

## Chapter 87

### Mixed Message

Noah looked across the room to where Ava's sleeping form lay wrapped up in the bed they'd made together and throttled the creeping feeling that years of best-laid plans were slipping out of his grasp. Careful not to make a sound, he backed out of their bedroom and closed the door firmly behind him. By the time he made his way down the dark corridor to his office, his phone was already ringing. "Mother." He said in greeting as he rounded his desk and sat heavily in the deep brown leather chair behind it.

"Did you tie up your loose ends, Noah?"

He sighed. No, Neia Thomas was not a subtle person by any stretch of the imagination. But it soul even a fraction less bold, could never have hoped to accomplish the things she had. It was times like these - and over the years, there had been plenty - that he needed to remind himself of the fact that his mother's vision, while grand and dangerous, was ultimately good.

And she'd gone through hell to see it come to fruition.

Born in a small rural town in the South that operated under human domain, his mother had been born with nothing and grown up with even less. Somewhere along the line, she'd decided that continuing the family business of low-grade meth dealing and underage prostitution didn't appeal to her. So, at the tender age of seventeen, she'd made her way north to see what the free states could offer her.

It turned out that they couldn't offer much to a lone teenaged girl without so much as a high-school diploma, but the waitressing job she picked up at a roadside diner was honest money. Her fortunes changed the day Montgomery Bennett and his entourage stopped by the diner on their way back to their own territory.

At twenty-two, it had been Neia's first encounter with a Were, but she didn't shy away from their rough exteriors and otherworldly presence. Instead, the hunters had become the prey, and she'd gone straight to the top with her advances. Neia handily charmed Montgomery and eagerly followed him back to Vermont when he offered to make her wildest dreams come true.

For two years, Neia entrenched herself in the lifestyle of the Elite, relishing in how far she'd come from rural Alabama. It all ended when Montgomery Bennett unexpectedly found his mate, rendering Neia

obsolete. It was simply a matter of bad timing when Neia discovered that she was pregnant shortly after.

She wasn't too proud to take the hush money Noah's father offered her to take the baby and disappear. But she was resentful. Even though Noah worked his ass off, earning advanced degrees in Finance and Corporate Administration, ultimately amassing enough to carve out a more-than-comfortable life for the both of them...Neia never let go of the bitterness she held against the male she'd loved who'd loved and left her, in turn.

When Bennett suddenly died a little over a year ago, she'd urged Noah to go to Eclipse and take his rightful place as the new Alpha. But by the time he'd arrived, Rhys had already taken up the title, and he'd been rejected yet again.

That had been the last straw for Neia. After Noah was sent back home without his birthright, Neia began to seek out people who had bad blood with the Alliance and its ruling Council. During her time with Montgomery, she'd been privy to the inner workings of the Elite, and some of the things she'd seen still haunted her to this day.

Those were the people she sought out, and together they'd built an army, hidden within the long shadow cast by the Alliance. It was a conglomerate made up of humans, Weres, and witches, all with an aligning goal. Their shining achievement had been acquiring the Estrellite from Axis, a feat born of years of ruthless networking and backdoor deals.

And Noah's bleeding heart was putting it all in jeopardy.

"If you're referring to Ava, then yes," he replied. "She's not exactly on board, but she's not going to stand in our way, either."

Neia made an unsatisfied hum, "Sweet as that is, she's only the tip of the iceberg you've created, son. I want to know if the Estrellite is secure."

"It is. I met with the supply team right after you left. The portal is compromised, but we have more than enough to meet our needs. Everything is under control."

"No," she hissed. "If everything were under control, the Council wouldn't be calling a meeting with the Seelie next week."

"The Seelie don't have anything to do with this. The Council isn't getting any information out of them."

"The fact that the Council is aware of our presence at all is a huge blow, Noah," she said. "We've come so far in just under two years, and you've put all of our work on the line for a girl who's already mated to someone else!" Noah sat back in his seat. There it was. Plan be damned, Neia's intrusion today had had far more to do with his relationship with Ava than doing damage control.

"Ava isn't Montgomery, Mom."

"No. She was mated before you ever knew her," she said. "Which makes it all the more perplexing why you would risk everything we've worked for just to keep her."

"Then why bother with the charade in the first place?" Noah demanded. "You came up here angling like you wanted to get to know her. You're a lot of things, Mom, but I never thought being conniving was your style."

The line went silent until his mother finally released a long sigh. "I'm your mother first and foremost, Noah," she said. "I'm not in the business of crushing your hopes and dreams. At the end of the day, I've expended a lot of energy making sure that you get everything you deserve in this godforsaken world we live in. If the girl makes you happy, I'm willing to play along."

"As long," she added. "As you don't throw away the rest of our work for the love of her. Do you understand?"

Noah leaned back and squeezed his eyes shut, "Yeah, Mom. I got it."

"Good," she said. "I love you. Oh, and don't forget to pick me up one of those baskets I like from the farmer's market. You know the ones I like?"

"Yes, I won't forget." "Thank you, dear."

At last, the line went dead, and Noah could allow himself to relax, but only so much. He poured himself another couple fingers of bourbon and resigned himself to yet another long night. As much as he hated to admit it, his mother was right about their disrupted supply chain needing to be addressed. Immediately.

It had been bad enough when they'd lost their Silver Moon outpost. Not only had the raid been wholly unexpected, but Noah had ended up having to rush to rehouse hundreds of soldiers, and the paper trail they'd left was concerning. Luckily, the Estrellite wasn't the only thing they'd picked up from Axis - no one outside of their organization could read the language used in their encryptions, full stop.

Even so, the loss of the Estrellite portal was a blow. He was fairly certain that they had more than enough to meet their needs, though. And truth be told, other than the incredible bargaining chip it made, Noah was wary as hell of the stuff. He didn't know how he'd come to himself in possession of a nuke, but Noah wasn't sure if he had it in him to set it off. And that only made it all the more dangerous. He needed to get his head together and get back into the game. If not, he could end up losing everything.

There was a line that he was riding, and he'd chosen his side a long time ago. He'd never second-guessed his path or the cause he'd dedicated his life to.

Then again, he'd never expected to fall in love with the enemy.

As soon as Noah went silent and the telltale tapping of fingers on a keyboard began, Ava backed away from the door on silent feet. Without making a sound, she slipped downstairs and out the front door without looking back.

She planned on returning, hopefully before Noah even knew that she was gone. But not until she settled some things first. Tonight had made it painfully clear that Ava was not the one in control of her life, no matter how many stupid fucking contracts she'd fulfilled.

She was a pawn, and she always would be as long as she kept running from the parts of her past that frightened her. Her childhood may have been taken from her, but that didn't give Ava an excuse not to grow up. If she didn't, she'd never be able to rely on herself...and she was done solely relying on others for her protection.

No one could be trusted. Not completely.

But that was going to change tonight. And she knew the perfect place to start.