

K Lover 261

Chapter 261: Is Something On My Face

Rose had the map folded into her stockings and hidden underneath her dress by the time she left Lady Delphine's room. It felt a little uncomfortable but it was hardly noticeable.

Lady Delphine had tried her best to read the map aloud, pointing at and saying the names of towns and places. Rose had done her best to keep them all in memory.

She knew she would have to study the map some more by herself. Lady Delphine wished she knew more to help Rose, but she had never embarked on any journey, and if she ever needed to leave the capital, she would just send Slade instead.

She had offered to ask him, but Rose knew that would only make Thomas suspicious, and she didn't want anyone to have the slightest idea that this was her plan. As soon as the crown prince even suspected, she had failed—and she would never be able to escape him.

Thomas looked down at her with an odd look in his eyes as soon as she opened the door. Rose was startled to see him, and she jumped. He stared at her even more oddly, and she tried her best to act normal.

She had completely forgotten he was out here. She had been so preoccupied with the map that she hadn't thought of anything else. Also, she hadn't expected Thomas to be out here the entire time—but it wasn't surprising.

"Have you been standing here the whole time?" she asked, more to calm herself than to actually know, as she already knew the answer.

He looked at her as though she had asked a stupid question. "Are you ready to leave?" he asked instead of replying. His scowl was even worse than ever.

"No, I still need to—" but Thomas didn't let her finish.

"We leave now. Had you stayed in the room any longer, I would have had to drag you out. It is mid-afternoon. You have been here long enough," he grumpily stated.

"You're right," Rose said with a bright smile. "I didn't realize so much time had passed. Thank you."

Thomas stared at Rose suspiciously. He could tell that something was up, but he couldn't place his finger on what it was. It was clearly odd that the women had spent such a long time eating lunch.

Thomas raised his head and met eyes with Delphine, and she smiled at him. She was missing her fur coat, and Thomas started to grow annoyed when her smile widened—but he was simply noticing that her coat was missing not whatever her knowing smile meant.

Rose was still wearing his coat. It was a little bigger than she was, but she could wear it all right, and by the looks of things, she had no plans to return it—not that he needed it.

"Thank you for stopping by, Rose," Lady Delphine said, and Rose turned around. Lady Delphine kissed her on both cheeks.

"Thank you so much," Rose said and turned away. She rushed after Thomas, who was already walking away.

The young knight was annoying. His attitude was the worst, but at this point, she was used to it. Rose turned around and waved to Lady Delphine, who was leaning by her doorway.

"Are you leaving already?" Esme asked as Rose got to the bottom of the stairs.

Rose slowly nodded. "I can't stay any longer," she said and glanced at Thomas, and Esme nodded as if understanding.

"Bye, Rose. Please visit again," Kali said.

Rose nodded and rushed after Thomas, who was already heading out the door. Thomas was standing by the carriage when she caught up with him.

"Get in!" he yelled.

Rose nodded but didn't immediately get into the carriage. Instead, she turned around and waved to the girls who stood at the entrance of the manor.

"Bye, Rose," their voices reached her ears.

"Bye," Rose said, still waving. She could feel Thomas's glare boring into her. She wasted more time than she needed to before getting into the carriage.

Thomas got in after her and closed the carriage door harder than he needed to. He sat across from her, and the carriage started to move. It slowly rolled out of the manor. After going through the gates, it gradually picked up pace.

Rose looked out the window with a smile on her face. It hadn't been a complete waste of time. She was grateful for that.

As she looked out the window, she couldn't help but notice Lady Delphine lived in a different section from Edna. She noticed the buildings nearby were just as big as Lady Delphine's manor, but she also knew this wasn't the upper echelons. This was probably the lower tier of the nobles.

Rose suddenly felt the urge to turn around, and she turned to see Thomas staring at her intensely. She smirked. "Is something on my face, Lord Thomas?"

"Yes," Thomas said without missing a beat.

Rose's eyes widened, and she frantically moved her hands around her face, trying to figure out what it was. "Did I get it?"

"No," he replied and looked away.

"What is it?" Rose asked. She was almost sure he was lying to her.

"There is a red stain on your cheeks."

"Both cheeks?" Rose asked in horror. It must have been when Lady Delphine kissed her.

"Yes."

"Did I get it now?" she asked again.

Thomas reluctantly looked at her, then turned away. "You made it worse."

"Ah, can't you help me?" Rose asked. She didn't really expect him to help, but she couldn't help teasing him.

Thomas's eyes widened, and his gaze rested on her cheeks. Then he turned away, saying, "Why would I help you?"

Rose held her laugh as best as she could at the sight of his red ears. She tried to wipe her face again and hoped she did a decent job before looking out the window.

Soon she would see her mother. Soon she would return home. It was a very pleasant feeling. She was still anxious about a lot of things, but for now, she could at least be hopeful.

Chapter 262: Thomas' Coat

The carriage rolled into the castle, and Rose couldn't help but think the journey was shorter than it should have been—or perhaps she simply didn't want to come back here again. She hadn't realized how suffocating the castle felt until she'd been away.

The carriage came to a full stop right in front of the main entrance, and Rose looked out the carriage door, which Thomas wasted no time opening. The knot in her stomach twisted tighter.

Thomas didn't look in her direction before stepping out. She followed right after him, eager to get into the castle—she couldn't risk being caught with the map. At least inside, she could find somewhere safe to keep it, and once she was in the bedchambers, she could check it to her heart's content.

The coat was still on her shoulders as she got out of the carriage, and she half expected Thomas to turn around and snatch it from her. But he did none of that. Not once did he turn to look at her as they went up the stairs.

The young knight was odd. If it wasn't so obvious that he fancied her, Rose would have been certain he hated her guts. She wondered when it changed from hatred to this. She found it amusing.

The guards opened the giant doors of the castle, and Thomas suddenly stopped walking. Rose hadn't been paying attention, so she bumped into him, hitting her head on his back.

She stepped down a stair immediately, grabbing her head, grateful she didn't lose her footing.

"What are you do—" But Rose didn't finish her sentence as she saw Thomas bowing.

"Your Highness," Thomas said with a bow.

The crown prince was here, Rose realized with horror. She kept her palm against her forehead as though her head still hurt—just to hide from him. However, there was no way to avoid him when he was right by the entrance with only Thomas between them.

