

# **Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted #Unshift 281 - Read Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted Unshift 281**

## **Unshift 281**

281 Ava: Catching Up

"That sounds..." I grope for a word. "Unpleasant?"

"Very: She shudders and leans forward. "Anyway, Chloe and Mia brought the vampires to the last place, and we barely escaped. We've been flying under the radar since and finally got here." Puzzling over that, I ask, "Are you sure it was them? You didn't hear what they were saying."

I hate both of them, so I'm not trying to defend them. I just don't want to tarnish any innocent names. Lord knows I have enough black marks against me in this pack.

Lisa looks at me soberly. "No. But the way they were acting... And the Grand Sage—ugh, sorry. Dr. Blackwell said he saw something on the phones."

I shudder. Even with as much hatred as I felt toward Blackwood, I never wanted them wiped from the map. Well, sometimes—but to call down an army upon the same people who watched me grow up, even if they turned a blind eye to my abuse, sours my stomach.

There are innocent people in any pack. They don't deserve to live through a nightmare like that.

squeeze

"I'm glad you're okay. Reaching over the table, I her hands. "Really glad. It was hard. Sometimes, I had to stop thinking about you..." Shit. That sounds terrible.

Lisa shakes her head and grips my hand tightly. "Trust me, I had to do the same sometimes."

"Yeah, but you were the one in a jail cell. I was out here." My lips twist into a grimace. "I should have been able to do more."

"Shut up, Ava." With a gentle squeeze that belies the harshness of her words, Lisa continues, "We're both unequipped to deal with all these supernatural guys. No wonder Jericho pushed us so hard. And yet..."

And yet we were still so easily overpowered.

Hearing her unspoken words, my soul shrivels at the memory.

Clearing her throat, she says, "What happened while I was gone? How are you and Lucas?"

Ah.

She studies my face, her brows drawing together. "Ava? What's wrong?"

"It's nothing compared to what you went through. Rubbing at my forehead, I sigh. "He's lost his memories. He doesn't feel our bond. I don't really know what to do."

"Your pain matters, too, she says immediately. "Tell me everything"

"I know, I know." I run a hand over my face. "So many things have happened, I don't even know where to start. Everything's a blur anymore. A memory hits me and I sit up straight, eyes wide. "Oh! You won't believe this!"

Lisa leans forward, curiosity piqued. "What?"

"Mrs. Elkins? My boss from Cedarwood?"

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Lisa nods. "The lady who gave you the apartment, right?"

"Yeah. She's from a bloodline of old witches. She brought me a magic book after the Moon Goddess brought her to Blackwood. Which I really need to get my hands on.

Lisa's jaw drops. "What? Are you serious? No, wait. More importantly, if the Moon Goddess can intervene like that, why doesn't she do anything directly? Why can't she just give you whatever knowledge you need, if she wants you to learn it?"

I shrug, feeling a bit sheepish. "I have no idea. Honestly? I only half-believed in the Moon Goddess because of how I was raised. It all seemed like stories to keep us in line, you know? Especially because the humans never believe in her,"

"I never believed in the Moon Goddess at all, Lisa admits. "I mean, I'm human. It wasn't part of my world."

I can't help but laugh at the absurdity of it all. Here we are, discussing deities like we're debating the weather.

"I didn't even end up learning anything from it. Instead I ended up in the city where you were held. Sister Miriam got me a teacher there, in the Fae Ward. That's why I was there.

Lisa's eyes widen. "Really? I'm glad she can be trusted then.

I hesitate. "I still don't fully understand her motives, but she's helped us out too many times for me to doubt her anymore. Even Selene is warming up to her. She's had it out for her ever since she called me a witch.

"Hey, where's Selene?" Lisa glances around, like she's just going to appear out of nowhere.

I take a deep breath, knowing I'm about to dive into a long explanation. "That's... a bit of a story." Over the next hour, I give Lisa a crash course in the madness that's been my life since she was taken. I tell her about my training at the Fae Ward, about the imposing yet oddly paternal Magister

Orion, and how communication with the outside world suddenly ceased when we could no longer contact anyone from the pack.

Lisa shakes her head in disbelief. "I can't even imagine. And Selene?"

"Selene and Sister Miriam left together to gather intel," I say, still feeling a twinge of worry at their absence. "It was right before everything went silent. I haven't heard from them since? "Do

you think they're okay?"

I nod. "They're here somewhere. Sister Miriam saved Lucas' life-" Lisa gasps, and I sigh. "It's a long story, I don't even know the details. I just know she kept him alive. They're out now, trying to get more information from somewhere, I think" My brain's been such mush, I can't even remember the details of what Kellan told me.

"God, Ava. That's legitimately crazy. My head's swimming just hearing about it." Lisa scrunches up her nose. "I feel like I'm more lost than before.

"Tell me about it. It's like the more I learn, the more nothing makes sense. As soon as I think I have a grasp on things, another layer appears and it's like just kidding!

281 Ava: Catching Up

"I need a notebook to keep up with this shit." Lisa shakes her head. "I just came here to hang out with my best friend because her family sucks. I didn't realize you were bringing me straight into the middle of a supernatural war."

I open my mouth, ready to protest, but Lisa's laughter cuts me off.

"Don't take it so seriously, Ave. I'm just messing with you."

How can I not? My eyes trace her gaunt features, the shadows under her eyes, the way her clothes hang loose on her frame. The guilt gnaws at me.

Lisa's expression sobers as she catches my gaze. "Hey, I'm a big girl. I can take responsibility for the choices that led me here."

Her understanding is even worse. She shouldn't have to take responsibility for this mess. None of this would have happened if I hadn't dragged her into my world.

Before I can voice these thoughts, a knock on the door interrupts us. Dr. Blackwell and Elverly enter, followed by Kellan, Marcus, and Vanessa. The room suddenly feels cramped.

Kellan moves to stand behind Lisa's chair, his presence looming. I can't help but notice how Lisa tenses, her fingers curling into fists on the table. The very air between them seems to crackle.

