

## Chapter 148

### Trial By Fire

The weeks leading up to the next month's Blue Moon and the Trial by Combat scheduled for that night went by surprisingly quickly and quietly. The calm before the storm.

Ava, for her part, spent most of that time talking, getting to know as much as she could about her newfound allies. There was a host of information that the spellcasters and the shapeshifters had to bring to the table; doors that she had never known were there to open. Her analytical tactician's mind was thoroughly stimulated at the influx of new information.

She had to be thankful that Marnie and Emmaline's coven had deemed their cause worth investing their time and resources into. And the Selkies? Ava was under no naïve misconception that their involvement was due to anything less than desperation. It just so happened that desperation was as good a motivator as any.

Slowly, ever so carefully, Ava worked with Emmaline, Marnie, and the Selkie diplomats to covertly spread the word of the tentatively named New Alliance. While Xavier, Liam, and Dylan headed the resistance's daily operations, Ava worked to lay the foundation for a brand-new government; one built on democracy.

Just as she'd pointed out to the Selkies, in most cases, all it took was being brave enough to ask the question. Are you ready for something different? Something better? The spellcasters, tight-knit community that they were, were easy to get on board as they followed the lead of the Consortium.

Within the span of a few weeks, Ava had been able to help recruit a handful of other shifter tribes across the Dark Moon, Silver Moon, and Grave Crown territories. Only time would tell how many others would rally to their cause once the civil war ended and they were free to travel between state lines again.

It was slow-moving work, yielding nothing concrete - just the promise of further cooperation once it became safe to do so again. But those agreements to sit down, to meet, and share ideas was the hope for them all that Ava had set out to find. It comforted her when her fears surrounding the upcoming Trial ate away at her quiet moments.

"You're worrying again," Xavier stated, slowing the punishing pace he'd set on his treadmill until she lowered hers in turn.

It wasn't a question, and Ava didn't bother trying to pretend as if she didn't know what he was referring to. Sharing a fully intact mating bond had an uncanny side effect of making her feel simultaneously seen and exposed. Xavier had said as much to her on days when navigating their newfound connection became more difficult than others.

"How could I not? The Trial is coming up and, I know that it's necessary, but I'm not a fan of either of the two outcomes."

Xavier studied her, silently reading her, and she allowed him the opportunity to do so. This was something that they found themselves frequently doing now - sitting in silence, experiencing one another. Now, he slowed to a complete stop and held a pair of fingerless kickboxing gloves out to her.

"Want to work it out?" He asked.

"I'm supposed to be the one keeping you company while you train," she pointed out. "Besides, I don't know how much sparring against me will help you fight Noah any better."

"Let's forget the fucking fight for a minute, alright?" He said and tossed her the gloves. "Sometimes you just gotta duke it out, and I'm in the mood to hit something."

Ava cocked an eyebrow, "Me, though?"

He smirked, "Not if you duck fast enough."

She smirked and lunged at him, forcing him to jump back to avoid a foot to his stupidly handsome face. He countered her with a combo designed to put her on the defensive, but Ava wouldn't be thrown off that easily. She led him through the wringer, turning their sparring session into a chance to take him to task and push his agility to the brink.

"Fucking hell," he panted. "Were you always this good a fighter?"

"Necessity breeds ingenuity," she laughed as she ducked a swing to the head. He was getting tired. Sloppy.

"I don't think the person who said that had ass-kicking in mind."

Ava grabbed his next wild swing and used his own momentum to send him sailing over her shoulder, where she followed him down to the mat and twisted her limbs through him in an effective hold. "Then they led a charmed life." Xavier didn't try to break out of the hold she had him in. He just laid there catching his breath beneath her. "Would it be out of li

"Why would it be out of line?" She asked.

Xavier blinked and looked away; if she didn't know better, she'd think he looked a little bashful. "I'm still figuring out how to navigate this part of our relationship. I've never been great at intimacy, and I don't want to misstep and cross any lines."

