

Chapter 121

All Is Fair In Love And War

Xavier didn't bother asking for an explanation. He didn't care. He was already half-transformed before he'd even consciously thought to give Alexandre the reins.

One moment there was a man; the next, there was a beast as Xavier burst into his half-formed state. The hulking black beast took off toward the helicopter, gaining speed on all fours before launching himself at the bitch in white. Laser-focused as he was on his target, he didn't register the other beast; its massive form crashed into him with all of the force of a freight train. The momentum sent Xavier flying, his large, furred body skipping off the wet tarmac like a stone. He threw his body over his shoulder, coming up on all-fours and digging his claws into the cement below, coming up just shy of the edge of the skyscraper they stood on. Xavier's barrel chest heaved as he stared down the other male. Noah was big, easily half a foot taller than Xavier in his Wolfman state.

The other male bared his stake knife-like fangs in warning, "You don't want to do this, Xavier."

Xavier answered him by launching at him again, but this time he was ready for Noah's next move. When the male juked out of the way, Xavier twisted with him, bringing up one meaty paw to slash his claws against Noah's ribcage. "End this, Noah! We need to go!" The bitch in white called out.

The male grunted, the resistance in his eyes turning to anger as he returned with a volley of his own. The males went down in a flurry of fangs and claws, retreating only to come back at one another with renewed vigor. Each slash, each bite, fueled Xavier on, fanning the embers of his anger and hate until his fury rivaled the raging conflagration below.

Noah lunged at Xavier, who dodged out of the way, only to realize that, in his own battle craze, Noah had accidentally positioned himself mere feet from the roof's retaining wall. Xavier sneered a bloody grin as his muscles tensed to send the traitorous bastard over the edge. Then, he'd go for the mother.

Just as Xavier made to leap, a streak of auburn skidded to a halt before him.

"Xavier, please!"

The bloodlust faded just enough for him to see Ava, covered and soot and soaking wet, a trail of blood snaking its way down her face. She stared at him, wide-eyed, both hands outstretched, both a plea and a warning.

"Move. Ava." His words came out gravelly and poorly formed. The better to impress on her just how dangerous her current position truly was. He was hanging on by a thread, every atom of his being screaming to make Noah and his mother pay.

"Xavier, please. We have to talk this out!"

"There's nothing to say! HE CAUSED THIS."

"No...." Ava's face fell as she turned to look over her shoulder to where Noah crouched, primed to make his own attack. "Noah, that isn't right. Tell me he's wrong!"

"Oh, for the love of all that's holy. Noah, I told you the girl was weak."

All three Wolves turned to face the bitch in white as she leaned against the door of the chopper, looking for all the world as if she were bored with the bedlam she'd sewn. "Neia," Ava snarled. "You did this!"

The woman rolled her eyes, "No, darling. You did this. The moment you got it into your thick little skull that you knew what was best for the legacy

I've spent decades carving out for my son. This is on your hands, I'm afraid."

7:30 PM

Ava turned, the pain of the transformation nothing compared to the agony of feeling Xavier's pain, much less the anguish that came with the idea that any of this could be laid at her feet. Ava knew that Neia was full of shit, and as long as she stood, she wouldn't allow Noah to take the fall for his mother's actions.

Ava turned her snarling maw on Neia, ready to join Xavier in eviscerating the terrorist. Her growls died in her throat when Noah's own guarded face filled her line of sight as he crept in front of his mother.

"I won't let you hurt her," he gritted out, pain evident in his shining onyx eyes. "I can't."

As grief filled her and the fight drained from her, Ava felt herself lose her grip on Mia and slip back into her human form. She looked at the male before her, the one that she had considered hers no matter what the goddess or the cosmos decreed.

She'd given him everything, more than it was in her power to offer, and would have moved heaven, hell, and everything in between to give him even more. And she'd expected nothing in return. Nothing, she realized,

except loyalty. "Don't do this, Noah," she whispered, her voice cracking underneath the weight of the resolve she saw in his eyes. "Don't let her take your life from you. She can't be forgiven for what she's done. No matter what she thinks, this isn't a battle she can win."

Noah's eyes briefly fluttered shut, and when they opened, she saw the telltale sheen of repressed tears. Regret. Sorrow. Anger. It was all there in his eyes, and she knew that none of it would make a difference. "Then I'll fight it for her."

Noah rose to his full height, and behind her, Xavier did the same. Each of the beasts took a step forward, intent on ending things here and now. Just then, a low groaning sound resonated around them. Ava felt it more than heard it as it seemed to vibrate up from beneath the very ground she stood on.

"NOAH! THE HELICOPTER. NOW!"

Noah hesitated. His eyes locked on Ava as the groaning intensified and the building's roof began to buckle. The helicopter lifted off, but still, Noah made no move to get onto it, even as his mother screamed his name, fear filling the vile woman's voice for the first time.

