

K Lover 221

Chapter 221: Ruined

Rose stood with her back pressed against the closed doors and her hands over her mouth. The bouquet fell to the floor, one of the flowers coming loose. It didn't make a single sound as it dropped to the floor, just as Rose did her best to keep her screams in.

She couldn't believe the sight in front of her, and she just stood unmoving by the door as her eyes scanned the room. Who could have done this? But as soon as she mentally asked the question, Rose already knew the answer.

She pulled her hand away from her lips when she was confident that she wouldn't scream. Rose took a shaky step forward, kicking the bouquet out of the way, but she was too dazed to pay attention to it. She staggered forward, one step at a time.

She stopped and bent to pick up a piece that was just at the edge of the bed. She could easily recognize the wine garment anywhere. Rose moved around the room gathering several pieces; she lost count by the tenth one.

The pieces varied in size from very small to large. It looked like someone had viciously ripped it. She doubted they had used any kind of cutting instrument. It looked like the dress had been attacked by a pair of strong hands.

The pieces led her to the front of her wardrobe—it had been flung open and remained so. At the foot of the wardrobe was the largest part of her dress. She couldn't call it that anymore; it was nothing but a rag. It was beyond fixing.

The dress she wore to the ball had been ripped to shreds and the pieces were scattered around the room. Rose gathered all of them in her hands. She knew this was the handiwork of the Queen, but the fear and horror she felt weren't because of the dress she saw. Rather, it was because the Queen now knew it was her—and this had been done to the dress. Who knew what the Queen would do to her?

Rose gripped tightly onto the fabric and immediately jerked her head towards the dresser. The pieces fell from her hands as she walked toward it, her heart nearly beating out of her chest.

She didn't know if whoever had come into her room had just destroyed the dress or perhaps destroyed something else. Rose turned the key and pulled open the drawer; the relief she felt was enough to make her legs give out.

They were still there—her father's gifts. Rose shut the drawer and walked back toward the dress. Someone had come into her room and done this. Her heart squeezed, and it suddenly felt hard to breathe as she recalled the time when she had been kidnapped.

The stranger had invaded her space just like this and taken her away. If it weren't for Lady Delphine, she couldn't imagine where she would be right now. She wasn't safe—and now that she had pissed off the Queen even more, Rose didn't know what might happen to her.

Rose heard a knock, but she was too lost in thought to react, sitting right next to the ruined dress. The door burst open and a worried Chelsy rushed into the room. She didn't look surprised as she saw the torn dress; rather, she ran straight toward Rose, who was hunched on the floor.

"Rose!" she cried.

Rose lifted her head at the call, genuinely shocked to see Chelsy. She hadn't even heard the door open. "Chelsy," she whispered.

"Rose," she called again and grabbed her.

"I'm fine," she said but remained on the floor. "Just shocked, as you can see."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "Isla and I came here during lunchtime. We didn't know you weren't in. We knocked a lot and started to get worried that it might be a repeat of this morning—so we walked in, and saw this. The dress was ruined and everything was spread all over, but there was no sign of you. We left but only found out you weren't in the castle later. We didn't tell anyone because we were scared. I rushed to your room as soon as I heard you were back."

Rose nodded her head at Chelsy's explanation. She knew the girls didn't have anything to do with this. She knew the Queen hadn't done it herself—she must have sent someone.

"Did you see who did this?" she asked, even though she knew it was useless. It didn't matter who was sent—her enemy was the Queen; the rest were disposable pawns.

Chelsy shook her head. "I don't know. I didn't hear anything either."

Rose didn't say anything as she stood to her feet. She stared at the pile of clothes while Chelsy stared at her with worry in her eyes.

"Can you get me Welma?" she asked.

Chelsy frowned a little, then started speaking. "I haven't seen her since last night, but I'll search for her."

"Thank you," she said. "I'd appreciate that."

Chelsy rushed to the door. She hesitated as she reached for the handle and slowly turned back. "Would you like to eat now?" she asked softly.

Rose shook her head. "I'm fine." She doubted she'd have any appetite for the rest of the night. Her head was spinning in different directions, but what was hard to ignore was the intense fear she felt.

She glanced towards the door, instantly spotting the bouquet. The flower that had gotten out of the bunch had been crushed and its purple petals were scattered on the ground. Rose wasn't sure if it had been her or Chelsy.

She rushed to the bouquet, picked it up, and stared into it. The flowers in the wrap were fine—only the one that had gotten loose had been destroyed. She brought the bouquet to her nose and took a deep breath. It had a sweet smell, and Rose found it mildly soothing—but she doubted anything could put her at ease right now.

She glanced down at the crushed flower but didn't pick it up. Instead, she walked to her bed and sat on it, still holding the bouquet as she waited. It was the only thing she could do for now.

It took a while for Chelsy to return, and she had an exhausted look on her face as she opened the door. Behind her was Welma, who looked even worse.

"I'm sorry I took so long," Chelsy was saying as she walked in. "I couldn't find her on time."

Rose lifted her head from the flowers and met eyes with Welma, who quickly looked away. Rose's eyes darkened—she had hoped the maid wouldn't know anything about this, but by the looks of it, she was wrong.

"Thank you, Chelsy," she replied, forcing a smile. "I'll see you later."

Chelsy nodded, bowed, and then sprinted out of the room. She was both relieved and worried as she closed the door as softly as she could.

Rose stared at Welma for the longest time, but the maid didn't lift her head nor did she move away from the door. Welma, who was usually chatty, rude, and snarky, was now silent as a mouse, not even asking why Rose had called for her. Rose had half expected her not to show if she was guilty.

"Won't you ask why I called you?" Rose asked.

Welma didn't lift her head. "I'm sure you have a good enough reason, and you'll just tell me when you're ready."

Rose's eyes narrowed. She was starting to get angry but controlled herself. Welma wasn't the person to get angry at, and it was a good thing she was somewhat on her side, she hoped that. At least she could ask questions.

"Do you know what happened here?" she asked, proud of herself for not raising her voice.

"What exactly are you asking?" Welma said and finally lifted her head.

Rose frowned as she took in the maid's expression. Her eyes looked tired, and there were bags under them—she didn't look like she'd gotten any sleep.

"The dress. Are you the one who did this?" she asked directly.

Welma blinked, and then her expression saddened. "You think I did this?" she asked.

"Did you not?" Rose asked.

"I did not," Welma repeated.

"But you know who did," Rose replied.

Welma didn't respond.

"I know you work for the Queen, and I remember what I saw at the party. I'll still get to the bottom of that, but for now I need to know this."

"I don't exactly have a choice here," Welma whispered. "I'm in the castle. I can't exactly not work for the Queen."

Rose shot her a dark look. "I don't care what your reasons are. I'm simply asking if you know what happened here."

Welma blinked at Rose's tone, and for a moment she looked anxious. "I know who did this. I was here when it happened. I brought her here."

Rose raised a brow, but her expression didn't change more than that. "Brought who?" she asked.

"One of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting. She ripped up the dress and scattered it around the room while I stood in the corner and watched."

Rose considered her response for a second, then she nodded and said, "Thank you."

Welma's expression changed. "Is that it?" she asked, slightly raising her voice.

Chapter 222: Mouthy

Welma's expression changed. "Is that it?" she asked, slightly raising her voice.

Rose glanced at her. "Whatever do you mean?" she asked, frowning as she met eyes with Welma.

"Are you not going to ask me more questions about this or yell or be angry?" Welma asked, taking a step forward. There was still quite some distance between them, and Rose remained seated on the bed.

"Now what will that do?" Rose asked her with a solemn expression. "Besides, weren't you saying a moment ago that you may not have a choice in this? Doing all of that would just be a waste of time."

