THE BARON'S BRIDE

JOANNA MAKEPEACE

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Gisela of Brinkhurst enjoyed managing her father's keep and had never thought much about marriage. Little did she foresee the threats to her father's lands and how marriage would ensure their survival.Sir Alain de Treville needed a wife, and there was no better time than when the king placed him in Allestone Castle to protect the area from daring marauders. When nearby Brinkhurst was attacked, and Lady Gisela's family suffered great losses, it was time for him to insist on their union, despite the beautiful maiden's indifference to marriage.Would the brave Gisela give in to her growing love for Alain–a man who showed her every day how much he adored her?

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She rose and made for the curtained doorway

But, with a hand upon her shoulder, Alain turned her gently but firmly to face him.

“Am I not entitled to the customary kiss to seal our betrothal?”

He drew her close, his arms reaching up behind her waist, pressing her to him. Gisela had expected him to kiss her brow or cheek formally, but his lips suddenly closed upon hers, gently at first, then demandingly, so that she was forced to open her own and respond.

“You must not be afraid of me.”

“I am not,” she said huskily. “I—”

“Good. I shall not expect too much of you—at first.”

The Baron’s Bride

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Chapter One

1152

Gisela could hear the sound of angry voices as she rode through the forest towards Aldith's assart cottage. She glanced worriedly towards Oswin who was riding with her. In this troubled year of 1152, when every man feared attacks upon his property from both known enemies and suspected ones, Walter of Brinkhurst had always insisted that Gisela ride accompanied. Her father's reeve had been inspecting the autumn work on the field strips and was now escorting her on a visit to her former nurse.

Aldith's husband had cut the small assart clearing, but he had died two years ago and Aldith had continued to live in the snug little cottage he'd built for her with her fifteen-year-old-son, Sigurd. Her older son, who had died within the first month of his life, had provided her with the milk to feed Gisela, whose own mother had died soon after the birth, and Aldith had given all of her hungry love for her dead child to her master's daughter.

Though she no longer lived at Brinkhurst Manor, there was still deep affection between them and Gisela visited her nurse frequently.

Gisela put spurs to her palfrey and urged on Oswin, whose usual speed was slow and dignified.

"That sounds as if it is coming from Aldith's cottage. She has always insisted that she is safe there, but Father has been urging her to come to live at Brinkhurst for some time now."

Within minutes Gisela and her mount burst into the clearing to find Aldith at the gate of her rough wattle fence, facing two men-at-arms and struggling to hold back Sigurd, who was intent on doing one of them some mischief.

Gisela saw by the blue chevron device on their boiled leather coats they were Allestone men. She kicked her feet free of the stirrups, leaped down easily without Oswin's assistance and hastened to reach her frightened nurse, with Oswin puffing more slowly in her wake.

"What is it, Aldith?" she said breathlessly. "What has Sigurd done?"

She was aware that some of the villeins and serfs frequently broke the forest laws in their pursuit of game. Old Godfrey of Allestone had, like her father, usually turned a blind eye to these proceedings, yet he had, on one or two occasions, delivered judgement on the miscreant at the manor court, though always tempered with mercy.

Now that Godfrey had been killed in a recent skirmish between royal and rebel troops near Gloucester and had had no living heir—his son having died three years before in the war,—the castle and desmesne had been granted to Baron Alain de Treville, by King Stephen.

Gisela knew little about the baron, having seen him only once from a distance in the nearby town of Oakham. He had looked, to her eyes, to be a tall, forbidding figure; she was now afraid that Sigurd might be in trouble and that this man would have little mercy for his misdemeanours.

"He has done nothing, Demoiselle Gisela," Aldith said, hastily cutting short Sigurd's excited attempt to explain, "but these fellows say we must leave our cottage before Sunday next. I keep trying to tell them that we have nowhere else to go but this sergeant says…" She broke down, tears streaming down her brown, workworn cheeks.

Gisela put a comforting arm round her nurse's shoulders and turned to the intruders.

"I am Gisela of Brinkhurst, the neighbouring manor," she said peremptorily. "Aldith is my former nurse. She is very dear to me. What is all this about?"

The older of the two men, a grizzled veteran of about forty, cleared his throat, obviously embarrassed.

"Begging your pardon, demoiselle, I understand your concern, but this is Allestone land and, as you know, to cut an assart in the wood is strictly unlawful."

“We are all aware of that,” Gisela snapped, “but there are many such cottages hereabouts. Rolf, Aldith’s late husband, worked for Godfrey of Allestone as a skilled forester, a free man, and his assart was tolerated by his master.”

“Aye, demoiselle, but the desmesne now belongs to Baron Alain de Treville and he has ordered me to clear this woodland to a depth of half a mile from Allestone Castle, and, as you can see for yourself, this cottage must be destroyed to allow for the total clearance.”

Aldith burst into tears and Sigurd renewed his attempts to fly at the sergeant.

“Surely some allowance could be made for this cottage. Aldith has lived here for some years and…”

“That is quite impossible.” A cold voice broke into Gisela’s pleading and she turned hastily to see that a mailed rider had come into the clearing. She had been so intent on Aldith’s distress that she had failed to notice the jingle of harness or the soft sound of his courser’s progress over the fallen leaves of the forest floor.

She presumed the newcomer was Baron Alain de Treville from the immediate deference shown to him by the two men-at-arms. He sat tall in the saddle and she could discern little of his features under the shadow of his conical helmet with its jutting nose guard and mailed coif for, like all men going abroad in these troubled times, he rode fully armed in mailed hauberk. He gently urged his mount closer to the opposing parties.

He saw a woman clad in an enveloping mantle of dark blue wool, caught upon the right shoulder by a heavy gold clasp which told him she was of knightly class. Even if it had not done so, the very regal stance and the haughty poise of her head would have informed him.

Her hair was mainly hidden beneath her head veil of fine linen and held in place by a simple fillet, covered in the same blue wool as her mantle, but he could just see, by an escaping strand from one braid, that she was fair. He had little chance to judge the stature of her figure, but the rigidity of her form as she stood proud and erect made him sure she was slim and very young.

His brown eyes flashed as he recognised a like spirit to his own. He had heard her high, imperious tones as he had ridden through the wood and he knew this to be a woman to match him in stubborn determination. His long lips twitched slightly as he bowed his head in courteous acknowledgement of her rank. He dismounted and handed his reins to the younger of his two men and came striding unhurriedly towards her.

“Demoiselle, I must reiterate that what you ask is impossible. I regret it must be so, but there it is. I am Alain de Treville, and you, I surmise, are the daughter of my near neighbour, Walter of Brinkhurst.”

He shrugged slightly in the Gallic fashion and the unusual intonation of his Norman French told her he had probably come originally from the dukedom overseas and had only lived in England for a few years.

Her lips trembled mutinously. “Yes, I am Gisela of Brinkhurst and, as I was explaining to your sergeant here, Aldith, whose cottage this is, is my former nurse and we are very fond of her and anxious to ensure her welfare. She cannot be cast from her home with so little consideration.”

“Believe me, demoiselle, I have given this matter every consideration. This woodland must be cut back to give my garrison a clear view of any approaching enemy force. Your father will explain that it is a very usual tactic. King Stephen has commanded me to improve Allestone’s defences, which have been neglected sorely of late.

“Your father will also agree with me that there have been frequent attacks on property in this district by unscrupulous mercenaries. He must be well aware of the need for defensive measures himself.”

His eyes dwelt momentarily upon Gisela’s still-indignant form and then travelled to Oswin, whose portly figure and frowning expression revealing alarm at this unfortunate encounter, hovered anxiously some little distance behind his young mistress.

“I see you do have an escort, but I consider one man is hardly sufficient to protect you should you be ambushed. I would have thought at least two sturdy men-at-arms would be necessary to accompany you when you leave the boundaries of your father’s land.”

“Oswin is perfectly trustworthy,” Gisela snapped irritably. Her father had, indeed, often remonstrated with her recently over such rash behaviour for she had sometimes ventured from the manor lands alone and, as a result of her father’s anger, had suffered curtailment of the freedom she had formerly enjoyed since childhood.

“I am sure he is,” the Baron replied mildly as if to a fractious child, “but it is possible to be too reckless of one’s own safety these days and, if you were my daughter, I would insist on more stringent precautions.”

“Quite likely you would,” Gisela returned drily, “but I am no kin of yours. Now, can we return to the matter in hand? Surely you can make an exception in the case of this one small building?”

He stood facing her, feet astride, one hand upon the serviceable hilt of his longsword. She was annoyed that he continued to smile as if he were reasoning with a child who did not understand the point at issue.

“Demoiselle, you must see that such an exception would defeat the object of the exercise. Your nurse is vulnerable here. The improved defences of Allestone Castle are for her advantage and the rest of the serfs and villeins nearby, as well as for your father and his neighbours, for the castle garrison is at his service should he need to call on it.”

“I hardly think that will be necessary.” Gisela knew her shrillness of tone could be deemed rude and somewhat ungracious for such an offer but she was so incensed by his lordliness that she could not prevent herself from blurting it out.

“I hope your father is of the same opinion,” de Treville commented pithily and she blushed hotly.

“My father has defended his own manor and been ready to answer the King’s call and to go to the assistance of his neighbours,” she retorted.

He made no answer and his very silence added to her feeling that her behaviour was both callow and boorish.

“It is not to be borne,” she said angrily. “Why should Aldith be made homeless simply for a whim of the new master of Allestone?”

“I am prepared to offer your nurse accommodation within the castle precincts where she and her son will be adequately protected,” he replied smoothly, which rather took the wind from her sails and made her draw in breath quickly.

“But there is the question of her vegetable plot. How will she survive the winter when that is destroyed?”

“Again, I am perfectly prepared to provide for her and the boy. She can take service within the castle.”

Aldith clutched agitatedly at Gisela’s arm and she turned to face her. It was evident from her expression and the meaningful glances she directed at first her son, and then the Baron, that she feared for Sigurd within the castle enclosure.

The boy would not bow down easily to discipline. Since his father’s death he had roved the forest fearlessly at will, and, doubtless, acquired food for the pot both from the woodland and possibly from the Baron’s own private preserves of stew ponds and rabbit warrens.

Gisela said hastily, “That will not be necessary. Aldith and Sigurd must come to Brinkhurst. I know my father will receive them. I will make arrangements for her belongings to be fetched tomorrow.”

She heard Aldith sigh with relief behind her.

The Baron bowed in answer. “As you wish, demoiselle,” he said quietly, “but should your father not wish to accept them, they must come immediately to Allestone.”

He turned as if to move back to his courser, having decided that the matter had been settled satisfactorily. Gisela gave her attention to Aldith and neither of them was aware of what happened next until it was too late. Sigurd gave a great snarl of fury and, leaping the wattle fence, made for his tormentor, whose defenceless back was turned towards him. Gisela heard the boy shout something she could not catch and then came a sudden oath in French from de Treville.

She turned horrified eyes to see the flash of a blade in the November sunlight and to discover that the boy and de Treville were struggling together. Gisela caught Aldith's arm to prevent her rushing to her son's assistance and could only watch helplessly with the two men, who had also been taken completely by surprise.

De Treville must have had ears like a lynx for he had discerned before any of them footsteps coming towards him across the fallen leaves. He had swung round in an instant and wrestled with the boy's arm and now held his wrist in a cruel grasp which made Sigurd give a sudden animal cry of pain.

Gisela saw the hunting knife fall from the boy's hand on to the leaves below and the older of the men-at-arms rushed forward to secure it. He bawled a quick command to his companion, who rushed to the Baron's side, ready to give immediate assistance.

