

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted #Unshift 271 - Read Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted Unshift 271

Unshift 271

271 Lisa: To Safety

LISA

Eventually, there's nothing else I can help the nurses with, and I wander back to the table. It's been hours. We came to the farmhouse in the early morning, and now it's well past noon. Aside from a few packages of crackers and some water from the sink, my belly's empty.

My stomach growls. The crackers and water did little to satisfy my hunger.

The Grand Sage speaks to Ryder, his voice low but clear. "The problem isn't with the individual phones. They're fine, but the networks are all corrupted. They aren't communicating properly. From what I can tell, it's all hacked. Someone's taken control.

"So..." Ryder takes his phone with a sigh. "It won't be fixed anytime soon.

"Correct.

The Grand Sage hands Chloe and Mia back their phones. The two women exchange a glance before leaving after a brief word from Ryder. Something about their interaction feels off, but I can't quite put my finger on it.

While the Grand Sage and Ryder continue discussing, curiosity gets the better of me. I slip outside, thankful that I'm not particularly noticeable.

A cool breeze brushes against my cheeks as I watch Chloe part ways with Mia. To my surprise, Chloe doesn't head back to wherever she came from. Instead, she steps behind a nearby building.

I frown, inching closer. What is she doing?

From my vantage point, I can see Chloe tapping away at her phone. It's strange—didn't the Grand Sage just explain that no cell phones are getting a signal? Yet here she is, acting like everything's normal.

My heart races as I watch her bring the phone to her ear. I strain to hear what she's saying, but she's too far away. I take a step closer, leaves crunching under my feet.

Chloe's head snaps up, and I duck behind a bush. When I peek out again, she's ending the call, her movements quick and furtive.

Something's not right here.

I make my way back to the farmhouse, my mind whirling. As soon as I spot the Grand Sage, I sidle up to him, keeping my voice low. "I just saw something strange, I murmur, relaying what I witnessed outside.

The Grand Sage nods, his expression tense. "I've already reported the matter to the delta," he says, his eyes darting around the room.

I follow his gaze, noticing for the first time that Ryder's no longer here. The room feels emptier now, with only the injured and the nurses remaining-

The Grand Sage catches my eye again, tapping on his wrist. I glance down at the bracelet he

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gave me earlier, confusion clouding my thoughts. What is he trying to tell me?

Before I can ask, the air is rent with shouts. My blood runs cold as I recognize the sound—a sound that's now devastatingly familiar to me.

Battle cries.

y veins.

My stomach twists, fear and adrenaline coursing through my

In an instant, the Grand Sage and Elverly are at my side. Their hands close around my arms, and I'm being hustled out the back door of the farmhouse. "That was faster than I expected," he mutters. "I thought we had a few more hours."

"You expected this?"

"Once I saw her phone—yes.

We rush towards the barn, our feet pounding against the earth.

As we clear the building, I can't help but look back. The sight that greets me is like something out of a nightmare. All around, able-bodied shifters are locked in combat

with a seemingly endless stream of attackers. But it's not their opponents that make my breath catch in my throat -it's where they're coming from.

A shimmering portal hangs in the air, defying all logic and reason. People pour out of it, weapons raised and faces contorted with rage. It's like watching the world tear at the seams, reality giving way to something I can't even begin to comprehend.

"Keep moving!" Elverly's voice snaps me back to the present.

I tear my eyes away from the battle and focus on putting one foot in front of the other.

My heart pounds in my ears as I push my legs to their limit, sprinting towards the barn. The Grand Sage and Elverly flank me, their urgency palpable in the air. We burst through the barn doors, and for a split second, I think we're safe.

But then I hear it. The Grand Sage's sharp intake of breath, followed by a string of muttered curses. I whirl around, my eyes widening in horror as I see what's caused his distress.

Vampires. At least half a dozen of them, racing towards us with inhuman speed. Their faces are twisted into snarls, fangs glinting in the dim light.

"Hurry!" The Grand Sage's voice cracks like a whip, snapping me out of my terrified trance. "Into the safe room, now!"

I don't need to be told twice. I scramble towards the familiar contraption, my hands shaking as I reach for the top hatch. It feels like an eternity before my fingers find purchase, and I haul myself up and in.

The inside of the safe room is just as cramped and uncomfortable as I remember, but right now, it feels like the most welcoming place in the world. I press myself against the far wall, making room for Elverly as she practically dives in after me.

"Come on, come on, I mutter, my eyes fixed on the opening. Where's the Grand Sage? He was right behind us, wasn't he?"

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Just as panic starts to claw my throat, I see his face appear. He's panting heavily, his eyes wild with fear and determination. With a grunt, he squeezes his tiny frame through the hatch.

The vampires are so close now, I can hear their snarls. They're completely feral. My whole body trembles, and I have to bite my lip to keep from screaming. This is it.

I'm going back to captivity.

But the Grand Sage moves with surprising agility for his size. His hands fly over the control panel, fingers dancing across buttons and levers. I don't understand what he's doing, but I pray to whatever higher power might be listening that it works.

The hatch begins to close, agonizingly slow.

A pale face pops over, red eyes staring into the room.

My breath catches in my throat, and I squeeze my eyes shut, unable to watch..

Then there's a resounding clang as the hatch seals.

They're probably scratching the hell out of the room, but it's completely silent in this tiny, cramped space. All I can hear is our ragged breathing and the frantic beating of my own heart. "We made it," Elverly whispers, her voice trembling. "We actually made it

I open my eyes, hardly daring to believe it. But it's true. We're sealed inside the safe room, the vampires locked out.

The Grand Sage slumps against the wall, his chest heaving. "That was... too close," he manages between breaths.

Adrenaline is still coursing through my system, making my hands shake and my thoughts race. Vampires.

Just like at Westwood before.

But this time, I escaped.

As the initial shock begins to wear off, questions start flooding my mind. How did they find us? What happened to the shifters we left behind? And most importantly, what do we do now?

I open my mouth to voice these concerns, but the Grand Sage holds up a hand, silencing me as he presses more buttons again.

That gravity-defying flip of my stomach starts up.

"I have the coordinates of another safe haven, a place they intend to reunite. The Westwood wolves are good folk, but silly to hand their phones to a gnome. They will lose many today."

"What happened? Why were they attacked?"

“Betrayal,” he says simply. “The girl you spoke of—her phone was filled with secrets. But she’s not the only one. He clicks his tongue in dismay. “At least we know who the traitors in this camp were. But the others won’t be so lucky.”

“Why are you following the Westwood pack?” I ask curiously. “They didn’t know your true

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He shakes his head. “I have no particular fondness toward wolf packs, but Sister Miriam places great faith in the leader of the Westwood Pack. It is war, Lisa. In war, it is imperative to gather your allies. We cannot fight back if we are all isolated. Do you think the three of us can stand against the army you saw?”

I shake my head. There’s no way. None of us are warriors.

We have a housekeeper, a magical engineer, and me.

We’d die in seconds.

Unshift 272

272 Ava: Self-Care

“Ava?”