Marcus takes up position by the door, ever the silent sentinel. Sometimes I wonder if he sees danger in every shadow.

"You seem to be doing well," Dr. Blackwell tells Lisa, with a fatherly smile. The wizened old gnome looks nothing like the garden statues we're used to thinking of.

"I'm glad to be with Ava," she agrees, not seeming to notice—or care—as Kellan stiffens behind her.

Poor guy.

Watching him is like a lesson in the torture I must have given Lucas, making my heart hurt further.

## **Unshift 282**

### 282 Ava: A Meeting of Allies

Dr. Blackwell—or, as Lisa calls him, the Grand Sage—holds out his hand for a very human handshake, his eyes twinkling in my direction. "It is good to finally meet you, Ava Grey. I've heard so much about you"

From who?

"Hello," I offer cautiously, despite knowing he's one of the good ones. His handshake is firm, even if his hand is as small as a child's.

"It will be good for magic to flourish once again," he continues, and I blink.

“Excuse me?”

Dr. Blackwell’s words hang in the air, and I’m not sure how to respond. Magic flourishing? What does that even mean? Before I can formulate a coherent question, Kellan clears his throat.

“I apologize for the delay in bringing Dr. Blackwell,” he says, his voice oddly stiff.

Lisa’s reply is equally stilted. “It’s okay.”

Their awkward exchange is so unnatural that I have to fake a cough to hide my amused smile. Despite the gravity of our situation, it’s almost comical to see them dance around each other like this.

His expression turns serious as he continues. “I was discussing recent events with Dr. Blackwell. The Westwood Pack is caught in the middle of an incredible war that will change our world.”

Everyone nods solemnly; there’s no surprise here.

Still, my stomach twists with anxiety as we put it into words.

He continues, “Dr. Blackwell has shed more light on the incident where Delta Ryder’s force was nearly obliterated after their first retreat. While he was not the only one to deal with a secondary attack, it was the worst of them. We lost all but fifteen of them.”

I notice Lisa stiffen at the mention of the incident. She did mention Ryder, she must be thinking of Mia and Chloe and their betrayal. Kellan places his hands on her shoulders, giving them a gentle squeeze.

“Two shifters have been confirmed as traitors,” Kellan explains to Marcus and Vanessa, his voice low and grim. “But more exist within the packs.”

Neither of them seem surprised; they must have already been briefed on the situation here. The healer just sighs, looking as though she’s aged ten years since I saw her earlier.

Marcus, on the other hand, turns his attention to Lisa. “Speaking of trust, I must question the human’s presence here.

My hackles rise immediately, and I can’t help but bristle at his regard of my best friend. I struggle to keep my expression neutral as everyone’s gaze flicks between Lisa and me.

Kellan watches me calmly, but I can see the veins in his arms popping from how tensely he’s

## 282 Ava: A Meeting of Allies

“Lisa is trustworthy, I state firmly, meeting Marcus’s eyes.

Marcus shakes his head. “Her trustworthiness isn’t the issue, but her status as an advisor is.”

I take a deep breath, trying to calm the frustration bubbling in my veins. “The number of people we can truly trust is already low. We shouldn’t alienate Lisa just because she’s human.”

Marcus inclines his head. “Understood, Luna:

Kellan regards me thoughtfully, his dark eyes hiding whatever thoughts are going on inside his head. As he continues, Lisa leans back against him. “As for the situation within the Westwood Pack since Lucas has been... incapacitated as alpha... He pauses, and I feel my heart clench at the mention of Lucas. “It’s been almost impossible to keep alpha challenges at bay. It’s only going to get worse now that Ava is here and he is still absent from his role:

Alpha challenges.

The blood drains from my face. Lucas is in no shape to be challenged. With his wolf gone, he’s as good as dead.

“Who wants to challenge him?” My fear takes a sharp left to anger. How dare they? After everything Lucas has done for his pack, after risking his life to save others... Now, he has to worry about alpha challenges?

Kellan meets my gaze, steady and calm. “Almost every wolf.”

Shit.

ried!

I’ve examined Alpha, Vanessa cuts in, sounding worried. “His healing rate is abysmal. It’s human— rate. There are so many theories, the doctors are in knots. They think he’s cursed somehow, but no one knows if it’s even possible.

“It is possible,” Dr. Blackwell says, unperturbed as several eyes cut in his direction, including mine.

“What kind of curse? What does it entail?”

The old gnome shakes his frail-seeming head. “I do not know such details. However, I am aware of curses befalling several of Lycan lineage in history, weakening their rule”

“What happened to them?” I ask, desperate for good news.

Stroking his silken white beard, he looks thoughtful. “I am no historian, but I believe all met with an unhappy end

The silence following his words has him startled, and he follows up quickly. “That is not to say there is no hope. Sister Miriam may be of more help in this scenario.”

-Biting my lip, I turn to Kellan. “Where is she? When will she be back?”

We need to cut this new complication off at its head somehow. I refuse to lose Lucas to some barbaric ritual of power usurpation. He is the alpha of the Westwood Pack. As soon as his strength retur

“No one knows. She comes and goes as she pleases.”

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Damn it.

“Why don’t you contact her?” Dr. Blackwell asks, staring at me with clear, guileless eyes.

Frowning, I shake my head. “No one’s phones are working. And even if they were, I don’t have her phone number!”

“Oh! We don’t need her number!” Vanessa brightens. “We have that communication ball from Magister Orion.” Setting her healer’s pack on the table, she rummages through it as she talks. “Though, I don’t know if you are able to activate it, Ava.”

“I have no idea, but trying is better than sitting around and twiddling my thumbs. I’ve had enough of that for a lifetime.”

Lisa grunts, and Kellan squeezes her shoulders. “Are you okay?” he asks, in a whisper so loud that everyone has to pretend they don’t hear him. Honestly, the man’s practically yelling.

