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A giant of a man fills the doorway, his broad shoulders nearly brushing the frame on either side. He's easily twice the size of any man I've ever seen, with pointed ears that stretch back into his salt-and-pepper hair. Despite the gray streaks, his face is unwrinkled, but his eyes—swirling from blue to black and back again—hold a wisdom that speaks of countless years.

"You're late," he bellows, his voice reverberating through the courtyard like a clap of thunder.

His larger-than-life presence fills the courtyard, very different from the Fae guards who led us here.

Marcus and Vanessa move to step between us, their stances protective, but the strange man roars at them. "Stand back, you flea-ridden mutts! Let me see my pupil!"

There's an excitement in his tone that belies the aggressive volume of his words, leaving me more confused than frightened. Selene slinks forward, her ears pressed back against her skull as she sniffs at the air to scent the new arrival.

"Your pupil?" I ask, my voice sounding small and uncertain even to my own ears. "Are you the one Sister Miriam told me about?"

The man throws his head back and laughs, the sound booming like a cannon shot. "Who am I? I'm the one who's graciously allowed you entry into the Fae Ward, girl. The one who's going to teach you to control that wild magic of yours before it consumes you whole."

All the Fae to this point have been elegant, their movements

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natural and flowing. Even the intimidating guards move with a grace that seems to come from deep within.

This man, this teacher of mine, is like a bear, with wide movements and a lumbering gait. Even so, his excitement shines through, making his sinister-seeming phone calls feel innocuous now in the light of his energy.

“You may call me Magister Orion,” he says, his voice dropping to a more conversational volume. “And you, Ava Grey, have a great deal to learn. It took you too long to get here.”

“A more friendly phone call might have helped.” Trying to keep my words firm and even, I hold out my hand in greeting. “Hello, Magister Orion.”

His massive head tilts, his eyes glittering down at me in the

brightest shade of blue I’ve ever seen. “Was I not friendly? I warned you about your friend, and you interrogated me as if I were her captor.”

“When you disguise your voice like that—”

“Disguise?” Magister Orion rears back, distaste crawling across his face. “I, a respected wizard and Magister, disguise myself? Why would I do such a thing?”

Marcus pulls me back, scowling at the giant Fae standing before us. “Are you not the one to call Ava’s phone, then?”

“Call? Ah, yes. Of course I called her. The daft child has no business running amuck without training.”

“I can explain,” a tiny, tinny voice says from behind him, and we all step back, startled by a new addition to our little group.

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“Magister Orion’s secretary,” Layla says from behind us, sounding amused. “We call her little Tinker, after one of your human movies.”

A tiny figure emerges from behind Magister Orion’s knee, her mechanical wings glinting in the light. She’s even shorter than Layla, with vibrant pink hair and sparkling lilac eyes that dance with mischief. As she smiles at us, I can’t help but stare at the robotic contraptions protruding from her back.

Noticing my fascination, the little Fae titters and spins around, revealing a remote control in her hand. With a flick of her wrist, the wings flap open and closed, a whirring sound filling the air.

"I just love the idea of wings," she gushes, her voice high and melodic. "Ever since I saw that fabulous movie about the tiny Fae and the flying children. Of course, you humans butchered our

existence, but still—it was inspiring!"

Vanessa and I exchange an uncomfortable laugh, unsure how to respond. "This place is far more amazing than any movie I've ever seen," I admit.

"What, the Fae Ward? Balderdash. We're just a cheap imitation of the Fae Realm, but it helps us feel more at home here." Tinker chuckles. "We have more freedom, too."

That sounds like a lot of history to dig through, but Magister Orion clears his throat, drawing our attention back to him. "Shall we head

inside? We have much to discuss."

Tinker nods enthusiastically, her wings fluttering with excitement. As we follow them into the cottage, she falls into step beside me, her head barely reaching my hip. "I should explain about the, mm, what's the word? Oh, yes. The phone call" she says, her voice

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lowering conspiratorially. "Magister Orion did it, but we used a

new device, aimed to muddle our communication against wolves. It reconstructs his words, but Sister Miriam says it makes him sound sinister. Did it have the same effect on you?"

The curious look on her face is almost rabid, her eyes eager and glistening.

"It did," I confirm, watching her over-enthusiastic nod with some confusion. It takes a second for her words to dawn in my

overwhelmed mind. "This device of yours is why none of the

shifters could understand him?"

Tinker's eyes light up, a mischievous grin spreading across her face. "Precisely! Isn't it just brilliant? The Fae Ward functions with quite a bit magitech—ah, magical technology—but it doesn't always work the way we intend. Human innovation is fascinating, but doesn't seem to mesh well with magic."

A small notepad appears out of thin air, and she scrawls something on it. The letters are similar to the runes I saw within the book

Mrs. Elkins brought me, and I curse myself silently for not bringing it here. I'm sure they would have been able to tell me more about

1. it.

"Sinister. Hmm. Indeed. I thought the dhampir was being a bit overblown, but I suppose it can't be helped. The device was

supposed to go for austere and majestic."

Tinker's words come out in the absent-minded fashion of someone

talking to themselves, and I'm not sure if I'm supposed to respond.

Before I can figure it out, we step into the cottage, and the words die on my tongue. Beside me, Marcus and Vanessa halt abruptly,

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their eyes widening in shock.

Despite the unassuming exterior, the inside of the cottage is a true marvel. A spiral staircase dominates the center of the room,

stretching up into darkness far above our heads.

My jaw drops as I take in the sight before me. Books—countless books—line the walls from floor to ceiling. Some float lazily through the air, as if guided by an invisible hand. There's the scent of ink and paper, a coming-home sort of cozy scent that fills my nostrils, and there's a huge part of me that wants to live here forever.

Don't start thinking like that, Ava, Selene warns. The Fae don't give back what come willingly into their fold.

Her warning is like a bucket of ice water on my face, and I stare at the heaven within with a little more wariness after that.

Magister Orion stands tall amidst the stacks, his chest puffed out with pride. "Impressive, isn't it?" he booms, his voice echoing through the cavernous space. "Centuries of knowledge, all at our fingertips."

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Selene sneezes several times, drawing Magister Orion's attention. "Ah, it seems your companion is allergic to our wards," he remarks, his tone sympathetic.

I frown, glancing down at Selene. "But she hasn't sneezed once since entering the Fae Ward."

Behind us, Layla snorts, amusement coloring her voice. "Magical wards and the Fae Ward are two completely separate things, you

know."

Magister Orion nods, his expression kind as he explains, "Magical wards are a form of protection, and some wolves are particularly sensitive to their existence."

Selene sneezes again, as if to punctuate his point, and I reach down to stroke her fur soothingly. The enormity of the situation sinks in -I'm standing in a magical tower, in a place that doesn't really seem to exist in my world, surrounded by Fae and a powerful (presumably?) wizard, about to embark on a journey to control powers I barely understand.

It's like a freaking movie.

This doesn't feel real at all.

Our world has always been bigger than what you've experienced, Selene says, with the faint hint of sneezing even in her mental voice. Full of magic and power and fantastic things you'd be shocked to see. Your world as you know it is quite desolate.

Even so, knowing that all this has been hidden away in a city not

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far from humanity...

Now that I'm here, Selene says, sneezing once again, I can sense it. I don't know about the others, but this city was created at a natural convergence of realms. It's a fascinating place. I'd love to explore it

more.

But her explanation is lost on me as Magister Orion guides us to a circle of comfortable-looking armchairs. "Now, sit, Ava Grey, and let me look at you."

