

The Hero and the Princess

by Sherwood Smith

Tam stomped the mud off his boots and shouldered the inn's door open. Cold, rainy air swirled in around him, causing the occupants of the common room to turn his way.

He paused on the threshold to scan the room, one hand near the sword at his hip, the other hand gripping the pack on his back that contained his travel gear, bow, and arrows.

He saw three men scowling at him, a couple of others busy with a game of skill, a woman and children in one corner, and at the other tables a scattering of old folks and young, but no threats, except maybe the three at the best table alongside the fireplace, still glowering his way.

He slammed the door shut. His heart thumped in his chest, but he kept his cold-numbered face unrevealing as he watched the scowlers assess his size, his heavy double-edged saber in its worn sheath, then turn back to their tankards, none of them quite meeting his eyes.

The innkeeper bustled up, wiping his hands. "Drink? Food?"

"And a room for the night," Tam said, carefully hanging his water-warded cloak on a hook besides the other patrons' rain gear.

"I'll have to see your coin," the innkeeper said, frowning at Tam's patched pack and worn leathers.

"I'll have ten gold pieces by tomorrow eve," Tam said, keeping his voice firm. "This is the village where the troll's been carrying off your livestock?"

Conversation in the room stopped.

"That it is, that it is, I'm sorry to say." The innkeeper scratched his chin through his beard, and sighed. "Not just livestock. Two youngsters, both in the last week. Still, you haven't earned that gold yet, and I need coin now."

Tam knew better than to show any reaction. "The troll will be dead by tomorrow night," he said. "I can pay you then."

One of the three bravos at the fireside made a derisive noise.

"He can come join us," came a woman's voice.

The innkeeper did not hide his relief. He nodded and disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

Tam looked around, saw the woman at the corner table gesturing to him. Feeling a little angry and a little embarrassed at the reaction his announcement had caused--so different from what he'd imagined during the long week's walk up the mountainside through bands of stinging rain--he said nothing as he crossed the room.

The woman sat at a rough peg table with a small girl and a half-grown boy, travel-worn tote bags beside each. There was room on the high-backed bench beside the boy. Tam adjusted his sword across his knees for fast access and sat down.

The boy's dark gaze took in the sword, then he looked away, his indifference plain. Tam wondered if the boy was a lackwit. When he'd been that age, just a glimpse of a fine blade like that had made him mad with yearning.

"Nelath," the woman said, smiling as she touched her bodice with a quick, graceful gesture. "And you are--?"

"Tam," he said, hoping that soon people would recognize him by reputation--and their voices would

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