

Chapter 24

Alpha's Lament

"A glass of wine, if you would."

Ava jumped at the sudden voice, only to realize it was Liam Smith, Alpha of the Silver Moon Pack, making the request. Ava tried to settle back into her skin but found it difficult to stem her trembling now that it had begun. "You're shaking," he said, probably wondering why some girl had wandered into his suite only to stand quaking by the door like a deer in headlights.

Ava did her best to snap out of it, jerking toward a nearby bar cart. "My apologies, Mr. Smith."

His eyebrows rose, "Have we met? How could you tell I'm Mr. Smith in a room this full?"

His tone was playful enough, but Ava was beginning to sweat. "Lucky guess?" She forced a small laugh that sounded strained even to her ears. There were probably a million excuses Ava could have made for guessing who her high-paying client was, but her thoughts were too frenetic to fall neatly into place.

Ava felt like she was doing a terrible job of not bringing attention to herself. Every few seconds, she felt compelled to look over her shoulder, checking to see if any of the Red Moon members in the room had recognized her.

She must have done it again as she filled a glass full of dry white and delivered it to Liam, because his playful demeanor quickly became suspicious. "Do you know them?" He asked.

Ava shook her head with too much force. She didn't know what to do, and just wished that he would stop asking her questions. The more she panicked, the more obvious it would become that something was wrong, and the more attention would be drawn her way.

Great, she was practically asking to be spotted and carted back to the dungeon, if the Red Moon Pack didn't just demand her head on the spot. Traitor. Murderer!

The echoing cries of a mob of righteously furious began to drown out every last one of Ava's usable thoughts. With each passing moment, she

was being dragged back into the past where a horde of her own people - family, friends, neighbors, and strangers - had called for her blood and gotten it tenfold.

Ava had only been away from the dungeon for a couple of fleeting months, but at this point, she didn't think she would survive being sent back. Not after being so close to the light at the end of the tunnel - of escaping the sins of her past and regaining control of her life.

"Is there a problem, Mr. Smith?" The voice was gruff, but nasally, and upsettingly familiar. She couldn't quite place the face, and she wasn't about to turn around to check, but it was a member of the Red Moon Pack, for sure. A mid-level administrator who worked under Xavier's father, she was fairly certain.

"Throw her in the dungeon! She deserves to rot!"

He'd been in attendance at her trial, had called for her unending punishment based on a few false facts. Ava had no doubt that if he had the opportunity, he'd do so again.

In a snap decision, Ava grabbed Liam's wrist and met his questioning gaze. She flicked her eyes toward the door, "Please..."

Ava didn't know exactly what she was asking for - permission to leave, a way out? It didn't matter. Liam read her silent plea and responded without missing a beat. He smiled and stood, pulling Ava into his chest so that her face was buried in his tailored shirt.

He turned to the male who had spoken and threw him a carefree smile, "We're all good here. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

He let his sentence linger in unspoken innuendo, and the male laughed at the insinuation. "And who said Alpha Smith wasn't a ladies man? Enjoy yourself, you hear?"

Liam winked and moved toward the door, pulling Ava along with him. She kept her face angled into his chest, the sharp clean scent of his cologne lulling her body into a more relaxed state.

He led her into the hallway and into another suite, this one was smaller than the other ones she'd been in, and blessedly empty. Ava's relief evaporated when she realized that she was once again in a dark room with a strange male. And an Alpha, no less.

She threw a cautious look toward the exit and was taken off guard when she found that Liam had left the door open, as if he were aware of the potential discomfort the new setting could cause her.

"T-thank you, Mr. Smith." She said shakily, "If you'll excuse me, I-I need to go." Ava stepped toward the door, but Liam stopped her by placing a large hand on her waist, halting her retreat.

"I hope you don't mind, but I have a few questions, first." He said. "What was all of that in there? Who did you know in that room?"

Ava tensed at the unbidden touch. There was power in that single embrace. This male was larger than life, bigger and stronger than Ava was in every way. In that sense, he was just like every disgusting male who'd gotten off on making her kneel and beg, just to make themselves feel superior - more powerful than they actually were.

