

## Chapter 89

### Strange Magic

It didn't take long before the gabled rooftops of Shady Oak proper rose to cast a whimsical silhouette against the stary backdrop of the night sky. Ava expected Aiden to stop at some point so that they could put together a game plan on how to best find Marnie, but to her surprise, he kept going until finally coming to a stop in front of a large Victorian home.

It was beautiful and stately, just like the many of the decades-old homes that made Shady Oak the quaint old-world retreat that it was. It was pleasantly secluded, taking up a large corner lot that was surrounded on all sides by trees. Ava had no idea how Aiden knew that this home belonged to Marnie, but he seemed awfully confident as he shut his bike down and removed his helmet. "How do you know that this is the place?" She asked.

"I told you I ran perimeter as soon as we got here. This place reeks of witchcraft...no offense."

"None taken."

They both jumped and whipped around to find Marnie sitting on the retaining wall behind them with an eyebrow cocked and arms crossed over her chest. Ava could've sworn they'd been alone as they'd pulled up. "Marnie!"

"Were-girl. To what do I owe the pleasure?" She hopped off the wall and swaggered her way over to where they sat on the bike, feeling caught. "I don't usually do house calls. Especially for people I don't really know and have never shared my address with. And at midnight, no less...."

"I...", Ava practically tumbled off of the bike in her nervous state. Now, confronted with the witch's questioning glare, Ava was suddenly aware of the multitude of better ways she could have gone about this meeting. "Listen, I'm really sorry to just barge in, but it's really important."

"To you."

Ava came up short, "Y-yes?"

Marnie rolled her eyes and nodded toward her house. "This house holds hundreds of years' worth of my family's untainted mystical energy. I don't just let anyone inside. Firstly, my visitors need to respect my craft and the

energy I wield," she said, cutting a pointed look in Aiden's direction. "And I've never even tried bringing a Wolf inside before. I need to know that I'm taking a calculated risk for a good reason."

"My Wolf," Ava started. "I-I just found out that an incident in my past left her blind."

Ava licked her lips and kept her eyes on the ground, ignoring Marnie's curious gaze and Aiden's sharp intake of breath.

"That incident also left one of my dearest friends dead. But I have no memory of that night," she finally looked up to meet Marnie's eyes. "Can you help me find out what happened?"

Ava didn't quite know what she'd expected from the inside of a witch's house, but Marnie's home both met any of her preconceived expectations and blew them out of the water. The home had all of the charm that came naturally to a centuries-old Victorian plus all of the eccentricity that stemmed from housing generations of magic users within its walls.

Dried flowers and herbs hung at the threshold of each doorway, filling each room with a gentle natural scent that reminded Ava of early fall days sprinting through forest foliage. The house was neat and filled with furniture that was a mix of modern comfort and vintage, handcrafted elegance.

And yet, the home felt...full. The walls were lined with shelves that were filled with items that seemingly had no obvious connection to one another - leather-bound books, delicate glass ornaments, even a tiny, fully reticulated mouse skeleton. As random and innocuous as they all seemed, each item emanated its own energy that added to the house's overall feeling of being charged. "It's an arrest warrant."

Ava looked away from where she'd been staring at a framed scrap of parchment that was tattered and browned with age. She could swear that she could make out the words...on pain of death' scrawled in swirly old-timey script. "For witchcraft?" Ava asked.

Marnie nodded, looking inexplicably proud of the document, "Hera Paige. If her name hadn't landed her on the pyre, the fact that she'd married an Abenaki man would have." "Was she an ancestor of yours?"

"Yep. A grandmother," Marnie picked out a book from one of the packed shelves, riffling through it before putting it back and selecting another, and another. "Everything in this house is directly connected to my family's magic in some way or another."

"Even the mouse?"

Marnie snapped the book she was holding shut and turned to Ava with a smirk, "Reibold was a family friend. He saved this place from burning

down back in 1902, so he's had an honorary spot on the mantle since his funeral a couple of years ago. It was very sad."

