

Chapter 324

Mac rolled over onto his back with a groan and threw an arm across his eyes. His body felt heavy and sluggish, lack of sleep being the main cause of his tiredness. He had needed to complete an errand after leaving Lily the night before, and then he'd simply been unable to stop himself from going into her room and watching her sleep.

The need to see her had almost been a compulsion and there was something quite unnerving about it. No one had managed to get under his skin the way she had, not for a very long time. The last time he'd opened himself up to someone, his entire world had changed. Sorrow and anguish had been carved into his soul before being replaced by a cold, brutal determination.*w(w)W.NóvelWorm.Cô*m

It was the latter emotion that had kept him going for the last fifteen hundred years. But as he'd watched Lily sleep last night, he'd found himself wondering just what he'd been missing by closing himself off.

He'd shaped himself into the perfect vampire, ruthless and cold. He'd assigned himself a personal mission; one frowned upon by his people even though they understood the need for it. He'd set himself up to be the judge and executioner of the vampires who crossed over.

Not only had he taken on the task, but he'd done so with relish. At each encounter, he saw Maria's face and little Sophia's torn body. With each vampire he killed, he avenged his family's deaths and fed a darkness that had grown steadily within him as the years rolled on. Like the vampires he hunted, he too had been just as consumed by the need to kill. It was only because he limited himself to vampires which had crossed over that he could justify his actions and stop himself from crossing over too.

The Vampire Council had let him go his own way, unofficially sanctioning his actions as long as he continued to limit himself to kills they'd deemed appropriate. He'd always managed to toe the line but he'd been forced to be sneaky about it. When he'd run out of obvious targets, he'd started hunting the ones who were about to turn.

He could always tell who was about to lose their grip on sanity long before they even knew. The humane thing would have been to guide them away from the destructive path they were on, but he did nothing to help. Instead, he'd stalked them, shadowed their every move until they snapped. Then he'd swooped in and dispensed his justice.

He'd been so close to crossing over and had been at the breaking point when Demetri had found him and given him a nobler task. He'd often wondered if his friend had known how lost he'd become and had invited him to lead the Praetorians to 'save' him as he should have been saving the vampires he waited to turn.

Demetri had been there centuries ago when Mac had given up and allowed his feral side to take control. Instead of putting him down, his friend had kicked the shit out of him until the pain had been so intense, it broke through the haze of insanity that had consumed him.

When reason finally returned, Demetri had kicked the shit out of him even harder and told him in no uncertain terms that he'd take Mac's head the next time he allowed himself to turn. It had been a painful lesson, one that left him broken and covered in blood. It had taken him almost a full day to completely heal from the beating. When Demetri made a point, he sure as hell made it.

Three times now the Ancient had saved his life. He owed Demetri a debt he doubted he'd ever be able to fully repay. Demetri must have seen something in him worth saving, though Mac still had no idea what it was his friend saw. Losing his family had damaged him beyond repair. He just wasn't capable of tenderness any more, not the kind that someone like Lily deserved.

She'd been brought up in a warm, loving environment, was adored and cherished by all around her. She was used to being pampered like a princess and he was used to being on his own, closed off and remote. No one was more surprised than he was by his own unexpected behaviour the night before. Lily had slipped under his guard for a moment, made him start thinking about being mated, about sharing a life with her... even when he was so wrong for her in every way.

Lily fought like a true warrior, all graceful lines and deadly precision. She was tough and resilient, a woman to be admired. But hiding beneath that tough exterior was a confused girl who hid a vulnerability that was shocking in its intensity when it surfaced.

He hadn't been prepared for it the night before. He hadn't been prepared for his reaction to it. One look into her tear-stained face and his barriers had started to crumble. The need to protect her, to wipe those tears from her eyes had almost been a physical ache.

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Maybe he could give her tenderness once in a while but it wasn't who he was. He wasn't suddenly going to change for her no matter how much he wished he could. He'd been honed in pain and spent his life doling out pain and ultimately death. He was a killer and there was no escaping that fact.

Lily might think that was what she wanted in a mate but he knew being with him would destroy her in the long run. She was currently running from her father because she couldn't cope with the type of dominant male he was. He had no doubt she loved Andrei, adored him even, but she chafed at the restraints he imposed on her.

She would wilt under the control Mac would force on her if he accepted her as his.

With a loud snarl into the silent room, Mac pushed himself out of bed and strode naked into the bathroom. Last night had been a mistake. For Lily's sake she had to understand that. He was not the mate she needed and he couldn't damage someone as vibrant as her. He would make sure she understood that when she woke up.

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The scent of lilac woke Lily and she tensed instantly. Had she released her hold on her scent? Her eyes flew open and her head turned to the bedside table, following the sweet fragrance. Sitting in an exquisitely cut glass vase was a bouquet of lilacs. The tension slowly eased from her body.

"Lilacs are a pretty flower."

She squeaked and sat up, her startled gaze flying to her bedroom door. It was closed but Karn leaned against it, his arms crossed over his chest, his expression so neutral it looked as if he'd donned a blank mask.

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He was big and imposing, his expression slightly frightening as he stood in her room and watched her so intently. She had no trouble understanding his message. He was letting her know that he knew who she was. Had Mac told him?

"Fuck!" she groaned as memories of the night before flooded into her tired mind. Mac! She'd told him everything! She'd tried to seduce him with sexy lingerie and, God forbid, she'd taken his blood. Could it get any worse? Even Karn knowing her identity paled in comparison to what Mac was likely to say to her when she saw him.

"My thoughts exactly," Karn agreed as he pushed off from the door and moved towards her closet and drawers. He pulled out clothes with quick, economical movements, raising an eyebrow at her as he dangled her lacy underwear by a finger.

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