

# THE KING'S LOVER

## Chapter 14: Thunderclap

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Rose tried not to scream in pain when the servant grabbed her wrist and pulled her toward the rear entrance. It was the door the servants used to get out of the castle. The servant in question was an older woman, and Rose suspected she had some authority over the servants here.

The woman held a light in her hand as she pulled Rose, who scrambled to follow her. They reached an open door, and the woman pushed her out. "Follow the walls of the house; you'll get to the front. For goodness' sake, hurry up."

Rose nodded and bent her knees before turning away. She was unsure whether to go left or right, but neither mattered. She dropped the clothes she was still holding, not caring that she was littering.

She took the left, as it seemed like it would take less time to reach the front of the castle. It was a bit hard to see in the dark, and Rose clung to the walls of the castle, holding it as she walked. Eventually, she started to see light and could tell she had reached the front.

Rose took the turn and was immediately met with disapproving eyes. Caius's men were seated on their horses, dressed to leave. A cape around their necks, someone held a flag, and a few held torches.

"Get on your bloody horse!" she heard a voice, and Rose scrambled toward them.

No sooner did she sit on the horse than the front doors opened, and Caius walked out with Prince Rylen next to him. Their eyes met immediately, and he smirked. Rose immediately bowed her head and didn't lift it until she heard the order to go.

"I wish you a safe journey, Your Highness," Lord Edric was saying. He was only with his wife, and his wife was forcing down a yawn as she waved.

"Hiya!!" Rose heard, and Caius took off, leading his men. Only when they were through the gates of the mansion did he slow down and let some of the men take the lead. Rose was at the edge of the group; they didn't push her out, but she couldn't ride any closer than she was. She wasn't complaining; it was already awkward enough.

Rose felt her eyes water as she thought of her parents. By now, she would be waking up to prepare for the day, starting with checking on her mother and then going out to fetch some water. She hoped her mother would be fine; her father wasn't very good at making her herbs.

How long would she have to stay away? Rose would make sure it wasn't for too long. She would get back to her parents and the love of her life as soon as possible. The crown prince might think he's won, but Rose could be persistent.

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Rose winced as beads of sweat fell off her face. She didn't have anything to protect herself from the hot sun, and it didn't help that the last meal she ate was breakfast from the day before. She had been offered some food after noon, but of course, there was no way she would eat it, not when the food had been given to her by someone who had no problem killing her father.

It was noon again now. Rose remembered how she felt around this time the day before. Was noon going to be a period she would... Rose felt her hand slip from the horse, and she tightened her grip. She didn't have much strength left, but she wasn't about to collapse here. The crown prince seemed very particular about getting to the capital on time. She couldn't ruin it.

Rose slipped again, but unfortunately, she couldn't catch herself. She scrambled, lost her balance, and fell off the horse, but Rose was already unconscious before she hit the ground.

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Rose frowned as she slowly gained consciousness. She could feel her hands and legs flopping as if she was on something moving, and there was a weird sensation around her rear like someone was grabbing it.

Rose's eyes flew open, and she could see the ground as she bounced. She was over a horse, and for some reason, she could guess whose horse. Rose wiggled and tried to get off.

Suddenly, Rose heard a sound, similar to a thunderclap, followed by the words, "Stay still."

Rose's eyes widened, and she clamped her hands over her mouth to keep from crying out. She couldn't believe her ears nor the sensation on her skin, but the way her rear was stinging, it wasn't lying to her. The crown prince had just slapped her buttocks.

Rose could hear whispers and giggles; she could also recall hearing a gasp when the sound erupted, but it was hard to tell if it was her. Rose's face was red, and she didn't take her hands off her face. It was louder than it hurt, and the stinging pain had completely faded. Rose's eyes narrowed, annoyed that she was still thinking about it.

They rode for a bit with her like that, and it wasn't until they got to a stretch of dense trees, their branches woven thick enough to cast deep shade, that he finally slowed the horse. "We will rest here for a bit," Caius said.

