

Chapter 751

He debated trying to persuade her further when she nodded but her expression remained skeptical, but ultimately decided against it. His parents' enticing aroma turned into a beacon, beckoning him to start the climb up into the mountains.

"Dara, the pull I feel is great," he said quietly, taking a half step forward. "I need you to watch our backs just in case whatever overcame my parents comes looking for me and I don't recognise the danger until it is too late."

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Though his tone was solemn, the blonde Vârcolac laughed, amusement dancing across her face. "I have never known you to overlook anything, whether you call yourself Agony or Kothari. I will be on alert anyway because I don't know how to do anything else, however you will know of any danger at the same time I do, Agony."

For the barest of moments something alien assaulted him, a sharp gnawing feeling, an instant of doubt. Never in his existence could he remember ever feeling uncertain, and he didn't like it one bit. The moment passed as quickly as it arrived, and he inclined his head at his friend. He knew Dara would protect the others if he was unable to, and that was good enough for him to start forward. He was conscious of Natalia meeting his step with only the barest of hesitations, his lips curling into an involuntary smile. She really was very brave for someone so fragile. Perhaps he should stop fighting Kothari so hard and pay more attention to the girl.

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"They're here, Rafe." Aaron Alexander popped his head around the study door long enough to utter the three words and then disappeared again.

The Armand-Hanlon alpha looked up from the report delivered by one of Jared's betas on the lone wolf movement within the city, and placed it on his mahogany desk. It hadn't seemed that long since Dara had called to update him on what was happening in Europe, however a glance at the clock on the mantle of the fireplace showed that he'd been sat at his desk for more hours than he cared to admit.

The remains of dinner sat off to his left and he remembered Lacey coming in with it and admonishing him to eat. A warm smile curved his lips at the thought of his mate, and he once more wondered how she put up with his overworking all of the time. He truly had lucked out that night so long ago when he had looked through the security cameras of the nightclub, and was stunned breathless when he'd seen the vision with long platinum blonde hair. His life had never been the same since then, and he wouldn't have had it any other way.

Rising wearily from his seat behind the desk, the tall Alpha ran a hand through his tussled shaggy brown hair, and headed outside to meet the refugees sent to him from protection. If what Dara suspected was true and the grieving wolf was one day going to be Kothari's mother-in-law, he had to do everything in his power to make sure that she didn't go rogue. He didn't ever want to be the position of telling Kothari's mate that they had to perform a mercy killing to keep everyone safe.

Stepping out of the large Alpha mansion in the middle to the secluded forest, Rafe Hanlon got his first look at the wolf called Ava, and the small child that had accompanied her. The woman was skittish, unsure, a hint of panic in her eyes as she clutch the young girl close. Aaron was talking to her quietly, however she wasn't responding to his second in command which was highly surprising. Aaron had successfully pulled two wolves back from going rogue. He knew that first hand, because he was one of them. Aaron was the pack's most experience beta and could probably take that last step up to be an Alpha, though it appeared that it wasn't something he wanted to be.

"Ava," Rafe called, putting as much authority into his voice as he could muster. Perhaps she would respond to the fact that he was an Alpha. It was at least worth a try.

Skittish eyes turned toward him, and for a moment he thought he would get through to her, and then, her gaze turned inward again, and a sinking tightness settled in the pit on his stomach. He really didn't want to be put in the position of performing a mercy kill. He would if he had to, but there had to be a way to save the wolf, there just had to.

"Ava, this is Rafe, the Alpha we told you about."

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It was only when the blond vampire spoke that Rafe paid any attention to him. It wasn't that he hadn't known he was there, because he was aware of everything around his pack. He just knew that this was Joshua. Caleb, and Demetri and Pietro had all vouched for him, so, there was no need to be concerned about his presence. He was a friend.

The woman backed into the vampire's chest, clutching at the child protectively. "Home," she whimpered, her fear escalating. "Tali needs to go home."

Things were going from bad to worse, and Rafe didn't know how to countered Ava's rising terror. Her big eyes were beginning to lose the small spark of sanity they contained, her grip on the child becoming harder as the little girl exclaimed in pain. He would have to protect the child at all costs. If that meant ending the she-wolf then so be it.

