

THE KING'S LOVER

Chapter 26: Delphine

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Rose realized as Martha spoke that it wasn't just her and Edna in the room. Standing in the corner, close to the exit, was Martha with her arms folded and her nose in the air as she looked down at Rose lying in the hay bed with contempt.

"Martha!" Edna scolded. "Don't say things like that."

"Why not?" Martha replied, rolling her eyes. "I only speak the truth. What did she think was going to happen? The crown prince was being very nice. He didn't even throw her in the dungeons after."

"I wasn't tryin' to escape," Rose said as she accepted Edna's assistance. "I fell." The maid gently helped her to her feet, and Rose murmured her thanks.

Martha scoffed. "If you want to lie, you best find a better one. Nobody is going to believe that. Besides, weren't you the one who said if I find a way for you to escape, I should let you know?"

Rose didn't reply to this. Clearly, no one would believe her, but she couldn't help but say it. She had spent the entire day preparing for tonight. She knew the crown prince wasn't the least bit patient. She was angry, in severe pain, and tired, but it was a little sad that all she could think about was that she was happy he had directed his anger at her and not her father.

"I can stand by mi'self," she said to Edna, who didn't seem to want to let go of her. She stood next to Rose, holding her arm.

Edna nodded and slowly pulled her hand away. Rose took a step forward and another, wincing with each step, but she had to at least act strong. Edna wasn't lying when she said they cleaned her up. Not only that, but they had also changed her clothes. They had to, the last one had been ripped by the whip.

She tightened the robe around her body as she walked out of the room, not even glancing in Martha's direction as she marched out. She made her way to the crown prince's wing. At this point, she could find it in her sleep. The path felt longer than usual, and all she could think about was if the crown prince was expecting her to lay with him while she was in such a state. Her back hurt, and her legs were still sore from all the walking she had to do to find her way out.

Rose grabbed the wall as she took a breather. The balm was taking a little too long to work, and the dress rubbing against the open skin with every step was enough to have her rolling in pain. But Rose pushed through it, and soon enough, she got in front of his chambers.

As though they were waiting for her, as soon as she appeared, the guards opened the door. Rose took a step inside, and the door was immediately shut behind her. The loud unexpected sound was a shock to hear but it was nothing compared to what was going on in the room. Rose had to clamp a hand over her mouth to stop from screaming out at the sight in front of her.

The room was dimly lit. The fire in the fireplace looked to have died, as only the embers from the burnt wood could be seen, but even the darkness didn't hide what she saw. About two candles were lit, but they weren't enough to brighten the room. Though silhouettes, the shapes were still as clear as day. The crown prince lay on his back, a robe draped around his shoulders and a woman sat atop him, her back to his front. She bounced up and down, grabbing her breasts as her head tilted back a little.

The sight was astonishing, but what was even more shocking to Rose was the sounds the woman made. It was loud, and she expressed her pleasure with such reckless abandon. It was absolutely wanton, and Rose didn't know how to react to this.

She stood rooted to the door and stared. She couldn't move, and just as she was about to look away, knowing she had stared longer than she should have, she met his eyes, clouded with desire as he stared at her. He didn't look away, and Rose didn't like how she felt about it. The woman moved with such vigor and seduction yet he just stared at her.

"Come," Caius said, his voice hoarse with passion. It sounded even thicker than normal.

Rose's feet moved before she could even give them the command, but she stopped immediately at the loud moan that echoed in the room. The woman had completely dropped her weight onto the crown prince, and she touched—Rose couldn't complete the thought. She turned away, palming her face.

Caius chuckled. "Behave yourself, Delphine. You have an audience."

"I am sorry, Your Highness," she whispered, slurring her words a bit. Her half-lidded eyes glanced in Rose's direction, and she let out a small smile. The woman didn't sound annoyed. Rose didn't think she could stand the thought of another person watching.

"Come," Caius repeated. "This is not for you, Delphine."

The way he said her name grated on her nerves. He rolled it around his tongue; it was alluring and casual, almost personal. Rose hated the next thought she had, but no matter how much she hated this, she had to do as the crown prince requested. She turned around slowly, making sure to keep her eyes on her feet as she walked to him.

