

Chapter 499

Violet

The four of us were standing in a line at the edge of the woods. The rest of the Elite team stood to the side with the commanders, and now that I was facing the crowd, I could see that it was even more than I had thought it would be from over here.

There were too many faces, which meant if I messed this up, it would lead to double the embarrassment.

Just thinking about it made my mind go numb. To take the tension off a bit, I leaned forward and tilted my head to look at the first person to my left.

Wes.

He glanced over at me and gave me a quick, small smile. It was mostly apologetic, like he didn't want to be here any more than I did but had just decided to go with it. Then I looked past him at Sienna.

She was the same girl who would find a reason to give anyone a compliment, but that girl wasn't here right now. She was focused, jaw set, and did not turn her head even an inch in my direction.

To my right was Cassian.

And when he shot me a wink as he grinned down at me, I wished I hadn't looked at him. Disgusted, I tore my gaze away and twisted my head to look at Kylan, Nate, and Dylan.

'Did you see that?' I mouthed. Kylan let out a small, light chuckle at me from where he was standing with the rest of the team.



Jorn cleared his throat in front of us, and I looked ahead again. With that, the voices in the crowd also dropped until there was only silence. All eyes were on Jorn.

His hair caught the wind, and the corner of his lips twitched. That man wanted to laugh in my face, but he didn't. The reason why he didn't was because if he did, everyone would see that this was the one thing in life that kept that grumpy professor going.

Standing in front of half the academy with the power to humiliate me in front of all of them.

No, Violet.

I rolled my shoulders, taking a breath. This was the same man who had adjusted the gloves I was wearing so they would fit me.

I glanced at his arm, noticing he was still wearing the bracelet. It already looked a bit worn in, so I could tell he had been wearing it the whole time. Confusing.

As I looked up, his eyes were already on me.

"The path through the woods has been marked," Jorn said. He turned and pointed back behind us through the trees. I spun a little to see what he was talking about.

The four paths were clear, and we were all standing in front of one.

"You will use your legs to run!" Jorn called out. "You will run to the other side of the woods, and I don't care what you do to get there. You can climb, crawl, but you will be using your legs," he said. "Once you reach the marked stone at the end, you touch it, then shift for the second half and run back here."



I fluttered my eyes.

'We need to thank the Goddess,' Lumia said. 'He has blessed us with instructions even you can follow.'

'Lumia,' I warned.

"Do not try anything funny out there," Jorn said, his gaze hard and threatening. "The forest is being watched by more eyes than you can guess."

That part did not come as a surprise. I had already expected more commanders to be scattered throughout the woods.

"I could run these woods with my two legs in my sleep!" Cassian announced. He opened his arms while a good portion of the crowd and the rest of his squad cheered him on. If only he knew what I had in store for him and that bad knee of his.

Jorn chuckled. "Anyone could," he said. "If your condition is decent, and you're...above average."

His eyes lingered on me at the end of it. I looked down at my boots as my hand balled into a fist. Well, forget it. Maybe he was trying to embarrass me after all.

"The first part of the race is...not that interesting," he moved his lips together. "The second part is where you can push yourself to win the real treasure."

"How much gold are we talking?" a voice called out from the side. The Elite team laughed, but I didn't. My whole body tensed. This was the part I wanted to know too because Aelius had told me it would lead me closer to my parents.



Maybe not exactly those words, but he did tell me not to lose. Rochwall had told me I should win this one, and he wasn't even a Soothsayer.

"It is not a money prize," Jorn said. "It is something way more valuable than gold."

He started pacing the line again. "What you have in front of you today is a once in a lifetime opportunity, and you will not get this offer again," he said. "Make sure you do not let down your squad. Trust me."

"Can we at least know what we are running for now?" Sienna asked, her voice eager. "I am going to win regardless...but it would be nice to have some extra motivation to beat Cassian and see him cry."

Cassian let out an offended laugh, and the two of them smirked at each other while I stood between them, watching in amazement.

They really did think this was their show. That Wes and I were the extras. The little side characters who got brought on stage to make their race look more dramatic. I doubted anyone in the crowd, aside from Trinity and maybe some of the other girls in our department, came to watch me win.

That was the thing about Starlight. You could be of royal blood, a crown prince's mate, or the crown prince himself, but when it came to battle... people only looked at the best.

Jorn glanced over his shoulder at Rochwall.

Rochwall shrugged.

A deep sigh escaped Jorn before he faced us again, his brows lifting slightly.

"The winner will..."



His words were stopped by the loud gasps that came from the crowd, and everyone's eyes searched to see what all the commotion was about.

And then I heard it. A slow tap against the ground that belonged to a walking stick I had not heard in quite some time.

My eyes shifted to the path leading to the field until I found him making his entrance.

Principal Sterling.

I raised my brows in surprise, observing the old man. The few gray strands I remembered him having were almost gone, but the smile on his face was the same warm one.

So warm, I could see the crinkles at the corners of his eyes. The woman who was always with him, his assistant, was practically jogging to keep up behind him while there was definitely no reason to.

"I have come just in time, it seems," Principal Sterling began, slightly out of breath. "Just in time to see the race, and just in time to tell you all what the prize will be myself," he continued. "Since, as you all know, you will be escorting me."

The crowd quieted again.

"Commander Jorn? Commander Rochwall?"

Jorn pressed his lips into a thin line. Both he and Rochwall gestured at the same time for Sterling to take over, and he did.

He took a few more steps forward toward us, then looked at the four of us. "The winner of this race," he said, "along with their squad, will have the privilege of joining me on a trip to the abandoned Royal Alpha palace —"



I did not hear much over the noise of the murmurs, but I was sure my heart stopped somewhere around the words, Royal Alpha palace.

The abandoned palace...

That was Dad's home.

I had thought of many things, but this was definitely not on the list. Thinking that there could be any connection between the abandoned palace and finding my parents was definitely not on my list.

My head felt like it was moving in slow motion as I turned to find Kylan, who was already looking at me. Just like mine, his eyes were wide.

What?