

5 princes and I Chapter 56-60

Chapter 56 Stranger

His voice....his voice sounded so foreign in my ears. It was hard and threatening and I could not understand the feeling that I am having right now; fear or relief?

When the man didn't make a move in releasing me, Fred's face hardened and, using his other hand, placed it on top of the man's wrist. I heard him mumble a few words and a second later, the man was screaming in pain and I was freed from his grip.

I saw smoke coming from the area where Fred had touched him. My eyes widened when I saw the burned mark on his wrist. The skin on his wrist was red and I could see a few areas spotted in black. It was a sickening sight.

Fred must have seen the look of horror on my face because he immediately drew me towards him and shielding me from the sight. He started rubbing my back to calm me down as I gripped his shirt tightly.

"Prince Frederick, is everything alright?" I heard another voice in the scene and I tilted my head to see a guard standing before the screaming man.

"Yes," Fred said.

Another guard appeared. "Your highness, we found the missing people and have now arrested the kidnappers."

"Good." Said Fred gestured towards the man on the ground. "Take this man with you and e***** the victims. Make sure they return home safely."

While one of the guards dragged the man with him to who knows where the other looked at me with a curious gaze. "Prince Frederick, would you like us to e***** her as well?"

I felt Fred's hold on me tightened and moved me farther beside him to hide me from the guard's view. "No. I'll take care of her. You may leave now."

The guard made a respectful bow at Fred before he left leaving me and Fred alone in the deserted area.

There was an awkward silence in the air before I heard Fred sighing. "Are you alright?" He asked.

I nodded.

"Were you afraid?"

I paused for a second before I replied by giving him a single nod. Fred released me from his hold to look at me. I saw his eyes softened making me recognize the Fred that I used to know back at Thalia. I don't know who or where that side of him went but for now I was happy seeing the old Fred that I started tearing up.

"Hey, hey it's alright, Rose." His thumb wiped away the single tear running on my cheek. "I'm here now. It's all right."

"You liar," I muttered.

Fred looked slightly taken aback by my words. "What?"

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"Nothing."

Fred studied me for a moment before taking my hand. "Come. I will take you to the palace. The others are worried about you."

At the mention of the others, I looked up at him.

Crap, with the sudden turn of events I almost forgot about them and the upcoming wrath of PRINCE Ace.

"Where are they? Are they alright?" I asked.

Fred chuckled. "They are." He said and started leading the way while holding my hand. "I was shocked when I found them at the doorstep of the palace a few minutes ago. They looked frantic and started asking where you were."

I tried not to focus on the fact that I was holding hands with Fred so I looked up and stared at the back of his head. "They were all there?"

Fred nodded. "Yeah. Well, at least Nate, Ren, and Dan were there. They said that PRINCE Ace stayed behind to look for you a bit longer."

I flinched and ran a hand through my face and groaned. "He is?" I couldn't hide the nervousness in my voice when I said it.

Fred turned to look at me with an amused look on his face as he nodded. "Yeah."

"Well, I guess I'm lucky that you found me first then."

Fred laughed, sending sweet melodies in the air. I miss that joyful and carefree laugh of his.

Fred stopped laughing and grinned. "Don't tell me you two still don't get along?"

"It's not my fault that he's always on his period."

"You should try to approach him. He's not so bad."

I cringed and stared at Fred. "Why are you defending him? Don't tell me you two have a thing going on?" I suddenly imagined Fred and PRINCE Ace. I quickly shook my head at the thought.

Fred didn't get what I was saying because he tilted his head to the side in confusion. "What thing?" He asked.

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"Never mind."

We finally came to a stop and I saw Fred's horse waiting for just a few meters from us. I looked at Fred and wondered why we suddenly came to a stop. "Fred?"

"Rose, I have a favor to ask you before we go." He said and the lack of humor in his voice worried me.

"W-What is it?"

Fred slowly turned to me with an unreadable expression. His eyes met mine for a split second before he looked up ahead. "Nate told me the reason you guys came for me and I am sorry to say but I did not wish to meet with all of you."

I shrugged. "Maybe the nymphs made a mistake, but I do hope that you come back-"

"If you still plan on taking me back to Thalia then I would suggest that you give up."

My lips suddenly felt dry. I licked my lips and opened my mouth to speak but Fred cut me off. "The kingdom of Hazel is not doing well. Our reputation is slowly deteriorating. You saw and experienced what happened a while ago. There are a few warlocks and witches who are practicing dark magic. They kidnap fellow warlocks and witches, and even other visiting species to harvest their organs to use as their ingredients for magic." Then his eyes suddenly met mine. There was a look of sorrow in them before it was covered with that unreadable look of his again. The look that the foreign Fred poses. "You were almost a victim of such...practice and I hate the thought of what might happen if I didn't make it in time."

I lowered my head and averted my gaze. "I'm-I'm sorry." That was all that I could think that is right to say at that moment.

“Rose, look at me.” He said and I did. “Tomorrow morning. I want you to leave Hazel.”

“What?! But-” For some reason, I felt like I do not wish to leave just yet. I wanted to talk to him some more.

“Just do as I say, Rose.”

I bit my lips and stared hard at Fred’s eyes. No, they weren’t exactly the soft and gentle eyes of the Fred I know. They were different. Taking a deep breath, I held his hand in mine. “I read your letter, Fred, and I could feel the feelings that were put into it.”

Fred sighed and started looking away. “Rose-”

“Let me finish.” I cut him off. “I felt that the time you spent back in Thalia was one that you treasure. The people you met and the friends you gained, all are important to you. That place was special to you and I have a feeling that if you were to choose, you’d want to stay there a bit longer.”

This foreign Fred frowned. “It’s a stupid letter, Rose.”

“A stupid letter that you wrote your whole feelings into.”

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“Let’s drop this conversation please.” He said. Frustration is evident in his voice. “I don’t want to talk about it. Forget everything and leave tomorrow morning. I’ll have everything prepared for your journey.”

This side of Fred is pretty stubborn, but I’m more stubborn than him. “Fine,” I said. “We’ll leave only if you look me in the eyes and tell me that you don’t want to go back to Thalia anymore.”

I felt his hand clench as he drew them back. He turned his back to me and let out a frustrated sigh and fist his hair and drew in a deep breath before facing me. “You don’t know what you are talking about, Rose! You talk as if you know me while you barely know me at all. The time you and I spend together was not enough for you to know me wholly.” He gestured to himself. “You see me, don’t you? This whole new side of me? You are surprised. It means that you don’t know me all that well for you to make such a conclusion all by yourself. Wanting to stay in Thalia? Don’t make me laugh. The emotions that you read in that stupid letter? It could even be fake! I could even be faking that whole demeanor the whole time, so don’t be such an ignorant human and make assumptions on what I want and how I feel! Ace was right. You should know your place, foreigner.”