"Wait." Coming to a halt, I look at this man who's declared himself to be my teacher, and the short little Fae. Or is she a gnome, like Layla? "First, I want to know: Where is Lisa?"

"Lisa Randall, currently in the Third Ward," Tinker reports immediately. "There's an extraction underway for Ms. Randall."

"So I can see her soon?"

Excitement has my heart racing. A part of me has been desperately avoiding thinking of her with too much frequency, worried that we're already too late. It's been paralyzing. To know that she's finally about to be rescued-

"No," Tinker says cheerfully. "Because she has been compromised, Ms. Randall has been denied access to the Fae Ward."

"Then-"

"She will be safe," Tinker continues, still upbeat and charging over my words with her giant, glittering eyes and cheerful demeanor.

My jaw sets. "I want to see her."

"My apologies, but that would be impossible."

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Her chirping responses have Tinker high on my list of people I can't really appreciate right at this moment, and Magister Orion clears his throat. "We have pulled in quite a few favors in order to interfere in the Mad Prince's business for you, Ava Grey. We have reached the limit in many ways. However, we will do what we can with your telecommuniphones."

"Telecommunication phonetics," Tinker corrects him.

"Telecommunication device, Tinker." Layla pops into the

conversation again from behind me.

“Cell phone,” Vanessa says at the same time.

“Cell phone?” All three of them turn to look at Vanessa, who shrugs.

“Or you can just say phone.”

“Cell phone,” Tinker muses. “What an odd phrase.”

“So you’re saying that Lisa might have a phone?” I interject, foreseeing a deep dive into worldly and cultural differences that will sidetrack us all from what really matters.

“I believe that would be acceptable.” Magister Orion clears his throat. “Now, about your tutelage. Apprenticeship is hard to come by these days, and I know your life span is much shorter than ours. Assuming you only have another thirty years to live, and

considering the amount of knowledge I have to impart, we have conservatively estimated that we should aim for 175,000 hours of study.”

Staring at the giant bear of a man, I can only splutter, “Thirty years? Sir, I don’t have-”

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“Not to worry, my star pupil. We have appropriately calculated in sleeping time. Sixteen-hour days give you a solid eight hours to sleep. We’ve heard this is necessary for your kind.”

“Magister Orion, Vanessa interrupts, only to be skewered with a hard stare and a scoff.

“Hush, you mange-ridden animal. I’m speaking with my favorite student.

It’s clear that I’m his only student. It’s also clear that Vanessa and Marcus don’t like him very much. Considering how he speaks to them, when he isn’t ignoring their existence...

“Magister Orion,” I protest, my voice going feeble under his delighted stare, “That’s impossible.”

“Impossible? No, I did the math myself.”

“No, I—” Clearing my throat, I shove my shoulders back and straighten my spine. This overgrown giant of a man might make me feel as though I’m a seven-year-old child again, but I’m not. I’m a

grown woman. A future Luna. And maybe I'm a little lost these days, but I know that what he's asking for is unreasonable. "I cannot spend that much time away from my life. My pack. My

mate."

"Packs? Mates? Who needs those, when you have magic?" Staring at me with honest bewilderment, Magister Orion motions around us with a sweeping movement of his arm. "Can't you see all of this? Isn't it spectacular? A world you want to live in forever?"

I told you, the Fae won't let go of you easily if you allow yourself to be charmed by them. Selene's warnings have the slightest hint of

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amusement to them.

"Of course it's amazing. It's an entire new world at my fingertips, and I want to learn from someone as wise as you." Buttering him up can't hurt, right? "However, this is not my life. While I appreciate and respect how you feel toward magic and the knowledge you hold, my mate is my first responsibility. My pack is second. I cannot lead my people if I'm sequestered here in the pursuit of..." Finding words fails me.

"Higher learning, Vanessa supplements, bumping her shoulder against mine.

"Higher learning," I repeat, tossing her a grateful smile.

Magister Orion's face flushes an alarming shade of red as he stares at us both. "You would prioritize your mundane life over the gift of magic?" His voice booms through the library, echoing off the countless shelves. Something in the air tickles against my skin, causing my hair to stand on end. Even the sunlit interior seems to darken, as if dense clouds passed over the sun, heavy with rain. For a second, I can even scent that hint in the air of an oncoming storm. "The power within you is a

rare and precious thing, and you would squander it for what? A pack of disgusting predators, who prioritize their base instincts over their brains?"

His accusations have Marcus and Vanessa stiff and eerily still beside me. Taking a deep breath, I force down the offense at his words, keeping my composure in the face of his bluster. "Magister Orion, you must understand. I'm here to learn control so I can keep my people safe. My magic is important, but it's not the only thing that matters to me."

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His eyes meet mine, and I hope to the Moon Goddess that I have even a semblance of the serenity in trying to project.

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Magister Orion storms around, his heavy footsteps shaking the floorboards. Agitation rolls off him in waves as he gesticulates wildly. “Absurd! Your magic is a part of you, girl. It’s not some accessory you can cast aside when it’s inconvenient!”

Marcus steps forward, pulling me behind him in a protective stance. His eyes narrow as he watches Magister Orion’s erratic pacing.

Layla darts between us, her hands raised in a placating gesture. “Magister, please calm yourself. We don’t want a repeat of the last time you set the library on fire.”

Tinker groans, her mechanical wings drooping. “It took a decade to duplicate all those ruined books. Please, Magister. Let’s not go through that again.”

Magister Orion freezes, a sheepish expression crossing his face. He takes a deep breath, his shoulders slumping as he turns to me. “My apologies, Ava. I let my passion get the better of me.” He sighs, running a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. “I must confess, I had an ulterior motive in agreeing to teach you. I had hoped that once you were introduced to our world, you might choose to stay here as my student. You see, the magic we share is dying out. It’s been centuries since I’ve found someone to teach.”

Glancing at the books flying in the air, lazily flapping their pages like wings, a frown tugs at the corners of my lips. “How is that possible? There’s magic everywhere here.”

He shakes his head, his eyes wrinkling at the corners with sadness

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and the harsh passage of time. Centuries, he said. Centuries. I can't imagine being alive so long. Just like Sister Miriam, he's lived a life I

can't fathom.

"The magic of the Fae and the magic that humans can wield are separate entities. They come from different sources, follow different rules."

"I don't understand. How-"

Magister Orion cuts me off with another shake of his head. "It's a long and complicated history, one we don't have time for now." His gaze shifts to Vanessa and Marcus, his nose wrinkling in disdain. "Are these the pack you speak of?"

He smells like a burning forest when he looks at them, Selene observes. There must be a history there. Fae can be hostile to any non-Fae, but this goes beyond that.

Anyone with eyes can see that Magister Orion has no respect for them, but I wonder at the history behind his dissatisfaction with their presence.

Still, feeling the frustrated tension in the two who followed me here, it feels dirty to hear how he speaks to them. Not wanting it to go on any longer, I wait until his eyes once again meet mine, leaving my face blank, trying to imagine myself as someone stern and unyielding.

The best that comes to mind is my mother's face, a vision that

makes my soul cringe from the baggage that comes with it, even as I can feel my face settle into the expression that I think mirrors her personality the best.

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Bracing myself for his reaction, at the possibility that my demands will cause friction between me and the man I'm hoping can keep me safe from my own power, I speak.

"Magister Orion, we have an issue that needs to be addressed.

