

Chapter 134

Lights Out

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, Elodie!" Ava rushed to the hyperventilating woman's side as Reyes guided her over to a nearby bench along the wall to have a seat. "Can you try to take a deep breath and tell us exactly what happened?"

The fae woman's chest heaved, gasping for air, but she nodded and fought past the panic trying to choke her in order to suck down one fortifying breath and then another.

"Good job, that's it," Rey quietly encouraged her, all the while rubbing gentle circles along her spine until she could finally breathe without her chest rattling again. "Now, what happened, Elodie."

"That's just it," she whispered, "I don't know. She never came home after school let out for the day. I called the school, and they said she'd left along

with everyone else like she was supposed to...I've checked everywhere, the school, at home, all along her bus route. This was the last place I could think of that she would be, but she isn't here either."

"Don't worry, El," Reyes reassured her in an achingly gentle voice. Elodie leaned further into his embrace, and his arm tightened around her. "If she's anywhere in this city, we'll find her."

The heartbroken fae looked up at him, meeting his emerald gaze with a meaningful glare, "But what if she isn't in the city, Rey?"

The moment that passed between them was very clearly loaded with hidden meaning and information that Ava hadn't been made privy to, but she decided that now was probably not the time to pry. "You can't think like that," he softly chided Elodie. "It's dangerous to let your mind go there, especially when there's no concrete information."

"I have a feeling, Rey," was all she whispered back.

Cold determination settled over the shifter, every bit the predator who's locked onto its prey, "If we think it's come to that, we'll do what needs to be done. Until then, we leave no stone unturned."

The chime of the front door's bell interrupted whatever Elodie might have uttered in return. Desperate and anxious for whatever lead she could

follow, she hopped to her feet and rushed out of the gym to greet whoever had entered the building.

Reyes rose to follow after her, but Ava stopped him with a hand on the arm. When he turned back around to face her, his lips were pressed into a grim line. "You're probably wondering what that was all about," he said after a moment of batting around words in his head. "It's just a rumor that's been floating around in our circles for a while now. There isn't anything to corroborate it, so Elodie didn't want to start making claims and getting people worried for nothing."

"I just want to find Eliza," she assured him.

With a sigh, Reyes relented. "There have been talks of a rise in missing person's cases," he told her. "Just here and there, people have up and vanished into thin air. Problem is that they usually come from communities like ours, outsiders with murky pasts and a lot of personal issues. And since no one's been able to link the disappearances together, much less find out what's been happening to the missing...."

"The police haven't been taking it as a serious threat," she finished.

"They claim it comes with the vagabond lifestyle a lot of refugees lead," he spat. "Too many skeletons in their closets to feel comfortable in one place for too long, and no personal ties to convince them to stay. It's

bullshit, but what can we do? It's our word against theirs, and if we were the next ones to disappear, they'd spit the exact same lies."

"Have there been any minors to go missing before now?" She asked.

"In Berkeley? Not that we know of. Certainly not any of the kids who regularly come to Bright Light," Reyes shook his head with a curse. "I can't even think about something like that happening. To any of our kids, but especially to a kid as fucking sweet as Eliza. And in broad fucking daylight? There has to be a more reasonable explanation that we just need to look for."

Ava nodded to the door that Elodie stormed out of only a few moments before, "Then let's go get some."

They rushed out of the gym and into the hallway beyond to find Elodie seated in the communal lounge area with several of the other Bright Light kids sitting in chairs around her.

"Are you sure that's the last you saw of her?" Elodie asked in earnest. The kids nodded, concern starkly written across each of their young faces. Of the group of three, all of the kids were a little older than Eliza, but Ava knew from working with them for the last few weeks that they all attended the same school.

"What did they say?" Rey asked, skipping pleasantries which was distinctly uncharacteristic of the Bright Light martial arts instructor.