Fred has never raised his voice at me, ever. But he was right. I shouldn’t have made such assumptions by myself. I feel like such a fool. So this is what he feels huh? That

whole demeanor of his was fake the whole time. I'm such an idiot for not realizing it. I am such an embarrassment.

My whole body was trembling and I kept my gaze down because I didn't want to look at this stranger standing in front of me.

"I-I understand. I'm sorry, your highness." I bit my lips as I tried to distract myself from the pain. Don't cry in front of him, Rose. Don't cry in front of this stranger.

I saw Fred's gaze softened. He extended his hand to pull me close, but I moved away. "Rose I-"

"I-I wanna get some air. Excuse me, your highness." I closed my eyes and ran away blindly. "I'll be back!" I called him and started running.

I know it's stupid for me to run considering what just happened to me a while ago, but I also don't want to stand anywhere near that stranger any longer. I sniffed and shut my eyes tightly to stop the tears.

I won't be crying for him. No, I won't. It's not worth it. It's not worth it.

I stopped running and stared up at the sky. Human. I never would have thought that that word would sound like an insult coming from Fred. It stung. The person who hurts you the most is usually the one that is close to you.

Suddenly I heard the sound of a galloping hoof to my left and a very familiar voice. "Woah, Midnight."

I turned to my left and saw a very furious Ace climbing down from his horse as he marched towards me. At that moment, even the thought of Ace killing me and throwing me off a cliff didn't seem scary at all. "Where the #\$%^ have you been?! We've been looking all over for you, you are an idiot!! Stop running around, you fake princess, or else I will personally chain your neck and tie you to your horse!"

Strange. For some reason, his insults don't seem to bother me. I guess I am used to Ace insulting me but not Fred.

Ace's furious look faltered when my tears started falling. "What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

I shook my head as my reply and before I knew it, I ran towards him and buried my face in his chest. A second later, I felt him brushing my hair gently in a comforting gesture. But it might just be my imagination.

I'll worry about the consequences later for ruining the prince of darkness's coat. For now, I just want to hide and I cry my heart out.

Chapter 57 My Escort is a Snob

There are a million words for me to describe this moment; A million ways for me to express what I feel and a million ways for me to deal with this situation right now.

Unbelievable!

After running away from Fred and meeting Ace along the way gave me time to think.

As I was thinking, I thought of how nice PRINCE Ace was to me as he carried me to Midnight and made our way to the palace. How considerable, unselfish, sensitive, and respectful he was and he didn't even bother to ask me why I was crying when he found me.

He must be a fake. Yes. He must be.

"Why were you crying?" Ace asked for the hundred nth times.

I gritted my teeth and focused on the back of Midnight's head as we made our way through the forest. Honestly, that PRINCE is so nosy. Can't he take a hint that I don't want to talk about it!? "I wasn't crying." You could tell the annoyance in my voice as I answered him.

"You think my coat wet themselves to the exact spot where you buried your ugly face?"

I have to fight the urge to throw my elbow back and hit him in the stomach. "I don't know what you're talking about. All I can tell you where I wasn't crying." I snapped.

"Not crying my a**. You almost blew your snot if I did not pull you back. Also, your eyes are a bit puffy."

"I did not!" I argued and almost killed myself when I tried to turn 180 degrees to face him.

"Did you smell that?" He suddenly asked. It was a change of topic and I was glad about that.

I suddenly looked around and up at the darkening sky and took a sniff. Nothing. I moved my body sideways so I can look at Ace. "I don't smell anything," I said.

"There isn't." He said and looked at me. "But I did hear a sniff. Your nose is wet which only proves that you were crying."

Touché. Smarta**.

“Will you just drop it!” I finally lost it and raised my voice at him. I was angry. All those feelings bubbled up inside of me ever since I saw Fred come loose and Ace was the unfortunate soul to unleash it. “Listen here, pal. I have a lot of things happening to me the moment I stepped foot on this world and the only person who I think I can count on turned out to be a complete jerk and left. I don’t need you pestering me about what happened to me, because let me tell you, IT’S NOT OKAY so shut up.” My voice rose and echoed in the forest.

Ace gave me a blank look and I noticed that our horse stopped, but I did not lose eye contact with Ace. His brow seemed to furrow as he studied before it came into a frown. “Very well then.” He said and hopped off of Midnight. Once he was on the ground again, he reached out and pulled me down.

I let out a yelp of surprise as Ace carried me down and settled me on the ground. He turned his back to me and climbed back up on his horse and took off at a slow pace. Did he just...?

“Hey!” I ran after him and settled on for a brisk walk beside Midnight. I glared up at Ace. “What’s the big idea?!”

“You said you don’t need my help. I guess that also means that you can walk your way to the palace.” Ace said without looking at me.

That imbecile! Doesn’t his conscience bother him that he left a girl in the woods in the middle of the night? Well, I should have known the moment I figured out he has no soul.

I rubbed my hand to my face in frustration before I turned to face Ace again. “That was not what I meant!”

Ace then cast me a side glance as he raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Then what do you mean by that?”

“You know exactly what I mean!!” I yelled.

Wrong move.

Ace frowned the moment I raised my voice at him and then his horse seemed to walk a bit faster than I had to jog to keep up with them.

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“You soulless freak! What’s the big deal!?” I was starting to sweat now. Buy me a rose and throw me in a coffin if you please.

"I am not a mind reader, you barbaric human." Said Ace, still not looking at me. "I don't have a clue of what you mean, but unless you say something then I suppose you can find your way to the palace."

I gasped and gave him an incredulous look. "Are you blackmailing me?"

No answer. He just yawned.

"Ace, you son of a pig! And you call yourself a prince. Oh, scratch that. A PRINCE!" Before I could finish what I was about to say Ace hit his foot on Midnight's belly and soon they were on a slow gallop.

I was running now and Ace doesn't seem to care.

"Ace! Hey!" He wasn't listening. He's not even turning around or even paying attention to me. Somehow I felt like this happened before and I feel like I know just the thing to do in this situation. I stopped running and took in a deep breath. I cupped my hands to my mouth and screamed. "PRINCE Ace!"

I wasn't sure if it would work or not, but it did. Ace stopped.

This snob prince and his stupid PRINCE t**le!

I ran towards him. Panting as I watched him climb down from his ride and turn to me. His face looked bored and looked down on me.

I was glaring at him with pure hatred. I wish I had laser eyes so I can meet him right there. "Did you seriously attempt to leave me just because I don't call you by your t**le?" I asked through gritted teeth.

Although Ace did not confirm it, I know I was right. With the way, he avoided my gaze and looked into the forest like he didn't hear a thing. I pursed my lips and fisted my hands. Suddenly irritated by him – when was I not?

Ace tilted his head to the side when the silence seemed to grow thicker. After a few more seconds, he finally sighed. "Look, I hate to pry on your private life, but would it not be better if you talk it out with someone?"

I looked at Ace. Confusion is evident on this face. "What?" Then I suddenly remembered what got us to this in the first place.

