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The Castle Keeper: Part One

Emily Upton

Saxen lay in a flowering bed of bleeding hearts, breathing in the sweet tang of summer earth. The leaves of the large plant kept much of the afternoon heat off of his back, but nothing could stop the heady scent of the warm garden from trapping itself in his nose, making it itch.

He sneezed once, clapping a smudged hand over his mouth to muffle the noise. Slowly, he lowered his palm to the dry soil, his ears straining. In the distance he could hear the soft rumbling of the sea. He could almost taste the brine on his tongue. But near him there was only the cry of a lonely cicada and a few chickadees answering its call. After a moment he loosed a wary breath, adding the sound of his exhale to the near silence.

The boy wriggled forward a few inches to peel back a layer of foliage, allowing himself the smallest of glimpses at the cobbled brick pathway beyond. Nothing moved, but he allowed his fingers to remain there, pinning the stem back. His eyes narrowed in the sudden burst of sunlight as he waited like a cat ready to pounce.

He didn't wait long. Soon enough he heard a familiar whistling, high pitched and punctuated by sing-song nonsense words. Then the scuff of a shoe against stone and the rhythmic tapping of a stick against the low garden walls before the girl marched into his view.

Her hair was black like his, and as curly as his was straight. She was cleaner than he was, too, her dark skin scrubbed until it shone. His light-colored cheeks were hidden somewhere under a layer of grime. Her blue tunic and cream colored breeches, though overlarge - Saxen suspected she'd taken them from someone else's wardrobe - were in pristine condition, while he couldn't be certain of the original color of his own garments. They were just as stained as his palms and torn besides.

She was a princess for whom he had no name. To Saxen, himself nothing more than a street urchin, she was also a signal. With a small smile, he allowed the stem he'd been holding to fall back into place and crawled silently from his hideaway, making sure to drag his near-empty bag with him.

The girl paused in her whistling for a moment and held her stick still, frowning. But when she looked, she saw only a string of bleeding hearts dancing in a light breeze.

Saxen had learned two things when he was quite young. One, timing was everything. And two, there was an awful lot to be learned from the observation of cats.

His mother had always said that he was like a cat. Solitary, for the most part, he made few unnecessary noises. He was always hungry when she opened the pantry door whether he'd just had dinner or not. She could tell when he'd done something wrong, because he'd slink through the back door with mud on his boots and "guilt on his whiskers." But he could always get out of trouble with one piteous look and a tentative hug, and usually get a chocolate studded biscuit out of the bargain, too.

He'd learned later in life that such skills were always useful. As he made his way to the edge of the palace garden where dirt faded into sand, he went over the plan again in his

mind. No one was ever posted on the beach – not even near the two distinct towers of the white palace growing over the cliff. The palace thought no one would be ignorant enough to launch an attack with a cliff face protecting them, giving the enemy the disadvantage. While useful for his purposes, he worried about it. If he was in charge, he would leave no base uncovered.

Another thing about cats was that they had that look of knowing precisely where they were meant to be. Like if someone asked them what they were doing, they would answer that all that mattered was that they knew and it was none of anyone else's business. That was the expression he adopted as he ascended the stairs cut into the rock that rose from the beach. Hands in his pockets, he strode casually to the wall of the nearest tower, avoiding eye contact with any who might seek it – not that the soldiers were paying the closest attention.

Saxen leaned against the wall, crossed his arms and bowed his head. He gazed at the group of guards rolling dice from behind a veil of lashes and black fringe. They sat on a raised dais that led to the palace's main entrance. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a gray tom stretching. With a twitch of his tail, the cat rose and padded behind one pillar and another. He curled around a third before stepping down the short flight of stairs and slinking across the yard.

The cat, Datchet, came to a stop beside a wooden door, hidden discreetly behind a stone outcropping. He sat just within the stone, out of the line of sight of the soldiers who he knew would shoo him away if they noticed, and pinned Saxen with a doleful glare. His tail flicked, beckoning the boy closer. Saxen waited just a few seconds more before setting a brisk, purposeful pace to the door.

Timing was everything.

Saxen reached the door just as it thudded open, revealing a large lady balancing a teetering tray in one hand with an empty pail hanging from the other. The cat darted behind his legs as he moved to hold the door open. He bowed his head as he did so, murmuring, "Allow me to hold this for you, miss."

"There's a good boy," the woman said jovially. She twisted, attempting to see her helper from behind a swaying tower of mugs. He didn't think she managed, since she was forced to pause for a moment to ensure the cups didn't fall. Instead, she sidled past him and gestured with the empty pail. "Get on up to the kitchens, then, or cook will be giving your dinner to one of those darn cats."

