

## CHAPTER 169

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169 Ava: A Strange Meeting Confusion flickers across the stranger's face for a moment before understanding dawns. "Ah, I see. If you saw someone just now, it was likely a manifestation of your own fears. A distraction, meant to throw off anyone who might be following me." I stare at him, my mind struggling to comprehend his words. A manifestation of my fears? How is that even possible? Selene pads forward, her nose twitching as she sniffs at the stranger's feet. To my shock, her hackles remain flat, her tail giving a tentative wag. She's never reacted this way to a potential threat before. He is not a danger to us, but he is not an ally, she tells me. "What are you?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper. The stranger tilts his head, studying me with those unsettling eyes. "I could ask the same of you. Why is a witch running with the Blackwood Pack?" The word "witch" hits me like a punch to the gut, stealing the breath from my lungs. The only ones to call me that are vampires. Careful, Ava. Selene's warning echoes through my mind, even as she continues to sniff at the stranger's shoes. The stranger glances at Selene, distaste crossing his face, but he allows her to sniff. Then he glances over my shoulder. "I'm afraid we'll have to continue this conversation another time. Once you 17:30 10 AW A Kuangs Meeting have permission from my mother, that is." "Your mother?" I echo, confusion and frustration warring within me. "What are you talking about?" But the stranger is already backing away, melting into the shadows as if they were never there at all. I lunge forward, desperate for answers, but my hands close on empty air. I hesitate, torn between the desire to chase after the mysterious stranger and the knowledge that I can't just go off running. I've been kidnapped enough times that I really should have learned my lesson. Ava, stop. Selene's voice is firm, halting me in my tracks. We need to get back to the others. Kellan is coming. The sound of pounding feet reaches my ears just as Selene's warning registers. I whirl around to see Kellan bursting forth from the trees, his chest barely rising and falling despite the clear effort he's exerted to reach me. His eyes, sharp and wary, dart around the area, searching for any signs of danger. "Ava, are you okay?" His voice is tight with concern as he approaches me, nostrils flaring as he scents the air. The golden stranger's cryptic words still echo in my mind. "I thought I saw someone out here. But they're gone now." Kellan's brows furrow as he takes another deep inhale, his expression growing more perplexed by the second. "That's odd. I don't smell anyone else. Just you and Selene." 17:30 160 Ave A Stranjas Meeting Confusion swirls within me, mingling with the adrenaline still pumping through my veins. How could Kellan not detect the stranger's scent? Selene had clearly caught their smell, even if she hadn't reacted with hostility. I open my mouth, ready to explain further, but something holds me back. The stranger's parting comment about needing permission from his mother—whatever that might be—leaves me unsettled. There are too many secrets surrounding my pack. Things about Blackwood don't make sense, as though there's a cloud of bizarre conspiracy hanging over us. I wish I'd paid more attention. Living as the beta's daughter, I should know more. If I'd known how my life would turn out, I would have spent more time lingering during late-night discussions, instead of tuning people out and hiding whenever I could. Hindsight is always better, I guess. (w)wv.(n)eVe(i)wOŘM.Cem

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Frustrated with these scraps of information I'm somehow supposed to piece together, I glance at Kellan, who's looking around again, nostrils flared as he double checks. Until I have more information, it's probably best to keep this encounter to myself. "Maybe I imagined it," I say instead, shaking my head. "It's been a long day." Kellan nods, though the concern doesn't leave his eyes. It's a little insulting to know that he thinks being mistaken is more likely than thinking there's something going on that can pull the wool over his eyes, but that's something that can only be changed with time. Everyone thinks of me as the one who needs to be protected. Not someone who can protect the pack. It'll be nice if that changes one day, it will. Selene's confidence is a small boost. Resting a hand against my shoulder, Kellan glances around again. "Let's get you back to the lodge. You'll be safe there." We walk, Selene padding silently beside me. I can feel her gaze on me, knowing and expectant, but I keep my own eyes forward. As we near the lodge, Kellan clears his throat. "I think it's best if you stay inside. We'll be adding more guards. At least until we are certain no other-" I stop short, turning to face him. "Actually, I was hoping to see Vanessa. I want to visit my mother again. One more time." Surprise flickers across Kellan's face, followed by a frown. "Are you sure that's a good idea? After what happened last time?" I swallow hard, the memory of my mother's venomous words still stinging. But there's a nagging feeling in my gut, urging me to try again. Especially now, with the appearance of this mysterious stranger. He's too comfortable here in Blackwood lands. Mom might know about him, too. "I just need to see her," I say, injecting as much conviction into my 17:39 voice as I can muster, Kellan studies me for a long moment before sighing. "I let Lucas know." It isn't consent. "I'm not asking for permission, Kellan. I'm here because of her. I want to talk to her again." He continues walking in silence, probably talking to Lucas on the other end of his mental link. Eventually, he grimaces. "Let me know when you're ready. I'll drive you there." I guess Lucas told him to do what I said. Knowing that my mate isn't holding me back lifts my heart a little. even as I worry about explaining things to him. If he knows what I'm up to... There's no way he's going to be okay with it, right? Probably not. But keeping secrets isn't good, either. As we resume walking, I reach out to Selene through our mental link. We need to talk, I tell her, keeping my expression carefully neutral. Selene doesn't respond, but I can sense her agreement. She continues to pad alongside me, her silence thoughtful and heavy with the weight of our shared secret. The vision of Lisa flashes through my mind, her terrified eyes and trembling form haunting me. A shudder ripples through my body. Lisa's suffering. 510 200 AWG: A Strange MenNAE Even if that was only an illusion, there's no way she's being treated. by a queen by that insane vampire. She's hurting. She needs to be saved. I need to bring her home. Every fiber of my being screams to find her, to rescue her from the hell she's enduring. I can only hope that the disturbing vision was nothing more than a manifestation of my worst fears. Hope that it's far worse than what she's enduring now. The alternative is too unbearable to consider. Comentario Ver todos > 17:39