

## Chapter 402

"I don't feel any different," Mac commented. "Perhaps the wolf gene is muted because of Lily's unique heritage?" He, too, looked to the Alpha for an explanation.

Rafe shook his head his frown deepening as he thought back to the first matings and how none of them had realised the vampires were his until the night Loretta and Ashleigh had been taken by Daniel.

"No, it's something other than that," he answered. He met Mac's eyes and held them for a long moment before he had to concede the unthinkable.

"I'm not your Alpha."

The words hung on the air, the tension in the room thick.

"But that means..." Loretta choked out shooting a glance at Lily and seeing the understanding crossing her face.

"That I will be leaving the pack after all," Lily finished, sadness creeping into her voice as her eyes filled with tears. There could be no other explanation and it hurt to think that she would be separated from her family in such a significant way. Being part of the Armand-Hanlon pack was all she knew. She trusted Rafe.

Her distress was enough to snap the fragile hold Mac had on his emotions. He tightened his hold protectively around Lily's slender frame. "Explain for the non-Were," he ground out, leaning down to brush his lips against his mate's temple as her tears silently flowed down her cheeks.

"Loretta was in the Hanlon pack at the time of her mating to Andrei," Rafe answered with a deep sigh. "He didn't bond with Jared Hanlon but instead bonded with me as did the others. When I accepted my position as Alpha, it broke the bond the girls had with Jared and they joined with me and became part of my pack. The same will happen with Lily."

He paused and let the words sink in, keeping his gaze fixed on the angry vampire. "Somewhere out there, you have an Alpha who hasn't accepted his position yet. When he does...Lily's bond will break with me and she'll become part of his pack."

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Lily raised her head from Mac's chest to glance tearfully at Rafe. "But you can manipulate the bond. You just said so...we can put it back."

Rafe sighed again, his eyes sad as he tried to explain. "I could, Lily, but the natural Alpha bond is instinctive. I can't sever another Alpha's bond. He would have to give it up willingly. He may agree with you but the likelihood of him doing so with Mackenzie is very low. Your mate has never been part of my pack therefore I have no prior claim."

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He knew that his woman wouldn't stand to be separated from him by being in another pack. She would stay with him wherever the Were bond placed him which meant she would be cut off from her family and friends. It was another blow, more pain that he was heaping on the woman he loved and he cursed himself.

Lily struggled to control her tears, glancing at her father, who was remarkably silent through the discussion. He was so still it was hard to imagine what he was thinking or feeling. A strong surge of love rushed through her as their eyes met.

"The changing of the Alpha bond won't affect the other bonds in place?" Andrei asked quietly, his heart banging in his chest. He had no idea if Rafe had ever had the power to sever the familial bond they had with their children. He wasn't the type of man to but if this new Alpha was...

"I don't believe so," Rafe answered carefully. "Though we lack the knowledge because this is all so new to us. I don't think even Caleb or Annie would know but we could ask them. The Alexanders retained their familial bond though it is nowhere near as advanced as the Vârcolac one. And neither I, nor, Jared would have done anything to interfere with it either."wwŴ.ŋôv@êw@rm. @om

"So we're basically reliant on what kind of man this unknown Alpha is?" Andrei asked.

"We just don't know." Rafe hated feeling so helpless. He didn't want to lose Lily or any of the other children but the signs were there that it would happen, with Lily at least and possibly some of the others depending on whom their mates turned out to be. @ŴŴ.Ň(ø)@elwøRM. @Om

He cleared his throat as the room remained silent, everyone lost in their own thoughts. He would check with Caleb and Annie but he wasn't expecting any answers from them. But it would have to wait while he pressed on with the reason he had come over.

"We'll have to shelve this for the moment," he announced, gesturing the others to take a seat at the dining table. "Caleb received disturbing news from Mara which impacts on everyone."

The tension level ratcheted up another notch and Mac frowned deeply as he took the chair beside Lily, keeping her hand firmly clasped in his and resting it on his thigh. "Pietro?"

Rafe nodded his expression solemn. "You were right to be concerned, Mac. When Demetri arrived in Scotland, Pietro was already in trouble. From what I've been told, the European vampires have created some kind of poison which breaks down your healing abilities. Given in too strong a dose, it effectively rots a vampire from the inside out."

"Oh my God!" Loretta gasped, looking first at Andrei and then her daughter. Fear rippled through her as the news sank in and suddenly she was being faced with the knowledge that her entire family, who she'd always considered as indestructible, were now at risk.

Mac kept his expression neutral though his hand tightened on Lily's. He was instantly in protective mode, his mind whirling as he considered what this meant for the Praetorians and how they could work to keep the Vârcolac safe in the face of this new threat.

"Is Pietro alive?" He asked the question they were all thinking.

"Demetri was able to save him but at a cost. He retains scars from his experience and by all accounts he is fragile mentally at the moment. The damage was severe and his recovery time is being estimated in months rather than days. The triumvirate have asked the pack if we'll allow him to recuperate here and I've agreed."

"He stays with us," Andrei bit out, fury on his face as he gripped the table hard. The thought of the coming threat was enough to send him over the edge; the news his friend had come so close to dying incensed him beyond measure.

Loretta placed a hand gently over his, her own concern evident. "There's no question about it," she concurred. "We have the room now that both Lily and Kal are up at the Praetorian compound. He'll have privacy to recover here."

"I thought you would say that," Rafe nodded, glad he didn't need to ask. If Pietro was as bad as Caleb had informed him, he most likely wouldn't want to interact much with the pack when he first got there.

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