

Bad Love 71

Chapter 71

There isn't anything I can say that is going to dissolve his anger.

His eyes are gold. His chest heaves.

The huge muscles in his neck and shoulders bulge.

In the next heartbeat, Aaron relents. It's like he flips a switch because the rage is banked and he's entirely different toward

"Let's try this a different way." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out two rings. One is the wedding band I'd given back to him when I demanded a divorce. The other is a giant diamond wedding band. I've never seen a stone so big.

He drops to one knee.

I can't believe this is happening.

"Let's try everything again, Leah. Only differently this time. Not for peace. Not for pride. Not for pack. I want you for my wife. Marry me."

Even kneeling this man is tall. His dark eyes are so earnest. I rub my eyes, because I'm convinced I must be dreaming.

Aaron reaches for my hand, but I pull it back.

"W-why?" I whisper.

He tilts his head. "I just told you. I want to marry you." Then he slays me when he adds: "Please."

It's like he pulled this script straight from one of my teenage fantasies.

But I'm not a young girl anymore.

And though this proposal is perfect, there is no glazing over all the things that have gone unsaid.

I'm an Alpha... renewing our vows would further strengthen his claim on me, and by extension, my pack.

There still remains the fact that he could kill me and claim everything.

My father.

My cancer.

Whatever unfaithfulness-or marriage!?!-with Jessica.

Years of being subjugated and unappreciated.

There is no mention of love.

Never love. This man isn't capable of it.

But the temptation is there to take his offer because I know he's offering the most he can. And I never, never thought this man would offer me anything.

"You belong with me, Leah."

My gosh, I've waited so long for these words and hearing them, my heart hurts because I can't accept them now. I can't just think of myself.

I shouldn't even want to, considering how bad things have been.

I'm so weak. And he's so... bad for me.

"Leah."

My heart shatters. It just up and breaks entirely. "I'm sorry, Aaron. No. I cannot be what you want me to be."

Aaron's brows draw together and he frowns. He looks ...hurt. I've never seen this man look anything less than stoic and right now, he's not masking his emotions at all.

"Don't do this, honey."

I hold my ground.

He rubs his chest. Like I'm physically paining him in some way.

Liam enters the foyer. He smirks upon seeing Aaron on his knees. "You heard my sister. Her answer's no. Not much more to say now is there? Get out."

Aaron looks to me as if for confirmation. I give the slightest nod.

It's the best decision for all parties.

I can't trust myself when it comes to this man. I can't trust him.

It's hard to describe the maelstrom of emotions sweeping through me.

Hope and hate.

Love and loss.

Regret. Always regret.

As he gives me one last look and then walks away, I'm left thinking that no man on this earth can bring me to such highs or leave me so low.

I have every reason to hate him, to distrust him. So why does it pain me to see him go?

Chapter 72

"Good riddance," Marla says.

I glance at her sharply but she doesn't notice. She's busy shooting daggers at Aaron's back with her mascara-caked eyes.

I take a deep breath.

I'm not being nice.

I look around the hall at the other wolves that are hanging around. A couple of older males look vaguely familiar and there are two younger guys who are conversing with

my brother.

No one approaches me. There are no welcomes.

Everyone is still grieving, I remind myself. But that doesn't make this 'homecoming' feel any less like 'home'.

It's not like there would've been time to clean out my room or to assemble the pack, but everything about today just feels anticlimactic, and, well, bad.

What's worse, I don't know what to do with myself or where to start.

My brother approaches and he's smiling. He pulls me into a hug. "I still can't believe you're here."

I soak up this hug. I needed one.

I haven't been around my family in a long time. And my memories of this place are so crystal clear-they were the only thing that kept me going in those early years-that I think seeing all the differences and feeling like an outsider has only compounded the negative thoughts.

"You're tired," he tells me. "You should rest."

Is this how Aaron felt, being 'dismissed'?

