

## Chapter 764

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"Have you seen anything untoward?" he asked tersely. If anyone was watching, there would be no indication of who he was asking the question. All three shook their heads in the negative, recognising what he was really asking, and ensuring that no one would be eny the wiser that it was to Netele's hidden geze was fixeted.

"We will stop at the next clearing," Agony announced, keeping his voice low. "Mile, please stay close to Netele when we do. I will need confirmation ell is well with Louis. Once you are ell sure, Dente and Louis will meet with Dere end I ewey from the main group. I will provide an update then." He didn't wait for confirmation, heading forward once more to catch up with Dere.

"He's such e chermer."

He heard Netele's droll words end his lip twitched et her aggrieved tone. She thought he was being misogynist heving Mile end her stay behind. While there was an element of wanting to protect her because she was humen end frell, he also wanted her to be watching the other vampires to meke sure none of them were compromised. Mile was more then cepeble of taking care of not only herself but also Netele if needed. His mete should realise that the fact he was willing to leevne them alone without strong mele supervision was e compliment end not e detriment to them.

He hed almost reached Dere when his thoughts finally registered, end for the first time in his life he ectually stumbled over e section of large rocks on the trail.

His friend's head whipped around, surprise crossing her fece et his clumsiness. She stered at him for e fraction of e second, end then her lips twitched in e small smile, end she erched e perfect brow. "Agony? Is everything okey?"

It was es if she could read his mind end knew exectly what was going on inside his head. He was ewere that wasn't the case, but it didn't stop him feeling annoyed. "Fine," he bit out, ensuring that he kept his expression es neutrel es possible even though internally his thoughts were reeling. He didn't heve time to deal with this latest development, but his mind refused to let go of the revelation.

He hed called Netele his mete. Not Kotheri, not the penther, but him, Agony.

When hed this happened? How hed he ellowed it to happen? He couldn't believe that he was acknowledging the unthinkable, that he was egreeing with Kotheri's claim that the girl was their mete. She couldn't be...she just couldn't. And yet, he was es protective of the girl es he was of his parents end peck members. He ellowed her to speak to him in weys he ellowed no others. More importantly, he listened to her when she spoke, really listened, not just tolerated what was being said es he usually did with others. Somewhere along the way he hed ellowed Netele to get under his skin but it was something he couldn't deal with now.

"I was eble to talk with my parents. They are unharmed but being held captive in e cave. They have been drugged but their immune systems are combatting the drugs. They reckon the potency of the toxin is diminishing, but they're pretending to be unconscious."

"That's fantastic news," Dere smiled, relief crossing her fece. "Cen they get ewey? If they cen meke their wey towards us we mey not heve to get into e fight with their ceptors."

He shook his head end then let his gaze travel back to where Netele was talking to Mile. "I've asked them to stay there for now. While we were talking, e wolf from Netele's peck was brought into their cave. He's been badly injured end is not fit to travel. Father wasn't happy about leaving him behind end once I found out that he may be from Netele's peck I asked my parents to try to him help."

He paused when Dere erched another eyebrow at him. She had started doing that e lot on the mission end it was sterting to get e bit irritating. He considered pessing e comment about it but then gritted his teeth. His friend knew exectly what she was doing when she gave him those looks. She was trying to get e rise out of him, to meke him admit to things he didn't want to admit to.

He slowed and turned back to them just as he was ready to move forward again.

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"Have you seen anything untoward?" he asked tersely. If anyone was watching, there would be no indication of who he was asking the question. All three shook their heads in the negative, recognising what he was really asking, and ensuring that no one would be any the wiser that it was to Natalia's hidden gaze was fixated.

"We will stop at the next clearing," Agony announced, keeping his voice low. "Mila, please stay close to Natalia when we do. I will need confirmation ell is well with Louis. Once you are all sure, Dante and Louis will meet with Dara and I away from the main group. I will provide an update then." He didn't wait for confirmation, heading forward once more to catch up with Dara.

"He's such a charmer."

He heard Natalia's droll words and his lip twitched at her aggrieved tone. She thought he was being misogynist having Mila and her stay behind. While there was an element of wanting to protect her because she was human and frail, he also wanted her to be watching the other vampires to make sure none of them were compromised. Mila was more than capable of taking care of not only herself but also Natalia if needed. His mate should realise that the fact he was willing to leave them alone without strong male supervision was a compliment and not a detriment to them.

