blood splattered on her nice clothes and alabaster face.

The man stumbled forward two steps and collapsed into the room, with the fletching of an arrow sticking out from the back of his neck.

“Fuck,” Guy sighed.

Marian turned to me with wide eyes.

I smiled at her, reveling in her fear and anxiety. “What was it you were saying, Maid Marian?”



Chapter 47

Little John



I watched the bridge from the darkness of a forested pasture. Alan-a-Dale was beside me, fidgeting with the bow in his hands. It looked too small against the minstrel's frame, but I made no comment on it.

Will Scarlet was somewhere in the distance, melding with the shadows. That arrogant lad always had a plan of his own, and refused to follow mine.

Friar Tuck didn't refuse, though. He sauntered across toward the bridge, dressed in his brown habit, smiling.

Two guards stood watch at the end of the stone bridge, which passed over a shallow stream and led to a winding hill. A cottage sat on that hill, and given the congregation of black-cloaked soldiers near it, I knew we had come to the right place.

Taken us all fucking day to get here, to Robin's childhood home of Loxley.

We had to get this right. I longed to hold my little star in my arms. To tell Robin what she truly meant to me and the others. No more half-hearted gestures. No more hesitation around my feelings for her.

Imogen was my past. A sorrowful past. She was a barricaded gateway that had taken me many years to break through.

But Robin of Loxley was my future. Now that I was on the other side of the gate, the beacon of her light shone bright. I *knew* she was up on that hill. I could feel her, even if I couldn't see her.

God, I'm not a religious man, because you've fucked me one too many times ... but I'll open an ear to you again if you see it fit to make sure Robin is all right. I won't make the same mistake twice—I won't let her leave my sight from now on.

I couldn't hear what Tuck was saying to the two guards. It didn't matter. The content of their conversation was irrelevant. As the friar spoke with the two men, the soldiers' demeanors grew more rigid and ill-tempered.

I nodded to Alan. We dashed out from our hideout, using the trees, the soldiers' distractedness, and the shadows cast by the moon to weave our way toward the bridge's flanks. Tuck kept them occupied. Alan and I were silent as wraiths, plus we had the sounds of the babbling stream to hide our footfalls.

Once to the craggy banks of the stream, Alan and I padded along the edge and splashed lightly into the creek, heading for the bridge on opposite sides. The water came up past our boots.

Tuck gave a final nod to the guards, fixing them with a wide smile, and began to walk away. At the same time, Alan and I pressed ourselves up to the sides of the bridge, with the friar's diversion complete.

"Any clue what that dumb fucker was saying?" the leftmost guard asked his comrade as they turned to pace down to the other end of the bridge.

"Babbling idiot. Must have been sauced."

They chuckled as they crossed the middle of the bridge.

Alan and I hopped up our respective sides, hands flooding over the low walls like monsters under a bed. We took the men by their shoulders and arms and heaved them over the sides of the bridge.

It wasn't a far drop into the water, but the floor of the stream was filled with sharp pebbles and stones. Their abrupt yelps ended on splashes. I manhandled my target, putting a knee to his neck, forcing him facedown in the water. He struggled, fighting, writhing, trying to buck me off him.

Under the arch of the bridge, across the way, I spotted Alan straddling his man's chest, growling like Will, stabbing the soldier over and over again in the neck with a dagger. The soldiers' cries became muffled, then gargling and bloody.

I looked down. My soldier had stopped moving, drowned in the shallow river. I nodded across to Alan, and we went to work executing the next part of our plan. Within five minutes, we had the men disrobed, stuffed under the arch of the bridge where no one would find them unless they went looking.

I hoped by the time someone went looking, we would be long gone from here.

Alan buckled the black trousers of his victim and wrinkled his nose at me while he threw on the black cloak. "How unfashionable," he sighed.

I gave him a pointed look. "Do you hear any lutes? We're not here to impress the king's court, mate."

"Aye. But we fucked up one avenue—forgot to take into account their clothes being soaking *wet* after we were done with them."

My frown curved on one side. Alan-a-Dale was nothing if not a man of creature comforts. Here we were, making a daring rescue attempt, and he was concerned with his appearance in the guards' clothes and the chill brought on by their soggy garb.

We appeared on the other side of the bank, straightened our clothes, and moved along the road, gaining the base of the hill. Hedgerows waited for us.

"Hoy," a voice came from the side, past the bushes.

I stiffened. Two guards moseyed toward us.

"What took so long on the bridge, eh?" the first guard asked. "Got any news on those shadows?"

Luckily, I knew how to look like a soldier. I grunted at the commanding officer and shrugged. "Turned out to be a drunk friar."

“A ... what?” He crossed his arms under his chest, confused.

Silver flashed behind him. The man saw the glint of a reflection from the moon and spun around, just in time for Will Scarlet to slice into his chest with both swords.

Blood sprayed.

The second guard’s mouth fell open, and Alan rushed him, wrapping an arm around his neck and clamping his palm down over his lips to stop him from screaming out in alarm.

Will pulled his blades out of the commander’s corpse, not even waiting for him to drop to the ground before lunging and stabbing the second guard in the stomach once, thrice, five times in rapid succession.

The second guard keeled over, blood trickling out of his mouth past Alan’s enclosed fingers, while his guts spilled out of him.

“Dammit,” I hissed, throwing my arms up. “What was the point of us disguising ourselves in their gear if you were just going to do that?”

Will shrugged, flinging the blood off his blades before sheathing them. “Don’t know. That was your plan. This was mine.”

“It was supposed to be *our* plan, if we worked to—”

Will pointed past my shoulder, up the hill. “Might still need the disguises if we’re going to get into the cottage, depending how well-guarded it is.”

Footfalls fell on the other side of the hedges. Our hands went to our weapons. We pounced out of the bushes—

As Friar Tuck came jogging past with his fists up, reflecting moonlight from the metal knuckle-bands he called Atonement and Discipline.

We froze, nearly stabbing our dear friend, and then let out a unified breath as our weapons lowered.

“Where’s Sir Gregory?” Tuck asked.

“You tell us,” Will said. “You’re *his* prisoner.”

Tuck smiled and winked. “Let’s let him keep thinking that a wee bit longer, aye?”

“Shit,” Alan said, nudging his chin toward the top of the hill. A soldier was running up the last of the winding path to the cottage, his cloak blowing in the breeze.

“Have we been made?” Tuck asked.

“Wouldn’t be surprised,” Will said. “You men need to work on your stealth.”

Alan bobbed his bow off his shoulder, bringing up an arrow with it. He nocked the arrow, squinting in the distance.

“You sure you’re a good enough shot for that, dandelion?” Will asked.

Tuck said, “Hold. Are we sure we *want* to let ourselves be known?”

The men all looked at me.

I flared my nostrils. *No more hesitation.*

“Aye,” I said. “Do your worst, Alan. Let’s give the fuckers a scare.”

Teeth glinted in the moonlight from our collection of wicked grins.

The door to the cottage burst open. From the darkness and distance, I couldn’t make out the man in the doorway who spoke to the runner, yet if I had to guess ...

“Sir Guy,” I hissed. “Bastard got here before we did.”

“How would he know to come here?” Tuck asked.

“Must have followed ...” I didn’t finish the sentence. He couldn’t have followed us, because we were behind him. Which meant he must have followed Robin.

She really *was* here.

My blood boiled. Battle-lust claimed me, climbing, begging to erupt.

“Boss?” Alan asked, fingers trembling from resistance on the tautened bowstring.

“Do it,” I growled.

The arrow whizzed through the air with a twang, and I quickly lost sight of it.

The soldier speaking with Sir Guy made a move back, away from the door, as if he’d just been given orders. Then he abruptly went rigid, back straight, and crumpled forward into the house.

Will pumped his fist, grinning ear to ear. Tuck patted the minstrel on the shoulder.

“Shit, Alan, I didn’t think you could make a shot like that,” I said.

He smiled. “Our little songbird taught me that. Leading the target.”

I grunted. *So she fancies herself an expert archer, does she?*

“Good,” I said. “Then let’s get up there and get our girl, before we’re too late.”



Chapter 48

Robin



The cottage fell into abrupt chaos.

Maid Marian—weasel that she was—reacted first.

She cursed under her breath and took off for the side door near the back of the house.

Father glanced down at the dead soldier in the doorway, then to Sir Guy, then to me. I was beginning to stand on wobbly legs, hurting all over, when Guy drew his thin blade.

Father scowled, baring his teeth. “Dammit all!”

Out the window behind me, shadows moved, running up the path among the hedgerows. The cries of battle and clashing of steel carried up the hillside. Black-cloaked men were cut down. I recognized the gaits of the pursuers, those battle stances, those weapons—

And my heart sang.

“Kill her or you’ll not be paid!” my father roared, and my singing heart plummeted.

When I veered my gaze, Father chased after Marian for the side door, making his decision to flee and fight another day rather than continue holding me hostage.

Then it was just me and Guy of Gisborne in the main room. I snarled and bent my knees in a fighting stance.

He went straight-backed, perking his brow, and let out a sigh. “I don’t find it honorable to kill an unarmed fighter. Much less a woman, little mouse.”

“As if you have honor,” I spat.

“I have my own code,” he said. His feet shuffled, making a small circle in front of me, cutting off any chance of escape.

I kneeled, reached into my boot, and brought out the small dagger I kept there. “Come at me then, bastard.”

He smiled. Rushed forward, hands a blur, catching me off-guard with his graceful speed.

I stabbed—and my wrist spun sideways with a loop of his blade. My dagger went clattering to the ground and I yelped, grabbing at my stinging hand.

He gave me another shrug. “As I said. Unarmed.”

He was toying with me. The Merry Men would not get to me in time. I had to buy—

Crashing steel and wood from outside, jolting me from how close it sounded.

My head spun to the side door. Uncle Gregory stood there, greatsword drawn. He had swung at my fleeing father, appearing from the shadows like a ghost.

“I’ve been waiting a long time for this, *brother*,” Gregory said, spittle flying onto his gray beard.

Father drew the sword, cursing, and faced off with his brother-in-law under the awning of the side door.

Uncle Gregory laughed at him. “You think you can defeat me, Thomas? You rusty lout. Let’s go then.”

Father charged with a scream, closing the gap fast.

Their swords clanged.

“Where are my fucking *sister and niece*?!” Gregory shouted, pushing Father back with a wild swing of his huge sword.

“Uncle Gregory!” I cried.

My voice caught the attention of my uncle for a split second, and that was my mistake.

I saw his graying eyes shoot past Thomas, widening and then narrowing on me—

And Thomas charged him again.

Gregory managed to parry at the last minute, swinging out wide, but Thomas' sword still caught him in the side.

Gregory growled in Thomas' face. Their bodies spun together, Gregory now with his back to me, and Father with his back to the fields that stretched out toward the woodlands beyond.

They pushed off, my uncle staggering back a step.

Thomas drew his sword out, backpedaled, and then *threw* his sword at my uncle.

Gregory easily batted it out of the sky, but had to duck and defend himself.

And then Father was running into the fields.

The entire exchange took a matter of seconds.

Boots thudding on wood stole my attention. I inhaled sharply as Sir Guy ran at me out the corner of my eye. He was to me in an instant. I yelled as his free arm wrapped around me and he brought his sword close.

The Merry Men burst into the room, covered in blood, weapons drawn—

Just as Guy swung me in front of him and pressed the thin edge of his sword against my neck, the iron-like grip of his arm keeping me immobile. He put me between the Merry Men to his left at the front door, and Uncle Gregory to his right at the side door, using me like a shield.

“Back!” Guy roared, the cool temperament of his voice filling with fire. “Or your prize dies.”

Little John was the first to stride forward, raising his quarterstaff with both hands. “She’s as much your prize as she is ours, Guy.”

Guy snarled, “Not another step forward,” and pressed the blade tighter against my neck. “I know how swiftly you move for a big man, Jonathan.”

There were less than ten steps separating me from my giant savior. I whimpered and adjusted my feet, eyes bulging,

darting to Little John. He saw the fear written on my face. A mixture of anger and grief spilled over his bearded features.

He dropped his staff with a wooden *thunk* and raised his hands in surrender. “She doesn’t have to be your prize, though, does she? Your quarrel is not with the girl. It’s with me and the Merry Men.”

“My quarrel is with *all* of you fucking vermin! You leeches of society!”

Guy’s voice pierced my ears, and I winced, clenching my eyes shut. He had his back to the wall and window, so none of the men could get to him from the sides. He was smart, but I could tell he was also nervous, perhaps for the first time in his life.

“Let the girl *go*, Sir Guy, and we let you walk,” John said.

Will scoffed. “Like hell we—”

“You think I can trust the word of a bandit? A highwaymen who holds no code?” Guy growled.

John wasn’t getting anywhere with him. My eyes darted to the frightened faces of Tuck, Alan, and Will. Not frightened for themselves, for surely they could take a single man, no matter how much of a renowned swordsman he was.

No, they were scared for me. Seeing their little heathen, little songbird, little thorn with a sword across her neck, inches from death.

I swallowed hard. A bead of blood inched down my neck, swelling in the hollow of my throat. I saw the righteous anger on their faces—their tight, coiled bodies, ready to lash out the moment they could.

Then the dull clop of hooves outside the back door had everyone looking over—

Everyone except Sir Guy of Gisborne, who continued to study the Merry Men and Uncle Gregory.

A horse galloped to the fields, Maid Marian astride it. A second figure burst free from the grass, frightening the steed and making it neigh and rear back on its hind legs.