Ava leaned down until her face lingered just a few inches above his throat and stayed there. She felt him tense beneath her, but she remained still, breathing in the musky scent of their sweat mingling with the mating bond. "Do you feel that?" She whispered. "Do you feel me, Xavier?"

His barrel chest began to rumble as he tensed again, trying not to shift suggestively beneath her. "You're hard to miss."

"No," she chided but smiled down at him to take the bite out of the reprimand. "I mean through the bond. Tell me what I'm feeling."

Xavier went silent for a moment, a pained expression taking over his features. "You're worried."

"Always," she scoffed. "Look deeper. Concentrate."

"You're angry. At Noah and Neia," he supplied, and she nodded. "And excited about the new Alliance."

Ava lifted an eyebrow. "Is that what I'm excited about?"

She watched Xavier's eyes darken, his hazel eyes taking on a metallic glaze as he followed that particular stream of her emotions deeper. "Does my mate need me?" He asked, heat turning his voice to velvet and stone. Ava smiled, slow but sure. "More and more each day, it seems."

Xavier's eyes scanned her body, lingering on her chest where she knew her hardened nipples pressed against the material of her sports bra. "I can feel it," he muttered. "Through the bond, I can feel how much you need me." "How much I want you, Xavier," she corrected. "And what don't you feel?"

"Fear," he answered, his voice going rough with a different emotion now.

Ava nodded, her eyes never leaving his. "No fear. No anger. No boundaries. We tried that, and it doesn't work for us," she laughed and brought her hands up to cup his face. "We're so different than we used to be, Xavier." He ran a thumb across the scar on her forehead. "I held that against you for a long time. I can't even remember why now. You're remarkable the way you are."

"And you're so much more than you give yourself credit for," Ava whispered. "A patient friend, a strong leader, a thoughtful partner. That's all you, Xavier. Outside of the Alliance's influence, that's who you chose to become. That's the male that I respect and choose to follow."

Xavier's eyes went hard even as emotion made them glossy with mist. "You don't follow anyone, Ava Davis. There are people who are meant to fit into boxes, and you've never been one of them. Even when I was the one trying to change you, I realized that," he growled. "But you're strong, the strongest person I know. Every time I touch you, I'm destroyed by your forgiveness, and every time you touch me back, I feel whole again."

Xavier brought her head to his, clutching her tightly. "You walk beside me, Ava, in all things because it's what you deserve," he said. "Because I love you."

Ava's heart seized and then began to pound hard against her sternum. Tears burned the backs of her eyes but didn't fall. Not today. "And I love you, Xavier."

His lips met hers, and she gave herself over to the kiss without inhibition or restraint. After only a few weeks together, Ava was still learning her way around the curvature of Xavier's hard body, and it was a journey she was always eager to take. His hands roved her body with a gentleness she wouldn't have thought him capable of a few months ago. But he could get deliciously rough at just the right sigh, reading her body like a roadmap, guided by her expressive moans. Xavier sucked a nipple into his mouth through her sports bra, causing her to gasp and shift her hips against his thickening erection. By the time he slipped his fingers beneath the band of her leggings, she was soaked through and aching. "I'll never get enough

of feeling you," he groaned against her throat, thrusting his fingers deeper within her.

Ava rode his hand like a toy, ready for more. "You'll never have to," she panted. "Now fuck me."

Her leggings were tossed aside a moment later and, as she took released Xavier's cock from the confines of his pants, Ava took the opportunity to suck him into her mouth. His hand flew to her hair as she bobbed up and down, getting him as ready as she was for him.

He tugged her up by the hair, pulling her lips from his cock to his mouth as he leaned back, grabbed her by the hips, and rammed home. Ava moaned long and hard into the cavern of Xavier's mouth as he used his grip on her ass to pound into her from beneath.

Mind going fuzzy from pleasure, Ava ripped her lips from his and pushed him back onto the mat.

"It's my turn," she said and began to shift the pace, moving her hips until it was clear who was fucking whom.

Xavier leaned back and grinned, eyes glued to every part of her from the way her breasts bounced to the relentless sway of her hips. Ava felt as if she were putting on a show for her male, and it excited her, spurring her on to rock harder, to take him deeper. Ava didn't stop until she'd wiped the



cocky grin from Xavier's face, focused as he was on meeting her stroke for stroke.