"Oh, you mean the reason why I cried – I mean – what would have been the reason if I cried." I quickly corrected myself when I saw him arch an eyebrow at me.

"Yes." He said slowly. "If you want to talk about it to make you feel better, then I will pretend to listen."

“Gee thanks!” I said sarcastically. “I appreciate that.” But honestly, when you think about it what Ace said makes sense. Maybe if I do talk it out with someone then maybe I would feel better. After all, bottling up your emotions is not good for you.

“Alright then.” Ace finally said. “I guess you don’t want to talk about it.” He reached out his hand towards me. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

“I’ll tell you.” I suddenly said.

“What?”

I looked to the other side and bit the side of my cheeks. “I’ll tell you if you’ll listen.” I cast a glance at Ace to see him nod.

Ace’s face scrunched up in disgust like he wanted to take back his offer. Fortunately, he didn’t. “Let’s go then. You can tell me on the way.”

With that, I let Ace help me back on Midnight, and on the way, I told him everything. I started from the moment that I got separated from them, when I saw Fred, met Sophie – I kept that info to a minimum though – got attacked by those dark magic people, saved by Fred, had a talk, and ran off and met him.

I wasn’t sure if Ace was listening to me, because he did say that he would only pretend to listen. But casting a glance at him from time to time as I told him my story, I saw him nodding as if he was listening.

After I was done, I did feel a little better. Heck, I could not stop talking till the end.

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Ace looked up and stayed silent for a few minutes before he spoke. “I can understand how you feel about him right now and I won’t blame you.” He said. “But you can’t blame him. Prince Fred has the issues that he’s currently dealing with.”

I blinked at him. I was completely surprised at the fact that he was helping me and for the fact that he was listening.

Wow, Ace does have a little soul in him.

Ace saw me staring at him dumbly and he glared. “What!?” He growled.

I looked away quickly. “Nothing.”

We rode on for a few more minutes before we saw a pathway of green and clean-cut gra** that leads to a huge white castle that I think is at least 4 stories high. As we pa**ed through the pathway I saw tall green hedges that stood on either side and continuing on

different right angles forming a maze. A bunch of flowers. The castle stood at the end of the path standing tall and majestic. It stretched throughout most of the maze's length. A gazillion fancy-looking gla** windows and walls decorated with intricate patterns. In the middle of this said castle stood a huge fountain that has a man holding a giant ball that spurts water.

It would have been an amazing view if it wasn't dark and if I was in a better mood. But most of all, this is where Fred lives and I don't think I want to see him after what happened a while ago,

"Can't we go camp out for the night? Do you know? Someplace far far away from here?" I twisted on my seat to smile at Ace with a hopeful look.

"We can't. With the amount of stress and time that we have, I don't think camping is wise. Especially since the others must have settled in and are now waiting for us."

"Um.....waiting?"

"Got a problem with that?"

"Yeah. If my eyes are still red from crying." At that, Ace smirked and I suddenly realized that I just admitted that I was crying. I rolled my eyes and waved at him. "Yeah yeah. I was crying. You win."

As soon as we stopped by the fountain, Ace got down and a**isted me. A stable boy then came and took Midnight to the stable.

We walked together to the door and I stopped in front of the door making Ace pause as well. He let out a frustrated sigh and looked at me. "What now? You're not going to run away, are you?"

"Of course not!" I said quickly since I don't want him to kill me on the spot. "I just...." I rubbed my eyes feeling that they were still swollen. I grunted. "I don't want the others to see me like this. They might ask some questions and I would have to repeat my story."

"You and your female insecurities." He muttered and I cast him a glare. He rolled his eyes at me and pulled me closer to his side.

Well not only is he rude, but he is a feminist. I will be jotting this down in my imaginary notebook.

"What are you doing!" I hissed at him.

He ignored me as he opened the door and we came in with me still stuck to his side with my face forcefully stuck to his coat. I grunted and fought to pull back when I heard footsteps and soon I heard them.

“Hey, guys! They’re here.” It was Dan and suddenly, more footsteps were heard but I could not see them, because – you know – I’m being held hostage here.

“Is she alright?” It was Ren.

“Where is she?” Asked Nate.

I suddenly felt Ace hold on me tighten and I felt him turn a little to the side and away from the voices. Is he....is he helping me hide?

“She’s fine. She’s tired. That’s all.” He said.

“Can we see her? I wanna know for sure if she’s alright.” Ren said and I heard footsteps coming closer to us.

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“I said she’s fine!” Ace snapped and he turned us to the opposite side and walked away. My head was still buried in his coat when I noticed that we suddenly came to a stop. I turned my head to the side and peaked what the reason for the pause was and immediately regretted it.

Standing before us is the last person that I wanted to see right now.

Fred stood with a maid at his side. He was looking at Ace and was looking back at him. Fred’s face was unreadable as he watched Ace. Fred then lowered his gaze to me and I saw him flinch and his eyes softened for a second before they came back to that unreadable mask. I looked away from Fred and pretended that he wasn’t there.

“Rose.” He called and I heard him take a step forward.

I let out a breath and moved back, but I just bumped into Ace instead.

Suddenly, Ace pulled me away from him and threw me to the side where a maid was just pa**ing by. The maid caught me and slowly steadied me.

“She’s tired. Get her to her room.” Ace spoke somewhere behind me.

“Already? What about dinner? She barely ate something this morning.” Ren said.

Ace didn’t say anything. It was Fred who spoke this time. “Bring dinner to her room.” He said. And again I was reminded by how hard and cold his voice now was. How different he was.

No, not different. This is him. The real him. He said so himself.

The maid bowed her head as she let me upstairs to where my room is. She led me to a hallway lit by lamps with some sort of glowing orb in them that I don't think is considered fire. The walls, I notice, were decorated with pictures and paintings of different swirls of different colors. Each painting has a different stroke and pattern in them and all of them make no sense.

If this were some other time I would have asked Fred and he would tell me all about them just like he did back in Thalia. Now, I don't think he would even bother talking to me or see me for that matter.

I wish I never came here. Stupid Nymphs. Is this the reason why they want me to see Fred? To see the real him?

The maid finally stopped us in front of one of the doors. "This is your room, princess." She said and waved a hand over the doorknob and it opened. She let me in a room painted in white. The floor was carpeted in red and there was a four-poster bed with a neatly folded nightgown on top of it. I couldn't see much but if you compare it to the room that I stayed in back in Vertez and Sanver this looks like a guest room. It doesn't have much but a bed, a bathroom, and a table for eating. There was a single window opposite of the door that we just came through and the room was dimly lit by those same lamps back in the hallway.

Well, I guess Fred went through his way of making me remember him as someone else.

"Is there still anything that you need, my lady?" The maid asked.

"No," I said. "Thank you. You may go."

"Dinner will be brought in a minute. Do you need help changing clothes?"

I shook my head. "I can take care of myself." I turned around and smiled at the maid.

