

Chapter 9

Escape (Part 2)

When the elevator's doors slid open punctuated by a cheery ding!, Ava found herself inexplicably torn. There, right there was the open world, ready to receive her with no strings attached for the first time in what felt like an entire lifetime. Right now, the dimly lit garage before her was practically nirvana, yet here she was rooted to where she stood, actually contemplating whether it would be better to press the button that would send her right back upstairs. But then what would she do if she did? Go sit right back down where Xavier left her, hoping that he'd see her compliance as an act of good will? Screw that, if he didn't believe she was innocent by now, he was never going to, and Ava had to come to terms with that sooner rather than later.

But what laid out there, on the other side of the parking garage? Ava was a fugitive among her people, so taking refuge with a neighboring Pack was out of the question. As soon as someone figured out who she was they would send for Xavier, and she'd end up right back at square one.

Escaping to the human world was her only viable option. Unfortunately, the human world needed money and Ava hadn't seen much of that in ages. At the Green Light Club, Ava was paid in not being sent back to prison; it was presumed that after a sufficient amount of time served, she would have earned her freedom and been released. Thank the goddess for tippers, she thought. It was only thanks to a couple of generous patrons that Ava had enough money in her pocket for a quick taxi ride, but after that...dammit. Ava didn't have a plan, and at the moment, she was too hyped-up on adrenaline and possibility to come up with a good one. She shouldn't be making this decision alone. For just a moment, Ava turned her mind's eye inward seeking out the comforting presence that she'd gone far too long without. Mia responded immediately, if not enthusiastically. Go!

The urge to move forward, to start running and never stop, flooded Ava, nearly sending her into sensory overdrive. With everything that had gone down this evening, Ava had barely had the opportunity to fully acknowledge the miracle of Mia's return, much less analyze what had gone wrong in the first place. Now that a few hours had passed, Ava was starting to become increasingly concerned about Mia.

It was more than the fact that the Wolf refused to fully rise to the surface - the normally fun-loving creature was now sullen and quiet, buzzing with anxious energy. There was something seriously wrong with her, something that the Wolf either couldn't or wouldn't communicate and Ava knew it had to do with her sudden disappearance and reemergence. Chaotic as they were, Mia's instincts had never failed her, and she owed

it to the both of them to head the Wolf's call. Still, Ava thought about how far away California was. The journey as it stood was almost unfathomable...she shook her head of the impending doubts.

Ava hated her hesitance, but she hated the thought of fucking up her own chance at freedom even more, so she ran. Every step she took was a wonder when she didn't immediately run into Xavier on his way back from wherever the hell he'd gone. She felt like she'd already wasted so much precious time going back and forth with herself. She pushed her legs to go faster.

Ava raced past row after row of expensive sports cars, all presumably belonging to the Wolves partying in room suite 803. Ava thanked her lucky stars that none of them had decided to head out early. In fact, she didn't run into anyone as she found her way to the exit and burst outside into the cool night beyond the reinforced door. Chest heaving, she didn't stop and barely slowed down to find her bearings. Ava darted down the closest alleyway, turning corners at random until even she would be hard pressed to find her way back to the club.

Ava finally stepped out onto a sidewalk that had to be at least a handful of streets away from the Green Light Club. She didn't immediately recognize where she was and momentarily wondered just how far from home she'd ended up. Ava knew it had to be past midnight at this point, and wherever she was didn't appear to have a lively nightlife since there were precious few pedestrians roaming the sidewalks and even fewer taxis dotted along the streets. Ava hurried to the nearest cab and slid inside, "Please drive."

She didn't bother with a greeting. "Out of the city, I'll tell you the address in a minute."

The driver paused mid-bite, probably wondering how best to deal with the vague bossy girl who was interrupting his dinner. "It's gonna be about a ten-minute wait," he gestured at his food. "I'm a little busy at the moment."

She met the driver's eyes in the rearview mirror and immediately clocked the disdain there. Ava felt her cheeks heat up as the man scoped out her tangled hair, wan complexion, and grubby grey work uniform. She looked pathetic even for the crowd he was probably used to climbing into the back of his taxi after midnight. Well, if she looked harried and desperate, it was because she was, and she didn't need some human making her feel worse than she already did. "I'm in a hurry," she stated curtly. "Please."

"Miss, I'm not trying to be rude or anything," he sat down his sandwich and whatever he said next was most definitely going to be rude. "But you do have money, right?"

Ava rolled her eyes, "Yes, and you'll get. It. If. You. Drive."

He held his hands up, "Alright, alright, no problems here then! You know, you can never be too sure in my line of work. You start to learn, it's better for everyone if you're just upfront, you know."

Ava sighed as the cabby took his sweet time putting the car into gear.

He finally got onto the road and cruised toward the next light. When they came to a stop, he looked up to meet her gaze in the rearview mirror again and shot her a chagrined smile, "It's better to have bruised feelings than a bruised pocketbook, right? Where we headed, miss?"

Ava suppressed another eye roll and paused to think. The first part of her plan was completed. Well, technically the second? First had been to escape the Green Light Club and she'd sucked up her courage and done that! Next, she had needed to procure transportation away from the source of all of problems, and she'd done that, but the fact remained that she still had nowhere to actually go.

"I can't exactly drive you without a destination, now can I, miss?" The cab driver's voice was laden with frustrated sarcasm, but Ava didn't know what to tell him. In the movies, getting in the car and yelling, "Drive!" was enough to get the ball rolling. Well, she had just tried it, and someone should call and tell the movies that their logic was flawed and that it was irresponsible to put bad ideas into the heads of impressionable traumatized girls.

Ava giggled at the thought, and when the cab driver threw her an incredulous look, she outright laughed. Goddess, she was tired. Sitting here, in relative safety for the first time in years, her head swum at the mass of tension that had rushed out of her body all at once.

The taxi driver cleared his throat, clearly unnerved by her bizarre behavior. She didn't blame him for the fact that he clearly thought that an insane woman had just climbed into his car. Of course, she knew what was happening; her adrenaline had spiked, and now it had crashed. She'd just ran out of hell and, for the time being, the devil didn't know where she was. She was alone in the big, wide world and, for the first time in a long time, that realization didn't bring with it a wave of crippling grief.

No, she didn't know where she should tell the cab driver to take her, and once she did figure it out, that would only be the first decision in a long, long line of choices that would lead her to a destination she quite literally couldn't fathom, right now. But, for once, they'd be her choices to make.

"You're not tweekin' are you? I can't go through that again; my insurance company will fire me if I need to have another door replaced." The cabby eyed her suspiciously.

Ava scoffed and shook her head, "Got a favorite motel just outside of the city?" She asked.

The driver looked relieved that the trip looked to be getting back on track. "Cheep and cheerful?" "Sounds amazing."

They road in companionable silence as they started off down the street. Ava yawned and let her eyes drift closed as they sidled up to another red light. Ava felt more relaxed than she had in ages, with the humming of the

cars engine soothing her aching bones and the arresting aroma of wood ash and violets wafting on the breeze.

Ava shot upright. She lunged forward to tell the cabby to go, only to find the man frantically staring at the distant ring of shadows now surrounding the car. Suddenly, one of the shadows appeared, rapping a knuckle on the passenger window.

When Ava met the frightened driver's eyes once more, "Please don't." Before she'd even finished her plea, the window was winding down.

The scent of wood ash and violets intensified as the window rolled down to reveal the furious male standing on the other side.

"Get. Out."