

Chapter 70

The Witch and the Wolf

"You want to read my cards?" Ava asked, looking at the deck of cards sitting on the clothed table skeptically.

"If you're up to it," the teller said, her voice dripping in challenge. "The cards usually find my regular clientele pretty boring. But they...well, I wouldn't say they like you, as much as they're drawn to your energy. There's a lot about you that's left to be uncovered."

Ava's eyes flicked back and forth between her and the card deck. The stack of illuminated tarot cards looked benign enough - they were covered in beautifully detailed hand-painted drawings, and the fine patina covering the thick cardstock looked natural instead of cheap tea bag and coffee stain tricks that could create a similar effect.

Arresting as they were, they gave Ava pause. In the way that some old things did, this deck of cards gave off its own energy, as if the weight of the cards' own history was too immense to be contained within the age-weathered packaging. And this wasn't even accounting for the fact that this particular tarot card deck was owned by an actual witch.

"I didn't think real witches used tarot cards," Ava asked, her eyes still glued to the deck. "I thought that was just something the humans picked up to feel special."

Laughter danced in the teller's eyes, "Maybe so, but they had to pick it up from somewhere, no? The cards are just a conduit, like most magical items of divination. If they stumble across an item imbued with enough natural mystical energy, even a regular old human can harness the arcane. If only for a time."

"Is that what I'm feeling?" Ava asked, nodding at the cards that were now sliding effortlessly through the witch's fingers like a waterfall as she shuffled. "That deck's backlog of energy?"

The witch nodded, "This is a deck passed down through my family for the last couple of generations."

She smirked. "These cards saw the Spanish Inquisition and lived to tell their tale across the world some two centuries later. Needless to say,

they've seen a lot of shit and stored even more." Ava sat back in her seat, "And they...want to read me?"

The witch shrugged, "It's the seeking nature of divination. They're called to uncover and drawn to those who need uncovering."

Ava let out a heavy sigh, "How often do you hate what they find?"

Now, the teller laughed out loud, "In Shady Oak? I mean, never say never, but so far, the stakes have been fairly low. Old Mee-maw Barker's world-famous brownie pie recipe is about as authentic as the back of a Nestle Toll House box can be, but you didn't hear that from me."

"Frankly, they're bored, I'm bored, and you happen to be remotely interesting," the witch leans forward and sets the deck down in front of Ava with a thud that felt resounding in spite of the silence. "And, for your part, you might find some answers that you really need."

Ava swallowed, her hand reaching for the cards almost of their own accord. Just before making contact, she stopped herself, pulling her hand away. Folding her hands firmly in her lap, Ava forced her full attention away from the cards and onto their mysterious owner.

"What would show me? I don't know how I feel about knowing the future. I have enough crap to worry about as it is, you know?"

The witch nodded, "Very astute. A lot of people think that tarot cards are used to read the future. It's a common misconception about the divining arts, in general. What they really do is show you where you stand in the universe." Ava shakes her head, "I don't follow."

"The universe is made up of energy, right? An immeasurable array of molecules bouncing off of one another to create everything that exists in every moment of every second that has, does, and will ever exist. Right?"

Ava nodded hesitantly, only barely following along but grasping enough that a picture was beginning to form. "When we divine, we tap into that ever-existing knowledge. We set an intention, a question we'd like answered, and the cards, crystals, bones and tea leaves, whatever, funnel that energy into a form that we can understand."

"So, it wouldn't, say tell me when I'm going to die or something like that?"

The witch raised an eyebrow, "Is that something that you'd actually want to know?"

Ava shrugged, "Not really, no."

"Then why bother dwelling on it? Besides, divination is expressed more through impressions and pre-existing determinations. Each card is

assigned a meaning, and your energy is interpreted through that lens."
"Doesn't that leave a pretty significant margin for error? Or self-determination?"

The teller smirked, "Not when you're fortune teller is a bona fide witch."