"Thomas," Caius's voice floated to her ears.

Rose felt all her nerve endings stand upright. She pulled her hand from her face and curtsied without saying a word. She couldn't fathom what he was doing here. Hopefully, he was just passing through, and she could get to her room without any problems.

Rose could feel his gaze on her even though she was behind Thomas. She hated how anxious she was feeling—wondering what the crown prince could possibly want.

"You took your time," Caius said to Thomas.

"I apologize, Your Highness," Thomas said without offering any explanation.

Caius's eyes narrowed, and he was quiet for about three breaths before he said, "You may go."

Rose sighed in relief and slowly followed behind Thomas as he walked through the door—but just as she came to the entrance, a huge figure blocked her path.

Rose stood rooted to the spot as Caius stood in front of her. It hadn't been that long since she saw him—so why did he look a little different? And why was she a little happy to see his face?

His expression, however, quickly reminded her—and Rose bent her head. She didn't say a word, didn't look at him, just kept her gaze locked on the ground.

He didn't say anything for what felt like days. He just blocked her path, staring down at her while she kept her head bent.

"Your Majesty," Rose whispered when she couldn't take it anymore.

"What are you wearing?" Caius asked, his tone dark.

Rose frowned, but only for a moment, as she recalled the coat on her shoulders. "Lord Thom—"

Rose didn't finish speaking before Caius lifted his hand and flicked the coat off her shoulders. It fell to the ground—the sound of it hitting the floor louder than it should have been.

Rose was flabbergasted as she looked up at Caius with wide eyes, and he frowned as their gazes met again. He moved his hands toward her face, and Rose flinched, afraid that he might hit her.

Caius didn't miss this. Annoyed, he grabbed her face more aggressively than he intended to and, using his thumbs, wiped the stain from her cheeks. She relaxed when she realized he wasn't going to hurt her.

Rose kept her gaze down, watching the coat at her feet. Why would he even do that to Thomas's coat? There had to be something wrong with the crown prince.

"Your Grace," Rylen's voice called from the other side of the entrance room. He looked like he had run all the way there.

He briskly walked to Caius, absentmindedly nodding to Thomas's bow. "I didn't even know when you left, Your Grace."

"Hmm," Caius said and reluctantly dropped his hands from Rose's face. "Let's go."

He walked past Rose without a word, and Rylen followed after him. Rylen looked a little confused, but there was no time to assess the situation further as Caius was already going down the stairs.

Rose bent and picked up the coat. She shook it to dust off any dirt before walking forward to where Thomas stood.

"I am sorry," she said and handed him the coat. "Thank you. Without this, I would have frozen to death."

Thomas glanced at her face before accepting the coat. Without another word, he walked in the direction of the crown prince's wing.

Rose didn't miss the look the guards and servants who had lingered gave her, and she wondered if she should have waited until they were away from the main entrance to give it to him.

But she had felt so bad about what the crown prince did to his coat that she had wanted to apologize immediately. Thomas didn't seem any angrier than usual, but the air around them was clearly awkward.

As soon as they got to the door of her room, Thomas turned around and left without a word. Rose watched his back until he went down the stairs, and all she could see was the top of his head—before she went into her room.

Chapter 263: The Day Of Departure

Rose was woken up long before dawn. She was surprised when Welma, Chelsy, and Isla appeared in her room holding a lamp. Rose didn't think she'd heard them knock—she just opened her eyes, and they were at the foot of her bed, staring at her.

If it wasn't for the candle Chelsy held, Rose would have feared the worst. She put a hand to her chest as the initial fright subsided.

"What are you doing?" she asked in horror, not the least bit amused.

"I am sorry," Chelsy whispered.

"We didn't mean to frighten you," Isla added. "We tried to be as quiet as possible."

That was the problem, if they were here to wake her up why would they need to be quiet about it? Rose pulled herself to a sitting position.

"What are you doing here?" she asked as she glanced toward the slightly open curtains. "It's too early."

"Mister Henry said we have to get you ready before dawn," Welma explained.

Rose shook her head and grabbed it with her palm. "And whose bright idea was it to wake me up in this manner? You nearly scared me to death."

"We are sorry," Chelsy and Isla said with their heads bent, looking truly apologetic. Welma had a smug look on her face.

"We had to be as quiet as possible," Welma explained. "The castle is still asleep."

Rose glared at Welma, but she didn't say more on the matter. She pulled the covers off her body and started to get out of bed.

"Is there anything in particular you'd like to take on your journey?"

Rose shook her head.

"I'm fine with anything," she replied, and the girls started to pack up.

Rose made her way to the washroom, and by the time she returned, the sisters had packed up two bags. Rose's eyes nearly bulged out of her skull. She had more clothes now, but it was still a ridiculous amount for a few days' trip.

"Two bags are too much," Rose said.

"I don't think so," Isla said.

"I'm sorry, I left her for a while as I tried to find the best dress for the journey, and she already packed up this many."

"That's too many for a few days," Rose said.

"It's not for a few days," Isla explained. "Mister Henry said it would take at least a week, and we should pack enough for a month. Snow is coming, and you might get stuck there. Better to be safe." Isla nodded her head as she explained.

Rose sighed but didn't argue. If it was too much, she could always just keep one bag. She let them dress her up, and when they were done, she wrapped a scarf around her neck.

Rose wished she had thicker clothing, but the scarf would have to do, and this time around she didn't forget to wear gloves. She wished she had a hat or something to cover the top of her head, but she could always use the scarf, so it wasn't a complete necessity.

When it was time for her to leave, a knock echoed on the door and it opened to reveal Mister Henry.

"Are you all set, Rose?"

Rose nodded and walked toward the door. She had also taken the swallows, her flute, the drug Lady Delphine gave her, and had used the excuse of putting all these in her bag to hide the map in there too.

It would be unsafe to keep it on her person, as she never knew when the crown prince would have one of his wild ideas. As she had experienced, he didn't care about where they were—and she would rather not be caught with something so incriminating.

"Yes," she said and stepped out the door, just as the crown prince was also stepping out of his room.

"Perfect," Mister Henry said and stood to the side.

