

## **K Lover 281**

### Chapter 281: Terrible Luck

Caius heard it first—the sound of hooves approaching them as they rode down the grassy path. It was past noon, and they had turned up empty again. They had made even worse progress than the day before, and something else that bothered him was that there were almost no more bandit attacks. Not a single one since he arrived.

He slowed his horse, and Prince Rylen stared at him oddly. He also slowed down so he wouldn't pass the crown prince.

"Your Grace," Prince Rylen called.

Caius turned his gaze to his back, and sure enough, a horse was approaching them at high speed. Rylen followed Caius's gaze, and the men with him stopped.

They were about five in number, while the rest of the men had been divided into two groups and sent to other sides of the town. However, the fact that he hadn't heard anything meant they had also been fruitless.

Caius didn't recognize the guard approaching him. Neither did he like the feeling in his stomach. There was no reason to be bothered—and if it was a message about another bandit attack, even better. They would be able to follow their trail and apprehend them.

The horse stopped abruptly in front of them, with Caius behind and his men up in front.

"What do you have?" Thomas asked.

"Your Highness," the messenger called. He sounded winded. "Lady Deana sent me to inform you that R..." The messenger paused, gasping for air.

"What?" Caius asked impatiently.

"Rose is missing?" He tried again after getting enough air. "She was supposed to go to the market to pick up the silk clothes Lady Deana had ordered the day before. However, Lady Deana didn't want to send her off alone, but Rose had insisted. She sent a servant after her not long after, and when the servant got to the market, there was no sign of Rose. The trader said no one has come by. Lady Deana sent servants to try and find her as best as they could, to no avail. She thinks Rose might have left on her own. I was asked to find you, Your Highness, to tell—"

"How long ago was this?" Caius asked. He was surprisingly calm.

"Not long," the messenger said.

Caius turned to Prince Rylen. "Carry on here. I shall return as soon as I can."

"Does Your Grace intend to go alone? Wouldn't it be better if we all searched for her?"

"No!" Caius said coldly. "We have bigger problems, and if we are correct, this is the only section where we haven't done a full search. We cannot afford to stop now."

Caius felt a lot of things, but right now, he knew it was not the time to dwell on them. He needed to find Rose. He was worried, angry—but first, he had to get to her.

"Yes, Your Grace," Rylen said and turned his horse toward the original path.

Caius turned to the messenger. "Where was she last seen?" he asked.

Rose sat on a small rock as she spread the map on her lap. She traced her finger over it—she couldn't read a thing. All she had was from memory, and unfortunately, the only things she hadn't forgotten were Futherfield, Stonegate, Edenville, and Stonegate Pass.

It was cold—colder than she had expected. The gloves didn't do much, and it seemed to be even colder in the trees. They at least protected her from most of the snow, but that wasn't the problem here.

Rose feared she was lost. Well, not exactly lost, as she was sure she was looking at the rocky path. Every corner had stones sticking out of the ground, surrounded by trees. The rocks were of different shapes and sizes. A horse could go through the path, but it would be suicidal to run.

The problem wasn't that it was impassable—rather, Rose was unsure whether to head to her left or towards her right, as she had come upon the rocky path from the side. She had also tried to look up and down, and neither seemed to lead anywhere. But that wasn't the only problem. There was a path through the woods on the map, but Rose wasn't sure this was the one.

Rose froze as she heard voices. She had been so engrossed with figuring out the map that she didn't realize anyone was approaching. She had also assumed she would be alone.

"We should have left before the crown prince arrived. The letter indicated that we do so," a voice said. It was a little shaky.

"Oh, relax," another voice said. It was this voice that made Rose snap her head up. "We're done now, aren't we? The others should be at the end of the path. As soon as we rendezvous, we'll be out of here. No need to get your nutsack in a twist. Besides, you didn't seem to have any problems with the raids."

"I apologize, Ryder," the shaky voice said. "I was just worried."

"Stupid! Don't worry when we're already leav— A horse," the voice said with a snicker. "A pretty one at that."

"What horse are yo—?"

"Shush!" Ryder yelled out. "It couldn't have wandered here. Check for the rider. Now!"

Rose palmed her mouth with her hand as she hid behind a rock. As soon as she heard the voices, she moved to the nearest rock that offered a better hiding spot. But her horse was too far away—she had let it wander to eat grass—and it was also too huge to hide.

Rose's stomach knotted. Something told her she might have found the bandits the crown prince had been looking for. What were they doing here? She had been told this path was safe. Perhaps she shouldn't have relied on the words of an old, shifty man.

However, they had said something about leaving, so he wasn't completely wrong—and this was the right path out of Futherfield. She just seemed to have terrible luck to have chosen the exact time they would be taking this path.

## Chapter 282: A Worse Fate

Rose crunched even lower as she heard footsteps approach where she was hiding. There had been a bigger rock not far from where she had been sitting, but it didn't do much for a good hiding spot, and she knew she had to move soon. As soon as anyone was close enough, she would be spotted.

Rose hoped they would take the horse and leave, but that was clearly never part of the plan. She heard the horse protest, and someone swore.

"Stay still, you useless—"

Rose couldn't see, but it was clear someone was trying to take the horse. It neighed loudly, and a struggle could be heard.

"Hey," Ryder cut in. "Careful with the horse!"

Something about his voice made it hard to ignore. It made her skin crawl. She knew without a doubt he was not to be messed with. How could she possibly escape this mess?

She clutched the map to herself as she looked around. The trees weren't very good for climbing. They stretched out tall, and the branches were high up. However, it wasn't like climbing was a good option—they could throw stones or worse to try to get her to come down.

Rose considered running, but she doubted she could outrun them. The path was also pretty rocky and uneven. She could sprain her ankle or worse—but Rose knew she would easily sacrifice her ankle to escape. If only the horse were close, she could use that to escape them.

She was also not sure about their numbers. She had heard three voices already, but something told her there were more than that. Five, perhaps? Rose couldn't dare lift her head to take a peek.

"I said look for the rider and stop messing with the horse!" Ryder yelled at the men, then smiled deviously.

"Hey!" Ryder yelled. "I know you can hear me. It would do you good to come out on your own." He took a step forward with each word while his eyes scanned around.

Rose felt the dagger in her stomach twist even harder. Someone was close to the rock—she could hear their footsteps on the grass. All the rock did was hide her back; as soon as they came around the corner, they were bound to see her.

Footsteps rounded the corner of the rock, and then a head poked out. Rose didn't even think about it—she bolted. She ran as quickly as she could, jumping over rocks and cornering trees.

"A woman," the man who had moved to the rock said as she started to run.

"Don't just stand there!" Ryder yelled. "After her! Don't you lot dare let her escape!"

Her dress was a little restrictive to run in, but Rose didn't care. She silently ran through the woods as fast as she could, knowing the bandits catching her was a worse fate.

