

Chapter 748

It was clear that Dara wasn't too happy with his assessment, but she didn't argue with him, merely inclined her head in agreement. "This is Joshua. He will take Ava and Pippa to Rafe. Don't you go giving him a hard time, Agony. He is trusted by both Caleb and Demetri, as well as by me."

Joshua would have preferred not to be the direct centre of attention for Kothari/Agony, but he knew he had to accept the scrutiny he was now under.

"It is not like you to trust so quickly," the younger male remarked, his gaze never leaving the vampire as he spoke, though it was clear he was still having a conversation with Dara.

The blonde sighed, and frowned slightly, before shrugging her shoulders and turning away. "I can't talk about it here," she called over her shoulder. "Let's just say, Liam and I share a similar taste in hobbies."

No one else would have known what she meant by that, though Joshua did, and he could guess from the understanding that crossed Agony's face, that the Liam mentioned must have had enhanced mental skills that resembled Dara's in some way. What they were he didn't know, but her words appeared to settle the brooding Vârcolac as he too, turned away, surveying the area around them for progress.

"We're wasting time," Agony growled, a dark frown marring his features. "I still don't understand why we need the human girl to come with us either. She will slow us down." He studiously ignored the protest from his other half. Having an unnecessary distraction was still gnawing at him.

"Believe me, coming with you is the last thing in the world that I want to do," Natalia shot back, her chin tilting upwards though it was clear to see that she wasn't feeling half as brave as she was trying to appear.

Then why are you?" the Vârcolac retorted, his shaded eyes trying to bore into the girl's head.

"I have to."

It was such a strange thing to say from such a frail girl, that everyone stopped what they were doing and stared at her. It was Mila who finally moved closer, her head tilting to the side in curiosity.ⓂⓌ.nôⓈé!wôrmm.coⓈ

"Why do you have to come, Tali?"

The girl appeared to shrink inward at the scrutiny for a moment and then she visibly swallowed. "Because just the thought of leaving is enough to send me into a panic attack and want to throw up," she admitted.

Their curiosity heightened though Mila smiled encouragingly at the girl. "This feeling has some important significance?"

Another long pause fell over the group before Natalia finally nodded and took a deep breath. "Sometimes I get a feeling when something bad is about to happen. If it's really dangerous, then I can even throw up and become too ill to move. It happened when Pippa came and told us about him." She pointed in Kothari's direction.

"At first I thought it meant he was a personal danger to not only my pack but also to me, but as time has passed, the closer I remain to him, the calmer I feel. It's only when I think about getting as far away from him as possible that the panic begins to set in again and I feel ill. My alpha has come to trust my feelings and it has saved our pack a few times. I have come to trust them too so there really is no option for me but to come with you."

Joshua shared a glance with Dara weighing up Natalia's words. "One of my coven mated with a human male a century ago," he announced. "Henry told us something similar happened to him, and that he sometimes just knew when he shouldn't walk in a certain direction. He is now our top security agent and his skills have increased exponentially since he made the change to vampire." He knew it was a lot of information to relate about his coven, but he trusted the people around him, and giving them his trust went a long way encourage them to return theirs.

"I would hazard a guess that this skill falls within the Seer spectrum," Mila mused. "It's not quite full foresight but something very similar. I also had strange feelings when I was human. The one time that I didn't listen to them, the end result was my human blindness that never repaired when I became vampire."

"Then these feelings will become stronger when I make the change to Were?" Natalia asked, genuine curiosity crossing her pretty features.

Agony growled and then appeared surprised that the sound had left his lips. He ignored Dara's raised eyebrow, working to keep his expression neutral. "That is a strong possibility...if you make the change to Were. At least you will be some use to the team."

It was Dara's turn to try to keep her expression neutral, a resigned sigh bubbling just under the surface. "Truthfully, there is a lot we're still learning about the different enhanced mental abilities some Weres and Vampires have. Europe is throwing up new ones almost on a daily basis, though it isn't something that we can invest any time to investigate at the moment," she said with a reassuring smile. "What we do discover here will be relayed to our Alpha and the Ancient Council for them to work out what it all means when we get home. For now, we need to get on with our mission to find Gard and Rayne."

"Something that we need to be doing now," Agony added, clearly feeling exasperated by the delay.

