

Morning Rides

"Good morning, George," Isobel greeted the young boy as she walked into the stables the next morning.

"Isobel," he said, seeming happy to see her as he beamed up at her.

"Hello, Simon," Isobel added, smiling at the stableman.

"Morning, princess," he greeted, apparently still refusing to call her by her name.

"Oh, is someone else taking Midnight Star out?" Isobel asked, trying not to show her disappointment as Simon led the already-saddled-mare out of her stall.

"No, I had a feeling you might be back this morning, so George and I got the horses ready for you," the man explained, nodding with his head to Chestnut and Dasher who were also ready to go out.

"Oh, thank you," Isobel replied, a bit surprised that he'd gone through the trouble without being certain.

"Will your lady's maid and guard be joining you again?" he asked as he handed the reins over to her.

"Yes, Alex and Katherine will be here in a minute," Isobel told him. Midnight Star nudged the princess with her nose, so Isobel obligingly began stroking her neck. "You needn't have gone through the trouble, Simon, but thank you."

"I wasn't expecting anyone so early yesterday," the man admitted apologetically with a bow of his head. "We don't make it a habit here to keep Lycans waiting. I hope I didn't offend you, princess."

Isobel frowned. "Simon, you didn't offend me," she assured him gently. "I know my father might not take kindly to something so minor but Charles and I are not like him."

The man simply nodded his head respectfully and walked over to Chestnut's stall.

"Aside from working with the horses, what do you enjoy doing, George?" Isobel asked the boy who was shoveling fresh hay into the stalls.

"There aren't a lot of other children to play with here. Sometimes James lets me watch him and his friends train," George said with a shrug. "That can be fun."

"What about reading?" Isobel asked, thinking of the huge collection of books she'd browsed through in the library when she was exploring with Katherine the previous afternoon. "Do you enjoy that?"

"I don't know. My mom taught me to read and write but she always said we couldn't afford to buy any books," George explained.

Isobel swallowed and tried not to let her sadness enter her expression. She, Charles, and their father had dined on soup, venison, chocolate pudding, and wine the previous night but George's family wasn't paid enough to afford a single book. Before she could promise the boy that she would bring him a book though, somebody else had walked into the stable and stole George's attention.

"James, you were right. Isobel did come back," the young boy said, pointing to the princess triumphantly.

"I can see that," James replied with an amused chuckle, walking over to his brother and giving him a tight hug. "How's your work going?" he asked after releasing George and ruing his hair affectionately.

"Fine," George grumbled, his cheeks a bit pink as he straightened his hair.

"Morning, Isobel," James greeted her with a blinding smile. "I thought I'd accompany you again today."

"Of course," she replied, her cheeks probably as pink as George's. "I'd like that," she added a bit more quietly, not wanting Simon to overhear her. It could have been her imagination, but James's smile seemed to grow with her words.

"I see you didn't bother saddling Willow for me," James said to Simon a bit drily as he noticed the man was holding Chestnut and Dasher's reins, the horses ready and waiting unlike the dark brown stallion.

"He bit me so I decided that if you wanted to ride that menace then you can do the hard work," Simon explained with pursed lips.

Isobel smothered her giggle with her hand and James looked at her with a knowing glare. But though his blue eyes were narrowed, they danced with humor as he muttered, "It's like nobody respects me."

"I respect you, James," George piped up with a grin.

"Ah, then you can saddle Willow for me," James replied, handing the brush that he had just picked up to George with unnecessary grandeur.

The boy swallowed and gaped at his brother. "No," he said, shoving the brush back into James's hands, making Simon and Isobel howl with laughter.

"You're all cowards," James proclaimed before walking into Willow's stall.

The stallion greeted the guard by resting his head on James's shoulder in a kind of hug. The dark brown horse didn't look like he was capable of biting anyone as the guard stroked his neck and murmured a quiet greeting. In their affectionate greeting, Isobel could see that he didn't actually mind having to saddle the horse himself.

"Did you see Katherine and Alex on your way here?" Isobel asked James while he brushed Willow's back, preparing it for the blanket and saddle.

"I did," he replied with an amused grin. "They seemed a bit preoccupied though so I decided to come ahead and not wait for them."

"Preoccupied?" Isobel asked with a confused frown.

"I shouldn't sully your ears with the scandalous details, princess, but Alex was kissing your lady's maid against a tree when I spotted them," he explained with a wink.

"Oh," Isobel muttered in embarrassment, realizing why her lady's maid was taking so long to return with Alex.

"Not to worry though. I don't think Katherine's honor was in any danger," James assured her.

"I see," she replied awkwardly, her cheeks probably bright red under her hat. She'd never spoken so openly about such subjects with anyone other than Katherine.

James didn't seem to notice her embarrassment though as he asked, "Do you ride every morning?"

"Most, yes," Isobel said.

James's lips twitched up. "Then it seems that Willow and I will get to spend a lot more time together," he said, letting her know that he intended to join her every morning.

