

Chapter 757

She noticed movement once more, and this time she moved stealthily in that direction, suppressing any want to run or fight. Whoever or whatever was up ahead wasn't a danger to her. In fact, a sense of ease wafted over her and she acknowledged reluctantly that it had to be Agony. That sense of ease around him had been steadily growing as they made their way up the Carpathian Mountains. The longer she remained in the volatile Várcolac's presence the stronger the feeling became. It irritated her as much as it intrigued her. She had to admit to herself that Agony fascinated her in a way no person ever had. She didn't like it, but she was honest enough to admit the truth.

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With a small sigh, she broke cover of the trees into a clearing that contained a small lake of water, her breath catching as she watched the naked back of the dark-haired male before her, muscles bunching and flexing as he worked through flowing motions of arms and legs in a rhythmic pattern. For a moment Netelle forgot how to breathe, transfixed as Agony performed some form of martial arts. She had never seen anything more beautiful or compelling in her life before. So much so, if someone chose that moment to walk up behind her and murder her, she would have been oblivious to the danger.

The beautiful sight was suddenly marred as long red gashes appeared on Agony's flexing back, rivers of bright red blood oozing from the rents in his flesh. Netelle gasped in shock, her hand coming up to muffle the sound, but he had the hearing of a predator, his head swiveling around to turn silver and crimson eyes on her. Her first thought was how melancholic his unfettered gaze appeared. Then familiar dark glasses covered his naked gaze, and the rents and blood vanished in an instant, to be replaced by a fully clothed male.

"What are you doing here?"

The words snarled out of lips twisted in anger, but she felt no threat from him.

"I was looking for you," she finally said, her voice sounding loud in the quiet clearing. "Why were you doing that? It was you that was hurting yourself, wasn't it?" She was aware that she didn't know the full extent of his mental powers, but she knew she was right on that point.

"Go back to the others, Netelle."

Hostility and rejection wafted from him in waves, but she walked forward, refusing to be shoed away like an errant child.

"Why does one of the most powerful beings on the planet cut himself?" she asked, confusion leeching her words. "That was what you were doing, Agony. I've seen it before though never quite like that."

Sitting on a boulder, she settled her gaze on his face, trying to see past the shades that covered melancholic eyes that called to her in ways she couldn't understand.

"I went to a human school for a while. We managed to stay in one place for almost a year, and my alpha finally agreed to letting me attend a normal school for a couple of semesters. A girl there was very withdrawn. I tried to make friends with her, but she rebuffed all my attempts. One day I went to the girl's bathroom during class and I found her cutting herself with a sharp razor." Netelle's eyes clouded over, and she was swept back to that day as if it were only yesterday.

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"She had this little bag that had antiseptic lotion and wipes, cotton wool, band aids, and a place to hold the razor. She was cutting her inner thigh, there were white lines along the skin from previous cuts. When she saw me she screamed at me to get out, and when I didn't leave she begged me not to tell anyone. She said she hurt inside and this was the only outlet for the pain. That if she couldn't do it then she would go insane. I didn't know what to do, but I finally agreed not to say anything if she would come and talk to me when she got the urge to cut."

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She paused, taking a deep breath as the memories came in a torrential wave. "I didn't say anything, Agony, and a week later the headmaster called an impromptu assembly and told us that the girl had died. She had slit her wrists and been discovered by her mother. I left school that very moment and I never went back again. If I had said something...told someone what I'd seen then maybe she could have gotten help." Natalia choked back a sob, guilt pressing down on her even though she knew deep down that if someone was determined to take their own life then they would find a way no matter how much someone tried to stop them.

"What was her name?"

It wasn't the question she had expected from him, but it drew her gaze to him, and she saw that he had moved to stand just in front of her.

"Carly."

There was a moment of silence and then Agony sat down on the boulder beside her, as close as two people could be without touching. "I am not Carly, Natalia. What you witnessed may have seemed similar to your earlier experience; however, it is not the same. I do not have a death wish, and you do not need to save me as you couldn't save your human friend. You're intelligent enough to know that you are not responsible for her actions. You should not beat yourself up about something you couldn't have changed."

Natalia knew what he was saying was right, but she couldn't banish the memories of his skin tearing and the way it made her feel sick inside. "If it isn't the same then what is it, Agony? Why do you do that to yourself?" She shook her head, confusion, and the need to understand, overwhelming her.

"I can't imagine any reason why someone would want to inflict such pain on themselves." Her eyes beseeched him for an answer, and for a moment, his expression remained closed. Then he looked across at the lake, though she knew instinctively his gaze was somewhere other than the clear water.

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Agony didn't like the quiet desperation he could see and scent around Natalia. He had felt each moment of her distress and pain as she'd related her story, and her pain had set off a spark of rage deep within. He was furious with the girl Carly for binding Natalia to a promise that had ultimately culminated in her blaming herself for something that wasn't her fault. He was furious with himself for not realising she was close, for allowing her to see him at his lowest point as he fought his inner demons.

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The human girl beside him was compassionate, sensitive to the darker aspects of the world. His instincts screamed at him to protect her, to try to shelter her, even though he knew she was stronger than she appeared. Natalia had stood up to him on the train when everyone else had been afraid. Just the thought of her flashing eyes and stern words were enough to tempt a smile to his face. Yet, the instinct to protect her was becoming stronger the more time they were together, and it irritated him even as it drove him.

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She shouldn't have had to see him excising his demons. She shouldn't have had to relive the experience of her time in school. By allowing her to witness his cutting, he had caused her to remember a childhood memory that was best forgotten. She deserved to have what answers he could give her.

Taking a deep breath Agony worked on lowering his inner barriers. For the first time ever, he tried to let someone in. "I have always been conflicted," he finally said, his words coming out on a quiet rush of air. "I have always kept myself apart from everyone, not because I didn't care, but because I was afraid of what I may do. I came into this world on a rush of pain and death, and I have lived each day that very same way."

He dropped his gaze to the ground, taking a deep breath. "It wasn't Kotheri who was born that day, Netelle. Agony drew the first breath of air. I was born feral, and starving for blood. I was so insane with the need to live and feed that I had no conscious thought about anyone around me."

He stopped, fighting a deep shudder as he struggled with being vulnerable. It had come to matter what she thought of him. It mattered how she would view him when she learned the truth. Would she understand or would she just see the monster. Taking another deep breath, he pushed on, words spilling out of his mouth before he did what he usually did and closed himself off from all around him.

"I literally clawed my way out of my mother, Tali." A shudder did escape him. "I have an eidetic memory and I relive that day repeatedly. I can hear her screams and my father's anguished shouting. I can smell the blood, feel my claws, and fangs ripping flesh. I wanted more...more blood, more pain. I never wanted it to stop. Then, there was a voice inside my head, a soothing whisper full of an emotion I couldn't identify until I was older."

Agony dropped his head into his hands, the scents, the sounds, all overwhelming him until he thought he would scream out loud. "It was my mother's love. She was forgiving me even as I was trying to kill her. It was a deep, aching, beautiful well of love that told me everything was okay, and it didn't matter how much pain I caused her. That she would give up her life for me in a heartbeat."

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