



# Heart's Key

A NOVELETTE BY  
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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 mote 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.

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