Rose didn't see it in time—a branch sticking out of the ground—and her right toes hit it with enough force to break them. Rose was sent flying, her face contorting from the pain emanating from her toes.

She fell to the ground, her hands barely protecting her face, but it was the pain in her stomach that made her gasp for air. Rose had landed on a stone, her stomach slamming right into it.

Rose's eyes watered, but there wasn't any time. She had to get on her feet now and resume running. However, she couldn't move. All she could do was roll to her side and grab her stomach in pain.

She tried to push to her feet in this position, but her body didn't listen, and through blurry eyes, she could see the men approaching her. Rose bit the corner of her lip.

She must have committed some grave sin in her past life to have ever met the crown prince. Things just wouldn't go right for her since he came into her life.

A hand grabbed her shoulder and lifted her off the ground. Rose cried out in pain. It hurt, but she didn't think it was just his grip. Had she also hit her shoulder?

"Shut up!" the man said and struck her across the face.

The force ripped the corner of her lip, and blood poured out of her nostrils. Rose felt her eyes roll to the back of her head. The force of the slap made her dizzy—it felt like her brain bounced in her skull. She fought the urge to go under, concentrating on the pain. She had never been hit with so much force in her life.

Rose's eyes opened, and surprisingly, her vision got clearer. She was surrounded, and the one called Ryder was grabbing onto her. She knew it was him because she could never forget his voice. It was raspy and unnecessarily loud. She doubted he knew how to speak in whispers.

"Who are you?" Ryder asked, and Rose turned around to look at him.

A fatal mistake.

Her reaction was normal—anyone who laid eyes on Ryder for the first time would have the same startled reaction. But Ryder didn't like this. His expression darkened, and Rose's heart dropped to her stomach.

Ryder dropped her to the ground and kicked her on the side. The force lifted her off the ground and a few inches away from him. Rose screamed as his leg hit her stomach—the exact spot she'd hit on the stone. He kicked her again and was about to kick her a third time when someone spoke.

"Ryder! If you kill her, you won't find out anything."

"Oh, relax," he said, and kicked her a third time. "A little kicking won't kill her."

Rose's voice came out in a whimper. She didn't know how she was still awake. She was in so much pain, she could faint—but she knew it would be a terrible thing to be unconscious.

"Her screaming—someone might hear."

This seemed to stop Ryder, and he pulled back his leg, avoiding kicking her again. He lifted Rose, this time by the front of her dress. She winced as he pulled her up—she could barely stand on her feet.

"I'll ask you again," he said, putting his face right in front of her as though expecting her to react as she had before. "Who are you?"

#### Chapter 283: Fear

Rose blinked, tears were spilling down her face, and her words didn't leave her lips. Her nose was bloody, and the cut on her lip was worse. The blood had slipped into her mouth, and all she could taste and smell was blood.

Ryder was a man in his early thirties with a scar running from the side of his forehead across his left eye and stopping just over his lips. It was a nasty ragged scar—the eye was clearly blind.

While the other side of his face was without any scarring, it didn't look better than the other. Ryder had a constant snarl. His huge nose was lifted, and his working eye glared at everything.

Ryder raised his hand as if to strike her again, but Rose knew there was no way she could survive another slap, so she forced herself to speak through the pain.

"Rose," she said. "Rose Vallyn." She coughed, spitting out blood, and her head rolled to the back.

"Who sent you?" Ryder asked.

"No one. I am just trying to leave Futherfield. Please let me go."

Ryder sneered. "You ran when you saw us."

Rose couldn't even find the irony in his sentence, she was too much in pain. It was expected that she would run—they were bandits.

"I was scared."

"Why would that be?" His sneer grew bigger. "We are trying to leave Futherfield too." He pulled her closer, grabbing her chest tightly and deliberately pressing on her bosom. "We could use the company."

Rose felt panic through the pain, and her eyes widened in horror. She shook her head. "I am fine by myself. Please let me go."

Ryder stopped smiling that creepy smile and looked at her as though disappointed.

"Isn't it rude to refuse my kind offer? However," he said as his eyes looked her up and down, "since you're so pretty, I'll let this go once."

Ryder tossed her over his shoulder. Rose didn't even have the energy to fight him as her stomach landed on the edge of his shoulder, causing her to scream again in pain. Her voice was hoarse, and it hurt to scream.

"Shut up!" he said and slapped her rear.

"Ryder," the same person who had stopped him from kicking her spoke, "Are you sure this is a good idea? She could be a noble, for all we know."



He scoffed. "Maybe, but we'll be out of Futherfield today and out of Velmount in a few days. I doubt they would chase us all the way to Wresthal, and with the snow, we have nothing to worry about. Move! We've wasted too much time on this bitch."

Rose jerked in pain as his hand contacted her buttocks again, but that wasn't even as terrifying as the words she just heard. They were leaving Velmount. Forget what she had to do—Rose might not get out of this alive.

She started to struggle. She didn't care about the pain. There was no point—if she let them take her, it would be all over. She couldn't let that happen. No matter what, she had to see her mother.

"Stay still!" he yelled.

Rose wasn't listening. She struggled until she fell off his shoulder, landing on tiny stones that pierced all over her body. Not enough to break skin, but it hurt.

Rose tried to push herself off the ground, but she didn't even get to move before another kick connected with her side. This one sent her flying quite some distance, and her side slammed against a nearby rock. She screamed. Rose was certain she broke more than a few bones.

"Stupid bitch! When I have been so nice." He stomped off after her.

"Ryder!" the same voice called again.

Ryder ignored him, stopping in front of Rose. He easily lifted her off the ground, ready to strike her again. Rose tried to protect her face. She was surprised her hands still listened to her with the pain coursing through her.

"Ryder!" the man called again, but it wasn't his name that drew Ryder's attention—it was the man's stance. He had pulled out his dagger and stood legs apart, looking behind them.

Ryder's grip on the front of her dress weakened, and Rose fell to the ground.

"What?" he asked as he looked back.

"Someone is coming! Can't you hear the hooves coming in our direction?" The man sounded panicked.

Ryder paused, and a slight look of fear passed across his features as he turned his attention in the direction of the sound. Just through the trees, Ryder could make out the small figure of a lone rider coming towards them.

"Relax," Ryder said. "It's just one horse." He cracked his knuckles. "Let's take care of this and be out of here, no more delays."

The woods were where her trail led. It wasn't hard to follow. She hadn't even been careful. He couldn't wrap his head around how no one had stopped her. Lord Leopold had to have better security. No wonder it was so easy for bandits to roam.

According to what he had heard, this wasn't an unknown path, and people who didn't have legal reasons to be in Futherfield tended to use it to avoid the guards at the front gate. And even if anyone was caught, they weren't punished as long as they weren't carrying anything harmful.