Rose suddenly felt sweaty, even though the temperature was freezing. Did she have to walk with him? It shouldn't have been a surprise—they were going to travel together but she still disliked it.

Caius walked toward them with long confident strides, and Rose curtsied. The maids did the same, even though it was particularly hard to do so with the bags.

Caius didn't even glance in their direction. He just walked past them, and Mister Henry muttered, "Hurry," so they could go after the crown prince.

Rose nodded her head and followed behind him, after the guards. She stuck closer to the maids, but when they got out of the crown prince's wing, guards took the bags from them and the maids were dismissed. Rose waved at them, and Isla looked like she might cry.

The castle was dark, but torches lit up the pathway as they made their way to the main entrance. Rose couldn't fathom why they had to leave this early.

She walked right behind Caius, but not once did he look back, and she was stuck staring at his back. She couldn't help but notice just how broad his shoulders were. A flash of the scars she saw on his back appeared in her mind, and Rose's brows furrowed. She doubted she would ever know what happened.

Eventually, they reached the main entrance, and the door was thrown open—just as a loud voice said, "Don't tell me you're going to leave without telling your mother goodbye?"

They all turned around simultaneously to see the Queen approaching them, her ladies-in-waiting in tow.

The guards' reaction was instantaneous. All of them bowed, and Rose wasted no time in doing the same, while trying to hide behind a guard. She was at the back, which meant the Queen could easily see her.

"Mother," Caius called, his voice devoid of any emotion. "You should be in bed."

"And not tell you goodbye? What kind of mother would I be?" she said as she sauntered toward the crown prince.

A path was made for the Queen, and Rose did her best to stay hidden, hoping the slight darkness would keep her from the Queen's eyes.

Chapter 264: When You Come Back

Queen Violeta stopped walking a few feet away from her son and stretched out her hand to him. Her hand was covered in blue gloves lifted high with the back of her palm on top.

Caius looked down at his mother's hand, and the thought of ignoring her outstretched hand crossed his mind, but he wouldn't see her for a while—he could indulge her.

Caius lightly grabbed it and kissed the back of her gloved hand. Queen Violeta smiled happily at him. She looked very proud. Caius raised his head and stood to his full height.

"I have to go now, Mother," Caius said coldly, dropping her hand. He gave her a blank stare as he spoke.

"I know, son, I know," Queen Violeta said, beaming at her son, pretending not to notice his cold tone. "I won't keep you for long, I promise. I am simply here to tell you goodbye." She spoke to him as one would a child.

Caius didn't appreciate this neither her tone nor her presence. "As I said, it is too early for you to be up. Get some rest. I'll be away for a while. If anything that needs my attention comes up, let me know."

Queen Violeta nodded and grabbed her son's hand. "May the goddess be with you," she whispered.

Caius's lips thinned, but he nodded and slowly pulled his hand from his mother's grasp. "If that is all, Mother, I have to go."

Queen Violeta nodded, her smile never wavering. "I know, son," she repeated for the umpteenth time. However, even as she said these words, she didn't step away.

Caius frowned, his brows dipping in disapproval. He didn't have the time or patience to deal with his mother. He also knew she wasn't just here to say goodbye—she couldn't fool him. But he found that he didn't care for the real reason she was here; he just hated that it was interrupting him.

"Very well," Caius said and started to turn around.

"When you come back," Queen Violeta started to say, stopping her son from turning.

"Yes, Mother?" Caius said, turning his attention back to his mother. She was doing this on purpose—stopping mid-sentence so he would have to ask.

"When you come back," the Queen started again, "your father and I will have a surprise for you."

Queen Violeta ended her sentence with a sly smile, but it wasn't the smile that bothered Rose—rather, it was that the smile was directed at her. Rose didn't know how the Queen had found her amid the guards, but she clearly had always been aware of her presence.

She had tilted her head just slightly and caught Rose's eyes. It was a brief glance, but the look she gave Rose shook her to her bones before Queen Violeta turned back to her son, who didn't look very impressed by her sentence.

"What surprise?" Caius asked.

"You'll see. You'll finally not need to flock with peasantry," Queen Violeta said loud enough for everyone to hear.

Caius's eyes narrowed. "If that is all, Mother," he said, turning away. "I'd best leave if we want to make it to Futherfield before nightfall."

"Of course," Queen Violeta smiled sweetly at her son as she took a step back.

Caius didn't turn around as he was already walking through the open door. Rose rushed after him, passing beside the Queen who was standing right in the middle of the path. There was no way to avoid her.

"Whore," Rose heard a voice say. It wasn't the Queen—it was one of her ladies-in-waiting.

Rose didn't even flinch. It would have been more shocking if they had called her by her name. She wondered if the surprise was getting the crown prince married, as Welma had said. Rose hoped so too.

She adjusted the scarf around her neck as she stepped out of the room. It was colder outside, and Rose briskly walked down the stairs. If she had to ride a horse in this weather, she might end up freezing to death.

At the bottom of the stairs were at least fifteen men. They were all dressed in similar clothes, but they weren't dressed like knights. Rose thought they were dressed too casually as they sat on their horses.

Only Prince Rylen and Lord Thomas were on foot. Thomas stood by a carriage holding the carriage door open. It was the only carriage amid all the horses.

Rylen, on the other hand, was speaking to the crown prince, but Caius didn't look to be listening as his gaze was locked on Rose as she approached them.

Rose's legs suddenly felt wobbly. She might fall over with the way he was staring. Caius wasn't subtle in the slightest, and she hated that she couldn't figure out what was going through his mind.

She got to the bottom of the stairs and curtsied to both Rylen and Thomas. Then she stood with her eyes locked on the ground as she waited for his orders.

It was still a little dark, and if it weren't for the torches some of them held, Rose wouldn't have been able to see much.

"Half should go ahead, Your Grace, and half behind you," Rylen was saying.

"Yes," Caius replied, with his gaze still on Rose. "Make sure they put enough distance between themselves and the carriage."

Rose adjusted the scarf on her neck. It was suddenly hard to breathe, and she knew the cold had nothing to do with it. It was just a certain person who wouldn't stop looking at her.

"Thomas and I will ride with the carriage," Rylen said.

