

# **A Guide to Guarding the Princess**

We, the council, welcome you to the illustrious ranks of the Princess's Guard. You are now the only active member. Isn't that exciting? We hope you'll find the castle comfortable, even if you are one of its only two occupants. It used to be the king's summer home, until the princess's tower was added, of course. Please, make yourself at home for your year-long stay.

If you need any supplies, put in a request with the kitchen staff. They leave at one p.m. every day after they've prepared dinner and left it on the fire. They won't come back until after dawn, and they refuse to deliver any meals to the princess: that's your job. The cleaning staff will stop by every third day, from ten to one, to make sure things don't get too dusty, but they're not allowed into the tower. You have the only key to the princess's tower, so you'll have to clean it yourself. We hope no one told you this was a glamorous job. The staff will be assembled when you arrive and can show you to your living quarters, just next to the tower door, close enough that you'll be able to hear if she breaks out.

It has been a few years since the princess's last escape attempt, but you're required to wear your sword at all times and keep her locked in her room at the top of the tower even during the day. The door at the base of the tower should also be kept locked, excepting when you're bringing the princess her meals. Do not enter the tower at all after sunset.

Don't be alarmed by what these pages contain. It may seem like we know an impossible amount, but it's merely from comparing all the past guards' stories with what we know about you from our extensive background check. And some magic. But really, this guide should be quite useful to you. Just please don't read ahead.

On the first day, the princess will hit you. Hard enough to hurt but not hard enough to draw blood. Just hard enough that for a moment you won't know which way is up and which is down. It comes before you introduce yourself but after you set the breakfast tray down on the elaborately-carved wooden table. She's not one to let food go to waste. We would have the previous guard accom-

pany you on that first day, to prevent her from getting the jump on you, but we want you to learn right away not to underestimate the princess. She's stronger than she looks. Pay attention to her tells, the way her green eyes narrow and the muscles under her pink sleeves tense just before her arm draws back. You learn the lesson the hard way, but the next time she swings you'll duck. Dust yourself off, clench your jaw, and say, "It's nice to meet you, too." Depending on your tone, you might just get a smile out of her.

On day two she'll pretend to forget your name. Though you're the first person she's met in a year, when you say, "Good morning, Princess," she replies, "Good morning, Sir. What was your name again?" She might even forget your name again on day three if it's cloudy. She hates gray days. Try not to take it too personally. Just put in a request for some blueberry scones, and when you bring her one with breakfast, she'll address you by name when she thanks you. She is fond of sweets. Start to make a list of her likes and dislikes and this year will be much easier. And no, you can't have the old guard's list. It might contain some errors, or the princess might have changed her mind about something, and besides, it's not like you have better things to do than make lists. But here's one more freebie: The princess hates it when anyone comments on the deep scratches that criss-cross the stone walls of her chambers.

On day five she'll figure out your secret. It's okay, everyone who volunteers for this position has some sort of secret, and she's had over a decade of practice at discovering them. It takes a certain kind of soldier to agree to spend a year locked in a castle with only a cursed prisoner princess for company. Some recruits are desperately curious. They've heard the stories and want to see for themselves exactly what happens when a king crosses a witch. Some recruits are trying to prove themselves, and this is the only chance anyone will give them. Some recruits are running away from something, and think a year in near-solitude is just what they need to escape.

She figures out which type of recruit you are. She figures out what you're running from, and why you want to prove yourself. She's smart, and she's bored. It's a dangerous combination. She notices when, while reaching for her breakfast, she accidentally elbows you in your not-quite-flat chest, and you jump away and try to discreetly adjust your binder. She notices how after that you change into a metal chest plate before serving her dinner. She hears the way your voice gets much higher-pitched when

she surprises you; she sees the lack of stubble on your chin. She watches the way you walk, and despite how hard you've worked to perfect a masculine walk, to take the swing out of your hips and to add confidence to your shoulders, she sees through it. She's always been good at seeing through people, even before she was locked away. She doesn't say anything to you though, or at least not right away. A girl that's lived in a guarded tower for most of her life knows a thing or two about secrets.

