

Chapter 349

Violet

I couldn't believe my eyes as I took in the three figures who had stepped inside.

Aelius stood at the front, and Jason beside him. And Varius...

Varius stood a step back with his hood pulled low over his eyes. There was no cane in his hand this time, but I knew it was him. We all knew it was him, and glanced at each other to confirm it.

He didn't seem to recognize any of us, which made sense. The Varius of this time had no reason to know who I was. I finally understood what he meant when he said one day we would communicate in a less invasive way. That day was this day.

Though I was still unsure why he would give me the box of ashes.

What was his goal?

My eyes shifted to Jason. Seeing him felt strange, almost unreal. This was the same boy who had held me when I was a baby, and he looked exactly like I had seen him through Adelaide's eyes, only a bit older.

He had the same dark curls, same warm eyes, same face. How old would he be now?

Thirteen, maybe fourteen? Not much older than that.

"Aelius."

His name slipped past my lips. Grandpa's eyes flicked to me for only a second before his attention shifted to the small body that ran into his

arms. "The old man is here!"

An unexpected, soft smile reached Aelius's lips. He adjusted the glasses on her nose, pushing them back into place. "You are not a good listener," he scolded with kindness. He tapped her forehead gently. "I told you to tell me everything."

Little Violet rubbed her forehead and pouted. "Sorry," she mumbled.

Aelius looked up at Morn and Dad. "She has to wear them properly," he said. "If she does not, they will not work as they should."

Morn and Dad both nodded at the same time. "Yes, sir."

Little Violet focused her attention on Jason next. Her face lit up at the sight of him. It was the kind of excitement that came from recognizing someone she liked and trusted because that's what it looked like. And when Jason gave her a big smile in return, I knew the feeling was mutual.

Looking at the two, I couldn't help but wonder...

If things were different, would we be friends in the present time? Two children of blood.

My breath hitched as I felt Kylan's warm hand slide into mine. My fingers curled around his on instinct.

He looked at me with a worried expression. Maybe he thought I would cry or that the thought of seeing Aelius like this would break me. Or perhaps he simply knew how overwhelmed I felt without needing a word.

Aelius's eyes drifted down to our linked hands, and then slowly lifted to look at me. He let out a chuckle. "As expected."

As expected of what?

Of who?

Of us?

Grandpa Aelius was just like the first time I had met him. Calm, unreadable, almost cold, but I knew he couldn't help it. He had smiled at Little Violet and seemed to care for her, but even then, he was still so...so distant.

"Gra..." I started, but the word barely left my mouth before Aelius cut right through it.

"I do not have time to talk about the weather or your mate," he said sharply. I closed my mouth, feeling the heat rise to my cheeks as Aelius turned to Jason and Varius.

"Go," he instructed.

Go and do what?

Jason moved first, stepping as if he had done this a million times before. He made his way to Dylan and Trinity and grabbed their hands. Both of them looked down at him with puzzled expressions.

"These two are ready, Father," Jason breathed.

Father...

Aelius must really love him.

Varius stood in front of Lian and Nate and grabbed their hands. Once he was finished, he did not speak, only lifted his chin and gave a single nod to Aelius.

My brows pinched as I nudged Kylan. "What is he up to?"

Kylan scoffed. "Does anyone ever know what that man is up to?" he muttered.

Aelius moved through the room, passing mom and dad, as he had already learned everything he ever would from them. "These two are good to go."³

Lian released an exhausted breath. "Good to go for what?"

"To shift," Aelius murmured. "All of you come from strong bloodlines, so I will allow you to fight with us."

I was sure she must've had a lot of questions. We all did, but I trusted Aelius and whatever he was doing. He placed a hand on Little Dylan's head, tapped his forehead, and let out a quiet sound of approval.

Then he stood in front of us. I swallowed hard, watching as Aelius's eyes hardened the moment they landed on Kylan.

Kylan stared right back at him, refusing to look away.

Aelius hummed, unimpressed. "If you weren't needed for the fight, I'd tear those eyes out myself."

A typical Aelius-like response...

A while ago, Kylan would've been flustered, but now he only chuckled. He knew exactly what that look would drag out of him.

"You'd better listen to that beast of yours tonight," Aelius went on. "You will need him. Know that."

Then he turned to me.

My breath paused, and I felt anxious. I could not tell if he was going to be cold or warm, if he would greet me after all, or treat me like a stranger. I

had already seen several versions of Grandpa and had no idea which one I would get now.

But as he stood in front of me, an unexpected feeling filled my heart. A feeling I had not noticed or expected to feel until this very moment.

I had missed him...

I barely knew the man, and it made no sense, but it was true.

Yes, the Hastings were my family.

Yes, Kylan was my everything, but Grandpa Aelius...

Grandpa was tied to Adelaide, Bloodstone Haven, where I came from before everything fell apart.

Being near him again felt like touching a life I used to dream about. His eyes softened just a little, and his hand lifted. A quiet gasp came from my lips as he brushed my cheek with the back of his cold finger.

"Do not fear me, child," he said gently. "Fear what your grandmother has called upon you."

"Gloria?"

"Yes, Gloria." He blinked. "And as long as you do not do anything reckless, you can take the knowledge you seek and bring it back to the future to end it for once and for all."

My heart skipped. "How did you—"

He shook his head. "You ask too many questions, child."

His gaze sharpened again. "I will only tell you this once," he said. "You

are ready to shift, ready to use your powers, but you are not ready to shift while using your eyes, under any circumstances. Have I made myself clear?"

My lips parted to speak, but nothing came out. Ready to shift? Ready to use my powers? I didn't even know how to do any of that, let alone at the same time. There was no way I was just going to stand on the sidelines, but now that he was depending on me, the pressure hit hard. I suddenly had to be someone I had never learned to be.

Aelius let out a slow breath. "You already know you can't cry here, so you'll have to do it in your bed later. We do not have much time."

Before I could process anything, he stepped away from me and walked to the center of the room. "We will all fight together," he said. "Tonight this house will not be a house. We will shape a space inside it, a place separated from the Bloodrose. A place where Baelor cannot touch anyone but those who choose to face him."

The room went quiet as everyone listened. I had never really questioned why only my parents faced this fate or why no one else had been there. But now I understand. This was what it took to protect the whole pack. Aelius was protecting them.

Aelius turned his head toward Little Dylan.

"You!"

The boy pointed at himself. "Me?"

"Do you love your cousin?"

Little Dylan scratched his neck. "Love?" He let out an awkward laugh. "I don't know about love, but I guess she's decent."

"Decent enough to protect her with your life?"

"Always," Dylan bopped his head. He didn't hesitate.

Aelius gave a single nod, as if that was enough, then turned to Mom and Dad. Little Violet stood between them.

"I will put a shield around both children, and then another shield around her," he explained. "The boy will be protecting her. I trust he won't fail me."

Little Dylan gulped.

"I will give him some of my magic so the shield will hold."

Mom gasped softly. "Like the shield Adelaide made?"

"Yes," Aelius answered without hesitation, "but much, much stronger."

He stepped toward Little Dylan, placed two fingers on his head, and tapped gently. For a split second, his blue eyes lit up with a spark of bright white light, then faded back to normal.

How did he do that?

"What do you need us to do?" Dad asked. Aelius looked over his shoulder.

"Claire and Greg," he said their names. "You will guard the shield. Protect it with your lives, and let no one pass," he instructed. "Baelor cannot reach Violet. Because if Baelor reaches her...I will have to kill her myself, and I do not want to do that."