

Chapter 104

Parlay

"The rogues?" Liam asked, his eyebrows drawing together in concern. "What do you know about the rogues, Ava?"

"For one, I know that rogue is a subjective term," she started.

"Ava...."

"No, don't Ava me," she bit out through clenched teeth. "You said we would do this my way, Xavier. And the first step to that is acknowledging that the Council's rogues don't exist."

Xavier turned to the other males and opened his mouth again, most likely to reinterpret her words, but a hand from Liam gave him pause. The Silver Moon Alpha stared at her intently, his normally intense dark eyes,

practically boring holes straight through to her soul, peeling back the layers as if to spot the first sign of deceit at its inception.

"Can you please explain what you mean?"

Ava swallowed but nodded. "Of course," she began. "The Council brands anyone who works outside of them or against them a rogue, right? And because cases like that happen so rarely, and the consequences for being branded a rogue are so severe, just the term has become tainted. Taboo."

"That would hold water if we hadn't seen their setup for ourselves," Dylan said. "Sure, we could mince words all day, but at the end of it, we know there's a threat."

"And a sizeable one at that," Liam added.

"Oh, I know that there's a shadow organization working against the Council. I just don't think they have to be a threat to you," Ava insisted. "I think that your goals may align more than you think." Dylan cocked his head to the side and shot her a look, "Are you trying to recruit us?"

She let out a breathless chuckle, "The opposite, actually. I'm hoping that the three of you together can recruit them."

Dylan's jaw clenched as he sat back in his seat, but he stayed silent, waiting to see how the next half of this conversation unfolded. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Liam leaned forward, barely blinking as he studied her face. "What's the connection, Ava?" He said plainly. "How are you affiliated with the rogues?"

Ava resisted the urge to look toward Xavier for... reassurance? For a sign that the next words out of her mouth weren't about to land her in prison again? She didn't know, but either way, looking to him wasn't an option. Not if she wanted to prove that she could stand on her own two feet against these males.

Not if she wanted to prove that she was strong enough to stand with them.

Ava didn't know when exactly that had become a goal, but it was. The males in this room had seen her at her absolute worst - two of them had only ever known her as a prisoner, a pawn, and a prostitute. And, yes, she had been all of those things.

But now, she needed them to see her as their peer. She might not be a born Alpha like the rest of them, but she was a Beta, born and raised. And as such, she had the right to demand their ear. It was her duty to advocate for her Alpha. Even if she'd chosen a different Alpha to speak for.

"Noah Thomas," she said. "He's the leader of your shadow organization."

"No- the boyfri...." Dylan's exclamation died out as he cut a cautious expression in Xavier's direction.

For his part, Xavier only rolled his eyes, "Yes. That Noah Thomas."

"How long did you know about this, Ava?" Dylan asked, the ice-cold mask she hadn't seen since she'd first met him slipping into place as his broad muscles shifted in agitation underneath the fine fabric of his sweater. "We've been running in circles chasing our asses, and you knew who was behind the "

"The what, Dylan? You've found some concerning stuff, but nothing solid. They haven't done anything."

"Yet." He bit out, "And if they do make a move on the Alliance without our knowledge, that falls back on the Alphas. And if that happens when you could have intervened, that falls on you."

"Enough, Miller."

Liam cut him a silent look, subtly pulling rank on the Dark Moon heir, "We're veering off-topic," he said. "Let her finish explaining herself."

Ava nodded her appreciation for his mediation and continued, "I want you to know that I only came into this knowledge recently. Very recently. And,

as I said, I think that if you all actually spoke to Noah, you'd find that you all want the same thing."

"And what is that?" Liam said softly.

"To put the Council in their place."

All eyes turned to Xavier, who'd stayed dutifully silent as he'd promised. Now, he met Liam and Dylan's questioning gazes in equal measure, showing without a shadow of a doubt that he stood in favor of Ava's proposal.

"You want to go up against the Council, now?" Dylan asked.

"I think it's time that someone does," Xavier said, every word slow and methodical. "And if that someone is anyone other than the Alphas, things will get out of hand."

"Or," Dylan posited. "We'd just substitute one problem for another and put all of our Packs in the Council's crosshairs."

"The Council shouldn't have crosshairs, Dylan," Ava said. "And it shouldn't be able to hold the livelihoods of your Packs, taxpaying citizens of the Alliance, on the line just to keep the Alphas in line."

"She's right," Xavier muttered. "We are the heart and soul of the Alliance. We were born to be its leaders, but somewhere down the line, we ended up playing go-between for the Council."

"An utterly corrupt Council that has normalized the use and abuse of its citizens cuts corners on public welfare, and

"And all the while, they smile to the humans' faces like our people aren't suffering," Liam whispered, his eyes staring unfocused at the carpet.

Dylan's eyes went wide, "Liam, are you buying this?"

"I don't have to buy it, Miller," he answered. "Everything they've said is true."

"That doesn't mean that we have to start a war over it," he insisted. "That's not the way we do things. That's how we've maintained the Alliance for so long."

"We've maintained the Alliance by playing along with loudest voices," Liam said. "At first, it was the imperialist Alphas looking to take their cut of the new world. Now, it's the former Alphas and their elitist comrades looking to maintain the status quo to keep themselves in power."

Dylan blinked at Liam as if he'd never seen the male before.

"What, Miller?" Liam murmured, the slightest smirk flitting across his full lips. "I've been listening to you shit talk the Alliance since training. You're surprised I listened?"

"Kind of," Dylan admitted with a shrug. "Mostly, I'm surprised you agreed with me."

"And I'm agreeing now. Why aren't you?"