On day seven she'll start talking to you. Up until this, she has just been cordial, at most a "Hi, how are you?" here and there, but now she starts a conversation. She tells you last year's guard was a real bore, but you seem to have potential. She asks why you volunteered to guard her, and you lie and say you want a quiet year for a change. Remember, as you're learning her tells, she's learning yours, so try not to be too obvious.

To distract her you might take notice of her bookshelf and ask her what her favorite book is. She walks over to the shelf and pulls out a fat, well-thumbed tome. "It's a tragedy," she'll say, "But I find it realistic." Then she asks you what your favorite book is and while you've never been a big reader, always preferring to run around outside and swing a wooden sword, you tell her you've always loved a collection of Arthurian stories your mother read to you. She smiles at you.

"I liked the adventure, and the knights of course," you say.

"Lots of tragedies in those stories, too," she says, before handing you her book and saying you should borrow it. Read it, late at night while wasting candles and trying not to cry onto the pages. Press your thumb against the watermarks left behind by the princess's tears and take note of when you cried at the same sections. Wonder at the parts where she cried, and you didn't. Wonder why the princess likes this story where the lovers die at the end, and no one lives happily ever after. Go to the castle's library and find a copy of the book your mother read to you, and bring it with you when you return the princess's book to her. She asks you if you liked her book and you nod but say, "It was too sad."

She nods. "Doesn't it give you the nicest excuse to cry?"

A few days later she returns the Arthurian storybook with notes that make you laugh in the margins of her favorite stories.

On day fifteen you'll finally give in to your curiosity and break the rules. This is the longest any guard lasts. It's okay, you won't mean to. And we haven't lost anyone in years. You lock the princess in her tower room after dinner, as usual, then you walk down the

spiral stone steps, one hand trailing against the wall, the other keeping the empty dinner tray tucked under your arm. You swing the tower door shut behind you, lock it as usual and go to your sleeping quarters. You think about how the first night sleeping there you kept waking up, imagining you heard her knocking.

But on this night you eat your dinner and watch the sun set and feel curiosity brushing against your legs like a cat begging for table scraps. You think of all the rumors about what the princess turns into at night. Another soldier told you while you were drinking together that she's a werewolf but two ales later he said she turns into a troll. Your mother's neighbor thinks she doesn't actually turn into anything, that her parents just wanted an excuse to lock her up. Calling the king a liar is treason, but we won't tell if you don't.

First, you tell yourself you just need to stretch your legs before you fall asleep. But a walk around the empty castle somehow ends at the tower door. You can't remember if you really locked it or not, so you tug at the handle. You did lock it, but you find you can't let go of the cold brass. You press your ear against the wooden door, but you can't hear anything. You desperately want to hear something. You tell yourself you won't even go all the way up the stairs, that you'll stop when you hear something.

But you don't stop until you reach the top of the stairs and are standing outside her door, breathless. You stand there, for a moment, not hearing any weird noises, wondering if your neighbor was right. Then the screaming starts.

It's worse than any scream you've ever heard in your life, including the time in training when a knight's horse missed a jump and fell and landed on the poor fellow and broke his leg in two places. Worse even than when you went with your mother to help your aunt give birth and the labor went on for nearly a day. It is raw and somehow sounds both low and high-pitched at once, like a small girl is having a screaming match with a grizzled giant.

The tower is built so that you can't hear the screams all the way from the bottom. It's designed so that no one has to hear them. You may have wondered why the tower was the only new part of the castle. It was built just for the princess.

The screams have you torn between wanting to run down the stairs and away and wanting to unlock the door and do whatever you can to ease the pain that must be causing them, but you don't do either. You stand there, frozen, until you hear a new horrible sound: claws on stone. Then you shake yourself and bolt down the stairs two at a time until you make it to the tower door and slam it shut behind you. Your fingers shake as you grab for your

keyring and lock it. It seems like you can still hear screaming, but that's just your mind playing tricks. You slump against the door and stay that way for a long time.

