

Chapter 75

Ley of the Land

Xavier hadn't spent this much time trudging through the woods at night since Basic, back when he was a high schooler learning the ropes of how to be a future Alliance leader. That was where he'd first met Dylan and Liam, the first real friends he'd had outside of his sister, Ava, and Sam.

"Is this bringing back any memories in particular for either of you?" Dylan suddenly asked out of nowhere after hours of cutting through heavy brush.

"Orientation week?" Liam's answer was immediate.

"Nah, couldn't be," Xavier quipped. "Miller doesn't have a ponytail."

"Laugh all you want, that ponytail some action."

As he and his friends shared a laugh, he had to agree that this did, in fact, feel a hell of a lot like their first week together. As the Alliance's rising Alpha's, they'd immediately been grouped together and then promptly dropped off in the middle of the woods with nothing but the clothes on their backs and one another for support.

"Remember Gamma Reyes' last words to us before he hopped his ass back in the Humvee and drove off?" Liam smirked.

Xavier dropped his voice even lower to better affect their old teacher's gravel pit voice, "See you in a week, sons. Don't die before then."

"Goddess, talk about a red fuckin' flag," Liam muttered, shaking his head. "Miller wouldn't have lasted the night without us."

"Is that right?" Dylan snickered, "You dumbasses wouldn't have killed one another outright if it wasn't for me."

Xavier laughed, "He has you there, Smith."

Liam shook his head with a smile, "Goddess, we were young back then."

Nodding, Xavier craned his head back to look at the moon, "At the time, I swore that week was the worst of my life. Now, I'd give anything to go back. Anything."

Suddenly, Dylan scoffed. "Because you let them sink their claws into you. I've told you for years to quit playing their games."

"Not all of us had the luxury of sitting out on our responsibilities, Dylan," Xavier said. He'd become one of the youngest appointed Alpha's in Alliance history when he'd taken over to avoid his father's scandal, but Liam hadn't been far behind him when he took over Silver Moon a year later, after his father's death.

Dylan, on the other hand, had the luxury of time. Until recently, at least, his father was fit as a fiddle and just as unproblematic. Miller had never needed to step up, so he never had.

"You can't hide away from the real issues forever, Miller." Liam tersely interjected, clearly thinking along the same lines as Xavier, "Before you know it, this world will swallow you whole and spit you out, and you won't even have anything to show for it."

Dylan's jovial expression clouded over, "Hey, don't fucking condescend to me, Liam. I always knew what the Alliance was."

"You think the buck stops at the Alliance? That's just the tip of the flame, the part we're closest to." The Silver Moon Alpha muttered. "This shit we're dealing with now? It's shit we've never seen, and even if it leads back to us, the Alliance didn't cause it."

Liam took a beat so long Xavier thought he'd finished, but he scowled and continued on, "Xavier's mate is wanted for murder and living with another male. Mine is dead. That's the sort of entropy that rules every minute of our fucking lives, and the Council can't be blamed for either of those fucking life-altering events."

Xavier and Dylan both quieted, shaken by the stoic male's sudden confession.

"So, what are we supposed to do about it?" Dylan asked quietly after taking a moment to truly process Liam's words.

"You show up, Miller. Even when you don't want to," Xavier finally spoke up, his voice rough. "You find something worth protecting, and you fight for it, even if those doors are closed to you."

"Then, at the end of the day, when you're sitting alone staring at the pile of ashes your life's become...at least you can say that you fucking tried." With that, Liam let his Wolf take over as he shifted, and a lean brown blur rocketed ahead of them into the darkness.

For a few heavy moments, Xavier and Dylan stood staring after him.

"Shit," Dylan cursed as Liam's steps faded into the distance. "I didn't know that. About his mate. I hadn't even realized he'd been mated."

"Neither did I," Xavier admitted feeling bitter. It was one more tally to his list of failures. Xavier hadn't made very many friends in his life, and so far, he'd failed them all. "What he said makes sense now, though." "What did he say?"

"A couple of months ago, I found him talking to Ava. I didn't...react well." Xavier shook his head, recalling a dozen different moments he'd give anything to go back and repeat.

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"I was so filled with rage, all of the time. When I ran in on them, I didn't stop to consider what I was actually seeing. I didn't see my friend and my mate, I saw my property and a threat, and I let those instincts take over." Dylan silently nodded, "I've heard that a new mating bond can do a number on a male's brain."

Xavier let out a harsh laugh, "The mating bond was nothing but an excuse to let my anger out on people who didn't deserve it, and Liam saw through my bullshit. He told me that I needed to be better for her. I wasn't, and now she's gone. Ergo, he was right."

