



Chapter 556

Violet

Figures started walking out of the caves.

I watched, full of anticipation, holding my breath. But I wasn't the only one. Everyone around me stopped what they were doing, some even lowered their buckets as every head turned toward them.

The dozen figures came out slowly, but the moment their eyes found mine, I knew...

I knew every one of those faces.

It was the mountain witches of Lyperia. All of them. From the elders to the small children clutching to their parents. Some of them we had nursed back to health, and they looked way healthier now.

Just when I thought it was the end, more and more came out, spreading across Bloodstone Haven. Grandpa Aelius stepped out from among them as one of the last.

At the very end came a figure I would have known anywhere. I let out a loud gasp. Relieved.

Varius...

He wore the same dark cape as always and leaned heavily on his stick. Though it hadn't been that long since we had last seen him, he suddenly appeared older than I remembered. It was clear the Lyperian dungeons hadn't been kind to him.



I blinked my eyes, looking at the two side by side. Grandpa Aelius and Varius. It was a strange feeling, considering the last time I had seen those two together was through the Box of Ashes. Not that long ago for us, but in reality, it had been a decade.

Varius slowly lifted his head, just enough for his hood to slip back, and I caught sight of his brown eyes. They were sharp and calculating, as if he was already searching for danger. The same look he had worn in the mountains.

Only now, I knew that was simply the way he looked at the world. Beneath that guarded gaze was a kind and honest man.

I let out a chuckle, nudging Kylan's arm.

"I'm glad it's him," I said. "Your teacher. I really am!"

Part of me always knew, but knowing it for certain felt like a weight being lifted off my shoulders. Because I knew Kylan would be just fine. Varius had once shared a close bond with Baelor and would know a way for Kylan to reach him.

While Varius used to scare me at first, I knew where his heart was now and had seen it.

He had kept an entire mountain village breathing on nothing but his own failing eyes. If there was anyone who knew what to do about Kylan, it was him.

I gave Kylan another nudge, telling him to come with me. Then I rushed across and stopped right in front of Varius.

A wide smile was plastered across my face.



He pulled his head back a little more so he could look at me properly, taking me in from under the hood.

His lips curled slightly. "Royal Mate," he greeted.

I nodded, grinning like an idiot. The problem was I didn't know how to properly greet him back.

Did I hug him? Shake his hand? I had no idea, so I ended up just standing there.

"I knew you'd come," I said.

"And I knew you'd welcome me with open arms," he said, squinting past my shoulder. I followed his gaze back to Kylan, who had come up behind me with his arms folded and his brows raised.

"You look older," Kylan commented.

A short, dry laugh scraped out of Varius. "I would hope you were not expecting me to look any younger, boy."

Kylan shook his head, a short laugh slipping out of him. He could deny it later all he wanted, but I knew he was also happy to see him.

"Thorne is—"

"Doing well," Varius said. "I am aware, and I am grateful."

The two shared a look. One I wasn't part of.

I glanced from one to the other, trying to catch what it was, but there was nothing. Then again, this had always kind of been the way those two communicated.



So I let it go and turned back to the mountain witches instead. The second I did, my chest felt warm. They were already watching me. Half of them were waving and blinking, trying to get my attention, while the others beamed like they had been waiting for this reunion all along.

"A deal with Baelor...You've made quite a mess of things," Varius said. I turned back to hear whatever he was going to tell Kylan. "I had hoped to get here sooner." He tilted his head. "But do not worry yourself, Prince. I will help you undo the mess faster than you managed to make it."

As expected.

He knew what to do.

Kylan sighed out a laugh, not bothering to argue back.

"Everyone." Aelius's voice dominated the haven, ending all the chatter. "Prepare your eyes, and spread the word. We gather at noon," he said. "I want to see how far along each of you are, and to know what must happen for us to properly support Violet and the prince in what lies ahead of them."

An uncomfortable pit settled in my stomach as most of the villagers scattered at once, hurrying off in every direction.

The kind woman who had made us the soup last night stepped forward out of the crowd.

"I had anticipated our guests' arrival," Aelius said, turning to the mountain witches. "In the meantime, this good woman will see that



you are all settled."

I watched as she glowed at the acknowledgment, her chin lifted. "Please," she called out, waving an arm. "Follow me so I can show you where you'll be staying."

Even with the kindness, none of the witches moved. They looked strong as a group, and every one of them looked to Varius first. Waiting.

When Varius gave them a small nod of his head, they finally moved, and the large group decided to follow her.

"Varius." Aelius carefully pronounced his name. "Join us. I was just on my way to check on Commander Jorn."

"The one with the shadow wound?" Varius asked.

Aelius gave both me and Kylan a nod, allowing us to follow him. We walked the path, and he walked in front while Varius made sure to walk a few steps behind him.

Kylan and I trailed behind. "I don't know why, but for some reason all of this makes me really happy," I whispered, watching them again. "It's like nothing ever happened."

"Something did happen, though," Kylan reminded me, one hand tucked into his pocket while the other held mine. "And I don't know if those two are going to be able to work together."

I glanced up at him. "Really? What makes you say that?"

"Two leaders, two groups, two ways of doing things." He kept his



eyes on their backs. "And looking at that gap between them, I'd bet they never actually sat down and talked out whatever went wrong between them. They just moved on." He shook his head. "That's a disaster waiting to happen."

A weak sigh slipped past my lips as I took a closer look. Now that he'd said it, I noticed it too. Sure, neither of them was the talkative type, but there were still things left unresolved between them. Things they would have to put aside for the good