

Bad Love 311

Chapter 311

AXEL

“How in the hell can you say you rejected Emily for her sake?” Aaron demands heatedly.

“There are things about me you don’t know, Aaron. Dangerous things.”

Aaron scoffs. “You expect me to be surprised about that? You’re not exactly an open book. And I’ve heard the rumors.”

“Most of what you heard about me is just that. Rumors. A lot of them started by Karolina to discredit me.”

Aaron seems to pause and take this in.

“Why would Karolina want to discredit you?”

“Because she knew I was onto her, and she needed me out of the way. She couldn’t kill me, so locking me up on false charges was obviously the next best thing.”

Aaron is definitely re-examining everything he thought he knew about me.

“Okay, I’m listening,” he says, some of the anger going out of him. “Who are you really, and why were you after Karolina?”

“My real name is Axiel Mercier-”

At this Aaron’s expression turns into shock.

And this is exactly why I never use my real name anymore.

“Axiel Mercier...as in the slayer?” he demands incredulously.

“One and the same,” I reply in an affirmative, and then let my eyes glow with the amethyst color of my dual nature. No one else in the world has eyes like mine, and no one ever will.

“What are you?” Aaron demands. “I’ve heard the stories. You’re immortal. No simple wolf is immortal.”

“I’m a hybrid,” I tell him, and this time I flash him my fangs. “My mother was bitten by a vampire when she was pregnant with me. As she started dying, she went into labor and I was born seemingly healthy, even though my family assumed the poison from the vampire bite would infect me too. It did...just not the way anyone expected.”

“How old are you?” Aaron

asks, and so far, he seems more intrigued than pissed off or like he’s about to murder me.

“Centuries,” I reply. “I don’t remember exactly how many years any longer.”

Aaron shakes his head in disbelief and begins to pace. “And you came here after Karolina?”

“I didn’t know Karolina was the one I was after. I’d just been

Wilig between wolves and vampires

in these parts, and I needed to put a stop to it before the peace treaty was threatened.”

“And Emily?” Aaron asks, voice lower and quieter this time.

I glance away from him, not wanting him to see the truth in my gaze.

“I never expected Emily. In all my long years of life, the Moon Goddess has never gifted me with a mate. Why would she? My very existence is a curse.”

Aaron mutters a curse under his breath and starts pacing again.

“Then why Emily? Why now? Hasn’t she suffered enough?”

I’m not sure if he’s talking to me, the Moon Goddess or himself.

I force myself not to be offended that he makes the connection between Emily being fated to me and it causing her to suffer.

It’s basically the truth, after all.

“I don’t know,” I answer truthfully. “I only knew it could not be. It’s dangerous for her, and for me.”

Aaron nods, and there’s a new light of respect in his gaze as he stares at me.

“You did the right thing, Axel. I can’t imagine it would have been easy, denying yourself and your mate the bond, knowing you

were causing her pain by rejecting her like that. Many wouldn’t have been strong enough to do the same. I can see **now**, what you meant about trying to protect her.”

I don’t need Aaron’s approval, but I appreciate it all the same.

“I’m glad you can see the truth of things,” I reply.

“But Karolina is dead,” Aaron says, brow creasing in confusion. “Why are you still here?”

“You saw what happened the other night—vampires brazenly walking onto wolf territory in a way they haven’t dared for hundreds of years. My work here is not done.”

Understanding dawns in Aaron’s expression.

“That’s why the vampires reacted the way they did when you walked in.”

I nod in agreement. “I didn’t lie, I’ve never met those vampires before. But vampires have a unique way of sensing my hybrid nature that wolves cannot. They knew who I was. Like you, they’ve heard the stories. Unfortunately, they’re not smart enough to be worried about me.”

“What are you going to do?” Aaron asks.

“Continue monitoring the situation, gather intel and be ready to act when I’m needed. Technically, I can only intervene when treaty lines have been broken. And while the vampires coming onto your lands was brazen as hell, they haven’t acted with aggression or broken **any** laws. Yel.”

Aaron is silent for a moment as he takes this all in. “And if myself or another wolf were the one to cross a line?”

“I think you know the answer to that, Aaron,” I tell him in return.

Aaron’s grim expression hardens, and I can see we understand each other.

“Still want me in charge of your pack while you’re in Romania?” I ask with a hint of dark humor.

“Now, more than ever,” Aaron answers, which surprises me.

“You can offer us—and the rest of the wolves in Montana—real protection against the vampires. I’ll be able to rest easier, knowing you’re keeping my pack safe in my absence.”

“Very well,” I agree.

“However,” Aaron says, and his narrowed gaze is icy as he regards me. “Emily is off limits. Should you change your mind about the mating bond, know that I will never accept someone as dangerous as you for my sister. I don’t care if you are Axiel, the Slayer of Legend. If you so much as touch Emily in anything other than a platonic way, I will hunt you down. And I will kill you.”

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EMILY

As soon as Axel confirms he is in fact Axiel Mercier, the legendary vampire slayer, I turn and run, no idea where I’m going, just knowing I need to get out of the house.

I had told the doctor I wanted to tell Aaron something—which was partially true—I’d decided in the bathroom I needed to tell Aaron I didn’t care about Axel rejecting me, that I didn’t want to be his mate after all.

