

Bad Love 271

Chapter 271

"I don't know," Aaron says with a smile. "I was hoping you could tell me. It feels familiar, but I don't think I've ever been here before."

"That's exactly what I thought!" I reply with a laugh, before simply staring up at him in awe.

"I can't believe you're here. I thought I'd never see you again," I say, hugging him closer.

"Now it's my turn to say that's exactly what I thought," Aaron jokes, squeezing me tighter. "Go d, I miss you, Leah. I don't know what I'm meant to do without you."

"I miss you too, Aaron," I say quietly, and the sadness starts creeping in, even though I just want to enjoy this moment and feel the joy of being with him again, even if on some level I know this isn't real. That I'm dreaming. That eventually I'm going to wake up and be without him again.

Except my wolf is nudging me from within.

She's trying to tell me that this is real, and Aaron isn't gone.

I ignore her.

I'm sure it's just wishful thinking on her part.

Because she misses her mate as much as I do.

I don't want to think about reality right now. I just want to savor every single second I'm here with him in this magical place.

We stand there for a while longer, just holding onto each other.

It's like time has ceased to have any meaning.

An entire eternity could have passed in the time we simply stand there, breathing together, while our hearts beat in sync.

I think about how we were first mated, how Aaron brought me back from beyond death.

How our bond transcends anything logical in this mortal life.

And I think there must be some real truth to that.

Because how else could I be here with Aaron, and it feel as real as any waking moment I spent with him in the past?

Eventually, however, Aaron shifts back a little.

I look up to ask him if something is wrong-scared he's going to tell me it's time to leave-but instead he kisses me.

It is so deep and loving and full of longing that it takes my breath away and makes my heart ache with how much love I feel radiating between us.

Aaron gently lowers me to the soft meadow grass, and clothes start disappearing.

This wasn't my intention when I saw him, but now that it's happening, I don't want anything else except to feel us joined as one.

To be as close to him as possible, body, heart, mind and soul.

Somehow, I think, if we can connect so completely, surely, I can bring him back to me from beyond wherever he went to after he died.

After all, Aaron did it for me.

Why can't I do it for him in return?

My thoughts splinter as Aaron lovingly worships my body until I'm nothing but a senseless puddle of pleasure.

Only then does Aaron join us, and he's never been so mindful, so tender yet intense, so utterly in tune with me that it feels.

like we're sharing the same heart and mind.

He takes us to incredible heights over and over, and I never want this to end.

I want to exist in this perfect moment of ecstasy forever.

But nothing lasts forever-that's one hard lesson I have learned over and over in this life-and then Aaron is shouting his pleasure as he comes deep inside my body, and I'm falling apart for the millionth time.

After, Aaron gathers me close and we enjoy the feel of the warm sun on our bare skin, breathing in the scent of flowers and sweet meadow grass like it's a perfect spring day.

"Leah," Aaron says after a while. "I wish you would come back to me. I would do anything to bring you back, you know that, right?"

I half sit up to look down at him, feeling confused. "What do you mean? I'm not the one who left. You did."

At this Aaron looks confused and sits up as well. "Leah, don't you remember what happened?"

"Of course I do!" I say, trying to keep the distress at bay, but not succeeding very well. "We broke the mating bond, and I lost you. I'll never forget that horrible day."

Aaron catches my hand, and he's looking even more confused now, but also like he's trying to figure something out.

"No, Leah, I lost you. All this time, you've been gone. You died abruptly, I'm snapped back to my body, awake and sitting up in a rush.

My face is wet with tears, and I cry harder as I realize I've been ripped away from that magical place, away from Aaron, and I'll never see him again.

But I'm so confused.

I don't understand what was happening in that dream.

Aaron said he lost me.

In fact, the last thing he said was that I had been the one to die, not him.

Which makes no sense, because obviously I'm sitting here right now in his bed and he's not.

It just had to be my mind, playing some kind of cruel trick on me.

But my wolf, she's pushing restlessly, urgently against my insides.

Like she needs to get out, like she needs to run until she finds her mate.

But she won't find him, because he's gone from this world.

No, my wolf says clearly and concisely. He's still alive. Chapter 272

AARON

I'm wrenched out of the dream like hitting a wall at a hundred miles an hour.

What the hell was that?

I sit up, waiting for the weird sense of being tossed out of time and space, knowing I'm physically here in the cell, but feeling

like I should be somewhere else.

With someone else.

With my mate.

She's still alive, my wolf insists. Go to her. Find her.