Still de Treville held on to Sigurd's wrist and Gisela saw the boy's face contort in pain and the colour drain from it. Aldith cried out in fear for her son and alarm for the Baron's safety. Gisela thought de Treville would break the boy's wrist as, inexorably, he forced the arm back and back until he released his hold abruptly and Sigurd gave another hoarse half-scream and fell back into the brawny arms of the man-at-arms behind him.

Then, and then only, did de Treville speak. "Secure him and bring him to Allestone." The voice was deadly calm and ice cold.

"No, no, oh please—" Aldith burst through the gate and ran towards the Norman baron. "—please, please do not hurt him any more. He was mad with fury. He is just a boy and meant no real harm."

"Indeed?" De Treville raised two dark eyebrows that Gisela could just discern beneath the rim of his iron helmet and placed his right arm across the mailed sleeve of his left. To Gisela's amazement and deepening alarm, she saw that blood was welling between the rings of the hauberk. She would not have believed that Sigurd's knife could have done such damage and in so short a time.

"You are hurt," she blurted out, somewhat foolishly she realised later.

His reply was typically ironic. "So you have noticed, demoiselle." He waved away his sergeant, who had been overseeing the pinioning of Sigurd's arms behind his back by his younger companion with a coil of rope taken from one of the saddle bags and who was now advancing upon his lord to offer help.

"No, no, man, it is but a scratch, but could have been worse. The knife might well have been buried in my back had I not turned in time." He regarded the little scene, unsmiling, while Aldith, sobbing, tore a strip from her voluminous skirt and proffered it to him with trembling hands. He thanked her coldly and, using teeth and his uninjured hand, bound it about the wound.

Gisela now regained her wits and came hurriedly towards him. "My lord," she said huskily, "I am sure Aldith is right. The boy is beside himself and did not know what he was about. I beg you to take that into consideration when he is brought before you in the manor court. I'm sure my father will speak for him and…"

Again de Treville regarded her sardonically. "I dread to think what he might have attempted, demoiselle, had he really meant me harm. However, we will give ourselves time to think this affair over when we all have cooler heads. In the meantime, your young protégé can cool his within the depths of my gatehouse guardroom."

The sergeant had secured the rope pinioning Sigurd's arms to the back of his horse and clearly intended to drag the boy behind him on the short ride to Allestone Castle. The Baron nodded to

Gisela and Aldith coolly and moved once more to his own horse. Gisela saw he had some difficulty in mounting and was further distressed. Obviously the arm pained him more than he would admit.

If the injury proved serious, Sigurd could pay for his reckless boy's temper with his life. Even if it were not to prove so, many lords would not be inclined to mercy, she knew. She was impelled to plead for the boy again.

"My lord, I beg of you…"

He turned just once in the saddle. "I see, demoiselle, that you are far more concerned for the boy's fate than for mine." He sighed and she thought, with rising temper, that it was an exaggerated sigh, made merely to cause her concern and possibly to taunt her to further outbursts. She controlled her rising irritation with an effort.

"Naturally, my lord, I am deeply sorry that you are hurt, but you said yourself it is merely a scratch. I beg you to consider that when giving judgement."

His good hand caught at the bridle rein. "Usually, demoiselle, I am more concerned to discover what was intended rather than the result and, in this case, you must agree, I would be right to infer that the boy intended to deliver a death blow."

Before she could make any reply—indeed, she could not really think of a suitable one—he had bowed again in the saddle and urged his men to mount up and ride from the clearing. The two stricken women and Oswin were left to stare helplessly as the three mounted soldiers rode from their sight, the sergeant relentlessly pulling the gasping, stumbling form of Aldith's son behind him.

Only then did the reeve venture a comment. "Demoiselle Gisela, I think you would be very unwise to make any move to anger the Baron de Treville further. I am sure your father, Sir Walter, would be concerned. Indeed, he might infer from what has occurred that we were instrumental in causing this injury…"

"Do you suggest that I encouraged Sigurd to do that?" Gisela demanded furiously and the old man stepped hastily backwards, knowing the intensity of his mistress's feelings when she took it into her head to champion the cause of one or other of the serfs upon the manor.

"Certainly not, demoiselle," he said hastily, "but—but had we not been here, the soldiers would have managed and—and…"

Gisela swallowed the sharp bile rising in her throat. She was beginning to believe that, to some extent, Oswin could be right; yet Sigurd had already been furiously angry when they arrived on the scene. She drew a deep breath. She was going to have a very hard job to save the impetuous young fool. She put a comforting arm round Aldith's shoulders.

"Come into the cottage. You can do nothing for the moment. I promise you, Aldith, both I and Father will do our best for Sigurd, whatever Oswin says." Her blue eyes flashed fire at the hapless reeve, who quailed inwardly and then gave way and prepared to wait outside the cottage stolidly until his mistress was ready to ride back to Brinkhurst.

Gisela persuaded Aldith that she must come at once to Brinkhurst. She could not leave the distraught woman here alone in this cottage.

It would not be beyond the bounds of possibility for Baron Alain de Treville to send men immediately to oust her and destroy the cottage immediately. Punishment must be fast and severe if discipline was to be maintained on his desmesne and, from what she had seen of him, he would rule with an iron hand and not encased in a soft leather glove, either!

Aldith, still weeping, gathered up a bundle of her own clothing and Sigurd's and one or two items she specially prized as being of her husband Rolf's fashioning, and Gisela briskly promised that she would send two men with a cart later to convey the one or two pieces of crudely fashioned furniture the two possessed.

Neither woman dared give voice to the fear that Sigurd would not live to require his belongings. Oswin took up the former nurse pillion behind him and they rode back to Brinkhurst in sombre mood.

Both disturbed and angered by her encounter in Allestone wood, Gisela rode into the courtyard of the Brinkhurst manor, dismounted hurriedly and handed her reins to a young groom who hastened to serve her.

She instructed Oswin to see to it that Aldith and her bundles were conveyed to the kitchen quarters, where she must be fed and cosseted until Gisela had had opportunity to explain what had occurred to her father and make arrangements for Aldith's reception into the household.

She hastened up the steps before the undercroft and into the hall. Her father was seated by the fire, for the November day was chill and raw, and a man seated opposite rose instantly and came towards her with a delighted cry. She almost ran to meet him, her own anxious expression lighting up with unexpected pleasure.

"Kenrick, how good it is to see you. I didn't know you were expected or I would not have gone out this morning to see Aldith."

"And how is she?" Her father smiled his welcome as his daughter divested herself of her mantle and came to his side near the fire.

Kenrick of Arcote, their nearest neighbour, only a few years older than Gisela and her friend from babyhood, caught his breath, as he always did at sight of her these days. Gisela of Brinkhurst was now on the brink of womanhood.

She was not over-tall for a woman, but stately of poise and already her youthful, budding breasts were thrusting tight against the cloth of her blue woollen gown. He was sure he could have encircled her waist, cinched in tightly with her ornamental leather belt, with one hand, so slight of form was she. Her luxuriant tawny braids caught golden lights from the fire as she moved nearer to her father.

He thought her heart-shaped face with its small, slightly tip-tilted nose, her luminous blue eyes and generous, sensuous mouth with its slightly fuller lower lip, even the remains of the summer freckling on nose and cheeks—for Gisela rode out in all weathers despite her former nurse's warnings about the ruination of her fair complexion—quite enchanting. Now he saw, as her father had already noted, that something had disturbed her badly.

Sir Walter urged her down upon a stool beside him and placed a gentle hand upon her bowed head.

"What is it, Gisela?" His heart thudded against his ribcage as he thought she might well have been accosted, even molested, on this ride into Allestone wood. "You have not encountered masterless men abroad and had to ride hard to safety?"

"No, nothing like that," she assured him hastily and turned, a little uncertain smile parting her lips, to face the anxious frown she could see gathering on Kenrick's brow.

"No, I have been in no danger. It is Sigurd, Father. He—he attacked the Lord Baron of Allestone Castle and—and he has been arrested and imprisoned there. It is very serious. Aldith is terribly upset and I have brought her here to Brinkhurst. You will give her shelter?"

"Of course, child. You know we owe so much to Aldith we can never repay her adequately. You say Sigurd dared to attack Alain de Treville? How in the world could that happen with the Baron well guarded? Is he seriously hurt?"

Gisela choked back tears as she tried to marshal her thoughts to tell of the encounter coherently. She explained the Baron's determination to oust Aldith and her son from their home and his reason for clearing the land and her own objections and attempts to dissuade him.

Her eyes clouded with tears as she burst out, "Then—then he refused point blank to reconsider and made to move away. Sigurd—he—sprang at him with a knife—and—and the Baron's arm was injured. Fortunately he had the presence of mind to turn in time or—or—he might have been killed."

She read the dawning horror in both her listeners' eyes and added, tearfully, "I—I blame myself for what—what happened. I should not have interfered. I think—poor Sigurd took that as encouragement for his cause and—and he lost all control." She stopped and turned away.

“Father, I know how terrible a crime this is, to attempt to kill your lord. In spite of everything, Sigurd is still just a boy and—and you will try to save him, won’t you, for Aldith’s sake?”

Walter of Brinkhurst let out an explosion of breath and leaned back in his chair, considering for a moment.

“Gisela, as you’ve said, this is a very serious matter indeed. Sigurd may well hang for this, or be maimed, at the very least. The boy is getting past control. I’ve said as much to Aldith many a time recently. Now, child, stop weeping, you will make yourself ill. You cannot blame yourself. The boy could well have done this whether or no you were present.”

Kenrick gave a hasty nod of agreement to this last statement.

Walter went on, “Though, I have to say, you were unwise to come to odds with Lord Alain over this. He is quite within his rights to clear his own land for defensive purposes and Aldith’s assart was cut by Rolf unlawfully. It is to be hoped that your disagreement with the Baron has not further prejudiced him against the boy. Such a man is unlikely to countenance any criticism of his orders, especially before his men.

“I cannot say how I would have reacted to that myself. However,” he added hastily, as he saw his daughter’s eyes begin to brim with tears again, “what’s done is done and we must make the best of it we can. Certainly I will plead for the lad at the manor court, but I have to warn you that my intercession is unlikely to be received well by my neighbour. From what I hear of the man, he makes his own decisions, consulting with no one, and likes to keep himself to himself.”

Gisela reached up to hug her father. She loved him dearly, this broad-built, heavily muscled, still-active and attractive man, whose brown hair was beginning to recede now from his brow. His round, blunt-featured face with the brown eyes that were often disposed to twinkle whenever he gazed on his lovely daughter, the apple of his eye, but which now had darkened with concern for her distress and the reason for it, began to take on an expression of very real alarm.

Baron Alain de Treville had been sent by King Stephen expressly to assist the shire reeve of Oakham to keep the peace in this district and Walter of Brinkhurst felt distinctly uneasy at being the man to oppose him on any matter. He fervently wished his daughter had never met and come into open conflict with his most powerful neighbour.

He gave another heavy sigh. “We may have need of this man in the future, so be circumspect in your dealings with him. Kenrick has come to inform us of another attack on a nearby manor, this time only five miles on the far side of Oakham, more than likely the work of that devil, Mauger of Offen, or the rabble of unruly routiers he keeps to attend him.”

Gisela turned a horrified face to Kenrick. “Were people killed?”

“Fortunately not. The family was away attending a wedding in Leicester Town. When the place was attacked the household servants fled into the forest land nearby and only returned when it was all over, but the manor house was sacked and its valuables stolen, then the house was fired. It’s unlikely it will be habitable this winter.

“Only the sense of preservation of the serfs in the village in running and hiding saved their womenfolk from pillage and rape. As your father says, Gisela, it isn’t safe these days for you to ride far from the desmesne without suitable escort. This unrest has been going on far too long. It is time Mauger was brought to justice. Everyone in the shire knows who is responsible for these depredations.”

