



## The Accompanying Guard

If George wasn't looking up at him so innocently, James would have thought his young brother was trying to make him look bad. "That's not- I mean I didn't-" James tried to explain to Isobel but his words were cut off by the arrival of Katherine and Alexander.

The two werewolves looked at James curiously, giving him nods of greeting before turning their attention to Isobel. He hadn't spoken to them the previous night during dinner but James had listened with interest as they defended Isobel and Charles to the other inquisitive servants.

"Morning, Isobel," the guard said to the princess with a familiar smile.

"Alex," she replied with an equally friendly grin.

"Isobel, this is Simon," Katherine said, gesturing to the middle-aged werewolf who had walked into the stables with them. "He's the head stableman."

"It's nice to meet you," Isobel greeted the man with a smile.

"Princess," he said, bowing his head slightly in a show of respect.

"That's not necessary," she told him quickly. "Please call me Isobel."

The man frowned but nodded. "Katherine told me that you want to ride?"

"Yes. Katherine and Alex will accompany me so we require three horses." Isobel explained.

"Isobel likes Midnight Star," George piped up, and James looked down at his brother in surprise. He must have been speaking to the princess for a while before James had interrupted them.

"She's a gentle soul," the stableman said approvingly. "George will help me saddle her for you, princess," he said, ignoring her earlier request to call her Isobel. "Do you have a particular horse you'd like to ride?" he asked Katherine and Alexander.

They both shook their heads, but Isobel sent a wink to George and said, "I think Chestnut and Dasher would be a good choice."

James wasn't sure if he'd ever seen George look so pleased with himself. It was strange to think that a Lycan princess was responsible for putting that blinding smile on his brother's face.

"Excellent," Simon said with a grin. He ruffled George's hair as he passed the young boy, and the two of them set off to begin their work.

"I'll be accompanying them as well," James stated, earning a surprised look from Isobel. He didn't wait for her to agree before he walked towards Willow's stall.

The stallion didn't get along with everyone but James had managed to get on the horse's good side after a few weeks of bribing him with slices of apples that James had pinched from the kitchen— he doubted the cooks or Edward had ever noticed the single missing slice from the apple pies and stews he'd eaten over those two months.

"You want to join us?" Isobel asked, sounding doubtful.

"King Edward is always accompanied by at least two guards," James explained as he brushed Willow's back. "I'm sure that rule extends to you as well." It wasn't a lie but it also was not the only reason that James had wanted to join them— he needed to speak to the princess alone and this was as good an opportunity as he was going to get.

"Alright," Isobel agreed after a pause.

James could feel her eyes on him as he placed a blanket over Willow's back but when he turned to look at her, she blinked as if she had been lost in thought and walked over to join her lady's maid and guard.

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"Ow," Isobel murmured, rubbing the back of her neck with one hand while keeping the reins secured in her other one.

Midnight Star was quickly proving to be one of the best horses Isobel had ridden but she seemed to be a bit nervous of the dark brown stallion who was walking astride her. Isobel had been surprised by James's choice of horse after what George had said about Willow, but James handled him well. Alex and Katherine were riding behind them, the two of them too far away for her to hear what they were talking about, but Katherine's musical laughter drifted on the wind to Isobel and James every few minutes.

"What's wrong?" James asked, turning his head to look at Isobel with a concerned frown.

"My neck hurts," Isobel complained. "You know what, it must be because I was walking around with my nose in the air," she told him with a pointed look.

He let out a surprised laugh and Isobel chuckled with him, any anger she'd felt towards the guard long gone. He had a lovely laugh and an even lovelier smile, and had Isobel been harboring any resentment towards him, it would have vanished after seeing the tentative grin he sent her way.

"I'm sorry about that," he told her. "I said those things before I met you."

"It's alright," Isobel replied genuinely. "I just hope that you and your friends no longer believe any of it," she added.

"Honestly, I'm not quite sure what to make of you yet," James admitted. "You're definitely not what I expected though."

"I suppose I should take that as a compliment," Isobel said with an amused shake of her head. "So, how long have you lived in Boston?" she asked.

"I was seven when my parents moved here. They came with your father," he explained. "My mother had George a few months after arriving in Boston. She was a cook and my father was a guard."

"Was?" Isobel asked quietly.

James didn't say anything for such a long time that Isobel had nearly given up on him saying anything before he said, "My mother died of smallpox two years ago but my father didn't survive the journey here." His voice betrayed no sadness but Isobel could see the grief that swirled within his blue eyes.

"What happened to him?" she asked with a swallow.

"The ship sailed into a storm and he fell into the sea when he went up on the deck to help the sailors."

"I'm sorry, James," she said, wishing she could find better words to comfort him.

The clop of hooves on the street was the only sound that filled the silence between them for the next few minutes. As the only one who knew the area, James was the one leading them and when he tugged on his reins to turn his horse to the right, Isobel did the same with Midnight Star. The mare needed only the slightest of movement in the reins before she turned.

"George is lucky to have you," Isobel said, ending the long and heavy silence. "He seems like a good boy."

"He is," James replied with a grin. "Everyone loves him."

"Unlike his brother," Isobel teased with a smile.

James narrowed his eyes at her. "Are you mocking me, princess?" he asked.

"Perhaps," she replied with a shrug.

James shook his head and smiled reluctantly. "Can I ask you something?"

"Ask away."

"Did that sailor really lose all his money to you?" he asked.

"I gave whatever I won back to the Captain," she told him quickly, the unexpected question making her defensive. "I know you think I'm spoiled, and perhaps even cruel, but I would never take money from anyone."

"That's not what I meant, Isobel," he replied, his deep voice growing soft. "I was just wondering how you beat a sailor at gambling."

"Oh," Isobel murmured, feeling embarrassed by her outburst. "My uncle Fred taught me," she explained. "He, Charles, Kathrine, Alex and I used to play dice and card games in London. We used to gamble for silly things like mince pies or candies."

"You seem very close to Katherine and Alexander," James noted with a confused frown.

"They're friends," Isobel replied easily.

"It's unusual for a Lycan to be friends with werewolves," he pointed out. "Most Lycans are..." he trailed off, but Isobel understood his unspoken words.

"I don't like many of my kind either," Isobel replied. "But we're not all the same, James. My uncle raised me and Charles after our mother died and our father came here, and he's the kindest man I know."

They'd made it to a large park and Isobel smiled at seeing the green of the grass after being surrounded by the drab colors of the city.

"It's beautiful," she said. "Thank you, James. I'm glad you came with us."

"I was only doing my duty, princess," he replied.

"Isobel," she reminded him, slightly stung by his dismissive words. "My name is Isobel, James."

Their eyes met and he gazed at her for a few moments before nodding. "Isobel," he agreed, her name a soft whisper on his lips.

It was only after they had returned to the estate and Katherine was helping Isobel change out of her riding habits and into a dress that Isobel realized she and James hadn't spoken about the bond.

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'The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.'