

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted #Unshift 231 - Read Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted Unshift 231

Unshift 231

231 Ava: Water

The rune for water swims before my eyes, its curves and lines blurring as I try to focus. My mind, however, has other plans. It drifts to Vanessa, her soft smile as she spoke of Vester. The ache in her voice. The longing.

I know that feeling all too well now.

Lucas. Where is he? Is he safe? Is the pack safe? Do we have more funeral rites coming? Are people hurting? Are our hospitals inundated?

Your brain is so loud I can't sleep, Selene's voice cuts through my spiraling thoughts.

Oh, I'm so sorry. Rolling my eyes at her nonexistent self, knowing she can feel it, I draw mentally, Let me just turn down the volume on my anxiety for you. Wouldn't want to disturb your beauty rest.

Selene huffs, a sound somewhere between amusement and exasperation. Worrying about things you can't control is a waste of time. You'd be better off focusing on what's in front of you. The sooner you master this, the sooner we can leave.

She's right, of course. Doesn't make it any easier, but she's right. I take a deep breath, trying to center myself. "Okay, okay. You're right. Let's do this."

"Is it Selene?" Vanessa asks in amusement. "Whenever you talk to her, your entire face scrunches up.

Damn. Really? I've watched them all go a little vacant-eyed when they're talking to their wolves or pack members, but no one's ever

That's amharging

sghing me pep talk

"You can do this, Ava. Look what you accomplished earlier today? Civing me two thumbs-up that couldn't be more cheesy if she tried. Vanessa grins. "I have faith in you"

Heat flushes in my cheeks. No matter how much care and attention I've been given in my time at Westwood, it still feels

awkward and wrong to have someone so enthusiastic in their
praise of me.

Good, too.

Really good.

That rush of warmth and affection in my heart that's brought about with a few simple words and encouragement is a little scary. It reminds me a little of how I'd begun to feel a little like I should stay with Clayton, all because he was kind to me and gave me a place to live, despite knowing that it was wrong.

Knowing him a little more now—stijl not very much, but enough to recognize that he didn't exactly have any sinister designs to throw me back to my pack or anything—I can see how he was just an alpha struggling to do the right thing and maybe a little too clouded by the heat—mating that occurred between us.

I like him. Selene murmurs. But he is not the one who stirs your
heart, is he?

No, he isn't.

231 Ave Water

Those flutters I felt toward him; the way I wanted to lean on him and rely on him? They're the same ones I feel toward Vanessa, who's been in my corner from the first moment we met. Someone who's willing to help me, to talk to me, to listen. To get to know my thoughts and feelings. Someone who cares about them.

Someone aside from Lucas, who's bonded to me. And aside from Lisa, who—despite being my best friend—doesn't understand my life..

It's different than Mrs. Elkins, who didn't know who I was. And it's
different from Selene, who's another half of my heart.

It's someone who gives without expecting anything in return. I'm weak to that. I see that now, and it only gets clearer by the day.

There's nothing wrong in appreciating those who care for you,

Selene murmurs.

Still, it worries me. I'm going to need to be smarter in the future. Make sure I'm not trusting the wrong people, all because they treat

me well.

Already, I feel my heart ache at the thought that maybe Sister Miriam isn't the best person to trust. Or maybe that Magister Orion isn't the best choice of teacher. Maybe being here in the Fae Ward itself is nothing more than some elaborate trap-

You're running through too many thoughts again, Selene says, affection from her coming through our bond to soothe my ragged

mind. You're going through everything you can to avoid what's in front of me.

Right.

16:24.

The magic.

With a deep breath, I purge my head as best as I can, turning my

attention back to the rune for water.

I trace its lines with my eyes. There's that place deep inside me where I felt the fire magic, but when I reach for it, it's like hitting a wall. I push against it, trying to find a crack, a seam, anything. But there's nothing. Just like before.

Frustration builds quicker than before. I managed it before, why not now? Visualizing the magic as a door that I need to open doesn't feel right. I tug at an imaginary handle, knock on its surface, even try to kick it down in my mind.

Nothing.

My shoulders slump.

It feels like I'm just leaning against this invisible barrier now, too exhausted to keep fighting. My arms and legs shake with exhaustion, just like they did after I accessed the fire magic. But this time, I have nothing to show for it.

No burst of power, no flickering flame. Just the trembling of

overexerted muscles and the bitter taste of failure.

I open my eyes, blinking away the spots dancing in my vision. The water rune sits there, mocking me with its stillness. I want to crumple it up and throw it across the room, but I resist the urge. Barely.

“This is pointless,” I mutter, more to myself than to Selene. “Maybe I’m just a one-trick pony. Fire and done.”

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231 Ava, Water

You’re giving up too easily, Selene chides. Magic isn’t something you can force. It’s about finding the right flow, the right rhythm.

“Easy for you to say,” I grumble. “You’re not the one sitting here feeling like an idiot.”

No, I’m just the one watching you act like one, she retorts, but there’s no real bite to her words.

My lips curve, some of the tension easing from my shoulders as I let out a soft chuckle. “Touché.”

I take another deep breath, trying to shake off the frustration. Vanessa is still and silent in her corner, and I can’t even feel her

gaze on me. She’s probably looking anywhere except at me, knowing the stress her regard would put me under.

More than ever, I’m convinced she’s an angel.

Thinking through it again, maybe I’m approaching this all wrong. Fire came to me in a moment of intense emotion, a vivid memory.

What do I associate with water?

I close my eyes again, thinking of the times I’ve felt most connected to water. The gentle lapping of waves at the lake near the pack house, escaping from yet another round of beating—

No. Don’t go there.

Instead, it’s the soothing sound of rain on the windows of Lisa’s apartment. The refreshing coolness of a glass of water, after a hot day of training with Jericho.

None of it feels quite right. I'm missing something, but I can't put my finger on what.

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231 Ava: Water

You're trying too hard, Selene says softly. Water isn't about force. It's about flow, about finding the path of least resistance.

"I don't know how to do that," I admit, frustration creeping back into my voice. "I've spent my whole life fighting to survive. How am I supposed to just... flow?"

By letting go, she replies simply. Stop trying to control it. Let it come to you.

I want to argue, to point out how impossible that sounds. But I'm too tired to fight anymore. So instead, I just nod and close my eyes again.

Visualizing nothing. I don't reach for the magic or try to force it. I focus on my breathing, on the feeling of air moving in and out of my lungs. On the steady beat of my heart.

Just existing.

And then, almost imperceptibly at first, I feel something. It's not the roaring inferno of the fire magic. It's softer, gentler. A cool trickle at the edge of my consciousness.

There's the urge to grab at it, to force it into form. Shoving those urges down deep in the recesses of my soul, I let it be.

Let it flow around me.

Through me.

The trickle becomes a stream, then a river. It doesn't overwhelm me like the fire did. It just... is. Cool and refreshing and alive.

I open my eyes, half expecting to see the room flooded. But everything looks the same. The water rune still sits in front of me,

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231 Ava: Water

unchanged.

And yet, I know something has shifted. I can feel it, a new awareness humming just beneath my skin.

“I think...” I start, then pause, unsure how to describe what just happened. “I think I found it. Or maybe it found me? I don’t know.”

Selene’s excitement comes through our bond, and Vanessa comes to me in two quick steps, resting her hands against my shoulders and squeezes.

“You’re amazing, Ava. You’re doing great.”