His thick brows wing up in surprise. "An issue? By all means, tell me, child."

My lips are dry, and I take two attempts to clear my throat before continuing.

Confrontation has never been my strong suit.

"I understand I am a newcomer to this world of Fae and vampires, and I appreciate your generosity in bringing me here under your protection. However, Marcus and Vanessa have been my steadfast protectors. Your attitude toward them and my pack is concerning. Regardless of any history between shifter and Fae, mutual respect is crucial if we're to work together."

Marcus' tense presence beside me relaxes, and Vanessa takes a step closer to my side. Their approval of my words is clear.

Shock flickers across the Fae's face, followed by a grimace. Intense eyes glower at the two who've followed me into this strange world, the two tasked to keep me safe even at the cost of their own lives.

Finally, he grunts, throwing his head back to stare at the endless expanse of this strange cottage—tower above him. "Very well, Ava Grey. I cannot argue with your words."

Tinker stares at me, her mouth open in surprise and those

mechanical wings of hers open as wide as they can be. Knowing that she controls them with a remote, it makes me wonder how

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long she's had them, that she's expressing her emotions through them so fluidly. I wonder if she even notices when she does it.

It could be a hundred years, Selene says thoughtfully. Though, it could even be longer. Time can flow differently in the Fae Realm, though I'm not well-versed on such matters.

How can time flow differently? A second is a second. An hour is an hour. Except, I guess, when it's not

I'm not certain, either. The Fae Realm has always guarded their secrets.

Interesting.

Magister Orion steps forward, toe-to-toe with Marcus. Despite dwarfing him in physical size, Marcus' sheer level of iron will has his presence holding its own against the Fae's. Magister Orion leans in to inspect Marcus' face, before finally giving a slow, approving nod. "Yes, I can see why they would choose one such as you. Welcome to the Fae Ward, Market."

"Marcus," Tinker hisses.

"Marcus." Magister Orion scowls at his tiny winged secretary, before turning to Vanessa. He doesn't move, only inspecting her from afar, before giving another nod. "A strong she-wolf. Rare to see

these days. Welcome to the Fae Ward, Vamoose."

"Vanessa." This time, it's Layla, who looks at us with apology. "I promise he's like that with everyone. So it isn't discrimination, just all-around jackassery."

Magister Orion scowls at the gnome woman, drawing himself to his full height. "To all a mighty wizard a donkey-"

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-is accurate," Tinker cuts in, ignoring his immediate deflation. She smiles at me, with an edge of desperation. "Please don't let his personality deter you from his teaching. We all gave up on him centuries ago, and it's only made him worse.

Magister Orion settles into a chair with an aura mostly reminiscent of a sulky child. It's hard to get a read on the man. He's aggressive and yet seems kind. Overly passionate about his magic. And kind of... silly.

The Fae are an interesting people.

Selene sneezes again, catching everyone's attention. This time it's five desperate ah-choos in a row, and even Marcus' normally blank face is pinched with worry.

"Is she going to be okay?" Vanessa asks, reaching out to rub Selene's ears.

I'm fine.

"She says she's fine, but it's even affecting her voice up here." Tapping my head, I frown. "How's that possible?"

Vanessa rubs Selene's head as my wolf leans further into her caresses, milking the situation for attention.

Ab not. Ab miserable.

Her voice is like typos in my head.

"Psychosomatic, maybe?" Vanessa ventures.

“Unlikely. The effects of the wards reach farther than the physical plane.” Magister Orion points at the wolf. “It’s likely even her mental faculties are somewhat slow and befuddled. She’ll be fine

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after some time away from the wards.”

If Selene’s so deeply affected by this place, there’s no way we can stay here for my training.

Can, she insists.

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Vote

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“Magister Orion.” A little concerned at how the strange man who claims to be my teacher will respond to my next words, I brace myself once more for the flood of emo..ons that might roll off him. *I understand your wish for me to stay here and learn

from you, but it is impossible for me to stay here for as long as you wish. And with my wolf unable to tolerate your wards, it makes it even more impractical.”

Wiw be fwine.

“No, it won’t be.”—

Magister Orion’s brow furrows as he scrutinizes Selene, his gaze sharp and assessing. The air thickens with tension.

Finally, he turns to me, his expression unreadable.

“If you cannot remain here in the Fae Ward, Ava Grey, then it is my duty as your mentor to go where you go.”

Layla and Tinker erupt into a chorus of protests, their voices overlapping in a cacophony of disbelief.

“Magister Orion, you can’t be serious!” Layla exclaims, her eyes wide with shock. “Leaving the Fae Ward? Impossible. Your request would be rejected on the spot!”

Tinker nods vigorously, her mechanical wings fluttering in

agitation. “She’s right, Magister. The Fae Ward is your domain. To leave its sanctuary is little better than,” and her voice lowers to a whisper, “suicide!”

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But Magister Orion is unmoved by their objections. He rises to his full, imposing height, his voice booming like thunder. “Enough! This goes beyond convention. I will not leave my chance at a student behind.”

Watching the argument unfold, my stomach twists with unease. The idea of Magister Orion accompanying me back to the pack

lands fills me with dread.

He’s already proven animosity toward the wolves. If an incident were to occur, would we be able to handle the consequences?

Vanessa and Marcus exchange worried glances, their postures tense and alert. I can feel their apprehension radiating off them in waves, mingling with my own growing anxiety.

Taking a deep breath, I turn to Magister Orion, my voice carefully measured. “Magister Orion, forgive me for asking, but how can you handle being on pack lands when you hold such disdain for

wolves?”

His eyes flash with an emotion I can’t quite decipher—anger? Resentment? Something else entirely? “My personal feelings are irrelevant,” he says, his tone clipped. “What matters is the greater purpose. If teaching you requires me to endure the presence of wolves, then so be it.”

I nod slowly, trying to process his words. Having to use the word endure when thinking about spending time with a pack doesn’t sound like a great idea.

“Can I simply travel to see you from time to time? Once a week?” The horror on his face has me scrambling. “Twice?”

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Selene shifts restlessly at my feet, her discomfort palpable as she sneezes once more.

“Three times?”

“Magic isn’t something so easily taught, child. It’s a daily exercise.” He rubs between his eyebrows with a sigh. “If only the Crone’s teachings weren’t lost to us.”

“Crone’s?” This is a new word, but something deep within me stirs, as if trying to warn me of the importance of it.

“A human affectation of the blessing of the gods. The witches of old.” His voice resonates through the room, taking on the cadence of a professor in a lecture hall. “They carried great weight on the shoulders of three priestesses who stood with the Goddess of Life, who gifted her believers with magic.”

Magister Orion’s words settle in the air, heavy with the weight of lost knowledge.

The Goddess of Life is someone I’ve never heard of; as wolves, we

are raised with the Moon Goddess. And for humans, it's usually God. Some few in the area even speak of Allah, but my father forbade me from learning more about the religion.

"The Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone were the names given to each priestess," Magister Orion continues, a hint of amusement creeping into his tone, "though none of them were mothers, and none of them were old enough to be a crone."

Tinker sighs. "Magister, you're too boring. Let me explain it to her."

She turns to me, her lilac eyes sparkling. "You see, Ava, the Crone was the one to record the teachings and knowledge of the witches

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in this ancient book passed down through the ages to their human successors. But the Crone disappeared from the earthly realm when all the gods did, which is considered the beginning of the downfall of magic" The doom resonating in her last few words has me shuddering,

It sounds ominous, which is absolutely what she's going for.

