

~Alastar's Perspective: Altering the Story~

I stood rigidly in my usual guarding post, but I wasn't watching Her Highness as was my duty—instead my attention was riveted to His Highness Prince Liam. Although I kept my expression impassive, inside I was restless as I awaited my opportunity to speak with the prince.

I knew it was inappropriate for a mere guard to approach a prince, especially with the scheme I had in mind. *It's necessary*, I reminded myself for the dozenth time. He deserved to know Rosie's latest plot she'd concocted...a plot that was utterly ridiculous.

She wanted to spell Prince Liam.

My lips twitched, aching to scowl at the way Rosie was determined to write her story, how she was utterly convinced she and Prince Liam belonged together, even though he couldn't bring her the love and happiness she desired—she only *believed* he could.

It's only because he's handsome. And charming. And royal. Essentially everything I wasn't. My jaw tightened at the thought. How could I ever compete for Rosie's affections with such a foe as him?

Remember that day in the garden. I obsessed with remembering the moment when Rosie's adorable jealousy over the thought I was courting other women caused hope to flare in my heart that perhaps she cared about me in the same deep way I felt for her, feelings I'd initially feared would always remain unrequited. After all, beautiful, imaginative, spirited, and thoroughly captivating maidens didn't fall in love with serious and rather unattractive guards.

But considering such a guard was foolishly in love with such a heroine, it was my duty to ensure that she didn't entangle herself in a mess in her determination to write her story all wrong.

The visit between Prince Aiden, Princess Eileen, and Prince Liam felt endless. I used every ounce of discipline not to fidget, to keep my attention remained straight ahead, to *not* think of a mischievous woman who was about to create a bunch of trouble for herself. But I thought of her anyway; it was impossible not to.

I still wasn't quite sure how she'd managed to wriggle her way into my heart so effortlessly. As a guard, I'd been trained to remain detached and focused, but from the

moment I'd met her, she'd captured my attention with no intention of releasing it. Even now when I was supposed to be focused on my duties, she filled my mind—her bright blue eyes that danced with mischief and laughter; the way she moved—as if she were half skipping, half dancing with every step—her bright smiles and frequent laughter; her sweetness and compassion towards those she interacted with; her charm; the amusing and imaginative things that came out of her mouth; the thrill that came from scrambling to keep up with whatever story she was currently living out; the anticipation I experienced while waiting for our upcoming unexpected interactions. When I was with her, I never knew what to expect, only that it'd be an adventure.

Was it any wonder I'd been so thoroughly spelled?

Because I cared for her, I had to protect her from herself before my Rosie's stubborn determination to do all in her power to ensure she got the ending she *thought* she wanted instead made her unhappy. Luckily, I had a plan to thwart her...if I could but have an opportunity to speak with His Highness. My plan hinged on his agreement to help me. If he didn't...

No, he would. I had to believe it so I had the courage to approach him.

The things fools do for love.

If only Their Highnesses' visit would conclude so I could speak with Prince Liam before Rosie finished whatever baking venture she was currently concocting in the kitchens—by the excited gleam in her eyes as she'd scampered off this morning, it'd likely be something delicious that she'd share with the servants. She was a sweet thing...when she wasn't scheming, that is.

Stop thinking of her. You're on duty. Focus.

I managed to do so, and after many tedious minutes later, Their Highnesses' visit was finally drawing to a close. They rose from their seats, and I finally seized my much-awaited opportunity.

I stepped forward and waited for Prince Aiden to acknowledge me. He lifted his eyebrow in question before waving his hand, granting his leave for me to speak.

"Permission to take my break now, Your Highness?" I fought to keep my plea from my voice; I couldn't alert Prince Aiden of the urgency I felt. He couldn't know I was going to speak with Prince Liam in private, for then he'd suspect something if—*when*—Prince Liam enacted my plan. Secrecy was a key factor, for it was imperative that Rosie

didn't have any suspicions that anything was amiss in her own plan, else everything would be ruined.

Prince Aiden nodded. "Of course. Return in half an hour."

I bowed and left the room, walking by Duncan, who's normal emotionally guarded expression became mischievous when he caught my eye. He'd been teasing me mercilessly ever since he'd noticed my interest had been thoroughly captured by the crown princess's bewitching best friend.

He leaned close as I passed. "Are you seeking the company of a certain young woman? What adventure will you two concoct this time? Will you undertake an elaborate hunt for dragons?"

I shook my head. "Not this break."

Although I'd miss my usual habit of taking every opportunity to conveniently put myself in Rosie's path, eager for whatever scene she wanted to enact with me, today I had another plan—do whatever it took to keep Rosie from spelling Prince Liam, and thus stealing the heart of the wrong man. Even if she didn't care for me the way I cared for her, I had to do all I could to ensure she didn't create an ending to her story that would make her thoroughly unhappy. An unhappy Rosie was a rather unbearable thought.

