

## Chapter 82

### The Mating Bond

Xavier and Jack had very different reactions to learning that his mother, who they'd only just learned had completely lost all connection to her Wolf, had suddenly found it again. Where Jack sat forward, his full attention turned onto Renata; Xavier was too shocked to make any discernable movements.

This revelation could change...everything for him. Not only was he on the cusp of finding actual answers to take back to Ava - Xavier might get his mother back as well.

"That's amazing," Jack exclaimed. "When did it begin? Can you think of anything, in particular, that may have prompted your Wolf's return? Have you noticed any changes in your physical or mental wellbeing since reconnecting with her?" When Xavier saw his mother's eyes begin to glaze over, he put a hand on Jack's shoulder, putting an end to the barrage of questions. "Steady, Jack. One at a time."

It took a visible effort, but Jack reigned himself in. "Apologies," he said, giving Renata a reassuring smile. "This is simply an... incredible turn of events! For you and your Wolf, of course, Mrs. Renata, but also for Ava. If both of your Wolves disconnected and returned, there has to be some connection between the two occurrences."

Jack ran an excited hand through his unruly brown curls, "Forget phantom pain - this is akin to regrowing a lost limb altogether. This discovery has the potential to open an entirely new field of study for our kind." "Yes, Jack," Xavier said. "But only if you let her speak."

Jack took a breath to settle himself before bending to grab a notebook from his bag. "Of course, forgive me. Mrs. Renata, would you mind starting from the beginning? What would you say prompted the disconnect?"

His mother cleared her throat, "Yes, well...It wasn't an abrupt thing. Not the way it sounded like Ava's happened. I first began Abrielle's presence fading from my consciousness shortly after...Sophia was killed. She seemed so tired, sluggish. I had just marked it up to my own depression for a while. Then, I realized that I couldn't change."

She let out a long sigh, "And pretty soon, I stopped feeling her altogether."

"And where did that fall in line with your move here?" Jack asked as he took fastidious notes.

"They correlate," she said. "I realized that Abrielle was gone just before my suicide attempt. After everything else and feeling so low for so long...it all suddenly became too much."

Xavier put a gentle hand on her knee, and his mother returned the comforting gesture with a soft smile.

"I couldn't tell you much on the matter from most of my stay here," she continued. "I was well and truly within the thrall of a psychotic break. No amount of therapy or medication helped. For years, the only way that I could manage to function with any presence of mind was when I was being pumped full of a constant stream of mood stabilizers, antipsychotics, and tranquilizers. And, still, my mind tended to...wander."

Jack nodded thoughtfully, "That seems to fall in line with what few accounts I was able to find among the Alliance records."

"How many did you find?" His mother asked, calling back to the fact that, up until only a few years ago, she'd been the Pack's lead historian and record keeper.

"I counted no more than eight recorded cases," Jack replied.

Her eyebrows raised, "In all of Alliance history?"

Jack nodded, "And your case sounds astoundingly similar to a few specific accounts. Most cases of Wolven disconnect followed an instance of physical trauma, much like we believe caused Ava's condition. But the other primary instigator was severe mental and emotional trauma. Those cases most often ended in bouts of sharp mental decline."

Renata sat back, looking a little pale but utterly fascinated. "And I doubt many survived?"

"None that I could find, save for Ava. Then again, her Wolf was only gone for a matter of weeks, she said. No longer than a few months."

"She wouldn't have had all that much time to suffer the negative effects of her Wolf's absence," his mother concluded, as Jack nodded his agreement. "Who knows how many other cases exist where the connection was only temporarily severed that were never reported."

She shook her head, disappointment heavy in the air, "There are probably Wolves right in this very country who know exactly what's going on. I don't doubt that the answers that have kept me in this hospital for years are right across our borders, shrouded in the disharmony that plagues this country."

"I don't doubt that you're right about that," Jack sighed. "It's truly a shame how little we know about our own species. Or Wolves. But this, I'm sure we can figure out."

Jack held his hand out to Renata, "May I?"

This time, she immediately agreed, placing her hand in Jack's. The two sat silent for a few long moments as Jack closed his eyes and concentrated on not only seeing the physical connections and synapses that kept Renata's body running but the metaphysical connections that tied her to the ethereal plane.

When Jack finally opened his eyes, he sat still for a moment, thinking. Putting together pieces to a puzzle that no one else could see, much less fathom. "How does Abrielle feel to you now?"

"She's present, but not constantly. I feel her growing in strength, but our connection is still weak, I feel. Corroded.

Jack nodded, "That's essentially what I observed of your connection. Think of your connection as two halves stitched back together; Your suture isn't as thorough as Ava's was when I examined her, but it is...thicker, you could say. More substantial. My guess is that your Wolf is physically stronger if more distant than Ava's.

Xavier frowned, "You can tell that much just from looking at their energy, or whatever it is you do?"

"Believe me, the picture pretty much paints itself when you can see the puzzle pieces. What we still don't know is what prompts the reconnection in the first place," Jack said and turned to Xavier. "Do we know what happened just before Ava's Wolf returned?"

Xavier wracked his mind but came up blank. "I can't be certain. She'd recently been freed from prison, but I doubt cleaning the club would be all that appealing to Mia." He cursed under his breath, shooting an apologetic smile as his mother looked at him pointedly, "If I'm honest, a lot from that time was a... really messy haze. The new mating bond made it difficult to think straight."

Almost simultaneously, Jack sat up straight while his mother sank back into her seat.

"The mating bond?" Jack asked.

Xavier nodded, "Alexandre felt Mia's presence before I'd even realized that I was in the same room as Ava. But I don't know if Mia had already returned by then."

"Well, that could certainly do it," Jack mused. "It's fairly well documented that Wolves in a mated pair have faster rates of healing, longer average

lifespans, and tend to be stronger than non-mated Wolves of the same station." "Could that be enough to fully mend a lost connection with a Wolf, though?" Xavier asked.

The idea seemed fairly far-fetched, but then again, the idea of a person's Wolf - the natural second conscience that every Lycan was born with, lived with and died with - simply ceasing to exist was also just shy of being beyond his realm of understanding.

Stubborn and moody as he could be, Alexandre was as much a part of Xavier as any of his limbs, his very heartbeat. Alex was what made Xavier a Wolf. He wouldn't be himself without him. It shredded him on the inside to think that his mother had spent so much time feeling this way - that Ava had been enduring everything he'd thrown at her, all the while living life as a literal shadow of her former self.

Jack sat up straighter, his words hastening as his theory picked up steam, "Now that I think about it, this checks with what I read in the Alliance records. Every account I read either dealt with the death of a mate or an altogether unmated person. Some married Wolves, sure, but not many mated Wolves."

"I admit that the coincidences between those cases and Ava are strange, but it doesn't explain my mother. She and my father aren't mated, so how did her Wolf come...."

A curious sense of understanding and dread settled over Xavier as he considered his mother. Really considered her. Sometime over the last month or so, she'd gone from the wan heavily medicated female he'd come to know to his mother again. Her cheeks were pink, she'd put on some healthy weight, and had picked up her old activities again.

Just like Ava had over the last few months since they'd reunited. He'd chalked the progress up to a steady diet, but what if it ran deeper than that.

"That doctor?" Xavier practically had to force the words out. He felt too...old to be feeling the emotions that felt like grasping vines at his throat. Given what he knew of his parents - what he felt for his own father - the way Xavier's stomach pitched didn't make sense.

But still. What was left of his family might be in tatters...but it was still his family.

"Yes, I can't believe I'm saying this, but," his mother's voice was barely above a whisper. "After all this time, I've met my mate, Xavier."