

## Chapter 332

The silence in the kitchen of the Romanov household was chilling. Loretta stood perfectly still in the doorway, her dark brown eyes concerned as she watched her mate carefully.

Andrei's face was devoid of all expression, his body so tense it gave the illusion that he'd break in two from the slightest touch. His usually brown eyes had bled into the thick blackness of his feral state. Wicked black talons tapped against the back of the wooden chair he was gripping.

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The sharp crack of splintering wood broke the silence and Loretta started, a barely audible squeak escaping her lips. Fear rushed through her body unbidden as memories of another time quickly surfaced. She had last seen Andrei in this state when he'd thought they'd lost Lily. He had exacted his vengeance by dismembering a vampire named Roberto, and all the while insanity had swirled in the depth of his eyes.

Something had to have happened to Lily. Nothing else could bring him so close to the killing edge. Her fear ratcheted up as he turned slowly to stare at her, his attention drawn by the sound she'd made. There was nothing civilised in his expression, nothing of the man she loved.

"Andrei?" Her voice shook and her eyes were anxious as she kept her gaze fixed on his. She knew he wouldn't hurt her, but until he told her what was wrong she could only guess that something had happened to their daughter. She could only detect an icy chill through their mate bond. It was so cold it was freezing her very soul.*www.novε(1)wo*R*Ml.c0*m

"Who told Lily about the Praetorians?" His question was asked in a cold, reasonable voice. There was no heat or anger in the words, and that made his words more chilling than anything else.

"Is Lily okay?" she countered, ignoring his question, needing assurance that her child wasn't hurt and suffering somewhere.

Thick silence fell across the room for a long moment and then Andrei breathed out slowly. "Loretta, when I ask you a question I expect it to be answered. Who told Lily about the Praetorians?"

Again it was asked in an even tone but Loretta wasn't fooled by the calmness. One wrong move and Andrei was going to explode. While he might not hurt her, there was no telling what he might do to anyone else he met.

Despite his coldness, Loretta knew he would have answered her if Lily was hurt in some way. Her fear abated at that thought and she focused on his question, a frown marring her face. "No one would have told her about the Praetorians, Andrei. No one would have told any of the children about them."

"Then why the fuck did my daughter just ask me if she was a monster? And why did she just say that the fucking Praetorians were there to keep people safe from her?!"

The furious roar and red hot rage suddenly burning down their mate bond almost made Loretta stagger backwards. The depth of Andrei's fury worried her, but she almost sighed with relief. She may not know how to deal with his coldness, but she knew how to handle his anger.

"I don't know why she said that, but I do know that no pack member privy to the knowledge of the Praetorians would ever tell Lily about them. You know that too, Andrei."

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He fell silent again, his body taut with the strain of holding himself in check. He continued clutching the broken chair as Loretta moved further into the room to stand behind him and rest her cheek against his back. She didn't touch him with her hands, merely allowed her body to press against his until her scent began to seep into his pores and he slowly started to relax.

Andrei looked down at the mangled chair and slowly released his death grip. Hot, spicy cinnamon swept over him while soft, delicious curves pressed against his back. His red-hot fury began to ease as he breathed deeply, letting his mate soothe him down with her wolf's touch and her heady scent.

Reason returned and he released his vampiric side. His talons disappeared and his eyes returned to a light shade of brown. He felt Loretta's hands slide around his waist and he leaned back against her, his arms coming to enfold hers around his stomach. A shaky breath escaped him as he realised how close he'd come to crossing over completely, to becoming nothing but a mindless killing machine.

"She thinks she's a monster," he whispered. "How could our baby think she's a monster, Loretta?"

Andrei turned as Loretta moved to slip into his arms. "Something must have frightened her," she said. "She's alone without the protection of the pack and she's very powerful. Lily has always had a buffer for her abilities here, but out there she has no one."

Andrei dropped his head to bury his face in the side of her neck, inhaling her scent deeply to calm himself down. His mate's words made sense even if he didn't like hearing them. His daughter's refusal to come home had infuriated him, but the fact she thought she was a monster had broken his heart. The thought of Lily hurting at all was enough to send him over the edge.

"What are you saying, Loretta? Are you implying that by protecting her we've somehow stifled her growth? And that she's out there with powers and abilities she can't control?" He didn't want to ask the question but he knew he needed to hear the answer.

His mate took a deep breath and stroked a hand through his long hair soothingly. "It's possible we've done more harm than good," she answered truthfully. "Lily and the other children were never given the chance to test the limits of their abilities. Until we give them that chance, there's always the potential they'd be overwhelmed by outside stimuli."

Loretta knew that not all of the children had this issue. Liam did and possibly also Kothari, but the others had more grounded personalities.

"So you're saying this is my fault?" Andrei's tone was harsh as he pulled away, heat in his eyes as he glared down at her. There was a hint of accusation in his mate's words which turned his tone defensive. He didn't like to be proven wrong about anything, least of all the way he raised his children.

"We couldn't leave them unprotected, Loretta. We couldn't assume that our children weren't still at risk just because there were no further attacks on the pack."

She agreed with him wholeheartedly in one respect, but in another she couldn't disagree with him more. She was gravely concerned about her daughter's well-being. She wanted to know where Lily was and she wanted assurance that her daughter was all right. Her fear for her child sparked her own temper and her eyes flashed with molten heat.

"Yes, when they were children we did need to protect them, Andrei," she snapped angrily. "The problems started when you and Alexei wouldn't let them grow up. Lily isn't five any longer. She hasn't been five for a quarter of a century but you've been hellbent on keeping her that age and this is the inevitable result! We don't know where our daughter is. We know she's frightened and alone somewhere and she won't come home or let us help her because she's terrified you'll cage her again. So do I think this your fault, Andrei? You're damned fucking right I do!"

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