

## Chapter 18

### Talk In Hospital : Part 2

Bella placed an arm around Ava's shoulder and drew her in, allowing the girl to rest her head while she cried. After a while, the body-wracking sobs settled into sniffles. She took the box of tissues Bella offered and began cleaning herself up, wiping away the remnants of her catharsis.

They settled into a companionable silence while Ava finished regathering her composure. With a comforting pat on the back, Bella began to rise from her spot on Ava's bed, "I shou- "

"What did you mean?" Ava interrupted, "About the prisons."

Taking a beat, Madame Bella seemed to weigh how just how much she'd already revealed to the girl and how much more she was comfortable sharing. Finally coming to some internal conclusion, Bella slowly lowered herself back down to her spot at Ava's side.

"I was the daughter of an Omega - a single mother, and a member of...another Pack within the Alliance. Like so many others before and after her, she'd spent her life working herself to the bone in order to make sure those of higher status were comfortable."

Bella paused for a moment before continuing, "It only took one misstep - some perceived slight against the mate of a neighboring Pack's Alpha, and my mother was sent to an Alliance prison, just so that her Alpha could save face with his peer. No one cared that she had a young child at home, waiting for her mother to come back. No one bothered to investigate the estranged uncle who'd been forced to take the girl in after her mother's imprisonment..." Bella trailed off, lost in memories of a far-off past that were still achingly fresh. "I still don't know what it was that she did. No one told me."

The older female seemed to give herself a shake before continuing, "I ended up being sold to a local pimp by my uncle - he had too much debt and no head for responsibility." Her tone was laden with long-held animosity. "I spent the next ten years being passed around to members of the Alliance's most elite members. Sometimes, I was a companion for their children, for a time, and I'd receive the same education and training as the rising Alphas and Betas. And at other times..."

Ava shifted uncomfortably, perturbed by the implications behind Madame Bella's words. This wasn't some abstract concept in a stranger's sad tale - this had been Ava's life, as well. As a rising Beta, herself, she'd run in the circles Bella was talking about.

How many of her grandfather and father's peers had participated in the atrocities that were being detailed. The thought that Ava could have sat in class, learning Alliance history alongside a child in Bella's position made Ava's stomach lurch. "My time with the upper class taught a lot. My favorite lessons were on how best to manipulate the hubris of the rich in order to mimic them, how to become invaluable to them so that I could be in a position to make a difference. So that's what I did."

Bella ran a hand down a lock of her waist-length hair and inspected the ends before tossing it back over her shoulder. "It may be unconventional, and to many, cruel. But over the last twenty years, I've liberated two hundred and thirty-seven females and males from Alliance prisons, as well as the region's underground sex trade. I took them among my ranks and made them my own court. Then, I taught them all I know and restored their sense of agency. All with the Alliance's permission."

Ava was stunned. Never in a million years would she have imagined that gauche sex club and its aloof mistress were a front for liberating and rehabilitating the many who were systematically oppressed by the Alliance's rule. "I hate to think of how I may have been complicit in something so horrible. It feels like there's no end to the Alliance's treachery." Ava said.

Bella shook her head firmly, "Your experiences are your own, Ava. Your story makes you who you are."

"That's depressing." Ava mumbled.

Bella smiled, "It can be. But your story isn't over. And neither is mine." She reached over and took Ava's hand in her own. "I can't help but feel that our meeting was somewhat kismet."

"Like the goddess wanted decided that you were meant to, what? Mentor me?" Ava asked.

"How about, for now, I just listen to you." She gave Ava's hand a comforting squeeze. "Your story, so far, has been a hard one. It deserves to be told."

Ava swallowed hard, fighting back the urge to sob all over Bella's silk top for the second time tonight. "Where do I start?"

"The beginning is always a good place to start. How did you come to be here?"

Ava sighed and it was painful, both inside and out. "Sophia and Sam."

"The girls who died. They were your friends?"