Datchet gave the woman a loathsome glare as he darted through the door before Saxen did, bushy tail held at a jaunty angle. Saxen knew well enough to thank the woman before following the tom, making sure to bow his head as he ducked into the tower – the soldiers' noses had made them well aware of the woman's approach, and it wouldn't do to have any of them recognize his features.

The cat waited for him on the first landing beside a cracked old door that led to an armory. He'd explored it on one of his first ventures into the palace and decided they could do without the rusty old dagger that now rested at the bottom of his bag. He'd had little reason to go in there since, and wasn't keen on exploring again. His stomach grumbled its frustration with the lack of food, and from the impatient glower Datchet gave him, he knew the cat felt the same.

You were late, Datchet complained as the pair made their way up the creaking stairs. We could have made it up before the Kicking Lady came down.

“I left precisely when I usually do,” Saxen corrected. He knew most people didn’t have to deal with the words of a grumbling cat. His ability to understand animals gave him that special privilege. “Perhaps she was early. And she didn’t kick you this time, did she?”

Datchet didn’t reply, and instead left Saxen standing on the second landing as he bounded up to the third. The boy could smell baking bread and a roasted ham, and his nose led his fingers to the door handle.

I expect meat this time, Datchet said haughtily. And none of those dry, burnt bits, either.

“Yeah, yeah,” Saxen muttered, turning the knob.

The sheer amount of staff separated palaces from other homes that might be easier to break into. No one ever knew everybody, and it was easier to sneak about simply because sneaking didn’t come into it at all. He walked in looking like he belonged there, and to the huge crowd gathered, he did. No one had ever asked who he was or why he stood in line for dinner. To the master gardener, he was the new boy working for the horse master in the stables, who thought that he worked for the carpenter who was adding an addition to the west side, who was certain that he worked in the gardens. And cook was used to seeing new faces all the time. He came so infrequently that she often forgot his, and he’d learned that she added an extra sweet to his plate with a wink, “to settle him in.”

As large as any kitchen Saxen had ever seen, the palace kitchen still couldn’t accommodate everyone who darted in and out. Three fireplaces lined one wall. Tall enough for him to stand in, their flames licked the wood within with varying degrees of fervor. Spice cabinets and shining metal pots and pans took up most of the other walls. As Saxen strode by one large pot, triumphantly carrying a plate piled with food, he caught sight of his reflection grimaced. He needed a wash.

He carried his plate to the back of the room, opposite the fire places, where most everyone had congregated. There weren’t enough stools at the tiny table that rested there, so nearly everyone stood. It had seemed odd to him at first that they didn’t simply find somewhere else to sit, since he was certain that there were more than a few dining rooms hidden somewhere along the jumble of palace hallways. He’d found that mealtimes for the staff weren’t simply times to get food into their bellies. It was also time to gossip.

Saxen wormed his way through the crowd and found himself wedged between a countertop and spice cabinet. No one so much as spared him a glance as he set his plate down on the counter and picked up his fork. He didn’t make eye contact, either, ostensibly intent on his meal. He’d found he learned the most when he didn’t appear overly interested because the most reliable of gossips kept their voices relatively low, hoping the shouts of exaggerations would cover what they had to say.

He’d learned about the princess in this fashion – rather, he’d learned that it was safe to dart into the palace whenever she appeared in the garden. It meant there was no one to tell her otherwise. Her father and mother would be in court with the rest of the nobles, and her elder brother would join them while the younger brother remained in the nursery, doted on by the attending maids. The other nobles were required to be in court, too, which left no wandering eye to judge the soldiers who abandoned their peaceful posts for a game of cards or dice.

“King’s off again,” said the nearest woman. Saxen didn’t know, exactly, but he thought she was one of the queen’s personal attendants. “Soon as he gets out of court.”

“Her Highness won’t be happy,” said her neighbor, frowning.

“No,” the first agreed. “But if it helps – she’ll understand when she’s older—”

Saxen turned his attention elsewhere. It landed on a man who gesticulated wildly, showering the floor and his peers with crumbs from the bread he held. "More fires this year than I've ever seen - and we've had rain! Magical fires, mark my words. King thinks so too. Why else would entire villages burn to the ground, but not one tree get so much as scorched?"

Saxen waited a moment to see if the man would say where those villages were, but they moved on, and Saxen did too. Another woman passed carrying a full plate, muttering to the man behind her, "A painting gone, frame and all, would you believe it? Just a small one, but even so. And I could swear the silver cutlery is disappearing. If we're not careful, Their Majesties will think we're stealing..."

