



Heart's Key

A NOVELETTE BY
STEPHANIE VAN ORMAN

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ONE

Leander did not like walking through the Spiknit Woods. It had a gross name like that because it was a gross place. He wore his armor and his helmet and walked with his knight's shield in front of him because, if he didn't, it felt like he was in the middle of the bloodiest battle he'd ever seen. Branches came out of nowhere like enemy swords.

Occasionally, he'd step in something squishy. He'd tell himself that whatever he stepped in, it was probably just a little bit of bubbling marsh. He'd look down and no, his first instinct—that he had stepped in a dead body—was correct. It was better than the dead body he would have stepped in on the field of battle because it wasn't a human corpse, but it was worse because it had been dead for quite some time. Maybe it was a deer. Maybe it was a unicorn. Maybe he should stop looking down when he stepped in something weird.

Then he watched for bear traps more carefully. What maniac had planted so many? He'd set off three and his armor was so fly that it protected him against the trap, but he still couldn't move until he dropped on his butt and pried the mechanism open with the tip of his sword. It was the weirdest when he sat on a recently deceased grizzly bear to undo the trap. The bear hadn't died from the trap. Leander didn't know what the bear had died from.

Leander wouldn't tramp through Spiknit Woods for his own amusement. The Head Wizard of his order had insisted that he answer the call for help from Castle Travista. It was part of their Lord's domain and, though the slimy woodland ensured it was not in a part of that domain that anyone cared to visit, the masters of Castle Travista paid their taxes religiously. No one wanted them to stop. Seriously. Tax collection was a big deal and it wasn't unusual for Leander and the other knights to fight battles over it. No one had heard from Castle Travista in years other than the seasonal money they sent via air balloon. That was, until last winter when they had requested aid. They wanted to borrow a single knight.

Leander was chosen because he met the requirements included in the request.

He was single: check.

He was under twenty-four: check.

He wasn't missing any limbs or any eyes: check.

There was more written, but Leander didn't see the rest of the list.

The Wizard took the envelope from the messenger, cracked the seal, read the letter, and looked up at the knights sitting round the table. Then he ripped the bottom of the letter off, rolled it into a tight tube, and shoved it down his throat like he was a sword eater. His Adam's apple bobbed in exactly the same way. Then he pointed at Leander and said that he had been chosen to go to Castle Travista. It was only then that Leander saw the letter and the requirements.

Something was being hidden from him.

Obviously.

Naturally, he assumed it was the requirement of tramping through Spiknit Woods and the craggy gloom that hung from everything around him.

His armor was a sickly shade of green by the time he reached the clearing that marked the end of the forest. Some of it was slick from slime. When had he touched anything slimy? Only every other minute. Other parts were mossy—almost hairy, but he didn't know where he'd picked those bits up. He found a whole moss ball in his collar. There was also something weird

and drippy hanging from his elbow. Was it a jellyfish? Or a deboned crab? He shook it off and it fell with a weird splurch sound. Then it glooped away.

Leander watched it go for a moment before he realized he was watching a living snot ball reenter the forest, where other snot balls were waiting for it. He thought he heard them cheer.

Stepping away from the reach of the trees and onto very ordinary grass, he finally opened the visor of his helmet. What was ahead of him was beyond his imagination. What was he looking at?

The first thing he saw was a moat. It had no water in it and it was so wide that even if there was a drawbridge, the height of the castle walls meant that it would not stretch over the whole expanse. Stepping closer to the drop-off, Leander saw that the moat was filled with heaps of shrapnel. Though, to be fair, there were cheerful little flowers growing between the blades and serrated edges.

He couldn't cross it.

He took his helmet off and tossed it on the ground. When it landed, a slug curled up inside it and then slowly made away with it. Leander watched it go like he was hypnotized. He should snatch it back, but his helmet was very slimy before the slug glooped into it, and the slug was taking it away very slowly. If it inched away all day, he doubted it would get more than a few feet away. He let it be.

Back to the castle. He sharpened his focus.

The castle was gray, hewn from beautiful bricks. There was a thick curtain wall built around the keep itself and a grassy lawn was visible. On the sloping lawn, he saw white puff balls. They were adorable. Were they hopping? Were they dancing? Squinting, he realized they were sheep, but he'd never seen sheep that cute before. They were all white with little black faces and they were... being cared for... by the... most beautiful woman... he'd ever seen... in a red dress.

If Leander didn't have laser vision before, it was a skill he suddenly acquired. When he hadn't been able to see the sheep clearly, he was suddenly very able to see the woman in the finest detail.

Her hair was golden blonde. It hung in waves of morning sparkle, mirroring that liquid white that reflected back like sunlight on the sea. He saw her eyelashes flicker in the wind and he admired their length and curl. Her dress would have been visible if he had been standing on the moon. Her dress... Well, her dress did something to him.

It was red.

Red like his heart.

Red like his pulse.

Red like the fire that flamed inside him when he leaped into battle.

Red like his dreams when he dreamed a soldier's dreams. It was a dream of a fight well fought, of blood spilling easily, of victory, of a woman waiting for him when he returned, a color of glory, a color of luck, a color of soft curves, and warmth at night.

He had to have her.

He shook his head violently. Such an assumption was stupid. She was feeding a lamb out of the palm of her hand and laughing at the touch of its tongue like a little girl. He was making up whatever he wanted to about her and it needed to stop.

On the plus side, he had been summoned to the castle and so he might actually get to meet her which was something to look forward to. Sometimes when he saw a woman who interested him, he was on a march and couldn't move more than his eyes to watch her. This time, he was going there and he might have a chance encounter with her.

The thought put a smile on his face until he remembered the moat filled with the jagged edges of abandoned circular saw blades.

How could he get across?

He was still mulling over the problem when something white floated up from behind the castle walls. He watched it with interest, though it moved slowly. Soon, he recognized it as an air balloon. He'd rarely seen them, but one that size was quite impressive. It was even more impressive when it changed directions and came toward him.

At first, he thought it would have a message for him dangling from the cord that hung from under its bulb, but as it got closer, he realized that it was much too large for that.

He stared in wonder as it approached. There was a tiny balloonist in a tiny basket under the enormous balloon and a thick rope hung from it with a disk on the bottom.

"Greetings!" the balloonist called.

"Oi," Leander replied. "That's quite the way to travel."

The balloonist was the most curious person Leander had ever seen. From a distance, it looked like he was a pixie of some kind, but on closer inspection, his race and his face were hidden. He wore a costume made from the same material as the balloon that made him seem like he was a part of it, giving a voice to the balloon. Otherwise, Leander couldn't see his eyes or his mouth. He spoke from behind a cloth mask.

"I'm Leander Charthlock, the knight sent from Glassmire to assist you."

"Yes. Yes. You don't look like the type we normally get here," the balloonist said. "I'm Blueleg, and I'll *lug* you to the castle."

Leander laughed because the joke was better than the slime forest and better than the shrapnel moat ahead of him.

"Although, I have to say," Blueleg continued. "I'm a little worried about your weight. We usually use this balloon to carry children and young men who've skipped more meals than you. Well," he huffed. "We may as well try it. Put both your feet on the disk, hold onto the rope, and I'll see if I can lift us up."

Leander gave Blueleg a weird look. He'd never been told he was fat before. No one insulted knights. Leander assumed Blueleg was in a unique position. He could float away and leave him in between the forest and the rusting blades of glory.

Leander let it go and scooped up his helmet, removed the slug, with a "Sorry, buddy", and put his helmet under his arm. Then he stood on the disk and grabbed the rope.

Blueleg gave every impression of a man who was attempting to do his job and get the balloon off the ground. Finally, he gave up. "You're too heavy. Is there anything you can leave behind?"

Leander let go of the rope, bent, retrieved the slug, put it back in his helmet with a weird slooping sound, put it back on the grass, grabbed the rope again, and shouted up, "Try it now."

The balloonist laughed. "You need to drop more than your helmet."

Annoyed, Leander started rifling around his person. He dropped his waterskin (it was empty anyway), his pack (all his camping gear was slick with slime), and his neck kerchief (it stopped

his armor from chafing his neck). Then he stopped. Glancing between the collection of things on the ground and the pillowy balloon floating in the air, he realized he was going to have to make some bigger concessions. He dropped his shield, which he felt was the biggest sacrifice a man ought to be asked to make, and tried again.

“Still too heavy,” the balloonist complained, crouching in his white wicker basket with a tremble while hanging in the air.

Was the balloonist scared of him? Leander wasn't going to hurt him. None of this was the balloonist's fault, but Leander was getting more touchy by the second. Tugging at his drawstrings, he dropped his plate armor in chunks, noticing all the dents from the bear traps. Standing in his chain mail, he tried again.

“Too heavy.”

“Uh... right.” Leander heaved the chain mail over his head. Once it was off, he felt very undressed. Under it, all he had on was an undershirt, that had once been white, but now it was blotched in sweat stains, blood (not his... probably), and the green slime that got into everything as he waded through marshland that some masochistic moron had called a wood on the map. He wore homespun trousers that were held up with a drawstring. Unless he was mistaken, the fabric was usually used for straining cheese, thus it was loosely woven, but strong. It had no rips in it, but it was basically see-through. His ginch beneath the trousers was very visible, and the fabric was very dirty. It was like all his bad parts were on display.

He was about to try to mount the balloon with that much weight when he saw his sword. He did not want to leave his sword behind. He dropped the sheath and tried the balloon again.

“Too heavy.”

