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Unshift 241

241 Ava: Sister Miriam's Words

"What does that-

"Never you mind, child." Sister Miriam glances toward Selene again, giving a faint shake of her head. "I will return with your wolf, and set some inquisitive minds in motion here in the city." Her words are slow as she gains control of her emotions once again. "This is a matter that affects me, after all.

"Thank you. I do my best to infuse my words with as much gratitude as I can.

Sister Miriam flaps her hand in my direction, an elegant wave of dismissal toward my appreciation. "Like I said, child, this matter affects more than just you. Layla and her lot will find out what information they can from the city council. While I can assure you Dakota Sanctuary is not at war with your lot, that doesn't mean certain factions within are not meddling in the affairs. of your packs." Her smile is tight. "As you've already experienced."

Answering is moot; she already knows what we've been through at the hands of vampires.

"Return to the Fae Ward, child. It is safer for you there. I will contact you when we have some

news."

"Thank you," I say again, like a broken record.

The dhampir glances at the portal. "Have you heard from the Fae named Steve?"

The question catches me off guard. "No, I haven't. I've been in the Fae Ward this whole time."

Sister Miriam's gaze locks onto mine, and I can't shake the feeling that she's questioning my intelligence. Her eyes narrow slightly, and I resist the urge to squirm under her scrutiny.

"That's exactly why I asked, child."

Heat creeps up my neck. Of course. Steve is Fac. She might be my neighbor, and I would have no

idea.

Sister Miriam waves her hand dismissively. “Never you mind. Return to Magister Orion and the safety there.

Vanessa and Marcus go first this time. As I step through, Sister Miriam’s voice follows me.

“Oh, and congratulations on contracting with fire and water.”

Before I can respond, the shimmering veil of the portal envelops me, whisking me away from Sister Miriam’s mansion and back to the Fac Ward. The abrupt transition leaves me momentarily disoriented, my mind reeling from the rapid-fire exchange.

My companions are already there, waiting for me.

“Everything okay?” Marcus asks, his brow furrowed with concern.

I nod, still processing Sister Miriam’s parting words. “Yeah, I think so. It’s just... Sister Miriam can be a bit overwhelming sometimes.”

Vanessa snorts. “That’s putting it mildly.”

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The woman’s cryptic off-kilter.

nature and apparent omniscience never fail to leave me feeling slightly

“Did she say anything useful?” Magister Orion’s booming voice startles me from my thoughts as he pops up from behind the guards of the portal.

They’re ignoring us this time. Makes sense, since Magister Orion is right there.

I turn to face him, noting the eager gleam in his eyes. “Not really. She’s going to look into the situation and get back to us. But... I hesitate, unsure how to broach the subject of Steve.

“But what?” Magister Orion prompts, his massive frame looming over me.

I take a deep breath. “We were working with a Fac outside of the city. A computer hacker kind of person. She disappeared right before we got here, in a very sudden way.”

Magister Orion's eyebrows shoot up. "A Fac outside the Ward? Interesting. And concerning."

"Why's that?" I ask, curiosity piqued.

*Fac rarely venture outside the Ward these days, he explains, stroking his salt-and-pepper beard. "It's not forbidden, mind you, but it's... unusual. Especially for one to do business in the human world."

I think back to Steve's basement office, so clean and professional despite the empty warehouse above. It hadn't seemed particularly magical at the time, but it was certainly unusual.

*Could she have been hiding from something?" Vanessa asks, voicing the question that's been nagging at me.

Magister Orion shrugs his massive shoulders. "It's possible. The Fae have their own politics and intrigues, from small family squabbles to massive wars at times. But without more information, it's

impossible to say."

I nod, feeling the weight of yet another mystery settling onto my shoulders. As if I didn't have enough to worry about already.

"Oh," I say, remembering Sister Miriam's parting words. "She also congratulated me on contracting with fire and water, but I never told her that. How does she know?"

Magister Orion's eyes light up, and I brace myself for another lecture on magical theory. "Ah, your elemental affinities. It's quite remarkable, really. Most wizards only contract with one element, at least initially. To have two right off the bat... well, it speaks to your potential. Potential is great and all, but it also means expectations. I'm struggling to maintain the ones associated with my status as Lucas' mate as it is."

"But how does she know? She's a vampire, not a wizard. Or witch. Or magician, or whatever you call us."

"You can use whatever word you deem appropriate. They're all accurate in their own ways. As for Sister Miriam, well, she has her own secrets. And she has her own magical affinities. She either saw it, or she saw it."

I open my mouth, a dozen questions on the tip of my tongue, but Magister Orion's massive hand

Sister Miriam's Words

gently guides me forward. "Come along now, back to the Magus Hall."

"Magus Hall?" I blink, surprised. "It has an official name?"

Magister Orion's eyes twinkle with amusement. "Well, this week it does. Next week, who knows? It might be the Wizarding Wonderland or the Sorcerer's Sanctum."

A disbelieving laugh escapes my lips. "You change it every week? Like the titles?"

"It gives me something to ponder each week. Although," he adds, a hint of cheerfulness creeping into his voice, "I suppose I'll have less time for such banal eccentricities now that I have a pupil

to teach."

The word 'pupil' sends tremors of exhaustion down my spine. His eagerness to teach is only

second to Jericho's drive to keep all wolves fit and able to defend themselves.

"About that," I say, stifling a yawn. "I'm still so tired. My brain even hurts."

Magister Orion's expression softens. "That will happen. Rest is crucial for magical development. We'll focus on more training in the morning" He pauses, looking at the sky. "The time difference in the training room will be a tremendous help if you can keep up with it."

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242 Lisa: Waking in Comfort

LISA

Waking up in a bed is too comfortable.

My brain wants to wake, but my body wants to keep sleeping.

If this comfort is little more than an elaborate trap before I'm murdered, just take me away. At least I'll be going in bliss.

A sharp poke in my side jolts me from my half-asleep musings. I crack open an eye, squinting against the sudden brightness. A face swims into view, so close I can count every wrinkle etched into leathery skin.

“Up! Up, you lazy girl!”

The voice is shrill, grating against my eardrums. I blink,

40 focus on the owner of that

voice. It’s a woman, impossibly small, with a nose so red it could guide Santa’s sleigh.

I open my mouth to speak, but my tongue feels like sandpaper. Before I can form words, a stinging slap lands on my calf. The pain is sharp, unexpected, and I jerk away, nearly tumbling off

the bed.

“Ow! What the-”

“No time for your nonsense,” the tiny woman interrupts, waving a hand in front of my face. Her fingers are gnarled, reminding me of tree roots. “You stink. Shower. Now”

I sit up, head spinning. The room tilts and sways around me. Where am I? How did I get here? The last thing I remember is... Darkness, Cold. A strange man who brought me out of my personal hell.

The tiny woman’s groan snaps me back to the present. “Look at this mess. Filthy! You’ve ruined

the sheets.”

I glance down at the bed. The once-white linens are stained with dirt and... is that blood? My

stomach lurches at the sight of my wrists, raw and a little bloody.

“Come on, come on. No time to waste. She tugs at my arm by the elbow, her strength surprising

for someone so small.

My legs wobble beneath me, and the floor is cool against my bare feet. Bare feet? Ah. Clothes I don’t recognize—a simple white night dress that is several sizes too big, soft and deceptively clean. I’m sure it’s a mess on the inside.

The tiny woman herds me across the room, muttering under her breath. I want to ask questions. -so many questions—but they stick in my throat. There’s something about her demeanor, gruff and no-nonsense, that makes me feel like a scolded child.

I spent so much time in fear that it almost feels comforting to be afraid of someone like this.

