

The Rose Queen

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Fairfield
SCRIBES

The logo for Fairfield SCRIBES features the word "Fairfield" in a serif font above the word "SCRIBES" in a bold, all-caps serif font. A quill pen is positioned vertically between the two words, with its tip pointing upwards and its base resting on the letter "I" in "SCRIBES".



CHAPTER 1

WHEN SHE WAS SIXTEEN, MIRABELLA attended the last ball her mother, the queen, would organize. Although Mira's beauty was maturing, she was not yet done with the plumpness of youth. Between now and her eighteenth year, she would grow five more inches. At eighteen, she would be the tallest of all the women and taller than a number of the men of court. She would come eye-to-eye with the king, although his stature was greater simply due to the height of his crown.

But at sixteen, something about her was not yet complete.

It was attractive, that unfinished quality in her. At her mother's ball, one could tell where the princess stood merely by the number of suitors hovering around one spot. Overwhelmed by the crowd, she had learned by that time to smile coyly and say little. She donned indifference like armor, and without intending it, her distant and cool demeanor became her trademark. What would they all say if they knew she felt shriveled up inside under the constant attention?

Because she didn't say much, Mira listened. Since childhood, she'd had the knack of paying attention to multiple

conversations at the same time. She could be at a crowded gathering like this ballroom, and still distinguish each voice around her. Even as she smiled at her companions, she was mostly paying attention to the conversation now taking place behind her.

“*Him?* What would the king want with *him?*”

“Called him from *there*, you know. The queen said—”

“Country buffoon. Did you know that when he made his bow, he neglected to—”

“Not surprising. What do you expect, letting in riffraff? And look at those *clothes*—”

She couldn’t help but turn to look for the subject of the conversation.

The person they spoke of seemed alone despite the hordes of people who swirled around him, like a pebble untouched in a stream. His clothes were a touch less elegant, less polished, as if he had spent money frugally and been cheated of the finest materials. It aped the latest style, but was not quite the thing. There was something about him, though, that spoke to her.

His features were forgettable, but his eyes—they were dark and miserable in the crowd.

She managed an introduction and, a touch belatedly it seemed, he asked to escort her around the ballroom. She glanced to each side, at the bodies of suitors piled up around her, and raised one perfect eyebrow at him in conspiracy. “Thank you, sir,” she replied and was granted his smile.

She heard a ripple of whispers after them, but it was unlikely she would ever see this country lord again, and so she didn’t worry about what impression she might be making. For a moment, she breathed more easily in the man’s ostracized

presence. He said almost nothing, and it was a definite improvement over the ceaseless prattle of the admirers left behind.

And for a moment, she felt... not alone. Or if alone, it was a shared aloneness. She could be a solitary creature and take comfort with another's pain in the midst of the crowd.

When the man made his final bow, she felt she had done a good service to rescue him and keep him company. Maybe someone might do the same for her someday.

And then she promptly forgot the incident, since there were no more balls and no more picnics. The air in the castle grew heavy with apprehension as the king's peace talks with the North broke down. Failure would mean a continued war with the various tribes, a war that had drained the resources of Dunlaidir's treasury. Mira moved listlessly about her mundane tasks as the tense atmosphere kept her confined to the castle.

It wasn't until a basket arrived for her about a month after the ball that the event resurfaced in her thoughts.

At a knock on her chamber door, she glanced up reluctantly from her stitching, but allowed her lady's companion, Brina, to answer it. The quiet murmuring outside told her little, but when Brina returned, she held a covered basket about the size of a trencher of bread. The older woman placed the basket on the ground before the princess.

Mira raised her brows, but Brina simply smiled. Mira knelt down and lifted up the square of linen that covered the basket. Immediately, she drew her breath in a soft sigh.

"Oh," she breathed. She took the bundle into her hands, lifting it as gently as a baby—which it was. A puppy, fast asleep.