Rose knew better than to move before he asked her to, so she lay still across the horse until he got off. Rose wanted to slip down herself, but the hands on her waist told her she wouldn't be getting that luxury. He helped her down, and while dropping her to the ground, slid her in front of his body.

At first, she felt armor, and then Rose's eyes could barely contain the horror. It was broad daylight. Surely, the crown prince had some control. Clearly, he didn't; he was like a dog in heat, ready to go anytime, anywhere, any day. However, Rose didn't think she could do

that again, and her body shook in fear. But instead of anything ridiculous, the crown prince let her go.

"Give her something to eat," he said as he started walking away. "And eat. If you faint and slow down my journey one more time, I'll give you a reason to be unconscious."

Rose could only see his back as he walked away, but the fear she felt was intense enough to make her legs shake, and it had nothing to do with the hunger she felt. She knew he meant every word, and not only would he carry them out to the letter, but he would also do so in front of his men.

Someone walked up to her and handed her a bag. "Thank ye," Rose mumbled and accepted it.

Holding the bag, she walked to an empty spot where she sat down on the grass under the shade. The cool air beneath it was a relief after the relentless sun. Rose looked up at the sun, and it looked to be after noon, almost mid-afternoon. She could barely hide her shock; she had been unconscious for a long time.

She must have fallen off her horse, and the crown prince had to carry her on his horse. She glanced in the direction he was. The crown prince was sitting with a leg resting on the other and arms behind his head as he lay under the tree. His eyes were closed, and as if he could tell she was staring, his eyes flew open, locking with hers.

Rose looked away, startled. She pulled open the bag she was given with a bit of aggression. There was dried meat, some fruits, and, more importantly, water. Rose felt her eyes water as she took the fruit and dug her teeth into it. The juices had her closing her eyes in bliss.

# Chapter 15: What If She Ran Away?

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"Ride close," Caius said.

Rose simply nodded, but she didn't ride any differently than she already was. That was because she was riding as close as possible, as she had done for the last twelve miles. After she had finished eating, the crown prince had kept an eye on her, and to do so, she had to be right next to him.

It was uncomfortable, and Rose missed the moments when she was at the rear of the party, minding her own business and enjoying the scenery. The crown prince made her too nervous, and she hated that she was painfully aware of him. Every movement from him made her want to run away or curl up in a ball. She was terrified of him and what he was capable of.

They were close to the capital, according to what Rose heard. She was unsure and could barely see her surroundings, as it had been dark for quite some time now. Thankfully, they weren't riding in complete darkness. The torches from dawn had been turned on after the sun set.

Rose was tired, and her arms also hurt. For someone who had never ridden more than a few meters before now and was currently riding for two days straight, Rose was beyond exhausted. It didn't help that she had slept on the cold floor the night before.

"We are close, Your Highness," one of his men announced.

Caius didn't respond to this, and Rose had to squint her eyes to see ahead of her. But as she did, her eyes widened. She could see light at the top of the fence. It was still a bit far off but clear enough for her to see. Rose suddenly felt energized. Even though she hated this trip and would rather be home with her parents, she was glad she had come to the end of the journey.

A loud bell echoed, and then the sound of a horn. It was startling and even louder than the bell. Then a voice announced the presence of the crown prince just as the doors of the capital were thrown open. Hearthdale, the heart of Velmount. Located right in the middle, it was the official residence of the King of Velmount.

Caius sped right through the gates, and Rose followed after him. He stopped abruptly, and she almost bumped into him.

"What do you think you are doing?" a foot guard holding a spear yelled at her. "Get out of the way, you—"

It was just a glance, a simple glance, and the guard crumbled to his knees, his head bent. "Your Highness."

Caius casually got off his horse just as a carriage pulled up. They were still right at the entrance, the gates still open as the rest of Caius's men rode through.

"Get off," Caius ordered Rose.