I try not to be offended, because his heart is in the right place. I'm a mess right now and it has been a brutal night.

"Go on up. Sleep for a few hours. We can figure things out later tonight."

I'm not really sure this is the best idea, but I also want to approach this carefully, as I'm sure I'm ruffling a lot of feathers and most people, no matter how supportive, always struggle with 'change' at least at the start.

"Yeah. Sure. Okay."

Marla grins.

They stand arm-in-arm as I walk off.

I don't go back to my room. I hit the kitchen first. There was a

wolf that used to bake apples for me and make some kind of homemade pop tart. But the kitchen is empty and the pans used for my bacon and eggs are still on the stove. Dirty bowls are left on the counter. It isn't a disaster, but there isn't a spread of food laid out or the team of wolves that would be up and making breakfast for the pack by this time of morning.

I check the giant refrigerator. There are a bunch of takeout containers and leftovers that look too old. Aside from the carton of eggs and a gallon of milk, there isn't much else.

Moving out of the kitchen I take the back stairs up to the main landing. From here, I can go up two or three flights. I can turn left or right. On a lark I take a right, toward my father's wing of the house.

The hallway looks like it hasn't been cleaned in a long while. There are pawprints on the floor, and the kind of stains that come from dirt being ground in by foot traffic over a long time. Again, I remind myself not to judge. Life is messy, people are what matter, not how meticulous a house is.

Though part of me is inwardly grimacing. Between the main hall/den, my room, I'm a little anxious that dad's room won't be much better. I would think with all the money I've been sending that they could've hired a housekeeper?

No. I shouldn't get hung up on money or details or a mess. These are minor details. And I can straighten it up. The thought takes shape and I find myself wanting to do just that. I want to clean and set things to right.

But most of all... I want to see if Dad left some note or letter. Some explanation or message just for me.

He had to have known what a shock it would send through the supernatural community and his pack in particular. I can't imagine that my dad would put me in this position without leaving me some instructions or message.

And there had to be some message relayed to the pack, right? How else could Brian or anyone else have known my father had chosen me?

I expect dad's room to be locked and I'm prepared to pick the lock or demand that someone open it.

But when I try the handle, the door swings open.

What the hell?!

I thought I'd had all the shocks I could bear for one day-clearly,

I was very very wrong.

Chapter 73

There are three naked women on my father's bed.

I don't even see clothes anywhere else. So maybe they came straight in after the funeral ceremony?

But that doesn't seem right either.

There are high heels on the floor and empty liquor bottles. Bras hanging from the bed posts and panties on the floor.

And they're moving.

The naked females, not their undergarments.

Legs writhing. Bodies arching.

I back up so quickly I slam into the wall.

All at once they sit up and stare. Wolf eyes flash back at me.

I'm not sure what they see. I'm in clothes better suited to a teenager. My hair is a mess.

I'm their Alpha's daughter.

One of them lifts her head from between a brunette's thighs. "Well... you're Alpha now, right?"

I nod.

Shock keeps my feet rooted to the spot and my thoughts scrambled.

The dark-haired girl looks me up and down. "So come in here and close the door, if you want to take your father's place."

AARON

We make it to the end of the long road off Roberts packlands before James slams on the brakes.

I look up from my phone. "What the-?"

"Yeah. Exactly." James is out of the vehicle first and moving to intercept Tobin where he leans against a Maybach on the opposite side of the main road.

I get out of the vehicle more slowly and scan the field behind him. Tobin appears to be alone, but that's not to say a contingent of his pack aren't nearby or already boxing us in.

"You're always so paranoid, Aaron."

I once watched this wolf slaughter three rogues and then go back to eating crepes.

He's... unpredictable.

"It's been a long time and now I'm seeing you twice in one day." I glance over my shoulder. My other men are already positioned and guarding my back. "What's up?"

"You don't really think they bought that whole spiel you tried at the Council meeting about her father and his embezzlement, do you?"

I say nothing.

