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Title: The Princess and the Maid

I tumbled off my seat as our coach jerked and stopped suddenly. We heard the coachmen shouting outside in the night. Mother looked at me, her face pale. “Laerin—”

With a crack of the wooden bolt, a blue-cloaked man burst into our carriage. Mother and I screamed. My servant maid Ryn stepped in front of us.

“Don’t move, princesses.” The hooded stranger got no farther when Ryn threw herself at him. Drawing a hidden knife from the folds of her skirt, she slashed his arm. The man grunted and swung his own knife at her, thunder crackling outside. “Who are y—”

Barely evading his swipe, Ryn attacked again, snarling and stabbing. Huddled against the far side of the carriage, I marveled at her grace and courage.

Suddenly the cloaked man cried out, his hand flying up to his shadowed face. It came away red and wet, and he threw himself with renewed vigor at my maid.

“Ryn!” I cried. As the intruder’s head swung my way, Ryn’s leg was a blur of motion. The next thing I knew, he had toppled out of the open door of the carriage. We heard his grunt and held our breaths, for the bolt was useless now. After a moment, I opened the door. I could just make out a shadow slipping beyond the far edge of a manor. I exhaled.

“Ryn!” I gasped. She lifted haunted eyes to mine and winced.

I turned to Ryn, but the amazed smile forming on my lips faded when I saw her. Ryn

leaned against her seat back, eyes half closed and shoulders slumped. She was clutching one arm tightly, blood trickling between her fingers.

I winced at Ryn's uncovered wound as I sat down on a stool by her infirmary bed. Tears leaked from Ryn's eyes and she shuddered. With her uninjured arm, she started to reach for my hand. Then she hesitated.

Quickly, I grabbed hers instead. With a little squeeze, I asked, "Are you ready?"

Ryn set her teeth and nodded.

I held her hand tightly as the needle pierced her skin. Her head was turned away from the wound, eyes fixed on a distant point above my head. On the third stitch, her mouth opened and she screamed.

I caught my breath, for where her tongue should have been, there was only a jagged stump.

Mother raised her head from her soup. "We might ask your wizard friends for help, Clide."

Father's arm tensed around my shoulders. "Grettalin, they're not—not exactly friends anymore."

Mother pulled her lace shawl tighter around her shoulders. "I know. But our soldiers obviously can't handle trained assassins." She sighed. "The war against Rikken killed all our best men, it seems."

"But we won," I protested, stabbing a noodle.

Father sighed. "It was close. Without the wizards, we would have lost."

Mother took a sip of wine. "Remind me why they..." she paused, "why you had to leave, Clide."

Father lowered his eyes. “I couldn’t fulfill my duties when I—when I joined the royal house.”

I plucked his sleeve. “Father? Why can’t *you* just protect us?”

He blinked a few times. “When I went from their midst, I lost the thunderbolt hand guard given to me when I became an apprentice. With it went my powers of the sky.”

I leaned against him. “I’m sorry.” He squeezed my shoulder.

After a sympathetic pause, Mother said, “Clide, I see no other way.”

Father sighed. “Nor do I. Shall we send Laerin? She’s skilled in diplomacy.”

I straightened.

“That’s fine. Should we send soldiers?”

I shook my head. “Only as far as the entrance to the forest. From there, I’ll be safe enough with a manservant.”

When we reached the council room, the wizards were already assembled. And yelling.

“You actually think it’s worth protecting the daughter of the man who left us for *them*?” a blue-cloaked wizard with a red cut on his face asked. “He didn’t even complete my training.”

“He was cast out, Trayun,” the doorkeeper wizard grumbled, stomping inside and taking a seat by the other red-robed wizard. “He didn’t have much choice.” He folded his arms. “Let’s start.”

I sat next to the doorkeeper wizard, my manservant beside me.

“Yes, let’s,” a blue-cloaked answered turning to me. “So, *princess*. Why should we even consider protecting your mother and her traitorous husband?”

I took a breath. “As you may know, a cloaked and hooded stranger and several others attacked our carriage as my mother Princess Grettalin, and I, along with a handmaiden, were traveling to the theatre last night.” I paused and took a steadying breath. “Thankfully, our handmaiden defended us and drove him away. But who knows if she will be able to next time?”

I looked several of them in the eye. One blue-cloaked wizard slouched defiantly. Trayun avoided my gaze, gently tracing a new scab stretching down his face. I continued, “That is why I—Lady Laerin—come to you, seeking your protection until we can catch the hooded attacker. This is your chance to show my grandfather the king your respectability and importance to our kingdom!”

“We don’t need to prove ourselves to him,” a blue cloak retorted. “We’re not on the side of the royalty.”

The doorkeeper wizard glared at him, but I nodded. “I understand that the idea of protecting my mother may not appeal to you. But consider that you will be paid generously. In addition, our family will remember you in kindness and gratitude.” I sighed conclusively. “Please consider lending a few wizards to defend our royal family until the hooded outlaw is arrested. It will mean a lot to us.”

After a pause, Trayun spoke. “I think we should.”

