

THE KING'S LOVER

Chapter 36: The Dungeon.

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Martha didn't leave immediately. She said a few other distasteful words and called Rose names. When she was finally satisfied, and she saw that Rose would neither beg nor indulge her, she turned around and left.

Rose lay on her side, protecting both her back and her side that had been kicked. At this point, she was wondering if she should have just let the Queen's ladies-in-waiting strip her naked, as she wouldn't have had to go through this if she had just walked without any clothes to her room.

Could she make a request? However, she doubted a mere servant could call on a steward, and Mister Henry was the only other person who knew that was at least low enough for her to call upon. There was no way she could request for Prince Rylen let alone the crown prince.

Rose couldn't help but find it a bit odd that Martha had this much power to throw her in the dungeons. At least one of the heads would have been involved — or was she that hated?

She could blame the guards; the proof was right there on the bed. Even Edna didn't believe her when she said the crown prince gave it to her. The crown prince should have just let her continue on her journey with her ripped dress. It was his fault.

Rose sought sleep, but it was far from her. At least she could find some solace in her dreams, but even that didn't want to give her peace. How long would they leave her here, and how long before anyone who could do something about it would notice? Rose didn't know, but maybe if she stayed here, she would be free from the crown prince.

This almost seemed better than what had transpired this afternoon. She shut her eyes. Why couldn't she fall asleep? She thought as tears ran down her face. She didn't want to think about all these thoughts.

"Hey!" the same old man called to her.

Rose didn't like that his cell was right next to hers. There were at least a dozen cells, and she had to be locked next to a creep. There was someone in the cell with the man, but he just stayed in the corner with a hood over his head.

Rose ignored the creep and kept lying down until she felt a hand try to grip her leg. Rose had never moved away so fast. She rushed to the other side of the cell, not caring about the pain that burned through her body at the sudden movement.

The man smiled at her, and Rose wanted to throw up. She buried her head in her legs as she whispered over and over again, "Let me out of 'ere, please. I promise I didn't steal anyt'ing."

Rose must have dozed off because she woke up to a loud noise as someone rushed down the stairs, pulling a screaming girl. Rose was startled awake, cleaning her face streaked with tears as she tried to figure out what was happening.

She wasn't the only one who was shocked. The warden stood up from his table with the little lamp. It was the only source of light in the whole dungeon. Even though it was bright as can be outside, the dungeons were darker than night. The men in the next cell also looked up, and Rose slowly stood to her feet. As much as she was curious, her feet didn't move closer to the bars.

After what seemed like an eternity of screaming, someone appeared at the bottom of the stairs. It was Mister Henry, and the screaming lady was Martha. She had good reason to scream too, as Mister Henry had a locked grip on her earlobe and he pulled her down the stairs with it.

"Where is she?" Mister Henry asked when he got to the bottom of the stairs.

"Steward," the warden said with a smile. "We don't see you around these parts often."

"I don't have time for this. Where is she? The young woman my stupid niece brought here!" Henry pulled her ear again as he asked this question, and Martha started another round of screaming.

"Would you shut up?" he yelled right at her. "Best pray His Highness doesn't find out about what you just did! Now answer me, warden, where is she?"

"Mister 'enry," Rose called as she stepped forward. The back of the dungeon was dark; anyone just stepping in would have trouble finding her.

"Rose!" Mister Henry cried and rushed towards her, dragging his niece by her ear.

"I heard what happened," he said with a bow. "Please forgive my niece. She is an idiot and— and..." Mister Henry stuttered.

Rose didn't think she had ever seen him this bothered. He even went as far as to bow to her. Rose thought that was a little too much, even if his niece had done something wrong. He was bowing to her — a mere whore.

"She stole the crown prince's co—"

"Shut your mouth!" Henry yelled and yanked down the hand holding her earlobe.

Martha screamed and tried to break free, but her uncle was quite strong. "How can you pull my ear for a whore? Why are you begging a thief?"

"Let her out!" Henry yelled to the warden.

