

## Chapter 40

### Long Scar

“I fucking hate you, Xavier Michaels.”

Xavier's gut clenched at the finality of the words. Ava had said them to him before, but this time was different, and he felt it as sharply as if she'd taken a knife to his chest.

Before he'd made a conscious decision to do so, Xavier was out of his chair and standing before Ava's rigid form. When he reached his hand out to her, this time she didn't flinch. There was too much fire in her, a fire that he recognized because it matched his own. It was the same inferno that had lit his darker moments for more than a decade.

It was also the same inferno that made it impossible to discount the fact that she might be a killer.

"Don't say that to me." He lifted a hand and brushed a lock of Ava's auburn hair behind her ear, "Say whatever else you want, but don't you say those words to me. Not you."

"Who else has earned the right to be over your bullshit then me, Xavier?" She snarled, "What do you care how I feel about you? Or is it just the knowing that hurts your pride?"

"Dammit, Ava, I'm trying!" He said.

"Trying to do what, Xavier? Other than doing your damnest to ruin me, you haven't done a thing for me."

Xavier paced away from the bed; his hands clasped behind his head.

"That's not true," he muttered.

"If you're going to face me, then face me, Xavier."

He whirled on her, "I said, that wasn't true!" He yelled, but quickly reeled himself back in before he scared or put Ava off any further, "I don't...you don't have the options that you think you do, Ava."

Ava narrowed her eyes, "What does that mean?"

"It means that there are forces at play here that I couldn't begin to explain to you, and I'm doing my best to make sure that you survive it!"

Ava brought her hand to her mottled throat, "Well, then you're doing a swell job, so far."

Xavier sat down hard in his abandoned chair and met her glower head-on, "Ava, I know that you won't believe me when I say this, but I never meant for any of this to get so out of hand."

Her lips turned down in a bewildered frown, "What the fuck did you think would happen when you decided to sell my body, Xavier?"

"For one, I had expected your stay here to be...less eventful."

"Then tell me that you're going to let me go."

The earnest challenge in her eyes was another fist in the pit of his stomach, even more so because he knew what he'd his answer would have to be.

"No. I can't do that."

Ava's bottom lip quivered as she turned her face away from his, "You're a coward, Xavier Michaels."

The truth of her words devastated him, even as they infuriated him. There were multiple sides to every tragedy, and Ava didn't know his. Xavier hadn't been living in a dreamscape over the last four years like Ava seemed to think. The path forward wasn't so clear for him - it never had been.

"This is the safest place for you, Ava," he stated.

"How can you say that?" She demanded, gesturing to her bruised body.

"This was unacceptable, and I will get to the bottom of it, I swear to you."

"Why? What makes what happened last night so different for you?" Ava was desperate for a straight answer for once, "You think I haven't suffered worse, but you don't know what I had to go through in the dungeon just to survive. You didn't care about me then, so why do you get to care now?"

"Because you're mine, Ava." He growled, "Because I can't be more than a few feet away without thinking about you, about protecting you...about being with you."

He took her hand and placed it on his chest, right over his heart. Ava's breath caught as she felt her heart stutter and restart, automatically

synching to Xavier's rhythm. He knew that was what exactly what she was feeling because he felt the same thing every time he was in the same room as her.

Xavier didn't have the answers to so many of the questions he was looking for. But he knew for certain that Ava was his, and he had a duty to protect her, one that he couldn't ignore. What he'd walked in on last night would haunt him for the rest of his days, but he was a man of revenge, and he'd get justice for his mate.

His mate who was here, right in front of him, with anger and disappointment written across her pretty face. Xavier didn't know what it said about him that her ire could fill him with such intense hunger, but it did. It told him that she was still his Ava, that he hadn't broken her. That she was still available to him.

He just needed to convince her to wait for him.

Ava's sore throat grew dry as Xavier's eyes suddenly darkened. As if a switch had been flipped, the air grew heavily scented with heady aroma of their mating bond. Their bodies began to warm, heating the wood ash and violet fragrance, until it infused with their very beings.

