

The Ghost

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The Ghost

by [Eugeal](#)

Summary

Sir Edward of Knighton had been killed, and Guy of Gisborne found out that, after her father's death, Marian ran away from the castle.

Just when he thought that his day couldn't become worse, Guy receives a frightening visit in his room...

Notes

I have many stories in progress, but it's almost Halloween, so we need a supernatural fanfiction set in Nottingham, don't you think?

This should be a short story (4 or 5 chapters, I think), and I hope I can end it in time for Halloween (but if I can't, be patient please, I'll give you candies instead :D)

As usual, Guy is the main character here, but this time he will have an unusual, spooky companion.

A Spooky Visitor

Guy of Gisborne didn't have the habit to get drunk, but that night he felt justified to find oblivion in wine.

In a single afternoon he had to face the shock of finding the dead body of Sir Edward of Knighton and to try to soothe Marian's sorrow. Seeing her weep so desperately made him think of the saddest day of his life, when he had cried for the death of both his parents and the loss of their home.

That thought filled him with shame: even Marian's house had been burned to the ground. By his hand.

He couldn't complain if the girl looked so unwilling to be comforted by him.

When the girl left him to take refuge in her room, Guy had to bear the rage of the Sheriff, furious because Robin Hood robbed him, taking the Pact of Nottingham from his room, and making him lose a lot of his gold too.

Vaisey yelled at Guy for a long time, menacing to fire him and blaming him for the incompetence of the guards and for their inability to catch Hood.

When the Sheriff finally let him go, Guy went to Marian's room, to check how she was, only to find out that she was gone, that she had run away from the castle as soon as her father was dead.

That was the moment when Guy decided that that day couldn't get worse: he grabbed a jug of wine from the kitchen and sat in front of the fire to drink it, ordering a servant to take him another one when the first was finished.

Allan sat with him, and drank some wine too, but this time the former outlaw was too worried to see Gisborne drinking so much to get drunk as well. Allan wasn't used to see Guy losing his control because of wine, and he felt that it wouldn't be good for neither of them.

When Guy finished his second jug of wine, Allan dragged him back to his lodgings, with some difficulties because Guy was tall and heavy, but at last he succeeded in leaving him on the bed, and soon the knight slipped into a deep sleep.

Guy woke up in the middle of the night, hearing somebody who was calling his name.

He groggily sat up in bed, taking a hand to his throbbing head.

"Allan? What do you want?"

A lit candle was on the table, illuminating the room, but when Guy looked around, he found out that he was alone.

A dream, he thought, just a dream.

He got up, a little unsteadily, to use the chamberpot, and he sighed, remembering that he was feeling so wretched because Marian had left the castle.

She left me. Again.

He went to the basin to wash his hands, and he realized that he was still wearing the same clothes of the day before. He wrinkled his nose in disgust: they smelled of sweat and wine.

Guy began to undress, ashamed of his sorry state, and regretting to have drunk so much.

He poured more water in the basin and he began to wash up: it was cold, but he didn't mind, it helped to clear his mind and to make him feel less foolish.

Gisborne took a towel to dry his hair, and he walked to the mirror, taking the candle with him. He looked at his face, tired and dejected, and he wondered if he looked so scary and evil

that Marian had to choose to run away rather than staying at the castle with him. He almost dropped the candle when he saw another person in the reflection. Guy turned around quickly, cursing because he didn't have his sword, and this time he actually dropped the candlestick and jumped back, slamming his back against the mirror.

It can't be. It's impossible!

Guy put a hand on his chest, trying to slow his heartbeats and to catch his breath. Surely he was still drunk and he had seen an image from a dream, a figment of his imagination.

He was sure that he had been alone in the room when he woke up, and he knew that he still was alone. If there was somebody else, he would hear the sound of his breath, sense his presence.

But he had seen someone, someone who couldn't be there.

Guy took a deep breath and said to himself that he had to pick up the candlestick and light the candle again, so he could see with his own eyes that there was nobody.

He was about to do it when suddenly the image of Sir Edward of Knighton appeared in front of him, a flame burning in each of his hands.

Guy stared at him for a moment, then he collapsed to the floor, in a dead faint.

When Guy opened his eyes again, the light of dawn was entering from the window. For a moment he wondered why he was lying on the floor, then he remembered the nightmare that had frightened him so much.

I'll never get drunk again if I start seeing impossible things.

"Really, Sir Guy, I didn't think you were so impressionable..."

A voice talked very near to his ear, and Guy jumped, scared. He sat on the floor and found himself staring at Sir Edward, who was crouching to meet his gaze. He was staring at his room too, because the image of the man was half transparent, and Guy could see through him.

Guy tried to retreat, but he found the wall behind his back. To move, he would have to push the ghost of the old man away, and he wouldn't touch him for anything in the world.

"No! It's impossible! Go away!" He gasped, and Sir Edward nodded gravely.

"It's surprising, indeed. I didn't expect that you could see me. It must be because you were the first one to find my body just after I died."

"It wasn't my fault!" Guy cried, terrified. "Please don't hurt me! I never wanted you to die!" Sir Edward looked at him, puzzled.

"I never blamed you for that. Actually, I was surprised to see that you were so shocked by my death. And I appreciated that you tried to comfort Marian, even if I have to say that you weren't very good at it."

Guy closed his eyes, trembling.

"Sir Guy? You aren't going to faint again, are you? Please look at me."

Gisborne shuddered, but he obeyed, forcing himself to look at the ghost.

Sir Edward was standing now, holding a hand out to him, as if he wanted to help him to his feet.

He was smiling, his eyes kind.

Guy struggled to stand without touching him.

"Why are you here?" He stammered, and the ghost seemed to become sad.

"I think you know very well what ties me to this world, Sir Guy."

The knight sighed.

"Marian."

Sir Edward nodded.

“You are trembling, Sir Guy. Are you afraid of me, or just cold? Get dressed and sit near the fireplace or you’ll catch your death. Then we’ll talk.”

The ghost disappeared and Guy sat heavily on the bed, upset.

Am I becoming crazy?

He was still shivering and he felt cold. He was only wearing his trousers, and his hair was still damp, and Guy decided that he should get dressed regardless of whether the ghost was real or not.

Guy opened a trunk, grabbing some clean clothes, and he wore them, struggling to close the clasps of the jacket because his hands were trembling too much.

He had to get out of that room, to reach his guards, so he wouldn’t be alone with his nightmares. As soon as he was dressed, he darted to the door, only to find Sir Edward on the threshold, an amused sparkle in his glance.

The ghost gestured to the chairs in front of the fireplace, and Guy obeyed him, dropping himself on one of them. The fire was warm, comforting, but Guy just wanted to run away. Sir Edward sat on the other chair, in front of him, and gestured to a basket of fruit that was on a little table between them.

“After drinking so much you should eat something, Sir Guy. But if I must be honest, getting drunk is a habit that I don’t like. It doesn’t do good neither for the health nor for the mind.”

“It’s not a habit for me,” Guy said, defensively, and a bit irked. He could understand if the ghost of Sir Edward wanted to haunt him for burning Knighton Hall and arresting him, but why should he care about his habits?

Sir Edward smiled.

“Good for you, Sir Guy.”

Gisborne took an apple from the basket, but he put it back before biting it. He was feeling sick and his head was still aching, and he wasn’t sure that he could keep anything down if he tried to eat.

He leaned his back on the chair, tired.

“What do you want from me?”

“You owe me, Sir Guy. You burned my house.”

Guy hanged his head with a sigh.

“I’d take it back if I could.”

“But you can’t.”

“So you are here to punish me? What will you do?”

The ghost looked worried.

“No, no, Sir Guy. It’s not up to me to punish you. It’s true, some ghosts can take revenge on the persons who wronged them, but I won’t. Actually, I’ve forgiven you. I did it even before I died, because I could see that most of your evil actions came from the sheriff. I could haunt him, he would surely deserve it. I know that you tried to ease my stay in the dungeons, I could see that I had more blankets and better food than the other prisoners, and I guessed that you were the one who ordered the jailers to treat me well. But you are still in debt with my family, and this is the moment to settle it.”

Gisborne was pale, as if he was about to faint again or to be sick.

“How?” He whispered.

“I want you to take care of Marian.”

Guy stared at him, his eyes wide with surprise, and unable to reply.

“I know that you have feelings for her and that you deeply care for my daughter, so you must protect her, because I can’t do it anymore.”

“She ran away from the castle,” Guy said, bitterly.

"I know. She is in love with Robin."

Guy winced. The words of Sir Edward hurt him deeply, but he realized that deep in his heart he already suspected that. He felt enraged, he wanted to lash out at Marian and to kill Hood, but Sir Edward's ghost was looking at him, and his stare made him feel guilty.

He remembered Marian's tears from the day before, the desperation in her eyes when she had seen the old man's body, and the warm softness of her body in his arms when he had hugged her. Guy suddenly knew that she might be in love with Hood, but that this knowledge wasn't enough for his heart to stop loving her.

"Why are you asking *me* to protect her, then?"

"Because Marian is the most important thing in your life. Robin loves her, I won't deny it, but he loves his King, his people and our England even more. I can't blame him, I died for England, and in the past I myself chose my country over my daughter. When she had to marry you, in example. I wasn't there because I thought that I could save England from the sheriff."

"I thought that you weren't there because you didn't approve me," Guy blurted, and Edward looked at him, his gaze softer.

"You should have more self confidence, Sir Guy. If you did, you wouldn't rely so much on the sheriff, and things would be better for everyone. As I once told Marian, she could have done worse than marrying you."

"It doesn't matter. She loves Hood."

The ghost smiled.

"This won't stop you from protecting her."

Guy gritted his teeth, enraged, because he knew that Sir Edward was right. He was feeling stupid and helpless and the sheriff would surely have laughed at him if he could read his thoughts.

Guy the gullible! He would say. The leper keeps betraying you, and you are ready to fall for her poisonous words again! Stupid, spineless, lovesick fool!

"You're not gullible, Sir Guy," Edward said, as if he could actually read his mind, "nor a fool. You love my daughter, and I'm glad you do."

Gisborne looked at him, startled.

"Don't do that!"

"What?"

"Keep out of my mind!"

"It's not something I choose to do, I'm sorry if this upsets you. It seems that when you die, you can read easily what is in people's hearts, it's as if their souls are exposed to my eyes."

Guy blushed, his eyes downcast.

"Yours is not as black as you think, Sir Guy," Edward said, gently, "you don't have to be so ashamed. The soul of the sheriff is really black, and it tainted you as well, but underneath his filth, yours is not that bad. You committed serious sins and heinous crimes, but it's not too late to change and be saved. There is hope for you, and you must believe me, because now I can't lie."

"I always thought that Marian's pure soul would cleanse mine," Guy confessed, and to his dismay the ghost burst out into a laugh.

"Forgive me, Sir Guy. Maybe you *are* a little gullible after all. Marian's heart is in the right place, but she isn't the pure, innocent angel that you think. She wronged you, she deceived you, even if she did it to help people in need, and she has her faults. We all have our faults, and my daughter makes no exception. Maybe it's time you learn to see her for who she really is."

“No, she wouldn’t lie to me.”

“She is the Nightwatchman.”

“No! It can be!”

Sir Edward smiled knowingly.

“Are you sure, Sir Guy? Try to think about it, about all the times you met the Nightwatchman. Once you cut his arm, and you found blood on Marian’s sleeve later that day.”

Guy covered his mouth with his hand, shocked.

“I stabbed the Nightwatchman! That’s why she was ill before the wedding?!” He jumped to his feet, his eyes wide with horror. “She could have died! I almost killed her and you are asking me to protect her?! Are you insane?! How can you say that my soul isn’t black when I stabbed her?!”

“Calm down, Sir Guy. Please sit, and try to breathe slowly.”

Guy didn’t listen to him, his thoughts in a turmoil, and he kept pacing around the room, distressed.

The ghost rose from his chair, and he seemed to become bigger and darker.

“SIT DOWN!” He bellowed, his voice unearthly and menacing, and Guy looked at him in horror, cowering on his chair and hiding his face in his hands.

Sir Edward rolled his eyes with a sigh: he never meant to scare the knight so much.

“Sorry, I just wanted you to calm down,” he said after a while.

Guy dared to look at him, his eyes damp with tears of fear and frustration.

“You wanted me to calm down? How? Menacing to drag me to hell?!” He snarled.

“I never did it!”

“Well, it bloody looked like it!”

“Sorry,” Edward repeated, then he grinned. “But it worked: you are sitting there and listening to me, now.”

Guy shook his head in disbelief.

“It doesn’t change what I did.”

“The Nightwatchman was robbing you, and you didn’t know that it was her. She has her faults, can’t you see it, Sir Guy? The point is that we can still love people, even if they are not perfect.”

Gisborne lowered his head in defeat. He didn’t think he had the strength to argue with that ghost, it was easier to surrender and do whatever he wanted.

“What do you expect from me?”

“For now wash your face, calm down and go to do your job. Nobody else should know that you can see me or they will think that you are insane, or that you are possessed. You must act normally. I will come back when my presence is needed. We will help each other to protect Marian. I have trust in you, Sir Guy, and I hope you will trust me too, in time.”

With those words, the ghost disappeared, and Guy was alone in his room again.

Because I Am a Father

Allan was relieved to see the dark figure of Guy of Gisborne walking down the corridor and he hurried to reach him.

“Hey, Giz!” He called. “Are you alright?”

Gisborne winced and turned to look at him, and Allan realized that he wasn’t. The knight was deadly pale and he had dark shadows under his eyes, as if he hadn’t slept for a week, and he looked jumpy and upset.

“Oy, mate, that wine was too strong, I guess. But don’t worry, I know a great remedy for hangovers, it’s a little disgusting, but it works miracles.”

Gisborne grabbed the front of his tunic with a growl, and he slammed Allan against the wall.

“You’re a liar! A snake ready to betray me!” He snarled.

“Are you still drunk, Giz? I wouldn’t betray you!”

“As you wouldn’t betray Hood? You lied to me!”

Allan frantically tried to understand which lie Guy could have found out, but just a moment later Guy answered that unexpressed question.

“You knew how I feel for Marian, but you never told me that she’s in love with Hood! And that she’s the Nightwatchman!”

“Who told you?!” Allan blurted, realizing immediately that he had just revealed to Guy that he knew about her secrets. He braced himself for a beating, but Gisborne didn’t hit him.

Instead he let him go, looking at the empty corridor, and lowering his eyes, as if he was ashamed of something.

“You wouldn’t believe me,” he said, with a sigh. “Why you didn’t tell me?”

Allan looked at him, and he saw how dejected Gisborne was. He felt some pity for the man, even if he was afraid that Guy could still beat him.

“I didn’t know how you would react. I might be a traitor, but Marian had always been kind to us, I didn’t want you to hang her when you found out the truth.”

Guy kept glancing at a point at the left of Allan.

“I would never hurt her.”

“Maybe, but you could hurt *me*. And I wanted to make sure that it wouldn’t happen.”

Gisborne didn’t answer to him, but he mumbled something, still looking at the empty space at Allan’s left. The former outlaw gave a worried glance at him.

“Giz? What’s up? You are worrying me.”

“Nothing.”

“That’s because of Marian? Did you really love her so much?”

Guy eventually looked at him.

“She means everything to me.”

“Even now?”

The knight nodded, and Allan felt sorry for him.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you, Giz...” He began, but Guy interrupted him waving a hand.

“You can spare your words, I’m not going to retaliate on you.”

“But I’m really sorry for hiding the truth from you,” Allan said, and for once he was sincere.

Guy looked at him, a little surprised. The ghost of Sir Edward, visible only at Guy’s eyes, was standing at Allan’s side, nodding at the former outlaw.

“He’s not lying,” the ghost said, “this young man is loyal to you, Sir Guy, at least for now.”

Guy glanced at Allan, uncertain.

"It doesn't matter now. We have something to do, come."

Gisborne led him through the corridors of the castle, and the ghost followed them. When they arrived in front of a door, Guy stopped, hesitating, and Sir Edward felt a sudden dread.

"What's inside this room, Sir Guy?" He asked, but he already knew the answer.

"Hey, Giz? Why are we here? It's some mission for the sheriff?" Allan asked.

"No, quite the contrary, indeed." Guy pushed the door open, and they stepped into the room.

On a bed, covered by a shroud, lied the body of Sir Edward.

Allan stared at the corpse, shocked, then he looked at Guy: the knight was standing at the side of the bed with his head bowed and perfectly still, as if he was praying.

"Poor Edward." Allan said, sadly, and Guy lifted his gaze to look at him.

"We must provide for a burial. Please, call a priest, and organize everything."

"The sheriff won't approve," Allan objected.

"The sheriff won't care, as long as he doesn't have to spend money for it. I will pay."

"Thank you, Sir Guy," Edward said, unable to avert his gaze from the body.

Allan didn't know if he found more strange to be in the same room with the corpse of a man he had known, or to see Gisborne so respectful towards the father of the woman who had deceived him so much.

"Go, now," Guy said quietly, "make sure that he is buried in a nice place."

"Here in Nottingham?"

Guy thought for a moment.

"No, at Knighton. I don't know if Marian will come back at the castle, but she must be able to visit her father's tomb. It will be easier for her if he's at Knighton."

Allan nodded thoughtfully.

"Aren't you coming, Giz?"

"Later. I just need a moment."

The young man wondered why Gisborne seemed to be so touched by the old man's death, but he didn't ask.

"As you wish," he just said, then he was gone.

"That was kind of you." Sir Edward had talked without looking at Gisborne, his gaze still fixed on his own body.

"I wish that my parents had a tomb I could visit. It would have been a comfort, I think."

Guy's voice was low, sad, and Sir Edward forced himself to avert his eyes from the corpse and look at the knight.

"They died in a fire, if I remember well. Marian and I arrived in Nottingham just after that tragedy, I remember people talking about it. They said that you killed them and Robin's father too, but I never trusted gossips too much."

"It's true," Guy said in a whisper, "I started the fire, but I never wanted them to die."

"It was an accident, then."

"But they are dead and it was my fault. I will have this burden on my conscience forever. Every day of my life."

Guy sighed. He didn't know why he was telling those things to the ghost. He rarely talked about his parents' death, he didn't even confess that sin to a priest, sure that he didn't deserve to be forgiven for that. But somehow Sir Edward seemed to be able to look into his soul, and Guy found easy to speak with him freely, maybe because he was the only one who could see the ghost and Sir Edward wasn't going to repeat his words to anyone.

"Poor child, it's an heavy weight to carry."

"A weight I deserve. Maybe that's why I can see you, but I never could see the ghosts of my parents, no matter how much I prayed to meet them again, even just for a moment. Just to tell them that I was sorry."

"I think it's more complicated than that, Sir Guy. I wish I could speak to Marian, to tell her that she mustn't feel guilty for the last words she said to me, but you are the only one who can see me. I am sure that your parents have already forgiven you, but probably they just can't tell it to you."

"How can you be so sure?" Guy asked, reluctant to allow himself to hope that the ghost could be right.

"I know, Sir Guy, because I am a father. There is nothing that Marian could do that could make me stop loving her with all my heart. She could have stabbed my heart with a knife and I'd still forgive her."

Guy glanced at him, almost shyly.

"Sir Edward? Have you met other dead people? Is there any chance that you could talk to my parents?"

The ghost shook his head, sadly.

"I am alone. I always thought that my wife would be here to wait for me when I died, but there is no one. I think that I am stuck. To reach her, I must leave this mortal world, but I can't until I'm sure that Marian will be safe."

"I will help you," Guy said, impulsively. Not out of fear, but just because he felt sorry for the old man and he wished that he could do something for him.

The ghost smiled warmly at him.

"I'm grateful, Sir Guy. If I can go to Heaven, I'll be sure to search for your parents and tell them how much you love them and that you miss them. Probably you won't be able to get an answer, but I am sure that they love you too and they will be there for you when your time comes."

Guy nodded to thank him, and they were quiet for a while, watching the corpse.

"Is it strange to see your own dead body?" Guy asked suddenly, and Sir Edward frowned.

"It is. Unpleasant too, but not as shocking as I thought. I can't stop looking at it, but it's hard to believe that it once was *me*. Now it's just... a *thing*."

"But you kept the same appearance as a ghost."

"Because you are used to see me with this aspect. You were already frightened enough, I couldn't show you anything more unsettling. But please, let's go away, now. I don't like looking at it."

Guy was more than happy to comply.

"What should I do, now?" Guy asked, as they went out of the room.

"Reach the sheriff, he will expect you to do your work, it wouldn't be wise to anger him."

"You're late, Gisborne." The sheriff kept painting his toe nail with black paint without looking at Guy. Only when he finished, he stared at his henchman, frowning. "And you look horrible. More than usual, in fact."

Guy's head was still throbbing, and he felt poorly, still feeling the effects of the hangover and of the shock of seeing Sir Edward's ghost.

"I think I am unwell, my lord."

The sheriff put away the nail paint, and pointed a finger at him.

"Actually I think that you spent the night crying like a girl and getting drunk because of your leper friend. 'Boo-hoo, Marian left me as soon as the crusty geezer was cold!' This should teach you something, Gizzy. She never cared for you, she was only staying here because of

her father.”

Guy was feeling sick. Only the day before he would have replied that it wasn’t true, that there was something between him and Marian, but now he knew the truth and it sounded too similar to the words of the sheriff.

He didn’t know what to answer, so he just hung his head while the sheriff kept talking.

Vaisey stood up, and went closer to him.

“So, do you have nothing to say, Gizzy? You know that I am right, don’t you? I always told you to keep away from women, they are only a nuisance, a disease. Now get over with it and move on.”

Guy didn’t answer, and he winced when the sheriff put an arm around his neck and got even closer.

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll give you a kiss, hm? That makes you feel better, huh? Come along, Gizzy, give us a kissy.”

Gisborne flied, and he pushed the sheriff away.

“Get off me!” He snarled, and Vaisey stopped mocking him, to look at Guy with a menacing stare.

He pointed a finger to the knight’s chest, prodding him with rage.

“Grow up, Gisborne. Now stop pining like a pathetic fool and take the guards to Clun, we have a trap to set.”

The sheriff went away, and Guy let out a sigh, closing his eyes for a moment.

“Does he always treat you like this?”

Gisborne looked around, startled: Sir Edward’s ghost had appeared again, and he was standing in front of the fireplace with his arms crossed in front of him. Guy could see the flames dancing through his body, and he just wished that he could go back to his lodgings, go to sleep and wake up in a world where he could just have some peace, a world with no sheriff, no ghosts, no Marian...

No. It wasn’t true.

For him, a world without Marian may as well turn to ash.

Guy didn’t answer, he just sighed again and turned to the door to get out of the room. The ghost followed him, floating at his side.

“Really, Sir Guy, you shouldn’t let him treat like that!”

“I don’t have much choice, do I?” He said under his breath, enraged.

“Marian often said to me that everything is a choice.”

“Well, I can’t choose to stop loving her. The sheriff wouldn’t be so harsh if I did.”

“You might stop working for the sheriff.”

“I have no one, nobody who cares for me, nobody who would ever support me. The sheriff can give me power, he can give me a position, wealth. I will have that, at least, if I can’t have anything else.”

“So you sell your soul to a devil?”

“That’s easy for you to talk, now! When he came to Nottingham why did you let him take your job? You were the sheriff, but you let him take your position because he was ruthless, he had power, and you were afraid. If you had the courage to stand up against him, I could be working for *you*, now. But you were a coward... I am a coward, so we must content ourselves with disappointment!”

Guy kept walking down the corridors of the castle, headed to the courtyard. The ghost followed him, in silence.

“Do you know, Sir Guy?” Edward said after a while, “You reminded me of Marian, a moment ago.”

Guy glanced at him, surprised by his words.

“What do you mean?”

“Your words... She told me the same things the last time she saw me alive. She said that she was ashamed of me, that I was a coward...”

Gisborne stopped.

“Those were the last words she said to you?”

Sir Edward nodded.

“I wish I could tell her that I don’t mind. I asked Robin to give her a message, but I am afraid that she will still feel guilty for what she said...”

Guy leant his back on a wall, and he closed his eyes.

“She will. I know that she will.”

Sir Edward looked at him, worried.

“Sir Guy?”

“I did the same with my father before he died. I called him a leper, I told him that he abandoned us...”

“I’m sure he has forgiven you. I am a father, I know that he did. For sure. If he could he would surely tell it to you. That’s why I asked your help: you can tell Marian what I wish I could tell her myself.”

“I already agreed to help you,” Guy said gruffly, unwilling to show that the words of the ghost had touched him, “but I don’t know where to find her.”

“Giz?”

Guy opened his eyes, startled by Allan’s voice. The young man was staring at him, a troubled look on his face.

“Were you talking to yourself? Are you sure you are alright, Giz?”

Gisborne glared at him.

“I’d be better if you would keep silent!”

Allan grinned.

“Drinking too much makes you grumpy, uh? You sure you don’t want that remedy for hangovers?”

“We don’t have time for this. Come on, we have to go to Clun.”

“What for?”

“The sheriff is going to set a trap for Hood.” Guy said, lowering his voice. “It’s a plan of that man who came to the castle, that Carter.”

“What do we have to do?”

“The guards will menace the villagers and that Carter will save the peasants from them, so he’ll get the trust of Hood.”

Allan frowned.

“Do you think that Robin will fall for it?”

Guy shrugged.

“I don’t know. I don’t care. It’s their plan, I’ll just do what the sheriff ordered me to do.”

Allan didn’t find anything to reply, and the two men headed for the courtyard to reach the guards.

Sir Edward’s ghost floated behind them, unnoticed by everyone but Guy.

The Touch of Death

Guy and Allan stood apart from the guards while the soldiers fought against the outlaws. Gisborne saw Marian for a moment, between the men of Robin Hood, then Robin dragged her away from the battle, making her disappear behind a stable.

He already knew that the girl was with the outlaw, but seeing her with his own eyes, even if only for a moment, hurt him deeply.

Then Carter arrived, and the battle became bloody: the man hit and killed the guards to get Hood's trust.

Guy stared at the battle, astonished: he didn't know that the plan implied losing so many men just to trick the outlaws in trusting Carter. The sheriff hadn't told him the details of the plan.

"That's a waste of lives!" Sir Edward said, disapproving.

"I had no idea that he was going to kill them..." Guy said, in shock, and Allan thought that he was talking to him.

"I surely hope you didn't know, Giz! It's inhuman!"

"Come, Allan!" Guy said, spurring his horse to reach the guards and shout orders to them.

"Retreat! Take the wounded and withdraw!"

While they galloped away from Clun, Guy glanced back, hoping to see Marian again, but he couldn't, so he pulled the reins of his horse and called one of the soldiers.

"Go back to the castle and take care of the injured men. You can have the rest of the day free."

"Aren't you returning with us, Sir Guy?"

"I have something else to do. Go."

Guy turned the horse, and nodded to Allan to follow him.

"Where are we going?" Allan asked after a while.

"You are going to take me to the camp of the outlaws."

The young man paled.

"I already told you that I can't. I work for you, but I don't want them to get killed, they were my friends..."

Guy scoffed.

"Good friends indeed if you were willing to betray them for money."

"I betrayed them because you tortured me!"

"This is wrong, Sir Guy!" Edward commented, giving him a disapproving look, and Guy had the decency to blush.

"I'm sorry for that," he said, and Allan stared at him, dumbfounded.

"You are... what?! Giz, what kind of wine was that? Are you still drunk? Maybe I should get you to a healer..."

"No, you have to take me to the camp."

"I can't! Giz, ask me anything but this..."

"I don't care about your friends, I need to see Marian!"

"What do you want to do to her?" Allan asked, worried.

"I have to talk with her. Just talk."

"Will you arrest her?"

"Of course I won't!" Guy snarled. "And I won't hurt her! What kind of monster do you think I am?!"

“Well, Giz, you always said that the Nightwatchman deserved to hang...”

Guy stopped the horse.

“Allan, please, I *need* to see her. It’s important, I swear.”

“You *always* need to see her. What changed since yesterday?”

“Everything changed, believe me.”

“Because you found out the truth about her?”

“Because the ghost of her father visited me last night, and I keep seeing him!” Guy blurted, and Allan stared at him as if he had grown another head.

“Very well, Giz, I *am* taking you to see a healer.”

“That wasn’t a wise move, Sir Guy,” Sir Edward commented, shaking his head a little.

“I needed to tell someone!”

“Your friend will say that you are crazy or possessed. How can you help my daughter if people will consider you a fool?!”

Guy stared at the ghost (at empty space from Allan’s point of view.).

“Allan won’t betray me. You said he’s loyal. I trust him.”

Allan gave him a wary glance.

“Giz... Maybe you should rest for a while. It’s clear that the wine you drank had to be spoiled or something...”

“He can’t believe you.” Edward said.

“Well, tell me something that can make him believe. You said that you can read in people’s souls, didn’t you?” Guy replied.

“He’s scared and confused, and he doesn’t know what to do.”

Guy gave him a pointed look.

“I think that anyone would be confused if he saw another person speaking to empty air, don’t you think? Tell me something that I couldn’t know in any other way.”

“Giz... you are worrying me. Really...”

Gisborne stood still for a moment, then he nodded and turned to Allan.

“You dreamt about your mother last night. She used to sing a song to you and your brother, a little out of tune, but sweet and slow.”

Allan almost fell down from his horse.

“How can you know?! This... This is witchcraft!”

“I don’t know what it is, but Sir Edward’s ghost is here, he speaks to me, and he can read in our souls. He told me about your dream. Need some other proof?”

An alarmed look appeared on Allan’s face.

“I don’t need anyone looking into my soul.”

“He says that it’s not as tainted as you think. He said the same about me as well.” Guy sighed, and looked at Allan, pleadingly. “Do you believe me? Please tell me you do.”

The young man thought that at that moment Gisborne seemed to be completely helpless, vulnerable, and he was strangely moved to realize that he was asking for his help, that he was trusting him so much.

“I guess that it wasn’t the wine, then. You look like hell, but I guess that I would too, if I could see a ghost. Is he evil and terrible? Is he haunting you for revenge?”

“Actually he’s quite kind.”

Allan shuddered.

“It’s still scary. Maybe we should go and see a priest...”

“No. I have to see Marian. Her father just wants to protect her. When she will be safe, he can go to Heaven.”

“When? It’s more like ‘if’. With the sheriff around, nobody can really be safe. By the way,

are you sure that he won't need you? What if he searches for you and you're not at the castle?"

"He's busy with Carter. They don't need me. And that's a good thing because I don't like that man."

"Who? Carter or the sheriff?"

Both. Guy thought, but he didn't say it.

"Take me to see Marian," he said, instead.

"If I take you to the camp, they could kill you, and me as well. Robin was very explicit about it when he kicked me out of the gang..."

"I don't care about Hood!"

"You should! I don't want you to get hurt!" Allan almost shouted, and Guy was surprised by his outburst. The former outlaw let out a deep sigh. "Listen, Giz, I can't take you there, but I could take Marian to you, would this be good enough for you?"

Gisborne nodded.

"I just want to see her."

"I don't think she will come to the castle or to Locksley, though..."

"I can wait in the forest."

Allan looked at Guy, noticing how exhausted he looked, and he shook his head.

"No Giz, I have a better idea. There's an inn on the road to Kirklees, it's called 'The Flaming Turnip', don't know why. It's a decent place, clean enough I guess, and they cook well. Go there, eat something and take a room. You look like you could use some rest while you wait."

Guy was about to complain and say that he didn't need food or sleep, but he realized that it would have been a lie.

"Very well. Don't make me wait too much."

Guy spurred the horse, taking the road to Kirklees, without looking to see if the ghost was still following him or if he had decided to go with Allan to search for Marian. When Marian would arrive to the tavern, the ghost would surely be there as well.

The Flaming Turnip was quiet at that time of the day. It wasn't a market day, so just a few patrons and two or three drunkards were sitting at the tables. Gisborne got a few wary glances when he entered the tavern, but soon people got back to their occupations and they didn't pay much attention to him.

He sat at a table in a corner, and called the innkeeper, paying for a room and for a meal.

The maid took him food and wine and she left. Guy looked around, and he sighed in relief to see that the ghost wasn't there.

He took a sip of wine, carefully, and a piece of bread. He was still feeling a little sick, and he wasn't sure that he could eat, but as soon as he bit in the fresh bread, he found out that he was hungry, almost ravenous actually.

Guy ate his meal, glad to be alone for a while. Now Sir Edward's ghost didn't scare him like he did in the beginning, but it was still unsettling to see something that nobody else could, and then he was still the father of the woman Guy loved. Knowing that he could read his thoughts, look into his soul, was upsetting too, and Guy was still shocked by the revelations about Marian and Hood, and about the Nightwatchman.

