

20

She was going to kill him, very painfully and slowly as possible. The idiot had jumped! Worse he'd made her do it too! Her stomach was lodged up in her chest as they plummeted toward the water. Eric held her impossibly tighter against his chest as they hit the water. When they sunk beneath the surface of the water, Eric covered her mouth with his own. Kicking his feet, he shoved them back up to the surface.

The moment her head broke the surface, Rebecca jerked her face away from his. Sputtering; she shoved at the wet curtain of hair that blinded her. "You jerk!" she shrieked. Hitting his chest with a loud slap, she demanded, "Let me go!"

Smirking, Eric inclined his head to the side as if in thought. A second later, he carelessly shrugged his wide shoulders. "Alright." With a pause, he dropped his arms around her, sending her tumbling back beneath the water.

Swimming back up, she splashed in anger at Eric's smirking face. In retaliation, Eric sent a wave of water back her. Wiping away the water from her face, she scowled at him. "Stop it."

Turning her back on him, Rebecca began swimming toward the massive waterfall, intending to ignore the big jerk. A larger wave of water hit her back a moment later, startling her. Stopping, she turned to glare at Eric, but he was nowhere to be seen. Chills of awareness, inched up her spine. Where was he?

Like a shark, Eric swam up to her unseen from beneath the surface. She gasped in surprise as two hands gripped her above her knees. Jerking her legs apart, Eric rose to the surface, pulling her against his straining cock. Wrapping her legs around his waist, he moved his hands to her buttocks, gripping them and lifting her out of the water.

Gripping her chin between his forefinger and thumb, he held her still as he reached up and claimed her mouth. With her heart pounded from the excitement, she panted into his mouth, returning his kiss. Her arms wrapped around his neck, holding him close as she took over the kiss with fevered eagerness. Breaking away, out of breath, Eric gazed up at her with heavy lidded eyes.

"It would seem I've caught you."

Her wet curtain of hair fell in twisted strands around her face as she bent towards his lips. "What do you intend to do then?" she inquired with a teasing grin, her ire at his little stunt nearly forgotten.

“Not have sex with you; that for sure.” He whispered, pulling away from her.

Surprised at his words, Rebecca drew back. “What do you mean?” when had a woman ever, ever heard those words from a lover? “You don’t want to?”

Smiling up at her like he stared up at her like she was the most precious thing in the world to him. With wonder shining in his eyes, he shook his head. “No. I plan to make love to you, Rebecca. Because that’s what this is and will be for me from now on. I love you and I hate that I wasted so much time to realize it. If I am lucky, maybe a day will come when you understand how precious you are to me and how my life wouldn’t be fucking right without you.”

Rebecca’s arms tightened around his neck as tears misted her eyes. Biting down on her bottom lip, she fought to keep from crying with joy. He loved her? This was what she wanted. What she had been waiting for. It was a sign. Eric would choose her. At this realization, she felt like her heart would explode.

I’m done for...

Seeing her watering eyes, the look of pure, unyielding love melted from Eric’s face to be replaced with confusion and disappointment. “Oh hell; I fucked this up didn’t I? I told you I’m not good at this type of thing. Don’t cry. I’m sorry.” He said, as he frantically attempted to comfort her.

Leaning away from him, she shook her head at his words. “Eric, you couldn’t have said a more perfect thing.” Leaning down, she covered her lips with his. Her lips moved against his in a gentle caress as a single tear of happiness trailed down her cheek. Pulling away, when they both were gasping for air, she pressed her forehead against his. In a teasing whisper, she asked, “Though I have to wonder how long you stood in front of a mirror practicing that speech of yours.”

Pulling back, Eric scowled at her. “I should make you eat those words.” He whispered in a dark threat.

“You could.” she nodded with a mock look of musing. “Or you could propose a sonnet...”

“That’s it!” he exclaimed with a grin. Wrapping one arm around her back, he held her to him as his other hand rose to tickle mercilessly at her stomach. Squealing with

laughter she squirmed against his hard body. "Take it back or that's the last time I try to be romantic for your ungrateful self."

Gasping for air when he stopped tickling her, she reached out to cup the edge of his jaw, with a serious look, she shook her head. "I don't need romance, Eric. All I want is you."

Leaning his face into her palm, he shrugged his shoulders with a sigh. "Then you have me, Rebecca."

