

"If you will bring your brother to where your page is lighting the fire," Avisa said, "I shall tend to his wound."

"Baldwin will do that," Christian's tone warned she would be foolish to argue.

She did anyhow. "But I told you that I have some experience with this."

"As Baldwin does." He wore a cool smile. "A wise page learns to tend all sorts of wounds. Why don't you prepare us something to eat?" He pulled some packages from behind his brother's horse's saddle. Tossing them to her, he said, "Prepare these."

"I am a better healer than a cook."

"You do not need to cook anything, just open the packages. The meat and bread are ready to be eaten. Let us men attend to the wound."

Avisa bit back the curse that no sister in St. Jude's Abbey should even know. She had learned it at a decrepit inn on the way to where she met Christian Lovell. Was this how all men treated women, or was he trying to humiliate her because she had questioned his orders?

Whirling so her skirt belled out behind her, she walked to where the fire was burning lowly. She threw the packets on the ground beside it and kept walking. How tempted she was to tell him that she had been sent here to protect *him*! That fact would erase the arrogant smile from his lips.

Her steps faltered at a roar of pain. She looked back at where Baldwin was bent over Guy. "Oh, dear God," she whispered, then almost screamed when a hand touched her cheek. She took a calming breath as it steered her face toward Christian. She had not realized he was following her.

"Do not look horrified," he said with a tight smile as he stepped between her and her view of the fire, "Guy shrieks while drawing a splinter from his finger. He will be fine."

Another screech sent a shiver swirling up her spine. "Are you certain?"

She saw the truth in his eyes. Christian was trying to prevent her from seeing what was happening. She pulled away and ran to where Baldwin was tossing aside the blood-coated arrow. A gash was torn across Guy's leg.

Baldwin's smile was strained as he reached for a pouch on his belt. "He will be fine once I clean it. I will stitch the wound closed."

"If you are suffering from a weak head," Christian added, as he came to stand beside her again, "you should sit before you faint."

"De Vere women do not faint," Avisia asserted, but her head did seem oddly light.

"On that I agree, for courage you have in great quantities." He motioned toward the brook. "Will you join me while I wash the dust of the road from my mouth? It

will give us both the opportunity to learn more of each other in a civilized manner."

"Very well." Better to relent a little. Deciding what to tell him would free her mind from focusing on his skin's teasing caress when he had cupped her cheek.

They crossed the clearing. The water had become silver in the moonlight. The stones trailed patterns in the slow current dancing around the dead plants.

She looked at the opposite shore. A motion sent her hand to her sword, but she relaxed when she saw several deer.

Christian knelt to scoop up some water. "If you fear the outlaws will follow us, Baldwin and I will take a turn on watch."

"An excellent idea. Those outlaws probably have given up the search for us, but who knows what others the forest may spawn?"

He stood. Water glistened on his lips, luring her gaze to them. She looked again at the tips of her shoes as he said, "My offer is for one night only. I do not want Guy's rest disturbed tonight. Nor do I want to wake with a knife stuck here." He tapped the center of her chest. When she stepped back, shocked, he chuckled.

"You are bold, sir."

"So are you!"

Avisa bit back her retort. Was Christian's concern truly for her and his comrades, or was he just trying to

unnerve her? If 'twere the latter, he was succeeding far better than even he might suspect. The stroke of his finger against her breast, brief as a heartbeat, had sent heat flashing through her with the speed of a summer storm. Fast and breathtaking and frightening as it swept all thought from her head.

Struggling to keep her voice even, she said, "Having a guard is a good suggestion." She must handle this situation delicately, for she did not want to create a chasm between them. Then he might leave without her, and she would have failed the queen and the abbey. Maybe assuming the woman's role and opening the food packets would ease the tension between them. "Excuse me. I must -"

He caught her hand and kept her from walking away. "I deserve an explanation, Lady Avisa."

"Lady?" she choked. "Please do not call me that."

"Why? It is your name, isn't it?"

"Why do you think that?"

He tapped her scabbard. "Your sword was made by a master craftsman." He rubbed his fingers on her drooping sleeve. "This fabric has not been embedded with smoke and ash from long hours of being near a smithy's forge, so I doubt you are an ironmonger's daughter. Although I have to consider you might have stolen your sword, you know how to use it. That suggests the sword was made for you, and such an excellent weapon would belong only to a lord's

daughter."

She wondered how else she had betrayed herself. Again she recalled the queen's warning not to misjudge her godson. "I have to - "

"Tell me the truth, or. . ."

Shock widened her eyes. "Or what?"

He drew her to him as his cloak flowed around her again, holding her within its dark wings. His voice became a low rumble. "Tell me, milady, why a lord's daughter hides in the woods."

"My sister - "

"'Tis more than that, for your father must have men to free your sister."

"No longer." She dampened her lips. The story she had thought was simple and straightforward was becoming more convoluted as she invented answers to his questions. Sitting on a mossy hummock gave her a way to keep him from seeing her face which might reveal she was lying as she spun the tale she had devised with the abbess. "Lord Hugh attacked my home, and few survive. Those who do have sought sanctuary with Milo de Sommeville. I must reach Milo de Sommeville and beg his assistance, but I cannot be certain he will grant my family such a boon when he could be Lord Hugh's next target."

