

Chapter 23: The Mall

Chapter 23: The Mall

The soft hum of the engine filled the quiet car, a comforting rhythm beneath my racing thoughts.

I sat beside her—Queen Selene.

She wasn't wearing one of her flowing gowns or embroidered robes today. Instead, she wore simple casual trousers and a soft cream blouse, her dark hair pinned loosely at the nape of her neck. And yet... nothing about her elegance had faded.

She was still the Queen.

Effortlessly beautiful.

Undeniably commanding.

And I... was just me. I dressed in a plain cotton dress, my hands folded in my lap. I thought we'd only talk for a few minutes in her room, maybe catch up since she had just returned from her long travel.

But after breakfast, she'd turned to me with a smile and said, "Come with me somewhere, Elira."

I didn't ask where.

I couldn't say no.

Now, here we were—riding in a black vehicle flanked by her guards, one car ahead, another trailing behind. Dianne sat quietly in the front seat beside the driver.

"Darling, could you give me what I asked you to bring?" Queen Selene asked gently.

Without hesitation, Dianne retrieved a small container from her bag and handed it back.

"Here it is, Queen."

I blinked in confusion as the Queen turned toward me.

Then I flinched—not from pain, but surprise—when her fingers gently reached for my hand—the bruised one.

The one I'd tried to hide beneath my dress earlier.

"This," she said softly, uncapping the jar, "is the cream I used to apply to Sorin's skin whenever he came home from sword practice all scraped up. Poor boy—unlike his brothers, his healing ability wasn't as strong. He bruised easily."

She dabbed the cream lightly onto my skin, her touch soft as silk. The scent was faint—lavender, maybe chamomile.

I didn't know what to say.

No one had ever done this for me before. I was used to my bruises and wounds healing on their own, though they took days—or sometimes weeks.

"You don't have to..." I whispered, unable to meet her eyes.

But she only smiled. "I want to."

Silence settled between us for a moment, but it wasn't heavy. It was full of something unfamiliar.

Care.

Affection.

"Wounds like this," she said quietly, smoothing the cream over my wrist, "shouldn't be ignored. Not the visible ones... and not the ones that go deeper."

I didn't know if she meant the bruises on my skin... or the ones I carried inside.

Maybe both.

She looked out the window as the car turned onto a quieter road, sunlight touching her cheek. "We're almost there," she murmured.

"Where... are we going, M-Mama?" I finally asked, still not used to calling her that. But she said she didn't want me to call her 'Queen'—and it was an order I had to follow.

She smiled again—mysterious and gentle.

"You'll see."

I didn't expect it.

The car pulled into a large, sun-drenched building lined with glass walls and colorful signs, and when we stepped out, I froze.

A mall.

I had never been to one before. I only heard it from Lorelei and read it in her magazines.

The air was cooler inside, with music playing softly and the scent of perfumes and something sweet.

People passed by—smiling, laughing, walking in groups or hand in hand.

Children ran past with shopping bags, couples browsed displays, and everywhere I looked, it was loud.

Bright. Alive.

I'd grown used to the noise at school.

But this... this was different.

This was the kind of world I'd only ever heard about.

I slowly stepped forward, then stopped again, my hands curling at my sides.

Too much.

Too fast.

It felt like all the lights were pointed at me. Like every person's gaze could see through me—see the bruises beneath my sleeves, the title forced into my name—the curse in my blood.

And then—

A hand gently took mine.

Warm. Reassuring.

Queen Selene.

She looked at me and smiled softly. "I didn't buy you clothes during my travels," she said, calm and steady, "because I wanted to see you wear them first. Though I'm sure any clothes would suit you, Elira."

I blinked at her, overwhelmed by her kindness again.

"M-Mama, I-I still have a lot of clothes at home," I stammered. "I haven't even worn them all yet—"

She shook her head gently. "We'll buy more."

"But—"

"And," she continued, a teasing smile tugging at her lips, "I'm going to buy you a gown. You'll need it."

My heart skipped. "For what?"

"For the gathering in a few days," she said. "You and Darius are attending a party. A formal one."

I froze again.

A party?

With Darius?

