

Chapter 703

Dara Romanov ran as if all the shades of hell were after her. It took less than two minutes to make her way from the wrecked house set apart from the main pack compound to the Alpha's large dwelling in the very heart of their community. Her urge to throw up had passed, but the pit of her stomach still rumbled with nausea.

Clutched in her hands, was the leather bound journal she'd discovered in Gard and Rayne's immaculate bedroom. The final words she had read were still embedded in her terrified mind.

Dear Kothari...

I'm here

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Just thinking about it made her want to weep and her throat tighten with fear. If what she suspected was true...then Lord only knew what that would mean for Kothari or the rest of the pack. This was something she couldn't keep from her Alphas, they had to know and know immediately.

She wasn't the least surprised to scent Rafe in his study the moment she entered his house. Given everything that had happened in the early hours of the morning, she doubted that he had even been to bed yet. Barely waiting for his summons to enter when she knocked, Dara opened the door to find her Alpha staring into the empty fireplace directly ahead of her.

Troubled brown eyes turned to regard her as she entered, surprise mirrored deep within. "Dara. What are you doing up and about so early?"

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"I went to check on Kothi. He didn't come to the pack's aid when the vampires struck and that seemed odd given how protective he is of the pack. Rafe...Rafe, I found the house completely destroyed, save for Gard and Rayne's bedroom. This was lying on the bed..." The words rushed out of her mouth, fear etched in every one as she held out the journal to her

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Rafe's strong brow puckered in a frown as he reached for the book. "I tested my link with him. His aura is peaceful." He took the journal to his desk, sitting in his customary seat as he quickly scanned the pages.

Dara couldn't form any more words, her fear suddenly leaving her so lethargic she practically flopped into a chair across from Rafe, relieved that she had passed the burden of her discovery to someone who would know what to do about it.

When the Alpha reached the end of the journal and his eyes met hers once more, she wanted to burst into tears at the expression on his face. In all her years, she'd never seen Rafe let down his guard before, to show exactly what he was thinking. Now the colour had leeches from his face and there was such grief etched across his features that the tears she was trying to hold back fell unbidden.

"Kothari has gone rogue."

As he uttered the words that confirmed her suspicions, Dara broke into loud sobs. She had tried to deny it even as she knew the truth. She had known it from the moment she'd read the last entry. Gard and Rayne's disappearance had finally done what they had all feared; it had tipped Kothari over the edge.

"Rafe? What's wrong?" She was vaguely aware of Lacey, the Alpha's mate's, worried voice filling the room, but she didn't look up, couldn't acknowledge the other person in the room. Kothi was out there somewhere alone, only he wasn't the Kothi they all knew and loved despite his quirks. He was something else, something different and potentially lethal. It was all that kept going through her mind, all she could think about for a long time.

By the time she had surfaced enough from her inner thoughts, there were more people in the study, her mother and father, Alexei and Cedar, and her uncle and aunt, Andrei and Loretta. Kallum was there too, his hair ruffled as if he'd just pulled himself out of bed.

"I stayed here rather than returning to the Praetorian Compound," her friend explained when she scrubbed at her cheeks and gave him a questioning look.

It made sense that he would stay close to the pack after the attack, he was the uncrowned leader of the Vârcolac. Their tight mental bond would have alerted him to Dara's distress and he had come without a second's hesitation. Next to her family, Kal was one of the most important people in her life, and he took his responsibilities seriously.

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It was only as she acknowledged that, that she noticed the additional mental support drifting towards her, and realised that Cassia and Pietro were in the room too. Her sister's mate was standing, leaning against the door as if he was barring any further people from entering. Cassia was standing beside her parents, worry etched across her face.

"I'm fine," Dara reassured her family, taking a deep breath to regain her composure. It was evident that everyone was aware of what had happened, and she wondered just how long she had been crying that she hadn't noticed her surroundings.

Her mother ran a hand over her hair, leaning down to give her a hug. Dara wasn't sure whether she was reassuring her daughter or herself, but she managed a weak smile and leaned into her touch. Her father was hovering close by, his concerned expression another clear indicator of the gravity of the situation.

Dara wanted to kick herself for losing it so completely, for scaring her family and her Alphas. She was better than this, stronger than this. They shouldn't have to be concerned about her. It was Kothari they needed to be thinking of right now, and how they could best help him.

"Has he really gone rogue?" Dara asked, her voice much stronger as she straightened her back and dug deep inside for the hidden well of strength she knew was there.

"What other explanation can there be?" Rafe answered, gesturing to the journal. "From what I've read, Kothari has walked a very fine balance for so many years. It's a wonder it's taken him this long to finally break. Clearly Gard and Rayne have been buffering him for a long time, though who this angel is he refers to, I don't know."

Dara knew...though she tried to deny it. Reading between the lines it was clear that Kothi believed this angel to be his mate...and she was more than certain that he was completely wrong about that. "It's me," she finally said, drawing all eyes to her. "He refers to an incident where Agony hurt his angel. I am fairly certain that he's referring to something that happened a while ago, when we were at the river together."

"He hurt you?!"

The icy quality of her father's voice made her shiver but she kept her expression as neutral as she could. "Not really, Dad. He got angry because I was pushing him and he did grab me, but he didn't hurt me per se. I shifted to wolf form and that appeared to trigger his panther because he shifted too. The odd thing was he appeared so surprised to see his animal, which after reading the journal I can now understand, but I didn't at the time."

She took another deep breath, her eyes appealing to her father whose expression was thunderous despite her words. "He didn't mean to hurt me and he didn't really, I swear he didn't. It was straight after that incident that he saved Lily when she fell from the cliff. Kothi loves us, Dad, all of us. He would never deliberately hurt any of us, and I think that he may even possibly believe that I am his mate..."

There, she'd said the words out aloud now, and for a brief moment there was stunned silence within the room and then everyone started to talk at once.

"Dara, is he?" Cassia gasped, her eyes going wide.

"Dear God, Karma surely can't hate me that much," her father grumbled, which brought him a dig in the side from his mate.

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"Alexei Romanov! Kothari is part of our pack. He's family already. Don't you dare speak ill of our daughter's mate!" Cedar's disapproval flashed from her eyes even as she nibbled worriedly at her bottom lip.

"The boy is dangerous," Pietro commented from his position at the door. "I have spoken with him and have seen his struggle. Alexei is right to be concerned, especially after what has happened."

"Is it even possible for Kothi to go rogue when he has found his mate?" Lacey asked, confusion and concern warring for dominance on her face.

"He's not," Dara muttered, frowning as everyone ignored her and started to have a debate on whether or not there was some hope that Kothari hadn't gone rogue because of this new development.

"He's not," she said a bit louder, rolling her eyes as no one paid a blind bit of notice to her.

"Kothari is NOT my mate!" she yelled, startling the rest of the room into total silence as they all turned to look at her once more.

"But you said..." her mother stammered, looking even more confused than she had been before.

"That Kothi believed he was my mate. Just because he believes it doesn't make it the truth. I am one hundred percent certain that he isn't my mate, Mom. I love him, of course I do, but not in that way. My wolf is completely ambivalent towards him. She is not the least bit interested in him."

"Couldn't it be similar to how my wolf was undecided at first with Pietro?" Cassia asked, though it was evident that although she asked the question, she automatically believed her sister.