"I'm not going to blow smoke up your ass and tell you that you didn't absolutely fumble everything having to do with Ava," Xavier growled low

in his chest, but Dylan continued. "What I will say is that I don't think you're giving Ava enough credit, even now. Have you ever, I don't know, apologized to her?"

"For having her thrown in jail, for leaving her there, or for forcing her into sex work when she finally managed to get herself out? No, Dylan. Somehow, I haven't found the right words to convey just how badly I've fucked her over." Dylan frowned. "There are only two words you need to say, Xavier." He held up his hand and counted on his fingers, "I'm. Sorry."

"That's not enough," he said, shaking his head. "Ava doesn't need an apology. Not unless it comes with answers. Besides, from what Bella Sutton's been telling me, she's happy wherever she's holed up with this Noah Thomas. It would be selfish of me to get in the way of that."

"But she's your mate, Xavier," Dylan sounded utterly sincere, like the mythic mating bond was one fable he wanted to hold true. "You're supposed to work out."

Xavier pointed off into the dark swath of trees where their friend had disappeared, "Liam already said it, Dylan. Sometimes, it just doesn't work out that way."

Dylan sighed, "Then, I'm here to help you get those answers in any way I can. Cause you're wrong, Xav. Ava does need an apology from you. And, even if you don't realize it, taking that step will help you, too."

Xavier stayed silent for a few moments, the forest's nightly symphony filling the space between them. From here, he could feel his friends - his brothers at arms - in their natural environment, where they'd been tossed into the fire and become stronger for it in some ways and weaker in others.

One of those strengths had been meeting one another, forging a bond in the wilderness that time could weather but never shatter. Xavier hadn't leaned on these bonds when he should have, but he wouldn't make that mistake again. "Thank you, Dylan." He said, "I have a feeling I'll be taking you up on that."

As you reach the final pages, remember that 000005s.org is your destination for the complete story. Share the joy of reading with others and spread the word. The next chapter is just a visit away! When the two of them came upon Liam, leaning against the base of a tree, Xavier knew they'd made it to the point marked on the map.

"It's clear," he said, standing to his feet.

"You went in alone?" Xavier demanded.

Liam gestured to the side where a couple of booted feet stuck out of the underbrush, and a pair of automatic assault rifles lay on the forest floor beside them.

"These two humans were the only ones here. No fancy transponders, this time."

"So, this site doesn't see a lot of use," Xavier said. "This point is closer to regular hiking routes than the last one. They were probably just stationed here to scare off wayward hikers. Maybe bears and wild cats, given the time of year." "My thoughts exactly," Liam nodded. "There's a grotto not too far from here. A natural cenote that matches up to the ley line. I'm willing to bet that whatever we're looking for is in there."

Ever the intellectual, Liam had had the realization that given the fae were involved, some of the more random points notated on the rogues' map could possibly line up with ley lines - the final lingering vestiges of Axis' chaotic magic that created nearly imperceptible fissures that spanned across the globe. Mystics had been drawn to the lines for eons, and the unpredictable nature of the interdimensional bleeds were responsible for countless unexplainable phenomena. Lo and behold, every single one of the points that weren't located within one of the Alliance territories - and a few that were - matched up with different ley lines. They'd picked one of the closest ones, a point in the Pennsylvania wilderness where several lines overlapped and made their way there.

As Liam led them closer to the grotto, the forest became denser and wilder, as if nature itself were raising a wall of protection around the area. When they finally came across the cenote, Dylan let out a long, low whistle. Even in the darkness, it was a sight to behold.

Seemingly out of nowhere, the forest fell away into a cavernous pit, encapsulated on all sides by ancient trees and draping moss. They carefully trekked their way inside, where thousands of years of limestone slowly chipped away and reformed to create a cavern filled with intricate rock formations dripping from the ceiling and rising from the damp floor - in some cases, meeting in the middle to create stories-tall columns.

It looked like the toothy maw of some mythical beast, and in the center of the cave sat a pristine lake, reflecting back the moon's rays like a giant jewel. The water was clear enough to count individual stones at the bottom of the lake, but what was truly curious was the stepping-stone path leading to a large outcrop rising from the middle of the water.

Even from where they stood near the entrance, they could see the arcane runes etched into the craggy rockface, a wall of characters that were simultaneously angular and fluid in their shape. Several characters glinted off the surface of the water in the moonlight, lit with an unnatural green glow.

"It's active," Xavier muttered. "I guess that answers the 'how.'"

The rogue's map had led them to a portal to Axis, and it had been used. Recently.