

Chapter 68

Fortune's Favor

The scene was almost too idyllic for words to describe. The crisp mountain air had just a hint of a bite to it, signaling the coming fall season. Growing up in upstate New York, Ava had seen plenty of trees in her day, but even further up north, the foliage took on a life of its own.

The outdoor market was a kaleidoscope of vibrant colors, from the ripe produce to the sunlight glistening off of the crystalline blue of the nearby lake. It was a gorgeous day, and it felt as if all of Shady Oak had come to partake in the day's festivities.

"Can you believe that people live like this all of the time?" Bren gaped, as entranced with the novelty of a small-town farmer's market as she was.

"I know, right? It's like the world's ugliness just skipped over this place," Ava replied.

"Yeah, it's something else, alright," Aiden walked up to them, balancing a trio of iced lemonades in his hands. He handed them off to Ava and Bren before taking a drink from his own. "Thomas wasn't kidding when he said this place was almost completely made up of humans. I did a perimeter check of the entire town last night, and we really are the only Wolves here."

Ava sipped from her drink, letting that information sink in slowly. She'd never been among the only Wolves in any place she'd been before, and the thought of being so thoroughly other was a little disconcerting. "Are we safe here? Do you think there's a reason that no other Wolves live here?" She asked.

Aiden shook his head, "Nah, not from what I can tell. This town sits right at the lowest edge of Grave Crown territory, so whatever Wolves live here probably stay close to Grave Crown's main hub further upstate." Bren scoffed, "And the humans get all of this to themselves."

Aiden shrugged, "Grave Crown's a weird place."

They began meandering through the vendor stalls pausing to look at the host of homemade wares. The market was fairly large and boasted everything from handcrafted jewelry and goat soaps to one-of-a-kind sculptures. About every other stall sold some sort of pie or jam or homemade something-or-other, making Ava's mouth positively water.

"Enjoying yourself, Ava?" Aiden laughed. "Remember, you have to pay for it first."

"Piss off," Ava fired back, sticking out her tongue.

Aiden laughed her off as they continued on, leaving a warm feeling growing in Ava's chest. She and Aiden had picked up their relationship right where they'd left it as if the last five years had never happened. Ava knew with every fiber of her being that her brother would have scoured the depths of hell to find her if he needed to.

She was just glad that she'd been in a much better state when he'd finally found her. There was still so much that they hadn't talked about, but Ava knew from the prolonged concerned stare he gave her whenever he thought she wasn't looking that Aiden was still worried about her. And, while it was true that she'd probably feel better for having shared more with her brother, Ava couldn't help but feel the same way that she did about Noah and Bren - her past had no place in these new relationships.

Aiden wasn't new, of course, but she was, and Ava didn't want to risk alienating her brother with how much she'd changed.

"Okay, I get why I'm acting like a complete tourist, but didn't you two grow up in a small town like this?" Bren asked.

"Oh, Caledonia is way smaller than this," Aiden gestured to encompass the entire town of Shady Oak that, while small enough to maintain the quiet charm of a small town, still dwarfed the glorified village they'd grown up in. "And where the Red Moon Pack resides is even smaller than that. Most Pack members don't live within Red Moon proper."

"Ah..." Bren nodded slowly, absentmindedly sipping from her lemonade.

"Were things different in your Pack?" Aiden asked.

Bren shrugged, "I wouldn't know. My family was never welcome in Silver Moon on account of my mother being human. We lived in regular cities my entire life."

Ava's brow furrowed, "Really? I've met the Silver Moon Alpha, and he doesn't seem the type to discriminate."

"Well, you're already ahead of me, then. I've never so much as laid eyes on my Alpha."

Aiden made a contemplative noise deep in his chest, "Probably for the best."

Ava turned to him, "What do you mean?"

"I don't know Liam; I was in Grave Crown when he took over as Alpha. I did meet his father once or twice, though, and Richter Smith was no friend to humans. Silver Moon as a Pack has had a long history of toeing the Alliance's tolerance treaties."

Aiden turned to Bren, naked sympathy written across his face, "I'm sorry for what your family's gone through. That must have been a rough way to grow up."

Bren gave him a small smile and shrugged, "Don't worry, my family made their own community where it mattered. Besides, I decided a long time ago that I was going to do what it took to set the Alliance straight from the inside." Ava and Aiden both looked at her with questioning looks of concern. "How are you planning to do that?"

Bren's smile widened, lighting up her naturally beautiful features, "Legislature!"

