

Chapter 431

Kylan

The halls leading to the dungeons were narrow, the only source of light being the flickering torches across the stone walls.

Although I had heard the stories, I had never visited, never bothered, because I hadn't expected to ever have to. At least that was before the king decided to lock everyone away, from the people in the mountains to his very own Beta.

He had truly lost his mind, and he wasn't the only one. I walked slightly behind Kayden, making sure to keep my eyes on him. 1

Once in a while, he would turn around with a tight expression, his gaze shifting from the path ahead to Thorne on my shoulder, and then back again.

He didn't fully know where to look or what to do with himself, and I couldn't blame him. Everything had gone to shit, and part of that was on him. His jealousy, his greed...

My thoughts drifted back to Violet. To the way she had looked before walking into that room. I should've been there, I was supposed to be there, but I knew exactly why the king wouldn't want me in that room.

It was because I wouldn't let him get away with it. I would've ruined whatever game he was trying to play. He thought he could manipulate Violet instead, but unfortunately for him, he didn't know her as well as he thought he did, because she wouldn't let him get away with it either.

I was sure of it.

The only thing that made me the slightest bit nervous was how he would proceed now.

My hand clenched at my side, and I blinked as Kayden's gaze found mine again. "Are you going to keep staring at me like that?" he asked.

"Should I not?"

A broken chuckle slipped out of him. "This is not how I wanted this to go," he said. "Trust me."

I let out a quiet breath through my nose.

Sure.

It was just lie after lie.

Did he or did he not tell the king about the box?

After everything that had already happened, his words didn't mean much to me anymore. They never did.

There was just this doubt in my mind that none of this was a simple coincidence. He played his part right, he looked nervous, anxious even... but Kayden without a plan? There could be a good possibility that he already knew what the king was up to, what he would do, and that this was all just part of whatever plan he had in mind.

Both the king and Kayden could be playing separate games, perhaps even together...

On top of that, Adelaide told Violet not to trust him...

Kayden shook his head as we kept walking. "A lot has happened between

us, starting with you poisoning me," he said. "I know that."

He let out a short breath. "But right now... we need to work together."

"Do we?"

"Yes," he stated, his back turned against me again. "We share the same enemy today."

"Do we?" I wondered. "Does that mean you have disavowed your Lord Baelor?"

Kayden didn't answer, though his steps slowed, and that bit of hesitation told me everything I needed to know.

We almost reached the end of our path, and at the far end stood a heavy iron door and a guard. Just one. Although he stood in front of it like he was guarding something precious, it was still odd that there would just be one.

My eyes narrowed as Kayden took confident steps, walking straight to the guard. How exactly was he planning to get us in when there were no visitors allowed?

When he said he had a way into the dungeons, I didn't realize he meant the main doors. I thought there might have been a secret tunnel or something. We might as well have just announced to the king that we were planning a visit.

I slowed for half a second, contemplating whether to ask or not, but then decided to let it play out.

The guard straightened the moment he saw us, and bowed his head. "Your Highnesses!" he greeted, though his nervous eyes were only on me.

Kayden clicked his tongue. "The crown prince is with me."

"Of course, Your Highness!"

The guard stepped aside immediately, then turned to twist the lock until the large door creaked open.

"Please...not too long," he added quickly. "The king—"

"I remember," Kayden said, waving him off. I was trying to make sense of the situation, but I just couldn't. He glanced over his shoulder and gave me a small nod.

"Wait," I said, picking up my pace until I walked beside him. I had quite a few questions, starting with how the hell he was getting more respect from a Lyperian guard than I did. What exactly had he been up to during my time at Starlight?

My eyes wandered around the hallway, and there were more flickering torches. The air was cold, and the ground and walls were stone.

"That guard."

"What about him?"

"I'm guessing that wasn't random," I said.

Kayden huffed softly. "The guard used to work in the east wing," he explained, giving a slight shrug. "He's been down here for a while now. We know each other, and he owes my mother a favor."

"What favor?"

"A favor," Kayden snarled, making it clear he wouldn't answer any

further.

"How convenient," I muttered, "that a guard from the east wing just happens to be stationed at the...dungeon door, right when you might need him the most."

It's almost like he saw it coming...

Kayden rolled his eyes. "Very," he said dryly. "And perhaps if the queen concerned herself more with palace politics instead of whether the king loves her today or not...she could actually do something for her children for once."

A short chuckle slipped out before I could stop it. I didn't think it was funny. I just didn't understand why he kept pushing me when he shouldn't.

"My heart almost broke when Kaelis..."

A disapproving hum came from Kayden's mouth.

"When Kaelis what?" I cut in.

"Nothing."

I had no time to press him further as a rattling sound tore through. Metal, chains, and then voices followed.

They were low at first, but the further we walked, the louder they got.

"That must be the others," Kayden pointed out. He did not seem surprised. "It gets worse than Prison Island down here."

My jaw locked, thinking about the situation. The people down here were

on another level, and the king had gone this far, pushed it further than necessary, to prove a point. Nate didn't belong here, Lian and Sora didn't belong here...neither did the witches.

We turned the corner for the first time, and then I saw the cells. There were too many, endless, and they lined both sides. They were protected by thick iron bars. Some were already slightly bent, others scratched like people had tried to claw their way out, and the smell of urine and dirt was unbearable.

Some prisoners pressed themselves against the bars as we passed. Too many eyes followed us with something between anger and desperation, while others paced back and forth like caged animals, either muttering to themselves or slamming their fists against the walls.

It sounded less like people and more like something caged for far too long. Animals.

There was no order, no control, and there was no surprise. The only guard present was the one guarding the door.

The prisoners were already long forgotten, just waiting to be transferred to Prison Island.

My eyes moved from left to right as we continued until I saw them. The witches, some of whom I recognized from the mountains.

They were scattered across different cells. Men, women...

But unlike the others, they were calm and quiet. They didn't shout, didn't move much, just watched with strong eyes. Thorne shifted on my shoulder, letting out a sound.

"Easy," I whispered, lifting a hand to run it over his feathers.

Kayden had also looked back to look at Thorne, but then his gaze landed on the ground. He was too much of a coward to look up because he felt responsible. But then again, it was Kayden. Maybe he just didn't care about them anymore. Perhaps he never did.

We kept walking, and when we turned another corner, Kayden's entire posture changed. His body went stiff, eyes softened, fist balled.

We stopped in front of a cell where a man was sitting on the ground. His back was hunched, and a cape draped over his head and shoulders. But I didn't need to see his face to know he was drained.

A familiar stick leaned against the wall, and that's when I realized...

"So you have returned," the figure spoke, his voice calm. "And so did my old friend, Thorne."

Kayden stepped closer to the bars, but kept a small distance, like he knew he wasn't welcome.

"I told you I would."

The man slowly removed the cape from his head, and for the first time, I saw his face.

Varius...

