

The Rogues 2: Secret Guardians, by Lian Tanner

Chapter 1: Witchery

Someone was following them. In spite of their disguises, in spite of all their caution, someone was on their trail. Duckling was sure of it.

Well, no. Not completely sure.

She stopped walking and stared back the way they had come. It had rained last night, and the wheels of the horse-drawn cart left long shining streaks on the road. Duckling could see a couple of houses and a barn, and nothing much else except trees, fields and grass.

There was no reason to feel so wary.

She checked to make sure that Grandpa was busy driving the cart, and not watching her. Then she began to hum a shiny little tune.

Immediately, a breeze sprang up around her, lifting her hair and warming her cheeks.

Duckling whispered, 'Go and find out if there's someone after us. Bring me sounds and voices. Go seek.'

The breeze *should* have raced away like an eager pup. It should have found out everything there was to know about whoever was behind them, and brought the information back to Duckling.

Instead, it played around her for a moment or two, whisking a dead leaf past her ear and a feather past her eyes. Then it paused, gave a disappointed sigh and wandered away.

When it came back, the sounds it brought were so small and quiet that they could have been anything. Or anyone.

Duckling glanced over her shoulder, but no one had noticed that she'd stopped. Pummel and Arms-mistress Krieg were walking on either side of the horse, so they could guard Otte without looking as if they were guarding him. Otte was riding the horse, with four white mice peeping from his collar, and a rug to hide the fact that he only had one leg. The cat was perched in front of him, and his night-black chicken Dora sat behind him.

Duckling hummed the shiny little tune again.

This time, the breeze stayed and stayed. It blew in her ears and up her nose. It tied her hair in knots. It picked up half a dozen blades of grass from the side of the road and dumped them on top of her.

‘What are you *doing*?’ she whispered, brushing off the grass. ‘I need to know if there’s someone following us. Go seek!’

At that, the breeze gave a huff of annoyance and disappeared.

Duckling waited, but it didn’t come back. So she hummed again. And again and again and again.

But there was no sign of her witchy breeze.

Instead, a strong gust of wind suddenly blasted across the road, touching no one but Duckling. It was nothing at all like her breeze; it was bossy and rumbustious, and as it passed it picked up a handful of reeds and threw them at her.

‘Ow!’ cried Duckling. ‘Stop it!’

Grandpa swivelled in the driver’s seat of the cart and called, ‘Are you quite well, my sweet?’

‘Yes, Grandpa.’ Duckling pushed the hair out of her eyes. Ever since they’d escaped from the Strong-hold and left the city of Berren behind, her grandfather had been trying to find out the truth about her witchery. Once, Duckling would have told him everything. But she had changed over the last couple of weeks, and all she said was, ‘It was a wasp. It’s gone now.’

‘Then you will not be making any more unexpected noises?’ said Grandpa. ‘They do not bother *me*, you understand, but there are strangers approaching and I would not like to frighten them, or cause them to look too closely at our disguises.’

Duckling trotted up beside the cart, shading her eyes. Two women and a man were walking down the road towards them.

Or rather, they were walking down the road towards Dame Swagger and her Glorious Travelling Theatre Troupe.

Most people, if they were escaping from great danger, would make themselves as small and unnoticeable as possible. But Duckling’s grandpa didn’t believe in small and unnoticeable.

And so, as the strangers drew level with the cart, Duckling smiled widely, the way a travelling theatre boy called Tanglefoot would smile. (A boy who wasn’t worried about witchery-gone-wrong. A boy who didn’t *believe* in witchery.)

Grandpa brushed the dust from the bosom of his enormous floral dress and said in his best Dame Swagger voice, ‘Greetings, fair travellers! How is the weather down south? Mild and sunny, I hope, and everyone in the mood for a bit of entertainment?’

The older of the two women smiled shyly at him. ‘We haven’t come far, Frow, so we can’t tell you about the south. But the next village you come to, that’s ours, and I reckon they’d like to see you.’

‘Then see us they shall,’ cried Grandpa, and he sang the first few lines of a very rude song that left the travellers laughing.

But as soon as they were out of earshot, Arms-mistress Krieg growled, ‘I wish you would not draw attention to us, Lord Rump. We are supposed to be hiding, but you put us all in danger.’

‘We are hiding in plain sight,’ retorted Grandpa, ‘which is always the best place. As for putting us in danger, you are the one who glowers at everyone we pass. You are the one who rests your hand on your sword, as if you will lop off their heads if they so much as look at young Otte. Why, you scared those poor people half to death, and it was only my song that calmed their suspicions.’

‘And that is another thing,’ said Krieg. ‘You should not sing such songs in front of the children.’

‘I have heard far worse in the Strong-hold,’ said Otte.

‘That is not the point, Young Ser—’ began Krieg.

Grandpa interrupted her. ‘How many times have I warned you not to call him that? He is – no, *she* is Daisy, the youngest member of our little troupe. No title. No special attention. No glowering!’ And he subsided into his seat, shaking his head and muttering, ‘Amateurs. I am surrounded by amateurs. If we are all murdered in our sleep tonight, do not blame me.’

Duckling looked over her shoulder, but she still couldn’t see anything suspicious. If only her witchery had come with instructions, like the ones Grandpa used to give her when she was small. *This is how you pick a lock, my sweet. Watch closely, I will test you on it tomorrow.*

But there were no instructions. An old Saffy woman had blown in Duckling’s ear, and ever since then Duckling had been able to hum up a witchy breeze.

She wished she knew why she had been given such an astonishing gift. Had she been mistaken for someone else? Would that someone turn up one day and demand that Duckling hand over the witchery?

They can demand all they like, she thought. I won't give it up, not for anything.

She let the cart pull ahead, and hummed the shiny little tune again. To her relief, the witchy breeze came to her, and although it was sluggish and only half its usual self, it did as she asked, and wandered back along the road.

When it returned, the sounds it brought were just loud enough to send a chill down Duckling's spine.

Clank clank

Rattle

'Haw haw haw—'

For a moment, she felt frozen to the spot. That clanking sound reminded her of the monstrous Harshman who had tried to kill Otte. Who'd tried to kill *all* of them.

But the Harshman was still trapped inside the massive stone walls of the Stronghold.

Wasn't he?

She couldn't take the chance. She ran after the cart, and as soon as she caught up with it, she blurted, 'Grandpa, I think someone's following us!'