Futherfield was also an easy town to get into, so nobody really used this route until the bandits appeared. Since major roads were getting attacked, only obscure ones were safe.

Caius couldn't even start to figure out how she had found out about this. She had only been in Futherfield two days. Yet she already knew her way out of here.

He hadn't thought about this scenario. Too many things were going through his mind—he didn't want to think. Right now, finding her and bringing her back was far more important.

Caius heard it pierce through the trees—Rose screaming. He would recognize it anywhere. A feeling he almost didn't recognize engulfed him.

Fear.

It had been a long time since he'd felt fear, but Caius felt it all the way to his bones.

#### Chapter 284: Fifty Thousand Gold Coins

Caius could make out figures as he rode deeper into the woods. Just how far did she go? He had lost count of how many times Rose had screamed. This wasn't completely true—Caius knew exactly how many he'd heard, and with every scream, the fear he felt worsened.

He pushed the horse, not caring if it couldn't go any faster. As Caius got close, his eyes moved around, trying to find her. His gaze zoned in on a figure folded on the cold ground, her red hair scattered over her body.

His eyes darkened as he got closer, and Caius was already reaching for his sword. He turned his eyes to the bandits, and then everything slowed. Caius could count five men standing, ready to attack him—but that wasn't what made him pause.

No.

It was the figure standing only a few feet away from Rose with a sneer on his face. Caius would recognize that scar anywhere. After all, he was the one who gave it to him.

"Well, well, well," Ryder yelled. "What do we have here? If it isn't our little prince. Hehehe. You've grown."

Caius stopped the horse abruptly, pulling on its reins. The horse skidded over the uneven floor, and Caius jumped off the horse even before it completely stopped.

"Ryder," Caius spat out bitterly.

Ryder took a deep breath and tilted his head from side to side. "I've told you to call my name with respect. I am your senior, after all."

The men were confused as they looked from Ryder to Caius, unsure if they should attack, but their leader looked relaxed and wasn't giving any orders.

"What are you doing here?" Caius snarled and glanced past at Rose. She moved a little, and he sighed in relief. She was alive.

"I'm sure you can take a guess," Ryder said as he opened his arms wide.

Caius scanned the crew—there was no doubt about it. These were the bandits he was looking for. But not once would he have guessed that a member of the band of mercenaries he had joined would be part of the bandits.

Caius frowned. Ryder was clearly not a mercenary anymore. Mercenaries weren't bandits. They took up the odd jobs no one wanted—as long as the pay was good. They didn't attack carriages and take their goods unless it was a job. This thought made Caius pause.

"A bandit," Caius said, the grip on his sword tightening. He scoffed.

"What can I say? I have to go where the business is," Ryder replied with an unapologetic smile.

Caius narrowed his eyes. "Give her to me and you all can leave," Caius said. Rose was the important one here. He never thought he would ever run into Ryder here but he refused to be distracted.

He didn't plan to let them leave, but he needed to ensure that Rose was safe first, and right now, Ryder was standing between her and him. He could tell she was injured. Her clothes were intact, which gave him some semblance of relief.

He couldn't see her face with the way she was curled up on the ground, but he knew she was in pain. He knew exactly what Ryder was capable of. The man wouldn't go easy on her simply because she was a woman.

Caius' vision blurred. Forget about capturing, he would kill them all here, right now.

"This?" Ryder asked and threw out his leg, striking Rose's leg. She yelled and pulled her legs closer to herself.

Caius's grip on his sword tightened. The urge to run forward and pierce his sword through Ryder's chest was so strong, Caius had to bite the inside of his cheek to regain some control.

"Why do you want her?" Ryder asked, enjoying the look on Caius's face. "She's not some noble, is she? Besides, don't you think you're being a little rude? We haven't seen each other in what, six years? And this is how you speak to your senior, especially when you left me such a gift."

Ryder traced the scar across his face and licked his lips. "You know, I did think of returning the favor—but Papa already did that, didn't he?" Ryder moved his hand to his chin, mocking Caius.

Caius didn't even flinch. "Fifty thousand gold coins," he yelled.

Ryder narrowed his eyes. "Do you have it with you?" he asked.

Caius shook his head. "But you will get it—and be on your way out of Futherfield."

"Do you still think I'm stupid? I know the exact reason you're here is to hunt us. Why would you let us go and even give us such a ridiculous amount? Or wait—is she..." He paused and glanced at Rose. "That important?" Ryder's sneer widened. "I thought I heard something about this matter. On second thought, I think I'll keep her."

"Ryder!" his subordinate called again.

"Shut up!" He glared at him, then turned to the crown prince. "If you leave now, I might consider sparing your life. You're still the crown prince of Velmount. It would be a shame if you died here."

Caius took a step forward, then rushed toward the nearest man, striking him across the chest. The man didn't see it coming and was too slow to protect himself. Caius's sword sank deep, slashing across him. Unlike him, none of them wore armor.

Ryder pulled out his sword with excitement. "You always liked to take on fights you couldn't win."

The man Caius struck fell to the ground, and the rest of the men rushed at him—including Ryder.

It didn't take long for Caius to realize it would be useless to try to have a conversation with Ryder. Besides, he already knew he wasn't getting out of this without a fight.

Taking out the men with Ryder wouldn't be a problem. It was Ryder he had to worry about. He was a veteran mercenary, and Caius had only won one fight with him—and that was by playing dirty. However, this was a long time ago. Things were different now.

Caius decided to take care of the extras first so he could fight Ryder alone. He flipped his sword, wiping the blood off, as he got into position, ready to fight.

#### Chapter 285: Ryder Vs Caius

The first man rushed at Caius with a dagger and even blocked his first strike, but Caius was stronger, pushing the man backwards. He dodged the second assailant also rushing after him, then kicked out the legs of the man holding the dagger.

As soon as he lost his footing, Caius pierced his sword through his heart and, without missing a beat, pulled it out and struck the second bandit across the neck as he turned to try to attack Caius again.

The man stopped with his arms raised in the air, holding a sword, and blood poured out the side of his neck. Caius kicked him, and his sword slipped out of his neck. The man fell backward with a thud.

Ryder stood some feet away, swinging his sword around then sheathing and unsheathing it. Caius was glad he had stayed back. If Ryder had been the second bandit who tried to attack him while his hands were busy, he wouldn't have easily evaded and countered.

Ryder smiled again while Caius's eyes scanned the perimeter. He had been worried Ryder would use Rose as a shield. That would have been terrible, but he was grateful Ryder thought he could take him on.

Caius shuffled while the three of them slowly approached him. He glanced at Rose, and she still hadn't moved from the spot—but at least she wasn't within strike range.

Two of them rushed forward while Ryder remained behind, but Caius knew Ryder wasn't nice enough to give him the chance to fight off his men first. Ryder was looking for an opening to attack him while his hands were full.

