

Staying at the manor of Thomas of Beresford was a bitter-sweet occasion for Alyson. Still grieving after the painful encounter with her sister, she found the manor contained many echoes of her old home at Olverton. It was the same kind of house, with a great hall and solar, a small pantry and buttery, a staircase to a series of small upper rooms and the kitchens and bake-house across the yard. The furnishings were those that reminded her of her childhood: sturdy oak tables and trestles, earthenware crocks, a few faded wall-hangings. She missed the flowers that she had spread about Olverton hall, and the scents of her old still-room, but otherwise she could have wandered through this place blindfold and known where she was.

In one way however it was strange - very strange. There were no womenfolk, no maids, no lady of the manor, no laundresses or spinsters.

Her host remarked on it as he showed her to the narrow chamber that would be hers for the night. 'I had my steward put you in here, my lady; you being a lone lass among men. It was my mother's sewing room.'

'Thank you, Sir.' Alyson glanced about, taking in the fresh thatch over the window shutters, the recently re-daubed wall by the bed, the stout bar to place across the door. There was even a candle for her and a small brazier, in case the summer night turned cold. 'You have made me most welcome.'

'No, 'tis nothing for the woman who can look at me without flinching. That is a rare skill, and one none of the village maids have mastered.' He scratched uneasily at his patchy beard, ducking his head under the low roof-beams. 'I would have women here, but they do not stay. The last washer-woman to work here told me straight out before she left that I had the evil eye and would sour milk.'

'How cruel!' Indignant on his behalf, Alyson crossed the floor in two steps to lay a hand on his arm. 'That is folly, utter superstition. You must

never think it true.’

‘I am used to it. Do not let it trouble you.’ Thomas grinned, the scars on his forehead seeming to crack open afresh once more. ‘But you are as fiery as the dragon himself! Tell me, are you the wee maid who gave him that title?’

Startled, Alyson dropped her cloak on the bed. ‘I did not realize he had mentioned it.’

‘Once, only, my lady, in Outremer, when he was a lad of twenty and we were making camp before our first siege. The talk round the fire fell to those remaining at home. The other men spoke half in jest as they bragged of women bedded and left, but not Guillelm. “If I could have the girl of my liking, she would be a small, dark elf, a clever girl, with eyes the color of a rising storm. She knew and recognized me before any other,” he told us then, and he tapped the dragon on his shield.’ Thomas of Beresford regarded her closely, his battered head on one side. ‘I thought then Guillelm spoke of his ideal, but here you are, in the flesh.’

‘Please, Sir -’ Alyson knew she was blushing and fumbled with her riding gloves. She was stopped by her companion.

‘I am glad you are real, my lady.’

‘Please, call me Alyson.’

‘Then you must call me Tom, as Guillelm does.’

‘Sir - Tom,’ Alyson faltered.

‘Sir Tom will do very well.’ He peered at her in the dim light of the chamber and nodded. ‘The good thing is that you are so different from the other one.’

Alyson felt the scrape of a sudden chill across the back of her neck. ‘What other?’ she whispered.

‘Never mind, it is years past and best forgotten.’ Sir Tom squeezed her arm, his eyes very kind behind their mesh of angry scars. ‘Now we should return to the hall, or Guillelm or his miserable shadow Fulk will have something to say.’

They walked downstairs, Alyson beset with a new fear. Who was the other one? What woman had Guillelm known in Outremer that she should cast so long a shadow? ‘Who was she?’ she demanded.

‘Her name was Heloise.’

‘What was she like?’

‘Proud and blonde - but I will say no more, so do not ask.’

‘Then I will ask Guillelm.’