My eyes snap open, heart racing as I jolt upright in the armchair. Kellan’s face swims into focus, his brows pulled together with concern. For a moment, I’m disoriented, the remnants of a dream clinging to the edges of my consciousness.

*I... what happened?” I mumble, rubbing my eyes. The cottage comes into focus around me, and I remember where I am.

Fell asleep on the armchair while meditating. Oops.

Kellan crouches beside me, his voice low. “You fell asleep here. Are you okay?”

My neck is stiff from the awkward position. Rolling my shoulders, I try to work out the kink. “How long was I out?”

“If you went to bed as soon as I left, it’s been about four hours.”

I guess that’s fine. Daylight is streaming through the windows, so I hop out of the chair with

excitement. “Can we see Lucas?”

Kellan holds up a hand. "Whoa, slow down. Visiting hours don't start for a couple more hours. I brought you some clothes and breakfast." He jerks a finger behind him at the table. "Figured you'd want a shower and to get..." He waves his hands vaguely over his body. "Presentable."

Oh.

That's a good idea, too.

"Thanks."

"I'll get you when it's time." Giving my shoulder an awkward pat, he adds, "Don't forget to eat. I have a few things to do, but I'll be here on time, okay?"

"Got it."

The shower is amazing.

Hot water. Soap. Shampoo and conditioner that smell like peaches.

Clean clothes. They're kind of large and hang off my frame like I'm a hobo, but hey. I'm a dirt-free hobo.

The tangles in my hair were horrific, but a lot of yanking and a sore scalp later, my blonde tresses hang free and wild with a bit of natural curl and a lot of frizz. Unfortunately, my hair products are in the Fae Ward with my suitcase.

Oh, well.

The aroma of coffee and bacon fills my nostrils, but my appetite is nowhere to be found. Sitting at the small table by the window, I wrap my hands around the warm mug, accepting its heat in lieu of its caffeine & haron-and-por candurich cite untouched

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(272 Ava: Self-Care

My stomach is fluttering, making it hard to even think about eating,

Beyond the cabins of the compound, rolling hills stretch as far as the eye can see. In the light of dawn, it's beautiful and golden.

Peaceful.

Serene.

Nothing like the chaos inside me.

Lucas.

The thought of him lying in a hospital bed, injured and without his memories, sends a sharp pain through my chest. I take a sip of coffee, hoping the bitter liquid will ground me, but it does little to ease the worry gnawing at my insides.

What if he doesn't remember me at all? What if the bond we share means nothing to him now? If the wolves can't seem to connect with him as alpha, does that mean our bond as mates is also null to him right now?

The questions swirl in my mind, each one more terrifying than the last.

I force myself to take a bite of the sandwich, knowing I'll need my strength for whatever comes next. The flavors barely register as I chew mechanically, my thoughts a million miles away.

The compound seems eerily quiet from where I sit. No pack members running about, no sounds of training or daily life. It's as if the entire world is holding its breath, waiting for something to happen. Or maybe that's just me, projecting my own anxiety onto my surroundings.

Then again, we're in the middle of the apocalypse, so there's that...

My fingers trace the condensation on the window, forming abstract patterns that remind me of the runes I've been studying. Magic. Another complication in an already complex situation. I close my eyes, trying to sense that elusive string of power within me, but it remains frustratingly

out of reach.

I really want that book.

Shoving my coffee and plate away, I focus inward, drawing on the well of power I've become intimately familiar with since my stay in the Fae Ward.

A small flame flickers to life above my palm, warmth tickling my skin. It comes easily now, a

testament to the endless hours of practice with Magister Orion. There's no fight or struggle to

pull the magic into circulation within my body. It's almost as easy as breathing to summon it.

I summon a second flame. Then a third. They hover above my hand, each no larger than a candle's flicker. Keeping them uniform in size takes more concentration than I'd like to admit.

Setting them into a small circular revolution, I focus on maintaining their shape and trajectory. Sweat beads on my forehead, a physical manifestation of the mental effort required. It's like juggling, but with fire and willpower instead of balls.

One full revolution. The flames dance in perfect harmony, mirroring each other's movements. A small victory, but one that fills me with a sense of accomplishment.

272 Ava: Self-Care

But this isn't the time or place for magical experiments. With a thought, I extinguish each flame. in quick succession. They wink out of existence, leaving behind only the faintest wisp of smoke and the lingering scent of sulfur.

The last thing I need is to draw attention to my abilities here.

A knock at the door startles me from my thoughts. Kellan's head pokes through the opening.

"You ready to go?"

"Ready!"

Hopping out of the chair, I rush to the door with a smile, trying to hide the anxiety fluttering in my belly. "Let's go."

Hopefully the same receptionist isn't working. Whatever she's heard, it's enough to bias her against me.

Two guards—unfamiliar and different from the night before—fall into step behind us without a word. I really need to do a full meet and greet of all my bodyguards so I can recognize their faces and put names to them.

"Stay positive," Kellan says, despite the worry creasing his brows.

Unshift 273

273 Ava: My Lucas

The hospital is a scurry of activity, more than I expected considering its small size.

Nurses and doctors rush through the long hallway, their footsteps echoing. The 'Staff Only

door behind the reception desk is in constant motion, barely staying shut for more than a few seconds at a time.

Kellan leans in close to the receptionist, speaking in hushed tones. This woman's different from the one we encountered earlier, but her demeanor towards Kellan is just as warm. A hint of a smile plays at the corners of her mouth as she nods along to whatever he's saying.

Lisa's going to be pissed, once she finds out Kellan's her mate. She's not one to share.

Hopefully she gets here soon. The need to see her is only second to my gnawing ache without Lucas by my side.

"Ava. Kellan's voice cuts through my musings. "This way."

With each step, my heart rate picks up. Finally. I can finally see my mate.

The bond within my chest sings in my veins.

Deep breaths, I remind myself. In through the nose, out through the mouth. It doesn't do much to calm the lightheadedness that's creeping in, making the fluorescent lights overhead seem too bright, too harsh.

It's as if every pair of eyes in this hospital is trained on me, judging my every move. I know it's ridiculous. These people are far too busy with their own tasks to care about some random woman

walking down the hall. But the paranoia clings to me like a second skin, making my palms sweat and my steps falter.

Get it together, Ava. You're being ridiculous.

We come to a stop outside a closed door. My breath catches in my throat.

Kellan raises his hand and knocks, the sound impossibly loud in the quiet hallway.

"Enter" Lucas' voice, usually a source of comfort, now sends a chill down my spine. It's cold, brusque, lacking any of the warmth I've come to associate with him.

My heart does a somersault in my chest.

I step into the room, and my world narrows to the man on the bed. The bond in my chest flares to life, a supernova of emotion that steals my breath and sets my heart racing.

My mate.

But the sight of him makes my heart constrict painfully. He looks... broken. Exhausted. One leg is encased in a stark white cast, his opposite arm secured in a sling. Bandages crisscross his exposed skin, a patchwork of white against his usual bronze. The strong, invincible alpha I know is nowhere to be seen.

Why is his healing so slow?

273 Ava: My Lucas

I drink in every detail, cataloging the changes, the injuries. My fingers itch to touch him, to soothe, to heal. But I'm rooted to the spot, frozen by the look in his eyes.

