

Tribute

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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Chapter I

She couldn't believe it. It was finally here.

Her Royal Highness, Princess Rose Violet Azalea Fleur D'Eylly Royston, was finally turning eighteen.

"I don't know what you're so happy about," said her sister, who was four years older than she was and far from a friend, quite gleefully. "You won't be when—"

The older girl clamped her mouth shut, knowing she was dangerously close to having said too much already. Their mother breezed in at that moment, as she always did at just the right time to help the brat.

"Nonsense, Iris. Your sister is going to do her duty by her country just like every other eighteen-year-old has since time immemorial. Why, I went for my sojourn—"

Iris snorted loudly that she had used such a benign word to describe what was going to happen to Fleur, but not quite under her breath enough to avoid her mother's well timed and placed smack on her upper arm.

"—just as you did and everyone else does."

"Angel Petit-Myerson isn't going. Her father got her a special dispensation so she wouldn't have to," Fleur piped up as her mother reached down and dragged the covers completely off of her so that she had nothing to snuggle under to avoid her fate.

"Like that is going to happen. Our father is too honorable by far for that," said Iris.

The queen frowned, knowing the truth of what her daughter said. There weren't supposed to be exceptions for anyone. Even those who weren't physically capable of serving were put to work in lowly administrative positions for their prescribed time instead of the usual method of serving, but corruption always seemed to find a way. Her husband, of course, would not allow his daughters to plead with the council for a deferment or waiver of their conscription simply on the basis of who they were. His pride demanded that the two of them shoulder their burden like the rest of the country. Although he did loudly complain to her that she should have produced a son, who would have found it much easier to comply than the girls.

So there was no need of agonizing over it, and the queen knew that. Because of the vow of secrecy all of the women took about their experiences for those two long years, Fleur had no idea whatsoever about what exactly it was that she was going to be facing once she had kissed her family goodbye and was taken away with the other girls from the village, who had turned eighteen that month.

Iris had been right in what she had been about to say—although she should never even have contemplated saying it. The pampered and indulged Fleur certainly wasn't going to be happy when she found out what it was that she was going to be expected to do. And Queen Lilla knew that even Iris had no idea the horrors that would be facing her youngest.

Iris was the elder, the more serious of the two, with long dark hair, stark green eyes and a pale, flawless complexion, but, although she was pretty, in comparison to Fleur, she fell well shy of the mark. She was already betrothed, and likely to become a bride while Fleur was away.

As she helped Fleur dress for the first time in over a decade, dropping the plain, rough, dark brown peasant shift that all of the tribute initiates wore down over her head, straightening it until it fell to her ankles, she was struck again—as she always was when her eyes landed on her—by just how beautiful her daughter was.

She could even make that unimaginably ugly sack dress look good. Lilla had despaired of her daughter when she was younger; she was a terrible tomboy, forever getting into scrapes, falling into the river, running through the woods, constantly dirty and bringing frogs and toads and lizards, not to mention any kind of wounded animal she happened upon, into the palace. The servants used to tease her that they could always tell where she was by the trail of dirt she left.

The heavy, wavy curtain of thick honey blonde hair was wrangled into a matronly bun at the back of her head with the plainest combs they owned. It wouldn't do for a 'Shiat to appear proud or immodest in any way. Her skin, too, was flawless—even without the makeup that she knew Iris used to make hers appear so—not pale, but sun-kissed, enough for a very healthy, very appealing glow that her mother knew she got from all of the time she spent outside, walking in the woods, riding her horse at a full gallop everywhere, or—horrors—swimming naked in the secluded pool in the middle of the forest on days in the summer when the heat became oppressive. Her spirits were almost always high, adding a blush of color to those rounded apple cheeks. Full, cherry red bow lips were almost always curved in a smile, but it was her eyes that

caught everyone's attention. Ringed by an abundance of sooty black lashes that curled prettily on their own, they were a deep, striking violet that even a woman could get lost in.

Only it wasn't women the queen was worried about—not that they couldn't be evil given the chance. She knew from personal experience that they certainly could. She had been quite a beauty, too, in her time, too, and some of the experiences she'd had at the hands of ...

Well, they didn't bear thinking of. And if she awoke in the middle of the night moaning and crying out pitifully—even thirty years later—that was between herself and her husband, who she knew—despite all of his bravado about wanting his children to serve their country as any other would be expected to—had his own concerns for their Fleur.

There was no way that this experience wasn't going to change their little girl. Lilla just hoped it wasn't for the worse.

Despite her very natural feelings of trepidation at the unknown, Fleur was almost vibrating with excitement at the adventure she was going to have. None of her family shared her boundless enthusiasm—they all looked as if they were sending her to her death when this was finally the beginning of her *life!* Her actual life as a person—an adult instead of a lowly child. She'd wanted to be an adult since she could remember—no more constraints, no more having to ask permission to do what she wanted to do. She would be free!