The thought that he had almost killed her was so horrible that he had to push it out of his mind if he didn't want to be sick, and he couldn't stand to think about Marian in love with Robin.

He wished that he could do what the sheriff kept repeating to him: to forget about her, to move on.

He couldn't. He still loved her, with all her faults, and he wasn't sure he could ever stop. Guy could be angry at her, despise her for all her lies, be hurt by her deceit, but love would still be there in his heart, stubbornly, patiently waiting to be rekindled. Gisborne sighed. He was tired and dispirited, and he wished that he could just run away from everything.

He wondered if the sheriff had noticed his absence, but he realized that he didn't care. Sir Edward's words about souls made him understand that he didn't like the sheriff. He was bonded to him by his oath of loyalty, and he still wanted the wealth and power that Vaisey could give to him, but he despised the man, the darkness of his heart.

Guy wondered if Sir Edward's words were true, if his soul wasn't really completely black, if he could still have some hope to be reunited to his family in Heaven someday...

But if he kept being close to Vaisey he would surely lose any hope. The evil nestled in his soul was like a disease, a plague that would defile Guy's heart for sure and that would take any hope from him.

I wish I had never met him...

"Why don't you leave him, then?"

Guy lifted his eyes to look at the ghost: Sir Edward was back, and he looked like if he was sitting at the table with him. Guy could see the grain of the wood of the chair through his face.

"It's not so easy," he said, taking care to cover his mouth with a hand, so people wouldn't notice that he was talking to himself.

"Why not? Find another master, a better one."

"If I leave him, he will destroy me. You know the power he has, you were *afraid* of it."

"You could go away."

"And to be banished once again? To lose everything I earned in all these years?" Guy asked, with rage.

"Would you still be so reluctant if you could take Marian with you? If you could have a fresh start with her somewhere else?"

Guy stared at him, astonished.

"Are you suggesting that I kidnap your daughter to take her away from Nottingham?!"

"Of course not!"

"She would never run away with me willingly. She... she went to live in the forest... with Hood... If she... if she loves him, why should she come with me?"

Sir Edward gave a sympathetic look at Guy.

"Sir Guy, I know that this situation is difficult for you, and I'm sorry if my requests make you suffer, but I know my daughter. I don't know if she could really be happy to live in a forest, and to be part of a gang of outlaws. Marian had never been good at following orders, and in a gang there can't be two leaders. I suspect that she isn't enjoying her life in the forest too much. If you talk to her, if you find the right words, maybe she could consider a different option."

"I've never been good with words. And anyways she never listened to me."

The ghost rolled his eyes.

"I know even too well, she always had issues with listening to reasonable advice. But this won't stop me from trying to help her, because I love her. She is my beautiful, lovely, willful daughter and I'd do anything to protect her. Even if this should mean being a ghost for eternity."

"I guess we have something in common. I will try, but I don't know if I can succeed."

Marian followed Allan, annoyed. She was still irked after her argument with Robin. He was mad at her because she threw herself in the middle of the battle, trying to rescue the inhabitants of Clun.

She knew that she had been reckless, but she hated the condescending tone used by Robin, as if she was just a stupid child.

She had been the Nightwatchman for years and nobody could ever catch her! While Robin had been the really reckless one, being outlawed just a few days after coming back from the Holy Land.

After the heated discussion, she had left the camp in a huff, expecting Robin to follow her to make peace, but he didn't, apparently too busy with that Carter who wanted to join the gang. Little John had tried to comfort her, but she rejected his attempt. She had wanted Robin's understanding, not the sympathy of the big man.

She had told Little John that she needed to be alone, to take a walk in the forest, and she left. She had walked for a while, then she had stopped into a glade, to train at knife throwing.

Then Allan appeared from behind a tree, and she almost hit him with one of her daggers.

The young man claimed that he didn't have bad intentions, but that he was there on behalf of Guy of Gisborne. The knight needed to talk to her about an important matter and he wanted to meet her.

"Well, tell him that I am mourning my father. That I took refuge at the abbey and that I went into seclusion."

"He knows that you are here."

Marian had paled.

"Who told him?"

"Not me, I swear! He found out somehow. Maybe leaving Robin's arrow tied to the rope you used to flee wasn't such a brilliant idea, was it?"

"That is another reason to avoid him. If he knows about Robin and me, he could be dangerous..."

Allan shrugged.

"He didn't take it well, how could he? Giz still loves you, poor fool. But he really needs to talk you and he swore that he won't hurt you. On the other hand, if you don't go to meet him, he will come to the forest to search for you."

Marian let out an unladylike growl, but at last he accepted to meet Guy and followed Allan.

They arrived at a tavern, and the girl glanced at the sign.

"The Flaming Turnip? I've never heard such a stupid name for a tavern."

"I thought that a lady shouldn't know the name of any tavern," Allan said with a grin, and the girl glared at him.

"So, where is Guy?"

"I told him to take a room and to eat something while he waited for us..."

They entered the tavern, and looked around. Eventually Marian noticed the knight, sitting at a table in a dark corner. She looked at him, frowning.

"Is he talking to himself?"

Allan sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Since you left the castle he hasn't been himself."

"I left yesterday!"

"Seemed longer."

Marian found herself agreeing with Allan. Just two days ago her father was still alive, and now in just a few hours he was lying dead, she had ran from the castle and she had managed to fight with Robin too.

She blinked to hold back tears, and looked at Guy: the knight looked dejected and upset too, and for a moment she softened towards him. He was suffering, just like her. Maybe for the first time they had something in common.

Heaving a deep sigh, she walked towards Guy's table.

As soon as he noticed her, Guy scrambled to his feet, swaying a little. Marian wondered if he was drunk.

"You came!" Guy exclaimed, almost in disbelief, then he did something that surprised Marian: he turned to Allan and smiled warmly at him. "You did it! Thank you."

"Why, did you have any doubts?"

The former outlaw grinned, and helped himself from the jug of wine. Marian noticed that it was still full, and she guessed that Guy's weird behavior wasn't due to wine.

Allan sat at the table and Guy winced. Both Marian and Allan glanced at him, a little worried.

"What?" Allan asked, and Guy hurried to shake his head.

"Nothing."

He couldn't say that Allan just had sat through Sir Edward's ghost.

The ghost moved to an empty chair, an amused spark in his eyes to see Gisborne's uneasiness.

"Guy?" Marian called, her tone a perfect mixture of worry and anger. "Why did you want to see me so urgently?"

Gisborne nodded gravely, and he pointed at the other free chair.

"Please, sit. Do you want to eat something? Or some other wine?"

Marian dropped herself on the chair, ungracefully.

"I am not here to have dinner with you! You should know that I am mourning my father."

"I wanted to talk to you about him..." He began, then he stopped, uncertain on how to continue...

"Come on, Sir Guy, you can't tell her that you can see my ghost!" Sir Edward snapped. "If you do, she'll think that you are crazy and she will go away without listening to you! Don't be an idiot!"

Marian wondered why Guy had suddenly blushed, but then the knight continued to talk.

"I wanted to say that I made provisions for his tomb. He will be buried in Knighton, near your mother's tomb, I think you had to know it."

The girl was surprised by his kindness, but then her thoughts stopped on the image of her father dead, trapped into a tomb forever, and she choked a sob.

Guy tried to take her hand, to hold it and offer some comfort to her, but she withdrew her fingers with a sharp movement.

"Thank you, but I'd rather not talk about this now... It's too early. I need time. I need peace..."

Gisborne couldn't help notice a note of coldness in her voice, a rejection, and it hurt him even more because his gesture had been sincere, with no second intentions. He glared at her, suddenly angry.

"And you have all the peace you need into the forest, amidst a gang of criminals, haven't you?!"

Marian gasped, and glared at Allan, but Guy slammed his hand on the table.

"What? Feel betrayed? Like me, every time that I failed to capture the Nightwatchman? Yes, I know *that* too, and before you dare to berate him, it wasn't Allan who told me the truth."

Guy's voice was low and full of rage and sorrow, almost a growl. "Have you the slightest idea of all the times that I protected you from the sheriff? Of all the times that I suffered punishments from the sheriff because I couldn't catch the Nightwatchman?! Of all the times

that I dared to hope that you could care for me, when you just wanted to deceive me to help Hood?!"

"I cared for you!"

"Liar. You are lying even now because you are afraid that I could arrest you!"

"So this *is* a trap." Marian said icily, her eyes bright with rage.

"No, because I am not a deceitful, fickle, ungrateful liar like you!"

Marian stood up, outraged. She had already been angry at Robin before coming to the tavern, but now Guy's word gave full vent to her fury.

"Ungrateful? Should I have thanked you for burning my house to the ground? Or for arresting me and my father? Or maybe I should have congratulated you every time you evicted some poor peasant to give more tax money to the sheriff?! You talk of suffering...

What about all the poor people who suffered because of you?!"

Allan shifted his eyes between the two of them, helpless.

"Giz? Marian? Maybe you should calm down..."

"Shut up, Allan!" They both shouted, in unison, then they resumed glaring at each other.

"I regret what I did to your house, I would take it back if I could!" Guy said, upset and tearful, "If only you could see the side of me that wants to build a home... I hoped to start a family with you, I hoped that someday you could see how much I loved you! I still love you, no matter what!"

"But I love Robin Hood!" Marian blurted, equally upset.

Guy moved towards her, and Sir Edward could see the blaze of madness that for a moment had darkened the soul of the knight. It vanished immediately, leaving just a broken heart, but for a moment the ghost had feared that Guy was going to hurt Marian.

The only thought enraged him, and he moved between his daughter and Guy, glaring at the knight.

"NEVER TRY TO HURT HER. NEVER!" He roared, and to add some emphasis, he grabbed Guy's shoulders with his ghostly hands.

Guy's wrath had already ebbed away before the ghost began to scream at him, and he was about to sit down and try to calm down. The mad fury that took possession of his heart, even if just for a moment, had frightened him. What if he had been holding a sword or a dagger? He had already injured Marian once, and he couldn't risk to hurt her again. He told to himself that he had to keep his emotions in check.

He shuddered when Sir Edward menaced him, and he was about to ask forgiveness to both him and Marian, when the ghost touched him.

Guy froze, unable to move.

The fingers of the ghost were unbearably cold and scorching hot at the same time, and he could feel the cold entering his body and reaching his same soul.

It was as if Death itself was touching him, draining any warmth from his body, and every pleasant thought from his mind.

It was all cold, icy cold, and desperation. No hope at all.

It was like Death.

Like Hell.

Marian saw Guy becoming very still and very pale, any trace of color drained from his face. Allan turned towards him, worried, but before he could say anything, Guy's legs gave way, and the knight fell to the ground.

Allan managed to grab him and he succeeded in slowing the fall, lowering him to the floor, but Marian thought that Guy was dead, that her words had killed him somehow...

She saw Guy's face, ashen and motionless and she began to tremble, remembering how her father had been equally still and pale, just the day before.

"He's dead..." She whispered, and her words were followed by a mumble of profanities by Allan, then the outlaw turned at her.

"No, he isn't, but I think he is ill." He touched Guy's face, worried. "He's too cold. Come on, gather a couple of servants, we need to take him to his room and try to warm him up."

Marian didn't argue, and obeyed, frightened. She paid some coins to the two young servants who helped Allan to take Guy upstairs, and ordered the maids of the inn to bring some water, both hot and cold, clean towels and a few extra blankets.

She waited by the door while Allan undressed the unconscious knight, her heart beating fast.

It wasn't her fault if Guy had taken ill, surely, but she couldn't help feeling guilty.

Sir Edward's ghost stood near the bed, careful not to touch Guy again, and he stared at his own hands. He was shocked too because he couldn't have imagined that Gisborne would react so badly to his touch. After all, Allan had sat on him and he hadn't even noticed his presence.

"I'm sorry... I'm really sorry..." He whispered, but no one could hear his words.

The Healer

Marian reached Allan near the bed, holding a pot of hot water. She placed it on the bedside table, dipped a clean towel in it, and passed it to Allan.

The young man used it to rub Guy's hands, still too cold.

Marian looked at the knight, serious and tense.

"What happened to him? Why doesn't he wake up?"

Allan put a hand on Guy's neck to check his pulse.

"I don't know. His heart seems to be as strong as ever, but he's too cold."

"It's because of what I said to him?"

Allan stared at her, lifting an eyebrow.

"Mocking his feelings for you didn't help for sure."

"I wasn't mocking his feelings!"

"What?! 'I love Robin Hood'? Are you serious? Giz always protected you from the sheriff, you have no idea how many times, and what he had to endure just for your sake. He's a fool to love you so much when you obviously don't care for him, but you could have avoided showing off your awesome love for Robin Hood just to hurt him. Not when he's doing so much for your father!"

"My father?"

Allan stopped himself from telling her about the ghost, he wasn't completely sure of it himself, but he nodded.

"Did you know that Giz is paying for the burial and the tombstone? He also thought to bury him in Knighton so it would be easier for you to go and visit his tomb, he was afraid that the sheriff could make it difficult for you if the tomb was in Nottingham."

Marian blushed.

"I am sorry," she whispered, looking at Guy. She gingerly touched his forehead, frowning to feel his skin so cold. "Allan? Do you think that he will be alright?"

The young man shrugged.

"How can I know? I'm no physician. Do you think that we should call for one?"

"Probably we should. I've seen people getting ill or fainting, but never like this. Do you know if he was ill?"

"Last night he got drunk. After he found out that you had run away. But other than the hangover and the strain of having to deal with all of this, he wasn't sick. I know the effects of too much wine, believe me, and there was nothing too strange in him."

Marian went to the fireplace to stoke the fire, in the attempt of making the room warmer.

"Call Matilda. She's the better healer in the county, she can surely help him."

"The same Matilda who Giz arrested and who had almost been drowned by the sheriff? Come on, Marian, do you really think that she will come to treat him?"

"Don't say that it's for him. When she comes I'll talk to her. She won't say no."

Allan unfolded another blanket, and he put it on the bed.

"Very well, I will go, and you will take care of him in the meanwhile. Try to warm him, and be gentle." Allan searched her gaze, and stared at her, unusually serious. "If he dies, I will never forgive you."

The man went away, and she was left alone with Guy. It was only then that she realized how scared she was. She was used to see Gisborne always strong and tireless, and now he was

laying in a bed, half dead.

"Please, please, open your eyes!" She whispered to the knight.

Marian paced around the room, wondering how she could help him, and at last she sat on the edge of the bed, taking one of his hands between hers. She took it close to her face and she breathed on it, trying to warm his icy fingers.

She had been doing it for a while, when Guy stirred a little, with a low moan. His eyelids trembled, and he opened his eyes, but his gaze was unfocused, and he didn't seem to acknowledge her presence.

"I'm sorry," Guy whispered, staring at an empty corner of the room, "I'm so sorry, I won't hurt her, I swear. Please don't take me to Hell, I beg you!"

Marian squeezed his hand a little, tenderly.

"Guy? I'm here, Guy, please look at me."

"Marian?" His voice was weak and he still looked confused, but he seemed to recognize her. The girl was a little relieved to see that he was awake, but he was still too pale and his skin was clammy and cold.

"How are you feeling? You scared us," she said in a gentle tone, still feeling guilty for her harsh words and afraid that they had been the cause of his illness.

"Cold. My stomach aches." Guy closed his eyes with a pained expression, taking some deep breaths, then he turned on his side, struggling to get up. "I'm going to be sick."

Marian moved quickly, managing to grab the basin just in time, and she helped Guy, supporting him while he threw up and then helping him to lie back on the bed when he had finished.

She looked at him for a moment, then she took the basin out of the room and she called one of the maids of the inn, giving it to the girl.

Marian hurried to go back to Guy, and she sat on the edge of the bed. The knight averted his eyes from her, ashamed.

"I'm sorry. You shouldn't see me like this."

Marian smiled, moved by his embarrassment, and she took his hand.

"It's not your fault if you are ill." Now it was her turn to feel uneasy, and she blushed.

"Actually it might be *my* fault. I've been cruel to you."

Guy glanced at her, surprised for her words.

"You just said the truth," he said, gruffly, "and if I got ill it wasn't your fault. I think it was... something else."

Guy looked at the farthest corner of the room: the ghost was there and he was staring back at him with a contrite look.

"I'm very sorry, Sir Guy," he said, "I didn't know that my touch could hurt you."

Gisborne gave him an imperceptible nod, and he looked back at Marian, noticing how worried and scared she was.

"Are you alright?" He asked, and the girl burst up in tears.

"I should be the one to ask this question to you, Guy! I thought you were going to die!"

"Would you care if I did?" He asked, more surprised than bitter, but Marian gave a little slap to his hand.

"How can you talk like that?! Of course I would!"

"You love Hood."

"And just because of this I shouldn't care for anybody else? You love one person and the rest of the world stops existing?! It doesn't work like this, Guy."

"For me it does. You were all my world."

Marian stared at him in disbelief. She nervously dried a tear from her cheek with the back of

her hand.

"It can't be, surely. Wouldn't you care at all if your friends should die or get very ill?"

"I have no friends."

The girl realized that there was no self pity in Guy's words. The knight was just stating a matter of fact, as if that situation was perfectly normal for him.

"What about Allan?" She asked. "He acted like a friend, just a while ago. He was worried for you."

Guy frowned. He thought that if something bad happened to the young man, he *would* care. He was so used to be completely alone that he hadn't realized that he actually enjoyed the company of the former outlaw, that maybe Marian was right and he had at least a friend.

"Where's Allan?" He asked, a little worried.

"He went to call for a healer. You gave us a big scare. How are you feeling, now?"

"A little better. Still so cold..."

Marian added another blanket to the bed, and she rubbed his hands gently, trying to warm his fingers.

"Do you think you could drink some broth, or some mulled wine? They would warm you."

"Not now. I'd be sick again."

Marian nodded.

"Maybe it's better to wait for the healer, then. Try to rest until she arrives, when I am unwell, sleeping always makes me feel better."

Guy closed his eyes, tired and weak, but his fingers clenched on Marian's hand for a moment.

"Don't leave me alone," he whispered.

Marian sighed to see him so vulnerable and sick, and clenched her fingers back on his.

"I won't go anywhere until you are better," she promised, but Guy was already asleep.

Guy was awoken from his fitful slumber by the sound of angry voices.

"If I had know that you called me for that filthy donkey turd, I'd never have followed you!"

The healer, Matilda, was pointing a finger at Allan, and the young man had his hands raised in front of him, defensively.

"Hey, that was why I didn't tell you. And it was her who suggested to keep silent," Allan nodded at Marian, and the girl intervened, pleading the woman.

"It's true, don't be mad at Allan."

"He works for the sheriff, that's enough to despise him."

"I work for Giz, not for the sheriff!" Allan exclaimed.

"It's the same." Matilda said.

"No it isn't. Giz is a decent man when he's not with Vaisey."

Matilda lifted her eyebrows, skeptically.

"Please, do it for me," Marian said, almost in tears, "You know me since I were a child, you know where I stand..."

"Yes, my child, I know you," the healer softened and gave a sad smile at Marian, "I'm really sorry for your father. You should be mourning in peace now, not losing your time after the bloody dog of the sheriff."

"Guy has been kind with my father."

"How? Burning your house and arresting him?"

"He will give him a decent burial, and he never liked the treatment that the sheriff had for my father." Marian was surprised by her own words. Just a few hours before she had accused Guy using the same words of Matilda, but now she was defending him.

The healer glanced at her, doubtful, but then she relented.

"I don't understand, but if it's so important for you, I'll treat that scoundrel. Just for you, child, because I don't like seeing you cry. Now go out and let me work."

Allan and Marian went out of the room, and Matilda crossed her arms in front of her.

"Everyone, out."

She stared directly at Sir Edward, and the ghost exchanged a surprised look with Guy, but then he followed his daughter out of the door.

"Could you see him?" Guy blurted, but Matilda walked to the bed and pointed a finger at his chest.

"Shut up. I accepted to treat you, but it doesn't mean that I like you or that I have forgotten what you and your master did to me. So keep your mouth closed unless I ask you anything, or I might be tempted to give you the most unpleasant remedies I know. I might change my opinion about leeches, just for you. Is that clear?"

Guy nodded, still too weak and sick to argue, and the woman began her examination.

She touched his forehead and his hands, and listened to his heart.

"You are cold, more than you should be. I have seen something similar when those children fell into the frozen pond last winter in Nettlestone. Have you been outside for a long time without adequate clothes? It's strange though, the weather had been warm in the last few days."

"I was downstairs, here at the inn, but..."

"Here at the inn? That room is always too hot, sometimes I wonder if they call it 'The Flaming Turnip' because of that! How can you be half frozen when anyone else down there is sweating?"

The woman put a hand on his stomach, and Guy winced.

"Does it hurt?"

"A little. Less than it did before I threw up."

"Was there blood in it?"

"No."

She touched his stomach again, with more attention this time.

"I think that there is nothing wrong here. You were sick because of the cold, it can happen sometimes. And you got drunk last night, probably your stomach was still unsettled because of it."

"How do you know?" Guy asked, frowning.

"Do you still think I am a witch? Be careful or I could curse you."

Matilda chuckled seeing Guy's worried expression.

"My, you aren't very bright, are you? I heard it from a couple of guards at the market. They were laughing because the terrible Guy of Gisborne got so drunk for the love of a woman that his servant had to drag him to bed."

Guy blushed, and the woman laughed even more.

"Well, if your cheeks can become so red, it means that you are getting better. But there are still two mysteries to solve. The first one is how you could have almost been frozen to death in a warm spring evening. For this I'll have to examine you further. Can you sit and remove your shirt?"

"Why?"

"I need to see if you have signs of diseases or poison on your body."

Guy tried to sit, but he was feeling still too weak and dizzy, and the woman helped him, with an annoyed sigh.

"What's the second mystery?" Guy asked, more to hide his discomfort at being so helpless than to really know the answer.

Matilda struggled a little to keep him upright while untying the laces of his shirt.

“Why a noblewoman like Lady Marian should care so much for someone like you to risk her reputation?”

“What do you mean?”

“When I arrived, she was lying next to you, on the bed, and she held you in her arms to warm you with her own body. Probably she saved your life doing so, but if a maid had entered in the room, she’d surely gossip and her reputation could be ruined.”

Guy didn’t know how to reply, astonished and moved. He now knew that Marian loved Robin Hood, but maybe she wasn’t lying when she said that she cared for him. It had to be true, at least a little, or she wouldn’t have tried so fiercely to save his life.

Matilda helped him to remove the shirt, and she gasped, backing away from him with a muffled cry.

Guy stared at her, beginning to worry. He knew that it had been the touch of the ghost to make him so ill, but he wondered if she had seen the symptoms of some disease.

With a shudder he thought of his leper father, banished from his village...

“What’s up?” Guy asked, and Matilda pointed at his shoulders, frightened.

“You should tell me. This is no disease! Look, your skin seems to be burnt here, as if it was touched by fire. But the burns are in the shape of two hands! Something touched you! Was it a devil?! Are you possessed?!”

The woman held a trinket in front of her, an amulet of some kind, and Guy stared at her, then he glanced at the marks on his skin: where Edward had touched him, his fingers had scorched his skin.

“I saw Sir Edward’s ghost,” he said, it was pointless to hide the truth, now, “and he touched me.”

Matilda stared at him, trying to understand if he was lying, but Gisborne’s gaze seemed to be sincere.

“Surely he wanted revenge.”

“No, he wanted me to protect Marian. He didn’t mean to hurt me, he apologized for this. He didn’t know that his touch would have this effect on me.”

Matilda dared to get closer to him, and she lifted a finger to touch the burns.

Guy winced in pain.

“Careful! It hurts!”

The healer prepared an ointment, and she smeared it on the marks, then she looked at Guy.

“Now we know what happened to you, you were touched by the chill of death itself. But you are recovering, I can see that. But why Sir Edward should appear to you?”

Gisborne shook his head.

“He said that only I could see him. But you saw him too!”

“Me?”

“He was staying in that corner, and you told him to exit. I tried to ask you about it, but you started to berate me.”

Matilda took a chair, and she sat down, heavily.

“I didn’t recognize him... Does Marian know about it?”

“I told Allan, but not her. How could I tell her that I spent the last day chatting with her dead father? She’d think that I’m mocking her sorrow or that I am crazy...”

The healer grinned.

“Well, maybe you aren’t as brainless as you look. What does the ghost want you to do?”

“To protect her. To keep her out of danger. To take care of her.”

“Will you obey him?” Matilda asked, and Guy nodded.

"I'd have done it anyways."

The woman sighed.

"Well, it seems that I'll have to take care of your health and get you back on your feet, even if you wouldn't deserve it. But if both Marian and her father have so much trust in you, maybe you aren't the black hearted demon that everyone thinks you are."

She bandaged his burns and helped him to wear his shirt again.

"You will be alright in a few days if you follow my advice," she continued. "Stay in bed, keep warm and rest as much as you can. Try to get up only to attend to your needs, and get back to bed immediately as soon as you are done. You look exhausted, and you probably were overtired even before being touched by the ghost..."

"How do you know that I was tired?" Guy interrupted her.

"Anyone who works for that little stinky bald man can't be relaxed. If it's true what your friends say, that you can be a decent person, you might consider to stop working for the sheriff. Nothing good can come from that bundle of filth."

Guy couldn't help grinning at her words, and the healer stared at him, a little surprised.

"Incredible, you *can* smile. And you look much better when you do. But well, let's go back to business: stay in bed, rest, and eat. Begin with some broth and bread and see if you can keep it down. If you can, you can try to eat simple but nourishing meals. No wine for now. In a couple of days you should be as good as new. Oh, you'll need to put some ointment on those burns every day, you can ask Allan to help you. It's all clear?"

"The sheriff will expect me to go to work tomorrow, as usual," Gisborne said, worried.

"Tell him you're ill."

"He won't care."

Matilda shook her head.

"Really. Are you insane to work for him?" She thought for a moment. "Well, send your boy to tell the sheriff that the healer said that your illness is contagious and that if he wants you to go back to your work before you are healed, he should expect to catch it too and spend a few days looking at the bottom of a bucket or running to the privy, or both at the same time. Let's see if he will want you back so soon."

Guy laughed, and Matilda helped him to lie down in bed, tucking the blankets with care so that he could be warm and comfortable.

"Sleep now, and when you wake up, try to eat something. I'll give instructions to your friends, and then I want to see if I can have a little chat with that ghost. You didn't lie to me, did you?"

"I didn't." Guy said, drowsily.

"It will be better for you. I'll come back tomorrow to see if you are better."

Matilda waited for a moment to see him falling asleep, and she looked at his face for a while. The knight looked younger in his sleep, almost innocent, and the woman wondered how could he be the same man who ruthlessly carried out every wicked order of the sheriff.

Friendship

Marian entered Guy's room while Matilda was talking with Allan in the corridor. The healer had told them her instructions, then Matilda said that she had to explain to Allan a few details about treatments of more personal nature and she asked her to leave them alone.

Allan rolled his eyes.

"Listen, I know that you don't have a great opinion of me, but I'm not an idiot, you don't have to explain me how can I help a man to use a chamberpot or how to help him to walk to the privy. I had a brother, I took care of him when he was sick or drunk..."

"Oh, I'm pretty sure that he won't need much help with that, let him rest and he'll be fine soon enough. I wanted to talk you about the ghost."

Allan's eyes widened.

"Oh. Giz told you about it..."

"Yes. And I can see him as well. He's over there."

Sir Edward looked at her, surprised.

"Do you really can see me?" He asked.

"I can."

"Aren't you afraid?" The ghost asked.

Matilda grinned.

"I've seen enough weird things in my life. I'm not so easily upset."

"Well, you are upsetting me now!" Allan said, nervous.

Both Matilda and the ghost ignored him.

"Will Sir Guy be alright?" Edward asked, anxiously. "I didn't mean to hurt him."

"Well, don't touch him again. He has burns in shape of your hands where you grabbed him, and you almost drained his life out of him. He will recover, but you could have killed him!"

Matilda rebuked the ghost, then she turned to Allan. "You will have to put an ointment on those burns daily, and be sure that Lady Marian doesn't see them."

Allan looked around, nervously, afraid that the ghost could hurt him as well.

Matilda grinned.

"Sir Edward says that you shouldn't worry: you sat on him earlier and you didn't even notice it."

"I sat on him?!" Allan exclaimed, horrified.

Marian entered into the room, and closed the door to give Matilda and Allan some privacy. She went to sit in the chair at the side of the bed, reassured by the healer's words, but still shaken and feeling guilty.

Guy was asleep, but this time his sleep seemed to be more relaxed and he was less pale than before.

Marian touched his hand lightly, to feel if it was still so cold, and Guy's fingers closed around hers, without him waking up.

The girl didn't retract her hand and stood still, with a little sigh.

She didn't know if she was feeling relief because the knight seemed to be better, or if she was still upset for the conversation they had before he got ill. For sure she was feeling sad and sorrowful.

She missed her father, and she couldn't help remembering how harsh her last words to him

had been. She quickly wiped a tear from her cheek hearing the door being opened, and just a moment after, Allan entered the room.

The man glanced at the bed, and lifted his eyebrows for a moment when he noticed Guy and Marian's intertwined hands.

He dropped himself on the other chair.

"Well, at least he's sleeping quietly. It seems that this time you didn't kill him."

"I never meant to hurt him!" Marian protested.

"Well, you always do. What are your intentions now?"

"I promised him that I wouldn't leave him alone until he feels better." Marian sounded uncertain, and Allan shook his head, with an ironic smile.

"And then what? You'll go back to Robin and you'll forget about Giz until he could be useful to you and your boyfriend. Then you'll get his hopes high until you get what you want, just to kick him in the face and leave him with nothing once again, when you don't need him anymore."

Marian's cheeks grew hot with rage, and she glared at Allan.

"That's not true!"

"No? Oh, right. You usually punch him in the face before leaving him."

Marian blushed even more, now also with shame. Allan's words made her look like an evil witch and she knew that everything she did was to help people, but she also realized that to help people she had also hurt Guy without even thinking too much about it.

And still he always came back to her, steady in his love.

She didn't find anything to answer, so she just glared back at Allan.

"For your information," Allan said, completely serious this time, "even if you go back to the forest, you wouldn't leave him 'alone'. I'll stay with Giz and for once he'd be with someone who actually cares for him."

"You do? Or you just want to think that because you can't go back to the gang?"

It was Allan's turn to blush a little.

"Well, that might have been true in the beginning, but I came to like him. He has his faults, but he also has his good sides."

"I know." Marian said, and they both were quiet for a while.

After a few minutes of awkward silence, Allan sighed.

He felt angry at Marian, but he knew that Guy would have wanted her to stay.

"What are you going to do?"

Marian looked out of the window: it was already dark.

"I should go back to the camp, Robin will be worried by now." She glanced at Guy. "But I promised him to stay until he was better."

"If Robin is worried, I'm sure that he can easily find you here. A lot of people saw you downstairs when Giz fainted, and I'm sure that some of them recognized you. But you shouldn't go to the forest at night, it might be dangerous."

"I am the Nightwatchman, I'm not afraid of riding at night."

Allan crossed his arms.

"Maybe you should. Listen, Marian, I can't leave him alone, so I can't escort you to the camp, but I won't let you go alone. If something should happen to you, both Giz and Robin would flay me alive."

Marian was about to answer that he shouldn't think that she was helpless just because she was a woman, and she was tempted to take a horse and go right back to the camp just to show him that she was able to do it. But then she looked at Guy, at his fingers closed on her hand, at his tired face, and she wasn't so sure that she wanted to go away.

"I guess that I will have to stay, then. Tell the innkeeper to bring another cot."

Allan stared at her.

"Are you going to sleep here?"

"I don't have money with me to take another room and then I won't be alone with him or with you. What's the difference than sleeping at the camp with all the lads?"

The former outlaw grinned.

"I hope you don't snore."

Marian yawned while she stepped down the stairs. The cot where she had slept was clean, but quite uncomfortable, and she had found out that it was Allan the one who snored.

She glanced at the light of dawn entering from the windows and she felt a bit miffed because Robin didn't come to search for her. According to Allan, it wouldn't have been difficult for him to find her, but he didn't show up.

A part of her felt relieved because Robin wouldn't understand her worry for Guy and they would surely have to argue because of that, but on the other hand she would have been flattered to see Robin's jealousy.

She went to the kitchen to ask the cook for some broth and a loaf of bread for Guy. While the man prepared a tray for her, Marian sat to eat something as well. With all the commotion about Guy's illness, she hadn't dined and she was hungry.

