

ALL THE PRETTY LADIES

by ellerean

When word got out about the pub, no one hung around the barracks anymore. It was a small wonder the barkeep didn't throw out the stinking lot of unwashed soldiers, but as long as they paid, she was fine to stay open past last call. And pay they did—countless coin slid over the bar, which swiftly sank into her apron pockets.

The mead was fine enough, but Gatrie was here for another reason.

“Look at this view!” he cried, nudging Shinon in the ribs. “I love this place!”

Shinon lifted an eyebrow. “Looks like every other dingy place to get a drink.”

“Oh, Shinon, you know what I mean. Look at *them*!”

If Shinon had cared to look up, he would have noticed *them*, even without Gatrie's urging. The civilian ladies were like nothing they'd seen in many months: skin clean, hair free of other people's blood, smiling. They weaved through the soldiers, dying to hear stories of battle and bravery. Gatrie had changed into more casual clothes, but now wished that he'd kept on his armor. It was a rookie mistake; everyone knew a uniform was a turn-on.

But Gatrie was undeterred. Leaving Shinon to his mead, he took a slow walk through the pub. Fellow soldiers said hello in passing, people he'd barely spoken to in the barracks who became friends after a few drinks. His shoes peeled off the alcohol-soaked floor with each step. More than one person bumped into him, splashing varieties of drink on his shirt and trousers.

He stopped short.

She stood out from the rest, a beacon of light across the sea. Shining blond hair, a smile that illuminated the dark. She hadn't noticed him yet, but he knew it was only a matter of time. Gatrie approached slowly, fearing he would scare off the delicate creature. Adorned in shades of purple, colors that flickered like silk in candlelight. She held a stein in one hand, but it didn't look cheap and dirty like everyone else's. She made it look delicate as she laughed, a tinkling of bells in his ears.

I'm in love, he thought, and hurried his steps.

She was surrounded by a group of ladies who paled in comparison. They seemed to part as he approached, clutching his heart, for he feared it would burst. Up close, she nearly matched him in height, a perfect match.

"Pardon me, lovely ladies," he said, bowing to each of her friends. He turned to the lady in purple, with the cascading blond hair, with perfect teeth behind a perfect smile. "My lady," he said, with a small bow. "You are a beacon of beauty in this dismal place. May I ask the honor of your name?"

Her laugh was teasing, eager to play along. "What a gentleman!" She raised her stein. "Isn't he a gentleman, ladies?" The friends giggled, which made Gatrie flush. "My good sir," she said with a bow of the head. "You can call me Heather. And what's your name, handsome?"

"Gatrie!" His voice squeaked, and he cleared his throat before starting again. "My name is Gatrie," he replied, placing a hand over his heart.

Heather smiled. She took a sip of her drink without breaking eye contact. "Tell me about yourself, Gatrie."

The words came in a rush. It was so natural talking to Heather, sharing his mercenary work and how they got to be fighting in a war. She tilted her head as she listened, nodding at all the right parts, gasping when he told the tale almost dying on a job (but did not get into too much bloody detail). He pointed out his good friend Shinon, who still sat in the corner of the pub; he wanted so much to introduce her to Ike, but the boy was probably in an important war meeting.

“Do *you* attend these war meetings?” she asked.

“Of course!” he replied, though he had yet to attend any strategy meeting.

“I’ll tell you what,” Heather said, leaning closer. “My friends over there are waiting for me. But if you’re still in town tomorrow night, I’ll see you back here?”

“My lady,” he replied with a slight bow. “War is unpredictable, but fate has brought us together! It would not tear us apart so quickly.”

He reached for her hand at the same time she raised it, waving to her friends across the pub. Gatrie swallowed his disappointment, yet smiled when Heather bid farewell. It was impossible not to reflect her radiance, watching her skip past him, looping an arm with her friend’s as they head for the exit. Gatrie felt like skipping, too, as he floated to the other side of the pub.

“I’m in love!” He grasped Shinon’s shoulder. “Heather—a beautiful name to match a beautiful girl. No, a real woman!”

Shinon jerked away from Gatrie’s hand, then tipped back the rest of his drink.

When Commander Ike announced camp wouldn't advance the following day, Gatrie wasn't surprised. He'd *known* it was fate, after all, smiling while everyone else complained. The pub would be packed again, and he would not miss an opportunity to express his love. His only worry was his lack of wardrobe away from home.

"I wish I didn't smell like... *this*." Gatrie sniffed under one arm, then the other, debating which was the relative better side.

Shinon leaned back on his bedroll, watching with mild curiosity. "Y'think anyone will notice in that dump?"

Gatrie raked his fingers through his hair, which stood up decently well in its unwashed state. "You're coming out, right? I want you to meet Heather!"

"About that." Shinon sat up. "I'm not sure about that one."

"Oh, Shinon, you're always so negative. You'll *love* her. Just don't try to steal her from me!" He giggled, a high-pitched squeak that made Shinon frown.

Gatrie hadn't had time to wash a shirt, nor found anywhere along the way to pick flowers like he'd wanted to. The smell he could mask—Shinon was right; it *was* a stinking pub—but he regretted that he had nothing to offer the lady. He would, of course, buy her a drink, a simple act he hadn't done the previous night.

