

Chapter 38

Trauma

"Filthy fucking humans," Dylan grated through elongated teeth.

Xavier hummed in approval from where the Alpha Prince stood before the bleeding and bruised excuses for men. He was in his completed half-formed state; seven feet tall, with a large wolves head, hundreds of pounds of muscle hulking over the pathetic sacks of human waste on plate-sized paws.

Ava's captors cowered beneath him from where they sat broken on the bathroom floor. Covered as they were now in their own piss and tears, it was almost shocking to think that, only minutes before, they'd been waterboarding a girl, suffocating her to within an inch of her life.

Where was all of that gall now? The wherewithal to stand over someone and play God, taking the reins of life and death in your hands?

It was in Xavier's hands now. And Dylan's. And he'd already made up his mind on the fate of the men on the floor. When he shared a look with his friend, he knew he had, as well. Eight men were in this room, and only four were leaving it alive.

"Take care of them. Since they're so fucking fascinated with death, give them exactly what they want," Xavier directed his guards. He knew, Alpha to Alpha, that Dylan would gladly stay to see the job while Xavier tended to his mate. "And make it hurt."

"Wait! Y-you can't do this to me," cried the stinking fleshy man he'd seen kneeling over Ava when he'd entered the bathroom. "Do you have any idea who I am? How much I donate to you filthy fucking animals?"

Dylan snarled through his toothy maw, "Make sure you tell the devil how charitable you've been. Hopefully, it will help you more down there than it will up here." Before the keening man's wide, horrified eyes, Dylan's claws began to grow, even thicker and longer than they had before.

The man's puffy lips gaped open and closed, letting nothing but raspy air through. "Y-you... It wasn't me! I-it wasn't even supposed to be h-her!" He fell to the floor on his face raising a twisted arm to cover his head with the only limb of his that still worked, "S-someone brought her to us. W-we paid them, and they b-brought the girl!"

Xavier's eyes narrowed on the limp form, "Keep him." He amended, "Dispose of the rest."

He stepped out of the room and made sure that the door was firmly shut right before the screaming started.

Xavier paced back and forth as he stood over Ava's sleeping form. She was deeply unconscious, her steady breaths rasping in and out of her ravaged throat.

But she was alive. Xavier kept muttering that fact to himself like a talisman. He hadn't felt...fear like that in a very, very long time.

Cautiously, he stepped over to the bed where she laid, and remembered how it really hadn't been that long ago since he'd stood in the same position - gazing down at Ava while she recuperated after an ordeal. She always seemed to be recuperating.

This time, when she slept, it wasn't peaceful. The gentle smile on her face had been replaced by a fretful downturn at the corners of her lips. Her lips were usually the color of fresh peonies, but now they were nearly blue. Her skin had a waxy sheen that denoted the presence of another fever.

He'd taken her to the suite he'd brought her to the night she'd run off, specifically because it was one of the few rooms in the club that had a real gas-burning fireplace, instead of the flashy electric ones. He'd tucked her into bed and a lit it right after, but her color hadn't improved any since then.

Dammit, Jack. Where are you?

As if he'd thought the healer into existence, the suite door opened. "For the goddess' sake, Xavier, not again." Jack walked into the room and set his travel bag down with a loud thunk, "Is she ever not sick?"

Xavier leveled him with a look. He was in no mood to deal with Jack's attitude with Ava. "What's that saying doctor's use? Do no harm?"

Jack narrowed his eyes at Xavier, "The Hippocratic Oath hardly applies here. I didn't do anything to her."

"What about that other saying," Xavier nodded his head in Ava's direction. "Do what I fucking tell you or your ass is worm food?"

Jack sighed, "Ahh, the sacred oath of Alphas. Tell me, do you have to recite that whenever you're sworn it, too?"

"Jack..." Xavier growled.

"Fine, fine! Let me see her," he moved to sit on the edge of the bed next to Ava.

Jack's eyes roved over Ava's body, coming to a stop on the thick, ropey bruise circling her throat. Xavier saw Jack's Adam's apple bob up and down as he studied the mark he hadn't seen upon his initial arrival. "You, uh...you do this to her? You might want to go a little easier next time, chief."