“I’m fine. Just understand what Ava feels like”

## **Unshift 283**

283 Ava: Create Contact

1 slam my hand on the table, frustration boiling over. “What’s the point of all this magical training if I can’t even activate a simple orb?”

The communication ball sits there, mocking me with its inert silence. I've tried everything I can think of—touching it, willing it to work, even whispering different incantations I can barely remember. I'm not even sure what most of them are for.

Nothing

Vanessa places a gentle hand on my shoulder. "Ava, we weren't expecting your connection to magic to be cut off so suddenly. Your training was brief:

"I know, I know." Running a hand through my hair, I blow out a long sigh. "I just wish I'd started earlier. Maybe things would be easier now."

If only I'd known then what I know now. But hindsight's always perfect, isn't it?

Dr. Blackwell clears his throat, drawing my attention. He's holding something in his wrinkled hand—a bracelet, but not like the chunky white one on Lisa's wrist. This one's a delicate silver chain, adorned with stars and moon phases.

"This might help," he says, offering it to me.

The metal is cool against my skin, but there's a familiar energy to it. Something I've long ago associated with magic within an item. "How?"

He shrugs, his eyes twinkling. "I don't know. It's an artifact, made for a witch long ago."

Long ago? That's shocking. "But it looks so... modern."

"Appearances can be deceiving," Dr. Blackwell says with a wink. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small obsidian disc. "This is a wardstone. This will create a ten-foot radius where no one can hear what's being said. One of our most requested items. Just infuse it with magic, or use the incantation. Just be warned, the silence activates after the incantation."

So basically—don't use the incantation if you don't want your enemies to know what you're doing. Got it.

"What's the incantation?" There's nothing about the stone that hints at its magical properties. Not even a buzz against my skin. It's just a rock as far as I can tell.

"“By moon's grace and stardust bright, silence falls, veiling the night.”"

The stone tickles my palm, magical energy seeping out of it. It's faint, but there.

Fascinating.

Though, the incantation is much than anything I've heard Magister Orion use. They're usually one or two words. Not a poem. "I'm going to have to write that down."

"Can I use it?" Vanessa asks curiously, reaching out to touch the stone. She doesn't seem to feel the magic emanating from it at all.

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203 Ava: Create Contact

"Anyone can use it. Wardstones have no owner and will activate if the requirements are met. To deactivate it, the incantation is, 'By dawn's first light and morning's cheer, break the hush; let sounds appear.'"

The thrumming disappears at once.

Lisa snorts. "No wonder no one knew about any plans if everyone's walking around with those."

Dr. Blackwell looks startled by her comment, his bushy eyebrows shooting up. "That is a point to

consider."

Staring at the item in my hand, I'm suddenly overwhelmed.

My brain hurts. My heart hurts. The bond inside me is still weeping.

"Kellan, is there anything urgent at this particular time? Or can I take a break for a few hours and get a little rest?" I'd love to visit Lucas after, but—well. That's for tomorrow, I guess.

"No, Luna. I have everything under control. Marcus and Vanessa are up to date, and Dr.

Blackwell is well aware of the situation here."

Luna? Since when did he call me that? I guess it's to keep the pack feeling secure since their alpha is indisposed.

"What about the war out there?" I wave an arm at the general outside. "Have we learned anything new?"

"Nothing new for you. I'm the one who has a lot to process." His lips quirk, even as his eyes travel toward Lisa. "Sounds like we're up shit creek without a paddle."

“Yeah. Pretty much.”

Fiddling with the bracelet, I nod. “I’m going to see what I can figure out, magic-wise, while we wait for Sister Miriam. I’m worried about Lucas, and about any possible alpha challenges.”

Kellan sighs. “Understood. One reason he’s been in the hospital is to avoid any challenges; they can’t challenge him if they don’t see him.”

It’s a temporary measure; an absent alpha can be challenged, especially if they abandon their pack.

“Don’t worry, Luna. I’ve got this under control.”

“That,” Lisa whispers, “is the coolest fucking thing”

Three flames flicker between us, looping in a lazy circle.

“That’s about the extent of what I’ve learned.” My wry tone catches her attention, and she shakes

her head.

“It’s still amazing. Don’t discount what you’ve learned just because it isn’t fast enough for your liking.

my wrist. It

Chastened, I flick each flame out of existence, fiddling with the new bracelet on my

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283 Ava Create Contact

“So, you said you need to just...” She waves her arms in the air, free to chat as much as she wants. with the wardstone keeping our conversation safe and all the curtains closed. “Summon this book? Like, out of thin air?”

“Somehow. Yes. Rubbing at my eyebrow, I close my eyes to concentrate on that string of connection inside of me. It’s been quiet since I saw Lucas. Everything about my magic, about me, is subdued.

But maybe if I get this damn book back, I can figure out something with the communication ball. Or, even better, Sister Miriam and Selene might be back soon.

“So, how can I help?”

Opening my eyes to see Lisa's visage practically sparkling with excitement, I laugh. "I don't know. I don't think you can. You just have to be quiet and not distract me."

"Oh. The light around her seems to dim as her face falls. "Well, I can do that."

"Sorry. It's nothing spectacular. Just..." I shrug, not even sure how to end the sentence.

She holds up her hands, shaking them and her head vigorously in my direction. "No. It's fine. I get it. I wanted to have the Grand Sage show you all the gadgets, but it doesn't sound like it's a great time right now. Maybe I'll just see what he can bring in. There has to be something helpful in his bag of tricks."

That might actually be helpful, but who knows.

So far, the bracelet's a dud, but I leave it on. Who knows what wards exist in it.

"Go ahead. Lisa scoots a little further back on the floor. "I'll give you space. Don't mind me. I'm not even here."

But she is here, and it's one of the best feelings on this earth. To finally have my best friend safe. To see her with my own eyes and know she's okay.

I'm sure she has plenty of traumas to work through. Hell, I've been ignoring mine. But that can always be dealt with another day, right?

