

Chapter 147

Changing Tides

"The nerve of you is astounding, Adair. What, pray tell, did you think you would accomplish by bringing them here?"

The hostile vibe Ava had picked up even from a dozen yards away and through several inches of bulletproof glass somehow didn't manage to improve by coming into close proximity to the...finfolk? The Selkies, Marnie had called them. People who could turn into seals.

It seemed ridiculous, given her own circumstances, that...well, anything really, could surprise her at this point. And, to be fair, it wasn't the existence of seal people that was currently throwing her for a loop; it was being hit, once again, with the staggering realization of just how little she actually knew about the world around her, her own wider community.

And it wasn't just Ava, either. Through their bond, she could feel Xavier's mind whirring, struggling to quickly process the new influx of information. Even now, after all this time, his first thought was on how best to conceal his ignorance, how to save face and gain the upper hand. Ava supposed that deeply ingrained conditioning of his had its time and place, but she couldn't see how they could finesse their way out of this one.

Granted, as with so many unexpected obstacles they continually found themselves coming up against, they hadn't been the ones to instigate this shortcoming, but nevertheless, they had ended up being the ones left holding the bag and desperately trying to somehow prove their worth to those that their community had managed to wrong in their ceaseless pursuit of power.

No wonder interspecies unity was such a foreign concept when entire generations of one community were being raised fully ignorant of another's existence.

For her part, Emmaline handled the Selkie's ire with a grace that far surpassed any that Ava thought could be expected from a male Alpha. The smile she gave the group was a perfect balance between cordiality and reproach, conveying both sympathies for whatever perceived plights dogged them and a lack of patience for their impropriety.

"I didn't call you here to fight, Shannon," she said to the lead Selkie, a tall, lithe blonde woman who was - like the rest of her companions, beautiful

in an ethereal way, almost as if they were one with the sea. "Quite the opposite, in fact. We would like to come to an agreement between our people."

Another of the party of finfolk snorted. "Because the word of a Wolf, especially one of the Council's lapdogs, is worth so much."

Through her bond, Ava felt Xavier tense, although his outward appearance would never belie his own offense. Dylan, on the other hand, was rarely one to withhold his opinion. He shot the contemptuous Selkie man a glare as cold as the sea they had just stepped out of. "In case you don't get decent cell reception down at the bottom of the bay, the Council's been out of commission for the last couple of months," he snarled. "So, how about we let bygones be bygones." "For people coming to us begging for peace, you're people have a funny way of showing it," chided the final member of the Selkie trio, another woman, but this one with flaming red hair, shades brighter than Ava's. "Not surprising, but funny all the same."

"Who's begging?" Dylan snapped, only to flinch when Marnie elbowed him unceremoniously in the ribs.

"Look, can we agree that this little pissing show is getting us nowhere?" Ava stepped up, hoping that another friendly face would help to ease the rising tensions.

She didn't know a thing about the Selkie's social structures, but as far as she could tell, each one of the three in front of them was throwing off enough Alpha energy to rival any she'd met.

"I'm just going to be honest, I don't think any of us here even knows what the hell the Council did to your people to make you so angry at the Alliance," Ava said frankly, waving off Xavier's sidelong glare. Now wasn't the time for social games; if they pissed these people off anymore, this plan was already DOA and a massive waste of precious time.

"What I can say, though, is that the old Alliance is dead, and an institution like that has no place in any world we want to live in going forward," she continued. "So, if you would just give us an hour of your time, we would love the opportunity to get to know you - really know you and your people and begin mending some fences."

The three stared down at her, looking thoroughly unconvinced. Then, they shared a look and, as if communicating telepathically, turned back to Ava and nodded.

"For over a decade, the Council's bullied and harassed our people," Shannon explained as her two companions silently scowled. "We used to live further south where it was easier for our people to thrive year-round until the Eclipse Pack chased us out by forcing us to pay ridiculous taxes for 'protection and perpetuity.' When we refused...things got violent."

"We've recently uncovered some of the heinous acts committed by Eclipse's former Alpha," Xavier supplied. "Surely things have improved since then?"

