



Chapter 301

Violet

By the time we came back from the dress fitting, it was already afternoon. Even though we were stuck again inside that palace, I was happy to be back.

I didn't think I could survive another hour with the king, who had clearly only tagged along to keep a close eye on me. His stares, his words, the necklace around my neck...

Everything felt like too much. I knew it was part of his bigger plan, but I couldn't see what it was, and it drove me insane. What was he up to, and who did he want to get rid of so badly that he had even given me the necklace so I wouldn't do anything crazy?

My thoughts got interrupted by Kaelis, who nudged my shoulder with a laugh. She said something about her dress, though I wasn't quite certain. I was supposed to return to Madam Renata after the fitting, and walked with Kaelis and Kiora, who couldn't stop chattering.

"This Howl needs to be perfect!" Kaelis said beside me. Her eyes still carried a glow from the fitting, and she seemed to have an excitement she couldn't contain.

"Perfect?" I curled my lips. "Really?"

"Of course!" Kiora answered. "Because you only get one!"

They both looked at me like it should have been obvious, and maybe it was, but my head wasn't there. All day I had listened to them talk about this Howl. Part of me couldn't help looking forward to it, but another part, no matter how hard I tried, was too selfish to care at all.

How could I care about some Howl when my thoughts were still stuck on what happened in the mountains, on the grave we dug? The thought of a



party after all that, with a Veil so close to opening, felt unbearable.

"Do you think Nate will feel better again before that time?" Kaelis beamed. "Because he has got to be there."

A chill ran straight through me at the sound of his name. I couldn't even imagine how much pain he was still in, and neither could they, because they didn't know...

I was sure Kylan was trying his hardest to fix things, but would Nate even be ready for that?

"I don't know," I whispered.

"He seemed just fine when we were up the mountains!" Kaelis huffed. "I wonder what it could be. Don't you?"

"I don't know," I repeated.

Kaelis squinted her eyes. "Maybe we should bring him some soup so he can get better," she suggested. "What do you say?"

Soup?

I so badly wanted to tell her. No, we can't, because soup will not bring his sister back, but I couldn't.

I caught her blinking at me out of the corner of my eye, waiting for my answer.

"I don't kn—"

The words stuck in my throat, and my stomach dropped as the familiar sound of wheels scraped against the floor just around the corner.

Shit...

I froze for a second, thinking about turning back, running away, but



before I could decide it was already too late.

He was already there...

Kayden.

Camille wasn't with him this time, but Thorne sat on his shoulder. Not ready to face him yet, I let my eyes fall on Thorne instead. The raven's stare was still sharp and unsettling, but he looked calm, calmer than I had ever seen him. Ever since we reached the palace, he hadn't seemed as creepy or terrifying as he was in the mountains. Here, he felt like just another animal.

And even as my eyes slowly lifted to meet Kayden's, I expected to be terrified, but I wasn't.

I felt more comfortable around him than I ever had before, and that was the crazy part. He was just Kayden...

My hand reached for the necklace around my neck as I stared into his eyes. He was smiling too widely, and his eyes looked bright with excitement. "Lettie," he greeted, then looked at the other two. "And sisters."

"Brother," Kaelis and Kiora answered in unison.

I stayed quiet, pressing my lips together.

"Lettie?"

I hummed softly, feeling unsure about how much I was even supposed to talk to him.

"How are you doing?" he asked, his smile softening, and believe it or not—it almost looked genuine. So genuine, I didn't know what to feel.

"Good," I said.



"That's good," Kayden nodded.

"And how is that eye of yours doing?" Kaelis jumped in. She scrunched her nose a little as she looked at the damage. "I know you don't heal as quickly as...how are you doing?"

The bruise around his eye was big and purple against his pale skin, but it didn't seem to bother him. If anything, he wore it like some kind of medal.

"I'm still alive," Kayden chuckled. "I've had worse. You should ask Kylan."

"Ask him what?" Kiora bit her lip, shifting on her feet.

Exactly. Ask him what?

