

Future

by Becky

Stefan felt the warmth from the early sun on his face, the memory of a bittersweet dream slowly fading away as his consciousness awakened. He felt a figure stirring beside him and, as always, there was that foolish hope that it would be her.

"Morning," Chloe's cheerful voice resonated through the silent room.

Masking his disappointment with practiced ease, Stefan turned to her and smiled tenderly. "Good morning. Did you sleep well?"

Chloe nodded. "Thank you for letting me sleep with you." She looked down. "I didn't dream anything, I'm sorry," she said apologetically.

"Do not apologize, it is not your fault," Stefan reassured her.

Her face broke out into a grin and she hugged him tightly, laying her head on his chest. "I'm just glad I have you with me."

Stefan kissed the top of her head. "Breakfast should be ready soon."

Chloe crinkled her nose and lifted her head to protest, "I'm not really hungry."

"You must eat," Stefan reminded her.

"I know," she said, "but I hate having breakfast here. It makes me miss my family even more. I know it sounds crazy, but I'd give anything to hear them argue and shout over a buffet table."

"It makes perfect sense," Stefan said.

"Well, I'm not going to lay here and feel sorry for myself. Let's eat, and then we can talk about finding a way out of here." Giving him a quick kiss on the cheek, Chloe got up, put on her robe, and headed for the bathroom.

Stefan sighed. He felt guilty for what he was about to do, but it couldn't be helped. Chloe was sleeping less and it was imperative that she dream. It was also impossible to leave for the main Island if she were awake, and there were papers there that he needed to get himself. Chloe had started spending almost every waking moment with him -- almost clinging to him -- making it exceedingly difficult for him to communicate and set his plans in motion, which were very close to coming to fruition.

I'm sorry, Chloe, he thought, meaning it in more ways than one. Despite himself, he did care about her, and that was also making it wearisome to use her in this way. Even though drugging her drink to make her sleep would not hurt her physically, he knew he was walking on shady ground.

He rose from the bed and prepared the arrangements, shedding any doubt, which would only serve as a distraction. The sooner this was over, the better.

Laura stood deathly still as the familiar smell, sound, and feel of the land she had just arrived in surrounded her. It all seemed so... normal. Still, her legs seemed to have lost their consistency as she tried to take a step and almost fell.

A hand reached out to help her, and she instinctively recoiled. At the young guard's wounded look, she quickly apologized. "I'm sorry, I'm just a little nervous, Petros."

"Of course, madam."

"Please, call me Laura," she smiled.

Petros nodded and blushed slightly under her kind gaze. Prince Nikolas had ordered that she be treated with the utmost respect. He had forgotten to mention how beautiful she was.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to walk around for a while.. alone," Laura said gently.

"Of course... Laura. If you need anything, I will be at your service." He reluctantly walked away, leaving her to be reacquainted with the Island.

Laura fought back the impulse to call the pleasant young man back and pushed down the feeling of fear. She was here of her own free will, she reminded herself. She closed her eyes, inhaled, and let out her breath. The knots in her stomach eased slightly.

She toyed with the blue ribbon in her hand, and bit her lip, blinking back the tears that threatened to spill.

She started walking, her body knowing instinctively where it should go. It didn't take long to get to a place she had tried to banish from her mind long ago.

It had not changed. The same breathtaking view that had once been a painful reminder of her inability to escape. The bench was there, too. For a moment, it was as if time had stood still as she sat down. The breeze caused a slight rustling sound behind her, and her body tensed in expectation.

Despite her common sense, it was a crushing blow to accept that he wasn't there. She was staring out into the Aegean Sea by herself, with only the memory of him to keep her company. She looked down at her palm, the ribbon splayed across it, and lifted it up. As if by her command, a strong gust of wind arrived and swept it up into the air. Laura followed its dance until it was no longer in sight, the ribbon having fallen beyond the cliff.

Ghosts of the past, regrets, and loneliness wrapped around her until she felt she could no longer breathe. She sucked in the warm air and a sob escaped her lips. Tears welled in her eyes and fell down her face. She lifted her legs and hugged them to her body.

"Stefan," she whispered.

He kept himself busy during the time it took the ship to arrive at the Cassadine home. There was much to do, and he did each job meticulously, not wanting to make any errors.

He felt the familiar swaying movement cease, and he prepared himself for the task at hand. There were no chances to be taken and he moved quickly. He knew there would be few guards and therefore it should be easy to avoid detection, especially since it was dark and he knew every inch of the Island by heart.

He stepped onto the Island, and paused a moment. Coming home was always filled with mixed emotions. There were memories around every corner. Raising Nikolas there had assured that he'd have at least some that were happy. The memories with Laura had always been bittersweet, and now...

Stefan shook his head, chastising himself for allowing himself to be distracted even for a moment. He walked on, determined to keep focused. He froze as a glimmer of blue caught his sharp eye.

His mind recalled the stories of water-starved travelers seeing a mirage of the thing they hungered for most. There, suspended on a thin branch, was a blue ribbon that he couldn't believe was not an illusion, even after he had taken it into his own hand.

He looked above him, but all he could see was the lush vegetation. Before he knew it, he was headed up there, all thought of the mission discarded.

Everything faded away as he quietly came upon that secret place they had shared all those years ago.

And saw her.

She was lying on the bench, her back to him, curled in a fetal position, accentuating the air of fragility about her. As if pulled there by some unknown force, he walked over to where she was and kneeled in front of her.

Her face was stained with fresh tears, a hauntingly sad look on it. But she was still as beautiful as ever. God, how he had missed her. His hand rose to gently caress her face, wanting to take away her pain, and ignoring the danger that such a simple gesture held. His thumb lightly traced her cheek as his fingers entwined in the soft blonde hairs falling over part of her face.

His eyes were drawn to her full lips and he saw a small smile form and a soft sigh escape them. His body immediately reacted to the faint sound and he ached to taste those lips once more.

Her hand was suddenly on his, and he backed away as if burned by her touch. He held his breath when she frowned, hoping he hadn't woken her up. He finally let it out as she settled back into her dream.

His eyes clouded over, coldness replacing the tenderness that had been there only moments before. Damn her. Why had she come here? Why now? When would he be able to close his heart completely to her?

"Who is it you dream of, Laura?" he asked bitterly. "Luke, no doubt, the great love of your life. You dream of the life you hope to have with him, the life I once thought we could share." He quietly got up and walked to the edge of the cliff. He tossed the blue ribbon into the air and turned back. He forced himself not to look at Laura as he walked by her.

She waited a few minutes after the sound of his light footsteps had faded away. She opened her eyes, a flood of emotions swirling in and darkening the blue irises. She sat up, her hands holding on tightly to the edge of the bench. She had been holding in any outward emotion ever since he had yanked his hand away from her touch and it was now manifesting itself in her trembling.

How dare he?! How... A joyous laugh erupted from her mouth. He was alive! Stefan was alive...That jerk! How could he have done that to her? To Nikolas! She knew instantly he had a reason, and a sense of peace that she had been craving over the last months soothed her weary soul. She should have known he would never leave them.

Should she go after him? No. She'd wait for him to show himself to her. Patience had never been her strong suit, but this time it would be worth it. A smile played on her lips. Yes, this time it was going to be different. He still loved her, she was sure of it. And she knew she loved him.

"I love him," she whispered to the trees that had always held her secret. "I love Stefan."

She stared out into the sea and thought of the future.