The shadow, my father, grabbed at the reins. He shouted with Marian for a moment, before Thomas got the horse under control and managed to leap and sit behind Marian. Then they were off again, and all eyes were turning back to me.

“Sword-fighting isn’t your calling, little mouse. Perhaps you’ll best me in something else some day?” Sir Guy whispered in my ear—

And my body plunged forward, suddenly, toward the Merry Men.

Guy held a crooked smile and *jumped* through the window behind us. The thin man angled his body perfectly through the aperture, rolled on the ground outside, and then his black cloak covered him in the moonlit darkness as he fled.

“Robin!” John shouted as I fell forward into his waiting arms. The burly man held me firm in a tight embrace, as if he sought to never let me go again.

I pushed myself out of his grip, and his face screwed up, features sinking with rejected sadness. I moved to Alan, throwing my arms around him—

And grabbed the bow off his shoulder, along with an arrow from his quiver. “Give me that,” I growled as blood rushed in my ears.

I spun, shoved my way past Uncle Gregory, to the patio outside. I raised the bow as the men congregated behind me like sentinels.

I nocked an arrow and gauged my options.

Marian galloped through the knee-high fields, my father holding her waist. They shrank smaller and smaller with every shallow breath I let out. Guy of Gisborne zigzagged through the field to the right of the riders, closer than them but heading the opposite way.

I didn’t have time to aim at both targets.

My heart hammered. I closed my eyes, steeled myself, and took a deep breath to let calmness wash over me. The pain at

my ribs, my neck, my stomach—it all subsided, drowning away along with the fading hooves.

The Merry Men didn't guide me. Didn't say a word. How could they, when the decision was in my hands, in the fingers pinching the bowstring taut?

I stared down the shaft of the arrow, jerking the bow toward Sir Guy's awkwardly moving body, then back over to Marian and my father.

“Don't do it, sister,” Robert said to me. *“Give him a chance to explain himself. He's still your father. My father.”*

I sighed. “He's had a lifetime to explain himself, Robert. And you're dead. So is mother.”

I lowered my gaze, back on Sir Guy of Gisborne, peeling my lips back.

My fingers lifted from the string and it snapped forward. The arrow whistled away, piercing through the night sky—

Then my father grunted, jerked, and pitched off the side of the saddle onto the high grass.

Maid Marian continued on, only glancing back once to see her promised meal ticket collapse onto the grass before she was to the edge of trees past the field.

Will Scarlet bolted forward, making sure to keep an eye on my father in case he tried to sneak away.

I'd struck him in the shoulder.

From this distance, with this visibility, I shouldn't have been able to hit him at all.

“What a fucking shot,” Alan-a-Dale whispered, elbowing Friar Tuck. “I know who I'm voting for to represent the Merry Men in the archery tournament.”

Little John's baritone voice set my mind at ease. “You did what you had to, Robin.”

I sniffed and looked down at the bow, my features twisting. It was a shortbow. Like I was used to. Brand new, it felt, yet so comfortable in my small hands.

Alan smiled at me. “I whittled it while you were away, little songbird. It’s yours.”

Tears came to my eyes. *A gift? When I thought they might be angry at me—hate me for betraying them with the map scheme I had no part in, and for leaving them in the first place?*

Maid Marian was wrong. She had never planted a seed of doubt in their minds, because unlike myself, the Merry Men had never doubted me at all.



My father was on his knees, fire crackling behind him, arms tied behind his back with a thick rope. His face was bloodied from Will Scarlet “accidentally” stepping on it while wrangling him from the grass.

He sneered and spat on the floor in front of me. Raised his chin, the very picture of defiance. He reminded me of Peter Fisher in a similar situation.

The tables had turned. I was no longer the prisoner. For once in my life, I felt free in truth. Free from this ... *monster*.

But I knew that feeling wouldn’t last. I would *never* feel completely liberated until ...

My shoulders sagged. I had the Merry Men surrounding me for support, as well as my uncle. They stood back and watched, hands on the hilts of their weapons in case Sir Thomas tried anything.

He wouldn’t. As much as he puffed his chest, I could see the defeated expression in his eyes. Defeated at the hands of the people who had robbed him—the people who had been hired, unwittingly, to get rid of me.

But he had underestimated the Merry Men, and me.

“What is it you want with me, girl?” he snarled.

“Nothing, Father.” My voice was tired. *I was tired.* “You cannot give me anything else, Father. You can’t *take* anything else, either. That time has passed.”

“I’m still your sire, Robin—”

“No. You’re nothing. You’re a cold-blooded killer. I heard everything you said to Maid Marian.” I looked to Uncle Gregory, whose face had twisted beneath his gray beard. Wrinkles creased his forehead.

“He poisoned Mama Joan,” I explained. “Long and slow.” My uncle looked aghast. Before he could do anything, I continued. “I met Wulfric. You were right, Uncle. He’s a great healer. He *could have saved her*. I’m certain of it.”

Uncle Gregory bit down on his teeth so hard I could hear the grinding. His leather gloves audibly tightened as he forced his hands into fists. He was ready to let his madness go loose.

I turned to Little John. “He also set up the robbery on my family’s carriages. The job you took from Marian, with its shadowy beginnings? *He* commissioned that job. You were supposed to kill me, while my mother died a slow, agonizing death from the poison.”

John’s shoulders fell. “But instead of killing you, we fell in love with you.”

My breath hitched. He’d never spoken those words to me. I had only recently thought of that word for the first time, in respect to the Merry Men. Now I saw the rest of them nodding slowly, fixing me with hungry, daring expressions.

I returned my focus to Father.

“You know my reasons,” he said, sniffing loudly. His voice was weaker now. Blood trickled from his shoulder wound down to the ropes binding him. “*This* is the romantic solution to your affairs, daughter? Not the noble suitors I sent for you, but these fucking brigands?” He scoffed. “You’re no better than I imagined.”

“The suitors you sent me, Father, were far from noble. These men, these merry, twisted fucking men, are five times as respectable as the sniveling brats you sent to my door.”

“And what will you do? The Wilford estate will not go to you. You’re an outlaw after Peter Fisher’s death.” When he

saw me flinch, he smiled. “Oh, yes, I know all about the poor sap’s death at your hands.”

“She didn’t kill him,” Little John blurted. “I did.”

Father’s frown wavered. He lifted his chin haughtily. “All the same. She’ll take the blame after taking out his eye. Why did you not just give him what he wanted? Wilford could have been yours!”

I wanted to slap him across the face, but I resisted the call. I wouldn’t give in to his baiting. “You truly never knew me, Father. You thought I’d let a spoiled miscreant like *Peter Fisher* win my heart? Take my body?”

“Well, I’m glad you found your savage jaunt with this lot, daughter. They are perfect for you.” Sarcasm dripped from his words. “At least until they grow bored of you, toss you to the wolves. And then what?”

“That’s not going to happen,” Little John said, stepping forward. “We’re going to protect Robin from vile evil like you, Thomas, as if she’s the daughter of the forest itself. Because she is our star—the Lady of Sherwood we never knew we needed.”

Father threw his head back and laughed. When his eyes came back to me, they were violent and mad. “If Peter Fisher could never win your heart, Robin, then you and I are travelling in the same flock. Your mother never loved me, either.”

“And that’s why you killed her?” My voice was level, seething with hatred.

“I simply eased her passing, girl. She died of a broken heart long before that, with Robert. Had our son not died, none of this would have happened. I would have had no reason to come after you if you hadn’t become heiress.”

“And you somehow hold *me* responsible for Robert’s death?” I said with a snort. “You’re delusional, Father. Always have been.”

His words hurt me. I tried to hide it, tried to keep my resolve. *I won’t ever be free unless ...*

He spit a wad of blood onto the floor. “I’m finished speaking with you, Robin. Take me to the authorities, if you think they’ll take your word over mine. The words of an *outlaw* over that of a *knight*.”

I gritted my teeth. “No, I don’t think they will.”

“Then ...” His eyes widened. The smarmy, smug expression on his face abruptly faded. “You wouldn’t.”

“Uncle,” I said, bracing myself, digging deep within my heart to do what I knew needed to be done. “I think it’s time you leave now.”

Gregory shook his head. “No, Robin. Joan was not just your mother. She was my sister, too. I stay.”

“Robin ...” Little John murmured, seeing the dangerous expression in my eyes. “You don’t have to—”

“I couldn’t do it with Peter Fisher—”

“I will gladly rip this man to pieces for you. Perhaps your uncle *and* you should leave while—”

“No. I must.” I locked eyes with him, and the flicker of the fire burgeoned in both our orbs.

His fire dimmed, face sinking. “I’m worried we’ll never get you back. If you do this ...”

“I’ll be corrupted absolutely?” I gave him a small, sad smile. “I think it’s too late for me.”

“It’s never too late, my star.”

I could still back down. John was right—they all were. I could see the eagerness in their eyes. They would gladly do this for me.

But my rage was too great. It overshadowed my sadness and reason. I wanted to take the biggest, most painful fucking thing I could find here and stick it into my father.

Steel clanked on hardwood.

I turned as Uncle Gregory handed me his massive greatsword. It was nearly as tall as I was.

I wrapped my hands around the worn leather. On instinct. I swiveled around, struggling to hoist the unwieldy weapon.

My father's eyes blew wide. "R-Robin," he sputtered. "Don't be foolish. Don't become like me—like one of these godless rogues!"

Now, I said, speaking to Robert as much as to myself. Now, at last, I will be free from a lifetime of torment.

With a primal shriek, staring into his huge eyes, I thrust the tip of the sword into my father's chest.



Chapter 49

Robin



Patricide.

I'd never thought of that word much. Never thought about what it meant, how it affected a person. To kill one's father.

He didn't die immediately. When my uncle's sword pierced into Father's chest, I had to watch his eyes widen in fear, a silent whimper pushing past his lips as pain settled at the corners of his eyes and lips. The open-mouthed wail where no sound came out.

It was worse when I had to *push*. In order to get to his heart, I needed to ram through the bones of his chest. Once the grotesque sound of cracking and snapping filled the room, he let out a guttural groan, a final gasp, and then life fled his eyes.

I released the handle of the sword like it burned my skin, with a sharp intake of breath. My heartbeat pounded in my ears, and then the world came flooding back to me, the red curtain of rage subsiding.

The Merry Men watched, as did my uncle—none of them taking their eyes away from what I'd done. Their frowns showed me hard men, accustomed to battle and conflict. Yet the glints of sorrow on their faces made me wonder if they pitied me, or were disappointed in me for going through with this.

I'd had ample time to reconsider. If I had managed to calm down and still wanted Sir Thomas dead, I could have easily had one of the Merry Men do it.

I thought I would feel remorse and regret once I blinked, watched his body slump back with the sword jutting out of his

chest cavity. But I didn't feel anything for the longest time. I was dazed, awed.

Now I was no better than those greedy princes who sought to slay King Henry. Some would say I was worse, because I had actually succeeded where they had failed.

I hadn't killed my father out of a need for more land or influence, though some would later say I'd done it in a heartless attempt to snag the Wilford estate for my own.

No, I had slain my father for my own peace of mind. For my safety and, yes, for revenge—to avenge the years of physical pain and mental anguish he forced me to live with. Never thinking I was good enough for the family; blaming me for Robert's death; beating me over any petty disagreement; never loving me; and, most importantly, for killing the one woman I'd loved more than anyone—my single protector before the Merry Men came along.

This was for Mama Joan, I told myself. Still, I whispered, "I'm sorry," under my breath, turning away from the scene before my father's blood could trickle onto the floorboards of the cottage.

I was apologizing to Robert most of all.

But my brother didn't answer. I feared I had scared him away from my thoughts and mind forever.

Little John brought his huge arms around me in a tight embrace. The way he folded over me, so protectively, made me feel warm and loved.

Loved like no man had ever provided me.

"You have nothing to be sorry for, little star," he whispered. "I'm only sorry you had to do it alone."

I buried my face in his chest. He smelled like cedar, birch, and the smoke from a campfire. "I wasn't alone," I eked out. "I had all of you here with me."

A hand fell gently onto my shoulder, and I craned my neck to see Alan-a-Dale smiling wistfully at me. "And you'll always have us with you, little songbird."

“I’m hoping you didn’t do that for our sake,” Will Scarlet said. When I shot him a frown, he bowed his head sadly. “I never wanted to turn you into one of us.”

“One of you?” I asked.

“A merciless killer.” Will sighed. “Show you the harsh ways of living no highborn lass ever sees? Fine. But never this.”

“She isn’t a merciless killer,” Friar Tuck said in a low, solemn voice. “If anything, it was a *merciful* killing ... of a depraved, lost soul who strayed from goodness.”

“Careful. You sound like a priest when you say that, chaplain,” Will said, his lips curving.

“Not a priest, lad. Just a human.”

While they touched on the finer points of my corruption, I looked around for Uncle Gregory. He had retrieved his sword and now stood outside the side door, arms crossed with his back to us as he surveyed the lavender-hued fields in deep contemplation.

I ducked away from the Merry Men to join him.

He did not turn to me. Gregory simply gazed out past the grassy meadow, toward the moon and the darker silhouettes of the trees punching into the bruised sky.

“What are your thoughts, Uncle?” I asked meekly, fidgeting in front of my belly. “Am I a horrible person?”

His beard flickered as his lips moved. He closed his mouth, sighed, and tried again. “The Merry Men aren’t wrong, Robin. After Thomas’ deceit, his zeal for power, he would have never stopped searching for you. You did what any sane, proactive person—any *soldier*—would do: You killed him before he could do the same to you.”

My uncle faced me, his eyes glassy with tears.

