

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted #191 - Read Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted 191

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191 Ava: Mom's Legacy (IV)

Vanessa's visit is a welcome distraction from Selene's refusal to come out from beneath the bed.

She's searched thoroughly, even her bag of medical supplies, before Marcus allows her to step foot into my room, as if she hasn't been one of my bigge

"Looks like security's been upgraded," she says with a laugh. "I owe Vester dinner."

"Dinner?" Watching as she slides the blood pressure cuff over my arm, I smile faintly. "Did you guys have a bet?"

"We always have a bet going. I usually win. Uncross your legs and relax your arms."

A quick check of all my vitals has her nodding in approval. "Still doing good. Did you get any check-ups done while you were back on pack lands?"

"Nope."

"Of course you didn't." She snaps my file closed with a sigh. "Kellan should have thought about it while you were there, but with. everything going on... M

The entire pack is in an uproar. I've barely seen Lucas in two days.

"They have the entire Council coming. Even Clayton. Kellan's here to take over for the duration of their emergency session," I explain,

not sure how much Vester's told her.

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"So I've heard. Open your mouth." Using her tongue depressor to clear her field of view, she inspects the back of my throat with a soft hum. "Your tonsils

"I have no idea." Of course, my mouth is open with what looks like a popsicle stick holding down my tongue, so it comes out more like, "A-ha-ho- ihea."

Yes, Selene offers up from her place beneath the bed, as Vanessa finishes violating my mouth with her

ressor.

After swallowing a few times and moistening my mouth, I mutter, "Selene says yes."

"We'll keep an eye on it. Hopefully you aren't about to come down with a cold or anything." There's a dubious note to Vanessa's voice, and I remember th

They don't get things like colds. Or illness in general.

Injury-related issues, sure.

Or poisons.

Which begs the question once again, why are all of my bodyguards supposedly 'retired'? An aging shifter is not the same as an aging

human.

I wonder if Vanessa knows.

"Vanessa-

"Hold on, let me finish." Her cool fingers brush against my neck, tapping and pressing4n spots that only make sense to her. Then she checks over all my

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breath or stop jiggling your leg.

"You seem to be back to your normal self, which is great news for Jericho. He wants you to start training again tomorrow."

Despite my new resolve to become more mature, responsible, and (above all) stronger, a groan escapes me. "Really?"

It would be a lie to say that there isn't a part of me that wishes. power would just appear in front of m nd embrace me within it, so I don't have to go throu

But as convenient as that would be. I'm not stupid enough to think it actually happens to people, so I straighten my slumped shoulders, clear my throat, like poise as I can muster. "I mean, that sounds great."

“Yes, I’m sure it does. Don’t push yourself too hard. I warned him to take it easy on you to start.”

“Small blessings.”

She laughs as she packs everything away. “You’re the one who told him you wanted to get stronger. I’m not sure what you were expecting.”

“I know, I know. I do want to get stronger. It’s just that Jericho’s version of training is a circle of Hell that’s better left undisturbed.” Watching her brings a cozy sort of comfort to my chest. Something deeper than a healer-to-patient relationship.

It’s unfamiliar, but it’s nice.

“Hey, Vanessa?” My fingers twist around each other, a nervous

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habit I can’t seem to break. “Have you figured out how to deal with my mother?”

The playful smile slips from Vanessa’s face, replaced by a serious expression to match the topic at hand. “I have.” She zips her medical bag closed and

My mouth dries faster than the Sahara in summer. The idea of facing my mother again, after our last disastrous encounter, sends an Arctic shudder down m

Vanessa’s lips twitch, a glimmer of amusement in her eyes. “Trying to avoid training with Jericho, are we? But tonight would be better! A laugh bubbles o too high– pitched to be genuine. We both know that visiting my mother is far worse than any hell Jericho could put me through on the training grounds, but the atte

“You know, I’m glad you’re finally opening up to other members of the pack,” Vanessa says, changing the subject, as if realizing I don’t want to linger on it too long.

She probably does.

She’s good at things like that.

Marcus stands by the window, his face a professional blank canvas He acts like he’s ignoring our conversation, but I know he’s heard every word. I’m pre

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It’s more than a little overwhelming, but I’m trying to get used to it.

"It's not easy, but I'm trying." My lips quirk, just a little. "Someone really opened my eyes, and I've come to see things differently."

"I'm glad to hear she helped you." Vanessa's expression softens. "Lucas has already called me several times, you know. Making sure I won't be putting y

My eyes widen, horror washing o

1. ne. "He what?"

She laughs, the sound rich and genuine. "It's hard being married to an overprotective alpha, isn't it?"

I groan, burying my face in my hands. The secondhand embarrassment and mild frustration over him is too much. "I can't

believe he did that. We talked about it before I left. He was on

board with it!"

"He loves you, Ava. He's just worried."

I peek at her through my fingers, grateful to hear how amused she is, instead of irritated. "I know. I get it. But still. It's too much."

"That's how they all are. 'Just too much. I'm pretty they're born. trying to outdo each other on who's more unrealistically overprotective than the next."

The worst part is, I can't even blame him for his level of concern, considering how much has happened to me. How many people get kidnapped more tha

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Still

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Vanessa's amusement fades, replaced by a more serious

expression. She glances over at Marcus, then back at me. "Is it really necessary to have a guard in the room at all times?"

Dropping my hands into my lap with a sigh, I try my best not to grimace. It isn't like I want Marcus to feel like I don't appreciate his presence. "Sister Miria

there, everyone feels better knowing there's at least someone around, in case it happens again."

Vanessa's brows furrow. "I'd heard something about that. It's concerning, to say the least. Sounds a lot like old magic, and we aren't very familiar with that of thing."

"Lucas doesn't want to take any chances."

She nods, her lips pursed. "I'm amazed he was willing to part with you at all, given the circumstances!"

A wry smile tugs at my lips, and I shrug. "After a lot of back and forth, Jericho convinced him to call a Council meeting. He thinks there's a much bigger is

"I agree with him." Vanessa smiles when my brows raise at her reaction. "As darling as I think you are, and as special as you seem to be, it isn't enough

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Nodding—because once Jericho pointed it out, I agreed with him— I add, "Since Selene says a strong wolf can sense the power within me, he wants me to avoid being seen by all the alphas of the Northwestern Territorie

"Would it be that big of a problem if the other alphas met you?" Vanessa looks a little doubtful I shrug.

"I don't know. I'm not familiar with the other alphas, really. Only Clayton."

"Hmm." She reaches out, giving my hand a gentle squeeze. "Well, I think it's good that you're here. Facing your mom might help with a lot of things you're

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The hospital is eerily quiet, our steps echoing through the halls. Visiting hours are long over, and night shift reigns.

Vanessa is unfazed by the creepy quality of the place at a late hour, but I jump when the elevator dings, signalling its arrival in front of

1. us.

“You okay?” she asks, concern knitting her brows.

Selene—who’s finally out from beneath my bed, though she refuses to talk about why she avoided me for the rest of the day—leans against my leg in silent comfort. “It’s just so quiet. I’m not used to hospitals without people bustling around.”

There’s a giant machine coming down the hall in our direction, cleaning the floor with whatever algorithm powers its movement.

I always wondered how hospitals kept their floors so clean. I guess everything’s automated these days.

Vanessa nudges me onto the elevator, pressing the button for my mom’s floor before we’ve all even made it in.

Four bodyguards flank us. Massive overkill, considering that there isn’t much we’re expecting to happen on this visit.

Still, Lucas—and Jericho—are taking no chances on my safety.

Marcus, at least, is getting a break, and a new guy seems to be the one to shadow me for the night. He’s a little short, but his eyes are black and intense

him in the dark.