Guess I'm going to need some serious therapy, if this tiny person isn't dragging me around to

murder me.

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We reach a door, and she pushes it open, revealing a bathroom. "In. Shower. Make it quick."

Before I can protest, she shoves me inside and slams the door shut.

I stand there, alone in the sudden quiet, staring at my reflection in the mirror. My face is pale, eyes wide with confusion and fear. Dark circles underneath them speak of exhaustion I can feel in my bones.

And speaking of bones...

My face is gaunt. I've watched my fingers grow to little more than bony sticks, but my face.

God.

I look like a skeleton with some skin hanging off it.

Horrible.

"What the hell is happening?" I whisper to my reflection.

The girl in the mirror has no answers. She looks as lost as I feel.

I turn to the shower, eyeing it warily. Part of me wants to march over and slam open the door, demanding answers to all my questions.

But a larger part craves the promise of hot water, of washing away the grime I can feel coating my skin, and the memories of... however long it's been.

With shaking hands, I peel off the shift dress. My body underneath is a map of bruises and scrapes. Some look fresh, angry red against my pale skin. Others are older, fading to sickly yellows and

greens.

Marisol didn't beat me.

In fact, for being a kidnapping victim, it wasn't technically all that bad, I guess.

But I did do a lot of thrashing around, trying to escape my chains. That usually involved falling to the floor in various painful ways. And when it wasn't escape attempts, it was me trying to do basic stretches and exercises to keep up my muscle mass—hard to do with heavy chains weighing me down..

Honestly, I'm surprised my wrists and ankles aren't broken.

The water hisses as I turn it on, steam quickly filling the small space. I step under the spray, whimpering as the hot water hits my battered skin. But the pain fades, replaced by a blessed warmth that seems to seep into my very bones.

The water cascades over me with a sense of peace and cleanliness I haven't felt since... well, before.

A bar of soap on the ledge is the first thing I grab, rubbing it all over me until it turns in a dingy

at my

gray, scrubbingkin as if I could wash away the memories along with the dirt. By the time

I'm done, my skin is pink and raw, but I feel more like myself.

My hair is a tangled mess. I'm not even sure it's possible to brush it out. Still, I take my time washing it with shampoo and conditioner, leaving in a layer of conditioner in hopes it will help

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with brushing out the tangles.

Stepping

Out of the shower, I wrap myself in a fluffy towel. Steam clouds the mirror, and I wipe it away with my hand. The face that stares back at me is familiar, but strange. There's a hardness in my eyes that wasn't there before.

A sharp knock on the door makes me jump.

"Hurry up in there!"

The tiny woman's voice cuts through my thoughts. I look around, realizing there are no clothes for me to change into. Do I put the dirty shift back on? Wrap myself in a towel and hope for the

best?

"Um," I call out, hating how small my voice sounds. "I don't have any clothes."

There's a huff from the other side of the door, then the sound of retreating footsteps. A moment later, they return.

"Open up."

I crack the door open, peeking out. The tiny woman thrusts a bundle of fabric at me.

"Get dressed. Quickly now."

The door shuts again, and I'm left holding what turns out to be a simple dress and undergarments. They fit perfectly, which is both a relief and slightly unsettling.

Who are these people? How do they know my size?

I take a deep breath, steeling myself. It's time for answers.

Opening the bathroom door, I step out, ready to face whatever waits for me. The tiny woman is there, tapping her foot impatiently.

"About time," she grumbles. "Come on, then. They're waiting."

"Wait," I say, finally finding my voice. "Who's waiting? Where am I? What's going on?"

She turns, fixing me with a look that could curdle milk. "Questions later. Move now

I want to argue, to plant my feet and refuse to budge until I get some answers. But the fire inside of me fades almost immediately, and I follow along, properly cowed by this woman's barked

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243 Lisa: Strange Introductions

LISA

Wherever I am, it's huge.

We've taken at least three or four turns, and I've already forgotten how to get back. Was it left

it?

first, or right? The last turn was to our right. Wait... Wten how to get back. Was it left

Shit.

Every time I lag behind, trying to map this place in my head—which is little better than at toddler's scribbling at this point, with my confusion over lefts and rights—the tiny woman turns and scolds me, telling me to pick up my

feet.

Before, I would have given her some sort of smartass comment and maybe even slowed down.

But now, my body feels cold sweat at the idea of making her angry. Even if I'm a prisoner, at least I'm a clean and comfortable prisoner here. I don't want to go back to the previous standard of kidnapping.

So I shut my mouth and hurry behind, wondering how she can be so freaking fast with such tiny legs. She's probably the size of a kindergartener, but faster than a full-grown adult.

What bizarre witchcraft is that?

I force myself to focus on the path ahead, ignoring the endless parade of closed doors lining these stark corridors. No pictures, no decorations, not even a potted plant breaks up the monotony. Just door after identical door, their handles gleaming dully in the harsh overhead lighting.

The silence is oppressive. Our footsteps echo off the bare walls, amplifying the sound until it feels like we're being followed by an army. I resist the urge to look over my shoulder.

"Keep up, my tiny guide snaps for what feels like the hundredth time.

I lengthen my stride, closing the gap between us. Seriously though, how can someone so small move so fast?

We round another corner, and I blink in surprise, Windows. Actual windows line this hallway, letting in natural light.

Wow.

The sun.

I haven't seen it in so long.

Before I can get a good look outside, my guide veers sharply to the right. She pushes open a set of glass double doors, ushering me through with impatient gestures.

Heat and humidity hit me like a wall. I stumble, momentarily disoriented by the sudden change in environment.

We're in some kind of massive greenhouse. Lush greenery surrounds us on all sides, climbing

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Lisa: Strango Introductions

trellises and spilling out of planters. The air is thick with the scent of damp earth and tropical

flowers.

Beads of sweat immediately form on my skin. My simple cotton outfit, so comfortable in the air—conditioned halls, now feels stifling.

My guide marches ahead, seemingly unbothered by the giant blanket of warmth pressing down on us. I trail after her, trying not to trip over the uneven stone path winding through the foliage.

As we walk deeper into this indoor jungle, a thought strikes me with the force of a physical blow. I could run.

The realization freezes me in place. I could turn around right now and bolt. My guide is tiny. I could easily outpace her if I tried, right?

But then what?

The momentary surge of hope fades as quickly as it appeared. I have no idea where I am or how to get out of this place. Those endless, identical corridors would become a maze. I'd be caught in

minutes, if not seconds.

And who knows what punishment would await me for trying to escape?

I shake off the fleeting fantasy of freedom and hurry to catch up with my impatient guide.

She leads me to a secluded area of the greenhouse, where an equally diminutive old man sits at a table. His beard cascades to his feet, and he peers through spectacles at a newspaper covered in unfamiliar script. A lavish spread of tea and snacks adorns the table before him.

Incongruously, it's sized for normal adult humans.

He's sitting in some kind of booster that gets him to the level he needs to reach the table.

I'd laugh, but I'm too worried about my fate.

Without warning, my guide shoves me into a chair. I stumble, barely catching myself as I fall into the seat. The woman bows to the old man and vanishes, leaving me alone with him.

Silence stretches between us as I watch him sip his tea. The greenhouse's humid air clings to my skin, making me acutely aware of every bead of sweat forming on my body. I shift in my seat, wishing it was easier to breathe in this weather. Actually, I'm just wishing to be anywhere else in the world.

Well, maybe not anywhere. Would rather not be in my cell.

But even as I think that, there's something about this old man that puts me at ease. A sense of warmth, of friendliness, radiates from him. It's as if I've known him for years, though I'm certain

we've never met.

The feeling unnerves me. Why do I feel this way? After everything I've been through, I should be on high alert. Instead, I find myself relaxing in his presence, my guard lowering despite my best efforts to remain vigilant.