Rose shut her eyes and wished she could shut her ears too as she heard the woman go, "Your Highness, I just came, I need a moment," followed by another loud moan.

Rose locked her eyes on her toes. She didn't want to see, didn't want to know, and didn't want to be a part of this. At least, that was what she repeated in her head as she slowly walked to the prince. Delphine was already screaming, and by the sound of skin hitting skin, she could guess that another round had commenced. Rose stopped beside the bed.

"Take off your clothes," Caius ordered.

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Rose's eyes flew open. Surely the order couldn't be for her—but unfortunately, she was the only one actually wearing any clothes. She raised her head and immediately regretted it. She tried to lower it again, but Caius slowly shook his head, his gaze straying to her chest before returning to her face.

Rose undid the ropes around her waist and let the robe fall, leaving her in an undergarment that hid very little. She fought the urge to wrap her arms around herself, her nipples pressing against the thin fabric.

Caius took a sharp breath, cursing under his breath, but his words were cut off as Delphine touched her chest and gasped. "Did your highness just get bigger? Is that even—Aah!" she cried as Caius grabbed her waist and slammed her onto himself.

She froze, trying to recover, but Caius pulled her hair back sharply. "Don't you dare stop moving."

Delphine obeyed, though the strain on her face was obvious. Rose was snapped back to reality by a hand sliding up her leg. She looked down to see the crown prince watching her, his other hand resting behind his head. He was daring her to move away. Rose clenched her fists and met his gaze with defiance. He raised a brow and smirked, his hand continuing its slow exploration, his fingers trailing her inner thighs as their eyes remained locked.

Don't move. Don't move.

Rose repeated the words in her head like a mantra. His fingers slipped beneath her undergarment, venturing dangerously close to a place she desperately tried to ignore. She couldn't dare bring herself to pull away. His touch was warm, teasing, and deliberate.

Rose jerked as he traced a single finger over her most sensitive spot. His expression brightened, and he commanded, "Bend forward."

Rose winced but complied, and his finger slipped inside her. She gasped, nearly jumping away, but she managed to hold herself still. The sensation was strange, unfamiliar, and yet there was something else—something she couldn't quite name.

"You can pretend all you want, but I know," he said, pushing deeper. Rose squirmed, biting her lip to stifle any sound. She'd rather die than let him hear her.

Her head hovered directly above his, and his eyes watched her intently. Rose braced her palms on the bed for support. He added a second finger, and she unconsciously spread her legs wider to accommodate him.

Why did he 'ave to 'ave such thick fingers?

Suddenly, his fingers curved, and like a spark igniting, a wave of pleasure surged through her body. Her eyes widened, and a sound caught in her throat, but no noise escaped as the crown prince sealed her lips with his own. If his fingers were warm, his lips were scorching, his tongue demanding and relentless.

The kiss was nothing like Ander's, where he had allowed her to take the lead. The crown prince was in complete control, his movements primal and unyielding. Rose struggled to keep up, her legs trembling as the strange sensation built within her. She tried to pull away, but his hand behind her head held her firmly in place as he ravaged her mouth.

A soft moan escaped her throat. Her hands gripped the bedsheets as his fingers moved relentlessly. She was close—she didn't know to what, but she was close—until the crown prince abruptly broke the kiss and withdrew his hand. Rose collapsed to the floor, breathing hard, her head resting against the bed.

"Get off," he growled, his voice strained with pain.

Delphine moved away just as he spilled onto the sheets. The entire time, his eyes remained locked on Rose. He smirked. "Did you want to finish?" he asked.

Heat flooded Rose's cheeks, and she looked away, unable to meet his gaze.

"Leave, both of you."

Rose scrambled to her feet, grabbing her robe and hastily draping it over herself. Her back still ached, and the events of the last few moments left her feeling raw and exposed. She secured the robe and fled the room with Delphine close behind.

Rose looked around the unfamiliar room. She wasn't sure how she had gotten here, but as they were leaving, Delphine had grabbed her and led her to this space. It was still within the crown prince's wing, and it was clear the room had been prepared for Delphine. The bed was similar to the one in the crown prince's chamber, though half the size.