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He smells like death, Selene says. To me, such words are atrocious, like I should avoid the person. To her? She speaks as though she

admires him.

And that’s a good thing?

Selene’s ears flick toward me, and I can feel her side-eye even without her eyes moving. He is a capable guard. This is a good thing.

Right. I guess that's true.

"You seem on edge," Vanessa murmurs, looking straight forward as the elevator numbers change from floor to floor.

"Just a little." I've been avoiding thinking about my mom, or her wolf. Avoidance has always been my specialty.

Healthy? No. But habits are really, really hard to break.

The walk to my mother's room feels longer than it should, each step heavy with dread. Selene presses close to my side, her warmth a small comfort in th

After a few turns, I realize that nothing seems familiar.

Each corridor is the same as the last, and yet it feels as though we're going in the wrong direction.

"Vanessa, did they move her?" I ask, confusion lacing my voice.

She glances back at me, a strange smile playing on her lips. "They had to make some adjustments for her care."

Her cryptic response does little to ease my apprehension as we enter the room. Two of our guards take up positions outside, while the other two follow us

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suffocating.

The room is dim, the steady beep of machines filling the silence. Vanessa makes her way to the bed where my mother lies,

seemingly asleep. She checks the IV bags hanging beside the bed, her movements practiced and efficient.

I hover near the foot of the bed, my eyes drawn to the frail figure beneath the sheets. The sight of her steals my breath. It's only been a few days, and yet she looks so much smaller, her cheeks hollow and skin pale.

She's not long for this world.

"The wolfsbane is taking its toll," Vanessa murmurs, her voice tinged with something I can't quite place. Pity, perhaps, or

resignation.

As if sensing our presence, my mother's eyes flutter open. They're dull, lacking the fire I've always associated with her. But when they land on me, they s

"You must have come to curse me into the afterlife," she rasps, her voice thin and brittle.

The accusation hits me like a physical blow, but I stand firm, saying nothing.

"Why else would you be here?" She struggles to sit up, her arms trembling with the effort, before finally giving up. The vitriol in her eyes never fades, though. "To gloat? To see me wither away?"

"I'm not here for you." My honesty cuts through the air between us, and she coughs.

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Even that sound is vile, coming out of her.

How can someone despise their daughter so much that even the sound of her cough is filled with hatred?

"And yet you're here, aren't you?"

"Calm down, Mrs. Grey." Vanessa finishes checking her medicine as a nurse steps in, holding a syringe and an impossibly tiny vial filled with clear liquid.

"I wouldn't be agitated if you would remove that filth from my presence."

As much as I'm trying not to flinch at the words she throws my way, that one hurts.

Selene's gentle nudge against my hand keeps me grounded. Don't let her bait you, she whispers in my mind.

Vanessa accepts the vial and syringe from the nurse, whose eyes dart around the room like a cornered animal. She scurries out, leaving an unsettling si

Questions burn on my tongue, but I swallow them back. Now's not the time to satisfy my curiosity.

As Vanessa carefully draws the clear liquid into the syringe, Selene's voice whispers through my mind, She'll be quiet soon.

A hollow comfort, but, I'll take what I can get.

I focus on my mother's face, trying to block out the vitriol spilling from her lips. Her features, once soft and warm, are now sharp

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and twisted with loathing. It's hard to reconcile this bitter shell of a woman with the mother I remember from my earliest years. Back then, her smile could light up a room, and her laughter was infectious. S

The memory rises unbidden, a bitersweet pang in my chest. I latch onto it, desperate for any shred of the mother I once knew.

"Do you remember?" I ask suddenly, my voice cutting through her tirade. "When I was little, you used to tell me I was blessed before birth, that I'd live a h

Her eyes narrow into slits. "Why are you dredging up such old, rotten memories?" Her words drip with disdain, each syllable a poison—tipped dart aimed at my heart.

This time, I don't flinch.

I already know this woman is not the mother of my memories.

That woman never existed.

"I wanted to know if you remembered. If any part of you still cares about those times."

A harsh, grating laugh fills the void between us. "There's no blessing, no happiness. Just the cruel reality of a world that chews you up and spits you out.

Vanessa, who's been quietly preparing the injection, steps forward.

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"That's enough, Mrs. Grey. It's time for your medicine."

My mother's gaze snaps to Vanessa, her lip curling in a sneer, "You think that will silence me? You're just as deluded as she is."

But even as she speaks, Vanessa deftly inserts the needle into her IV line, depressing the plunger halfway. The clear liquid disappears into the tube, sna

Within moments, Mom's eyelids droop, her words slurring

together. "You'll see..." she mumbles, her head lolling to the side. "No happiness... No blessing..."

Vanessa checks the clock before injecting the rest of the medicine. "There we go."

Mom's quiet, her chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. The sudden silence is heavy, the beeping machines almost welcome in the tense atmosphere

It's not your fault, Selene says, and I latch onto the neutral tone of her mental voice. She lost herself a long time ago.

I know, logically, that my mother's hatred isn't a reflection of my worth. And the distance I feel now might not be there forever.

But at least I know I have several people to lean on. People in my corner, trying to help me. Making sure I'm safe. Wanting me to grow stronger.

My found family.

So much better than the ones who brought me into the world.

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Vanessa glances toward Mom's vitals, reported in real time by a monitor by her bed. "Everything looks good. Selene, do your thing."

Selene pads to the hospital bed, leaving me behind.

There's absolutely no sound or thought inside my head, and it startles me. I'd assumed that I would somehow be a part of this process; that I would hear my wolf reaching out to my mother's.

Instead, I strain to hear even the slightest whisper, with no result.

Seconds stretch into minutes, and still, Selene remains motionless, her ice-blue eyes fixed on my mother's frail form. The steady beep

of the heart monitor is a metronome, a silent and rhythmic mark of time passing.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, Selene shakes herself from nose to tail. Her voice echoes in my mind, a gentle caress against my frayed nerves. Her wolf has cooperated as much as she can. A wave of relief washes over me, loosening the knot of anxiety in my chest. It's not much, but it's something. A small victory.

But the respite is short-lived. Selene's tone shifts, becoming somber and weighted with unspoken implications. Your mother doesn't know as much as we hoped, but what she d

Her wolf won't talk to anyone else. Her mental voice is tinged with a hint of frustration. But she's very happy to hear you have a wolf of your own, Ava.

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My mother's wolf, who I've always imagined as a distant, uncaring entity, is pleased by my connection to Selene?

That's a twist I never saw coming.

Selene's next words, however, steal the breath from my lungs. It's a tiny bandaid over the thousands of wounds spent

under my mother's rule.

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She loves you like her own pup, Ava. And she's so very sorry for everything you've been through.

Tears sting my eyes and blur my vision as I stare at my mother's sleeping form. The machines continue their steady rhythm, oblivious to the emotional tu

How can my mother's wolf claim to love me when my own mother has only ever shown me cruelty and disdain?

"Then why?" I whisper, my voice cracking under the weight of years of pain and rejection. "Why didn't she ever intervene? Why didn't she fight for my ha

As if in response to my anguished plea, my mother's eyelids flutter open, her gaze seeking mine. But instead of the familiar cold blue, her irises are rimmed with a golden haze.

This is not Grace Grey.

This is her wolf.

“I’m sorry,” she rasps, her voice barely audible over the hum of the machines. “I wasn’t strong enough to keep you safe, my pup.”

Tears spill down my cheeks, hot and bitter, as I watch her eyes drift closed once more, her features slackening into the peaceful

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repose of medicated slumber.

A moment.

Just a moment.

All I’d wanted was to see my mother’s face once again soft with love.

Hear her voice, telling me she loved me.

And now—I have it.

From a source I never expected.