She got off the horse immediately, staggering as her feet touched the ground. Her vision spun, and she held the horse for balance. It was the horse she had stolen from the baron. She hoped her father wasn't charged for it. It was a very good horse; even if they sold the house, they couldn't afford it.

She shut her eyes tightly as she stood to her full height. She didn't want to think about home. It made her nauseous. Her sick mother. She knew they were terribly worried about her. Ander—she wondered what he would do when he discovered she wasn't coming back. The wedding was in four days, and there would be no bride.

Rose jerked as she saw the crown prince's gaze on her. She pulled her hand away from the horse, praying she wouldn't fall. He turned his gaze toward the carriage; a guard was holding the door open. Rose looked around, a little lost.

"Get in!" he said as he sat inside.

Rose hopped, scrambling toward the carriage. The dark made the colors a bit unclear, but Rose could see the gold shining off the carriage. She was hesitant to get in, but she couldn't anger the crown prince. Lifting her dress, she raised a leg and got in. The door shut behind her, and Rose jumped. Caius narrowed his eyes at her and leaned back on his seat.

Rose stood with her back bent in the carriage. She couldn't possibly sit on the plush, velvet-cushioned seats with gold embroidery. The walls were silk-lined with the royal crest embossed, and the floor was carpeted with small footstools on each side of the seats.



Suddenly, the carriage moved, and Rose had to stagger for balance. A yelp escaped her lips, and she quickly sealed it.

"Do you intend to stand the entire journey?" Caius asked with irritation.

Rose slowly shook her head and dropped her rear onto the seat. She had thought of sitting on the ground, but she suspected that would only annoy him. She hated that she had to sit across from him, but there was no way she would sit beside him.

Rose sat with her legs together, her hands on her knees. She wanted to make as little contact with the seat as she could. She couldn't dirty them. She also kept her head down. The space was ridiculously small, and even though it was dark, with the only light coming from outside as guards rode with them holding torches, Rose knew he could see her clearly.

He didn't stop staring, and she wilted under his gaze. She could feel him undress her slowly. It made her want to turn her head to the side and throw up. Rose couldn't help but imagine the horrors that waited for her in the castle.

What if she ran away?

She had thought about it several times during the journey. She had thought about turning her horse around and fleeing, but she didn't even know if her father was safe yet. And if he was, the crown prince could get them again. Right now, her only chance was to do as he wanted and pray he would tire of her quickly.

# Chapter 16: The Castle

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Rose heard the sound of the portcullis lifting as they approached the castle, followed by the sound of the draw bridge dropping to allow the carriage through but Rose kept her head down. Not once had she looked up since she got into the carriage. She could hear sounds and people's voices as the carriage passed through the town, but Rose remained stiff and unmoving.

The sound of gravel was the next thing she heard as they went through the castle gates. Rose felt her stomach knot even more. She was really here. The ride from the gates to the front of the castle felt both too long and too short. When the carriage finally came to a halt, Rose was both mentally and physically exhausted.

The door was thrown open, and a trumpet was blown. "His Royal Highness, Prince Caius Ravenor, Heir to the Throne of Velmount!"

Caius stepped out of the carriage, and a high-ranking servant quickly undid his cape and stepped to the side.

"Welcome back, Your Royal Highness," the steward said with a bow. Turning to Prince Rylen, he said, "Welcome back, Prince Rylen."

"It's good to be back, Henry," Prince Rylen replied.

"Right this way, Your Highness. Your mother has retired to her chambers for the night, but I shall inform her of your presence."

"There is no need for that. I'd rather not see my mother until I have to. Don't bother her."

"Yes, Your Highness. Your father is—"

"I have something in my carriage. I'd like you to take care of it for me and bring it to my chambers after dinner. You know what to do," Caius interrupted.

"Ah, of course, Your Highness. Your dinner will be ready very soon," Henry said as they went up the stairs leading to the castle doors.

