

Chapter 254

Violet

Jack and I walked at the very front as we entered the village. With every step, my stomach twisted, and my eyes moved over the huts and tents, just like they had the first time.

Just like before, people slowly stepped out. Elders, women, men, and children. Their faces were half-hidden behind doorframes and wooden beams, and they appeared to be even more cautious than last time.

I couldn't blame them.

Last time it was just me and Kayden, who they trusted. Now it was a whole group of Lyperians, and I was sure they had already been warned that we were coming. How could they trust Lyperians, when they were the ones who put them here to begin with?

How could they trust Lyperians, when all they've learned is that they hate them, and it was probably true?

"These people live better than any commoner in a nearby village!" someone called out from behind, proving my point. It was a buff-looking man, carrying three crates with ease. He had a wicked smirk on his lips as if the only reason he was even here, was to convince himself that these people didn't have it that bad.

"Really?" Trinity said before I could. "If this is what you call 'living well,' then maybe Lyperia isn't as great as it thinks it is. Sounds like the council still has a lot of work to do."

I gave her a grateful smile as the man looked the other way with a scoff, and she shot me a thumbs up. At least that shut him up.

More murmurs followed, along with the sounds of carts being dragged as the rest of the group arrived. Jack, who hadn't been that focused on the conversation, but rather the state of the village, stood with his hands on his hips, eyes squinting as he looked around like he was trying to figure something out.

"I think—"

His words were cut short by a loud raven's cry that cut through the village. Everyone stepped back, including me.

It was all because I knew that cry.

It was Thorne...

And that meant Varius was close.

Jack, who had also taken a step back at first, now moved forward. I didn't know what came over me, but I reached out and pressed my hand to his arm to stop him. "Wait!" I said, louder than I meant to.

The last thing I wanted was to make these people uncomfortable. They were witches, used to their own kind. "Wait!" I repeated, this time glancing over my shoulder.

I waited until everyone had stopped, then took a small step forward. "Be careful, Violet," Lian said from behind me. I could hear the worry in her voice. I knew she meant well, but I couldn't help thinking she wouldn't have warned me if these people weren't witches.

Still, I stepped out further, my heart pounding. The villagers began to show themselves one by one, whispering quietly, their eyes full of curiosity as they watched me.

I took a deep breath and tried to steady myself.

"I'm looking for Varius?"

My voice came out softer than I wanted. Careful. Maybe too careful. But I didn't want to do too much or say the wrong thing. For all I knew, they would throw themselves at my feet and call me their savior.

Thorne was still out of sight, but I could hear his loud cries again. That was all it took for Jack to move beside me. His hand brushed my arm as he gently pushed me behind him.

"Watch out, Violet," he said, his voice low and firm. He scanned the crowd with sharp eyes.

A moment later, I felt someone else beside me. It was Nate. He didn't say anything, but his eyes stayed focused on the villagers like they could attack at any time.

Then I felt another presence, and this time it was Kaelis. "Don't worry, Violet!" She gave me a confident smile. "I won't let these witches lay a finger on our future queen," she said, leaning in slightly. Her ponytail bounced as she shifted, looking more excited than nervous, like she had been waiting for a moment like this to play the role of my personal guard.

I stared at both of them, my heart tight in my chest. For a second, I didn't know whether to laugh, cry, or shove them away and tell them how ridiculous they were being. I was the one who suggested this mission, and the witches were the one who needed the help, so why was I the one being treated like I needed saving?

What was it with Iyperians and witches?

I shook my head and shrugged myself loose.

"I've been here before," I said, stepping forward again. "I got it."

Right at that moment, the villagers began to part, creating a path, and then he appeared. Varius.

He wore the same dark cape as last time and was hunched over, leaning heavily on a stick as he slowly made his way toward us. Thorne circled above him, crying out before landing on his shoulder.

My breath caught as I saw him. Both of them.

That scary raven, and the man who reminded me so much of Grandpa Aelius. The man who had called Kayden 'Kian,' and who had protected all these witches with nothing more than a pair of glowing eyes.

And that raven...

As I looked into those pitch-black, pearl-like eyes, everything from the Veil rushed back to me. For a second, I really thought about turning and running back down the mountain.

This raven was not just any bird, and I still couldn't figure out what made him different or so familiar, but I was sure of it. Thorne's sharp eyes locked onto mine, but I didn't flinch. I really wanted to, but whatever problem this creature had with me, today was not the day.

Varius kept walking, and more villagers stepped out behind him. The crowd grew, doubling in size since the last time I came here with Kayden. Their eyes followed us closely. They seemed nervous, suspicious, but also curious.

"Look at them!" someone behind me shouted. "The king is right. These people are liars, and they seem just fine! We're wasting our time here."

The king?

Some of the Lyperians mumbled in agreement, while others didn't respond. My chest tightened with anger. I wanted to turn around and scream that these people had suffered enough already, but the words wouldn't come out.

Varius took his last step and stopped in front of us. Thorne shifted on his shoulder again, moving just enough to keep those dark eyes on me.

"We meet again, royal mate," Varius said.

I forced my eyes off the bird and met his gaze.

His face gave away nothing, and that scared me the most of all. For a second, panic rose in my chest. What if I had made a mistake by coming here with all these people? What if I had upset him? I hadn't thought of that.

What if he was 'him' and I had just betrayed him by bringing a bunch of Lyperians to his village?

If he really wanted to, he could expose me right here and now. Perhaps he was the figure floating in the air, and Baelor would suddenly appear. Anything could happen.

In that moment, I really wished Kylan was here. He would know what to do. He always did.

Varius stared at me, hard. It felt like he was looking straight into my soul with those squinted dark eyes. My breathing slowed, and my skin started to tingle with an unfamiliar feeling. I didn't know what was happening, but something about it felt strange. Like something ancient and strong was reaching into my mind.

Then, out of nowhere, I heard a voice in my head.

'Do not ever fear me, Child of Blood. We are woven from the same thread.'

My heart skipped a beat, but I kept my face calm, hoping no one noticed. That voice...it was him. It was Varius. Inside my head.

But how?

How had he done that?

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