

## Chapter 129

### Rest For The Weary

"We made it out. For the most part, everyone is safe thanks to you, Ava."

Relief left her weak, her knees turning to jelly as she slid down the wall behind her until she was little more than a shivering lump on the floor. Goddess, it had worked. The idea had been so far-fetched as to be considered unlikely, at the absolute best.

While she considered Marnie, Ava was very aware of the fact that they were near perfect strangers. She knew next to nothing about witches or magic - had no real reason to believe that Marnie could do anything to help Xavier and the other fighters, much less if she even would.

But the witch had been the only person she knew who might even be remotely capable of making a difference, so she called her, not with any particular plan in mind, but just to ask the witch for an idea on what she

could do next. To Ava's surprise, Marnie had agreed immediately - almost before Ava had finished uttering her plea, the witch said, "We've got it handled," and hung up the phone.

Needless to say, the interaction didn't leave Ava feeling very confident that her actions would somehow turn the tide, but then, around two hours later, Xavier texted her in time for her to receive the message on the new phone she had just bought out of an overwhelming sense of caution following Noah's warning.

"What about the original prisoners?" She asked.

Xavier scoffed, sounding exhausted. "Which ones? The ones from the checkpoint we came here to rescue in the first place, or the ones...."

"The ones I used to share those cells with?" Ava prompted. Their relationship had come leaps and bounds in the months she'd been away, each of them providing an anchor to the wildly different world the other lived in.

A key element to their friendship that they'd both unconsciously agreed upon was to dwell on the past as little as possible. But, while that arrangement allowed for them to move forward without constantly dredging up old hurt feelings, Ava noticed that when something about their past did come up, Xavier didn't know how to address it without walking on eggshells.

Whether it was out of a want to not trigger her anxiety, or if he was just wary of her remembering that one thing that would send the carefully constructed house of cards that made up their relationship, she didn't know. But neither were issues he needed to worry about. Ava had repressed a lot, but she remembered everything now, and she'd chosen to move forward.

Now, she had to convince Xavier that it was okay for him to do the same.

"It's alright, Xavier," she prompted softly. "I want to hear about both."

"The refugees from the checkpoint were fine, but, honestly, that was completely by chance. Their guards hadn't finished the hand-off before Neia's auxiliary forces showed up, and the fighting broke out. We're all lucky as shit that the refugees were still on their buses in the loading bay. If they had been transferred to cells...."

"Those innocent civilians would have been right in the middle of a stampede when then humans killed the guards and released the inmates."

"Right on the money. As for the Wolves," Xavier continued. "Your witch friend and her witch friends have the survivors subdued and back in their cells."

"What are you going to do with them?" She asked as concern rose in her throat like bile. "Are you going to put their collars back on?"

Ava truly hoped not; life in one of the silver-infused collars used to stifle the connection between a Wolf and their host was a miserable experience. Everything was dull as if all vibrancy had been sucked from the world. And with your connection to your Wolf being thoroughly suppressed, it was impossible to feel whole.

It was an unideal situation for Xavier and the others to parse through, she knew. After all, there were just as many guilty inmates in that prison as there were innocent ones, and even the most docile of individuals going into the pit could quickly turn as vicious as the most cold-blooded killer.

Xavier didn't need her to tell him how it wasn't going to be an easy task, determining the desperate from the truly dangerous. The process would take time that they didn't necessarily have, especially if they continued with the plans to convert the prison into a sanctuary.

"We haven't had to put the collars back on since the witches brought in backup," he reassured her. "They have a way of keeping them docile while keeping the more violent ones asleep, so we've been able to get the refugees settled in their own section. We're waiting on a shipment of supplies to come in as we speak."

Ava worried her bottom lip with her teeth, "Marnie and the other witches have been incredibly helpful in this. I wonder why."

Xavier choked out a wheezing chuckle, "They're your friends. Why else did you call them in?"

"Marnie is a friend. Sort of. Like, in the sense that we have had several friendly interactions with one another," she clarified. "Certainly not in an 'all hands-on deck, of course, I'll join your political rebellion' sort of way."

As grateful as she was for their intervention, it would be foolish not to consider their motivations.