She bowed her head to me one last time before she went out and closed the door behind her. Now I was alone in this room.

I sighed and decided that I should take a relaxing bath to keep my mind clear. I mean, I need to do something or I might go insane!

I stripped off of my clothes and headed for the bathroom. I was just laying my head on the bathtub when I heard a knock on my door and informed me that dinner was already prepared at the table in my room. I thank them as I continue to let the relaxing foam brush my skin. Once I was done, I got a towel and dried myself before I slipped on some bathrobe and went out.

Sure enough, dinner has been prepared on the table at the center of the room and a maid was waiting for me. I took a seat as I ate alone in my room with the maid watching

me eat and not even bothering to make small talks. Trust me I tried to talk to her. The food was great, but I just don't have the stomach for it right now.

I barely finished half of my food when I told the maid that I was done. She started to wave her hand on the plates and it floated in the air and transferred to a wheeled tray.

Chapter 58 Maze

Once the maid was gone did I head to bed, but not before I changed out of my robe and into my nightgown. I sighed and placed the robe on the side table only for it to vanish. I blink in surprise.

I know I am a place filled with magic, but a vanishing robe is still hard to take in.

I climbed onto my bed and rested my head on the pillow even though I wasn't that tired. Once I did, the lights seemed to grow dimmer in the room that I am guessing is also one of the works of magic. Is it me or is time room alive? It must have thought that it was bedtime for me as soon as I lay down on the bed – that or it wants me to go to sleep.

Either way, I don't mind. Sleep sounds pretty good to me. The only problem is, I can't. Millions of thoughts swirled inside my head that I couldn't sleep.

It must have been minutes, hours of me twisting and turning on the bed but I still can't seem to fall asleep.

"Come on brain. Shut up!" I muttered in the darkness of the room.

My brain doesn't want to listen to me because it kept replaying and showing me images of the old Fred in Thalia and comparing it to the Fred here in Hazel.

"For goodness sake! Why can't I-" I started to grumble but stopped when I heard a faint knock on my door. I immediately shut up.

"Rose?" It was Fred.

Great. I haven't even fallen asleep and now I am living in my nightmare!

I heard the door creak open and I did the only thing I could think of. Pretend to fall asleep. I cracked one eye open and saw light bursting in my room as Fred himself entered.

I willed myself to breathe steadily and remain calm when he gently closed the door behind him and made his way to me. The moonlight from the window did nothing in helping me see his face. I only saw his shadow coming closer to me as he took a chair, placed it beside my bed, and sat. He leaned against it and let out a sigh.

What is he doing here?

I wanted to get up and scream at him to get out. I don't talk to strangers, and I don't ever want to see him again, but we all know that that is rude and this isn't my house, to begin with. This is his castle and we are his guests.

Fred started to lean on his chair and stare at his fingers and played with them. By the looks of it, something was bothering him. I know because I saw him do that once back in Thalia and when I asked him about it, he only smiled and told me it was nothing.

But this is different. He's different.

He started to straighten up and when he did, the moonlight caught his face and I saw his look. Something does bother him. He does that by biting your lower lip thing and looking out in the distance. He did that for like a few seconds behind he looked at my sleeping face – excuse me – pretending to sleep face.

I have to fully shut my eyes in case he finds out that I am still awake.

“Rose, I don't know if you're awake or not, but I just want to say this to you.” He started. “What happened back there, the way I acted to you, I am sorry.” He said. I have no clue what he looked like right now and I badly wanted to crack my eye open just to see if he meant it. But judging from the softness and the sincerity in his voice it reminded me of the old Fred.

I heard him take in a deep breath as he continued. “You were right, Rose. About everything. I don't want to leave Thalia. I love it there and if I were given a choice, I would have stayed. But I can't, Rose. I can't. I am the only male heir to our kingdom and it is a custom that only the male child is to rule and marry a pure-blooded witch in their kingdom to keep the line intact. And that's me. I have no choice. I am the future king.” He paused. “I only came to Thalia because the Queen told my parents that I would become a better king for this kingdom if I met up with the other prince back in Thalia. That I would be able to learn the customs of others and apply them to our kingdom to make it better. My stay in Thalia was never permanent and even if you choose me, I still won't be the next king of Thalia. I was the second player there. Not much of an importance.” I paused. “You know, I was supposed to leave Thalia one week before the ball.”

Now that he says it, I do remember Fred being a little depressed during our last dance lesson. We were having a break back then and he took me to the garden pavilion to get some fresh air. I saw him gazing off into a distance with a look of sadness and longing in them. When I asked him if he was alright, he smiled at me and said that everything was fine and he gave me a flower.

That was the day before the ball.

I heard Fred let out a soft chuckle. It was as if he was afraid to wake me. "That was the plan, but I couldn't leave just yet. After all, you did promise me your last dance and I want to see to it that you give me that promise. When you think about it, it was our last dance with each other."

I suddenly felt tears forming in my eyes at the memory and I have to shut them tight just to get them back in.

"I have no other choice. I was afraid that if I told you, you would react and persist that I would come along with you." He chuckled. "I know exactly what you would do if I tried to explain this to you. You would overreact, b*** in, and you might even kidnap me and bring me back to Thalia because you never think things through."

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Correction. I never think.

I think my tears just died down and I want to punch this guy over here because my ears do not deceive me and I don't think that it was a compliment.

"But that is a good thing about you, Rose. You do those things because you care. You understand our feelings. You understood me well enough in my letter that it may be the reason why the nymphs lured you here. I appreciate that, but nothing has changed. I still can't go back and I don't even know if you ever want to speak to me again or see me for that matter. I just know one thing: It's for the best. I love my kingdom. And as for the future king, I will do my best to put Hazel back to its feet. If only-" He didn't continue and curious as I am, I cracked my eyes open just a bit to see him shaking his head and sighing. He ran through his hair and looked back at me. I closed my eyes again. "I don't even know why I am telling you this while you're asleep. Maybe I'm just a coward." He muttered and I felt him pulling the covers up my chin and felt a kiss on my forehead. "Goodnight, Rose." He whispered and then I heard the door open and then close.

It was silent again.

This time I opened my eyes. Fred had just tucked me into bed and talked to me while I was asleep. I can't place it but that was the Fred that I know and somehow not the Fred that I know. He's sweet, but never that sweet to me. Jolly but not so jolly.

I groaned. Does he have a split personality or is he just bipolar?

And so far, from what I've learned from this trip, the princes all have other stories that they left when they became king, candidates.

I barely slept last night. It was bad enough that I kept thinking of Fred before he came into my room and after he left, it just made my mind swirl with more thoughts. I was confused.

My eyes were still swollen both from crying and lack of sleep. But as of the moment, I don't mind what I look like right now as I am headed to the same table in my room as last night. Breakfast was served in my room and the same maid who had accompanied me during dinner stood there and waited for me.

