

## Chapter 318

He cursed and ran a hand through his hair, frustration riding his body hard. "That was a mistake, Annie. One I won't be repeating. Ruminsky is a potential Praetorian and nothing more. The whole point of meeting with her was to knock any amorous notions out of her head."

Rhianna's lips quirked. "I see you managed to do that successfully."

"Fuck! Annie, will you just let it drop?" It was a testament to how rattled he was that he didn't moderate how he spoke to her. Usually he was unfailingly polite, respectful with a touch of old school gallantry.

"If she's affecting you this badly then maybe you shouldn't fight it so hard," she mused. "Sometimes forbidden fruit takes on a more tempting taste because you deny yourself."

His eyes swung to meet hers and he blinked slowly. "You're encouraging me? I would have thought you'd be warning me away from the girl." The raw disbelief in his voice was almost comical.

"You need to make a decision one way or the other and stick to it, Mac. You can't be distracted by a woman to the point it clouds your better judgement. And now, that I've done my "Dear Abbey" moment, can we get to the point of why I'm here so I can go visit my family?"

Mac pulled himself together, nodding sharply as he eagerly strode towards the door. He probably had no idea just how fast he was moving, heading towards the woman who was shattering his self-control as no one had ever done before.

Despite the complete mess and its inevitable fallout, Rhianna couldn't help but smile. Mac was most definitely Lily's mate even if he was currently clueless. The way he hurried from the room made that more than evident.

He was a good match for her. Lily was wild and untamed, feisty and so reckless at times it was scary. She needed a tough male who could curb her excesses while appreciating her inner strength and allowing her the freedom she needed to be herself. Somehow they would find a way to convince Andrei of this, though it wasn't going to be an easy task. *©w w . n o t E L W o r M . C o ©*

Lily was standing at attention with the other four candidates when they stepped outside the house. Mac's eyes automatically sought her out though she remained staring ahead as if oblivious to his gaze.

Rhianna glided down the steps and approached the first of the candidates. She smiled at the male, introducing herself and holding out her hand. Her words were inconsequential, asking about the tough training, what personal growth he felt he'd achieved since becoming a candidate.

Deep within his mind, the vampire queen sifted easily through his memories, finding his mind refreshingly open and honest. He was a good man for a vampire, his crueller nature not as evident as in most of their kind. She released his hand and moved on.

She repeated the process with the others, giving her blessing as each met her stringent assessment. They were all proud to be Praetorians; they were all willing to die to protect the Vârcolac.

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Rhianna finally reached Lily and took her hand as she had the others so as not to show any different treatment.

"You need to talk to your father, Lily darling," she sighed softly. "Half of the problem is you've closed off all mental communication with your family and friends. I obviously should have made my own link to you a lot deeper," she added dryly, sensing the younger woman's chagrin at her subtle rebuke.

"As it is, I'm only able to speak through your blocks now because of Anakatrine's power and the fact that I'm close enough to see you. You know they can't track you through your mental link. Let them know you're safe and well." *w w w . n o t E L ( w ) O r M . © o M*

Lily adored Rhianna and hated to disappoint her in anyway. She'd known when she suppressed her link to Annie that the vampire queen would be unhappy. While she did regret it, she knew she would do it again. Despite Annie's championship of the Vârcolac, the redhead had other claims on her loyalty. It would have been wrong to put her in an awkward position.

"I don't want to disobey anyone, Annie. You know Dad will order me to come home, and I don't want to be in the position of refusing his order. It would break his heart."

"It would be the lesser of two evils, Lily. He doesn't know if you're alive or dead, and that's making him homicidal. You know how your father gets sometimes. At least this way he'll know you're safe. It will calm him down a little.

You've chosen your path, little one. I think your choice of Mac as a mate is a perfect one. You keep claiming you're a grown woman, so start behaving like one. Be firm with your father but hold your ground. If you want Mac you need to fight for him. But be warned, keeping secrets from your mate will only bring you tears in the end."

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Lily stared deeply into her eyes, squeezing her hand tightly. "Will Caleb be very angry with you, Annie?" She'd correctly read the other woman's unease.

"I expect so. Still, it's been a quarter of a century since our last big fight so I dare say we're overdue." Rhianna kept her tone light, instinctively soothing the younger woman because she knew she'd feel bad about causing any potential conflict with Caleb.

Lily lips twitched in a small smile, warmth and love engulfing her in a strong mental hug. "You approve of Mac." She was elated Annie was blessing her choice of mate.

"When I told him twenty-five years ago he would be happy again one day, I had no idea at the time that you would be the cause of that happiness. I love Mac very much, Lily. Not as much as I adore you but almost. I couldn't be happier to give my blessing to your mating. But it's your parents' blessing you really need, and to gain that you need to talk to them."