

Chapter 742

Agony hissed, his gaze flitting to the young child, "Pippa is under my protection." "She nearly passed away after I gave her my promise. She has to remain with me.

Natalia needs to stay, Mila insisted. She is essential for locating Gard and Rayne to be successful. Dara, if she leaves, all will be lost.

Dara looked from one to the other and then her gaze fell on Natalia who was looking rather shell-shocked by the other woman's insistence that she remain and was somehow crucial to their success. She had little time to make a decision and she didn't even know if she could get the others to accept her decisions as final.

Squaring her shoulders, she settled on Agony, giving him her no nonsense look. "Agony, we cannot take a baby with us to Romania and you know that. In addition, we cannot separate Pippa from Ava as she's the only person keeping Ava from going rogue. Now, I'm certain you don't want us to be back where we were only an hour ago and we cannot take Ava with us, so they must return to our pack. There is no other way you have to see that. I know you're not intimidating that you don't trust Rafe and Lacey to be able to care for the child either. I can call Joshua and have him take them to Rafe. I trust him as does Caleb and Demetri. You can trust him too."

She didn't wait for his agreement, turning her attention to Mila and Natalia. She wanted to send the younger woman back with her mother and Pippa, but she was aware of her importance to Kothari, and Mila's vehemence just hammered that point home. They really had no option but to take the human girl with them, even if it did place her in danger. "Tali, I know it's a lot to ask, but we need you to stay with us. I'm not going to lie and say that this won't be dangerous, because you've heard what we're up against. I promise we will do what we can to keep you safe, both Agony and me, and all the others who come with us. Can we count on you to help us?"

Natalia's first instinct was to scream no. She didn't want to leave her mother, and she didn't want her to be sent away either. Why couldn't they all stay together? Even as she thought it, she knew in her heart that it couldn't happen. Her mama was sick and what Dara said was true, she needed Pippa more than she needed her own daughter right now. If she agreed to stay, her mother and Pippa would be safe. Whoever this enemy was in Europe would have a harder time hurting them if they were on another continent.

Nodding her head slowly, Natalia looked at her mother and then turned back to Dara. "They will be safe with your alpha, and they can come back when our alpha returns?"

"Of course they will, and they can, sweetheart. This is just a temporary measure to give them the care they need. It's not forever. You will see your mother again, Tali."

That was all she needed, to know that they would be safe. Her instincts would have been screaming at her if her decision to stay was the wrong one, but despite the clear danger she would be in, this was the calmest she'd felt since before Pippa arrived in their camp. Kneeling down beside her mother, Natalia brushed a stray strand of hair from her temple. "Ava, you and Tali are going on a big adventure to meet another pack of wolves. Isn't that exciting? Why don't you take Pip...Tali into the tent to gather up some things for your journey?"

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"Come on, baby, we're going to see some new wolves. Won't that be fun?" Ava crooned, standing and scooping the little girl into her arms.

"It will be okay, Pippa," Natalia whispered to the child. "You will be safe and cared for."

"I'll look after your mama for you, Tali," she whispered back. "I'll help her get dressed, and make sure she doesn't go to sleep forever."

Pippa's young eyes were far too old, and her words brought a strangled sob from Natalia, but she managed to put a shaky smile on her face. "You are so brave, little one. We are so proud of you."

"I'm not happy about this," Agony grumbled, though he didn't make any move to stop what was happening. Dara's logic made sense, but he still couldn't see why the human girl couldn't be sent away too. It would be less of a distraction for him if he didn't have to deal with Kothari making moon eyes at the her. "Call Joshua. I will see if I can locate where the remaining pack young went to." He turned and vanished once more, relieved to be away from everyone for a little while.

"Are you coming with us, Louis?" Dara asked the coven leader. "If you are and want to bring some of your coven with you, make sure they fall into the 'known forever' category." She was already pulling out her phone to call Joshua. With any luck, he wouldn't have any objections about doing her a favour.

Louis just stared at her, his expression unreadable. As far as he was concerned, what they were planning was nothing short of suicide, despite having that crazy bastard Agony on their side. However, he had to consider what was best for his coven. If he didn't go and they failed at their task, it was only going to buy the rest of them a short period of time before this unknown enemy showed his hand, buoyed from having defeated some of the most powerful vampires and hybrids on the planet. Possibly, a few extra vampires could help the mission succeed. Wasn't it in his coven's best interest to help?

"Louis?" Dante's expression was pensive as he spoke. It was clear his friend thought they had a better chance with him on board.

"Fine! I'll come," he grumbled, knowing he really didn't have much of a choice. He had to throw his hand in on one side or the other, so it was better the devil he knew than the one he didn't. In addition, he had a feeling Freya wouldn't be best pleased if he didn't help out her pack mates, and he didn't want her on his ass. "Give me half an hour to organise. I will be back."

She completed her call just as the vampire turned and disappeared into the treeline. "Joshua will escort Ava and Pippa to Rafe. He said Caleb has a private jet that he keeps here for urgent, discreet travel so they will use that to minimise any distress to them. He'll be here shortly to pick them up."w(w)w.N0v(e)lW0rM.c0m

"Then we just need to wait for Agony and Louis to return and we can be on our way," Mila answered.