“I’m not a soldier, though,” I said with a snuffle.

“No. You’re a survivor. And you’ve avenged my sister.” He put his hands on my shoulders, drawing me close in a hug.

“I’m in agreement with their other words, too. I’m so sorry you had to do that.”

“I don’t regret it,” I quickly snapped. For some reason, my anger flared at everyone’s apologies. As if they thought I was too meek and weak-willed. Too feminine and highborn, perhaps.

“And you shouldn’t,” Gregory said. He pulled me to arm’s length to lock eyes with me, and his voice became gravelly and filled with sorrow. “You will struggle with this, Robin. Perhaps not tonight. Maybe not for years. However, eventually, doubts and remorse and guilt will seize you. You need to be ready to fend them off. If you must, hold on to the men who care for you”—his chin nudged to the Merry Men inside the cottage—“to find guidance, support, and aid in trying times. Because it is no simple thing to take a life.”

I nodded slowly, taking his words in. “I understand, Uncle Gregory.”

He cleared his throat and turned away, as if to hide the dewiness of his eyes because he didn’t want to appear weak to his niece.

I thought about his words. “You see now that the Merry Men care for me, don’t you?”

“Aye.” His nod was solemn. “I have no right to try and take you from them, if you wish to stay with them.”

“I do.”

“Then I will stop hounding you to come home with me. What even is *home*, anymore, eh? Perhaps you *are* safer with that rowdy bunch. God knows you weren’t safe behind the walls of your own household.”

My head bobbed. I didn’t have much to say to that.

“I was only trying to protect you, dear niece. For as long as possible. But now ... now I must pass the shield, I’m afraid. And that is why I weep.” He chuckled darkly, swiping his eyes with his forearm and giving me a crooked smirk. “You never were much of an innocent lass, I know. Though whatever innocence you still had, I worry it is now gone completely.”

“We all have to grow up at some point, Uncle.”

“Aye. A sadder truth I’ve never heard.”

Silence fell over us. The wind whispered through the grass. The voices behind, in the cottage, had gone quiet, and I imagined the Merry Men were watching me and my uncle closely, making sure he didn’t make any last-ditch effort to steal me away from them.

I had been so conflicted about Uncle Gregory. For a while, I thought he had abandoned me like everyone else in my life. Then I thought he had done worse—*betrayed* me. I thought he was responsible for Sir Guy of Gisborne’s search for the Merry Men; that he had broken his agreement to them in order to find me.

Now I knew the truth. Though he had never been perfect, he was simply trying to keep me alive. We were the last vestiges of our family name, after all.

If people discovered the truth of my mother’s death, or my father’s part in it—and his end at my hands—it would be a sad, morose day in Nottingham. A tragic tale of a family turned against one another, all for ambition, greed, and caused by heartache.

Selfishly, I hoped the truth of what had happened here would never see the light of day. In fact, I would fight to make sure it didn’t.

“What will you do now?” I asked my uncle.

He folded his arms and narrowed his eyes at the sea of swaying grass. “Maid Marian has proven herself a cunning adversary, and Sir Guy will report what happened here to the Sheriff of Nottingham. No doubt I will be pursued. I have resigned myself to my fate, since the deaths in Wilford that came from my hands while protecting you. I am an outlaw. My property is forfeit, and so is my freedom. Luckily, I’ve had my hand in a few hats over the years. I have places to go—places I’d rather not say—to keep me well-hidden and protected.”

I swallowed hard. “So you’ll ... hide?”

“Until the right time. I suggest you do the same, Robin.”

I was confused about his words. It wasn't like my uncle to take the coward's way and hide. *The right time? When is that?*

He was right about our overall prospects. As an outlaw myself, my claim to the Wilford estate would be forfeit. I would be branded a killer, just like the Merry Men. My family's house—and likely the textile operation that created my lineage's wealth—would be seized by the government of this tyrannical land. Emma and the serfs would be taken with it, and I felt ashamed for not thinking more about her, about her future. What would become of my dear friend?

“And you, lass?” Uncle Gregory asked, thankfully stealing me from my misery. “What will you do? Where will you go?”

I glanced over my shoulder at the men inside. Sure enough, they were huddled shoulder to shoulder, watching me intently. They respectfully kept their distance so I could speak with my uncle and give him my farewell.

“I suppose I'll go wherever the Merry Men take me. After all ... seems I'm one of them now, doesn't it?”



Chapter 50

Robin



The Merry Men and I left the cottage in Loxley. They had left a trail of bodies in their wake. This quaint countryside village would wake up in horror. It would put more strain on the outlaws who made the woodlands their homes, because the authorities would be pressed to extinguish the threat of the highwaymen that supposedly terrorized their people.

As we passed the bodies on the path leading down the hill, it wasn't lost on me how far the Merry Men were willing to go to protect and rescue me. On one hand, I wished it wasn't this way. On the other, it filled me with a gruesome sense of pride and love.

Yes, my corruption certainly did seem complete.

Uncle Gregory stayed with my father's body. He said he was going to bury Sir Thomas in the fields, and asked if I wanted to say any words.

I declined.

It was easy leaving Loxley without being seen, in the dead of night. My men had the rest of their company—about twelve more Merry Men, including some new recruits—camped in the forest outside town.

I brought Mercy and kept the horse close on the trek to camp. Little John told us we shouldn't stay long, due to Sir Guy of Gisborne getting away and likely wanting swift retaliation for his defeat. He said we could rest for the night, which we all desperately needed.

I was allowed to sleep in the carriage. The one object still attached to my family name. Despite my exhaustion, I found sleep difficult. I tossed and turned, cried quietly to myself, and

struggled with everything that had happened. Just as Uncle Gregory said I would.

It came on much faster than anticipated. The guilt, the shame, the remorse ... the emotions flooded me like an avalanche, burying me in sleepless thoughts.

I also realized I didn't want to sleep in the carriage anymore. Something had changed. It made me feel superior—*better* than the others—while inside I felt much worse.

I was no better than them. They were treating me like a pampered damsel, allowing me to sleep off the ground in a cart lined with softness, because I was highborn and the only woman in the crew.

So I left the carriage in the middle of the night. I scampered away, dressed in nothing but a nightgown most likely crafted by Mama.

I hadn't had time to dwell too deeply about her. I knew the painful tears would come soon. My heart could only handle one bout of momentous grief at a time. For now, I needed to keep it together for the sake of the Merry Men, until we escaped from danger. I trusted Little John to lead us where he thought we'd be safest.

It was cold outside, my body tight and chilled as I snaked through the camp like a specter. I found myself venturing toward Friar Tuck's tent. I needed to discuss things with him. Plus, being the heftiest and friendliest of the men, he would provide the most warmth.

When I poked my head into his tent, I was surprised to find him sitting up. His lower half was blanketed and he was shirtless. It was the first I'd seen him outside his monk's habit since the river.

He was reading a book on his burly chest with the aid of a sliver of moonlight passing into his tent. He closed the book when my head popped in.

A smile quirked his lips. "Imagine my surprise, little heathen."

“A-Apologies,” I said, rubbing my hands together. “May I come in? I was lonely in the carriage, and can’t stop thinking. I can’t sleep.”

He gestured me forward. “Please, join me.”

Inside, I immediately felt safer and warmer. He had his habit laid out as a mat. It kept my bare feet from the forest floor.

“What are you reading?” I asked, crawling next to him.

“Sometimes the Bible still interests me, strangely enough.”

“That’s not strange. You’re still a holy man.”

He wrapped an arm around my shoulder, bringing me close to his side. His body was thick and soft. I practically melted into him, curling my legs beside him.

“I’m not,” he said. His breath was warm against my cheek. “I’m a sinner. Trying to repent every day, and usually failing.”

“Oh?”

A small nod. His chin touched my forehead. He sounded comfortable, at ease with me next to him. Though he was much larger than me, our bodies seemed to fit together like puzzle pieces.

“I’m at risk of failing again,” he murmured, “with you so close to me, Robin. Your, erm ...”

My throat hitched, and color came to my cheeks. When I looked up to see what he was glancing at, I noticed it was my chest, and I looked down to see my nipples were hard and pert against the fabric of my nightgown.

I bit my lip in shame. “Sorry. It was cold outside.”

“And in here?”

“Nice and warm. It feels like home, almost. A home I never had.”

He laughed. “You have a flare for the dramatic, little heathen.” His hand cupped the back of my neck. Bumps sprouted along my arms. I scooted closer against him as the

warmth in my belly spread lower. One of my legs lifted and rested on the top of his meaty thigh.

“So,” he said, moving his hand to my thigh to rub lazy circles above the nightgown, “you can’t sleep. I think I know what ails you, but why don’t you tell me?”

I was unable to tear my eyes away from his thick fingers teasing my hot flesh. The fabric of my nightgown was thin enough that I could feel his touch to my core. “I’m sorry for running away from you in Nottingham. I feel like none of this would have happened—”

His finger fell on my lips, shushing me. I had an intense urge to take that finger in my mouth, but I resisted. “Don’t apologize for that, Robin. None of this is your fault.”

I swallowed hard. “I’m wondering if I should confess and repent for what I’ve done.”

“That is between you and God, lass. I don’t have authority to hear confessions any longer ... but I will, if that’s what you seek.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think it is. Not right now. I’m having trouble thinking about that.”

“I wonder why ...”

As his voice trailed off, his hand dipped under my nightgown and I gasped. “F-Friar Tuck.”

His hand stopped. It wasn’t fear in my voice, but surprise. He began to move his hand away, quickly, saying, “Apologies, lass, I’m afraid I misread—”

“No,” I said, snatching his wrist and slapping his hand back on my thigh. “It’s not that. Don’t go anywhere.”

“What is it, then?”

“Maid Marian ...”

His hand paused its lazy circles. His body tensed against mine. “What of her?”

“She said something to me in the cottage. I accused her of sewing the map in the dress, realizing I’d seen her in the

carriage the morning before you left for Nottingham. She said she was there to have ... to have something soft to lay on so she was comfortable while you, erm ... plowed into her.”

A growl fell out of Tuck’s mouth. His hands abruptly took my arms, and he all but *pulled* me onto his lap, so I was forced to straddle his hips. I let out a small yelp as my body moved, leg looping over, and noticed a tinge of fire in his amber eyes.

“That damned woman,” he said, and then searched my body up and down before locking eyes with me. I could feel a hard protrusion against my ass, and I tried futilely to ignore it as his eyes ravenously ate me up. “There’s no truth to her words, lass. I understand why she said it—to pit us against one another. I want you to know I haven’t laid a finger on that succubus since laying eyes on you. I won’t ever touch another woman while I have you. That is my solemn vow.”

Awestruck, I nodded dumbly. My eyes were wide. He looked so sincere. I believed him. To my bones, I believed him.

It wasn’t a small thing for a priest—excommunicated or not—to make an oath. “Do you trust me?” he asked.

I nodded quickly. “Yes.”

“Do you believe me?”

“Yes, Tuck.”

“Then perhaps I can show you how much you mean to me, and why I’m hopeless to be absolved of my sins.”

My chin trembled. I nodded slowly this time, leaning forward. “Please,” I whispered, touching my hand to his warm chest. “I need someone.”

He cupped the back of my neck as he kissed me. Claiming me with his lips, ravenously, in a way I never thought a priest could do. I didn’t know priests had experience like this—I’d grown up thinking chastity was important to them.

But not Friar Tuck. He was a master with his tongue. The intense heat that billowed inside me begged for more. *There’s a reason he’s an ex-priest*, I thought.

It came on hot and fast. The bulge below me became undeniable—painful, I felt, for him. He threw his blanket aside and his thick cock rose and slapped against my ass.

My legs were spread wide so I could straddle the girth of his lap. His rotund stomach gave me a perfect place to push against, and I crouched forward to kiss him harder.

Tuck's hand roamed through my hair as the dim moonlight bathed us. Our bodies became all touch and feel. His hand crept down, where my wetness had begun dripping onto his stomach. His fingers hooked beneath my nightgown, sinking into my cunt, toying with my wet heat.

I wrapped my arm around his thick neck, reaching back with the other hand to close my fist around the throbbing head of his cock. Stickiness smeared my palm, trickling out of him. "Oh Tuck," I moaned in his mouth.

"You're everything, Robin. My sweet, devious little sinner."

I rose on the balls of my feet. I couldn't stand this—the way he played with me, dragging his fingers in and out of me, lighting my insides on fire.

Without another word, I blindly groped his thick cock, repositioned his length under me, and then swung my nightgown open at my legs. I settled down on him, moving too quickly for comfort—only slowing once the bulbous head pushed my lips aside and sank inside me.

I agonizingly lowered myself on him, planting his rigid length inside my warmth, struggling to take him all.

Finally, the swell of my ass landed on his thighs, and I had him fully planted inside me, hilted deep.

He let out a groan, hugged my body against him, and bucked his hips to send his cock slamming up into me.

My eyelids fluttered. The bliss was immediate, exquisite. I was wet and slick, and he easily stretched my tunnel and hit every deepest part of me. This was a man who had proven himself to me, and this was the final act for him to make his love for me known. To show me how much he cared.

My heart swelled, even as he jiggled his body and squeezed me close to him, smothering me, sending spikes of pure pleasure thrumming through my core.

I put my hands on his shoulders so I wouldn't fly off his bucking lap. I rode him hard, slamming my ass down, making our flesh clap.

Coldness drifted over my back like a cool breeze. I didn't think much of it. I was lost in the throes of lust, turning this depraved holy man into an instrument for my pleasure.

"You're so tight and warm, Robin," he breathed in my ear. "The perfect woman. The only one I ever need."