“Son of a...” Leander burst, getting control of himself mid-sentence. He sheathed it, set it on the pile of the other things he was leaving behind, noting that the slug in his helmet was at the bottom of the pile, and tried again.

“Still too heavy.”

Leander dropped his boots. His shirt, his pants, pulled out a razor blade, and let his beard fall on the grass. Then he chopped off his ponytail. Standing there in his dirty undies, he said, “This is the last try. If I'm still too heavy, I can't go. I'm not chopping off my nose and feeding it to the slugs.”

“Reasonable,” Blueleg agreed, pulling up the fabric mask and showing a more inviting face. “Try it.”

Leander got on the disk and with significant effort, the balloon lifted him off the ground. Slowly, like the slug, they crossed the moat. Leander didn't bother to look down. He was looking at the grassy plain within the castle walls. More than anything, he did not want the maiden in the red dress to see him. He was caked in filth... and for some reason that he didn't quite understand, there was another living snotball hanging from his other elbow. He shook it off in hot irritation and kept his focus on the grassy hills. The maiden in the red dress was not there.

Once they passed the castle's curtain wall, Blueleg positioned them above a pool of water.

“What's that?” Leander asked, shouting up at the balloonist.

“It's the landing pad.”

Leander caught the balloonist's meaning. “Wait!” he shouted. “Was I really too heavy, or did you make me take off all my stuff so you could force a cold bath on me?”

“You'll never know,” the balloonist said with a smile and wink. Then he snipped the cord.

Leander fell with a shout into the pool when he had no idea how to swim.

TWO

When Leander got over the initial shock of the water, he realized three pleasant things. The first was that the water was not deep enough for him to drown in it. The second was that the pool was not caked with the same slime as was in every waterhole he'd seen in Spiknit Wood. The third was that the sun had been warming the water and it was really quite pleasant.

He waved to Blueleg to show that he hadn't broken anything in the landing.

Blueleg yelled back, "If you don't clean yourself properly, I'll be down to wash you myself."

That idea made Leander's eyes chase around in all directions to find soap and a washcloth. He found both and got to work.

Then he realized sadly that the slug inside his helmet was cleaner than he was. He was making a mess of the crystal-clean water just by being in it.

He groaned and continued on. Surely they had this problem with all their guests. There wasn't another way to the castle except through Spiknit Wood. There was a lake on the other side of the castle and mountains beyond that... What was on the other side of the mountains? Leander didn't know. His travels had been in other directions.

Eager to have the 'bath portion' of his travels complete, he pulled weird things out of his ears, blew green things out of his nose, spat up a couple of oddities, scraped something that looked very much like roof tiles off the back of his calf, and pulled another boneless snotball from the middle of his back—the spot no one can reach no matter how hard they try.

After he was quite clean, he looked as dapper as a prince. The clothes they had given him were nicer than the clothing he wore to court. Blueleg had kept his promise and cleaned up Leander's shaving and trimmed up his ragged impromptu haircut.

Since he had looked like a prince after he was merely cleaned, after he was styled he looked like what?

Blueleg gave him a disgusted grunt. "I didn't even know they made people as pretty as you. Yuck. I suppose it's all for the best. If you weren't a pretty boy, this probably wouldn't work."

"What am I doing again?" Leander asked as he tied the laces on the boots they'd given him.

Blueleg tightened his mask strap. "Have you ever seen a ghost, son?"

"I've thought I saw ghosts lots of times, but whenever I went to investigate, I saw nothing."

"Oh, then you've seen lots of ghosts."

Leander laughed. "Is that so?"

"Yeah. Ghosts are like clouds," Blueleg explained. "You can see them from afar, but once they're in your face, they disappear like smoke. You can walk through them and if they don't want to talk to you, you wouldn't even know they were there. Were you scared when you saw those ghosts?"

Leander looked around oddly. "I am a knight. I kill people. I'm a ghost-maker. Of course not."

"Oh, good," Blueleg said gleefully. "Then you'll have no problem meeting the Mistress."

Leander followed him as they left the garment room. "Please tell me she is not the woman I saw with the sheep on the hillside."

"She is not. You saw the Maiden. I saw her too. It's her habit to hide with the sheep when she's avoiding her duties. But you're right, they look a lot alike."

Once his concerns were assuaged that the woman he wanted to meet was not dead, he asked Blueleg, "When will I be able to get my armor and sword? I want my sword back in particular. It's very valuable."

Blueleg stopped and slapped Leander on the chest with the back of his hand. They were in a hallway, a long passageway with high arches over their heads. On one side there were pillars that showed the dipping water and the mountains. On the other side were the castle walls. The balloonist was short, barely coming up to Leander's bicep.

"She's here," he said. "Wait here until she speaks to you. See if you can see her. I'll get your sword."

The balloonist departed and Leander was left standing on the stones looking for a trace of smoke where one shouldn't be. Finally, he saw one. It was a puff of red smoke like one that came about when a man softly blew into his pipe instead of pulling on it. The haze in the air hung in front of a staircase.

Tentatively, Leander approached it.

"Follow me." The words were whispered across the breeze. The sound and shape of the words reminded him of the sound someone makes when they've already been impaled, but they want to say one last thing. The actual words 'follow me' were particularly poignant. He thought he'd heard them before as someone on the threshold of death invited them to come along after them.

Leander was not afraid of death or anything else. As a knight, he had been trained to fear nothing. And without fear, he took his first steps on the staircase leading around and around up the cylinder of a tower. At the top, he looked down from the north watchtower to the grass between the curtain walls.

He saw the maiden in the red dress again. She held a newborn lamb in her arms, and the way her light hair curled around her face and figure, he felt himself quite stolen.

However, he was a knight before he was anything else. "What did you bring me here to do?" he said with the low timber of a brass bell.

"Do you see that girl?" the red vapor was more visible now as it spilled over his ear and down his neck to disappear at his chest.

"Naturally," he responded.

"She's the source of all the trouble," the disembodied voice continued.

"Is she?"

"I need you to get rid of her," the voice said with an air of finality.

Leander almost laughed. Of course, the ghost was trying to sneak people into the afterworld. He had seen that coming yards off.

The scene on the lawn changed as various men approached the maiden. Up until then, Leander had seen the maiden, Blueleg, and the smudge of red smoke that was called the Mistress. He hadn't even known there were other people in the castle. They had been so quiet. Now we saw at least two dozen men hurrying to the maiden on the grass.

"I'll escort you to dinner!"

"No, I'll bring her."

"No. Me!"

Leander stroked his chin. Was he about to see a full-on brawl for one woman? He chuckled. "How am I supposed to get rid of her?"

“Tomorrow night, you’ll take her and go. Sleep well tonight for tomorrow night, you won’t sleep at all.” The words floated to him like a balloon being pulled away by the wind. The reddish smoke snuffed out.

Leander rolled his eyes. That must be the language of ghosts. He had never heard it before. They couldn’t talk unless they spoke in riddles, with nuance, and a slight foreboding. It sounded so much like ghost stories he’d heard around army campfires that the encounter was immediately mundane.

He yawned and went to find the supper that had been promised by the men yelling in the courtyard.

THREE

Leander did not wander around the castle like a newb. He went directly to the dining hall because he had a set of nostrils on his face and he knew how to use them. Meaning, he knew the difference between the smells. He didn't need to poke his head into any of the rooms to know that he passed a wood workshop, a tannery, an armory, and the barracks... for lack of a better word. All the men slept in that room. He only opened one door, the one to the dining hall.

There, he was greeted by a sight that was most familiar to him: a bunch of men breaking bread and dipping it in meaty beef gravy. Someone good was cooking for them.

He got in line.

"Hey, who are you?" the man in front of him asked. He was a tall man with wood shavings dusting his clothes and skin, making his brown eyes look even browner.

Leander pushed his sun-bleached hair out of his face to show his bronze-colored eyes. "I'm Leander and I'm starving. Are there bowls up at the front of this line?"

"Yes. I'm Stocking and this is Barnibo," he said, pointing to a shorter man in line ahead of them. "If you'll take advice, here's some—don't even think about talking to the maiden tonight, since it's your first night. It will piss everyone off."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Leander lied.

"The woman in the red dress. That's why you're here, isn't it?"

"I was brought here on a balloon from the edge of the forest. Isn't that the usual way?"

Stocking shifted his gaze playfully. "Sometimes guys come in like that. I took the labyrinth path through the shrapnel when I was twelve."

Leander had seen no such path when he surveyed the moat. Looking at the man's age, Leander imagined he had taken the route seven or eight years before. More metal had obviously been added.

"Well," Leander said positively, "that's incredible. I'll shake your hand, sir."

They shook hands.

"Why were you so desperate to come here?" Leander asked, thinking that he would only have taken such a route if he had been commanded to by his King.

Stocking pointed and Leander saw her all over again, but since it was only from across the room instead of across a great distance, it felt like he saw her for the first time.

She was radiant, all curves, all softness, all beauty, all choking at his heart in a way he couldn't explain. What did he want from a woman like that? Gold hair, blue eyes, her bare throat, and the slight curve of her breast before her neckline hid all her best secrets. She was a vision before him. Did he want to worship her like she was his queen? Did he want to swear love to her as other knights were wont to swear to ladies? The feeling didn't quite fit the bill. Did he want to bounce her on his knee like a barmaid or grab her and kiss her as a last act before heading off to war? He was instantly confused because his usual range of emotions didn't describe what was happening inside him.

