

Eleanor looked out over the large, rolling green fields of the manor. From here she could see everything: the fields of wheat and barley, the rolling green pastures dotted with lazily grazing sheep and cows, the small dwellings of the peasants and their small vegetable patches. Beyond all of that, she could see the dark green of the forest, where deer and rabbits hid among the trees, and where everything smelled of pine. Among the trees, she knew the stream trickled freely, laughing musically, its own lord and master, with no one to halt its flow. She had visited the stream a few times when she was able to escape from her duties, and she could picture it very clearly in her mind. When she went there, she felt relaxed and at peace. She relished the view from the window where she stood, gazing upon the lands of the estate. Looking out over the property gave her a sense of authority, and for her that was exhilarating.

Eleanor had been in charge of the manor since her husband had left on crusade three years ago. He had been struck by the fervour that had been rampant throughout the land. He had fancied the idea of travelling to the Holy Land and reclaiming it from unbelievers. He thought that it would be a great adventure. Eleanor had not even attempted to make him stay; she knew it would have been a useless venture. Since he had gone, in addition to her usual duties of managing the cooking, brewing, spinning, and other workings of the household, the usual duties of a noblewoman, she had also had to manage the herds, the fields, and all of the other workings of the property. She had come to exercise full control over her husband's estate in his absence, and she knew that she had won the respect of all those who worked for her.

She stared out over the vast lands, lands which she now considered to be her own. Captivated by their breathtaking beauty, Eleanor wondered where her husband was now. She had not heard word of him since he had left. They had been married when she was sixteen and he was thirty-four, a

common practice among the nobility. She had given birth to four children, but only two had survived, both of them girls. Her only son had died in infancy. Suddenly, the thought of her husband not returning from the crusade entered her head and what the repercussions of this would be. As she pondered the possibilities of things beyond her control, she shivered. She did not want to think about maybes. She would rather focus on the present.

As she gazed at the horizon, she saw two men riding across the grass. Eleanor wondered who they were and what they wanted. As they came closer, she recognized them as nobles, men who had travelled with her husband. They had left with him on crusade and their presence was of concern for her. She saw them speaking with one of her servants. The servant turned, no doubt to inform her of the nobles. Although curious about their purpose, Eleanor waited for the servant to come; she did not want to seem too eager.

The servant rounded the corner of the hall. "My lady," he addressed her. "There are two noblemen, just arrived, who wish to speak with you. They say 'tis urgent."

"Tell them to wait in the parlour. I'll be down in a moment. Thank-you. You may go."

The servant left, and Eleanor made her way downstairs to receive her visitors. A few moments later, the two noblemen entered. One was Lord Purcell, equal in status to her husband and a widower whose wife had died in childbirth ten years previously. The other was not equal in position, but noble nonetheless. He was Lord Burwald. He was only in his early thirties, having recently inherited his property when his father had passed.

Lord Purcell spoke first. "It is grave news that I bring you, Lady Eleanor. I sadly must inform you that your husband, Lord Vaughan, has died, killed during a siege, three months ago. He died a death of honour and of glory, although he never made it to the Holy Land. I am honoured to have

called him my friend for many years.”

“And I am honoured to have known him, for however brief a time, and to have travelled with him. He was a great man,” said Lord Burwald.

Eleanor was shocked. She was unsure of what to say or what to do; she felt blank, like there was not an emotion to fit the situation. The news was shocking, but yet surreal. She opened her mouth to make some appropriate, yet composed, comment. However, before she could begin, Lord Purcell began to speak again.

“I know that you are in shock, Lady Eleanor. You have just received the news of the most unfortunate death of your husband, and you have just inherited this vast territory. It is quite a burden for you. Tell me, just how do you plan to manage?”

Eleanor pricked at this. She could manage just fine; she had been managing for three years. She raised her chin, and looked Lord Purcell directly in the eye. She calmly told him, “I am sure that I will get along just fine. I haven’t had any problems thus far, and I do not anticipate having any in the future.”

“I admire your confidence, although it is not always attractive in a woman. You may find that having spirit is not enough. Let me know if you need any assistance.” He smiled a smile that was half a smile and half a sneer. “Come,” he addressed Lord Burwald. “Let us leave Lady Eleanor to her grieving.”

“I’ll be along in a moment,” he replied coolly.

Lord Purcell turned on his heel and stalked out of the room. Lord Burwald took a deep breath and then looked Eleanor dead in the eye. “I’m sorry, my Lady, but I have to inform you of this. Lord Purcell believes that you are weak, that you will need a man to get by. He wants to marry you or one

of your daughters so that he can increase his property. I just felt that you should be aware of his plans, as he will be forceful since he is very determined to get what he wants.”

While he was speaking, Eleanor remembered something that she should mention if she wanted to give Lord Purcell peace of mind. “Thank-you. I am grateful to you, but you can inform Lord Purcell that I have already found a support, someone who I have been in correspondence with since my husband left three years ago and who has helped me through so far.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, who is this support that you speak of?” Lord Burwald looked at her intensely, as if he might find out a very interesting bit of gossip, such as that she had a secret lover or something of the sort.

“I have been in contact with my dear cousin, the Duke of Brittany, since my husband left for the Crusades. He has offered his advice on various issues and sent knights and messengers to check and see that everything here is well. I have full confidence that he will continue to do so.”

Lord Burwald’s face fell, but he wiped the disappointment off of his face quickly. “I am glad to hear that,” he said with mock sincerity. “I wish you well. Lord Purcell still may not think it enough, however. He may still push for marriage. I am willing to assist you in any way I can, should you need it.”

“Thank-you, Lord Burwald. Now I should like to be left alone for a while.”

Lord Burwald nodded and then he left. Eleanor watched him leave. She watched until she could no longer see his receding figure in the distance. Once certain that he was gone, she walked quickly back upstairs, brushing by any servants she saw, sending them to complete various tasks and duties. She passed her window and withdrew into her chambers, shutting the door so that no one would see her. The only thing that she desired was to be alone for a while to think.

When she turned from barring the door, she turned around and smiled to herself in satisfaction. She paced around her chambers, barely able to suppress her glee. Everything she could have possibly hoped for had come true. Despite her happiness, however, she recognized the threat of the two lords who had visited her that day. She did not trust either of the two. As she had been listening to them, she had realized that it was completely plausible that Lord Purcell wished to increase his power. However, she did not trust Lord Burwald either. As a lesser noble, she felt that he may also be looking for ways to increase his personal power and influence. He, too, may expect to marry one of her daughters in reward for his kindness. She smiled to herself again. She had completely fooled them both. She had barely heard from her cousin, the Duke, since she had left France to marry her husband. Lord Purcell and Lord Burwald had no way of knowing this though. However, from correspondence with her sister, she knew that the Duke would never visit her in England. He wasn't really one for travel. She also knew that none of the local nobility had ever seen her cousin. She could dress anyone up in a noble's clothing and pretend that it was the Duke come for a visit. Lords Purcell and Burwald would never know the difference and her freedom would be secure. She relished her new-found freedom and she took pride in her ability to manipulate those around her in order to protect herself. She did not need a man in her life to protect her, to manage her land, to be her master. She was her own master and she would never relinquish her power or independence to anyone. Eleanor was as free as the river that trickled through the woods, singing its way through the trees.