

Chapter 303

Here we go again. Buckle seatbelts, hold on tight, and have fun reading LOL!

That break I was having didn't last too long again. Can't keep the stories out of my head or my fingers off the keyboard :-)

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This story is probably best read after reading the preceding ones.

To my regular readers, welcome back. To any new ones, I hope you enjoy.

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Special thanks as always goes to my close support group for all their help. Also to the tweeps who I've teased mercilessly with updates on how far I've gotten in this story without posting it up yet (LOL). They've been very patient with me.

***Enjoy.

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Prologue

Romania -- Twenty-five years ago

The two dark-haired males travelled fast, the scent of blood strong in the air as they ascended higher into the heavily-wooded mountain range. It was well past dawn but the air was cold despite the sunshine piercing the wide canopy of the trees.

Not that either of the males felt the cold. They were vampires; one so Ancient he'd existed over two thousand years, the other an Elder who was barely a handful of years from reaching his thirteenth century. They'd known each other a long time and were comfortable travelling together in silence as they strove to reach their target.

Their passage was silent despite their incredible speed, their eyes completely black, long wicked-looking black talons at the ready. Modern day humans had such a mythical view of what real vampires were. They would have been horrified to see them running in sunshine without burning to ash.

It was what the species had propagated over the years, lies and deception to hide their very existence. Humans had to believe vampires didn't exist and if they did then humans had to feel safe, had to think vampires had Achilles heels like sunshine, (and) holy water, garlic and crosses.

The truth was it was all ridiculous nonsense. Taking a vampire's head could kill him; complete incineration could kill him but that was about the sum extent of what could endanger a vampire's life. They could walk in the sun, their hearts beat just like anyone else's, and they could even drink any beverage they wanted to if they enjoyed the flavour.

The one myth which was true was they required human blood to survive. Most existed by utilising the many private blood banks run by their kind. They did indulge on humans but it was for recreational purposes when they were involved in their second favourite pastime, having sex. Their human partners were never aware of the vampire taking a small sip of the precious life-giving blood in the throes of passion.

They had managed to maintain their secret existence for millennia this way.

With long life came apathy though. The vampire species had become cold, devoid of emotions and incredibly arrogant. Their superiority had set them up as being the only species they cared about and that had led to imbalance and intolerance.

The two males were on their way to seek another of their kind. He was urgently required for a task that was so important it could stop a civil war and possibly avert the destruction of the vampire nation. If he didn't agree to help, if harm came to those who were about to be placed under his protection, then the Ancient vampire with midnight black hair was positive the wrath of a reincarnated vampire queen would spill over.

And heaven help all who stood in her and her allies' way when it did.

Demetri Bozic slowed when the scent of blood became overpowering, signalling Pietro de la Rios to slow his run as they approached the area. The other male instantly obeyed, his dark brown hair swaying in the wind as the sound of fighting reached their ears.

They came across the body of a slain vampire almost immediately. The head of the Youngling was detached and lay a few feet from the mangled corpse. There was still an expression of horror on the face of the male, as if he couldn't quite believe what had been coming his way.

It shouldn't have made Pietro smile but his lips quirked. If you were stupid enough to piss off an Elder then you paid the price. It was that simple for him. The law of the jungle was how he lived his life when he wasn't tending bar for Andrei Romanov.

But even in supposed civilisation the rules were still the same. In a place like The Dive, a seedy club frequented by vampires, the law of the jungle still ruled. Only he was the king in that environment, taking care of the club while Andrei took care of his Council business.

The next body they came across was another Youngling, just as dead and just as surprised that his happy existence had been cut short.

"I'm seriously starting to like this guy," Pietro said with a laugh, his black eyes flashing with a hint of viciousness as the scent of blood became even stronger. He didn't bother keeping his voice low. The other vampires in the area would have heard his quietest whisper.

Demetri allowed himself a smile as he turned to his friend. "Yes, Mac is pretty impressive when he gets pissed off about something," he conceded.