The Maiden was surrounded by admirers, so many that the only reason he could see her was because her dining table was set up in the middle of the room on a slightly higher platform. She ate alone, though one man was passing her his handkerchief to use as a napkin. Another was jumping up to refill her water glass. Others tried to talk to her and others still just gazed up at her like that was all they wanted.

What was Leander feeling?

He was baffled. His feeling made no sense. Was he attracted to her or not?

One thing was for certain, he hated all the men that surrounded her, pandering to her. That was disgusting. But why? He'd had plenty of times when he returned from war where the press of people paused his warhorse. Many of those people were young women. That had been normal for him, to be surrounded by admirers. Seeing it flipped was... clawing something inside him.

"What's her name?" Leander asked Stocking.

"Oh, they never tell us their names. You only get to know her name if she chooses you."

Stocking picked up his plate and bowl and went through the line for gravy and bread.

Leander copied the other man. "What does that mean, if she chooses you?"

The men took their seats, quite far from where the Maiden was propped up for all to see. Leander guessed Stocking didn't want to take the chance that she could overhear what he said. "This is where unwanted people come to get a life."

"A life," Leander said reflectively. "What does that mean?"

"Well, I was an orphan," Stocking explained. "I wasn't raised in an orphanage though. My family was killed on the road by brigands. I was twelve and I was far from my village. I was the only one left alive. I didn't know how to get home. I didn't know how to get anywhere. I started walking through the woods by the road and hoped I'd get to a town. One didn't come. Days passed and I was desperate, I had nothing. Then, when I thought all hope was lost, I saw someone up the road. It was a woman in a red dress. I ran after her, but no matter how hard I ran she was always up the road a little further."

Leander guessed the woman he saw was not the Maiden, but the Ghost Mistress, guiding the boy to the castle.

"Finally I came to the edge of the woods and found this castle," Stocking continued. "She went through the labyrinth. I followed her path and came to the gatehouse. They welcomed me in and told me that I'd work here until I was skilled enough at my craft that I could secure a living somewhere else, but that I'd also be given a prize."

"What kind of prize?" Leander wondered.

Stocking looked at Leander like he was dumber than a boneless crab. "The Maiden of course."

Leander turned to look at the woman in the red dress. "You're going to marry her?" he asked incredulously. "Seems like you have a lot of competition."

"That one," he said, pointing at her with his bread crust, "is very popular. She's going to cause a riot if she doesn't choose soon. I already said my piece to her and she already told me she wants to talk to *everyone* before she makes her decision. The problem is that she's already talked to everyone about three times and she still can't make up her mind. There are other maidens in red dresses. They just only bring them out one at a time."

"Well, if she doesn't like any of the guys here, maybe she'll like me best of all," Leander teased.

Stocking nearly choked on what he was chewing. "You? Well, if you want to take a whack at that fussy one, be my guest. However, I said she was popular. You'll have a fight on your hands if you try to get fresh with her. There are at least half a dozen men here who think she'll choose them tonight. But they've been thinking that for weeks."

“Nah, she’s not going to choose me tonight,” Leander said, catching hold of what the Mistress meant when she gave him her instructions. He was brought to the castle in the first place to kidnap that girl and take her off because she was ruining the program for the young men like Stocking who wanted to get married and get gone and the young women waiting for their chance to be the Maiden and choose a husband. “She’s going to choose me tomorrow night,” Leander said boldly.

Stocking let a blob of his chewed food sit in his open mouth before he pushed it out with his tongue and it landed back on his plate with a plop.

Barnibo chuckled so hard, he almost snorted gravy up his nose.

“Good luck with that,” Stocking said, not even turning to look at his laughing friend.

“No, no,” he said, putting up a finger. “I’d make a bet with you that I’ll have her all to myself by tomorrow night and gone by the next morning with her, but you wouldn’t be able to collect anything because I’ll be gone.”

Stocking laughed. “All the same, I’ll take that action. What shall we wager? I bet you came here as naked as the day you were born.”

“Nah. I had some pretty awesome ginch on.”

“Which they took away,” Stocking snickered.

“They did. Because they were a holy mess.”

“Meaning it had a lot of holes in it?”

“Yeah,” Leander laughed back. “Way more than the mandatory four.”

“If you are still here the day after tomorrow,” Stocking said, getting a great idea. “You have to find that old ginch of yours, show it to everyone and wear it. Only it, all by its lonesome, for the rest of the day.”

“Fine, fine.” Leander agreed. “And if I win?”

Stocking snorted. “If you win you’re going to be using that beautiful bust as your pillow. Even if she is a snooty cow, I wouldn’t say no to that.”

They shook hands again and Stocking took him to the sleeping quarters, but it wasn’t like Leander couldn’t have found it himself. Like every other keep he’d visited, this castle had a lot of smells.

FOUR

The sleeping quarters were weirder than Leander was expecting. He expected to walk into a room with beds arranged in blocks, maybe the occasional hammock. The castle seemed like a fairly civilized place, so he figured they'd at least have straw mattresses in bed frames if they didn't have something fancier.

As it turned out, what was inside the mattresses was far less curious than the way the room was arranged. The room was circular like it had once been the home of King Arthur and his round table in his round hall where all were equal. Except, instead of a round table for discussing things or sharing a meal, there was a raised platform. It was almost exactly the same as the one the Maiden ate dinner at in the dining hall, except this one had a cage on it. It was a cage that had once been part of a circus caravan. The wheels had been lopped off, but the garish wooden flourishes remained, and it had been recently painted. It was for housing a toothless lion or a gorilla. Instead, there was a bed inside, placed right in the middle so no one could reach through the bars and touch the person in the bed or even the sheets.

"The Maiden doesn't sleep there, does she?" Leander asked in surprise.

Stocking snorted. "She does. It makes all of us crazy. It means that if we choose to sleep here, it's pretty hard to get a good night's sleep, but there aren't any other beds in the common barracks. The younger boys get priority for sleeping there and this place is getting crowded. I've never seen a Maiden take this long to make up her mind. She deserves a good spanking. If she doesn't like any of us, she should give up the dress and go..." he hesitated on those words.

"Does she not have anywhere to go as well as you?" Leander questioned.

"I don't know where they get the girls exactly. It's hard to imagine they come from better circumstances than we do. The idea of putting her out of the castle alone is unheard of, but there has to be something that is done with girls like her. I'd flip the question and put the decision in the hands of the men, but..." he paused to look at a group of rough-looking men who had just entered.

They came forward and claimed the beds on the ring closest to the cage. No one had gone near what were obviously the best seats in the house.

"They'd kill each other trying to be the man to claim her?" Leander supplied.

"That and... I wouldn't force any woman to run off with one of them if it wasn't her idea to begin with," Stocking explained.

Leander snorted. "What are their names?"

"The one in the middle is Agrite. He's a nasty bugger. The guys next to him are Farley and Koe. On the other side is Devon..."

"I'm not going to need to know all of them," Leander said, putting up a hand.

"Oh, right," Stocking said, squashing a chuckle with a palm over his mouth. "You're not going to be here after tomorrow night."

Leander laughed too, but it was hollow. Not because he didn't think it was funny, but because he was very occupied scanning the men who took the closest beds. As a soldier, he saw them differently than Stocking did. It wasn't that they weren't dangerous. They just didn't look like the type of men who killed people for a living. All the same, they could probably

bludgeon someone from behind better than the average man. Leander would have to watch out.

He turned and smiled at Stocking, trying to make his face a mask. If someone looked too deeply at Leander, they would lose count of the number of strokes that marked his kills inside his eyes. It was better for him to make his smile so wide, it ate his eyes in mirth. Then no one would know that if he had a lance, he didn't even need a horse to be a war machine.

The boys hushed down as the Maiden entered the room.

Though she was still wearing the red dress, it was obvious that she was dressed for bed. Her long hair was braided in long twin tails. She wore a long nightcap that fell down her back with a golden tassel on the end that looked like a third tail. Her face was pink and slightly glossy from her evening washing. She lifted the corner of her dress and held the loop in a clenched hand at her waist to keep the slight train off the floor. The lifting of the fabric exposed her feet. She wore gray slippers with one wooly pompom on the toes of each slipper. A little of her ankle was exposed as well which made her look younger and more vulnerable than the suggestion of cleavage at her low neckline.

"You just got here. Tell me you don't want her," Stocking said at Leander's side.

"I do. That's why I'll be leaving with her tomorrow night. How do I meet her?"

"Meet her? She'll talk to you. If she wants to. That's the only way anyone can speak to her now. Trying to get past those six oafs is a near-death experience few of us are interested in having."

The Maiden mounted the steps and opened the door to the cage. She stepped in with a step that was as light as a feather swept up on the wind. Inside, she closed the door. Then she slipped her fingers into her neckline and pulled out a golden key. She locked the door. Then, in a gesture as tempting as Little Red Riding Hood completely alone in the woods, she unfolded the place at her breast where her dress opened and replaced the key.

The wolves were salivating.

Every man was a wolf.

Even Leander was salivating. He had to swallow.

Just as the Ghost Mistress suggested, this couldn't continue. She would have to go. In a minute, the men would be tearing her cage apart. It was supposed to protect her from the men. That much was obvious, but it couldn't protect her from all of them at once. The situation was rising. Soon it would burst.

Leander only had one day.

He had been given the day so he could rest and so he could make it convincing that she had somehow fallen so desperately in love with him in one day that she was willing to run off with him. Obviously, the show did not need to be convincing for her since she was going to be kidnapped, but convincing to the men who missed her the next day.