Tinker leans in closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Some say the Crone's book is still out there, hidden away, waiting for the right person to find it. Others believe it was destroyed, lost forever. And then there are those who think-

"Tinker!" Magister Orion's voice cracks like a whip, cutting off her rambling, "Go do something helpful, would you?"

The little woman pouts. "But Magister, your lecture are so dry! Nobody wants to listen to them"

"I actually found it quite interesting-"

"Hush, you miserable little sprite. Some of us enjoy the pursuit of knowledge." Waving her off with one massive hand, he ignores her scowl as she scurries away, her wings whirring.

"Pay no mind to the vapid gnome, Ava Grey. Her conspiracies are nothing more than idle chatter through the ages."

But his words barely register. My mind is racing, pieces of a puzzle clicking into place. The book Mrs. Elkins gave me, the strange symbols that vanished, the power thrumming beneath my skin...

It's all very, very magical. It was passed down for a long time. It holds secrets. And it makes Selene sneeze, much like these wards that have her sneezing even now, rubbing her nose with her paws

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in a desperate attempt at gaining even a little bit of relief.

Can it be?

It has to be.

There's no other way, right?

"Magister Orion," I say slowly, my heart pounding, "I've come into possession of a magical book. It's written in odd symbols that disappear, even when I try to copy them."

He leans forward with such velocity that his chair nearly tips over 'with his weight. Marcus steps between us once again, and I shove the overprotective wolf to the side as Magister Orion's eyes bore into mine. "A book with vanishing symbols? Do they look something

like this?"

With a flourish of his index finger, Magister Orion traces symbols in the air. Thin, blazing lines of fire follow his movements, hanging suspended for a moment before fading away. I squint, trying to make sense of the strange script. It takes me a moment to realize they're written backward, like a mirror image.

Excitement stirs.

"Yes. They look similar, though I can't read them."

Magister Orion's face splits into a wide, beaming grin. His eyes sparkle, and I can feel the enthusiasm radiating off him in waves. It's almost contagious, and I find myself smiling back-

Ava. Selene's voice whispers in my mind, cutting through my thoughts like a knife. If Magister Orion didn't know you had the book, how was there a message in there telling you to come here?

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Selene's question is like a brick wall for my speeding thoughts. I suck in a sharp breath, my heart pounding against my ribcage as I remember the words written in the book: Your teacher awaits

Enter the sanctuary of wizards, Ava Grey.

The words had appeared as if by magic the runes shifting and morphing until they formed a coherent message. A message meant

for me.

My voice shakes. "Did you know I had the book?"

Magister Orion's eyes widen, genuine surprise etched across his features. "No, I had no idea the book was ever found. This is news to me. Realm-shattering, in fact. We haven't even found a trace of it in..." He blows out a breath, looking skyward. "A century. More, perhaps."

My mind races, trying to make sense of it all. "The runes in the book... they moved around until they wrote a phrase in English. It told me to come here, to the sanctuary of wizards."

Magister Orion frowns, his brows knitting together in

concentration. "The sanctuary of wizards? That's not a term I would associate—well, I suppose it is, as such, a sanctuary. And of wizards. However, such a technical level of manipulation is beyond anyone I know who would be alive today. Someone able to fight the wards spelled within that book would be powerful beyond

measure."

A chill runs down my spine at his words. If even Magister Orion, with all his knowledge and power, doesn't know who could have

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done this...

"Is it possible there are others in the world who know of this magic?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

He sighs, rubbing a finger over his forehead. "It's always possible. The Fae were not the ones to govern this knowledge in the first place. There could be others out there, hiding in the shadows, keeping the magic alive. It would be a good thing, I suppose." Yet he sounds doubtful.

Selene sneezes again, her body shaking with the force of it. I reach down to stroke her fur, trying to offer some comfort.

Magister Orion rises from his seat, his robes swishing around him. "I need to pack for my journey to your pack lands. We must unravel this mystery and begin your training as soon as possible."

Layla steps forward, her face pinched with worry, "Magister Orion, you can't leave. There are protocols, paperwork that needs to be filed-

"Bureaucracy be damned!" Magister Orion snaps, his voice booming through the room. "This is a matter of utmost importance. I will not be held back by red tape and formalities."

Raising my hands, I try to calm the situation between them. "Why don't you figure it out on your end while I talk to my mate about you being able to visit? We can meet in the middle. It isn't as though we are in an extreme hurry, are we?"

Magister Orion grumbles under his breath, clearly frustrated. "Very well. But we must begin your lessons as soon as possible. Time is of the essence.

mod, rehref waashing ever me. Can we start while we figure

Exem

everything out? Ben just the basis

He hesitates for a moment before agreeing though I can sense his reticence. Selene nudges my leg, her voice whispering in my

mind. I think. Magister Orion secretly wishes to leave the The Wart and experience our world.

His eyes dart to the windows. There's a longing in his expression. something yearning. For freedom? Force? I'm not sure. It's possible Selene's right. Being cramped up in this place, no matter how magical, must get tiring after a while.

Leon looks like she's about to have a breakdown her hands

wringing together. "Magister Orion promise me you'll stay within

the Fae Ward until we can sort this our Please”

He waves her off clearly annoyed Yes yes. I won’t go galivaming

off into the sunset just ve

“Thank the Sun” Lava miners Trogt cond of this sization before. Yes lank that would be best. The forms sicut be...” Her words grow more incoherent as she mumbles, screwing EMEX FROM US Without acknowledging us any further. Her footsteps ezo behind her as she leaves.

Magister Orion signs, turning to me. Lata is one of the good ones. She means well even if she can be a bit... overbearing at times.

THI I do won mean by that lass, curiosity getting the better of

He shakes his head, a way smile on his lips. The politics of the

225 Ava Fae Ward (VII)

Dakota Sanctuary never sleep, Ava Grey. There are always those vying for power, trying to gain the upper hand.”

A shiver runs through me at his words. I’m not sure I like the sound

of that. “Is it safe for me to be here?”

Magister Orion places a reassuring hand on my shoulder, and something warm passes between us at the contact. Something both welcoming and foreign.

Magic, Selene says. He’s sharing with you.

Is that way it feels so soothing, as if smoothing down the frayed edges of my nerves?

“The Fae Ward is somewhat separate from the other wards within Dakota Sanctuary. While we are not truly a part of the realm of the Fae, we are under the protection of the Fae King and the laws of our people. It is why we can restrict its access from other denizens of the city, and the reason you are safe here. You have nothing to fear within this place.”

Marcus steps forward, his face serious. “Then what would happen if the vampires decided to war against the Fae King?”

Magister Orion throws his head back and laughs, the sound echoing through the room. “Impossible. The vampires may be powerful, but they are no match for the might of the Fae. They

would be crushed like ants beneath a boot.”

His words do little to reassure me, sounding too much like the ego of Lucas’ pack before the vampires appeared within it, taking so many innocent lives.

My knowledge is too lacking to know how right Magister Orion is,

16:43

45

225 Ava: Fae Ward (VII)

but I push my worries aside for now.

I can’t do much about politics between Fae and vampires. There isn’t even much I can do between them and Lucas. Instead, I need to focus on what I’m here for: learning to control the magic that threatens everyone around me.

Check out my new book!

>

Comentario 4

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Unshift 226

226 Ava: War is Here (I)

Magister Orion personally escorts us up the mysterious spiral staircase to two adjoining rooms, promising to begin my training in the morning. O

The moment the door closes behind him, I pull out my phone, unsurprised to see no new texts or phone calls. Sister Miriam did say only the occasional ones text would come through.