Louis chose that moment to return to the campground with four of the original vampires he'd brought along to help out with the clean-up operation. He gave Joshua a brief nod and shot a pointed glare in Dante's direction. It was obvious that he knew the other vampire from the opposing coven and he wasn't too happy to see him present. His reaction didn't appear to faze either Joshua or Dante but then Dara presumed that this was typical of the European Covens.

She ran her gaze over the assembled group who were now all looking at her. It was disconcerting in a way but also exhilarating. They were all viewing her as the leader of the group, including Agony for the moment. Who knew what would happen once they touched Romanian soil, but for now, he was willing to follow her lead.

"Joshua, I think Ava and Pippa are ready now. I know you will take good care of them. Tell Rafe that I will be in contact with him once we reach Romania and have a direction to head in. We'll check in daily so if he doesn't hear from us, then he knows that we've hit a problem. That way, should there be any issues; the others will at least know what our last check in point was."

"They will be safe with me," Joshua answered smiling at Ava and Pippa as he shouldered their backpacks. "Are you ready to go, m'ladies?" he teased, drawing a soft giggle from the little girl.ⓂⓌ.nôvélwôrM.ôómm

"I will come for you when I have completed my task, little one," Agony said quietly, bending down to Pippa's height. Though his expression remained neutral, there was a glimpse of softness surrounding the usually chilling Vârcolac. "You must listen carefully to Rafe when you reach my pack. Though he is not your Alpha, he is mine, so you must respect his words. He will help you care for the wolf and instruct you on what must be done. Continue to be brave as I know you are."

Dara fought to stop her mouth dropping open as she watched their interaction. She had never seen Kothari bond with another so openly and compassionately before. It was as if he recognised and empathised with the wounded spirit the child was working so hard to hide. Perhaps Natalia was not the only female who was going to be instrumental in anchoring her volatile friend. This turn of events was certainly something to discuss with their Alpha when they returned.

"Come on, Tali, time to go," Ava smiled, taking the little girl's hand.

Natalia visibly flinched as she watched them, swallowing hard as she fought back tears. Dara couldn't even begin to imagine how painful it was for the younger girl watching her mother treat a stranger as her daughter. Her heart went out to Natalia though she also felt proud of how the human girl was holding it together.

"Take care of each other," Natalia managed to get out, giving them both a quick hug before turning and walking a little distance away from the group.

Dara expected Mila to follow the girl, but instead, it was Agony who took the three long strides to her side, passing her the lightest backpack of the team.

"You will stay close to my side," he announced. "That way, I can aid you when your humanity proves an obstacle, and you can alert me when the path we choose is perilous. I know you do not wish to do this but you have no choice in the matter. I suggest you resign yourself to that fact with no need to argue the matter. Arguing irritates me and I become unpredictable when I am irritated."

It wasn't the type of support that Dara felt the girl needed, however, strangely, she accepted it without an argument, and her expression turned resolved.

Sliding the backpack fully onto her shoulders, Natalia stared up at Agony with a thoughtful expression, and then she nodded her head, a ghost of a smile threatening to break across her lips. "I bet that sticks in your throat, realising that I am actually good for something. Who would have thought it? A little human girl can do something the big bad monster can't."

She walked back over to Mila and Dante, and missed the grudging respect that crossed the Vârcolac's face. Dara did notice it though, and her misgivings about what would happen between the couple lightened a little. It appeared Natalia had more spirit than she'd originally given her credit for. Oh, she had recognised the girl's strength just by how she was managing to cope with losing her father, and her mother's rejection. She'd just doubted if she would be strong enough to deal with Kothari let alone Agony. It seemed that maybe she had the strength to do just that.

"How are we planning on getting to Romania?" Dante asked. They couldn't rely on their supernatural skills, not with Tali being part of the team. Unless she would consent to them carrying her around like a piece of baggage but he didn't think the girl would agree to that. It would make her appear like she was more of a burden than an active member of the group.

"We can go by train. Europe's borders are pretty much open," Louis answered. "Though, once we get into Romania we're going to meet some difficult terrain. I am presuming that any old 'home' would not be in an easily accessible region."

"I will assist Natalia when the time comes." Agony repeated his earlier comment to Natalia. He didn't wait for a response, he turned and headed North. "It's time to move out. Come

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She walked to join him after a brief pause, and the rest of the group picked up their packs and followed them out of the campground. They moved in a line out of the open and into the thick woodland, where they were headed for their next target and what was probably the riskiest phase of the mission.

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