I don't trust it. I can't trust it. This comfort, this sense of safety—it has to be some kind of trick. Maybe they've drugged me. Maybe this whole setup is designed to lull me into a false sense of

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security.

My fingers dig into the arms of the chair as I force myself to stay alert. I won't fall for whatever game they're playing.

his Ble. 1

The old man turns a page in his newspaper, seemingly oblivious to my internal study him, searching for any hint of malice or deception. His wrinkled face is serene,

unhurried as he reads.

movements

Just as I'm about to break the silence myself, he folds the newspaper and sets it aside. His gaze meets mine, and I'm struck by the intensity in his eyes. They're old eyes, yes, but sharp and clear, almost terrifying with the way they seem to stare straight into your soul.

"Lisa Randall," he says, his voice surprisingly strong and deep for such a small man. "Welcome."

My name on his lips sends a jolt through me. How does he know who I am? A thousand questions race through my mind, but only one makes it past my lips.

"Who are you?"

He smiles, the expression crinkling the corners of his eyes. "I am the one who ordered your extrication, my dear."

He falls silent, watching me expectantly. The pause stretches on, pregnant with unspoken meaning. I rack my brain, trying to decipher what he wants from me.

Then it hits me. He's waiting for my gratitude.

"Oh," I stammer, caught off guard. "Um, thank you. I guess."

The words feel hollow, inadequate. But what else can I say? I'm grateful to be out of that hellhole, yes, but I have no idea if this situation is any better. For all I know, I've jumped from the frying pan into the fire..

Still, manners compel me to add, "Why did you rescue me?"

The old man's smile widens, and he gestures to the spread before us. "Please, help yourself to some tea and refreshments. We have much to discuss, Lisa Randall, and I find such conversations are always more pleasant over a good cup of tea."

I eye the food warily. It looks delicious—delicate sandwiches, scones with clotted cream, and an assortment of pastries that make my mouth water. But years of watching crime documentaries have taught me to be cautious of accepting food from strangers, especially when I've just been kidnapped.

Actually, scratch that. I really only learned the lesson from drinking that damn punch right before— well. You know.

“I’d rather not, thanks,” I say, trying to keep my tone polite despite my suspicion. “I’d prefer if you just answered my question.”

The old man’s eyebrows rise slightly, but his smile doesn’t falter. “As you wish. Though I assure you, the food is quite safe. I have no desire to harm you, Lisa. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

He pauses, taking a sip of his tea before continuing. “As for why I rescued you... well, that’s a

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rather complex question. The simple answer is that you were in danger, and I had the means to help. It seemed the right thing to do.”

I snort, unable to contain my disbelief. “The right thing to do? You don’t even know me. Why would you go to all this trouble for a stranger?”

“Ah, but you’re not a stranger to me, Lisa,” he says, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “I know a great deal about you. Your friendship with Ava Grey, for instance. Your relationship with the Westwood beta. And your fate, decided long before your birth.”

My blood runs cold at his words. How does he know all this? I lean forward, my voice dropping to a harsh whisper. “Who are you? Really? And what do you want from me?”

The old man sets down his teacup, his expression growing serious. “Who I am is not important right now. What matters is that I am someone who wishes to help you—and, by extension, to help your friend, Ava.”

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244 Lisa: Seriously, It’s Just Weird

LISA

At the mention of Ava’s name, my heart clenches. God, I hope she’s okay. I haven’t seen her

since....

I push the memories away, focusing on the present. “What does Ava have to do with this?” “Everything,” he says simply. “Your friend is at the center of events that could reshape our future, Lisa. She needs allies. People she can trust. People like you.”

I shake my head, too confused. I'm missing huge chunks of the picture.

"Sorry, I don't understand. What events? What's happening to Ava? Isn't she safe with

The old man sighs, suddenly looking every bit his advanced age. "She is safe enough, I suppose. But the danger is always present, waiting for the right moment to strike. Decades, if not centuries, of planning have come to fruition, and we're only just learning of it. For now, I will have to apologize as we leave you in the dark a little longer. Just know that you're in a safe place."

"So why tell me anything at all?" I demand, my patience wearing thin. "Why not just leave me in the dark?"

"Because I don't need a human gallivanting off to what she thinks is freedom, only to be snatched up once again" He peers over his spectacles. "You thought of escape at least once, didn't you?" My cheeks heat a little, even as my chin lifts. The stubbornness deep within me is coming back to life, at least a little certain that I'm safe enough to snap back. "Wouldn't you, in my shoes?"

"Indeed. He chuckles, sipping at his tea again, with the elegant air of a gentleman. Someone you'd see on those TV shows about posh royalty in England. "Hopefully I'll have a little more clear information for you soon enough, to prepare you in the times ahead."

I laugh, the sound bitter even to my own ears. "Prepared? For what? More kidnappings? Torture? Sexual assault? You know, in the human world, I was never kidnapped. And even Ava has never been kidnapped in the human world. But add werewolves to the mix?" I snap my fingers. "Kidnapped. Twice! And don't get me started on the assault rates in werewolves compared to humans. I thought humans were bad, but between the wolves and vampires..."

The old man's face softens with sympathy. "I am truly sorry for what you've endured, Lisa, No one should have to suffer as you have. But I promise you, what I offer is not more pain. It's a chance to make a difference. To protect your friend and perhaps save many lives."

I want to scoff at his words, to dismiss them as an old man's delusions. But something in his tone, in the earnestness of his gaze, gives me pause. Despite my suspicion of this desperate desire to trust him, I consider his words.

"What do you mean?" I ask cautiously.

The old man's smile returns, warm and encouraging. "You, my child, are Fae-blessed. This gives

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Just Weird

“Wait, I say, my voice barely above a whisper. “If I was stillborn... does that mean I’m not really...

human?”

The old man’s expression softens. “You are very much human, Lisa. The Fae magic brought you to life, but it didn’t change your fundamental nature. You’re simply enhanced. For every child brought back to life, a tiny piece of a High Fae Priestess’ soul lies within them.”

Enhanced. The word echoes in my head, bringing with it a mix of emotions I can’t quite sort out. Fear, confusion, a strange sort of wonder, and underneath it all, a simmering anger.

“Why?” I demand, my voice stronger now. “Why would the Fae do this? What do they get out of it, besides... besides feeding on souls?”

The old man sighs, leaning back in his chair. “The motivations of the Fae are complex and often inscrutable, even to us gnomes. But from what we understand, Fae–blessed humans serve as a sort of bridge between our world and theirs. You have an innate connection to Fae magic, even if you can’t wield it directly.”

“And this vampire–the Mad Prince? Why does he care about Fae–blessed humans?”

The old man’s expression darkens. “The Mad Prince has an obsession with them. He once believed that by consuming the essence of a Fae–blessed human, he can gain access to Fae magic himself. Several have died in his pursuit of that power, and he never succeeded. But he gains something from their blood, even if it isn’t Fae magic. It’s how he grew his power?

A shudder runs through me as I remember the time he visited me. The way the Mad Prince had touched me. The way he’d been infuriated at my body’s lack of passion, like that made a difference.

I guess it really did.

What a freak.

I feel dirty even thinking about it, and suddenly want nothing more than another shower. Maybe twenty showers.

“So, what are you trying to say? If all this is true–” which it can’t be, because my parents are normal humans and definitely have never talked to some High Fae Priestess or whatever, “–then what is your plan with me?”

“Training,” he says promptly, his eyes gleaming. “A Fae—blessed human has grown up with technology and has an affinity for magic, though they can never wield it. You’re the perfect. medium for magitech.”