In this strange room, in a strange club, with this strange male, Ava suddenly felt as if she were home.

She blinked, trying to fight off the conflagration in her blood being stoked by the chemical reaction in her brain. She'd meant what she'd said - she was done playing by Xavier's rules. Her life wasn't his to play with anymore. Damn him and this connection they shared.

She licked her dry lips, watching as Xavier's eyes zeroed in on her tongue and tracked its path along her lips. "You know how this goes, Xavier."

He didn't take his eyes off her lips, "I'll pay."

Ava blinked up at him, "I'm sorry?"

His hazel eyes flicked up to meet hers, "Whatever you want, I'll pay it, Ava. If it's the only way that I can earn a taste of you, name your price."

Ava swallowed. She hadn't expected this sort of reaction from Xavier. She'd grown so accustomed to his disregard or outright rejection, that she'd killed that part of her that still yearned for his approval. Ava reminded herself that she was better for it because that Xavier was dead and gone.

But this intent, pleading male in front of her was someone completely new to her. And her body responded against her better judgement. Ava's body hummed under Xavier's liquid honey gaze. For the first time since their bond had made itself known, Ava was experiencing the full breadth of the carnal connection between them.

Even if she didn't agree, her body recognized it's mate, and wanted him ferociously.

Ava's lips parted, beckoning Xavier in closer, and he heeded the call. Xavier descended on her with single-minded purpose. But instead of crushing her to him, he kept himself restrained, mindful of her injuries.

Xavier brought his hands up to cup the back of Ava's head, keeping her still as he plundered the depths of her mouth with his tongue. Instead of overpowering her, his tongue matched hers, stroking and caressing her as surely as if it were his hands on her body.

Ava sighed and melted into his touch, any thoughts she'd had of dismissing Xavier, unable to compete with the fulfillment of her body and soul, as she was finally held by the one who was meant to hold her.

Xavier guided her down until he hovered over her, never breaking their kiss. His hands gently roamed her body. When her breath hitched, he paused to massage away the ache, all the while increasing the unbelievable throbbing growing between her thighs.

He slid her blanket away, coming down to press his hard body against her own. The difference between their sizes had never been so apparent to Ava before it was now, with his aroused length pressing against her nearly

naked belly. Xavier kissed his way down her neck, stopping to press whisper soft kisses against the bruise around her throat.

"Never again," he whispered. "You're mine. You've always been mine."

When he spoke, it wasn't only his voice laying claim to their union. Ava felt Mia's distant pleasure at the sound of Alex's growl.

Ava's eyes drifted shut, letting the bond overtake her. Xavier's hand cupped her breast, making her nipples pebble with each pass of his thumb. He moved down her body, nuzzling her breasts with his nose, while his hands reached down hitching Ava's thighs up until they were spread open on either side of Xavier's hips.

She automatically moved her hands down to cover herself with the bottom of the dressing gown she'd been wearing when she woke up. Xavier growled playfully, "Playing coy, now, Ava? I didn't know you knew how."

Ava bit her lip but kept her hands in place as he yanked the gown up around her waist. The atmosphere changed abruptly when Xavier went still.

Ava opened her eyes to see revulsion plastered across his face. She followed his gaze down to where Xavier was staring in horror at the long S-shaped scar that ran from the top of her thigh to her belly, where it ended on a curve right over her hip bone. "What the hell is this?"



It was one of the larger tokens the dungeon had given her, but it was hardly the most severe. And yet, the way Xavier's voice hardened, she might as well have been hiding a third leg underneath her skirt.

Instantly sobering, Ava sat up, ignoring how her stiff muscles pulled, and pushed Xavier back hard onto his haunches.

"I knew you couldn't handle it."

She got out of the bed and made for the door, only to come up short when Xavier caught her by the arm.

"Ava, wait- "

She didn't wait for him to finish, just pulled her arm out of his grasp, and walked out of the suite.