Caius parried the first strike and barely avoided the slash from the second man. It was hard to fight two men without a shield, but that wasn't the most concerning thing—he could see Ryder from the corner of his eyes.

Caius swore. He had to move quickly. He doubted the same trick would work twice. He parried another attack and then another while taking a step back. The ground was uneven; it made movements difficult.

They simultaneously attacked. Caius slashed one of them, his sword slicing open his arm, while the other struck him in the side. The force caused a dent in the armor, but Caius had risked it to strike one of them. Caius noticed that Ryder was closer now. He had to move faster.

The man who had a cut in his arm jumped away, and Ryder glared at him. "What are you doing?"

The man moved closer, gripping his sword, but Caius had cut his dominant hand. He was bound to have trouble striking as before. It wasn't that Caius could take them out as easily as before, but he had to be wary of Ryder.

The uninjured one rushed at him, and Caius didn't hesitate—aiming for his neck even as the latter tried to strike his chest. His sword passed through the bandit's neck, and blood burst out, splashing onto his face as the man stared with a dazed expression.

Everything went eerily quiet, and the bandit with the cut arm scrambled, as if running towards Rose. This distracted Caius for a bit, and with his sword still in the neck of the dead man, he panicked, taking his eyes off Ryder.

Caius saw it coming but couldn't move fast enough to avoid it or stop it. He felt the slash just as he saw it. Ryder had slashed the space between the armor on his forearm and arm. There was no armor there to allow ease of movement.

Caius jumped away, his sword already out of the dead man's neck, who had fallen just as Ryder attacked. Caius glanced at his arm—it was a deep cut, and his arm was bleeding.

Caius looked at Ryder, who was coming closer, and the older man sneered. Caius tilted his head and tightened his grip on his sword, determined to end this.

The man who had run off wasn't running toward Rose; rather, he rushed toward Caius' horse and got on it. "I will go tell the others!" he yelled as he rushed away.

"You little bitch!" Ryder yelled toward him.

Caius took a step, rushing towards Ryder, who was distracted by telling the man off. He struck Ryder, aiming for his neck, but the latter easily blocked it and smiled in Caius's face.

They exchanged strikes for a bit, each one echoing through the woods. Caius didn't back down.

"You've gotten stronger," Ryder said with a grin, as Caius easily pushed him back with his attacks.

Caius struck again, this time aiming for his neck, and Ryder easily blocked it. It felt like he had the upper hand—but something was off. It was Ryder's attitude; the latter seemed a little too confident, almost like he was toying with him. He also seemed to be only on the defensive—not attacking, only defending himself from Caius's attacks.

Caius made to strike him—and was suddenly rooted to the spot, like a puppet whose string had been cut. He pushed through it, but his attack was slow, and Ryder struck him. Caius jumped backwards, his armor barely saving him.

"Finally," Ryder said with a little grin. He ran a hand through his hair. "I thought the poison would never kick in. Such strong strikes you have—definitely not close to the pathetic ones you had before."

Poison!



Caius's eyes widened in horror. Was Ryder's sword coated in it? Was that why he had seemed overly confident—because he managed to cut him? Caius swore—he should have thought about this. There was no one else who used more underhanded methods than Ryder.

Caius noticed his grip on the sword wasn't as strong, and his legs felt a little wobbly—but he could still move, and he could still fight. Caius charged, raising his sword as he rushed for Ryder.

Ryder shook his head. "So stubborn, still!" He charged again, and the two of them struck swords one more time—but this time, Ryder had a huge, satisfied grin on his face.

#### Chapter 286: You're Bleeding

Caius felt the sword fall from his hand as pain filled his wrist, but even that felt numb. He had only managed to strike Ryder a few times, and none were fatal. Ryder, on the other hand, had landed several slashes, worsening the effects of the poison currently flowing through his bloodstream.

Caius staggered, not wanting to fall. He tried to glance toward Rose, but he couldn't even turn his head in her direction and more importantly, he couldn't take his eyes off Ryder.

Ryder closed in, also dropping his sword with a devious smile. When he got close enough he punched Caius hard on the side of his face. Caius was propelled backward, his head snapping dangerously to the left—still, he didn't fall.

Ryder closed in, punching him again, and then again, until Caius's lips were busted and his face was bruised. Still, he didn't fall. Annoyed, Ryder kicked his legs out from under him, and Caius crashed to the ground, his armor clanking loudly against the earth and rocks.

Ryder was on him in an instant. "I told you to walk away, little boy!" he said, raining blows down on Caius's face.

"Don't worry, I won't kill you," he said between punches. "I'm simply returning the favor."

Suddenly, Ryder let out a cry of pain as a dagger was stabbed into his back. He swung around and struck Rose, who fell back. Ryder cursed, lifting himself off Caius, ready to attack her.

Caius immediately reached for his sword, which had fallen nearby, fighting through the numbness and moving his hand with all his strength. He grabbed the sword and drove it through Ryder's stomach with all the strength he had left. Then he collapsed back to the ground, all his energy spent.

Ryder turned to Caius with a startled expression, mouth open, blood pouring from his lips. His expression twisted into something sinister as he pulled the sword from his stomach, ready to impale Caius with it.

The sound of stone hitting bone echoed through the forest as Rose slammed a rock the size of a helmet right on top of Ryder's head with all her might.

He crumpled instantly, the sword slipping from his hand as he fell to the side, off of Caius. Rose didn't stop there—she rushed forward and dropped the stone on his head again, even though she had already bashed his skull in, she didn't want to take any chances.

Rose was in pain. Her stomach and sides ached from all the kicking, and her face burned, but she had known what she had to do when the opportunity arose.

She was surprised the crown prince had come after her, and even more surprised that he was willing to let the bandits go if they released her. She didn't know if that was a good thing or not, but she knew for certain that he was better than the bandits. She hadn't even been able to look him in the face.

When he started fighting, Rose could scarcely believe it. She had been a little relieved to see him—until she realized he was alone. Still, he took them down easily, until Ryder cut him with the poisoned blade.

When he collapsed and Ryder wouldn't stop hitting him, Rose knew she couldn't just stand by. Besides, if Ryder finished with the crown prince, he'd come after her next.

Her eyes had first rested on a sword beside one of the fallen bandits, but Rose worried she didn't have the strength to use it effectively. The dagger had been farther away, and she knew she risked being seen, but Rose threw caution to the wind.

Thankfully, Ryder was too engrossed in beating the prince to notice her approach—until she stabbed him in the back. And then she hit him with the stone when the dagger wasn't enough.

Rose rushed to Caius. He was bleeding from several places. The cuts weren't deep, but the blood wouldn't stop. His face was also badly beaten up but nothing that couldn't be healed.

"Rose," he said softly, trying to touch her face, but his hand wouldn't lift off the ground.

