

Chapter 543

Violet

"He's been expecting you."

Sterling's voice reached me from behind. After some time of walking, we had finally reached the caves. I let go of Kylan's hand and looked farther up the hill.

As the entrance came into view, I saw a figure waiting at the mouth of the cave. Even from a distance, I recognized the familiar cloak, his hood down and his hands folded in front of him.

Aelius.

Suddenly, everything inside me eased at once. It was strange how this cave, and this still scary-looking man who happened to be my grandfather, had somehow become the closest thing to safe I had.

I guess every time everything fell apart, this was where we ended up. Me and Kylan. And he was always there, waiting, just like he had been for Mom. That, together with the talk we'd had the last time I was here, made me feel a little better.

It gave me hope.

Hope that he'd know what to do, and that Jorn would survive.

"We need to hurry." I picked up my pace and looked over my shoulder. "Is he still awake?"

Jorn's head hung limp against Rochwall's shoulder, and the man who

had so much to say had been quiet for a while now.

He let out a soft groan, barely audible.

"Barely," Rochwall answered.

Trinity reacted immediately. She stepped closer and pressed two fingers against the tear in Jorn's gear, checking his wound again. A gasp escaped her, her brow lifting slightly. Her face fell. "I-I think it might be happening again," she said. "The wound...it's traveling."

"Okay," I breathed. I knew it would happen, but that didn't stop my chest from going tight all over again. A thousand thoughts hit me at once.

What if we hadn't done enough? What if all of it, the pulling, the holding, had only bought him minutes and not the hours we needed?

But most importantly, what if he didn't jump to protect me? Then he wouldn't have been in this position.

Why...

I looked around, biting my lip. My eyes met Kylan's beside me. He didn't say anything, just looked back at me with a pair of brown, steady eyes.

"I am calm," I told him.

He never asked.

When we got closer to the last part, I ran until I reached the cave. "Grandpa!" I called out, breathless.

Aelius took a single step outside the cave, quickly scanning the situation. I didn't know whether to tell him about what had happened, that I had found Mom or...no.

"My Commander," I swallowed, still catching my breath. "He's hurt! I tried. I did everything I could, but I..." I shook my head. The words wouldn't come.

Aelius lifted a hand to stop me from talking.

"I know," he said, calm as ever. "Go inside," he instructed. "Someone will take you to Jason. He might still be able to save your Commander."

"Thank you."

My voice cracked as I spoke. I stepped aside to let the others pass first. Rochwall, carrying Jorn, then Trinity, Dylan, Nate, and Kylan, who had returned to my side.

Sterling stayed behind with Aelius, right in front of the cave, but I didn't wait for either of them.

"So you've returned," Aelius said.

"After all these years...I have returned," Sterling answered.

I couldn't catch the rest. We were already stepping into the dark tunnel, and the voices behind us disappeared.

"Haven't been down here in a while," Rochwall muttered, like he was talking about the weather. I watched him glance around the dark cave.

"Well, you weren't exactly welcome," I reminded, letting out the part where he couldn't even remember.

He let out a small laugh and shrugged.

Dylan exhaled. "It's too dark in here..."

Before he could finish, I let my eyes glow to lead the way. My knees were already wobbling from the effort, but Kylan's hands were quick to steady me again.

"It's nothing...I'm already feeling much better..."

Kylan gave me a simple nod. Surprisingly, he didn't argue.

I felt a little bad because he must've been just as tired as I was. So tired that he wasn't in the mood to go back and forth with me and just decided to take my word for it. He had been more quiet than usual.

"Seeing you like this...like her? It's going to take some getting used to, Violet." Rochwall's voice came out rough as he balanced Jorn, whose body was growing more limp by the second.

"Don't worry," I told him. "After everything that happened today, by the looks of it, it seems like I'll be using them a whole lot more."

With my eyes leading the way, we were able to move a little faster.

"And this Jason?" Dylan asked without slowing down. "He can really save him?"

"Of course he can!" Trinity defended. "He can do anything."

An unconvinced hum escaped Dylan. Meanwhile, Nate let out a nervous laugh beside him and nudged his shoulder.

"We're here!" When we reached the end of the tunnel, the door was already opening before we could touch it.

One of the Soothsayers appeared on the other side, holding it open for us. It was an old man with long white hair and a white beard that fell past his chest. His cloak was identical to Aelius's.

"Thank you," I said with a little grateful bow.

He shook his head, as though it needed no acknowledgment. He glanced at Jorn on Rochwall's back.

"Adelaide's daughter...Follow me. Quickly." The man's voice was hoarse and deep. "Jason has been waiting for you."

So he also knew?

They really knew we'd be coming.

His eyes went to Kylan as we moved past.

"The prince must rest as well," the old man said.

I narrowed my eyes, thinking it would somehow confirm my suspicions that there was definitely more behind those words.

Could this be his teacher?

The one who would teach him to control the Baelor he had now betrayed?

The thought crossed my mind for a second before I pushed it away. No. It could still possibly be Varius.

Then his gaze swept over the rest of us.

"You must all rest," he said. "I can feel a tired energy, and it clings to every one of you."

"Well, we refuse to rest," I said, walking. "Not until we know he's okay."

"You even walk these paths the way your mother did," the old man said. He moved past me and took the front of the group, leading the way. "You have your mother's...interesting way of speaking."

My eyes fluttered in confusion. What was that supposed to mean?

I took a small breath and just kept walking, reminding myself to come back to it later. Relief hit me when the temples finally came back into view. We were so close. Everything would be just fine, right?

A small smile found its way onto my lips. We were so close now. So close.

But whatever hope I'd been holding onto vanished when Jorn made an unexpected sound. It wasn't a groan this time, but something else. A choking gurgle, low in his throat.

Kylan and I heard it at the same time. We exchanged a worried look and moved at once to catch up to Rochwall. The others did too.

"How is he doing?" Rochwall asked, his voice shaking. We all leaned in closer to see Jorn's face.

It was Kylan who found the courage to reach up and lift Jorn's head by the chin. And when we saw it, we all held our breaths.

"This isn't looking good," Kylan muttered.

Jorn's eyes had gone black, and the veins that had started at the wound were spreading across his face.

"What's happening to him?" Trinity's voice trembled. "Is he going to survive?"

She was barely holding it together. Trinity had poured everything into keeping him alive. So had I. Now we were watching it all slip through our fingers.

The Soothsayer glanced back at Jorn. Then he faced forward again and said nothing.

"Please answer us!" I snapped.

"Young Jason is our finest healer," the old man said calmly. "Only he can tell you that."

"Where is he—"

Before I could finish, a figure appeared from one of the temples. It was Jason who had come rushing out to meet us. He walked with urgency.

Jason was shirtless, his chest and shoulders glistening like he had been in the middle of preparing for something. Sweat or oil, I didn't know which one it was, and didn't care at the moment.

He didn't so much as glance at any of us. His eyes went straight to Jorn and stayed there as he closed the distance to Rochwall.

We all fell silent, waiting to hear what he would say.

"Let's give him some space," I said quietly.

Kylan released Jorn's head, and Jason took over. My shoulder bumped against his as we stood back and let him work. He took in Jorn's condition, his eyes focused.

Then he pressed two fingers to the side of Jorn's neck, and his eyes began to glow. It wasn't a ordinary glow. A faint, pale green. How did he do that?

"And?" Nate pressed. "Can you save him?"

Finally, Jason's glowing eyes lifted and found mine.

"Your friend..." he started.

He shook his head.

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