

Chapter 126

Prisoners Of War

The sounds of gunfire could clearly be heard echoing through the dense brush of trees as Xavier and his convoy raced through the untamed wilds of northeastern woodlands. The ride was hard and unforgiving; there were no trails to follow, no roads to smooth the way, for the simple fact that the Red Moon dungeon was strategically located in the harshest environment available within their region.

Where the logic stands that to keep a prison as big as Red Moon's hidden somewhere remote, it made it hell to reach in case of emergency. But then, Xavier supposed, there probably weren't very many instances that would constitute an emergency worth risking the time and resources required to make such a trip.

Typical, he snarled inwardly. In the six months since their world had gone completely to shit, it had become painfully clear to Xavier that the true enemy wasn't the asshole humans vigilantes or even Noah perpetuating

his mother's ill- conceived war. No, what continually fucked their efforts over at what seemed to be every imaginable turn, was the decades of cutting corners and shady fucking dealings that had become the Council's bread and butter.

And it was a sin that they were paying for now, with the lives of innocent civilians as well as their own men hanging in the balance as they roved through the forest at a snail's pace. Xavier could only imagine what Dylan and his team were currently going through. Despite their best efforts, Xavier and the other Alphas were politicians, not warriors.

And Xavier knew for a fact that many of the males and females who made up the reconnaissance teams had been civilians themselves, who had never had once had a want or need to pick up a weapon before their society collapsed and a sense of duty spurred them into action.

Fucking hell.

Dylan was running out of time. And they were still so far away.

POP! POP! POP! POP!

Dylan ducked behind the thick cement pillar he'd taken refuge behind just in time to miss having his young, blonde brains splattered all over the prison wall behind him. Fuck, this shit had been going on for what felt like hours, even though he knew that it couldn't have been more than thirty

minutes. But, fuck that noise; thirty minutes was still a hell of a long time to be getting shot at.

We could really use some fucking backup right about now.

It had been a good twenty minutes since he'd managed to shoot off that message to Bell.

Ma Bella, he mused, maybe just a hair on the other side of delirious after spending so much time high on adrenaline and pure fucking chaos. She's going to be so sad when I end up smeared across the pavement...or impaled on a tree...or spontaneously combusted, or whatever the fuck else these asshats had up their sleeves.

Actually, sad was probably being a tad generous. No matter how much the former madame enjoyed riding him as a form of post-apocalyptic stress relief, she'd made it clear that their "relationship" was strictly casually carnal in nature. In reality, the best that he could hope for was that the news of his gruesome demise left the delightfully authoritarian female slightly inconvenienced. Maybe even unpleasantly perturbed.

In all honesty, though, he would miss the fun they had together. They were an unlikely pairing, but the chemistry they shared was straight fire, undeniable. He had been looking forward to the challenge of wheedling his way beyond her fortress of defenses. It would have been my greatest achievement, my magnum opus.

The white-hot flash of a fireball crashing to the ground in the space between himself and another member of his team was enough to shake him from his daydreaming. With expletives spilling from his lips, Dylan darted out around the pillar just far enough to spot the offending spellcaster, fire off a few quick rounds directly into their torso, and duck back behind the pillar just in time to avoid the next volley of returning gunfire.

"How much longer until your team gets here?" Came the gruff tone of the male who'd been posted up beside him throughout the thick of the ambush. "We can't hold them off for long. Not if they have casters with them." Dylan knew the male was right on that front. Luckily, that didn't seem to be the case since he'd only seen a few tell-tale signs of magic since their caravan had been sideswiped. "We hold them off for as long as we need to," Dylan replied, injecting his tone with frosty command. "Good people died here tonight. I'm not letting their sacrifice be in vain."

Yeah, that was easy enough to say now that they were at what was essentially a standstill. Dylan didn't know how they'd known to be on the lookout for their convoy. His team had arrived at the prison well in advance of the expected time of the drop, and they'd staked out and waited far away and well out of sight on a ridge that overlooked the prison.

After all, their objective had never been to rescue the civilians from the sanctuaries. They'd only been ordered to confirm that the prisoners had, in fact, been transferred to the prison. The rescue would come later when

they had a proper team of soldiers and a store of supplies and weapons that was actually worth a damn.

The enemy had attacked from all sides, all at once, flanking them. Like them, Noah's army had primarily switched to firearms, opting for the awful efficiency of modern warfare. Curiously enough, there hadn't been a Wolf in the bunch. Dylan and his team put up a hell of a fight, but they'd ultimately been pushed back toward the prison. Then, the enemy forces managed to surprise their six again as the soldiers tasked with escorting the prisoners inside the building reported for backup. The ensuing firefight would have been the most devastating shit he'd seen if he hadn't been dead at the center of ground zero during the Tower attack last October.

His motley group of non-fighters was scrappy, though, and together they'd managed to pick off a decent chunk of Noah's and the Governor's men. Unfortunately, the opposing forces had them massively outmanned, and even after their surprisingly impressive display, the battle wasn't over. Just stalled. For what, Dylan hoped to not find out until after reinforcements arrived.

Ava sat alone in her room, flipping through brochures promoting the many services Bright Light offered. The organization provided everything from certified counseling to a day camp for underprivileged and affected youth.

Ava found herself particularly drawn to the daily martial arts classes they offered. They were even looking for someone to volunteer to host a course

on self-defense! The biggest draw, however, was the promised sense of community. And while she knew that was a subjective claim that could never come with a guarantee, it was something that she was willing to try for.

Suddenly, the apartment's landline rung from out of nowhere. The fact that she'd never heard it ring before was enough to go check it out of sheer curiosity. When the caller ID came up PRIVATE, she let it go to...voicemail? She didn't even know if there was a mailbox set up. She shrugged off the experience as spam and turned away when the phone went off again.

Scenes from every horror movie she'd ever seen skirted through her mind as she waited for the phone to go silent once again. When it started to ring again, it was morbid curiosity that led her to pick it up.

"Hello?" She answered, all too aware of the fact that she was home alone.
"Who is this?"

"You told Xavier what I told you about the Governors. The checkpoints. Everything."

Her throat went dry at the sound of Noah's voice. It was overtly clear that he wasn't asking a question or looking for confirmation. And, as much as

it twisted her stomach to do so, she didn't bother trying to talk her way out of what he clearly already knew. She told the truth.

"Yes. I did."

The deep sigh that came from the other end of the line sounded utterly exhausted, "Ava, you need to get in touch with the Alphas. Now."

Ava felt the bottom drop from her stomach, "Your mother knows?"

"The extra convoy she sent out after the escort would assume so."

"Goddess," she gasped. "Does she know that you told me?"

"That's my issue to deal with. This is going to be the last you hear from me for a while, Ava."

"Noah-"

"No," he interrupted. "This is on me. I shouldn't have dropped that on you, but I didn't know a better way to get the information to the Alphas."

"But how did she know?" Then a thought occurred to her, "Do you think our phones are bugged?"

"I found your landline as a precaution. They might not be," Noah warned. "Technology isn't my mother's only means of getting information anymore. Either way, you're my only reliable means of communicating with the resistance. Hurry." He ended the call without another word, leaving Ava panicked and floundering for an option. Any option. Then, a wild, utterly unlikely idea came to mind, and she pounced on it. After a brief pause, Ava shut her cell phone off and threw it into a drawer.

Then, she picked up the landline and made another call.