

## Chapter 149

### Keep Calm And Carry On

The helicopters hovered above the arena as long dark ropes unfurled from the gaping voids of their cockpits, and soldiers in white began to descend into the Trial grounds. The largest chopper in the group tilted downward, and Xavier watched in horror as gun turrets descended from the vehicle's hull.

Just as he shouted a warning, it was drowned out by the spray of rapid machine – gun fire that bathed the stands where his people, his allies, his mate stood watching on in bewildered shock. It was a stroke of luck and good fortune that Emmaline and Marnie Adair had insisted on attending the Trial along with several other representatives from their coven.

The witches were quick to respond, throwing up glimmering shields that did an excellent job of deflecting the rain of bullets, sending them careening off to join the hundreds of other projectiles currently reducing the two hundred-year-old structure to little more than kindling.

Xavier roared his fury and shifted, snapping around to find Noah. “What the fuck is the meaning of this, Thomas? Answer me, you fucking coward!”

He didn’t. Instead, he took a breath so deep it hunched his back and released a haunting, pointed howl that cut through the rat-a-tat of gunfire and the whirring of the helicopter’s blades. Xavier immediately understood the cry for what it was. A signal. A battle call.

Razor-sharp claws extended, Xavier prepared to lunge at Noah, ready to end his betrayal before he could get him and those closest to him killed.

Xavier, Stop!

He froze, hearing Ava’s voice as clear as day ricocheting throughout his mind. Even as he wanted to keep going, driven by rage, Alexandre pulled rank, stopping him dead in his tracks. No sooner did he stop than did Noah’s gathered soldiers raise their weapons and take aim. But not at the stunned resistance fighters. At the helicopters.

Noah’s soldiers released a torrent of lead hellfire upon the hovering behemoths and the wave of his mother’s soldiers currently making their way onto the ground. Almost immediately, the lead chopper with the machine guns disengaged, pulling up and away from the formation.

“You’re making a grave mistake, son.”

The staticky warning came from over the lead bird's megaphone, and even through the overbearing clamor of war, the fury in Neia Thomas' voice was clear.

Noah's only reply was to turn to Xavier, Wolfman to Wolfman, and growl, "We end this. Tonight."

Xavier didn't need more convincing than that. He nodded and turned toward the stands where his people stood safely behind the witch's shields, but nevertheless at the ready.

"If it comes from the sky," he howled. "It dies!"

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The world around Ava descended into chaos in a matter of moments, and she didn't know what to do. One minute, she was reliving her most frequently reoccurring nightmare as she watched Xavier and Noah square off against one another. Then, the helicopters appeared, and within the blink of an eye, Ava found herself once again neck-deep in the middle of a firefight.

She thanked the goddess that her interference with Xavier hadn't resulted in all of their deaths. Ava wished that she could say that she had seen through Noah's rouse, that shed known on some level that he would never go against the rules of the Trial and betray them all. But she hadn't. She'd

sensed that Xavier was going to attack, and she'd done what she could to stop him.

It had worked in their favor this time, but she couldn't ignore how dangerous that instinct was, especially in the midst of war.

Barraged by bullets, the rest of the helicopters retreated as the forces that were already on the ground continued to duke out. Ava joined the fray in the stands, protecting the spellcasters from any Neia's attackers while they offered ranged support.

"Stop this, Noah!" We've come so far, don't be so weak!"

Noah and Xavier continued to lead their soldiers against the brunt of Neia's attack, former enemies coming together as one against a common greater enemy. Together, the Alpha's quickly turned the tide of battle, pushing back Neia's army until it was only a matter of time before she'd be forced to all a retreat.

As she kicked away another soldier, grabbing his gun from his hands and emptying a few rounds into the kneecap of another, Ava began to hear the spellcasters behind her cry out.

"NO!"

“Goddesses, what is she doing? The woman’s insane!”

A hand grabbed Ava’s shoulder, and she looked up to find Marnie looking ashen. “We need to get these people out of here,” she gasped.

“What’s happening?” Ava urged, and Marnie pointed. Ava followed the witch’s gaze to Neia’s helicopter that had once again dipped low to the battlefield. The machine gun turrets had lowered again, but tis time they pulsed with a bright purple charge, one seemed to grown along with the acrid scent of burning ozone.

