

Chapter 99

Will Come To The Light

"What exactly are you hoping to find, Ava?"

Bella's voice rang through the speaker of her smartwatch, filling the spacious void that became of the lake house every time she found herself alone within its warm timber walls. With Noah away planning espionage, Ava had given Aiden the go-ahead to spend the weekend with Bren, leaving her all to her lonesome.

The idea of being completely alone was a foreign concept to Ava, one that she quickly realized she was not a fan of. The house seemed to double in size in the dark, perfectly mundane objects she walked past every day, casting threatening shadows.

Every time lake breeze rattled the trees outside or the home's massive bones settled, Ava's muscles tensed, convinced that one of the dozens of demons she'd left trailing behind her was just around the next corner.

Noah's office lay a perfectly lit beacon in front of her, but as she stood at the threshold, it was painfully clear that this was the most dangerous room in the house. To her. To the happiness she'd found there and the safe and cozy bubble she'd built with Noah.

Ava had no doubt that the answers she wanted were inside, but as Bella prompted her again - what exactly are you hoping to find. Ava couldn't rightly answer. There was such a dichotomy between what she hoped they would find and what she feared they would find.

"Ava...." Bella prompted. "Did something happen? I need you to communicate with me, hun."

Ava jolted back into the here-and-now, licking her dry lips as she shifted from one foot to the other, "S-sorry, I'm here."

"Good," Bella replied. "Now, what are we looking for? I can tell you the best places to look, but you're going to need to keep your eyes peeled for anything noteworthy."

"Ah, gotcha. I honestly don't know what to expect, so why don't we aim for whatever we can find?"

"Sounds like a long night, but alright. Why don't we start with his desk?"

Ava made her way over to Noah's desk, noting how pristine it was in his absence. The mahogany desk was completely clear save for his computer and a few framed photos, both of himself and Neia during different stages of Noah's life. She touched his computer mouse, causing the screen to light up. Her heart leaped when she saw that he'd saved a picture of the two of them as the screen saver. It was a photo taken shortly after she'd moved in during a walk they'd taken along the Shady Oak lake shoreline. Strangely, it felt as if that brief moment in time happened forever ago, even as it lasted a lifetime.

"The computer is locked, of course," Ava said, opening up the various drawers. "I'm finding files, though. What am I looking for?" "Anything that looks like a ledger or receipt. When in doubt, follow the money."

Ava poured through the various files tucked away in Noah's desk, her pulse beginning to race at what she found inside. She almost couldn't believe her luck as she flipped through what looked to be pages and pages of carefully organized administrative correspondence.

"Okay, Bella...I think I've found something!" Ava said, "I'm looking at expense reports, monthly fiscal records, all for about a dozen different companies."

"List them out to me," Bella urged, and Ava could hear her begin to type away as she did so. "Thomas said that he was in finance, right?"

"Venture capitalism, yeah. I figured that was his way of dancing around the fact that he was financing a political coupe."

"Not completely. All of the companies you just listed check out, and Noah is listed on the director's boards of each one," Bella said. "All except for Black Shuck Enterprises. That one routes me to an edgy t-shirt printing business out of Indianapolis. Even if their company were big enough to have a board of directors, I don't think low-grade band merch fits into Thomas' portfolio."

"So it's a front?" Ava asked.

"It's a front."

Ava returned to the file for Black Shuck Enterprises and combed through each document with a more discerning eye. "Yeah, these numbers definitely don't correlate with a small graphic design firm. Millions of dollars are funneling into their expenses, but they're getting next to nothing in return, comparatively," Ava breathed. "Unfortunately, there are no specifics. Nothing that can be identified."

"And nothing that can be traced," Bella concluded. "Let's move on to the computer. Try any significant dates first. Perhaps a--"

"Got it!" Ava exclaimed. "10181964. His mother's birthday. He uses a version of it for our front door code, too."

The line is silent for a few loaded moments before Bella speaks again, "Convenient."

After a cursory scan of his files came up empty, Bella ran Ava through a complicated step-by-step process to uncover any files possibly hidden within the desktop. Even though she trusted Bella's knowledge, she was still surprised when a single file suddenly appeared on the screen.

surveillance_library.exe

She didn't dare to breathe as she hovered the mouse over the file name and double-clicked.

The sound of releasing air and whirring gears filled the room, making Ava jump, her eyes darting over to the far wall where a small section of bookcase slid forward and to the side, revealing a dark void beyond.

"You have to be shitting me," Ava breathed, ignoring Bella's questions as she stepped through the newly revealed entryway and into a small hidden extension to Noah's office.

