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Merlusine

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Abstract

I had been wandering for a year when I stumbled on Castra Castle. The month was Mys Rhagvyr, the Year's Wane, and the weather had been cruel and cold, bringing snow and ice and hail

Additional Keywords

Fiction; Merlusine; Janet P. Reedman

MERLUSINE

by Janet P. Reedman

I had been wandering for a year when I stumbled on Castra Castle. The month was Mys Rhagvyr, the Year's Wane, and the weather had been cruel and cold, bringing snow and ice and hail. I had left my post in an outland tavern two months before, after an altercation with a thieving landlord who treated me like a slave and then withheld my pay; but I was regretting my actions now, for my belly was empty and my clothes ragged as a beggar's.

I laughed bitterly as I walked the pinewoods of the lowland hills. I'd gone seeking my Destiny, and found only poverty. My hair was full of burrs, and I hadn't shaved in several weeks. My cheekbones stuck out like swordblades, and my breeks barely stayed up on my hips. I wondered if I'd last the winter -- and then I spied Castra Castle.

It lay in a little hollow, a small place, more a fortified manor than a true castle. Ivy swathed its broken walls, and the crenellations were smashed from the top of the Keep. I hastened gladly towards it. Though a ruin, it would provide some shelter from the elements. Maybe there would even be some herbs left in the garden, so important to all strongholds.

I climbed the wall near the old sallyport; the bar-bican at the entrance had collapsed inwards, its two great drum-towers lying across each other like fallen chessmen. I guessed that they had been broken by undermining, during some Border siege. The Northern wastes had always been violent, troubled lands, and many castles lay shattered like Castra.

Entering the overgrown bailey, I strode toward the Keep -- and then I stepped upon the adder. Hissing, it lunged at me, fangs extended. I tried to slash it with my dagger, but I wasn't quick enough, and its teeth sank into my leg.

The pain was terrible. Even as the snake slithered away, I crumpled to the ground, frightened and confused. I had seen men die of snakebite before, and such deaths were not pleasant. I didn't know what to do. Swelling had already begun to puff my calf and turn it dark. I slashed at the twin incisions with my knife, but I knew the poison could be removed only by sucking -- and my mouth could not reach that part of my leg.

"Gods help me!" I moaned, but it was no god who came to my aid. Out of the keep came a woman, a vision of loveliness in her blue-and-gold raiment. She was tall, fine-boned, pale, with long silver hair caught up with a jet clasp. Her eyes were

dark blue, and full of concern. "Are you hurt?" she asked in a voice thick with a foreign accent. "I heard you cry out."

"A snake..." I gasped, pointing to my leg.

She knelt down, white with consternation. Taking off her corded belt, she wrapped it tightly round my upper leg. Then she took my knife from me, cut a cross on the bite mark, and then began to draw forth the venom into her own fair mouth. When she was done, she spat on the grass and wiped her lips. "You will live," she said simply.

I stared at her, amazed. I had not expected a lady, obviously highborn, to help a filthy wanderer from the wilds in such a manner. "Who are you?" I asked.

"Merlusine is my given name, though few call me that in this land. Here, they call me Merla."

"And you live in this castle?" I gestured to the ruins.

"I do. I -- I am hiding from my husband, Lord Tier-nan. He abused me sorely while we were together." A shadow darkened her face. "I told him I didn't want to marry, but he insisted, and my brother was all too glad to throw me to him."

She glanced away. "But I'm sure you don't want to hear my woes. Let me help you into the Keep, where you may rest and dine. You look half-starved!"

"What about the serpent?" I asked. "Shouldn't we search for it and kill it? It's dangerous ..."

"No." She shook her head. "It may give us some protection against Tieman. He seeks to punish me."

I struggled to my feet, and with Merlusine's strong arm around me, I limped into the castle Keep. The tower was still in fairly good condition, its floors and roof complete, if rotting. Only a few holes broke the sturdy beams of the conical parapet.

Merla ushered me into a chamber still bearing a shabby splendor. She tossed some logs onto the fire that burned on the hearth, and motioned me to a chair. "I'll prepare something for you to eat," she said. "What is your name?"

"Ilmarinen," I replied. "Ilmarinen Ap Ilmater."

She glanced keenly at me. "That's a noble name."

"Well, I'm not noble." I leaned back, stretching my long legs before the hearth. "I'm from Theldry-on-the-Moor, a humble little place ..."

She shrugged. "No matter. Lord or not, you're welcome to stay in Castra Castle as long as you wish. I'd appreciate a man's company -- you can help me with some of the chores."

I was startled. "Aren't you afraid, taking in a stranger from the wilds?"