They stared at her blankly, making her laugh, "The Alliance's accords are full of archaic little loopholes that are easily exploited, right? It keeps the Elite, elite and gives them enough authority to freely persecute anyone they deem lesser than, without having to deal with any consequences from breaking the law. I want to be the person that finally sets those loopholes straight."

Ava felt reasonably embarrassed for having not known any of that. She'd known that her friend was a Political Science major, but Bren's calling went so much deeper than that. "Is that why you work at the club?"

Bren nodded, "Packs aren't obligated to provide financial aid to anyone living outside of the Pack proper, and - while they're not allowed to chase anyone out of town officially...."

"Years of social warfare is enough to push anyone away," Aiden concluded.

"Right. But that was just the cherry on top of the shit sundae. Packs aren't required to give any sort of aid to humans. Unfortunately, there's not a single statute in the accords defining half-breeds one way or the other."

Ava sighed, "So, Silver Moon deemed you and your siblings human and ineligible for support."

"Not just Silver Moon," Bren muttered. "The Council."

Ava was surprised that she could even still be surprised at this point. The Alliance was broken, the Council was corrupt, and the happy humans of Shady Oak were probably the only ones not being negatively affected by the grasping reach of their unjust society.

Ava was just about to say as much when she felt an electric tingle shoot its way up her spine, causing her to jump. She saw Bren shiver at the same time she did.

"What the hell was that?" Bren asked, looking around for signs of an oncoming threat.

That tingle didn't feel quite the same as the preternatural buzzing that warned their Wolves of danger. It almost felt as if they'd walked into something, like crossing the border of one of those invisible pet fences.

"Aiden," Ava started. "You said that this town was *almost* completely made up of humans. What exactly did you mean by that?"

For his part, Aiden seemed largely unconcerned by the shift in atmosphere, but his eyes carried a glint of wariness as he nodded toward a tent sitting at the back edge of the market, only a few yards off from where they stood. "Witch."

Bren gasped, "Get out! I've never met one in person."

Before she was consciously aware of doing so, Ava began walking toward the tent as if drawn to it by some outside force. She didn't get more than a few feet before Aiden grabbed her arm, "Wait, Ava. I don't think you should go in there." "Why? Kids are coming out of that tent."

"Human kids. At best, the witch is grifting them, showing them scripted fortunes for profit. At worst, they're setting those children up for a lifetime of privatized therapy bills."

Ava knew that she should follow her brother and enjoy the rest of their evening, but her eyes kept wandering back to the little tent at the edge of the market. "I really want to go, though...."

Aiden started shaking his head when Bren coughed, "Let her go! I want to see what happens."

Aiden gaped at her as the girls laughed. "If anything strange happens, I'll come right back out."

Her brother only shook his head, "If your hair starts falling out, that's on you. Don't say I didn't warn you."

Ava smiled and walked over to the tent, pushing her way inside. It was fairly standard looking, based on what she'd seen of fortune tellers on tv; Tapestries and rugs lined the walls of the tent, and shelves filled with varying curios surrounded a single table draped in cloth. At the table sat a beautiful woman covered head-to-toe in what had to be a costume."

While her entire set-up was obviously a schtick, the witch's eyes were sharp as ice as Ava took a seat. "A Wolfe in Shady Oak. I've seen it all...."

"I've never met a witch before," Ava said without thinking. Wincing, she backtracked. "Sorry, is that a stupid thing to say?"

The fortune teller's smile was small and secretive, "Not if it's true. What can I help you see?"

"Help me see?" Ava asked.

The witch took a deep breath and held it for several long seconds before letting it go. Ava felt her excited heartbeat immediately begin to slow. Although she didn't give any sign of being affected by the display, the witch raised an eyebrow. "Profound, isn't it?"

Ava swallowed, "What?"

"The curious ways the darkness can take hold of you."

Ava began to wonder if this counted as strange enough to prompt a swift exit, "I'm sorry?"

"My Wolven friend, darkness surrounds you like a cloak, follows you like a train. Does that sound familiar?"

Ava broke eye contact, her eyes shifting around at the different items lining the walls. Uncomfortable as she was, whatever force had drawn her here made her hesitant to leave.

"Relax, friend. I never said that was a bad thing, did I?"

Slowly, Ava's eyes returned to the witch's face where that small all-knowing smirk remained.

"After all, you'd think a Werewolf would know that some of the world's most amazing sights live hidden by the shadows."

"What do you want?" Ava asked.

The witch leaned forward, "Just to read you. To help."

She reached under her table and brought out a deck, setting it on the table between them.

"Let me read your cards."