

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted #Unshift 211 - Read Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted Unshift 211 Unshift 211

211 Ava: Bringing Trouble to the Pack

There's a simple text on my phone, from an unknown number.

[UNKNOWN: Come to Dakota Sanctuary. We have a place for you. Now that you've unlocked your power, you're a danger to everyone around you.]

"Is everything okay?"

Marcus' eagle eyes must have noticed the blood draining from my face.

I don't want to lie to him, but I don't know how much he should know about the situation.

Then again, the man's my bodyguard.

How can he effectively guard me if he doesn't know what's going on?

Tell Lucas, Selene says, sounding grim.

I will. "This text. Probably the same as the unknown call from before." Handing Marcus my phone, I watch as his face zones out to inform Kellan or Jericho of the situation. Or both of them. Probably both.

My gaze flicks to the book, but the words that had appeared moments ago are gone, leaving only those illegible runes once again. The cryptic message lingers in my mind, unsettling in its implications.

I don't like this, Ava, Selene says, her voice laced with concern. It feels like we're being herded into something.

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The thought of being manipulated, of being led down a path I didn't choose, brings nothing but unease

What are our choices right now? I ask, hating the tremor in my mental voice. If my power really is a danger to everyone around

me...

I trail off, not wanting to finish that thought. The idea that I can hurt the people I care about, that my mere presence could put them at risk, is a heavy weight on my chest.

I've already hurt so many people.

But leaving isn't an option.

So what the fuck am I supposed to do?

It feels like I'm being forced into making a bad decision. There has to be another way, right? Like Vanessa said—I was always thinking in black and white. So, now I need to find gray. Or orange. Or whatever other color it could possibly be.

Somehow.

Lucas' face flashes through my mind, and I can already imagine his reaction to this new development. Can he really keep me safe from my own power? Can I keep him safe?

The Unregistered city is an unknown, Selene says. We need to talk to someone we can trust.

But the only lead we have is Sister Miriam, and Lucas doesn't trust her.

I don't necessarily trust her, either—but I don't think she intends me harm.

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Your power is a concern, Selene admits, though I can hear the reluctance in her voice. But...

Her concern mirrors mine.

Funny; before, when we had no one to rely on, we were ready to take so many risks. Selene wasn't as worried as now.

But with the people we care about warning us, time after time, about our safety?

After the vampire attacks?

She's learned caution.

So have I.

Marcus clears his throat, drawing my attention. "Kellan and Jericho are on their way," he says, handing the phone back to me.

I nod, trying to quell the rising panic in my chest. Kellan and Jericho will know what to do. They'll have a plan. They have to.

Don't always rely on others to do your work for you, Ava. You have to do it, too.

Fair. But there's nothing that comes to mind...

And my plans in the past have led to trouble.

But you successfully found freedom in Cedarwood, didn't you?

Did I?

With Mrs. Elkins' arrival, it's been a niggling doubt in my head.

Did I find freedom?

Or was it the first stage of someone's grand plan?

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That's just paranoia, Selene murmurs, but I can tell she's not sure, either.

The Unregistered city. A place where the laws of the world don't. apply. Where vampires and other creatures roam unchecked. The thought of venturing into such a place...

And Lisa's already there.

She's been there for so long.

I could go. I could save her.

But I don't have the training, and I'm... what, some sort of exploding time bomb of magical power?

My brain just keeps rushing in circles, making me dizzy with the force of my indecision and panic.

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If only I were like my family. A bizarre thing to think in a moment like this, but even I have to admit that Jessa was never one to panic. Phoenix, either. And my father? I don't think I've seen him at any level past moderate concern in his entire life.

Then there's me.

Paranoia. Secrets. Worries. Uncertainty. I can't even figure out how to mend my relationship with a pack without getting advice from

Vanessa.

I didn't even realize how much damage I had done until she'd pointed it out.

It isn't like your family realizes how much damage they've done to

emulate them, Ava. They're nothing but either. Don't try to

you,

flaws.

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Selene's dry words bring a little relief, easing the pressure in my chest. And mortification.

Why would I ever look at my family as people to emulate?

Because you've been trained to, all your life.

"Sounds like a flimsy excuse when you know better," I mutter.

Marcus, to his credit, ignores me as he always does when I talk to Selene, glancing up only when Jericho and Kellan come rushing in.

Kellan holds out his hand, concern on his face. "Can I see your phone, Ava?"

I hand it over, watching as he scrutinizes the text message, his frown deepening with each passing second. Jericho's gaze is intense, studying me like I'm a puzzle he's trying to solve.

"We should talk to Steve," Kellan says, looking up from the phone. "See if she can get any information from this message."

I shake my head, doubting that Steve will find anything more than what's already there. "I don't think it'll help. Kellan, It feels like I'm being herded to the city, like I don't have a choice."

Jericho sits on the window ledge and leans forward, his elbows resting on his knees. "We've been dancing around this for too long. We know you're different from other shifters, and we know that Selene is your wolf. But these powers of yours? We need to know more. From you, not anyone else."

I take a deep breath, trying to organize my thoughts. "It's hard to explain. It's like I have this hidden well of energy inside me, and sometimes it just... spills out." I pick up the book, flipping through

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the blank pages. "And then there's this. It shows me things, but I don't understand what they mean, and no one else can see them."

Jericho stands abruptly, leaving the room. He returns a moment later with a pen and paper, handing them to me. "Copy what you see in the book."

I nod, opening the book to the first page. The symbols are there, as always, and I begin to sketch them out. But as soon as I finish the last stroke, the design vanishes from the paper, leaving it blank

once more.

I stare at the empty page, shocked. "What the..."

Ava, Selene says, her voice grim. Write down every symbol, one by one. Hurry.

"You think you know what this is?" I ask, already starting on the

next symbol.

It might be a coincidence, but it's similar to an ancient language I learned long ago. My memories are a bit fuzzy, though, so we need to get this down quickly.

I nod, my hand flying across the page as I copy each symbol, watching as they disappear in turn, Kellan and Jericho watch silently, their expressions growing more concerned with each vanishing design.

I finish the last symbol, setting down the pen with a shaky hand. "That's all of them. Do you know what it means, Selene?"

I caught a few that I recognize. Mostly elements, and the Fae. I didn't understand them all. It hurts my head to think of them.

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"Elements and... Fae? As in, a specific Fae, or just in general?"

In general.

"Ava," Jericho warns suddenly, "Being a witch will come with a lot of problems. Especially if you're intending to become the Luna of a wolf pack. Have you and Lucas discussed this?"

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Jericho's words leave me reeling. "No, he hasn't said anything." I can't keep the surprise from my voice. "But I'm aware it's not normal. How can any of this be normal?" I wave a hand over my body in frustration. "It's unknown territory for all of us, but Lucas. says we can get through it together.

His eyes narrow. "Witches aren't well regarded in history. There will be pushback from those who want nothing to do with a witch, even one born from a pack."

Kellan shifts uneasily, conflict etched on his face. "Ultimately, the Westwood wolves will accept their alpha's mate." His words are confident, but his tone is not.

"If Lucas is hell-bent on forcing Ava down their throats, there will be alpha challenges." Jericho's words are a grim warning.

And he's not wrong.

Alpha challenges are a right of any wolf in the pack.

If Lucas chooses an unsuitable Luna—me—there will be outraged wolves ready to challenge his status within his pack. It's why I can't take the responsibility lightly. Why I can't take the title as my due, even when some of the guards use it for me.

I don't want to be Lucas' weakness.

I want to be his strength. His partner.

A Luna isn't just their alpha's mate; she is a leader in her own right.

"I've never wanted to become Luna until the pack accepts me. That

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doesn't change."

Jericho's expression softens slightly. "I'm not trying to hurt your feelings, Ava. But I need to know if you're willing to fight for your place in the pack despite all odds."

"Jericho, stop borrowing trouble," Kellan interjects, but Jericho rounds on him.