She took her time to eat: in the room, Allan was helping Guy with his needs and to wash up, so she wasn't in a hurry to go back upstairs.

When she did, holding the tray with Guy's meal, Allan was coming out from the room, fully dressed and in a hurry.

"Marian," he called, "I have to go to the castle and warn the sheriff that Giz is ill, but you stay here with him until I'm back. You owe him at least this."

The girl nodded, irked by his tone, but she didn't argue because she hadn't meant to leave Guy alone anyways.

Allan went away, and Marian knocked at the door before entering the room. Guy was sitting in bed, his back propped up by pillows, and he was awake, his eyes following her.

Marian smiled, seeing that he looked much better after a night of sleep: he wasn't so pale anymore, and the dark circles around his eyes had disappeared. He had managed to shave and to wash, his hair was still damp and the ruffled locks around his face made him look younger and somehow innocent.

Guy smiled back at her.

"Good morning," he said, and his voice was soft, with no trace of the bitterness of the day before.

"You look better. Have you slept well?"

"I did, but you look tired."

"Allan snores," she said, rolling her eyes.

Gisborne chuckled.

"I was so tired that I didn't notice. It was a long time that I didn't sleep so soundly, no nightmares at all. Maybe I should get ill more often."

Marian glanced at him, surprised to find out that he had often nightmares, and she was curious to know more about them, but she didn't dare to ask. He seemed to be in a light mood, and she didn't want to spoil it.

"Do you feel like eating something?"

"I'm hungry. What do you have there?"

"Broth and bread, as Matilda ordered. Listen to her suggestions, she might be harsh

sometimes, but she's the best healer in the county."

Guy took a piece of bread, and he grinned.

"Well, I won't contradict her, or she might use leeches on me."

"Are you afraid of leeches?" Marian asked, a little smile on her lips.

"Who isn't? They are small, black, slimy and disgusting."

"Just like the sheriff." Sir Edward said, appearing at the foot of the bed.

Guy stared at him for a moment, and he burst into a laughter, almost choking on the bread he was chewing.

Marian glanced at the knight, frowning a little.

"Are leeches so funny?"

"I was just thinking that maybe the sheriff is a leech, the description fits perfectly to him too."

The girl looked at him for a moment, amazed to see him so cheerful, then she joined him.

The idea of Vaisey as a blood sucking worm was too accurate and she couldn't help laughing.

They laughed together for a while, then Marian became serious again.

"Allan was right."

Guy finished drinking his broth, put the bowl aside, and he looked at her.

"About what?"

"He says that when you're not with the sheriff you are a different man. A better man. When you are at the castle you never laugh. You rarely smile as well."

Gisborne sighed.

"I don't have many reason to do it, do I?" He lifted a hand to brush a lock of Marian's hair away from her face, in a sort of caress. "And now I have even less reasons to smile. Your presence was the only thing that made the life at the castle bearable. You aren't coming back, I guess."

Marian was taken aback by his sad frankness and she thought that if Guy looked dejected and lost, she was lost as well. She knew that she didn't have anymore a place that she could call home.

Knighton was lost, the castle was a hostile place now that her father wasn't there, and she felt that she couldn't really call the forest a home. She loved Robin, and he returned her love, but he was always committed to his mission, he was the hero of the people of Nottingham, and Marian knew that he could never give her his whole attention. She understood, and she shared his dreams, but there were moments when she just would have wanted to have all of his heart and of his mind, everything just for herself.

She felt egoistic and childish for those thoughts, but she just wanted to cry in her father's arms, just like she did when she was a little girl.

Then, it didn't matter if she was weeping for a silly reason: her dad was there for her, ready to comfort her.

She suddenly burst out crying, and Guy looked at her, alarmed, then he saw that Sir Edward's ghost was weeping too.

"She misses me, and I can't comfort her..." Edward said, sorrowful.

Guy put the tray aside, on the bedside table, and he gingerly put his hand on Marian's arm.

"You miss your father," he whispered, and the girl nodded, sobbing.

"He misses you too, I'm sure," Guy said softly, and he pulled her in his arms gently, repeating to himself that he had to be just a support for her, without asking anything in return. This time Marian didn't retreat, too sorrowful and lonely to reject his hug. She rested her head on Guy's chest, sobbing, and the knight quietly stroke her hair with a hand.

Sir Edward stood by the bed watching them in silence, wishing that he could be in Guy's

place to soothe his daughter's sorrow.

When Marian stopped crying, some time later, she didn't move away from Guy's hug. For once, the knight wasn't taking advantage of his power to demand her affection, he was just being caring and supportive.

He had only held her in his arms, whispering soothing words once in a while, but he never tried to suggest that he could take care of her and protect her... as a husband.

She let out a deep sigh and straightened her back, pulling away from Guy's embrace, and she wiped her face with the hands to dry the tears.

"I'm sorry," she began, but Guy interrupted her putting a finger on her lips.

"Don't. You needed it, you don't have to apologize. Your father has died, it's normal that you want to cry. I have to apologize, yesterday I told you terrible things without stopping to think that you were suffering so much."

Marian touched his cheek, lingering there with her fingers for a moment. She was relieved to feel that now Guy's skin was warm under her touch.

"Yesterday I broke your heart. You had your reasons to be angry."

"And you have many reasons to despise me."

"I don't despise you," Marian said.

"But you love Hood."

They were both quiet for a moment, then Marian looked at Guy.

"If I offered you my friendship, would you accept it?" She asked. "No lies this time. No more secrets."

Guy glanced at Sir Edward's ghost, thinking that this time he was the one who had to keep a secret, and the ghost nodded at him, encouraging him to accept.

"I don't have much choice, do I?" He said, unsure if he was answering to Marian or to Sir Edward.

He gave her a little, shy smile, and Marian hugged him for a moment, brushing his cheek with her lips.

Guy blushed, and for a moment he wished that her kiss could mean much more than simple friendship, but he didn't want to delude himself once again. She didn't love him, she wanted another man, and there was nothing that he could do about it. Even arresting or killing Hood wouldn't do: if her heart belonged to the outlaw, she would never forgive Guy for that.

He could only accept the reality and try to be contented with what he could have.

Was simple friendship so bad? Surely it was better than her contempt, much better. He wondered if he could really trust her, after everything that happened between them, after all the lies, but then again, now he knew the truth, there were no more reasons for lying. He *wanted* to trust her, he realized.

Don't hurt me again, Marian.

"I think that we both need a friend now, don't we?" He said softly, and she nodded, wiping away another tear.

"I'm not very good at this," Guy continued, "I never had many friends. What do we do, now?"

"Maybe we should get to know better each other. If we had tried to talk a little more in the past, to understand each other, maybe we would have spared ourselves much heartbreak. I am realizing that I know very little of the real you, and probably you don't know me as well."

"So I can ask you something and you will answer sincerely, right?"

Marian nodded.

"Why the Nightwatchman? I understand that you want to help the poor, but why like this? If I

had captured you, the sheriff would have hanged you!”

Marian gave him a impish grin.

“But you never did.”

Guy didn’t answer to her smile, and he pointed at her belly.

“I almost killed you. Do you realize how much you risked?”

“I admit that trying to rob you when you had the house full of guards wasn’t my brightest idea. But I usually was more cautious, that night I wasn’t thinking straight. I felt trapped, and I was so mad for that. I wasn’t free to do what I wanted just because I was a woman, I had no other choice than marrying you, you were boasting about your money as if you wanted to buy a cow at the market, Robin was making me feel guilty because I was choosing safety for my father and me over certain death, and I just tried to rebel to all of this in the only way I could think of. If I robbed you, I wouldn’t have the feeling of being purchased, and nobody could say that I was marrying you just because you were rich. And then your money would help the poor, and that would be a consolation.”

Guy stared at her, astonished.

“I never considered you as a cow!” He blurted, then he realized what he had just said and blushed, confused, trying to explain better what he meant. “I... I didn’t want to buy you. I just wanted to show you that I could be worthy as a husband, that I could provide for you and give you the life that a noblewoman should have. I didn’t want to fail you... but obviously I did.”

“You failed me because you lied me about the Holy Land and about the false King.”

Guy blushed.

“When you asked me if I had tried to kill the King, I panicked. I didn’t know what to answer: I couldn’t deny it, but I knew that you would never marry a traitor. I don’t remember what I said, did I actually lie to you?”

Marian tried to remember his words, and after a while she shook her head.

“You said that I shouldn’t listen to gossips and that you could assure me that the day the King was coming back to England would be a happy day for you because we were going to get married.”

“I meant it. I don’t care for the King, if he lives or if he dies, but marrying you meant everything to me.”

“Did you try to kill him?”

Guy nodded.

“I did. The sheriff ordered me to do it, and I obeyed. He promised me power beyond measure, wealth, and anyways I swore loyalty to him.”

Marian sighed.

“Why is power so important to you?” She asked. She wasn’t judging him, she was really curious to know.

“Because I know even too well how it is when you don’t have any. I swore to myself that I will never be helpless and weak again.”

“Again?” Marian asked, and she saw a sparkle of sorrow in Guy’s eyes, a moment before he averted his gaze. She wondered if she should inquire more, but she decided that it could wait. There was another answer she wanted from Guy before they could have a fresh start. “But you knew that it wasn’t the true King and you lied to me about it.”

“At first the sheriff didn’t tell me. He thinks I’m gullible, that I wouldn’t be able to keep such a secret in a believable way, so he deceived me too. When he told me the truth I found myself in a difficult position: I didn’t want to lie to you, but marrying you was, and still is, the only thing I ever wished in my life. I was afraid that when you knew that the King wasn’t really

coming, you would back off from the wedding. I came to your house when I knew the truth, I wanted to speak with you, to be sincere... But you were unwell, and your father said that it was because of the excitement of the wedding, that you were looking forward to it..."

"I couldn't tell you that she had been hurt while trying to rob your house, could I?" Sir Edward said, with a shrug.

Guy gave a quick glare at the ghost, then he remembered that Marian couldn't see him, and he focused back on her.

"That's why I didn't tell you about the King. If you were happy to marry me, it wasn't important if the King was coming back or not..." He touched the little scar near his eye, left by Marian's punch when she ran away from the ceremony. "I won't forget that error again."

"We both hurt each other," Marian said, with regret, "but we can change this."

Guy nodded, and looked at her: she was sitting on the edge of the bed, so close to him that he could hug her, kiss her, in a moment.

He didn't.

He rested his back on the pillows, and smiled to her.

"So, tell me about the Nightwatchman. Did you get the idea from Hood?"

"Of course not!" She said, indignant, but in a playful way. "Don't you remember? The Nightwatchman has been around for years before Robin even came back from war!"

Guy grinned at her tone, and she kept talking, telling him how she had the idea of helping the poor, where she had found the mask, how scary and exciting it had been the first time that she went out to ride at night alone.

She found out that it was easy to talk about her oldest secret to him, because Guy really listened. It was a new sensation for Marian: her words usually were dismissed because she was a woman, but Guy was actually interested in what she had to say.

She liked it.

Walking at Your Side

Guy and Marian were still talking when Matilda knocked at the door.

The healer entered the room, and Marian stood up. The girl glanced at Guy with a pang of guilt, and she saw a veil of sadness falling on his face.

“You have to go,” he said, and she nodded.

“I should better go back to the camp, they’ll be worried for my absence...”

“I doubt it,” Matilda intervened, “I heard that Robin caused a great commotion in Nottingham last night.”

“What happened?” Marian asked, and even Guy was curious to know.

“I heard that the sheriff had hired a killer to infiltrate in Robin’s gang, but they could bring him on their side and they robbed the sheriff with his help.”

Guy scoffed.

“I knew that that Carter wasn’t trustworthy. What did he do?”

Matilda grinned.

“He was sent to kill Robin, so they faked Robin’s death. That man took his ‘body’ to the castle, and when they were in the sheriff’s room, Robin ‘came back to life’ and robbed him.”

Guy rolled his eyes.

“Didn’t anyone think to check if he was actually dead? I’d have severed his head from his body, just to be sure.”

“Guy!” Marian turned to him in horror, and Guy averted his eyes.

“Sorry, but it would have been common sense to check if an enemy is really dead before introducing him into the heart of the castle.”

“What he said may be unpleasant, but he has a point,” Matilda commented, and Guy looked at her, surprised to hear that the healer was defending him.

Marian sighed.

“I suppose you are right. But I wish you wouldn’t be on the side of the sheriff, Guy.”

“Marian?” Guy looked at her and sighed, sadly. “What I’m going to say might be considered betrayal, I could hang for it, but I won’t kill Hood, if I can avoid it. I don’t like him, I never will, and I won’t cry if he dies during one of his insane plans to bring havoc in the castle, but for you, only for you, I won’t have his blood on my hands. I won’t inflict any more sorrow on you, it’s my promise to you.”

Marian hugged him tight, moved by his words, and they remained close for a while, then Marian opened her eyes to meet his gaze, putting a hand on his cheek, tenderly.

For a moment she felt the urge to kiss him, to clear away the sadness in his eyes, but she immediately dismissed the idea as a folly that would surely end up hurting both of them. Instead she smiled at him affectionately.

“I want another promise from you,” she said.

“Name it.”

“Be safe. I’d suffer if anything bad should happen to you.”

Guy smiled back at her.

“I’ll try. Go, now. If Hood comes to search for you here, we’d end up fighting and I’m afraid that neither of us would come out of it unscathed.”

Marian planted a kiss on his cheek, then she went away. Guy followed her with his gaze and stared at the empty door of the room until he realized the Matilda was looking at him with an

amused smirk on her face.

“Stop staring at me, witch,” he snarled, mostly to hide his embarrassment.

“I see that you are feeling better,” Matilda said, moving to close the door, “back to your nasty self, I see.”

“So what? Are you going to get leeches, now?”

Matilda laughed.

“Do you know, Sir Guy? I don’t think you are so terrible, after all. Not when you are on your own, anyways. What you said... That you aren’t going to kill Robin, was it true?”

The knight sighed.

“If I kill him, Marian would hate me, she couldn’t forgive me for that. I have no choice... I never have choices,” he added, bitterly.

Matilda glanced at him for a moment, then she sat on the edge of the bed and patted his hand, affectionately.

“Now, now, my boy, don’t be so tragic. Maybe you are not in the best situation at the moment, but I think that your life can improve if you really want it.”

“How?”

“You could begin by understanding what would make you happy...”

“Marian!” He blurted, interrupting Matilda, and the healer shook her head.

“You shouldn’t build your happiness on a single person. Not even on material things, because you can always lose them and then you’d be left with nothing.”

“I can’t stop loving her, no matter what, God knows that I tried.”

Matilda was a little surprised to hear that heartfelt confession, and she guessed that the knight was so lonesome that he rarely had the chance to confide his feelings to anyone.

“It’s a different thing, Sir Guy. Nobody says that you should stop loving her, it would be a folly to think that you can change your feelings when they are so strong. But you can live a satisfying, happy life even without her love.”

“I don’t know how.”

“I never said it’s easy, but it’s possible. Everyone must find his own path to happiness, and there are many paths that lead nowhere, but I’m sure that if you keep trying, in time you can do it. I can give you a simple suggestion to begin: take your distances from the sheriff. That man is evil, following him blindly won’t lead you anywhere.”

“It’s not that easy. I can’t stop working for him, he’d never allow me to be free.”

Matilda thought for a moment before answering.

“Well, that’s another reason to avoid killing or arresting Robin Hood, don’t you think? If you can’t get rid of the sheriff, he might solve the problem for you. Robin wants to free England from his oppression, he might end up freeing you too.”

“I doubt that Hood can help me, but even if he can, until then, I still have to obey the sheriff.”

Matilda nodded.

“Of course, but to work for him you don’t have to trust him. If he gives you an order that you think is wrong, obey if you have no other choice, but at least try to think of the options you have, try to think of a solution, of a better way to give him what he wants. Maybe you are not used to use your brain, but I’m sure that you’re not half dumb as the sheriff thinks you are. Follow your heart, if something inside you suggests that what you are going to do is wrong, then probably it is.”

“He says that humanity is weakness, that it will lead me to ruin...”

Matilda snorted.

“That’s because he wants to be the one to lead you to ruin, he wants a compliant slave, a pawn in his hands. Don’t believe him, humanity can be your greatest strength.”

Guy didn't answer: the words of the healer sounded true and sensible, but for him it wasn't easy to dismiss the loyalty he had for the sheriff.

Matilda noticed his uneasiness and she changed subject.

"Even if you are less disagreeable than I thought, I'm not here to chat, I have many other patients waiting for my help. So, how do you feel today?"

"Better."

"Did you eat anything?"

"Bread and broth this morning. Still hungry."

"No sickness at all?"

"No."

The woman smiled.

"Well, then I have something for you. It will give you strength, and it's good." She took a little jar from her bag, and she placed it on the bedside table. "Honey. You can eat it with some more bread."

Guy looked at the jar, almost in awe, and Matilda lifted an eyebrow.

"What's up? Is it the first time you see a jar of honey?"

"No, but it's the first time since I was a boy that somebody gives some to me."

Poor man, he's not used to people who take care of him, the healer thought.

"Well, enjoy it, then. Are you still cold? Let me feel your hands... No, you're not. But I bet that you are still tired."

"How do you know?"

Matilda grinned.

"I'm a healer. You will need a couple of days of rest to recover completely."

"It will be a new experience as well."

"Come on, surely sometimes you have been unwell, or injured in the last few years. I noticed that you have the scar of a burn on your arm, and it's rather recent, last year maybe. It must have been very painful."

Guy touched his arm with a little sigh. He still remembered the searing pain he had felt when the sheriff had poured acid on his tattoo.

"It was, but the sheriff didn't allow me to lose time to recover. As soon as I was able to stand, I had to get back to work."

"Well, this time I forbid it. Even if you feel better, you'll take time to rest. Now take your shirt off, I'll put some ointment on those burns."

Guy complied, and Matilda noticed how meekly he had obeyed to her command, as if he was conditioned to do what the others ordered to him.

I guess that he's so lost that he would follow anyone who looks stronger and wiser to his eyes. Too bad that he had met the sheriff.

The healer treated the burns in silence. When she finished, Guy gave her a little smile.

"If you have other people to help, go. I can be left alone now, I really am much better."

The woman nodded, a little reluctant.

"Very well, Sir Guy. Take care and try to remember my words. If you need my skills or my advice, you know where to find me. Just, don't come with your guards."

Gisborne was about to reply, when Allan came back and both Guy and Matilda stared at him, horrified: the young man had a bleeding cut on his cheek, and bruises on his face.

The healer jumped to his feet, and hurried to meet him.

"What happened to you?!"

"The sheriff," Guy said, before Allan could answer, "he didn't like to hear that I'm ill and not coming to work."

“What?! That filthy rotten pile of donkey crap!”

Matilda went close to Allan and made him sit on a chair. She took a clean towel and dipped it in the water of the basin, beginning to clean the blood from the cut.

“He was wearing his ring,” Guy said, in a tone that implied that he also knew very well that kind of treatment.

“He was furious because of Robin Hood. I heard from the guards that Robin made him kneel kicking him in the groin, and then robbed him. Giz, if I were you, I’d take my time before going back to the castle, he blames you for not being there to stop Robin. When I told him that you were ill and contagious, he began hitting me, in a rage.”

Guy averted his eyes.

“I’m sorry, you had to bear the brunt of his wrath...”

Allan blinked, unused to see Gisborne worrying for his sake.

“That’s alright, Giz, nothing worse than a tavern’s brawl. At least this time he didn’t menace to hang me.”

“Maybe I should go there...” Guy began, but Matilda interrupted him.

“Are you stupid or just insane? Why should you rush to the castle to work for a man who clearly doesn’t care at all about you? Anyways you can’t go, even if you feel better: if you do, he’ll understand that we have lied about the nature of your illness and it will be worse for all of us. Besides, you have something more important to think about.”

Guy blinked.

“What?”

“The ghost. He wants you to protect Marian. Do you have any idea on how to do it?”

Guy shook his head, sadly.

“He’d want me to take her away from here, but she would never follow me.”

Allan looked around, nervously.

“Is he still here?”

“Not now,” Matilda answered, “I guess he followed his daughter. However,” she turned back to Guy, “the best thing you can do is to recover completely and to be ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“For anything. Be sure to have money and a fresh horse in case you need to run away from the county, be ready to leave the castle and the sheriff if he endangers you or Lady Marian, be ready to start a new life somewhere else, and even to let her go if her best option is to be with Robin. Be ready, and be strong.”

After taking care of Allan’s wounds, and giving some other advice to the two men, Matilda went away to see her other patients.

Allan took the bag he had dropped to the floor when he entered the room, and took it near the bed.

“Before going to the castle, I went to Locksley and I took some of your clean clothes. Do you need help to get changed?”

“No, I’m still a bit weak, but I’m well enough to manage on my own.”

Allan nodded.

“I’m glad for this. You were in a pretty bad shape yesterday, I was worried.”

“Thank you...” Guy said awkwardly, then he pointed at the jar on the bedside table. “I have some honey there. Find some bread and we’ll share it.”

“Really, Giz?” Allan asked almost shyly, not used at Guy trying to be friendly, and the knight smirked at him.

“Go on, hurry, I’m hungry.”

Marian followed the path that lead into the heart of the forest, shadowed by tall trees, and she wished that she could see the sky. She was walking to go back to the camp, but her heart was heavy.

Now that she was alone, without the presence of Allan or Guy, she felt even more sad and lonely, and she missed her father sorely.

No more than a year ago, they were still living at Knighton, in the manor where she was born and where she grew up. She had thought to be unhappy then, that the life in the county of Nottingham was too hard, and that the oppression of the sheriff was too cruel on poor people. It was true, of course, but now she remembered those days with yearning.

Life was difficult then, Guy used to woo her, his affection unwelcome and somehow a little scary, and the Nightwatchman wasn't able to give enough relief to the poor, but her father was alive.

Maybe weak, but still the owner of his manor and his lands, a nobleman with no power, but proud of his lineage.

Marian kept drying her tears with the hands, but she couldn't stop weeping. She wanted to be strong, to hide her sorrow at the eyes of the others, but now she was alone, and she needed to cry.

She kept walking, even if her vision was blurred by tears. She knew the way to the camp, and she just wanted to get there, to be held by Robin. She wanted to be comforted, understood in her pain.

But, as she was getting closer, she began feeling a sort of oppression in her heart. She didn't like much living in the forest, with the other outlaws, and under Robin's command: that life just didn't suit her.

I have no other choice.

She burst into another bout of sobs.

Father, if only I could see you once again... I need you. I thought I didn't, but it isn't true, I do...

Marian walked under the trees, her hands on her face, brushing away the tears like she did when she was a child and she came home weeping for a scratched knee or for a little bruise, knowing that her father was always there to comfort her.

At her side, invisible to her eyes, Sir Edward's ghost followed her. His diaphanous fingers tried to dry her tears, to caress her curly hair, but she didn't feel her touch, and she couldn't notice his presence.

"Father, father, please come back," she whispered, "don't leave me alone! I need you, I need you so much!"

"I am here, my child, right at your side," the ghost said, longing to comfort her, but the girl couldn't hear his voice.

A Void in the World

Marian sat near the fire, in disbelief. She had been away from the camp for a good part of a day and a whole night, and nobody even noticed!

When she had come back, Robin had welcomed her with a kiss, smiling and not even a little worried.

“Have you been in the forest for a walk?”

Then he had yawned, tired, because they had been at the castle for the whole night, running from the sheriff’s guards after robbing him.

Marian had been too shocked to retort that she hadn’t been out for a walk, and she had just watched him going to one of the bunks to sleep.

What if I were in danger? What if I needed your help? Your comfort?

Marian looked at the outlaws, all sleeping just like Robin, united in that too.

They were a family, parts of the same thing, and Marian felt that she couldn’t really fit.

She felt terribly alone and once more she wished that she could be back at home, with her father.

The following days passed, boring and uneventful, and Marian tried her best to become a real member of the gang, but she always ended up helping Much in the kitchen or mending torn clothes or damaged weapons. It was as if Robin didn’t trust her skill as a fighter, as if after what had happened with Carter, he considered her like a reckless child not to be trusted with a weapon.

She was aware that she had been reckless that time, but then again Robin always risked his life, often just to show-off, and nobody ever complained.

Marian sighed, fighting back the tears that prickled her eyes. She didn’t want to cry, to show the others how sad and vulnerable she felt, to let them see how much she missed her father.

Everyone of the outlaws had lost someone who was very dear to them, but they didn’t weep, they were strong and they went on without lingering on the past. She was ashamed to show them her sorrow, as if it was a confirmation that she wasn’t good enough for the gang.

A sudden commotion averted her from those sad thoughts, and she saw Robin and Will coming back to the camp accompanied by a crippled man, a young messenger with only one leg.

Robin looked very excited, and the outlaws gathered around him.

“Who’s that man, Robin?” Little John asked.

“He’s Laurence McLellan, a messenger from the King! He took a big risk: he went to Locksley and asked for the master of the manor, thinking that it still belonged to me. Luckily Gisborne wasn’t at home, and we were able to take him to the forest before the guards could notice him.”

“Where is Gu...Gisborne?” Marian asked, a little worried to hear that he hadn’t gone back to Locksley yet.

Robin glanced at her for a moment, a little surprised, then he shrugged.

“I don’t know, and I don’t really care. Thornton said that he got a message from him saying that he had fallen ill, and to cancel the celebration expected for his birthday, but Gisborne isn’t important now. Look! This is a message from the King!”

He went on talking about the message and of a special pigeon that could take another

message to the King in just a few days, but Marian wasn't listening anymore. Her thoughts wandered to Guy, and she hoped that he was feeling better, then she realized the meaning of Robin's words.

Celebration for his birthday? Is it Guy's birthday today?

She wondered if he was still ill and what he was going to do on that day if he wasn't back to Locksley.

She glanced at the outlaws: they were all excited by the King's message, and they were deciding what answer they should send to the King. Suddenly, Marian found the air of the camp too oppressing, she felt jealous of the King, and for once she found herself hating him. He went to the Holy Land to fight a war, leaving the country in trouble, and still he sent orders and dictated Robin's life with his requests!

She blushed, ashamed of her own thoughts.

This is betrayal! He's the King: when he comes back everything will be fine.

She went closer to Robin, trying to join the general excitement, but she couldn't put her heart in it.

Then the outlaws got ready to go out of the camp and Marian moved to follow them, but Robin stopped her.

"It would be safer if you stay here."

"Where are you going?"

"We'll set the pigeon free with the message to King Richard, but we'll take him far from here so it can't be intercepted by the guards of the sheriff, and then, on our way back, we are going to ambush the convoy from the castle, taking the money of the taxes that Vaisey is sending to London."

"I want to help you!" Marian said, but Robin shook his head.

"No, Marian. It will be dangerous, I have to focus on the ambush, I couldn't protect you."

The girl was about to say that she didn't need to be protected, that she had been the Nightwatchman for years and she could fight like each of his men and maybe even better, but she kept silent.

She knew that Robin wouldn't listen, that he'd keep seeing her like a weak maiden who needed protection.

"Very well," she said with a sigh, "I guess I'll go to see Matilda, then."

Robin frowned.

"Are you unwell?"

"No, but she always needs help to pick her herbs, to dry and to store them. When you were away in the Holy Land, I often helped her, and she gave me the remedies for the poor."

Robin nodded, and Marian could see that he was relieved for her choice. She felt saddened, because it was even too clear that his attention was all for the King, now. Maybe she was being childish, but she would have wanted to be comforted, to feel the most important person in the world for him.

Allan gave a sad glance at the inn, before mounting on his horse. At his side, Gisborne was doing the same.

"So it's time to go back to Locksley... Who'd say that I could miss this inn?"

Guy nodded. The Flaming Turnip wasn't the best inn he had ever seen in his life, but he had spent a few peaceful days there, with nothing to do other than resting and eating good meals. It had been a little boring after a while, but it was always better than working at the castle. Guy found out that he appreciated having some peace and enough time to rest properly once in a while.

He wasn't used to it and he always had to work hard since he was a boy.

"I guess that we'll have to make up for all the time we lost. The sheriff wasn't happy at all," he said, with a little sigh.

"Tomorrow, Giz. Today we are still free." Allan kicked the sides of his horse with his heels.

"What are you going to do when we arrive at Locksley?"

"I must stay at home in case there's someone spying for the sheriff, it will have to look like as if I'm still on the mend. But I think I'll order Thornton to prepare a bath for me."

Allan grinned, and patted the pouch full of coins that he was carrying at his belt.

"Fancy another game of dice, Giz? You could win back a few coins if you're lucky."

"Or I might challenge you at chess, at least you won't be able to rig the game."

"My dice are not rigged!"

"Come on, I can recognize loaded dice when I see them. The sheriff used a pair of them to trick that German idiot, once."

Allan gave him a cheeky smile.

"If you knew that I was cheating, why did you keep playing with me?"

Guy shrugged.

"I didn't have anything else to do. I couldn't win, but I still had fun."

Allan chuckled, and he noticed that Guy was trying to scratch his shoulders through the leather of his jacket, where he still had the burns from the touch of the ghost.

"Does that hurt?" Allan asked.

"Not anymore, but it itches."

"Are you sure you are alright?"

Guy stared at him, amused.

"Are you really worried for me?"

"It has been scary! Both Marian and I were afraid that you were going to die! And she doesn't even know the real reason why you were sick, I guess that she still believes that it was because of the cold, or maybe food poisoning. But to think that a dead man touched you..."

Allan shuddered, while Guy blushed remembering that he had been sick in front of Marian. She hadn't been disgusted by his sickness, but he still felt ashamed for that.

He now knew that he had no hopes with Marian, but still he wanted to show her his better sides.

"I'm perfectly well now," he said. "And I actually needed some rest, after all. Even if the sheriff will make me pay for my absence, I'm afraid."

"Well, let's enjoy this last day of freedom, then. It's useless to think about tomorrow, don't you think, Giz?"

Gisborne grinned.

"You might be right, for once."

They rode for a while, with no hurry, just enjoying that warm day of late spring, and they were almost arrived to Locksley when Guy saw the figure of a person who was walking along the road, and who made his heart beat faster.

Marian!

He hurried his horse to reach her, and the girl turned to look at him with a smile, as if she was pleased to see him.

Guy glanced at her right: the ghost was there, hovering around her, a sad expression in his eyes.

"She is so sad..." Sir Edward said.

Guy unmounted to greet her, and Marian kept smiling, looking at him, but Guy could see what the ghost had told him: in her eyes there was a deep sadness, just barely masked by her

smile.

“Guy! I’m glad to see that you are better. I was worried.”

“I am.” He answered, a little awkwardly. “How... how are you? Is the life in the forest very difficult?”

Marian stared at him, surprised that he was worrying for her comfort, when it was clear that he hated the fact that she had joined Robin’s gang. He was surely jealous of her relationship with Robin, but still he was trying to be nice and to care for her.

She let out a little sigh.

“I wish there were bathtubs in the forest. The water of the river is still so cold, and warming it at the camp is almost impossible...”

“You can have a bath in Locksley, if you wish, as my guest.”

Marian glanced at him, trying to understand if he had an ulterior motive for making that offer, but Guy looked sincere. He was trying to be kind to her, and she found herself smiling at him.

“Thank you, but if the sheriff should find out that I’ve been at Locksley, won’t you end up in trouble?”

“He doesn’t know where you are living now, and I’m not going to tell.” Guy said, and Allan grinned.

“If he asks, we’ll say that you went to a nunnery for a while, to mourn. You could say that you have joined with the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, at Ripley Convent.”

Marian found herself thinking that the quiet life of an abbey could be comforting for a while, and for a moment she wondered if she should actually do what Allan had suggested as a cover story for the sheriff.

“Will he believe that?”

“He will, if Giz shows him a letter coming from the convent and addressed to him, to Giz I mean, where you say that you want to be in peace for some time.”

“The letters from the convent have to be sealed by the Mother Superior.”

Allan shrugged.

“I can manage that.”

Guy looked at him, lifting an eyebrow with a skeptical glance.

“How?”

Allan grinned.

“I’m good with nuns.”

Guy laughed softly, then he turned to Marian.

“So, will you come to Locksley with us?”

The girl thought that it was strange to see him so relaxed, laughing for Allan’s cheeky words, and she found herself nodding.

“I will. The idea of hot water is too appealing to refuse.”

They walked along the road, Guy leading the horse by the bridle. After a while, the knight looked at Marian, frowning.

“By the way, why were you here, all alone? It isn’t safe.”

