

Chapter 137

Objetos Perdidos

With a taser pressed against the small of her back, Ava was led down and down, even further into the bowels of this seemingly never-ending maze of concrete hallways. All the while, she took stock of what she could, noting the dozens of steel doors that most likely led to rooms that were just like the one she had just been escorted from.

Holding cells.

A chill ran up Ava's spine as she was momentarily transported back into the Red Moon dungeon, where she often found herself shuffling down similarly long, dank stone hallways. Just like when she'd been locked away, Ava had no way of telling what dangers lurked around each corner. She had nearly no sense of time, either, and felt just as helpless as she did now.

Except that she wasn't helpless. Ava had to keep reminding herself that she couldn't afford to fall into the trap that was panic. She wasn't the frail, underfed, physically and emotionally stunted prisoner she had been when she'd been locked away in that detestable hole, the true source of her anxiety.

And whatever this place was, it wasn't the pit. Hell, the pit wasn't even the pit anymore. That dark period of her life was well and truly over. The memory of that hateful, desperate building razed to the ground so that a refuge of hope and healing could rise up to take its place.

That was how Ava had to think of this entire ordeal. It was just a snapshot in time, and hopefully, this time, it would be a relatively short one. Like so many other situations she always seemed to find herself embroiled in, this was just one more thing she had to get through. And she would. Because that was what she did.

This time, though, Ava had a few more people she needed to take along with her. But, just as she did everything else, she'd burn that bridge when she came to it. For now, she needed to cut her pity party short and focus on getting ready for whatever lay ahead.

Back in the holding cell, the goon escorting her with a stun gun against her back had mentioned something about wanting her to fight, and come to think of it, the man in the loafers had said something similar when she'd been a little more out of it.

As surely as if she'd pulled on a mask, a strange sense of calm settled over Ava.

They wanted her to fight? Good. She could do that.

It was difficult to make out the cacophony of sights and sounds around her as she was finally led out of a tunnel and into a large open space. They were still underground, but the thick concrete walls belied just how many people were actually in the structure with them.

There were easily a hundred people crowded around a central ring surrounded by a tall barbed, chain-link cage. The further Ava was led through the crowd, the clearer one thing became. All of these spectators? They were all human.

Sudden as a bolt of lightning, this entire stupid affair came into glaring focus. They were in a literal underground fighting ring. The disappearances of supernatural youths, many of whom were refugees and likely to go unsearched for by overworked and lazy cops, if they were even reported missing at all.

The silver suppressant finally made sense now, too. Who knew how many supernatural beings were being held in this facility. If even a few got loose, it'd bring this awful place to its knees. Injecting them with silver kept them weak and, even more so than the standard silver torques and shackles utilized by law enforcement, it kept them ill.

It had been a good twelve hours before Hank or Dana could stand, much less access their powers. But, by the time the injection had worn off enough for them to regain their senses, their powers were short to follow. That made it the perfect drug to keep their powerful captives complacent until right before they were needed.

To fight one another. For their enjoyment. And probably money, too. There was always money involved in these things.

Just then, a man in a well-tailored suit and a pair of shiny black loafers stepped into the middle of the ring.

"Ladies and gentlemen, my fellow members of the one natural species!" He called out, arms outstretched, reedy voice thick with misplaced confidence. "Tonight, I have put together a particularly entertaining bout for you. A feisty young pup who will face an epic showdown on her debut bout against our reigning champion! Please, place your bets now. Will the victor be the Underdog or the Kodiak?"

The crowd erupted as he exited the arena, and as soon as the stage was clear, Ava was shoved right on in. Her head whipped back and forth, trying to take in as much information as she could, but all she saw now was a sea of shadowy figures cheering and booing and shouting obscenities at her for no discernable reason.

A thud from the other side of the ring drew her attention to the presence of a newcomer, a man, large and brawny and covered with scars. She considered appealing to his better nature for a moment, but one glance from his furious, frustrated gaze told her that this place had already beaten it out of him.

A bell rung and her opponent wasted no time before shifting, growing, and expanding until a giant ass brown bear loomed over her on its hind legs. Ava had hardly gained her bearings before the Kodiak roared and charged at her running, for the love of the goddess, at her on its hind legs rather than dropping down to all-fours.

Besides being utterly unsettling, this gave him greater reach and maneuverability than he would have had on all-fours. Ava attempted to tuck and roll off to one side, but from his greater vantage, the bastard just turned and collapsed on top of her. Ava heard and felt several bones fracture simultaneously as twelve-hundred pounds of bear slammed on top of her.

If she had been anything other than a Were, she would be dead. As it was, it was all she could do to stay conscious. Luckily for her - sort of the massive bludgeoning sent Ava into a shock-like state rendering the aftermath of the attack all but painless. With her bell thoroughly rung, though, it was up to Mia to step in, and Ava gladly handed over the reins.

The bear shifter lost its balance and stumbled to one side as the tiny ball of girl beneath him ballooned into a fully grown She Wolf that equaled

him in size, if not mass. His center of gravity thrown off-kilter, Ava unsheathed her claws and swung blindly, feeling no sense of accomplishment when she felt fur and flesh rip beneath her fist.