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Unshift 232

232 Ava: Bursting In

“But I didn’t do anything,” I protest. “I just sat here.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Vanessa says, just as Selene says the same thing in my head.

I swear I can hear a smile in my wolf’s voice. Sometimes doing nothing is the hardest thing of all.

I look down at my hands, half expecting to see water droplets forming on my skin. But they look the same as always. “Did I really do it, though?”

I don’t know. I’m not a wizard.

Pausing at that, I scowl at the air, since she’s not near me. “Then

what was all that advice about?”

A hunch.

What the hell.

It worked, didn’t it?

Can't really argue with that.

The door flies open with a resounding bang, and I nearly leap out of my skin. Before I can even process what's happening, Vanessa's between me and the entrance, her body coiled and ready to strike.

My heart's still racing when Magister Orion bursts in, his massive frame filling the doorway. But it's not his size that catches my attention this time. No, it's the tiny sparks of flame dancing above his

head like a bizarre halo. I blink, wondering if I'm hallucinating.

16:25

232 Ava: Bursting In

"Fire!" he roars, his voice booming through the room. "You touched fire!"

The volume of his words has me flinching, but there's no mistaking the excitement in his tone. He's practically vibrating with energy as he continues, words tumbling out in a rush.

"I knew it! I knew you were special, Ava Grey! Do you have any idea how long it usually takes trainees to access their magic? Weeks!

Sometimes months!"

His enthusiasm is almost infectious, but I'm still reeling from the sudden intrusion. Marcus follows Magister Orion into the room, taking up his usual position in the corner. His face is impassive as ever, but there's a hint of amusement in his eyes.

Vanessa relaxes her defensive stance and moves to the opposite corner, still on high alert but recognizing that we're safe. I'm grateful for her protective instincts, even if they weren't needed

this time.

Magister Orion's still going on about magical potential and rare talents when he suddenly stops mid-sentence. His eyes dart around, taking in the room as if seeing it for the first time. The realization dawns on his face, and I watch as his expression shifts

from excitement to mortification.

"Oh. Oh, dear. This is a terrible mistake. I'm in your..." His words come out in a stammer, his face flushed as red as the fire dancing above his head. "My sincerest apologies, my lady!"

Before I can even form a response, he's out the door, slamming it behind him with as much force as when he entered. The silence

that follows is deafening.

16:25

232 Ava: Burstant in

I exchange bewildered looks with Vanessa and Marcus, trying to process what just happened. Did that really just occur? Or did I fall asleep during meditation and dream the whole thing?

A polite knock on the door breaks the stunned silence. Vanessa moves to answer it, and I have to stifle a laugh at the absurdity of

the situation.

"Magister Orion," Vanessa says, her voice carefully neutral. "How may we help you?"

"My apologies. I... ahem. May I please have permission to enter Miss Grey's chambers?" His voice is subdued now, a far cry from the booming enthusiasm of moments ago.

Vanessa glances back, catching my eye, and I can see she's struggling to keep a straight face. "Of course," she says, stepping

aside to let him in.

Magister Orion enters, his massive frame somehow seeming smaller than before. His face is beet red, and the dancing flames above his head have disappeared. He clears his throat, looking

everywhere except at me.

"Miss Grey, I must offer my sincerest apologies for intruding upon your personal chambers without so much as a by-your-leave. It was terribly rude and unprofessional of me. I allowed my excitement to override my manners, and for that, I am truly sorry"

The formal language and contrite tone are such a stark contrast to his earlier behavior that I'm not quite sure how to respond. Part of me wants to laugh at the absurdity of it all, but another part recognizes the genuine remorse in his voice.

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“It’s.. it’s okay. Magister Orion, I manage to say, trying to keep my voice steady. “I understand you were excited about the magic thing.”

He nods, still looking uncomfortable. “Yes, well, that’s no excuse for such behavior. I assure you, it won’t happen again.”

An awkward silence falls over the room. I glance at Vanessa and Marcus, hoping for some clue on how to proceed, but they both

seem content to let me take the lead.

“So,” I begin, searching for a way to break the tension, “about that fire magic...

Magister Orion’s eyes light up, but he visibly restrains himself from launching into another excited tirade. “Yes, of course. Perhaps we could discuss it in a more... appropriate setting? The library, perhaps?”

I nod, relieved to have a direction. “That sounds good.”

“Of course, of course,” he says, backing towards the door. “I’ll await you there.”

As soon as the door closes behind him, a hysterical giggle escapes. “Well, I say, looking at Vanessa and Marcus, “that was...”

“Interesting,” Vanessa supplies, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “I never heard that the Fae have such conservative

mores.”

“I’ve heard the exact opposite,” Marcus muses. “But then again, the knowledge we have is contained in storybooks. We have very little contact with anyone associated with the Unregistered

Communities”

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27 Ava Thesi

Standing up, I stretch out the kinks from sitting so long, “I guess we’d better not keep him waiting. Who knows what he might do if he gets too excited again.”

Vanessa snorts, a sound that’s both amused and exasperated, “It’s not like he’s going to barge into your bedroom again, Ava”

I raise an eyebrow at her. "You sure about that? Did you see how he got when he thought I'd done fire magic? It's like nothing else in the world exists when he's talking about it."

Marcus makes a soft sound of agreement. "Magister Orion seems oblivious to anything outside his interests."

"I mean, did you see those little flames dancing over his head?" I ask, gesturing vaguely above my own. "It was like he didn't even notice them. And the way he just burst in here..."

She gestures above her own head. "The fire seems indicative of his excitement. Perhaps it's something you need to remember for fire, Ava? If he can summon little fire things when he's at that level, maybe you can, too."

Fire is explosive. Perhaps an exaggerated level of happiness can also be like fire, Selene offers. An adrenaline rush brings heat, too.

Interesting. It would be much more pleasant to think of something like that than the feeling of skin burning and melting off my bones. Shuddering a little at the vague remnants of those old dreams, I snatch the runes off the bed. "Let's go. We can ask Magister Orion about it instead of playing guess-how-to-magic."

"Can he even teach anything without the approval back from all that paperwork?" Vanessa muses, falling in line behind me as I

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232 Ava: Bursting In

head out of the room and down the staircase to the bottom level.

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Unshift 233

233 Ava: Graceless Florice

“Hogwash!”

Magister Orion’s roar rushes through the space with such force

and volume that my foot slips off a stair coming down. Only Vanessa’s quick reflexes in grabbing my arm and hauling me backward saves me from an undignified tumble down the stairs and whatever injuries that might have brought my way.

Marcus squeezes by me on the stairs, motioning for me to stay

back as we strain our ears to listen in.

There’s someone else talking, a female voice that’s unrecognizable to any of us, judging by the looks on everyone’s faces.

“Balderdash. This is nothing more than an attempt to curb my authority-”

The voice cuts Magister Orion off again, but I can’t hear what she’s saying.

Marcus’ brows lower into a fierce look that sends shivers down my

back, and Vanessa’s jaw is tight enough to crack her teeth. Whatever they’re hearing, it isn’t good.

Magister Orion’s voice continues to climb the decibel ladder.

“I refuse to be constrained by arbitrary regulations, Florice. Should you wish to summon me, do so with the proper backing. Your misuse of authority holds no sway here. This is a battle you cannot hope to win.”

The argument between Magister Orion and Florice continues to

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233 Ava: Graceless Florice

Her nose is too long and slim.

