

Chapter 138

It Starts With A Feeling

Over the next few days, Ava wasn't afforded much downtime between matches. As far as the sick lot who frequented this little fight club were concerned, she was a hot commodity. Not only had she quite literally come from out of nowhere and put their top fighter in the infirmary, her method of swiftly switching between forms to keep her opponents confused was a rare - and from what she'd heard her guards claim, a quite entertaining - tactic.

Ava couldn't care less. She was biding time, waiting for Xavier to call her brother. From there, Aiden could contact the Californian Federation and have them storm the castle and take this operation out at the source. At least, she hoped so. She still didn't know exactly where she was, but she'd begun to notice more people than not speaking Spanish.

Ava thought about how long they'd been in the van on the way here, and it made her nervous. If they had been taken across the border down to

Mexico, rescuing them would no longer be a matter of sending in a rescue team to bust up a run-of-the-mill shady situation. It would be an international incident.

And, since Mexico was staunchly under human rule, she couldn't even be sure that their government would view this fighting ring as strictly illegal. But, whether it was or not, it was almost certain that kidnapping was. She hoped. Whatever came next was for Xavier and Aiden to figure out. And, even though she felt bad enough for having to distract him from whatever chaos he was no doubt dealing with back East, Ava had no doubt that Xavier would come through with rallying the troops for her. He'd proven as much to her time and time again since she'd left, and they'd inexplicably relied on one another to help hold each other's shattered pieces together.

Somehow, they'd become much better at it from thousands of miles apart than they ever had been whenever they lived in the same city. And, just like she had when she'd called Marnie and her coven to help him and his team during their ambush, she knew that Xavier would go to great lengths to get her and her people out of this.

And Ava was surprised to find that she did consider Dana and Hank her people. Since she had proven herself a reliable fighter over her first few matches, Ava had been offered a new room, not one with a view, but it at least had a cot. She'd turned it down, instead preferring to stick close to the only people she knew here.

They'd offered her companionship and vowed to help her escape when the time was right. In return, she helped teach them the basics of fighting, just enough to help get them through their first matches without sustaining severe injury. Thanks to her winnings, they'd eaten fairly well, which helped Dana and Hank keep their strength up during the precious few hours they went without the silver suppressant. For Ava's part, she'd yet to receive a dose since fear of being tased again seemed to keep her in line well enough.

In truth, it was false compliance, but whatever explanation floated their boat worked well enough for her if it kept that poison from her veins. This way, she was always in the best shape she could be whenever she went in for a fight, and that was just the way their human overlords liked her.

In fact, she was on her way to the private gym saved for "top competitors" when she caught the faint sound of terrified cries.

"P-please, I d-don't have any magic! I c-can't shift!"

Ava paused mid-step as she recognized a familiar voice echoing from an unfamiliar room down the hall. She immediately began to backpedal and stride toward the sound of the crying, ignoring the angry bitching coming from her guard. She knew he wouldn't touch her before a match. He'd probably put a month's pay on her winning the next match.

"You don't have any magic, huh?" She heard someone reply aggressively. "Well, we know you're not human, so that must make you a liar. That'd be enough to earn you a beating. The least you can do is fight to earn your keep. Go on, then. Fight!"

Ava pushed into the room and stopped dead in her tracks. She'd been right that the scared voice she'd heard was Eliza's, but she never expected the scene she'd just walked in on. The room was set up like a mini arena with about a dozen or so kids gathered around a makeshift ring.

Inside the ring, Eliza faced off against another frightened middle-schooler who had no doubt been abducted from his home. Towering over the children were two human adults holding paddles as they oversaw the miniature fight ring. At her entrance, all eyes turned on her, all filled with an array of emotions. Irritation from the humans, fear from the kids, and relief from Eliza.

"Miss Ava!" She yelled, tears choking her voice. "T-tell them that I don't have magic! I-I don't want t-to fight."

Ava accepted the inevitable chaos that was about to ensue as she lost all sense of her carefully kept composure.

For days, she had been beat on and forced to beat others into submission. Over and over again. All of that, the wracking guilt that made it difficult to sleep at night, her own incessant pain from cracked bones and bone-

deep bruises that were never given more than a few hours at a time to heal...she could handle that. Would take and dish out whatever she needed to in order to get out of here.

But these monsters were teaching children to fight one another. For sport. It made Ava sick to her stomach, but what's more, it made her see red.

Ava spun and cold-cocked her guard, laying him out with a single well-placed fist to his jaw. Her own knuckles screamed at the blow, but it was worth it for the seeds of chaos it sowed in the room. Were or shifter, these children had the same instincts she had been born with and thusly could pick up on cues that their human captors could never hope to. They also had half the fear of their adult counterparts and a lot less silver running through their veins.

As soon as Ava laid the first human out, the rest of the supernatural children saw their opening and struck, not out at each other, but at their oppressors. Like a switch had been flipped, a dozen children shifted and pounced, lashing out with their tiny claws and fangs.

"No! Don't waste time attacking! Run!" Ava yelled. "Stay together!"

As much as she would have liked to stick around to see a bunch of humans get owned by a handful of babies, Ava wasn't deluded enough to really think that was how that encounter would go. The humans were ten times

their size, and they had weapons and very few morals. For now, their speed was their biggest asset.

Most of the kids listened to her, racing out of the room, but one stayed back to get a final bite in on their instructor, who reared back, drawing up a leg to stomp on the lion cub. Ava reached down and grabbed the taser from the guard she'd knocked out and fired.

"Eliza, grab him!" She called, and the fae girl complied, scooping up the little lion cub and rushing to Ava's side. She didn't wait to see the human she'd tased drop before taking off at a dead sprint, with Eliza easily keeping pace beside her. She followed the sound of commotion coming from the corridor leading to the arena. Ava was suddenly terrified that the children had gotten turned around and wound up right in the thick of a match, surrounded by fanatic humans hell-bent on getting off on seeing supernatural beings bleed. She doubted that they cared exactly how that was achieved.

"Eliza, stay behind me," she commanded as they drew closer to the double doors where the sounds of absolute chaos could be heard on the other side.

She grabbed for the handle, determined to find the source of the commotion if only to make absolutely sure that her temper tantrum hadn't accidentally sent a bunch of children to the slaughter. Just then, a hand reached out from a side room and clamped onto her wrist, pulling her inside.

"What the...!"

She blinked as Dana's face came into view and, as Ava took in her surroundings, so too did Hank and the gaggle of cubs she'd freed and then promptly lost track of.

"Dana, Hank! What are you doing in here?" She gasped. "And how did you get the kids?"

For their part, her two friends looked as perplexed as she did as they struggled to wrangle the rowdy bunch.

"We were being escorted to the holding room to wait for our matches when some guy knocked out our guards and told us to wait here and not go near the arena. Then, not long after that, the screaming started." Ava's brow lowered in concern, "Goddess, we need to get out of here."

"That's what we were doing when we ran into these little ones," Dana said, gesturing to the pups and cubs. "We led them back here where that man told us it would be safe."

"What man?" Ava asked.

"Male, tall, dark hair...." Hank supplied just as Ava heard the door behind her open. "Oh, there he is."

She turned, hoping against hope that her brother had finally arrived, only for an electric jolt not-unlike a taser to shudder through her as she suddenly and unexpectedly came face-to-face with Xavier.