Sir Walter shook his head regretfully. “The wily fellow covers his tracks and disowns those fellows who are caught. The King is too busied with continued insurrection throughout the realm to be concerning himself with our small pocket of land here.

“In the South, men are suffering far worse. There is talk of merchants being savagely tortured to reveal hidden wealth, nuns ravished and priests murdered while church plate is plundered and no man can trust his neighbours. It is a sorry state of affairs when our King and his cousin, the Empress Matilda, cannot reach an equable solution of their differences.”

Gisela said fiercely, “Father, you said all men swore allegiance to the Lady Matilda when commanded to by her father, the late King Henry. Why didn’t the barons keep faith—simply because she is a woman?”

Her father shrugged. “There is no binding law which says in England that the eldest son of the monarch must inherit. Even before King William came to our shores from Normandy he believed he had right of inheritance, but the Witan chose Harold Godwinson to be King and William only succeeded in his claim by his victory at Senlac.

“William’s oldest son did not succeed him to the English throne. William, called Rufus, became our King and, after him, his brother, King Henry. It is likely that his son would have inherited but, as you know, he was lost in the tragedy of the wreck of the White Ship, a terrible blow to his father. Yet life continued to be unsettled and, on his death, the council almost unanimously decided that his sister Adela’s son, Stephen, should be our King.

“I cannot help agreeing that they were right. The English barons and earls will not readily accept a woman to rule over them, not even one so strong and formidable as the Lady Matilda.”

Gisela’s mouth set in a hard line. “Yet many men do support her. Her half-brother, Robert of Gloucester, accepts her as sovereign lady.”

Walter nodded, pursing his lips. “Aye, and so battle has been waged these many years. I cannot believe now Matilda will ever ascend the throne. Unfortunately, I cannot place much hope for peace in the King’s eldest son, Eustace, who has proven himself feckless and unstable. I wish it were otherwise.

“Stephen is a fine soldier, too chivalrous for his own good. A King needs to be ruthless to prosper. The Conqueror proved that. Men are tired of war and the barons must make soon an acceptable treaty with Matilda’s supporters for the good of the realm. Rumours abound that the King is ailing. Meanwhile, we continue to suffer from the unspeakable behaviour of men like Mauger, who thrive on unrest.”

“And you think this man, de Treville, will be able to bring order to the shire?” Kenrick asked.

“He is the younger son of a knightly family in Normandy who came here to make his way in the world. He has served the King well, they say, and has a reputation as an efficient and ruthless commander.”

“He doesn’t appear old enough to have achieved such a reputation,” Gisela said, “though I could not see his features clearly. He was armoured and wore his helmet.”

“He must be in his middle twenties,” Walter mused, “possibly close to thirty. He’s said to be a hard man, but just.”

“Which does not augur well for Sigurd’s chances,” Gisela said gloomily.

Kenrick rose, nodding courteously at his host. “I should be returning to Arcote. My mother worries herself almost into a panic these days if I am even a fraction late returning.”

“Understandable,” Sir Walter grunted.

Gisela scrambled to her feet. “I will go with you to the stables. My palfrey seemed a trifle lame this morning and I want to make sure the grooms are examining her properly and tending to her if necessary. I was in too much of a hurry to tell Father of Sigurd’s plight when I arrived home to give instructions properly.” She slipped her discarded mantle round her shoulders as Kenrick drew on his own which had been draped over a stool.

He watched her as she spoke anxiously with the head groom, who reassured her about her palfrey’s condition and promised to keep the animal under surveillance for any signs of further discomfort.

Kenrick’s desires were quickened by her nearness as they moved together outside the stable while he waited for his own mount to be brought out. He would have declared himself to her father long ago had it not been for his doubts about his mother’s declining health.

She had seemed to ail continually since the death of his father two years ago and, more and more, clung to her sturdy, handsome young son for comfort, so much so that her constant demands

for attention were becoming irksome. He looked now at Gisela's radiantly healthy countenance and mentally compared it with that of the sickly, pale creature awaiting him at Arcote.

He longed to wed Gisela and take her to be mistress there, but knew there would be constant conflicts of wills between the two women and was not sure if he could honourably request Gisela's hand of her father. He was aware also that she was now ripe for marriage and if he did not do so soon, he might well lose her. He must tackle his mother on the delicate subject of his marriage, tonight if possible or tomorrow if she had insisted on retiring early to her chamber.

Gisela watched him as he rode off, a smile lingering round her lips. Kenrick was a kindly man. He would never have uprooted Aldith so ruthlessly and so precipitously brought about this terrible trouble to Sigurd.

She had been considering recently that perhaps Kenrick, who came so often to Brinkhurst on some excuse or other, would ask for her hand in marriage. She had also allowed herself to consider that life at Arcote with so considerate and admiring a young husband could be very pleasant indeed.

She liked the openness of Kenrick's expression, his curling brown hair and wide-spaced grey eyes. At twenty he was not over-tall, but well set up, hard-muscled, an attractive man who could handle himself well with weapons and in the wrestling ring. Despite his prowess he was not boastful and she perceived no hint of cruelty in his make-up.

In fact, secretly, she thought Kenrick too easy on those who served him and much too compliant with Lady Eadgyth, his demanding mother. Were she to become his wife, she would lead him gently in the way he should rule at Arcote.

Alain de Treville strode purposefully into the hall of Allestone Castle and bawled for his squire, Huon. He stopped as he entered through the screen doors to see he had a visitor, who rose from his seat by the fire to meet his host.

"Rainald," Alain said delightedly, "how good it is to see you. Do you come on the King's business?"

The two friends clasped arms and Rainald de Tourel stepped back in some alarm when his friendly squeeze of the arms was met with a sharp, hastily suppressed gasp of pain.

"By all the saints, Alain, you are hurt? Have you been ambushed?"

Alain de Treville sank down wearily into the opposite armchair and looked up as Huon came running.

"Not exactly." He grimaced. "I was involved in an altercation about the clearance of land in the wood when one of my tenants took strong objection and decided to end me."

"God in Heaven!" De Tourel snapped at the boy, who was staring in dawning horror at the blood welling up on his master's sleeve through the improvised bandage, "Get that Jewish physician here at once and bring warmed water and towels. Your master has been wounded."

The boy scuttled off and de Treville leaned back, grimacing as the pain of the wound was beginning to make itself felt.

"Stand up," Rainald de Tourel ordered. "Let me help you off with your hauberk. The boy will be back soon with your physician. How in the name of the Virgin could this happen and you well guarded, I hope?"

De Treville did as his friend commanded and gave only the slightest of grunts as the painful business of divesting him of his mailed hauberk was concluded. He explained briefly what had occurred.

"I cannot, in justice, blame the men for being off guard. My back was turned and I had no expectation of the attack. God be thanked I heard the boy approach over the fallen leaves, though he moved like a cat, and was in time to prevent him stabbing me in the back or, more likely, the neck." He grinned faintly. "I have the lad securely locked in the guardhouse."

"You should have hanged him out of hand," de Tourel commented tersely, "and left the body dangling from the keep to show the rest of the villagers you mean business."

"Yes, I might well do that after he's been brought before me in the manor court, but the lady will not like that. Already she considers me a Norman barbarian and a tyrant to boot."

"What lady is this?"

"Ah, I forgot to tell you that bit. The two Saxons were defended by a young termagant, the daughter of my nearest neighbour, the Demoiselle Gisela of Brinkhurst. I think she was far more concerned about the boy's fate than my survival, more or less told me the whole business was my own fault for insisting on my right as desmesne lord."

Rainald made a comical gesture. "She appears to have made an impression on you, my friend. Ah, here is your physician and the boy with water and towels."

An elderly Jew, clad in the dark blue gaberdine robe of his calling, came unhurriedly to his master's side and bent to examine the wounded arm. Behind him hovered the alarmed Huon.

"Mmm," the physician murmured. "It does not appear too serious, my lord, but we must cut your sleeve and lay it bare, then we shall know more. Our most imperative task is to ensure there is no dirt or fragments of cloth in the wound. It may need to be stitched."

Alain grimaced again. "Oh, very well, Joshua, submit me to your torments. I'll not complain." He set his teeth again as the physician opened his small chest containing instruments and medicaments, extracted a slim, long blade and slit the long woollen sleeve of the tight-fitting tunic de Treville wore beneath his hauberk, then with gentle fingers probed the cut.

The Jewish physician worked quickly and in silence, gesturing to Huon to come close with the metal dish of warmed water. He declared it unnecessary, after examination, to stitch the wound, but drew the edges together carefully after cleansing it with vinegar and wine, which made de Treville gasp and curse briefly, then he bound up the wound, made obeisances to the two Norman knights and, waving to the boy to withdraw with him, left the hall.

He had advised de Treville to drink watered wine to replace the blood loss, but not to overheat his system with too much wine and to eat sparingly and take himself off to bed as soon as convenient. De Tourel poured for his friend and watched, frowning, as Alain drained the cup.

"That fellow is a treasure. I hear he has saved your life on more than one occasion—but then, you saved his hide, I understand. He should be and is grateful."

"Joshua is a fine physician and, more importantly, knows when to hold his tongue from too much gratuitous advice." Alain de Treville's long lips curved into a smile. "As you perhaps do not know, he was taken by routiers, his house burned and his family murdered. It was lucky my company came along in time before they roasted him over a slow fire to make him divulge the whereabouts of treasures he did not possess. We put the fellows to flight and rescued Joshua ben Suleiman. He has been in my service ever since and has saved my hide many times on campaign." He laughed out loud. "Faith, I think he was hoping for a quieter life since we settled here at Allestone, but this affair bodes ill for our hopes."

"Are you having trouble with your villeins?"

"No, just with my neighbours, it seems."

De Tourel's merry brown eyes met the darker ones of his friend and they both laughed.

"Do you anticipate trouble with her father?"

"I sincerely hope not, since I intend to further my acquaintance with the lady more closely."

"Ah, then she is pretty?"

De Treville raised one eyebrow as he considered. "Truth to tell, I am not sure, she was so hooded and muffled in her mantle. I could see by the way she carried herself that her figure is pleasing and she is fair. I saw just a glimpse of tawny hair and—" he laughed joyously "—what counts most with me is that she has spirit enough to match that of two good men. By the saints, Rainald, I was greatly taken with the wench."

De Tourel looked thoughtfully round the sparsely furnished and appointed hall, noting its lack of tapestries and hangings to keep out the draughts and only the most elementary luxuries.

“You know, Alain, it is more than time you considered taking a wife. This place needs an efficient chatelaine to oversee the work and enhance its comforts. Allestone is a fine castle and you are fortunate to have it within the King’s gift, but it could be considerably more comfortable.

“Incidentally, I am on no particular business, as you asked when you first came in. I am on my way to join the royal army. It’s likely Stephen will lay siege to Wallingford soon and will need my support. The last time I was at Court he asked after you and, strangely enough, expressed a hope that you would soon marry and get an heir.”

He gave a little regretful sigh. “He sorely misses the late Queen, you know. That was a love match indeed and he thinks we should all be so blessed. Her death was a terrible blow to him.”

Alain nodded thoughtfully as he sipped his watered wine and experimentally moved his sore arm. “She was a fine woman and as good a commander as her lord. I do not know what he would have done without her on many occasions. Think what pains she took to have him released when the Empress held him prisoner.”

“So, this little demoiselle is unwed?”

“Yes, so I hear.”

“Not betrothed?”