The room lacked chairs but featured a desk, a shelf filled with books, a large wardrobe, and a dressing area. Despite its simplicity, it was far grander than any room Rose had ever slept in. Perhaps that was why she wasn't bolting for the door—or maybe it was curiosity.

Delphine stood uncomfortably close, inspecting her. "You know, when I heard the crown prince had brought a little plaything to the castle, I could scarcely believe my ears."

"Playt'ing?" Rose asked, horrified. "Tha's not what I am."

Delphine raised a brow. Her robe hung loosely over her shoulders, her breasts barely concealed. Her folded arms were the only thing holding the robe in place and it also featured as a support for her breasts.

"Then what do you call yourself?" Delphine asked with a smirk. She was at least ten years older than Rose, with pale skin and luxurious black hair that cascaded over her shoulders.

"Rose," she replied.

"Rose," Delphine repeated, walking away. "It's a pretty name."

She reached the bed and opened a drawer, pulling out a pipe. Rose watched as Delphine lit it with the lamp on the table. She took a long drag and exhaled slowly, her expression relaxing. She turned to Rose, offering the pipe.

Rose shook her head, remaining by the door. "Nay."

"You need it," Delphine said with a smile. "Well, I know I do. After a fuck like that, phew. I could use a little something."

"I'm fine," Rose replied, eyeing Delphine warily. She wasn't sure what to make of her.

"You know, I've never been to the castle before. The crown prince must have fucked me at least a hundred times—his vigor is second to none," she added with a smirk. "But not once has he called for me like this. You can imagine my shock when I found out why." Delphine stood again.

"Why tell me tis?" Rose asked, wondering if she should just leave.

Delphine sighed. "No reason," she whispered, stopping in front of Rose once more. "No reason," she repeated, blowing a puff of smoke in her face.

"Stop," Rose said, coughing.

"I'm sorry," Delphine smirked. "You really do have pretty hair and such a lovely face. I definitely see why."

"Why what?" Rose asked.

Delphine shrugged and began walking away. "You can stay here tonight. It's too late to wander the castle, and I sleep better with company, so this works for me too."

Chapter 28: Delphine's Kindness

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Rose fell asleep faster than she wanted. She could hear Delphine speaking in the background, but for the life of her, she couldn't understand a thing she was saying. She didn't want to think about what had happened. She just wanted to forget it, and the soft bed being so soothing against her sore back was just what she needed.

The sound of rustling woke her up. She opened her eyes to see Delphine by the dresser, a powder puff to her face and a candlelight beside her. She turned to see Rose looking at her and smiled. Rose realized Delphine had been wearing makeup last night—no wonder her face had seemed oddly pale.

Delphine stood up and rushed toward Rose, gathering her dress in her hand. "I have to be out of the castle by dawn. You can still sleep some more if you'd like."

She was dressed completely differently from last night. Instead of just a robe, she wore a full dress, a corset tied around her waist, and a skirt so voluminous it looked like she was hiding at least two people under it. Her hair was also done, tied up to expose her shoulders. A simple necklace rested on her neck, drawing attention to her collarbones—or perhaps two other things.

"Nay, thanks," Rose replied with a smile as she moved to a sitting position. Her back was sore, but at least it didn't hurt as much as it would have if she had slept on the hay bed.

"How's your back?" Delphine suddenly asked.

Rose's eyes widened, and she lifted her head to meet Delphine's gaze. "Ye knew."

Delphine shrugged. "There was a commotion when I arrived. I might have asked around."

"Thank ye," Rose said softly.

"Don't mention it. Well, I don't think we'll be seeing each other again, at least not anytime soon. With you here, I doubt..." She paused, smiling knowingly. "I best be on my way. Oh, that reminds me."

"What?" Rose asked.

"He likes it when you're spontaneous. I thought I might give you a hint. If you're here, why not make the most of it?"

Rose's eyes narrowed. "I'd rather go back home." She didn't want tips on how to please the crown prince. She wanted to be out of here.

"Hmm, it's a pity you think that. Well, your entire situation is pitiful." Delphine placed a kiss on her forehead, smearing lip color over her face. "It was a pleasure to meet you."

Delphine walked away, picked up her parasol, and went out the door, leaving a stunned Rose sitting at the edge of the bed. Rose could tell Delphine was a courtesan. She could pass for a court lady. Not only was she pretty, but she had such exquisite mannerisms. It was completely different from the woman from last night who had screamed so brazenly.