Caius lifted his gaze to Rylen, his eyes not hiding how he felt about this. He had already had this argument with his cousin, and the latter was insistent. Caius had to agree to change the path before Rylen accepted the plan of letting the men ride some distance away from them to lure the bandits.

Rylen thought it was too dangerous for Rose. Caius felt insulted that his cousin thought he couldn't protect her. It was a battle both of them intended to win and a compromise had been made.

Chapter 265: Awkward Carriage Ride

"There won't be any need for that," Caius said in a bland tone as he stared at his cousin. "You can both join the rear guards or the front guards."

"Your Grace, Thomas and I aren't too much to ride with the carriage, and if the bandits intend to attack the carriage, I doubt they would be deterred because of two riders," Rylen said, returning Caius's stare. He was not backing down from this.

Caius was clearly irked and he didn't hide this from his expression. "Anyone can guess who you are with just a glance," Caius stated. "They would be stupid to attack the king's nephew."

Rylen had very recognizable features. Blond hair that was almost white and striking blue eyes. These were not features one could easily come about in Velmount and that was because Rylen's mother wasn't from Velmount.

"I will wear a hood," Rylen replied without hesitation.

Rose watched the exchange and couldn't help the anxiety that washed over her. Suddenly, Caius turned and looked at her. Rose looked at her feet immediately.

However, she lifted her gaze as something cold landed on her arm. Rose blinked as she looked up. It melted as soon as it made contact. It wasn't possible that she was seeing things. It definitely explained why she was freezing.

"Do as you like," Caius said and started to take off his coat.

"Thank you, Your Grace," Rylen said with a slight bow.

Caius scoffed and took a step closer to Rose, the coat in his hands. Rose could only see his feet walking closer to her and she fought the urge to take a step back.

He stopped directly in front of her and placed the coat over her shoulders by wrapping his arms around her while looking at Thomas, who was standing behind Rose only two feet away by the carriage door.

"Your Majesty," Rose called, looking left and right at her shoulders before looking up at Caius. If his coat were even an inch longer, it would drag on the ground.

Caius forced his gaze from Thomas and looked at Rose. His hands fell to his side. He glanced at her face—her flushed face from the cold was looking back at him. Caius frowned at the expression on that stared at him. His gaze darkened.

"Get in," he commanded.

Rose didn't say a word; she just curtsied and tried to step into the carriage. The carriage was pretty high, and she prepared herself to lift her legs as high as they could go. Rose didn't take the step before she felt arms around her waist as Caius lifted her.

Rose was startled, and it took a lot of restraint not to show just how startled she was. He had picked her up so suddenly, without any prior warning. The same thing he had done with the coat.

Rose sat close to the opposite end of the carriage as she got in with his help. He got in after her and sat across from her. Rose looked out the window, even though it was too dark to see anything.

Her back was as stiff as her body, and she was aware of every move he made. She was starting to think that perhaps it would have been better to ride in the cold than be stuck in this enclosed space with him.

Thomas shut the door after Caius got in, and Rose could hear his footsteps as he walked away from the carriage.

She adjusted the coat on her shoulders, recalling how the crown prince had given it to her. She would have refused if he weren't the crown prince—and if she wasn't indeed freezing.

The carriage started moving, and Rose buckled forward at the movement. They moved right to the gates, and Rose kept her gaze glued to the window and her back locked against the carriage seat.

Caius's stare didn't waver, and she was starting to wonder if he even blinked. It was weird the way he just stared at her and the air around them was awkward.

The carriage rode out the castle's huge gates, and Rose felt sentimental. She was determined not to return. She wouldn't miss it; she just couldn't help the pull in her chest.

She had the map in her bag, and she intended to keep her ears on the ground. She had also studied it enough to know it like the back of her hand. There was a chance she might lose it.

"What did you do in Lady Delphine's manor?" Caius suddenly asked.

Rose was completely caught off guard that he would speak to her. It also didn't help that her train of thought had been about the map. "Your Majesty," she whispered, more as an effort to catch herself rather than not hearing his words.

"Didn't you request to see the courtesan? Surely, there must have been a reason."

Rose nodded. "Ah, yes. I wanted to see her before we left," she whispered.

"Why?" Caius asked.

"She invited me to her manor," Rose started, as her brain scrambled for some excuse. "I was worried it might be a little too late by the time we returned."

Caius narrowed his eyes at her, and Rose could feel shivers run down her spine. She twisted her fingers together and stared at her lap, wondering if he had some suspicion—that's why he was asking her all these questions.

"Well, what did you do?" Caius asked with a glare.

Rose adjusted in her seat. "We ate lunch and talked about how she was faring." His questions were starting to get really uncomfortable.

"And yourself?" Caius asked.

Rose nodded. She didn't have anything to tell him, and she couldn't even think of a lie at this point.

"Did you ask her to give you anything?" Caius asked.

Rose almost soiled her underwear. "No," she forced out, even though it came out as only a whimper.

Did Thomas tell the crown anything? she wondered in horror. The young lord had not seemed to have heard their conversation. However, Caius seemed to be convinced she had been up to something.

Did he know, and she had just lied to him? But that wasn't even the worst part. If he knew, her plans were completely ruined.

Chapter 266: Thoroughly Unpleasant

Caius watched Rose's expression as she sat looking very uncomfortable. It was a little annoying that he couldn't ask her directly, as she didn't know he knew about the herbs in the jar.

He had tried to ignore the implications of her actions, but recent developments had him recalling them. Caius thought the feeling it invoked was thoroughly unpleasant.

He wanted to know if that was the reason she needed to see Lady Delphine. Thomas had not been able to tell him anything useful. It still irked him. Everything she did told him just how much she wanted to get away.

The crown prince didn't look like he believed her, and the way he studied her as though he knew something was up unnerved, Rose. She adjusted in her seat; the coat on her shoulders no longer felt as warm as it once did.

Caius didn't say anything for the longest time, and when he finally did, it was only two words: "Very well."

Rose nodded. The lump in her throat didn't feel any smaller, and it was hard to swallow. She turned her gaze away from him toward the road. It was hard to say if it was getting brighter or if she was just getting used to the darkness.

She didn't know how long the journey would be, but she could recall Caius mentioning something about getting there before nightfall, which meant she would be stuck with him in this carriage until then. With the atmosphere in the carriage, Rose feared she might not survive until then.

