

CHAPTER 124

124 Ava: Surprise Invitation Easier said than done. But I try to clear my head, to let my body take over. Slipping to the side, I evade a vicious right hook. There—an opening. It's classic and obvious and it might be a trap, but I dart forward, inside his reach, and drive my elbow into his solar plexus. He grunts, doubling over. Not letting up, I grab his arm and pivot, using his own momentum to flip him over my hip. He hits the mat hard, the breath knocked out of him. For a second, I just stand there, stunned. Holy shit, did I actually just do that? A slow grin spreads across my face. "Good!" Amara calls out. "That's enough for now." We break apart, both of us panting and sweaty. I glance over at my opponent, expecting to see grudging respect or even surprise. Instead, fury contorts his face, his eyes flashing with barely contained rage. A chill runs through me. Did I just make an enemy? 13:43 < 124 Ava: Surprise Invitation Anxiety claws at my throat; I know what it means to have a pack who detests me. Even with the guards Lucas has me under, I have no faith that I'm safe if I'm hated by everyone in Westwood. I know what happens in the shadows. Before I can smooth things over, the shifter—I think his name might be Ben or something—bows, his expression smoothing into polite neutrality. "Thank you for the match," he says stiffly. Then he turns on his heel and stalks away, leaving me staring after him in confusion. Did I imagine that look? I replay the moment in my head, trying to pinpoint what I saw. But with each passing second, I grow less certain. Maybe it was just the heat of the fight, the sting of being bested. Surely he doesn't actually hate me for throwing him once... right? You did well, Selene says, her voice warm with approval. Don't let one surly pup shake your confidence. Shaking off my worries, I take a deep breath, trying to ignore the throbbing in my jaw. It reaches deep into 13.43 my car. My ribs ache every time I breathe, but I fill my lungs anyway, before consciously relaxing my body, one muscle group at a time. Selene's right. I can't control how others react to me. I'm here to train. If they want to hate me, there's little I can do about that. I just have to keep training. Improving. I'm going to get bruised, but eventually, I'll be able to give back as much as I get. Still, as I towel off and head for the showers, I can't quite shake the unease prickling down my neck, making me shiver beneath the sweat cooling on my skin. "Aval!" Lisa pops out of nowhere, which is—as far as I'm concerned—a specialty of hers. "I threw a girl called Anneliese today. She told me I'm not bad, for a human." Lisa's enthusiastic arm collides with my tender ribs as she loops our limbs together in a familiar hug. Pain lances through my side, stealing my breath for a moment. I grit my teeth, waiting for the ache to subside. 124 Ava: Surprise Invitation "Oops, sorry!" Lisa's eyes widen as she realizes her mistake. She quickly withdraws her arm from mine, looking sheepish. "You okay?" "Yeah, I'm good," I manage, straightening up with effort. The bruises throb in protest, but I ignore them. "How about you? Hanging in there?" Lisa's grin returns, undimmed. "I'm sore as hell, but it's getting better. I think they went a little easier on me today—only a couple new bruises to add to the collection." "Lucky you," I mutter, only half-joking. My whole body feels like one giant contusion. But Lisa's cheer is contagious, and I find myself smiling back at her, the knot in my chest loosening a bit. It's a relief to see her spirits lifting again after the brutal introduction to shifter training. "Oh, I almost forgot!" Lisa bounces on her toes, eyes sparkling with sudden excitement. "Guess what? We got invited to a party!" I blink at her, certain I've misheard. "A party? Us?" Skepticism colors my tone. After the chilly reception from the Westwood wolves, a party invite seems about 1343 124 Ava: Surprise Invitation as likely as a snowy Independence Day. "Yes, us!" Lisa links her arm through mine, undeterred, but this time careful not to smack against my injuries. "Chloe invited us. She said it's like a monthly thing, a chance for the younger wolves to let off some steam." Chloe. Tall, willowy, gorgeous. Green eyes, black hair, and a perfect nose. I turn red when I sweat; she does that whole glistening thing, where she just looks s@xier after a workout. I hesitate, doubt niggling at me. Is this a genuine olive branch, or some kind of setup? My experience with my birth pack has made me wary of any overtures of friendship. But Lisa looks so hopeful, her face open and guileless. She's been through a lot because of me... maybe a party wouldn't be the worst thing. A chance to feel normal for a night, to forget about the threats lurking in the shadows. Assuming we can convince Kellan to let us go, of course. "When is it?" I ask, throwing concern to the abyss. We have Kellan and multiple bodyguards. It should be fine. 13. 5/8 124 Ava: Surprise Invitation. "This Friday." Lisa gives me a pleading look, sensing my indecision. "Come on, Ava. It'll be fun! We could both use a break from all this craziness, don't you think? Maybe get to meet some people, make new friends here? We've been in limbo from the beginning. I think it's time for that to change. It'll be good for both of us." She's right. We've been training non-stop, barely a moment to breathe between sessions. As much as I'd love to