There's nothing. No spark of recognition, no hint of the intensity that usually blazes between us. He regards me with the same polite disinterest he might show a nurse or orderly. A stranger.

My heart stumbles, tripping over itself as the reality of the situation crashes down on me. He doesn't know me. My mate, the other half of my soul, is looking at me like I'm nobody.

Can't he sense our fated bond?

Or has that disappeared for him?

"Lucas." Kellan's voice breaks the silence as he steps up behind me. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been hit by a truck," Lucas replies, his voice gruff. "Who's this?"

The words are like a physical blow. I struggle to breathe, to keep my face neutral even as everything inside me is screaming.

"This is Ava," Kellan says, his tone careful. "She's your mate, Lucas."

Lucas' eyebrows furrow, confusion etching itself across his features. "My mate?" He looks at me, again, more intently this time, but there's still no flash of recognition. "I don't think so."

"That's okay," Kellan assures him quickly. "The doctors said your memory might take some time to come back. Ava's been worried sick about you,"

I force myself to step closer to the bed, summoning a smile that feels brittle and false on my face. "Hi, Lucas," I manage, hating how small and uncertain my voice sounds. "I'm so glad you're awake."

His eyes roam over my face, searching for something. I hold my breath, hoping against hope that something will click, that he'll suddenly remember everything. But after a moment, he just nods. "I'm

sorry," he says, and the genuine regret in his voice is almost worse than indifference. "I wish I could remember you."

"It's okay," I lie, even as my heart splinters. "You've been through a lot. Your memory will come back"

I perch on the edge of the bed, careful not to jostle him. Up close, the extent of his injuries is even more apparent. Bruises mottle his skin in shades of purple and yellow. There's a nasty gash above his left eyebrow, held together with neat stitches.

"Can I...?" I gesture vaguely, wanting to touch him but unsure if it's welcome.

Lucas hesitates for a moment, then nods. I reach out, my hand trembling slightly as I brush my fingers over his uninjured arm. The contact sends a jolt through me, our bond humming to life. But Lucas shows no reaction, and I pull back, trying to hide my disappointment.

"Kellan tells me we are... close," Lucas says, his tone cautious. "I'm sorry I can't remember. This must be difficult for you!"

A hysterical laugh bubbles up in my throat, but I swallow it down. Difficult doesn't even begin to cover it. "It's not your fault" I assure him. "I'm just glad you're alive."

273 Ava: My Lucas.

And I am. The relief of seeing him awake and talking, even if he doesn't remember me, is overwhelming. But it's tangled up with a grief so profound I can barely breathe around it. How do I mourn someone who's right in front of me?

"Do you...

do

you remember anything?" I can't help but ask, hope and dread warring in my chest.

Lucas frowns, concentration etching lines across his forehead. "Bits and pieces," he admits. "I remember being alpha. Fighting. But it's all jumbled up. Nothing specific."

I nod, trying to hide my disappointment. "That's a good start," I say, injecting false cheer into my

voice. "I'm sure the rest will come back soon."

“So,” he says, clearing his throat. “Tell me about us. How did we meet?”

I freeze, panic clawing at my throat. How do I even begin to explain our complicated history? The rejection, the misunderstandings, and how I pushed him away for so long?

“It’s a long story, I hedge. I’ll tell him. I will. But maybe not in the first ten minutes of us finally being together again. “Maybe we should start with something simpler. Like... your favorite food?” Lucas raises an eyebrow, a flicker of amusement crossing his face. It’s so achingly familiar that for a moment, I can almost pretend everything’s normal. “Is how we met really that bad?”

A startled laugh escapes me. “No, not bad. Just complicated. We didn’t exactly get off to the best

start.”

“Now I’m intrigued, Lucas says, and for a moment, I see a flash of the man I know. Curious, determined, unwilling to let things go.

New Book!

Unshift 274

274 Ava: Give Us Both Time.

END SEASON FOUR!

“...and that’s how we met,” I finish, my heart racing as I watch Lucas’s face for any sign of recognition. His brow furrows slightly, a look of concentration I’ve seen a hundred times before. But there’s no spark of memory in his eyes, no sudden realization. 1

1

“That’s... quite a story,” he says. His tone is polite, interested even, but it’s clear the tale doesn’t resonate with him on a deeper level. It might as well be a movie plot for all the personal connection he feels to it.

I swallow hard, trying to push down the disappointment threatening to choke me. “Yeah, it is,” I agree, forcing a smile. “Not exactly a fairytale beginning, huh?”

Lucas chuckles, the sound achingly familiar yet somehow wrong. It lacks the warmth, the depth of feeling I’m used to hearing. “I guess not. But it sounds like we worked things out eventually.”

"We did," I nod, my fingers twisting in the blanket covering his legs. I want so badly to reach out and touch him, to take his hand in mine. But I'm afraid of how he might react, this Lucas who doesn't know me. "It took some time, but we got there."

A heavy silence falls between us. I can feel Lucas studying me, his gaze intense in a way that's familiar and foreign all at once. There's curiosity there, maybe even a hint of attraction, but none of the bone-deep recognition I'm used to seeing.

"Can I ask you something?" I blurt out, unable to bear the tension any longer.

Lucas nods, his expression open. "Of course."

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for the answer I'm afraid I already know. "Do you... can you feel our bond at all? Even a little?"

His face falls, genuine regret clouding his features. "I'm sorry, Ava. I wish I could say yes, but..." He trails off, shaking his head. "There's nothing"

My heart sinks, but I try not to let it show on my face. "That's okay," I lie, my voice barely above a whisper. "It'll come back. It has to."

Lucas shifts in the bed, wincing slightly as the movement jostles his injuries. When he speaks, again, there's a note of hesitation in his voice. "There is something I'm curious about, though."

I perk up, hope fluttering in my chest. "What is it?"

He

gestures towards my neck, his eyes narrowing slightly. "If we're mates, why don't I see my

mark there?"

My hand flies to my throat instinctively, fingers brushing

over the unmarked skin. "Oh, I breathe, feeling heat rise to my cheeks. "That's because... well, we haven't completed our mating yet. We're fated mates."

"Why not?" The question is blunt, curious rather than accusatory, but it still makes me flinch. How do I explain the complexities of our relationship? The fears and insecurities that held me back, the external pressures that kept pushing us apart?

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It seems impossible to condense it all into a few sentences.

"It's complicated," I say finally, hating how inadequate the words sound. "We've both had our reasons for waiting. And then there just never seemed to be the right time, with everything that's been happening."

Lucas nods slowly, processing this information. "I see," he says, though I can tell from the slight furrow in his brow that he doesn't, not really.

"But we were getting there," I add hastily, needing him to understand how far we'd come. "Before all this happened, we were in a really good place."

"We were?" There's a hint of something in his voice—surprise? Doubt?

Lucas is quiet, his gaze distant. When he looks back at me, there's a softness in his eyes that makes my breath catch. "I'm sorry," he says quickly. "I can see how much this means to you. How much I mean to you. I wish I could remember"

The lump in my throat threatens to choke me. I blink rapidly, trying to hold back the tears that are suddenly burning behind my eyes. "It's okay, I manage, my voice thick. "You will. Your memory will come back."

