

## Chapter 496

Dara completed her call just as the vampire turned and disappeared into the treeline. "Joshua will escort Ava and Pippa to Rafe. He said Caleb has a private jet that he keeps here for urgent, discreet travel so they will use that to minimise any distress to them. He'll be here shortly to pick them up."@ww.no©èℒ©ø(·)m.c0@

"Then we just need to wait for Agony and Louis to return and we can be on our way," Mila answered.

Dara nodded, relief and concern warring for dominance. It felt good to finally be moving forward instead of backwards, and yet she would have been a fool not to be worried about what they were possibly walking into. If they didn't find Gard and Rayne, safe and well...there was no telling what Agony would do, or if they would ever see Kothari again.

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There was the briefest of knocks on his study door before it opened and Rhianna slipped inside, closing it quietly behind her. Rafe Hanlon watched his sister silently for a moment, his thoughts still immersed in his last conversation with Dara. Dara and Kothari needed her help and yet he knew when he told her why she would want to go to them, and that was something neither he nor Caleb would allow. For the first time since he could remember, he wasn't entirely sure how to deal with the petite redhead in front of him. She was no longer just his Annie, but the living embodiment of the last vampire queen, and he'd seen first-hand just how powerful Anakatrine was and what she was capable of.

"I don't think I like your expression very much, Rafe," she said, a frown marring her exquisite features as she moved to sit on the sofa under the window.

For some reason she never took one of the seats directly across from the desk when she visited, as if she was wordlessly letting him know that she wasn't subordinate to him. Not that he had ever considered that she was, not the way an alpha did with the rest of his pack. Still, she was his baby sister and therefore his to protect whether she needed it or not. He didn't think he would ever lose that feeling where his Annie was concerned.

"Will Caleb be joining us?" he countered, hoping for an affirmative. He didn't like the way this meeting was starting to shape up. A difficult Annie was a pain in the ass to deal with.Ww*w.n*©ø(e)lWoOm.c0m

His response only had Rhianna's frown deepening and her mouth setting in a stubborn line, and he wanted to kick himself. Clearly she knew something was wrong and was reacting to the tension she could sense in him.

"I am more than capable of talking to my brother without my mate being present," she answered. "Or am I talking to the Armand-Hanlon Alpha as opposed to the man who brought me up?"

Yeah, he'd gone and done it from the icy quality of her tone. Now he needed to work out how to diffuse the situation before they had one of their extremely rare fights. There was nothing for it, other than to appeal to her softer side. Sighing, he rubbed a weary hand over his eyes. He hadn't managed to get the amount of sleep he really needed, and he was worried about Dara and Kothari and what was in store for them going forward. "Cut me some slack, Annie. Please? I've got enough to deal with without having a war for dominance with you as well as every other bloody alpha male that comes into my study."

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Shrewd lavender eyes regarded him solemnly for a long moment and then he saw her expression soften, concern replacing the annoyance in her gaze. "I'm sorry. You're tension just whacked me so hard in the face when I came into the room that I reacted to it. What's wrong, Rafe? Has something happened in Europe? Are Dara and Kothi okay?"

"For now they're fine, though the news Dara has shared is a worry. Agony is still in dominance but Dara assures me that he's being compliant at the moment." Rafe paused, getting up to walk around his desk. He wanted to be close to his sister in case she tried to take off recklessly when she learned the next part of the news. "He's worked out where Gard and Rayne were headed after they left Louis's coven. They were going home."

"Home?" Rhianna frowned again, confusion crossing her face. "But they never..." her words suddenly trailed off and then the confusion turned to shock. "Oh my God, they went home! " she gasped, instantly putting the pieces together. Her eyes were wide as she stared up him. "They returned to Romania," she whispered before jumping up, a hand pressed against her stomach, a gesture that was so inimically Annie when she was concerned that it brought Rafe a level of comfort. It meant that Anakatrine was still dormant and allowing Rhianna to deal with the revelation.

"What's waiting for them there, Annie? What are they walking into?"

"Home," she whispered, moisture gathering in her eyes. "Our home. It's where Anakatrine, Callain, Gard and Rayne all began their journey. It's where Ana and Callain died, and where Gard lost Rayne as an infant. It is the beginning but also the end, where the rot set into the vampire nation and we lost our way for millennia."

A tear slid down her cheek, sorrow flowing across her face. "We never went back, Rafe. Neither Caleb nor I ever considered it. I doubt Rayne ever did either, though Gard may have. He was alone a very long time while he waited for Ana to be reborn. It would have been his only link to her, so he may have gone back. I just don't know why we didn't think about it earlier. It makes so much sense that they would have gone back to the beginning."

Did it? Maybe it did to Rhianna, but Rafe doubted very much it would have been something the rest of them would have considered since Gard and Rayne's disappearance. After all, it had never crossed his mind to ask Rhianna or Caleb about the origins of the Triumvirate, not even after he'd learned of Anakatrine and Callain's rebirth. Now that they were on the topic, Rafe found his curiosity piqued. "You were never tempted to revisit your old home?"

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Rhianna shook her head. "There can't be anything left of the Palace or its grounds after all this time. We did visit Romania when we did that tour of Europe years ago, Caleb even made it as far as Braşov but he never went to the Palace. He was meeting Joshua and I remained in Bucharest. It was at Braşov where Gard discovered Caleb hosted Callain inside and reawakened him."

"And because you didn't go with Caleb that's why it took more time for Gard to learn about you."