"How can that be so? When Stephen was king, such things happened, but Henry is king, and he is bringing law back to the land."

"Lord Hugh believes the only true law is his own. Will you help me reach Milo de Sommeville's stronghold and save my sister? I know you are on your way to your friend's wedding, but I fear I cannot save her on my own."

"I suspect you could." He smiled. The expression transformed his face. The strong lines remained, but a gentleness slipped into his voice. "You have guile and wit as your two best weapons, so you might not have to draw your sword."

Avisa blinked as his laugh broke the spell his voice had woven about her without her being aware of it. Vexed, she fired back, "If it were that easy, I would not be seeking your help."

Sitting beside her, he tossed a stone to plop in the water. His easy pose did not deceive her. His hand was not far from his knife and his feet pressed against the mossy bank so he could jump up at the first sign of trouble.

"Before I agree to assist you, tell me the truth of one thing," he said, low enough so his words would reach no one's ears but hers.

"If I can."

"Why are you traveling - ?"

A warning shout rang through the clearing. Avisa reacted without thought. Christian gasped when she struck him hard in the chest. With a curse, he fell back on the ground. She yelped as his arm swept around her to pull her

down, too.

"What are you doing now?" he gasped.

"Saving you from that arrow."

His eyes widened when he looked past her shoulder to the quivering arrow stuck in the tree inches from where his head had been. "So I see."

"If the outlaws have returned - "

"It did not come from one of their bows."

"How do you know that?" She stared at him. "You recognize the fletcher by his work?" She reached up to pull the arrow out of the trunk, but his arm around her halted her. "Please release me!"

He smiled and twisted sharply from beneath her, flipping her onto her back. She cried out in amazement as he slid his sword from its scabbard. Was he going to slay her? Why? She had just saved his life.

She gasped again when he tossed it aside. She put up her hands to push away his heavy cloak. When her fingers brushed his hard chest, his thumb edged along her chin. She tried to turn away, but his fingers twisted through her hair.

"What is wrong?" she demanded.

"Very little at the moment, I would say."

"I thought you said we would behave in a civilized manner."

"We are."

"But you just drew your sword. Have the outlaws

returned?"

"No."

"Then why - ?"

"It would have been in the way." His other arm slipped beneath her.

"In the way? What do you mean?"

His laugh vanished as his mouth slanted across hers. Shock riveted her at his brazen kiss. . .and at the luscious pleasure on his lips. Her breath sounded swift and eager in her ears as his mouth slipped along her neck. Each fevered touch was a separate pleasure, growing excruciatingly exciting.

She lifted her hands to shove him away, but, as she touched his firm shoulders, he pressed her more deeply into the moss. Boldly, he explored her lips, and the tip of his tongue grazed the corners of her mouth, sending undeniable desire racing within her. A desire for more of these dangerous, delicious kisses. When he raised his mouth from hers, she stared up at him, her breath ragged.

He chuckled again. "How simple and delectable it is to hush you this way! I would be glad to think of endless ways to seduce you into silence."

"Are you quite finished?" She shoved him away and sat. How dare he be so presumptuous. . .and how dare he ruin her pleasure with a jest?

He laughed. "Now that is a charming thank you when I wanted to show you how grateful I am."

"Do not foolishly assume I wanted such gratitude."

"It was not a foolish assumption when you were willing."

"Christian!" came a shout.

Baldwin ran up to them and pulled the arrow out of the tree trunk. His arrival kept her from having to devise a lie to conceal how close Christian was to the truth. His kisses had overwhelmed her, making her forget - for those wondrous moments - even her obligations to the queen and the abbey.

"Christian!" Baldwin cried. "Are you all right? Guy should have known better than to try to fire at a stag when he cannot stand."

"Guy?" Avisia gasped. "Guy let fly that arrow at us?"

"How else would I have recognized it?" Christian asked with a cool serenity that threatened to unleash her temper. He took the arrow from his page. "See this notch at the end of each feather? That is the hallmark of my father's fletcher."

"Your own brother fired an arrow at you?"

"Do not worry yourself. We were not hurt."

"It nearly struck you."

"You saved me, and he did not let loose another."

Standing and brushing twigs from her gown, she said, "I saved you *again*. You are in my debt."

"And you wish me to even that debt by rescuing your sister?" His smile straightened into a frown.

"Yes."

He regarded her for a long moment, then nodded. "Very well. We shall help you as you have asked." Brushing his fingers against her cheek, he added, "But you must agree to one important thing, Avisia."

"What?" She wished her mind would function, but the sensations his fingertips had sent through her held every thought captive as surely as her imaginary sister in that imaginary dastardly baron's imaginary castle.

"That I shall be the leader, and that you will follow my orders. Do you agree?"

"Yes," she replied, knowing she risked him not helping her if she said anything else.

He tweaked her cheek as if she were a child. "I trust a de Vere does not break such vows."

"I do not break any vows I take."

When he smiled again and went with his page to where his brother began to apologize for firing the arrow, she did not follow. She would not break any vow, not to him and not to the queen. She would protect Christian Lovell as she had pledged, but, for the first time, she realized she would also have to protect herself from surrendering to her longing to be in his arms again. She was not sure which would be more difficult.