Claim her.

I shake my head, trying to get my wolf to calm the hell down.

Leah is gone.

I saw it with my own eyes...

Or did I??

It certainly seemed like Samsen and Petyr were acting like she was dead, but I didn't physically confirm it myself.

Except I'm just grasping at straws.

What possible reason would Samsen and Petyr have to pretend Leah was dead if she wasn't?

Except now I feel like I've got a burr caught in my mind.

Because of that dream.

It was so damn real.

In fact, I don't even think it was a dream.

It was like I had truly gone to that meadow and spent time with Leah.

Everything was so bright and real, now it feels like a memory, not a simple product of my imagination while I'm asleep.

It's close to dawn-my wolf can sense it, even from down here

in this underground cell-and I don't bother trying to go back to sleep.

Instead, I sit there and think about everything that's happened in the past few days.

Especially since I broke the mating bond and lost Leah.

The Council has been keeping me locked down.

They haven't let me see any visitors, they haven't let me make any phone calls and they certainly haven't let me out of this cell. I see the same rotation of four Enforcers over and over, as if they don't want me to have any other contact with anyone else.

And now I'm beginning to wonder why that is.

Why they insisted that they would get my affairs in order for me.

Something about this whole situation is off.

I mean, more off than the Council simply railroading me into false treason charges in the first place.

And I now know how good the Council is at keeping secrets, since rumors stated that Axel had gone to North Dakota, yet they'd been keeping him in their secret basement cells all along.

Something is going on, and I'm determined to figure out what that might be.

I sit there, thinking and stewing, getting more and more agitated for answers.

Eventually, the familiar clang of an Enforcer coming down with our breakfast sound.

I stand in the middle of the cell and watch like I'm tracking prey as the Enforcer first goes over and slides Axel's tray in the slot at the bottom of the bars, before turning to my cell.

I wait, staying perfectly still as the Enforcer crouches down and sets the tray on the floor.

I wait until his attention is not on me any longer, but on the action of sliding the tray across the floor. And then I lunge.

I reach my arms through the silver bars and grab hold of the front of his shirt, too fast for him to even realize what's happening.

I yank him forward into the bars until his face-and anywhere else bare flesh is touching silver-starts sizzling.

He immediately howls and starts struggling against my hold.

But I only drag him in tighter, until his chest is pressed so tight against the unforgiving metal of the bars, he's struggling to breathe.

"Listen up, buddy, because I don't want to have to repeat myself," I tell him in a low threatening voice.

"You're going to tell me exactly what's going on out there with the Council, otherwise I'm going to pull you right through these bars until the silver mangles your entire body. Do you understand?"

www

The Enforcer jerks a desperate nod, wheezing with pain and suffocation.

"Good. Now tell me, why won't the Council let me make any calls or see my Beta?"

I loosen my hold just enough for the guy to suck in a panicked breath, but also so he can talk.

"They told everyone that you died after breaking your mating bond," he replied in a strangled voice.

"They did what?" I demand furiously, yanking him in tight again. "What else are they hiding?"

The guy starts struggling again, and I have to loosen my hold as he starts going purple from lack of oxygen.

A thought occurs to me then.

If they told everyone I'm dead, then what if they were lying to me about Leah being dead?

My wolf practically spins circles inside me, agitated and excited that I seem to be getting somewhere with his insistence that Leah is still alive.

"What about my mate?" I snarl at the guy.

"She-she's still alive!" he wrenches out.

I distantly hear a clamoring-other Enforcers coming to help their trapped friend, but my mind is reeling from what the guy just admitted.

Leah is alive.

This changes everything.

Just as I'm getting ready to let this idiot go and break down the silver door-willing to fight my way to freedom if it means getting to my mate-there's movement in my peripheral.

Then the deafening bang-bang-bang of someone shooting a gun in close quarter. I'm hit with bullet after bullet, and the immediate and unfortunately familiar burn of those goddamn silver wolfsbane bullets registers as I go down.

Whoever is shooting doesn't stop until they've emptied an

I'm incapacitated, but my fury knows no bounds as I shift to heal.

The Council finally crossed a line I won't stand for in tricking me into thinking my mate was dead.

They were worried about me and my power of three Alphas before?

That was nothing.

Then, I was still interested in playing along with Council 'rules' for the greater good.

Now, I'm pissed, and I no longer care about playing by the Council's rigged rules.

I'm coming for them.

I'm coming for all of them.
And I will be their worst nightmare.