Her face is round, with plump cheeks and narrow lips. She's not even conventionally pretty, with a pinched look to her face that seems permanent, as though everyone around her is lacking in

every way.

Mom always looked elegant. Beautiful.

This woman is harried, old despite the lack of wrinkles in her skin, and altogether unpleasant.

Nothing like Mom at all, except in her hair and eyes.

Her voice is too shrill, despite being cold and level. It stings my ears to listen to it.

"Magister Orion," she says, her voice dripping with disdain as she maintains eye contact with me, "housing diseased animals will only work against you."

My stomach churns, and fury bursts from my belly, up my spine, and into my head with a rush of heat. The way she looks at us, like we're something foul she's stepped in, makes me want to launch myself at her haughty face and claw her eyes out.

Maybe it's because I saw her as my mother, even just for a moment.

Magister Orion's response is swift and shocking. With a flick of his wrist, a burst of orange energy surges towards Florice, shoving her towards the exit. She stumbles and nearly falls to her knees, her eyes wide.

"This is unacceptable!" she protests, her composure finally

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233 Ava: Graceless Florice

cracking. "You cannot-"

But her words are cut off as the door slams shut behind her, leaving blessed silence.

The rage within me simmers, having nowhere to go now for relief, but there's a sick feeling of satisfaction as I think about that

shocked look on her face.

Magister Orion turns to us, his face a mix of frustration and regret.

"I apologize for allowing you to witness such a disgusting display," he says, his voice softer now. "That creature does not represent

the best of our kind."

The loud noise in my head, I realize, is Selene's growling.

She's furious, too.

"Did we bring you trouble, Magister?" Marcus asks.

Magister Orion shakes his head. "The trouble you see pre-dates your arrival by quite some time." He pauses, his eyes landing on me, studying me intently. "How are you feeling after accessing your magic? Your body, I mean."

Before I can answer, Vanessa chimes in. "She seems unusually clumsy and slow," she says, concern evident in her voice. "She almost fell down the stairs just now, and I had to hold her up."

"That's because I was startled-" I protest, but Magister Orion cuts me off with a forced laugh, trying to change the mood of the

moment.

"The first few times one uses magic, it typically drains all the energy from their body. It's quite normal to feel as if you've run a

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233 Ava: Graceless Florice

marathon." His lips quirk up in a small smile. "Though, I suppose it's usually without the burning lungs."

It's as though my muscles just got the memo, because they suddenly feel fifty pounds too heavy. I'm exhausted, too, like every ounce of energy has been sapped from my body.

I guess I felt that way before, but I didn't pay too much attention to

1. it.

Like mentioning it made it worse.

"So this is normal?*

Magister Orion nods, his expression softening further. "Perfectly normal, and a good sign, actually. It means your body is adapting to channeling magical energy. With practice, this fatigue will lessen. You're lucky, child. Most do not experience this for weeks after their first lesson."

He pauses, looking thoughtful. "Though, I suppose they are quite a few years younger. In that respect, you've been quite delayed in your education."

It's one thing to know, intellectually, that I have magic. It's another entirely to feel its effects coursing through my body.

"Perhaps we should continue this discussion seated," Marcus suggests, eyeing me with concern. "Ava looks like she might topple

over at any moment."

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Unshift 234

234 Ava: Magister Orion Explains Things

234 Ava: Magister Orion Explains

Things

I want to protest, to insist that I'm fine, but the truth is, I'm grateful for the suggestion. My legs feel like jelly, and the idea of sitting down is appealing.

Very appealing.

I want to sit down.

Right now.

Magister Orion agrees, leading us to the familiar sitting area nearby. As I sink into a plush armchair, relief washes over me. I hadn't realized just how much effort it was taking to remain upright.

"Now," Magister Orion says, settling into his own chair, "let's discuss what happened during your practice session. I'd like to hear about your experience accessing your magic for the first time."

My thoughts are jumbled now that the moment's

arrived. How do I even describe the rush of power, the

vivid memories, the feeling of connection to something greater than myself?

234 Ava: Magister Orion Explains Things

"It was intense," I begin, searching for the right words. "Like I was drowning in dreams, or maybe memories. They were awful ones, where I died in a fire. It was horrible and painful. I felt a surge of

energy and then, before I knew it, the rune paper was on fire."

Magister Orion leans forward, his eyes sparkling with interest. "For the wizards of the past, past life

memories were not uncommon when first accessing one's magical core. It's as if the magic itself carries the echoes of its previous incarnations. While it isn't

normal, it isn't unheard of. Usually, it comes with a great level of power."

Relieved that he doesn't think I'm crazy, I admit, "It felt so real. Like I was there, experiencing it all over again."

"That's because, in a sense, you were," he explains. "Magic is timeless, Ava. It exists beyond our mortal understanding of past, present, and future. On a different plane, as it were. When we tap into it, we sometimes glimpse the vast tapestry of existence."

His words are both awesome and terrifying.

Rubbing goosebumps from my arms, I ask, "So, what does this mean? Is it going to happen all the time? Am

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234 Ava: Magister Orion Explains Things

I going to remember my past life now?"

"No, no." He shakes a hand between us with a laugh. "Nothing like that. It's a glimpse, a window, but nothing more than that. It's similar to clairvoyants, who can see or predict future events. Cloudy and uncertain, and

sometimes things change before things come to pass. Or, you see an alternate history that was never written in your story books."

"Clairvoyants," I murmur, thinking back. "Like Sister Miriam?"

"Ah, Sister Miriam."

Magister Orion leans back, his thick fingers steepling as he considers his words. "Sister Miriam is unique

among vampires."

My ears perk up, and I can even feel Selene focusing more on what she can hear through my head.

"Vampires have their own brand of magic, you see," he continues, his voice taking on the cadence of a lecturer. "It's tied to their very nature—blood magic, some call it, but it isn't necessarily accurate. Even so,

Sister Miriam is different."

I lean forward, hanging on every word. The fatigue in

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234 Ava: Magister Orion Explains Things

my muscles seems to fade as curiosity takes over.

"We believe she's of partial Fae descent," Magister Orion says, his eyes distant as if recalling some ancient lore. "Though the truth of her parentage remains a mystery to most. There isn't much known about the dhampir and what powers they inherit from their non-vampire parent, but Sister Miriam's clairvoyant abilities must come from a Fae bloodline. There has never been a human wizard with the ability of prophecy."

"Does everything come true, if she sees it?"

This is something that's been bothering me for a long time. The prophecy she gave, the one my mother

heard.

"No. It doesn't work that way. What a clairvoyant can see is merely a possibility in your life. Sometimes, it works out exactly as they've foreseen. Sometimes, you make choices that change such a future. And other times, knowing pushes you to make choices to avoid that future—yet brings it to fruition instead, in a prophetic paradox. Many consider it a useless ability, but some become addicted to the visions, unable to

make decisions without them."

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234 Ava: Magister Orion Explains Things

"So even if she said something..."

"Ava Grey," he interrupts, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees, "whatever you've learned, or whatever you've been told, don't fear the future. The knowledge any prophecy gives you is fleeting and

uncertain. Far more important is to live a life that

makes you happy and proud, not to lead one based off your fears."@

Hearing it from someone like Magister Orion, deeply integrated with the world of magic, finally lifts the worry from my shoulders, and I sigh in relief.

