



Chapter 268

Violet

Not even his own blood?

He squeezed his eyes as those last words left his mouth. To any other ear, it might've sounded innocent, but to Kylan, it didn't. Kayden's words had a double meaning, and he was referring to what happened at the battle. It was an unfair and twisted move.

The children bounced and squealed with excitement, but Kylan shot daggers at Kayden. During the Elite challenge in the woods, he had claimed his brother held no resentment toward him. Yet now Kayden was growing bolder by the second, showing that he, in fact, did blame him for everything.

It was almost like a direct attack, as if to say, You paralyzed me, and I am this close to telling everyone. What will you do about it?

Kylan's hand tightened around mine. He wasn't holding on for himself, but probably for the sake of everyone. Including Kayden, and not giving him the reaction he wanted.

Kylan was too controlled for that, but I didn't know how long it would last because Kayden had really been pushing it.

I think it was clear who Varius was referring to. It was obviously Kylan and Kayden.

"Do you think we can meet the king?" A small voice broke the tension. Both brothers tore their gazes away from each other, and Kylan drew in a slow breath.



"Maybe," he mumbled.

"Is this little squirrel really yours?" Another one asked. Kylan looked down at the boy, then at Jumpie, who was still resting on his shoulder, her cheeks stuffed with whatever she had stolen earlier.

"She is," Kylan smiled. "Her name is Jumper."

The questions didn't stop there. They just kept coming, one after another.

"Does she live in the palace with you?"

"Is the palace really made of white and gold stone?"

"Is it true the food never runs out?"

"Is it true you all have monsters inside of you?"

Kylan gave short answers, remaining calm and patient even through his anger, because he was angry at Kayden. One of the questions made my heart flutter.

"Is the Royal Mate your girlfriend?" one of the boys blurted, pointing right at me. My cheeks burned instantly, and before I could stop myself, I laughed nervously.

A surprised laugh came from Kylan. "Yes," he said without hesitation, his eyes flicking to mine. "At least, I hope so—"

"She doesn't have a mark yet, Kylan," Kayden jumped in. He had looked behind once more, and there was a faint smile on his face. "Which means ...anything can still happen."

The air suddenly shifted again. The two brothers went back to glaring at



each other while Varius let out a short chuckle from the front. Meanwhile, my thoughts were racing because he wasn't mistaken. Anything could still happen, and something was about to happen.

I didn't know if Kayden was just doing this to taunt me, but I knew he wasn't the only one. The king also seemed to feel the same way, as did everyone else. Madam Renata even referred to me as a placeholder.

My eyes stayed on Kylan, who was still very much focused on Kayden. Wasn't he going to say something? Deny it, reassure me...anything?

It couldn't possibly get any worse than this...

The children, who didn't seem to notice anything, just kept asking their questions. "Is there a royal baby?" another one asked cheerfully.

So it could get worse...

Kylan's eyes softened, and he laughed lightly. "No, no royal baby," he said, glancing at me with a soft smile. "Yet..." he added.

Heat filled my cheeks again, and I took a small breath, feeling a lot more relieved after his reaction to the future. I was just being Violet and looking into it too much, while the only reason he didn't say anything was because he was probably irritated that he couldn't strangle his brother.

I didn't know if my eyes were deceiving me, but a soft flush appeared on Kylan's cheeks as well. One I wouldn't have noticed if I hadn't looked that closely.

Varius glanced back at us as he walked, his stick tapping lightly against the ground. "Listen well, children," he said, and the children instantly hushed. Their eyes were fixed on him.



"Not everything in life happens right away," he went on. "Some things wait for the right moment...and that moment can take many, many years, because life often likes to throw us in different directions before we find where we belong."

The children's mouths parted, and their eyes were wide with wonder. I could tell they didn't fully understand, and just enjoyed listening to Varius.

I didn't quite understand either, but I knew we weren't talking about the same thing anymore. He did that thing again, and I was not going to listen. He nodded once, as if to make sure I had heard him, but I quickly looked the other way.