I clear my throat, desperate to change the subject and escape the weight of Lucas's confusion and my disappointment. "So, um, how's your healing going? It looks..." My words falter. "Slow?"

A flicker of frustration crosses his face. "No one's sure. Nothing they run explains why I'm not healing at my normal rate."

My brows draw together. Something about this doesn't add up. Alphas heal incredibly fast, even from severe injuries. For Lucas to still be bedridden after all this time... it's unheard of.

I see why Kellan's been on edge when he talks about his alpha's recovery. It isn't just the memory loss; it's the entire situation. There's something weird going on.

"What does your wolf think?"

Lucas stares at me for what feels like an eternity. His golden eyes, usually so warm and full of life, seem dull and distant. When he finally speaks, his voice is barely above a whisper. "My wolf is gone."

gone?

My mind reels as I try to process what he's just said. Gone? How can his wolf be gone?

"What do you mean, gone?" I ask, my voice trembling. "Like, you can't hear him? Or you can't feel him at all?"

His jaw tightens. “I mean gone. As in not there. There’s nothing inside.”

“But that’s impossible,” I protest, leaning forward in my chair. “Your wolf is a part of you. It can’t just disappear. Maybe it’s just dormant. Or maybe

hiding from the trauma? Like a hibernation?”

“I don’t know,” Lucas snaps, his patience clearly wearing thin. “I’ve told you everything I know. Which, in case you haven’t noticed, isn’t much. He closes his eyes, taking a deep breath before continuing in a calmer tone. “I’m sorry, but I can’t do this right now. I need to rest.”

Guilt washes over me. Here I am, badgering him with questions. For me, it’s full of concern. For

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him? I’m a stranger who can’t stop bothering him when he’s clearly overwhelmed. “I’m so sorry. You’re right, I shouldn’t be pushing you like this. I’ll go.”

Lucas nods, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. “Thank you for understanding.”

I hesitate at the door, not wanting to leave things on such a sour note. “I’ll come back later today, okay? Maybe we can talk more when you’re feeling up to it.”

To my surprise, Lucas grimaces. “That sounds... exhausting, to be honest. Maybe you should wait until tomorrow. Give us both some time to process everything.”

My heart bleeds with every word, but I force myself to nod. “Of course. Tomorrow then.

As I step out into the hallway, closing the door behind me, I feel like I’m leaving a piece of myself behind.

How long did I get with him? Fifteen minutes?

The Lucas I know—my Lucas—would never push me away like this. What’s that saying? To appreciate what you have before it’s gone...?

I’m feeling that. Hard.

I make it halfway down the corridor before my legs give out. I slide down the wall, drawing my knees up to my chest as the tears I’ve been holding back finally break free. The sobs wrack my body, and I don’t even try to stifle them. Let the whole damn hospital hear. Let the whole world

hear.

My mate doesn't remember me. My mate has lost his wolf. And now, he doesn't want me.

Unshift 275

275 Ava: Visitors

"Ava." D

My head feels like it weighs a million pounds. My ears feel stuffed and woolly. And Kellan's hands, dragging me to my feet are like burning embers pressed against my skin.

"What?"

"You passed out."

Staring at him blankly, it takes a while for my brain to catch up to his words. "Oh. Shit. I guess that's one way to deal with stress; just let your body shut down.

Don't really recommend it.

and Kellan doesn't ask questions about my visit with Lucas, just escorts me back to the cottage and makes sure I'm taken care of. Brings lunch I don't want to eat and promises to check on me in

another hour or two.

Of course, lunch is out of the question. My stomach's too queasy for that. And until Sister Miriam and Selene return, I don't have a great way to get information on what happened to Lucas' wolf. I'm definitely not going to tell people he doesn't have one; the pack needs stability, not another

blow.

I'm not even sure Kellan knows.

The thought that Lucas may have trusted me with a little secret buoys my depressed spirits by a

millimeter or two.

Maybe, even if he can't feel it, there's a part of him wanting to trust me. Knowing I'm his mate.

Even if he doesn't want to see me for the rest of the day.

Fuck.

It's like the bill for all the time he spent waiting patiently for me, delivered express mail with cash on delivery. Now it's my turn to wait and trust and hope.

Water cascades over my skin, hot to turn it pink. It's my second shower in hours, but I can't shake the depression clinging to me like second skin. Steam fills the bathroom.

I scrub hard, until my skin is raw and angry red, as if I can wash away the memory of Lucas staring at me like a stranger.

It doesn't work.

I

Eventually, the hot water runs out. Dressing in the clothes I was just wearing—they're still clean. -I flop onto the bed.

Sleep. That's what I need. Just a few hours to reset my brain and maybe wake up and find this has all been some twisted nightmare.

My damp hair leaves wet spots on the pillow, leaving them for me to discover as I flop from left to right, then from belly to back, struggling to find a position that brings comfort..

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275 Ava: Visitors

No matter how tightly I screw my eyes shut, sleep doesn't come. Instead, there's a constant replay in my mind, of every moment of my encounter with Lucas. The confusion in his eyes. The way he spoke like none of our history involved him at all.

The sheets tangle around my legs as I flip from side to side. Minutes stretch into what feels like hours. My eyes burn with unshed tears and exhaustion.

A soft knock at the door startles me from my restless attempt at sleep. Before I can respond, the door creaks open.

"Ava?" Vanessa's gentle voice calls out.

I'm on my

feet in an instant, practically flying across the room and into her arms.

I hadn't realized how desperately I needed human contact until this moment. The solitude of the past few hours weighs on me, making Vanessa's presence a lifeline I cling to.

"Oh, sweetie," she murmurs, rubbing soothing circles on my back.

I pull back, wiping at my eyes. "Sorry, I just... it's been a rough day."

Vanessa's face is grim as she asks, "How are you holding up?*

"Honestly? Not great," I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. "How much do you know?"

Her eyes dart to the side before meeting mine again. "About Alpha, you mean?"

I nod, holding my breath.

Vanessa's gaze

flicks to the front door, then to the windows. Her voice rises slightly as she says, "I'm so glad he's doing well. Such a relief to see him up and about."

Confusion furrows my brow until she pulls a small notebook from her pocket. She scribbles something quickly, then turns it so I can read: I know about his memory loss.

My eyes widen. Of course. We're being watched, listened to. There might even be a traitor somewhere. We can't talk about his situation openly.

Vanessa's voice is unnaturally cheerful as she asks, "Did you break down crying out of sheer relief in the hallway? I heard rumors flying around already."

The hint isn't subtle, but I'm grateful for it. I nod, forcing a weak smile. "Yeah, I was just so overwhelmed seeing he was okay. I guess my body finally decided it was safe to shut down for some much-needed rest."

"That's understandable," Vanessa says, patting my arm. "It's been a stressful time for everyone. especially you!"

The bedroom is the farthest room from the door and nosey ears, so we head there.

I sink back onto the bed, suddenly feeling drained as I grab her pen to write my own words. He doesn't remember me at all.