Chapter 273

The pain is what wakes me up.

I find myself tied to a chair, held in place by the same kind of silver-wolfsbane infused chains that Tobin used that night at the factory when he tried to kill me for my Alpha powers.

I bring my head up, clenching my jaw against the constant searing and burning that's keeping me from shifting back into my wolf.

I'm in some kind of rundown house, in what was once maybe a den or living room.

The ceiling is water stained, the carpet is mottled and moldy so it's impossible to tell what the original color was, the drywall is cracked, and the dirty, tattered curtains shift from the breeze coming in from the broken window.

It smells like rats and decay.

What the hell am I doing here?

Why aren't I in the cells in the basement of the Council Hall any longer?

The door opens and in walks Karolina.

At this point I'm not all that surprised.

There's always been something about Karolina I didn't like or trust, this low-level vibe of malice that wasn't obvious on the surface of her personality where she seems like an upstanding Councilmember who only wants what's best for the packs and the continued survival of wolves.

"Ah, you're awake," Karolina says as she struts in. "Those Alpha powers you have really are something. Wrap any other wolf in chains like that, and they would have been dead hours ago."

"What am I doing here, Karolina?" I ask through a clenched jaw.

"It's quite simple, Aaron," she replies with a shrug, as if she doesn't have a care in the world. But when she looks at me, I see the true frustration and fury in her gaze. "I'm sick of your getting in the way and messing up my plans."

"I'd apologize, but I'm not sorry," I tell her in a deceptively mild voice. "Besides, I don't even know what plans you're talking about."

This seems to annoy her further.

"I had it all figured out with Tobin. We were going to take wolves forward into a bright future. The Council is too attached to the Old Ways. And when wolves from the Old Country turn up and start meddling, it just gets worse. The Old Ways don't serve us any longer. The Old Ways mean we have to hide from humans. We're hunted, even as we fight between ourselves to the point that our species is in dangerous decline. Are we just supposed to hang onto the Old Ways until they wipe us out?"

She looks at me, as if expecting an answer, but I sit stubbornly still and silent.

"Of course we're not!" she exclaims, answering her own question. "But it's fine. My plans are back on track. I can see it through. I just need you to be out of the way. And I realized there's a simple answer to that. One that will ensure I can be strong enough to stand against whatever resistance I encounter when the world begins reshaping for the better. People can't always see it that way, you know. They're scared, so they hang onto what is familiar, even when it's so obviously pointless. But they'll see. They'll see what

we wolves can do when we innovate. When we create tools humans asked for, but use them for our own advantage instead.”

Her words take a moment to sink in through all the pain, but when they do, it’s confirmation of something I didn’t want to

be true.

“You’ve got the AI tech,” I say. “Tobin took it, and you took it. from him.”

Karolina smirks but doesn’t reply and I can’t read anything in her expression.

“Oh, Aaron, can’t you see that demanding answers doesn’t do you any good at all?”

She crosses her arms, and I can tell she’s enjoying every second of this.

“Tell me. Now!” I snarl at her.

“What’s the point in knowing anything when you’re going to be too dead to do anything about it?” She lifts her foot and shoves it into my shoulder, sending the chair tipping back and slamming me painfully into the ground.

“I figured it out, you see.” She brings over a large plastic tub and a hose she’s dragged in, presumably from somewhere outside. “I’ve got the means to make real, lasting change, and to back that up, all I need are your Alpha powers.”

Chapter 274

LEAH

I’m sitting in the library, reading a book to Ethan, who is rolling around on the blanket I’ve spread in front of the hearth, when James comes to find me.

“Leah, I think I’ve got something you should see.”

“Okay,” I reply, wondering if it’s something to do with tracking Karolina’s movements.

James has been in the office all day, along with one of the wolves who runs and maintains all the pack’s servers and various online

activities.

Just as I’d hoped, Leo was able to hack the GPS in both Karolina’s car and phone, and we’ve been tracking her ever since.

I call Tara up to watch over Ethan, and then follow James down to the office where Leo has an impressive back of computers newly set up and is somehow working off four different screens.

“This is about Karolina?” I ask as I stop next to James looking at all the information displayed, most of which I don’t understand.

“Yep,” James says with a nod. “Since we’ve started tracking her, she’s mostly been between her pack lands and the Council Hall,

but just now, she’s gone somewhere completely out of left field.”

“How so?” I ask, glancing between James and Leo where he’s tapping away at the computer.

"She's gone outside of any pack territory at all," Leo says, pointing to a map on one of the screens showing two flashing red dots.

