

Chapter 136

The Underground

In spite of the pain wracking her body, Ava managed to remain alert enough to take note of where she and her fellow captives were being dragged off to. From what she could gather, they were being taken somewhere underground. The winding cement corridors reminded Ava of an unholy cross between the Red Moon's prison and something like a repurposed subterranean parking garage. As both options were specifically known for being labyrinthine structures with very few ways in or out, neither thought particularly filled Ava with confidence as she and her poor charge, Eliza, were hauled deeper and deeper into the unknown.

Eventually, they came to a branch in the corridor where their captors began funneling Ava, Dana, and Hank down one hall while Eliza's dragged her down another.

"Miss Ava! No, Miss Ava!" Still, under the influence of whatever they'd been drugged with whenever they'd been captured, Eliza's tiny cries were frail but persistent, and the terror in the young girl's voice was so clear it made Ava feel like being sick right then and there.

"Hey! Where are you taking her?!" Ava shouted as she struggled in vain against the guard holding her, as her recently abused muscles simply refused to work the way she wanted them to, staying maddeningly limp and weak when she needed to be strong.

She cursed silently to herself as frustrated tears began to sting her eyes. Eliza needed her help, and here Ava was utterly useless to protect herself, much less anyone else. And after everything, Elodie had done to help Ava feel as if she had a place in the world, a purpose...if she couldn't return Eliza to her mother, Ava didn't know how she would ever find the will to live with herself again.

No one answered their cries as they continued on, carting Ava, Eliza, and the rest of their group off to their respective destinations, but Ava kept her gaze locked onto the little fae girl for as long as she could, not daring to take her eyes off of Eliza until she and her captor rounded a bend and disappeared into the dim light.

"I'll find you, Eliza!" She cried. "I swear I'll find you!"

The sound of a thick metallic door creaking open directly preceded Ava's nearly limp form being bodily tossed into a cold, cement room. The thudding thunk, thunk of Dana and Hank hitting the ground beside her quickly followed and, soon after, they were alone.

The three of them stayed where their bodies had hit the floor for a long while, each struggling to regain their strength enough to speak without too much effort, much less get up and moving. Since her ailment was mostly physical in nature, Ava was the first to regain her faculties, pushing up to a sitting position with a wince and a protracted moan, every muscle in her body simultaneously screaming for her to lay the hell back down!

But she persisted, pushing through the remaining spasms and bunching, causing her muscles to tighten and ache. Panting from the effort, Ava pulled herself to the nearest wall and posted up, slumping against the hard, damp surface, struggling to catch her breath.

"Why didn't you tell me you were drugged?" She eventually gritted out through her clenched teeth.

For their part, Dana and Hank were still pretty much laid out where they had been, neither one managing much more than to make it from one laborious breath to the next. After a few more long minutes of Ava watching what she was dubiously certain might be the other two's final pitiful moments, Hank finally moved, rolling to his side and pushing up onto his hands and knees.

The male paused so long that Ava was certain that he was about to be sick, but he only gritted his teeth and pushed to his feet, swaying all the way up. On unsteady legs, he stumbled his way to the nearest bit of wall and collapsed into it before sliding his way down into a seated position.

"Fuck me running," he muttered to himself. "This is awful."

Ava figured that if he was fit enough for colorful language, he was healthy enough to answer her question. "Why didn't you tell me that all of you had been drugged?" She pushed. "You had enough time to relay the information." Slowly, Hank shook his head. "Would have mentioned it if I knew. They must've dosed us while we were unconscious."

Even more slowly, Dana began to rouse, pushing herself up inch by inch. Unlike Hank, however, she failed to resist the urge to purge right in the middle of their little shared cell. When she was finished heaving, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and sighed. "I thought I just had a concussion," she groaned. "But then, I couldn't shift."

Ava's eyes darted to where Hank sat, nodding, "Did that happen to you, too?"

"Yeah. After I woke up, I noticed that I couldn't feel my Wolf. So, no shifting, obviously. Then, the lethargy came. I've never felt so weak."

Dana nodded her agreement, "Exactly. Shifters don't have...Wolves, or whatever our equivalent would be. We have a single consciousness. But everything around me, my sense of smell, sight, even taste... all became so dull. I thought that I was dying." "What is this place?" Ava murmured. "Where are we?"

No immediate answer came, and none would for a while yet. Left with little else to do, Ava and her new companions hunkered down in their cell and focused on recovering as much of their strength as they could. They had no idea what might be in store for them in this underground bunker, but whatever lay ahead, they were sure that they would need to conserve their strength.

Thankfully, the next several hours were spent in nearly blissful silence. No one came to bother or harass the trio as they recovered, and soon enough, Dana and Hank's complexions looked relatively back to normal. As for Ava, her body still ached as if she'd taken a particularly hard fall...off of a skyscraper...straight into oncoming traffic. But, at least, she could once again freely move her limbs.

Hank flexed his hand experimentally and, to his own amazement, watched as inch-long claws erupted from his nail beds for a split second before contracting again.

"Whatever they injected us with, it's starting to wear off," he grinned. "I can feel my Wolf again, even though I can't really hear him yet."

Ava's eyes narrowed at his description. "I've been thinking about that," she said. "At the height of your...affliction, did your entire body feel heavy? And I don't mean from lethargy. I mean, did it feel as if your very blood felt dense? Hotter and weightier than usual?"

Dana and Hank shared an astonished look between them before they both nodded.

"I don't know if I could have put the feeling into words myself," the shifter gasped. "It was unlike anything I've ever experienced before."

"But I take it that you've gone through something similar?" Hank asked her, and Ava shook her head.

"Not exactly," she admitted. "At least, not to that level. But, I remember feeling a weighty burning sensation whenever my silver shackles would cut into my wrists and ankles back...back when I would sometimes have to wear silver shackles." "My God," Dana whispered, but Ava powered through, not willing to get into that story right now.

"It's pretty common knowledge that silver acts as a suppressant to Wolves. It muddles and blocks our connection to our Wolves. Perhaps something similar happens to shifters," Ava continued. "If they injected some sort of silver-based solution directly into your bloodstream, I would imagine it would have similar effects."

"That's awful enough to consider, but they used on us, they used on the little girl, too, and that obviously worked," Hank said. "And silver doesn't negatively affect spellcasters. In fact, they like it."

"Eliza isn't a spellcaster. She's fae," Ava corrected him. "It just makes me wonder what the hell they're doing down here that they would need to abduct and subdue supernaturals so efficiently. I mean, the drug they've created is strong enough. to knock a fully grown male on his ass but wears off on its own in under twenty-four hours...."

Hank frowned, "Those are oddly specific properties."

Just then, the door to their cell opened, and three armed goons shuffled inside. "The man and the taller chick need their re-up," the one by the door announced to the other two, who marched up to Hank and Dana, brandishing filled syringes in their hands.

Still weakened from their last dose, neither put up much of a struggle as they were manhandled and reinjected.

"Hey!" Ava shouted, rising to her feet.

"Ah, ah, ah," the last man said and pointed a taser gun directly at her chest, giving her pause. "Don't worry. You're not getting the suppressant just yet. You need your strength where you're going."

Ava bared her teeth and resisted the call to shift right then and there. Extra muscle or no, her lack of sight would only endanger herself and everyone she was determined to help save.

"And where am I going?" She snarled, and the man holding the taser grinned, slow and vicious.

"To fight."