How true those thoughts had turned out to be.

I’d gotten as far as the hallway when I’d heard Aaron shouting at Axel about him rejecting me, and then paused outside the door as Axel had told Aaron there were things about him that Aaron didn’t know.

Dangerous things.

It wasn’t my fault their voices had carried so clearly.

And okay, maybe I shouldn’t have been eavesdropping.

But after Axel's reply, my curiosity had gotten the better of me, so I'd loitered, holding my breath, wondering what could be so terrible and dangerous that Axel had apparently rejected me for my own good.

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Would turn out to be none

other than a notorious, immortal slayer.

Axiel Mercier is like the human bogeyman for young wolves. We got old scary bedtime stories about him

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Be a good wolf or Axiel Mercier will come for you.

A lot of wolves don't even believe he actually exists.

Stories about him petered off in the last hundred years or so. People began to believe that maybe he'd been killed.

But the literal living proof is standing in a bedroom across the hall from my own room.

It's the worst possible scenario for me.

The man Aaron has assigned as my guard to protect me and look after me is the very same person who would kill me the second he found out the truth about what'd happened to me.

I'm in more danger than I ever imagined.

I shift and run, and don't stop running until I've left Rathborn pack lands behind me.

I'm in a local National Forest where humans come to go hiking and camping.

I don't want to go back—especially with Aaron leaving for

How what to do.

I have nowhere else to go.

I have no possessions, no money of my own.

Aaron has organized a bank account for me to access the family's vast finances, but the card hasn't arrived in the mail yet, and I'm not even sure I have full access without Aaron's approval.

Considering what he thinks about my fragile state of mind, there's every chance he's restricted my access to make it harder for me to run.

I shift and emerge from the forest, coming out on a hiking trail.

There's a bench nearby overlooking a small river, so I go and sit there, resisting the urge to cry as my thoughts spin in circles and I can't come up with any answers.

I wanted to kiss Axel earlier.

I wanted to surrender my body to him.

And the worst thing is, even knowing now who he really is, part of me—especially my wolf—still longs for her mate.

How could the Moon Goddess tie me to such a man?

What did I do to deserve such a terrible fate?

“I hope you don’t mind me saying, but it’s such a beautiful day, how can someone so lovely look so sad?”

I startle at the voice just off to my left and look around to see a tall man standing there.

His hair is like the gloss of a raven’s wing and his eyes are the most startling blue I’ve ever encountered.

Somehow, my senses are all screwed up—they’ve been off ever since the old Roberts Alpha began his horrible experiments on me—so I can’t tell if the man is another wolf, human, or otherwise.

The man holds up his hands to indicate he means no harm, and I realize I’m probably staring at him in suspicion.

But can anyone blame me for not trusting anyone?

First, I was abducted, held and tortured for ten years, then the man who was meant to be my mate rejected me, and turned out to not be a simple man at all, but the biggest threat to my life that I’ve ever encountered.

“Sorry,” he says with a friendly smile. “You just look like something is really bothering you, and I couldn’t keep walking past.”

“My whole life is bothering me,” I reply honestly, even though I’m not sure why.

But the stranger has kind eyes and a friendly smile, so I find myself relaxing a fraction.

That sounds like a lot to deal with,” he says sympathetically.

“That’s an understatement,” I mutter darkly, which makes the stranger laugh.

He has a nice laugh, and now I’m kind of intrigued.

And I do kind of feel touched that he was nice enough to stop and talk to me, just because he thought I looked sad.

He’s also right.

It’s a beautiful early-spring day. The snow is starting to melt, and the sun has just the slightest bite of warmth to it that feels wonderful.

The stranger edges closer, indicating the empty end of the park bench I’m sitting on.

“May I? Sometimes it’s easier to talk to a stranger. I don’t mind listening.”

I glance around, part of me so lonely and misunderstood, I pathetically want to pour my heart out to the first person who offers.

However, I'm also aware that this nice man probably doesn't deserve the burden of my problems. And I can't even tell him the full truth anyway.

I'd have to be purposefully vague, because no one can ever know what happened to me.

"I don't want to interrupt your hike," I reply instead of answering.

The man shrugs and walks over to sit on the far end of the bench, keeping an appropriate amount of distance between us.

"I'm not in a hurry, and I've already done a fair bit of hiking today. I can probably use the break." He smiles as he regards me. "My name is Ronan."

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He holds out his hand and I take it, shaking.

His grip is firm and cool, and there's something almost comforting about it.

"I'm Emily," I tell him in return.

His smile deepens. "That's a pretty name."

I laugh at this.

Ronan might be too charming for his own good.

"I think it's pretty basic myself, but you're welcome to your opinion."

He gives a quick, friendly laugh.

"So, Emily, what has you out here looking so down on a day like today?"

I take a slow breath, working out how I can explain without sounding crazy.

"Something bad happened to me, something traumatizing," I begin, choosing my words carefully. "Something that went on for a long time. I finally got out just recently, and now my family are treating me like I'm fragile and broken. Maybe because I am."

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But I don't want to be. And I can't stay with my family, I can see that. It's just not going to work. They'll hate me when they realize the truth of everything that happened to me. Except I don't know what to do, and don't have anywhere else to go."