"We wolves are superstitious and loyal to our lore. With everything going on and the increase in vampire presence, a witch won't be looked at kindly."

"Why would it be a problem when wolves once worked with witches? They called them magicians." I can't hide my confusion at the history I've learned from Selene.

Jericho shakes his head. "I've never learned of witches working with wolves, only of those who wished to gain control over humans

and wolves."

Glancing at Selene, I ask, "How do vampires see witches?"

"I don't know." Jericho's admission hangs heavy in the air. "The Unregistered communities have been around for a long time, effectively segregating many from our world. Common knowledge is no longer common."

"Have either of you ever been there?" I ask, looking between them.

They both shake their heads. "We've lost several scouts trying to learn more about it," Kellan admits

I can't shake the feeling that we're missing crucial information. Why do Sister Miriam and this unknown person seem so sure I'll

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enter the city? "How much does Steve know about the

Unregistered city? She seems familiar with it, even calls it by a different name."

Kellan frowns. "She's told us she has no information to give."

Latching onto those words, I cling to them like a lifeline. "That doesn't mean she doesn't know anything. It's just that she doesn't want to give you the information you're looking for."

"That's... possible," Kellan concedes after a moment.

"We should visit Steve." I'm talking to Kellan, but Jericho interrupts again, bringing us back full circle.

"Ava, do you intend to fight for your position by Lucas's side?"

I meet his gaze unflinchingly. "I will never give up my place as

Lucas's mate."

"What will you do if you have to choose between your magic and your mate?"

"Lucas." There's no hesitation in my answer.

Jericho nods, seemingly satisfied, but Kellan rounds on him, fury in his eyes. "Stop interfering. This isn't even a concern yet. Ava isn't a witch. She's a shifter, just like the rest of us."

"The position of Luna is a concern of every wolf in the pack."

Jericho's voice is steel. "I need to know that the Luna will work for

the pack over all others. No Alpha and no Luna can lead a pack with split loyalties."

His words settle uneasily in my gut, a disquiet I can't quite understand.

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"I won't put the pack in any more danger. I can't do that again." Meeting Jericho's gaze, then Kellan's, I add, "I've learned my lesson. I want to fight with all of you. I want to keep every Westwood wolf safe. What power I have, I want to wield it for a better tomorrow for my pack. For my mate."

"I know that, Ava," Kellan says, but Jericho just grunts.

"Remember that resolve. You'll need to stand by it when the challenges come."

The ride to Steve's office is silent. It's a different kind of silence to our normal, and Kellan seems distracted as he drives.

"Jericho seems convinced there will be challenges if Lucas announces me as his Luna." May as well address the elephant in the room.

He glances toward me out of the side of his eye, before returning his attention to the road. "Jericho's a paranoid old man."

"Is he?" Jericho's always seemed to have good advice.

Kellan sighs, shifting in his seat. "Jericho was once a beta who followed his alpha's orders blindly. Unfortunately, he ended up causing the deaths of the previous pack leaders, Lucas' parents. Ever since, he's been hip-deep in conspiracy theories, and devoted his time to training the younger generation in case of war."

"How did they die?"

Kellan shakes his head, his knuckles white on the steering wheel. "That's for Lucas to share, when he's ready."

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Tilting my head, I say, "It isn't like it's a secret. I can ask anyone in the pack."

Kellan glances at me, his gray eyes unreadable. "You sure you'll get the actual truth that way?"

The official story may not match the facts, Selene murmurs in my mind. Somehow, her presence feels stronger today, despite being

so far away.

"I don't even know the official story," I mutter, rubbing my temples. The more I learn about Westwood, the more questions I have.

"Good." Kellan's voice is firm. "There's nothing wrong with not knowing. It doesn't affect how you perceive Jericho. He's a good man, Ava. Loyal to a fault." Yet his voice is bitter and cold, at odds

with his words.

I study Kellan's profile, the tension in his jaw. "Why do you hate your father so much?"

Kellan's laugh is humorless. "I don't hate Jericho. I just... I've heard too many conspiracy theories, dealt with too much paranoia and false alarms. It wears on you, after a while."

I nod, letting the silence stretch between us. It's clear Kellan doesn't want to discuss it further.

But Jericho seems to be the most knowledgeable of all of us.

Dismissing his concerns as paranoia seems wrong—but I haven't seen him over years. My experience is not the same.

I can't keep the silence going after all. "You believe him now though, don't you?"

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He sighs, leaning back against the seat and steering with one hand. "He's brought up valid and logical concerns."

“These are also valid and logical, aren’t they? Being a fit Luna- risking alpha challenges...”

“Alpha challenges are already rare. For a young wolf to risk death by challenging a reigning alpha, it requires a lot of courage.” Kellan throws me a reassuring smile. “It might be rough, but they’ll accept you. They trust Lucas. And in our fated mate connections.”

Letting the subject drop, I stare out the window, unable to stop the vague feeling that Kellan and Lucas are making a giant mistake by brushing off Jericho’s concerns as paranoia.

It feels a little like Jericho’s the only one who seems to understand a little of what’s going on, who’s seen the world past our sense of normal, and I wonder if Lucas and Kellan are too blinded by their

egos.

Or is it me, making bad judgments again?

The uncertainty makes my head hurt.

Wolves have always been insular, even as Lycans, Selene’s voice echoes in my mind, a hint of sadness coloring her tone. It’s in our nature. Sometimes to our downfall

Kellan pulls the car into the familiar, dilapidated parking lot. The cracked asphalt and faded paint lines stand in stark contrast to the sleek, powerful SUV we’re in.

We stand out like sore thumbs.

It’s amazing Steve doesn’t get unwanted visitors after we come by.

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It’s like our presence screams, “There’s something important in here!” If she wanted to operate in hiding, working with Kellan and Lucas seems to be the worst way to achieve that.

There’s something different in the air. It’s a subtle thing that sends a prickle down my back, like an itch that doesn’t want to leave. Helpless, I scratch at the side of my neck, easing a little bit of the feeling as I follow behind Kellan, my legion of guards behind me.

For a moment, the entire neighborhood seems to flicker, like a glitch in reality. Rundown buildings and overgrown lots shimmer, replaced by gleaming storefronts and manicured gr

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213 Ava: It's Gone

"Did you see that?" I ask Kellan, my voice barely above a whisper.

He glances at me, brows furrowed and body alert. "See what?"

I shake my head, not quite sure how to explain the strange phenomenon. "Nothing. Never mind."

As we exit the car, I can't help but glance behind us, taking in the six guards that follow in our wake. Their presence should be

reassuring, a sign of Lucas' commitment to my safety, but instead it only serves to heighten my unease.

There's something in the air, a buzzing energy that sets my teeth on edge and makes my skin feel too tight. It's like the world is holding its breath, waiting for something to happen.

We enter the building, our footsteps echoing in the empty hallways. Kellan leads the way, broad shoulders tense beneath his suit jacket. I trail behind him, my heart hammering in my chest as we descend the stairs to the basement, noticing that there's no light coming from below.

Kellan and I both pull out our phones to use as flashlights, but don't stop our descent.

When we reach the bottom, I stop short, my breath catching in my throat. The office, the reception desk, the colorful artwork that had adorned the walls—it's all gone. In its place is nothing but a bare, concrete room, devoid of any sign of life. As if no office had ever existed. No drywall. No electric wires.

Just... nothing.

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"What the hell?*" Kellan mutters, his eyes scanning the empty space.

1 step forward, my fingers trailing along the rough wall. "It was here, wasn't it? We didn't take a wrong turn?"

A silly question. It's the same building, in the same neighborhood.

Nothing's changed.

And yet Steve isn't here.

Kellan shakes his head, his expression g...n. "No, we didn't. Something's not right."

This place reeks of magic, Selene growls, her hackles raised. Be careful, Ava.

My throat is tight, making it hard to swallow. The air seems to crackle with energy, making the fine hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Every instinct screams at me to run, to get as far away from this place as possible.

