

# **Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted #Unshift 251 - Read Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted Unshift 251**

## **Unshift 251**

251 Ava: Florice's Fate

My legs tremble as Marcus guides me down the stairs. Each step feels like a monumental effort, and I'm acutely aware of the sweat beading on my upper lip and hairline. The living room comes into view, and I'm taken aback by the sight of Magister Orion pacing in silence, his usual booming presence subdued.

Vanessa's concerned gaze meets mine as we enter and she comes over to help Marcus lead me into a nearby chair.

I sink into it gratefully, my body feeling like it's made of lead.

"Thanks," I manage, offering Vanessa a weak smile. The room seems to spin slightly, and I have to focus to keep my vision steady. "What's going on?"

Magister Orion halts his pacing, his eyes locking onto mine. The gravity in his expression sends a chill down my spine before he even speaks.

"Florice has been murdered.

The words hang in the air, and for a moment, I can't process them. Then reality crashes in, and I feel the blood drain from my face.

"What?" I exclaim, my voice cracking. "How? When?"

More suspicious timing. More odd events. And we're still in the dark, with no any of this.

It's not a coincidence.

idea who is behind.

Florice was coming to us with information; whatever she found meant something. But the knowledge is now lost to us.

Magister Orion's complexion is ashen, worry etched into every line of his face. He opens his mouth to respond, but Vanessa cuts in.

"It's not safe here," she says, her voice tight with strain. "We need to consider our options. Whoever didn't want Florice spilling their secrets might know she was coming to you, Magister."

Marcus clears his throat, drawing everyone's attention. "There's more, he says grimly. "Ava received a phone call earlier. Someone pretending to be from Westwood, begging her to come back before everyone's slaughtered."

Magister Orion's frown deepens. Suddenly, he bellows, "Tinker!"

I jump at the sudden volume, my nerves already frayed. To my surprise, Tinker appears almost instantly, her mechanical wings whirring softly. I realize I haven't seen her since we first arrived, and her presence is oddly comforting.

"Yes, Magister?" Tinker asks, her lilac eyes darting between all of us.

Magister Orion gestures to Marcus. "Explain it, the telephonic connection Ava received."

Any other time, I might have found amusement in Magister Orion's formal way of describing a

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Marcus recounts the details of the call, and Tinker listens intently, her expression growing more perplexed with each word.

"Did it sound like when Magister Orion speaks?" Tinker asks, turning to me.

I shake my head. "No, not at all. When he called, it was robotic and ominous. This person was a woman, whispering. It sounded like she was afraid."

Tinker's eyes widen. "That's surprising. No one in the Fae Ward uses a normal telephone like you do. The magical wards interfere with the signals, causing them to break down over time."

I stare at her blankly, my exhausted brain struggling to process this new information. "Wait, what? When were you going to mention that could happen?"

Tinker has the grace to look sheepish. "I apologize. We assumed you knew. It's common. knowledge here in the Fae Ward."

I lean back in my chair, feeling overwhelmed. "Is it possible for them to call us without sounding like Magister Orion did?"

"Not that I'm aware of. I created the technology, but it isn't impossible for someone to doctor it."

"Or for someone to get a cell phone and bring it into the city for this purpose," Vanessa says.

Both are viable scenarios. "It could be a vampire living among humans, Marcus points out.

Exasperated, I say what we're all thinking. "There's no way to know who it is, then. It could be almost anyone."

"But it's unlikely to be someone from our pack." Vanessa squeezes my shoulder. "At least we've

ruled that out.

Okay, so anyone in the world except a Westwood wolf.

Magister Orion strokes his beard, his eyes distant. "We're dealing with forces beyond our usual understanding. Florice is murdered, and someone tries to get you away from me and the safety you

have here. There's a clear connection, but we don't know their motive."

I want to ask what we do next, but a glance at Marcus and Vanessa tell me how stressed they are. They're on edge, Marcus standing on the balls of his feet as though ready to jump into action. Vanessa's so tense her fingers dig into my shoulder despite her attempt at soothing my

anxiety.

This isn't the time for me to be dependent on them. I need to think things through, be a leader.

"We know that I'm in danger, and that Florice learned something important. They didn't want that information getting to Magister Orion. I meet my teacher's eyes. "That means you're an obstacle to whoever's orchestrating this madness. Somehow, you would get in their way. Why? How? Who are your enemies?"

He frowns. "A loaded question. I have been a thorn in the side of many, as I've always advocated on behalf of humans. I'm sure you've noticed that there are few of them in the city."

"I haven't seen the city, only some of the Fae Ward. Sister Miriam took us directly here from one of her... buildings. A vague idea stirs in the back of my brain, but it's little more than a feeling.

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"Ah. Yes, well, the Dakota Sanctuary is not kind to humans or any wolf with a pack. Rogue wolves are welcome, to an extent. Most of them are in the Third Ward, which is

little more than a slum. Most humans in the city are here on business, and are found in the Second Ward, where most businesses are located. Many people dislike allowing humans entry at all.” He grimaces. “The few with access rights are usually wiped on exit.”

“Wiped?” My eyes widen. “Murdered?”

“What?” Magister Orion shakes his head. “No, of course not. Memory wipes. Most people believe that if humans know too much about our city, they’ll press us to assimilate under your laws, forcing us all to register and be governed by your leaders.”

“Oh.” My shoulders relax. Wiping memories sounds drastic, but a lot less terrible than murdering any human who enters the city. “Is that why nobody knows anything about you guys?”

“Most assuredly. We keep to ourselves, asking only to be left alone by your government and people. It wasn’t always that way, of course, but once supernatural existence became regulated, things changed. Not all of us reacted well to the overreach of human government.”

“I heard about vampires growing up, but I thought they were little more than stories,” I admit. “A bogeyman the others would use to scare kids.”

“Yes, that happens when you segregate your society as we have.” Magister Orion smiles. “While some vampires and other-shifters have come to embrace life among your lot in their Supernatural Communities, accepting the overreach of your overlord, most do not.”

“We call him our president, Vanessa corrects, leaning forward as she listens. “We were taught that the Unregistered cities came about because vampires refused to accept the Human Survival Rights, not wanting to give up their victims.”

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“Perhaps that is true for some vampires, Magister Orion concedes. “But for most of us, it is because of freedom. We do not wish to be regulated and numbered, at the whim of human demands, simply for being different. Those who breach the peace between the human world and that of Dakota Sanctuary are punished. Depending on the severity of their actions, some lose their lives. We have had some vampires put to the guillotine for feeding on nearby human

cities.

Fascinating.

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“But what does that have to do with circling back to the main topic.

“I am one of the few who advocate for increased trade and visitation between our city and the human realm.” Magister Orion waves a hand around the room. “Very few of us wish to live within the Fae realm, under the rule of our kings. There is little freedom to be had under their tyranny. Here, we have equality, votes, and laws to protect us from the overreach of our leaders. Vampires and gnomes are treated as equals. However, our reliance on the Fae realm for food and magical items means that we are at the mercy of the Fae kings. Our freedom here is little more than an illusion.”

He slams a fist against the table. “I say, if we truly wish for freedom, we should establish connects with the human realm. We have things you do not. We can barter for food, even more land. We can be equals in this world, instead of living half in, and half out.”

He sighs. “But that is heresy to many.”

“Then why do you hate wolves so much, if you’re willing to work with humans?” Vanessa asks, and I glance at her in surprise.

She’s fascinated by everything he’s saying, and I’d already forgotten about how he treated Vanessa and Marcus when we first got here.

“Lycans,” and his lip curls before he shakes his head and sighs. “Ancient history, but prejudice is passed down in our history books.”

“But what happened between wolves and Fae?”

Magister Orion waves a hand. “It is

or vampires willingly work with the import in this situation. Suffice to say, very few Fae freedom to work as human dogs.”

In our world, they’re traitors, giving up their

He pauses for a second, glancing between Vanessa and Marcus. “No offense intended.”

“So the leaders of the city are all against your views?” Marcus asks.

“Indeed. I am a rebel with a cause.” He spreads his hands with a shrug. “However, to call them my enemies is a bit of a stretch.

