

Chapter 539

Violet

I dropped to my knees as I reached him. The dirt scraped my skin, but I didn't care. "Look at me."

I cupped his face in both hands and gently lifted his chin so I could see him clearly.

He looked wrecked, pale, and drained. But when those brown eyes met mine, it was all I needed. He was really here. He came back.

"Thank the Goddess." A sigh escaped me as I ran my thumb along his cheekbones, tilting his head in every direction as I searched for any scratches.

"What have you done?" he rasped.

His voice was barely there. I knew what he meant. But of all the things he could have asked me right now, that was the one he picked. I pulled him against me and wrapped my arms around him as he let his head drop onto my shoulder.

"No, Kylan." My voice cracked as I ran a hand through his hair. "What did you do?"

That was the real question. He was the one who had made a deal with the devil. He was the one who had decided, again, to take matters into his own hands to protect me. All of us.

"Idiot," I whispered, tears burning behind my eyes. "Don't ever do that ever again."

His hand rubbed slow circles over my back, pulling me closer. As the sound of a cane tapping against the ground drew closer, I pulled back and met Sterling's eyes.



Sterling's gaze was calm. My eyes drifted to what he was holding by the hair in his other hand. The bus driver's head.

My stomach turned, and I looked away fast. If I'd stared for even a split second longer, I would've puked.

"He may have had a family," Sterling said calmly, like he hadn't noticed me going green. "They would appreciate having something to bury."

Though his gaze had been calm just seconds ago, I could hear a hint of anger in his voice. I was angry too. That it had to come to this. An innocent life.

He started tapping his cane against the dirt and walked toward the path.

"The two of you are an endearing sight," he added. "But if you want Stellan to still have a chance, I suggest we get back to that bus."

Jorn.

Guilt hit me hard. I was so happy to have Kylan back that I'd actually allowed myself to forget. The man who had jumped in front of me and had possibly saved my life. He was on that bus right now, running out of time.

"Come on." I slid my arm under Kylan's. "Lean on me."

He didn't. Instead, he planted a hand against the ground and pushed himself up on his own. His legs wobbled, his jaw tightened, but he stood up without me.

"I'm fine now," he said. His voice sounded colder than usual. Kylan's brows creased while his eyes were fixed somewhere ahead of us.

Despite his reassurance, I helped him anyway, whether he liked it or not. Then we started walking right behind Sterling.

I stole a glance at him from the side.



Did I do something?

Say something?

Maybe he was angry too. I couldn't help but feel that perhaps some part of him had wanted to take that deal, and he felt like I had taken that away from him.

I didn't know...didn't have it in me to ask right now.

"Are you—"

"Hurt? No," I finished. "I'm good."

"And is he?" Kylan said after a short moment. "Commander?"

"He's been hit with dark magic...he has a shadow wound." I felt him tense under my arm. "Trinity and I managed to slow it down, pull some of it out the way Jason taught us," I went on. "But it's the kind of thing that spreads to the heart, and neither of us knows how to actually heal it, so we're taking him to Bloodstone Haven."

Kylan reacted with his eyes. They squinted like he was deep in thought. "Kian...he has managed to do all of that...and never fought at full strength," Kylan concluded. He had noticed it too. "None of them. They were all holding back."

"I thought so too, and it terrifies me," I said. "Because that means if they had actually come at us with everything..."

There was no point in finishing my sentence, so I didn't. Kylan was smart enough to know where I was going with this. I kept turning it over as we walked. That, and the way Gloria had made them all vanish.

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"I believe the reason why they never fought us at full strength is because they couldn't risk revealing where they were keeping my parents."

I looked up at the sky. "A petal fell on my cheek...a blue petal."

Kylan's brows shot up. "Marrowrose?"

"I believe so." I took a breath. "I think Gloria made a realm to hide the cave." My eyes drifted to the bright sky above us. Whatever dark clouds they had brought along earlier, they were gone now. "I think it's...up there somehow, but we just can't see it. If they'd fought us at full strength, they would've given it away."

He exhaled. "That's why he..."

He didn't finish. That's why he what?

"Did Baelor tell you something?" I wondered.

Kylan's lips parted, but before a word could leave his mouth, Sterling let out a loud shout.

"I found the rest of him!"



The bus was already in sight, and in front of it, the rest of the driver lay on the ground. The body without its head, slumped in the dirt like it was nothing.

There was no doubt the others must've seen it too, but with Jorn injured, they couldn't do much about it. That sick feeling shot right back up my throat. I turned my face into Kylan's shoulder before I could see any more of it, breathing hard through my mouth.

I finally knew where it came from. Looking at the driver's body made me think of my parents and the brutal way they had been taken away from me. Claire and Greg.

Don't make a scene, Violet.

Just don't...

"Violet?" Kylan wrapped his arm around me.

"I'm okay." I nodded against him. I squeezed my eyes shut. "Really. Just...give me a second."

Sterling called out Kylan's name. "Please help me get him back on the bus."

Kylan was quick to help him. I carefully turned around and watched as he carried whatever was left of the body up the steps.

I went last, and right before I climbed on, I glanced over my shoulder one last time at the path behind us.

The heart of the Common Lands, where we had nearly lost our lives...

As soon as I stepped inside, I heard voices coming from the back. Jorn's



in particular. He was complaining about something. A good sign, and nothing new.

Kylan laid the body down in the open area near the front of the bus, folding the arms over the chest. Sterling set the head beside it, then took a blanket from one of the seats and covered the driver from head to toe.

But Kylan didn't stay to watch. He was already heading toward the open space at the back of the bus, where Jorn had been laid down.

I followed him down the aisle, and we both dropped to Jorn's side.

"Kylan," Nate breathed in shock. Everyone turned to look at Kylan, shocked to see him unharmed and so different from the last time they'd seen him.

"How's Commander doing?" he asked, ignoring the stunned looks around him.



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