

## Chapter 361

Violet

All eyes were on Aelius as we waited for his instructions.

Dylan and Nate were supporting Kylan, one on each side. He clearly wanted to prove he didn't need it, but his weight leaning on them said otherwise. He was still weak.

Aelius's words kept looping in my head.

'Now that all of you have learned what not to do...'

They had been directed at all of us, but they hadn't done anything wrong.

I had.

That was on me.

Kylan had nearly died because of me, and hadn't hesitated for even a second. He had been willing to let Baelor inside him just to keep me alive.

I let out a slow breath and looked around. The ground was torn apart, feathers lay scattered everywhere, and blood-stained places I refused to look at for too long.

My parents were gone, Esther unfortunately still alive, and the children... I didn't even want to think about that. Whatever this night had been, it had taken everything and left me standing with so many regrets.

I looked at Aelius.

"I'm sor—" I started, but when his eyes hardened, I knew not to speak. He didn't want me to.

The way he looked at me made my stomach drop. It wasn't anger or even disappointment, not anymore. It was something much, much colder.

And the silence that followed was uncomfortable.

"Don't look at her like that."

Kylan had managed to pull himself free from Dylan and Nate, ignoring their protests. He reached for me and wrapped his arm around my wrist, looking down at me.

I recognized that look.

It was the one he carried whenever he was about to say something after holding back for a long time.

I nudged his arm gently, begging him not to say anything. His jaw clenched, but he understood.

"My advice for the future?" Aelius said flatly. He had seen the look on Kylan's face but didn't care much. "Do not open your mouth and let Baelor inside of you. Ever!"

I flinched as he slightly raised his voice. He was scolding me. "Violet, I have lived a very long time," he continued. "And that was, without question, one of the most reckless things I have ever witnessed. Letting the devil inside your body is not bravery...it is stupidity."

Kylan released a scoff, wrapping his arm around my waist.

"And you," Aelius managed, glaring at him.

"Being willing to die for her like this? You wouldn't have saved her. You would have traumatized her, and it's ridiculous. This is not a game, and her way is not the way of a child of blood or Ad—"

"That's enough," Kylan snapped, his voice cold.

Adelaide...

I never wanted to be her because I knew I could never be like her. That woman, my mother, who was holding down the veil, was amazing.

I squeezed Kylan's hand. "Don't worry," I whispered. "It's okay."

He shook his head. "It's not."

Aelius exhaled, pointing a weak finger at me. "The girl is right. It's okay because she needs to hear this," he stated, then locked his eyes on me.

I wanted to hear it.

"We were close to sealing Baelor, but your desire for a...a grandfather who does know his part and who never asked to be saved cost you lives tonight," Aelius said. "Your parents' lives, and fate or not, Violet, that weight is yours to carry." 1

My breath hitched.

He wasn't sugarcoating anything, and as much as it hurt to hear it, there was some kind of truth to it.

"No," Kylan chuckled loudly. "No, we're not going to do this when she did everything out of love."

He took a step forward despite his unsteady legs.

Aelius didn't look away. "I do not know her very well, and we do not have much in common, but I am her family, and that gives me the right to speak plainly because I mean well."

"You are right. You do not know her well—"

"And!" Aelius cut him off. "The truth is that she loves too much, and love without restraint is dangerous. It kills."

A huff escaped me. All I wanted was for them to stop going at each other when there was no need for it.

"Great," Kylan looked between us. "Then we can all agree that you were willing to give your life to seal Baelor because you love her, and she was willing to save you because she loves you."

I stared at the man, waiting for him to deny any kind of love for me. The longer I waited, the more I realized that it wasn't like that.

Maybe he did love me.

Aelius's jaw clenched.

"She did this because she loves," Kylan told him. His eyes softened as he looked at me. "Violet always loves first and hardest, and she gets punished for it every time. You say you don't know her, that's fine, but you don't get to stand back and watch from a distance for all those years while she needed you, then judge her as you do."

The last time he had gotten like this was at the feast. He was usually controlled, contained, but when he reached his limit, there was barely anything that could stop him. He rarely got angry with himself, but with others, and in this case, he really didn't have to.

"You might want to calm down," Nate suggested from behind. However, Kylan wasn't having any of it.

"The reason we're even here in the first place is that you left her with those eyes and gave her nothing else. No guidance, no love, nothing," he

called out. "You weren't there when she needed you the most, and she had to figure everything out on her own while you were fucking floating around in Bloodstone Haven, doing nothing!"

I reached for his arm. "Kylan—"

"No, he needs to hear this," Kylan nodded. The words hit like blows, even to me. 1

Even if it was only for a split second, something shifted in Aelius's expression. It looked like regret, but I wasn't quite sure.

Was a man like him capable of regretting?

I glanced at Varius, silently begging him to say something, but the old man's attention was elsewhere. He just kept patting Thorne, a faint smile on his lips.

Jason paced back and forth, head lowered, his body tight with tension. Still, he did not step in to stop Kylan. It was so clear just how deeply he cared for Aelius, yet he let him speak without interference.