So I call Lucas.

He answers on the first ring.

“Are you okay?”

His question is more of a shouted demand for an answer, and I hold the phone several inches away from my ear, blinking at the force of his volume. "Yes. I'm fine. Did you get Kellan's messages?"

"Do you need help? When can you come home? Why won't our phone calls connect? Is everyone treating you okay? Are you in danger? Have you eaten?"

"No. Soon. I don't know. Yes. No. Not yet." My lips curve at the way his questions barrage my ear. "I miss you."

"I miss you too, Ave. So much." Lucas's voice softens, the rough edges smoothing into something tender that wraps around my heart. "I understand why you're there. I do. But I don't like it."

As if sensing the shift in conversation, Vanessa catches my eye, tilting her head toward the adjoining room. Marcus follows, the door clicking shut behind them, leaving me alone with Lucas's

16:44 C

220 Ava. War is Here (1)

voice in my ear.

Questions pepper through the phone, rapid-fire, all with the same ultimate theme: Is the city safe? Can Alpha Renard or my family

find me?

"The Fae Ward is different from the rest of the city somehow. Only accessible by portal, I think. They don't have access here, Lucas. Sister Miriam promised. Even Sister Miriam can't come here." I settle onto the edge of the bed, the plush comforter dipping beneath my weight. "Vanessa and Marcus are with me. I'm okay."

"And the Fae aren't going to keep you there forever?" The suspicion in his words is both legitimate and something that makes little giggles bubble in the back of my throat.

"No, Actually-"

"Shit. Hold that thought, Ave." His voice quality changes as he pulls away from the phone to tell someone to enter. I try to listen in, but it's impossible to clarify the words coming out of whoever he's talking to. Only Lucas' side of the conversation is coherent.

Something about the hospital and wounded, which has ice forming into an anxious ball in the pit of my stomach.

“Sorry, Ava. I’m back. There’s been an uproar in the Council.” Exhaustion roughens his tone, grim and heavy. The ball of ice transforms into a lead weight that drops my stomach straight to the floor.

“What kind of uproar?”

Silence stretches, broken only by the static crackle of his sigh.

“One of the other alphas separated from the Council. He’s claiming

16:44

we overstepped our bounds, abused our authority by allowing the takeover of the Blackwood pack. There have been five rogue

attacks today. All concerted efforts, timed perfectly. We lost a few people, and others are in the hospital.”

Standing is impossible as my legs turn to jelly. Sliding onto the bed, I whisper, “What does that mean, Lucas?”

“It means war is here, Ava.”

The words hit like a punch. War. The weight of it steals my breath, leaves me reeling. “What do you need me to do?”

“Stay in the city. Stay safe. You’re probably safer there than here, now. Blackwood is under our control, but only because they haven’t attacked there yet. Our forces are too scattered, spread over too wide an area. We’re working with the other alphas on bringing reinforcements, but without knowing the targets...”

“No. The denial rips from my throat, fierce and unyielding. “Westwood is my pack too, Lucas. I want to fight. I’m part of this.”

“Ave...” He sounds as though he’s tiptoeing around the truth he wants to say. “It might be a blessing in disguise that you’re there. It was the last place I wanted you to be, but now...”

“Lucas, I want to help.”

He’s silent for a moment longer, before groaning. “Ava, you can’t. You aren’t strong enough. You’ve worked hard, but you’d be a liability to any of my teams. I can’t send you into a battlefield surrounded by a team of bodyguards.”

The truth hurts more than I thought it would. Biting my lip, I say, “I can help at the hospital.”

16:44

315

220 Ava: War is Here (1)

“Ava, public opinion isn’t on your side there, either.”

My mouth snaps shut. That’s right. Several wounded shifters have been recuperating there, and a few of them even died under the care of the nurses. I’m sure they would be less than thrilled to see me around. Blood pressures would spike just seeing my face.

The reality of my decisions weighs heavy on my shoulders. Too weak. Too self-centered. Too many bad decisions. And now my mate is fighting the real war brought to his door, and I’m being asked to stay in what we once thought was the most dangerous place for me to be.

But I can’t keep whining at Lucas.

He has more important concerns than dealing with a whiny teenager of a mate.

“I won’t get in your way. But Lucas, promise you’ll be careful.” My

voice cracks a little.

“I will, Ava. Keep your ears to the ground there. You might be able to help me from the inside. The vampires haven’t shown up yet, but only an idiot would think they won’t be a part of this war.”

Maybe we can find the information they’ve been looking for, Selene agrees, resting her head on my knees.

“I’ll do what I can,” I promise earnestly.

He sighs again. “Just be careful. Every scout we’ve ever sent, even the ones who successfully got into the city, is dead. We still haven’t heard a word from the people Ryder sent in, so we can only suspect that they’re dead, too. Don’t do anything that will put you in danger. Your life is more important than any information you

16:44

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226 Ava: War is Here (1)

can try to get out of there,”

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Comentario 3

Deja el primer comentario para este capítulo

Vote

3

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FANDOM

Deslizar a la izquierda para continuar >

Ver todos

ENVIAR REGALO

Unshift 227

227 Lucas: War Is Here (H)

227 Lucas: War Is Here (II)

Knowing Ava is relatively safe, even if I have to rely on strangers to keep her that way, lifts a giant boulder of worry from my

shoulders, @

My wolf, of course, paces in the back of my mind, snapping at the air, frustrated with me. With her. With everything.

She's too far, he growls. We should be with her, not here.

The same complaints I've heard since I let her return to Blackwood. It's like a madness in my mind, the desire to rush to her side and drag her back home, damn the consequences.

The only reason he kept quiet during the Council's visit is because he didn't want any of those alphas near her. He's still upset over Clayton, though our wolves seemed to have reached some sort of truce between us.

The fact that Clayton's given way with such grace probably helps.

Alpha, there's another group of wolves moving in from the southwest. I've dispatched scouts to check on them, but I have a feeling that these are Whispering Pines wolves, not rogues. Ryder's voice intrudes on my musings, quieting my wolf for a moment.

Got it.

Frustrated, I rub my hands over my face. The Council had met one last time, to work over the logistics of moving forces and how to handle the distribution of our fighters and leaders to avoid conflict. Instead, Alpha Talon had come in with a declaration that the Council had overstepped, throwing a verbal bomb into the

15:46

127 Lucas War is Hote (1)

middle of an already volatile situation.

With the suspicious timing of multiple rogue wolf raids on my people mere hours after he denounced the Council and said his pack would no longer be a part of tyranny, we've had no rest.

It's like a leaking boat, only we can't find the damn leaks.

I shove my phone into my pocket, my jaw clenched tight, as I head for the large office where the Council has been meeting. My wolf paces restlessly in my mind, agitated by the distance from Ava and the looming threats.

As I enter the office, I'm not surprised to see Alpha Twilight Ridge already there. Her silver hair catches the light as she leans over the large map spread across the table. She looks up, greeting me with a polite nod, but I can see the exhaustion etched into the lines

of her face.

44

"Alpha Westwood," she says, her voice carrying a grim note. "A pack of scouts has been sent to the southwest, near the human

territories. A large group of wolves was spotted traveling through the area."

Joining her at the table, I glance over the map. "My Delta's

informed me. So far, no news from the Blackwood territory. It's suspiciously quiet there."

