

## Chapter 523

He was about to continue ahead when he slowed and turned back to them.

"Have you seen anything untoward?" he asked tersely. If anyone was watching, there would be no indication of who he was asking the question. All three shook their heads in the negative, recognising what he was really asking, and ensuring that no one would be any the wiser that it was to Natalia his hidden gaze was fixated.

"We will stop at the next clearing," Agony announced, keeping his voice low. "Mila, please stay close to Natalia when we do. I will need confirmation all is well with Louis. Once you are all sure, Dante and Louis will meet with Dara and I away from the main group. I will provide an update then." He didn't wait for confirmation, heading forward once more to catch up with Dara.

"He's such a charmer."

He heard Natalia's droll words and his lip twitched at her aggrieved tone. She thought he was being misogynist having Mila and her stay behind. While there was an element of wanting to protect her because she was human and frail, he also wanted her to be watching the other vampires to make sure none of them were compromised. Mila was more than capable of taking care of not only herself but also Natalia if needed. His mate should realise that the fact he was willing to leave them alone without strong male supervision was a compliment and not a detriment to them.

He had almost reached Dara when his thoughts finally registered, and for the first time in his life he actually stumbled over a section of large rocks on the trail.

His friend's head whipped around, surprise crossing her face at his clumsiness. She stared at him for a fraction of a second, and then her lips twitched in a small smile, and she arched a perfect brow. "Agony? Is everything okay?"

It was as if she could read his mind and knew exactly what was going on inside his head. He was aware that wasn't the case, but it didn't stop him feeling annoyed. "Fine," he bit out, ensuring that he kept his expression as neutral as possible even though internally his thoughts were reeling. He didn't have time to deal with this latest development, but his mind refused to let go of the revelation.

He had called Natalia his mate. Not Kothari, not the panther, but him,

Agony.*wWw.Nov(ø)lWσ(ι)m.c(ø)m*

When had this happened? How had he allowed it to happen? He couldn't believe that he was acknowledging the unthinkable, that he was agreeing with Kothari's claim that the girl was their mate. She couldn't be...she just couldn't. And yet, he was as protective of the girl as he was of his parents and pack members. He allowed her to speak to him in ways he allowed no others. More importantly, he listened to her when she spoke, really listened, not just tolerated what was being said as he usually did with others. Somewhere along the way he had allowed Natalia to get under his skin but it was something he couldn't deal with now.

"I was able to talk with my parents. They are unharmed but being held captive in a cave. They have been drugged but their immune systems are combatting the drugs. They reckon the potency of the toxin is diminishing, but they're pretending to be unconscious."

"That's fantastic news," Dara smiled, relief crossing her face. "Can they get away? If they can make their way towards us we may not have to get into a fight with their captors."*wWw.NoV⓪lWórm.(c)om*

He shook his head and then let his gaze travel back to where Natalia was talking to Mila. "I've asked them to stay there for now. While we were talking, a wolf from Natalia's pack was brought into their cave. He's been badly injured and is not fit to travel. Father wasn't happy about leaving him behind and once I found out that he may be from Natalia's pack I asked my parents to try to him help."

He paused when Dara arched another eyebrow at him. She had started doing that a lot on the mission and it was starting to get a bit irritating. He considered passing a comment about it but then gritted his teeth. His friend knew exactly what she was doing when she gave him those looks. She was trying to get a rise out of him, to make him admit to things he didn't want to admit to.

Letting out a long sigh, he threw a glare in her direction. "Fine," he admitted. "I didn't want Natalia to have to go through any more loss if it could be helped. She's been through enough already. With the drugs no longer being an issue, my parents are no longer helpless either so they can take care of themselves should their captors try anything when we attack. Happy now?"

He waited for Dara to gloat or come out with some half-assed comment to piss him off more. Instead she smiled softly before turning to look back up the mountain. "Sounds like a good plan," she said. "We can attack on two fronts. They won't see Gard and Rayne coming from behind. I need to find some decent reception to give Rafe a call and let him know we've managed to contact them. I'll do that now."

"Agreed," he replied, pleasantly surprised that he wasn't going to have to butt heads with her. "We're going to take a break at the next clearing. Natalia has confirmed that there are no further mental incursions so far, so I've asked Dante and Louis to meet with you and I away from the group when we stop. It seems only fair to let them know where we stand. I haven't asked Mila or Natalia to join us. For one, I don't want the other vampires to think they're as important to the mission as they are, and two, if the wolf can't be saved then I don't want to get Natalia's hopes up that one of her pack is near."

His words did bring a stern look from his friend, but he kept his expression fixed, not willing to counter any arguments.

"She's much stronger than you give her credit for, Agony." Dara sighed. "How many other people do you know who could cope with losing most of her pack, her father...hell, even her mother at this point. Yet, here she is climbing through the Carpathian Mountains with a group of dangerous strangers helping to rescue your parents and alerting the rest of us to the dangers of being mentally compromised. That young woman has more backbone than half of the youngsters in our pack, and she has no physical strength or stamina to keep her going. She can handle knowing the truth of the situation."

*Www.NO(v)ElwóRm.CóM*

She turned to head off to the right, to find a clearing among the trees to phone Rafe. "It's your call on what you tell her, but if you have any respect for Natalia, I would strongly suggest you tell her everything."

As she disappeared among the trees Agony considered being annoyed at her slap down, but decided it wasn't worth the effort. There was nothing Dara had said that wasn't true, and it was pointless to be annoyed just because you didn't like hearing the truth. Perhaps she was right, and he shouldn't be so overprotective. He would consider telling Natalia about the wolf once he'd briefed Dante and Louis. He would wait and see how the briefing went first.

*WwW.No(v)élwórm.com*