

## Chapter 372

Kylan

Tears still streamed down the queen's cheeks, and an uncomfortable ache settled in my chest. Even after everything, I could not stand seeing her like this.

"I don't know why I'm crying," she huffed. "I regret the years we lost, but I suppose I brought this upon myself, didn't I?"

I lowered my head and blinked hard, forcing my own tears away. When I looked up again, I saw the embarrassment in her eyes. She did not want us to see her like this either.

I stood up, and three heads snapped toward me at once. Kaelis, Kiora, and the queen all looked tense, as if they were bracing for something worse.

Maybe they thought I would walk out like I usually did. But I couldn't.

Not anymore.

Instead, I stepped closer, gathered some courage, and wrapped my arms around the queen.

"Please don't cry," I whispered. "I didn't say all that just to see you cry."

I did not know why I did it, but I leaned down and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. Maybe this was the comfort I had once hoped for, after everything that happened with Kayden.

"You're right," I said softly. "We need to stay together."

After all, with everything that was coming, it felt like the right choice.

The queen took a shaky breath and rested her hand on my arm, as if she was afraid I might pull away. Her lips curved into the smallest smile.

"Yes."

"And I'm twenty, not eighty," I added with a quiet chuckle. "We still have plenty of time."

I heard soft laughter to the side and turned to see Kaelis and Kiora wiping away their tears. It looked like the first real breath they had taken in a minute.

"I think this calls for a family hug," Kaelis said brightly as she stood up.

I shook my head, but it was useless. They were already moving.

The two of them crashed into me from the side, nearly knocking the air from my lungs. I stiffened in surprise, completely unprepared. It took a moment before I relaxed, but when I did, it felt good, warm, and comforting in a way I had not expected.

These were not strangers, but my sisters. And if something ever happened to them before I could hold them like this, it would break me in a way I wouldn't survive.

"Hey," Kiora hummed against my cheek. "He hasn't pushed us away yet."

"Yet," I mumbled. "And this doesn't mean I suddenly find either of you less annoying."

They both pulled back just enough to glare at me.

"Good," Kaelis said. "I feel the same."

Kiora nodded right behind her. "Yes, and can we eat now before everything gets cold?"

Kaelis murmured something under her breath, and the two began bickering as they went back to the table. I followed, my chest feeling lighter than it had in years.

When I sat back down, my eyes locked with the queen's as she looked at me across the table. Her eyes were still teary, but she wore a soft, motherly smile.

"Thank you," she mouthed.

I reached out and took her hand, giving it a small squeeze. Then I pulled back, but she wouldn't let me. She gave my hand a tug and shot me a desperate look, begging me not to let go yet.

I gave her a brief smile and stared back. It had been a long time since we had looked into each other's eyes like this, and we stayed that way until breakfast was finished.

Kaelis and Kiora were already off to their next destination while I ended up standing in the hall with the queen, her ladies lingering at a respectful distance.

I gave her a tight smile as I searched for the right way to greet her. The right words, the right tone, the right everything.

It still felt strange.

The queen sighed deeply, breaking the silence first. "How was Kayden this morning?"

A frown appeared on my face. "How did you know I went to see him?"

"Just a guess," she said simply.

I looked away for a moment, my jaw tightening. "Not much has changed," I said. It felt safer than saying more. There was nothing anyone could do about the situation, or even Baelor, and there would be no point in telling.

That's what we had all agreed on.

The queen's gaze stayed on me. "There's something more going on," she said. "But you're not telling me because you don't trust me, do you?"

There was a sudden instinct to shut it down because I didn't want to offend her, but she didn't lie, and she had said it herself. I wanted to trust her with everything. I really did, but unfortunately trust wasn't something I could just hand over to her anymore.

"You're right. I don't."

She didn't flinch. She just nodded once. "I understand."

Her honesty almost surprised me. "But do I need to be worried?" she asked, leaning closer.

"Do I need to protect my girls?"

I thought about Kayden, the raven, Baelor. Just about everything.

It would've been amazing if I could tell her she didn't need to worry, but that would've been a lie. "That's something I can't answer yet," I told her. "But when I do have the answer...I'll tell you first."

Her eyes lingered on me. "I'm sure we'll have a lot to discuss."

She looked uncertain, her feet glued to the floor. That's when I realized the only reason I hadn't left yet was because she hadn't said goodbye. She didn't know how to.

"We should do this more often," I said.

Her face lit up instantly. "We should."

It went silent again. I could see it in her eyes. She wanted to ask me to come with her. To walk together, maybe even talk some more. I wanted that too, but at the same time, I feared that too much of a good thing would break us again.

"I'll...see you," I said instead. "Bye, M—"

Her eyes softened before the words could leave my mouth, and I managed to stop myself just in time.

I had almost said it.

Mom...

The word pressed against my throat, but something held it back. "Y-Your Majesty," I exhaled, correcting myself.

The queen let out a slow breath. She didn't look angry, just a bit disappointed. But someone like her...I bet even she could understand that it just wouldn't be that easy.

I shot her one last smile, then turned and walked away. I could still feel her eyes on my back, but for the first time in a long while, it felt okay. I felt safe and protected because I knew she was watching me.

The rest of the day passed quickly. There were meetings, talks with the

elders, conversations I could barely keep up with because my mind simply wasn't there.

I waited and waited, and when the night finally came, it was time for the group to gather inside the library again.

Violet and her ladies were already there when I walked in. Only Dylan and Nate were missing.

"Kylan!" She looked up immediately, patting the seat beside her.

Her smile was wide, and my heart almost beat out of my chest as I looked into those happy eyes. Yesterday had not been easy for her. I knew she would have a hard time, but I didn't want to push her. I felt grateful for Nate's visit and for what he had been able to do, because it mattered.

Seeing that smile on her face mattered.

I took the seat beside her without thinking twice, and she didn't wait before wrapping her arms around my neck.

"Did you miss me?"

"Of course he missed you," Trinity laughed. "You're the only person who can really stand him."

"Good one," I chuckled. Dylan wasn't here yet, which meant someone had to take over his job of making unnecessary comments, and that someone was Trinity.

I focused on Violet and took her hand. I lifted it, then pressed a lingering kiss to her knuckles. There was no point in telling her how much I had missed her. Words simply weren't enough.

Her cheeks flushed as she leaned her head on my shoulder and looked up at me with those puppy eyes. "I did miss you," I whispered, giving her what she wanted. I brushed my index finger against her cheek, feeling her soft skin.

"You two are so cute!" Sora cooed from across the table. "Aren't they, Lian?"

"I'm shocked," I whispered, bringing my lips to Violet's ear. "I didn't think she was capable of saying anything useful."

Violet laughed and slapped my shoulder. "Be nice!" she hissed, her eyes flicking to Sora, who still smiled at us, completely unaware.

The door burst open, and Dylan and Nate walked in. Dylan seemed to be in some sort of trance, his eyes only on Trinity, while Nate could only look at me.

"Do you already know what happened to Kayden?" he asked immediately. "I asked my dad, but it looks like he hasn't heard anything."

Jack didn't know?

That came as a surprise.

It was no wonder Nate was curious. We had suddenly left for the East Wing yesterday, and he hadn't heard anything since.

Dylan frowned. "Did something happen to Kayden?"

The table went silent, and just like that, every pair of eyes turned to me. I glanced around, taking them in one by one.

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+25 Bonus

It wasn't just Nate, but all of them.

I exhaled slowly. "So where do I start?"



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