Before I could say anything, she gave my hand a small squeeze. "Don't worry," she said. "You won't be alone. I'll help you choose something beautiful. You deserve to feel that way."

My throat tightened. I didn't know how to respond. No one had ever said something like that to me before. That I deserved anything... let alone to feel beautiful.

I simply nodded, letting her lead me deeper into the unfamiliar world of shining boutiques and towering mannequins.

She never let go of my hand.

And I never wanted her to.

Queen Selene led me into a boutique with glass doors and silver lettering that shimmered under the lights. A soft chime sounded as we stepped inside, and a woman in a pale pink suit greeted us with a warm smile and a slight bow.

"Queen—"

Before the woman could finish what she was about to say, Queen Selene brought a finger to her lips with a gentle smile.

The woman nodded in understanding, then glanced at me. She gave me a soft, curious look—questioning but not unkind. Still, I gripped the Queen's hand a little tighter.

"I'm here to buy a dress for my daughters," Queen Selene said. "Do you have any new collections?"

I looked at Dianne, who stood calmly beside us. She seemed used to how the Queen addressed her—and unlike me, it also seemed this wasn't her first time in a place like this.

The store was like a dream.

Racks of flowing dresses, rows of heels adorned with crystals, shelves lined with delicate jewelry.

Everything sparkled. I didn't know where to look.

"Yes, Ma'am, we do," the woman replied enthusiastically, leading us into a more private room.

The woman clapped her hands gently, and two other staff members appeared, carrying dresses in varying fabrics and colors as we sat on a cushioned lounge.

Queen Selene turned to me with a warm smile. "Try as many as you like. We're not in a rush."

My hands trembled slightly. I still didn't think I deserved any of this—but Queen Selene kept smiling at me as if to reassure me otherwise.

She turned to the woman and asked her to show us more of the collection.

The assistant held up a soft lilac gown, its fabric glittering subtly in the light. "Would you like to try this one first?"

"Go ahead, Elira," Queen Selene said softly. "Try it on. I want to see you wear it."

I stood and stepped behind the curtain into the dressing area, heart pounding.

The dress was too beautiful... and I knew it must be expensive. I still had so many clothes back in my closet, most of them untouched. But I also knew rejecting the Queen's thoughtfulness would be rude.

"Would you like me to help you, Elira?" Dianne asked gently.

I shook my head and smiled. "I can manage, Dianne."

The fitting room was softly lit, mirrors lined with gold trim, and the curtain was thick and velvety.

I stared at the gown in my hands.

It looked delicate—too delicate for someone like me. But I took a breath and slipped it on, carefully easing the silky fabric over my skin.

I shouldn't have told Dianne I could manage.

Because now I was struggling.

The zipper at the back refused to cooperate. I twisted my arm behind me, trying to reach it—just a little more...

I winced.

A sharp pain shot through my shoulder as I strained, fingers barely grazing the zipper. "Ugh," I groaned under my breath, frustrated.

Outside, I heard Queen Selene's soft voice.

"Oh, you're here. What took you so long?" she asked lightly.

I barely registered her words. My full attention was on the cursed zipper. Why did gowns always zip in the most impossible places?

My shoulder throbbed from the strain, and I knew I couldn't do this on my own.

With a resigned sigh, I reached for the curtain.

"I need help, Dianne," I murmured, pulling it open—

And froze.

It wasn't just Dianne and the Queen waiting outside.

Darius was with them.

Tall. Unmoving. His eyes landed on me—and lingered.

I felt the blood drain from my face, replaced almost instantly by a burning heat that rushed up my neck.

The gown clung to me, only half-zipped, revealing more of my back than I was comfortable with. My hair was loose, draped over one shoulder. My breath caught in my throat.

Darius didn't speak.

But he didn't have to.

I could almost hear what he might say.

The accusations were waiting behind those storm-dark eyes.

What's he going to think this time? That I'm manipulating his mother to do this for me? That studying wasn't enough for me—and now I'm using her to shop for dresses I don't deserve?

"Why don't you help your wife, son?" Queen Selene said, but before I could protest or ask Dianne to help me instead,

Darius was already walking toward me—his eyes never leaving mine.



Send Gifts



13 Likes