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The Princess And Her Hero

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"Who's there?"

The youth stirred himself; his eyes flickered open, but nothing changed. Blackness shrouded him; he might as well have been blind. Beneath his cheek the rough stone flags of his cell were cold and gritty and stank of urine and his smashed hopes. He listened.

Silence.

Another dream, he thought languidly, and closed his eyes, although it made no difference here in the eternal night.

"I ask again," the whisper came, barely audible, "are you there?"

A voice! The youth twitched; on his stomach the new scabs broke and bled. The only time he heard anything down here was during the interrogations. Yet with the interrogations came the unbearable white light. But this time there was only darkness. The youth raised his head, cocked it first to one side then the other.

"Well?"

He couldn't be certain of the voice's origin; it seemed to issue from the back wall of his cell. He propped himself up on his good arm, shook his head to clear it, then brushed away grit and the threads of soiled straw that clung to his bruised cheek.

"Answer me!"

Rolling over onto his knees, the youth shuddered, then curled into a crouch, feeling a sudden surge of vertigo and nausea. A minute passed, and the youth's discomfort receded to a fiery point in his rib cage. *Broken*, he thought, breath hissing from between clenched teeth, heart racing. He pressed his fingers lightly against his side, and pain surged through him. He gasped.

"Did you speak?" Fear laced the voice. "Who is that?"

The youth clutched his side and rocked silently. The pain retreated in diminishing waves with each of his breaths, his quiet moans rising and falling with his motion.

"I hear you!"

This time the words were loud enough for him to determine it was a woman speaking. Struggling to his feet, he ran his right hand along the rough stone, feeling for an opening, a chink or a grate perhaps, a crack through which a voice might pass.

"Is this a trick? It shan't work, you know." The woman's voice fell off in a quavering pitch; he could hear her fighting for control, could sense her rising hysteria. "I beg you, speak!"

The youth remained silent; this wasn't his first visit to the cells, and never before had he spoken to -- or, for that matter, seen -- another prisoner. Much less a woman. This was a special place, a place of extremes and madness. Not for ordinary criminals, no, but for high-ranking spies and saboteurs, for the overly ambitious dukes and their would be king makers. A place to torture the mind as much as the body. A place of darkness and silence, warded by men who carefully bound their feet with felt to stifle their steps, who wore goggles with eye-distorting lenses to penetrate the dark, and who, out of a perverted pride in their calling, cut out their own tongues with a knife to ensure they wouldn't inadvertently break the silence. Nor were there the noises of a normal prison by which to measure the passage of time: the coughs, the raspy breaths, the weeping, the flatulent defecations. The cells were staggered, separated by clever twists in the corridors that defeated the passage of both sound and light. Prisoners had not even the cries of each other's misery for company. Only darkness, silence, and the weight of their own sins --

-- except during interrogations. Then they brought the noise and the light. The other extremes. Deafening, soul-wracking sounds and blinding, dizzying white light, obscuring those who hid behind it as they vouchsafed pain.

"Answer!"

Up and to the left. Moving his hand in that direction, he barked his knuckles against a jutting stone, and swore softly; a large roach, or young rat, leapt out reach.

"I heard you! What did you say?"

Then he found it, a narrow opening where the mortar had crumbled, no wider than his small finger, no longer than the span of his palm. He stood fully now, and found it was at shoulder height, and that if he inclined his head slightly, he could hear her distinctly.

"Please!" Louder, until it seemed to the youth it should be impossible for the tongueless wards not to hear it.

"Be quiet," he hissed sharply. "If they hear you, they will send for the torturer." Leaning against the wall he felt another unexpected spur of pain in his side. He squeezed his eyes shut as jagged flashes of light coloured the inside of his lids.

"...you?"

"*What? What?*" In his agony, the youth had missed her words.

"Who are you?"

He hesitated, unable to remember which name he had given. "No one," he said at last.

"But --"

"It is better not to use names here."

"Oh." Her voice was small, chastised, but, the youth noted, calmer. She said nothing for a few breaths. Then: "Will they?"

"Will they what?"

"Torture me? They haven't yet, you know."

The youth was taken aback; he had thought such interrogations inescapable. "They will."

"I heard. But I wanted to believe they were only rumours. Until... until your cries."

The youth felt shamed; how loud had he cried for mercy? "You heard me?"

"Not very well, at first. But then I found a stone in the wall that felt different from the others, and that's where the sounds seemed to come from. So I pushed, and it moved just a little, and I wiggled it, then started digging at the mortar until it finally came loose. As soon it fell out I could hear, well.... Everything."

Everything. The youth thought back to the bright torture lights, the cloying voice of his torturer, the feel of steel slivers slipping under his skin, his eyes so dazzled he couldn't even see his own body or the implements worked upon it. He suppressed a shudder. "I'm sorry that you did."