The carriage rode for quite a while in silence. All she could hear were the sounds of hooves and commands given to the horses.

Rose stuck to the edge of the seat, keeping her gaze locked on the window, as she knew if she stared anywhere else, she was bound to meet eyes with him. She didn't want that.

They soon drove through the marketplace, and Rose wouldn't have recognized it if she hadn't been through the front before. It was mostly empty—no children running around, barely avoiding the carriages and horses that ran past.

A few traders were setting up, opening their shops as they prepared for the day. Rose recalled the man who had been caught by the guards the last time she passed through there. She was still staring in that direction even after the carriage had gone past.

By the time the sun had fully risen, they were out of Hearthgale. This time, Rose stared even harder as they passed through the gates. She hoped this would be the last time she would ever have to set eyes on the capital.

Rose settled in her seat as she tried to enjoy the rest of the journey as best she possibly could, even though an angry prince was glaring at her every moment of the way. She didn't have the slightest clue why he was angry.

The journey was surprisingly uneventful. The carriage rode without stopping until noon. They had chosen a field where the horses could eat grass and rest a little.

Rose didn't want to leave the carriage at first, but when the crown prince did not attempt to leave, she knew she had to step out. Just for a moment to escape his glare, or she might really suffocate.

She dropped from the carriage, gripping the coat around herself. It was still cold, even though it was noon. She looked up, and snow clouds covered the sky, only letting a few rays of the sun reach down.

The field had a few trees, and Rose planned to walk around as best she could. After all, she was going to be stuck sitting in the carriage, and something told her they might not stop again until they got to Futherfield.

The grass was wet as she stepped down. Rose walked away from the carriage, approaching the nearest tree. She got underneath it and just stood there, recalling when she used to climb trees when she was younger.

Rose heard footsteps approaching her, and she turned around to see Prince Rylen heading in her direction on foot. His horse was feeding on the grass with the other horses.

Thomas was behind him, and the young lord seemed awfully quiet. Rose curtsied when they got close, surprised that Prince Rylen would seek her out. The crown prince's cousin rarely acknowledged her.

"Have you been fed?" a voice asked.

Rose looked at the two men standing a mere three feet away from her, and it occurred to her for the first time since the journey began that she hadn't even eaten a single thing.

Rose slowly shook her head, and simultaneously, Caius chose that moment to step out of the carriage. The coachman stood next to him and bowed as though receiving orders from the crown prince. After their brief exchange, Caius walked toward them, and Rose stiffened.

"Neither breakfast nor lunch?" Rylen was asking.

"Neither, Prince Rylen," Rose whispered. She was painfully aware of just how close Caius was getting to them. He was only about eight feet away now.

"A meeting without me," Caius called, his voice loud enough that it carried across the field. His expression showed amusement, but his tone told just how irked he was.

"Your Grace," Rylen said and turned his attention to Caius.

"Your Highness," Thomas said and stepped a bit farther back.

Rose didn't want to think about it, but it was hard not to notice that the young lord had not spoken to her. She might even take a step further and say he might be avoiding her.

Caius walked to them, and Rose curtsied once more. Now they were all standing under the tree with her, with Caius staring down at her. If she had known he was going to step out of the carriage, she would have remained inside.

"Isn't Your Grace starved?" Rylen asked.

Caius glanced at him. "Perhaps."

Rylen narrowed his eyes at him. "Rose has neither eaten breakfast nor lunch," he said. "You shouldn't have taken her on this journey."

Caius's eyes darkened, and he glanced at her. "Lunch has only just begun. Did you not eat breakfast?" he directed his question at her.

Rose shivered. She should have told Prince Rylen she was fine. She couldn't understand why she was getting scolded when she was the one who hadn't eaten.

"No," she replied, annoyed at his tone. "There was no time."

Caius took a step forward. "I was with you in the carriage the whole time. Not once did you mention not having eaten breakfast, but as soon as you get down..." Caius's eyes darkened.

"I asked her," Rylen replied.

"Are you saying this is my fault because I didn't ask?" Caius turned his dark eyes to his cousin.

Nobody said it was anybody's fault, Rose thought, but she knew she couldn't say this out loud. Besides, she had just missed breakfast—it wasn't that big of a deal.

"I didn't say that, Your Grace. I'm simply saying the only reason she told me was because I asked," Rylen explained.

"I don't see how we're saying separate things, Rylen. By your wording, the reason I was not made aware of this was because I didn't ask. Or are you saying that I'm wrong?"

Rylen took a deep breath; he was visibly exhausted by the conversation. He opened his mouth, but he couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't have the crown prince reacting like this. He had suspected that something wasn't right, but he hadn't thought it was this bad.

Something must have happened between him and Rose. Rylen didn't think their relationship was amicable, but Caius usually didn't seem this much on edge in her presence. He tended to be more relaxed. The crown prince had even addressed him by just his name in public—something was certainly wrong.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty," Rose said and curtsied, pulling his attention back to her. She couldn't stand Prince Rylen getting yelled at when he was just trying to help her. "It's my fault. I didn't mention it because I wasn't hungry."

Caius jerked his head in Rose's direction. He couldn't understand why he was so irritated. He knew why—he just didn't understand it.

Throughout the ride, Rose had barely spoken to him except to answer his questions. She didn't smile, and she didn't meet his eyes. However, the instant she saw Rylen and Thomas, she seemed like a completely different person.

Her pleasant demeanor didn't disappear until he arrived, and he had also discovered she had told Rylen more in a literal moment than she had told him the entire morning of the ride.

He was indeed quite furious. He wanted to remind her who she answered to. She spoke to everyone else but him. Thomas's coat on her shoulders still pissed him off. Just how friendly was she with Thomas that he would give her his coat?

Her apology didn't even scratch the surface of his anger. He had been nothing but lenient, giving her as much time as she needed—and this was the thanks he got.

Caius opened his mouth to speak, but the coachman was approaching the tree with a folded mat in one hand and what looked like a picnic basket in the other.

Chapter 267: Lunch In The Fields

Rose was grateful for the interruption. Caius hadn't seemed satisfied with her apology, and she was a little lost on what else to do, but the coachman approaching seemed to distract him for the moment.

