

Chapter 261

Violet

"Bye, Violet!"

Little hands reached for mine as soft voices called my name. The children of the mountain smiled so wide I was sure their cheeks must have hurt.

"Will you be back soon?" one of them asked.

I crouched down to meet them, brushing their tiny fingers with my own. "I'll try," I said with a smile, though it broke my heart to lie. I probably wouldn't be able to return, but I would make sure others would. I would make sure they were taken care of.

Sometime during the three hours we had spent in the mountains, the second group had arrived, which meant it was time for the first group to head back down. The third group must already be making their way up by now. I found myself wondering if I would cross paths with Kylan, and to my own surprise, I almost wished I wouldn't because seeing him would also mean seeing Chrystal and Kayden...

As if that thought weren't bad enough, the idea of leaving the witches here while I returned to the palace's luxury filled me with guilt.

Even though we had done much already, there was still so much more waiting. These people could not be healed in a single day, and neither could their struggles, but at least now they had something to hold on to. A beginning.

Varius and Kayden could say whatever they wanted, but they at least seemed to be doing a bit better than when I first saw them.

It took some time today, but slowly the witches had grown more at ease. They had been open, kind, and welcoming, and not just to me, but to everyone who came with us. Their kindness made one thing clear. Lyperia was the problem, and not these people.

The witches were just like anyone else. They joked, played around, talked like any other person and were not the monsters they were made out to be. My people weren't monsters.

I rose to my feet and spotted Varius at a distance, leaning on his stick. For once, Thorne was not by his side.

The way Varius crept into my mind still freaked me out, but he wasn't half as bad as I expected. He had been helpful and quiet during my time here, and he wasn't nearly as frightening as he looked.

I lifted my hand to wave, but he did not wave back. He kept his eyes on me, and instead of being impossible to read they looked worried... burdened.

And I couldn't help but wonder.

What's on his mind?

"Okay, we're heading out!"

Jack's voice rang out in the mountains, and people started walking down the path. I was still focused on Varius when someone suddenly brushed my shoulder as they rushed past. "Let's go, Violet!"

It was Sora, with Lian and Trinity close by her side. In a rush, I followed the group, but my eyes stayed fixed on Varius. Even when I tried to look away, I couldn't. At the last moment, I broke from the group and hurried toward him.

His gaze locked onto mine as I stood before him, and he didn't blink once. What was his problem?

"What—"

Before I could speak, he raised his hand and pressed it gently to my forehead. My breath caught, and when I tried to step back, my legs wouldn't move. Instead, I stared into Varius's eyes as they began to glow white, chills running through my body.

"Do not betray him," Varius whispered. "Do not betray him."

The words left an uncomfortable feeling in my chest, and this time I managed to take a step back. My eyes were wide, my heart pounding. That warning...

They were the same as what Adelaide had spoken. First her, and now Varius...

"W-what...who..." My voice broke, the words breaking apart as they left my lips.

"Vivi!"

My head snapped toward Nate who was waiting for me near the path. His voice pulled me back to reality.

"Forget what you've just heard. I never should have spoken it," Varius said, his voice heavy with regret.

"But—"

"You should go," he repeated again. He shook his head once, then turned away, walking off as if nothing had happened.

First he gave me a warning, then he told me to let it go...

What was he getting at?

I wanted to follow him. I wanted to demand more. But when Nate called out again, louder this time, I knew I had to move. I took a sharp breath, pushed my feelings down, and hurried toward him.

"Nate!" I sang, putting a smile on my lips. He threw an arm over my shoulder and pulled me in close.

"And?" he asked, grinning. "Happy?"

I gave him a small nod. "Of course!"

"Good. You should be," Nate said. His eyes seemed to be sparkling, and there was no doubt he was in an even better mood than before. "These people will be cared for, and it's all because of you, Vivi!"

Yes, either that or they would all be doomed, which would also be because of me. "I'm just happy for them, and hope everything works out," I said softly. "That's all."

Nate was just about to answer, but then Kaelis suddenly pushed herself under his free arm. "Me too!" she declared, tilting her chin up like she had been there all along. "And I have decided to make sure these people will continue to receive the help they need," she said. "Or maybe I'll even join the council!"

Nate arched a brow. "You?" He chuckled. "Joining the council?"

"Yes," she said with a confident nod. A smirk appeared on her lips. "Are you jealous because you're stuck on that silly student council of yours?"

"Jealous?" Nate chuckled. "Now you're just making things up."

I looked back and forth between the two, who seemed to have completely forgotten about me. "I'm not making things up," Kaelis laughed, leaning her head on his shoulder. "I'm just stating facts."

"You always need the last word, don't you?" Nate squinted his eyes.

Kaelis's eyes went wide, and a smile spread across her face. "Do you think so? Really?"

"Yes," Nate responded. "I really wonder how long you can survive without one. We should play a game."

Her eyes lit up instantly. "You name it, I'll win."

"Alright," Nate said, his grin widening. "Whoever can keep their mouth shut the longest wins."

Kaelis blinked at him, stunned. "Again? But that's unfair," she complained. She leaned a bit forward to look at me. "Isn't it, Violet?"

I hid the small smirk that threatened to appear on my lips and pretended not to hear, because I really didn't want to get in the middle of it.

"Unfair?" Nate teased. "Or impossible for you?"

Kaelis traced her fingers over her lips like a zipper. Her cheeks puffed, and she pressed her mouth tight to hold the words in, although I wasn't sure if someone like her could even last a minute.

This time I couldn't help it and let out a laugh.

Kaelis's brows creased as she turned to me, and a muffled sound escaped

her. Just then, someone up ahead struggled with the returning crates. In seconds, Kaelis slipped out from under Nate's arm and darted over to help, scooping up both crates without letting a single word leave her lips.

Only when she was far enough, Nate released a breath and smiled. "It always works," he said. "Kylan and I used to do it to her all the time."

"But you lost," I arched a brow.

"She isn't talking, so I'd say I won." Nate patted my shoulder, looking far too pleased with himself.

He smiled softly at Kaelis's back, and I realized then what it was. His feelings weren't romantic like hers at all. It was a sad, one-sided kind of love, but there was still real care in the way he looked at her. She had him as a brother figure, and I had him as a friend. We were both lucky in our own ways.

It was kind of sad, the way he had so easily gotten rid of her, but hilarious all at once. He hadn't turned her down harshly, only found another way so he wouldn't hurt her.

I released a quiet chuckle. "I never knew you were this funny."

Nate pointed to himself. "You think I am funny?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but right at that moment Beta Jack called out his name from the front. Nate let his arm slip from my shoulders, gave me a soft smile, and jogged off to his father.

He wasn't even gone a full second before Trinity appeared at my side. I turned to meet her determined eyes, and I already had a feeling where this was going.

"What did that Varius guy want from you?"



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