Rose reached for the skirt of her dress and ripped it. She knew she'd need a lot of fabric. It was a good thing women wore so many unnecessary layers.

"You're bleeding," Caius whispered. He sounded delirious.

"That's my line," Rose replied.

She tied the cloth around his bleeding arm, then his neck. It was hard with the armor in the way, but she did her best. She also tied up the wounds on his legs; there were a few cuts there too.

"Have you always been this beautiful?" he asked softly as she worked to stop his bleeding.

Rose was certain he was at death's door. She had to get him out of there quickly. However, he just wouldn't stop talking. She would think the cut on his lips would keep him quiet.

"I do like red, but not when you're bleeding," he added, and for a moment, Rose thought about tying his mouth shut.

Satisfied that he wouldn't bleed to death before she got him back to the estate, Rose got to her feet. Her knees hurt from kneeling too long.

She had expected some of Caius's men to arrive by now, but it was becoming clear the crown prince had come alone. Was he stupid? Aside from him bleeding to death and being poisoned, Rose now had to worry about more bandits returning, especially since one had escaped.

Rose caught sight of the horse she had ridden—it stood between the trees. She had half-expected the poor thing to run away, but it was munching on some grass not far off. That was when she noticed it had been tied. She wondered if one of the men had done that.

Rose walked to the horse, undid the rope, and led it to where Caius lay. She immediately realized she had an even bigger problem—how was she supposed to get him onto the horse?

For a moment, the thought of tying him to the back of the horse and dragging him through the woods was tempting—but she brushed it aside. He had come to her rescue. She had to remember that and they wouldn't be in this mess if it weren't for her.

#### Chapter 287: Saving Both of Us

Rose rolled Caius onto his side, which took a lot of effort, and grabbed his arm in an attempt to lift him, but it was like trying to lift a stone stuck to the ground—he wouldn't budge. Not even digging her foot into the ground helped. How was she going to get him on the horse?

Rose tried again, lifting his torso off the ground, which was very hard to do as the crown prince didn't have any strength to move on his own, making him even heavier. She stood behind his bent back as he sat on the ground and tried to lift him from under the armpits. He didn't budge, and when she let go of him, he fell, his head dropping low to his legs—as far as the armor would allow.

She tried again but quickly lost her footing and scratched her knees lightly against the floor.

"Blast it!" Rose swore as her grip slipped.

However, she wasn't giving up. She couldn't.

She placed the crown prince on his back and immediately started to undo his armor. It would most likely make him lighter, but she was still worried about how she'd get him on the horse.

"Leave me," Caius said as she started to take off his breastplate.

Rose glanced up at him but didn't respond. Instead, she continued to undo the armor and anything else that was likely making him heavier.

"Rose!" he called.

For someone who couldn't even lift a finger, his voice was as clear as day. She raised her head to look at him again.

"I am letting you go," he whispered. "You should leave me and go."

Rose was certain it was the blood loss that made him say that. Letting her go in this situation—it was too ridiculous. Rose was fully convinced Caius was out of touch with reality.

She wasn't trying to help him out of the goodness of her heart. He was the crown prince. If he died on her watch, she'd best kiss goodbye to her life and the lives of everyone she loved. Rose wasn't about to let that happen.

"Rose!" he called again when she didn't answer. "Leave me and get your—"

"With all due respect, Your Majesty," Rose said as she finished taking off the armor and any other heavy gear, "shut up."

Caius smirked. "That's not how you speak to—"

But Rose stood up and started walking away before he could finish talking.

She walked toward the dead Ryder, taking the dagger out of his body. The sound of the dagger exiting his flesh made her wince. Caius tried to see what she was doing, but he couldn't even move his head.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Saving both of us," Rose muttered as she gripped the dagger, staring at the blood on it.

She proceeded to use the dagger to cut the sides of Ryder's pants, from waist to boots, for easier removal. Her dress didn't have any more fabric to spare, and at this point, she risked revealing more than her stockings.

She dropped the dagger and took the pants. She walked to the horse and moved it as close as possible to the crown prince. Then she pushed down on the horse's back.

"Please go down," Rose whispered. "Please."

She didn't even know if the horse understood her, but this was the only chance she had of getting Caius onto it.

It took a while and a few stomps from the horse, but eventually, it bent its knees and dropped to the rocky ground.

"Thank you," Rose cried with joy, almost hugging the poor animal.

She wiped her nose and noticed some blood. She quickly wiped it on her dress. She was hurting all over, and the pain in her shoulder was worsening, but Rose ignored all of it and walked back to the crown prince.

She grabbed him by the shoulders again, putting her hands under his armpits and dragging him backward toward the horse with all her might. This time, he moved, and Rose almost did a little dance—but she still had to get him on the horse.

It was a struggle, and with every pull, Rose felt like her shoulders might dislocate. But eventually, after much struggle, she got him onto the back of the horse. At least he was quiet through this but that was when she realized she was unconscious.

"By the heavens!" Rose swore.

Still holding onto him, she tapped the horse. At first, the horse didn't move.

"Please, please," Rose cried.

She tapped again and the horse reluctantly started to lift itself and finally, it stood to its full height, lifting the crown prince completely off the ground. Rose immediately secured him with Ryder's pants, tying him up as tightly as she could.

She shook him several times to make sure he wouldn't fall off. It was going to be a bumpy ride, and she couldn't let him fall—at least not until they got out of the woods. Rose still couldn't believe he had really come after her alone.

When she was certain he wouldn't fall off after shaking him a few more times, she placed her foot in the stirrup and hoisted herself onto the saddle. She had to move quickly.

The horse shuffled as though the weight was too much, but it quickly balanced.

Rose lightly scratched the horse's coat as she whispered, "Thank you." Then she said, "Hiyah," which immediately got the horse moving.

Caius shook with every movement, his hands and legs flailing in the air. She was apologetic that the crown prince was in such a state, but this was the only way she could think to save his life.

She was gravely worried about the poison in his body. She had clearly heard Ryder mention it. She couldn't let the crown prince die—not only because she and her family would likely die with him, but because it was a little sad that he had come to her rescue and ended up like this.

Rose pushed the horse, riding through the woods as fast as she could without risking hitting a rock or tree. She easily remembered the path, as the bandits hadn't taken her far from where they'd found her.

She took the path that had led her onto the rocky trail and, riding as fast as she could, she got out of the woods.

## Chapter 288: To The Estate

Rose rode the horse through the field, and after some riding, she came back into the residential part of the town. She could see houses again and pressed on, urging the horse to go as fast as it could.

She still had quite a while to go before she could get Caius to the estate, and she was deeply worried they wouldn't make it in time. The crown prince was tied to the back of the horse, flailing with every movement while also still bleeding. Rose was sure this position was uncomfortable, but right now, his discomfort was the least thing to worry about.

