

Chapter 524

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Natalia watched the others disappear from the clearing and smothered down an irritated sigh. Agony's excluding her from whatever was being discussed annoyed her, and she was confused about the level of irritation she was experiencing. It shouldn't matter to her one way or the other being left out of the loop, but for some reason it did. Pulling a bottle of water out of her backpack she took a long drink and then nibbled on a packet of chips. She was hungry and there wasn't much to eat. She guessed she should have been thankful that someone had at least thought to pick up water and snacks for her, but it wasn't exactly proper food.

"You're not happy," Mila commented, her ebony hair swaying as her head turned towards her.
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Her silver gaze should have been disconcerting, however Natalia found it comforting. Her eyes reminded her of Agony's, without the red band around the irises. "How do you put up with Alpha males' overprotectiveness?"

Mila laughed, a sweet tinkling sound that soothed the younger woman. "By allowing them to think they are actually protecting me," her friend answered with a smile. "Understanding Alpha males is a skill that you need to hone over time. The more you fight with them the more protective they become. Dante used to be a complete nightmare when we first met. It took years for him to realise that the more he took away my independence, the more he was causing me hurt. Once he realised that, he became less of a nightmare. Don't get me wrong, he still has his moments, but for the most part he behaves."

"Then why did you allow them to leave you behind from this meeting?" Natalia asked, confusion crossing her face.

Mila laughed again. "Dante and I often split our resources, Tali. We don't always do everything together." She reached out and gently touched her hand to take away any possible sting from her words. "Dante is currently gathering intel which he will share with me when he returns, and I am here with you, making sure that none of the vampires around us become compromised, and helping you develop your skills. I am also your protection detail."
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Protection detail? The thought hadn't occurred to Natalia, but now that her friend mentioned it, she suddenly realised that the strongest members of their group had left them alone with the remaining vampires of Louis' coven.

"Do you think Agony would leave your protection to just anyone?" Mila continued. "The mere fact that he is content to leave you here with me is testament to the level of trust he is placing in me. Is that the actions of an overprotective Alpha male or is it an Alpha male who sees the strength and worth of a member of his team?"

"I hadn't thought of it that way," Natalia conceded, blowing out a slow breath. "I felt like we weren't good enough to be part of their meeting, not that we were performing an alternative role as part of the team."

It was a bit of an eye-opener to realise that not only her skills, but Mila's too were valued on the mission. Maybe she was giving Agony a hard time when he didn't deserve it. Sighing, she let go of the irritation she'd been feeling, and let her thoughts focus on a question she'd been dying to ask but had been biting her tongue to keep quiet. Her mother had often told her that she should engage her brain before she spoke, but sometimes she couldn't contain herself. Natalia let her curiosity have full reign and dived in headfirst.

"You and Dante are together but not together," she commented, wondering if she was trespassing into unwanted territory. "It's obvious to everyone around you that you're both crazy about each other. Why aren't you a couple? If you don't mind me asking."

For a moment she thought she had overstepped Mila's personal boundaries, but then the vampire sighed softly and stared off in the direction the male in question had vanished.

"The life of vampires can be pretty tumultuous, Tali, especially for Elder vampires. A lot of their early lives involve behaviour and actions for which they often struggle to grant themselves forgiveness. Until they can, they cannot move on and find happiness."

Natalia didn't need to ask what she meant, she had been around wolves and vampires long enough to know that their pasts were often littered with regrets. "Dante can't forgive himself his vampiric past?"

Her friend sighed again, turning back to her. "If only it was that simple," she said quietly, sadness marring her exquisite features. "Dante can't forgive himself for his human actions."

At Natalia's confused expression, she smiled sadly. "He was part of an order than hunted vampires. Only the fastest, strongest humans were allowed into the order, so he was formidable even then. Even with that, the order had to hunt vampires from a distance. The Amort poison was their creation, it was how they destroyed the vampires."

"Oh my God!" Natalia whispered, horrified at the picture the other woman was painting. From all the histories and tales she'd heard over the years there had been no mention of some secret order of humans who had hunted supernatural beings, and she had thought wolves had created the Amort poison. To discover it was humans and so long ago was astounding. Add to that fact that Dante had been part of that order...it was just mind-blowing.

For a long moment she didn't know what to say, but then she blurted out the one thought that kept rolling through her stunned mind. "But he's a vampire now." She didn't think Mila's sadness could deepen any further, but it did.

"And therein lies the dilemma," she whispered sadly. "One of his missions went awry and he was turned to the life of a vampire. Since that day he has tried to reconcile his human past with his vampiric nature. He has spent his life searching for ways to protect vampires from any dangers lurking, to track down any threats and neutralise them. He wanders the world trying to atone for every vampire life he and the order were responsible for taking. And I travel with him, waiting for the day when he is finally able to admit that he has done enough to assuage the guilt he cannot overcome."

Natalia didn't realise she was crying until a tear dropped onto their joined hands. The pain in Mila's words was overwhelming, not to mention the pain that Dante carried in his soul and had carried for centuries. She couldn't imagine how much the stoic vampire hurt inside; how hard it must be for him to come to terms with his early life. Dante was living a penance that he may never be able to overcome, and if he couldn't, then Mila and Dante would never be happy.

"That's not fair," she said, choking back a sob and struggling to contain her emotions. "You can't be apart because of something that can't be changed, Mila. And who's to say that what Dante did as a human was wrong anyway? He was protecting his people in the only way he knew how. You said Elder vampires feel guilt for the things they did in their early past. Those things were killing humans by bleeding them dry to feed. How many humans died in those times from vampires? Was the order so wrong in trying to protect humanity?"

"I know that," Mila sighed. "You know that. The issue isn't what we know but in what Dante will concede. Both Abraham and I tried to get him to see sense. He refused to listen, especially after he revealed the second part of the reason he feels so guilty."

"There's more?" Natalia didn't think Dante's story could be any more tragic.