“Who have been the victims of the riots?” I ask, rubbing the bridge of my nose as I try to think. “Wouldn’t they be the leaders of the city? If that’s so, then they’re probably not who we’re looking for.”

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Magister Orion looks thoughtful. “Some families, yes. But that doesn’t mean all of them. I would need to contact someone to find out more.”

Tinker, who’s been quiet all this time, speaks up. “I can contact Layla and see if she’s heard. anything.”

He nods, a sharp movement of his head. “Yes. Get a list of every attack, and lists of victims. We must organize the information we have. And see what Florice has been working on lately.”

“Yes, sir!” Tinker salutes, her mechanical wings slapping together, before she darts off.

It’s like a giant puzzle without a reference picture. My head aches.

A wave of dizziness washes over me, and I have to grip the arms of the chair to stay upright.

Vanessa places a cool hand on my forehead. “Your fever’s getting worse,” she murmurs. “We need to get another dose of suppressant into you.”

The reminder of my impending heat adds another layer of complication to an already impossible situation. I feel tears of frustration prick at my eyes, but I blink them away.

I don’t have the luxury of being weak.

“Magister, Marcus says, his voice steady despite the tension in his shoulders, “do you have any way to contact the outside world safely? We need contact Sister Miriam and Selene, see what they know. With the city up in arms, coming back might not be easy. If it were up to me, I’d lock down your portals.”

Magister Orion frowns. “Usually, no. But with Sister Miriam, it’s possible. I can’t guarantee how quickly we will get a response, but I’ll post a message.”

“Post a message?” I ask, my brain immediately jumping to the internet and message boards. “Indeed. He smiles. “How do you think we send messages without your,” and he waves vaguely toward my phone, “little devices? We have our own.”

We have cell phones—outrageously expensive, easy to break, and needing to be upgraded every few years for fear of becoming obsolete in the face of bigger and better software.

The Fac?

They have magic balls.

The kind you think of a quack fortune teller using.

Only, these are actually made of magic.

“How fascinating” Vanessa breathes, touching it with one finger. It looks like lightning dancing in its depths, and a ribbon of it reaches out to where her finger touches the glass.

“Does it hurt?” I ask curiously.

“No. Can’t even feel it.” She places her entire palm on it, and several arcs of lightning connect to where she has contact. “Feels like just a glass ball.

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disappears, replaced by swirling gray smoke. It’s mesmerizing, like watching storm clouds gather in fast motion.

He stares intently into the ball, his eyes narrowing in concentration. The smoke begins to swirl faster, condensing into a tiny orb before vanishing completely. My breath catches as a miniature version of Sister Miriam materializes within the glass sphere.

“Wow,” I murmur, unable to contain my awe.

Magister Orion’s deep voice resonates as he addresses the tiny figure. “Sister Miriam, the city is in unrest. Contact me once you receive this message. We need more information.”

The tiny Sister Miriam doesn’t respond, but I find myself leaning forward, half—expecting her to speak. Instead, her image fades away like mist in sunlight, and the familiar dance of lightning returns to fill the ball.

My mind reels with questions. How does it work? Can Sister Miriam respond the same way? Is it instantaneous or does it take time for the message to reach her? The practical applications of such a device are staggering.

"That's incredible," I breathe, my eyes still fixed on the ball. "Is it like a magical voicemail?"

"Voicemail? Ah, your telephonic messages." Magister Orion chuckles, the sound rumbling through the room. "In a way, yes. Though far more secure and almost impossible to intercept."

I tear my gaze away from the ball to look at him. "Can she respond the same way?"

"Indeed she can." He pats the ball. "It will let me know when her message arrives."

"Could we use it to contact Lucas?" The words tumble out before I can stop them, hope rising in my chest.

Magister Orion's expression softens slightly. "I'm afraid not, child. He would need one for the contact to take."

My heart sinks, but I nod in understanding. Of course it couldn't be that easy. Even magic has its rules.

"How long does it usually take for a response?" Vanessa asks, her practical nature shining through.

"It varies, Magister Orion replies. "Depending on where Sister Miriam is and what she's doing, it could be minutes or hours."

I sway slightly on my feet, the excitement of the moment giving way to exhaustion. Marcus steadies me with a hand on my elbow, concern etched on his face.

## **Unshift 253**

253 Ava: Enforcement Division.

A banging on the door interrupts the moment. Magister Orion glances toward it before his face suddenly shutters. "We need to go," he says, his voice lower than normal.

"What? Go where?\*

"Out of here," he says, his words still soft and terse. The banging comes again. "Go to the training

room. Now."

Vanessa and Marcus are already on guard, flanking me as they lead me in that direction, not quite running, but not far off.



It's hard to be quiet when running.

Thankfully, the windows are spelled to keep anyone from seeing inside.

"What's happening, Magister?" Marcus asks, his face grim.

Magister Orion shakes his head. "I had hoped... But hope is for the naive, I suppose. I should have prepared all of you for this possibility. They will prosecute me for Florice's murder. His eyes flicker in my direction. "That would leave her vulnerable in the Fae Ward."

My entire back goes cold. "Why would they go after you for her murder?" I hiss, trying to keep quiet through my outrage. "That makes no sense. You were with us the entire time."

"It doesn't matter. I can be found innocent later, and by then they've already gotten what they want. The only thing precious here is you." He rushes us with hand movements. Tinker and Layla can

contact me at any time, but for now, we must leave the city. My protection is no longer viable for you."

"How do you know this?" Vanessa cuts in. "There's no reason to believe

"Why else would the Enforcement Division be at my doorstep?" He shakes his head. "They only deal with the blackest of criminals. If they are here, it is for me!"

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"You didn't even look to see who was at the door. How do you know?" I protest. "It could be someone who works with Florice, or Layla, or-"

An explosion rocks the building, throwing us all forward.

Three bodies cover me from raining debris.

Feet pound in our direction. I squint past the cloud of smoke obscuring my view, trying to count

the shadows.

Four.

Five?

No, wait—more. How many people did they send?!

“Move, fools!” Magister Orion bellows, and Marcus heaves me over his shoulder in a swift movement as we bolt down the hall.

“Half Manieter We are the Enforcement Division here under Article Three–Thirty–Two–”

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Another explosion. This time it comes from the end of Magister Orion’s hand as balls of energy fly toward the intruders.

\*-aiding and abetting a traitor-” The man’s practically screaming above the noise.

-unauthorized use of witchcraft-” This is a woman, shouting more charges.

“The door’s open! Go!” Magister Orion shoves us through. “Ava, call your book to you. Don’t let it get into the wrong hands!”

“Magister-”

Two minutes. Maybe even less.

In just two minutes, we went from tense to terrified. From safe to running for our lives.

“Portal to the human realm!” Magister Orion shouts into the room as the doors close between us, leaving us alone in the familiar metal box that housed us all for a long week.

“What the fuck just happened? Vanessa breathes, holding the magic ball we used to call Sister

Miriam.

Marcus sets me onto the floor, and I wince, my stomach bruised where his shoulder slammed into it as he ran.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine.” My body’s shaking, belying my words. “He had time to come in. Why didn’t he come

in?!”

“Interference,” Marcus says grimly. “There were likely more than he expected. He’s making sure

we get away.”

"But why the hell would they want me? I shake my head, remembering how mortified I was just minutes ago when I realized I hadn't questioned someone wanting me to save an entire pack. "I have some magic power, but that's not enough to explain what's going on around me. It isn't enough to set an entire city to war."

It's like having three different books happening at once.

Whatever's happening with Lucas and Whispering Pines probably involves Blackwood; that, at least, makes sense in my head. Renard's quest for power, and even Whispering Pines turning on the Council, are things I can wrap my mind around.

The phone calls reference Westwood, yet seem to come from Dakota Sanctuary.

And now the Dakota Sanctuary is unsafe, with mysterious forces battling over an unknown motive. This should have nothing to do with me.

The only reason I'm even in the city is to receive magical training. Aside from Sister Miriam and Magister Orion, the only person connected with me in the entire city is the Mad Prince.

It can't be....

"The Mad Prince isn't the cause of all this, is he?" I murmur, rubbing my forehead as my brain aches with all the information I'm trying to process.