One of his hands squeezed my pert breast through my nightgown, while the other guided my hip on top of him. He was more assertive and dominant than I would have imagined from his kind, soft exterior. But we all had secrets, didn't we?

The ecstasy inside me became a beacon of warm light that grew and grew and threatened to consume me from the inside out. I was losing my mind, losing my grasp on anything other than his cock rolling through me and his hands ravaging me.

Then a *third* hand caressed my spine, ghosting over my flesh, and I gasped sharply. Before I could look over my shoulder, I heard a soft, syrupy voice.

"Won't you sing for him, little songbird?"

Alan-a-Dale smiled in my cheek, hands wrapping around my middle.

"A-Alan," I croaked.

"Apologies, dove. I couldn't stand to hear our resident holy man getting you all to himself. Simply couldn't abide it."

"Alan," Tuck growled, hugging me against his warm chest. He kept fucking me, drawing that ball of light inside closer to an explosion. "She didn't ask for your—"

"No, please," I said, riding Tuck hard. "I want you too, Alan-a-Dale. You beautiful, treacherous man. I want *all of you!*"

I moaned, throwing my head back. The Merry Men had awoken a primal need inside me. The need for carnal exploration, and the transformation had been swift and all-consuming, the descent abrupt and drastic.

Alan wrapped a hand around the front of my neck from behind, squeezing lightly, keeping my face staring up. He dipped his head over mine, on his knees, and kissed me upside down as my spine bowed.

Where Tuck was ravenous and needy, Alan was smooth and tender. The bristles of his short-cropped beard tickled me. His tongue flitted over mine, and I batted it away, trying to assert dominance.

I was sandwiched between the two men, and could feel Alan-a-Dale's hard cock sliding between the mounds of my ass, even as Tuck pumped my cunt nearby.

"Which hole shall I take, songbird?" He grinned wickedly.

"Take whatever you want! I'm begging you."

A climax rolled through me at his words and the feeling of Tuck's cock pelting into me, curving just right.

"A dangerous game," Alan said. "Looks like one is already taken ... but I can be persuasive."

I had no idea what that meant. All I could do was gasp and mindlessly nod. "Thank you for the shortbow," I said, as if it was relevant *at all* as to why Alan-a-Dale had barged into this tent.

The small space grew stuffy. There was hardly any room for us to move, yet we made it work. I gripped Tuck's shoulders as Alan pressed his chest against my back and slid his cock beneath me, teasing the tight bundle of nerves on his way to my engorged lips.

He played with me, circling his shaft, planting it near Tuck's heavy balls before whispering in my ear, "The beauty of me, songbird? I don't care what my cock touches, so long as it's inside you."

With that, he grunted and shoved hard, sliding the underside of his cock against Tuck's, penetrating my already-stuffed hole.

I went rigid, back straight, and my eyes widened. "Oh God save me!" I screamed as Alan-a-Dale's swollen length snuggled against Tuck's and filled me fully.

I had both men inside me. Against all logic and possibility, I rode them together. The sensation was painful at first, but I was so wet and aroused that it quickly melded into the most blissful experience of my life. I couldn't understand my own thoughts because they fucked them out of me.

Alan pumped into me with slow precision. Tuck's hands fell on my ass to pry me open further so they could work me together. Their two shafts melded exquisitely, becoming a back-and-forth motion of pure pleasure. They hit so deep. These hung men, so good at this—showing me a way of living I could have never imagined in the ivory tower of the Wilford estate.

The Merry Men didn't corrupt me purposefully. They didn't *need to*, because I wanted it so damned bad. I begged for it, holding both of their necks as I straddled their cocks and bounced up and down on their laps.

I urged them deeper inside me, moaning and with every rise and fall of my body. They touched me everywhere at the same time, freeing me of my nightgown, exploring every part of my flesh with their greedy hands.

I was their entire world. For a few long, desirous minutes, I was good enough. I was better than good enough—to *them*, I was perfect.

The thought of having these men all to myself, with Will Scarlet and Little John included, gave me a heady rush of dizziness. I came again, ready to erupt and shatter into pieces.

Tuck played with my clit from the front. Alan-a-Dale speared two fingers inside my asshole and curved, probing me, keeping both my holes filled. I gasped when he first entered

my rear, but then I melted into it, realizing he knew what he was doing.

The feeling was intense. The emotions poured out of me. I found myself crying, laughing, and coming. Losing myself to hysteria and simultaneously feeling more in control than I ever had. The sheer *release* was an impossible sensation to interpret.

There was no specific Merry Man better than the other, because they all offered me something different. Little John gave me unconditional protection. Will Scarlet gave me crazed obsession. Friar Tuck gave me hopeful guidance. Alan-a-Dale gave me witty camaraderie. They all imbued me with confidence.

Their cocks sparked a fire and touched me in their own ways—flames I never wanted to put out. I felt more experienced and whole than ever before, after coming into this life untrained and untainted.

The two drilling deep inside me throbbed and swelled, widening me even more. My mouth fell open and I lifted myself on shaking feet and wobbling thighs, using Tuck's shoulders as leverage to stay upright.

A sheen of fluids squirted out of me as their cocks withdrew from my gaping hole, and I came undone, shaking and quivering with an intensity that defied belief. Whimpering as I came and lost myself.

I reached down, fighting through the orgasm to stay conscious, and wrapped my hands around their cocks. I rubbed them together, with both palms, as if trying to start a fire between the molten-hot lengths. Tuck's thick cock was slick and glistening against Alan's long shaft, fighting for release while their cocks expanded and darkened from my ministrations.

The men groaned. They threw their heads back, not caring what I was doing to them, between them. They were tools for my pleasure, and I got *immense* pleasure watching them squirm, groan, and moan while I had them in my grasp.

I scooted off to the side, Alan's thighs on top of Tuck's, and lowered my face between them. I licked their glistening, warm cockheads, tasting myself on them, and the salty potency dripping from their ridges.

When I licked, they lost control. Cum rocketed out of their cocks at the same time, cascading into the air, painting my face, delighting me. I yipped in surprise and laughed as I pulled my face back, letting them coat my hands and drip from my wrists and chin.

Tuck and Alan latched onto my wrists as I stroked them, forcing me to continue doing it through their intense orgasms. I peered into the pinched faces of both handsome men, smiling at them in wonder—wondering how it felt for *them* to come so undone.

“Good God Almighty,” Tuck breathed, his voice raspy as he jerked and spurted one last time.

“Fuck the Almighty,” Alan said, shaking his head as he took in deep breaths. “That was worthy of a song!”

The men kissed me. They brought me close, sandwiching me as we reclined in the small tent. Our bodies were tangled messes of limbs, and it was exactly what I needed to fall asleep into a deep slumber.

I tried to stamp their essence on me for eternity. To never forget. The interior of the tent reeked with the heady scent of sex and sweat. It was undoubtedly the filthiest thing I had ever done, yet I felt more accomplished than ever.

And I knew it would only get better from here.



Chapter 51

Robin



Ironically, we found ourselves in Barnsdale Forest. The place my family initially sought to “heal” my mother.

For nearly a month following the frightful events in Loxley, we kept to the hills and valleys surrounding the village. We made camps near the hamlets of Load Brook, Dungworth, and Damflask. We stayed near the confluence of River Loxley and River Rivelin, though never straying too close to the city proper of Sheffield.

Barnsdale became our home. Little John realized we were safer here than in Sherwood Forest. Since Sherwood was our stomping grounds, he suspected Sir Guy and the Sheriff of Nottingham would assume we’d return there. Our hideouts in the vast forest had been compromised, so we didn’t see any reason to needlessly gallivant through those woods for a time.

Many of the Merry Men had family there, such as Will Scarlet’s father in the village of Ravenshead. Our plan was not to stay away forever, but rather bide our time and recuperate before returning. Sherwood was still home to the Merry Men.

The villages this far north did not know our band’s reputation. We were relatively unknown, while other outlaw crews were more feared and infamous in these parts. As news of the mysterious Loxley Massacre spread across the valley, different groups’ names were pinned to the slaughter.

We used our relative anonymity, and the townspeople’s fear, to our advantage. Some families wanted to leave South Yorkshire. Men of fighting age were either opting to join the militias to protect their people, or considering other, less scrupulous options. Those who forwent military service would have to pay the scutage shield-tax for opting out.

Taxation here was just as punishing as it was across the rest of England. No quarter was given to the people. The Sheriff of Yorkshire was a rival to Sir George of Nottingham, and just as hated and feared.

When the collector came riding into the shire with his catchpole, people hid in fear like he was a death-dealer.

We coaxed quite a few young men toward those *other* options. As we slowly migrated northeast, away from Loxley, toward the villages of Skelbrooke, Hampole, and Doncaster along the Great North Road, we picked up stragglers who needed a fresh start or anonymity. Men fleeing their tax obligation, deserting the military, or falling on hard times and being forced to thieve.

The ranks of the Merry Men swelled. We planned our illustrious return to Nottinghamshire, because we had unfinished business there.

Though we frequented many of the villages, thorps, and taverns in South Yorkshire, we always ended up scuttling back to our forest dwellings to rest our heads. It was still the only place we felt safe enough to reside.

“I wish for a time when we can lay our heads on the soft pillows of an inn,” said one of the newcomers one day, who had been on the run from the law for two years. He was only sixteen.

“And the soft bosoms of those *in* the inn,” said his friend with a snicker. Unsurprisingly, also sixteen.

I aimed my bow at one of the targets we’d etched into the piney coniferous trees of these woods. My fingers released from the string and with a snap the arrow whizzed onto the mark.

Nearly a center hit, just a finger’s width to the right.

I cursed under my breath, pulled another arrow from the quiver at my feet, and readied another shot.

“*Pillows?* What are you, a king?” Will Scarlet scoffed at the young man, strolling through camp eating berries. “Might

as well keep wishing, boy. We won't be taking residence in any village anytime soon. Right, John?"

Little John grunted. He was working on his leather armor, scuffing it and blowing on it, trying to make it look nicer.

He needed a new piece of armor. He disagreed, with the excuse, "It still works. Why get a new one?"

To which I said it was unbecoming of our leader, to which he scoffed like a curmudgeon.

Alan-a-Dale walked up to me, outside the center of camp. Crossing his arms, he clicked his tongue as I took my shot and missed wider than the first one.

I scowled at him, peeved he'd distracted me. How could such a beautiful man, especially creeping up on me like that, not be a distraction?

He shot me his charming smile. "You'll need to do better than that if you want to win the tourney."

I pushed the shortbow he'd made me toward him. "Do *you* want to take a shot?"

"And embarrass myself against you? No, songbird, I don't. But I also never agreed to do this."

Friar Tuck came up on my other side. I squirmed a bit, remembering the filthy affair the three of us had a couple weeks ago. We continued our nighttime activities even now, with me occasionally disappearing into Will or John's tents, too. So far, I hadn't brought the four of them together, though I figured it was only a matter of time. There was no reason to press the issue, because I was getting my needs met, *assuredly*, and we had other pressing matters. Namely, the archery tournament Alan-a-Dale mentioned.

"I still think it's too dangerous," Tuck said.

He was exceedingly cautious these days after losing me in Wilford. It made sense, seeing as how things tended to go wrong when we left our comfort zone.

I'd partaken in a couple carriage robberies since joining the Merry Men. No one had died in either of them, because I'd

told them I wanted deathless raids, and they agreed. Perhaps it was because I was a woman. I liked to think I brought a softer side to the group.

They were less prone to violent streaks when I was partaking in the raids, since my guys were focused on keeping me safe. In that sense, I was a liability, but the thrill of the raids was incredibly satisfying. The nights always ended up with me fucking one of them nearly unconscious to expel my excitement, so none of them complained. They only vied for my body any given evening, going so far as gambling for the chance to worship me.

A girl like me, who had never been the apple of someone's eye except as a means of wealth and land distribution, could get used to this.

The carts we pilfered did not belong to nobility, which irked me. The gains were minimal. Little John complained our reputation would be damaged if we continued robbing smaller quarry, and I agreed. Yet stealing from the gentry was exponentially more dangerous.

Something needed to be done. We needed a bigger score to make up for the weeks of continuous escape from Sir Guy of Gisborne, which stripped away our revenue streams. We also needed to be somewhat safe while doing it.

Enter the archery tournament at Nottingham.

At first, it had been merely talked about over ale at a public house in one of the small villages along the River Rivelin. The seed was planted, however, when I said, "It would be life-changing for the Merry Men."

The next night, after a small and unsatisfying robbery, I said, "We can't keep on like this. The law will catch up to us if we don't do something."

On the third night, I had half the Merry Men convinced the tournament was the answer to all our problems. They saw how good of an archer I was. With a bit of training—like the training I was doing now—I felt I had a good shot at taking

home the ten-pound bag. I told them it would also be a way to reintegrate us into Nottingham.

Little John had shaken his head morosely. “That’s just what we need right now, Sir Guy and Sheriff George on our asses. We’ve finally created some breathing room.”

“Aye, but the girl is right,” Will said, always in disagreement with our big leader. “We’re hungry. Winter is approaching, and then what? We need money to carry us through the season once snow falls and the game hibernates. Food will become scarce soon, and you know it. Happens every year.”

John sighed, distancing himself from Will. “I won’t support such a strategy. It’s too dangerous for Robin.”

“You won’t support it,” I said. “... But you can’t stop it, either.”

Coupled with my mischievous smirk, Little John’s eyes flared. He took me by the arm, pulled me through camp. “Oh, I can’t, can I?”