"There's a note." Brina plucked the roll of vellum from the basket. It was crushed into the shape of the puppy's backside, where it had been nestled. She unrolled the note and

read, “Another creature in need of rescuing.—M”

Brina turned the page around, but there was nothing else. “Now what do you suppose *that* means?” Left out of the mystery, her tone was cross.

But Brina’s temper escaped Mira’s notice. She laughed in delight as the puppy, still sleeping, rooted around and finally snuggled closely against her stomach. “I do not know.” She stroked the silky ears and ran a gentle finger down the animal’s back. The black bundle shivered under her touch, but didn’t wake. “Brina, what do you know about puppies?”

A sigh, but she smiled also. “Lord have mercy on us.” Although her words were tough, her tone was gentle.

The next few days were filled with little else but milk and porridge and the constant hovering of maids to clean up the mess afterwards. The chief huntsman visited the first day at Brina’s request, took one look at the pup and said, “That’s a lymer, that is. I’d say five weeks.”

At Mira’s blank look, he elaborated. “A bloodhound,” he said. “Not one o’ ours. More o’ a mongrel. Hard to tell at this age, but you’ll see development in the next week or so. Do you know where he came from?” When she said no, he blew out his breath. “Oh, well. Keep him close when he gets older, Your Highness—if he gets near the bitches, the king will have me head.”

“Ah,” she realized. “Yes, the king’s white hounds. I dare say that would not bode well.”

“Feed him bread dipped in milk for now. Or pottage. We normally give ’em meat on the hunt, but—ahem—” he glanced over at Brina, then back to her. “It seems unlikely that he will be a’hunting with the pack, so it will do no harm to give to him when he’s old enough. I’ll send you a leash for him to be

walked in the gardens.” As if running through a checklist, he said, “Oh, yes, he’ll grow like a weed. Be near his full size in half a year.”

“Full size?” she asked in surprise. “He gets much bigger than this?”

The man laughed as if he could not help it, but stopped abruptly when she only stared at him in puzzlement. “Oh, aye, Your Highness. He’ll outweigh you before he’s grown.”

She stared at the pup. The man rambled on, covering the uncomfortable silence. “He’s a right good working dog. They catch a scent and won’t let off it for as long as it takes to follow it. Hard to train, and need to be leashed at all times or they’ll just up and run off chasing down something what they think is interesting.”

When she said nothing, he cleared his throat and shifted his weight from knee to knee—she had forgotten to bid him to stand after he’d kneeled before her, figuring only that he was examining the pup in the basket. Now, she said, “Thank you, huntsman. You may go.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.” He stood and made his bow.

Brina’s expression, when they were alone, could sour milk. “Who would send such a creature?” she asked. “A working dog!”

Mira smiled down at the pup. “A misfit,” she agreed softly. “Among all the lap dogs in the city. It reminds me of another misfit I met a month ago.” Her smile became a grin as she met Brina’s eyes. “Do you remember the man at the ball?” She related the story of the country nobleman to her companion, sparing no detail except for the man’s name, which she had forgotten. “It is the only thing I can think that fits.”

Brina tapped her chin. “Another suitor?”

Mira glanced down at the small black bundle, which was just now stirring. "Maybe. But I feel as if this is the end of it. I do not think we will hear from him again."

And she was right—the mysterious nobleman didn't come again to court, although she looked for him somewhat wistfully. If, for nothing else, to thank him—for the dog became her constant companion. When she could not manage it, a maid would take him outside, but more often than not it was the princess herself going for long walks at all seasons, towed by an increasingly large creature straining at the end of a leash. Maids in her room learned to keep things locked in cabinets, for anything left unattended—a slipper, a veil, a length of tatting—was soon unrecognizable once it met Goliath's teeth.

The dog was the terror of the servants, and responded well only to Brina and its mistress when told, "No." Mira loved Goliath more than anything in the world, and was so caught up in watching him grow that she neglected what duties she could at a time when her ailing mother, the queen, was constantly absent from public life. Perhaps Mira should have paid more attention to the outside world, but joy, so absent in her life until now, was cherished because of its rarity.

A month after her seventeenth birthday, the queen died.