

## Chapter 101

### Olive Branch

"What are you saying, Ava?" Xavier demanded from the other end of the line, but Ava was already on her feet and racing upstairs to Noah's office.

It was the work of mere minutes before she was back inside of Noah's hidden study, where he had several live feeds of the Eclipse compound running on several monitors. As she watched, the cameras flipped through different areas around the Eclipse Alpha's estate, from his study to an angle situated above the front and back gates.

The small table in this tiny study was much more cluttered than Noah's actual desk and, among the various notes and documents scattered around the area, Ava remembered seeing several maps. She exclaimed as she picked one up, realizing that she'd been right. Among the maps detailing the layout of the estate and its surrounding property was one that looked much less detailed and way more complicated.

"It's here," she breathed, almost completely forgetting who was listening in on the other end of her cast aside phone. "Secret tunnels. There are secret tunnels, Xavier!" "What?"

Ava picked up the phone and opened her camera app, taking snapshots of all of the maps before ceasing Xavier's increasingly frenetic questions, "We can get into Eclipse and find the proof that we need; because I have maps of Montgomery's tunnels in and out of the compound."

"Ava, what are you talking about?" Xavier asked, sounding harried, "How do you have access to any of that? Does this have anything to do with T-"

"No," Ava snapped, more forcefully than she'd meant. She could see a way out of this shit for Noah, but the path was so precarious, and it all hinged on Ava getting Xavier to see things her way. That meant that she needed to keep control of this situation. No matter what, this wasn't the time to let Xavier steamroll her. "I want to meet with you as soon as possible. I'm not saying another word until we're face to face, Xavier."

"Fuck, Ava," Xavier muttered. "What are you not telling me?"

"Not. Another. Word."

"Fine. I can be up there by noon," he said.

"Not here. I don't want to do this here."

The silence that fell over the line was tense with inferred assumptions, but Ava let it ride until Xavier was ready to speak again.

"Fine," he said. "Then I'll be there to pick you up by noon."

"Works for me," she said. "See you then."

A few hours later, they were sitting in a cozy little bistro a few towns over, sharing a few afternoon apéritif's while their pasta boiled. Out of all of the abysmal and strange interactions Ava had shared with Xavier since he'd found her in the Green Light Club all of those months ago, this one was the most unsettling.

Her anger towards him for convicting her for murder and leaving her to waste away in prison had made it easier for her to come to terms with his abhorrent behavior at the club while he was under the throes of mistrust and their crippled mating bond.

Even with all of his mistreatment, Xavier had been the only male she'd ever wanted up to that point, so that staggering flame fueled their spare few hectic, passionate moments.

Hell, even their conversation a few nights ago had held the electric undercurrent of Ava's vision and the mating bond urging them on, making the whole night feel bizarrely clandestine.

But here, sitting in a nice restaurant, politely passing a basket of bread between them...this was almost too much for Ava's nerves to handle. It was too normal for them. Too- "Remember that little restaurant that we used to go to all the time whenever we went to Pittsburgh for meetings with Dark Moon?"

"You mean the one next to the museum? That's where that waiter told you that you'd been saying gnocchi wrong the whole time, right?" Ava smiled as he nodded, "You were so pissed. I remember it, but I was always more interested in the museums, to be honest."

Xavier's brow perked up with surprise, "Yeah, I'm surprised you remember that. I haven't ordered gnocchi since."

"But ordering pappardelle is somehow better?" She asked.

"I know I won't fuck up the word pappardelle," he replied. "There are a lot of things I don't say because I'm afraid of ruining the delivery. So, I want you to take the lead on this one because it seems really important. Too important to fumble." Ava stalls for time, taking a sip of her drink as she figures out how to respond. This was exactly what she'd wanted; the ball was in her court. But Xavier wasn't the only one terrified of fumbling

this meeting. It meant too much to too many people, some of which had no idea that their livelihoods were on the line in the first place.