"It would seem so," Isobel agreed, unable to contain the smile that stretched her lips.

~

James had woken up unusually happy that morning, and he had the growing suspicion that it had to do with the woman riding next to him. He'd felt somehow lighter after their ride the previous day, and his good mood had lasted even after accompanying Edward and Charles on a ride in the afternoon. While Andrew, Matthew, William, and even Charles had returned to the estate with clenched jaws and frustrated expressions, James had endured the king's foul temper and returned to the estate in much the same mood as he'd left it.

A week previously he would have rather walked over hot coals rather than spend time with a Lycan, yet he found himself smiling and laughing with Isobel as if she were his friend rather than a member of the species he detested.

"What's London like?" James asked curiously after he'd nished laughing at Isobel's story about how her brother had gotten revenge on a particularly nasty family of Lycans by hiding horse manure under the seats of their carriage.

"Big and noisy and dirty," Isobel replied with a sigh. "I miss my uncle and our old home, but I like that you can smell the sea air here and that the streets aren't so crowded."

James's brows lifted in surprise. He'd always found Boston quite busy and noisy, but he supposed it was nothing compared to a large city like London. "Do you think your uncle will visit you here?" he asked. James had come to realize that Isobel's uncle had become something closer to a father to her and Charles over the years.

"I don't think so," Isobel sighed. "He and my father hate one another so he wouldn't be welcomed here."

"Your father doesn't seem to like many people," James noted carefully, hoping the truth didn't offend her.

"And not many people like him," she quipped in response, making James chuckle.

"Oh, I love that one," Isobel said to Katherine who had started humming a song.

Katherine and Alexander were riding closer to them than they had the previous day, so Isobel and James could hear the lady maid's humming perfectly.

"She was humming it all through dinner last night," Alexander informed them with a long-suffering sigh, earning a slap on his arm from his mate.

James and Isobel shared a smile.

"If it bothers you so much, I'll stop," Katherine told her mate.

"Kat, you know I love your singing," Alex replied.

They were riding behind James and Isobel, so he couldn't see Katherine's reaction to her mate's words, but based on her silence, Alexander's soothing words hadn't worked as well as he'd hoped.

"Come all you young sailor-men, listen to me. I'll sing you a song of the sh in the sea," Alex started singing rather poorly and loudly.

When Isobel joined him, her singing thankfully better than the guard's, James turned to her with wide eyes. Luckily, the Boston Common was empty so early in the morning so nobody else was there to witness a wealthy lady singing a sea shanty in the park. Katherine reluctantly joined in next, her musical voice making up for Alex's poor performance.

"You're all mad," James informed them with an amused shake of his head before they started singing the last chorus. Isobel looked over at him and laughed, leaving Alex and Katherine to nish the song as she shared a smile with James, the sunlight bringing out the green in her hazel eyes.

"Beautiful," Alex said, mirroring James's thoughts as Katherine sang the nal words.

~

"Charles? What are you doing here?" Isobel asked, pulling Midnight Star to a halt in front of the stables. It was rare to see her brother awake so early.

"I thought we could go for a walk around the estate," Charles replied with a glance toward James and the others. "Alone," he added.

"Alright," Isobel said, surprised by her brother's unusual rudeness. She dismounted and handed the reins over to Simon who had come out of the stables. "Thank you," she said gratefully, giving the mare a nal rub on the neck before she was taken inside.

James had dismounted as well and was leading Willow into the building but paused when Isobel turned to him.

"I'll see you tomorrow morning," she said, unable to hide the hope from her voice.

"Of course," he replied with a small smile.

"Isobel," Charles said impatiently.

With a nal glance toward James, Isobel turned and followed her brother away from the stables. "What's the matter with you?" she asked him once they were far enough away not to be overheard.

"You haven't rejected him yet, have you?" Charles asked, his voice almost angry.

"Well...no," Isobel admitted reluctantly.

"What are you thinking?" he hissed at her, their walk forgotten as he turned to her. "This isn't a game, Isobel."

"I know," she replied quietly.

"Isobel, please tell me you haven't come to care for him," Charles said, his eyes searching her face for an answer.

"I've only known him for three days," Isobel replied, somewhat managing to avoid the question.

Charles's eyes softened at whatever he saw in her face. "You know that nothing can ever happen between the two of you. I won't force you, but you need to reject him, Isobel."

"I will," she replied, forcing herself to say the words even though she hated them.

"Good," Charles said. "And until you do, I'll be accompanying you on all your morning rides."

Isobel blinked at him as he continued walking. She truly hoped that he was joking because she knew that she and James wouldn't be able to speak so freely with her brother there.

Charles proved to be entirely serious though because she found him waiting for her at the stables the next morning, a grey horse already saddled for him.

~

'O how much more doth beauty beauteous seem By that sweet ornament which truth doth give! The rose looks fair, but fairer we it deem For that sweet odor which doth in it live.'