* ~ * ~ *

Resting her head against Eric's warm chest, Rebecca sighed with contentment as she watched the waterfall move like a curtain of liquid silk to the side of them. When Eric had said he intended to make love to her instead of just taking her, she now knew that he meant it. Never before had she felt so cared for, so loved. His every kiss and touch had been gentle, loving her with slow and savoring thrusts of his body. It wasn't until a little while ago he'd coaxed her to follow him beneath the waterfall into the small cave behind it. There they lay, reclining against the smooth silver rocks that rose out of the bowl shaped cave to form the high walls and ceilinged cave.

Idly, Eric rubbed his hand up and down her back as she curled against his side, the cool water gently lapping up to their collarbones. "What are you thinking?" he asked, gently squeezing her tighter against his side.

Surprised by his sudden question, Rebecca blinked, pulling her eyes from the sight of the waterfall to look up at him. Smiling, she shrugged her shoulders. "I think we're going to have to return soon."

Eric scoffed. "Not likely. I'm enjoying this too much."

Rolling her eyes, she settled her head against his shoulder once more. "Your mother can't be expected to watch Emma and Travis forever, Eric. I should be there to help." She pointed out.

Drawing his head back to look down at her, Eric raised a mocking eyebrow at her statement. "I thought I fired you."

She nodded. "You did. I'll bill you later." She replied with a smug look.

For several minutes Eric didn't say anything. Sighing loudly, he whispered. "You're not planning on trying to run again, are you?"

Pursing her lips at the thought, she shook her head. "No. I don't plan on running again."

From what Damon had said; running would do her no good. If they'd been attacked because others knew her secret or even if it was retaliation against Eric, it wouldn't matter. She'd be found no matter where she went. Here; amongst the strength of Eric's pack, she was safe—for now.

After Eric's earlier words she was convinced that she could trust him to protect her, to choose her when it came down to it. Her last excuse for not telling him was gone. She only wished that she felt braver in that moment.

"Why did you before?" Eric's hesitant question cut through the silence like a blade. "Was it me? Had I scared you or something? You just seemed to want to get away from me constantly." His voice was filled with doubt and concern, everything that wasn't him. She knew now was the time to come clean.

"I tried to run because it's what I'm used to doing, Eric. Ever since my parents were killed, I've lived in fear for so long. I suppose its second nature to me to run when I get too close to someone."

"There's more to the story of your parents and your scars; isn't there?" he asked, suspicion heavy in his voice.

She nodded. Pressing her lips together, she tried to will her pounding heart to slow as she fought off the memories of that night. Blinking against unshed tears, she replied in a shaking voice. "Y-Yes,"

Eric looked down at her with such heartbreak and concern. It warmed her heart to see those emotions swirling deep in his blue eyes. Lifting his other arm out of the water, he cupped her face tenderly, leaving small, cool water dripping over them both. "You can trust me, Rebecca. I would never let anything hurt you."

She gave a watery smile as she recalled his earlier words, "I love you and I hate that I wasted so much time to realize it. If I am lucky, maybe a day will come when you understand how precious you are to me and how my life wouldn't be fucking right without you."

It was time.

Taking a deep breath, she steeled herself for what she was about to do and what his reaction to her long played out deception would be. “The night my parents were killed...was the same night I was attacked but it wasn’t...” she choked back a shutter of breath as she tried to stay calm enough to speak. Taking a deep gulp of air as tears spilled over her cheeks, she tried to finish telling him. “It wasn’t—”

Pressing a finger against her lips, Eric silenced her. “Stop.” He shook his head with a pain filled expression. “I don’t want to see you cry.”

“Eric...you don’t understand.” She began, only to be cut off once more.

“I understand more than you know.”

Wiping impatiently at her tears, she shook her head. “I want to tell you, Eric.”

“And you will; when you are ready. I understand more than anyone how a painful memory can change you and still inflict pain even years later.” Pausing he inhaled deeply before continuing. “For me it was Beth or at least the memory of her that has plagued me.”

“Beth?”

“Emma and Travis’s mother. She was my...wife.”

Needing distance from the memory of the woman that held a place in Eric’s heart, Rebecca sat up, pulling out of his arms. Not noticing her when she pulled away, he tangled his hand with hers before he began telling her his most guarded secret.

“My life hasn’t always been as it is, Rebecca. I had to fight; literally, for everything I have now. With everything I gained, I inherited...responsibilities and expectations. One of those was to get married young.” He paused, meeting her eyes.

“You had an arranged marriage?” Rebecca didn’t doubt that Eric was downplaying the parts about his shifter heritage as he told her, but she was too curious to know what had happened to Emma and Travis’s mother to stop him.

Shrugging his shoulders with a hesitant look, he nodded. “I guess you could call it that. Beth and I had been best friends ever since we were children. Our families were close; I suppose it made sense at the time for us to get married.”