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253 Ava: Enforcement Division

"I don't know," Marcus says, his eyes trained on the doors that have disappeared. "But I have no idea how safe this room is. We should find a way out before those Fae get to us in here."

I nod. "Magister Orion gave the room an order. It should change based on that."

But it's still the training room.

Vanessa and Marcus flank me so closely that their breaths tickle my neck.

"Please change into a portal," I beg the room, not sure what else to do. "Like Magister Orion asked.

Nothing happens. The metallic walls remain stubbornly unchanged.

Vanessa's voice is tight with worry. "Are we stuck here?"

I swallow hard, trying to push down the rising panic. “This is our first time in here without Magister Orion,” I point out, grasping at any explanation that might offer hope. “Maybe... maybe the room doesn’t recognize our authority?”

Marcus’s brow furrows, his eyes darting around the space. “But why isn’t it following orders? Magister Orion told it to create a portal.”

I bite my lip. “What if it’s because he wasn’t in the room when he gave the order? Maybe it needs his physical presence to activate?”

The seconds stretch into agonizing minutes as we wait, the sound of our breathing the only thing breaking the stillness. I can feel the heat of Vanessa’s palm against my back, Marcus’s arm brushing mine.

Even here, with no one around, they won’t leave my side.

## **Unshift 254**

254 Ava: In the Attic

Just as I’m about to suggest we try something else—anything else, like banging until we find a hidden door—movement catches my eye. A shimmer ripples across the far wall, like heat waves rising from sun-baked asphalt. It swirls and coalesces, taking on the familiar appearance of the portals we used to travel to Dakota Sanctuary,

Relief floods through me, tempered by caution.

Magister Orion asked for a portal, but his directions were vague. There’s a hell of a lot of world out there.

Marcus steps forward, his jaw set with determination. “I’ll go first,” he says, his tone brooking no argument. Before I can protest, he’s through the portal, vanishing in a blink.

Vanessa and I exchange a quick glance, an entire conversation passing between us in that split second. Together, we step into the swirling vortex.

The world twists and blurs around us, and for a heart-stopping moment, I feel like I’m falling through an endless void. Then, abruptly, solid ground materializes beneath my feet. I stumble forward, colliding with warm bodies in the darkness.

“Oof!” Vanessa grunts as we all tangle together, a mess of limbs in a space that feels far too

small.

“Sorry,” I mutter, trying to extricate myself without elbowing anyone in the face. “Where are we?”

A rustling sound, then a click. Soft light floods the space.

Marcus stands a few feet away, his hand on a dangling pull cord attached to a bare bulb.

As my vision clears, I take in our surroundings with growing amazement. We’re in what appears to be an attic, but unlike any attic I’ve ever seen. The space is absolutely crammed with... stuff. Artifacts of every description crowd the room, lining shelves, stacked in corners, hanging from

the rafters.

There are ornate mirrors with tarnished frames, their surfaces cloudy with age. Delicate porcelain figurines pose next to weathered leather-bound books. Intricate clockwork devices tick softly, their gears exposed like mechanical organs. Crystals of various sizes and colors catch the light, throwing rainbow reflections across the walls.

Despite the sheer volume of objects, the attic is surprisingly clean. No cobwebs drape the corners, no dust coats the surfaces. It’s as if time has been suspended here, preserving everything in a perfect state of organized chaos.

“What is this place?” Vanessa breathes, her eyes wide as she takes in the spectacle.

I shake my head, at a loss for words. The air itself seems charged with potential, tingling against my skin. My newly awakened magical senses hum, picking up on some sort of energy present in the space.

Marcus moves cautiously, his trained eye scanning for potential threats. “It seems safe enough,”

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he says after a moment. “But I wouldn’t touch anything if I were you. No telling what some of these things might do.”

I nod in agreement, though my fingers itch to explore. We might not know where we are, but I can tell there’s magic somewhere.

Each object seems to whisper secrets, promising knowledge and power if only I’d reach out and grasp them. I clench my fists at my sides, resisting the temptation.

“We need to figure out where we are,” I say, forcing myself to focus on our immediate situation. “And more importantly, how to contact Lucas and the others. They need to know what’s happening. Sister Miriam and Selene will have no idea how to get back to us, either.”

I didn’t ask Magister Orion how to use that damn communication orb, but at least Vanessa brought it along.

Marcus nods. “First, stay with Vanessa. I’ll investigate the area. We need to make sure it’s safe.”

“Just because it looks peaceful doesn’t mean it is, the healer agrees.

As if in response to her words, a faint sound reaches their ears. I don’t hear anything, but Marcus holds a finger to his lips, tugging at the light again and letting the attic

I can hear it now.

go dark.

Footsteps, coming from somewhere below us. My breath catches in my throat as I exchange alarmed glances with Marcus and Vanessa.

We’re not alone.

My heart pounds against my ribs as Marcus and Vanessa move in tandem, shoving me behind them. Their bodies form a living shield, and I struggle to quell the surge of guilt that rises in my

throat. They shouldn’t have to risk themselves for me. I’m not worth their lives.

I press my lips together, fighting the urge to protest. Now isn’t the time for heroics or misplaced pride. I force myself to stay still, to become as small and quiet as possible in this cramped, magical attic.

The silence stretches, broken only by our shallow breathing. Sweat beads on my forehead, trickling down my temple. The air feels thick, oppressive. Every creak of the floorboards beneath us sends a jolt through my system.

I can feel the tension radiating from Marcus and Vanessa. Their muscles are coiled tight, ready to spring into action. My body thrums with nervous energy, my heart booming in my ears.

The soft tread of footsteps on stairs. They’re getting closer.

Marcus reaches for something. Once I hear the soft schnick, I understand. It’s his knife.

He's going to take them down if he has to.

We don't even know if they're friend or foe. He's prepared to make the hard decision just to keep

me safe.

It's a humbling experience.

254 Ava: In the Attic

My mouth goes dry, and I swallow hard, trying to wet my parched throat.

They pause, in a moment of agonizing silence.

Then, the unmistakable creak of a door opening.

I hold my breath, every nerve in my body screaming. This is it. We've been found. My mind races.

through possible scenarios, each more terrifying than the last.

But instead of shouts or the sound of weapons being drawn, a voice breaks the silence. A voice that sends a shock of recognition through me, though I can't quite place it.

"You can come down now," the voice calls up to us. "There's no need to hide in the attic,"

## **Unshift 255**

255 Ava: The Golden Stranger

Light illuminates the room, and Marcus steps back, hiding me more fully behind his bulk.

"Who are you?" he asks, and I glance at the knife he's holding behind his back.

When I try to step around him to see who's talking, Vanessa steps forward to block the gap.

I

can't see anything, and yet I know who's talking. I just can't remember who they are.

"Easy, wolves. I am no enemy of yours, and no danger to the witch you shield."

"Give us your name, Vanessa snaps, uncharacteristic hostility in her tone. "Who are you, and why do you know us?"

"Ah, yes. I suppose you wouldn't know. I am known as Acarus, of the Fourth Beginning. You know my mother"

"Mother?" Marcus asks, shifting his weight as he edges a little closer. "And who might that be?"

"And what the hell is the Fourth Beginning?" Vanessa's annoyance is clear. "You can't throw around words and expect them to mean a thing."

"Oh. Yes, I suppose you wouldn't know that, either." A long pause. "Don't look at me so, wolves. My mother is Miriam, of the Fourth Beginning. Or, as you know it, Dakota Sanctuary. There's a lilt in his voice that tells me he's probably smiling. "Does that help?"

"Miriam?"

The talk of a mother dislodged a long-forgotten memory, and I shove past Marcus.

The golden stranger stands before us, his palms raised in a gesture of peace. His ethereal beauty. is just as striking as I remember—inhuman in its perfection. Golden hair catches the light, and those piercing blue eyes seem to shift to a crimson hue as they move. A mild smile plays on his lips, but it does little to ease the tension in the room.

Marcus and Vanessa tug me back, their protective instincts kicking in, but I shake them off as I

exclaim, "It's you!"

I turn to my friends, eager to explain. "He was in the woods during the Blackwood riot. He didn't harm me then."

Acarus nods in my direction, his gaze appraising. "You've become stronger since we last met, Ava

Grey."