“I have heard nothing about that.” Alain laughed again. “Do not take my telling of this encounter too seriously, my friend. I have talked with the demoiselle but once, but I confess my curiosity to see her at close quarters is piqued. She has Saxon blood, as do many of the knights and squires in the shire. If I took one of their women to wife, it might be pleasing to the community and be more likely to achieve their willing co-operation in the defence of the district.

“I think one or two look on me as an interloper, especially since I was born in Normandy. She is young and appeared healthy; she could give me sturdy children, I think. I have no great need for her to possess a large dower, though that, too, would prove beneficial. You might be right. The time has come for me to settle down and marriage could be the first step in establishing myself in the shire.”

“So you will visit her father?”

Again Alain de Treville’s eyebrow was raised comically. “Nothing so definite. She, I am sure, will come to me.”

“How?”

“Well, I hold her young protégé in my dungeon, don’t I? His fate is very much in my hands. Unless I am very much mistaken, she will attend my manor court when the boy is arraigned.”

De Tourel’s expression became more grave. “You cannot afford to lose face, my friend, even to please the lady. You must treat this attack upon your person with the gravity it deserves. The boy must be severely punished.”

De Treville’s dark brown eyes met his squarely. “I am well aware of that, Rainald. My hold on this castle and the desmesne must be absolute, and my villeins and serfs made to be aware that I will brook no trace of indiscipline. The question is—how do I accomplish this without further antagonising my neighbour and avoid once more coming into open conflict with his daughter?”

Chapter Two

Gisela shivered as she, her father and Aldith passed under the grim gatehouse arch of Allestone Castle. Here, somewhere in one of the guardrooms, Sigurd had been confined or, possibly, he had been moved to an even less salubrious dungeon below the castle keep. As they cantered into the inner bailey, grooms hastened forward to take their bridle reins and one helped Aldith down, for she had been riding pillion behind Sir Walter.

Another attentive straw-haired young man, more stylishly dressed, with a round, boyish face hurried to lift up two arms offering to assist Gisela down. She allowed him to help her and waited until her father joined them and their horses were led away to the stables. Aldith stared bleakly at the tall keep before them and then at the ground.

Sir Walter identified himself and his daughter and servant and explained the reason for their arrival.

“I understand, the boy, Sigurd, is to be brought before your lord today and, since Aldith, here, is his mother and naturally very concerned for him, we hope your lord will not be offended by our presence at the manor court. My daughter, the Demoiselle Gisela, was present on the unfortunate occasion of the attack and is anxious to hear his fate.”

The young man bowed. “I am Huon, Lord Alain’s squire. Allow me to escort you into the hall. I know he will wish me to afford you every courtesy. I will see to it that chairs or stools are provided for you.”

Gisela thought he looked very young for a squire; indeed his polished manners and boyish intensity suggested he had only recently completed service at some other household as a page. He led them up the steps to the entrance of the castle keep and stood back politely for them to precede him into the great hall.

Aldith padded silently in the rear, looking neither to right nor to left. Gisela cast her a worried glance. She felt Aldith had little or no hope for her son’s survival. After that first day when she had arrived at Brinkhurst and wept hopelessly, they had had hardly one word from her since. She had attended Gisela efficiently as she had formerly when she had been her nurse and, privately, Gisela, who had missed her sorely, was pleased to have her back at Brinkhurst.

As she was escorted to the front of the little knot of villeins and serfs gathered for the manor court to stools brought hastily for their use by servants summoned to attend them, Gisela reached out and placed a comforting arm round Aldith’s shoulders as she seated herself. Sir Walter gently but firmly pressed the woman into a stool by Gisela’s side while he took another brought for him. Gisela took Aldith’s hand and her maid sat listlessly not even gazing round the great hall.

Gisela, for her part, stared round curiously. The hall was circular with a small gallery at one end. There was a central hearth and a lantern trap above it for smoke to escape, but it appeared it was rarely used these days for another, more ornate, hearth had been constructed beneath the gallery near the dais where, presumably, the Baron sat at meat, at the far end.

She gazed up at the huge smoke-blackened roof timbers and round at the solid stone walls. The place had certainly been built primarily for defence only, for there seemed no vestige of comfort to be had here. One arras near the dais looked dirty and torn and would do nothing to keep out draughts, nor did it do anything to soften the uncompromising grimness of the hall’s general appearance.

True, the rushes underfoot had been freshly strewn and the place was swept scrupulously clean. She tightened her lips as she thought how this new lord kept discipline within his desmesne. If his servants feared him, and he was certainly well and efficiently attended, it did not augur well for Sigurd’s chances of mercy.

There was a little stir behind the dais and the group of villagers, awkward and undoubtedly worried about their own summonses to attend this court, stopped whispering together and looked

expectantly for their lord to enter. A door beneath the gallery was opened and two men stepped through.

Gisela instantly recognised the tall form of Baron Alain de Treville; behind him came a smaller, grey-haired man who walked with a stoop and advanced uncertainly as if he were short-sighted.

“Sir Clement de Burgh,” her father whispered in her ear. “The Baron’s seneschal. The man served Sir Godfrey before him for many years.”

Gisela found herself staring intently at Allestone’s lord. For the first time she could see his features clearly, for today he was devoid of his military garb and wore a tawny over-tunic over a longer brown one, with a tawny-lined brown mantle over them for the hall was chilly. She noted at once that a border of coarse linen bandaging showed beneath the tight sleeve of one arm and she swallowed uncertainly.

She had known he was tall and carried himself like a prince; now she saw he was broad-shouldered and slim-hipped also, recognising the steel-like strength inherent in that spare, well-muscled body. His hair was cut short in the slightly outdated style Norman knights adopted for convenience beneath the conical helmet. His face was oval, tanned, smooth complexioned, without the roughness she associated with life out of doors on campaign.

The features were arresting, the nose slightly over-long and very straight beneath dark level brows, which were drawn together now as he stood in the doorway and surveyed the company. His eyes were very dark brown, almost black, and she felt the chilling quality of their steady gaze and pitied those poor creatures who were trembling as they stood before him now, awaiting judgement in the body of the hall.

His mouth was held in a hard line, as if in concentration, but was long-lipped and without the trap-like rigidity she had noted in men of her father’s company whom she suspected of harshness or even cruelty to their subordinates.

His eyes, roving the hall, found and recognised his neighbours. He bowed his head courteously to Sir Walter and his daughter and smiled approval as he saw they had been given stools.

“Sir Walter, you are very welcome to Allestone. I confess I rather expected you would take an active interest in the proceedings this morning.” The mouth relaxed in a slight smile. “I bid you good day, Demoiselle Gisela. As a witness to the attack on my person, I am grateful that you have placed yourself at the disposal of the court.”

Gisela’s lips parted in her shock at the sheer effrontery of his statement—and in public. Did he expect her to add more damaging testimony than his own to the evidence which would doom Sigurd?

He was continuing to speak in that low, quiet voice that she was sure brooked no argument from underlings.

“I hope, Sir Walter, that, at the conclusion of these proceedings, you and your daughter will stay and take refreshment with me? There are one or two matters, sir, on which I would value your opinion.”

Sir Walter inclined his head. “I shall be delighted to do so, lord Baron.”

Angered by her father’s apparent subservience, Gisela cast him an outraged glance, which he merely met with a smile. Before she could pass comment, there was a noise of rattling chains from the screen doors and all turned to see Sigurd Rolfson hustled between two sturdy guards into the hall.

He was manacled at wrists and ankles and shambled awkwardly forward, his head lowered to the rush-strewn floor so that, for the moment, he did not catch sight of his mother, but at her sharp, heartbroken cry of “Sigurd”, he lifted his head and looked at her dully.

Gisela could discern no signs of mistreatment upon his person and could only put down that uninterested slow gaze to sheer bewilderment at his predicament. She moved to rise and go after Aldith, who had gone to him and sobbed on his shoulder, despite the efforts of one of the grizzled-haired guards, who tried to prevent her, but in an embarrassed fashion as if he misliked the necessity.

“Leave her.” The Baron’s voice arrested him in the act of physically pulling her from the prisoner. The Baron said quietly, “Will you please sit down, mother? You will have a chance to see your son again after this trial. That I promise you.”

Aldith lifted a tortured face to his and then went, unresisting, back to her stool. The guards led Sigurd to a place in the centre of the hall near the other villagers, but far enough away from them as to make it impossible for any of his erstwhile companions to talk to him.

He noted Gisela in passing and, for the first time since his entry into the hall, she saw a misting of tears in his blue eyes as he nodded to her in gratitude. Then he resumed his posture of despair, standing docilely between his guards and gazing stolidly down at the floor. Not once did he cast an appealing glance at his lord.

Gisela was too distracted by conflicting thoughts to pay much attention to the minor matters brought before the Baron for judgement. For the most part they concerned quarrels and disagreements between neighbours which were listened to attentively and judgement pronounced unequivocally and swiftly. Two men were accused of failing to do desmesne work which was their duty and each was fined and dismissed.

One youngster stood, like Sigurd, head down, while the desmesne reeve told of his being caught red-handed, poaching in Allestone wood. There was a little hush when the Baron’s steel-like tones asked the boy if he had anything to say in his own defence. The youngster shook his head miserably after being nudged by his father, who stood next to him.

All knew this could be a hanging matter; though many guessed the Baron would not go so far, the boy could certainly be condemned to maiming, possibly to the loss of a hand. There was a silence while the Baron conferred with both reeve and seneschal. He looked up and ordered the boy to come forward.

“You have been warned before, I understand,” he said coldly and the boy nodded. “You realise this is a serious matter for which I could punish you severely, so severely that a maimed son could become totally dependent upon his family. I am informed that your parents have served Sir Godfrey and now me faithfully and for that reason I will show mercy.

“You will be handed over to my marshal for physical punishment. A sore back should teach you to keep to your own preserves in future. A fine could also fall hard upon your parents and so I will not impose one. Be brought before me again and I shall not be so easy on you.”

The youngster looked anxiously towards his father, who was gesturing to him to respond to the sentence. He was not sure what his fate would be, having been too terrified to hear properly. He stammered out some sort of apology and expression of gratitude and was pulled away by one of the attendant guards.

Gisela bit her lip hard now as she saw Sigurd being brought forward to stand before the dais. One of his guards poked him sharply and he looked up at last and faced the Baron. Gisela could not see his expression, but judged from the set of his shoulders that it was still sulky. Aldith gave a little anguished gasp at her side.

“Well—” de Treville’s voice was silkily cold now as he eyed the prisoner “—there is little need for me to ask for evidence in this matter since I, myself, was the victim of a deliberate attack. Your guilt cannot be denied as witnesses will attest.” He looked beyond Sigurd’s bowed head to where Gisela sat and she started up agitatedly, ignoring her father’s urgent pull upon her skirt to try to force her back onto her seat.

“My lord.” Her voice rang out in the raftered hall and she stepped slightly forward, facing the man who sat at the trestle table upon the dais. “Sigurd cannot deny the charge and, as I was present, I cannot deny the truth of it either, but I came today to plead with you to take into consideration that he was provoked.”

“Provoked?” The dark, level brows swept upwards and Sir Walter gave a little strangled gasp of annoyance behind her.

"My lord, Sigurd loves his mother deeply and she was being evicted from the assart cottage that is very dear to both of them."

"May I remind you, demoiselle, that the cottage, standing where it did, was unlawfully built."

"Yes, my lord, I know that too but, nevertheless, it was home to Sigurd and the loss of it and his mother's anguish caused him to lose all control. He is so very young. Had he had time to think coherently I am sure he would not have wounded you. He meant to strike out at one whom he believed had injured his mother and himself and…"

"Demoiselle, you were present, you know well enough that had I not been quick off the mark to turn and defend myself, I might not be seated at this trestle now."

