

Chapter 339

The ringing of the telephone in the early hours of the morning would have woken Mac had he been asleep, but his earlier encounter with Lily had made sleep impossible. He retrieved his cell phone from the coffee table, the familiar number automatically setting his instincts on high alert

"Hello?" He deliberately altered the sound of his voice, making it huskier. His caller wasn't due to check in for another week and it paid to be cautious.

"You do that very well, Mac," Pietro laughed softly. "For a moment there I didn't recognise your voice."**Ww1W.00vElw0r0.CrM**

Mac blew out an irritated noise. "Just because the number belongs to you doesn't mean someone else didn't get their hands on it," he countered. "I know you think you're infallible but even the best make mistakes." He couldn't stop the little dig. He wouldn't have been awake and brooding if Pietro had paid more attention when he vetted 'Andrea Ruminsky.'

"Who pissed on your parade?" Pietro laughed again. "Almost wish I was there to witness it, but you'd probably be tempted to rearrange my face for me."

Mac counted to ten, then kept going until he reached twenty. When he could trust himself to speak calmly, he let out a slow breath. "I assume you called in the middle of the night to tell me something important? Or did you just feel like pissing me off?"

The other man sobered immediately. "I got a whiff of something and followed the trail to the UK. I'm now in Edinburgh with a couple of barely-turned Elders. They act like brain-dead idiots, but it's all just a good show. These two are deliberately hiding their smarts. But they're not that intelligent though, as they've bought into my anti-establishment rhetoric. They appear excited by the prospect of having someone more experienced sharing their views. Makes me think an individual is running this little European rebellion after all. And it feels like someone important is coming soon to check me out."

Mac's tension increased at the news. "So you think they're finally going to make a move?"

"Something's in the wind, Mac. It's been so long since the last attack and I'm getting little clues here and there that appear to be nothing on their own. But taken together, they all point to an offensive about to happen. Our European brethren have a distinct lack of concern about The Council and even the Ancients. They don't view themselves as being under Council control. I also think they expect the Vârcolac to be easier targets now that they're grown and more likely to be out and about unescorted."

Mac's eyes automatically drifted to the door as he inhaled deeply to scent Lily as she slept just down the stairs from him. Pietro couldn't be more right about the timing of the Vârcolac's movements. He felt a surge of rage at the thought of someone making plans to harm the woman he was now personally protecting.

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"You're sure there isn't a central figure pulling the strings from here stateside?" he finally asked.

"It's unlikely but not impossible," Pietro conceded. "The anti-Council rhetoric is pretty fierce over here, but that could just be a smokescreen. There could be someone close to our leaders who hates all the changes. The formation of the Ancient Council could have stirred up bad blood. Someone could be plotting to bring down both Councils and set themselves up as the new ruler of our nation."

Mac's smile was grim. "If they had any inkling of the triumvirate's existence they wouldn't be so stupid," he growled. "If someone close to the Council is involved then your cover may not be as good as you think, Pietro."**0wWw.noV0llw0rm.c0M**

The other vampire laughed softly. "Why, Mackenzie. For a moment there it actually sounded like you care."

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"I care about losing the only eyes and ears we have over there, de la Rios. I've got people to protect and losing you would make my job that little bit more difficult."

The other man still laughed, delight in his voice. "You know that's not the only reason you sound worried, Mac. I know you like me, really."

Mac growled in annoyance, his mind whirling at the possible implications of Pietro's intel. He chose to ignore the teasing. "How much longer will you be in Edinburgh?"

Pietro sobered again. "Don't know, but it'll probably be a while longer. I get the impression I'm receiving my final vetting before they let me in deeper."

Mac mulled over his options. If the vampires were preparing to move then the Vârcolac and possibly even the Council were in danger. Lily was tucked in bed downstairs and his gut instinct was to send her home. But no one knew she was here, and it would be logical to assume the attack would be made against the Armand-Hanlon compound. She would be safer staying with the Praetorians. The question was: could he safely leave her with Karn and the others?

"I don't have all day to hang around on this call, Mac. The others could come back any moment."

"Send me details of where you are and how long you expect to be there. Update me if you move again. I've a couple of things I need to do here but I'll meet you there as soon as possible. I want to get a feel for these people personally," Mac finally answered.

His gut clenched hard at the thought of leaving but it was the right decision. The more firsthand intel he had, the more effective the Praetorians would be in their mission to protect Lily and the others. He trusted Pietro, but he was used to trusting in his own abilities more. If something was off about the Elders Pietro had met, he'd be able to spot it right away.

And there was the risk that Pietro wasn't safe. If someone stateside was running this little rebellion then the final vetting process could blow Pietro's cover. The other vampire's link to the Romanovs wasn't exactly a secret here, even though Pietro had been cultivating his cover in Europe for the past 25 years. Mac had no such ties so his cover would be harder to expose.

"You do care, Mac," Pietro laughed softly. "I'm really touched."

"Fuck off and just send me the information, de la Rios. I'll let you know when I'm heading out."