

Chapter 10

Things Have Changed

Ava instinctively reared back from the window. "Shit! Please drive," she yelled at the cab driver.

The driver looked frantically around at the shadowy figures that surrounded his car, "Do you see this?! Who are you people?"

Ava took out her wadded-up cache of paper bills and tossed it on the empty front passenger seat. Hopefully, he wouldn't count it until much, much later. "Here, that's all the money I have. Just drive, it's fine, they'll move." "Are you out of your mind?!" He spat.

"I told you not to roll the window down," Ava spat back before surging forward to wrench back the button to bring the window up. The glass pane managed to rise a few inches before Xavier clamped and hand down on it and pushed. Gears from within the door began to whirl in protest as Xavier

brute forced the window back down in its chassis. With a low growl, the window's regulator snapped, and the pane slammed all the way down.

Ava and the cabby both jumped in surprise. Cursing, the driver laid on the horn, "No, no, no, no, no!"

"I did ask nicely," Xavier leaned down until his face was framed in the open window. "Sort of."

"Fuck this!" The cab driver cried before turning around to look to where Ava sat pressed against the opposite window, out of Xavier's reach. "Get the fuck out my car."

Ava's eyes went wide, shooting between the cab driver and Xavier's thoroughly unamused face, made even more menacing by the shadowy backlighting of a nearby streetlamp, "Seriously?!"

The driver jabbed an angry finger in Xavier's direction. "Yeah, seriously. What did I just say about crazy-ass people fucking up my car?"

Xavier's full lips hiked up in a smirk, "I take umbrage at being called crazy, but I will continue to fuck up this cab. Wanna do the man a solid and exit the vehicle before things get ugly?"

The driver's glare shifted between Ava and Xavier, "And take your friends with you!"

Xavier's eyebrows rose in feigned surprise as he glanced at the shadow figures surrounding the car, "Oh, I don't know them."

The driver paled, anxiously looking about at the unknown entities. Xavier barked out a buoyant laugh, "I'm just fuckin' with you man. I am done playing around, though."

Xavier pulled out of the window and rose to his full height. Suddenly, there was a crunch followed by a loud POP!, and the car door flew open.

Without pausing to listen to the cab driver's indignant screams, Ava threw open the lock on the opposite door and pushed her way out of the car. She took off at a run, aiming to rush back the way they'd come and slip down another alley way. She didn't actually expect to outrun Xavier, much less whatever goons he'd brought along with him. Still, Ava was discouraged, if not surprised, by just how quickly her lungs began to ache. Apparently, three months of hauling laundry baskets up and down stairs wasn't enough to counteract three malnourished years sitting behind bars.

Even so, the bastard could have bothered to humor her. Weren't wolves supposed to enjoy the chase? Instead, Xavier seemed to step straight out of the darkness before she'd made it half a block away from the irate taxi driver.

He grabbed her by the scruff, a single fist grasping the neck of her dingy uniform and snatched her back and up off of her feet until she was dangling a good two feet off of the ground. Ava's uniform shirt hiked up high along her ribcage, baring most of her midriff.

Panicked by the unexpected altitude, Ava reached up to clasp Xavier's wrist with both hands, leveraging herself slightly, trying to take some of the pressure off of her neck where the shirt pulled tight around her throat.

"Ava," he drew out her name in a disparaging tone. "I know I always had you beat in gym class, but - come on, you basically just ran into me."

Ava gasped for air - a little bit because of being hung a couple feet off the ground by her collar, but mostly because of the running. "Haven't had a lot of time for cardio lately."

He set her down and lightly massaged the back of her neck where her collar had chaffed. Ava bit her lip hard enough to leave an imprint; the moan that had almost slipped out in reaction to his firm touch would've been worse than death. "I won't lie, Ava, that was a bold little move you just pulled." He pulled his hand away from where it had been massaging her neck, only to cup her chin with it. His grip was firm, but far gentler than she would have expected, as he lifted her chin enough for her to meet his eyes, "If I'm being honest, I don't know what disappoints me more - the fact that you thought for a moment that you could outrun me that easily...or the fact that you didn't manage to get further." Frightened as she

was of what Xavier had become, Ava had been relatively prepared for his fury, braced for his vindictiveness. The familiarity that stared back at her through his hazel eyes, though...it made her uncomfortable, like he was harkening back to a companionship that - as far as Ava was concerned - was beyond dead.

Years ago, Ava had had a knack for irritating Xavier, frequently pushing his buttons, and butting against his presumed leadership. Instead of being frustrated by Ava's antics, he'd heave a long-suffering sigh and roll along with Ava's shenanigans or point out the numerous holes in her cartoonish logic. It had been Ava's way of getting Xavier to set down the burdens he carried and smile for a while, so it had become a sort of game between the two of them.

The thought of falling back into that easy camaraderie stung Ava like a bruise. It'd be a lie, she thought. None of it was real then and it isn't real, now.

Ava licked her dry lips and averted her eyes, resisting the unwanted nostalgia that was filling her heart like lead. "Well, I might've gotten further, except my cab driver was being less than cooperative." "And he's lucky for it."

Ava's eyes snapped back to his, "You and your little sycophants had better leave him alone."

Xavier's eyebrow quirked at her tone, "The fuck do you think I want with your taxi driver?"

He nodded back to where Ava had left the driver with the mess she'd made. Ava looked back, afraid of what she'd find, only to see the car and the surrounding shadow figures gone, as if the whole ordeal had never happened. "We even paid him for the door," he said.

Xavier spun her back around to face him, "You stay mistaken. I'm not the bad guy, here, Ava."

Ava met his glare with one of her own, "You keep telling yourself that."

Before he could retort, Ava began sullenly walking back down the street in the direction of the club. Without a word, Xavier fell into step behind her.

Before long, the near-companionable silence began to itch at Ava. "How did you find me?"

Xavier barked out another laugh, "Even if you hadn't driven right past me, finding you would've been easy enough."

Ava was grateful for the darkness that hid her furious blush. She'd taken a gamble tonight and lost, sure. But it was still humiliating to realize just how futile her efforts had been.

"It's honestly a little insane the connections being an Alpha can get you, though." He continued, "Even if you'd made it all the way to another city, I could get enough people scoping out CCTV footage to find you pretty much anywhere you'd think to go."

Xavier's tone was casual, if condescending, and his nonchalance made Ava seethe. Ava briefly wondered if he recognized the bomb he'd just dropped on her, before quickly discarding the question. Of course he did. Xavier was a master at saying a thousand words without saying much of anything at all.

With that one careless admission, he'd let Ava know that any further attempts at escape would end just as poorly as the one that had taken place tonight. Ava didn't know just how far reaching an Alpha's influence was outside of their home region, but if she tried to leave again, she was sure to find out.

"Where were you planning to go, anyway?"

Xavier's unexpected question made Ava stop in her tracks. Her money. That crumpled up ball of cash was everything Ava had in the world, and she'd left it in the long-gone taxicab.

Pressure built up behind Ava's eyes, and by now, she was far too tired to hold them back. Ava put her head in her hands, and before long, she was sobbing. The force of her frustration caused her slight shoulders to shake, as Xavier looked on in confusion.

"Ava, stop." His plea fell on deaf ears as Ava continued to bawl in the middle of the street. At a loss for what to do, Xavier put his arm around the weeping girl and pulled her in close.

With her trembling body pressed so closely against him, it was impossible for Xavier not to notice how frail Ava had become. She was already hardly recognizable as the fiery spitfire he'd grown up with.

There were times throughout the night when he thought he saw remnants of the proud girl he'd known, when he simultaneously despised and yearned for the way she fought against him. Now was not one of those times.