Ronan nods, listening with sympathy and understanding.

And I realize it's something no one has bothered to do since I got home.

They all just assume they know what happened to me, and what they should do about it.

Well, I did have that moment with Axel earlier...

Except that wasn't real..

And now I know he—more than anyone—would be first in line to kill me if or when the truth came out.

“Well,” Ronan says thoughtfully. “You don't seem broken and fragile to me. Truthfully, I'm pretty sure the fact that you're here talking to me points to you actually being extremely strong and brave. You survived that bad thing you went through. And maybe these might seem like empty words, but I'm sure if you look inside yourself, you'll see that you came out stronger for it.”

I know I'm definitely different, but I don't think I've ever stopped to consider that I might be stronger for what happened

to me.

Ronan is right. Just not in the way he probably means.

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he experiments were literally torture, but I can do things now that I couldn't do before.

I'm not saying that makes it all worthwhile.

If I could go back and have a choice, I'd choose not to ever go through that, because I can't exactly say what I've gained makes it all okay.

Particularly since it puts me in greater danger from people like Axel.

However, maybe there are benefits to the new me, if I decide to look at it from a different perspective.

“I can sense that you're special, Emily,” Ronan continues in a sincere voice. “In a way that no one in your family can probably see. But I get the feeling that's also because you don't want them to see.”

I can't believe how much this stranger has actually seen me- in a way Aaron and Jessica and Axel and everyone else maybe never will.

Do they just not care?

Or are they simply so caught up in their own drama—and I was gone for ten years, so they've all moved on without me—that they just don't care.

And I don't mean in a spiteful way, I just mean in an oblivious

kind of way.

“You just need to remember it's them, not you,” Ronan says conspiratorially, leaning forward a little. “It's also their loss if they can't see any of that. You're strong. You've proven that to yourself. You don't need to prove it to anyone else, even if they are your family.”

I'm speechless.

I don't know what to say, but I'm deeply touched by his words.

"Thank you," I say to him, emotion catching in my voice.

He smiles as he gets to his feet.

"I like to hike these trails a few times a week," he says. "Maybe I'll see you around again sometime."

"Maybe," I reply, smiling, because I hope I do see him again.

I also get to my feet, and we stand there looking at each other.

Impulsively, I step forward and hug him.

He seems surprised, but then hugs me back, and it's nice.

"Goodbye, Emily. Nice to meet you," he says as he steps back.

"Likewise," I tell him with the first real smile I've felt in ages.

Ronan waves goodbye and then heads off down the trail, quickly
sight through the woods.

I feel better as I head for the break in the trees where I came out of the forest earlier.

This was just what I needed.

To get out.

To get away.

To speak to someone completely outside of
the situation who didn't know my history and hadn't already judged me based on the past.

As I walk through the woods, I feel more at ease.

And I pick up the scent of a rabbit nearby, making my teeth tingle.

Since I escaped the house I'd been locked up in, I'd been shifting to hunt and feed, not
wanting to do it in my human form.

I guess it was a way of still being in denial.

But now the urge to enjoy a fresh kill without shifting is too strong to ignore.

And I'm too curious to know what it might be like.

So I don't bother shifting as I stalk the rabbit.

It's a little hard to track, and a little
harder to catch, but I manage to do it, and I'm going to feed. It sends a satisfying thrill through me...

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AXEL

I come across Emily just as she tosses the rabbit carcass aside.

A few times when she's run off on me, I've scented traces of blood and assumed she'd been hunting.

The hunting instincts vary from wolf to wolf.

Some have very strong compulsions and regularly shift into wolf form to hunt. Some will even hunt in human form. I'd heard

Tobin was one such wolf.

Others, the compulsion isn't as strong, so maybe they only hunt under a full moon.

As I watch Emily step over to the river to wash the blood from her hands and mouth, I wonder if she's always had a high hunter drive, or if this is a new development since her captivity.

I can't say whether she hunted in human form just now, or whether she had done so in wolf form like usual and had just shifted back when I came upon her.

It probably doesn't matter in the scheme of things, but **if** it starts looking like it might be causing issues or getting out of hand,

then I might have to consider talking to Aaron about it.

one more thing about Emily I'll have to monitor closely.

I can also pick up the quickly dispersing scent of some kind of male.

It's weak, so I can't tell if it was another wolf or human.

We're not far from the public hiking trails the humans use around these parts, so there's every possibility it was just someone passing by, and they had no interaction with Emily whatsoever.

Still the part of me that wants to claim Emily as my mate- mostly my wolf- feels a twinge of jealousy at the stray thought she might have met up with someone else.

Eventually, however, that is a thought-a reality-I will have to get used to.

I rejected Emily as my mate.

That means she's free to go find another mate, should the Moon Goddess decide to bestow her a second mate, or anyone else she finds attractive enough to be with.

I have no idea how I'm going to handle that.

Hopefully I won't be around to see it.

Even just the vague notion of it is enough to set my blood boiling.

Now, I'm fuming.

It's not helped by the fact that Aaron and I emerged from our frank talk to realize Emily had run **off** again.

Aaron hadn't even said anything, but his narrow-eyed look had spoken volumes.

I needed to find her right away.

