

### Chapter 343

His friend gave him a rueful smile. "That's women for you. Why do you think I stay as far away from them as possible, Mac? Let them get anywhere near you and before you know it, you're thinking with your cock instead of your head and all hell breaks loose. I'm stuck between pitying you and wanting to kick the shit out of you if you hurt her."

Mac couldn't stop the snort of laughter that escaped him. Give Karn an inch and he took a mile. Hell, he took two. He eyed his friend speculatively, trying to work out just when their relationship had changed.

They'd known each other for over a century, had worked together on some of the more taxing assignments Mac had undertaken. He respected the other man immensely for his skills and his dedication to his tasks, but at some point in the last few decades their relationship had changed. He'd started thinking of Karn more as a friend and not just a colleague. He'd come to trust him.

It was a disconcerting thought. Since he'd met the triumvirate, he was starting to trust more people, letting them into his life, allowing them to matter to him. Was that why Lily had slipped through his defences so easily? Just thinking about her was enough to send his blood pressure sky high. He took a deep breath. He really needed to get away.

"Keep her safe, Karn," he ordered softly, his tone resolute. "If anything happens to her while I'm away..."

"You don't need to threaten to kill me," Karn snorted, rolling his eyes. "If anything were to happen to her then I would already be dead, Mac, and you know that."*uw̃Ŧ.novêŁWð(r)@.com*

He did know that. It was the only reason he was willing to leave Lily's side. Why he'd even opened his mouth he had no idea. Was he really so far gone that he needed Karn's reassurance? The situation was becoming intolerable. He couldn't afford to have his thought processes muddled. The threat to the Vârcolac was becoming more dangerous and he had to get himself under control as soon as possible. Now was not the time to become unfocused.

He nodded to Karn and headed out of the house to the waiting Jeep. Dawn wasn't far off but it was still too early to go and see Annie. He headed to his apartment, not surprised when he did not encounter another soul in the building upon his arrival. Anyone with half a brain would be tucked in bed fast asleep.*ww̃(w).novêŁwoŦm.čom̃*

As he let himself into the apartment, Mac wondered if he'd ever get a full night's sleep again. He'd had precious few hours of sleep since Lily had crashed into his life. Something told him this was about to become the norm for him rather than the exception. He surveyed the apartment, finding the expected scent of the cleaner and the underlying trace of blood.

He tried not to inhale too deeply but couldn't stop himself. Lily's 'scent' of nutmeg still hung in the air and he stifled a groan, trying not to imagine her here in his private space. Karn was right. It had been insanity to bring her here, to the very place he used to satisfy his sexual needs and his blood lust. It had been disrespectful, especially when he knew she considered him her mate.

But it was done and if nothing else, her reaction had highlighted the issues she had with her control of her abilities and her wolf. If something good came out of it then they'd both just have to learn to live with his insensitivity.

He spent the remainder of the night and early morning hours reviewing the data Pietro sent to his cell phone, trying to work out how best to tackle things once he got to Scotland. When the clock hit nine o'clock, he gathered his gear and headed back outside. It was time to have a chat with Annie and find out just what the hell she was playing at leaving Lily in his care.

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Rhianna smiled, her head turning to the front door as she felt her guest's approach. It was so unusual for him to visit her at home that for a moment she genuinely felt surprised -- a feat very few managed to accomplish.

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"The door's open, so just come right in," she called out, her smile widening when she heard his footsteps falter on the steps for a second before the door swung open to reveal Kallum Romanov.

"How do you do that?" Kallum laughed, shaking his head ruefully as he closed the door and leaned down to give the petite redhead a kiss on the cheek.

"Magic," she laughed, giving him an affectionate hug. She loved all the Vârcolac as if they were her own and loved to spend time with them. She usually had to visit the pack to see them, but today one of them had actually come to see her.

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"Should I guess why you're here?" she smiled, leading the way to the living room with Kallum close on her heels.

"Lily sent me," he admitted with a smile. "Said I was to mention Mac to you and you would fill me in on where she is."

Rhianna stiffened noticeably then let out a slow breath. She turned to give him a long, measuring look. The Vârcolac had been children and in need of protection when she'd first set up the Praetorians. Back then, it had been a simple matter to keep their charges ignorant of the threat whilst ensuring they were never left unguarded.

It had worked for almost twenty-five years. What none of them had factored into the equation was the way the children's skills had advanced so dramatically as they had grown up. It was plainly obvious now that the children, if trained properly, would outstrip their guardians when it came to protecting themselves.

She should have seen it coming, should have realised that they needed to reassess the situation once their charges became adults. With the benefit of hindsight, she could see that the triumvirate and the pack had created an untenable situation for Lily by failing to act earlier.

Rhianna couldn't blame the girl for fleeing everyone she loved if that was the only way she'd have a chance to discover who she was as a person. And Lily was not alone. Some of the other children clearly exhibited character traits that indicated they'd have a hard time adapting to the real world and coping with their abilities.

Thankfully, Rhianna knew Kallum wouldn't have any issues. The young man was every inch the Alpha, and reminded her of her brother Rafe in some ways. He had a slightly more ruthless streak, though, which he kept strictly controlled. There was no doubt in her mind that the young man standing before her could more than adequately take care of himself and all those he considered part of his pack.

So now she had to decide just how much she was going to share with him. She was almost certain that she would tell Kallum everything, even though Caleb would be furious once he learned that she had not only concealed Lily's whereabouts, but she'd also made the unilateral decision to reveal everything without consulting him first.

"First Lily and now you," she smiled ruefully. "Caleb is not going to be very happy with me, Kal."

Kallum frowned slightly, disbelief on his handsome face. "I can't imagine Caleb ever being unhappy with you, Annie. He adores you."

She laughed softly. "Believe me, I frustrate the hell out of him very easily. Thankfully he doesn't stay mad long."