She swallowed, feeling the curious gaze of the guards and the short-sighted one of Sir Clement full upon her. Fortunately for Sir Walter's peace of mind, most of the villagers had now left the hall and the Baron could not consider himself humiliated before his own serfs and villeins.

"That I must acknowledge, but the blow was awkwardly delivered. Sigurd is no trained warrior. He meant to hurt, not kill, I am sure. There was a struggle for possession of the hunting knife. In that you were injured." He was silent, gazing back at her sardonically and she pressed on desperately. "You have his life in your hands. Please, I beg of you, be merciful. Forgive his youthful impetuosity."

Sigurd had lifted his head now and was looking pleadingly at Gisela, for what she did not know. Was he asking her to beg for him even more earnestly, or was he soundlessly pleading with her to keep a dignified silence for his mother's sake?

Aldith said brokenly, "My lord, I beg you, he is my only son…"

Sir Walter stood and cleared his throat. "While I cannot, nor would I wish to, interfere in your decision, my lord, I would attest to the loyalty of Sigurd's mother, who has served me faithfully since the birth of my daughter as wet nurse. Indeed, without her care, I doubt Gisela would have survived.

"She and Sigurd are foster brother and sister and were brought up together in babyhood. I would add my pleas to hers and those of his mother. The boy deserves to be severely dealt with, but if it is within your sense of pity, I ask you to spare his life."

Alain de Treville nodded coolly to Sir Walter. "I have sympathy for this boy's mother, Sir Walter, and acknowledge the debt you owe her. Indeed—" his lips parted in a smile as he gazed at Gisela "—we would all have suffered a great deprivation had your lovely daughter not been present here today."

Gisela made a little indignant sound deep in her throat. How dare he choose such a moment for meaningless pleasantries!

De Treville continued. "What has the boy to say for himself? Do you understand you are like to hang for this? Did you intend to kill me?"

There was a shocked silence as all eyes now were focussed on Sigurd. Would the young fool doom himself by some stupidly proud outburst?

Sigurd said roughly, "I don't know," then, when prompted to repeat himself as his answer had not reached the Baron's ears, said, more loudly, "I—I don't know—what I meant to do. No—I thought to stop you from walking away, make you listen—" His voice broke off and he looked down miserably at the floor again. "I would not have really meant to—hurt you."

"And do you now regret the attack?" The voice was merciless in its demand.

Sigurd said awkwardly, "I—I don't truly know. I was angry and—"

"Are still angry?"

"Yes." This time the voice was more sure, defiant, and Aldith uttered a choking cry of protest at his foolishness.

"I see."

Gisela was forced down upon her stool by her father and sat utterly still, not taking her eyes from the Baron as he sat tapping his quill lightly against a roll of parchment before him, considering.

At last he looked down at his prisoner. “Sigurd Rolfson, you are guilty of attacking your liege lord and undoubtedly deserve to die. You tell me that still you deny my right to destroy your cottage for good, military reasons and do not regret your crime. I have little choice but to deal out the sentence required by law.

“However, you are still very young and I must take into consideration that you, at least, believed you were provoked. You are a free man and I could declare you outlaw, but I believe you would not survive long in the coming winter. That might be a more prolonged agony than the one decreed at the rope’s end.

“Therefore…” he paused and looked straight at Gisela as if she were directly challenging his authority by the very intensity of her fixed gaze “…I formally deprive you of your freeman’s rights and declare you serf. You will remain within my dungeon at Allestone until I consider you can be trusted to walk the castle precincts without posing a threat to myself and to others. You will continue to serve me and whoever succeeds me to the desmesne of Allestone.”

Aldith gave a great sob and Gisela drew her former nurse hard against her heart, patting her shoulder in a clumsy attempt to comfort. She heard the rattle of chains as Sigurd was led off towards the screen doors, presumably to his prison once more in the gatehouse.

She gave a terrible sigh of relief. The boy’s life had been saved and she had not dared hope for that. He would suffer the indignity of serfdom throughout his life and, knowing Sigurd, he would find that hard to bear, but though servitude would be galling, in time, surely, he would recognise the measure of mercy that had been dealt him and be duly grateful for it.

Gisela now saw that the young squire, Huon, had entered the hall and that the Baron had summoned him to the table and was talking to him. The boy turned and looked where they were still sitting and came towards them. He bowed politely.

“My Lord Alain has sent me to request you join him at table, Sir Walter. He has also instructed me to take Dame Aldith to the gatehouse where she will be allowed to speak with her son.”

Aldith rose at once, her face working. “Thank the Virgin, I thought the Baron would have forgotten…”

“My Lord Alain is not in the habit of forgetting—anything,” the boy said with a grin.

Gisela said quickly, “I will go with you, Aldith, at least as far as the gatehouse,” and the boy nodded again.

Gisela’s father was frowning slightly and then, as he realised his daughter would be escorted by the Baron’s squire, nodded his agreement. He rose to make his own way to join his host where already servants were laying out jugs of wine, goblets and sweetmeats upon a fine damask cloth which now covered the table.

Huon led the two women out of the main door of the hall and down the steps to the courtyard. Aldith was visibly trembling with excitement and Gisela deliberately slowed their pace. She was afraid that Aldith would collapse in her agitated state. She put an arm around the older woman’s waist as they went and could see that tears were glimmering now on Aldith’s lids.

At the gatehouse she did not insist on entering with her maid. She was sure Aldith and Sigurd would wish to be alone together at this moment, and she turned back into the courtyard itself to wait for Aldith to return to her. Huon conducted the maid into the guardroom and then returned dutifully to Gisela’s side.

The place was a hive of industry. From the stables nearby Gisela could hear the whickering of horses and the cheerful whistling of grooms as at Brinkhurst. The Baron’s servants appeared to be happy enough about their labours. A shrill screeching and hectic fluttering of wings from the mews informed her of the Baron’s love of hawking. Her own father rode out occasionally; Gisela hardly at all. She had confessed to Kenrick once that, though she admired the deadly skill of her father’s hawks, she did not like to see them stoop to their prey and make their kill.

From wooden sheds adjoining the inner bailey wall she heard the sound of hammer on metal as the armourer went about his work and the blacksmith's blowing up of his fires and his hammers, too, beating upon the anvil. Serving men and women scuttled about from keep to bakehouse on various errands and Gisela began to understand just how many people this great fortress kept employed and protected.

A sudden commotion from the stable doorway caused her to turn hurriedly as a small hound puppy skittered across her path with a young stable boy in hot pursuit. Both she and Huon dived for it at the same moment, but it managed to evade them and dashed off towards the entrance to the outer bailey. Just then, a young man-at-arms appeared through the entrance pushing a small handcart containing an assortment of swords, battle axes and arrows.

Huon shouted a warning as the puppy raced across his path almost under the cart wheels. Gisela was before him. She launched herself forward and grabbed the young dog by the scruff of the neck, but she almost overbalanced and fell beneath the heavy iron wheels herself as she stumbled over the skirt of her gown.

Still trying to hold on to the squirming puppy, she was unable to fling out her arms to steady herself and gave a cry of alarm, but found herself caught and pulled back as the cart rumbled harmlessly past of its own volition as the startled soldier let go the handle.

Baron Alain de Treville's voice sounded in her ear as his arm tightened around her waist.

"What a good thing I came in search of you, Demoiselle Gisela. I would hardly have dared to return and inform your father you had suffered injury in my castle."

She scrambled frantically to free herself as the horrified man-at-arms stammered out an apology.

"My lord, I am sorry. I did not see the little dog. I'd my head down and then—then I saw the lady and…"

"It was not your fault," Gisela said breathlessly. "You could not be expected to see the pup. It is so small."

The Baron nodded to his man to proceed and as the cart trundled by them, he looked down, eyebrows raised, at the squirming hound pup in Gisela's arms.

"One of Freya's litter. I hear there is one constantly escaping. It's probably this one. I see you are fond of dogs."

Gisela dropped a kiss on the smooth fawn-coloured head as the puppy was struggling to reach up and cover her face with kisses.

"He's quite beautiful."

De Treville was thinking the same about the pup's rescuer as she stood, trembling slightly from her recent fright, her hood fallen back, revealing her smooth fair braids beneath her fluttering head veil. Her mantle was slipping back from her shoulders and he had a tantalising glimpse of her tight, hip-hugging woollen gown beneath as the wind swirled its folds against her legs.

Her bosom was heaving from her recent exertion and her cheeks were tinged with pink, her eyes sparkling. He thought he would have given much to bring that tender glow to her face as she gazed down, smiling, at her still-wriggling burden.

"He will dirty your gown," he said quietly and gently took the hound from her, handing it to Huon. "Return him to his mother, she'll be fretting."

Gisela stood watching as the boy ducked his head beneath the stable door and went inside with the still-agitated stable boy.

"I came to escort you back to the hall. You must be getting very chilled out here."

"No, no," she said hastily. "I was waiting for Aldith. She's—she's with Sigurd."

"Yes."

"It was good of you to allow her to see him."

"I promised I would."

“Not all men keep their promises,” she responded.

He smiled. “Forgive me, demoiselle, but I would have thought your extreme youth would have prevented you from finding out that sad truth so soon.”

“I am almost seventeen.”

She bridled as she saw his long lips curve into a smile again and added hurriedly, “It is just that I have heard Aldith and the serving wenches say that…”

She broke off in confusion, then her eyes caught sight of the bandaging on his left arm and widened. “Oh, my lord, I hope you did not hurt your arm again in helping me.”

“No, but had I done so it would have been damaged in a worthy cause.”

“You are making fun of me,” she said reproachfully. “I regret that I have not yet asked you how serious it was. I would not have believed that the knife could have pierced through the rings of your mail.”

He grimaced. “A sharp blade can pierce through anything if wielded with sufficient force, as can the iron tip of a good arrow. No, it is but a long scratch. The blade grated on the bone of the forearm and was deflected. It is sore and needs to be kept covered to keep clean, but it pains me little now.”

Her expression had become sweetly grave. “I must thank you, my lord, for listening to our pleas and granting Sigurd his life. I know he was in grave peril. Many lords would not have shown such mercy.”

He shrugged in that Gallic way she had noticed before.

“Do not trouble yourself unduly about the boy. He will do well enough. He will resent the loss of his status. Freemen guard their rights with pride, but a hard winter can cause many of them to starve, while serfs fill their bellies at their lords’ expense.”

“Not always. Compassionate lords will deal with their serfs responsibly but some are neglectful and some are worse—they treat them less kindly than they would their horses.”

“Demoiselle Gisela, if you know how costly a good courser is to buy and maintain, you would understand the possible reason for that,” he said, smiling again.

She turned away, her cheeks burning, as she resented his teasing once more.

“Sigurd can be—difficult,” she said stiffly. “As you have said, he will resent his loss of freedom.”

He shrugged again. “We shall manage him, never fear. He lacks a father, I understand, and has needed a firm hand for some time. Your former nurse must have worried about him constantly.”

“Will he be beaten?”

“If he proves—difficult, as you put it. A sore back will teach him obedience and will do him no permanent harm, as it has done no harm to Huon, nor did to me when I was undergoing my training as page and squire.”

She looked at him thoughtfully, trying to imagine this tall, authoritative man as recalcitrant page and squire and finding it hard.

“Shall we go back into the hall? Your father will be concerned about you. Huon will wait for your nurse and escort her back to you.”

He held out a lean brown hand and she reluctantly placed her fingers within his grasp and allowed him to lead her back towards the keep steps.

Sir Walter was palpably relieved to have his daughter return to the hall and smiled his pleasure. A panting Aldith, breathing hard as if she had been running, hurried through the screen doors and made for her mistress. There were visible marks of tear stains on her roughened cheeks and she curtsied dutifully to the Baron to show her gratitude.

