

## Chapter 290

Violet

"I believe it's safe now."

I gave Kylan a slight nudge, hoping he would take the hint. We were closer to the end of the path when I realized how quiet it had gotten.

The front was alive with Sora and Nate leading most of the conversations, but as I walked with Kylan in the back, neither of us spoke much. My mind kept going back to what Varius had said and what it meant. He wasn't going to make it, and I knew it...

His last words, the box...it was all because he would die. But his would not be the only death.

I shook my head, trying to push the thought away. That's what I had been doing all this time, including not trying to stare at Kayden, and the raven that was now his.

"I said it's safe now," I repeated. "So whatever you thought you couldn't say...you can say it."

Kylan's head shifted slightly. "What?" He whispered, acting oblivious. He didn't really look at me, and it appeared he was trying to avoid the conversation.

I knew that look.

I knew that tone, and I knew it couldn't be any good. He had been just as nervous in the mountains.

I tried again, a little stronger this time. "What happened with the stone..."

the price?" I rolled my eyes. "I said, I think it's safe now."

He let out a quick breath, still avoiding my eyes. "Yes, right. The stone."

His words felt heavy, and it was clear he would rather not speak at all. "We went back up," he began. "We placed our hands on the stone, and then there was this bright light in the cavern," he explained. "The stone needs time before it takes effect. It will heal in time, and so will the witches...could take days."

Days...

It had all seemed so complicated, yet it was this simple.

"That's all you had to do?" I asked softly. "Put your hand on the stone?"

"Yes."

I hesitated, then forced out the real question that had been on my mind since the moment he had told me he had made the deal with the king. "And the price?"

My voice was steady as I didn't want to repeat myself. I just wanted him to tell me what was enough to make him this nervous. Kylan exhaled, staring in front of him.

I studied his face, and when his gaze never moved, I followed it.

He was looking at Kayden, who was being pushed by Camille. My eyes flicked briefly to Thorne before I forced them back to Kylan.

"Kylan, what was—" I started, but he cut me off.

"I have to take a mistress."

His voice was clear as well. My heart sank, and it felt like air had been sucked right out of me.

Mistress?

Kylan kept talking, but it all passed me by. The only thing stuck in my head was that one word—mistress.

“The king demands there will be an official royal ceremony before we leave,” he added. “He made me swear an oath in front of two guards and a council member, before we went up to the stones.”

As he continued, I just blinked at him, unable to form a single thought. I started twisting the ring around my finger, faster and faster, like it would somehow help me think, but it didn't help. Nothing made sense.

What had he done?

“So Chrystal will be getting her way then?” I asked, holding myself back. Would it be bad for me to admit that I wanted to yell, scream, kick, and throw a tantrum? I badly wanted to, but I didn't. Because he had agreed to do the one thing I absolutely didn't want.

“No, not Chrystal.”

I drew in a deep breath, bracing myself for his next words. “Then who?”

“Camille,” he said instantly.

Camille...

I took a breath, then another, and another...Until my stomach twisted, and I felt close to losing all control.

Of course it was her...

As I looked ahead, it occurred to me that it wasn't Kayden whom he had been staring at. It was her. Everything suddenly fell into place.

Him singling her out yesterday, his odd behavior, the way she behaved around him.

This must have been the deal from the very beginning. She would spy for the king, and in return, one day she would be named one of the crown prince's mistresses. Chrystal wasn't the king's only option.

What was the king even trying to achieve with this?

"And you said yes?" I whispered, turning to him. My eyes were as sharp as knives as I tried to stay calm. "You didn't want me to take the blame for the Veil because you thought I wouldn't be able to handle it."

He stayed quiet, just listening.

"But for some reason, you think I'll be able to handle this?"

Then what was that thing last night?

Why would he tell me in our most intimate moment that he should just mark me, actually make me believe it, and make a fool out of me? Was this a game to him?

Is that what it was?

To push me into accepting it, so he could trap me and call it a favor to us both?

He wasn't the hero he thought he was being. He wasn't protecting me. If

anything, he was breaking me. And with no use of my eyes, no loss of control, we weren't even certain how the Veil would open. There might have been another way...

