

Chapter 94

Cooperation

Ava felt her jaw drop again, but this time she didn't feel like throwing the forest at Xavier. She...almost wanted to give him a hug. Of course, she didn't. Instead, she surreptitiously moved to sit on her hands, combating the inconvenient need she felt to reach out. "Oh."

"Yeah, oh," he said, raising his head to look at her. "And that's why I wanted to bring it up. I know that we're not mates in the traditional sense, Ava. But if clearing the air between us will help you heal - help Mia heal - I want that. But that choice is yours to make."

It didn't take Ava too terribly long to consider his offer. She'd already come to the conclusion that forgiving Xavier would be cathartic for her, and after surviving their first real conversation in years, she felt ready to not only forgive him but forgive herself for choosing to move on.

The fact that their reconciliation was literally the answer she'd been looking for to Mia's recovery felt downright kismet.

Ava nodded, "Alright. I'm willing to...not start over. I don't think we can ever really do that. But I am willing to move forward. On an even playing field."

Ava stuck out her hand, and the uncertainty on his face as he hesitated before taking her hand reassured her that she was making the right decision. Their palms warmed where they connected, the mating bond jumping at the slightest opportunity to spark. Ava dropped Xavier's hand before the ember could catch, tucking her hand right back under her thigh.

"So, when do we get to nail Victor?" She asked.

Xavier took a moment to answer, still coming to terms with the unfamiliar feeling of forgiveness. "As soon as we figure out who he was working with."

"MB? Who do you think it could be?"

Xavier shrugged, "It could be anyone. All the letters gave away was the fact that the culprit is well connected."

"And probably a member of the Council," Ava stated.

Xavier paused and looked at her with his brow furrowed, "How do you figure? They could be from anywhere. Not just inside of the Alliance."

Ava shook her head, "Yeah, no. One of the letters said that his people got caught in Silver Moon territory, right? By the Jersey border? That means that they probably have access to the North Atlantic coastline. Every coastal city from Virginia Beach down is fanatically human-oriented. At least they were before I went away."

"Shit, you're right. New Jersey is one of the most insular states within the Alliance. They wouldn't be able to reach it unless they decided to trek across about four or five other Alliance Territories." "Unless they were already in an Allied Territory," Ava concluded.

"That doesn't mean they have to be on the Council, though. It could be someone tangential."

Ava shrugged, "Sure. But someone with enough sway to pull this kind of backdoor bullshit? If it's not someone on the Council, you can bet that someone on the Council knows exactly who it is."

Xavier blew out an excited breath, "Damn. I forgot how much better than me you were about the nitty-gritty tactical shit."

Ava's smile was slight and wistful, "That was all part of the job. You lead, and I do what I can to help you do it." "And you make a hell of a much better Beta than I do."

"That's because you're not a Beta," Ava said.

"Tell that to my father," Xavier scoffed. "I wonder if this new insight will give him any ideas on who it could be."

"Your father's working with you on this?" Ava asked, her pitch sharpening with surprise.

Xavier nodded, "He wants to put Sophia's murderer down just as much as I do. It's the first thing we've agreed on in years.'

"Then maybe he should have spent more time figuring out who it really was from the beginning," Ava said without thinking. But even as Xavier's expression fell, she couldn't bring herself to take back what she'd said. Offering her forgiveness to Xavier was one thing; they were connected in a way that couldn't be avoided.

But August? He could take a long walk off a short pier for all she cared.

"Yeah, well, between finding MB and stopping these new rogues, we're doing enough investigative work to last a lifetime."

Ava stiffened, "New rogues?"

Xavier sighed, "Yeah, you wouldn't believe the shit we've been finding, Ava. We found a bunker in Silver Moon that housed hundreds of soldiers. They got the drop on us and abandoned ship and tried to flame us out, but before they could, we found a mountain of documents we can't even read because they destroyed the only fucking decoder."