The space wasn't big, more of a closet with a fancy door than a nefarious secret lair. But what it held inside was enough to give Ava pause. She'd run through hundreds of scenarios in her mind leading up to tonight, each one depicting all of the deal-breaking evidence that she might discover once she began to pry into Noah's private affairs.

Never once had she thought she'd find a live camera feed channeled directly into the Eclipse Alpha's estate. Or the highly detailed maps of the Eclipse compound and annotated journals that showed every movement in or out of the Pack grounds since right before Montgomery Bennett's death.

"What did you find, Ava?" Bella asked in a terse tone.

"The reason therapy exists, I think," she quipped to hide her unease. "Noah's been keeping tabs on Eclipse. Really close tabs. It's definitely concerning, but not treason."

"Hmm...is there anything else?"

Either side of the alcove was lined with books, some newer, but most were leather-bound and darkened yellow with age. As she cracked open spine after spine, it became clear that this was her lead. Every single one of the books was covered in strange symbols and arcane-looking diagrams that she couldn't make heads or tails of. But, thanks to Xavier, she had an idea of its origin.

"Eclipse isn't the only thing Noah's been studying," Ava said. "I can't read any of it, but I'm pretty sure that all of these books are from Axis."

"What on earth would he be doing with those?" Bella asked.

"Xavier said that the rogues had been working with the fae, right?"

Ava sighed and turned to leave just as a small object tucked away on a shelf caught her eye. It was a cylindrical tube, covered in the very same symbols and runes filling the pages of the books around her. She picked it up, her conversation with Xavier coming to the forefront.

"Did you find something, Ava?"

"Yeah," she breathed. "I'm pretty sure I found Xavier's missing decoder."

It had been a surreal experience, stepping into one body of water and walking out of another one miles and miles away. Amazing as it was, though, Xavier's first taste of Axis magic made it painfully clear why the two worlds had split all of those years ago.

Over an hour later, Xavier's head was still throbbing, and even Alexandre whined internally at the toll the alien magic took on their bodies.

Disgruntled growls and murmuring from the rest of the party let Xavier know that he wasn't the only one feeling the fae magic's unpleasant effects.

"We've been here staring at this forsaken rock for over an hour," Rhys snapped. "How long until we know for certain if it was the Unseelie who opened it?"

King Ore turned from where he and the queen had stood closely examining the portal, liquid metal eyes glowing.

"The Unseelie were undoubtedly the ones who opened this portal," the fae king said. "They were also the ones who closed it. It will not open again." "Then why are we still here?" Rhys asked.

"Because it is of import to our people that we uncover who from our side accessed this portal in the first place," Queen Orlaith said coldly, leveling Rhys with an icy look. "Apologies if matters of political import tire you so...Alpha Bennett, was it?"

The Eclipse Alpha frowned at the queen's shrewd stare, snarling as his second laid a tempering hand on his arm. "Are we done here?"

Orlaith waved a hand toward the glowing doorway they'd stepped from, shining brightly from the cenote's underground pool, "The way home is open to you. Feel free to take it. We have all that we need from you."

With a parting grimace and a shake of his head, the Eclipse representatives stomped their way through the portal.

"We apologize profusely for the Eclipse Alpha's behavior," Wyatt Miller announced before tense silence had a chance to settle inside of the cave. "He is young and very new to his role. He's still learning."

"Oh, I'm sure he learned all he needed to," Orlaith's eyes cut to her husband as they shared a look, silent information no doubt passing between them. "We are not surprised by the Eclipse Alpha's behavior." "What do you mean?" Liam asked.

"While we were unable to learn who opened this portal recently, we were able to pick up some...familiar energy signatures," Ore said, sounding as grim as Xavier had heard him. "We had expected the incident you called us here for to be somehow related to a past instance where our borders were breached."

Xavier's father stepped forward; his usually stoic face clouded with shock, "You've been contacted before?"

Ore nodded, "And not too long ago, even by your standards. Another attempt to gain resources from our side by a fellow who claimed to be making big moves on your side. He wanted to expand his already sizable underground network." The king continued, "Although, those events took

place at a different location than this. We'd thought we'd put an end to the whole ordeal, but it seems other attempts were made."

"By whom?" Xavier asked. "Do you remember?"

"Monroe? No, that's not it...Madison?"

"Montgomery," Orlaith said, her lavender eyes trained on the glowing portal where Rhys had disappeared. "It was a male named Montgomery Bennet."