“Magitech?” I echo. “What the fuck is that?”

He gives me a stern look, and I shift in my seat. “Excuse my language, sir.”

Damn. It’s like swearing in front

Your ar

“Magical technology. Gnomes, unfortunately, have no gift for magic. We can see it, but we can’t utilize it in any form. And very few Fae use technology, because they have their magic. You, Lisa, are the answer. Technologically inclined, with magical affinity.” He smiles. “I have a few things in

mind for voti”

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The way he looks at me is not predatory, like a wolf in front of meat. It’s more like... when my

mom comes into my room with an outfit she adores, hoping I’m going to love it.

Beaming and way too invested in something I have the feeling I’m going to hate with every fiber

of my being.

“Joy” I say weakly, not sure how else to respond.

Unshift 245

245 Ava: Magic Boot Camp

Magister Orion keeps me in the training room for an entire week.

Eating. Sleeping. It doesn’t matter; I do it all there.

At first, it’s weird. I’m always rushing, wanting to go back, to see if we’ve heard from Sister Miriam or Selene, but Magister Orion points out every time—enough time hasn’t passed in our

world.

It's weird. I don't think it'll ever feel right.

"How long has it been? Didn't you say it changes?"

"It changes from time to time, but stays stable for long periods." He rests in a hammock, swaying from two palm trees in the middle of our weird, metal training room. He looks like he's on

vacation.

Marcus is watching in silence, as he always does.

Vanessa's asleep in her own hammock. They've been taking turns.

Me?

I'm drenched in sweat, but there are three different flames, about an inch in size, floating in the

air in front of me. It's little more than candle-strength, but I'm proud of it.

Maybe it doesn't sound like much, but it's massive progress.

Instead of pestering Magister Orion for a more concrete answer, I try to pull the three flames together and merge them into one.

It all falls apart after that.

One flickers out of existence. Another bounces off, and I cut my trickle of magic as it dives straight for Magister Orion's face.

It, too, disappears.

In the end, I'm left with one feeble little fire.

"Damn it, I mutter, cutting my magic and watching it fade away.

"Nine hours have passed in the Fae Ward," Magister Orion announces on the heels of my failure.

I blink, surprised. "How do you know?"

He points at the wall behind me. "The room told me."

Turning, I'm startled to see two modern-looking clocks on the wall. One displays a countdown for our time in the training room, while the other shows the time and date in the Fae Ward.

"Wait, the Fac use digital clocks?" I ask, confused by the sleek, futuristic design.

Magister Orion gives me an odd look. "What's digital?"

"You know, clocks with numbers," I explain, gesturing to the displays.

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He sits up eagerly. "We've always used clocks with numbers. What other kind is there?"

How do you describe an analog clock to someone who's never seen one? They have hands that go around in a circle, and go from one to twelve."

His excitement fades to confusion. "A circle? Why? Why do you need hands? Is it to move the

circle?"

"No, the hands—well, they're actually needles that point to the numbers."

He rubs the tip of his nose in thought. The numbers one through twelve

1 nod.

"How do you tell time with only twelve numbers?"

"Each number is either an hour, or five minutes. The big needle is for minutes and the short needle is for hours."

"You only have twelve hours?"

"No—there's A.M., so before noon. And then there's P.M., which is after noon.

Magister Orion shakes his head, a bemused expression on his face. "Human inventions can be so very strange. This technology of yours brings you backward."

Giving up on the clock explanation, I just agree.

He's not wrong. Trying to explain old clocks just makes my head hurt. I have no idea how elementary teachers can throw knowledge at children; I'm trying to teach an adult

and I already want to tear my hair out. Imagine teaching third-grade children how to read a clock.

It's amazing they didn't all run for the hills and give up their professions.

I turn my focus back to my training. I close my eyes, concentrating on summoning fire once more: the power inside of me is easier to grasp, though it feels like it wiggles in my mental

hands.

"Stop," Magister Orion's voice cuts through my concentration. "Focus on gathering your magic inside of you until it's stable. Your control is poor."

My eyes snap open and I stare in exasperation. "Why didn't you tell me that earlier? I've been at this for days!"

He chuckles, a deep rumble that fills the room. "How would I know if I didn't watch you trying to control things?"

His point is fair, but I still feel like he's dragged me around for way too long. "Fair point. So, what

should I do?"

"Close your eyes again," he instructs. "This time, don't try to push your magic outward. Instead, imagine it as a ball of energy in your center. Focus on containing it, making it denser, more compact. It will fight you. You have to subdue it."

Following his guidance, I close my eyes and visualize my magic as a swirling orb of light within me. It's harder than I expected, like trying to hold water in cupped hands. Every time I think I

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245 Ava: Magic Boot Camp

have a grasp on it, tendrils of energy slip away.

It isn't a fight. It's like my power's laughing at me.

"Good," Magister Orion's voice is softer now, encouraging. "Keep at it. Control is the foundation of all magic. Without it, you're just a walking disaster waiting to happen."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, I mutter, but I don't lose focus.

Time seems to stretch as I work on containing my magic. It's frustrating, like trying to solve a puzzle with pieces that keep changing shape. But slowly, ever so slowly, I feel the energy becoming more stable, more solid.

The wiggling is back.

It doesn't want to be contained, but can no longer slip away like wisps of smoke. Now, it's like wrangling a goddamn alligator.

My head pounds. I've been concentrating for too long.

"Open your eyes, Magister Orion says after what feels like hours.

I do, blinking as the room comes back into focus. To my surprise, there's a faint glow emanating from my skin. It's subtle, barely noticeable, but definitely there.

"What's happening?" I ask, my heart fluttering. Did I do it? Is this my magic?

Magister Orion smiles. "Don't get excited. I'm transferring some energy to you. I can sense your magic going wild. It will help your headache."

"Oh."

Damn it. I thought I'd done something.

My disappointment must be clear on my face, because he clears his throat. "You're doing well, Ava. Most students take months to get to this point."

Unshift 246

246 Ava: Off-Kilter

Staying in the training room for another week is mental torture.

The training isn't the worst part.

It's the tedium.

Vanessa and Marcus are tense and jumpy, even with nothing happening.

Sometimes, the weird training room turns into a quiet beach. In an unfortunate twist, the room can't emulate scent, so it doesn't help much as a change of venue.

Once I'm able to summon fire with ease, Magister Orion announces that it's a great time to return to the Fae Ward.

The clock on the wall shows eighteen hours have passed since we entered.

“Despite sleeping in here, your mind and body aren’t truly rested. You should sleep once we

return.”

“No, I need to see if Selene’s returned, I protest, swaying on my feet. The idea of sleep is tempting, but the worry gnawing at my gut won’t let me rest. “What if something’s happened?” Magister Orion’s eyes soften. “Ava, I assure you, if any important news arrives, I will wake you immediately. But right now, your mental faculties need replenishing. You’ve pushed yourself hard. While this room is convenient for fast-tracking your training, it comes with downsides.” “Days?” I blink, the concept of time slipping through my fingers like sand. “It’s only been eighteen

hours.”

“There, yes. And in here, it’s been two weeks.”

Right. I knew that.

I’m just a little confused.

My body betrays me with a jaw-cracking yawn. Vanessa steps forward, her hand gentle on my arm. “He’s right, Ava. You’re dead on your feet.”

Marcus grabs my other arm, holding me upright. It’s only then that I realize I was tilting to the

side.

my

Their concern warms me, but anxiety still coils in chest. “But what about Lucas?”

“We will keep our ears to the ground,” Magister Orion says firmly. “Eight hours of sleep, minimum. That’s an order from your teacher.”