As Leander couldn't do anything to seduce her until morning, he pointed to a bed near Stocking and asked, "Is this one taken?"

"The ones closest to her and the most desirable. Then the second row nearest her," Stocking explained. "After that, the next best rows are the ones closest to the doors. There's more fresh air there. So, this one is for you, my man," Stocking said, pointing to one next to his bunk that was situated in one of the middle rings.

"Works for me," Leander said, falling face-first on the bed.

For a man who had been camping in Spiknit Woods for a week, the mattress felt indescribable. He clutched at the pillow. He had rarely slept with one as he often slept with his head inside his helmet to keep the dew and the insects out of his ears.

He was supposed to think of a strategy. What would happen if he actually did get that little Maiden to fall in love with him?

A minute later, she was his pillow as he disappeared into soft warm dreams that men who cut people up rarely had.

FIVE

The sound of someone sneaking was as likely to get Leander's attention as the sound of someone running, or the sound of someone pounding a war drum in his ear for that matter.

He awoke with a start. It was still dark though vibrant moonlight spilled into the room lighting the stones of the floor like each one of them was illuminated from within.

Leander rolled over and saw the trouble immediately.

The boys from the first row clearly worked in the blacksmith's forge. They had fashioned a long pole with something on the end. They had placed it between the bars of the cage.

Leander sat up with interest. What were they doing?

When he realized what they were doing, he sniggered. The guys in the front row were really sore losers. Sure, they had scared all the other guys away, but none of them had been able to get the Maiden to choose them and take them away.

They had made some sort of grabbing hook and they were using it to first remove her blankets. They looked like they had tried to pull the hem of her dress up, but had been unsuccessful. One of them was hissing. "We've got to get the top button undone. That's what all this has been for. Who cares about her legs?"

Leander got up, regretted sorely that Blueleg had made him enter the castle without his armor or sword, and then sauntered up to the cage. He leaned against it. "Whatcha doing?" he asked in a whisper.

They had hooked their instrument into the buttonhole of the dress and were tugging on it, trying to make the hole open up enough to swallow the button.

None of them appeared to notice him. With each tug, a finger width more of her cleavage came into view, only to disappear again when they were unsuccessful.

"That's a really smart tool," he said, a little louder.

They stopped collectively and turned to glare at Leander.

"This doesn't concern you," Agrite hissed aggressively.

"I just think you're doing this all wrong," Leander said, lowering his voice. "Can I try?"

"No! You just got here. Get lost," Koe stormed. He was the one holding the hook.

"Okay, but I just want to ask you guys why you aren't picking the lock instead of pulling at her clothes. What are you guys going to say to her when you scratch her beautiful bosom and she wakes up angry as a big scorpion? And what if she scars? Why aren't you picking the lock and running off with her in the night?"

"Uh... that wouldn't be a good idea," one of the smaller fries contradicted.

"Why not?" Leander pressed.

"If we left the castle like that, all that we'd get would be a moat full of razor blades and three days through Spiknit Woods to still be in the middle of nowhere."

Leander gawked unpleasantly for a second. How many times had he gotten lost in Spiknit Woods? It had taken him a week to reach the castle. It was three days for someone who knew where they were going? He kept his groaning inward and clenched his jaw on the smile he wore before he jumped into combat.

"Okay. Decide which one of you gets her beforehand, open the door, and let him take her. Everyone step aside and let Blueleg balloon you to wherever you want to go. Isn't that how this normally works?"

The guys stepped away from the cage and started listening to Leander more carefully.

“How would we decide which one of us got her?” Agrite asked hesitantly.

“Like men?” Leander suggested, touching his nose. He had broken it twice. The first time had made it crooked and the second time had straightened it out.

“You’re saying we should fight over her?” Koe asked, like the idea was more alien than Leander—a grown man who had arrived at a glorified orphanage.

“Of course,” Leander said as though it was the most natural thing in the world. “How do you think we solve things in the real world? We have a disagreement and we fight over it. We champion the woman we want to bed, get it sealed with a holy kiss, and live happily ever after. Sometimes things get out of hand and we fight whole wars over land, over crops, over mines, over rivers, and best of all, over women. Don’t be fooled. If she chose you tonight, you’d have to fight for her honor repeatedly wherever you settled. She’s such a delicious morsel that if you married her, you might have to fight every night of the week just to stop her from becoming a sudden widow. Every man around her would want her to become a sudden widow... if you get my meaning.” Leander winked at them.

The men had suddenly lost a bit of their appetite.

“Every night?” one of the smaller boys asked, repeating what Leander had said.

“Definitely. I’d fight you tonight just to switch beds with you. Isn’t yours this one with the great view?”

“It’s mine,” Agrite said gruffly.

Leander smirked. He knew it was Agrite’s. “I’m just teasing, but I’m not joking about deciding between us who should get her and then picking her lock. From what I’ve heard, she’s had plenty of time to make up her mind. If she wasn’t going to decide for herself, she should have had her mind made up for her. Besides, whoever heard of a society where the women decide who they’re going to marry? That’s a man’s job.”

The guys were looking around amongst themselves. Leander noticed that it wasn’t just the knot of guys in the center. They’d woken up more and other men were sitting up in their beds listening.

“Hey,” a guy from the back yelled. “I’ve been holding back, but if you guys are going to duke it out, I want it on it. I could beat Agrite on his own, but not the whole posse.”

“We should set up a tournament!” Leander yelled in reply. “We’ll make rules and do this the gentlemanly way!”

During the next two hours, Leander busied the men by organizing heats. Someone brought him a slate with a white stone to write on it. Leander dropped the slate and instead started scratching white onto the wall. He made each man a symbol with which to represent himself since none of them knew how to write anything much beyond a few notches and numbers.

Occasionally, Leander looked over at the Maiden. The first time he looked, she had covered herself with her blanket. The second time, she had pulled her nightcap over her eyes. The third time, she had turned away from them and was looking for all the world like a prissy woman who was done with every single man she’d ever known.

Had she been awake the whole time? Was that why those idiots hadn’t been able to get her skirt up? She’d been consciously holding her hem down with her toes? That was probably why they hadn’t been able to get her top button off either. And here he thought he was saving her

from a fate worse than death by keeping the men entertained when he was supposed to be sleeping.

Ugh... fucking waste of time.

The men weren't ready to fight right away because nothing kept a bunch of men entertained as much as setting up the rules for a sporting match. They argued about the rules and who should fight who and in what order.

Mostly, Leander thought they were excited to think about literally anything other than the Maiden.

Finally, they agreed that the match would be over once someone hit the floor. They didn't need to be unconscious, or dead, just on the floor. Leander thought that was a great idea.

So, they got their first two competitors ready. Leander bellowed through his fist like it was a bugle and started it.

The noise was amazing as all the men had utterly forgotten to whisper and now they were yelling advice to the fighter they bet would win.

Leander wasn't looking at the fight. He was looking at the cage. Was their little maiden going to keep her head under the blankets and pretend that what was happening wasn't really happening?

At that moment, a spectacular arch of blood spurted from the face of one of the fighters. Through the bloody arch, he saw her. She was standing at the bars and she wasn't looking at the fighters or the blood spray. She was looking straight at Leander. Her green eyes were huge as saucers. Her stare was so wide, it was like he could see the reflection of her soul through her eyes, like seeing what was under the surface of the water. Whatever effect Leander had hoped to have on the Maiden, it was too late to choose now. She thought something and she thought it very strongly. Her fingers were white as she clasped the bars.

He smirked again, a beautiful feeling inwardly if not a beautiful expression outwardly.

Even if her falling in love with him was something he fantasized about before falling asleep, he did not need her to fall in love with him.

The guys in front of them were getting bloodied up. When one hit the floor, there were cheers of glee from half the men and groans of frustration from the other half.

"Oh, relax," Leander said with a wicked grin. "It's not like you had any money on that."

"Well, something is on the line," Stocking whined, before glancing back at the Maiden.

She was back in bed. Had any of them noticed her standing?

"Yeah, well, it's not like you want either one of them to win *that*," he said, turning her from a woman into a trophy with one word.

They were about to set up another match when Leander saw a little light breaking from over the window. "I'll catch you guys tomorrow night," he said as he flopped back on his own bed. "I'm wasted. Gotz to sleep."

Without the ringmaster, the others didn't know what to do. Some of them stayed up talking, but it wouldn't have mattered what they did short of throwing Leander in the pond. He could sleep through most things and a bunch of his friends getting rowdy was one of them.

SIX

Leander was still dreaming about the Maiden that morning. His dream was a strange one like sea monsters diving into the aqua sea of her eyes. While reaching for her, her dress turned to water... red water... blood slipping through his fingers and leaving him alone. He stroked his wet hand against his face to smell the scent of her blood like perfume.

Keeping his eyes closed, he cracked his neck.

He knew what he was dreaming about as he fell through the clouds like a dagger from heaven to slice the red tide beneath him. He hadn't been the bodyguard of a Wizard for years for him not to know what dreams meant when they busied themselves in the cavern of his slumbering mind.

He was struggling.

The feeling of hot blood over his hands in wartime was the most warmth he could hope to experience. Not only was there heat on his skin when the air was so icy he could see his breath like ghost vapor but there was also triumph. He had outwitted the black crow of death in battle once again.

A world where a woman wore a pretty dress and sat in the sunshine surrounded by her admirers was no place for him. Stepping forward into a world like that was like choosing a false vision of the afterlife and stepping into the red mist that was the Mistress of the castle herself. As a soldier, you didn't get peace until the war was over, or until you were dead.

