

## Chapter 119

### Changing Of The Guard

12:30 PM

"Earth to Ava! How is this not inspiring something in you?"

The fingers snapping in Ava's face caused her to blink back into the present...and then blink again in surprise at the enormous stone figure rising up out of the Upper New York Bay before her, "Oh, wow...where did that come from?" Beside her, Aiden chuckled and held up the pamphlet he picked up from the kiosk outside of the ferry dock, "According to this, France all the way back in 1884 as a sign of friendship and a celebration of independence. Hmm...maybe the Alpha's should've had a statue commissioned for tonight?"

From her other side, Bren snorted, "I'm glad to see that the moment hasn't been wasted on you, Miss. I've lived a few hours from New York City my entire life and have never seen the Statue of Liberty."

Ava shrugged, raising her phone to capture a picture of the towering figure like a proper little tourist, "I've told you how it was; if it wasn't for Pack-related business, I didn't travel. Hell, I'm only here right now because of Pack business, technically."

"Are you nervous about the meeting?" Bren asked.

"Of course, I am!" Ava groaned, "But, I've done everything that I can. It's all up to them to seal the deal, now. They're all big boys, and I can trust them to express themselves without sparking a civil war." Aiden smirked, "You don't believe that for a second, do you."

"Of fucking course not. My stomach is in knots right now," Ava exclaimed as she leaned her head back against the ferry railing and forced herself to take a deep breath.

"Can't say that I'm not the least bit relieved to be getting out of dodge," Aiden admitted. "I only wish that you were coming with us, Ava. I still say that nothing good is coming out of this shit with the Council, no matter if the Alphas come out on top or not."

"But, we completely respect that staying behind is your decision to make," Bren quickly interjected as Aiden gave a non-committal grunt. "Even so, coming out to California with us is an open invitation. If things get too

hot out here, please promise you'll take us up on the offer. At least for a little getaway?"

Ava wrapped an arm around Bren's shoulders and gave her a squeeze, "Even if everything after tonight is nothing but rainbows and Kit-Kats, I promise I'd still come for a visit. After all, I still have unfinished business in California that I have every intention of finishing. I just have to make sure things are settled here, first."

"Alright, alright, It's time to change the subject," Aiden said. "We've only got a few hours left until our flight leaves, and I don't want to spend what's left of it being sad."

Ava smiled at two of the most important people in her life and agreed. She hated the thought of them leaving almost as much as she yearned to join them. It meant the world to her that Noah had given her his blessing, not because it was his decision to make, but because he recognized the need in her and wanted her to be satisfied.

And, if Ava was being honest, there was nothing more that she wanted at that moment than to board that flight with her brother and her best friend and explore the world Layla had so badly wanted for the both of them.

But, there was an insidious whispering in her mind that refused to be silenced or ignored. It kept echoing the same words to her over and over, not yet, not yet, not yet....

By this point, Ava knew better than to ignore her instincts; they were the only reason she was alive today, the only reason she hadn't curled up and let the darkness take her years ago. It scared her to take these whisperings seriously, but it terrified her what could happen to Noah, to Xavier, and her friends if she left and the voices were right.

So, for now, she'd stay.

5:45 PM

With the Alliance's Harvest Moon Symposium set to begin in only a matter of minutes, it was hardly a surprise that August Michaels found himself among the very first to arrive, even among his own Pack's representatives. He hardly minded, though. It gave him a moment of peace to gather himself before the bombastic jawing began, and he - as his station entailed - joined the fray of pretentious small talk.

As with any official gathering of the Council, it was widely expected that the annual Harvest gathering would ultimately amount to nothing. But this celebration of each Pack boasting their wealth or hiding their shame would be different this year.

Then again, what aspect of August's worldview had failed to take him by surprise, the goddess had tested him lately, and he knew that he'd been found wanting. Of the numerous recent blows to his ego, August found among the most shameful of his own misgivings was just how...inflexible

he'd become over the years. And just how much that hubris had cost, not just him, but those he held most dear.

So, this Harvest Moon, he relished the silence before the storm. This time of year, the sun was already beginning to set behind the New York skyline, bathing the sky in shades of ochre and amber. The full moon rose high and full in the distance, making his Wolf sing beneath his skin. The post-meeting run would be especially invigorating this year.

Season of change, indeed.

"Well met, August."

"Well met, Wyatt." August nodded cordially at the elder Alpha as he strode in and took his seat. He was a good male, fair and resilient, but the years had clearly taken their toll. It was no wonder his son handled most of the Pack's heavy lifting as of late. It was only a shame that the boy was too stubborn to allow his father the release of a quiet retirement.

"I take it that Xavier explained that tonight's Symposium will be more...eventful than usual?" Wyatt asked.

August nodded but didn't elaborate as others had finally begun to file in, "And you've found these events to your liking?"

The Dark Moon Alpha huffed out a wheezy laugh. "Any cause worthy of urging my lackadaisical son into action is to my liking well enough," he sighed and lowered his voice so much that August had to concentrate to pick up his words. "Besides, old friend, whether we like to think so or not, our time is past. And if it means the Council as we know it dies along with it...I am at peace."

August was spared having to dwell on the male's uniquely morose take by the arrival of the dinner spread, where dishes representative of each Pack territory were served. After the respective greetings and a prayer of thanks, dinner was underway.

August partook, more out of habit than anything. It was strikingly obvious that Wyatt and Rhys were the only Alphas yet to arrive, and the majority of August's attention was utilized straining to keep tabs on who thought what of their absence. "The disrespect..."