All these years, I’d assumed that my mother’s wolf was just as cruel and uncaring as she was. I never once separated them in my head.

Now, faced with this glimpse of remorse, I find myself questioning everything I thought I knew.

Vanessa’s hand on my shoulder startles me from my reverie, her touch a gentle reminder of the present. Her eyes are on the monitor, and it takes me a second and a lot of blinking to clear my vision enough to see what she’s seeing.

Numbers are going down.

“She’s going.”

Her heart beat plummets.

95. 95. 96. 92. 97. 87. 98. 83.

69. 69. 70. 53.

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Down and down it goes.

A soft, wet rattle comes out of her, and Vanessa squeezes my shoulder. "That's normal."

Every breath she takes has that sound, like she's trying to breathe with water filling her lungs and phlegm in her throat.

But her face never changes.

Peaceful.

Quiet.

Weathered and worn, a ghost of the woman in my memories.

The numbers fall in a dizzying spiral, each one a step closer to the inevitable. Alarms blare, a cacophony of sound that pierces the

stillness of the room. But Vanessa moves with a practiced ease, silencing them one by one.

"She's DNR, Ava. Do not resuscitate. There's nothing left to do."

Her words are gentle, but they hit me like a punch to the gut. Do not resuscitate. The finality of it, the shocking end, is... crazy.

I didn't know she was this close.

I'm not even sure how much I care.

A doctor and nurse slip into the room, their presence a silent acknowledgment of what's to come. They take their places by the bed, their eyes fixed on the monitors, watching as the

gacy (VI)

Vanessa and the doctor exchange a glance, a silent communication passing between them. A polite nod, a shared understanding of the gravity of the mo

And then, it happens.

No heart rate, and a red alarm blaring ASYSTOLE in capital letters, alerting us all to what we already know.

Just like that, she's gone.

My mother, the woman who gave me life, who shaped me in ways I'm still trying to understand, is dead.

I stare at her still form, numb with shock. It's surreal, the way death comes so quietly, so quickly. One moment she's here. In the next, she's not.

The doctor moves to her side, his fingers pressing against her neck, searching for a pulse that's no longer there. He listens to her lungs, the stethoscope

"Time of death?" he asks, his voice low and somber.

The nurse glances at her watch, the dim light of the room glinting off its face. "11:47 p.m."

The doctor nods, stepping back from the bed. "Time of death, 11:47 pm."

The nurse taps away on her tablet, her fingers flying across the screen as she documents the moment. It feels strange, reducing the end of a life to a few taps on a screen.

The doctor turns to me, his eyes filled with sympathy. "I'm sorry

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for your loss," he says, his voice gentle.

I nod, the words sticking in my throat. "Thank you," I manage, my voice sounding distant and foreign to my own ears.

As the doctor and nurse leave the room, I catch snippets of their conversation, their voices low and hushed.

"Such a shame," the nurse murmurs. "To end like this..."

The doctor nods, his reply too low for me to hear.

And then, they're gone, leaving me alone with Vanessa and the shell of the woman who was once my mother.

Vanessa's hand finds my shoulder, a gentle touch that grounds me in the moment. "Are you okay?" she asks, her voice soft with

concern.

I shake my head, the movement feeling slow and sluggish. "I don't know," I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. "I have no idea

how to feel."

As I stand here staring at the lifeless form of the woman who brought me into this world, I'm lost. Adrift in a sea of emotions that

I can't even begin to name.

Grief, anger, relief, guilt... they all swirl together, indistinguishable from one to the next.

"Did I do this? Did I kill her because I wanted to talk to her wolf?"

She shake her head. "No. She was ready to go. We had another day, maybe two, at most."

I want to ask why she didn't tell me that, but I don't.

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There's a strange sense of emptiness. A void where my mother once was, a space that I'm not sure can ever be filled.

Selene's cold nose startles me out of my paralyzed state, brushing against the back of my hand.

It's okay to not know how to feel, she whispers in my mind. Grief is complicated, and your relationship with her was even more so.

My fingers tangle in her fur as I try to anchor myself in the present. All I can do is breathe. To let the reality of my mother's death wash over me, to feel the weight of it settle into my bones.

Vanessa brushes a hand against my shoulder. "Let's go, Ava," she murmurs, her voice soft and understanding. "You've been through enough for one night."

I nod, swallowing past the lump in my throat, and allow her to guide me from the room. Selene follows close behind.

As we make our way through the quiet hospital corridors, my mind churns with unanswered questions and conflicting emotions. My mother's wolf's apology echoes in my ears, a bittersweet melody that both soothes and stings.

For now, as I step out into the cool night air, I allow myself a moment to breathe and for my

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194 Ava: Garden Visit

"Are you okay?"

Vanessa pops into my field of view with a steaming cup of what smells like hot chocolate.

Much better than coffee.

"I'm okay."

The steam from the mug assaults my face with humidity and heat, reminding me that summer is over.

The weather isn't chilly enough for hot cocoa to be a regular occurrence, and the wind is a little too warm against my skin, but the rich chocolate flavor th

It's a small thing, but it helps ground my racing thoughts as Vanessa settles beside me on the bench.

Out here, in the small garden behind the alpha lodge, there's only peace under the vast expanse of darkness and stars. Selene

slumbers peacefully a few feet away, her silver fur almost glowing in the moonlight.

There are, of course, the ever-present guards stationed around us. Four of them, at least.

But at least they're giving me this time out here, instead of leaving me to my misery indoors.

"How are you holding up this week Ava? Since we last talked... A lot seems to have changed. You look different. You sound different." Vanessa's gentle question pulls me from my thoughts.

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Thinking about this past week is much better than thinking about Mom, and how quickly her life had slipped away in front of me.

I stare into the depths of my mug, as if the answers might be found swirling in the chocolate. "It's been hard," I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. "Mostly, it feels like I'm stumbling in the dark, unsure of which direction to take. And I don't like the perso

Vanessa's hand rests on my arm, a reassuring touch. "Don't overthink it. Trust in those around you. We're here to support you."

Her words are meant to comfort, but they remind me of the tensions within the pack. Another distraction I grab onto gratefully. "What about Jericho? Lucas and Kell seem to listen to him much, even though they seem to respect him."

She sighs, a sound laden with weariness. "One of the worst epidemics among wolf shifters is their narrow-mindedness. It's a product of their wolf legacy, I'm afraid. It's hard to get them to go back on their own conclusions."

Tilting my head, I try to puzzle through her words.

It sounds a lot like they're just being idiots, but pairing the word idiot with alpha isn't something I'm comfortable with.

She catches my expression and laughs. "When a new alpha takes over, many of the previous alpha's most trusted advisors end up retiring. New blood, loyal to the current alpha, is brought in."

"Oh?" My mind reels. That explains a lot. I wondered why all my bodyguards were retired, despite being in great shape.—

Not a single one of them twitch at the compliment, even though I

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know they can hear every word we're saying.

"Renard has been alpha for as long as I can remember, so I've never seen it happen in Blackwood."

Vanessa shrugs, leaning forward to rest her elbows on her knees. “Yes, well— in Jericho’s case, he made some mistakes that led to the death of the previous alpha and his Luna. It’s a stigma he’s never been able to fully shake in Lu

“That seems...” I grope for a word to convey my thoughts properly.

“Short-sighted? Stupid? Absolutely asinine? I agree.”

An incredulous sound halfway between a laugh and a gasp comes out of me as I glance around in a panic.

Of course, there are only the guards nearby.

“Vanessa! You can’t talk about Lucas like that.” I pause. “Can you?”

Settling her chin in her hand, she watches Selene, who’s still sleeping. “They’re used to it. I’ve said far worse to his face. But it isn’t really as simple as I’ve made it out to be. You’ll hear about it soon enough, I’m sure.”