Like when war isn't at our freaking doorstep. With supernaturals at the helm.

As if human wars weren't bad enough.

As if there isn't enough death and hatred to go around.

Now Book!

## **Unshift 284**

284 Ava: Yet Another Strange Forest

Shaking off the morbid thoughts clouding my mind, the images of war and supernatural chaos, I breathe deeply and close my eyes. (D)

Focus, Ava. There's work to be done.

Concentrating on that elusive string of connection I can feel deep within me, it's like a gossamer thread. Barely visible, but undeniably present.

I tug at it gently, as if saying hello to an old friend. No response.

I press on, trying to deepen the connection, fumbling along in this strange magical mental space. It's like groping in the dark, unsure of what I'm looking for.

The sound of Lisa's breathing and subtle movements a few feet away threaten to break my concentration, and it's an effort to push those distractions aside, diving deeper into the recesses of my mind. The world around me fades away, replaced by a vast emptiness.

Then, I'm falling.

By now, the sensation is familiar enough for me not to panic, waiting it out as space whizzes past at breakneck speed.

My stomach lurches, instinctual panic taking hold of my body; my mind might understand that I'm not falling, but every physical reflex of mine insists that it is.

And then, a torturous second or two later, it's gone and I'm alone in the middle of what looks like the creepiest forest to exist on the planet.

Gnarled, dead branches wrap together in a dense canopy of trees that block out the majority of light.

Dead leaves litter the ground, crackling and crunching beneath my feet, but there's a shocking lack of underbrush. It's like walking inside an unfinished painting.

There's a pond, of course. Why is there always water? Is it symbolic, or just coincidence?

Unlike the pond where I met with the Moon Goddess, this one is so murkily dark that it seems filled with black water. Just looking at it makes my skin crawl, and I step back reflexively, not wanting to get near the edge—even when I'm a solid ten feet away already.

There's an unnatural quiet to the space. No birds singing. No insects buzzing. Fuck, I'd take a cicada to break up the oppressively creepy environment. But no.

Just the dead leaves crunching with my every movement and my breathing.

I turn in a slow circle, taking in my surroundings. The forest stretches out in every direction, seemingly endless. The trees all look the same—tall, dark, and foreboding. There's no path, no sign of which way I should go. Only the pond breaks the monotony.

My eyes are drawn back to the water. Its surface remains perfectly still, not a ripple in sight. I approach the water's edge, peering into its depths. For a moment, I think I see something moving beneath the surface. But when I look closer, there's nothing.

## 284 Ava Yet Another Strange Forest

There aren't even reflections on the surface.

A chill runs down my spine. Whatever this pond is, it might look like water, but I have a feeling it's something else entirely.

When I throw a pebble into it, it sinks without a single ripple.

Note to self: Don't go swimming.

"Okay, Ava. You wanted to connect with your magic. Is this what that looks like?"

As if in response to my words, a gentle breeze stirs the branches overhead. It carries a whisper, so faint I'm not sure if I actually heard it or just imagined it.

I strain my ears, trying to catch the sound again. Nothing.

If this is my magic, it's... Horrifying.

Like I'm supposed to be some sort of evil overlord. Dead trees. Creepy, murky water. No signs of life whatsoever.

Definitely doesn't seem like the kind of thing I want associated with my magic.

When I met the Moon Goddess, it was bright and beautiful. Refreshing. Wonderful.

This is just a nightmare.

The pond catches my eye again, and I make my way closer. There's some sort of glint in the inky water, and I'm pretty sure it's important, whatever it is.

I edge closer to the water, my eyes straining to catch another glimpse of that elusive glint. It's maddening, like trying to catch light with my bare hands. Every time I think I've spotted it, it slips away, dancing just beyond my focus.

"Come on," I mutter, leaning forward. My reflection should be visible on the surface, but there's nothing. Just that darkness that swallows everything.

The strain makes my eyes ache, and I give up to walk around, rubbing them to ease the tension building behind my temples.

This isn't working.

I'm going about this all wrong.

But what the hell am I supposed to do? I can't see anything. I can't hear anything. I'm not about to try drinking the water, even if someone tells me it's the source of all magic. So what else can I

do?

I've been...

Fuck.

Wait a second.

I'm relying too much on what I can see, on what my physical senses are telling me. But this place... it's not real. Not in the way the physical world is. It's connected to my magic somehow. Beelie like a dunce I close my eyes. Instead of trying to see or hear or smell. I reach out

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284 Ava: Yet Another Strange Forest

something else. That intangible sense that's connected to my magic.

At first, there's nothing. The world around me feels empty, devoid of the energy I'm searching for. But as I push harder, shoving away all thoughts of the physical world, I sense... something.

It's faint at first, barely a whisper against my magical senses. But it's there. A warmth, a golden glow that seems to emanate from... the pond?

My eyes snap open, and I stare at the inky black water with newfound understanding. There, beneath the surface, is a source of magic. It pulses gently, like a beating heart, warm and inviting.

Thunderstruck, I can only laugh. "Oh, hell no. There is absolutely no way I'm going in that water. Not even for a little bit of magic."

The very thought of submerging myself in that black water sends a shudder through me. Who knows what else might lurk beneath the surface? No, thank you. I'll find another

way.

But how? The magic is there, I can sense it now. It calls to me, begging for me to reach it. But it might as well be on the moon for all the good it does me here on the shore.

I

pace along the edge of the pond, my mind racing. There has to be a way to access that magic without taking a dip in nightmare fuel. Maybe if I concentrate hard enough, I can... I don't know. Connect with it?

Settling down on the dead leaves at the water's edge, I close my eyes again. This time, instead of just sensing the magic, I try to reach for it. In my mind, I imagine tendrils of my own power stretching out, seeking that golden warmth.

Nothing happens, of course,

"Son of a bitch!"

Seriously, what's the point of this magic when I can't do anything with it?!

