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Heart of a Forest

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# *HEART OF A FOREST*

Angelia Sparrow & Naomi Brooks

## Author Note

Books come from many seeds.

The first seed of this book was planted in 1973, when Disney released the animated *Robin Hood* and Angelia promptly fell in love. Another came in the late '80s, when she asked her Brit lit professor, Dr. Nicholas Knight, what would happen if Mordred were female.

In fall 2007, Naomi developed a sudden crush on Errol Flynn, which she transmitted like a computer virus to Angelia. When, in Spring 2008, Emily Veinglory asked on the Erotic Romance blog why no one was mining legends, specifically Robin Hood, we pounced on it.

Throughout the Spring of 2008, movies, books and Childe ballads were consumed in mass quantity. When Julnowrimo 2008—the project where one attempts to write fifty thousand words in thirty-one days during July—rolled around, *All in the Merry Greenwood* was born. The title was changed to *Heart of the Forest* in edits.

We've taken a few liberties with the legend. The tale of Eleanor dressing her maids as Amazons comes from *The Lion in Winter*. There is some doubt of its historicity. Most Robin Hood stories are set during the Third Crusade, with Howard Pyle being the notable exception by setting it during the reign of Henry II. We opted for a later-period Robin, setting him in the reign of King John. While King John did indeed die in a castle on the Nottingham-Lincolnshire border, it was from dysentery, not apoplexy. The song Robin sings is *Women*, a medieval bawdy, from Lambeth Manuscript 306. We have changed the Middle English into more modern words.

Special thanks go to a number of midwives. Emily Veinglory for the idea. Atalanta Pendragon and Katie Yates for inspirational music. Sue Rea, Angelia's mother, for a read-over. The boldoutlaw.com website, which was invaluable, and especially Professor Stephen Knight's essay on "Gendering Robin Hood". Elizabeth Donald, our fearless, Julnowrimo leader. And of course, always Briana St. James, our editor who puts up with a great deal from us in the course of making our books the best they can be.

Most of all this is a love letter to the amazing men who have taken up the legendary bow. Douglas Fairbanks and Errol Flynn. Sean Connery and Kevin Costner. Brian Bedford, Carey Elwes and yes, Daffy Duck.

Dodge! Thrust! Parry! Spin! HA!

Angelia and Naomi

## Prologue

*Limoges, France. March 1199*

The tent stank of death. Sir David ducked under the flap to where the king lay, wishing his mail didn't rattle so loudly. It sounded unseemly in this solemn place.

Richard, his mangled arm covered by a sheet, beckoned him in close. No other soldiers or courtiers attended them on this grave business.

"Love," the king rasped. "I have a duty for you."

"Command me, my lord king. I will obey."

Richard clasped David's hand with his good left one. "So formal now, when the Great Judge makes all men equal?"

David brought the royal hand to his lips and kissed it, lingering over the scarred knuckles. "Anything you ask of me, my love."

"My son is in England."

"Nay, love. Phillip lies still in Cognac yet, with his wife, your ward."

Richard blanched with pain and David could smell the rot of the wound that would not heal. The poison of it worked through his blood. "Another. A very young one, a year, maybe two. You'll find him in Gildesford, near London. His mother has the most amazing green eyes. Keep him safe." He shuddered.

"Her name, my lord?"

Richard waved him away weakly. "Mother. Where is Mother?"

David saw he would get no more information. He bent and kissed his dying lover. "I will keep your boy safe, love."

"By any means, David. Any means." Richard waved a hand to a chest on the table. "Safe passage. Go quickly." Queen Eleanor came into the tent and Richard reached out to her. "Mother."

"Yes, my lord king. Until I bear arms beside you in the army of Saint Michael as we battle the Dragon." David bowed to them both, scooped up the chest and nearly fled the place where Death breathed down his shoulder.

## Chapter One

*A Good Tight Butcher*

*Nottingham Castle, 1216*

Marion watched the handsome man in Lincoln green move through the market crowd. She wished she could be down among the people, although it was not at all seemly for a princess, even an unacknowledged one. She was never permitted out of Nottingham Castle without a guard.

But she could look. She leaned on the heavy stone railing of the balcony and watched, pretending to look at all the people doing their marketing on this fine May morning but focusing on him. He stood half a head taller than most of the men he passed. She would come to his chin, possibly his nose. His fair hair shone in the sunlight where he'd pushed back the dark brown hood.

She leaned out more for a better look and her motion caught his eye. He looked straight at her. At the sight of his handsome face focused solely on her, Marion's insides felt most peculiar, as if she were both too hot and too cold at the same time. Her stomach behaved most unusually as well, first rising as if to choke her and then falling down into her shoes.

When he smiled, just for her, all of her organs fluttered as if in greeting. Before she could stop herself or think of propriety, she waved a kerchief to him. In return, he pressed a kiss to the palm of his own hand and flung it upward to her, garnering a nasty look from a baker whose tray he nearly overturned.

Marion felt as if the kiss had landed squarely upon her mouth. The idea of being kissed by the tall man with the laughing mouth and fair hair made her tingle and her prick twitched. She looked down to make sure it wasn't showing through her skirts. Her old nurse, Bess, was very strict about how nice ladies looked and stiff pricks were not allowed. She tended to scold Marion for even waking up hard, as if she herself didn't wake jutting as well.

Marion remembered once, as a child, she had amused herself by trying to piss on the head of one of her uncle's guards. Her stream fell short, but Bess snatched her away from the window so fast there was a mark on her arm for a day and she had landed hard on her bottom.

That was when Bess had explained that the primary difference between boys and girls was that boys were proud of their pricks and flaunted them, while girls needed to be modest.

The man was still staring up at her. The smile on his face made her prick twitch again. That was unseemly too and Bess would chide her. She returned the smile and gave a small wave of her fingers, then dashed away from the railing and back into her apartments before she could be tempted to more wicked thoughts.

She wanted the handsome man. For what purpose, she was quite unsure. Definitely to kiss him, as she had seen a shepherd lad do to a buxom maid. Perhaps for more. Her prick twitched a third time and threatened to rouse fully like the unruly serpent it was.

She tried to absorb herself in the tapestry on her loom, but the sweet May air turned her thoughts to the man in the market-square. "Bess," Marion pretended to sort her wool to cover her confusion, "tell me of my father."

Bess left off her own tapestry and came to sit beside her. "What would you know, my dear?"

Marion made herself comfortable on the bench, very carefully checking her appearance. No sign of her naughty desires showed. "The tale of my mother."

Bess smiled. "Your mother Linette, God rest her, was the loveliest girl in Gildeford, the smith's daughter. King Richard heard of your grandfather's work and came down from London to have a sword made. Her green eyes ensorcelled him, as Morgana did Merlin. She was willing, he was tender and on a night in late spring, they made you together in the great bedstead in the smith's house. Your father was called to the Crusade. Your mother died, poor thing, about the time you were born. Your grandmother cared for you and when you were a wee mite of three or four, I came to care for you by your father's orders."

Marion sighed. She loved that tale. Perhaps someday, she would have the nerve to ask Bess exactly how they had gone about making her. Before that, she would know the tale of Bess' orders.

Robin hurried out of the gates of Nottingham town, his purchases slung on his back, moving as if in a dream. Nothing could mar his mood this day. He would find Will Scarlet and hasten back to the safety of Sherwood's deep glens. He wanted to spend some time doing nothing but imagining the beautiful girl he had seen and relieving the tightness in his braes.

He found Will kneeling before an alcove in the city wall, in an attitude of prayer. Robin moved a little closer, expecting to see a small shrine. There were many such in every city, even a few along the road so that travelers could make their devotions.

There was a shrine, right enough, but the devotions Will made were to Venus, not to any of the Saints or the Virgin. The girl, some maidservant or daughter of the city, leaned back in the alcove, trusting the wall to shield her from prying eyes. Will had his face between her legs and was drawing a series of soft muttered curses from her lips.

Robin settled himself to watch, helping shield the lovers from any curious passerby. The girl sagged a little as Will clutched her hips, making soft moans himself.

The girl opened her eyes and saw him standing there. Her eyes got big and she kicked Will in the side.

"We're caught!" she gasped.

Will looked up and Robin saw that the pleasure had not been solely the girl's. He hadn't had the sight of Will's cock for many months and now it stood thick and proud, as red as Will's clothing.

Robin licked his lips, wishing for a taste of it, even as Will tucked his cock away. The girl jerked her veils over her face as if to hide now that Robin had seen her face. She scrambled over Will, straightening her skirts.

Will laughed and watched her go. "Next week then, love." He dusted off his knees and pulled a bit of bread from his wallet. Robin seized the moment to shove him back into the niche for a kiss.

Will squirmed a bit under him, but his larger body easily held his small friend in there. Robin tasted the girl all over Will's face and kissed him deeper. When he abandoned Will's lips to taste his cheeks, Will whispered, "Robin, this is unwise."

"Of course it is," Robin agreed without ceasing to taste his Will. He seldom got the chance. Will preferred girls to any man's kisses.

Will sighed and Robin kept kissing him. Emboldened, Robin slipped a hand into Will's braes and found his friend's cock still standing hard and ready. Robin closed his hand around Will's cock and almost moaned against his mouth. It had been so long since he'd had his beloved Will. So long. Fired by the memory of the girl in the tower, he kissed Will again harder and stroked him, feeling the hot, pulsating shaft and sweet head under his fingers.

Will melted beneath his touch for only an instant and then his hands were next to Robin's, extracting himself from Robin's grip. "Please, Robin. No."

Robin let him go but could not resist giving him a look of deep hurt. He saw Will wince and clench his jaw at that. They left the alcove and walked across the meadow toward the road.

Will fell into step with Robin's longer stride. Not to be daunted, Robin whistled a snatch of a bawdy tune he'd heard that day.

"You show your face too boldly in the town," Will chided when they were well away from the city. "You'll not whistle half so jauntily when the hangman cuts your air with his hempen necklace."

Robin slung an arm over Will's shoulders. "The day is fair, the air is sweet and yet you are fretting again?"



Will sighed. "How can I not? Your capers leave me with without a moment's peace. Has not the Sheriff who lives in the castle you passed not a stone's throw from sworn to hang all seven score of us and you higher than the rest?"

"He doesn't scare me," declared bold Robin.

"He scares me enough for both of us," Will replied. He took a long drink from the skin of good sack he carried. He offered the wine to Robin who had a drink and passed it back.

"I've proven myself more clever, time and again," Robin boasted and laughed, sending it ringing among the trees.

Will shook his head, a grim look on his face. "Hard to laugh hanging, my merry master."

Robin grinned and caught him around the waist. "Will, Will, my dour conscience, I don't see a noose around my neck yet."

"Not yet, but you take too many chances."

"If we are not bold, how will we be taken seriously?" Robin demanded.

"Yet if we step too boldly, we will saunter into their hands. And you should not walk through the town with your naked face."

Robin embraced Will, holding him tightly. "Never stop being my conscience, dearest Will. I need you."

Will smiled up at him. "Come, let's see what awaits us back in the wood. What did you learn today, bold Robin?"

"I think I did see that lovely maid."

Will feigned shock, pressing a hand to his chest and staggering backward a step. "A maid? Our fair Robin's eye has been caught by a maid? Will wonders never cease!"

Robin cuffed him lightly about the head, grinning. "She's lovely, Will. But under our dear Sheriff's protection."

"Oh indeed?" Will raised his eyebrows. "Tell me of this maid you saw? For I thought that sort was much more my hunting preserve than yours."

"I have hunted your course before, Will Scarlet, and I may hunt it yet again. Oh her lips..." He trailed away thoughtfully. "Her lips are lovely. As lovely as yours, my dear Will, although you keep them from me." Robin ran one finger over Will's very full mouth, the one that sang so sweetly he charmed merchants out of their best wares and maidens out of their virtue.

Will rolled his eyes. "Robin, you know I love you and you know as well we lie together poorly."

Robin took his hand from the soft lips, wishing he could one day get more than brief touches and kisses as he had today. "Of course. I know. Still..." He touched Will's mouth again and stroked his face. "I still want. I don't expect anything of you."

Will stretched up and pecked Robin on the cheek. "As if you have not seven score others to slake yourself upon."

Robin pulled him close. "But my Will is always my most trusted."

"Aye, your own sweet Will. Which you have whether we lie together or not!" Will laughed at his own joke and Robin joined in, for as chief of the outlaws in Sherwood, his will was the law of the forest.

"Now the maid," Robin took up the thread where he had gotten distracted. Will passed over the sack again.

"Oh aye, tell me of her and I shall compose a song and serenade her until she drops a flowerpot on me or consents to be yours. One will come first."

Robin laughed again at that and then all his mirth went out of him. "I don't even know her name. I only saw her from a distance. I must find a way to get a message to her." He paused and worried his lower lip with his teeth. "If she'll accept it."

Will smiled. "Leave that to me, sweet master. Tell me, where did you see her? I know a few chambermaids, aye, more than a few. I can learn her name and get your message delivered."

"She was on the North Tower of Nottingham Castle, watching me. She wore blue, like the Virgin, and had the face of an angel in a church painting. I smiled and she waved, Will. She waved her kerchief at me." Will smiled at this and Robin went on. "I fear I grew over-eager, for I blew her a kiss. She hastened inside as if distressed, but not without a last wave." He noticed the alarm on Will's face and asked, "What?"

"Oh you did not!" Will clouted him from behind on the head. "Robin, you beautiful idiot, that was the princess."

Robin's melancholy left him at once. "Princess? Why didn't I hear of this?" He looked at Will. "Tell me everything." After a moment he thought the better of it. "Princess. I suppose there's no hope for a romance."

"Lady Marion FitzRoy is good King Richard's daughter. I suspect King John wishes to marry her to someone suitable, like Nottingham, so she's been sent to live with him. She's been here for almost two years, but she is not allowed out of the castle except to go to Mass."

Robin turned thoughtful. "I wonder if I can draw her out," he mused. "I'd rather it were me she is to wed than Phillip of Nottingham. I would not trust him to care for a hart I was about to kill."

Will shrugged. "There is the small matter of being dispossessed of your rightful half of Lincolnshire, yes. Not to mention the fact your family supported Henry and Richard,

but you failed John. But on the whole, you'd make a better husband any day and twice as good on holidays."

"Not forever. I'll have it back." Robin scowled at the mention of the lost earldom of Locksley, taken from him five years before when he refused to send knights or pay the scutage, a levy in cash instead of knights amounting to two marks per knight, to aid King John in his wars. "I must study on how to win this maid."

"The earldom you certainly will and the Lady Marion, perhaps, as well. But King John needs strong barons just now, for all are ranged against him and the French even now attempt to put Prince Louis on the throne of England."

"Another French King. At least John is half-English. We must needs redouble our efforts. The Lady needs her husband. And England needs no more Normans on her shores."

"A princess of the blood!" Will exclaimed, mostly trying to take Robin's mind from the grim politicking of the Baronial War. "Only the granddaughter of the Great Eleanor could turn your head to the distaff side."

"Was ever there a match better made? I have to see her again." Will's gambit was successful as Robin fell to thinking of the lady's charms. She stood tall and slim, her dress of dark blue silk making her eyes flash. He wanted to kiss her so badly he could almost taste her lips. There was something familiar to her name. He felt he should know it but could not call it to mind. It would come to him, he decided, but for now, he wanted to think of her beauty, of the touch of her hand and the feel of her lips on his.

"Aye, you will. Of that, I have no doubt." They reached a crossroad under the Great Oak in Sherwood. Will bowed. "And here we must part, good my master. My Kate awaits me." He glanced to where a firefly light dangled high in the trees, glowing in the early dusk. Robin knew he'd been seeing a crofter's daughter, bringing her up to an old, abandoned watch platform and keeping her the whole night through. He hoped perhaps Will's roving spirit could find the same true love as he knew he'd seen this afternoon.

Robin embraced his trusted companion. "Good night, Will."

It was another fortnight until the Nottingham marketday came around again. Robin resolved to go and, putting aside his customary suit of Lincoln green, dressed himself in dun and strode along the road without a thought but the Lady Marion. He would see her today and perhaps lure her from the tower with some clever plan. He wanted to see her close, to gaze into her lovely face and see whether her eyes were green or brown. He hoped they were blue like her dress had been.

Near Fosse Way, he came upon a butcher driving a cart laden with beef and lamb. The plan presented itself, fully formed, and he stepped into the road.

"Good morrow!" called bold Robin, for he had a mind to be a butcher this day and so gain the attention of the lady.

"Morrow yourself and see how you like it!" called the butcher and laughed. "Come up and ride with me to Nottingham, for you look a jolly fellow and fine company."

"You are merry this morning," Robin said, climbing up.

"Oh aye. For it is a lovely May morning and I am hale and on Thursday next, I shall be married to the loveliest lass in all the country round."

"St. Dunstan bless you then. What will you take for your cart and meat and clothing?" asked Robin. "For I think butchering will suit me well today."

"Four marks, for if I do not sell all my meat, I will not have that much."

Robin dug into his purse and drew forth six marks. "Here, take this for your cart and two more as a wedding gift from Robin Hood."

The butcher gaped. "I did not know it was you, good master. I thank you for your generosity."

They changed out clothing quickly. The butcher tucked his six marks into his purse and turned his feet homeward. Robin took the reins of the cart.

"Give your lass a kiss from me," called Robin as he drove on to Nottingham's gate.

The guardsman at the gate did not know him in the butcher's apron with a hat pulled low over his face and so sent him to set up his stall. Robin situated himself across the square from the North Tower and began to sell.

He cried in a loud voice, "Come and buy, come and buy! Fine meat have I in abundance. Come and buy! Four fixed prices have I. I sell to a fat friar or priest three pennyworths of meat for sixpence, for I do not want their trade. Stout aldermen I charge threepence. Their trade means nothing to me. Come and buy!" he implored a pretty young wife with a child on a tending string. "To buxom dames, I sell three pennyworths of meat for one penny for I like their custom well. But to a bonny lass that likes a good tight butcher I charge one fair kiss, for I love her custom the best of all."

The wife stopped and prodded a liver. Robin weighed out three pennyworths of the meat and took her single penny. He glanced up and saw Marion on top of the tower, watching him.

Marion stood at the rail and watched the handsome butcher. She knew him for the man who had so stirred her. Her dreams over the last fortnight had been troubled. Sleep had come late and fled early. She had awakened jutting forth every morning, save the middle of one night when she awakened from dreams of the man's hot kisses that left her sticky. She had washed her braes and chemise quietly and said nothing of that dream to Bess.

She smiled as she watched him sell three pennyworths for a penny to all the good wives of Nottingham. Handsome and generous too, she decided. She listened to his laugh drift up to her ears and wished she could go down to buy like every other woman. Not another butcher in the marketplace was selling so much as a gizzard, save to churchmen.

Then a busty maid, her uncovered hair hanging in long butter-colored braids, her gown tight about her body and immodestly high on the legs, kissed the butcher for some meat.

Marion felt a great hatred rise in her for the pretty girl. It rose until Marion was near choking from it as the kiss went on, his arms around the curvy lady.

The butcher wrapped the maid's purchase in a cabbage leaf. She went on her way, laughing for it had clearly been no hard duty, her staff laden with flower garlands bouncing gaily in the May sun.

"Come and buy," he called. This time he looked right up at her as he cried, "Come and buy!"

"Bess!" Marion called. "Bess, all haste down and buy meat from the jolly butcher who sells three pennyworths for a single penny. Haste, or he'll sell all and we shall have none."

Bess came to the rail beside her and saw him give a double measure to Widow Eglantine, without charging her so much as a groat. The woman and her passel of children moved on, calling down loud blessings upon him from St. Dunstan, St. Aelfrida and St. Wulfric.

"And you'd like nothing better than for me to take you along for to exchange kisses for meat like a common wanton, I suppose," Bess grumbled, but Marion saw her brown eyes twinkle.

"It has been too many days since we had an outing, dear Bess," Marion implored. "Months," she added. "Almost a year?"

"Aye, for the last outing led my lord Nottingham to gander at you. Better safe than to catch his eye again, lass." Bess scowled. Marion knew not to press. She did not like Phillip of Nottingham and staying hidden in her tower was, as Bess said, much safer.

Marion returned to watching the butcher, her eyes transfixed and unable to move from his manly form. She watched his brown arms move as the bright knife flashed among the meat. She watched his large hands, wishing she could feel one on her cheek. "Then I am pretty enough to be desired." She sighed, longing to be in the square. "I should like to make him kiss away all his store."

Marion turned to see if Bess had overhead that wistful little wish. But the old woman was gone, so Marion watched longer, scarcely daring to hope. There came her own dear Bess to the merry butcher. She wished herself at Bess' side.

"Good morrow, my lady." The butcher sketched a little bow, apparently recognizing Bess was no commoner. "You honor my humble stall."

Bess laid out a sixpence on the counter and scowled at him, an expression Marion knew well. She knew her lady had perfected the tactic for intimidating everyone from Phillip down to the lowest scullion. Marion smiled behind her hand to see her use it on the butcher. Bess would have half his stall if she demanded it. "The best that will buy. It is for the Lady Marion."

The butcher looked up to the tower and smiled at Marion. She gave a little wave and hoped Bess would not see it. "And why does the lady not come herself to buy? For her, I would make a very special deal."

Bess boxed his ears for that and Marion winced in sympathy. "Because she does not trade with a common butcher, you ass. Now quickly!"

Bess in a temper made most men move as if a fire had been lit in their braes and their hose were catching. But the butcher laughed, seized her around the waist and kissed her thoroughly, leaving her flushed and fanning herself. He sent a broad grin up to Marion as he measured two shillingworths of meat.

"Take all of that back to your lady, with my compliments." His grin only broadened and he moved as if to kiss Bess again. "To prove my measure is good."

Marion laughed as Bess dodged this kiss and he looked up again, so she knew he had heard. She could not imagine Bess kissing her so, bending her back a bit and lingering on her open mouth. Bess' kisses were sweet brushes on her forehead, quick pecks on her cheek, never the naughty heat that she had seen between them.

She felt better, for none of the kisses he had given the other women today were nearly so lavish or sensual. As Marion thought of him, and the kiss, her prick woke as it had the first time she'd seen him. She wanted a kiss like that and not from her nursemaid. She wanted him to wrap her in those nut-brown arms that looked as if they could lift a young pony, to cover her own mouth with his and hold her there until...

She had no idea what came after the until.

She left the balcony to cool herself before Bess returned. A jutting prick and flushed face would only earn her a scolding. She was occupied with her needle when Bess came in to wash, her hands all bloody from the meat.

"He did say take it all to me, Bess," Marion teased.

"Your kiss, my lamb." Bess pressed her lips to Marion's as she had a thousand times before, sweet and dry and motherly.

"I think he kissed you with more interest," Marion said.

"And I think someone has been listening to usurers and priests to talk so of interest," Bess snapped. "Your lessons, my lady, and do not be slow in tuning your lute today."

Marion made all haste. She knew when Bess reached the point of saying "my lady" there would be no further discussion. Only "Your Highness" was a signal that she was in deeper trouble. For now, she would be very good and try to coax Bess back to her usual words of "lamb" and "duck".

Marion brushed her hair, thinking on the oddities of the day. Bess had already retired. She heard a bird call from the balcony, but surely no lark was abroad at this late hour.

She set the hairbrush aside and hurried out. A cloaked figure hovered at the edge of the balcony. She withdrew in fright. The handsome young butcher pulled back his hood and clung to the rail, his legs entangled in the ivy that grew on the tower.

"Mad and merry butcher, you take an unwarranted chance with your neck." She looked down, knowing it was many feet to the ground.

He smiled at her, his teeth white within his yellow beard. "A worthy risk to finally see my lady this close." He took one hand of hers and kissed it.

Marion gasped both at the shivers that ran over her from the brush of his lips and at his precarious hold. "Caution! Both hands on the rail or the vine. I would not see you fall." She stepped closer and did not try taking his hand from hers. "'Twould be a shame to lose you before I know your name."

He swung up, throwing his long legs in their green hose over the rail and landing on his feet before her. He favored her with a proper bow, as courtly as any she had seen in the Great Hall. His voice was sweet as the birds in the morning as he said, "Robin, my lady. I am Robin."

She inclined her head in acknowledgment. She knew the name. Bess had told her this story almost as often as that of her parents. "My lord Locksley," she said, her voice soft and reverent, using his proper title. She offered her hand again. "Lady Marion FitzRoy, your betrothed." She gave him a sweet smile.

His eyes went very large and he grasped the rail for support. "My...betrothed?" After a moment of thought, he recovered. "Indeed, I had forgotten. We were, seven? Eight?" He took her hand and she shivered again in the strong grip. "A lovely surprise to be reminded. And to see you in something other than tangled braids and a grubby dress suitable for playing tag in the fields of Locksley with a wild boy." He kissed her hand again, pausing to breathe over her wrist. "So soft. I knew you would be." His eyes twinkled as he looked up. "Are you entirely soft or can you still chase me down over three fields and wrestle me to the ground?"

Marion blushed at the reminder of her unladylike childhood. "My lord Nottingham does not allow me out, so there can be no chance to learn the answer. I'd have been down for a kiss from a good tight butcher, else."

"I didn't coax you well enough to sneak out then. I tried my best." Robin looked entirely crestfallen.

Marion took his other hand with her free one. "Please, my lord, understand, I am locked in. Bess is allowed out, but my uncle, the king, says naught should happen to me. The war goes badly. Alas, Bess is a poor messenger." She gave him her naughtiest smile, knowing full well what came next, even if she didn't know what came after that.

Robin laughed and the sound caused a knot to form low in her belly. Not fear, but excitement sent waves through her all hot and cold by turns. "Shall I remedy that?" He drew her closer and wrapped his arms around her waist. She felt as if she had spun around and around too fast, as she had on that long-ago betrothal day, and then fallen backward into soft hay to let the sky spin above her. It would not do to show these feelings. She was a princess.

Instead of melting against him like the last patch of snow in the April sunshine, she gave him a saucy look and a wicked smile. "Have you still three pennyworths of meat about you? For it was fine beef." She wanted to tease and flirt tonight. Despite her usual behavior, she heard, overheard and remembered everything, from the words of a bawdy song to the conversations the Sheriff thought her too dim to grasp.

Robin sighed. "Only a bit of kidney, too squashed to sell. I was going to pass it to a beggar as I left town." He gave her a wicked smile. "Unless my lady's mind was on a bit of meat better suited to the wedding feast?"

Marion giggled. He was indeed a match for her. "I daresay that bit will have to roast a little longer. But allow me to pay you for that kidney." She slid her arms around his neck, feeling his strong shoulders and the heat of his skin even through the cloth. "And in full." Boldly, Marion kissed him, pressing her lips to his for a long moment. He tasted wild, of wood and wind and forest. As he drew her closer, lightning filled her body. The scent of him, leather and blood, sweat and man, made her head swim. She pulled back and smiled. "That is how the girls do it, is it not? That is what I saw. Although it is not quite the one you bade Bess give to me."

"Aye, let me deliver that one to you."

Robin pulled her so close she could feel his large body all against her own. Her prick, stirring from the moment he had arrived, now came fully awake. She could feel his as well and a strong desire to hold it seized her. But that was far too forward.

He kissed her, bending her back just a little with the force of it. His mouth moved hotly on hers, his tongue brushing her lips. She parted them a little and he slipped inside. His tongue pressed hers and then up to the roof of her mouth. She reeled from excitement, her heat rising until she thought she might faint. She knew he would hold her if she did and that too excited her.

Her breath came in short sharp bursts when he released her, as if she had run up all the stairs to the tower. She smiled at him, his face still above hers and very close. "Does a princess of the blood kiss as well as a peasant girl?" she whispered.



Robin smiled and shook his head. "Nay. Better, much better. As far beyond that milkmaid who turned you red as the moon is beyond the millpond."

Marion smiled. "Then meat to the beggar for charity, in the name of our Lady. And payment again for you, in the same." She kissed him again, learning quickly from him and returning his pleasure threefold.

He caressed her face when they parted and she looked up into his twinkling eyes, their color uncertain in the moonlight. There were many things she wished to say but none she could shape at this instant. Her thoughts were consumed by the heat between them.

From behind her, Marion heard a light tread and a loud cough. "My lady, this is quite unseemly," Bess scolded.

Robin leapt back, his face that of a small boy caught stealing a pie cooling on a windowsill.

Bess looked him up and down scornfully. "A bit late to be peddling your meat, is it not? I thought you quite spent."

"All but one piece for I saw my lady interested in it." Remorse having failed to soothe the stern old woman, Marion watched as he smoothed on charm, smiling and flashing his dimples at her nurse.

Bess was not charmed and shot a stern look at Robin's tunic front and Marion's own dress. She scowled. "And was she indeed? Be off with you, mad blade, and do not trouble my lady Marion again."

Marion whirled on her lady, speaking sharply to her for the first time in her life. "Bess, hold your tongue. You would speak so to the Earl of Locksley?"

Robin shifted and Marion saw him try coaxing his own serpent into submission. "Former earl, my lady."

Bess grasped Marion's hand. "When he is the earl again, he may come seeking your hand. Until then, my lady, I will keep a firm grip on it."

Robin bowed, understanding what Bess said, as well as what she did not. Marion heard as well and knew Robin would return to her like the birds in spring, since he now had Bess' permission.

"I'll not keep you from your rest, my ladies." He sat on the balcony rail and grasped the vine to climb down.

Marion broke free and embraced him once more. "Good night, sweet Robin. Fly away. It is too dark for you to be out." She watched as he made his way down. As soon as his feet touched the ground, Bess dragged her in for bed and Marion did not protest.

