

MAID RIANNE

Her stance was relaxed, her feet about a shoulder's width apart. Backlit by the sun peeking through the trees, the loose leggings she wore hinted at the shape of her legs. The shapeless jacket topping them was cinched at a small waist. A bow was draped over her shoulder, and an accompanying quiver of arrows hung across her back, its sling defining curves hidden by the baggy jacket. One hand rested on a sheathed dagger hanging from the belt. In the other, she held what looked like a walking stick. She stood there, a true warrior, her sharp gaze appraising the scene, ignoring the tail-wagging, three legged dog competing for her attention.

Wow! What movie did she just walk out of? As far as Petir knew, girls from Connecticut didn't walk around armed to the teeth. Unexpectedly, this dream had just developed some serious potential.

As she stepped closer, the sunlight splashed across her face, revealing a scowl. Her black-brown hair was all but hidden under a peaked green cap. Her gaze narrowed at his open-mouthed stare. He snapped his jaw shut and began scrambling to his feet.

He barely registered the boys skirting him to stand by the warrior girl. Most of his attention was hijacked by his thigh. Shocked by the sudden onslaught of pain, he collapsed on the ground, gasping as he grabbed his leg.

Should there be this kind of agony in a dream?

"Take this, John." The girl shoved her walking stick at one of the larger boys.

"But, mistress," he protested as she handed the bow to another boy, "if 'tis indeed a trap?"

Mistress? Petir eased himself into a sitting position, trying to decide if he dared massage his injury.

"With you wielding the staff and Dale the bow, I shall be well protected." She smiled reassuringly at the boy as she unslung the quiver and passed it to the one called Dale.

John followed her back to Petir, slapping the staff against his palm. Dale hastily notched an arrow into the string and aimed it at Petir's chest.

"Hey, watch where you're pointing that thing!" cried Petir, extending his arm as if it could ward off an arrow.

"Behave, m'lord, and no harm will befall thee." John's grim tone matched his expression.

The girl dropped to her knees by Petir's side. "Where are you hurt, m'lord?" she asked, her manner brusque, but her fingers gentle as they inspected his battered cheek.

He pulled his face away. "I ... I'm not sure. Everything hurts." Although he still focused on the cocked bow shaking in the boy's grip, the rest of his attention zeroed in on her and her fresh outdoor fragrance. *Nice.*

"Were you in a fight?" She ran practiced fingers over his arm, her head lowered as she focused on her task.

Petir stopped breathing and stared at her blankly. This was different. In the last two years, the only females who ever touched him were related to him. Or cleaning his teeth. They certainly weren't cute British girls dressed up like a female Robin Hood.

A few rebellious curls escaping from her hat outlined the curve of her cheek. Oh yeah. She was cute, but it was her confidence and grace that cranked her up to *hot*. Even though it hurt when she touched him, the simple act of running her fingers along his arm was reducing him to stupid, leaving him with all the capabilities of a puddle, including a puddle's ability to hold a conversation. He had nothing to say. Absolutely nothing.

What was there to say anyway? *Come here often?*

She shifted to his collar bone. Judging by her behavior, she seemed to have no idea how her touch affected him outside of the pain she was evoking. He was fairly certain it was fortunate she was causing him to wince; otherwise, he might be embarrassing himself in front of all these kids.

"M'lord?" This time she spoke louder and slower as if talking to a simpleton. "Were you in a fight?" Her prodding fingers moved to his ribs as he grimaced.

Yeah. You should see what I did to the other guy. “No,” he managed to mutter. He didn’t want to appear to be an actual idiot, but... “I fell out of a tree.”

“Pardon, m’lord? I did not hear you.”

“I fell out of a tree, okay?” Petir’s face heated.

A moment of silence greeted his confession, followed by a burst of laughter from the boys. The girl by his side ducked her head to hide her own grin.

Embarrassed, he snapped, “And who are you supposed to be? Robin Hood and her Merry Men?”

With the boys snickering behind her, she chuckled as she reached across his body to examine the other side. “Not likely! You may address me as Maid Rianne. And your name, sir?”

“Petir. Petir Capota.”

“Ah, as in Saint Peter, one of the patron saints of travelers. He must be responsible for us coming to your aid.”

“Well, I’m P-E-T-I-R, not P-E-T-E-R.” Squirming, Petir grabbed Maid Rianne’s wrist. “Look, I really appreciate the exam and all, but it’s my leg. Okay? My leg needs help.”

Startled, her eyes swung toward his, and whoosh! All the air left his lungs.

Brown eyes.

Very brown eyes.

Very brown eyes with dark rings around them.

Very brown eyes with—

Her very brown eyes narrowed. John and Dale took an anxious step closer.