I push harder, straining with all my might to make some kind of connection with that tantalizing source of power. Sweat beads on my forehead from the effort.

Still nothing.

It's there. Tantalizing, just beyond reach.

But nothing.

No connection between us.

With a cry of frustration, I slam my fist into the ground. Dead leaves crumble beneath my hand. "Why won't you just—"

My words cut off as I feel... something. A spark. A connection

## **Unshift 285**

285 Ava: Who Are You?

My eyes fly open, and I gasp. Where my hand touches the ground, a faint golden glow spreads outward. It's barely visible, like sunlight filtering through murky water, but it's there.

Heart pounding, I press my palm more firmly against the forest floor. The glow intensifies slightly, spreading further. I can feel it now, a warmth seeping up through my skin, traveling along my arm.

It's the magic from the pond. Somehow, it's not confined to the water. It's here, in the very earth beneath my feet.

A laugh bubbles up from my chest, half disbelief and half triumph. “Well, would you look at that?” Encouraged, I place my other hand on the ground as well. The glow spreads further, creating a small circle of light around me. It’s beautiful, a stark contrast to the gloomy forest surrounding

1. me.

I close my eyes, focusing on the sensation. The magic feels... different from what I’ve experienced before. It’s not the raw, primal power of the Moon Goddess, nor is it the structured, disciplined energy I’ve been trying to work with in my training.

This magic feels wild. Untamed. Like a force of nature that can’t be reasoned with. It reminds me of the feeling I get when I’m running through the forest, wind in my hair, heart pounding with the thrill of freedom.

The glow continues to spread, pushing back the darkness of the forest. With each passing moment, I feel stronger, more alive. It’s intoxicating.

It isn’t under my control; it spreads without my thought or push. I’m little more than a conduit. The dark water slowly changes, from black to navy. Then, slowly, into a glossy blue that reflects

the sun.

And hints of green.

Green, from the leaves sprouting on once–dead branches. From the unfurling trees once again reaching high to the sky.

It’s limited to the area surrounding me, but there’s life here, where there was once nothing at all.

A comfortable buzz against my wrist catches my attention, and I glance down at the silver bracelet Dr. Blackwell gave me.

It’s glowing, with the faintest hint of lavender aura around it.

Is that what’s allowed me to tap into the magic of this place?

“No. It’s just enjoying the door you finally opened:

I leap to my feet, heart pounding. “Who’s there?” My eyes dart around the forest, searching for the source of the voice.

285 Ava: Who Are You?

Silence. Nothing but trees and shadows.

“Oh, for the love of-” The voice cuts through the air again, dripping with sarcasm. “Why are you acting like I’m some sort of attacker? You’re the one who barged in here and woke me up.”

I spin in a circle, trying to pinpoint where it’s coming from. The voice is... odd. Not quite feminine, not quite masculine. Young, maybe? “Show yourself!”

“Why does it matter if I’m male or female?” The voice sounds annoyed now. “Honestly, you humans and your obsession with categorizing everything.”

“I’m just trying to figure out who you are,” I say, eyes narrowed as I scan the area. Something moves in my peripheral vision, and I whirl toward the pond.

The dark surface ripples, then bulges upward. My breath catches as a figure begins to rise from

the water.

Slowly, it emerges—first a head, then shoulders, torso, legs. Water cascades off its form as it steps onto the shore. I take an involuntary step back, my mind reeling.

The figure before me is... ethereal. Androgynous. Its skin shimmers with an otherworldly iridescence, like moonlight on water. Hair the color of seafoam falls in waves past its shoulders. Its eyes are the deep blue-green of the ocean, with flecks of gold that seem to dance and shift. It— they?-cocks their head to the side, regarding me with a mixture of curiosity and irritation. “Well? Are you satisfied now that you can see me? Or do you need me to provide a detailed anatomical breakdown?”

I blink, trying to process what I’m seeing. “What... who are you?”

They roll their eyes. “I’m the spirit of this place. Or I was, before it started dying. They gesture at the small patch of greenery surrounding us. “Though I suppose I should thank you for the little bit of life you’ve managed to bring back.”

My mind races, trying to make sense of this. A spirit? Like... a nature spirit or something?

There should be nothing in this world capable of surprising me, yet here I am, sent reeling once- again.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” I say, my voice softer now. “I was just trying to connect with the magic here. Wherever this is.”

The spirit's expression softens slightly. "Yes, well, it's been a long time since anyone's been able to do that. Most just pass through without even noticing."

I take a tentative step closer. "What happened here? Why is everything... dead?"

A shadow passes over their face. The magic is fading. Has been for a long time here withers away."

"But why?" I ask, my curiosity overriding my initial fear.

time. Without it, the

They shrug, a surprisingly human gesture. "Who knows? The ways of magic are mysterious, even to those of us who are born of it.

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285 Ava: Who Are You?

The strange figure moves closer, their head cocked. "You carry the legacy of witches, but have the mark of a wizard. What are you?"

"Me?" Startled, I point at myself. "What am I?"

The way they stare at me leaves me feeling about two inches small. "Yes, you. Who else is here?"

Good point.

"I'm a wolf shifter-"I can see the blankness in their eyes almost immediately. "Uh, a Lycan. But I'm also a witch. Or a wizard. Magician? Something like that."

"They are all the same," they admit, pacing around me as they inspect me like something strange.

I'm not the strange one here, okay. You are! You're the strange one!

But I keep my thoughts to myself.

"No. This is my domain, and you're the strange one here.

Right. They've read my mind a few times now. Should have caught onto that quicker.

"Indeed. Your intelligence seems to be lower than your predecessors. They squint at me. "Witches gave more powerful. Wizards devoted themselves to

back to magic, and in turn gre learning. Magicians had no interest in living with humans, leveraging their abilities for power.

It's amazing how many different answers I've gotten from different people. History is so murky. Everyone has a different view of it, and it's so far removed from current time I'm not sure I'll

ever get a clear answer.

