

Chapter 723

That wasn't going to stop Ava from speaking though. With Fox off somewhere on a separate mission for their Alpha, that made Roland the head beta and by rights, she was the senior female in the pack. "Terra is too young for the responsibility. She's just had her eighteenth birthday. What if there are vampires out there? The children need an adult to protect them."

"Don't take this the wrong way, Ava, but you still think like a human...and that's understandable considering your daughter has yet to make the change," Astrid commented, her words tough, but her expression sympathetic. ""Terra is a born shape shifter. She's been raised and trained in survival techniques. She's more than capable of escorting the children onto the next site. In fact, you may be as well to send Natalia with them too, and the young one you're holding."

The very thought of sending her daughter away was unacceptable, though Ava had to concede the other women had valid points. She pondered on their words, looking back down at the child who had maintained her silence, apart from when she'd called her mama. Making up her mind, she let out a small sigh. "Very well, Terra can take the children to the rendezvous point, but Natalia and this little one are staying here. Roland may want to talk to the child."

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She could tell the other two women didn't agree with her decision but they held their peace, and both headed over to the larger tent where the handful of children were still sleeping. Ava turned her attention to one of the other tents, the one that contained the most precious person in her world, not counting Roland.

"Tali..."

There was a moment's silence and then a muttering under breath, as her daughter pulled herself out of her tent. She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and blinked into the sunlight, a frown marring her pretty features. Her brown eyes appeared slightly glazed, as was wont to happen when Natalia was dragged unceremoniously away from her science books.

"Mama? What's happening?"

Ava couldn't help smiling as she stared at her daughter. Her Natalia lived in another world within their own, often being the last to know anything that was happening within the pack. There was no way in hell she would ever be separated from her often-distracted daughter. She relied too much on her mother to guide her through life.

"This child just wandered into the camp a moment ago. Your father and the others are out trying to find where she came from. Terra is going to take the youngsters onto the next rendezvous point as a precaution."

Roland wasn't Tali's real father, though he had brought her up as if she were his own since the day he had found Ava dying from blood loss after being attacked by a vampire. Tali had been less than six month's old, and it had only been her love for her child that had helped Ava withstand being turned to a Were to save her life. Roland had taken them both under his protection, and as time had passed, the mate bond had formed between him and Ava.

They had been a family ever since, even though Ava could bear no other children. It hadn't mattered to her mate. As far as he was concerned, Tali was his daughter.

While Natalia was processing what she'd been told, the child's initial reaction to Ava's hair had quickly waned, and she wriggled in her arms. Ava set her down as she felt the little girl's fear rising. Whatever had happened to her was so traumatic it was as if she couldn't bear to be touched. Her natural maternal instincts were to comfort the girl, but she didn't want to frighten her any further.

Ava's heart swelled with pride a second later, as her daughter reacted to the child's distress, her instinctive empathy kicking in as tears well up the little one's eyes.

"It's okay, sweetheart. That's my mama and she's very kind. She won't hurt you." Natalia's tone was soft and soothing as she sat down on the ground to bring herself closer to the girl's height. It was clear she felt sorry for the child, a little girl who was as lost and out of place as she was. "I'm Tali...what's your name?"

Natalia held her breath, trying to be as non-threatening as she could. Truth be told, in a pack of wolves, that usually wasn't too hard to achieve. She was worried about whatever may have happened, and what that could mean for their pack, but she wanted to help the little girl, she just looked so haunted and forlorn.

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The child stared at her for a long moment and then she sniffed noticeably, recoiling a couple of step backwards, her mouth dropping open. "You're not a wolf." It came out as an accusation, as was to be expected from one who was so young she hadn't had any life experience with the other races that made up her world.

Natalia didn't let the girl's tone upset her though. She smiled to show her that she understood her confusion as she nodded her head in agreement. "Not yet," she answered. "I am still human. My mama's a wolf though, and one day soon I will choose to become one."

The unexpectedness of her answer seemed to capture the child's interest, and she moved forward again, sitting down a couple of feet away from the human girl. "I'm a wolf and my Mama and Papa were wolves. How come you're not one?"

Were...Natalia didn't look at her mother, keeping her gaze fixed on the child but she knew she would have caught the past tense the girl used. Something had clearly happened to her parents, something bad. "I was only a baby when I came to live with the pack. Our Alpha is very wise and she decided that I should be allowed to grow up before I made the decision if I wanted to be a wolf or not."