A question that's been nagging at me since our first encounter bubbles to the surface.

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"Are you the vampire Margot was talking about?" I blurt out.

Confusion flickers across his perfect features. "I'm afraid I don't understand."



I take a deep breath, trying to organize my thoughts. “There was a vampire on Blackwood lands. Margot came to warn me about it, right before I found you in the woods. It was so long ago, the details blur in my mind. “She was worried about something. Worried I’d tell Lucas about their connection with vampires, I think”

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His brows arch and he tilts his head in thought. “That seems unlikely. I have no contact with others. Especially wolves.”

His words don’t quite satisfy my curiosity, but before I can press further, he changes the subject.

“Why don’t you all come down for dinner? I’m sure you must be hungry after your ordeal.”

Marcus and Vanessa exchange wary glances. I can feel their hesitation, their distrust of this beautiful stranger who seems to know so much about us.

“I think we can trust him,” I say, surprising myself with the conviction in my voice. If Sister Miriam is his mother, then he’s probably on our side.

Vanessa’s eyes narrow. “He knows things he shouldn’t, Ava.”

“Because his mother is our ally,” I point out.

Marcus shakes his head,

his pot out.

tense. “He was near Blackwood before we began working

with Sister Miriam. That’s too convenient to be coincidence”

“You’re the ones who intruded on my privacy,” Acarus points out from the bottom of the stairs. “Come along. I made sure to have dinner waiting for you.”

Marcus moves first, his movements cautious as he descends the stairs. His hand never strays far from his weapon. Vanessa follows, positioning herself behind me.

Acarus leads us into a giant dining room. The entire house looks familiar, but it isn’t until I see the giant table that I realize why.

It’s eccentric and eclectic, just like the first place I met Sister Miriam. This one isn’t quite the same, but it definitely has the same feeling.

There are more windows here, for one. And outside the windows is nothing but trees. Wherever we are, it isn't in a city.

"I apologize for the modest accommodations," he says, as if a huge table that can easily fit sixteen is not good enough.

The table is set for four, a simple spread of bread, cheese, and what looks like a hearty stew steaming in earthenware bowls. It's far from the elaborate Fae meals we've grown accustomed to, but my stomach growls appreciatively at the sight.

Marcus and Vanessa remain tense.

Wait a second.

"How did you know we would be here?"

He chuckles, and even the sound is perfect. Melodious and deep, like a soothing balm to frayed

nerves.

"Please, sit, Acarus says, taking a seat at the head of the table. "I'll do my best to answer your questions."

I slide into a chair, ignoring the pointed looks from Marcus and Vanessa. They reluctantly joint

255 Ava: The Golden Stranger

us, positioning themselves on either side of me like sentinels.

"First, how did you know we would be here? Second, you said Sister Miriam is your mother, I begin, unable to contain my curiosity any longer. "How is that possible? She never mentioned having children, and vampires aren't usually..." Well, that's kind of silly. She's the product of a vampire and something else herself. "Well, do dhampirs have... babies?"

His lips quirk into a small smile. "Mother can be selective with the information she divulges. I'm sure you've noticed that by now"

With all the times she's danced around the subject or promised to answer things later, much like Selene does—yeah, I'd say I've noticed that.

"I am not her biological son," he says, motioning for us to partake as he sits back in his chair.

Marcus and Vanessa sit stoic, not tempted by the food. Though I'm pretty sure it's safe, I follow

their lead.

"She has raised me since I was young. In every way that matters, she is my mother. Do you not like stew?"

"We'd rather have answers right now," Vanessa says, still suspicious. "How did you know about our arrival? We didn't plan on coming here."

Lacing his fingers together, he sighs. "Truth be told, I didn't know exactly when you would arrive. I've been preparing a meal every day for weeks. He nods toward the food on the table. "At least this time I won't be throwing it out for the pigs."

Pigs? I want to ask about the pigs, but I keep my mouth shut. More important things to worry about than pigs.

"How did you know we were coming?" Marcus asks again, each word like a hammer.

I think I know the answer.

"My mother told me to expect you." He shrugs. "Not everything comes to pass, but I've learned. to listen when she speaks."

Bingo.

Feeling a little triumphant at finally understanding something, I grab a chunk of bread. It's soft and squishy, fluffing back to shape after being squeezed, with a hard crust.

Would probably go great with the stew.

Ignoring Marcus and Vanessa's double side-eye, I pull a bowl closer to me, dipping the bread in

1. it.

It's delicious. Amazing. A simple fare, elevated by whatever spices are in it.

I groan in appreciation, and Marcus grins. "I'm happy to see you enjoying the food, Ava."

"Why were you at Blackwood during the riot?" Marcus asks, still not warming to the newcomer.

\*Spying" he admits, with an unrepentant smile. "Mother likes to keep an eye on things."

“So you know a lot of

of what’s going on at any given time?” I ask around a mouthful of bread

255 Ava: The Golden Stranger

Vanessa elbows me. She might not trust Acarus, but she’s not okay with bad manners.

“Of course”

“Then, what’s going on with the packs? I can’t reach my mate.” Though, now that we aren’t in the city, I should try again. Digging into my pocket, I pull out my phone with eager fingers.

No signal.

Of course there’s no signal here.

Holding my phone up high, I move it from side to side, trying to see if I can even get a single bar.

No such luck.

Acarus watches me, waiting until I set my phone down with a long sigh to finally answer.

“The packs...” For the first time, Acarus’ golden light grows dim, his face taut and lips pressed together in a tight line. Sighing, he rubs one blond eyebrow with a perfectly manicured finger. “Much has happened. My mother is searching for information as we speak.”

My stomach drops to the floor. The food, the pigs, and any other questions we may have are shoved to the side as I jump out of my seat, slamming my hands against the table as I lean toward him. “What happened? Where’s Lucas?”

## **Unshift 256**

256 Ava: The World Burns

Acarus holds up his hands. “Calm down, little witch. Your alpha is alive.”

Alive.

What a weird way to put it.

Wouldn’t someone normally say, your alpha is fine?

“What happened?” I ask, sitting back in the chair as I focus my gaze on Acarus.

“Great change. Rebellion. The end of days.”

I frown. “What do you mean, a great change?”

The air is heavy, making it hard to breathe. Or maybe it’s just that my chest is tight.

Acarus leans forward, his eyes intense. “The supernatural communities have risen up against the limitations imposed by human laws. It’s not just the wolf packs. Registered communities, unregistered cities—they’re all involved. War is everywhere.”

Marcus’s brow furrows. “How widespread is this unrest?”

“It started here,” Acarus explains, “but once the media caught wind of it, riots spread to large communities across the country. This anger has been simmering for a long time. Many feel the humans have chained us with their biased laws.”

My heart races. “Just tell me what happened to Lucas, I demand, worry coloring my tone.

Acarus inclines his head, his expression softening slightly. “He’s recovering in a hospital.”

Relief and consternation flow.

Why? By who?

1. me. A hospital? Then that means he was injured. How?

“Westwood is now under the control of rogue supernaturals. And Blackwood... My apologies, Ava. Alpha Renard has retaken it.”

Lucas has been defeated.

And my father’s back in power.

The implications make my head spin.

Marcus speaks up, his voice tight with concern. “That doesn’t explain why we haven’t been able to contact anyone from the packs.”

Acarus sighs. “Most modern communication methods have been hijacked. It’s impossible to contact people via phone. I’m not familiar with the technical terms, but it’s some form of hacking. It’s beyond even what humans are capable of. Probably the work of gnomes or Fae.”

“Wait,” I interrupt, struggling to comprehend. “How is it even possible to take down an entire country’s infrastructure?”

“It is limited to most of this side of the country, Acarus clarifies. “That is as much as I understand. Beyond that, you would have to discuss with someone familiar with technology. I

am not that person.”

:~P

My mind races, trying to make sense of it all. Then, a thought strikes me. “What about Clayton? How’s the Aspen pack doing?”

Acarus raises an eyebrow, surprise evident in his features. “You still care about the Aspen alpha?”

“No!” I deny immediately, wondering if I’ll ever outlive that presumption. “It’s just... Clayton’s been in Westwood and Blackwood for so long. I hope he’s okay, and his pack too.”