At least it ended whatever it was he wanted to say and he no longer argued with Prince Rylen so that was a good thing.

Rose stepped to the side as the mat was laid down and the basket was placed on it. It was a decent-sized basket, covered in a napkin. This was clearly lunch. She was certain the basket held more than it showed.

As soon as the basket was placed on the spread-out mat, the coachman bowed and retreated. Rylen and Thomas did the same, bowing and leaving. Rose nearly collapsed when she realized this was just for her and the crown prince. She didn't want to be stuck alone with him again. The carriage ride was more than enough.

She glanced at the crown prince, and he looked at her with a bland expression. Rose shuffled on her feet, not exactly sure what was going on. Was she supposed to sit on the mat with the crown prince? There was certainly enough space for two, but that wasn't nearly close to the problem.

"Won't you sit? A moment ago you were whining to Rylen about how hungry you were," Caius stated with disapproval.

Rose couldn't recall having such a conversation with Rylen, but there was no point trying to convince the crown prince of that. Whatever had got him in this sort of mood would most likely only get worse and she didn't want to be on the receiving end of his moodiness.

Rose nodded and sat at the edge of the mat, keeping the basket in the middle. She folded her legs to the side and sat as ladylike as the dress would allow her to sit on the mat. The ground felt very hard underneath, and even the mat didn't soften it.

The crown prince didn't sit immediately, not until she started to unpack the items in the basket. Rose didn't need anyone to tell her it was going to be her job.

She pulled out a round of aged cheese, which she unwrapped from its cloth, alongside slices of cold roast chicken seasoned with herbs from the palace kitchen. Two dense loaves of brown bread were halved, and dried figs nestled in the corner of the basket.

There were also fresh fruits and a flask that Rose didn't think held water, as there was another skin bag that looked more like it held water.

Rose moved quickly even though she wasn't sure what the crown prince would like to eat, but she didn't want to get yelled at again.

She started with the flask, uncorking it and pouring the liquid into the pewter cup. She only filled one and laid it before the crown prince. It was red and smelled like wine mixed with cinnamon and cloves.

Rose took a deep breath — the spiced wine smelled heavenly, but she knew better than to indulge. After placing the wine, she laid out several dishes. She didn't bother to ask what he wanted; rather, she set out everything. Whatever he disliked, he wouldn't eat.

All through this, Caius watched her. Rose expected him to yell or stop her several times, but he didn't — he just watched.

When she was done setting out his lunch, she attended to herself, opting for some fresh fruit and the dried figs. She wasn't that hungry, and the earlier exchange had certainly ruined her appetite, but she was sure it would piss the crown prince off even more if she said she wasn't going to eat.

He had nearly ripped Prince Rylen apart all because she hadn't told him she hadn't eaten. How was she supposed to eat when they had left the castle before dawn? At least Prince Rylen had been thoughtful enough to ask.

"Is that enough for you?" Caius asked.

Rose paused mid-chew and slowly nodded. She was only eating because she was worried there would be repercussions if she didn't.

"You'd best eat more. There will be no chance to eat again until we get to Futherfield. Stopping again would put us behind schedule."

Rose nodded. What the crown prince said made a lot of sense, and if the words had come from any other person in the world, she wouldn't have taken offense — but she did when he spoke. It was his tone and the condescending way he said it.

She could also hear his anger in the undertones, which Rose found ridiculous. He had no right to be angry. She was the one getting dragged to the other side of the kingdom instead of going to see her very sick mother.

Did he think that perhaps she had forgotten about it or just let it go? Was that why he stayed away — so it would pass over? Rose lifted her head just as the crown prince brought the pewter cup to his lips.

Even as he drank from the cup, he still stared at her over the rim. Rose was sick of his stares. She couldn't wait to get away from him.

Lunch didn't take too long, and soon enough, she was back in the carriage. The mat, dirty dishes, and leftovers had been packed up. The coachman took care of them, putting them in the carriage with the bag.

The horses were reattached to the carriage, and Rylen and Thomas got on their horses. Rylen pulled up his hood and covered his hair again just as the coachman whistled loudly.

The carriage started to move, and Rose gripped the side as it jiggled until it settled and began to move in a steady rhythm.

It wouldn't be much longer anymore. She could survive a carriage ride with him. For some reason, she couldn't help but think the second half was more bearable. Perhaps his glare wasn't as intense as before, but Rose didn't care enough to figure it out.

Chapter 268: Futherfield

When they got to Futherfield, it was sunset. An orange hue filled the skies, and Rose found herself looking up through the carriage window one too many times. It was a pretty sunset, and while she stared up at it, she didn't remember her turmoils.

Futherfield was quite the town. It was just as big as Stonegate—possibly bigger. However, it didn't have strict entry like Stonegate did. There was a huge fence and a main entrance, but it didn't look like it went all around the town.

Rose could probably guess that the town was too big for that or perhaps there was some other reason she was unaware of. She doubted it was something she could ask anyone about.

Rose could see how they had a bandit problem, but the situation itself was indeed strange. Edenville barely had any guards and only an easy-to-break wooden gate, yet they had never had any issues with bandits. But here was a major town close to the capital having such a problem. It was concerning.

At the same time, it made sense that bandits chose this town, as it was flourishing and they had a higher chance of running into rich nobles and wealthy merchants than they would in Edenville. Regardless of the risk of it being close to the capital, the profits would be enormous.

Rose frowned as she realized the streets weren't as bustling as Stonegate's. They had arrived in Stonegate similarly around dusk, but it had seemed no different from noon.

The streets were filled, and more importantly, the marketplace had been open. Here, they didn't pass through the marketplace, but the path to the Lord's residence was quite empty.

Children didn't run after the carriage, nor did they stare. They weren't given the chance to. Mothers scolded their children to go into the houses, and if they didn't listen, they would go as far as to drag them inside. After that, they locked their doors shut, and only the light of candles could be seen from outside.

It didn't take too long for the carriage to go through the town and soon enough, they went through the gates of the Lord's estate. The carriage hadn't even reached the gates before they were swung open and allowed inside. Prince Rylen and Thomas had gone ahead and Rose suspected that was the reason they had easy access.

The carriage slowed then came to a full stop in front of the main building. Rose gripped the edge of the window as she stared out. The door was quickly opened, and Caius stepped out first.

