

Chapter 243

Violet

After a long walk, Nate and I ended up at two heavy wooden doors of the council chamber, and we waited in the quiet hall. Well, it wasn't completely quiet, because I could hear a muffled voice coming from the inside.

Most likely, someone was in there already, standing before the council to make a request, deliver a report, or plead their case. Whatever it was, it reminded me that my turn was next.

The scariest part was knowing something waited for me on the other side, but not knowing what. All I knew was that I would have to speak, use my voice, and that Kylan would be there. But so would the king, and I couldn't mess it up.

Nate stood beside me. He leaned against the wall in quiet support, and I was grateful that he stayed.

I could have asked him all the questions that were on my mind. Questions about who would be there, how it would go, what to expect. But I didn't ask, because I knew it would only make me doubt myself.

"You seem to be getting along well with Lian and Sora."

Curious, I turned to Nate. He had spoken for the first time in minutes.

"I do," I answered. Deep down, I was already freaking out. Why would he suddenly bring them up? Was he about to tell me I couldn't trust them?

"They're good girls," Nate said. "Kind and supportive."

"You know them?" I asked.

He gave a small shrug. "A little," he murmured. "Our families are all close, so I've seen them around. That's how I know they're good people."

I let out a quiet breath and leaned my head back against the wall. Okay. At least I didn't need to worry about that.

"Whatever this council thing is about," Nate said softly, "you'll do well, Vivi."

I gave him a doubtful look. I knew he meant well, but I wasn't sure I could do it. Speaking clearly when it mattered most? That wasn't something I was good at.

"I mean it!" Nate said, pushing himself off the wall. "You always do this thing when you're nervous," he added, then wiggled his lips like he was trying to copy me. I blinked at him, pretending to be offended, but then burst out laughing.

"I do not!"

I totally did.

Nate's mouth pulled into a smirk. "Well, you're not doing it this time," he said. "And that's how I know you'll be fine."

He gave me a soothing smile. It was the same that same smile I had gotten used to, the kind that always showed up when I needed it.

"You look really good, Nate," I said before I could stop myself.

His eyes snapped to mine, then quickly shifted away. "Thank you!" he said, scratching the back of his neck. He clearly hadn't expected me to

say that. "I...got a good rest last night."

I raised my eyebrows. That clearly wasn't what I meant, and we both knew it. But neither of us said anything. I figured he didn't want to talk about it, and like always, I didn't push. If there was one thing I understood, it was what it felt like to not want to talk.

Still...

As I looked into those soft eyes, I couldn't help but wonder if maybe he was just waiting for someone to ask. Just enough to give him a reason to let go. To cry, to yell, to do something. Nate always seemed so strong, but the more I looked at him, the more I believed he shouldn't have to carry everything on his own.

For how much longer would this to continue before he would finally snap?

"You just look really handsome today," I said after a moment. A small smile appeared on my lips.

Nate shot me a look, an amused grin already forming on his face. "Are you trying to get rid of Kylan and get with me?"

I burst into a fit of loud giggles, for a moment even forgetting what was behind those doors.

"Maybe," I teased.

"Don't," Nate chuckled. "Because I really like seeing the two of you together, and this is the happiest I've ever seen him. No one should get in between that."

That coming from Nate's mouth, someone who had known Kylan all his

life, meant a lot. But then his face shifted, and his smile faded.

"I never got the chance to apologize."

My smile slipped too. "For what?"

He swallowed deeply. "What Chrystal did..." His eyes shifted side to side, then dropped to the floor. "At the feast?"

"Nate, no!" I shook my head right away, but he raised his head and held up a hand.

"No, I should apologize," he said. "I knew what she was planning, and I kept quiet because I didn't want to get involved. But it wasn't right. You didn't deserve that. Any of it."

My heart felt heavy. I just didn't want him to think he had to carry that guilt, when none of it was ever his fault.

"You don't need to apologize for your sister, Nate," I said, keeping my voice steady. I took a few steps closer and reached out, giving his shoulder a gentle squeeze. I looked for his gaze, and once I found it, I continued. "You are not her, and you've never been her. You're your own person, and you've always been good to me," I told him. "You are good, you do good, and that is the only thing that matters."

He didn't speak for a moment, but I caught the surprised look in his eyes. It felt like something in him shifted, and maybe those words had been needed more than I realized. Slowly, I let go of his shoulder.

"See," he said, giving me a calm nod. "You'll do great."

He reached over and gently ruffled my hair. "Thank you, beautiful."

I lowered my head a little, smiling.

I nudged his arm in return, trying to hide how much that little compliment meant.

Our moment didn't last. A few seconds later, the heavy door creaked open. We both turned our heads at the same time, and there in the doorway stood Beta Jack.

He looked from Nate to me with that same calm expression he always had. Jack greeted me with a nod, and as I watched him, I could tell he wasn't the slightest bit suspicious or even curious about why I was there. His posture was steady, and as always, there was something kind and welcoming in the way he held himself.