"You aren't angry?" Welma asked, peering at Rose.

Rose rolled her eyes. "Compared to everything you have done, this is the least annoying," she said and looked away. She wasn't lying when she said it was the least annoying—this didn't get on her nerves.

She didn't care about the dress; she cared more about who would have done something like this and how it was likely to affect her. The fact that Welma was willing to give her details, even though it was a danger to herself, was enough to make her contribution to it mild.

Welma shuffled on her feet. "I am sorry," she whispered.

Rose scoffed. "That's rare," she glanced at her. "Have you been so worn down that you'd apologize to me? I thought you said I was pitiful."

"I still think you're pitiful!" Welma stated.

Rose chuckled and placed the bouquet on the bed. She couldn't take this lying down. Anyone could tell this was a warning. She doubted the Queen, who had gone as far as orchestrating her kidnapping, would be satisfied with just ruining the dress.

"Let's start with last night at the ball. What were you doing to the lord?" Rose asked.

"I already told you, I needed to give him the antidote," she said.

Rose was quick to notice that Welma's usual attitude was back. She wondered if the maid had been worried that Rose might report her to the crown prince.

"Why?" she asked. Rose didn't want to think about it, but Lord Elrod had drunk the wine Welma had said she shouldn't drink, and she had been saying something about poison before the crown prince interrupted.

Welma sighed and folded her arms. "Because he drank the poison meant for you."

Rose nodded, doing her best not to show a reaction. She had already felt uncomfortable about being at the ball, knowing the Queen wouldn't have been very happy about it and had decided not to eat or drink anything and, more importantly, not do anything that would draw attention to her.

However, fate had other plans, and it kept moving from one disaster to another—and finally the worst part of it all: dancing with the crown prince in front of everyone while dressed like that. She was sure the Queen was out for her neck, but this information meant the Queen had already been out for her neck even before the dance.

"That's it?" Welma asked when Rose didn't say anything more.

It was useless to be hostile to Welma—a terrible approach, really. She was a maid who was willing to help her while working for the Queen. Even if the crown prince did get rid of her, another would just take her place. It was better to stick with the one who would at least tell her before she poisoned her.

"If you're expecting a reaction from me to appease your conscience, you won't get it. And it's already tiring that you keep asking this."

Rose stretched her arms—she felt stiff. Riding in the carriage, the wedding, and now this. She couldn't even get the chance to ruminate over the events. She was petrified of the Queen's actions, which was the reason she couldn't fold her hands and do nothing. Who knows what the Queen might try?

"Ha," Welma laughed sadly.

"What happened to the lord after? Did the antidote work?" Rose asked, not letting up on the topic. She needed to know as much as she could.

Welma grabbed her head and slightly shook it. "I do not know, but just the mere fact that my head is still attached to my body must mean he is at least alive." She had a dull expression at the end of her words, as though she had recalled something unpleasant.

Rose nodded. She knew the maid's words were true. The first person to abandon her when chaos broke loose would be the Queen. Welma wouldn't be roaming freely—or be alive—if she had caused the death of a very important lord.

"What other plans does the Queen have for me?" Rose asked.

Welma studied Rose's face for a moment. "I do not know. They don't exactly share plans with me unless they need me to execute them."

"What do you know then?" Rose asked. "Do you know how the Queen found out it was me?"

Welma took a step back, and Rose smirked. She had hit the mark. Something told her that Welma more than knew—she might have been the reason.

"My job is to tell the Queen even the slightest information about you, regardless of whether it's important or not. There is no way I could have—"

Rose forced out a yawn. "You're giving unnecessary information. As I said, I do not care about your conscience. You spy on me—we both know that. Trying to justify it makes you look pitiful. Wouldn't you say that?"

A smile lingered on Rose's face. This time was different. It was time she took Lady Delphine and Edna's advice. It was the only way she could protect herself from the Queen's wrath—which still was solely the crown prince's fault.

Welma paused for a second as she stared at Rose—something seemed strange. She could tell that Rose was scared and deeply bothered by the situation, but at the same time, there was an air of confidence around her.

"We both know who is pitiful here," Welma said.

Rose threw her head back and laughed. Welma was still mouthy. However, to be honest, they were both pitiful—and simply victims of circumstances beyond their powers.

"Did you tell her it was me?" Rose asked.

"Yes. She asked who the maiden the crown prince danced with was, and I said I had reasons to believe it was you."

Rose nodded.

"I served you the drink. There was no way I couldn't have noticed your dress. I was also supposed to destroy it so you wouldn't make it to the ball, but Bailey fixed it on time."

Welma winced as she recalled how much the ladies had scolded her, and they had also queried her about not mentioning the similarities with the dress. But Welma said she was too preoccupied to notice and that Rose mostly stayed in the dark.

They almost didn't believe her, and Welma thought she might be punished this time, but her constant spying on Rose seemed important to them, and they were willing to let the matter slide. Still, Welma had seen the expression on the Queen—she was out for blood.

Rose thought for a moment. She could remember Bailey lamenting about how she was late because she had to fix a tear, and she had been grateful Welma noticed.

She almost wished they never did. She hadn't wanted to go to the ball, but she doubted the crown prince would have taken kindly to that. Everyone involved would have been punished.

"I see. Is there anything you think it would do me good to know?" Rose asked.

"The Queen is angry. I fear the dress is only the start. It will only get worse from here."

"Thank you. You may leave," Rose said and turned away.

Welma stared at Rose for a second. She seemed hesitant but eventually opened her lips. "One more thing."

"What is it?" Rose asked without lifting her head.

"The Queen mentioned the crown prince had been the one to choose her dress. She had asked him to decide from five other dresses, and he had chosen that one without even seeing her wear it. I just thought you should know."

"Thank you again," Rose said, trying to not pay too much attention to her words. "And you can tell the Queen whatever she needs to know—as long as you warn me beforehand. I will be speaking to the crown prince tonight. Don't worry, I'll skip the part where you tried to kill me."

"I told you not to drink it. It would have been stupid if you drank it after I acted so suspiciously and then told you not to drink it."

Rose didn't miss Welma's choice of words. She had been acting weird on purpose while bringing her the drink.

"That's brave talk for someone who almost killed me. Perhaps I should also tell the crown prince about the poisoning."

"No," Welma cried.

"Good," she smirked. "You're not stupid, Welma. I shouldn't have to tell you what shouldn't reach the Queen's ear."

"Ha," Welma said, shaking her head. "Using my own words against me. Yes, Rose. I'll keep my end, as long as the crown prince isn't on my back."

She moved her hand to dismiss Welma as she got out of bed. Tonight was going to be demanding.

Chapter 223: Punish Accordingly

Rose sat still as the maids, Chelsy and Isla, helped her prepare. The air around her was so tense that the girls didn't even try to converse with her. Rose preferred that—she was too anxious to indulge in any form of conversation. The girls seemed to think she was still upset about what had happened during the day, and Rose didn't try to correct them.

She had casually told Welma she was speaking to the crown prince, but truth be told, it wasn't as easy as she made it sound. The crown prince wasn't someone she wanted to owe any more favors to, because at this point, she might never get home. But if she didn't try to find a solution against the Queen, she would indeed never get home.

She slowly stood up after they were done with her hair, and Isla helped her wear the robe. The young girl tied a sturdy rope, and Rose smiled at her as she pulled away. She wondered if Isla had explained the situation to her younger sister, or perhaps the child had figured it out herself.

Rose glanced at the table which held the dahlias. She had asked the maids to help her put them in a vase. The flowers were looking better and less droopy. She knew they wouldn't last, but at least she could keep them for a few more days.

Rose headed for the door while Chelsy and Isla waited behind, watching her leave. They still had some cleaning up to do—she had finally told them to get rid of the dress.

