

Dark Rose

Red Lily

Told from Sky's perspective

It was only five days since the Harvest Meal, but to Sky it felt like forever. She looked at the book in her hand, then leaned her elbow on the table.

"Any ideas?"

Sky turned to look at Dani, who was perched on a nearby chair, a book resting in her hands. "Ideas?"

"You were looking at that book to get an idea for decorating the shirt." Dani pointed at a pile of grey material on the table next to the book. "Have you thought of anything?"

"Not yet."

Sky was normally good at inventing patterns to sew onto shirts and tunics – when she put her mind to it. She often had to redo several stitches to make sure everything was perfect. But today, she was unable to concentrate no matter what she did.

Sky's father was busy tutoring Jeremy, her younger brother. Her aunt, Lady Alexandra, was in the larger drawing-room with Monica and Sky's mother, discussing the upcoming wedding. Sky wondered when she would be asked to come and join them. She loved her cousin and did want to help her, but she wasn't sure how much help she could give.

Her uncle was still furious about the article in *The Announcer*. Sky knew she was lucky to have received only *one* lecture about it. Her family didn't want to sever the friendship between Sky and Isabel as it meant alienating a powerful future ally.

That would never happen. Izzie would never abandon their friendship, and neither would Sky. Not even if her family ordered it.

"What's going on?" Dani asked, setting her book aside. "You've been on edge since yesterday. What is it?"

Sky knew what the issue was. She was even more restless than usual, and she couldn't understand why.

"I don't know."

"Skylar!" It was her mother's voice. "Could you come to the drawing-room, please?"

Dani grimaced. "You'd better go."

Sky got up and flounced out of the room. Fortunately, the larger drawing-room wasn't far away from the smaller one. She opened the door to reveal her mother, Monica and Aunt Alexandra reclining on chairs the same dark green as the door. A pot of tea and some cups sat on the oval table in the centre of the room.

"What's wrong with seeing a fitter, Monica?" Aunt Alexandra asked as Sky sat in one of the empty chairs. "It would be lovely if you got married in a new dress, and I know several fitters would love to make a dress for an heir's wedding. Then you could give it to your daughter when it's her turn."

"You didn't let Monica try on *your* wedding dress," Sky's mother said pointedly.

"That's because she's taller than I am."

"What colour do you want, Monica?" Sky asked.

"I don't know. Probably a pale blue or green. Actually," Monica said hesitantly, "I might embroider my sky-blue dress. It is one of my favourites."

"You can't get married in that one!" scoffed Aunt Alexandra. "You're the family heir. You've got standards to uphold."

"But why not? It's a perfectly formal dress, and it'll look even nicer when I'm finished."

"Then you'd better start sewing quickly, because decorating it is going to take time."

"We haven't even decided a date for the wedding!" protested Monica.

"Then hurry up and discuss it with Derrick! We need to give the church appropriate notice."

Derrick, Monica's fiancé, was the nephew of Lady Findley. Sky had met him several times and he seemed like a good match for Monica, personally as well as socially. Sky sometimes wondered if it was the latter her family really cared about. She just wanted her cousin to be happy with someone she loved.

"I hope you're paying attention to this, Skylar," her mother said warningly. "This will be you one day, so mark and learn."

She continued to discuss dresses and potential wedding dates with Monica and Aunt Alexandra, but Sky wasn't listening. Her mother's words had sunk deep into her heart.

This will be you one day.

Didn't Sky have a say in that?

She wasn't stupid. She was fortunate to have the life she did, but...was this all her future held in store?

Was her entire life going to revolve around being a perfect member of a noble family?

The thought stayed in her mind for the rest of the morning.

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After lunch, she sat in the lesser drawing-room again, staring at the pile of grey silk, unable to concentrate. She twirled the needle around in her hand, caught by how it turned into a silver shaft in the sunlight.

She stuck it into the edge of the silk. "I'm taking the movil out, Dani."

"Take care. When are you coming back?"

"I won't be long. Just tell my family I needed some air."

They'd probably want to know why she hadn't just gone into the garden, but Sky didn't care about that.

Sky was already wearing shoes. She walked through the hallway and towards the door, trying hard not to break into a run. Her shoes were far too loud on the floor, but it wouldn't be long until she was out in the open air.

"Where are you going?"

Sky turned around. Monica stood at the foot of the stairs, her arms folded. Rivers of dark brown hair fell over her left shoulder.

"Just going out for a bit," Sky replied, smiling casually.