There isn’t really a great way to respond to that, so I just say, “Oh,” and stare at the sky again. “If that mistake changed how they think of Jericho, I’m never going to

“You will. Wolves are used to pups making terrible mistakes. You aren’t the first youngling with blood on your hands. Even in

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Jericho’s day, there were idiot scuffles where several lives were taken because of a single hotheaded idiot. He became the alpha when he was older, and now his son is alpha.”

Crossing my arms over my abdomen, I refrain from pointing out that I’m twenty years old, not fifteen. But it gives me a little comfort to know I’m not the only idiot out there.

Still a pup, Selene whispers. Clearly, she’s not really asleep.

“Been spending all your time feeling bad, wondering how to make things better?”

Vanessa’s still not looking at me. She’s just casually perched there, looking ahead of her, making conversation.

My shoulders ease a little. “Yes. Jericho keeps telling me to stop wallowing and feeling sorry for myself and start acting, but I don’t...” Flapping my hands

sentence.

“Don’t know what to do to fix things.”

“Yeah.”

“There’s no easy fix, Ava. You just have to move forward trying to make better choices than the day before. Apologize to those you’ve wronged. Take res your actions. And do your best every day. There’s no magic answer.”

That seems a little too simplistic of a world view after everything I’ve put Lucas and the pack through.

“I’m trying.”

“I know.”

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When I glance at her side profile again, I can see the faintest smile curving her lips.

“People are noticing, Ava. You don’t need to be so apologetic that you lose sight of who you are. Making mistake—even a terrible one—doesn’t mean that you lose the right to be yourself. Okay?”

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Her words make sense, but it still seems wrong.

Thinking of myself too much is what got me into trouble in the first place, isn’t it?

But I tuck Vanessa’s words into the back of my mind, ready to think

over them later.

For now, I’m trying to enjoy the peace. Trying not to think about things I should probably think about.

Then again, maybe I don’t need to.

She hasn’t mentioned Mom, or how I’m dealing with her death. Maybe it’s okay to just... ignore it for another day.

Deal with it tomorrow.

Picking up my cup from beside me on the bench, I take another sip of the now lukewarm hot chocolate.

Vanessa glances over. "Want me to heat that back up for you?"

Shaking my head, I offer a small smile. "No, it's fine. I'll be done with it soon."

"Mm. It tastes best when it's too hot to drink, but it's impossible to enjoy it when it burns your tongue.

"Exactly."

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Just as I'm about to take another drink, a commotion erupts from the side of the garden. Three guards rush over, their postures tense and alert as they d

My heart nearly stops when I hear the familiar voice respond, "Oh, dear. Am I in the wrong place?"

Comentario °

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Deja el primer comentario para este capítulo

Vote

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Deslizar a la izquierda para continuar

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195 Ava: A Familiar Face

. "Ma'am, can you explain how you entered pack lands without detection? And how you made it all the way to the alpha lodge?"

There's suspicion thick in his voice, and I see Vanessa tense from the corner of my eye. Mrs. Elkins looks around at the hostile faces, bewilderment plain on her features.

“Ava, dear, are you in some sort of trouble?”

Glancing at my guards, all on alert and intent on saving me even from a little old woman, I sigh.

Their questions are imminently reasonable, and I’m wondering the same things. Not to mention—Selene’s hiding under the bench is beyond suspicious. I can’t shake the feeling that I’m about to hear answers I’ll regret having heard.

No matter how I look at this situation, for an old woman to have accidentally stumbled onto me here, a thousand miles away, without knowing my true identity...

There’s something more going on.

Straightening my shoulders, I take a deep breath, ready to side with my bodyguards against the sweetest woman in the world.

“No, Mrs. Elkins. But we are going to need some answers.”

She hugs her parcel a little closer to her chest, looking over each of my bodyguards in turn, before nodding to herself. Her faded eyes crinkle at the corners as she offers them

I never expected to add my former boss being held up by a flock of bodyguards, a solid thousand miles from Cedarwood, to my list of fucked up shit that

So it takes a minute for me to process what I’m hearing.

“Mrs. Elkins?”

Selene flattens against the ground, her ears going back as she belly-crawls her way to my bench.

Her bizarre demeanor doesn’t even register in my head, because- well, frankly, she’s been weird as hell for the past several hours.

“Ava! My dear girl.”

Those familiar rheumy eyes and her welcoming smile have me so intensely, terribly homesick for Cedarwood that I have to blink like a maniac to keep th

Vanessa follows behind as I push my way through the bodyguards, who refuse to let me get too close.

“Calm down, boys. She’s a friend of our Luna.”

Vanessa’s at least forty years younger than any of these men, but they respond to her words anyway, letting me through their -human barricade.

I’ve got to figure out how to wield whatever flimsy authority I have. Even Vanessa gets people to listen to her. Granted, she’s a healer- no one wants to get on a healer’s bad side. Not even the alpha.

11:00

195 Ava, A Familiar Face

Reaching the old woman, I can see that she’s carrying a huge parcel, hugging it to her chest.

“Ava, my dear. Are you all right?”

Her hand shakes as she reaches for my face, as though reassuring herself I’m really alive.

“I’m fine.”

I grasp Mrs. Elkins’ hand in mine. It’s delicate and fragile, her paper-thin skin soft against my palm. My mind is still working at wrapping itself around her being here, in the flesh, a thousand miles from home.

“How did you get here, Mrs. Elkins? I mean, not that I’m not happy to see you, but... how?”

She sighs, the sound weary and drawn out. “Oh, Ava, it’s a story for the ages. But that can wait.” Her eyes, sharp despite their age, sweep over me with a critical gleam. “You’ve lost weight, Ava. Have you been eating properly?”

I shake my head, a rueful smile tugging at my lips. “Actually, I’ve gained weight. Even though I look skinnier. Must be all the muscle I’ve put on during tra

Her brows knit together in concern. “And you’re here of your own will? These people...” She glances warily at the stoic bodyguards flanking us.

“No, no, Mrs. Elkins,” I assure her quickly. “None of these people are the ones who took me from Cedarwood. I promise.”

She frowns at the bodyguards, their impassive stares unwavering

11:00

195 Ava: A Familiar Face

under her scrutiny. Vanessa mutters something about bull-headed men before turning to Mrs. Elkins with a polite smile. "Why don't we head inside? I'm sure you've had a long journey."

The bodyguards tense, their postures shifting subtly to block the path. Vanessa's eyes narrow, and she takes a moment, her gaze unfocused. Mind-linking, I realize. Probably with Jericho.

"Jericho will be here shortly," she explains to Mrs. Elkins, her tone apologetic. "But I'm afraid we can't let you inside without approval from the head of security. Protocol, you understand."

Mrs. Elkins titters, waving a hand. "Of course, of course. I

understand completely." She reaches into her pocket, pulling out a small ziplock bag. "Here, Ava. I brought you some of your favorite cookies. Homemad

My heart swells at the gesture, and I reach for the bag with a smile. "Thank you, Mrs. Elkins. You have no idea how much I've missed-

Before my fingers can close around the bag, it's snatched out of my hands.

you w

I whirl on the bodyguard in question. "What the hell? Give that back!"

He meets my glare with a stoic expression. "I'm sorry, Luna, but we'll have to check these for safety before you can have them."

"Safety?" I echo, disbelief coloring my tone. "Mrs. Elkins would never hurt me. She saved me in Cedarwood. She's a genuinely good person."

Another guard steps forward, professional and blank-faced as he

11:00

195 Ava. A Familiar Face

addresses Mrs. Elkins't

11:00 C

105 Ava. A Familiar Face

run into anyone on my way here.

