

Chapter 13

A Deal

It was clear from Xavier's standoffish posturing that he didn't consider it necessary for Ava to be a part of this conversation.

Still, Bella's eyes flicked nervously toward Ava and back as she forced a breathy chuckle. "I'm sorry, sir, I don't think you understand what you're asking."

"I understand that I'm not asking at all. I gave you an order, Ms. Sutton."

Bella ducked her head in a nod, "Of course, sir. If you'll allow me a moment to prepare, I'd be happy to prepare a demonstration for you." She hesitated for just a moment before continuing, "It would give you the opportunity to see how we train our staff."

This time, the smile Xavier offered was nearly genuine, "That would be perfect, Bella. Thank you."

With another nod, Bella strode out of the conference room, notably lacking much of the grace she had strode in with.

When the door shut behind her, Xavier walked over to a fully stocked bar hutch and grabbed a laser-cut crystal glass. Ava stood in disbelief as Xavier pondered over a half-dozen decanted liquors before grabbing a jug that held a deep caramel liquid.

He poured himself two fingers worth and took a sip and nodded appreciatively, "Delamain cognac - Bella doesn't skimp." He held the glass out to Ava, "Doesn't get much better than this, no matter what the old hats say. You should try some." Ava stared at him in dumbfounded silence. She was still reeling from the confrontation they'd just had and his twisted revelation he'd just made with no context, no explanation. Ava's racing thoughts became a singular homogenous drone as she marched forward and smacked the glass from Xavier's outstretched hand.

The glass shattered, spraying brandy-colored liquid all over the club's polished floors. Xavier glanced down at the mess and sighed, "That liquor was older than you are."

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Someone I considered a friend murdered my sister. You?"

"Someone I considered a friend is in the process of *pimping me out*!"

Xavier spread his arms wide, encompassing not just the room they stood in, but the entire compound, "You found your own way here, Ava. If you were smarter, you would have taken this opportunity for yourself instead of contenting yourself to scrubbing toilets for the next ten years."

He brought a hand down to point an accusing finger in Ava's face, "But that's you, Ava. Always happy to take the easy way out."

Ava's lips drew back in a snarl, "If I were smarter, I'd- " Ava bit back whatever she had been about to say. She was certain that nothing that would have come out of her mouth right then would have helped her cause any. "Are you even listening to yourself? This entire evening has been a nightmare and every time I think you can't get worse, you outdo yourself!"

Xavier's laughter was joyless and cruel, "What? Am I not the *nice guy* you remember?"

Suddenly overcome by a wave of sadness, Ava paused. No, he wasn't the sarcastic and thoughtful boy she'd grown up with. Hell, he wasn't even the charming and stoic future leader he presented to the world. Like her, something intrinsic in Xavier had broken.

For the first time that night, however, Ava wondered if Xavier realized it, too.

It still didn't give him the right to treat her the way he had been all night and she was beyond sick of being strung around like a puppet.

"What is your endgame, Xavier? I asked you earlier with the kissing bullshit, but *for real*," She stalked forward until they were toe-to-toe. "What are you getting out of humiliating me like this?"

The bastard looked perplexed for a second, as if he'd completely forgotten how he'd almost forced her to kiss some asshole in a room full of strangers earlier that night. "I already told you what I want, Ava. Your humiliation is neither here nor there for me."

"Whether you realize it or not, I'm doing you a favor." He said.

Ava cocked her head to one side, "How do you figure?"

"You wanted your freedom," reaching behind him, he grabbed the cognac bottle and brought it straight to his lips, taking a long drag. "Earn it."

"As a prostitute? No big fucking deal, right?"

Xavier tutted in mock disappointment, "Such reductive language, Ava. They work hard, and Bella makes sure they're properly recognized for their efforts."

Oh, Ava **knew** that already. As part of the housekeeping staff, she'd done plenty of rotations on the floors where the 'court members' lived. Unlike the service staff, the court warranted much more of Madame Bella's attention and benefited from being the face of the club.

Fine food, spa treatments, plush rooms - even after the cost of their maintenance was subtracted from their regular earnings, most members accumulated enough revenue to cash out and leave the club within a couple of years. And it wasn't uncommon for some to extend their contracts, paying the club a cut of their profits to allow them to stay on longer.