“Pixie Dust!” Marnie shouted, alerting everyone in range to pick up the call.

Emmaline rushed to her sister’s side and shouted, “To me!”

A canon spiked with Pixie Dust. Ava didn’t know exactly what something like that would do, but she remembered the aftermath of the Tower attack well enough.

Xavier! Ava called, urging him to look up and thank the goddess, he did. As she watched, desperately far away from the stands, Xavier shouted something causing Noah to look up.

“One last chance, my son.”

Noah sent a desolate look in the direction of the stands where he'd last seen her and took off sprinting toward the helicopter. Ava's insides turned to lead as she realized what he was doing. Noah was going to try to bring the helicopter down with his mother inside it. To protect them. To protect her.

“Do it.”

All at once, the pulsating purple charge solidified, causing the space around it to go silent a split second before it... burst. From behind her, Ava heard Emmaline yell something unintelligible through the blood rushing through her head, and a collective stream of bright blue energy went careening toward the helicopter. At the same time, Noah ran. He leaped, just managing to snag onto the chopper's landing gear, sending the hulking piece of metal reeling. Right into the witch's stream of energy.

There was a sonic boom, and the world went white, but the tidal wave of blowback that knocked Ava and everyone else still standing in that field of their feet was... cold, like an icy gale. Or like heat too hot for the body and mind to comprehend.

When the atmosphere finally cleared, it was raining, and all signs of the helicopters and the Thomas' were gone. Truly. There was no wreckage, no scorched earth. There was just... nothing.

What remained of Neia's soldiers ambled around the field aimlessly, looking as shaken and confused as the rest, but the fighting had finally, finally stopped.

Ava didn't realize that she was sobbing until she felt Xavier's arms around her, enveloping her in silent warmth as he rocked her back and forth in the rain. She didn't glean so much as a whisper of jealousy from their bond, just as a profound sense of sadness as her mate sat and helped her grieve the male who had taught her how to love.

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The first official gathering of the Northeastern Supernatural Union was called into session exactly three months after the night of the Blue Moon Trial. Although events unfolded quickly after Neia and Noah vanished, it had taken time to establish the proper connections between supernatural communities, but thankfully, that was only because there was so many conversations to be had.

Ava would have liked to have been able to say that it was the promise of a common goal that smoothed the Union's way forward with the human governments after Neia's fall, but as was so typical of powerful men, it was the appeal of saving face that moved the process along.

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Without Neia's backing, it wasn't long before the New York and Pennsylvania governors were forced to release the refugees as soon as the lockdowns were lifted. It didn't go unnoticed that such prominent figureheads had sided with a terrorist, and, in order to avoid further public outcry, the resistance's requests were quickly met.

They didn't ask for anything outlandish, just the free reign and resources needed to reestablish and rebrand the Alliance. Eager to return things to even a semblance of how they once were, the humans complied, and the NSU was born. The following months were a whirlwind of community outreach and press releases, all culminating to this, the Union's first official democratic vote of leadership where each represented group would determine their own governance, who would then represent them in the new Union.

There was, of course, Shannon of the New England Selkies, Emmaline of the Grave Crown Wolves, and Marnie of the New England Coventry and ambassador to the Consortium. Due to their proven leadership during the Alliance War, Xavier, Liam, and Dylan received a resounding number of votes, earning them the right to remain the reigning Alphas of their Pack territories and ensuring that Red Moon, Silver Moon, and Dark Moon's legacies lived on.



And so on the day went, with supernatural communities throughout the former Allied territories – most of which Ava and the Alpha's had never even heard of – were represented as they elected their own leaders, some of which, for the first time ever. The Union's Board of Representatives grew to over a dozen members that day, with room for more in the case that more communities petitioned to join.

“I know that it's been a long day, but there's one last matter at hand,” Ava announced, relieved that her role as the meeting's organizer and moderator would soon be ending. “What to do with the Eclipse Pack territories. Given that community's unique positioning after the war and its current... lack of leadership, we must either vote in new leadership for the Pack or choose to dissolve it altogether.”

Ava initiated the vote, and the majority choose to keep the Pack intact. It was, on the one hand, a relief to see the Pack stay, but that decision came with its own set of complications. As it were, they were the only community that wasn't able to represent themselves, complicit as so many of Eclipse was in Neia's tyranny and the Bennett's before her. So, it had been decided that determining the Pack's fate would be the board of Representatives' first task.

