

Chapter 313

"I think you're lethal enough without any knives being involved," he remarked dryly. There was a hint of respect in his voice and she preened inside at the compliment.

"I was thinking the exact same thing about you," she answered, her own tone respectful as she placed the short sword back inside the chest.

He nodded once in her direction and then turned to the others. "Sparring is essential for honing our skills. Pain is used as a teaching tool so you learn how to ignore it to achieve the goal of protecting our charges. Emotions should not come into play when sparring. Loss of control can lead to the death of your fellow soldier. Control is everything. Remember that at all times."

Lily had the distinct feeling there was something more to Mac's teaching words. Was he indirectly apologising for hurting her? She'd wondered if brutality was part of sparring in the Praetorians but the shock she'd sensed from the others appeared to negate that.

Mackenzie had crossed the line and he was warning the others not to cross that same line. She was just as guilty and she took his words to heart. She wouldn't apologise for her actions without an apology from him first, but she would heed his words and ensure they do not reach this point again.

After a brief pause, he signalled one of the other recruits to come forward. Lily sat down to watch the rest of her team match wits with the leader of the Praetorians. She watched eagerly, admiring the sheer animal beauty of her mate, holding in a pleased sigh as he went through the motions with each of them.

Her male was glorious; total perfection all wrapped up in the most sensually pleasing package. He was strong enough to tame her wild spirit but most importantly he was strong enough to stand up to her father. The male she chose as her life's mate would have to be strong to combat Andrei's objections. She had no doubt her father would object most strenuously to the idea of her mating.

It wasn't going to be easy claiming Mackenzie as hers. First she had to get him to realise that he did belong to her, and then he had to convince her father that he had the right to claim her as his. She had no doubt her mate would walk through fire to secure her. She couldn't imagine Mac allowing anyone to take what he considered his and she was most definitely his.

* * *

The four remaining candidates passed Mac's rigid testing and he was hot and sweaty by the time he'd put the last of them through their paces. The entire time he'd worked with the others, he'd felt Ruminsky's eyes on him following his every move. It had been a little distracting being so conscious of her appraisal, but not enough to make him reckless with the others.

A dull pulsing anger still burned within him because of his lack of control when sparring with her. She'd managed to elude him in the forest too which was another irritation. He was the most skilled tracker among the Praetorians; hell, he was probably one of the most skilled among their species. How had she managed to elude him?

He turned to Karn, his second-in-command. "Assign them rooms and get them fed." He turned and walked away without a backward glance, feeling eyes tracking his movements. He didn't need to look back to know who it was; his body's heated reaction to her told him all he needed to know.

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He cursed under his breath as he headed inside and took the stairs two at a time, stripping off his top and wiping his face on a clean section as he reached the attic floor which was solely his. The scent of Ruminsky's blood saturated the top making his body clench hard.

What the hell was it about the damned woman that made him think of sex every five seconds? So she was beautiful. He'd seen many beautiful women in his lifetime and hadn't felt the need to bend them over the first thing he could find and pound mercilessly into their hot sheathes. Beauty wasn't the be all and end all so why he was reacting to hers was a complete mystery.

And why the fuck had he felt concern and guilt at having injured her? She was nothing to him, just another Praetorian candidate being put through her paces. Why was she under his skin, and how the fuck had she managed to do it? He wasn't a man who allowed people to slip past his barriers.

Andrea Ruminsky was an enigma and something told him he would be a fool to keep her around. But she was the best of the five he'd just recruited and he'd be just as foolish to let his personal feelings get in the way of his assigned task.

With that thought firmly in place he picked up his cell phone from his coffee table and considered sinking down into his favourite plush, black leather armchair. He needed a shower though so opted to do that first. Hitting the first speed dial he waited for the call to be answered, stretching his back muscles to work out a couple of kinks.

"Mac, how lovely to hear from you."

The soft, musical voice caressed his ears and he found himself relaxing as he always did when he heard his queen speak. When Demetri had told him they had a queen, it had merely been words to him, a new cause to fight for. Then he'd met her and had known instantly he would serve the petite redhead until his dying day.

He smiled and breathed out softly. "It is always a joy to speak with you, Annie. I have five new candidates to be vetted. Can one of you attend either today or tomorrow?"

"I will come," she answered and he knew she was smiling as she spoke. "It's been too long since I've seen you, and Caleb is busy at the moment with his Ancient work. Gard is still acting as if he's on honeymoon with his mate. You would think after twenty-five years they would have worked that out of their systems."

Mac laughed loudly. "Just as you and Caleb have worked it out of your systems?" he teased. Her soft laughter was all the answer she gave him.

"Will ten o'clock be okay, Mac? I'm heading over to the pack for a visit so I'll be in the area then."

"Ten is perfect, Annie. I look forward to seeing you."

She said goodbye and he placed the cell back on the coffee table. One last hurdle and he would know if choosing Ruminsky to join his team was the correct thing to do. He was suddenly anxious that she pass the triumvirate's test. Because if she failed, if their queen detected deception in the woman, Andrea Ruminsky would die and he would be the one to carry out her execution.

Once the triumvirate were involved and the candidates became aware of that involvement, there was no discreet way to handle the situation. Rhianna Armand was under the impression she was powerful enough to slip into vampire minds and erase their memories. Caleb and Gard had appeared to share her confidence so Mac hadn't questioned it.

Until Caleb had returned the night after they accepted their first recruits and they'd had a private conversation. Although all the recruits had passed the final test, Caleb wasn't one to leave any eventuality uncovered. His instructions had been blunt and ruthless. In the event a spy was unearthed and Annie's safety was jeopardised, death was the only recourse.

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Mac had agreed wholeheartedly. Mercy towards enemies was suicidal. He'd learned that young and had lived by that code ever since. Their queen would most definitely object to it but the other three males wouldn't allow her kind heart to sway them. They'd take her fury, endure her wrath because keeping her safe was more important and worth any disappointment she may feel.

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