He smirks. "Okay, let's try this a different way... how do you think Karolina and I knew exactly where to be... and when?"

My hackles rise. I'm pissed at Leah and there's no way I'm going to just let her go. But I have to balance how much I let that

show.

""

Something only has value if a person believes it does.

And I've never given anyone any reason to think that my wife is of value to me.

I learned that lesson from Alpha Roberts. It was his love and obsession with his true mate, Leah's mother, that made him so

vulnerable.

In the end, she'd been his downfall.

It was no different than with my own family. Only it was my father who paid the ultimate price for his love.

Weak. Both of them.

Tobin continues to study me. His eyes have a coldness about them that isn't so much reflective of mood or emotion but more

a form of detachment.

When he looks at someone, I don't think he actually sees them. I think he views the world around him in primal degrees. He admitted it once, when we'd been younger. Something about his wolf is always present at the forefront of his mind. That unlike most every other shifter, he cannot relegate his wolf to the background.

I can't imagine battling with my wolf day-in, day-out.

They've obviously found a way to co-exist that doesn't involve him fur-out on all fours more often than not. Though perhaps his extreme propensity for violence comes as a result.

"Why are you here, Tobin?"

He pushes away from the car. "I'm here to visit an old friend." His smile has a distinctive bite to it. "And to make a new one..."

"Get back in your car. Go home."

He snorts and walks right past me. "Not to worry, bro," he tells me. "I'll keep a good eye on the Mrs. for you."

He strolls toward the first security gate. The low-level basic outpost that looks like most every other ranch entrance in this area. He pauses before leaping over the gate and glances back at me. "With as hard as you fought to save your Luna, I'm

surprised you sent that human into a wolf's den...You never know what kinds of wolves she might meet."

Chapter 74

"What do you want to do, Boss?"

James is eyeing Tobin's retreating form with the same mixture of fury and concern that I am.

I take a moment to think things through.

Could Tobin kill Leah?

Of course he could, without sprouting a strand of fur. But to do so alone. On Roberts' packlands. Amid her pack whilst he is surrounded by enemies.

"I don't think he's going to make a play for her." At least not today.

"So let me ask again," James says. "What do you want to do, Boss?"

What I want to do, and what I can do at the moment, are two very different things.

"We go back and regroup." I have no intention of leaving Leah here. She's a lamb awaiting slaughter. Her brother isn't up to the task of protecting her. I don't think any of her pack is.

But it pains me.

It physically pains me to walk away.

My wolf is clawing at my insides, a vicious assault on my mind and body, his way of punishing me for choosing to go.

"Ease up!" I bark at him.

"James, get Geralt on the phone. I want diagnostics on every facet of Pack Roberts. And every member in existence."

He gets back behind the wheel, and I take a few moments more to scan the landscape. There's a sense of foreboding I can't

escape.

Clouds gather overhead.

Vast dark clouds that have lightning crackling in the distance.

Leah told me to leave.

And for the first time, there is no way I can keep her with me.

"We should go," James says.

As my beta, he's likely reading my mood.

I've never been so angry.

Leah might think this is over. That she's seen the last of me. But what she did today, rejecting and pushing me away...

There's going to be a price for it.

Chapter 75

"Well, I must say, I wasn't expecting this."

I turn slowly. There's a man in the hallway, I'm not sure where he came from. I recognize him from the Council and from the

Grove.

"I'm not sure we've been introduced," I tell him.

"Neither have they," he says, inclining his head to the three women on my father's bed.

I shove out of the room and slam the door behind me.

For the last few minutes, I've been trying to get a handle on things. And two of the females, Deanna and Isabel, they'd gotten right back down to business even as the dark-haired female struck up a conversation with me.

I've been very sheltered it seems.

"You can get back to it," he says, indicating the females. "Something tells me Aaron wouldn't be one to share, even when the fairer side of our species are so much more interesting."

No, I can safely say that Aaron has never tried for a menage.