Ava sighed, “So be it. Would anyone like to put forward a nomination?”

“Yes. I would,” Xavier announced, hand raised. “I'd like to nominate Ava Davis as the Alpha of Eclipse.”

Ava stared at him in open horror as Dylan and Liam were quick to follow.

“Seconded.”

“Aye.”

One by one, Emmaline, Marnie, Shannon, and the rest of the community representatives Ava had spent the last few weeks getting to know all raised their hands to unanimously vote her in as the next Eclipse Alpha.

All semblance of professionalism dropped away as Ava gaped at everyone’s raised hands.

“A-are you sure?”

“Who better than to fill the final seat than the person who brought us together in the first place,” said Shannon.

Beside her, Emmaline nodded. “My existence is proof that times are changing for the Wolves, whether we’re prepared or not,” she agreed and smiled. “But, I’d rather we adapted quickly.”

Ava's throat tightened with wonder and an overwhelming sense of gratitude. She didn't know what to say, especially without crying. Fortunately, Dylan rarely had the same problem.

"Besides, Eclipse is a fucking mess," he quipped. "We didn't do any favors."

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"Congratulations, Alpha Davis," Marnie greeted her with a smile as the meeting adjourned. Then, she surprised Ava by being the one to actually initiate their hug.

"I wonder if I'll ever get used to that," Ava breathed.

"You will because you've earned it."

Ava felt herself flush. "Not without you, I wouldn't have. Can you imagine what would have happened if I hadn't walked into your tent that day?" Ava asked and immediately began to sweat at the horrendous possibilities. "What were the odds? Unless... It was by chance that I walked into your tent, wasn't it?"

A slow, knowing smile spread across Marnie's lips until Ava's jaw dropped. "I'm just fucking with you," the witch laughed. "But who's to

say, really. That's the funny things about destiny; you never really see it coming until it's already arrived."

Then and there, Ava decided that wasn't a subject she wanted to scratch the surface of. "Did you want to come out with the other Alphas and me? They said that they wanted to give me some pointers, but I think we're all just going to let Emmaline teach us how to run a functioning pack."

"I wish I could, but I have some studying to do," Marnie replied, a far-off look crossing her face. "There's just...something about that explosion the night of the Trial that I can't get out of my head."

Ava swallowed hard. "You mean the one that...killed Noah. You know that wasn't your fault, right?"

Marnie blinked and looked askance. "Yeah, I know. The thing I'm not sure of is if there's anything to actually be sorry for."

"What do you mean?" Ava whispered, and Marnie shook off her reminiscence.

"Probably just wishful thinking, but it's an itch I want to scratch," Marnie began to turn away when she paused. "Ava, have you ever heard of 'The One That Started It All.'"

Ava's brow furrowed. "The first portal? The one that opened the divide to Axis. I thought no one knew how that happened. It was just a fluke that had been lost to time."

"Huh. Yeah, just a fluke..." Marnie gave her a vague smile and patted her on the back before walking away.

Ava didn't have much time to dwell on Marnie's parting words before the comforting scent of wood ash and violets filled her nose, and a leanly muscled arm wrapped around her shoulders.

"Ready to head out?"

Ava breathed out a heavy sigh. "That's a loaded question. In here, I'm still Ava the Gamma. Out there, I have to be an Alpha," she said, her voice wavering. "How do you know that I can do it, Xavier?"

Ava blinked up at Xavier, who met her gaze with nothing less than complete utter confidence. "Because I've seen you stride through every layer of hell and step out the other side with a smile on your gorgeous fucking face and compassion in your heart," he said, pressing a kiss to her temple. "And it won't be easy, but this time you won't be alone. As long as I live, you'll never be alone again, Ava Davis. I love you."

“I love you too, Xavier.” It still felt odd to say out aloud, but she meant it with everything in her, and it felt like a miracle to know and feel that he meant it back.

And that’s how Ava knew that, finally, after all of this time, she’d finally found her place. The spirits of those long-depart and dear to her no longer haunted her; they motivated her to continue living and thriving; like they always had, even if Ava couldn’t see it at the time.

As she and Xavier walked linked together, mind, body, and spirit, Ava wasn’t afraid for whatever the future brought because no matter where the road took her, she knew she would always find her way home.