“Did you love her?” she winced when the words fell out of her mouth. Did she really want to know the answer to that? Please say no...

“I had hoped we would in time or at least something close to love, but no; I didn’t.”

“What happened to her?”

“For a time we were happy; or at least I thought we were.” He finished with a cynical laugh. “We shared the typical husband and wife rituals; sharing meals, going on outing together, holding hands, and sleeping together. At the time it didn’t seem to matter that we didn’t love each other the way people should. A year after our marriage, Emma and Travis came along.” He smiled faintly as he seemed to replay the memory in his mind. “I never felt so happy in my life as when I first stood over their cradle and saw them for the first time. I had a family and I knew then that I would never want anything else.” His smile on his lips faded into a hard line. A muscle along his jaw ticked as his voice turned cold and distant. “I was so happy that I blinded myself to what was happening in front of my face. I came home one night to Emma and Travis screaming. It was a heart tearing cry to hear from your children. Rushing to their nursery, I found them in the dark inside their cradles; Beth had always left a light on in the far corner. I don’t know how long they had been alone until I found them. Beth was nowhere to be seen. It wasn’t until I discovered that all her belongings were missing that I saw the truth. She left me and abandoned Emma and Travis.”

“Oh Eric.” Rebecca gasped out, her hand covering her mouth.

Her chest filled with a physical ache at the thought of coming home to what Eric had. It was no wonder he never spoke of Emma and Travis’s mother. Why would he? The person that should have been his partner, his friend, his lover; left him and their children without a word.

“Did you ever find her? Did she ever contact you?”

“No.” he shook his head. “I didn’t look for her and she didn’t contact me. In truth; I don’t know where she is or why she left. I can only assume that she no longer wished to be bound to me.”

“But for her to just leave like that and without her children? I don’t understand it.”

“Even if she’d told me, I never would have been separated from my children.” His eyes locked on hers. “Just as I could never let you go.”

“Eric—”

“Listen to me,” he interrupted again. “I am not telling you this to garner pity or pressure you into anything with me. There are secrets more dark and deadly than what I have just told you. In time; I will tell you everything, just as I trust you will. All I ask, Rebecca, is that you give me a chance to win your love. I will not force you to be with me if you don’t wish to, but if there is a chance that you feel anything for me. Give me one chance to be the man you need in your life.”

“What happened to the man that said he wasn’t a romantic?” she asked dryly with a teasing smile. Inside her mind she was soaring! So many emotions swelled up in her chest and overflowed. Just as Eric said he loved her, she knew that she was already half way in love with him. She wanted to be with him in every possible sense of the word. It was only her fear of his pack that kept her from throwing herself at him.

Flashing an irritated look, he tugged her across his body, sending a wave toward the curtain of water to his right. When she laid flat against his front, he narrowed his eyes at her. “Most women would be swooning at such words; not making fun of them.”

She inclined her head mockingly. “True, but most women haven’t been around you like I have.” Serious now, she reached out to brush back the wet strands of his hair that fell forward. “I don’t need you to say romantic things for me, Eric. All I want—all I need, is you. I...” she gulped as she gathered her courage. “I love you too, Eric.”

Eric didn’t seem happy at her declaration. Instead he looked bewildered. Shaking his head as his brows lowered over his eyes, he asked. “How can you be sure of this so soon? Just days ago you were fighting against giving yourself to me and then running from me.”

She shook her head, pressing a hand over his heart. “I was never running from you, Eric. Like you said; we both have secrets and I will tell you all of mine. But just as you’ve been holding yourself back from me, I’ve been doing the same. I want to be with you, to stay with you. If you will have me and accept who I am.”

Accept me as the human that your kind hate and would kill in an instant. She said silently to herself.

She didn’t know what she was doing saying all this to him; all she knew was that she was tired. Tired of running from what she wanted. She’d been drawn to Eric from the beginning; even when she was terrified of him. After he’d opened his heart to her by telling her about Beth, about how a woman he trusted and treasured left him, she

knew she wanted him to know that it was possible to be different. Between them, it would be.

Her answer was Eric tugging her higher up his chest. When her naked breasts were pressed against his collar bone, he seized her mouth in a claiming kiss. Holding her face, he poured his very essence into that kiss. Sighing against his mouth, she fisted her hands in his wet hair. Tomorrow she would tell him. Even if she had to gag him so that he couldn't stop her; she would tell him and she would pray that his love for her would only burn brighter as hers did for him. For the first time in years, she wasn't afraid of telling her secret.

She was ready.

She was ready to be free...with him.