He tills his head. "You're human. Perhaps you have hang-ups about these things."

Is he trying to have a s*x talk with me? I don't know this male. I mean, I've seen him at the occasional Council meeting. I know of him. But I don't know him personally. I'm not even sure how he got into this house and to the door of my father's bedroom.

Aaron wasn't joking... the security here...

"What do you want?" I ask with no preamble.

I want these women out of the room so I can search my dad's belongings.

The man stares at me like I'm an oddity to be dissected.

With his teeth.

If ever there was a Little Red Riding Hood vibe... I'm getting it right now.

I turn to the left so I can guide him back to the main hall. I hate turning my back on him, but I'm not keen on being alone in this hallway with him either.

"Please," I say without glancing back, "allow me to make you some coffee."

It's the only thing in the kitchen that's probably safe to serve.

"That's not necessary," he says. "I tend to take my meals in my true form."

Just how often is he a wolf then? Daily?

That's unheard of. Most wolves only shift with the moon, monthly.

If he's shifting at will and so frequently, he must be a powerful Alpha. Probably on level with Aaron.

I sneak a peek as we descend the stairs. He's tall, but not as tall. Bulkier by a couple pounds, maybe. It's his eyes I like the least though.

I always thought Aaron's eyes were cold.

But this wolf takes frigid to a whole other level.

I keep moving to bring us closer to the rest of the pack. This man fought to protect me, but on the contrary, I don't feel safe at all around him.

I keep my breathing even and try to mask my fear.

Like any predator, he would scent it.

I come around the last bend in the stairway and nearly slam into Adam.

He stops short and drops what he's holding to catch me from tripping.

The wolf behind me keeps moving past us to the foot of the stairs. He picks up the package that Adam dropped.

When I see what it is, I blanch.

Chapter 76

Adam recovers before me. He grabs the syringe and the collecting bag from the imposing wolf.

"Are you continuing to pay the blood debt?" Tobin asks me.

I have a pretty good idea why Adam's here. And what he's thinking. "No," I tell him.

He angles his head quizzically at Adam.

Adam, bless him, says nothing.

Tobin's eyes flash. He sniffs the air

Then his brows draw together. "Hmm," he says absently.

Hmm? What the hell does that mean?

"You didn't say why you were here," I tell him.

"No," he agrees. "I didn't."

Then he turns and walks away from us. Who is this wolf wandering inside my father's-my packhouse-as if he has every right to be here?

Adam mutters a curse.

"Should I be worried?" I ask him.

His light eyes are kind when they take me in. "We have bigger concerns just now."

Right. My health, for one.

Oh, and the little fact that I'm still human...

"Well," I say. "Let's do what you came for." And let's see if this absorption of my legacy has finally healed me.

I do feel better. I'm less tired. I feel stronger. But I don't want to get my hopes up. I can't because if I'm wrong...

Adam takes my hand. "Have faith, Leah. I can't believe that there would be no effect. Alpha powers can yield many things."

I wouldn't know.

I probably should've asked Aaron before I told him to leave.

Adam is still holding my hand. He twines our fingers together. But it doesn't feel right. It's like a betrayal of sorts and far too

intimate.

I don't want to offend him, but I also don't want someone to see us like this. I squeeze his hand once and then extricate myself from his grip.

I glance up the stairwell, plotting a path that won't bring me past the, uh, party in my father's room.

"This way," I say.

"No, let's go to the infirmary instead."

"Why?"

"The building itself is more secure, and it has surveillance cameras. I can see who is present and even lock the ward down."

"Is that really necessary?"

But then I think about it. I don't have a sense of how many wolves are present or what they think of me. I don't know if I'm cured or even what it means to be an Alpha. A little time and space... maybe that's not a bad idea.

"Okay, Adam."

"Follow me."

