

Chapter 551

Caleb groaned, kicking off the covers as he rolled over and buried his face in his pillow. Moonlight shone in the window, bathing his sweat-slickened body in its light as he was sucked down once more into a time long past.

Dark tunnels, slick with dampness and mildew were no challenge for the cloaked figures silently marching through them. It mattered not that there were no lights shining. A vampire could see in the dark, and these three better than most.

The trio halted at the barred cell, its steel so thick it would have taken a dozen Elder vampires using all their supernatural strength to break though. Inside the rancid room, a panther in human form cowered in the corner, her arms wrapped protectively around her babe as her vampire mate growled at the intruders.

"Hush, Gaston. It is I."

Tears gathered in the bedraggled male's eyes as he immediately knelt, his filthy blond hair falling forward as he bowed low. "Forgive me, my Queen. I feared you were more of the same we have endured for the last half day. They come and taunt us. They abuse my mate and torture us with how our precious Sarayne will be rendered limb from limb at tomorrow's execution."

Callain bristled at his words, outrage firing his blood lust. Was the rot already so ingrained in the hearts of his people that they took pleasure from thoughts of murdering an innocent child? He could feel his mate's rage just as strongly through their mate bond.

"Forgive me, Gaston. I tried to temper their judgement but I fear my voice holds no sway anymore. Now there is so little time, and even less I can do." Anakatrine touched the thick steel bars and incanted under her breath. For a moment, there was no discernible difference and then the bars parted as if they were made of the softest metal.

The Were gasped, venturing closer from her hiding place as freedom beckoned. Gaston's eyes lit up as he shuffled forward to bow even lower at his Queen's feet.

A muffled sob escaped Anakatrine's lips as she bent down and pulled him upright. "Please, old friend, do not abase yourself before me. I do not deserve it. I cannot free you this night. This is not the reason we are here."

He met her gaze before looking past her at Callain and Gard, the two most fearsome warriors of their people. If his Queen could not free them, then why were they here? His confused eyes turned back to Anakatrine. As he noticed the tears tracing down her face at her inability to save them, denial of her pain rushed through him. Even knowing he was facing his death, and that of the two women he loved, he hastened to reassure her. "Do not weep for us, my Queen. If death is the payment for the love we have shared, Sara and I will accept that. If we had known the outcome of being together beforehand, we would have still chosen the same path."

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"Your courage shames our people, Gaston. Your mate's love shames our people. You are the essence of all we have lost, dear friend; it is my honour to mourn you and your panther mate, though I know her not." Anakatrine swallowed hard as she beckoned the woman closer. She had been sheltered her entire life from the animal shifters, but she could see the love in Sara's eyes for her mate and her child.

"I cannot save you fore they would hunt you to the ends of the world to find you. You would never be safe; we all know that to be true. There is one thing I can do, however, if you will trust in me."wwW.ℳóv©⓪woRmm.cóm

"My Queen?"

"I can save your babe, but we have little time. I have used powerful spells to keep us hidden from everyone. More of my strength was used to soften these bars and I will need to solidify them. I fear I have used up almost all my reserves, Gaston. What remains can conjure up one illusion and it can only be a small one. My magic can create an image of your child that looks and feels so real they will truly believe they are executing her by your side. Gard will take her and hide her until it is over; then, as your child grows, we will keep her safe and tell her of how strong and courageous her parents were."

"Please, my lady, take her," the panther cried, rushing forward so quickly, Callain and Gard moved forward to block her.

"Stand aside," Anakatrine sighed in a vexed tone. This was no time for their over-protectiveness.

"Please!" Sara held her babe up, the tattered blanket surrounding the youngling so dirty it was hard to see the hidden child. "Save my Sarayne. She is innocent, lady, just a helpless babe. I know we are not of your kind, but my mate has told me of your compassion. Protect her. Please."

The vampire Queen reached out, carefully taking the silent child in her arms. She had to bend forward, her gaze settling on Gaston's mate. The wealth of love was evident in the panther's eyes, as was the willingness to sacrifice herself for her child. How could her people fail to see the beauty of the being before them? How could they fail to see their future?

"Your child will live, Sara, mate of Gaston. You have my word as the vampire Queen, and you have my word as a woman who has been proud to have you grace her family for this briefest of moments. Sometimes the brightest lights shine for the shortest of times, but their warmth lives on forever."

She turned from the couple, placing the child in Gard's arms. "Run my brother, run faster than you have ever run before. Take this child and keep her safe. No matter what you hear, no matter what you feel, do not falter. She is yours to protect until such time another can take up that burden. Give me your word, Kothari, Guardian of the Queen, Defender of the Weak."

Callain could see Gard longed to refuse his Queen. It was written in his eyes as well as in the stiffness of his body, but she had invoked his birth name and he knew there was no way the Guardian could disobey her.

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"You have my word, Anakatrine, but know I resent this task."

Tears glistened in her eyes as she pulled his head down and brushed her lips against his mouth. She kissed his closed eyes as he held still to her touch. Her mouth brushed across both cheeks until her breath grazed his ear. "There are so few I can save, beloved brother. Save this one child for me." As she slowly pulled away, she incanted silently, her lips unmoving as she brushed his once more.

"As my Queen commands." Without another word, Gard turned away, disappearing along the tunnels with the child.

"Stand back while I close the bars."

Gaston pulled Sara into his arms, holding her as they silently wept tears. He knew they would die on the morrow, but their Sarayne was safe and that was all that mattered.

Anakatrine incanted again, solidifying the steel once more, before taking a weary step back. Callain moved, placing his arms around her from behind, sending his strength down their mate bond as she recovered some of her flagging energy.wwW.ℳóveIwórm.Có©

"Remember, you must act as if you would if you truly held Sarayne in your embrace. Do not give them cause to doubt, or all of this will have been for naught." With no further words, Anakatrine began casting; she called up a spell so old it had been long forgotten by most, as had many of the other spells used this day.

The couple in the cell were suddenly joined by a third; a blanket covered a small babe, so real in appearance that if Callain hadn't been privy to what had happened, he would have sworn it was Sarayne.

"It is done," Anakatrine sighed softly, shifting in his embrace to face him. "We have no time left, my love."