

Chapter 199

Violet

A crowd of people stood around me, pulling at a dress I hadn't even seen yet. It wasn't one of the dresses from the racks, but one Madam Renata had had made and pulled out at the last minute. They were still making adjustments, and no one had let me look at it. Everyone was talking at the same time, their voices mixing together until I couldn't understand anyone.

They weren't just pulling the dress. They were pulling my hair, my arms, my back—every part of me.

We had been doing this for hours. No food, no water, no rest. Just standing, turning, posing, again and again. My feet hurt, my back was sore, and it was getting harder and harder to breathe.

"I need some space," I said, but no one seemed to hear me.

"She needs some space!"

It was Trinity who finally spoke up for me. "Let her breathe!"

Madam Renata clapped her hands, sharp and loud. In just a second, everyone stepped back at the same time. As they moved away, I noticed the maids staring, their mouths open, eyes wide.

I looked around, confused. What was going on?

"What is it?" I asked, trying to understand. No one answered, so I turned to Trinity.

And then I froze. No wonder they were staring.

She looked like a goddess.

Her gold dress shone in the light. It fit her perfectly, like it had been made only for her. She was glowing. Her hair was pinned up neatly, not a strand out of place. She didn't even seem real. She was just too beautiful, like a painting come to life.

"Trin, you look—"

She gave me a soft smile. "Turn around."

"What?"

"Turn around," she said again, motioning with her hands.

I turned slowly, unsure of what I was even turning toward.

But then I saw it.

My own reflection...

My eyes squinted right away as the light hit the sparkles on my dress so precisely it almost hurt to look. I had already caught a glimpse of the color earlier and it was exactly as promised, a light blue. Only it looked nothing like the already gorgeous dresses that had been on the rack, and I had no idea what I had done to deserve this.

The dress fit me gently at the top and spread out wide at my waist, almost burying my short frame. It looked like something one could only imagine in a dream.

I took a quiet breath and lifted my hand toward my hair but stopped just before touching it. Soft blonde curls fell down my back and over my shoulders, shinier than I had ever seen them. I was scared that even one

touch might mess it up.

There were whispers behind me, low murmurs I couldn't make out. But I didn't need to hear them. Now I knew what they were looking at.

It was me...

"Wow," I whispered.

I stared at my reflection, unsure of what to think, because the girl looking back at me wasn't Violet. She didn't look lost, broken, afraid, or hopeless.

She looked...Lyperian?

And was that a good thing or a bad thing?

Madam Renata gave a slow, dramatic clap. I caught her smirking through the reflection as she approached, her purple dress looking nothing short of breathtaking as well. Her bun had never changed and was still as tight as it had been. Maybe even tighter if that were possible.

She circled behind me as she repeatedly bopped her head, proud of her work. "And that," she tilted her chin, "is how you turn a rough, little creature into a proper lady."

I let out a soft chuckle. "Thank you, Madam Renata."

Although I did thank her, I still believed there was nothing wrong with the old Violet, the rough, little creature. Because deep down, I knew that beneath it all, I was still Violet. And beneath all their dresses, the Lyperians had their scars too. Queen Cecilia had them, and I'm sure many others did as well.

But maybe Madam Renata meant no harm. Maybe this was just the way

she was. She had been insufferable since I got here, sure, but today, she had not been as bad as I had expected. Trinity's presence had certainly made a difference, but I also knew the only reason why I was still standing was because I hadn't crossed Lady Mona yet.

Queen Cecilia had made it all too clear that Renata was one of Lady Mona's people, and until that woman—who I hadn't even seen yet—had nothing personal against me, neither would she.

Simple as that.

Trinity stepped beside me. "So what's next?" she asked Madam Renata.

Curious, I glanced at the clock on the wall.

It was six.

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other and nearly lost my balance. The dress was heavier than it looked. I let out a small yelp as I tipped backward, but Trinity grabbed my shoulders just in time.

"Maybe Kylan should just carry you tonight," she laughed quietly in my ear.

Kylan...

If he were here, he would've called me clumsy. Maybe even smiled at me as he said it, because lately, there always seemed to be a warmth in it.

I wished he were here.

I didn't care about this feast or the politics, this dress or how Lyperian I looked—no. I cared about him, and I wanted to see him.

I could only wonder what he would say when he saw me. Maybe he would throw in one of his little compliments. The ones I longed for so badly.

Madam Renata interrupted my thoughts. "Guests will arrive at six-thirty."

I exhaled slowly. Okay. That meant I had some time to—

"You," she continued, pointing her finger at me, "will make your grand entrance at seven. Speech at seven-thirty. Dinner at eight."

"Violet?" Trinity snorted. "Speech?"

Although she had been trying to hide that laugh of hers, it was impossible to miss. I knew exactly why she was laughing, and she was right.

I guess I could add that to the other long list of things that Kylan forgot to mention.

If these Lyperians really thought I was going to give a speech, then they had another thing coming. I sucked at speeches. I wasn't made to lead, and that was completely fine, because I had other qualities I excelled at. Some people were natural speakers, motivational speakers. Unfortunately, I just wasn't one of them.

So Kylan could do this little speech of his, and I would support him of course. Stand beside him, and keep my mouth shut.

