

Chapter 85

Wolf Mother Pt. 2

A mad dash ensued as Ava and Noah rushed to get themselves straightened up enough to greet Noah's waiting mother at the door. Ava pulled on a pair of soft black leggings and an oversized sweater before hastily running a brush through her hair.

"This is exciting!" Ava said, even though her belly was riddled with nerves. "Did you know she was coming?"

Noah cocked his head to the side as he re-fastened his belt, "Does it look like I knew she'd be here?"

Ava shrugged, "I don't know. I thought maybe she's one of those people who likes to arrive early."

"You can stop trying to give my mother the benefit of the doubt," he sighed. "She's the kind of person who likes to keep people on their toes, is what she is."

Ava paused on her way out of the room, "Is it a... problem? That she's here?"

His smile was tight and didn't reach his eyes, but he shook his head anyway. "No, don't worry about it," he said, rubbing her arm as he passed her on his way out of the room. "She's probably just excited to meet you, is all." Ava watched his back as he left. He was tense even though nothing he'd hinted at about his relationship with his mother seemed to warrant this sort of response. Although, if she thought about it, he hadn't hinted at a lot.

Noah hadn't talked about his mother very much, but then again, he didn't talk about his personal or professional life very often at all. As someone with a bunch of her own baggage that she preferred stay in the past, Ava hadn't been too pressed to grill Noah for information that he didn't freely offer up. Added to the fact that, until today, she was technically under his employ, it just hadn't ever seemed like her place to pry.

Now though, if what Noah had said earlier was true, and he really did want them to stay in one another's lives, then Ava needed some answers. Real answers. She was done being a passive bystander in her own life. She was a free female now, and she needed to figure out what that meant for her. Quickly.

Ava rushed down the stairs behind him, catching up just in time to see him plaster on a smile and swing the door open wide.

"Mom," Noah said through slightly gritted teeth. "What are you doing here?"

The voice that spoke back to him was clear as a copper bell and lightly tinted with reproach. "Is that any way to greet your mother?"

Noah's mother didn't wait for a response before pushing her way inside of the house. She paused just inside of the threshold, taking a moment to look around the stately home with a content sigh. "I haven't been able to visit Shady Oak in an age! I'd forgotten just how rejuvenating the country air can be."

She unwrapped her scarf, prompting Ava into action. Rushing forward, Ava stuck her hands out to receive the outerwear, "Please, let me take that for you!"

The older woman's face lit up, "So polite! And pretty, too. Just like my Noah said."

Ava blushed as she took the offered coat to the coat closet and hung them inside while Noah followed behind them, looking uncharacteristically

nonplussed. "Right, Mom," Noah said, gesturing between them. "This is Ava. Ava, this is my mother, Neia Thomas."

Before she could stick out her hand, Neia had enveloped Ava in a warm embrace. It took her a beat, but soon Ava melted into the sincere gesture. As she returned the hug, Ava was suddenly reminded of Bella, who she'd sorely missed in the weeks since she'd left the club.

But it wasn't just a matronly warmth that Bella and Noah's mother had in common. They also shared an uncanny aura of competence and grit that was proven by the rigidity of Bella's façade and hinted at by the glint of steel behind Neia's dark eyes and the way that Noah, imposing Alpha that he was, looked at his mother with such deference.

They were both women who'd seen the darker side of life and tamed that darkness for themselves.

Beyond that, Neia was beautiful with her warm bronzed skin and long, dark waving hair that was streaked with thick stripes of white that framed either side of her face. She was just as impeccably dressed as her son always preferred to be, her tall, willowy frame cutting an impressive silhouette in a sleek, white pantsuit.

It was clear to see where Noah inherited many of his finer traits, but what Ava couldn't have predicted, and what frankly floored her, was the fact that Neia was human. She recalled what Noah had told her about his history with the Eclipse Pack and how he'd been rejected because his mother wasn't former-Alpha Montgomery Bennett's mate. That story

would have made a bit more sense if he'd mentioned that Bennett's paramour had been a human woman, shame as it was. Looking at Neia, it wasn't hard to gather what about her had attracted a male like the late Eclipse Alpha. She held the same sort of magnetic pull that Noah did. Ava had assumed that the key to Noah's appeal lay in his Alpha blood, but really, he'd be just as captivating if he were a full-blooded human man.