She looked at me again, a subtle smile on her lips. "I have ways of protecting myself, Ilmarinen," she said, "but I'm sure I won't have to use them on one such as yourself."

Weeks passed in Castra, pleasant weeks. Merla had cultivated herbs and vegetables, and had also stored the meat of coneys and other beasts, so we ate well. I even fashioned myself a bow of yew and went hunting in the nearby forest, where I brought down several deer.

At night, we would sit before the fire and Merla would sing songs of her homeland across the sea, and play on a little golden lyre. I felt content for the first time in years. We were both outcasts, Merla and I -- she a runaway wife, I a free-thinker who was scorned in the village -- and it made a kind of fellowship between us. Gradually, despite our differences in rank, I began to love her ...

However, I was afraid to speak of my feelings to her. Long ago, ere I'd left Theldry to wander, I'd heard a voice in the woods telling me to take none but a lady of rank. Strange and fey as the voice had been, I had obeyed; I was as celibate as a holy man, which few folk understood, for I am, according to the village maidens, quite comely to look upon. I was too shy to tell Merla of my chaste ways lest she laugh at me -- and so our lives went on, together and yet apart.

But then one day things were changed forever. A rider came by night to Castra Castle and rattled on the portcullis, which I'd fixed and put into lowered position in the span of masonry that still stood behind the frontal towers of the ruined barbican. Drawing my dagger, I went to see what the stranger wanted. He was a very daunting figure, huge, armored, his face invisible in his helmet. I almost fancied I could see the gleam of red eyes behind the visor. "Be off with you!" I ordered. "We allow no strangers in Castra after dark!"

He made a disdainful noise. "Go, serf, and fetch the Lady Merlusine at once!"

"I am no serf, and I'll not disturb Merla. She's asleep."

"Know you not that she has abandoned her rightful lord?"

"Yes, I know all about it! And I think she was right to have done so!"

"You are a fool!" growled the knight. "Bring her to me, or I shall smash my way in!"

I made to walk away, fearful, but determined not to allow the knight entry. The knight's hidden eyes bored into my retreating back. Then he raised a mailed fist and shouted words of sorcery. A blinding green flash lit the night, and the bars of the portcullis ripped apart as if they were straws. The knight thundered into the inner ward. He drew his sword. "Where is she?" he growled.

I raised my dagger, willing to die to keep him away from Merla -- but then, to my horror, she came flying out of the keep, her tresses unbound, a thin nightshift frothing about her ankles. "Don't fight him, Ilmarinen!" she cried. "He'll kill you! I know him: he's not even human! My husband's wizards have conjured up a dead man to capture me, because Tiernan's too craven to get me himself!"

"Lady Merlusine." The knight lurched toward her on his dark charger, his attention rivetted on the slender woman before him. Taking advantage of the situation, I leapt up behind him and toppled him to the ground. We rolled in the long grasses, his huge, iron-clad limbs bruising and crushing me.

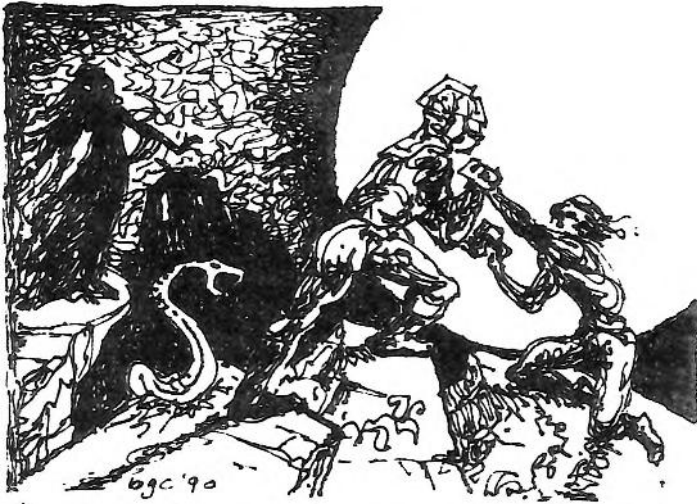
Out of one eye I could see Merla looming above us, hair a wild cloud. Her arms were raised, her eyes wide, reflecting the moon. I struggled with my opponent's visor, seeking to rip at his eyes in a last attempt to survive.

But as I pried the metal away, a serpent, the same miserable adder that had bitten me, darted from the grass and leapt into the knight's helm. A scream echoed through the courtyard, and the knight clawed at his unseen head. I could hear hissing and snapping, as if the serpent in the warrior's helmet had gone absolutely mad. It horrified me to think of anyone, even an enemy, slashed time and time again by those deadly fangs, and I took a faltering step forward.