This particular male was set apart, though, because he didn't need to force submission from anyone. He was already at the top of the food chain and people naturally fell in line whenever he walked past. That's what it meant to be an Alpha. In a lot of ways it was even worse than the bottom feeders desperately scrounging for scraps of approval. People like Liam, Alphas like Xavier...when they told you to beg, it was just for fun. Humiliation was nothing more than a test for them, constantly pushing the boundaries of their fealty and weeding out those unlucky enough to underperform.

Ava thought about Xavier's guard who'd forced that human waitress to drink, and the blonde male who'd kissed and discarded Brie without a second thought before turning his gaze on her to do the same. She thought of the males who'd forced her to dance and then called her a clown before cheerfully lapping up whatever physical gratification she offered them.

Inevitably, Ava's mind went to Xavier and the chaotic whirlwind he made of her life every time he came around. Nothing he did made sense, and at the crux of it all, that was what upset Ava the most. At a base level, she accepted that he believed her to be a murderer and could understand his need for retribution, disturbingly creative as his punishments were.

What she couldn't reconcile was the heat that darkened his eyes whenever he looked at her for too long. Or the way he'd seemingly give in to intrinsic urge and kiss her as if she were responsible for his next breath. The mating bond causing him to act this way, then why hadn't he formally rejected it yet? He could cut ties and be done with her, but he refused to do so.

As if he were enjoying the torment just a little too much to end it so soon.

Ava's jaw tensed. It was a sick ass game she was trapped in, and she was sick of it. She was tired of being a pawn and a punching bag. She was sick of these males using her to reinforce their fragile masculinity. There was already too much in her life that she couldn't get away from - whether she liked it or not, she was stuck dealing with Xavier until she could earn her clean slate.

What Ava was about goddamn done with, was being treated like a doormat by a bunch of cocky, degenerate strangers, while she was just trying. to. do. her. fucking. job!

Ava brought one of her stiletto heels down on Liam's instep, causing him to yelp and buckle forward, slamming the door shut.

"Are you mad? What the hell is wrong with you?!" He yelled but let her go.

Ava immediately dropped to the floor and crawled to the far side of the bed. She couldn't believe she'd just done that. She hadn't read that specific rule anywhere, but she was fairly certain that assaulting clients was a pretty big no-no at the club. Especially, Very Important Alpha clients.

If this male didn't decimate her first, there was no way Bella would allow her to stay. At the very least she could kiss all of the extra help the female had given her goodbye.

Light suddenly flooded the room as Liam flicked the light on. His expression was thunderous as he stalked around the bed, finding Ava in the corner she'd staked out. He came up to her and crouched down, taking her jaw in his hand. "What the fuck was **that**?" He asked incredulously.

Ava met his eyes unblinkingly, and slowly, whatever haunted shadows he saw there leached the anger from him. The aggressive set of his shoulders slumped as the fight got knocked out of him.

Liam sat back on his haunches and leaned against the bed, much like Ava was positioned against the wall and he just...waited.

Ava was wary of the silent male, but he didn't even look at her as he let her make the next move. Eventually, Ava let her guard down enough to acknowledge that she may have funneled weeks of pent-up aggression into the wrong person.

"I'm...sorry." She mumbled.

"You feeling any better?" He asked. His voice was calm and full of understanding.

Ava nodded and he stood, holding out a hand to help her up. She hesitated but took the offered gesture.

"Where'd you get the scar? On your forehead."

Ava touched her bangs, instinctively making sure her hair was in place, hiding the mark. "Accident."

"Accident?" He'd obviously clocked the outright lie.

"Can I go now, Mr. Smith?"

Instead of replying to her pointed question, he took a seat on the bed and took a cigar out of a jacket pocket. He didn't light it, just bit down on the end, and began to chew absentmindedly.

"You know, you remind me of someone I used to know." Ava looked at him questioningly but didn't reply. "She had a scar on her forehead, too. Used to cover it up with bangs and shit, just like you."

Ava stayed rooted to where she stood, curious of where his musings were headed, in spite of herself.

"She told me once that she wasn't really covering up the scar, just everything the scar represented. It stuck with me, you know?"

His words hit Ava like a freight train. Just like during her heart-to-heart with Bella, she felt unexpectedly seen. Technically, Ava knew that the scar was small, barely visible at a glance. Insignificant. The events surrounding the marring, however... that damage wasn't visible at all, but left the deepest mark, nonetheless.

"Who is she?" Ava whispered.

"She was my mate."