

CHAPTER 122

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122 Ava: Getting Stronger “Don’t push yourself too hard.” o Lucas’ voice is deeper through the phone, giving our hushed conversation in my bedroom a more sordid feeling than would be expected, given the fact that we haven’t talked about anything remotely intimate. That fated–mate tingle settles into my nether regions as he speaks. Lisa’s asleep, and Kellan is, too, taking over the couch in the living room like he does every night. “I’m not.” Trying not to wake the others, I speak in a soft murmur. “I miss you.” He sounds frustrated. Tired. Kellan said he’s been trying to track down my family. I hope he finds them soon; I just want everything to be over. Having guards everywhere I go is awful. I have yet to meet anyone new. No friends. Not even acquaintances. I don’t even get to buy things at the store, because someone is always sent to buy what I ask for. 13:41 122 Ava: Getting Stronger It’s suffocating. “Have you made any progress?” “Mmm.” His noncommittal sound gives little hope. “I will find them, Ava. You will be safe.” “I know.” “Get some sleep. It’s late.” “I will.” A yawn catches me by surprise, my jaw cracking with the force of it. “Good night, Ava.” “Good night, Lucas.” *** Somehow, despite my long hospital stay, my body has suffered no ill effects. My muscles are toned, what little excess flab I had around my belly is gone, and I breeze through most of Jericho’s workouts with little effort. The self–defense training takes a bit more work. I’ve become athletic. That doesn’t mean I’ve magically gained an ability to fight. It would be nice, though. 13:47 122 Ava: Getting Stronger Summer has passed in a haze of training, Kellan’s constant presence, and Lucas coming and going from the pack lands. Our relationship is still murky and undefined, but the fated bond within me disagrees vociferously. It yearns for him in a way that hurts almost more than his rejection. Selene remains indifferent to Lucas, though she’s avoided open hostility. It’s an improvement. I can understand, though. She, too, is frustrated by this feeling of living in a gilded cage. When Jericho suggests that Lisa and I join a training group of young shifters in the pack, I jump at the suggestion. “No.” Kellan’s refusal is immediate. “I didn’t ask you,” Jericho snaps, turning back to me. “Are you interested, girl?” “Absolutely,” Lisa says, the vehemence in her voice earning her a dark glower from the pack beta. “She can speak for you, but I can’t?” He protests in my general direction. 13:42 122 Ava: Getting Stronger “That’s because I’m saying what she wants to say, and you’re not.” Getting between them is pointless; it just goes round and round. Jericho watches me with expectation in his glower. “It would be helpful to train with a variety of people. I would even venture to say that it’s ultimately for my own safety, right?” He knows where I’m going im

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mediately; that glower lightens to a grimace that passes for a smile in the old man. “I’ll speak with the alpha, then.” Lisa struts with triumph to my side, grabbing my arm in a hug. “It’s settled, then. Even your alpha can’t argue with Jericho.” “Come along,” he grunts. “They’re in the training gym.” Being inside a sweaty gymnasium with a bunch of junior shifters doesn’t sound like a fun time, but Lisa and I follow with excitement. It’s our first real introduction to the Westwood Pack. The gymnasium isn’t a far walk, and I recognize it as the place we train during rainy days. It’s filled with at least twenty young shifters, almost all men, all sparring on the mats. Lisa clings to my arm, her 417 122 Ava: Getting Stronger fingers digging into my skin. It must be odd, as a born–human, to be surrounded by a bunch of wolves. One of the female shifters walks up to us with a respectful bow in Jericho’s direction, one hand over her heart. All the others turn and bow after she does, with the same motion. I look at Jericho in confusion, but he doesn’t acknowledge it, just staring in his signature brooding way across the crowd. “Beta Mentor.” The young woman’s voice is soft but clear. “We are honored by your presence.” Beta Mentor? My brows furrow as I glance at Jericho again. It’s a title I’ve never heard before. He doesn’t correct the girl, merely grunts. “At ease.” The tension in the room dissipates as the shifters relax their stances. The woman turns to me, her gaze curious as she looks between Lisa and me. She’s taller, with tan skin and black hair that shimmers in the light. “I am Amara, a trainer here. Welcome to the Westwood training grounds,” “Thank you.” I try to keep my voice steady despite my confusion. “My name is Ava, and this is my friend Lisa. 13:42 5/7 122 Ava; Getting Stronger We’ve been training with Jericho and thought it would be good to work with others as well.” Amara’s nose flares as she scents us, and I can sense her relax once she does so. I wonder why she was so tense to begin with. Is it because of Jericho’s presence? Or something else? “Of course.” Amara smiles, but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “We’ve heard a lot about you, Ava.” Great. I fight the tension creeping through my muscles. Rumors must have flown about my connection with Lucas, considering that even Vanessa had called me Luna at our first meeting. Still, it isn’t a good feeling to know that I’m a subject of gossip in the community. Even in Westwood, in Granite City—a large city integrated with humans—this pack is close–knit. My life is firsthand experience on how awful rumors can make living within a pack; I don’t want a repeat of my time in Blackwood. Lisa squeezes my arm in a silent show of support, and I force a smile. “All good things, I hope.” Amara’s expression is unreadable. “The Alpha’s mate is 13.42 5/7 122 Ava: Getting Stronger always a topic of interest.” Damn. Now it’s confirmed that they know. Judging by her not–quite–friendly demeanor, it’s not a good thing to have my name connected with his. And yet we aren’t even mated. Fated, sure. But I guess no one’s talking about how he rejected me. I glance at Jericho, hoping for some guidance, but he simply watches Ww.Nov@IORM.com

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