

THE QUEEN'S GUARD

FICTION

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Running the needle through the layers of fabric, she dresses the warrior mice of her kingdom in sombreros, armed with rapiers and long swords. Some even dawn decorative masks to conceal their true identity as honorable, private denizens serving her majesty and her majesty's people. Between stitches something falls in the closet. Just as she begins quickly considering if anything of value could have been damaged, her son peeks out from behind the door. Wrapped in the thin cuts of cloth from previous quilting ventures—put aside, never discarded—the little boy appears to his mother like a collage that has just started to be realized and put together; intricate tapestries of abstract images, patterns of angler fish, colorful candy skulls, and wise quotes from Yoda posed to the cast of Monty Python. Smiling, she looks back at the table to discover that she has bled through the cotton filling all the way to the pearly fur of her decorated military officer. As natural as kneeling down to tie one's shoes, she bites off a bit of packaging tape and bandages herself while walking over to help unravel her son.

"What are you doing in there?" she asks, chuckling to herself while unwrapping him like a last-minute birthday present.

"I wanted to see what you were doing. I tried to be quiet. I'm sorry."

"Is that all? Here. Come look at this," she says, taking his hand and leading him to her sewing table. "This is what I'm doing now. What do you think?" He pulls himself up over the edge, standing on his tippy toes and almost immediately recoils, falling back against his mother's legs.

"M-mommy, what's all that red stuff? Did the mouse get hurt?"

"A little bit of blood among friends."

“Is it yours?” he asks, turning back to look up at her.

“The lupus honey. . . it’s hard to feel,” she says, offering her injured hand for him to examine.

Her son takes a moment to look at his own before running his small fingers across her palm. “Mom, can you feel me?”

She grabs his hand and kisses him on the head. “Of course. Sometimes it just takes a little more,” she says, looking back at the bloody mouse. “But it’s all in service. No ruler should expect to never bleed a little for their people. Do you understand?”

“Yes. I think so,” he says, looking ominously to the drying pool before him.

“Good. Now go play with your sister downstairs. Mommy has to finish up some work here.”

“Okay,” he says walking to the door before erupting into a sprint around the corner and down the stairs. She exhales and returns her focus to the stain formed at the center of her company.

“What to do with you now,” she says, picking up the mouse in question. Loose threads still tethering it to the quilt. “It would be a shame to dismiss you without ever letting you see combat.” She stands the mouse up on the table and wiggles its sword. “Maybe PTSD at the sight of seeing your leader’s blood? Not only that, but to have been drenched in it! What is the regulation for a matter such as this?” She brings the mouse up, face to face with herself. “The answer to that could very well determine your fate soldier. If you stay and continue to serve your people with such a terrible condition, I wonder what that says about your leader, about the government that not only encourages but seemingly demands you subject yourself to even more torture! Is that the world I am building here with you?” She knocks her head to the side and waits, as if anticipating some grand reply. “If you would choose to retire now of your own volition it could resolve these concerns.” She waits another moment. “You abstain from decision?” She lowers her head to the mouse. “Then the future of this country’s stance towards its military personnel must be considered with the deepest forms of thought,” she states with utmost sincerity, raising her head and pacing about her studio. “Am I creating a world where the people have no safety from the horrors of their mind—especially if those issues were the result of serving one’s fellow citizens?” She stops just before the window, looking out to the mail truck making its way down the quiet suburban street. “These are the questions—and the likely conclusions—they will consider when they look at

you among your compatriots if you stay.” Pressing the tip of her finger against the glass she feels the pressure build beneath the tape. As she pushes harder, she watches the blood rise up her finger. Closing her eyes, she places her entire palm against the glass wondering which she’ll feel first: the cold from the outside or the warmth seeping from within. After some time she lowers her hand, smacking her lips. She looks at her finger and sucks the escaping blood through the tape. “Not out of consideration for what the eventual spectators might determine from you, but for the good of my own heart...,” she says, jovially, “...I order you to retire—honorably discharged, Sir Mouse. Thank you for your service,” she declares, proudly resting him on the windowsill. Stepping back towards her table she realizes she’s become tangled up herself. Gripping the fine strands in one hand, she tears through them with her teeth. The forgotten bundle would soon become harp strings for Snoopy playing a tune for Charlie Brown and the Peanuts.