"Then how can you tell the difference?"

They snap their fingers. "That bracelet is a legacy of witches, and your soul bears several wards. Very interesting. Only a wizard would put so much effort into a warded soul. Magicians and witches never practiced with glyphs. It's all in the training, and they never shared.

"I don't understand, I admit, turning as they turn, until the world spins around me, leaving me off balance. "You say they're the same, but then explain how they're different."

"Mother, these children learn nothing" they mutter, finally stopping. Maybe they're dizzy, too. "All humans access the same magic. It's how they learn or what they use it for that creates a difference. Otherwise, you're all the same. Humans with magic."

They pause for a second. "Though, Lycans don't have magic. Are you sure you're Lycan?" "Positive." Kind of. I mean, I have Selene—I can't exactly have a wolf if I'm not, right?

Barring the whole not sharing a body thing, anyway.

"So, they say suddenly, changing the subject without warning. "You could access the sealed magic?"

## **Unshift 286**

286 Ava: Not Yet Ready.

\*Sealed? By the water, you mean?"

"Of course not." They look irritated now, likely by how slow my brain is catching up to their thought process. The seals, girl"

"So, a lockbox?"

"Lockb—you humans have such odd innovations." The way they're peering into my face, it feels like they're tearing apart my memories to educate themselves.

“In a sense, I suppose. It isn’t that easy” They sit.

In the air.

Floating.

Just—there. As if one would lower themselves into a chair, only there’s nothing there.

“Why so surprised?” they ask, tilting their head as they blink owlishly in my direction.

Gesturing toward them, I just say, “You’re floating. In mid—air.”

They roll their eyes again, a surprisingly human gesture for such an otherworldly being. “And you’re standing on the ground. How extraordinary.”

Their sarcasm catches me off guard, and I shake my head, trying to refocus. “I’m sorry. I’ve never seen anything like this before.

“Clearly.” They wave a dismissive hand, changing the subject abruptly once again. “Why are here, girl? This isn’t a place for casual visitors.”

you

Left off—balance mentally and physically, it takes a while to gather the words. “I was... I was trying to focus on a new connection I felt within me. My magic, I think. I didn’t mean to intrude on your, er, world:

The spirit clicks their tongue, annoyance flashing across their ethereal features. “You make quite a habit of coming uninvited, don’t you?”

“Habit?” I frown, confusion swirling in my mind. “What do you mean? I’ve never been here before.

A long—suffering sigh, like I’m an obtuse child they’re obligated to handle. “Not here, specifically. But you have a penchant for barging in where you’re not expected. Grimoire doesn’t like to be disturbed, you know,”

Energy fizzles through my veins, my heart beat rapid and shallow. “Grimoire? You mean my magic book? How do you know about that?”

The spirit’s expression remains settled in perpetual annoyance. “I know many things, girl. Including the fact that Grimoire prefers his peace and quiet. Yet here you are, once again, stumbling into places you don’t belong

“I’m not trying to stumble into anything. I’m just trying to connect with my book. With, uh,

260 Ava: Not Yet Ready

Grimoire?" It makes sense that it—he—would have a name, somehow.

But it's kind of on the nose, isn't it?

"How did someone like you manage a contract with Grimoire? They inspect every inch of me with a curled lip and a slow shake of their head. "Has the world changed so much?"

"How long has it been since you were out in it?" I venture to ask. The spirit must have some experience with the world. The way they roll their eyes and the timing of their humor feels very human. Much more than their appearance.

"Acons, perhaps?" They shrug. "Time is inconsequential.

I have a feeling further questioning will only lead me nowhere. They don't seem interested in a two-way conversation, only in satiating their own curiosity. "How can I reach Grimoire?" The spirit blinks, their gaze sweeping around us. I hesitate, then follow suit, scanning our surroundings. Beyond our small circle of vibrant green, there's nothing but a vast expanse of dead forest. The contrast is stark—life and death separated by an invisible barrier.

But no one else is out there.

"Where is Grimoire, little human thing?" the spirit asks, crossing their arms.

Taken aback, I protest, "I thought you were going to tell me. After all, they went on and on about how Grimoire doesn't like to be disturbed and enjoys his peace and quiet. Wouldn't they know better than me?"

Their eyes narrow. "You're the one who came barging in here. Shouldn't you know where your own book is?"

"I don't know anything about him," I counter. "You seem to know him quite well. I figured you'd know where to find him, too."

The spirit groans, dramatically falling flat on their back in mid-air. It's surreal, watching them float there like they're lying on an invisible bed.

"The future of magic is doomed," they announce to the canopy above, which has parted into a frame of green trees surrounding a sliver of blue sky. "Perhaps I should just set the world ablaze

and start anew."

A chill runs down my spine. This spirit, for all its human-like mannerisms, doesn't seem to have any real empathy for my life. I'm sure it's even worse for a real human.

"Is that... possible?" I ask, unable to keep the worry from my voice.

The spirit's reaction is like something out of a horror movie. They sit up so abruptly it makes me flinch, their eyes burning into mine with an intensity that roots me to the spot.

"Obviously not," they snap. "Or why else would I be stuck in this hellhole?"

Their words hang in the air between us, heavy with frustration and bitterness. I steel myself to request the information again. "Can you help me? You seem to know about Grimoire. How can I reach him?"

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286 Ava: Not Yet Ready

Isn't just a book you can flip open whenever you please. He's... particular

"Particular how?" I press, eager for any information.

The spirit waves a hand dismissively. "He chooses when to reveal himself. If he hasn't shown himself to you yet, there must be a reason."

Wrapping my arms around me, I fight off the frustration edging into my voice. "But I need to contact him now."

"Ah, there it is," the spirit says, a knowing look in their eyes. "The weight of expectation. It's always the same with you humans."

frown. "What do you mean?"

