

Chapter 141

Homecoming

Eight months ago, if someone had told Ava that just the sight of the Green Light Club's garish neon sign would be enough to make her smile, she would have laughed in their face. Alright, well, she probably wouldn't have, but she certainly wouldn't have believed them either.

And yet, here she was, grinning from ear to ear, at the prospect of feeling something familiar, even if the majority of her memories of the place were of the variety that was best left forgotten. She was fairly sure that there was probably some sort of clinical diagnosis with a long name used to describe the contextually perverse sense of relief she felt at her first glance of shiny black lacquer and crushed green velvet.

Goddess, this place was awful, and she was so glad to be back.

Then again, the journey getting back to the club had been fraught enough to make her eager to climb under the first black silk duvet she saw, regardless of the fact that it could never, under any circumstances, ever be shown under a UV light. Ava hadn't really known what she had pictured whenever she considered how exactly Xavier had traveled out of a state that had been put into a strict lockdown for months. The reality, however, was that he'd had to be snuck across state lines down to Pennsylvania, where he'd taken a very, very small, decidedly non-commercial plane out of Pittsburgh's tiny regional airport so as to better avoid detection.

Thank the goddess, they had been able to take a standard-sized plane back into Pennsylvania, but from there, they were right back to sneaking. Luckily, most of Pennsylvania was made up of woods and farmland, so when Dylan came to pick them up, not in one of the resistance's armored SUVs but in a completely non-descript grey sedan, it was a relatively easy drive across the vast swath of a state.

Getting across the border back into New York, however, had taken some finesse. Namely, fake IDs for Xavier and Dylan and a whole lot of lying on all of their parts. Apparently, this was all old hat for Dylan by this point.

After all, his primary role in the resistance was to act as a go-between for Bella's many underground contacts. Setting up fake documents, ferrying refugees and supplies back in forth, and skirting human border patrols was all in a day's work for the former Dark Moon Alpha.

The truly harrowing part of the drive had been after they had entered the Rochester city limits. It had taken the better part of two hours for them to navigate the city streets in the dark, avoiding human police and the litany of gangs that had cropped up looking for supernatural beings to harass.

While, for the most part, life for the humans of Rochester and the greater tri-state area trekked on, as usual, the effect the collapse of the Alliance had on everyday life was apparent to Ava. There were fewer people out on the streets, while the number of cops had multiplied. Ava noticed a number of storefronts that had anti-supernatural signage and even more that had simply closed up shop altogether, unwilling to end up in the potential crossfire.

The Green Light Club itself was neutral enough territory, simply because no human, no matter how high and mighty they might feel, was deluded enough into thinking that walking directly into a literal den of already pissed-off Werewolves would end in any other way than a bloodbath on their part.

It was definitely a boon that the club's reputation alone was enough to keep it safe since it was the most well-known and easily locatable of the resistance's hideouts, as well as the base of their operations. Even so, the changes to the once sordid locale were impossible to ignore.

Every allusion to the building's past as a den of iniquity had been expunged, down to someone wrapping the dance poles in the former public play area in string lights in an effort to attempt attention away from

their true purpose. And Ava was fairly certain from the sheer number of children running around the room to dissuade the kids from taking up any pole-centric extracurriculars themselves.

In fact, one of the most bizarre changes to Ava was the simple fact that the club was now brimming with women, children, and the elderly. It was a downright wholesome turn from the greasy middle-aged sleaze bags that had previously made up the club's clientele.

"I can't say that I expected to see you around these parts again. I thought I told you never to come back here."

Ava's arms were flung around her ex-mistress before Bella could even finish her unique brand of greeting. She had expected the professional madame to clam up and stiffen underneath her embrace like she used to back in the burgeoning days of their friendship. Instead, she was delighted when her friend immediately returned her hug, squeezing Ava tight.

"All things considered, I'm glad to see you, Ava," Bella muttered into her hair.

"I missed you, too, Bella."