He smiles. "Worry not, my pupil. What will come to pass is always in a state of flux. Even time can be unreliable."

"How can time be unreliable?" Vanessa asks, the curiosity in her voice unmistakable.

She's been drawn into all this insanity with me, and all this knowledge only deepens her hunger for more. Unlike me, who stresses over my power and how to control it, she just wants to learn about this world. About magic. About the possibilities that it brings. "Once upon a time, there were Archmages in this

234 Ava: Magister Orion Explains Things

world. These people were special enough to reach the level of the gods and change time at their will."

Magister Orion sighs. "Alas, nothing good comes from such a level of power."

“What happened to them?” This time it’s Marcus, even his stoic bearing broken by his intrigue.

“None of the stories agree.” He spreads his hands in regret. “I have been looking for these answers all my life, but I’ve yet to find any account that stands out as the absolute truth. What I do know is that it changed the world as we know it, tearing apart everything. The gods disappeared. The Archmages died. And the Lycans—your forebears—were erased from both worlds.”

Confused, I blurt out, “Both worlds? What’s the second world?”

“This one, of course, child. The realm of Fae.”

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Unshift 235

235 Ava: Magic Training (1)

235 Ava: Magic Training (I)

Magister Orion clasps his hands in front of him and beams in my direction. “And now, we have you, Ava Grey. The first wizard in a very long time.”

Feeling the intensity of his gaze, I shift my weight, settling a little deeper into my chair as though that will somehow shield me from his excitement. “I don’t want

you to see me as something special. I’m just me.”

“You can’t get away from being special, Ava Grey.” He sighs. “It’s unfortunate, but you’ll never be able to escape that. Even without your magic, you’re mated to an alpha, correct?”

I nod.

“Then you were already special to begin with.” He spreads his hands with a little shrug. “Your magic is

like confetti on a cake.”

Confetti?

Oh. He must mean sprinkles.

“Sprinkles are disgusting,” I point out.

They are not. I like them. Selene’s little whisper in my

09:31

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235 Ava: Magic Training (1)

mind has my nose wrinkling

Sprinkles are just crunchy wax covering delicious icing. They have no business being within a mile of a decent

cake.

“Yes, well, there are those who love their sprinkles.”

Magister Orion claps his hands. “So. Fire was your first element. I’m a little surprised. I thought it would be

water.”

Tilting my head, I ask, “Does it matter?”

“Matter? No. It’s a simple bit of curiosity. A personal theory, I suppose. Have you had any success with

other elements?”

“Water,” Vanessa offers.

“Oh?” That sparkling look in his eyes is back. “You

touched water?”

Shaking my head, I admit, “Not exactly. Nothing happened, but I could feel something inside.

Something that felt refreshing and cool, when I finally stopped trying to force it.”

“Interesting,” Magister Orion murmurs. “And were you having memories again, when you felt it?”

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235 Ava: Magic Training (1)

“Not like with fire.” Squinting, I think back. “I did think about water and its properties, but it felt like

something was missing. Like it wasn’t enough. Then Selene told me to stop trying to force it, and I tried to relax. Once I finally did, it came to me. It doesn’t really feel like I’m in control of it, but that it’s coming up to

me on its own.”

Babbling through my explanation makes me feel

awkward. I’m not sure of the words to use, or how to describe the feelings in my body. I don’t even know if it makes sense to him.

“It sounds like a partial activation. You felt your attunement with the element. This is still good, still good. Yes, indeed.”

Magister Orion bounces out of his chair, his massive frame surprisingly agile as he begins to pace. His lips move, but the words are too quiet for me to catch. I strain my ears, leaning forward slightly, but it’s no use. Whatever’s going through his mind, he’s keeping it to himself.

After a few minutes of this, he lets out a sigh so heavy I swear I feel the air move. “Red tape,” he grumbles. “Always with the red tape.”

235 Ava: Magic Training (1)

I’m about to ask what he means when he continues, his voice rising. “Florice can take her damn applications and shove them up her ass.”

My eyes widen. It’s jarring, like hearing a teacher

swear.

“I apologize for my crass language,” he says, noticing my expression. “I’m simply sick of how things are governed here. Did you know we even need to fill out paperwork to take a shit?”

A laugh escapes me, awkward and uncertain. Is he joking?

“I wish it were more of an exaggeration than it is,” he mutters, confirming my suspicions.

Before I can process this bizarre tidbit about Fae bureaucracy, Magister Orion’s demeanor shifts. “Follow me,” he says, his tone brooking no argument.

We trail after him to the back of the building. He stops in front of a blank wall, and I'm about to ask why when, like magic, doors appear.

No, not like magic. They are magic. The wall shimmers and parts, revealing an entrance where there was

nothing before

235 Ava: Magic Training (1)

We're in what looks like a forested grove, trees stretching up towards... I blink, trying to make sense of what I'm seeing. The ceiling—if you can call it that—cycles between sun, stars, and wooden beams like a normal ceiling. It's disorienting and beautiful all at

once.

The magic here is palpable. It's in the air, in the ground beneath my feet. I can almost taste it, a tang on my tongue like ozone after a lightning strike.

"Welcome to the training room," Magister Orion

announces.

As soon as the words leave his mouth, the room shimmers. The trees melt away, replaced by sleek metal walls. We're suddenly standing in what looks like a giant metal box.

"What just happened?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

"This room changes according to the needs of its owner," Magister Orion explains. "But it won't change at whim for others."

I spin in a slow circle, taking it all in. The level of magic surrounding us is staggering. It makes the hair

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235 Ava: Magic Training (1)

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235 Ava: Magic Training (1)

on my arms stand up, sends a tingle down my spine.

"In this room, you should be safe to practice your magic," Magister Orion says.

Marcus, ever vigilant, latches onto one word. "Should?"

Magister Orion nods, his expression grave. "It is

possible to break through the wards of this place,

given enough raw magic. But it would take an immense amount of power."

I'm still reeling from the room's transformation when Magister Orion drops another bombshell.

"Time flows differently here," he says. "An hour here can be a minute in the Fae Ward, or ten. It changes, and even I can't always predict it."

My mind struggles to wrap around this concept. How is that possible? And then, suddenly, I'm aware of something else. An absence. A blankness in my head where Selene's presence should be. This is worse than when we're separated by distance. I

can't feel her in my head then, but this emptiness is different somehow. Deeper. More profound.

Panic rises in my chest, sharp and suffocating. I reach out mentally searching for that familiar connection.

09:31

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235 Ava: Magic Training (1)

Nothing. It's like shouting into a void.

"Selene's gone," I whisper, my voice

embling.

Magister Orion's face falls as he sees my expression. "I apologize," he says quickly. "I should have thought of that before bringing you in here. This place is not

within the same plane as the Fae Ward. It interrupts your link with your wolf, since we didn't bring her with

us."

The panic doesn't subside. If anything, it intensifies.

"I need to go back," I say, my words coming out in a rush. "I need to be able to reach her. She doesn't know what's going on."

Magister Orion holds up his hands in a placating gesture. "Of course. We can leave immediately if you wish. But please, consider staying for a moment. This room offers unparalleled protection and privacy for your training. It could be invaluable."

I take a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart. He's right, I know he's right, but the absence of Selene feels like a physical ache. Oddly, my mate bond is quiet in my chest. Not painful like the loss of Selene, like it

still exists.

