

K Lover 241

Chapter 241: The Ring

Rose stood up from the seat without thinking about it. "What happened?" she asked.

Welma frowned as she took in Rose's appearance. "I should be asking you. Your eyes are all red."

Welma pulled her hand from her pocket and approached Rose. She lightly touched her on the shoulder, and Rose sighed. She dropped back into her seat.

"What happened?" Welma asked.

Perhaps it was because she was too mentally exhausted and emotionally drained, or she just wanted to try to ease the pain a little bit—Rose replied before she could stop herself.

"It's my mother," she whispered, surprised that more tears weren't running down her cheeks. "She has always been sick, but I think this might be it."

Welma put her hands over her mouth to keep from gasping. "I am so sorry," she whispered.

She didn't know who her parents were, but Welma knew she would be devastated if she ever found out either of hers was dying. It was weird—she didn't think much about her parents, as there was nothing to think about—but at the same time, she strangely cared about them.

Rose shook her head. "Don't apologize. We always knew it was coming, and frankly, I hate that she has been in that much pain all my life, but I would want nothing more than to be by her side. Yet here I am." Wearing fancy clothes and playing house when Mot'er is dying.

"Enough about me," Rose said and shook her head. The topic was too weighty to discuss. "What happened? You walked in like you'd seen a ghost."

Welma immediately lost the color in her face again and stood to her full height. She stepped away from the chair and put her hand in the pocket of her apron.

Welma shook her head lightly as she mumbled, "It's too cruel."

"What is?" Rose asked, a little unnerved by the maid's behavior.

Welma pulled her hand out and twisted it. "I don't know what to do. I couldn't say no, and I am tired," she whispered. "I know I will never find another job, and I doubt I can leave, but I fear that this might be the day I die."

Rose's eyes widened as she stared at Welma with genuine horror and concern. "What are you talking about?"

"The Queen asked me to hide this in your room," Welma said and pulled out the ring from the front pocket of her apron.

Rose blinked as she tried to figure out what she was looking at, but it didn't take long. She would recognize the ring anywhere. The crown prince had used it on the letter he sent to stop her father from getting killed.

"What?" she asked, nearly jumping to her feet. "Why?!" As soon as she asked the question, she knew it was stupid. Rose already knew why.

"They are convinced the crown prince would chase you away too if it is found that you stole this—and that you have a record of stealing."

"Why would I steal this?" she asked in horror, even though she knew there was no point in asking. "And I didn't steal anything. Martha just wouldn't believe me."

Rose leaned forward. She didn't have the energy to deal with this. She was currently thinking of things to say so the crown prince would let her go home just for a little while. She was almost tempted to go along with this plan. Rose laughed bitterly.

"I am sorry," Welma said.

Rose looked at her, and Welma fiddled with the ring, her expression still as pale as ever.

"If it isn't found in your room, I don't think I would be able to keep my head this time. This is the chance to redeem myself—and for them to decide if I should spend the rest of my life in the dungeons for trying to kill a lord."

Rose thought it was quite bold of them to keep holding that over Welma, but she knew exactly why. It didn't matter what the evidence said; the nobles' words would always hold more weight than a commoner's.

"What do I do?" Welma asked, fearfully.

Rose couldn't even wish she could cheer her up. She had more important things to worry about. "I don't know."

"Should I hide it in your room?" she asked.

Rose closed her eyes. "Welma," she whispered. "If this plan would indeed make the crown prince let me go, I would consider it. I wish the Queen would try to speak with me. I don't want to be here either."

Welma's expression hardened. "That's never going to happen."

Rose laughed. "I know. Nobody seems to believe I want no part of this. Give me the ring."

"What about me?" she whispered.

"I don't know," Rose whispered. "I will keep it hidden, and depending on how things play out, I will decide."

"I am a little ungrateful, aren't I? You have so much to deal with and I bring you problems that I got into myself."

Rose shrugged. "To be honest, I am glad you're partially on my side. Martha was such a pain to deal with."

"I'm on my side," she stated. "I don't want to make an enemy of both sides—neither would save me. Where would you keep it?" She asked changing the subject. "I need to report to the Queen where I hid it so she can tell the guards where to search."

"Would she ask the guards to search?" Rose asked.

"I don't know."

"Under the bed," Rose said.

"Are you going to keep it there?" she asked.

"No," Rose whispered. "I plan to give it to the crown prince. There would be no search if I just returned it."

"That would mean I did a bad job."

"You still did your job. I just found it first."

"I don't like it," Welma said honestly. "But I don't have much choice in this matter. It would be cruel of me to ask more of you."

"Not exactly. You could have hid it without telling me," Rose replied.

"I'll consider that next time," Welma said with a smirk, but her expression quickly softened. "I worry. This is the royal prince's ring. Just touching it is a crime. The Queen will stop at no lengths to get you out of here."

Rose's expression darkened as she looked away. The maid didn't have to tell her—she already knew this.

Chapter 242: Pesky Peasants

Caius didn't miss how his mother continuously stared at his empty ring finger. He noticed her stare during lunch and had expected her to bring it up, but surprisingly, she held her tongue. Rylen acted completely oblivious to the situation, his gaze on his food.

They were halfway through dinner when his mother interrupted. She looked like she had been itching to bring up the topic from the start of dinner, and he was surprised she had been able to keep it in for that long.

"Son," she called sweetly.

Caius lifted his head, pausing mid-chew. "Yes, Mother," he replied curtly.

"Where is your ring?"

Caius's eyes flew to his ring finger immediately, and they widened as he feigned shock. He thought he should work in the theatres with this performance.

"What?" Caius yelled and turned his hand left and right as though the ring would magically appear if he stared hard enough.

Rylen picked up a goblet of water and stuck it to his mouth as he tried to hide his reaction to Caius's exaggerated performance.

"Did you not notice?" she asked in horror.

"No, Mother. I must have lost it earlier in the field. I'll ask the guards to check for it tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Queen Violeta sounded absolutely mortified. "Tonight! You can't be so careless about such an important ring."