Robin reached the ground safely, pausing only to fling one more kiss up to the lady, and ducked through the shadows, avoiding Nottingham's guards. Their patrol patterns

never changed and he had learned them well enough this evening. He made good on his promise to Marion and presented the last piece of meat to a late-roaming beggar, with the message it was from the lady herself.

Will Scarlet awaited him in a tree near the water sluice. He swung down from the low limb, wearing his worried look, a frown on his soft lips and a scowl-line between his eyebrows, the expression quite at odds with his bright clothing.

"You're late," Will snapped.

"So I am." Robin gave him a smug smile, despite his ducking to get out of the town. The gates of the city closed at dusk and would not reopen until morning.

"How went your charity errand that could not be put off until daylight or a Sunday?" They strode quickly toward the forest and safety.

Robin laughed. "Very well. And I got a kiss from Lady Marion."

"Oh indeed?" Will raised an eyebrow and made mock haste as if in fear. "Then home quickly, before her maid finds out. That one has a hard, stern look to her. Rather like my auntie."

Robin laughed more at that. Will's wild tales of his iron-spined aunt with the short temper and cruel fists were great favorites among the men. Outside of the stories, Will's aunt was a lovely lady who made sweet beeswax candles for the church.

"Her maid already knows. She told me to come back when I'm earl again."

Will tossed his cap aloft, careful to catch it in the wan moonlight. "There's hope!"

"There's always hope." Robin smiled, a real smile and not one of his great laughs. "John cannot live forever and I shall have her and my lands once more."

Will set his cap back on and clapped Robin on the back. "Come, there is always another day to see her."

"Aye, always while we live." Together they walked home in the night.

## Chapter Two

### *Unexpected Guests*

May ran into sunny June and Nottingham sent his men abroad to collect the rents and taxes that were due. By Midsummer's Eve, all of them had been gathered. He collected mostly in cash this year, taking in kind only from the nearest parts to supply the castle.

On Midsummer's Day, the household rode out, traveling to Lincoln with the tax money. This year the levy was too important to trust to messengers. King John needed every pound, nay every penny, as the Barons' War raged on. John was in Lincoln and needed the money and knights to fight for him.

Nottingham took with him the best of his guard, ten score knights in bright mail. For added safety, he brought Marion and her lady. The way led through Sherwood and it was well known that Robin Hood never harmed a lady, Saxon or Norman, noble or common.

He rode beside Marion, braving Bess' scowls. The princess hadn't been out of the tower since Lammastide, except to fill her ceremonial function at his table for the great feasts. He had missed her company.

Marion looked about eagerly, taking in the sunshine and the songs of the little birds. She cast occasional glances at the knight who led her palfrey. Nottingham rode in closer and smiled at her.

She would be a fine wife, if he could persuade King John to the idea. She was beautiful and dainty, all the things a good lady should be. She was slender though. Phillip liked buxom women and he worried about the narrowness of her hips. Lovely though they were, he wondered if they would pass many strong sons and pretty daughters for him. He did not dwell on his great fear that she would scream and bleed her life away in childbed like so many slim women.

He smiled again, imagining a day like this in the future with her beside him and no glowering Bess. Phillip knew well enough that Bess was none other than Sir David of Doncaster, a favorite of King Richard's, who had been unmanned by Saracens during the Crusade.

He had admired the knight once. He had been David's squire long ago, seeking his own road to glory and his spurs. It had been grand and glorious, until the day David had caught him with a peasant girl. The chit had cried and David had believed her. He'd thrashed Phillip, a thorough trouncing, and dismissed him. Seeing the old man relegated to being a woman was revenge enough, Phillip reminded himself. But the first

day he'd seen David in skirts, leading a coltish girl into the hall, he had sworn he would have the girl and see "Bess" executed for heresy or treason or on any pretext he could.

But the day was too pleasant for such thoughts and he turned his mind to more enjoyable dreams. In his mind, two tall sons rode behind him and a third led his sister on a palfrey. A fourth rode in a sling from his saddle and Marion's belly swelled with the next.

Half-lost in the daydream, he reached over and took her hand, still smiling.

She squeezed his hand lightly and returned the smile.

"It is a lovely day for a ride, my lord Nottingham. And I haven't been to Lincoln in ever so long."

"Please, Your Highness, call me Phillip," he managed, a little uneasy in her company. He shifted in his saddle, embarrassed by the arousal a single smile had caused. He didn't want to think about how long it had been since a woman had taken his hand willingly.

Marion was pleasant, but he'd never found her particularly intelligent. All the words she spoke were of the most obvious and banal sort. That was all right. Clever women like the late Queen Eleanor could be a great burden for their menfolk. Simple suited him well enough. He wanted more of her smiles. They made him feel as if the sun were shining all over his body. "I'm glad you enjoy it. Perhaps we should ride more often? Together?"

She smiled at him more. "I like to ride." She sent another sour look at her guard. "Although, sometimes I wish it were proper for me to truly ride instead of merely being led about sitting on a horse. I rode as a child, but now I sit quietly and am led."

Awkwardly, Phillip suggested, "Perhaps out in the courtyard? No one will see."

Marion smiled and nodded. A flutter of scarlet caught her attention and she pointed at the robin redbreast who perched on a low branch and sang loudly. "Isn't it sweet? Singing just for us."

"It's warning us off its territory, my lady."

"Indeed I am!" came a hearty voice from above them. Robin Hood, all in Lincoln green, swung onto a low limb above the road directly before them. He bowed to Marion. "Welcome to Sherwood, my lady." From the forest around burst scores of bowmen, springing up like mushrooms after a rain, all in Lincoln green with arrows on the string. "Now allow me to welcome you into my domain, Lord Nottingham. Peacefully." He bowed to the Sheriff. "It is my hope you and your men will join us for dinner."

Nottingham gestured for his men to stand down, disgust on his face. Their swords would not be as quick as the clothyard shafts and he would lose them all ere Robin was touched. He sighed, knowing the outlaw had the better of him. "Lead on then, to your dinner." He tried to keep the humiliation out of his tone. The bandits' freedom spoke ill

of his own attention to duty. He would find a way to dispose of them before his king had to brave the woods.

The taxes had occupied him much more than the slippery cutthroats. He had not known there were so many of them. He scowled as Robin himself took the reins of Marion's palfrey. A large man who could only be the famed Little John took the Sheriff's reins. Robin gestured and a small man in red whom Nottingham recognized as Will Scarlet led Bess' horse, with all the men trooping after, well-covered by the archers.

Through the paths of the forest and over many twists and turns they led them until the sun was high in the sky. Phillip tried remembering the way they had come, but one tree was like another and the route was long and winding.

Nottingham was thoroughly lost when, at the end of it, they came to a glen where stood the largest oak any of the visitors had seen. Beneath it, the clearing bustled with men and smelled of good food.

A grand feast met the visitors' eyes. Heaping platters of rich venison and roast boar sat on a low trestle under the branches, amid heaps of pasties and bread. Large kegs of ale and beer stood by.

Robin helped Marion dismount and led her to the center of the head table. Phillip followed closely and seated himself on her other side. Bess seated herself on Phillip's other side, clearly unhappy at being so far from her girl, and Little John sat beside her. Robin smiled at Marion and bowed to the Sheriff.

"My lord, my lady, if it pleases you, be our honored guests." Robin beckoned his men to have the food served out.

The small man in red poured out mugs of the beer for Robin and the Sheriff and then presented goblets of wine to Marion and Bess. "Your very good health, my ladies."

The platters came around. Robin speared two pieces of the venison and a pasty that he set on Marion's half of their shared trencher. Nottingham took his share, for it all smelled marvelous. He lost his appetite as he watched the smiles Marion gave the outlaw. The ones she had given him this morning seemed pale and weak in comparison. The easy way she laid her hand on the bandit's arm, her soft laughter at something he said too low for the others to hear, they all robbed him of his joy in the food.

"Will, music for my guests." Robin gestured and the red-clad man came forth again. He sang a song in Breton and then in French. Nottingham scowled at the choice of a love ballad. The singer seemed to perform as if only Robin and Marion existed in his audience. Phillip tried to drown his anger in the excellent beer but only grew more sullen.

Robin enjoyed the discomfort of the Sheriff. After Will's third song, he called for more amusement. "For I know you love the manly sports, my Lord Sheriff. Let it never

be said that Robin Hood and his men gave poor entertainment. Little John, try Wat and see how his new quarterstaff fares!"

Little John rose from where he was head close by head with Bess and stretched. "As you say, good master. Forgive me, my lady." He kissed Bess' hand.

The Sheriff nibbled at an apple pasty and watched the sport. Little John was a great bear of a man, fully seven feet tall, while Wat was smaller but nimbler, leaping about like a grasshopper. They danced a long time, tap for tap with their long staves, until the Sheriff quite forgot himself in the excitement.

"Oh!" he yelled, as Wat caught Little John's fingers and made him nearly drop the staff. "Well struck! A pound to the one who triumphs." John growled and went at it hammer and tongs, harrying Wat about the clearing. The Sheriff's pasty sat quite forgotten in one hand as he watched.

Robin smiled, seeing Nottingham wholly caught up in the bout. He gestured Will over to him. "See that he enjoys the sport. Wrestling, anything he fancies. Keep him here. Keep his cup full."

Will nodded and winked. Robin knew he understood. "Aye, sweet Robin."

Robin added, "Be careful with the torches. Dusk comes quickly." He slipped off and beckoned Marion to follow in an instant. He lurked in a dimmer part of the forest until she caught up with him. He held his breath that Bess wouldn't notice, but she too was watching the sport, where Little John had stripped to his braes and was wrestling all comers in pairs.

Robin took Marion's hand and they walked along a cleared path. "I have forgotten much," he said. "But it seems to me we walked so before."

"Walked is scarcely the word for it," Marion laughed. "You clutched my hand and pulled me after you as a dray horse pulls an empty cart. We were late for mealtime, do you remember?"

Robin thought. Dim memories rose of childhood and his father. They did not hurt as much as they had once. It had been long since he had thought of the old man. He recalled the braids and dirty shift, which had been clean that morning, and a grinning face missing a couple of teeth.

Marion went on. "You weren't gentle washing my face either, just plunging me into the bucket a couple of times and wiping it with your cloak. But since you did the same to clean yours, I didn't fuss."

Robin laughed at the image. "Why do I not remember these things?"

Marion stepped over a root, lifting her skirts delicately. He swung her down onto level ground and led her along a path. "You have had much to occupy you. You don't sit at a window for hours, watching people go by and remembering when you were not a prisoner." She sighed. "I am a lady. I do not cook or sweep or tend children or animals. It is a dull sort of life and new to me. Before we came to Nottingham, I fed

chickens and washed pots and made myself useful. Now I embroider." She frowned. After a moment, Marion looked up and asked, "What do you like to do, Robin?"

He chuckled and squeezed her hand. Few ladies were bold enough to ask such questions. "I embarrass lovely ladies, for I love to see their cheeks flame and their eyes shine. It's my specialty."

"Really? How?" Marion's eyes shone in the light of the rising full moon. "Are you terribly wicked?"

He stopped and took her in his arms. "I am. Very, very wicked." He loved the way her breath quickened at his touch. He leaned in, much too close to be proper.

She squirmed a little in his arms, sending shivers through him. "And what do wicked men do?" She nearly panted with his closeness.

"This." He brought his lips down on her upturned face, kissing her more strongly than he had on the balcony. His arms tight around her, he nibbled at her lips, tasted her tongue and learned all the secret places of her mouth.

She trembled in his arms, her eyes wide and dark in the moonlight and her lips red. He smiled at the faint flush on her cheeks.

Her smile went cunning and she moved closer and took a kiss of her own. "I'm wicked too."

"So I see. You are lovely that way." He kissed her again, taking it deeper still, testing her. She clung around his neck, letting him have all he desired from her mouth.

When she began pumping her hips against the empty air, he let her go. She stilled herself and pulled away a little, looking shocked at herself.

"You must think me quite the wanton. I don't know what's come over me." She fussed with her skirts and wimple. "Good Robin, please forgive my forward behavior."

"Oh no. Not at all. Come, my lady, I would see more of it, as much as you care to show."

She nodded. "A private place? Where we can be as wicked as we like?"

He nodded. They hurried deeper into the wood, Robin leading her to where the river ran. They found a waterfall and went into the cave behind it. A bed of moss and rushes lay on a stone shelf.

Robin sat down and pulled her beside him. "I sleep here many nights, close to the sound of water. It's well hidden and few of the men know where it is."

"It's lovely. The water is soothing." Marion smiled at him. "The only sound I get is Bess snoring." She giggled and Robin laughed softly.

He kissed her, a light, sweet peck that made her shiver. "I'm sure you'll have a husband to replace that snoring soon?" He traced a light finger over her lips.

She kissed his finger. He replaced it with his mouth, pressing her back to the soft moss. Her body shivered under him, nipples coming alive as they never had and her prick standing straight up. It was all she could do not to thrust against him.

"None has sued for my hand. Nottingham wants me, but I despise him, although I let him think otherwise," she gasped.

Robin lifted away her veil and ran his hands through her brown hair, uncoiling her braids and scattering the strands about. "I would have already come for you if the situation were different. If I had something to offer, I would claim you right now."

She pulled him down for another of those kisses and this time she did thrust against him, just briefly. "Then we must regain your lands, so that you may ask for me." She gave him a small, secretive smile. "Bess is willing, for all her growling. And your father was as well, which is why my hand has always been promised to you."

Robin smiled and pulled away her wimple. "Is she now? Good. I have two new allies then." He kissed her throat and noticed the Adam's apple in the front. None of the other girls he knew had one. As he kissed up her neck, the faintest hint of stubble scraped his lips.

Before he could say anything, Marion pulled him down for an even longer kiss, rubbing wantonly against him this time. There was no doubt of what he felt pressing against his hip. He lowered his hand to confirm his finding and Marion obliged by shoving into his palm. He caught hold of her cock by sheer reflex and held it, feeling the length and thickness.

Stunned, Robin kept kissing. Marion, the princess, was a prince in disguise. It was something out of a nursery story. But she kissed divinely and showed no awareness that she was not a woman. Perhaps it would be wisest not to speak of the matter. He would try Marion and see the responses to his touch and kisses.

"Robin. Sweet Robin," Marion murmured, dropping kisses over his face and beard. She thrust into his hand again and he stroked her prick in response. It felt very nice if a bit at odds with her dress.

"My lady?" He tipped her face up to look at him. He saw no surprise or confusion in her eyes, only dreamy pleasure.

Marion shook herself, as if coming to her senses. "Oh marry," she glanced down her body in horror. The sight of Robin's hand holding her erection made her cover her mouth. "So wicked, the old serpent, Eve's tempter," she said through her fingers.

Robin still had a grip on her cock through her skirts and now he rubbed it gently, using his favorite stroke. Marion shuddered beneath him, clinging around his neck. He realized then that she truly didn't know of the pleasures to be had.

He released her for a moment and cupped her face. "Lovely lady. My lady," he said, kissing her sweetly.



"How improper of me," he whispered, sliding his hand under her skirts. Her legs were strong and sweet. Where they met, he found hard heat and standing cock waiting for his hand. He circled it with his fingers, finding it the perfect thickness. Not a monster like Little John's, but no worm to be ignored either. He wanted to taste it, to feel it, to watch her shoot all over his hands. He stroked slowly up the shaft and rubbed his thumb over the head. "Taking such advantage of my betrothed. Wicked me."

She breathed rapidly and moved as if wanting more. "Oh no, it grows larger still, the wicked thing. Bess said I wasn't to handle it." She shoved hard into his hand, her hips seeming beyond her control. "It feels delightful."

"It will feel even better in time." He didn't stop stroking her. Her thighs tightened and he felt her balls draw in close on the downstroke. The sweet brown curls cradled his big hand as he pleased the lady. Still, he felt the need to suggest, "Your reputation, my lady. I must get you back to the feast."

"Oh aye," she agreed absently, before immediately begging, "One more kiss?" Her soft green eyes mirrored the forest around them and he could not resist the lure of her plump lips any longer.

"Yes, of course." He gave the kiss, long and deep, tasting every corner of her mouth and stroking her tongue. His hand never ceased its ministrations, varying first fast and then slow, the firm grip never loosening. He felt her convulse beneath him and gasp.

"I die. I faint with love," Marion whispered and went limp in his arms, her green eyes smiling up. He felt the warmth of her seed as she climaxed over his hand and smiled.

He held her in. "So lovely. All untouched save by me. How was that for your first loving, sweet?" He drew his hand from beneath her skirts and stared at the milky pale seed on his palm. After moment, he licked at it to clean it up.

Marion did not notice or answer. She piled her hair into hasty buns and fastened the wimple and veil atop them. "Ah Robin. Quickly now, we must return."

He helped her to rise from his bed and walked her back to the feast. The night-sounds of the forest filled the silence as he held her hand and they walked. He glanced at her from time to time, only to see a dreamy smile on her lips. As they approached the feasting glen, Marion looked a bit worried. Before they reached the glade, she stopped.

"Robin?"

He wondered if he were about to hear a confession of a well-acted masquerade or an outpouring of guilt. Neither appealed to him. He wondered again whether she really did know of her true sex and whether he should be the one to tell her. "Yes, my lady?"

"Am I as nicely built as the other girls? Do I have as much to please you with? I know others have larger bosoms and wider hips."

"Oh yes." Robin kissed her. "And a little extra." Marion smiled prettily, looking relieved, and from behind him came an unmistakable cough.

Bess had found them.

"I think, my Lord Locksley, you should attend to your other guests." Bess' voice was chill. "At least those few who remain conscious."

As Robin looked at her, he realized she too was a man in a dress, as he had suspected after the rather impassioned kiss he had given her in Marion's stead. Something about the high cheekboned face was quite familiar.

As he stepped into the glade, he saw his men were well at work. The Sheriff's men had all drunk themselves witless, thanks to Will's clever hand with lavender and chamomile added into the beer. They lay snoring about the greensward, wherever they had fallen asleep sitting or lounging. The Sheriff himself still sat at the table, his head in his trencher, a half-eaten venison pasty in his hand.

The men of Robin's band were busily unloading the horses of their burden of taxes and replacing it with the burden of sleeping men. They tied Nottingham to his horse. Will Scarlet himself led it and all the others that were tied in a line behind it to the high road and aimed them to Nottingham Castle.

"All horses know the way home," he said and slapped the Sheriff's mare on the rump. The horses trotted off in a line toward the distant town. With luck, the men would awaken to the sun high overhead, their bladders aching and the whole town laughing at the sight.

Robin laughed, long and loud, sending it ringing through the night shadows of Sherwood, disturbing bats and owls, but the men never stirred. "Thank you, good Sheriff! Come dine again when your purse can stand the tab!" He turned to his band.

"Little John, take the ladies to the guest house. I think it is time for all good folk of the forest to be abed." He kissed Marion's hand and then Bess'. "It is my hope you will consent to dwell with us for a time, ladies. If you like, I shall send you homeward tomorrow or you may tarry here with my band."

"We shall stay, good Robin, for a time," Marion said before Bess could contradict her.

He kissed her hand again and let her go without complaint. Little John would take care of them tonight.

As they left, Bess tucked her hand into Little John's arm. Robin smiled to see her glance over her shoulder and then kiss Little John on the cheek. Will had his ladies, but Robin's strong right arm was too often alone. A sweetheart of his own would be just the thing for John. Perhaps Bess could take care of Little John as well, once they got Marion settled in the guest house.

Robin sat under a tree, distracted by all he had learned this night and all he remembered. How different his life would be were he still the earl. Then he would have Marion, his wife legally and his beloved always, in Locksley Hall. She would adore

being useful in her own home, with Bess to help. He would make sure she never had a dull life again. Will plopped down beside him, munching one of the cherry pasties.

"You smile like a cat that has devoured all the cream, Robin," Will said, sticking his tongue into the crust and scooping out a cherry.

Robin chuckled, thinking of his untouched lady. "I have, Will. I have."

"You kissed your princess again," he teased.

"Far more than that. We're in love." Robin stared at the silvery moon, fat and round as a shilling. Will tuned quickly and played a snatch of a bawdy tune.

"Ah love." He adjusted his lute and played the Breton song he'd sung earlier that evening.

Robin smiled. Will was always good company. Will set aside his lute and pulled a long face.

"You're in love. John's in love. And Nell and I are spatting."

Robin laughed at how quickly his friend summed it all. "You know your spats never last long."

"Nay and while they do, there's always Nan. When Nell and Nan both are peevish and quarrelsome, there's fair Mary." Will's ladies were legendary among the band and there was a certain song – composed by Will himself, some said, for all that he could not abide it sung in his hearing – of how he pleased them all in a single night, racing from house to house clad only in his braes.

"Ah Will, I think those days are over for me." Robin ruffled Will's hair. He loved his young friend dearly, although after the first disastrous night they had not bedded together.

"Not for me, not yet."

"Nay, you are but young. Come, sing me of the shepherd and the nymph."

Will played late into the night, his music counterpoint to the sounds of Sherwood.

## Chapter Three

### *Merry Men, Merry Maid*

Robin rose early as was his custom and walked through the wood, making sure all was well. He checked the guard platforms, responding to the due challenges. He sought the cooks who were baking bread for the men to break their fasts. In time, his steps brought him to the bower that served the band for a guest house. A lovely thing, made of willow wythes and woven with vines, it kept off rain and sun and snow. Marion and Bess slept still, for he could hear Bess snoring as Marion had said. He peered within, only to startle.

Bess came awake and put a finger to her lips to shush him. Marion lay on her bosom, clinging like a child even in sleep.

Robin watched as Bess eased Marion away, wishing she clung to him so, knowing he would never disentangle himself if she did. As Bess slipped out of the bower, he noticed her erection and morning stubble.

"Come, Robin. I would speak with you alone, before the men distract you or my lady awakes."

"Were he mine, I would never leave his arms so," Robin muttered.

"Hold your tongue. She has ever slept so, since childhood, when disturbed or confused. That is one score we must recount." Bess grabbed him by the arm with surprisingly strong hands and hustled him away to the riverbank.

Bess sat him down, turning a stern glare on Robin. He fidgeted beneath it, twiddling an arrow between his fingers as if checking the shaft's trueness.

"What distressed Marion or confused him?" Robin asked

"You. Your desire overwhelmed her. She told me all of it, begging my forgiveness for having taken such pleasure. I granted it, of course. I cannot deny her anything."

Bess made herself comfortable on the bank and stripped away the veil and wimple. She shook out her long fair hair, streaked with gray, from its tight bun. "Ah better. I do get tired of that piece of the law. Wimples are far too warm, even as they cover a multitude of sins." She stroked her throat and Robin was not surprised to see an Adam's apple.

"Sir," he began. He'd suspected Bess was a man from the day he'd played butcher and kissed her.

"Sir David of Doncaster, although I daresay you don't recognize me now, lad, and without my beard." David ran his hands through his long wavy hair again. "But you have grown up quite handsome."

It came to Robin then, the old memory of his father's feasting hall and the knights within it. "I do remember you. Not just from the betrothal, but from very long ago."

"Aye. You were a wee rascal, barely out of swaddling but into everything, when I left on King Richard's crusade. I've watched you grow from youth to man in the last sixteen years, Robin." He nodded slowly. "I've seen you dispossessed and outlawed and too, I hear what the Nottingham folk say of you."

Robin smiled. "I'm very glad to know that you survived. My father always said you were one of the king's best men."

David patted his hand, the ladylike habits of nearly two decades not laid aside. "I know you would be a fit match for my Marion. You have questions. I can see them in your face."

Robin nodded. He spoke slowly and thoughtfully. "I've thought a great deal since I found out. The why of it is obvious to me now."

David looked serious. "On his deathbed, my king commanded me to protect his child in any way I could, by any means necessary. I never intended for this deception to last so long. But when John became king rather than Arthur of Brittany, I knew Marion could never be a prince. Kings' sons harbor ambition. Kings' ruthless brothers who are now king do not like ambitious nephews. A king's daughter is no threat, most of the time, and can even be beneficial, properly married. It is for her safety and your own."

"No. He can't be revealed. I never would. I love him." Robin's words were out before he had given them any thought, but he knew them for the truth.

David glared at his words. "I have taken great pains, Robin. Marion believes herself female in every particular. All that is manly about her, I have called womanly. I have lied, constantly and wantonly, and shall answer for it before God at Judgment. But God will just have to understand that I would rather own a hundred thousand lies than see my girl dead. Marion must not know."

Robin thought for a moment, a crafty look lurking around his face. "What if there was no further danger?"

David shook his head. "There will be danger until John is no longer king. And with young Prince Henry having been born, there is no hope for Marion to ever live as a man."

Robin sighed. "Perhaps it's better so. I've not told her otherwise in any way. Nor shall I."

David began winding his hair back into its bun. "She may have begun life as a prince, but she is as much a woman as any born. To say otherwise will only confuse and distress her, sweet and simple child she is."

"I don't wish to do that," Robin agreed. "But if I were to marry her and there are no children..." He trailed off, wondering how David would explain that.

"Many women are barren and there is always fosterage. Cross each bridge in its time, good Robin."

Robin laughed softly. "Here I am, a man with nothing, already talking of marrying a princess."

David looked him over, assessing and shrewd, as he replaced the wimple, reverting to Bess. "A princess who is a virtual prisoner. She has a small income, but no property or other title."

"Nor have I. It's a match of love for me. And I think for her as well."

Bess smiled, Sir David all gone away. "And in that, you are blessed. So few of your rank are allowed such."

Robin brought her hands to his lips and kissed them. "So you approve. She's said so, but I'm happy to hear it from you."

Bess patted his cheek. "Dear Robin, I bounced you on my knee a hundred miles and more to Banbury Cross when you were so tall. I can no more tell you no now than I could then. But discretion and modesty must be your watchwords. It's more about preserving the reputation of a lady than keeping her virtuous. After all, it hardly matters if she's a virgin."

Robin smiled a bit, remembering the night before. "Not at all. I'd sooner cut off my draw fingers than harm her."

"She looked very pleased, so I have no quarrel with you."

Robin kissed her hands again. "Thank you. I can't hurt her. It's not in me."

Bess gave him a sharp look. "Even the gentlest of men may hurt inadvertently. I have, in my time, known many men. And I know a good man when I see him. All that Nottingham is not, you are."

Robin smiled broadly at the compliment but answered, "And that is why, my lady, when next I meet with Phillip it will come to blows. I fear that in the end, only one of us will survive."

"Love her well, gentle Robin. I will leave her to your hands. Be careful of her name, though, until I see you married. On that day, you will be earl with all your lands. Then I will dedicate myself to that as I have to my lady."

Robin handed Bess to her feet but made a small bow to Sir David, whom he remembered more clearly now. There had been a bright day behind Locksley Hall when the knight had presented him with a bow and shown him how to draw it. He had laughed and fired it, telling the knight he had been shooting for most of his years. David had picked him up, laughing himself, and teased him about still being in baby skirts, telling him that when he was out of them, he would make a fine squire.

"Thank you, Sir. That's what I want. A united England, once John is gone and the barons are pacified, and a home for us."

\* \* \* \* \*

Marion and Bess bided in the forest with the band for a fortnight. Robin taught Marion all the secret byways of the place, the paths to come to them without being seen, should she have need.

Bess found herself the center of Little John's attention. He seated himself beside her, stole kisses when she was distracted and laughed when she covered her mouth to hide her own laughter.

One afternoon, not long after their arrival, Bess sought him out. She smiled at the great tall man who sat in the shade of the Great Oak, eating a pie. "I'm looking for my lady Marion."

"Robin's out walkin' with her. Might be awhile." John, for all his attentions, was not a talkative sort. He ate more of the pie and followed it with a long drink of March beer.

"I see." Bess frowned. "Which way did they go?"

Belatedly, Little John remembered his manners and offered the end of his pie to Bess. "Want some?" When she shook her head, he finished it in a large bite. "Not really sure. You can wait with me." He took another pull of beer and grinned.

Bess looked him over and a small, flirtatious smile crossed her face. "Are you sure we should wait? Or perhaps you'd rather take me walking?"

The thought seemed to strike Little John like a physical blow. He rose and offered her his arm. "Let's do that."

Bess tucked her long, bony hand into the crook of his elbow. "It's been a very long time since I've spent time with a man. My love died almost twenty years ago."

Little John looked sad at that and brushed the edge of her veil. "Been a long time since I've seen a lady for more than getting a drink. A lot of us men in the forest here, but I only see the maids when I go into town or to the Blue Boar."

"How many men?" Bess asked, laying her free hand atop his corded forearm.

"Uhhhh," Little John thought hard. "A hundred?"

"And no ladies at all? I know your Will frequents the town. That hat of his is unmistakable. Each time I see him, another lady or two are trailing him. They follow him like bees follow a flower cart."

Little John laughed. "Yes. Will's gone often enough. I don't go though. The Sheriff knows the look of me."

"You're so large anyone would know you on sight. John Little, called Little John, second in command of the outlaws," Bess turned the name over in her mouth for a moment. They strolled by mossy bank, all overhung with willows.

Little John leaned down and whispered, "Not little at all. Not anywhere."

Bess gasped, her eyes large and her mouth a round O of shock. She smacked his arm, barely a tap. "You're naughty!"

John registered no pain but gave her wide and merrily wicked grin. "Are you naughty, Bess?" He stopped them under a willow with wythes that grew so thick none could see them.

Seeing they were curtained in, as certainly as if they had been hidden in the little anteroom of the palace with the velvet drapes, Bess beckoned Little John down and whispered, "Wicked as the day is long and more versed in the carnal arts than you can imagine. I went on Crusade after all."

Little John scratched his great shaggy head. "What was a lady doing on a crusade?"

