

Chapter 62

A New Deal

The knock at her office door drew Bella out of the monotonous sea of production reports she'd been entrenched in all morning. Building her own little piece of heaven within the Alliance had been thrilling, but dammit if maintaining it weren't boring as hell.

"Come in."

She was momentarily relieved to have a reason to close her laptop, but the feeling quickly evaporated as soon as Noah Thomas stepped through her door. Bella remained seated and made sure that none of the apprehension she felt showed on her face.

That was one of the first things she'd learned as an adolescent wading through the cesspit that was the Alliance's Elite underbelly; powerful males despised equally powerful women, true, but they were still inclined

to respect them. This Noah Thomas was a six feet five question mark, but if there was one thing about him that was abundantly clear, it was that he was a powerful male.

"Mr. Thomas," she said in greeting. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

He walked up to her desk and took a seat, seemingly unmoved by her deliberate social gracelessness. When he sat, he met her stare full on, and when her eyes met his, she could see that there was nothing but earnest determination lying within.

"Ms. Sutton," he nodded. "I'm here to renegotiate my current arrangement with Ava."

Bella raised an eyebrow at the declaration. Even as she presented a cool front, Bella was growing increasingly worried. While she'd been fairly certain that whatever Thomas had come to discuss had something to do with Ava, the multitude of things that he could request were nigh on endless.

She truly hated to admit it, but when it came to Ava, circumstances usually tended to lean toward the worst-case scenario. For such a sweet girl, she certainly tended to draw out the worst in people. So, if it was up to Bella - and this time, it would be she planned on cutting this potential threat off at the knees before it ever had the chance to escalate.

"In what way?" She asked.

"I'd like to take Ava out of this place."

"Mr. Thomas, we've already agreed that it's far too risky to allow Ava free run of the city, right now. The incident during your last outing should have proved as much to you."

Now, it was his turn to cock an eyebrow, "And hiding her away in an Alliance hot-spot is the safer choice? You and I both know that her staying here is just a waiting game until she's eventually recognized."

"There's only a little over two months left in her contract. We've managed this long; I'm sure Ava will be able to stick it out until then."

"She shouldn't have to stick it out, waiting on edge for something that may or may not happen. That's no way to live." Noah leaned forward, bringing his hands up to interlace them on Bella's desk. "If she were with me, she could live the next few months in true anonymity, instead of staring at the same four walls every day."

"What you're posing sounds nice enough, but Xavier Michaels would never go for it." Bella shook her head, "And, in this case, it's his decision to make. It's his club, his contract, his rules."

"Right. Because he's had Ava's best interest at heart, so far." He leaned back, leveling Bella with a stark glare that took her aback, "Tell me, how has Ava fared during her time here?"

"Compared to how she was when she first came to this club, she'd much improved. Ava is an incredibly resilient young female."

He nodded, but the gesture felt hollow, "That she is. But how much has she had to persevere against while living here?"

"Apologies, but I'm not inclined to share the details of Ava's employment with you, unless it directly impacts her ongoing contract with you."

"But it does impact our contract. Ava tends to keep a lot of her history close to her chest, and that's fine. It doesn't mean that it's not apparent that she's struggled here. Let me take her somewhere where she can really thrive. I promise you that she will be in good hands." Bella's eyes narrowed, "Do you? Promise me she'll be in good hands, that is. Because, I'll be honest with you, Mr. Thomas. I don't trust you. And, what's more, I don't trust your intentions with Ava. You barely know her."

She'd expected to get some sort of rise out of him at the blatant accusation, hoping to finally peel back the shroud of mystery the surrounded him. Instead, he nodded and leaned back in his seat.

"Fair enough," he said. "I understand that full disclosure is warranted in these sorts of situations. So, what do you want to know?"

Bella was thrilled. Of course, she'd take everything he said to her with a pound of salt, and she'd do follow-up research afterward, but it she hadn't expected him to be so forthright. And she fully intended to have at least some of her more bothersome questions answered.

"For starters, Ava mentioned that you claim to be an Alpha of the Eclipse Pack. I can tell just from being near you that you do have Alpha blood, but to claim Alphadom...I've seen Rhys Bennet, and you are definitely not him."