I left to track her, barely thinking about the fact that Aaron had told me I couldn't change my mind about rejecting Emily as my mate—not that I ever would—and if I did so, he would kill me.

I don't take his words lightly.

Aaron probably really could kill me. Well, he could try.

I'd put up one hell of a fight. But there's every chance with the power of three Alphas at his beck and call, he'd quickly be able to put me down in a way no one else had managed in several centuries.

So the line has been drawn in the sand.

Emily is off limits for good, and that's the way it should be.

I move away from watching her and figure out which direction she'll need to go in order to get back to Rathborn lands.

Then I lean against a tree with a bored expression on my face, even though inside I'm an inferno of conflicted tensions.

Eventually Emily comes strolling along like she doesn't have a care in the world.

I straighten as I realize I don't think I've seen her looking this at ease and carefree since I met her.

What could have happened in the short amount of time she's been gone to improve her mood so drastically?

She pulls up short when she sees me and my insides clench at the way the light immediately dims in her eyes, being replaced by something too close to fear for my comfort.

Is it possible she is actually afraid of me, and I didn't even realize?

"What have you been doing out here?" I demand, the accusatory words slipping out before I can control them.

She crosses

her arms defiantly. "Aaron may have appointed you as my minder, but I don't have to tell you everything I do."

Her insolent words only inflame my already hot temper.

"When you sneak out

and run away again, yes, you do have to tell me what you've been doing," I tell her heatedly in return.

This woman drives me crazy in a way no one else ever has in my entire life.

She scoffs dismissively at me.

I don't owe you anything, Axel. I thought we already established that."

For some reason, her stubborn refusal to tell me—even though I already know she was hunting again—makes me more suspicious of her.

If she's got nothing to hide, then why not tell me?

"Maybe you don't owe me, but you owe Aaron if you want to keep a roof over your head," I snap in reply.

It's the wrong thing to say, I know as soon as her eyes narrow willfully.

I can see she's about to shift and run off on me again.

I step forward and grab her arm to stop her from going anywhere, but as soon as I do, that faint scent of the other male gets slightly stronger, and I realize it's *on* Emily.

"Who have you been meeting **with?**" I demand angrily.

"No one!" she protests, tugging on her arm, trying to free herself. "Let me go, you brute!"

Instead of letting her go, I pull her in closer and then lean down to scent her neck.

The lingering traces aren't strong. I still can't tell if he was a wolf, human or otherwise. And they probably did not much

more than stand near each other, but the idea of her out here alone with another man is driving me—and especially my inner wolf—crazy.

"Who is he?" I demand in a snarl.

Chapter 315

EMILY

Axel is

infuriated, and I think he must have seriously heightened senses to be able to smell Ronan on me when we barely touched for more than a few seconds.

"No one!" I yell angrily—though that anger is fed by a healthy dose of fear now that I know who Axel really is.

"Tell me the truth, Emily!" he growls menacingly.

"Fine!" I yank harder, and this time he releases me, and I stumble a step. But he crowds closer to me until I'm backed up against a tree with no means of escape.

"It was just some guy," I lie, hoping he can't somehow tell I'm not telling him the truth. "I tripped over on the trail up there, and he helped me up. That's all. It was just some stranger. We barely even spoke!"

Axel stares at me, eyes hard, glittering and threatening.

I half think he's going to run off and track down Ronan to ask him for his version of events.

However, Axel doesn't do any of those things.

Instead, he moves back just enough to give me room to breathe.

Still, I don't know whether he believes me, or knows I'm lying.

"Shift, now. We're heading back to the mansion." Somehow, his already intimidating stare becomes even more threatening. "And don't even think about running off on me again. You won't like the consequences."

Part of me wants to defy him.

I wish I was brave enough—like Ronan had said—to ignore his threats, to shift and run and escape him and my brother and their stupid suffocating rules.

But I'm not that brave.

At least not today.

Because like Axel so aptly pointed out, I'm reliant upon Aaron for a roof over my head.

For my clothes and food and pretty much everything else in my life.

If I left, I would have to live in the human world, and likely be homeless.

Sure, I could petition the Council to join another pack, but that wouldn't solve my problems.

I'd still be hiding the monster within me.

I'd still have to live in fear that someone might discover my secret.

Or worse, that Axel might somehow find out and come for me, just like we were warned in those scary fairytales as kids.

Besides, Aaron is basically running the Council now with his status as a wolf with the power of three Alphas.

He would simply block or stop any petition I might put to the Council.

So I'm trapped.

Almost as effectively as I was living in that isolated house all those years.

Tears well up so hard and fast and I choke on them.

I won't be weak. I won't. Never again.

My tears have Axel's features changing and I shove away from him and shift before I can allow myself to even contemplate what his expression might mean.

I watch as he picks up my clothes and rolls them into his own. He's squatting, watching me. And I don't dare let myself—my wolf self—linger on the sight or scent of him.

I run.

Hard and fast over the terrain. The scents I encounter are all

Rathborn which makes me think seeing that man Ronan was a complete oddity. We don't traipse much near the public parks and the state preserves don't typically see too many visitors this far out. Why was Ronan here, I wonder?

Getting back home, I don't bother to shift until I'm inside and in my room. I've been gone most of the day and it's almost dark by the time I walk back into the house.