Welma had told her concerning news. She already had her suspicions, but for them to be proved right was worrisome. Rose didn't like what it meant—that the crown prince didn't care about her. If he had deliberately put her in this situation, then speaking with him was simply a hopeless endeavor.

However, she couldn't just wait until the Queen had her way this time. She was lucky the Queen chose someone like Welma this time. Who knows what might have happened to her already? She wrinkled her forehead as she recalled just how much trouble Martha had put her through.

The crown prince's bedchambers were only a room away, but the walk to his room always felt either too long or too short—but tonight, Rose was unsure which it was. She got to the front of the door, and the guards opened it—no questions asked.

She stepped into the room and was immediately hit with the familiar fragrance. She walked right to the seats clustered around the lit fireplace. If the fireplace was already set, it meant the crown prince was going to be here soon.

Rose dropped onto one of the seats, choosing the one the crown prince rarely used. She got comfortable and looked around, noticing that she couldn't see the chessboard. It had been a while—she almost missed it. Well, she couldn't pretend the crown had called her here for anything else.

Rose didn't have to wait long before the door opened, revealing the steward, Henry, who walked in with his head low as he spoke to the crown prince behind him. Rose thought the older man seemed to have more white hair, but it might be the lighting. She had seen him that morning—he hadn't seemed different.

She lifted her gaze and was not surprised when she met eyes with the crown prince. She didn't look away, nor did she acknowledge his presence—she just stared at him.

Caius frowned. Something felt terribly wrong. He had expected nothing but excited gratitude for fulfilling her wish. Thomas had told him it had gone very well, but right now, something was clearly wrong.

"Leave us," Caius said, interrupting Mister Henry.

"Your Highness, please forgive me, but this is important. We do not know exactly what happened to Lord Elrod, but we have reasons to—"

"Tell Prince Rylen," Caius said dismissively. "Do not let me repeat myself."

Mister Henry looked very worried but bowed and said, "As Your Highness wishes." He left the room, taking the servants with him.

Rose remained seated as she watched this exchange, and even after the conversation ended, she didn't move a muscle. She had heard the conversation about the lord and from Mister Henry's words, there seemed to be trouble.

Caius tilted his head, a smile lingering on his lips as he watched her. She was being blatantly disrespectful. This was new—but surprisingly, it amused him more than it annoyed him.

It was not hard to notice that she hadn't said a word to him, and even though she didn't look away once, she wouldn't pay her respects to him. Caius's smile widened as he walked toward her.

He stopped in front of her and stared down at her, but she didn't look away. Caius grinned. "Are you asking me to punish you?" he asked, towering over her.

He leaned forward, grabbing the arms of both chairs, locking her in the middle. Caius bent his head even lower, his eyes showing just how amused he was. "Very well, Caius continued with a sultry tone in his voice. "I can make sure you're adequately punished." The smirk on his face turned into a sly smile as he lowered his head even more.

"Your Majesty," Rose said and bent her head, avoiding his lips so they brushed on her cheek instead.

Caius squinted his eyes, his lips thinning but he didn't pull his head away. "What is this about?"

Caius wasn't particularly asking because he cared. He was rather starting to get irked because he hadn't gotten his thanks yet, and something was clearly wrong—but Rose didn't seem to want to spill it out.

"Did Thomas not take you to the wedding you wouldn't stop whining about?" Caius asked.

"He did," Rose said, still keeping her head down, even though her body tingled with how close he was. He was literally breathing down on her, and she was starting to worry that he might be getting really angry.

"This is about a different matter," Rose said.

Caius pulled away and stood to his full height, folding his arms. "So, there is something? Stand up!"

Rose stood up without hesitation but kept her gaze lowered. One might say she was throwing a tantrum, but she was hoping her unusual demeanor would show the crown prince just how important this situation was.

"Your attitude irks me. When I walked in, you wouldn't stop looking at me, and now you won't even look at me. If you do not say what is wrong, I will take your behavior as disrespect and punish you accordingly."

"No, Your Majesty," Rose cried, doing her best to fake the panic. "I do not mean to anger you, Your Majesty. I am just scared," she whispered, pressing her hands to her chest.

"Scared of me?" Caius frowned as he peered at her, but she still wouldn't look at him.

Rose shook her head. "Not Your Majesty," she said, shaking her head as she thought hard about how to phrase what she was about to say. Regardless of whether the crown prince was on her side or not, she was still talking about the reigning Queen. One wrong word, and even the crown prince would turn against her.

"The Queen," she whispered. "I fear I may have angered her beyond rectification."

Caius' eyes narrowed as he realized the problem. "Worry not," he replied.

Rose almost scoffed. He wasn't the one who got kidnapped, and he certainly wasn't the one who had to face any consequences.

Rose shook her head, visibly shivering. "I have more than enough reason to worry, Your Majesty."

Caius's brows nearly touched each other as he frowned. He undid his arms and lifted her chin, forcing her to look at him. "Do you doubt that I can keep you safe?" he sounded angry.

Yes, you obnoxious heir to the throne! Though Rose screamed this in her thoughts, she managed to keep it only in her head.

"No, Your Majesty. I just don't want to be sold off again. While I was away from the castle, someone got into my room and completely ruined the dress you had made for me. They scattered the pieces all over the room."

Caius's grip on her chin tightened. "This is news to me. When did this happen?"

"I do not know," Rose whispered, adding a hitch to her voice. "But when I returned, the damage had already been done."

"Was anything else tampered with?"

Rose shook her head. "But if they could do that," she said and shivered excessively, "I worry."

Caius's eyes darkened. He knew exactly what she was implying—she might get taken again. Caius was embarrassed. From Rose's reaction, she truly believed his mother could do the same thing again, right under his nose.

"I said, there is nothing to worry about. And as for the dress, I'll get you even more."

Rose nodded, but her expression didn't change. It wasn't that she didn't believe the crown prince's words, but he was a little oblivious to her plight. She knew he only remembered she was a peasant when it suited him. He didn't mind putting her in front of the royals. They wouldn't see his actions; rather, they would all act as though she were the problem. So she did not believe for one moment that there was nothing to worry about.

Chapter 224: Restrict

Rose nodded. "But, Your Majesty," she whispered, "would it be too much if I made a request that would make me feel better?" she asked softly.

She was getting nowhere with this conversation. All the crown prince had said so far was that she had nothing to worry about—but everything around her suggested otherwise.

"You may," Caius replied, pulling his hand away from her chin.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Rose started. "I would like to restrict the number of maids who bring me my meals and help me get ready. I prefer a very reduced number and hopefully pick the people I can trust. I know it's too much for me to ask, Your Majesty, but I'd feel better if only the people I trusted were allowed around me."

"Done," Caius said without hesitation. "Anything else?"

Yes, let me go. How long does this intend to go on? Rose thought, but she knew she couldn't dare say these thoughts out loud.

"No," she said instead, her voice a little lower. "That's all the request I have, Your Majesty."

"Good. Enough with this."

Rose's stomach twisted at his words, but her expression didn't change. She didn't know if the crown prince even saw her as anything other than something he could command—something to parade in

front of nobles for his amusement. His words often sounded like favors, but they were shackles in finer wrapping.

She doubted this would ever change—not that she cared. She just wanted to be away from the castle and all its troubles. Dealing with nobles was far beyond her powers.

"Henry will take care of it, as well as the guards. As for my mother," Caius whispered, stepping closer, "you have nothing to worry about. The most you'd get is petty actions like this. She wouldn't dare hurt you this time."

Rose stared intensely at Caius as he spoke. She wondered if he would still be saying this if she had been the one to drink the poison last night. She wondered if she would be dead by now.

