

Chapter 117

Schism

"What have you done?"

Noah knew from the moment he saw the stark white Bentley parked in his driveway that he was in for a treat of a conversation. But when he walked into the parlor only to find the bottle of extremely rare Rebouche au Chateau already half empty, he considered turning right back around.

Alpha or not, hell hath no fury like an irritated mother. Especially when said mother was Neia Adelaide Thomas.

"Which part? You'll have to be more specific." Noah feigned nonchalance as he took off his coat and hung it on the nearby coat hanger. "Baring all goes well in a few days, I've secured a seat for myself on the Council, established myself as the rightful heir to the Eclipse Alphadom, and made

good with the leaders of the Alliance. All in all, I think I've smashed out goals."

Neia grimaced, her crimson lipstick standing out like a bloodstain against her bronzed skin, "No, Noah, darling. You've changed them. Your little laundry list of perceived successes, baring all goes well in a few days, is all well and good. But our original goal is clearly one that you've lost sight of."

"I don't understand...." Noah ran a hand across his face, already feeling the beginnings of a tension headache working its way through his frontal lobe, "Is this not what we've been working toward? We wanted a seat at the table, Mother. Soon enough, that's exactly what we'll have."

"No!" His mother rose to her feet, the glass of wine in her hand quivering under the force of her thinly veiled rage. "I've been fighting for you to have the opportunity to obtain true power, Noah. Not the fairy-tale kumbaya bullshit that the Alpha's and that girl are shoving down your throat."

"Stop...."

"That doesn't exist!" She yelled, flinging an arm out and sending the incredibly expensive Merlot splashing across one of the parlor's cream love-seats.

"They're playing you because that's what they do, and you've fallen right into line," she snarled, bringing up a hand to jab a talon-sharp nail in his direction. "I taught you better than that."

"Stop!"

"What? Is the truth so difficult for you to hear, Noah, my love?" She asked, her words slurring ever so slightly. "When did you get so soft?"

"What's hard to hear is how little you seem to think of me," Noah walked past her, grabbing the glass from her hand and snagging what remained of the bottle as well.

He stowed both away at the bar and poured his mother a glass of water, which he delivered with a grimace of his own.

"That you'd think I'd settle...." Noah scoffed, "I wouldn't have taken up their offer if I thought that I was being played. I wouldn't have come to you like this with nothing to show for my efforts, our efforts. I am just as invested in this as you've ever been."

"Love, you've been getting played since you let that little girl waltz through here, making decisions." Neia glared at him and took the most spiteful sip of water he'd ever witnessed. "You had one job, Noah. Use her for information. Instead, you fell for her. Rookie move, my love."

"Don't drag Ava into this. Not any more than you already have," he said and took a seat on the dry couch. Considering the other now looked like the scene of a gruesome murder, it was most likely a lost cause. "Remember, she wouldn't even know about any of this if it weren't for you, in the first place."

"I wanted to see what she would do if we gave her our trust and brought her into the fold. Now, I know. She immediately turned around and gave that information to her mate and the rest of our enemies." Noah's jaw clenched hard enough he thought he'd crack a molar, but he refused to rise to her bait.

"Yes, she made it possible for all of us to avoid a war," he quipped and gestured for her to sit, attempting to level the playing field with her before her temper got too out of hand. "If I can't appeal to your empathetic side, then how about your pragmatic one, Mom? Resources, lives...think of how much we're saving by joining the Council instead of going up against it."

"Joining the Council..." She let out a derisive laugh that edged just a touch too much toward manic for his liking. "What you're doing is sitting on a gold mine. We have everything we need to rule, Noah. Why the hell would you settle for anything less?"

"Because, in this case, less is better. In every way, Mother."

"It's weak." She spat. "You're weak."

"Excuse me?"

"If you think for a moment that those Wolves won't turn on you the moment you let your guard down, you're not the man I raised. Look at what they did to your father."

Noah sat back in surprise, "What are you talking about?"

She scoffed, "Montgomery Bennett was the strongest male the Alliance has ever seen. As his son, your power is undeniable, even with my human blood. Men, males, like that don't die peacefully in their sleep in their mid-fifties." Considering the years of open animosity his mother had shown toward her former lover, Noah was stunned to see tears fill her eyes. "They go out in a blaze of glory due their station, or they're taken out by the cowards who fear them," she murmured. "I, for one, have my money on the latter."

"And you'd be right," he said softly, feeling for his mother no matter how much her views and resistance to change were disappointing him. "But the Council didn't have anything to do with it. It was Rhys who had him killed. Ava all but heard him admit it."

Neia let out a grave, mirthless laugh, "While your sourcing is impeccable, I assure you that the Council knows exactly what happened to your father, no matter who pulled the trigger, so to speak."

"Rhys would never have been allowed to take up the Eclipse Alphadom if they'd known he was behind Montgomery's death."

Neia closed her eyes and let out a deeply exhausted breath, "It doesn't matter who did it, Noah; it matters why. Your father's own personal empire was growing too powerful. It was making the other worms on the Council jealous. When he turned up dead, it alleviated a lot of problems for a lot of people on the Council. I'm sure it was just the gold star on top that his replacement was a teat-suckling moron."

"That moron committed patricide," he cautioned. "You may not think much of him, but underestimating Rhys is clearly dangerous."

"You're giving him far more credit than he deserves, Noah, dear. The easiest targets are the ones who are the most unsuspecting. It's not so surprising that your father was taken unawares, but the Council is never so blind. They have exactly who they want heading Eclipse, and you mark my words. It's only one of the many reasons why your ridiculous little plan is so foolish."

"There's nothing foolish about having an equal say."

"You aren't their equal, Noah. Not in their eyes." When she looked at Noah, her onyx eyes were filled with a palpable sorrow. "At the first sign of opposition, the first moment your ideals misalign, they'll show you just how much your input truly matters, I guarantee it."

"So, this is how it's always going to be, then?" Noah shrugged, feeling just as much at a loss as he was certain she did. "Us against them. Forever."

"That's just the way that it is, Noah," Neia replied, her voice regaining a bit of its earlier vigor. "Unless we do something to change that. Unless we stick to our original goal."

"Your goal, you mean," he countered. "Regaining my place as Eclipse's Alpha was always my goal. Until now, I had thought that it was yours, too."

Neia reached out and cupped her son's jaw in one hand. So many of his attributes he'd inherited from her, but his jawline and chin were his father's.

"I simply want what we achieve to last, my love."

"No, you want revenge." It pained him to remove her hand from his face, but he did so anyway. They were at a crossroads, and this wasn't the time for coddling. For either of them.

"Fortunately, this is one decision that is wholly mine to make. We're doing this my way," he said.

Neia frowned, hurt and anger suffusing her expression, "You mean the Alphas' way."

Noah rose to his feet and began to make his way toward the door.

"Don't you walk away from me, Noah!" Neia shouted, "You would never have gotten this far without me!"

And you won't get any further without me, so I suggest you find a way to get yourself on board." Noah leveled her with a final withering look as he stood at the threshold and prepared to leave his mother behind, "You can see yourself out."