

## Chapter 132

### Dire Straits

Xavier walked through the long winding stone corridors of the Red Moon and tried his fucking hardest not to get sick. To call the conditions the inmates had been living under would be an understatement so severe it would require an unhealthy dose of cognitive dissonance to even utter.

The facility was big, far larger than the actual number of current inmates called for. And so it baffled him to no end why when the building could fit two prisoners per cell with relative comfort, there was so much fucking evidence suggesting that so many cells were crammed to bursting with two or three times that amount.

And it was filthy. From the inmate's sleeping quarters to the cafeteria to the shower rooms, every visible surface was covered in a thick layer of grime. Unsettling russet splotches were smeared periodically across walls, the floors, even the goddess damned ceiling. One of their men who had

been in charge of scouting out the prison had reported back significant evidence of a roach and rodent infestation.

Somehow, despite how thoroughly disturbed the conditions of the building already were, it still managed to surprise Xavier when he reached the areas designated for the guards and warden, only to find them all but pristine. Clearly, the lack of maintenance wasn't due to some unfortunate budgetary restraints or a lack of capable staff. No, it was very, very deliberate.

In fact, these particular quarters were incredibly, remarkably well-stocked. So much so that if he were to double-check the inventory sheets, Xavier would bet that the amount of available food, water, and general amenities reserved for the prison staff would come up quite a bit higher than that left to tend to the actual prisoners.

If he thought about it, if he were a lazy, selfish, who didn't blink twice at inflicting the slow torture and deaths of other living beings just to skirt by more comfortably, then being housed in a veritable fortress would seem like a pretty cushy way to wait out a sudden political and societal upheaval.

They had already given a proper burial to the bodies of the guards and the warden days ago, and still, Xavier had half a mind to dig the mother fuckers back up just so he could toss their weighted corpses into the middle of the deepest body of water he could find.

Swine, the entire lot of them. Red Moon swine. This, Xavier thought, was on him. And on his father and his grandfather before them. It didn't make sense to him. His father was a deeply flawed male, but Xavier knew that, at his core, he was good. How, then, does something like this happen right underneath their noses?

"You're blaming yourself."

Xavier didn't bother to turn to look over his shoulder to the doorway where he knew Liam stood. "That isn't news, Smith," he muttered. "I have a lot to be ashamed of."

"Silver Moon's a shit hole, too."

At that, Xavier turned to face his friend. As per usual, Liam didn't so much stand as he did post up, legs braced at shoulder width, leanly chorded arms crossed over his chest, and face as solemn as a stone. "You guys putting the Geneva Convention to the test down south?" Xavier snarked.

"Maybe not intentionally, I'll give you that. But there's been more than one winter night where we've struggled to keep inmates from freezing just long enough for the sun to hit the horizon. And there's been more instances than I care to admit that our best efforts failed anyway."

Xavier bowed his head at the news, "I'd heard rumors, but I didn't realize things were that tight in Silver Moon."

"Right, cause by all accounts, it shouldn't make sense that the biggest territory should have so little, especially since we're one of the least populated. Washington D.C. is right in our back fucking yard, for fuck's sake." Liam gave a derisive scoff, "You weren't the only figurehead Alpha, Xavier. At least your father cared enough about public perception that he didn't let his people starve."

Xavier frowned, "I remember being a damn fine male."

"He was the best," Liam replied, his voice going tight with emotion. "And he died too soon. It didn't take a year for Silver Moon's Councilors to steamroll me, render me all but obsolete. Our region's tax agreement with the States already left us with barely anything to get by."

Liam gritted his teeth but kept going. "But then someone had the bright idea to start loaning out soldiers for profit rather than duty to the Alliance. That was how Amelia died, on some meaningless patrol route for a nearby tech warehouse," he said, hands clenching into fists. "They had no business being there, and Amelia's team wasn't the first to get hurt on the job. The wrongful death suits and insurance payouts started rolling in soon after they started that practice. Silver Moon hasn't been in the black in years."

Xavier cursed underneath his breath, "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Why did you go years allowing yourself to believe that your five-foot-nothing best friend murdered two people?" He snapped. "Why is Dylan still acting like we don't all know that his father was terminal and would already be on his way out the door if one of Neia's bombs hadn't gotten to him first?"

The male's brutal honesty hit Xavier hard, but he forced himself to listen rather than react.

"It's all part of the same problem, Xavier. We were born and raised into a tainted system, built to be followers no matter what our bloodline dictates," Liam gestured to the dilapidated building around him. "This didn't happen in your lifetime. It took years and generations of rot to get this far. You, me, and Dylan? We already took the first step to make things right, and it quite fucking literally blew up in our faces. Moping about what could have, would have, should have been, isn't going to get us where we need to be in order to finish the fucking job."

"You're right," Xavier admitted. "But how do we get things back on track? Right now, we're so busy trying to keep our people alive against the myriad of outside forces trying to do us in that we're spread too thin to even think about going on the offensive."

"Then we need to work smarter, not harder," Liam mused as he turned to start making his way back down the corridor away from the depressing scene they'd just witnessed and back to the area of the prison that, thanks

to a couple of shipments from the Green Light, was somehow beginning to feel less desolate.

"So far, Neia has consistently always been one step ahead of us," Liam pointed out. "She's had years to prepare this; she created it. We need to hit her where she won't see it coming. Luckily, she played her hand by attacking us during the scouting mission. Now, we know the one thing she doesn't have control over, no matter how much she might want to." Understanding hit Xavier like a brick, "Noah. He went behind her back and told Ava about the deal with the Governors." "Exactly," Liam nodded. "It looks like Noah hasn't gotten as far onboard with Mommy Dearest's plans as she thought he would."

"Be that as it may, he doesn't leave her side. He might be his mother's blind spot, but we can't fucking get to him," Xavier spat.

"That is the problem, yes," the other male agreed. "Our next step is figuring out how to force Noah's hand. We need him to come to us."

Just then, like some sort of divine musing, the answer appeared in Xavier's mind, "Trial by Combat."

Liam stopped walking and spun to face him, "I'm sorry? I thought I heard you suggest we announce a Trial by fucking Combat. Like this is the Middle Ages, or some shit."

"It's the perfect opportunity, Liam. When he accepts, he'll be forced out of Eclipse in order to fight."

"You mean if he accepts, which he would never do if he had so much as half a brain."

"I disagree. I think that you're underestimating how Thomas hates what his mother's done. It makes me wonder what the original plan was before she decided to crank shit up to one-thousand," Xavier insisted. "Neia's little tantrum cost Noah everything, his seat, his legacy...even his female. Mother or not, I doubt he's moved past that fact."

Liam went silent, deep in thought. "Say he does show up and even fights. What's the end goal? Trials by Combat were created to challenge another Alpha for their title as leader of the Pack. Not only are there no titles to win, there aren't even really Packs to lead. What's the incentive to fight."

Xavier shrugged, "We can always pitch fealty. Loser disbands their army and takes punishment as the winner sees fit. That would end that conflict, at least."

"It would also most likely end in his mother's execution if he lost. He'd never go for that. He's already proven that he'll put her life above his own."

"Then let him," Xavier growled. "If the bastard can't take his head out of his ass long enough to see reason, then we do things biblically - winner takes all, loser ends up dead."

"Okay, and please tell me who's job it'll be to volunteer for that shitshow idea."

Xavier started walking off, already deliberating the best way to send his message to Noah, "Me."