Rose was incredibly worried about the poison, and she knew him being unconscious wasn't a good thing. She had to get him to the estate as fast as she could and hopefully, they would be able to save him.

She heard gasps as she rode through the streets. People pointed, and more people stepped out as she passed in front of their houses. Rose didn't slow down, didn't glance at them—just headed straight on, glad that the road was mostly empty enough for her to maneuver the horse through.

"Get out of the way!" she yelled as she turned around the corner to see a rider who had stopped right in the middle of the road. He was speaking to a man who stood beside the horse and was pointing in the direction she came from.

He lifted his head, looking offended, and Rose realized he wasn't alone—but that wasn't the problem. She was forced to stop her horse when they wouldn't get out of the way.

"Blast it!" Rose screamed, wincing at the pain in her shoulder as she pulled on the reins too hard.

"Rose," she heard an agitated voice in the midst of the men on horses, and that was when she realized she might have run into the crown prince's men.

"Thomas!" she cried, and he rode his horse towards her, the men moving out of the way to let him through.

"What happened? We have been trying to find you and the—" He tilted his head, noticing what was behind Rose.



"The crown prince, poisoned..." Rose frowned as she realized her vision was blurry, and she couldn't speak more even if she tried.

Her grip on the reins loosened, and she felt herself start to slip off the horse. Rose internally swore—she was going to fall, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. At least, she got the prince to safety.

"Rose!" Thomas yelled and grabbed her arm to try to keep her on the horse while he struggled with his own. Her head slacked, and her weight pulled her to the opposite side.

"Quick!" he yelled at the men. "Get her off."

This was the last thing Rose heard before she went under.

Thomas swore as the men moved too slowly for him. They safely got Rose off the horse, and she rested on the guard's shoulder. Her face was badly bruised; her dress was also in a terrible state, as though she had been attacked by some animal.

Thomas couldn't even begin to comprehend what could have possibly happened. The crown prince was unconscious and tied to the back of her horse, and Thomas was worried he might be dead. He moved his horse closer and put a finger right under the crown prince's nose—and he was breathing.

Thomas sighed in relief, but they weren't out of danger yet. He had heard Rose say something about the crown prince being poisoned. Thomas had too many questions.

He wished Prince Rylen was here, but he was simply here by chance. They were returning to the estate, and Prince Rylen had gone ahead while Thomas had been told to stay back.

They hadn't heard any news from the crown prince, and where they had been sent to was another dead end. Prince Rylen had immediately set off to the estate, as he had been quite uncomfortable about letting the crown prince go alone.

They had been a little slow to return to the castle, as Thomas suspected he might get sent a messenger soon. The last thing he had expected was to run into Rose and the crown prince.

"Lord Thomas," the man holding Rose called. "What do we do?"

"Put her on my horse," Thomas said instantly.

The guard nodded and placed Rose in front of him, sitting sideways, her head on his chest, and he held her with one hand to keep her steady.

"Secure His Highness. Make sure nothing is amiss. Both of you are with me!" Thomas pointed to the two men that held Rose down and the man that handed her to him. "Let's get them to the estate. The rest of you head out the way she came and see what this is about."

The men raised their hands in salute, and they separated. Thomas rode fast with Rose in his arms while the men rode with the crown prince—one making sure he wasn't falling off while the other rode the horse.

Thomas rode as fast as he could with one hand, making his way to the estate. Approaching the gate, he noticed that it was opening, and Prince Rylen and the few men he had ridden out with were stepping out. As soon as Prince Rylen saw him, he rode up to him, but Thomas didn't stop.

"We have to get them inside now! Get a physician. His Highness is gravely injured!"

Prince Rylen's face went pale immediately, and he moved out of the way while signaling for the gates to remain open, while two of the men accompanying him rushed back in carrying the message.

"What happened?" he asked as he rode side by side with Thomas.

"I do not know, Prince Rylen. I found Rose riding with the crown prince, and they were both bloodied. She fell unconscious before she could tell us anything other than His Highness was poisoned."

"Poisoned!" Prince Rylen yelled out in horror. "Are you certain about this?"

"She said it before she went unconscious."

Prince Rylen swore. "They had a few cases of the men being poisoned, and only a few survive depending on how heavy the dose was."

Rylen glanced at Rose, whom Thomas held as tightly as he could to his chest. He couldn't see much of her face from this angle, but he could see the damage done and the rips in her clothes.

"Were they attacked?" Prince Rylen asked—more for himself than anything else.

"I think so," Thomas replied. "I sent the rest of the men in the direction she had come from, but unfortunately, that's all the information I have."

They were through the gates now and close to the main house. The front door had been thrown open, and Lady Deana and Lord Leopold rushed out.

Thomas pulled on the reins, and a guard walked to him. He carefully handed Rose to them and jumped off the horse. He wanted to take her back, but Lady Deana was already leading the guard away.

"Rose!" she cried. "I should have stopped her from going. I am sorry."

"Is the physician here?" Rylen asked as they got the crown prince off the horse.

"Yes," a voice said, and an older man moved closer.

"Just one?" Prince Rylen spat out. "Get more! Take him—and get someone to look at Rose."

\*\*\*

Rose's head hurt—that was the first thing that registered—and then the pain in her shoulder crept in. It was more intense, and she couldn't help but let out a groan of pain.

It caused her to open her eyes. At the pain, she grabbed her shoulder and was startled when she noticed there was someone staring straight at her. She jumped back, startled.

"It's just the physician," a voice said, and Rose turned to see Thomas sitting in a corner.

"How do you feel?" the physician asked and moved even closer, checking her eyes.

Rose winced. "My shoulder hurts, my head too... and my stomach."

The physician nodded. "I noted a lot of swelling and bruising," he said and stepped back.

Rose didn't recognize the room they were in. It was smaller than the one she shared with the crown prince, but it was still a decent room. The windows were open, and light poured in, illuminating everything.

"I don't think you wil—"

"I hate to interrupt when you've only just woken up and you're in so much pain, but I need you to tell me exactly what happened," a voice said from the door.

Rose was startled as she looked up to see Prince Rylen walk through the open door. His hair was a mess, and there was blood on his clothes. His face was etched with more worry, and Rose felt her heart tighten.

"Prince Rylen," Rose called, trying to push herself to a more upright position so she could properly address him, but he stopped her with his hand.

"Just speak as you are—and don't leave a single detail out."

## Chapter 289: At The Estate

Rose grabbed the metallic cup close to her chest. It was steaming hot, but the physician had told her it was best to drink it this hot. Her tongue and a little part of her lips had been scalded from the heat, and she couldn't risk taking another drink just yet, so she just held it close to her chest.

She noticed her clothes had been changed into something more comfortable. The torn dress had been done away with, and she couldn't feel dirt in her hair—but more importantly, she wasn't cold.