"I am not letting a thief out," the warden retorted.

Henry raised his head and glared at the warden. "Then I suppose you don't mind explaining to the crown prince why you won't let her out."

"Yes, she stole from him!"

"Are you sure, or did my niece here tell you that? Do you think anyone would be insane enough to steal from the crown prince? And even if they did, why in the goddess' name would it be a coat? Wouldn't it be something more valuable? Now let her out this instant."

The warden looked very confused, but he could clearly see the panicked look on the steward's face and the way he kept brutally pulling on his niece's ear. The girl was weeping and trying to break free, but her uncle wouldn't let go.

Though with a little hesitation, the warden finally stepped forward and took the key from his waistband to unlock the door. He slowly opened it, letting Rose out. She stumbled out, almost falling forward as she walked out.

Chapter 37: Out Of The Dungeons

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"Thank ye, Mister 'Enry," Rose said with a bow as she stepped out of the cell. She could barely stand. Her bare toes wiggled as they touched the cold floor. She clasped her hands in front of her as she bowed. Rose was unsure how she felt; she was just glad this was over with and she didn't have to spend too long in the cold dungeons.

"No, no, no," Henry cried. "Don't thank me. You shouldn't be here at all." As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he pushed his niece down to the ground.

"Uncle!" Martha cried, as her hands hit the floor first, protecting her face. "What are you doing?"

"You best start pleading for your job—or better still, your life."

"What? I'm not going to beg—ahh!" Martha screamed as Henry pulled her ear again.

Martha kicked her legs out as she once again screamed in pain. Her ear was sore and red. Her eyes were bloodshot, and her voice was starting to go hoarse, but it didn't stop her from screaming.

"You don't seem to understand the severity of what you've done. You threw an innocent woman into the dungeons—and not for any reason but because of what the crown prince gave to her. Do you understand that we could both lose our jobs and suffer even more severe consequences for this stupid act of yours? Just what were you thinking?"

"It's not wrong that I reported a crime, Uncle," Martha screamed as she cried her eyes out. "Why would the crown prince give her his coat in the first place?"

"That is none of your business. Now apologize to her!" Mister Henry yelled.

"I'm sorry," Martha said, but the apology didn't sound genuine, and even her uncle didn't buy it.

"Apologize properly. You aren't fooling anyone with that half-assed apology of yours," Mister Henry yelled at his niece.

"I'm sorry, Rose," Martha said with a sniff.

"It's okay," Rose finally said. She just wanted to go back to her room and get some sleep. She was just happy this got resolved in time.

"No, it's not," Mister Henry said and bowed. "Please forgive my stupid niece. And should she bother you again, let me know instantly, and I will put her in her place."

Rose nodded and grabbed the wall as she started to move up the stairs. "Thank ye for gettin' me out of 'ere," she said as she slowly went up the stairs.

"Let me escort you to the servants' quarters," the steward said with a bright smile.

"Nay, ye don't 'ave to do that," Rose said as she continued up the stairs. "I'm fine. I'm sure the steward has far more important t'ings to attend to."

"Nothing is more important than this," Henry said and rushed after her, abandoning his niece on the floor, not caring whether she got on her feet or not.

It was clear how Martha had been able to call guards on Rose. Martha's uncle was the steward. There was no resemblance, and if she hadn't found out today, she never would have guessed—not even their personalities were alike.

She got to the top of the stairs to see Mister Henry behind her. Rose barely spared him a glance and just continued walking as carefully as she could toward the servants' quarters. Just as she was about to take the turn that would lead her there, Edna appeared.

"Rose!" she cried and rushed toward her. "You're out."

Rose gave her a curt smile, but when the maid got close enough, she couldn't help it—she put all her weight on the poor woman. "Mister 'Enry got me out," she whispered against her.

"Rose!" Edna screamed.

"I'm fine," she said and tried to push herself up again. "I'm just tired and maybe a little 'ungry." She tried to laugh to make it seem lighter, but she only ended up coughing.

