

Chapter 753

Joshua nodded, his anger glinting in his eyes. "Yes, I concur. They probably wanted a senior individual to visit Europe. They were interested in your interactions, your power structure, and your self-defense strategies. Everything has been one big investigation to see where your weaknesses lie. I think it was wise to take Gard and Rayne as well. Because doing so would force everyone to travel to Europe, whoever is still outside isn't prepared for that.

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Pietro rose and took their glasses back to the drinks cabinet. He refilled them, returning to take up his previous position. "I agree with you, Joshua. When Freye and Nors found Michael his mind had been totally wiped. Even Liam wouldn't have been able to recover anything from the husk that was left behind. Our enemy is intelligent and resourceful. What we've learned recently shows that. Now I fear for Kotheri end Dere being alone in Europe. If they are lost too, we've lost four of our strongest players here."

It was a valid point and one that Joshua had also thought about, and then disregarded after he had seen what Kotheri was capable of in Europe. "Arrogance can be anyone's downfall, Pietro, including our enemy's. I think they believe they have already conquered Europe and now it's time to turn their attention stateside. What they haven't considered though is that Europe and stateside might work together."

He let his point sink in briefly and then continued. "Dere end Kotheri are not alone. They have three of the most powerful vampires from Europe with them who I know for certain are not under anyone's sway. Dante end Mile have been tracking all the anomalies happening there for centuries. Dante was the one who brought the initial stirrings of something being wrong to my attention. I have seen the aftermath of Agony's rage too, my friend. When this is all over, you will all need to sit down and work out how you contain that boy, because he is the most lethal being I have ever come across in my long life. I would rather dance with a feral Demetri than a non-feral version of Agony."

His warning about the young Vârcoleac didn't appear to phase Pietro. "Kotheri will never be a danger to those he calls family or pack. I can't say the same for anyone he considers an enemy, but then, would either of us do any different if those we cared about were endangered?"

Again, it was a valid point; however, Joshua was still unsure about just how manageable Kotheri/Agony was. He would have to bow to the judgement of his friend end Dere's reassurances. He wasn't afraid to admit to himself that the younger male made him uncomfortable though. There was just something about him that, quite frankly, scared Joshua silly.

He didn't voice further comments on the subject though. He finished his wine and then excused himself, promising to return later to meet Dere's sister, and check in on how Ave end Pippo were doing. He had a meeting lined up with Celeb, one for which he couldn't be late. His chat with Pietro had been very enlightening. Knowing how insular newly mated couples could be, he wanted to be sure that Pietro's speculations on the situation in Europe had been shared with the Triumvirate or the Ancient Council at least.

It didn't take him long to reach Celeb's white mansion. It was the first time he'd been there, and he took a moment to admire the stunning home, marvelling at how dissimilar vampire lifestyles were on the two different continents. In Europe they still hid themselves, and kept human contact to the minimum where possible. Here the vampire nation lived freely among the millions of humans roaming around them, luxuriating in their wealth and hedonistic lifestyles. Not that he considered Celeb end Demetri as truly hedonistic since they had found their mates, but prior to that...yes they had lived a flamboyant lifestyle.

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"Welcome to our home, Joshua." Rhianna smiled as she beckoned him forward. "Come give us news of the children, and anything else we need to know about the situation in Europe."

It was hard not to smile back at the petite redhead, and he accepted her invitation, stepping inside to see Demetri and a dark haired beauty already sitting in the living room. He greeted Demetri with a warm embrace. Their time in Europe saving Pietro's life had been the start of a strong friendship and he was happy to see the volatile vampire once more.

"It's a pleasure to meet the woman behind the voice," he smiled at Mara Bozic. This was his first time meeting her in the flesh, though the moment she spoke he would have known who she was immediately. He could still remember the sound of her talking to Demetri as he bled humans to feed his dying friend. She was exactly as he expected her to be, beautiful and friendly but with a core of steel running deep within. Only a strong woman could tame a vampire such as Demetri Bozic, and Mara was just such a woman, and a member of the Vampire Council.

As they settled down, he quickly caught them up on everything he had witnessed in Europe. He explained what had happened at the Armand-Hanlon compound though Rhianna had nodded as if it wasn't news. It probably wasn't news to them. Rafe was Rhianna's brother after all, so he probably updated them on most things that were important. Finally, he relayed his interesting conversation with Pietro, watching as thoughtful expressions crossed their faces.