He takes the stairs down and through the house to the back span of hallways and corridors until we're outside on the second level patio. He moves with the ease of a man who is very comfortable in his environment. Yet, I catch the way he pauses at every corner and doorway and window. He's assessing, bracing for some unseen threat. And I'm not sure if I should be concerned or if this is part of his normal behavior. Maybe it's as ingrained as it is in Aaron.

Only... I'm not sure that's the case.

And that wolf Tobin.

Something tells me I should be very cautious where he is concerned.

And what's more, though he left me alone today, I know in my heart that I haven't seen the last of him...

Chapter 77

Adam locks down the medical facility the minute I'm in the lab.

He punches a series of buttons on the computer screen and I hear the electronic locks click into place. He cues the video feeds for the other parts of the building and I'm relieved he hasn't locked anyone else inside with us.

Maybe it was Tobin's unexpected visit or the way he seemed to waltz right into the place, but I didn't want to deal with any more surprises.

"Is it normally so quiet?" I ask him. Meaning, for a state-of-the-art medical center and lab, right here adjacent to the main house... the building is decidedly empty.

"It has been slow since they've been buying peace with your monthly blood donation."

This room has several microscopes across one wall and a series of hospital beds lined up along the other. It looks like one part lab-with tables, spectroscopy equipment, glassware, etc. where the other half of the room resembles an ER with gurneys, IV stands, and an assortment of medical equipment.

"I take it you know the drill?" he asks.

I dutifully roll up my sleeve.

He grabs an alcohol swab from within one of the drawers and wipes my arm gently. "Sit," he tells me. But I don't want to.

"I'm fine."

"I have to run several tests, Leah. This is going to be a decent amount of blood. You may feel lightheaded."

I doubt there's much Adam could do that hasn't already been

done to me.

“Does anyone else know?” I whisper.

He glances at me sharply. “Other than your brother?” He shrugs. “I’m not sure who he may have told. He’s been keeping... interesting company lately.”

My thoughts go to the women in my father’s room. Maybe they were expecting Liam.

It must have been a bit of a surprise when they saw me. Or maybe not.

I don’t know.

The last day has been mindblowing.

He ties a rubber band around my bicep. The pinch of the needle stings, but only for a second. Adam deftly finds the vein. “Make a fist and release it.”

I do as he says, watching as my blood fills the bag and he

It flow more quickly.

“What do you think?” I ask.

He’s a doctor and a wolf. Surely he has an opinion.

He smiles and tucks a curl behind my ear. “I think there’s a good chance, Leah.”

There’s hope in his voice. A hope I want to believe.

I catch movement on the cameras. It’s Liam. He tries the door. Frowns when it doesn’t open. I incline my head. “It’s my brother.”

“In a minute,” Adam tells me. “Here.”

He hands me my cell phone.

“How did you-”

“I’ve been cleaning up Pack Roberts messes for a long time now, Leah.”

What does that mean?

“Keep it with you. Keep in touch with me.”

He says it like he’s leaving. “Are you going somewhere?”

“Maybe.”

Chapter 78

Adam finishes drawing my blood and then goes to store it in a refrigerated panel that requires him to type in a code.

Only after he's locked it away and put a bandaid over my arm, does he undo the security measures and allow Liam in.

"I thought you were going to rest," Liam says.

He looks between me and Adam as if we're puzzle pieces and he is considering how we fit.

"I got pretty banged up last night," I tell my brother. "Adam, being Adam, wanted to check on me.

Liam looks at Adam. "Well, doctor, what's the prognosis?"

"Leah is good. Strong. Despite...recent events, she appears to be no worse for wear."

Liam grunts. Then he looks back at me. "That wolf who was here earlier... Tobin. You know who he is?"

Vaguely. "I've seen him at the occasional Council meeting. He seems tough, and I don't know, more feral maybe."

"That's an apt description," Liam says. He rubs his trim beard. "We're going to enforce security around the perimeters and at the main gate. Try and stay in the main house, all right? At least

until we have a better grasp on the situation. Okay?"

