

Chapter 143

Witch! Please

Ava blinked in and out of consciousness as searing pain ripped through her abdomen. Whenever she surfaced, the renewed shock of pain would cause her to take a quick breath inward that would send yet another, even more, intense wave rocketing through her, sending her back into oblivion.

It took a couple of tries and several hours for Ava to wake and stay awake; the pain finally dulled to a thrumming ache. When she could finally open her eyes without her eyelids feeling as if they were made of lead, the first thing she saw was Jack's pensive face hovering over hers.

And the second thing she registered, along with an intense sense of déjà vu, was Xavier's equally pensive face a little ways off, slumped in a nearby chair.

"This feels awfully familiar," she quipped, her dry throat making her joke sound more like a croak.

"Really? And to think that I was just beginning to forget what it was like trying to glue you back together whatever fresh hell you found yourself in." Came Jack's perpetually sarcastic reply, "Color me surprised that you've managed to keep yourself out of trouble for so long."

She scrunched up her face at his tone, and from behind him, Xavier snorted in derision. "Trouble is...a subjective term," Ava said, grimacing as she attempted to sit up. "Let's just say that I haven't ended up in an infirmary in a while." Xavier rushed to her side, helping her up with a supportive hand on the small of her back. Now that she was fully seated upright, Ava looked around and could finally take in her surroundings. What she saw sent an intense crawling shiver down her spine.

"Especially not this infirmary," she muttered, swallowing down an instinctive lump of fear that was clogging her throat. "I have to hand it to you, Jack. It looks a lot cleaner than I remember."

Jack gave a sympathetic sigh, "Don't even get me started. Thank the goddess for the witches and that weird hocus pocus thing they do. When I say there wasn't enough bleach in the world...." Ava looked up in surprise, "The witches have spells that can clean? What the hell can't they do?"

It was Jack's turn to snort as Xavier handed her a glass of water. "They said it wasn't cleaning as much as a restoration. Turning back the temporal bonds of a person, place, or thing, until it was returned to a state before it had been sullied by the hands of man and time."

Ava blinked at him, "Right. Because a cleaning spell would have been too complicated."

Xavier smirked, "I'm just repeating what they told me. I can't pretend to wrap my head around it either."

"If you ask me if they can make lightning fall out of the sky, travel wherever the hell they want at the drop of a dime, and play with time like it's Silly Putty," Jack muttered. "It's a wonder why this war isn't over by now." "It's a good thing that no one did ask you, then."

All three of them turned to see Marnie leaning in the doorway to the infirmary, arms crossed over her chest. "It's presumption like that that saw my people burned at the stake for hundreds of years, healer."

Jack quirked an eyebrow at her, "Was I being presumptive? I thought that I was only stating proven facts."

"This isn't Axis. We don't make miracles out of thin air," Marnie countered. "Every bit of magic we do comes at a cost. The bigger the magic, the bigger the payment."

"If that's the case, then what have your people sacrificed to help us with our war?" Xavier asked. "And why?"

Marnie's electric green eyes traveled from him to the place where his hand rested against Ava's back and then finally rested on Ava herself. "You're asking questions that are above my paygrade. Anyway, I didn't come here to ponder the secrets of the universe. I came to see how my wayward friend was feeling."

"A lot more like my organs are where they're supposed to be, thankfully," she said with a smile. "And don't let Jack speak for all of us. You and your people have been an invaluable asset to us. We're lucky to have you as allies." The healer rolled his eyes and muttered beneath his breath, "Just begs the question of what's in it for them, is all I'm saying."

"Jack," Xavier chided.

Marnie gave a tense smile, "Glad to help. Just remember that the faster this is ended, the better for all of us, not just the Wolves."

Ava nodded and turned to Xavier, "She's right. Which means the sooner we get started enacting my plan, the better."

"You need to rest, Ava. And we all need a chance to recuperate after yesterday. The resistance took a blow yesterday. The Green Light Club is

gone, and we have a hell of a lot of scared, confused civilians looking for some reassurance right now."

Ava's heart ached for Bella, knowing that the loss of the club - tainted as it was - hit her more than it ever would Xavier. But, that didn't change that they were at a crucial point in time, and they needed to act now before Neia had the chance to pull even further ahead of them.

"The next Blue Moon is less than a month away, Xavier," she insisted. "If we don't have something to offer Neia's army when it comes, it won't matter who wins the Trial. The people following Neia will never stop fighting; they'll never be content."

"At the end of it all, they are fighting for the same reasons that you are," Marnie added.

After a moment of silent contemplation, Xavier finally nodded his assent. "I'll take it to the others, and we'll figure out the logistics," he said. "This is your plan, though, Ava. You're at the helm. Where should we start?"

The thought of all of the responsibility he had just handed her weighed on her; it felt as if a pit had opened up in the depths of her stomach, but she was prepared for the challenge. It was something she believed in, a path to a more united tomorrow.

"I think we should start close to home," she answered. "We should start by visiting Grave Crown. Whatever rift they had with the Alliance, it needs to end with us." "That's not a good idea."

Ava whipped her head to stare at Marnie, surprised by her frank outburst.

"What do you know of Grave Crown?" Xavier asked, his eyes narrowing in suspicion. Ava had no doubt that every single one of Jack's previous comments was circling through his mind. "They're one of the Alliance's Packs, and we barely have a connection to them. How do the witches know them at all?"

Marnie pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes right back at him, "The Alliance may have claimed a lot of land as their own, but my people occupied New England far before your forebearers settled here, and we have a far better relationship with those who originally stewarded the land before that."

"What are you getting at?" Xavier pushed.

"Us spellcasters have a long memory, and nothing takes place in these parts that we don't know about," she says, casting a sidelong glare at Jack, who was currently pretending not to eavesdrop as he sat with another patient. "Whether we choose to get involved is a matter of preference, given our history of persecution. Needless to say, we've heard of Grave

Crown, and what we've heard makes us wary. I'd advise you against venturing there."

Xavier scoffed, and it sounded just shy of a snarl. "I'm about fucking tired of Grave Crown's uncanny ability to shirk off their duties. They made vows they've done a piss-poor job of keeping for too long. The least they can do is look us in the eye and explain why."

"For what it's worth, we agree," Liam said as he and Dylan entered the infirmary, looking tired but fired up and ready to take on the next challenge.

"Grave Crown has a lot to answer for," Dylan growled. "They've stayed hidden while the rest of the Alliance fell and remained silent while we've scrounged to piece back together the society they abandoned. It's time that came to an end." Shaking her head, Marnie silently slipped from the room without a backward glance. Ava wanted to go after her and try to finally get some concrete answers from her cagey friend, but she doubted that she'd have much luck. The witch had more secrets than not, and she seemed to be particularly skilled at keeping them.

But never mind that they had a goal.

"Grave Crown is only just the beginning," Ava reminded them, anticipation fueling her. "We only have a matter of weeks to come to terms with the shifters and the humans as well if we plan on creating a new

Alliance." Liam gave an unconvinced grunt, "Any idea on where to begin with either of those tasks?"

"No," Ava grinned morosely. "But that's just all the more reason why we need to get started sooner rather than later. We're building from the ground up and don't have a lot of time to do it, but that doesn't mean that we can't get it done."