She sits beside me. The delay in conversation gives me time to think as she writes. Give it time. Head injuries are tricky. The important thing is he's alive and recovering

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—

275 Ava: Visitors

out. You're not alone."

When she pulls back, her smile is bright but her eyes are serious. "Now, have you eaten? Kellan says you aren't eating much."

My stomach's still in knots, and the thought of food makes me queasy. "I'm not really—"

Vanessa goes still, her eyes growing unfocused. What now?

After a moment, she blinks, refocusing on me. A smile spreads across her face. "There are new

arrivals."

I stiffen, hope and fear warring in my chest. "Is it—" My voice cracks. I swallow hard and try again. "Is it Lisa?"

"It might be," Vanessa says, her smile widening. "Come on, let's go see."

We're out the door in seconds, my exhaustion forgotten. I forget even to put on boots, my bare feet pounding against the grass as we rush to the scene.

All I can think about is Lisa.

Unshift 276

276 Lisa: Dr. Blackwell Returns

LISA

"We're here, the Grand Sage announces, and my cramped muscles shrick with relief. We've been traveling at a snail's pace—his words, because we can't see outside—for what feels like forever. Morning? Night? It doesn't matter. We live in a box.

If it wasn't for a cleverly hidden toilet (which is gnome-sized—1 100% do not recommend using one as an adult human female), we would have been fucked. Even then, it was awkward. There's no privacy because there isn't room for it.

our

"We have a bit of a walk ahead of us," he continues, pressing buttons that enlarge our space, little magitech Rubik's cube unfolding. The gadgets hidden away by the walls reappear in their organized glory of clutter.

One catches my eye; it looks like a small gun. He's shown it to me a few times. Pretty easy to use; point and shoot, but with a wallop that comes from its magitech origins.

After the vamp fiasco, I'm all for weapons. Give me all of them. Strap them to every inch of me. I never want to feel that helpless again.

"Can I take that with us?"

He smiles. "Of course. I'll link it to your bracelet."

"Link?" This is new.

"This will help maintain your affinity levels at the lowest synchronization rate. While our people have no magical affinity, it's a necessary concern for you."

es over

It sounds reasonable, in that way IT people try to explain computer problems but it goes my head. "Okay."

Elverly grabs a few gadgets I don't recognize, things that she shoves under her clothes in strategic locations. The Grand Sage takes only a pen. It's an exquisite pen, but still a pen.

"No weapons?"

"This is my weapon." He holds it up with a gentle smile. "Do not underestimate what is in front of you, my dear.

The warning only makes me want to touch it, but I shove that impulse away. "So, where are we?"

"We are about two miles from a safe haven for the Westwood Pack wolves. They will be on edge. The survivors of the attack should already be there; we have been traveling at a much slower speed.

The survivors. I wonder how many made it. There were so many injured wolves; there's no way they could have run to safety.

How many died that day?

And how can Chloe and Mia live knowing they brought such devastation to their own family?

270 List Dr. Blackwell Returris

I shake my head, trying to dislodge the unsettling thoughts. The Grand Sage's eyes are on me, curiosity evident in his gaze. I wonder what he sees.

"It's time to go, he announces,

I nod, following Elverly out of our cramped safe room. The old woman's silence is eerie. No biting remarks, no insults about my incompetence. It's almost as unsettling as the situation itself.

Outside, the air feels different. Heavier, somehow. The Grand Sage fiddles with our bracelets, pressing buttons with practiced ease,

"Take twenty steps forward, he instructs.

I comply, counting each step carefully. At twenty, I turn back and gasp. The safe room shimmers

and vanishes from view.

Fascinated, I take a step forward. It reappears, as solid as ever. Another step back, and it's gone again.

"The cloaking is active," the Grand Sage explains, a hint of pride in his voice. "Your bracelet will guide you if needed."

1

open my mouth to ask how exactly the bracelet works, but he cuts me off with a wave of his

hand.

"We need to start walking," he says, already moving forward.

I bite back my questions and fall into step behind him, Elverly bringing up the rear.

There isn't much cover out here. It's mostly rolling plains, with a few copses of trees scattered about. "Won't they have seen us coming?

"He cloaked us long ago, Elverly snaps, and the sound of her voice has me jumping in surprise.

Good to see she's still her cantankerous self.

"But not any longer," he says, cheerful as ever.

My legs feel like jelly, each step a monumental effort. Have I ever been this weak in my life? Pretty sure I came out of the womb stronger than this. Even breathing feels like a chore.

The inclines are the worst. My thighs burn, and I'm panting like I've run a marathon.

"Keep up," Elverly hisses, her voice grating on my already frayed nerves.

There's no energy in me to snap back. Instead, I focus on putting one foot in front of the other. Left, right, left, right. Don't think about the pain. Don't think about how far we still have to go.

Suddenly, the Grand Sage stops. I'm so focused on my feet that I nearly crash into Elverly's back. My hand shoots out to steady myself, and I feel her tense beneath my touch.

"Sorry," I mutter, but the word dies in my throat as I look up.

We're surrounded.

Wolves. Massive beasts with teeth as long as my fingers. My heart leaps into my throat, and I

276 Lisa: Dr. Blackwell Returns

"I am Dr. Jonathan Blackwell."

The wolves continue to growl, circling us. I edge closer to the gnomes, my only protection in this nightmare. My eyes dart from wolf to wolf, trying to keep track of their movements. There are so many of them.

Then, something incredible happens. One of the wolves begins to change. It's horrifying and fascinating all at once. Bones crack and reshape, fur recedes, and suddenly there's a man standing before us.

A very naked man.

Don't blame me for staring. He's all rippling muscles and tanned skin. My cheeks heat up, and I force myself to look away. Now is not the time to be ogling hot werewolves, Lisa.

"Dr. Blackwell?" the man says, his voice deep and rough. "We thought you were dead."

The Grand Sage nods solemnly. "I barely made it out with my life."

The shifter's eyes go unfocused, like he's listening to something we can't hear. The silence stretches on, and I shift from foot to foot. My legs are still trembling, and standing still is almost worse than walking.

Finally, the man's gaze snaps back to us. "Follow me," he says, turning without waiting for a response.

New Book!

Unshift 277

277 Lisa: Kellan

After the third time I stumble while walking, the naked shifter stares at me with a curled lip.

"Why are humans so weak?" he asks, his tone grating on my already frayed nerves.

I bristle at his words. Who does he think he is? "None of your business," I snap, surprising myself

voice. I

with the venom in my ericho said I do pretty well for a human, thank you very much. I'm just weakened.

I'll get back into shape and then wipe that cocky stare off his face on the mat.

Though, I have yet to have a legitimate win without any handicaps during our training spars...

But a girl can dream, damn it.

The shifter's eyebrows shoot up, clearly taken aback by my sass. He peers at me more closely, his brow furrowing. "Do I know you?"

Before I can answer, he leans in, his nostrils flaring as he sniffs at me. I recoil, but he's already pulling back, a puzzled expression on his face.

"You don't have much of a scent," he says, sounding perplexed.

