

## CHAPTER 97

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97 Ava: Life in Westwood (II) “Ava, Lisa, this is Jericho. He’s one of our most experienced enforcers and will be overseeing your training.” Kellan’s introduction hangs in the air as I take in the man before me. Jericho’s weathered face is a tapestry of scars, each one a story etched into his skin. His eyes, a piercing blue, seem to see right through me, assessing and calculating in equal measure, his scarred lip curling in disdain. I force myself to stand tall, to meet his stare head–on. “These are the whelps I’m meant to train? They look like they’d snap in a stiff breeze.” Kellan’s jaw tightens. “Jericho, mind your tongue. Ava and Lisa are under the Alpha’s protection. You will treat them with respect.” Jericho snorts, a harsh sound in the tense air between us. The shifter’s lip curls, exposing yellowed teeth. “Respect is earned, not given. They live or die by their 12.31 O <97 Ava: Life in Westwood (II) own strength, not mine. If they can’t handle it, that’s not my problem.” “They’re under our Alpha’s protection,” Kellan grits out again, his patience clearly fraying. “You just need to train them. Help them learn to defend themselves.” The shifter snorts, a harsh, derisive sound that sets my teeth on edge. “Defend themselves? Look at them, barely more than pups. Soft. Weak.” He spits the words. like they’re poison on his tongue. “What’s the point? They’ll be dead within a week out there.” Kellan takes a step forward, his posture radiating menace. “Let me make this clear,” he says, his voice low and dangerous. “Ava and Lisa’s wellbeing is of the utmost importance to Alpha Lucas. If anything happens to them under your watch, you’ll answer to him directly. Do you understand?” For a moment, the shifter looks like he might argue, his scarred face twisting with disdain. But then he shrugs, a casual roll of his shoulders that does nothing to dispel the tension crackling in the air. “Fine. But the Alpha should have better priorities. A real leader doesn’t waste time coddling weaklings.” 13:31 97 Ava: Life in Westwood (1) Kellan opens his mouth to retort, but Jericho cuts him off with a sharp gesture. “Enough. Leave the girls to me. I’ll whip them into shape.” With a last warning look, Kellan turns on his heel and stalks away, leaving Lisa and I alone with our new mentor. Jericho eyes us appraisingly, his gaze lingering on my still–healing wounds. “Looks like you’ve seen some action already,” he grunts, something like approval in his tone. “Good. Means you might just survive what’s coming.” Lisa shifts uneasily beside me, her hand finding mine and squeezing. I glance at her, seeing my own. apprehension reflected in her eyes. Whatever training Jericho has in store for us, it’s not going to be pleasant. “But then, nothing about my life has been pleasant lately. I squeeze Lisa’s hand back, drawing strength from her presence. We’ll get through this together. I meet Jericho’s gaze head–on, my chin lifting in silent challenge. “We’re ready,” I tell him, my voice steady despite the fear coiling in my gut. “Teach us how.” He circles us slowly, his gaze raking over every inch of ▯ Avs Life in Westwood (1) our bodies like he’s looking for weak spots to exploit. I feel exposed, vulnerable in a way that makes my skin crawl. “So,” he says finally, his voice a rough rasp. “You’re the ones the Alpha thinks are worth protecting. Can’t say I see it myself, but orders are orders.” He stops in front of me, his eyes boring into mine with an inte

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nsity that steals my breath. “You ever even thrown a punch, girl?” I lift my chin, refusing to be cowed. “I’ve done what I had to do to survive,” I say, my voice steady despite the fear thrumming through my veins. “I’m not afraid to fight.” He barks out a laugh, harsh and mocking. “Fighting ain’t just about throwing fists, girl. It’s about instinct, about being willing to do whatever it takes to come out on top.” His gaze flicks to Lisa, dismissive. “And you? You look like you’d faint at the sight of blood.” Lisa flushes, her hands trembling at her sides. But she meets his stare head–on, her voice only wavering slightly as she says, “I may not be a fighter, but I’m not weak. I’ll do whatever it takes to protect the people I care about.” 97 Ava: Life in Westwood (II) The shifter’s lips twist into a cruel smirk. “Pretty words, but they don’t mean shit out there. In the real world, it’s kill or be killed. And right now, I wouldn’t bet on either of you lasting more than a minute in a real fight.” I swallow hard, my mouth gone dry. He’s right, of course. For all my bravado, I’m woefully unprepared for the realities of this new world I’ve found myself in. But I refuse to let him see my fear, to let him think he’s won before we’ve even begun. “Then teach us,” I say, my voice ringing with a conviction I don’t quite feel. “Show us how to survive. We’re not afraid to learn, to do whatever it takes.” The shifter stares at me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then he nods, a single, sharp jerk of his chin. “Alright then, girl. Let’s see what you’re made of.” He takes a step back, his posture shifting into a loose, ready stance. “Come at me with everything you’ve got. And don’t hold back, because I sure as hell won’t.” Lisa looks at Jericho with her face scrunched up, her confusion clear. “You mean, just... attack you? Right now? Just like that?” 10.31 5/7 C 97 Ava: Life in Westwood (1) Jericho’s scarred lip twists in a sneer. “You expecting an engraved invitation, girl? In the real world, your enemies won’t wait for you to be ready. They’ll strike hard and fast, without warning.” My heart pounds as he turns his piercing gaze on me. “You think you got what it takes, Little Missy Ava? Then prove it. Come at me with everything you’ve got.” “I’ve only ever defended myself.” And even that was a recent development. “Then now is a good time to learn. Come on, girls! Don’t lollygag about. This is your life at stake. Come at me!” Lisa charges at the shifter with a determined yell. He sidesteps her easily, grabs her arm, and uses her own momentum to send her sprawling to the ground. “Lisa!” I cry out as she shrieks in pain. Jericho turns to me, waiting, an expectant sneer on his scarred face. My mind races, trying to analyze the best approach. I lunge at him, feinting left before swinging right. But he’s too fast. In a blur of motion, he has me pinned face–down on the mot my arm uranohad hahind mu T 97 Ava: Life in Westwood (II) back. “Again,” he grunts, releasing me. “Get up. Both of you.” Comment 0 R Leave the first comment for this chapter. Vote 12 Fandom Swipe left to continue > 2

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