

Chapter 306

"I'm in," he smiled at Demetri. "Just point me where you want me and I'll get all the intelligence you need."

Demetri nodded turning his gaze to meet Mac's. He wondered if he would need to use his ace card to convince the other Elder to take up the reins of The Praetorians. He didn't want to but the children were at risk. If he had to bring up the past to secure their future then he would.

"So you want me to run this elite guard, train up loyal vampires and protect a wolf pack without being seen by them or our charges?" Mac finally asked staring into the dying embers of the funeral pyre. "Just how is that supposed to work, Demetri, if we have to stay hidden from the very people we're meant to protect?"

Demetri smiled, relaxing completely as he watched his friend. The tone of Mac's voice told him everything; his request for more information a clear indicator that he would accept the task given to him.

"By scent," he answered. "The children are extraordinarily talented, Mac. They can mask their true scent and are receiving instruction in how to do so as quickly as possible. The Praetorians will be given their true scent. Only when they leave the compound will you have to track them. They will release their scent for a fraction of a second before they mask it, allowing their guardians to follow their 'new' scent at a distance.

They will have no idea why they're doing it, but this practice will be taught until it becomes an ingrained habit. It's imperative they have a normal childhood, not just for their sake but for everyone who loves them. You know how volatile the Romanovs are. They've become worse since they've had children."

Mac did know the Romanovs well, though it had been many years since he'd been in their company. The fallout of anything happening to their offspring would be catastrophic.

He'd known instantly he was going to accept control of The Praetorians. Demetri had known it too, the moment the children were mentioned. Memories flashed unbidden; a babe in a bloody gown with her throat ripped out, a woman lying dead at her side.

Mackenzie pushed down the memories ruthlessly, his face a hard mask, no sign of the gut wrenching pain he was experiencing coming to light. He had failed a child once before, so very long ago when life had been much simpler. He would never fail a child again. He would die before another babe was destroyed because of his inaction.

"What else do I need to know?" His voice was as unemotional as his expression, acceptance in the words he spoke.

Demetri's deep green eyes glowed with respect, his nod conveying his thanks. He knew what Mackenzie was thinking of, knew his hard mask hid an agony he would never personally understand.

He'd been there that day so very long ago, had seen the madness of grief in the human male's eyes as he'd discovered his wife and child dead. It was one of the very few times Demetri Bozic had ever chosen to Sire another to the life of a vampire. He had stopped the man from taking his own life, had healed his wounds and mentored him past the bloodlust.*W(w)w.Nö(v)EℓŴbrm..c©m*

Then he had taught him everything he knew about how to protect and how to kill. Mackenzie had been honed in a fire of fury and revenge. His entire life had been consumed with the need to fight for a cause, to right any wrong he came across.

Without realising it, Demetri had carefully crafted the ultimate killing machine on the side of good. The children could have no better protector, of that he was certain.

The sun slipped low over the horizon as the three male vampires huddled together talking in low voices despite their secluded location. High in the mountains in the wilderness of Romania, the Praetorians were once again born.

Present Day

A quarter of a century had passed since that day and Mac was standing in the outer courtyard of a secluded building high in the mountains surrounding the Armand-Hanlon pack. He was staring at five men and three women who had applied to join the Praetorians, vampires whose loyalties had been checked rigorously before they reached this point of their induction.

The Praetorians' one objective remained the same. Protect the Vârcolac, the Romanian title given to Vampire/Were children. Technically the word could be used for either a vampire or a Were. There was no true name for a hybrid, but someone had decided they didn't like the term hybrid being used for the children so Vârcolac has been as good a name as any.

Whatever their charges were termed made no difference to The Praetorians. They were to be protected at all costs; nothing was more important than that, even though the children were now fully grown adults.

The Praetorians were above the normal chain of command, answerable only to three people, the members of the triumvirate. Before final selection occurred, one of the three would arrive and scan each candidate using their magic to determine any deception hidden deep within. No one could hide from the power they wielded no matter how skilled they were.

Mac knew that from personal experience. He could still remember that day as if it had just occurred. Demetri had taken him stateside straight to Caleb Cullen's home after Pietro had headed off to begin his mission.

He'd heard of Cullen before, though he hadn't met him. The sheer power oozing from the towering Ancient had been impressive, the way his golden brown eyes had bored into his soul intimidating even to one as confident as Mac.

The Guardian had been equally as impressive, with flaming auburn hair and age oozing from his skin. His glowing lavender eyes were piercing as he too dug deep within Mac's soul.

But it was the petite redhead standing beside them that had brought a true chill to Mackenzie's soul that day. Rhianna Armand was but a babe, a Youngling not even a decade old. But by God, her eyes had held such power, flashing lavender like her brother's but with an intensity that had stripped him bare and left him feeling helpless.*www.Nz©èl©Oṙm.Com*

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One glance and he was hurtled back in time, screaming in raw agony over the bodies of his wife and child, wanting to die with them, unable to stand the thought of never seeing them alive again.

The vampire queen's eyes had suddenly brimmed with tears as she pierced every barrier he'd ever had, a muffled sob escaping her and drawing the eyes of the males who'd flanked her.

"Such suffering for one so noble," she'd whispered shakily, moving to stand before him and reaching a hand up towards his face.

He'd found himself leaning down without conscious thought, allowing her to cup his cheek gently and soothe some of the inner anguish he'd felt. The pain had dulled slightly, had become more bearable. He'd instinctually known she would be able to soothe him.

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She wept for him. This small woman with eyes so old they told a thousand tales of her own loss and suffering, her own heartbreak at what had befallen her people. She had stolen his allegiance in that very moment. He'd been ready to sink to his knees before his queen but her eyes had told him not to.

"You will be the perfect guardian for our children, Mackenzie," she'd said softly. "One day you will know peace again, proud warrior. I don't know when that will be but I do know it's fated for you. Welcome, my Praetorian."

And his new life had begun that day, blessed by a queen and her king and guardian. The males had used their powers to assess his loyalty but he'd sensed Rhianna's acceptance was all they'd required to accept him as the right candidate to lead the elite guard.