Noah's small smirk looked more like a grimace, but staying true to his word, he answered, "I'll take that as a compliment. It really is a shame that my brother hasn't lived up to the role the way our father had hoped that he would. Then again, I wasn't the only one who had warned him that Rhys wasn't cut out for the job."

Bella stilled, "Your brother?"

"Half-brother, but yes. Montgomery Bennet, former Alpha of the Eclipse, was my father."

Bella sat back in her seat, utter shock sucking all pretense out of the room. The knowledge that Noah had just dropped into her lap wasn't simple idle

gossip. If it proved true, there was a major cover up happening in the Eclipse Pack that spanned the last several decades.

Like all political truces, the Alliance relied on all parties adhering to the pre-determined rules set forth to maintain an equal playing field. With so many semi-independent territories all at play, it was crucial for all Packs to keep open communication with one another.

The Allied Council, largely comprised of former Pack Alpha's, were in charge of making sure that everyone played by the rules. And among the most harshly enforced rules had always been those surrounding proper succession. It was within a Wolf's nature to create a pecking order, and where their natural born class system helped to straighten out the chain of command, infighting between family members had nearly wiped out their species more than once. So, when the Alliance was created, all potential Alphas competed for the right to lead one of the territories, and the rest were sent away to make their fortune elsewhere. If more than one eligible Alpha were born into a single family, the role defaulted to the eldest male child - no exceptions.

If Noah Thomas had been passed over for his birthright - even as an illegitimate son - the Bennet family was in extreme violation of the Alliance.

"Impossible. The Alliance would have your father's head if it came out that you'd been denied your title. Why not go to the Council with this information?"

"The Council knows who I am, and they sided with my father before he died. They all agreed that Rhys was a better fit for the role."

Bella blinked slowly, hardly able to process just how deeply this conspiracy led, "The Council...*knows*, and then covered it up? Why?"

Noah sighed heavily, "I'm a half-breed. My mother was human."

"Ah..."

As torrid as it was, the picture just became a whole lot clearer. If there was one group the Alliance cared less for than Omegas, it was humans. They may be sworn to protect them, but the mingling of the two species was highly frowned upon, and even persecuted against.

One of her newer girls, Brenda Nguyen, was half-human, as well - the only one in the club, at the moment. Bella had recently had to step in and ensure that she never took Wolven guests alone, due to the dangerous fetishization she tended to experience. Being a half-breed in the Alliance wasn't simply looked down upon, it was taboo.

As a half-human, Noah Thomas never had a shot at his title to begin with. The Council would never allow it. Still, it was an egregious

misrepresentation of the rules the Alliance had kept in place for generations.

"So, you were passed over for Alpha when you became of age."

Noah shook his head, "More than that. I was wiped from Eclipse records. My existence was so thoroughly expunged, that there's no record of my birth at all, much less my parentage. I only know any of this because my mother told me about my father. When I confronted him years later, he acknowledged everything and still threw me out on my ass."

He scoffed, a deep bitterness coloring his words, "My mother did what she could, but she didn't have much to begin with. I grew up poor and alone, with no community or proper sense of identity. What I learned about being a Wolf, I learned from television, and what I learned from life, I learned from a woman who was so thoroughly disillusioned with her own, that she couldn't make it down the stairs most days."

He leaned forward, "That's my connection to Ava; Why I feel so strongly for her. I've seen what life can do to people like her - like us, and I won't let that happen to her as long as I'm able to stop it."

Several long, quiet moments stretched between them as Bella considered his words. This was not an ideal situation to be in, to say the least. If she allowed Ava to leave with this male, there would be hell to pay when Xavier found out.

At the same time, she knew the truth in his words. Too much had already befallen Ava within the club, and try as she might, Bella didn't know what more she could do to keep the girl safe.

"You maintain constant communication with me on Ava's whereabouts. She has two open contracts with this club, and until they're fulfilled, she's my responsibility and that will not change. You tell me where you're taking her, and she keeps her phone on her at all times. If I feel that anything is the slightest bit off, I will come get her, and I won't be alone. Do you understand?"

Relief and respect flashed across his face in equal measure, as Noah nodded.

"Understood."