

Chapter 20 - The Prisoner and the King

Chapter 20 - The Prisoner and the King begins with a moment of raw honesty and emotional exposure, as Colonel Sapt tells Princess Flavia the truth: the man before her is not the King, but the one who risked everything to protect him. Sapt's words are simple and direct, delivered in his usual blunt tone, but their weight shifts the world for everyone in the room. She hears them with trembling poise, her voice gentle yet piercing as she turns to me and asks the question that brings my hidden identity to light. I can no longer deny her the truth, but my answer remains cloaked in humility—I call myself merely a friend to the King and her servant. Yet in her eyes, I see she understands all that remains unsaid. The silence between us is filled with meaning, and when she looks away, it is not in dismissal but in sorrowful recognition of what could never be.

Her words and bearing remain regal, even as the world beneath her has shifted. She speaks not in anger but with dignity, acknowledging the deception carried out in service to her country. Then, turning her attention to the King who now lies wounded, she prepares to return to the castle, her hand brushing against mine in a moment that says more than any speech. She asks softly if I will come later, and I answer not as the man who stood beside her as a royal consort, but as the loyal subject I now must be again—"If the King wishes it, madame." Her eyes linger, and in them is a depth of feeling that leaves me both grateful and broken. Then she is gone, with Sapt by her side, and I am left in the quiet woods with Fritz, surrounded by silence and the echo of love that must be left behind.

In the stillness that follows, there is no need for words. Fritz understands, as do I, that what was gained here cannot be carried forward. The game has ended, the

masquerade is over, and the rightful King of Ruritania has been restored. And yet, the cost is not only measured in danger faced or wounds suffered. It lies also in the tender gaze of a woman who now walks away from the man she truly loves, because duty demands it. What I shared with her—our fleeting closeness—must now dissolve into memory. I do not leave this place a defeated man, but I do leave as one changed. I have known a kingdom's trust, the devotion of good men, and the heart of a queen. And now, I must relinquish them all.

Ruritania, too, has changed. Though it will speak only in whispers of the events that unfolded in the castle, the tale will endure. A king saved, a villain unmasked, and a stranger who stepped in when no one else could. The land will remember, though not in names or titles, but in legend. The truth will remain buried with those who lived it, held only by a few whose loyalty binds them to secrecy. The crown is secure, and the kingdom stands, its future protected. But the price was steep—for Flavia, for Fritz, for me. We have paid it without regret, yet not without pain. This chapter does not close with triumph, but with the ache of sacrifice, the kind that leaves no visible wound but never quite heals.

And so, my part ends not with applause, but with a retreat into shadow. There is no place for me now in Ruritania, not even in the retelling of its glory. My reward is the knowledge that I served when called, that I stood where I was needed, and that the woman I love remains safe, though not mine. I carry her memory not as a burden, but as a blessing and a wound. In the stillness of my future, I will recall this moment as both the end and the height of my life. If love were all, the story would be different. But love, though true, was not enough—not against the weight of crowns, countries, and the duties they demand.