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stronger, I'm not sure how many more bruises I can take before I crack. Go, Selene urges in my mind, her tone encouraging. You've earned a night of fun. I'll keep watch, as always. Her reassurance settles it. I trust Selene to have my back, even if I can't fully trust the Westwood wolves. yet. "Okay," I agree, mustering a smile for Lisa. "Let's do it. Party on Friday." Lisa lets out a delighted squeal, squeezing my arm. "Yes! This is going to be amazing, Ava. Just you wait." Her enthusiasm buoys me as we head for the showers, chattering about what we might wear and what to expect. For a moment, the weight of my worries lifts, 13:43 6/0 < 124 Ava: Surprise Invitation pushed aside by the simple pleasure of making plans with a friend. But even as I let myself get swept up in Lisa's excitement, a small, wary part of me can't help but wonder: Is this party really the innocuous fun it seems? Or is something more sinister lurking beneath the surface? In the showers, I let the hot water pound against my aching muscles, steam rising around me in soothing clouds. Closing my eyes, I lean my head back, letting the spray hit my face. Stop worrying so much, Selene chides gently. You're allowed to have fun sometimes, you know. I know. I sigh, rolling my shoulders under the cascading water. It's just hard to turn off the paranoia, after everything. I understand. But trust that I won't let anything happen to you. And neither will Lucas, or your friend Lisa. You're not alone in this, Ava. Selene's reminder warms me more than the hot water ever could. She's right—I'm not facing these threats by myself anymore. I have people in my corner now, 13.43. 7/9 124 Ava: Surprise Invitation people who care about me. The thought bolsters me as I towel off and change into clean clothes, the prospect of the party seeming a bit less daunting. Lisa waits for me outside the locker room, practically vibrating with anticipation. "This is going to be so much fun," she gushes as we walk out into the cool evening air. "I can't wait to let loose a little, maybe have a couple drinks. I'm not sure what a shifter party usually looks like. What should we wear?" I snort, bumping her hip with mine. "Just don't go too crazy, party animal. We still have training in the morning." I've never been to one, either, but I've been at the tail end of celebrations a few times. It never ended well for me. "Ugh, don't remind me." Lisa makes a face, but it quickly dissolves into a grin. "But seriously, Ava. I'm really glad we're doing this together. I know things have been rough lately, but I'm here for you, okay? No matter what." Throat suddenly tight, I blink back the sudden sting of tears. "Thanks,/Lise. That means a lot." 13.43 124 Ava: Surprise Invitation And it does. More than I can put into words. Having Lisa's unwavering support, her friendship—it's a light in the darkness, a reminder that even in the midst of all this supernatural insanity, I'm not alone. My phone buzzes in my pocket, startling both of us. I don't get that many messages. It's usually Lucas or Clayton, and they rarely text me until the business day is over. It's only three

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