Something was never right about Steve and her little child receptionist.

About the office in the basement of a decrepit building.

The way I felt nauseated when I looked into her eyes.

"Kellan, I think Steve's a-"

The world tilts, reality blurring at the edges as the air is sucked from my lungs. I crumple to my knees, one hand clawing at my chest, the other scrabbling against the rough concrete floor. Beside me, Kellan gasps, his face contorted in pain as he struggles to breathe.

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Darkness engulfs us, the light from our phones snuffed out like candles in a hurricane. I'm drowning, suffocating, my lungs screaming for oxygen. Tears streamh down my face, hot and stinging, as I silently beg for mercy, for release from this torment.

And then, as suddenly as it began, or maybe a hundred years later,
it's over.

My chest heaving with great, shuddering brea, feeding oxygen to my starving lungs. Sunlight sears my eyes, blinding after the impenetrable darkness. Spots dance across my vision as I try to make sense of my surroundings.

We're in the parking lot, sprawled on the asphalt like discarded ragdolls. The guards are scattered around us, some on their knees, others flat on their backs, all of them gasping and coughing as they suck in lungfuls of air.

But the building is gone.

Where once stood an abandoned structure housing Steve's office,

there is now nothing but empty space. No rubble, no debris, not even a single brick to mark its former presence. Just overgrown

grass.

As if it never existed at all.

I stare at the vacant lot, my mind reeling. "I think Steve's a Fae," I say lamely, the words falling from my lips like lead weights.

Kellan pushes himself to his feet, his face ashen. "No shit," he mutters, dusting off his pants with shaking hands.

How could I have been so blind? The signs were there all along- the strange energy that surrounded Steve, the way her office.

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seemed to exist outside of reality, the unease that coiled in my gut every time I looked into her eyes.

And now, this. A building that vanishes into thin air, leaving no trace of its existence. It's the kind of magic that only the Fae are capable of.

At least, I can only assume it's Fae magic.

It's definitely magic of some sort.

Kellan runs a hand through his hair, his expression grim. "We need to tell Lucas. If Steve's a Fae, she could be working with the vampires. I don't know how much information she's funneled their

way."

The idea of a Fae working with vampires is a new level of terrifying.

“We need to find out what she wants,” I say, my voice steadier than I feel. “Why she was helping us, what her endgame is. It’s possible she’s not working with them at all. Just because she isn’t a wolf, doesn’t mean she’s not an ally.”

Kellan looks doubtful, but I have a gut feeling that I’m right.

But where is she, and why is the building gone?

He pulls out his phone, his fingers flying over the screen as he sends a message to Lucas. I watch him, my heart pounding in my chest as I try to process everything that’s happened.

Steve, the quirky hacker who seemed like an ally, is a Fae. The building where we met her, where she helped us track down information on the vampires, has vanished into thin air. And now,

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we’re left with more questions than answers, and a growing sense of unease that threatens to swallow me whole.

Meanwhile, some strange person keeps insisting I need to enter the Unregistered city, domain of the vampires.

Where my family is supposedly hiding.

Everything is pointing at this city. Too neat. Too tidy. Selene’s voice in the back of my head is suspicious.

“Kellan, I think we need to contact Sister Min. I don’t know if I’ll be able to bring anyone with me, but I don’t think we can put it off any longer.”

This time, I’m not asking for permission. I’m back to demanding, and a part of me shrivels inside, wondering if I’m doing the right thing.

I went from willfully doing as I thought was right, to not doing anything at all, standing complacent as Lucas ordered me safe.

But we’ve made no progress. None

This can’t go on forever, and too much happening has to do with

“Selene went with you last time, didn’t she?”

I nod.

“Was she touching you at the time?”

Thinking back as hard as I can, I shake my head. “I don’t think so. I can’t remember”

Kellan nods. “I can’t leave Blackwood. Let’s get back to the alpha

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lodge. You can take your guards with you. Just make sure they’re all close when you call her.”

“Lucas won’t like it-”

“He doesn’t like when you run into danger without adequate protection. He never said you have to live like his subordinate.”

Comentario

Deja el primer comentano para este cap

Vote

Unshift 214

214 Ava: Dressing for Danger

Lucas doesn’t answer Kellan’s text, or my phone call.

Probably busy again with the Council.

Stretching, I test the range of motion in the lightweight tactical clothing Kellan provided. The fabric is breau..able, but I’m already sweating beneath the impact-resistant layer in the shirt. A knife rests heavy on my belt, and the boots feel stiff, promising blisters if I have to run for my life. But of course the beta insisted, so here I am, trussed up like an operative minus the arsenal.

The bodyguards have all ditched their suits for similar getups, though several sport guns on their hips. I turn to Marcus, brow raised. “Why don’t I get a gun?”

He barely glances my way. “A gun in untrained hands is just asking for trouble.”

I purse my lips but concede his point with silence. Using it would require an instruction manual, and there’s no time for that in an

emergency.

Still seems like something I should probably learn, considering that my physical prowess is much worse than the average shifter.

The door swings open and I blink in surprise as Vanessa strides in, kitted out like some special ops soldier. She catches my stare and explains, “Jericho updated me.”

Something in her gaze gives me pause. Is that pride? Whatever it is, I shift uncomfortably under the unexpected approval. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

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214 Ava. Dressing for Danger

Vanessa’s lips quirk. “Lately, you’ve seemed paralyzed by

indecision, scared to make the wrong move, I’m glad to see you’ve found your confidence again.”

A humorless laugh escapes me. Confidence? I’m trembling in my boots. Literally. “I’m not confident at all. I’m constantly second-guessing myself, wondering what the right call is.”

Vanessa steps closer, her voice low and intense. “Stop admitting that. Everyone needs their leaders to project confidence, even if

it’s an act.”

Doubt claws at my mind, insidious whispers reminding me of all the ways I could fail. All the lives I’m risking with every choice. How can I possibly-

No. I cut off the spiral before it takes hold, squaring my shoulders and lifting my chin. Fake it ‘til you make it, right? I meet Vanessa’s gaze, hoping she can’t see the cracks in my facade.

“You’re right. No more wavering.” The words taste like ash on my tongue, but I force them out anyway. “It’s time to act.”

Vanessa nods, something like satisfaction flickering across her face. "Well, we'll be behind you, in case anything happens." Holding out her hand, I notice that she's holding the candle I asked for.

"Here."

"Thanks."

Marcus's hands are everywhere, tugging at the straps and buckles of my gear, testing the fit with an intensity that borders on invasive. I squirm under his scrutiny, biting back a yelp when he yanks a strap too tight.

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"Three boots are going to kill me grumble, flexing my toes against the rigid confines.

Marcus pauses, fixing me with a stare that can cut glass. "You dressing for a fashion show or a mission?"

Glancing away, I mutter under my breath, "It's not about how they look. I just want my feet to survive?"

He grunts, and I think it might be approval, but it's hard to tell when he punctuates it with a smack to my back that nearly sends me stumbling. I shoot him a scowl, but he's already turning to two other bodyguards, more of the older wolves under Jericho's authority.

"Ava, this is Liam and Adam. They'll be coming with us. Remember, if I tell you to jump, you jump. Don't stop to ask how high, and don't argue."

I nod, recognizing their faces from the constant rotation of suited figures that shadow my every move. It's strange, finally putting names to the stoic expressions. "Got it. Nice to officially meet you."

They incline their heads, professional to a fault, and I wonder if they're as nervous as I am beneath their unflappable exteriors.

Probably not.

They've had a lifetime of these kinds of situations.

The door swings open, and Kellan strides in, his gaze sweeping over us in a silent inspection. I stand a little straighter, feeling like a soldier awaiting orders.

He comes to a stop in front of me, his eyes boring into mine with

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an intensity that steals my breath. “Be careful out there, Ava.”