Caius shrugged. "If any of my men found it, they know to return it," he replied.

"What if someone stole it?" Queen Violeta reiterated. "You might not have realized exactly when it went missing if you didn't notice it until I brought it to your attention."

"No one would dare," Caius said dismissively.

"Son! Take this seriously. I think you should search rooms—especially the rooms of anyone who has had access to you. This has never happened before. You wouldn't carelessly lose such an important ring."

"You're right, Mother," Caius said. "I will take care of it."

"Don't forget to search the whore's room." Queen Violeta's face contorted as she spoke about Rose, as though her insides twisted. "I heard it wouldn't be the first time she stole."

Caius's eyes narrowed—she wasn't even trying to be subtle. But Caius found that he was more curious about her last statement. "What do you mean?"

"I'm saying you brought in a thief. Of course, you'd expect nothing less with pesky peasants." Queen Violeta spoke in a soft tone, as though she were offering useful advice—that this was simply out of concern, and not that she was willing to do anything to get Rose out of the castle.

"What else did she steal?" Caius asked, acting as though he believed his mother's narrative, but he was quite curious where she got this idea from.

"I don't know the details, but she was thrown into the dungeons and Henry had to come to her rescue." Queen Violeta shook her head and muttered, "Pesky peasants."

"Is that so, Henry?" Caius asked, sending a piercing gaze in the direction of the steward.

Henry's back glued to the wall, and if he could tell it to open and swallow him, he would.

"Y-your H-highness," Henry stuttered, unsure of how to proceed.

The old man lost color in his face, and his grey hair appeared even greyer as he stood in the corner trying to appear smaller.

"I will expect more details after dinner is over," Caius said, his gaze causing Henry to shrink further.

"Yes, Your Highness." He nodded his head, trying to figure out what he would do in this state. He was surprised the Queen had heard about it—but he wasn't shocked. He was sure his niece had told Her Majesty, twisting the details to suit her. His niece was no longer here, but she was still causing him so much trouble.

Queen Violeta didn't speak anymore on the matter. She had sown the seed of doubt and distrust. All she had to do was sit back and watch it bloom—or at least, that was what she thought.

Henry fell in line with the crown prince, who was significantly taller than he was, as they walked towards his room.

"Speak, old man. What was my mother talking about?"

Henry twisted his hands. There was no use avoiding this one. "My niece had seen Rose with your coat and had accused her of stealing and thrown her into the dungeons. I heard of this and got her out."

Caius stopped in his tracks and turned to face Henry. The old man took a step back, his face filled with fear.

"Did you deliberately keep this from me?" he asked darkly.

"I am sorry, Your Highness," Henry cried.

Caius blinked and muttered under his breath, "She didn't tell me either."

Henry didn't have the heart to tell the crown prince that it was his fault—not when it felt like his heart was about to give out.

Caius turned to face Henry again. "If this happens again, you'd be no different from your treacherous niece."

"Thank you for having mercy, Your Highness," Henry said and fell to the floor, his face to the ground.

Caius turned and left the steward, uncaring. He walked to his wing with Rylen. The latter didn't say a word until they went their separate ways.

Caius was too preoccupied by his thoughts to notice, and Rylen knew better than to poke an angry bear. Caius had done a decent job of hiding it, but he knew the crown prince was fuming and something told him it was even before dinner.

Caius marched up the stairs, his footsteps hitting the floor a little too hard. The guards shuffled uncomfortably as he approached, but immediately stood unmoving when he got close.

Caius paid them no mind and headed straight for his bedchambers. All he needed was to step inside to know she was in there.

His room smelled like flowers—like summer when flowers were in full bloom. The scented candles placed around the room didn't come close to her scent.

Rose turned to face him, clutching something, and there was a distressed look on her face. However, Caius was quick to notice there was no sign of the letter in her hands. He suspected but he didn't really think it was true.

Chapter 243: No Light In Her Eyes

"Your Majesty," Rose said with a curtsy as Caius walked into the room. She stood a few feet away from the crown prince, clutching the ring in her closed palm as she bent her knees to greet him.

At first, she had thought of holding onto the ring for a bit but decided it might help in the request she wanted to make. It truly was an important ring. That wasn't the only reason Rose had thought to give to the crown prince as soon as she could. She also didn't think it was a good idea to keep it.

The crown prince didn't trust her. He was likely to believe she would do anything to leave—even steal his ring. She didn't want another whipping, or worse.

Caius didn't reply to her greetings and she couldn't help but notice he had stepped into the room alone. Usually, servants and Mister Henry accompanied him. They wouldn't leave until he chased them off.

Rose slowly lifted her head when it was starting to feel awkward and there was still no response from the crown prince. She lifted her head to see that he was looking at her in a way that was hard to describe.

"Did you receive the letter?" he asked as their eyes met.

"Yes," Rose nodded with a tight smile. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

"Where is it?" he asked.

"In the bedchambers," Rose replied immediately, wondering if the crown prince wanted to see it. However, his reaction was not what she expected.

Caius's gaze darkened, and he looked angrier—which made Rose realize he had to already be angry to look angrier. She shuffled on her feet, wondering if he had discovered his ring was missing and the Queen had convinced him that it was her.

"What are you holding?" he asked.

Rose jerked; she had forgotten how scary the crown prince could sound. She fiddled with the ring, but there was no way to hide it from him.

Rose stretched out her hand immediately. "I think your ring—I found it in the room you assigned to me," Rose said and handed it to Caius. It felt hard to call it her room cause it didn't even feel like it.

Caius glanced at her hand, and his gaze grew even colder. Rose started to worry about what she had said. Did she speak wrongly? Saying she found it in the room was certainly an odd thing to say.

"I don't know how it got there. I was just looking around and I found it. I don't know if it slipped off your finger..." She was rambling, but what could she possibly say when the crown prince was looking at her like that?

"Yes," he said and glanced at her as he reached out for the ring. "Probably."

It was the tone that bothered her—not his words.