Then he fucked me in his tent to get out his frustrations, my playful moans carrying through camp where everyone could hear. Afterward, I realized I needed to rile up Little John more often. Because I liked that disciplining side of his. I enjoyed when he took charge and put me in my place.

Regardless of the way he punished me for my bratty tendencies, I was right: Little John *couldn't* stop the inevitable. I was doing the tournament. He either needed to get on board or shut up, and he eventually came to understand that. It took a couple weeks, but I finally had all of the Merry Men in agreement.

Except for Tuck, who agreed on principle we needed money, yet didn’t think this was the best way to get it.

“Remember what happened last time we kept her out of arm’s reach,” Tuck said now.

“That was different,” I said defensively.

“How?”

“I needed to reflect on my family. Needed to find my truth, which none of you could help with. Now, I trust you all. I know where I belong, and it’s with you.”

Tuck smiled sadly. “You don’t know how glad I am to hear you say that, little heathen, but how does that change the fact that we won’t be able to protect you in Nottingham?”

“We will,” came a stern, deep voice behind us.

We spun to find Little John with his arms crossed, propped against a tree. I had no idea how long he’d been there, listening to us or watching my archery practice.

“How?” Tuck asked.

“We will protect our shining star by doing what we’ve done these past few weeks: Staying close to her, not letting her out of sight.”

I smiled at him. This was quite the turnaround from being the single holdout just a few short days ago. I was surprised John, of all people, was coming to my defense.

He pushed off the tree and marched over to us. In the dirt, he drew out a map with his foot. “We know Nottingham and Sherwood Forest better than anyone. We can arrange our defenses to make sure we have every corner occupied, every field covered, every gate protected.”

I nodded vigorously. “Close in around me like a shield wall.”

“Aye, lass.” He finished his crude map so we could see what he was showing us. “We know where the tournament is being held. With all eyes on you, from multiple positions and angles, we will be able to act swiftly in case anything bad happens. At first sign of deceit or danger, we whisk Robin out of there.”

“I love this plan,” I chirped, already enthusiastic at the prospect of doing something *useful* for a change.

Friar Tuck frowned. “We might know where it’s going to take place”—just outside the eastern grounds of Sherwood

Forest, in the fields—“but the military presence will be vast. It could be risky.”

Will said, “Everything we *do* is risky. It’s who we are.”

Alan said, “As much as I love your fervor, Little John, you are forgetting one thing: Robin is an outlaw, like us. If any of us are spotted by the military, or, God forbid, someone like Guy who would recognize us ...”

At least ten other Merry Men had wandered over to listen to the public conversation between the leadership. I wasn’t a leader, but these four had been with the Merry Men longer than anyone. The younglings deferred to them and called them “boss” and “sir” and showed respect to John, Will, Tuck, and Alan, even when they didn’t show respect to one another.

Little John nodded, pursing his lips. “You’re right, Alan. If we’re spotted, or Robin is recognized, it could spell disaster.” Silence, as he circled behind me and lightly touched my neck under my hair. My hair had grown past my shoulders, wild, wavy, and unruly. I imagined I looked more feral than I ever had in my life.

As John lazily ran his fingers through the strands, I blushed. Everyone watched me curiously, heads tilted.

“... Which is why we can’t let anyone recognize you, star.” John’s voice was a low caress in my ear. “Do you remember how you came to us, Robin? How you managed to dupe *us*, even when our eyes couldn’t leave you?”

I gasped. *Of course. Why didn’t we think of it before?*

“I came to you as a man.”

“Aye.”

Murmurs broke out among the Merry Men. Besides a few veteran members, the new recruits had not been here for that. They’d never seen the disguise I so expertly used to protect myself during those first few days of fear and confusion.

Little John curled his fingers toward the others. “Lads, hand me a dagger. I think our little star is in need of a haircut, aye?”



Chapter 52

Robin



We returned to Sherwood Forest a few days later. The trek was daunting and arduous. The days were growing shorter and the nights longer, and nearly every day was gray, rainy, or a combination of the two.

We needed better shelter. The men were grumpy and unruly. My four lovers kept up a façade of good spirits, even though I knew this plan made them nervous.

At the end of the day, *I* was going to be responsible for earning. I was going to be thrust front and center, with hundreds watching. In the robberies, I had always played a bit part. Now I was the lead role, and that responsibility unnerved me more than anything.

I couldn't let the Merry Men down. Cold, wet weather meant fewer hunts, hungrier stomachs. I had practiced my shooting every day, for hours. I was a better shot than anyone else in the group. That didn't stop John and Will from trying to show me pointers. It frustrated me. Perhaps it was my grumbling belly frustrating me, too.

Alan whittled me an endless supply of arrows. By the end of that month away from Nottingham, my new shortbow was well-worn, like an old friend in my hands.

I was ready. I had to be.

We arrived at the northern edge of Sherwood Forest on a windy morning the day before the tournament.

No one knew the exact point where one forest ended and another began—the entire countryside was filled with them. Leaves were beginning to fall, and our footsteps crunched. We'd kept the fires burning high and late recently, because we'd had nothing to fear outside of Sherwood. Now we were

back, everything would change. We became quieter, more focused, less friendly.

I wondered if Sherwood really *was* the home of the Merry Men any longer. Could they even be called *merry* if they acted like sour shitstains most of the day?

We camped a few miles outside Nottingham in a new, never-before-used location. It wasn't on any of the maps that had given them away and forced them to flee.

Not "them." Us. I'm part of this now.

During the afternoon, Little John sent young recruits into Nottingham and surrounding villages to gather news. He sent men who had joined in Barnsdale, because they'd be unknown here and wouldn't raise suspicion.

We needed to know who was going to show up tomorrow, what the competition was going to look like, and if there was danger afoot.

Five men staked off in every direction.

By sundown, four of them returned, each within an hour of the other. We grew worried that the fifth scout had been captured, but then he showed up an hour later with the moon high in the sky.

We learned he had gotten caught up with a whore in town who wouldn't let him leave until she got what was "owed" to her. In other words, his cock.

"Sounds like Maid Marian," Will said with a scoff.

"It wasn't," the young, redheaded man said, scratching the back of his neck. "I would have known."

John said, "Did anyone see her or hear about her whereabouts? If Marian is prowling, none of us are safe."

The five scouts shook their heads.

Shit.

"What of the competition?" Tuck asked. "What will it look like?"

A different young man, bucktoothed and grimy from weeks of travel, stood from the circle sitting at the campfire. “There will be fifty-five participants. I included Robin—er, *Robert’s*—name on the tally.”

Alan-a-Dale smiled wide and ruffled my hair. It was short and scruffy, to my ears. “Why does she look just as pretty as a boy as she does a woman?” he asked the group, apropos of nothing.

I elbowed him with a smirk.

“Because you’re a proper rake, dandy,” Will murmured, shaking his head, earning a few chuckles from the other dozen or so men.

“And because you *know* her,” John said, serious. “No one else will.” He turned to me. “Which is why you need to be swift and inconspicuous. Stay hooded. It won’t be strange with this weather. Don’t look anyone in the eye for too long—”

“Yes, yes, we’ve been through this five times already, Little John,” I said with a flap of my hand. “I’ll be safe.”

He scowled.

“Plus,” I said with an innocent smile, “my valiant men will be there to protect the weak, fragile little damsel.”

More chuckles from the crew.

John rolled his eyes and sat back, propping his arms behind him. “You’re incorrigible, woman.” He nudged his chin at the young man still standing. “Continue.”

“Right. Fifty-five competitors.”

Friar Tuck cursed under his breath, slapping his knee.

“What is it?” I asked him.

“I should have bet against Scratch. He thought there’d be eighty. Dammit.”

“The weather is likely keeping some competitors away,” Alan pointed out.

Will snorted in disbelief. “You were going to gamble on the tournament ... before it even began?”

The friar narrowed his eyes. “I didn’t, did I, boy?”

The next scout said he went to Wilford and learned my estate was vacant, abandoned. No one had done a thing with it yet.

The boy after him told us of the rules, and the length of the competition. “Four matches in eight hours, in groups. Hour-long intervals between them. I believe Robin will be in most danger between the matches, because she’ll be close to the other competitors.”

“Aye,” John said. “We’ll also be close. Spectators?”

“Hundreds are expected. Maybe thousands. All of Nottinghamshire is invited. This will be a spectacle.”

“Why so many?” Alan-a-Dale asked.

“Because there’s nothing to fucking *do* in this damned place, in this damp weather,” Will said. As if to make his point, the wind howled through the campfire.

Alan crossed his arms. “Right. I’d much rather be farming for honey with your father in Ravenshead.”

Will flared his nostrils. “Careful, dandelion.”

Tempers were flaring. We were all testy. It had been like this for days.

“The Sheriff of Nottingham himself will be there,” the scout said. “In attendance—not participating.”

Little John scoffed. “Sir George wouldn’t want to embarrass himself. Not against some of the best archers in the land. Did you snag a ledger, get any names?”

The boy shook his head. “Apologies, boss.”

“It’s okay. You did well, son.”

The scout sat.

Another one stood, across from me at the fire. “I heard a rumor in a tavern that Prince John might make an appearance.”

The men groaned.

Little John sighed. “That would be disastrous.”

“Why?” I asked. “Is the prince that popular?”

“It’s not that Lackland is popular or well-loved, little star. On the contrary. His presence means the presence of more guardsmen, which will be stifling.” John tilted his head at the standing scout. “Who told you that?”

“A drunkard.”

“Then let’s hope his drunk ramblings were just that: nonsense. Otherwise, we’re calling this off.”

“What?!” I blurted. “No! We can’t!”

“Of course we can. Remember what we said about putting you in harm’s way? I won’t allow it.”

I threw my arms out wide. “You can’t unilaterally make this decision, Little John! We’ve come all the way here! This tournament is *important*.”

“Not important enough for you to die over.”

Silence fell over the group. The flames snapped.

Friar Tuck sighed heavily. “... Our fiery damsel is right, brother. We need money. And food. We should hold this to a vote.”

A struck look fell over John’s face as he whipped his head over to Tuck. The friar glanced away, shamefaced.

Little John scowled. “Fine. All in favor of letting Robin participate in the tournament, regardless of whether Prince John attends, raise your hand.”

Of the sixteen Merry Men present, ten raised their hands. The men who didn’t? Will, Alan-a-Dale, Little John, and three others I didn’t know well.

When Friar Tuck raised his hand, John flared his nostrils. “Why you?”

“Because it’s what Robin wants,” Tuck said. “And because I trust her. We all should.”

I gave him a shy smile.

“Quite a change of heart from being the last holdout, chaplain,” John grumbled. “It’s not that we don’t trust her. Of course we do. It’s that I’m worried we won’t be able to *protect* her, should anything—”

“Enough,” Will Scarlet cut in. Perhaps the only person here with big enough balls to interrupt our leader. Other than me, of course. “The vote passed. Robin is participating, John, whether you like it or not. Don’t scowl at me like that—I voted against it, too. But I know when the battle is lost.”

“So what’s your opinion, lad?”

“My opinion is we need to shift our focus on how best to protect her, in the face of all the potential guards, bounty hunters, and knights that will be there.”

John puffed his cheeks out and sighed heavily. He turned to me, eyebrows arching. “Wear that hood low, Robin. Wear it like it’s part of your damned skin.”



Chapter 53

Robin



I stayed focused all through the night and morning. Keeping to my tent, no longer using the carriage as my temporary quarters. When Will tried to pop his head in late at night, I sent him away and he scowled and wandered off. Same went with Alan, Tuck, and John.

I couldn't be distracted. Lord knew I could have used some release, but I didn't want to get sidetracked by those hungry, beautiful men before the big day.

It came on fast. Next morning, we were ready to go before the sun had crested the hills in the distance. It was going to be another gray day.

After a short breakfast, we crept through the woods in silence. Two men were left behind—drawing the shortest straws—to keep watch on our camp. The other fourteen of us ventured toward eastern Nottingham.

There was no point going into the city, which meant little risk of exposure and arrest. I had to imagine there were quite a few outlaws showing up to this event, hoping it was possible to buy their way to freedom if they won the tournament.

In the vast fields north of the River Trent, spectators congregated. Hundreds of them in the early hours, which only swelled as morning progressed. Dozens of bow-strapped men appeared from every direction, coming out of the woodwork. Some arrived from our direction, others from the south and west. They looked like hard, grizzled men, while I appeared little more than a boy with my short hair, slender stature, hooded cloak, and shortbow.

The competitors mostly kept to themselves. Some of them had teams, others were loners. Before we reached the edge of

the tree line, the Merry Men dispersed in different directions, toward their planned positions for the day. Will, John, Alan, and Tuck stayed with me as long as they could before scattering for their own spots.

“Just know, we’re never more than a shout away, and you’ll *always* be in our sights,” Little John told me before kissing me on the forehead and departing.

His words gave me confidence, which I sorely needed.

A line formed in front of a small table where a scribe was entering the participants. So far, we’d seen no sign of Guy of Gisborne, Sheriff George, or Prince John. Oh, there were guards aplenty, stationed in every corner, behind every shadow and under every tree. But none of the heavy players I hoped to stay away from.

I got in line and waited, tapping my foot.

The man behind me chuckled. He was also hooded, and when I glanced back, he said, “First time?”

I ignored him. Then, thinking it was rude and more suspicious staying quiet, I gave him a curt nod.

“Don’t be scared, lad. It’ll be over quickly.” He chuckled again.

I didn’t like the way he spoke to me, as if shading his words with innuendo. I wished John was there to smash him across the face with his cudgel, or Will to slice that smug smirk off his face.

