

Chapter 25

Confrontation Between Two Alpha's

Ava stood in weighty silence, unsure of how to respond to what Liam had just revealed to her. She wasn't used to people opening up to her - hell, at this point she wasn't used to people speaking to her like a sentient being with feelings and opinions.

Needless to say, Ava had no idea how to navigate sensitive subject matter. Did he want her to ask about his mate? Surely, he wouldn't have brought it up if it weren't a subject he was comfortable talking about. Right? "Is she..." Ava trailed off, opting to let him take the lead on the subject, so as to not accidentally offend.

"She died," He said, his words understandably clipped. "Rogues. She was a marvelous fighter. A real warrior up until the very end."

His words were heavy, prompting Ava to believe that there was so much more to the story he hadn't said. Ava decided to back off. After all, she respected someone who'd clearly felt pain and just wanted to keep something close to themselves.

"I'm so sorry for your loss." She said. If finding a mate was one of the most sacred things a Wolf could experience, losing one was undoubtedly one of the hardest. A healthy mated bond went so much deeper than a mere chemical reaction - it was mental and spiritual. Supernatural.

When a bond that went soul-deep was suddenly severed, it was as if a piece of your very soul was rent apart. Wolves were known to never recover from such a devastating loss.

Liam looked at her with a self-deprecating twist to his lips. "You have nothing to be sorry for," he paused before finishing. "I'm the one to blame."

Ava stayed quiet, allowing the male to choose whether or not to continue. As rocky as it may have started, this moment was important. Based on the begrudgingly determined look about him, Ava thought that this may be as crucial a conversation for Liam as it was for her.

For her, this was real human connection - something she found that she craved, even as she feared its repercussions. Ava wondered exactly what this confession meant to the pained male beside her.

"I rejected her," he said, just as Ava was beginning to think he wouldn't continue. "Right before the night she was killed, I rejected her."

Ava felt his naked agony as if it were her own. He didn't outwardly show any reaction to his words, despondent as he was, it was almost as if he were recounting something that had happened to a stranger. But the self-loathing radiating off of him spoke volumes to Ava.

She couldn't begin to imagine what he had gone through, but she knew that pain, that regret. Without speaking, Ava took a seat on the bed beside Liam and put a hand on his shoulder. She doubted that it would be much of a comfort, but that wasn't her intention - she knew that some aches weren't able to soothed.

Instead, she hoped that he'd see the small gesture as one of commiseration, a link to someone who understood. He'd seen her pain, and now she saw his.

Without warning, Liam moved, pulling Ava in for a hug. He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed, taking solace she hadn't realized she was still capable of offering.

Liam pressed his lips to the spot where Ava's scar hid behind her hair, and simply sat there. It clearly wasn't a kiss - there was nothing remotely romantic about this display of emotion. Right now, Liam wasn't even in

this room. He'd traveled somewhere far away, in a time that was long gone.

"I'm sorry, Amelia," he whispered against her skin, "I'm...so sorry."

Ava didn't know what to do, not completely comfortable in her new role as Amelia's pseudo-replacement. She decided not to overthink the moment and simply returned Liam's hug. Ava wrapped her arms around the broad male and felt him shudder under her touch.

That sat in silence for a long while, giving and receiving the sort of physical relief that was the hardest to find - pure, unadulterated intimacy.

Liam gave her a grateful squeeze just as the suite door flew open. The abrupt clamor startled Ava enough for her to pull back, but Liam kept a protective arm around her shoulders, as he glared at the person who'd intruded on their cleansing moment.

"Let her go." Xavier growled, and Ava wasn't surprised in the least that it was him coming to, once again, stomp all over one of the most gratifying moments she'd shared in the longest time.

The male was determined to see her miserable, whether it was dispensing the woe upon her himself, or ensuring that she never found peace in another person or thing. In this moment, her fear and apprehension of the male flared into a conflagration hot enough to scare her. She hated him.

Ava bit her lip, frightened by the ferociousness of her own anger, and turned her face away from both males.

Liam chuckled at the fuming male storming toward the bed.

"Let. Her. Go." Xavier's voice was low and threatening, the mating scent emanating from his pores.

