

Chapter 632

"Pietro..."

He halted on his way out of the room, not turning to look back as Andrei called his name.

"I expect you back behind the bar at The Dive tonight. I suggest you use the apartment over the bar for a while until you're feeling more like yourself."

It was Andrei's way of telling him that no matter what had happened this day, he still counted him as his friend and would have his back to the best of his ability. Pietro was aware it was more than he probably deserved but he accepted it as gracefully as he could.

"I'll see you later then."

ww(w).ncvcllwóŔm.CcMf

*****Www.m0VclWcŔM.c0@

"Dara, let me, honey." Alexei's calm words belied the expression on his face as he ushered one daughter aside to reach the other.

She looked up through tear-filled eyes to see her parents beside them, her mother clearly having shifted into her wolf form at some point, as she now stood naked before them. "She won't stop weeping. I can't do anything to help her."

Her mother held out her arms, enfolding her in a tight embrace. "That's our job, sweetheart, not yours, though you are a credit to all of us that you have tried so hard." Gentle hands soothed down her back, trying to take the ache from her heart at her sister's distress. "Can you rustle me up something to wear, honey? There's a bit of a nip in the air."

Smothering down another sob, Dara fought for some composure and the concentration she would need to accede to her mother's request. She knew it was a deliberate attempt to redirect her, and she was grateful to her mother for it. She was no help to Cassia being an emotional wreck. She needed to be Cassia's strength right now.

Taking a deep breath and doing her best to tune everything out around her, Dara tapped into the well of power she had inside, conjuring up a sarong in deep forest green. It was easier to create single bolts of cloth as opposed to specific clothing, and it appeared her mother was content with her offering as Cedar wrapped the sarong around her body.

Turning back to Cassia, Dara watched her father kneel beside her, his hands gentle as they stroked through the wolf's tangle fur.

"Cass, honey, you can't hide within your wolf. I know it's hard right now but you need to come back to us. You need to let us take care of you." Alexei kept his words soft and low, all the while his hands continued to stroke the wolf as he talked.

"Come, daughter. Show me that wonderful strength I know that lives within your heart. Return to your family. Come home to us."WŴw.0(vclWcŔM.c0@

For a long moment it appeared as if she would refuse him, and then the wolf shifted into the woman, curled up on the forest floor. The second she shifted, Alexei scooped her up into his arms and she burrowed her face into the side of his neck, loud sobs wracking her body.

"He doesn't want me, Daddy. My mate doesn't want me."

Alexei's footsteps faltered as he started walking towards his mate and youngest daughter, a flash of fury in his eyes. His gaze fell on Dara after Cedar gave a quick shake of her head.

"Explain." The word ground out in a low voice almost over-shadowed by Cassia's crying.

Dara swallowed hard, trying not to shrink back against her mother, who continued to run a hand down her back.

"Alexei, please moderate your tone," Cedar remarked, a hint of censure in her tone. "Whatever is going on is not of Dara's making, and she deserves better than that from her father."

The rebuke in her tone was enough to get through her mate's initial fury, and he conceded her point, giving Dara an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, Dara. I'm just concerned for your sister. Please tell us what you know."

Relieved to see a more normal expression on her father's face, Dara straightened up, giving him a tentative smile back. "I don't know much, Dad. Cassia told me that Pietro was her mate but that her wolf was acting a bit strange about it... as if it couldn't quite make up its mind one way or the other."(w)WŴ.NcVclw0ŔM.c0m

"That's impossible," Cedar interjected, a frown marring her face as she reached out to Cassia and stroked a hand through her weeping daughter's hair. "Our wolves always know - instantly."

"Cassia says otherwise," her daughter answered, shrugging her shoulders. "I wouldn't know personally as I haven't met my mate yet."

"One at a time..." Alexei muttered under his breath, his tone rueful as he cradled Cassia tenderly in his arms as they headed back towards the compound. She had finally stopped weeping, though it was apparent she was lost somewhere within herself. "Is Pietro aware of this?"

There was no mistaking the hard edge to his voice and Dara was glad the vampire would be gone by the time they got back. There was no telling what her father might do giving his current mood. "As far as I know, Cassia was taking things slowly with him, giving him time to heal from Europe before making her claim. I don't think he's aware of it despite the fact they've been spending a lot of time together."

"Lucky for him." Again the words were muttered, a dangerous edge to each one.

"Alexei," Cedar sighed, placing a hand on his arm to try to sooth the rage she could feel flowing through their mate bond.

"Look at her, Cedar. Look at our girl. Don't expect me to be rational about this when Cassia is hurting this badly. I just can't do it."

"Don't you think I'm every bit as concerned as you are, Alexei?" she answered quietly, unable to hide her disappointment. "Don't you think my heart is breaking seeing our daughter so distressed? One of us has to keep a level head about this, and of course, that person is going to have to be me, as it always it. I don't get the luxury of exploding into a temper and protecting my daughter because I'm too busy ensuring you don't do something stupid that will make things worse."

It was so unusual to hear the trace of bitterness in her voice that for a moment Alexei stopped walking, surprise crossing his face. Dara was equally surprised and uncomfortable witnessing one her parents' rare fights. She wasn't sure whether she should keep walking or stay with them.

Her father remained silent for a long moment, and then his expression softened and he leaned down to kiss his mate, brushing his cheek against the top of her head. "I'm sorry, I know you're just as concerned, honey. I'll promise to behave."

As quickly as Cedar had become irritated, her expression mellowed and she rolled her eyes in disbelief. "You don't even know the meaning of the word, Alexei Romanov, but I'm holding you to that promise."

With the disagreement over with as soon as it had begun; they broke through the trees and entered the pack compound. It was clear of most of the people from earlier, however Rafe was sitting on the steps to his house, his eyes pinned to them as they walked out of the forest. He rose and met them half way, his trouble gaze on Cassia.

"Is she okay? Do you need to use the safe room?"