

## CHAPTER 23

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23 Ava: Paranoia and Secrets (IV) 23 Ava: Paranoia and Secrets (IV) I stare at Selene in shock, emotions roiling within me like a sea at storm. Searing heat flushes my skin, beads of sweat forming along my hairline. My legs tremble, the world tilting precariously, and I clutch at Selene's fur, her solid presence the only thing anchoring me. "Are you..." I swallow thickly, the words catching in my throat. "Are you my wolf?" The question seems absurd even as it leaves my lips, defying all logic and reason. And yet, as Selene preens, her gaze gleaming with an intelligence that transcends any mere dog, a hysterical giggle bubbles up from deep within me. "My wolf is a husky," I wheeze between breathless peals of laughter. "How does this even happen?" Selene's ears flatten against her skull, and she emits a low growl, her displeasure rippling through our newfound connection like a physical force. I am not a husky, her voice echoes in my mind, resolute and unyielding. The laughter dies on my lips as abruptly as it began, 1/6 23 Ava: Paranoia and Secrets (IV) and I gape at her, struggling to reconcile the reality before me. "But... you look like one." Appearances can be deceiving, my human. There's a hint of amusement in her tone now, as if she's enjoying my bewilderment. I am a wolf, through and through. This form is merely a vessel, a guise to help me blend in among your kind. My brow furrows as I study her. Nope. Still a husky. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?" The words come out harsher than I intend, tinged with a hint of accusation. If my wolf had appeared, my life wouldn't have been so terrible. And maybe, at the Gala, I wouldn't have been No. No point thinking over things that have already happened. Though I can't help glaring at my dog in accusation. Selene regards me steadily, her eyes ancient and inscrutable. You were not ready, she says simply. Your path has been a winding one, filled with obstacles and pain. But you were young, and they had too much power over you. I suck in a sharp breath. her words striking a chord 4:46 ▶ 2/0 23 Ava: Paranoia and Secrets (IV) deep within me. The weight of my past—the isolation, the rejection, the constant struggle to find my place— presses down upon me, and I sag against her, suddenly exhausted. Selene nuzzles my cheek, her warmth enveloping me like a comforting embrace. Now, you can embrace your destiny, she murmurs. You have learned that you are strong, but you are more than you know, my human. And I will be by your side every step of the way, guiding you toward the path you were always meant to walk. I pat her fur, feeling the connection between us, marveling at its existence. I realize now that it's what's been helping me get through it all. I can even feel how it's a wall sheltering me from the pain of rejection. But more importantly— "Selene," I whimper, as pain shoots through my abdomen. I'm on fire. "Why does this hurt?" Strength comes with a roar, and weakness comes with a whimper, Selene says, like that means anything at all. "That doesn't explain anything," I wheeze between the worst cramps I've ever felt in my life. 14:46 36 23 Ava: Paranoia and Secrets (IV) Selene stands and trots away a few paces, looking behind her. Get up, little cub. We have a long way to go. I groan. "Are you serious right now? I can't move. I'm just going to die here for a little while. Why'd you take me so far from home?" There is a place we need to be, she explains, and I can hear the patience in her words. Come now. I push to my feet with a groan, swaying with every step. "We should have taken an Uber." Not for this. She stays just out of reach, leading me somewhere. It isn't far now. I follow Selene's lead, every step a torturous effort as pain lances through my abdomen. Sweating, vision blurring—it feels impossible. But Selene's steady presence urges me forward. The trees seem to close in around us, casting eerie shadows across our path. Selene navigates the darkness with ease, her lithe form weaving through the undergrowth with a grace that belies her apparent husky exterior. na That when I think I can go no further the tread nort to 14.46 — 4/6 23 Ava: Paranoia and Secrets (IV) reveal a tiny clearing. The canopy above allows just a glimpse of the night sky. With a groan, I collapse onto a soft carpet of moss and fallen leaves, my body trembling. The pain intensifies, threatening to consume me from within. I curl into a ball, whimpering. Selene settles beside me, her warmth a comforting presence. "What's happening to me?" I rasp, my voice strained and hoarse. Selene's eyes gleam in the dim light. You are becoming, she murmurs. I grit my teeth, riding the waves of agony that wrack my body. Every fiber of my body feels as though it's being torn asunder, only to be remade anew. Sweat soaks my clothes, my hair plastered to my skin. Focus on my voice, she commands, her tone gentle. Obeying her words, I cling to the sound of her voice, allowing it to anchor me as the world around me dissolves into a haze of pain and disorientation. The stars above blur and spin, the trees swaying in a dizzying dance. Then just when I think I can bear no more, the agony 576 23 Ava: Paranoia and Secrets (IV) reaches a crescendo, a blinding flash of white—hot anguish that steals my breath away. And in that moment, something within me... shifts. Realizing what it is, I burst upright as soon as the pain begins to fade. I hold out my hands in excitement, holding out my hands. Fur! Claws! But no. I'm still me. Chipped coral nail polish, a burn on my right index finger from cooking, and skin that was once pale and has finally achieved a light golden hue from the sun. My shoulders slump. "I didn't shift." Of course not. How can you shift when I'm not within you? Selene tilts her head at me curiously. Now, dig. Comment@www.NoVellworm.com

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