

Chapter 120

Hellfire

6:38 PM

Ava went crashing to her knees right in the center of 4th and Broadway, surrounded on all sides by the hundreds of families, tourists, and native New Yorkers that crowded the city's sidewalks at any given time. Every single one of them seemed to fade from her view as she was suddenly filled with overwhelming heat.

There were times, back when she'd been imprisoned in the dungeon, that guards would get their rocks off passing the time during their slogging shifts by watching the smaller inmates squirm by putting out their cigars and cigarettes on arms, throats, faces...any bit of exposed skin they could get their filthy hands on.

She'd been on the receiving end of that special brand of torture play a time or twelve, but that pain was child's play in comparison to the tsunami of

agony ripping its way through her muscles, her skin - not even her teeth and hair were safe from the pain.

"Ava!" Aiden dropped to the sidewalk beside her, resting a bracing hand against her back, only to shy away in retreat when his touch caused her to hiss in distress. "What's happening?"

"I-I don't...." Her broken plea faded off as, from deep within, Mia supplied an answer. "Xavier. Aiden, something's happened to Xavier."

6:40 PM

Xavier came to with a deafening ringing in his ears. He moved to shake the high-pitched tone away, only to abruptly stop when the slight movement caused his roiling stomach to pitch drastically. Afraid that he wouldn't be able to scrape up the strength to roll onto his side in case he vomited, he went still and focused on breathing away the nausea and the pain.

Even that basic function, breathing, proved to be too much for his battered body to handle. As he breathed in, acrid smoke scorched away the hair inside of his nostrils, causing him to cough. And as the air left his lungs in brutal, rib-shaking rattles, hot ash came out with it.

Fucking hell....

The ringing persisted as he lay still and took stock of his body. He hoped that the pain coursing throughout seemingly every cell of him meant that all of his limbs were present, if not properly responding at the moment. He blinked open his eyes; the toxic air around him, all but completely devoid of oxygen, immediately caused his tear ducts to sting and water.

Xavier gritted his teeth and actually did muster up the strength to roll over onto his side, and from there, he managed to climb to his blistered hands and knees. Once again, the world swayed as his perception changed, but as he was determined not to die here, he muscled his way past what he assumed were the lingering effects of a formidable concussion.

When the conference room came into focus, though, Xavier reconsidered his stance on whether or not it would be best to just lie back down and drift back into unconsciousness. Around him, the once-awe inspiring feat of architectural prowess that was the Alliance's central headquarters was utterly decimated.

From what he could tell, the explosion had radiated from the back corners of the room and spread outward. Now, smoke and purple-tinged flames funneled out of the gaping hole to the outside caused by the large portion of glass blown from the room's panoramic window. Xavier shuddered to think what he would have woken up to if the window had held if he would have woken up at all.

Many of the towering marble columns bordering the room were in sedan-sized chunks strewn across the floor. Xavier's stomach churned again as

he noticed more than a few limbs protruding from underneath some of the slabs.

A groan sounded from off to his side, drawing Xavier's attention to the huddled, limp mass beside him. He bit back a shout of pain as he pushed himself to his feet and dragged himself over to the body. From this height, he could see several more people around the room doing the same.

"Dad!" Xavier cursed as he turned over the unconscious body only to find his father's blackened and bloody face. "Shit. Hold on."

Xavier didn't know if the male should be moved, but he was certain that they couldn't stay here. He threw his father's body over his shoulders, his own bruised form screaming as he rose to his feet and started making his way across the field of carnage.

When he came across someone hunched, shaking over a clearly lifeless body, Xavier's mind damn near refused to comprehend the scene before him; Dylan - icy, irreverent, and his closest friend - openly weeping over his own father's shredded corpse.

"Dylan." Xavier's voice was nearly unrecognizable, hoarse as it was from smoke and grief. Still, his friend ignored him. "Dylan! We need to go, brother. I don't know how long this room is going to stay standing."

"He didn't deserve to go out like this, Xavier. He was the best male I've ever known." Dylan choked out between broken, gasping sobs. "I won't be able to live up to him."

"But he'd want you to try," Xavier whispered. "All Wyatt ever wanted was for you to be the male he knew you could be. Don't let him down by giving up now."

With a final shuddering breath, Dylan leaned down and pressed his lips to his father's forehead before gently placing the male to rest. Miller rose to his feet with a great deal less effort than Xavier had, so he gestured for the male to lead them through the rest of the field of detritus and deathbeds.

Instead of the relief, they'd hoped to find on the other side of the door, they only found more chaos. Snarls, gunshots, and the telltale sparks of magic filled the corridor and adjacent rooms as Wolves battled it out against a horde of unfamiliar uniformed attackers.

The floor below them rumbled, evidence of yet another explosion. As they watched, a Wolf Xavier thought may have been Silver Moon's Gamma shifted launched himself at an opponent, tidily ripping out the human's throat. As the body fell, a pouch slipped from its hand, a damning shimmering substance scattering across the marble floor.

"Noah's fucking army," Xavier snarled. "They did this."

"But...why?" Dylan asked.

As Xavier surveyed the scene before him, it was clear that the attack had spread beyond the Council's meeting hall. The entirety of Alliance Tower was filled with Alliance citizens and employees fulfilling various duties for the Pack. At any given time, there were children's lessons, recruit training, fucking tax prep taking place within these halls. Regular people just doing their jobs, not a single damn one having anything to do with whatever fuckery occasionally went down on the top floor.

From the faint screams and rapid tattoo of gunfire, Xavier knew that for whatever reason, Noah's forces were systematically wiping out each and every one of them.

"Take my father and get out of here," Xavier commanded. "Alive, Dylan."

Xavier slid August from his shoulders and passed him off to the still-shaken male. "Where are you going?"

"To find Noah," he snarled. "He's going to answer for what the fuck just happened here."

7:13 PM

As Dylan took August and made his way to the floor below, Xavier let his eyes slide shut and allowed Alexandre to rise to the surface. Through the discord around him, his Wolf's preternatural hearing picked up a faint repetitive whump, whump, whump. Xavier recognized it immediately, and it all started to make a sick sort of sense in his head.

He took off in Dylan's wake, but instead of following the male down the frenetic crowd on the stairwell, Xavier went up. There was only one more flight of stairs above the Council's meeting hall, leading to a single door that Xavier slammed open.

At some point during this disaster, it had started to rain. The pattering of the downpour only served to amplify the sound of the helicopter's propellers as it prepared for takeoff. "NOAH!" Xavier bellowed.

As soon as the male turned, Xavier knew there was more to the scene than he's seen. Even from as far away as he was, the male looked every bit as disheveled and downtrodden as Xavier felt. The naturally proud set of his shoulders sloped, and as Xavier drew closer, he saw that the male was ashen and distraught.

"Don't come any closer, Xavier."

Noah's tone was clear and full of warning, causing Xavier to draw up short. He stared at the male, and the newly crowned Eclipse Alpha stared

back, face hardening against the fiery, apocalyptic backdrop that had only recently been his coronation ceremony.

"Why?" Xavier demanded. "What did you have to gain?"

Pain and anger flashed across Noah's face as he grimaced, "Not a damn thing. This wasn't my doing, Xavier."

"Then who?"

From behind Noah, a figure stepped from the helicopter. Tall, lithe, and dressed head-to-toe in white, the human woman bore a striking resemblance to the male before her.

"It was mine," she announced, pride and contempt dripping from her voice.

"Then you'll be the one to pay!"