Uh oh. You think I’m coming on to you. Petir released her like she was a hot potato. *As if anyone would ever put a computer geek like me and a hottie like you in the same sentence.*

“No, honest.” He cocked his palms back in surrender. “I can’t stand. Watch!” He rolled to his side and began to repeat his previous night’s attempts, but she restrained him.

“That will not be necessary, m’lord.” She pressed him back down and assumed a position closer to his leg. Her skilled fingertips resumed their exploration.

Whoa! This is way worse. Computer jockeys hardly ever got hot babes checking out their ribs, however, they absolutely did not get them feeling up their legs. But here was this babe doing things his leg had only dreamed of.

Wish I had my cell phone so I could take a selfie. Hey there, Mistress Hottie, would you mind posing for a picture so I can prove you groped my leg?

Whoops! Her fingers drifted a little too high. *Okay, this could end up being a problem.* He needed a distraction, and he needed it fast.

Conversation. Yeah, that’s the ticket.

“Hey, you, uh, really know what you’re doing. Are you some kind of—” His attempt to chat her up ended in a yelp as she probed the site of his injury.

Maid Rianne sat back on her heels, hands at her waist, as Petir gingerly rubbed the back of his leg. She pondered the situation, her teeth tugging at her lower lip.

Females biting their lips is definitely underrated.

Sighing, she looked over her shoulder and addressed the boys. “We cannot leave him here to fend for himself. We shall have to drag him.”

Drag me?

“Fetch at least two large branches. We can lash smaller branches to them with vines.”

“But, m’lady, we canna bring him back to the camp! He might be a spy!” Dale’s brow furrowed as he shook brown hair out of his eyes, still pointing the bow at Petir.

A spy? In Connecticut? Whatever for?

“He could lead them right to us,” said a frizzy-headed blond boy with a scowl.

Lead who?

Maid Rianne faced the boys. “As to his fate, ’tis not our decision to make. We shall bring him back to the camp blindfolded and let the elders decide. Off with you.” She tilted her head toward the trees.

After a moment's hesitation, Dale lowered the bow, nodded to John, and turned toward the brush. Immediately the others scampered off in different directions, leaving John smacking the walking stick in his palm. Maid Rianne held out her hand, and John reluctantly returned the staff to her. She nodded as if to reassure him, but instead of following the others, John retreated to a nearby tree and squatted against it. From there, he seemed content to glower at Petir.

Petir cleared his throat. "I guess he kind of has a crush on you, huh?" He nodded toward her protector.

"A crush, m'lord?" Maid Rianne frowned.

"You know, he ... you know ... he likes you," Petir floundered as she looked at him. He was fairly certain they didn't use the word "crush" where she came from.

"Likes me, m'lord?" Maid Rianne furrowed her brow. "We side together for the same cause, our fight against oppression from tyrannical rulers. He merely stays to protect me should you be revealed a clever trickster."

"Clever trickster? Not me!" Petir raised his palms in a defensive gesture. "I'm not at all clever. I mean, I'm clever, but I'm no trickster."

She quirked a delicate brow.

Great eyebrows.

"Oh, really, m'lord?"

Heat rose around his neck as she studied him.

"And how is it that you come to be in these woods, with your foreign talk, and your odd clothing?" she asked.

"My foreign talk? My odd clothing?" Petir sputtered "What about you and the seven dwarfs?"

"The seven—?" She leaned back on her haunches, hands on her hips. "You would insult those who would come to your aid, sir? Perhaps we should simply be off and let the soldiers help you find your way."

"Oh, the soldiers, huh?" His voice dripped sarcasm. "You mean the ones who work for the tyrannical rulers and cause all the oppression?" Sarcasm, it turned out, helped keep the rest of him in check. "Look, I'm more than sore, and I appreciate playing bows and arrows as much as the next guy, but—"

"Playing bows and arrows?" the girl parroted, irritation sweeping her face.

"Well, yeah. You know, a girl like you, armed to the teeth—"

"A girl like me?"

She sprang to her feet, twirling the staff faster than he could follow. Her spinning staff traced an arc over her head then slammed into the ground, inches from Petir's ear. Only the floating leaves landing on his scrunched-closed eyes disturbed the silence. Petir carefully opened his eyes, ignoring the fresh aches created by his manly cringing.

She straightened gracefully after her lunge and rested the staff on her shoulder.

"A girl like me, m'lord?" She spun on her heel and stalked away.

John smirked from his position by the tree.

"Whoa!" breathed Petir. He propped himself on his bruised elbows and surveyed the dent in the ground left by the staff. *What the hell?* That could have been his head.

Maid Rianne? Ha! More like Mad Rianne. Or Maid Xena, the Warrior Princess.