On day sixteen you'll ask her about the curse. Her eyes narrow and a muscle in her cheek jumps before she grins at you. "My father fucked the wrong witch, and now I turn into a monster every night," she says brightly. "What else is there to know?" Her voice is a bit too loud for the cramped tower room. You wonder if she misspoke, if she meant to say "fucked *with*" but you don't say anything right away and so she turns away from you and says, "You can go now, I'm going to take a nap."

On day seventeen when you bring the princess her breakfast, you may notice she's been crying. Whatever you do, don't comment on it.

On day twenty-two she'll tell you about the curse. She waits until you're about to leave with the lunch tray before saying, "I don't blame the witch, not really. Not like everybody else does, anyway." You turn around and cautiously ask her what she means. She explains what really happened between the witch and the king, how when she was ten the king hired the witch to work in the castle, to help the healers and do whatever else came up. How the witch fell in love with him, then into bed with him. How when she became pregnant the king had told her to either get rid of it or leave the castle, forever. How the witch had screamed at the king, the queen, and the princess the day she left, cursing, "If you won't have this child, you don't get her either," and pointing at the princess. She tells you being cursed felt like being dunked in ice water.

"At first they thought I would get sick and die," she says, and shrugs. "But then they just wished I would."

She tells you about the first time she changed, that night at sunset, how it felt like her skin was peeling off. How she killed three maids and a member of the royal guard before they managed to lock her in the trophy room. How they figured out she was still just a girl, most of the time, until night when she slept in the locked trophy room. How she had killed three more knights several months later when she had gotten stronger and the trophy room door weaker.

She tells you about how she tried to run away several times before being locked in the tower, to find her own way to break the curse, or maybe to just find a place far enough away from

people that she couldn't hurt anyone. About how she doesn't fully remember her time spent as a monster but she does remember the feeling of blood splashing against her skin. About the way the change doesn't always hurt, so she doesn't always scream. Sometimes she sleeps through it completely, and the only way she knows she changed is the bits of broken stone under her fingernails in the morning.

She doesn't tell what she looks like as monster. "Hairy, with claws, I think," she says, and explains she's broken every mirror she's seen while changed. "And I get bigger. Much bigger."

You want to hug her, as she tells you she blames her father, not the witch, but don't. She doesn't want your pity. You should sit across from her at her table and let her look at her book instead of at you when she talks. When she's finished just nod and thank her, and when you bring the dinner tray later, pour her a slightly larger glass of ale, and when she says thank you, know that it's not just for the drink.

On day twenty-five she'll tell you that you look dashing in blue. The next day when you catch your tunic on a nail and have to put in a request for a new one, know that you're allowed to specify which color.

On day thirty-one she'll pick a fight with you. It won't be over anything important, perhaps the way you set the breakfast tray down too loudly, but when you slam the tower door behind you it feels like you've been doing sprints and your head hurts. She's very good at arguing, even about nothing. And she's very good at being sullen after an argument, as you notice when she knocks over her dinner plate and claims it was an accident.

On day thirty-two you'll wish the king would find room in the royal budget for a damn dragon already. Let one fire breathing beast guard another.

On day thirty-three you'll bring a scone with her breakfast, and she'll break it in halves and offer you one of them with a smile that says she's sorry. Smile back and take it.

On day sixty-seven you should request a deck of cards because if you do she'll teach you how to play poker, despite your protests that you already know how to play. She tells you that you're no good at bluffing and she's going to teach you. The two of you spend nearly two entire days playing poker, using buttons as currency

until they're all on her side of the table and she suggests you wager articles of clothing instead.

"What?" you ask, even though you heard her clearly.

"Come on, just a couple of hands," she says. "You have the advantage with all that armor on. We can stop once your tunic's off." At that you stand up too quickly, knocking your knee against the table.

"That's not appropriate, Princess," you say, and won't see her biting her lip as you slam the door behind you.

On day ninety-eight she'll tell you a secret after she's had two glasses of ale and you're sitting across from her at the table reading one of her books of poetry. "I wouldn't mind changing into a monster, really," she says, tapping her fingers against her glass, "If only I was able to control it at all." You set the book down and give her a slight nod.