Liam seems nervous for me.

Adam nods. "It's the right thing to do. For now."

"Yes, okay."

They share a look between themselves and I wonder what they aren't telling me.

XXXX XXX

AARON

It's been barely an hour since I left Leah at her family's lands. Hell, I'm not even halfway home yet, and all I can think is that this is a mistake.

"Stop the car, James."

Dutifully, he pulls to the side of the road.

"I can't leave her."

"You try and pull her out of there, it's going to start a war."

I know that. Logically. "We'd win."

His hands tighten then relax on the steering wheel. "Our

numbers-and by 'our' I mean our species-are not so vast that we should spill blood lightly."

That's about the last thing I'd expect him to say. James is ferocious. One of the best fighters in my pack.

"So are you all of a sudden a pacifist?"

Again his hands clench then release. "We've had thirteen pups born."

I think back over the last few years. Yes, there have been a number of births.

"And it'd be nice if those parents are around to raise those kids."

Right. Because his parents weren't. Okay, I can see where he's coming from on that. But... "I can't leave her there, you know that, right?"

"Yes. But hear me out for a minute..."

Chapter 79

LEAH

I sleep.

I'm not sure how long or even what time it is when I wake up.

I just know that I'm groggy. I check my phone for maybe the thousandth time. No messages. No calls.

I'm not sure what I'm expecting.

I told Aaron to leave. I let him go with 'peace' – who even talks like that!?! I told him I did not want to be with him. That he could not stay with me.

It's just habit, I tell myself.

Habit and loneliness, because I've known him and have been with him for so many years, that of course it feels weird to be alone somewhere else.

Back home at Aaron's pack, we always slept in the same house each night. Maybe not always the same bed, but the nights we did spend apart were ones he was on guard along the perimeter, out running with his pack, or holed up in the library working. And those library nights, I usually fell asleep in a chair beside him. I'd always wake up in my bed though, so I know he carried me up all those flights of stairs and tucked me in.

Bad habits.

Yes, that's what I'm feeling now. I'm not sad or lonely. I'm just learning to live by myself after a decade of co-dependence.

The sooner I get used to things, the better it'll be for me.

There's a brisk knock on the door right before it opens.

I locked it. I know I did. Before I went to sleep.

"Hi!" It's Marla.

I hold up my hand. "Hey, please don't do that. I don't make a habit of barging in on others, so I don't expect that to be done to

me.”

1

Her pretty eyes go so wide her lashes stretch past her eyebrows. “I’m so sorry, Alpha.” She holds up the tray in her hands. “I just wanted to bring you dinner. You slept through breakfast and lunch.”

Of what day, I wonder.

But I don’t say that.

“You can set it on the desk,” I tell her.

Marla has a peppy step that makes bits of her bounce as she walks. I bet in her true form she’s a prancer. Jessica is like that too. Her wolf is always leaping and bounding.

Marla places the food where I told her and she steps back. “Oh, here.” She pulls out the chair. “Come on over. Have something to eat.”

It does smell good. Savory.

There are roasted yams and caramelized onions. A piece of steak grilled just right and sliced neatly.

My stomach rumbles.

She smiles. “See. You were hungry.”

I slide out of bed and approach her. Only when I sit down and my mouth waters, I find her watching me a tad too expectantly. It brings to mind the situation in the library where Aaron forced Liam to taste-test my food.

Technically, I don’t know this female.

And, while I appreciate the gesture, I’m not sure I want to take the risk.

She frowns. “Is something wrong?”

My phone rings and I’ve never been more grateful for a distraction. I lurch back toward the bed. “You should bring that back downstairs,” I tell her. “It smells delicious and I appreciate it. Truly. But I’m just not sure I’m up to it.” I point to the phone. “And I might be on for a while.”

She grabs a piece of potato and chews appreciatively as she walks out the door. “Suit yourself.”

Before I can answer the phone, it stops ringing.

