

Chapter 396 - The Party (Part 1)

Kai paced the strip of floor between his desk and the wardrobe. His fingers raked through his tousled hair. Clothes draped his bed in defeated heaps; a blue jacket was slung across the pillow, trousers folded over the headboard, a heap of colorful silk and linen shirts.

He glanced at a crumpled invitation card in his hand. The golden lettering glinted on the thick black paper. Apparently, the patrician who let Flynn hijack the party for his birthday decided to go all out.

Dress code: Casual Formalwear.

What does that even mean?

Two lives across two worlds—Kai had rarely felt more unprepared.

Parties had never ranked high among his priorities at Raelion. Most of his knowledge came from Earth's old shows and movies, hazy memories of actors in expensive suits clinking champagne glasses, of raves of sweaty bodies, blasting electronic music and neon lights; nothing that seemed remotely reliable or practical to his current predicament.

The last 'party' he actually went to was a middle-school backyard birthday in the suburbs. He had flashes of popping paper streamers, plastic cups of neon soda, and a pyramid of cupcakes slowly melting in the summer heat. Somehow, he doubted his skill at musical chairs or striking a piñata would help him today.

By the time his friends threw proper parties in high school, his health had declined. Invitations faded into hospital visits and quiet evenings at home.

His second life brought little new experience. In the archipelago, they had intimate family gatherings and town-wide festivals. But aside from perhaps Higharbor, partying wasn't really a thing, not in the way wealthy mainlanders conceived it here.

Every student at Raelion knew about its secretive party scene. From boasts in the dorms to disciplinary notices outside lecture halls, each snippet only strengthened Kai's resolve to steer clear. Half the parties sounded like hodgepodes of hormonal teenagers, unregulated alcohol, and recreational potions to forget their academic woes. The rest seemed like Fight Club, just with more social snobbery and magical gimmicks. Patricians gathered in tightly guarded invitation circles, trying to outdo one another by throwing boatloads of mesars on extravagant nonsense.

Why did it have to be for Flynn's birthday...

Kai exhaled heavily. From the invitation, this one wouldn't be much tamer than the rumors.

He had yet to figure out what to wear, let alone formulate a plan for when he got there. What did students do for hours and hours?

Hitting the snack tables might buy him half an hour if he *really* stretched his chewing. What about after? Practice Shadow Magic in the corner? Engage strangers in small talk? Cling to his friends like a lonely barnacle? What kind of music would patricians have? It'd be nothing like tavern bards. Would he be expected to dance? Were there steps to memorize?

If I just knew sooner... I would've done more research.

The only thing he was sure to find was *awkwardness*. Lots of it. Enough for months of cringing whenever he lay in bed, and his thoughts drifted.

Turning to the spread of nice clothes on his bed, most of which he'd never worn, he already dreaded having to refold them into his wardrobe. Did the cream shirt with tight cuffs go well with navy trousers? A dozen times he was about to pick, and a dozen times he remembered Valela would be there.

He was scowling at a pair of flaxen trousers when a knock jolted him.

"...yes?"

Rain poked his head from the doorway. "Hi, just checking if you need a hand. I got a few tips from Flynn. Human fashion is so *peculiar*." His amber eyes fell on the mismatched heap. "You *look* like you could use a hand."

Kai bit his cheek, but pride quickly bent to necessity. "I'm just debating a few choices... you know what will fit at the party?"

"I do!" Rain strolled over to the garment jumble. "Always happy to offer a second opinion. I promise I won't use this for jokes. I heard you've been struggling with decision paralysis."

I—what? Who has been spreading that slander!

Before Kai could unclench his jaw and respond, Rain was rifling through the clothes and paying him no mind.

"We'll find something nice. You've got plenty of good pieces here."

"Yeah, you bought most of them."

Rain threw him a perfect smile. "So you agree I have good taste."

"I..." Opening his mouth with no ready reply, Kai shook his head. "Just shut up and help me. I won't wear anything with squirrels," he added as his roommate went to browse his wardrobe.

"What if they're very *tiny* squirrels?"

"No. Not today. Same for acorns."

"That cuts our selection a lot. What if they're only stitched on the inside? No one will even see them!"

Kai folded his arms and stared Rain down until his roommate huffed in defeat.