I bristle at his tone, ready to snap back, but Vanessa’s voice distracts me. “He’s right, Ava. You’re no good to anyone if you collapse from exhaustion.”

The fight drains out of me, leaving behind a bone-deep weariness. “Fine,” I concede, “but wake me if anything—and I mean anything—happens.”

Magister Orion nods solemnly. “You have my word.”

(C) 240 Ava: Off-kilter

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As we exit the training room, the sudden shift back to the ornate halls of the Fae Ward makes my head spin. Vanessa steadies me, concern etched on her face. "Easy there."

I smile. At least, I think I'm smiling. Honestly, everything's a little fuzzy and the world is off its axis. "I'm fine. Just disoriented."

Marcus falls into step beside me, with a gentle shove that tilts me back into a proper angle to the floor. "I'll take first watch. Vanessa will check in with everyone while you sleep."

"Got it." Exhaustion weighs down my tongue; I'm not even sure the words came out sounding right.

By the time we reach my room, I'm stumbling with every step. The bed looks impossibly inviting, and I barely kick off my shoes before collapsing onto it.

The training room did give us the luxury of showers, but it couldn't give us new clothes. Next time, I'll pack clothes.

They feel gross against the clean, cool sheets.

"Sleep well," Vanessa murmurs, her voice already fading as I drift off.

My dreams are a chaotic swirl of fire and water, faces I can't quite recognize, and a persistent sense of urgency. I'm running, always running, but I can't remember what I'm chasing or what's chasing me.

The chase stops abruptly when I reach a clearing, and a small stream within.

It's familiar, but I can't imagine why.

I want to walk in it, but something tells me it isn't safe.

It's like I've been here before, and my entire body's screaming at me to run away.

I take a step back, and the water darkens. It goes from crystal clear and blue to murky brown, and there's something moving in its depths.

There's a flash of red in the trees, and a menacing presence that makes it hard to breathe.

Then, suddenly, I'm not there anymore.

There's no water, only a beach, with water lapping at my toes. A white wolf with clear blue eyes stares at me, the only color in her fur a patch of black at the end of her tail.

When I finally surface from sleep, it takes me a moment to remember where I am. The soft bed and ornate furnishings of the Fae Ward come into focus slowly. I blink, disoriented, and reach for my phone out of habit. It's dead, of course.

Oh, wait. It's not.

It's charged, but not powered on.

"I'm hot and sticky, and feel feverish. My entire body hurts, like Jericho's been putting me through

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246 Ava Of-Kitar

"Good morning, sleepyhead, Vanessa's voice startles me. She's perched in a chair by the window, looking far too alert.

"How long was I out?" I croak, my mouth dry.

"About ten hours. Magister Orion said to let you sleep as long as you needed."

Ten hours. It feels like I only slept ten minutes. "Why didn't you wake me? Has there been any news?"

Vanessa shakes her head. "Nothing yet. And before you ask, no, we haven't been able to reach Lucas or the pack"

The worry I'd pushed aside during sleep comes rushing back. "We need to do something."

"Ava-

"We need to do something. Lucas is in danger."

She sighs, a mix of understanding and frustration in her eyes. "I know. But rushing in half-cocked won't help anyone. Let Sister Miriam and Selene look around. You need to focus on your training."

I feel like I'm missing something. Anxiety tugs at me, but I don't know why everything feels wrong today.

I'm off-kilter, and I don't think it's from the training room.

Vanessa inspects me with concern. “Are you feeling okay? You’re flushed.”

“I feel like I’ve been run over with a truck. Pressing my hand against my forehead, I add, “I think I’m okay. Maybe a little sick.”

She frowns and replaces my hand with hers. “You have a fever.”

That’s odd. I haven’t been sick in months. When was the last time?

Oh, that’s right. In Cedarwood. I was alone and miserable. That’s when I met Selene.

As I swing my legs out of bed, the room spins. Vanessa is at my side in an instant, steadying me. “Easy. Your body’s still adjusting. Maybe you should just stay in bed. I’ll get you some food.”

I take a deep breath, waiting for the sensation to fade. “I’m okay. Just need a minute.”

She shakes her head. “No. Healer’s orders. Get back in bed.”

“I have to pee.

“Then I’ll take you to the bathroom. And then you’re going right back in bed. I need to check your vitals and make sure you’re okay. Do you get sick often?”

“No.” Keeping my eyes closed makes the spinning worse, but oddly seems to help the nausea. “It’s been a long time. I get colds and things, though, like a normal human.”

“But not since your constitution’s changed, right?”

I peek an eye open. “Constitution?”

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240 Ava: Oll–Kilter

Interesting. I never thought of using that word to describe what’s happening to my body. “No, I haven’t been sick.

Unshift 247

247 Ava: Pre–Heating

Vanessa shakes her head. “You might have a fever from overworking yourself, but I doubt it. At this point you’re more shifter than human, I think—you shouldn’t be getting sick. You don’t even need your glasses anymore.”

“It’s probably fine-”

“Better to check, she interrupts. “I’ll get my supplies and check with Magister Orion to see if this is normal after an extended time in that magic room of his.”

“You’re making a big deal out of nothing. I’m fi-” The room tilts as I take a step, and suddenly the floor rushes up to meet me. Vanessa’s quick reflexes save me from an ignoble face-planting.

“You were saying?” Her tone is gentle but firm, her fingers digging into my arms as she sets me straight again.

My nose wrinkles. My sense of smell still isn’t as acute as theirs, but I swear I can scent her satisfaction. Maybe it’s my imagination. “Okay, maybe I’m a little wobbly.”

Vanessa guides me to the bathroom, her arm a constant support. “Take your time. I’ll be right outside if you need me.”

When I emerge, she tucks me back into bed like I’m a child. The mattress feels too soft and too hard all at once. I want to protest, to tell her I can go downstairs and speak to Magister Orion myself, but exhaustion weighs me down.

I’m definitely not feeling right.

Marcus appears in the doorway, his hulking frame filling the space. He nods at Vanessa. “I’ve got this. Go talk to the wizard.”

As Vanessa leaves, I shift restlessly. One moment I’m burning up, the next I’m shivering. Blanket on, then off. A deep ache settles into my bones, making it impossible to get comfortable.

Marcus is here now, in the corner. The tension in his shoulders is obvious. Guess he doesn’t like

germs.

I drift in and out of consciousness, fragments of my earlier nightmare flashing through my mind. The murky stream, the bizarre presence.

Odd how I didn’t remember it when I woke, because now I’m cold from my hair to my toes at the memory of it. Something insidious lurks there.

My lungs burn, I take shallow breaths, because it’s impossible to fill my lungs with air.

I toss and turn. Even my fingertips hurt.

A cough builds in my chest, and I try to avoid letting it out.

When it finally escapes, it feels like my entire torso rips apart, leaving me sore and bruised in my ribs.

Marcus shifts from foot to foot. He's clearly uncomfortable. He's usually a statue when he's on

247 Ava Pro—Heating

"Don't worry." I rasp, trying for a weak smile. "You can't catch whatever this is."

He grunts. "I don't get sick."

I sigh, sinking further into the pillows. "Must be nice."

The silence stretches between us, broken only by my occasional coughs and the rustle of sheets

as I toss and turn.

My thoughts keep circling back to Lucas. I hope Sister Miriam and Selene get back soon.

"Marcus," I croak, "have you heard anything from Lucas?"

He shakes his head.

Of course he hasn't. He would have told me.

Still, the tiny flicker of hope is dashed, leaving me morose.

Another coughing fit wracks my body, leaving me curled on my side, gasping for air.

"Vanessa should be here any minute, Marcus says, taking a step back.

For someone who professes he can't get sick, he sure seems worried about catching this.

"I hope she has medicine."