“I’m not a helpless girl, you should know it very well by now. I wanted to see Matilda, but she wasn’t in her hut, so I was going to Locksley to see if she was treating some of the peasants there,” she said, not completely sincere. In fact she wanted to see Guy, to check if he had recovered, but she couldn’t admit that.

“Why do you want to see her? Are you unwell?”

Marian smiled. Guy had just used the same words of Robin.

“You don’t have to see a friend only when you need something from her. Matilda is a good woman, I enjoy speaking to her when I have the chance.” The girl noticed that he still looked

worried. "And I'm perfectly healthy, I can assure you."

She saw him relaxing at her words, and she thought that she had never seen Gisborne looking so calm and peaceful. She didn't want to spoil that quiet moment, so she kept her conversation on light subjects, commenting about the good weather or noticing the bright flowers growing in the fields.

Talking, they arrived at Locksley, and Thornton welcomed them, giving Marian just a slightly surprised look.

"Welcome home, Sir Guy. Lady Marian."

Guy gave the instructions to prepare a bath for Marian, earning another surprised look from the servant, but Thornton hurried to obey.

While they waited for the bath to be ready, Marian and Guy sat near the fireplace, while Allan went to the kitchen and came back with a tray of food.

"Do you want me to go away, Giz? To leave you alone with Marian?" Allan asked, while chewing, a teasing look in his gaze.

Gisborne rolled his eyes.

"Don't be an idiot. You can stay, but stop talking with your mouth full, it's disgusting."

Marian chuckled, reassured by Guy's words. Once, he would have tried to seduce her, to woo her in his awkward, possessive way, but now he was just being kind and harmless, and letting Allan stay was a proof of his good faith.

She was happy that he tried so hard to respect her choices, but she couldn't help feeling a bit disappointed.

Did he give up on me so easily?

She felt fickle and childish, but she couldn't help missing a little Guy's devotion to her, his passion.

I shouldn't even think about this. I love Robin, I made my choice.

Guy offered her a cup of wine, smiling to her, and she accepted it, her heart beating a little faster when she met his gaze, so blue and full of warmth.

"Is this to celebrate?" She asked, to avert her mind from that unexpected emotion.

Guy looked puzzled.

"To celebrate what?"

"Isn't your birthday today?"

Guy stared at her, surprised.

"Oh. Yes. How did you know?"

"I heard that you canceled a party that was to be held today."

"You are right. I didn't go to the castle because I was recovering, the sheriff wouldn't like to learn that I held celebrations when I am supposed to be sick. It isn't a big loss, anyways.

Actually it's better this way."

"Don't you like celebrating your birthday?"

"Not since my parents died. Those parties are just to show that I can afford them, that I am the lord of Locksley and people must respect me. The people who usually attends to these celebrations are not friends of mine. They come because they must, to show the sheriff their loyalty, or because they have the chance to eat for free. I don't care for them and they don't care for me."

Marian turned her gaze to the fire in the fireplace, following the dance of the flames.

"That's sad. Birthdays should be moments of joy. My father always gave me a rose when I woke up on my birthday day..."

Her eyes filled with tears suddenly, when she remembered that Sir Edward would never see another one of her birthdays.

She stood up, and turned her back to Guy, in a vain attempt to dry her tears before he could see her crying, but Gisborne stood up too, and took her in his arms, pulling her to his chest. "He will always be there," he whispered, lifting a hand to caress her hair, "his love will be there on your birthdays, he will be at your side every day of your life. I'm sure he is here now," Guy glanced at Sir Edward's ghost, who nodded gravely, approving his words, "and he will always protect you."

Marian sniffled.

"I miss him. It feels like there is an empty place in the world, a void that can't be filled."

"I know."

Something in Guy's voice made her lift her face to look at him, and she was surprised to see a deep sadness in his eyes. She understood that they were sharing the same sorrow.

"You miss your parents too."

Guy nodded.

"Even after twenty years, the void is still there. Sometimes I just wish that I could talk to my mother, to ask for her advice, but..."

Marian touched his face, catching a tear with the tip of her finger, and Guy flinched, startled by her touch, or maybe he was just surprised to find out that he was crying after such a long time since his parents' death.

The girl hugged him, lifting her face to give him a kiss on his cheek, wishing to comfort him, and to get comforted as well, but at the last moment, something changed.

Instead of pressing her lips on his cheek, she found his lips, pulling him into a passionate kiss.

Guy froze for a moment, astonished, then he hugged her tighter, returning the kiss.

Still sitting at the table, Allan stared at them, so dumbfounded that he dropped the food he was eating.

My Mind to Your Mind

For a moment, Guy thought that he was dead and that he had somehow ended in Heaven, then he realized that it couldn't be, because he was surely destined to Hell. But then, if it was all true, Marian was kissing him!

It seemed impossible to him, but he held her closer, losing himself in that kiss.

Then it happened.

Suddenly, he had the impression that he was in two places at the same time: holding and being held, kissing and being kissed, offering protection and searching for a refuge.

He felt his love for Marian, stronger and stronger any moment, and at the same time he *was* Marian.

He could feel her deep sorrow, her fear and the need of comfort and protection hidden behind her pride, the unsettling emotion she was feeling right now, the desire to keep kissing him and forgetting everything else, and at the same time the guilt she felt for having started that kiss.

I love Robin, I shouldn't...

And Guy for a moment loved Robin as well, for a moment he saw Robin Hood as Marian used to see him: the gentle hero of the people with all his dreams for a better world, a brave, generous man, who sometimes disappointed her because he loved too much the people in need to give her all the attention she wished for. The part of Guy's mind who was still himself and not Marian was pleased to find out that the girl could see Robin's flaws amidst all his many merits.

Then he saw himself with Marian's eyes, and it was disconcerting: the girl could actually see good where Guy thought there was none, but she was also aware of his flaws, the worse ones always strictly connected with his work at the sheriff's orders. He realized how much scary he could be and how evil he looked when he punished or arrested the villagers who couldn't pay the taxes, taking their things or burning their houses, and at the same time he was shocked to see how much a simple act of kindness could impress Marian.

She was grateful for his comfort, touched by his words of consolation, and she had felt close to him when he had told her about his own sadness for his parents.

And she liked him, she was stirred by him, and that kiss had awoken a strong passion in her, the desire to find out more... It was strange to feel so wanted, when usually he was the one to wish for more...

In a single moment, Guy understood Marian more than he did in all the years he had known her.

He *was* Marian.

Then the moment passed, and he was just Guy again, holding in his arms the woman who now he loved even more than before.

The kiss ended, and Marian stared at him, her eyes bright with tears, and as upset as he was.

"Guy... I... I have to go."

He looked at her, still stunned.

"Go?" He repeated.

"This was a mistake," she whispered, and even if he wasn't in her mind anymore, Guy knew how confused and scared she was.

"This wasn't a mistake. It was the most perfect thing that has ever happened," he answered

softly, still embracing her, but without trying to kiss her again.

"I'm grieving Guy, I misled you..." Her voice broke a little. "I'm sorry."

Guy shook his head, tenderly hushing her.

"I know, I know. It's alright, I know how you are feeling, don't worry."

He gently caressed her hair, and the girl snuggled in his arms, quietly weeping.

Gisborne noticed Thornton standing on the door. The servant had come to the main hall to tell them that the bath for Marian was ready, but he had stopped on the threshold when he saw the girl kissing his master.

"Is the bath ready?" Guy asked to him, and Thornton nodded, then the knight turned back to Marian. "Don't go, please. Stay, take your bath, and relax. You need some quiet, and I won't disturb you. Hannah and Mary will provide you with everything you could need: food, wine, fresh clothes, you don't have to worry about anything."

He bent to give her a little kiss on her cheek, as reassuring and sweet as the other one had been passionate, and Marian nodded, accepting his offer.

She began following Thornton, but she stopped and turned, looking at Guy, still uncertain.

"Guy... About what just happened..."

Gisborne shook his head.

"No need to talk about it. I understand. I really do."

Marian smiled at him, relieved, and she went out of the room.

As soon as she was gone, Guy lost the calm attitude that he had used to talk to her: trembling, he turned to a corner of the room.

"What does it mean?! What happened?" He asked urgently, and Allan stared at him, a little worried.

"She kissed you, Giz, it didn't look so difficult to understand, did it?"

Guy winced and turned to Allan, almost scared.

"What?"

"I just answered your question, Giz."

"I wasn't talking to you."

"What? We are alone in this room... Oh! The ghost? Is he mad because you kissed his daughter?"

"No, no, this is not about the kiss! It's about that other thing..."

Allan frowned.

"What other thing? I just saw you two kissing, and you seemed to be both very... involved. But I haven't seen anything else going on."

Guy walked to Allan and grabbed his arms, staring at him.

"I was her, I was in her mind, I could feel what she was feeling, think what she was thinking!"

Allan looked at him, surprised. He'd have thought that Gisborne had gone insane were not for the presence of the ghost.

"Isn't that what Sir Edward told you he can do?"

"That's why I was asking him what happened!"

Guy looked at the ghost, and Edward gave him an apologetical look.

"I don't know, Sir Guy. I am dead but I'm not omniscient. We can suppose that it's an effect of my touch."

"I could have guessed that too," Guy growled, "That's not very helpful."

Allan gave a worried glance at him.

"Maybe you should calm down, Giz. If you fall ill again, it won't be helpful either."

Guy dropped himself on the chair near the fireplace, hiding his face in the hands.

“Are you alright, Giz?”

Gisborne let out a shaky sigh.

“It was so... so overwhelming...”

Sir Edward hovered at his side, careful to avoid touching him.

“I feel your fear, Sir Guy, you are afraid that you aren’t able to help her, to soothe her sorrow, but you are wrong. When you comforted her, when you told her that she shouldn’t worry, you weren’t in her mind anymore, but I could feel her soul, and I can assure you that your words and your kindness really helped her. You gave her what she needed. Now you know that she sees good in you, and I see it too.”

Allan filled a cup with wine, and he gave it to Guy. The knight sipped it slowly, trying to calm down.

The former outlaw was right, making himself sick with worry was completely useless and, after all, the whole experience had been unsettling, but not completely unpleasant.

He had been in Marian’s mind, and it had been nice. Apart from the sorrow for the loss of her father, Guy had been able to see her hopes, her dreams. She was innocent and brave, sensible and impulsive at the same time, strong and passionate, but also so frail.

He had loved her even when he didn’t know her well, but now that he had looked in her soul, he knew that he had never loved her so much.

It doesn’t matter if you love Hood, and if you will never return my feeling. I belong to you. As long as I live, my heart is yours. And if I can’t have you, I will protect you till my last breath.

“Giz?” Allan called him, distracting him from his thoughts. Guy was happy that he was there and that he knew about the ghost, his presence made everything less frightening.

“What?”

“Do you think you can read the mind of other people too, or just Marian? Can you see what I’m thinking?”

“That’s easy,” Guy answered with a grin, “nothing at all.”

“Very funny, Giz,” Allan said, not offended at all, but amused by that reply. “So, what are we going to do, now?”

“I don’t know. Probably you should proceed with your idea of the letter from the convent if you really can do it. We must avoid that the sheriff could find out that she’s living with the outlaws.”

Allan nodded.

“No problem, Giz, it will be easy.”

“What will you do to protect her?” Sir Edward asked.

“It depends.” Guy stared at the wine that was left in his cup. “I will respect her choices, so if she wants to be with Hood, then we’ll have to talk with him and make sure that he can keep her safe.”

Allan stared at him, his mouth open.

“What?!” He blurted. If Guy had said that he was going to marry his horse, he would have been less surprised.

“I can’t force her to choose me or to stay away from danger, but maybe we can persuade Robin Hood to do everything he can to protect her. Maybe he could be the one who takes her away from Nottingham.”

“He’d never leave the county. He’s the hero of the people, he will want to protect them.”

Guy emptied the cup of wine, and he looked at Allan, grimly.

“Well, he will have to make a choice, then. His peasants or Marian, what’s more important to him?”

“But Giz, how are you going to talk to him? If you tell him the truth, he will think that you’re

crazy or a liar. He will never listen to your words...”

Gisborne stared at the fire, a hand over his mouth, while he tried to think of a solution.

Sir Edward’s ghost was floating near the window, and he suddenly turned.

“Sir Guy! We have a problem!”

Guy stood up and reached the window in a couple of strides.

Allan saw him getting pale and tense.

“What’s up, Giz?”

“The sheriff. His carriage is coming!”

Allan shuddered, and looked at Guy: the knight seemed to have frozen, so he grabbed his shoulder to shake him out of his panic.

“Come on, Giz, hurry! We told him that you’re still sick, so he mustn’t see you like this. Run upstairs, go to bed, and for God’s sake, try to look weak and ill. Go. Now!”

Guy winced at his words, but he nodded, and obeyed, running upstairs. He had almost reached the top of the stairs, when he stopped and turned back to Allan.

“Marian! What are we going to do with her?!”

“It won’t matter, if the sheriff finds out that you’re not ill. Go. We’ll think of something.”

Guy hurried to his room, opening the clasps of his jacket while he walked. He flung it on a chair, removed his boots and the scabbard of his sword, dropping them to the floor, and he jumped in bed, pulling the blankets over his head and pretending to be asleep.

Vaisey stepped out of his carriage, looking around, then he entered the manor, followed by his guards.

Thornton welcomed him in the hall, meek as usual.

“My lord Sheriff, I am afraid that the master is still indisposed. If you wish we can serve you a meal, some wine.”

“I’m not here to eat or drink. Where is Gisborne?”

“The master is resting in his room. He just came home this morning, but he was still unwell, and traveling overexerted him.”

“Do you think that I care? A clue: no.”

The sheriff went upstairs, and opened the door of Guy’s room slamming it.

Gisborne jumped and sat in the bed, trying his best to look confused as if he had just awakened.

“My lord?”

The sheriff walked to the bed, looking at Guy as a snake would stare at a prey, ready to attack.

“Feeling better, Gizzy, hm? You don’t look very ill, no, not at all.”

“My lord, you shouldn’t be here, the contagion...”

Vaisey waved a hand, to dismiss his words.

“I’d keep away if I believed that you were really sick. I think that you are lying, Gizzy, and believe me, I will find out if you didn’t say the truth.”

Guy kept his eyes downcast, looking at the blanket of his bed, afraid that if he met the gaze of the sheriff, he’d expose his lie.

The door opened suddenly, and Allan entered the room, holding a bucket.

“Hey, Giz, the servants cleaned this. I hope that you won’t need it again, but I thought that it was better bring it back in your room, just in case. Oh,” he looked at the sheriff as if he had just noticed his presence, “you came to see how is Giz, my lord? I wouldn’t get too close to him if I were you. Maybe it was just food poisoning, but the healer said that there was no way to know if it was contagious. She said that there had been some cases in Clun last week.”

Vaisey gave him a disgusted look, and he turned back to look at Guy.

“You’d better be at the castle tomorrow. I don’t care if you’ll have to take that bucket with you, but I’m not paying you to laze in bed. For sure I won’t pay you for the days that you have lost.”

“I’ll be there, my lord,” Guy said, respectfully, and Vaisey gave his back to him, heading out of the room and to the stairs.

Allan and Guy exchanged a glance, hoping that he was really going away, and Allan followed the sheriff to escort him to the door. But Vaisey stopped and looked around, listening, then he slammed open the door of one of the other rooms.

Marian had just stepped into the tub and she was just beginning to enjoy the warm water, when Hannah hurried into the room, a panicked expression on her face.

“Hush, lady Marian, the sheriff is coming. Hurry, get out of the tub and get dressed, then you must hide!”

The girl stood up, wrapping herself in the towel held by the servant, then she began wearing the clean undergarments that were neatly folded near the tub. For a moment she wondered why there were such fine items of clothing at Locksley when there was no lady of the manor, then she realized that Guy probably had purchased them before their failed wedding, to offer her anything she could need.

She had just donned the chemise, when the door was suddenly opened and the sheriff entered the room, glaring at her. Marian let out a cry, and blushed, but Vaisey didn’t stop staring at her, a malevolent expression on his face.

Marian saw Allan, standing behind him and looking terrified, and a moment later Guy ran into the room barefooted and without his jacket, alerted by her cry.

Guy looked at her and immediately averted his eyes.

“Well, now I know what you were doing instead of working,” the sheriff said, icily. “It’s true, you were ill, infected by this leper. What’s up, Gizzy? Did you eventually become a man and took her maidenhood? *If* she had ever been a maiden. You are coming to the castle *now*.”

Guy nodded, frightened by his tone, afraid that he could punish Marian as well.

“Yes, my lord.”

Vaisey pointed at Allan and at the girl.

“All of you. Your leper friend is still under house arrest, don’t forget it. Behave and I could let you keep her in your bed sometimes.”

The sheriff stopped in front of Guy and suddenly he slapped him hard, with the back of his hand, the one wearing the ring, hard enough to make him lose his balance and fall to the ground.

Gisborne touched his cheek with his hand, and Marian could see blood seeping through the fingers, but the knight didn’t say anything.

“This, Gizzy, is to remember you that you shouldn’t lie to me. Never again, Gisborne. Remember: this was only a kind warning.”

Chained

Allan was silent, riding his horse just a few paces behind Guy and Marian. They were all following the carriage of the sheriff, surrounded by the guards, as if they were under arrest. Gisborne was staring in front of him, his face grim and bloodied because of the cut left by the sheriff's ring, while Marian had tears in her eyes and her cheeks hot, ashamed because the sheriff didn't allow her to get dressed before leaving Locksley.

She was still wearing just a chemise, mercifully covered by a old cloak belonging to Guy that Thornton had succeeded in giving to her while she was being marched to the stables.

The journey to the castle seemed to be longer than usual, but at last they arrived.

Vaisey went out of his carriage, grinning, then he whispered something to one of his guards.

After a while, the man came back with the jailer, and Allan saw Guy shuddering, clearly afraid that the sheriff was going to punish them, somehow.

Vaisey kept grinning, and he turned to the people in the courtyard.

"I just found out that Gizzy misbehaved, telling that he was sick while he was spending his time bedding his leper friend."

"My lord! I didn't..." Guy began, but Vaisey silenced him with a single, cruel glare.

"You didn't *what*, Gizzy? Shut up now and let everyone keep the illusion that you are a man, after all."

Guy lowered his gaze to the ground, not daring to answer to the sheriff's insults, and ashamed to look at Marian.

"You tried to lie to me and I should punish you, but I'm feeling generous, Gizzy. Today it's your birthday, isn't it? I'll be more than generous, then: you can keep your bitch, as a gift. But every dog needs a leash."

The sheriff nodded at the jailer, and, before they could react, the man closed a manacle around Marian's right wrist, and the one at the other end of the chain around Guy's left one. The sheriff laughed at their astonished expressions, and he kept talking to Guy, without even looking at Marian, as if she didn't exist.

"You wanted her? Well, now you have her. We'll see if you'll still like your leper friend after being forced to share with her every single moment of your day. Go, now, take her away from my sight."

The sheriff dismissed them, and went inside the castle, leaving them in the courtyard.

Guy stared at the manacles that tied him to Marian: the chain was long enough that they could be a couple of steps apart from each other, but not much more.

Eventually, he dared to glance at the girl: she had tears in her eyes, but she was trying hard not to cry, and she was shivering, partly because her chemise wasn't warm enough for the day and her hair was still wet after the bath, and partly in rage.

Guy sighed, thinking that she had to be mad at him for his weakness, but Marian lightly touched his bleeding cheek.

"Maybe we should better get inside, this wound needs to be treated before it gets infected."

Her voice was bitter and defeated, but her tone was kind.

Guy led her through the corridors, to his lodgings, while Allan went to search for remedies and bandages.

"I'm so sorry," Guy said, in a low voice.

"Why?"

"I did nothing to stop him. I let him insult you, do *this* to us."

He shook the chain, furiously, and Marian took his hand, to calm him down.

"You didn't have any choice. To defy him would have been foolish. I guess that we can only let him have his fun, and hope that he gets tired of it soon."

Guy pushed open the door of his room, with another sigh.

"I'm afraid that he'll enjoy our discomfort for some days at least. He can be very single minded, and he'll make sure that I won't lie to him ever again. And he's always happy when he can humiliate people."

Marian pulled the chain to lead him near the ewer, and she poured some water in the basin, then she dipped a clean towel in it, and she began cleaning the blood from Guy's cheek.

"You shouldn't work for him."

"He'd never set me free. I'm like one of his little birds, he'd rather crush me to death than letting me fly away."

"You should have avoided him from the beginning." Marian said, sternly, but she softened her tone when she noticed of dejected Guy was. "But, well, I guess that now we don't have many choices. There's no use in reproaching, I think that we should better get along with each other, since we are stuck together."

She gave him a little, encouraging smile, and Guy smiled back.

"Guess so," he said quietly, and he stood still while Marian finished cleaning his wound.

"You will be missed." Guy said, after a while, in a flat tone, and Marian looked at him.

"What?"

"Hood. By now he will be wondering why you aren't back to the camp."

Marian turned her back to Guy, and she walked to the window. The knight was forced to follow her.

"Marian? Did I say anything wrong?" He asked, and the girl hit the frame of the window with her free hand, with a gesture of frustration.

"I wish he would notice. Maybe he will when he'll have finished robbing the sheriff. But only after feeding the poor."

Guy frowned.

"Is he going to rob the sheriff?"

Marian was startled: she had forgotten that she was still talking with the Master of Arms of the castle.

"Well..." She began, uncertain, but Guy stopped her putting a finger on her lips.

"Don't lie to me, please. If you want to protect him, and you don't trust me, just keep silent, but don't tell me more lies."

"I trust you."

"But Robin wouldn't, and you don't want to betray his confidence. I don't care, actually: he's always trying to rob the sheriff, anyways," Guy touched the manacle around his wrist, "and today I'm inclined to think that the sheriff deserves it richly."

Marian sighed.

"However you are right: they will realize that I didn't go back at the camp... I must find a way to tell Robin what happened."

Guy thought that Robin would surely rush at the castle to 'save' Marian, and that his presence was the last thing he needed, but it was right that Marian wanted to warn the man she loved, and he couldn't deny that to her.

"We could send Allan to Matilda's hut, and then she can talk to Hood."

Marian nodded, a little relieved.

"I'll write a note to Robin, I'll explain what happened." She glanced at Guy. "I'll write that it

isn't your fault, don't worry."

Guy thought that Robin wouldn't agree and he hoped that he wasn't going to get an arrow through his heart.

I surely hope that she won't write that she was taking a bath in my house or I'm done for. And she'd better not mention that kiss...

Guy blushed at that memory, and Marian gave a questioning look to him.

"What's up?"

"Nothing."

"Now who's the liar?" The girl asked, with a little smile.

Gisborne couldn't avert his gaze from her lips, unable to counter the desire to taste them again.

"I was thinking of our kiss," he said, unexpectedly direct, and Marian held her breath for a moment.

"Why?" She blurted, her heart beating faster.

"Because probably it's wrong, but I want to do it again," he said, his voice so low, that she could barely hear his words.

She lifted her free hand to grab his shirt, pulling him a little closer.

"It would be a mistake..." She said, but she did nothing to get away from him.

"I know."

Guy stooped a little, and Marian closed the distance between them.

God forgive me, but I want this too!

They kissed hungrily, with passion, but there was also tenderness between them. Marian closed her eyes, yielding to those overwhelming emotions.

She felt incomprehensibly safe in Guy's arms and the touch of his lips could send away the sadness and her fears, at least for a few moments. When he kissed her, she couldn't think, and lately her thoughts had always been so sad and grim that she welcomed that oblivion.

"I don't want to be funny, but this is becoming a habit." Allan said from the door, and both Marian and Guy got away from each other with a jump, only to realize that they were still chained together.

"You should knock!" Guy said, with a sort of growl.

"Had my hands full," Allan said, nodding at the bandages and at the little vial of ointment that he was holding. "For your wound, Giz. And the sheriff wants you to get to the hall to dine with him." He glanced at Marian, who was still wearing just her chemise, and grinned.

"Probably you should get changed for dinner."

Marian glared at him, but she had no time to rebuke him. She hurried to write the message for Robin, and Guy ordered him to go to the forest and give it to Matilda.

As soon as he left the room, the girl turned to Guy.

"I think that he is right. I should change my clothes, but how, if we are tied like this?"

At last, Guy called one of the maids of the castle, and, with her help, Marian managed to wear a sleeveless dress over her chemise. But if Marian's dress was made of two parts laced together, there was no way that Guy could wear his leather jacket while he was chained to Marian, so he just donned a cloak over his shirt.

They reached the sheriff at dinner, and Guy noticed with dismay that Vaisey had invited to dinner some of the other nobles, surely with the purpose of having an audience while he humiliated him and Marian.

Guy and Marian sat side to side, hiding their chained hands under the table, while Vaisey grinned widely at their discomfort.

He had fun at them for the whole long, interminable dinner, forcing the other nobles to laugh

of them, then, when the last dishes had been served, Vaisey looked at Marian for a few moments, then he turned to Guy.

"You can go now, I think that your leper friend needs something, maybe you should take your dog out for a walk, hm?"

Guy frowned, unsure of the meaning of his words, but Marian was quick to stand, and to take leave from the room. Guy followed her while she hurried down the corridor, and he wondered why the girl was so tense and red in the face.

"Are you alright?" He asked, a little worried.

"No, I'm not," she answered harshly, blushing even more.

"What's up? How can I help you?"

"Can you get rid of this chain now?"

"No, I can't. I could try to talk to the sheriff again and if I plead and humiliate myself for a long enough time, maybe he will accept to free us."

"I have *no* time," Marian said, close to tears now.

"Why?"

The girl stopped abruptly in front of a door, and nodded at it, annoyed that he wouldn't understand without her having to explain her problem.

"Because I really need to use the privy!"

Now it was Guy who blushed.

"Oh. Maybe I can stay just out of the door..."

"The chain is too short! Get inside, hurry."

She dragged him into the small room, and Guy closed his eyes.

"I won't look, I promise. And you'll do the same when it's my turn."

They went out of the privy a little later, and they found Vaisey passing in front of the door.

"Oh, Gizzy, now I bet that your leper friend looks less appealing to your eyes, isn't it? Aren't you a little disappointed tho find out that she's not the ethereal angel who you thought? Take care to take your puppy for a walk every now and then: I don't want puddles on the floors of my castle."

Even if he wasn't in her mind anymore, Guy could feel the rage of the girl, and he took her hand to stop her from replying to the sheriff. With a malignant laugh, Vaisey went away.

Marian tried to brush away a tear from her eyes, in vain because another one was ready to fall on her cheek.

"I hate him. I hate him so much! This is *so* humiliating..."

Guy caressed her cheek, with love. He was still flushed because using the privy with Marian so close had been really embarrassing for him too, but now he just wanted to soothe her distress.

"It's just a natural thing, I had a sister and when we were going back to France, we were alone, with no one who could help us in case of danger, so I didn't trust to leave her out of my sight if I wasn't sure that the place was safe. Sometime it happened that we had to use the same place to..."

Marian sighed.

"This should make me feel better?"

"Hey, it hadn't been funny for me either, we are even" he said, inadvertently imitating Allan's downplaying tone, "and then I also threw up in front of you, so I should feel even more embarrassed. I am the more humiliated one."

His tone, and his words, succeeded in making Marian smile a little.

"This is not a game," she said, drying a last tear, then she gave a little friendly squeeze to his

hand.

Guy smiled back, and he stifled a yawn.

"Maybe we should go to sleep. I feel really tired."

Marian nodded.

"It's true, you are still recovering from your illness, you need to rest."

They walked back to Guy's lodgings, and the girl helped Guy to open the clasp of the cloak he was wearing, while he helped her to untie the laces and remove her dress. They both looked at the bed at the same time, and Marian let out a nervous laughter.

"Well, at least, after sharing a privy, sleeping in the same bed won't be so awkward."

Guy nodded with a chuckle, helping her to lie down, and Marian rolled on her side and closed her eyes. She was very tired too, and despite their unusual closeness, both Guy and Marian fell soon asleep.

Marian woke up shortly after dawn, and for a moment she was alarmed because she wasn't alone in the bed, then she remembered about the event of the previous day, and she relaxed.

It's only Guy, she thought, and she rolled on her side to look at him.

The knight was fast asleep, his expression relaxed and somehow innocent, despite the red mark of the cut on his cheek. He was sleeping on his side too, his free hand holding her chained one and cradling it to his chest. She remembered that when she was a child, she used to sleep like that, snuggling a doll in her arms.

Near the fresh wound, she could see a faint little scar near his eye, and she realized with shame that she was the one who had left it when she punched him at the altar, with the ring he had just given to her.

If I had known him better, would I've still have run away?

She couldn't find an answer to that question and she felt immediately guilty.

Robin...

As soon as she thought of him, she felt guilty for Guy too.

I can't love one without hurting the other.

But she couldn't stand to hurt neither of them.

She sighed, and she looked at Guy. He was still wearing the shirt of the day before, until they were chained, he had no way to remove it unless he cut it, and the laces that closed it at the neck were undone, showing a part of the chest of the knight.

Marian blushed a little, but she couldn't refrain from looking at him.

He is handsome... and I'm a naughty girl.

She stifled a giggle pressing her hand on her lips, but she didn't avert her eyes. After a while she noticed a dark spot on his skin, near the shoulder, almost completely covered by his shirt. She looked better, and she saw another one on the other shoulder.

Curious, she moved her free hand to move the shirt away from his skin, and she realized that the dark spots were wounds, maybe burns, in the shape of two open hands.

Marian gasped loudly, and Guy woke up with a start. He looked at her, clearly wondering why she was touching his chest.

"Marian?"

"Who did this to you?! Was it the sheriff?! Of course it was him, who else could be so cruel?!"

Guy! How can you let him do this to you?! This... this is torture!"

Gisborne understood that the girl had seen the marks left by the touch of the ghost, and he searched the room with his gaze, finding immediately Sir Edward, who was hovering discreetly in a corner.

Guy gave him a pleading look, as if to ask him what he should say to the girl, but the ghost

shook his head, unsure.

“If you tell her the truth, Sir Guy, she might think that you are crazy, but how else could you explain that burns to her?”

Guy glared at the ghost, wishing that he could say him that he wasn't helping at all, but then he didn't need to find an explanation anymore, because an arrow entered from the open window, and embedded itself in one of the columns of the bed.

Both Marian and Guy turned with a start, and Sir Edward floated in front of them, as if he could protect his daughter: Robin had climbed through the window and he was pointing another arrow at Guy's heart.

“I think you will need a very good explanation, Gisborne.”

His Life

Guy looked at Robin: the outlaw seemed more than ready to shoot at him, and somehow he could understand him. Marian was in his bed, chained to him, wearing only a flimsy chemise, and she was touching his chest through the opening of his shirt.

I am dead.

He looked at Robin with a taunting smirk.

“Why should I give you an explanation? Would you listen to it?”

Marian recovered from her surprise only to give him a reproachful look. She was suddenly annoyed at both of them: Robin was there, his face grave and his eyes full of accusations and clearly unwilling to listen to any explanation, and Guy who reacted taunting and provoking him, instead of trying to talk civilly.

“Guy! Are you stupid or just insane?” She asked, giving him a slap on his forearm, then, still fuming, she lifted her wrist to show the chain to Robin. “Look at this, do you think we are having fun?”

“You were sleeping in *his* bed!”

“What should have I done? Cut my hand, maybe?”

“Better than to let him bed you! Or maybe you should have cut *his* hand. Or something else.”

Marian jumped out of the bed, dragging Guy after her, and she ran to Robin, hitting him with a punch on his stomach, then she turned to glare at Gisborne.

“If you only dare to laugh, or just even to smirk, you’ll get one too. The sheriff is enough, I won’t deal with you acting like two rabid dogs fighting over a bone.”

Robin stood up, touching his stomach with his hand.

“How can you defend him?! He chained you!”

“He didn’t! It was the sheriff! Haven’t you read the message I sent you through Matilda?!”

Robin glared at Gisborne.

“He could have forced you to write that. Maybe there was a hidden message and you were asking for help. And from what I see, I was right: you *need* my help.”

Marian pointed a finger to his chest, now really annoyed.

“Listen very well, both of you: I’m not a helpless maiden, I’m not a bone, and certainly not a prize. You can fight against each other until you are beaten to a pulp, but whoever is the winner, he won’t get me. I have a free will, I’m perfectly able to make choices, and certainly I won’t choose an idiot. In this moment I’m not sure *if* I want to make a choice.” She turned her back to the two men, and she gave a sharp tug at the chain, making Guy to stumble after her. “Come.”

Robin looked at her in disbelief.

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t need help, what I need now is to use the privy. So let me go.”