I catch the Grand Sage's eye, noticing a mischievous twinkle there. The bracelet must mess with my scent, too. It bolsters my courage for some reason. "That's because humans like to shower," I retort, my chin jutting out defiantly.

The shifter's eyes narrow. "You don't smell like you've showered recently.

My jaw drops. Did he really just say that? The audacity! I'm about to unleash a tirade on this insensitive jerk when a bone-chilling growl cuts through the air.

My heart leaps into my throat as a massive reddish-brown wolf emerges from nowhere, its teeth bared and hackles raised. Without thinking, I stumble backward, instinctively seeking shelter

behind the naked shifter.

Bad move.

The new wolf's growl intensifies, the sound reverberating through my chest. I can feel the naked shifter stiffen in front of me, his muscles tensing beneath his skin.

Suddenly, I'm shoved forward at the animal, nearly losing my balance in the process. The naked shifter holds up his hands once I've been sacrificed, a look of fear flashing across his face.

The enormous wolf bounds forward, placing itself between me and the other shifter. Its massive jaws snap at the naked man, a growl so loud it drowns out everything else.

Around us, the other wolves drop to the ground, bellies pressed to the earth in submission. The air crackles with tension, and I find myself frozen in place, caught between terror and awe.

"Mating instincts are quite strong, the Grand Sage muses.

"Make more sense," I hiss at him, not sure if I should try to back away or stand still. Which is less likely to get the wolf's attention? It seems angry. I don't want to be within bite range of an angry

277 Lisa Kollan

+27

"It'll make sense soon, he assures me, looking for all the world as fascinated as a woman sucked

into Grey's Anatomy.

The wolf growls again, this time turning in a swift motion to get between me and the Grand Sage, snapping impatiently in the gnome's direction.

"I am no Lion for you, wolv" Unaffected by the fierce visage of a growling apex predator, he gestures in my direction. "She is yours."

Excuse me?

But the wolf lets out a remarkably satisfied-sounding huff and turns to rub hard against my thighs, almost knocking me off balance. When I grab at its fur to hold me up, I swear the damn thing rumbles in happiness.

"What the fuck is going on?" I hiss at the naked shifter, who looks panicked by my attention.

"Don't look at me!" he snaps, before shifting into his wolf form again and cowering to the ground

like the others.

Has everyone lost their damn marbles?

I awkwardly run my fingers through the angry wolf's fur, unsure of how to handle this situation. To my surprise, the beast seems to melt under my touch, its eyes half-closing in bliss as its tail wags. The fierce growling from moments ago transforms into a contented rumble that vibrates through my palm. 2

Confusion swirls in my mind. I turn to the Grand Sage, unable to keep the bitterness from my voice. Bitterness, to be clear, that he was willing to sacrifice me off to a rabid wolf. "What the hell is going

on?"

The gnome's eyes twinkle with amusement, and I fight the urge to shake him. "If you can't figure it out now, my dear, you will soon enough." He turns to address the wolf. "We need to continue on our way. Would you mind?"

The wolf lets out a loud rumble-growl, clearly displeased by the interruption. For a moment, I think it might snap at the Grand Sage, but then it heaves a heavy sigh. Before my eyes, the wolf's form begins to shift and change.

My breath catches in my throat as the fur recedes, revealing smooth, tanned skin. Muscles ripple and bones realign, the wolf's body stretching and morphing into a human form. A very, very

familiar human form.

Kellan.

My eyes widen as I take him in, unable to stop myself from drinking in every inch of his naked body. Unlike the other shifter, whose nudity had barely registered, I find myself appreciating Kellan's form with a reverence that surprises me. My gaze travels from his broad shoulders down his chiseled chest, following the trail of hair that leads to....

Oh my.

Heat floods my cheeks, and I force my eyes back up to his face. Kellan's intense gaze locks onto mine his ruses burning with an emotion I can't quite name Before I can process what's

ort Lisa kalian

happening, he steps forward, closing the distance between us in one fluid motion.

"Mate, he whispers, his voice rough and low.

Then his mouth is on mine, crushing our lips together in a kiss that steals my breath away. The heat of his skin, the strength of his embrace, the taste of him on my tongue—I'm overwhelmed.

Everything else is gone, flying right out of my head. The danger we're in. The strange place we've found ourselves. Even my OWIE TRAIN

All that exists is Kellan and this kiss that feels like coming home.

When we finally break apart, I'm gasping for air, my head spinning. Kellan's forehead rests against mine, his breath warm on my face. "I found you," he murmurs, his voice filled with wonder and relief.

Reality comes crashing back, and I struggle to make sense of what just happened. "Kellan?" I manage to croak out, my voice embarrassingly breathy. Sure. I'm a healthy girl with an appreciation for sex. I may or may not have eye-fucked Kellan from across the room a few times, even when I was mad at him. But this? What is this?! 1

"What... how... what are you doing?

my

He pulls back slightly, his hands coming up to cup my face. His thumbs brush over cheekbones, and I shiver at the tenderness of the gesture. Every part of me wants to melt toward him, and honestly? My legs are too tired to fight the urge.

So I do.

I melt right against his body, snuggling into his arms like I was always meant to be there, as he tilts my face toward his, meeting his intense gaze.

“I’ve b

been waiting for you” he says, his eyes never leaving mine. “When I heard you were taken... I couldn’t... I had to find you. I’m sorry I wasn’t the one to save you, Lisa.

Unshift 278

278 Ava: Lisa!!!

There are at least seven wolves accompanying a group of people, but my eyes follow only one of them.

Lisa.

Whose face is as red as a tomato. Kellan’s carrying her like a princess, naked as the day he was born, as if that’s the most natural thing in the world.

Despite the humor of the situation, my heart withers at the sight of her. Once—vibrant features are now haggard, black hair limp instead of lustrous. Her tanned skin has grown pale.

At least she’s finally here.

She’s staring at Kellan like she wants to murder him. Always a good sign.

“Lisa.”

Her name on my lips is a bare whisper, but Lisa’s head snaps in my direction as her eyes search frantically. Once she sees me, her entire face lights up, the redness forgotten as she struggles to escape Kellan’s grip..

She fails.

He holds her tighter against his chest and I’m pretty sure he growls at me, but I don’t give a fuck as I rush forward, ignoring the awkwardness as I hug her while she’s in his arms.

“Lisa. Thank fucking God. Are you okay?”

“That’s my question—damn it, Kellan, put me the fuck down!” She wiggles harder against his grip, clinging to me like a toddler. “I want to be with Ava!”

“No.”

She growls her own human growl. “Ava, I’m going to stab him in his fucking balls if he doesn’t let

me go.

“No, you won’t.” But Kellan might mutiny against his alpha if I stay in his space now that he’s finally with his mate. “You’re just going to have to put up with it for a while.”

“I’m not putting up with this shit. Did you know he-” Lisa’s mouth snaps closed as she looks around, seeing how many people are surrounding us. “Never mind. We’ll talk about that later. In private:

I have no idea when later is going to be. Judging from Kellan’s demeanor, he might drag her to his lair and never leave.

“Kellan, Lisa needs a little space to adjust.” It isn’t that I don’t sympathize with him—I do—but I can see my best friend’s panic.