When I find out Aaron and Leah have already packed and left for Romania, I try not to feel hurt.

Part of me knows **it** was my **own** fault I wasn't here to say goodbye, and Aaron probably viewed it as me being petty and spiteful yet again.

Except I honestly didn't think about it.

Aaron hadn't told me what time the private jet had been booked to take off. And because it is our own jet, he easily could have asked to postpone for an hour or two so I could be here to say goodbye.

Instead, they simply left, and it feels like Aaron is telling me how high his regard is for me, and where I am on his life priorities.

Which is to say low to the point of not caring.

I drag **on** clothes and then head back into the hall because something silvery had caught my eye when I ran in.

I see a shiny new lock has been installed on the door.

One that latches on the outside and prevents me from being able to open the door and escape.

"No."

Axel approaches. His big, hard body coming down the hall. His jeans ride low on his hips and he hasn't taken the time to put his shirt back on.

Muscles ripple across his chest and stomach.

"Wait!" I cry, resisting as Axel pulls me into my bedroom. "Why is there a lock on my door? What are you doing?"

Once we're inside, Axel releases me, none-too-gently, then stands between me and the door, preventing me from going right back out again.

"Believe me, Emily, this is not what we wanted for you," Axel says in a hard voice. "But you leave us no choice. You keep running off without telling anyone, no matter that you know vampires are lurking around, waiting to strike at any weakness."

"And in this case, I'm the weakness?" I demand, my voice hoarse as I resist the urge to start crying.

After everything—after spending ten years behind a locked door I had no control over—
how could Aaron and Axel even think to

do this to me?

Don't they know this is my absolute worst nightmare?

Being locked up, unable to get card, wanalale to pats in

on what's

I'd rather heddend

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"Don't even think about locking me in here, Axel," I tell him, **my** voice low and threatening.

Axel crosses his arms and looks on dispassionately, not intimidated by me in the least.

Why would he be?

He's an impossibly powerful slayer who is reportedly hundreds of years old.

I'm probably nothing more than a gnat to him, small, annoying and inconvenient.

"You're meeting up with strange men in the woods," Axel replies, eyes narrowing. "You repeatedly run off no matter how many times we tell you not to, and you attacked your own Luna. You've brought this on yourself, Emily. Don't act like it's a surprise."

"I didn't meet up with anyone!" I shout in frustration. "I told you; it was just some random stranger. And I explained about Leah! I thought you understood."

"Just because I understand, doesn't mean I condone your behavior," Axel replies in a harsh voice. "Aaron left me in charge, and I don't plan to let him down. Your selfish actions. affect the pack whether you know and care or not. I'll do

whatever it takes to keep you in line, Emily."

With that, Axel turns on his heel and strides out of the room.

I rush after him, but he slams the door closed between us before I can get there.

A second later, that's when I hear the lock clicking into place from the outside.

"No!" I yell furiously. "You can't do this!"

After that, everything becomes a blur of yelling and crying, but Axel doesn't come back, and doesn't open the door.

I even rush to the window, thinking I can go through the French doors and climb down from the balcony, but those doors have also been locked.

I think about simply breaking the glass and leaving anyway, but I'm not that far gone that I can't see how that would only make things worse.

I'd have to come back eventually since I have nowhere else to go, and Axel would probably just lock me in the cellar or some kind of windowless room, making it even harder for me to escape.

The thought of being trapped like that makes me shudder, and the fight goes out of me, leaving me calmer, but no less upset.

I drag myself to bed and cry into my pillow for a while, before falling into a restless sleep.

That's when the dream starts.

I'm walking aimlessly through the halls of the house, but everything is dusty and feels abandoned, like I've been left here alone and forgotten for decades.

But then I walk into the library and the room is warm and inviting, candles glowing softly and a cheery fire in the hearth.

Axel is there, and my heart leaps at seeing him, at realizing I'm not alone after all.

"There you are," Axel says. "I've been waiting for you."

This Axel isn't cold and aloof. He's smiling, warm and welcoming.

Part of me thinks I should be wary, but I can't remember why.

So I rush forward, and Axel catches me up against him, holding me close and safe in his arms.

It's all I've ever wanted.

All I've ever needed.

And now I finally have it.

have a mate who loves me and will protect me and never let anything bad happen to me again.

I lean back to look up at him, but before I can say anything, he swoops in and kisses me.

Oh, how he kisses me—devours me, really, like a drowning man gasping for air.

It's deep and consuming and everything a kiss should be.

Pleasure storms my body, and for a heady moment I think that if he claims me right now, I wouldn't deny him.

Just as I'm losing myself to the kiss, Axel suddenly pulls back to look down at me in confusion.

"What's wrong?" I ask him, suddenly feeling scared and worried.

There's something about him I'm meant to remember.

Something bad.

Some reason why I shouldn't want this with him, but the answer eludes me.

Axel frowns, looking suspicious and intimidating.

I try to pull back, to escape his hold, but he locks his arms around me, stopping me from going anywhere.

“What are you doing?” I demand, becoming more frightened by the moment.

Axel lifts a hand and presses a thumb to my upper lip, before exposing my teeth.

“You’re one of them.”

I wake up with a start, gasping, clutching at my chest, my heart pounding like I’m having a heart attack.