The ground cracked beneath Ava's feet, triggering Noah into action. He lunged forward, only to be jerked to a halt as two bands of light encircled his chest, bringing him up short. "Bring him up!" Neia shouted to the

spellcasters holding Noah. The helicopter took off, a struggling Noah, still in his Wolfman state dangling below as it faded off into the distance.

That was the last thing Ava saw as the ground beneath her finally buckled. Xavier was on her before she could go fully airborne, wrapping his much larger Wolven body around hers as they began to freefall. She heard as well as felt every thick, meaty impact Xavier's body made as it crashed against falling debris, rebar, and metal framework on the way to the floor below.

They landed with a sick thud in the center of what used to be the Alpha's conference room. Ava landed hard against Xavier's thickly muscled form, knocking the wind from her lungs. She coughed and gasped for air, only to have ash and smoke smother her instead.

"X...Xavier?" She sputtered. "Are-"

The structure around them groaned again, giving just that minute warning before the floor beneath them collapsed again. This time, the freefall was longer, the floor beneath them having already crumbled away sometime during the night's previous battle.

This time when they landed, Xavier's arms fell away as he bounced, sending Ava flying. She rolled to a stop only a few feet away. When she opened her eyes, she was met with the sightless gaze of someone who'd

had green eyes only an hour before. She swallowed down the bile rising in her throat as she pushed to her knees.

When she realized that the poor woman didn't even have a body anymore, Ava lost the battle against her body. She heaved, and cried, and heaved some more. She backed away from the grotesque scene, every muscle shaking. "X-Xavier..."

She reached his limp Wolven body and shook him. When he didn't respond, she took his head in her lap and sobbed.

"Xavier, please wake up," she whispered.

Ava knew that he wasn't dead, knew without a shadow of a doubt that she would have felt it just as strongly as if she'd died herself. It was their connection that had alerted her that he was in trouble and the bond that had led her to him in the nick of time. So, she knew that the same connection would wrest him back from the brink.

"It can't end this way," she sniffled. "I feel like I was only just getting to know you again."

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"Do...you mean that?"

Ava sobbed at the sound of Xavier's hoarse, pain-laden voice. From the gurgling sound she heard as he breathed, she could tell that he was in a bad way. But he was awake.

"Yeah," she admitted, letting out a watery laugh. "I just...I wanted you to be okay, Xavier. I just want you to be okay."

He brought up a clawed hand to brush a tear, his hand trembling with the effort, "Thank...you, Ava. For giving....me...a chance. To...be better."

She cupped his furred maw with her hand and sniffed back the renewed onslaught of tears, "You did that yourself, Xavier. You're still the remarkable boy I knew, and tonight's proven it. You just lost your way, is all."

Xavier smiled and coughed, a spray of red tinging his fangs, "I...wanted you to be...the girl I knew. But, Ava...you're so much more."

"Shh, Xavier. Don't talk. You need to reserve your strength until help comes," she said before breaking off in a body-wracking sob. "I'm so sorry. I'm not strong enough to get you out of here myself."

Ever so slightly, Xavier's head moved back and forth. "You're stronger... than I've ever been," he grated out as he cupped her head and brought her

forehead down to rest against his. "Which... is why...you need...to leave."
"Xavier!"

"No," he snarled, still clutching her close. "This...is only the beginning. You...need to protect yourself. Get on that flight."

Ava pulled back in surprise, "H-how did you?"

He huffed out a strained chuckle, "I'm still Alpha...you're brother...reports to me."

Ava surprised herself by chuckling, too. "Goddess, you're the worst."

"Promise me...you'll leave," he pleaded. "P-please."

Choking back a sob, Ava nodded.

"Good," Xavier breathed. "Now...go get me...some help."

10:00 PM

For the first time in her life, Ava watched a plane take off from the inside. It was hard to believe that it had only been a few hours since she'd

stumbled out of Alliance Tower only to, thankfully, run into Liam and Dylan. When she'd come across her father, strapped to a gurney, barely conscious and bleeding, she'd finally cast aside the last of her resentment.

It felt wrong to leave. She'd debated long and hard whether or not she should break her promise to Xavier, but as Liam and Dylan hauled his mangled body from the ruins of the Tower, they all agreed that there was no reason for her to stay. As Xavier said, this was only the beginning. War had been waged today, the Council had been decimated, and the state of the Alliance was uncertain at best. Ava wasn't the only one fleeing New York tonight, and the longer Neia's war went unresolved, the more the chaos would spread.

Liam told her that Xavier would need to focus on recovering without having to worry about her safety, so she'd found her brother and Bren and gotten on the plane. But as the New York City skyline grew smaller and smaller below her, Ava knew implicitly that she wasn't out of this war.

She'd be back.