

~Deleted Scene: Uncovering Stories~

"Would you object if tonight's wandering took us somewhere specific?"

It was midnight again. It had only taken a few minutes after I'd slipped from my bedroom before I met up with my fellow adventurer, an arrangement which pleased me greatly, despite the tension that had filled the end of our last interaction. Wandering the palace corridors just wasn't the same without my story comrade.

"Although having a specific destination breaks the rules of wandering, perhaps I can make an exception if the place is fantastic enough," I said.

Alastar led me down a flight of stairs that descended towards one of the palace exits. Oh, I hoped we were going outside; how splendid would it be to wander the immaculate gardens beneath starlight on this glorious summer evening.

"We better be going where I hope we are lest I'll usurp you in order to become our guide in tonight's adventure."

Alastar's lips twitched. "Ever determined to be the one plotting the story. How do you know my intended destination? Have you become a mind reader, Rosalina?"

"Your book is becoming increasingly easier to read the more I come to know you."

His eyes softened as he refocused his gaze straight ahead. "I'm happy to inform you that we're indeed going to the place you desire."

"Have you become a mind reader?" I asked.

"As one quite invested in your story, I find reading your own book very much worth my time." We reached the landing. Alastar lightly took my elbow to guide me outside, nodding to the guard we passed, who cast us a suspicious look as we did so.

I gasped as we stepped into the garden. It was utterly breathtaking seeing the ornate palace grounds bathed in silvery light beneath a canopy of velvet night pinpricked with glistening diamond stars.

"Oh Alastar, it's so beautiful, especially when everything is cast in a sheen of starlight. Is it any wonder the stars are so glorious considering each is a wish come true?"

Alastar actually sighed. I tore my gaze from the artistic patterns dotting the night sky to see tenderness filling his eyes as he looked at me. "Rosalina, you're so *delightful*. Everything seems more enchanting when I'm with you."

I beamed at the most perfect of all compliments. "Does this mean you're not tired of my company?"

"Not in the least." He offered me his arm and escorted me along the once familiar garden paths, now foreign beneath the moonlight's glow. "Every heroine needs a knight to protect her from the perils of night and I'm all too happy to be yours, just for a glimpse of your wonderful imaginative mind."

"And what perils do you imagine to potentially befall us?"

"Well a dragon attack, for one..."

I giggled and earned one of Alastar's coveted half-smiles.

"As for the other potential perils, those will have to be supplied by your own delightful imagination." He looked at me hopefully, as if he truly anticipated loving any story I told him. It was a delightful feeling, one that filled me to the brim with tingly warmth.

I stood on tiptoe to reach his ear. "My spies have informed me that an invisible nocturnal beast stalks the palace grounds under cover of night, a beast whose diet consists solely of lovely maidens."

"Good thing your gallant knight is protecting you, considering you'd be the primary target should we encounter this ravenous creature."

I grinned girlishly. "Does this mean you think I'm pretty, Alastar?"

The darkness and moonlight couldn't mask his crimson blush as it filled his cheeks. "You're not merely *pretty*," he stuttered breathlessly.

"Then you think I'm beautiful?"

His blush deepened as he gave me a look as soft as a caress. "You're a very lovely girl— *woman*, one who is also charming."

The warmth already filling me expanded to envelop me like an embrace. "You're so sweet, Alastar."

He hastily severed his gaze, as if looking at me was physically painful. "Back to your story: who are these spies of yours?"

"Why the stars themselves, of course."

He nodded. "Of course. And how did you manage to recruit them to do your bidding?"

I smirked up at him. "That's a secret but shall I tell you anyway?"

"Please. I'm rather anxious to know."

I launched into the most fantastic story involving me, the stars, and our adventures traveling across the night sky. By the time I'd finished, Alastar and I sat facing one another knee-to-knee on the lawn. The reverent stillness that follows every spectacular tale settled over us. Alastar leaned back on his elbows and stared up at the sky before peering at me with eyes lit with wonder.

"I'll never look at the stars the same way ever again."

I sighed contently. "That means you loved the story."

"I did, very much."

"Then it has served its purpose— to delight the mind and change a person's heart."

A soft smile caressed his lips and it thrilled me to see it. "How did you become such good friends with words and the playful adventures they take one on?"

I laid down on the soft lawn and stared up at the sky. With the stars surrounding me and the moonlight caressing me, I felt part of another world.