I hated bullies. Funny, I thought, since the men I’d fallen for had been my captors and bullies before all this. God above, Will Scarlet had ripped my shirt open to expose me. I’d nearly forgotten about that.

Stay focused.

I blinked at my inner thoughts. No Robert, still, though I couldn’t blame him. I’d killed our father. I wouldn’t want to talk to me, either.

Before long, I was at the front of the line. I stepped forward and presented the old man with my bow.

He looked it over with a scowl, making sure it wasn't tampered with or weighted in any illegal way. "Name?" he asked, putting the bow aside on the table. He didn't bother looking up at me.

"Robert of Loxley," I said.

The man grunted, found my brother's name, and marked it off on his list. "Late addition." He finally glanced up, and I averted my gaze. "Your bow is small. You know that, yes?"

I nodded.

A shrug. "It's not my coin. A shilling to enter."

More than a week's wages for a laborer. I fished around in my pocket for the money and stared down at the large silver penny in my palm.

A few months ago, this shilling would have meant nothing to me. As a highborn noblewoman of Wilford, I had been carefree. I'd even gambled a shilling away with Rosco and his boys. Now? The Merry Men needed every penny we could get our hands on.

"Boy?" the scribe said, gesturing to me with wagging fingers. "A shilling to enter."

I handed it over. A squire walked up and handed me a quiver of arrows.

"Your arrows for the tournament, with your specific fletching," the scribe explained, nodding to the unique feathering of the arrows. "Used for all four stages of the competition. Understand?"

I nodded.

"Then be off with you." He shooed me away with a hand-flap. "Timed target shooting begins in one hour."

The hour passed absurdly fast. I kept to myself, chewing my lip raw, keeping my head lowered beneath my hood. Avoiding gazes, peeking out from my hood at the competition.

A few tall men swaggered past me, boots squelching in the morning mud, and shouldered me out of their way.

I wanted to snarl at them like a savage, but resisted. I'd grown rather feral in my time away from Nottingham. People were everywhere, and I couldn't start a scene. I'd made a promise to my guys to stay out of trouble, even if it came sniffing for me.

"Since when they let whelps whose balls haven't dropped into these kinds of things?" one of them laughed on his way by.

"Little Lackland is getting desperate for coin," his friend said. "The prince will let anyone enter."

"I put my money on it being the Sheriff. Man's got no scruples."

Then they were gone. Prince John was insultingly called "Lackland" because, well, he lacked land. As the youngest son of Henry II, he didn't gain an inheritance of provinces. Lucky him, then, that he pilfered some land due to the absence of his brother, King Richard.

A deep voice called across the field, listing off names of the first group to participate in the timed target shooting.

I was one of the names.

So was another name that made me tilt my head.

"Oliver of Mickley," said the voice, and I furrowed my brow. It was a familiar name. I couldn't remember from where.

I was surprised to find "Oliver of Mickley" wore not only a hood to hide his hair, but a black mask that covered the lower half of his face, only showing his eyes.

I scoffed at the maneuver. *That's one way to stay anonymous. I suppose I should have thought of it.*

Oliver wasn't that uncommon of a name, and Mickley, though a small village, shouldn't have raised my hackles. Yet it did.

I shook the distracting thoughts from my head when we came to the shooting range. Targets were set up in three intervals—closest to furthest.

The competition began without preamble, a man behind me yelling “Time!”

My heart thundered in my chest when I raised my bow for the first time that morning. There were tall men on either side of me, and Masked Oliver stood a few stalls down. He had perfect posture. It brought out the competitive spirit in me.

When I loosed my first arrow and saw it strike the closest target nearly dead-center, a few men looked my way and grumbled. The crowd behind and around us let out “ahhs” and “oohs” as arrows were flung from their bows, all of us shooting in tandem.

My heart raced, the first target falling back onto the field from the force of my strike. I raised my arrow and took aim at the middle target, straight ahead, and loosed.

A few fingers to the right of center, but it did the job. The raised target fell, leaving only the final and furthest one.

I took a deep breath, remembering my training, and leveled my bow. I stared down my forearm, quieted my rushing heart, and took aim, closing one eye.

My tongue skimmed my lips—a tell the Merry Men always said I did when I was concentrating on a shot. It was a feminine look, and I hoped my hood hid enough from the spectators.

My arrow whistled from my bow, flying straight and true, nearly a hundred feet away in front of the tree line of Sherwood Forest.

The target thudded, fell, and I squinted to see where I’d hit it.

Nearly dead center again.

I let out a soft sigh, smiled, and a smattering of polite applause rose from behind me. A few people murmured and whispered to themselves. I heard one say, “He’s a good shot for a young lad. Should keep an eye on him.”

“Aye, almost beat the entire crop in time.”

“Sure, but that Oliver of Mickley fellow beat him in time *and* accuracy.”

I paused, whipping around, my cloak billowing.

The masked archer named Oliver was striding away from his stall, bow slung across his back. He didn't look in my direction.

Bristling, I moved on as the rest of the archers finished their stage. Half of them were disqualified for missing the time or target, and they walked off grumbling.

Fewer than forty participants remained.



The rest of the day went by in a whirlwind. The next hour, I was tasked with clout shooting, which involved shooting at a thin, flagged stick planted in the ground.

The archers who shot closest to the clout won the event. It wasn't that the stick was hard to hit—obviously it was—or even that far away. It was that your shooting had to be *precise* to land near it.

Luckily, mine was close, thudding into the damp ground mere inches from the mark.

Three others were closer, however, as noted by the fletching on the arrows.

One of them belonged to Oliver of Mickley.

At that point, I grew frustrated. *Sir Guy of Gisborne*, I thought. This masked man was tall and thin like Guy. The hood hid his long black hair. The Merry Men had warned me the Sheriff would likely pull an underhanded maneuver to try and win the tournament of his own making. Thus entering his expert marksman lackey and hiding his face so he didn't get complaints.

It seemed unfair.

Then I thought, *Is it unfair, though? Guy has just as much of a right as I do to be here. More, even, because I'm not even a man.*

If he's truly the best archer, then I have to beat him. There's no point getting bent about it. I have to beat the competition to win the coins, whether it's Sir Guy or someone else.

When I started thinking of Guy as a rival rather than an enemy, it brought my pulse down. My blood stopped pumping so furiously in my veins. My shots flowed easier out of my grip.

The third section of the competition, after morning, was moving targets. The sun had finally pushed through the clouds, though it was still a cool afternoon.

I had practiced this one for hours and knew what to do. Alan-a-Dale had been lifesaving while assisting me.

Here, I didn't have Alan to toss the birds into the sky, or roll the disks along the ground.

I took my own advice when I'd told Alan to "lead the target," and whizzed arrows from my quiver one by one. I fired rapidly both up high and down low, angling my shots just right, and then popping up to strike the next target as it fluttered into the sky.

I only missed two targets out of fifteen—the furthest ones, which were difficult for my shortbow to reach.

When I smacked the final rolling disk across the grass, a roar of applause sounded behind me. It had been incredibly quiet up until then, with everyone holding their collective breath.

Now that the stage was over, the spectators let loose.

I even turned around and gave a small bow, proud with how I'd done. This third event halved the competition again, leaving fewer than ten finalists left.

I was one of them.

Oliver of Mickley, of course, had missed only one target.

I didn't let it rattle me.

I had one last chance to overtake him—the fourth and final stage. The most important bout of all.



I dashed through the woods, hopping over a gnarled root, my eyes darting in every direction. My breath came shallow, puffs of white lifting from my nostrils and mouth as I breathed.

“Time!” yelled the sprinting man behind me, which meant my time had just started—there was a target somewhere and—

There!

I aimed left, angled my bow flatways and fired off a shot into the trees.

The circular target, which was positioned oddly as it poked up from a branch, rattled and shook.

I weaved through the copse of birch trees ahead. This stage was where my sprightly stature gave me an advantage. The roving marks section, where I navigated a course with a timer-man behind me. I had to find the targets in the vicinity when he yelled that my time had begun, and then we moved onto the next area.

The targets came high, low, wide, narrow. One was positioned on a rock, nearly hidden by a tree branch. Another, next to a pond, sat on a bed of lily pads, slowly floating across the surface of the water.

I shot them all swiftly, feeling confident in my abilities.

Other archers were in other sections of the woods—all of us leading to the same location at the end. We were each given a stretch of time to work through the course on our own.

I channeled my brother. I channeled what I knew of Guy of Gisborne, and the soldiers who had grown up alongside my family in Robert’s troop, and—

I gasped.

Oliver of Mickley.

It was the name of one of Robert’s childhood friends. A young man who had gone off to war with him.

How could I have forgotten that? He was a handsome boy I was smitten with when I was a little girl.

When he and Robert left for war together, I was just as sad at losing Oliver's smile as I was at losing my brother for a time. Or losing him *forever*, as it turned out.

"Time!"

Ripped back to reality, I fumbled my bow, blinked away my thoughts, and scanned the scene ahead. Undergrowth crept out from an oak tree, and in the hollow of the tree itself, higher than two men stacked together—

I pulled back on the arrow and shot.

And missed.

"Fuck!" I growled, and took aim again.

Now I was rattled, thinking about my brother's friend.

I took a deep, deep breath and held it, slowing my heartbeat. Then I went to a knee for better leverage and balance, aiming high.

My second shot struck true. I pushed off my knees.

There were two options, the way I saw it, and both of them were bad. If my rival in this competition was truly Oliver of Mickley, then he would know something about my brother's death. The circumstances surrounding it, at least.

How could Oliver never come to Wilford to tell my family the story of Robert's demise? How callous and disillusioned has the young man become after leaving the military?

In my mind, it seemed impossible. That wasn't the handsome, smiling lad I remembered. Then again, that was years and years ago. People changed.

The other option, of course, was the one I was steering toward. My original hunch—that this was Sir Guy of Gisborne, in disguise. Playing everyone for fools. The stature of this man was more aligned with Guy's tall, lanky frame than what I remembered of Oliver.

I couldn't fault Guy for his impersonation or disguise since I was also in disguise and impersonating a man.

If it's Guy ... then what does that say about the frightening man, for him to know so much about my childhood and youth?

Because surely choosing that name couldn't have come by accident or coincidence.

It made me shudder to wonder if Guy had been watching me much, much longer than I knew.

What is Guy of Gisborne trying to show me?



Chapter 54

Little John



Keeping an eye on Robin during the roving marks leg of the tournament frustrated the hell out of me. It was difficult because she constantly swerved through the trees, crisscrossing in random directions. She moved fast, too. Too damned fast for my old knees to keep up with.

Spectators who were daring enough to brave the forest, and willing to take on the risk of getting shot by an errant arrow, were allowed to follow the competitors through the woods.

The forest did not go *too* far into Sherwood Forest, because there was always the risk of running across a bandit camp the deeper into the trees you went. Then again, I was certain the Sheriff had cleared the area of encampments before the tournament.

A few other middling spectators braved the woods—bettors, undoubtedly, who had high stakes on the turnout of the competition—but no one was near me.

I had no money on anyone, but my heart on Robin. She was admirable, incredibly proficient with a bow. I was so proud of her. I made a mental note to tell her how proud of her I was after this was done, winner or not.

The lengths she went to help the Merry Men was not lost on me. Of course I disagreed with this entire endeavor, but that was only because I worried for her.

Robin herself made me realize I couldn't hold her back. No one could. She was a spitfire renegade who would do whatever she wanted. The thought of her taking on these hardened men who had twice her archery experience in war,

hunting, and other tournaments, quickened my blood. She was fierce and resilient.

She fit perfectly with the Merry Men.

And she even had a shot at winning this damn thing!

Though it shouldn't have, it shocked me. Based on the points from the first three matches, she was in the top five of competitors, perhaps even top three.

If she could convincingly beat out Oliver of Mickley in this final stage, she would win the fucking silver.

You amaze me, lass.

Spectators had to keep a fair distance from the archers as they roved through the course. I respected the distance I needed to keep, managing to catch sight of her through the branches, brambles, and foliage. Whenever Robin moved, I moved ... though not nearly as swiftly.

By the time the course neared its completion, I was panting. I wiped a sweaty brow, resting my forearm on a tree trunk, and leaned over to catch my breath. The whispers and voices of other watchers had faded. We were quite deep into Sherwood now, and only a smattering of spectators had gone this far to watch the conclusion of the tournament.

I was on the east side of the route, while Will Scarlet was on the west side somewhere. We couldn't see each other, but I knew he'd be there. Alan-a-Dale would be north, at the end of the track. He'd be the first to congratulate Robin on her victory or defeat, given his depth in the forest. Friar Tuck was south of us, near the tree line, making sure no undesirables stalked in after the competitors.

This was the perfect place for an ambush, after all. Given the high-stakes nature of this tournament, I didn't put it past marauders, bandits, or even the Sheriff of Nottingham from trying to silence one of the competitors to keep them from winning.

Luckily, no one suspected a thing so far, from what I'd seen. Robin's disguise was intact. We were *this* close to

making it out of this tournament, perhaps much wealthier than when we arrived.

A loud voice echoed through the trees ahead, as the runner yelled “Time!”

I heard rustling, caught a glimpse of Robin hopping over an overturned log in full sprint as she moved to the next targeted area, and I groaned and pushed off from the tree, jogging after her.

She froze in a glade, eyes scanning trees and rocks left to right, up and down. My eyes landed on the hidden target ahead, and I gritted my teeth, my pulse pounding.

Of course it was illegal to cry out help to the competitors, and was the quickest way to get them disqualified. It pained me knowing she wasted valuable seconds while I *knew* the location of the target.