I force a grin, hoping it looks more confident than it feels. “Careful? Always. Besides, it’ll be weird not having you around. We spend way too much time together as it is.”

Kellan doesn’t laugh. If anything, his expression grows more serious. “I mean it, Ava. Be careful. Stay with your guards at all

times.”

I’ll take care of you, Selene chimes in, slinking to my side. This time, I’m not leaving your side.

Sober beneath the weight of Kellan’s concern, I nod. “I will. Liam and Adam will think I’m a barnacle.”

He holds my gaze a moment longer, searching for something, before stepping back with a sharp nod. “Good. Make sure to keep your phone on you. Don’t hesitate to call for backup if anything goes wrong.”

He’s acting like we’re about to head into war. In his head, that’s probably true. Still, it’s hard not to feel like we’re overreacting to a trip to see Sister Miriam.

Better to be prepared than be caught pooping in the bushes.

Staring at Selene, I can’t even repeat her words out loud. Pooping in the bushes? Really? That’s what you went with?

Her mental shrug is unrepentant. Wolves don’t have the same hang-ups about bodily functions as humans do.

“Okay.” I take a deep breath, trying to calm the butterflies rioting in my stomach. This is it. No more hiding, no more waiting for others

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to make the tough calls.

But still-

“If something goes wrong, what’s the plan?”

“We go in.” Kellan meets my eyes. “No matter the cost.”

The doubt on my face is clear. I know it is, because I’m letting it all out.

“We won’t be stupid about it, but if anything happens to you, it will be an act of war.” He hesitates for a second, appearing to struggle over saying what he wants to say.

But I can see it on his face, and I don’t blame him for thinking it.

“Don’t start a war, Ava.”

I’m not planning on it.

I just hope I don’t let them down.

Comentario O

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Deja el primer comentario para este capitulo.

Vote

Unshift 215

215 Ava: Going to Sister Miriam Again (I)

The candle wick flickers to blazing life. Marcus and Liam’s hands are heavy on my shoulders, grounding me as Adam and Vanessa complete the chain. Selene’s fur brushes my leg, a silent reminder

of her presence.

I focus on Sister Miriam, on my desperate need to understand... everything.

My powers. The city. These phone calls. Steve. The Fae. The Moon Goddess. Lisa. And that damned Mad Prince.

The flame flickers, casting eerie shadows across the faces of those gathered around me. I close my eyes, picturing Sister Miriam’s enigmatic smile, her ruby eyes glittering with secrets.

Sister Miriam, I need you.

I hold my breath, waiting for the rush of magic, the dizzying sensation of being transported across space and time.

But nothing happens.

I open my eyes, blinking in confusion. We're still in my room, surrounded by the trappings of my everyday life. Kellan and

Jericho exchange a glance, their expressions a mix of curiosity and concern.

"When's it supposed to happen?" Kellan asks, his brow furrowing.

A sinking feeling takes hold of my gut. "I don't know. It worked before."

Staring at the candle, I whisper Sister Miriam's name, each syllable

15:00 C

215 Ava Gloing to Sistor Miriam Again (1)

a desperate plea. "Sister Miriam. Sister Miriam, please"

The silence stretches, broken only by my harsh breathing. Selene presses closer to my leg,

I'm about to try again when my phone rings, the sudden sound making us all jump. I fumble for it, my hands shaking as I see the unknown number on the screen.

"Hello?" My voice cracks, betraying my nerves.

"Are you an idiot?" a robotic voice demands. "Trying to access your power now could kill everyone around you!"

Jericho and Kellan stare intently at the phone, and I put it on speaker.

"Who is this?"

The robotic voice sighs, the sound harsh and grating through the phone's speaker. "You're taking too long."

I glance around at the others, searching their faces for any hint of understanding. Kellan and Jericho exchange a bewildered look, while Marcus and Liam simply shake their heads.

“Who are you?” I demand, my grip tightening on the phone. “Tell me.”

“I’m trying to help you,” the voice snaps, frustration evident despite the robotic distortion. There’s an edge to their words, something that doesn’t translate through whatever filter they’re using.

“You’ve tapped into your power,” the voice continues, and my heart skips a beat.

“How do you know that?” I whisper

15:58

217

215 Ava: Going to Sister Miriam Again (1)

The line goes silent for a moment, the absence of sound almost deafening. Then, abruptly, the speaker changes the subject. “Lisa will soon be in safe hands. That should help your worries.”

Ice floods my veins. “What do you mean? What have you done with her?”

“You—need to hurry up,” the voice repeats, ignoring n questions. “Time is running out.”

Kellan leans in, his brow furrowed. “Who is this? What do you want with Ava?”

“I won’t talk to any wolves,” the speaker snarls, and the line goes dead.

I stare at the phone in my hand, my heart pounding. The candle flickers, casting eerie shadows across the room.

“They said they won’t talk to wolves,” I tell Kellan, who huffs out a long breath, looking thoughtful.

“What the hell was that?” Jericho demands, his eyes narrowed.

“I don’t know,” I whisper, my mind reeling. “But they know about my powers, and they said something about Lisa. Said she would be safe.”

Kellan runs a hand through his hair, his expression grim. "For all we know, their safe is just another danger."

I nod, my throat tight. This person won't answer questions, and knows too much.

"What about Sister Miriam?" Vanessa asks, her voice soft. "Why didn't she come?"

215 Ava: Going to Sister Miriam Again (1)

I shake my head, staring at the candle's flickering flame. "I don't know. Maybe she can't, or maybe she won't."

The silence stretches, heavy with all of our unanswered questions.

"We can't just sit here," I say finally, my voice shaking. "We have to do something."

"You do look dressed for the part," a voice agree. tartling all of us.

Sister Miriam melts from the shadows. Her black dress clings to her figure, and she walks with mincing steps. There's a cigarette holder dangling from her fingers, a slender line of smoke curling toward the ceiling. Something I've only seen an old movie once.

Kellan and Jericho are in front of me before I can blink, a wall of muscle and menace. Even Vanessa steps forward, her gentle face set in lines of determination.

But Sister Miriam merely arches a brow, her ruby lips curving in a smile that's equal parts amusement and danger. "Is that

greet a guest, child?"

"Sister Miriam! How did you...?"

any way to

No one relaxes, even after hearing her identity. Unfazed by the hostility aimed toward her, she takes a long drag from her cigarette, the ember flaring bright in the dimness of the room. "You called me, did you not?"

I swallow hard, my heart hammering against my ribs. "I did, but I thought it didn't work."

"Because you didn't come to my home?" She laughs, but it sounds oddly affectionate. "Oh, Ava. You have so much to learn."

215 Ava: Going to Sister Miriam Again (1)

Kellan shifts, his shoulders tense. "Who are you?"

Sister Miriam's gaze flicks to him, her eyes glittering. "I am many things, wolf. But to you, I am an ally. For now"

+27

"For now?" Jericho growls, his hand twitching toward the gun at his hip.

"Peace," I say, stepping forward to touch the back of his shoulder. "She's here to help." They're both on edge "er that phone call, and

so am I.

Sister Miriam inclines her head. "Indeed. Though I must say, your choice of companions is... interesting"

I take a deep breath, forcing myself to meet her gaze. "Sister Miriam, this is Kellan, Jericho, Marcus, Liam, Adam, and Vanessa. They're friends. Pack."

Something flickers in her eyes, gone too fast to name. "I see."

"How did you get in here?" Kellan demands, his voice rough. "We have wards, guards..."

Sister Miriam waves a hand, dismissive. "Your wards are child's play, wolf. You should know this by now. As for your guards? They never had a chance to spot me."

I shoulder my way forward, putting myself between her and the others. "You said you were here to help?"

She takes another drag from her cigarette, the smoke wreathing her face. "In a manner of speaking. You've gotten yourself into quite the predicament, haven't you, child?"

The condescension in her tone has me bristling. "I didn't exactly

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215 Ava: Going to Sister Miriam Again (1)

plan for any of this." But I realize how childish my response is as soon as the words come out of my mouth.