"Your Majesty," Rose called. Something told her it was a bad time, but she thought he must be a little happier now that he had gotten his ring back. There was no way she could miss the opportunity. She had to ask now—she needed to know now.

Caius simply grunted in response as he slid the ring back onto his finger. It was a perfect fit, like he had never taken it off.

"The letter said my mother is sicker," Rose said. The air in the room dropped a little as she mentioned the letter, but she pushed on. "If Your Majesty would be so kind to let me g—"

"I am never letting you go," Caius said.

It wasn't loud, he didn't raise his voice, but he might as well have.

Rose's heart sank to her stomach as she looked at the crown prince. His eyes told her he meant every word and that it was a waste of time to continue on this matter with him.

Rose was stumped. The crown prince had never shut down her request before. He might not like them, but he had never been this final.

"Your Majesty," Rose tried again. She knew she shouldn't, but her mother's life was on the line. She had to go home. "Please con—"

It was a glare—a simple one—but it silenced whatever it was she wanted to say. The words felt heavy in her throat, but worst of all were the thoughts in her head.

The crown prince said he was never letting her go. Did that mean it didn't matter what she did or didn't do—he had no plans to release her? Did he plan to make her his sex slave for the rest of her life?

It suddenly occurred to Rose that she had never tried to escape the crown prince, and by the looks of things, that was the only option she had to see her mother.

She was going to come back—but he didn't even want to listen to her request and didn't care that her mother was sick. Why was she surprised? This was the same man who had easily sent her father to the gallows because she wouldn't spread her legs for him.

All it took was a few dresses and favors for her to start thinking highly of the prick who almost killed her father. Rose laughed internally. She must have lost herself somewhere along the line.

Caius stepped forward and kissed her. Rose's body reacted, but her mind was elsewhere. They didn't make it to the bed—and she didn't care.

Rose gathered herself, feeling it drip down her legs. She donned the nightdress, and the crown prince grabbed her hand. Rose pulled it from his grasp and stepped back.

"Your Majesty," she curtsied.

"Where are you going? Stay," Caius demanded.

"I am only here to spread my legs for Your Majesty. Since my work is done, I shall take my leave."

"Who said your work is done?" Caius asked coldly.

Rose lifted her head and took off her robe without any hesitation and fell into his arms, but there was no light in her eyes.

Chapter 244: Shed All The Tears

Rose adorned the robe one more time, securing the ropes around her waist. She tied and retied it, giving her hands something to do as she tried to calm herself.

Rose didn't know how much time had passed, but she hoped it wasn't too late and that there was still enough time for her to get a full night's sleep.

As she took her hand away from the ropes, certain the robe wouldn't fall off her shoulders, she noticed the fireplace was dying out. There was more ash than wood. The candles in the room had melted so much wax that it was enough to remake several candles.

Rose could feel the crown prince's gaze on her back, but she didn't care, nor did she turn around to meet his stare. She had done what she was supposed to do, and now she was leaving. It was stupid of her to think things had changed. It was stupid of her to think she could make such a request.

Rose didn't curtsy this time before heading for the door. She walked to it without looking back. She could still feel the crown prince's eyes on her.

She kept her back straight and her chin high as she walked out of the room. She didn't wrap her arms around herself, didn't give even the slightest hint that something was wrong, and most importantly, she didn't stagger or falter in her footsteps.

The guards outside the crown prince's room stood as usual. None of them stared more than they should have, and for the first time, she was grateful that they always ignored her.

She didn't think she had the strength to make it to her room. She feared that at the slightest stare, at the slightest look of concern, she might fall apart and cry—begging anyone who would care to listen to get her out of here.

Rose got to her room and immediately started to undress. The nightdress and robe pooled at her feet. She didn't want them clinging to her body, didn't want any reminder of what had occurred tonight.

She staggered forward but didn't make it to the bed before she fell. Rose could feel her heart breaking, but surprisingly, her eyes were clear. Perhaps she had shed all the tears she could.

Rose couldn't think of why the crown prince wouldn't even listen to her, but as she had figured out, there was no use using logic with the crown prince. He was only driven by what he wanted, and everything else didn't matter.

Rose lay on the hard floor. At least the carpet made it less cold, but it was still uncomfortable. Yet she had no zeal, want, or energy to leave it. She just lay on her side with her hands to her chest.

All she could think about was home. She couldn't stay here, couldn't wait until the crown prince decided to consider her request on a whim. Besides, she had heard him say he was never letting her go.

When Rose forced herself off the ground, she had a different look on her face. She no longer looked like the whole world was falling apart—rather, she looked determined.

When her breakfast arrived the next morning, Rose was seated by the table, her hair brushed and tied away from her face. She was dressed in one of the new dresses. It was a cream dress with long sleeves. The weather was getting cold; it was no surprise—winter was fast approaching.

Isla and Chelsy kept staring at her oddly, but none of them could place their finger on what was wrong even though it was clear something was. They placed her breakfast and prepared to leave the room.

"If you see Welma, tell her I would like to have a w—"

A soft knock cut her words short, and the three of them turned their attention to the door with puzzled expressions. Chelsy glanced back at Rose, and Rose nodded.

Chelsy opened the door, and Welma walked into the room. She had bags under her eyes and didn't look like she had slept much the night before.

"Welma," Isla called. "What happened? Were you attacked in your sleep?"

"Isla," Chelsy scolded.

"What? I'm just worried."

Chelsy grabbed her sister's wrist, bowed to Rose, and fled out the still open doors, shutting them behind her.

Rose glanced at Welma, and she couldn't blame Isla for reacting in that manner. The maid did look like she had been attacked in her sleep. Not that her appearance was in disarray—rather, her eyes were red, and she had bags under them as though she had barely gotten any sleep, which didn't explain the extreme sleep marks across her right cheek that cleaning up didn't get rid of.

"I was about to ask them to call for you," Rose said, ignoring Welma's appearance. She turned her attention to the food and prepared to eat.

