

Chapter 54

Violet

I opened my backpack one last time, checking that I had everything I needed. It was 4:50 AM, and I had ten more minutes before Kylan expected me at the gates.

My bag was packed with extra clothes, a water bottle, a first-aid kit, towels, and even some muscle rub because I knew he would work me to the bone.

Sighing, I zipped my bag and slung it over my shoulder before heading out of my room. As I stepped out, I saw Chrystal sitting on the couch. She had turned around instantly, her gaze sharp as always as she kept her lips pressed together.

I truly hated her, and I knew the feeling was likewise.

We stared at each other. I couldn't help but wonder if she knew I was meeting Kylan—then again, if she did, I was pretty sure I'd be dealing with more than just a glare right now.

I mean, the bitch threatened to scratch my eyes out.

We both rolled our eyes at the same time, and then I finally left the dorm.

By the time I reached the gate, Kylan was already there. I glanced down at my watch, feeling relieved after confirming I was right on time.

"Good morning," I greeted.

He watched me for a second. "Morning," he then greeted as he pulled out a key.

I released a small gasp as he put the key in the hole of the Starlight gates. "You have a key?"

Kylan raised an eyebrow, looking back at me. "Did you want to climb over the gates, then?"

His tone dripped with sarcasm as always. Of course he had a key—why wouldn't he?

"Perks of being captain," he added, unlocking the gate and pushing it open. He stepped aside and motioned for me to go first, then he followed.

I already began bracing myself for whatever he had planned, but one thing was certain. Whatever it was, it wouldn't be easy.

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We walked for quite some time, neither of us exchanging a word. The only sounds I could hear as we stepped deeper into the woods, were rustling leaves and the occasional chirp of a bird.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked, unable to hold back my curiosity.

Kylan didn't answer. I felt a flicker of nerves, his lack of silence only making me feel more anxious. "Are you so tired of me you've decided to kill me already?" I cracked a joke, knowing him long enough to know that he'd appreciate a good one.

As expected, Kylan released a low chuckle:

"If I wanted you dead, you would've been dead already, Puppy."

A smile tugged at my lips, though I tried hiding it. Even when he was trying to be nice—or as close to nice as he got—he would still give a Kylan-ish response. Even yesterday, when he had admitted that he was only up for the punishment because he was the only one allowed to hate me—his attempt at kindness was toxic.

Not long after, Kylan stopped walking. He brushed a large, hanging tree branch aside, revealing a beautiful spot. There was a blue lake in front of us, and the warm colors of sunrise made it look even prettier.

Right by the edge of the lake was a plaid on the grass, a brown picnic basket placed on top of it—and it was stuffed with food.

"This is so cute!" I blurted out, "Someone is here on a date!"

Kylan scoffed. "That someone is you—and this certainly isn't a date. Sit down."

"Wait, what?" I stammered, looking back at the picnic setup. This was unexpected. "You did all of this?"

He stretched his hand to the blanket, silently telling me to sit. What was the meaning behind this?

As far as he was concerned, I screwed his best friend, I held back the group in training, I robbed him off his spare time—and this was my punishment? A picnic?

"I thought we were going to train," I hesitated.

"In that case," he frowned, "give me forty la—"

"No—no!" I said, quickly sitting down. "This is fine!"

Amazed, I glanced around as he joined me. With Kylan, you just couldn't know what to expect.

Of course, I knew this wasn't a date, but it did make me wonder what kind of stunt he might pull for someone he actually cared about.

The scent of fresh bread and salad reached my nose, making my mouth water. Before I could control myself, my stomach growled loudly and my cheeks heat up in embarrassment.

Kylan smiled, grabbing a plate. He filled it with some food, then placed some cutlery beside it and slid it over to me.

"When's the last time you actually ate something?" he asked, his tone serious.

"Three days ago?" I blinked, thinking back. I had managed to grab a granola bar between classes and training, and that was about it. Every night after finishing my laps, I was so exhausted all I could think about was bed.

Food had been the last thing on my mind.

Kylan shot me a strict glance. "You've been exercising without eating for days?" he scolded, shaking his head. "That's dangerous. You need to learn to prioritize your health."

Knowing better than to argue with him, I took a bite of the bread, savoring the taste. Kylan almost made it sound like he cared, and maybe he did. His tone was something more than his usual cold or sarcastic one.

"For today, and anytime it has to do with training, I want you to forget everything that has either happened or is happening between us."

I looked up, meeting Kylan's eyes. There was something different about him, something almost warm. I nodded slowly, still trying to figure out what his deal was.

"I'm not here as your enemy," he continued. "I'm here as your captain, your squad leader—and I'm here to help you."

