

Chapter 110

Detente

For a place Ava had been convinced she would never see again only a few months ago, the flashing neon of the Green Light Club was becoming an all too familiar staple in her life as of recent. And yet here she was, sitting in the passenger seat of Noah's car as he pulled into the club's private parking lot.

She clenched his hand tight in hers, just as she had for most of the trip down to Rochester, doggedly attempting to take even the most minute portion of Noah's tension into herself. Thankfully, it hadn't taken much more to convince Noah to hear her out - the revelation about his stolen birthright and his family's many, many crimes had all but sealed the deal by providing the irrefutable evidence they'd need to force the Council into acknowledging Noah's stake. Even so, after her reassurances that the Alphas were as interested in an even playing field as he was, he was still reticent about their meeting. And, as much as Ava hated to admit it, he was probably right to be hesitant.

After all, trusting the Alphas at all was a risk for someone who'd spent a sizable portion of the last few years building a shadow operation geared solely toward the deconstruction of their entire society. And on top of that, each individual Alpha was not without their own risk; although Liam seemed on board with the plan, could he be trusted to back up the son of the man who'd had his mate murdered?

Meanwhile, Dylan had been vocal enough about his reluctance to go up against the Council, but whether he landed on their side or not, ultimately, the decision was his father's, not his. And Ava hated to even consider it, but Xavier could be using the entire coupe as a rouse to weed out the rogue threat while simultaneously taking out the male who currently had designs on his mate.

Of course, Ava, the friend, and companion didn't think that any of these theories were likely, but Ava, the Beta tactician, needed to be prepared for any eventuality. It would be utterly foolish of her to put Noah on the line unless she'd thoroughly vetted each option beforehand.

And so, he'd put his faith in her and agreed to the meeting. And three days later, here they were.

"Are you ready?" Ava asked as he put the car into park.

Noah didn't immediately answer, instead staring intently ahead, clearly lost in his own inner miasma. Finally, he nodded, slowly but with the steadfast determination she'd come to know him for.

"I don't like how this all went down, A. The sneaking off and cutting deals behind my back...I've never been anything but as honest as I felt I could with you," he said, making Ava's heart sink. "But, ultimately, I recognize that you were only doing the same. I just hate that you didn't trust me to hear you out."

Ava bit the inside of her cheek hard to keep from speaking out. To say what, she didn't really know, and that was exactly why she chose to stay quiet. He hadn't said anything but the truth - she'd lied, or as near to it as she could have without ever actually speaking to him about her intentions.

And Noah had done the same in omitting his role as the leader of an insurgent cabal. Ava was only glad that Noah recognized that she'd had his best intentions at heart, just like she'd understood that he'd felt that keeping his secret life a secret would ensure her safety.

Still, the stark truth was that, when it came down to it, they hadn't trusted one another. And, while that could be forgiven considering the circumstances, Ava knew that it couldn't be ignored forever.

"Even so," he continued. "I trust that you wouldn't have gone to all of this trouble if you weren't certain of the outcome. You're too wily for that."

Ava raised her eyebrows at that, "Wily?"

"Don't try to play coy, now, Ava. You've already played your hand," he smirked and pointed toward the club's entrance. "I knew it from the moment I met you that you were one to watch - I just didn't realize how on the money I was. You've been playing on a field entirely your own since the very beginning."

She frowned, casting her gaze around the parking garage just to break eye contact, "I don't know about all that. If I were playing a game, wouldn't I know what my goal was at the end?"

Warmth enveloped her hand as Noah closed his palm around hers and squeezed, "If there's one thing this has taught me is that having an endpoint doesn't count for shit. It's the people that can stay one step ahead that ultimately get where they're trying to go."

The air practically began to crackle with tension the moment they stepped from the elevator into the secluded VIP suite, nestled back in the far reaches of the club's renowned eighth floor. If the other Alphas had been conversing before their arrival, their presence brought all discussion to an immediate halt.

"Noah Thomas," he announced through his easiest, breeziest smile. "It's a pleasure to finally meet your acquaintance."

After a beat of silence, Xavier was the first to move, greeting them with a nod gesturing for them to have a seat.

"Xavier Michaels. I can say that I'm relieved that we're meeting under...friendlier terms than might have previously been considered."

"Me, as well," he replied. "In truth, given the Council's history, it had never occurred to me that its leaders would be up for cordial discussions. I mean, I'd hoped, but excuse me for taking an... alternative route."

"You talk around in circles enough to fit right in," Dylan quipped with a touch more venom than usual. "If it weren't for Ava's meddling, we'd all be gearing up for war at this very moment. And yet, here we are, trusting that you won't take everything you learn here and go shore up your defenses."

Noah's smile went tight around the edges, "Dylan Miller, right? Rising Alpha of Dark Moon. I understand your hesitance; I'm putting a lot on the line, too. But, if nothing else, believe that I wouldn't have thrown away my life's work for nothing. I'm here because I want the same thing you do; a better Alliance."

"And you think you're up to the task of making that happen?" Liam asked.

"I have to be," Noah replied. "We have to be. We're all there is."

"And ain't that a bitch?" Liam held out his hand for Noah to shake, "Liam Smith. Silver Moon Alpha."

A softer, more genuine smile touched his lips before a thoughtful frown replaced it.

"Liam...I've recently learned some...revealing information about my family," Noah said in a grave tone. "I offer my most sincere condolences for your loss."

Liam's jaw went tight, but nevertheless, there was a glint of respect in his gaze as he considered Noah's words.

"From what I hear, the sonofabitch didn't do you any favors, either. Still, I appreciate the sentiment," he paused as his voice caught, his normally gruff tone becoming a tinge hoarser. "It's...good to finally know what happened. And that bastard behind it is collecting worms as we speak."

There was the sharp edge of challenge in Liam's words, but Noah didn't flinch, "In that, we agree. As far as I'm concerned, the greatest boon Montgomery Bennett ever gave to the Alliance was the gift of his early

death. From what Ava's told me, we have my half-brother Rhys to thank for that."

Liam and the other Alphas go preternaturally still, jolted with disbelief. Xavier was the first to react, his amber eyes sliding to where Ava sat.

"You found evidence of that in Eclipse?" He asked.

She shrugged, "Well, I found a letter addressed to Noah from Montgomery essentially denouncing Rhys' claim to the Alphadom along with official documents meant to formally reinstate Noah's. Rhys' little manic soliloquy right before burning the evidence sort of filled in the rest."

Dylan sat back, "Goddess. We're all but guaranteed the Council's surrender at this point."

Xavier hummed in quiet agreement, "We're at least guaranteed their cooperation. There's no way they could publicly reject this claim. The question is, what do we do afterward? What are our next steps after gaining the majority."

"I propose a direct approach," Noah announced, all eyes turning toward him. "If I may, I've spent a sizable amount of time gathering intel on the Council members for obvious reasons. I quickly came to the realization that while the Council holds all of the cards, they haven't got anything to

back it up. All of their power is sentimental; generational wealth, legacy, and all that."

"They're the aristocracy," Xavier muttered. "But the Alphas are the face of the Alliance. We're who the Packs will follow."

"Exactly," Noah nodded. "We need to cut the head off of the snake. As soon as I'm reinstated, and we gain the majority, we need to dismiss the Council."