

An icy smile pulled at Saxon Fitz-Juste's lips. "I cannot believe that *you* are the one the queen has come seeking."

Mallory de Saint-Sebastian drew in a quick breath to keep anger from tinting her voice. "The queen trusts the abbess to make that decision. As her man, you should do the same."

"You are right. However, as the queen's man, it behooves me to serve as her eyes. You do not have the stance of a skilled warrior. If *you* are the best in St. Jude's Abbey, maybe the queen's faith in the Abbey is misplaced."

Was he trying to make her despise him? If so, he need not try so hard. She already loathed his arrogance. He could look down his aquiline nose at her all he wished. That did not do more than vex her, but she was furious at his disdain of her beloved abbey.

"If you wish," she said, knowing she should have waited for the abbess's permission to speak, but too angry to keep quiet, "I will be very glad to show you the extent of my training."

"That exhibition must wait for the queen." Again his gaze slid up and down her. "She must see something in you that I do not."

"I agree."

"You do?"

She smiled as she set her quiver back on her shoulder. “She must see something in *you* that I do not.”

He said nothing, and she wondered if she had shocked him speechless. Maybe he had not expected a cloistered sister to speak her mind, but she could not allow him to denigrate the Abbey. . .and the queen! Queen Eleanor deserved their respect and more.

When he turned and went back toward the horses, she smiled. That smile vanished when he pulled a quiver off the saddle and withdrew two arrows. They were several inches longer than the arrows she used. To use them would mean readjusting her stance and draw, and even that might not be enough. She had never practiced with arrows of that length.

“You would do well,” Fitz-Juste said, “to guard that whetted tongue in the queen’s presence. She is unlikely to have patience with your attempts at wit, considering what is going on.”

Mallory’s brow ruffled with bafflement. What was occurring beyond the Abbey that would distress the queen?

As if she had asked the question aloud, he focused his dark eyes on her and said, “Surely you are not so isolated here that you are unaware of how the young king and two of his brothers have risen up against King Henry the Senior.”

“We are aware of the revolt.” She tried to put as much haughtiness in her voice as he had in his. “If the king had not been determined to guarantee his heir the throne by coronating him three years ago, his son might have enough patience to wait until the throne is rightfully his with his father’s death.”

“Sister Mallory,” said the abbess.

Mallory turned, horrified, to see the abbess’s scowl. Not wanting to know what was on the queen’s face, she lowered her eyes, knowing she had spoken in a way that could bring shame on the Abbey. Heat scorched her face, and she was glad the moonlight would bleach any color from her cheeks.

When Queen Eleanor spoke, there was no hint she had heard anything said by either Mallory or the abbess. “Where do you teach others, milady?”

Her finger shook as she pointed beyond the abbess’s house.

The abbess frowned at her again before gesturing more graciously for the queen to come with her. As they walked away, the four dark-haired men fell in line behind them with practiced precision.

Fitz-Juste copied the abbess’s motion toward Mallory. He said nothing, but he did not need to. In addition to speaking openly of the

king's demise, she had been rude not to answer the queen aloud. She could not fault him when he had been successful at infuriating her to the point she did not guard her words. It had taken her five years to learn to control her temper that had flared too often at her father's indifference to her mother's suffering. Five years of restraint which had been negated within minutes by Saxon Fitz-Juste's taunts.

She flinched as she hurried to follow the queen and the abbess. The queen had suggested he knew what to do. Had his words been a test of some sort? If so, she had failed completely, shaming herself and, more importantly, the Abbey.

The familiar targets that were set against short stacks of hay offered Mallory no comfort as she rounded the corner of the abbess's house. Other footfalls came from behind her, and she knew the sisters awakened by the voices were coming to watch. Hadn't she done the same, peering over the kitchen garden wall, the first time the queen came to St. Jude's Abbey and challenged Sister Avisia to prove her skills? Mallory had wished then that she could have been chosen. Now she would have gladly traded places with any of the sisters following quietly behind to see what the queen proposed.

"There," Queen Eleanor said. "The target farthest to the right,

Saxon.”

He gave Mallory a smug smile before crossing the open area to the target half-concealed by darkness. Easily he drove one arrow and then the other into the target before stepping aside.

“There is your target, Lady Mallory,” the queen said.

Mallory stared in disbelief. The moonlight and shadow dappled across the yard made more difficult a shot that would have been challenging in the sunlight. The arrows were barely the breadth of her arrow apart. For so long she had been training others in the Abbey, and she had not spent much time in practice.

Silence filled the courtyard, but she was aware of everyone looking at her, waiting to see if she could accomplish the task given to her by the queen. Setting the arrow to the string again, she turned so her left side was to the target and raised the bow, then lowered it. She heard whispers all around, but neither the queen nor Fitz-Juste spoke. He simply watched her with that same self-satisfied smile. She wanted to warn him that he would not be wearing it long.

She slid her quiver off her back, leaning it against her right leg. The murmurs vanished when she lifted the bow to aim again. Slowly she drew the string back until it touched her lips and the middle of her chin. As she

had hundreds of times, she let her fingers ease off the string and the arrow fly.

It arched at what seemed an impossibly slow pace. She held her breath, not wanting to disappoint the queen and the abbess, even as she reached for two more arrows, sending them after the first. As it reached the top of its arc, the first arrow seemed to speed toward the target. It struck the target with a dull thud, directly between the two arrows. Right after it, the other two arrows hit, one on the outside of each of the arrows jammed into the target. All five arrows quivered with the impact.

Mallory lowered her bow and picked up her quiver, so nobody would see her relief. Or, she had to admit, her own smug smile if she looked toward Saxon Fitz-Juste.

“Well done, Lady Mallory,” the queen said.

Straightening, Mallory delighted in the queen’s praise. “I have been taught well.”

Queen Eleanor continued, as if Mallory had not spoken, “You shall travel to my court in Poitiers where I have a task that you are well-suited for.”

Excitement and uncertainty battled within her, but she kept her face serene. “I am eager to serve, my queen.”

“You will travel separately from us.”

“As you wish.”

“I would wish that you could journey with me so you could tell me how you learned to be so accomplished.” The queen’s smile wavered for only a moment. “One must be cautious not to show one’s hand in these parlous times.” She motioned to her men to return to their horses.

As the four dark-haired men obeyed, Queen Eleanor expressed her thanks to the abbess. Neither woman could have noticed the lecherous smiles the four men wore as they eyed Mallory anew.

She raised her chin and looked away, dismissing them with the dignity the queen had shown. Her pose was threatened when Fitz-Juste walked toward her, carrying all five arrows. He held out the three shorter ones to her.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

“You would have been wiser to miss.” He walked away without giving her a chance to answer.

Which was just as well because she had no idea what she might have said.