09:31

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235 Ava: Magic Training (1)

How can that be?

“How long will I be in here?” I ask, my voice still shaky.

“That’s up to you,” Magister Orion says. “We can start with short sessions if you prefer. An hour here might only be a few minutes outside.”

66

Thank you all for your patience with updates!

I am working on securing an office this week, where I can work in peace. (Super excited about this.) However, just as I’m doing these

Unshift 236

236 Ava: Magic Training (II)

236 Ava: Magic Training (II)

Magister Orion’s version of training is reminiscent of Jericho’s somehow, though he doesn’t insult me or force me to run massive amounts of laps.

It’s more like this inexorable insistence that he believes in my ability that forces me to try, and try again, and again, until sweat is pouring down my face and back. It’s worse than physical training because it’s an agony that breaks my entire body down from within, but it’s better because I can breathe without feeling like my lungs are burning out.

Magister Orion’s voice washes over me, a soothing balm to my frazzled nerves. “Close your eyes, Ava Grey Block out the world around you. Let your magic flow through your veins.”

His instructions are the same as before. Simple. Repetitive. Calm.

I take a deep breath, trying to follow his instructions. My eyes flutter shut, and I attempt to focus inward. Earlier, he told me to stop screwing my eyes shut, but to only rest them like butterfly’s wings.

08:32

177

236 Ava: Magic Training (II)

He waxes a little poetic, I've noticed.

"Allow it into your heart, your circulation," he continues. "Feel it becoming a part of you."

Nothing happens in my veins. No warmth, no fizzle, no pop. The magic within me is warm and enveloped in its own little area, probably laughing at me because I can't figure this out.

"You've blocked it off, treated it like an invasive

species," Magister Orion says. "But it's a part of you, Ava Grey. It always has been. You need to accept it into every fiber of your being. Let it flow through you, from the tips of your toes to the ends of your hair."

The image of magic coursing through my hair makes me snicker. I can't help but picture it: every blonde strand glowing like fiber optic cables, leaving me as bright as a Christmas tree.

"Focus, Ava," Magister Orion rebukes me gently. "This isn't a joke. Your magic is serious business."

Inod, chastened, and try to concentrate again. This

exercise feels different from working with the elements. There's no water to flow with, no fire to ignite. It's just... me. My power. My essence.

00:32

217

236 Ava: Magic Training (II)

But how do I tap into that?

I reach deep within myself, searching for that elusive spark of magic. It's there, of course. But it doesn't go anywhere.

My body is empty of anything except the rhythmic pulsing of my heartbeat and my slow, deep breathing.

Forever goes by, ticking away minute by minute. My body aches from the effort. Sweat beads on my forehead and trickles down my back. My muscles

tremble with exertion.

Despite having no success, my body is feeling the strain. That must mean something's happening, right?

"Relax," Magister Orion's voice cuts through my concentration. "You're trying too hard. Your magic isn't something to be forced. It's a part of you, as natural as breathing."

Popping my eyes open, I blink against the artificial fluorescent lights this strange room has decided are necessary. "I don't understand. How can it be natural when I can't even feel it?"

"Because you're looking for it in the wrong place," he

evnlaina notiently "Vou're searching for something

00:32

317

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236 Ava: Magic Training (II)

separate from yourself, but your magic isn't separate. It's you. The separation is all in your head."

He's wrong. It's a ball inside of me. I can feel it, sense it, and reach for it at any time. I just can't access it.

Still, I try to focus on his words. Maybe it really is in my head. Maybe this little ball of energy in the core of me is just a psychosomatic manifestation of my magical aptitude.

I close my eyes again, trying to shift my perspective. Instead of reaching for something outside myself, I attempt to sink into my own being.

But it's like trying to catch smoke with my bare hands. The harder I try, the more it slips away from me. Saying it is all well and good, but how do you do that?

It's just me in my head.

My voice in the emptiness.

Nothing else.

My body feels heavier with each passing moment, worn down by the constant strain. My head throbs, a dull ache pulsing behind my eyes.

“I can’t do it,” I finally admit, my voice small and

09:32

236 Ava: Magic Training (II)

defeated. “It’s impossible. I’ve made zero progress.”

Magister Orion’s hand rests gently on my shoulder. “That’s enough for today. You’ve pushed yourself hard.

Rest now.”

As I open my eyes, the room spins slightly. My legs wobble as I stand, and I have to grip the back of my chair to steady myself.

Wait.

Since when have I been sitting on a chair? I was sitting

on the floor all this time.

The room flickers, and I swear it’s trying to tell me something. Like it’s alive.

Am I supposed to thank it for providing a chair for me? Or is it just my imagination, throwing human emotions onto something inanimate?

This world of magic is hard to decipher.

“Why is this so difficult?” I ask, frustration coloring my tone. “I could feel the elements a little bit. Why is my magic so hard to get to?”

Magister Orion’s eyes are kind as he regards me. “It’s fundamentally different, Ava Grey. The elements exist

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236 Ava: Magic Training (II)

outside of you. Your innate magic is a part of you. It’s like asking a fish to describe water. It’s so integral to your existence that

Unshift 237

237 Ava: Wrung Dry

By the time we exit the training room, Vanessa and Marcus have to hold me up to walk in a straight line. <

It isn't the type of exhaustion where my muscles are sore and stretched and tired after running or doing a thousand squats. It's more like the energy in my body has bled away, leaving me so weak that my muscles can no longer function properly.

When exercising, you can kind of feel good about your exertion. The pain and exhaustion comes with a sense of accomplishment.

This?

It just feels like I'm a wet dish rag wrung out one too many times.

The water's gone, and now I'm going to float away on the next strong breeze.

Ava! Where did you go?

Selene's panic is so explosive in my head that my legs buckle, even with the support of two shifters.

Long story. Training room. Magic place. My body's dead. Training sucks.

Even in my head, I can only speak in short sentences. It feels fuzzy and also like something's slamming into it with a sledgehammer, fueled by the rage of a thousand flying monkeys.

Not sure where the flying monkeys came from, but I'm just going to go with it.

Are you okay? she asks, and the warmth and care from her side of the bond also seems to infuse me with a little bit of extra energy.

Her concern also makes me feel a little better. Like having a parent who's panicked after they wake up in the middle of the night to see their child gone; someone who cares about me. I need food. And sleep, I tell her. Maybe not in that order.

"I see you've re-established contact," Magister Orion says, peering at my face. "Does it hurt to speak with your wolf?"

My head jerks up. "What? No. Why do you ask?"

"Ah, I'm sorry. You just looked so pained..."

"She always looks like that," Vanessa says, sounding amused.

Marcus nods, despite his silence.

“Sorry for not having years of experience, I mutter, wishing I had the strength to shove the both of them off me.

Guards, my ass. They’re way too comfortable making fun of me for such a lowly title.

“Hm, yes. This bond you have with your wolves is unique, indeed. If I had the time. I’d love to pick it apart. Especially you, Ava Grey, to have a wolf outside of your body, like the Lycans of old.

And vest chefe a mere dog How interesting”

171

237 Ava Whung Dry

I feel like he’s going to slice me open and look at me under a microscope, Selene says, and I can feel her internal shudder from my end of the bond.

Vanessa must feel uncomfortable with his line of interest, because she interrupts him to ask, “Why do

you call her by her full name? You almost always call her ‘Ava Grey, not “Ava.”