“With *him*?!” Robin blurted, in a indignant shock.

Marian turned, with tears of rage in her eyes.

“Do you think I have any alternatives?! Or that I’m having fun at this? What? Do you want to come as well and enjoy the show? Isn’t this humiliating enough?!”

Robin closed his mouth, and looked at Guy, who was keeping mercifully silent. The knight seemed to be intimidated by Marian’s outburst, unwilling to contradict her, and Robin realized that he should better try to please her as well, instead of fighting Guy.

“Actually, I can help,” he said, unsheathing a dagger.
Guy looked at him, worried, but ready to defend himself.

“Hood?”

Robin grinned, and he used the tip of the dagger to open the lock of Marian’s manacle.

“Now you don’t need Gisborne.”

The girl gave them a wary look, wondering if she could trust them to remain alone while she went to the privy.

“If when I’m back, you two are fighting, you’ll regret it. Both of you.”

She walked out of the room, and Guy and Robin exchanged a hostile glance.

Guy looked at the dagger, and he wondered if Robin Hood was going to attack him. A part of him wished that he did, so he could have a good excuse to hit him.

He was jealous, he hated Robin because Marian loved him, and still he had preferred to be outlawed and fight for the people than keeping his position as lord of Locksley and taking care of her.

He had everything I could wish for, and he threw it all away.

“Sir Guy, giving up to your rage wouldn’t be wise at all,” the ghost of Sir Edward warned him, floating between him and Robin. “I can understand how strong jealousy can be, but fighting with Robin won’t help Marian. You promised that you would keep her safe.”

Guy looked at him for a moment, then he sighed.

“Very well.”

“Very well, what?!” Robin asked, suspicious.

“Hood, show me how you did that.”

“What?”

“How to open that manacle.”

“Why should I? Don’t you have the key?”

Guy glared at him, but the ghost remembered him to keep calm.

“The sheriff chained us like that because he wanted to punish and humiliate us. If he should see that we opened the chains without his permission, he will surely be angered and he will find another way, a worse way, to punish us. Do you want this for Marian?”

Robin grinned.

“Of course not, that’s why I’m taking her to the forest with me.”

“And you are so sure that she wants to come...” Guy insinuated.

“Of course she wants to come! She’s one of us!”

“Have you asked her? Have you asked if she really wants to live as an outlaw? In a filthy camp in the forest, always in danger, with no shelter, terrible food, forced to live with a group of stinking outlaws and not even the chance to take a bath! Probably she will come because she loves you, but if that’s what you want for her, probably *you* don’t love her.”

Robin was taken aback by his word: Gisborne had found out that Marian was in love with him! And yet he didn’t seem to want to take revenge on the girl, and he didn’t even call the guards to arrest him.

Instead he had began berating him on how to treat Marian. Something was amiss, but Robin couldn’t point out what it was.

The worse thing was that Guy’s words were sensible. He wanted to reject them because it was Gisborne who was saying them, but deep inside Robin knew that they sounded right.

“I do love her,” he said defiantly, staring at Guy.

“Well, then prove it.”

“I don’t have to prove anything to you.”

Guy crossed his arms in front of his chest, stubbornly.

“Oh yes, you do. I love her, probably more than you’ll ever will and I will love her forever. I will respect her choices...”

“I have seen very well how you do that: she didn’t want to marry you and you burned her house and arrested her and her father!”

Guy shook his head, sadly.

“I was wrong. I was blinded by anger, but it’s all different now. It doesn’t matter if she will ever love me back, I will always protect her. Maybe I can’t have her, but I can live with it, if I know that she is happy and safe. Can you guarantee this? Can you give her everything she needs? Safety, love, attention?”

“Of course I can!”

“When? Before or after taking care of your poor peasants? Or just when you are not busy risking your neck for a king who doesn’t even care for his people?!”

Robin tightened his grasp on the dagger.

“Don’t even talk about the King, you traitor!”

“I don’t care for the king, I care for Marian! If you really love her, you must choose her over the king, you must choose her over anybody else in the world!”

“Like you choose her over the sheriff? You can say whatever you want, but you let Vaisey to hurt her, you did nothing to stop him! You would never deserve her, she wouldn’t marry you even if you were the last man in England!” Robin retorted, and he got ready to fight, because he was sure that Gisborne was going to attack him. For a moment he saw a flash of blind rage in his eyes, and he was almost scared by Guy’s expression, but then Gisborne just stopped and hung his head in shame.

“I know,” he said, painfully, “that’s why you must be a better man than I could ever be. She just lost her father’s, for God’s sake! She doesn’t need to fight for the good of England, you can’t leave her alone because you have to help the poor. Your men can do it, and many of those peasants doesn’t even deserve or really need your help, by the way.”

“So, what do you suggest, Gisborne? My camp isn’t good enough for her, but being here at the castle, chained to you like a puppy is any better?” Robin asked, with contempt.

“It’s safer, for now. The sheriff will get tired of this soon, and until then you could teach me, or just her, I don’t care, how to open and close these manacles without a key, so we would be chained only when the sheriff could see us. And in the meanwhile you can make arrangements to take her away from Nottingham, in a place where she can live the life she deserves. I can give you my word that she will be as safe with me as if her father would be at her side to watch over her. I swear on my mother’s memory.”

Robin slowly shook his head, an ironic smile on his lips. Gisborne’s behavior, and his words, were strange and worried him, but he couldn’t trust him, not after all his evil deeds.

“Shut up, Gisborne. You have some nerve to swear on the memory of the mother who you killed. It takes a black, ruthless soul to do so, and you can forget that I’ll ever leave Marian in your hands. Do you know, Gisborne? I’ll take her with me now, and you must thank God that I’ll let you live.” Robin grabbed the open manacle dangling from the chain, and he quickly closed it around one of the iron supports for the torches that were embedded in the walls of the room.

Guy couldn’t anticipate Robin’s move, but he reacted after a moment, grabbing the outlaw’s wrist with his free hand.

“You won’t go anywhere, Hood,” he growled, “Now, listen to me.”

Robin lifted his other hand to punch Guy, when suddenly he was no longer alone in his own mind.

He cried, terrified and pained, and he tried to fight that intrusion into his thoughts, but he

couldn't help feeling what Gisborne was feeling, seeing the memories of the knight as if they were his own.

And some were the same memories: the fire, the despair, his voice pleading Guy to do something.

But in Robin's memories, Guy did nothing, he just stood there, hugging his sister and watching the fire that destroyed their lives.

Now, instead, he could hear Gisborne's voice crying in his mind.

I can't... I can't... God, I didn't want to do it, I swear... I can't go there, I can't... Maman... Father...

Robin faltered, and he put his hands on Guy's shoulders to support himself. Gisborne did the same, in a sort of desperate hug.

The memories were too many, most of them terrible: Guy's fear when he and his sister had to travel alone, to fend for themselves trying to survive in a world full of dangers, and then a moment of relief when he could arrange a favorable wedding for his sister.

She's only a child, but she already looks like a woman, it would be dangerous for her to keep living like this... This is a rich man, he will provide for her, she'll get a good life. And I could earn my lands back...

And then his lonely training to become a knight: the oldest squire of the castle and the less experienced, trained to survive, but inexperienced at interacting with people. Always afraid that he wasn't good enough.

Always alone.

Until a man came and chose him over all the others: he offered him a job, a home, protection, but, above all, he lifted a burden from his shoulders. Now Guy didn't have to make difficult choices or to deal with responsibilities too big for him, the noble man who hired him would tell him what to do and he just had to obey his orders, trusting in his wisdom and experience. For the first time after many years, Guy could allow himself to be just a boy.

He swore his loyalty to the man, he came to love him almost like a father, a strong, stern father who wouldn't let him down.

It was only later, when his bond with him was too strong, that the man, Vaisey, revealed his true nature, and then it was too late.

Robin wanted to cry. Too much sorrow, the constant fear of being worthless, not good enough, of being alone, the burden of guilt, the effort of forgetting memories too heartbreaking to be recalled, to close them in his heart.

Darkness everywhere, and just a single, flickering star: Marian.

He had always thought that Gisborne wanted to marry her for her beauty and to take her away from him, and maybe in the beginning it had been true, but now he could see how deep was the love that Guy had for her, how he liked everything in her, how he had accepted and forgiven her lies, and how hurt he had been when she rejected him.

And then he knew that Guy hadn't lied, that he was really ready to sacrifice his own happiness for her.

He would have died for her.

Robin didn't want to see anything else, he would have preferred to keep thinking that Gisborne was just an enemy, a evil man driven only by greed and ambition, a foe that deserved to be defeated, but he couldn't stop sharing his thoughts and memories.

He saw himself with the eyes of Guy, he saw flaws that he never imagined he could have, and he was surprised to find out that amidst his hate and jealousy, Gisborne had also some admiration for him, for the courage he had to rebel to the sheriff.

There were disconcerting things, things that he could barely understand. He saw his father in

a secret relationship with Guy's mother, a secret that he had never suspected, and that Guy knew.

And then he saw Sir Edward, the ghost of Sir Edward, talking to Guy, asking him to protect Marian, the terrible cold of his touch, the ghastly fingers leaving marks on his skin.

What was happening now with him, this impossible merging of their minds, already happened to Guy, it wasn't new for him. With Marian. After a kiss.

A kiss! And she gave him another one!

Robin wanted to hit Guy, but at the same time he couldn't, he could understand him.

He *was* him.

At the same time, he knew, Gisborne was in his mind, learning all his feelings, and his more secret and hidden thoughts.

He should have felt violated, but he didn't. They were even, sharing a whole life in just a few moments.

We can't be enemies anymore. Not after this.

Then the connection broke suddenly, and Robin was alone in his mind.

He was trembling, still clutching Gisborne's arms, and leaning his head on his shoulder, trying to catch breath again. Guy was in his same conditions, pale and shocked.

Robin let him go and dropped himself on a chair, feeling too weak to stand. Gisborne couldn't imitate him, being still chained to the wall, so he just leaned his back on it, closing his eyes with a sigh.

He looked at Guy, trying to decide what to say. Robin had many things to ask him, but he didn't know how to begin. Surprisingly, it was Guy the first to talk.

"I didn't want to do it. It was an accident," he said in a low voice, and Robin thought that he was referring to what had just happened.

"You'd be crazy to do it on purpose. To see in the hearts of people... It's painful."

Guy opened his eyes to look at him.

"It's true. But I wasn't talking of this."

"What, then?"

Guy averted his gaze.

"Your father. I didn't want to kill him, I just wanted him to leave *maman* in peace. I didn't want to start the fire, I swear I didn't. I saw how much you loved him, what I took from you... I am sorry, Hood."

Robin didn't expect his words, and he didn't know what to reply.

"Gisborne, I..." he began, then he stopped with his mouth open, staring at a corner of the room.

Guy followed the direction of his gaze, and then he looked back at him, in awe.

"Can you see him?!"

Robin took a deep breath, staring at the ghost.

"Edward," he whispered, and the ghost lifted a hand to wave at him.

"Hello, Robin."

"It seems you can, now," Guy said.

"Now?" Robin asked.

"He has been there all the time. Probably you can see him now because you have been in my mind."

"Marian? Can she..."

Guy shook his head.

"No, she doesn't know. And I could see her mind, but she couldn't see mine."

"You kissed her!" Robin said, indignantly, remembering when their minds merged.

“Actually *she* kissed me.” Guy replied, with a smirk.

“This isn’t the point, now!” Sir Edward said, stern, and they both turned to him, blushing a little.

“She should know that you are here,” Robin said, looking at Edward.

“Are you volunteering to tell her that you can see the ghost of her dead father? Would you believe that if you couldn’t see him?” Guy objected.

“Shut up, Gisborne, let me think.”

“Could you open this thing while you think?!” Guy snarled, shaking the chain.

Robin glared at him, but he relented, taking the dagger to free him. He was about to pick the lock of the manacle, when Marian came back in the room, followed by Allan.

“What are you doing?!” She cried, enraged, “Are you fighting again?!”

Allan grinned.

“Told you, it had been foolish to leave those two alone in a room.”

A Short, Eternal Moment

Robin and Guy exchanged a quick glance before turning their attention to Marian. The girl looked very annoyed and ready to rebuke them.

“We weren’t fighting!” Robin said, trying to look more outraged than guilty.

Surprisingly, Gisborne nodded, agreeing with him.

“He’s right, we weren’t.”

Allan stared at them, surprised, but Marian wasn’t convinced.

“Why did you chain him to the wall, then?” She asked, and Robin couldn’t find a good answer.

“He was teaching me how to pick this lock,” Guy said, with a completely innocent look, “so we can open and close these manacles when we need to, without the sheriff knowing.”

Robin was quick to nod.

“Exactly,” he said, “You shouldn’t be so quick to jump to conclusions.”

Allan lifted his eyebrows in ironic surprise, while Robin took his dagger to show them how to open and close the lock.

“If you have an hairpin it will work even better.”

“You have a lot of practice with hairpins, don’t you?” Marian asked, and Robin grinned.

“Why, are you jealous?”

Marian glared at him, while Guy blushed a little.

“I have hairpins,” he said, awkwardly, nodding at a little box on the table, “over there. Take one of them.”

The girl walked to the table and opened the box, wondering why Guy should have hairpins in his room. When she opened the lid, she was even more surprised: the box was full of jeweled hairpins, trinkets, brooches, and even a small, feminine dagger, similar to the one she once used to hid in her hair. Like the one that her father used to escape from the dungeons the day he was killed.

That sudden memory hurt her deeply, but she hid her sorrow and grabbed a hairpin, wondering why Guy had so many jewels in his room.

“They were for you,” he said quietly, as if he had guessed her thoughts. “Gifts that I bought for you when we were betrothed, and that I never had the chance to give you. Actually I purchased some of them even after you left me at the altar.”

“Guy...” Marian looked at him, touched by his confession, while Allan was expecting Robin to react to his words attacking Gisborne, and he was ready to separate them in case they should begin to fight, but the outlaw just cleared his throat, even if the expression of his face was grim.

“Do you want me to teach you how to open this lock or do you prefer to stay chained to that wall?” Robin said to Guy, without looking at Marian. “Look what I do, then try yourself.”

After a few attempts, both Guy and Marian succeeded in picking the lock of the manacles.

Robin looked at them, and, for once uncertain of what to do, he glanced at Sir Edward.

The ghost smiled encouragingly at him.

“Robin, now you know that you can trust Gisborne. Please, forget your rivalry for now, and work together to keep Marian safe. Sir Guy, Robin, if you really love her, and I know that you both do, now it’s the time to prove it. Don’t think of your own happiness, but do your best to protect her, to give her the good life she deserves. Do you think you can do this for

her?”

The two men looked at each other for a moment. They couldn't answer to Sir Edward's question, but they exchanged an imperceptible, although reluctant nod.

“I have to go now, before your useless guards wake up,” Robin said to Guy, “but remember: hurt her and you are dead.”

“I'd never hurt her. Hood, think about what I said. Make your choice.”

Then Robin was gone, and Marian and Allan stared at Guy, confused.

“I'm not sure of what just happened, Giz, but you two didn't kill each other, so I can be contented.”

“What choice?” Marian asked.

“Don't worry about it,” Guy said, putting the manacles aside, and removing his shirt, “We don't have much time, the sheriff will expect me to show up at work on time.”

He threw the shirt at Allan.

“Find a clean one identical to this one. They're there, in that trunk. Marian, I'm afraid that you'll have to keep your nightgown under the dress, unless you have another identical one, the sheriff mustn't suspect that we could get free from the chain.”

Marian nodded, thinking that she could search for another one in her room later. She combed her hair while Guy finished washing up, and she looked at the burns on his skin, wondering how he got them. Only the sheriff could be so cruel to inflict wounds like those, even if their shape was so weird.

He must have some strange torture device, she thought, but how could he be so evil to hurt his most loyal man?

She was also curious to know what happened between Guy and Robin while she was away, because she couldn't believe that Robin went away without any further discussion, just trusting to leave her with Guy.

You will have to give me a few explanations, she thought, looking at Guy, but she had no time to say it aloud, because Guy was ready to begin his work and they had to get chained together again.

She followed Gisborne, who was headed to the sheriff's chambers at a fast pace, Allan in tow.

Now Guy didn't look anymore like the kind, caring knight who comforted her, but he was serious, professional, hiding his emotions behind a neutral expression.

Even Allan wasn't joking as usual, not daring to risk enraging the sheriff.

They entered the sheriff's room, and Guy stopped a few paces from the door, impassive, while she covered her face with a little cry, and Allan tried not to laugh: Vaisey was lying in a bathtub, completely naked, a satisfied grin on his face.

“You are late Gisborne, what's up? You didn't sleep well? Lady Marian, how did you enjoy spending the night with Gizzy? Can we assume that you aren't a maiden anymore, hm? It was about time I'd say, but you're lucky, many spinsters never get bedded in their lives.”

“My lord!” Guy exclaimed, horrified, and Vaisey burst out in a laugh.

“Oh, Gisborne, now don't start blathering about you respecting her, and some other idiocies like that! If you didn't take advantage of my gift, you're just a poor idiot. Now stop losing time, and get to work!”

Vaisey stood up, and the other three turned away, disgusted, while a young servant hurried with a towel to dry the sheriff.

“Pat, girl, don't rub,” he said, irritably, then he wrapped a towel around his waist, “Now you can look, lady leper, you can stop faking to be shy. Or maybe you don't like what you see? I should be offended, but I won't because I have no interest in your pretty face. Neither of

them.” He turned to Guy. “Gisborne, I expect you to do your job, show me that you are not hindered by your leper friend, or I’ll throw her into the dungeons. We have a free cell, now that the old fart became food for worms.”

Guy glanced at Marian, and he saw her become flushed with rage, but she kept quiet.

“What do you want me to do, my lord?” He asked, in a flat voice.

“Go to Clun, get the taxes, and if they don’t pay burn their houses. You can go, now.”

When they walked out of the sheriff’s room, Allan glanced at the faces of the other two, and decided that he didn’t want to be too close to them, at least for a while.

“Well, Giz, I think I’ll go saddling the horses...” He quickly said, then he hurried away.

Marian walked fast down the corridor, her head low, avoiding the curious glances of the servants, until she reached the door of the closest empty room. Only when she and Guy were alone, she allowed herself to burst out in tears.

“I hate him!” She sobbed. “I wish he was him to die and not my father! He’s a devil, a true devil!”

Guy held her in his arms, feeling guilty and ashamed.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, Marian. I wish I could stop him from treating you like that... I wish I had the power to do something.”

Marian looked at him: Guy was really upset, his eyes were darker with rage and sorrow. She lifted a hand to touch his cheek, with a sigh.

“It’s not your fault.”

“If he dares to hurt you, I’ll kill him,” Guy whispered, then he stopped, a memory suddenly coming to his mind.

The sheriff was kneeling to the floor, his dying sister in his arms, and then Davina said something: “Prince John has made the Sheriff a promise. If my brother should die an unnatural death, then the county of Nottingham and everything in it shall be obliterated.”

Guy frowned, confused. He remembered perfectly well that Vaisey’s sister was already dead when he had arrived, that day.

It’s Hood’s memory! He realized. She told this to Robin. And it must be true...

“No. I can’t kill him,” Guy said. “Nobody can. He has an agreement with Prince John, and Nottingham will be destroyed if he is killed!”

Marian dried her tears, looking at him.

“Then we’ll have to find another way to defeat him, but I guess that for now we must obey. Let’s go to Clun and collect those taxes, if we must.”

Marian wrapped her arms around Guy’s waist, leaning against his back.

He had proposed to ride on the wagon, but she refused and mounted behind him. It had been a little difficult to climb on the horse while chained, but on the wagon they would both have been exposed to the mocking glances of the guards and of the people.

She had already ridden like this when Guy had saved her from lord Winchester, and now, like then, she felt safe with him.

That day he had killed a man for her, he had returned her to the arms of her father...

Her eyes filled with tears remembering how relieved her father had been to see her coming back unharmed.

“Guy?” She called.

The knight turned his head towards her.

“Are you alright? Do you want me to slow down or to stop?”

“No. I want you to go faster. Could you put your horse at a gallop?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Hold me tight, then.”

Guy ordered the guards to keep escorting the wagon to Clun, then he kicked the sides of his horse.

Marian fastened her hold on Guy’s waist, and she enjoyed the ride. Guy’s black stallion was fast and powerful, more than any other horse she had previously ridden, and it was the first time that she could experience all his unleashed energy.

The road was straight and clear, and Guy let the horse gallop at his full power, without holding him back.

It was like riding the wind, almost like flying.

Marian closed her eyes and she imagined that the road didn’t lead to Clun, but to some imaginary place, somewhere where there was no misery, no sorrow, no sheriff.

Then, too soon, Guy slowed the horse, and Marian came back to reality. She was breathless, as if she had been the one who galloped, and not the horse. She could feel that Guy was panting too, and suddenly she felt flushed, her heart beating too fast.

The knight turned his head to glance at her, smiling.

“Did you enjoy the ride, my lady?” He asked, his tone unexpectedly playful, and she found herself smiling back to him.

“It was incredible! I loved it!” She answered, surprised to feel tears in her eyes.

Guy gave a worried look at her, and he helped her to dismount.

“A little too much, maybe?” He asked, gently. “Shall we walk for a while?”

Marian nodded, looking around: she could see the huts of Clun at a distance, but the guards and Allan were still far behind, forced to follow the slow pace of the wagon.

Guy took the bridle of the horse with his free hand, and wrapped the other around her fingers.

He had removed his glove before taking her hand, and Marian could feel the reassuring warmth of his skin. The chain clinked between them at every step, but she didn’t mind.

She thought that being chained to Guy wasn’t such a terrible punishment, after all.

When he was so kind and caring, she actually liked to be so close to him.

Maybe I like it more than I should.

She felt her cheeks becoming even more hot.

Guy sighed, and Marian noticed that he was looking at the village, sadly.

“Are you alright, Guy?”

“You won’t like what we are going to do. The sheriff sent us to Clun too early, usually their payment is due at the end of the month, they won’t be ready. And if they can’t pay, I’ll be forced to punish them. He knows that, and that’s why he sent us here today.” Guy sighed again, a dejected look in his eyes. “I’m tired of burning homes. So tired. A moment ago I wished that I could just keep galloping and never stop, I wished that I could take you away from this, that we could be free...”

Marian stopped walking, and she suddenly hugged him. She didn’t want to see him so sad and defeated, and she hated the sheriff even more.

“We won’t burn anything, today. We will find a solution, I’m sure that we can.”

Guy held her close, comforted and grateful for her words.

She was right, he thought. He was still feeling upset and confused after sharing Robin Hood’s mind, he felt as if he had lived another life in just a few minutes, but he could see from the memories of the outlaw that there was always a solution. Sometimes it was just difficult to find.

But he *had* Robin’s memories, so he could as well try to use them.

The outlaw was incredibly good at finding always new ways of tricking him and the sheriff, so maybe Guy could learn from his experience, he could try to think as Robin did.

It could work. I can do it.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, the trace of a smile in his voice, and Marian lifted her face to look at him, and her hand to brush a lock of hair from his cheek, with a gentle caress.

He kissed her, or maybe it was Marian who kissed him, they couldn’t say for sure, and, for a moment, they both forgot about the sheriff and his cruelty. For a moment they were free, miles and miles away from there, still galloping on the wind. Happy.

It was just a short, eternal moment.

Then Allan, the guards and the wagon got closer and reached them. Guy helped Marian to mount again, and the girl hid her face against his back to avoid that the others could notice how flushed she was.

Guy, instead, was more successful in keeping a straight expression, but she could hear his heart beating fast under her hands.

“To Clun,” he ordered, and the others followed his horse.

The Bright Light in Her Eyes

The inhabitants of Clun were gathered at the center of the village, and they looked at Gisborne and at the guards, worried.

They knew that it was too early for the taxes, but they also knew that they couldn't do anything if the sheriff had decided that it was time to pay: he had power and they didn't. But if they weren't much surprised by the ruthless decisions of the sheriff, they were astonished to see lady Marian at Gisborne's side, a chain linking their wrists.

"Poor woman, she must be his prisoner. I wonder what he's going to do to her," one of the girls of Clun whispered to her neighbor, but the older lady shook her head.

"She doesn't look like a prisoner. Look, she his holding his hand now, and she smiled to him."

"But why are they chained?" A third woman asked, and the first one giggled.

"Maybe Gisborne is the prisoner."

"Shut up, fools!" A elderly lady intervened, her face grim. "You are here gossiping, but we are in danger. Gisborne is the sheriff's man, you know very well that he's dangerous."

The women stopped talking, now afraid.

Gisborne was standing in front of the gathered crowd, his face stern. At his side, Marian was quiet and serious.

"People of Clun! I'm here on behalf of the sheriff and of England itself. The King needs funds for his Holy War, and we are all called to do sacrifices for the Crown. So I'm asking you immediate payment of this month's taxes."

An elderly man made a step forward, trembling.

"But Sir Guy, it's too early. We are not ready."

"You should be. But I'll be generous, I'll give you some time to gather what you need." Guy nodded at the guards, and two of them carried a big hourglass, placing it on the ground. "You have time until midday, When the sand stops, you'll have to pay or suffer the consequences of your non compliance."

Marian gave him a worried glance: now there was no trace of the caring, gentle knight, and Guy looked just like the cruel henchman of the sheriff.

She was afraid that he could really carry on his menaces if he couldn't find another solution.

No, I have to trust him. He is a good man.

The villagers scattered, going back to their homes to frantically look for a way to pay their taxes.

Guy put an arm around Marian's waist, with a possessive, sensual gesture, and he pulled her closer, stooping a little to kiss her neck, hungrily.

Marian winced, aghast.

This was a different kind of kiss, not loving or passionate, but just aggressive and unwelcome. She tried to pull away from him, but Guy didn't let her go.

Around them, the guards sneered and laughed at her reluctance.

"Guy?" She called, uneasy and afraid, as if a harmless puppy had suddenly turned into a ravenous wolf.

Gisborne grinned at the guards.

"I'll be back for noon. Don't disturb us," he said, then he lifted Marian in his arms, and started walking towards the line of trees. The girl tried to get free, but she was still chained to

him, and Guy was holding her tight, and she couldn't move.

"Let me go!" She shrieked. "Guy! What are you doing? Let me go!"

The knight didn't listen to her, and he carried her far into the forest before stopping and putting her down. As soon as her feet touched the ground, Marian lifted a hand to punch him. Guy moved to dodge her blow, but he couldn't avoid it completely: she missed his face, but she hit his shoulder. She tried to hit him again, but this time Guy stopped her hands, grabbing her wrists.

"Wait! Wait! I'm sorry! I have no intentions to hurt you!" He hurried to say. "It was just an act!"

Marian looked at him: now he seemed to be again the same Guy she knew.

"An act?"

"I needed a good excuse to disappear in the forest for a while. If they think..." He hesitated and blushed, averting his eyes from her. "If they think that I'm taking my pleasure with you, they won't dare to follow us and they won't ask where we have been. I'm not doing anything like that, of course!"

Marian looked at him, reassured, but still irked.

"What are they going to think? People will believe that you are a beast!"

"They already do. I'm sorry, I didn't think that I would ruin your reputation, but it was the only idea I had to get away from the village for a while without having to give an explanation to the sheriff. Please, forgive me."

Marian sighed, Guy seemed to be really sorry and she wondered if he had a plan.

"Do you actually have an idea to save the village?" She asked, and Guy nodded.

"I do. But I need your help."

"Explain."

"They don't have money, I'm sure of that, but, if they don't pay, I'll have to burn their houses. I can't show myself pitiful or the sheriff will put you into the dungeons and he will still burn Clun. So, at noon they'll have to pay."

"How? You just said that they can't!"

Guy took a bag he was carrying at his waist, hidden under his cloak, and he gave it to her.

"If they don't have money, the Nightwatchman will give it to them."

Marian stared at him, dumbfounded, then she opened the bag and she found a hooded cloak, a mask and men's clothes similar to the Nightwatchman's costume.

"Really?"

Guy grinned, pleased to see her surprise.

"I took these clothes with me before leaving the castle because I thought that I could order Allan to wear these and show up, so we'd have to chase him instead of collecting the taxes, but it was too dangerous, and then it wouldn't solve the problem. When you told me that we could find a solution, I had a better idea. The people of Clun need money, right? I know where to find what we need."

"Where?"

"I know where Robin Hood hid some of the gold he stole from the sheriff. We'll go and take it, and the Nightwatchman will deliver it to the inhabitants of the village. You can reach the houses without being seen from the guards, can't you?"

"Yes... of course I can... But Guy... You can't rob Robin! And how do you know where he hid his gold?"

"I found out," Guy said without saying that he had seen it in the outlaw's memories, "and I won't be robbing him, let's say that I'll help him to redistribute that gold. Isn't that what he always does? Robbing the rich to give to the poor? Well the people of Clun are poor."

“We could ask him.”

“Look, there is no time. We have to go and take the gold, then you will take it to Clun and you’ll have to reach me in the forest and we’ll have to get chained together again and go back to the village. And we have to do this before the time is over.”

Guy took an hairpin, and he gave one to Marian, and they both opened their manacles. The girl glanced at Guy.

“Do you trust me to do this?”

“It will be dangerous, I know. But I know that you can do it.” Guy smiled at her. “I could never catch the Nightwatchman, I expect that my guards can’t do better than me. I told Allan to distract their attention, but you’ll have to be very careful. If they discover you, I’ll come to defend you, but if we are caught, we’ll all be hanged as traitors.”

Marian stared at him, in disbelief.

“Guy, this plan is as crazy as Robin’s ones!”

Gisborne sighed.

“You think it will fail...”

The girl took his hands, smiling.

“No, I think it can work! It will work! You found a way to save Clun! Let’s do it!”

Marian ran behind a bush to change her clothes, then she came back and took Guy’s hand.

“Show me where is the gold,” she said, and Guy smiled at her, glancing at their joined hands as they ran deeper in the forest.

“Look, I finally caught the Nightwatchman,” he said, happily, and she laughed, giving a friendly squeeze to his fingers.

“Actually, I caught you.”

“Oh, yes. And I’ve no intention of running away. Not even if you punch me again.”

“You deserved it. You scared me.”

“Sorry. You have a powerful punch, by the way: my shoulder hurts, and I still have the scar of the first one you gave me.”

“I am not going to apologize for that.”

Guy nodded, ashamed. He had burned her house to the ground as a revenge, of course she didn’t have to apologize!

They reached Robin’s hiding place, and Guy looked around, afraid that the outlaw could stop them, but Robin didn’t show up, and he and Marian hurried to fill a bag with gold coins.

Up, hidden in the branches of a tree, Robin Hood looked at Guy and Marian, wondering what they were going to do. Once, he would have intervened, stopping Gisborne, maybe even hitting him with an arrow, but after the incredible experience they had shared, he just couldn’t.

He was still confused, but now he knew that Gisborne was not as evil as he had always thought, and that he really wanted the best for Marian.

Robin had no idea of what they were going to do with his gold, but he didn’t move, choosing to wait and see if he could really trust Gisborne.

Marian and Guy closed the bag, hid again the entrance of the cache, and they ran away in the direction of Clun.

Robin waited for a moment, then he silently followed them.

Marian crept behind a stable, reaching the back of one of the huts. Inside, she could hear the villagers rummaging between their things, hoping to find at least a few coins to give to Gisborne.

She made sure that there were no guards around, and she knocked at the door: when one of the men went out to see who it was, he found a few coins on the threshold, enough to pay the taxes and buy food for the whole family.

The girl smiled, as she moved towards the next house. Every once in a while, she glanced at the guards, to be sure that they couldn't see her, but Allan was busy giving orders to them on behalf of Guy, and the men had their attention on him. She distributed more coins, growing prouder and happier at each house she visited.

She was taking a big risk, but she was doing something to help people, just like Robin. She knew that Guy was watching her from the undergrowth, ready to help her in case of trouble, but he didn't try to stop her, or to put her aside. On the contrary, it had been his idea, and he trusted her for that mission, sure that she could do it.

Silently, she moved to the next house.

Guy was watching her, tense and worried, but he didn't move from his hiding place.

Robin looked at the far figure of the Nightwatchman, horrified.

"Are you insane, Gisborne?!" He blurted, reaching the knight and startling him.

"Hood! For how long have you been watching me?"

"For enough time to say that you are a fool and a coward! You sent her to risk her life!"

Guy shook his head.

"We are trying to save your precious villagers. Isn't this what you want?"

"Not risking her life!"

"She can do it! She's the Nightwatchman, she's perfectly able to fool my guards!"