"The best. We'd all been born within the span of a year, making us littermates. We did...everything together. Samantha, she was the heart of our group, the one you went to when you needed that pick me up, you know? And Sophia - if Sam was the heart, then Sophia was the soul. Caring. Kind. Like if unconditional love were a person. And she was like that with everyone, no matter who it was."

Bella looked at her questioningly, "If Samantha was the heart and Sophia the soul, then what were you?"

What *\*had\** Ava been to her litter? She'd been... pining after Xavier, that's what. Thinking back on it now, she'd give anything to go back and give all of those precious hours she'd spent catering to Xavier's emotional baggage and put it all into making sure Sophia and Sam knew exactly how much they'd meant to Ava.

Ava frowned in derision and shrugged, "I was the groupie." "Xavier?"

"I followed him around for years, just pining for any opportunity to support him. And I thought I was actually doing something important, not just for him, but for the Pack. I was his Beta! I was his sounding board, his shoulder to cry on - not that he ever cried."

Ava wrung her hands together in a poor attempt at self-soothing, "When he was too afraid to tell his parents he was failing calculus, I stayed up hours past curfew helping him study. When he questioned whether he'd

ever be able to fill his father's shoes, I was the one who told him he had what it took to be the fiercest Alpha the Red Moon Pack had ever known."

Ava sniffed back the unexpected wetness gathering at the corners of her eyes, "And I did all of that willingly, because he appreciated me. He confided in me when there was no one else he trusted - not even his own sister. He pushed me to be the best version of myself and whenever he talked about his future reign, I was always right there beside him...as his second."

A ragged sob tore from Ava's chafed throat, "So, how could he do that to me, Bella? How could he put me in that place?"

Ava's throat was raw, and she tasted copper on her tongue, but she needed to continue. "There was no light, no warmth, no humanity. I was targeting constantly for a position I'd never gotten to inherit and Every. Fucking. Day. was a fight to keep what remained of me whole."

Her next breath felt completely devoid of oxygen, "And I fucking failed. I couldn't stop them from breaking me." She looked to the other female, who's utter sorrow permeated the air between them. "I don't know who I am anymore. My mind is a fucking warzone, trying to reconcile everything I've lost, and I can't k-keep up."

Ava rubbed her sleeve along her eyes, "The only bright spot I had in a long time was Layla, and I fucked that up, too. Now, she's dead like everyone else."

Her voice was hoarse and croaky from stress, but she felt compelled to finish, "I-I think...I deserve everything Xavier's doing to me." She somberly laid back in her hospital bed, utterly spent.

"But nothing he could do to me is worse than the hell I live in every day in my mind."

Bella Sutton arrived back at the Green Light Club - her own little piece of hell - with her back straight and just a hint of sway in her walk.

This wasn't the place for emotion, her pride and joy. It had taken years of sacrifice, of simpering to the very people she detested, but she had made a difference - continued to make a difference. Maybe she wouldn't dismantle the patriarchy from the inside like she'd entertained as a child, but every day her club gave a broken Wolf back that spark, was a day well spent.

She thought back to the girl she'd left curled up in a hospital bed. That was Bella's legacy, making sure girls like Ava Davis had a voice and the means to reclaim their self-worth.

Bella walked stepped into the private elevator that took her to the private suite that secretly took up the entire ninth floor. Stepping into the richly appointed receiving room, she stopped in front of her employer. "You called, sir?" Xavier barely looked up from the documents in his hand, "Send her up."

Bella sighed, "She isn't here today."

He finally looked up at her with a warning in the set of his jaw, "What do you mean she isn't here? Where the hell is she?"

"The hospital. She's sick." If he detected the frost in her tone, he didn't acknowledge it.

He placed the papers aside and rose to his feet, "Sick?"

"The flu, sir. She collapsed today...her doctors were quite concerned by how underweight she was. Malnourishment can make even a simple cold deadly." She debated whether or not to poke the bear. "As can stress." Xavier pushed past her, entering the elevator without a backward glance, "Which hospital?"

"Rochester General." She replied, but by the time she turned around, he was already gone.