

Chapter 109

The Reckoning

The flight back to New York seemed to pass in an absolute flash even as each anxious moment bringing her closer to her tete-a-tete with Noah seemed to carve years from Ava's lifespan. She spent half of the time trying to formulate what exactly she could possibly say to make up for being caught red-handed. And the other half, she spent mentally berating herself for even feeling as if she had anything to apologize for.

After all, she reminded herself, all of this she'd done for him and his well-being. And, damn it, she was proud of what she'd accomplished here tonight! Other than setting fire to the Eclipse Alpha's mansion - which she sincerely hoped Noah wouldn't end up being blamed for - tonight couldn't have gone better. Not only had she and Xavier found the missing pieces they needed to set their lives straight, what she'd found would all but deliver the Eclipse Pack to Noah in a shiny new bow.

Or send him down an existential rabbit hole, but there's nothing to be done about that.

Even after her ten or fifteenth pep talk, she still couldn't get over the fact that through all of her backdoor negotiating and moving around chess pieces; she'd neglected to figure out just how she was going to break all of her backdoor negotiating and moving of chess pieces to Noah.

After he'd already spotted her sneaking around his estranged half-brother's home a state away, the point almost felt moot - amusing even! Too bad there wasn't an ice cube's chance in hell that Noah would see the situation in the same light. "You should relax a little, Ava," Xavier said from his seat across the plane's narrow aisle. "We did damn fine work here tonight."

She gave him a half-hearted smile and a nod of recognition but didn't reply. She felt Alexandre brush up against her consciousness and felt the soft nudging of his concern as Mia rose to give him the reassurance that Ava couldn't offer Xavier. He was obviously curious about what had held her up on her way back to the tunnel. And after the reaction she'd had to the documents she'd found back in the boat, she wouldn't be shocked if that curiosity held more than its share of suspicion after she'd refused to elaborate.

But Ava was afraid that if she started to talk, she wouldn't know when to stop. She didn't want to spook any of them by admitting that she'd run into Noah during the heist, and as for the letter, she'd found...that needed to go through Noah first, and that was non-negotiable.

After all, she may be coming home a liar, but at the very least, she wouldn't be empty-handed.

When she entered the front door code, Ava was mildly surprised when the light flashed green and let her inside. If she'd returned to a barred house, she would have understood. It would have been massively inconvenient, but she could hardly blame him.

He probably thinks I'm working for the Council. Or a complete psycho.

At this point, it was unclear which scenario was preferable, which would be easier for her to explain away.

Alright, she goaded herself. Nut up, Davis. You wanted to play ball, so go play some fucking ball.

Sufficiently hyped, Ava stepped into the living room, expecting Noah to be waiting for her inside. Instead, the house was as dark and silent as she'd left it. She made her way to the stairwell and listened for the driving, bass-heavy music Noah liked to listen to whenever he needed to unwind - no matter how tense he was when he returned home from whatever dealings they'd agreed he'd keep to himself, she'd never seen him in a mood that his music couldn't ease. But as she navigated the stairs, there was no floorboard-trembling, no filthy cathartic lyrics. If it weren't for the light emanating from underneath his office door, she'd have thought that she'd

beat him home. When she pushed open the study door, though, it was clear that she hadn't.

There was no immediate sign of his presence, but the door to his hidden surveillance alcove stood tellingly ajar. When she walked up to the bookshelf compartment, there he stood, his hands resting in fists on the desk, intently studying the wall of screens in front of him.

Craning her head, she noticed that several had gone dark, and, as she watched, she saw an Eclipse guard walk up to a camera, his squinting expression quickly morphing into one of disgust right before the feed went black. "How much did you end up using?"

She started as Noah abruptly addressed her, "I-I, uh...."

"Cut the deer in headlights act, A. It doesn't suit you," he said in a low, controlled tone as he finally turned to face her. His stonelike face was unreadable as he leaned back against the table and crossed his arms over his chest.