Robin shook his head.

"She should be safe at the castle. You promised to keep her safe!"

"That's what I'm doing. If we didn't collect the tax from Clun, the sheriff would throw her in a cell. Now we are making it possible to get the money of the taxes, as the sheriff wants, without damaging anyone."

Robin lifted his eyebrows.

"With my money."

"That's the sheriff's money. You robbed him to give it to the poor, we *are* giving it to the poor, so where's the problem?"

"The problem is that Marian is risking her life."

Guy smirked.

"What's the alternative? Her joining your gang? How *that* is a safer choice?"

Sir Edward's ghost appeared between them, and Robin made a step back, not yet used to see him.

"I'm afraid that Sir Guy is right, Robin. We all know that Marian would be safer in a room at the castle, embroidering, or hidden in your camp, with nothing to do other than cooking and mending the clothes of the outlaws, but that wouldn't be what she wants. My daughter can be stubborn, willful, even reckless, but I learned, I had to learn, that you can't close her in a cage, not even a golden one. She would wither, she couldn't be happy with the life of a common girl. Look, she's coming back!" The ghost smiled, looking at the girl with love.

"Her eyes are filled with joy," he whispered, then he disappeared.

Robin looked at Marian, coming back with a lively spring in her steps, and at Guy, waiting for her, proud and trusting. He suddenly felt sad, knowing that in Gisborne's place he'd have stopped her, going to help the people in her place. She would have been safer, he realized, but the light in her eyes would have been lost, faded.

Silently, he stepped back in the bushes, before Marian could see him.

The girl arrived running and laughing at the same time, excited and out of breath. She ran to Guy and she threw her arms around his neck.

“We did it! We really did it! I gave the money to everyone and nobody knew that I was there!”

Guy hugged her, pulling her close, and Marian rested her head on his chest. He brushed her hair with a light kiss, smiling.

“Yes, you did it. I was sure you would. Now hurry, change your clothes, the time is almost over.”

Marian lifted her head to give him a kiss on his cheek, then she grabbed her dress and rushed behind a bush to get changed. She came back a moment later, and she gave the Nightwatchman costume to Guy. The knight hid it under a bush, glancing to the undergrowth behind him, in Robin’s direction.

The outlaw didn’t move, but he understood that Gisborne wanted him to take care of the costume and make it disappear.

Before taking the chain, Guy stopped to look at Marian: she had dressed in a hurry, and she was still trying to fix her dress, tucking and straightening it. He stopped her, then he untied some of the laces of the dress, and he ruffled her hair with a hand.

“What are you doing?”

Guy blushed.

“They must think that I... Well, it wouldn’t be believable if you weren’t a little disheveled. And me too.” He added, loosening the laces of his shirt, and pulling a part of it out of his breeches.

“Oh. Right...” Marian said, blushing as well.

“Come on, hit me,” Guy said, after a moment.

“What? Why should I?”

“For believability. People wouldn’t believe that you surrendered to me without putting up a fight. Scratch me, give me some bruises, or I’ll have to do it myself.”

Marian hesitated.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Guy.”

“It’s needed, and I’m afraid that I’ll deserve it, later. I’ll have to be rude, to say things that you won’t like. To ruin your reputation... Go on, don’t be afraid, hit me.”

Marian sighed.

“My reputation is already ruined, after the sheriff made us sleep chained together in the same room, but I see what you mean,” she said, and she slapped him, scratching him with her nails.

“Ow!” Guy touched his cheek, and looked at the blood on his fingers, smirking. “Remember me to never make you angry for real.”

Marian gave him a little kiss, near the scratches.

“Sorry.”

Guy smiled, closing the manacles around their wrists again.

“Come on, let’s go and collect those taxes.”

Dust to Dust

Marian turned in bed, still half asleep, and she moved closer to Guy, unconsciously searching for the warmth of his body. They had opened the chain before going to sleep, and the knight had offered her the bed, ready to sleep on the floor, but she had refused.

“Don’t be silly, Guy, it’s still cold at night, and we had already slept in the same bed. I trust you.”

She would always remember the happy, grateful look in his eyes at her words, and how respectfully he had stretched on his side of the bed, careful not to touch her.

Marian opened her eyes to look at him, so peacefully asleep, and smiled, snuggling closer to him.

Guy hugged her, without waking up, protective, and Marian let him, enjoying the safe refuge of his arms.

Maybe it was wrong, sinful, to sleep with a man who wasn’t her husband, but she didn’t feel guilty, in fact she felt safe and reassured. She fell asleep again, and when she woke up, at dawn, Guy was already awake, looking at her.

“Good morning,” he said softly, a smile on his lips.

Marian stifled the sudden impulse of kissing those lips, instead she smiled back to him.

“You have been good yesterday, your plan saved Clun,” she said, and once again she saw that happy light, so unusual in him, brightening his eyes.

“We did it, together. I think I never met a woman as brave as you.”

Marian closed her eyes, leaning her head on his chest. She could hear his heartbeat, and she found herself smiling.

Guy still loved her, she knew that, and she realized that now his love wasn’t so unwelcome as it once was.

She held her breath at this thought.

No, it can't be... Guy is a friend, I love Robin.

But still, she did nothing to move away from Guy’s hug.

At last, he was him who stirred, reluctantly.

“We must get ready, the sheriff won’t tolerate another delay,” he said, with a sigh, and the girl nodded.

“Do you think that he will agree to remove this chain today? I found another nightgown identical to the first one, but I’d really love to wear something else.”

“Maybe, it depends if he got bored of laughing at us or not. Act as if you got used at being chained to me. He is entertained by our discomfort, if we don’t show it, he’ll get tired.”

Marian smiled.

“It won’t be too difficult: I *got* used at being chained to you. It isn’t too terrible, to be honest.”

Guy bent to gently kiss her cheek.

“I don’t mind, either.” He didn’t say that actually he loved being so close to her and that in his heart he hoped that Vaisey wouldn’t free them so soon. “But I wouldn’t dislike being able to bathe and change my clothes freely.”

They hurried to get ready, and then Guy and Marian closed the manacles around their wrists again.

Marian followed Guy, and she noticed how Guy’s expression grew detached as they got

nearer to the sheriff's chambers.

Gisborne entered into Vaisey's room, dropping on the table the pile of parchment he was carrying.

"Good morning, my lord, I'm sorry to disturb you..." he began in a flat, professional tone, but he stopped talking when he realized that the sheriff wasn't there. Instead, a stranger was sitting on the sheriff's chair, with his feet on the table. Guy stared at him for a moment, then he unsheathed his sword, with some difficulty, being chained to Marian.

"Who are you? Where is the sheriff?!"

"I was about to ask you the same question. And I'd be careful with that sword if I were you: you hurt me, you hurt Prince John, I'm his special envoy."

Marian stared at the man, then she glanced at Guy.

"Is it true? Do you know him?"

The knight shook his head.

"Never seen him before."

"Well, that's because I arrive at dawn every other Thursday, share a glass of wine with the Sheriff, he stamps his seal here, I take it to Prince John and the Prince knows that all is well in the provinces. But today all is not well, is it? No sheriff, no stamp... And of course you have no idea what's happened to him."

Guy and Marian exchanged a look, then Gisborne answered him.

"No."

"Well, you should better find out. If anything happens to the sheriff, Prince John will send an army to raze Nottingham to the ground."

"We don't know what happened to the sheriff," Marian said, but the man grinned unpleasantly.

"He's not here, that's enough. I already sent word to the army. They'll destroy Nottingham at sunset, if the sheriff doesn't show up."

"You can't do it!" Marian exclaimed, horrified, and the man grinned.

"I just did."

The girl looked at Guy: the knight was shocked and she could see fear in his eyes, but then Guy took heart, and he sprang into action.

"Come," he said to her, starting to walk out of the room at a fast pace. "Guards! You! Call Allan. And you! Go and send me the jailer in the main hall, immediately!"

He kept giving orders to all the soldiers they met on their route to the great hall, where Guy eventually stopped.

"Guy? Where do you think the sheriff is now?" She asked, frowning.

"I have no idea. This never happened before. Usually he is in bed at this time of the morning, or, if he's awake he's here or in his lodgings, working at his plans."

"Maybe he went on a trip? To meet some of his allies?"

"He would tell me, he'd ask me to organize everything for him. And even if he wanted to keep the secret from me, he wouldn't leave the day when Prince John's envoy is coming. He's not forgetful, he'd remember that he must put his seal on that tablet."

Allan came running in the room.

"What's going on, Giz? The guard said that you wanted to see me. He looked almost frightened, he said that you were terribly upset."

"The sheriff is missing, and Prince John is going to destroy Nottingham. Form a search team, find out what happened."

Allan's eyes widened in surprise, but he didn't ask any questions and he hurried to obey. After a while, even the jailer arrived, and Gisborne gave a stern look at the man.

“Open these manacles.”

The jailer gave a sly grin at him, unwilling to comply.

“The sheriff ordered to keep you chained together.”

“The sheriff isn’t here now, so I’m in charge. Open these locks immediately or I’ll have you flogged!”

This time the man was startled by Guy’s tone, and he understood that it would have been better to obey. He took his keys and finally set Guy and Marian free.

Guy threw the chain at him, with contempt.

“Take your things and go back to the dungeons.”

The jailer was just gone, when Allan came back with a young, frightened servant. The girl had been working in the stables early in the morning, before dawn, and she had seen the sheriff taking his horse. He had ordered her to open the gate, and she had obeyed, even if she was surprised because he was wearing only his night clothes.

Gisborne let the girl go back to her duties, and he turned to Allan.

“Take the guards and search the castle and the town, check every house, every corner... even the wells and the ponds.” He took a deep breath before looking at Marian. “Call Hood,” he said, lowering his tone, “he knows the forest perfectly, he can surely find the sheriff.”

Both Allan and Marian went away, the former taking all the guards with him, and Guy remained alone in the hall.

He wearily sat on the sheriff’s chair, and sighed.

“Sir Edward?” He called, and the ghost appeared in front of him. “I need your help. Do you know where is the sheriff?”

“I don’t. I was watching over Marian, tonight.”

Guy frowned.

“You were watching us sleep? Were you afraid that I could hurt her?”

“Don’t be offended, Sir Guy, I know that Marian can trust you, but I’m still a father, I find unsettling to see my daughter sleeping with a man... and a man who loves and wants her so deeply as you do.”

Gisborne looked at the ghost, wondering what Sir Edward had seen in his mind during the night, and hoping that his thoughts hadn’t been too embarrassing.

“Now there’s a more urgent matter: we have to find the sheriff or the whole town will be in danger. Can you do... something to locate him?”

“I can try.”

Sir Edward disappeared, and Guy covered his face with the hands, trying to calm down.

He was terrified, afraid that the responsibility of the destruction of Nottingham would fall on his shoulders, another burden to carry, another fault on his soul...

I’m not good enough to save the town... I’ll fail again.

Vaisey always repeated to him that he should always follow his orders because he wasn’t smart enough to make his own plans, that he was only good to do what he was told and no more.

Was it true? Was he really always destined to fail?

He thought of Marian, of the first words she had whispered to him in the morning: “You have been good, your plan saved Clun.”

She had been happy, proud of him, and, thinking of her, Guy felt his fear lessening.

He was doing everything he could to find the sheriff, he had moved immediately and he had sent the guards in a thorough search, he wasn’t doing bad, he just had to keep calm.

Sir Edward appeared near the sheriff, and he watched Vaisey walking barefoot into the forest.

The sheriff stepped on a thorn, and he cried, holding his foot, and Edward grinned.

"Well deserved," he said, even if Vaisey couldn't hear him.

At the same time, a large man approached, staring at the sheriff.

"I've been watching you, you have been sleepwalking."

The sheriff looked at him, surprised, and the other touched his clothes, fingering the smooth fabric.

"Nice silk."

Vaisey glared at him.

"I am the sheriff of Nottingham! I do not sleepwalk. And you will take me to Nottingham."

The other tugged at Vaisey's night clothes, a greedy look in his eyes, then he knelt him in the groin, to rob him. Vaisey cried in pain, and he fell onto his back, while the mugger came closer, determined to take his silk clothes. The sheriff bit his hand, and the robber howled in pain: when Vaisey opened his mouth, his jeweled tooth was embedded in the man's wrist.

The sheriff grinned, expecting the mugger to run away, but the man unsheathed a dagger and buried it in Vaisey's chest.

The sheriff stared at it for a moment, in disbelief, then he coughed and his mouth filled with blood. He fell back to the ground, and died, staring at the sky.

The murderer pulled the sheriff's tooth out his own wrist, and the dagger out the sheriff's body, then, slowly, he began undressing the corpse, paying attention to keep the silk clean from blood.

Sir Edward looked at the scene, astonished. He had seen the darkness in the robber's heart, but he didn't expect him to kill the sheriff, nor that Vaisey could be caught by surprise.

Edward realized the meaning of what he had just seen: he had no love for the sheriff, and he thought that Vaisey deserved to die, but now there was no way to save Nottingham.

"I have to warn Sir Guy..." He said to himself, and he vanished.

Guy followed Prince John's envoy, Sir Jasper, and Marian reached them both, a little out of breath.

Gisborne gave her a questioning glance and the girl nodded, meaning that she had sent her message to Robin Hood. Guy was relieved to know it, even if he wondered why Sir Edward was taking so long.

He was a ghost, he should have been able to find people! At least, he seemed to know perfectly where he and Marian were all the time, appearing suddenly to check if his daughter was safe with Guy.

But until he had news of the sheriff, either from Robin or from the ghost, Guy had to try anything he could think to keep Nottingham safe. He had learned from bitter experience that it was always better not to expect help from the others.

"Sir Jasper, I hope that we can come to a sort of understanding. We are all working to find the sheriff."

The other man looked at him.

"You're not doing a very good job, are you?"

"We just need some more time, but I'm sure that we'll find him."

"Time? You have till sunset. I can't make any exception for you or every other ambitious young captain will murder his sheriff hoping to get away with it."

"Guy didn't kill the sheriff!"

"I didn't kill the sheriff!" Guy and Marian said at the same time, and Jasper just stared at them, not convinced at all.

Gisborne sighed, trying another kind of approach.

“Look, I could make you a very rich man...”

Jasper stopped in front of a window, and he turned to Guy, looking at him with amused contempt.

“Do you think that my ambition is to be a messenger forever? No, Sir Guy. If Nottingham will be razed to ground, it will have to be rebuilt, and the royal charter for reconstruction has been licensed to my cousin. You can’t offer me anything more than what I’m already going to get.”

Marian stomped her foot to the floor.

“This isn’t right! You can’t destroy Nottingham!” She cried, while Guy looked at Jasper, pale and grave.

“You really are going to do this, aren’t you?”

“Sure. Come sunset, no sheriff, no Nottingham.”

With this, Sir Jasper went, leaving Guy and Marian in front of the window.

“He can’t do this! It’s wrong!” The girls shook her head, on the verge of tears.

Guy kept staring outside, and Marian realized that he was scared. She stopped complaining, and she walked at his side, taking his hand. Guy turned to look at her for a moment, grateful, then he went back to stare at something in the distance.

Marian tried to understand what was fascinating him so much, but she could only see what seemed a cloud of smoke.

“What is it? A fire?”

“No. Dust.”

“Dust?”

“It’s Prince John’s army. When many man are moving, they kick up a lot of dust. This must be a great army...”

The Sheriff is Dead!

“We can’t go to the castle! It’s surely a trap!” Little John said, shaking his head.

“The message from Marian said that I would have safe passage today.” Robin looked at the gate leading to the courtyard of the castle, and knew that something was amiss: there were no guards at the gate, just two of the servants of the castle.

“You can’t trust Gisborne!” Much complained, worried and afraid. “If you go into the castle alone, he’ll kill you!”

Robin bitterly thought that he probably could trust Gisborne more than Marian at the moment, because now he knew perfectly well what the knight had in his soul, while he was afraid that the girl didn’t know what was going on in her own heart.

“Gisborne may be our enemy, but he would never break an oath, if he gave his word, he won’t betray us.”

The outlaws looked at him, surprised, but they stepped aside to let him enter the castle. Allan was there, waiting for him, and he led him to the great hall.

Guy and Marian were there, Guy sitting on the sheriff’s chair, and the girl standing at his side. They were talking, still unaware of his presence, and Marian seemed to be comforting the knight, who was pale and tense. She had a hand on his arm, and while they talked, she was stroking him lightly, in a reassuring gesture.

Robin felt something dark and bitter growing in his heart at this sight, it was a disturbing sensation, as if he was the intruder between them, as if his presence could only spoil things instead of making them better.

Then Guy noticed him, and Marian too, just a moment after. They both looked relieved, sincerely happy to see him, and this made his uneasiness even worse. His jealousy made him feel guilty too.

“So, what’s up? How did you lose the sheriff?” He said, smugly, deciding to show off a little to avert his own mind from those unpleasant thoughts. “And now you need me to find him... Well, Gisborne, I didn’t expect that you would ask for my help.”

Guy rolled his eyes. Once, Robin’s demeanor would have irked him, but now he found it almost comforting: the world could fall into ruins around them, but the outlaw would always be his cheeky self.

He was about to answer him with equally provoking words, when he suddenly saw Sir Edward appearing in the hall. Guy noticed that even Robin had seen him, because he had to stifle a wince.

“Sir Guy, Robin, I have to talk to you. Alone,” the ghost said, looking at Marian and Allan. Guy and Robin exchanged a worried glance, then Guy turned to Allan.

“Any news from the guards? Go and check if they found anything, then go to the kitchen and see that the cooks are ready to prepare meals for the men of the search teams. Marian, please, go with him, you are good at organizing deliveries of supplies, and if we can provide those men with some food, they won’t lose time coming back at the castle to eat.”

Allan nodded, but the girl hesitated, glancing at Robin. She understood that Guy’s request was also a pretext for sending her and Allan away from the hall, and she was worried that he wanted to fight with Robin.

The knight touched her hand, and searched her gaze.

“Trust me.” He mouthed, and she answered with a slight nod and a little smile.

“For a few coins, we could ask the children of the town to deliver the meals to the guards, so the servants won’t be distracted from their duties,” she suggested.

“Good idea, do it,” Guy agreed.

It was actually a sensible suggestion, but now, seeing Sir Edward’s expression, he would have agreed to anything, just to hasten the delivery of the news he was carrying.

According to the dark face of the ghost, it couldn’t be good, but not knowing was even worse.

Even Robin probably agreed with him, because he didn’t make any of his witty remarks, he just kept silent, waiting for Marian and Allan to leave.

As soon as they were alone, they both turned to the ghost.

“How bad is it?” Guy asked, in a whisper.

Sir Edward floated closer.

“The sheriff is dead.”

Guy stood up abruptly, and he instinctively tried to grab Sir Edward’s arms, but the ghost vanished and reappeared a little further to avoid his touch.

“Careful, don’t touch me or you’ll be sick again!” Edward said, worried, and Gisborne stared blankly at him.

“It can’t be. He can’t be dead,” he whispered, in shock.

Even Robin stood up, and he walked closer to Guy.

“What happened?” He asked.

“A man wanted to rob him in the forest, the sheriff tried to react, and the robber stabbed him.”

Robin closed his eyes for a moment, trying to think, but he was feeling so upset that he couldn’t focus. He turned to look at Gisborne and for a moment he thought that the knight was going to die as well.

He remembered what he had seen in Guy’s mind, the bond that he had formed with the sheriff when he was just a boy, the mixture of love and hate that he had for that cruel man. For Guy, Vaisey had been a father and an oppressor at the same time, a strong influence in his life, and, even if his loyalty to him had become weaker since Guy had fallen in love with Marian, the sheriff’s death was still a big shock for him.

Robin felt pity and worry for his former enemy, and he put a hand on his shoulder.

“Gisborne? Are you alright? Sit down...”

Guy winced at his touch, and he looked at Robin for a moment, then he dropped himself on the chair, burying the face in his hands.

“How can I be alright? How can any of us be alright?! He’s dead and we are all dead as well! They’ll destroy the town as soon as they know! We’re all dead!”

Robin shook him.

“Shut up!” He ordered, and Guy looked at him, helpless. “Calm down, Gisborne. I know that you’re upset, I am too, but we can’t afford to give up to panic. Try to breathe slowly, and listen to me.”

Guy closed his eyes, trying to obey him and drawing shaky breaths. After a while, he looked at Robin, hoping desperately that he had a solution.

“I am listening, Hood.”

“You are right. When they know that Vaisey is dead, they will attack. That’s why we must keep it secret, so we’ll have at least time until sunset.”

Guy nodded. He was still terrified and in shock, but if Robin had a plan, there could still be some hope.

“We must hide his body, then.”

“My men can do it, they will keep the secret. Sir Edward, you’ll have to tell me where we can find it. Guy, we must protect the town. Can your guards fight against Prince John’s army?”

“They wouldn’t last much. They are little more than peasants, the sheriff wanted many guards, but he didn’t want to lose money for their training. That’s why you could always enter the castle so easily.”

Robin sighed.

“That’s a hard blow to my self confidence, do you know?” He said, in a lighthearted tone and Guy answered with a half grin, then Robin became serious again. “If they can’t fight, I’m not sure that it would be a good idea to call them back, we would only lose more lives. Do you know if it will be a big army?”

“I’m afraid it is.”

“I could bring some gold here, we could bribe Prince John’s envoy.”

“No, we can’t. I already offered him the contents of the treasure room, but he wasn’t even tempted, And if he razes the town to the ground, he will get all of it, anyways.”

Robin sat in the other chair, heavily.

“We can’t fight... We can’t corrupt him... There *must* be something we can do.”

“Don’t you have one of your crazy plans?”

Robin shook his head, discouraged.

“Not today. Not yet.”

Guy let out a moan of frustration, and he leaned his back on the chair, closing his eyes once again.

He felt like he was going to be sick, and he took deep breaths to fight against a sudden wave of nausea. He couldn’t disgrace himself throwing up in front of Robin, so he sat still, with his eyes closed, trying to calm down.

Robin looked at him, quietly. Once, he would have made fun of his distress, even in that terrible situation, but now he just couldn’t. Actually, he felt somehow sorry for him, he could understand his terrible shock.

He stood, took a pitcher of wine that was on the table and filled two cups.

“Gisborne? Here, drink this,” he said, offering one to Guy, and downing the other in a single gulp.

Guy instead, took the cup and drank it with small sips, but when he finally emptied it, he felt better.

“Is this your plan, Hood? Getting drunk?”

“No, but we mustn’t lose hope. We will find a solution, I’m not going to give up until we do.”

“Sir Guy, Robin,” Sir Edward called them softly. He had waited in silence, but seeing them so upset and in despair, he decided to talk. “If the town can’t be saved, you should at least try to save the people.”

Robin looked at Guy.

“Do you think that we could evacuate Nottingham?” He asked, wondering where all those homeless people would go and how could they live. But it was still better to lose a home rather than their lives.

Guy sighed.

“I don’t know if Sir Jasper will allow it. Prince John promised to destroy the town *and* the people in it.”

“You have to save Marian,” the ghost said, and the two men looked at him. “If you can’t do anything else, at least her must live. Even if everyone else dies, she must survive.”

The words of the ghost were stern, irrefutable, even cruel, but both Robin and Guy agreed with him.

"I will protect her with my life," Guy said, and Robin nodded.

"We'll both protect her. But now we must decide what to do."

"Hood, you have to hide the... the body of the sheriff. Meanwhile I'll try to talk to Sir Jasper again, to persuade him to let go at least the women and the children."

Robin looked at Guy.

"What will you say to Marian? She will notice how upset you are."

"The truth. I won't hide the severity of the situation to her. And then, her help might be precious."

The outlaw nodded.

"She will ask you how you found it out."

"I'll say her that you told me, that you just got word from one of your men."

"Very well. Talk to Sir Jasper, but be careful, if he suspects that the sheriff is dead, it will be the end. Don't go there immediately, speak with Marian first, and calm down. Panicking won't help us."

Guy nodded.

"I'll also check the weapons that we have in our armory, and I'll ask Allan to be ready give them to the people who are willing to defend the town in case of a siege."

"In that case, you can count on me and on the members of my gang who will agree to follow me."

Guy looked at him, surprised.

"It's foolish, Hood. If we came to a siege, it will be just a matter of time, but we are going to die. It would be a suicide."

The outlaw looked out of the window, at the cloud of dust along the road that was getting closer any moment.

"I feel responsible. If it weren't for me, the sheriff probably wouldn't have asked for this agreement with Prince John. The menace of destroying Nottingham was to be sure that I wouldn't kill him. There are many people in town, persons who are just innocent victims of this whole situation. I gave up everything to protect the oppressed, if they are to die because of my rebellion to the sheriff, it's just right that I'm ready to die with them."

Guy reached him near the window, stopping at Robin's side, and crossing his arms in front of his chest while he watched the approaching army too.

"I still hope that you will come out with some insane plan," Guy said after a moment of silence, with a little smirk, and he held a hand to Robin. "Come on, Hood, you always had a plan to hinder me, you can't fail now that we are on the same side."

Robin grinned, and took his hand.

"You're a better man than I thought, Gisborne, but believe me, dying at your side is not my greatest ambition. So I guess I'll have to find a solution."

"Good."

Robin turned to go away, but he stopped to look back at Guy: the knight had regained his composure, but Robin could see the shocked, frightened, hurt look in his eyes.

He found it strange, almost impossible, but Robin knew that, apart the menace of Prince John's army, the death of the sheriff would take a toll on Gisborne in any case, that a part of his heart was going to mourn for Vaisey.

Robin reached for Gisborne's shoulder, and he gave him a quick, comforting squeeze.

"Be strong," he said, in a sympathetic tone, "you won't have to face all this alone."

Guy looked at him, taken aback from his words, but Robin just grinned at him, and left the room.

"He's right Sir Guy," Edward said, nodding his agreement, "you won't be alone. I can't do

much, but I can give you advice, I can offer my experience as sheriff.”

“Thank you,” Guy said, staring at him, “but you *can* do a lot: you can make use of your condition of ghost. Follow Sir Jasper, try to get information on his army, to find out the details of their plan to destroy the town, so we can counteract them more efficiently. And search for a way to allow the people of Nottingham to evacuate the town when the army will attack.”

“I will,” the ghost said, vanishing.

Guy went back to the sheriff’s chair, and he sat down, closing his eyes for a moment and massaging the bridge of his nose.

He was still shocked, and he still couldn’t believe that the sheriff was really dead, but he forced himself to put his feelings aside for the moment. There would be time to let his emotions take hold of him, if he survived, but for now he couldn’t let them to distract him from his duty: he had the responsibility of Nottingham, and he had to do anything he could to save the town and its inhabitants.

Marian came back to the great hall, after a while. She hurried, afraid that Robin and Guy could have been fighting again. Guy had told her to trust him, and she did, but they were still two men who both loved her, and she knew how terrible jealousy could be.

But when she arrived, Robin wasn’t there anymore, while Guy was sitting at the table, all alone, his face buried in his hands. She shuddered in seeing him so dejected and forlorn, and she wondered what Robin had told to him.

She walked in the hall, fear creeping into her mind as she saw how pale Guy was.

Is he ill again?

The thought that he could be gravely ill frightened her, making her forget the menace of the army that was approaching to Nottingham.

She ran to him, and she took his hands, gently forcing them away from his face, so that she could look at him.

“Guy? Guy? What’s happened? Are you feeling alright?”

The knight looked at her, and Marian touched his fingers with her lips.

“Your hands are cold, and you are so pale... Are you feeling unwell?” She asked, worried because he wasn’t answering to her questions.

Then Guy stood up, still holding her hands, and he suddenly pulled her closer, hugging her with a half sob.

Marian snuggled in his arms, lifting her hand to caress his hair, soothingly. She felt a little reassured because his hands were cold, but his body was warm and his embrace was tight, strong.

She kissed his neck impulsively, taking in the scent of his skin. She found herself wanting to kiss him again, and she tilted her head up to search for his lips.

Guy returned the kiss hungrily, and she could feel both his passion and his desperation in it, but she wasn’t scared by the roughness of that kiss. Actually, she liked it, and she answered with the same strenght. It wasn’t just a kiss: in it, she could feel Guy’s sorrow and fears, his pain, and she recognized those same feelings lingering in her soul.

Her sorrow for her father was still there, fresh and strong as if she had just lost him, and she was afraid that the army would kill everyone in Nottingham. She wanted to cry, to weep as she did when she was a little girl and a kiss from her father could soothe any sorrow.

So she wept while she kissed Guy, and she could taste the salt of tears on his lips. Was he weeping too? She couldn’t be sure, but she knew that his soul was full of sorrow, just like hers.

When their lips eventually parted, they kept hugging, their foreheads touching. Marian touched his cheek, gently: she hadn't been wrong, there were tears there, as well. "Guy?" She called, and the knight stirred a little at the sound of her voice.

"The sheriff is dead," he whispered, "Robin just told me."

Marian shuddered, in shock. It seemed impossible to her that the sheriff was really dead. She had hated him so much, and she had wished that he could die, but now that it had happened, she could barely believe that it was true.

And if it was so shocking for her, she couldn't imagine the impact that those news could have on Guy. Or better, she could because she could see the effects on him.

She suddenly realized that he wasn't just shocked, but that there was sorrow in his eyes, and that he was also mourning for the sheriff.

She wondered how somebody could feel love for that horrible man, but she just knew that Guy had done it, sometimes in his life, and now the remnants of that long faded, twisted, filial love were paining him.

She hugged him closer, and he sighed.

"Nottingham will be razed, now," he began, but she put a finger on his lips.

"Hush. We'll think about it later. Now just hold me tight for a while."

He obeyed, closing his eyes: they both needed that hug.

Marry Me, and Live

Guy went to search for Allan, while Marian began gathering all the women of the castle to give them instructions in case of an evacuation. Her task was difficult because she had to get them ready to leave with no delays, but she had to be careful to avoid alarming them too much. However, Guy was sure that she could do it.

He found Allan who was talking with Sir Jasper, and he inwardly sighed: he had to inform Allan of the sheriff's death, but of course he couldn't do it with Prince John's envoy there.

"What are you doing here? Didn't I give you a job to do?" He asked, harshly.

Allan nodded.

"You did, I'm on it."

Allan left, and Jasper grinned.

"Your boy really wants to save you."

"This isn't about me."

"Exactly. I dislike you, but you don't have to fear for your life. As a Black Knight, you and your family will be allowed to leave the town unharmed."

Guy was about to say that he had no family, but Sir Edward appeared, lifting a finger to warn him.

"Allan and Marian are coming with me," Guy said, and Jasper lifted an eyebrow.

"I said family, not friends."

"Allan is my half brother," Guy lied, "and Marian was my betrothed once, I have reasons to hope..."

"Reasons to hope? That woman can leave with you only if you are married, and why I should believe that that boy is your brother? No one ever mentioned it."

"Half brother. A foolish error of my father with a servant, Allan doesn't even know about it." Jasper snorted.

"He has no resemblance with you."

Sir Edward pointed at his eyes, and Guy understood his suggestion.

"What about his eyes? They're blue, just like mine. And if he weren't my half brother, I'd never keep one like *him* working for me. My father was a leper, when he was banished from our village, he made me promise that I would take care of my younger brother. I wish that he had been faithful to my mother, but I can't ignore the bonds of blood."

Forgive me, father, I have to lie about you to save Allan. It's for a greater good...

Jasper shrugged as if he didn't care.

"Very well, take the boy if you wish, but if you want to take the girl with you, you'll have to be married."

"Well, I can't marry her between now and sunset, can I?!"

"Why not? She's hardly going to say no, is she?"

Robin stopped his horse near the walls of Nottingham. His friends were close to him, but they all looked upset while they watched the army that was slowly surrounding the town.

"Master, you can't do it, I beg you!" Much pleaded, distressed, "It's foolish! A suicide!"

"It's funny, Much: Gisborne used your same words..." Robin said, and his friend shook his head.

"No, Master! That's not funny at all! For once Gisborne is right, you should listen to him!"

You should listen to us!”

“I’m not going to abandon those people, Much. If I can do something to protect them, I’m ready to die for them.”

“You can’t do it, Robin!” Little John growled. “If you die, who’s going to help the poor?!”

“You will do it.” Robin pointed at him, then at Will, Djaq and Much. “And you, you and you. You are Robin Hood, you can keep fighting our fight even without me.”

“I’m coming with you, no matter what you say, Master!” Much said. “If you die, I’ll die too of heartbreak, so I can as well die while fighting at your side.”

“Robin, I will come too.” Little John said, gruffly, but Robin shook his head.