Well, once she returned home, anyway. Whatever happened in the next two years she'd deal with head on and get through it, waiting for the day her service ended and she could come home triumphant and do whatever she wanted. She wasn't afraid of hard work—despite what her family obviously thought of her—and she'd do whatever she needed to get by and perhaps even thrive wherever she was put. From what little she could glean about the experience, even as a princess of the realm, she would be expected to serve everyone and anyone, even those who she clearly outranked. She did know that, once she'd set foot in the wagon that would take her away, she would lose all position and become simply a tribute, like the thousands of others with her and the millions before her.

She was leaving through the servant's quarters, and they had all gathered in the kitchen where her mother had given her a sack of food and a skin of water. Fleur had protested that she could have wine now, but her mother had said that this was not the time for her to begin drinking—despite the fact that she wished she had given the girl some to have for when the inevitable occasion arose ...

Fleur kissed Iris goodbye first, who shrugged out of her hug and away from her kiss as expected. Her mother was next, holding onto her for much too long, as if she couldn't bear to let go. Her father was last and it was the hardest, longest hug she'd ever gotten from him, one that swung her off her feet as if she was a little girl of six again.

"You be good, Fleury," he said, refusing to give in to the tears that flooded his eyes. "And I mean that. You'll have to be where you're going. They're not going to be soft touches like your mother and I are."

"I'll remember, Father."

"And write your mother if you're allowed. You know how she's going to worry."

Fleur was already headed out the door towards the big wagon that was to take all of the newly minted tribute initiates to market. "I will, Papa," she agreed absently. "Bye!"

She was running, as usual, towards her fate.

The king brought his sobbing queen against him with one strong arm. "She'll be all right."

"Can you promise me that, Liev? Can you do something to assure that?"

He frowned down at her, scolding. "You know better than to ask me that, woman." Still, he made a mental note to make inquiries to see how she was doing, at least. Though, in the interest of fairness, he'd only intervene if he felt he absolutely had to.

When she got to the wagon, there was someone from the council taking information from everyone who presented themselves to him.

When it was her turn, he asked, "Name?" without even looking up.

"Princess Rose Violet Azalea Fleur—"

"You're not a princess any more, girl. You're just the same as all the rest—lower than low." He said it with such a smile of relish that it sent the first fission of fear she'd had about the situation sizzling up her spine, tightening her nipples, and making her shake just a bit.

But Fleur managed to shake of the feeling of impending doom and smiled at him genuinely, even though he couldn't see it. "That's fine. I don't care."

When he finally did deign to gaze up at her, her smile evaporated as if it had never been, making her wish wholeheartedly that she'd just kept her mouth shut, as her mother had been begging her to do only minutes earlier while trying to give her advice about how to adapt to her new situation.

“I don’t care whether you do,” the man yelled loudly, attracting the attention of those around them. He stepped forward, close enough to press his prominent nose into hers as he towered over her. “You best watch your tone, you little baggage. One more word out of you and I’ll give you a taste of my belt right here and now, princess or not, and there’s nothing your parents could do about it because you’re not theirs any more.” Big, impressively dirty hands grasped his belt and that was more of a threat than Fleur needed by far.

Confused by his animosity, Fleur looked down instinctively.

“That’s better. Now shut up and get your skinny arse on the wagon.”

Although it was nearly full, no one offered a hand to help her up, until a big paw that was nearly as dirty as the obnoxious official’s appeared before her face.

She looked up and tried to identify its owner, but the sun was too fierce behind him for her to make him out. Mindful of what she’d been told, she grasped hold of him and let him help her up, primly retrieving her hand as soon as she no longer needed his assistance, wisely nodding her thanks as she took her seat.

Zay D’Varra settled back into the throng of the nervous, shifting mass of flesh. The wagon was so chock full of them that there really was nowhere to go to get to a point where you weren’t brushing up against something of someone else’s that you really didn’t want to touch. But he didn’t worry about it. He rarely worried about anything; it was a waste of energy he’d rather expend either fighting or fucking. He derived equal enjoyment from either activity—although fighting was easier.

He’d grown up on the streets and both sets of skills— those of a warrior and a lover—had helped him survive in different ways. Now he was being pressed into a different kind of service, supposedly, but he doubted it. He figured he’d be doing much the same kinds of things he’d always done to survive, only this time the state would sanction them instead of trying to put him into a work camp for struggling to stay alive.

Or he could end up at a work camp anyway, since he wasn’t much for being told what to do. It wouldn’t be long before he’d be in deep trouble there. He’d been independent too long and he had no illusions about himself. He really wasn’t going to be any safer over the next two years than he would have been living by his wits.

He smiled broadly to himself. Although he’d listened to whoever it was who had been jawing at them about how the lower classes were going to see how the other half lived, or

something like that, Zay intended not just to see it, but to become a part of it. Hell, he'd heard about how the empress herself kept a bunch of pretty women and hunky men around her at all times. He figured he had a reasonable chance—probably better than most—of getting into that group if he was given the opportunity.

If he had to, he'd create one. He wasn't about to let anyone or much of anything stand in the way of getting a better slice of life's pie than the one he'd been given, one way or the other.

Fleur knew she looked like a country bumpkin, but she'd barely been allowed out of her parents' kingdom—except when she was presented to the empress at court. But that was two years ago and such a blur of faces and names and trying to memorize antiquated customs and etiquette for the approximately two seconds that she'd be scrutinized by the empress that she hadn't had a minute to enjoy the experience.