“Oh?” Magister Orion ushers us to the dining room as we talk. “It is a bit of a custom among the Fac. We don’t have a first and last name as you humans do, you see. We do have a family name, but it isn’t a part of our identity.”

“If it’s a family name, wouldn’t it be a part of your identity?” I ask with a frown, as Vanessa and Marcus help settle me into a chair. With a wave of his hand, Magister Orion manifests into creation several plates of steaming hot food.

Soup, salad, and a lot of different cuts of meat. I’ve learned since coming here that Fac food doesn’t always have a particular corresponding animal to the ones we are used to in our world; for example, their steaks might be from a giant carnivorous beast that they hunt, or an herbivore similar to a cow. Some of them are even from aquatic mammals.

They’re all delicious and—most importantly—have no magic in them whatsoever.

Magister Orion seemed horrified at the possibility when I brought it up, but I haven’t told him the entire story of Sister Miriam and the Fac food. I’m still not certain on the allegiances of people in this city, and I’m hesitant to get Sister Miriam in trouble for possibly going outside of some sort of law against tampering with Fae food.

Vanessa fills my plate with food without being asked, and I give her a smile when she catches my eye. Everything on the table is food I’ve had before and enjoyed; I’m not blind to the kindness.

that Magister Orion is showing me.

He realizes how exhausted I am..

As she slides several meat slices and various vegetables onto my plate, Magister Orion finally responds to my question. "Your identity is not defined by your family. Even when one is disowned, they remain true to their own sense of self, do they not?"

A stab of pain shoots through my heart, interrupting its normal rhythm for a moment. There's no way he's talking about my family dynamics, but I still feel like I've been put on display for a moment, a spotlight aimed right at all my pain and trauma.

But his question makes sense.

"Our sense of self is not tied to our family, I murmur, feeling my heart clench a little.

The memory of my mother as I last saw her flashes through my mind, reminding me that there's a lot in my head and heart waiting to be processed. I shove it back, far back, and lock that door tightly closed.

I'm not ready for that. Not sure if I ever will be.

"Even serial killers have families, Vanessa points out, sitting next to me with a lot less food on her plate than on mine. Probably about a quarter of what I'm eating. The healer isn't even a slim eater, she has a hearty appetite, just like anyone else. It's a testament to how much energy my

237 Ava: Wrung Dry

body's begging to be replenished. "Imagine being their child. Do their sins become yours, or is your life separate from them?"

It isn't hard to imagine. My father's committed plenty of atrocities as Renard's beta.

But until recently, I never considered my life to be separate from that of my family. It's the opposite of what we learn growing as pack. The pack is us; we are the pack.

Our identities are forever entwined.

Or maybe that's only what Blackwood teaches their pups.

Westwood, and even Clayton's Aspen, are much more progressive packs.

The meat has my stomach growling, savory aromas teasing me with their existence. But I stab into the vegetables first, shoveling them into my mouth with little grace. Vitamins first, and then I'll fill my belly with what I really want.

But said belly protests, wanting a huge, juicy chunk of medium–rare steak.

“While we are always bound to family by blood, a Fae lives for a very long time. We accomplish many things in our lifetime. Family raises us when we are young, but that is a mere twenty years, when we can live for hundreds. Even thousands, in some cases.”

Shaking his head, Magister Orion concludes, “While family is important, the authority of our parents fade quickly. There are some domains where Fae families are strongly bonded and remain together, but multigenerational homes tend to collapse under sheer numbers with our lifespans.”

Unshift 238

238 Ava: A History of Magic

“That makes sense. Finished with my vegetables—all crunchy and drowning in garlic, which. seems to be a favorite Fac flavor—I attack the first steak on my plate. It looks similar to chicken, and has some sort of thick layer of cheese melted over it.

Once it enters my mouth, I have to bite back a groan.

Delicious.

Everything I eat here is good. I need to ask Magister Orion about learning how to create food. out of nowhere, but I’m too busy shoveling the food in my mouth to ask something so practical. Besides, I’m not able to replicate the magic anyway.

Later.

I’m definitely going to learn it later.

It would really come in handy.

“When we introduce ourselves, we rarely include our family names. It is always our full name and title, if we have one. You humans have both names as your identity, and so we often use them. If it bothers you, I can always call you by your short name.”

“It doesn’t bother me at all, I assure him, stabbing into another bite. “If you use titles, I should probably mention that Vanessa is a Healer in the Westwood Pack.” But I can’t remember her last

name.

What’s her last name? Shit, I’m a terrible person. I’m pretty sure she introduced herself with her full name when we first met. Then again, I was pretty out of it.

Still.

I should know this.

Magister Orion turns to Vanessa, his expression softening. “My apologies, Healer Vanessa. I’ve been remiss in my manners. May I ask your full name?”

Vanessa straightens in her chair, a small smile playing on her lips. “Vanessa Thorn, Healer of the Westwood Pack”

Right. Thorn. I feel like there was someone else with that name, but I can’t remember who.

Your mate’s delta. Delta Ryder Thorn. You’ve met him a time or two.

Shit. She must be his sister. Maybe a cousin.

I’ve known Vanessa for what feels like ages now, and I didn’t even know she had a brother/ cousin/something who works with Lucas regularly.

Some friend I am. I even made a decision to grow closer to my people and learn more about them, and I failed with someone who’s quickly grown into a great friend.

Wouldn’t be awkward to just run up to a friend and ask them a thousand questions about their family life and histories? Such things come out in time. Vanessa doesn’t even talk that much

238 Ava: A History of Magic

about her mate; it’s no surprise she doesn’t talk about her family.

Selene’s words soothe the panic spiral in my chest. That’s right. I didn’t even know she was mated to Vester for ages. They don’t show off their mating bond much in public, either.

I can tell she loves him deeply, but their relationship is very different from many mated couples. Then again, as I think has been established several times now, Blackwood is pretty different from the other wolf packs.

Magister Orion nods, his eyes twinkling. “A pleasure to make your proper acquaintance, Healer Vanessa Thorn. And you, sir?” He turns to Marcus, who’s been quietly observing our exchange.

“Marcus Finley,” he says, his voice gruff but respectful. “Just Marcus is fine.”

He's not one for unnecessary words. Especially when he's on duty—which, right now, is literally every hour of every day.

"Well then, Just Marcus," Magister Orion says with a chuckle, "I believe it's only fair that I properly introduce myself as well. He stands, his massive frame seeming to fill the entire room. "I am Magister Orion, Grand Sorcerer of Human Wizardry."

The fork I'm holding clatters to my plate. Grand Sorcerer? I knew Magister Orion was important, but this sounds like a lot more than just some old man with an enthusiasm for human magic.

It sounds awfully important and high-ranking.

"Grand Sorcerer?" Vanessa asks, coming in clutch with the important questions. "I've heard of many terms now—magician, witch, wizards. Now we add sorcerer to it?"

Magister Orion settles back into his chair, way too approachable for someone with an intimidating-sounding rank. "Sorcerers are Fae who have also manifested as a wizard. Also known as witches, or magicians. Over thousands of years, many names have come about for humans with magic. Illusionist, arcanist, shaman. While every school of magic focused and taught in different specialties,

the core of human magic is always the same. It comes from within, an innate magic that has deep ties to the elements. Not all humans can access the elements, but some can. Like you, Ava Grey"

"What's the difference in Fae magic and human magic, then?" Vanessa's forgotten all about her food, leaning over the table as she listens intently to his explanations.