Was this just Kayden playing games again, claiming he is 'so happy' to share a secret while always threatening to tell everyone whenever things don't go his way?

"Kayden," Kaelis said with a forced smile. "Would you mind moving aside? You're blocking our path."

Kayden's jaw twitched, and I caught a flicker of anger in his eyes. To him, even something as small as being asked to move aside felt like disrespect.

"I was hoping I could borrow Lettie from you," he said.

My heart nearly beat out my chest.

Borrow?

"Violet is on her way to Madam Renata," Kaelis answered quickly. "We all are—"

"And from now on, Madam Renata answers to me," Kayden replied, grinning as he clapped his hands. "So I'm sure she wouldn't mind."



I couldn't miss the expression on Kaelis's face as she too must've wondered what he meant by that. How and why would Madam Renata answer to him?

"Violet might not want to go," Kiora added.

His head snapped toward her. "You don't know what she wants," he snarled. The sound was sharp and cold. "And we should let Violet answer for herself!"

"Then you should ask me," I blinked, confused.

Just as quickly as Kayden lost his cool, his lips curled into a smile again. He took a long, steady breath, as if nothing had happened.

"You're right..." his eyes slid back to me. "Violet, would you like to give me some of your time?"

The way he said my name unsettled me.

For so long it had been 'Lettie' and I wasn't even sure I wanted him to use my real name. From his mouth, it sounded even stranger than Lettie ever did.

Everyone's eyes turned toward me, waiting. Kaelis, Kiora, even Thorne, with that unblinking stare from Kayden's shoulder.

My throat tightened. I wanted to say no. Every part of me screamed that I didn't want to walk with him, didn't want to be near him, didn't want to hear his voice or feel his eyes following me. But then I found myself staring into that desperate gaze of his.

He had no one...

He had made himself believe he had me, to the point he had even killed someone for it.

My head throbbed with confusion. Was it okay to feel bad for a murderer



because he killed the person I wanted dead myself? Or did I only feel bad because I felt guilty, because I knew he had done it for me? Or maybe it wasn't guilt at all but just me trying to control the situation, because now I knew exactly what he was capable of.

I sighed, hoping I wouldn't regret my choice. "Kaelis, Kiora...you can go. I'll be fine."

They both looked at me as if they hadn't expected I would actually be okay with Kayden's presence, because in their minds, who would be? He was the sibling everyone avoided.

The girls shrugged at each other and went on without me. As they brushed past Kayden's chair, Kaelis bumped his shoulder on purpose, and Kiora immediately followed.

Was this how they had all treated him, the reason he became like this? Or was it something he did that made them keep their distance?

My breath hitched, waiting for him to snap, for Thorne to screech, but neither of them reacted. Kayden only looked back with a bump before turning forward again to fix the angle of his chair.

"They're the queen's puppets, and she's the one who decides who they smile at, whose ass they kiss, and who they pretend not to see..." he muttered. "They never liked me...But I never really liked them either."

I scoffed softly, shaking my head, but I didn't answer.

"That's a really nice necklace, by the way!" he added suddenly.

My hand flew up to cover the stone, even though I knew it was already too late. It wasn't really something to hide either.

"That's Dad's," Kayden noted, tilting his head. For a moment, he seemed lost in thought, like he was putting two and two together.



"Did you want to say something?" I asked carefully.

Kayden chuckled. "You know me so well," he said. "I just can't shake what Kylan said about me making you uncomfortable, and after all that happened..." he waved his hands in the air, dismissive, like it was nothing. "I can only imagine what's running through your head. So I figured you might want to hear my side, and the reason I did what I did."

The way he spoke made my skin itch. Too formal, too practiced. He was trying too hard to sound reasonable, normal, and good. That wasn't like Kayden at all, and it scared me more than if he'd just acted like himself. But who was I to judge? Maybe he really did just want to explain.

"Can I invite you back to my room?" he asked, politely.

Every thought in my head circled back to no, but it didn't feel like I really had a choice. Not with him.

"Yes."



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