

Chapter 696

The car wound its way along the road, passing the boundary to the Hanlon Pack, its speed never wavering despite Rhianna spotting the grouping of wolves fanned out along the treeline. Her mind acknowledged they were there, but it was a fleeting recognition, her thoughts far away on another continent. There was an ache so strong in her heart that threatened to consume her, and that was all she could focus on at the moment, so the wolves were dismissed from her mind.

She could feel Caleb's eyes on her, was aware that her silence concerned him, and yet, she couldn't open her mouth to speak, couldn't put into words the terror that was infusing her soul. She knew if she said the words it would somehow make them real. She couldn't bear for them to be real, her heart would surely shatter into a million pieces if they were. So she remained silent, and bottled up her emotions with a ruthless iron will. She would not speak of it...she couldn't.

She could feel Caleb's gaze drifting to her rigid form once again, and knew he wanted to reach out and break through the wall she had built around herself. Her beautiful mate would want to tell her everything would be okay, but they both knew he wasn't entirely certain it would be.

Had it really only been a couple of hours since they had first received the telephone call to meet Rafe in the early hours of the morning? It felt as if days had passed, what with everything that had happened. Closing her eyes, Rhianna tried to block out everything, tried to hold onto her composure and not lose control. She had to remain strong. She couldn't be weak right now and yet her heart was silently breaking.

"Gard...please answer me...please..."

Caleb's eyes flickered towards his mate again, and he bit back the automatic words of comfort that sprang to his lips. How could he ease Rhianna's pain when he didn't know if everything would be okay? He prayed that it would be but they had insufficient evidence of what had occurred over in Europe. His eidetic memory replayed the sequence of events over the last few hours as he drove the car as if on auto-pilot.

He had awakened to the sound of Rhianna's cell phone ringing, and listened to her muted conversation with her brother.

"What's happened? Why do you want us to come over, Rafe?"

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There was a pause as she listened to his response, her brow furrowing in a frown before she sighed and agreed they would meet him shortly.

"He's being very Alpha this morning. He won't say what's wrong until we get there."

"Must be pack orientated otherwise he would have told us." Caleb had answered as he'd risen from their bed, dressing as quickly as his mate and heading downstairs with her.

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They hadn't conversed in the car ride over to the Armand-Hanlon pack, both lost in their own speculative thoughts of why Rafe wanted to talk to them. It had to be serious otherwise it would have waited until the morning. Was it something Vârcolac oriented or was it something to do with Reasa? Deep down they both had known there were a myriad of reasons why the Alpha required their presence, so it was pointless to speculate until they spoke with him.

Neither of them had imagined it would be what was finally revealed. They hadn't even considered checking down their Triumvirate bond for Gard's presence. How could they have imagined it? Gard was the oldest vampire in existence, over six thousand years old. His mate, Sarayne, was the first and oldest Vârcolac, a hybrid child of vampire and Were, and over three thousand years old. It was unthinkable that anything could have bested these two powerful individuals but something had, and now they were missing.

Rhianna's distraught expression at hearing the news had been expected as she tested the link between herself and her brother from another time, and found only silence. Her startled exclamation, her terrified eyes, had been enough to have Caleb reaching for his mate and pulling her close.

The last time she had lost a brother, or thought she had, Rhianna had closed off and turned inward to escape her grief. He couldn't allow her to do that again. He had to protect her as best he could because she was his mate, the very reason he breathed. Even as his own heart was heavy with sorrow over what may have befallen Gard and Rayne, he had to be strong for his Annie until they knew for certain what had transpired in Europe.

The information had barely had time to sink in before a pack alert suddenly went out, signalling they were under attack. Everyone had reacted as one, moving to protect the pack as their top priority. Caleb and Rhianna had heeded the call too. The pack was their family and they would protect it at all costs.

All thoughts of Gard and Rayne's disappearance had taken a back seat while the pack fended off the assault of the European vampires. Rhianna had immediately gone to Thereasa's aid, sinking to the ground beside Liam as he cradled his dying mate. Beside him, Cassia had her arms around Pietro, the vampire coated in Reasa's blood, confusion on his scarred face.

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"She threw herself in front of me," Pietro kept muttering, disbelief in his voice." Why would she do that? She had to know the bullets would kill her - she's human now!"

Cassia quiet voice murmured soothingly to her mate, her gaze never leaving the dying woman.

All around were the sounds of screaming and fighting, but to the group kneeling on the forest floor there was only Reasa, and the sound of Liam's pleas. His frantic eyes searched wildly, finding the one person he sought. "Help her, Annie. Help her. Make her wake up again...please."

"Oh, Liam...I wish I could, sweetheart. I truly do..."

"She's there, Annie, I can feel her still there," he wept, his eyes pleading with her. "I can feel her in there, she isn't gone."

Then Mallen had appeared, pushing through the group. "Let me through," he ordered, as he pulled open his medical bag. "If Liam says she's there then I'm not going to argue with him, not after he just brought six seemingly dead vampires back to life. So, I'll work on the physical side and you can do your mental shit. Come on, people, we don't have a lot of time here." His stoic pragmatism seemed to shake off some of the stunned grief they were experiencing and the group parted to give them room...

As events moved around them, the barest change in posture was enough to tell Caleb that his Annie had ceded control to the inner soul the resided within her - to the vampire Queen Anakatrine, and he automatically slipped into his role of protector, guarding the three crucial elements to Thereasa's possible survival.

He'd had no idea if they could pull the woman back from the brink of death, but he would give them every opportunity to do so. He had learned long ago not to doubt Anakatrine's resolve when she wished something to happen. If she had decided today was not Reasa's day to die, then he expected that would be the case.

The fighting had been over by the time Rhianna had slumped tiredly into his waiting arms, the vampire queen once more withdrawn, a healthy pallor beginning to suffuse Reasa's pale cheeks.

"Thank you! Thank you!" Liam's grateful words gushed forth as he cradled his mate carefully, watching the wounds heal miraculously on her body.Www.ŦOV_e(1)wOrM.cóM