“No,” he says again, setting his jaw.

“You should at least put on some clothes,” I try again.

“No” he enane

278 Ava: Lisa!!!

“Yes,” she hisses.

Oh, this is going great

Lis was

Of all the reunions I ever dreamed up—well, one of them. But now that it’s here, it feels so freaking Lisa that I’m giddy. “Bring her to my apartment and let her decompress for a little bit. Shower. Feel human. Relax. And then I can explain it all to her. I lay heavy emphasis on the latter half of the sentence, holding eye contact and trying with all my might to appear as authoritative as a Luna should be. “She deserves that, not this caveman wolf act.”

He hesitates, scowling as he holds my gaze, and everyone continues to watch in silence. Then he drops the eye contact with a dissatisfied rumble. “As you wish.”

Watching his naked behind storm in the direction of my apartment isn’t really a vision I ever wanted in my life, but there you have it.

At least Lisa’s back.

The surrounding wolves shift into their own naked forms, and I stare at the sky, assaulted by swinging dingalings in the breeze.s

Jesus.

There has to be a better way around this. With all the time I've spent away from packs lately, it's become awkward to see naked people again.

"Go get dressed," I order all of them, never realizing how smoothly that comes out of my mouth as I stare at the gnomes they've accompanied here.

"Dr. Jonathan Blackwell, the old man announces, holding out a hand. "Pleasure to meet you

you, Luna

Ava."

"I'm not- Biting back my denial, I just smile awkwardly. "Hello, Dr. Blackwell."

"He's been helping the pack for a while, Ryder says, appearing at my elbow like he's materialized out of thin air. "We thought he died in the last ambush. It's good to see you again, Dr. Blackwell. I didn't realize you had the coordinates of the safe haven."

"Yes, yes. The old man nods his head like a bobbing parrot. "It is good to see you still standing, Delta Thorn."

"If it wasn't for your warning, I might not be," he says grimly, and I wonder what all that's about. Ryder me politely. "There's an empty cabin to the south side. Shall I set them up there?"

turns to

"I-ah, yes?" Flummoxed by the deference, I respond without understanding.

He nods. "Great decision, Luna. Dr. Blackwell, due to the situation, I'm sure you'll understand that there will be guards-

His voice fades as they walk away, leaving me alone in the middle of the field, wondering what the hell just happened.

I knock on the door of my cottage, half-expecting to hear Lisa's shrieks of outrage. Or, worse,

278 Ava: Lisa!!!

There's absolutely zero part of me that wants to deal with that new-mate situation.

Instead, it swings open to reveal a dejected-looking Kellan, his broad chest bare and jeans slung low on his hips.

"What's wrong?" I ask, though I have a pretty good idea.

Kellan's shoulders slump. "She won't let me near her."

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. He looks like a lost puppy, all sad eyes and drooping posture. It's almost endearing, if you drooping posture. It's almost endearing, if you forget he's usually an intimidating beta wolf.

"Well, if you came on pretty strong, I say, trying to keep my voice gentle, "It might take a while for her to warm up to you."

A blush creeps up his neck, coloring his cheeks. Oh boy. I can only imagine what he tried.

I can't help but chuckle as I give him a light push out the door. "Why don't you wait outside for a

Give her some space. Trust me, if you want this to work out, you need to take it slow."

Kellan opens his mouth to protest, but I cut him off. "You can stay nearby, just... not inside. Okay?"

Unshift 279

279 Ava: Best Friends Together Again

Kellan nods reluctantly, trudging off the porch with slow steps. I shake my head, still smiling, and step inside.

"Lisa?" I call out. "It's safe to come out now. I've banished the big bad wolf."

A muffled curse comes from the direction of my bedroom, followed by the sound of shuffling feet. Lisa appears in the doorway, wrapped in a towel, her wet hair dripping onto the shoulders.

"Is he really gone?" she asks, peering around me suspiciously.

I nod. "He's outside. I told him to give you some space."

Lisa's shoulders relax, and she pads over to the couch, sinking into it with a heavy sigh. "Thank God. I thought he was going to break down the bathroom door. I had to kick him out because he kept peeking in to make sure I was okay. While showering"

"Yes, I'm not surprised." I toss a few things at her to wear. Shirt, pants, underwear. "These aren't fancy, but none of us got to bring our wardrobe."

"I never realized what a luxury clothes are," Lisa agrees, unperturbed by the mismatched and style-less choices, hopping into the bathroom to get dressed. "Do you happen to have a hair dryer?"

"Nope."

"Damn. Oh, well."

Lisa emerges from the bathroom, striking an exaggerated pose in the oversized clothes I've given her. The baggy fabric hangs off her frame, accentuating how thin she's become.

"How do I look?" she asks, her voice playful but strained.

My heart clenches painfully in my chest. "Fabulous as always," I manage, forcing a smile. "You could make a potato sack look good."

Lisa's laugh is a shadow of its former self, but it's there. She flops onto the couch, and I join her, our shoulders touching. For a moment, we just sit there, the silence heavy with unspoken words.

"How are you really doing?" I ask softly, turning to face her.

The humor fades from Lisa's face, replaced by a weariness that makes her look years older. "I don't want to think about it right now, if that's okay." She reaches for my hand, squeezing it tightly. "Can we just focus on the fact that I'm here? With you? God, Ava, I missed you so much." Guilt crashes over me like a tidal wave. I grip her hands, my vision blurring with unshed tears. "Lisa, I'm so sorry. I tried to find you, I swear I did, but-

"Hey, no," Lisa interrupts, her voice gentle. "Don't do that to yourself."

But the words keep spilling out, raw and painful. "There was no way to get to you. We didn't know where you were, and then we did, but we were powerless to save you immediately, and then... then there was the funeral, too." My stomach churns at the memory. "All those shifters

11:30

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279 Ava: Best Friends Together Again

who died, I had to... I had to be there. I felt like I was betraying you, but I couldn't-

Lisa's hands tighten around mine, her face somber. "Ava, stop. You don't need to explain. I get it, okay? I hate that our... our selfishness brought all this tragedy to Westwood. If anyone should be apologizing, it's me. I was with you every step of the way, whining and complaining. I'm the one that pushed you to go to the party."

I shake my head, unable to form words. We lapse into silence. There's so much I want to say, so many questions I want to ask, but I can't bring myself to break this fragile peace.

So we sit, hands clasped, lost in our own thoughts.

At least until Lisa says, "So, do you have any coffee around here?"

My lips quirk. "I think so, but we'd have to let Kellan in. He's been feeding and watering me. Like a plant."

"He's good at that." A grin flashes across her face. "Though the food is always delivered."

"Still, he orders it."

"Always remembers that I hate mushrooms."

"And olives."

"Oh, and adds extra bacon!"

I grin. "Sounds like you aren't too unhappy with how things have turned out, then."

The happiness on her face disappears abruptly. "No. What the fuck, Ava. You don't understand. I was just standing there, and then this giant wolf comes out of nowhere growling and ready to tear us apart. All the other wolves don't even fight him, and then—ugh. Anyway, when he shifts I finally realize it's Kellan, but then he—"

Lisa glances around, even though we're the only ones in the room, and lowers her voice to hiss, "He kissed me, Ava. Not a peck. Not a smooch. He just grabbed me like this—" she moves her arms in the air around an imaginary figure, "-and just swooped in."