Trust me, I almost screamed as soon as I saw her there too. The maids here are just too freaky and unpredictable.

After I ate my breakfast, I changed into some nice clothes prepared for me before heading out and into the open air by the very same fountain that we saw yesterday. One of the maids informed me that the princes were waiting for me here for our departure and sure enough, they were already there.

"Rose!" I turned my head towards the owner of the voice. It was Ren and he was running up to me fast. He stopped the moment that he was in front of me and leaned down to study my face. As soon as he did, he arched an eyebrow. "What happened to you last night? We were worried." He said.

"I wasn't worried! Ren was. He barely slept. Just thought that you should know!" Dan called out somewhere behind Ren.

Ren turned and growled at his brother. "Shut it, Dan!"

"I was worried too!" Nate suddenly appeared behind me and made me jump.

I turned around to look at Nate, he flashed me his vampire fangs. "Tell me, love. Who made you cry and I promise that I would rip them to shreds. And I will do it painfully."

"If anyone is ripping anyone who messes with Rose, it's Ren!!!" Still, Dan was now hiding behind the fountain from Ren's murderous glare.

"No one is ripping anyone to shreds." I quickly said before things get bloody around here.

"Awwww.....but I love ripping things to shreds," Nate said and wiggled his eyebrows as if emphasizing something that I could not get. I tilted my head to the side in confusion and Nate only facepalmed at me. "You're too young. Too pure. Too innocent." He said melodramatically and earned a slap at the back of his head from Ren.

"You know better than to talk to her like that." He said and gave Nate a disapproving look. He then turned his eyes on me and grinned. "Don't mind him, alright?"

I nodded slowly. Still having no clue of what just happened. "Okay..."

"Anywho," Said Nate and gave me a serious look. "What happened? After PRINCE Ace sent you to your room, he and Fred had this intense staring contest and things seemed to get awkward during dinner. Not to mention that PRINCE Ace would not tell us anything about what happened." He then jerks a thumb at Ren. "Ask wolf boy over there. PRINCE Ace almost skewered him on the spot for persisting."

I looked at Ren. He looked away and shrugged his shoulder while Dan let out a wolf whistle.

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I smiled. I find it sweet that they would worry about me. "I'm fine," I told them. "Stop worrying about me. I can take care of myself and whatever happened, it's already done."

"But-" Nate started to argue but I cut him off with a wave of my hand.

"Nate, I am not gonna dwell in the past forever you know. I'm going to move forward. Isn't that what I told you way back then?"

At this, the corner of Nate's lips lifted into a smile as he nodded. "Yes. I understand."

My eyes caught something behind Ren. It was Ace standing beside his horse, Midnight, with his back to us.

"Excuse me for a sec," I told them as I made my way towards Ace. "Ace!" I called out and stopped as I stood behind him.

"PRINCE Ace?" I called him again when he didn't turn around.

At my last call, he finally turned and as soon as I saw him I couldn't help but wonder. He seemed pale and he looked tired. His eyes seemed unfocused and I saw a smudge of red coming out of his nose. "Ace?!" Ace quickly looked away as he wiped his nose.

Was that blood?!

"Are you alright?!" I asked worriedly. I'm not sure but I think he was having a nosebleed.

"Fine." He snapped at me and glared. "And it's PRINCE Ace. How many times must I remind you?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. As many times as you can to remind you that I don't care if you are a prince."

"Tch!" A look of annoyance crossed his face.

I glared at him. "What's your deal? Why do you have a nosebleed?"

"I wasn't. And if I was it is none of your business." He said ever so rudely.

"Not fair! I told you about my problems yesterday and you won't even tell me yours?"

Ace cast a glance at me. Again, it was one of that you-are-a-worthless-human-and-I-am-a-high-cla**elf-prince kind of look. "We're not friends for me to tell you my problems. You were the one who told me your problems willingly. It's not my problem that you have a sensitive heart and can't stomach not being able to confide in someone."

I felt my nerve twitch. This guy has some serious talent for p***** me off. "Well, you might as well tell me since you don't have any friends, to begin with!"

"I don't need friends, to begin with."

"Figures. You don't even have a social life, to begin with."

"Who even needs a social life, to begin with?"

"Are you even normal?"

"I'm not even what you humans call normal, to begin with." He shot back.

"Why you-"

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"Shh!!" He shushed me! And he wasn't even looking at me. He was looking at something behind me. "He's here." He said.

I don't know why, but for some reason, I don't even need to ask who this he was talking about. I already know the answer to that. It's Fred.

I immediately stiffened. After what I heard from him last night, I don't think I'm ready to face him yet. I mean, what would I say to him? What face would I make? Should I smile and act natural? Tell him that I wasn't sleeping and I heard him talking to me last night? What? What?

Suddenly, everything went black as something was thrown over me. I reached up and pulled the thing down only to see that it was Ace's coat.

“Keep it up.” He said and pulled the coat over me again. “You don’t want to see him right? And you most certainly don’t want him to see you with that hair.” Oh yeah. With so much in my mind, I forgot to brush my hair this morning.

“Prince Ace.” I heard Fred’s voice and I had to bite my lips to prevent making any sounds.

With one of Ace’s hands still on top of my head and preventing me from seeing either him or Fred, he answered. “We’re leaving as per your wishes.”

“Thank you,” Fred said and even though I couldn’t see him, I somehow got the feeling that he was watching me. “Have a safe trip, Prince Ace, Rose.” When he said my name, I heard the familiar Fred that I used to know and my throat seemed to tighten. Then I heard his footsteps getting farther and farther away.

“He’s gone.” Ace finally said and removed his hand from my head. I lowered the coat and Ace seemed to stare at me.

I glared at him. “What?”

He sighed and scratched the back of his head in frustration. “Look, if you want to talk to him then do it. You look so pathetic standing there and looking troubled.”

Then the moment that he said it made me aware that I was indeed troubled. I quickly brought my hands to my face and wiped the expression away. “I don’t want to,” I said stubbornly.

“You say that, but then you’ll regret it later. Before we knew it, you’ll be crying the whole way back to Thalia and might sneak out again to come here.”

“I won’t,” I said. “I can’t. I don’t know what to say.”

Ace stared at me. “You talk back to me with that mouth of yours and yet you can’t converse with Fred?” He snorted. “Wimp.”

“Hey! I just can’t okay? It’s embarra**ing and even if I do, he’s gone anyway.” I said sadly.

“You humans make good fiction novels about this sort of situation and yet you can’t follow your advice. All talk and no work.” Ace said. He was getting annoyed with me by the second. “Come here.” Before I could even react, Ace threw me over his shoulder and started walking in the direction of the maze.

“Ace? Hey! What are you doing? Put me down.” I growled at him.

He didn't listen and kept walking instead of in the direction of the maze. What is he up to?

He started to walk us into the said maze before he threw me down not so gently and took his coat from me. "Ow!" I said and rubbed my b***. I glared at him. "And you call yourself a PRINCE!?"