"Good riddance..."

"More for me...."

To be fair, while the missing Alphas were a topic of conversation throughout dinner, August hadn't heard anything much worse than would be readily said to any of the young leader's faces. Although, he didn't fail to notice how increasingly agitated the Eclipse Alpha seemed to grow as the night drew on.

August watched the sun sink lower and lower as dinner finally came to a close.

"Well, Old Man Wyatt," exclaimed Rhys, smug bravado clear across his face. "Since it would seem that we're the only Alphas who deemed this, one of our most sacred traditions, worth their time...I say we call an early end to this farce."

"Hasty as always, Rhys."

Two dozen heads turned at once, following the sound of Xavier's voice. August watched as his son and his compatriots filed in and took their empty seats as if nothing was amiss.

"I didn't realize that being fashionably late was an appropriate gesture for sacred rites," Rhys sneered.

"You aren't wrong," the soft-spoken Silver Moon Alpha interjected. "And so, I propose that we move this along. There's no point in prolonging the evening."

"Excuse me?" The Eclipse Alpha scoffed, looking back and forth between the other Alphas.

"I agree," Xavier announced as he produced a file much like the one he'd compiled for Victor's trial and spread it across the now-empty conference table.

"What is this?" As soon as one Eclipse council member opened the floodgates, the questions began pouring out, the meeting quickly descending into confused mutterings and unfounded accusations.

August watched as Rhys Bennett silently reached for a sheet of paper and then another one, growing increasingly pale as the din around him grew.

"It's come to our attention that one formerly counted among our ranks failed to uphold the values that we as a collective hold in regard," Xavier projected, his voice cutting through the growing clamor. "Montgomery Bennett was a liar and a murderer who committed grievous crimes against the Alliance....including orchestrating the assassination of several Red Moon members, including my sister."

"And initiating interterritorial violence that led to the death of my mate," Liam snarled.

Affronted silence permeated the conference room as the Council members took in the information that they, no doubt, were far less surprised to hear than they put on.



"Shame as that is, what are we supposed to do about it, now? Montgomery Bennett is long dead," exclaimed one Dark Moon representative.

"A fact that suggests that the apple doesn't stray far from the tree," the Silver Moon Alpha remarked. Tentative stares slid in Rhys' direction, causing the younger male to bare his teeth in return.

"That's a bold and unproven accusation," he snarled.

"True," Xavier said, tapping on a particularly thick sheaf of papers. "But what is irrefutable is that before his untimely death, Montgomery Bennett transferred all rights to his legacy away from his second son, Rhys Bennett...and to his newly legitimized first-born, Noah Thomas."

Rhys shot to his feet, driving his knuckles into the conference table's stone tabletop, "My father was sick and old. Whatever you think you've found is the delusion of a male nearing the end of his life."

"Be that as it may, the paperwork was filed. I saw to it myself."

Heads whipped toward Wyatt, who calmly looked on, hands folded as if braced against the wave of vitriol coming his way.

"Then you're an enabler," Rhys snarled. "Eclipse will not forget the night you came for us!"

"On the contrary, tonight spells a new era for Eclipse. And I don't plan on kicking it off with grudges."

A male who could only be the aforementioned Noah Thomas stepped into the room and approached the table, flanked on either side by one of his soldiers. The male was broad-shouldered and straight-backed, and he exuded an air of borderline cocky confidence that immediately identified him as Montgomery Bennett's son. Although, August had to admit that he carried that inherited arrogance far better than his younger brother.

Rhys went rigid at the sight of his brother, already commanding attention, if not outright respect, "You dare come here on this sacred night and approach this Council making claims on my Pack?!"

"With valid reason to do so." Xavier rose to his feet and addressed the dumbfounded consortium. "I move to invoke the Law of Governance, one of the founding declarations of our esteemed Alliance granting the Alphas majority vote over the Council. Red Moon votes to reinstate one Noah Thomas as the rightful heir to the Eclipse Alphadom."

"This is preposterous!"

"No!"

"Can they do this?"

Indignant shouts rose up, most prominently from the Eclipse representatives, and only grew as Liam Smith rose to his feet, as well.

"Silver Moon votes to reinstate one Noah Thomas as the rightful heir to the Eclipse Alphadom."

"How dare you?"

"After all we've done for your sniveling Pack?!"

"This can't be legal. Grave Crown isn't even here!"

All at once, the jeering hushed as the eldest and most respected among them rose to his feet.

"Dark Moon votes to reinstate one Noah Thomas as the rightful heir to the Eclipse Alphadom."

The tension in the room redoubled as Wyatt Miller smiled serenely across the table, "It would seem that those in favor have the majority. Congratulations, Alpha Thomas. Do your Pack proud."

The New Eclipse Alpha grinned as the ousted one fumed, utterly rocked by the sudden turn of events.

Noah stepped forward to address the Council, "You do not know me, but I- "

"For the glory of the Untethered! For the glory of Eclipse!"

Noah's face fell as he, along with the rest of those gathered, turned toward the source of the cry. Perhaps if it had not been for the nearly tangible level of testosterone and hostility clogging their senses, they would have been prepared to see one of the New Alpha's guards pull out a pistol, aim, and fire a bullet straight through Rhys Bennett's skull.

Bennett's warm body hadn't even finished falling to the floor; the first horrified scream hadn't had a chance to be bellowed before the remaining guard pulled out a small black box and flipped a switch, sending the world around them up in white-hot flame and a haze of otherworldly shimmer.