The boy choked, and his coughing drowned out the remainder of her words. He hastily bolted down what remained of his food, thinking he had, perhaps, been there too long. Remembering to save strips of meat for Datchet, he placed the plate in his satchel and squeezed his way back to the cook, who beamed at him as he approached.

"More, boy? Plenty left," she said.

"Yes, please," Saxen said, and she began to pile bread rolls and cheese onto another plate. He added, "Could I have some milk, too?"

"Of course," she replied with a wink. "I know you growing boys need it. Why, His Highness just yesterday—"

But Saxen didn't wait for her to finish. He took the plate in one hand and the glass in the other and made his way back to the service door. He slipped through it and closed the door behind him, reveling in the relative quiet of the staircase. He looked up to see two glowing eyes watching him, and only when he dug into his bag for the first plate and placed the glass of milk on the ground did he hear a series of clunks as something rolled down the stairs to the landing.

The golden candleholders, complete with white wax candles with wicks barely burned, came to a stop at his feet. He placed the full plate carefully in his bag for minimal mess. Food safely stowed, he bent to pick the candleholders up, marveling. They were probably the most expensive-looking things, besides perhaps the painting, that Datchet had ever collected for him. Indeed, the cat looked pleased with himself - though perhaps that was only because he'd sat down to his meal. His tail curled contentedly around his body as he bent his head to lap the milk.

"Thanks, Datchet," Saxen said, adding the candles to the rest of his haul. They would fetch a good price in the market the next day. "See you later."

Until next time, my friend, Datchet answered. He didn't look up to watch the boy leave.

Several days passed before Saxen could be found lying amongst the bleeding hearts once more, nose to the earth as he rested his chin on one balled fist.

It was late, and the girl had not yet arrived. He considered trudging to the palace with nothing to gauge what might be waiting for him there. Sunset cast a reddish glow over the surrounding bushes, and the birds seemed to have retired for the night. The garden was even quieter than usual in the mid-afternoon heat.

Saxen shifted uncomfortably, stretching his toes. He thought that he should simply return home and await the following day, when he heard the familiar tapping of the stick against the stone path. There was no whistling or singing to accompany it this time. It

seemed the princess was having a quiet sort of day. He crawled forward to peer through a gap in the leaves big enough for one eye to look through. The girl wore a simple purple dress with short sleeves that puffed at the shoulders instead of her usual trousers. Stranger still, she looked directly at him.

He drew back, frowning, waiting for the sounds of her passing, but they didn't come.

The plants trembled and stretched, giving Saxen just moments' warning before the flower stems wound their way around his wrists, his ankles. The binds dragged him forward and up, until he burst from the cover of the leaves with a strangled cry. The heart-shaped petals of the flowers laughed at him, blushing pink, looking into the crinkled honey-colored eyes of the princess who stood before him with her arms crossed.

"I knew there was someone in there the other day. I knew it," she said, looking more pleased than angry to find someone hiding in the bushes. Then her face fell, and Saxen was sure she was going to call a guard. But she only said, "You're not a soldier."

"N-no..."

"I thought you might be. Daddy sends them to spy on me sometimes." She squinted at him. "What are you doing in the bush, then, if you're not spying?"

The surprise of not being apprehended immediately wore off, leaving Saxen's mind scrambling for some excuse that might get him out of the situation. His mouth worked for words, but all his tongue could come up with was, "I'm—I'm a gardener—"

The girl snorted. "No, you aren't. If you were you'd know the plants don't like being hidden in. I know I've told all of the gardeners just that at least three times." She dropped her arms and added, "They don't much like this, either. Will you run away if they let you go?"

The question itself didn't lend him an answer. He was unsure if she wanted him to run off and cease bothering a leisurely walk with her stick, or if she was bored enough to desire a conversation with a stranger. Her features were impassive, too, save for mild curiosity. The only thing left for him to do, then, was to attempt to escape the situation with as much dignity as he could muster.

"I will do whatever pleases Your Highness, of course," he mumbled, lowering his eyes to his feet.

He heard her sigh, and with a flick of her wrist, the plant began to unravel itself, slipping from his wrists. Suddenly he stood in the middle of the bed, leaves flapping innocently against his sides. He yelped, a cry that went unheard by any but the sleeping birds, and jumped onto the pathway.

The girl giggled. "You're funny. What's your name?"

"Saxen," Saxen said immediately, not thinking to give himself a fake one. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. It wasn't as though he had an address listed within the city, if they ever chanced to put his face to the missing decorative accents in the palace.

He lifted his eyes, then, and saw the girl merely looked at him - taking in, he imagined, his patchwork of clothes and the mud on his cheeks. After a moment, she smiled.

"I'm Raya - but you already know that. I'm eight," she said, drawing herself up, "and a half. Daddy says that's too young to practice swords with Gareth. Do you think so?"

