

Chapter 88

A Sense Of Self

The night was dark as pitch out in the country, and the air held a frigid bite that made it known that summer was well and truly over. Ava made short work of her dash off of Noah's property, navigating the forest adjacent to the main driveway in order to keep the automatic floodlights from going off.

She wasn't hiding from Noah, necessarily. Ava didn't know exactly how he'd react to finding out that she'd slunk out of the house in the middle of the night without telling him, but she didn't think he'd react too poorly. Of course, only a day ago, the sliver of doubt she carried wouldn't have existed at all.

But yesterday, she'd been willfully ignorant. Ridiculously comfortable with the idea of living with a near-stranger she knew next to nothing about, just because he treated her well. Ava cared for Noah so much, but it shouldn't have taken such a rude awakening for her to realize that she'd

allowed her life to revolve around him. Just like her life had revolved around Xavier before him.

As painful as it was to realize that she couldn't rely on Noah the way that she had - that she shouldn't rely on him in that way - the feeling wasn't new to her. Ava had come to the realization that she couldn't rely on anyone but herself a dozen times before, and each time she got too close. Fell too hard.

It was a crushing descent back to reality each time she realized that she'd lost herself in yet another person. Xavier and her friends, Layla, Bella, and now Noah.... Goddess, she felt pathetic.

Ava lived in extremes; she didn't know how to compromise. She didn't hate Noah. Far from it. What she felt for him, she'd never experienced before, and it was something that she didn't want to lose. No, she didn't hate him. She didn't hate any of them, including Xavier.

The raw truth was that she loved them too much. When she loved, it felt as if she didn't know where the other person ended, and she began. As a Beta, she was born to protect and serve. Fulfilling other's needs was hardwired into her DNA, and it was a duty she'd executed without complaint her entire life.

It was a disturbing realization to have that you don't know who you are without the direction of a male. And after twenty-one years, Ava was only

just beginning to realize that she'd never learned to live for herself. To depend on herself. If she'd ever thought about it before, she would have said that she'd depended on no one but herself for the last three years. Surviving the dungeon, the loss of countless loved ones, the sentient swill who frequented the club...but survival wasn't actually living, much less thriving.

Ava hadn't truly processed any of the trauma that stemmed from those events, and she doubted she'd be able to sort through it all tonight. But she did realize that she'd been running on autopilot for a very long time, and it was time to stop. And the first step to reconciling her past is to finish fitting the broken pieces back together. And that meant she had to find a certain witch. Unfortunately, at half-past the middle of the night, finding her would be a mite more difficult than last time.

Picking up her pace, Ava began jogging down the unlit road headed toward town. She hadn't been running for long before the deep rumbling of a motorcycle sounded in the distance, growing louder and louder until a pair of headlights appeared before her and stopped.

"What the hell are you doing out here alone?" To her surprise, it was Aiden who ripped off the bike helmet, staring at her as if she'd lost her mind.

"Perfect! I need your help with something. Mostly because running to and from town was gonna be a bitch."

Aiden cocked an eyebrow, "I'm still waiting to hear why you felt an itch to run along a desolate country backroad in the dark. I feel like I don't need to spell out for you how serial killers work, Ava."

She rolled her eyes and picked up the spare helmet strapped to the back of the bike. "Believe me, I'd love it if a serial killer came at me," she quipped. "I'd give your right arm to have a problem I could just beat to hell to make it go away." Aiden frowned, "What happened?"

Ava didn't immediately answer. She didn't agree with what Noah was doing, but she understood why he felt the need for change. She was wary, but she fucking understood. Ava wasn't so sure Aiden would, though.

Like her, he was raised in the Alliance. Raised to serve. Unlike her, he hadn't been burned and cast aside - he still had a life here. A future with their parents and his lifelong friends. Aiden could still find his mate or a wife and carry on the Davis name and be the Beta she couldn't be when it was time for their father to pass along the title.

It was for people like her brother that Ava held reticence about Noah's plans, and if she couldn't fully get behind it, how could she expect Aiden to do so.

"Ava," he said, the joviality in his tone dispersing into familial concern. "What did I miss?"

"Noah's a rogue," she whispered as her throat began to tighten. "Or a rebel? I don't really know, but he's working against the Alliance."

Aiden's face immediately went blank. Shit. She'd made a mistake. He was going to go directly to the Council and -

"What do you mean by he's a rogue?" Aiden asked.

"I...", Ava stumbled over her panicked train of thought, taken aback by Aiden's non-accusation. "He didn't go into detail, but he was screwed over by the Council and found a bunch of others who were, too. He said he wants to confront the Council and demand change in the Alliance."

"Do you agree with him?"

Ava shrugged, "I agree that the Alliance needs to change...."

Aiden stayed silent so long that Ava's palms began to sweat against the sleek, hard plastic of the helmet in her hands. "W-what are you going to do?"

His eyebrows rose, "What am I going to do? Hell, if I know, Ava. All I really feel inclined to do is leave."

"You want to leave?" Ava asked, suddenly feeling breathless.

"Yes. Emphatically, yes," He replied. "I don't give a damn who's right or wrong. All I know is that this fight doesn't have anything to do with us. You spent the last three years in a hole, while I spent the last five in a frostbitten cabin...I think we could both use a little sunshine, don't you?"

Ava only stared at him, unable to fully process what he was implying. "But Noah-"

"Isn't our problem, Ava. Not if he's intent on going toe-to-toe with the Alliance. Frankly, he's going to get himself killed, and you don't need to be around for that. It's best that we get out before you get hurt."

Ava abruptly cut off that line of thought. It had been plaguing her all night and was only one of the reasons why she was out here in the first place.

"Well, I'm not going anywhere before I get my head straightened out. Literally," she held up the helmet. "So, can you take me into town, or what?"

Aiden followed her lead and allowed the topic to change without a fight. He nodded for her to get on the back of his bike and waited for her to comply. "Where to?"

"I'm looking for that witch from the market. Marnie?"

Aiden cursed under his breath, "Again with the witches, Ava? It took you days to shake off that tarot reading."

"But she wasn't wrong, and that's what counts. I need her to be not wrong again."

"Damn it, fine." Without any further prompting, Aiden revved up his bike and took off down the road toward town.

Ava clutched tight to her brother as he sped down the dark road, the autumn-tinted trees whistling in their slipstream. The night was beautiful, painfully so. It belied the flurry of uncertainty that made Ava sick even as it spurred her on. Fueled her fire.

Every time she came to a crossroads, it felt as if her life as she knew it was ending. Maybe that had always been her first mistake. Tonight, her life wasn't ending. She wasn't losing anything or walking away from someone she loved.

Ava assured herself that she was only barreling toward a new frontier. And on the other side, she'd be a stronger person. A more complete person. She'd been very honest lately, with everyone but herself, but that wasn't a line she couldn't uncross.

If what had been missing from her closest relationships had been trust in herself, she'd do what it took to rectify that. She deserved that, to live knowing that if all else failed, she was enough to fall back on. She wasn't there yet. But, she swore she would be. Starting tonight, Ava was putting herself first.