

Chapter 317

Mac rounded the desk to meet his queen with a pensive expression on his face. "You're early, Annie," he remarked, shielding Andrea to give her time to collect herself. He bent down to brush his lips against the redhead's cheek.

"Well, I'm certainly glad I didn't arrive ten minutes later," Rhianna smiled, unable to curb her teasing. She'd never seen Mac so flustered, but then he'd never met Liliana Rose Romanov before. She had a thousand questions flying around inside her head but she kept silent, waiting to see how this was going to play out.

"Andrea Ruminsky, meet Rhianna Armand."

Lily had slid from the desk, her expression already under control. She had even managed to slow her heartbeat. She watched Rhianna's face carefully, waiting for the redhead to announce her true identity.

"A pleasure to meet you, Andrea," the other woman answered, her expression giving nothing away to the male watching them both. Of course she wasn't ready to leave it at that.

"Nice play on the name, Lily. I don't think it's going to mollify your father much, though. He is rather irate at the moment, which is why Caleb couldn't be here. Your little note was more of a red rag to a bull than an appeasement for your disappearance."

Rhianna always managed to make her feel like she was five years old again. She didn't do it unkindly and was always supportive and caring, but she still managed to reduce her to a defensive child. Lily straightened her shoulders and tilted her chin up.

"I'm sorry Dad's upset, Annie, I really am. I don't want to cause the family any grief, but I need to live my own life, and disappearing seemed to be the only way. Do you know I'm a month shy of my thirtieth birthday and I haven't even been kissed by a male? I can't breathe at the compound without Dad getting a written report about it." www.novelworm.com

"You could have spoken to Rafe, Liliana, or even to me if you didn't want to discuss anything that personal with him." Rhianna's mental tone was still kind but there was a hint of reproof in it. "We could have spoken to your father on your behalf."

"The only person Dad listens to is Mom and you know that. Sure, Rafe could have Commanded him but he won't impose his will on a member of his pack if it's a family matter. If Mom couldn't convince Dad to unbend, no one could have." Lily could hear a whiny tone creeping into her mental voice and she worked to tamp it down. She was a grown woman and shouldn't need to justify her actions to anyone.

Rhianna didn't answer her immediately, turning instead to Mac as if she hadn't just been having a private conversation. "So is Andrea one of these new recruits you were telling me about, Mac?"

"She is," he replied looking down at the woman who was now standing at his side and appeared to be fascinated with his queen. He needed to speak to Rhianna alone.

"Ruminsky, go find Karn and tell him to assemble the rest of your team. We will be out shortly." It was clearly a dismissal but she turned her head to glare at him as if he'd done something wrong before she moved to the door.

"Are you going to tell him, Annie?" Lily asked the question as she closed the door behind her, irritation lacing her mental voice at being dismissed so summarily. www.novelworm.com

"Can you give me one exceptional reason why I shouldn't?" www.novelworm.com

Lily swallowed hard, turning to look back at the closed door. Mac was behind that wood, seconds away from learning her true identity. If he found out who she was before he learned to love her there would be no hope for them. His sense of duty was too strong. He would push her away before she could convince him they were meant to be together.

"He's my mate, Annie," she whispered mentally.

Silence greeted her words for a long moment. Then a deep surge of warmth enveloped her, and the fear that had been slowly building deep within her began to ease.

"Okay, Lily darling, I will keep your secret. Now go do as you were instructed so I can do what I need to before Caleb comes looking for me. He would not be as inclined as I am. Be quick about it."

Rhianna watched Mac carefully after Lily left, seeing his eyes drawn reluctantly to the closed door. When Lily had disappeared and all attempts to find her had failed, the redhead had realized with dismay that the Vârcolac could suppress the bond she'd made with them at birth. All this time she'd assumed that it was because Lily had been too far away for her to sense. Learning now that the missing girl had simply been in the heart of the Praetorian compound was a shock.

Finding her in a compromising position with Mac of all people had been downright staggering! The questions she had were overwhelming; Lily's confession that she intended to mate with Mac posed a huge problem and was now giving her the biggest headache ever.

The Armand-Hanlon compound was in total uproar over the disappearance of one of their own. Andrei was practically homicidal, kept in check only by Loretta and Alexei working together. Twice Rafe had stepped in and Commanded him to calm down. Once he'd removed his edict, though, Andrei had become worse. The Alpha had eventually stopped.

Granted, the Ancient vampire was trying hard, managing to hold onto his temper most of the time with only a few lapses requiring intervention. Loretta was concerned for her daughter, but appeared to empathise with her too. They all wanted Lily brought home, but if she was unhappy with her life they knew she wouldn't stay.

Andrei appeared unable to understand that he was forcing his child into this course of action. She was his little girl, his baby, and he couldn't believe that she would run away from him. He'd insisted that an outside influence had to be responsible for her leaving. And now, with the shocking announcement that Mac was Lily's mate...!

Rhianna suppressed a shudder and turned to look at the mate in question. Mac was good, one of the best, but could he survive a direct assault from Andrei? The Ancient would blame Mac even though it wasn't his fault. There was no fighting the mating pull. And it looked as though Mac was not even aware that he was Lily's mate. He was frowning at the door with a perplexed expression on his face.

What a mess! And here she was, right bang in the middle of it. Caleb was leaning more towards Andrei's point of view. His overprotective streak was in full on mode, his need to protect the hybrid children his sole priority. He loved Lily as if she was his own and he wanted her home. If he knew Lily was with the Praetorians he'd march her straight back to the compound, which would just be a disaster.

www.novelworm.com

So she was going to have to keep this quiet from her mate. Keeping secrets from Caleb was not something she relished doing. If their positions were reversed she'd be livid if he kept this from her. And there was the thorny issue of what Mac would do when he finally discovered Lily's true identity. He'd be furious with Lily for deceiving him. Hell, he'd be furious with her for keeping Lily's identity a secret too.

And what would all this mean for the Praetorians as a group? They were supposed to be a shadowy organisation, their charges ignorant of their presence. Now one of those charges was among them, fighting by their side. When all this came out in the wash there would be hell to pay and she'd end up being the one paying.

Rhianna couldn't halt the weary sigh that escaped her. It drew Mac's attention from the door.

"It wasn't what it looked like," he said quickly, his tone defensive.

"So you weren't just about to lock lips with that attractive lady perched so temptingly on your desk, Mac? I must have read the scene all wrong."