As if summoned by my words, Vanessa bustles into the room, her arms full of supplies. Magister Orion follows close behind, his massive frame dwarfing the doorway.

"How are you feeling, child?" His booming voice seems softer than usual.

I try to sit up, but my arms shake with the effort. “Like I’ve been hit by a truck. Do you have two

heads?”

“Sometimes I have three,” he says cheerfully, taking my fever-blathering in stride.

Vanessa sets her supplies on the bedside table and presses a cool hand to my forehead. Her mouth is pinched with worry. “She’s burning up. She shouldn’t be this sick with her body’s rate of rapid healing.”

“I’ve never seen a sick Lycan,” Magister Orion agrees, scratching at his head. “The training room has never had any side effect outside of exhaustion, but I suppose there’s a first time for everything.”

As Vanessa fusses over me, taking my temperature and checking my vitals, Marcus steps out of the room. I snort with laughter. “He’s worried he’s going to catch it.”

“Marcus?” She glances up in surprise. “I doubt that. He has no reason to fear germs. But she looks at the door with a frown. “I’ll check on him when I’m done with you.”

“Oh, goody. More doctoring.”

She laughs. “Yes, more doctoring. Sit back, Ava. I’m just going to make sure you don’t have any festering wounds we’ve overlooked.”

“Fester is a fun word,” I muse, following her commands as best as I can.

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247 Ava. Pre-Heating

The dizziness gets in the way, and she ends up rolling me around in different directions until she’s satisfied she’s checked over every millimeter of my skin.

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“No infected wounds. I don’t have a lab to run your bloodwork, but your blood pressure high. You’re tachycardic. Clammy to the touch. A little delirious. Ava, do you know where we

are?”

“Of course.”

“Where are we?”

“We’re...” Huh. That’s odd. I know where we are, so why isn’t it coming to me. “Home?”

It doesn’t feel like home, though..

“Do you know what day it is?”

“Tuesday?” I guess. “Maybe Wednesday. I was on vacation.”

She glances at Magister Orion before sitting on my bed, her words slow and gentle, like she’s talking to a child. “Where did you go on vacation?”

“What do you mean? We went to the beach. You were with me. My brows draw together. “Weren’t you?”

“Yes, I was. Good job, Ava.”

I preen, delighted at her praise, even as she shoves a thermometer in my mouth.

“Whaff diff fo?”

“It’s to check your temperature. I already checked with the forehead thermometer, but I just want to see it again. Is that okay?”

Giving her a guttural sound of assent, I wiggle a little deeper into my pillows, exhausted.

When the thermometer beeps, she yanks it out of my mouth, squinting at the numbers. “Well, that’s not good. Ava, do you like ice baths?”

After an ice bath from hell, I fall asleep.

I’m not sure how long it is before I wake up.

The room is dark, and Vanessa’s sitting in a chair next to my bed. It wasn’t there before.

“How are you feeling?” she asks in a whisper, leaning over to touch my forehead.

I roll her question around my mind for a moment, reconnecting with my body.

I blink slowly, trying to focus on Vanessa’s face. Every part of my body aches, as if I’ve been thrown to the mat a thousand times. My skin is clammy, and sweat trickles everywhere. I want a

shower.

“I think I’m dying” I croak, my voice barely above a whisper.

Vanessa's lips quirk into a small smile. "You're doing a little better now. We've given you a few

247 Ava: Pre-Heating

Oh.

"The ice bath helped bring your fever down, too."

My entire body shudders at the memory, sending waves of pain through my muscles. "Please don't do that again, I plead, wincing as even speaking hurts. My throat feels like I'm talking around shards

of glass. Swallowing is even worse.

"We had no choice, Ava," Vanessa explains. "You were delirious with an incredibly high fever. We had to bring it down quickly."

I try to nod, but my head feels too heavy. My eyelids droop, but I don't want to fall asleep.

"Do you feel anything unusual?" Vanessa asks, leaning closer to examine me.

Everything hurts. There's no point in trying to single any particular pain out. "No, I mumble.

"Just feels like an awful cold."

As if on cue, a coughing fit seizes me. My chest burns as I hack and wheeze, my ribs bruised and aching with each spasm.

Vanessa helps me sit up, rubbing my back until the fit subsides.

When I can breathe again, she asks, "What happened the last time you were sick?"

I squint, as if that'll help me remember better. It feels like ages ago. "Slept a lot. Drank soup. Slept more"

"Was that before or after your heat?"

The question catches me off guard. I frown, thinking back. "Before. It was in Cedarwood."

Vanessa nods, her expression thoughtful. "Ava, there's something you should know. Marcus is... uncomfortable around you right now."

“Why? Because of germs?” I ask, confusion clouding my already foggy mind.

She hesitates for a moment before answering. “You smell like you’re going into heat. A pre-heat, if you will.”

My eyes widen, and panic surges through me, washing away my exhaustion in one fell swoop. “What? No, no, no. Where’s Lucas? I can’t go through that again!”

“It’s okay, Ava. Calm down,” Vanessa soothes, placing a hand on my arm. “We’re handling it. Magister Orion is out sourcing some heat suppressants, just in case we need them. Until then, Marcus is staying away to be safe. I can’t smell it, so he might be wrong”

I sink back into the pillows, my mind reeling. Another heat? So soon?

Then again... it’s not that soon, isn’t it? It’s been a while.

But to go into heat in the middle of all this chaos? Without Lucas nearby? No, thank you.

Been there. Done that. Don’t recommend.

Vanessa squeezes my hand. “You’ll be fine. Just rest and focus on getting better. The Fae heat suppressants work like a charm, from what Magister Orion says.”

208 Ava: Fever Dreams

Unshift 248

248 Ava: Fever Dreams

“How would he know?”

Vanessa shrugs. “They’ve been around for a long time. I guess the Fae go into heat, too.”

Flopping onto my back, I groan at her words. “Fae aren’t shifters”

“From what he says, the biological heat is the same, and the suppressants will work. All we can do is try. She checks my temperature, clicking her tongue. “It’s down, but you still have a fever.” With all the sweat trickling down just about every part of my body, I’m surprised. I thought the fever already broke. “When will Magister Orion be back?”

“Soon, I hope.”

“So am I sick, or just going into heat?” I squint at Vanessa, the dim light of the room enough to burn my eyes. “Because let me tell you, if I’m going to be miserable every time, I think I might just want my uterus taken out.”

She laughs softly. “You might be sick. Magister Orion thinks it might be from your increase in power. Something about backlash overwhelming the body.”

Selene mentioned that I go into heat in order to gain power, or something like that before. I still don’t know the exact details, but it makes sense, I suppose.

“How long do I have before I go into heat?” No matter how hard I try to think back, I can’t remember how long it was between meeting Selene and wearing the necklace.

She sighs. “I have no idea. You’re an unusual case in every possible way. The sooner we get the suppressants, the better it will be. For it to be already affecting Marcus when you have no other

signs of heat is almost unheard of.”

This blasted heat is the stupidest thing I’ve ever had to endure.

“Do me a favor and knock me unconscious if you can’t suppress it. I don’t want to repeat past

mistakes.

Leaning forward, Vanessa flicks my forehead. “Don’t borrow trouble before it comes, Ava. Get

some rest.”

Twigs snap beneath my feet as I trudge through a barren forest. Snow glistens, but isn’t cold against my bare feet. Despite being the dead of winter, the temperature is comfortable. A dream. It has to be a dream, because I’m asleep in the Fae Ward.

The moon casts an eerie glow, turning skeletal trees into ominous shadows against the sky.

I’ve never seen a forest so lifeless. Even in the depths of winter, there should be evergreens. But here, there’s nothing. No pines, no firs, not even the hardy juniper bushes that cling to life in the

harshest climates.

