

Chapter 107

The Bird Cage

Xavier crept into the room that was supposed to be Montgomery Bennett's old office and found it pristine, with not a single sheet of paper out of place. After a thorough search of the room, it became clear that there was nothing of use left in the picturesque shell, much less anything incriminating.

It didn't surprise him that Bennett was too smart to make the same foolish mistakes as Victor - he'd probably had strict instructions for his office to be cleared if there was anything there he'd been stupid enough to keep around at all. Xavier ducked behind a wall and pulled out his phone, bringing up the log of access codes. There had to be something here that he was missing. From what he could see, the code for Montgomery's office was used regularly, most likely for routine cleaning. It was the same for most of the other ten rooms on the floor.

No, he thought. There are nine rooms. He'd counted them on his way here. Xavier listened at the door, going still as he heard the single patrol scheduled for this time block stride past. When they were gone, he made his way back down the hall, testing each code on its correlating door. And, still, he came up short.

Looking at the log again, he noted that the missing tenth door would be easily missed on the log since it alone had been opened only once during the log's timespan. And according to the location stamps, it should have been here, right beside Montgomery Bennett's bedroom.

Realization dawned on Xavier as he pushed into the room and began to search. He found what he was looking for at the back of one of the walk-in closets - a concealed door, locked with a keypad. Xavier typed in the final code, and the light turned green, but he wasn't expecting what he found.

He'd expected a safe or a hidden study; instead, it was another bedroom, beautifully decorated with a sophisticated, feminine aesthetic. It was the most carefully luxurious room he'd seen in the compound so far. It was also the dustiest. It was clear that no one came in here, even to clean.

Except, someone did. Recently and only the one time, according to the log.

Xavier didn't have to bother searching the room - he simply followed the trail of footprints in the thick layer of dust on the floor to where they ended at a vanity. It was mostly empty save for a vase of long-dead white roses, a gilded jewelry box, and a framed photo that laid face down on the tabletop.

Xavier picked up the frame and saw a couple, not so much smiling at the camera as they were staring it down. He instantly recognized the tall, burly male as Montgomery Bennett, looking about a decade younger than he'd last seen him and every bit as smug.

However, he distinctly did not recognize the raven-haired beauty on his arm as Joanna Bennett, his mate. With caramel-colored skin and deep, dark hair and eyes, the resemblance to Noah Thomas was too clear for her to be anyone but his mother.

Xavier looked around at the room, a pretty cage, literally hidden away. This woman had been a trapped bird - a secret obsession, coveted, used, and promptly thrown away as soon as the appeal had worn off. A profound sense of disgust filled Xavier as he recognized the same sick sense of possessiveness that had to have born this room within himself.

How could he stand here and judge when he'd considered - done - similar and even worse to his own mate? He thought back to the cave and how reluctant Ava had been to admit to him that she had been struggling, how she'd immediately gone on the defensive when she had finally brought it up.

He deserved no less, and yet, the fact that she'd somehow trusted him enough to confide in him was...humbling. Xavier knew that he was neither a worthy male, nor mate, nor a leader. But he hadn't truly understood just how far he'd fallen; how similar he was to the sort of male who'd plot and murder for nothing but self-gratification.

And, even so, every tool he'd been given to redeem and better himself, he'd gotten from Ava. She owed him nothing but her ire, and yet she came to him asking him to be her partner.

Xavier snarled, placing the photo back where he'd found it. He didn't have time to wallow in self-pity. He could guarantee that Ava wasn't doing the same. Watching her scale that cliff alongside him proved as much. He'd been so consumed with how different she'd been from the girl he'd known that he couldn't see her for the female she'd become.

On that cliff, with the surrounding storm reflecting back the vigor in those deep gray eyes, he'd finally understood that while she wasn't the Ava he'd known, she'd grown into something more. In spite of his efforts to shove her back into a role that he understood.

Shaking off his melancholy, Xavier checked the time and cursed. He needed to get back to the tunnel ASAP. He yanked open the vanity drawers and rifled through them, coming up empty. He was about to call it and move on when he noticed the small trail in the dust underneath the jewelry box.

He opened the first of several shallow drawers to find it empty. But in the rest were stacks and stacks of invoices. There was nothing outwardly sinister indicated on any of the receipts, but there was enough to prove that money changed hands with some very specific people, and that was more than enough under the right microscope.

Xavier's jaw clenched as he found exactly what he'd needed. Two stubs - one dated just over three years ago, and another dated a little over a year ago...both signed by Victor Brown.

Thirty-thousand dollars. That's how much his sister's life - his own daughter's life - had been worth to Victor. And whatever they'd been doing when the Silver Moon patrol had been attacked cost Victor a fraction of that. Liam's mate snuffed out for a measly ten grand.

Xavier felt sick with rage. He was complicit in this. It had been up to him and his father to sniff out Victor's deceit, and they'd failed - allowed him to go free so that he could ruin even more lives with his pitiless scheming. Now, at least, he had what he needed to make sure nothing like this ever happened again.

Xavier made a silent vow to himself, one full of contrition and resolve, only to freeze when his reverie was interrupted by the blaring of an extremely high-end security alarm. "Alert. Unauthorized presence on-premises. Alert. Unauthorized presence on-premises."

Ava halted to a stop as the alarm sounded, sending chaos clamoring through the second floor. She cursed and slipped into a nearby maintenance closet before anyone could get a look at her. She'd been making good headway throughout the level, utilizing the servant's corridors to slip in and out of the main hallway, unseen.

This floor saw a lot more activity than the one Xavier was exploring, but it wasn't nearly as densely populated as the first floor. According to Noah's notes, they had Rhys Bennett's famously stand-offish nature to thank for the lucky break. He tolerated very few people and trusted even less, meaning that the once-bustling compound held only his most loyal confidants, house staff, and enough security to count as a certified militia.

The security was so rigidly regimented that it was easy enough to slip through the breaks in their patrols, and the staff made it clear that this was a 'keep your head down and your mouth shut' kind of household. Armed with the wing's access codes and a list of occupied rooms, she'd made short work of searching through most of the guest rooms, the study, and what looked to be a second-floor lounge room. Rhys' office had been next on her list when the siren began. "Alert. Unauthorized presence on-premises. Alert. Unauthorized presence on-premises."

Ava felt her heart begin to pound. She'd been careful; she was sure of it. And she couldn't see Xavier making some novice mistake. She looked at her watch - they only had about ten minutes before they were supposed to meet up at the tunnel and only about ten more before Dylan and Liam came in to back them up.

"Sir, we've located the intruder!"

Ava felt her lungs seize as angry footsteps stomped past the closet she hid in, expensive dress loafers creating a clipped staccato on the tile flooring.

"Where were they?" She didn't recognize the voice, but the male sounded wickedly displeased.

"Erm...at the front door, Mr. Bennett, sir."

She heard the smack of skin hitting skin right before Bennett snarled, "What the fuck do I pay you lot for if you can't even- "

"Come, now, Rhys. I know Dad taught you better than to mistreat the help. Makes them less helpful."

Ava nearly collapsed where she stood. That...that was a voice she recognized.

Noah.