

Chapter 683

For the first time since they'd arrived a shadow crossed Gard's face. "I realised that though Ana had returned, she was but an echo of a time long past, and I was holding onto memories that would never come again. Annie isn't Ana, they just share a body and mind. She doesn't want to live up here in the ruins of a Palace long buried, and why should she? Annie's life is with Caleb and the pack. It was wrong of me to presume that she would ever want to stay here."

"I'm sure one day Annie would love to come here, Gard. She would come for Anakatrine so the vampire Queen might one day relive her life here with you."

He shook his head, his smile turning resigned. "No, that life has passed now. I am content with the life that I now live. How could I not be? I have the best of both worlds."

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The kiss he gave told her how much he loved her and that he meant everything that he said. When they broke apart, they shared a smile and then her gaze turned back to the room before them. "Tell me of the throne room. Is that a tapestry I see over there?" Rayne truly did want to hear more of the world her mate had loved so much before they had come to know each other.
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Gard's smile was once more that of excitement, lighting up his face and making him more beautiful if that was humanly possible. "All the great vampire houses had their own banners. This one is all that remains and it's of the Royal house of Ardweni. I was astounded to find it still in existence after all this time. Ana must have placed a preservation spell on it though it appears to have faded."

Leaning down they stared at the faded cloth. "Can you see the crescent moon shape at the top?" he asked, his fingers hovering a bare inch above the fabric. "Behind the two thrones was a wall of clear glass. Above them was a skylight shaped in the crescent moon. To either side of the audience chamber, the seating also curved in that same crescent moon shape. It was the emblem of the Royal house and just about every area within the throne room echoed with that design."

Rayne gasped, startled eyes flowing to meet his. "The Council chambers...its seating is in the same design..."

Gard laughed, a soft sound echoing through the crumbling walls. "You see what thousands of vampires have never seen despite looking at it each day." His voice was warm with approval and more than a hint of pride. "Yes, my heart, they are unaware but they still hold to traditions of long passed. The vampire nation still bows to the Royal House of Ardweni though they are unaware."

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Rayne laughed with him...it was hard not to as she imagined some of the more traditional, hidebound vampires sitting there with all their pomp and arrogance. In their ignorance, they were completely unaware that they had retained a symbol of the most precious thing they had ever lost, their Queen. "Do you think they will ever learn the truth, Gard?"

He was silent for a long moment and then he shrugged his shoulders. "I have no idea what Anakatrine's plans are, though I am fairly certain she has one. She always did know far too much than any one person ever should have. It was what made her the greatest ever vampire Queen and why our people never deserved to have her grace our world."

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Rising, Gard let his gaze swing around the room once more and then held out his hand. "While reminiscing is fun, it's not getting the job done we came here to do. Come on, let's check out the area behind the Palace."

"It doesn't look as dense out there," Rayne mused, scanning the area quickly. "Is that normal?" If Gard had been visiting from the main entrance, which would be the norm for him as that would be the route he was used to entering the site; possibly he may not have approached from the rear.

It appeared her train of thought was echoing in his mind because he tensed a little, a frown on his face. "On the contrary, it should be more overgrown," he muttered, starting to walk forward. "Stay close, Rayne."

She wanted to roll her eyes and make a smart quip about being overprotected, however his tense demeanour dampened down any words she may have uttered. There was a silence about the mountain that didn't feel natural, as if the animals knew something was out there that shouldn't be. Following his lead, she stepped back out into the forest, moving to the left as he signalled his movement to the right.

"Keep in touch at all times. Alert me the instant you see anything that doesn't feel right."

"Maybe we should stay together? If you're so concerned." She didn't asked the question because she was afraid, but more because she knew his focus would be split if he was worrying about her safety.

We'll cover more ground this way," he answered telepathically.

It made sense so she concentrated on her surroundings, looking for any signs of tracks that would indicate anyone had visited the site recently. Rayne had made her way a circuitous route of about a mile from the Palace when she noticed the first indication of trees having been chopped down. The trees had been removed a good fifty or so years ago but given the remoteness of the spot, it was still highly suspicious.
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"Gard, I have evidence of someone being here." She expected an instant response and held her breath when all she received was silence. "Gard?"

Again, there was nothing but silence and shiver of unease trickled down her spine. Gard would never leave her alone, especially when what they were tracking was a direct threat to everything they held dear. Had something happened to him and that was why he didn't answer? He'd given her no warning that anything was amiss.

More unease overwhelmed her as she was struck by a sudden thought. Their failsafe! She had to check it was still in place. Turning her thoughts inward, she searched for the great tree she'd placed at the very forefront of her mental defences, and what she found brought her feet to a dead halt. It was gone! In its place was barely a mark that it had ever existed.

Someone had been inside her mind and tampered with her defences. He or she had to be powerful to breach them, and also very close by. Had they gotten to her mate yet, or was he still safe? If Gard tried to reach her and couldn't find her he'd come looking and then they'd be in serious trouble. Spinning on her heels Rayne took off back the way she'd come only she didn't make it two steps before something bit her on the neck and her feet stumbled over a tree root.

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