I increased my pace as I left the parlor so I could catch up to Prince Liam, several paces ahead in the corridor. "Your Highness," I called.

He paused and glanced over his shoulder with his usual easygoing grin. "Good afternoon, Guard Alastar. Is there something—"

"Might I have a word, Your Highness?"

He raised his eyebrows in surprise before shrugging. "Certainly." He stepped into an abandoned side room and I followed, closing the door behind us before facing him.

There was no need for preamble. "Rosie is planning on giving you a love spell."

Whatever he'd been expecting to tell him had clearly not been *that*. His mouth fell agape. "Excuse me? Rosalina is going to...what?"

"She's going to give you a love spell."

Prince Liam simply stared at me before grinning, not the reaction I'd expected. "A *love spell*? Does such a thing exist?"

“When a determined young woman living in a bakery has access to a recipe book of enchanted desserts and has spent weeks tracking down the necessary ingredients to create such a thing, I have to conclude that yes, I believe one does.”

Prince Liam just continued staring. “If that’s the case, why would she spell me? I’d think if she wanted to spell anyone, it’d be *you*.”

My heart lifted. “Why would you draw such a conclusion?”

Prince Liam snorted. “I saw the way she repeatedly looked at you at the ball. She’s besotted, although admittedly I don’t believe she realizes it yet.”

“She thinks herself besotted with you, Your Highness, especially with all the attention you’ve given her.”

He raised a skeptical brow. “I haven’t paid her any particular attention.”

It took all my guard training not to roll my eyes at a royal. “You sought her presence for the feast at the ball, and the following day you took her on a private tour of the palace.” Burning jealousy seeped over me to recall Rosie’s bright expression she got whenever she brought up those moments.

Prince Liam furrowed his brow, considering. “Oh, yes. I asked Rosalina to sit with me during the feast at the ball. For one, I didn’t want to sit with Lavena”—he pulled a face at mentioning the name of his intended—“and I also thought Rosalina, who doesn’t know anyone else in the court, would be more comfortable sitting near Eileen and Aiden.”

A thoughtful gesture, I grudgingly admitted to myself. “And the private palace tour?” Rosie had been particularly fluttery about His Highness after *that*. Ever since its occurrence, I’d tortured myself unceasingly imagining what could have possibly transpired between her and Prince Liam during it.

He shrugged again. “I seek any excuse to share the stories and secrets of my home, and Rosalina, being a new guest, provided the perfect opportunity. Besides, she’s entertaining; I enjoy her company.” He gave me a suspicious look. “Are you implying that I sought her out for *more*?”

I gritted my teeth, fighting down my jealousy still pressing against my chest. “She gave the impression that something *more* took place during that tour.”

Prince Liam raised both brows. “Come now, Alastar, I’m an honorable man. Whether I like it or not, I’m engaged. I’d never toy with a young lady’s emotions when I

can give her no promise. It'd be dishonorable, both towards her and the arrangement I'm a part of."

I released the breath I just realized I'd been holding. So nothing had happened. The piercing envy eased, but only slightly.

"Forgive me, Your Highness, but I don't think you realize that with your personality, you often leave quite the impression on the women you interact with, including Rosie."

His Highness seemed on the brink of laughter, even though the situation clearly didn't warrant it. "Are you suggesting I implied to Rosalina I have a romantic interest in her?"

I tightened my jaw. "That is indeed the situation." I hated admitting it, hated the fact that compared to Prince Liam, I was entirely inadequate for someone such as Rosie. No wonder he'd captured her attention.

Prince Liam snorted. "Nonsense. She may enjoy my company, but I could tell at the ball she doesn't feel for me; it was *you* she was looking at throughout our entire dance. I found it rather amusing."

Once again, my heart lifted in hope. "And do you feel anything for her?" I asked hesitantly.

"Heavens no."

I released another long sigh. I hadn't *thought* he did, but I didn't know His Highness well...except for the fact that the man possessed the talent to charm anyone with little to no effort, and I had no way of knowing his intentions behind the attentions he easily bestowed, particularly on Rosie.

Prince Liam searched my expression. "Were you really so worried?"

I hesitated before realizing there was no use hiding anything from him—being upfront would hopefully better persuade him to participate in my plan.

"Forgive my saying so, but you have a habit of frivolous flirting, Your Highness, and considering you've detected my affections for Rosie, I'm sure my resentment towards the attention you've given her is understandable."

Prince Liam frowned, a rare look of displeasure for the normally carefree prince. "I must disagree with you. I don't flirt with anyone. From the moment I started taking interest in girls, Kian died, leaving me both his unwanted title and his even less desirable betrothed. My engagement contract has made my taking interest in anyone but her an impossibility, and as much as I dislike her, I've remained true to our

agreement. You have no need to fear me trying to steal your girl, not when I have my own, whether I want my fiancée or not."

I searched his expression. He appeared sincere. "Despite your lack of romantic feelings and attentions for Rosie, that's what she believes she's received from you," I said. "Thus she's determined to secure a future with you."

