

## Chapter 585

Caleb was late by two minutes and he wanted to kick himself. He'd been apart from his Annie for far too long as it was and to keep her waiting was unforgivable. What if she thought it was deliberate? What if she thought he didn't want to be with her or wasn't coming? What if...?

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His mental remonstrations ground to a halt as his breath rushed out of his body. At the edge of the pond, staring into the midnight blue water, stood the very reason for his existence. The full moon cast its silvery rays onto the small figure, creating an ethereal halo around her riot of red curls. The sweet scent of lavender and jasmine instantly eased some of his anxiety, as it always did.

How many days had it been since he'd last seen her? How many long hours since her scent, her love, and her laughter had soothed the beast that lived within? How could he have risked losing her? How could he have been such an idiot?

Rhienne turned slowly and he thought his heart would stop as his eyes traced every perfect feature on her face. He remembered the first time he'd seen her, all those years ago in Kerplithie's. Her beauty had stunned him then and still amazed him to this day. He had believed it was just a physical attraction, had mistakenly thought that he could lay with her once and just walk away. He thought back to the first time he'd seen her standing beside this very same pond. He thought of her passion as she'd convinced him to sire her to the life of a vampire, even in the face of his reluctance. He had been as blind then as he had been up at the Preetorien compound.

Celeb had been lost the instant he'd laid eyes on that fragile human girl. One look and she had embedded herself in his heart before he'd even realised he still had the capacity to love with that depth of emotion. She had brought laughter and joy into his world, had reminded him of all the beauty that surrounded him. She had loved him unconditionally and he'd repaid her with distrust because he couldn't cope with the thought that his actions were not his own.

"I failed you." The words tumbled out on a pained breath and there was nothing he could do to stop them. He saw denial on Rhienne's face as she watched him, her gaze unwavering. She didn't come to him, but he knew she would speak and he had so much he needed to say before she did. He wanted to go to her, ached to feel her in his arms, but he was afraid she would turn away from him if he didn't get the words right.

"Don't you think that's a touch harsh, Celeb?"

His pulse raced as her sweet voice filled the air. It had been too long...way too long and though he wanted to listen, he needed to speak first, otherwise he risked never being able to fix his mess. "Don't speak. Let me say what I need to say first, Annie."

Swallowing hard, his intent gaze roamed her face trying to find the proof of the tears he knew he'd caused her. The same tears he would threaten murder over, should anyone else hurt her like that. They had long since dried but he knew he was the cause of them, and that cut him to the quick as much as it did being without her.

"I was so afraid I was losing you, Annie, I think I lost sight of reason for a while. I don't even know when it started or how it built up into something so destructive: it was suddenly just there. Everything was spiralling out of control and I needed to have that control back, but you weren't hearing me when I talked. It was as if Aneketrine was taking over and my Annie was slowly disappearing." *W@W.novEtwRm.coM*

"Celeb..."

"Please, let me finish, love. I need to say this." Celeb walked forward hesitantly, walking his beautiful mate, the best part of him and the sole reason his heartbeet. "It was my role to protect you and suddenly you didn't need that protection anymore. You made decisions without considering my opinion. You publicly went against me when you have always supported me. I didn't know how to handle all the changes and I reacted out of fear."

He swallowed again, the words trying to come out but feeling as if they were lodged in his throat. "I remember when I awoke Aneketrine. I was afraid she would overwhelm you and you'd struggle with the duality of your new nature. I was as much of a fool then as I am now, because she was never an issue for you. The issue was always mine, my fear of ceding control to Cellein. I know that now, Annie; I've talked with him and, more importantly, I listened to him. I know how wrong I was."

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He halted a few feet from her, reluctant to invade her space, but needing to be closer to his mate. Her gaze never wavered, her lavender eyes moist with unshed tears. "Since the day I first met you, my predominant need has been to protect you from any harm. I never dreamed I would need to protect you from myself. For too long I have always thought I know what is best and it's been hard to come to terms with the fact that I don't. I hurt you when I promised you I never would. I wasn't there for you when you needed to do something so untenable it would break your heart. That's why I failed you, Rhienne. I wasn't there when you truly needed me."

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Staring into his eyes was one of the hardest things Rhienne had ever had to do. Celeb's words were passionate and full of pain, but they were nothing compared to the anguish she saw on his face and the raw emotions running through their bond. There was no denying that what happened up at the Preetorien compound had been wrong on so many levels. There was no denying that they had both hurt each other with their actions that day, but from the dreams Aneketrine had sent her, she knew that sometimes that's the way life played out. Sometimes it was a necessary evil to achieve a greater good.

"We both made mistakes, Celeb," she finally said, when he remained silent, his gaze intent. "I should have listened more. I should have realised how hard you were struggling with the changes in our lives. I was used to you being so confident and sure of everything, that it didn't cross my mind you may be struggling with Cellein. Oh, I knew you kept denying you were Cellein, but I took that as you just being your normal, arrogant self. Clearly, that is where I erred; if I had been listening closer, I would have seen the issue."