Prince Rylen had left the room as soon as she recounted the details. He didn't ask why she had been trying to leave, and he didn't fault her. He just wanted to know what had happened.

She had noticed his expression darken when she mentioned Ryder, and it had only gotten worse when she mentioned the poison. He had then nodded and left the room without another word, looking deep in thought.

Rose dreaded that she was in trouble. She had wanted to ask about the crown prince, but she wasn't given any chance to, and as soon as Prince Rylen left, the physician had handed her the cup with the dark green liquid.

Rose eyed the contents, but it was pretty sweet-smelling—she could smell mint and some cloves. Rose wasn't sure, but the taste wasn't that bad. It was just the heat that made it an awful drink. She tried to take another sip but stopped herself for fear of her tongue.

"Take it," the physician repeated. "Your injuries aren't severe, and in a few days, the swelling will be less and the bruises will heal."

Rose nodded as she looked at him. "Thank you," she whispered.

He narrowed his eyes a little at her, and then, seeing Thomas glare at him, he hurriedly nodded and left the room.

Rose slowly turned her head to Thomas. He was just sitting there, not saying a word. It was almost easy to forget his presence. He wasn't wearing his armor like when she had first run into him, and he looked visibly distressed.

"Thank you," Rose said softly to him.

She didn't know what would have happened if she hadn't run into Thomas at the time she did. She had been pushing herself more than she could take.

Thomas grunted and looked away from her. "How do you feel?"

If she hadn't been listening closely, she wouldn't have heard what he said.

Rose shrugged, still clutching the cup. The brew didn't look like it was getting any colder. She blew on it and brought it to her lips. At least, it wasn't as scalding hot.

"Not bad," she finally said as she put the empty cup to the side. "Do you know anything about the crown prince?" she asked.

Rose gripped the sheets tightly. No one was saying anything yet, but she was certain she wouldn't get away from this without punishment.

Not only had she tried to escape, but the crown prince had to save her in the process, endangering his life. She wondered if they were waiting for the crown prince to wake up before giving judgment.

She was even surprised she was in such a comfortable room. Rose had half expected to be locked in the dungeons as soon as she woke up.

"His Highness is still unconscious," Thomas replied with a grim expression.

Rose opened her mouth to ask more questions, but a knock on the closed door drew her attention to it. She jerked her head, and Thomas stood up and walked to the door.

He pulled it open, revealing Lady Deana, and behind her were a few servants. Rose immediately pulled herself to a sitting position. The pain she felt at the sudden movement made her freeze for a moment, but the guilt she felt was even more intense. She kept her gaze low as Lady Deana burst into the room, rushing to the bed.

"Lady Deana," Rose said as the Lady approached.

"Rose," she cried, and got to the bed.

She sat by the side and grabbed Rose's face and stared hard, turning the poor girl's face left then right as she studied her.

"Your nose isn't bleeding anymore. I was worried about that," she cried.

Rose suddenly remembered she didn't know what happened to the bag of coins. It must have fallen off either during her run or her struggle with the bandits. It was an odd thing to think, but it was what her mind fixated on—and the first thing she wanted to do was apologize. Not just for the missing coins, but everything else.

"This is going to scar," Lady Deana was saying as she studied Rose's face.

Rose was unsure if she was speaking about the cut on her lip or the bruise on her cheek. However, that wasn't the problem. This wasn't the sort of reception she was expecting.

Even while she had ridden the crown prince back to the estate, it had occurred to her that she would be punished for this—but she knew the punishment for not bringing him would be even worse.

"Don't worry about that. Beatrice knows everything about how to make a scar fade. Just heal up soon," Lady Deana was still speaking while holding onto Rose's face.

Her hands were hurting a little, but Rose didn't have the heart to tell her to remove them. She just stared at her oddly as she spoke.

"I'm sorry, Lady Deana. I shouldn't—"

"I'm sure you had your reasons," Lady Deana replied. "But I was very hurt, and you did break my trust. But I'm glad you're safe. With the bandits around, what were you thinking? I'm sure there must have been some other ways. That was too dangerous of you."

Rose simply nodded her head as Lady Deana spoke. She didn't have anything to say about her anger—nor could she get angry at her scolding. At least all she got was the scolding.

"Why did you need to leave?" Lady Deana asked.

Rose was a little shocked at the question, as Lady Deana had seemed as though she did care to know but understood that it must have been difficult.

Anyone would try to leave if they were stuck in a situation they didn't like, but Rose didn't say that.

"I needed to see my sick mother," she whispered. "Fat'er told me she was getting a little worse, and he fears the worst. My father isn't one to make a fuss out of nothing. I wanted to see her as soon as possible. There is no way I can wait until after winter. It would be too late then."

It wasn't until Lady Deana wiped the tears from her face that Rose realized she was crying.

"Well, you didn't have to take such a risky step. You could have been killed. Why didn't you just ask His Highness?"

Rose controlled her expression. Surely, the crown prince she knew wasn't the same one everyone else knew, for them to easily suggest this.

"I did," Rose said without hesitation. "He refused."



Lady Deana looked dumbfounded for a moment, and Rose felt a little good at this. She had been worried all the royals and nobles had something off about them, but for Lady Deana to be appalled that he wouldn't let her see her sick mother—Rose was relieved.

"I'm sure there is some explanation," she said after some time. "However, this is very worrisome. He hasn't woken up, and the house is quite worried. I fear for you," she whispered. "Word has been sent to the castle, and we are hoping the best physicians will arrive soon."

It was her tone that had Rose more worried than what she said. She wondered exactly what had been sent to the castle. She hadn't had the chance to think about it—but what would happen to her if the crown prince never woke up?

"You should get some rest," Lady Deana said. "Don't hesitate to let me know if you need anything."

Rose nodded, watching Lady Deana stand up with a smile. "Thank you," she said, more from a lack of what to say rather than how she really felt.

Lady Deana kept her smile and then slowly turned away from Rose and walked out of the room, the servants going out with her and leaving Rose alone.

Rose looked around the room again, and her chest felt tight. Lady Deana hadn't said anything but it was hard not to read the tone in her voice. She grabbed her arms for some time and then slipped between the covers, laying her head on the pillow.

She closed her eyes and internally prayed that the crown prince would wake up. However, Rose wasn't sure if that was also a good thing. It would be better than her current situation but she had tried to escape and then this had happened to the crown prince.

Rose shut her eyes. It wasn't supposed to be like this. Not at all. Now what was she going to do?

## Chapter 290: The King's Decree

Prince Rylen gripped the letter in his hands until his knuckles turned white and the edges of the letter crinkled. He had foreseen this, but he hadn't expected action to be taken so quickly.

He had thought the crown prince's health would take precedence—perhaps after His Highness was out of danger, this would be addressed: the appropriate punishment for Rose's supposed involvement in the crown prince's current state.