If he didn't follow his instructions to kidnap the Maiden and stayed to compete for her hand with all the sincerity of his heart, it would be like dying because the war wasn't over. The war just wasn't here. Here was where the King and the Wizard had sent him because the King needed money.

The King needed money.

Money.

His awareness awakened like hundreds of coins smashed together at once.

Leander was sitting up in his bed. The sun had risen to the eleventh hour. The Maiden was sitting on the edge of his bed. His fingers were laced with hers and her wrist was against his lips.

The moment hung between them, like the one where she stared at him through the bars the night before. They looked at each other, scouting the depth of each others' eyes. He wondered what she saw in his bronze eyes, while her cool ones showed nothing but cool refreshment.

He kissed her wrist again.

She moved to slap him with her right hand.

He blocked it with one finger of his left hand. "I have kissed the hands of many ladies of the court before yours, got down on my knees swearing all kinds of vows. I would protect them with my life. These occasions are not as intimate as a marriage ceremony as there are many knights swearing promises to many ladies—often more than one lady. There is nothing remotely indecent about me kissing your hand."

"Oh?" the Maiden asked, her voice mild yet challenging.

"Yes," he said lingeringly before allowing his lips to explore her skin in a way that would not have been acceptable in any court anywhere.

“Ugh!” Stocking exclaimed behind her. “There are a ton of us here and you’re going to put those kinds of moves on her while we’re watching?”

Leander kept his eyes on the Maiden and kept his fingers locked with hers. He noticed she made no effort to remove them. “What’s your name?”

“I’m not supposed to say,” she whispered back.

“It’s quite alright to tell me,” he coaxed. “I’m a knight and I have a much higher rank than the Mistress of your castle.”

“Really?” she asked, her eyes flashing like turquoise moons.

“Just whisper it in my ear,” he pressed.

To the shock and horror of the other men in the room, she leaned forward, and putting her mouth very close to his ear, she whispered, “You smell like blood.”

He kissed her knuckles. “So do you.”

The griping the men made behind her back was enough that the two conspirators let go of each others’ hands at the same time but kept their eyes on one another.

“Breakfast is already past, but luncheon will be in a few hours. Have you chosen a workshop or has one been chosen for you?” she asked.

“Neither. I was given today to rest,” he volunteered, rising to his feet.

“Then you can come with me. I graze the sheep on the eastern plateau. A little help would be more than welcome,” she offered. “I’ll pack a few bites from the kitchen and we’ll eat on the plain. Does that suit you?”

He nodded.

She flounced her skirt and left the room.

“Yo, you brainless peck,” Agrite shouted once she was gone. “You can’t go with her. We’ll kill you.”

Leander yawned. “Can’t that wait for tonight? I’d like to get to know her a bit more before I’m ready to die for her.”

“Isn’t that what all the wrist kissing was about?” Koe said crankily.

“I didn’t promise her anything. I just got a bunch of freebies,” he said with a grin before hopping up from the bed.

However, Leander was grossly outnumbered and they pounced on him. Then he was unceremoniously carried back through the castle on their shoulders. He didn’t fight it at all because he had been hazed so many times it wasn’t even a mystery what the men were going to do to him.

“Stop being so jealous, boys!” He laughed like he was their champion and not like he was about to get thrown in the pool again. “You’ve all had your shot with her. Don’t be so greedy! It’ll just be for the afternoon.”

“Dunk him! Dunk him! Dunk him!” they chorused.

“If you want to, but I’m pretty sure I’ll come out of that water looking and smelling cleaner than I do now!”

Splash!

Into the water, he dropped.

He stayed down for a second longer, waiting for them to wonder if they’d killed him so they’d peer over the water to check on him. On schedule, the noses came over the edge.

Leander heaved himself out of the water and splashed them all.

They ended up having a water fight and Leander's hair was dripping into the collar of his dry clothes when he went to meet the Maiden.

SEVEN

Leander carried the picnic basket while the Maiden herded the sheep. She had two dogs with her named Stag and Buck. They were so interested in bossing the sheep around with their long noses and sharp barks that the Maiden hardly had to do anything.

She walked leisurely, always quite aloof from where Leander was walking. If he tried to walk near her, she noticed a wildrose off the path and rushed to pick it.

After he tried for the third time, she said to him, "They're watching us, you know."

"Are they?" he replied, glancing over his shoulder at the castle and spotting several shapes at the watchtowers.

"Yes. They're going to watch us the whole time. It would be wise of you not to let them see you get too close to me."

"I see. I wouldn't want to end up like a drowned rat in the pool again," he laughed. "Weakest hazing ever!"

"They can do worse," she said in a distant voice. "Part of the reason I invited you here and offered to eat with you was to keep them from poisoning you at lunch. I don't want you to starve or spend the next two days throwing up."

He beamed at her. "Well, that's very kind of you. What was the other part?"

"Other part?"

"U-huh. You said *part* of the reason you invited me here was to protect me. What was the other part?"

She tried to stifle a smile. "You're very playful. Where do you get so much energy? Arranging fist fights in the middle of the night."

"I did that for you," he said plainly.

"I know," she said, brushing her hair out of her face and taking a step further away from him.

"So you know what they were doing?"

She nodded. "It's stupid. They're stupid."

"Is that why you can't choose one of them to marry?"

"I feel nice about a few of them. Your friend, Stocking, was really lovely to me. I could have chosen him or three or four of the others. Maybe I should have."

"Why didn't you?"

She cocked her head to the side and let her head loll on her shoulder. "I love wearing this dress. I never want to give it up."

The red dress she was wearing was a thing to behold. It had dazzling rouge stones all over it. The neckline was square and framed her bosom, collarbone, and throat. It led the eye up to her lips with such effect that when Leander looked at her, he could only think of pulling her into his arms and burying his face in any of the corners he found there. Both the ones that pointed outwards and the ones that pointed inwards. He wanted to fit himself together with her in the most playful way.

Leander scoffed at her remark. Lucky for him, he was the type who could still think when his body wanted something. So, he put away the flush of blood he felt and put the pieces together. "Are you like Stocking then? You were an orphan who followed a red dress into the woods, past the blades, and right to the castle door? Did a red dress like that become your gospel, your dream, and all you ever wanted? To be like the woman in the red dress who led you to safety?"

Her large eyes grew even larger. She was still wearing the dress, but perhaps she felt suddenly uncovered because she put her hands over her heart and stepped further away from him. "What would you know about that?"

He grinned. "I'd know more if you'd tell me."

"Oh," she said absently. "The girls aren't led to this castle. They're kept elsewhere. It's a secret to stop the boys here from visiting them. In that place, I was finally safe, but not exactly happy. I sewed. All the girls sewed. I made dresses, table clothes, all sorts of things. They were all sold. Sold to pay for our dinner, for more materials to make more clothing. I didn't get to wear any of it. This is the first nice dress I've ever worn."

He nodded, trying to understand. He wasn't sure if he did understand. The dress she was wearing was not like other dresses. In truth, he wasn't sure if the Queen or any of the princesses owned more than one dress that elaborate each. Indeed, it made her look prettier than a queen... unless she was the freshly crowned queen of hearts.

"Hmm..." he said, stepping further away from her and making his voice loud enough to compensate for the distance. "I know what you mean. I wanted something like that myself. Not clothing exactly, but sort of. I wanted to be a knight. I wanted a suit of armor. I don't know what you know about warfare, but I wanted to be a knight on the field of battle. Have you ever seen a knight in plate armor?"

She shook her head in the negative.

"They're basically indestructible. That's what the stories say. When you're not wearing armor and you see those knights coming on the field, you know they're going to kill everyone they face and they're going to walk away from the battle with a few scratches. It's terrifying when they're coming against you. It gives you fresh wind when you're on the side they're coming from. I didn't believe in angel wings for protection, I believed in silver polished plate armor. I'd take that in place of a halo any day. It was one of the scariest things I've ever seen when I saw a knight taken down for the first time."

The Maiden took a few steps toward Leander. His story intrigued her. She knew she wasn't supposed to get close to Leander, but she couldn't help herself and she came forward.

He smiled and then let his smile go cold. "Do you know how to kill a knight?"

She took another step forward. "No."

"First, you have to knock him over. It's best if you can get him on his stomach. It's also easiest to knock him over from behind. Once he's on his face, you have to straddle him. Even if he's a monster of a man, it's difficult for him to lift you and the weight of his armor at the same time." Leander took another step away from the Maiden intentionally as he coaxed her to chase him. "If you're smart... when you've got him on his face like a turtle on the beach, you'll lift between the armor plates and see how they're held together. If they're held with fabric, you can cut those ties and have him standing there in his chainmail. Once that's done, it's easy to overwhelm him and kill him. But if the armor is held together with leather, it's going to be hard to cut, no matter what knife you have."

He was zig-zagging away from her, rounding the area where the sheep were grazing and she was walking after him, moving in awkward steps to stop him from getting too far away for her to hear what he was saying.

"What do you do if you can't cut his armor off him?" she asked.

“Oh,” he stopped walking and let her come much closer to him than she meant to. It could be a romantic moment if Leander didn’t have to say the next words. Instead, he looked at her lingeringly before jumping on a nearby boulder and singing, “Then you have to gouge his eyes out.”

“How horrible!” she called back at him.

He knew from the merry look on her face that she’d been subjected to a thousand gory fairy tales and he wasn’t shocking her.

He jumped down in front of her. “From there, a good fighter will call over some of the lesser soldiers to finish him off while a man of my skill will move on to the next.”

