

Chapter 553

Violet

"Grandpa!"

I pulled away from him so fast I nearly slid off the counter. My hands brushed frantically at my clothes, eyes wide as I stared back at the man with the blankest expression on his face.

There was no telling at what point he had entered or how he had even entered in the first place, but Aelius stood in the doorway with both hands folded over his body.

I hadn't seen him since that little speech of his, and of course he had decided that now would be the right time to visit.

There was no flicker of surprise, disgust, or anything else for that matter. Meanwhile, a hundred questions shot through my head at once, and I prayed to the Moon Goddess I'd die on the spot before I ever had to hear the answer to a single one of them.

This was definitely up there with Fergus and the greenhouse... 1

"Grandpa, you can't just..." I gestured around the room, then dropped my hands beside me, defeated.

"The door was open," Aelius said simply.

"And? You still can't..."

I whipped my head toward Kylan, who had come to stand beside me. "Why would you not lock the door?" My voice dropped into a furious



whisper.

He shrugged, releasing a chuckle and looking just as unaffected by all of this as Aelius. I shot him a glare that only intensified when I realized his gear was still hanging halfway down his chest.

Kylan followed my gaze, blinked when he also realized, then just calmly yanked the fabric back up over his shoulders and zipped the gear.

All of this was still happening while he was just standing there...

My cheeks began to flush, and even though I tried to think of literally anything else, I couldn't stop thinking about the fact that my grandfather had heard me say those words.

"Well..." I said, aggravated. "Can we help you with something?"

"Yes, actually." Aelius unfolded his arms and rubbed his temples. "I wanted to see how you were doing, and I was hoping to walk with the two of you. There are a few matters I need to discuss before tomorrow."

His voice was stiff and even more formal than usual. No wonder. Just because I couldn't see the disgust on his face didn't mean he wasn't feeling it.

"We can—"

"But I can see you are occupied," Aelius cut me off. "I shall wait outside the door until the two of you are..." He waved a hand in the air. "Finished."



Kylan lost it at the word 'finished,' laughing as he shook his head. Aelius turned and walked back out without another word, leaving me standing there feeling like a complete idiot. 1

My face burned hotter than my eyes had ever done. Of every person in this village, it had to be him. The one who could supposedly see everything. Yeah right.

I glanced at Kylan, and he carefully did the same. A small smirk still played on his lips, and he released a breath. "So I'm guessing we're not going to..." he started.

"No." I scoffed. "Obviously not."

He shrugged, then slammed his arm around my shoulder to pull me in closer. "Worth a try," he said. "At least we weren't in the middle of—"

"Okay, that's enough!" I stopped him. I huffed out a breath and turned toward the door, already dreading going to sleep tonight because I knew I'd think about that one moment over and over again. Maybe even for the rest of my life. Unfortunately, that was just how my brain worked.

I huffed out a breath and turned toward the door, already dreading falling asleep tonight. Unfortunately, I knew myself and knew I would replay that one moment over and over in the dark. Probably for the rest of my life.

Out of all the things that had happened today, this was definitely the biggest nightmare.



"What do you think he wants to talk about?" Kylan asked.

"I don't know," I answered truthfully. Today, he had randomly announced that we were all going to die and that he would be taking a step back from his duties. With Aelius, you could never really be too sure about anything. "I guess we should go find out."

My eyes landed on the key, still sitting on the small table where Kylan had left it. I quickly walked over and snatched it before he could reach it.

Kylan gasped out a laugh. "I'm holding onto this one this time," I said, waving it at him. "Make sure to lock the door later!"

He innocently threw up his arms, like he had no idea what I could possibly be talking about, and followed behind me.

My eyes were lowered as I pushed the door open, and when I looked ahead again, my heart nearly stopped on the spot.

"Dear Goddess!" I stumbled back, hitting Kylan's chest with my shoulder.

Aelius was standing directly in front of the door. Close enough that I had almost walked straight into him. It was definitely not normal to just stand there in the dark, but it was to him.

And although I loved Grandpa Aelius, I still had to get used to how strange he could be. I attempted to meet his eyes but regretted it immediately because it was still too early.

To make matters worse, he didn't look away. He never did. He just kept staring like he was trying to figure something out. What could it



be?

I flinched, hearing Kylan pull the door shut behind us. Only then did Aelius start speaking.

"I would like to take a short walk through the haven," Aelius said. "It will not take long. Walk with me."

He turned and started walking without waiting for an answer. I reached back for Kylan's hand, laced my fingers through his, and we followed him into the dark.