Unfortunately, that was clearly not the case, not with the letter he held and certainly not with the words on it.

Rylen had tried his best to keep Rose out of the account he sent to the castle, but it was nearly impossible. He was required to give as accurate a report as possible, especially in such a critical situation.

He had tried to mention her only in passing, stating that the crown prince had gone off alone, refusing to be accompanied by any of the guards. However, that didn't work. Rylen had expected that he and the men who had accompanied His Highness to Futherfield and had let him go off alone would be the ones punished, but there was no mention of that.

"Prince Rylen," Thomas called after some time, noticing Rylen's grave expression. "What does the letter say?"

Rylen slowly lifted his head and looked at Thomas, dumbfounded for a few moments. Then his lips finally moved. "Rose is to be sent to the castle on charges of crimes against the kingdom and the royal family. It says here she led His Highness to the bandits. They're charging her with high treason."

"What?" Thomas asked in horror.

Rylen was not shocked at Thomas' reaction even saying it out loud told him just how insane it sounded. Nothing about this made sense.

They were in Rylen's bedchambers. Rylen was seated at his desk with a lamp nearby to light the letter for him to read, while Thomas stood next to him, keeping a respectful distance as he patiently waited for Rylen to finish reading.

They couldn't be with the crown prince—he was being treated by the physicians sent from the castle, who insisted they work without anyone else present. Paul, the crown prince's official physician, had arrived, so Rylen hadn't objected and had stepped outside to read the letter Paul handed him.

The physicians had arrived just after midnight. Rylen had been surprised they made it so quickly—the journey through darkness and snow must have been harrowing—but the crown prince's life was at stake.

The letter bore the king's seal; it was clearly a royal decree. But everything about the contents screamed the queen's influence. This was a death sentence. There was no doubt about it. If Rose were sent to the castle, she would be executed. And to make matters worse, the crown prince was still unconscious. That wasn't even the worst part—there was a chance he might die.

Paul hadn't been able to tell him anything before the doors were closed, but Rylen had seen the grim expression on his face. He knew it wasn't good.

"Yes," Rylen said, trying not to crush the letter in his hand.

"Is she going to be killed?" Thomas mumbled, his voice softer than Rylen had ever heard.

Rylen paused. As much as he wanted to say he didn't know, he knew that would be a lie. He knew exactly what was going to happen. The only real question was whether it would be a public execution or a private one. She might go to trial, but it wouldn't matter. The verdict had already been decided the moment this letter was written.

What Rylen hated even more than the fact that Rose was going to be punished for something she didn't do was what she was being framed for—leading His Highness to the bandits. That was the most ridiculous part.

Rose had nothing to do with the bandits. He would know because no one even knew who was truly behind them yet. The most obvious suspect was Galdoris. They had resented Velmount ever since the incident with Caius' grandmother. But Caius had said it wasn't them, and Rylen trusted the crown prince's judgment.

His Highness might be a little fuzzy about many things, and Rylen had found himself unconsciously questioning the crown prince's actions. But when it came to matters of the kingdom—affairs of state, reading political plots—Rylen had full faith in him.

"Most likely," Rylen said at last, folding the letter and slipping it into his inner coat pocket.

He could probably stall for half a day at most, but if Rose was not in the castle by nightfall, he feared what kind of measures would be taken. The crown prince was also being summoned to the castle for proper treatment, but Rylen knew that wouldn't happen until he was well enough to be moved.

"We can't let that happen!" Thomas burst out.

Rylen looked at him from the corner of his eye. Of course, he already knew that. Beyond moral reasons, he might end up dead if the crown prince woke up and learned what had happened while he was unconscious.

Caius had risked his life to save her, even going as far as to get poisoned. Rylen doubted he'd be fine with letting her die after all that. He had to think of something. Unfortunately, the only person who could stop this was lying unconscious a few rooms away.

Rylen tugged his coat tighter around himself. It was bitterly cold—especially at night. Though a fire burned in the hearth, he could still feel the chill seeping into his bones. It felt especially sharp tonight.

"We can't," he said quietly. "The only thing we can do is pray that His Highness wakes up soon. He can stop this."

Thomas paled, but he didn't say anything. Neither of them could. They were still bound by rules, and Rylen knew exactly how dangerous it was to overstep them.

First of all, they weren't in some private manor. The Futherfields could be trusted, but they were loyal to the crown. If they found out there was a decree of high treason against Rose, Rylen doubted they would be willing to go against the king's orders. And Rylen couldn't blame them. Even he was having a hard time reconciling with it.

"Are we just going to send her to the castle?" Thomas asked. His fists clenched tightly at his sides.

Rylen frowned slightly as he looked at him. He could recall how much Thomas had once disliked Rose. When has that changed? He supposed it was a good thing. Considering everything the poor woman had been through, she deserved at least that.

"We don't have to do that until sunrise. And I don't think anyone else knows what's in the letter. However, we cannot disobey His Majesty's orders for long. We would be putting ourselves and Lord Leopold's entire family, at risk."

"We still can't send her to the castle. She'll be killed."

Rylen nearly rolled his eyes. The boy was as headstrong as ever. "That doesn't matter. You should know better than to go against the king's orders."

"But His Highness is the future king. Doesn't his orders matter?" Thomas asked.

"Yes," Rylen said with a weary sigh. "If he gave us one. But he can't. And even if we know what he would want, we can't act on our own judgment. Do you understand me?"

Rylen raised his voice slightly at the end. He felt like he had to. Thomas could be stubborn—especially when it came to doing what he believed was right.

"Yes, Prince Rylen."

Rylen nodded. "Good. For now, we'll keep an eye on the crown prince and hope Lord Paul can deal with the poison."

He didn't believe it. Caius had been badly poisoned. By the time they got to the estate and removed the fabric Rose had used to bind his wounds, the injury had turned purple. The veins around each cut were swollen and discolored.

The Futherfield physicians had been unable to create an antidote, and Rylen knew their best physician was skilled enough to serve in the royal court. That didn't give him much hope.

"We should go," Rylen said, finally rising from his seat. He had stepped into his room for a moment of privacy. Something had told him not to read the letter in the hallway outside the crown prince's chambers.

Thomas placed a palm on the table and pushed himself upright. He couldn't do anything now—only wait.

He followed Rylen to the door. Rylen intended to keep watch over the crown prince through the night. That was the only thing he could do.

Perhaps, sometime between dawn and noon, the crown prince would open his eyes. If he didn't, Rylen might have to be the one to tell Rose what will happen to her. He didn't want to. He would do everything to avoid it.

Which meant the crown prince had to wake up.

He wondered just how much Paul knew. Regardless of what Paul suspected, Rylen knew the physician's priority would be to save the prince. Their lives—and Rose's—depended on it.