There had never been a moment where I felt uncomfortable around Beta Jack, even knowing he was one of the king's people. He must have known the king didn't like me, but I never felt any bad energy from him.

"It's good to see you, Violet," he said warmly. "You can come in now. The council is ready for you."

You can come in now...

My brain had stopped functioning right after, and I couldn't move. I just stood there, staring straight ahead with a dazed expression.

"You seem like a very well-spoken and polite girl," Beta Jack added gently.

I hummed softly in response, my eyes widening as they flicked to his. "Whatever it is that you have to say in there," he continued, "do not let anyone intimidate you."

My stomach turned. The way he said it made it clear he was referring to the very king he served so faithfully, and yet his eyes stayed gentle.

"Just be you."

Those three words grounded me, and they were his last piece of advice before he opened the door all the way.

Just be Violet...

I smiled at him before pulling in a breath through my nose. "Thank you, sir."

I turned and looked behind me. Nate caught my eyes, gave me one last reassuring look, and then we all stepped in. Me first, then Nate and Jack quietly following behind.

The moment I stepped inside, I almost stopped breathing. The council room was huge, and there were way more people than I expected. Just a quick look told me there had to be at least fifty, maybe even more than that.

There were rows of blue benches all around. The floor was shiny marble and reflected the light from the high, round ceiling. A big chandelier hung right in the middle, above the spot where I guessed I was supposed to stand.

Even as the door clicked shut behind me, I stayed frozen in place. My eyes moved over the council members, most of them looked stiff and uninterested, and almost all of them were men. Older men I had no idea how I was supposed to convince.

I looked at their faces one by one, until my eyes landed on the person sitting near the center.

Kylan...

He was seated beside the king. The second our eyes met, he sat up straighter, his expression immediately softened, and when he gave me a small but proud smile, it gave me just enough air to breathe.

I bet even he was surprised to see me standing here. We both were.

I kept my eyes on Kylan, refusing to look at the king. Not that he was looking at me anyway. His eyes were locked on Kylan, and even if I didn't want to notice, it was hard to miss.

His face was drawn tight with fury, and it made me think for a second. It seemed like Kylan hadn't told him I was coming, because he looked pissed. But then again, even if Kylan had told him, he probably still would've looked pissed. It was Elyx.

"Now is the moment when you walk, Vivi," Nate whispered behind me, just loud enough for me to hear.

"Oh...right."

I dropped my gaze to the floor, mostly so I wouldn't trip.

Don't embarrass yourself, Violet.

I shut my eyes, took a breath, and once I opened them again, I lifted my chin and walked. Although the chamber was filled with murmurs, I could only hear and focus on the sound of my own footsteps. Somehow, I managed to block everything else out.

If I wanted to throw up later, I could. But right now, I needed to stand tall and hold it together. I wasn't just representing myself or those witches. I was representing Kylan too, and if I fell apart now, they would never take

me seriously. Not as 'just Violet,' and sure as hell not as their future queen. They would never listen.

Surprisingly enough, I had managed to reach the center of the room without tripping over my own feet. I gathered some courage, and this time, as I looked up, I didn't look at Kylan but straight at the king.

And when I looked into those cold, dark eyes, something deep inside boiled. How dare he still look at me as if I was the one who had wronged him, when he was the reason I had to face this council in the first place?

He had some nerve to sit there like that, like he hadn't been the one to destroy my life. There was so much I could judge him for, yet that man sat up there and judged me.

"We have an unfamiliar face," King Elyx's voice blasted through the chamber. "State your name and your business."

Was he serious?

He knew exactly who I was.

All the confidence I'd had just a split second ago had instantly vanished, and I couldn't help but think that maybe this wasn't a good idea after all.

Even all the murmurs I had managed to block out broke through, and for some reason they sounded so much louder now. I knew what they were thinking, and I knew that they were mocking me.

The 'royal mate' who hadn't even received the king's approval.

The room started spinning, and all I wanted was to run out of here. Maybe I was so irrelevant, they would all just forget about this moment.

My vision blurred for a second, but then I caught sight of Kylan. His eyes pierced through mine, and he shook his head as if to warn me not to dare turn away. Not now.

And I didn't want to. I didn't want to disappoint him, but I also wouldn't allow this king to make me look stupid.

My chest tightened as I considered all my options, but then I heard a low growl from within.

It was her...

Lumia.

'Do not embarrass us as usual, and just say something,' she snarled. 'You better speak before I force the words out of you.'

No...

Why did she decide to appear now, after bailing on me several times? I had gotten this far on my own. I didn't need her now. This was my moment, not hers.

I clenched my jaw, lifted my chin, and stared King Elyx down.

Lumia was right about one thing. I could not let this man embarrass me. Especially not the man who had already embarrassed himself more times than I could count. Adelaide and Alaric, Mom and Dad, wouldn't want me to do that. Kylan wouldn't want me to do that. So I could not.

"I am Violet Hastings," I said, not knowing what had come over me. My voice was loud and clear. The king sat up in his chair with a dismayed look on his face, his smile fading in every way possible. "And you know very well who I am, Your Majesty."