

Chapter 111

Combined Forces

Dylan leaned forward, his handsome face frozen into a gritted snarl, "And how exactly do we reinforce that? There are five of them to every one of us. And I highly doubt they'll go down without a fight. This will throw the entire Alliance into chaos." "Not if we replace it with something else," Xavier interjected. "Perhaps we don't disband the Council completely. Instead, we'd clean house and start fresh. There are no laws stating who should be on the Council." Dylan shook his head, "The pushback...."

"Is inevitable," Liam said. "We can't trust a soul who's already on the Council. I, for one, would rather deal with a clean slate than attempt to negotiate with a nest of snakes."

"If fixing the Council was as easy as all this, then why hasn't it happened before now?" Dylan posed.

"Because, until now, everyone who could have made the call benefited from sticking to the status quo?" Ava shrugged, looking around the table at the males who would change their world. "This will work because you're a united front, symbolizing everything the Alliance was meant to stand for. Besides, you have the law and the people on your side."

"Plus an ass-load of Pixie Dust, right?" Dylan asked pointedly. "If all else fails, we could always fall back on intimidation."

Noah met Dylan's accusatory stare with a steady look of his own, "It never hurts to have an Ace up your sleeve. However, I can guarantee you that the Estrellite will never see the light of day."

"By handing it over?" Dylan challenged.

Ava looked around to see if Xavier or Liam would interject, but they both looked at Noah expectantly. Noah paused, sitting back in his seat. Ava could feel the air grow incrementally denser the longer Noah contemplated. Finally, he gave a resolute nod of acquiescence.

"As literally and metaphorically volatile as it is, I wouldn't advise moving it," he cautioned. "But I can offer you the exact coordinates of each holding facility. As a gesture of goodwill."

"I'd feel more comfortable if it went back where it came from," Liam said.

"Unfortunately, there isn't much of a return policy for interdimensional dynamite," Noah replied. "And besides, I couldn't if I wanted to. Our anonymous contact went dark the moment you compromised that portal." "Sounds like we got the response we were looking for then," Dylan quipped.

"Maybe, but that's neither here nor there," Xavier sighed. "Whether we like it or not, it's here now. And I'd rather it stay under our control than anything else, so its existence needs to stay between us." "And the thousands of soldiers at Thomas' command," Liam said gravely.

"They aren't soldiers," Noah countered.

Xavier frowned, "That bunker we found said otherwise."

"I built a community of people who were tired of living under the Council's rule. Were we prepared to enter into the fray in order to bring about change? Yes, but change was the immediate goal. Not conflict. As far as I'm concerned, every member of my community will have a place in Eclipse at the end of this."

"And, that's your call to make," Liam stated. "As long as you understand that it only makes sense for us to be cautious of dissent amongst your ranks."

Noah gave a mirthless smirk, "I get it, we're on notice. As long as my people are afforded the same rights as every other citizen in the Alliance, I won't fight you on that. But I will not bring my people into an environment where they'll be persecuted for following their beliefs."

One by one, the Alphas nodded in agreement. Ava let out a pent-up breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding as her body relaxed.

"That's settled then," Xavier said. "No war, no war crime. Next up, when do we make our stand?"

Liam sighed, "The sooner, the better."

"What about the Harvest Convocation?" Ava offered.

The males all took a moment to consider her suggestion before eventually nodding, one by one.

"That would be an opportune time to confront the Council," Xavier confirmed.

And it was true; the Harvest Convocation was the perfect forum for them to speak out against the Council. Not only would the entire Council be in attendance, as it was one of their annual sacred days of gathering, but the Harvest was a time for reflection and growth.

Ideally, the Packs would all gather together once a year to take stock of the past year and offer one another aid in improving for the year to come. In practice, it was little more than a pissing contest where the more fruitful Packs rubbed their good fortunes in the faces of the smaller ones who, in turn, spent the entire event aggressively shunning everyone else.

"So, we have a plan," Noah said, smiling as he took in each of his new compatriots.

"And a damn fine one at that," Liam answered, coming dangerously close to cracking a smile of his own. "Do you think it will be enough to gain your father's backing, Miller?"

Dylan gave a non-committal grunt but offered a slight nod, "He was skeptical, to put it lightly, that we'd scrounge up enough evidence to make it worth the effort. I think we've managed to tip the scales."

"Good," Xavier said, rising from his seat. "Keep the group posted on any news. Otherwise, see you in two weeks."

Ava and the other males stood and said their goodbyes. As she turned to head out of the room, Xavier called out for her to stop.

"Ava," he said. "Can I have a minute?"

She fought the urge to look toward Noah to gauge his reaction; it felt petty to completely ignore how her speaking with Xavier alone might be offensive to Noah, but it felt no less pathetic asking for permission to do so. "What is it?" She asked.

"Victor's trial will be coming up in a couple of days."

Ava stilled, practically frozen in place by the weight of all that implied. She'd be pardoned - truly pardoned in the eyes of the Alliance as well as the Red Moon Pack, and not just the unofficial banishment that Xavier had offered her to fulfill his contract.

She could go home if she wanted....

But, no. Pardoned or not, Red Moon wasn't her home. It had stopped being a place of refuge the night her community - her family - had let her be carted away after a false trial led by mob mentality. She could never see herself going back, no matter what happened to Victor or how many bridges she mended with Xavier.

Even so, Ava knew that there were still some demons left for her to face before she could move on, once and for all.

"I'll be there."

The car ride back to the lake house from Rochester was lighter than it had been on the way down as if a weighted blanket of tension had been lifted from Ava and Noah's shoulders. And, in a sense, a huge weight had been lifted. Only - for Ava, at least - it felt like it was cast aside only to reveal a slithering nest of deeper anxieties patiently waiting their turn below. There were still too many unknowns standing in the way of her peace. The trial, her parents...Noah. Not Noah, specifically. She loved him...so much. But his life represented everything that had oppressed her, the very pit she'd so desperately tried to crawl her way from only to run right back into the fray.

It was painful to admit just how deeply Dylan's words had reached her out on that boat. She was joyfully falling headfirst back into the haunting world of powerful males, trading one Alpha for another and trailing him right into the fire. She could tell herself all she wanted that this time would be different - that Noah was nothing like Xavier and that the Council and the Alliance would be altogether changed after the upcoming Harvest Convocation. But Ava wasn't fool enough to allow herself to believe such a blatant lie.

Even the best-case scenario where the Alphas pull rank and become the Council would come with its own long line of challenges. This was a band-aid, not a cure, and after the Convocation, a lot of neutral nuisances would become powerful enemies.

The warm touch of Noah's hand pulled her from her worries, sending them off to a corner of her mind as he brought her hand to his lips and pressed a lingering kiss to the center of her palm.

"Thank you, Ava," He said. "You have no idea what you've done for me today."

She clutched his hand in hers and tried her hardest to mask the doubt swirling inside of her.

"Yeah, love," she whispered. "I think I do."