

~Deleted Scene: Boredom at the Palace~

I wriggled restlessly as I looked around the parlor for something, *anything*, to satisfy my boredom. It'd been an endless day, and after several dull hours, even my overactive mind—which normally never seemed to run out of stories—had been lulled to sleep.

I glanced sideways at Eileen, who sat curled up beside Aiden going over reports, her forehead furrowed in concentration and her eyes growing glassy from her increasing boredom. "Have you finished yet?" I asked.

"I'm afraid not; there's still quite a bit left." She flipped through the non-shrinking stack, her eyes widening at how big it was. "But there's no need for you to be cooped up with me. Why don't you go exploring before it gets dark?"

I'd done that nearly every day, and while I hadn't thought it was possible, the thrill that I, Rosalina, was in a palace had gradually begun to fade as I slowly ran out of nooks and crannies to investigate. "I've already seen everything several times," I said. "When's the next ball?"

"Balls are rather rare events, Rosalina." Aiden didn't even look up from his own stack of reports. All the man seemed to do was work. I'd always thought princes led more exciting lives.

"What about a lavish banquet?"

"That costs money, Rosalina," Aiden said. "We only host such events for special occasions. We must manage our tax income carefully."

I frowned. It was rather disappointing to realize royals had to budget just like everyone else. "Well, if balls and banquets are out of the question, what do you normally do for fun?" There had to be *some* magical royal event we could concoct.

Aiden chuckled and finally glanced up. "*Fun* is something that must be carefully worked into an already full schedule, which happens less often than you might think."

Over the past several weeks, as Aiden and Eileen settled into their routine, the image of palace life I'd spent my entire life imagining had begun to crack. While Eileen always made time for me, she seemed to be swamped with her own royal duties, ones that seemed terribly dull.

I glanced longingly out the window. It was such a sunny day. If I were at home in Arador, I'd spend such a day not cooped up as I was now, but instead in my favorite meadow, with a basket of day-old pastries and a stack of my favorite fairy tales. Even if

I was expected to help my parents in the bakery, there we could at least exchange stories as we went through the familiar, comforting motions of baking. A sudden homesickness swelled within my breast. I never thought I'd find my common girl life more exciting than any moment I spent in a palace.

I set my jaw in determination. No, that thought was ridiculous. After all, I was in a *palace*. Not everyone was so fortunate as myself to be a guest here. Thus I'd make my time here far better than what I'd left behind.

That decided, I scanned the parlor again for inspiration on how to go about that. My gaze settled on Alastar, standing next to Duncan in his usual guard position along the wall. I grinned and went over. I could always count on Alastar to entertain me.

"Seen any dragons lately?" I asked, hoping the question would lead to one of our playful conversations.

He didn't stir, keeping his focus rigidly ahead. "I'm sorry, Rosalina, but I'm on duty."

I nearly groaned in disappointment. I turned to Eileen, who watched me worriedly. "Can't Alastar take a break?"

She nibbled her lip. "You're bored, aren't you?"

"No," I said hastily. "This is a palace, a place where being bored isn't even possible."

The lie sounded utterly unconvincing, even to myself. I frowned. Puzzling, especially considering I liked imagining that the life of a princess was as grand and thrilling as I'd always believed it to be. But I was convinced that once Prince Liam fell in love with me, palace life would be magical once again considering I'd be living there with my prince.

A reprieve from my current monotony finally came in the form of a maid as she entered the room with a fresh tray of tea and sweets. I smiled at her and was thrilled when she returned it. It was the same maid who cleaned my room, and whenever I happened to see her, I made it a habit of sitting on my bed and keeping her company while she worked.

She glanced at Aiden and Eileen—who hadn't even looked up at her entrance—before pointing to her bulging apron pocket, where I glimpsed the note I'd written for her and left on my pillow with one of my famous sugar cookies. Excellent, she'd received my treat. I itched to go talk to her, but Aiden had warned me kindly but firmly that I couldn't distract the servants from their work.

But I could risk at least one small exchange. I pointed at my own hair. *Your hair is cute*, I mouthed. Her smile widened before she left the room, leaving me considerably cheered; compliments were so fun to give.

Unfortunately with her departure, I quickly grew bored once again. I slumped in my seat and fidgeted restlessly as I stared out the window. I sensed Eileen's gaze and turned to find her smiling. "Is she one of the servants you've befriended?"

She'd noticed our exchange? Perhaps she'd been as desperate for a distraction as I'd been. "Yes. She's a lovely person," I said. "She has adorable twins. She let me play with them the other day when you and Aiden had that long meeting. I love babies. When are you and Aiden going to have one?"

My question yanked Aiden's gaze from his reports. A rare blush filled his cheeks but Eileen's expression warmed. "I'm not sure. Hopefully we'll be blessed with a child soon." She held Aiden's hand, and after the two exchanged smiles, they returned to their work, and I was left without company once more. I tried to pass it calmly, but restlessness quickly made such a task impossible. It was amazing that even such an elegant room such as this could feel like a cage.

"It's such a beautiful day. We should go outside." Sunshine always lifted my spirits.

"I told you that you're welcome to stroll the gardens," Eileen said.

"Can't you accompany me?"

Eileen stared out the window overlooking the Forest, her look full of yearning, before giving a resigned sigh and thumbing through her stack of reports. "I can't. I have to finish these." She looked utterly weary at the thought.

"You've been working most of the day," I protested. "I can tell you're just as bored as I am, if not more so."

Aiden's attention immediately snapped to Eileen, where he eyed her expression with a wary one of his own. Her false smile didn't mask the fact that she was strained.

"Perhaps Rosalina is right," he said. "We've been working a bit too long. We should do something fun for the remainder of the evening." He began gathering the papers, arranging them into a tidy stack.

"But don't we have reports to go over?" Eileen sounded so tired.

"They're not pressing and will be here tomorrow." He kissed her brow, which earned him Eileen's first real smile in hours.

"Really?" she asked hopefully.

"Yes, of course, darling." He rested his hand over hers. "You need to tell me when you need a break."

"I feel ridiculous when I need one much more frequently than you do."

"But I'm accustomed to putting in long hours of royal tedium; you're not." He wrapped his arms around her and nestled her close. "What would you like to do?"

"We haven't played cards for awhile."

"Cards it is." He kissed her again before glancing towards me. "Are you up for a game of cards, Rosalina?"

Anything to escape this tedium. "That sounds like a grand adventure." I was already settling myself at the card table. Eileen and Aiden joined me and he began dealing the cards. "When is Prince Liam due for another visit?"

"In a few days." Aiden paused mid-deal to look up warily. "Why?"

A few days? That didn't give me much time to create my love spell. I was still two ingredients short, and some of the steps would be tricky and could use a bit of practice; I needed to get the spell *just right*. Perhaps I could sneak into the palace kitchens after everyone had gone to bed...

"No reason, I'm just looking forward to his visit." I eyed the clock on the mantle. Midnight was still *hours* away. So annoying.

Those hours ticked by at a crawl, despite them being occupied—first with cards, then with taking turns reading a book out loud, and concluding with conversation. I wriggled impatiently through several games—which in my distraction I lost quite horribly—ignoring Aiden and Eileen's exchange of perplexed looks and Alastar's rather attentive watching.

Finally the clock struck eleven thirty. I leapt from my seat, and after rattling an excuse about how tired I was, I scampered from the room. I had a love spell to practice.