

Chapter 115

I don't know how late it was when Vale stumbled back into the bedroom but I was already laying in bed. He slipped into the bed but curled up on his side, making sure to keep a canyon between us. Flipping over so I was facing the balcony doors, I laid there for a while before finally getting up. It was still dark and I took a pack of cigarettes out of my drawer and sat on the balcony, smoking as I watched the sun rise.

Part of me wished I hadn't stormed out of there. I would have liked to listen to what Auri had to say and see what other questions we were able to get out of her. Still though, Vale was way out of line. Chuckling, I wondered how much time I would spend in the cell. I'd built them myself so I knew they really weren't terrible. How to explain it to Reagan and Rowan though. That would be a tough one. Maybe just that I was going to be gone for a little bit for work.

Letting out a puff of smoke, I sighed. The feelings and the look Vale gave me was exactly what I was expecting. What I wasn't expecting to feel was a lack of regret. It wasn't just that I was justifying my actions but I genuinely knew how Vale would react if I'd told him Estel was Auri. It wouldn't have gone well. Far worse than it had last night and he would have been chasing her to the ends of the earth after getting a whiff.

"Come back to bed, Ezekiel."

My eyes widened and I looked into the room. Vale was still laying on the bed, his back to me but I knew he was the one that said it.

"Go back to sleep, Vale."

Instead, he sat up and turned to me. His face was hard but I could see the dark circles under his eyes. Slowly, Vale slipped out of bed and walked around the bed to the balcony with me. Surprise filled me as I watched him grab a cigarette and light it, leaning against the balcony railing. After a couple of puffs, he sighed.

"This is so fucked up."

I chuckled. "It always has been. We've just been forging ahead for so long that we chose to ignore just how bad everything has gotten."

He sighed. "Hector kicked my ass after you left."

My lips thinned as I tried not to smile.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I shouldn't even had thought it. You've shown me and I've seen the aftermath of what Oran did to you. I just...I don't see that in my mother. She looks perfectly fine."

"Do I look perfectly fine?"

Vale's head tilted to see me but I took a deep breath and

leaned further into the chair. "What?"

"I mean, just looking at me, you could never tell. You've felt my emotions, been there when I was falling apart, and you've seen my memories. Without all of that though, would you know? I don't have physical marks. I don't flinch anymore. As much as I try not to let what happen affect who I am, it has fundamentally changed me but you would never know by looking at me." Moving my head to look Vale in the eyes, I gave him a soft smile before continuing.

"If anything, I think Auri might feel even more pain than before. I mean, yeah, she's healed but she's also probably had to go through the fact that she's changed. How she has coped with everything, everything she's had to do and learn, all the changes she's had to make because of her scars or eyes or voice; they are gone. Sure, she's probably happy to have her voice back, the use of her eyes...for the first time in her entire life, but imagine the thoughts going through her head after that."

Vale shook his head. "It doesn't matter. She isn't my mother."

I shook my head and sighed again. "She is. She always will be. That will never change. No matter how much you try to push her away."

"I'm not trying to..."

"You are, Vale. You're trying to protect your heart against her

just up and leaving again. But Auri will always be your mother. She loves you. She's here because she knows you need help now. Something has happened that may be beyond your ability to fix. Something you need to do together."

Vale snorted. "I could never trust her."

"Can you trust me?"

He was quiet for a while, smoking as he looked out over the sea. My heart hammered in my chest as I waited for him to answer my question. After a moment, he finally ran his hands through his hair. Vale turned to me, and moved to crouch in front of the chair.

"I do. I'm still so angry and so frustrated with you. I'm also hurt but I understand. I understand that you're probably right that all of our progress would have been lost."

I nodded. "I didn't feel good about it. I just needed you to be focused. I knew Auri would come back. I knew there would be a time we would reach a wall and she would come to tear it down. For the moment, you couldn't be trying to follow her just to try and fight her."

His head leaned forward and I reached out, holding his head in my hands. Kissing the top of his head, I closed my eyes and just breathed in his scent. The smell of fresh baked bread and a hint of basil. It would never not smell like the most wonderful thing on the planet.