"Like...into human territory?" I say in confusion.

Most of Montana is drawn up into pack lands that obviously overlap with human occupation, even though the humans don't know it. But there are some places not claimed by wolves, and where any wolf very rarely ventures because they're known to be violent or unfriendly places, even for the humans to live there.

Worse, some of those territories are where Vampires live, who hate wolves and will kill us, if given half a chance.

"Yes," James says. "She stopped at some house. Leo looked up the records. The person who owned it died years ago and it was left abandoned. Now it's completely run down, and that's saying something considering the neighborhood it's in has seen better days. Whatever she's doing, she obviously wants it off the Council's radar. She wants it off everyone's radar."

"What if that's where she's keeping the AI?" I ask excitedly.

James presses his lips into a line. "I knew you were going to say that."

"Well, what else could it be?" I demand. "James, we have to go check this out."

James huffs a resigned sigh. "I knew you were going to say that too."

I cross my arms. "Then why are we even standing here having this conversation?"

"Because this is no joke, Leah. This neighborhood is dangerous. It's not the sort of place wolves should venture. If Aaron was here, there's no way he'd let you go."

I get that painful ache in my chest again, the one that's become so familiar to my every waking moment.

The only thing that changes about it is the intensity.

"Aaron's not here," I say in an even voice, and it amazes me how quickly I've gotten used to talking about him being gone.

Doesn't make it hurt any less.

And I know that really, Ethan is the only thing keeping me going through these nightmare days. I

"Karolina is clearly up to something," I continue, putting a hint of Alpha in my voice that makes both James and Leo drop their gazes in submission. "And I intend to find out what that is. With or without you, James."

James raises his eyes again now, and they're gleaming with

"I knew you'd say that too."

I can't help a small smile.

The two of us have come to know each other so well, James is honestly my best friend in the whole world right now. I don't know what I would have done without him.

"Good, that settles it then. Have someone bring the SUV around."

James nods and goes to do my bidding, while I turn to Leo.

"Thanks for your work on this. I assume it's not exactly legal, so I appreciate the risk you're taking."

"Anything for you, Luna Leah," Leo says with a reverent nod. "With Aaron gone, you've been doing an admirable job at keeping the pack safe and not feeling too lost without our Alpha. We couldn't have asked for a better Luna."

"Thank you," I reply, blinking at the emotion those words rouse.

To think, a year ago, I never thought I would find my place here.

Now I can't imagine being anywhere else, even with Aaron gone from this world.

I leave Leo to his work and go get ready, carefully arming myself just the way I know Aaron would expect.

Chapter 275

The closer we get to the address where Karolina is situated, the more my wolf becomes agitated. I shift restlessly in the front seat of the SUV, wondering what's going on with her.

It's like she's on high alert. Like we're somehow trapped, or there's some unseen danger, and we should be fleeing in the other direction.

I can tell James is also feeling similarly troubled as he parks the SUV just down the block from the abandoned house.

James had been right about this neighborhood.

Every house is in a sad, neglected state. Sagging roofs, broken windows, junk in the weed-choked yards and broken down, rusted cars.

Only some of the houses look like they're even occupied. A lot of the houses look like they've been abandoned.

"Why is my wolf so--"

"Freaked out?" James finishes with a quick smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "You should trust what she's telling you, there's danger nearby."

"What do you mean?" I ask apprehensively.

That prickly feeling

there are Vampires somewhere nearby. We need to get in and out as fast as possible, before they realize wolves have wandered right into their territory."

I nod and swallow down the dread, checking my weapons before we get out of the SUV.

Despite the fear and the way my wolf is clawing at my insides to get out of here, I'm not going to back down.

I've never faced Vampires before, but I've heard the stories from other wolves who've either narrowly escaped them, or heard stories from other packs who encountered them.

Vampires are no joke. They hate wolves for the simple fact of our existence, and if they ever come across us, they don't show any mercy.

I've heard tales about entire packs being wiped out.

We're strong, but mortal. Vampires... are not.

And it's nigh on impossible to kill something that's already dead.

Karolina must be hiding something huge here-most likely the AI tech-otherwise why risk coming here at all?

James and I hurry down the block toward the house.

I'm alert to every step we take, scanning my surroundings, scenting the air, my senses running higher and sharper than they ever have.

It's almost exhilarating, I can feel the true power of both my wolf and her Alpha status flowing through my veins like fire. But the reason for it-the danger we're in just by being here-that gives the whole thing an unpleasant edge.