"It's just—I hate not having any control over my body every night. If I could only control what I change into, maybe something bigger even, or when I change, well. It wouldn't be so bad, I think."

You think of your own body that you've worked so hard to change and nod again.

"I understand, Princess," you say.

On day one hundred and twenty-three she'll ask what your real name is. You repeat the name you told her your first day but she shakes her head and gives you a look that makes you feel like you forgot to put on your armor today. "No, your real name," she says. She tells you, "We're past lies now."

"That is my real name," you say, "now," and she looks at you some more until all the moisture has left your mouth, but then she nods and says okay. You want to promise that you'd never lie to her, that you don't think you could lie to her if you wanted to, but you think perhaps she already knows.

On day one hundred and thirty she'll convince you to take her to the library. She tells you she's out of books and desperate for something new, and first, you offer to pick her up something, but she says she can't remember the specific titles and it will take too long and don't you trust her? You say *no* and she laughs but really you do trust her. God help you, but you do. Besides, you know her tells now, so she wouldn't be able to surprise you with a punch. And you watch her closely as you walk behind her down the stairs, careful not to let her get more than a step ahead of you because you are still on guard duty, you tell yourself, not because

you want to be close to her.

The library isn't very big but she does several laps of it until there are two large stacks of books and she tells you, teasing, the heavier stack is for you to carry because you're so big and strong. You roll your eyes but follow her back up the tower stairs. After you set them down in her room the muscles in her arm will tense and you brace yourself, expecting another punch but instead getting a hug. Your arms ache when you go sleep that night but you think of the hug and don't care.

On day one hundred and forty-eight she'll ask if you'll take her for a walk on the castle walls so that she can get some fresh air. You say no at first, as you should, but she behaves so sullenly the next few days that you relent. "Don't worry. I'm not going to fling myself from them. If I really wanted to die I could break a window and jump," she says, and you snap at her not to joke like that. She sees your serious expression and apologizes. She confesses she's never been good at knowing what to joke or not joke about. You tell her you've noticed.

"I'm getting so pale. I need some sun," she says, and you try and keep your voice even when you tell her she looks lovely even without any sun. When she sees she's wearing you down she says, "But I'm not going to try and escape. How about you go take your armor off so it won't be weighing you down and I can't outrun you?"

"But then what if you stab me?"

"You can search me for weapons," she says, with a wink that will make you blush and imagine frisking her, feeling the warmth of her skin beneath her silk dress. You tell her that won't be necessary before going to your quarters to change into something you can run in, just in case.

She rushes ahead of you when you push open the door to the castle walls, and for a moment your heart will jump, but she just runs to the edge of the walkway and leans back against the parapet with her face tilted up towards the sun. You go to stand next to her and after a moment she points out a shape in the clouds, a man bending over. You play the children's game with her, spotting shapes in the sky. She starts making dirty jokes, claiming one cloud is an ass and another some breasts, and you soon find yourself forgetting you're on guard duty because you're laughing too hard. The princess has a lovely laugh, kind of squeaking, like a small animal. Your own laugh is higher pitched than you'd like, something you usually work to mask, but now you don't bother.

On day one hundred and ninety-one you'll spend the day on

the castle walls with the princess, reading together. She complains that the stone is too hard and she wishes she had brought a pillow, before leaning her head on your shoulder. “You make an excellent pillow,” she tells you. Later when you take off your tunic for bed, you catch a whiff of her, lavender soap and honey and sweat.

On day two hundred and thirty the princess will invite you to eat breakfast with her, and from then on you eat every meal together. She starts putting the sugar in your coffee for you, just the right amount. She teases you for your awful table manners, and you tease her right back for her perfect ones. “You have no one to impress, why bother using the right fork,” you ask, and when she says she wants to impress you, you spit out some of your coffee.