"Fine. Be boring." Throwing a few shirts on the bed, he began matching up the pieces. "Mhmm, yes... What do you think of these?" With a nod to himself, he gave a flourish and sank into the desk chair. "Any of these three sad *squirrel-less* pairings to your liking?"

"They're not *bad*." Kai rubbed his neck, studying the outfits and pointedly ignoring the scarves and puffy hats—it wasn't winter any longer.

I should look at what people gift me... I didn't even know I had most of this stuff.

Dismissing the more brightly colored pairings, he focused on the most sober outfit: an ashen shirt with a fitted deep-blue vest and dark slate trousers. A subtle silver embroidery gleamed on the vest as he held it up.

Does this count as 'casual formalwear'?

"It'll do," he said out loud to lock in his choice. Enough overthinking. *That's* when he noticed the motif on the embroidery, inside the trousers' pockets, and on the shirt's top mother pearl buttons. "You knew I'd pick this one..."

"*Me*? How could I ever guess you'd pick the boring option?" Rain grinned. "You just said no squirrels and acorns. These are otters and shells. Completely different. They live near rivers, lakes, and shores. Not trees."

"Okay, fine. I'll wear it." Most of his fancy wardrobe had animal themes. At least the detailing was easy to miss unless one watched closely. He still had ninety-six minutes to plan a survival strategy. "Do *you* need help with anything?"

"Nope," Rain said. "I already prepared my outfit and triple wrapped my birthday present." He hung his head on the backrest, rocking back the chair and gazing up, strangely pensive.

Kai busied himself with refolding his clothes and stole a covert glance. Their team review meeting had been an awkward one after the last Mixed Combat class. Once Rain had apologized for losing the flag, he seemed to take the loss in stride—better than he would have—though the siren's relaxed demeanor never let slip anything he didn't want to show.

"You want to talk about it?"

Rain hooked his leg below the desk to stop rocking. His furrow quickly smoothed with realization. "Oh, that... It's nothing. I just felt silly. Flynn was right that I didn't take it seriously enough. I should've used the reinforcements beacon when they attacked in seven, and not chased after them. I even considered they may have been luring me away from the flag, but I didn't pay enough attention to notice the illusion."

"You underestimated them. Not like I didn't do that myself." The high rankers weren't the only students to look out for. After the Trials, his avoidance of public spaces meant he learned little of other elites. Apparently, he wasn't the only relative unknown who ranked above expected front-runners. "That's what classes are for. To learn."

"I guess..." Rain raised his legs to rock against the desk. "I should take team exercises more seriously. I let Flynn down. Even if he makes a joke of it, he takes his team role seriously. You *all* do. I just... All of this still feels strange sometimes."

"You mean like enrolling at an academy?"

"That. And other stuff. Walking on flat land. Learning quirky human customs. Being free to choose what I want to do without worrying that Mother will find out. Not having any of my kin around."

"Oh... You never talk about them. You have a big family?"

"I'd say normal, though it's all relative. I have six older sisters. Meiryla, Aerielle, Nerienne, Orelve, Leima and Lydiene," Rain said with a soft smile, fidgeting with the six enchanted shells in his bracelet, and Kai had to resist the urge to hum *Under the Sea*. "I found their attention stifling, but now I think I miss them... Well, *not* Aerielle and Nerienne. Then, there's also my mother. I'd rather not name her." He threw a wary look over his shoulder. "She always listens."

Seeing no hint of humor, Kai swallowed his chuckle. "You mean like... she can hear if you speak her *name*?"

"Yeah, it makes cursing her quite vexing." He laughed. "I used to simply assume that she knew everything. And I mean, *everything*. That was until Leima told me about her trick. It likely doesn't work on land. But still, I'd rather not take the chance."

"That seems... wise. Anything else I should be wary of?"

"No, my sisters are fine. *Well*. Unless you whisper their full names to the waves silvered by the light of the mercurial moon, of course."

"Obviously." Kai bobbed his head as if that were self-evident.

He's definitely joking now, but...

Memo 91: Never mention Rain's family by name.

He had enough watching his back from cultists without adding a court of bewitching sirens with a chronic disregard for boundaries. Respecting Rain's privacy, he never pried about his life under the sea, though he was always curious.

“What about your father? What's he like?” He asked. From the few context clues, he suspected sirens had a matriarchal society, though not all pieces fit.

