

The Guardian's Protector

Princess Iris stared at the snowflakes drifting past her bedroom window, willing them to turn to ice. It wasn't cold enough. They wouldn't be able to skate. Her fifteenth birthday would be spent inside, watching the lazy snow swirl around the castle. She ran her finger on the edge of the vaulted windowpane, soaking in its chill. But if her father was coming home, then ice would only make the roads more dangerous. She frowned, twisting the midnight fabric of her dress around her cold fingers. Why did it seem so impossible to get what one wanted? She wanted the lake to freeze but she wanted her father to be safe. She wanted to be fifteen but she didn't want to be sworn in as the Guardian of the Throne. She wanted to be strong, but she wanted her father to hold her tight and tell her everything would be alright.

She'd trained as Guardian for years, since she was approved at age seven. But she wasn't ready. Sparring with a teacher was entirely different from defending your family and country.

A knock sounded at the door and she started. She cast a threatening glare at the weather, daring it to ruin her birthday, then she crossed the room, her footsteps hushed on the dark fur rug. Her attendant, Maud, was out on an errand and wouldn't be back for an hour yet, so there was no point in stalling.

Iris straightened her skirt and opened the door. Her eyes met, not a servant, but a boy. She took in his warm brown skin and frayed blue tunic. Clearly not a messenger though he held an envelope with her father's seal.

"May I come in?" His voice was low, deeper than she'd expected from someone so lanky, and accented like a Southern farmer's.

She stared and he stared back, his brown eyes watching her blue ones dance around his face. "I – can come back later, if you like?"

Good breeding. Iris thought, remembering her own manners. "Not at all, come in. Would you like any tea, the chill's been awful."

"No, thank you, Your Highness. I just thought I should come and introduce myself. Brendan, official protector of the Princess Guardian, who I've heard is – you." He bowed slightly, a grin tugging at his cheek.

"Protector? What do you mean official protector?"

"Perhaps you should read this." He extended the sealed envelope. "Your father thought it appropriate since you are coming of age and will be sworn in tomorrow."

Iris slit the envelope and skimmed the message. Sure enough, her father's signature hung on the page. "They think I need a protector?" She flushed and Brendan's grin disappeared. "And you, you're a boy, hardly older than me!"

"Your Highness –"

"*Don't* call me that!" She stormed to the window, the silver stationery crumpled in her fist. "You're part of the royal household now and you are not required to use formal titles. I never liked them anyway." Her voice was bitter as the whistling wind outside. She turned back to him, the flush fading from her cheeks. "No doubt the king has told you of your duties." She glanced at the note, listing its contents. "You will be like a brother. We shall train and study together. You shall address me simply as Iris. You sleep in the guardroom with the other guards, but you attend me until otherwise dismissed." She looked up. "I'm sure you will be a great

protector one day, but if you think for one moment,” Iris walked forward, her eyes boring into Brendan. “If you think that I am a child in need of a nurse, you are mistaken. I am the Guardian of the Throne and I can defend my own.”

Brendan looked down at her amused. She didn’t like that he was half a head taller. “Are you used to being underestimated? Because I never said you were in need of a nurse. The queen thought you would say as much.”

Iris sighed. “Of course she did.” She walked to a chest next to the bed. “How are you with a sword?” She straightened, holding two wooden swords in her hands.

“High- Iris – I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“Afraid of a few bruises?” One eyebrow shot up, tugging the corner of her mouth with it.

Brendan simply stared at the handle dangling in front of him. It was worn smooth with use and when he looked toward the floor he noted that Iris’ hem was cut several inches higher, showing her flexible leather boots. “The queen will have my head if I give you so much as a scratch.”

Iris’ smile broke into a laugh and she tossed the sword to Brendan. He snatched it out of the air, frowning at her recklessness. Iris saw his frown and laughed harder. Brendan coughed. “Is there a particular reason you find the imminent possibility of my death so amusing?”

Iris’ merriment trickled down to a chuckle. “You don’t know my mother. She would kiss you for teaching me a lesson in humility.” She pinned her skirt to the side, lifting a corner and twisting it back against her hip. “Besides, if we’re going to train together I at least should know how good you are.”

