

Chapter 516

Violet

"Stories..." Rochwall eased out a slow breath.

"I have got too many of those, Violet. I would not even know where to start."

"You can try," I said, my voice desperate. I didn't want him to stop talking. "We still have time before we get there," I told him. "I would love to hear every story you can possibly think of."

My eyes were intense. I knew mom and dad, saw through mom's eyes, but that's where it ended. Sitting beside me was someone who had spent years with them. Someone whom they both considered a close friend.

He shook his head slowly. I could tell he was trying to pick out the best ones. "I can tell you about one thing that has stuck with me through all these years." A chuckle escaped him. "Addy...she could not say sorry. The word just physically would not come out of her."

"Mom?"

"Yes," he said. "She was too prideful. What she would do instead was make these big gestures to fix things." He explained with his hands. "She would show up at our rooms with breakfast trays, defend us even harder than usual, go soft on us until she felt like we had forgiven her." A chortle slipped out of him. "She would rather move a whole mountain to make it up to us than admit out loud that she had been wrong. That was Addy."

My eyes flew open in surprise. I had spent my whole life apologizing for every little thing. Whether it was bumping into furniture, believing I was

taking up space where I shouldn't have been, or even breathing too loudly, I would apologize. Now I knew I didn't get it from her, so perhaps from dad.

"Your mom was strong and confident, Violet," Rochwall praised. "I don't think I have ever met anyone in my whole life with that much confidence. None of us had. I believe that is why even Elyx admired her."

The smile on my lips faded a bit. "What more?"

I was waiting for something. Just anything that the two of us might have in common. And the longer he talked, the more aware I became that she was indeed on another level.

My fingers fumbled in my lap. This was the thing I did not want to think about. That when I got her back and finally sat across from her for the first time, the two of us would just be too different to fully connect.

"She despised people who could not think for themselves," Rochwall went on. This time I didn't ask him to, but I could tell he enjoyed talking about her. "She would go out of her way to give us really terrible advice, just to push us into listening to our own hearts and figuring out the right thing without relying on her."

He gave an amused laugh. "She had a really strong personality...but it suited her."

My smile shrank with every word.

Strong personality...

Even so, I forced myself to stay optimistic. There had to be something. Even one small thing I could hold onto.

"What about food?" I asked, eager to find that one thing. "Any likes?"



Dislikes? Was she into crispy chicken sandwiches by any chance?"

Rochwall hummed. "She was not a big fan of bread," he said. "But she absolutely loved chocolate and strawberries —"

I let out a frustrated puff, folding my arms across my chest.

"What is wrong?"

"I'm sorry." I shook my head in disbelief. "I was just trying to see what we had in common," I said honestly. "I thought if I pushed hard enough, you'd give me the answer I liked, but it just keeps getting worse and worse the more you tell me."

Rochwall tilted his head and looked at me for a long second. His lips curved into a satisfied smile.

"You have her determination, Violet."

Her determination?

Rochwall ran his hand through a few strands of my hair. "Her hard work. Her drive to win and keep standing, even when the world tries to knock you down." He smiled softly. "You may have your dad's eyes, but that look in them? That's undeniably Addy."

A smile crept back onto my face, and he continued talking. "You have her gaze...yet talking to you feels like talking to Al all over again."

"So I remind you of him?" I sat straight, my attention fully on him. It was what mom had said when we were inside the Veil. She had made the same comparison. "Tell me more about him."

"Your dad was the kindest person I have ever met in my life, Violet."

Rochwall didn't let a second pass. It was like he immediately knew what

to say about dad and couldn't wait to tell me. "Al had a heart of gold, and I am not exaggerating."

He shook his head slowly to himself. "That guy couldn't stop apologizing. I think sorry was his favorite word." He sighed. "Thank you, on the other hand...he could not stand to hear. He couldn't stand seeing people bow down to him either."

Neither could I...

"And he was so afraid of being disliked that he went out of his way every single day to show people how normal he could be. Even when he had those guards around at the beginning." Rochwall beamed as he spoke without a pause. "He hated compliments, was always humble, memorized every face he came across, and not just the face but also the name," he spoke in awe. "Students, maids, palace guards—you name it. It did not matter who you were...he would remember."

"That sure sounds like him," I muttered. James shot me a suspicious glance, and I quickly recovered myself. "I—I mean, that's something I would do." I could already feel the sweat forming on my forehead as I waited for him to go on, and he did.

He hummed softly. "There was this one time I came to stay with him for a few days," Rochwall said. "It was supposed to be just the two of us at dinner, but he called over a maid, pulled a chair out for her, and handed her his own plate," he shared. "Which is completely normal for us, but not for someone of his status."

Well, yes.

I figured Elyx would rather die than do something like that. I suppose the only maid he did do something for was Camille, and her fate hadn't been that pretty.

As I closed my eyes for a second, dad's face flashed in front of me. It was hard to forget how those warm eyes turned cold whenever I'd mention his former friend.

"Did he ever get angry?" I asked, curious.

"Not really," Rochwall shrugged. "I do remember the cafeteria lady at Starlight, who still works there, slipped and dropped a tray of food right in the middle of the cafeteria," he said. "Everyone laughed, but Alaric stood up out of his seat and called them out for it." His lips twitched. "He asked everyone if they were insane, if they had lost their manners, and I have never heard him speak that loudly in my life," he said. "None of us had."

"And then?"

Rochwall exhaled deeply. "And then everyone went silent. He walked over, knelt down on the floor next to her, and used the cuff of his own sleeve to wipe the gravy off her uniform."

I felt my throat get tight. He had been good. Genuinely good. I wasn't as confident as mom, but I also wasn't as kindhearted as dad.

The way Rochwall described him felt too good to be true, yet I knew it was the truth because I had experienced him myself. He was amazing.

"You are a perfect mix of both of them, Violet."

I lifted my eyes to look at him, but didn't say anything back. His words were kind, but I could only hope I was.

A yawn slipped out of me, and I covered my mouth with my hand. My body leaned into the seat again. "I am pretty sure we still have at least two more hours to go before we get there," I said. "I would love to hear



more stories if you have them."

Every story he told brought me one step closer to the parents I knew I would one day hold in my arms. More than anything, I wanted to know them completely.

"Gladly."

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