My brows knit together in confusion. If she didn't walk through the pack lands, then how did she get here? There's no way she could have made it to the

The bodyguards share my bewilderment, their postures tense and wary.

Vanessa steps forward, her voice gentle but firm. "Mrs. Elkins, I'm afraid we don't understand. How did you get to the alpha lodge if not through the pack lands?"

Mrs. Elkins chuckles, the sound warm and familiar, and I feel a pang of homesickness so intense it steals my breath. "Oh, I came directly from Cedarwood

Straight from Cedarwood? That's impossible. Cedarwood is a thousand miles away. There's no way she could have just appeared here, unless...

My thoughts are interrupted by Mrs. Elkins' voice, soft and knowing. "Ava, dear."

I meet her gaze, and there's a glimmer in her eyes that I can't quite place. Something ancient and wise, a secret knowledge that I'm not privy to.

"Did the necklace return to you safely?"

The necklace. My hand flies to my throat, where the amethyst pendant once rested against my skin. The same necklace that had been lost, only to reap

bloodstained.

11:00

195 Ava, A Familiar Face

It's not on me now, but the ghostly weight of it remains.

"How did you know about the necklace?" My voice is barely above a whisper, my heart pounding so hard that it deafens my ears.

Mrs. Elkins smiles, and it's a smile I've seen a thousand times before. Warm, comforting, and tinged with a hint of mischief. "Oh, Ava. There's so much you couldn't tell you

before."

She steps closer, and my security team goes tense, ready to intervene. But Mrs. Elkins pays them no mind, her focus solely on

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Unshift 196

196 Ava: History of Witches

196 Ava: History of Witches

She is a good person, Selene whispers.

No shit.

I know that already.

Mrs. Elkins is the one who took me in when I was lost and

desperate to start anew.

But Mrs. Elkins is also here, knowing something about the necklace that helped hide my powers.

How much did she know about me? How much did she hide?

My stomach churns with the bitter feelings of betrayal. "You knew about me all along, didn't you?"

"No." Mrs. Elkins stops walking, concern crossing her face. "I knew you were a shifter, of course. I've seen more than one rogue in my life, looking for a new start. You were so lost, so scared. I had to help you."

"Why?" There's a part of my mind that immediately throws in unlikely scenarios, like Mrs. Elkins laughing behind my back over my naivete and ignorance.

But I know Mrs. Elkins.

That's not the kind of person she is.

So I shove it down, squashing it beneath a mental heel with ruthless efficiency.

It's my paranoia trying to take over again. Just like it did every time

16:00

196 Ava: History of Witches

Lucas tried to give me any bit of attention or care.

He proved himself with time. I need to give Mrs. Elkins the same chance.

“It’s a bit of a story, if you want to hear it.”

Of course I do. “Let’s sit down,” I offer, motioning toward the bench.

My security detail lets her through with no grumbling, though their eyes never leave her. It’s somewhat amusing to see them so on edge over an elderly lady who spends her day in a bookstore, gossiping with Cedarwood residents and doling out wise advice.

But I guess it’s a good thing that they take any threat so seriously.

Mrs. Elkins sighs, easing herself onto the bench beside me with a soft groan. She places her parcel next to her and gives me a wry smile. “I’m getting too old for this kind of travel, dear.”

I try to smile back, but it feels strained. My mind is a whirlwind of conflicting thoughts and emotions. I want to trust Mrs. Elkins, to believe in the genuine care she’s always shown me, but the doubts linger like shadows at the edges of my mind.

Listen to her, Ava, Selene urges gently. She means well.

I take a deep breath, forcing myself to focus on the present moment. Mrs. Elkins studies me for a long moment before speaking again.

“Ava, how much do you know about witches?”

The question catches me off guard. “Witches? They’re not real.” The words tumble out automatically, a knee-jerk response. But

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196 Ava: History of Witches

even as I say it, there's no belief behind it.

Mrs. Elkins watches me with that calm gaze of hers. "Are you sure about that?"

I shake my head.

Honestly, until recently I'd never seen a vampire and hadn't really known about them. So how am I supposed to know what's real and

what isn't?

Mrs. Elkins looks surprised, then pleased. "Well, it's no surprise you think they aren't real. The packs don't talk about them. It's a touchy subject in history."

"Are witches and magicians different?" I ask, curiosity piqued despite my reservations.

She shakes her head. "Magicians? They're the same. But the history of witches is shameful on all sides."

A few soft growls rumble from the older guards, their disapproval clear. Mrs. Elkins fixes them with a stern look. "Now, now. Let's not pass judgment before we've even heard the whole story."

She turns back to me, her expression softening.

"You see, Ava, witches once lived in harmony among humans. Their abilities were hidden, and they didn't cause any trouble. But as- time went on, many witches were threatened by the power of wolves, vampires, and the Fae. It caused a lot of political strife

between them."

I lean forward, drawn in despite myself. "What happened?"

"They were hunted down," Mrs. Elkins says quietly. "By humans and

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Most of them were innocent.” Mrs. Elkins agrees. “ha there were those who did terrible things. In the end, the innocence of most didn’t change the genocide wrought upon their kind. People feared their power, and fear can make even good people do terrible

things.*

One of the guards growls low in his throat. “Witches wanted to eradicate everyone who could stand against them. They are not victims here.

There are a lot of questions in my head, but I try to focus on the most important for the moment. I also don’t feel like mediating historical wars between my guards and a little old lady. “Why do some people call them magicians, then? Is there a difference?”

Mrs. Elkins considers the question for a moment. “The only magicians I know of were witches who worked closely with shifters. But they were hunted down just the same as the others, in

the end.*

Is that true? I ask Selene silently, seeking confirmation.

I’m not sure, she admits. I only know what I learned as a pup—that witches were evil and magicians worked for good. But it seems everyone has a different version of the past.

I nod slowly, my mind reeling. Even Sister Miriam seems to have her own take on what happened so long ago.

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“Because witches were hunted, magic died out. Only the Fae have magic now.”

My spine snaps straight. “The Fae have magic?”

Her old eyes blink in owlish surprise. “Well, yes. They are, after all, the Fae.”

If the Fae have magic, then maybe...

“Here.” The parcel she’d been carrying is deposited into my lap by her old hands. It’s heavier than I thought it was. “This has been passed down in our family for generations. It should be a book about magic, but we long ago lost the ability to unlock its secrets. Perhaps this should help you in your journey.”

A magic book?

“Why did you bring this to me?”

Mrs. Elkins stares at me with both brows raised high. “Aren’t you a witchling, Ava?”

Comentario

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Deja el primer comentario para este capitulo.

Vote

Unshift 197

197 Ava: Do You Believe in the Moon

Goddess?

“I don’t understand. How did you know about the necklace? And this book? How did you get here?”

“Ah, yes.” Mrs. Elkins sighs, reaching over to pat my hand in a familiar gesture. “Do you believe in prophetic dreaming?”

Vanessa steps forward now, her voice pitched high with incredulity. “Are you a clairvoyant, ma’am?”

“No, dear.” Mrs. Elkins gives Vanessa one of her warm smiles. “But some dreams mean something. Do you believe in your Moon Goddess, child?”

The guards’ growls fill the air, a group offense at being questioned on their faith.

Vanessa’s stern look silences them. She turns to Mrs. Elkins, her voice soft yet resolute. “I do believe in the Moon Goddess, yes.”

Mrs. Elkins reaches for Vanessa’s hand, and though bewilderment

flickers across Vanessa’s face, she allows the contact. The old

lady’s eyes crinkle with warmth as she clasps Vanessa’s hand in her arthritic fingers. “I’m so grateful Ava has found a friend. She was far too lonely in Cedarwood.”