The dream felt so real, for a second, I don’t know if it actually happened or not.

But then my brain manages to separate out reality, and I remember Axel locking me into my room.

I grab one of the blankets I’d tossed aside and wrap it tightly around myself, shivering.

But I’m not shaking because I’m cold.

It’s because Aaron left my welfare to the single most dangerous person I’ve ever encountered.

One way or another, I know Axel is going to be the death of me.

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I barely sleep the rest of the night.

The next morning, Axel unlocks the door early, but I don’t immediately get out of bed.

I’m not sure if I have the energy or will to face the day.

I wonder what Axel will do if I turn the tables on him and refuse to leave my bedroom, so whether he locks the door or not becomes pointless.

Around mid-morning, there’s a knock on the door.

I don’t answer, even though I doubt it’s Axel.

He wouldn’t knock. He would just barge right in.

The door swings open a few seconds later and Jessica walks in, carrying a tray with what looks like breakfast on it.

“Good morning,” she says in a soft voice, sending me a hesitant smile, as if unsure of her welcome.

Oh great, now even Jessica is tiptoeing around me.

“Does the entire pack know I’m a nutjob who needs to be locked up in her room?” I ask, pulling a blanket over my head.

I hear the sounds of Jessica setting the tray onto the nightstand next to my bed, then a second later the mattress dips and Jessica tugs the blankets away from my face.

“No one thinks that,” she says, and now her expression is more sympathetic and understanding.

“Don’t they?” I question bitterly as I push myself upright.

I look at the selection of food Jessica has brought me and realize I’m actually quite hungry.

Probably doesn’t help that I missed dinner last night.

I grab the tray and settle it on my lap as Jessica smiles in approval.

“At least you haven’t lost your appetite,” she says as I start eating.

I don’t bother telling her that when you get abducted and held captive, eating becomes about survival, especially if you don’t know if or when the next meal is coming.

I learned to eat whether I had any appetite or not.

“Jessica, you can’t possibly think what’s happening to me is okay,” I say between mouthfuls.

Jessica frowns and glances away.

“Aaron said it was for your **own** good,” Jessica says, and it

sounds more like something she’s reciting, rather than something she actually believes.

“I know I’ve been a bit...erratic since I got home,” I reply, trying to choose my words carefully. “But I don’t deserve to be locked in my room like I’m some badly behaved kid. It’s not fair.”

I clamp my mouth closed after saying it’s not fair, because actually, I do kind of sound like a whiny kid.

Jessica sighs, and I can see that she does care about what happens to me.

She is my best friend, after all.

“Aaron is Alpha, Emily. Even if he is your brother, we can’t go against what he says. And maybe I haven’t always been Leah’s biggest fan, but attacking your Luna is crossing a line.”

I duck my head and stare down at my partially eaten breakfast, shame heating my cheeks.

Maybe I shouldn’t have attacked Leah...at least not where there were witnesses.

But Jessica doesn’t understand everything I went through because of Leah.

“I spent ten years locked away,” I say instead of answering Jessica’s statement. “I can’t be locked up in t his bedroom all the time. I need to shift. I need to run. If I can’t do those things, I don’t know how to cope.”

www

Jessica reaches over and takes my hand.

“Truthfully, I don’t agree with how they’re handling this,” Jessica says **in a** quiet voice, probably so she is n’t overheard. “I’m not willing to defy Aaron...but maybe there are times when I can look the other way, if you truly need to get out for a

bit. Just make sure you don't leave for long. I hate to think what else Axel might do to you if he catches you sneaking off again."

"You and me both," I tell her, my stomach fluttering.

I should be thinking about all the ways Axel might hurt me, and how he locked me in this room last night without caring what it might do to my mental state.

However, for some reason, all I can think about is the dream I had.

Before it turned into a nightmare.

When Axel kissed me.

And despite knowing I shouldn't, I find myself wondering if it would feel anything like that should Axel kiss me in real life.

Of course, that's never going to happen.

Axel barely tolerates me.

He obviously doesn't care, otherwise he would have resisted Aaron's idea to lock me up, because he would have realized how

triggering that would be after ten years of captivity.

Besides, Axel might not realize it yet, but we're basically enemies.

If he ever got that close to me again, I should be less worried about him kissing me, and more worried about him killing me.

Chapter 318

AXEL

I've been checking in on Emily all morning.

From a distance.

Staying away so she wouldn't be aware I was still closely monitoring her.

I asked Jessica to keep an eye on her, knowing Emily wouldn't welcome my presence after what I was forced to do last night.

I didn't want to lock her in her bedroom like that.

I know a thing or two about captivity, and it literally would have been her worst nightmare, having her power and freedom stolen away like that.

But it was what Aaron decreed needed to happen to keep Emily secure while he was away.

I think Emily attacking Leah was the last straw for Aaron, and I wonder what he's going to do about his sister when he eventually gets back from Romania.

Last night, I'd sat outside her door in the hallway as she'd raged and screamed and cried until she'd given up in exhaustion, and I'd hated myself every second of every minute for doing that to her.

gone.

I spent most of last night and this morning-when I wasn't dealing with pack issues-trying to think of ways I could help Emily.

She needs to be able to prove to Aaron that she's working through things in a healthy way, and I don't think simply seeing the pack therapist is the answer.

