

Chapter 351

Violet

Prepare ourselves?

How?

Aelius gave the order so calmly, like we were all supposed to have any idea what that meant. Jason moved first. He grabbed Little Violet and Little Dylan's hands, leading them to the center.

Both children looked at him with big eyes. "It's going to be okay," Jason reassured with a smile. His eyes moved to Mom and Dad, who gave him a nod. Jason placed his hand on the boy's shoulder, and Little Dylan's eyes lit up with a bright glow.

He jerked back in surprise. "What was that?"

He was still trying to sound tough, but I knew that little boy was scared, and it was okay. We were all scared.

Dylan was still like that, and I knew for a fact even the older version was shitting himself, but would never admit it out loud.

"Don't be scared, Dylan!" Little Violet said.

"I'm not scared," he muttered. "I was just asking, but I'm not scared."

"Good," Jason exhaled. He raised both hands and created a shield around the two, a second one wrapping itself around Little Violet, just like Aelius had instructed before.

All I could do was look in amazement, wondering what else that kid was capable of.

"One hundred seconds," Aelius whispered. "Prepare yourselves."

My whole body froze. There were under two minutes left, and we didn't know where he would appear or who he would bring along.

I stumbled back and bumped straight into Kylan's chest. A gasp left my mouth as I looked up at him. His jaw was set, eyes hard, but underneath I could feel his fear too. Yes, Kylan was afraid, and I knew he could see my fear just as clearly.

"Prepare ourselves...how?" I asked quietly.

None of us had to communicate, but all of us moved closer on instinct. We moved in until our shoulders touched, and there was barely any space between us. A tight circle.

The only ones not in the circle were Varius and Jason, who were shielding Aelius while he remained on the ground with his eyes closed.

I looked beside me and caught Dad's eyes on me. Not just me, but Kylan too.

There was something in his eyes that I couldn't quite describe, but Kylan seemed to have figured it out before I could.

"I will protect her," he said.

Dad was worried...

He responded with a sigh, like that was enough for him. I wished I could say it was enough for me, too, but this whole situation felt strange.

Mom and Dad were about to die, and I didn't even have any time to process that because I had to fight Baelor.

He was our priority...

"Fifty seconds. Prepare yourselves," Aelius called again.

Nervously, I glanced back at the others in the circle. Nate, Trinity, Dylan, and even Lian looked just as lost as I felt. None of them moved or made any attempts to shift.

What did Aelius want us to do anyway?

Did he want us to shift right this moment?

"Kylan," I said, my throat suddenly dry. He turned to me, wearing an expression that warned me not to ask anything complicated.

"What is it?" he asked softly.

"Do I use my eyes...or do I shift?"

His expression changed. That was undeniably one of the most complicated questions at the moment. The others were the kind of people to just take action, but one thing I was good at was overthinking, and at the moment, I was doing just that.

I had expected him to answer, but when he stayed quiet for a second too long, I began to worry.

Even he didn't know what to do.

Was this even the right step?

We had stepped into something none of us understood. We had trusted Varius' box. I had brought my friends here and had no idea how to get them out.

We were not ready.

It was the devil.

We would never be ready...

I heard a roar within me. 'All you need to do is kill, kill, kill!' Lumia snarled.

Before I got time to process her words, the ground beneath our feet shook. The air changed, mist appeared, and the sky turned darker by the second.

"Twenty seconds. Prepare yourselves," Aelius said, louder than before.

"I do not know if I can control her."

My breath hitched as I dug my fingers into Kylan's arm, like that would somehow make the situation better. "Lumia is losing it, and I don't trust myself to keep her in check."

Kylan went into deep thought as his brown eyes pierced through mine. His eyes darted for a moment as he searched for an answer he didn't have.

"Do you remember what Aelius told you about shifting, the first time we visited the cave?" he said in a rush.

I closed my eyes for a second, forcing myself to think, and then the memories kicked back in. Kylan was right.

Aelius did say something about shifting, and he told me I wasn't ready. Back then, I thought he was just making sure I was being careful...but what if he wasn't? What if he was warning me about the past... this past?

"We don't know what's going to happen, Violet."

Our Aelius had already experienced this day and knew exactly what would happen. I doubted he had lost his memories.

"So you're telling me not to shift?"

"No!" Lumia screamed.

Kylan shook his head slightly. "I'm telling you that only you know what you can and cannot handle," he said. "Not me, not Aelius, no one. We can guess, we can worry...but the truth is that we won't carry the scars this could give you."

His eyes were full of understanding, as if he already knew where this was going.

"Mommy and Daddy are being ripped to shreds," Lumia growled. "But I will, and if you'll let me out...I will stop it. All of it!"

No.

I couldn't...

The ground trembled harder, and I grabbed Kylan's hand and held it as tightly as I could.

The sky almost went black. Everything was dark, except for the shield Jason had made around the children, the light shining from Aelius's eyes, and from Varius's as he stood guard over him.

"Now!" Aelius warned.

Suddenly, the woods dropped into complete silence, and the ground stopped trembling. It was quiet, and all I could focus on was the sound of

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Chapter 351

my heavy breaths as we waited.

Where was he?

Had Little Violet been mistaken?

Then a growl came through the sky. It was not a sound any normal creature would make, but something deep, old, and terrifying.

"I have come to take the body that belongs to me!"

A chill went through me as the dark voice came from everywhere at once. We all turned in a circle at the same time, trying to find the source of it.

"Be careful," Mom shouted. "Do not lose focus!"

She didn't stay with us. She ran straight toward the shields, and Dad was right behind her. Neither of them shifted.

They had this look in their eyes like they were ready to give it their all, to fight...and that terrified me. Could Lumia really save them?

I wanted to scream at them to shift, to protect themselves, to stop acting like they were still dealing with simple village wolves and think about themselves for once.

This was Baelor.

This was death.

My eyes shifted to the little girl I once used to be, who stood in the shield, looking at her cousins' and parents' backs with a sad look.

That girl...

That was their daughter, and they were doing this for her.

Chapter 351

"Sweet Violet!" The dark voice sang. The sound dragged my focus away from the children and slammed it right back into the dark.

Nate pointed into the trees. "Over there!"

Every head snapped to that direction, and a raven cry tore through the air. Red dots lit up in the dark, and it wasn't just two.

It was six in total.

Six pairs of eyes.

"What the fuck," Trinity breathed.

Honestly, that was the correct reaction.

The only correct one.

How many Thorne's were we going to fight?

Was this what Aelius meant when he told us to prepare ourselves? I took several breaths, watching as the glowing eyes got closer and closer.

"Give us the little girl and no one else has to get hurt."

This time it was a woman's voice that spoke. My breath stopped...I knew that voice.

I turned to Kylan with wide eyes. "That is..."

His jaw tightened, but his eyes didn't leave the trees. "I know," he said. The circle tensed around us, and I knew the others were thinking the same thing.

But how?

How was that possible?

The figures stepped in sight, and as soon as they did, my suspicions were confirmed. That really was her...and her eyes were red.

She stood in front, Thorne resting on her fingers with those same, red, glowing eyes. I knew it was Thorne because now that I did know him, I could never forget that raven.

The four hooded figures behind her pushed back their hoods, and that's when I realized that they were not people.

They were shadows...faceless shapes with nothing left of them except those burning red eyes.

What was going on?

Aelius let out a dry, humorless laugh. "Long time no see...Esther."