Rose shook her head and stood from the bed. Was that what the crown prince wanted from her? If she did it, would he tire of her and let her go? Rose slowly walked to the door. She didn't want to be in the room after Delphine had left. She might be punished for being somewhere she shouldn't be.

Rose made her way to the servant quarters without much incident and arrived at the room she shared with Martha, only to find it locked. She knocked once, twice. She inspected the door. It was clearly locked from the inside. Rose tried again but didn't get any response.

Some servants were already awake and going about their duties. She didn't know how long she had before she would get assigned something to do. She would have liked to at least change out of these clothes. She wrapped herself tighter.

"Mart'a," Rose whispered and knocked. "Mar—"

The door was pulled open. "Never call my name like that," Martha said, glaring down at her.

Rose rolled her eyes and walked past her. "Next time, it'd be nice if ye opened the door—"

"What was that? I can't understand you. Maybe when you learn how to speak."

Rose sighed and didn't reply. She just walked to her bed and sat down, mindful of her back. She sat upright, avoiding resting her back against the wall. She searched the satchel that held all her belongings and found a good enough dress.

"Also, we need water. Edna and I used all the water trying to get you cleaned up twice in one night. Fetch some!" Martha ordered.

Rose slowly lifted her head to look at her. She was clearly wounded, but Martha didn't care. She sighed. She would have to get the balm from Edna. She doubted Martha would give her any, even if she knew where it was.

"Are you deaf?" Martha asked.

"Didn't ye say ye couldn't understand me? Does it matter if I respond?" Rose asked, meeting her gaze.

Martha narrowed her eyes. "Now!"

"I 'ave to at least change clothes," Rose replied, lifting the dress she had picked out of her bag.

Martha scoffed and left the room. Rose sighed at her absence. She couldn't catch a break. Her back burned, and she could feel the start of a headache. Rose grabbed her head and pushed herself to her feet. She had to get to work, but before then, she would check the kitchen for something to eat.

It was either that, or she was likely to fall on her face. She was still here, and she had no idea how she could possibly leave. Rose made a mental note to ask the crown prince the next time she saw him for her proof. She had not forgotten the reason why she was here.

She didn't know if her father was done with her wedding present yet, but if he knew he had to send it to her here, he would finish it as fast as he could. She felt a pain in her chest. It was only two days until her wedding, and it was pretty clear she was not going to make it.

Chapter 29: Swallows

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"Rose," a voice called, and she lifted her head from the floor she was scrubbing. She was dressed in maid's clothes and an apron, she wore a scarf around her head to hold her hair in place and keep it from covering her eyes.

Rose frowned, but her expression brightened a little when she saw who it was. She scrambled to her feet and curtsied. "Mister 'enry," Rose called.

He stood in the doorway and gestured for her to step out of the room. Rose glanced at the floor, hesitant. She had only just begun cleaning this room, and it was still mostly a mess.

"Don't worry, someone else will take care of it," Henry said when he noticed her reaction.

"Okay," Rose replied, wiping her hands on the back of her clothes. She stepped over the bucket and walked out of the room, partially closing the door behind her. "Is somet'ing wrong?" she asked.

"No, some things arrived for you."

Rose frowned and noticed he held a bag. However, she didn't say anything and just waited for Henry to give her more information.

"Here," he said, handing the bag to her. "You can take a break for now while you check it. His royal highness insisted that I make sure you go through the items as soon as I give them to you."

Rose accepted it and nodded, her breath catching in her throat. She didn't know what she would find inside, and she was almost scared to check. "Thank ye," she replied.

Henry shrugged and walked away without another word. He didn't have to bring it himself; he could have sent a servant to hand it to her but the crown prince's order made him deliver it himself. Rose tore her gaze from his retreating back and turned her attention to the bag. It was a little heavy, but not too much.

She held back her curiosity and slowly made her way to the room she shared with Martha. She unrolled the hay bed and sat on it. It was either that or she would have to sit on the bare floor. Rose undid the bag and frowned. It was a bit of a mess, and she wondered if it had been ransacked before Henry gave it to her. It slightly upset her, but she figured things that came into the castle tended to be checked.

