

Chapter 210

Dayton was surprised to see Ashleigh talking with Rafe in the main hallway as he headed downstairs following the heavenly scent of breakfast. Cedar had mentioned that she didn't stay at the compound though she visited often. He wondered if it had something to do with Freya and the meeting that had occurred the night before.

The little blonde looked up as he approached, emotion swirling in her big brown eyes as she watched him while biting her bottom lip. He couldn't quite work out what it was but he had a feeling it wasn't good.

The urge to protect her hit him like a sledgehammer. His Beta instincts were kicking in almost continuously since he'd met the children in the forest. It was disconcerting but not something he could easily push away. He had been born to be a Beta, it was in his blood.

Rafe bent his head and said something to her before she nodded and he headed off into the dining room leaving them alone.

"Ashleigh."

She gave him a sad smile. "Dayton," she greeted him quietly, her tone subdued. She appeared to be trying to think of what to say, finally taking a deep breath. "Will you walk with me before breakfast?"

He considered it for a moment and then nodded his head, following her out of the Alpha's house. She obviously wanted to talk in private. He just wasn't sure if he was ready to listen to what she had to say. But she was David's sister and his friend would have wanted him to be there for her if something was troubling her. Which it was very plain to see something was.

They walked a little way into the forest until they came to a trickling stream with some large flat rocks close to the edge. Ashleigh climbed onto the rocks and sat down. Dayton joined her and waited for her to speak.

"This is my fault," she finally said in a quiet voice, staring down into the running water. "If I hadn't come to the gallery then Freya would never have known about you. I'm sorry."

She had a point but he didn't hold the other woman's actions against her. Taking a deep breath, he let the early morning sunshine dance across his face, warming him up a little inside. "You're not responsible for her actions," he sighed. "We're only responsible for the decisions we make, Ashleigh. We can't control other people."

"But we can help them when they need it," she whispered, pain in her voice. "If we know they need our help. I wanted to help you, Dayton. I wanted you to come home so I could do something for David even though he's no longer here. Instead I made things a hundred times worse." There was such misery in her voice that he had to alleviate it somehow.

"You did get me back into the pack," he commented a little dryly. "Probably not how you intended to do it but you achieved something no one else ever managed to do." He wanted to take away her guilt. He could see it eating her up inside.www.novelworm.com

She had a good soul and he knew she must have been through hell losing her family. He had heard the vampires kidnapped her too, years ago. He could only imagine what they had done to her but she was strong because she had survived it.

She turned to look at him and her eyes held such pain in them that he wanted to touch her, comfort her, but he held himself still.

"I brought you home but I lost Freya by doing so," she said. "I broke my mate's heart because I couldn't leave well alone. All he's ever done is love me and all I ever do is bring him pain and suffering. He's been very unlucky with the women he's chosen to love, first Freya and now me. We're no good for him and yet he loves us unconditionally."

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Dayton knew the mate bond, knew that no man would ever regret loving this tender hearted woman at his side. He reached for her, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and pulling her hesitantly to his side. It felt strange touching someone, reaching out to another person who needed his comfort, but it felt right too.

"I'm sure your mate doesn't feel anything but joy having you in his life, Ashleigh," he said soothingly. He asked the question he didn't want to ask but knew he needed the answer to. "You said you've lost Freya?"

Ashleigh pulled away from him, rising to her feet and staring into the thick wooded forest surrounding them. Rafe had said it was okay to tell Dayton what had happened. Taking a deep breath she looked down at the wounded man sitting on the rock.

"She's gone. Dayton. We don't know where or if we'll ever see her again. Nors was angry with her about what happened. We didn't know how fragile she was because she hid it so well. Nors...he's almost certain that Freya has gone to seek a way to end her life." A muffled sob escaped her and she looked away from him again.www.novelworm.com

"I know what she did was wrong," she whispered. "I know she hurt you but she was trying so hard. She wanted to belong so badly but she just didn't know how to. I don't know why she fixated on you or what it was about you that pushed her over the edge but something did. And now she's gone and Nors' heart is breaking and I don't know how to fix it."

A frown crossed his face at her words. Part of him felt a moment's satisfaction that the vampire was hurting so much but another part of him couldn't bear to see and hear Ashleigh's pain. She loved Freya Eriksson and it hurt her that she had lost her. How anyone could love the cold-hearted vampire he had no idea, but she must have had some good qualities if the little blonde and her mate did.

"Maybe she'll come back," he finally said picking up a loose pebble and throwing it into the trickling water. "If she stays away from me I won't make an issue out of what happened. Not for her sake but for yours, Ashleigh. You've lost so much already. I don't want to be responsible for you losing anyone else."

Ashleigh wiped at her face jumping down from the rock to stand before him. "I don't think she's ever coming back," she admitted. "I can't tell Nors that because it would break his heart even more. He needs to believe that she will, that when she does everything will be just fine."

She gave him another sad smile and then tentatively reached out and touched the side of his face. He let her, knowing she needed the comfort of touch at that moment.

"One day I'd like to talk about David with you, about my family. I hope we can do that. Not now, when your own pain is still so raw, but maybe one day soon."

He saw such yearning in her eyes, the need to connect with someone who knew her family and had been part of them. He felt his own pain and sadness at losing such a wonderful family build up inside him, but he pushed it down and placed his hand over hers on his cheek. "I'd like that," he smiled gently.

"Welcome home, Dayton," she said softly, the sad smile still gracing her face as she turned and headed back to the house.

He stayed on the rock, digesting what she'd told him. Freya Eriksson was gone. There was no need for him and Rayne to remain at the compound. The threat was no more. He should have felt glad about that but he didn't. Ashleigh's pain ripped at him.

He found it strange that she could affect him when he didn't even know her, and yet she did. She was the last surviving member of a family who had taken him into their hearts and welcomed him as their own. His need to protect her was overwhelming him on all levels.

Dayton felt as if he was on the verge of an emotional meltdown. It was all too much, too soon. Everyone was reaching out to him, offering love and support. He didn't deserve it, not after he'd hurt his family so much. Just as Freya was hurting her family right now. The thought made him snort out a harsh laugh. If Ashleigh's words were true then he had more in common with the missing vampire than he'd known.

They were both outsiders looking in, both hurting because of their past, neither of them feeling that they deserved the unwavering love and support of their friends and family. He hated having anything in common with the woman who had taken Faith from him. He didn't want to acknowledge any kind of empathy with her, have any kind of understanding of what she may be going through right now. He wanted her to burn in hell for the rest of her very long life.

'Nors...he's almost certain that Freya has gone to seek a way to end her life.'

Ashleigh's words echoed in his head and his wolf let out a vicious snarl catching him completely off guard. He subjugated the animal ruthlessly so was unused to it surfacing outwith their agreement. Something about the vampire irritated the beast within him. Something about Ashleigh's declaration infuriated the man.

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"You don't get the luxury of eternal rest, Freya Eriksson," he whispered into the quiet morning air.

"Not after taking Faith from me." The words made him feel better, an idea taking shape in his mind as he whispered his oath to the forest. The bitch of a vampire deserved to suffer for her actions and he would find a way to make it happen. And to hell with the consequences.