Of course I didn't plan for any of this. That doesn't change the fact that it's happening. It doesn't absolve me of the responsibility. A hard lesson, learned from the loss of too many lives.

"No, I don't suppose you did." She sighs, the und ancient and weary. "But here we are."

“Can you help us find Lisa?” Kellan asks, his voice tight.

Sister Miriam’s gaze slides to him, considering. “We already know where she is. I suspect you’re asking me to help you save her, but that’s not why I’m here.”

“Then why are you here?” I ask, my hands clenching into fists at my sides.

She smiles, slow and dangerous. “To teach you, of course. You’ve finally awakened your power, Ava. But you have no idea how to control it.”

I swallow hard, my mouth suddenly dry. “I don’t...”

“Don’t what? Want to learn?” She laughs, the sound harsh and grating. “You don’t have a choice, child. Your power will consume you if you don’t learn to master it.”

Comentario 0

R

Deja el pémer comentario para este capítuld

15:58

Vota

11

1

FANDOM

Unshift 216

216 Ava: Going to Sister Miriam Again (II)

216 Ava: Going to Sister Miriam Again (II)

“What do you mean, consume her?” Jericho demands, his eyes

narrowed.

Sister Miriam sighs, flicking ash from the end of her cigarette. “Magic is a living thing, wolf. It has a will of its own. And right now, Ava’s magic is wild, untamed. If she doesn’t le to control it, it

will control her.”

When they still stand there, waiting for more, she rolls her eyes, making even that seem almost elegant, even if the rest of her face is too blank to make it seem natural. "Your girl will go boom, wolf. And everything around her will pay the price."

"What's the difference between now and before?"

Sister Miriam's brows draw together slowly, just a little out of sync. Sometimes, she acts so naturally. Other times, it's like she can't

control her entire face. This is one of those times, and the wrongness of it causes shudders of repulsion. "Before?"

It's a struggle to find the correct wording. "When I first got my powers. I went into heat. It was painful."

"Ah." Her brow smooths out almost instantly, and it's fascinating. Like there was something beneath her skin, and it just dashed out, leaving it flat and expressionless.

"Yes. It was more of a half—

awakening." She holds out her hand, tight as a fist.

"Once, you were empty. Then, small cracks appeared, allowing the power to flow within." She opens her fist a little, spreading her fingers, as though holding onto an invisible ball. "This is the state

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of most of you as children. You have power coursing through you. Some of you will tap into this power in times of immense stress." Memories of running through the forest, almost as fast as Lucas in his wolf form, flash through my mind. Sister Miriam nods, seeing whatever expression on my face tips her off.

"You have experienced this. But you cannot feel it, no matter how hard you try. Right?"

Before I can even nod, she opens her palm flat and now, you have made a connection with the power inside you. It's a contract, of sorts. Can you feel it? A warmth in your chest?"

"Yes." My answer is a mere whisper; hearing her say what only I've experienced is surreal.

"It invites you to touch it. To tap into it. To use it. But, Ava," and she snaps her fist closed, before bringing it back to her side. "You have no control over that power. Even

now, you can only access a flicker of your potential. And that is still enough to level several houses around you.”

“How do you know all of this?” Jericho demands, grabbing my arm and yanking me behind him. Kellan closes the ranks so I can barely see over their shoulders. “You’re doing a lot of talking but no real explanations. You know too much for someone who isn’t around. How? What spies do you have on our land?”

“Your land?” Sister Miriam sneers at the old shifter, and for the first

time I can feel a violent intent coming from her direction. “Your land. That is what you are taught, isn’t it? That your wolf territory is sacred. That any who come within are trespassers on your land.

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210 Ava: Going to Sister Miriam Again (II)

“The Westwood Pack has taken over the Blackwood territory,” Kellan asserts coolly, “It has been approved by the Council and by the highest level of human government. Until such a time as a new leader has been established for the Blackwood Pack, Alpha Lucas Westwood is the leader of this territory.”

“Ah, yes,” she mocks. “Your petty little laws.”

“Petty?” Kellan’s back tenses, and I grab onto his elbow, squeezing hard in a reminder for him to hold back.

We want answers from Sister Miriam; not a squabble.

“Sister Miriam, can you answer my questions?” I interrupt, squeezing between the two men. They don’t let me at first, but Jericho eventually grunts and steps to the side, letting me through.

“Of course, my dear.” She’s once again calm toward me, with no hint of the fury she harbors against the two shifters.

Is it because I’m more human?

“We were working with someone named Steve. She disappeared. Everything about her disappeared. The building she was in doesn’t exist anymore. It’s like it was never there.”

Sister Miriam’s entire body straightens, her ruby eyes narrowing. “You worked with the Fae? Child, what were you thinking? You don’t know enough about this world to step foot in it without a

mentor.”

“How do you know she’s a Fae?” Kellan interjects with a frown. “We haven’t even told you anything about her yet.”

“Illusion is a Fae’s bread and butter, wolf.” Sister Miriam bares her

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216 Ava: Going to Sister Miriam Again (II)

teeth at him, and for the first time, I can see her long canines.

All of the wolves behind me growl; even Vanessa.

The strange woman licks her canines, never one blinking as she stares Kellan down. “You know nothing about the Fae, and yet you are prepared to walk into the fire with your Luna. It is

commendable to be that much of an idiot, I suppose. But wolves are always frantic over their mates. Don’t worry, you pathetic canine soul. Your precious mate will be in good hands soon, far from the Mad Prince’s tower.”

Her eyes dart toward mine. “Did you make a contract with this Fae? Eat anything she gave you?”

I shake my head.

Sister Miriam relaxes a little. “It is unusual to see a Fae in the human lands, but not impossible. They are an adventurous people.”

“Should I be worried? She disappeared not long after we went to her.”

She shakes her head, her long black hair swaying with the gentle movement. “No, child. It is likely that she felt some sort of danger, and escaped. There are many out to get a wayward Fae. It is a hard life.” Her eyes pin me in place. “Much like it is to be a little

witchling, unaware of the extent of her power. Did you know that you’re now like a beacon for anyone in the area?”

“A beacon?” Startled, I can’t help the urge to glance down at myself.

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Unshift 217

217 Ava: Embracing Change (I)

“Those attuned to you could feel it immediately.” Sister Miriam looks me over with some curiosity. “Though I feel you won’t explain how this change happened to be, it is both blessing and a curse to you, as you are right now.”

There are so many questions rushing through my head, but I know she isn’t going to answer them. She’s too cryptic to explain how she knows what’s going on with me, or what she wants from me. So I switch tactics.

“Someone’s calling me. Texting me. Telling me to come to the city.”

“Yes. He is reckless and wild in his old age, but it is a teacher. He’s been waiting for quite some time, and is eager to meet a new student. They are quite rare these days.” Her eyes flicker toward everyone else in the room. “Though he does hate your people.”

That isn’t the answer I expect, and it throws me off. “Are you sure? He did want me to come to the city, but he also sounded very...” my voice trails off, unsure of how to explain how menacing his words sound, without ever having threatened me to my face.

“Strange? Blunt? Sadistic?” Sister Miriam tosses words at me, seeming to be genuine in her desire to help.

“Doomsday, maybe? At first I thought he was one of the people who took Lisa.”

“He, work with the likes of the Mad Prince?” Her lips curve in something like derision. “You should have no fear of that, little witch. You will be safe in his care. Access to your phone. Free reign

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217 Ava: Embracing Change (1)

of the city, with guards. You can even leave and see your alpha lover, if you so wish. We are not monsters there.”

Her last words are shot toward Kellan and Jericho.

The old man looks thoughtful, but Kellan continues to scowl. “Pretty words, with no guarantees.”

I sense only truth from the dhampir, Selene says, the most relaxed out of all of us. Even so, I can feel the wariness and caution emanating from her end of our bond.