"It's lovely to finally meet you, dear. Noah has told me so much about you."

"Only good things, I hope."

Noah pressed a kiss to Ava's temple before leading his mother to the parlor, where a fire was already flickering invitingly. "Don't be silly, A," he said. "I couldn't find anything negative to say if I tried."

Neia reached up and patted his cheek, "I hope he's always so gentlemanly."

Ava smiled and made her way over to the bar to grab a couple of glasses, "For as long as I've known him, anyway."

It was a little before noon, so Ava reached into the mixer fridge and quickly contemplated her options. She considered making a batch of mimosas, but as she glanced up, she noticed that Noah still had that slightly pained expression on his face, despite his overly cheerful tone.

With a shake of her head, Ava passed on the Prosecco and went straight for the bottle of gin and a jug of grapefruit juice. Greyhounds it is.

"And she likes a good drink," Neia chuckled as Ava handed her and Noah their cocktails. She took a sip, making an appreciative sound. "Thank you, Ava, now sit, please! I want to speak with you."

"Me?" Ava asked as she carefully took a seat beside Noah, where he sat on the sofa facing his mother.

"Of course, dear." Neia sat forward in her chair and leveled Ava with an intent gaze. "If you don't mind, I'd like to hear more about your story."

"My story?" Ava slid a questioning glance in Noah's direction. He didn't return her glance, his eyes staring daggers at his mother.

"Mom...." Noah's voice held a distinct warning, but Neia didn't spare him a glance as she continued.

"I have a... vested interest in learning about those the Alliance has wronged. I assume my son has told you about our history with Eclipse?"

Ava nodded, "You were rejected by the Pack."

"Used and cast out like last week's garbage is more like it." Even though Neia's tone remained even and light, there was acid burning behind her midnight eyes. "My son, the rightful Eclipse heir, is twice the male that sniveling whelp Rhys Bennett could ever hope to be, despite his impure blood."

"Mom," Noah said more forcefully. "Ava doesn't need to hear your soapbox tirade."

Neia only grinned, "Never limit a woman's ability to think for herself. Ava already has so much in common with us, as it is."

"I...", Ava looked between Noah and his mother. "What does this have to do with the Alliance? Or me? No offense, Ms. Thomas, but my...situation was more of a Pack issue. I don't think the Alliance had much to do with it at all."

"And that's the problem we face, isn't it?" Neia said. "The Packs ensure that the powerful remain powerful, and in return, the Alliance allows them to rule with iron wills. There are no rights in the Alliance. Not unless you happen to be born into the upper echelon...."

Neia took a sip from her glass, her eyes never leaving Ava's, "And sometimes not even that is enough."

Ava sat back, blinking in an effort to process Neia's words. She understood the sentiment; she just didn't understand where the fuck it was coming from. This entire conversation was feeling very left field to her. "Okay...where do you come in, then?" She asked.

Noah let out a low chuff. When Ava looked at him, his expression hadn't changed much during the exchange, but it was obvious from his white-knuckle grip on his cocktail glass that his mother had quickly worn out her welcome. Neia must have sensed the same because she sat back in her chair, finally relinquishing her hold of the conversation.

"Let's just say that I consider myself a purveyor of experiences, is all. I think that it's important that people with similar backgrounds have their stories told. In order to make us all stronger in the end."

With a sigh, Neia rose to her feet. "I really should be going, but it was a delight to meet you, my dear," she said with a soft smile. "Although my son may disagree, I truly do think that you would fit right into the community I'm building." Ava didn't get a chance to respond before Noah got up as well, "Let me walk you out?"

He looked at his mother pointedly, causing her to sigh heavily as she followed him out, "Looks like I've done it now!" The striking older woman threw Ava a wink over her shoulder before they passed out of view.

Ava waited to hear the front door slam shut before darting to the window. From where she was situated, she couldn't hear their heated exchange, but Noah looked more upset than she could remember ever seeing him. For her part, Neia looked wholly unapologetic as he presumedly chewed her out.

She couldn't ignore the sinking feeling she felt as she watched them. Noah was right - his mom was a shit starter, and apparently, she wanted Ava in on the action.