"The rogues," she began, eyes trained intently on her drink. "What makes them rogues to you, Xavier?"

His eyes narrowed, but he answered her without question, "Anyone who operates outside of the Council's purview is considered a rogue, Ava. You know that."

She nods, finally meeting Xavier's laser-focused gaze, "And what constitutes the Council's purview? Is it child sex trafficking? Barely funding an unregulated prison system? Allowing Packs to mete out sham trials just to avoid the extra paperwork?"

That familiar stone-cold mask fell over Xavier's face, completely masking his features as he leaned to her, his stare becoming intense, searching for the hidden truth behind her words.

"What are you saying, Ava?"

She met his austere stare with one of her own, uncowed by the inquisition she saw in his amber eyes, "I'm saying that I don't completely disagree with the rogues' mission. Just their methods." "What you're saying is treason, Ava," Xavier warned.

"I'm already a wanted female, Xavier," she plainly stated. "That's why we're having this conversation in the middle of nowhere, miles away from home. Because our system is broken, Xavier. And someone wants to fix it." Xavier sat back in his seat, his mouth turning down in a derisive scowl, "Noah Thomas?"

"Noah Bennett," Ava corrected him, watching the confusion wash away the accusation in his expression. "At least, if the Council hadn't backed Montgomery's bid to shut him out of the line of succession."

"Why would he do that? One of the few things the Council holds dear is their pure fucking bloodline."

"For that very reason, Xavier. Noah is illegitimate. His mother is human."

He pressed his lips together and leaned back, his gaze finally leaving hers to rest somewhere above her head as he processed her words.

"Ain't it a fucking riot...."

"W-what is?" Ava asked, sensing a dark, looming energy coming off of Xavier as if it were emanating from her own body. That's new.

"When we found out that Victor set up the assassination, we found out why," Xavier muttered. "Turns out, we're related. One of our ancestors was mated to a human, and the family booted him and his mate before emigrating to America." "Oh...."

"Yeah, oh." Xavier shook his head, rubbing a tired hand across his face. "It says a lot about how far people will go to get what's theirs, doesn't it. Murder. Treason."

"Is it treason," Ava posed. "Or revolution?"

Xavier's eyes finally met hers, and when they did, the former accusation had completely subsided, "That depends on how we go about things. I have enough on my plate. I'm not interested in fighting a war. I'm guessing we're here because you don't want one either. For your male's sake."

Ava didn't flinch at his frank choice of phrasing, "Yes. For Noah's sake. And for yours, and Bella's, and everyone else in this stupid fucking system that deserves better."

The arrival of their food gave them a much-needed break from the heavy tone their conversation had taken. Ava already felt drained, and the real talks had only just begun. What kept her going was the lack of admonishment in Xavier's eyes. The fact that he hadn't gone completely dark or starting overturning tables or whatever shit, he'd been prone to every time he'd been in her presence a few months ago.

"So, is Thomas how you found all of that shit about the tunnels under eclipse?" Xavier finally asked after a few minutes of attempting to enjoy their meals.

Ava nodded, "He's been...keeping an eye on things for personal reasons, I'm guessing."

"You're guessing? He didn't say?"

"He doesn't know that I know," she admitted in a rush of breath. "He doesn't know about any of this." "Shit, Ava."

"I wanted to come to you first."

"Why?" Xavier demanded.

"Because, Xavier, I know that if we cut the bullshit, the both of you want the same thing. And if Noah sees that someone on the Council sees things his way, I know he'll come around. He wants change, the same as you."

"And if he came to me looking for it, I would shoot first and ask questions at the gravesite. Is that why you came to me first? Because I'm the one who needed to be convinced to see reason?"



Ava shrugged, refusing to rise to the bait.

"Noah might have more secrets, but he's generally more...consistent than you," she said. "But that's not the only reason I came to you first. Something that I think you need."

With that, Ava reached into her purse and pulled out the decoder, setting it on the table between them.

"There. A peace offering."