She didn't want to hurt this man who was in the same situation as she was and for who knew how much longer. But, eternally stronger than her sympathy for him was her own sense of self-preservation. So, locked on to his general location, Ava swung out again, and again with her claws, her heart hurting with every connection.

Then, the bear howled in anger and pain and shifted out of her reach. It was the heavy shift in the air to her right that clued her in that he'd backed off and charged, most likely realizing how her milky, scarred eyes failed to properly track him. The jig was up; he knew she was literally running blind.

As his mass grew nearer, displacing the air around her, Ava shifted into her wolf form as she dodged, using the extra agility to carry her further. Then she turned and shifted into a human in just enough time to see him stumble, banking on her being there to absorb the momentum from his charge. He ran face-first into the fence surrounding the ring only to stumble back, his shaking his head to clear it. All the while, seeping red rivulets with every movement.

He had her on size and strength, but she clearly had him beat on speed and stamina. And, as long as she was smart, that would be all she needed. He

huffed and growled as he turned to face her, clearly ready to make another charge, but this time, Ava was ready, and she had him in her sights.

When he ran at her, Ava held her ground until the absolute last moment before shifting into a She-Wolf and jumping into the bear's face, pummeling him with her large fists, unwilling to slice into her opponent any more than she already had. As soon as he stumbled, she darted away, shifting into a wolf to gain distance before turning back into her human self to take stock of where he was.

He stumbled, falling down onto all fours, clearly rattled by the beating and wasted energy. He cast his gaze wildly around the cage before landing on her and, even from across the ring, she could see the confusion there. He knew that she was blind and couldn't figure out how the hell she'd gotten the drop on him. Clearly tiring, the next time the Kodiak charged, it was on all-fours.

Ava repeated her method of attack over and over, shifting between forms to misdirect each attack while keeping her opponent off-balance and unable to find his bearings while she pelted him with heavy-fisted strikes.

When he finally fell to his side, Ava knew it was sheer exhaustion that put him there more than any blow she could have dealt him. Nevertheless, she was the last one standing as the referee counted down and the bell tolled, announcing her the victor.

Once again, the crowd erupted into a cacophony of cheers and curses as she re-dressed, and her assigned goon came to collect her from the ring. As she was escorted from the arena, she felt eyes on her back and, looking over her shoulder, saw the man with the loafers - Easton - staring back at her with a cold and assessing smirk.

"I knew you were scrappy the way you put Fuentes on his ass!" Her, now overly chummy, captor crowed. "I put money on you. You know that? You're gonna make me a fucking fortune!"

"And what do I get out of all of this?" Ava asked with forced nonchalance.

"You get to keep breathing, for one," he sneered. "But don't you worry, life here gets a whole lot easier for winners. Even dogs get a treat for performing neat tricks."

He slapped Ava on the back, and while she thought it was meant to be good-natured, between that morning's (last night's...it was impossible to tell at this point) tasing and the beating she'd both delivered and received, the pat felt as good as a punch.

She bit back a hiss of pain as her back, shoulder, and neck proceeded to throb but kept her mouth shut. As much as she wanted to shift and eviscerate this asshole, Ava saw the writing on the wall and knew that it was in her best interest to ride this wave as far as it would take her.

As far as she could tell, the more she endeared herself to these clowns, the better her chance to get herself and the others out of here relatively unscathed. It wasn't the most detailed plan she'd ever concocted, but it was a solid foundation that she could build up as she continued to gather information.

Suddenly, her guard grabbed her arm and pulled her into a side hallway and into a door there. Every one of Ava's muscles wound tight, despite her discomfort, ready to spring into action and take this human down. Instead of attacking her, though, he flicked on a switch bathing the nondescript room in fluorescent light.

"Perk number one," he smirked. "The Lost and Found."

Ava looked around at the room that was filled with boxes and boxes of clothing, shoes, electronics, jewelry, all of it used and none of it with seemingly anything in common other than the fact that it had made its way down here. "What is all of this stuff?" Ava asked, even though she was fairly certain she already had a pretty good idea of the answer.

"Confiscated items from all of the fighters we, uh, recruit," he had nerve enough to laugh. "If you impress the big man, Easton, you get better digs, maybe even something with a view. But if you impress us, you get your pick. One item per win." He gestured for her to have at it, and she did, scanning the piles of stolen goods until her eyes landed on a pile of electronics, a familiar watch standing out in particular.

Oh, goddess! Ava couldn't believe the stroke of luck as she reached down and picked up her smartwatch, the very same one her borderline psychotic estranged mate had given her nearly a year ago.

"Don't get any ideas, sweetheart. There's no wifi down here, and even if you could get a signal this far below ground, anything with a SIM card...no longer has a SIM card. Capisce?"

Ava hid her grin as she booted on the watch and found the custom app Xavier had installed in both her cellphone and her watch. It had bothered her in passing when he'd randomly showed up in Shady Oak, but now she was grateful that Xavier's type-A personality left no stones unturned.

Careful not to alert her shadow, Ava pressed the watch's built-in panic button that instantly broadcasted her location and an SOS to Xavier, no matter the location. Hiding her own sense of smug satisfaction, Ava tucked the watch into her pocket and turned back to the goon.

"Capisce."