

Chapter 55

The Chase

The trio of Red Moon members didn't waste a beat before turning completely hostile. One moment, they were blinking away the confusion of suddenly coming face-to-face with their Pack's most reviled criminal, and in the next, they were charging.

As one, they came at her, pushing through the crowd, sending unsuspecting humans sprawling. Ava leapt onto the counter of the game booth behind her and took off running down the length of the counter, racing past her pursuers as she kited around them.

Ava came to the end of the counter and hopped off, her feet barely hitting the floor before she was off, zigging and zagging her way through the crowd. She didn't have a clear idea of where she was going - Noah was off somewhere in the opposite direction, and the carnival had changed quite a bit since she'd last been here.

As Ava flew through the park grounds on sure feet, she only had two clear objectives - putting as many bodies as she could between herself and the people chasing her for long enough that she could feasibly hole up somewhere until the coast was clear.

Ava took a sharp turn down a break in the booths running along the midway, quickly dodging around the startled couple she'd nearly barreled straight into. "Excuse me!"

The wind carried her words behind her as she went headlong into another throng of revelers. Behind her, indignant shouts rang out as the mini mob following her took less care, mowing hapless civilians to the ground in their hot pursuit. She came up next to a face painting tent and skidded to a stop, quickly ducking inside. It was a gamble, but she'd take it.

"Hey, what's the rush?"

She didn't stop long enough to address the confused attendants, before rushing to the back of the tent and dropping to her knees. Just as she'd hoped, the tent wasn't complete tacked down. Ava yanked up the bottom of the tent enough to crawl through to the other side.

Ava popped up into a new lane of stalls and backtracked, turning back the way she'd just come. She quickly scanned the horizon, looking for a place to cache in the precious few moments she'd hopefully just bought herself.

Suddenly, a giant ghastly clown face rose from the darkness, beckoning Ava to come towards it. Without a second thought, Ava raced into the large structure, banking on the idea that hiding in a crowded fun house might simultaneously be so random and cliché that her pursuers would just pass her by.

Almost immediately after sprinting into the large red and white striped doors, Ava realized that this had been a mistake. Not only was the fun house rundown and creepy as hell, but it was also disturbingly empty. Clearly, it was an older attraction - the kind that no one actually attended and stayed up year-round, so no one felt particularly pressed to visit it too often.

Ava turned back to the doors only to find that they weren't designed to open from the inside, forcing its victims to complete the maze in order to leave. That was probably another reason why this place was empty - it was a fucking fire hazard. With little other choice, Ava pressed on, travelling deeper into the ratty old set dressings that were an awful byproduct of a bygone era where the sole goal of these attractions was to send as many grade-schoolers into therapy as quickly as possible.

Grotesquely stretched clowns stood ten-feet tall, looming over her in a variety of similarly eerie settings, like if the clown from IT had somehow ended up as the protagonist of Alice in Wonderland.

Tinny circus music accompanied by a repetitive track of canned, distorted laughter played on a loop, as the dim lights flashed a kaleidoscope of

colors, sending long shadows creeping across the path. Around nearly every corner, some sort of crumbling animatronic dropped down or popped up, sending Ava's already compromised nerves rattling.

The influx of stimuli did exactly as was intended, setting Ava on edge, and bombarding her senses enough to distort her perception of her surroundings. Luckily, Mia operated on a slightly higher playing field.

If it weren't for the Wolf's preternatural perception, Ava probably wouldn't have been clued into the faint sound of frustrated muttering trailing her through the winding halls.

She cursed under her breath. Ava had hoped that the overpowering scents of the carnival would be enough to hide her scent long enough for her to disappear. She'd also expected other people to be in this building with her.

If any of her pursuers had stopped near the fun house entrance for any amount of time, it would be only a matter of concentrating for a moment before they picked up her trail again.

Ava sucked in a breath and held it, wrangling her wildly increasing heartbeat back under her control. She tried to stay silent as she made her way through the disconcerting scenery, hoping that she'd soon come to an exit.

The only bright side to this nightmare was that if this fun house was wreaking this much havoc on her senses, then it was doing the same to the ones chasing her.

Ava passed through a door and into darkness, momentarily relieved, thinking that she'd come to the end of the line. She nearly threw a well-deserved tantrum when she came to the attraction's final room. A large blinking sign read, "Phantasmagoria!" and surrounding it were two of those crank mirrors; one that seemed to stretch Ava to twice her length, while the other shrank her to knee height.

There was the telltale sound of a spring trap activating, followed by a shriek and loud cursing. Then the sound of running footsteps increased.

"Up ahead!"

Ava clenched her fists, wholly dreading what she knew lay beyond the curtains and made her way inside to find the stuff of nightmares. "Why'd it have to be a mirror maze?"

It had only taken a few second's guesswork to figure out that, somewhere along the line, their night had taken an unexpected turn. The initial commotion had alerted Noah that something was amiss, drawing him back to the stand where he'd left Ava for no more than a minute. By the time he'd arrived, she was already gone.

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From there, it was all a matter of following the trail of chaos across the fairground; If Noah followed the steady stream of overturned carts and disgruntled guests, he was reasonably certain it would lead him right to Ava.

That wasn't what concerned him. What made his Wolf stand on end was the fact that he wasn't the only one on Ava's tail.

The male was dressed in dark clothing, with a baseball cap pulled down low over his face. When he walked, he stuck to the shadows; His every movement was deliberately causal, so as not to attract attention. Unlike the people chasing Ava, this one knew what he was doing.

When the male slid into the fun house where he'd picked up the scents of Ava's pursuers, he became Noah's number one target.

It had been little more than dumb luck that he'd found her here tonight. After weeks of searching only to get nothing but dead end after dead end, it was almost madness to think that an impromptu trip down memory lane had not only brought him to Ava, but right in her time of need.

He didn't recognize the trio following her, but he knew that they were Red Moon, he felt it in his blood. No amount of time and space would take that genetic memory from him. He felt his Wolf rise and they were immediately on the prowl. Whatever the inciting incident, he knew it had to be related to the reason why he hadn't been able to get any solid answers on Ava's whereabouts since returning to Red Moon territory. He'd left, pacified by the knowledge that she was safe under the Pack's protection. Apparently, somewhere along the line, that had changed.

And he was going to find out why if he had to move heaven and earth to do it.

He had a goddess given duty to serve his Pack, but he knew that he'd forsake every vow he'd ever taken and damn the consequences if one of them laid a hand on her. The Red Moon Pack was his obligation, but Ava Davis was his heart. If the Pack wouldn't protect her, then he sure as hell would.