Shortly after, we reached the woods. Everything was dark around us, with the only faint light coming from the huts behind us, fading with each step.

Aelius walked ahead of us, and his silence made me worry that we'd be back soon before he would ever get to whatever this was about. Or what if he did want to speak, but was still disgusted by what he had just walked into.

"Grandpa," I said finally.

He looked back over his shoulder, a weak smile on his face. "Yes, Violet?"

Something melted within me as he said my name.

I squeezed Kylan's hand, hard. "That thing you walked into, back in the hut..." My face was already burning again. "Whatever it was you saw, I just need you to know that I don't normally talk like—"

Aelius shook his head, cutting me off. "You are an adult. What you



and the prince do behind closed doors, and whatever vulgar language leaves your mouth, none of it concerns me." He faced forward again. "What concerns me is whether we will have enough time to train those eyes of yours and whether you'll be ready. That is all I have room to think about right now."

I swallowed, hearing the seriousness in his voice. In that moment, I knew he truly didn't care. There were far bigger things to worry about.

"You have only ever used them for one purpose, but there is more you can do with them than you have ever imagined and nowhere near enough time to learn it," he said.

I took in his words. There were indeed some strange, unexplainable things, like the shield I could create with my hands, the second heartbeat I had been able to sense inside Sonya, and those sudden bursts of anger I would still get.

"I am telling you right now, I am going to push you harder than anyone has ever pushed you before, and you are going to hate me again." He glanced back at me. "Do you understand?"

I hummed, nodding. If that was necessary for me to be the best, so be it.

Then his eyes moved to Kylan. "The same goes for your teacher," he told him. "You will be pushed even harder, as you have lost the trust of Baelor, and the teacher will need to try to restore it."

"I understand—"

"No, not you." Aelius closed his eyes for a brief second, smiling. "You



do not understand. You will accept it, but you will not understand. You have a good heart, but I already know you, Crown Prince. We all do."

Kylan let out a soft scoff. One only I could hear. But he didn't argue because even he must've known there was some truth to Aelius's words.

"The announcement I made must have shaken the both of you," Aelius said. "I did not know I was going to make it until my eyes showed me the truth I can't ignore." His voice went softer. "I have looked, and I have looked again...and I do not wish to look anymore."

His words were devastating, and his feet dragging through the fallen leaves made it even worse. Even though I knew better, some small, stupid part of me had been holding out hope.

Waiting for him to stop, to turn around, to tell me this was all some strange test and none of it was real.

"Are you going to die soon?" I asked bluntly.

Aelius stopped mid-step and turned to look at me. His whole face changed, and he had clearly taken it as an insult. "Just me? I certainly hope not," he muttered.

I stared at his teeth as they pressed together, still rotting and yellow in the dark. Though I had offended him, relief still washed through me anyway. He wasn't dying...

That was one horror I could cross off the very long list running through my head.



"Then if that's not it," I went on, "why give new roles to me and Jason? Why step back at all?"

"So that I can fully focus on you, my child." He started walking again. "I have not found a solution to any of this yet. Not the realm, not the ritual, not the fight ahead," he said. "But I do know that you will figure it out." He glanced at me. "The more you learn you can do, the more your confidence grows," he said, "and the more confident you become, the less nonsense comes out of that mouth of yours, and the more that is actually useful. You can be smart if you want to."

I frowned at him, not sure whether to feel flattered or taken aback. He was starting to sound like our Commander Jorn.

A laugh slipped from Kylan beside me. "It is good to see you in better spirits again," Aelius said, turning his attention to Kylan now. "And judging by the activities you had planned for tonight, your body has healed fast."

I pushed my palm against my face. He said he didn't care, but he couldn't help himself either and just had to say something.

"It takes a heavy toll on a vessel, and most would need at least a day to recover," Aelius told him. He tilted his head. "You are handling it better than your brother."

My mind went to Kian. He needed the red streaks in his hair, needed his eyes glowing red all day, and had spent years fighting to become a vessel. Kylan had simply done it, and I hadn't even noticed at first. None of us had.

"You are not as special as your sister, Kaelis, I am afraid," Aelius went



on. "But the blood of the Moon Oracle runs through your veins as well."

"I've heard that before, but I still don't know what it means." Kylan's face pulled into confusion. "And what does my sister have to do with this?"

Aelius shook his head. "We are not talking about her right now, Prince. We are talking about you," he sighed out.

"But since you seem to know absolutely nothing, perhaps a little more knowledge of your ancestral history will prepare you for tomorrow and save your teacher the trouble of filling in every gap."