Instead of delicately pulling out the items one by one, Rose overturned the bag on her bed, and the contents spilled out. There were some clothes, her favorite scarf, some snacks, her flute—Rose's eyes widened when she saw this—and the wedding present.

As soon as she laid eyes on it, she knew. It was small—not too small—but she knew it was smaller than her father would have originally made it. It was also incomplete. Rose felt tears welling in her eyes as she held it in her palms. It was a pair of birds on a branch, her favorite bird, the swallow.

They stood side by side on the tiny stick, but one was visibly missing a lot of features. There were no eyes, just a beak, and while there was a shape for wings, there were no carvings for the feathers. It also faced away from the other swallow, while the completed swallow's gaze was locked on it.

Rose held it to her chest, and tears spilled down her face. It was certainly her father's work, and she knew what he meant. Her father hated incomplete works. He had to finish them, no matter how long it took, no matter the interruptions that might occur. But he had clearly sent her this one. Rose could only interpret it to mean he believed he would one day complete it.

Rose lifted the carved piece to her face before slowly setting it down. Her father was alive, and not just that—he also had faith that she would return. Rose thought so too. The crown prince couldn't keep her here forever. As soon as he had what he wanted, he was sure to let her go. She just had to give him what he wanted.

What if that wasn't enough?

Rose squashed the thought and began putting away the things brought to her. She was glad she had more clothes to wear. Leaving abruptly had been so chaotic and had left her disheveled more often than not. She arranged everything in the bag. The satchel had been a little too small, but at least she had something bigger now.

She kept the carved piece underneath the other items. It wasn't that she didn't trust the maids, but she'd rather avoid any unnecessary accidents. Besides, she was sure Martha might do something to spite her.

Her hand touched the flute, and Rose instinctively brought it to her lips. She closed her eyes as she played a simple tone. It was something her mother used to hum. She quickly placed the flute back in the bag, deep in the corner, wondering why her father had sent it. She doubted she would be able to play to her heart's content here. However, Rose was happy he had sent it.

She was a little sad that there was no message from Ander. It wasn't like she could read, but Ander could write a little, even if it was just a word he wrote. It would have meant the world to her. Her parents couldn't read or write either so sending her a letter was out of it. Besides, even if they did send her a letter, she would probably just stare at it.

Satisfied with the arrangement, Rose tied the bag. The crown prince had done exactly as he had said he would, and she hadn't exactly done her part. Rose staggered to her feet. Something told her he would take his end of the bargain soon enough. She adjusted her dress and retied the scarf around her head.

Her back didn't hurt as much as it had the night before, but it was still a little sore. Edna had said it was healing nicely and, at this pace, should be completely healed by the end of the week. Rose had wondered if she was just trying to be nice, but wounded or not, she had run out of chances. She'd best prepare for the night.

Chapter 30: The King

Caius walked with long strides toward the throne room. Rylen walked beside him. If it weren't for his cousin, he wouldn't have responded to the King's call.

"You haven't visited His Royal Majesty since you returned," Rylen said as they walked through the hallway.

"It was on purpose. I'm sure you've relayed everything that transpired during the journey to the King. My input would be unnecessary."

"His Royal Highness has requested your presence twice. It has nothing to do with your travels. You should see your father when you return to the castle."

Caius stopped walking and slowly turned to look at Rylen. His gaze was sharp as a blade. "You should be the last person saying that."

"His Royal Majesty is very sick, Your Grace."

"And?" Caius asked with genuine nonchalance.

"Well—"

"I'd prefer it if you left matters with my father alone. You should know better than anyone. Don't do more things that would piss me the fuck off, Rylen!"

Rylen flinched slightly. Caius was angry—he usually didn't call Rylen by his name without his title in public. "I apologize, Your Grace, but His Majesty insisted that it was imperative he sees you today."

Caius turned away and continued walking without saying another word, while Rylen trailed after him. He reached the front of the throne room, and the mahogany doors opened. The doors were at least twice his height, and a guard held one side open.

As soon as the door opened to reveal him, activities inside the throne room ceased, and the King lifted his head from the scroll one of his advisors held. "Leave us," he said, his raspy voice carrying across the room.