On day three hundred and sixty-four she’ll tell you what the witch said would break her curse. “True love’s kiss,” she says, “Isn’t that stupid?” You nod and agree with her though your stomach fills with lead. She always tells her guards the supposed counter-curse, but she doesn’t usually wait this long. “I don’t even know if I believe her,” she adds while staring at you like she wants you to say something but you don’t know what. What she wants or what to say.

“Every now and then my father sends an eligible prince to kiss me, but it hasn’t worked yet.” She laughs awkwardly. “Obviously.”

You clean up the dinner tray slowly and carefully, facing away from her because you know she knows your tells. This is usually the point where she asks her guard to kiss her, just to give it a shot. You don’t see her open her mouth to ask you, don’t see her shut her mouth and clench her jaw. Since you’re facing away from her you don’t see her fingers twitch nervously when she says, “I think she thought it was poetic. That the thing she no longer believed in would break the curse.”

You nod, your heart pounding. You hate and blame the witch, even if the princess doesn’t. You hate everyone, in that moment, except the princess. You don’t spend the rest of the day with her, as you normally would. Instead, you pace the entire length of the castle until your legs feel like they’re about to fall off and you go to bed.

On day three hundred and sixty-five you’ll kiss her. You open the door with her breakfast, as you do every morning, and when you see her sitting in bed, sheets rumped around her, sleep still in her eyes, an imprint of the pillow on her cheek, you slam the breakfast tray down and cross the room in three steps. She

stands up and starts to ask what you're doing but you don't have an answer for her as you pull her close and press your forehead against hers. She laughs just before your lips meet hers and then you swear you can taste the laughter on them.

Her skin is the softest thing you have ever touched and you aren't able to stop touching it, not as you work her nightgown off and onto the floor, and certainly not as she pulls your tunic over your head and doesn't hesitate to unwrap the binding from around your chest. You pause then, unsure if your body was what she was expecting, but her hands are sure and insistent as they slide over your skin. You keep kissing her until the two of you fall back into her bed, and she keeps laughing between kisses until she loses her breath, until both of you lose your breath.

On day three hundred and sixty-five you'll wait for the sun to set while sitting on the cold stone floor with your back against the princess's door. You asked her a hundred times when the change usually starts and each time she said that it's different every night. But after sunset, always after sunset. You can't feel her warmth from the other side of the door, where she sits, waiting, but you imagine you can. You wish the door was thinner so you could hear her breathing. You wish a thousand things you don't dare put into words, not even in your mind. You don't sleep that night. She made you promise not to open the door until sunrise, in case she changes and you don't hear her and you open the door and she does something awful. She had tears in her eyes when she said this, and you kissed her again, wanting to tell her you know it will be okay but not wanting to lie to her.

This is the worst night of your life. You bite all your fingernails to the quick while you wait. You pull at the loose thread in your tunic until you unravel all of the embroidery along the bottom. You use your sword to carve your initials in the door, then the princess's, then a heart, because although it feels stupid and childish, you want some proof of what you felt before a witch's curse proves you never felt it all.

You wait until sunrise.

The next day you'll open the door. We don't know what you'll find. Maybe the princess will be crying, wearing a ripped nightgown, surrounded by clawed furniture. Maybe she'll fling herself at you the moment you open the door, kissing you and telling you she didn't change, the curse is lifted. Maybe it doesn't matter either way. You don't need a witch's broken curse to end this story, do you? Does it have to be true love for it to matter?

It's just a year-long contract, guarding the princess. We can't tell you what to do now that it's up, or what's going to happen. Sorry, but our magic is tied to the contract. Maybe the two of you will pack your bags and run away to find the witch and break the curse. Maybe you'll stay in the tower together, forever. Maybe you'll go back to the king's army, a shiny new promotion awaiting you, and we'll simply have to assign a new guard to the princess. Maybe the princess will be waiting for you on the other side of the door with a heavy book and you won't notice her muscles tense and she'll knock you out and escape by herself, whether or not the curse has been broken. Maybe you'll live happily ever after together. Maybe you'll live happily ever after apart. It's up to the two of you now. Go ahead, open the door.

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