Scanning the familiar landmarks, we both trace the likely path of the newcomers, and I feel a growl building in my chest as we reach the same conclusion.

“Whispering Pines,” I mutter, frustration coloring my words.

Alpha Twilight Ridge nods, her expression grave. “If they’re

15:46

confirmed to be Whispering Pines wolves, Lucas, there’s no going back. This will be war. This isn’t just a Council blow–up any longer”

My molars grind together, and the duplicity of Alpha Talon burns in my gut. I’d never trusted the man, but this level of betrayal is more than I ever expected out of him.

“Did you expect this?” Alpha Twilight Ridge asks, her keen eyes studying my face. “Alpha Talon’s sudden about–face?”

I run a hand through my hair, exhaling slowly. “No,” I admit. “I never trusted him, but this is beyond what I thought him capable of. I never thought he would side with Renard over the established territories. It seems too risky of a move for someone who claims to be neutral.”

She nods, her fingers tracing the border between our territories on the map. “I can’t in good conscience approve a war without absolute proof that he’s behind these rogue attacks, Lucas. We need to be certain.”

My patience, already worn thin by days of stress and worry, snaps. “Then leave,” I growl, meeting her gaze with a hard stare. “If you can’t handle the blood on your hands, go. I won’t wait for the Council’s approval to defend my people.”

The silence that follows is heavy, charged with tension. Alpha Twilight Ridge holds my gaze, neither backing down nor rising to the challenge. After a long moment, she sighs, her shoulders sagging slightly.

“I apologize,” she says softly. “Twilight Ridge won’t abandon Westwood in your time of need. We stand with you.”

15:46

1 ts 30 (3)

I nod, accepting her words without comment. She turns back to the map, her fingers tracing the borders between territories.

“Renard was a cancer to shifter society,” she murmurs, almost to herself. “I wonder what he did to get into Alpha Talon’s head. What could have swayed him so completely?”

I snort, the sound harsh in the quiet room. “Talon’s neutrality was nothing more than a disguise for his greed for power. He’s always wanted more, always been waiting for his chance. He just went unnoticed because Renard was always there.”

Alpha Twilight Ridge looks at me, her eyes sharp. “And you think this is it? His grab for power?”

I nod, my mind racing through the possibilities. “It makes sense. With Blackwood in chaos and Westwood distracted, he probably thinks he can make a move. Expand his territory, maybe even challenge for leadership of the Council. Either that, or he’s working with Renard for an even longer game.”

“It’s a risky gamble,” she muses. “If he fails, he loses everything.”

“And if he succeeds, he gains more than he’s ever had,” I counter. “For someone like Talon, the potential reward outweighs the risk.” My wolf growls in the back of my mind, urging action, demanding we protect what’s ours. It takes effort to keep him in check, to think rationally instead of charging into battle.

“What’s your next move, Lucas?” Alpha Twilight Ridge asks, breaking the silence.

I trace the path from Whispering Pines to our borders, my mind working through strategies. “We wait for confirmation from the

15:46

207 LUCAS War la Hero (10)

scouts. If it is Talon’s wolves, we move to intercept them before they can breach our territory. I won’t give him the advantage of striking first. But something’s fishy here.”

She nods, her expression grim but determined. “Twilight Ridge will stand with you. We’ll mobilize our forces to support yours.”

“Thank you,” I say, the words feeling inadequate for the weight of her support. “But I have a feeling there’s more than meets the eye.”

“Blackwood? There’s been no movement in the area.” Alpha Twilight Ridge sets her finger dead-set in the middle of pack lands, where Ava was supposed to be. “But you’re right. You would think this is where they would attack, not heading toward Westwood lands. You think it’s a ploy?”

“Most likely.” Rapping my fingers against the map, I think. The vampire attacks on our pack lands brought the Council together. Now that the Council’s together, the alpha of Whispering Pines has defected from the Council, but only after learning of our plans. If everything was a concerted effort to distract us from Blackwood...

“Here, here, and here. These are the most likely routes to travel in stealth from the Whispering Pines territory.”

“Yes, I thought of those, too.” Alpha Twilight Ridge points to the east. “There are also several options here. The likelihood of catching anyone from the direction of the Unregistered City is low. And, as you said, the vampires could travel into the territory and disappear within seconds. I can’t think of an effective way to defend against that kind of movement.”

“You’re right. There was never a word or hint of their movements, before or after the attacks.” Tapping the west side of the map, I

15:46

11. We ta thee (8)

grimace. “We need to concentrate forces here. If you can do that, I can focus on the rogues coming in. And there’s always the chance of unrest within the pack lands themselves, from all the wolves who stayed without defecting from Renard’s pack.”

Alpha Twilight Ridge sighs. “You realize that if I bring all my forces here, it leaves my territory open for invasion?”

“I do. I’m not asking this lightly.”

She shakes her head. “It’s a risk for all of us. What is Alpha Silvermoon intending?”

My lips quirk. “He’s conducting an unapproved survey of enemy lines.” Flicking the general area of the Whispering Pines pack lands, I wink at Alpha Twilight Ridge.

“Without Council—never mind. We’re beyond that now, aren’t we?” Alpha Twilight Ridge shakes her head again, with a long sigh. “The only Council to fall apart in how many generations?”

“We haven’t fallen apart yet.”

Check out my new book!

Unshift 228

228 Lisa: Rescue?

An odd scraping has me waking in the middle of the night, when even the faint light from the high— up window has disappeared.

The sounds are irregular, not at all patterned, which I've come to learn means that there's either a person or animal behind it.

I hope it isn't a rat.

Sitting up, I strain my ears, past the thudding of my heart against my ribs. More odd sounds echo around me. A soft scuffle comes > from outside the wall where Marisol usually appears with my

meager meals. My breath catches in my throat.

That mysterious note comes to mind.

Could it be? After all this time, has someone finally come for me?

Hope surges through my veins, making me dizzy. I press a hand to my chest, trying to calm my racing heart. Slow, deep breaths that expand my ribs and reduce my pulse rate to a level that doesn't have me woozy with the rush of blood.

My muscles are weak, despite the squat and other stretches I work on daily, trying to keep myself as in shape as I can.

How long have I been in this hellhole? Days? Weeks? It's impossible to tell without windows or any sense of time passing. I'm not even sure my meals arrive daily; sometimes, I think it's two or three times a day. Other times, it's as though a day or two passes between them.

The cycle of night and day here seems different, too. Which is an

15:47

228 Lisa: Rescue?

odd thing to think, but time just doesn't seem right.

The scraping sound comes again, closer this time. I take a tentative step forward, then another. My legs shake beneath me,

threatening to give out at any moment, and it's only three steps before the manacles yank against my wrists and ankles, keeping

me where I am.

I know these stones intimately, the boundaries of what little movement I have.

“Hello?” I whisper, my voice hoarse from disuse. “Is someone there?”

Silence greets me. I hold my breath, straining to hear any

response. Nothing. Maybe I imagined it all, my mind playing cruel tricks after so much isolation. Disappointment threatens to crush me, but I refuse to give in to despair. Not yet.

A muffled thud makes me jump. It’s definitely coming from beyond the wall. My heart races even faster, hope and fear warring within me. What if it’s not a rescue? What if it’s something worse?

Images of my captor flash through my mind, but I shove them away. I haven’t seen him since he first brought me here, and I don’t want to somehow summon his presence with my thoughts.

No, I can’t think about that now. I have to focus on the present.