"The machines... the sounds. I covered my ears."

"They bound my hands so I couldn't."

"Did they... are you hurt?"

"I am alive."

"Was it bad?"

He traced the circle of bloody incisions on his abdomen and arms. "Worse than sometimes, not as bad as others."

"You've been here before?"

The youth experienced a sudden spasm of fear; he cursed his carelessness. Did they suspect he was meant to be here? Was she someone they had planted to trick him? If they discovered the number of times he'd been here, the countless nights he had woken in the dank cells under different names and faces, they might begin to suspect....

"Twice," he whispered back, his voice controlled as he could make it. "In different lives."

She seemed to take the hint; for a time there was silence.

She sighed. "You snore."

It was true. Ever since his father had broken his eight year-old nose in retribution for a spilled tankard. "Again, my profoundest apologies."

"No. I find it comforting. To know someone's there."

"My pleasure. If you like, I shall endeavour to snore more loudly."

She laughed, a throaty, becoming chuckle. Then, abruptly, a question: "What do you look like?"

The Youth was caught off guard; he hesitated, finally answering, "Like a beggar who's been beaten soundly."

"That's not what I meant. Describe yourself, height, weight, all of that."

The youth hadn't seen his reflection in months, and the image that had stared back at him then was a dim memory. "No," he said, "I don't know any more. I don't want to know. Thin, dark -- empty, maybe."

"Yes," she said slowly, "I think I know what you mean. I feel that way too -- at least since I've been *here*." He heard a faint scraping sound, and realized that she must also be leaning against the wall, and had just shifted her weight. "Lord, I wish I could see!"

The youth laughed bitterly. "Not much to see, really. And what is here is better left unseen."

"It's never better giving in to the dark. Not knowing...."

"They will come and make you afraid of the light. Make you pray for the darkness and silence to return. For oblivion." The harshness of his own voice struck him, and he immediately regretted his words.

"No." Her voice caught, it's anguish plain. "Never."

He felt impelled to say something to dull the edge of her pain, but had no words of comfort: it was not a service he had often been called upon to perform. Nor was it likely to change anything. His lips moved to form a sound, to simply make her aware he was still there, still listening, but he hesitated when he heard a small noise. At first he believed it to be the snuffling of a nocturnal creature nosing for a morsel in the narrow conduit between them, but then he realized it was her.

She wept softly.

Again he felt a strange compulsion to speak, but had no words. He called out softly, but she didn't respond. Soon, the sounds of her distress faded and silence and darkness closed in upon him again.

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Awake now, remembering her dream of the market. Moving through the noisy, jostling crowd, past brightly covered boards spanning rickety supports, boards laden with semple silks from the South, brocaded velvets from the North. The details of her walk down the metalworker's row seemed too vivid to be real: pots and kettles, ladles and spoons, hung in gleaming rows, rattling clamorously against each other in erratic gusts of wind; and, near the wharf, the lower market too, where foodstuffs warped unpainted boards and assaulted the nostrils with a thousand battling odours, all bowing, finally, to the reek of the morning's catch rotting dreamily in the sun, the smells so strong her eyes watered. The noise, the sights, the stench, the swirling richness of it all stupefied her in her dream -- as it never had that day. Were these proper memories? Or was her mind elaborating, perhaps drawing on other times, other experiences, to fill in details, to ameliorate the dark night of her cell?

But the memory of him, that was real. Lounging carelessly against a piling in his courtier's attire, surrounded by his servants, young and darkly beautiful, an intense, pensive face, staring at her without shame. A recollection as sharp as the tip of the silver dagger her father had given her. How could she have been so naïve?

She shuddered, wrapped her arms around herself, tried to dispel the remnants of the dream by opening her eyes. Then realized that they were already open. The darkness suffused her with an incalculable despair. Even the torture light would be preferable to this. A sob escaped her.

"Hello!" The voice was almost inaudible.

"Is... is that you?" she asked, then feeling foolish for asking and ashamed of the quaver in her voice answered, "Yes. Still here."

"I heard you... moving, and thought maybe..."

"What?"

"I don't know." All at once he sounded sullen. "Nothing."

"I... I had a dream," she said, not wanting to anger him, suddenly afraid of estranging the voice in the darkness.

"Dreams can be bad. They bring false hope. Best not to indulge false hope."

"I...I suppose not."

"If you spend your time thinking about what's outside, who may be waiting for you, how you'll exact your revenge, it will surely creep into your dreams. Put these thoughts aside. Try to think only about what's here. The time will pass more quickly."

"But... but there's nothing here."

"Ah," he said, his tone strangely playful, "that's perfect, then. What better to start with than nothing? A blank page, if you will."

"A blank page?"