What would the crown prince think if she were to die? Would it make any difference to him? Rose knew this was not the sort of thought to be having—but what else could she do?

Tonight was already so exhausting, but at least she was able to state what she wanted. She doubted it would do much, but she would certainly feel much better if only a few people were allowed into her room.

She doubted this would stop the Queen, but she didn't exactly have a list of options, and the crown prince wasn't treating this as seriously as it was. Still, she was only a peasant who was here to warm the crown prince's bed. She didn't expect to be treated any less.

She nodded at his words, even though she didn't believe a single one, but the crown prince wanted to move past the topic—and from the look in his eyes, he wanted to move to the next. Her body.

Caius lifted her chin and pressed a kiss to her lips, forcing her on her tiptoes. Rose couldn't even fake it if she wanted to. She was clearly distressed, but the crown prince didn't seem to care; he only cared for one thing.

Caius pulled his head away and ran his fingers through his hair as his eyes studied her face. Rose was quick to bow her head.

"I apologize, Your Majesty. I just had a rough day and I—"

"Your apology isn't nearly enough," Caius interrupted with a dry tone.

He lifted her chin and Rose shut her eyes, not looking at the crown prince. She feared she might be punished but try as she might she couldn't. Not tonight.

"Not tonight?" he asked.

Rose slowly opened her eyes to reveal wet lashes. For a moment, she had thought she said her thoughts out loud. "Your Majesty," she whispered.

"Answer me!" Caius said sternly, his voice so cold it could drop the temperature in a room.

Rose shook her head, which the crown prince still held up by her chin. She saw his expression darken at her reply.

Caius let go of her chin and stepped back. "Leave," he said with difficulty, the veins in his neck ticking with each breath.

Rose nodded and fled the room. She didn't even bow before leaving. The sound of the door closing behind her as she stepped out of the room was the only reason she believed she wasn't dreaming.

The crown prince had let her go. Rose still found this hard to believe. It was one thing to not call on her for the night, but to let her go without forcing himself on her was unheard of. The only time she managed to escape it was when she fell asleep. She didn't count the times they just played chess, as Rose also thought it was another form of torture.

When Rose returned to her room, she was still shocked and stayed by the door as she ruminated on the crown prince's actions. She didn't know how to feel about it. It was hard not to notice that he had asked her.

Rose shook her head as she tried to remind herself: he didn't do anything nice. He was the reason she was in this mess in the first place, and if he was willing to do as she asked, it might help her feel a little better.

Rose was exhausted and all she wanted to do was sleep. The events of the day had been a little too much, and she could already feel the effects.

She pushed herself away from the door. At least this time around, she returned with her robe in one piece.

Rose walked to the vase. The flowers weren't as bright as they were when Edna had thrown the bouquet to her, but they still looked pretty. She touched a petal and it came off. She didn't toss the tiny piece away; rather, she kept it on her open palm and just watched it.

She blew on it, and the petal floated off her palm, but it didn't fall to the floor immediately. It tossed and turned in the air, as though fighting against it—but eventually, it dropped to the ground.

Rose turned away and threw herself on the bed. She was asleep in only a moment. As soon as her head hit the pillow, she immediately felt drowsy and fell asleep.

Rose woke up early, stretching and yawning as she got out of bed. It was a much-needed sleep, and thanks to the crown prince letting her go, she got more than enough rest—especially since she hadn't slept much the night of the ball.

Rose opened the window and stared out of it. It wasn't dawn yet, but one could see it was fast approaching. Rose couldn't really see anything as she stared out—it was still quite dark.

Rose heard a knock just as she finished dressing up for the day. She looked toward the door with a concerned look on her face. It was just dawn. There was still a significant amount of time before breakfast.

She walked slowly to the door, opened it, and was shocked to see Mister Henry standing right in front of her door with his arms behind his back.

"Mister Henry," she called.

"Rose," the older man said.

"What are you doing here so early, Mister Henry?" Rose asked.

"You told the crown prince you want to restrict the number of maids that come to your room."

Rose was surprised Mister Henry was already making inquiries so early. However, she was more impressed that the crown prince had immediately given the orders—he could have waited a few days more if he wanted. It shouldn't please her, but she couldn't help it.

"Yes," she said, nodding happily. "I'd like to restrict it to just three."

"Three?" Henry yelled out in horror.

Rose jumped a little at his outburst. "Is that too much? I was hoping I could choose Chelsy and Isla. I am absolutely happy with them."

"The sisters?" Henry asked with slight confusion on his face.

"Yes," she whispered.

Henry immediately looked relieved. "Good," he said, nodding vehemently.

He had been worried she might choose maids the Queen frequently used. The sisters were a perfect choice—they didn't even attend to anyone in the castle, let alone the Queen.

"And the last one?" he asked almost immediately.

"The last maid would be Welma," she replied.

Henry frowned. Welma was a little troublesome, as she was currently one of the busiest maids, from attending to the Queen to working around the castle. However, he didn't think this was a problem, as Chelsy and Isla were free enough to attend to Rose without ever needing Edna.

"Very well," he said after some time. "I will do as you have asked."

Rose thanked Mister Henry as he withdrew. He barely heard her words, his mind churning on how he would carry out these orders.

Chapter 225: Silent Treatment

"Did Your Grace not sleep well?" Rylen asked as they walked to the Queen's wing.

Caius didn't answer his cousin; rather, he walked a little faster. Rylen watched this with a concerned expression. Something was clearly wrong. However, this was not the time, as not only did they have a council meeting today but Rylen needed to speak to Caius before then.

They got to the entrance of the dining room, and Rylen tried once again to speak to the crown prince, but Caius wasn't receptive at all. Rylen was quick to give up as they walked into the room.

Caius took his seat first, his expression icy, and the maid who brought the dishes to the table almost jumped away in fright. Rylen glanced at the crown prince, but Caius didn't even spare him a look.

Rylen frowned as they waited for the Queen to arrive. There were lots of things he needed to discuss with the prince before the council meeting later in the morning.

The most important one was the discussion about when they would head to Furtherfield. Things were not going well—the guards they had sent were having a very tough time.

It was as though the bandits knew exactly how they would be attacked and had come up with several ways to avoid them, or they would engage with the guards—mostly injuring them. But according to the letter he got the night before, two guards had died from the injuries they sustained.

Lord Leopold suspected that the bandits were using weapons coated in poison. The problem was that they didn't seem to recognize the type of poison used, and at the moment, Lord Leopold didn't have the physicians to deal with it.

Rylen glanced at the prince again. This was new information they hadn't had a chance to discuss and he clearly wasn't going to get the chance now.

Last night, Mister Henry had also interrupted him to inform him that Lord Elrod would be absent from the meeting today as he was terribly sick, and there were reasons to believe he might have been poisoned at the ball.

However, this was simply the diagnosis his physician had given. Lord Elrod himself refused to believe he had been poisoned. Rather, he believed he may have either drunk too much or taken something he shouldn't have.

Henry was panicking that the former was the case. He had immediately questioned the servants as soon as he heard the information, but all the servants denied knowing anything.

Prince Rylen had calmly told Mister Henry to try to make further inquiries. If Lord Elrod didn't get better in a few more days, they might have to deal with the matter differently.

Rylen pressed his temples. He had to discuss all of this with the crown prince before the council meeting. Rylen was starting to worry that he might not even get the chance to speak to him, let alone convince him to attend.

Rylen's thoughts were quickly cut short when the Queen appeared. He rose to his feet immediately but noticed that the crown prince remained seated. It wasn't completely unusual, but Rylen could tell there was more to it this time.

Perhaps he should have asked the steward. The man tended to have useful information, but even Rylen knew he didn't need the steward to let him know that Rose was involved. What was it this time?

