

Chapter 92

Star-Crossed

The black Wolf took a cautious step toward his mate, waiting for any sign of reticence on her part. She dropped her head and huffed in response, giving him her blessing to move closer to where she stood, somehow looking so powerful and yet, so vulnerable at the same time.

When he took another step toward her, she moved to meet him halfway. The Wolves felt a sense of soul-deep completion as their bond resurfaced and their souls rose up and found one another, touching and intertwining, just as the goddess had intended.

An endless ache that had plagued the Wolves for far too long was finally assuaged as they buried their faces in the warm scruff of one another's necks, nuzzling away the ache of years of separation. The last time they'd been in one another's presence so completely, their bond hadn't matured, and they hadn't yet realized that they were meant for the other.

And then, all of a sudden, they were enemies locked on either side of a war that neither one of them could relate to. It was the curse of their existence. As Wolves, they were blessed to see the world through the lens of man, but far too often, their human's slights and grievances became their own. And so too did the consequences of their mistakes.

Now, though, in this moment, Mia and Alexandre had the opportunity to speak for themselves and let the other know that they had not been forgotten. Alexandre lapped at the old scar that ran across Mia's face, and she lightly nudged him with her head in return.

So simple. He recognized her pain, and she accepted his support. All without the cumbersome additive of human language. For all the blessings that came with the ability to interact with the human world, their two-legged counterparts were terrible at communicating with one another. Even now, they tensed as the two Wolves reconnected, causing their hackles to rise.

After they'd satisfactorily reassured one another of their affections, the Wolves parted, and the urge eased. For all the world, Mia could swear that she felt that much stronger for the achingly brief interaction with her mate. But she knew, felt it in the depths of her spirit that Ava didn't have the ability to reach, that this calling was intended for all four of them to heal, and now it was the human's turn.

Ava was the first to take a step back. And then a few more. She knew on a rational level that it was important for Mia and Alexandre to have this

moment; she was still all too aware of the male that lurked underneath that thick, onyx fur. And while she had already decided that it was for the best that she forgave Xavier, Ava kind of viewed that as more of an introspective conclusion. She wasn't sure that she was ready to put her money where her mouth was just yet. Especially not when he was...so close.

The bigger Wolf immediately backed off. As she watched, he disappeared behind some trees, probably to shift, so Ava took the moment alone to do the same. This time, the shift was at least twice as fast as last time, but it still smarted like a bitch.

When she was fully human again, Ava rose to her feet, pulling her long hair over her shoulders to cover what she could. And whatever she couldn't, she didn't bother trying to hide. Every Wolf grew up well aware of the fact that, while you can shift, your clothes can't.

Shifting in mixed company had been a part of her life for so long that nudity had never been an issue until prison had taught her to guard herself. And after she'd been released, she hadn't been able to recognize herself. But that dark period was over now, and shame had no place attaching itself to her body. Not her figure and not her scars.

When Xavier reappeared, he was wearing a pair of dark jeans and boots, but his chest was bare. Ava averted her gaze, uncomfortably aware as she was of how the scent of their mating bond still hung in the air. She'd

recognized it almost immediately after Mia had picked up the trail, but the pull of the urge was too strong to deny.

Xavier held a t-shirt out to her as he kept his eyes trained squarely on the woods off to the side of them. She snagged the offered shirt and pulled it on, her heart thudding of its own volition as her unwanted mate's natural scent suffused her, filling her nose with his wood ash musk.

"I wasn't expecting to find you all the way out here," Ava said, her voice projecting her uncertainty in the dense silence that surrounded them. "How did you know where I was?"

Even though she was now decently clothed, he still didn't turn to meet her gaze. "I have a feeling that I'm not going to like the answer, am I?"

He let out a testy breath and finally turned to face her, "The phone Bella gave you? I'm the one who gave it to her. There's a tracking device in it."

"For fuck's sake, Xavier. I'm not your goddamned property."

He fixed her with a frank stare, "And I recognize that. Now. And I've done a lot of fucking soul searching to get to that point, believe me. But I don't care how hard I have to check my attitude; you're out of your mind if you thought I was just going to let you go off with some male I don't know."

Ava rolled her eyes, "That wasn't your decision. For once, that was a choice I made!"

"And I didn't interfere!" He protested. "But if something happened, I'm not willing to be stuck not knowing where you are or how to find you."

He took a step toward her, looking relieved when she didn't retreat. "I swear I never actually intended to use the tracking device. I never even looked at it before today."

Ava sighed, "So what changed? And don't say you. I don't care how much soul searching you've done, Xavier; I doubt it's enough."

He winced but nodded, "I agree. But I was waiting until I had something that I could bring to you."

"Like what?"

"Information. Your freedom."

He turned away and disappeared behind a tree, coming back to the small clearing holding a leather satchel. Xavier reached inside and pulled out a stack of papers, and handed it to her. Ava flipped through the letters, eyes brimming with tears as she read the irrefutable proof of the plot that had wrecked their lives and ultimately sent her to prison.

"It was Victor, Ava. All of it."

Ava placed a hand over her mouth and focused on leveling out her suddenly haggard breaths, "I know."

Xavier blinked in surprise, "What do you mean, you know?"

Ava shook her head, her eyes never leaving the letters, "I spoke with a witch. She helped me recover my memories of when I was attacked in the dungeon."

Ava let out a long breath, blinking back tears, "My attacker said that Victor had sent her. But I didn't have proof. Xavier, this is...everything. I-I didn't even realize that you were looking into it. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Probably because whenever I open my mouth, I have an uncanny habit of making your life worse."

"When has that ever stopped you?"

"Touché," he said with a smirk. "But when your own mother tells you that you're an asshole, it really makes you reconsider your recent life choices."

"Your...mother?" After all of this time, Ava was ashamed to say that she hadn't spared her old teacher a thought in years. As a rising Beta, she'd spent a decent chunk of her schooling, learning about Pack Law and history with the female. Sophia's death must have been unbearable for her, but Ava had never gotten the chance to ask.

Xavier made a disgruntled sound deep in his chest, "Yeah. There's so much going on that you've missed. This shit with Victor? It's only the beginning."

Ava gave him a look that was heavy with skepticism, "And you...want to share this with me? Why?"

Xavier walked over to a tree and sat down heavily, his back braced against the thick trunk. "Because you're my mate? Shit, before everything went to hell, you were my best friend. I've never been able to talk with anyone as freely as I can with you."

"Could," Ava said, feeling the anger she'd tried so hard to disperse rising up. She held up the stack of papers in her hand, "Just because you finally know for sure that you were wrong doesn't just make the last four years go away, Xavier. The only reason we're still mates is because I'm not physically strong enough to break the bond by myself, and you refuse to do it. And we're definitely not friends."

Xavier brought up a hand to brush a lock of hair from out of his eyes, "You're right."

"Excuse me?" She demanded, not quite believing her own ears.

"I said, you're right, Ava." When Xavier met her gaze, she was stunned to see the gleaming sheen of tears in his eyes. "You're absolutely fucking. No matter what Victor did, I'm the one who broke us. And I'm so goddamn sorry."