The scraping sound comes again, more insistent this time. It’s as if someone’s trying to pry something open. Could they be working on the mechanism that opens my cell?

“Hello?” I call out, a little louder.

15:47

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228 Lisa: Rescue?

Still, nothing.

The thought of getting louder makes me cringe. What if I alert Marisol?

No, better to be quiet.

To wait and see.

“Please,” I whisper, not sure if I’m talking to God or whoever might be on the other side. “Please let this be real.”

My legs tremble beneath me, threatening to give out. I slide down, my eyes fixed on the wall in front of me as I sink to my knees. The cold seeps through my thin clothing, but I barely notice. I'm always cold, anyway. It's nothing new.

All my attention is focused on that sound, willing it to be my salvation.

The noises continue, sometimes loud, sometimes so faint I wonder if I'm imagining them. I dig my nails into my palms, the pain keeping me anchored in reality.

Suddenly, there's a loud click. I scramble to my feet, heart in my throat. The wall moves, sliding open just as it does when Marisol brings my meals. But it's not Marisol on the other side.

A figure stands in the doorway, backlit by dim light from the hallway beyond. I can't make out their features.

"Lisa Randall?" a voice whispers. Male, I think.

And as the figure steps closer, his height shrinks dramatically. A trick of the light, perhaps? But by the time he's standing in front of me in a dark robe, he's perhaps as tall as my hip.

220 Lisa: Rescup?

"Who are you?"

"Never you mind. Is your name Lisa Randall?" His words are snappy, even rushed.

"Yes."

"I have an order for extraction. You coming, or what?"

Holding up my hands, I rattle the chains holding me to the ground.

"I can't. I'm stuck."

"Ah." Shoving the hood of his robe back, I'm shocked to see a weathered face and short, spikey white hair. He's old. Ancient.

And so, so small.

"Iron. Rusted. Easy enough to fix." Reaching forward with one hand, I notice nails so long and curved that they are best described as claws. With one tap of his index claw—nail, the manacles open, falling to the ground with a loud clatter.

He does the same to the ones around my ankles.

The absence of their weight has me a little off balance, used to fighting against them.

“Let’s go, Lisa Randall. Your extraction order expires in an hour.”

The strange little man shuffles away, his dark robe swishing against the stone floor. For a moment, I’m frozen, staring at the open doorway. Freedom beckons, but fear roots me to the spot. My gaze sweeps over the dank cell one last time—the rough stone walls, the iron rings where my chains were anchored, the scraps of fabric that served as my bed.

“Come on, girl” the old man’s gruff voice snaps me back to reality.

15:47

228 Lisa Rescue?

“We haven’t got all night.”

My heart pounds against my ribs as I take my first tentative step. Then another. And another. Each step feels like I’m wading through molasses, my muscles weak from disuse and malnutrition, no

matter how much I tried to keep in shape. But I’m moving. I’m leaving this godforsaken cell behind.

As I cross the threshold, a shiver runs through me. The hallway beyond is dimly lit by sputtering torches, casting eerie shadows on the walls. It’s not much brighter than my cell, but it feels vast and overwhelming after so long in confinement. And weird. Who uses torches in this day and age?

But when I look closer, they’re battery-powered. No smoke, no fire. Just the effects of a torch, in a clever LED lighting concept.

Bizarre. Who goes that far to make a creepy hall?

Vampires, I guess.

“Keep up,” my rescuer—if that’s what he is—mutters. He’s already several paces ahead, his small form barely visible in the gloom.

I hurry after him, wincing as my bare feet slap against the cold stone. Questions swirl in my mind, but I bite them back. Now isn’t the time for interrogation. Now is the time to run, to get as far away from this place as possible.

But even as I follow the little man through twisting corridors, doubt gnaws at me. Who is he? Who sent him? And most importantly—are they any better than the monster who imprisoned me here?

15:47

Unshift 229

229 Ava: Fire

Bureaucracy in the Fae Ward moves with the pace of a paralyzed sloth, leaving me with an itchy feeling between my shoulder blades, as if staying here is the worst decision I've ever made.

Selene spends most of her time slinking around the Fae Ward, finding pockets of space with less wards to sneeze over. Vanessa and Marcus stick with me, with Vanessa sharing my bedroom. Our first lesson doesn't happen for three days. Why?

Application for Unlicensed Magus to Practice Dangerous Magic Within Residential Areas.

It's an actual title of a piece of paperwork Magister Orion had to file. Apparently, new wizards (though the official Fae-paperwork term is magus, unknown origin) are deemed a deadly force.

Whoever runs this place has a serious stick up their butt about me learning magic.

"I don't like it," Vanessa says, staring out the window. "They'll have your name on official paperwork. We have no idea how deep Renard's influence lies."

"It's only within the Fae Ward," I point out, like I have the other thirty times she's mentioned it. "If they're going to find me here, the paperwork won't be the only reason."

Marcus, of course, is quiet. We already know how he feels. He hates it and doesn't trust the paperwork, either.

Not that I disagree with either of them—it's just that, like them, I feel stuck.

17:05

that I've been unable to reach Lucas for three days.

ty

Knowing that they're fighting over there, not knowing the full
us on edge.

Have you made any progress" Vanessa changes the subject to sit

bed beside me, where I'm surrounded by five papers with

ent rapes written on them. Unlike the magic book I'm still kicking myself over for leaving in my room at the lodge, these

nes don't disappear, and Vanessa and Marcus are able to see

"No. Nothing" Frustrated, I grab the different papers, looking them over again and again. There's nothing that happens when I touch them: no tingle or buzz within my fingertips. I can't feel anything.

It's just a paper.

Magister Orion, grumbling about red tape, gave me these five papers and told me to find the elements within me that

correspond to them. With such vague instructions, it's no surprise I've had no success.

No matter how I try to commune with a single element within me, nothing happens.

"Try meditation," Marcus advises, grimacing at the papers before me. "It helps with fighting. Learning to center, to focus only on what matters. Maybe you're too in tune with the world around

you

Giving him a dubious look—it's not like I haven't tried that before—I grab the one that means fire, close my eyes, and focus deep within.

SVR XS. FIR

I let out a slow breath as I center myself. The sounds and scents of the world fade away, leaving only the sensation of my own body, its thudding heartbeat vibrating through my chest, and the pulsing core of magic within me. It's there, bright and tantalizing, just out

of reach.

Focusing on that core, that energy that warms me from within, I imagine myself reaching out to touch it. Nothing happens. I try to visualize tugging at it, like pulling on a string, but it remains stubbornly distant. Knocking on it in my mind yields no response

either.

Frustration bubbles up inside me. How am I supposed to access this power if nothing works? Taking another deep breath, I force myself to relax. Maybe I'm trying too hard.

In the silence of my meditation, my thoughts drift to the rune for fire sitting on the paper in front of me. Fire, Destructive,

passionate, life-giving. I think about its properties—how it consumes, how it transforms, how it burns.

Burning.

A memory surfaces, unbidden. Not a memory of this life, but of another. A dream? A vision? Whatever it was, it feels as real as

anything I've experienced.

Pain. Searing, scorching pain that raged through every fiber of my being. I couldn't move, couldn't scream, couldn't see. There was nothing but the all-consuming agony of flesh melting from bone.

My breath catches in my throat as the phantom sensations wash over me. I want to pull away from the memory, to escape the torment, but something holds me there. This is important. This

17.50

220 Ava. Fire

matters.

In that other life, that other death, I was nothing. Only pain. No name, no self, just pure sensation. And in that moment of complete dissolution, something else emerged. Something primal and powerful.