Queen Violeta walked in and noticed that Caius didn't stand up to welcome her—nor did he greet her while sitting. She walked to her seat, and her ladies-in-waiting pulled it back so she could sit comfortably.

"Your Majesty," Rylen said with a long bow.

The Queen smiled at him when he lifted his gaze and met hers. "Rylen," she said, still smiling while glancing at her son, who was still acting as though she were invisible. "How fare you this lovely morn? I trust the night treated you kindly."

"I thank you for your concern, Your Majesty. I rested well. And yourself, Your Majesty? I pray your night was peaceful," Rylen replied as he dropped into his seat.

"It was," Queen Violeta said.

"That's great news," Rylen smiled as he prepared to dig into the meal that had been served.

"Do you no longer care for your own mother, that you would not ask how she fares? What son won't speak to their mother or ask about her well-being?" Queen Violeta blurted out after getting a response from her son even after conversing with Rylen.

Caius lifted his head briefly, meeting his mother's gaze then glanced back down at his food. Rylen's jaw nearly hit the table as he stared at the crown prince in shock.

Caius was known for being rude, but he was never one to directly and so blatantly ignore his mother—especially after being scolded about it. Rylen glanced at the Queen, she was clearly angry and also in shock.

Queen Violeta ground her teeth with enough force to chip them as she stared at her son. She didn't need to speak again. She knew she would only get the same response from him. Caius had no plans to speak to her. All because of a peasant whore.

Queen Violeta didn't need to figure out why. The whore must have complained to the crown prince about the dress. All she had done was ask that the similar dress the whore wore be destroyed. She didn't even do anything to the peasant whore directly.

Queen Violeta had burned her own dress immediately after she had found out about the incident and the possibility that she had worn the same gown as a peasant whore. She didn't even wait for confirmation of her suspicions before destroying it. She had left this job in the hands of her trusted ladies.

The common whore had disrespected her, and Violeta hadn't even given the order for her to be thrown in the dungeons—and yet her son was giving her the silent treatment because of a harlot. Violeta was furious.

There was almost no conversation as they ate. Caius was clearly not in the mood to speak to anyone, and it was too awkward for Rylen to try and converse.

When breakfast was over, the crown prince was the first to rise to his feet, leaving Rylen to scramble to meet up with him. He quickly bowed to the Queen, who gave him a polite smile before he rushed after the crown prince.

He had thought about apologizing on the crown prince's behalf, but Rylen knew that would only make matters worse. Besides, the crown prince tended to be nicer to his mother compared to his father.

Usually, he rarely antagonized his mother, and if he did, it didn't last longer than a couple of days. But recently, more issues had been rising between them since Rose came to the castle, it was more issues than in the three years Rylen had been there.

Without a doubt, it was about time the redhead returned to her family. But Rylen knew that wasn't the sort of conversation he could have with the crown prince. The latter wouldn't listen.

Rylen followed after Caius, who surprisingly was leading them to his private study. Rylen was relieved—it meant the crown prince wasn't against having a conversation.

"Your Grace," Rylen said as they walked into the space. The drapes had been drawn, and light poured in through the windows. Shelves filled with different documents lined up against the wall.

Caius walked right to his seat and dropped down, while Rylen sat across from him with the huge mahogany desk between them.

The table was mostly empty, and not a speck of dust could be seen. However, Rylen knew the table wouldn't remain this way for long.

"What was it that you wouldn't stop bothering me about this morn?" Caius asked with a bored expression as he fiddled with his ring.

This ring was only worn by the heir to the throne, and it also served as a seal. The power of the ring was equal to Caius; with just the ring, anyone could act as though the crown prince had given the order.

"Our journey to Furtherfield. You need to pick the day we'll leave. The situation has worsened and we need to move now."

Caius narrowed his eyes. "Five days," he said. "We leave in five days."

Rylen nodded, showing his approval. He had hoped it would not be longer than a week. Five days was perfect. He knew Lord Leopold could hold out until then, and it would give them time to prepare before making the journey.

"I'll write a letter to Lord Leopold immediately."

"Is that all?" Caius asked, ignoring his statement.

"The council meeting will commence soon. We cannot start without the crown prince's presence."

Caius jerked his head at him. "Did I say I wouldn't attend?" he asked.

"No, but Your Grace didn't say if he would either."

"Write the bloody letter!"

Rylen grinned. "As Your Grace pleases," he said in the most condescending tone—but Caius didn't respond.

Rylen knew he had been dismissed, and the crown prince would not listen to anything else he might have to say. The only other matter he would have brought up was Lord Elrod's absence from the meeting and his illness, but Rylen doubted the crown prince would notice the lord's absence. Until he had more information about the illness, he preferred to keep the matter to himself.

He got up as he prepared to draft the letter. The letter should reach Furtherfield, hopefully just after noon if the messenger left with the fastest horse—which meant he would get a reply before nightfall.

Chapter 226: What Would A Dressmaker Bring?

It wasn't until lunchtime that Rose learned the crown prince had taken her complaint quite seriously. After Mister Henry had knocked on her door just before breakfast, there hadn't been any visible changes, and a different set of maids brought her breakfast, even though the sisters had been serving her for the past few days.

When this happened, she became doubtful and feared things would only remain as they had been. However, when lunchtime came around, there were guards placed right outside the doors to her room, and not just anyone was allowed into the crown prince's wing.

The dressmaker was also not allowed into the crown prince's wing, let alone onto the floor Rose was on. It wasn't until Chelsy and Isla were bringing her lunch that they noticed the young woman waiting at the entrance with a heavy bag. Even with Chelsy and Isla present, the guards didn't let Bailey through, and she had to hand the bag over to the sisters with a message for Rose.

"I can't believe they didn't even let her bring it to me," Rose whispered as she listened to the sisters' story.

It sounded as though she was complaining, but Rose was very pleased. She knew she couldn't possibly stop the Queen, but she was hoping the order would prevent the Queen from sending just anyone to her.

Chelsy shook her head as she arranged the table for Rose while her sister stood aside, still holding the bag. "They said only people who had gotten permission or a pass from the crown prince would be allowed to pass."

Isla suddenly laughed. "Imagine walking around with a permit just to get into the crown prince's wing. That would be funny."

"Only you would find something like that funny. It's bothersome," Chelsy said.

"I only said it was funny; I didn't mean it was something to laugh at."

"Oh, is there another definition of funny that I am unaware of, Isla?"

"Not everything funny is laughable."

"That's silly. Funny means it's laughable," Chelsy replied.

"Not really," Isla said, not giving in.

Rose smiled as she watched the sisters exchange words. The sisters were always arguing about one thing or another. At first, it had been bothersome, but now Rose enjoyed it, especially since the sisters made up so easily.

"Oh, whatever you say," Chelsy said, rolling her eyes.

"But why is this happening?" Isla asked.

"I was wondering the same thing too, especially since Mister Henry called us earlier to speak about our new assignment—to work in the castle but only attend to you, Rose. That's why we were away this morning and couldn't bring your breakfast."

Chelsy looked at her as she spoke, as though expecting some explanation, but Rose only shrugged, pretending to know nothing about why this was happening. There was no reason to tell the sisters and the less they knew the better for them.

"Well, I think it's a good thing," Isla said. "At least we don't have to worry about the wrong person getting into Rose's room and ruining her dress again. I hope you didn't think we did it," Isla added with panic in her eyes. "We would never."

Rose chuckled as she moved her legs to the ground while sitting at the edge of the bed.

"What are you talking about now?" Chelsy asked her sister with an exasperated tone. "And don't just stand there—hand the bag to Rose and tell her what Bailey said."

Rose stood from the bed, approaching Isla instead. "What did she say?" She asked gently.