"Fae are tied to their magic from birth. We are attuned to the world around us. To nature. To the air we breathe. We cannot create from nothing, but we can encourage or manipulate what already exists. Fae cannot exist without magic.

"If you can't create from nothing, then how did you make this food appear?" Marcus interjects, also drawn into the educational seminar.

I shovel more meat into my mouth, grateful for them both for asking the questions my sluggish brain can't come up with, too over-awed by the knowledge tossed in my direction.

Everything he's saying is interesting, but my eyelids threaten to droop and leave me asleep on my plate.

238 Ava: A History of Magic

It's a struggle to stay awake.

“And that is why I am the Grand Sorcerer,” Magister Orion says with a smile. “I have manifested human magic. It isn’t impossible for Fae, as we already have a core of magic within us. But it is incredibly rare. There are those who believe that I have human blood within my veins. It’s always possible, though I have yet to find where in my family tree such an impurity occurred.”

He waves a hand dismissively, clearly unconcerned. “While my magic is not terribly powerful, I’ve spent my entire life trying to gather as much knowledge as possible about the magic taught by humans. And thus I am also a Magister. A teacher of magic. As a Grand Sorcerer, I am the bridge

between the human and Fae worlds for magical affairs. As Magister, I am the bridge between humans and their magic.”

Then he laughs, a big, booming sound that startles me so much I jump in my seat.

15. 15.

The drooping eyelid problem is solved—for the moment.

“Unfortunately, the lack of human magic means there’s little use for me these days. The title is little more than window dressing.”

There’s something missing here, Selene says suddenly. I clearly remember that Sister Miriam spoke of a woman when she was seeking out your teacher. Magister Orion is not the only one with knowledge of human magic in this city.

She pauses. Though, I suppose she can be from outside the city.

“Is there anyone else you know who has also manifested human magic?” I ask, trying to sound

casual.

Not knowing how people really feel about each other in this town is awful. I really need to question him more about things outside of my training. It’s clear that vampires are not necessarily best friends with the Fae, and yet they’ve been coexisting for so long in the Unregistered City. And Sister Miriam seems to be highly regarded, even if she is denied access

to the Fae Ward.

It’s weird.

Though, I guess packs seem weird to people who aren’t used to them, either. Especially when it comes to men and their mates.

“No.” Magister Orion shifts in his seat, suddenly leaning forward to place food on his own plate.

“No one.”

But I don't believe him.

And, judging from the way Vanessa and Marcus share a glance, I think they don't, either.

Unshift 239

239 Ava: Radio Silence

The phone doesn't even ring anymore. It goes straight to voicemail.

Kellan's rings, but there's no answer.

Vester's rings, too. But he also doesn't answer.

In fact, we've tried everyone. No one's answering.

If we hadn't already had successful calls since being in the Fae Ward, I'd suspect that we can't call people. Instead....

“Something's wrong

Stating the obvious does nothing to ease the tension in my room. The thrill of success over me reaching my magic earlier is long gone, leaving us all staring at our phones.

Magister Orion was kind enough to send a folding table upstairs for us to use, and Marcus uses it to spread a few papers across its surface.

“I've summarized all the information we've learned since being in the Fae Ward, but it's very little. I think our best bet is to ask Magister Orion and Sister Miriam to see if they can use their resources to better source intel on what's going on outside the city.”

The papers are a pathetic level of information..

Marcus had a few text messages from Jericho, stating that rogues were encroaching on Westwood territory. We have no news about Blackwood, but with Kellan and Vester's silence, it doesn't bode

well. We know that the alpha of Whispering Pines has something to do with all of this, but we don't know if he's working with Renard or the vampires.

We have far more questions than answers, and frustration bubbles in my belly. Is this how Lucas felt, when he searched for me after the Gala?

Experiencing it now, and remembering how I treated his presence once he found me...

My heart sinks.

Yet another thing to add to my list of reasons to treat Lucas well. I would be crushed at a cold

reception.

Selene's soft voice interjects between my thoughts. You had reason at the time.

"Still," I murmur, setting my phone on speaker as it rings Kellan's cell phone once again.

It takes thirty seconds before his voice picks up.

"You've reached Kellan. Leave me a message."

Short and sweet.

"It's okay," Vanessa says, reaching over to squeeze my shoulder. "They might be mid-mission. It isn't unusual to turn our phones off or leave them home."

But all of them?

239 Ava: Radio Silence

Every leader of Westwood is unavailable.

"What about Delta Ryder?"

She shakes her head. "His phone goes straight to voicemail, too. Since he was in Westwood with Lucas, it leans more toward missions than anything particularly bad going on."

But then why are Kellan and Vester unreachable?

Biting at the side of my thumb, I slide the papers back and forth over the table, reading them over and over. It isn't much.

Marcus has a few text messages written verbatim that came from Jericho, which somehow managed to ping his phone from within the Fae Ward.

Rogues headed into Westwood territory. Scouts going in. Whispering Pines defected from Council. War is coming. Keep your Luna safe.

Then, Possible Whispering Pines is working with Blackwood and vampires. Keep eyes and ears open.

That's it.

Nothing else.

There's even less from Vanessa's end; she has no messages, and only Vester's vague mentions of how the Council seems to be going through trouble when she last contacted him.

I have the most information of all, coming straight from my phone call with Lucas.

It isn't enough.

Had I known I wouldn't be able to reach him again, I would have asked more questions. Demanded more details.

Stupid. So stupid to rely on future conversations during such a crucial time.

"You need to focus on what you can do, Ava, Vanessa says, taking the papers from me and handing them to Marcus. "We'll keep trying to reach people, but you need to focus on your magic and your learning"

"Maybe Marcus can go back home and see if he can-"

"No." His interruption is swift and calm. "I am not leaving your side. It may seem safe here under Magister Orion's care, but this city is still dangerous for you."

"He's right. The vampires who attacked came from here. Even if they aren't in the Fae Ward, we don't know who's involved in these attacks. There's no way either of us can leave you here."

I rub at my face with a groan. "One person isn't worth an entire pack. There are so many lives at stake here. If there's war and something has happened to Lucas..."

"Every pack is prepared for a situation like this, Ava." Vanessa sits beside me, looking

Solemn. "Lucas has his beta. He has his deltas. The entire pack knows what to do when the alpha falls. While it would be terrible, Westwood will like/live. You cannot save the pack on your own, Ava. You're too weak. You can't fight an alpha in combat, and you have no power backing to help

239 Ava: Radio Silence

in a war.”

“Still, there has to be something-”

“You can’t fix everything. What you’re doing right now is the best option you have. Focus on that. We will do what we can on our end.”

I have an idea, Selene says.

Holding my hand up so Vanessa knows I’m distracted, I ask, “What idea, Selene?”

I’m useless here with all these wards. I can return and scout the Blackwood territory, see what I

can learn.

“But how are you going to get back? I don’t think our bond will work with us separated like that.”

The dhampir will probably have a solution. Call her. You can focus on your training, and I will find the information for you. Selene sounds grim. Too many odd things are happening around you, and it’s making me itch. There’s something wrong. I want to find out what that is.

Vanessa’s inquisitive stare is patient and calm.

My lips quirk a little. “Selene wants to run recon.”