Kayden let out a huff. "I don't agree," he stated. "I think sometimes waiting only means leaving the door open for someone else to step in—"

"And have you already found someone, Kayden?" Kylan cut him off calmly. He tilted his chin at the maid behind Kayden's chair. "Maybe there's a future for you and..." he squinted, pretending to think hard. "Clara...Callie? What's her name again?"

"Camille," Kayden responded with a soft grunt.

Kylan exhaled. "Camille..."

Kayden's eyes searched mine, and when he found them, he didn't look away. His smirk appeared, and it was as if he wanted to remind me that I was somehow at the center of all of this, whether I liked it or not.

Varius chuckled, and although it wasn't loud, it was enough to tell me that the old man was amused by all of this. It wouldn't surprise me if he had been waiting for this exchange all along.



I spun my head, desperate to focus on something else. The huts, tents, and people had already faded behind us as we walked further into the mountains. Kylan's steps slowed, and his grip around me tightened once more. "Where are we going?" he asked.

Varius didn't bother to turn. "I told you. I wish to show you something," he explained calmly.

"I want to know where," Kylan pressed, his tone harder now. At that moment, we stopped walking.

A breath escaped me as I looked in front of us. We stood at the entrance of a cavern. It was completely dark, except for a faint glowing light flickering from the inside.

I had been up these mountains all day, yet I never knew this place existed. What was this place?

Varius's gaze slid back to the children. "You know the rules. Until here, and no further for you."

The children nodded quickly. "Yes, Master Varius!"

Then they ran down their path, disappearing back into the trees, and it was only us.

"And you can go too," Kayden dismissed his maid with a wave of his hand. The poor girl, who always seemed to have her head lowered, followed after the children.

Once she was out of sight, Kayden released a chuckle. Kylan and I both snapped our heads toward him, and his eyes locked onto Kylan. "I will tell them, Varius," he said eagerly. His maid rolled his chair closer until he was right at our side. Kylan's arm stretched out protectively, forming



a barrier between Kayden and me. 1

"This cavern is the original root of the extinguished Lyperian stone," Kayden explained. "The place where the witches of these mountains draw their strength from."

A chill ran through me as a thousand thoughts immediately went through my mind. How did we get here? From me being pushed to use my eyes, to helping the witches with aid, and now...back to this? Back to the stone? Why were we here?

Kayden leaned forward in his chair, his grin too wide, like he couldn't hold his excitement in. "I suppose this means that because Violet refuses to use her eyes directly, Varius has decided to move on to the other way."

I blinked at him, completely lost. I knew we had discussed the stone before, I hadn't forgotten, but what other way?

"Why are we here?" Kylan threw up his hands. He was beginning to lose his patience.

A breath escaped from Varius's lips, his eyes scanning the cavern. "Because while I appreciate the help you've given my people, I know it won't last. It simply cannot, but this—" he lifted his stick toward the weak source of light coming from the cavern, "this is the next best option. Bringing back the stone would give them what no bandages, herbs, or helping hand ever could. It can give them the strength that was taken from us."

He took another long breath, then turned back to us. His eyes softened. "But do not mistake me. I only wish to show you, to tell you the history. I will not force anyone. It doesn't work that way—"



"Yes, you are right. It doesn't," Kylan interjected.

"Violet won't use her eyes, and that is final."

A frown appeared on Varius's face, and Kayden laughed so hard his shoulders started shaking. "Violet?" he questioned. "No, not even Lettie can do that." He leaned back in his chair, his eyes glinting with amusement. "It requires two specific people."

Kylan's jaw clenched. "Violet won't do anything," he said word for word, his voice dropping lower.

"You're right, she won't," Kayden confirmed.

I didn't know where to look because I couldn't even keep up with what they were saying anymore. All I knew was that neither Varius nor Kayden had given me clarity about the stone. There was another option they hadn't told me about for a reason.

"It has to be the one who destroyed it, and the next in line," Kayden said. That was why the details about the stone had been so vague and why they always made it sound like there was no path forward other than my eyes. Not because there wasn't a way, but because the way forward was nearly impossible.

It had to be the king and Kylan...