"Running a booth in a small-town farmer's market?" Ava questioned.

The witch rolled her eyes, "Look, I didn't pick where I was raised."

"You're from the area?"

"I'm fairly certain that you're the only one in Shady Oak who **isn't** from the area. As for me, my family helped found this little farmstead sometime after fleeing the Salem Witch Trials."

"You are a very interesting person." And Ava meant it. If she left this tent having accomplished more than this conversation, it would have been an afternoon well spent.

The witch smiled, "I feel I'll soon be saying the same, my not-so-furry friend."

"Ava," she offered. "Ava Davis."

"Nice to meet you, Ava. I'm Marnie Prescott."

"Good. It was starting to feel rude, referring to you as 'the witch' in my head."

"Yeah, 'shifty Were-girl' was getting a little repetitive for me."

They shared a conspiratorial smile, the rest of Ava's misgivings giving way under Marnie's invitingly sardonic sense of humor. Finally, she nodded toward the deck.

"So, do I pick a card?" She asked. Ava still wasn't sure she understood exactly what she was getting herself into, but she felt that she'd been drawn here for a reason, and that counted for something. Marnie grinned, "You'll pick several. But first, cut the deck with your left hand."

Ava did so, taking the top half of the deck and setting it aside before topping it with the bottom half. "Now what?"

Marnie took a hand and ran it over the tops of the cards and, without making physical contact, the cards spread out in a wide fan, each one readily available to be chosen.

Ava stifled a gasp. Considering she had some sort of primal wolf spirit living inside her body, and she and practically everyone she knew could spontaneously turn into said wolves, the concept of magic shouldn't be so...foreign to her. Even so, Ava had never actually come face to face with any other kinds of real, unfettered natural magic. This wasn't sleight of hand or illusion work she was witnessing. It was one of the innumerable forces of nature that governed their world and the ones beyond.

It was awe-inspiring to Ava, if for no other reason than the uncanny feeling of having her horizons expand before her eyes.

"Alrighty then, pick three sets of three cards and keep them face-down and separated. Don't think too hard about which ones. They'll call to you."

As Ava reached out a hand, she had the sense that she was finally interacting with the cards in a way that was more than physical. When she felt Mia stir within her, she knew that the Wolf had to be feeling the same pull that she did. Ava closed her eyes and focused on clearing her mind. Roving her palm over the cards, she paused when Mia suddenly growled - not in a menacing way, it was almost like a cat's purr. A warm sensation behind her sternum prompted her to pick up the card, and when she did, it felt right.

Apparently, this reading wasn't just for her - it was for Mia, too. That knowledge made Ava more nervous than any of the arcane knowledge she'd learned within the confines of this tent. The Wolf had been stubbornly quiet and solemn. Ava knew that Mia's condition hadn't gotten any worse, but she wasn't sure what it meant that she wasn't getting any better.

Ava never expected to get answers from a fortune teller's tent, but here Mia was, showing more interest in the outside world than she had in months.

Hovering over the cards, Ava picked the rest of her set, placing them before her two-by-two. "Okay, now what do I do?"

"Just sit back and watch."

Marnie's eyes began to glow a soft shade of purple that steadily increased in brightness until her the entirety of her eyes glowed a vivid shade of violet. Ava couldn't feign her astonishment this time, her jaw-dropping unabashedly open as Marnie made a series of symbols with her hands, the air around her wavering with the force of her arcane energy. As she watched, the purple light spread to the cards as they rose a few inches off the table and began to spin.

The witch threw her hands out and, suddenly, the influx of energy, the purple light, the spinning, all of it abruptly stopped. Within the span of a single blink, the air inside of the tent had completely stilled, and the cards

in front of Ava were in a new configuration, floating in front of her like some eldritch mobile.

For a few pregnant seconds, both Ava and Marnie stared at the cards, slowly shifting in the air.

"Well, shit, Were-girl," Marnie finally said. "You *do* have a story."