

CHAPTER 78

C 78 Ava: An Old Enemy 78 Ava: An Old Enemy The terror that had gripped me so tightly finally begins to loosen its hold, washed away by the exhilarating rush of my feet pounding against the ground, the world flying past in my periphery. It's a simple rhythm. One foot in front of the other. Vault over an obstacle. Veer to avoid a tree. The wind against my skin is harsh, like a thousand icy whips snapping against my cheeks. But the pain is almost euphoric. My feet pound against the forest floor, each step fueling the fire of freedom burning within me. It's a feeling unlike anything I've ever experienced- raw power, an almost frenetic energy, thrumming through my body with an intensity that steals my breath away. The trees zoom past in blurs of shadow. I can hear the wolves keeping pace beside me, their breaths ragged growls that harmonize with the frantic beat of my heart. My unnatural speed helps me keep 1/8 78 Ava: An Old Enemy pace. I'm not faster than they are, but I'm far faster than their human forms. They probably have questions. I don't know how to answer them. But, that's for another time. Right now, we need this. There's no fear now, no uncertainty. Only an overwhelming sense of freedom so pure and intoxicating that I want to lose myself in it forever. I am unleashed, unchained—a force of nature given form. My lungs burn with the effort, but I don't slow. Can't slow. This is what it means to be truly alive, to embrace what dwells within me. To hell with being human; right now, I am so much more. The trees begin to thin, and through the gaps I can see the faint glow of distant lights. Civilization. Safety. My throat tightens with a sudden surge of emotion—hope, relief, gratitude. I'm going to make it. After everything, I'm finally going to escape this nightmare. A piercing howl shatters the night, closer than before. My heart stutters, but I don't falter. 13:00 – 418 78 Ava: An Old Enemy I have wolves beside me. Wolves willing to risk their lives by entering enemy territory to find me. The last of the trees falls away, revealing the city of White Peak. An hour's drive has taken much longer on foot. A breathless laugh escapes me as I pour on even more speed, reveling in the rush. I'm so close. So damn close. Another howl, this one laced with a chilling resonance that raises the hairs on the back of my neck. The wolves are gaining, closing the distance with every second. I can sense their urgency, their hunger. They've found us. I can tell by how Lucas and Vester crowd into me, teeth bared and hackles up. I let the power within me surge, a tidal wave of energy that propels me forward with impossible velocity. The city is closer with every passing heartbeat, the details sharpening. Something slams into me from the side, a massive force that drives the air from my lungs and sends me tumbling across the uneven ground. I scramble for nurchano fingernails gorahhling against the dirt and 3/8 78 Ava: An Old Enemy rocks as I fight to stop my momentum. The world explodes into snarls and growls, of vicious, inhuman noises torn from the vocal chords of wolves. When I finally grind to a halt, I'm breathless and disoriented, the world spinning around me. Twigs and leaves cling to my hair, my palms stinging from the impact. I blink tears from my eyes, struggling to make sense of what just happened. There are shadows everywhere, glints of white teeth in the darkness, and eerie shrieks of pain interspersed between the rumbles. Fur and fangs clash in a frenzied melee, a tangle of snarling beasts. Their forms are indistinguishable from one another. Massive jaws snap mere inches from vulnerable flesh, -saliva flying in glistening arcs. The ground trembles with the force of their collisions, each impact punctuated by deep, guttural growls that reverberate through my bones. The scent of earth and rage hangs thick in the air, mingling with the metallic tang of blood. In the chaos, I catch fleeting glimpses of familiar wolf faces. But they are mere flashes, lost in an instant as Ag 78 Ava An Old Enemy the battle rages on. And then I have somethin

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far worse to worry about. I scramble backward, my hands clawing at the earth as a familiar wolf emerges from the shadows, its golden eyes locked on me with an intensity that chills me to the core. The raw hunger in that gaze is unmistakable -a predator sizing up its prey. All the power that had surged through my veins mere moments ago has evaporated, leaving me feeling weak and sluggish in its wake. The euphoria of my newfound freedom has been replaced by a visceral terror that seizes my lungs, making each breath a struggle. Todd Mason's wolf is an average-sized wolf, but still menacing to someone who can't shift. I've seen him -hundreds of times through the years. I'd never mistake him for another. He stalks toward me with a menacing silence that's somehow more terrifying than any snarl or growl. The air around him is filled with the energy of barely restrained violence, a promise of brutality in past and present. 13.00 < 78 Ava: An Old Enemy There's a predatory gleam in his wolf-yellow eyes that seems to strip away every last shred of my humanity, reducing me to nothing more than a trembling rabbit for dinner. Terror dries my mouth as he prowls ever closer. If he were human, I could envision the arrogant smirk that would be curving his lips right now, the wild look in his eyes that mirrors that of his wolf so accurately. The rough bark of a tree collides with my back, halting my retreat. I'm trapped. Lucas is fighting off a number of wolves. I can't call out to him. The sounds of the battle raging around us fade into a distant murmur, the world narrowing to this single, horrifying moment. Todd pauses, his muzzle wrinkling as he scents the air. My fear has probably soaked this area in its scent, something he's always delighted in. A low rumble builds in his chest, a sound that reverberates through my bones and sets my nerves on edge with frittering panic. I want to scream, to cry out for Lucas or Vester or anyone who can save me from this nightmare, but the 13.09 16/8 78 Ava: An Old Enemy terror has robbed me of my voice. I'm mute. Helpless. His muscles bunch, his haunches tensed as he prepares to pounce, and I finally regain some of my senses. I'm not helpless. I'm not powerless. I can defend myself. I've trained for this. I am not a victim of this circumstance. I slide my hand into my pocket, willing my fingers to "stop shaking as I grab the pocket knife I'd placed into it hours before. 66 For those of you who have bought my privillige tiers, thank you! Thank you for enjoying this story with me. Thank you for following Ava in her chronic misadventures! Lenaleia . Creator's Thought 13:10 D

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