

Chapter 146

Give And Take

"Alright, alright, shock aside, this is good for us, right?"

"That we're so out of touch that we didn't even know that there's an ancient order of witches ruling the world?" "I'm having a hard time tracking your logic, sweets."

"First, to be clear, the institution is ancient, not the witches," "Well, save for a few that I can think of, but none that we know personally."

"All that aside," Ava reiterated through gritted teeth. "We all want the same thing! We came here looking for allies to start a new society, and here you all already have irrefutable proof that our plan has legs." "In theory," Emmaline emphasized. "Once again, I feel the need to impress upon you the fact that we have no real insight on the inner workings of

these pan-supernatural communities outside of the fact that they exist. Much less whether something of the like would actually work here."

"Unless, of course, your infamously territorial and well-known community would somehow be cool with being essentially wiped off the face of the planet by said ancient of witches."

"No, no, no," Ava shook her head vehemently. "This isn't the 1700s anymore. Even if that could feasibly work in this day and age, if we can't figure out how to come together in the name of peace, then maybe we deserve to pick each other off one-by-one."

Xavier, Dylan, and Liam stared at her in surprise, but Ava meant every word. At this point, she was over the infinitely petty history that seemed to plague every inch of this stupid planet. Ava wondered if Axis shared issues anywhere remotely similar to their own.

For her part, Emmaline threw her head back and laughed. "That's a mighty strong opinion you have, but it's not one I disagree with," she said. "As someone whose very existence has, up to this point, been a highly guarded secret, I can attest that a life in the shadows is hardly a life at all."

"So you agree it's a shot worth taking," Ava insisted.

"I agree that our fathers' status quo was doomed to fail, and if you're serious about establishing a new one where both of my people can live in

harmony," Emmaline said, carefully selecting each word. "Then it is crucial that we be involved in those talks."

"Since you mentioned it, what did happen to your father?" Liam asked, doggedly holding onto his deep suspicion. "The last we heard, Jeremiah Adair hadn't been seen in nearly ten years. Just up and vanished one day. Rumor around the Council was that all the solitary time in this forest must have driven him mad. Either that or he brokered some sort of deal with the Canadian Lupins to expand upward behind the Alliance's back."

The corner of Emmaline's mouth kicked up, the only sign of her irritation. "With allies like that, it's hard to conceive of how such a stalwart organization managed to cannibalize itself," she said. "Don't concern yourself too much; old Jeremiah Adair is as whole and hale as ever. He only stepped down within the last few years. The last I heard, he was somewhere in Germany helping my mother establish a new covenant."

"Nice."

She rolled her eyes at the Silver Moon Alpha's snide remark. "Look, if you're looking for me to defend how certain things have played out, don't hold your breath. I deal in explanations, not excuses. The fact is, I'm in charge of Grave Crown, not my father. All of Grave Crown's decisions for the last two years have gone through me, so how my father chooses to spend his retirement is neither here nor there."

The two stared each other down, and tension practically crackled between them. Still, Ava was surprised when Liam was the first to back down. "Noted," he grunted, a glimmer of respect glinting in his eyes.

"Now that's settled, how do we move forward?" Marnie posed.

Ava cleared her throat, "We were planning to approach the shifters next and the humans afterward."

"Which humans?" Marnie asked, looking understandably skeptical. "Surely, not the ones who are already in bed with the people who are in the habit of starting firefights with you, correct?"

"Ideally, we'd find some backup before we approached local legislators," Xavier admitted, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Granted, it seems to be New York and Eclipse territory governments giving us the most hassle. If the human gangs weren't hellbent on seeing to our destruction, a grassroots approach would be worth investigating."

Marnie made a contemplative sound and scooted closer to the cheerily lit oversized fireplace. "I may have an idea for that, but I'll need to make a few calls first."

"Fair enough," Emmaline nodded. "But on the topic of the shapeshifters, who are we looking to approach?"

Ava and the Alphas looked back and forth between each other without offering anything up.

"Really?" Emmaline gasped. "Goddesses, and I thought I was sheltered. Have any of you ever even met a shapeshifter before?"

"I have," Ava said sheepishly. "But only in California."

"It sounds like you have, though," Dylan stated. "If you have a lead, we'd love to hear it."

Emmaline gave a sarcastic chuckle as she sat back in her seat and shared a look with Marnie, "Oh, I have a lead, but it's definitely one of those 'road less traveled' deals."

"They can't be any less standoffish than you lot," Dylan joked.

The Grave Crown Alpha shrugged, "Oh, on the contrary, they're quite outspoken...mostly about how they despise the Alliance and everything it stands for."

They didn't spend more than a few hours to quickly rest up at the Grave Crown manor before they set out again, this time accompanied by

Emmaline. Surprised that she was willing to join them without an escort, Ava asked her if anyone from her security detail would be joining them. The female simply patted her sister on the shoulder and informed her that said security detail was already present.

Over the next several hours, Emmaline navigated them southeast toward the coast. What should have been a trip lasting less than five hours would have taken twice as long thanks to the sheer amount of ice and snow that persisted this far North if it had not been for the sister witches discreetly easing their passage.

It was amazing seeing Emmaline practice spell craft. Not because it was any more impressive than Marnie's, but just for the simple fact that it was possible in the first place.

"Does your magic interact with your Wolf?" She asked at one point along the drive, only afterward realizing that the question might be intrusive. "Sorry, you don't have to answer that."

Emmaline waved her off. "Nonsense, it's a good question," she reassured Ava. "And to answer it, yes and no. As far as I can tell, Cosima can't manipulate my magic directly. Say, when I transform into a she-wolf, I'm simply a wolf, but in my half- formed state, I can wield magic as surely as I do my claws."

From the front seat, Xavier let out a low whistle. "That's a hell of a lot of power for one person."

"Maybe that's why there's only one of me," Emmaline quipped back.

"What about when you're just you?" Ava continued her questioning. "How can Cosima interact with your magic?"

"It's much like a Wolf's natural, preternatural sense, I think, but...bigger. Almost prophetic at times, like a really, really intense case of déjà vu."

"That's amazing," Ava breathed, and from her spot beside her, Marnie smiled.

"The world is full of amazing things, and its horizons are only ever-growing," she said. "You know, I had my misgivings about getting involved in your war, but I have to admit that I look forward to watching you lot learn a thing or two about the real supernatural world. Your homeschool energy is intense."

Xavier huffed out a derisive chuckle, "Tell us how you really feel."

Ava lightly nudged Marnie's side, "Yeah, go easy on us, would you? If it didn't directly benefit the betterment of the Council, we didn't learn it. I,

for one, am glad for the opportunity to meet new communities. The small glimpse I got of true comingling back West was inspiring, to say the least."

"Then I'm sorry that the finfolk are going to be your first introduction to the greater eastern supernatural community," Emmaline sighed. "They do say it's best to get the hardest obstacles out of the way, though."

"The finfolk?" Xavier asked as they finally pulled to a stop along a craggy stretch of rocky beach. Emmaline nodded toward the coastline.

Today, the sky was overcast and grey, and the ocean beyond was choppy and angry-looking. As they watched, a row of round figures slid from the sea and onto the beach. Seals, Ava realized. Just then, a heavy wave crested over the animals, completely obscuring them from view. As it receded, so too did the forms of the seals and, in their places, stood tall, humanoid figures.

And Ava didn't need Emmaline's supercharged senses to glean the animosity wafting from the willowy group.

Marnie sighed and reluctantly reached for the door handle. "Wolves, meet the Selkies."