"Now isn't the time for jokes Jack."

Jack swallowed hard again, "So it would seem."

The healer looked sullen, but he didn't complain anymore. He reached into his bag and pulled out a pair of heavy-duty fabric scissors. He removed the blanket from over Ava's sleeping form and moved the scissors into place at the bottom hem of her sleep shirt.

"Whoa, what are you doing?" Jack jumped and froze when Xavier's hand came down on his shoulder.

"Jeez, my job, Xavier. Which is a lot easier when people don't jostle my scissors."

"What do you need to cut her shirt off for?" Xavier frowned.

"That's just how it goes, boss. I can't make sure she's okay if I can't see her." Jack pointedly looked toward the door and Xavier took the less-than-subtle hint. He needed to let Jack do his job. Xavier nodded and left the healer to his work.

When Jack exited the room thirty minutes later, Xavier had just taken a seat. Up until then, he'd paced back and forth across the length of the suite until the sound of his own footsteps had begun to drive him crazy. But, as soon as the healer walked into the room, he was back on his feet. "How is she?"

Jack put up a palm, gesturing for Xavier to relax, "She'll be fine. She just needs to rest and she'll right as rain in no time."

Xavier grimaced at his friend's choice of wording. The sight of shower water pouring down onto Ava's lifeless face would haunt his nightmares.

"You might want to sit for what we have to discuss, though." Xavier only glared at Jack. "Suit yourself, but I sure as shit need to take a seat, myself."

Jack sat on the couch with a deep sigh and scrubbed his hands across his face. Seeing his friend's haggard expression, Xavier eventually took his own place on the chair across from him. "You said she was fine." Xavier said.

"Yeah, physically." Jack looked to the ceiling as if searching for an answer there. "Her Wolf..."

"You mentioned before that there was some sort of disruption."

"Not just a disruption, a complete rupture." He said solemnly, "It's knitted itself back together, but the edges are...rough."

Xavier inhaled and exhaled slowly, trying to temper his frustration with not understanding what was happening to Ava, "What does that mean, Jack."

"It means that at some point, recently, Ava fully lost her connection to her Wolf."

Xavier shook his head back and forth, "How does something like that even happen?"

"It doesn't, usually. I've scoured our records and there have only ever been a handful of cases like this in Alliance history, Xavier. Not just within the Red Moon. In Alliance history." Xavier waved him on, not nearly as marveled by the rarity, "But what caused it?"

"Heavy physical trauma. To Ava and her Wolf." Jack ran a hand over his mouth, "The thing is...it never ends there. Every account I've found has alluded to more permanent side effects." "Like what?"

"Nothing good. One story told of a male who'd lost his connection for a time after his Wolf's hind legs were severed in battle. He eventually regained access to his beast, but the Wolf never returned to the surface. The male never transformed again."

Xavier cursed under his breath.

"Another..." Jack began, his breath hitching in his throat, "Recorded the story of a pregnant female who'd been forced into changing in the middle of labor. The results were...horrific. She lost her young and her Wolf on the same day. Some think that the Wolf died during the birth because the female never shifted again and began to...deteriorate. Mentally. She would rant and rave about 'being alone inside', until she finally succumbed to her mental illness, some years later." Xavier pushed to his feet and resumed his pacing, "But those are just the worst-case scenarios, right?"

Jack didn't answer until Xavier whipped around, "No. Every account ended differently each time, but every story was similar. There's something seriously wrong with Ava's Wolf, and we won't know what it is or its lingering effects on her health unless she tells us."

"Then we'll ask when she wakes up and go from there."

"If she tells us," Xavier paused at the blatant accusation in the healer's voice. "Who does she trust here enough to confide in? Not me. And definitely not..."

Jack caught himself, but Xavier had heard him loud and clear.

Silence grew between the two males.

"What do we do then?"

Jack sighed, "I can try to run a more thorough scan on her, but I can't do that here."

Xavier closed his eyes, dreading what he knew was coming next.

"She'd have to be taken back to Red Moon territory."