"My earliest memories are sitting on Mother's lap listening to her weave stories. They delighted me immediately, love at first sight. I learned to read as young as I was able and spent every possible moment in the small village library. One girl frequented it as much as I did."

"The princess?"

I nodded. "We met every day to read out loud to one another and to reenact the tales after we'd finished them. Our friendship blossomed through stories and what fascinating stories they were, for they took us on marvelous adventures without our even having to leave our seat. In them, the impossible became real, dreams came true, and love conquered all. The one thing I wanted more than anything was a book of my own. It took me ages to save my allowance, and when I finally did, the first book I ever purchased was..."

I held up *Tales of Magic and Romance to Enchant the Heart*, which I'd brought with me from my recent trip home. Alastar's expression softened.

"Ah, that book is more than your favorite; it's your treasure."

"I love it so. While I've managed to build a small book collection, this will always be my most cherished. Please take care of it when you borrow it."

He carefully took it. "You're allowing me to borrow this even though it's your greatest treasure?"

"While the book itself is very dear to me, its *words* are the most precious. I grew up with these stories. They were my light during my darkest moments, a reminder that there's always a happy ending waiting if one keeps reading. I'm not sure how much you'll enjoy the stories considering they're fairy tales, but I want to share them with you."

He eased the book open with reverence and scanned the table of contents. "I confess I've not read many fairy tales but I want to now; it'll help me get to know you better, something I'm quite eager to do." His smoldering gaze met mine, making me feeling turned inside out.

"That's why I brought it along tonight's wanderings. I want you to know this part of me."

"So you knew we'd encounter one another tonight?"

I smiled. "Don't we always? We're midnight wanderers, after all."

"We are. Anything to keep you out of mischief." He winked before carefully closing the book. "Thank you for allowing me to borrow this. I'll read every story. Which do you recommend I start with?"

"My favorite, 'The Tale of a Princess Discovering a Wishing Well,' and 'The Tale of the Witch and the Love Potion.' The first because reading about the wishes of one's heart coming true is utterly delightful, and the second so you'll better support my quest to create my own love spell."

The tenderness eclipsing his usual serious expression faded, leaving me yearning for it. "Even the powerful influence of a good story will never cause me to believe your current scheme is a good idea."

I pouted. "How come?"

"Because true love can't be created through magic."

"Even though love is a form of magic?"

He tilted his head, considering. "Because it's a magic so beautiful, it cannot be duplicated. Would you really be satisfied with a counterfeit version of the real thing, Rosalina?"

I combed my fingers through the cool lawn, unable to meet his eyes. "I want a happily ever after, one that will only come through true love."

"I don't doubt that," he said gently. "But love created through a love spell isn't true love at all. As such, it can't make you happy."

I said nothing. I stared out across the grounds to avoid Alastar's gaze. I didn't want to consider his words. Nothing would push me off-course.

Despite the tension which had sprung between us, I still felt immersed within an enchanted world. Moonlight cast artistic patterns across the ornately-arranged fauna and danced with the shadows across the dappled lawn, all while a soft breeze carrying the surrounding blossoms' perfume caressed my skin. It was incredibly *magical*, somehow made even more so by the presence of the man sitting beside me.

"How did you come to love stories?" I asked him after several minutes of this most perfect stillness, the comfortable kind that contained countless beautiful conversations.

"You really want to know such trivial details about a mere guard?"

"Of course I do, for you're no mere guard— you're a knight, a villain, a fellow wanderer, and an adventurer, all rolled into one."

His lips twitched upwards into a full smile. "Those are very noble traits, especially coming from you... except for my being a villain; that one is more fun, considering it's you I ruffle."

"Come on, please answer my question." I playfully shoved my shoulder against his, a gesture which sent a jolt of heat down my arm.

"Didn't we just establish I'm a villain? Thus I must live up to the title and torture you by keeping you in suspense."

I crawled closer and shoved what I hoped was my fiercest expression in his face. His eyes widened. "If you don't tell me right now, Alastar, so help me *I'll* become the villain in this scene and *make* you."

He chuckled as he tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "Frightening. Very well, I'll humor you. My most treasured memories are similar to yours: when I curled up on Mother's lap as a boy and she read to me. Stories not only remind me of her but are an excellent way to pass the time when one stands around guarding all day. I've already planned on adding your story about the stars to my rotation."