A chill runs down my spine, but it’s not from fear. This place, for all its desolation, doesn’t feel

248 Ava Fever Dreams

threatening. It's more like walking through a graveyard—solemn and empty.

The silence is absolute, broken only by the crunch of my footsteps and the whisper of my breathing.

I keep moving, drawn forward by some inexplicable pull. The moonlight plays tricks on my eyes, casting shadows that seem to move and dance at the edge of my vision. But when I turn to look, nothing's there.

Just more bare trees and frozen earth.

The path I'm following winds through the forest, leading me deeper into its heart. I lose track of time, my mind drifting as I walk.

Hours must have passed, but my muscles don't ache.

Just as I'm starting to wonder if this forest goes on forever, I see a break in the endless sea of lifeless trees.

My pace quickens.

I step into a and my I

catches in my throat.

In the center, defying all logic and reason, is a single flower.

It's unlike anything I've ever seen. The petals are gorgeous in color—deep purples fading to brilliant blues, edged with a shimmer of gold. It seems to glow from within, the only beacon of life in this dead world.

The flower sways gently, though there's no breeze I can feel.

My heart aches at the sight. After the monotony of the forest, this burst of color and life is almost painful, a reminder of what's missing in this place.

I'm drawn to it, my feet moving of their own accord.

The stem is a vibrant green, so bright it almost hurts to look at. Tiny droplets of dew cling to the petals, catching the moonlight and scattering it in prismatic bursts.

It has to be magic. Nothing like this exists in our world.

Or maybe it's some fantastical Fae flora.

I reach out, wanting to touch it, driven by a need deep within that urges me closer.

"Ava."

Silence is shattered. I'd know that voice anywhere.

Whirling around, my eyes scan the treeline. "Lucas?"

But there's nothing. No movement, no sign of life. Just trees upon trees.

I turn in a slow circle, searching for any hint of movement. "Lucas?" I call again, louder this time. My voice echoes through the clearing, bouncing off the trees and coming back to me, distorted. and strange.

Still nothing.

248 Ava: Fever Dreams

I was so sure I heard him. The voice was so clear, so real. There's no way that was my imagination.

My gaze is drawn back to the flower. It seems even brighter now, its colors more vivid. The petals sway gently, as if beckoning me closer.

A gust of wind sweeps through the clearing, rustling branches and sending a shower of dead leaves skittering across the ground. I shiver, wrapping my arms around myself.

For the first time in this place, I'm cold. It's worse than being in the snow without shoes or other appropriate clothing. It's a bone-deep freeze, where heat no longer exists.

The wind dies down as quickly as it came, leaving the forest in eerie stillness once more. I turn back to the flower, half-expecting it to have vanished.

But it's still there, vibrant and alive, a splash of color in this world of gray and shadow.

I reach out once more, my fingers inching toward the delicate petals.

"Ava!"

The voice comes again, louder this time, more urgent. I spin around, my heart racing.

“Lucas?” My voice echoes through the trees. “Where are you?”

But just like before, there’s no response.

Unshift 249

249 Ava: Unrest

Magister Orion’s booming voice wakes me from the unsettling dream, though it’s too much work to open my eyes. I’m exhausted. My body feels like it weighs a thousand pounds.

My ears tune in before I’m fully awake.

*-in an uproar. Every portal is guarded, and the death tolls keep rising. The militia’s working on the riots, but they might not be enough. It makes no sense at all. There’s no rhyme or reason to

1. it.

“How safe are we here?”

“It’s impossible to tell. The High Fae have already taken one family into custody for insurrection, but it’s possible there are more. It’s as though everyone’s lost their minds.”

That doesn’t sound good.

My eyes snap open and I struggle to sit up, pleasantly surprised my body’s aches are gone, even if I still feel heavy.

“What’s going on?”

Magister Orion’s face swims into view, his contorted features smoothing over. The sight jolts me fully awake, my heart rate picking up.

“How are you feeling?” he asks, his voice gruff.

I wave off his concern. My health isn’t as important as this conversation. “I’m fine. What’s going

on?”

Magister Orion exchanges a loaded glance with Vanessa. My stomach tightens.

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"The city is in an uproar, Magister Orion says, his words heavy. "In the First, Second, and Third Wards, there are riots and uprisings. There's no rhyme or reason. Vampire against vampire, Fac against Fae; it's unclear who is ally or foe."

The timing is suspect. We can't contact anyone outside this place, and now there's civil unrest?

My mind reels, leaving me dizzy. "Does this happen often?"

"No, never." He clicks his tongue, running a hand over his face in frustration. "There have always been struggles of power, but they never involve the city. Assassinations, maybe. Financial destruction. Things of that nature. Too many powerful families have allied to keep peace in this sanctuary; no one can stand up to their combined power."

"Until now," Marcus says, surprising me. I didn't realize he was here.

"Until now," Magister Orion echoes with a sigh. "Too many people are missing. The body count keeps rising"

"Where are all these powerful families, then? Vanessa asks. "Why aren't they keeping the city in

peace?"

He spreads his hands. "Missing.

249 Ava: Unnest

He continues, "There's no sign of Alpha Renard, or any other shifters in the city, including the rogues who have lived here for years. It's suspicious, no?"

"Very. I murmur, wondering how all this ties into our inability to contact anyone.

There's no way this isn't connected.

What aren't we seeing?

Trying to p Trying to process this information has my head spinning one way, then the other. It feels like I've

woken

up in a different world; this feeling is getting too familiar. How many more times will the rug get pulled out from under me?

“Someone is coming who might have answers,” Magister Orion adds. “Do you remember the strange Fae named Florice?”

I nod, recalling the stern woman who resembled my mother. Her cold demeanor is hard to forget. “Doesn’t she hate you?”

“Florice might be a giant pain in the ass with the way she sticks to protocols, Magister Orion says, a hint of grudging respect in his tone. “But she’s also a wealth of information. She goes through almost every document a Fae ever puts their hands on.”

My curiosity piques. “What information might she have gleaned?”

Magister Orion shakes his head. “I’m not sure, but she seems agitated by the situation. That alone is cause for concern. Florice never involves herself in politics. She lives and breathes paperwork.”

“Why would she come to you?” Marcus asks suspiciously. “Do you think this could be a ploy to get to Ava?”

Magister Orion shakes his head, his salt-and-pepper hair catching the light. “Florice may dislike me because I refuse to play by the rules, but she knows I’m neutral in the city’s political landscape.

I mull that over. “So she trusts you because you don’t have a stake in the game?”

“Precisely,” Magister Orion nods. “I’ve never aligned myself with any faction. My only interest is in magic and its preservation.”

Marcus shifts beside me, his posture tense. “But how can we be sure she’s not using that neutrality against you? Against us?”

He’s paranoid. I guess it comes with the territory; he’s here to keep me safe, not fight someone else’s war.

Magister Orion’s lips quirk into a wry smile. “Florice is many things, but not duplicitous. She’s rigid, inflexible, and often infuriating, but she’s also honest to a fault. If she’s coming to me, it’s because she believes the situation warrants it.”

But what would be dire enough for someone like Florice to seek help from someone she disdains?

249 Ava: Unrest

Being awake doesn’t mean I’m healed; I fall asleep not long after, despite the turmoil.

At some point I wake up again, still groggy. Vanessa’s gone, and only Marcus remains.

I guess the suppressant's working. That's good to know.

"You feeling okay?"

Marcus' gruff voice warms my heart.

"Better, I think." I feel like I'm lying in a puddle of my own sweat, but my mind has regained some clarity.