"With a love spell?" Prince Liam's expression sobered at my nod. "And you're certain this love spell will actually work?"

"I have no doubt that should you take it, you'll find yourself infatuated with Rosie." My stomach tightened at the thought.

His frown deepened. "Not only would that be disastrous, but I don't like the idea of having my heart stolen not of my volition. It's no different than the arranged engagement I find myself, but at least my union with Lavena, as undesirable as it is, will benefit my kingdom, even if it'll do nothing for me."

"So you're seeing the problem."

"While it's undoubtedly a problem, there is an obvious solution to it—I'll simply never accept another baked treat from her so there's no chance I'll inadvertently take her spell." He sighed. "Which is rather unfortunate, considering I'm quite partial to her strawberry tarts."

"That won't work, Your Highness," I said. "Rosie is stubborn and determined. She won't cease trying to spell you until she actually succeeds."

"Then what do you propose we do?"

Finally, the moment had come, but despite it being the one I'd been waiting for, I hesitated. I had no right to approach the prince with such a drastic favor, not to mention my plan would, for the time being, inevitably hurt Rosie.

It's for her own good, I rationalized for the dozenth time since coming up with the perfect scheme to combat Rosie's own. *You may not be a prince, but you can at least serve as her knight.*

"I have a favor to ask you," I began slowly. "I understand I have no right to ask it, but..."

Prince Liam's eyes gleamed. "Those are the best sorts of favors." He folded his arms and leaned against the wall, the picture of ease as he awaited my pronouncement. "Out with it, Alastar. What do you have in mind?"

Push forward. A knight had to do anything to protect his princess, even if his princess currently wasn't interested in his help. I took a steadying breath. "I want you to eat whatever Rosie gives you and pretend that it's the love spell."

Up went his eyebrow. "Pardon?"

"Rosie is determined to give you a love spell," I said. "She'll undoubtedly bake a dozen until she succeeds...unless I put a stop to it. The only way to do so would be for her to realize she won't be happy with spelling you, and she won't come to such a conclusion until she experiences the consequences herself. Thus we must make her *think* she's spelled you. I'll steal her real spell and swap it out for a fake one, but she won't think it worked unless you—"

Understanding filled his expression. "You want me to pretend to be under a love spell."

"Yes." I shifted restlessly from foot to foot. "I know I have no business asking you to do such a thing, but—"

Prince Liam tipped his head back and laughed boisterously. I tensed and glanced towards the still-closed door. I couldn't risk our being overheard.

"That. Is. *Brilliant.*" He rubbed his hands together, his expression gleeful. "Oh, I am so in. What a fantastic scheme. All the things I can do to fool her..." His grin grew as his mind raced with all sorts of possibilities. "Yes...yes...this is going to be great fun." His eyes brightened. "And the best part is, should Lavena learn I'm courting another woman, perhaps she'll cry off."

I doubted it'd be so easy as His Highness participating in this charade to escape the match he dreaded, but I didn't have the heart to say so, not when I wanted the prince to have incentive to participate.

"A likely possibility," I ventured as guilt for my deceiving him pierced me.

He brightened further. "I hope so. I truly can't bear the thought of marrying Lavena." He actually shuddered. "I'll put on this most spectacular performance. It'll be quite the show."

I released a breath of relief. I'd miraculously gotten Prince Liam to agree. Now I just needed to be patient and wait for the rest of Rosie's story to unfold...and hope it soon wove with mine in the way I desperately wanted.

Prince Liam considered. "How long should I pretend to be spelled? Should there be something that 'breaks' it?" He furrowed his forehead in thought before his eyes lit with

an idea. "I have it! I'll keep up the act until she admits to her spelling me. Then I'll know she realizes whom she really cares for." He winked at me. "How does that sound?"

"Excellent, Your Highness." I nervously eyed his grin. Should I be worried over how excited he was over my proposition? Whatever he had in mind for his love-sick performance for Rosie, I hoped it wasn't too drastic, for Rosie's sake.

Prince Liam's expression became mischievous and far too knowing as he watched my own. "So while I'm pretending to be in love with your girl, what are you going to be up to? Trying to win her heart?"

My cheeks warmed. "Yes."

He actually patted my shoulder. "No worries, I think you've pretty much succeeded in stealing that from her. In the meantime, I promise to treat your girl with respect... although I don't promise not to make her squirm." His grin became wicked. "I think that should help you in your own quest—the more she dislikes my attention, the more she'll realize whose attention she *does* welcome." He wiggled his eyebrows at me. "Yours, my good friend. Not to fear, you'll win the heart of your fair maiden, I'll be sure of it."

How I hoped so. Prince Liam exited the parlor, beaming widely, and I followed to return to my post, my heart pounding wildly. My plan was set to unfold—I was going to alter Rosie's planned story. What I didn't know was whether it'd end with the outcome I longed for—her seeing me as more than a guard.

Could she ever think me a prince?