Acarus nods slowly. “I believe Alpha Shadowpine has returned to his pack, but I’m not certain. He pauses, his gaze intense. “Ava, I don’t think you understand how much the world has changed. Perhaps it is better to show you.”

The moment Acarus suggests showing me what he means, Marcus and Vanessa tense up like coiled springs. I can feel the shift in the air.

“It’s not a good idea to bring Ava outside right now, Marcus says, his voice low and firm. “We need more information first. We still aren’t certain where we are.”

Acarus looks at them, his expression a mix of amusement and bewilderment. “There’s an easier way to show her what I mean,” he says, his golden eyes flickering between us. “Are you done eating?”

I glance at the untouched plates in front of Marcus and Vanessa, a pang of guilt hitting me as I realize they haven’t even had a chance to take a bite. Then again, they don’t trust Acarus not to poison them.

Before I can say anything, he’s already leading us into the living room.

The TV flickers to life under Acarus’s touch, and suddenly, the world I thought I knew shatters into a thousand pieces.

A news broadcast fills the screen, the reporter's voice tight with barely contained panic as she describes the scene unfolding behind her. New York City, a place I've only seen in movies and postcards, has become a war zone.

My breath catches in my throat as the camera pans across streets I don't recognize, littered with... bodies. So many bodies. The reporter's words wash over me, a torrent of horror I can barely process.

"...unprecedented riots across the city... hospitals overwhelmed... death toll rising by the hour.."

I want to look away, but I can't. My eyes are glued to the screen, taking in every horrific detail. Smoke rises from burning buildings, casting an apocalyptic haze over the cityscape. People run through the streets, their faces masks of terror and rage.

Occasionally, one of them stops for a quick interview. They all say the same thing:

Run.

Run for your lives.

The scrolling headlines at the bottom of the screen hammer home the reality of what I'm

256 Ava The World Burns

seeing:

ARMAGEDDON: SUPERNATURALS BETRAY HUMANITY

GLOBAL UPRISING: NO CITY SAFE

DEATH TOLL SURPASSES 100,000 IN NEW YORK ALONE

SUPERNATURAL DEMANDS SENT TO WHITE HOUSE

My legs give out, and I sink onto the couch, unable to tear my eyes away from the nightmare playing out before me. I feel Marcus's hand on my shoulder, steadying me, but it does little to ground me in this new, terrifying reality.

The peace between humans and supernaturals has broken.

What will life look like in the future? Humans will never trust us again. Will we have to hide?

Wrapping my arms around my stomach, I can feel myself dissociating from the moment, my feelings growing distant and dim as I watch the TV.

The reporter and the camera are running. From what?

I'm surprised they don't cut away to anchors safe in a building somewhere, citing technical difficulties. Instead, we follow along a nauseating run.

Then, no visibility at all, and a lot of coughing.

"Building went down, someone says.

"How did they take down an entire building?"

"Hold on, is the camera still working?"

"Yeah, I think so. Let me clean the lens.

We watch in silence as someone brushes dirt off the lens. We can see again, the reporter's face. illuminated against darkness.

"An apartment building just collapsed, sending dirt and debris everywhere. We're safe, but I think the death toll just jumped. Back to you, Adam."

"Thank you, Kyle—the horrors in New York City aren't isolated, as riots inundate every major city..." The camera returns to a horrified anchor who speaks with professional detachment, despite the pallor in his face.

"It came without warning" Acarus says quietly, his voice barely audible over the TV. "Yet it must have been in planning for decades.

Marcus's voice is tight with disbelief. "How? How could something this massive go undetected?"

Acarus turns to him, his expression grim. "That's the question everyone is asking. How is such a thing possible?"

I can't wrap my head around it.

People can't keep secrets this big. How did it go undetected?

256 Ava: The World Burns

attacks.

We weren't expecting... this.

+51



“Lucas,” I whisper, my voice trembling. “You said he was in the hospital. Was it because of this?”

Acarus nods slowly. “He was caught in the crossfire when the riots broke out. From what I understand, he tried to protect both his pack and the humans in the area. It didn’t go well. He saved many, but the cost was high.”

My heart constricts painfully in my chest. Of course Lucas would try to protect everyone. Of course he’d put himself in harm’s way. And now he’s lying in a hospital bed while the world burns around us.

“And my  
mean...?”

father?” I ask, dreading the answer. “You said Alpha Renard took Blackwood. Does that

“They are aligned himself with the rebellion, Acarus confirms, his golden eyes fixed on me. “As have many rogues. They see this as an opportunity to reclaim their power, to throw off the shackles of human law. Not all, of course. There are many who side with the humans. But they were not prepared for this. Coordinated attacks across the country.”

I feel sick, knowing my home pack is a part of this madness.

“Did everyone know? Or are they just following Alpha Renard blindly?”

“I do not know,” Acarus says with a sigh. “Mother did her best to infiltrate the Blackwood Pack and gain their confidence, suspecting several families of—Well.” He shakes his head. “Our ideas. were small. Nothing on this scale, even with Mother’s visions.”

Part of me wants to believe it’s all a mistake, a misunderstanding. But the evidence is right there. on the screen, impossible to deny.

“What about the Aspen Pack?” Vanessa asks, her voice trembling. “You said Alpha Shadowpine returned to them. Is it as bad there?”

Acarus shakes his head. “The Aspen Pack is fortuitously situated without any Supernatural Communities or any Unregistered Cities near them. While they have had fewer riots that have been

easily quelled by the human military and the Aspen Pack’s enforcers, they are already inundated with refugees from neighboring lands. It’s only a matter of time. Their communications are down, but they’re in better shape than much of the country.

The entire world has gone mad.

“Is it only here? Are other countries having the same problems?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t know

## **Unshift 257**

257 Ava: Everything’s Changed

Acarus holds up a hand when Marcus opens his mouth. “Before you ask—remember, communications have been disrupted. Even the video you just watched is a recording. I’m sure there are people who know more about what is happening across the oceans, but I do not have any access to that information.”

Unable to keep watching the TV, I head back to the relative peace of the dining room. All three of them follow behind.

my shoulder in

“Every time we turn around, there’s something new, Vanessa says, squeezing my comfort. “It’s okay to feel overwhelmed.

“I know. Taking a deep breath, I sink back into my chair and stab at the food in front of me. not hungry, but energy is crucial right now. “I feel like our tiny story has been swallowed by a freaking space whale.”

“Space whale?” Marcus and Vanessa sit on either side of me, and they both reach for the food they weren’t interested in before.

“Yeah. It’s from a show I watched with Lisa. They jump around in hyperspace and-”

Vanessa looks fascinated, but I can feel Marcus staring at the back of my head, probably wondering what crazy woman he’s accepted as Luna.

“Anyway. They were huge,” I mutter, dunking another piece of bread into my stew.

“I should really watch more TV, Vanessa says with a sigh. “The world out there is vast, and all I ever see of it is blood and guts.

The bread catches in my throat, and I cough violently. Marcus’s hand thumps against my back, helping me clear my airway. I wheeze out a thanks, my eyes watering.

“For most people,” I rasp at Vanessa, “your entire life would be a TV show. They’re not used to werewolf shenanigans.”

She sighs, her eyes distant. “It definitely feels like a movie now!”

I nod silently, agreeing with her sentiment. The events of the past few weeks feel surreal, like I'm living in some bizarre alternate reality. Werewolves, magic, rebellions—it's all too much.

Acarus clears his throat, breaking through my thoughts. He addresses Marcus, who's shoveling food into his mouth like it might disappear at any moment. "Do you want to know your current

location?"

Marcus nods, his cheeks bulging

He resembles a grouchy chipmunk more than an apex predator. Have I ever seen him eat before?

I don't think I have.

"You're on the far border of Westwood, Acarus says, his voice steady. Then his gaze shifts to me, and my heart rate picks up. "You're only a few hours away from your alpha, if you wish to see him."

257 Ava. Everything's Changed

My body goes rigid, every muscle tensing at once. Lucas. He's close. After everything that's happened, after all the worry and fear, he's within reach. "Yes," I blurt out, already half-rising from

my chair. "Let's go now."