Dara nodded, relief and concern warring for dominance. It felt good to finally be moving forward instead of backwards, and yet she would have been a fool not to be worried about what they were possibly walking into. If they didn't find Gard and Rayne, safe and well...there was no telling what Agony would do, or if they would ever see Kothari again.wWw.0(v)elw0rm.č(0)0

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There was the briefest of knocks on his study door before it opened and Rhianna slipped inside, closing it quietly behind her. Rafe Hanlon watched his sister silently for a moment, his thoughts still immersed in his last conversation with Dara. Dara and Kothari needed her help and yet he knew when he told her why she would want to go to them, and that was something neither he nor Caleb would allow. For the first time since he could remember, he wasn't entirely sure how to deal with the petite redhead in front of him. She was no longer just his Annie, but the living embodiment of the last vampire queen, and he'd seen first-hand just how powerful Anakatrine was and what she was capable of.

"I don't think I like your expression very much, Rafe," she said, a frown marring her exquisite features as she moved to sit on the sofa under the window.

For some reason she never took one of the seats directly across from the desk when she visited, as if she was wordlessly letting him know that she wasn't subordinate to him. Not that he had ever considered that she was, not the way an alpha did with the rest of his pack. Still, she was his baby sister and therefore his to protect whether she needed it or not. He didn't think he would ever lose that feeling where his Annie was concerned.

"Will Caleb be joining us?" he countered, hoping for an affirmative. He didn't like the way this meeting was starting to shape up. A difficult Annie was a pain in the ass to deal with.

His response only had Rhianna's frown deepening and her mouth setting in a stubborn line, and he wanted to kick himself. Clearly she knew something was wrong and was reacting to the tension she could sense in him.

"I am more than capable of talking to my brother without my mate being present," she answered. "Or am I talking to the Armand-Hanlon Alpha as opposed to the man who brought me up?"

Yeah, he'd gone and done it from the icy quality of her tone. Now he needed to work out how to diffuse the situation before they had one of their extremely rare fights. There was nothing for it, other than to appeal to her softer side. Sighing, he rubbed a weary hand over his eyes. He hadn't managed to get the amount of sleep he really needed, and he was worried about Dara and Kothari and what was in store for them going forward. "Cut me some slack, Annie. Please? I've got enough to deal with without having a war for dominance with you as well as every other bloody alpha male that comes into my study."

Shrewd lavender eyes regarded him solemnly for a long moment and then he saw her expression soften, concern replacing the annoyance in her gaze. "I'm sorry. You're tension just whacked me so hard in the face when I came into the room that I reacted to it. What's wrong, Rafe? Has something happened in Europe? Are Dara and Kothi okay?"

"For now they're fine, though the news Dara has shared is a worry. Agony is still in dominance but Dara assures me that he's being compliant at the moment." Rafe paused, getting up to walk around his desk. He wanted to be close to his sister in case she tried to take off recklessly when she learned the next part of the news. "He's worked out where Gard and Rayne were headed after they left Louis's coven. They were going home."

"Home?" Rhianna frowned again, confusion crossing her face. "But they never..." her words suddenly trailed off and then the confusion turned to shock. "Oh my God, they went home!" she gasped, instantly putting the pieces together. Her eyes were wide as she stared up him. "They returned to Romania," she whispered before jumping up, a hand pressed against her stomach, a gesture that was so inimically Annie when she was concerned that it brought Rafe a level of comfort. It meant that Anakatrine was still dormant and allowing Rhianna to deal with the revelation.

"What's waiting for them there, Annie? What are they walking into?"

"Home," she whispered, moisture gathering in her eyes. "Our home. It's where Anakatrine, Callain, Gard and Rayne all began their journey. It's where Ana and Callain died, and where Gard lost Rayne as an infant. It is the beginning but also the end, where the rot set into the vampire nation and we lost our way for millennia."

A tear slid down her cheek, sorrow flowing across her face. "We never went back, Rafe. Neither Caleb nor I ever considered it. I doubt Rayne ever did either, though Gard may have. He was alone a very long time while he waited for Ana to be reborn. It would have been his only link to her, so he may have gone back. I just don't know why we didn't think about it earlier. It makes so much sense that they would have gone back to the beginning."

Did it? Maybe it did to Rhianna, but Rafe doubted very much it would have been something the rest of them would have considered since Gard and Rayne's disappearance. After all, it had never crossed his mind to ask Rhianna or Caleb about the origins of the Triumvirate, not even after he'd learned of Anakatrine and Callain's rebirth. Now that they were on the topic, Rafe found his curiosity piqued. "You were never tempted to revisit your old home?"

Rhianna shook her head. "There can't be anything left of the Palace or its grounds after all this time. We did visit Romania when we did that tour of Europe years ago, Caleb even made it as far as Braşov but he never went to the Palace. He was meeting Joshua and I remained in Bucharest. It was at Braşov where Gard discovered Caleb hosted Callain inside and reawakened him."

"And because you didn't go with Caleb that's why it took more time for Gard to learn about you."

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