

Chapter 388

Kylan

I glanced at the clock, thinking it might move at the pace I wanted it to if I stared hard enough.

Six.

The celebration would start soon, but that wasn't why I wanted time to move faster. I just wanted it all to be over. The howl, the sealing, Kayden, everything.

I stood in line with my eighteen brothers, waiting as the king walked slowly down the row. He fixed cuffs and ties, straightened collars, and adjusted everything to perfection like we were all pieces on a board he wanted perfectly aligned. Today was one of those days where he would pretend to care.

I had already known today wouldn't be normal the moment I saw Kayden walk again, and it had become even weirder when I saw him tied up in the kitchen pantry.

Knocked out by Sora of all people?

A quiet laugh slipped out of me, and I managed to cover it with a cough. I had to give it to her, just a little. That little stunt of hers was something, and she had gone up at least a full percent in my book.

I had already sealed off access to the kitchen under the queen's name, hoping it would hold for now, but I knew I couldn't keep Kayden there forever.

As I looked to my right, the impatience crept in more and more. The king still had four brothers to go before he would finally reach me.



I exhaled, and as I shifted on my feet, movement beside me caught my attention. It was Khaedric, struggling with his tie. His fingers, that I bet only knew how to hold a game console, were clumsy, and his jaw was tight with focus.

"Let me help you," I offered, quietly losing my mind. He was only going to take up more time, and the longer it went on, the closer I came to losing my shit, which I really didn't want to happen.

His startled eyes flicked to me like he hadn't expected any kindness. Why would he? It was his mother who had made him believe that the queen's children were all a bunch of monsters.

"Thanks," he mumbled.

I planted a smile on my lips as I fixed his tie and smoothed his suit so the king wouldn't have to. I honestly felt bad for him, always had. He looked exhausted, bored, like he was always trying his best and still coming up short. He would've been better off being born from any mistress past the fourth. There would have been far fewer expectations.

"Did you finish your speech?"

He shrugged, muttering something under his breath. Unfortunately, howl speeches were one of our stupid traditions. At every howl, every sibling stood up and said something nice about the one being celebrated. Fake words, faker smiles, and the king loved it. It made us look united to the outside world, and to anyone who didn't have to experience this shithole from inside the palace, up close.

Ironically, considering it was the king who had put us all against each other in the first place.

"What have you been doing all this time?" I asked. "Have you prepared

anything at all?"

I glanced at him, wondering if he would start talking about Kayden, and he took the bait. "Kayden is gone," he told me. "No one can find him. Mom says he probably left for the day because his heart is too kind, and he didn't want to steal Kaelis's spotlight," Khaedric said.

I felt my mouth twitch.

Kayden and kind? Those two didn't go well together.

"And you don't believe that," I stated, trying to get a bit more out of him. What would be their next move?

Khaedric shook his head, chuckling. "No."

I finished adjusting his suit and looked at him. "What do you think, then?"

He closed his eyes for a second. "I think now that he can walk again, he expected things to go back to how they used to be right away, that everyone, including dad, would give him attention, and when he realized Kaelis was the priority today, he got angry."

"So he's doing all of this for attention?" I smiled faintly. It was a good theory, and although that wasn't the case, it would've been if the situation were different.

As long as no one suspected Kayden had been dragged, tied, and gagged in a pantry, everything was fine.

"Is there going to be a search party?"

Khaedric shook his head. "Kayden likes his space, and Mom knows that will only anger him," he said. "She thinks he'll come back on his own."



Interesting.

I nodded slowly, eyes drifting back to the front of the line as the king finally moved closer. My eyes rolled back as I braced myself. He hadn't even reached me yet, but I could already feel the presence that always settled something uncomfortable in my chest.

I waited, lowered my gaze to the floor, and when I looked down at a pair of shoes, I knew he stood in front of me. My gaze slowly lifted until our eyes met.

"The last time you went to a howl, it was your own," he said with a grin. "And I do wonder if you would be here at all if you were not on break, but still...at least you're here. That counts."

At least I'm here?

Where had he been all this time?

I lifted my chin, my jaw tensed as I reminded myself not to make a scene tonight. Baelor would make enough trouble on his own, and Kaelis's howl did not need more damage.

"Let me see."

The king twirled his finger, and I turned on the spot. When I faced him again, he let out a low sound of approval.

"But this," he said, lifting his hand. He dragged two fingers across his own lips, signaling for me to smile. "It does not suit a crown prince. Today is a happy day. It is your sister's howl, and your brother, who is... not here," he glanced around, "has healed again. I need you to smile."

I let out a quiet grunt and forced a small smile on my face. Any other day, I would've argued with him, but now was really not the time.



He nodded, satisfied, and stepped past me toward Khaedric. The moment he was out of my sight, the tension in my shoulders loosened.

By the time he finished with all of us, nearly fifteen minutes had passed. The king stepped back so everyone could see him before clearing his throat.

"My sons. All eyes will be on you tonight," he said proudly. "I need you to behave like a prince, a Lyperian, and if I hear or see otherwise, measures will be taken."

He pointed at his youngest son, Prince Knox. "And you," he called out, his voice softer. "No eating boogers tonight."

The younger ones broke out in laughter immediately. Knox, who was barely six, giggled the hardest and ran straight to him.

"Yes, daddy!" he chirped.

The king picked him up, groaning. "My big boy. Are you going to make me proud tonight?"

I watched it all in silence. The way Knox's eyes lit up as the king acknowledged him. I used to look at him like that once. I used to think that man was everything. Strong, untouchable, worthy of worship.

Now all I felt was pure disgust...

Would they see it one day?

The truth?

"Tonight is about Kaelis," the king continued. "She deserves to be celebrated, just as each of you has been, and will be."



Bullshit.

He would find a way to make this night about himself, just like he always did.

The door opened then, and Beta Jack stepped inside. Our eyes met instantly, and his lips curled into a small smile.

I hadn't seen him since the night we showed him where Chrystal was buried. I wasn't even sure whether he would come tonight.

The king put Knox down, and he ran back into line.

"Ah, Beta Jack," he said, smiling wide. "Don't all of my sons resemble me?"

Jack frowned, his gaze sliding down the line of princes. "They do, El —"

"That's what I said. Now please empty the room," the king cut in. "I need to speak with the crown prince."

I felt bothered. At first because I needed to stay behind, but more so because the way he dismissed Jack was wrong. He had only asked him a question so he could cut him off and embarrass him.

Jack gave an awkward smile and nodded. My brothers started walking out, the younger ones grabbing the hands of the older ones, and Jack turned to follow them.

The king scoffed.

"Not you, Jack!"

Jack froze before stepping back inside. He leaned his back against the door and bopped his head like he knew something.

Commented [Ma1]:



Now it was just the three of us.