Especially when it comes to her need to shift and run.

I wish I could let her roam to her heart's content, but with the new threat posed by vampires, it's just not safe.

I've come up with an idea, I'm just not sure whether she's going to like it.

But I think it's a good alternative to get some of the pain and aggression out if she can't shift and run.

Just before lunch time, I go to where Emily and Jessica are. working in tandem on some of the duties Leah would usually do as pack Luna.

Emily is pale and tired, but seems as if she's having an okay time with her friend.

However, when I step up to them, Emily's expression

immediately shutters, and maybe I'm mistaken, but it seems as if there's a real spark of fear in her eyes.

I know my treatment of her has been questionable, but I don't understand what I did to make her truly fear me.

was really going to hurt her when I subdued her

in the hallway after she attacked Leah?

Or did locking her in the bedroom last night make her think I'm no better than the old Roberts alpha who abducted her?

"Emily," I say, and my voice comes out rougher than I mean it to. "Come with me."

"Why?" she asks, mostly suspicious, but with a hint of anxiety.

"Do you have to question everything?" I snap at her. "It's time you learned what it means to obey your Alpha."

Technically, I'm not her Alpha, but I'm acting in his stead, so my word should be law.

Her constant need to fight and defy everyone and lash out like a wounded, cornered animal is exhausting.

I'm not

and surprised Aaron decided that locking her up at night

and having her watched constantly throughout the day was the best answer to protect both her and the rest of the pack from her self-destructive behavior.

But if my plan works, I hope we'll soon see the last of that.

Emily looks to Jessica, who sends her an apologetic look and then turns away.

At that, Emily's expression shows her hurt, and then betrayal.

But both are swiftly followed by rage.

Good, if she's angry, maybe she'll be able to see the benefit of what I'm about to propose.

I march through the house at a clip expecting Emily to keep up.

I've got a million things to do today once I get Emily set up with her new schedule.

We walk out across the expansive grounds to the entrance of the training ward and huge underground facilities where Aaron both trains his pack and keeps them fighting fit.

I was highly impressed the first day here, when Aaron gave me the tour.

The facilities are excellent, and it's clear Aaron's training regimen and expectations of his pack members are high.

The Rathborn pack is certainly a force to be reckoned with.

"Why are we here?" Emily asks worriedly as we step out of the elevator on the lower underground level.

Across the way, one of Aaron's senior pack members-Owen -is beginning a new training session with the younger pack members. Older teens and pack members in their early twenties.

From what I've seen since I arrived here, Owen is one hell of a drill sergeant.

It's probably a testament to Owen's skills that Aaron's pack is so disciplined and well-trained.

I stop at the edge of the training area and indicate to where starting to put the young wolves through their paces.

"Your training starts today," I tell her in a tone of voice that says I expect not to be argued with.

But this is Emily we're talking about.

Of course she's going to argue.

"I'm fully trained. I fought in the war," Emily says peevishly. "I'm not starting from scratch with the newbies."

"You were barely old enough to fight in the pack wars," I tell her, raking a glance over her. "How many battles did you actually see? One? Two? Or none?"

She presses her lips into a line, and I can see I've struck a nerve.

“I don’t need to be trained,” Emily insists instead of answering my question. “I know how to fight.”

“Okay,” I reply, spreading my arms wide. “Here’s the deal. You take me down. You get out of training. But if you don’t, then you do as I say...”

Chapter 319

EMILY

I can’t believe the audacity of Axel.

Treating me like a literal child who doesn’t even know the basics of fighting.

Expecting me to train with the beginners who know nothing.

I could probably wipe the floor with all of them, and barely break a sweat.

And now he’s thrown down a challenge.

If I want to get out of this, I have to beat him.

Part of me thinks it’s impossible.

Especially knowing who he really is.

Axel has killed countless vampires and wolves over centuries.

I doubt I pose much of a challenge to him.

However, this feels like yet another punishment he or Aaron has come up with to keep me inline. Forcing me to prove I can still be part of the pack.

‘m desperate enough not to endure the humiliation of starting training with the newbies that I think maybe if I’m quick and nimble, I might have a chance of getting Axel down long enough to claim victory.

It’s not some fight to the death, after all.

He said I only have to take him down.

Maybe I’ll be able to use his size and arrogance against him.

I glance at where the newbies are beginning some strength and fitness exercises.

“Let’s go somewhere a little quieter,” Axel suggests, and I appreciate it, because if I’m about to be humiliated, I don’t need an audience.

I nod, and then Axel leads me across the huge training space to one of the smaller workout rooms off to the side.

There are some weights and a few other bits of equipment on shelves and racks on the walls, but otherwise the mats are clear in the middle of the room.

Axel kicks off his boots and then strips out of his shirt, leaving him in a muscle shirt underneath. It shows off the bulging muscles of his biceps and fits snugly to the contours of his chest and torso.

“Is this really necessary?” I ask as he steps to the middle of the mats and waits for me.

“No,” he replies, and even though there’s mostly no inflection in his voice like usual, I feel like I detect a hint of humor. “But it only seemed fair to give you the opportunity to get yourself out of it.”

I think this whole thing is probably rigged against me somehow, but I don’t say anything.

