

Chapter 517

Violet

He kept going, and somewhere along the way I lost track of how much time had passed. I knew it had been a while because we had already driven past places I no longer recognized, and the farther we went, the darker the sky grew.

Rochwall told me about how Adelaide loved pranking everyone and would persuade them to sneak out of the gates, while Claire would literally tremble the entire time. How she would drag them to the Common Rings, the canals beneath the bridges, in the hopes of seeing merfolk, certain they would show themselves if they stayed long enough, even though Alaric kept telling her they wouldn't.

I laughed at almost everything, and the picture of the two in my head grew clearer with every story.

The last one brought tears of laughter to my eyes.

It was the story of Dad allowing students to challenge him because he was too kind to say no, and letting them win because he was too kind to embarrass them. He always said he had nothing to prove.

Mom, who was too competitive for her own good, couldn't stand it.

One day, the look she gave him scared him so much that he had no choice but to win.

Because he would do anything for her.

My hand pressed against my chest as I tried to control my laughter. "Normally, I don't care much for winning, but I wouldn't lose on purpose either. Anyway, that's a strange trait for a royal. I am glad I skipped that



part."

Rochwall chuckled. "I'm sure he didn't enjoy letting them win. When you carry the royal blood of the Common Lands, competition tends to run in your veins," he said. "Look at Jorn, for example."

I tilted my head at him. "Jorn?" I reacted. "I thought he is from Elarin?"

"He is," Rochwall lifted a shoulder. "But his great-grandfather was once the Alpha King, and his grandmother was his youngest daughter. I guess that makes him your cousin of some sort."

"B-But...he's a Lycan!"

"He is," Rochwall confirmed. "I believe his grandmother was the only wolf."

My breath hitched. "I didn't know he had royal blood..."

"Barely," Rochwall scoffed out a laugh. "His great grandparents had over fifteen children, so there are many of his position. And it is so many generations removed. Also, I suppose it is not really something he wants to brag about. Especially not with the version of history all of us have been made to believe."

A soft gasp left me. I snapped my head back and looked toward the front of the bus.

Jorn was sitting in the back, sunglasses still covering his face, his jaw locked tight. I took a good look at his butterscotch hair. It might not have been golden like mine or Dad's or the distant royals I had met, but blonde regardless.

I thought back to my conversation with Aelius. His theory about a distant cousin somewhere on Starlight grounds whose blood would start to

remember me as my own power grew.

Knowing what I knew now, I understood that his strange behavior after the race that day hadn't come out of the blue. And then that weird speech about this not being a family vacation.

Maybe the blood between us was not too far removed if it had been enough for him to remember.

Jorn lowered his glasses for a second, and his hazel eyes glared right back at me. My heart stopped beating for a split second, and I quickly turned around.

"So...we are family?" I asked Rochwall.

He responded with a laugh that echoed through the bus. "Barely. Do not worry about it."

Suddenly, a voice dominated the bus. "We are here!" Sterling called out. The bus began to slow down, and I glanced out of the window.

We had stopped at a clearing, and I could already make out the shape of a long stone bridge in the distance.

Beyond that was the abandoned palace, barely visible through the thick fog. The bus hadn't been cold seconds ago, but suddenly it was. All the times I had driven past, I didn't remember it ever being this cold. Perhaps I had never really paid attention.

Or maybe it only felt that way now because the situation was different. I knew what was at stake, and I knew that, at all costs, we had to come back with some kind of information.

Once I stepped off this bus, I would have to think clearly.

"We will have to walk a bit before we reach the bridge," Sterling said. He had already gotten up from his seat and reached for his stick. "We will leave our bags on the bus. The driver will take good care of them, and if we need anything, we can always come back for it."

Everyone got up, and so did I. My eyes immediately searched for Kylan, who had already made his way down the aisle. His gaze found mine as well.

Rochwall noticed, and he gave me a warm smile.

"I enjoyed sitting next to you for the ride, Violet," he said. "If any of it gets to be too much for you out there, you come find me...Always."

"I know," I said softly. "And thank you."

He gave my arm a pat and turned to head out into the aisle, but before he could, I called out his name. "James?"

He turned back, his face shifting at the sound of his first name. It might have been too much, but for what I was about to tell him, I had to address him by his first name. Not as Rochwall.

I grew self-conscious. "I-I mean—"

His eyes fluttered. "James is fine, Violet."

A breath left me, and my shoulders dropped with relief. "You can also come find me," I gave him a single nod. "Anytime you want to talk... about them?"

James gave me a small smile and a nod in return.

He stepped aside, and before I could even put a proper foot into the aisle, Kylan's hand was already wrapped around mine.

His brown eyes darted from me to Rochwall, who had made his way out of the bus. Behind us, Nate's voice filled the bus. "Do you want me to carry you, sir?" he offered. "Dylan and I will take turns."

Dylan tipped his head back, pointing at himself. "Come on. It is a long walk to that bridge."

Nate offered an explanation. "I just don't want him to tire himself out."

"Thank you, Nate. But I think I can manage!"

Kylan chuckled under his breath. "Those two..."

I lifted my eyes to him. "Were you nice to Trinity?"

His mouth twitched. "I think you meant to ask if Trinity was nice to me, Pup."

"No?" My nose scrunched. "I am asking you if you were nice to my best friend."

Kylan let out a short laugh. "It went well, actually. I think she is starting to warm up to me again."

He observed my face for a moment. "You are in a good mood. So I am going to assume the talk went well too."

I shrugged at him as we headed toward the front of the bus. The driver gave us a weak salute as we passed. I couldn't help but feel bad for him, having to stay behind here all alone for who knew how many hours while we did whatever it was we were about to do.

"Wait," Kylan whispered, letting go of my hand. He stepped off the bus first, then turned around and put both of his hands on my waist to lift me off before setting me down on the ground.



"So the talk?" he asked again. "It went great?"

"It depends what 'great' means," I said, picking the conversation back up. "More like complicated."

His brow furrowed while the rest of the group also got out of the bus. Sterling was quick to move to the front. "Alright!" he called out. "Everyone follow me and listen up!"

The rush I had seen on him at the gate that morning was still there, but even more intense now. His hand gripped his stick like he meant business, and I couldn't help but laugh.

"I am going to tell you the rules for this trip," Jorm took over. He pushed his sunglasses onto the top of his head. "I need every single one of you to listen to me carefully. There will be severe consequences if any of you choose not to follow them."

"Ah." I rolled my eyes. I looked up at Kylan, who was frowning at me, still stuck on the part where I'd told him the talk had been confusing.

"My cousin is barking again."

Kylan's eyes widened before he whipped his head toward the front.

"I'm sorry. Your what?"

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