I was sure my friends felt the same, and I understood Kylan as well, but what more could we do if Aelius had already made his stance clear?

Some time passed before Aelius finally spoke. "For someone with such a loud mouth, I expect you to be an extraordinary mate. You have put the odds rather high for yourself," he hummed. "You must worship the ground she walks on and shield her from whatever comes down her path because you believe she, who was so easily influenced by Baelor, can do no wrong."

His gaze flicked between us. "The Moon Goddess made a beautiful match," he said sarcastically. "You might think you can do no wrong

either, and that it gives you the right to speak to me that way—"

"I'm not saying I'm perfect," Kylan chuckled, shaking his head. "But at least I'm not kicking her when she's already down, so I do think I'm better than you, yes."

He gave him a light shrug, and the silence that followed felt even worse than the first. Aelius tapped his finger against his chin, and in that moment, I knew it was time for me to step in.

If I didn't, I feared the two would fight for the last word and keep going until there were no words left to say.

"Are the two of you done?" I asked. My voice was barely above a whisper. I wasn't angry, just tired. So tired.

Kylan released a slow breath and shrugged his shoulder as he forced himself to stand down. Aelius cleared his throat and fixed his cloak, his expression slightly embarrassed. Because in what universe did a soothsayer go back and forth with an academy student?

"What do we do next?" I asked.

Just talking felt heavy. Everything still hurt. My chest, my head, and especially my heart. I had yet to process what had happened, but I knew very well that standing still wasn't an option.

Aelius moved beside Varius, his attention back on Thorne. "Since Gloria's raven is no ordinary creature, I am curious how long the shadow will hold and if we can extend the period," he said, caressing the raven with the back of his finger. "There are too many questions for now, and I will need to find the answers."

I nodded, but my eyes stayed on Varius. It wasn't like he had said a lot

before, but he was too calm and quiet. Same as Thorne.

That thing...since it was nothing more than a raven now, I wasn't even sure whether to call it Thorne.

"I assume the raven must be present in your time as well?" Aelius asked without looking at me. "Only yes or no. I don't need to hear a life story."

"Yes," I answered.

It was no surprise that he was being cautious with the timeline. He brushed the feathers at the top of Thorne's head aside, then squinted to study something.

'Violet,' I heard his voice inside my head. 'Once I am finished with my tests, I will leave a mark beneath the feathers. You will be able to see it in your time. If it is a circle, I suggest you seal Baelor the same way, should he escape again. If it is a cross, you will need another solution, but now that I know this is all you can handle, I will make sure it's a circle.'

All I could handle?

I stared ahead, trying to process his backhanded instructions.

I did think it was strange he decided to connect instead of saying it out loud, which made me wonder.

Would he already be aware of Varius's motives by now? And if he was, why hadn't he acted?

'Respond!'

I nearly flinched at his loud voice inside my head. 'Yes!'

He removed his hand from Thorne as his eyes met mine. "My body is still

weak," he said. "Which means you will be the one to make the vessel forget. Come with me, and I will teach you how."

I took a step, but Kylan tugged me back. I gave him a look, asking him to let go. A sigh left him as he released my wrist, and as he did, his body swayed.

Before I could reach for him, Dylan and Nate were there in seconds, steadying him.

"Are you alright, Your Highness?" Lian asked.

"Fine," Kylan muttered, clearly not convincing anyone.

Aelius started walking toward Esther, and I followed. I heard footsteps beside me, and suddenly, Trinity was there. Her lips curled into a sad smile. "I'm here for you, Vi," she said. "Also...I wasn't a big fan of your grandpa's tone. If he tries something again, I'll get him for you."

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a faint smirk tug at Aelius's mouth.

"Why can't we just kill her?" Trinity asked, glancing ahead.

Aelius looked back over his shoulder. "I have not conducted enough research on the aftermath of killing one of Baelor's former vessels," he replied. "It could backfire, and I will not take that risk."

Trinity hummed. "Makes sense. I don't think we want another shadow beast."

My blood started to boil as we reached Esther, and all the anger returned. She looked a mess, and I didn't believe she deserved to live...yet here we were.

Her body lay twisted in the dirt. Her clothes were torn, blood smeared

across her skin, and her breathing shallow and uneven. She groaned with every inhale.

Her green eyes, almost lifeless, lifted to meet mine, and I really had to hold myself back. She had no right to look me in the eye while my parents couldn't.

"You will do as I say," Aelius said, kneeling beside her.

Trinity and I shared a look and joined him. "You will place your left hand on her forehead and do exactly as I say—"

He had barely finished when my palm was already pressed against her skull. I felt the energy flow through my hands, and Esther's eyes widened.

"I will kill you," I whispered. "We will meet again. You will remember, and I will kill you."

Aelius sighed and gave Trinity a look. "If you were not a fan of my tone earlier, you are going to hate me now."

Trinity rolled her eyes with a playful smile. "Keep going, vi," she said softly, giving me an encouraging nod. "Just let it all out."

My eyes returned to Esther as I prepared to continue.

She would remember this.

All of it.

I would come for her.