She was curious about what was in the bag and had been meaning to ask, but the girls had been going on about how hard it was to get to Rose's room and arguing between themselves.

"Sorry," Isla said with a sad look on her face. She placed the bag at the foot of the bed. The opening untangled, and dresses spilled out of the bag.

Rose had expected nothing less when she heard the bag was from Bailey, but she was still shocked—more by the number of dresses than anything else.

"I told you it would be dresses," Isla said with glee as she stared at her sister.

"Oh shut up. What else would a dressmaker bring? That's why I didn't respond to you. With your constant arguments, I fear Rose won't get the message." Chelsy stated, she sounded as though she had had enough of her sister's antics. "Bailey said that—"

"There would be more, but she was asked to bring the ones she had ready today by the crown prince. And she wasn't sure about the fitting of some of them, but if you encounter any problems, to send for her immediately," Isla interrupted Chelsy, who glared at her.

Rose nodded as she listened, staring into the bag. There were already more dresses than she had ever gotten at once in all her life. Rose was stunned at how fast Bailey had made the dresses. There was no way she could have done this all by herself. She probably hadn't gotten any sleep. It had only been a few days since she took Rose's measurements, yet she was able to make this many dresses.

Also, did the crown prince already plan for this? When he had blurted out about getting her more dresses the night before, she had thought he only said it so she wouldn't complain about the ruined dress. But it turned out it wasn't just the dress for the ball and mending her torn dresses that Bailey was supposed to do. All along, she was going to get more garments.

Rose didn't know how to feel about this. She didn't completely think it was a good thing, and this would most likely piss the Queen off even more. There was still the incident of her dressing the same way as the Queen and the crown prince being behind it.

Rose could not wrap her head around why he would do something like that. Was there a purpose, or perhaps did the crown prince just enjoy putting her in danger? Something told her she already knew the answer.

Rose picked one of the dresses—a pale purple one. It reminded her of the wedding, and she had instinctively picked it up without realizing.

"Great choice," Isla praised. "I think you should try this one first."

"Isla," her sister called. "Let her eat lunch first. It's several dresses—her meal will be cold before then."

Rose nodded and dropped the dress. "Chelsy is right," she said and walked toward the already set table.

Isla pouted but didn't say anything. Chelsy stepped away from the table and walked to where Isla stood, grabbing her by the arm. "We will let you enjoy your meal," Chelsy said, bowing and forcing her sister into one. "We will be back later."

"No," Rose said with a soft smile. "Stay. We can try on the dress after I'm done eating. I still need to let Bailey know if it fits or not." Rose wasn't sure if it was a good idea to accept the dresses, but she also knew she couldn't decline.

Isla lifted her head and smiled at Rose while nodding happily. Rose smiled back at her, and for a moment, she forgot her troubles.

Chapter 227: Not So Useless

Welma walked up the stairs and was astounded by the number of guards that lined the hallway. She had met a few of them at the entrance of the crown prince's wing and had been asked her name. Welma had given it to them without much thought, but now that she was on Rose's floor, she understood just how serious it was.

She was only here because she had been told the sisters were taking too long after serving Rose lunch. There was also a change in the crown prince's wing and only certain servants were allowed in. The way the servant had phrased the message was almost like Welma was expected to go to confirm this, and not just because the sisters were taking too long.

Welma wondered if the Queen had heard about this or if she was supposed to report it. Her relationship with the ladies-in-waiting had been a little strained since the incident with the Lord.

She didn't know what had happened with him, and it wasn't exactly something she could ask about, so all she could do was wait for the day she would be dragged into the dungeons.

Welma got to the front of Rose's bedchamber and was equally surprised—two guards were standing on each side of the double door. They stared at her oddly behind their helmets; they almost looked ready to battle. Welma was completely taken aback. Even the King's and Queen's wings didn't have this many guards around.

Welma curtsied, but they ignored her, and seeing as they weren't asking her to leave, she walked through the middle of them and knocked on the door. A giggling Isla answered.

"Welma," she cried.

"Yes," she whispered and looked into the room, but she couldn't see much with the tall Isla towering in front of her. "I was wondering what was happening. The kitchen has been waiting for the dishes."

"Oh," Isla said and stepped away from the door to let Welma in. "I forgot."

Welma walked in and saw Rose in the middle of getting dressed while Chelsy was struggling to tie the ropes. There were beads of sweat on Chelsy's forehead, which was furrowed in concentration.

"What is going on here?" Welma asked.

"Oh, Welma, you're here," Rose replied.

"I came for the dishes," she said and walked toward the table while Isla shut the door and rushed to help her sister.

"Very well," Rose said and turned away.

Welma could tell this was not the first or third dress they had tried on. The bed had no fewer than three dresses, and there were a few hanging in the open wardrobe.

"You got new dresses?" Welma asked.

Rose turned to look at Welma, but before she could say anything, Welma started speaking again.

"I can't stay," Welma said, making eye contact with Rose. "I have to attend to Her Royal Majesty."

Welma saw the way Rose's eyebrows lifted, but her face quickly returned to neutral and she said, "Okay."

Welma nodded and turned to leave the room. She knew that Rose had understood that she would be informing the Queen.

She wondered if she could avoid telling the Queen about the dresses, as the Queen wouldn't run into Rose—who barely left her room—and other maids who were likely to tell the Queen wouldn't see Rose either, since they weren't allowed in the crown prince's wing.

Which begged the question—why was she allowed? Welma had wanted to ask Rose, but there was no way she could do that with the sisters in the room. She would have to find some time to speak to Rose in private. For now, she had to report quickly.

She found a servant to give the empty dishes to while she quickly made her way to the Queen's bedchamber. Welma got there without any trouble. When one of the ladies eventually answered her knocking, she looked at Welma as one would stare at dung.

"You've got some nerve to show yourself here, Welma, without being summoned."

"Please forgive me, my lady," Welma said with her head bowed. "However, I have new information and decided to let you know the situation as soon as possible."

The lady looked at her oddly, as though contemplating the situation. She stepped out of the way to let Welma inside—but not into the main part of the Queen's bedchamber, just a corner for them to discuss privately.

"What news could you possibly have this time? We all know how useless you can be."

Welma nodded immediately. She could have avoided coming here. Now that the ladies didn't think there was a use for her, she could have stayed away—but Welma knew better than anyone that was a bad idea. Her neck was still on the line, and if news were to reach the Queen before she reported it, regardless of whether they thought she was useless or not, she would be in trouble.

It also didn't help that out of all the other servants, Rose could have picked Lily—rather, she chose her. This was an opportunity the Queen and her ladies wouldn't dare to pass up.

"Spit it out!" she snapped, sounding impatient—but Welma knew it was far from it.

"The crown prince has increased the number of guards in the east wing, and he has restricted the servants who can access the wing."

The lady placed her hand on her waist and laughed. "Is this the important news you have? You're still so useless!"

"I am allowed to serve the peasant," Welma said softly.

"What?" another voice yelled, poking her head through the curtain that separated Welma from the other side of the room.

"I said, I am allowed to serve the peasant," she whispered. "A different set of maids attend to her food," Welma lied immediately. She was worried that the ladies might ask her to try and poison Rose again. "But I help her get ready to see the prince and tidy the room."

The two ladies stared at Welma with a different expression this time, and one of them said, "Perhaps you're not so useless."

Welma had expected to answer questions about why she was selected, and she didn't know either, so she was absolutely relieved when they didn't ask.

Chapter 228: The Prince Is Leaving

"What did you just say?" Rose asked, staring at the three ladies standing in her room.

"I said, Mister Henry told Welma not to serve you dinner in your bedchambers tonight as you won't be dining in your quarters as usual. Rather, you'd join the crown prince to eat dinner," Chelsy explained, slowly this time.