Ava bit her lip, already thrown by the encounter even though they were no more than a sentence in. She'd anticipated his anger and disappointment, even though she didn't know what those emotions looked like on him. In fact, it was probably her dread of finding out that worried her most. What Ava hadn't expected was for Noah to act like...Noah. Cool and level-headed even during the utmost duress.

"I'm sorry if we fucked up your operation," she finally said, nodding past him toward the remaining live feeds. "It must have been a pain to set up."

He didn't look at his ruined work, just kept his onyx eyes trained on you, "I gotta be honest, that feels like the least of my worries at this point, Ava. I'm glad you could find it useful, though."

"Right. I should explain," she said, but silence stretched as she searched for words that wouldn't come. "I'm sorry, Noah. I don't know where to start."

"How about we start with who 'we' is, Ava."

In one fluid motion, he shifted, rising to his full height and taking one, two, three painfully measured steps until he loomed over you. Still, in spite of his imposing stance, the only expression his face displayed was one of patient contemplation. He was waiting for her to set the tone, to react first. It was a trick she knew well, but damn it, just because she was aware he was doing it didn't make it any less effective.

"I'm not working with the Council if that's what you're worried about," she said, her words a rush. "I would never do that to you."

He didn't move to reply, just waited for her to continue, "I...I was working with Xavier. That's who I was in the Eclipse compound with."

This finally coaxed a reaction from him as his eyes narrowed, "Why, Ava?"

"I was looking for something. Anything that could help you and your claims against Eclipse."

His gaze turned questioning as she took a deep breath and reached inside of her waterproof pack and handed him the charred documents waiting inside.

"Here, this is what I found," she breathed, her chest feeling tight with anticipation. "It's...definitely something I think will get the Council's attention."

He took the papers from your hand and studied them, first one and then the other. The longer his eyes took in, the paler and more ashen his bronzed complexion became. She didn't speak up, didn't move to scramble for any more half-assed excuses, she just let him be to take in what he was reading. She knew that he would need a minute to process because she knew what those documents held.

The first was his original birth certificate. Even though it had taken the brunt of Rhys' ire, the flames had failed to reach the most important section - the paternal designation line with Montgomery Bennett's name and signature clearly visible and legally binding.

Of course, while that confirmation was invaluable, it wasn't what had Noah lowering himself into the closest seat. That was the letter dated only weeks before Montgomery Bennett's death: Noah,

I'm writing you this letter, not as a contrite father looking to make amends - I know that there is far too much blood in the water for that. Instead, I'm writing to you as a male who has prided myself in being decisive, never wasting time on what could have been. I've always shaped the future I wanted, so there's never been a need to regret the past.

That is, until very recently.

While I've always considered you my single mistake – a rare, unfortunate blind spot, I've recently come to the conclusion that my error was not in creating you but in turning you away. The goddess makes no mistakes, and you were the heir I was gifted. It was a prideful folly that saw me reject what was clearly a boon from the Mother and a blessing to our Pack.

It causes me no small amount of grief to admit that a son of mine could be so inept, but alas, legitimacy isn't enough to make up for Rhys' infantile grasp on leadership. Meanwhile, you've flourished from nothing - becoming a male worthy of my legacy. In truth, I see myself in you in a way that I've only ever found disappointment in Rhys.

In casting you aside, I've all but doomed my legacy and the Eclipse Pack. This, I will not allow to stand. Therefore, I've taken the steps to have you

legally reinstated as my sole heir and will soon petition the Council to have you formally acknowledged as Eclipse's Rising Alpha.

All that I have built is yours if you prove to a worthy enough male to take it.

-Montgomery Bennett

The final papers he held were those very documents, the very proof he needed to present to the Council and claim his Alphadom, all without the threat of bloodshed. "Ava...." His voice trailed off as his mind raced, "I've had eyes in Eclipse for over half a year. How in the hell did you find this?"

"Coincidence, really," she said. "Rhys led me to them."

"He did?" He questioned, confusion playing across his face.

"Yeah. And about that," she hesitated before deciding to rip the Band-Aid off of her suspicions. "I'm pretty sure your brother had your father killed."