"Move out of the way, Joshua."

The blond vampire stiffened at the female voice, spinning around defensively as Liam and Thereasa joined the group. "I thought you were dead, Thereasa." His tone was conversational, but his stance was tense.

"Sorry to disappoint you," she countered, a half smile on her face. "You've travelled a long way for a hat," she remarked, alluding to their meeting not so long ago, when she had slipped inside his mind in Europe, to steal the fedora that contained the vampire scent she'd needed to track the Vârcolac stateside. From his expression it was clear he was still annoyed about it, though she didn't appear too bothered.

"Step aside, Joshua. I will not hurt your charges. If anything, perhaps Liam and I can save the wolf before she loses whatever semblance of sanity she still retains."

It was clear he didn't trust her, and Liam fought to keep a scowl from his face. It was difficult enough in their pack for Reasa to earn any trust. He was unhappy that a stranger could come onto their lands, and get away with questioning her too.(w)ŵ©.©o©©Lŵ0ṁṁ.Cóṁ

"Let Liam and Reasa do what they can," Pietro del a Rios called as, he too, arrived in the meeting area. "I never did get a chance to thank you properly for all you did for me in Europe, Joshua. Please come to our home and meet my mate Cassia." He qualified his statement by standing side by side with Thereasa, smiling at her to show that they had come to terms with their previous difficulties.

Pietro's appearance seemed to sooth the other vampire, and his defensiveness lessened a bit, though he still cast a sceptical glance in Thereasa's direction.

"A lot has happened since Europe," his friend continued, beckoning him to follow him to his home. "Let's get you caught up on the developments before Caleb drags you away for a debrief."

"They are safe with us, Joshua." Rafe nodded his agreement. "I give you my word on that."

With such strong positive reinforcements, it was hard for the European vampire to continue his distrustful stance, so he finally relaxed, turning to Ava and giving her a reassuring smile. "These people will help you, sweet one. Do not be afraid. You are safe and Tali is safe here. They will care for you until you are well enough to return to your Alpha."

"Home," Ava gasped out, the little girl giving a pained cry as she gripped her a bit too hard.

Rafe took an involuntary step forward, but Thereasa intervened first. She quickly scooped the child out of the woman's grasp, handing her expertly to Liam who had moved at the same time. Ava screeched out aloud, lashing out at the vampire, who deftly caught the raised arm, and gripped the woman's neck to keep her immobile.

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"Be easy, Ava," Thereasa said, both mentally and out aloud. "You are unwell at the moment, and don't understand what you do. This is no fault of yours. Shifters are genetically programmed this way. However, it doesn't need to be this way. We can work together to help you become well again so that you can take care of the child. You wouldn't wish to accidentally hurt the young one, when you are unwell."

The shock of hearing someone inside her head as well as speaking out loud was sufficient to still Ava's struggles, her eyes going wide. Thereasa used that shock to delve a little deeper into the tortured wolf's mind, ruthlessly shutting out the overwhelming grief that cascaded through the broken mind she encountered.

"We will care for Tali for you. We will feed her, clothe her, ensure that all her needs are met until you can once more take over those duties. You know you are not capable of that right now. You know it is best for Tali. Let us help make you well again, Ava. You have been so brave, so strong fighting this awful pain on your own. Let me help take some of that burden from you, brave wolf. Let us bring you home."

Large tears pooled in Ava's eyes, slowly trickling down her cheeks. "Home." She gulped out the words. "There is no home." An anguished wail erupted from her lips, a cry so full of melancholy that the child in Liam's arms burst into tears.

"He's gone...oh God he's gone." Ava cried out the words, the words containing so much pain her voice sounded raw. "Let me go too, vampire," she begged, her tortured gaze swinging to Rafe. "Alpha, let me go too...please let me go too."

"No!" the little girl screamed out, struggling in Liam's embrace. "I promised her. I promised. You can't leave me. You can't go to the forever sleep. I promised, Mama. I promised."