Bess laughed and settled herself on a tussock of grass. "Have you not heard how Queen Eleanor took a whole hoard of us? She dressed her maids as Amazons and rode topless halfway to Damascus."

John sank down beside her, his eyes huge at the thought of the Queen and her maids riding bare-breasted across the continent.

"And how naughty are you, Johnny?" Bess teased.

He caught her round the waist again and kissed her. She opened beneath him, letting him go deep into her mouth. He crushed her closer and she only kissed him the harder, her own passions ablaze.

Bess clung to him, mindful of the job she'd done in her braes earlier so that no erection would betray her to Little John until she was ready. When he let go of her mouth to look into her face, she breathed, "Yes, oh John, yes."

He gave a lopsided grin behind his beard. "Oh you are a naughty girl."

Bess laughed. "Oh yes, I am. This is a fine and private place. I'll show you all my wickedness if you desire."

"Oh aye." Little John kissed her again. He fumbled with her dress and she pushed his hands away, rolling them until she lay atop him and pinned his wrists to the grass. He let her use her knee to part his thighs, then groaned when she settled herself between them and began to unlace his hose and braes.

When his long cock stood forth, triumphant as a rooster at dawn, she smiled and wrapped her hand around it. He shivered under her touch. It had been too long since her last lover and Bess craved him like she had no man since Richard's death. The feel of his cock in her hand made her ache for his hands on her own cock, for his cock plundering her arse, for all the hot urgency of lovemaking and all the pleasures of men. But this was not yet that time. She would enjoy what there was time to have.

"Bess," he said.



"Hush, Johnny, my love, my sweet. Let Bess show you the wild wantonness of the East." She licked along the whole thick shaft and then took the head in, stretching to get her mouth around him. It had been far too long since this pleasure. The taste of man filled her mouth, making her own prick twitch and beg to be released from captivity.

Little John made no words, only low animal sounds as she continued her bold exploration. Although this skill had come easily to Sir David in the long-ago days when he had served King Richard, Bess found herself slow, rusty like an unused suit of mail.

She sucked it in deeper, relishing the fullness in her mouth and the taste of him. The warm musky scent left her more aroused and wanting. Incredibly, his cock seemed to swell even larger under her licking and sucking, the skin of it hot and tight under her lips.

"Ah marry, you do that good as Robin does," Little John sighed. "Suck it deeper, naughty Bess. All the way, since you don't think it's poison."

Bess took as much as she could and gave him a swirl of her tongue as she moved off. He was too close, she could tell by the tightness in his balls and the hard pulsing of his prick. She didn't plan to taste him completely. Not yet. She couldn't bear it yet. That pleasure was too long ago and far away. David's memories overwhelmed Bess until she wanted only to weep.

But she replaced her mouth with her hand and stroked him. John didn't seem to notice or care as long as she kept touching him, playing with him. Her long fingers moved over his shaft and head, teasing him until he spent. She exclaimed, "Through the garland and split the wand with that shot, my handsome archer."

He gave her a tired grin and pulled her down to his chest. She rested there, smelling him, so different than the horse and leather and mail scent of Richard. There was only the smell of Little John and the flowers all around.

"Sweet Johnny mine." She couldn't keep the tears from her voice.

"Not little, huh?" He kissed her forehead, trying to tease her from her melancholy.

"Not at all," she agreed. He tipped her face up and kissed her, less fierce than before, almost sweet. His thick tongue filled her mouth and his beard tickled her face. She welcomed him in, enjoying the kiss.

"I like you, naughty Bess." John ran a strong hand over her bottom, stealing a pinch of it.

"And I'm very fond of you." She stroked his face and pulled him back to her for a long, sweet kiss. They lay together silently on the bank for a time, letting the small birds sing around them, listening to the nearby river. "You're a good man," Bess whispered.

"Yeah. So's Robin. Sorry we kidnapped you, but I'm not sorry you're staying awhile."

Bess shrugged. "It was more enjoyable than a trip to Lincoln in Phillip the Fumbler's company." Little John barked with laughter to hear the Sheriff of

Nottingham described so. "It's not my first kidnapping. King Richard once had to ransom me back for my weight in silver. Fortunately, I'm slender." Bess looked at Little John and kissed him under his beard before she sat up.

"Doubt we'll be ransoming you this time."

Bess knew what he meant, but still feigned distress. The playacting would purge her of the sorrow that hung on her. "Oh no! You'll keep me here, you wicked thing, and have your fierce naughty way with me! Every day!" She turned her face away and bit the knuckle of her index finger. "Every night!" She turned the other direction, pressing the back of her hand to her forehead. "And sometimes right after lunch?" She gave him a wicked grin as she fell giggling across his chest for a kiss.

Little John kissed her, grinning at her. "Especially in the mornings."

"Oh John." She smiled down at him and patted her wimple and veil back into place. "But really, we should find my lady and your Robin."

Little John rose and adjusted his own clothing. "We should. They could be back by now. I could use some beer and mayhap you could too?" He offered his arm.

Bess took it. "That sounds splendid, dear Little John." She tried concentrating on the path as they walked, but her mind drifted, to other paths and places and a different man beside her, in the days when she had not been a woman. In all the days spent as Bess, today was the first where a man had moved her so. The big charming oaf at her side made her wish she was a woman in truth to please him. She kept her face down so John would not see her pain, even at the good memories of Richard.

They found Robin and Marion at the feasting. Marion's mouth was as swollen with kissing as Bess knew her own to be. She settled herself beside her lady and let Little John fetch them pies and good beer.

Robin Hood gave Bess a smile when he saw her watching Marion's half-dreamy movements. She made herself return it, although it felt wan on her face.

"I suppose we'd better be releasing you for the sake of our hides," he teased.

"I understood we came here of our own will. And those that enter freely should leave freely." The answer sounded sharper than Bess would have liked. She took a drink and tried not to flush.

"That is the truth, but I doubt the Sheriff will see it that way."

Bess smiled. "Leave that to me, good Robin. And I think we shall bide a bit longer. The forest air seems to agree with my girl."

\* \* \* \* \*

Bide they did, days passing in long green shadows and much loving. Quarter-day came and Robin took Little John, Will Scarlet and Wat with him to Lincoln town to fetch the cloth so the men might have their new clothes.

As they made their way back, each mopping his brow under the summer sun and all passing the wineskin back and forth, a slim youth in the green of their band dropped from a tree before them. The stripling barred their way with a quarterstaff.

The boy lowered his voice and growled as gruffly as he could, "Who goes there? Give the password!"

The men laughed and Robin stared at Marion dressed as a boy. Surely Bess did not know of this antic. Marion laughed at the surprise on Robin's face and flung her arms around him.

"Hullo, Robin."

In reply, Robin kissed Marion, hard enough that the watching men shifted from foot to foot.

"It puts me in mind of fair Jane. Has it been a fortnight since I kissed her so?" Will asked of no one in particular.

"Aye, Robin, finish giving the countersign. Bess is waiting on me," Little John complained.

"How's that for the password...lad?" he teased, fingering Marion's boy's clothing.

"Aye, that'll do fine, Master Robin. Friar Tuck put me on guard duty since you'd be coming home soon."

Robin did not seem inclined to let go Marion's narrow waist. "Time to find another guard, I think."

"Mudge is up there too. But he let me do the honors to your lordships." Marion made a little bow that took all the men in.

"Good." Robin bussed her again and drew her along as he started the last leg to the Great Oak. John and Will drew the horses with their packs of cloth and supplies along. Wat climbed into the tree to take Marion's deserted post. "Because I'm starving. Come have dinner with me."

Marion wrapped her arm around his waist and they headed off together. "Will Stutely has been teaching me to shoot."

"Yes? How are you faring?" Robin looked pleased at the idea.

"I hit the target twice out of the whole quiver. I will improve." Marion blushed to relate her failure as an archer.

"You will. I'll help you. But after we eat."

\* \* \* \* \*

Evening found them at the archery butts, Marion aiming and firing. She did not bend the longest bows, as Robin and Little John did, but Mudge's suited her well. The

shafts sped the length of the field and most of them hit the target, although all out of the bull's-eye.

"Your stance is wrong, Marion." Robin corrected her position gently. She settled into it, feeling the way her body adjusted to the new position. Robin pressed close behind her. "Just to be sure you stay put. Try again."

She pulled the string back to her cheek and let the arrow fly. This time most of the arrows hit within the black. Robin stole a kiss for each that did. When the quiver was shot, he sent Marion to retrieve them with a swat on her hose-clad rear.

"Good lad," he said, enjoying the sight of her striding down the field. The short tunic set off her adorable arse clad in the green hose of his band. His hands twitched to feel it. One arrow gave her difficulty and she yanked at it with a curse he knew Bess had never taught her. He laughed softly as she strode back, peevish and sour looking.

"Will you call me boy until I take my own clothing back?" Marion asked, half-exasperated and half-longing, as she thrust the arrows back into the quiver and prepared to shoot again.

"Aye, for you are the prettiest lad in Sherwood, my own Marion." Robin moved in behind her, settling them both into shooting stance. Marion wriggled against him, arse against his thighs, knees spooned together with his own and heard him stifle a soft sigh.

"Robin, dearest," she moved against him again, deliberately rubbing against his cock, "I seem to be drawing forth another shaft besides the gray goose ones."

Robin pressed against her, letting feel the truth of the matter. The warm cleft he could feel through the thin cloth was a sweet torment. He would have her soon enough. "Oh you are, naughty boy."

Marion sent him a sweetly naughty wink. "Perhaps we should put the little bald friar to bed before we continue my lesson, for his insistence distracts me from my learning."

Robin bit down on a groan at that suggestion. He couldn't wait to see what she had in mind. "Oh yes."

Marion turned in his arms and let him feel her own erection. She thrust it against his and wrapped her arms around his neck. Unable to resist, he kissed her, hungry after days apart. She met him with an equal hunger, thrusting into his mouth with a new-found daring that made him grow even harder.

She whispered, "Friar Tuck has been most impressed with my piety. Perhaps your personal one would be pleased to have me on my knees saying a catechism?" She rubbed against him a little and licked his ear. When she nibbled his earlobe, Robin growled.

Robin barely gave her time to drop the bow before dragging her by the hand to a private platform built high in a beech tree. He swatted her hose-clad arse. "All right,

you naughty boy, let's hear your catechism. It's meet you do a little penance for your badness."

Marion went to her knees on the platform. "The catechism, just as you have taught it to me, dearest Robin." She loosed his braes and drew out his cock, holding it gently in her hand. "And so brethren greet one another with a holy kiss." She kissed the head then flicked her tongue over it. Her own cock jerked visibly, demanding the same. Robin promised silently that she would have it. The taste of her made him wild every time she let him suck her so and tonight promised great things.

Robin trembled under her tongue, her fast, very busy tongue that moved as if she were indeed asking questions and giving answers. It flitted over the bottom of his cock, then danced around the head. She sucked him as deeply as she could and he felt her breath against his belly.

He relaxed under her touch, her hands stroking his belly and thighs before reaching under him to cup his balls, gently as cradling eggs. He hissed at this touch and gave a deeper moan when she left off sucking to mouth them. After a moment, she returned her attention to his prick, which had lain along her soft cheek. She pressed her tongue along what length of his prick she could fit into her mouth, rubbing with a soft, velvet stroke, and he shot forth as cleanly as she had from the bow.

Marion swallowed the issue and tucked him up neatly before climbing to her feet. She shoved Robin back against the tree and kissed him hard, tasting his mouth with a boldness he never expected. He tasted his own seed on her tongue and sagged against the tree with pleasure and exhaustion.

Breathless and smiling from her aggression, Robin panted, "Dear boy, what's come over you?"

Marion laughed, putting her hands on her hips just as he did. "Being a boy. It's a wild, free feeling, the kind I have when you laugh." She gave a saucy thrust forward that put her prick on display. Robin reached out and grasped it since she had offered it so willingly.

He drew her close by her cock, wrapped the other arm around her waist and kissed her neck. "I like you bold."

Marion thrust against his hand, her own prick hungry for his touch. Robin laughed softly and Marion shivered softly, deliciously against him when he whispered, "And now, my boy, I'll return the favor."

He helped her to sit on the platform, seating himself beside her, and opened her braes, freeing her cock from them. It stood, hard and red, looking almost angry at having been left to wait so long. He looked at it for a moment, taking in the pretty sight.

Robin lay down on the platform and rested his head in Marion's lap as she stroked his hair.

"Let any who come upon us think you are sleeping," she whispered.

"Aye." Robin flicked his merry tongue around and about the head of her prick, almost as lightly as he danced through the trees, taunting the Sheriff's men. Then he swallowed her down, all the way to the bottom, burying his nose against her body, filling his mouth with her cock. He wanted to stay like this all night with Marion's prick sweetly filling his mouth, her fingers in his hair, her thighs firm beneath his head.

There was no law here, save the primal desire that drove him, that he knew sent Marion to the brink of pleasure, demanding she spend. She tried to speak and he heard her tongue go all tangled.

"Robin, my Robin..." she sighed and came, shooting his mouth full, as he loved her to do. Robin took a last kiss to the head of her cock and looked up at her.

"My boy, my Marion," he sighed. "Darling, do you like being a boy?"

She gave him an odd look, then leaned down and whispered, her lips warm against his ear. "Of course I like being a boy. I am a boy, aren't I, despite being a woman? I am sheltered but not stupid, Robin. It is safer to let all believe Bess' tales. One sees much when others think one is a silly ninny who has no thoughts deeper than a supper trencher."

Robin smiled up. Apparently all the lies in the world, even from earliest childhood, couldn't convince a man he was other than what he was. "I am glad to know better. I wonder, though, would you want to lie with me like a boy and not a princess?"

Marion's eyes grew large. "Aye, that would be a new thing." She stripped away her clothing and stood before him, a slim, naked youth of about twenty. Robin stared at his beloved, taking in the smooth chest with tiny dark nipples, the narrow hips and strong legs. Marion, whether man or woman, defined loveliness. His desire leapt again and he was ready for her.

"Do you know how it's done, darling?" Robin stripped himself to let her see him. Marion came to him and ran gentle hands over his chest, toying with the soft fair curls and reaching up to stroke his beard.

"No," she whispered. "Show me."

Robin eased them both to lie on the platform. He kissed Marion and stroked her, reaching around to cup her strong, flat arse with both hands. Her eyes went big. "I won't hurt you, sweet," he promised.

She let him roll her onto her stomach and adjusted her cock and balls so she didn't crush them against the platform. Robin ran strong hands over her back, rubbing away her tension and fear. He kneaded her buttocks and then kissed the top of each. Marion giggled.

The giggles stopped when he stroked his tongue along the cleft of her arse. He felt her shiver when he found her opening. A soft moan escaped him. A beautiful virginal arse and it was his for the taking. Marion loved him and offered freely.

He tasted her again, prying at the tight ring with his tongue. He made these kisses very sloppy, wanting to wet her enough that it wouldn't hurt. He lingered, teasing and soaking her. She shuddered beneath him, moaning his name.

That was enough to spur him to take her. Carefully, with all the gentleness her innocence demanded, he pressed the head of his rigid prick to her hole. She breathed against him and then he slipped in, the tightness gripping just below the head. He paused for an instant, waiting.

Marion gasped. "Robin!"

"Have I hurt you, love?" he asked, straining to keep his voice calm. If she asked him to stop, he would, although it would be the hardest thing he'd ever done, harder even than living with his conscience in those first dark days of being outlawed for killing a king's forester.

His lady was tight beyond his dreams, hot enough to sear the reason from his mind, and soft, so very soft. He needed to be within her, to have her fully. It would be no crude fucking such as he did to relieve tension. This would be a lovemaking to rival the ones sung about by the poets.

"No," Marion whispered. "It feels so strange."

"It will feel better soon." Robin pressed deeper, changing his angle, trying for the place inside that always sent him off like an arrow fired at a clout. He hoped Marion had the same. She relaxed under him, not shying away from his prick as many did, nor complaining of any pain.

He thrust within her, the tight heat of her arse melting him even as it drew his body taut like a bowstring. The urge in his loins to shove and plunder and take his pleasure grew and howled within his mind like a wolf. Robin set a steady pace and ignored its ravening. His beautiful lady did not need the full force of his lust unleashed upon her.

By the sound of her gasps, she had that same place and he had found it. Robin moved there for as long as he could, until he heard her peak again, and then changed to the motion that suited him best.

Three good hard strokes and he shot within her with a cry, encompassed by the tight heat of her body, her soft, whispered love-words coming to him on the breeze.

They stayed locked together in the embrace until he softened and released her. Then she sat up and smiled at him. She leaned in for a kiss but he shook his head. Instead, he reached for the wineskin he kept on the platform and offered her a drink of sweet Canary. She took one. He took one from his hands and rinsed his mouth then another from the skin proper to steady himself. Then he kissed her smiling mouth, taking reassurance from her that he had not hurt her and that she had enjoyed the pleasure.

She kissed him in return, then drew him to lie with his head in her lap. They watched the moon set, passing the wine between them. He did not remove his head from her lap and she stroked his hair.

"You'd best be back into your clothes before Bess sees you in that costume. She'll tan my hide and wear it for shoes," Robin said. He looked up at her. "But wear it again for me?"

Marion looked down at him, serious for the first time since they'd met. "Robin, my love, someday I will be able to wear it all the time. But for now, I must remain the Princess Marion FitzRoy." She bent down and kissed him. "For now, for my own safety and Bess'. Someday, though... Someday I will be only Marion."

Robin nodded. "Can you endure the skirts longer? I want to marry you, darling."

"And make me the lady of Locksley Hall?" Marion laughed. "If you asked it of me, sweet Robin, I would wear the dress until my dying day."



## Chapter Four

### *Returning the Lady*

The days ran away, June passing into hot July, and at last Bess suggested they might want to return to the castle. That day, she and Little John had heard word of parties of soldiers being sent into Sherwood to capture the outlaws and torture them until they revealed where Robin had hidden the stolen princess.

"We shall no longer endanger our sweet hosts," she insisted and Marion agreed.

"Then on the morrow you shall be returned unharmed to the gates of Nottingham," Robin declared. "If I may, my Marion, I would not spend a moment away from your side."

Marion assented, eating with him and vanishing with him as the shades of evening fell.

Little John hadn't stirred from Bess' side either, although he made no proclamation as his master had. Finally urged to speech by their impending parting, he said, "Gonna miss you."

"And I you, my large darling." Bess kissed his cheek. "If you'd like, we may do the same as my lady and your lord."

"Aye." Little John nodded and handed her up from her meal. As they walked to their willow tree, he asked, "Why don't ya ever let me see you naked, Bess? You always suck me. Don't you want something more? I do."

Bess stopped them under the willow. She ran her hands over John's broad chest and stroked his arms. "John Little, do you love me?" She smiled up at him only to gasp when he kissed her breath away.

"Course I love you, Bess." He jerked her closer and grabbed her rear, squeezing it. "Want all of you tonight. Want to see and feel and taste."

Bess took a breath and swept off her veil and wimple, hoping that he would live through the next minutes. He suspected he would, since Little John had hinted that he enjoyed Robin's attentions now and again. "My name is David. Sir David of Doncaster. I was a knight in the service of King Richard."

Little John blinked. He looked over David, a slow, wolfish grin taking shape on his face. "So whatcha hiding under the skirts, Sir David?"

David undid his long hair, brushed it over his face and gave John a teasing look through the curls. "Why don't you come and find out? Your own cock is very nice, my

darling. But from the look of things, you're eager to see the sword that defeated the Saracens."

"Show me," Little John demanded and sat down to take off his own clothes.

David stripped out of the dress and undergown and his own braes, as well as the tight cloth he wore that bound his genitals up, pressing his testicles into his body and hiding his cock. He stood naked, a short man, hairy of chest and leg, with a cock that hung short and thick.

John looked so long David grew nervous under the scrutiny, but the wide, wolfish grin never dimmed. "I suck this time. I'm good at it." John reached out and grabbed David's cock, pulling him close by it. As he touched it, the organ came awake, growing three times its size in his hand. "Now that's a pretty piece," Little John said and licked the head of it.

David stiffened with a gasp, not having been touched by another in years. His own caresses had been few and far between. He'd been busy being Bess and setting a good example for Marion. Little John's tongue danced over the large head, big as a July apple, before he swallowed half of David's cock.

"Oh John. Don't stop," David whispered. He steadied himself by burying his hands in John's short fair hair. John's mouth made him hot and cold and weak by turns as it lapped at him, sucking him ever deeper.

Little John gave his whole attention to David's pleasure and so did not stop but instead took half of the thick shaft, which was now as long as his whole handspan, into his mouth. His tongue wrapped around it and he swallowed. David, overwhelmed by the touch, did not last past this and spent, moaning as Little John swallowed around him again.

His knees buckled and Little John caught him as he sagged to the mossy bank. Little John ran a big hand over his face.

"My Bess. David..."

"Whichever pleases you, love." David pulled him down for a kiss of the wide laughing mouth. John rolled him onto his back and pinned him to the ground. The hard strength of the big man left David wishing he was younger and that he could gain his second arousal more quickly.

"They both please me." Little John kissed him again, thrusting his own cock against David's belly. "Shame you have to go back."

"I am not so restricted as my lady. I can slip away, now and then, for a drink at the Blue Boar."

"Only for a drink?" Little John looked disappointed.

David laughed. "Oh Johnny, you'll be the death of me. Of course there can be more." He pulled John close, licked his ear and whispered, "You can take me to the

stables, bend me over a feedbox and fuck me with that large cock of yours as often as you like."

John laughed and squeezed David's arse. "Oh I will. Come as David and wear the green of our band. The landlord will tell me." He looked at David. "Robin knows?"

"Aye. He knows."

Little John kissed him. "Want you."

David smiled. He had never doubted that. "Of course." He slid down to wet Little John's cock. "Be careful, love? It's been too long."

He made sloppy wet circles all over the head of John's cock and more down the shaft before returning to the head. He had to get it very wet. There would be no slow stretching and gentleness here in the woods, no sweet-scented oils or leisurely lovemaking. It would be rough and ready and he would feel it tomorrow.

Little John, to his surprise, rolled onto his back and pulled David atop him. "Careful, like you said. Just as careful as you like. Ride, knight. Bare tits all the way to Damascus, like you told me." He reached over and tweaked one of David's tan nipples, rolling it between his fingers until it woke and David arched into his hand with a cry.

David straddled Little John's wide body. He tipped Little John's enormous cock until it stood straight up, pointing to the sky, and eased himself back on it, hissing at the sheer size.

"Oh love," he said, letting the tip press against the tight ring of muscle. "Love," he moaned as he opened and the spit-slick head slid in.

"You like it." Little John grabbed his stirring cock and pulled, both trying to wake it again and trying to force David to take more of him.

"Yes!" David pressed down, crying out as he did and took about half of Little John.

He eased off for a moment and then slid down for more, but Little John shuddered beneath him, coming hard. David felt the pulsations of the massive cock. Carefully, so as not to lose him, he leaned forward and kissed Little John's mouth.

"So tight," Little John mumbled. "Sorry. You're too tight."

"It's a compliment, dearest. There will be other nights for long lovemakings and I will again show you much of what I learned in the East."

"Aye," Little John mumbled, softening. He helped David off to lie on the moss beside him. He drew the small man into his arm and held him close. "Gonna miss you, Bess."

David kissed his cheek. "Sleep now, my Johnny, my love." Perhaps tonight there would only be John and no dreams of Richard.

The next morning found Bess seated on her horse and Marion on hers, both impeccably arrayed and fresh from a wash in the stream. Two of the men, clad in common clothing and not the Lincoln green, took the reins of their horses and led them from the Great Oak and onto the high road.

Marion waved and blew kisses to Robin as long as she could see him. Even after they left the heart of the forest, she could hear his laughter echoing down from the treetops as he followed them.

She rode out with a heart lighter than it had ever been. She did not bear her secret alone anymore. The handsomest man in the world loved her for herself, not for her title or her wealth. It was almost worth going back to the castle.

They arrived at the gates of Nottingham Castle near mid-morning and the merry men faded into the crowd. Bess caught Marion's reins and dismounted to lead the horses. A groom took the reins in the bailey and helped her dismount.

The Sheriff was sitting in his hall, awaiting them. He looked the women over, his face guarded. Marion knew he was angry but waited to see exactly where his fury would fall.

"You look well, my dear." He included Bess in his gaze. "Both of you. For having been in the clutches of an outlaw, that is."

"We are well, my lord Nottingham. For when did Robin Hood ever offer injury or insult to any woman, maid, matron or crone?" Marion found she could not hold her tongue. A fortnight of living among the outlaws, speaking her mind, had left her saucy.

Nottingham rose and came down to her. "That is what they say, my lady. But I doubt the truth of it."

"It is the truth." Marion held her head high and looked him in the eye. His rage might fall in her, but after the time in the forest, she knew she could bear it.

"Is it?" Nottingham drew close and took her in his arms, an embrace that would look loving to all eyes. She alone knew he squeezed her too tightly, pinning her arms to her sides. "Did he have you?" he whispered viciously, squeezing harder. Marion almost gasped in pain but refused to give him the pleasure. "Have you come away without your head, my lady?"

Marion twisted out of his arms, resisting her desire to sneer or to plant an unladylike knee where it would do a world of good. "I don't understand, my lord. Are you feeling well? My head is here, is it not?" She felt the top of her wimple. "Aye, 'tis, so I came away with it." She took his meaning perfectly well but maintained her mask of simplicity.

He caught her around the waist again and snarled, "Did you now, Maid Marion? Did you come away with your head, maid?"

"Here now!" Bess stepped between them, easing Marion out of his grasp so deftly she never remembered afterward just how Bess had done it. "There is no call for your

rudeness, my lord." She took Marion's arm. "My lamb has had a difficult fortnight and you do not aid her homecoming with your vulgar questions. No injury was offered us. Now let me take her to her room, for she needs a nap."

Bess led her up the stairs, but at the second landing, Nottingham was running lightly beside them and pressed Marion back into an alcove. She gasped at being separated from her protector. His hands circled her waist and his mouth came down hard on hers, without Robin's gentleness or affection, a gag to stop her cries.

"I'll have everything you gave the wolfshhead and I'll see him dance upon nothing at all into the bargain. I'm going to try you, my lady, and see if you remain a maid or whether your uncle has another score to settle."

His hand drifted toward her thighs. She knew he meant to lift her skirts and take her there on the stairs as if she were a common scullery maid or whore. She twisted, trying to free herself, but the stone pinned her on three sides and his weight barred the fourth.

"Try you and if I find you no better than you should be, I'll have you, but not as my wife. Leman will be good enough for you, princess or no." He slid his hands over her chest and nuzzled her neck. "Little whore. Giving him everything you should have been saving for me." He ran them down to grip her arse. "I'll have you. I'll have your pretty lips wrap around my cock, just like you did for the bandit. He's stolen your virtue from out your pretty quim and left only a gaping cunt, begging to be filled. I'll fuck it anyway and fill it better."

Marion, sickened at his words and the wet kisses he was trailing on her skin, brought her knee up sharply, sending him howling in pain. He might not think her such a simpleton after that, but it would be a small price to pay. A dagger from behind circled his throat and Bess, looking more fierce than Marion had ever seen her, pressed it to the Sheriff's skin, drawing a bead of blood.

"You will keep your hands off my girl," Bess said, her voice soft and firm. "No man has been within her, nor shall any as long as I am by her side. If you write to His Grace, rest assured I will write him as well. Your behavior is despicable. We were safer among outlaws than in the company of the man who makes and enforces the law."

Nottingham raised both hands and let Bess pull him away. Marion pulled herself from the alcove and hastened up the stairs to her apartments. Bess kept the dagger on him until she saw Marion had made it to her rooms. Marion dropped on her bed as Bess followed her in and barred the door.

"I want to go back to Sherwood," she said as Bess came to her. She clutched her lady around the waist and buried her face in Bess' chest, as she had since infancy. "Surely my uncle won't make me marry him." Marion knew the words were false when they left her lips and that made the tears come hot and furious. Nottingham was one of John's oldest and most loyal allies and they would stop at nothing to get him wed to Richard's bastard daughter.

Bess said nothing and stroked her hair.

Phillip listened to the sobbing from outside the door, feeling very ashamed of himself. He tried telling himself he had not been about to force the princess herself, but his stiff cock gave lie to that. He had been. He would have raped her there, as if she were a traitor to the kingdom and crown, as if she were a peasant girl caught in a raid. And he would have enjoyed it.

That knowledge shamed him, but only his cheeks burned with it. His loins burned with a different sensation, demanding satisfaction. He'd find a willing serving girl. John would kill him for forcing himself on Marion, he knew.

There was always the wedding. After that he could have her in any way he desired and she would have no say. But John needed to know what had happened with the outlaw. He had put off the letter as long as he could.

Phillip made his way to the scriptorium and picked up his own paper and quill. He pared it until it fit his fingers and then dipped it. He hesitated. English was a bad idea, French and Latin no better. Although he suspected the rustic earl could not read, he knew the renegade priest who succored the band could.

He began the missive in Greek, knowing John read it as easily as Norman French.

"My Lord King, greetings from your loyal and humble servant, Phillip of Nottingham. Before word reaches Your Grace by other hands, I felt it my duty to inform you that my journey to bring you the tax money was detained by the rascal called Robin Hood.

"He robbed me and my men and, adding insult to the crown to injury to its treasury, kept your niece, the Lady Marion, and her maid hostage for more than a fortnight. I fear the worst, although she denies any impropriety. She has returned headstrong and saucy.

"To the end of restoring your lost treasure and expediting the capture of this bandit, I have doubled the taxes in Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire. The reward on the outlaw has been tripled. Surely someone's debts will get the better of him.

