



Chapter 278

Violet

"What are they doing here?" I asked, louder this time. I looked at Kylan, hoping he would give me an answer.

Instead, he looked back at the little girl with a kind smile. "What are you?" he asked, ruffling her hair.

She scrunched her nose. "Just a witch!" she said proudly, then leaned closer. "But the raven does say that we children are the future, and will be of great value to him one day...I'm sorry. I'm not sure if I was supposed to ask you this question."

That nervous look in her eyes unsettled me. She suddenly looked so small and unsure again, as if even speaking had put her in danger. An uncomfortable feeling reached my chest, and the hopelessness I had felt in these mountains returned.

What was happening?

Kylan lowered his eyes as he chuckled. "Well, none of it makes sense, so don't ask any more silly questions," he told the girl. I knew exactly what he was doing. He was protecting her, making it seem like we didn't believe her words, just in case Thorne had been listening.

It was the right thing to do. It wouldn't shock me if the same Thorne who went after a squirrel might also target children.

"Go on now," Kylan urged. The girl shot him an innocent smile before she ran off to one of the nearby trees.

My attention returned to the path. The others were closer now, and with



each step they took, the knot in my stomach twisted tighter and tighter. I wasn't okay with someone taking a life for me, and I had tried not to think about it too much, but hearing that we would be forced to bury a body was another thing.

Neither I nor my friends would dig a hole, and we would not be forced to bury a body. Fate could fight me on that one, but I knew my heart.

I was sure Kylan felt the same. His eyes were fixed on the path, his jaw locked, and his hand slowly curled into a fist. This might not have been the storm Varius spoke about, but it was still one.

It was a storm between us, around us, inside us...

We had already gone through so much, far more than anyone should have to endure, and each time we thought this was the beginning of the end, more followed.

How many more people had to be dragged into this? How many more pieces had to be put at risk before Baelor would act?

"Trinity is back!" One of the children's voices rang out.

I turned just in time to see the children race toward the group, waving their little arms. They circled around them, tugged their clothes, hugged their legs. With each hour that passed, they seemed to feel more familiar and comfortable with the faces they had already seen before. I really hoped that despite everything, it could still be this way...

"Wow," Trinity laughed. "At least someone is happy to see us!"

Were we that obvious?

My throat felt tight, and I swallowed hard. It wasn't that I wasn't happy



to see her, it would've just been better for them to stay inside the palace. My eyes drifted past them, straight to Camille. She did her best not to look at anyone. She just quietly grabbed a bag from the cart they came with, and then walked away with her head down. No one noticed, but I did.

Though I had to admit, if it weren't for Varius warning us about her, I wouldn't have known either.

"What is the meaning of this?" Kylan's voice cut through the noise. "What are you doing here?"

Nate took a step forward. "I told you I'd come back, didn't I?" He smiled brightly. "But it was actually Dylan who —"

Dylan cleared his throat loudly and scratched his neck. Then he looked the other way. Of course, it was him. I should have known from the moment he didn't push about me spending the night here.

He would've never left me alone in these mountains, and neither would Fergus. That was just who they were, and it was never going to change.

"Look!" Sora pulled a bag from the cart with a proud grin. "We brought you fresh clothes, tents, more food..." She rummaged a little more until she found the thing she had been looking for, then held it up in the air. "Oh, and even marshmallows!" she said. "I was thinking we could sit around a campfire, share our secrets —"

"No!" Kylan growled. "There will be no marshmallows or sharing secrets. We're not in kindergarten. What will happen is that you will all go back down at once and —"

I poked his side, hard, trying to calm him. He pressed his lips together,



but his words had already done damage. The bright and innocent look in Sora's eyes had dimmed in a second.

Nate stepped in quickly, placing a hand on Sora's shoulder. "Just ignore him," he said, smirking. "He's always like this."

He was usually on the grumpy side, though this time his anger came from worry, and rightfully so. Same as me, he was the kind who wanted to protect whoever he could.

"Everyone is welcome in these mountains."

A low voice came from behind us. My throat went dry as Varius stepped out of a tent, his stick in his hand. Kayden was beside him in his chair, and Camille was already at his back while Thorne sat calmly on his shoulder.

"And since all of you have come all this way to join your friends," Varius spread his free arm. "It makes your presence that much more special."

Varius's gaze slid to me, then to Kylan, lingering on him for a second more than necessary. He was hinting...pushing us to let things be, to not stir what couldn't be undone.

A deep breath came from Kylan because that was also what he stood for. Not challenging fate.

"Thank you, Grandpa Varius," Sora said sweetly.

"Grandpa...Varius?" Lian frowned.

Varius chuckled. "Just Varius is fine," he said, looking around. He scanned the group once more until his eyes landed on Nate. "Where is the Princess Kaelis?"



Kylan and I turned to Nate. Kylan's face showed clear surprise, his brows pulling together.

"Inside the palace, I assume," Nate shrugged. "But...why are you asking me?"

Varius chuckled again, tapping his stick lightly. "The two of you seemed close before," he spoke with his eyes closed. "That's why I asked."

When he opened them again, he let out a long breath. "The shifters have helped us today, so we will help them as well!" he spoke to his people.

A few witches stepped forward at his words. Their faces were curious as they waited for direction.

I caught Kayden looking up at Varius, his jaw locked. He gave the man an angry frown, then lowered his gaze to his lap. He looked so uncomfortable, so pissed at the world...withdrawn. It wasn't just him, but Thorne as well...

But even as I kept staring, trying to see through him, to catch anything that told me what was going through his mind, what would ultimately push him to kill someone for me...there was nothing.

"They have helped us with our accommodations, brought us food, blankets, and medicine, so we will help them with their tents," Varius continued. "Make them feel welcome, show our gratitude for all they have done for us today."

The witches nodded, smiling at each other as they all seemed to agree with his words.

"And after all of you are done setting up," Varius added, lowering his voice. He looked at the group and tapped his stick once against the



ground, "I would love to taste some of these marshmallows of yours... and perhaps share some of my secrets."

Then he turned and walked back inside his tent. Thorne adjusted on his shoulder as the tent flap closed behind him. Camille pushed Kayden's chair, and the two followed Varius.

Sora leaned her head against Lian with a dreamy sigh. "Aww, Grandpa Varius and Kayden look so cute together!" she cooed. "The two of them seem to have gotten close today. It's so nice of him to take care of the prince."

Cute?

I glanced at Kylan, wondering whether the two of us were thinking the same. Just by a single glance at the furious look on his face, I could tell we did. It was almost comical to put the words 'cute' and 'Kayden' in the same sentence, as they had no business being so.

However, I couldn't blame her. Kayden had deceived me once, too.

There was nothing cute about any of this...and tonight would be a long night.



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