

CHAPTER 64

www.novelworm.com

64 Ava: Homecoming (VI) Hot water scalds my hands as I scrub dishes in mindless monotony. Anger. Fear. Despair. They all churn together in a toxic mix that threatens to drown me. I have to stay strong, stay focused. Alpha Renard has made his intentions clear. The plates clatter against each other as I rinse them, the sound almost therapeutic in its familiarity. This is what my life has been reduced to—cleaning up after my family, tiptoeing around their expectations, their rules, their control. A mere shadow in my own home. Muted voices drift in from the other room, and it's impossible not to overhear the tense exchange between Phoenix and my father. "...even more reports of rogues crossing the border," Phoenix growls, his voice laced with anger. "We can't let them encroach on our territory." My father's response is quieter, but no less stern. "Have you confirmed the sightings? This has to be done carefully, or else the Council can intervene." 64 Ava: Homecoming (VI) "We can't afford to be complacent," Phoenix snaps. What does the Council have to do with rogues? Every pack has the right to deal with rogues as they wish. My confusion has me straining my ears to hear more. "Easy, son." My father's tone is placating, but there's an undercurrent of steel beneath it. "Just handle this discreetly. As long as we're only touching the rogues, no one can do anything. They're just learning from our game. As long as there's no evidence, the Council can't touch us." "That means the Council can't touch them, either," Phoenix growls. "All in due time. We just have to wait a little longer, and everything will be set." "It would have been better if Jessa had managed to stay there." "She didn't, so there's little point in worrying about it." Phoenix scoffs, and I can practically see the contemptuous twist of his lips. "Westwood sent her back as a challenge. Lucas is getting bolder. We should respond." 12:44 2/8 64 Ava: Homecoming (VI) My heart stutters at the mention of that name, memories of intense golden eyes and searing touches flooding my senses. Lucas. If I can somehow get word to him, would he...? It's possible. He's sorry for how he treated me. But are his apologies enough to put my hopes on him for an escape plan? Either way, it's better than relying on Phoenix. "That's the least of our concerns right now," my father rumbles. "We need to focus on securing the borders." There's a pause, and then Phoenix speaks again, his voice low and dangerous. "What about the Aspen Pack? You don't think they're involved in this somehow? Isn't it odd that Ava was found there, right after Lucas was seen with her in the garden?" My breath catches in my throat, and I strain to hear my father's response, my hands stilling in the soapy water. They knew about that? Is that why they suddenly began looking for me? To use me against him? "Westwood and Aspen get along well" Dad says grimly. 12:44 3/8 64 Ava: Homecoming (VI) "But we need to keep Ava with us. She's our card to neutralize Aspen. Once she's mated to the alpha, it will lend legitimacy to our petition." A knot forms in my stomach. There are too many eyes between Blackwood and Westwood to ever reach Lucas, and even Clayton isn't an option. More, they're planning the mating between me and Alpha Renard. "Aspen can't move without the Council's approval. Because Ava is our pack, we can argue that Aspen kidnapped her. It's easy enough to neutralize them as a threat. So keep your focus on Westwood, and don't worry about them." *** I'm surprised to see Jessa lounging on the couch the next morning when I venture downstairs. The house is eerily quiet, devoid of the usual bustle of my family's presence. It's unsettling, especially considering the events of last night. Jessa doesn't even glance up from her phone as I approach, her fingers tapping away at the screen with a single-minded focus. I hesitate, unsure of how to proceed. 12.44 4/8 < 64 Ava: Homecoming (VI) I take a deep breath and settle onto the couch near her, careful to maintain a respectful distance. "Hey, Jess," I venture, my voice sounding too loud and unnatural. "How have you been?" She doesn't respond immediately, and for a moment, I wonder if she even heard me. But then, with a sigh, she lowers her phone and turns to face me, her blue eyes assessing. "Fine," she says, her tone clipped. "What do you want, Ava?" The question catches me off guard, and I blinwww.n@vêlworm.com

Updates...www.novelWorm.com

, trying to formulate a response. What do I want? I want to be free of this suffocating house, this oppressive pack. I want to find my way back to the life I've built for myself, to the people who have become my family. But I can't say any of that, not to Jessa. Not when I don't know what she's thinking. Is it possible she, too, worries about Phoenix's standing in the pack? Instead, I shrug, aiming for nonchalance. "Nothing, really. Just wanted to chat, I guess. It's been a while since we've had a chance to talk, just the two of us." Jessa's gaze narrows, and I can practically see the gears turning in her head as she tries to decipher my motives. 12 5/8 64 Ava: Homecoming (VI) "Since when do you want to talk to me?" she asks, her voice laced with suspicion. I force a smile, hoping it doesn't look as strained as it feels. "I know we haven't always seen eye to eye, eye, but we're still sisters, aren't we? I just thought..." I trail off, unsure of how to finish that sentence. Jessa studies me for a long moment, her expression unreadable. Then, with a shrug, she turns her attention back to her phone. "Whatever. I'm busy, Ava. If you want to talk, find someone else." The dismissal stings, but I try not to let it show. Instead, I glance around the room, noting the absence of the usual guards. It's strange, being left alone with Jessa like this. Almost as if... Almost as if this is a chance. A chance to escape, to find my way back to the life I've fought so hard to build. But just as I think that, I dismiss the possibility. If it's anything, it's a test. I can't get any suspicions up right now. "It's nice to have you around instead of the other shifters" I offer tving another olive branch. 12:44 4/6 64 Ava: Homecoming (VI) Jessa ignores me. "I heard Dad and Phoenix talking last night," I say, watching out of the side of my eye as her fingers slow, then still. "They said I'm going to be mated to Alpha Renard." She looks at me, her face blank. "So? You should be grateful to have such an honor as a defect." I lower my eyes, but keep her in my peripheral vision. "I'm worried about Phoenix. If I'm really this omega they keep talking about, what if I give Alpha Renard an heir? Wouldn't that be bad for Phoenix? For us?" Jessa watches me for a long time, before returning her attention to the phone in her hands. "Don't think so much, Ava." I let out a little sigh, but inside, I feel the faint stirrings of triumph. There's a slight quaver in her voice, and she's pushing on her screen harder than she had been just a minute earlier. Yeah, Phoenix and Jessa have always been close. If I want to escape, I'm going to need them to be on my side. 12:54 7/8 65 Ava: Homecoming (VII)– Season 1 END

www.novelWorm.com