He stood right outside and looked into the carriage. Rose knew she couldn't stay in there much longer—not with the way Caius stared directly inside. She was still wearing his coat and had thought he would request it at some point, but Caius never did.

She scooted closer to the door and stood up. Caius's hand was outstretched as she poked her head out the door, and she had no choice but to take it.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," she mumbled as her feet touched the ground.

His hand pulled away from hers, and Rose's hand fell to her side. It was strange that she thought she could feel the warmth of his palm through her gloves.

"Your Highness," a loud, bubbly voice said as the doors of the mansion opened.

Rose lifted her gaze and briefly locked eyes with Lord Leopold, the Duke of Futherfield. The Lord was a middle-aged man; he reminded her of the Marquis of Stonegate, but he looked a little younger. There was a joviality to him that gave him the air of youth, even though he was no less than forty.

However, the Lord didn't hold her attention for long, because right on his arm was his beautiful wife. That was exactly Rose's thought as she stared at the Lady of Futherfield.

She had beautiful light brown hair that cascaded over her shoulders. She had slightly slanted eyes, a small nose, and full lips.

She stood by her husband as though resting some of her weight on him. There was a softness to her face and her mannerisms.

All it took was one glance to see that the Lord adored his wife.

"Lord Leopold," Caius called right back.

He took a step forward, and Rose stayed back, unsure of where she fit in all of this. The last time they were at a Lord's house, she had spent the night in the corridor of the servants' quarters. She doubted the situation would change just because she was wearing nicer clothes.

"Your Highness," his wife curtsied, letting go of her husband's hand only briefly.

Rose thought her voice was as soft as she looked. She stood behind the crown prince, trying to keep herself hidden. Thomas stood to the side, where the servants were trying to take the horses away, while Rylen walked closer to the Lord.

"Lady Deana," Caius called as he stood in front of her.

"Thank you for answering our call, Your Highness. I apologize for worrying you with our problem when you're so busy."

"It's no problem," Caius replied immediately.

"I see you didn't come alone," Lord Leopold said, cutting in. He glanced past Caius, his gaze resting on Rose, who immediately curtsied.

"Who is that?" his wife whispered into his ear, but it was still loud enough for Rose to hear.

Rose grabbed the hem of her dress at the question. It felt a little heavier than it needed to be. Hearing the Lady of Futherfield ask who she was was disheartening—she was nothing more than the crown prince's whore, accompanying him on this journey to make sure he wasn't bored.

"Rose," Caius said before the Lord could reply to his wife.

"It's the redhead I told you about," he whispered to her. Then, louder, he said to Caius, "I didn't think you'd bring her all the way here. Last time, you refused to introduce us."

"Your Highness," Lady Deana cut in, "Please pay my husband no mind. He is quite happy to see you. Let's go in—dinner will be ready very soon."

Chapter 269: Sharing A Room

Rose was in disbelief as she stood in the middle of the room, dressed for dinner. Not only had she been given a room, but she had also been given servants to attend to her. The only downside was sharing the room with the crown prince.

Rose thought this was the worst-case scenario, and she was tempted to choose the corridor. At least there, she would have some privacy from the crown prince to study the map.

She has been rushed into this room, and the servants moved quickly, trying to get her dressed for dinner. She had lost sight of Caius when they led her here, but the servants had brought in more bags than she had—which was all she needed to know.

She hoped she was wrong, but it certainly explained why she would be put in such a fancy room. She looked around, unable to keep from staring.

The drapes were made from velvet and were just as thick as the ones in the castle. The room was big enough to fit the king-sized bed at least three times.

Different kinds of furniture filled the room. There was a huge shelf and a table in the corner, a long cushioned chair, and three other cushioned chairs stood in a separate corner. The fireplace was burning, and the room had been warm even before Rose walked in.

"Would you be needing anything else, ma'am?" the maid asked her as they were done dressing her up.

Rose was shocked for a moment; she couldn't believe they were talking to her. Surely, they must know she was nothing more than the crown prince's escort, yet they were being so respectful.

"No," Rose said softly with a small smile. "Thank you."

She had been worried the maids would search through the wrong bag, but that didn't seem to be the case, and the bag in question was sitting in the corner unpacked.

The maid nodded her head. "If you'd like, I could show you where dinner is," she said and stretched her hand toward the door.

Rose shook her head. She needed some time alone so she could take the map out of her bag and keep it somewhere safe before the crown prince came into the room.

As though her thoughts triggered his appearance, the door was immediately swung open, and Caius walked in with a look of disapproval on his face—an expression that only worsened when it rested on Rose.

Rose stiffened and had to suppress the look of horror on her face. "Your Majesty," she immediately curtsied while also hiding her face from him.

The two women bowed their heads too, but Caius didn't say a word to them. As soon as they bowed, they left the room. It was obvious Caius was about to get dressed for dinner and their disappearance was to give privacy.

Rose sat quietly on the edge of the bed opposite Caius as the servants who came in with helped dress him for dinner. Not once did she glance in his direction.

Rose didn't even think much about his presence in the room. All she thought about was how she would be able to take out the map from the bag and find a suitable place to hide it.

"Do you not plan to eat dinner? Or do you intend to miss this meal as you did breakfast?" Caius asked, standing close to the bed.

Rose turned her head to face the crown prince, and he was a little closer than she expected. He was all dressed up—his hair combed and his clothes changed from traveling attire to something more suitable for dinner.

"Your Majesty," Rose said and scrambled to her feet. "I didn't know you were ready." She truly hadn't noticed and he probably wouldn't have if he had left the room without speaking to her.

"Of course. You had your gaze locked on the wall ever since," Caius said, and turned away from her.

He started toward the door, which the servants were quick to open and keep open. Rose rushed after him—he was clearly intending to leave her here.

She walked a couple of feet behind Caius, who moved briskly as though he knew where he was going. Rose didn't think this was his first time here.

They went down a set of stairs and through a long hallway before Caius slowed as they approached a door with guards in front. The doors were opened, and Rose winced at the bright lights as she stood outside the open doors.

Caius walked right through the entrance, and Rose couldn't help the hesitancy clawing at her chest. Was she really about to eat here? She glanced at the guard standing by the door, but of course, he wouldn't have the answer she sought.