“No. You must stay away from the town. If we can evacuate Nottingham, the people will need help to survive and to have a fresh start, and, even if everything is lost, I want you all to remember us, to talk about our fight and give hope to the people, so that this could never happen again. I need you to survive: if you keep my memory alive, Robin Hood will never die.”

The outlaws understood that they couldn’t make him change his mind, and in turn they hugged him.

“I’m still coming with you,” Much said, stubbornly, and Robin nodded, moved.

“Thank you, my friend. We shared so many dangers during war, we’ll face this together too.” They said goodbye to their friends, then Robin and Much hurried to sneak into the town before the army completely surrounded it.

“You have to marry her.”

Guy stared at the ghost, and he sighed.

“It’s my greatest wish, but she’ll never agree.”

“If you don’t ask, of course she won’t.”

“She loves Robin Hood. She would never marry me. You’ve seen what happened the last time I tried.”

Sir Edward scoffed.

“What? The town is going to be destroyed and you are afraid to get punched again? And why are you so sure that she’ll refuse?”

“You know your daughter. She wouldn’t marry me just to save her life.”

The ghost rolled his eyes.

“She didn’t seem to dislike you, just a while ago. And yesterday... And the other day... You don’t kiss someone that you don’t like.”

Guy stared at him, in disbelief.

“What? Are you keeping a list of all the times we kissed?”

“Of course I did! I might be dead, but I’m still her father.”

“However, she will never accept.”

“Who? Accept what, Giz?” Allan asked, reaching him in the hall and looking around. “Were you talking with... *him*?”

Guy nodded, and Allan gave a better look at him.

“Are you alright? You look like you’ve been in hell and came back.”

“The sheriff is dead and Nottingham is doomed, but we must keep it a secret,” Guy said, in a flat tone, and Allan stared at him.

“What?!”

“You are safe, your life will be spared because I’m a Black Knight and my family will be free to leave the town before it’s destroyed.”

Allan frowned, really worried now.

“Giz? What are you saying? Have you gone mad?”

“It’s true, Jasper told me. It’s part of the agreement with Prince John: Black Knights have protection from any harm.”

“So are you going to leave?”

“If there’s no hope I will, but I will take you with me.”

Allan sat on a chair, in front of Gisborne.

“That’s nice of you, Giz, but I’m not part of your family. They won’t let me leave.”

“I told Sir Jasper that you’re my half brother.”

“What?! And did he believe you?!”

“I’m not sure, but he agreed to let me take you with me.”

Allan lifted his eyebrows, impressed.

“Shall I have to call you brother, now?”

“I told him that you don’t know about it, that your mother was one of the servants at our manor.”

Allan grinned.

“I didn’t think that you could lie so well, Giz.”

“I did neither.”

“What about Marian? Did you tell him that she’s your sister? It wouldn’t be very believable, I’m afraid.”

Guy didn’t answer, and he just sighed.

“What?” Allan asked.

“I can save her only if she’s family. And to be family, she’ll have to marry me before sunset.”

“Why aren’t you asking her, then?” He asked, unaware that Sir Edward was nodding in approval.

“That’s what I keep telling you, Sir Guy, at least ask her.”

“Asking me what?”

Allan and Guy turned to look at the balcony, startled, and they saw Marian, looking down at them.

The girl went down the stairs, looking at Guy and wondering why he looked so embarrassed.

Allan opened his mouth to answer, but Guy silenced him with a glare.

Marian gave them a questioning look, but she didn’t ask for an explanation, instead she turned to Guy, a grave expression on her face.

“I talked to Sir Jasper, to ask him to allow at least women and children to leave...” She said, and Allan and Guy looked at her.

“Did he accept?”

“No. He said that the best examples are written in blood.” Marian’s voice broke a little.

“What are we going to do?”

Allan looked at her.

“Well, you could marry Giz.”

“Allan!” Guy snarled, while Marian stared at them without understanding what he meant.

“We should focus on the situation of Nottingham, now. This has nothing to do with it.”

Guy glanced at her, shyly, and he couldn’t help thinking that at least she didn’t immediately say no.

“Actually, it does,” Allan explained, “Sir Jasper will let Guy and his family go away from the town. If you marry him, you’ll become his family, you’ll be safe.”

“Are you going to abandon the people Nottingham?” She asked, and Guy could feel a vein of contempt in her voice.

“I...” Gisborne began, and stopped, not knowing what to say.

“Would it change anything to them if he stays and dies too?” Allan intervened. “He would be an idiot to give up this chance, and you’ll be an idiot if you don’t take it as well!”

“We can’t leave people here to die! There are women, children, innocent men who don’t deserve to be killed!” Marian shook her head, disappointed and hurt.

Guy was silent, his face pained and sad, but Allan wasn’t going to relent.

“Is death better, then? Do you prefer to die than marrying him?!”

Marian opened her mouth to answer, but she didn’t say anything.

She couldn’t answer that she would marry Guy just to save her life, but she realized that if she said that she preferred to die than marrying him, she would break his heart and he didn’t deserve it.

“That’s an interesting question,” said a voice from the door, and they all turned to stare at Robin.

The outlaw was leaning on the door jamb, an unintelligible expression on his face.

“Hood! You came back!” Guy stood up, surprised. “You are a utter fool!” He walked a few steps towards him, hopeful. “Or maybe you have a plan?”

Robin looked at him, fighting with his own conscience, then he sighed, taking a decision.

“I have one, *now*.”

He went closer to Guy, and the knight looked at him, worried.

Robin will never let me marry her, even if she should agree. And she won’t.

The outlaw grabbed Guy’s wrist, and Gisborne flinched, but Robin didn’t let him go. Instead, he grabbed Marian’s hand as well, and he joined them.

“You two will have to get married. That’s the plan.”

“What?!” Guy blurted, not sure that he had understood well. But Marian and Allan were equally surprised, and even Hood’s servant, who had followed him in the hall, was staring at them, open mouthed.

“The army is surrounding Nottingham, and there’s no way that we could evacuate the town without them noticing. If you have a chance to get out, you should take it, even if that means marrying Gisborne.”

“Marian,” Guy said, in a somber tone, “a marriage contracted in this situation could be easily annulled. I will respect your choices, but please, let me save your life. Marry me, and live.”

“We can’t abandon the people!”

“They won’t be abandoned, I will stay here and we’ll hold the castle until we can find a solution,” Robin said, with a cheeky smile on his face, “because I’m sure that we *will* find a solution. If the three of you can get out of the castle, it could be useful: Much and I will work from the inside, and you will work from the outside. *If* there is a chance to save everyone, we’ll find it.”

“What if there isn’t?” Guy asked, concerned.

Robin grinned.

“Well then, three lives spared will be better than no one at all, don’t you think?”

Marian looked at them, trying to think clearly. She couldn’t believe that Robin was asking her to marry Guy, and that Guy was giving her the choice to nullify the marriage, in case she should accept to marry him.

Both the men had surprised her, and now she didn’t know what to do.

Refusing to marry Guy, would probably kill all of them. She didn’t know if Guy would accept to leave Nottingham without her, and if he should choose to stay and die at her side, even Allan would be condemned too.

But how could she run away, leaving everyone else to die?

We have to stop that army, but Sir Jasper won’t listen to any reason. I have to think. There

must be a way to save everyone...

Then a faint idea began to form in her mind: Sir Jasper wouldn't listen, but maybe somebody else would...

"There could be a chance!" She exclaimed suddenly, and the four men stared at her.

"Do you have a plan?!" Guy asked, hopeful, and she was amazed to see how much trust he had in her.

"It's just a possibility: it could be useless. If Sir Jasper won't stop the army, maybe Prince John would, if we could talk to him. We could explain him what happened, that the death of the sheriff was an accident, and maybe, if we can offer him something that he wants, we could find an agreement with him."

"He wants to usurp King Richard's throne!" Robin exclaimed, horrified.

"The king is away, but the people of Nottingham are here, and they are going to die if we don't do something," Guy said, supporting Marian's idea. "I don't care about who sits on the throne, but it doesn't matter: making a deal with Prince John doesn't mean that he'll become king anytime soon. We just have to find something that he wants, and offer it to him in exchange for the safety of Nottingham. Probably gold, a lot of gold, could do."

Robin thought about it for a moment, glancing at Sir Edward's ghost for some advice.

"It could work, Robin. The prince will need money to finance his plots, if Sir Guy and Marian offer him the means to hire mercenaries or buy new alliances, he could agree to spare the town. If he thinks that he can get a bigger advantage, he might disregard the agreement he had with Vaisey. Then, if you are afraid that it could be a real menace for King Richard, you could always rob him, take the gold back."

Robin nodded at Guy.

"I'll tell you where I hid the gold that we took from the sheriff in the past. My friends won't like it, but I'll write a message for them and they will help you."

"And I'll take all the money that we have at the castle, and my personal belongings in Locksley. It should be enough," Guy added.

"Then we have a plan:" Robin said to Guy, with a grin, "you and Marian will get married, get out of the castle and persuade Prince John to withdraw the army. In the meanwhile we'll hold the castle."

Marian hesitated, uncertain. She wasn't sure that the plan would work, and she didn't like the idea of being forced into a marriage, but it was the only chance they had, so she had to get along with it.

She gave a little smile at Guy, who was looking equally dubious and worried.

"Yes," she said.

The knight lifted his head to look at her.

"What?"

"Yes, I will marry you."

Guy was alone in his lodgings, feeling like a fool.

He knew perfectly well that their marriage was going to be just a fake, a ruse to force Jasper to let him take Marian out of Nottingham, but he couldn't help feeling nervous, exactly like he had been the first time he had tried to marry Marian.

He still couldn't believe that the girl had agreed, he had been sure that she would have willfully insisted to stay in Nottingham to fight at the side of the people and die with them.

Maybe she really believed that they could persuade Prince John? Guy wasn't so sure of it, he wasn't sure that the prince was going to listen to their plea, but he hid his doubts and completely supported Marian's idea because the most important thing to him was to save her

life.

Somebody knocked at the door, startling him.

“Come in!” Guy said, and he was surprised to see Robin entering the room and closing the door at his back.

Gisborne lowered his gaze, feeling guilty.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“What for?”

“The list would be too long, but right now I’m sorry for all this. She should be marrying you, I’m not the man she loves.”

Robin looked at him for a moment, studying the expression of his face.

“Maybe. But you still love her, don’t you?”

Guy sighed.

“I can’t help. Even if it’s wrong, even if she’ll never be mine, even if it will destroy me, I’ll love her forever. But I think that you’re not here to talk about my feelings, are you?”

“You’re wrong. That’s exactly why I am here.”

Guy frowned.

“What do you mean?”

This time it was Robin who averted his eyes. He looked different than usual: uncertain, reluctant, sad.

“This is hard for me, Gisborne. I would never agree, if I hadn’t seen what’s in your heart. I would never have trusted you with her. I want to be sure that you can give her a good life, that you’ll make her happy.”

“What’s the point of that? When all this is over, she’ll come back to you. When she does, I won’t try to stop her, don’t worry. I’ve learned that I could never keep her in a cage. I love her, but I must accept that she needs to be free. She is the one who will decide, and I’m sure that she’s going to choose you.”

Robin put a hand on his shoulder, with a sad smile.

“Not everything is a choice, my friend.”

Guy widened his eyes at his touch, but was even more surprised at his choice of words.

“If she wants you, I won’t force her to stay with me.”

“She can’t stay with a dead man, can she?”

Guy understood what he meant, and he shook his head.

“Don’t be an idiot, Hood, you’re not going to die. You always find a way to survive. Now you just have to hold the town until we are back with Prince John’s agreement. We will get it, I’m sure. Maybe we wouldn’t if it were just me to ask for it, but Marian can persuade him, I know.”

Robin went to the window and looked out.

“Look at that army, Guy. You will need time to get to London and see the prince, a few days at least. We won’t be able to hold the town for such a long time. Not against so many soldiers.”

“Are you saying that Marian’s plan won’t work?! That it will be useless to try?!”

Robin turned and put both his hands on Guy’s shoulders, searching his gaze.

“It won’t be useless because it will take her out of the city, to safety. I won’t give up so easily, I *will* try to hold the town, praying that you can go to London and back before we are all dead, but know that I wouldn’t blame you or Marian if we don’t succeed. Don’t let her feel guilty, because I know perfectly well that it’s just a desperate attempt, with very few hopes of success. Now go, marry her, and save her life, I entrust her to you.”

“Hood...” Guy closed his eyes for a moment, to collect himself and hide his emotion. He

pointed a finger at Robin, menacingly. "Listen to me, Hood! Don't dare to die. I will go to London and I will be back to stop the army, or I'll find another way to save Nottingham, but be sure that I will come back. I expect to find you and the town still in one piece. You entrusted me with Marian, but I am leaving you a whole town, don't disappoint me."

Robin grinned, then he nodded at the door.

"Go now, or the bride will think that you abandoned her at the altar."

Guy touched the little scar on his cheekbone, with an ironic smile.

"And I guess that she'll want to keep the privilege of doing so."

The Siege

The floor of the little chapel was hard and cold under his knees, but Guy didn't even notice it. He was nervous, more than the first time he had tried to marry Marian.

This time, at least, he knew that he had to wait for her inside the chapel, at the altar.

He hoped that she would come soon.

He hoped that she would come.

A light step made him turn to look: Marian was there, on the threshold.

She wasn't wearing a rich dress like the first time, but she had taken some time to change into clean clothes and to comb her hair in a simple braid. She was wearing comfortable clothes, good for traveling and riding a horse, but Guy thought that she was even more beautiful than the first time.

In her wedding dress she had looked sad, uneasy, like a little bird trapped in a golden cage, but now she was just herself: the proud, brave girl, always ready to fight to help people in need.

How could I never notice that she was the Nightwatchman?

She wasn't smiling, and Guy thought sadly that he had dreamt to see her happy to marry him someday. He rebuked himself: in a situation like that, who could ever smile?

She had come, it had to be enough.

Marian walked to reach the altar, unaware that her father was at her side, walking her down the aisle to give her away, as he should have done the first time.

Guy stood up to meet her, taking her hand, then they both knelt in front of the priest.

The ceremony was quick, with only Allan in attendance, and Guy thought that his dream was coming true in a totally unexpected way.

In a wrong way.

It should have been a day of joy, a feast for everyone, and the bride should have been joyful, happy to start her new life with him.

Still, when the priest asked him if he wanted to take Marian as his bride, his voice trembled with emotion when he answered that he did.

Then, the priest asked Marian if she wanted Guy as her husband, and Guy looked at her, in fear that she could say no.

He met Marian's gaze, and the girl took his hand and held it in hers, with a short, sad smile.

"I do," she said, and she stood still, waiting for Guy to put the ring on her finger.

She gave a quick, guilty glance at the little scar under his eye. She knew that Guy was afraid that she could run away again, that she could refuse his love for a second time.

She didn't move while he fumbled to slip the ring on her finger, and she just glanced at it.

It wasn't the same ring, she noticed: this time it was smaller and simpler, a thin silver band with a blue stone. It was more comfortable than the other one, and she liked it better.

Guy seemed to be petrified, holding his breath in fear, and her heart softened to see him so nervous.

When the priest proclaimed them man and wife, she smiled at Guy before brushing his lips with a light, reassuring kiss.

Guy hugged her, holding her tight, seeking comfort in her warmth, and the girl hugged him back.

The priest went away in a hurry, without saying goodbye, hoping that the soldiers would let

him run away from the town before it was too late.

Allan stood up and cleared his voice.

“Sorry to interrupt you, but I think it’s time to go.”

Guy and Marian looked at the window: the sky was turning golden.

Jasper grinned, looking at the gate that was being opened.

Three horses came out of it: Guy of Gisborne on his black stallion, his boy, Allan, on a brown mare, and lady Marian, mounting the white horse that had belonged to the sheriff.

“Sir Guy, and his *family*. So in the end she married you, didn’t she?”

Guy glowered at him.

“She did.”

“I had no doubts. She would have been an imbecile to do otherwise.”

Marian bit her lip to refrain herself from answering.

Guy kicked the sides of his horse, and he went away without looking at Jasper and at the army.

Once again he had to run away from his home, humiliated by someone more powerful than him.

They galloped away, headed to London, trying to ride at least some distance before nightfall.

They followed the road even when there was no light at all, riding in the dark, but, when they arrived at a inn, they had to decide if they should stop.

Marian wanted to keep riding, even if it was too dark to see, but Allan disagreed.

“It has been a terrible day, we are all tired.”

“But we must hurry to reach London! We can’t stop!”

They both turned to Guy, waiting to hear his opinion. Gisborne hesitated, trying to think about his options.

“We will have to stop anyways, sooner or later,” he said after a while, “If we travel during the day, it will be safer and we can go faster. I think we should rest now and travel all day tomorrow.”

Marian was about to reply, but she stopped, reflecting on his words, and she nodded.

“You are right, I guess,” she sighed, dismounting.

When they entered the inn, she glanced at Guy, suddenly nervous. She couldn’t almost believe that they were married, now! She wondered what he was expecting from her now.

Had he been sincere when he had said that he’d let her choose if they should nullify the marriage? Or maybe he was going to ask what it was now his right to get from her?

He had respected her till now, she thought, but now he had power over her, the power of a husband.

Could she still trust him?

Guy was talking to the host and she heard that he was asking for a single room with three beds.

They sat at a table to eat something, and Guy looked at her, worried.

“I hope you don’t mind. I couldn’t sleep knowing that you were alone in a room. This inn doesn’t look very safe for a woman.”

Allan looked around.

“It doesn’t look safe for anyone, look at those faces. I guess that choosing to not take the gold with us was wise, Giz. If Prince John agrees, we’ll organize a safe delivery.”

Marian was about to berate Guy for thinking that she was helpless just because she was a girl, but the knight looked so dispirited, that she decided to keep silent.

A little, shallow part of her mind kept suggesting that Guy should look happier after marrying

her, but Marian kept those unwanted thoughts at bay: who could feel happy when Nottingham was in such a serious danger? If Guy should express joy for their marriage, she would be mad at him, she knew.

"We already slept all together in the same room at the Flaming Turnip when you were ill, it's not a problem for me," she said instead, stifling a yawn. She was tired, and Guy and Allan looked exhausted too.

Guy was stretched on the bed, and he stared at the ceiling. Marian was in the bed nearest to him, and she was sleeping, curled on her side, while Allan was snoring in the third bed. Gisborne was tired, but he couldn't sleep. Every time that he tried to close his eyes, he saw Robin, his strange, sad expression and he heard his hopeless words.

"Sir Edward?" He whispered, and the ghost appeared. "What's happening in Nottingham? Are they still holding the town?"

Sir Edward disappeared for a moment, then he came back.

"They are standing the siege, for now. Some houses are burning, others have been destroyed. The army had trebuchets, but Robin and Much managed to sabotage them. But they still have battering rams. They can't hold out for a very long time."

"The castle should be fitted to stand a siege..."

"It was, when I was sheriff. Vaisey neglected it. The gates aren't as strong as they should be, and nobody cared to repair them when they were damaged, the portcullis is rusty, and the guards weren't properly trained to fight."

"The guards aren't there now, and I can't blame them. They weren't properly paid. Who would be willing to fight and risk their lives for such scanty wages?"

"I should have opposed him when Vaisey came to took my position," Sir Edward said, bitterly, "I have been a coward, and now so many people pay the consequences of my weakness."

"He'd have ordered me to kill or arrest you, if you had tried to hinder his plans." Guy was quiet for a moment. "I wish that there were more persons like Robin, people who won't accept the unacceptable." He let out a low laugh. "Funny to hear those words from my lips, isn't it?"

"I am glad that you could get rid of the bad blood that there was between you. You and Robin are both good men."

"Be honest with me. Do they have any hope to keep the castle until we are back?"

"I don't know, Sir Guy."

"Can you go and see what Prince John is doing? Maybe we'll find out a way to take him in a good mood."

"I can check," the ghost said, disappearing for a moment. When he came back, his face was grim.

"He is traveling south, to the coast."

"No!" Guy cried, and Marian opened her eyes to look at him.

"What's up, Guy? Are you alright?"

Gisborne stared at her for a moment, then he shook his head.

"Nothing. Just a nightmare. Don't worry, go back to sleep."

Marian mumbled something, sleepily, and she fell asleep again.

Guy looked at her, and a tender smile creased his lips, then he turned to Sir Edward again, serious.

"We won't reach Prince John in time if he's traveling south. Nottingham is doomed, and Robin too."

Gisborne got up from bed, stopped to look at Marian for a long while, his expression longing and sad, then he took his boots, his sword and his leather jacket, and walked out of the room, barefoot.

He put his boots on only when he was downstairs, and he headed to the stables.

“Where are you going, Sir Guy?” The ghost asked, worried, already knowing what he was going to answer.

“To Nottingham.”

“You can’t!”

“I have to. Listen, I did what you asked me, Marian is safe and Allan will protect her. Now let me do the right thing.”

“I could stop you. A little touch and you’d be too sick to go and throw away your life.”

Guy looked at him, saddling his horse.

“You could, but you won’t. I can’t abandon Robin. *We* can’t let him die alone. You can try to stop me, or you could help. I’m tired to be a coward... What about you?”

Edward kept silent while Guy finished saddling the horse and mounted, then he floated in front of the horse. The ghost opened his arms, holding a ghastly flame in each of his hands, but Guy wasn’t frightened, and led the horse out of the stable.

Sir Edward smiled at him, and the flames burned brighter.

“Come, I’ll lighten your road.”

Much looked at the fires: the camp of the army was well organized and the soldiers could siege the town for a very long time. Groups of soldiers surrounded the town, not allowing anyone to escape, while fresh men were resting and eating around the fires, ready to begin their shift.

Much was hungry, but he didn’t even try to go and search for food, there was no time for it. Robin reached him on the walls.

“What are they doing?”

“Waiting. Beating on their drums just to let us know that they are there, waiting to destroy us. Look there, Robin! The battering rams are ready...”

“They will attack after dawn, I think. They’ll keep us on alert all night, just to make us tired, easier to defeat when they will actually attack.”

“Are there no hopes at all, Master? Are we really going to die?”

Robin sighed, looking at his friends.

“I’m afraid we are. When they use the battering rams, the portcullis won’t hold for a very long time. I’m sorry Much.”

“I guess that I’ll never see Eve again, then.”

“Who?”

“The woman who helped us when the sheriff gave me Bonchurch. I told her that I would search for her when there was more justice in this world.” Much passed the sleeve of his tunic on his face quickly, to dry his tears. “But there is never justice in the world.”

Robin closed his eyes, downhearted. He wasn’t going to give up, but he knew that their resistance was hopeless, and he had no ideas.

The people of Nottingham relied on him, still believing that he could save them, and that was the only reason why they were still trying to defend the castle, even if they were just common people with no fighting skills. And that was the only thing that Robin could do for them: giving them hope so they could die a heroic death, believing to make a difference instead of being slaughtered in fear, like helpless cattle.

He thought of Marian, and that was the only light in the darkness of his mind: at least she was

safe and she would have a chance to have a good life.

With Gisborne.

Robin shut that jealousy out of his mind. It was useless now, and he knew that it wasn't Guy's fault if he loved Marian too. It was a good thing, instead: Guy's feelings would guarantee that Marian would be safe and loved.

"Master!" Much called him, his voice pitched in surprise. "Look!"

Robin stared at the enemy's camp, and his eyes widened in surprise: the battering rams were on fire, burning fiercely, and there was a commotion in the camp, with many of the soldiers trying to douse the fire, and others running around the camp with unsheathed swords, searching for something or somebody.

"The battering rams are burning!" Robin exclaimed, a little hope growing in his heart. If they were completely destroyed, they would have to replace them before entering the town, and Nottingham would gain some more time.

"When did you do that, Master? You're a fool! Going there on your own!"

"I didn't, Much. It's a surprise for me as well."

"What? Who did it, then? It looks like one of your crazy plans!"

Robin was about to answer that he didn't know, when he saw Sir Edward's ghost approaching.

"Was it you?! Did you set their camp on fire?!" Robin asked to the ghost, and Much looked at him, worried.

"Robin? Who are you talking to? There's no one there..."

"No, I didn't do it," Edward answered, "I can't interfere with material things. He did." The ghost pointed to a figure covered by a dark cloak who was crossing the courtyard, running towards them.

Robin grabbed his bow, but the man lifted his hands to push the hood of the cloak away from his face.

"Don't shoot, Hood, it's me!"

"Gisborne?!"

Robin and Much hurried to reach him into the courtyard.

"What are you doing here?! You should be miles away, with Marian!"

Guy smirked at him.

"She and Allan are miles away, I came back. It seems that you could need a hand, don't you?"

"Did you set the battering rams on fire?! How?"

"I threw pitch on them. Sir Edward helped me to reach them unseen, telling me when the path was clear, so I could throw a lot of pitch on them, and on some of their tents too. Then I walked away, and I threw flaming arrows at them from a safe distance." Guy grinned. "Like my plan, Hood? I bet that it sounds familiar, doesn't it? But I have to concede that it's funnier when I'm not the one who's covered in pitch and burning."

Robin stared at him, impressed.

"How did you enter the castle?"

"I got the idea from your memories too: the garbage chute." Guy wrinkled his nose. "It's disgusting, though, now I understand why you outlaws stink so much. Now I smell like one of you."

Robin burst out into a laugh, and he unexpectedly hugged Guy.

"Well, I don't care if you stink or not, I've never been so happy to see your face! And now you *are* one of us."

"Get off me, Hood!" Guy said, pushing him away, but he was smiling too. "Close that chute

before anyone else has my same idea. And let's get to work, we have a town to defend."

Much hurried to take care of the garbage chute, and Robin turned to Guy.

"Without the battering rams, maybe we can hold out until Marian and Allan come back."

"I don't think so, Robin. Prince John is not in London, Sir Edward saw him traveling south."

Robin looked at him, worried.

"Why? He must be plotting against the King. Maybe he got knowledge of the port where he is going to land when he comes back to England, and he is setting a trap! We must stop him!"

"I guess we have a more urgent problem," Guy said. "Probably the town will fall anyways, but we must do everything we can to slow them down and to damage that army. Sir Edward has a couple of suggestions for us."

Robin nodded, then he looked at Guy, grave.

"Are you aware that we are all going to die? You've been a fool to come back."

"And you've been a fool to stay, we're even."

Robin grinned.

"We're both fools, then."

Guy patted his shoulder.

"Come on, let's find out a crazy plan to defend this town."

The End is Coming

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The cook and the kitchen girls were looking at the two men, in awe. They knew very well both Guy of Gisborne and Robin Hood: one was the dark henchman of Vaisey; the black knight who once ruined the life of one of them, Annie; the stern master who barked orders at them whenever the sheriff wanted something; the other was the brave outlaw who helped their families and always made fun of the sheriff. They feared one, and acclaimed the other, but they would never expect to see them working together in perfect harmony.

Robin had gathered them in the courtyard of the castle, and they wondered what he was going to say. They knew that they were in a dire situation and they were all scared, but they didn't know what they could do about it.

Robin and Guy were on the stairs, a few steps higher than the gathered crowd of servants, and Robin began to speak.

"I won't lie to you, the danger is great. If that army succeed in entering the castle, they won't have mercy on anyone, they will kill us all."

The women looked at each other, in fear, and they all began to speak at once.

"Please, listen to me!" Robin said, trying to get their attention again, but they didn't listen, too panicked to pay attention to him.

"Shut up everyone or the army will be the last of your worries!" Guy roared, and the women closed their mouths instantly, terrified. Gisborne turned to look at Robin with a complacent smile and made a gesture with his hand as to say that he could go on speaking.

Robin nodded at him, and he turned back to the crowd of women.

"As I said, the danger is great, but we won't give up. We can fight back, defend ourselves, and we will. To do this we will need your help."

"What help could we give you?" The cook asked. "We are just women. Servants."

"It doesn't matter. Guy?" Robin looked at Gisborne, and the knight nodded back. "Please, listen to Gisborne, he will explain how you can help."

Another murmur spread through the crowd, but they didn't dare to express their doubts in a louder voice.

Gisborne cleared his voice, and he began to speak, uncertain at first, but becoming more sure at every word he uttered.

"It's true: you are women," he said, looking at them, "but the bravest person I know is also a woman. Maybe you think that you can't do anything to help us protecting the castle, but it isn't true: your help will be significant, it could make the difference and save all of our lives."

A young kitchen girl gathered all her courage to reply.

"Sir Guy? What could we do? We don't know how to use a sword or a bow..."

"Can you cook? Are you capable of boiling water?"

"Yes, but..."

Guy pointed a finger at her.

"That's what we need. You will take all the big pots that you have, and you will bring them on the walls, along with all the necessary to make a fire. You'll boil water, and oil, and you'll take care that they keep boiling. Then, if the enemy soldiers try to enter the castle, you will pour them on their heads."

The women looked at him, surprised, then they began to nod, to approve his idea, glad that there was something that they could do.

“Much will show you where to set the fires and how to pour the boiling liquid on the enemies,” Robin said.

“What about our children? We can’t leave them alone!” One of the women asked, her eyes full of tears.

“And I have an elderly father, he doesn’t have the strength to fight...”

“We’ll hide them in the cellars,” Guy said, after thinking for a moment, “The walls are strong, and the doors are made of solid wood, if they barricade them from the inside, pushing barrels and bags of grain against them, it would be difficult for the soldiers to open them. The elderly ones can look after the children.”

Robin agreed.

“Do it. And make sure that they have water and food so they can survive for some days, if necessary. As soon as they are safe, set the fires and begin boiling water and oil.”

Allan woke up with Marian shaking him.

“Oy! What’s up?” He asked, sleepily.

“Allan, wake up! Where is Guy?!”

He sat up in the bed, looking around and yawning.

“Isn’t he here?”

“If he were, I wouldn’t be asking you!”

Allan looked at her.

“Why should I know? I was sleeping. Maybe he needed the privy.”

“That’s what I thought when I woke up and I didn’t see him, but he didn’t come back. And he took his sword! Why should he take his sword to use the privy?”

Allan shrugged.

“In a inn like this one, I’d take the sword to go anywhere.”

“However he’s been away for too long, get up and let’s go searching for him.”

Allan nodded, and he hurried to get ready. He was beginning to worry a little, because it was strange that Gisborne got up without waking him too. At the castle there was no way to keep sleeping if Guy was awake.

They went downstairs, and Marian hurried straight for the stables.

“His horse is not here!” She exclaimed, and Allan rushed to reach her, now really worried.

They went back inside the inn, and the host gave a piece of parchment to Marian.

“Your friend paid for your room, and he left this for you.”

The girls grabbed the message from the man’s hands, and she hurried to open it.

Allan got closer, trying to look over her shoulder.

“What does it say?”

Marian’s face became pale.

“He’s gone back to Nottingham to help Robin...”

“What?! Is he mad?!”

The girl crumpled up the parchment in her hand, as if she wanted to make it disappear.

“We must run after him!”

Allan turned to the host.

“When did he leave?”

“In the middle of the night. Silly thing to do, if I have to be honest, but who am I to judge my customers?”

Allan turned to look at Marian, serious for once.

“Marian, I don’t think that we can reach him in time. He’ll be already in Nottingham by now.”

The girl shook her head.

“We can let him go there. He’ll die!”

Allan grabbed her arms, and looked at her.

“He will die if we try to follow him. If we want to save him, the only thing we can do is to go to talk to Prince John and persuade him to stop the attack to Nottingham. Giz and Robin together will fight with all their energies, and they will try to hold the town for as long as they can. If we hurry, we might make it in time.”

Marian nodded, wanting to believe him. She felt almost stunned, and she couldn’t believe that Guy had left her to go to risk his life to help Robin.

I was right, he’s a good man... But now I wish he wasn’t!

She shuddered, feeling cold as if they were in the middle of winter, and she thought that she just wanted to sit in a corner, alone, and cry all her tears, to weep until she would fall asleep, but she couldn’t.

If there was even a single hope to save Guy and Robin, they had to try, they had to run to London and get Prince John’s approval to save Nottingham.

Marian looked at the crumpled parchment and straightened it, thinking that maybe those were the last words that Guy would ever address to her. She couldn’t accept it and she wondered why it was so much harder to think that Guy could die than it had been to leave Robin to defend the city, just a few hours ago.

Do I love him?

Marian didn’t dare to answer to her own question, and she cowardly said to herself, that now she had no time to search for an answer, they couldn’t afford to lose time.

She looked at the parchment for a last time, then she folded it and she put her under her jacket, close to her heart.

“Allan! Saddle the horses! We have to go!”