Marla’s gone though. So I suppose it worked well enough.

I swipe my passcode into the screen.

Aaron.

I gulp.

Seeing his name.

It dredges up all sorts of feelings.

I toss the phone aside like it might burn.

That lasts about a minute. There's another beep, this one indicating that a text has come through.

Curiosity tugs at me like a noose.

Chapter 80

Miss you.

It's just those two words.

I stare at them for hours.

I draft a hundred different replies and delete them all. Because there is no right thing to say to the husband-who-isn't-my-husband who-is-my-captor/enemy.

If he's looking at his phone I'm sure he'll see the three dots that pop up and disappear as I type and then click back to undo.

As night passes into morning, I sleep again.

It's fitful. Filled with dreams that are more like nightmares, and memories I've bottled up since I was a kid.

I cry.

I curl up and try to comfort myself.

Because it's going to take 48 hours for the results back from my lab tests.

Two days to learn if I'll live or if I'm right back to counting down the time left with my terminal illness.

I want to live so badly.

It's some ingrained survival instinct, sure, but when facing my own mortality, I don't want to die.

At some point, I get up and start cleaning. I organize clothes and move boxes and clean up the junk that had been left behind-some of it by teenage me.

A day later, there is another text. This one is also brief. It just says, Special Delivery.

What does that mean?

The answer comes when my brother shows up at my room with Adam behind him.

They each carry a box. Really big boxes.

2

Adam sets his down first. "That blockhead beta just left these at the main gate."

I'm pretty sure he means James.

And James is big enough to lug around both of these. The guy built like a silverback.

"Did you search them?" I feel compelled to ask.

"Of course, we did," Liam snaps at me.

It's a fair question. They're essentially violating my privacy, but
is

on the other hand, they're doing it for my safety.

"It's like that a asshole thinks your own pack won't feed you," Liam mutters. Then he opens the box and pulls out packages of protein bars and giant jars of peanut butter. There are sealed packages of dried fruits and bottles of vitamins.

"Ironic, isn't it?" Adam says to me.

I know he's thinking about me being locked away and starved for a week.

"What's in your box?" I ask him.

He drops it and the components inside clang loudly.

When Adam reaches in and pulls out knife after knife and then an assortment of weapons and magazine clips, my mind goes blank.

"It seems your old lover wants to arm you against your own family." Liam curses, "the ba stard."

"It's not that," I say automatically.

"Oh, what is it then?"

I reach for a jar of peanut butter and a box of crackers. I have to be careful. Defending my family's 'enemy' will only reflect poorly on me. But how sad is it that I trust a delivery of food from the man who kept me a virtual prisoner for ten years, and don't trust eating or drinking something from the kitchen I grew

up in?

'Aaron lives by a very basic adage,' I tell them.

Adam glances at me confusedly.

"Keep your enemies close."

Both my brother and Adam spend close to an hour inspecting everything that had come in those two giant boxes. I want to ask them to stop or to leave, but decide to go a different route. I'm grateful they don't dissect what I said about enemies because they could probably apply that to themselves.

I trust my brother and Adam implicitly. But seeing Tobin in this house, walking around like he owned the place... maybe it's not such a bad idea for me to have weapons.

Liam shakes his head. "We have an entire arsenal here. If you wanted a gun or knife, you could take your pick."

True enough. But Aaron offered. I didn't have to ask. And if other wolves saw me arming myself, that act could be misinterpreted.

"Thank you," I tell my brother and Adam. "I appreciate it."

It's best that they know I am in solidarity with them, and that while I inwardly appreciate these small gestures from Aaron, that I won't be swayed by some silly text message or a grocery delivery.

I mean, really... I have my own phone. I am not a prisoner here. I can shop online for whatever I need or get my ass into a car and drive into the nearest city.

Unlike on Aaron's lands, I am not a prisoner here.

I hold the highest position in this community.

And it's about time I did something with that power.