His own feral nature was asking to be set free at the blood and death around him. It was always a tightrope he walked when the hunt was on. But Demetri was Ancient and he'd learned to master the need to kill, only doing so when it was required. He was sure that whatever was going down at the moment, Mac had it all in hand and his help would not be required.

They moved forward past the dead and entered a wide clearing where two vampires danced around each other. It wasn't a natural clearing. It had been created as huge trees had been ruthlessly felled in the heat of battle. The once proud monoliths now littered the area at odd angles.

Demetri clacked his talons together as he watched another dark-haired vampire spin high in the air, his left leg coming out to catch a blond male Youngling across the face sending him crashing into another tree which groaned and shook with the impact.

Mackenzie moved with a lethal grace which was almost hypnotic to watch. His hair as black as Demetri's, his eyes even blacker, he flowed effortlessly towards the stunned vampire, moving in for the kill. Hard muscles flexed under his black silk shirt, his talons ripping through flesh as if it was the most gossamer lace.

The Youngling shrieked in agony as his face disintegrated before he could defend himself. His shriek cut off as the merciless talons ripped through his throat. With almost no exertion required, Mac severed the head from the body and watched dispassionately as it rolled to the forest floor.

"Sometimes it's too easy, Demetri," he said quietly, his back still towards the new arrivals. His muscles were tense but there was no hint of fear in his voice.

"I know what you mean, Mackenzie," Demetri replied, his lips quirking. His friend had felled half a forest taking out three Younglings and he called it easy. He knew he had chosen the right man for the task ahead.

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Mackenzie turned then, his thick warrior's plait swaying as he made a subtle shift inside himself and his fangs and talons disappeared. Returning from his feral state should have shifted his eye colour too but they stayed as black as night. He regarded Demetri intently for a long moment then switched his gaze to the other vampire.

"You're not travelling with your usual cohort," he remarked. Though he very seldom made it stateside he was well aware of what was going on over there and knew that his friend was tight with Caleb Cullen, an Ancient he hadn't had the pleasure of meeting.

He didn't know who Demetri's current travelling companion was but he didn't view him as a threat. The Ancient was the only person that Mackenzie came even close enough to trusting. His friend wouldn't bring anyone untrustworthy into his presence.

Mac strode over to Demetri and clasped arms in the traditional greeting of vampires who considered each other friends. "It's been a long time. I take it you need me for something? I hardly think you're here to enjoy the scenery."

Demetri laughed quickly, surveying the area again. "You don't appear to be too enamoured with the scenery yourself, Mac." It had been too long since they'd caught up with each other. He'd forgotten how much he enjoyed Mac's blunt way of speaking his mind.

"Pietro, meet Mackenzie," he continued, getting the introductions out of the way. His gaze met Mac's. "Pietro's a friend, so please refrain from trying to detach his head from his body. I'd hate to have to kick your ass for you."

A rare smile cracked Mac's face, amusement dancing in his eyes. "You could try but I've just had a little warm up session so I fear you may be at a disadvantage." He nodded at Pietro in acknowledgement and then turned to start building a funeral pyre for the dead.

"I am really starting to like this guy," Pietro laughed as Demetri rolled his eyes but didn't respond to the subtle jibe Mac had thrown his way.

The Ancient found a stable tree trunk and sat down as he watched Pietro vanish from the clearing only to return a moment later with one of the bodies they'd passed on their way there.

"So what did these three do to piss you off, Mac?" Demetri knew there had to have been a reason for his friend destroying their kind. The other vampire never did anything without a reason.

"It's wild out here, Demetri," Mac answered as he continued to collect wood for the fire. "You've got it too cushy stateside. There is a lack of mentoring being done for new Sirings. Some cross over like these three and need to be put down. Our kind on this continent has forgotten the old ways; a fair number think they're even superior to The Council. They've lost respect."