



126 Already precious to me.

Arwen didn't realize her words had come out so forceful, and her tone laced with such strength and conviction that she rarely dared to show. 1

On the other end of the line, Catrin was left momentarily speechless. The shock she felt was very evident in her silence. Maybe because this was the first time in a long time her daughter hadn't cowered or made excuses. It took a moment for Catrin to gather her thoughts.

"Arwen, what tone are you using? Did you forget who you are talking to?" Though in a low voice, Catrin spoke with the familiar edge of authority.

Arwen's hand clenched the phone tighter. She had always accepted her mother's harsh words with a smile, no matter how deeply they stung. She had constantly strived to meet her impossible standards, only to be left disappointed within. Yet, none of it had ever brought her any warmth from her mother.

Suddenly all her efforts seemed absurd. Had her mother ever truly seen her beyond those rigid expectations?

Maybe not! Because to her mother, she was



never just a daughter, but rather a project that she bent to get successful as per her set plans.

"I didn't forget anything. I always remember it very well, Mom. But I think it's you who has forgotten that I am your daughter —not some piece on a chessboard to be moved and sacrificed as you please," Arwen said, her voice remained steady, defiant even, though her heart was pounding inside.

"You —"

"That's enough," Idris spoke, his voice holding the authority superior to Catrin's this time. "We will return and discuss about it. Now, over the call, is not the good choice," he said, and it was clear that his words were for Catrin's.

Silence filled the line for a few moments before Idris spoke again, his tone softer as he directed his words to Arwen. "Arwen, we are returning tomorrow, and that's final."

"Okay, Dad," Arwen replied, her voice much calmer than anyone might have expected.

The call ended, and Arwen lowered her phone. The silence in her room felt oddly soothing. For the first time in a long time, she had spoken for herself without fear and hesitation. The last time

when she had tried, she was easily subdued. But this time she would make sure that wouldn't turn out to be the case —not even when she would be facing her mother face-on.

Arwen knew the conversation with her parents wouldn't be easy, but she also knew it was time to face it. "Tomorrow, then," she muttered to herself just when another voice asserted her.

"And you will be able to do it, beautifully."

Arwen hadn't expected Aden's voice. She turned around and looked only to be surprised, finding him standing there in the doorway. Since she had her back facing in that direction, she hadn't realized he was there. God knows, for how long he had been standing there.

Had he been standing there for long? Did he hear it all?

"When did you come?" she asked, and Aiden walked in with a smile that held the hints of pride.

"Just when you got the call."

Arwen closed her eyes, feeling a flush of embarrassment. *If he had come when she had got a call, it meant he had heard it all.* "My



parents will be coming back tomorrow. I am going to tell them about us," she said, suddenly feeling shy about what else should say to explain better. She didn't know any easy way with which she would be able to describe the complicated bond she shared with her mother.

But she quickly realized Aiden never intended to ask for the details. He was simply there with her in that moment, promising to stand beside her in every moment to come, without needing any stories or explanations.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Aiden asked, looking into her eyes.

Arwen stared at him, overwhelmed. For a moment, her thoughts drifted to think what she did she do to deserve his such unconditional support and trust. She had been just been around a month with him, and Aiden had treated her with kindness and understanding she had never known.

She had felt deprived before, even after having everything. But only now she realized what it means to be cherished, to be cared and to be ... loved.

Love was a daring word and she knew was being

presumptuous to think that, but all of this was simply making her too daring. She was fearing the worst that could come tomorrow, but at the same time, she was getting too confident within holding a strong belief that the worst would never be able to make out to reality.

Aiden reached out to hold her hands, and feeling his gentle touch she was pulled back out of her thoughts.

"If you want I can come with you," Aiden said, softly as if he wasn't asking but requesting her to take her with him. But at the same time respecting her plans and wishes.

Arwen smiled at his such considerate gesture. Shaking her head, she said, "I would love to take you along. Your presence alone fills me with such great confidence that I don't fear losing. But no matter how strong you make me, some battles would turn out better if I fight them alone. One of such is tomorrow. So, I would go alone."

Aiden nodded at her, though the hints of disappointment flicked in his gaze. "Alright, I will wait for you back at home." 1

Cupping his face, Arwen traced her finger over

his cheek, her touch reassuring. She couldn't sense he wasn't angry, but she could also tell he was affected by her decision. "I don't want to drag you into a mess that you don't deserve," she whispered. "It may be early, but you are already precious to me. I wouldn't want you facing something harsh because of me."

Aiden's expression softened, and he pulled her into a gentle embrace. "Arwen," he murmured as if he was overwhelmed a little. "Even if you insist on fighting your battles alone, know that I will always be there at your side, ready to support you."