Rose heard her clearly the first time, but much like the first time, it still didn't make much sense to her. Why would she join him for dinner?

"Why?" she asked, looking from one person to another.

Chelsy shook her head while looking at Rose with a puzzled expression. Welma also wore a similar expression—only Isla seemed excited.

"We do not know," Welma replied.

"Are you certain of this?" Rose asked in disbelief. She had only half her behind on the chair beside the table.

Chelsy nodded. "The kitchen didn't even make dinner for you so you have no option but to eat with his highness," Isla commented, and Welma nodded in confirmation.

"When we arrived—Isla and I—we were told to go away and find Mister Henry. Of course, it was hard to find him, it's dinner time, and he would be busy organizing dinner for the royal family. Luckily, we found Welma instead, and she told us what he said."

"It's already time for dinner," Welma cut in. "We have to get you dressed. You might end up being a little late if we don't start now."

Rose paused for a bit. She probably didn't need much help to get ready, and more importantly, she needed to speak to Welma. After now, she wouldn't be able to see her until tomorrow morning, and the sisters would be here too. This was the perfect time.

"Chelsy, Isla, you may retire early. You both have been here with me most of the day, trying on the different dresses. Welma will help me prepare to see the crown prince."

"We don't mind, and the more hands the better," Isla suggested, grinning from ear to ear. She hasn't been able to stop smiling since she heard about Rose's dinner with the crown prince.

"I insist," Rose said with a smile.

Isla looked as if she might complain, but her sister grabbed her wrist and Isla slowly nodded. "Goodnight, Rose," she whispered.

"Goodnight, Isla. Goodnight, Chelsy."

"Goodnight, Rose," Chelsy said and pulled Isla's wrist, leading her towards the door.

The sound of the door closing sounded almost deafening in the silent standoff between Rose and Welma. Welma didn't move a muscle, and neither did Rose move from where she sat. For an even longer moment, neither of them said anything.

After some time, Rose broke the silence. "Was the Queen pleased with the information you provided?" Rose asked with a snarky tone.

"More like the opposite," Welma replied immediately, not taking offense at Rose's tone. "They are planning something," she added even before Rose asked.

"What?" Rose asked, hoping she sounded calm, but to be honest, she nearly jumped out of her skin when Welma told her the Queen was plotting something again.

"I don't know. I am not usually a part of the planning process, but I think the Queen will do something soon, as the crown prince will leave the castle in a few days."

"Pardon?" Rose asked, wondering if she had heard wrong. "The crown prince will leave the castle?"

Welma nodded. "I don't know the details, but the crown prince will embark on a journey to the town of Futherfield in a few days," Welma explained.

"Do you know why?" Rose asked and wrapped her arms around her body. The crown prince was leaving. She didn't want to think about it, but she didn't need anyone to tell her it would be a bad idea to remain in the castle when he wasn't here. It didn't matter if he left her with enough guards—it would be suicidal for her to remain here.

Welma shook her head. "Well, there have been talks about bandits attacking Futherfield," Welma replied. "I think that's why."

Rose frowned. "Bandits?" she asked and rubbed her arms some more. Why was it suddenly so cold?

She wasn't particularly aware of this. To be honest, she didn't really know what happened in the kingdom except through gossip. Besides, she doubted this was information available to just anyone.

"Yes," Welma replied.

"What exactly did you tell the Queen?" Rose asked. She wanted to know how to prepare herself for the Queen's attack.

"Not much," Welma started to say. "I only mentioned the guards and the fact that I can still serve you. I did not mention a word about the new dresses."

Rose nodded. The new dresses were a source of worry to her. The Queen had ruined the last one—only the heavens knew what she would attempt if the Queen were to find out that the crown prince got more dresses for her.

"Shall I help you get ready?" Welma asked when Rose didn't say anything more.

Rose nodded absentmindedly as her thoughts churned. Other than the Queen's plans before the crown prince leaves, there was still after the prince leaves. She wouldn't survive until he returned. Was there a way she could convince him to let her go, at least just for the period he would be away?

"You look pale," Welma commented as she brushed her hair.

Rose snapped out of her thoughts and met Welma's eyes in the mirror. "I am scared," she said without thinking much about it.

Welma looked shocked that Rose would tell her something like that, but she didn't say anything rude. She simply nodded her head and said, "You have enough reasons to be. I will put some color on your face—it should help."

Rose nodded, and the conversation fizzled out again.

After Welma was done, Rose stared at her reflection. Even though it looked like her, Rose could barely see herself—she was too anxious.

There was also the dinner with the crown prince. Why would he want to eat with a peasant? But worst of all—what if the Queen found out? At this rate, they wouldn't even find her ashes by the time the Queen was done with her.

"Rose," Welma called, snapping her out of her thoughts again. "You have to go."

"Ah, yes," Rose said and turned away from the mirror. She needed to get a grip on herself. However, ever since she got into the castle, she hadn't gotten a moment of peace.

Chapter 229: Dinner With The Prince

A guard was waiting outside the room when she stepped out. Without saying a word to her, he led her down the stairs. Rose gripped the hem of her dress as she followed after him.

She had chosen the pale purple dress; it was a little lighter than the others, and Rose had chosen it out of the urge of having something familiar with her rather than anything else. The color was starting to feel a little nostalgic, and she knew she needed some kind of comfort tonight.

The guard led her down the stairs and onto the ground floor. Rose couldn't help but look around as they walked, realizing she had barely been on this floor before. She always took the stairs straight to the crown prince's floor, and when Thomas gave her a tour, he had been very unhelpful.

The hallway stretched as long as the first floor. The rooms were on the right side, while the opposite wall held torches that lit up the pathway. The sun had set, and it was starting to get dark.

The guard didn't lead her far down the path before stopping in front of a door. The guard knocked once, then a servant opened the door, and the guard stepped out of the way to let Rose into the dining room.

Rose walked in with hesitation, but it was quite easy to forget her worries at the sight in front of her. The room wasn't small, and with enough tables and chairs, it could pass off as a hall.

There was only one table in the space. It was located right in the middle, and the table was longer than she was tall. The table was also filled with different dishes, from appetizers to desserts. There was barely any space on the table.

The room was bright with candles and chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. Rose could count three, and several candelabra were on the table. The space sparkled, and regardless of her nerves, she couldn't deny how great it looked.

Rose's gaze fell on the crown prince, who sat with an elbow on the table watching her with an amused expression. He was on the opposite end facing her, and he wore the gold band around his forehead. His brown eyes stared at her as though he wanted to see right into her soul.

Rose shuffled on her feet as she stood close to the door. Even from this distance, she could clearly see how handsome he looked.

"Your Majesty," Rose softly called, bowing.

"Have a seat," he said.

Rose nodded and walked forward, picking the seat furthest from the crown prince. She sat down and lifted her gaze to see the crown prince looking at her, the smirk still hanging on his lips.

Rose looked around the room. They weren't alone. She could count five servants, and it was clear they were all here to serve. Caius moved his fingers, and two servants moved immediately.

One appeared on her side and dished out a decent portion onto her plate and stepped back. Rose glanced at them and then at the crown prince, feeling very out of place.

She still couldn't figure out why he would ask to eat with her. Didn't he usually eat with his mother or Prince Rylen?

"You might want to eat to your full. You have got a long night," Caius said with a knowing tone to his voice.

Rose stiffened, but she would be lying if she said she didn't expect this. Besides, the crown prince had been so lenient last night, she doubted his patience would last for much longer.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Rose said.

Caius raised a brow and dug into his meal. "For what?"

Rose narrowed her eyes, but she couldn't even be angry. The crown prince did too much for her not to be appreciative—it would be rude. However, she doubted she would ever forget she was in this mess because of him.