"What did you guys talk about when I left?"

Vale chuckled. "Nothing. Hector lunged over the table and beat the shit out of me. But the time the dust settled, Auri wasn't even in the room anymore. Pretty sure she just jumped off the balcony."

My eyes widened. "You're serious?"

"Yeah. Hector did say that they would be by in the morning. Apparently, they are bringing all the kids too. I set up Dad and Týr in the guest rooms here."

"Alright. Well, I guess we will hear what they have to say in the morning. Are the kids back?"

Vale nodded. "I checked in on them when I walked in. Both are asleep but somehow Rowan made his way into Reagan's bed again."

I chuckled. "So same old, same old."

"Come back to bed? I can still feel the alcohol messing with my head. I'm going to need a little longer to sleep it off."

Nodding, I got up and followed him back inside. His arms wrapped around me and I buried my head in his shoulder. I cried out and laughed as Vale forced the both of us to fall into bed. Stuck in his embrace, he rolled us once to be in the center of the bed. Vale nuzzled into my shoulder and I wrapped my hands around his waist.

"This is not conducive to sleeping."

He chuckled. "Just...give me a minute."

I smiled. "I've given you my lifetime, Vale. You can have however you want."

The next thing I heard was his steady breathing and I closed my eyes, listening to it as I fell asleep as well.

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I stood out back with a mug of coffee in my hands. The chaos that I was witnessing on our lawn was laughable. Auri, Hector, and Morgan all had shown up about seven in the morning with all their kids. It was like a clown car watching the kids come out of the two SUV's they brought. Now, though, the commotion had woken up Rowan and Reagan who had now joined the chaos that I was looking at. Auri and Hector were in the center of it, trying to catch kids and steal some kind of object they were holding. Laughter and screams filled the air and I was surprised that anyone could sleep through it.

A hand on my shoulder made me peel my eyes away from the game and looked up at Morgan. He was smiling, his own mug of coffee in his hands.

"It's good to see you. We missed you."

"You too. Between my businesses, requests from Auri and the grandkids, I had my hands full. Time tends to slip away a

little more as a vampire despite me trying to ground myself in the werewolf ways." He chuckled to himself. "Rowan and Reagan have really grown. You've done an amazing job."

I shrugged, looking back at my two pups. "We try. I always feel like we could do better but what parent doesn't feel like that."

"I know what you mean."

Looking up at Morgan, I followed his gaze and I knew he was looking at Auri. He wasn't her biological parent but I knew he took much of the responsibility of her since she was young. Hector scooped three kids of and carted them towards us. All of them were laughing as he dropped them on the grass. He was coming up to the deck where Morgan and I were.

"Care for a spar, Zeke?"

My eyes narrowed as I looked over Hector. "You kidding? You'd pummel me, Hector. I've kept up mostly with my training but you look even more beastly than before."

He threw his head back and laughed. "Not really. I'll give myself some handicaps if you're worried about it."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, because that will make me feel better."

Morgan elbowed me. "Better than facing off against Auri."

"He only says that because he can't be Auri anymore."

Hector waggled his eyebrows at Morgan.

My mouth dropped open. "But...how? I thought..."

"A lot has happened. Something she may go into later, but she is stronger now than she ever was. No one could stand in her way." It sounded like a compliment but the look on Morgan's face said otherwise.

"Come on, Zeke. Let's have at it. For old times sake."

Sighing, I placed my coffee mug on the table and rolled my shoulders. "Fine, old man. Let's have a go."

Hector smirked and shook his head. "You're going to regret calling me that."

"Yeah, yeah. Just bring it."

Auri was smirking as she ushered the kids out of the way. They all sat and watched on the grass, whereas Auri was holding one of her kiddos, the smallest one, in her arms.

"Ready?"

I took a deep breath and nodded, smiling, as I looked at Hector. It was like old times and I hoped I learned a thing or two since we last spared.

"Let's do this."