Dylan looked around the room, measuring the faces of some of his closest friends and companions. "It's just...so far-fetched. To think of a way this shit doesn't end in disaster." Ava sat forward, "That's why we do it by their rules. We hit them where it counts."

He shook his head, "Half the Council's personal funds come from sources we couldn't begin to trace."

"Trust me. We'll get there," Ava said. "But that's not what I'm referring to."

"Then what?" Liam asked.

"Their fucking rules."

Liam began nodding, interest entering his dark eyes, "What's our angle?"

"The statutes on the line of succession," Xavier declared.

Identical looks of intrigue crossed Liam and Dylan's faces.

"I'm assuming this is where Noah Thomas comes in?" Dylan asked.

Ava nodded. "His father was Montgomery Bennett," she announced. "He's the rightful heir to Eclipse."

Dylan and Liam went silent as they processed the news, much like Xavier had when he'd found out and Ava before him. For anyone raised within the Alliance's upper echelons, the implications were clear. Their society's laws on the Alpha's lines of succession were rigid - so set in stone as to be a point of very public pride.

"That's what this rebellion is about?" Dylan finally asked. "Noah's mad he got passed over for the Alphadom?"

Ava shrugged, "In a sense. Montgomery and the Council rejected him because his mother is human. They decided to find others in the Alliance who were sick of being subject to the Council's mercurial impulses. There were a lot." Xavier shot Dylan a loaded glance. "We've already seen what people will do to reclaim their blood right."

Dylan shook his head, "But start a war?"

"Noah doesn't want a war. He wants a confrontation," Ava corrected.

"With the Council?" Liam asked, and she nodded. "And when the Council is publicly served with the evidence of their cover-up, they'll be forced to act."

"But in what way?" Dylan asked.

"If we show them that Thomas has our backing," Xavier said. "They'll do what they need to avoid public outcry when we take air out their laundry to the people." "But what does Noah get out of this," Dylan asked pointedly. "No conjecture. Plainly."

"Ideally, a seat at the table," Ava answered. "His seat. As the Eclipse Alpha."

He and Liam share a loaded glance between one another, and, for a moment, Ava began to worry that they'd object. But when they turned back around, they only shrugged. "Yeah, giving Eclipse to a potential domestic terrorist is still more appealing than that puny little jagg-off, Rhys Bennett," Dylan muttered.

Ava smiled as relief flooded her, cooling her frazzled nerves, "I'm glad you think so."

"So, when does this go down?" Liam asked. "I want to speak with Thomas before we go any further. I don't know him, and I'm not dumb enough to trust him."

He paused and sent Ava an apologetic look, "No offense."

"Soon," Xavier said, reaching for a file on the coffee table and flipping it open to reveal the blueprints for Eclipse. "First, we need to get evidence to present to the Council."

"By breaking into the Eclipse compound," Liam asked, his voice as close to incredulous as Ava had ever heard it. "Is that all?"

"Believe me, I hate a fetch mission as much as the next," Xavier said on a sigh. "Even so, we still need to go into Eclipse. The leverage isn't just for the Council." "Who's it for?"

"Noah Thomas. Now that you're on board, we need to convince him."

Ava kept a white-knuckled grip on the edge of the speed boat as it cut through the roiling dark waters just off the coast of Rhode Island. They'd purposely chosen a particularly dreary evening, hoping that the in-climate

weather would dissuade would provide adequate cover for their trip into the Eclipse stronghold.

It honestly hadn't crossed her mind that rain on the open ocean meant waves, and waves meant Ava's long forgotten propensity for sea sickness once again reared its treacherous head.

"Looking a little green, Red."

She glared at Dylan who's signature laissez-faire grin still held an edge to it. Now, guilt added to the awful roiling in her stomach caused by the choppy waters. Ava didn't know why she felt guilty, and that bothered her even more than the guilt itself. She hadn't hidden anything from Dylan, and even if she had, that was her right to do so.

"It's just the waves."

"Hmm," he gave a non-committal nod and turned away, letting his gaze roam the indigo horizon.

"Dylan, do you have something you want to say to me?"

"Nothing productive, no."

"Wow. Well, okay then," she said softly, hoping her nausea masked her hurt. "Then how about we keep the cute comments to a minimum, okay?"

Uncomfortable silence settled over the back of the boat as Ava and Dylan sat rigidly, staring as far in the opposite directions as possible.

"You're putting a lot on the line for this male."

Ava slowly turned to Dylan, who still stodgily refused to meet her gaze, "For Noah?"

"Why?" Dylan asked, finally turning to face her. "You got out, sweets."
"Because of Noah."

"Is that enough reason to stay? To get yourself involved in this shit?"

Ava frowned, "I'm strong enough to handle it, Dylan."

He bared his teeth in a flash of contempt, "You shouldn't have to. This isn't a place for you, Ava. It never has been. Leave the bullshit to the people who might actually get something out of it."

She sat back, anger momentarily smothering the rumbling in her stomach. It burned hot but quickly faded as his words sank in, and his intent hit her.

"I don't know what's out there, Dylan," she whispered. "Sometimes, that's more frightening to me."

"Than getting in bad with the Council?"

"I was already in bad with the Council," she said. "From the moment I was locked inside one of the lawless wastelands they pass off as prisons without a fair trial."

His crystal blue eyes met hers, and the naked, sincere affection she saw there made her want to weep. She'd always enjoyed Dylan's company because his flagrant attitude made her feel normal when her life had been anything but. In the back

of her mind, she always kind of assumed he'd just been keeping an eye on her for Xavier during his frequent visits. She'd never stopped to consider that he actually cared... that he might consider her a friend, too.

"Is he worth it?" He asked, his deep voice barely above a whisper.