"You know as well as I do that the spellcasters have stayed well away from this fight," Ava reminded him. "As much as I'd love to take the credit for this, they sure as shit didn't get this involved just because I asked them to."

After taking a deep, steadying breath...and then another...and another, Ava finally worked up the courage to push open the door to Bright Light's storefront. If pressed to identify the source of her nerves, she would probably chalk it up to taking a step this big without Dr. Schuster to help guide her.

It had been five months since she'd arrived in California, and this was the first real thing Ava was doing solely for herself. She had fallen into a

discouraging routine of trolling for ways to amuse herself in between bouts of helping Bren study or shopping for baby stuff. Her brother and friend had been great companions to her over the months, helping her through her own lingering trauma from the Tower attack by lending a sympathetic ear or offering a fun distraction. But she was starting to feel like their practice child. And Ava was determined not to end up an accessory to another person's story. Bright Light was a chance for her to find her tribe, and she wanted to take it.

A bell above the door chimed as she stepped across the threshold, ringing in her arrival. There wasn't anyone currently manning the front desk, but it didn't take long for the back door to open, and when it did, it was none other than Elodie who greeted her.

"Ava, it's good to see you!" She said warmly. "We missed you yesterday."

Ava nodded at the reference to the appointment she'd missed, "Sorry, I know that I was supposed to come in for a tour, but I...had an emergency come up. It took a while to deal with."

"Hey, that's perfectly fine! Everything here is available whenever you need it," Elodie reassured her. "Plus, that just means that you'll have to come back in order to meet most of the crew. Wednesdays are typically slower since we don't have too much going on. Mostly it's our junior members."

"Junior members?" Ava asked.

"We have a fairly decent-sized group. We offer counseling, tutoring, after-school activities, the whole nine yards." Elodie looked over her shoulder at Ava with a smile, "We're always looking for volunteers, in case you're wondering." Then, she led her into the back room. It was tastefully decorated with a warm, homey aesthetic that made the space feel incredibly inviting. There were other doors that branched off into different parts of the building, but this one was set up as a lounge area with plush couches, armchairs, and floor pillows all arranged around a sturdy coffee table and a red-brick fireplace.

Currently occupying a good amount of the room were kids ranging from late teens to grade-schoolers. Ava would have immediately felt the diverse range of supernatural energy radiating throughout the room even if it weren't so self-evident. From the Wolf cub she spotted curled up next to the fireplace, furry little ears twitching in their sleep, to the group of teenaged spellcasters currently embroiled in a magic-infused boardgame, the game pieces glowing bright shades of blue, purple, and orange as they literally flew across the board.

Avidly watching the colorful display were a couple of younger kids, among them were more Wolves, spellcasters, and even humans. One girl with a shock of dark curly hair run thorough with silver and pink streaks looked up and waved, "Hi, Mom!" Elodie exuded pride as she waved back.

It was honestly stunning to witness. Ava had never even met a witch before a few months ago, and she hadn't ever considered ever being able to speak to a fae, and yet here she was standing in a room where all three species and more comingled peacefully. Drawn together, she supposed, by shared experiences that far outweighed racial divides.

"They were all seeking asylum?" She whispered so that only Elodie could hear.

"From all different parts of the country," Elodie confirmed, pain clear in her voice. "Some have parents who are also members, but a lot of them are orphans. Rescues." "Rescues?" She asked. "From what?"

Elodie's eyes grew hollow for a brief moment before clearing, but the edge of anger in her gaze still remained, "Terrible, disgusting people and things the likes of which you wouldn't believe. It would shock you how many monsters out there make a habit of preying on the most vulnerable of us."

Somehow Ava doubted that, but the point was clear and only made her feel for these children more. She had come here thinking that Bright Light had something to offer her, but she realized that there might be something that she could offer them in return.

"I know that I'm not really a member, and I only just arrived," Ava said in a rush, shrugging a shoulder in forced nonchalance. "But I saw that you



were looking for a self-defense instructor. If it's okay with you, I'd really like to volunteer." For the first time in what felt like a long time, Ava felt her nerves abate as she and Elodie shared a look, and a slow smile spread across the fae woman's face.