

Chapter 82

“What happened to her?” I asked Valens when I successfully got Celeste settled in. She was having a bath now so I went to grab her some clothes. She’d refused to speak when I asked her what was wrong. She’d cried the more I asked her if anything had happened. The only coherent words I got out of her were ‘I don’t want him!’”

I assumed it had something to do with Jabari but still couldn’t figure out how my mate fit into the mix.

“Did you know she is Jabari’s mate?” He asked in response to my question, raising his head from his computer.

“Yeah, Jabari told me,” I replied. He scowled.

“And you couldn’t tell me?” Why did it sound like he was accusing me?

“Why? It didn’t even occur to me that Jabari hadn’t told you.” I shrugged, pulling out a nightdress for my friend. It was bright, a sunflower yellow that I hoped would brighten her up a bit.

“He told me today. He was nervous about seeing her so I offered to go along with him.”

He sighed, pinching his nose. “You should have seen the way she looked at him.”

“How?” I could already imagine but I asked anyway.

“It was something of a mix of disgust, hatred, and fear. She looked at him as if he was an ugly monster who’d ruined her life. Then she just – ran off.” He looked appalled. “She ran into the streets and almost got run over. When we caught up with her, she was screaming and crying. We didn’t even say anything to her.” He looked upset as he spoke.

“Did Jabari try talking to her?”

“He did but ended up making things worse.” He scrubbed a palm down his face. “It was a hustle getting her here.”

“She has her reasons,” I said, wondering if I made things worse by asking Jabari to try talking to her. I hoped I hadn’t made things worse. I hadn’t seen Celeste break down like this before.

“Jabari is a good man. Why would she react to him like that?” I shrugged as I escaped from his unending questions.

When I got back to Celeste’s room, she was shivering, a towel wrapped around her. She took the pajamas from me without a word.

After putting them on, she crawled into bed and under the covers.

“Will you eat at the dining or should I bring dinner up?” I asked when she disappeared under the covers.

“I’m not hungry,” she answered after a second of silence.

“Don’t play with me. You haven’t eaten and you will eat. I’m only asking if you’ll eat here or at the dining,” I said.

She was silent for a long time after that. The covers started to shake and I knew she was crying again. I approached her but she emerged slowly from underneath the covers, her eyes red and puffy.

“Why doesn’t anyone care what I want?” Her voice broke as did my heart.

“Please don’t say that.” I got into bed and sat next to her, my shoulder brushing hers. “I care what you want. We all do.”

“But I don’t want him. I don’t want him!” Her voice rose, hysteria setting in. I put a hand around her shoulders.

“And it’s okay not to want him. No one would dare force you to be with someone you don’t want to be with, mate or not.”

“Even the goddess didn’t care. She just – gave me the last person I would ever want. I – and he’s the Beta while I’m just the girl from a bad family. He’s above me. How can I say no? What if- what if -“

“No, no what if’s. Jabari is the last person to force someone to mate and even if he were, I’m above him. I would never let that happen,” I assured her.

“You – and the Alpha –

“Would be stupid to say otherwise,” I cut off her sentence. “You don’t have to be with him if you don’t want to. It’s as simple as that.”

“It can’t be,” she countered. “I want it to – I want to believe you but – my life is ruined.”

She smacked her head against the headboard with the force with which she leaned back.

“You’ve been here for me all along. I won’t leave you to deal with this on your own. If you don’t want to be with him, then you don’t have to,” I said, squeezing her hand.

“But don’t you see – He’s the Beta. How can I continue in this pack with him? Will I be forced to leave? I’ve been here all my life. I don’t want to leave!”

“No one is making you leave. You’re thinking too far. Take a breathe, babe.” She breathed in deeply and then paused. Then she started to

suffocate. “Let it out.” Horror froze my b***d when I saw her turn purple.

I’d never seen Celeste break down like this before. I’d never seen her – I’d never seen her lose herself like this and it made me realize how much I’d been wrong about her in the past. Even as her best friend, I’d always thought she didn’t have any problems. She had a family and she had love so she had no struggles in life. She didn’t have my struggles but she had hers and I felt like an awful person for not thinking about that till now.

“My life is over.” She let out a breath, her head falling to my shoulders. We stayed in that position for a while, with me trying to convince her that she wasn’t losing her life because she was mated to someone she didn’t want.

“Do you think I’m overreacting?” She asked after a while. “I’m being unreasonable, aren’t I?”

She raised her head with a sniff.

“No, you aren’t overreacting. You’re feeling cornered and that’s perfectly understandable seeing as you’ve been predestined to someone you don’t want without any foreseeable way out.”

“I could just reject him,” she said but I knew she knew that wouldn’t work.

“He would never accept your rejection,” I told her, not wanting to lie. “He has waited for you for years,” I added.

“He’s a good man.” It was exactly what Valens said a short while ago but I didn’t know if I was supposed to be agreeing with her. “But I don’t want him.”

“And that’s perfectly fine,” I assured her yet again.

“Is it, though? The goddess gave him to me.

He's supposed to be the best person for me," she looked more miserable as she said that.

"What if rejecting him turns out to be the worst thing I ever do? I've waited for my mate for a while too, you know?" Her eyes were b***d red when she said that.

"If you don't want him, then you don't have to be with him but if it's trauma that you haven't dealt with stopping you, then we will get you help, I promise." She looked away from me.

"I know he is a good man. He is dedicated to his duty and will never compromise his honor," she sounded like she'd said this to herself countless times, as if she was trying to convince someone, perhaps the part of her that didn't see a reason to be with Jabari, "I don't – I don't know what to do."

"Celeste, what did your parents do when Mr. Vann abused you?" Her hands shivered and she clasped them together. I put my hand on them, squeezing.

"They- Well, they made him apologize to me, then the Alpha had him whipped and he was subsequently banished from the pack with his teaching license revoked."

"What did they do for you?" I emphasized the last part.

"I got to choose what they used in whipping him and – and how many stokes he got. My mum got me a doll and my father got me some device – it was to use to defend myself in the future."

"How often did you get to speak about it?"

"We went to the oracle and I got to vent to the goddess." I gawked at her.

"And what did the goddess say?" I asked, incredulous.

"What? She only speaks to her oracles. She said nothing."

“In a nutshell, you never got help,” I concluded.

“How do you feel when you see Jabari?”

“He makes my skin crawl,” she said without her hesitation. “He looks too much like Mr. Vann. I try to tell myself that he’s nothing like that but – I – they look the same.” She buried her face in her palms, letting out a small scream.

“Help me, Aysel. I’m confused.”