

Chapter 133

Open Heart

Ava hit the mat with a thud, and her back screamed at the impact, but she didn't take more than a beat to process and dismiss the pain before she swung her legs behind her, rolling over her left shoulder to pop right back up onto her feet. Without breaking eye contact with her opponent, she dropped seamlessly back into her ready position.

"Not a bad recovery. You took that blow like a champ," her sparring partner and instructor, Reyes, lauded. Despite his complimentary tone, he never once dropped his guard, staying seated low in his hips but light on the balls of his feet, ready to counter any sudden movement she might make.

"Would have been better if you hadn't managed to knock me on my ass in the first place," she grumbled.

Rey laughed, forever the easy-going type, "You're good, A. But you ain't that good."

She launched herself at him, twisting her body to deliver a powerful roundhouse kick. Quick as a viper, Reyes brought his arms up to block his face, catching her ankle in the crook where his wrists came together and, in one fluid movement, ducked underneath her foot, utilizing her own momentum to redirect her leg off to the side, instantly throwing her off-balance.

Ava stumbled harder than she would have liked but quickly whipped back around only to see Rey already recovered and settled right back into his ready position.

"One of these days, I'm going to learn how you move like that," she said.

He answered her with a smirk, "I don't know if our particular skill sets interchange so well."

He was so well-trained; his movements were so preternaturally subtle that Mia didn't have more than a fraction of a second to relay his sudden burst of movement. Reyes lunged forward, and, in the blink of an eye, he was gone, and a big-ass jungle cat took his place, barreling straight for her.

Ava let out a thin shriek and covered her face in anticipation of the leopard jumping at her. Instead, Reyes went low, body checking her at the shins

and sending her tumbling head over heels and, once again, flat onto her back. This time, Ava let out an unflattering groan while Reyes took the time to shift back and redress, cackling his ass off all the while.

"I'm sorry, you just looked so surprised," he managed to say between fits of laughter. "I didn't expect that coming from you. It's like you've never seen someone shift before!"

Ava's cheeks burned as she crossed her arms and glared at his still-laughing form. "For your information, I haven't ever seen someone shift into anything other than a Wolf before. And I've never seen a leopard before ever, so the entire experience was a little jarring for me, okay?"

Reyes cocked his head at her in a way that struck her as...deeply feline. She wondered if she'd picked up any mannerisms from Mia. Ava couldn't recall ever chasing after and tearing into a rabbit with her bare teeth or pissing on a tree in full view of her friends, but who was to say.

"You've never met a shifter before?" He asked.

Ava shook her head, "Back east, the Alliance isn't the biggest proponent of comingling between species. If there were shifters in the area I grew up in, I never met them. I'm surprised that the Federation is so accepting of there being so many different supernaturals all in one place. I've recently come to realize just how rare that is."

Reyes laughed again, but this time it was far less mirthful, "They didn't have much of a choice since the shifters were here first. But, I feel the need to warn you that I think that you're getting the wrong impression of California. We get to call ourselves a 'free state' because the Federation only has one state and operates under one huge Pack."

He rose to his feet and offered Ava a hand up after him. "But make no mistake, Ava," he said, a morose edge replacing his usual joviality. "California isn't accepting, Bright Light and the handful of other organizations like it are. Us shifters, the witches, we don't get to govern ourselves like the humans, and the Wolves do. Our only saving grace seems to be that the Federation isn't as corrupt as the Alliance was. No offense."

"None taken," she said, and then a thought occurred to her. "You said that the shifters were here first. Like, before the European settlers came over, right?"

He nodded, "Our people have been here as long as the North American Natives. We evolved from the same peoples."

"Then do you know if your people have any stories about...maybe not utopian, but societies where true free cities, where all species did live in tandem with one another. Not just a central two monopolizing resources while the others duke it out for just enough to stay afloat."

"La Isla de las Estrellas, or Isla Estrella for short. The island of the Stars," he nodded. "It's just a myth, though. Kind of like Atlantis."

"What was it?" Ava asked. "What happened to it?"

Reyes rubbed the back of his neck as he thought, "Oof, I haven't thought about this story in forever! Legend has it that a couple of hundred years ago, there was an island located somewhere off the coast of South America. But it was big, more like the size of a state. Anyway, it was large enough to hold a single massive city that was ruled by a democracy. There was a panel of representatives that were voted in by all species."

Ava sat enrapt in his story, "And where did it go?"

Reyes shrugged, "The explanations change based on who's telling the story, but some say a volcano or seaquake may have cracked the island in half. Others say that a tsunami washed it beneath the waves. The only thing all stories agree on is that whatever happened to the island, it happened overnight, leaving only those lucky enough to have been on the mainland left to tell its story." "Fascinating," Ava breathed.

"It was certainly a trip down memory lane, that's for sure," he chuckled. "What has you so interested in old ghost stories?"

"Eh, a personal research project I was looking into has recently turned into something of a mystery for me," she admitted. "Have you ever heard of

New Rhodes? It was like La Isla de las Estrella only located back east. And it was a group of smaller individual city-states that operated under a single banner. It disappeared, too, but without anyone left who was willing to carry on its story."

"Are you saying that you think Isla Estrella is real? Ava, that's just a children's story! There's never been any proof that it actually existed."

"Except that generations of your people said so. And I found at least one written account of New Rhodes. I'm beginning to think that a little is just enough to connect the dots."

"To...what? Are you planning to go looking for it?" He asked, throwing her a look that made it clear that he thought her passion project was 'out there.' Ava didn't care. There was something here. She knew it.

"No, I want to study it. Tactically."

Reyes' eyes narrowed as he studied her more intently. "You're a good fighter," he said. A statement. Not a question. "And now you're asking about lost societies and throwing around words like 'tactically.' Wh...I know that we're not supposed to ask stuff like this out of the blue in case we accidentally trigger someone's baggage. But were you, like, someone back in the Alliance?"

Ava sighed, "No. I was supposed to be, but, unfortunately, my baggage got in the way. But I do know people who were on the Council, who want to make a difference. And could if only we knew a better alternative."

Rey nodded slowly and tossed her a water bottle before cracking open one of his own, "You're an idealist."

"I like to think I'm just being practical, looking for solutions," she shrugged. "I'd like it if my friends didn't all die fighting for nothing."

It was fairly common knowledge that the wars that had been instigated by the Axis wars hundreds of years ago had left much more than the two dimensions divided. Many historians attributed this conflict to the beginning of the animosity between the different species.

But, where most countries were able to come to some manner of agreement, much like the Federation, where different countries or cities were peacefully governed by a specific species, the US remained as divisive and destructive as ever, with millions of innocent bystanders caught between the perpetual social tug-of-war between the humans and the Wolves.

And, no matter who won out for any period of time over any given space, there were still so many that ended up at the bottom of the pile, screaming to be heard. Ultimately, Layla had been right; California did hold an

answer to her problems. It just wasn't one that either of them could have feasibly anticipated.

They had dreamt of finding the secret to a better life, but New Rhodes and La Isla de las Estrellas held the secret to a better way of life. A better world.

Ava was so excited, lost as she was in the puzzle that was vanished utopias, that she was completely caught off guard when Elodie came crashing into the room.

"Eliza? Have either of you seen Eliza?" She scanned the room in a panic before letting out a choked sob, "Shit."

Reyes sprung to Elodie's side, wrapping a protective arm around her shoulder as she began to weep. "Eliza's missing," she gasped. "My daughter is gone!"