

CHAPTER 123

Lisa and I share a look before following Amara further into the gym. I can feel the eyes of the other shifters tracking our every move. Unease has my heart beating in rapid rhythm, like a frantic chicken flapping its wings. All the excitement I'd felt at meeting new people is now buried beneath the worries dashing through my mind. Do they hate me? Is their disapproval because I'm a Blackwood wolf? Do they know I can't shift? Have there been complaints about me? What have they been saying? But, of course, I don't have the answers, so I follow. behind with my mouth shut. It will be fine, Selene assures me, but she's very unconcerned about the thoughts of humans or shifters. In fact, I'm not sure she cares about anyone other than me. She isn't even fond of our fated mate. Selene snorts. Fated doesn't mean inevitable. 13:42 123 Ava: New Shifters: her Once we reach the mats, Amara turns to face us, stance relaxed but ready. It's hard not to focus on the lean muscles defined in her arms. I'd thought I was making improvement with my training, but compared to her? I look like a newborn baby, soft and squishy. "Let's start with some basic defensive moves and see where you're at." Amara launches into an explanation of a simple block and counter, demonstrating the moves with fluid grace. I focus on her words, trying to commit the steps. to memory. Then it's our turn to try. Lisa goes first, her face set in concentration as she attempts to mirror Amara's movements. It's a little clumsy, but she executes the block successfully. "Good," Amara praises. "Remember to keep your weight centered and your arm firm." Lisa nods, blossoming beneath her praise. Jericho snorts, but by some miracle manages to keep himself from saying anything terrible. I step up next, taking a deep breath to center myself. Amara nods at me to begin. 13:42 28 123 Ava: New Shifters. I move through the motions, muscle memory from Jericho's training kicking in. The block is solid, my stance steady. Amara's eyebrows raise slightly, a hint of surprise flickering across her face. "Well done," she says. "You've clearly been practicing. Next time, commit to the movement. You're hesitant, and hesitation will get you killed." "I understand." Pride surges through me as I glance toward Jericho, who watches me in continued silence. Maybe I'm not as far behind as I feared? Maybe I can hold my own here after all. We continue like that for a while, Amara showing us new moves and critiquing our form. It's challenging, sweat dripping down my back as I push myself harder, striving to perfect each technique. I have to repeat. them multiple times, and despite her initial reticence, Amara proves herself to be a dedicated teacher. Lisa and I take turns facing off against each other, putting our new skills to the test. Lisa is a quick learner, her determination making up for any shortcomings. She gets me down more often than not, but I can tell a difference in our strength. Jericho has said nothing about it—but I can feel it now. 3/8 173 Ava: 123 Ava: New Shifters I'm stronger. This is beyond training, but something else. Like my enhanced healing, and how I woke up from a three-week long coma no longer needing glasses to see. By the time Amara calls for a break, my muscles are burning and my lungs heaving. But beneath the exhaustion is a sense of accomplishment. There's definite progress, and it's exciting. Even Lisa, who's usually dead after a long day of training, bounces with more energy than usual. As I gulp down water, a prickle of awareness runs along my spine. Glancing up, I find several of the male shifters watching me with interest. It makes me want to squirm, their gazes a little to

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o intense for comfort. I look away, focusing on Lisa instead as she chatters excitedly about everything we've learned. Her enthusiasm is contagious, and I find myself smiling, the unease from earlier fading. *** The first day was a f@cking bait and switch. Jericho leaves us to Amara's tutelage, and over the nout five dove wa'ra brutalizad and hanton to the mat 123 Ava: New Shifters Lisa isn't smiling anymore, and I no longer feel pride over my improvement. If Amara ever looked at me with more than mild curiosity and distance, I would be certain she's trying to bully me out of Westwood. Instead, she's meticulous in explaining what she's teaching me and what I'm doing wrong. There's nothing, technically, to complain about. But there's just something, a subtle energy among the shifters, in their eyes and the way they speak. They are jealous, Selene opines, sounding distracted. Are you watching your trashy TV show again? Of course. I can sense her tail swishing despite our distance. It is very entertaining. Humans know how to tell a story, even if their accuracy is subpar. "Focus!" Amara shouts, and I drag my head back to the situation at hand. One of the other shifters, a younger male with a cocky swagger, is my opponent this morning. He's one of the many who watch me from the sidelines, judging every move I make. 123 Av Now Shifters I'm lacking. It makes sense, knowing they think of me as their alpha's mate. Their future Luna. Don't worry about what they think. They are all beneath you. Selene's natural arrogance is probably because of her Lycan soul; I don't know how she cares so little about how other people think of me. They are not our pack, she says, without me asking. How they think of you is inconsequential. If they have something to say, they can do it through a challenge. None of those pups is arrogant enough to challenge one who might become their future Luna. Still. It's hard to let go of a lifetime of conditioning, where knowing how your pack feels on any given day could save you from a beating—if you run fast enough. When you are strong enough, there is no need to run. Simple words from a simple view. It must be nice to be a wolf. It is, she agrees, sounding only half-interested again. A fist flving toward my face reminds me it isn't the 13:42 123 Ava: New Shifters time or place to be focused on discussions with my wolf. Giving up on any semblance of grace, I drop to the ground with a broad sweep of my leg, halting his advance. I can tell out of the corner of my eye that Amara's unimpressed with the move. I already know what she's going to say. Too flashy. The male shifter lunges at me again, undeterred. I block the first punch, but the second clips my jaw, snapping my head back. Pain explodes through my face. Shit, that hurts. My knees buckle and my stomach twists, nausea sliding in as a vicious response to the pain. I stumble back, shaking my head to clear it, setting my jaw against the urge to vomit. Breathe. You'll be fine. Selene's unconcerned but kind advice helps me power through as I stumble, shaking my head to clear it. He presses his advantage, crowding into my space with a flurry of hits. I backpedal, struggling to remember my training, to find my footing. 7/8 123 Ava: New Shifters He gets me in the ribs twice and again in the face, but at least this time I don't feel like I'm going to vomit from the pain. Focus, Ava, Selene chides in my mind. You're overthinking it. Let your instincts guide you. Comment 4 View All > R Post your first comment! Votewww.n0vε0W(0)0m.c0m

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