As we approach the house, I almost expect to find Council Enforcer wolves guarding the perimeter, but there's no one else around.

Karolina took a big risk coming here without any backup.

What could she possibly be up to that she'd put even her own safety at risk like that?

We quietly slip into the house and pause to listen.

At first I don't hear anything but the sound of water running somewhere deeper in the house.

I scent the air, but it's heavy with mold and rats and general gross decay, so it's hard to pick up any trace of anything else.

I do think I get a hint of Karolina over all that, but the stronger scents are definitely wreaking havoc on my sensitive nose.

James and I share a quick glance of acknowledgement, before we start creeping toward the sound of running water.

We pause at the sound of Karolina humming, as if she's doing some boring task, and absentmindedly filling in the silence.

scent reaches me that makes me stop dead in my tracks.

It zaps though my body like a livewire, lighting up every cell of me, but I can't believe it.

It doesn't make sense.

James notices that I've stopped and sends me a questioning look.

He's not reacting like he scented anything besides all the gross in here, and I think maybe I just imagined it.

I take another step, then another, and on the third, I get another hint of the scent, this time stronger, and I know I'm not imagining it.

"Aaron!" I whisper in shock.

James looks at me with wide eyes, but then suddenly cuts his gaze toward the doors of the den or living room or whatever's down there, his gaze flashing with his wolf, and I know then he's scented it too.

"Alpha," he says, voice all growling and protective.

Even if I can't believe my own senses because I miss my mate so much, I trust James.

And if he's scented Aaron, then that means something.

That means Aaron isn't dead.

He's here, with Karolina.

I don't care about being silent or stealthy any longer.

I charge forward, my wolf close to the surface, ready to tear through anything that stands between me and my mate.

Chapter 276

I burst into the room and Karolina looks up at me with wide, startled eyes.

There's a garden hose filling a large plastic tub, and Aaron is chained to a chair balanced precariously on the edge. One slight tip in the wrong direction and Aaron goes under, unable to save himself from drowning in the water.

Aaron stares at me surprised and desperate with longing.

"Aaron!" I lunge forward, but someone catches my arm and tugs me back again.

I turn in confusion, thinking James is holding me back for some reason, but I find Ryker standing there holding me, while James is crumpled unconscious on the ground a few steps behind me.

At least I hope he's only unconscious.

I was so focused on Aaron, I didn't even realize Ryker had arrived and come up behind us, let alone got the jump on James.

"Let me go!" I shout angrily, tugging on my arm.

"Now, Leah," Ryker says in an admonishing voice. "I believe I told you what would happen if you went after my mate."

"I'm not going after your mate," I tell him furiously, struggling against his hold. "I'm trying to save

"Ah, but I'm afraid in doing so, my dear Karolina might get caught up in some unfortunate conflict,"

Ryker answers reasonably, as if we're not standing in a literal life-or-death situation.

"I told you I can fight my own battles, Ryker!" Karolina says furiously. "You made it clear you weren't willing to help me, and I told you to stay out of things. Why did you come here?"

Ryker's gaze narrows on Karolina in anger.

Wow, things really are that bad between the pair.

"My honor can only stretch so far, Karolina," Ryker replies. "The Old Ways aren't just a set of rules or traditions to me. They are in my blood, set into my bones. I told you I wouldn't help you, but I also told you getting between me and my sense of duty to the true ways of wolves was a dangerous thing to do."

Karolina throws up her hands in furious exasperation. "The Old World is gone! When are you going to see that? I don't care what you say, and I don't care if you're my mate. I'm doing what's right for our species, even if you're too far buried under your stupid ancient honor to see that."

With that, Karolina steps forward and shoves Aaron, so that he tips back and lands in the tub with a huge splash.

"No!" I scream, finally able to break free of Ryker's hold.

"Oh no you don't," she says, shoving me back again. "Aaron is dead, and those Alpha powers are going to be mine!"

I growl and bare my fangs, even as my claws spring out and I partially shift.

I'm about to spring forward, planning to shred Karolina into tiny, bloody pieces, when Ryker gets in between us and shoves us apart.

"This stops now. All of it!" Ryker yells, and he seems to be talking more to Karolina.

I manage to dodge Ryker's restraining hold and then avoid Karolina-who tries to turn on me, but is still being held by Ryker herself-and rush over to the tub.

At first, I think I should pull Aaron out, but between the chair and the chains, it'll be awkward and heavy and take precious minutes I've already lost.