\*Slow down," Marcus says, swallowing his mouthful of food. His hand on my arm is gentle but firm. "We need to be cautious."

Vanessa nods in agreement. "We can't just rush in blindly, Ava. We don't know what's waiting for us out there."

I force myself to take a deep breath. Running headlong into danger won't help anyone, least of all Lucas. "You're right, I concede, sinking back into my chair. "But I still think we should need to meet up with our allies. There's safety in numbers, especially now."

1. go.

We

"We will," Vanessa assures me. "It's a matter of planning timing and routes."

Marcus turns to Acarus, his expression serious. "What exactly happened in Westwood? We need details"

"Lucas..." I start, then falter. I'm not sure I want to know, but I have to ask. "How badly was he

hurt?"

Acarus's eyes soften as they meet mine. "He took a bad hit defending a group of human civilians caught in the crossfire. Multiple lacerations, some internal bleeding. But he's stable now, healing."

His face clouds over, troubled lines appearing around his eyes and mouth. The pit in my grows deeper. Whatever happened, it can't be good.

stomach

"It started with small skirmishes," Acarus begins, his voice low. "Rogues testing the borders, probing for weaknesses. Like your alpha, we assumed it was the Whispering Pines pack making their move. He's hungry for power, and the Blackwood territory is enticing fruit. But it escalated quickly."

I lean forward, hanging on his every word. My hands clench into fists under the table, nails digging into my palms.

"Overnight, everything changed. Too many wolves were sent to cover the skirmishes, leaving the central lands weak. Westwood, Blackwood, and Twilight Ridge were all attacked on the same day. It wasn't rogues anymore. Vampires and Fae were involved, in frightening numbers. They overwhelmed the defenses. It was a massacre.

His eyes flicker toward me. "What happened before was nothing more than a warning"

Marcus curses under his breath. I can practically see the tactical wheels turning in his head, assessing the situation.

"But that isn't the worst of it!

His grim words turn my veins to ice.

They wer

"There were shifters among them. Not rogue. Not pack. mindless warriors. They were the most frightening of all. Like a curse ravaging the pack."

257 Ava: Everything's Changed

My stomach flips.

“Are you saying...”

“Zombies?” Marcus cuts me off, his voice tight. “Are you saying the bodies they stole became

zombies?”

“Yes, I suppose that would be the best word for them.” Acarus grimaces. “They are inexorable. Already dead and unable to die again.”

Yet another blow to my already shaky worldview.

Zombies.

Real ones.

Not the

Not the kinds in movies.

My arms wrap around my waist instinctively, as if I could somehow shield myself from this nightmare. A violent shudder runs through my body, and I can’t stop the trembling that follows.

Beside me, Vanessa lets out a soft cry. The sound is filled with disbelief and fear, mirroring the emotions churning inside me.

That’s right; she knows these people. Not only that, I’m sure she was part of the care team for the ones who passed in the hospital.

This must be even harder for her.

My thoughts race. All this time, I’d believed the attacks were centered around me, driven by the Mad Prince’s desire for my power. It had been a heavy burden, but at least it had made a twisted kind of sense. Now, that fragile understanding crumbles away

“I thought...” My voice comes out as a whisper, barely audible even to my own ears. I clear my throat and try again. “I thought all of this was because of me. Because the Mad Prince wanted my

power.”

Acarus's golden eyes meet mine, a flicker of sympathy passing through them. "While your situation did play a part, I'm afraid the Mad Prince's desires are likely to have been a happy coincidence in the grand scheme of things."

Another shudder wracks my body, more violent than before. "Happy?" The word tastes bitter on my tongue. "There's nothing happy about this."

Acarus's expression shifts, a look of genuine remorse crossing his face. "I apologize sincerely for my poor choice of words," he says, his brow furrowing slightly. "I don't spend much time around mortals. Sometimes my phrasing can be... insensitive."

The idea that my involvement is just a tiny part of some larger, more terrifying picture...

If I'm not the main target, then what exactly are we dealing with?

"These... zombies, I force myself to say the word, hating how it makes my skin crawl. "How widespread are they? And how... how do they work?"

Acarus looks thoughtful. "We haven't heard of any other werewolf corpses stolen before burial,

257 Ava: Everything's Changed

so it seems they are centered here. We saw most of them at Westwood, and a few during the Blackwood attacks, before Renard regained his power.

He sighs, his shoulders sagging slightly. "As for how they work, we're still trying to understand that ourselves. They seem to retain some of their shifter abilities, but they lack any semblance of consciousness or self-control. They attack indiscriminately, and they're incredibly difficult to put down for long"

My stomach churns at the thought. I've seen enough horror movies to have a vivid imagination of what these creatures might look like, but the reality is probably far worse than anything Hollywood could dream up.

"Is there any way to... cure them?" Vanessa asks, her voice trembling slightly. I can see the healer in her desperately searching for a solution, even in the face of this unnatural affliction.

Acarus shakes his head slowly. "Not that we've discovered so far. The best we can do is contain them and prevent more from being created."

Rubbing my arms as briskly as I can manage, I ask the question we're all thinking. Or at least, I assume they're thinking what I am.

"What about all the dead during the attack? Where are their bodies?"

Marcus and Vanessa stiffen beside me, so fast that I'm honestly surprised I don't hear their spines crack.

Acarus glances away. "It was all the survivors could do to bring along the injured."

Shit.

## **Unshift 258**

258 Ava: The Distance Between Us

By the looks on everyone's faces, they're thinking the exact thing I am.

"So, we won't only be fighting the enemy. We'll be fighting our friends. Family. Lovers."

My voice is flat and distant, the words feeling like they're coming from thousands of miles away.

"It is possible," Acarus murmurs, rubbing his eyebrow as he sighs. "Without knowing how they do it, how long it takes, what it involves..."

But my ears aren't listening. I'm thinking back to Sister Miriam and how she popped into my room out of nowhere to give me cryptic warnings.

"Sister Miriam knew what they were doing.

Acarus hesitates. "In a sense, yes."

I pin him with a hard stare. "She knew what they were doing and never told us."

Marcus and Vanessa's gazes go dark; Sister Miriam has been a solid ally of recent times, but her nonanswers have not endeared her to the wolves.

The man claiming to be Sister Miriam's son holds up his hands. "Don't look at me like that. I do not have power over the knowledge my mother divulges, or doesn't."

Marcus scowls, and Acarus sighs. "Understand, my mother is full of knowledge. Some relevant. Some not. Things that never came to pass. Things that did. Most with clairvoyance go mad, living half in this world and half in another. Whatever information my mother deigns to share is a gift. It is not fair to put the weight of your world on her shoulders, don't you think? If she does it for you—then

who next? How many more times must she go through several possibilities, never knowing which will come to pass?

When he puts it like that...

I shift uncomfortably, realizing that I've shredded my last piece of bread into little more than crumbs. "Where is she now?"

"She and your dog-wolf are with your alpha. From what I understand, the wolf won't leave his side."

Selene? Not leave Lucas' side?

That's beyond unexpected, going straight up the ladder to bizarre and out of character.

"Do you know how close I need to be to gain contact with Selene again?" I ask, throwing the question to any of them to answer.

Acarus shakes his head. "I am no expert on Lycan bonds."

Marcus looks thoughtful. "A bond between low-ranking members of the pack to their alpha is about fifteen miles. A delta can reach Lucas over thirty miles away. Kellan and Lucas have been known to communicate at fifty miles, though it requires a great deal of concentration. Most missions are created with these general guidelines of distance in mind. Of course, these are

C

250 Ava: The Distance Between Us

This is the first time I've heard it broken down in such a way. "What about mated pairs?"

Vanessa clears her throat. "It depends on the bond between them and their individual strength. Vester can only reach me about forty miles apart, but I can reach him from as far as one hundred. He can't respond, but he can receive."

"Can you reach-"

"No." She cuts me off gently, sadness in her eyes.

Of course. She needs to see her mate, too.

So, farther than a hundred miles away. I think back to the times Selene and I have been apart. "I feel like my range with Selene is much shorter."

"It's a new bond. No matter how close you are with your wolf, it takes time until you can think as one. You and Selene have been at odds, haven't you?"

"No." I frown. "Not at odds, but she's been quieter lately, and I question her more than I used to."