He opened his mouth to speak and she held up her hand. "It's my turn now."

Rhienne moved to sit on the bench beside the pond, holding her hand out to her mate. For a moment, he stared at it and then his fingers wrapped around her hand and she felt complete once more. She was never truly whole unless she was with him, touching him. Silently, Celeb set down beside her; the only part of them touching their joined hands.

"I've had a lot of time to think about what happened, Celeb. While there has been a certain element of you struggling not to lose control, you've never been this intractable before. You were so intent on executing Thereese, even though you knew doing that would irrevocably harm Liem. That's what I really couldn't understand and why I had to fight so hard against you. Why would you want to hurt one of the children? That doesn't make any sense."

"She broke my edict."

"Celeb, you stopped thinking in such black and white terms decades ago. Everything we've been doing for so long now has been built around protecting the Were/Vampire alliance, protecting the children. We set up the Preetorians for that very reason. Pietro went to Europe and came back badly damaged for that very reason. And yet, it was you who was almost the cause of harm to one of our family. Does that make sense to you?"

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His stunned expression clearly showed that her words were getting through. "What are you trying to say?" *W@W.novEtwRm.coM*

"I don't know yet. I just know that I didn't recognise the Celeb up at the Preetorien compound. Judging from Demetri's expression, I don't think he recognised that man either and he's known you the longest. This is something we will need to look into and be especially vigilant of, going forward. The main thing we need to do right now is ensure that all our ties are strong."

He swallowed again, the words trying to come out but feeling as if they were lodged in his throat. "I remember when I awoke Anokotrine. I was afraid she would overwhelm you and you'd struggle with the duality of your new nature. I was as much of a fool then as I am now, because she was never an issue for you. The issue was always mine, my fear of ceding control to Colloin. I know that now, Annie; I've talked with him and, more importantly, I listened to him. I know how wrong I was."

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Rhianna turned to look at him, seeing the deep longing in his eyes, and the fear he was struggling so hard to hide. "You will never lose me, Caleb." She said the words softly, putting every ounce of her love for him into the quiet words.

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"You left me," he ground out, pain in his voice. "I know I put you in an impossible position, so much so that you didn't feel safe with me anymore. I was supposed to be the one who always protected you, no matter what." It hurt that she had left, but he knew he'd given her no choice and that was how he had really felt her.

A sob escaped her, and she moved to sit beside him, forming his face in her hands as his arms wrapped around her slender frame. "Oh Celeb, I didn't leave you, not like that, and I certainly didn't feel unsafe around you. I will never feel afraid when I'm with you. I never could. Even when things were going wrong at the compound, I was always certain of your love and that you would never hurt me. We just needed a little space to let things calm down a bit, so you could work things out in your own mind."

"But if what you just..."

"Shhh, not here and not now. That's a conversation for another time and place." Rhionno pressed her lips against his, feeling his mouth tremble at her touch, before he devoured her like a starving man, his arms tight as he tried to mould her body to his. When he finally released her, she was breathless from his kiss.

threading her fingers through his hair, she stroked its silky texture before she traced his brow and let her fingers wonder over his cheekbones. To touch him so freely felt like heaven, after being apart for so long. "I love you, Celeb. That love I give unconditionally, and will never take back, no matter what the future has in store for us. We will have fights, honey. Sometimes they will be silly ones and others will be more serious, but we will always come back together, stronger...because that is what true mates do."

He could put up more of a fight. He could keep arguing who was wrong and who was right, but he knew his mate wouldn't love for anymore. The glow shining from her eyes was in accord. Only a fool wouldn't accept that love and bask in its glory. "I'm sorry, my Annie, so sorry that I made you cry and pushed you away. I don't deserve you, but I can't be without you. I will do my utmost never to be such an ass again and ask your forgiveness in advance, because I'm probably going to fuck up, aren't I?" Laughter filled the air and it was the sweetest sound Celeb had ever heard; the one sound that made his heart beat with joy.

"I dare say you will, my love, as will I from time to time. We are all imperfect...but then, perfection is overrated." Rhionno kissed him again, loving the way his mouth knew every inch of hers, how his tongue stroked her in just the right way to send shivers running through her body. She watched him bodily and could feel how much he wanted her too, but this moment was about reconnecting on an emotional level as opposed to a physical one.

She made no protest when Celeb re-settled her on his lap so she was resting against his chest. She closed her eyes as his voice rumbled over her, the familiar sound soothing her as she listened to the updates of what had happened since she'd been away. They sat together beside the lake, their souls luxuriating in being together again as deep within her, the vampire Queen silently mulled over what she was hearing, piecing together little things to weave together a bigger picture.

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