

Chapter 347

"Everyone has underestimated just who and what the Vârcolac are," Kallum said firmly. "Everyone is so hell-bent on protecting us that you appear to have forgotten just what we're capable of. Mac said himself that Lily was a lethal fighter. I can tell you right now that she would have been curbing her skills in any sparring matches she's undertaken. If she was trying to pass as a full vampire, and a reasonably young one at that, then she'd have no option but to hide her true abilities."

"Yes, you've have extensive training, Kal," Caleb agreed though his tone was slightly doubtful. "Gard has done his best to ensure you can handle yourselves in emergency situations until backup arrives. But it's an entirely different thing when you're being assaulted by a group of experienced fighters out in the real world."

Rhianna kept her eyes on Kallum's face, noting the way his lips tightened in displeasure. She let out a slow breath, the sound drawing his gaze to hers. His lips quirked into a smile and she felt herself answering him with a smile of her own as realisation dawned on her.

"How much have you all been hiding from us?"

He shrugged nonchalantly. "It varies depending on skill level. I'd say the majority of us probably train at about eighty percent. Me, personally, I dial it down to about seventy percent, Lily about seventy-five. I'm not entirely sure about Kothari because he only does the basic training. I think he's hiding a lot of his power from all of us.

"The same goes for Liam. He's so empathic he doesn't want to fight but he knows he has to be able to defend himself. I think he's got a lot in reserves. It's almost as if he's afraid of what he's capable of..." Kallum trailed off to give the people in the room time to process his admission.

They'd never made a conscious decision to hide their abilities from their pack; it had just sort of happened. When it had become so obvious that they were outstripping their teachers at such a young age, they'd become concerned that their friends and family would start to fear them.

Without discussion, they'd all started training that little bit under their skill level until it became the norm for them. The only time they trained at their full abilities was when they were alone and sparring against each other.

Rhianna wondered why she wasn't overly surprised by the news. She could sense Caleb's consternation through their bond. He didn't say anything though. He appeared to be content to let her decide how to deal with the situation.

"Does that include whatever magical abilities you have?" she finally asked.

Kallum frowned and shook his head. "That's the one area we've still not managed to break through yet. We can all do the small things that Rayne does but no one's exhibited anything more enhanced than that. Lily can create things other than clothes when she shifts, mostly jewellery and girly trinkets. She's certain she's got untapped power deep inside. She believes she can create things that don't necessarily relate to her body, though she hasn't been able to so far."

"Why is this the first time we're hearing about all this, Kallum?" There was disapproval in Caleb's tone. He wasn't happy that they'd all been kept in the dark.

The younger man met his gaze steadily. There was no apology in his eyes. "Nobody wanted to listen to us, Caleb. You were all too busy telling us what to do and how to do it. I know it was done out of love and concern but you guys dropped the ball big time. You left us with no choice but to rely on ourselves."

More silence filled the room and it was Mac who eventually broke it. "So basically, Kallum's saying that the Praetorians are a waste of time and the Vârcolac could run rings around us when it comes to protecting themselves?"

"On the contrary, I think the Praetorians are completely necessary," Kallum countered. "When we were younger, we needed the protection you gave us. Any new children born will be in dire need of that same protection as they grow into their skills.

"Lily's problems highlight that we still need you, just in a different way. We need to train with you, learn what issues we have as individuals and work to correct any problems which may crop up. Everyone just needs to stop treating us like we're incapable of protecting ourselves and let us train properly."

His gaze left Mac's and turned to Rhianna. She wasn't one to hide her emotions and he could clearly see the distress in her eyes. He hadn't meant to make her feel bad. Learning about Lily's anguish had just been the last straw. The situation was no one person's fault. They had all failed to communicate properly.

"No one's angry, Annie," he said soothingly, giving her his usual lopsided grin. "We love our families and our pack. We know you love us too. It's a relief to finally be taken seriously and tell you about this. I've wanted to for a long time, and until Lily ran away there really wasn't a compelling reason to break the silence."

"I feel like we've failed you, Kal," Rhianna whispered, her voice trembling slightly. "How could I have gotten this so wrong?"

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He moved to kneel before her, taking her hands gently in his. He was just like everyone else; he couldn't bear to see her so upset. "You didn't fail us, Annie. All you've ever done is love and protect us. We just need a different kind of guidance now. I should have told you sooner. I'm sorry I didn't."

He squeezed her hands gently, his eyes turning to Caleb to see his reaction. The Ancient didn't like it when his mate was upset. He couldn't read Caleb's expression though his hand was stroking gently through Rhianna's curls.

Caleb nodded to Kallum, silently urging him to return to his seat. They'd learned so much in this meeting, and it was a lot to take in. He gathered Rhianna against his side and brushed his lips soothingly against her hair as he sensed her distress starting to subside.Ww.NovêL®.R®.COM

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"You really think your presence is required in Scotland?" he finally asked Mac.

"I'm concerned that Pietro's cover could be blown if we're wrong and someone close to the Council is actually involved in this plot. I know he's not technically a Praetorian in the real sense but I class him as one of mine. I don't leave one of my team hanging out on a limb with no backup, Caleb."

The Ancient couldn't fault his logic. He wasn't willing to lose Pietro either should there be a spy hidden among them. "And you're content to leave Karn in charge?"

"I wouldn't leave Lily if I didn't trust Karn completely," Mac answered. His voice rang with certainty.

Caleb nodded again and turned to look at Rhianna. "How do you want to play this, Annie?" He could make the decisions himself but he knew she was feeling uncertain because of the recent revelations. She needed to be doing something to address the mistakes they'd made.

Instead of answering, Rhianna glanced at Kallum. He met her gaze, smiling as he did so. "What do you think, Kal?"

His smile broadened and he relaxed back on the sofa. It was only then that the others realised he'd been tense, as if waiting for something.

"If Mac's going to be out of the country, then Lily needs someone she trusts close to her," he answered instantly. "Mom's managed to get through to Dad somewhat but I think it's too soon for Lily to come home and face him.

"I'm sure this Karn is a reliable person otherwise he wouldn't be Mac's second-in-command, but he's not family and she's already lost control once when he's been her companion. She needs someone she can't dominate, someone who will kick her ass if she's about to lose it. If that person can't be one of our parents then I guess that only leaves me."

"And just how are we going to explain you to the Praetorians?" Mac growled softly. He knew what Kallum said made sense, but he still didn't like hearing Kallum say he was ready to kick Lily's ass, even if she may need to be kept in line until he returned. He ignored the possessiveness that was shifting through him like a whirlwind when he thought of Lily.

"That's the point I've been trying to make," Kallum retorted, a hint of steel in his voice. "You don't explain me, just as you don't explain Lily or any of the others. The time for secrecy is past. The Vârcolac aren't hiding any more, Mac. We're joining the Praetorians."