“Growing pains,” Marcus says out of nowhere. “Happens to all of us.”

As we fall silent, Acarus clears his throat. “Now, as far as traveling to meet your allies—the journey to your pack is safer in these rural areas, Acarus says, his voice calm and reassuring. “There’s little established wolf presence here, so there has been no war.”

My heart leaps in joy, but Vanessa’s brow furrows in confusion.

“Wait,” she interjects. “If there’s no wolf presence, how is Lucas being treated in a hospital?”

It’s a valid question, one I hadn’t even thought to ask. My mind had been so focused on the possibility of seeing Lucas that I’d overlooked the logistics.

Acarus nods, acknowledging Vanessa’s point. “He’s in a small hospital run by supernaturals with no affiliations. They’re registered supernaturals, to be clear

Marcus frowns, his eyes narrowing with suspicion. “There are no supernatural communities on

the far border.”

But Acarus doesn’t seem fazed by Marcus’s doubt. “These are registered supernaturals who have chosen to integrate with human society. They’re not part of established communities in the traditional sense, though they abide by the laws of the land.”

But if there are supernaturals in this place, how can it be safe?

Acarus glances at me, seeming to understand my unspoken question. “While human cities

those with established pack presences. The

have been attacked, they are all major cities o

country is still safe, for now”

For now. For how long, though?

Marcus grunts. “Do you have a map?”

“I do.” Acarus gets up immediately, heading to a large cabinet. “There’s more news that should make you happy, Ava,” he adds over his shoulder.

258 Ava: The Distance Between Us

“Your friend—the one liberated from the Mad Prince’s dungeon—should be there soon. These

are refugees from the supernatural communities to the north.”

My heart beats furiously. “Lisa’s coming?”

Knowing she’s safe and being able to see her with my own eyes are two very different things. Knowing I’ll be reunited with the people I care about most has my limbs limp with relief, despite the horrors and atrocity outside of this house. “That’s wonderful. Do you know how she’s doing? Who she’s with? Is she okay? Healing fine?”

“She’s doing well, from what I hear. Aside from malnutrition, she’s been fine. I assume trauma as

well, but they aren’t great with therapy in that community. Not very modern. Supernatural

mental health falls behind advances in modern medicine.”

## **Unshift 259**

259 Ava: Going to Lucas

No shit.

I could have told him that; in so many ways, wolf packs are far behind their human counterparts. Even the humans have run little news clips on these things. Especially the rates of sexual assault. on women, or wolf—on—wolf violence.

“How do you know this?” Vanessa asks suspiciously. “You said communication has been disrupted.”

“Not all communication. Only those relying on human technology.

“Then shouldn’t you know more about what’s happening in the world?” I frown at the Inconsistency.

“If I had people to communicate with, I would know. I don’t, so I am as lost as you are, Here. A map.” Acarus tosses a rolled up paper to Marcus.

witchling.

For some reason, I expected something old and antique, with yellowed paper and jagged edges.

This is more like a smooth poster banner, neatly rolled up. A modern map.

Of course it is. Why would I think otherwise?

Distracted by thoughts of Lisa, I tune them out as they discuss routes and nearby cities. Ever since I decided to become a proper Luna, I've avoided thinking about her, leaving me with an icky feeling that I'm a terrible friend.

It's like no matter what, every decision feels wrong.

But every time I go down that road, I'm told I'm wallowing.

There's a huge part of me that still thinks I should have gone my own way and saved Lisa. Of course there is. Who wouldn't want to tell the world to fuck off and save their best friend?

But her safety came out of luck, not from the effort I put into it. Not even from the efforts of Lucas' pack.

It adds to that guilt rolling around in my soul.

Thinking about Lisa and the time after her kidnapping has my mind wandering down the dark days of not knowing anything, until Sister Miriam-

"Wait a second. Acarus, maybe you can answer this question"

"Yes?" He pauses mid-sentence to look toward me. "What is it?"

"Is your mother able to stop time?\*

He stares.

One second..

Two.

Marcus and Vanessa look confused.

250 Ava: Going to Lucas

"You know?" he asks, the words even and calm.

I nod. "Figured it out when she visited me after the rites."

Shaking his head, he turns his attention back to the map. "Keep such thoughts to yourself, Aval Grey. There are certain talents people would kill to get their hands on"

The truth of his words has me shuddering. I know the feeling of being targeted too well.

Vanessa mouths, 'stop time?' at me, but I just shake my head.

That's a conversation for another day. If it's a secret Sister Miriam keeps in order to stay alive, I'll keep it quiet.

Acarus lends us a truck.

It's old and rusted. The engine sputters in a way that has Marcus doubtful it can even get us to the place marked on the map, and Vanessa holds onto the door for dear life as we bounce our way down the gravel road out of Acarus' driveway.

He doesn't follow, saying he only goes where his mother tells him to.

He's a strange person.

The first hour is nothing but Marcus muttering directions to himself as he makes his way through the back roads, avoiding major highways. If we took one, the drive would only take three hours, apparently.

But with how the world is burning, we decide on an alternate route.

I must have fallen asleep after a while, because Vanessa shakes me awake by the shoulder. I'm in the backseat, which is basically a tiny bench that pretends it's big enough for someone to sit on.

"What is it?" Groggy, I glance out the window. It's dark. Lots of stars in the sky, telling us we're far from any large human city. No light pollution here.

Beautiful. The moon is bright too, and about three-quarters full. A piece of my soul yearns.

toward it.

"I can sense Vester. Her lips curve, her eyes dancing. "He can't respond, but I told him we are on

the way."

Vanessa's words stir something within me, and I close my eyes, reaching out with my mind.

I still can't feel Selene; there's only vast emptiness where her consciousness should be.

But there's a faint tugging in my chest, not quite painful, but a definite pressure. It's different from my connection with Selene, yet somehow familiar.

"I'm pretty sure I can feel Lucas. Well, not him, but my bond knows we're close."

Vanessa turns in her seat, with a warm smile. "That's wonderful, Ava. It means he's okay. It would probably hurt if he wasn't. Though..." Her brows draw together. "That's usually with the mating

mark."

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that separate us, and buoys my wearied spirit.

"You know," Vanessa says, her voice taking on a thoughtful tone, "considering everything that's happened, maybe it's time you and Lucas finalized your mating bond."

Her words catch me off guard, and I feel a blush creeping up my cheeks. "What do you mean?"

She gives me a knowing look. "The partial bond you have now is a handicap, Ava. If you were fully mated, your connection would be stronger. You'd be able to sense each other more clearly, communicate better. In times like these, that could make all the difference. And with how strong you both are? Who knows. That level of communication might be the edge we need in battle."

We've been taking it slow—mostly because of me. I wanted to be accepted by his pack, to prove myself as Luna.

But with everything that's happened, Vanessa has a point.

"You really think we should? Even in this situation?"

Vanessa nods. "I do. It's not just about the physical aspect, Ava. A completed mate bond strengthens both partners. You'd be able to draw on each other's strength, share energy. And in a crisis like this, that could be crucial.

A little shiver of excitement runs through me at her words.

Maybe it's a silly thing to be thinking about when the freaking apocalypse has descended on the world, but being truly, completely mated to Lucas?

—

My heart sings. My bond sings.

I can feel it thumping away in my chest, excited at the possibility.

"You're right," I say, surprised by the certainty in my voice. "We should."

Vanessa smiles, reaching back to squeeze my hand. "I'm happy for you, Ava. You and Lucas deserve that happiness, especially now. Even in war, you have to look for the things that bring

you joy!"

I turn my gaze to the window, taking in the vast expanse of stars scattered across the night sky, to the nearly-full moon.

Closing

my eyes, I offer up a silent prayer to the Moon Goddess. I've never been particularly religious, but right now, I'll take any help I can get.

Please, I think, let everything be okay. At least for a little while. Lucas and Lisa need to be healthy and safe. And everyone else, too.

The tug in my chest seems to pulse in response to my prayer. I focus on that feeling, imagining it as a glowing thread connecting Lucas to me across the miles.

We've been apart for too long.

So much has happened, so much has changed. The world seems to be falling apart around us, with supernatural creatures rebelling. And zombies. How the fuck do we add zombies into this mix? It's insanity.