Instead, I step out of my own shoes and then walk over to stand on the mat across from him.

“So, what are the rules?” I ask, stretching my arms a little.

He grins wolfishly at me, a glint in his eyes.

“There are no rules.”

My stomach flutters at his devilish attitude.

If not for the fact he is currently making my life hell at my brother’s request-not to mention the fact he’s a slayer-I think I would otherwise be in danger of falling hard for him.

“So I put you down, I win, right?” I clarify.

He gives a shallow nod. “The second I hit the mat; you win.”

I rake a gaze over him, taking into account his size and strength, and trying to figure out how hard I’d have to hit him to take him down.

Right at him, it’ll probably be like hitting a brick wall.

I shift to the side a little and he mirrors me. Then we’re slowly circling each other, sizing up the competition, both of us searching for weaknesses and openings.

Bits and pieces of my original training are coming back. Being in the underground facility is jogging memories I had long forgotten.

I know I’m rusty. I didn’t exactly have much opportunity to keep up with my training, locked alone in a remote house for ten

years.

And while I agree I could probably use a refresher, starting all over again with the rookies seems like cruel and unusual punishment.

Also just downright galling.

Somehow, despite the odds stacked against me, I need to figure out a way to beat Axel at his own game.

“Are we just going to keep dancing around each other all day or are you going to make a move?” he taunts with a rakish smile, and it’s easy to see he’s trying to goad me into rash action.

He flexes his arms, making his muscles ripple, and now I just think he’s showing off.

There's no way I can match him in strength, so I need to find a way to outsmart him and catch him off guard.

That's when I come up with a truly terrible idea that just might work.

Chapter 320

I can see Emily weighing up her options as she stares at me.

Maybe it wasn't fair of me to offer her a chance to get out of her training.

I don't plan on breaking my word.

I take my vows seriously.

If she can put me down on the mat, then I'll honor what I said and I won't make her begin training from scratch with the rookies, even though I think it would be good for her.

She probably doesn't even realize how much of her training she forgot during her years of captivity.

Plus, I think learning those lessons from the beginning again. might do her humility some good.

But all this is empty speculation.

Emily will train with the newbies.

And I won't break my word.

Because there's no way she can beat me and put me down on the mat.

She might not realize it, but her lessons are starting right now.

And the first one is that she shouldn't underestimate me or doubt my willingness to run the Rathborn pack with an iron

fist until Aaron returns.

At last Emily seems to come to some kind of decision, and I would love to know what's going on behind those expressive eyes, in that quick-witted mind of hers.

Confidently, she strides toward me, and for a second, I get distracted by the sway of her hips.

She truly is gorgeous, this mate of mine whom I cannot claim.

She steps up to me, but she doesn't attack as I expect.

Instead, she shoves me high in the chest, forcing me back a step.

I don't resist, curious to know where this is going and what kind of strategy this is, because she's clearly not trying to do

anything to take me down...yet.

mirrored wall.

I'm still trying to figure out what she's up to when she presses her entire body up against the length of mine and catches my lips with her own.

For a split second, I'm shocked into freezing in place.

But then white-hot lust erupts through my body and I'm acting before I've even had a chance to think about what a

bad idea this is.

I clutch her up against me, hungrily kissing her back, taking the one thing I never thought I'd get to experience.

I'd heard being with your mate was like nothing else a wolf could ever experience, but nothing has prepared me for the maelstrom of heat and lust and this soul-deep yearning that storms through me now that I've got Emily in my arms and her

mouth beneath mine.

I want nothing more than to throw her down on the mat and claim her with my body and my teeth, sinking into her and making her mine-marking her-so that everyone will know who she belongs to, and no one will ever even think to take

her for themselves.

I spin us around, and press Emily up against the mirror, getting my hands under her thighs and picking her up.

She wraps her lithe legs tightly around my waist, and I rock into her, imagining how good it would be if I f u c ked her up against this mirror right here, right now.

I plunge my tongue deeper and harder into her mouth, the same thing I want to do with my coc k into her welcoming

body.

When Emily pushes us away from the wall, I go along with her.

And when she urges me down, I eagerly drop back onto the mat, pulling her on top of me, not breaking the kiss.

Her legs slip down either side of my hips as she perches on top of me.

All I can think about is tearing off every single item of clothing between us and thrusting up into the tight, wet heat of her. Letting her ride me until she's screaming my name.

Just when I grip a handful of her shirt with the thought of tearing it in two, she breaks the kiss and sits up.

Her cheeks are flushed, while her lips are reddened and slicked.

I want to work her over until her whole body is blushing pink and limp from the countless times I make her orgasm.

"I win," she says, lips widening into a grin.

It takes my mind a few seconds for the meaning of those words to sink in.

"I put you down on the mat," she says triumphantly. "So you lose. Looks like I won't be training with the newbies after all."

She did all that-seduced me-just to win the challenge on a technicality?

I don't know whether I'm thoroughly disgusted and enraged that she apparently used me, or highly impressed and proud of her cunning.

All I know is I've never been this fucking turned on in my life.

I growl, and clamp my hands on her hips before she can realize the danger she's in and escape me.

I then flip us, putting her beneath me, my hips fitting into the cradle of her thighs and pinning her in place.

"That was a huge mistake, Emily."