“Can I bring my guards with me?” I wave a hand at them. “It would go a long way to assuring my safety in the city.”

Sister Miriam sighs, her gaze sweeping over the wolves

surrounding me. "It's too dangerous for pack wolves to enter the city, even with scent blockers."

Jericho's jaw tightens. "We're supposed to trust your protection alone? Why would a vampire even want to help Ava?"

"Vampires are driven by pleasure. Inherently selfish creatures." Kellan's eyes narrow at Sister Miriam.

She regards Jericho for a long, heavy moment. "I remember your situation well."

Jericho stiffens, his face paling.

"You did nothing wrong," Sister Miriam says, her voice almost gentle. "Some vampires, when they're too young, they can't control themselves. They make for great friends, being so close to humanity still. But that lack of control also makes them dangerous."

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217 Ava: Embracing Change (1)

Questions burn on my tongue, desperate to know more about what transpired between them. But Jericho's shock at Sister Miriam's knowledge keeps me silent.

Kellan's brow furrows with concern, but he doesn't speak.

Vanessa steps forward, taking advantage of the awkward silence. "What can you do to assure us of our Luna's safety?"

"What more must be done? I have done all this without any payment from the girl. And no gratitude." Sister Miriam arches a brow. You should know that vampires value their time. A contract is required for every transaction, and yet Ava has been forced into nothing. I've been quite generous, only to be treated like some sort of leper."

All of the wolves stare at her with suspicion, but guilt crawls in my gut.

Sister Miriam has yet to do anything to harm me, even as I harbor more and more suspicion against her. Even now, when I call her here, everything sounds as though she's an ally. And yet I can't

trust her.

It's not a good feeling.

"I'm sorry," I say, meeting her eyes and straightening my spine at the incredulous stare from Kellan. Jericho only watches me with a measuring gaze. "Truly. I do appreciate everything you've done for me. More than I can say."

She inclines her head, accepting my apology. "I understand your caution." Then she cuts her gaze toward Kellan. "But Ava must learn to wield her magic. The longer it remains untamed, the more

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217 Ava: Embracing Change (1)

dangerous it becomes. For her and everyone around her."

"How many of us can you bring with you safely?" I ask, feeling the depths of responsibility stir within my gut. I had already resolved to stop being so indecisive and make hard decisions in order to move forward; now, at the slightest sign of trouble, I'm waffling again.

This cannot go on.

She glances over us, looking thoughtful. "Two. The girl and," she points at Marcus, "that one. Those two will be your strongest

assets."

Liam and Adam both look as though they want to say something, but are too professional to open their mouths.

But I already know. Vanessa's wolf is stronger than most in this room. I'm not sure how she compares to Jericho or Kellan, but I

already know she's stronger than Vester, who ranks above any of my guards.

Sister Miriam has chosen the two most suitable and strongest guards in my arsenal.

Yes. Selene's mental voice seems stronger now, more assured. This is what I remember of the vampires. They are not inherently evil, and can be a strong ally.

It seems she's been going through her own mental struggles and doubting herself.

Many things I once believed true are now cast in doubt, she agrees, still sounding confused. I would be, too, if the entire world and truth around me had changed.

11.24

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217 Ava: Embracing Change (1)

“Okay. And Selene is okay to come with us?”

Sister Miriam’s lip curls a bit as she locks eyes with Selene, but something seems to pass between them, soothing the tense air that they’ve had toward each other since Sister Miriam called me a witch. “Yes. She is already under her own protection. They will only see her as a dog.” With an amused quirk of her lips, she adds, “She’ll fit right in.”

Taking a deep breath, I make my decision. We were already prepared to be in her territory before. This changes nothing. “Let’s go.”

Comentario 1

Ver todos

R

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11

1

FANDOM

Deslizar a la izquierda para continuar >

23

ENVIAR REGALO

Unshift 218

218 Ava: Embracing Change (II)

218 Ava: Embracing Change (II)

Traveling with a vampire is a lot less mystical than I expect. (1)

It's nothing like whatever fueled my magic travel to her home. There is no endless darkness, nor an expanse of red that blots out the existence of everything else. There's no sense of travel, no sense of suffocation.

Instead, Sister Miriam spreads an arm, and a shimmering gate appears before us, silvery-black and swirling on the inside.

"Since your guards are so wary, I shall allow one of them to go first. Then me. Then you, Ava, and the last guard. This gate will disperse after the last, or after thirty seconds. It's your choice."

Her warning is clear: Either come with her, or don't, but the choice is mine.

"Got it."

Marcus steps forward without a word, giving me a brusque nod before walking through the magical vortex, as tense as a man walking to his execution. He draws his gun before entering, and Sister Miriam says nothing, only allowing an amused twitch of her lips.

Before Sister Miriam enters, she glances toward Jericho. "That wolf who died, screaming about a vampire in the Blackwood territory. What was her name? Marjory?"

Kellan steps between them. "How do you know about-"

She shakes her head. "That vampire never existed. When you go

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218 Ava Embracing Chango (II)

through your investigation, remember that. He never existed,

Think of my advice as a free favor from a friend. It would have been a costly one." She winks in a way that should come across playful, but looks awkward on her not-quite-in-sync features, before stepping through the gate.

"I-damn it, she's gone. Ava, I don't think this is a good idea."

"I'm leaving. Marcus is already on the other side. I have my phone. I'll call you as soon as I'm there." Feeling terrible for ignoring Kellan's plight, I dash through the portal, hoping I'm making the right decision.

Vanessa's right behind me, giving me a warm sense of safety as I step through, prepared to feel some sort of otherworldly traveling experience.

But there's nothing.

One second ago, I was in my room.

Now, I'm in the middle of another room. It's large, with no furniture at all. Only Sister Miriam and Marcus are there.

There are no windows, only a ridiculous amount of lamps in various styles. Some look like street lamps. Others are more sleek, and modern. Some look like bizarre art deco styles that make no

reasonable sense to exist as a lamp versus an art piece.

"Welcome to the First Ward of Dakota Sanctuary, Ava Grey." Sister Miriam's eyes crinkle. "Was it that terrible?"

"Not at all."

Stepping forward, my boots thud against the smooth hardwood

17:18

218 Ava: Embracing Change (11)

floor, echoing in the near-empty space, save for all the lamps. There's a faint scent of citrus and spice, something cozy and fall-feeling, that settles my nerves. Marcus is at my side in an instant, his eyes sweeping over me with the efficiency of a trained bodyguard.

"You good?" His gruff voice is laced with concern.

I nod, offering a small smile. "I'm fine. Just... processing."

Vanessa moves past us, her gaze locked on the array of lamps scattered throughout the room. Her fingertips graze the surface of a particularly ornate piece, a wistful expression on her face. "I had one just like this when I was a kid. It sat on my bedside table."

Sister Miriam tilts her head, a smile playing at the corners of her lips. "Collecting things is a personal hobby of mine. I find joy in surrounding myself with objects that hold meaning or beauty."

Images of the bookshelves in Sister Miriam's home flash through my mind—row upon row of books, antique editions mingling with modern paperbacks. The sheer volume of knowledge contained within those pages is staggering.

"How many homes do you have?" The question slips out before I can stop it, my curiosity getting the better of me.

Sister Miriam waves a dismissive hand. "Oh, who keeps track of such a thing?"

Vanessa catches my eye, and we both grin. Who doesn't keep track

of their houses?

Who even has the money to lose track of how many properties

they own?

17:18

218 Ava Embracing Change (II)

Sister Miriam lives in a very different world than we do, and it has nothing to do with a shifter versus vampire mentality.

The portal behind us doesn't disappear, and Marcus frowns at it. "I thought it would dissipate after we entered?"

"Only the temporary gate on the other side. This one is permanent. You can touch it when it isn't activated."