The next morning, our family gathered in the garden to formally meet the two shielder wizards. My grandparents the king and queen sat at a separate table.

Ryn and I sat at one of the glass tables. I noticed that the hand of her undamaged arm kept straying to the dagger hidden in her skirt. “Your dagger has a pretty hilt. How did get it?”

Ryn hesitated, then pulled out her writing book. *My commander gave it to me when I was promoted.* She looked at me. I furrowed my brow. *Our town had its own force in the war against Rikken two years ago. I needed the money for my family.*

“And that is where you learned to fight.” I nodded as the pieces clicked together. “Are you the main source of income for your family?”

Ryn sighed. *My father died when I was young; my older brother left home a few years before.*

I touched her hand. “I’m sorry.”

Ryn’s eyes met mine, and she inclined her head again.

Hearing voices outside, we rose. Two soldiers opened the gate to let in four wizards, then closed it again.

“Thank you for joining us,” Grandfather said.

“Of course, Your Majesty.” The doorkeeper wizard bowed. “I am Ram, and this is my apprentice Eron.”

Grandfather nodded and turned to the blue cloaks.

“And I am Trayun. This is my apprentice Yert.”

Beside me, Ryn sat down heavily.

Then Grandfather nodded at Father. He cleared his throat and announced, with gestures to indicate to whom he referred, “King Erei, Princess Grettalin, Lady Laerin, and I am—”

“You’re Clide, my former master,” Trayun interrupted, “who scorned our association and traded it for the luxury of royalty.” One hand closed around his other fist as a cloud passed over the sun, darkening the garden.

I glanced at Ryn, but she was staring at Trayun as if her eyes would pop out.

“Trayun—” Ram placed a hand on his arm, but Trayun shook it off.

“You betrayed us.” Trayun’s voice dropped to a harsh whisper. Lightning lit the sky. “You betrayed me.”

Grandfather turned to Father. “What—”

Father blinked rapidly. “Trayun, I—”

“No. It’s too late.” Thunder crackled.

Ryn sprang from her seat, drawing her dagger and tackling Trayun to the ground. But Yert still stood. Lightning flashed and Father stumbled to the ground. Eron’s hands glowed red for a moment, and fire consumed Yert. But in the next second, Yert brought his hands together, cupping the thunderbolt hand guard he wore, and a gush of rain doused the flames.

Ram waved his arms. “Laerin, get yer family back!”

“Get back!” I shouted. As I ran to assist Mother in dragging Father to the far side of the garden, a whoosh sounded behind me. A wall of fire six feet high, stretching through the entire garden, separated us from the wizards.

And Ryn.

I bit my lip and sprinted towards the flames, leaping as high as I could.

Heat.

Light.

Pain.

I stumbled to the ground, my skirt on fire. Then the fire disappeared.

“Go help ’er!” Ram shouted hoarsely, gritting his teeth as he sustained the flaming wall.

I staggered up and dashed to Ryn, who struggled desperately beneath Trayun's weight. "Get off her!" I kicked Trayun's stomach. He grunted, wide-eyed, and collapsed beside Ryn. She hastily wriggled free and flung herself on his back, her dagger pricking his neck. I grabbed one of his flailing arms and forced it down. "Kill him!"

Ryn kept her blade against his neck but made no move to press it deeper.

Trayun stilled. "You wouldn't dare to end the life of your older brother, would you?"

His free hand crept towards his belt. Unseeing, Ryn trembled, withdrawing her knife.

Trayun snatched at his belt and rolled over, toppling Ryn from his back.

"No!" I yelled, grabbing his dagger hand. He twisted away. I found myself clinging only to a leather hand guard with a thunderbolt etched in the palm.

With a flash of light, a stream of fire struck Trayun square in the back. Eron raced from Yert's prone body towards us, but no flood of rain came to douse the flames. Trayun screamed and fell to the ground as white-hot fire consumed him. In a few moments, nothing was left of him but blackened ash on the ground.

Ram dropped his flaming wall and walked over to clasp Eron's arm.

Ryn stood and ran away from the wizards back to the table. I followed her and put my arm around her shoulders as she buried her head in her hands and wept.

Grandfather called from the far side of the garden, "Is it safe?"

"Aye, yer Majesty." Ram stomped towards us, Eron by his side. The two parties—wizards and royals—met beside our table.

Ryn stilled and raised her head. She and I rose in Grandfather's presence, arm in arm.

"We killed 'im, Yer Majesty."

“Grandfather,” I cleared my throat, “Trayun was the hooded stranger. He had the same blue cloak, and the scar on his face was where Ryn cut him.” Ryn tensed and I squeezed her closer.

Grandfather nodded. “I commend you all for your tremendous courage. Ram and Eron, you’re welcome to stay for a couple of hours.” He coughed. “And, Laerin, I’m sorry, but your—um—”

Mother began to sob, leaning into Grandfather’s side.

“...your father died, Laerin.”

I blinked, stunned.

This time, Ryn squeezed my shoulder. I stumbled to the far side of the garden, dropping to my knees beside Father’s still body. Ryn followed me and put her arm around my shoulders.

Weeping, I buried my head in my hands and leaned into her side.