"Did you give it to the crown prince?" Welma asked and took a step forward.

Rose's expression darkened, but only for a moment. She took her time to respond and then softly said, "Yes, last night."

"Did he accept it easily?" Welma asked with a curious expression.

"Yes," Rose said. "He didn't ask any questions." She stabbed into her food harder than she needed to.

Welma jerked, but it was hard to say if it was from Rose's action or her own thoughts on the failed plan and what her punishment would be that bothered her.

"I see," Welma whispered. At least the crown prince didn't seem particularly curious about how it got to Rose's room, so she was safe on that end.

The Queen, however, would not be pleased about this development, and Welma's mind churned as she tried to think of a way to save her head.

"I have to go home, Welma," Rose suddenly blurted.

"What?" the maid said and lifted her head.

Rose had completely stopped eating and was facing Welma. Her hands were in her lap and her face was devoid of emotion.

Chapter 245: I Have To Go Home

"I said, I have to go home," Rose repeated.

"Your mother?" Welma whispered.

Rose nodded. "I have to see her. I must."

Welma nodded, trying her best to pay attention to the conversation even though she was worried about the Queen.

"Have you spoken to the crown prin—" Welma shook her head. "Is there some way for you to go home?"

It was stupid to ask that, especially when she knew Rose wasn't here by choice, and by the tone of her voice, it was clear to anyone that the crown prince was not an option.

Rose glanced at the open window for a brief moment, her gaze passing through the parted curtain, not settling on anything but the broad blue sky from this distance.

Rose turned her attention to Welma. "It's hard to say," she whispered.

Escaping the castle was hard, but that wasn't all. The crown prince was sure to capture her before she even left the capital. She doubted she could make it out of the castle unless she found some secret pathway that led outside the fences.

However, if by some miracle she got away, Welma and the sisters would be punished. She didn't particularly care for Welma, as it was hard to sympathize with someone who was a spy for the Queen, but she would feel awful if harm were to come to the sisters because of her.

Welma took a step forward. She didn't like the way Rose sounded. "What can you do to leave?" She asked.

Rose's gaze furrowed. "I don't know yet, but..." Rose paused as she mentally completed the thought.

She was traveling with the crown prince. She didn't know how it would go, but something told her it might be easier to get away while away from the castle. She didn't know the full details, but the crown prince was likely to have his hands full with the bandits, and there might be an opportunity for her to get away.

"But?" Welma asked when she didn't say anything.

Rose blinked as she pulled herself out of her thoughts. She smiled a little, but the smile didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Welma, I have some information the Queen might find useful. Something that might keep your head," Rose suddenly said.

Though Rose doubted the Queen would actually send Welma to the dungeons, the crown prince was stricter, and the Queen probably already knew that Rose had handpicked the maids to attend to her.

She doubted the Queen had much control over Isla and Chelsy, as they originally didn't work in the castle, and even if she did, the sisters might not easily side with her, and the news might reach the crown prince. Welma was Her Majesty's best bet. At least for now.

Welma brightened up and stepped even closer. "What is it?" she asked eagerly.

Rose had thought Welma was a lot smarter, but at the same time, she couldn't fault the maid, as she had come close to death after the incident with the lord. It was enough to break anyone's back.

It didn't help that it still hung over Welma's head, as no one knew if the lord was fine or not. Rose almost wished him dead, as she hated what he had said to Lady Delphine, but Welma would take the fall.

Rose forced herself to return to the current issue. Her situation was more important than anything else, and figuring out a solution for herself was her priority.

"I am certain Her Majesty would appreciate the information that I will leave the castle in a few days."

Rose knew the Queen couldn't win against the crown prince. If he said she was going with him, no one could stop him. However, it didn't mean the Queen couldn't make it difficult for him.

Rose knew it would be easier to escape the castle if the crown prince was gone, but that was only if the Queen didn't get to her first. But it was a chance she was willing to risk.

"What do you mean?" Welma asked, confused. She wasn't sure if Rose was talking about her escape plan or something else. Rose had just mentioned that it was hard to say how she would leave the castle.

"The crown prince will take me when he leaves for Futherfield in less than four days."

Welma instantly looked relieved but immediately appeared shocked. "The crown prince is taking you?"

Rose nodded. "Yes, and I plan to escape him then and go back to Edenville to see my mother."

Welma's mouth fell open. It was an escape plan.

"W-wait, what? Wait! Why would you even tell me this?"

Rose shrugged. "So you'll pray for me. If it doesn't work and I'm caught, I'll say it was your idea. I also need your help—to tell me all you know about Futherfield and any information you can find. You have to tell me everything you know, because if my plan fails, we will both take the fall."

"Please slow down," Welma said and sat down at the foot of the bed. She needed some time to process what she had just heard.

"Will you help me?" Rose asked.

Welma lifted her head to look at Rose. "You aren't giving me a choice, are you?"

Rose shook her head. "I am not."

"Are you sure this information about you leaving the castle would be that important to the Queen?" Welma asked.

Rose looked at her with an unimpressed face. "You tell me. What do you think?"

Welma turned her gaze away and sighed. She palmed her face and sighed again before taking her hand off. "You're right."

Rose shrugged. "Knowing Her Majesty, she would be very interested in knowing."

"What you're asking me to do is quite dangerous. I can't just go around asking."

Rose rolled her eyes and stared at Welma with a bored expression. "What kind of spy are you? Besides, you owe me. If it weren't for me, the prince would have caught you, and if it weren't for you, I would have escaped and the Queen would have never known about the dress."

"You owe me too. I warned you about the poison."

"That doesn't count when you're the one who tried to kill me."

"Yeah... I am sorry about that."

The room went quiet for a bit.

"Are you serious about escaping?" Welma asked.

"Yes," she whispered.

Welma sighed. "I'll do my best to see what I can find out. I don't think it will be much, but I'll try."

"Thank you," Rose whispered.

Chapter 246: The Ring Had Been Found

"Is something wrong?" Prince Rylen couldn't help but ask as he and Caius made their way to the dining room.