"Your obedient servant, Phillip, Sheriff of Nottinghamshire."

The Sheriff called his most trusted messenger to him and put the missive in his hands. "Go directly to the king. Do not go by way of Sherwood or within a league of it."

The young man nodded and left. Phillip listened to the hoofbeats as he rode out. He began drafting the new tax and reward notices. Those finished, he ordered the scriptorium to make copies to be read and posted in every town and church.

Then he summoned Marion for dinner.

He didn't expect her to come. Nor did he expect Bess to come and face him as boldly as if she had not put a dagger to his throat that afternoon.

"My lady will take her meals in her room. She has no desire to see you."

"I, however, desire to see her. If she does not eat at my table, she does not eat."

Bess dropped a curtsy that was half an inch shy of being insultingly shallow and stalked out, her stride not that of a lady but of an irritated knight.

Nottingham held his tongue on that score. He would keep the knowledge of Bess' identity until revealing it served a true purpose.

Marion appeared less than ten minutes later and took her proper place. She refused to look at him or speak to him. Those would come, in time.

The notices appeared around and about the towns. Friar Tuck managed to acquire two copies of the reward poster. One was nailed to the church door. The other resided above Robin's favorite seat beneath the Great Oak tree.

When Tuck had hurried to the band's meeting place with the news, he'd found them eating and drinking, making merry on the king's deer and good March beer.

"Robin, look at this. All of you, hold! Feasting has its place, but as the Preacher says, better to go into a house of mourning than of feasting. I fear this will become one and not to anyone's betterment. Look, Robin!"

He thrust the reward poster in Robin's face. Robin unfurled it. Although he could not read all the words, he knew his numbers well enough and could guess at the general gist of a reward poster.

"Ha, ha! My lads, I am worth fifteen hundred pounds to our good friend, the Sheriff." Robin threw back his head and laughed long and loud, setting the forest ringing with the echoes of it.

"Robin, do you know how he's getting that money?" Tuck demanded. "He's doubled the taxes to replace all you and the men took, as well as to pay for your head."

"Ah, good friar, you do worry overmuch! Another five hundred pounds and I'll claim the reward myself," Robin laughed. With a long thorn he tacked the poster to the tree above his seat.

The men laughed at that jest. Tuck fumed.

"You would, at that," Will Scarlet said.

"And steal it back too," added Little John, pounding his great fists on the trestles until they shuddered and several men had to save their beer from being spilled. "I'd like to meet the man who thinks he can get that reward. He'll answer to my fists. Both of them!"

"A murrain upon you for a pack of fools!" Tuck roared. "The people you protect are being bled as if with leeches and you gorge yourself while widows go hungry and children cry for want of bread because the last farthing sits in the Sheriff's counting house!"

"Peace, good friar. You know us well. When have we ever turned our back on those in need? They will have bread again. Is that not why we took the tax money in the first place?" Robin sobered a bit and laid a hand on Tuck's shoulder. "We will see to their needs. Even a Sheriff does not live forever."

"I'll see to that," roared one of the men, who promptly tumbled over drunk.

"See to your own cups, Mudge," Will Stutely said. He and Will Scarlet came to Robin's side. "Ask of us, we will go. For all men will seek your head and Little John is too known."

"Aye, I will send you into towns, with money and food for the most desperate. Tell all that as long as the taxes are levied, Robin Hood will see to them."

The men nodded. The feasting at an end, some began packaging what they could to be given to the poor.

Will Scarlet drew Robin aside. "If you need me to get word to your lady while I am in Nottingham, I will, good master."

Delighted, Robin kissed his cheeks. Will grinned.

"Aye, I'll pass that message too."

"Try it, sweet Will, and I'll box your ears until they ring." Robin still smiled, but there were teeth in it.

Tuck stepped in. "Robin Hood, the best blessings will fall upon you and none of the curse I called before." Robin went to his knees and the friar blessed him in the names of St. Dunstan and the Blessed Virgin. "I will take your men and show them the lay of the land tonight. Tomorrow, there will be happiness again in Nottingham and Lincoln town."

"Thank you, friar." Robin rose.

\* \* \* \* \*

The messenger was near fainting when he staggered into the hall a fortnight later and presented King John's response. Phillip took it and read it while ordering food and wine for the servant.

The response was written in Greek as well.

"Clever Phillip, I knew you would not fail me more than temporarily. Do not hasten your collection, for I am coming to you at the end of summer. Look for me in mid-September. I think I shall stay quite a while. Your Harvest Fair is this year or I disremember.

"See to it I can resume my rightful place come spring and all will be forgiven. Fail me and I may see if a wolfshead whose loyalty was always to my brother might make a better Sheriff."



The letter threatened, but Phillip mopped his brow in relief. As Sheriff, he paid a thousand pounds a year to keep his position. But he collected all the taxes and rents and levies due that position, which more than made up for it. With the doubled taxes, he could easily manage to resupply his king, meet the reward for Robin Hood and keep his job.

He frowned at the bit about the Harvest Fair. It was held every five years and indeed this was the year. He hesitated to hold it, for fear the men of the forest would spoil it, as they did everything.

He needed to get them out of the way before King John arrived. His liege's safety must take priority over everything.

Phillip poured himself a goblet of wine and began plotting.

## Chapter Five

### *Will Scarlet's Song*

Many cottagers found themselves visited by sprites and brownies in the next weeks. A goodwife would put a loaf of bread on a windowsill to cool, only to find it had acquired such jolly companions as a wheel of cheese and a joint or a small cask of ale or some pies. Now and again, the daughter of the house would hang a patched dress out to dry and return to find a new one in its place. A grandfather would find his rough stool replaced with a well-made one. Always a small pouch of coins accompanied these gifts, which came a few days ahead of the tax-man.

There were never golden marks among the coins, nor large pounds, such as would draw suspicion from Nottingham's men. There were always farthings and pennies, sixpence and a few shillings. It was enough to keep the household going and meet the new taxes.

So, because of the diligence of Robin's men, the folk of Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire did not suffer under the Sheriff's new plan and turn on Robin and his band as the authors of their woe, but instead loved him all the more.

On a hot day in July, as the grain lay ripening in the fields and the bees buzzed lazily about the wildflowers, a beggar found his way into Nottingham's town gate. Young he was and missing a leg, with a cloth tied about his eyes and a stout staff to guide him. Still, he came whistling a merry air, for all of the heat and his pains.

He wandered the poorer quarter of the city, lingering at windows, rapping on doors. In each place, he was given a seat and a drink. He left each as merrily as he'd come. His visiting took some time and it was quite dark before he came near the castle.

Marion watched him from her balcony as he tapped his way along, singing to himself. He seemed to know exactly where he was when he stopped under her window.

"All in the merry greenwood glen  
The robin makes his nest  
The great bear roars, the cardinal sings  
But robin knows no rest.

Far away in a golden cage  
the robin's mate doth lie

Guarded by wolves and lions grim  
She can no longer fly."

Marion recognized the sweet voice and dropped a scarf off the balcony. With unerring aim, the beggar picked it up. He looked about for the guards. Seeing none, he scrambled up the vines on her tower, his missing leg no hindrance.

He bowed to her and offered her scarf without unbandaging his eyes. "My lady, I believe you dropped this," he said. He leaned closer. "I bear a message from my master." He pecked her cheek.

"Will Scarlet, you are as wicked as your bold master. Give me all the message, quickly."

"He sends you his everlasting love and bids you keep watch for he will come to you soon."

"No, he mustn't. It's too dangerous." Movement caught Marion's eye and she pulled Will into her rooms, lest he be seen on the balcony.

"Our bold Robin fears no danger." Will unbandaged his eyes. "Ah marry, you grow more beautiful with each day. I should write a roundelay in your honor." He thought for a moment before singing. "Marion, the lady fair, with a down, hey derry derry down—"

"Sweet-tongued singer," Marion teased, covering his mouth with her hand. "You'll turn my head completely and we shall have to elope together, then where will Robin be?" She gave him a smile. "Give me all of his message, for I am sure he entrusted you with more than words."

"Aye, that he did." Will took Marion gently in his arms. "But not too much of one, for he will deliver that message in person." He kissed her lips, chaste as a brother. "Robin says it is a pledge to pay. You may collect his kisses that are due when you come again to the greenwood glen."

"That debt will go unpaid," snarled Nottingham as he flung open the door. The guard stationed outside nodded.

"Just as I said, your worship. A man in her rooms," he said.

The Sheriff sneered and stepped aside to allow three more guardsmen into the room. "Throw him in the dungeon. We'll see how sweetly this bird sings when he's caged and plucked."

"No!" Marion got between Will and the guardsmen, hindering them. Will made it onto the balcony before his crutch and strapped-up leg made him topple as he tried to leap for the vines. Nottingham thrust Marion rudely aside and the guards seized the fugitive minstrel.

"Will Gamwell, called Scarlet, I believe," Nottingham said when they dragged Will to him. "You'll swing for thieving as surely as your master."

The guards hauled Will away. Nottingham looked over to where Bess had helped Marion back to her feet. When Bess opened her mouth, Nottingham cut her off with a slash of his hand.

"Any more out of either of you and you'll join him. I'm willing to overlook high treason...for now. King John has too much to worry about to be signing an execution order on his niece." He gave a slight bow. "For now, Your Highness, consider yourself imprisoned in your rooms. I have doubled the guard." He bowed again and left.

Marion made a small curtsy and nodded her assent. She clung to Bess as he left and sobbed, knowing he was listening and enjoying her tears, but unable to help herself.

"Hush, lamb," Bess soothed. "Your young rogue will have a rescue plan within a fortnight, for you and the minstrel."

Marion shook her head and sobbed more. "It's all so hopeless," she wailed.

"Hush. Now let Bess see you to bed. Sleep, lamb. Morning is wiser than evening."

Marion let Bess put her to bed, the touch of the long bony hands the same comfort as it had been for as long as she could remember. They soothed her by combing out her long hair. Bess kissed her cheek and whispered, "I'll nip down to the Blue Boar once everyone's asleep."

Marion smiled a bit and snuggled into her pillow. All would be well now, she knew. Bess and Robin would make it all right between them.

Bess waited until Marion slept. Then she snuffed the rushlights so that no one would see her transformation. She could not go out as a lady tonight, so she would be David again, for a time. David had learned many tricks in Jerusalem, among them not being seen. He changed into gray clothes that would blend with the night and the castle stones alike. He covered his hair and face with a cloak.

Silently, he crept down the back stairs, through hidden ways known only to a few servants. The guards at the door of Marion's chambers almost certainly did not know of the stairs or the back ways. He passed the chamber where Nottingham lifted a celebratory goblet of wine—clearly the most recent of many—to his reflection in the mirror.

He made his way quietly out of a small water gate in the city wall. The great gates closed at sundown and would not re-open until after Prime had been sung. The Blue Boar would be open. It never closed its doors to the weary traveler. Fortunately, the summer had been dry and the small river was little more than a stream. David made it out mostly dry, his boots and hose wet to his knees and no more.

David hastened through the darkness toward the inn, hoping one of Robin's band would be there. More, he hoped the man would be willing to bestir himself to save Will.

He was gratified to see Little John sitting by the lowering fire, arm-wrestling two men with the same arm. A pitcher of beer, with foam still showing near the top, sat near his other hand. David stepped in, making sure he was seen and took off his cloak.

"A sport for men that is," he commented as Little John pressed both of the men's arms to the table.

Little John took a long pull of beer directly from the pitcher, wiped the foam from his mouth and looked David over. A slow grin lit his face. "Aye. That it is. Do you have the stomach for it, friend?"

"Alas, no. But I'll stand you another pitcher and myself a pint of brown October."

Little John nodded. The others, seeing the sport was done for the night, drifted away to rooms and stables. David got his beer and took a long drink, trying to decide how to be discreet about the situation and still penetrate Little John's thick wits.

"Haven't seen you in a while," Little John said after another drink of beer. "Finally get to sneak out of Nottingham prison?"

"Aye, but I fear neither my lady nor your sweet minstrel is so fortunate."

Little John set the empty pitcher down. "Will?"

David nodded. "He was caught delivering your master's message to my lady. I do not doubt Nottingham will use him as bait."

"I better get this news to Robin." Little John rose. He left enough for his score and David's pint, despite David's offer to buy. He was unsteady enough on his feet that David caught his arm.

"Perhaps you'd best let me take you to him?"

"Aye, come with me." Little John lurched out the door of the Blue Boar, one arm around David.

"Guide me, love, and I'll see you home," David promised. The walk cleared Little John's head and he became more steady the deeper they walked into the forest.

They were nearly to the Great Oak when Little John shoved David against a tree and kissed him hard. David clung for a bare moment, losing all his own burdens in the rough, hot mouth that covered his. He yearned to make it last, to slake himself into insensibility on the large body and sleep one night untroubled. But there was no hope of that. Little John's hand closed on his crotch, hot and rough as his mouth.

David wanted to let the outlaw have his way right there, against the tree. He welcomed the first hard stroke but then squirmed under the second. "No, Johnny, love. We're busy, remember?"

Little John let him up. "Aye. But that's a promise for more later, Bess. We gotta save our people. And you gotta get home." He began shouting for Robin.

Robin came from the waterfall, shaking his head against sleep. "Little John, what?" he yawned. "Need you rouse the whole band before the sun?"

Little John, still not letting go of David, beckoned him close. "Will's taken. Nottingham's imprisoned him."

David nodded. "He delivered your message to my Marion and Nottingham caught him at it."

Robin looked entirely at a loss.

"Watch and wait, good Robin," David counseled. "When we know Nottingham's actions, a plan will present itself as well."

"Time to get you home," Little John said. He steered David toward the high road, his own steps unsteady with beer and weariness.

As they went, David saw Robin sink onto his mossy seat, his fair head cradled in his hands. "Bide a while. I will keep your lady safe," David called as they hurried back home.

Dawn was just lighting the east with pink when David slipped out of his wet hose, put on his chemise and, having turned back into Bess, crawled into his own bed.

More notices appeared throughout the region. Robin glared at the one he found hanging on a tree outside the Blue Boar. He bought a pint of ale for a passing clerk and asked him to read it. He had made out Will's name and the words "outlaw" and "hanged" but he needed to know the date.

"For you see, my letters are few and that contains a great many." Robin gave the black-clad man his most charming smile.

The clerk peered at the notice. "It reads, good rustic, 'The outlaw, Will Gamwell, called Will Scarlet, a known thief and traitor, is to hang at sunset on the next market day.' I thank you for the drink and I must be off."

The clerk ambled off. Robin tore down the lying sheet and crumpled it in his fist.

Marketday dawned clear and hot. Nottingham watched, pleased, as the vendors set up. He would have Robin Hood by nightfall, he knew it. Maybe he would simply make it a double hanging.

The streets moved with a thick crowd, for many had come to see the famous outlaw hanged. They bought and sold, ate and drank, until noon. Then they retired to the shade of houses or inns. The frugal had brought their own meals. Others ate at taverns. By midafternoon, the city guard had already arrested half a dozen brawlers. He had ordered the guard to lock all such away until the morrow. He'd fine them then.

An hour before sunset, a bugle sounded from the castle wall. The people lined the road between Nottingham Castle and Gallows Cross, the execution place set up at the crossroads outside of town.

The sun hung low and red when a great many men-at-arms trooped out of the gate, raising a great clatter over the stones. The Sheriff, the dying day painting his shining mail with bloody light, rode out on his white mare. Beside him, the Lady Marion, her face pale as the moon and just as stony, sat her dapple palfrey. He gripped the reins of her horse as firmly as that of his own. He could take no chances that she was in league with the outlaws to rob him of his hanging.

The people craned and stretched, for in the middle of the guard was a cart. Tied to the cart, with a noose already around his neck, rode Will Scarlet wearing only a shirt and a wreath of oak leaves on his head, the mark of a traitor to the crown.

Will looked at the crowd, searching each face. Although some pitied him and some looked at him sorrowfully, he didn't see the faces he sought. His heart sank like a plummet of lead, but he refused to show this.

Instead, he sang. If he was to die this day, he would teach all of Nottingham a new song. They would sing it long after they had forgotten him and it would set the Sheriff's teeth on edge each time he heard it.

Head held high, he sent his voice ringing over the crowd.

"The Sheriff of fair Nottingham  
doth tax his good folk full sore  
But Robin Hood has tweaked his nose  
Fie on Phillip the Fumbler!

He sets the men about the gate.  
He sets them at his door.  
Still he cannot catch the rogue,  
Fie on Phillip the Fumbler!

He spends too much time in the stable there  
Along beside the hostler  
Lucky for him, the mare does not talk  
Fie on Phillip the Fumbler!

He taxes folk upon their bread  
He taxes them their beer

But Robin Hood will steal it back  
Fie on Phillip the Fumbler!"

By the second verse, the more daring rascals were singing along with the chorus. When he finished the first time, he began again. Half the young men, already merry on beer, took it up.

The Sheriff ground his teeth and nodded to one of his men. The sturdy guard jabbed at Will with his pikestaff. Will dodged as well as he could, tied to the cart.

"Silence, prisoner, or you hang without your tongue," the Sheriff said.

Will stayed quiet as they rolled through the great town gate. Evening lay upon the countryside, the first purple shadows carpeting hill and dale. Far away, he saw the dusky line of Sherwood's skirts. He swallowed hard.

The slanting sunlight lay upon field and fallow, turning the crops to beaten gold. It shone red on the houses, setting their windows alight as if on fire. The sound of small birds preparing for the night and sheep bleating as they were driven home filled his heart to bursting.

When a swallow ascended, singing loudly, his eyes blurred and he bowed his head, lest the villagers think him afraid or unmanly for his tears. He tried to whisper a prayer, but all that came was an old ballad of Good King Arthur. God would just have to understand.

But when he looked up again, his aching heart leapt within him for pure joy. Near the edge of the crowd stood Mudge, his broad, homely face as lovely a sight as the fairest spring morning.

Will glanced around quickly and spotted more of his companions from Sherwood. Careful not to linger overlong on any face, he searched the crowd and saw all but one face, the one he longed for most.

As they approached the Gallows Cross, the crowd began to press in on the men-at-arms, shoving and jostling, trying to touch Will. Will stretched as much as the ropes allowed and touched all the hands that reached for his. Suddenly he smiled, for he had seen Robin in the throng.

All would be well now. There remained a line of armed men between the band and him, but Will thought nothing of it. The press grew so thick the cart could not move.

A bugle horn blew bright and clear, unlike the one that had announced the beginning of his death. His heart put back in him by the silvery notes, Will twisted in his bonds and started another chorus of "Fie on Phillip the Fumbler".

"Silence that prisoner!" the Sheriff roared. "Now stand back! What do you mean pushing upon us so? Stand back, I say!"



The men of Sherwood paid no heed but encircled the house-carls. Little John, being larger and more bold than most, managed to push his way between a guard and the cart.

"Stand back!" cried the guard whom Little John had pushed.

"Stand back yourself!" bellowed Little John and clouted the man upside the head, felling him like a pole-axed steer.

A wedge thus made, the band soon encircled the cart and the guards were shuffled well away by willing hands of the villagers, while being pressed so closely they could not raise an arm or weapon.

Little John stepped into the traces where three guards had been drawing the cart. "Shame for you to hang without even a chance to say goodbye, Will. Or maybe we'll both hang for this. I couldn't do it in better company." He cut the bindings that held Will's hands to the cart, then picked up the shafts and pulled it through the crowd at a much faster pace than the guards.

"Four score golden marks to the man who brings me the head of that sturdy traitor!" cried the Sheriff, spurring his horse forward and striking at Little John with his sword.

Little John ducked under the horse's belly and the blow landed on the cart, shattering one side. Will sprang well back from the flashing steel and shattering wood. "No, my friend," Little John said, seizing the Sheriff's sword and wresting it from his fingers. "Let me borrow this." He tossed it to Will Scarlet, adding, "Here, Will, the Sheriff just lent you his sword."

Will, quick enough to pluck the sword from the air, leapt from the cart and stood back to back with Little John as the Sheriff tried to ride them down in a rage, forgetting Will held his sword.

"Ware arrows, my lord," cried a guard, even as a clothyard shaft whistled near the Sheriff's head. The bugle horn rang true again and Robin's laugh filled the thickening dusk.

The men-at-arms were far enough from the cart that there was no need for a battle. The men of Sherwood drew closer and the Sheriff reined his horse and looked about, only to find himself alone and outnumbered.

He edged it to a part where the crowd contained no Lincoln green and backed his horse in among the townsfolk.

"Oh stay!" shouted Will Scarlet after the Sheriff. "You'll never catch bold Robin Hood if you do not stand and meet him face-to-face." He laughed and embraced Little John as the Sheriff made his escape, getting clear of the people and riding back to the castle, Marion forgotten.

Will saw Robin Hood looked up from where he held the reins of Marion's horse and passed soft words with his beloved. He looked around and Will knew he saw only his own men and a few villagers.

"It grows dark, my love. Return safely home. Know I will come for you." Robin kissed her hand.

He gathered his men in close rank, with Will in their center still bearing the Sheriff's sword, and they melted back into the night of Sherwood as mists melt in the morning light.

## Chapter Six

### *The Golden Arrow*

The Sheriff, realizing how easily he might have been killed, retreated indoors for a long time. He saw no one, nor was he seen except by the servants who brought him food and wine.

He knew they whispered of his temper, of his fury when all was not to his satisfaction and sometimes when it was. Old Joseph, his body servant, nursed a cut scalp where he had thrown a heavy goblet at him. In truth, he did feel badly about that immediately. He suspected that Bess relayed all this up to Marion in her tower.

The tax men still went forth to collect the doubled duty. They always returned with it and tales of the prosperous villagers spread among them. This drove Phillip's rages to even louder cursing, which he hoped carried as far as Marion's tower.

It was late July, nearly Lammas tide, when Marion sat in her chambers, brushing out her hair before bed. In the absence of the master of the castle, she had resumed freedom of the castle and of her own rooms and balcony.

The soft whistle of a robin redbreast sounded from her balcony. It was nearly dark, far too late for such a bird. She hurried out to the railing.

"Robin," she gasped, kissing him before he was over the rail.

"Yes, me, my lady. I had to see you." He gave her a saucy smile and climbed onto the balcony.

"This is not safe, not at all. Too, this is a lady's chamber and it is well after vespers," Bess fumed from the window.

"Hush, Bess." Marion kissed Robin, clinging round his neck.

"Phillip plots your death and you dance into his very clutches," Bess said, scowling at Robin.

"Bess, go to bed," Marion ordered. Bess obeyed with a small curtsy and no more argument.

"I'll be quiet. We won't be caught as Will was. Tell me the news." Robin stroked her face and Marion trembled under his touch. She had missed it in the weeks she had been within the castle.

"Phillip plots. He hasn't emerged from his rooms for a week. Be wary of anything." She sighed, wishing she had more news than that. He had taken such a chance and she could tell him nothing.

Robin kissed her one more time. "Then like a bird on your rail, I must fly."

She looked at him, long and loving. "Fly away, my sweet Robin. For you are no nightbird. And the snares may even yet draw around you."

"I know." Robin looked down and swung over the rail. His face grew pained at having to leave. "Come with me?" He reached up and clasped her round the waist.

"I cannot. Not for my safety and Bess' very life." Marion slipped out of his hold. "Go, love," she said and bent over to kiss him again and speed him on his way.

Robin slipped away from the castle and out of the town, dressed as a peasant, and found Will Scarlet awaiting him under the eaves of Sherwood.

"If you will not exercise some small prudence in the matter of keeping your skin whole for your lady, I will appoint Little John to do so, if he must sit on your scoundrel head to manage it."

"I can't live like this, Will, stealing small moments when I crave her all the time. I only kissed her ere I flew." He looked back at where the towers rose over the tops of the trees. A light still burned in the north tower and he imagined Marion brushing out her long brown hair.

"Oh you mad man. Then be careful, for her sake and the sake of more kisses, if you will not for the sake of your men and the poor who need you."

Robin sighed and nodded, turning his face to the forest and home. "I will. Oh Will." He wrapped his young friend in a tight embrace.

"Come, good master. I'll sing you to sleep and you may dream of your lady and the day when you are again together."

On the last Sunday of July, well before Mass, Phillip burst from his rooms clad in his best hose and gown, the ones he wore for state occasions and visits from King John. He raced up the stairs to Marion's tower.

"My lady, you have half an hour to attire yourself properly! We ride out to Mass today."

Bess and Marion stared at him as if he'd quite taken leave of his wits. He hurried off, scarcely noticing. En route to the stable, he snagged a bun from a scullion to serve as breakfast. He grabbed four messengers from the guardroom and sent one in each direction with a notice.

Marion was ready in the hall at the appointed time and rode beside him to Mass. At the end, the priest read forth new decrees and notices, since most of the people could not.

"In celebration of Lammastide this year, our gracious Sheriff has decreed an archery tournament. To the winner goes an arrow of pure beaten gold, two oxen and a butt of good brown October ale."

Marion looked at him, her eyes narrow. "Very clever, my lord."

"Yes, isn't it?" He smiled at her. "I expect the outlaws will like nothing better than to beat me at the games I decree. But we shall see who wins."

Marion gave him a slight bow of her head.

"I had hoped, my lady, you would be willing to present the prize. It would silence many wagging tongues that say you are disaffected with me."

"Of course, my lord," she whispered.

"A wise woman you are growing to be. Your uncle, the king, still desires us to wed. A wife would be a great asset to me."

Marion again gave him the noncommittal little incline and said nothing.

He gripped her arm and pulled her close, hissing, "What John says is law. You will marry me and you will tender me all the duties of a wife, my lovely traitress."

Marion said nothing, nor did she struggle in his grasp. Her eyes were cold as she stared into his. She had spirit, too much for any one woman, and he looked forward to curbing it, as he would look forward to breaking a horse.

He shifted his grip to a more formal one and led her out of the church. On the steps, he paused a moment, taking in the summer day.

When Marion looked up to ask if they would be going, he kissed her, laying claim to her soft lips. The sweetness of her mouth inspired him to linger until a cleared throat from behind him made him jump.

"If you wish to kiss at the church door, perhaps I should cry the banns for you," the abbot said, his tone light and teasing. "I was closing and about to sweep the steps."

"Soon, Abbot, soon," the Sheriff smiled and led Marion down to the horses. "I have a great many things to do, my lady, in preparation for this tournament. So I bid you farewell until such time as you take your place in the stands beside me." He kissed her hand and unable to resist, stole another of her lips. "My man, Gil, will see you home."

As he rode away, he did not see Marion spitting to clear her mouth of his touch.

A week later saw the celebrations of Lammastide. The wheat harvest was gathered in and every woman, great and small, made a loaf of bread to be blessed at Mass.

Marion baked hers in the shape of an arrow. She'd tried to sculpt it into a robin, but failed. Each attempt had been worse than the last, so she settled on an arrow.

Let Nottingham take it for pleasure in his false tournament. She meant it to honor her lover. She gilded it with egg yolks, turning the bread golden at the last of the baking. She had no doubts Robin would come and win the arrow and take her back to Sherwood as well. She shook her head to clear it of that idea. As much as she lived on that dream, she knew she could not go, not until something changed in the politics of the realm.

On the day of the tournament, she stood outside and watched the archery field prepared before attiring herself for the festivities. Butts were set up for the archers to shoot at. Great casks of ale were lined up and mugs with them, free to be broached by any of the archers who might wish to refresh themselves. A box for the Sheriff and benches for people of quality were raised and the whole field was a-flutter with colorful pennants.

Even knowing it was a snare for her beloved, Marion found herself gladdened by the sight of the field in its gay adornment. The trap was so transparent that surely Robin would walk in, have a marvelous time and make free with the ale, then steal the prize from under Nottingham's nose before he knew what had happened.

Whistling Will Scarlet's song, she dressed herself in a silken golden kirtle and gown of deepest Lincoln green. Her golden shoes she wore and also a golden girdle and mantle. Bess braided her hair, saying nothing of her choices, and she covered it with a veil of green silk, on which she had embroidered golden wheat-sheaves.

The sun was high and the field was full when she rode out by the Sheriff's side. Burghers and knights and their ladies seated on the benches, the common folk pressed along the makeshift railing that kept them from the shooting range. All made way for the Lady Marion and did her proper honor as one of her guards led her and Bess to the box.

She took her place beside the Sheriff, who wore his finery of brown silk and velvet. A little brown cap with a gold feather sat on his head, looking very silly, and Marion stifled a smile. He scowled when he saw her choice, but the wheat and gold redeemed it. She knew she looked like a harvest queen and ascended the stairs like one. He bowed over her hand.

"You are lovely today, my dear," he said, handing her into her seat. The arrow of beaten gold sat on a cloth-of-gold pillow beside her chair.

A flourish of burnished trumpets marked the arrival of the archers. One by one they emerged from the great tent at the end of the field where they had enrolled themselves with the herald.

As they came onto the field, the people called out for their favorites, shouting for some with a great voice like the rushing sea and others meriting only a few throats in

support. "Red cap!" called one. "Hey for William O'Leslie," shouted others. "Adam of the Dell! Cruikshank! Clym for the Clough!"

Marion watched men who had shot legendary tournaments, including Adam of the Dell, whom her mother's father had made arrows for, as they came to the box and presented themselves, their clothing colorful and their bows strung taut. But she did not see Robin Hood among them. Several of the archers had yellow beards like his, but none stood so tall.

Each took his place on the line and saw to his arrows that they would fly straight and true and to his bowstring that it might not fail him. Anxious, Marion looked over the men again, but no more archers emerged. The herald stepped out and announced the rules, but she wasn't listening.

