

Chapter 602

Louis's icy tone appeared incongruous with the venom in his expression as his talons dug into Michael's throat and left him gurgling.

"Answer me!"

"Uh, Louis, it might be easier for him to answer if you weren't choking the life out of him."

For a second there was only silence and then the coven leader slowly turned to survey the new arrival. "I thought I told you never to come here again." The words were issued in the same cold tone, their warning explicit.

The other male merely smiled, as he ran a hand through his short dark, wavy hair; almost a mirror image of the irate vampire before him. "Maybe you should be thanking me for passing through. That is, if you wish to glean any information from that vampire you're about to decapitate."

His words sank in and Louis swung back around to look at Michael. With an annoyed growl, he let go of him and watched him sink down to the floor in a boneless heap. "What do you want, Dante?"

"Like I said, I was just passing through the area and heard there had been a little excitement recently. I was intrigued when I heard it was your coven, Louis. It's not like you to have problems."

Dante entered the room fully, ignoring the recovering vampire as he kept his gaze firmly on the Frenchman. It was never wise to take one's eyes off the deadliest predator in the room, and he was certainly no fool. Louis was barely in control, and appeared more volatile than usual. Something was amiss, something he had been sensing for a long time though unable to determine the cause.

So far, he hadn't been successful in ferreting out anything useful, despite his endless travels. He knew there was a danger out there, something that could bring harm to all of the covens in Europe. As soon as he'd heard talk of trouble in Louis' coven, he'd come back immediately. This was the most stable coven in the area and if it was being affected...the instrument of that disaffection had to be nearby.

"My coven is none of your business. I suggest it remains so; otherwise I may have to reconsider our non-aggression pact, Castillo. You did me a service once in the past. Do not presume that gives you carte blanche to become involved in matters that are none of your concern."

Sitting down behind the desk, Dante levered the chair backwards until it rested against the wall. "Perhaps I can assist you once more? Has that not occurred to you, Louis? I hear you have recently lost one you valued highly. Perhaps I can fill that role for a short time until you find a more permanent replacement?"*www.™@træ(1)W(ø)ℜm.com*

At his words, the other vampire stilled completely. There wasn't even an indication he was drawing breath as his eyes darkened to the point of turning feral. "Just what have you heard? "

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Righting the chair, Dante turned serious, and allowed his true thoughts to show. "Be calm, my friend. The rumours are not common knowledge...yet. You know that I have a discreet network covering most of Europe. I picked up small snippets here and there and managed to weave them together to form a more complete picture. For the moment, none of the other covens are aware of the dissent within yours, and I came here in an effort to keep it that way."

The Frenchman regarded him intently for a long moment, searching his open expression for any sign of deceit, and then he slowly relaxed and pulled up a chair to sit down. Behind him, the younger male was moving to make himself more comfortable against the wall as his body slowly healed from the damage inflicted.

"You ask for trust, when in the same breath you admit to having spies everywhere. Who are you, Dante, and why do you have such an interest in my coven?"

A low chuckle escaped from Dante's lips unbidden, though his expression clouded. "You know who and what I am, Louis. You have always known that. You just can't understand me, and therefore you search for something that is not there."

Distrust remained in the coven leader's eyes. "You expect me to believe that all you are is a reluctant vampire living his life in constant penance? That your sole intent is to move from coven to coven and help where you deem it necessary?"

Louis barked out a laugh, devoid of any humour. "Vampires are not altruistic, Castillo. Even those across the water who believe themselves better than us still do what they do for their own benefit. They may try to convince themselves otherwise, but they are lying to themselves. There is no we in vampire. Everything we do is ultimately for our own selfish needs."

"I know you believe that, my friend, which is why I said you do not understand me," Dante sighed, and leaned on the desk, his expression still clouded. "I do not lie to you, Louis. I am who I am; a reluctant vampire."

He smiled as a glint of humour suddenly danced in his pale brown eyes. "I quite like that. It sounds suitably tragic. However, we digress from the point of my being here. Your coven has lost a high-ranking member, and when I arrived, you were interrogating your subordinate. How may I assist you?"

He waited for his friend to weigh up his options. Louis wasn't a fool and hadn't lived so long by being weak. All through his coven's history he had aligned himself with the strongest of vampires, choosing his allegiances wisely to build up his powerbase The Frenchman was now in the enviable position of having the strongest of covens and had no further need to seek alliances with some of his past cohorts. Maybe he would decide he didn't need Dante's help after all.

The silence stretched out longer and then finally Louis snapped his fingers at the young male. "Come here, Michael."

The blond vampire rose on unsteady feet and painfully made his way closer. "This is Dante Castillo. He takes Thereasa's position until I say otherwise. You will obey him as my second." He didn't wait for any sign of agreement. His entire coven knew better than to question one of his edicts.

His intent gaze turned back to the new arrival. "So, tell me what you think you know."

A small smile settled across Dante's lips as relief coursed through him. The odds had been fifty/fifty that Louis would accept his help. It was gratifying that he had. He ran an experienced eye over Michael and noted his healing was almost complete, though there was a shadow of fear still lingering in his eyes.

His gaze swung back to Louis. "It would appear you have drawn the eyes of the Northern American vampires to us. You've garnered the attention of none other than Demetri Bozic, himself, from what I've managed to learn. I'm intrigued as to why you have suddenly decided you want to tangle with Ancients, my friend. It's not like you to be so reckless."

"It was a simple information-gathering exercise which turned sour," Louis growled, his eyes flashing with fury. "I presumed Thereasa could handle the imbeciles I sent with her, but she failed and it got out of hand. There was never any intention to tangle with the Ancients. The coven leaders merely wanted to know what was happening with the mixed matings and their offspring. Michael here, and the recently departed Bruce, became overly zealous in their task. Reasa was supposed to clean up the mess, but it appears she found her own fervour unexpectedly and decided to take matters into her own hands."

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He snapped his fingers at the younger male. "Speak."