The steward had come to fetch him; he seemed very worried. Though he didn't exactly say what was wrong, Rylen understood immediately and agreed to get Caius out of the room.

Rylen had expected a fight, but surprisingly Caius had left the room without so much as a word to him. Rylen had chalked the whole interaction with the steward up to fear for his life after the incident from last night, but it didn't take long for Rylen to discover that something else was definitely wrong—though he couldn't place his finger on it.

"What nonsense are you asking now?" Caius said with an annoyed tone.

Rylen frowned as the crown prince rested dark eyes on his face. He had barely spoken, and this was the first question he would ask. There was no doubt about it—Caius was in an extremely foul mood.

"Nothing, Your Grace," Rylen said curtly and returned his attention to the path. It hadn't been this bad last night, which meant something must have happened.

There wasn't really any sign or indication that something had gone awry other than the crown prince's broody state. He kept a straight face and a somewhat calm demeanor, but it just felt like the calm before the storm. It was painfully eerie.

Rylen glanced at the steward walking behind them. Henry kept his gaze down and maintained some distance between them. Rylen returned his attention to Caius, but the latter didn't seem to notice.

Caius addressed his mother indifferently as she stepped into the dining room. He didn't look at her and didn't further the conversation. Queen Violeta was left looking at Rylen with a puzzled expression, while Rylen could only shrug and shake his head.

Caius picked up his cutlery and brought it to his lips, exposing his ring to his mother. Queen Violeta nearly flew out of her chair, and even Rylen had a hard time hiding his shock, as he had not noticed the ring before and Caius hadn't mentioned it.

"Caius," Queen Violeta called.

Caius immediately stopped what he was doing and lifted his gaze to his mother. It was rare for her to call him by his name—she often referred to him as "son."

"Yes," he said coldly, hoping it wasn't a conversation—he truly wasn't in the mood.

"Your ring," she whispered. "You found it."

Caius glanced at his finger, and his gaze darkened as the details of last night poured into his mind.

"Hmm," he said absentmindedly.

"Where did you find it?" Queen Violeta pressed, refusing to give up.

"Does it matter?" he asked, still absent-minded. "I found it."

"Yes, it could have been stolen."

Caius glanced at his mother again and then looked down, not saying another word.

Queen Violeta glanced at Rylen, but she had seen how surprised he was. Her brows furrowed as she tried to figure out how he could have gotten the ring back so fast.

Did the stupid maid mess up? Did the crown prince secretly conduct a search to find it but was still protecting the whore?

She tried to get the information from him, but no matter what she said or did, Caius didn't respond to her more than with his occasional tired grunts.

Queen Violeta, unfortunately, had to give up, and after the meal was over, Caius left with Rylen not saying a word more.

Queen Violeta was fuming. "Get the incompetent maid!" she yelled as she headed for her room.

One of her ladies-in-waiting was quick to bow and separate from the bunch. She quickly ordered a servant to get Welma and returned to the Queen.

When Welma got to the Queen's bedchambers, Queen Violeta was seated, waiting for her. She was not surprised to be summoned, however, Welma couldn't hide her shock when she was taken right to the Queen.

She fell on her face without saying a word, her chest tightening as she was placed in front of the Queen. Welma no longer attended to the Queen, and it was her ladies-in-waiting who usually received her, at least recently.

She had immediately figured out the Queen was limiting her interactions with Welma for several reasons, and Welma would not be surprised if one of them was so she could easily cut her off when the time came.

"The crown prince has found the ring, you worthless maid," Queen Violeta said.

Welma closed her eyes as she kept her forehead locked to the floor. This was different—very much so. The Queen had such an overbearing presence, completely different from the ladies. Her words were also final, and Welma knew one wrong move and she would be punished on the spot.

"Your Majesty, please forgive me," Welma whispered. "I didn't find out until after breakfast."

"What do you mean?" Queen Violeta asked.

Welma felt sweat drip down her back, and the part of her head on the floor was already sticky. The Queen sounded really angry. She doubted the news about Rose leaving the castle with the crown prince would be enough to pacify her.

"Just before you called me, Rose was talking about how she found the ring. It was my mistake, Your Majesty, but I never thought there would be any reason for her to look under the bed. She saw it when an unlit candle fell and rolled under the bed. She told me she gave it to the crown prince last night. I am so sorry, Your Majesty."

"You should have known that was a silly place to keep such an important item. What if it had gone missing?!" one of the ladies yelled.

"It doesn't matter what went wrong or not. This is the last time you will fail the Queen," another said.

"Yes," the rest agreed.

"Your Majesty, please have mercy," Welma cried.

"Has Her Majesty not shown you enough mercies? You're nothing but useless, and for this crime, it is only fitting that the Queen be rid of you."

"Please, no! I have something that I am—"

"Seal your lips!" one of the ladies yelled.

Chapter 247: Queen Violeta's Fear

"Seal your lips!" one of the ladies yelled. "Your Majesty, please send her to the dungeons. A simple task, and as always, she does it wrong. Lord Elrod has been bedridden for days now because of a useless servant, and now the crown prince has his ring back."

"Yes, Your Majesty. I believe she will only bring further disappointment. We will get a better, more useful servant. It was my mistake—I never should have brought her. But this will not happen again," another said.

"She might be useless," the third said, "but we might not easily find another servant who can get close to the peasant whore with the guards on the floor."

"This would have been the perfect opportunity to get rid of the whore permanently, but this useless servant keeps getting in the way."

Welma didn't like the way the conversation was leaning. It seemed two of the ladies were in support of getting rid of her and punishing her, while one seemed to be on her side. Welma thought it was weird, as they were never at odds.

She needed to tip the scale in her favor, or she might actually get punished. Just what had she gotten herself into? She should never have agreed when the ladies walked up to her—but it wasn't like she could exactly decline. She worked in the castle.

"Rose is leaving with the crown prince for Futherfield in four days," Welma blurted out, the consequences be damned. She prayed that this news would be able to distract them from the failed stolen ring attempt.