"Stay here." He ordered me and ran off. Leaving me alone in this maze.

"Hey! Ace, you big-eared freak! Come back." I got up and dusted my b*** from the dirt as I ran to the last direction that Ace had disappeared to. I turned to a corner and found myself stuck between 3 paths. One of which might lead to his exit while the two might leave me deeper into the maze. I growled. "Ace, you fool!" I screamed.

Does that menopausal kid hate me that much!?

Chapter 59 Sing My Goodbye

"I am so gonna kill you when I get out of this." If I get out of this. I started walking blindly in the maze. I kept walking and walking, but I still couldn't find the way out. I always admire Mazes and I was pretty good at it if I wasn't the one in it.

Heck, I am a woman with no sense of direction and that jerk just threw me into a maze! That is equivalent to a lifetime of prison for me.

"Rose?" It was Fred's voice. And it was coming somewhere in the maze too. That's it! Fred! He might know a way out.

I was suddenly forgetting all my indifference towards him for the thought of getting out of this maze. I was getting claustrophobic and I am one minute away from screaming in panic.

"Fred? Where are you?" I asked.

"Over here!" He called out and I turned from corner to corner as I tried to follow his voice in the maze.

"Fred?"

"Rose?"

I kept running and I am guessing he is trying to find me too. One time I heard him on the other side of the hedge and a minute later, he was hedged away from me. I have a feeling that we were going around in circles calling for each other.

"FRED!"

“ROSE!”

Where is he!?

“Fred?”

No answer. Did he give up and cry?

“FRED.”

No answer again.

Ugh!! This is making me sick. What if I just play football and tackle this hedge, go straight, until I find my way out. Sure it would destroy their fancy garden, but I am certain that they would rather fix it than find a dead body in it, right?

I braced myself and faced my shoulder to the hedge to my right as I readied myself to tackle it. “Alright then. One, two, three-!” I was just about to make contact with the hedge when I saw a yellow bob of light like a firefly headed my way. It hovered over my face and I shooed it away with my hand but it was still bugging me. It was getting annoying that I karate chopped it. “Hiya!”

It dodged my attack.

“Rose?” I turned to the side to see Fred coming out of a corner panting. His blonde hair was a mess and he was only wearing a white b***on-down polo shirt with brown khaki pants. His shirt was sweaty and I could see droplets of sweat coming down from his forehead to the side of his left swollen cheek. He looked relieved when he saw me and I could wager that I mirrored his look.

He suddenly ran towards me and engulfed me in a hug. I could smell his familiar scent despite the dirt and sweat on him. To me, this was the Fred that I know.

“I’m sorry.” He started to say. “I’m so sorry, Rose. For everything. For making you cry. I don’t mean any of it. I swear. Just please, talk to me again. Don’t hate me. Please.” The last part came out as a whisper and I couldn’t help but smile as I hugged him back. It is him. He’s back.

I ran my finger through his golden locks and said, “I know, Fred. I know.” Fred moved back and looked at me with those childlike eyes and stared at me in wonder. I laughed. “I heard you last night.”

Fred looked surprised and his mouth formed an ‘O’. I guess he has no idea that I was pretending to be asleep. Fred blushed in which I never thought I would see him do. He’s embarrassed, but he was still looking at me and I realized that he was waiting for my reply.

"I forgive you," I said.

As soon as I said those three words, I saw him smile again. That very smile that I miss him wears so much.

"So you understand my situation?" He asked.

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"Yes. I do now. And I understand." I said. "I'm sorry too for acting so rash and coming here. I hope I did not cause you any trouble."

He laughed and gently brushed my hair out with his fingers. "Funny. You've been causing me trouble since day one."

"What?"

"Nothing."

I pouted. "You're ugly."

He laughed again. "I miss that. I miss you too." He said and he laced our fingers together before I looked at him with uncertainty. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Can you have one last dance before you go?" His grip on my hand tightened. The word 'last' seemed to trigger something in me and leaves a strange feeling. An unpleasant feeling.

Looking at him in the eye, I nodded. "Of course."

That made him smile. And it was not a happy one. Ever so gently, he started to position us into the proper dance position. I felt nostalgic and remembered the days of our lesson. How many times have we dance during those times, how many times I stepped on his foot, how many times he laugh at my mistakes, how many times he healed my blisters, and how many times we

made eye contact? I started to recall them all.

Fred then started to hum a familiar tune.

"Fred is that-"

"Shh." He said. "I remember the song. And maintain eye contact. I can't believe how easily you forget that one." A sad smile appeared on his lips.

I nodded and pursed my lips as I looked at him in the eye. Fred continued humming and I had to blink hard and fast to keep the tears at bay.

Fred started singing and I recognized that song. It was the very first song that we did the waltz together with a full song. Only this time, Fred was singing the song. There was no music. Only Fred's voice. His voice was beautiful and I could feel everything in it. I could feel his emotion in every word.

I know, because his eyes reflect the same emotions too and I am staring at them.

I looked to the side and let out a sigh from the bottled-up emotion inside of me. Fred used his hand as he made me face him again and smiled sadly as if he understood. He continued.

I tightened my hold on his hand and his shoulder and he did the same. It was like he was pa**ing on some of his strength to me to finish this dance.

A single tear fell from my cheek and he wiped it away with his thumb. And then Fred started to hum and I just focused on his voice as we danced in circles inside the maze. No one was there but us. We were stuck in our room with only each other as our company. I accidentally stepped on his foot and bit my lips in embarra**ment at my mistake.

"Sorry," I said.

He chuckled and started humming again. It suddenly made me remember the first time I stepped on his foot by accident. I felt a sense of nostalgia. It was like that memory happened eons ago.

I started to cry. "I'm sorry." This time I apologize to him not because I stepped on his foot, but because it was too much for me to keep eye contact with him without remembering the times that we danced in the palace. Those were some good memories that I know will never happen again.

Fred seemed to understand because he placed one hand behind my head and pulled me close to his chest while I cried.

"Of all the songs, why this?"

He carefully stroked my hair. We were still doing the waltz as he continued to sing. This time, his voice was a little softer.

My hands balled into his shirt. My tears just won't stop. I could tell that he was having a hard time singing because his voice faltered for a bit.

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He pulled me closer to him. Tightly and I heard his breath. I heard him take in a deep breath as he sang the next lyrics.

I could tell that the dance was almost over since we were starting to slow down. "Please let this not be goodbye." He sang it in an ending tone and I looked up to him knowing that there was more in the lyrics.

Fred met my gaze and shook his head at me. "This is goodbye now. I can't sing the last part of it would just make things harder." He brushed some hair out of my face. He leaned down and kissed me on the forehead.

I closed my eyes at the kiss. I bit my lower lip and tasted salty tears. I reached up and whipped the tears on my eyes.

Fred stepped back and I saw his eyes glistening with tears. When he blinked they were gone. "Goodbye, Rose." He said.

