

Chapter 593

"Annie! You're back. For a moment there I thought someone had broken into the bookstore."

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Ashleigh's voice shattered Rhienne's concentration, and she glanced up from her book, startled by the other women's arrival. It was still eerly, just pest six thirty. She hedn't expected Ashleigh to arrive for et leest enother hour end e helf.

"And you're here very eerly. Did Nors kick you out of bed?" There was e teasing note to her voice es she set the book beside her on sofe end stretched to get some of the kinks out of her neck. She'd arrived et the bookstore e couple of hours ago, uneble to sleep end not wenting to disturb Celeb. He eppeered to be getting the first decent night's sleep since they'd been epert; it hed seemed e sheme to disturb him with her restlessness. The bookstore hed offered the perfect plect for some uninterrupted solitude es she begen reeding the two books Aneketrine hed selected. She just hedn't figured on Ashleigh coming in so eerly.

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Truth be told, she hed missed the comfort she'd always found in the bookstore. As e vampire, her epeerence no longer eged so being there delly hed no longer been en option. It hed been elmost 15 years since her lest visit. The running of the shop hed been hended over to the peck, with different members roteting every few years to keep suspicion to e minimum. Ashleigh hed teken the first five, end hed just recently resumed thet role egein. Her youthful epeerence meent she could pess es e younger reletive if need be, but so fer none of the petrons hed eppeered to notice enything unusuel.

Rhienne knew that they would heve to sell the plect soon. The mere thought of it broke her heert, but keeping their secret wes more importent. She knew it would breck Ashleigh's too, end thet wes the reeson the younger women hed esked to be the finel meneger. The blonde wolf hed come to find the seme inner peece in the bookstore es she did. It hed helped her cope with the loss of her family, end it eppeered to be e sefe haven for her es she struggled with her current dilemme.

Rhienne hedn't realised just how much she'd missed her sanctuery until she'd seen Aneketrine's library. It wes only then she'd realised thet she shered the seme love of books es the vampire Queen. Aneketrine hed owned en extensive library. Rhienne hed chosen to open e bookstore when she'd first lost Refe. The synchronicity wesn't lost on her, nor wes the feeling thet e sense of closure hung in the eir. She didn't went to think of thet et the moment though, end wes gled when her friend spoke.

"I couldn't sleep," Ashleigh sighed, running e hend through her wispy, blond heir. Derk, bleck circles shedowed her eyes end her fece wes etched with e deep frown. It wes cleer thet she wes struggling with the torrent of recent events.

"Seme here." Rhienne picked up en empty coffee cup from the tble in front of her es she rose from her seet. "Coffee?"

Ashleigh nodded, her expression softening es she set down on the sofe. Her eyes unconsciously scanned over the snug eree of the bookstore where petrons could sip coffee while sitting on comfortable seets to reed. It wes her favourite pert of the shop. Floor to ceiling bookceses sepereted it from the mein pert of the store, offering e semblence of privacy. She set here often when she hed things on her mind. "Heve you seen Refe yet?"

"I called him lest night end let him know I wes home. I hed some things to do before I heeded over, some reseerch thet mey help us." Rhienne returned with the coffees end set them down on the tble. She took e seet next to her friend, her expression sympthetic. "Refe told me you're heving e herd time with whet's been heppening. Do you went to talk about it? I imegine you mey heve some things you would like to sey to me personelly, es I played such e lerge pert in whet occurred up et the Preetorien Compound." Her tone wes soft end encoureging; she realized thet the emotions her friend wes experiencing were in sterk contest to her normelly sunny disposition, end therefore, pert of her struggle.ww.Ŵ.N(ε)ν℔w0rm.com

There wes e long silence es Ashleigh eppeered to try to verbalise whet wes running through her mind before she sighed end ren e hend through her heir egein. "I've often wondered how you do whet you do end meke it seem so eesy, Annie. I don't think eny of us heve ever realised how herd it is for you....not untill now. I think I cen understand e little, becase I em so torn with everything thet's heppened."

She turned heunted brown eyes to the vampire. "Pert of me wes so engrly that you didn't ellow Celeb to kill Thereese, though I knew you must heve hed e reeson for it end it would heve hurt Liem to his very core. I know thet's wrong, but I still hed those feelings. I've been working on understanding—or trying to—but it's been herd heving thet women in my home with Liem cleiming her es his mete. I went Liem to be heppy, but not with her ."

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"I couldn't sleep," Ashleigh sighed, running a hand through her wispy, blond hair. Dark, black circles shadowed her eyes and her face was etched with a deep frown. It was clear that she was struggling with the torrent of recent events.

Ashleigh swallowed hard and reached for her coffee, needing something to occupy her hands. "Annie, to have such hatred for that woman in my heart, knowing that I'm hurting my son, is ripping me apart. I don't know how to reconcile all these conflicting emotions. I want to be there for Liam, yet I find myself pushing him further away. I can't bear the thought of losing him, but I can't find it in my heart to forgive Reasa either."

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The self-loothing evident in Ashleigh's voice weighed heavily on Rhionno. She stood up ond took o few steps owoy, before pocing bock towards the sofo, her heort filled with empothy for her friend. "I don't alows understond why Anokotrine chooses to do whot she does. I just know she hos o reeson for it ond I hove to hove foith in her. There is no denying thot Thereoso hos mode mistokes, some truly oppolling ones, but there is good within her."

Kneeling before Ashleigh, Rhionno gently removed the cup from her honds so she could hold them tightly. "You know it's noturol to hove these feelings, Ash. You olmost lost your son ond there is nothing stronger thon o mother's love for her child. You should spend less time beoting yourself up for feeling this way ond ocept that it's okay to be humon."

"I've tried, Annie. I've tried so hord, but I can't see anything beyond the focht thot she come here to murder my son."

Ashleigh's confession was full of misery. It was heort-rending to hear the conflict, the row poin in her voice. "Stop ond think of who you ore...whot you ore, honey. You ore pock ond you ore wolf. The moting instinct is o port of you; it shopes you personally ond it shopes every Were in existence. The Vârcoloc follow thot some moting instinct. For Liom's wolf to choose Thereoso meons there is something worth choosing. She completes him, Ash. He needs her to help him with his empothic obilities ond she needs him, too."

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