

The return: nightfall chapter 23

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A cold shiver went down Elena's back, the most delicate of shivers. Damon didn't for kisses.

This wasn't right.

- " No," she whispered.
- " Just one."
- " I'm not going to kiss you, Damon."
- " Not me. Him." Damon denoted " him" with a tilt of his head toward Matt. " A kiss between you and your former knight."
- " You want what ?" Matt's eyes snapped open and he got the words out explosively before Elena could open her mouth.
- " You'd like it," Damon's voice had dropped to its softest, most insinuating tones. " You'd like to kiss her. And there's no one to stop you."
- " Damon." Matt struggled up out of Elena's arms. He seemed, if not entirely recovered, perhaps eighty percent of the way there, but Elena could hear his heart laboring. Elena wondered how long he'd lain feigning unconsciousness to get his strength back. " The last thing I knew you were trying to kill me. That doesn't exactly get you on my good side. Second, people just don't go around kissing girls because they're pretty or their boyfriend takes a day off."
- " Don't they?" Damon hiked an eyebrow in surprise. " I do."

Matt just shook his head, dazed. He seemed to be trying to keep one idea fixed in his mind. " Will you move your car so we can leave?" he said.

Elena felt as if she were watching Matt from very far away; and as if he was caged somewhere with a tiger and didn't know it. The clearing had become a very beautiful, wild, and dangerous place, and Matt didn't know that either. Besides, she thought with concern, he's making himself stand up. We need to leave - and quickly before Damon does anything else to him.

But what was the real way out?

What was Damon's real agenda?

- " You can go," Damon said. " As soon as she kisses you. Or you kiss her," he added as if making a concession.

Slowly, as if he realized what it was going to mean, Matt looked at Elena and then back at Damon. Elena tried to communicate silently with him, but Matt wasn't in the mood. He looked Damon in the face and said, " No way."

Shrugging, as if to say, I did everything I could, Damon lifted the shaggy pine rod -

- " No," cried Elena. " Damon, I'll do it."

Damon smiled the smile and held it for a moment until Elena looked away and went to Matt. His face was still pale, cool. Elena leaned her cheek against his and said almost soundlessly into his ear, " Matt, I've dealt with Damon before. And you can't just defy him. Let's play along - for now. Then maybe we can get away." And then she made herself say, " For me? Please?". The truth was that she knew too much about stubborn males. Too much about how to manipulate them. It was a trait she'd come to hate, but

right now she was too busy trying to think of ways to save Matt's life to debate the ethics of pressuring him.

She wished it were Meredith or Bonnie instead of Matt. Not that she would wish such pain on anyone, but Meredith would be coming up with Plans C and D even as Elena came up with A and B. And Bonnie would already have lifted tear-filled, heart-melting brown eyes to Damon. Suddenly Elena thought of the single red flash she'd seen under the Ray-Bans, and she changed her mind. She wasn't sure she wanted Bonnie around Damon now. Of all of the guys she'd known, Damon had been the only one Elena couldn't break. Oh, Matt was stubborn, and Stefan could be impossible sometimes. But they both had brightly colored buttons somewhere inside them, labeled PUSH ME, and you just had to fiddle with the mechanism a little - okay, sometimes more than a little - and eventually even the most challenging male could be mastered.

Except one...

- " All right, kiddies, enough time out."

Elena felt Matt pulled from her arms and held up - she didn't know by what, but he was standing. Something held him in place, upright, and she knew it wasn't his muscles.

- " So where were we?" Damon was walking back and forth, with the Virginia pine branch in his right hand, tapping it on his left palm. " Oh, that right " - as if making a great discovery - " the girl and the stalwart knight are going to kiss."

In Stefan's room, Bonnie said, " For the last time, Meredith, did you find a backup file for Stefan's note or not?"

- " No," Meredith said in a flat voice. But just as Bonnie was about to collapse again, Meredith said, " I found a different note completely. A letter, really."
- " Different note? What does it say?"
- " Can you stand up at all? Because I think you'd better have a look at this."

Bonnie, who had only just gotten back her breath, managed to hobble over to the computer. She read the document on the screen - complete except for what seemed to be its final words, and gasped.

- " Damon did something to Stefan!" she said, and felt her heart plummet and all her internal organs follow it. So Elena had been wrong. Damon was evil, through and through. By now, Stefan might even be...
- " Dead," Meredith said, her mind obviously following the same track that Bonnie's had taken. She lifted dark eyes to Bonnie's. Bonnie knew that her own eyes were wet. " How long," Meredith asked, " has it been since you called Elena or Matt?"
- " I don't know; I don't know what time it is. But I called twice after we left Caroline's house and once at Isobel's; and when I've tried after that, I either get a message that their mailboxes are full or it won't connect at all."
- " That's about exactly what I've gotten. If they went near the Old Wood - well, you know what it does to phone reception."

- " And now, even if they come out of the woods, we can't leave them a message because we've filled up their voicemail - "
- " E-mail," Meredith said. " Good old e-mail; we can use that to send Elena a message."
- " Yes!" Bonnie punched the air. Then she deflated. She hesitated for an instant and then almost whispered, " No." Words from Stefan's real note kept echoing in her mind: I trust Matt's instinctive protectiveness for you, Meredith's judgment, and Bonnie's intuition. Tell them to remember that.
- " You can't tell her what Damon's done," she said, even as Meredith began busily typing. " She probably already knows - and if she doesn't, it'll just make more trouble. She's with Damon."
- " Matt told you that?"
- " No. But Matt was out of his mind with pain."
- " Couldn't it have been from those - bugs?" Meredith looked down at her ankle where several red welts still showed on the smooth olive flesh.
- " It could be, but it wasn't. It didn't feel like the trees, either. It was just... pure pain. And I don't know, not for certain, how I know that it's Damon doing it. I just - know."