Ava brought her hands up to cup her breasts and tweak her nipples as her wave began to crest. When Xavier reached between them to caress her clit, she came apart in a shudder of ecstasy. Xavier was soon to follow as she milked him to his own shivering climax.

Together, they sprawled across the gym floor in a sweaty tangle of limbs. Xavier brushed her hair back from her face and pressed a sweet kiss to her lips. "Thank you, Ava. For teaching me how to love you."

Ava closed her eyes and leaned into his touch. "We were meant to be, Xavier," she whispered. "Through hell or high water, we would've gotten here eventually."

"I'm glad that we finally did," he replied and held her close, unwilling to let her go just yet. Not when he'd only truly found her.

The moon rose high over the site of the Alliance ancestral grounds. Located off the beaten path in the middle of bum-fuck nowhere Pennsylvania, the spot was the original central meeting hub for the Alliance all the way back in the 1700s. The Alliance had purchased the meager space but had neglected its maintenance in the roughly hundred and fifty years since the institution's main hub moved to New York City to solidify the Wolves' integration into mainstream society. Now, it was

little more than a rudimentary wooden stadium, the colonial era's best crack at a Colosseum that had been primarily utilized as a space to hold symposiums. Xavier figured that it could have also been built to host Trials had the reigning Alphas at the time not deemed the practice unnecessary in their new, civilized society.

The thought would have made Xavier laugh if the situation weren't so fucked. As it were, he was so damn keyed up it felt as if the very air around him was thrumming with pressure.

Xavier shook out his hands and arms, releasing as much tension from his muscles as he could before the Trial began. Behind him, his Witnesses comprised of his closest allies and a contingency of resistance fighters. Among the number, his mate stood carrying enough tension for the entire lot of them.

Before him, Noah Thomas stood, looking mighty limber. Xavier would have too if he'd rolled in that deep. The sheer fact that Thomas had felt the need to bring about a hundred of Neia's finest to back him up in the stands didn't fill Xavier with the confidence that things were going to end in a gentlemen's agreement.

Added to that, he was fully aware of the fact that the other male's eyes spent more time on Ava than he did the battleground, and he had no doubt that Ava was just as transfixed on him. He could feel the roiling cauldron of her emotions; had gotten pretty fucking used to feeling them, in fact.

He'd known his mate for most of their lives, in one capacity or another, and never had he realized just how much time the female spent thinking, and usually of other people. It wasn't until he'd experienced the sheer depth of her capacity to feel for others that Xavier realized just how fucked up he really must have been. Borderline sociopathic.

He'd never considered another person - other than her - so much in his entire life, much less every other fucking person he'd ever come into contact with. Her empathy, her cunning, Xavier was inundated with her night and day, and he couldn't be more grateful for the opportunity she'd given him to truly experience her.

So, he didn't blame the deposed Alpha for his lingering gazes, and he didn't begrudge Ava her lingering thoughts. Even as he'd hated it, Xavier had always respected the male for giving Ava what he hadn't been able to, stability, compassion, love. Xavier didn't want to fight Noah for the reason alone that doing so would hurt Ava, and he didn't want to be the cause of another one of her tears for as long as they both lived.

"Call it off?" Xavier called out to Noah. "We can end this now, and all go home tonight. Sort of. You'd probably be going into a cell for a while."

Fuck it, the bastard seemed to consider it, making Xavier feel even more strongly that this whole thing was the wrong move. "It's too late for me, Michaels," he muttered. "There will be a fight tonight."

Xavier's brow furrowed as his ears prickled, and he realized that the thrumming in the air that he'd assumed was tension had just become audible. The gathered crowd sprung to attention as a horde of helicopters crested over the horizon. Noah barely spared him a glance over his shoulder as his mass of soldiers jumped to attention, each and every one drawing weapons. "Fortunately for you," Noah snarled, thick black fur beginning to obscure his face. "You're not my target."