Robin hadn't come. She couldn't decide whether to be pleased that he had not walked into a trap or disappointed that he had not come for her. She settled back into her seat to watch a tournament she was no longer interested in. The man she presented the arrow to would not be her true love at all.

"Either your wolfshead hides well, my lady, or he is not as enamored of you as you believed. Perhaps he is even now roistering with some tavern maid and laughing at you for thinking he'd come."

"Then he laughs at you too, my lord," Marion returned, "for laying a trap so transparent a blind beggar could spot it."

Nottingham said no more, but fumed. Marion watched the first flight of arrows. The finest archers had gathered and most arrows fell within the black, many within the clout itself. The archers retired to drink and rest themselves until the ten who shot fairest should be announced.

Bess poured her a glass of wine, for it was warm weather. Marion sat quietly, a new plan forming. If Robin would not come for sport, perhaps he would come for a rescue. She kept her eyes down and thought, trying to find a way that would let them be together and free of Phillip for good. It came to her like a vision of the Virgin in one of Bess' stories. Peasants were always seeing the Virgin in those tales and She always spoke sense instead of cloudy prophecy.

"It was fine shooting, my lady. The next should be even better."

"Yes, my lord." Marion kept her voice soft. She had a lot to do to carry out her plan. The Sheriff looked at her, concern on his face.

"You're quiet, my lady. Does the heat affect you?"

"A bit, my lord. I am not feeling quite well." She looked up at him and smiled. "And so, I must apologize for my sharpness earlier. I plead your understanding that the heat and the crowd have me out of my usual humor and in turmoil, so that I spoke harshly."

Her smile seemed to dazzle him. "It was nothing. More wine, my lady?"

"If you please." She let him refill her goblet, still smiling.

The herald announced the ten archers who would shoot the next round. Six were well-known archers of the region, two more were stout yeoman from Lincolnshire. One in blue said he came from London town and the last was a one-eyed beggar in tattered scarlet.

The Sheriff beckoned his captain of the guards to him. "Do you see Robin Hood among these men?"

The captain shook his head. "Nay, my lord. Gil Redcap is your own man and Adam of the Dell I know full well. Dickon Criukshank, William of Leslie and I have shot and drunk together many nights. Swithen of Hertferd got a lucky shot today. The Lincoln men are both too short and the one in blue is too thin. The one-eyed man, he could not be. He is too short and his beard is brown."

The Sheriff smiled. "Not only a thief but a coward who dares not show his face among honest men."

Marion ground her teeth, furrowed her brow and made her eyes flash hot anger. "A caitiff rogue to turn a maid's head so. For all his flash and dash, he has not any bravery."

The Sheriff laughed and patted her hand like a child. Marion did not withdraw from his touch as she usually did. He smiled at her and laid his hand atop hers for the next flight.

Each archer shot two arrows. Never was there such shooting for not an arrow missed the butts. Indeed, few fell more than a hand-span from the mark. When it was done, many of the good folk threw their caps in the air and cheered to have seen such sport.

The archers again retired to rest before the final flight. The Sheriff offered Marion a bit of sweet cake and more wine. She took them from him with gracious thanks, her feigned anger at Robin seeming to make her more pliable toward Phillip than usual. He held her hand through the final round, his hand dry and cool where it lay atop hers protectively. Marion tried not to think that it was him she needed more protection from than any other man.

Gil o' the Red Cap, Adam o' the Dell from Tamsworth Town and the one-eyed stranger stepped to the line. The crowd cheered, some for Gil and some for Adam, but none for the stranger.

"Shoot well, Gil, and I'll pay you five score broad silver pennies as well as the prize," the Sheriff called. Marion knew he was very proud of his chief archer to offer so much.

"I'll do my best, which is all any man can do," Gil said. He sent a single shaft straight and true to lodge a bare finger's width away from the center of the clout.



The tattered stranger shot, to the sound of much merriment as he raised his arm and showed a yellow patch beneath his scarlet sleeve. But he shot between the drawing and releasing of a breath and his arrow lodged closer to the center by half than did the Redcap's arrow.

Adam of the Dell, a wizened old man who looked scarcely strong enough to pull the great yew bow he carried, stepped up and placed an arrow within a hairs-breadth of the stranger's.

After a few moments, they shot again, all arrows within the clout, but this time, Adam's lodged the farthest. They refreshed themselves with good ale and checked their bows and last shafts very carefully.

The Sheriff leaned forward, eager enough for this last round that he drew Marion with him. She had given up all hope of Robin, but resigned herself to some ragged stranger taking the arrow from her hand. Her important target was Nottingham now. And with her own well-chosen smiles and words, she would send arrows of Cupid's cut flying straight into his heart, softening him toward her.

Gil shot first. He saw to his aim very carefully and the shaft lodged hard by the spot that marked the center.

"Well shot, Gilbert!" cried the Sheriff. "I would believe the prize is yours already." He looked at the stranger. "Come. Shoot a fairer shaft than that if you can, you ragged knave."

The stranger said nothing but drew his bow. He held for a long breath and sent the arrow down the course. It came so near Gil's arrow, it knocked one of the feathers off, sending it fluttering to the ground. A great cheer arose until the rooks and daws that circled the castle towers rose in clouds.

For the stranger had hit the very center of the target.

Adam of the dell unstrung his bow. "I shoot no more today. Three score years have I borne the bow, but never have I seen such shooting and no man breathing could match that shot."

The herald announced the winner. "Jock of Teviotdale has won the Tournament of the Golden Arrow." All the people cheered, not even sore at heart that their favorites had lost, for it had been fine shooting.

Jock approached the box, using his great oaken bow as a crutch. Marion could see he limped with one foot turned inward.

The Sheriff smiled down on the man. "Jock of Teviotdale, you are the fairest archer that I ever saw. Take service with my house and I will clothe you well. You shall eat of the best and every Christmastide four score marks will be your wage. You draw a better bow than that coward knave Robin Hood, who dared not show his face here this day. So, tell me, will you take service?"

"Nay," came the rough answer, the stranger's voice being like the sound of grinding millstones. "I am my own man and serve no master ever. Especially not one the townspeople sing about every night since I've been here." He whistled the refrain of "Fie on Phillip the Fumbler". Marion fought not to smile.

"Then take the reward and get you gone," snapped the Sheriff, needled at the reminder of Gamwell's rude song. "Only your fortune and the grace of Our Lady saves you from a beating for your insolence." He clutched Marion's hand and she gave a gasp of pain. He let go as abruptly, distress on his face. She touched his hand lightly and then returned her attention to the archer.

Jock stepped to face Marion. She looked down at the graying hair and brown beard then offered the golden arrow without a word. For a bare instant, she looked into the stranger's remaining eye, the same changeable green and gray and brown of her own Robin. He smiled at her and she knew him but said no word.

"Take this, good Jock, in honor of your skill and as a keepsake from the hand of Lady Marion FitzRoy. May it bring joy to your house."

"Aye, my lady, and my thanks." Jock kissed her hands and tucked the arrow into his shirt with a grin. He walked away.

Marion did not watch him. To do so would give him away. Instead she rubbed at her hands where he had kissed them, as if in distaste.

"I think you like that fellow as well as I, which is to say not at all, my dear." The Sheriff stilled her rubbing and led her back to the castle. There would be riotous celebrating this evening, when the ordinary folks helped themselves to the archers' beer.

As they passed through the castle gates, Marion heard a chorus of boys strike up "Fie on Phillip the Fumbler". She did not smile when Nottingham's fist clenched beneath her hand. Nor did she flinch when he called the guards to beat the boys away. The song was forbidden in the town.

"If my lord will excuse me, it has been a very exciting day and I need a rest before dinner." She tried to make the statement more of a request. She knew he liked it when she asked for simple things like that.

"Of course, my dear." He kissed her hand in a different place than the stranger had. She smiled. "I'll be down to dine with you, if it pleases you."

"It would please me very much."

She smiled and made a little curtsy, not mocking as usual, nor as rude, but a real one. She hurried up to her rooms, with Bess trailing in her wake.

A motley crew of beggars, tinkers, barefoot friars and other such gathered around the Great Oak deep in the heart of Sherwood Forest. On the mossy seat at its roots sat a

brown-bearded one-eyed man in tattered and patched scarlet, holding the Golden Arrow.

He threw aside the battered hat and gray wool from his hair, stripped away the eye-patch and shook off the rags to stand before them clad in fair Lincoln green. He held aloft the arrow to great cheers from the band.

"The clothes come off easily enough. But walnut juice in my fair beard will take more work." The men laughed at how he'd fooled the Sheriff and stolen the prize away. "But we shall hang this trophy in this tree for the joy of all our men."

As the others feasted, Robin drew Will Scarlet apart to aid him in restoring his beard to its normal shade. "I need your brains, good Will, for I am vexed. The Sheriff said I shot better than Robin Hood, who was such a coward he would not show his face. I want to let him know who took the Arrow from my gracious lady's hand and that I am no coward."

Will mixed oil and ashes, for that was the only way to take off walnut juice. He thought as he worked, then rubbed the mixture into Robin's beard. "Do not risk yourself, my master, for simple sport and pride."

"Nay, 'tis no pride," said Robin and dunked his chin in the river to rinse the mess out of it. "'Tis my very honor at stake."

"Let Will Stutely or me send him the message." Will made a second application of the cleanser for the first had merely lightened Robin's beard.

"It is my own message and I will send it myself." Robin dunked his whole head and came up puffing and blowing. He waited until the water had stilled in a pool and looked at his reflection. "I am myself again. Write me the message, Will, for I have no letters and you scribe like a parson."

"Aye, Robin." Will resigned himself to the task.

Together they went to find some ink.

## Chapter Seven

### *A Robin Caged and Freed*

Marion dressed in brown and rust for dinner, a compliment to Nottingham, knowing that the Sheriff was already puzzled by her performance earlier. If she played her part correctly, he'd be believing she had experienced a complete change of heart.

She joined him at the high table, letting him seat her beside him and sharing his trencher without complaint. She ate delicately, her manners impeccable. She caught him looking at her, clearly wanting her. His eyes strayed between her face and hands and figure.

She smiled at him. "My lord Nottingham, is there something amiss?" She checked her gown for stains.

"No, no. Nothing at all. I'm just admiring your great beauty." He caught her hand as she reached for a bit of bread, holding it gently as he had at the tournament. She was not surprised when he kissed it, lingering as he tasted her fingertips.

Marion gave him a small nod. "The Sheriff is over-gracious in his compliments." She stroked his lip with one of the fingers he was still kissing. He shuddered under it.

"I'm not really. I'm just very honest. And you are very lovely."

Marion gave him a bold look, her smile wide. "It was fine sport this afternoon at the shooting. Thank you for such a lovely holiday."

He returned her smile, seeming gratified by her warming to him. "Oh yes. The finest archers I've ever seen."

"Such a pity your Gilbert did not win. He always shoots so well. And a greater pity your trap failed to snare its game." Marion twisted her face in anger at Robin.

"Yes. I thought sure his great pride would win out." He scowled at her a moment. "I see the gossip is increasing in the castle."

"My lord, your intention was transparent from the start. You know full well how Bess' tongue wags. I would have had to be blinder than one-eyed Jock who won not to know."

"And here it was all in the clever disguise of entertaining you in grand style." He laid a hand over hers. Marion did her best not to flinch or remember how he had squeezed her hard enough to hurt that afternoon. "Your attitude is greatly changed toward the outlaw."

"He was civil enough, what little I saw of him, while I was his prisoner. But the battle at the execution and his cowardice in this matter have shown me the true nature of the rogue he is." She stabbed at a bit of beef on the trencher.

"So you're not only beautiful but clever and wise as well." He poured her more wine from the ewer and offered another slice of meat.

She was taking a drink of wine when an arrow sailed in from the high window of the hall and buried itself in the joint. The Sheriff sprang to his feet and all around the hall guardsmen drew their swords.

The Sheriff grabbed the arrow and wrested it from the meat. Around it was a bit of parchment tied with a scrap of Lincoln green. He unfurled the parchment and read it.

"Now Heaven bless Thy Grace this day  
Say all in sweet Sherwood  
For thou didst give the prize away  
To merry Robin Hood."

He crumpled it in his fist and his face turned purple. "Find that one-eyed man!" he roared. "And that red-clad popinjay who makes such rude rhymes!"

Marion had a discreet coughing fit. The Sheriff looked concerned as Bess thumped her on the back.

"There, lamb, did something go down wrong?" Marion nodded at Bess' question, her face red. She coughed some more.

Phillip's eyes narrowed. Marion decided not to force another cough. She couldn't afford his suspicion that she might have been laughing at him. She sipped some wine and that time it did go down wrong. Marion was still sputtering when a bound man in a brown cloak was dragged into the hall, struggling between two guards.

"We caught this miscreant firing on the castle," said one.

"Let's have a look," the Sheriff ordered. When the guard pulled the hood off, the entire hall gasped. Fair-haired, yellow-bearded and merry of eye, Robin Hood stood there. Marion felt her heart plummet to the very floor and shatter on the hard flagstones beneath the rushes. Robin would not rescue her now. It appeared she would have to arrange a rescue for him.

The Sheriff laughed cruelly. "There you are. Your braggart tongue has wagged long enough. Now 'tis fitting that it will be the end of you."

Marion sneered down from the high table and turned her face to look at Nottingham rather than Robin. She had to make sure she didn't end up in the dungeon as well, if she was to effect this rescue. If Robin thought himself spurned, she would make amends when they were both out of the castle. He wasn't looking too long at her either, she noticed.

"My lord, is it safe to have such a wild outlaw here in your very hall?" she entreated the Sheriff, her eyes wide with fear she did not feel.

"He won't be here long," Nottingham reassured her, patting her hand. He looked down at the prisoner. "You're under arrest, outlaw. Take him away."

More roughly than necessary, the guards shoved from the hall, beating him as they went. He made no cry. Marion swallowed her fear for her lover.

"My lord, what will you do with him?" she asked, looking more curious than worried. She moved closer to Nottingham, nearly hanging on his arm.

Nottingham sat down and smiled at her. "Oh he'll stand trial in a day or so. Perhaps next week we can celebrate his hanging." By the end of the plan, Nottingham positively beamed.

Marion caught the mood from him and clutched his arm. "A hanging? How exciting!" She made her eyes sparkle with anticipation as the plan for rescuing Robin sprang to her mind full blown.

"Oh yes. We'll have the finest seats for it too." Nottingham patted her hand. "Perhaps that will impress you even more?"

Marion smiled, a naughty twinkle in her eye. She leaned close and whispered, "Save me the one right by you." She kissed the Sheriff's ear and excused herself hastily, blushing demurely.

"Right at my side, my lady." Nottingham stood as she departed and bowed to her.

Bess lingered a moment, seeing her charge's plot. She gave the Sheriff a small curtsy. "If you will take my word, your lordship, she is infatuated. Strike while the iron is hot and you may yet align with the royal house." She hurried after Marion, knowing Nottingham would be planning his engagement celebration for the evening of the hanging.

Once out of sight, Marion fled up the stairs, able to keep her composure no longer. She collapsed on her bed, sick at heart, her fear for her lover choking all her plans. Bess shut the door and came to sit beside her.

"There, there, duck. Your love won't hang. I'll see to it."

Marion clutched her, clinging round her neck. "Bess, dear faithful Bess, I've no right to ask you to risk yourself a second time."

Bess smiled. "If I risk for the man, should I not dare it for the master? You love him, that is reason enough." She kissed Marion's cheeks. "Unlace your gown and let me brush your hair, child. You'll feel better."

"You know I don't want Nottingham?" Marion turned her large green eyes on her maid.

"Marion, my own heart, I know your thoughts before you think them. I placed a bug of my own in our Sheriff's ear, to buzz and distract him from all thoughts." She whispered, "For he must not see us contriving to put an end to his desires."

"I love you so." Marion embraced her guardian. "Thank you."

"My duty to your father and to your own sweet self, lamb."

Marion talked in low, urgent words as Bess undid her court clothing. She laid out the plan and how the Merry Men should come. Bess corrected her on certain tactics and Marion bowed to her superior knowledge of battles. After Marion was down to her shift, Bess brushed Marion's hair until she fell asleep. Accustomed to the treatment since childhood, Marion slept quickly but Robin being struck by the guards haunted her dreams.

Late in the night, Bess hurried to the Blue Boar, not bothering to become David for this trip. Little John had dozed off at the doorpost, watching the road from Nottingham. Even in sleep, a frown furrowed his brow and turned his laughing mouth downward.

"Little John," Bess called softly. When he stirred and saw her, she flung herself on him. "Oh Johnny."

"Bess!" He hugged her tight and kissed her hard. As much as Bess wanted to lose herself in that kiss, her mission occupied most of her mind. "What are you doing out here alone? Where's David?"

She ignored the question. "It goes from bad to worse, my love. Robin is taken and the Sheriff plans to hang him. He sent a boastful note over the wall and the guard seized him for firing on the castle"

"I knew it! He and Will cooked up that fool plan. Too many brains are worse than none at all. Come, Bess, let's tell this to Will and the Friar and they'll help us plan what to do."

"My lady has a plan and merry Robin may yet escape to laugh again." She tucked her hand into John's arm and they headed into the forest together.

After she had related the details to Will and the Friar, Little John walked her back to the main road. They paused a moment before leaving the safety of the deep woods.

"You'll help us map out the places we can hide things?" Little John asked.

"Aye. I'll come to the Blue Boar the night after the trial. We can pray he is found innocent, but I know Phillip too well to hope. Phillip will see to it that the jury will find him guilty and sentence him to hang. I'll have the map for you then, of storage and hiding and ways into the castle. I must away." She took a quick kiss.

Little John pulled her back for a longer one, silencing her protests with a grin. "Might be the last."

Bess laughed. "Never. We'll steal a night soon, as easy as cutting the purse of a fat abbot."

"Until then, have another for all that luck you'll be needing." He kissed her again and she pressed close against his large body. She did miss their time together in the greenwood.

"Ah Johnny, you make an old woman happy. Now we save your master." She hurried back to the castle.

Little John watched her go, missing her already, and walked back to where Will and the Friar still argued.

"If we take a hundred men we can get him out," Will said, tracing a line on the map through the main courtyard of the castle.

"If we have a hundred, the Sheriff will have three," Tuck corrected, tapping the towers.

"I can take three at a time. Can you?" Little John offered.

Will stroked the neck of the lute slung across his back. "I can deafen fifty at a time."

Little John laughed and even Tuck smiled in spite of himself.

"We'll be ready. We can get him," Will said, his face grim as Little John had ever seen it.

"We have to. Or all is lost." Tuck got up. "Morning is wiser than evening."

"Bold Robin..." Little John buried his great shaggy head in his huge hands. His beloved Robin lay in Nottingham's dungeon, doubtless already in pain, despite the fact he was not yet convicted and handed over for torture.

Will laid a comforting hand on his shoulder. "John. It's not your fault. No one stops our mad master when he has a notion. You couldn't have saved him. If you'd tried, you'd both be taken, with no one to lead the rescue."

"True enough. I'd rather be on this side of the gallows."

"No one is going to swing." Will glowered, a look Little John had never seen. He seemed to be taking Robin's whole capture as a personal insult.

"No." Little John heard the same resolve in his voice as in Will's.

Will clapped him on the back. "Trust your ladylove and all will be well. Lady Marion is clever when it suits her. Your Bess always has three plots a-boiling and a fourth stirring."

The trial took several days. The procedures were all new, outlined in the damnable Charter John had been forced to sign. Phillip wanted it said about that he had done everything legally and correctly.



Of course the selected jury found Robert Huntingdon, former earl of Locksley, called Robin Hood, guilty. There had never been a doubt on that score. In accordance with the law, the men sentenced him to death and the judge set the execution for September first.

Phillip considered waiting until John was there to witness the execution. But he decided that having the quarters of the outlaw hanging in cages outside the city gate would make a more impressive welcome.

He smiled as he walked down the stone steps to the dungeon. The sound of leather on skin reached him. Robin hung in irons, no cell for him, on display in the center. Phillip was gratified to see his orders to beat the man daily had been observed and indeed were being carried out at this very moment.

Robin wore only his braes. Red welts, some bleeding, others scabbed over, marked his back and thighs. The guard slapped the whip across him again. Robin closed his eyes and bit down hard, clearly in pain. Phillip watched, gloating.

The guard finished his work and looked to Phillip. "Anything more, my lord?"

Phillip smiled to see Robin open his eyes and then shut them again. "No, nothing. I can handle it from here."

The guard left and Phillip circled the hanging man. "What? No laughter? No saucy words or mocking rhyme?" He ran his hands heavily over the cruelest of the welts. "Were we not executing you, I'd have the gaoler rub salt all over your back to help heal these. It's too valuable to pour on a dead man."

Robin said nothing, only glared.

"I see you still count on a rescue. It won't come. If I could, I'd kill you here in the dark and display your parts for the public. But no, executions must be done in view of all, that they may learn." Phillip ran his bloody hand over Robin's strong, sweaty chest, leaving faint streaks.

"But nothing says I may not have some small revenge."

He drew the dagger from his belt and ran its sharp edge along the side of Robin's face, nicking away a lock of hair. "I'll just present that to your lady love as a keepsake." He trailed the dagger down Robin's throat, feeling himself growing hard. "On our wedding night."

Robin scowled at that and Phillip laughed. "She loathes you now. I don't know what you two had planned for the Tourney, but you let her down. Fickle child, she's turned on you." He pushed very close and whispered, "It's me she kisses now."

"I'll have everything you never took from her, outlaw. I'll have the kisses she used to give you, as well as the ones she never did. I'll press her delicate breasts and plunge into the sweet lock she carries between her thighs. And all you will have is that knowledge to accompany you to the gallows." Phillip realized he was grinding against the prisoner and pulled away.

"Filth. Sodomites and witches all of you forest folk, ensnaring honest Christians. I peril my soul simply being in your presence. But," he moved close again, breathing in Robin's very breath, "I must have one taste."

He stepped back and shifted his hold on the dagger. He savored the brief instant when fear flickered over Robin's handsome face. He made the first two cuts. Shallow, but well past the skin, and a little longer than the length of his fingers, he cut the letter T into Robin's right breast.

Robin hissed in pain. Phillip smiled.

"I'm going to cut your sentence into your very flesh, traitor. Your last days will be filled with the pain of this reminder." Phillip carved the R and the A.

Robin turned his face to his arm and muffled the sound of his pain. Phillip carved the I, T and O. He hesitated, letting the full bloom of agony be felt.

"Finish it," Robin growled, his teeth clenched against Phillip's handiwork.

Phillip carved the R. He worried the edges of the wound, spreading them to see the flesh beneath the skin. He picked until they were jagged and wide enough to admit his smallest finger. He dug it into the cut, twisting and prodding.

Robin, unable to bear more, screamed at last, a harsh cry of anger and pain, not at all the broken sound Phillip wanted. But no matter. He dug one more time and wiped his hands on Robin's blood-streaked belly.

"I'm going to kill you," Robin said weakly, hanging limp in the chains.

Seeing he was failing to get clean, Phillip switched his attention to Robin's hair. The blood made dark streaks against its blondness.

"No, not this time." Phillip looked over his handiwork. Robin glared back, breathing hard and sweating. "If your lady could see you now." He slapped Robin on each cheek, the way he would correct a child or a woman. Robin set his jaw.

"Two beatings a day," Phillip told the guard as he left. He needed to be alone with his demanding prick.

The folk of Nottingham crowded the castle courtyard until Marion was hard-pressed to stay calm as she walked through them on Phillip's arm. The ordinary people had been searched at the gate and anything that looked like a weapon taken from them. A scaffold, high enough that all the crowd could see, had been erected and a gallows on it. The sight of it made her stomach lurch in fear.

Marion let the Sheriff lead her out to their seats. Vendors hawked pasties and sticky-cakes. A handsome man in the livery of the Sheriff's household poured wine for her. She took it, trying to hide her trembling hands. If Phillip held her hand, as he did so frequently these days, she would have to plead excitement.

Phillip leaned forward, too intent upon vengeance to even notice her presence. Marion gave the liveried servant a small nod and a little hand-sign. He poured wine for the Sheriff, who drank without noticing. Will Stutely, for it was he, refilled the cup again from the special pitcher Will Scarlet had prepared.

Other liveried servants moved through the noble area, making sure the knights and their ladies as well as the rich Bishop of Hereford and the fat burghers of the town were all well served. Marion watched them carefully. Nothing could go wrong. Even the slightest error and they would all stand on the gallows beside Robin.

At noon, the bell of the chapel began to toll. The crowd held their breath and looked to the gaping door of the dungeon.

Five guards led Robin out of the castle. He blinked against the light that Marion knew he had not seen for weeks. The word "traitor" on his chest had scabbed over. His back was a mass of raw meat. One guard tugged him along by a noose already around his throat. Three guards walked on each side to make sure no foolhardy man charged forward to rescue the prisoner.

Behind him came the last guard and the good folk gasped when they saw he wielded a knotted cat. The leather thongs bit into Robin's destroyed back at every other step. He held his tongue but his face had gone gray with pain under the bloody smears.

Marion felt faint at the sight. She wanted to weep or rage or bash Phillip over the head with one of the heavy silver goblets, battering at him until she dashed his brains out. But this was not the time. Haste would not serve any of them, Robin least of all. She took another drink and leaned forward, catching the eye of one of the servants, a slight fellow with a full mouth. She nodded.

"Ah, the sight pleases you." Nottingham held up his goblet and the servant filled it again. "My lady, you are beautiful and wise. I adore you and the sun and moon shall rise and set upon you." Nottingham took her hand. She knew she was shaking. "You're trembling."

"The excitement, my lord. And I confess, blood always makes me feel faint." She gasped as Robin stumbled, going to his knees. The lead guard kept walking, dragging him by the noose.

"I did notice you never enjoyed hunting or hawking, my dear." He stole a kiss. "Endure and it will all be over far too soon." She saw him tense, as if to catch her. Bess too moved closer.

Robin had gained his feet, although the blood flowed down to his heels. He mounted the scaffold steps, head held high, although his fair hair was matted with blood.

The guards threw the rope of the noose over the scaffold. Marion watched as Robin rose to his full height, then onto his toes as the hangman pulled. When his feet left the ground, she fell forward, faking a faint.

That was the signal. She heard Phillip try to catch her, but his wine had been full of lavender and chamomile again, as well as some rare poppy juice. He collapsed beside her, snoring. Bess helped her sit up and she watched the chaos through a gap in the bunting of the box.

The servants had cast aside the livery of the Sheriff and showed themselves clad in fair Lincoln green. Will Stutely seized the Sheriff's new sword, after making sure Marion was well, and vaulted over the rail into the fray.

Knight after lord after burgher went down between the benches, groggy, a testament to Will Scarlet's herb-craft and Little John's work as the wine steward. The guards had been given wine rations as well and were slow to draw their weapons.

The Merry Men charged the scaffold, Little John leading the wedge. The executioner ran, letting Robin drop. He waited on his knees, blinking at his rescuers.

Will Stutely fought at Little John's side, the Sheriff's new sword singing in his hand. Will Scarlet wielded the Sheriff's old sword to devastating effect. Little John picked up Robin, mindful of his wounds, and slung him over one broad shoulder.

Marion watched as they fought their way out of the castle gates. Then she drank the end of the drugged wine and slumped across the Sheriff, giving herself a credible alibi.

Little John never flagged as he strode to the heart of Sherwood Forest. Will Scarlet ran lightly beside him, guiding him to the cave under the waterfall. Tuck waited with all they might need, whether for healing or for Extreme Unction.

Will said a hasty prayer to St. Dunstan that the latter would not be needed. Little John eased their battered leader onto the soft bed of rushes and moss.

Tuck helped Will take away the shredded hose and destroyed braes. Tuck brought a basin of water and wine and Will washed Robin's wounds, keeping his touch as light as he dared.

Robin stirred just enough to open his eyes. "Will," he whispered, his voice thick and raspy.

"Yes, good master? Lie quiet now and I'll have you your old self in no time."

"You and John. Lead the men. Protect Marion. Hold to the way we have lived." The words took a great deal of what Robin had left in him.

Will shushed Robin with a gentle finger across his mouth. "Hush yourself, love. That was just a lark. You'll be good as new soon." He placed a spoon of the poppy juice near Robin's lips. "Drink this. It will help you sleep."

Robin swallowed. "Thirsty."

Little John brought a cup of beer. Will fed about half of it to him with the same spoon. It too would help him sleep. "Take what you can, Robin." He remembered from

his own sojourn with the Sheriff that the condemned man would only be fed enough to keep him alive.

He offered Robin a tiny bite of bread, well soaked in the beer. Robin took it and two more before he dozed. Will nodded in relief.

"He'll live. He's sound asleep now. John, roll him up so I can tend his chest. There's no help for it, he'll have to lie on that filthy word."

Using a salve he had gotten from a local herb-wife, who told him it would heal any wound in a week without a scar, Will tended Robin's front and then his back.

"I'm gonna kill him," Little John growled. His big hands had balled into fists and swung dangerously near Will's head. "Phillip and every one of the guards who did this."

"Hold your peace," Will snapped, distracted by the ticklish business of getting Robin tended. "Let our Robin heal. And then we shall see whether Phillip the Fumbler deserves death or only more humiliation."

Tuck made the Sign of the Cross and Will smiled to see it. He listened with less than half an ear as the priest prayed softly over the three of them. Robin fought for life and he and John fought the same battle for him. Will realized that even Tuck helped in that battle in his own way, as well as handing over supplies when Will called for them.

