

## Chapter 528

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DOWN MEMORY LANE

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Caleb stared down at Rhianna, seeing confusion in her eyes but unable to separate the actions of the vampire queen from his mate. What she had done...it would rock their society to its very core and more importantly, it would place them all in danger and played right into the hands of the paranoia surrounding the European vampires. She had stripped a vampire of their immortality! Dear God, the repercussions of that one act would change everything.

The noise had receded within the room until the only sound was Reasa's weeping, but even that had faded to a subdued moan. Caleb tried to gather his thoughts, tried to look past the events and think of how to start trying to repair the damage that had been done. He had to put his personal feelings to the side until he had time to think about it.

"Caleb?" Rhianna whispered his name once more and he couldn't answer her. Inside, everything was locked down and despite the plea in her voice, he couldn't bring himself to reach for her to give her comfort. He knew he was in shock. They all were. He knew his emotions would kick in but for now, he couldn't feel anything. Long, dormant instincts surfaced and the man he had once been pushed for dominance. He refused to give in to Callain, but it was enough to spur him into action.

"Demetri, take Rhianna home and stay with her. Don't let anyone other than myself or Gard into the mansion. Ensure you have adequate backup. If anyone doesn't like it, tell them they can speak to me."

The coldness of Caleb's tone stirred a slow, burning anger deep within Gard. He knew the enormity of Anakatrine's justice would have major repercussions, however, Caleb's reaction to his sister wasn't something he could accept. For too many years she had been his to protect, and though so much had changed since then, his instincts kicked in.

Gard turned to Rayne, his eyes troubled. "Do you have this?" His kept his voice low as his gaze flickered from his mate to his son, who, for once, didn't have a mocking smile on his face as he stared at Liam and Reasa.wŴW.ṡô(v)ēlŵô©(m).com

She followed his gaze, a frown marring her brow. "Go do what you need to. I'll take care of Kothari." She understood his dilemma. Caleb's detachment, and the way he was looking at Annie, was frightening. Her mate had spent his life protecting his sister and the need to do that was ingrained into him. He had to decide who needed his protection the most and, at the moment, that person was Rhianna.

Gard felt his heart swell as he looked into Rayne's deep green eyes and saw complete understanding there. She was perfect for him and that was why life or nature had bonded them together. He stroked her cheek gently, his eyes expressing everything he wanted to say. "I love you."

"I love you too," she whispered, rising on tiptoes to brush her lips against his briefly, before pulling back. "Go protect Annie. Keep her safe. We all need her."wŴŴw.ṡô(v)©lŵôRm.c©ṡṡ

He turned and moved over to his sister, cutting Demetri off as he approached with Mara. It seemed inconceivable that the tension in the room could get any higher but it did as Gard positioned himself between Rhianna and the other vampires. "Annie comes with me, Caleb, and no one else. When reason returns, we'll discuss this more, but until then, you stay away from her. You and all those who follow you." He heard Demetri hiss but he ignored him, his lavender gaze never wavering from the Ancient vampire.

Caleb's eyes remained cold, though inside, he felt his rage ratchet up another few notches at Gard's defiance. Did he really believe he would allow anyone to harm Rhianna, including himself? He may be struggling to come to terms with today's events, but the whole purpose of sending his mate home with the person he trusted most in the world was solely for her protection. His fury escalated. "You dare presume I would allow harm to come to her?"

"I don't know what you're thinking right now, Caleb, and until I do, Annie stays with me. You want to come through me to get to her then go ahead. You want to finish the job Thereasa started and cause civil war among all you love, then be my guest because I am not backing down. This is not open to discussion." His words were resolute and everyone in the room automatically tensed, waiting for the explosion to happen.

"I'm leaving with Gard." Rhianna's quiet words had all eyes turning to her. Her face was pale, her expression so neutral it was surprising. She was usually so animated, so full of smiles and laughter. Now her expression was blank, her eyes devoid of all emotion as she looked first to her mate and then to Demetri and Mara.

Her friend was close to tears, clearly feeling the strain of the events. Mara held a hand out to her. "Annie, we would never hurt you," she whispered, pain in each word.

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Demetri was scowling, fury dancing in his green eyes as he tried to skewer Gard with his gaze. To say he was livid was an understatement. Everything that had happened stunned him, but what stunned him the most was Caleb's reaction to it. Even as he was angry at Gard's implication, he could also understand it because he was concerned about Caleb's state of mind too. "Listen to Mara, Annie. You know you are family. You know I would die for you."

A sad smile crossed the petite redhead's face as she regarded them solemnly. "I know, Demetri. I do not fear for my safety with you and Mara. I never have and I never will. No, I will leave with Gard because it's the right thing to do." Her gaze slid to Liam cradling Reasa and her smile saddened more as she stared at them. "We all need time to come to terms with what has happened and how we are going to move forward. We need more than time. We need space too. I will be safe with Gard."

Her gaze turned back to Caleb who was watching impassively. His expression remained closed, only the slight tightening of his mouth an indication that he didn't agree with what was happening. He had never looked at her so coldly and pain engulfed her as she watched him. Anakatrine had done what was required, and, in doing so, it appeared she had destroyed something that everyone had believed unbreakable.

"When the time is right, you will know where to find me, Caleb."

His lips tightened further, his golden brown eyes narrowing. "Still you defy me, insult me by implying I would harm you or allow harm to come to you. Your lack of trust is staggering, Rhianna."

Trying hard not to flinch at his tone, she met his gaze levelly. "As is yours, my mate." There really wasn't anything further to say, so she turned to Gard, threading her hand through his proffered arm. Rafe's anxious gaze met hers and she tried to give him a reassuring smile, knowing he was as torn as all the rest of them.

"Annie?" There was a hint of her brother in the word but, mostly, it was the Alpha of the Armand-Hanlon pack who spoke.