"What did you just say?" the Queen asked.

"Please forgive me for speaking out of turn, Your Majesty, but Rose said this," she whispered.

"She's lying. There's no way the crown prince would take a peasant whore on his journey," one of the ladies blurted.

Welma's heart fell to her stomach when she said Rose's name, but the noble women didn't seem to notice. She couldn't see their expressions, as her face was still to the ground, but no one was yelling at her.

Queen Violeta went quiet, and her eyes lost their focus. The ladies immediately went quiet when the Queen no longer spoke.

Welma could hear nothing but her breath against the floor. She couldn't tell what was happening, but it didn't sound like they would take her to the dungeons anymore.

"Are you certain?" Queen Violeta asked. Her voice was quieter.

"Yes, Your Majesty. She told me herself."

"Your Majesty, she might be saying this to save her neck. Securing Futherfield is important for the kingdom. The crown prince wouldn't just take her with him."

"At this point, we cannot say," one of the ladies added, and the rest went quiet.

"What else do you know?" the Queen asked, her voice softer. It was almost like her anger had dissipated but that wasn't the case, rather it had compressed into something denser.

Welma slowly shook her head. "That's all," she whispered. "I couldn't find out more information before I was called," Welma lied easily.

"Find out all that you can!" the Queen said and stood to her feet.

She took a step forward and her ladies tried to go with her, but Queen Violeta put out a hand to stop them, and they understood. There was only one place they couldn't go with the Queen.

Queen Violeta stepped out of her room and rapidly made her way to the King. She was ushered in immediately but had to wait in a smaller section of the King's bedchambers for a while before she was told the King could receive her.

Queen Violeta walked into the room and King Gaius sat on the bed. The pillows propped him up, but even that couldn't stop him from slightly leaning to the side.

He looked older than the last time she had seen him. His black hair was now all white and thinning. He was smaller, paler, and she could see his bones sticking out.

Queen Violeta did her best not to show any reaction. Her husband had always been of weak constitution, and it was one of the reasons he had been harsher on their son. It had also affected their marriage—but not enough to bother Violeta. She was Queen.

Violeta sat on the chair that had been set up for her close to the bed. The room smelled of herbs and death. She didn't like to think about it, but she knew her husband didn't have long.

Gaius coughed twice, and a physician held a handkerchief to his lips. He wiped the King's lips, and blood stained the white fabric. Violeta felt cold. It was worse than she thought. Gaius always chased away all the physicians, but right now, one remained.

"Violeta," Gaius called softly. "You have come to see me more times than ever in the past two months. What is it this time?" Gaius sounded weak, but he spoke clearly.

"You didn't tell me you had gotten worse," Violeta whispered.

"I get worse every day," Gaius said with a tired laugh, which led to another round of coughs and the physician frantically wiping his lips.

"But..." the rest of her words drowned out at the King's stare. "Don't you think it is time?" she asked, changing the subject. Gaius hated the topic of his illness.

Gaius opened his mouth to speak but coughed again, and the physician had to give him herbs to drink before the coughing subsided.

"I am sorry for bothering you, but your son cannot refuse an order from you. He might hate it, but he has no choice but to obey the order of the King."

"You and I know using force will only backfire."

"I am not asking that you order him to get rid of the whore, but shouldn't the crown prince be married by now? We were married long before your father, the late Majesty, died."

Gaius closed his eyes at his wife's words. One would call it cruel, but he didn't think it was. Violeta always spoke like this.

"You think marriage will stop this?" Gaius asked.

"No, but I fear a peasant whore might end up being Queen if you don't stop your son!"

Chapter 248: Almost Slashed

Caius walked with Rylen by his side. The men were training in the field, and as he had promised Rylen, Caius made his way there. It was not a good idea to train with the men today—he was too furious to control his strength.

Caius opened and closed his palms as he walked down the long path overlooking the open field with well-trimmed grass. At the end of the path was a canopy-like stand, and underneath it was Lord Maximus. He wore a strange expression as Caius approached.

"Your Highness," Maximus said with a bow as Caius got close enough. He was standing, offering up the only seat in the arena to Caius.

Caius took it without hesitation and sat under the shade. He looked forward, his eyes scanning the men on the field.

"Your Highness has been here twice in a row," Maximus said with an amused tone as he stood next to Caius, watching the scene play out in front of him. Five pairs of men were exchanging swords, while a few brawled, and the others just watched.

"It's unlike you to keep count of such an occurrence, Lord Maximus. Did you forget there was a time when I was here every day?" Caius asked. His tone sounded annoyed.

"Who could forget, Your Highness? You were only a wee thing then. Look how much you've grown now."

Caius's gaze darkened. He hated speaking of that time. He moved his hand to his chin, slightly running his finger over the scar there—the memory of how he got it clear as day.

"Hmm. You could join our expedition to the south. Futherfield could use your skills," Caius said, glancing up at the huge man.

"As much as I would love to join Your Highness on the battlefield, I cannot leave the King's side," Maximus stated. "I wish you victory."

Caius scoffed. He had expected nothing else. It was hard to get a read on Maximus, but he knew the older man was loyal to his father. It wasn't his father in particular—more like the crown—and he was sure he would get the same loyalty should he ascend the throne. However, he wasn't sure if he wanted the huge man by his side.

"If you'll excuse me, Your Highness, there is something I need to attend to," Maximus said and walked forward.

Caius didn't care what the huge man did as long as he didn't bother him. Caius had always wondered if he would be able to take down Maximus in a fight, but now he could confidently say yes. His lips lifted in a sneer. Maximus had made his younger days hell—all thanks to his father.

Caius returned his gaze to the men, and the sneer froze on his face. Thomas was approaching the canopy. There was a spring in his step as he walked toward them.

Caius's gaze darkened as he recalled something unpleasant. He tapped his finger on the armrest as he rested his arm. It wasn't a voluntary action—Caius wasn't even aware of it.