Her words tug at my heart, reminding me how grateful I am to have Vanessa in my corner. But Mrs. Elkins continues, her voice

taking on a dreamlike quality.

“I’ve had strange dreams this year. One of a lonely witch, hunted

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197 Ava: Do You Believe in the Moon Goddess?

by wolves.” Her gaze meets mine, and I feel a jolt of recognition. “I had the same feeling when I met you, Ava. I felt drawn to help, considering the history of witches.”

Her explanation of the eradication of witches makes sense now- why she’d started to answer my questions with a history lesson. “I

see.”

“After you disappeared, the dreams stopped. For a long time. Until recently.” She pauses, her expression serene. “I dreamed of the Moon Goddess asking for my help. And when I accepted, I woke up here. In this garden.”

Her words hang in the air, defying logic. How can she be so calm, so unfazed by such an outlandish claim? As if the Moon Goddess visits people in their dreams.

And yet—here she is.

Her words are truth.

Selene’s firm belief rings in my head, and every guard studies Mrs.

Elkins with both wonder and suspicion. There’s no scent of

deception to mar her words.

“How often do you have these... bizarre experiences?” one of them asks, his voice tinged with doubt.

Mrs. Elkins chuckles, her eyes twinkling. “Never before, my dear. Never before. But when a goddess calls, do you ignore them?”

How can she take this in stride? How can she have such blind

belief? My instinctive reaction to learning how different I am... was much different. Paranoia. Fear. Frustration.

16:01

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107 Ava: Do You Believe in the Moon Goddess?

To Mrs. Elkins, it's some sort of blessing, something she accepts without gripe or grumble.

As if sensing my thoughts, Mrs. Elkins squeezes Vanessa's hand before letting go. "Interventions like this, they're rare these days. But in the age of witches, they were much more common."

"Gods and goddesses coming to dreams?"

"Or in person. There are old stories of such times."

Selene presses against my leg and I glance down at her, finding comfort in her steady gaze.

When I look back up, Mrs. Elkins is watching me, her expression knowing. "You have a lot to learn, Ava. About yourself, about your heritage. I wish I could help more, but alas," and she points to the book in my lap, "I only have what has been passed down to me."

Heritage. The word feels foreign, heavy with implications I'm not ready to face. The only heritage I've ever known is that of my pack, my identity as a wolf shifter. Even a defective one.

Now, it's like being invited into a new family. One where everyone's a stranger.

My fingers trace the worn leather, and I feel a spark of something- anticipation, maybe. Or fear.

If Mrs. Elkins is right, and the Moon Goddess somehow intervened, why did she take so long?

Why not earlier?

Why not teach me my powers before Lisa was taken? Before lives were taken?

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197 Ava: Do You Believe in the Moon Goddess?

I don't know that answer, either, Selene murmurs in apology.

Mrs. Elkins touches my forearm, her grasp warm and loving, leaving me aching for those memories of life in Cedarwood. "Everything happens for a reason, Ava. You're meant for great things. I'm sure of it."

Your destiny is what you choose, Selene murmurs. You chose your pack and your mate. This is now your fate.

My eye twitches, just a little. Didn't you tell me I have no great destiny?

She sneezes, which I'm pretty sure is something she does when I catch her in little logical loops. That was before. This is a direct result of choices you made.

So, if I had stayed in Cedarwood... My life would be different? If I had rejected Lucas? Avoided my family?

Yes. Fate is fluid.

"Ava? Are you okay?"

Her wrinkled face peers into mine; she must have said something while I was distracted by Selene.

"Thank you, Mrs. Elkins," I manage, my voice steadier than I feel. "For the book, for... for everything. I've really missed you, and everyone in Cedarwood."

The dull pain of nostalgia, of regret, aches in my chest. I think I'm always going to miss that apartment, the first place in this world that was truly mine. Even now, I've spent my time either in Lisa's apartment, or now at Lucas' lodge.

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197 Ava: Do You Believe in the Moon Goddess?

The apartment was my safe haven. I miss it.

And my job.

And the people.

The old lady beams, an expression I've seen on her face many times. "You're welcome, my dear Always remember, you're not alone. You have friends, both old and new."

Friends. The word wraps around me like a balm, soothing the raw edges of my soul.

I glance at Vanessa, at Selene, at the guards who stand ready to protect me, with a rush of gratitude.

It's true. I'm not alone.

Many things have changed in recent weeks, and not all of it is bad.

You have grown, Selene agrees.

"But how are you going to go back?" Vanessa asks, kneeling in front of Mrs. Elkins. "If you didn't come here under your own power, I'm guessing you didn't bring any identification with you?"

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Unshift 198

198 Ava: Are You Angry With Mo?

198 Ava: Are You Angry With Me?

Are you angry with me?

Selene's hesitant whisper tickles in the back of my mind, even as her dog breath assaults my face.

Prying an eyelid open, I glare out the side of my eye. "I'm sleeping, Selene."

No, you're not. I can hear you thinking.

Grunting, I burrow deeper into the warmth and softness of my bed. Selene's insistent nuzzling makes it impossible, her furry body pressed against mine until I feel smothered by her heat.

"Too hot," I grumble, attempting to shove her away. But she's an immovable wall of fur and muscle.

She whimpers, resting her chin on my cheek. Her breath, evoking imagery of dog food and sardines, washes over my face. Are you angry with me, Ava?

"No, I'm not angry." I sigh, resigned to this conversation happening whether I want it to or not.

You sound angry.

I crack an eye open to peer at her. "Why are you acting like some insecure girlfriend all of a sudden?" A thought occurs to me, and I laugh. "Wait, are you learning this from those shifter shows you watch?"

Selene's ears droop a little. Well, usually when the girl does this, the guy relents and hugs her. Then they make up and everything's

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198 Ava: Are You Angry With Me?

fine again.

Despite my annoyance, a chuckle escapes me, "Selene, life isn't a TV show. You can't just hug away all the secrets and

disappointment."

So you are disappointed in me. Her blue eyes are soulful, pleading.

I sigh, reaching out to scratch behind her ears. "A little, yeah. I mean, you knew Mrs. Elkins was some kind of witch and you never told me. That's a pretty big secret to keep."

It wasn't my secret to tell, Selene protests. And besides, I'm the one who asked the Moon Goddess to reach out to her. To help you.

That catches my attention. I prop myself up on an elbow to look at her fully. "What? How?"

Selene sits up, her posture proud, ears and tail erect. Prayer, she states simply, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world.

My silence speaks volumes as I stare at her, and eventually, those prideful ears droop.

"Your entire plan was just to pray to the Moon Goddess and hope she gave us some divine intervention?"

Yes.

“And that was a good plan. In your head. You thought that was an actual, valid, useful plan.”

Her eyes wander, unable to hold the pressure of my gaze. It worked.

“And if it didn’t?”

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It would have.

Giving up on the idea of sleep, I sit up in bed, crossing my legs. beneath the comforter. “Selene, that isn’t a plan. That’s desperation.”

Her intervention is not as rare as one would believe.

“Oh? And how would you know that?” Crossing my arms, I watch Selene, blinking exhaustion from my eyes.

Her ears twitch. She allowed me to come to you.

And how am I supposed to argue against something like that?

“It doesn’t mean she’d do it again.”

And yet she did.

Groaning, I flop back onto the bed, yanking at my covers. “Selene, I’m too tired for this roundabout conversation.”

So you’re not angry anymore?

She shuffles her way closer, staring at me from above. That kibble—and—sardine breath whooshes against my nose, and I smack her face away without a single qualm. “You’ve got to start brushing your teeth.”

I don’t have hands.

Point taken. “Then I’ll do it. Who’s been sneaking you sardines?”

A soft cough from the corner of my room, in the direction of my bodyguard.

Marcus.

