



Chapter 224

Violet

My steps slowed as we entered the village. Deep down, I knew I wasn't supposed to be here, but it wasn't like I could run away and find my way back to the palace. Kayden had led the way.

I looked around carefully, taking in the silence. It was quiet, almost too quiet, to the point that even the trees barely made any sound.

There was one thing that Kayden had said that bothered me. "You said they dumped my people here," I asked softly, "what do you mean?"

Kayden leaned his head back with a small smile, like he had been waiting for me to ask that. "Well..." he stretched the word out. "They didn't want them living with the common folks. So they were pushed up here. Pressured to stay for over a century. That's dumping, no?"

The word pressured hit something in me because it was almost the same as forced. I suddenly felt the ground shift beneath me.

My people.

They were here...but they were hidden in the mountains, away from the rest of the kingdom for reasons I couldn't even begin to imagine.

How could I be queen of Lyperia when this was what they did to people like me? People like them?

Kayden let his head fall back into place, releasing a sigh. "Did Kylan not tell you about them?"

I didn't answer.



He did address it, and back then, I had the exact same thought as I have now.

But maybe Kayden was overreacting. Maybe the people here loved nature and chose this out of free will. The air was cleaner, the view more peaceful ...

"Are they—"

"Witches," Kayden responded before I could ask. "At the end of the day, all witches are the same, and all witches are treated horribly. You should know that."

I was surprised to see people starting to come out of their huts, one by one. Some young, some old, women with babies on their backs, men with long silver hair, children holding hands and peeking around the corners of wooden doors. They were around forty in total, maybe more.

They were all watching and whispering as they neared closer. For some reason, I felt safe behind Kayden.

These were supposedly my people, but he seemed way more at ease. They seemed more like his people. "It's good to see you all again!" Kayden greeted. "Where is Varius?"

The growing crowd slowly parted, making a path for someone.

And then an old man stepped forward, leaning on a long cane. He wore a long black cape with a hood covering his eyes, the same as Aelius, so there wasn't much to see.

His steps were slow, and it wouldn't have surprised me if he were over a hundred years old. From the way the others looked at him, I could tell this man was their leader.



On his shoulder was a black raven.

The raven made a sound as its dark eyes landed on me, and it was a stare that sent a chill up my spine. I couldn't explain it, but the raven felt familiar...Like I had seen it before.

Then again, I had seen more ravens than I could count in my life, and they all looked alike.

"Kian," the man greeted, his voice deep. "You're back."

Kian?

I followed the man's gaze and froze as Kayden rolled himself forward. Why would the old man address him as Kian?

Kayden gave me a sheepish look, like he had just been caught, then rolled back his shoulders with a quiet sigh as if the secret was out.

That's when I realized. Kian...that was his new name.

"I have returned, Varius. Just like I promised," Kayden said proudly, holding his hand out. "And I bring you..."

He turned his chair back to me, gesturing with his hand.

My heart beat faster, and I began feeling dizzy. Even though my feet stayed steady on the ground, I felt like throwing up. Why were they all looking at me?

Kayden's eyes locked on mine. "Violet Hastings of the Bloodrose," he said loudly, "the future queen!"

The crowd muttered as they gathered around me. Hands reached out



toward me, people smiled, whispered my name, touched my arms and shoulders, while a few even came close enough to shake my hand.

What was happening?

I nodded and smiled as best I could, but my eyes stayed locked on Kayden, who was giving me a goofy thumbs-up like he had just done something extraordinary.

Then my eyes shifted to him.

Varius...

The man didn't do much. He just gently patted the raven on his shoulder. I couldn't see his eyes under that dark hood, but I did see his smirk. And something about it made my skin crawl.

Something about this whole situation made my skin crawl.

These witches?

This...Aelius cosplayer.

Kayden...or Kian?

Before I could process it any further, a woman stepped forward and gently took my hand. Her soft brown eyes bore into mine, and a warm smile was plastered on her lips. "It is so good to finally meet you, Violet. We have been waiting for years," she said. "The future queen coming all the way up here to visit must be a blessing from—"

"That's enough," Kayden said sharply. His voice wasn't as kind as usual, and he was rather quick to cut the woman off. The woman holding my hand blinked, then quietly stepped back.



"Maybe next time," Kayden softened his tone, giving a slight roll of his eye. "Violet and I are in a hurry, and we've come here for Varius."

As those words left Kayden's mouth, the raven on Varius' shoulder let out a loud, sharp sound and flew straight toward Kayden. It landed softly on his lap, looking comfortable as if it had done that a thousand times before.

Kayden chuckled, brushing the raven's feathers. "Soon, Thorne...soon."

Soon what?

I stared at the bird, my skin crawling. What was happening? Why was he talking to a raven like it was a friend? Why were these witches acting like Kayden being here, in their space, was normal?

Like, me being here in their space was normal?

My stomach flipped. If Kylan had been here, I would've probably buried my head in his chest. I came here to see what Kayden could've been up to, but now I wish I hadn't.

Especially as Varius stepped forward, stretching his hand toward me.

"Come," he said, his tone gentle. "Do not fear, my child."

As soon as a toothy grin appeared on his face, my heart sank. I stepped back. Kayden let out a small sigh and tilted his head, shaking it a little, as if telling me I was overreacting. He looked a bit disappointed, even.

My eyes widened as Varius slowly lifted his hood just a little higher, just enough for me to see. His brown eyes began to glow with a white shade.

Just like mine.



Just like Aelius'.

Just like Adelaide's.

And then, they faded back to brown, and the hood was pulled over his eyes once more. Kayden looked between us with a slight smile.

"Do not be afraid, child of blood," Varius said, opening his hand again and motioning for me to come closer. "I've been waiting for you. I'm not here to hurt you, only to guide you toward your destiny."

A strange pressure pressed against my chest.

I looked over at Kayden, though I didn't really know why. Maybe I just wanted some kind of reassurance from the person who had brought me here, even if it didn't make much sense.

But when he met my eyes with that smug smirk of his, that's when I knew.

Kayden knew more about me than he was letting on. Way more...

And something told me that even if he hadn't seen my eyes glow that day in the hallway, it wouldn't have made a difference. Because somehow, Kayden had known all along.

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