"Your Highness," Thomas said and bowed when he got close. "Prince Rylen."

"You are late," Rylen replied.

"I apologize," he said and bowed again.

The kid wasn't bad. He was one of the youngest among Caius's personal knights and would easily follow the crown prince blindly. His father was a lord on the council. He wasn't very prominent, but he had enough influence.

"Thomas," Caius called.

Thomas appeared in front of Caius, so as not to tower over him, he dropped to one knee. "Your Highness."

It was quick—Rylen didn't even get the chance to understand what was happening, let alone react to it.

As soon as Thomas knelt, Caius leaned forward, reaching for the young man's sword, unsheathing it, and holding it to his neck.

Thomas's eyes nearly popped out of his skull, and he could feel a slight sting where the tip of the sword broke skin. He knelt stiff as a board, knowing the slightest movement could turn this into a slash.

"Your Grace," Rylen yelled, his voice filled with panic.

Thomas lifted his hands. This had never happened before, and for a moment, Thomas was confused—until Caius spoke.

"Henry told me something unpleasant," Caius said, staring down at Thomas.

Thomas was afraid to swallow. He feared that moving his throat might cause the sword to pierce him more. He didn't speak. He didn't think he was supposed to.

"Did you read the letter to her?" Caius asked, his gaze locked on the scared lad.

As soon as Henry appeared in his room this morning, Caius had asked him if he was the one who read the letter to Rose. The steward had immediately denied it but had said he thought it might be Thomas.

Caius thought so too. He had seen the lad leave when a maid came to call him. Caius hadn't thought much about it, but he could recall that he had noticed.

Thomas was not surprised when he heard the question. However, he didn't think the crown prince's interest in Rose ran deep enough to care if he read a letter or not.

When the maid came to seek him out, he hadn't thought much of it. The crown prince had put him in charge of Rose—he was expected to answer her summons. At least, that was what he told himself.

When she asked him to help her read, with pleading eyes, Thomas knew he couldn't say no. And then she burst out crying in front of him. It had physically hurt to leave.

"Yes," Thomas said.

Caius took a deep breath. "Don't do more than you are supposed to, Thomas. Your job is to make sure she is safe. I'll let this slide one time."

"Yes, Your Highness, it won't happen again."

Caius didn't pull the sword away immediately. He kept his eyes locked on Thomas before slowly pulling the sword back. He tossed it to the ground, and Thomas felt relief.

"Thank you for your mercy, Your Highness." He picked up the sword and stood to his feet, sheathing it. He started to walk away, glad it was just a tiny cut on his neck.

"What was that? Did you almost attack Thomas because he read a letter?!" Rylen asked in disbelief.

Chapter 249: Gnawing Feeling

"What was that? Did you almost attack Thomas because he read a letter?!" Rylen asked in disbelief.

Thomas heard Rylen's question as he walked away. There was no doubt in his mind that the crown prince would have sliced his neck open. Thomas shivered as he recalled the look in his eyes. There was no panic, no agitation—just coldness.

Thomas swore as he hopped away. What had he gotten himself entangled with? He preferred it when he hated her and didn't care. Now, he didn't know why, but he knew it would be hard to get rid of the image of her crying out of his head.

He had wanted nothing more than to see her in that sorry state. As a peasant, she deserved nothing less—but Thomas wasn't so sure now, and he didn't even know why.

He touched his neck, tracing the slight cut. It stung a little but Thomas did not take his hand away.

Rose was not a woman he should be having thoughts about. She was not his business, and he needed to remind himself of that—not her freckled face and how great she looked under the sun.

Caius heard Rylen yell, but he didn't register the words. All he could think about was that he should have read the letter before giving it to Henry—or better still, had Rose sent to his private study and read the letter to her himself.

She had told him last night that she wanted to leave. It was hard to explain what he felt, but he had said the words before realizing it, and as soon as he did, he knew it was true.

He couldn't dare let her go because Caius didn't like that he knew she wouldn't come back. His only hold on her was the debt she owed. She didn't want anything from him, and it irked him. He was the crown prince—no one should want to get away from him. But she never wanted to be here from the start.

It was not something he liked to think about, and he might have deceived himself into thinking that she needed him. However, the longer this went on, the less he had to hold on to.

Laying with her was phenomenal. He could spend the rest of his life buried deep in her, and Caius wouldn't have any complaints.

She shivered from the slightest touch from him and would moan his name without hesitation. However, Caius hated the gnawing feeling that it wasn't enough.

He shouldn't care about this. He told himself he didn't, but she had asked to leave, and he had seen red. He wasn't cruel enough to not let her see her sick mother—no matter how angry he was—but he could not skip out on Futherfield, and he was the only one who could make sure she would come back.

Caius heard a ringing in his ear as he recalled Rose's fiancé. There were times she acted like all that mattered was him, but other times, Caius could clearly see that she'd rather be elsewhere.

He didn't think much about it—he could keep her here, and he had unlimited access to her body just like he wanted. But Caius didn't know when he started to realize it wasn't just for some time, and more importantly, when he decided he was never going to let her go.

"Your Highness," Rylen's voice broke through his thoughts again. Caius glanced up at Rylen, and the other took a step back.

"You could have seriously injured Thomas."

"I didn't."

Caius looked at his palms and closed them. She could have asked him, but she chose someone who was only nice to her on his command. It irked and bothered him—mostly because he knew he would have ended whatever he was doing to go to her if she had called on him. But she would rather ask Thomas.

The veins on Caius's arm, under his clothes, strained as he tightened his fist. His muscles tensed, and his palms reddened. He wanted to smash something, but he knew once he started, he wouldn't be able to hold back.

"Your Grace, we both know how loyal Thomas is. There isn't any reason for such a harsh approach."

Caius undid his fist and took a deep breath, ignoring his cousin who stared at him with concern. His cousin wouldn't get it if he explained. He didn't get it either.

"No, but I fear a peasant whore might end up being Queen if you don't stop your son!" Queen Violeta yelled.