Saxen was planning his escape route. As it was, he would have to be a lot more careful in the palace with the possibility of the princess herself recognizing his face, assuming she remembered. Considering her noble title, he wasn't entirely sure she would. And that was assuming she returned from her afternoon jaunts early like she had a few days previous. Perhaps he wasn't in as much trouble as he first thought, then. And besides, everywhere his

eyes darted, he saw only the green of leaves punctuated by the bright yellow, orange, or pink of petals. Everywhere he could go, he'd potentially be affected by someone with an unnatural affinity for plants.

"Well?" Raya demanded.

"I—what?" Saxen asked, blinking at her.

"Swords," she said, gesturing at her stick with the hand that wasn't holding on to it. "Daddy says I'm too young, but Gareth can, so I don't see why I—"

"I can't say I know enough about swords to really—" Saxen coughed, realizing he'd cut her off. "I apologize, Princess Raya."

"That's okay." She tilted her head.

That cool gaze began to make him nervous, and he fidgeted. He was unused to being in the presence of nobility. His old village was far removed from anything so grand. His normal response would be to act as pompous as they were purported to do, but he suspected that wouldn't get him incredibly far with the princess, who had the power to order guards this way and that.

Hoping she might bore of him, he added, "I should probably get back to work, Your Highness."

At this she sighed again—the long, exaggerated sigh of a child who thought she was unrightfully deprived of something. Saxen thought the sigh, if not her slight stature and build, proved she was too young to be practicing with swords of any kind. Saxen's brow moved upward in question as he watched her bottom lip pull over her top one in a pout.

"Everyone says that," she said, brandishing her hands. Saxen barely dodged the stick she held as it whirled over his head. "Gareth always has his duties, and momma's been busy with court while daddy's been away, and Lance is just little and isn't any fun. Hey! You said you didn't know anything about swords. I can teach you. I've watched all of Gareth's practices, or most of them." She bounced on the balls of her feet and added brightly, "I can bring a picnic!"

Saxen felt as though he was unable to say no. He ran his fingers through his dark hair, making it stand up a little. If he said he wouldn't, he imagined she'd argue until he consented - and the thought of food was entirely appealing, so long as her idea of a picnic wasn't one filled with fake substitutes made of baked and painted clay. "Yes, yes we can do that. Sometime."

"Tomorrow?"

"I - yes, alright."

"Do you promise?" Raya asked. She glared at him from under a furrowed brow, precisely the kind of threatening look that his cat used to give him when his mother said it needed a good wash. Saxen glanced down at his left arm where he could make out the faint white lines of a scratch he'd earned on one occasion that he didn't heed the creature's warning.

"Promise," he said. He extended his hand with just his pinky outstretched.

She blinked at it and asked, "What are you doing?"

"It's a pinky swear," Saxen said. "Don't tell me you don't know what a pinky swear is. Here." With his other hand, he grabbed hers and linked their pinkies together, shaking them. "There. That means I have to come back tomorrow, no matter what. And you have to bring a picnic. Pinky swears can't be broken."

Her face brightened as she stared at her littlest finger with a new sort of reverence. As she shifted her gaze to him, her lips broke into a smile, revealing the pearly buds of two incoming teeth. "Okay. Let's meet here after court begins. I'm never able to get away before then."

She spoke as though he knew precisely when court occurred, and perhaps the average kitchen hand did. He simply nodded and resolved to arrive when he usually did, wondering how he might send a message to Datchet and when he'd be able to shake the girl off. He still needed to eat, after all.

She glanced behind her, and Saxen heard it too. Someone farther along the path called her name, obscured by the surrounding trees. She grinned once more and gave him a little wave, whispering, "See you then!" before she skipped off in the direction of the voice.

Saxen turned, but not soon enough. A boy around his age—eleven, or maybe twelve—strode around the corner and met his eyes, if only briefly. He had the same dark skin and dark hair that Raya did, though his was straight and cropped short. There resemblances ended. Where Raya's demeanor remained childlike, her brother appeared to have been groomed into an adult before his time. His clothes were neat and his hair severely parted. He clasped his hands behind his back and peered down at his sister as a father might a small child.

"Who was that?" the boy asked.

Raya shrugged, and Saxen heard before they strode out of his view, "I don't know, do I? Probably a gardener..."

Her voice trailed off, and Saxen hopped off the path once more, striding through bushes that he eyed warily, lest they too sneak tendrils out to capture his wrists and ankles. Soon he faded amongst the trees, and he ran. It would do no good to have the heir to the throne decide he'd like to investigate Saxen's identity further.

Anonymity was the best policy. It always had been.