

## Chapter 504

It was Dara's turn to try to keep her expression neutral, a resigned sigh bubbling just under the surface. "Truthfully, there is a lot we're still learning about the different enhanced mental abilities some Weres and Vampires have. Europe is throwing up new ones almost on a daily basis, though it isn't something that we can invest any time to investigate at the moment," she said with a reassuring smile. "What we do discover here will be relayed to our Alpha and the Ancient Council for them to work out what it all means when we get home. For now, we need to get on with our mission to find Gard and Rayne."

"Something that we need to be doing now," Agony added, clearly feeling exasperated by the delay.

Louis chose that moment to return to the campground with four of the original vampires he'd brought along to help out with the clean-up operation. He gave Joshua a brief nod and shot a pointed glare in Dante's direction. It was obvious that he knew the other vampire from the opposing coven and he wasn't too happy to see him present. His reaction didn't appear to faze either Joshua or Dante but then Dara presumed that this was typical of the European Covens.

She ran her gaze over the assembled group who were now all looking at her. It was disconcerting in a way but also exhilarating. They were all viewing her as the leader of the group, including Agony for the moment. Who knew what would happen once they touched Romanian soil, but for now, he was willing to follow her lead.

"Joshua, I think Ava and Pippa are ready now. I know you will take good care of them. Tell Rafe that I will be in contact with him once we reach Romania and have a direction to head in. We'll check in daily so if he doesn't hear from us, then he knows that we've hit a problem. That way, should there be any issues; the others will at least know what our last check in point was."

"They will be safe with me," Joshua answered smiling at Ava and Pippa as he shouldered their backpacks. "Are you ready to go, m'ladies?" he teased, drawing a soft giggle from the little girl.

"I will come for you when I have completed my task, little one," Agony said quietly, bending down to Pippa's height. Though his expression remained neutral, there was a glimpse of softness surrounding the usually chilling Vârcolac. "You must listen carefully to Rafe when you reach my pack. Though he is not your Alpha, he is mine, so you must respect his words. He will help you care for the wolf and instruct you on what must be done. Continue to be brave as I know you are."*wŴŴ.novēlŴ©RM.c©m*

Dara fought to stop her mouth dropping open as she watched their interaction. She had never seen Kothari bond with another so openly and compassionately before. It was as if he recognised and empathised with the wounded spirit the child was working so hard to hide. Perhaps Natalia was not the only female who was going to be instrumental in anchoring her volatile friend. This turn of events was certainly something to discuss with their Alpha when they returned.

"Come on, Tali, time to go," Ava smiled, taking the little girl's hand.

Natalia visibly flinched as she watched them, swallowing hard as she fought back tears. Dara couldn't even begin to imagine how painful it was for the younger girl watching her mother treat a stranger as her daughter. Her heart went out to Natalia though she also felt proud of how the human girl was holding it together.*uv©Ŵ.NóVēLwórM.co(m)*

"Take care of each other," Natalia managed to get out, giving them both a quick hug before turning and walking a little distance away from the group.

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Dara expected Mila to follow the girl, but instead, it was Agony who took the three long strides to her side, passing her the lightest backpack of the team.

"You will stay close to my side," he announced. "That way, I can aid you when your humanity proves an obstacle, and you can alert me when the path we choose is perilous. I know you do not wish to do this but you have no choice in the matter. I suggest you resign yourself to that fact with no need to argue the matter. Arguing irritates me and I become unpredictable when I am irritated."

It wasn't the type of support that Dara felt the girl needed, however, strangely, she accepted it without an argument, and her expression turned resolved.

Sliding the backpack fully onto her shoulders, Natalia stared up at Agony with a thoughtful expression, and then she nodded her head, a ghost of a smile threatening to break across her lips. "I bet that sticks in your throat, realising that I am actually good for something. Who would have thought it? A little human girl can do something the big bad monster can't."

She walked back over to Mila and Dante, and missed the grudging respect that crossed the Vârcolac's face. Dara did notice it though, and her misgivings about what would happen between the couple lightened a little. It appeared Natalia had more spirit than she'd originally given her credit for. Oh, she had recognised the girl's strength just by how she was managing to cope with losing her father, and her mother's rejection. She'd just doubted if she would be strong enough to deal with Kothari let alone Agony. It seemed that maybe she had the strength to do just that.

"How are we planning on getting to Romania?" Dante asked. They couldn't rely on their supernatural skills, not with Tali being part of the team. Unless she would consent to them carrying her around like a piece of baggage but he didn't think the girl would agree to that. It would make her appear like she was more of a burden than an active member of the group.*uwŴw.nô©elŴorm.Co©*

"We can go by train. Europe's borders are pretty much open," Louis answered. "Though, once we get into Romania we're going to meet some difficult terrain. I am presuming that any old 'home' would not be in an easily accessible region."

"I will assist Natalia when the time comes." Agony repeated his earlier comment to Natalia. He didn't wait for a response, he turned and headed North. "It's time to move out. Come Natalia."

There was a brief pause before she moved to join him, the rest of the party picking up their packs and following them away from the campground. One by one they filed out of the clearing and into the denseness of the forest heading towards their next objective, and what was likely to be the most dangerous part of their mission.