"Vanessa's with Magister Orion downstairs, waiting on Florice," Marcus says, noticing when I look around the room.

"Who?" My brain takes a while to start up, slowly tugging at my memories. "Oh. Florice. Wait, how long have I been asleep?"

"Three hours."

That's it?

Seeing the surprise on my face, he says, "You can go back to sleep."

Despite my muddled head, I'm wide awake.

"No, I'm good." Shoving myself into a seated position, I twist my hair off the back of my neck. The room air is cool against the sweat gathered at my nape. "I think my fever's broken."

"You look a little better," he agrees.

"I want a shower, and about twenty pounds of bacon, but I'll settle for going downstairs to wait

for Florice."

But when I try to slide off the edge of the bed, I fall to the side.

Marcus steadies me, holding onto my arm as I try to stand.

After three different attempts—all ending in me falling, only saved from hitting the floor thanks to Marcus' help—he tucks me back into bed like I'm a child. "Just rest. When Vanessa gets back, I'll get you those twenty pounds of bacon."

My phone rings, and I nearly leap out of bed to reach for it.

Marcus grabs it as I fall into an unceremonious tangle of blankets and legs on the floor, staring at me with an impassive face that hides his amusement.

I know he's laughing inside, because there are little crinkles at the corners of his eyes, and his jaw's a little tenser than normal, as if holding back laughter.

"Unknown number," he reports, handing it to me.

Damn. Not Lucas.

Then again, maybe it is.

I answer eagerly, before I'm free of the mess I've created. "Hello?"

"Is this Alpha Westwood's mate? The voice is soft and feminine, her words coming out in a rush.

I don't recognize it. "Yes. Who is this?"

"You must return to the pack, or everyone will be slaughtered." The woman's voice trembles, urgency lacing every breathy word. "You can't trust the Fac

My heart leaps into my throat. The room spins, and I grip the phone tighter, its edges cutting into my fingers. "What? Who is this? What's happening?"

"There's no time to explain. Just come back as soon as you can. We need you."

"But who's in danger? What's going on?" My voice rises, panic seeping into every syllable.

"Everyone. Or else Alpha-

The line goes dead.

"Hello? Hello!" I shout into the phone, but there's nothing but silence.

Marcus snatches it out of my hands, hands tapping at the screen. "Can't dial back."

No surprise there; the number didn't even show up. I struggle out of the tangle of blankets trapping my legs. "We need to go back. Everyone's in danger."

He frowns. "Ava, calm down. Sit, first."

"I can't calm down. Lucas-

He shoves a hand over my mouth, shoving me back until my knees hit the bed.

I sit, glaring at him over the edge of his palm.

“Calm down,” he repeats, his heavy brows drawn in as his eyes bore into mine. “You need to listen to me before you do anything.”

My heart pounds like crazy. It’s a war drum, each beat reverberating through my body. The rush of blood in my ears wants to drown out the world, but I force myself to focus on Marcus’ face.

Unshift 250

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Stern expression. Narrow eyes. Tight lips.

He thinks I’m about to do something reckless.

My mouth is covered, so I close my eyes and breathe through my nose, drawing oxygen into my lungs and stretching them as far as I can bear, before releasing it all in a single measured breath. One. Two. Three. I count each inhale and exhale, willing my racing pulse to slow.

When I open my eyes again, I meet Marcus’ gaze. His hand drops from my mouth as he takes a step back, giving me space.

It helps me feel less trapped by the panic fluttering in my heart.

“I’m listening,” I say, my voice steadier than I feel inside. “What do I need to know?”

Marcus holds up my phone, tapping the screen as he stares at me. “First, we can’t trust random phone calls. Anyone could be on the other end of that line, Ava. It could be a trap.”

I bite my lip. “But what if it’s not? What if Lucas and the pack really are in danger? We can’t reach them—doesn’t it lead credence to what she was saying?”

“Then rushing in blindly won’t help them,” Marcus counters. His tone softens slightly. “I know you’re worried. But we need to be smart about this. You can’t run off half-cocked. That’s how you get kidnapped—” I wince. “—or worse.”

Okay. Of course he’s right.

Everything I do is on impulse and instinct, and I don’t have a track record of stellar decision-making.

So I take another deep breath, ignoring how small I feel when I realize how much I’m still lacking. Being upset over good advice is childish.

Forcing myself to think logically, I take a moment to mull it over.

Of course I can just ask Marcus what to do, but there's a reason he isn't throwing orders at me.

Because that's my job, as his Luna.

So, think it through, Ava. Strange phone call, vague statements, and a voice I don't recognize.

Wait.

"Why did this phone call get through? We're in the Fae Ward. It shouldn't have gotten through to us. It can't be a Westwood shifter.

His shoulders relax, I hadn't realized how bunched up they were. "What else?"

The calm encouragement in his voice makes it feel like we're in a classroom, and I'm responding to a teacher's prompt.

Odd as it is, it helps my mind clear.

"She asked if I was Alpha Westwood's mate. She didn't call me by name, yet she has my number." He nods. "Good. Keep going."

"It's weird Wouldn't she either call me by name or call me Luna?" That's what the other wolves

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do, when they find out I'm his mate. Even without an official ceremony.

"It's strange," he agrees. "Anything else?"

I think back. "She said I can't trust the Fac.

Another nod.

My eyes widen. "No one in Westwood knows I'm with the Fae. Only Lucas." Everyone who knew is at Blackwood. "Maybe she's Blackwood? No. Wait. Any Blackwood wolf would know my name." And very few know I'm mated to Lucas. "None of this makes sense."

"Exactly."

The approval in Marcus' voice has my back straightening and my chin lifting with a sense of pride.

"Is there anything else that strikes you from that conversation?"

I pull my brows together, thinking. "I don't think so. She was cut off in the middle of talking about Lucas..." My voice trails off. "No, she said Alpha. If she's Blackwood, that might mean Alpha Renard."

Glancing up, I'm surprised to see his nose wrinkle in disgust. "Just call him Renard. He is no longer Alpha Blackwood."

Ah.

"Right. Renard." The name feels weird on my tongue, almost naked. But it does make him feel a little less powerful in my memories.

"And nothing else gives you question?" Marcus probes, clearly aiming for something.

I shake my head.

"She said you need to return. That they need you." He pauses. "You, Ava."

I tilt my head. "I know, I heard—oh,

Mc.

Why would they need me?

I'm weak; barely stronger than human.

My powers are a secret, and even then, they're almost useless until I become stronger.

So why would anyone need me to save them?

Wow. Do I have a larger ego than I thought? It didn't even occur to me to question being begged

to save someone.

"Yes. Oh. He shakes his head. "Their purpose is to draw you out of the city, ostensibly to the pack. But who, and why?"

"We have no way of knowing: Falling back, I stare at the ceiling from the relative comfort of the

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“We know a little.”

“Right. Someone who might be in the Fae Ward...” I pause. “Wait. No. Someone here in Dakota Sanctuary. Vampire, Fae, gnome—could be any of them.”

“But likely not a shifter,” he points out.

So, almost anyone in this city.

“Lucas couldn’t get anyone into the city when he was trying to get information, but Alpha Re- uh, Renard has ties here. And there are rogues. But what about the Whispering Pines pack?” “There are other supernatural communities and Unregistered cities closer to them,” he points out, though it doesn’t sound like he’s dismissing the possibility.

“Do they work together? Are they friendly?”

He pauses. “I have no idea.”

More information we don’t know. I cover my eyes. “We can ask Magister-”

Marcus makes a soft sound and I sit up, ignoring my dizziness to see his eyes unfocused and face

gat me with a grim expression. “Are you able to slack. Then he returns to the present, walk downstairs?”

“I think so.”