

Chapter 244

Dayton wandered through the retreat his strength almost fully restored. Freya was gone when he woke up and for a moment he had panicked, thinking she had left for good but then he'd spied her cell phone on the table, her papers still scattered over it. The feeling of relief that had swept over him had been so intense he'd almost sunk to his knees.

His emotions frightened him with their intensity. He's gone from hating Freya to knowing she was becoming vitally important to him, a part of his soul just as surely as Faith had been. If anything happened to her, if she left him as Faith had, he didn't think he would be able to stand that agony again. And it frightened him.

His wolf growled in irritation and he shook himself slightly, wandering towards the door to Freya's room. Taking a deep breath he opened it and stepped fully into her personal, private showing of his artwork.

She had opened up to him but he felt he still needed to learn about her, to understand what drove her. He could only capture her heart if he knew how to reach it. He knew instinctively it was something very hard to do. His mate had hidden inside herself for so long; it wouldn't be an easy task to tempt her back out again.

He examined the art on the wall with an objective eye. He could remember painting every piece, the darkness inside him each time, driving him incessantly until he was exhausted and had nothing left to put into them. *©wW.n.vEIW@Rm.Com*

He'd used to paint the forest, draw charcoal portraits of his family and the Bryants. He'd stopped painting properly when all the joy had gone out of his life. It had all become about abstracts, fury and violent brush strokes, something that appealed to Freya. *4W.W.n0(v)el(©)TML.c(©)©*

He was sitting on the bed, staring at the paintings when Freya returned, walking silently down the hallway towards him. He'd left the door open so she would know he was in her room. He had no intention of sneaking around behind her back.

He turned to watch her as she reached the doorway. Her eyes were shuttered, her emotions hiding behind the serene mask she donned so easily. His breath caught as he looked at her exquisite face. She took his breath away with each glance in her direction.

He knew he was totally lost to her. He didn't fight it, didn't want to. So many years of being alone was coming to an end. While he feared it on some levels, he welcomed it on others. He wanted to live again, to be free to laugh once more.

"You were in Japan," he smiled softly, turning back to the paintings in front of him. "It was my best showing. I was surprised I sold so many paintings that week. I can see why now."

She stepped into the room and moved silently to sit beside him. "I didn't see you there. I had no idea I was buying wolf art." The latter was said in a derisive tone.

"Would it have stopped you buying them if you'd known?" He was curious to know how deep her prejudice ran for his kind. He knew she was prejudiced; she'd done little to hide that fact from him when they'd first met.

She was silent for a long moment and then she turned to look at him. "No," she whispered, her mask slipping ever so slightly. "Each one called to me. I looked at them and I thought the artist was painting my soul. It was as if you'd reached inside me and pulled away all my barriers." Her voice faltered and she turned away again.

"My favourite one was Blood. That one represented me as none of the others did."

Dayton watched a tear trail down her cheek and he couldn't stop himself from reaching up and catching the teardrop on his finger.

"Was your favourite?" He remembered painting it as if it were only yesterday. He had done so on the first anniversary of Faith's death. It had taken him decades to finally bring himself to show it. A part of him had been relieved when it had sold.

"I destroyed it." Another tear fell as she whispered her admission. "It hung above my fireplace at home for years. After that night in the gallery...I knew I'd crossed the line. Nors came to the house. He was furious with me. He had every right to be, just as you did. I destroyed the house. And then I destroyed me."

His heart broke at the raw pain in her voice. He didn't care about the painting, she could destroy every single painting in this room and he wouldn't care. His arms went around her and he pulled her close to him, leaning her head on his shoulder.

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"It doesn't matter. None of it matters any more, Freya. No one can change the past, we can only move on and create something better. I'm finally ready to do that. Are you?"

Freya leaned against Dayton, savouring the warmth of his arms around her, the gentleness in his voice. It felt like he was asking her something important, that it truly mattered to him that she was willing to take a chance at life.

She had caused him so much pain, destroyed his work and he didn't condemn her for it. It was wrong to let him ease her guilt but she couldn't pull away from him.

"I'm scared," she whispered, her voice breaking. "What if I fail, Dayton? I tried so hard for Nors and Ashleigh and I still failed them. What if I'm just incapable of being the kind of person you're asking me to be?"

"What if you can be?" he countered; his voice hoarse as her pain almost drove him to his knees. "What if you can be better than you've ever dared to hope? You're a fighter, Freya. You have to be or you'd never have survived as long as you have. You don't have to try alone. I'll be with you every step of the way if you let me."

She stilled in his arms, a sharp intake of breath catching her off guard, almost making her choke with its suddenness. She raised her head to look at him, confusion on her face. "Why would you want to?"

His answer was to kiss her. He couldn't stand seeing her pain, hearing it in her voice. He needed to make it go away so he parted her lips gently with his and tasted of her sweetness. His heart soared as she surrendered immediately, accepting his mouth against hers as if he had a right to touch her like this. He knew he did but he didn't think she knew it yet.

Dayton finally pulled back, staring into her eyes. His hand touched the side of her neck lightly, gently brushing over the unblemished skin that had bled the day before. His gaze never wavered from hers.

"Maybe it's my way of asking your forgiveness?"

She knew what he was referring to and she was surprised at the regret she read in his eyes. He held himself accountable for that?

"No forgiveness is required," she answered quietly. "You did not hurt me and it healed instantly."

"I wanted to kill you, Freya." It was a tortured admission, full of self-loathing.

She shouldn't laugh but she did; a soft tinkling sound that filled the depressing room with light.

"Well, you make a terrible assassin then, Dayton. A good one doesn't change his throw at the last moment; he goes right for the target. And he doesn't forget that Ancients are not ordinary vampires. Even if you had gone for my throat that little knife wouldn't have slowed me down any. I was perfectly capable of protecting myself the entire time had I so wished to." *Ww©.ñoveI(w)@Rm.Com*