"I am so glad, thank you, Mister Henry. I'll get her to her room," Edna said and adjusted Rose so she could support her while she walked.

"I'm grateful," she whispered.

They got to the door of the room she shared with Martha, and Rose felt her eyes well up. It had been an absolutely worst day. She hadn't even had the chance to mourn properly—to mourn what she had lost.

"Rose," the steward called as Edna made to open the door.

Rose had completely forgotten about his presence and couldn't help but be taken aback when he called her. "Mister 'Enry," she replied and turned her head in his direction.

"If it isn't too much to ask, would you please not inform the crown prince of this?" the older man asked. He looked uncomfortable as he made his request.

Rose paused for a second. The steward seemed to have misunderstood. She didn't think the crown prince would lift a finger about her situation. He wouldn't care, but since the steward was so bothered, she could adhere to his request.

"Yah," she replied.

"Thank you," he said.

Rose shook her head as she turned away. "Nay, I should be thankin' ye instead." Who knows how long she would have stayed there if he hadn't come to get her? Rose wondered how he had found out.

"Edna, make sure you get her something to eat and tend to her wounds. The crown prince might call..." The steward let the rest of his words trail off.

Rose's stomach twisted as she tasted bile. She didn't think she could bear it tonight. Not tonight. She might actually jump off the balcony if she had to endure anything else tonight.

"Yes, I will."

"Mister 'Enry," Rose called. "May I ask for a favor?" She pulled herself from Edna. She needed to be on her feet for this.

Henry looked hesitant, but he knew he couldn't refuse—not after what his niece had done to her. "If it's within my power," Henry replied.

"I don't t'ink I can see the crown prince today," Rose said with water in her eyes. "Would it be too muc' to ask ye to help me with that?" she asked.

Chapter 38: Stolen

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Mister 'Enry lost all the color in his face. "I can't, I'm sorry," he said, lowering his head. "If His Highness calls on you, you will have to respond."

Rose nodded and wiped her face. "I figured," she said with a dejected look on her face and turned toward the door.

"Get enough rest. You don't have to do any duties for the rest of the day," Mister Henry said.

Rose slowly nodded as she walked into the room. She knew she would scrub as many floors as possible if it meant she didn't have to deal with the prince tonight, but that was clearly not going to happen.

The bed was exactly as she had left it, but her bag was in a different position. Rose wondered if she was imagining things. The guards had forcefully dragged her out of the room—it might have moved then. Besides, she didn't have time to think about it, as all she wanted to do was lie down.

Rose dropped onto the bed with a loud thud and groaned in pain. She had landed a little too hard on her side, the one that had been kicked. She immediately rolled onto her front. Though it was a little uncomfortable to lie on her chest, it was currently the only position she could lie in that didn't hurt so much.

"Are you in pain?" Edna asked.

Rose merely grunted in reply.

"I'll get you some water to clean the wounds and some balm to help with the pain."

Rose nodded and started to cry again. "I want to go 'ome, Edna. I don't care about anythin' else. I just want to see mi mother, mi father, and Ander again. I want to get married and live wit' him. What did I do wrong?"

"I know. You did nothing wrong. It was just a series of unfortunate circumstances."

"Why did it 'ave to 'appen to me?"

"I'll get you something to eat," Edna said, unsure of how to console her. She didn't know if Rose would ever be able to do any of those things, and she didn't want to lie to her.

Rose smiled tightly and faced the wall.

"I'm sorry, Rose. I really wish I could help."

"Tis not yer fault," she simply said.

"After eating, get some sleep. I'm sure it will make you feel better."

Rose didn't reply to this, and she heard Edna stand up from the ground and head for the door. She was sure nothing could make her feel better—not even sleeping for hours. Getting out of here was the only thing that could.

After she had eaten and cleaned up, Rose fell into a deep sleep she couldn't help. She was mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausted. When she eventually woke up, it was dark, and there was just a little candle in the room. There was no sign of Martha, but that was unimportant. What was more important was, that it was clearly past the time she would wait in the crown prince's room.