"For a while after his reported death, things went back to normal. We even began reclaiming our old homes along the coastline," Shannon started. "Then, the Alliance fell, and it all started up again. This time, under Neia Thomas. Either we joined her growing army, or we had no place in her society."

"And, now, to find out that your people largely have never even heard of us, much less what your Council allowed to happen to us...It's galling," The redheaded Selkie, Shelby, said with a deep crease furrowing her porcelain brow. "It's as if we can assure you that it isn't only your culture that was being targeted," Xavier replied. "It seems as if we've spent every other day since the Council's downfall learning just how deeply flawed the Alliance was. We've been uncovering a lot about our own society as well as others within the supernatural community."

"In fact, we're hoping to bridge those gaps between our communities," Ava agreed.

"Which communities?" The Selkie man, Lyle, challenged. "Most supernatural communities thrive alone, staying out of the Wolves' and the humans' affairs whenever we can."

"The state of this country shows just how ineffective that sort of discordance has proved to be," Ava insisted. "History has shown what good can come when our communities band together. So much, in fact, that these societies were hunted down and eventually hidden away - all because of the power we supernaturals wield when we stand together."

Shannon frowns, "What makes you think that we, too, won't be hunted down. Especially in this political climate?"

Ava sat back and thought on that for a moment before the answer came to her. "Because we aren't just talking about making a change in the Northeast or picking up the Alliance's slack. There are people all across the continent looking for change who don't have any place to start," she said. "I propose that we be that place to start. A true refuge, a blueprint, we can be all of those things just by showing up and succeeding."

"You have pretty words, Wolf girl, but do you have the power to back up your big ideas?" Lyle asked.

Ava looked around the table at all who were gathered there. "Well, we've got Wolves, witches, and shapeshifters all sitting at a single table and sharing an equitable discussion. I don't think that's happened in this region in the past couple hundred years," Ava said, suddenly smiling. "We made history today, and all we did was ask. I don't see why we can't do that again."

"All we would need is for you to help us represent your people," Liam spoke up. "Surely not every shifter tribe in the former Allied regions, but to the Selkies. Word will spread from there."

"We're under no disillusions that this will all come together overnight," Dylan added. "We're just looking for a place to start. A group that those currently in power will be compelled to listen to."

"And what of those currently in power?" Shannon asked. "No matter our efforts, we won't get so much as a foot in the door with the Thomas' and their army making deals with the humans. We've told you that they've already chased us off of the mainland. We cannot fight them."

"No," Xavier said, his voice hard with certainty. "But I can. And at the next Blue Moon, the Thomas' won't be a problem anymore."

"You sound so sure."

Ava glanced at Xavier, who stodgily refused to meet her gaze.

"That's because I am," he replied. "One way or the other, Neia Thomas and her son are going to surrender."

"You're a fool if you think for a moment that I'll allow you to answer that challenge, Noah."

Noah continued beating at the sandbag before him, refusing to so much as acknowledge his mother's presence. He spent most of his time doing that lately, keeping his hands busy just to fight off the need to wrap them around her manipulative throat.

He hit the bag so hard a tiny stream of sand began pouring through a small tear he'd ripped in the leather. Damn, he hated the dark turn his thoughts had begun taking.

And it was only getting worse.

It had started with child traffickers. As proof of her promise to enforce radical change in the old Allied territories, Neia had sent him after those of the former Elite who she recalled dealt in the worst parts of the old institution's underbelly. Noah had executed those monsters gladly, but it couldn't be ignored that something within him changed that day. He was a lot of things, but until that point, he'd never been a killer.

Then, after the traffickers came his father's remaining loyalists, then came any naysayers amongst their own ranks. Nowadays, Noah wasn't so much a leader, even by proxy. No, he was his mother's enforcer and, too often, personal executioner.

And, in his daylight hours, he shook hands with the senators, and governors, and fucking mayors, earning his mother's way into power with every smile. Damning his own people with each handshake.

Neia Thomas would finally get the world Montgomery Bennett had promised her all those years ago. It had only taken her son's soul to claim it.

So, yes, Noah would be answering that challenge on the next Blue Moon. And he intended to win.