Though they arrived early, the pub was already crowded. Shinon attempted to sit at the bar right away, but Gatrie grabbed his arm to steer him away. He *knew* Heather would be there. He wouldn't miss another chance for Shinon to meet the girl of his dreams.

He spotted her immediately. Heather was at the farthest end of the pub, raising a delicate hand to get the attention of the barkeep. She was resplendent, a shock of color amongst the din. Gatrie would swear he could smell her sweet scent the moment he came inside, a burst of flowers that matched her smile.

Gatrie hadn't noticed that Shinon was now missing, ducking into the first vacant stool he saw. He zeroed in on his soulmate, raising a hand above the crowd, calling Heather's name.

When she finally looked up, her shock was quickly replaced with a smile.

"Barkeep," Gatrie called as he approached, "put the lady's drink on my tab." He didn't wait for a response before turning to Heather, grasping both her hands in his. "Heather!"

"Gatrie, I'm... surprised you're here." She slid her hands out from his grip. "I thought the army was moving out?"

"It was a strategic decision." He leaned an elbow on the bar. "But it means fate has brought us together again!"

She picked up the stein that appeared on the bar. She glanced over Gatrie's shoulder, but when he followed her gaze, he didn't see anything. He scanned the area for potential suitors, other men lining up to sweep her off her feet. He startled when she placed a hand on his forearm.

Gatrie was surprised how calloused her palm was, not smooth and dainty like he imagined. Not a royal lady, then, he surmised; perhaps she had grown up on a farm, and was working her way up the social ladder. He would have to work that angle, then. Being with a mercenary was a step down, but maybe—

“Gatrie?”

He sat bolt upright. “Yes, m’lady!”

Heather leaned in closer. Her breath was hot on his ear, and his eyes widened. He hoped Shinon was seeing this. He would never believe it later, that a lady like this was whispering to him. His cheeks colored when her breasts pressed against his arm.

Heather said something, but he couldn’t hear above the electricity of her touch, the warmth on his ear. He nodded like he understood, trying to figure out a way for her to say it again. *I can just ask!* he thought. *She loves me, so she’ll forgive me!*

“What?” Gatrie said, maybe too loudly, as his mouth was near her ear, too.

She laughed softly, a sound he wouldn’t have heard if they weren’t sitting so close. “I said,” she spoke directly into his warm ear, “I’m into ladies, too.”

Gatrie frowned. He sat back on his stool, staring into her lovely blue eyes. Now, he wished Shinon *wasn’t* there, almost certainly watching the exchange with curiosity. Gatrie stared at her mouth as she smiled, revealing a row of perfectly white teeth.

“Wh— What?”

Her hand fell away from his arm. He still felt the warmth of her breath, the imprint of her breasts on his ribs. He glanced around the pub, trying to remember if any of the ladies were with her the previous night. He found Shinon instead, seated down the bar, staring directly at him. Gatrie looked away. He was hearing words that didn’t register into a complete thought—*friends, sweet, luck*—and without thinking, he grasped Heather’s hand. Her eyes widened in surprise.

“Maybe I could...” His voice trailed off as she shook her head.

“No, sweetheart.”

He dropped her hand just as quickly. “I-If you’ll excuse me.”

Gatrie tried not to bolt straight out of the pub. He passed Shinon without looking at him, passing everyone who must have been laughing at him. He pictured all of them hearing their conversation, knowing the words she’d whispered in his ear. He pushed the door open and gulped in the cool, night air.

Curse fate! he thought, leaning against the wall. *Why would it bring me back here at all?*

He stared up at the sky. It was a clear night, studded with thousands of stars. *Romantic*, he thought, swallowing a lump in his throat. He listened to the mingled sounds of joy inside, unintelligible conversations and laughter. He thought of the men talking up nice ladies, or the *ladies* talking up nice ladies...

“Gatrie?”

His thoughts were interrupted, his name spoken in a voice he imagined he’d hear for the rest of his life. Sweet like sugar. Heather leaned beside him, propping one foot against the wall. She stared up at that romantic sky.

“It’s a tough life when you’re searching for love,” she said. When Gatrie didn’t reply, she turned to face him. “But I’ve got a proposition for you. We’re here for the same reason, right?”

Gatrie stroked his jaw in thought. “I guess we are.”

“I know how you feel,” Heather said. “I meet a lot of girls who aren’t interested, if you know what I mean.”

Gatrie watched the starry sky, waiting for her to go on, but then his eyes widened. When he turned toward her, she was smirking. “I think I get it!” he said.

“If I find a pretty girl who’s not interested, I’ll send her your way. If you do the same for me.”

Gatrie laughed, clapping his hands. “I love this idea! You’re the smartest girl ever! I love you, Heather!” He cleared his throat. “As a friend.”

Heather grinned. “As a friend.”

They sat at the far end of the pub, a couple of brimming steins before them. Gatrie shared tales of his romantic misadventures, and Heather of her near-misses. They watched the ladies coming in and out of the pub. Heather laughed as Gatrie declared each of them his soulmate, with every hair and eye color his favorite, every height perfect for his height.

She lay a hand on his shoulder, leaning in to whisper. Gatrie couldn't suppress a giggle, but for a different reason than he was used to. “Let me teach you a thing or two about women,” Heather said.

Gatrie beamed, raising his stein in salute.