Anything but this...

I would've taken the blame ten thousand times if it meant him not being forced into this. I would've carried it until it killed me. For him. For us.

Kylan released a low chuckle, and I was quick to respond. "Do you think this is funny?" I asked, confused.

"I don't want it any more than you do, but I did not have a choice," he stated. "I'll be responsible for anything that happens, I'll take the heat, and not you," Kylan said. "You can get angry, curse me, hate me if you want, but at least I know you'll be free of judgment, and I do not regret my decision."

Exactly.

His decision, not mine.

And you know what?

Maybe I didn't like him making all the decisions after all.

I didn't want to be free of judgment if it meant this. I wanted him, just him, no conditions, no compromises.

He sighed, looking almost exhausted. "Either way...if I didn't believe there was a way out of this, I wouldn't have agreed to it so easily," he said. "You always worry too much, and I didn't want you to worry about this, Violet."

I forced myself to meet his eyes. They weren't careless or cruel, but burdened, and as I stared even deeper, they seemed certain. I swallowed hard. Kylan didn't throw words around loosely. If he said something, he meant it, which meant he truly believed there was a way out.

He took my hand and squeezed it tightly. "Trust me," he said. "There will never be anyone else. It's you and me, Violet. I promised you that first, and I'll spend whatever it takes keeping that promise while doing everything I can to protect your heart as well."

I wanted to believe him. I really did. But how did that explain him saying he wanted to mark me last night? Did he even know what those words meant to me? What they did to me?

I knew he cared, but did he care enough to think about that? Trinity would say, just ask him, and I really wanted to...But I didn't want to make it harder than it had to be or look like an idiot who was begging for a mark I wasn't even sure about anymore.

That didn't mean that I didn't want him. I just wanted it to happen in the most natural way possible. All of it.

I let out a long sigh. "I appreciate you trying to protect me," I said quietly, "and I'll trust whatever plan you have."

A small, relieved smile tugged at his lips.

"But," I added, my voice sharper, "I was serious the first time, and I still haven't changed my mind. I won't accept any mistress. I don't think I can do that."

I wasn't strong enough for that...

"And I understand that," Kylan stated, "I would never let you go through



that either."

I gazed into his eyes, and all I could see was his pain. He must've been thinking about Cecilia, and all she had gone through.

"I wasn't trying to keep anything from you," Kylan spoke. "I was going to tell you."

I nodded. "I know."

And I did. I knew he would because he was just honest like that, but all his words sounded too good, perfect, almost. Exactly what I wanted to hear.

He would not take a mistress, there would be a way out, and that was that ...

But in this case, words just simply wouldn't be enough. I needed to see it. See that he would go through with it, and make sure it would really be just us.

My eyes landed on Camille's back, and I felt a hidden rage within me. I couldn't believe I had ever felt pity for that girl.

If it were up to Lumia, she would've...

Wait...

Where had Lumia been all this time?

I pushed the thought aside, focusing on Camille again, my brows creasing. My body heated with an anger I hadn't felt in a long time. And it was all because of her...

The bitch had nerve, going after my mate. I had to give her that.

I sucked in a breath.

No, Violet. Don't say words like that. You don't know her situation.

Maybe she would be forced into it, and just wouldn't have a choice. I knew for a fact that if that were the case, Kayden wouldn't care. If Kayden ever found out what his maid had been doing all this time...spying, scheming, he would lose his...

My breath hitched as my head snapped to Kylan.

Could that be his plan?

To push Kayden to the breaking point, force him to drop the facade, knowing his brother would never let someone walk away with what was his?

Had he already forgotten Kayden was not to be provoked?

"What are you thinking about?" Kylan asked.

I hummed. "Everything."

Before I could add more, the group suddenly halted. Moments later, Nate's voice rang out.

"Didn't she tell you to leave?" he called out. "What are you doing here again?"

Kylan and I shared a quick, worried glance before we both looked forward. It could not be a coincidence. This had to be it.

At the end of the path stood a face I knew too well.

Chrystal...