## **CHAPTER 67**

67 Ava: Their Plans (I) Every day that passes is a slight uptick in my stress level. Mom and Dad are never home, busy with something. I haven't seen Phoenix since the day we spoke in the kitchen. And Jessa has been less than receptive over talking about future plans with me. The fragile alliance feels like it's crackling away beneath my fingers, like old paper that disintegrates with the faintest touch. So when Phoenix comes by without Jessa around, dismissing my guards, my heart jumps into my throat. It's hard to swallow the water I'd just sipped out of one of mom's coffee mugs. "Hi." "Hey." Phoenix looks me over, rubbing his left brow in a mannerism that's new to me. "They're planning the mating ceremony for next week. Mom's in charge." "Oh." What else is there to say? We all knew it was coming. It's odd how peace flows through me at the 12:40 1/7 67 Ava: Their Plans (1) announcement. It's like my body understands that I'm either going to escape or die trying, because there's no way in hell I'll ever let Alpha Renard near me like that. "Have they sent you to the healer yet?" I shake my head. "I haven't heard a word about any of this." Phoenix sits at the kitchen table, so I sit across from him, setting my glass of water aside. The tightness in my throat makes it too hard to swallow. "How much do you know about the pack situation, Ava?" My lips quirk up into a mocking smile. "How often do you think people inform me about anything, Phoenix?" He nods slightly, acknowledging my words but otherwise unmoved by them. It's just a clear indicator that he's only here for his own interests. Despite everything, he's not here to save his sister. He's not here to care about me, or what happens to me. He just wants to keep his position safe. My heart hurts, even around the walls I've built to keep it safe. < 67 Ava: Their Plans (1) "Alpha Renard sent Jessa to the Westwood territory, under the guise of attending college. His plan was for her to mate with the beta or another high-ranking shifter in the pack, but Westwood sent her back home, closing the boundary to all shifters from our pack." I shift uncomfortably in my seat. Was this before or after Lucas suddenly decided to come to me with apologies? All of his actions feel somehow tainted. Was it all pack politics? But Phoenix doesn't give me a moment to process as he continues, "Westwood's been accusing us of attacking their wolves at the border, but all their investigation has proven is that they're being attacked by rogue wolves." Ah. Now the conversation between him and Dad makes sense. "Now, we have rogues encroaching on our side, attacking our scouts. The Council's kept their paws off for now as there is no clear evidence of a war brewing between each pack." His brown eyes, cold like Dad's, bore into mine. "That's what's kept peace here so far. 12:46 3/7 < 67 Ava: Their Plawww.ño(v)elwo(r)m.co@

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ns (1) This has been going on for a year or more, and we have managed to avoid any large–scale conflicts between either packs." I nod to indicate that I understand, even as I'm confused he's telling me all of this. "But Westwood's aggressiveness has increased since the Lunar Gala. Why?" My entire body stiffens. "We have reports that you were with him in the garden, and he left in anger." What did you tell him, Ava?" I shake my head. "Nothing. I didn't know who he was, and he was flirting with me. Once he found out my name, he left." I hide the rest of the truth. There are things none of these people need to know. Phoenix leans back with a sigh. "We had reports that Lucas had been sniffing around, trying to get information on you. Once we heard that, we put every pack in the Northwestern Territories on alert for you. We needed to find you and see what your connection was." That explains the sudden shifter presence in < 67 Ava Their Plans (1) Cedarwood. They must have been out searching. The ones in the Novel Grind watching me must have been trying to see if I was masking my scent-either that, or I'm paranoid. "Something must have happened in the garden, Ava. When you first disappeared, the alpha told us to leave you alone, that searching for you would make us look weak." Right. That's why my family didn't look for me. I want to roll my eyes at the blatant gaslighting, but I just keep listening, wanting to know more. "But when one of our scouts let us know about. your interaction with the Westwood alpha after he kicked Jessa out of the territory, things changed, and Alpha Renard developed a keen interest in bringing you back. I was in charge of it all. I even went to find your friend at your little job, and she didn't know anything." Go, Lisa! "Alpha Renard is convinced that you've consorted with our enemies, Ava. He thinks they know about our plans. Are you sure you haven't let anything slip?" I shake my head again, in firm denial. "I didn't tell him 5/7 67 Ava: Their Plans (1) anything, Phoenix. I never got a chance. The moment he realized who I was, he turned into a different person." That much is truth, without any alteration whatsoever. Phoenix must be able to smell it on me, because he relaxes. "Alpha Renard assumed you'd escaped into Westwood territory. When even Jessa couldn't find any evidence of you there, we branched out, asking other clans to help find you. The plan was to use you to approach the Council and tell them that you were taken from us without approval, in order to begin the war with the Council on our side. Are you following?" "Yes." The blood in my veins is sluggish and cold. "I was going to be a scapegoat." "Yes. Alpha Renard would have made sure you told the Council what he wanted you to say." I close my eyes, swallowing hard against the obstruction in my throat. Tears want to flow, but I fight them back. "I would have been a prisoner here. Tortured if necessary. That's what you're saying, right?" "Right. And I was tasked to find you." 12:46 6/7 < 67 Ava: Their Plans (1) So he approved of it. "And–Mom, Dad, Jessa? They all know?" "Yes." His answers are clipped and cold, as though speaking to a stranger. Not to his baby sister. It isn't like I'm surprised by their disdain. It's just that I didn't realize how deep it went. I thought nothing would top the day he walked in after Todd Mason had forced me onto my knees. I was wrong. "Why are you telling me this now?" Comment 1 View All > A Leave the first comment for this chapter. Vote 12 1

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