The knight roared and stabbed at me with his sword, wounding me in the side. Cursing myself as a fool for trying to help him, I collapsed, red and black swirling before my eyes. Merla gave a high, shrill scream, fear and anger combined, and the hissing of the adder increased tenfold. The knight gave one terrible bellow and then toppled onto his back. Angrily, Merla ripped off his helm. His head, whatever it had been like, was now black ash, nothing more. The troublesome adder slithered away without touching Merla, though it passed within an inch of her white hand.

"Merla ..." I clutched at her hem. "Are you hurt ..."

She dropped to her knees beside me. "I'm unharmed. You're the one who has been injured. Oh, Ilmarinen, you were so brave tonight. Here, let me staunch the bleeding, and take you inside the Keep. I'll take good care of you, I promise ..."



I lay sick for many days, no -- weeks -- as the wound in my side festered. Merla tended me as lovingly as a mother tending her child. I watched her leaning over me, and my heart was full of love. Finally, I gained the courage to look into her eyes, and I realized her clear blue gaze mirrored my own desires. I no longer felt shy or embarrassed. I wanted her, and I was determined that when I was well, she would be mine, and I would be hers.

Yet it came to pass that when I was still weak and feverish, she came to me. The chamber was dark, unlit by even a single taper. Merla stood in the doorway, dark against the darkness. I heard the sound of swishing silk as her gown fell to the floor; her feet made no noise as she glided to my bed and leaned over me on my pillows, kissing sweat from my brow. "You must never gaze on me unclad at night," she whispered, running her hands through the length of my dark hair. "Not even by torchlight. Promise me."

"I promise." I would have promised her anything.

"And never question me, if I disappear for a time."

"I won't. I trust you, Merla. Gods, how I love you..."

Her mouth closed over mine, and my arms circled her waist.

A sudden shriek from Merla shattered our bliss. She wrenched away and fell heavily to the floor as the door burst open and shapes filled the room -- shapes of armed men. They rushed around her, circling; I saw the flash of swords ...

I became a screaming madman, thrashing and flailing at the attackers. One pouchy, tired face looked into mine, and then a gauntleted hand slammed across my face and I tumbled down into darkness.

Hours later I woke on cold flagstones. The tired-looking man loomed above me. A torch burned in a bracket on the wall, and I could now see that he was terribly scarred, his face marked by some kind of bite. "Where is Merla?" I cried. "You've killed her, haven't you? You're her husband, Tiernan!"

"I am indeed Tiernan," he said wearily, "but do not glare at me as if I were a demon! I've raised no hand to any woman, save Merlusine. Gods, and how I loved her once -- before I learned the truth."

He dragged me to my feet and hauled me into the chamber where Merla and I had planned to make our love complete. There, to my horror, lay Merla's body, still wrapped in fallen bedclothes. Leaning over, Tiernan turned her on her back, and then I saw that only her torso was a woman's. Her lower half was that of a serpent. Tiernan pushed back her upper lip, and I saw fangs, a snake's deadly teeth.

"No!" I cried, falling down and throwing up.

"Yes!" He grabbed my hair, forced me to gaze at her. "Look what you would have lain with. A Lamia, a serpent-woman! How do you think I came by these scars on my face, boy? I spied on her while she bathed one night, and saw her true form in the light. She attacked me, then fled."

He released my hair and I clambered up, sick at heart. I still loved her, despite the truth. I could not imagine her as a monster -- even though the evidence lay before me. "What would she have done to me?" I gasped, half sobbing. "If you hadn't killed her."

"Kept you as her plaything. Hatched little Lamiae eggs in secret. Then, when she drained you of your strength -- as such creatures always do -- she'd have devoured you, like any other prey."

I gasped. "But she *loved* me!"

"Perhaps. If a snake can love..."

I wept bitterly into my hands, not caring if he thought me unmanly.

He shook his head. "Well, let this be a small comfort -- she couldn't help herself. It was an old family curse. She was driven by instinct, not malice."

"She couldn't help herself." I muttered it over and over again. The thought indeed brought some comfort. I turned to face Tiernan, composure regained.

I looked him in the eye. "She couldn't help herself," I said firmly -- and then I struck him a mighty blow that sent him tumbling onto the beautiful body I had desired so much. "She couldn't help it -- but you killed her anyway."

"I saved your life!" he gasped, but I did not listen. Yanking on my tunic and breeks, throwing a cloak round my shoulders, I left Castra Castle and fled into the wilds.

That winter I lived among the pines like a wild man or a hermit-priest, though by the time the thaw came, I had recovered my sanity and continued on my wanderings. But never in all the years that stretched ahead could I look upon a snake without a shudder of fear -- and a sigh of remembered sorrow.