

Chapter 680

"No vampire ever lived in that Castle," her mate answered, a smile still playing across his lips.

"Doesn't hurt tourism though to let people think that he was real and foster the myth Bram Stoker created with his book. The Council had a long talk with the vampire who revealed our existence to the author back then. They decided to let him off with it after the way the myths and legends grew and covered our tracks."

Rayne laughed, shaking her head. "If only they knew what they were seeking was actually walking beside them right now," she whispered, as they skirted around particularly large group of tourists.

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"They'd wet their pants," Gard growled, causing her to laugh louder.

A few people turned to look at them, quickly turning away again and hurrying forward towards the fabled Castle. Gard and Rayne turned in the opposite direction, heading further away from the seat of civilisation.

"There are no trails where we're going anymore," Gard said, his eyes drawn to the Southern Carpathians that were looming ahead of them. "The trees and vegetation have overgrown everything so we'll have to take to the skyline to get there."

"If it's so difficult to reach now then is it the place we're looking for?" Rayne asked, a frown marring her brow.

"It's difficult for humans to reach, even possibly Weres, but not to vampires. We're lucky you're a cat and like climbing trees. I think a wolf would have a devil of a time trying to get through the underbrush."

The smugness of his tone had her laughing. "Yes, you were very smart to pick a panther for your mate," she agreed.

He shot her a grin, picking up his step as anticipation washed over them. Now they were so close to home, it was impossible not to rush forward. "Come on, let's go. I'm suddenly very antsy to see what's left of the Palace."

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A few hours later, and far off the beaten track, a sleek black panther sailed from one treetop across to another, closely followed by a redheaded vampire. The cat expertly dug claws into a branch, drawing its hind legs up to balance on the thick limb. Gard hadn't been kidding when he said the trail was overgrown. It was nigh on impossible to continue by foot as they wound their way higher and higher up the Carpathians.

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Rayne uttered a small purring sound as her mate ran his hands down her back, inwardly smiling at the sheer joy on his face. The closer they came to their goal, the more charged he became, his excitement rippling down their mate bond.

"We're close," he breathed out, his lavender eyes almost glowing with anticipation. "Only a few more miles now, but we need to head east. Can you make that tree over there or do you want me to carry you?"

The tree in question was quite far even for her panther to leap, but she was reasonably confident she could make it. She'd only had to shift back to human form twice so far when the distance had been too great for her panther, and that had only been because Gard had refused to take a minor detour.

"You just like rubbing your body against mine and being the knight in shining armour," she answered telepathically, injecting humour into her words. "I can make the jump but you go first just in case I need any assistance." There was no harm in being pragmatic.

"You'd better not," Gard growled, eyeing the waiting tree to their right. He dropped down a few branches beneath her, and then sprang forward.

Rayne watched her mate glide effortlessly through the air. She could tell he'd used all of his supernatural reflexes for his push off the lower branch to counter the loss of momentum he had from stopping. That didn't bode that well for her if he'd had to use all his resources. Though, he did almost overshoot the Oak tree so perhaps it wouldn't be as bad as she first thought.

Gard had deliberately placed himself lower down on the waiting tree. If she failed to make the jump then she would start to fall downwards and he would want to be lower to enable him to react in time if needed. He was a smart male and she couldn't help grinning with pride.

"Panthers are so not supposed to smile, Sarayne," he called across the expanse. "It's downright creepy."

Shaking her head, she judged the distance to the branches above him, her hind legs coiling ready to spring. Rayne pushed off with all her strength, arching her back to increase her forward motion. She knew instantly that she wasn't going to make it but she didn't panic. Instead, she made her body as aerodynamic as possible, giving herself as much of a chance as possible.

"Sarayne!"

Gard's furious yell echoed through the trees as she began to plummet downward. Her stomach lurched and her front paws began to scramble in the air for purchase that she knew wasn't there. She shifted in mid-air, knowing her panther's body was much heavier than her human form. At least this way she would fall at the slightly slower pace, and it would be easier for Gard to catch her.

If she hit the ground it was going to hurt and there was a good chance it could kill her. There were far too many branches out there that could take her head at the velocity she was falling. For the first time ever, Rayne considered the possibility that she might actually die. Gard would murder her if she let that happen though...the fact that she would already be dead being a bit of a moot point.

Pain rattled through her side as a moving object crashed into her halting her fall. The pain increased as she was suddenly propelled sideways at such speed she caught a thick branch to her midriff, her breath cutting off at the hard impact. It hurt to breathe; it hurt to move, but she was alive and draped rather inelegantly face forward over a branch.

"Ouch!" She shrieked as a hand connected with her upturned backside. "I'm injured here!"

"You're damned lucky to be alive, woman," Gard retorted, fury lacing his tone. "I've a good mind to spank your bottom harder and for at least a week. I swear you just took a thousand years off my life."

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