

Chapter 289

Violet

"Do you know what this is?" Varius asked.

I gave him a nod. "Yes," I whispered. "I think I do."

He shot me a warm smile. "Then you must know that you will always be able to find me, no matter what."

Could I really use this to speak to Varius?

There were still so many questions I had wanted to ask him. Who was he? Where did he really come from? What was his story? His connection to Grandpa Aelius? He knew his name.

"After all these years of waiting, it was a true honor meeting you, Royal Mate," Varius nodded.

"And Crown Prince."

He stuck out his hand, and Kylan ended up accepting it. "Do not lose faith in each other...ever," Varius added. "Not today, not tomorrow...and especially not now."

Those words...

It felt as if he was trying to warn us about even more than he already had.

"The raven won't be staying with you anymore, will he?" Kylan asked, his tone direct. I followed his eyes for a moment, noticing they were on Kayden, who had still not left his position. Neither did Thorne.

Varius chuckled. "You are a smart one," he acknowledged. "Thorne has

decided that my job here is done. He will be going with your brother now."

"Done?" Kylan scrunched his face. "What do you mean, done?"

Yes, what did he mean?

An important thought slipped into my mind. If Thorne were going with Kayden, did that mean he would be able to hear us, just like he had done in the mountains?

Thorne had ears everywhere...

That's what he'd said.

Varius caught the look on my face and shook his head. "Soon, but not yet. Some things take time to ripen," he said cryptically. "There are certain things that require...a power, and once you leave these mountains, you will be that power."

He looked at us like we should already know what he was talking about. I glanced at Kylan. He just hummed, like it all made sense to him.

What I gathered was that Kayden wasn't strong enough yet for Thorne to do whatever he really wanted, so once we left these mountains, he wouldn't be able to hear us anymore. Going with Kayden meant Thorne couldn't listen in on us for now.

But Thorne wouldn't give up his ears without a reason, so there had to be one.

A sound of laughter cut through my thoughts, and we all looked back.

It was Nate. He had Dylan in a headlock, ruffling his hair while Dylan

squirmed and tried to break free. My lips curled into a smile. Seeing Nate so full of joy filled me with it too, even though it shouldn't. Not now.

But I loved seeing him like this, and really hoped he could stay that way. It was clear that he had enjoyed these mountains, the people, and just spending time with everyone.

Having people around...

That's what made him happy.

"Your friend seemed to have a lot of energy in the morning," Varius pointed out. "His smile lit up these mountains the same way the princess's had."

I suppose he meant Kaelis. Though he hadn't spent much time with her, he really seemed to have a soft spot for her.

"That's just Nate," I answered, catching the beautiful sound of his loud laugh again. Even Kylan had a smile on his face.

"It's what he does...make others happy," I looked at Varius. "That's why I adore him."

Varius let out a low hum. "Take good care of your friend, Royal Mate," he said. "Take good care of each other."

I stared into his soft eyes, and before I even realized what I was doing, I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around the man.

"Violet—" Kylan started, but it was already too late to pull me back. Varius released a startled breath as his body stiffened, but then he wrapped his arm around me.

The hug felt warm and safe. Kind of like embracing a grandfather you barely knew but somehow trusted anyway. Because that's the way I felt about him right now.

I trusted the man I had once feared. I appreciated that he was trying to change, and I knew it couldn't have been easy to turn his back on Kayden, who he held dear, and on Thorne...Baelor. But it certainly looked like that was what he had done.

"Goodbye, Royal Mate," Varius whispered.

I pulled back, shaking my head. "I don't want to say goodbye," I told him. "So I'll say, I'll see you later."

A sigh escaped his lips before a slight smile appeared. "Fine," he agreed. "I'll see you later."

"Later." I gave him one last smile before turning away. Kylan grabbed my hand, and we walked off, leaving Varius behind.

"So that thing will be coming with us," he said right away.

I glanced down at the woven bag in my hands, the one containing the box. How would I even get that thing to work?

"This?" I asked, pulling a face. "Or that?"

My eyes flicked to Thorne, who was still on Kayden's fingers. Jumpie peeked her little head out from the edge of Kylan's pocket, her eyes darting around as if she were keeping watch, just in case. As we walked, the village seemed to come alive. People left their huts one by one, following behind us until there was a whole crowd.

By the time we reached the path, it felt like the entire village had

gathered to see us off. Trinity had joined the group again and stood with Sora and Lian.

Dylan was beside Nate, who had the cart in his grip.

And Kayden...

The moment I checked to see what he was doing, his eyes locked on mine. That same smirk of his tugged at his lips before his eyes slid back to Thorne. Then he chuckled, stroking the raven's feathers like he had just found his greatest treasure.

There was something about that look on his face that felt too unsettling for words. How was it that every time I looked at Kayden, the same question spun through my head?

What was he up to?

It wasn't just me thinking it. Kylan's eyes were shooting daggers at his brother, and this time, I was the one who wanted to ask if he was okay.

"So," Nate's voice cut in, his gaze sweeping over the group. "Are we all ready to go?"

I glanced back one last time, anxious. Varius was still there, standing at a distance, and when he bowed his head, my heart sank. He hadn't handed me the box for chitchat. He had given it because he knew we wouldn't see each other again.

He also had a price to pay.

His job was done...

Did that mean he was going to die?

No, he couldn't...

"Vivi," Nate looked at me. "Ready?"

Kylan nudged my shoulder lightly, urging me to answer. All eyes were on me. "Yes. I'm ready!"

No, I was not...

Nate led the group, taking the first step, and as we started walking, voices rang out around us. Villagers, children, and elders all said their goodbyes.

I peeked back through the crowd, hoping for one last glimpse of Varius, but all I saw was his back. He was already turned, his steps slow as he walked away.

I really do wish we had more time...

The moment my foot hit the path, officially leaving the village behind, a voice found its way inside my head.

'I said I wasn't going to invade anymore, but I need to tell you one last thing, Royal Mate,' it whispered.

I felt a chill down my spine.

Varius...

'If you do not speak, you will be spoken for. If you do not act, you will be acted upon,' he stated. 'Do not fear, do not bow. What was once soft must now be sharpened. It is time to be a Child of Blood.'

My chest squeezed. His words weren't just warnings, they were a wake-up call. I didn't know if I could live up to them, but part of me already

knew I didn't have a choice. The world was going to shit, and it wasn't going to wait for me to be ready.

I clutched the bag in my hands and closed my eyes before taking a slow, steady breath.

Focus, I told myself.

What was once soft must now be sharpened.

"Violet," Kylan's voice reached me. "How are you feeling?" I opened my eyes and turned to look at him, my gaze steady.

"Good."



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