

Chapter 352

Violet

Esther...

I had never seen her like this before. Not through Adelaide's eyes, and not even through my own. She looked so powerful in a way I could've never imagined.

Her hair was tied up in her usual bun, but it was no longer gray. It was dark brown, the exact shade I had seen through Adelaide's memories. Her face looked much younger, too.

The woman in front of us didn't look like Esther, yet she was. And she was much more real than those cloaked shadows standing behind her or that creepy raven.

Lian's voice broke the silence. "Do you know her?" she whispered to no one in particular. She must have felt the tension coming off us.

Nate swallowed hard. "She's a professor at Starlight."

Esther's eyes landed on Mom. "Claire," she greeted in the most casual tone.

Mom's face went pale, and she took a small step back without meaning to. I could tell she was trying to stay strong, but this had to be difficult, even for her. I remembered the way she was so fond of Esther back at Starlight.

Mom's jaw clenched. "Esther..."

A warm smile appeared on Esther's lips. If I hadn't been aware, I would've thought the two were on the same side. "Not Mama Esther

anymore, I suppose?" she asked.

There was a sudden switch in Mom's expression as her eyes darkened. "After all you have done? Never," she spat.

"Oh, sweetheart. It doesn't look like you're all that excited to see me," Esther spoke with a fake pout. "This is kind of hard for me, too, because I really do adore you, Claire. I just need the girl, and then we will be on our way."

"No!" Mom cut her off, moving a bit closer to the shield.

Thorne nudged his beak against Esther's shoulder while the woman was completely dumbfounded. Did she truly believe Claire would hand over me, her daughter, with no fight at all?

"But she doesn't belong to you," Esther said, stunned.

She tilted her head a little to take a better look at the shield and Little Violet. She had covered her eyes with her hands, like she didn't want to see any of this...because she already knew how it would end.

"She is Adelaide's, which means she is Gloria's, which means she belongs to Lord Baclor."

Esther lifted her brows as if this were the most obvious fact in the world. "Your baby died a long time ago, remember?"

My fists clenched at my sides. How could she even think to say something like that?

My heart shattered for Mom, who let out a short laugh like nothing surprised her anymore. I was surprised and felt disbelief, pain, and anger.

My blood boiled so hard, and it just wouldn't stop. Before I even realized,

I had taken a step forward, but Kylan grabbed my wrist and pulled me back.

"No," he hissed softly. "Not yet."

Because it was Kylan, I decided to listen, but the anger did not disappear. Someone should slam her into the ground for saying something like that. No matter what, Mom and Dad really didn't deserve to...die like this.

"You do not have to do this, Esther," Dad called out. "You can still walk away."

Aelius sighed from behind. "She does have to do this," he said, his voice calm. "Baelor wants her to do this."

Esther grinned. "Listen to the old man."

Aelius rolled his shoulders as if he were bored. "And if we are finished with the chit chat, can we begin the fight already?" he said. "I would like to drink my tea before sunrise."

Esther snorted. Her eyes drifted across the circle as if she were measuring our strengths, deciding which one to kill first.

When our eyes met, her brows tightened, and her gaze sharpened. She held my look a moment longer than she had anyone else.

Did she know?

Did she somehow see through me?

Did she realize I was that same little girl inside that shield?

Or did she feel my power the same way she had the first day I entered Starlight and realized I was not normal?

Whatever she was thinking, I just knew it couldn't be any good. She looked away with a quiet burn and focused on the shield again.

"Fine, Claire," she said, singling her out. "If you do not want to give her to me..."

The sound of her voice changed completely. It dropped lower, heavier, and way deeper, the same way it had been at the start. This was no longer Esther's voice. It was Baelor.

I could recognize that darkness anywhere.

It was one thing seeing all of those red eyes, but putting a face to the one that haunted me, even if it was Esther's, was another.

Baelor had shared his energy with her, was living through her, and that was the reason for those eyes.

But it was not fully him. It could not be. Esther was too weak to hold Baelor's power since most of her magic had been stripped away years ago. She was basically a fragile human body with a dark force borrowed from someone her body couldn't handle.

That's why Baelor wanted something better. A stronger vessel...one that could hold all of him.

And at this moment, that was Little Violet.

Esther lifted her hands and opened her palms very slowly. The shadows behind her bent toward her like she was calling them.

Suddenly, a sharp sensation hit my head. I winced softly and pressed my fingers to my temple.

"Violet?"

It was Aelius who had found his way inside my head. "Yes?"

"Baelor's energy is ten times stronger than all of us combined," Aelius warned. "Do not use all your strength at once. Save some for later. Do not underestimate him."

I released a breath. "I would not dare to."

Esther had lowered her gaze to the ground, and her lips moved slowly. Strange words rolled from her tongue, and once again the ground beneath our feet began to shake.

Something was coming...

Thorne let out a sharp cry as every shadow behind Esther pulled together. My breath caught as the cloaks fell off, and the shapes merged and grew until they were no longer on their own.

They became one...

A monstrous shadow beast appeared, even taller than the trees. Its body was made out of complete darkness, but those eyes...they were huge and red. They weren't just glowing, no...they were burning.

How could anyone be a match for this thing? That would be impossible.

Nate chuckled, as if he had already accepted our fate. "We are so... fucked."

The shadow beast let out a howl so deep I nearly lost my balance. Thorne circled above the beast, and black feathers fell from the sky right before he dove straight into the shadow's back. Huge horns tore out of the creature's skull, and that was when my stomach dropped.

"He's right. We are..." Trinity agreed.

'This was not normal...

The shadow beast seemed to grow even more as it roared again, this time louder and angrier.

So this was what Little Violet meant when she said Thorne could turn into whatever he wanted.

Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, a large group of ravens suddenly erupted in the sky. It was hundreds, maybe even thousands.

They filled the trees, the air...they were everywhere. Their cries echoed through the woods, and my heart thudded in my chest.

I felt small.

So small...and it wasn't only because of that thing Thorne turned into.

This was Baelor's power.

'This was the thing that would come for me and Kylan later. This was the thing Kayden or Kian would turn into, and here I was thinking we could just pick up some random knowledge to take back to the future.

This thing could literally destroy us.

No wonder Little Violet's memories got wiped. Hell, I would erase my own memory and run back to Starlight if I could.

I heard growls coming from beside me and turned my head. Dad was shifting, and Mom too. They were not wasting any time.

I watched as their bodies twisted and reshaped into their wolves, determined to defend the shields. Two dark wolves paced around the shield, growling as they stood guard. Seeing them both like that, ready to

fight despite seeing that shadow beast, not only brought back a lot of memories but also motivated me. I already had so much respect for them, and they somehow managed to double it.

Those were my parents, and they didn't fear anything.

If they could do it, so could I.

Esther smirked as she stretched out her arms and pointed her fingers. One at the shield protecting Little Violet and Dylan, and the other at us. "Attack!"

My breath hitched as the ravens divided. Half dove straight for the shield, and the other half came right at us.

"Shift!" Kylan shouted. "Now!"