Instead, I throw my entire weight into the side of the tub and send the whole thing tumbling over sideways. A mini wave of water splashes out and rolls into the far wall.

I scramble around the tub, shoving it aside.

Aaron is on his side, still chained to the chair and he's not moving. He wasn't underwater for more than a minute, but he'd been bound, chained with something that must have sapped his strength entirely, if it could keep him held in the first place.

He's not breathing.

"No, Aaron, no!" I say desperately.

I smash the chair into bits and frantically pull at the chains, even though they're burning my hands down to the bone and the pain is agonizing.

"Karolina!" Ryker says in alarm, and I look over to see she's fallen to the floor and gone rigid with pain.

Aaron is dead.

And the transfer of his Alpha powers to Karolina has begun.

Chapter 277

No.

No-no-no-no-

This can't be happening.

I can't have found Aaron only to lose him for real this time.

I finally get him free of the chair and the chains, ignoring how Karolina is thrashing from the power of three Alphas inundating her body, and Ryker exclaiming in alarm about it.

I lay Aaron out flat, and then lean down to breathe into his mouth.

I fill his lungs with air from my own body, and then sit back to pump hard on his chest, counting through the compressions with staunch determination to bring him back.

As lean down to give him another few puffs of air, I realize I can somehow still sense him.

His presence-his soul-it isn't quite gone.

I can feel him clinging on.

Clinging on to me my wolf and our bond

No!

I will save him.

I have to save him.

2/4

I keep up with the compressions, but then my wolf nudges me with the memory of how we'd broken the mating bond.

She's desperately trying to tell me something important.

So it is done in blood, so it will be undone in blood.

I'm not sure exactly what my wolf is trying to tell me, so I give over control to her, just a little.

Next thing I know, I've stopped compressions and I'm leaning down to sink my teeth into Aaron's neck, claiming him.

His body jerks, but he's still not breathing.

However, I can sense something is happening.

Like somehow, it just got a little easier for his soul to hang on.

That he's not just hanging on any longer.

He's coming back.

through my wrist, making blood

well before I lean down and smear it across Aaron's parted lips.

Again, his body convulses, but it's not quite enough.

My wolf recedes and nudges me, so I get back to pumping on Aaron's chest.

"Come on, Aaron," I mutter desperately.

Aaron's body jerks, and then suddenly he's coughing, all the water coming up to spill out of his mouth as he splutters.

Relief storms through me so hard, it almost hurts.

I quickly roll him onto his side, letting the water clear until he's gasping and blinking awake.

"Oh my go d!" I cry, unable to believe I actually managed to bring him back.

Aaron weakly reaches up and grabs my hand. "Leah, you saved me."

I pull him up into me, and his arms go around me like tight bands.

He's shaking, or maybe I'm shaking. Or probably we're both shaking, panting and clinging onto each other like we're the only salvation for each other in a world trying to drag us down

From the corner of my eye, I see how Ryker is holding Karolina, looking pained, as if this is the worst thing that's ever happened to him while she shakes with the power surging through her body.

Just as I fully turn my attention to him, he suddenly loosens his hold a little, and now he's looking resigned and determined.

"I'm sorry, Karolina," he says in a pained voice. "But I can't let this come to pass. It would mean the final destruction of the Old Ways, and I refuse to stand by and let that happen."

I'm confused, no idea what Ryker is talking about, what he's apologizing for.

And then he reaches down and snaps Karolina's neck. Chapter 278

I gasp as Karolina falls limp in Ryker's hold, and then he gently lays her down on the floor.

Oh my g d.

Ryker just killed his mate.

I tighten my hold on Aaron, who suddenly groans and becomes rigid in my arms.

I look down, realizing the Alpha powers are all reverting to him now that Karolina is dead, and the transfusion was interrupted.

Ryker steps closer and I look up at him.

His wolf is glowing in his eyes, but I can see the wildness of it now.

Ryker killed his own mate, and now he's fighting the urge to go rogue.

Ryker is strong, but I doubt even he can resist the primal urges. taking over him after what he just did. The pain must have been unbearable. His eyes are wild, stricken, his whole body shudders.

Aaron gasps in a breath and I look down to see the effects of the power transfer seem to be waning.

"Aaron," I say, pushing the wet strands of his hair back from his face as he blinks open his eyes. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay, Leah," he says in a hoarse voice.

All I want to do is collapse into his arms in relief, but I'm too aware that we're not safe here.