But it isn't like I can't guess.

want the book because Magister Orion told me to. Because it can teach me magic. Because it as use for me.

espite the feeling of welcoming from this string inside of me, have my expectations been the all between us?

hey lean forward, still floating in the air. "Magic isn't about meeting others' expectations, girl. "s about understanding yourself, your place in the world. Grimoire won't reveal himself until ou're ready to see what's already inside you."

**Unshift 287**

## 287 Ava: Seeing Lucas Again

“Ava?”

Lisa shakes me awake, but it takes a few blinks for my eyes to adjust to reality.

“What is it?” My throat is croaky, and I clear it with a few dry coughs.

\*Kellan brought dinner. You’ve been sitting like that for a few hours. I wasn’t sure if I should bother you or not.

My muscles protest as I push myself to my feet, my entire body stiff after hours of stillness. Every joint in my body seems to creak and pop, like I’m twenty years older than I am. Or maybe it’s just the weight of everything bearing down on me.

“Thanks.” I mumble as Lisa hands me a plate with a simple turkey sandwich. The sight of food makes my stomach growl, and I realize I’m ravenous.

i

I take a bite, savoring the simple flavors. It’s nothing fancy, but right now it tastes like the best thing I’ve ever eaten. Lisa watches me, concern etched on her face.

“Did you make any progress?” she asks hesitantly, after depositing the wardstone between us for security. It’s only a ten-foot radius; better to keep it close.

I grimace, swallowing hard. “I’m not sure if what I did was considered

Lisa’s eyebrows furrow. “What do you mean?”

progress.

I take another bite, chewing slowly as I try to gather my thoughts. How do I even explain what happened? The eerie forest, the mysterious pond, the spirit... it all seems so surreal now that I’m back in the real world.

There’s a place I go sometimes. It’s like some sort of magical realm, but it feels kind of like a dream. This time, there was a dead forest and a dark pond. And a spirit.”

Lisa tilts her head. “A spirit? Like a ghost, or...?”

I shake my head. “No, not like that. More like... a guardian, I guess? Of the magic in that place. But I still don’t know where that place was, or why I was there.”

Resting her chin in her hand, she watches me eat. “Well, where were you trying to go?”

“To the book. Well, I wasn’t trying to go anywhere, but I wanted to connect with the book.”

“So doesn’t it stand to reason that it has something to do with the book? That place, and the spirit?”

“No, they said- Wait. Squinting, as if that somehow makes my memories clearer, I think back. The spirit never gave me their name, but gave up Grimoire’s without a second thought. The spirit somehow knew about Grimoire and my connection, and knows a lot about the book—and my attempts to contact him.

Could it be...?

“Son of a bitch, I mutter, scowling at the sandwich in my hands. I want to go back to that place

287 Ava Soon Lucas Again

:: Ash

and demand answers, but my stomach demands more food.

I’ll just have to eat fast.

“What is it?”

Unable to talk around a mouthful of food, I hold up a hand, chewing furiously as I think. If the spirit is Grimoire, then that place is—what? I don’t know. Either Grimoire’s place in that magical realm, or maybe the bond between us?

There are too many things I don’t understand.

Sealed magic. Dead lands. They called it a hellhole. Said they were trapped.

Curious. Very curious.

Swallowing, I tell Lisa, “I think the spirit is the book. I just missed it while I was there.

Lisa convinces me to sleep before trying again, despite the anticipation coursing through my veins. I’m sure she’s right—it would be better to try after a good night of sleep and some renewed energy.

But it doesn’t help the feeling of urgency, like I’m lagging behind as things inexorably move

onward.

I'm always a few steps behind.

But first, Lucas.

My night is spent tossing from side to side, wondering if he'll be happy to see me. Or if he'll suffer through it like an obligation.

A few nightmares, a mediocre breakfast of boiled eggs and toast, and a quick shower later, I'm back at the hospital, meeting a familiar unfriendly face at the front desk.

Kellan isn't here—he's already been sniffing around Lisa this morning before disappearing for whatever he has to do to keep the pack running—but Marcus is, and his presence behind me makes it a little easier to meet the disdain in the receptionist's eyes as she looks me over.

"Oh. You again.

"That's right," I say, forcing maximum cheer into my voice. "Here to visit my mate."

Her face goes remarkably impassive at my words. I'm sure she's cursing my audacity in her head. "Why don't I see if he wants visitors?" she suggests, oozing fake concern.

to snap. 117—hou

I sense Marcus tensing behind me, his energy coiling like a spring ready turning, I raise my hand slightly, a silent signal for him to stand down. This isn't his battle to fight.

"Oh, I'm surprised, I say, injecting a healthy dose of false sweetness into my voice. "Do you do this for every patient under your care when a visitor arrives? Or is there another reason behind your... diligence?"

287 Ava Seeing Lucas Again

called out so directly. I can almost see the gears turning in her head as she tries to formulate a response that won't get her in trouble.

"I'm simply following protocol, Miss Grey, she says, her tone clipped. "We take patient privacy very seriously here."

"I see." I lean forward, placing my hands on the counter. "And does this protocol extend to all visitors, or just me?"

Her eyes flicker to Marcus standing behind me, then back to me. "All visitors," she insists, but I can hear the lie in her voice.

“That’s interesting. I muse, tapping my fingers on the counter. “Because I couldn’t help but notice yesterday that several other visitors walked right in without being questioned. In fact, I don’t recall seeing anyone make a single phone call to check if those patients wanted visitors.”

The receptionist’s face flushes, a mix of anger and embarrassment coloring her cheeks. “I—I don’t have to explain myself to you,” she stammers.

“No, you don’t,” I agree, my voice low and steady. “But you do have to do your job fairly and without discrimination. Unless, of course, there’s a specific reason you’re treating me differently?”

I can feel Marcus shifting behind me, probably itching to step in. But I need to handle this on my own. I’m tired of this. Tired of feeling like everyone’s looking at me sideways. Tired of worrying about not fitting in.

All I want is to see my mate. To be his strength.