“Did you ever get your suit of armor?” she asked him, taking a swat at his shoulder with the flat of her hand.

“Oh, yes,” he said with a grin. “Do you see that point of light?” Leander pointed to the place where he’d left his armor. It was a heap of silver metal reflecting the sunlight in the distance.

The Maiden couldn’t see it, so he pulled her back toward his chest and showed her with his finger as the line of sight.

He smelled her hair and enjoyed the nearness the activity allowed. “It’s right there.”

She gave him a sharp glance and pulled away. “Why did you leave it there?”

He moved further away, giving her more space than she wanted. “I came to the castle, I saw you behind the curtain wall playing with the sheep and Blueleg said I couldn’t be flown over unless I lost some weight. I left it there to come here, to meet you, and to fulfill my quest. I couldn’t let my desire for a lesser thing keep me from my larger goal.”

“What do you mean?”

He spun around and faced her. “I mean that my goal was to be a knight. If my armor is stopping me from being that, then it has to go. The weight and treasure-like nature of a suit of armor can kill me as easily as not wearing it. I want to reach for something bigger.”

“What?”

“Maybe you. Maybe I’d like to want something more than I wanted a suit of armor. Maybe I’d like to want something more than I want myself. Well, Maiden, what do *you* want?”

“I…” she hesitated. “I worry that there isn’t a happy ending.” She curled into herself and lowered herself onto a boulder with her arms across her chest.

The pose was ten thousand times too seductive for Leander and though he didn’t mean for it to, his blood completely took over. With long strides, he came to her and pulled her up to meet her eyes. “You don’t know anything about what happily ever after will look like.” And he kissed her.

From her reaction, she had never been kissed before, and she tried to pull away.

However, Leander knew from experience that inexperienced girls didn’t need less kissing, they needed more. So he made his kissing more gentle, laying careful kisses on her knuckles, on her wrists, on the tip of her nose, and then finally to her mouth again.

She kissed him back, entwining her arms around his neck.

She slid off the rock and he came down on the grass next to her. It had been a long time since he had rolled around in the grass with a woman and the Maiden was as light as a feather. He got on his back, put her waist on his feet, and held her hands until she was high up in the air.

“Fly,” he said, as he let go of her hands.

Their fingertips unclasped and she shrieked with laughter. “I’m flying!” she called gloriously.

And for a moment, her hair fell around her face and fell so low, it brushed across Leander's nose. He couldn't resist her for another moment, and he rolled her down, so her legs were tangled up with his.

He kissed her.

Grass was in their hair.

She kissed him.

A sheep was standing over them.

Wait. It wasn't a sheep.

"Get up," Blueleg said. "These boys are about to kill you, Leander. Get up and come with me."

Leander sat up and opened his eyes wide to the world. All the shapes from the watch towers had abandoned their posts. As fully materialized men, they were glaring at him, spears and bows in their hands.

"Excellent job you guys are doing," he said as he rose and helped the Maiden to her feet. He kissed her hand again. "I'll see you tonight."

Then he crossed the meadow with Blueleg.

As soon as they were a decent distance from the others, the little balloonist started laughing. "Damn. None of the other boys have moves like yours."

"Were you watching?"

"The whole time. We should have you give them lessons before you leave tonight. If only we could do that." He grinned and led the way back to the castle in the spangling sunlight. It was the kind of sunlight dreams were made of.

EIGHT

“Eat this,” Blueleg said, placing a platter on the table in front of Leander.

It had taken the man two hands to carry it.

They were in Blueleg’s private quarters on the third floor of the keep. The window showed beautiful views of the mountains in the distance. The mountains were beyond their King’s kingdom. What was on the other side? What ocean or field or space beyond the stars lay there? Leander had always wondered.

Leander turned back to the plate with a crooked eyebrow. There was a slab of ribs dripping with gravy, Yorkshire pudding, roasted herb potatoes, and flame-roasted vegetables. It was a feast.

He was fed like this before battle sometimes.

He hiked up his sleeves and reached for a Yorkshire pudding. He dipped it in the gravy and heaved it into his mouth. Then he shoved the food into his cheek and said to Blueleg, “Am I going to be fighting my way out tonight? Is that why you’re feeding me this way?”

“No,” the man said, placing a clay goblet of water in front of him. “All the food served in the dining hall tonight is going to be laced in a sleeping draught tonight. Even the Maiden is going to eat it. We don’t need to make your job harder. Let them all sleep like the dead. I’m not even going to send you to bed with the others. If you can sleep, you should sleep here until nightfall.”

“Thanks. That is easier.”

The balloonist took a goblet himself and sat across from Leander. “I have to tell you how we’re going to manage all this. First thing, the Mistress will open the cage for you, so you won’t have to pick the lock.”

“That’s handy,” Leander agreed.

“You’ll go into the cage. Everyone will be drugged, but it would still be wise to be as stealthy as possible.”

Leander snorted within himself. Yet another reason why it was prudent for him to leave his armor out of the equation. He was rarely quiet when he wore it.

“Then?”

“Then you need to remove the key from around her neck,” Blueleg said reluctantly.

“That key isn’t on a necklace,” Leander observed. “It’s not like I can tug on the chain and get it off her.” He looked at Blueleg.

The man looked bored.

“Oh!” Leander exclaimed. “You’re giving me permission to root around her body to find it when you know full well that she keeps it down the front of her dress.”

“Can you do it?” Blueleg asked blandly.

“What on earth would make you think I couldn’t? Of course, I can. I can slide my fingers between a woman’s breasts. I’ve slid my blade between a woman’s breasts. This will be considerably more pleasant.”

“Have you really killed a woman?” Blueleg asked, shocked. “I thought knights were chivalrous and didn’t kill women and children.”

Leander shrugged. “They dress like men and come on the field of battle like men. When you’re stripping corpses at the end of the fight, some of them are women. Some of the ones I’ve killed have been women. What does it matter when they’re all worm food in the end? It

was their choice. They had as much of a right to a glorious death as the rest of us. Fighting for what they thought was right.”

“Oh...” Blueleg said. The moment hung.

Leander kept eating. Talking about death somehow made him hungrier, hungrier for food, for love, and for everything else.

“Oh,” Blueleg said again. “If you’ve stripped women’s corpses, you’ll be able to take the red dress off Faydra.”

“That’s her name?”

“Yes. After that, leave the dress and the key on the bed and carry her out. There’ll be a balloon waiting for you at the north watch tower.”

“The same tower the Mistress took me when I first got here?”

“The very same.”

“Are you going to steer us out of here?”

“No. The balloon with the basket beneath is a gift. Get her aboard, get aboard yourself, and cut the rope like you would a boat.”

Leander laughed. “That’s impossible. I don’t know how to steer a balloon.”

“You don’t need to worry about that. The balloon is magical and it will take you wherever your heart wants to go. What you want is stronger than the wind, stronger than the rain... even thunderstorms. It will go where your heart points.”

“That easy?”

“That’s how all my balloons work. I’ve rigged yours to follow you.”

“How did you do that?”

“I took a bit of your hair when I was prettying you up. It will follow your heart.”

Leander sniffed. “Well, that sounds wonderful. My Wizard would like to have a man as good as you working for him. Ever considered a career in warfare?”

Blueleg frowned. “I like it here. It’s magical... in its own way.”

“Suit yourself? Help me eat. This is too much food.”

Blueleg broke off a length of ribs. “I thought you wouldn’t offer.”

“Nah. I’m happy to. I guess the balloon is my reward for a job well done?”

“You don’t want the girl?” Blueleg asked. Clearly, he thought she was a much better prize than the balloon.

Leander didn’t answer at first. “What am I supposed to do with her? Where am I supposed to take her? I’m a knight. After this, I go back to the service of the King. I suppose she’s aged out of the orphanage, so you don’t want to drop her off there. I can take her back to the castle with me, but I don’t know what sort of future she’ll have there. It all would have been better if she’d chosen a husband here.”

“She was warned repeatedly that she needed to make a choice. When the maidens come here they are advised to take at least two weeks before making a decision, but to take no more than four weeks,” Blueleg explained. “It’s been four months.”

“Oh,” Leander said flatly. “Can’t I give her one more chance to choose someone?”

“No,” Blueleg said, keeping his voice equally flat. “She’s been given more than enough chances. The Mistress met with her every day and spoke to her about it, but got nowhere. It’s a shame you can’t marry her.”

“If I did, she’d be a widow by next week,” Leander said before ripping a bite full of meat off the bone.

“All the more reason for you to marry her,” Blueleg said with an evil eyebrow swagger.

“Well, I suppose I could get her carrying my child by the end of the week, I’ll die by next week, she’ll die in a few months when she gives birth to the baby. Maybe they’ll both die, her and the baby at once. Then we’d really have a happily ever after.”

Blueleg chuckled. “Well, if it’s not one thing, it’s another. I chose to be a balloonist. I used to be two feet taller. The accident that made me this way was completely my fault and if I had it to do over, I’d try to do the same thing again.”

Leander lifted his cup. “Cheers to my favorite kind of idiot.”

“And cheers to you,” Blueleg said with his cup raised. “To the man who kissed the Maiden and got her to kiss him back. If you could do that, I think you can do anything,”

They clinked cups.

NINE

Blueleg woke Leander with a gruff, "It's time."

Leander yawned, smelled under his arm, scratched his neck, and arched his back as he stood up.

"Still smell like roses?" Blueleg laughed.

