

Chapter 144

Grave Crown Rising

"No."

The line went silent as Ava blinked rapidly, her neurons firing at all cylinders struggling to process the fact that her brother had just blatantly shut down such a simple request for information and why on earth that would be. "Excuse me?" She finally asked. "What do you mean no?"

"I mean that I don't think it's a good idea for you to go meddling in Grave Crown affairs," he said, his voice stern and giving no quarter. That was all well and good that he felt so strongly, but as long as he was also giving her no answers, 'no' wasn't going to cut it for her.

"Grave Crown affairs are Alliance affairs, Aiden. You know that," she replied.

Her brother huffed on the other end of the phone - a frustrated sound. "Even if the Alliance still existed, you, I, and everyone else knows that hasn't been the case in a long time."

"Bullshit," she snapped. "Grave Crown is a Pack; it isn't some mythical enigma sitting loftily in the mountains somewhere watching all of us plebians struggle from on high. They have motivations, and we deserve to know what they are." "I just don't think that you're going to find what you're looking for when you get there, Ava," he said, the fight leaving his voice. "You don't have a lot of time to do what you're doing before the next Blue Moon comes, and it's time for the Trial. You shouldn't waste it chasing ghosts."

Ava went silent, and the tension that stretched between her and her brother was all too new and uncomfortable. This discordance had no place in their relationship, and yet, she knew that he wasn't going to budge just the same as she knew that she couldn't, either.

"If we can't even get our own people to join us to create a better tomorrow, then how are we supposed to convince anyone else to do it?" She finally whispered. "And then what, Aiden? Neia and the humans win? That terrorist becomes the leading power over the Werewolves in the Northeast? You know that if she gets that power, she won't stop there. This isn't about principle for her. It's about winning."

"And it isn't for you?" He countered. "You can't just go around bullying people into helping your cause if they don't believe in it."

"Then they can damn well tell me that to my fucking face instead of hiding in the shadows like a bunch of cowards," she snapped. "And I don't know what the hell you went through up in that so-called cabin of yours, but it clearly wasn't the entire story. If there's something going on up in Maine that's more important than your loyalty to the Alliance...than your loyalty to me, then it sure as shit sounds like something worth discovering."

"Ava-"

She ended the call and sat, breathing heavily in and out through her nose, trying in vain to calm her fraught nerves. Ava was angry, and more she was hurt by the secrets and lies perpetuated by her own blood, the last family she had rely on. But, above all of that, she was filled with a blatant determination, a profound sense that she was on the right path. It was the same instinct that had led her to where she was now, and, despite the constant highs and lows, she knew this was the road that needed to be taken because every step closer led her to...something.

Her mind suddenly turned back to that fateful night at Marnie's when the witch had opened Ava's mind, energy, whatever it was to the very universe itself, and she had been filled with an evanescent sense of speeding toward something greater than herself. Then, she'd been rushing toward her mate, but she felt a very similar sensation now.

This winding, painful road she led would all be worth it, she felt, when it led her to her destiny.

"Move over. I'm coming along."

Ava dutifully moved aside to make room for Marnie beside her in the SUV, content enough to have someone as powerful as the witch accompanying them on the trip north. Xavier, however, eyed her over his shoulder from his spot in the front passenger's seat.

"Thought this wasn't your scene," he said, the challenge in his tone clear as daylight.

Marnie didn't rise to the bait, though, and only settled into her seat without bothering to respond. And with that, their small caravan set off to Grave Crown with Xavier, Ava, and Marnie in one escorted vehicle, and Liam and Dylan taking up the rear in a second one following closely behind them.

The trip wasn't an easy one. The drive alone was over ten hours long, which would be a harrowing enough trek. Added to it, though, every optional route meant cutting right through Eclipse territory in some capacity or another, so they opted to take the scenic route adding an additional couple of hours to the trip, but greatly lessened the chance of them running into Neia's forces by avoiding Massachusetts altogether.

On top of the level of low-grade tension that persisted throughout the long drive, with everyone anticipating trouble at every traffic light, the divided opinions surrounding the trip made it a quiet one at that. Ava, for her part, was still seething over her conversation with her brother.