It was just over a small hill, past her line of sight. Grunting, “Come on, girl,” I took a step forward, my legs compelling me toward her.

Her feet shuffled. She twisted, body jerking with recognition, and her bow lifted.

A second later, a *thunk* rang out as her arrow slammed into the target and sent it rattling on its perch.

“Yes,” I hissed, pumping my fist next to my body.

Only two areas left. Two targets to win the tournament. The last target was the most important. It allowed *each* participant a chance to strike the target at the same time. Depending how swiftly and efficiently an archer had run through the course, they would have extra time or less time to find the final target, strike it, and win the round.

She took off running toward the penultimate staging area.

Sighing, I moved to follow her.

Pain lanced through my right side, so sudden and excruciating I couldn’t let out more than a sharp gasp.

Sucking my breath, eyes bulging, I glanced down—

And saw a dagger stuck in my side, held by a gloved hand.

I blinked rapidly, watching as Robin became smaller and smaller in my vision. The pain melded into numbness, and that numbness threaded through my body like a twisted herbalist's concoction.

I tried to fight off the poison coursing through me. Tried to open my mouth to scream—for once needing aid and willing to ask for it from one of my allies—but found I couldn't force the words out. My throat had gone dry and dead.

I reached for my quarterstaff at my back. My hands were weak, arms heavy, and it was futile. My attacker easily knocked it out of my hand, to the forest floor.

“Well met, Jonathan,” a smooth voice purred in my ear. The man hadn't made a sound creeping up to me. “So engrossed in watching your little mouse run through the course, you didn't think to watch your *own* back.”

I knew that hateful voice anywhere.

I slowly turned to face Guy of Gisborne. My body shook. My knees started to buckle, and Guy held me up under my arm. Though he was slender, he showed surprising strength to hold a man of my stature upright.

Guy wore a thin smile, his dark eyes twinkling.

“You should have never come back to Nottingham, Jonathan. You were almost free.”

I eked out a sound that was hardly human. It was a garbled mess—certainly not *words*—and my head filled with dizziness and a fog I couldn't shake. The edges of my vision dimmed, growing dark.

“Then again,” Guy said, clicking his tongue, “there isn't a sanctuary far enough or large enough in all of England where I wouldn't find you, old friend.”

I furrowed my brow, fading fast. Feeling my body slumping forward, I looked one last time in the place where I thought Robin was located.

She was gone.

I didn't fear for myself. I feared I had let her down. That after this was all done, if I was dead, I'd never be able to take hold of her, kiss her, and tell her how proud of her I was.

For defying the odds. For defying *me*.

With the burning image of a smiling, mischievous, hooded Robin of Loxley in my eyes, darkness took hold of me completely.



Chapter 55

Robin



An arrow whizzed over my head and slammed into the tree trunk behind me.

My eyes widened. My survival instinct took over. I had just knocked the second-to-last target and was ready to move onto the final area.

The timer-man behind me cursed. “What in God’s name is ___”

His voice was cut off as another arrow whistled through the leaves and branches, thudding harmlessly to the ground near me.

I squinted, spotting a shadow ahead.

It quickly darted away into the bushes.

Gritting my teeth, I followed. *A scare tactic!*

Someone was trying to tilt the game in their favor, frightening me from continuing.

Like hell I’m going to let that happen.

Stubbornly, I smacked aside loose brambles and pursued. They were headed toward the final staging area, which meant they were most likely a competitor. Either that or a wily spectator who had too much money placed on the event and couldn’t afford to lose.

“Come back, coward!” I yelled into the trees, my voice echoing.

I assumed it was Oliver of Mickley. Though he had shown no signs of cowardice, I knew men like that. How they acted once they thought no one watched them.

As I gained on the shadowy figure and pushed into the clearing ahead, I slid to a stop. The timer-man was hot on my heels.

Surprisingly, it wasn't Oliver. It was one of the other archers who had qualified for the final round.

“Hoy!” I shouted.

He turned his head to face me, a scared look in his eyes. He couldn't focus on me, eyes darting.

“Disqualified!” the timer-man shrieked—

Just as an arrow plunged into the archer's shoulder.

He spun away from me with a growl of rage, and staggered forward.

Another arrow took him in the chest, stopping him cold. He dropped with a choked sound, blood spraying the grass underfoot.

I backpedaled, real fear clawing at my stomach. The bow in my hands trembled.

There were no guards this far out in the woods. No one except me, the timer-man, and whoever had shot this fellow.

Once he dropped, a man appeared from a bush, rising from his knees. He scowled at me and the timer-man. I recognized his face from other parts of the competition, yet I'd never seen him before this day.

“Disqualified!” the timer-man yelled again, pointing a shaking finger at him.

“You think I give a shit?” The man grunted, nodding his chin toward the fallen competitor. “Should'a never stolen my lady, Heath. Bastard had it coming.”

With that, he turned and disappeared into the trees.

Blinking, I muttered, “Should have never ... what?”

And it hit me. These two men had known each other. This one had entered the tournament knowing the other would be

here. *These two men didn't come here to win the money ... they came here to finish a blood feud.*

The fourth section of the tournament was the perfect grounds for an assassination attempt: secluded, quiet, and away from prying eyes.

Dread curled along my spine. The stakes had become *much* higher, because if Oliver of Mickley really was Guy of Gisborne ... what was stopping him from doing the same thing to me once I pushed through those trees ahead?

The final glade was only a stone's throw away. I could have turned around, handed my bow to the timer-man, and given up.

Yet I didn't. I was too stubborn, too angry, and, honestly, too curious. And I wanted to fucking *win*.

The timer-man said, "Will you continue, lad?"

"Yes!" I yelled, gripping my bow tightly. "We're the only witnesses to his murder, sir. We have to keep going."

"Very well." He poked his gaunt cheek with his tongue, narrowing his eyes on me. "... Your voice," he began to say.

I turned and sprinted off toward the final staging area. In my belligerence, I hadn't masked my voice with the gruff undertones I was used to while disguising myself as a man.

The timer-man was onto me.

I raced through the trees, dashed over a small stream, a bundle of thick roots, and into the clearing ahead.

The killer was there, looking around in frustration. "Where the fuck *is it?!?*" he growled, searching for the final target, ignoring his disqualification.

He had come in at the wrong angle. Where I was, I could already see it—just overhead about thirty paces, atop a small hillock, jutting out from the side of a birch tree. It was angled at a difficult position.

I needed to get to it before the killer knew *I* knew where it was. Otherwise I feared the same fate for myself as Heath.

He paid me no mind, even as the timer-man yelled, “Time!” and went to speak to him, likely to admonish him.

The murderer shoved the timer-man out of the way, saying, “Later, old man. For now—”

His eyes turned to me, narrowing. I danced around, hopping, scanning the land-bridge that went over the small creek, and the oak tree past it. Pretending that the target was anywhere *but* where I knew it to be.

Fuck it, I thought, my skin crawling when the killer studied me. I steeled myself. He started to say something, and I made a mad dash past him.

He reached out to grab me—

I ducked, veering past him toward the hill.

He yelled, “Shit!” and gave chase, undoubtedly spotting the target at last.

I drew my bow. My body trembled with nerves. I knew I’d have to take the shot on the run if I wanted to have any chance of beating this taller, meaner man.

It was a difficult shot on the best of days. With a thin fog starting to roll through the trees, it was nearly impossible.

I aimed anyway. While running. Heart pumping.

The man had stopped chasing, opting to try a stationary shot from a further distance.

My first shot blew wide, and I cursed under my breath. The killer’s shot was far wider, and he yelled in frustration.

I fumbled with the quiver on my back, telling myself I had this. I *had this*.

Can’t let them down!

I slowed as I reached the base of the hill. The angle of the target was hanging from the branch, and I craned my neck, closed one eye, and took aim.

I loosed my arrow—

Holding my breath, gauging the trajectory, knowing it was going to hit—

And an arrow from the side slammed into the center of the target a heartbeat before mine landed.

I froze, mouth falling open. Wheeled around, but found the killer was still struggling with his shot, still nocking his arrow.

It wasn't him.

I scanned left, to something out the corner of my eye—

And saw the masked bastard, Oliver of Mickley, perched on a tall rock, bow extended in a masterful stance. He lowered it, glancing my way for the first time.

He gave me a tiny nod.

“Score!” the timer-man screeched behind me. “Oliver of Mickley first, Robert of Loxley second. Victor of the roving marks: Oliver of Mickley!”

My upper lip peeled back in a snarl.

Oliver hopped off the rock and started to walk away. Behind me, the killer cursed and also wandered away, back into the trees, likely to never be seen again.

Nausea flooded through me. I had lost. Let the Merry Men down, when I promised I wouldn't.

They had *trusted me*, and I'd failed.

I chased after Oliver, into the trees. “You!”

There was rustling behind me as the timer-man jogged to keep up—likely to make sure we didn't come to blows or end up like poor Heath.

Oliver didn't stop. If anything, his stride quickened.

“Just who in God's name are you, *Oliver?!?*” I shrieked. I wasn't trying to use my comical manly voice any longer. There was no point hiding myself. I had lost.

He faced me. It was unnerving, staring into that masked mien, unable to read his expression.

I threw my hood back, showing my hair and face in the dim fog. “Do you not recognize me? Do you not remember me, Oliver?”

His face slanted. His eyes narrowed and his brow furrowed, though I couldn’t tell if it was a concerned look or an anxious one underneath that black mask.

I thrust a finger at him. “I don’t care that you won. Good match. I *need* you to tell me what happened to Robert, though. Tell me what happened to my brother, and how he died!”

I would never forgive myself if I didn’t ask. I didn’t care if he had turned into a callous bastard. I deserved this, at least. My brother had fled my thoughts. He no longer spoke to me, and it pained me.

I needed closure.

Oliver let out a sigh.

Then his body stiffened. His eyes flashed wide.

The man raised his bow at me, arrow already nocked.

My breathing ended on a sharp exhale and a silent gasp. *Just as I feared, Guy of Gisborne used this tournament as a staging area to kill me!*

He fired his arrow, no less than ten paces from me, and I ducked, knowing this man could never miss me from this distance.

The arrow hissed over my shoulder.

A gurgle and strained croak behind me.

I spun around.

The timer-man staggered, a dagger in his hand, an arrow lodged in his forehead. His eyes rolled wildly as he took his last steps, his brain collapsing from the wound, and he toppled forward.

“Not *her*, dammit,” said Oliver of Mickley. “Never her.”

Slapping a hand to my mouth in confusion and fear, I wheeled back around to face Oliver.

He had saved me from a would-be assassin.

And his voice ... so familiar.

Screams broke out in the distance, back toward Nottingham. Muffled, at first—

But growing louder.

Shapes flitted through the trees. Shadows, men, bandits? People ran, dashing toward Nottingham.

The forest came alive with hunters.

How did I not see them? Was I so entranced by the competition that I missed an army of highwaymen hidden in the trees? And why did the timer-man want me dead?!

“What ... what is going on here?” I breathed.

The man pulled his mask down to his neck. His lips pursed as he stared at me with narrowed eyes.

Shock made me recoil, colliding with my mind and dizzying me. I staggered, knees nearly buckling.

One word eked from my shaky lips, on a stammer.

“R-Robert?”



Chapter 56

Robin



My brother held out his hand. “Come with me, sister.”
“What?” I said dumbly. I was too awestruck to say anything more. My face was slack, my body rigid.

Everything felt surreal. Dreamlike.

My brother stood in front of me. My *dead* brother.

Surely a figment of my imagination, like his voice in my head.

“You’re dead,” I said. “I hear you in my mind.”

Confusion rippled across his face.

“We argue, like when we were kids,” I explained. “You try to tell me what is right. To guide me.”

The screams were getting louder past the trees, rising into the air. Panicked spectators, havoc being wreaked. I could hear the faint sounds of steel clashing together. The yelling of injured men, blood soaking a battlefield.

“I’m sorry, Robin.”

That was what he said after years of being gone. He didn’t expand—didn’t tell me anything substantial.

“You aren’t safe here,” he added. Then he nudged his chin past me, to the dead timer-man. “Clearly.”

“Who was he?” I asked.

Robert sighed. “One of my men.”

“One of ... *your* men?” My teeth gritted. Robert looked similar: tall, dashing, broad. His hair was darker now, wavy and tipped with amber under his hood. But his face looked different.

I couldn't reconcile it. Couldn't understand what was happening.

"There's no time to explain," he said.

My whole world came crashing down in a matter of seconds. Yet he was trying to speak to me as if this was normal. As if dead brothers just sprouted up out of the ground. As if my mother hadn't grown sick from heartbreak because of his death. As if I hadn't lived the last months in sorrow and heart-wrenching agony, speaking to a *fucking skull* in the woods to try and process my grief and get on with my life.

To make sense of Robert's death.

But none of it made sense anymore.

He held out his hand again, urging me. "Come on. I'll tell you everything when—"

"Robin!" a voice screamed behind me.

Will Scarlet emerged from the thick tree line, his face sweaty. He drew his swords when he saw Robert standing in front of me, arm extended, and he charged toward me. Friar Tuck barreled in next, from a different direction. Alan-a-Dale wasn't far behind, from the north.

We had Robert quickly surrounded. My men inched closer to me, weapons drawn, staring daggers at him.

"Who the fuck are *you*?" Will growled, knees bent like a lion ready to pounce on his prey.

Robert didn't draw his bow. He looked at the faces surrounding me—my saviors—and said, "You have a choice, Robin."