“I gathered that” Vanessa taps her cheek thoughtfully. “I don’t think it’s a bad idea, but we need to be able to bring her back to the city somehow in order to find out what she knows.”

“She said to call Sister Miriam over. She might be able to help.”

Unshift 240

240 Ava: Sister Miriam is Angry

Chapter 30 Magister Orion doesn’t bat an eye when we tell him that we want to get in touch

with Sister Mirlam.

Two hours later, we're back in Sister Miriam's strange mansion, just outside of the Fae Ward.

We all try calling people again, but nothing but voicemails answer us.

Selene rolls against the cool floor, groaning in relief. So much easier to breathe here. Pity. I do like it there.

"Sorry." Watching her writhe around to soothe her itchy skin gives me something to do while we wait for Sister Miriam's arrival.

Layla is back, hunched over a pile of papers she dragged with her, marking through various papers with terrifying efficiency. I'm not even sure if she's reading what's on the pages. Just flip, sign, flip, flip, sign.

Every so often she sets one to the side after writing REJECTED in large letters at the top of the

page.

"Their language is fascinating." Vanessa murmurs, also watching the gnome work.

"Language?" Startled, I glance at the healer. "She hasn't said a word."

Our whispers echo through the room. It's impossible for Layla not to hear everything we're saying, yet we continue to whisper.

"Her writing," she corrects me. "Those letters—you called them runes?-are so interesting. She writes them so quickly, but they're so intricate and detailed."

Glancing at the papers again, I squint my eyes.

It takes a while for me to realize that Layla is, in fact, writing in the strange language of theirs, and not in English.

That can't be possible. I'm reading everything she's writing with such ease, as though it were already in English. How?

Affinity, Selene explains with a yawn. You've accessed your magic. You've gained an understanding of the language it encompasses.

How is that possible? Unlock magic and an entire language just appears in your head?

Precisely.

I'd ask Magister Orion a few questions if he was here, but he's not, so I shelve them for now. It's a strange thing, but not nearly as important as what we're here for.

The sharp click of heels against the floor announces Sister Miriam's arrival before she even enters the room. Selene, who's been rolling around on the floor, suddenly sits up straight, her posture prim and proper. I can't help but smile at her antics.

My amusement fades quickly as Sister Miriam steps into view. I blink, taken aback by her

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appearance. Gone are the vintage dresses I've grown accustomed to seeing her in. Instead, she's wearing a loose shirt and jeans. It's so... normal. So un-Sister Miriam-like that for a moment, I

wonder if this is some sort of illusion.

"Good evening," she greets us, her tone cool and polite. Her red eyes lock onto mine. "Is there a problem, Ava?"

How much should I reveal? I'm not sure. Glancing at Vanessa and Marcus, whose faces are blank, I launch into a question first.

"Sister Miriam, is the city at war with shifters?"

Her reaction is immediate. Her eyes widen, and she takes an involuntary step forward, so intense that it steals my breath away for a moment as her eyes darken and her usual composure cracks, showing her fury. But there's surprise, too.

"Why would you ask such a question?" she demands, her voice sharp with intensity. Then, as if catching herself, she quickly adds, "I've heard nothing about any war, but that doesn't something isn't happening. Quickly, explain."

Her fingers twitch, and her eyes dart around the room as if searching for unseen threats,

I've never seen her agitated.

She knows something

"There have been strange rogue attacks on my pack, I explain, the words tumbling out in a rush. "And I can't get in touch with anyone. No one's answering their phones?"

Sister Miriam's gaze snaps to Layla, who's been watching our exchange instead of working on her papers. "What's going on?" she demands, her tone sharp and bordering on rude.

Layla jumps to her feet, her small form quivering. "I don't know of anything, I swear!"

Sister Miriam's eyes narrow as she studies the gnome. After a few seconds, she must decide that she believes her, because she barks out orders. "Find out what's happening and see if Alpha Renard and his brood are still in the city. Now"

With a snap of Sister Miriam's fingers, Layla vanishes the sudden

into an air, I blink, startled b disappearance.

Sister Miriam turns back to me, tension radiating from her every movement. She's almost shaking with anger, but it makes no sense.

It's my pack in danger. Why is she so angry?

"Why did you call for me?" she asks, her voice tight. I'm sure there's a reason."

Before I can respond, Marcus steps forward. "Selene wants to run recon, try to establish a connection with our pack" he explains, gesturing to my husky. "But she'd need a way back into the city

Sister Miriam's gaze falls on Selene, and I'm shocked by the blatant dislike that twists her

eatures. It's the most open display of emotion I've ever seen from her. For a long moment, she Just glares at Selene, who stares back, unperturbed.

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She's upset, Selene observes, like that isn't obvious. But it isn't at us. She has murderous intent toward someone, though.

Finally, Sister Miriam lets out a long sigh. "Fine," she says, the word sounding as if it's been dragged out of her. "I'm willing to travel with the... wolf. It shouldn't take long with both of us looking

into the situation."

Then her eyes snap back to me. "Tell me everything you know," she demands. "Every detail, no matter how small. For attacks to occur without my knowledge means that someone is tampering in my information network. This is not a good thing, Ava."

Her grim words only cement the foreboding in my heart, but I ask, "Why?"

Sister Miriam's sigh breaks the tense silence, her gaze softening slightly as she looks at Selene. The change in her demeanor is subtle, but noticeable.

"My information network," she begins, her voice measured, "operates independently of wolves or the city. These are individuals loyal only to me."

I feel a chill run down my spine at her words. Just how extensive is her reach?

"I have priority on information from both Blackwood and Westwood," she continues. "Yet, I've received no word of any attacks. This can only mean one thing: someone has either infiltrated or destroyed my network. And if that's the case, I'm working blind."

Her red eyes lock onto mine, piercing and intense. "Who, Ava, would be interested in keeping me out of this situation?"

The answer comes to me instantly. "Alpha Renard," I blurt out.

Sister Miriam shakes her head, a look of disdain crossing her features. "No, he's far too stupid to orchestrate something like this."

Her dismissal of one of the strongest alphas in the Northwestern Territories should bring me some satisfaction, but I'm too focused on the puzzle in front of me. If not him, then who?

"Who lost their toy?" Sister Miriam asks, her tone cryptic.

The realization hits me like a punch to the gut.

Lisa.

"The Mad Prince," I whisper, feeling the blood drain from my face.

Sister Miriam's grimace confirms my worst fears. "He was supposed to be chasing his prey for longer," she mutters. "Something must have happened"

Marcus interjects this time. "What are you saying?"

Sister Miriam's explanation sends ice through my veins. "The Mad Prince has an obsession with those blessed by the Fae. Their blood increases his power." She pauses, her eyes distant. "His life's goal has always been to create a harem of Fae-touched thralls to give him power. But very few of his prisoners have survived his... unique torments."

My heart shatters at the implications. What has Lisa been through, because it took so long to

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Sister Miriam's voice softens slightly, perhaps sensing my distress. "Since he enjoys playing with his food, it's likely she was only mildly harmed before I lured him away with something he would have found irresistible"

Hope flickers in my chest, fragile but persistent. "Is that irresistible thing real?" I ask, desperate for any shred of good news.

Sister Miriam's smile sends shivers through my body. It's not comforting; it's predatory, full of secrets and hidden meanings.

"Oh, it's very real, she purrs, her eyes glinting with an emotion I can't quite place. "And far more dangerous than the Mad Prince could ever imagine."