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198 Ava: Are You Angry With Me?

No wonder he coughed. I'm going to kill him. Never mind that he's my new bodyguard.

Jericho too. Oh, and Vanessa.

They're all going to die.

The leather is soft and supple beneath my fingers, almost silky despite the obvious age of the book. No, not book. Tome. It's ancient and heavy, deserving of its title. Ornate silver clasps hold it closed, the metal tarnished and blackened in the crevices of the intricate design. I don't recognize the symbol, but it's beautiful.

Selene watches me from her spot on the bed, her eyes tracking my every movement. The guard who replaced Marcus this morning stepped outside, more than willing to avoid any exposure to a witch's magic, so we're alone.

Are you going to open it?

"I'm getting there," I murmur, tracing the embossed symbol with a fingertip. "It's just... It's gorgeous, Selene. Look at this

craftsmanship."

It's a book.

"Thank you, Selene. I hadn't noticed."

Her huff washes over the back of my neck. You're stalling.

Maybe I am. This book feels important. Weighty, and not just physically. Like it holds the secrets of the universe, and once I open it, I can never go back to the blissful ignorance of before.

But that's ridiculous. It's just a book. Old. extremely well-made but

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198 Ava. Are You Angry With Me?

ultimately... Just a book.

Right?

Oh, for the love of kibble—just open it already!

“Alright, alright. Relax.”

The clasps resist at first, stiff with age, but after a few tries, they pop open with a soft snick. The front cover falls open, and I’m hit with a waft of air that smells like dust and time and something strange. Something sharp and almost metallic, with a hint of ozone, like the air before a thunderstorm.

Magic.

I stare at the first page, my heart sinking into my stomach. It’s blank. Completely, utterly blank.

With a growing sense of dread, I flip through the pages. They’re all the same. Empty. Devoid of any mark or word or indication that this is anything more than an elaborate, expensive journal.

“There’s nothing,” I whisper, a lump forming in my throat. “All of it. There’s nothing written here.”

What? Selene jumps down from the bed, her nails clicking on the floor as she trots over. She peers at the pages, her ears pricked forward. That can’t be right. Why would Mrs. Elkins give you a · blank book?

“I don’t know.” Disappointment is a heavy stone weighing in my gut. “Maybe this was all a mistake. Maybe this is just nothing. An empty journal.”

No. Selene shakes her entire body. The Moon Goddess wouldn’t

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108 Ava: Are You Angry With Me?

make that kind of mistake. If this is the book Mrs. Elkins was meant to give you, then this is the book you’re meant to have.

“But it’s useless like this!” I slam the cover closed, anger and

frustration welling up inside me, “What am I supposed to do
with

an empty book, Selene? Scribble my deepest darkest secrets in it like a diary?”

Of course not. Don’t be ridiculous. She tilts her head, considering the tome. Maybe it’s a test. Or a puzzle. Mrs. Elkins did say that they lost the ability to unlock its knowledge, remember?

Feeling a hint of shame at my overdramatic reaction, I pause, thinking back. “You’re right. She said something like that.” Reopening the book, I stare down at the blank pages with new consideration. “So you think I’m supposed to... what, exactly?”

Selene leans in, her nose twitching as she sniffs at the pages. There’s definitely magic here. A lot of it. It’s so strong, it’s almost-

She cuts off with a violent sneeze, her whole body jolting with the force of it. And then another. And another. She backpedals. frantically, rubbing and pawing at her nose as she retreats to the

far corner of the room.

“Selene!” I scramble to my feet, the book tumbling forgotten to the floor. “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

Comentario 1

Ver todos >

16:02

Unshift 199

199 Ava: Magic

Magic, she whines pitifully, her eyes watering. So much magic. It’s overwhelming.

I look from her to the book and back again, realization dawning.

Just what exactly did Mrs. Elkins give me?

Kneeling, I carefully pick the book back up, handling it with a new sense of reverence and caution. The symbol on the front seems to glint in the early morning light, almost as if it’s winking at me.

I glance at Selene, still huddled miserably in the corner. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to figure this out on my own.”

Agreed, she says nasally, pawing at her snout. But maybe... Let’s put that thing away for now, okay? Before it makes me sneeze my brain out through my nose.

The mental image makes me laugh, even as I close it, snapping the clasp closed with a firm click. “Don’t be so dramatic. Your brain is far too big to fit through your nostrils.”

You don’t know that. You’ve never seen my brain.

“And I hope I never do.” Standing, I move to the closet and carefully tuck the book onto the highest shelf. Out of sight, but definitely not out of mind. “There. Safe and sound and out of sneezing range.”

My hero, Selene drawls, finally uncurling from her corner. She still looks a bit bleary-eyed, but at least she no longer seems to be in imminent danger of sneezing herself inside out. So what now?

That’s the question, isn’t it? I lean against the closet door,

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worrying my lower lip between my teeth as I think.

My phone interrupts the morning with a ringing that’s a bit muffled. Startled, I glance at the bed—but it isn’t there.

Damn.

It’s probably Lucas.

Diving for the bed, I yank the comforter off the bed in a fabulous move that has it soaring through the air. No phone clatters to the ground, though.

Shoving my hand between the mattress and headboard, my fingers brush against smooth plastic. “Got it! Hello?”

I’m breathless as I answer the phone, not bothering to check the caller ID.

Strange silence greets me as I press the phone to my ear. “Lucas?” I try again, my brow furrowing when no response comes.

I pull the phone away, frowning at the screen. The phrase UNKNOWN CALLER blinks back at me, with no number at all.

Confused, I bring the phone back to my ear. “Hello?”

Still, no answer. But there’s something—a soft sound, like breathing, barely audible over the line.

Goosebumps prickles along the skin of my forearms as I strain to listen. Is someone there? Or did I just imagine it?

“Who is this?” I demand, a trickle of anger seeping into my voice. If this is some pervert getting their kicks by calling random girls, I swear I’ll—

16:02

100 Ava: Magic

“Ava Grey?” A strangely mechanical voice cuts through my budding tirade, stopping me cold. It’s flat, emotionless. Inhuman.

My grip tightens on the phone, my knuckles bleaching white. “Yes,” I say slowly, my heartbeat quickening in my chest. “Who is this?”

Who is that? Selene’s concerned voice brushes against my mind.

I shake my head slightly, not taking my eyes off the opposite wall. I have no idea. But something about this feels off. Wrong.

“We need to talk,” the voice says, ignoring my question. “It’s about Lisa Randall.”

Ice shoots through my veins, freezing me in place. Lisa. Oh God.

“What about her?” I ask, my voice trembling slightly. “Do you know where she is? Is she okay?”

Horrible images flash through my mind—Lisa, chained and

bleeding in some dank cell. Lisa, screaming as a vampire tears into her throat. Lisa, broken and lifeless, her once vibrant eyes dull and empty...

Squeezing my eyes shut, I try to banish the nightmarish visions. No. I can’t think like that. Lisa is alive. She has to be.

“She’s alive,” the voice confirms, as if reading my thoughts. “For

now.”

My eyes snap open, my heart lurching in my chest. “What do you mean? Where is she?”

“I can’t tell you that.” A pause, filled with static. “Not yet.”

Frustration battles with the fear coursing through me. “Then why are you calling me?” I snap, my free hand curling into a fist at my

16:02

199 Ava: Magic

side. “What’s the point of this?”

“I’m calling to warn you.” The mechanical quality of the voice seems to intensify, becoming even more flat and distorted. “Your wolves are too slow to act, and danger is coming. If you don’t come soon, Lisa will be sacrificed like the others.”