"On which to create a new story."

"Pages are white. Here I see nothing but black."

"From the outside a blank page appears white. But consider the unwritten story the page contains. To characters inside that story, all is darkness until the story rises around them."

Despite herself, she smiled at his fanciful notion. "Perhaps. For those with poetic souls. But I haven't the imagination."

"Have you never day-dreamed about how your life might have been different?"

She had. Only not for years. Other matters had consumed her. Staying alive at court for one. A tricky business in the best of times. But now....

Perhaps another life, any other life, would have turned out better. How would she rewrite herself now? she wondered. But the moment she thought this she found herself flung back into real memories too painful to bear. "I can't."

"You can," he said. "Let me show you how easy it is." For a moment there was silence, as if he was gathering his thoughts. Then he began: "In my story I imagine you to be tall and slim, with high cheek bones and grey eyes like an overcast sky. Your hair is dark brown -- no, raven -- braided and falling to mid-back."

She sucked in her breath sharply; reaching back she felt the braid, unconsciously began to roll it between thumb and forefinger. How could he have known?

"You, a princess, loved a prince unwisely, and now pay the price -- as do all who love imprudently. Together, you plotted to overthrow his stepfather, the iniquitous Regent, but were discovered before you could affect your plans."

Was he a madman, saying these things of the Regent? Even in jest, his words spoken aloud at court would have meant a dozen daggers in the night....

"Ah, and here's the twist princess: your punishment was doubly harsh, for your lover was captured too, but disavowed you and blamed you for clouding his mind. His father, believing him, pardoned him. Despite his betrayal, you still love your untrue prince. You cannot help but do so. It is tragic, this noble but misguided affection, that shackles you as surely as the chains of this prison...."

"Love," she said bitterly.

"Yes, love and desire," he continued. "It makes people do things they ordinarily would not. Things that make no sense without the wash of love rewriting all reason." He lowered his voice. "It makes traitors and liars and thieves of us all in the end."

The softness of his tone startled her; he spoke with understanding and compassion.

"Well then," he said too quickly and with forced joviality, "It's your turn now. How -- or rather who -- am I in your new story?"

"You?" she shook herself from her thoughts, and called to mind the mental picture she had formed of him. "You're tall, tall for a man from the city, but dark and broad like they are too. Your face is round and your brow is high leaving your eyes in constant shadow, giving you a

brooding semblance. You have the look of one who thinks too much, who watches -- rather than is watched -- from those hooded eyes of yours. About you is an air of hardened experience, though you are relatively spare of years. This is born, one might speculate, of an acute awareness of what the world is, and an understanding of what it might have been."

"Why, it's as if I were standing next to you!" he exclaimed, though she sensed a note of mockery in his voice.

"Well, that's the way I see you," she said. "Would you like me to continue?"

"Oh, most certainly!"

"Though you feign indifference, you work quietly and diligently in an attempt to oust the Regent, knowing in both heart and mind the Regent's greed and indifference spells disaster for his kingdom and all who live there." Perhaps she was saying too much. But it was too late for regrets. "You too were betrayed by the untrue prince to whom you vowed secret allegiance, and though you fled the Regent's wrath, your noble house was stripped of its rank and privilege, forcing you to travel disguised as a common man to carry your struggle to the people you seek to liberate."

"And you, my Princess," he whispered. "Where do you fit into this story?"

She could feel the blood rise to her face. "Why, naturally every hero must have a princess to rescue, a foolish and vain one perhaps, but good-hearted all the same. And what better way to find her than to pass as a common thief, have yourself arrested and put in a cell adjacent to hers so that you might plot your escape together?"

"A goodly story, Princess." He sounded sad. "And with more truth in it than you know." His voice became fainter; she knew he had moved away from the slim channel that connected them. "But you bring us back to this place without hope." She pressed her ear against the opening, and still it was difficult to make out his words. "Perhaps we shall start a new story tomorrow."

"Wait! Have you been sent to save me?"

"Sweet dreams, princess," he whispered.

"Will you not save me?"

But she heard nothing more, not even the least stirrings, as if her hero had never been.

#

"Sloppy job."

The muted voice jarred her into wakefulness. "Wh... what?" she said through the fog of sleep.

"On your feet!"

A different voice this time, shriller, but still distant. *The opening*, she thought. *It's coming from his side*. She'd fallen asleep sitting against the wall, and now her back ached fiercely and the muscles of her legs were knotted, making it difficult to straighten.

"He's not moving." The first voice again, deep and melodious. "Is he alive? Not much fun in torturing a dead body, you know."

She pressed her ear to the hole in time to hear a thumping noise, like the sound of a heavy grain sack falling to the ground, followed by a prolonged groan. A sickening feeling spread in her stomach.

"Yes, definitely alive."