Gisela seized her by the hand and dragged her to the far end of the table to question her about her interview with Sigurd. De Treville followed her progress regretfully and signalled to Huon, who had entered with Aldith, to carry the wine jug, sweetmeats and goblets to the two women.

He took a long pull at his own wine cup and then looked steadily at his guest.

“You have a very beautiful and spirited daughter, Sir Walter.”

“Aye.” Sir Walter followed his gaze fondly. “Too spirited for her own good sometimes. She can be headstrong. I put that down to a lack of a mother. My beloved Hildegarde died soon after her birth and Gisela is as lovely as she was.” He sighed a trifle lugubriously. “I fear I spoil her outrageously.”

“I imagine you will be looking soon for a suitable husband and protector for her. In these difficult times that can be a worrying business.”

Sir Walter shook his head. “The truth is, my lord, I cannot face the prospect of life at Brinkhurst without her.”

“I can understand that.” De Treville sat thoughtfully silent for a moment, then he leaned forward in his seat slightly towards his guest. “Demoiselle Gisela has Saxon blood, I understand.”

“Her great-grandmother was Saxon. Her husband was killed at Senlac and she married a Norman knight. My wife, Hildegarde, also had Saxon blood.” His lips twitched. “Many men in the shire are proud of their Saxon inheritance, my lord.”

“Of course. I am equally proud to know my Norman ancestors came from Viking stock.” De Treville twirled the wine round in his goblet, watching the firelight behind them glimmer in its red depths.

“You will see, Sir Walter—” he looked up and gestured towards the stark bare stone walls of the hall “—that my castle lacks a chatelaine.” He gave a short laugh. “My friend Rainald de Tourel, who visited some days ago and has now left to return to the King’s court, took me to task over this matter and brought a message from the King himself that I should be thinking soon of taking a wife.

“I am twenty-six years old and my hectic life on campaign at the King’s side left me little time to consider that possibility, nor had I sufficient means to do so. Now that I have obtained the castle and desmesne of Allestone, my bachelor state begins to gall me.”

He saw his guest’s body become rigid in his chair and his eyes wary. De Treville looked pointedly at Gisela, who was talking excitedly to Aldith. Her lovely eyes were flashing and she moved her hands expressively as she was obviously engaged in attempting to comfort her maid for the loss of Sigurd’s company.

“Your daughter tells me she is nearly seventeen, Sir Walter, an age when she is ripe for the marriage bed. In our short acquaintance, I have come to have a healthy regard for her unequivocal honesty. She is not only beautiful but brave, and kind to both people and animals. I find both qualities admirable. I take it there is no prior arrangement for her betrothal or you would have mentioned it. I could keep her safe at Allestone. I ask you now, formally, for the honour of her hand in marriage.”

Sir Walter blinked rapidly and, in order to give himself time to think, he helped himself to more wine and drained his cup.

He said deliberately, “I have said Gisela can be headstrong, my lord. Naturally I believe she has every quality finest in womanhood—she is my beloved daughter—but I have to face the fact that she could prove—difficult.”

De Treville laughed. “That is the way she described Sigurd to me, just now. I assured her I would manage the lad.”

Sir Walter’s eyebrows flew upwards and de Treville shook his head very gently.

“Have no fears, Sir Walter, it is not my way to be cruel to women nor unduly so with my servants. I would deal well with the Demoiselle Gisela and I believe she would make me an excellent wife. Her Saxon blood and standing in the shire makes her eminently suitable. With her at my side, I am confident I could achieve the ready co-operation of my neighbours that, perhaps, my Norman heritage may render open to reserve.

“I am the third son of Sir Gilles de Treville. Our manor is close to Caen. I came to serve in the Earl of Leicester’s household as squire when I was but fourteen and have lived in England serving the King since then.”

His dark eyes brightened somewhat. “I have no mistress established here at Allestone and, since my mother is some distance away, there would be no other woman here to challenge the Demoiselle’s rule. My seneschal’s wife, the Lady Rohese, is a very gentle lady and would prove helpful and friendly. She would be delighted to have the company of another female within the bower.

“Gisela would have a totally free hand, which I believe would be important to her. I recognise in her a nature as formidable as that of the Empress Matilda, and I have, on occasion, met that lady.” His dark eyes twinkled and Sir Walter could not hold back an answering smile.

“On the matter of dower…”

“I am sure we could come to some sensible arrangement, Sir Walter. My needs are not great on that score.”

Walter of Brinkhurst gave a little sigh. “My lord, will you allow me time to consider?”

“Of course. Naturally you will wish to speak with the Demoiselle Gisela.” He put one hand gently upon the older man’s arm. “I know you are reluctant to give her in marriage, but Allestone is very close. You will see her often and—in these hard times, you will need a man who can hold her safe. Think well on what I have said and send me word soon.”

Sir Walter said doubtfully, “Though Gisela lacks a mother, Aldith taught her well all the housewifely skills but,” he hesitated, “she is so very young…”

“Not so young that she will not learn quickly.”

“No.”

He turned in his chair as Gisela also turned and caught his eye. Both she and Aldith were looking happier but, as if she read in his expression the gravity of the matter in discussion, her vivid blue eyes clouded over somewhat and one fair brow arched upwards as if in interrogation.

He said heavily, “If you will excuse us, my lord, we should be riding back to Brinkhurst. I promise I will think very hard on what you have said.”

“I know you will.” De Treville rose and held out his hand to the other, who grasped it.

“Thank you again for your forbearance in the matter of the boy.”

De Treville bowed his head.

Gisela came hesitantly to her father’s side and curtsied as he took his leave of his host.

As they rode home together she was aware of his absorption in his own thoughts. She ceased her chatter about Allestone and rode silently beside him.

Over supper he seemed just as quiet and, at last, she ventured to challenge him.

“Father, what is it? I saw you were talking intently to the Baron. Had he some information about the course of the war which has troubled you or are you still worried about Sigurd?”

“No, Sigurd will be safe enough at Allestone. Sooner or later the lad would have come to grief without discipline and I had no real authority over him.” Sir Walter tackled a chicken leg bone with unusual ferocity and Gisela watched him doubtfully.

“Then did he take you to task over my behaviour? I know you think I was unwise to challenge him there in open court.”

He put down the leg and looked at her deliberately. “On the contrary. He appears to have admired your spirit in outfacing him. He asked for your hand in marriage.”

Colour drained from her face and she sat unmoving, her eyes growing larger and larger before his gaze. He waited for her to speak but she continued to sit rigidly still. Then, at last, she said very quietly, “And what did you say to him?”

“I told him I needed time to consider.”

She drew in her breath in a little hiss.

“But you cannot be thinking of saying yes!”

Again he regarded her directly. “Why not? It is a fair match. You would be mistress of Allestone. Many maidens in the shire would give their eyeteeth for such a future.”

“I am not one of them,” she said, again speaking so calmly and softly that he leaned towards her to both hear and catch her expression. Still she appeared deadly pale.

He said almost jovially, but in a tone patently false, “You have never considered such an honour I know, but…”

“Honour?” The single word was suddenly shrill with outrage. “You cannot believe I would welcome such a match?”

He turned from her, embarrassed, and once more gave his attention to his food.

“Child, I cannot afford to simply dismiss this offer. All fathers have a duty to provide for their daughters fittingly and I cannot deny that your welfare and protection would be assured at Allestone.”

She shivered as she had done when they had ridden below the gatehouse arch this morning. “The place is a prison. I cannot face the prospect of being immured behind those defensive walls.”

“That is just it, Gisela. They are defensive. I have to consider, first and foremost, your safety. You heard Kenrick talk the other day of the attack on that manor near Oakham. It seems the shire reeve is powerless to curb that man’s excesses. Baron Alain de Treville has both the ability to do so and the King’s warrant.”

“Father, are you afraid of the Baron de Treville?”

He met her unflinching gaze steadily. “I would not wish to offend him.”

“So I am to be sacrificed so that you can keep the favour of this King’s man?”

“That could be the size of it, daughter,” Sir Walter admitted. “What have you against him? He is young and personable. He did not appear to me to be excessively harsh. You could do worse.”

“I could do better. What of Kenrick, whom I have known and loved since childhood?”

He was visibly flustered. “Kenrick of Arcote has spoken to you of love?”

“No, he has not,” she replied quietly. “That would have been dishonourable without asking your permission to court me first and Kenrick would not behave so.”

“Kenrick is a fine, upstanding young man, Gisela, but he is not for you.” The statement was made bluntly and she winced at the finality of his tone.

“What if I were to say I loved Kenrick?”

“Frankly I would not believe you. You know nothing as yet of love. Your mother did not love me when we met, nor I her, but we grew to love one another. My father chose her for me and I obeyed him as was right and proper. I have spoiled you, Gisela, for you to so defy my wishes in this.”

“Why do you object to Kenrick?”

He turned to bluster, not finding it easy to put into words his doubts about such a mating.

“He is simply not the man for you. He is kind and honourable, I am the first to admit that, but he is weak-willed, easily swayed, too much under the influence of that mother of his. I do not believe you would be happy or fulfilled in such a marriage.”

“But you think I would be, wed to this man you hardly know.”

“I believe I have the measure of Alain de Treville.”

“And,” she said bitterly, “the fact that he is a powerful baron and in the King’s favour does not weigh with you in the slightest. Will you not have to beggar yourself to provide a suitable dower for me? That is usual in such alliances, isn’t it?”

“We did not discuss a possible marriage contract.”

“I will not do it,” she protested stubbornly.

“Gisela, do not be foolish. I have seldom opposed your wishes. In that I was, perhaps, unwise, but this is a serious business. I will not be defied. I have not yet made up my mind but I tell you plainly, every instinct impels me to accept this proposal. I shall inform you of my final decision tomorrow. You can retire to your chamber if you have finished your meal.”

He was dismissing her as if she were an unruly page or servant. She was trembling with distress and fury. Never had he showed his anger so plainly. She could find no words to answer him so she

stood and curtsied formally, an action rare with her to this man she knew only as a loving and generous father, then she walked in dignified fashion from the hall.

She felt her limbs still trembling as she climbed the stair to her chamber where she found Aldith sorting gowns in her clothing chest. Aldith had fallen easily into work as her personal attendant from the moment she had come to Brinkhurst on the afternoon of Sigurd's arrest. Now she slept on a truckle bed within her mistress's chamber and to Gisela, it seemed her beloved nurse had returned to her as if she had never left to live with Rolf and Sigurd in the little cottage in the assart.

Aldith saw at once that something was terribly wrong. She did not make the mistake of enquiring, knowing that if the matter concerned Sigurd she would have been informed at once and sensing Gisela was not yet ready to tell her what was distressing her so badly.

Gisela walked to the little casement, its shutters not yet drawn to, despite the cold outside, for Aldith knew that her mistress liked the still-scented air from the herb garden to freshen the little room behind her mother's bower, which was warmed from below by the hearth fire and could become stuffy.

Gisela stared bleakly over the darkened garden. She said without turning, "Aldith, I want you to find a reliable servant to take a message for me to Sir Kenrick of Arcote at first light tomorrow." Her voice shook slightly. "Kenrick does not read well so it must be verbal. I want him to meet me at noon tomorrow in the clearing in the wood near the stream. He knows the place. We have ridden there often together."

Aldith frowned. She was aware, without being told, that this message must not be repeated to others, or reach the master's ears.

"Mistress, you do not intend to ride out tomorrow without escort? That would be very dangerous."

"I must, Aldith." The words were whispered.