Whether it was strictly warranted or not, she couldn't stave off the feeling of betrayal, and, frustratingly enough, she felt bad about that. Sensing her disquiet, Xavier glanced back at her with a questioning gaze, but she only shook her head. The only way out of her funk was to get to Grave Crown and finally get some answers.

And good riddance.

They had driven through the day and well into the next night by the time they came to what seemed to be the end of the line. The winding, lightless road led to a bridge that was blocked off with cement pylons and neon reflective signs alerting travelers that the only path forward was inconveniently out of order.

Xavier let out a testy breath as his radio crackled. "Now what?" Came Dylan's voice from the other car.

"Keep going," Marnie muttered, barely looking up from the book she'd been glued to since the beginning of the drive.

"It says the bridge is out," the driver protested.

"Keep. Going."

Ava, Xavier, and the driver all shared a dubious look, but at Ava's nod, Xavier motioned for the driver to keep pressing onward. He did so, but slowly, creeping up to the row of awfully permanent-looking stone pillars and gently nudging forward.

To their amazement, instead of impacting with the pylon, the SUV's front bumper continued through as if the obstruction weren't there at all. Because it isn't, Ava thought.

"An illusion?" Xavier directed at Marnie. "Why is Grave Crown hidden by magic?"

Marnie sighed, finally looking up from the pages of her book. "I'm not trying to be a dick; really, I'm not. But I can not give you the answers you're looking for," she said and cast a particularly hard look in Ava's direction. "You'll get your answers soon enough, but in the meantime, let's agree not to shoot the messenger."

By now, Ava was used to Marnie's uncanny ability to seemingly see through a person and into events that she shouldn't be privy to, but it was still unnerving whenever the witch turned her eerie abilities onto her. Still, she agreed, and Xavier let the point drop. For now.

They continued on across the bridge and further into the woods, still frigid despite the coming of Spring. This place gave the word 'remote' new meaning and, just when Ava was beginning to doubt that there could possibly be anything at the other end of this road, a looming shadow rose up against a sudden break in the moonlit tree line.

A huge, modern gothic manor sat pristinely in a frosty clearing as if the forest itself had been built around it. Wrought iron gates opened seemingly of their own accord, allowing them passage inside. When they reached the roundabout driveway and the curved stone stairs leading up to the massive solid wooden double doors, they opened, once again, on their own, beckoning their party inside.

Outside of the cars, Xavier, Liam, and Dylan stared up at the massive hideaway with expressions so deeply suspicious she feared that superstition alone would be enough for them to call the entire venture off. So, when Marnie took the lead and started up the stairs, Ava didn't hesitate to follow her.

The inside of the manor fit the outside's stately visage. It was all hardwood and stone; old-world craftsmanship lovingly etched into every fine detail of the interior. It was also, Ava noticed, completely empty.

"Where is everyone?" Ava whispered, her low voice still carrying throughout the high-ceilinged chamber.

"They don't like company, remember?" Marnie quipped as she continued to lead the party forward. At first, Ava had just assumed that the witch happened to be in the lead as they walked in a straight line, but now as she noticed how Marnie didn't once take a look at the opulence around them, Ava realized that Marnie knew exactly where they were going.

She felt the hair on her arms stand on end, and based on the tensing in the Alphas around her, they'd noticed the same thing as well. Just then, they came to a set of carved double doors that Marnie pushed open. The room beyond was something of a cross between an office and a throne room, with a large ornate chair sitting behind a massive mahogany desk.

Perched on the desk itself instead of the chair was a female, not much older than Ava, and gorgeous in a way that was almost intimidating but somehow familiar. With warm caramel skin and a heavy fall of wavy dark hair falling to the small of her back, she was stunning, for sure, but it was her vivid green eyes that spoke to Ava.

"Ava, Alphas, I'd like to introduce you to Emmaline Adaire," Marnie said, striding confidently forward. "Reigning Alpha of Pack Grave Crown."

As they stuttered to a halt, the female hopped off of the desk and opened her arms wide, a disarming smile brightening her face. All directed toward Marnie, who eagerly embraced who she claimed to be Grave Crown's Alpha. "It's good to see you, Marnie," Emmaline said in a smooth, husky voice. "I'm glad to finally have my sister home!"