We stood there for a few more seconds until I realized that he was waiting for me to reply. Taking a deep breath I looked up at him in the eyes. I tried to be brave and tried to smile at him. "Goodbye, Fred." My voice cracked at the words and I started crying again. We hugged each other, knowing that this is the end.

Fred chuckled. "Stop crying." He said and whipped tears from my eyes again. "The others might think that I was being a jerk to you again.

Although PRINCE Ace didn't say anything, I know that he disapproved of the way I treated you yesterday."

I laughed a little at that. "I kind of told him," I admitted.

Fred nodded at me and looked up. "I think the others are waiting for you right now." He said and started to chant words that I could not understand. Suddenly, a yellow light appeared out of thin air that floated above my head. "It will lead you to the way out. Follow it."

"Fred-

"Go." He smiled. "I'm alright. I'm going to be okay now, Rose. I talked to the others already before PRINCE Ace threw me in the maze looking pissed. And let me tell you, Ren threw quite a punch there. Nate and Dan had to hold him back." He laughed and I couldn't help but join him too.

So that explains why his upper cheekbone looks swollen and starting to turn purple.

Seeing Fred again, the normal Fred, I suddenly felt content. It was like the problem was already settled and I have a feeling that we can now go and continue living in the palace even without Fred. He decides to stay and I should respect it.

Maybe the nymphs wanted us to resolve our unspoken feelings. Maybe this is why I was lured here.

Wiping the remaining tears from my eyes, I looked up at him and was finally able to give him a full smile. "Alright. I'm off then."

I started to turn around and leave – the floating light looked antsy to leave anyway – but Fred called. I paused and turned to look at him.

He grinned. "When I will be king and if you decided to..." He trailed off and shook his head. "Just expect that there will be changes in our culture and if you're still here, I hope to be able to be by your side." He said.

I blinked at him. Stunned at what I have just heard and would have asked more if Fred didn't point at the hovering light that was getting farther and farther away from that I would lose it if I don't catch up soon.

I looked at him one last time before I turned around and followed the light. It started to turn from corner to corner. Turning here and there in the maze until I was finally out of the maze. As soon as I got out, the light flickered and vanished.

"Took you long enough." A voice said at my side and I turned to see Ace leaning on one of the statues by the maze with his arms crossed over his chest.

Was he waiting for me?

Ace got up and headed in my direction. As soon as he stopped in front of me, I saw his face scrunch up in disgust as his lips drew back. "What is wrong with your face?"

I touched my face consciously. "What about it?"

"You look like you cried but you have a stupid-looking goofy smile plastered on your face." He said and moved back from me like I was so disgusting that he could not stand being near me.

I gave him a smug smile. "It's because I'm so beautiful," I told him. I know I heard him say it. He did say it. Whatever he said to me just made my ego grow. But then again, why do I have a feeling that I was dumped and confessed to at the same time? It was like adding +1 plus -1 in my ego chart.

That makes it back to zero.

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"I think you must have eaten something bad during breakfast because you are being delusional."

"Hey!" I protested and Ace looked away and started coughing loudly. He started to turn sickly pale again. "Ace?"

What's wrong with him?

Ace stopped coughing and turned his back on me and started walking away. He paused and turned in my direction. "You said goodbye to him, right?"

I nodded.

"Good." He said. "Let's get going." With that, he turned his back on me and headed off without even waiting for me.

I started to follow him but paused as I looked back into the maze. With the absence of Fred in Thalia, I know that things would never be the same again for us. His mere jolly and calming presence is already a great deal in helping me adjust to the palace. He was one of the few people I find the most comfort in.

Now that he's not around anymore, what would living in the palace be like?

"Ros!" I turned around to see Nate, Ren, and Dan running towards me. "Prince Ace told us where you were and I just had to come." Said Nate and held my hand dramatically in his.

"He said that if you won't show up in a minute, then we'll leave you behind," Ren said.

"Correction. Ren rushed in while we were taking our time." Dan wiggled his eyebrow and Ren while slapping Nate's hand from mine.

"Brother, we all rushed in at the same time."

"What the heck was that all about?!" Screamed an angry Nate from being slapped.

And with that, they started a three-way argument with each other. Watching them there made me realize something.

Sure, living in the palace without Fred would be hard; different. But that doesn't make it bad or lonely. Even though he won't be there anymore and I lost my prime candidate for the king, at least I still have the others with me. That even though I can be a pain sometimes they still stuck with me. They supported me. Ace included.

If that isn't what you would call lucky then I don't know what is.

Funny how I never noticed it before until now.

"Hey." I started and stood between the three to cut off their argument about a missing sock and flying potato. I looked at each one of them. "Didn't you say that we need to be back before the minute ends?"

They nodded.

"Well then. We better run because I think the minute is almost over and I am guessing that Ace is already on his horse and ready to leave."

They exchanged glances before realization hit them.

"Uh crap!"

"Better run!"

"Rose, let's go!!"

With that, we started to run.

So long, Fred. I know you'll be a great king someday.

Chapter 60 First Errand and I Met a Fish

"What do you mean the sack is empty!?" Nate growled at the twins, who were each holding a sack in hand where our lunch should be.

"As we said, the sack was hanging upside down. Our food must have fallen along the way." Ren deadpanned and leveled Nate's murderous gaze with his own.

"How could you both not have noticed anything!?"

"Gee let me think." Dan stepped forward and tapped his chin three times before looking at Nate with a not-so-happy look.

"Maybe because we were busy blocking you out and away from Rose because you kept flirting with her!"

I patted Cloud as I watched the three of them argue. Cloud and I were getting along pretty well and she seemed to have grown fond of me seeing as I kept feeding her apples. "Here, Cloud." I cooed and gave her an apple. I grinned as I watched her taking the apple from my palm and eating it. I find it cute when her lips move to eat. After all, horses in my world are not that common any more thanks to modern transportation.

"It was one job. One job for the two of you to keep an eye on our food and yet you can't handle it!?" Nate bellowed.

Ace was standing not far from them looking tired. His head was cast downward and one of his hands was rubbing the bridge of his nose. I say give it about 10 seconds before he would start to explode.

"Well if you are so concerned about the food then why don't you carry it?" Ren shot back.

"And make you idiots carry our sleeping bags? Forget it!"

"Are you implying that we can't be trusted with our belongings!?"

"What else could it mean?!"

I took another apple from my saddlebag and fed it to Cloud when she nudged me for more. She's just too cute not to feed. I can just cuddle with her all day!

"Fine! You know what? Since you two lost our lunch, then we might as well eat the fruits that we got." Said Nate just as

Cloud finished her apple.

"Rose!" I jumped at the sound of my name.

I stopped petting Cloud and turned to the princes. "Yes?"

"You got our fruits, right?"

I nodded. "Yeah. In my saddlebag." I pointed my thumb to the saddlebag at Cloud. Nate nodded and gave the twins one last glare before heading towards Cloud.