"Take Danielle with you."

"No, thanks." Sky felt the edges of her smile grow a little sharper. "I want to be by myself."

The cousins looked at each other, neither willing to back down.

Eventually, Monica sighed. "I didn't see you leave."

"Thank you."

Sky slipped out of Eastwater and into her green movil. She started it and drove out of Eastwater grounds, thankful nobody was coming up the opposite end. She was glad to have her own movil instead of having to borrow her parents' – but maybe she shouldn't take it for granted. If she went too far, the movil might be confiscated.

She opened one of the glass-shields on the side. The wind caressed and played with her hair. Hills and trees swept past her as she wove her way down the roads. They were as familiar to her as Eastwater itself; she knew there was no chance she would ever get lost here.

Soon she was unable to stop smiling.

It was only when she recognised a certain clump of trees that she realised what direction she was going in: towards the shelter housing the Merrows.

Sky didn't have anywhere to be that afternoon. She would have been told if anything important was happening. Why not pay the Merrows a visit? It couldn't do any harm.

Just as she drew the movil to a stop outside the building, she felt a little uncertain. Paying a visit without previously announcing you were coming was something done by the likes of Lord Tasseton and Lord Sinclair, not by someone like Sky.

The shelter door opened. "Miss Skylar," Oliver said. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"I was just going by and thought I might say hello."

"How kind of you. Please, come in." He held open the door for her, his expression neutral but his eyes watchful.

The first person Sky saw when she stepped inside was Tom Hickathrift. His eyes widened a little at the sight of her. "Hello, Miss Skylar! This is a nice surprise."

She smiled, hoping his words were sincere. "Thank you. It's nice to see you too."

"Jules!" Tom called over his shoulder before turning back to Sky. "Look, Miss Skylar...I hope there weren't any problems from that article in *The Announcer*."

"Don't worry about it," she replied lightly. "There weren't any."

For one moment, Tom gave her a look only a father could give. It said: *Do you really expect me to believe that?* The expression was on his face just for a second, and then it was gone.

Fortunately for Sky, Jules chose that moment to come hurrying up to them. "Hi, Dad. What's... Sky! What are you doing here?"

"I thought I'd drop in," Sky said, "and pay a social call."

Jules' smile broadened and for a moment Sky felt a little catch in her throat. How many people smiled as brightly and as openly as Jules?

Tom cleared his throat. "Jules, maybe Miss Skylar would like some tea."

"Would you?" Jules asked Sky.

Perhaps she could stay a *little* bit longer. "I'd love some. Thank you!"

A few moments later, she was sitting on a faded but comfortable chair, cradling a cup of hot tea carefully in her hands. She took a sip; the taste of cinnamon flooded her mouth.

"I'm sorry we don't have anything to go with it," Jules said. "Do you normally have biscuits with tea?"

"It doesn't matter. I like tea without them. So, how are you?"

Jules shrugged. "I'm fine."

"Are you?"

"Yes. Well, there's nothing much do around here, apart from chores and going into Silverby. Have you met this man called Ian Osten? He and Dad could spend ages talking to each other about tools and fixing houses."

"Next time I go into Silverby, you can introduce me," Sky said offhandedly.

"All right."

Sky's hands froze, the rim of the cup barely touching her lips.

"You'd like him a lot," Jules told her. "How are your friends?"

"They were fine the last time I spoke to them."

Jules leaned in a little closer. "Can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"Does Isabel ever smile?"

"Yes," Sky said firmly. "That Cruel Princess act is just a front she's putting up."

"Why would she do that?"

"I don't know. She's been different ever since her brother joined the Wolf-Lords. Maybe the act is just to protect herself." Sky met Jules' eyes. "But she's not as cold and aloof as she wants you to think she is. And she never used to wear black either."

Why was she saying these things? She would never tell them to Terrence Wallace, or to Arthur Sinclair. Jules seemed to have no formality at all, and four questions from him had been enough to make her confide in him as if he were an old friend.

He wasn't an old friend – but Sky didn't mind in the least if he became a new one.

"May I ask *you* something?"

"Sure," Jules said.

"How long will it be before everyone here starts calling me Sky? 'Miss Skylar' is so formal."

“I don’t know,” was his reply. “You might have to come here more often.”

Was he *teasing* her?

The thought didn’t surprise or shock her. In fact, she rather liked it – and two could play at *that* game.

She didn’t need to be perfect here.

“I will...if you’re willing to have me.”