He had almost reached Dara when his thoughts finally registered, and for the first time in his life he actually stumbled over a section of large rocks on the trail.

His friend's head whipped around, surprise crossing her face at his clumsiness. She stared at him for a fraction of a second, and then her lips twitched in a small smile, and she arched a perfect brow. "Agony? Is everything okay?"

It was as if she could read his mind and knew exactly what was going on inside his head. He was aware that wasn't the case, but it didn't stop him feeling annoyed. "Fine," he bit out, ensuring that he kept his expression as neutral as possible even though internally his thoughts were reeling. He didn't have time to deal with this latest development, but his mind refused to let go of the revelation.

He had called Natalia his mate. Not Kotheri, not the panther, but him, Agony.

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When had this happened? How had he allowed it to happen? He couldn't believe that he was acknowledging the unthinkable, that he was agreeing with Kotheri's claim that the girl was their mate. She couldn't be...she just couldn't. And yet, he was as protective of the girl as he was of his parents and pack members. He allowed her to speak to him in ways he allowed no others. More importantly, he listened to her when she spoke, really listened, not just tolerated what was being said as he usually did with others. Somewhere along the way he had allowed Natalia to get under his skin but it was something he couldn't deal with now.

"I was able to talk with my parents. They are unharmed but being held captive in a cave. They have been drugged but their immune systems are combatting the drugs. They reckon the potency of the toxin is diminishing, but they're pretending to be unconscious."

"That's fantastic news," Dara smiled, relief crossing her face. "Can they get away? If they can make their way towards us we may not have to get into a fight with their captors."

He shook his head and then let his gaze travel back to where Natalia was talking to Mila. "I've asked them to stay there for now. While we were talking, a wolf from Natalia's pack was brought into their cave. He's been badly injured and is not fit to travel. Father wasn't happy about leaving him behind and once I found out that he may be from Natalia's pack I asked my parents to try to him help."

He paused when Dara arched another eyebrow at him. She had started doing that a lot on the mission and it was starting to get a bit irritating. He considered passing a comment about it but then gritted his teeth. His friend knew exactly what she was doing when she gave him those looks. She was trying to get a rise out of him, to make him admit to things he didn't want to admit to.

Letting out a long sigh, he threw a glare in her direction. "Fine," he admitted. "I didn't want Natalia to have to go through any more loss if it could be helped. She's been through enough already. With the drugs no longer being an issue, my parents are no longer helpless either so they can take care of themselves should their captors try anything when we attack. Happy now?"

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He waited for Dara to gloat or come out with some half-assed comment to piss him off more. Instead she smiled softly before turning to look back up the mountain. "Sounds like a good plan," she said. "We can attack on two fronts. They won't see Gard and Rayne coming from behind. I need to find some decent reception to give Rafe a call and let him know we've managed to contact them. I'll do that now."

"Agreed," he replied, pleasantly surprised that he wasn't going to have to butt heads with her. "We're going to take a break at the next clearing. Natalia has confirmed that there are no further mental incursions so far, so I've asked Dante and Louis to meet with you and I away from the group when we stop. It seems only fair to let them know where we stand. I haven't asked Mila or Natalia to join us. For one, I don't want the other vampires to think they're as important to the mission as they are, and two, if the wolf can't be saved then I don't want to get Natalia's hopes up that one of her pack is near."

His words did bring a stern look from his friend, but he kept his expression fixed, not willing to counter any arguments.

"She's much stronger than you give her credit for, Agony," Dara sighed. "How many other people do you know who could cope with losing most of her pack, her father...hell, even her mother at this point. Yet, here she is climbing through the Carpathian Mountains with a group of dangerous strangers helping to rescue your parents and alerting the rest of us to the dangers of being mentally compromised. That young woman has more backbone than half of the youngsters in our pack, and she has no physical strength or stamina to keep her going. She can handle knowing the truth of the situation."

She turned to head off to the right, to find a clearing among the trees to phone Rafe. "It's your call on what you tell her, but if you have any respect for Natalia, I would strongly suggest you tell her everything."