The advisor bowed and rushed down the stairs. He bowed to the crown prince, offering his respect, before walking past him. Caius faced his father, standing at the bottom of the stairs while his father sat on his throne.

The physician stood beside the King and he bowed to the crown prince. "Your Highness."

"Your Majesty," Rylen said, bowing as low as possible.

"Rylen," King Gaius grinned and turned his attention to his son, but Caius stood rooted to the spot, locking eyes with his father.

"Leave us," King Gaius said to the physician.

"But Your Majesty, your health is—"

"It will only be for a few moments. To think I will die before then is insulting." King Gaius shot a look at his physician.

The poor man bowed twice. "I am so sorry, Your Majesty. That's not what I meant. I will be right outside. Please send for me as soon as I am needed," he said, bowing again before rushing out of the throne room.

King Gaius Ravenor was visibly sick. His face was pale and sunken, and his clothes looked a little too big on him. The crown on his head was tilted, and he rested awkwardly on the throne.

"What is this about, Your Majesty?" Caius asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm as he addressed his father.

Caius shared a resemblance with his father. They had the same black hair, deep brown eyes, hooded eyes, and thick brows but right now none of that was noticeable. The King just looked sick.

King Gaius narrowed his eyes. "You haven't seen me in nearly a month, and this is the first thing you say."

Caius didn't respond to this. He just looked at the King with a bored expression on his face. Rylen, on the other hand, looked to be at a loss. He glanced from father to son, deciding there was nothing he could do about the situation, and kept his lips shut.

"What's this I hear about you bringing one of your many whores into my castle?" King Gaius asked.

Caius didn't respond to this either. He just rested a hand on the hilt of the sword attached to his waist.

"Answer me!" King Gaius said angrily, then burst into a fit of coughs.

"Your Majesty," Rylen called, rushing forward. Caius didn't move an inch.

King Gaius held out a hand, stopping Rylen. "It's only a cough," he said.

Rylen was reluctant to step back, but when the King stopped coughing, he returned to his position beside Caius.

"If it bothers you so much, I don't have to stay here," Caius replied when it was quiet again.

King Gaius looked like he would attack his son if he could. "The Crown Prince stays in Velmount Palace. You are not allowed to live elsewhere."

"I thought you'd say that. Are we done here then, Father?"

"Get rid of her."

"No," Caius replied without hesitation.

King Gaius's right hand clenched into a fist, shaking slightly. "Get rid of her!"

"No, Your Majesty. Saying it another time won't change my mind."

"You—" King Gaius pointed and burst into another round of coughs.

The sound echoed in the hall, loud enough to shake the pillars. King Gaius gripped the armrest as the coughs forced their way out of him, the veins on his neck bulged, ready to burst. Rylen rushed up the stairs to help just as the door burst open.

"Your Majesty," the physician and one of his advisors rushed inside.

Rylen stepped aside for them to do what they needed, while Caius slowly turned around and started walking away.

"Don't you dare leave!" King Gaius called out to his son while gasping for breath.

"I don't think you're in any position to talk, Father. You should take care of your health," Caius said and continued walking toward the door.

Rylen looked from the King to the Prince. He knew he couldn't do anything for the King and decided to go after the Crown Prince. He walked a step behind him as they stepped out of the throne room.

Caius's grip on his hilt was tight. No sooner were the doors to the throne room shut than Caius turned around and threw a punch straight at Rylen. The latter was frozen and could only stare, but Caius didn't hit him. Instead, he punched the wall.

A gasp echoed in the hallway from the guards, and they immediately pretended they hadn't seen what just happened.

"Never do that again!" Caius said, enunciating each word. He slowly pulled his bloodied hand from the wall, completely unfazed. There was a dent in the wall, even though it was made of pure granite.

Rylen leaned against the wall, still in shock. He didn't know the extent of what the King had done to his son. Caius didn't like to talk about it, but Rylen had hoped the crown prince's hatred for his father would thaw as time went by. Instead, it only seemed to have gotten worse.

Caius turned away, and as he was leaving, he said, "Get her to my chambers now."

Prince Rylen slowly bowed to Caius's retreating back and gestured toward a guard. "Get Rose."