It was a simple glance—she didn't even know how he realized she wasn't stepping in after him—but Caius turned just his head to look at her, and for a moment, Rose forgot her other worries. Not pissing him off was now her priority.

"Your Highness," Lady Deana and her husband said as they both simultaneously stood up from the table.

Caius reluctantly turned his attention to the table, where Lord Leopold stood smiling with arms lifted. "Lord Leopold," Caius replied and walked to the table.

Prince Rylen was also on his feet, and there were young boys seated side by side beside their mother. Rose thought they bore a striking resemblance to their father, only taking after their mother's hair.

Rose walked slowly to the table—anything else would have been more awkward. She curtsied as she stood close, looking like a little lost lamb.

Caius sat down and tapped the seat next to him. Rose nodded and took it. She sat down and couldn't help but feel as if all eyes were on her. She felt very out of place. It would have been better if they had left her out; this was more unbearable.

The table was filled with different dishes, and Rose couldn't help but salivate as a servant served her. The aroma reminded her of just how hungry she was. She was used to the large portions she would always get in the castle, but all she had eaten today was some fruits and dried figs—no thanks to a certain person.

Chapter 270: Betrothed

Rose made sure to observe proper dining etiquette, just as Lady Delphine had taught her. She had the older lady to thank for more than a few things. At least, she could feel less out of place.

There wasn't really much of a conversation at first. They simply exchanged pleasantries, and no one spoke to her directly. Rose didn't mind being excluded; she was sure it was already awkward for the lord and lady to have her at the table. They were most likely being cordial because of the crown prince.

Rylen was a pretty good conversationalist and Rose couldn't help but understand why the crown prince trusted him so much. Caius barely spoke while Rylen handled most of the conversation.

Lord Leopold and Lady Deana seemed to have only two children—boys. The boys both looked older than fifteen, and Rose was almost envious of how easily they joined in the conversation.

Lord Leopold made a comment about them joining the crown prince to hunt the bandits, and they laughed about it. Lady Deana didn't find the joke very funny and she scolded her husband about which only made him laugh more.

After that, Lord Leopold asked the crown prince about his parents, the King and Queen, and Rose didn't miss how Caius left Rylen to answer this. Rylen gave a decent answer, but Lord Leopold didn't seem satisfied by it.

Suddenly, a sly smile appeared on his face, and Rose felt a chill. She didn't pay much attention to it and tried to enjoy her meal as best as she could.

"Your Highness, you're at that age now. Shouldn't you be getting married to your betrothed?" Lord Leopold blurted.

Lady Deana jerked her head in her husband's direction, while Rylen looked at Caius with utter disbelief. Rose had not been paying full attention to the conversation, but this was enough to make her lift her head again. There was silence for more than two breaths, and in that moment, one could hear a pin drop.

"You're betrothed?" Rylen asked in horror, finally breaking the silence. He looked from Caius to Leopold as though expecting one of them to deny it.

"Of course His Highness is. He is the heir to the throne, the crown prince of Velmount. Wouldn't it make sense that he's betrothed?" Lord Leopold replied, enjoying the look of shock on Rylen's face.

Lord Leopold lifted the goblet and took a sip of wine, but even the cup didn't hide the smug look on his face. He placed it back on the table after a healthy gulp.

"My lord," Lady Deana called, trying to defuse the situation, but Lord Leopold didn't look like he had any intention of letting the matter go.

"I've never heard anything about this," Rylen said, still visibly mortified. "Who are you betrothed to?"

Caius glared at the lord, then turned his attention to his food. "That was a long time ago."

"Pardon me, Your Grace, but a betrothal wouldn't simply end just because it happened a long time ago. You're still betrothed."

Rylen glanced at Rose. He wasn't trying to be rude or attack her—he just couldn't wrap his head around the fact that the crown prince was engaged to be married but acted completely otherwise.

"It's not as important as you make it seem. I was only five," Caius casually explained, annoyed that Rylen was making a big deal out of it. He glanced at Rose, but she chose that exact moment to look away.

"Oh, it was a great ceremony," Lord Leopold added, thoroughly enjoying the commotion. "She could barely walk, and His Highness held her hand with a crown on his head that hardly fit," Lord Leopold laughed as though it was the funniest thing ever.

"My lord," Lady Deana tried again, even though she knew it was hopeless. Once her husband got into this mood, he would keep fanning the flames until he set everything ablaze.

"Grandfather was alive then?" Rylen asked, his expression softening.

"Yes. If I recall correctly, he is the reason it was even possible in the first place," Lord Leopold explained.

"Who is she?" Rylen asked.

The more information Rylen got about this, the more baffled he became. He was also very curious as to who would want to marry Caius—however, he doubted the lady in question had much choice in the matter. If Caius was only five, she was probably much younger.

"The third princess of Ly—"

"That's enough about a betrothal that happened nearly two decades ago when I was a child," Caius stated, cutting off the lord.

"It doesn't matter when it happened. You're still—" Rylen immediately stopped speaking at Caius's death stare.

Rylen looked down at his food, but it was clear from his expression that he was still thinking about the situation. Rose couldn't blame him—she was just as shocked.

Conversation quickly dwindled, and there was a tension that never really broke. Rose concentrated on eating her meal, pushing the conversation she had just heard to the back of her mind.

She didn't miss the glances that Caius sent her way—and it wasn't just Caius who looked at her. She almost wished she were not at the table.

When dinner was finally over, Rose was quick to get on her feet. She curtsied to both Lord and Lady while mumbling her thanks. It felt rude not to speak about how nice the meal was, but at the same time, she didn't think she was supposed to speak so she kept her voice low.

"I'm glad you liked it," Lady Deana replied in response to her thanks.

Rose lifted her head in disbelief but that didn't seem to be the only surprise, Lady Deana was also walking toward her. "Yes," she said and stood to her full height. "It was a delicious meal."

Lady Deana nodded and said, "Walk with me. The men are going to be here for a while. I'll show you to your room."

Rose nodded. As much as she wanted to decline, it felt very rude to refuse the offer of the lady of the house. "Thank you," she replied.

Lady Deana smiled at her and led her out of the dining room. Rose made sure not to look back at the crown prince.