## Chapter Eight

### *By Order of the King*

The messenger arrived early in the day, footsore and hungry. The king's message was conveyed from his hand to Phillip's without a breach of confidence, but all saw the livery of the king. News passed from lip to ear in the back corridors and the kitchen bustled. The great hall was swept out and fresh rushes laid down. New candles were placed in sconces and on the chapel altar.

Phillip read over the message again. John would be here at sunset, arriving with a small retinue. He saw the preparations being made around him and knew all would be in readiness. He went upstairs to tell Marion personally.

She'd been aloof since the failed execution. He didn't believe her story of being drugged as he'd been, of course. But he had seen to it that word had reached her that Robin Hood was dead of his injuries in Sherwood. The men of the forest came no more to Nottingham town. Not one had been seen for a fortnight.

He pushed open the door of her rooms, startling her as she worked at a tapestry frame. She sat in a patch of sunlight, concentrating on her needle. She did not smile or hum as she worked, but Phillip stared anyway. The sun glinted off her long brown hair, hanging in braids down her back. He seldom saw it and forgot between times how beautiful it was. It would be more beautiful still spread across his pillow. She looked up, her lovely face marred with sadness.

"My lady," he said and made a small bow to her.

She set her tapestry aside and smiled. He could see it was an effort and a poor one. The smile did not reach her eyes. He was tired of her false sweetness, of her forced smiles and touches that required an act of will.

"What news, my lord?" She rose and straightened her gown. Green again. Like her eyes. Like the outlaw. She would never wear green when she was his. That time was nearer than she thought. He stilled his hand, which had—of its own accord—reached for the gown as if to tear it off her body.

"Your uncle will be here at sunset. You will greet him with me. Wear something suitable. Not that." He spat the last words. "In fact, my sweet traitoress, I think all the green you have needs to be given to the poor. It would suit your bandit's memory." He went to the clothing chest and threw it open.

She glanced down, seeming to realize for the first time what she wore. Her dazed apathy told him a great deal. "Yes, of course, my lord. Will blue be suitable?"

He pulled every piece of green he could find out of the chest. The gown she had worn at Lammas, the veil and slippers joined another robe and even a chemise with vines embroidered on it. He gave the heap a kick as he rose.

"His Grace loves blue." He came to her and stroked her face. "It makes your skin so lovely and pale, fragile even." He felt her tense briefly under his touch and then relax into it. That she still feared him excited him. When she tipped her face up for a kiss, he stifled a moan.

He wrapped her in his arms and kissed her more deeply than he had kissed any woman. To his surprise, she clung around his neck, open to the kiss, returning it and letting him take all he wanted from her mouth.

After a moment she pulled away. "My lord. Surely that was not proper for anything but a bedchamber. You must think me a dreadful wanton."

He held her at arm's length and sneered. The wolfshhead had corrupted her more than he'd expected. "No, I think you a whore. No lady kisses so."

Marion's eyes went large and she slapped him.

He laughed. "But you are right. That's quite suitable in the bedchamber." He shoved her toward her own, pushing her off-balance. "And you owe me for hitting me, my lovely traitoress." He caught hold of her braids like the reins of a rebellious mare and pulled her toward the bed. "I'll take payment now. A deposit against our wedding night, so to speak."

"Phillip, please!" Marion cried, her hands entangled in his, trying to ease the pulling on her hair. "Please do not dishonor me so. I will come to you with all willingness when we are wed."

He seemed to not hear her and slung her to the bed, straddling her narrow, flat chest. He liked his women buxom, with large pillowy breasts. He hadn't had a woman in two years. Even the whores in town had quit taking his money. Marion's slender figure would serve.

"That is only a few weeks away, my dear," he snarled. "I do not wish to wait."

"I'll scream the castle down," she warned, pushing at his chest. She could get no leverage to shove him off. She made a grab for his stones, a move he anticipated, and he caught her hand before she reached them and did him injury.

He laughed again and pinned her hand to the bed beside her head. He found his face inches from hers. He kissed her soft lips. When she set them in a hard line against him, with none of her earlier welcoming openness, he bit her lips, careful not to bruise her. It would not do for her to show the marks of his passion when John arrived.

"You'll do no such thing. Nor will you tell your uncle a word of this." He tucked up the skirts of his tunic and opened his hose and braes. "I know your secret, my lady. A few words to your uncle about your treason and harlotry and I could have you swinging before sundown." He shoved his cock at her face. "And no teeth."

She stroked the head hesitantly with her tongue. He moaned softly, delighted at her skill, and shoved entirely into her mouth.

Marion gagged and spat his cock out. He slapped her. The tears on her face made him harder than ever.

"Please, my lord, I beg you, patience." Her pitiful plea moved him only to seize her jaw in one hand.

"I don't feel like it." He shoved back in, thrusting three times into her mouth as she gagged around him. He moaned again and got his hands back in her hair. He felt an odd lurch in her throat as he pulled her down deeper on him.

Marion hammered at his hips with her hands and finally wrenched free of his hold, only to vomit all over the both of them. She looked pale and ill, sweat beading her forehead.

Phillip slapped her, revolted and squelching his own urge to spew. "Disgusting trollop."

"Forgive me, my lord. I did counsel patience," she said miserably, wiping her mouth.

He wiped his cock clean on an unsoiled portion of her gown. "Burn this and all that green. It reeks. You will be presentable when your uncle arrives."

As he stalked out to clean up, he saw Marion tear the gown from her body. The glimpse of pale shoulder under her shift made him ache with unfulfilled lust.

Phillip sat by the window, attired in fresh clothes and clean once more. He listened to the vespers service wafting up from the priory near the castle and watched the road. He wasn't hearing the sacred music, being too lost in his own favorite memory that had become a fantasy. Marion, the teasing strumpet, had left him unsatisfied.

*The small boys always come early for a hanging, especially on a fine May morning.*

*Vendors wheel carts into the gates of Nottingham. Tapsters put on extra ale and a festive feel is in the bright morning air.*

*A pretty lady with red boots and redder hair saunters through the thin crowds. She'll find plenty of custom afterward. Something about a death makes men seek the most primal expression that they still lived.*

*He smiles from his window. Today, at last, is his triumph and he will savor every precious instant of it.*

*For too many years had the outlaw capered and gibed, taking and giving back in grand style, all the while plotting insurrection. Now he has the merry blade and the laughs will come hard from Robin's throat when it wears the hempen collar.*



*Phillip descends the stairs, taking each step with a deliberate slowness. Marion, his lady-wife, awaits him at the foot, arrayed in sky blue, which sets off her green eyes.*

*She takes his arm, her face downcast. He thinks he sees a tear escape. That pleases him. It will make having her after the execution much more delicious.*

*He leads his wife to the box that had been erected next to the execution platform. Marion grips his wrist, looking grim and set. He knows she is trying not to cry.*

*They can see the whole of the high street. He really wants to walk after the condemned, watching as the bold outlaw is dragged through the streets of Nottingham on a hurdle, wearing only a thin shirt and a crown of oak leaves. He wants to wield the cat that will lay open the shirt and skin alike.*

*But such is far beneath his station, so he has let Gil o' the Scar have that pleasure, for Robin had beaten him many times in tournaments and games. He seats himself and watches the procession coming his way*

*Marion catches her breath at the sight of her lover, dusty and bloody and torn. Phillip hears a sob from her and smiles.*

*He watches each step the horses make, the sharp twigs of the woven willow hurdle beneath the outlaw, scratching him more and adding to the blood. The noose around Robin's neck jerks at every step, not yet strangling him, only reminding him it is there.*

*His men untie and drag the tattered Saxon before him. He looks down on his old enemy, gloating. Today is his.*

*He can feel his manhood swell as he pronounces sentence. "Robert Huntingdon, former earl of Locksley, called by all men Robin Hood, you stand convicted of high treason to John of England, King by the Grace of God. Also, you have been found guilty of theft and impiety, of highway robbery, of breaking the King's Peace, of poaching, of usury, chicanery and witchcraft."*

*Robin says nothing, as he said nothing when Phillip carved the word "traitor" into his skin the previous summer. As he said nothing the night before when Phillip slipped to the dungeon, unsatisfied by Marion's body, and slaked himself on the condemned. Now as then, Robin only hangs his head. His yellow hair is matted and blood clots his beard.*

*"The sentence of this noble court is that you be hanged, drawn and quartered and that your quarters be laid in unhallowed ground."*

*Marion sobs even harder at that. He allows himself a small smirk. Not only would he take the bastard's life, he was robbing the thief of an afterlife as well.*

*"This sentence is to be executed immediately." He nods to his executioner.*

*The man seizes the hempen noose around Robin's neck and half-drags him to the gallows. There is no fight left in Robin, for none of his Merry Men can get within a bow's shot of the place, save one. The saucy Will Scarlet stands in poor disguise among the crowd. There has to be one to witness, one to carry the tale back, and who better than this fish that had slipped his net before with a mocking tune upon his lips?*

*Robin stumbles on his way up to the platform. Someone from the crowd throws a sharp rock and it gashes his face.*

*He does not say a word.*

*The executioner throws the rope over the cross-tree of the gallows and pulls down with his great bull-like arms, dragging Robin's bare feet off the ground*

*He steps on the rope and takes a higher grip and pulls again, until the tall frame of the bandit is a full cubit from the platform.*

*Robin coughs. He struggles in the noose, fighting to draw breath and live.*

*The Sheriff feels his prick stand upright as it never has, begging for a touch, a kiss, the warm softness of his wife to quench its fire, dreaming of the tight heat of the outlaw. He denies it the relief, reveling in the exquisite torment of arousal and the exquisite pleasure of seeing his enemy dying.*

*The moment Robin stops kicking, he motions the hangman to cut him down.*

*The executioner binds the outlaw to the block, face up, and slits away his shirt. He gives Robin but a moment to recover as he thrusts a torch into the oil-soaked wood of a nearby brazier, making it flare. He picks up a knife and looks to the Sheriff.*

*"Be sure he sees everything," he commands and the executioner slaps Robin awake.*

*From the box, he too can see everything. Robin lies splayed on the block, his face flushed and the rope burns on his neck bleeding. The bandit coughs now and then, which makes his very stiff prick bob. The Sheriff gestures. "You see that, my dear? All men come awake when hanged."*

*Marion gives him a look chillier than ice in the moat at midwinter and says nothing.*

*He spares another look for the soon-to-be severed organ. The executioner sharpens his knife even more on a grindstone. The cock is long and thick, utterly magnificent. For a moment, Phillip is jealous. He smiles at Marion again. "No wonder you loved him."*

*Marion turns her face away and he jerks it back.*

*"Willful, insolent harlot," he snarls. "You will watch, my dear, and you will see every detail of your lover's death. Then I will have you all afternoon long." He pulls her close and kisses her, grinding against her so she can feel his own hard prick, less impressive than the bull-pizzle on the block, but all she will ever have after this. "And if you please me well, I will not cast you down from the tower like Jezebel to join your lover in unhallowed ground."*

*The executioner, finally satisfied with his blade, makes one strong hacking chop. Robin screams, the first sound he's made.*

*Several women in the crowd faint.*

*Phillip sees Will Scarlet cover his face in horror.*

*Marion sobs and twists out of his grip to bury her face in Bess' bosom. Phillip grits his teeth in annoyance. He'll have the old woman burned as soon as he can.*

*The executioner seizes the severed parts and yanks Robin's head up to show them to him. He holds them before the man's bloody face and then tosses them into the brazier.*

*Phillip exceeds himself, relaxing back into his seat with a sigh of release.*

*The disemboweling fills the square with the stench of burning shit and he presses a perfumed cloth to his nose.*

*The sword comes down, taking Robin's head with it. The executioner's assistant, a brawny youth of about twenty, seizes it, puts it on a silver platter and delivers it to the box as the executioner hacks the body into four pieces.*

*He stares down at his vanquished enemy, pleased with the day's work.*

Phillip came awake from his dreaming to the sound of distant trumpets. He leaned on the windowsill, staring over the harvesting meadows, and caught the first glimpse of King John's retinue. Marion was not yet his and Robin still roamed Sherwood. But he would have them both. He glanced down and found his hose were sticky from his seed, which had spilt during his reverie. He sighed at the need to change a third time.

He felt much better and could endure anything the day brought. Even the imminent arrival of his king. He saw the banners of the royal progress wending toward the city gates and hastened his washing.

He sent a page running for Marion. She came down the stairs in a pale blue gown trimmed with swan's down, looking fragile and elfin. He offered his arm and she took it without looking at him. He felt her tremble at his touch and smiled.

"You look lovely, my dear." He laid his free hand atop hers so she could not withdraw. She trembled again.

"Thank you, my lord." His smile widened at her soft, fearful voice. She sounded as if she wanted to sink into the flagstones and never be lovely again. He'd taught her lovely was dangerous.

"Your uncle will be pleased to see you." Together, they walked out the gate to greet the king.

His Grace did not ride. He was borne in a litter between four horses. Servants walked beside him. He beckoned Nottingham to him. Phillip worried to see how old and sick John looked. His face was gray and drawn. His hands lay on the coverlet like dead things.

"Phillip." His voice barely raised above a whisper.

Nottingham went to his knees on the flags and kissed John's hand. "My King."

"Is this my niece? You're lovely, child."

Marion curtsied and accepted the pat of her head. "My Royal Uncle, welcome to Nottingham."

Phillip clapped and servants came to aid the king. He dismissed Marion back to her rooms until dinner and smiled to see her flinch when he addressed her. After that, it

was a long process but eventually King John was installed in the best bedroom of the castle. Phillip sat at his bedside, trying to tempt him with wine and bread.

His heart ached to see his king so. John was forty-eight, old and tired. Even old King Henry had only seen fifty-six winters. John would be fortunate to see the spring.

"Phillip, there is much to be done. Quickly."

"Rest, my liege. Eat and drink. Restore yourself. You'll grow well and strong here on good milk and clear air. You've exhausted yourself in war. Now take a winter's peace."

"No time. I need an heir. Seventeen children and a French prince trying for my throne and I need an heir." He laughed himself into a coughing fit.

Phillip offered wine and laid a hand on John's shoulder. "Does nothing go right for us, Sire?"

John sipped the wine and a little color returned to his face. "Nothing, dear Nottingham. The French are on our shores even now." He grasped Phillip's arm. "Phillip, you are the last. All the others are arrayed against me. Only you, my dear one. The barons will have Louis on the throne before the end of the year if we do not act."

"What can we do? We don't have the support of anyone anymore. They all rally around an outlaw. Although some say he is dead." He fumed at the thought, blushing to disclose it before his king

"Marion. The princess." John sipped more wine. "They revere the name of my brother, who bankrupted England and left me to pick up the pieces. His son is with France. But we have the daughter." He drained the goblet and Phillip poured him more. "She needs a husband. A loyal man. The barons will rally round her, but her husband will be mine and hold the reins."

"Whom do you suggest?"

John looked at him sharply and Phillip realized his flattery had been taken for slowness. "You."

Phillip bowed a little. "I am honored."

"Do you love the maid?" John asked.

"I am fond of her, yes. Quite fond." Phillip was surprised to find it true. He could not imagine the castle without Marion in it.

"Then take her quickly. I will abdicate, put her on the throne and remain to deal justice and administer what you give me, a realm where I have no mean skill." John finished the wine and took a bit of bread as well.

Phillip smiled, realizing he had just been offered the crown. "I owe you a great deal. How should I repay you now?"

John laid a hand, warmer now and stronger, over his. "Let us see what the lady says before we drink to your coronation. Have her fetched. I would see her now that I feel a few paces off of Death's doorstep."

"Yes, Sire." Phillip stepped outside the door and sent a page running for her.

Marion appeared moments later and curtsied to the floor. "Your Grace," she said gravely. Phillip noticed her eyes landed on him early and kept track of his every motion.

"Oh dear girl, come. Is that any way to greet your uncle?"

She rose and bowed a little. "When I have never seen him before this day, it is not meet to fling myself upon his neck crying, 'Uncle John, what did you bring me from Anglia?' is it?"

Phillip scowled. Word traveled fast, as always. The crown jewels had sunk crossing a marsh in Anglia, while John's party went around. "Marion," he warned.

Her eyes darted to him and she caught her breath, looking for all the world as if she expected to be struck. She turned back to the king, to apologize, Phillip hoped.

John only smiled indulgently. "I brought you a husband."

"Really?" Marion's tongue ran loose and Phillip scowled more. "Did you stow him in the blankets of your litter or will you produce him out of a pouch?"

John looked at him. "She has a sharp tongue, Phillip. I do not envy you."

"I'm sure I'll manage my wife just fine." Phillip took a bite of his own bread, relishing Marion's brief show of spirit as well as her fear. She watched him and flinched when he picked up the knife to cut the bread for John.

John returned his attention to Marion. "You'll marry my lord Nottingham as soon as we can have the banns cried."

"If it please Your Grace, I will not. I have been promised to the Earl of Locksley since infancy."

John scowled. "I will make him Earl of Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire and Locksley *all*, but you will marry him, girl!" He sounded almost like his late father when he roared like that. Phillip was surprised he had it in him.

Marion, unfazed at the rage, curtsied again. "With all due respect, my Royal Uncle, I will not marry him. Not if he were King of England."

"Your outlaw is dead, princess, on my orders. There will be no rescue. You will obey," Phillip growled.

John sat up and looked her over, his legendary ruthlessness that had killed one nephew and imprisoned the Maid of Brittany coming to the fore. "Because you are my niece, I grant you twenty-four hours. At this time tomorrow, you will agree to wed Nottingham or I will sign your execution order."

Phillip saw the astonishment on Marion's face and felt his own jaw drop. He had expected a royal command, certainly, but not one backed by that threat. He wanted her. He did not want her dead.

John laid his hand atop Phillip's. "Do you have a holding cell appropriate to a lady of quality, my lord?"

"Not really. But I'll do my best."

John waved Marion away. "Lock her up. Her servant can supply her meals and she may change her mind at any time. The moment you change your mind, puss, is the moment you are free. But you have few moments to decide." He beckoned her closer. She curtsied again at his bedside. "A shame." John ran a hand over her face. "You're so lovely to die such a nasty death. If you weren't my brother's child..."

Phillip saw the lecherous look in John's eye and the way Marion shook under the king's touch. He rose and took Marion's arm. "My lady..."

She jerked out of his hands, her fury at his touch firing his blood. "I know the way to the tower very well, my lord Sheriff." She stalked out, her head held high.

Phillip shuddered with wanting her and poured another cup of wine for each of them. "She's spirited. Damn Locksley and his father and their ridiculous loyalty to your brother."

"Hush. It was good loyalty, for its time. But times change. Ah marry, I do detest threatening relatives."

"You do it well," Phillip said, his admiration plain. John caught Phillip's hand as he took the goblet. "Love. Stay?"

Phillip smiled. "If it will not injure you?"

"You're warm. I need the warmth."

Phillip removed his outer clothes and slid between the blankets. John was indeed too cool to be healthy in a living man. "I've missed this."

"Aye," John agreed. He curled around Phillip, absorbing his warmth. "It's good to be safe."

Marion clutched Bess' hand through the bars of the tower door. "Robin will save me. See to it."

"Ah, my girl. They say he is dead."

Marion glowered at her and Bess saw her father in the girl. "I would know if he were dead. Phillip's eyes go narrow when he speaks of Robin's death, so I know he is lying. Go. I haven't time to argue." Her father melted into her green-eyed mother and her words came more gently. "Dear Bess, don't let me be forced into Phillip's bed."

Bess did not hesitate. Not caring if she was seen, she fled the castle. Phillip would be tending King John. If anyone else interfered, she'd kill them. She grabbed a fleet-footed mare, not a walking palfrey, and led it out the gate. She straddled it, her skirts flying every direction, and raced for the Blue Boar.

Little John was seated outside, counting the stars. A barrel of ale sat beside him and a mostly empty pitcher atop of it. She could see his beer-buying errand had become a sampling drink and maybe more than one. He looked up at the thundering hooves. His face was pure astonishment when Bess reined in and climbed down.

"Must need that ale pretty bad, Bess," he said, sweeping her into a hug. "Or is it something stouter you need?" He nuzzled her neck. "Hope it's that."

"Aye, you and all your stout men and Robin himself if he lives." Bess looked up at him. "He does live?"

Little John nodded. "He's in a bad way, but he lives."

Bess told him all the evening's wicked work. "Don't let my girl die, Johnny." She clung to the big outlaw.

"She won't. Robin and I'll take care of it. Tell her to say yes. It gets us time."

"Only two weeks! She'll be married on the third."

"Aye, but we'll handle that. The only one she's marrying is Robin."

Bess kissed him quickly. He didn't want to let go when she pulled away. She rested a moment more on his broad chest. He let her go with no struggle after that.

"I'll see you soon, Bess. Someday, you're never going to have to leave again." Little John kissed her one last time and sat her on her horse, sideways. "I'd lead you home all proper, but no sense giving Phillip the Fumbler my head as an early wedding present." He laughed as she swung her leg over to ride again. "Only one he'd get and he might not be able to keep it."

Bess frowned, worried he wasn't taking the predicament seriously enough. "Johnny, be careful. I have a whole night planned soon."

"Always, lovely lady. Always." He kissed her hand, shouldered his ale cask and she rode back to Nottingham to relay the orders.

## Chapter Nine

### *Healing in the Heart of the Forest*

Robin lay restless on his bed behind the waterfall. In the fortnight since his near-execution, he had recovered much. The salve Will used on his chest had eliminated most of the carving. Only the ghost of scars remained, except on the last R. Phillip had carved that one too deep and too wide to be easily healed. He'd nearly lost his left nipple to the knife and he would forever bear an R above his heart.

Friar Tuck came in, bearing beer and bread, along with a bowl of venison soup. It was all Will would let him eat. He said Robin was still too out of his ordinary humors to tolerate his ordinary food. But he was glad to even be on soup instead of beer-soaked bread. He propped up on his elbow.

"Tell me, Friar, how go things in my absence?"

"Fret not, gentle Robin. Do you feel well enough to sit?"

Robin pushed himself up experimentally. His back screamed as he moved, but he sat upright. It wasn't comfortable, but nothing was. "Aye. And feed myself today. My hand works better than it did yesterday."

The long dungeon stay with his hands chained above his head had left those extremities damaged. He did not know if he could shoot. He hoped he could hold a spoon. Yesterday, he'd dropped it five times before Will had taken it from him and fed him like a babe, to his great frustration and eternal mortification.

He grasped it in his fist like a child and spooned up the first bite. This might go all right. His stomach growled for more. He sopped some bread through the soup and ate it. Unable to bear the slowness of his spoon, Robin took the bowl in both hands and drank straight from it.

Tuck sighed and rolled his eyes at the bad manners, then laughed to see Robin eating heartily. "Oh lad. You will be well soon enough."

"Tomorrow, bring meat. I don't care what Will says. Get me a pasty full of rich pork and gravy." Robin ate the end of the bread. "Thank you, friar. You and Will and Little John have hardly slept since I've been here."

"We sleep in turns. Little John sleeps now so he will be fresh to see to you this evening. Will is eating and practicing so he can sleep and be with you tonight."

"Aye, marry, a bow. I need to shoot. To see that I still can." That had been his great fear, that the pain in his hands and arms would steal his greatest skill.



"When Will says you may." Tuck laid a hand on Robin's shoulder. "I know it is hard for you to take your ease, knowing there is work to do. But if you do not rest, you will not heal."

"Aye, I know." Robin lay back, easing his back and arms. "Phillip would have let me die unshriven, friar. Take my confession now?"

Tuck signed a cross. "You need not kneel, child. All that is said is between me, thee and God." He laid a hand on Robin's head.

After Robin had unburdened his conscience, Tuck bent and kissed the top of his head. "I'm proud of you. You've come so far, lad. From an angry boy to a strong man. Now rest, so that those who depend upon you may know you are healing." Robin obeyed, breathing easier as he lay quietly.

The confession had put him in a reflective mood. Tuck was right, it had been a long journey. There was little to do as he waited for Will, so he remembered.

He'd just come into his patrimony, the Earldom of Locksley and all its lands and wealth, when the first scutage was levied. None of his father's knights had yet sworn to him, the old man being barely a fortnight dead, and he had not sent them. Nor did he have the outrageous amount of two marks per knight.

A half-year later, the scutage was levied again. His knights were overseeing the harvest and could not be bothered. He could not lead them, for he himself was not a knight. And he still did not have the money.

When he failed to pay the scutage to King John the third time, Phillip of Nottingham had arrived with a warrant for his arrest and an impoundment order for all the lands. The knights and many serfs were forcibly conscripted.

Only a word from a certain lady, whom he'd been entertaining regularly and whose husband was one of Phillip's guard, let him slip out the window and hide in the woods, with only the clothes on his back and a pouch full of golden marks. Phillip had raged and sworn to find him flown, and from his treetop hideaway, Robin had done the same when Phillip burned Locksley Hall.

He'd sworn revenge then, vowing he would not rest until Locksley Hall was rebuilt and Phillip had paid his debt in full. He'd taken refuge in Sherwood Forest, the great ancient trees a hiding place for a desperate man. He trapped and killed what he needed for food. Any man who came near, he shot. Most went away, cursing the name of the outlaw who had lamed them or shot their arm.

Only once had he killed and he regretted it the instant it was done. A forester came upon him. Not knowing Robin for the outlaw, the forester had boasted of his intent to catch and hang the scourge of Sherwood. He claimed to be the best man with a bow in three counties. Robin challenged him to prove it. Both had shot at a fair stag, a hundred yards away. Robin's arrow found its mark and the forester turned on him to arrest him for killing the king's deer. As Robin made his escape, the forester shot at him. Robin

shot back and his arrow found its mark again. He fled to the depths of the forest, his heart sick within him.

Only after he emerged a week later did he discover that the price on his head went up to three hundred pounds that day.

He had been nearly a year athirst, drinking only water from the deep springs of the forest before he dared a tavern. He slipped into a corner of the Blue Boar and blessed his throat with the richest brown ale of October brewing that a man had ever drunk. A handsome youth sat singing love songs in one corner, his tall scarlet hat upside down to catch any stray farthings. Robin finished a meal of lamb stew and beer and moved to leave. He had not gotten fifty paces down the road before he heard trouble behind him, the sound of breaking crockery and a loud cry of "thief" followed by one of "cuckold".

The minstrel flew out the door, clutching hat and lute, flashing his heels as fast as he could go. He passed Robin, who sped up, but he could not maintain the pace. Robin found him a mile away, puffing and blowing, his purse looking considerably fatter and a fine bruise showing near his left eye.

Robin grinned at him. "A good evening then, sweet nightingale?"

The minstrel gave a rueful look. "Aye, until the miller caught up with his wife."

"And where are you bound this evening?"

"Any place away from pretty dark eyes and strong millers."

"Come with me then, for I could use the company and you seem a merry fellow. I get lonely in the woods." Robin gestured and the singer followed him into Sherwood.

He and Will had not tried sharing a bed, save as brothers, since the first night. The congress had gone badly, ending with him furious at himself and Will cursing from pain. They had curled together, with many apologies, and slept. In the morning, Robin had expected Will to leave, but the youth stayed.

Together, they haunted the forest, taking from the fat abbot and rich burgher alike. Will always had a girl or four he was seeing. Robin contented himself with the warmth of Will's body on cool nights.

The spring day had been warm when the fat friar, a curtal friar and a worldly one, ambled through the woods. Robin, seeing an easy mark, dropped out of the tree.

"There's a toll to pass these woods, good friar."

The friar laughed and cast his purse at Robin's feet, where it landed with a dull thunk and single clank. "Have it all, good fellow, for tonight I will sleep in the gatehouse of Fountain Abbey and will have no more need of it. Only," he paused, "if you be a good man, and I think you are, you'll put it in the poorbox at Nottingham church Sunday next rather than drink it away. For that was where it was bound once I arrived."

"And why do you think me a good man?" Robin growled. "Would a good man make his bed in the forest?"

The friar laughed again. "Aye, for I do, most of the year. And I know you, Robert, Earl of Locksley. I know it was distractable youth that cost you your lands. Your father was a good man, a leader of men. I had hoped for the same from his son." The friar moved closer and grew somber. "There is great ill since you've been outlawed, Robin. Nottingham does not plow and aid the people as your father did, as you did. He taxes them, takes their work-pledges and keeps them from their fields."

"Oh aye. So I hear." The friar made him feel put upon, obligated. He wanted no part of that. Robin picked up the purse. It had a farthing, a groat and a sixpence in it. "There's nothing I can do about it." He bounced the purse in his hand. "There is no good man to be found here."

"There is, Robin. Nottingham runs the peasants off their land, turning freeholders into wanderers. A strong leader could unite those people, save them from starving and turn them into a force for good."

"What can one man do? I have no power." Fascinated by the idea, in spite of himself, Robin listened. The dream of rebuilding Locksley Hall, which had faded in the last two years to a misty shadow, now shone bright and clear, the light of the friar's words cutting away the mist of despair.

"You have your name. Already men speak of Robin Hood, who lets the poor pass unmolested and takes only from the rich. Put it about that Robin Hood seeks good Englishmen, driven from their homes, to aid him in regaining their land."

"It can't work. Phillip has men, knights and horses. I have nothing. They'll have nothing. I'd need an army." Robin tucked the purse into his belt and turned away.

The friar thumped his thick staff on the hard dirt of the road. "Are you or are you not the best archer in England, lad? Do they not tell tales of how Queen Eleanor herself once watched you shoot before you were out of skirts? You have that. Do you not think that if you were to call today, you could not have ten score good men at your side, bows ready and fire in their eyes to burn Phillip of Nottingham with?"

Robin sneered, not daring to trust the spark of hope that the friar had kindled. It would snuff itself out soon enough. He was not going to feed it on forgotten dreams.