"Yup. It's been unusually extravagant." Leander cracked his neck with several horrifying pops.

"Wanna stay?" Blueleg offered with a note of good humor and another of hospitality.

Leander wobbled his hand like he was considering the negatives versus the positives of that plan. "I don't know if you've noticed, but this place has nothing but dudes. One of the advantages of warfare is that there are a lot of women wherever you go."

"Yeah. Don't tell the King about this place. I don't want him coming here to fill his garrison."

Leander snorted. "You sound like you've never met our King. You send these boys out into the world with their trades, right?"

Blueleg nodded.

"The King needs blacksmiths. It's no good to have unarmed soldiers. He needs carpenters too. Whatever you're making, he needs them. Scatter them all over the place! It's a great idea. Wherever his army goes there will be someone he can use." Leander halted his tirade. "Now, give me a coat. I don't want to fly with the eagles in only this shirt."

Blueleg grimaced and got him the coat he needed. It was an old thing, but Leander knew it was at least something they could spare.

Down to the barracks, Leander walked, half thinking that a few men would still be up, planning their tiered fighting matches. However, the place was completely dead when he got there. All the men were asleep. A few of them were so tired, they hadn't made it to their beds. Stocking was one of them.

Leander heaved him up on his mattress with a motion that involved his knee to Stocking's back. It was fairly gentle, but the man weighed as much as a corpse. It brought back unwelcome memories. It wasn't so much that Leander minded slinging corpses. He didn't. However, he minded it a great deal when it was someone he knew.

"Leave them," Blueleg said, coming after Leander. "I'll put the stragglers to bed."

Leander patted Stocking's sleeping head. "I'll remember you, friend. If our paths ever cross again." He touched his face. It was a gesture he'd picked up from handling corpses. It was the move he did to close a dead man's eyes. He always waited to close their eyes until he was ready to set fire to the pyre, cover them with dirt, or toss them over the edge of the boat. It was the first time he'd ever unintentionally done it to a living person.

Raising his head, Leander turned to the Maiden, Faydra. She couldn't be 'The Maiden' in his mind anymore. She had a name and he had to use it.

The moonlight was brighter than it had been the night before and a corner of light from an upper window illuminated the place where Faydra's head rested on her pillow.

For some reason, Leander didn't want to do what was asked of him. There was something fateful about the whole thing that stilled his blood in his veins. If he took his place in the dance, if he moved like he was expected to, perhaps nothing would be the same again.

He took a deep breath and decided to handle Faydra the way he had handled Stocking. He was going to pretend she was a corpse.

He opened the door to the cage and stepped inside. The first step was in darkness and the second step brought him into silvery moonlight.

She lay on her back. Her arm fell over the side of the bed and hung limply. The other was clasped to her chest in a fist. Her chest rose and fell in strong heaves, like she couldn't get enough breath, like her body was fighting an invisible enemy.

It was very seductive.

He didn't know if he'd be able to forget for one second that she was a very live creature or that she was the type of creature that fit together perfectly with the beast that he had become.

He opened her clasped hand, hoping the key would be there and he wouldn't have to search her body further. He knew what would be under her dress and removing the red dress didn't bother him at all. Under that dress, she'd have at least two more layers of clothing, but searching for the key next to her skin was something else. He immediately decided it was better if he searched for the key before he removed the dress. That way, the key would stay in her secret place and he wouldn't have to rifle through all her nightgown's nooks and crannies to find it in the dark.

He tugged her hand away from her cleavage, undid the first button of her dress the way he had seen her do it when she hid the key, and reached in.

Leander's eyes went wide.

What he felt was not what he should have felt. He knew he should feel softness, warmth, maybe even the salt smear of sweat. Instead, he felt nothing. There was the dress and then there was nothing. There was a hollow space where a breastbone should have been—where ribs should have been! He felt a cavern, not breasts, not bone, not even skin. Her body ended and nothing began.

Being a man and not a baby, he didn't withdraw his hand. Instead, he pushed his hand deeper inside her, eventually feeling her clothes that were nearest to the mattress. No matter how far down he touched, he felt nothing. Curling his hand awkwardly, and painfully, he reached under the ribs he could see. Then he started to feel things, the rapid breathing hadn't stopped and Leander could feel the multitude of soft balloons that made up her lungs. Then he felt the hot beating of her heart in his hand like a small animal that wanted to run away but couldn't.

A tear splashed on Faydra's face.

It wasn't her tear. It was Leander's.

He had never felt life like this, beating with wild little thumps. No matter how many lives he saved when he butchered the enemy, life had never been this close to him. It had never been warm or intimate. His breath was caught and his whole body was arrested.

Another tear fell on her cheek and skidded down to her ear.

He got a grip and opened his hand, letting his fingers feel her insides. He felt the sharp edge of the key. With two fingers, he tugged it free from the place inside her. Gently, he removed his hand from the red folds of her dress.

He expected his hand to be red with blood, but it was not. It was clean. Dropping the key into his free hand, he saw the key closer than he had seen it before. It was familiar to him.

The shape and designs etched into it were the same as an amulet the Wizard passed around from man to man in the army. One man wore it for a month and then it was moved onto another man. It was given to the best fighter to wear as an honor. He had worn it himself more than once, but not for two months in a row as Faydra had worn this key. He had worn it for a month two years ago and then another month a few moons ago. What did it do?

Leander looked around the cage for clues. There was nothing there except the bed. The blankets were so large, they fell to the floor. Leander picked up one side and threw it over Faydra to see what was under the bed.

There was a box that ran the whole length of the bed frame. Leander grasped the handles and pulled the box forward. There was a lock on it, but it looked like it had been broken many years before as the hinges were rusted and bent.

Opening the lid, he saw a skeleton dressed in a white dress. He had opened a coffin. The smell was only that of dead flowers. From the looks of the flowers, they had been replaced often and, more importantly, recently. The white dress was the exact fashion as the red dress Faydra was wearing.

A bit of the red dress hung loose over the foot of the bed. Leander turned it between his fingers. For the first time, he thought that the dress Faydra was wearing was red because it had been stained with blood over and over again. How many girls had contributed to the blood that had dyed it?

“What are you doing?” Blueleg asked, standing just outside the cage.

“So, you use the life force of these girls to keep your Ghost Mistress in this world?” Leander said conversationally.

“It would have been fine if Faydra had chosen someone in the month she was told to,” Blueleg said sternly.

“Yes, it would have,” Leander agreed. He closed the coffin and gently slid it back under the bed. He replaced the blankets that covered its hiding place. Then he dropped the key onto a corner of the bed. “I think I wore something similar once. I always wondered how our Wizard stayed alive. Not only is he at least a hundred years old, but he sometimes seems to take mortal blows on the battlefield only to resurface a few days later.”

“So, you’re not angry?” the balloonist asked slowly.

“You and your ghost did not do this to her,” he explained. “She was supposed to fall in love like young women are prone to do. You gave her plenty of reasonable options, but she couldn’t. I wonder if she can live somewhere else now.”

“I hope so,” Blueleg said, his shoulders relaxing.

“Could you look away while I strip her?” Leander asked in a brittle tone. “I’m not sure how much of her body is left. I’m a knight, I can handle corpses.”

“Goodbye then... and thank you. Everything you need is in the north watch tower. Good luck.” Those were the last things Blueleg said to Leander before he disappeared into the night of the castle halls.

TEN

Once Leander was alone with Faydra, he needed a minute before he could move. His breath was shallow and it felt like his heart beat irregularly. He licked his lips and got started.

Her dress had a button placed every finger's width from her neck to her toes. He turned off his brain and got the buttons undone as quickly as he could, which was fast. When he got them all undone, he put his hand under her back and lifted her out of the dress. She was so light, Leander felt a sick ripple hit every one of his vertebrae in succession. It was like carrying half a person. The weight was off balance and Leander argued with himself about how he was supposed to carry her. In the end, he leaned her head against his chest and balled the rest of her up in his arms.

"You know," he said out loud as a way to soothe himself and maybe her if she could hear him. She was still breathing, so she might have heard him. "This is the most wounded I've ever seen a person. If you make it through this, you'll be the most hardcore soldier I've ever seen and you're not even a soldier. You're a seamstress. I've always liked seamstresses," he continued keeping his voice at a tone used to calm a distressed animal. Maybe the animal was her. Maybe it was him. "When I went to a new town, I'd find a good seamstress straight off. Not only can they darn socks and patch the knees in breeches, but they're also a lot faster at sewing people up when the doctors are busy."

He came out of the barracks.

"I always thought it was the best day of my life when the seamstress I found turned out to be a beauty. That must mean that today is the best day of my life. It even feels like the best day of the best days because you are the most beautiful seamstress I've ever seen."

He reached the bottom of the north tower.

"You may think that the red dress made you look the most beautiful because women are always confused about what makes them beautiful, but you look far prettier in this white dress than you did in the red one. White dresses make men insane, did you know? They speak silently of innocence, of openness, like a wedding dress. Men of war love that to counteract all the killing they do. And I've done a lot of killing."

He came out in the open air of the tower. There were no smudges or shapes in the other watch towers. It was a night without a watch, but Leander saw a light shining in Blueleg's window. He paused to see if he could see the old balloonist before he left. Indeed, he saw him. He sat on the table and took an apple from a bowl like he was the freest man that had ever been.

And then a woman in a red dress came across the room and kissed him.

You could only see a ghost's shape from a distance.