Just then, James groans and rolls over, finally regaining consciousness from being knocked out by Ryker earlier.

As for Ryker, he casts one last pensive look at Karolina's body, and then heads for the door.

"Ryker, where are you going?" I call after him, worried about what's going to happen to him.

We weren't exactly friends, and he did have a hand in what happened the night Liam tried to kill me, but since then, he's allied himself with us, helping both myself and Aaron without question.

Ryker pauses by the door, his wolf still wild in his eyes as he glances back at me.

'Don't worry, Leah, we'll see each other again.' Is that a promise, a threat!?

His eyes are haunted and deadly and his power pulses off of him in a wave that sends a trickle of fear up my spine.

Ryker leaves.

Aaron sits up, and since he seems okay for the most part, I quickly go over to James.

His hair is matted with blood on one side of his head, and he still looks a little woozy.

"James, are you alright?" I ask him, quickly looking for any other injuries.

"I'm okay, I think," James replied, his voice rough. "Luna, I'm sorry, I failed-"

I reach down and squeeze his shoulder. "No, James, you didn't. We couldn't have known Ryker was going to jump us. And

we're all fine, so in the end, it didn't matter."

"Aaron?" James suddenly says, sitting up in a rush, as if he only just remembered what brought us rushing into this room.

"He's okay as well," I say with a smile, shifting aside so James

See where Aaron is sitting behind me.

James gets to his feet, a little unsteady, as does Aaron, and then the pair embrace.

"Aaron, thank G d!" James says in relief. "I can't believe you're alive."

"There seems to be a lot of that going around today," Aaron says with amusement in return as they part.

However, Aaron's expression then becomes serious. "We're not safe here. I can sense-"

"Vampires," James confirms before Aaron can even say the word. "You're right, we're way outside of any pack territory."

"Then we need to get out of here," Aaron says, catching my hand and pulling me closer.

"Actually, we need to get to the Council Hall," I tell Aaron as we hurry from the room.

"Why?" he asks, brow creasing.

"Because that's where the AI tech is being kept." Chapter 279

AARON

All of my senses are on high alert as we leave the house and hurry down the block to where James parked the SUV.

It's like I can feel the threat of Vampires dragging over my skin.

I can't believe Leah and James risked coming here to rescue me.

Actually, I can't believe Karolina was foolish or desperate enough not to be discovered by her fellow Councilmembers stealing all of my Alpha power for herself, that she would risk coming into Vampire territory.

This isn't like some bit of Twilight, with some peaceful co-existence ala the Cullens. We're sworn enemies, and our species staunchly avoid each other.

We jump into the SUV and Leah insists on driving since she's in the best condition out of us all.

James gets into the backseat and immediately shifts to finish healing his head trauma that'd looked really nasty. Probably

Neither me nor Leah say anything as she starts driving, navigating out of the suburban streets to leave the run-down neighborhood and Vampire territory behind us, both of us too on edge until we know we're in safer lands.

A while later, Leah suddenly pulls off the highway into one of those picnic rest stops. There aren't any other vehicles parked there right now, so the place is empty.

Leah pulls the car into a parking space and cuts the engine.

"Leah, is everything okay?" I ask, wondering why she's stopped so suddenly.

She doesn't answer me, but wordlessly climbs out of the SUV

and walks around to the back.

Confused, I climb out and go to join her.

I find her standing there, her head bowed into her hands, and her shoulders shaking as she cries.

“Leah!” I say in alarm, quickly stepping in to pull her tightly into my arms. “What’s happening? What’s wrong?”

She buries her face into my neck, and my skin is instantly wet and scalded by the heat of her tears.

“They told me you were dead, Aaron. I thought you were gone. I thought Ethan and I were somehow going to have to live our lives without you. Do you have any idea-”

She breaks off then, crying too hard to say anything else.

“Yeah, actually, I do,” I tell her. “They told me the same thing, that you didn’t survive breaking the mating bond. I thought you were dead as well.”

This seems to quiet some of her tears, and she looks up at me, lashes damp and sparkling with tears, her hair tousled

and my entire body aches as I wonder if she’s ever looked as beautiful as she does in this moment.

“They did?” she whispers in confusion. “Why would they do that?”

“I don’t know,” I tell her, running my hand over her soft, silky curls. “Maybe they knew we wouldn’t stop coming for each

other, that we wouldn’t let anything or anyone stand in the way of us being together.”

“It’s true,” she replies, smiling through her tears. “I would never stop coming for you. Nothing in this life or the next can keep us apart.”