Sister Miriam strides forward with confidence, reaching over to rap against the swirling gray-black smoke within the portal. Her knuckles ring against what sounds like glass, and Marcus leans forward to touch it, looking doubtful. Then his eyebrows raise in surprise, his hand sliding over the surface.

Sister Miriam laughs. "Many old vampires have acquired their own portals over the years."

Marcus mutters under his breath, "Well, that explains how they've been able to travel into pack lands so easily."

Sister Miriam inclines her head. "A simple question in my direction would have saved you a lot of time and trouble."

Marcus looks stunned by the revelation, his eyes wide and mouth slightly agape. Vanessa frowns thoughtfully, her brow furrowed as she processes this new information.

Sister Miriam leads us out of the room, and Lean't help but marvel at the sheer size of the mansion we've stepped into. It's like

walking through a museum, with clusters of collected items

displayed on every available surface. Antique vases mingle with modern art sculptures, while vintage photographs hang alongside abstract paintings.

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218 Ava: Embracing Change (II)

We have a lot to learn from this Sister Miriam, Selene murmurs.

We do, and—oh, shit, I didn't call Kellan.

"Hold on." Fumbling my phone out of its pocket, I see several texts from Kellan, with increasing exclamation marks after his question marks.

Vanessa peers over my shoulder as Sister Miriam waits patiently. "Oh, he's upset."

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"I said I'd call—damn, we were all so caught up in..." my voice trails off as I call him. He answers mid-ring.

"Aya! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Why do you sound so worried?" Glancing at Vanessa, who looks more amused than anything, I add, "I'm sorry I didn't call

right away. We were... distracted. It's interesting here. Like a

museum."

"That's fine. It's fine. As long as you're all okay." Kellan blows out a loud breath. "We tried calling you, but it wouldn't go through. I thought that damn bloodsucker lied."

"I can hear you," Sister Miriam calls out, a mocking lilt to her words.

"I thought Sister Miriam lied," he corrects himself. He must be talking through his teeth, the way his words are ground out.

She sighs. “Typical wolf. Thinking the worst. No, I did not lie. However, outside services cannot dial within. Once you’re in the city, you have access to our...” An elegant hand waves above her head in a vague gesture.

218 Ava: Embracing Change (II)

“Towers?” Vanessa offers.

“Yes. Those monstrosities that destroy our horizons. You will be able to contact anyone you wish, and from what I’ve heard, the occasional text message will get through. But phone calls rarely do.*

“Got.it.” I’ll have to be a lot more careful about remembering to call people. Maybe I should set alarms on my phone. I always seem to forget about important things when I’m distracted by what’s in front of me.

I think the humans call it ADHD.

Comentario 2

View All

>

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Unshift 219

219 Ava: The Fae Ward (I)

“I don’t have ADHD, Selene.”

“Don’t you?” Vanessa looks surprised.

“Do I?” My surprise mirrors hers.

*I assumed you... Well, I’m not a doctor, only a pack healer, so I could be wrong.”

“ADHD or not, we’re taking too long. Let’s go, children. Ava, finish your conversation or talk while you walk, please.”

Sister Miriam’s stern housemistress voice has us all straightening up and following, as I mutter into the phone, “We’re all safe, and have a few things to tell you later when we get settled.”

Kellan sighs. "Make sure you call, Ava. And call Lucas too. You know he's going to be worried. I've already updated him through text. Since he hasn't blown my phone up or ripped my head off from afar, I can only assume he's busy with the Council."

"Got it. I will."

Hanging up, I see Vanessa sliding her own phone into her pocket, flashing an amused smile in my direction. "Had to text Vester and warn him."

"Doesn't he know you're doing this?"

"Of course, but he worries."

As we walk, Vanessa quickens her pace to catch up with Sister Miriam. "What did you mean earlier, before we went through the portal? About that vampire in Blackwood territory never existing?"

17:19 C

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210 Ave The Fan Ward (

Sister Miriam pauses, turning to face us with an enigmatic smile. "Ah, yes. Marjory, was it? The one who died screaming during your interrogation"

My best guess is that she's talking about my neighbor, Margot Mitchell. The idea that she's dead sits heavy on my mind; I'm not sure how to feel about it.

"How did you even know about it?" Marcus interjects.

"We have our ways, wolf" Sister Miriam sighs. "That vampire was not real, she continues, her voice low and serious. "He was a

fabrication, a clever illusion designed to sow fear and chaos within your pack."

"But why?" Confused, I trot a little faster to reach her side. "Who would do something like that?"

Sister Miriam shakes her head. "That, my dear, is a question with a complicated answer. One that I believe you will discover in due

time."

"So you won't answer us."

“There are some things I cannot tell you, wolf. No matter what price is given.”

As we navigate the winding corridors of the mansion, I find myself drawn to the eclectic mix of artifacts on display. A gleaming sword catches my eye, its blade etched with intricate runes that

seem to shimmer in the light.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” Sister Miriam notes, following my gaze. “That sword once belonged to a great warrior, a man who fought alongside the Fae in a battle that shaped the very fabric of our

worlds

treach out, my fingertips hovering just above the cool metal. “How did you come to possess it?”

Sister Miriam chuckles, “Let’s just say that I have a knack for acquiring rare and valuable items. Over the centuries, I’ve amassed quite the collection”

Centuries. The word hangs in the air, a reminder of the vast chasm of experience and knowledge that separates Sister Miriam from the rest of us. I can’t even begin to imagine the things she’s seen, the secrets she holds,

“And this is just the beginning, Sister Miriam says, as if reading my thoughts. “There is so much more for you to discover, Ava.”

We’re led to what appears to be the main foyer, where a peculiar group awaits our arrival.

Two of them bear a striking resemblance to the thralls who served me during my previous visit to Sister Miriam’s home. However, it’s the third individual who captures my attention—an incredibly short woman, standing no taller than a five or six-year-old child. Despite her youthful stature, her face reveals the maturity of a woman well into her forties, Long blonde pigtails frame her pretty features.

Marcus, Vanessa, and I falter in our steps, taken aback by the sight before us, Vanessa mutters under her breath, her medical knowledge kicking into gear as she attempts to rationalize the woman’s unique proportions. “Not warfism,” she whispers, her brow furrowed in concentration. “She’s too proportionate for that.

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Maybe it’s some other condition...”

Before Vanessa can continue her speculations, the woman in question speaks in exasperation. "Haven't you ever seen a gnome before?" Her tone is deep and fully matured, a stark contrast to her

childlike stature.

Vanessa's cheeks flush with embarrassment, and she quickly

apologizes for her rudeness. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to stare. I've never even of gnomes. Just the garden ones-"

Darkness clouds the woman's face.

"I mean, I've never encountered a gnome before."

I've never seen Vanessa so flustered.

The gnome woman huffs, crossing her arms over her chest. "Well, now you have. And I'd appreciate it if you kept your medical musings to yourself."

I've heard of gnomes, of course. Even my mother has one in her garden, saying something about it warding off bad energy. But they look nothing like the woman in front of us.

Selene, on the other hand, trots straight up to the woman, her nose twitching as she takes in her scent. The gnome woman recoils, her face scrunching up in displeasure.

"Back up," she demands, her voice sharp and authoritative. Selene, startled by the gnome's reaction, takes a few steps back, her ears flattening against her head.

The gnome woman shudders, rubbing her arms as if trying to rid herself of Selene's presence. "Wolves," she mutters under her

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breath, shaking her head in disapproval.

Sister Miriam clears her throat, drawing our attention back to her. "Layla, this is who we've been waiting for Ava Grey of the

Blackwood Pack."

I open my mouth to protest, but close it at Sister Miriam's sharp look,

Layla's nose scrunches in disgust. "Renard's little runaway bride?"

"Precisely."

Layla's gaze sweeps over us, her eyes narrowing as she takes in our motley crew. With a heavy sigh, she turns to Sister Miriam. "There's no other choice then, is there?"