And although this experience wasn't supposed to be a pleasant one—necessarily—she intended to get all she could from it, even though her head was swiveling on her neck fit for it to fall completely off as she tried to see everything at once.

It was a long, boring, hot ride from L'Ondia to the realm of the empress and they continued to pick up young people along the way until those who ringed the perimeter could barely manage not to fall out at every turn, the wagon was so full.

All of a sudden, they stopped, and the four men who seemed to be in control—two who had ridden up front and two who had clung to the back—got down. Two of them began pulling people down off the wagon in a manner that was definitely less than gentle, and the other two produced bags of something that looked like scarves but were made of rough material that echoed the quality of what they were all wearing.

“Everyone is going to be quiet and cooperative while they wear these for the rest of the trip,” the man, who had derided her earlier, announced sternly. They were not allowed to don them themselves, nor were they allowed to help anyone else put one on. The four men were surprisingly efficient, however, and it didn't take them more than about ten minutes to completely rob everyone but them of their ability to see.

The guys seemed to be okay with it—or they were acting as if they were which was more likely—but the girls were nervous, fidgeting and shifting from foot to foot and murmuring worriedly under their breath. One girl—Fleur remembered her distinctive, nasal voice as she'd

talked the entire trip so far without taking a breath once, it seemed—just couldn't seem to stop talking.

As they were being herded into a single file line, rough, no nonsense hands dragged Fleur to where they wanted her and then moved on to the next person, doing the same thing until they were organized to their satisfaction—with one loud exception.

It was obvious that she was so nervous that she couldn't control herself enough to shut up, but the men who were accompanying them on their trip to market weren't inclined to give any of them any slack. In fact, they were more interested in making an example of her in order to encourage the rest of them to be more cooperative.

None of them could see what was being done, although the girl herself gave a play-by-play description up to a point.

“Let go of me! No, don't do that! What do you think you're doing? Please, no! Take your hand off my neck! Don't!”

Seconds later, everyone heard the loud report of something hard and unforgiving striking the flesh of the poor girl who had acted out. And in case they had been wondering exactly what was happening, the man who seemed to be the person in charge—the same one who had been so surly to Fleur—seemed to take great relish in informing the rest of them of exactly what it was that was happening to the poor unfortunate.

“Your blabbermouth friend here has found herself on the receiving end of the same kind of discipline that the rest of you will be subject to for the next two years. She's just the first of you to get a taste of it, although I can promise that everyone of you at some point or other—and probably with what you would consider alarming regularly—will be stripped down to your bare skin, bent over at the waist and held there by someone or something, while the person standing behind you, probably your new owner, wields with considerable mastery a paddle—as in this case—or a belt or a switch or a whip. They will lay it against your behind with such emphasis as to have you crying like a baby and begging for it to stop within the first few swats,” he paused here for emphasis, the silence filled by the sounds of the punishment—smacks and splats and cries of anguish and pain. “Just like she is.”

Every woman—and no small amount of the young men—jumped every time they heard that horrifying crack of hard, unrelenting wood against soft, cringing flesh, but no one said anything, lest they be next.

The girl wasn't saying anything either except for moans and cries and the occasional scream.

Fleur didn't know how many swats the poor girl received; she was too distraught to count them. It wasn't the fact that the girl was naked in front of those four men, or that two of them were holding her down and one of them was cracking that paddle against her ass so loud it reverberated through the trees, along with her wails of distress that upset her. No, it couldn't have been that easy.

It was the alarming fact that Fleur wished that they'd singled her out instead of that nameless young woman. While the spanking continued, her fertile mind went to work what it must be like to be her, to be exposed, bent over, and punished like that, almost but not quite in front of all of them, too.

Although she jumped, she also shuddered strongly at every stroke, her nipples peaking and rubbing painfully against the crude material of her shift, her breath becoming ragged—and it wasn't because she was afraid.

A big warm hand slid into hers, thick fingers forcing hers to lace with his.

“This is the second time today I've given you my hand.”

It was the same guy who helped her into the wagon when no one else would.

“Don't be scared. They're just making an example of her so that the rest of us will be easier to handle.”

Fleur let the breath she had been forcing herself to hold—once she realized she'd been panting—escape loudly. She'd worried that he'd recognize the alarming fact that she'd just learned about herself—that she wasn't afraid of what was happening. She was fiercely aroused by it.

Not wanting to say anything that might draw attention to either of them, she simply squeezed his hand in thanks for his efforts and deliberately let go.

Then she got her answer, sort of. She felt him take a step forward, so that his front was to her back. He bent down just the tiniest bit, so that it wouldn't be noticeable if anyone cast a glance their way and whispered, “I'm picturing you in the position she must be in. And I'm the one holding the paddle. I'd make you scream twice as loud as she is, then I'd put my mouth against your privates and make you faint from the combination of pure pleasure and pure pain.”

Then he stepped back, leaving her alone and bereft with her jumbled thoughts, and, seconds later, she had to wonder whether she'd imagined the entire conversation.