As I looked at him, the sun glowed on his skin. His dark brown eyes appeared slightly lighter than usual, and now that every little detail of his features had been exposed—it made me realize just how handsome he was.

This man was a piece of art, breathtaking...

No—Violet.

I quickly shook it off, focusing on his words instead.

"When will we actually start training?" I asked, after another bite.

"It's already started."

I frowned, confused. "How?"

"Training doesn't just mean pushing your body to the point of breaking," Kylan explained. "It's also about training your mind, to know when to rest and when to push harder—to find the right balance."

I took in his words, surprised. "So...this is supposed to be mental training?"

He looked at me with narrowed eyes. "Why are you on this team?"

His question was short, simple, yet deeper than I expected.

"Because my professor, Esther, told me I'd be a good fit," I replied, certain.

However, Kylan shook his head. "That's not the right answer," he stated.

If that wasn't the right answer, then what was?

I stared at him, startled. "Then why are you on the team?"

"I'm here because I want to prove that I'm the best. And the best is on this team."

His answer caught me off guard. He sounded so driven, so sure of himself.

"I have no choice but to be the best," he said. "I might be the heir to the throne, but until I'm sitting on it—and even then—I can't slack. I have a kingdom to take care of, and in order to do that, I have to be at my best."

Hearing him speak like that almost made him appear in a whole new light. He wasn't just there because he wanted to show off or intimidate others, he was on the team because he had an actual purpose. A responsibility.

What was my purpose?

Perhaps, I had been too busy using Esther's approval as my motivation instead of finding my own reason.

"So," he tried again. "Why are you on this team?"

I thought carefully this time. "I'm here because I'm one of the..." I swallowed my throat, trying to find more confidence. "No, I'm the best freshman healer, and when you finally get to see how good I am, when we go on outside missions, and I finally get to be useful—you'll be surprised!" I said. "And I'm holding on because I want to follow in my mom's footsteps."

A smile appeared on Kylan's lips. "Good," he sounded satisfied. "Every time you train, remember why you're on this team, and why you won't let any of the commanders bully you away."

His words sank in, and for the first time in a long time, I found an unexpected light inside of me—a purpose I could hold on to. There was a reason I ran the laps instead of quitting, and Kylan had just made me realize that reason.

I couldn't quit, and I wouldn't quit—because I was not a quitter.

I belonged on the Elite team.

I deserved to be on the team.

"Thanks," I whispered. "I needed that."

Having this talk with him, and hearing those words from his mouth, of all people, made me feel a bit more than what wanted—but what I was planning to do to him with the whole Nate situation, and him believing it actually happened, didn't make me that much better either.

For some reason, I felt this urge to explain myself—to clear things up about me and Nate.

After doing me this favor, he deserved to know the truth, right?

I opened my mouth hesitantly. "Nate and I—"

"I don't care," Kylan's face hardened. "And I don't want to hear about it."

A sharp pain reached my chest. I had barely realized just how much I cared about what he thought of me, but the thought of him believing something happened between me and Nate made my skin crawl. He didn't want to hear it, though. He had shut me out, making it clear he didn't want to hear a single word about it.

He didn't care for my explanation.

"As long as it's not about training," his nose scrunched for a second, "I don't want to hear about it."

I felt my body tense as I looked down, keeping my mouth shut. Whatever warmth he had just shown me felt like it had vanished, replaced by that wall he always kept up.

He drew a clear line between captain and teammate, and I wasn't going to lie—it hurt.

The worst part was not knowing if it actually bothered him or if he genuinely couldn't give a shit—because at this point, it could be either one.

"So, what's after breakfast?" I shifted the focus.

"After breakfast, we'll head back to school, and you'll enjoy your day off," Kylan decided. "We'll be back here tomorrow, after Roehwall's training, to work on your condition."

"Why are you helping me?" I asked, glancing up at him. I was unsure if I'd even get a straight answer, but he was so determined to help me—and I couldn't help but wonder why he would even bother.

There had to be more to it than just me being his teammate.

"I don't like seeing strong people fail."

"You think I'm strong?" I said, a bit surprised. He saw me at my weakest for days straight.

Kylan gave me a nod. "You were right. I've been on your case since the day we met, and you're still standing, still talking back, still stubborn...so yes, you're strong."

His words meant more to me than I had expected. They gave me encouragement, as if some part of me had been waiting for his validation—but those feelings also left me feeling humiliated, because he was the last person whose validation I needed.

"I will make you even stronger," Kylan stated. "So strong that everyone will regret ever doubting your place on this team."

"Thank you," I said softly. "For everything."

Kylan looked away, pretending not to hear me, but I could tell he did—and that was enough.