Even though the kids were clearly worried for the safety of their friend, they didn't clam up like Ava might have expected a couple of children who were such intense scrutiny to do. Instead, one of the girls quickly offered up what she knew. "Eliza was on the school bus with us, and that was the last time any of us spoke to her because she got off of the bus early," she admitted. "She said that she was going to the Arclight Theater to go see a movie with a few other kids from her grade. She wasn't alone, we swear!"

Beside her was Ricard, one of her most enthusiastic students, he was soft-spoken, but he worked hard. Tears filled his eyes as he stared down at his lap, unable to meet Elodie and Reyes' worried stares. "We just assumed that she had permission to go, or else she wouldn't have gone," he mumbled, sounding unbearably guilty. "We shouldn't have let her get off the bus without checking with someone first. We were supposed to be vigilant like you taught us, Miss Ava, but we failed, and now Eliza is missing."

Ava didn't know what to say. It was enough of a wonder to realize that the boy wasn't only avoiding his long-time authority figures' attention, but hers, as well. It touched her that she had managed to make such a strong impression on the teenager in such a short amount of time, but now that he needed a word of comfort, she realized that she wasn't sure how to encourage someone so young.

Luckily, there were others present who were much more well-versed in the subject. Rey placed a comforting hand on the boy's shoulder, "You did the best that you could with the information that you had available to you," he reassured not just Ricard but the other upset teens as well. "And now, you have more information to utilize next time than you had today."

Elodie carefully schooled her features, trying her best not to let the kids know just how scared she truly was. "Rey is right, you did nothing wrong, and we all really appreciate how forthcoming you've been," she said. "Just like you said, she's probably just in a movie right now, completely unaware of the fright she's given all of us! Whatever the case, we'll handle it. You all focus on your schoolwork."

"Yes, Ms. Elodie," they replied as the fae woman pushed to her feet and ushered Ava and Reyes out of earshot.

"Rey, will you watch the kids while Ava and I go check the Arclight for Eliza?" She asked. "Gods, if she was just watching a movie this entire time...I want to be angry, but I'm just so relieved."

Ava wanted to feel the same sense of relief, but she couldn't help but note the tenseness in the shifter male's posture. She could all but feel the agitation vibrating off of him. "What's up, Reyes? You don't seem happy about the news." His tongue flickered across his lips in yet another physical sign of his distress. "The Arclight. I just realized why it rang a bell to me," he stated. "It's one of Maurice's favorite haunts."

Elodie squeezed her eyes shut and began to breathe deeply, struggling to remain calm.

"What?" Ava asked. "What does that mean?"

"Remember at the library when I told you that one of our volunteers hadn't shown up for his shift?" Elodie asked, and she nodded that she did. "We haven't seen or heard from him since."

The day was filled with blow after disappointing blow. Together, Ava and Elodie got permission to search the Arclight movie theater from top to bottom and came up empty. Eliza wasn't there. And better yet, not a single person working the ticket or concessions counters had been even remotely sober enough to remember who had been going in and out of the theater, much less a specific girl.

Elodie had just gone to speak with a manager about looking at security footage when the idea came to mind to check the alley out back. By this time, darkness had fallen, but she hoped that away from the overwhelming scents of popcorn, sweat, and pot smoke, Mia might be able to pick up a scent.

She stepped into the alley and didn't see anything out of the ordinary upon a first glance. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath in...and instantly got a hit. Ava's eyes snapped open as she realized that she could scent the young fae girl in the alleyway, and it wasn't faint, either.

Ava followed the trail to a dumpster tucked away at the far end of the alley's dead end. Fear rose up in her stomach, knowing that whatever she was about to find would be devastating. She just didn't yet know how much so. Ava took a beat to push down the bile clawing its way up her esophagus and threw open the dumpster lid, preparing for the worst. Then, she blinked rapidly in surprise, struggling to comprehend what she was seeing. "What the fuck?" She muttered, utterly consumed by the sight of Eliza, along with two others, bound and gagged and peering up at her with wide, wild eyes.

From behind her gag, little Eliza let out a muffled shriek, but it was too late. Ava heard the crack of something hard cracking against her skull, but before she even had the chance to register the pain, everything went dark.