"What a mess. Who did this?"

"The new man, Milord. Couldn't make him talk."

The deeper voice *tchhed* disapproval. "Whatever do they teach them now? Well, then, let's get started."

"Right."

"You there, boy. Can you hear me?"

"No, *Milord*." It was the youth's voice; the sneer was plain to hear.

There was another thump and a groan again.

"He's listening now, *Milord*."

"Insolent lad, eh?"

"Yes, *Milord*."

"I like 'em feisty. Well, let's see if this will catch his attention." Metal sounded on metal, as if the jaws of monstrous scissors were opening. Gears ground as a machine whirred to life, it's parts groaning like a wretch.

"Ah, *Milord*," the shrill voice said, "You have his undivided attention now, I believe. See how his eyes went wide."

"Yes. It's an attention grabber all right."

"Torture me if you wish." Though his words were bravely proffered, she heard the smallest waver in his voice. "I am not afraid of your toys."

"No doubt."

The metal screeched and the youth screamed as if his insides had been turned out.

"Now then, who sent you?"

"N... no one." The youth's words came in gasps, as if he could barely catch breath enough to speak them.

"Right-o."

The machine roared to life, and the youth howled again; then he gasped, a prolonged guttural moan, reminding her of something utterly different that she could not at first place; then the memory returned abruptly, the recollection of passion, and bodies intertwined, the same heavy breaths and low moans she remembered of her lovemaking the night she had been betrayed.

"Now then, lad, what say you? As much pain as you feel now you may also experience pleasure, and then more. Are you for it?"

"Go to Hell," she heard the youth say.

"I see. Give me a hand with this, will you?"

"Certainly, *Milord*."

She could hear the squeak of wheels as something large was moved forward. A whirring noise, like blades slicing the air. And then the unmistakable snap of bone.

The youth screamed, and screamed again. She felt his pain it as if his torture fell on her too; her fingers clung to the edge of the opening, nails straining, then breaking, against unyielding rock, her head swirling until she feared that she would lose consciousness. Please, she thought, *do not let him die*.

"Wait!" the Torturer shouted over his raucous machine. The whirring diminished, settled into a complacent hum. The youth's whimpers could now be heard distinctly in the background. "There's something not right. I say! Be a good fellow and hold his head up...."

She heard the sounds of a brief, half-hearted struggle, then a gurgling noise. A loud, surprised yelp filled the air.

"He bit me! The catamite bite me!"

"Oh, do be quiet and hold his head steady... Well, what have we here? Why, this face seems familiar, yes it does. Different hair color, yes, and no beard, but familiar all the same. Why, I do believe I've served you before, have I not?"

Her heart faltered. *He is undone*, she thought, *he is discovered*. She wanted to shout, to scream, "*No! He is not the one!*" But her terror struck her dumb, locked her jaw, paralysed her tongue.

Then, as if in a dream, she heard laughter, the booming laughter of the Torturer.

"Why my good warder, we're not the ones playing with him, but he with us! Aren't you, my incautious lad? What's the matter, no coin to pay for your pleasures tonight, hm?"

Pleasures?

The whirring diminished, then stopped all together. She heard a low animal noise, a feral snarl, but it was choked off almost before it began.

"Remove the machine, warder."

"I don't understand, Milord. Aren't we going to torture the spy?"

"No, I don't think so."

"But, Milord--"

"You fool. He's no enemy to the Regent. There's no conspiracy here." The torturer chuckled. "He was telling us the truth. He works for no one."

"I don't understand."

"He knew that when he whispered in the ear of our agent he would be turned in. Sent down here. Those are moans of pleasure, not of pain. He likes it here. The darkness, the silence. The lights and sound and expert pain only we can deliver. Look at the tent in his pants!"

The rough cell wall tore at her cheek as she slipped to the floor, though she felt it only as a distant sensation. *Please, my hero, don't let it be so.*

"Leave him. He will not struggle now. See how he scowls at us, but he is passive as a suckling lamb, aren't you, my poor, twisted boy? It is no good now that we know. His desire has flagged...."

#

"Princess?"

As soon as she heard his whispered entreaties she began to search the floor of her cell, slowly and methodically groping in the dark. The stone was heavy, and she grunted as she worked; after three tries she discovered the proper angle and pushed it resolutely into the opening. Wadding straw and packing it with the detritus she scraped from between the flags on the floor, she filled the cracks, jamming it as deeply as her fingers would allow until the voice on the other side was an indistinct murmur.

Later, they returned for him, and took him away, whether to death or freedom she would never know.

She waited patiently for the torturer.

Hours, or perhaps days, passed.

When the torturer arrived, and the light went on, blinding her, she welcomed it. She let her past go, falling into the whiteness of the light like it was a blank page on which her new story would be written.

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