

## Chapter 181

Zeke was by Ava's side the instant the magic released him. Ava had her arm over her ribs and her teeth clenched to stop her from screaming out, but he could sense how much pain she was in. He helped her to her feet and fought to calm Shadow down when he gently held her in his arms.

The contact was only mildly soothing, and Shadow still growled in his head, still close to losing control.

'You should have ripped his head off,' the beast said.

He should have When he had agreed to this plan, he had thought this meeting would merely be a conversation where they would finally get to know what the fuck the Council wanted. Nothing had prepared him for this. Feeling Ava in pain and not being able to do anything about it had been torture on a different level

But he knew he couldn't beat the Head of the Council, not by himself. Not yet. He would have paid the price with his life, and Ava would have died.

'I can beat him.' Shadow snarled.

‘Stick to the plan. Shadow. You only have one jobs to do right now.’

He kissed the top of Ava’s head and released her. Her gaze was full of questions, but they knew better than to discuss anything here, especially now that they knew what the forest was capable of. Ava sighed and tried to walk, but she hissed in pain. In a perfect world, they would have been sneaking quickies between lessons, not getting injured by a Council that was supposed to protect them. And definitely not trying to outsmart Hansson.

“You should shift to heal quicker,” he said.

“Not yet. Not here,” Ava whispered.

He looked back at the forest looming behind him. It was still early morning, but beyond the tree line was perpetual darkness. And the silence within it was as unsettling as the noise that had come from it before.

He had driven through the woods on the first and last days of every semester for years, but he had never heard anything like that before. There was something in there much worse than what he had fought when he rescued Ava. And now those things were silent.

Ava had done that.

Her growl had been a promise of death that had made them scatter away. And it had made the Head of the Council eager to have Ava under his thumb. He’d seen that look on his face. That bastard had been practically

drooling. And he hadn't been the only one—Shadow had been enthralled by the proof that she was his equal in every way.

But she was right. If she shifted here, outside the gates, there was no telling where her wolf would go. He needed to teach Ava to co-exist with her wolf as soon as possible. Co-exist and not control because there was no such thing when it came to wolves like theirs.

“I'll carry you,” he offered.

The sooner they got away from the forest, the better. He gently picked Ava up and cradled her against his chest before walking towards the school gates. He stepped as smoothly as possible to avoid jarring her and causing more pain. He had no idea why the Council had left them outside the campus. A test. maybe? To see if they would escape?

But he knew that was the furthest thing on Ava's mind now. Not with her father trapped in the school and his presence known.

Because the forest had seen him or someone had told? How had they known who was in his basement? And was Mr. Patrick still safe?

“This is so messed up.” Ava whispered.

So fucked up. Especially since he didn't know when they would be forced to decide which students to sacrifice. Everyone he cared about was stuck in this school with him, and they would all pay if he and Ava failed.

The school gates opened before they reached them. Council soldiers stood guard, and their eyes followed them as they walked through. He knew that if he made one wrong move, they would still do the job they were trained for despite the Council's interest in them. When he reached the turn to go to his house, there were guards there, too, and they moved as a unit to block his path.

"No students allowed in the residences during lesson time," one of them said.

"She's injured. She needs to rest."

"Take her to the Infirmary,"

He shook his head and turned towards the Infirmary. He knew by the time he got there, Ava would have healed, and he would be accused of wasting their time.

"They weren't all dead," Ava whispered.

"Who?"

"Those things. Claire and her friends. Some of them were still breathing, so I think he..."

Finished the job. The Council had finished the job because it was part of their plan.

"Shh," he whispered.

By the time they reached the Infirmary doors, Ava asked him to put her down.

“I feel a bit better. I don’t think we need to go in,” she said. “I find a place to sit for a bit until I feel completely better and then find the dean because I don’t know what my classes are now,”

“Okay. I’ll find you at lunchtime.”

They had a meeting in the basement, but he wasn’t sure if that was safe anymore.

He turned away from the door and stopped when he felt a prickling at the back of his neck. Ava must have felt it, too, because she stopped and turned back to the Infirmary doors. They opened, and two Omegas walked out with their gazes down. Parents. And the woman couldn’t hide her sniffles or her pain.

Ava made a sound that had them all looking at her, though the Omegas looked down again quickly.

“I’m so sorry for your loss, Ava whispered.

The murdered Omega’s parents. He lowered his head and offered his condolences, too, and there was surprise in the man’s tone when he answered. The system told them they had to accept all the bullshit that happened in their lives, and with men like Mr. Hansson in charge, that would never change.

“Thank you.”

They didn't linger, and he knew why. That prickling was still coming from somewhere inside the building.

When the doors opened again, councilor Andrei walked out with his hands in his pockets. The vampire watched the Omegas hurry away before he turned his gaze to them.

"They came to collect her body."

"Did you tell them it was you who killed her?" Ava hissed.

She seemed to remember who she was talking to because she lowered her gaze.

"I did. And I told them to do a better job with the rest of their children."

Like he didn't even give a shit. Ava gasped as if she couldn't believe the audacity of this centuries-old vampire.

"It's a job, and the sooner you two realize that, the better," Andrei said.

"You have to make the right choice because you really have only one option. If you refuse, he won't kill you. He will kill your families, your packs. He will kill anybody and everybody you care about and make you live with that guilt for the rest of your life. And then he will own you anyway and still make you do what he wants."

The vampire sounded like he had intimate knowledge of that punishment.

“It’s not too bad,” Andrei said. “After a decade or two, you really stop giving a shit one way or another. If we’re lucky, we’ll all die eventually, right?”

The vampire then looked at Ava.

“How did you do that, by the way? The thing with the growl and the forest.”

Ava remained quiet, and the vampire grinned.

“More secrets,” Andrei said. “You enjoy teasing me, don’t you? Well, I will see you very soon, children.”

And then he disappeared in a rush of wind.