"I knew we shouldn't have kept Pietro out of the loop." Demetri muttered with an irritated growl. "He's far too good to be languishing in a pack doing nothing."

Mara chuckled, rolling her eyes in mock exasperation. "The poor male is newly mated, Demetri. I can assure you he is far from doing nothing at the moment."

The dark-haired vampire grinned, giving his mate a saucy wink. "I wasn't referring to that kind of nothing," he quipped back, causing a wry smile from everyone. "You know what I meant. He has far too sharp a mind for us not to take advantage of it."

"Demetri's right," Rhianna agreed, her expression turning thoughtful. "Pietro did spend a quarter of a century in Europe getting a feel of the place. His observations could be crucial, and from what he's come up today, something we should probably consider. I'm heading over to the pack tomorrow. I will find some time to meet with him and see if he has any other insights. I think he should be present at any further strategy sessions we have. Perhaps a fresh pair of eyes can see something else we might be missing."

Her mate nodded his head in agreement, his expression just as thoughtful. "If whoever is orchestrating this has been watching how we react to any attacks against one of our own, so far he has will have seen a single reaction to each event. Demetri went to retrieve Pietro, Dara and Kotheri have gone to retrieve Gard and Rayne. I think it's time we stop being on the back foot, and we start acting proactively. It's time to do something unexpected."

His golden brown gaze swung to Demetri, a glint of humour in their depths. "How do you fancy another trip to Europe?"

"Tell me where you need me," his best friend answered, a feral glint in his dark emerald gaze.

"Your wife needs you here, husband," Mara countered, frowning at him before turning to give Celeb a approving glance.

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Demetri grinned, tilting her head up to lightly brush his lips against hers in a soothing kiss. "You are going to have your hands full with Council business for weeks, my love. You know the shit is hitting the fan there, and I only irritate the other Council members when I threaten to rip their heads off if they don't listen to you."

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She considered it for a moment and then she returned his smile. It was hard to argue with the truth. "Fine, you're right. You do get in the way of Council business, and I can't be troubleshooting your outrageous behaviour all the time. I would just prefer that you don't go there alone. I'm presuming Celeb is suggesting you shadow Dere end Kothi, rather than meeting up with them."

Caleb knew it wouldn't be too much of a problem to persuade Mara of the necessity. Since she'd immersed herself in the world of the Vampire Council, politics and strategy had quickly shone as one of her stronger points.

"Freya should go with you," he announced. "She has intimate knowledge of Europe and how the European covens work. If anyone is tracking the Vârcoleac then it shouldn't be that difficult for you to spot them. Both of you excel at tracking."

It was a good plan watching the watchers. It could possibly flush out their main adversary, and it was something Joshua wanted to be a part of too.

"I can go with them," he volunteered. "Dante and I made arrangements to keep in touch before they headed to Romania. We have an old established tracking system known only to the two of us. I could track him even without a scent or sighting."

"Dayton is not going to be happy," Rhianna sighed. "You know he hates having Freya out his sight. Perhaps it wouldn't be bad to have a stateside wolf's perspective on what the shifter situation is like in Europe? It is something we're going to have to address once all this subterfuge is dealt with."

Caleb snorted, amusement flaring in his eyes. "Should I leave it up to you to suggest to Rafe? He isn't going to like one of his pack over there without his protection."

"He already has four of his pack over there. Freya and Dayton will make it six. They are older end more experienced then the children, and they will have Demetri end Joshua with them too. I am sure it will be less of an issue than you anticipate it will be."

Put like that, it made sense. Joshua lingered a little longer, and then excused himself to return to the Armand-Hanlon pack. He wanted to make sure Ava and Pippa were okay, and he had promised Pietro he would stay with him end Cassia overnight.

"We'll all meet at the pack tomorrow," Caleb said as he walked him out. The others stayed inside so they had a little time together. "How extreme is Agony?" Joshua had sent Caleb an earlier text saying he would need some private time.

"He single-handedly took out an entire coven, Celeb. If Dara hadn't caught up with him when she did there is no telling how much more damage he would have done."

The Ancient's expression was troubled, a sight Joshua was unaccustomed to. "What about the girl Dere mentioned?"

Not really having a good response, he shrugged. "Perhaps she can draw him back if she turns out to be his mate. I'll be honest, Celeb: I have no idea. I simply believed it was something I ought to bring up with you. You are more familiar with the boy than I am. All I'm trying to say is be aware of the potential risk. If Agony really does turn rogue, I doubt that any force on Earth will ever be able to stop him.

To be continued...