Bella abruptly pulled away, quick to regain her ever-carefully crafted composure, even as Ava noticed the older female rapidly blink a few times as if to stave off any pesky emotions their reunion might have conjured

up. "Right, well, you're just in time for our next strategy meeting," Bella said as she began walking down the hallway, her stilettos clicking a satisfying tattoo against the marbled flooring. "You can fill me in on all the trouble you got up to on the West Coast on the way."

Ava shrugged. "I don't know if there's much worth telling," she shrugged. "I guess I did get crushed by a bear?"

After a brief pause, Bella just shook her head with a sigh. "Goddess, just start at the beginning, Ava."

Much like the first time Ava had found herself seated in a war room, Ava felt like she'd suddenly stumbled into something that was way over her head. And with good reason, too. Just like all those months ago in Xavier's suite, she was surrounded by the most powerful men in her society, locked in tactical discussions that could forever make or break the future of the world around them.

For someone who had never gotten the opportunity to fully step into her intended role as a Beta, Ava was well into the deep end now. She found the entire experience as heartbreaking as it was thrilling and terrifying.

The entire time she listened to the Alphas and their closest confidants share status reports and strategies, all the while preparing to share her own, Ava couldn't help but think that Noah should have been here. It was

no less than what he deserved after casting aside his own plans and choosing peace over violence.

Now, somehow, instead of offering support in favor of their shared cause, a cause she knew he still held dear to his heart...the cause was debating what tactics would be best used to destroy him.

"Trial by combat," Xavier announced. Around them, the atmosphere in the small meeting room ratcheted up several degrees.

"That's reckless, Xavier, and you know it," Liam bit out through gritted teeth. "At best, it's like throwing a bandage on a hemorrhage. At its worst, it'll confirm everything that the humans already fear about us, that we're animals losing our grip on our humanity, willing to resort to archaic practices that even our kind found too barbaric."

"Then let them think that," one of the minor captains snarled. "Trial by combat was a noble and respected practice back in the old country. It only became barbaric when we decided it best to kowtow to the humans, and we've done that ever since. Look where that's gotten us. We let them all but fucking castrate us."

From the other side of the table, Dylan cleared his throat. "Personal convictions aside, he's not wrong. What worked for the Alliance before clearly didn't cut it, so now is the time to reassess and start fresh. I, for

one, am game for a Trial. If we're going to iron this shit out, we need to start at home first."

"So, say we issue a Trail, and our side wins, then what?" Bella poses. "Even if that were enough to unify the Wolves, should they all agree to adhere to the ancient rules, this fight isn't ours alone."

Finally, Ava saw an opportunity to speak up. "I have a proposition for that. It's true that ending this initial conflict with Neia Thomas' army won't be enough to end the war," she said, nodding at the male who'd spoken up earlier. "Right now, there's a power void that needs to be filled, and neither the humans nor the other supernatural communities will blindly accept Woven rule again after this."

Around the table, Ava could see her words sinking in. Finally, Bella nods, "What do you suggest, Ava?"

"We need to start rebuilding bridges that were burned a long time ago."

Thirty minutes later, they were about a quarter of the way into a halfway decent plan of action when it came time for a break. Ava got up to stretch her legs and checked her phone, startled to find several missed calls from a private number that dated back to only minutes before. Even as she moved to redial the number, it flashed across her screen.

"Noah?" She asked in a low whisper.

"I just got intel that you're back in Rochester. Tell me it isn't true."

His voice sounded rushed, breathless...scared.

"It was a fairly last-minute thing, but yeah, I'm back."

Noah cursed. "Are you with Xavier? At that club?" He demanded, his frantic words running together. "If you are, you need to leave. I couldn't stop her in time. She cut me out of the loop-"

"Whoa, whoa, slow down! What are you saying?" She asked, trying to tamp down her rising fear.

"Ava, the club! She's going to att-"

The sound of gunfire drowned out the rest of his warning.

What exactly happened?