She saw Meredith's eyes unfocus and knew that she was thinking about Stefan's words, too. " Well, my judgment tells me to trust you," she said. " By the way, Stefan spells the preferred American way," she added.

- " Damon spells it with an e. That may have been what was bothering Matt."

- " As if Stefan would really leave Elena alone with everything that's been going on," Bonnie said indignantly.
- " Well, Damon fooled all of us and made us think so," Meredith pointed out. Meredith tended to point out things like that.
- Bonnie started suddenly. " I wonder if he stole the money?"
- " I doubt it, but let's see." Meredith pulled the rocking chair away, saying, " Grab me a hanger."

Bonnie grabbed one from the closet and grabbed herself one of Elena's tops to put on at the same time. It was too big since it was Meredith's top given to Elena, but at least it was warm. Meredith was using the hooked end of the wire hanger on all sides of the floorboard that looked most promising. Just as she managed to pry it up, there was a knock at the open door. They both jumped.

- " It's only me," said the voice of Mrs. Flowers from behind a large duffel bag and a tray of bandages, mugs, sandwiches, and strong-smelling cheesecloth bags like the ones she'd used on Matt's arm.

Bonnie and Meredith exchanged a glance and then Meredith said, " Come in and let us help you." Bonnie was already taking the tray, and Mrs. Flowers was dumping the duffel bag on the floor. Meredith continued prying the board up.

- " Food!" Bonnie said gratefully.
- " Yes, turkey-and-tomato sandwiches. Help yourselves. I'm sorry I was away so long, but you can't hurry the poultice for swellings," Mrs. Flowers said. " I remember, long ago, my younger brother always said -

oh, my goodness gracious!" She was staring at the place where the floorboard had been. A good-sized hollow was filled with hundred-dollar bills, neatly wrapped in packets with bank-bands still around them.

- "Wow," Bonnie said. "I never saw so much money!"
- "Yes." Mrs. Flowers turned and began distributing cups of cocoa and sandwiches. Bonnie bit into a sandwich hungrily. "People used to simply put things behind the loose brick in the fireplace. But I can see that the young man needed more space."
- "Thank you for the cocoa and sandwiches," Meredith said after a few minutes spent wolfing them down while working on the computer at the same time. "But if you want to treat us for bruises and things - well, I'm afraid we just can't wait."
- "Oh, come." Mrs. Flowers took a small compress that smelled to Bonnie like tea and pressed it to Meredith's nose. "This will take the swelling down in minutes. And you, Bonnie - sniff out the one that's for that bump on your forehead."

Once again Meredith's and Bonnie's eyes met. Bonnie said, "Well if it's only a few minutes - I don't know what we're doing next anyway." She looked the poultices over and picked around one that smelled of flowers and musk to put on her forehead.

- "Exactly right," Mrs. Flowers said without turning around to look. "And of course, the long thin one is for Meredith's ankle."

Meredith drank the last of her cocoa, then reached down to gingerly touch one of the red marks. "That's okay - " she began, when Mrs. Flowers interrupted.

- " You're going to need that ankle at full capacity when we go out."
- " When we go out'?" Meredith stared at her.
- " Into the Old Wood," Mrs. Flowers clarified. " To find your friends."

Meredith looked horrified. " If Elena and Matt are in the Old Wood, then I agree: we have to go look for them. But you can't go, Mrs. Flowers! And we don't know where they are, anyway." Mrs. Flowers drank from the cup of cocoa in her hand, looking thoughtfully at the one window that wasn't shuttered. For a moment Meredith thought she hadn't heard or didn't mean to answer. Then she said, slowly, " I daresay you all think I'm just a batty old woman who's never around when there's trouble at hand."

- " We would never think that," Bonnie said staunchly, but thinking that they'd found out more about Mrs. Flowers in the last two days than in the entire nine months since Stefan had moved in here. Before that, all she'd ever heard were ghost stories or rumors about the crazy old lady in the boardinghouse. She'd been hearing them since she could remember.

Mrs. Flowers smiled. " It's not easy having the Power and never being believed when you use it. And then, I've lived for so long - and people don't like that. It worries them. They start to make up ghost stories or rumors - ". Bonnie felt her eyes go round. Mrs. Flowers just smiled again and nodded gently. " It's been a real pleasure having a polite young man in the house," she said, taking the long poultice from the tray and wrapping it around Meredith's ankle.

- " Of course, I had to get over my prejudices. Dear Mama always said that if I kept the place, I might have to take in boarders and to be sure not to take in foreigners. And then, of course, the young man is a vampire as well - "

Bonnie almost sprayed cocoa across the room. She choked, then went into a spasm of coughing. Meredith had her no-expression expression on.

- " But after a while, I got to understand him better and to sympathize with his problems," Mrs. Flowers continued, ignoring Bonnie's attack of coughing. " And now, the blond girl is involved as well... poor young thing. I often speak to Mama" - still with the accent on the second syllable - " about it."
- " How old is your mother?" Meredith asked. Her tone was one of polite inquiry, but to Bonnie's experienced eyes her expression was one of slightly morbid fascination.
- " Oh, she died back at the turn of the century."

There was a pause, and then Meredith rallied.

- " I'm so sorry," she said. " She must have lived a long - "
- " I should have said, the turn of the previous century. Back in 1901, it was."

This time it was Meredith who had the choking fit. But she was quieter about it.

Mrs. Flowers' gentle gaze had drifted back to them. " I was a medium in my day. On vaudeville, you know. So hard to achieve a trance in front of a roomful of people. But, yes, I really am a White Witch. I have the Power. And

now, if you've finished your cocoa, I think it's time we went into the Old Wood to find your friends. Even though it's summertime, my dears, you'd both better dress warmly," she added. " I have."