My breath hitched as I turned back to the mirror, my face suddenly going pale as a wave of panic hit me. Forget the speech. What did she mean by a big entrance, and a dinner?

Kylan was really going to have some explaining to do. Where in all of that

was he planning to fit pulling me away after ten minutes?

Madam Renata snapped her fingers, and I snapped back to my senses. "That gives me thirty minutes to explain what is expected of you."

She motioned with her hand. "Come with me."

Trinity offered me her hand, helping me down from the platform. The moment my feet touched the ground, maids rushed in from every direction, closing in to form a circle around me, Trinity, and Madam Renata.

And just like that, I felt trapped once again. My gaze searched for an opening, but there wasn't one. The maids' skirts brushed with not a single gap in between them.

"It's to conceal your dress," Madam Renata said before either of us could speak. "People have traveled miles to lay eyes on you, and a striking entrance is everything!"

"Far?" I commented. "How far are we talking?"

"Too far to mess this up," Madam Renata didn't even blink.

Okay.

Not a big deal...

—

Not much time was left, and we had been walking the halls for a while now. Though I could hear many voices around me, I had no idea where to, and was only focused on trying to keep up with Madam Renata as she spoke. Trinity was still by my side.

Madam Renata listed names of noble houses, regions, and guests I hadn't even heard of before. What I did remember was that there would be over 200 guests in total.

Another small detail Kylan forgot to mention.

"The two most important guests tonight aside from our very own king," she continued, "will be the royal families of Aevenor and Elarin, the two other Lycan kingdoms. You will need their approval more than anyone else."

My stomach tightened. Great. Just what I needed. Two more kingdoms to impress, as if Lyperia wasn't enough already.

Trinity gave me a light tap on my shoulder, her brown eyes giving me a gaze of reassurance. "You'll be fine."

I didn't answer. I didn't know if she was trying to calm me or herself, because we both knew what I could be like under pressure.

"You don't curtsy. You don't bow to them," Madam Renata added, glancing over her shoulder. "Tonight, you are supposed to cosplay a Lyperian. And the Lyperian royal family is the highest and the strongest."

I let out a small laugh at the word cosplay.

It suddenly all felt like one big joke because no matter what I did, I was still pretending to be something I wasn't. Pretending to be someone they would hopefully respect, and wishing it would all work out.

"I will not do the speech, by the way," I chuckled. There was a lot I could take, a lot I accepted for the sake of not being a burden, but that was where I would draw the line.

Trinity giggled beside me while Madam Renata stayed calm. "Yes, you will," she decided for me.

No, I won't...

"And a good thing for you is that you cannot prepare it. A welcoming speech like that comes from the heart, and is a great test."

A test?

I was already so tired, so overwhelmed, and now I had to pour out my soul in front of hundreds of strangers? I wouldn't do it. Over my dead body.

"Even though you are a Bloodrose, you seem clean and modest."

Ouch?

"—and I have taken quite a liking to you, and your yappy friend," she glanced back at Trinity, who grinned back at her.

"Or maybe it's pity," Renata then added with a shrug. "I do not know yet."

"Thanks!" I responded, sarcastically.

"But the crown prince—"

"Yes?" My head snapped up. Now she had my attention. "What about him?"

Madam Renata sighed. "It's clear the crown prince has put his trust in you," she stated. "And that means something. His Highness doesn't trust easily, and never has. Always guarded, always calculated. Which

means, if he's opened that door for you, then he must believe in you. Fully."

He had put his trust in me, believed in me...fully.

Those words just didn't feel good, and I knew why. Because I didn't deserve all of that. Not at this moment. Not right now. Not when I couldn't even find the decency to be honest with him about what had happened with Kayden.

Trinity nudged my shoulder. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," I responded a bit too quickly.

"You cannot fail," Madam Renata spoke sharply. "As a Lyperian, what I care about most is seeing someone truly great on that throne beside him. So prove yourself."

Those words didn't do much to me, because I knew I wouldn't be sitting on that throne beside him.

Madam was also quite something. First she called me a placeholder, and now I had to prove myself. Her words weren't quite adding up.

"You seem to know him well," I said softly.

She nodded once. "I sure do."

"I wonder what he was like as a kid? Can you tell me?"

A laugh came from Trinity. "I bet Kylan was something."

I thought so too. I knew Kylan wasn't a big fan of Madam Renata, but I could also imagine him being a handful. I could see him as mischievous,

smart-mouthed, always pushing limits.

"Your friend is right. He was something," Madam Renata took a deep breath, as if remembering it all.

Trinity and I shared a look. Something we seemed to be doing every hour inside this place, as we both waited for Madam to continue.

"Well?"

Suddenly, the maids stopped walking and opened a small gap which led to a closed door.

Where were we?

Madam Renata smoothed out her dress, turned around and looked at me. "You can ask him yourself."

She knocked three times, then opened the door, revealing a bright, empty room which I had never seen before. Before I could react, Madam Renata gently pushed me inside. I looked back, but the door clicked shut behind me.

I turned again and winced as the sunlight that came through the tall windows hit my eyes, and squeezed them shut to have a better look.

Now I could see it clearly. A figure stood with his back to me. My heart lifted, and I instantly felt at ease looking at the one I had been waiting for all day. I didn't need to see his face. I knew.

It was Kylan...