"You always overreact, Violeta. Caius wouldn't dare. He is simply going through his rebellion phase, as he has for the past three years. This is nothing but a tantrum, and you're acting exactly as he wants," Gaius said calmly not a single cough interrupted his words.

Queen Violeta shook her head at the King's words. "To remain silent will only make this worse. I do not say His Majesty is wrong, but I don't think asking your son to get married—as he should—is wrong. It should be time now," Violeta stated. "There is no reason to wait any longer."

Gaius sighed. It was exhausting to speak, and he couldn't deny the truth behind his wife's words. They didn't have much time left, and it was a good idea to make sure Caius was married.

There was truly no reason to wait any longer, and a wedding would do great things for the kingdom—especially with everything that was going on. It would also strengthen their alliances, and Gaius knew he had to make sure Caius had a good alliance with a strong nation.

"Very well," Gaius said with a smile. "Winter is fast approaching. I will send a letter before the snow comes."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Queen Violeta said with glee.

If the King had given his word, she had no reason to worry. If Caius was married, it would be easy to get rid of the peasant whore—and even if it wasn't, her presence would no longer pose a threat. She would be nothing more than the crown prince's mistress. And if perhaps she bore his child, it would be nothing more than a bastard.

Chapter 250: Surprisingly, Nothing

Rose paced her room for the most part of the morning. Time flowed a little too slowly. She couldn't count the number of times she pulled the letter out of the envelope to stare at the words, trying her best to recall exactly what Thomas had said as he read the letter.

Sometimes, she would walk towards the window to stare out of it, and without meaning to, she started thinking about if it would be easy to escape this room.

She was on the first floor; getting down didn't seem to be a problem. She could always use the drapes—she could rip and tie them together to form a rope.

The problem was that she wouldn't even get to the ground before she was spotted. Daytime was completely out of the question, but guards patrolled the castle during the night.

If she did manage to get to the ground, the dogs would get her—and even if the dogs didn't, Rose couldn't scale the castle walls. And if there was a side door she could use, she didn't know where it was or how to unlock it. It was a terrible plan.

She turned away from the window and folded her arms. The only thing she could think about was escaping on the way to Futherfield or while in Futherfield.

That was why she needed to find out all that she could about Futherfield, but she couldn't go around asking questions. She couldn't give Caius a reason to suspect her.

Rose was still lost in thought when a knock echoed in her room. She pushed herself from the window and walked to the door. She didn't get to it before the door opened and Welma walked in.

Rose stopped abruptly as she stared at the maid. Her expression didn't say anything, but she didn't have the restlessness in her eyes as she had that morning.

"You look better," Rose commented.

"You look worse," Welma replied.

Rose shrugged. "I thought the next time I'd see you, you would be missing your head—but yet here you are. You owe me again."

"Yes," Welma said reluctantly.

"I'm guessing the Queen quite liked the information you provided," Rose smirked.

"Well, yes—but at the same time, it's not good for you."

Rose shrugged. "That's not news. What has she planned this time?"

"Surprisingly, nothing," Welma replied.

"Nothing?" Rose asked in horror. She was almost disappointed. She was ready for something worse than kidnapping and poisoning.

"Nothing," Welma repeated.

"She isn't going to try and stop him from taking me with him?" she asked, still in disbelief.

Welma shook her head. "No, but she did something odd."

Rose narrowed her eyes. "What?"

"She went to see the King, and when she returned, she was all smiles and said something that made the ladies cheer."

Rose frowned. "What did she say?"

"The King agrees with me. Now we wait."

"Wait for what?" Rose asked.

"I do not know," Welma said.

"That's not nothing," Rose whispered and chewed on the nail of her thumb. If the King was involved now, it meant more trouble for her.

"She didn't give me any orders," Welma replied.

"Of course not, because she is going to ask the King to take care of it." Rose didn't think she had bothered the Queen enough that she would report her to the King.

"I don't think it's what you think," Welma replied. "The ladies whispered something when the Queen left—something about marriage. I—" Welma stopped speaking when she saw the look on Rose's face.

"What did you say?" she asked.

"They said if the crown prince was married, he wouldn't pay attention to you. But the King refuses to listen to the Queen's pleas."

"You think the Queen asked the King to get the crown prince married?" Rose asked.

Welma nodded.

Rose frowned. That didn't make any sense. But if the crown prince was married, she would finally be free.

"Are you sure about this?" Rose asked.

Welma shook her head. "As soon as the Queen arrived, I was chased away. Her orders were to report everything I see and to make sure I leave nothing out."

Welma watched Rose carefully. It was hard to guess what she was thinking.

"Rose," Welma called.

"Did you find out anything about Futherfield?" she asked.

Welma shook her head. "I came here as soon as I left the Queen. I wanted to tell you something so we both didn't have to worry about the Queen—and to thank you."

"I don't want your thanks," Rose whispered. "I want to know about Futherfield and if it's close to Edenville. A map would go a great way."

"A map? Those are hard to come by."

Rose internally cursed as she looked around the room. She couldn't read—how would she read a map? How would she even find one? The shelves in this room were empty, and this was the only room she was allowed in... the crown prince's room.

However, there was no way she would understand what she was looking at. She had seen glimpses of maps before, but Rose had never needed one. Would she just ask for directions on the road? It couldn't be that easy.

Aside from escaping the crown prince, she had to make sure she got to Edenville safely. Rose had heard stories—especially about women traveling alone. It would be unfortunate if she ended up in a worse situation while trying to get away from him.

"Welma," Rose suddenly called. "Can you read a map?" she asked.

"No," the maid said, vigorously shaking her head. "What are you thinking?" she asked.

"I don't know, Welma," Rose stared at her with intense eyes. "But I have to go home, more than anything."

Rose dropped onto the bed and looked at Welma with heavy eyes. "You have to help. You're the only one I can ask."

Welma sighed and nodded. "The only place there would be a map would be in the library, the crown prince's private study, or the archives. I am not allowed into any of these places. I can't steal a map, but I can ask around."