I can feel the tension radiating off Vanessa and Marcus as they subtly shift to block me from view, their bodies poised to protect me at a moment's notice. But Sister Miriam seems unperturbed, her expression serene as she meets Layla's gaze.

"The Fae will have a lot to say about this," Layla grumbles, her tone laced with annoyance.

Sister Miriam's lips curve into a knowing smile. "They're already aware, Layla. Trust me, everything has been arranged."

Layla's eyes widen, surprise flickering across her face before she quickly schools her features into a mask of indifference. With a huff, she storms off down a hallway to our right, her tiny feet carrying her towards a set of imposing double doors.

"Follow me," Sister Miriam instructs, her voice calm and steady as she trails after Layla.

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As we make our way down the corridor, Sister Miriam's voice

echoes off the walls. "You are being granted access to the Fae Ward

of Dakota Sanctuary. It is a place of safety, where none who wish

you harm can enter"

Marcus frowns, his brow furrowing in confusion. "How is it supposed to keep us safe?"

Sister Miriam smiles faintly. "None of your enemies would ever be allowed entry into such a sacred space, Marcus. The Fae are ancient and powerful, and their wards are not to be trifled with." As we approach the double doors, Layla holds up a hand, bringing us to a halt. She turns to me, her expression softening slightly. "I must inform you, Ava, that vampires are not permitted within the Rae Ward. Not even ones as... unique as Sister Miriam."

Thank you all for your patience with updates. My kids brought a severe form of hand, foot, and mouth disease (Coxsackie virus) that went through the home. After several days of high fever. I had blisters all over my hands that made it impossible to write, and

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"Oh. I understand." Glancing toward Sister Miriam, I'm not sure how to feel about being separated from my benefactor.

She inclines her head. "If at any time you wish to speak to me, just let the Fae know."

"I was under the impression you would be with us," Vanessa cuts in, suspicion written all over her face in giant, bold letters. "How are we supposed to trust whoever you're handing us to?"

"You're still under her protection," Layla sighs. "She just can't come into the Fae Ward. For our sakes."

The gnome's gaze flicks to Vanessa and Marcus, and she mutters under her breath, "The paperwork for a bunch of pack wolves to get admitted in such circumstances is going to be a nightmare as it

is."

If your teacher is in the Fae Ward, we need to go there, Selene interjects, her tone firm. No matter what. That is why we are here.

Resting my hand on her head, I turn to Layla. "Will our phones still work in the Fae Ward?"

"Phones?" The gnome blinks at me, and for the first time I realize that her pupils are bare pinpricks, making her eyes seem even larger. Then those same eyes widen, and I swear for a moment that something sparkles within them. "Ah, telecommunication devices! Yes! They will still function."

There's an excitement in her words that almost buzzes from her, and Vanessa steps between us in a casual motion. "To send and

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receive calls from outside the city?"

"Of course, of course. We worked that out aeons ago." Layla scoffs, as though our questions are over the top.

But—aeons?

Marcus frowns, and I grab his arm with a gentle squeeze, shaking

my head slightly. From how Layla speaks about phones, calling

them telecommunication devices, I don't think she's the one to give us the best information.

We'll have to trust Sister Miriam, who nods when I glance in her direction.

"You'll be able to contact your family and friends even in the Fae

Ward, child."

"See? Now, come on, come on." Impatient now with our hesitation, Layla produces an archaic bronze key that glows with a subtle shimmer and inserts it into the door, which swings open to reveal a shimmering golden portal.

The fact that magic seems so natural around here already has us all feeling out of place and uneasy, and Marcus steps forward without a word to go first.

"Wait when you get there, so I can check us in," Layla says in a monotone spiel that says she's said this same line a hundred times before.

"Understood." He glances toward Vanessa, who gives a quick nod, before passing through. Then it's my turn.

Like the portal from Blackwood lands to Sister Miriam's

17:20

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mysterious museum-like mansion, there's an abrupt change, an walk into a medieval world that belongs in picture books.

It's green.

I understand, now, the prose in old, rambling stories about knig and maidens. Everything is just so much more, the sky more vas the colors more vibrant, the scents more enticing.

But it's not just the landscape that's breathtaking. The Fae themselves are a sight to behold, a mix of modern and fantasy th has me gaping. A group of Fae women stroll by, their hair in shad of lavender, turquoise, and bubblegum pink, wearing sleek bodyc

esses that shimmer in the sunlight. And their ears? They're pointed. Just a little at the tip for some, and long and sloping for others.

There are plenty of Fae in more natural colors—at least to my eyes -but it's like I've walked into another world.

The Fae realm is another world, in a sense. Like a sister world that mirrors our own.

Selene seems distracted by a pair of Fae men standing guard on either side of Marcus. They're taller than any of us, and dressed in brown leather armor that looks like it's been plucked straight out of a Robin Hood poster. Their hair is long and braided, and comfortingly brown. One has blue eyes that hold the chill of winter, and another has eyes so silver that a shiver goes down my back at how unnatural his gaze appears. My brain insists that he has to be blind, but it's very clear he is not.

My brain struggles to process the sheer absurdity of it all, half—expecting them to vanish in a puff of smoke.

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Selene's tail wags in excitement. This place feels like home. Like my old life.

I can feel her joy through our bond, a warm glow that spreads from my chest to my toes. She takes a deep breath, her nose twitching

as she inhales the scents of the Fae realm. Even the air smells the same, she muses, a hint of nostalgia in her voice.

I'm about to ask her what she means when I hear the sound of

footsteps behind me. I glance over my shoulder to see Vanessa and Layla stepping through the portal, the gnome walking briskly toward the Fae guards despite barely reaching their waists.

“Names and affiliations,” one of the guards says, his voice deep and commanding. He eyes us warily, his hand resting on the hilt of a sword at his hip.

Layla clears her throat, standing as tall as her diminutive stature will allow. “They are under the protection of Sister Miriam,” she says, her voice surprisingly authoritative for someone so small. “I need to bring the to the Wizard’s Tower. Ava Grey, Blackwood Pack, and her guards.”

The disdain when she declares my pack is mirrored by the looks on their faces. Silver Eyes exchanges a glance with his partner, before giving me a nod. “Very well. Follow me.”

He turns on his heel and strides off, leaving us scrambling to keep up. Vanessa falls into step beside me, her eyes wide as she takes in the sights and sounds of the Fae realm. “This is not what I was expecting,” she murmurs, her voice barely above a whisper.

I nod in agreement, my gaze drawn to a group of Fae children playing some kind of game involving glowing orbs that hover in

17:20

air. They’re laughing and shouting, their voices carrying on the breeze, and I can’t help but smile at the pure joy on their faces.

As we walk, I notice that the Fae we pass are just as varied in appearance as the ones I saw earlier. Some are dressed in modern clothing—jeans, t-shirts, even the occasional leather jacket—while others look like they’ve stepped out of a Renaissance Faire. There are Fae with skin in every shade of the rainbow, from pale lavender to deep emerald green, and their hair ranges from natural colors to hues that don’t exist in the human world.

I could get used to this Selene says, her voice dreamy as she trots alongside me.

A pang of envy over her easy acceptance of this strange new world shoots right through my heart. For me, it’s all overwhelming—the sights, the sounds, the sheer impossibility of it all. But there’s a part of me that’s eager to learn more about this place, too.

The guard leads us to a towering gate made of shimmering silver, its surface etched with intricate designs that seem to move and shift before my eyes. He places his hand on the gate, and it swings open with a soft whoosh, revealing a courtyard filled with even more wonders.

There are fountains that spout water in every color of the rainbow, their mist creating a shimmering haze that hangs in the air. Flowers the size of dinner plates bloom in beds along the edges of the courtyard, their petals glowing softly in the sunlight. And in the

center of it all stands a massive tree, its trunk wider than a car and

its branches stretching up to the sky, laden with fruit that glitters like precious gems.

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change with eye we

ugh the time the bling is anything but a tower In fact, compered to the wat of the courtyard, E's little more than a

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