“Very well,” Brendan ducked his head in a short bow. “I promise not to hit too hard – Highness.”

“Don’t - ! Fine. I win, you never call me Highness again.”

“And if I win?”

“Then you may address me by any formal title you choose.” Iris raised her chin, her narrowed eyes casting doubt at the very possibility. She raised her sword to first position.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

“Commence.”

Iris sprang and the swords clacked together with a hollow smack. Brendan’s grip wavered at the strike but he stepped back and readjusted. Iris smiled and advanced. “You hold your sword so flat,” she lectured. “It’s not going to stab your eye if you point it up a bit.”

“You’re shorter than most of the opponents I’ve had.”

Iris flushed and swung harder. Brendan parried simply, retreating slowly enough that he did not find himself backed against a wall. Iris was frowning at his defensive technique when Brendan’s sword snaked out and nicked her wrist. She hissed and switched her sword to her left. Brendan’s eyebrows arched, but he made no comment. Unlucky for him, Iris thought, she had trained equally with both her hands. Nevertheless, she couldn’t improvise as well with her left and she fell back on her practice. She clearly knew more technique than Brendan and she used it to push him further and further toward the fireplace. Still she couldn’t touch him, he parried and side-stepped, almost careless in his defense.

Then it shifted. Brendan went straight from a parry into the more aggressive 2nd position. His attacks were swift and Iris was forced into the defensive. Her strokes were still well-placed but she left her right side open on the recoil. Whether she'd meant to or not, she had been showing off, while he'd been studying her flow, watching for patterns.

After a few short exchanges, Brendan released an onslaught, forcing Iris to retreat unbearably fast. She countered haphazardly, until finally, she over-extended and his sword slammed into her ribs. Iris dropped to her knee and spread her hands in surrender. "Yield," she gasped, her eyes smarting with pain.

"You alright, Iris?" Brendan bent, his brown eyes shadowed in concern.

She nodded, clutching her side. He helped her to stand, still asking if she was sure she was alright. He insisted on probing to see if any of her ribs were broken and Iris leaned against the bedpost, staring up at the vaulted dark blue ceiling and trying not to hiss as his fingers nudged and prodded her corset.

"You'll have to take it off at some point. The pressure would help if it was a wound but it'll just aggravate the bruises."

"Thank you, Brendan. And good match. Were you pretending the whole time?"

"No. You're good. Very good. But you don't vary your attacks. If that makes sense." Brendan stepped back, helping Iris over to a low sofa to sit. "You use a pattern. An intricate one, but a pattern."

Iris stared. "Where did you learn to be such an honest gentleman? I've met polite young men – too many noblemen's sons who flatter me beyond belief. And I've met a few coarse ones who would strut like peacocks if they beat the Princess Guardian in combat. You've done neither. Who are you?"

"I'm your birthday present, Highness." His eyes twinkled and she knew he only meant to use the title in fun. His eyes grew serious. "And with my last breath, I am your protector." He kissed her hand and took his leave only after Iris assured him for the fifth time that she didn't need ice for her bruises.

Iris looked back out the window, waiting for Maud to arrive and help her out of her corset. The snow was still swirling down, but Iris didn't really mind. Perhaps her birthday would not be such a fiasco after all, even if the lake didn't freeze.

The next morning, Maud had stoked the fire extra high and was humming softly to herself. Iris stretched, blinking in the pale morning light. "Happy Birthday Miss Iris. There's clementines on the tray."

"Clementines?" Iris' eyes widened. "At this time of year?"

Maud grinned. "From the king," she mouthed.

Iris bounded to the sitting table, her eyes devouring the glowing orange of the clementines and pausing on a piece of paper tucked inside the napkin.

*Every Guardian needs a protector. You are ready.
P.S. The lake is frozen solid, I'll be waiting with the skates.*

Iris' glance snapped to the window. Maybe – maybe the danger and the safety belonged together. She could accept them together and see the goodness of both.