He paused and opened the saddlebag before turning towards me. "Is this the bag?" I made my way beside him and checked to see if it was the right pocket.

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"It is," I confirmed.

"It's empty." He said.

My eyebrow shot up. "Empty? It can't be. It was full of appl-" I stopped as soon as the realization hit me. Oh boy. Don't tell me that I got so caught up in feeding Cloud that I fed all our apples to her. I gulped and turned to face Cloud, who flicked her tail in excitement when our eyes met.

Well, at least she's cute.

"Uhm...Rose? You were talking about apples?" Asked Nate to give me a scrutinizing look.

Oh well. Might as well play dumb and clueless, because I am quite positive that they won't like it when I tell them the truth.

"I'm pretty sure that it was full of apples before we left!" I said and made my voice rise as if I was as confused and distressed as I looked. Plus, I know Nate and he has a soft spot for girls who are on the verge of tears.

Dead puppies, Rose! Dead puppies! Think of t**anic! Think of something sad and horrible and bring out those tears!!

"You don't know what happened?"

"I don't." I breathed heavily and looked him in the eye with big round tearful doe eyes.

The expression on Nate's face allowed me to confirm that my acting was working. He was slightly taken aback by my look that he swallowed hard and took a step back.

"Ren!" Dan screamed. "Nate is making Rose cry!"

"I can see that, brother!" Ren snapped at him. "You don't have to shout in my ear!"

"I-It's fine, Rose. It's fine." Nate cleared his throat and patted my back as some sort of comforting gesture. "We'll find another way on how to get food."

"I'm sorry," I said sadly.

"It's okay, Rose. It's not your fault." As soon as those words came out from his mouth, I turned slightly to the side and let out a victorious evil grin. My plan worked. Stupid ignorant princes!

I knew that trick would work. Avoiding their gaze, I grinned victoriously.

My eye caught something and I looked up to see that Ace was looking at me as I was smiling. He didn't react though, he just stared at me with a blank look. Very slowly, I wiped the smile off of my face and plastered on my distressed look, and looked away.

Crap...He of all people saw me.

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He's going to tell the others. I just know it!

"Prince Nate," Ace started to speak. There it is. He's going to rant me out! "I remember that you learned how to skin and gut our kills now, don't you?"

Nate nodded. "Yes, I do. Why?"

I turned my head slightly towards Ace's direction and I saw him addressing the twins. "You two, go into the woods and hunt for wild berries. Make sure they are not poisonous because I am going to let you eat them first. I'm going into the woods to hunt." He said.

Huh? He's not ranting me out?

I turned to him fully with a confused look. He noticed me watching him and only raised a brow in my way while giving me an unreadable expression.

Then I noticed that he already assigned everyone a task except me.

"Um...what should I do?" I asked.

"What good are you for?" He challenged me.

I frowned. "I don't know. You have to give me something."

"I would think that it is already an initiative to do something without the others hinting it for you."

"Not fair! You assigned their task for them. What makes me different?"

At that, Ace gave me a look that said 'you want me to say it in front of everyone?'. I gritted my teeth and sighed. "Fine. I'll go get some water." I muttered and went to grab each of our bota bags from the pockets of our saddle to fill them in.

"Rose, want me to help?" Ren offered.

"She can do it on her own." Ace told him.

"But it'll be heavy," said Nate as he stood behind me and helped me gather our bota bags. He was looking at Ace while following me.

"If you go, then no one will watch our camp. Also, if the twins separate then there is no knowing what the other one might do."

"Hey!" The twins protested.

I already gathered our bota bags and held them to my chest. The others still have a little water in them so it just added to its weight. "There is a lake just below that cliff." Ace pointed behind me and I turned around to see that the cliff was not that far from us and

that we are below it. "Once you are done, hurry back here. Also, you can bring your horse with you. I think she needs a little exercise." He said and started to turn around to get his fancy silver bow and arrow to hunt. Oh, I bet he's just dying to kill something.

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I rolled my eyes at his back and went to Cloud to place the bota bags in the saddlebag. Ren came to my side and helped me secure them all in. "I don't know what his deal is making you do this work." He muttered and secured one at Cloud's side.

"I can manage," I said.

"Still, I think he's being rude."

"He's always rude. You should know that."

Ren laughed. "Alright then." He dusted his hands when we finally finished securing them all in. "If you need any help or get into trouble just yell. I have good ears and I'll run to you as fast as I can if you need me." He grinned proudly.

"Aw yeah boy!" Dan hooted somewhere in the background for some unknown reason.

I nodded and offered him a smile. "Got it. Thanks."

"Hey, I can -" Nate started but was dragged away by Dan when he jumped between Ren and me.

"I've spent so long waiting for one tiny moment such as this and you are not going to ruin it!" Dan growled as he dragged Nate away from us. Ren and I only stared at them long enough before looking at each other again. Both are utterly confused by what just happened.

"I think you should go now and stop your brother from killing him."

"Nah. I wouldn't stop him anyway." He said and when I stared at him for a long time he shifted on his feet and cleared his throat. "Um...alright. I'll stop whatever Dan is going to do to him. Take care." He gave me one final wave before running off to where Dan and Nate were.

I shook my head at them and grabbed Cloud's reigns as I started to lead her towards the cliff. It wasn't that far, to begin with, but the route that I took made it difficult with many twists and turns. It was a good idea that I wasn't riding Cloud because I would have fallen with the state that the ground provided. I struggled to hold my skirt up while pulling Cloud's reins.

We finally emerged from the forest and finally, I saw the lake that Ace told me about. It was indeed beneath the cliff that stretches about half of the clear landscape in front of me. The water was very clear and reflected the blue hues of the sky and sun making it glitter like diamonds. I could even smell the freshness of the water that I didn't even know has a scent.

I tied Cloud's reins to a tree and started gathering the bota bags in my arms as I made my way to the edge of the lake. I placed the bags beside me as I reached out and ran my fingers in the water. Smiling as I watched the ripple run through the water. And before I knew it, I started playing with the water by making it rain around me.

"Weeee!" I felt like a kid again. Not caring whether my dress was sprayed with droplets of water. It felt good. I giggled and rained water around me again.

"Feels nice, doesn't it?"

My head turned to the side and saw a girl leaning by the edge of the lake with half of her body submerged in the water. Her long blonde hair covering her naked chest and her green piercing eyes staring at me in pure amus****t. I stared at her. Entranced by her beauty and perfect skin and body. My eyes caught something glimmering below her and I looked down to see sea green scales moving. At first, I thought it was just a huge fish but when I followed where it was headed, it led back to the blonde-haired beauty in front of me. My jaw dropped in sudden realization of what she was.

"Y-Y-Y-You're" I stammered.

"A mermaid?" She smirked at me and raised her fishtail for me to see clearly. She flicked it once, sending raindrops in the air, and started to run her fingers on it gently before looking back at me.