Rage flares hot and bright in my chest. “Like hell she is,” I snarl, my lips curling back from my teeth. “I will never stop looking for her. Never. And if you hurt her, I swear to God I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” the voice interrupts, a hint of amusement creeping into its mechanical monotone. “You have no idea what you’re up against, little wolf. Hurry and come to the city, where we can teach you your powers and you can save your little friend. If you don’t, you’ll end up being the worst mistake your narrow-minded alpha has ever made.”

A chill runs down my spine at the threat, but I refuse to back down. “I’m not afraid of you,” I say, injecting as much steel into my voice as I can muster. “Or whoever you’re working for. I will find Lisa. And I will make you pay for taking her.”]

“You think I’m the enemy,” the voice muses. “But we’re trying to save you. Come to us, Ava Grey, before you destroy everyone. The price of your pride will be too great. Your power is too strong to be left alone. Either learn to control it, or everyone dies around you.”

A click, and then... nothing. The line goes dead, leaving me standing there with the phone pressed to my ear, my heart pounding and my mind reeling.

Ava? Selene presses again, her concern sharpening to alarm. What is it? What’s wrong?

16:02

Unshift 200

200 Ava: Steve (I)

The phone rings.

And rings.

All I get is voicemail, three different times.

Knowing that Lucas is busy with the Council, I just send a quick text for him to call me back when he can.

A knock on my door interrupts us, and Jericho pokes his head in with his typical scowling face. "All good in here?"

"Good," I confirm, as Selene rubs her nose against the ground.

The older shifter watches her as he closes the door behind him.

"What's wrong with that?"

The way he emphasizes the 'that' has Selene freezing mid-movement, her lip curling above her teeth in a silent snarl.

Did he just call me-?!

"She is fine. Just sniffed the book and got a little too much magic in her nose."

That grizzly head nods, like it's a normal occurrence. "Every pup has to learn sometime, I guess." After seeing the blank stare on my face, he says, "It isn't unusual to run into the occasional magical artifact. Witches magicked just about everything they put their hands on. One fellow even found a pair of magic underwear."

I stare at Jericho, my mouth hanging open. Magic underwear? Seriously?

16:03

200 Ava: Steve (1)

He just shrugs, completely unfazed. "Witches are an odd breed."

Shaking his head, he changes the subject. “Your Mrs. Elkins is having breakfast downstairs. Care to join her?”

My heart leaps. “Yes, absolutely! Eager to talk to her, to ask her more about this book, about magic, about everything, I almost fall back into an old routine.

Secrets.

Tell him, Selene murmurs.

“Wait. Jericho, before we go downstairs, I had a strange phone call...”

Breakfast with Mrs. Elkins doesn’t happen. Instead, I’m dragged to a strange building in the middle of White Peak, which looks like an abandoned warehouse more than anything else.

Six guards—my biggest entourage yet—follow me into the building, while two stay outside to make sure we don’t receive any

unexpected visitors.

The dusty air scratches my throat as we walk through the dimly lit warehouse. Shadows loom in every corner, making me feel like I’ve stepped into some gritty crime movie set. I glance at Kellan, his face an impassive mask.

“Why couldn’t Jericho come with us?” I ask, my voice echoing off

the metal and concrete.

Kellan doesn’t break stride. “Someone needs to stay on Blackwood land while I’m away. Besides, Jericho’s a lot less tech savvy.”

16:03

200 Ava: Steve (1)

I frown, unsatisfied. “Who are we meeting again?”

“You’ll see soon enough.”

I mutter under my breath about the building belonging in a movie, and Kellan actually cracks a smile. “It’s Steve’s unfortunate

aesthetic.”

“Who’s Steve?”

“A human who’s been helping us out.”

We reach a black metal door that creaks open with an ominous groan. Kellan leads the way down a set of stairs without a single light, except whatever’s coming from below.

A brightly lit basement that greets us. It looks like a professional office, complete with fake plants, paintings on the walls, and several cubicles. The only thing missing is people.

“I wasn’t expecting this,” I admit as we approach the empty reception desk.

Kellan nods. “No one ever is.”

Suddenly, a young boy dressed in a suit and tie pops out from beneath the desk, startling me. He can’t be more than ten years old. As he climbs onto the chair, my heart drops to my feet, waiting

for it to roll out from beneath him.

Eventually, he stands on the seat and stares at us over the counter with a stern expression.

“Do you have an appointment?” he asks, his voice high-pitched but serious.

Kellan shakes his head. “No. I’m Kellan Ashbourne, and this is-”

16:03

The boy cuts him off with a sneer. “I remember you.” His gaze shifts.

to me, and Heel like a bug under a microscope. “Why is the

Blackwood beta’s daughter here?

Surprise jolts through me. How does he know who I am?

Kellan clears his throat. “Ava is Alpha Lucas Westwood’s mate”

The boy—Steve, I assume—looks taken aback. He studies me intently, his eyes narrowed, before grunting and waving us forward. “Follow me.”

He leads us down a long carpeted hallway to a door at the very end. Pausing with his hand on the knob, he turns to us with a warning look.

“Stay quiet. Steve is in a mood.”

Okay. He’s not Steve.

So who the hell is this kid?

I’m more curious than ever as we step into the room. What kind of operation is this? And why would Lucas and Kellan be involved with a human child?

What’s so interesting? Selene’s voice touches my mind, grumpy and petulant. She’s still upset about being left behind, but Kellan was very firm about pet allergies.

I’m not sure yet. The room is an office, with a large wooden desk dominating the space. Bookshelves line the walls, filled with anything but books. Instead, there are action figures mixed with strange artifacts. Behind the desk sits a girl.

There’s no way around it. This isn’t a woman, or even a young

16:03

200 Ava Stove:!!)

woman.

She looks to be maybe thirteen, with a head that’s half-shaved and long, bright pink hair on the other side of it. She has what looks like a cartoon pony temporary tattoo on her cheek, and Mardi Gras necklaces over a simple white shirt. A lot of plastic necklaces, in purple and gold.

“Why the hell are you back?” she asks, with the attitude that goes with her age.

Kellan inclines his head. “Hello, Steve.”

Steve?

This is Steve?

I’d been expecting a man.

“We have a situation. This is Ava Grey, Lucas Westwood’s mate.”

Steve's gaze snaps to me, and I feel like I'm being dissected under her intense scrutiny. The only thing that doesn't surprise me about her is the gum bubble that she snaps. "Ava. Yeah, I've heard about

you."

Somehow intimidated by this strange child, I glance toward Kellan beside me. He's acting like this is a normal office visit, so I try to do the same, telling myself that she's some sort of professional and not a neighborhood kid. "What exactly have you heard?"

Her nose wrinkles. "Many things. Some true, some not. But that's not important right now." Grabbing a pen, she jabs it toward the chairs in front of her desk. "Sit down. Why are you here?"

Kellan and I exchange a glance before taking our seats.

10:03

200 Ava: Steve (1)

"We received a phone call," he begins, his tone grave. "A mechanical voice, threatening Ava's friend Lisa's life if Ava doesn't go to the city."

Steve's brows draw together as she stares at me, and I realize that there are several black balls pierced into her eyebrows. Who would do that to a minor? It makes me wonder if the temporary tattoo is actually temporary. "The city? Which one?"

"We aren't positive," I admit, my stomach twisting. "The voice didn't specify. But it's probably the Unregistered city."

"Which one?"

"The one Blackwood's been associating with." Kellan speaks up again. "And there's more. Her wolf couldn't understand what she was hearing. It's like whatever voice changer they used affects wolves."

Steve looks at me, with enormous eyes and a tiny face. For a second, it's almost like her entire body flickers.

Once I blink, the effect is gone.

Comentario 1

R

¡Has llegado al último capítulo!

16:03

Vote

10

FANDOM

Deslizar a la izquierda para continuar >

Ver todos

>