

CHAPTER 95

A light tapping at my door pulls us out of our giggling. “Come in,” I call out, wiping the last of my tears away. I’m sure my eyes are red and puffy, but I can’t find it in me to care. Dr. Beaumont steps into the room, her smile gentle as she takes in the sight of us huddled together on the bed. “Well now, isn’t this a pretty picture?” For the past few days, Dr. Beaumont has been thorough in my care. I’ve come to enjoy her visits, even if they’re just for work. She’s respectful to both nurses and patients, and doesn’t treat me with the awed deference like some of the nurses do. Everyone knows I’m their alpha’s fated mate, even the humans. Few seem to understand that we aren’t in a relationship, though. It is interesting to see how many humans think of Lucas as ‘their’ alpha, though. I’m used to a distinct difference between shifter and human, even in the Aspen territory. Here, there are humans working alongside shifters, and they even interact with each other. Just yesterday I heard a shifter nurse talking to a human doctor about her mate’s desires for shifted s@x—something I’ve known about but never heard talked about—and the human hadn’t been scandalized. She’d even asked questions. Maybe she watches the same show Selene does. TV is great for normalizing things. “Lisa, this is Dr. Beaumont. She’s been taking care of me.” I introduce them, watching as they shake hands. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lisa.” Dr. Beaumont’s eyes twinkle. “I must say, a little company has really helped our Ava here look a lot better.” That has to be a lie. My eyes are still puffy and swollen, and hurt a little when I blink. Still—having Lisa here, - being able to cry, and talk, and laugh... It’s helped. A lot. “Thank you for taking such good care of her,” Lisa says earnestly, like an older sister more than a friend. Dr. Beaumont chuckles. “Oh, it’s my job. And even if it wasn’t...” She leans in conspiratorially. “No one tells 13:20 218 95 Ava Lisa (II) Lucas no when it comes to Ava’s care. She’s in the best hands here.” He’s been overseeing my treatment and making sure I have the best of everything, and it’s not a secret. Still, hearing it stated so plainly is embarrassing. “He really cares about you, you know,” Dr. Beaumont continues, her voice softening. “I’ve never seen him so worried.” Part of me is thrilled at the idea of Lucas caring so much. But another part, the part that’s still raw and hurting from everything that’s happened, is terrified of what that means. “I know,” I manage finally. “I just... it’s complicated.” Dr. Beaumont nods in understanding. “Fated mate bonds always are. But from what I’ve seen, the two of you have something special. Don’t let fear hold you back from exploring that.” Lisa squeezes my hand, offering silent support. She knows better than anyone how conflicted I am about Lucas, about everything. “Well, I just wanted to check in and see how you were doing” Dr. Beaumont straightens slinining back into 3/8 C 95 Ava: Lisa (II) her professional demeanor. “Your vitals are perfect. I’m just here to check your wounds again. Without knowing the rate of healing acceleration, we’ll have to check you at least twice a day to make sure everything’s doing well. Sometimes, the wound heals too quickly and traps infection within, causing abscesses. It shouldn’t be an issue with your antibiotics, but still something to keep an eye on.” She slides on a pair of disposable purple gloves as she speaks. Lisa settles into the recliner by my bed, giving us space, but watching with worry creasing her brows. The doctor carefully peels back the dressings covering my neck and shoulders, her brow furrowing in surprise as she examines the skin beneath. “Well, would you look at that,” she murmurs, tracing a finger along what I assume must be a scar. “These have healed remarkably well, Ava. They’re a bit raised and discolored, but that’s to be expected with such deep wounds. They might heal completely, but one can never tell with shifter wounds.” The idea of carrying these scars, these permanent reminders of what Todd did to me, make

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s my skin crawl. I don’t want any mark of him on my body. 95 Ava: Lisa (II) Dr. Beaumont moves on to check the wounds on my abdomen, her eyebrows climbing even higher. “And these are nearly healed as well. At this rate, I’d say you’ll be fully recovered by tomorrow.” She glances up at me, curiosity bright in her eyes. “Is this normal for you, Ava? Do you usually heal this quickly? I would say that your rate of healing was normal for a human until today.” I shake my head, the truth hidden behind my denial. “No,” I admit softly. “I’ve always healed normally.” There’s no reason to explain Selene’s existence to anyone here. I still haven’t spoken to Lucas about her, and I don’t feel the urge to. Maybe in the future, if we can get over our past. But we aren’t there yet. The doctor’s face clouds with confusion, but she doesn’t press the issue. “Well, regardless, this is excellent news. You’re well on your way to being discharged.” Lisa perks up at that, a grin spreading across her face. “That’s great! You can come stay with me, Ave. Your overprotective alpha has me in a nice apartment 13.29 – 05 Av thus 710 instead of a hotel. It’ll be great!” Dr. Beaumont hesitates, glancing between us. “You’ll have to take that up with Kellan, I’m afraid. He’s in charge of Ava’s security.” Lisa doesn’t miss a beat, whipping out her cell phone. and dialing Kellan’s number. I can only watch, my heart in my throat, as she launches into her request. “Hey, Kellan? It’s Lisa. Listen, can you bring a few things for Ava in the morning? She’s going to need a cell phone, some clothes, and oh! Pepper spray. Definitely pepper spray.” Even from across the room, I can hear Kellan’s confused voice. “Pepper spray? Why would she need-” “Because,” Lisa cuts him off, exasperation dripping from her tone, “I don’t need anyone sniffing around and causing issues, okay? Just trust me on this. Girls need pepper spray.” She gives me a stern look. I’m not going to argue with her. It would have come in handy recently, on a few occasions. There’s a long pause, and then Kellan’s voice again, still sounding baffled. “Ava will have guards with her at all times Lisa She won’t need nener soray There are 95 Ava: Lisa (II) already guards stationed all over her hospital wing and by her door.” That’s news to me. Then again, I haven’t left my room -ever. Even when I was encouraged to go on a hallway walk, I refused and paced in my room instead. Guards. Of course I have guards. Because even now, even here, I’m not really free. I’m still a prisoner, just in a gilded cage instead of a dingy cell. Lisa argues with Kellan for a few more moments, but I tune out their words, my mind reeling. Dr. Beaumont, perhaps sensing the rising tension, quickly makes her escape. “Well, this conversation is above my pay grade,” she jokes weakly, edging toward the door. “I’ll get your - discharge papers ready, Ava. You should be good to go after breakfast tomorrow.” And then she’s gone, leaving me alone with Lisa and the weight of my new reality pressing down on my chest. Guards. Constant surveillance. No privacy, no freedom. Is this really what my life has come to? Trading one form of captivity for another? 13 95 Ava: Lisa (II) +37 I close my eyes, fighting back the sudden sting of tears. I should be happy. I’m alive, I’m safe, I’m surrounded by people who care about me. But all I feel is trapped, already suffocated by the expectations and obligations that come with being Lucas’s mate. I don’t want guards. I don’t want to be watched and monitored and controlled. I just want to be normal, to live my life on my own terms. To find me. I managed that at Cedarwood, and I was happy there. C

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