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And magic, of course. There's always the-

"Magic," I blurt out, slapping my cheeks as my brain finally remembers an important piece of information. "The book Mrs. Elkins gave me. Shit. Magister Orion told me to get it, to keep it

safe." 1

"Isn't that at Blackwood? We can't go there, Ava. It's under Renard's control."

Vanessa turns in her seat as she talks, her tone urgent and pressured, as though worrying that's exactly what I'm going to do.

FINALLY!

## **Unshift 260**

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"I know" Nibbling the side of my finger, my brows pull together. Why would he tell me to keep it safe, knowing it might be too dangerous?

What were the words he used again? They seemed significant.

"Ava, I need you to tell me you're not going to the Blackwood territory."

Jerking my head up, I blink at Vanessa's worried stare. "I'm not going. I'm just trying to think."

My brain's dead set on remembering what Magister Orion said.

What was it?

Call my book?

Yeah, that's it.

"The book is useless to anyone even if they find it," Marcus says, his words soft. Is he trying to comfort me? "Don't worry, Ava. It'll be a paperweight. Or, if we're lucky, they'll be allergic. Like Selene."

He is trying to comfort me.

How sweet.

"That's if we assume they don't know how to open it. The knowledge has been lost to us, but there are Fae involved now, remember?"

Marcus sighs. "Life was casier without this magic shit," he mutters, almost too soft for me to

hear.

But I do.

My lips quirk. I agree with him wholeheartedly.

"Magister Orion said to call the book to me," I say, looking to Vanessa instead. Sometimes it helps to talk out my thought process. "He wouldn't have said it like that if I were to go pick it up, right?"

Her eyes squint as she thinks it through. "That sounds right. But what does it mean? Can you move it from place to place with your magic?"

My nose itches, and I rub at it in frustration. "I think that's exactly what he means, but I have no idea how to implement it." A long sigh, filled with regrets and lack of time. Time is always in short supply. "I wish Magister Orion had taught me something like that before everything happened."

Vanessa's lips quirk into a small smile. "If wishes were fishes, we'd all cast nets."

I stare at her for a moment, the unexpected phrase catching me off guard. Then, despite the

gravity of our on a laugh bubbles up from my chest. "I haven't heard that phrase since I was in human school."

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inside me. It's strange how such a small thing can bring back memories of a simpler time, before I knew about the complexities of pack politics, before I discovered my own magical abilities, before the world seemed to be falling apart around us. Not a happy time. But simpler.

"My grandmother used to say that all the time," Vanessa says, her eyes softening with the memory. "She had a saying for everything."

Marcus clears his throat, bringing us back to the present as his eyes remain glued to the road ahead. "As much as I appreciate the trip down memory lane, we should focus. It must be important, for him to warn her in that situation."

The car hums, jostling its way over the road as if it's full of potholes, making it even harder to concentrate. "We spent most of our time on basic control exercises. Also known as the thing that would keep me from kabooming everyone within radius if I didn't get training. "I can light a candlestick if you need me too. Blackouts? I'm your girl. Summoning a magical book across hundreds of miles?"

"Not so much," Vanessa chimes in with a chuckle.



I close my eyes, trying to recall anything that might be useful. “He did mention something about intent being crucial in magic. He must think I’m capable of doing this, so I just need to figure out how. Right?”

Vanessa turns almost completely around on the passenger side of the bench to face me. There are no seatbelts. Well, there were once upon a time—they were all cut out at some point in this truck’s long and busy life.

“Intent, huh? That makes sense. Magic seems to be all about willpower.”

I nod, latching onto the idea. “If I lose concentration, I lose control. So it’s the bedrock of my magic.”

Even the back of Marcus’ head can’t hide his skepticism. Probably because it leaks out in his voice. “So what, you just think really hard about the book and it appears?”

I shrug, feeling a bit foolish. “Maybe? It’s worth a try, right?”

Vanessa leans over the seat to whisper, “He just doesn’t have the imagination to comprehend

what you can do.”

“I can hear you, Healer Thorn.”

“You were meant to,” she chides. “Don’t make her feel bad when she’s trying to figure things out.”

“I wasn’t trying to-” he bites back the rest of his words. “Never mind. I’ll just drive.”

Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes and try to empty my mind.

The old truck rattles and shakes, every bump in the road threatening to jostle me out of my concentration. A stale, acrid smell of cigarette smoke lingers in the air, tickling my nose and tempting me to sneeze. I push it all away, focusing on the task at hand.

Mrs. Elkins’ book. I picture it in my mind, with the silky feel its leather cover and the ornate silver clasps, tarnished by age. The way the pages felt beneath my fingertips. The symbols that

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appeared and disappeared like magic.

Magic. That’s what I need now.

I take a deep breath, trying to center myself. The truck hits another pothole, and I grit my teeth.

Focus, Ava. Focus.

The symbols dance in my memory, swirling and shifting. I try to grasp them, to hold onto their meaning, but they slip away like smoke. Frustration bubbles up inside me, and I push it down.

Calm. I need to be calm.

“Ava?” Vanessa’s voice breaks through my concentration. “Are you okay? You look pale.”

I nod, not opening my eyes. “I’m trying to focus.”

“Okay,” she says softly. “We’ll be quiet.”

The truck rumbles on, and I sink deeper into my thoughts. I picture the book again, trying to will it into existence. Come on, I think. Come to me.

But whenever I open my eyes—nothing happens.

No book in my hands..

Just the three of us, this ancient rust bucket on wheels, and the deserted rural road we’re

traveling.

I frown, concentrating harder. Magister Orion said to call it to me, so it must be possible; I just have to figure out how.

A massive undertaking for a new magic user.

The smell of smoke grows stronger, and I wrinkle my nose. It’s distracting, pulling me out of my focus. I try to push it away, but it lingers, stubborn and persistent.

I’m not giving up. Besides, we have a long way still before we make it to wherever Lucas is at.

I picture the book again, this time focusing on the feeling it gave me when I held it. The sense of power, of potential. The way it seemed to hum with energy, as if it was alive somehow. I reach out with my mind, trying to connect with that energy.

For a moment, I think I feel something. A spark, a flicker of... something. But then it's gone, lost in the rumble of the truck's engine and the jostling of the road.

The snarl that rips out of me is a sound I've never made in my life, sounding human.

Vanessa's brows are high on her forehead as she stares at me.

more wolfish than

I shrug. "It's not working. I thought I had it for a second, but..." My mouth twists. "It's gone."

Marcus glances at me in the rearview mirror. "If you felt something, that must mean you've made progress," he says, his tone softer than before. "Don't discount that. Even if you haven't done it

yet."

I nod, grateful for his attempt at encouragement. "You're right, I just wish I had more time to

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figure it out."

Vanessa turns in her seat to face me. "Why don't you tell us more about the book? Maybe talking it through will help center your..." She wiggles her fingers at me in a strange gesture. "You know. Magic visions."

I can't help but laugh. "You guys have seen it already."

"But tell us how you see it. How you remember it"

I consider this for a moment. "Well, it's old. Really old. The cover is leather, and so worn that it's

as soft as butter. The silver is intricate, but in the little nooks and crannies it's all black and

tarnished. There's an energy to it. It tingles on my fingers and goes up my arms sometimes."

As I speak, I can almost feel the book in my hands again. The weight of it, the texture of the cover. “The symbols inside aren’t like anything I’ve ever seen before. They appear and disappear, like they have a mind of their own.”

“That was unsettling.” Marcus agrees.

I nod. “Yeah. And amazing, too.” I pause, remembering the awe I felt when I first realized what I was seeing. “It’s like the book is alive somehow. Like it knows things.”

The truck hits another bump, and I grab onto the seat to steady myself.

I close my eyes again, trying to recapture that sense of connection I felt earlier. The book is out there somewhere, waiting for me. I just need to reach it.

I think about the magic I’ve learned so far. The way it flows through me, an extension of my will. I picture that energy extending outward, searching for the book, trying to connect with that thrumming magic within.

For a moment, nothing happens. Then, suddenly, I feel... something. A tug, like a string attached to my magic. It’s faint, barely there, but it’s real.

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