Ava's jaw opened and closed silently as she failed to make the math work in her mind, but Marnie didn't offer any further explanation as she turned on her heel and walked off through an open set of carved pocket doors. "Follow me. Don't touch anything."

Ava did as she was told, trailing the curious witch through her curious home. The experience was unlike anything she'd ever felt before - even during the impressive display during her tarot reading, Ava had never felt magic before.

It didn't feel like when she shifted - from what she could remember, shifting didn't feel like anything other than the occasional discomfort that came from the physical transformation. The closest estimate for what she felt flowing throughout this house like a living river was perhaps the feeling she got whenever Ava was in her Wolf form, and she and Mia seemed to share a single mind and body.

Perhaps it was different for other Wolves who had access to greater powers stemming from whatever plain of existence their Wolves hailed from, like Jack the Red Moon healer. But for Ava, the closest she'd ever come to her own natural magical connection was when she and her Wolf were as one, completely in sync.

It was a connection she'd known she was missing, but Ava hadn't fully realized how severe - how unnatural - the loss was until this moment. Marnie was never without her magic; she lived in it and took it with her wherever she went. If Ava's connection with Mia was half as concentrated, it was no wonder she and Mia were both suffering.

It pained Ava to think of how she'd contributed to the divide through her complacency. But that ended tonight.

Marnie brought her to a set of French doors that led to a quaint study that looked like a more permanent version of Marnie's farmer's market stall. Instead of a clothed circular table, Marnie took a seat behind a sturdy oak desk and gestured for Ava to sit in one of the plush upholstered seats before her.

"You mentioned needing to uncover the events leading to what happened to you and your Wolf, right?" At Ava's nod, Marnie opened the book she'd selected and flipped to a certain page. "Alright, then we're looking at a minor regression. When did this event take place?"

Ava thought back, "It's October now? Goddess...I guess it's been about seven or eight months by now."

Marnie nodded and flipped another page, "Okay, so a very minor regression."

"What is a regression?" Ava asked, rubbing her damp palms against her jeans.

"I already told you how everything is made up of a perpetual flow of energy, right? Including time?"

Ava nodded, remembering how, during their first encounter, the witch had so casually rewritten Ava's understanding of the universe, how it worked, and what was possible to achieve if only one was so inclined to try. It had been a very enlightening afternoon.

"Right, so if you have a repressed memory, it's because you've blocked off your connection to that point in time, but it still exists. I'm basically going to open your connection to that timeframe so that you can access it." "So I'll be able to see what happened that night?"

Marnie nodded, "And hopefully get some closure."

Ava took a deep breath and let it out, "It sounds so simple."

"Life's quandaries often are, if you happen to know the right person with the right answers."

"So, what do I do?"

Marnie took out a stick of incense and lit it, filling the room with a heady, earthy scent that instantly began to lull Ava into a fully relaxed state. "Just get comfy and try to focus on what you need to see...who you need to find...." "What I need to see...." Ava's eyelids began to droop, falling completely shut. "Who...I need to find."

A mist seemed to fill Ava's mind as flashes of memories she'd forgotten flooded past. Her first fight with Sophia - Soph had pulled rank on her after Ava had implied that August's rules were too stern. She and Sam had stayed up all night castigating the Alphas and the stifling rules that made up their hierarchy. They couldn't have been more than thirteen at the time.

Ava remembered the night her brother left for duty and how she'd been inconsolable but insisted on putting on a stoic face for her friends and family. Beta's don't doubt their duty. They don't object when a job needs doing. Funny how visceral these moments had been at the time, how telling...only to become memories that weren't even worth keeping. While interesting, these visions into the past weren't why she was here. These lost recollections were natural, easily recalled upon with a small nudge.

The memory she was in search of was darker than these and repressed by necessity, not happenstance. Ava allowed herself to wander deeper into the mist until soon enough, she was swallowed whole.