"What is he talking about?" Alan asked. "We have to get out of here, love. Hell has burst open and let out all its little minions."

"*Love*?" Robert said, eyes squinting on me.

Friar Tuck said, "You're Oliver of Mickley. Winner of the tournament, yes?"

Robert hesitated. Glanced at me. “What will you do, Robin? I will explain everything once you’re safe with me.”

Safe with me ...

Turmoil ran rampant through me, like a physical thing eager to make me sick. The pressure nipping at my heart was too much. Here was my brother, the man I had lost to war under mysterious circumstances. In the flesh. *Living*, and apparently thriving. He had just killed a man to protect me.

Safe with me ...

“Say the word and we’ll strike this madman down,” Will growled. “Happily.”

I shook my head adamantly. “No. He just saved me.” I pointed at the dead timer-man behind me.

Seemed *everyone* in this damned competition was using some kind of disguise. *But what did Robert mean when he said the timer-man was one of his men? And how is he alive?!*

I had so many damned questions. If I went with Robert, he promised to answer them. We could rejuvenate the Wilford estate, reclaim our name and legacy.

We could make Mama Joan proud in Heaven.

I was torn in so many directions, I didn’t know which way was up. This was the boy I’d grown up with. My flesh and blood. The boy I admired, who taught me everything. The boy who enabled me to do so well in this tournament, because he believed in me when we were younger and didn’t scoff at me when I said I wanted to learn how to shoot arrows and swing swords like him. The boy I spoke to in my mind, even after losing him, because the pain of him being gone forever was just too difficult for me to admit.

So I played pretend.

This entire time, I’d been playing pretend with the Merry Men. Acting like I was one of them. Gallivanting around the woods, taking part in daring robberies, living a life of subterfuge and adventure. Fucking them like they would ever

think of me as anything other than their prize or possession. Their trophy.

My eyebrows arched helplessly, and I looked into the faces of my men: Alan, Tuck, Will.

Where is John?

I blinked, and saw something in those gazes. Something that made me reappraise the entire situation, and my entire way of thinking.

I saw true *love* there. They didn't need to say anything. Didn't need to try and coax or coerce or force me into a decision. Because they trusted me. They had said it, and shown it by letting me live my life how I wanted.

Robert? He was an extension of my family. My dead family. Mother, father, brother. They were gone, and even when they were *here*, they hadn't been much of a family at all.

No. They had forced me to go looking for a family to make my own.

And I had *found them*.

"Robin, there's no time!" Robert yelled, growing frustrated as the yelling grew louder.

I flinched. Shook my head. "I'm sorry," I said.

I turned away from Robert, perhaps for the last time, and faced my men. My *forged* family. The people who had ripped me from the group who called themselves my bloodline, and made me fall for them.

If it was Robert from my childhood, perhaps my decision would have been different.

But this Robert? I didn't know *this* Robert.

"You're making a mistake, Robin!" he yelled after me.

"Let's go," I said to the trio, squeezing between them.

"Good idea, little thorn," Will said. "We can ask questions and talk about the dead bodies around you later. Right now, there's something big happening."

“What is it?” I asked.

He shrugged. “A rebellion of some sort. Men flying in from the trees and river, attacking the fields of eastern Nottingham. No idea, but they don’t look happy, and I would prefer not to get caught in the crossfire.”

“This isn’t our fight,” Tuck agreed.

“Where’s Little John?” I asked.

They bowed their heads, slowly shaking them.

“We’ll find him, songbird,” Alan said, squeezing my shoulder.

“For now,” Will added, “we run!”

I looked over my shoulder one last time as we left the clearing, trying to memorialize Robert’s face.

But there was no one there anymore.



The tournament was a complete debacle. As John and Tuck had feared it might be. Not only had we not left with the ten-pound reward, we had lost money—a shilling, to be precise.

More importantly, we’d lost Little John.

I was unreceptive and distressed the next few days. We hid in the woods, far away, until things died down.

Whoever the rebels were that had attacked Nottingham, they had failed. I wondered what Robert had been doing prior to this to be part of them, while I had thought him dead.

We vowed not to leave the area until we learned more about Little John. On the fifth day following the tournament, we slowly stalked our way back through the final stage of the competition—the course where I had ultimately lost to Robert.

It took us hours of combing through the eastern side where John had been stationed ... but we eventually found it.

Alan-a-Dale said, “Hoy, lads,” as he rose from a crouched position. His morose voice stabbed through my lungs before I had even turned around to face him, because I knew what it

meant. I didn't need to see what he'd found. I nearly burst into tears right then and there.

Alan held Little John's quarterstaff in his hands like it was a priceless artifact and not a simple hunk of strong wood.

The rest of the Merry Men converged on the minstrel. We passed it around, searching for clues—for *anything* that would tell us what happened to him.

"He's not dead yet," Tuck promised us, trying to be the sole guiding light in John's absence. "We don't know what this means, but let us not jump to conclusions."

We nodded sadly. Whatever it meant, it didn't bode well. Maybe one of the rebels got him? Maybe an assassin in the woods, like the one who killed that poor man Heath?

Later that night, around a campfire, spirits were low. Perhaps lower than they'd ever been. We'd lost our leader. Our fearless commander, who was stern and sturdy, always willing to accept other ideas on what to do, but firm in his convictions and beliefs.

He had been the most hesitant to do this tournament. And now he was gone.

It's my fault, I thought, sniffing. I'm too reckless and proud for my own good.

"What do we do now?" one of the younger scouts around the fire asked.

It was a question on everyone's mind. Did we wait and see how this played out? Wait to learn of Little John's death from someone in Nottingham? Did we become proactive and vicious, and search for him no matter the cost?

No one had any idea who to look to. With Little John gone, there was a deep void that wasn't filled.

We didn't know who to call "boss" any longer.

A few of the men turned to Will Scarlet.

He readjusted the red sash around his neck, which gave him his namesake, and cleared his throat. Little John's staff

was passed around the circle until he held it reverently in his hands.

Will was the most obvious choice to lead us with John absent. He had been John's most vocal critic and detractor. He knew John's mind better than any of us, because they had spent the most time together.

Yes, he was half John's age, but that didn't matter. He had the experience of being a bandit, perhaps longer than any of us. Since childhood, even, after parting ways with his ailing father. With William Elder, he had a reason to fight. A drive and ambition some of us lacked.

Yet Will Scarlet looked in *my* direction, shaking his head. He held the quarterstaff out, toward me. "It shouldn't be me. It should be the one holding us together. Little thorn."

My eyes bulged in shock. Slowly, the men started nodding. They looked to me. They passed the quarterstaff around until it was in *my* lap and *my* hands.

I felt the weight of the world then, staring down at that hunk of wood. "But I ... failed all of you."

"No," Friar Tuck said. "You tried something none of us were willing to try. You made an effort to help the Merry Men, despite the danger to you, Robin. Will is right: You're the best of us. You deserve the staff."

I blinked at him. Where was all this coming from? I was no leader. I had no experience. I wasn't even a man!

But as I held that staff longer and longer, and the night dragged on, I steeled myself. In the typical, stubborn way I did, I started to think of what this meant—what I could do with a little bit of power to help the Merry Men *in truth*.

Not an idiotic, rigged tournament. Not little robberies that proved more dangerous than they were profitable.

Since the beginning, I had thought we needed to think *bigger*.

"What will you do, Robin?" Alan-a-Dale asked. "Will you take on this responsibility?"

I nodded quickly. “Only because you men have voted on it. If it’s the will of the Merry Men, I’ll do it.”

The men smiled, slapping each other on the backs, and let out a small ruckus of hoots and hollers.

“To think,” Will said, grinning mischievously, “the Merry Men ... led by a woman.”

“A *hooded* woman, no less!” one man called out, drawing laughs. “Three cheers for Robin of the Hood!”

The laughter grew. It was the first laughter we’d had in days, and we desperately needed it. They chanted the phrase “Robin Hood,” because three syllables were easier to chant than “Robin of the Hood.”

I wasn’t sure I liked it.

Then Tuck said, “Onto the next order of business,” silencing the crowd with a waved hand. Despite me being the leader of this messy group, he was still the “chaplain” and elder. People listened when he spoke. I could learn a thing or two from Friar Tuck.

The friar stared into my eyes. “What would you have us do, little heathen?”

I swallowed hard.

“Aye,” Alan said, winking. “Speech!”

My cheeks flushed as the crew erupted in cheers.

This was all so new to me. I ... didn’t know what to do.

But that’s not true, is it? I’ve known what to do this whole time, I just haven’t had the power to make my voice known.

Now, my voice *would* be heard.

So I stood. Holding the quarterstaff in my hands, pointing it at people around the campfire as I spoke.

“Little John is missing. Our leader is gone, and we have to find him. That is the first order of business.”

Everyone nodded.

“But,” I said, raising the staff, “we have to start thinking bigger. We need to do better.”

A few cocked heads at that one, with Tuck saying, “What do you have in mind, lass?”

“Helping the orphans is one thing, and it’s fantastic. We should keep doing that. But we need to help *everyone*.”

“That ... doesn’t sound sustainable,” Will muttered.

“It is if we think smarter,” I repeated, smiling at his scowling, handsome face. “We can’t keep robbing these merchants and traveling families. It ruins our reputation. As I told you once, Will, the people of your father’s village don’t defer to you out of love, they do it out of fear. I want to change that.”

The men were all ears, sitting forward.

“And the way we change that?” I smiled wickedly, and drew a box with wheels in the dirt, so everyone could see. “We steal from more people like *me*.”

A few of them sputtered questions. Confused looks on their faces.

“Like you?” Alan asked.

“Wealthy. Rich. Like I once was. We steal from the nobility, *exclusively*, and we take Tuck’s strategy of giving to the orphans and the poor and destitute one step further. *That* is how we’re going to build an army capable of taking on the Sheriff of Nottingham—no, Prince John himself!”

The Merry Men were taken aback by that admission, by my loud voice.

I slammed the butt of the staff into the dirt. “We steal from the rich and give to the poor.”

“Christ above,” Will said, laughing incredulously. “I didn’t think you had that kind of nerve and grit in you, girl.”

“You *know* I do,” I shot back. We matched grins.

“*That* is what you want us to do?” Alan asked. “Build an army? I ... didn’t know that was an option.”

“And why not? The Sheriff of Nottingham will never stop searching for us. He has a vendetta. Guy of Gisborne is his attack hound. I’m convinced we need to meet them with force.”

“Bloodthirsty,” Tuck murmured. “And dangerous.” He grinned. “I love it.”

I had made my decision to stay with the Merry Men. Now I needed it to *mean* something. We couldn’t just keep surviving. We needed to thrive.

“There are bandits and peasants aplenty struggling in these harsh times put on us by Prince John. The younglings we have in our ranks here are proof of that. So we gather more. If we rob the wealthy and give to the needy, we might be able to convince enough of them to join us to *actually make a difference*. We can topple the tyranny of Prince John and his ilk forever.”

It was grand talk. Perhaps delusional. Alan claimed I was “ambitious beyond expectation.”

But the Merry Men wanted a speech? They wanted a path forward? I gave them one. They had stuck with me, and I would stick with them.

This plan hadn’t sprouted out of nowhere. I had been assembling it, keeping it to myself. I knew attacking the nobility was a dangerous gambit ...

But dangerous gambles reaped the largest rewards.

First, we needed to find Little John. He was instrumental to our success, and I couldn’t fathom him being dead—I wouldn’t accept it until I saw his cold body with my own eyes.

I faced the men, one by one—new, young, old, veteran alike. They had high expectations and gazed up at me with renewed hope.

I didn’t want to let them down anymore.

“I ran from my home,” I said, smacking the staff against my palm as I listed off my cowardly acts. “I ran from the

Merry Men. From Peter Fisher. From my uncle. From Guy of Gisborne. From my own flesh and blood!”

I bared my teeth. “I am *tired* of running.”

I slammed the end of the staff into the ground again.

“Now I fight.”

The Merry Men jumped to their feet, cheering. They hugged each other and embraced me.

I had found my family. In the strangest, most unexpected of places. In the freedom of the forest, they had come to me like specters in the night. I had found my Merry Men ... and as I gazed around the fire at their wicked gazes, the hungry glint in Will and Alan and Tuck’s orbs, the men who only saw *me* ... I amended my statement.

I had found my Merciless Men.

And we would change the world.



To Be Continued!



Robin and the Merry Men are just getting started. [Dive into the sequel of *Daughter of Sherwood* right here, with *Huntress of Sherwood*!](#)



Want an extra spicy bonus scene between Little John and Robin, where the big man teaches bratty Robin some... *manners*? [Join my newsletter for access to the scene!](#)



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I want to thank all my fans and readers. You make writing these books possible.



And finally, if you enjoyed this book and would consider leaving a review on Amazon, I'd be forever grateful!



About the Author



KC Kingmaker lives in San Diego and has been writing and reading fantasy and romance for years.

Briarwitch Academy was KC's first foray into paranormal romance, trying to bridge the genres to make something steamy, funny, mysterious, action-packed, and most of all, fun!

Dragon Shifter Dominion came after, trying to meld that same steaminess with traditional fantasy, to create a romantic fantasy explosion!

Shadowblade Academy, KC's third series, is technically a spin-off of *Briarwitch Academy*, though it can be read as a standalone series. It has just as much intrigue and mystery and steam as the others, but things get a bit darker.

Camelot Untold, KC's fourth series, is a deep, dark dive into the rich lore of Arthurian legends. It's reverse harem fantasy romance.

Robin Hood and Her Merciless Men is KC's fifth series, and another spicy, dark retelling of an iconic legend.