“I don't know.” Rain chewed his lip. “I never met him.”

Kai cringed. “I'm sorry.”

“Huh?” Rain looked at him, puzzled, then chuckled. “Oh, no, no. My father is not dead. He's simply been away on a matter of highest importance since before I was born. I don't know the details, but Mother said it couldn't be delayed. I was due to meet him in a decade or two once he came back.”

“And does he not know about you?”

“I'm pretty sure Mother told him.”

So... he didn't think to come back to meet his son?

This time, Kai held back his curiosity, though Rain still seemed to guess.

“Yeah, I could see it might appear odd to you. But it's not *too* unusual. A short filial meeting can't justify breaking his duties. Upon his return, we'll still have centuries to know each other. Perhaps longer. And I'll be better able to engage with him.”

That actually... no, that's still super weird.

Regardless of how long sirens past Green lived, they matured at a rate similar to humans and only had one childhood. Though he might be missing much of the culture-specific context. What kind of duty would even require someone to spend decades away?

Summoning all his self-restraint, Kai held back from probing further. Mostly it was consideration, a little from worry that Rain would close up if he kept pushing.

With each lost in their own musings, the conversation petered out in companionable silence.

“If you're set, I'll go get ready and see you at the party.” Rain stood up with a lazy stretch.

“Now? Isn't it still early?” Kai nearly cracked his pocketwatch in his panicked speed to check.

“Yeah, you have time. I just want to be the first one there.” Rain strolled out with a merry wave. I'll see you there.”

“Oh, okay then. Thanks for the uhm... help.”

Seventy-six minutes to formulate a survival strategy.

It said the third level. It should be around here.

Kai peered at the curving hallway. Doors etched with lush forests lined the inner wall of the Arboris Tower, which soared just outside the central cluster. Twilight tinged the view through the wide windows. Whoever Flynn hooked hadn't gone to a dorm room party. Most of the academy's central buildings rented spaces for an hourly fee, though usually they were laboratories or practice halls—not parties.

His boots echoed lightly on the gold-streaked marble flooring. Perhaps he should've worn different shoes? Not that he owned any.

Too late now.

His hand rose to fix his shirt's mother pearl buttons for the umpteenth time. Students often used the weekends to ditch their uniforms for more casual outfits. From the looks he received on the walk over, either his clothes suited him well or exceptionally poorly. He chose to trust in Rain.

The panoramic hallway branched through the inner wall. Spotting a woman in Raelion's sharp uniform, Kai took out his invitation card and approached.

"Excuse me. I'm looking for—"

Glancing over him and his badly crumpled paper, her professional expression brightened. "Right this was, sir."

"Thank you."

Striding to a door, she brushed the etching of a pine groove and bowed aside. The hinges soundlessly opened onto a narrow corridor, lit by a string of crystals.

"So should I follow—" Looking back, Kai found the attendant had already left.

Alright. I'll just go in then.

Hands stilled at his sides, he stalled a heartbeat and entered. Within two steps, the door shut behind him. Within five, he caught the faint beats of music. Notes drifted in layered melodies.

The corridor bent. Suffused lights escaped a warded threshold, where he glimpsed two dozen sharply dressed students mingling. On the far wall, deep purple drapery spilled over tables of artistically arranged finger food and fluorescent crystal decanters.

What's up with people and coloring drinks in unnatural shades?

Kai halted, relieved and slightly anxious. Commanding his legs to move, he crossed into the wide hall.

C'mon, what's the worst that can happen at a party?

Music, laughter and voices washed over him. A quintet of musicians on a platform played a trio of strings, a trilling flute, and a harp. Hummed vocals wove through the crowd, warming the atmosphere without drowning conversations.

Wisps of gold and violet floated like stars across the vaulted ceiling. Scanning the crowd, he recognized a few faces in passing. No one he had really spoken to. From how they stood, several must come from Martial studies. He moved away from the entrance as a girl in a billowing ivory dress sauntered in behind him, giggling and running to hug another student.

Am I in the wrong place...?

As panic started gnawing, he spotted another set of doors on the opposite walls, opening onto two adjacent halls. Glimpses of colorful lights and students' shadows slipped through the open passageways.