Rose's eyes opened wide, and she felt relief flood her body. Did something happen? She didn't care. Didn't want to know. If he had someone else to do that with, Rose couldn't be happier. As long as it didn't involve her.

She lifted herself to a sitting position and pulled her bag closer to herself. The prince's coat hadn't been returned to her after the guards took it. She didn't know what had happened to it and hoped it wouldn't cause more trouble later on. Rose could hear sounds outside the room. Servants were clearly moving up and down the hall, but she didn't step outside to find out what was happening. If they would let her sleep, Rose intended to sleep for however long she could. She wouldn't leave her room unless she was called upon, and she wasn't hungry. Edna had been quite generous when she gave her some food before she slept.

Rose frowned as she realized something was missing. She wanted to rearrange her bag, as she wasn't able to do that after she returned because she was so tired. However, as soon as she poured out the contents of her bag, she knew some things were missing.

At first, she thought it was just her wedding present, but even her flute was gone. Rose's gaze darkened. She had had enough. There was no other person who would take such obvious things from her.

She stood to her feet, and Rose almost fell on her butt as the world spun. She managed to grab the wall to save herself, but she needed a few moments for the spinning to stop and her vision to clear. She picked up the light and marched to Martha's section. She wasn't even going to ask her. She knew Martha would lie about it. The only way she could get her things back was if she found them herself.

Rose felt her heart squeeze. Martha was cruel. She could do something as evil as breaking them or burning them—or, yet again, she could accuse Rose of stealing them. Rose walked to the dresser and pulled out the drawers. She saw a few trinkets and some makeup, but nothing that looked like the flute or the swallows.

Rose pulled out the second drawer and also came up empty. She checked under the dresser, and yet again, nothing. Then she moved to Martha's bag. It was more than five times bigger than hers, and it would take her a while to check it.

Rose didn't hesitate as the idea came to her head. She just flipped the bag over, pouring the contents onto the floor. As soon as the bag overturned, the door opened, and Martha walked in. She had a neutral look on her face until she saw the mess in the room.

"You riffraff! How dare you search my things?" she yelled as she rushed toward Rose, ready to hit her and push her away from her belongings.

Chapter 39: You Thief

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"You t'ief!" Rose shot back, turning around to face Martha with her flute in hand. "Is this yers?" she asked, anger blazing in her eyes.

Martha stopped in her tracks immediately. "No, but I'm pretty sure you stole it, it doesn't belong to you, she scoffed. "You had no right to go through my things."

"I could say the same t'ing about ye. Ye stole from me. After accusin' me, ye are the thief."

"It's you, not me. And I wonder what people are going to say when they come into the room and see you with the evidence in your—"

"Where is it?" Rose didn't care about anything else that would come out of Martha's mouth.

At first, she had thought Martha was simply jealous of the crown prince's attention toward her, which she thought was silly. There was nothing to be jealous about—she would trade places in an instant. However, now she was pretty certain Martha was cruel and enjoyed being mean to her.

"What?" Martha asked with a sneer. "Speak properly; I can't hear you. And how dare you speak to me like that? Just because my uncle favored you earlier today doesn't mean—"

Rose's ears rang, and her vision started to blur. "Where is it?!" she asked clearly this time.

Martha looked taken aback. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Mi swallows on a branch. The piece mi father carved for me. Where is it?" Rose's voice rang out in the small room, her dialect more obvious.

"That's not yours either, and you can never get it back," Martha proudly stated.

Rose tossed the flute toward her bed without even looking. She needed both hands to be free. "I'll ask ye one last time. W'ere is it?" Rose walked closer to her.

Martha didn't like the fear she felt. Rose was just a commoner who had barged in here. She was beneath her, and yet her uncle had punished her for someone like that, even though Rose was clearly a thief. She tried to regain control of the situation, puffing her chest and scoffing. There was no way she would let the whore intimidate her.

