

Chapter 115

Old Wounds

It wasn't until hours after the end of Victor's trial that Xavier finally sent the last of the day's crowd home. He and his father had been prepared for the questions, and damn if there weren't more than enough to go around. He couldn't blame the Pack for their confusion; after all, to them, the accusations, the trial, Victor's sudden and harsh sentencing had all seemingly come out of thin air.

They had no idea that the events of this morning were simply the culmination of years of injustice. And, since he was being honest with himself now, it was his and his father's faults that the town was so unprepared to see one of their pseudo-leaders brought low and punished. It didn't happen very often, not in Red Moon and not in the Alliance as a whole.

"I'm proud of what you accomplished today, Xavier."

Xavier let out a heavy breath, stretching his aching back as he made his way over to the perpetually stocked bar in the corner of his Town Hall office. He grabbed two glasses and the closest carafe of dark liquor and poured himself and his father a couple of servings well-suited for numbing a weary mind.

"Is that right?"

August's eyebrows drew low over his amber eyes as he studied his son, "Of course. Justice was served. I'd say that today was a win."

"Today was a clusterfuck," he said as he handed off one glass and nearly drained the other. "We just explained to our entire community that we let a serial killer walk free among us for years when all it took was a three-month investigation to put him away. Half led by the person we sent to jail in his place. That wasn't justice. It was the bare fucking minimum required of our jobs, Dad."

His father quietly studied his drink glass, turning it back and forth, back and forth, before finally setting it aside. The expression on the older male's face gave Xavier pause. He knew his father a lot of shit, but Xavier had never seen the male look so tired. Weary. It was as if he was nearing the end of his seemingly endless reserve of facades, and the real August Michaels was finally peeking through.

There were times when Xavier had done nothing but pushed his father's boundaries, daring the male to let down his wall of curated professionalism and show his true colors. Now, Xavier realized he might not be ready for what August's true self had to say.

"You know, I thought about what you said the other day. In fact, I've been thinking about little else." August's voice was low and lacked the sharp edge he typically used when addressing his son. "This isn't on you, Xavier. It's on me. All of it; Victor, Sofia...your mother."

"There's a lot of blame to go around for all of those things."

"But I haven't been taking my fair share, and that's fallen on your shoulders, son."

August leaned back and stared into the lit fireplace, lost in thought. At a loss for how to respond, Xavier opted to take a seat and give his father the time and space to sort through his mind at his own pace.

"The rogue scare three years ago wasn't the first time the Michaels Alphas were nearly ousted and replaced."

"What?"

This was news to Xavier. As far as he knew, their Pack boasted a nearly spotless reputation among the Alliance; they were a relatively wealthy territory, despite having one of the smallest populations living within the Pack proper. In fact, their sterling history was one of the driving reasons behind the scandal that had become of the rogue scare in the first place.

"My grandfather nearly brought the Pack to ruin after opposing the Council for one reason or another. We were a breath away from losing everything. The experience taught my father to stay in line, and so that's what he taught me to teach you. We were wrong."

August picked up his glass and took a deep swallow. "I spent my life believing that showing vulnerability was a sign of weakness. All the while, I've been hiding - my emotions and mistakes. It's made me an ineffectual leader, a domineering father, and a worthless husband. For that, I apologize, Xavier."

Xavier swallowed down the lump in his throat, "Yeah. I've made my fair share of apologies lately, so I know what it took for you to make it. And the shitty road you had to take to get to that realization in the first place. I appreciate it." "Just learn from my mistakes, Xavier. And learn from yours, too. The legacy we've sacrificed so much for isn't one worth continuing. There's no pride in being docile, no honor in pushing away the ones you love for the greater good." "Have you spoken to Mom?" And, unlike the last time he asked his father this question, he did so with sincerity and not to leave a mark.

August sighed and finished the rest of his drink, "Yes, I have. And I've spoken to Wesley Fjord." "And?"

