

CHAPTER 98

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98 Ava: Life in Westwood (III) After several rounds of Jericho demanding we attack him, only for us to end up on the ground with new bruises every time, I collapse onto the dusty ground, chest heaving, lungs screaming for air. Sweat pours down my face, stinging my eyes. Lisa lies beside me, equally drenched, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Jericho looms over us, his scarred face impassive. "Pathetic. You'd be dead the moment a wolf looked at you wrong." I glare up at him, too winded to retort. He jerks his head, motioning for us to rise. "On your feet. Follow me." -Somehow, I stagger upright, my muscles trembling with exhaustion. Lisa groans as she pushes herself up, her face flushed and hair plastered to her forehead. Jericho leads us to the track, his stride purposeful. "You're so weak, you'd probably break your necks running through the woods. From now on, five miles around this track every morning." I gape at him, but he's not finished. He rattles off a list 19:31 O 112 98 Ava: Life in Westwood (III) of exercises—push—ups, sit—ups, something called burpees, some lunges that I'm not entirely certain how to do without a visual—that we'll be doing daily to build strength. Lisa makes a noise of despair beside me. Jericho's piercing gaze finds mine. "Alpha Westwood will be gone at least another month dealing with the Blackwood situation. Don't expect him to swoop in and save you." Something hot and defiant rises in my chest. I lift my chin, meeting his stare head—on. "I wouldn't want to be saved anyway." For the first time, a hint of a smile tugs at Jericho's lips. "You've got guts, girl. Maybe there's hope for you yet." -Lisa stares at the track, dejection dripping from her pores. "How many times do we have to go around for five miles?" I shrug, just as clueless. "No idea." Jericho scoffs, his lip curling in disdain, I'm starting to think that's his default look. "Unbelievable. You two are so sheltered you don't even know how to track 217 C 98 Ava Life in Westwood (III) distance." It's not like I've had much opportunity for extracurricular sports, what with being locked away in a pack that didn't see any point in allowing any enrichment in my life. I bite my tongue, knowing any excuses will only earn me another scathing remark. Lisa, however, seems to have no such reservations. She plants her hands on her hips, glaring at Jericho. "Well, excuse us for not being born with an innate knowledge of track and field. How about you enlighten us instead of standing there judging?" For a moment, I think Jericho might actually snap at her. But then he barks out a laugh, shaking his head. —"Fair enough. Twelve laps around this track is roughly five miles. And before you ask, yes, I expect you to I keep count." I eye the track, the red rubber seeming to stretch on forever. Twelve laps. My legs ache just thinking about it. But I straighten my spine, determined not to show weakness. If this is what it takes to become strong enough to protect myself, then so be it. 13.32 98 Ava Life in Westwood (III) "Okay," I say, my voice steadier than I feel. "Twelve laps it is." Jericho nods, something akin to approval flickering in his eyes. "Good. Now get to it. I'll be timing you." Lisa groans, but falls into step beside me as we start our first lap. The sun be@ww.Ñov@1WóRm.COМ

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ww@.môve@worm.c@M

ats down on us, the air thick with humidity, but I push through the discomfort. Each step, each breath, is a reminder that I'm alive, that I survived. Stronger. I want to be stronger. I don't want to depend on anyone for rescue, ever again. —"I'm dying" Lisa moans, even though we've gone maybe five feet. I suck in a breath, my lungs burning as they expand to hold in what little air I manage to gather. "Come on, Lise. We've got this." "This is inhuman," she pants, her face flushed. A laugh escapes me, turning into a wheeze. Too much oxygen used not enough coming in. "Shifters aren't 98 Ava Life in Westwood (III) human, anyway." Lisa groans, and we both fall silent, the only sound our labored breathing and the pounding of our feet against the track. I stumble. She stumbles. It's inelegant and I'm starting to think she's right about us dying. I already want a water break, and it's only been a minute since our feet hit the track. Jericho's voice booms from behind us. "You call that running? My grandmother could outpace you, and she's been dead for a decade." My teeth grind together and I push myself harder, gasping at the effort. Jericho catches up, his strides effortless. "Breathe from your diaphragm, not your chest. And land on the balls of your feet, not your heels. It'll make it easier." The nasty glare I give him does nothing, because he doesn't even look at me to appreciate it. I adjust my breathing and stride, surprised to find it does help. Beside me, Lisa does the same. "I think I'm starting to like him," I mutter. 13-32 617 98 Ava: Life in Westwood (III) Lisa snorts. "I hate him. But... I think he might actually be good deep down." A laugh bursts from me, and Jericho's head snaps in our direction. "Stop playing around like a bunch of girls and run like men!" "I am a girl!" Lisa yells, indignant. Jericho's roar echoes across the track. "You're nothing more than a recruit, so shut your yap and run!" Lisa's jaw drops, but she clamps it shut and focuses on the track ahead. I hide a smile, pushing through the burn in my muscles. Jericho may be an asshole, but he's an asshole who's going to make us stronger. -Every time we slow down, here's there to bitch at us until we bring up the pace. Every time we stumble, he's there to laugh. Every time we stop, he's there to scream in our ears. So we run. "Keep your arms at a ninety degree angle," Jericho barks as we round the track again. My lungs burn, a 13 12 08 Ava: Life in Westwood (III) stitch in my side screaming with every stride. "I can't," Lisa wheezes beside me, her face beet red. "I'm dying." "Did I ask for your opinion, recruit?" Jericho's voice cracks like a whip. "Elbows in, Blackwood. You're not a chicken." "Blackwood?" she yelps. "I'm human! My name is Lisa Randall!" "Even worse!" I grit my teeth so hard my jaw aches. Sweat pours down my face, stinging my eyes. Every muscle in my body feels like it's on fire. "I changed my mind," Lisa pants, each word coming out .in a ragged gasp. "He's not good deep down. He's the f@cking devil." Comment 5 View All > R Post your first comment!, Vote 12 Fandom Swipe left to continue >Ww@.n@velwORm.coM