"I burnt it. You're lucky I didn't burn the flute. I was going to—"

Martha didn't get the rest of the words out before she felt a slap across her face. Spittle flew out of her mouth, but she didn't even get the chance to react before Rose grabbed her hair and pulled her to the ground. She sat on Martha's chest, pinning her to the floor and locking Martha's arms with her legs as she slapped her repeatedly across both sides of her face.

Martha screamed, kicked, and struggled, but she couldn't seem to push Rose off, and she couldn't kick her with the way Rose had her pinned. It only took her a few seconds to realize she couldn't get out of this, and instead of struggling any longer, she started to cry for help.

Rose didn't say anything, just kept striking her across the face—right, left, right, left. Her reaction was visceral; she was so angry she could taste it. It was one thing for Martha to come after her, to lie about her and throw her in the dungeons. It was something completely different for her to steal presents from her father and even go as far as to burn them.

Rose's ears rang, and her vision blurred as tears poured from her eyes. She couldn't even see what she was doing, but she didn't stop, striking even when her hands started to hurt and feel numb. She didn't even hear Martha's constant screams. It wasn't until someone pulled her off Martha that she snapped out of it.

"Rose!" Edna called. She and another girl had been the ones to pull Rose off Martha. It was a struggle. "What are you doing?"

Rose wasn't nearly satisfied, and she made to rush for Martha again, but Mistress Edith's voice stalled her movements. "Have you lost your mind? How dare you attack another maid?"

Rose didn't say anything; she just bowed her head. When the two girls saw she wasn't struggling anymore, they let her go.

"Punish her, Mistress Edith! I came to the room and saw her ransacking my things. When I asked her about it, she attacked me." Martha clutched her red face with both hands as she spoke. Her lower lip was split, and blood poured from it. She pulled her knees up as she moved to a sitting position.

"Kneel!" Mistress Edith ordered.

Rose dropped to her knees without hesitation. She already knew it looked bad, and she was pretty ready for the consequences. It couldn't be worse than what had already been done to her, but she couldn't just do nothing while Martha destroyed something so

important—something her father was to complete when she returned. She shot a glare in Martha's direction, and the woman jerked.

"Has the crown prince's favoritism gone to your head?" Mistress Edith's voice thundered through the room. "Surely, you don't expect this to go without punishment?"

"I think Martha is lying," Edna blurted out. The girl next to her looked shocked, as though she didn't expect Edna to say anything.

"What are you talking about? Can't you see her clothes are scattered everywhere, and she was clearly attacking Martha when we came in here?" Mistress Edith asked Edna with a stern look on her face.

"Yes, I know, but Rose wouldn't attack Martha needlessly. Even when Martha threw her into the dungeons on false accusations, she didn't try to hit her. Martha must have done something she couldn't absolutely forgive."

"What do you have to say for yourself?" Mistress Edith asked.

Rose didn't reply. The way she spoke made it harder for people to listen to her, and Martha had been here longer. Not only that, but her uncle was also the steward, so she was likely to gain more favor.

"You best speak, young lady. I don't have the patience for this. I'll throw you into the dungeons and report to the Queen that you're nothing but a nuisance that should be severely punished."

Chapter 40: Mistress Edith

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"You best speak, young lady. I don't have the patience for this. I will throw you into the dungeons and report to the Queen that you are nothing but a nuisance that should be severely punished," Mistress Edith said, stepping closer to Rose.

They were still in the confines of the small room. The open window and the dying candlelight were the only sources of light. Rose could barely see Mistress Edith's face, but she could tell the woman wasn't lying. If she didn't defend herself, she would end up in a worse situation than she already was.

The front of the room was crowded with other servants who had been drawn to the commotion. Rose couldn't hear what was being said, but there was a lot of snickering and shocked reactions.

Rose took a deep breath as she got ready to recount her side of the story.