I focus on that feeling, on the memory of being unmade by fire. The bright core of magic within me pulses in response, as if recognizing a kindred spirit. For the first time, I feel a connection to that

power.

It's not about reaching or grasping or forcing. It's about becoming. About letting go of who I think I am and embracing something deeper, more elemental.

My mind opens to fire and the magic surges forward, no longer held back by my attempts to control it. It flows through me, around me, filling every part of my being with warmth and light.

My eyes snap open. The paper with the fire rune is floating an inch above the bed, glowing with an inner light. As I watch, stunned, it bursts into flame, consumed in seconds and leaving nothing but a

faint wisp of smoke.

“Holy shit,” I whisper, staring at the empty space where the paper used to be.

Vanessa jumps up from beside me, her eyes wide. “Ava? What just happened? Did you do it?”

It’s a silly question. We all know.

But I can’t blame her for asking, because hell, I’m thinking the same thing. Was that me? Did I do that?

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I look at her, then at Marcus who’s rushed over from his position by the window. A giddy laugh bubbles up from my chest. “I did it. I actually did it!”

The elation is short-lived as the reality of what just occurred sinks

1. in. I destroyed one of the runes Magister Orion gave me. More importantly, I accessed my magic for the first time on purpose- and I have no idea how to control it.

“We should probably tell Magister Orion,” I say, my limbs shaking, as if using that tiny amount of power sucked the life from my body.

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Comentario 0

Deja el primer comentario par

Unshift 230

230 Ava: Change of Balance

“I’ll get the Magister,” Marcus offers. “You focus on the those other ones. Try not to flood the room or something”

“I can swim,” Vanessa says. “I can probably keep her afloat until you get here.”

Their faith in me is so touching. "I'm not going to flood the room, guys."

"Did you know you were going to set a paper on fire before you

did it?" Marcus looks stern, but there's a slight twinkle in his eyes, and a little quirk to his smile, that tells me he's becoming more comfortable around me.

At least he's not trying to escape the general vicinity of magic, after being in the Fae Ward for a few days. He's getting used to its existence around him, though he admits that it feels itchy. Vanessa doesn't seem to have the same problem.

Selene, on the other hand.....

I'm not sneezing, but all I can smell is refuse. She sounds sour in my head. There's an alley with garbage cans. I guess no one wants to ward their trash.

As Marcus leaves to fetch Magister Orion, my heart clenches in sympathy for my wolf. I wish there was a way to make you more comfortable.

It's fine, Selene replies, though her mental voice sounds strained. I'd rather be here than leave you alone.

17:05 C

230 Ava: Change of Balance

Vanessa settles on the bed, her fingers tracing the edges of the rune papers scattered across the covers. She looks up at me, her eyes filled with concern. "How are you holding up, Ava?"

Falling onto my back, I throw my arm over my eyes, blocking out the lights. Every one of my feelings presses down on me, shoving me deeper into the mattress. "Honestly? I feel like I'm missing something huge. Like there's this... I don't know, this looming disaster just waiting to happen, and I can't see it coming."

Vanessa nods, her expression thoughtful. "Well, we know Lisa's been relocated. That's good news, right? And Lucas is an experienced alpha. He's handled tough situations before."

"I know, I know." I squeeze my arm harder against my face, against the sudden spring of tears in my eyes. "But I can't shake this feeling that I should be doing more. It feels like I'm hiding while everyone else is out there facing real danger."

Vanessa holds up one of the rune papers. It crinkles in the air, tickling my ear as I lower my arm to peer in her direction. "Maybe working on your powers is the best help you can be right now. Think about it—if you can master this, you'll be able to protect the pack in ways no one else can."

I want to agree with her. I really do. But that prickling feeling of unease won't leave me alone. Pulling out my phone, my fingers hover over Lucas's number. I've left him twelve messages since yesterday. "I should call him, just to check in."

The phone rings, once, twice, three times. No answer. I try again, my heart rate picking up with each unanswered ring. Nothing.

"He's probably just busy." Vanessa says, but I can hear the slight

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uncertainty in her voice.

I switch to Kellan's number, hoping he'll at least be able to give me an update. But his phone goes straight to voicemail,

"Dammit," I mutter, tossing my phone onto the bed. I look at

Vanessa, suddenly feeling very small and very scared. "How do you handle this? The stress, the not knowing?"

Vanessa's eyes soften, and she reaches out to squeeze my hand.

"It's hard," she admits. "There's no easy way to deal with it. The amount of times I've been left at the hospital while Vester's out on a mission is not small."

"And what did you do?"

She shakes her head. "You focus on what needs to be done. There's always a patient who needs something, or more wounded coming in. There are things that you need to do, and you do them. Worrying yourself into an anxiety spiral won't help. Right now, I'm focused on you."

Grabbing her hand back, I squeeze hard. "Thank you. For being with me. For sacrificing for me." If Lucas being unreachable is hard for me—newly mated and spending more time away from him than with him—I can only imagine how hard it is for a couple mated as long as Vanessa and Vester. 2

“Does it hurt, to be away from him? Here, in your chest?” I rub mine, where there’s an ache I’ve become familiar with. It was there

the moment I ran from the Lunar Gala, and only recently

dissipated since accepting my mating bond with Lucas.

It’s back now, and driving me crazy.

17:05

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A soft smile spreads across her face, her eyes taking on a distant look. “Always,” she says quietly. “When he’s not near, it’s like... like I’m missing an arm or a leg. Missing a lung. I can’t breathe a full breathe, and I can’t walk at full strength. You don’t realize how much you rely on someone until they’re not there.”

Her words hit me hard. There were so many times I just got busy, too distracted thinking and doing to even remember to call Lucas. It seems stupid that I ever got that complacent before, when now my entire day revolves around my phone, sending out regular calls in case he finally answers.

He can’t call me; only I can reach him. It’s been an eye-opening experience. Once I accepted him into my life, as my partner, and the responsibilities of the position it brings, I thought I was finally ready. Finally stepping up.

But now I realize I still was complacent, knowing he was there to hold us up. He’s always been the glue of our relationship, and I’ve been like a flighty hummingbird, flitting from one place to the next.

with our

Without him being the one to text me, to call me, distance, I realize how much I relied on him. On his presence to steady us, to keep our relationship going.

Now, I’m desperate to know he’s safe, and finally understanding how he felt.

It doesn’t feel good at all.

It feels like the entire world keeps throwing revelation after revelation at me, and I’m drowning in a sea of knowledge that I haven’t done enough.

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Maybe that's where this uneasy feeling is coming from.

"Do you regret coming with me?" I ask, almost afraid to hear the answer.

But Vanessa shakes her head without hesitation. "Not for a second. This is important, Ava. What you're learning here, what you're becoming... it could change everything. With

vampires coming to wolf fights, and these magical portals, and now this city, I feel like we're all unprepared for what a real war entails. You're our key to salvation."

Her words send all of my insecurities straight to my lungs, making it even harder for me to breathe. How can I live up to someone as sweet and caring as Vanessa? Someone who's willing to stand by me despite my mistakes. Someone who isn't forced by a fated bond to be with me.



"That's a bit much-"

She cuts me off with her simple words. "But that's how I feel"

And I, Selene echoes.

"Besides," she adds with a wry smile, "someone's got to keep you from burning down the Fae Ward."

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Comentario 2

12:05

Deja el primer comentario para este capítulo

A

Ver todos