I could just picture the tender, homey scene he described. "That sounds lovely. Was your mother also a servant at the palace?"

"She was the Lady-in-Waiting to the late queen, His Highness' Mother, for she came from a noble lineage before she married a guard far below her station. They were so happy together that I knew she never regretted it."

"Of course not. Nothing brings happiness like true love."

"Hence won't you be miserable even if you're a princess in a palace if you're married to one who *isn't* your true love?" He gave me a stern look, which caused me to squirm. I didn't want *that* look of his, but the soft one that had filled his expression as he'd spoken of stories and his mother.

"How did she die?"

Sadness filled his eyes. I rested my hand lightly on his arm. "In the illness that struck Sortileya several years ago. It spread from the Capitol to several of the surrounding villages, taking many lives, including my parents. I'm fortunate it didn't take me or my brother, Duncan."

"Is that why you never smile?"

Alastar frowned. "Do you believe me to be unhappy?"

"You never smile. It's rather disappointing. I like smiles."

"I hate the thought of disappointing you, which means I'm doomed to fail villainy lessons." His frown deepened. "I suppose I feel my emotions rather than express them. But please be assured that I'm not unhappy by any means."

A strange wave of relief washed over me. I beamed. "I'm so glad."

His lips twitched, the usual Alastar way of smiling. "You have a lovely smile."

"As all heroines do."

"No, there's something different about yours... sweet, genuine, *happy*." He hypnotically traced my lips with his fingertip, as if to memorize the shape of my smile. I shuddered at his touch. When he pulled away, I lost myself in his hazel gaze, a pleasant sensation I'd read about but had never experienced for myself.

Wait, why was I staring into *Alastar's* eyes? He wasn't my prince. I blinked rapidly and looked away, heat tickling my cheeks. "For being wanderers we're not doing much wandering. Might we remedy that oversight?"

Alastar stood and helped me up, drawing me so close we were mere inches apart. I could feel the heat emanating from his body, smell his intoxicating honey-lemon scent, and once again I found myself staring into his eyes, lit both by the moonlight and with a strange secret I couldn't even begin to decipher, but one I desperately wanted to.

"You have a secret," I said accusingly.

"As do you." A lightness filled his eyes. "I love your secret."

"What's my secret?"

"Not to worry: Rosalina, Uncoverer of Secrets, will figure it out soon enough."

"But what of *your* secret?" I asked. "Will I discover that one, too?"

"I hope so." He released me and stepped away, leaving me feeling strangely chilly despite the warm evening. He cocked his eyebrow at my shiver. "Are you cold? Would you like to return inside?"

"No," I said breathlessly. "I want to wander more. I'm convinced the palace grounds are different at night."

"Undoubtedly. Hence we must explore every bit of them."

He offered me his arm and after a moment of inexplicable shyness I took it, holding on a bit more tightly than necessary. He didn't seem to mind as he led me down a twisting path to the rose garden, the very place where a few days earlier he'd given me the wooden rose he'd carved and claimed I had a secret, a secret I'd since tried and failed to discover within myself ever since.

"Tell me a story," I pleaded. He froze, eyes wide, before shaking his head in bewilderment. "What is it?"

"I was about to make the same request before you stole my dialogue."

I smirked. "How do we know it's not *you* who stole the line from *me* and I'm just taking back what's mine?"

"Because you have a habit of stealing many things from me, even when you don't realize you're doing so."

I frowned. "What have I taken?"

"Something very precious." The look he gave me was incredibly tender and caused my heart to flutter. "Now won't you tell me a story, Rosalina?"

"I told you one earlier, it's your turn."

"I'll oblige if you don't mind being lured to sleep, for any account from my dull life is as powerful as the strongest sleeping draught."

"It's extremely disappointing to learn that an imperial guard doesn't have grand adventures to recount," I said. "The only solution to this dilemma is for you to make some up."

"I could do that," he said. "Or I could tell you stories from my childhood that will hopefully amuse you... although those may be boring, too."

"Certainly not." And I was suddenly very anxious to hear these stories. "Won't you tell me? Please?"

"Only on the condition we do an exchange, a story for a story."

And thus we passed the evening, strolling through each of the moonlit gardens many times as we spun tales from our past for one another. It was perhaps one of the most perfect evenings I'd ever spent, made even more so by the presence of the man who I was becoming increasingly surprised by how much I was growing to crave his company.