

Chapter 102

In My Court

"Damn it, Ava. What do you want?" Xavier's hands clenched as he reached for the decoder, only for Ava to quickly move it back out of his reach.

When he looked at her now, it was with a newfound consideration, as if he were speaking to an actual opponent who understood the game that they were playing and demanded a seat at the table. Which, to be fair, wouldn't be all that far off if Ava had her way.

An unquenchable part of Ava regretted the new edge of suspicion that colored Xavier's eyes, but a much larger part of her reveled at the undeniable glint of respect that she found there as well. Good. He should be wary of her if that was what it took for him to take her seriously.

For once, Ava wasn't frustrated by the fact that she'd been underestimated. In this case, that had been Xavier's mistake to make. All the while, she'd happily reap the benefits of his transgression.

"I told you what I want," Ava said. "You need to go to Eclipse to get the Council's proof. I just want you to take me with you when you go."

Xavier sat back in his seat and shook his head, "First, you tell me why, Ava. What is in Eclipse that you want? Or more accurately, what's there that Thomas wants?"

Ava turned the decoder over in her hands and considered whether there was any merit to holding any cards close to her chest at this point. Her experience with scheming only went so far, and she was in the deep end now.

On the one hand, Xavier could block her at any point from here on out. After all, she'd already given him enough information on Noah to take back with him to the other Alphas. But that was the calculated risk she'd taken, and, so far, Xavier seemed receptive, if wary. She'd already taken something from Xavier. Now she needed to give something back, or else he'd never trust her moving forward.

"My goddess, Ava," Xavier breathed. "You don't want me to sing kumbaya with your boyfriend. You want me to offer him Eclipse's spot on the Council."

"It was his, to begin with," Ava stated.

Xavier leaned in, that familiar inferno creeping into his eyes, setting the honeyed lights ablaze, "You've overplayed your hand, Ava. Your little plan is never going to work because the Council, the other Alphas are never going to agree to let a terrorist run one of our territories."

"My little plan only has one other alternative, and that's a full-blown war that you yourself admitted you'd rather avoid, Xavier. What changed?"

"You deciding that your conniving boyfriend deserves to be rewarded a seat at the table for committing treason."

"Don't be petty, Xavier. You've come so far," Ava sighed. "You already pointed out that people will do a lot to get what belongs to them. So, it stands to reason that they'll compromise a hell of a lot in order to get it, too. Especially if it's the easier path." "The Council will never go for it."

"You know, that's what I never really understood, Xavier," Ava sneered at the decoder before sliding it across the table, where it rolled to a stop in front of the Red Moon Alpha. "The Council isn't the one who's supposed to call the shots. The Alphas are. When did you allow the advisors into the captain's chair?"

Xavier stared down at the decoder for a few long moments before slowly reaching down to pick it up. He studied it reverently as if it held the answer to every question that had ever burdened his spirit.

"That happened way before my time."

"That doesn't mean it isn't your responsibility to make it right," Ava whispered. "Noah hasn't passed the point of no return, I'm sure of it. The other Alpha's shouldn't prove too much of a hard sell. Not when it means getting the most profitable territory in the Alliance out from under the Council's thumb."

"You say that he hasn't done anything that can't be forgiven," Xavier said as he held up the decoder. "This could prove otherwise."

Ava licked her lips, silencing the ever-present fear that she had that he could be right about that. That was one variable she had absolutely no control over. If that decoder uncovered some unknown atrocities, Ava wouldn't be able to talk Noah's way out of that. If she could, at all.

"I have faith that won't be the case," Ava said, leaving no room for doubt in her tone. "Noah is jaded and disillusioned, but he isn't evil. And in a lot of ways, he isn't wrong either."

Xavier made a non-committal sound deep in his chest before slipping the decoder into his jacket pocket. Ava's pulse briefly leaped with panic but

quickly settled when the tension suddenly left Xavier's shoulders, and he picked up his fork. "So, how do we play this?" Xavier asked, letting out a frustrated huff when he was only met with her shocked silence. "You're the one doing the scheming, Ava. What's your plan for Eclipse?"