G d, I love this woman.

But I don’t have the words to tell her that, instead I drag

her into a kiss, putting every ounce of longing and love into claiming her mouth beneath mine.

Leah immediately goes pliant against me, and it sends both me and my wolf crazy.

Next thing I know, I’ve got her pinned up against the back of the SUV with her legs wrapped around my waist as I kiss her deeper and more desperately.

This isn’t the time or place, but f ck, I want her so badly right now.

I let us indulge for a few more long minutes.

All I want to do it take her home, throw her into my bed and then keep her naked and begging for the next week straight.

But we can’t pretend like the rest of the world doesn’t exist.

Countless lives could depend on me and Leah finding the AI tech and stopping the Council from misusing it.

Eventually I reluctantly break the kiss but rest my forehead against Leah’s as we both catch our breath and try to come down from the high.

“I love you,” I murmur to her, even though love is too simple words to describe the things I feel for her.

“I love you too,” she whispers in return with a smile. “I can’t wait to go home to Ethan so we can finally start our lives.

together.”

I step back and let her slip down to stand on her own feet. “Me too. But first, let’s go get this damned software back once and

for all.” Chapter 280

“What the hell...” I utter as we roll in through the gates and wind our way toward the Council Hall.

It’s utter chaos.

There are dead Enforcer wolves scattered throughout the parking lot, leading all the way up to the main doors of the

Council Hall.

People are fleeing from the Council Hall-mostly the admin and support staff I note-they all look scared out of their minds, and some of them are spattered in blood.

I drive the SUV all the way up to the doors and pull up with a screech of tires.

As soon as I jump out of the SUV, I grab one of the admin. wolves and pull them to a stop.

“What the hell is happening?” I demand.

“It’s one of the Old Country Wolves,” he says, eyes wide and

glazed with shock and fear. “He’s gone rogue. His pack is slaughtering the Councilmembers.”

“Fck,” I exclaim, watching the battles as they unfold. The Enforcers and Councilmembers are fighting back, but many are old, and it’s clear the Old Country wolves have the upper hand.

I turn around to see James and Leah standing behind me, both looking alarmed but determined, obviously having heard what the admin guy said.

“Ryker,” I say anyway, getting a nod from both of them. “We have to stop him. He dies. His pack stands down.”

Although, I wonder, will they?

There is an honor among them that is as deadly as it is admirable.

As for the Council and other packs... Sure, some of the Council -the ones who had that fanatical plan to wipe out humans. and some packs they deemed undesirable-probably deserve to be executed.

It’s no less than what they were going to do to me.

But I wouldn’t stand by and watch as my species was

annihilated. The Council wasn’t perfect, but it served its purpose. Up until recent times, I’d even say it allowed our packs to thrive, to move beyond the wars that had ravaged our kind for centuries.

Before there’s no Council left.

If it’s not already too late.

I glance at Leah.

The protective Alpha streak in me wants to tell her to stay behind, to stay safe and not put herself in the line of fire so we can ensure she goes home to Ethan.

But I’ve personally overseen Leah’s training since she was thirteen. And now, she wears her weapons with the ease of someone who knows how to use them and is willing to do so.

Rogue wolves are powerful and unpredictable, but I’m stronger. I can kill Ryker, though I’m not sure I want to. He’s a wolf who was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice-killing his own mate-for the greater good of our species.

I understand him wanting to cleanse the Council of its corruption.

But that doesn't mean I can stand by while he indiscriminately murders everyone.

We head into the Council Hall and then basically follow the tide of escaping people, as well as the sounds of screams and cries echoing from deeper in the building.

of C

Members in the corridors,

including Samsen and Petyr, and I can't say I'm too sorry about that. James launches at two of Ryker's packmates. I keep pressing forward.

Eventually we reach a conference room when Ryker—who is covered in blood—has the last of the Councilmembers trapped, including Eleanor.

They're all lower-ranking Councilmembers and I know most of them are good, honorable wolves. It's doubtful any of them were involved with Tobin and Karolina's schemes.

"Ryker!" I shout, drawing his attention.

He's partially shifted, and even though I expected to find him completely rogue and out of control, there's a surprising amount of calculation and sanity in his gaze as he swings around to look at me.

"You shouldn't have come here, Aaron," Ryker snarls. "This doesn't concern you."

I let my claws and fangs emerge. "Actually, Ryker, I think it does concern me. This travesty ends now."

Ryker laughs. "It's already done, Aaron. No one can stop me."