"Robin," the friar stepped closer still, "You can do this. I know you can. Your father would have and with less argument. You are his son. I see it in every line of you."

Enticed by the friar's words, Robin yearned to ask how. He suspected this man had a plan. He needed purpose and a plan.

"I'll aid you. They tell of your clever companion; he will aid you as well. But you are the leader." The friar clapped him on the shoulder with a blow that nearly sent Robin flat. "Then it's settled. I, Tuck of Fountain Abbey, will spread the word among the dispossessed. Make yourself ready for when they come to you."

Friar Tuck strode off into the morning. Robin went to Will and told him all that had happened. And come the people had. Men, women with children in tow. He found them clearings to settle and farm a bit. With Tuck's help, he trained the men to archery, keeping the seven score stoutest of them.

Now these men waited for him to decide which side of the line between life and death he would choose to stand on. He thought of Marion. He needed to live. Phillip had tried to kill him twice now. The third time would see one of them dead.

Will came late and sat beside Robin. He brushed Robin's hair out of his eyes. "I carry bad news." He had half a loaf of bread and some cheese. He saw to it that Robin ate five times a day, very small meals so he would not be ill.

Robin took a bite of the cheese, eating it slowly. He'd learned that if he tried devouring his food at the pace his stomach wanted, Will would take it from him and dole it out. "How bad?"

"The men say you are dead. That I run the band in your name, with Little John as my right hand and Tuck conspiring with us to keep the secret."

"'Tis no surprise. I worried that they would." Robin sighed. "I did not wish them to see how badly Nottingham harmed me, for fear that it would demoralize them."

Will took a breath. "They agitate to lay siege to Nottingham Castle now that King John is in residence. They say they will kill both master and man and rid England of two French rats as easily as killing four-legged ones in a barn."

Robin sat up to drink the beer Will had brought. He gave a grim smile at the words his men had chosen. "Good men. But alas, they cannot stand against a castle and the armored warriors of our enemy. So I must reassure them that I still live. In the morning, I'll need you to help me to the Oak."

"Robin, you aren't well enough," Will insisted.

"I will be on the morrow." He gave Will a grin that he hoped looked almost like his old one. "Besides, I am quite well enough to speak, even if I am not able to lead a charge yet." He finished the bread and cheese. "I thought I asked for meat as well?"

"Not yet. You may have some tomorrow if you are well enough to speak to the men."

"Without meat, I'll not have the strength to make the walk, Will. You feed me as if I were a child."

Will ignored the complaints and offered a hand. "If you are climbing down, let us get you to your feet."

Robin took his hand and stepped gingerly onto feet that had not borne his weight for a fortnight. He leaned heavily on Will's smaller form, taking hesitant steps around his small sleeping cave.

"There," Robin said, his face smug but very pale. "You see? I can walk."

Will eased him back to his bed. "Aye, but at what cost? What hurts? You're pale as milk, Robin, and no healthy man looks so after scarcely a dozen paces." He bent down and felt Robin's head to be sure the fever had not returned.

Robin kissed his cheek. "Will. My own sweet Will. Thank you." Will did not draw away, but finished making him comfortable. As he did, Robin's eyes searched Will's face, looking for any trace of rejection. "You know I must."

Will nodded. He knew and he knew why and what would happen if Robin could not. "You will address the men if I must carry you down on my back."

"Save that duty for Little John. He is the beast of burden. You are my mind. And I love you both as parts of me." He took another drink. "Come, let us walk again for my feet have forgotten my weight and the sooner they learn it again, the happier I will be."

Will agreed. They made two circuits of the cave, Robin bearing more of his own weight as his legs grew steadier. On the third, Robin tried alone. He made the steps slowly, clutching the wall, and more than once Will moved to catch him, clearly fearful he would fall. But make the circuit he did and he sat, grinning his old merry grin on the bed, although his face stayed pale as death.

"There. Now I am no longer a newborn fawn unable to wobble along without a mother's licking." He held up the empty platter. "Now I beg you for meat again."

Will rolled his eyes and sighed. "I expected this and came prepared." From his pouch he took two nicely cooked rounds of venison, wrapped in cabbage to keep them good, and laid them on the plate. He offered Robin his own knife. "For a newborn wolf who has just run with the pack gets his meat as well as his milk."

"Right you are," Robin said, his voice growing stronger as well. He tucked into the meat.

"Slow, love, slow. Your body may not tolerate it. I would rather clear away three bites than all of it." Will sighed when Robin ignored him and ate with relish. He produced another lump of bread and also an apple from the pouch. "You are much better indeed, it seems," he commented as Robin ate the end of the apple.

"Phillip the Fumbler could not break me so easily, dear Will, try though he might. Now what is this word you bear of the king?"

"King John is here. He has taken refuge in Nottingham Castle. The Barons' War goes very badly. It is even said he lost the crown jewels in an Anglia swamp. Prince Louis sits on the throne in London. And one Norman is as bad as another. At least John is an English Norman. Louis is all French."

"Indeed I must quell this talk of storming the castle. Our Phillip is twice as dangerous with the king beside him." Robin sighed. "Had he the humor of his father or brother, I would feast His Grace as I did our Sheriff. But I fear for our heads should I manage that feat."

Will nodded. "There is more bad news. The first banns for Lady Marion FitzRoy and Phillip, Sheriff of Nottingham, were cried on Sunday. It is Wednesday, dear Robin. The second set will be cried next Sunday."

Robin stopped with the last bite of venison halfway to his mouth. He stared at Will.

"I do not lie, good master. I was there. As was Mudge. Tuck saw the banns and they are legal. But talk to Little John before you do or say aught you will regret. He knows the whole of it from his lady."

Robin set down the last bite, looking ill. Will cast a worried glance to the broom and supply of rushes in the corner. Robin saw Will had enough for one more cleaning, then he would need to gather more. He was sorry to have been such a burden on his men and added one more notch to Phillip's score.

"Has she turned against me, Will? Or does she think me dead? Does Bess send any word?" Robin peppered his friend with questions until Will pressed on his shoulders and made him lie down. He ached, needing to know what Marion was planning or whether she too had betrayed him.

"Hush. Rest. Little John will be here soon. He has not told me, for he knows I carry enough with healing you and heading the band until you are well."

"It can't be truth," Robin said, lying back down on his belly. His eyes fell shut. Will didn't wake him.

Will knew he hadn't told Robin everything. Little John could do that on the morrow. He'd been making a cunning plan, doubting every bit of it without Robin's lead. Robin had to show himself and speak. Already men were drifting away, going to farms or cottages, taking to the road as beggars or archers for hire.

Ah God, what if Robin couldn't shoot? Will looked at the big hands that still bore shackle galls around the wrists. Robin handled the spoon and knife better, but not as easily as he had. It would be a long time before he could split a willow-wand that held a garland. Will brushed his fingers over the back of Robin's damaged hand, his touch light as a breeze on the aspen leaves, and swallowed his tears.

Robin's lips moved. Will leaned closer. Robin whispered in his sleep, "Marion," and a tear escaped him. Not one had fallen during his whole ordeal. Never had his face changed from its defiant look. But now, a woman drove him to weep in his sleep.

Will brushed it away with the same light touch, knowing all too well the perils of women. He picked up his harp and played softly, hoping the sound would lull Robin where his beloved waterfall did not.

Little John came to the cave at dawn, bearing breakfast. Will met him on the path outside and helped him carry it in. Will's fingers ached and he had two new blisters. He had played all night and Robin had slept without stirring and without herbs.

Will looked up. "Little John, he needs to know."

"He's not ready." The big man's answer came flat and hard.

"He can't face the men thinking his lady hates him. Tell him all you have from Bess." Will set the harp aside and stood. He grasped Little John's big forearms, each as thick as one of his thighs. "He wept in his sleep."

"You told him she was getting married."

Will nodded. "He had to know. But he needs to know all of it."

"All right. As long as you have a hand in whatever *monseoc* scheme he cooks up."

Will, exhausted and relieved beyond reason, barked a laugh at the old Saxon term that meant literally "moon-sick". He hadn't heard it since his mother had died, years before. He hugged Little John tightly. "I will. Oh John, he's going to make it! He walked around the cave last night."

"He'll make it if he keeps his mind on his skin instead of the princess'."

Will laughed, even through the tears that threatened to burst out of him. "As well wish for the sun and moon to stop going around the earth, my large friend. Come, let us see him."

In the cave, Robin was stirring and had sat up without aid for the first time. Sitting was more comfortable than lying down. His back pained him, Will knew, and even though his chest was almost healed, he knew that hurt too.

Will made sure Robin had plenty of food and took his own breakfast. Little John sat down on the floor.

"I have word from Bess," John said.

"Tell me," Robin said around a mouthful of apple pasty. The news did not diminish his appetite, it seemed. Will watched how much he ate and made sure he got enough. "Good or bad, I must know."

"Your girl is a prisoner, Robin. She's under command to marry the Sheriff or die. And...she begs you to rescue her." Little John knitted his broad brow. He had relayed the exact message. Will nodded and Little John relaxed.

Robin looked relieved for a moment and then scowled. "How? I can barely sit up or walk without you helping me." He balled his hands into fists and then released them. Will saw his mouth go tight at that pain.

"You sat up alone this morning. And we have two more weeks," Will reassured him.

Robin set his jaw. "Then we must plan. I said I wouldn't see her hurt and I meant it."

"First you need to see the men," Will said.

Robin finished his breakfast. "So much to do. Help me up, men. It is time to begin." He swung his legs off the bed and Will and Little John helped him to his feet. "Will, go ahead of us and gather the men. Little John will get me to the Oak."

Will looked at him worriedly but knew Little John could carry him there if needed. "Aye, good master. We'll see you there." He hurried lightly down the path, sounding his horn.

When Little John brought him to the clearing, Robin released his hold on his arm. He had only needed to steady himself a few times. The walk had exhausted him, but his heart was glad within him to see so many of his men gathered and awaiting.

As he walked to his seat beneath the Great Oak, a cheer rose, resounding through the forest and echoing over the water. Little John smiled at him and Will stood by to help him sit.

Robin, although on the dregs of his strength and aching, smiled as he eased himself down on the seat. The reception gratified him. When the cheering died down, he held up a hand for silence.

"Men of Sherwood!" he began in a harsh rasp unlike his own voice and coughed. He had not given Phillip the satisfaction of breaking him with that knife, but near the end, he had screamed his voice away during the twice-daily beatings. More loudly, his voice growing stronger and more like its old self on each word, he tried again, "Men of Sherwood! Word has reached me that you lose faith, but I didn't believe it. And rightly, I see now."

The men stirred and he went on. "Once we gathered here and vowed to join together and fight for what is right. To oppose tyranny. To protect our lands and families from being bled dry. We swore an oath with our very lives that we'd never give up. Never lose hope. Not while we live. We still live!"

The men cheered, raggedly at first and then more strongly. Someone in the back—Robin always suspected Will of planting him—yelled, "We still live!"

The crowd took it up. "We still live! We still live!"

Robin surreptitiously used Little John to help him stand. The big man put him on his feet as if it were nothing. He held up his hand for silence again.

"Let us renew that oath, my Merry Men. For we are needed now, more than ever before, with King John in our very land."

"And I say we take him! Him and his poxy Sheriff! Drag 'em out of that rat-hole castle and hang them as high as they would hang us," yelled a voice from the back.

Murmurs of agreement ran through the men, growing to a groundswell of nods and a chorus of "ayes". The sound of the men grew to that of an angry mob, ready to march the miles into Nottingham and carry out their rough justice or die trying.



Robin held up a hand for silence but the men ignored it. The noise grew until some of the hotter heads among them were ready to storm the gates that instant. Three or four started assembling men and giving orders near the edge of the clearing.

"Silence!" Little John bellowed and leaves and broken limbs rained out of nearby trees. The men hushed at once and a few covered their ears.

In the wake of the roar, Robin held up his hand again. This time, all listened to his voice. "First our oath, then we decide how best to carry it out together. Kneel, men of Sherwood."

Little John helped ease Robin to his own knees and knelt beside him. Will, hovering like a hen with one chick, knelt at his other side.

Robin raised both hands, almost like a priest giving a blessing. "Do you, free men of England, swear to take from the rich only to give to the poor? To feed the hungry and to clothe the poor? To shelter the homeless, to protect all women, noble or common, Saxon or Norman? To fight loyally to the death for our people and country? If so, answer aye!"

The "aye" was a roar louder than Little John's, coming as it did from seven score throats of stout Englishmen and true.

Robin smiled, wavering on his knees in pain and exhaustion. "Then rise, good men, take up your mugs and be merry this day! Tomorrow, we all start anew!" Little John caught him as he lurched.

"Good master, will you have a drink with us or do you need your rest?" Will asked. Robin knew from looking at his face which Will would advise.

"I can take a mug with the brave hearts that surround me. Ease me back to the seat, my loves, and let me rest there. For now, I cannot walk to the cave."

"Then sleep in the guest house," Little John suggested.

Robin laughed at the idea that he could climb a rope ladder, even one so easy as that of the guest house. "Nay, you may carry me back to the waterfall if I need it."

Will returned with the mug of ale and Robin sipped, doing his best to hide the way his hands trembled at the weight of the wooden pint, watching his men. They were good men. They had just needed to know Phillip had not beaten him or them either.

## Chapter Ten

### *A Prayer Before Execution*

Marion waited in her cell. The second banns had been cried on Sunday and tomorrow was Sunday again. Robin had not come. She prayed by her bunk for a long time.

Her wedding dress, blue like the Virgin's gown, blue like heaven, lay out over a chair. She stared at it for hours, wondering if she would end her wedding day by staining it with her own blood should Robin not come. She would not go to Phillip. He would never have her.

She had assented to the wedding as soon as Bess had relayed the information from John and Will. She'd bought Robin two weeks. She hoped it was enough. She knew now, for a certainty, that her love lived. That alone bore her through the days.

She spent those days in prayer or watching the preparations from the window of her cell. The people came and went in the courtyard below, some bearing food and drink, some bringing rich gifts or flowers. She sighed sometimes, wishing they brought their good presents for a good man.

She spent her nights dreaming of Robin. She remembered the night under the waterfall when they had made love and the evening on the platform when she had been his boy. She remembered the taste of his kisses and long afternoons walking with him as he showed her the secrets of the forest. His laugh haunted her dreams and the memory of his scent and touch lay heavy on her. She lay in the darkness of her cell, with no disapproving Bess, and stroked herself until she spent. Only then could she sleep and often as not, she awakened to a pillow damp with her tears.

Although Phillip had petitioned to allow her back into her rooms, King John had refused. She was to remain imprisoned, like her luckless cousin, Eleanor the Fair Maid of Brittany, until the wedding day.

A ruckus in the courtyard drew Phillip's attention. A group of black-clad friars, one of them singing drunk in a wheelbarrow that held a number of small casks of mead and wine, was seeking entrance. The Bishop of Hereford had sent word he was sending cheer for the wedding.

"Let them in," he ordered the guards, stepping out on his balcony to do so. "And you, monks, sober up. You make a fine spectacle of your holiness."

One signed a cross up at him and the others lurched off. But not before the one too drunk to walk waved a flagon at him and burst into song again.

"Some part their legs without a hire,  
And some bait poor men in every shire,  
And some check-mate with our Sire,  
Yet all of them are not so.  
Some be lewd and some be shrewd,  
Go where they go!"

His companions got the cart rolling into the castle keep before Phillip could protest the impugning of the king. The drunken one kept singing, growing louder until he was nearly bawling out the song at the top of his lungs, as they wheeled him to the cellar.

"Some be brown and some be white,  
And some be tender as a tripe,  
And some of them be cherry ripe..."

Phillip grew lost in thought at that. He hoped Marion was as honest as she was beautiful. He wanted her cherry-ripe. He wanted to see the fear and pain in her face as he burst through her maidenhead.

If the outlaw had robbed him of that pleasure too, he would burn all of Sherwood and hang every man he found over the age of seven. He went to check on John. The king was growing halier in the good air, on good solid food, it seemed. Perhaps all would yet be well.

Will and Mudge wheeled the barrow into the wine cellar. Robin had to be sore from his uncomfortable journey atop the barrels in the jouncing contraption but he was clearly still too larded with poppy juice to feel it yet as he finished his last verse.

"He that made this song full good,  
Came of the north and of southern blood,  
And somewhat kin to Robin Hood,  
Yet, aren't we all so?"

Will stuffed a venison pasty in his mouth, knowing Robin would want it soon and not wanting him to speak their names in his current state. "Hush. Do not sing of bold Robin in the Sheriff's very cellars."

Robin mumbled around the pasty as if to speak, but decided to eat it instead. Will and Mudge made him a bed of flour sacks and eased him to it to rest more. Will tried not to fret.

The other ten men drifted in singly through the day. Little John had been left behind in charge of the majority, since his great size would betray them. A single friar

here and there, each walking head down and hands in sleeves, would attract no attention, nor even be remembered afterward.

Each knew his part and each was thrilled to be a part of the most audacious scheme Robin had cooked up yet. Tuck came at last and blessed the men. Will curled up beside Robin, the better to make sure he slept and was rested for the morning. The others settled against walls and on sacks to rest before the morrow.

John, stronger than he had been, sat up and ate as Phillip paced. "Do sit down, Phillip. You're distracting me. You act like a man about to be executed, not about to be married."

"I'm not sure which of those would be worse, with the way she hates me so." Phillip sat anyway on the edge of the bed. "Something is wrong. I can feel it in my bones."

John waved his concerns away. "Nothing is wrong. The bandit is dead. You have three new shires to govern. You'll marry my wayward niece tomorrow, whether she hates you or no. Love is not a necessity. My mother may have preached such nonsense, but she is dead, the old harpy, and her foolishness died with her."

Phillip looked relieved that he would not be expected to love the girl. "You're right. An heir is the only important thing." He lowered his voice. "You know my love is only for you anyway."

John smiled and stroked his face. "I am not as given to the French vice as my brother was. But even I appreciate a loyal man's love."

Phillip kissed John's forehead. It was cool now, instead of burning with fever as it had been upon the king's arrival. "Given to it quite enough for me."

John pulled him down onto the bed and took a kiss. "Get the food out of the way. I am feeling much my own self now."

Phillip cleared the tray from the bed and stripped to his own shirt before returning to it. John opened his arms, as he had many years before and Phillip came as willingly as he had then.

John's kisses were no longer the hot-blooded passions of their youth, but neither did they hold the lying heat Marion had given him when she had been spying for the outlaw. Phillip relaxed for the first time since the Tournament of the Golden Arrow. He gave himself wholly into the kisses, moaning softly into John's mouth.

"My perfect wedding gift," Phillip sighed.

John laughed soundlessly and opened the neck of his shirt to lick at his chest. "Yes. You'll kiss the bastard princess with the taste of my prick still on your lips."

Phillip moaned under his king's kisses. "Yes. Exactly right. There could be nothing more fitting for the little trull." When John kissed his mouth, silencing him, he smiled. When John let him go, he asked, "Shall I?"

John nodded and Phillip slid down his body. It was good to have his old lover back. He remembered the taste, the smell of this as if it had been only yesterday and not years before, when John was young and he was younger.

He was ready for the new life, in which he bedded an unwilling woman each night. But this was a sweet farewell to the old. He stroked his tongue over the shaft of John's cock and sucked the head.

Slowly, he managed to take the length of it, pressing it with his tongue. John moaned his pleasure at that. Phillip worked, enjoying every lick and touch, knowing they would be rare or not at all in years to come. He swallowed when John finished and slipped up to lie in his arms.

John stroked his face. "King Phillip the first of England, is it to be then?" he whispered. "The lovely queen Marion by his side and her uncle at his right hand, a trusted adviser."

Phillip kissed him then and gave a soft groan as John's hand slipped round his own hard prick. John knew more than most about such work and his fingers teased and played, extending Phillip's pleasure.

"Aye," John continued, "and as you make the laws and negotiate the treaties, I will be there. On nights when your spitting cat of a wife is too much, I will be there."

"Ah, love. I'll do everything as you wish," Phillip sighed.

"Use your own judgment. I am poor with finances and such, being altogether too absorbed in minutiae. You are not. For that, and other qualities, I love you, my dearest Phillip."

When John kissed him, Phillip spent over his hand. He clung around the king's neck as long as John let him.

"Now get a good night's sleep. You have to make a confession before your wedding, after all," John reminded him.

Phillip knew this little bit of imperfect sodomy would not reach the bishop's ears from his lips. God would have to understand.

Marion rose from her morning prayers as the friar was let in. Six or so of his brethren stood at the door. He traced the Sign of the Cross in the air and she returned to her knees.

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned." The friar laid a large hand on her head and she took it as a sign to continue. "I have lain with a man who is not my husband. I have betrayed my king by bearing messages to his enemy. I have violated the hospitality of

my host by allying with his enemy. I have committed imperfect sodomy. I have lied, wantonly and continually, by action and word to my host and husband of this day."

"Ego te absolvo," came a raspy whisper from above her. "Marion, love."

Marion looked up at the friar as he pulled his hood back. With a cry of joy she sprang to her feet and covered his fair face with kisses. "Robin! They said you were dead. I believed until Bess told me otherwise."

He held her to him and kissed her quiet. "To the Sheriff I am, love."

"Hurry then. We must go." She looked at him and tugged his hand, bringing a hiss of pain from him. "You did bring me a monk's robe to escape in, yes?"

Robin shook his head. "No. You are to go through with the wedding."

"No!" Marion shoved him away and saw him wince. "Not while you live. I will not."

Robin pulled her close again. "Trust me, Marion. It's all a part of my plan. You will not marry Nottingham this day." He kissed her. "Go to your wedding with head high as befits a princess. And trust me."

She gave a short nod, but her eyes remained wary. "Robin, if you fail, know I will not live as Nottingham's wife. I only consented to marry him because Little John said to buy you time. I never truly believed you were dead."

She lost her breath as he clutched her to him, kissing her so hard her mouth ached. She met him with a wild hunger, a desire she had only ever felt for him.

He released her far too soon for her liking. "I must go. Or Brother Robert might do something quite unseemly to the maid he is shriving."

"Would that you had time. But the maid's sins are few."

"And that done of love is no sin at all." Robin stole a last kiss. "Our Lady see to you and I shall be with you soon." He slipped out the door.

Marion was praying again when Bess came to ready and fetch her. She let her guardian lace her into the dress without a word. She sat silent as a stone while Bess did her hair.

"Lamb, you don't have to do this," Bess whispered. "I can get us out."

Marion shook her head. "I must." She clutched Bess' hands. "I love you, dear Bess, for thinking of this. But trust and watch and do not fear. I go of my own will with my eyes open."

"He'll make you miserable, child. He'll hurt you and hate you and all will be ill." Bess' voice quavered as Marion had never heard before. She suspected the stern woman was on the verge of tears.

Marion gave her a small smile. "Bess, dear, trust me. And trust your large love. All will be well."

She rose and went down to the chapel, Bess trailing worriedly in her wake.

Phillip met them at the foot of the tower stairs. He offered Marion his arm, his face wreathed in smiles. She took it, her green eyes narrow and her jaw set.

"Your uncle is already seated. The nobles have arrived. Even the bishop is ready, my dear. Yet you look as if I'm leading you to the gallows instead of the altar."

She glared at him. "A lesser woman would take the gallows. I am a princess. I know my duty to my house and to the realm."

Phillip's jaw tightened and she felt his hand under hers clench. "You will pay for that tonight, my dear." He sneered the last words and jerked hard at her arm, practically pulling her off her feet as they walked into the chapel.

No bishop stood before the altar, but her uncle, still looking very ill, sat in the front row, surrounded by his guard. She knew every nobleman and knight in the chapel. Not one face looked friendly. A few of the women smiled at her.

Phillip leaned over to the captain of the guard. "Where is the bishop?"

"Called out. A problem with the holy wine or something. He'll be back soon." The guard settled back beside the altar rail. Marion realized that if she tried to bolt, he would seize her.

Phillip must have seen her looking at the guard and the exit, because he laid one of his hands over Marion's hand and clamped down. "We'll wait. No second thoughts, Your Highness."

"I've had them and the third and fifth and eighth thoughts as well," she snapped. She heard Bess inhale sharply. There was no sense carrying on any more pretenses, least of all that she was an empty-headed simpleton who sang to the bluebirds.

Phillip smirked. He shuffled impatiently. "Rolf, go find the bishop," he ordered the captain. Rolf slipped out to the vestry.

They waited some more. Neither Rolf nor the bishop reappeared. Muttering started from the assembled nobles, swelling quickly. Marion ignored it.

Phillip scowled. He clamped even harder on Marion's hand. She kept her face still. She would not cry out, not if he broke every bone in it. "Upon the grave of your father, my lady, I want your word you will not move until I return."

Marion nodded, her face a mask. She felt as if she looked like her grandmother, Eleanor, carved atop her tomb. She hoped she did. "Upon the grave of my father, King Richard, I will remain here until you come back."

Phillip went into the vestry, his face looking a dangerous shade of red. Marion suspected it would go hard for the bishop if he was anything other than gravely wounded. She prayed he would not be found.

The congregation shifted, clothing rustling and low voices murmuring. King John took a drink of wine that one of his guard handed over. Marion waited. The slanting bar

of autumn sunlight that fell through the halo of St. Dunstan moved across the flagstones of the chapel floor.

A commotion at the entrance of the vestry drew everyone's eye. A fat friar was prodded out before the altar by Nottingham. He'd clearly had to search outside for he still wore his cloak with the hood up. The bishop was nowhere to be seen.

"Marry us. I will brook no more delays," he growled.

The friar stammered and fumbled his missal and rosary. Nottingham jabbed him with the butt of his dagger before taking his place beside Marion. He grabbed her hand and laid it atop his. She stared. The large hand under hers was scarred and broken, a barely-healed shackle gall on the wrist. Nottingham's hands were far from soft, but they were not so badly used as these.

"We are here, in the presence of God and the saints, in this holy place, to join Marion FitzRoy with Phillip of Nottingham," Friar Tuck began. Marion returned her attention to the service and kept her face still so as not to betray her lover or their friend of the greenwood.

She looked into the eyes of the man beside her. Under the hood of the cloak, Robin smiled at her and gave her a saucy wink. She squeezed his arm in acknowledgment as she made the proper responses to the friar.

Robin tried to keep his voice grave and low, imitating Nottingham, but Marion could hear his laugh straining to burst free. Tuck blessed them as they knelt at the rail and tasted the ritual wine, sealing the sacrament.

"By Our Lady and St. Dunstan and the holy saints Serge and Bacchus and by our Lord, Jesus Christ, I pronounce you married," Tuck said as a commotion broke out in the back of the chapel.

"Who is that harlot marrying?" yelled Phillip as every head turned. He stood in the door, wearing only a torn shirt spattered with drops of blood, a cut rope dangling from one wrist and his braes.

Robin threw back his hood and laughed until the chapel rang with it. "Me! It seems I've stolen your bride from under your very nose, Phillip."

From half the guards surrounding the hall came a low song that quickly grew.

"He taxes folk upon their bread

He taxes them their beer

But Robin Hood will steal it back

Fie on Phillip the Fumbler!"

Black livery of Nottingham was doffed to reveal Lincoln green and Robin's men formed a line that held back both Phillip and the real guards.

King John stood up. "Niece, what have you done?" he roared. His face turned an unhealthy shade of purple and he collapsed. Phillip broke free and ran to his side.



"My king," he whispered. He felt John's chest and checked for breath. Slowly, Phillip stood up. "The king is dead."

The word passed from lip to ear in a steady buzz and soon the entire assemblage was on their knees in respect to their dead sovereign. Tuck signed a Cross over the body.

"The king is dead and that faithless strumpet killed him!" Phillip bellowed, pointing at Marion. "She had her witch poison him so she and that wolfshead could take his throne!"

The murmuring started again and Marion let go of Robin's hand. "People of Nottingham! You know Phillip lies." She began shedding her wedding dress, only to be stymied by the laces. "Husband, help me," she whispered and Robin, without care or regard for the rich garment, used his dagger to slit the lacing of the gown so it fell away. She shed the undergown, until she stood before them, a young man wearing only his braes, his sex evident through the thin linen.

The noise of startlement rolled through the chapel. Marion let it die. Phillip just gawked.

"I am Marion FitzRoy, son of the late King Richard. I will see my uncle's body to London, with my husband's men as a guard. There, I will advise my young cousin Henry as he assumes the throne."

"She – He – That creature lies!" Phillip shouted. "It has lived a lie, pretending to be a maid."

"Prince Marion," rang a commanding voice from the back of the hall. All turned to see William, Sheriff of Lincolnshire, there. He was known as a fair man and a just one. Many peasants taxed to poverty by Phillip had fled to Lincoln. "Prince Marion, will you not be our king?"

Marion bowed to him and picked up her shift. "I should not know how to be king. I do not even know how to be a man. But," Marion slipped the underdress back on and picked up the ruined wedding gown, "I do know justice and the right way to run a shire. Phillip of Nottingham, I charge you in the name of King Henry to run this place well and report to Sir David of Doncaster in my absence."

William thumped his walking staff on the floor. "My cousin David is long dead at the hands of the Saracens."

Bess stepped forward, took off her wimple and shook out her hair. She smiled at him and spoke in what Marion knew must be her normal voice, a pleasant low tenor. "Not dead, William, only carrying out my king's last command." David made a small bow to his cousin and one to Phillip, then dropped a deep curtsy to Marion. "My prince."

Phillip stared from one face to another and Marion saw he had no friends left in the chapel. Even his household guard were on their knees to her. She descended to where he still knelt beside the body of her uncle.