"I received a few t'ings from 'ome," Rose winced at her dialect, but Mistress Edith didn't even react. "A few clot'es and two carved pieces. One is a flute—I've 'ad it for a few years. The second is two swallows on a branch. Mi father made t'em for me. 'E's a woodwrig't. Martha took t'em from mi bag w'en I was in the dungeons." Rose's eyes pooled with tears as she spoke, but she didn't let them fall.

"I c'eked mi bag after I woke up, and t'ey were missin'. I knew it was 'er immediately, and my guts were rig't. I found the flute on mi bed in 'er bag, and..." Rose's voice broke a little, "w'en I asked ye about the swallows, ye said ye burnt it!" She pointed her finger at Martha.

Gasps echoed through the audience, and a few people whispered about how cruel that was.

"It's mi weddin' present," she said as she wiped the tears from her face, "and ye destroyed it!" Rose glared at her, her anger far from subsiding. This wasn't something she could forgive.

Mistress Edith's brows furrowed, and she turned to face Martha. "Is this true?"

"Of course not!" Martha replied. "I didn't even know she had carved pieces. She just attacked me out of nowhere." She wailed at the end of her words, trying to garner sympathy. "She's crazy! See what she did to my face. She attacked me and clawed at my eyes."

Mistress Edith was at a loss. There was no proof that any of what Rose had just said was true, but she had heard about what happened earlier—how Martha had thrown her into the dungeons for no reason.

"Does anyone know you have these items, Rose?" Edith asked.

Rose's eyes darted around and then rested on the floor. "Not really." There was no way she could say the crown prince knew, or at least one of his guards did.

"This is troublesome. Did anyone see Martha burn anything?" she asked.

The girls shook their heads as they looked from one person to the other. "No," echoed through the confines of the room and outside of it.

"Why would I touch her things? They're disgusting. I'll have to burn everything of mine that she touched."

"Rose," Edith called. "It's a little hard to believe your story," she started to say.

Rose nodded. She hadn't expected anything less, and she would have been able to bear any punishment if it meant she got the swallows back.

"It's pretty clear you attacked Martha. It wasn't a fight. I can't let that go without punishment, and you're accusing Martha without proof..."

"I found mi flute in 'er—"

"Don't interrupt me. For all we know, you could have ransacked her room for nothing. The flute is on your bed, is it not?"

"I only—"

"Answer my question."

"Yah," Rose said dejectedly.

"However, Martha already accused you wrongly, so I'd say that's fair. But I will punish you for attacking her. You will be required to clean the south wing, all by yourself, for one week," Mistress Edith stated.

"Mistress Edith!" Edna cried. "That's too much. Rose wouldn't be able to clean more than a few rooms in a day, let alone the whole wing—and for her to do that for a week? She clearly acted out of anger, but she isn't the sort of person to just lash out. Everyone knows Martha has been picking on her since she got here."

"Is this true?" Mistress Edith asked, but no one answered. They all kept quiet.

"Not one person can back what Edna just said?" Mistress Edith asked, clearly angry.

Whispers could be heard floating into the room, but none of the words were clear enough to understand.

"I will assume that there is almost no truth to what you've just told me, Edna. Rose, you will be required to clean the wing. Any of the maids who want to help, can, and if they refuse, you must make sure all the rooms are clean and the halls spotless. I will come around to check, and next time, you'll think twice about attacking another maid. Should anything happen, inform your superior."

Rose nodded, and Mistress Edith walked out of the room. The girls scrambled out of the way. "If I hear one more thing about you girls fighting tonight, you'll sleep under the night sky."

Rose stood to her feet and walked to her bed. Martha fearfully got out of the way when she came close. She picked up the flute and carefully placed it into her bag.

"Thank ye, Edna," she said. "Sorry for draggin' you into this."

"What are you talking about? Sorry I couldn't help much." She turned to Martha. "How can you do that to Rose? Has she ever done anything to you?"

Martha glared at her. "How dare you support an outsider? You think I'd ever touch her things?"

Martha crawled to her section as she tried to salvage her clothes. She muttered as she put them in her bag. "I can't believe she got away with such an easy punishment. Look at what she did to my face. It is going to scar."