Robin sat near one of the fires that had been prepared on the walls of the castle, to rest for a moment. Gisborne was there too, sitting on the floor, with his back leaning on the wall and his eyes closed. Neither of them had slept during the night, and they had spent the day improving the defenses of the castles, and keeping the army at bay, whenever the soldiers tried to attack the castle and to get closer to the gates.

For now, the soldiers were working hard to replace the destroyed battering rams, and they just tried a few sporadic attacks, just to force them to stay always on guard.

All the able men were on the walls, using bows to aim at the soldiers, while some of the women and the older kids who didn’t hide in the cellars with the younger children searched and collected the enemy’s arrows, bringing them to the archers. The more skilled ones worked to make new arrows, carving wood and melting metal objects to create arrowheads. Robin held his hands to the fire, taking in its warmth. The weather wasn’t cold, but he was exhausted, and he didn’t remember the last time he had eaten something.

He glanced at Guy, and he guessed that it was the same for him too.

“You’re a fool, but I’m glad that you are here,” he said in a low voice, thinking that Gisborne was asleep, but the knight stirred and opened his eyes.

“I thought we had already agreed that we are both fools,” he mumbled, and Robin grinned.

“We are, we are, no doubts about it.”

“They have been cutting trees all days. Soon they will be able to replace the battering rams. Do you think that we could try another sortie?”

Robin shook his head.

"No, I don't think so. You took them by surprise, but now they'll be alert, they would kill us before we can get near their camp."

Guy sighed.

"I thought so. The time to fight is coming, then."

"Yes, my friend."

They were silent for a moment.

"I would have never expected to die at your side, Hood," Guy said, with a low laughter. "The sheriff would say that I deserved it for being a sentimental idiot."

"The sheriff is dead, we are still alive. Maybe we are two sentimental idiots, but for now we still have an advantage over him."

"Master!" Much arrived, carrying a blanket and a basket. "You should rest for a while until you can. Keep your strength." The outlaw hesitated, giving an uneasy glance at Guy. "You too, Gisborne."

Robin took the basket from his hands, grabbed a loaf of bread, breaking it in two and giving half of it to Guy, then he shared the rest of the food, some cold meat and a few pieces of cheese, with him.

"Thank you, Much. We both needed it," Robin said, with a grateful smile, and Guy gruffly mumbled his thanks too.

"Eat and try to sleep, I'll keep watch, and I'll wake you up if they try anything," Much said, nervous and afraid, but trying to be brave.

Sir Edward's ghost looked at Robin and Guy too.

"Much is right, Robin. I can see how tired you are. Sleep and get some rest, I will keep watch too."

"Very well, we know that we can trust you," Robin said, answering to both Much and Sir Edward.

Satisfied to see that Robin had appreciated his help, Much went away, and Sir Edward vanished too.

"This might be our last meal," Guy said, and Robin rolled his eyes.

"Always the optimistic one, aren't you? Well, if you are right, we might as well enjoy it."

Guy nodded with a grin, and they ate, savouring that simple food as if it had been a nuptial banquet.

Ironically, Guy thought, that could have been his nuptial banquet.

At least, if he was going to die, he'd have the consolation of having married Marian, the love of his life, even if his dreams had turned to be so different from reality.

I stole that from them, at least. He thought, proudly, then he glanced at Robin and he felt saddened for him. *I stole that from him, too.*

Robin drank some wine from the flask, and he passed it to Guy, then he grabbed the blanket.

"I'm afraid we had to share this too."

Guy shrugged.

"Not a problem for me. I slept in worse conditions when I was traveling with Isabella."

Robin nodded, he had seen the memories of those terrible years in Guy's mind.

"Why did you never make contact with her after her wedding?"

"I wrote her in the beginning, but she never answered. I thought that she was still angry at me for marrying her off. I should have insisted, maybe I should have gone to Shrewsbury to see her, but then, working for Vaisey, it was better not to have a family."

Robin stretched on the floor, next to him, and he pulled the blanket over both of them.

"You should search for her."

“If we survive, I will.”

“We have another reason to survive, then. I’m curious to see how little Isabella grew up. She was a nice child. Nicer than you at least.”

Guy chuckled.

“Very funny Hood. Now shut up, I want to sleep.”

“They’re coming! They’re coming! Master! Gisborne! They’re coming!”

Guy woke up at the sound of Much’s voice, and he found himself crushed by Robin’s weight. The outlaw had rolled on his side, and he was hugging him in his sleep, snoring loudly.

Gisborne pushed him aside, shaking him to wake him up.

“Hood! Hood! Your friend is calling us! They’re coming!”

They both got up in a moment, and they ran to the edge of the walls to look at the attackers: the soldier were carrying the new battering ram near the gate.

“So this is it,” Guy said, looking at the soldiers with horrified fascination, “I had hoped that it would take longer to replace the battering rams...”

“We have to hold them back for as long as possible. The more we resist, more chances the children in the cellars have to survive.”

Guy nodded and he took a bow. Robin looked at the weapon, lifting an eyebrow.

“That is one of ours...”

“We confiscated them from one of the inhabitants of Locksley last year. The sheriff wanted to torture him for making weapons for you, but you set him free. We kept the bows, however: they are good weapons.”

Guy aimed to one of the soldiers who were pushing the battering ram, and his arrow hit him in a leg, while Robin shot another man. The other soldiers hurried to retreat, to get out of shooting range.

Robin let out a surprised whistle.

“Nice shot!” He said, impressed, looking at Guy. “Once you were terrible.”

“I was terrible until a few days ago. I’m making good use of your memories. I could still improve a lot by training, but your experience helped.”

Robin laughed, amused.

“Well, Gisborne, I thought that you were too proud to take archery lessons from me.”

Guy shrugged.

“I found out that pride is often overrated.”

Robin gave a friendly pat on his shoulder.

“Well, now I’m surely glad of it. Let’s keep them away from the gates.”

The soldier came back, using shields as a cover, and eventually they managed to slam the battering ram against the gate, while other soldiers, armed with bows, shot at the walls, trying to hit Robin, Guy, and the other archers of the castle.

“We can’t keep the walls,” Robin said, ducking to avoid an arrow. “Much! Take the archers in front of the gates and form some rows! Women, now it’s the moment to use the oil! When your pots are empty, take cover inside the castle! Gisborne, with me!”

Robin ran down the stairs, and Guy followed him.

“Do you have a plan?” Guy asked, hoping that Robin had one of his crazy ideas.

“Not really. We’ll be a backup for Much and the archers. They are untrained, they can shot their arrows in the group of enemies and hope to hit somebody, but you and I can put each of our arrows to a good use. We’ll keep our position for as long as we can, and then we’ll retreat inside the castle too, putting barricades on their way. We can’t stop them, but we must slow

them down.”

Guy nodded, and he took his position, holding his bow. He didn't have many arrows left in his quiver, but he was determined not to waste any of them.

The battering ram hit the door again, and Guy looked at it, scared. The gate held, but it wouldn't last much.

I am going to die, he thought, terrified, and for a moment he regretted coming back. He could have been with Marian, safe and far away from Nottingham. From his position, Robin nodded at him, to signal him to be ready, and Guy recovered his courage. The peasants, lined up in front of the gates, looked at him, Robin, and Much, waiting for their orders.

Robin trusts me. Those people rely on us, they put their lives in our hands, and they follow us. They were surely scared, they had no training at all, but still they were ready to fight for their lives and their families.

The women poured the last of their boiling liquids on the attackers, and then they ran to take cover inside the castle. One of the girls cried, hit by an arrow, and she fell from the walls, landing on the courtyard, where she lied dead.

Everyone looked at her, in horror, and the men began to lose heart. They realized that they could easily die too, and some of them began to look at the entrance of the castle, pondering if they could make it inside, to take refuge with the women, or even with the children in the cellars.

Robin realized that in a few moments they could panic and run away, and he stepped in front of the gates, to reach the body of the dead woman.

The gates trembled again under the battering ram, menacing to give way, but Robin ignored the danger. He respectfully lifted the dead woman in his arms.

“This woman gave her own life to defend Nottingham! She was just one of the humblest maids of the castle, but she died like a hero. Her efforts, and the efforts of the other women, stopped many enemies, the risks they faced helped to delay the enemy and protect our town! Our families! Pay respect to her and don't let her sacrifice to be vain!”

The men hesitated at Robin's words, uncertain if they should run or if they should stay and fight.

Guy left his position to reach Robin in front of the gates, he unsheathed his sword, and he knelt in front of him and of the dead woman, facing the archers too.

“My sword is at your service. I have done wrong in the past, but now I am ready to give my life to protect this town. Will you follow me?” Guy looked at Robin, and stood up. “Will you follow us?!”

“I will!” Much cried, holding his bow, and soon the others joined their voices to his, finding their courage again.

Guy helped Robin to carry the dead woman aside, resting her body in a protected corner of the courtyard, then Gisborne covered her with his cloak, respectfully, before going back to his position.

The battering ram hit the gate for one last time, and the wooden door shattered. A moment later the soldiers began swarming into the courtyard.

“For Nottingham!” Guy cried, then he pulled the rope of his bow, and released an arrow, hitting a man. Robin did the same from the other side of the courtyard and a moment later even the first line of the peasants shot their arrows and moved from their position to allow the second line to shoot again. The men lined up again in the back of the formation, and got ready to shoot another arrow.

Many of the soldiers fell, but there were many other ready to take their place, and soon the archers began to run short of arrows.

Robin gave the order to retreat, and the men ran into the castle while he and Guy covered their back.

They had few arrows left too, and Robin shot the last one, unsheathing his sword and glancing back to see if the men were all safe. A moment later Guy joined him, and they fought together to stave off the attacking soldiers.

A man attacked Robin from behind, and he would have killed him, but Guy pushed Robin away, parrying the blow with his sword. The blade of the enemy broke against Guy's sword, and a piece of metal hit Guy on the forehead, cutting his skin and making him bleed.

The sudden pain made him stagger, and the blood blinded him, but Robin grabbed his arm, pulling him away from the path of another blow.

"Run!" Robin cried, leading him towards the castle, and Guy followed him, stumbling, still unable to see. The door closed a moment after they entered the castle, and the men hurried to pile furniture and barrels in front of it, to bar it from the inside.

Robin pulled Guy aside, worried.

"You're wounded!"

"It's nothing, just a scratch. But I have blood in my eyes."

Robin untied the scarf he had around his neck, and he used it to clean the blood from Guy's face, then he pressed it on the wound, to staunch the flow.

"Better?"

Guy nodded.

"Yes, thank you."

"You are right, it's not deep, but it bleeds a lot. Maybe you'll need stitches." Robin continued, moving the wad from the wound to look at it, and then pressing it again.

"Told you, it's nothing." Guy said, smirking.

"You saved my life."

"And you saved mine just a moment later. So?"

Robin grinned.

"So are we even again, my friend?"

"Of course we are. And I guess that we'll die at the same moment too. Very soon, I'm afraid," Guy said, as they heard Prince John's soldiers slamming the battering ram against the door of the castle.

Robin looked at the door: it had been strong, made of solid wood, but now the wood was old and frail after years of negligence, and it surely wouldn't last long.

"I fear that you're right again, Gisborne. I hate when you do."

Another slam.

The door cracked, but still held. Robin and Guy knew that the next blow of the battering ram would probably be the last one.

Guy tightened his hold on the sword, and glanced at Robin.

"So this is the end..."

"For you and me both, my friend."

"At least she's alive, and safe."

Robin nodded.

"Let's protect this people till the end, Guy. We will die knowing that we did everything we could."

"I'm proud to die at your side, Hood."

"See? Me too, we're even once again."

They waited, ready to fight, but the battering ram didn't hit again.

After a while, Guy and Robin shared a questioning look, not daring to break the silence, and

they both winced when Sir Edward's ghost appeared in front of them.

"What's happening?!" Robin asked. "Why aren't they coming?"

"They are withdrawing!" The ghost answered. "They are going away!"

"Why?" Guy asked, afraid to get his hopes up.

The ghost flickered for a moment, and he came back, smiling.

"There's another army! And Marian and Allan are with them!"

"Maybe they got an agreement with Prince John!" Guy said, but Robin wasn't sure of it.

"It's too early. If he was traveling south, they couldn't have reached him so soon. Come, Gisborne, let's go and see what's going on. Much, stay with the men."

"It might be a trap, Master! I'm coming with you!"

"No. If it's a trap and something happens to us, you must lead the men and keep defending the castle."

Robin opened the door, and he and Guy sneaked out of the castle, climbing the stairs that lead on the walls to look down. Prince John's army was really going away, and a smaller group of soldiers was heading towards the town.

Robin looked at those soldiers, dumbfounded, and Guy gave an uneasy glance at him.

"What's up, Hood? Who are those men?"

"Look at their flags! That's King Richard's coat of arms! The King came back to England!"

Robin smiled: finally the King was back, and he would bring justice with him!

The outlaw hurried to go back to the courtyard to wait for his arrival, and Guy followed him, in silence. Robin turned to look at the knight, and noticed that Guy was very pale.

He realized that he had to be worried of being accused as a traitor, and he hurried to reassure him.

"Don't worry, the Sheriff was the only one who knew about the Holy Land, and he's dead. I'm not going to tell, I swear. Your secret is safe."

Guy nodded weakly.

"Thank you," he said, swaying a little, and Robin hurried to support him.

"Guy?"

"I feel faint."

"Too many emotions, I guess, and the loss of blood. Rest for a while, and you'll feel better."

Robin helped him to lie down on the floor of the courtyard, cradling his head, and pushing once again a wad on the bleeding wound on his forehead.

"Here. Be quiet now, recover your energies."

Guy smiled at him, tired. Now that all the tension of the impending fight had dissolved, he felt exhausted.

"Go on, Hood. Go and meet your King, you've waited him for so long... I'll be fine."

Robin shook his head and patted his chest with his free hand, affectionately.

"The King can wait."

Chapter End Notes

So, next chapter will be the last. As usual this story turned out longer than I thought, but it's almost complete! Not in time for Halloween as I thought, but just a month late :D
The coming of the King is not historically accurate, let's say that this is an alternate

universe where the King came back straight to England without being captured and held hostage (this happens in some of the Robin Hood legends too :D)

Nicer Than You

Marian ran into the courtyard, followed by Allan.

The King was arriving, taking his time to reach the gates of the town, but she couldn't wait. She passed through the broken gate, and she stopped in horror: Guy was lying to the ground, terribly still and pale, with his face covered in blood. Robin was kneeling next to him, holding him with care.

He's dead. The King is coming, Robin wouldn't stay here with Guy if he weren't dead or dying.

Allan stopped at her side, and Marian glanced at him, as to ask for help, but the young man looked to be just as scared and worried as she was.

She was afraid to move and find out that he was really dead, and in that moment she realized that she couldn't stand such a pain, that her heart would surely break.

With a cry, she began to run, dropping on her knees at Guy's side.

"Guy! Don't dare to die, you idiot! If you got yourself killed, I'll never forgive you!" She cried, beginning to sob. Robin looked at her, his look half sad and half amused.

"So you really fell in love with him, didn't you?" He said, and the girl looked at him, startled. She knew that she was meant to be in love with Robin, that she had always thought that she was going to marry him, but now all that mattered to her was that Guy could be dead and that, if he was, the whole world would look like a barren desert to her, a world turned to ash.

"I do! Forgive me Robin, I think I do!" She sobbed.

Robin took her hand, gently, and he placed it on the wad on Guy's forehead.

"Well, take care of your husband, then. Probably he'll need a few stitches, but he's fine. He fainted like a girl, but he received no serious harm."

Marian looked better at Guy, and she realized that Robin was right: his skin was warm, he was breathing steadily, and all the blood on his face came from that little cut on his forehead. She breathed a sigh of relief seeing that he was just asleep, then she glared at Robin, recalling his words.

"What do you mean that he fainted like a girl? Do you think that girls can't be brave?!"

Robin glanced at the body of the dead servant, still lying where they had put her, covered by Guy's cloak, and he turned back to Marian, serious.

"Today I had the demonstration that they can be as brave as any men. Without the women of Nottingham, probably you would have found us all dead." Robin smiled, looking at Guy.

"And he has been brave, today. Very. Like any girl." Robin laughed and stood up. "Forgive me, now, I have to go and meet the King. By the way, how did you find him in time?"

Allan had been looking at the other three, astonished to see that Guy was alive, that Marian had eventually confessed her feelings for him, and that Robin accepted her words so easily, without getting mad at neither of them. Actually, he looked to have grown quite fond of Guy since the last time he had met him.

"Robin," Allan said, seeing that Marian was too overwhelmed by her emotions to answer coherently to his question, "we had been very lucky, actually, but it was also thanks to you."

"What do you mean?"

"Your pigeon. The one carrying a message. The king received it on the ship, while he was about to land, and so he knew that the sheriff and Prince John were plotting against him to take his throne. So, fearing an ambush, he landed in one of the ports in the north instead than

in the south. He was traveling to reach London when we met him, and Marian managed to inform him about Nottingham.”

Robin thought that it was almost a miracle and that they were all very lucky to be alive, then he walked away, reaching King Richard. He had to talk with him, to explain what happened to the sheriff and why he had been outlawed.

He sighed, thinking of Marian, but he had learned to understand when a battle was lost, and Robin knew that he had been defeated. Surprisingly, it didn't hurt as much as he had expected.

Guy woke up feeling a wet touch on his face.

“Marian?” He mumbled, before opening his eyes, and he heard a soft chuckle.

“That girl can be sure of your love!” Matilda said, and Guy looked at the healer. “Well, you're awake at last.”

Gisborne looked around: he was in his room at the castle, lying in his bed. Somebody had undressed him while he was unconscious, he was wearing a warm, clean nightgown, and he had a bandage on his head.

“What happened?”

The healer finished cleaning his face from the last traces of blood, and she smiled.

“You've been wounded while you and Robin were defending the castle. I've heard that you've both been heroic, I didn't expect it from you.”

“Well, thank you so much,” Guy said, ironically.

“Come on, don't be touchy, now. Just be glad that you survived, and that lady Marian cares so much for you.”

“Marian? Is she here?!”

“She is, and I had to fight to send her out of the room so I could examine and treat you. I think that she's just out of the door, anxiously waiting to see you. I heard that she got quite a scare in seeing you lying to the ground, full of blood. Hey! What are you doing?” The healer exclaimed, seeing that Guy was trying to get up from bed.

“I need to see her!”

Matilda stopped him, putting her hand on his shoulders and pushing him, so that he was forced to lie down again.

“Not so fast, my boy. You will see her, but you won't get up yet. That wound is just a scratch, but it bled a lot, and you overexerted yourself. Stay there and I'll let her in.”

Matilda opened the door, and Marian rushed into the room. She looked at Guy, who was sitting in bed and looking at her, and she spoke to Matilda, her voice choked with emotion.

“Don't go too far, because you might need to stitch him again. I think I'm going to kill him.”

Matilda chuckled and she left them alone.

“Marian...” Guy called her, and the girl rushed near the bed, furious.

“You... You... Utter fool! Leaving in the night, like a thief! Running away from us... to get killed!”

Gisborne stared at her, surprised to see tears in her eyes, and he smiled at her, softly.

“I'm here. Alive.”

The girl sat on the edge of the bed, grabbing the fabric of his nightgown with a hand, and punching his shoulder with the other.

“Alive by miracle, you idiot! If you had died, I... I...”

Her voice broke, and she buried her face in his chest, bursting into a fit of sobs.

Guy took her in his arms, trying to comfort her, amazed to realize that she was crying for him.

“Marian? Please don’t cry... It’s all right. I had to come back, I couldn’t live with myself if I had ran away leaving everyone else to die, but I am alive, most of the inhabitants of Nottingham survived, and Robin is unscathed too, we can thank God for this. God... and the King.”

Guy blushed to think that the king whom he had almost killed now had saved his life, and he averted his eyes from her, in shame.

Marian sniffled, snuggling against his chest to find comfort in the warmth of his body. She was calmer now that she could hug him, now that she could hear his heartbeat, steady and strong.

After a while she parted a little from him, to lift her head and search for his gaze.

“Never run away from me again. Never. Promise that you won’t.”

Gisborne caressed her face, tenderly, a sad look in his eyes.

“I can’t.”

Marian frowned.

“Why not?”

“You can’t ask me to stay when our marriage will be nullified, and you will marry Robin.

He... he is a friend now, and I won’t resent him, nor you. But I think that I’ll need some time to accept that I’m going to lose you. I can’t force you to love me, but please, let me go.”

“No. I forbid it, you don’t have to go away. Now promise.”

“Marian, please. It would be a torture for me to stay here if you don’t love me. I can’t...”

Marian put her hands at the sides of his face, to force him to look at her.

“Do you love me?” She asked, serious.

“I will always love you, Marian.”

“Then stay.”

“I can’t...”

“Guy!” She interrupted him. “Are you dumb or what?!”

He frowned.

“Why?”

“Do I really have to say it? I’m asking you to stay because I love you too, you idiot!”

“What? Really?”

He stared at her, in complete shock, and Marian didn’t know if she should laugh or hit him. She shook her head with a sigh.

“Really.” She confirmed, and she kissed him.

A month later.

Robin yawned, looking at the pile of parchments piled on the table. A soft knock at the door announced the entrance of Gisborne, and Robin noticed with dismay that the knight was carrying another bunch of scrolls.

“My lord sheriff,” Guy greeted him, standing in front of the table and dropping the parchments on it.

“Oh, stop it, Gisborne. Don’t go all formal with me now. I know that you do it just to annoy me.”

Guy grinned.

“Come on, Robin, I know that you love having me at your orders.”

“Be careful or I could order you to clean the stables.”

“It would still be better than what Vaisey ordered me to do. And then again it might be preferable than helping you with this stuff.” Guy gestured at the table, and Robin sighed.

"I never thought that there would be so much paperwork when I accepted to be the new sheriff."

"You wouldn't have refused anyways, since it was the king asking."

"You didn't refuse to be my Master of Arms, either."

Guy shrugged.

"Say what, Hood, I'm used to this job. And now that you got Locksley back, I need to live at the castle."

Robin grinned.

"Just until Knighton Hall is rebuilt."

Guy smiled.

"I'm trying to have it done exactly as it was. Your man, Will, is a good carpenter, he's doing a good job."

"Told you. Now let's get to work, shall we?"

Guy sat at the table with a sigh, and he took a parchment.

"You said that we need to lower the taxes on plowing, but then we won't have the funds we need to strengthen the walls, and you know that it's necessary. Maybe we should raise a little the tax on the mills, instead?"

"No way. The mills can't be taxed more than they already are."

"But you must get money from the people. I know that you want to help them all, but you can't hope to abolish taxes at all."

"I know, I know," Robin sighed. "Sir Edward?"

The ghost appeared.

"Robin, someday you'll have to do without my advice. I taught you everything I could about my experience as sheriff, but I won't stay here forever. I think that it's time for me to move beyond."

Guy looked at him, sadly.

"I will miss you, Sir Edward. I wish that I had met you before Vaisey, my life would have been so different..."

"Someday we will meet again, I'm sure of it. If I can find them, I'll tell your parents that they can be proud of you."

Gisborne looked at the ghost for a moment, then he put the roll of parchment back on the table.

"This can wait, Hood. We will find a solution, I'm sure, but now I think that it's time for Marian to know the truth."

"Are you going to tell her that you can see Sir Edward's ghost? She'll think that you are mad."

"I have an idea. Come."

Somebody knocked at the door, and Marian appeared on the threshold.

"Hi Robin, sorry to disturb you, but I need Guy. Will wants to talk to you about the manor."

"He can wait," Guy said, "come inside and close the door. I was about to come to search for you: there's something I need to tell you."

The girl looked at him, worried.

"What?"

"It's hard to explain, but I think that I could show you. Give me your hand," Guy said, taking her fingers, then he turned to a empty corner of the room, "and you take my other hand."

Marian frowned, seeing that Guy was holding his hand to the empty air.

"Guy? Who are you talking to?"

"I can't Sir Guy, if I touch you, you'll be ill again!" Edward said.

"I'm not sure of it. Last time you were angered, I think that's what had hurt me. Allan sat through you, and he didn't even notice. And even if I should be ill again, I don't care. It's worth the risk. She needs to know."

"Guy? Now you are worrying me..." Marian said, seeing that Gisborne was trying to grab something at his side, then she let out a little cry when she felt a tingling sensation where Guy was touching her. She lifted her gaze on him, and she widened her eyes in surprise: her father was standing at Guy's side and Gisborne was grabbing the wrist of the ghost.

"Father..."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"Father, it's really you? Am I dreaming?"

"No you are not," Robin answered for him. "We'll explain everything later."

Sir Edward gently freed himself from Guy's hold. Gisborne swayed a little, and he leaned on the table for support.

"Are you alright, Sir Guy?"

"A little dizzy, but not ill like the other time," Guy answered, then he glanced at Marian.

"Can you still see him, now?"

The girl nodded, still too shocked to reply.

"Good. Hood, let's go, they need to talk. And I think I need to lie down for a moment."

Robin hurried to stand up, and he walked at Gisborne's side to support the knight and help him out of the room. On the threshold, they both stopped to look at the ghost for a last time.

"Farewell, Sir Edward," Robin said, with a little bow.

The ghost smiled at them.

"Goodbye Robin. Sir Guy, I can't express how grateful I am. You fulfilled your promise: you protected her, you comforted her, you love her, and you are making her happy, and now you are giving us the chance to talk for a last time. Thank you, I would be proud to have a son like you."

"It has been a honor, my lord." Guy put a hand on his heart, and he and Robin went out of the room.

Allan walked into the porch, and he noticed Guy and Robin sitting on the stone bench where he often liked to doze when the weather was warm enough. Actually, Robin was sitting, while Guy was stretched on his back, with his eyes closed.

"What happened to him?" Allan asked, a little worried.

"He touched Sir Edward's ghost to allow Marian to see him."

Allan touched Guy's hand, and he was relieved to feel that it was warm.

"How are you feeling, Giz?"

"Fine. Just a little tired."

"Good," he said, dropping himself on the bench near Robin. "So now she knows. Do you think that she'll be mad at you for keeping the secret till now?"

Guy opened his eyes to glance at Robin, and they both let out an identical little sigh.

"Guess so," Robin said, "but she'll forgive us. She loves him, and well, she can't be mad at the Sheriff of Nottingham, can she?"

A Year Later

The hall of the castle was full of guests, who had come to celebrate the birth of Sir Guy of Gisborne and Lady Marian's first son, Edward. Robin held the child in his arms for a while, smiling, then he gave him back to Marian.

"You're lucky, he looks more like you than like his father."

"Very funny, Hood," Guy said, but he smiled at his friend, offering him another cup of wine.

"At least you aren't going to abandon this one in the woods, are you Giz?" Allan said, and Marian glared at him, while Guy blushed.

"Of course I won't! And I apologized to Annie as well. She agreed to avoid trying to kill me on sight, when I guaranteed that I'll provide for Seth."

Robin grinned, lifting his cup again in another toast.

"I guess that I'll have to ask Will to make a toy bow for little Edward too, as he did for Seth a few years ago."

Guy rolled his eyes.

"I hope that my son won't become as cheeky as you. I'm afraid you'll be a bad example for him."

Robin put an arm around his neck, and pulled him in a sort of hug.

"Come on, Gisborne, don't disrespect your sheriff! And then I know that you love me."

"Get off me, Hood!" Guy said, pushing him away, but they lost their balance, and they both crashed to the floor, laughing.

Marian shook her head at them, lulling the baby in her arms.

"Boys, I think you both need to stop drinking and to get some fresh air before you disgrace yourselves in front of the other nobles."

Guy gave her a repentant smile, and he stood up, offering a hand to Robin to help him to his feet.

"I guess that Marian is right. Come?"

Robin followed him, muttering that it wasn't right that the Sheriff was being sent out of his own castle.

They went outside, in the courtyard, and they sat on the bench, under the tree.

Gisborne stared at the full moon as he spoke, without looking at Robin.

"You're a better man than I'd ever be, Hood."

"I know," Robin said, with a grin, "no need to remind it to me."

"I'm serious, Robin."

"I think that you're drunk, but let's hear: why should I be a better man than you?"

"You should hate me. I took the woman you loved, and now we have a child. It could have been your son... I don't know if I could stand it, but you do, and you keep being the best friend I ever had."

Robin put a hand on his shoulder, smiling.

"Yes, you're drunk and I'm sure that tomorrow you'll deny saying those words. But it doesn't matter. The truth is that I'm happy for you. Losing Marian had been painful in the beginning, but not as much as it should have been. She's happy with you, everyone can see it, I don't know if I would have been able to give her the same happiness."

"Don't you feel lonely? You should have a family too."

Robin shook his head.

"The life of a Sheriff is too busy to feel lonely. And *I have* a family: you, Marian, the gang..." He realized that he was talking to himself because Gisborne had fallen asleep, leaning on his shoulder.

Robin smiled, then he thought that a nap could be a good idea for him too, and he closed his eyes, still smiling.

The captain of the guards came to wake them up at dawn.

"My lord sheriff?" The man called, hesitant. "Sir Guy? I'm sorry to disturb you, but your presence is needed."

Robin stood up, yawning. He felt sore, his head ached and he was a little ashamed for getting drunk. A glance at Gisborne revealed that the knight wasn't feeling much better.

"What's up?"

"An unexpected guest arrived at the castle, my lord. She asked to see the sheriff."

"She?"

"It's a lady from Shrewsbury, a widow."

"Did she say what she wants from the Sheriff of Nottingham?"

"No, my lord."

Robin sighed.

"I'm coming. Gisborne?"

Guy stretched his back.

"Go ahead, I'll reach you in a moment. I need to see Marian: she'll surely reproach us for getting drunk, I must at least let her know that I am still alive and that I was with you, or there will be hell to pay."

Robin chuckled.

"See? The advantages of freedom. Go, I'll wait for you in the hall."

Robin arrived into the great hall and he looked down from the balcony to look at the woman who was sitting in front of the fire with two little girls huddled at her sides: she had long, dark curly hair, and a black dress that made her skin look very pale. The girls were very young and they seemed to be afraid, grabbing their mother's gown with their tiny hands.

Robin walked down the stairs to reach them.

"Good morning, my lady. How can I be of service to you?"

The woman looked at him, unconsciously wrinkling her nose a little, and Robin thought that maybe he should have followed Gisborne's example and make her wait for a little time to make himself a little more presentable.

"Are you the Sheriff?"

"In the flesh. And you are?"

"Lady Thornton. My husband died recently."

"My condolences."

The woman's face hardened.

"He deserves to rot in hell. And his family isn't any better. As soon as he died, they sent us away, taking our home and lands and saying that we have no rights over them because I didn't have a male heir."

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid that I don't have a solution for your troubles. Shrewsbury is not in Nottingham's County, I have no authority there."

"I don't want those stinking lands back, nor going back to that horrible place ever again."

Robin looked at her, puzzled, but intrigued: she was a handsome woman and he couldn't help thinking that she reminded him of somebody he knew.

Who? Marian maybe? For sure she's spirited like her.

"What can I do for you, then?"

"I have a brother in Nottingham, you can help me to contact him. I'm not sure if I really want to see him, he ruined my life giving me to a cruel husband, and then he just disappeared for many years. Last year, though, I got a letter from him. I didn't know what to think, and I wondered why he wanted to get in touch with me all of a sudden. I never replied, but now I thought that I could check if he is really as sorry as he claimed to be in the letter, and if he is willing to give us his protection."

Robin nodded.

"This is something I can do." He looked up at the balcony, noticing that Guy had just entered

the hall, now looking completely sober and professional, and a bit chastened too. “Oh, Gisborne, come to meet Lady Thornton, she needs our help to find her infamous brother.”

Guy stared at the woman, incredulous, and the lady stood up to look at him.

“Isabella!” Guy blurted, not sure if he was more happy or worried to see her.

Isabella smiled at Robin.

“Well, you are efficient, Sheriff: it seems that you just found my brother. Guy, I think that we need to talk.”

Robin nodded at her, recovering from his surprise.

“Lady Thornton, I have to see to my duties, now, but I hope that we can talk again later. You and your children will be my guests at the castle until you find a better accommodation.”

They looked at each other for a moment, then Isabella averted her eyes, blushing a little, while Robin felt his heart beating a little faster. He turned and went up the stairs while Guy was coming down, meeting him halfway.

Robin put a hand on Guy’s shoulder.

“Don’t be a stubborn idiot, just apologize to her. She’s your sister, those are your nieces, they are family,” Robin whispered to him, “you’ve been apart for too much, now try to keep them close. And by the way, I was right, as always.”

“About what?”

“She’s still much nicer than you,” he answered, grinning.

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