Her mouth quirked as she traced the Sign of the Cross over his head. "Ego te absolvo, Phillip. Now do better." She paused to speak to David. "See my uncle's body is readied for travel. We move fast for he will not keep and it is forty leagues to London."

Bearing the ruined dress, one hand on her husband's arm, Marion swept out of the chapel to make the arrangements for a caravan to London.

## Chapter Eleven

### *All Things Set to Rights*

Message-riders flew between London and Nottingham all that winter. Sir David held the shire in trust until the succession could be sorted out. Marion, as the prince, backed her nine-year-old cousin Henry's bid for the throne and advised him well.

Word had traveled fast of John's death. All along the route of the passage, the good folk had turned out to see the prince and late king pass. Robin and Will rode close beside Marion and a score of guards from Nottingham made sure they were not molested in their travels.

The coronation of the young king at Gloucester Cathedral was a hasty thing, but Marion and Robin stood in attendance. The Archbishop of Canterbury did not crown the boy, since he'd already thrown in with Prince Louis of France. The Bishop of Gloucester set a simple band on the lad's forehead and it was done.

Marion had talked long with her young cousin, advising him as to the character of his regents and his duties to the people. Henry had been more interested in the fact she was a boy in skirts.

When the regents announced they would indeed rule by the Great Charter John had been coerced into signing and that all lands and duties would revert to those who held them in the time of Richard or Old King Henry, should such people live, Marion knew her work in London was done.

On a soggy February morning, they set out for Nottingham. There was no need for great haste, as there had been with their coming to London. Robin had long since grown tired of city life and taken to visiting the open parklands and climbing the trees there. Many evenings, Marion had sent Will Scarlet to find him for supper, only to get word back that he'd been high up a great oak.

Robin had Marion ride before him, wrapping them both in his great cloak. The bitter wind howled out of the north and the horse picked its way through the frozen mud of the road. Will Scarlet, riding beside them, staying as close as he could for warmth, laughed.

"No fair, Robin. You bring your lady, but forced me to leave fair Mathilda behind in London." He blew on his fingers, well-covered in their fur mittens.

"But what would Nell and Nan say if you brought some city wench home to cosset and pet while they are busy serving ale?"

Will laughed at the words, but his face fell. He had not lacked for female companionship in London, Marion knew, and had sampled many. But she could see his

heart ached for the country girls, particularly the plump barmaid at the Blue Boar. "For all I know, they've found good stout lads and married. Robin, I think I should settle myself."

Marion reached out of the cloak and patted his cheek. "Only when you find the right lady, dear Will."

Four days they rode in the wind and cold rain, stopping at inns to sleep someplace dry. Marion felt as if her feet would never be truly warm or dry again. She was not used to being out in such weather. But she bore it uncomplaining, riding curled in Robin's arms, sleeping wrapped in them at night and laughing when he rubbed her cold toes after a long day's travel. As dusk was falling on the fifth day, they came to the walls of Nottingham town.

"Who goes there?" challenged the guard sounding new to his post and very full of his own authority.

"Wat, you dog-chased tinker, have they got you heading the guard?" Robin demanded and laughed at the scowl that greeted his challenge.

"Master Robin?" Wat came closer to them and held up his lantern against the gathering gloom. "It is! And Will and the Lady Marion too. Come in, come in. The guardhouse has a bit of a fire. I'll send Dob up to castle to tell them to expect you." They followed him into the guardhouse. Wat nudged a boy of about ten. "Dob, go. Tell 'em up there Robin Hood is home."

"Cor! Robin Hood!" The boy stretched closer for a look at the famous outlaw. Marion stole one as well only to be shocked at how tired he looked. His face was set in lines of grim determination and pain and she saw the first hints of gray streaking his temples. The winter had taken a fierce toll on him.

"Aye, and the Lady Marion as well." Robin patted the boy's head and he ran off on the very important mission. Marion wrapped herself next to his body inside both their cloaks as they stood at the fire. Will stretched under the warmth, rubbing his arms and shoulders and backside.

Wat poured them each a bit of ale that had been mulling on the hearth. "I'd offer you better, but we didn't look for you just yet. In truth, we'd been expecting you back with the spring, Robin. But it don't feel too spring-like tonight."

"Nature sleeps a bit longer to awaken at Eastertide with our Lord," Marion said. She nestled closer to Robin and kissed his jaw. He smiled at her.

Wat collected the empty mugs and poured the end of the ale into his own. "Go on up to the castle then. That's enough of a start for Dob to get halfway there. Old Sir David will have a place set at the table for you, I reckon."

Marion smiled up at her husband while they rode as fast as they dared through the streets of the city. Night was gathering fast and they wanted to be inside. The lowering clouds meant that even the light of the half moon would not be seen. The city streets

would be the inside of a tar barrel in mere minutes. "It will be odd having David always and not Bess. Although I expect he was pleased enough to wear men's clothing again after so many years as a woman."

"And why have you not taken it up, my Marion?"

"Because in long skirts or short, I remain Marion. And I feel too naked in the short." She slipped her hand into the place where his hose parted and grasped his cock. She had done this many times on the journey, making it the most pleasant Robin had ever enjoyed, despite the wind and weather. She whispered, "Quickly, love, for all must be in order as we dismount."

Robin gently removed her hand and kissed the knuckles grinning broadly. "Later, my wanton darling. That bit of beef must turn a bit longer before the feast."

Will overheard and rolled his eyes in mock disgust. "Stop that. You're married now and being desirous of your wife...well, it's just odd," he teased.

They cantered into the torch-lit courtyard and dismounted. Robin swung Marion down, but she was careful to slide on her own so as not to hurt his hands and arms. He was not yet at full strength for all his tree-climbing. Grooms came running and led the horses away. They made their way into the great hall. Dinner was already begun, but everyone rose when Robin and Marion walked into the hall.

Sir David bowed and came down to greet her. "Welcome to Nottingham Castle, princess." He kissed her hand before embracing her. Phillip followed with his own bow, but with less grace.

"Warm wine," called Robin to a servant. "Her Highness is quite chilled, as are we all."

Once seated at the head table and warmed with sweet mulled wine, Marion ate with good appetite and talked quietly to David. Robin sent warning glares in Phillip's direction. Marion knew that if Little John did not give a good report, Phillip would wind up on his own gallows. She might be forgiving, but Robin was still unhealed and bore a grudge.

He could no longer shoot as he had. Together, they had sparred with Will using quarterstaves, but Will had trounced Robin more easily than he'd beaten Marion. Robin's hands ached and shook in cold weather. He could make a few shots, but not arrow after arrow any longer. Nor did all of them find their marks.

She listened and watched the servants and guests. The servants were clean, well-dressed, well fed and much more cheerful than she'd ever seen them. They moved swiftly and smiling through their duties. The guests talked lightly to each other. Phillip was given wide berth by all and no one spoke to him where he sat alone at the very end of the High Table, carefully keeping his cup out of the reach of Will who sat next to him. A small, angry part of her whispered it was meet and right that a man who so loved his title and position be left with only that and none of its power.

Marion stood and held up a parchment. "Sir David. My Lord Nottingham. Lords and ladies, I bring word from London." The hall silenced and everyone looked at her. Word from London was rare enough and she would wager that barely a quarter of the people before her had made the journey to the city itself. She opened the parchment and read, "All lands and titles are to revert to those who held them under King Richard or King Henry, if possible. The regents will govern by the Charter. With particular regard to Nottingham and surrounding shires, Robert Huntingdon, Earl of Locksley, Sheffield and Nottingham, is empowered to appoint his Sheriffs and game wardens."

She gave Robin a smile before turning to David. "Sir David, your earl begs your hospitality for a time, until Locksley Hall can be rebuilt and rendered habitable. Servants and builders have already been dispatched to see to this."

David rose and gave her a small bow. "Of course, your highness."

After the meal, David showed them to the master suite himself. In a moment of informality, he embraced Marion. "Ah, lamb, it's good to have you home. Married life agrees with you then?"

Marion nodded. "Aye, that it does. A handsome husband of my own, just as you always promised I'd have." She looked over to where Robin was washing from dinner. "He'll want to see Little John."

"I know. Johnny will be up later." David kissed her cheeks. "He has to see to the guard and all the doors himself. It's his way."

Marion chuckled. "I am not the only one for whom married life has brought adjustments then."

"My dear child. Welcome home." He pecked her again and left.

"If you keep kissing other men, I shall have to be jealous," Robin teased.

"But a girl may kiss her nursemaid good night, yes?" Marion came to him and gave him a long, deep kiss that left her hard and aching for the pleasures that came with marriage.

"As long as you're not kissing our Bess like that, I've no word against it." Robin pulled her down for another.

Sir David summarily dismissed Phillip, stripping him of all his titles and lands and income. Phillip had taken up a staff, stuck a scallop-shell in his hat and announced his intention to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Joseph de Compostela in far Spain. Marion wished him well and promised to pray that he would make it. She suggested a real religious experience might do him good.

Robin watched her wave Phillip off on the pilgrimage, no jealousy in his heart. He knew his lady was as pleased to see the back of the former Sheriff as he was. He'd been privy to the dismissal, which Sir David had conducted in private, in deference to

Phillip's name and family. Afterward, he'd caught up with Phillip as the latter headed to the counting room.

"Did Old Bess send you along to keep me honest?" Phillip sneered. "Or are you just checking the location of the spoils for the day when castle life bores you and you return to the wood?"

Robin's eyes narrowed. "If that day ever comes, I would not want to be you."

"Never fear, *bold Robin*." Phillip turned the name into a curse. "I do not intend to return to England. My king is dead and I have no future here."

"Indeed you don't." Robin supervised as Phillip took the share Sir David had allotted him, a paltry sum to Phillip's mind but much more than Robin thought he deserved. Phillip had looted the shire, damaging everything from field to croft to beehive in his governance. He had not even made the roads safe, although Robin had had a hand in that.

"My lady prays for your safety. She is a good Christian," Robin said. "I...am only a man and do not forgive easily. Now get you gone and do not show your whey-face around here or come Mayday, I may set the antlers on your head and declare you quarry for a hunt." Robin leaned in closer. "My arrows find their mark, Phillip, whether in the great horned harts or your cuckolded heart that wears its own horns."

Phillip tucked the full purse in his belt, sketched a small mocking bow and said nothing as he departed. Robin watched him take his leave of Sir David and Marion that very day and set off to the south.

It was after Eastertide before Locksley Hall was ready. Marion, although pleased to be spending time with her old companions, was eager for a home of her own. The earl's procession moved slowly through the countryside, taking the twenty-mile journey at a leisurely pace. Robin wore his old attire of Lincoln green and Marion's dress matched it. The folk waved to them, greeting them along the road with bread and cheese and beer. Some of the goodwives made honeycakes.

Like the castle servants, they looked healthy and prosperous. Marion was pleased to see it. Robin had named Little John as his Sheriff for the shire of Nottingham, with David overseeing it.

They set up housekeeping and Robin soon found himself feeling confined under a roof. It was as bad as London, worse than being ill in his own cave. Marion made his days perfect, but he needed to sleep under the stars. The business of accounts and rents and taxes was not for him. He called Tuck and Will to do his cipheryng, for although he had more numbers than letters, both left his head aching.

He found some surcease of his restlessness in helping with the plowing and sowing for Sheffield and Locksley and all around. There was much to do if the land was to

produce as it had of old. He practiced daily with his bow and his aim improved. He still shook after one quiver. Shooting two would make his hands and arms ache for a day.

Marion threw herself into making the shire produce wealth and seeing that all and sundry were cared for. The announcement at the wedding had been a nine-days' wonder, but most folks seemed to fall back into their comfortable Lady Marion mindset and treat her as such. He watched in amazement as everything she turned her hand to blossomed and thrived. The local wives clucked that it was below her station, but he was proud of his lady for aiding in the calving.

Once the crop was in the ground and the cattle had safely come through the calving, Robin vanished for several days, coming in only at nightfall to eat and fall into an exhausted sleep. Marion asked, once, what was consuming him.

"Consider it a wedding present, darling." Robin kissed her and fell asleep without making love to her as he often did these days.

It was Walpurgisnacht when Robin blindfolded Marion after dinner. "Come see my wedding surprise." She laughed as he led her out of the hall and through the back field to the small park enclosure. He had smoothed the way carefully yesterday and gone out this afternoon to make sure no sticks or stones had found their way into her path.

Under the first of the trees, he stopped to kiss her. "Marion, my lovely. You've been very good and patient. Trust me just a little longer?"

"I trust you, Robin," she said. He looked at her, the pale gold gown catching the last of the sun, her face turned up to him, unseeing but filled with absolute love and assurance that he would never lead her badly. He kissed her again, praying to be worthy of such devotion.

He led her to a great oak tree, not nearly as large as the one in Sherwood, but with sturdy forks. She gasped in delight when he took the blindfold away and directed her gaze up to the lowest branches.

He'd built a sleeping platform in the tree, like one of his own back in Sherwood. He put the rope ladder in her hands and she climbed up.

"We'll sleep out all summer, if the weather's fair," he said. "Listen." Marion listened and he smiled when the realization dawned on her. "We're near a small river too."

"Robin, it's perfect." She made herself comfortable on the large featherbed he'd brought up. There were blankets and pillows as well. He'd made it much more comfortable than the rustic bed of moss and pine boughs in Sherwood. Nothing but the best for his beloved bride.

He sat beside her on the bed and wrapped an arm around her. "We haven't made love in a fortnight, do you know?"

"Aye. You've been busy." Marion kissed him under his beard.

"As have you, my Lady Locksley. Being an earl is hard work."



"I have missed you. Only in sleep have your arms wrapped around me." She kissed him again. "Do you regret leaving your life of ease in the greenwood, where you hunted and made merry all the day?"

Robin laughed. "Such a layabout you think me, wife? I aided the farmers there, for we traded them meat for their crops. And I regret nothing. No more shall we be parted. I'm all for you now, my lady fair."

Marion shoved him back to the featherbed with a wicked grin. "Indeed? Shall I demand my rights as the Lady of Locksley Hall?" She plunged down for a kiss, fierce and open, and Robin moaned beneath her mouth. He sucked at her tongue and let her nibble his lips and stroke his tongue.

He could feel her arousal grinding against his own as she thrust instinctively against his belly. The thought of her wanting him so drove him to madness with desire. "Or would that be your right as my prince and I, a mere earl, your humble vassal?"

Marion stopped and looked at him, shocked and unhappy. He felt her erection soften against him. "We tried that in London. It went poorly." She rolled off him and looked away, up at the stars. Robin's heart sank. He hadn't meant to remind her.

"Poorly" barely described how that time had gone. Marion had been horrified by his scars and wept over them. Robin had been tense and too tight to allow her in. Even well-oiled fingers had not eased him enough. When she entered, he had screamed. The sound embarrassed him and terrified her. She had sworn she would never try to be his prince again.

He pulled Marion close, curling around her from behind. "My prince and my wife. All I know is that I adore you and want to love you under the stars." He tipped her face around for another kiss. "It's Walpurgis. The Celts call it Beltaine. They believe their god and goddess make love on this night to set all the crops to growing. Among their tribes, every chieftain and his lady love in the fields to ensure this."

Marion laughed and relaxed, turning fully to face him. "Oh you naughty man. Are you saying we should behave like wild Celts?"

Robin rolled her onto her back and loomed above her. He felt her interest revive. "I sleep in trees like a heathen," he laughed. He kissed her deep and sweet, tasting her mouth as if for the first time under the May moon. "Nay, love, for that would mean we have to climb down and make love in the fields. I prefer our private place, with a bed rather than hard plowed ground." He kissed her again, more slowly still, and whispered, "There's another furrow I seek to plow, my lady wife."

Marion giggled and wrapped her arms around his neck. "And it's a fine plowman you've become, my lord."

Robin eased her skirts to her waist, stroking her legs as he went. He loved the feeling of her long, strong legs under his hands. He wished he could talk her into hose more often so he could see them as well.

Marion guided his hand to her cock, which stood ready for him. "Lay your hand to the traces and let us see how straight and deep you plow."

He gripped her cock. "A fine smooth motion is the key," he said. He spared a small kiss of the head and then lay atop her again for a kiss of her mouth. His hand never stopped caressing her cock and bringing her harder.

"I like your kisses," she said, with a lick of his ear.

In answer, he gave her more and more, until she thrust into his hand in urgent need and desire. "Yes, love," Robin whispered between kisses. "Seed for the ground on this night. Scatter it, spend forth, my love." He laughed softly when Marion came, covering his hands and wrist.

"So the ground is opened. Now to prepare for plowing as with the good spring rains," he teased, reaching for a bottle of oil. His fingers slipped along her cleft, wetting her. They stroked inside as well, opening her.

"My Marion," he said softly and lifted her thighs in the crook of his arms. She smiled up at him as he slid into her body. He groaned at the tight ring that clutched his cock. He'd been neglecting her.

The heat of her body made the tightness even sweeter as he pumped. He wasn't going to last long at this pace, but oh it would be worth it. After all, the might of a harvest lord was not in how long the plowing took, but in how much it yielded.

Robin gave another few thrusts and yielded with a shout that rang off the nearby water. Marion tugged at him. He lowered her legs and kissed her. She clung to him.

"My lord," she whispered.

"My lady," he said.

They lay entwined in the soft spring night that smelled of borage and clover, heather and mayweed and under it, plowed earth and all the new green growing things.

## Chapter Twelve

### *When We a-Maying Go*

They woke to raucous shouting from below the platform in the tree. Marion clutched her undergown and peered over the edge. She nudged Robin. He stirred and rolled over with a grunt.

"Husband, we've been caught out! Treed like quarry." She laughed and kissed him fully awake.

"What? Who?" He sat up fast and looked out, not bothering with his tunic.

"Come on down from that tree, Robin. The Maypole's not getting any taller! Leastwise not the one we put up." Little John's voice made him smile.

"What, John, can't you see we're busy?" Robin pulled Marion up beside him and kissed her in full view of the dozen men who surrounded the tree.

"Come on down here," yelled Will Scarlet. "We have you surrounded. On this morning, the Lord of Locksley, Sheffield, Nottingham, Derbyshire and all the country round has a duty to do."

"I did it last night!" Robin shouted back. The bawdy answer set up a roar of laughter among the men and made Marion turn pink, a situation he remedied with more kisses.

"It's May Day, lamb," called up Sir David. "Come down and be our May Queen."

"Not that duty, you layabed lecher," bellowed Tuck. "Don't you know excessive venery renders one's eyes poor and weakens the sinews? 'Tis no wonder you can't shoot a straight shaft, save the one God gave you, since your wedding!"

"You speak fighting words, good friar. Art looking for another drubbing with the quarterstaff?" Robin pulled on his braes and hose, then belted his tunic.

The men below laughed uproariously at that, for all knew Robin had never defeated Tuck at the staff, nor would he now. Robin climbed halfway down and leapt the rest of the way, landing on his feet before them. Marion took a few moments to put herself into proper array and climbed down as well. Robin caught her before she reached the ground and twirled her about before kissing her and setting her on her feet.

"Tell me, friar, if it is love of my wife that makes my shooting less keen, whose wife have you been loving to make yours so bad?"

The men hustled them out of the forest still laughing. In the courtyard of Locksley Hall a great May-pole had been erected, crowned with flowers and ribbons. The folk of the area stood about, well-fed and cheerful, ready to dance.

A cheer went up for their lord and lady, who looked decidedly less regal after having slept wild and not had a glass to comb their hair in. But the villagers crowned them anyway in the traditional fashion, Marion with the first wildflowers, Robin with willow and oak that sported a small set of antlers as well.

Robin laughed, "Married half a year and already I wear the horns of a cuckold. Dear wife, who is it? 'Tis Will, I'm sure of it."

Marion laughed when Will Scarlet ducked, as if in preparation to run away. "As if I have eyes for any man when my lord and husband is about."

Robin kissed her for that. "Marion, my love, I don't recall inviting everyone to breakfast."

She stuffed a sticky-cake in his mouth and took one for herself. The twinkle in his eye as he licked his honeyed fingers clean told her that the May air was indeed at work.

The sun rode high overhead as they sat to table. The good March brewing and fresh bread and new cheese and wine all made the hearts merry. Robin and Marion had led the May-pole dance and admired all the cattle that had been presented before them, as was the custom. Now they watched and ate roast chicken, as the cattle and sheep and goats were driven between a pair of bonfires to ensure a blessing on them. Tuck made the sign of the Cross over each herd. Marion knew he considered the ritual pagan and was doing his best to make it holy anyway, since the folk would not give it up.

Sir David nudged Marion as he poured her more wine. "Out to the jakes with you, my lass. We need you in Nottingham on the morrow for the same festivities. There's a monk's robe in the corner of the third hay box near the privy. Take my horse. Go, child. We'll send Robin after."

Marion excused herself and hurried to the privies. She found the robe where David had said, popped it over her dress and climbed onto his horse, riding astride as a man would. Head low and hood up, she spurred for Nottingham, wishing she could have been in Lincoln instead of Locksley. The Fosse Way ran that course. Never had she traveled faster than on that old Roman road. Sheffield to Nottingham, however, was only dust and stones.

Three miles out of Sheffield, she slowed the horse to a walk, pushed back her cowl and unpinned her wimple. The sunshine felt glorious after the dreadful winter, so she let it play among her hair and on her face.

She rode awhile at an easy canter, enjoying the bright warm day as the bees buzzed in flowers along the road and birds sang their mating songs. Behind her, she heard

hooves. Turning, she saw a large man in black, with a tall hat, riding the same road, but not trying to catch up with her.

She nudged David's horse to a trot. The distance widened a bit but the man closed it. They passed under the eaves of Sherwood, him riding less than a bowshot behind her in the dim greenness, never letting her out of his sight.

When she turned from the main road, meaning to find her way to the waterfall and hide, he turned too instead of continuing on to Nottingham. He closed the distance between them by half, so as not to lose her in the thick woods.

Marion clutched the little dagger Robin insisted she carry. She glanced again at his bulk. It seemed a tiny toy to take such a large man. A thought came to her then, that it was Phillip come back for revenge. He hadn't gone to Spain at all, but remained and watched and waited. Now he had caught her alone. This third time there was no Bess to save her and she wasn't sure she could save herself. Robin would expect her to try.

Her back stiffened. Was she not Marion, only daughter of the Lionheart? Marion, granddaughter of Eleanor? They would not have been so resigned to an attack. She thought on all Robin and David had taught her. She would observe.

She watched him ride. Phillip wore black now and again. Phillip was large. She bit down on her fear and set her jaw. The decision took less than an instant. She was going to kill him and tell Little John he'd died. God would understand and so would the Sheriff.

Phillip halved the gap again. He was not yet close enough to seize her. Marion guided her horse into a glen she knew of and slid off, drawing the dagger. Phillip too slid off his horse and walked toward her.

"Stay back," she warned and brandished the dagger. She felt as if she could slice him open and carry him all the way to Nottingham. "Phillip, if you touch me, my husband will gut you if I don't manage it first."

The man doffed his hat and laughed. "That's a fine greeting. Threatened with a gutting. By myself! Brother, you look a bit flushed and wor—" Robin's words all stopped when Marion flung herself on him and kissed him hard. "Worried," he finished a moment later. "Did you really think me Phillip?"

"You did not speak. You chased me down as if to do me mischief. Who else but Phillip would mean me harm?"

Robin held her close for a moment. She knew she was trembling. Every muscle in her body suddenly felt too weak to move. "I am sorry, darling." He stroked her arms through the rough black cloth of the habit and then looked at her.

Marion knew that look and loved it. She kissed him.

"Have I ever told you I always wanted to corrupt a priest?" Robin whispered.

Marion smiled and pulled her cowl up. She tucked her hands into her sleeves. "Perhaps you should confess, my son. I will consult the bishop about your penance."

Robin went to his knees. "Aye, for I've been most wicked. I lie abed half the day in debauchery, sating myself on the flesh of a beautiful woman. I rise late, eat much and drink until I sleep again."

Marion laid a hand on his head. "Tell me of the woman. Does she perform all wanton carnal acts as you desire?"

"Every one. Better than I can imagine or dream. Her mouth is a well of honey and I am the bee. Her body is a feast of delights and I starve ere I approach it, but leave sated. Her prick –"

Marion cleared her throat. "Child, are you simple?"

"Oh no, Brother. Everyone has a prick. But only men are proud of theirs." Robin's grin slipped out as he said what she had told him she'd been taught.

Marion laughed. "A full rosary, on your knees to the smallest friar and I will absolve you."

Robin lifted the hem of her robe and set to making his penance with a more cheerful heart than he'd ever had. Marion stood proud and ready beneath her dress. He kissed just the tip. "First, one always does the proper honors."

Marion stroked his hair. "All haste, child, or I will doubt the sincerity of your prayers."

At that Robin laughed and plunged down, swallowing all of her at a gulp. He felt her knees tremble when he slipped out his tongue to stroke her balls. He made a careful ten circuits of her cock with his tongue, a full decade, before coming up to play with the head for a moment.

"A decade of prayers and a glorious moment."

"Hush," Marion said. "Keep going. You've four more decades."

"Mmm," Robin smiled, "four more." He'd already decided to see if he could make her come before he finished the count. He took her back in, sucking in the way he knew she loved best, and began counting the strokes. She came at thirty-six.

"Oh dear," Robin said, settling back on his heels. "The smallest friar is taken ill in the midst of the Third Joyful Mystery."

"Ego te absolvo," Marion managed.

Robin sprang to his feet. "Now it's my turn, priest," he growled, grasping her by her shoulders. Marion saw his plan and smiled.

"I was a fool to think you anything but a rogue and a lecher," she sniffed, trying to look disdainful to match her words, but failing miserably. Robin grinned at the eagerness on her face as he pulled her to the ground and rolled her onto her hands and knees.

*"Fili hominis duae mulieres filiae matris unius fuerunt et fornicatae sunt in Aegypto in adolescentia sua fornicatae sunt ibi subacta sunt ubera earum et fractae sunt mammae pubertatis earum,"* Marion said, as if praying.

"Cunt, not sunt, if we're talking about fornication, brother," Robin teased, coming up with the only words he knew of the Latin. He said his Ave and his Paternoster well enough, but like his French, he had very little Latin. He flipped Marion's robe and skirt up over her hips, baring her sweet arse. He gave one soft globe a swat and then settled between them to kiss a bit.

Marion continued, *"Multiplicavit enim fornicationes suas recordans dies adolescentiae suae quibus fornicata est in terra Aegypti et insanivit libidine super concubitu eorum quorum carnes sunt ut carnes asinorum et sicut fluxus equorum fluxus eorum et visitasti scelus adolescentiae tuae quando subacta sunt in Aegypto ubera tua et confractae mammae pubertatis tuae."*

She gave a soft groan as Robin pressed his tongue as deep as he could. "Ah Robin!"

Robin laughed. "Just dampening a dry old priest for a bit of fornication and fluxes and sunt work." He spat into his hand twice and rubbed it on the head of his cock then pressed against her opening.

"Oh fuck!" she gasped as Robin pushed in. He hadn't even been sure she'd known that particular Saxon word. She was tighter than she'd ever been and he wondered if he could last.

"Wicked naughty priest to know such nasty words," Robin said and swatted her rear. She shuddered under his touch and thrust back, hot for him.

Driven by his own need and her desires, aroused by the filthy Latin and filthier Saxon words, Robin slammed against Marion's hips, driving into her arse with each stroke. She swore under him, all her Latin gone to Saxon crudeness that said she spent too much time with the farmers' wives.

All thoughts fled under the pound of his hips, the tightness of his wife, the sweet tautness in his balls that begged to be sent forth like an arrow. He came with a shout, shoving deep into Marion, and felt her go to her elbows on the grass.

When he came to himself, Robin blushed as crimson as Will's favorite hat. He pulled away from Marion and sought her face. She rolled at once onto her back and looked at him, smiling.

"Oh husband." She drew his flaming face close and kissed him.

"Wife. Heart of my own heart. I adore you," he whispered and covered her face with kisses.

They walked out of the glade, leading their horses, arms around each other's waist. Will Scarlet waited for them, mounted on his own dapple-gray at the fork in the road.

"So there you two are. We thought you'd gotten lost in the forest."

Robin gave him a weary smile. "Will, you may be my mind, but I do not get lost in my own home."

"Tut, the pair of you. Bess has had us working day and night. A sharp tongue on that woman. And a swift flat of the sword on the man." Will grinned and rubbed his arse. "To the Great Oak and swiftly for your dinner grows cold with waiting, my king and queen of May."

"Dinner?" Marion looked at Robin. "Thank you, what a lovely thought to dine in Sherwood."

He smiled. "Dine, aye, among good friends. And then, mayhap, we'll make love in that cave where I first debauched you."

Marion aimed a swat of her own at Robin's rear. "Of course, it would never do to keep Bess waiting." She climbed on Sir David's horse and nudged it to catch up with Will's.

"Of course not," Robin smiled and joined them on the road into the heart of the forest.



## About the Authors

Angelia Sparrow has been telling stories for about forty years, and writing for almost that long. She traded a library paraprofessional position for ten in the wind and the hum of the highway. She drives a semi and writes during her loading and unloading times.

Her home time is spent refereeing four kids, two cats and a husband. She crochets and knits to get past writer's block.

She has been publishing professionally since 2004, mostly paranormal romance, and has been nominated for several awards.

Naomi Brooks has been writing since the age of nine, when she won a short story contest at her elementary school. She has been active in the fan fiction community since 1999, before finally going pro in 2006.

She works as a shipping clerk when not writing and finds her young male coworkers her number one source of inspiration. She is mother to one brilliant, gifted and non-finicky cat.

Angelia and Naomi welcome comments from readers. You can find their websites and email addresses on their author bio pages at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

### *Tell Us What You Think*

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