Liam finally let Ava go, but stood from the bed, placing himself firmly between Ava and Xavier. "It's been a while, Xavier. You look...well."

Xavier growled deep within his chest and moved to side-step Liam. "Come here, Ava."

Ava's body began to tremble, in effort to suppress her growing rage. She ducked her head and refused to look at him.

"Come to me now, Ava!" He snapped.

Liam sidled to the side, blocking Xavier's view of her, "Come on, Xavier. There's no need to scare her."

Ava almost laughed. She'd lapped scared a long, long time ago.

Completely unaware of the fire stoking inside of her, Xavier took Liam's admonishment to mind. When he spoke again, he'd significantly adjusted his tone to something much softer, "Ava..."

Liam looked between Xavier and herself, and she finally looked up to meet his watchful eye. Liam put a reassuring palm on Ava's head, smoothing back her hair. "You'll have to wait your turn, old friend. Ava here is my company for tonight." The steps Xavier had taken to temper his behavior were dashed as soon as he saw the other male lay a tender hand on her.

"Get away from her!"

Both Ava and Liam froze, clearly picking up on the same thing - that hadn't only been Xavier speaking. The full power of his Wolf was behind that enraged snarl. Ava felt Mia respond to the intensity of her mate's indignation. Her own Wolf whined anxiously as Xavier's muscles tensed, to change or attack she couldn't tell, but neither instance was acceptable.

"Stop it." Ava stood, stepping out from behind Liam to meet Xavier head-on. With a protective arm, Liam repositioned himself in front of her.

"There's no need to be afraid," he said with a slight lisp to his words. If Ava looked, she knew she'd see his incisors lengthening into dagger-like fangs. She could practically see his hackles raise as he prepared to shift,

as well. Xavier noted the imminent shift in the other male and grew even more agitated, his shoulders hunching, ready to meet the opposing male's challenge.

Mia bucked at Ava's psyche, urging her to get out of the line of fire. Ava moved backwards a few steps, only for her heel to catch on the side of the nearby end table.

Ava gasped as she felt her ankle roll and her foot slip from under her. As she began to tip over, both males snapped to attention, rushing to meet her before she hit the floor.

After a blur of movement and snapping growls, Ava found herself caught against a powerful chest. When Ava got her wits about her she realized it was Xavier crouching over her protectively, while Liam crouched a few feet away.

Both males were half transformed and sizing one another up, with fangs fully extended and bared, and fists clenched into ominously sharp claws. Xavier unleashed a guttural growl as a final warning - this female is my turf, back away or there will be consequences.

The atmosphere in the room was taught as a trip wire - one wrong move could lead to bloodshed. Liam studied the two of them as Xavier shielded her, ready to attack at the slightest sign of further aggression. Slowly, the increased adrenaline seeped away, and Liam's claws began to retract. His

fangs withdrew behind his lips and his shoulders relaxed. He looked at Xavier with an assessing gaze as he rose to his feet. He shook his head and chuckled mirthlessly, "Take care of her, Xavier. Don't let yourself lose sight of what's important." With a final lingering glance at Ava, he turned to leave.

Ava caught herself before she yelled for him to stay, aware as she was of Xavier's battle-ready state. This was not how she would have wanted this confrontation to end.

Ava pulled herself out of Xavier's hold and climbed to her feet. When she was out of his reach, she didn't stop, just continued toward the door.

When Xavier grabbed her wrist, her fists clenched of their own volition, and she gritted her teeth.

"What were you doing in here with him?" The inquiry came out like an accusation.

"My job. The thing you're forcing me to do," Ava's eyes were trained on the door. "It's funny how you keep forgetting that."

She needed to leave before she did something she'd really regret.

Xavier ran a thumb against her pulse as he digested what she'd just said, "Ava," he started, her name infuriatingly soft on his lips. "If you don't want to do this- "

Ava ripped her wrist from his grip and marched for the door. "Xavier, I'm sick of your games."

She opened the door and finally looked over her shoulder, hoping he saw every last bit of rage she felt reflected in her glare. "The only thing you need to worry about is keeping your fucking promise." With that, Ava walked from the room and didn't look back.