I lean forward, resting my chin on my hand. "Was it good, though?"

“No.” She avoids my eyes. “Okay, yes. It was mind–blowing. Like sex, but with only mouths. But everyone was watching. And then he picked me up and refused to put me down. And he was

naked.”

“Yes, I saw that.” Trying desperately to hide my amusement, I ask, “Did he tell you anything?”

“Just that he would beat me within an inch of my life if I was ever kidnapped again. Oh, and then he threatened to cut off all my hair and turn me into a monk if I ever hide behind another naked man again.”

I blink. “That’s... extreme.”

She snaps her fingers at me. “That’s what I said. He’s lost his damn mind, Ava.”

“That’s because he’s your mate, Lisa.”

She stares at me “No”

144:39

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279 Ava: Best Friends Together Again

“He is, though.”

“Ava. I’m human. I can’t be his mate.”

I nod. “It is unusual. I guess he didn’t realize it until he could smell your blood. It’s a thing, I

guess.”

“But I’ve bled from a thousand different cuts when he’s around.”

Scratching my cheek, I shrug. “I didn’t make the rules. Maybe you didn’t bleed enough?”

Lisa recoils. “That sounds barbaric. How much do they expect someone to bleed to verify their

mate status?”

Unshift 280

280 Ava: Debrief

I can't help but laugh at Lisa's horrified expression. Her eyes are wide, her mouth hanging open in a perfect 'O' of shock. It's such a quintessentially Lisa reaction that, for a moment, I can almost forget everything we've been through.

We lapse into a comfortable silence, the kind only possible between best friends. It feels like old times, before vampires and shifters and mates complicated everything. I close my eyes, savoring the moment.

"I miss my parents."

Lisa's voice, small and fragile, shatters the peace. My eyes snap open to find her staring at her hands, twisting them in her lap.

"I'm sorry, Lisa. The cell phones aren't working right now. We can't—"

"I know," she sighs, her shoulders slumping: "Just wishing I could tell them I'm okay. They're worried sick, I'm sure."

I reach out, squeezing her hand. There's nothing I can say to make this better, so I don't try. Suddenly, Lisa jerks upright. Her eyes, when they meet mine, are bright and intense. "Ava, Chloe and Mia... they're not very good people."

The abrupt change in topic throws me. "What? Who?"

Her gaze darts around the room, landing on the walls, the ceiling, the floor. "Are they listening?" she whispers, leaning in close. "The guards, I mean."

My face goes blank as I nod, careful to keep my expression neutral. "There's a place we can go to talk, if we need to."

Lisa's on her feet in an instant. "Can my friends come too?"

I blink, startled by her urgency. "Um... I guess so? We'd have to check—"

"Great," she interrupts, already heading for the door. "Let's go."

Bewildered, I follow her. When I open the door, Kellan's there, his posture tense. I can see the longing in his eyes as he looks past me to Lisa.

"We need to go to the conference room. Can you escort us? And bring Lisa's friends?"

He frowns, his gaze finally shifting to me. "It would be better to wait a few hours. Ryder's debriefing Dr. Blackwell right now."

“That’s okay” Lisa pipes up from behind me. “We can wait.”

Kellan’s eyes snap back to her, filled with a yearning so intense it makes my chest ache. I shut

the door, guilt twisting in my gut as his face disappears from view.

Turning back to Lisa, I find her rummaging through cabinets. “What are you doing?”
“Looking for paper.”

11:30

280 Ava: Debrief

Ah.

Vanessa left her notebook, so I grab that, flipping to an empty page and handing Lisa the pen. “Here you go.”

Snatching it out of my hands, she rushes to the table, scribbling across the paper and then turning to face the notebook in my direction.

The words are simple.

Chloe and Mia are traitors. Brought vampires to attack. Party = them too???

My eyes dart to the door, heart pounding. I lean in close to Lisa, my voice barely above a whisper. “Are you sure?”

Lisa’s pen flies across the page, her hand shaking slightly. When she turns the notebook back to me, I see POSITIVE!, underlined several times.

Damn.

It took a while for the names to click in my head. Lisa knew everyone’s names more than I did, but I remember now the two girls at the party, with their intrusive questions and their clear disdain for me. I’d figured they had crushes on Lucas; I never would have guessed them to be

traitors.

And why?

They were well-regarded among their peers. Why would they betray Lucas?

It doesn’t make sense.

“Do you want me to have Kellan come in-”

Lisa’s glare in my direction has me snapping my mouth closed, teeth clicking with the force of it. I purse my lips in thought. “Or not. Okay. Why don’t I see if I can figure out the coffee situation without him?”

After a couple hours and two cups of coffee, Kellan brings us to the conference room, leaving us alone and promising to bring Lisa’s friends.

Once the door is closed, Lisa launches into everything that’s happened to her since the party, shuddering as she talks about the vampire’s visit to her cell and how it took forever until her cravings for him faded, and about a girl named Marisol.

Marisol must be one of his thralls.

It’s disturbing to know their minds can be so affected by their bond with a vampire, and I wonder if Sister Miriam’s thralls are in a similar situation. It makes my mouth taste like dirt to think about it.

The gnomes are the true surprise of her story. Sister Miriam had refused to elaborate over the details of Lisa’s rescue; of all people, I never expected the gnomes to be her saviors.

The only ones I’ve met are more like secretaries, not ninjas with gadgets and gizmos.

11:30

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Though, Tinker’s wings prove that the technology is out there, even in the Fae Ward.

Interesting.

“None of the shifters seem to realize they’re gnomes,” Lisa adds. “It’s like it’s a secret.”

Scratching at my neck, I nod. “They keep things pretty secretive, it seems. I didn’t know they existed until I entered the Fae Ward. I only met two of them.”

“Fae Ward?” Lisa tilts her head. “What’s that?”,

“It’s a section of the city the vampire lives in. You have to go through a portal to get there, and it’s full of Fae-”

“Portal? What kind of portal?”

“You know, the ones that transport you to...” I pause. “Wait. Lisa, you never used portals?”

“No. I woke up in my jail cell. Then, when I was rescued, I...” She thinks back. “I don’t remember a portal.”

I’d been under the impression that portals were a normal method of travel. Now I wonder how prevalent they are. “I see. They’re like these doors between one place and another. Like teleporting. Very TV magic stuff.”

Lisa bites back a yawn, smiling sheepishly when I catch her eye. “Sorry, I’m good. That sounds cool. Better than flying around in a tiny Rubik’s cube.”

The curious part of me wants to go out and look at what she calls a Rubik’s cube, but I figure there’s probably time later to look into something like that. “Well, vampires aren’t allowed in the Fae Ward. It’s like a... Fae haven, I guess? Gnomes are there, too, though I don’t know how many. They’re an interesting people.”

“I like the Grand Sage, but I feel like Elverly’s some sort of strict English governess. One that whips you if you don’t know your manners.”