"Oh, I...." She felt her mind go infuriatingly blank, surprised as she was at the turn of events. She'd thought that she'd be lucky enough for Xavier to drag her along; she wasn't prepared for him to offer her the reigns. It was... utterly unlike the Xavier she knew. But, perhaps, the Xavier she knew really was trying to become something, someone, better.

Ava steeled herself and wrangled the tangled mass of her racing thoughts into line as she leaned into Xavier, a linear plan coming together in her mind's eye.

"I found a map of the tunnels surrounding the Eclipse estate," Ava said in an excited hushed voice as she pulled out her phone and began flipping through the many photos she took. "We can take this one that empties out into the bay. From Noah's notes, none of the tunnels are particularly manned anymore since Montgomery's death. But that means that they haven't been maintained, either."

"That's going to be hell to get to," Xavier muttered, pulling up his own map of that particular bit of Rhode Island shoreline. "There's not a strip of bay along that entire coastline. It's a straight drop into the Atlantic." "Sounds secure," Ava said.

"It's perfect," Xavier confirmed gruffly. "Now, what about when we get inside?"

Ava flipped to a detailed log Noah kept of the compound's guard schedules, cobbled together via his observations through his web of hidden surveillance cameras, "There isn't enough data to map the entire compound, but the path from the tunnel we're aiming for, and the Alpha's office is well-documented. We should have a decent window where the halls are clear since security isn't nearly as tight inside as it is outside of the compound."

"It makes you wonder why there's that much security at all, doesn't it?" Xavier said as he studied the documents. "Red Moon doesn't have nearly this much in our entire town. And this is just the Bennett home."

"If we're right, Montgomery probably made a lot of enemies who'd be pretty relieved that he's gone," Ava posited. "Maybe Rhys is afraid some of them might want their pound of flesh."

"Coward," Xavier sneered. "I am curious, though, what are you looking for while we're in there? Specifically."

Ava sighed and shrugged, "Anything alluding to Montgomery's tie to Noah and his mother? We just need evidence that the line of succession was tampered with. The Council won't be able to deny it openly with the

Alphas as witnesses." "It's a long shot that you'll even find the sort of paper trail you're looking for."

"It was a long shot that you found the same for Victor," she countered. "I'm banking on Montgomery sharing Victor's affinity for blackmail."

Xavier pushed his empty plate to the side and let out a heavy breath, "This sounds solid."

Ava's eyebrows shot toward her hairline, "Really?"

"Hell no. This plan is risky as fuck all," Xavier griped. "But as far as plans, it's the best we've got. And for what it's worth, it's not a bad one. Just dangerous."

"Then we should keep this between the two of us," she suggested. "It'll only get riskier the more people are involved."

"I agree," Xavier nodded. "So it'll be you and I who go inside, but you're nuts if you think we're going alone." "Xavier-"

"That's non-negotiable, Ava." Xavier's dark tone left no room for argument. "We bring Liam and Dylan as back-up. If you want their trust enough to hear Noah out, then you need to trust them enough to have your back. That's how we do things."

"Who is we?" Ava asked.

"Us. The Alphas," Xavier stated hesitantly as if he hadn't fully made that connection himself before saying it. "At least, that's the way I'd like it to be. It's worked so far."

Ava smiled. That's what she wanted to, for the Alliance to be run by people who had their community's best interest at heart. And that started with building a solid foundation built on trust.

"But first," Xavier said, patting his jacket pocket. "We need to make a stop."

"You've been having secret Alpha meetings at the Green Light Club?" Ava asked, perplexed, as Xavier led her through his ninth-floor suite and into the familiar sitting room lying beyond the dark chrome elevators.

"I've thought of the club as a lot of things the past few months," Ava said, her eyes casting around the space as if this was her first time seeing it. "A political HQ was definitely not one of those things."

In a sense, it was her first-time seeing Xavier's space. Truly seeing it. Every other time she'd been in this suite of rooms she'd been sick, panicked, or angry as hell. The details that made up the area had all been

a blur of mental notes - where she should go to escape, where to hide, what could be used to put as much distance between herself and the male she willing trailed behind now.

And, now that she looked at Xavier's home through the eyes of a guest and partner, instead of a prisoner, it looked...different than she remembered.