Leander turned away. The balloon Blueleg had given him was a large one, much larger than the one he had used to bring Leander to the castle. It blew up in huge gusts. It was white and gray, pink and lavender in patches. The basket beneath it was a basket woven to look like a boat. Leander liked it immediately. He placed Faydra in the bow. There were pillows and a mattress placed there. Leander found a basket with food and water. There was also a blanket, which he covered Faydra with.

He got aboard himself and cut the rope.

The balloon turned and propelled itself forward just as Blueleg said it would and Leander ordered the balloon to the place where he'd left his armor and sword. When he arrived at the spot, his armor was gone. He looked around. Had he got the location wrong? Turning around, something in the moat of shrapnel caught his eye.

Shredded and twisted in the sea of metal, he saw the jewel that had been part of the hilt of his sword. His armor was there too, warped, but still covered with the fresh moss he'd picked up in the forest. Then he saw his discarded clothes torn to scraps among the shredded lengths of his armor.

That explained where they got their metal from, he thought glumly as he hovered over the area.

But then, he saw something that cheered his heart. His helmet was still on the back of the slug and he was slowly escaping.

Leander laughed and ordered the balloon to dip low enough for him to scoop up the helmet, slug, and all.

It was a gross thing, half purple, and half yellow, but Leander didn't care. He'd never had a pet before and he was going to have one now. He turned it upside down and held it in his lap while the slug retracted into the helmet to fill it entirely.

The balloon soared higher to match Leander's mood and the clouds in the night air became the ghosts of armies in his mind's eye. He joined them, floating up in the air as the only man alive.

He glanced at Faydra. She was causing the blankets to take shape. That was a good sign. He pulled the blanket to stretch around him also. He loved it when he was with a woman and there was only one blanket. In the summer, he didn't carry a blanket in his pack for that very reason.

The mountains were nearer than ever. They were the last thing he saw before he joined Faydra in a sleep that encompassed them both.

ELEVEN

Leander's foot brushed up against something. What was it? His leg was next to something warm—long and warm. What was it? Where was he?

He blinked his eyes in the morning sunlight.

He put out his hand and touched what felt like a knee. That jerked him awake.

Faydra was sitting up in the balloon. She was holding the helmet with the slug in it and staring curiously at Leander, her eyes as wondrous as peepholes behind the curtain of life and death. "You could have asked me to marry you before you spirited me away."

He scoffed and scratched his chest. It was slimy. Had the slug been sleeping on him? Maybe he didn't want a slug as a pet after all.

"Ah... I didn't ask you to marry me. Nor will I," he said, quite loath to admit the truth.

"Then what are we doing here?" She lowered her eyelids to half-mast and glared at him.

"The dress was killing you. The Mistress requested a knight from the King to take you away. Castle Travista pays their taxes well so the King was obliged to grant their wish. I was sent to kidnap you."

"That isn't a very smart plan. They could have asked any of the men that were there to kidnap me in my sleep and they could have done it as easily as you. Far easier actually, because they wouldn't have had to travel to the castle in the first place. Why you?"

Leander had taken it for granted that he was called because none of the men in Castle Travista could do what he could do, but when Faydra put it like that, he began questioning it as well.

"I'm not sure," he admitted easily. "You lived there. You wouldn't take off the dress. Why do you think they couldn't get one of those boys to fly away with you?"

She looked smug. "Because they weren't my fated lover. You are."

Leander laughed. "Uh... I think not. I'm not anyone's fated lover, or husband, or whatever. I'm a knight and I—"

"If you're a knight, where's your sword?" she asked abruptly.

"Uh... It got eaten by the shrapnel moat," he admitted with an unpleasant tang in his mouth.

"Where's your armor?" she persisted, haughty as a princess.

"Well, it got eaten by the moat as well, but my helmet is right there," he pointed out, feeling like he had scored a point.

She stretched out her hand and dropped it, slug and all, over the side of the basket.

He leaped to the side to see where it landed, and it landed back in the Spiknit Forest. A few branches broke its fall, and then Leander heard the splunk of it landing in water. He wasn't sure if his pet slug had landed well.

Leander pulled away from the edge of the basket and stared at her incredulously. No words at all on his tongue.

"Forget all that stuff. Nothing is more important than us being together. Now, let's get that guck off you. You can't be my lover if you're filthy," she said, pulling a square of cloth from her sleeve and dabbing at his chest.

He touched her elbow and felt the bones beneath. He hadn't imagined touching her knee earlier. Being out of the dress had healed her, bringing her back to life and limb.

“Look,” he said, putting his hand on her other elbow and putting her away from him with both hands. “They couldn’t have one of the boys from the castle take you away. Things had gotten too far out of hand. They would have discovered that the red dress was the property of a dead woman and that wearing it, and the key too, was taking your life force and giving it to the Mistress. If that young man found that situation less acceptable than I do, he would probably rebel and find some way to destroy the system. They needed an outsider to do the job because they needed a man to take you away who followed orders. I follow orders. All the men think you and I have left under the correct terms of the castle. All is well with them, but you are the one who broke their rules.”

“I did no such thing,” she said hotly, much hotter than she had been when she wore the life-sapping red dress. “They promised me a man. I wasn’t *supposed* to be with any of those men. Our match came about differently than expected, but that proves all the more that you and I are meant to be together.”

Leander objected, “I’m meant to be a knight. Knights are away from home. They don’t take their women with them. It’s better for a knight to meet someone new in each and every town and form a bond there than to always be thinking about one woman far from him. I can’t marry you or anyone.”

Faydra shook his hands off her and looked around the outside of the basket like she was looking for a place for him to drop her off. “There,” she said, pointing. “Do you see that cross on that building? It’s a church. Take me there.”

“Certainly. I hear they’re always looking for nuns,” he said sourly as he pointed the balloon toward the church.

They hovered above a crossroads and Leander stopped to read the sign. One way led to the town, another way led to the church, another way led to the capital (where Leander should be reporting for duty), and the last one led toward the mountains.

“I’ll get out here,” Faydra said crossly as she dropped down from the balloon as gracefully as a bird alighting on the grass.

He leaned over. “I don’t like you going like this. Get back in the balloon. I’ll take you all the way to the church.”

“Don’t bother,” she said, grabbing his collar and pulling him down far enough for her lips to touch his.

The kiss was enough to drive a man mad. She was so soft, so warm, so angry, so close to slipping from the reach of his fingers.

“If you’re my one and only, like I think you are, then it doesn’t matter where you go today or any other day. We’ll meet again and maybe then, you’ll know what you really want. Goodbye.” She gave him one last look in her eyes like scrying pools before she turned on her heel and walked barefoot along the path.

“Let me take you. You don’t even have shoes!” he called anxiously.

“I’m wearing a wedding dress, so I’m all ready for my wedding,” she called over her shoulder. “I’m sure I’ll find a groom along the way.”

“Wait!” he hollered in anger, the balloon coming up behind her. “I thought you were going to wait for me.”

“Yes, but I need a man to care for me today. I think I can find one. I’ll marry someone today, and you can take the chance that I’ll be a widow when you’ve come to your senses. Or maybe

we'll miss each other entirely in this life and we'll get together as ghosts after we've died. What color of vapor would you like to be?"

He groaned as the balloon followed after her like a scolded dog.

Leander got up on his feet, leaned over the basket in the opposite direction, and stared at the sign on the roadside that marked the way to the capital. He determined within himself that he would go to the capital, deliver the balloon to the King and get himself new equipment in exchange for it. That's what he would do.

But the balloon didn't turn. It didn't change directions. It just kept following Faydra.

He dropped to his knees and hung both his arms and his head over the side of the balloon. He damned himself, damned the balloon, and damned her internally before urging the balloon to speed up. The balloon followed his heart and after Leander had held her heart in his hand the night before, he couldn't give her heart up. He wasn't thinking of her with another man. He was merely thinking of her being away from him. That was unthinkable. She was his now.

He caught her around the waist and pulled her aboard.

"What was written on that horrid paper the Wizard swallowed?" he spat.

"What are you doing?" Faydra asked in alarm as she was placed on her bum on the basket floor.

"I can't leave you alone."

"So you'll marry me?" she asked, a bright smile beaming on her face.

"Let's not talk about it. I'm the worst husband you could ask for. I don't know how to do anything but be a hero. You really would have been better off with a blacksmith or a carpenter. I don't have a home other than with the other knights and I have a very serious suspicion I'm going to lose all my teeth much younger than other men. The fact that I've kept them this long is a wonder."

She pulled her cheek and showed him that she was missing a few teeth in the back.

He looked at her. "Let's get to that church. You've got a dress that needs undoing."

Leander pulled Faydra into his arms and remembered to forget all the important things he'd learned from Blueleg, from the Mistress, from Stocking, from the slug, from the King, and from the Wizard, which was a good thing for that moment because Faydra wanted all his attention.

However, far in the distance, the academics who inhabited the Wizard's guts pulled the scroll he swallowed apart and read the last prerequisite of the knight they were to send to Castle Travista.

"Send someone whose line of fate is about to turn."

The academics dropped the note into a pot of boiling acid and the Wizard hiccupped.

"Farewell, Sir Leander. Have at least eight sons and raise them to be knights as strong as you. There's a war coming that's bigger than the ones you've fought in."

"What did you say, sir?" asked the knight that had taken Leander's place as the Wizard's bodyguard.

"I was just telling the glow worms that you'll never get a woman with those scrawny arms. Leander had arms like tree trunks. Build muscle if you're just going to stand there." Then he chuckled to himself and went back to the book he was reading.

THE END