"For listening to my request," she stated. "I am grateful."

"You can show your gratitude after the meal. For now, you need all the energy you can get," Caius smirked.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Rose said obediently as she started to eat, grateful to Lady Delphine for teaching her eating etiquette. At least she didn't have to worry about embarrassing herself.

Caius looked surprised at her compliant response, but his expression quickly returned to neutral. He didn't say anything to her again, and they both slowly ate in silence.

Regardless of how anxious she felt, Rose soon discovered that she didn't hate sharing a meal with the crown prince. Rose was used to sharing a meal with her parents; only on very rare occasions did she eat by herself.

"How was the appetizer?" Caius asked.

Rose nodded as she wiped the corner of her lips, even as the servant changed out her old plate for a new set with a completely different meal.

"The turnip porridge was really tasty. There was a very nice sweetness to it even through the peppery taste. It was very well done," Rose said with several nods. She was very satisfied with the meal.

The turnip had been mashed and cooked with butter and spices. She could recognize some, but most of them were ones she would have never tasted otherwise. The usual thought of going back to mediocre meals popped into her mind.

Caius gave her a very odd stare before speaking. "You're right," he agreed.

Rose smiled at him as she adjusted the napkin on her lap and dug into the next course. It was fish soup. Rose couldn't tell what kind of fish it was, but the smell was very nice. She was about to take a scoop when Caius spoke.

"We will leave for Futherfield in five days," Caius said casually, but his gaze did not leave Rose's face.

She stopped moving, and the cutlery made a soft clank as it hit the side of the bowl. "I apologize, Your Majesty, but I think I heard wrong. Did you say we?"

"Yes," Caius replied and brought a spoon to his lips.

"Are you sure I should come with you, Your Majesty?" she asked.

"It wouldn't be the first time you would travel with me. Or would you rather stay here?" he asked, his eyes half closed as he stared at her, as though gauging her.

"No," Rose replied immediately. It would be stupid of her to stay here, and she was glad this option was available. She doubted the crown prince would have let her go home while he was away.

Rose's expression contorted as she thought of home. She really was a terrible daughter. She hadn't heard from her parents, and here she was enjoying a meal when her mother was terribly ill and there was only her father to take care of the older woman.

"What's wrong?" Caius asked.

Rose blinked as she realized she had let her worry slip out of her expression. She smiled, doing her best to make sure it looked genuine.

"I was just wondering why we have to go to Futherfield. I know it is rude for me to ask, but it would be nice to know why."

"It's nothing you should worry about. It's just important."

Rose nodded and resumed eating. The crown prince stared at her for a bit before he turned his attention to his food.

Chapter 230: The Queen's Plotting

"Where is my son?" was the first thing Queen Violeta asked as she walked into the dining room.

Prince Rylen was still on his feet, having just welcomed the Queen. "The crown prince decided to have dinner by himself tonight."

Queen Violeta was halfway to her seat when she stopped abruptly. Her ladies-in-waiting almost bumped into her but managed to stop themselves in time.

"What did you say?" She turned fiery eyes to Prince Rylen.

Rylen sighed as he repeated what he had just said, "The crown prince decided to have dinner by himself tonight."

Rylen already saw this coming from the instant Caius had said he wouldn't be joining them. Rylen didn't even try to convince him. He knew it would only fall on deaf ears. The part he hated, out of everything, was the fact that he would be the one to break the news to the Queen. Mister Henry had looked absolutely terrified and had stared at him with pleading eyes. Right now, the steward stood in the corner as though he didn't want to be seen.

"Was that what he told you?" she asked darkly.

Rylen nodded, "Yes, Your Majesty."

Rylen studied the Queen as he wondered what she would do. He knew she wouldn't take the matter lying low. The crown prince also knew this, but he wouldn't stop putting Rose in danger. Rylen felt very sorry for her.

"Where is he now?" she asked, glaring at Rylen.

Rylen kept his gaze down. "I believe he is dining in his wing," he replied.

"Let's go join him," Queen Violeta said and turned as if to walk to the door.

Rylen's eyes widened in horror. He knew he couldn't let the Queen leave the room. The crown prince didn't tell him if he would be dining with Rose, but Rylen had seen the pleased look on his face—there was no way the crown prince was eating alone.

If the Queen saw Rose in that manner, only the heavens knew what she would do. Rylen knew she had already found out that it was Rose with whom the crown prince danced. If she found out about this now, Rose might not live till midnight.

"Your Majesty," Rylen said. He kept his voice as neutral as possible. "I know this is not my place to say, but I would be honored if you'd listen to my words."

Queen Violeta stopped in her tracks and turned to look at Rylen once again. "Speak!"

"I don't think it is a good idea to seek the crown prince. I don't know what occurred, but he has been in a foul mood all day. I think he just wants some time to himself. Tomorrow, I will speak to him and convince him to join us. I don't want your relationship with the crown prince to be any more strained."

Queen Violeta considered his words for a moment. Then she sighed and walked to her seat. "I suppose you're right," she said reluctantly. "All this has been because of that peasant whore. He was always such a good son."

Rylen tried not to show any reaction to what the Queen called Rose. He thought it was a little cruel to give her such a name. He knew Rose wanted no part in this, and if it was up to her, she would never see the crown prince for the rest of her life.

The Queen finally sat down, and Rylen could also return to his seat. The servants started to serve them, and Rylen couldn't help but notice that Mister Henry kept himself hidden. Rylen had not failed to notice how panicked the steward had seemed when the Queen said she would go to her son.

The dinner was quiet for a bit, and Rylen could not wait for it to end. He could tell the Queen was brooding, and from the look on her face, he doubted she would be silent for long.

Suddenly, Queen Violeta kicked all the servants out of the dining room. Rylen watched this with patience; he knew he would find his answer soon enough, and he didn't have to wait long. As soon as her ladies-in-waiting had turned all the servants away, Queen Violeta turned her attention to him.

"Prince Rylen," Queen Violeta called softly. "Do you think you could do me a favor?"

Prince Rylen felt cold. He knew just how bad the Queen's plotting could go. If she could orchestrate Rose's kidnapping, there was almost no length she wouldn't go. Besides, the mere fact that she needed them to be alone before she discussed it told him all he needed to know.

"Your Majesty," Rylen said with a slight bow. "This humble servant would fulfill your wish to the letter." Even as he said this, Rylen knew he was making a big mistake.

"I need you to do something of the utmost importance. I am afraid you're the only one I can count on, Prince Rylen."

Rylen's palms formed fists. "Please tell this humble servant what it is, and I will do as you have asked."

"I need you to take the crown prince's royal ring," Queen Violeta said a little too easily. "That should be enough to make him consider sending her away. I heard this is not the first time she has stolen something, but he let it go. If she were to steal something this important, Caius would have no choice but to see her for who she truly is."

Queen Violeta looked at Rylen with puppy eyes, her lower lip quivering as though to request something like this was breaking her.

"If I were to do it myself, Caius would suspect me. The peasant has already made my son so distrusting of me. I cannot let this continue. We have to get rid of her. It's about time I got rid of the shameless harlot. A mother has to do what is best for her son."

Rylen didn't like how she said we, but he couldn't exactly say no. It may seem like a request, but it wasn't one. He would even go as far as to say it was a command. Another reason why he would agree to this—he was hoping this would make the crown prince realize how far the Queen was willing to go.

"You don't have to do anything other than that," she said. "Just give me the ring, and I will take care of it."

"As Your Majesty wishes," Rylen said.

Queen Violeta smiled at him. "I knew I could count on you. I wish my son were just like you, Prince Rylen. Then a mother wouldn't have to worry."