

This scene was from an older draft where Rosie's imagination was a bit more wild.

~Deleted Scene: Poisoned Tea Charade~

"Your Highnesses I've succeeded in retrieving your slippery guest."

Eileen sighed in relief. "Thank goodness. Rosie, why did you run off? Must you have chosen now for your wild imagination to overcome you?"

"Welcome back," Gavin said wryly. "Only you would pull off such a ridiculous stunt as you just performed, Rose."

"Rosie," I corrected automatically through my teeth as the guard led me back to my seat and encouraged me to sit by softly pushing against my shoulder. I sighed and slouched in the armchair, running my fingers along its silky smooth fabric as I did so. So these were what palace cushions felt like.

"Thank you, Guard Alastar," Eileen said. The guard apparently called Alastar bowed and returned to his previous post against the wall as Eileen leaned forward in her seat so she could grasp my hand. "Dear Rosie, please be assured there's no devious plot against you. Did you really think I'd invite you here for anything other than to see you again and have you attend my wedding?"

Guilt prickled me and my frantic imagination gradually settled. Of course she wouldn't, for she was my oldest and dearest friend, so precious to me we were practically sisters. But her *fiancé* on the other hand... I peeked at him from the corner of my eye. He leaned casually in his seat looking perfectly at ease, as if his plot to murder me was going exactly as planned.

"He's the Dark Prince," I hissed to Eileen considering she'd obviously failed to grasp the danger of her situation. She sighed.

"Yes, I'm well aware of who he is but I love him. You were the one who first believed that the man I'd met in the Forest was my heart's match."

That was *before* I'd learned who her mysterious lover really was. I glanced sideways at the Dark Prince, his expression warm and friendly rather than cold and evil. If it was a mask he wore, he wore it well. I felt myself softening involuntarily. Perhaps I was being rather dramatic.

The Dark Prince signaled to the waiting maid and she began serving tea in elegant porcelain cups with a floral trim. Although the tea smelled divine— rose blossom and

raspberry—I couldn't help but eye it suspiciously as my imagination sprung to life once more. It was undoubtedly spiked with poison. Of course: a mess-free and subtle murder. The Dark Prince was an evil genius.

Trying to be stealthy, I leaned towards Gavin just as he was about to take a sip. "Don't drink it," I whispered from the corner of my mouth.

He frowned. "Why not?"

"It's been *poisoned*."

He snorted. "Of course it has." And looking as if he hadn't a care in the world, he took a large gulp.

I gasped. It was all I could do not to knock his cup from his hands. "Gavin!"

"The tea isn't poisoned, Rose," Gavin said. "If the Dark Prince was planning on bumping you off, wouldn't he drag you to the dungeon instead?"

"Not when poison is much quicker and cleaner."

Gavin merely snorted and took another gulp of tea. I bit my lip in frustration. Why couldn't anyone see the dangers of this precarious situation?

I turned to Eileen, whose brow was lined with puzzlement as she watched me. "Don't you want any tea, Rosie?"

"Apparently, it's been poisoned," Gavin said with a shrug.

Hurt filled her eyes and guilt prickled my heart once more. The Dark Prince, however, appeared amused. Suspicious.

"If you're concerned, Miss Rosalina, might I offer the services of Guard Alastar to test your tea?"

The Dark Prince motioned to the guard who'd thwarted my escape. His stoic expression not faltering, he obediently came over, picked up a tea spoon, and dipped it into my tea. Before he could test it, my anxieties flared back to life and the Dark Prince's scheme became clear.

"Of course you want *him* to test it; he's a guard and therefore has conditioned himself to become immune to poison."

Guard Alastar's gaze slid to me to raise a single eyebrow, as if seeking further explanation for my accusation, which I was all too happy to give.

"Poison was the murder-weapon-of-choice in a book I read last year." The familiar excitement I got whenever reciting a story settled over me the moment I began. "All the guests were assembled at an elegant tea party eating the most delectable-

sounding foods. Prior to the event, the murderer seeped a flavorless poison into the tea— one she'd trained to become immune to— and all who consumed it died in the most gruesome manner as the poison ate up their insides." I shuddered in horrified glee. "So forgive me for failing to trust the results of a guard testing my tea."

Eileen sighed the moment I finished. "Your fears came from a book? I'm not surprised."

Guard Alastar's gaze never left my face during the recitation of my juicy tale, nor did his serious expression falter... except for the brief moment when the corner of his lips *twitched*.

"It appears we've been found out, Your Highness," he said gravely. "She's figured out my ability to be unaffected by not only all poisons but any sleeping drafts or shady spells that may be lingering in this tea. But I'll test it by your order, just in case..."

He dipped his spoon into the tea and took a sip. I bit my nails as I watched. At first, his expression remained stoic, but then suddenly his eyes widened and he made a choking noise.

I gasped. "He's being poisoned!"

Gavin laughed while Eileen, cheeks pink, slammed her cup on its saucer. "Guard Alastar, don't be rude to my dear friend and honored guest."

His choking immediately ceased. Contrition flickered on his hardened, emotionless face as he bowed deeply. "Forgive me, Your Highness. My behavior was inexcusable."

It took a moment for my pounding heart to settle for me to realize he'd tricked me. I scowled at the guard as he returned to his post. The fiend. It appeared I had a new enemy.

The Dark Prince leaned forward and I instinctively recoiled to press myself further against the silk cushions. "Miss Rosalina, be rest assured that your tea is not tampered with. I promise."

I studied him through narrowed eyes before the glance at Eileen's pleading expression softened me. Slowly, my frantic imagination settled enough for me to look at the situation logically: Eileen was too sensible to fall in love with a villain. I owed it to my dearest friend to trust her judgement and enjoy both the tea and our reunion. Besides, tragedies had no place in *my* story.

That decided, I took a deep breath before taking a hesitant sip and was immediately enveloped in the tea's sweet floral and fruity taste. With each sip the

adventure I now found myself in settled over me and melted away the rest of my nerves. I, Rosalina, was now an honored guest at the Imperial Palace. Whatever came next in my story would surely be utterly fantastic.