

Robin's hand generated a warmth against Joan's palm that tickled her insides. The morning slipped by without her errand list getting any shorter, yet Joan wished they could spend all day out here. How long had it been since they were alone?

"Do you feel dizzy?"

Joan sighed.

Of course, they weren't *actually* alone, as Tuck's sporadic polling of her health reminded her.

"I feel fine, Tuck."

Throughout the day, Robin had opened his mouth to say something, only to glance over his shoulder at Tuck and close it again. She wanted to hear whatever was on his mind, but there was nothing she could do.

Tuck didn't know many details concerning Miles Jessop, so Joan took this opportunity to bring her up to speed.

"The rest of the unit leaves next week. They're waiting for their families to arrive. They plan to travel around the mountain. Get out of the cathedral's immediate reach. There is plenty of wilderness over there to disappear into."

She did not miss the wistful look on Robin's face, but he made no comment. Instead, he said, "Are there any leads I can pursue while you interview Captain Humphrey? Our chance of finding Miles decreases every day."

"We might find clues at the cathedral. Someone in power must be the mastermind behind the disappearances."

"I'll handle that," Tuck said.

Joan looked at her. "You can't go there!"

"It's for a good cause. I'll take Kit. We'll be fine."

Before she could protest further, six masked men jumped at them from the trees. They swarmed the horses, brandishing knives and staves.

"Halt!" the leader ordered. "Surrender your purses and mounts. If you submit peaceably, we may allow you to live."

Robin smiled at Joan. "I've always wondered what it feels like on the receiving side of this."

"Nonsense. We are never so rude."

"See here!" Tuck steered her horse right into the man's face. "We have a busy day with no time to waste on your theatrics. Move."

The men laughed. They sounded more than a little drunk.

The leader pushed his knife up into Tuck's face. "Don't push me, old woman. You'll regret it."

Joan settled back into her saddle and rested her hands on the horn.

"Young man," Tuck grinned wickedly, "the regrets shall exclusively be yours."

She slammed her palms together. Immediately, the bandits clutched their stomachs. They staggered across the road and puked into a cluster of ferns. The leader seemed to be particularly affected as he heaved his guts with little reprieve or breath between rounds.

"Don't you think—"

Tuck held a palm in Joan's face. "He called me old, Joan. You know how I feel about that."

"But they're not breathing."

"The human brain can survive several minutes without oxygen."

Joan sighed. "Oh dear."

An arrow zipped through the air and struck Tuck in the back. She pitched forward in her saddle.

"Tuck!" Joan shouted. She sent an arrow in the direction of the ambush—a cluster of trees on the far side of the road. The leaves shook from sudden movement but no one appeared. She reached for a second arrow.

Meanwhile, the bandits stopped vomiting and circled them again with their weapons raised. Robin and Jinx plunged into the fray, slashing and kicking furiously. Joan stayed close to Tuck. She smacked anyone who got too close with the flat of her sword.

Tuck pulled the arrow from her shoulder. There was a spray of blood, but she paid it no mind. She fitted it to her bow and let it fly to its original owner. This time, the tree yelped and a man fell from the branches.

"Nice shot, Tuck."

Tuck shrugged. "Somebody had to teach Robin's father."

Together, the women put their hands on her shoulder. Joan pushed strength into Tuck's healing gift and the flesh knitted back into place. Immediately, Joan felt dizzy.

Tuck pushed her hand away. "I see you using your powers again in this fight and I'll box your ears, understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

By now, Robin had taken down several bandits. Though he was outnumbered, they were poor fighters and drunk to boot. Robin twirled around them with practiced grace. It was clear he was playing with them now.

It took Joan a moment to notice the brown bear and small army of raccoons

at his side. "Dear, I'm sure they had better things to do."

"They assure me they're enjoying themselves." He jumped clear of one bandit's pathetic swing. "Besides, I needed some practice since that showdown with the ravager. Consider this therapy."

Two bandits, seeing the odds had never been in their favor, fled. The bear gave chase at top speed. When they saw their pursuer, the men screamed shrill and long.

The raccoons were clearly having a good time. They sunk their claws into the flesh underneath the bandits' trousers and climbed up their legs. The bandits howled at each new piercing. Joan dashed in and out of the fray, scooping up any who had been knocked aside. They nuzzled her palm in thanks before springing onto the backs of their attackers again with a feral cry.

Another man broke off and fled, angry raccoon swinging from his bum by the teeth. Jinx brought him back.

When all were subdued, Robin tied the bandits into a string and forced them to sit. They had just finished when the bear came back, proudly dangling one bandit by the bum from his mouth and sliding the other along with his rear foot.

Robin scratched the bear's ears. "Release, please."

It sat back on its haunches with a *thud* and released his prisoners. Tuck put a hand on both of them. They yelped as their bodies regrew the needed flesh. Joan added them to the string while the raccoons helped themselves to the food in the men's packs, stowed in the bushes nearby.

"Ambushing strangers in Sherwood." Robin shook his head. "I've never seen anything so daft."

The leader's mask had been tore off, possibly by a raccoon paw, revealing a fresh black eye. He looked Robin up and down. "So you're Robin Hood, eh? You're shorter than I expected."

Robin's shoulders lifted as he drew in a long breath, but he said nothing.

"We should form a partnership! You and us, the terror of Sherwood. What do you think?"

Robin grabbed the man by the shirt and hauled him into the air. The rope between him and his neighbor went taut. "I think thugs like you give my people a bad name. We risk our lives to protect others. You steal and kill for profit."

The man smirked. It was ugly and toothy. "Whatever helps you sleep at night, mate."

Robin dropped him. He whistled into the forest. A second bear emerged, coming to take its place next to the first. "My friends here will escort you to the main road. I'm sure the King's Nationals will be interested in your activities."

The leader sputtered. "You're-you're leaving us with wild bears?"

"Welcome to Sherwood. Mate."

Joan and Tuck scavenged the sacks of gold from the bandits' supplies—Tuck got into a brief tugging match with a particularly persistent raccoon until Joan redirected his attention to a sack of biscuits—and mounted their horses.

"Thank you kindly for your donation," Robin said. "We will put it to nobler use than you intended."

The lead bear took up the rope in his teeth. The second one patrolled up and down the line of prisoners like a surly guard. The parade waddled in the

direction of the main road.

“I love bears,” Robin said when they had gone. “Such a delightful sense of humor.”