"And I'm devastated, Xavier. But more, I'm relieved that your mother has finally ended up where she belongs. It clearly wasn't with me. I only wish that her road to getting there had been easier, that I had been a better caretaker for her." Xavier sat forward in his seat, "You do know that there's nothing that we could have done for her, right? It was fucking awful sending her away, and I'll admit to resenting you for that decision, but it was the right one. If she hadn't met her mate, her mind never would have been able to heal."

August's eyes narrowed, "Yes, your mother explained it all to me. I had no idea about any of this before she did, though. How did you come by it?"

"Jack, mostly. I, uh, had him do some research into broken bonds between Wolves and their hosts."

"What brought that on?"

Xavier hesitated out of sheer reflex. Typically, whenever his father started asking questions, it was rarely out of genuine curiosity. The male was an expert interrogator, a skill that Xavier had only inherited a fraction of and still greatly benefited from.

But, in the spirit of mending old wounds, he decided that it was past time he offered his father the benefit of the doubt. If the ever-austere August Michaels could open up even a little to offer his son a glimpse behind his shell, then Xavier could do the same.

"Ava, actually," he said. "There was an incident at the prison; Victor greased a few palms to have her quietly taken out. She survived the attack but was injured. When she woke up a few days later, her Wolf was gone." "And, her symptoms...did she exhibit anything similar to your mother's," he asked, his eyes sparkling with interest.

"From what I can tell, no. She'd...left the prison shortly after. Her bond with her Wolf had only been severed for a few months before we reunited."

"Before you...."

You see the spark of understanding in August's eyes just before it's shuddered by a wash of pain.

"Ava Davis is your mate?"

Xavier nodded silently. August gave a pained sigh as he pushed to his feet and strode over to the bar to grab the bottle of liquor. He set it down on the table between you with a thunk.

"Goddess, help me, my list of sins is long and far-reaching...." August muttered beneath his breath before pouring himself another glass and knocking it back.

"My spirit is weak, but the Wolf is strong. Give me the strength to follow its lead." Xavier followed suit, taking a shot of his own. "It's been a while since I last prayed."

August let out a mirthless chuckle, "You and me both, son. Looks like we're experiencing all manner of changes."

"Since we're sharing and shit, I should warn you that change is coming to the Council."

August's glass paused in mid-air, inches from his lips for a moment before his father cleared his glass again. "When?" "Soon enough."

"Is it the rogues?" He asked.

Xavier scoffed, "Depends on who you ask. Just know that it's a decision that the other Alphas and I made collectively."

August gave a reluctant grunt of approval, "Good. That's how it should be. I can count on a single hand the number of times my cohorts and I came together on any one thing, and that was exactly how I liked it."

"Yeah, well, you have Ava to thank for herding us together," Xavier shook his head, a melancholy smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "She really is something else."

"Mind like a whip, if I remember correctly," August agreed. "Twice the thinker her father ever was. She would have made a formidable Beta and an even better mate...I take it that bridge is burned?"

Xavier rolled his eyes, "And the land beneath it salted, yes. It's a miracle that she's even speaking to me. Literally. The closer we are as mates, the more her bond with her Wolf will heal. As it is, we're hoping that 'cordial' is enough to get the job done."

"Perhaps there's still hope on that front, Xavier. The mating bond is a powerful thing."

"Yeah, but even if she weren't happily with another male, forgive me if I'd like Ava to want me because she can actually stand my company and not just because some supernatural force tells her to."

August leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees, and met Xavier's downcast eyes.

"I didn't give much credence to the mating bond until I saw it with my own eyes. Truly saw it. As much as it kills me, your mother's connection with her mate is...undeniable," August nodded introspectively. "That's the only way to describe it. Undeniable. And she's better for it."

"As far as I know, Dr. Wesley isn't an asshole. The same can't be said for me."

August lounged back, cracking one of his rare wry grins, "Like I said, son...all manner of changes."