She turned from the window and Aldith hastened across to draw to and fasten the shutters. The room was illuminated now only by a single candle on a chest by the bed but, by its light, she saw how white her young mistress was, especially round the mouth.

Gisela had sunk down upon the wolf-pelt coverlet of the bed and was stroking its fur absently.

"What is it, child?" Aldith questioned gently, reverting to her former familiar attitude when Gisela had been her loved charge. "You would not disobey your father without cause. It is not your way."

"He intends to wed me to Baron Alain de Treville."

Aldith's lips rounded in an "o" of astonishment but she uttered no sound.

Gisela said woodenly, "I love Kenrick of Arcote. I—I somehow never questioned the fact that, in time, we should wed."

Aldith chose her words with care. "It is within the right of your father to choose for you."

"I know that, but it never occurred to me that he would gainsay me in this, my deepest desire."

Aldith hesitated, then pressed on, "Few girls expect to marry the man of their own choosing. The Baron is the wealthiest man in the shire. It is natural your father should consider this the finest match for you."

"I do not wish to be mistress of Allestone." The words were ground out through gritted teeth. "This man is an arrogant stranger. Look how he treated Sigurd."

"He granted him his life when it was in his power to hang him," Aldith reminded her softly. "I shall pray for him to the end of my days for that mercy."

"But if he had not thrown you both from your cottage, the attack would never have happened."

Aldith sighed. It was not for her to challenge the decisions of the great ones.

"What do you think Kenrick can do about this?" she said at last diffidently.

"I don't know," Gisela said desperately. "Surely he can plead with Father…"

“Suppose it is not in his mind to—offer marriage,” Aldith ventured, “since he has not declared himself? It is my opinion that Sir Kenrick will be guided by his mother in this.”

Gisela stared at her dully. “I am sure he loves me,” she said desperately. “I could be happy at Arcote.” She seized her maid’s hand. “You will do this for me, find me a messenger and help me to get out of the house?”

Aldith nodded slowly. She was kneeling close by her mistress’s side. She rose heavily. Everything appeared to be happening suddenly to disrupt the even tenor of their lives. She felt cold to her bones. Surely this was a natural sense of foreboding for the problems facing them and not the acute approach of old age!

Chapter Three

Gisela rode fast for the little clearing in the wood once she had managed to get free from the village. She had not found it as difficult as she had feared; her father had risen early and ridden out on the desmesne, obviating the need to lie to him about her destination and purpose for the ride. Since the latest attack on the manor near Oakham, he had been more and more adamant that she be escorted and it was essential that she should ride alone this morning.

In the end, it had been the head groom she had had to convince that she needed no one to accompany her, giving as her excuse that she was going no further than the church in the village. Aldith had stood by the manor gate, clearly alarmed. Had Sigurd been available, he could have run by his mistress's saddle bow and afforded her some protection.

Aldith's heart misgave her as Gisela put spurs to her palfrey and rode out of sight. Not only was her mistress at risk, but the necessity to urge Kenrick to declare himself also worried Aldith. Suppose her mistress was to be disappointed in the man and humiliated by a refusal to help her? Gisela was so sure that Kenrick was a suitor. If she were wrong, she would be brokenhearted.

Aldith had sent off Gisela's message as promised. Since there was no time for a reply she could only hope Kenrick would be at the trysting place as Gisela had requested. She sighed and went wearily back into the manor house. She had slept badly, still worried about Sigurd and concerned for her mistress.

Gisela knew she was early when she reached the clearing. She had been too impatient to wait before leaving Brinkhurst. She walked her palfrey to a large flat stone she had previously used as a mounting block and managed to dismount unaided, then secured her palfrey's reins on a low branch of overhanging alder and moved unhurriedly to the stream.

She had encountered no one in the wood. The villagers had been working at the final autumn tasks within their own cottages. There were still rushes to be dipped, apples stored and inspected and the final sealing done on salted pig-meat barrels.

She frowned as she tapped her riding whip against her booted foot. If Kenrick had been from home when her message arrived, this last desperate measure to avoid what she considered an enforced marriage could well be doomed for, somehow, she knew her father would give his decision later today. He would not keep Baron Alain de Treville waiting and last night he had been so definitely in favour of the match. Only Kenrick could give her hope of rescue from this sorry fate by declaring himself today, as she prayed he would consent to do.

She heard sounds of movement on the track and turned instantly to find Kenrick's sorrel hack entering the clearing. She waited by the stream, her heartbeat quickening, as he sprang down and almost ran towards her. He took both her hands in his and squeezed them tightly.

"Gisela, oh, my dear, I came the moment I received your message. I was out when the man came but he waited, praise God, and found me as I rode through the gate. There is no trouble at Brinkhurst? But, surely not, your father would have sent word."

His greeting was so ardent. She scanned his face anxiously; she could not have been mistaken about his feelings for her.

She went straight to the point. "I thought you should know at once. My father proposes to wed me to Alain de Treville."

Shock registered instantly on Kenrick's good-humoured countenance. For a moment he looked almost haggard. His gloved fingers tightened upon hers and he pulled her a little closer to him.

"He has given his word?"

"Not yet. I think it will be soon. De Treville asked for me yesterday, at the manor court. Did you hear about Sigurd?"

Kenrick nodded. “Yes. I am sorry for the boy, but I suppose it was the best we could hope for him, under the circumstances.” He drew her away from the clearing some way so that they would not be seen so easily by any passerby on the track. “Tell me, Gisela, you are not in favour of this match? He would make you my lady…”

“Of course I am not. Father was angered with me last night more than he has been for years now. I was vehemently against it. I told him I would not be coerced. I cannot imagine why the Baron should want such a marriage. We have been at odds from the first time we met and he does not strike me as a man who would accept a rebellious wife lightly. Surely he could make a more advantageous marriage at the King’s court?

“I am at a loss to understand it. The proposal has come out of the blue.” Her eyes appealed to him and she hesitated, then plunged on. “I—I had hoped that—” she swallowed hard “—Kenrick, I must humiliate myself by asking if you have any feelings for me…”

“Of course I have,” he said forcibly. “I would have declared myself months ago had not my mother been so against it.”

“You have spoken with her about it?”

“Aye.” He looked away momentarily. “We have quarrelled. I rode out early this morning to clear my head of wine fumes. We had a fierce engagement only last night when I informed her of my intentions regarding you and I drank more than I should.”

“She does not approve of me,” Gisela sighed. “I feared as much.”

“She would not approve of anyone I wished to marry, if the truth were known,” he said angrily. “She is unwilling to allow any other woman’s rule at Arcote, but I informed her last night that I would brook no more tearful scenes, that I would go to your father soon and request your hand in marriage.”

Gisela expelled a tiny sigh and he bent and kissed her gloved palm. “Do not be afraid, my love. I will ride back with you today and ask for your hand. When he is made aware that we both want this match, I do not think he will force you into a marriage that would be odious to you.”

Gisela was doubtful. Her father had been determined last night that Kenrick was not the man for her but surely, as Kenrick said, he would listen to reason? She had to try. She looked into Kenrick’s young frowning face intently.

“You are sure? I would not press you. It is just that—we have always dealt well together and —and this has come so suddenly…”

“Aye,” he said bitterly, “and this man de Treville is far more noble than I. Your father will take some persuading.”

“Oh, Kenrick, what shall we do if he will not listen to reason? He has never been so adamant before, about anything.”

Kenrick’s brows drew together. “Let us meet this squarely first, Gisela. If your father refuses me outright, we must think again.” He paused and looked down at her steadily. “Would you—would you be prepared to defy him and—and run from Brinkhurst?”

She caught her breath in a great gasp, her gaze directed from him now, looking wildly about the little clearing, at the trees almost denuded of leaves now and the short grass where the pigs had grazed. “I don’t know, I—” Then she turned fully back to him. “Yes, if it is necessary. I will escape this forced marriage by any means but, Kenrick, where could we go, what could we do if my father refuses his consent to our betrothal?”

His mouth set in a stubborn line. “Why, then we must wed without his consent. I will take you before a priest in Leicester Town. There we are not known and any priest will wed us, given the right inducements. Afterwards—” he gave a click of the tongue indicating distaste for his next words “—afterwards your father will not wish to have the marriage annulled, not if—if you are truly mine. Do you understand, Gisela?”

She nodded, but her eyes were misting with tears. “Yes, but I pray the Virgin that it will not be necessary. I love him so, Kenrick. I would not wish to live in enmity with my own father, nor will you wish to be at odds with a neighbour.”

Alain de Treville rode at ease through Allestone wood. He was accompanied only by his squire, Huon. Today he expected no displays of hostility from his own people. He had proved to them who was master and he hoped they would recognise the degree of mercy he had shown. True, he was leaving the desmesne of Allestone but only for a short time; he intended calling on his neighbour, Walter of Brinkhurst, so he rode without mail.

The reason, or was it excuse, for his visit was curled up in a rush basket within a pannier secured to one side of his saddle. He smiled down at the hound pup fondly. He had been assured that it was correctly weaned and would make a suitable gift for Gisela of Brinkhurst. Had she not said he was beautiful? He was humming an old Norman folksong sung to him in childhood by his own wet nurse, which he had not remembered in years. The air was cold but the day was bright and his hopes were high.

Huon, keeping a respectful distance behind him, watched the jaunty set of his master’s shoulders and wondered. Alain de Treville had proved himself a good and fair master but, so far, Huon had seen little sign of jollity in his character. Throughout these past months the Baron’s one abiding desire had been to ensure the defences of Allestone Castle. He had not ventured into Oakham or Leicester Town to seek feminine company and since he kept no leman at Allestone, he had apparently lived like a monk throughout the time Huon had been assigned to him as squire.

Now, without warning, his master’s mood had lightened and he had gone about the castle joyfully. Huon gave a little secretive smile. He had glimpsed the light in his master’s eye when he had spied the Demoiselle Gisela within the manor court assembly and knew their destination now was Brinkhurst. If Lord Alain was not yet in love, Huon believed he could soon arrive at that delectable state. Huon was in favour of whatever it took to keep Lord Alain permanently in this pleasant mood which eased the lives of all in service at Allestone.

As they entered the clearing that led to the track to Brinkhurst Lord Alain checked, drew rein and Huon drew up close. Two horses were tethered in the clearing, one a sorrel hack, the other a lady’s palfrey. Huon believed he had seen that dapple mare once before. He made a little sound deep in his throat that was checked by his master’s upraised hand.

De Treville’s eyes gazed warily round the clearing. The two horses paid him little attention and seemed intent on grazing quietly. Neither appeared to be soldiers’ mounts and would pose no threat. He made to move on again, then stared hard once more at the palfrey. His throat tightened as he realised he had seen it before in the assart by Aldith’s cottage. It was Gisela’s palfrey.

Some movement to his right alerted him and he put one hand to his sword hilt, swinging round in the saddle and motioning silently for Huon to move back and keep quiet. His watchful eyes swept the clearing until he saw the two people half hidden by coppiced beeches. The man, young by his stance, unknown to de Treville, was bending low to kiss the girl held close in his arms.

De Treville drew a harsh breath as he knew, without even glimpsing her features properly, for she was half-hidden from him by the man who held her, that Gisela of Brinkhurst was in the arms of a lover. How could he be mistaken in the poise of that head, the slim perfection of the youthful form?

He kept his mount perfectly still, one hand gentling the animal, so it made no sound, not even a whickered greeting to the other horses in the clearing. Skilfully he turned the horse and motioned for Huon, who was waiting warily by an oak nearby, to do the same.

Keeping his courser to the softer ground where its passing would not be heard by the two lovers, de Treville headed back to Allestone, Huon falling in behind. He looked down at the puppy who woke suddenly and began to wriggle, wag its tail and make little squeaks demanding attention. His lips curved into a rueful smile.