With every word he uttered, Ava felt her heart begin to thud harder and harder against her chest, "They...these rogues haven't hurt anyone, have they?"

A derisive sneer crossed Xavier's face, "Not yet. But the Pixie Dust we found in the bunker, and the open portal to Axis don't leave me hopeful that we'll be able to hug this shit out." "They opened a portal to Axis?! How?"

"That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? That's why we've called a meeting with the Seelie Court to figure out what the hell is going on across the veil. It would be our luck if a cross-dimensional war came knocking for the first time in a thousand years, and it happened right on our doorstep, huh?"

She didn't respond. She didn't know how. Ava found herself filled with a curious sense of horror and relief. What Xavier was describing was...absurd. Too much for the reasonable protest that Noah and Neia had

described, surely.... "Sorry," Xavier said lightly. "I shouldn't be bothering you with all of this- "

"No!" Ava said in a rush. "I mean, thank you. I like being in the know. It reminds me of when we were in school together. I liked those conferences way more than you ever did."

"If I could send you to talk to the fae for me, I would. There'd probably be less of a chance for an interdimensional incident that way."

Ava cut him a sardonic look, "With my track record? Highly unlikely. It's probably for everyone's best interest that I stay right here in Shady Oak."

Xavier laughed at her depressingly accurate joke but quickly sobered. "So, you like it here?" He asked, "In Shady Oak...."

Ava bit her lip and asked the question he didn't want to, "Am I happy with Noah, you mean?"

Xavier nodded silently, "I know that our contract just ended. Bella wanted to schedule a get-together with you so that you could touch base."

Ava nodded, "Yeah, I think I'd like that. I could use a reason to get out of town."

And it was the truth. She needed to get away, to have a chance to think in a place where she wasn't surrounded by Noah and the beautiful fantasy that was their life together.

Xavier leveled her with a severe look, "And why is that? If you don't mind my asking. I know it's none of my business."

She waved him off and forced a breezy smile, "What else would I do as a newly free woman than immediately go directly back to my place of forced tenure."

Xavier grimaced, apparently not finding the humor in her joke. Good. But she batted him in the knee anyway.

"I'm just kidding. Now, the Green Light Club is just the place where all of my closest friends live."

Xavier nodded, but his demeanor was still somber, "That's good. That you have friends there. I'm glad that I didn't ruin that for you, too."

"Well, very nearly. There were a few times where I'm pretty sure Bella thought her career was over," Ava quipped.

Xavier smiled, and this time it reached his hazel eyes, "Lucky her, I'm feeling a sudden need to give her a raise, instead."

You share a smile before rising to your feet, "Not that this hasn't been lovely, but I should probably get going. I left Aiden on a strange street corner in the middle of town."

Xavier got up after her and grabbed his satchel, "So, you didn't run out of the house alone in the middle of the night? Well, shit. You have changed."

At her noncommittal chuckle, he glared at her. "Anyway, there's something else I wanted to give to you. It's up to you whether you want it. It's...not very flattering. But we're doing the truth now, so I won't keep it from you."

He reached into the bag and pulled out a flower-covered notebook, and handed it to her. Ava opened up the cover and gasped, "Sam's notebook? Why are you giving me this?"

Xavier blew out an uncomfortable breath, "There's a lot of shit in there. And a surprising amount of it is about you. I swear, I didn't know about any of it, Ava."

An uneasy feeling turned Ava's stomach as she turned the first page. It didn't take long for her to understand what Xavier was talking about. Not ten pages in was a page completely dedicated to an admittedly well-done

caricature of her. The artistic quality was undercut by the giant scarlet 'A' slashed across her face and the word 'whore' scrawled across the top of the page.

Ava snapped the book shut and swallowed hard, "Oh."

Xavier cursed, "You shouldn't have to see that. You should remember Sam how you knew her."

"Apparently, I didn't know her, though," Ava muttered. "But what else is fucking new?"