On a whim, he moved toward the left. Through the arched doorway, the music shifted to a more rhythmic tune; the floating wisps glowed indigo and silver. Another quintet of musicians played strings, brass, and drums, new arrangements of food lined the walls, more students chatted in clumps.

"You made it!" Before Kai could react, Flynn wrapped him in an enthusiastic hug.

"Yeah, happy eighteenth birthday," he patted his back and mumbled.

"Thanks! Now I'm unequivocally taller and *older* than you." Flynn pulled back with a beaming smile, standing straight in a sleek black and gray suit.

"Right." Kai rolled his eyes. "You know, I got thinking about our year in Higharbor yesterday... And I could have sworn your birthday was before mine."

"Was it...? You've never been good with birthdays. And that would have made it *terribly* impractical to celebrate."

"Indeed." Kai snorted a laugh. He could blame his extended stay in the Sanctuary, but having realized so late gave him little ground to stand on.

"All's well what ends well, right?" Flynn winked and looked over his outfit. "Cute otters, by the way. Rain helped you pick?"

Falling for the distraction, Kai brushed his clothes self-consciously. "Is it bad?"

"Nah, the pieces fit you well. Most people will be too busy gawking at other stuff to notice. I'm really glad you came."

"I said I would." Kai swept his gaze over the hall. "Though this is a little different from what I imagined."

"Yeah, you came early. Most people have yet to arrive. It'll fill up."

Kai stared in silence. "Three halls?"

"Seven, actually." Flynn jerked his thumb toward another door behind him. "Manny got a little carried away with the scale and invitations. Seven grades and seven colors. Not a very creative theme, but don't tell him that. It's his first party. And this one hall is plenty for me."

"How frugal of you."

"You know me." He smirked before someone behind him caught his attention. "Sorry, I have more people to greet. But we'll talk more later. I'll introduce you to a few friends. Rain and Rowan are already around here somewhere. And Hobbes offered to look after the kit. Help yourself to the snack tables. I personally picked those in this hall with Rain. Alright. Gotta rush. Try to enjoy yourself. For me? I'll find you later!" Flynn flashed a huge grin and slipped into the growing crowd.

"I will try..." Kai sighed. He wandered over toward the tables draped in indigo linens. The spread of tarts and colorful treats stretched across seven tables along each wall. Definitely not the most inspired theme. Inspecting the strangely glowing drinks, he inched toward the corner where a student's back barred his path.

Wait a second...

His eyes narrowed. "Alden...?"

His roommate startled and froze, then slowly turned. "Matthew. Good evening."

"You're here."

A slight flush spread over his pale complexion. "I did receive an invitation."

"I wasn't insinuating you snuck in. I just didn't take you for a party guy."

"Cause I'm not," Alden said dryly and angled to use him as a shield. "But I was told most high rankers and prominent patricians would be here. I have obligations to my family to... *mingle* with my peers. Plus, Rain kept talking about it and Flynn is your friend, so..."

"Well, I'm glad we can share in the suffering."

Alden smiled wryly. "Thanks."

"What else are roommates for?" Kai chuckled. "Speaking of, did you manage to adjust blue wolfbane proportions for the potion we were testing?"

His morose mood immediately brightened. "Kai's Valor?"

"*Please*, don't call it that."

They drifted into the familiar rhythm of recipes and herb distillation until Kai glimpsed a flowing aquamarine dress and froze midsentence.

Valela met his gaze and stilled for the briefest heartbeat before walking over. Gold pins glinted in her auburn hair—her steps slow and measured. She halted a stride away.

Alden looked between them. "I should go fulfill my duties." He dipped his head. "Matthew. Miss Hightide." Downing a glass of his indigo cocktail, he determinedly marched into the hall.

Alone, a quiet lull stretched between them until Kai cleared his throat. "I'm glad to see you here."

"You too."

"Do you want a drink?"

Valela glanced at the glowing concoctions. "Maybe... later. I should probably go see that Lys doesn't drag Rena into trouble."

"Wait!" Kai grabbed her hand before he could think better. "Would you like... to talk?" He scrunched at the hall. "I'm sure we can be somewhere quieter. It's important."

"Is it about that mysterious story you hinted?"

Kai swallowed and gave a curt nod. "It is."

Her eyebrow quirked. "Well, I can't say I'm not curious."