As for Ava, as the only service worker who actually lived at the club, she was paying for room and board on top of what essentially amounted to minimum wage. She hated him for throwing it in her face, but Xavier hadn't been wrong by saying she'd be cleaning the Green Light Club until she was frail and gray.

It still beat the dungeon, though.

"Why not just send me back to the dungeon if I need to be punished so badly? After all, that's where I should be right now."

Xavier took another long drink from the cognac bottle, "I have my reasons for not sending you back to the prison, and I'll leave it at that. You should be lucky that I'm offering you the chance to earn your freedom, at all." Freedom. The prospect seemed too good to even consider, especially when coming from Xavier Michaels.

Still...

"How?"

Xavier made a low sound of approval, "A fair trade; you work here long enough to earn five-hundred grand, and we'll call your dept paid. Then, I never want to see you in Red Moon territory for the rest of either of our lives." Five-hundred thousand dollars. Ava did the mental math and figured, at the rate the court members made on average per customer, she could earn that in about two years - maybe less if she kept her living expenses down. If Ava swallowed her pride and considered his offer objectively, it wasn't a bad deal. At the very least, it was the best she'd been given in a long time.

Ava took a deep breath and slowly reached out, taking the half-empty bottle from Xavier's hand. She downed a good portion of the biting liquor in a single swallow. "What's the catch. I know you have one." Xavier's lips lifted in a crooked grin, "Three months."

Ava choked on her next mouthful of alcohol. "Excuse me?" She sputtered.

"You have three months to earn your freedom, Ava. Or you could always try running away again. Cause that went so well last time." And that was it. No reasoning, no explanation, no *logic* - just his terms, stated with no room for debate. There was no amount of magic training that would allow her to make that kind of scratch in such a short amount of time...but, if there were somehow a way, Ava would find it. If nothing else, the last three years had proven that she was adaptable to a fault.

She'd learned how to survive prison, she'd convinced Madame Bella to allow her to stay, even when the female didn't believe she had any value. Even now, she was sharing a somewhat civilized drink with the very person who'd dropped a nuke on her life and proceeded to drag her on an emotionally traumatic rollercoaster all night.

Just as she always had, Ava would do what she needed to survive. And, if she walked out of the other side with half a million dollars in her pocket, that was all the better.

"Fine."

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Both of Xavier's eyebrows shot up toward his hairline, "What was that?"

She knew full well the bastard had heard her the first time, "You have a deal."

Ava threw back her head and downed the rest of the Delamain, just as the door opened and Bella walked back inside.

With a marble-like face, she took in their terse stances, the mess of broken glass and expensive alcohol on the floor and remained completely silent. Hands folded demurely before her; Bella waited patiently to be addressed. "How can I trust you?" Ava whispered.

"As goddess as my witness - or Bella, if that makes you more comfortable - I swear to uphold my end of our bargain, if you can manage to keep yours."

He turned to the observing female, "Ms. Sutton, make note that Ava has three months to make five-hundred thousand dollars. If she succeeds, her debt to the Red Moon Pack is paid and she is free to leave as she sees fit." Madame Bella's mouth dropped open before she caught herself and just nodded.

"I'll have a lawyer come past and draw up the necessary paperwork," he said, and she quietly nodded once more.

"Now, I was promised a demonstration?"

Bella jerked into action, "Y-yes, of course."

She walked over to a panel of buttons on the wall. Pressing a switch, the lights in the meeting room dimmed while the lights in the display room brightened. Sultry music began to play as two performers, one male and one female, entered the room and began to play with one another, caressing each other, punctuating each touch with deep kisses.

Xavier took a seat at the table and began to watch. Madame Bella poured him another drink but paused by Ava before returning to the table.

"Will...you be okay?" The older female asked with unexpected concern in her dark eyes.

Ava remembered her reticence to allow Ava to stay in the first place, since Ava wouldn't be able to service the majority of their clients, due to the weakened state her Wolf was in.

Ava swallowed past the nervous lump in her throat, "I guess that's up to you, now."