Rose sat in the carriage, twisting her hands. She had heard what the crown prince said, which meant she was not to leave the carriage until someone told her to. Somehow, she preferred it this way. She didn't think she could stand the stares that came with being by the crown prince's side.

She sat away from the windows as she waited, fearing even to peek. She was really here; it was a lot to take in. She winced as she remembered the latter part of the crown prince's words. He expected her in his chambers. Was she really going to lay with him?

Two knocks, and then the carriage door was opened. Rose squinted her eyes as a lamp was shoved into the carriage and right in front of her face. "What's your name?" a voice asked.

Rose blinked against the light. She couldn't see their face, but they sounded like a woman. She couldn't gauge if they were older or younger. "Rose," she whispered.

The woman took a step back. "You can call me Edith, Mistress Edith. I am in charge of the maids in the castle."

Rose nodded and started to get out of the carriage. She dropped to the ground and saw Edith wasn't alone; there were four maids behind her. They looked to be girls around her age or a little younger.

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"Good evenin'," Rose said with a bow but got no response. She also noticed the girls looked at her with contempt, and one of them covered their mouth with their hand to hide a laugh.

Rose looked around. They were still in front of the castle. Guards were patrolling the area, but that wasn't what had Rose's attention. It was the space—she couldn't see the fence surrounding the castle from where she was standing. She would have sworn the castle was as big as the whole of Edenville.

"Did you hear me?" Edith's voice, filled with irritation, reached her ears.

Rose tore her eyes from the scenery. "Nay, ma'am."

Edith narrowed her eyes and then handed the lamp to one of the girls. "Come," she simply stated.

Rose followed after her, and they went past the front of the castle and all the way to the side. At the end was a door, significantly smaller than the main entrance. It was clear only servants used this door.

Edith pushed the door open, and they were in a kitchen. Rose thought the kitchen looked smaller than she expected. There was a hearth, a few plates and pots, and tables arranged in the center of the room. Rose counted three, each lined up with benches on both sides.

"Martha," Edith said as she dropped the light on the table. "I am sure there is something left to eat. If there isn't any, give her some dry bread and water."

"Yes, Mistress Edith," the one called Martha replied. She looked a little older with makeup on her face. The powder gave her a startling look at first glance but it was ignorable.

"When she is done eating, clean her up and dress her for His Highness," Edith paused dramatically and looked at Rose from the top of her head to her feet and then back up. "She must be in his chambers before his dinner is over."

Rose shuffled on her feet. It was hard to tell if Edith approved of what she saw or not but at least she didn't say anything reproachful.

"What?" one of the girls said, sounding like she couldn't believe her ears.

"What are you sounding so surprised about, Edna? Do as I asked."

"Yes, Mistress," the girls said in unison.

"Good, you better not be a moment late." With that, she was gone, leaving Rose with the four girls.

Martha tossed a plate on a table. It had soup and some lumps of—Rose wasn't sure if it was potatoes or something else. She nodded and approached the table. Sitting down, she picked up the bowl. There wasn't any spoon, and she brought it to her lips.

"Where are you from?" It was Edna who asked. Edna was the shortest of the girls with hair tied up in a short bun.

Rose swallowed first before she spoke. "Edenville," she replied.

"That's far out. I've never been to any town other than the capital. What is it like there? I hear you both sleep and—"

"Edna!" Martha yelled. "Don't chit-chat. You, finish your food."

It was clear Martha was the oldest in the group and the one in charge when Edith wasn't there.

"We are the Queen's attendants. I don't see why we have to attend to some peasant from some backwater town."

Rose choked on the soup at the words of one of the girls. She knew she shouldn't be surprised, but their blatant dislike was still startling.

"We have direct orders from the steward, right from the crown prince, His Royal Highness. You know better than to go against his orders." As soon as Martha said those words, she marched to Rose, pulled the plate out of her hands even though it was clear she wasn't done eating, and said, "Stand up."