As she disappeared among the trees Agony considered being annoyed at her slap down, but decided it wasn't worth the effort. There was nothing Dara had said that wasn't true, and it was pointless to be annoyed just because you didn't like hearing the truth. Perhaps she was right, and he shouldn't be so overprotective. He would consider telling Natalia about the wolf once he'd briefed Dante and Louis. He would wait and see how the briefing went first.

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Natalia watched the others disappear from the clearing and smothered down an irritated sigh. Agony's excluding her from whatever was being discussed annoyed her, and she was confused about the level of irritation she was experiencing. It shouldn't matter to her one way or the other being left out of the loop, but for some reason it did. Pulling a bottle of water out of her backpack she took a long drink and then nibbled on a packet of chips. She was hungry and there wasn't much to eat. She guessed she should have been thankful that someone had at least thought to pick up water and snacks for her, but it wasn't exactly proper food.

"You're not happy," Mila commented, her ebony hair swaying as her head turned towards her.

Letting out a long sigh, he threw a glare in her direction. "Fine," he admitted. "I didn't want Natalia to have to go through any more loss if it could be helped. She's been through enough already. With the drugs no longer being an issue, my parents are no longer helpless either so they can take care of themselves should their captors try anything when we attack. Happy now?"

Her silver gaze should have been disconcerting, however Natalia found it comforting. Her eyes reminded her of Agony's, without the red band around the irises. "How do you put up with Alpha males' overprotectiveness?"

Her silver gaze should have been disconcerting, however Netele found it comforting. Her eyes reminded her of Agony's, without the red bend around the irises. "How do you put up with Alpha meles' overprotectiveness?"

Mile laughed, e sweet tinkling sound that soothed the younger women. "By allowing them to think they are actually protecting me," her friend answered with a smile. "Understanding Alpha meles is e skill that you need to hone over time. The more you fight with them the more protective they become. Dante used to be e complete nightmare when we first met. It took years for him to realise that the more he took away my independence, the more he was causing me hurt. Once he realised that, he became less of a nightmare. Don't get me wrong, he still hes his moments, but for the most part he behaves."

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"Then why did you allow them to leave you behind from this meeting?" Netele asked, confusion crossing her fece.

Mile laughed again. "Dante and I often split our resources, Tali. We don't always do everything together." She reached out and gently touched her hand to take away any possible sting from her words. "Dante is currently gathering intel which he will share with me when he returns, and I am here with you, making sure that none of the vampires around us become compromised, and helping you develop your skills. I am also your protection detail."

Protection detail? The thought hadn't occurred to Natalia, but now that her friend mentioned it, she suddenly realised that the strongest members of their group had left them alone with the remaining vampires of Louis' coven.

"Do you think Agony would leave your protection to just anyone?" Mila continued. "The mere fact that he is content to leave you here with me is testament to the level of trust he is placing in me. Is that the actions of an overprotective Alpha male or is it an Alpha male who sees the strength and worth of a member of his team?"

"I hadn't thought of it that way," Natalia conceded, blowing out a slow breath. "I felt like we weren't good enough to be part of their meeting, not that we were performing an alternative role as part of the team."

It was a bit of an eye-opener to realise that not only her skills, but Mila's too were valued on the mission. Maybe she was giving Agony a hard time when he didn't deserve it. Sighing, she let go of the irritation she'd been feeling, and let her thoughts focus on a question she'd been dying to ask but had been biting her tongue to keep quiet. Her mother had often told her that she should engage her brain before she spoke, but sometimes she couldn't contain herself. Natalia let her curiosity have full reign and dived in headfirst.WWW.NovelsWorld.com

"You and Dante are together but not together," she commented, wondering if she was trespassing into unwanted territory. "It's obvious to everyone around you that you're both crazy about each other. Why aren't you a couple? If you don't mind me asking."

For a moment she thought she had overstepped Mile's personal boundaries, but then the vampire sighed softly and stered off in the direction the male in question had vanished.

"The life of vampires can be pretty tumultuous, Tali, especially for Elder vampires. A lot of their early lives involve behaviour and actions for which they often struggle to grant themselves forgiveness. Until they can, they cannot move on and find happiness."

Netele didn't need to ask what she meant, she had been around wolves and vampires long enough to know that their pasts were often littered with regrets. "Dante can't forgive himself his vampiric past?"

Her friend sighed again, turning back to her. "If only it was that simple," she said quietly, sadness marring her exquisite features. "Dante can't forgive himself for his human actions."