“Not the right moment, my boy,” he said regretfully. “Perhaps one day soon you can meet your new mistress again.”

Huon noted with some concern that the humming had stopped. He had not emerged into the clearing to see what de Treville had seen, but he was convinced that, whatever it was, it had disturbed his master’s peace. He gave a heavy sigh of disappointment.

Gisela rode in silence by Kenrick’s side as they made for Brinkhurst, watching him covertly. His brows were drawn together and his lips compressed. She knew he did not relish the coming interview with her father, neither did she. She was not sure why she did not feel as comforted by Kenrick’s nearness as she had expected to be.

He had greeted her as warmly as she had hoped, had promised immediately to do what she asked, indeed, had drawn her into a tender embrace. Everything had gone as she had planned it in her dreams, yet she was neither as sanguine nor as happy as she had thought she would be.

Kenrick’s kiss had been warm, tender, caring, but had not drawn forth in her the passionate response she had dreamed of and heard about in the troubadours’ tales. She castigated herself for her own doubts. Those tales were foolish, for entertainment only, not intended to be taken seriously by any sensible maid. Aldith would have said as much. Kenrick was like a brother to her; she held him in high esteem, trusted him utterly.

It was unlikely that at their first proper kiss—for on other occasions he had kissed her lightly in her father’s presence on cheek and forehead many times, in greeting and in taking farewell—her heart would pound madly or her bones melt or strange tingles run through her body as the troubadors declared. It would take time for such love to come to fruition, when they were wed and he held her close on their marriage night.

She had not managed to convince herself either that her father would so readily consent to their betrothal as Kenrick predicted. And what if he did not? Although she had promised Kenrick she would, Gisela was not sure she wished to steal from Brinkhurst secretly and shamefully wed in direct disobedience to her father’s wishes. She stirred uneasily in the saddle and, catching Kenrick’s eye, managed a weak smile in response to his own assured one.

It was in the action of turning and, once more, giving his attention to the track that Kenrick suddenly froze in the saddle, pulled up his hack sharply and seized Gisela’s bridle rein. She stared at him in astonishment as she saw that his usually ruddy features drained of all colour and his lips tightened in alarm.

“Kenrick, what is it?”

His eyes were focussed dead ahead in the direction of Brinkhurst manor and she followed his gaze in utter bewilderment. Then she saw it, black smoke curling up above the trees, oily, thick smoke that could not be mistaken for the normal emissions from hearth fires and cookhouse and bakehouse. She gave one frightened cry.

“Kenrick, it cannot be Brinkhurst!”

“I’m afraid it is.” His tone was grim. “You must wait here, Gisela, while I ride forward to reconnoitre.”

She dragged his hand free of her bridle rein and, putting spurs to her mount, flew on ahead of him. She heard his quick curse of surprise and anger faintly on the wind. Her mount was docile but powerful and she was soon well ahead of Kenrick on the track. If something had happened at Brinkhurst nothing and no one was going to prevent her reaching her father.

As she pounded along, Kenrick riding hard in pursuit, she tried to tell herself that whatever had occurred, her father could not be involved. He had been away from home when she left and that had not been so long ago, yet—she knew in her innermost heart that her father must have seen the smoke just as she and Kenrick had and must, even now, either be on route for the manor or had already arrived.

The gate was unguarded as she thundered through and the courtyard deserted, though horses were milling about, confused, bridles trailing. She was breathing in the smoke now, coughing and retching as she rode. There was no mistaking the sounds of conflict assailing her ears from the hall as she kicked her feet free of the stirrups and sprang down.

She neither knew nor cared now if Kenrick were following. Her one desperate need was to get to her father. Her riding gown was hindering her headlong dash and, impatiently, she bent and tore her feet free of it as she ran on. A serving lad, coughing as she was, and crying at the same time, blundered past her near the screen door and she shouldered him aside and rushed on.

The noise of men shouting and women screaming was almost deafening now as she burst into the hall then stopped dead, stricken to stone momentarily by the sights that met her eyes.

Trestles had been overturned, bodies lay still or twitched in pain where they had fallen. Men clad in mail whooped their triumph as they rushed about the hall seizing anything of value they could find. She stared round blindly for sight of her father, but the brief fight appeared to be over. The manor had been taken completely by surprise by this band of marauding routiers and now all that was left was for them to loot the place, see to it that no man could pursue them and get away from the scene of destruction without being captured.

A girl's sharp scream of utter terror froze Gisela once more to the spot. Try as she might she could not turn and run. It seemed that her feet would not carry her away, for she realised instantly that there was nothing to gain by remaining. Her only chance was to follow that boy who had fled from the chaos. In their wild lust for destruction, the attackers had thrown torches up to the roof timbers, which were already engulfed in flames and giving out the thick, lung-wrenching smoke that had alerted her and Kenrick to the scene.

Her eyes roved the hall while, for a blessed moment, no man appeared to notice her entrance for the intruders were too intent on enriching themselves, taking in the smaller signs which she found so touchingly horrifying: the spilt wine, the wooden mazers and platters that had been hacked about in the acts of senseless destruction, all marks of the dread scene, and her father's favourite elderly hound lay slain, horribly blood-smirched.

Gisela found her voice to let out one long howl of anguish. Instantly she alerted one of the routiers, who was in the act of wrenching a wall hanging from behind her father's chair. She registered the fact, dully, that she had been told that it was especially prized as her mother's work when Lady Hildegarde had first come as a bride to Brinkhurst.

The man turned and let fall the hanging. He let out an animal yell and leaped for Gisela and bore her to the ground. She fought him desperately with teeth and claws, crying out curses to the god who had let this disaster overtake them and pleas to the mother of all to protect a virgin, as she was herself.

She was suddenly wrenched free and rolled clear, sobbing, clumsily attempting to hold together the torn parts of her gown, to see Kenrick in mortal combat with her attacker. The two men were rolling over and over, panting hard, scrambling for mastery and thrusting with their daggers in frantic attempts to find vulnerable spots to aim for and finish this fight.

Gisela crouched some feet away, too winded and frightened to even try to rise and run. She was too shocked even to be fearful for Kenrick's safety. She watched each move with horrified fascination, not even aware that there were other men in the room, men flushed with victory, their hauberks smeared with ominous bloodstains, their faces soot blackened.

They were all laden with pillaged goods, linens, fur pelts, metal drinking cups, weapons. They stood and cheered on the combatants as if this was one special entertainment put on for their amusement, for the moment too engrossed in the fight to take note of the girl crouched some feet from them.

Gisela gave a terrible sob of desperation as she saw Kenrick's opponent strike down ruthlessly, giving a panting gasp of triumph that was echoed by his fellow routiers.

Alain de Treville saw the betraying plumes of smoke almost at the same moment as Kenrick of Arcote had done so. He reined in his horse abruptly and stared back towards the clearing he had just left. Huon rode up to his side and peered in the same direction.

"A cottage fire, got out of hand, my lord?"

"I doubt it. There's too much smoke for that. It could be the manor house."

"My lord?"

"There have been several attacks on property near here, recently. Huon, take the pup. I'm going back. Ride straight for the castle and tell Sir Clement I want a company of men to mount up instantly and follow me to Brinkhurst. Impress on him the urgency of my need."

He scooped up the wriggling, protesting puppy from the pannier basket and thrust it into the boy's arms. He could see he needed to say no more to have Huon realising his need and obeying his orders instantly. The boy's young face was set. He made no attempt to protest that he should accompany Lord Alain. Obviously his lord's prime need now was to have reinforcements at his back. He nodded and spurred his horse in the direction of Allestone, firmly holding in his squirming burden with one arm.

De Treville cursed inwardly at low-lying branches that impeded his headlong ride down the track. His one thought was for Gisela. As he thundered through the clearing he saw at once that the two horses were gone. Gisela and her youthful swain had left and were, doubtless, heading back to Brinkhurst and certain danger.

He rode on, straight into the smoke blown his way by the wind, gritted his teeth and soothed his courser, which was rearing and squealing in dismay at the obvious signs of fire his master was deliberately aiming him into, through the gate arch into Brinkhurst's courtyard, where he saw now only three riderless horses. His expression hardened as he jumped down and gave a curt command to his mount. Well-trained, despite his natural fear of fire, the destrier would wait docilely for his master's return.

De Treville made for the hall steps at a run, his hand on his sword hilt. It would seem that what opposition to this attack there had been, had been easily subdued and most of the marauders had already left. His body went cold as he thought Gisela might have been carried off by one of them. Her one champion would have had little chance to foil any attempt to abduct her. He burst through the screen doors to the scene of destruction.

He'd been right. Most of the looters had departed. One man only, laughing and whooping with delight, was engaged in pulling along a scratching, biting girl, whose gown and head veil were torn, a girl whose wrists had been bound with some cloth, possibly torn from a damaged wall hanging.

At the sudden entrance of a newcomer, her abductor raised a hand in guffawing greeting, as if to a companion, then his eyes narrowed as he recognised a stranger. He let go of the girl, who fell back against an overturned trestle, and, drawing his sword, got ready to defend his prize.

De Treville leaped into the attack, his soldier's eye taking in the fact that the man appeared to have recently been engaged in conflict. He would be tired. There was no need for haste now. He could be defeated simply enough by being worn down.

De Treville called a curt command to Gisela. "Stand clear. Leave the man to me."

She was distraught and totally exhausted and was only too glad to obey. She scrambled up from her tumble and moved warily to the side of the hall, her eyes never leaving the combatants. She looked across once at the sprawled form of Kenrick and hastily averted her eyes.

This contest at arms lasted very little time at all. She watched, dry-eyed, as de Treville skilfully fought the man back and back until he was tight against a trestle. One well-aimed move and her erstwhile captor had been thrust headfirst over the fallen trestle and de Treville leaned easily down and dispatched him with one thrust. The fellow gave only one strangled grunt as if utterly surprised.

Alain de Treville rose and moved towards the distraught girl. He sheathed his blood-smeared blade and, after freeing her hands and took one shaking hand within his, his head jerking upwards

as two men came thundering down the stair behind the dais. They took in the sight of their fallen comrade and, laden down with valuables, thought it best to take to their heels and flee.

One made it, scrambling through the screen doors, dropping most of his trophies, but de Treville sprang over another fallen trestle and engaged the other swiftly. Taken as much by surprise as Gisela's former captor, the man took a thrust beneath the arm where his mailed hauberk was weakest and dropped with scarce a murmur and the clatter of metal cups as they fell from his hands.

Gisela had run towards Kenrick's body. He was lying face down and, frantically, she tried to turn him, the tears she had held back till now streaming down her face.

De Treville reached her and bent down to draw her aside gently. "Let me."

She sat back on her heels, mutely entreating him to inform her that Kenrick still lived. He turned the young man, noting grimly the gaping chest wound and blood soaking the rushes beneath him. His questing fingers sought the side of the neck for sign of a pulse and he looked up quickly to meet Gisela's agonised gaze and gently shook his head.

"I am sorry."

She let out a terrible sob and put one shaking hand to her lips.

"He died protecting you?"

She nodded mutely.

"Then you must be glad for him that he died a true man's death, fighting for one he cared about."

"I—I have known him all my life. He…he is Kenrick of Arcote…"

He nodded, rose to his feet and, slipping off his mantle, he covered Kenrick's form after gently closing the staring eyes.

Gisela gave another great gulp of terror. She looked round wildly at the sprawled bodies. So far she had not been able to recognise individual servants, womenfolk and—and still—still—she had not identified her father.

De Treville put his hands to her shaking shoulders and drew her to her feet, then he led her to a bench, which he righted, and pushed her gently but firmly down upon it.

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