I’m his partner, and I need everyone to see that. Even if they don’t like it.

The receptionist opens her mouth, then closes it again, clearly at a loss for words. I press my advantage.

‘Look, I understand you might have your reservations about me. But I am Lucas’s mate, whether you like it or not. And right now, he needs me. So unless you have a direct order stating that I’m not allowed to see Lucas, I suggest you let me througho

For a moment, I think she might actually refuse. Her hands clench on the desk, and I can see the struggle playing out across her face.

Wrapping my knuckles on the desk, I add with a cheerful smile, “Right now, ma’am.”

Her shoulders hunch and her head ducks down, refusing to meet my eyes. “Room three.”

I turn to Marcus, who’s watching me with an expression that might be pride.

“You good to wait here?” I ask him.

He nods. “As you wish, Luna.”

The receptionist behind me sucks in a sharp breath. Yeah, that title is probably a punch in the gut when she tried to play petty tricks just moments ago.

“Thanks, Marcus.

<287

#### 287 Ava: Seeing Lucas Again

Slipping into Lucas' room after a quick knock, I lean against the door, suddenly feeling drained. It's a small victory, but it feels significant. For once, I didn't back down. I didn't let someone else fight my battles for me.

Lucas is sitting up in bed, his broad frame making the hospital bed look almost comically small. His eyes lock onto mine the moment I enter, and I feel a jolt of electricity run through me. Even without his memories, the connection between us is undeniable.

"Hi," I say softly, suddenly feeling shy. "How are you feeling?"

Lucas studies me for a long moment before answering. "Better," he says, his voice a low rumble. That sends shivers down my spine. "You seem worse, though."

I nod, not trusting my voice. There's no recognition in his eyes, no warmth of familiarity. It's like looking at a stranger wearing Lucas's face.

"I'm sorry," he continues, "but I still don't remember you."

Letting out a shaky sigh, I force a weak smile to my face. "Didn't expect that to change so quickly."

"How's the food here?"

There's an empty tray off to the right, and-

"Wait a second." Where's his cast? His sling? His numerous bandages?

#### **Unshift 288**

#### 288 Ava: Healed

Lucas motions toward his arms and legs with a wry smile. "I guess my healing came back with a vengeance."

That's an understatement.

My heart pounds as I rush a few feet forward, stopping short at the foot of the bed as I drink him

In.

Alive. Well. Healed.

The strong alpha I remember, even if he doesn't know me anymore.

"Can L... would it be okay if I looked you over?" All the confidence I projected at that receptionist from earlier is gone, and I'm timid in front of my mate, this man with my heart in his hands.

He surprises me by standing up beside the bed, a low chuckle stirring my heart and tear ducts. into production. A slow circle, arms raised, as if showing himself off.

Steady,

Confident.

No trace of the injuries that had left him bedridden.

The familiar planes of his face soften with a lopsided smile that squeezes my heart. I ache to touch him, to assure myself this isn't another dream that will evaporate like mist.

His golden eyes are clear, no longer marred by the hint of pain. The broad shoulders I once clung to stand straight, unbowed by suffering. His skin is unblemished, no longer marred by recent wounds.

Joy surges through my veins, bright and buoyant. He's here. Whole. Well, almost.

My vision blurs with tears, and I hiccup in the most unladylike manner. "I'm so glad you're better.

The words aren't enough to convey the depth of my joy over his recovery.

Lucas motions for me to sit on the end of the bed. I perch there, hyper-aware of his presence as he settles on the opposite end. The distance between us feels too far, and I wonder if for him it isn't far enough.

His gaze is still that of a stranger, but his words are more friendly than yesterday. "The mate bond must be real. You're the only change in my treatment. I guess my body recognizes it

somehow.

Mate bonds are supposed to help with healing, but we never finalized ours. Still, it feels good to think that my presence has somehow contributed.

My eyes

fix on his hand resting on the bed. I ache to reach out, to feel the warmth of his skin beneath my fingers. But I hold back, not wanting to make him uncomfortable. He may acknowledge our bond now, but he doesn't know me. Not really.

288 Ava: Healed

"If being here helped at all, I'm just thankful to have finally done something for you. My lips quirk. "You're usually the one doing everything for me. It's odd to have the shoe on the other fit He

chuckles. "I can see how that might be strange

Like it's someone else's problem. It hurts a little less knowing he's healing, though. Maybe soon his memories will return. That would be amazing.

Suddenly, Lucas sniffs the air. His brow furrows, a strange expression crossing his face. "Your scent... it's different today. Why?"

Heat floods my face. I cross my arms over my chest, mortified. Whatever it is, he doesn't seem to like it. "I showered before I came, I insist, my voice higher than usual. "I'm clean."

Lucas shakes his head. "No, it's not that. There's something... new."

I bite my lip, trying to think of what could have changed. Maybe the bracelet Dr. Blackwell gave

me?

"Is it this?" Lifting my wrist, I waft the bracelet in the air between us. "It's new."

He leans forward to sniff, then shakes his head. "No. Something else. Earthier."

There's a flash in his eyes, reminiscent of the way Lucas used to look at me. Hungry.

Though I might be wrong. By the way his nose wrinkles and he recoils back just a bit, my guess is that I'm really wrong.

Shit. He doesn't like how I smell.

How can my mate dislike my scent? Such a thing should be impossible.

Even when I hated Lucas, I wanted to bury myself in my scent.

"Sorry. Should I shower again?"

“No,” he says, sounding oddly distant as his nose wrinkles again. “I think it should be okay. What’s your name again?”

My heart drops. “Ava. Ava Grey

“Right. Grey. The Blackwood Greys, right?”

For a second, I’m startled he would remember that—but, of course, Kellan must have filled him in on recent history and the current pack situation. Of course he knows my family. My old pack.

My nod is heavy on my neck. “Beta Grey is my father, yes.

He looks thoughtful, bending his knee to rest his arm against it. Casual. Powerful. Looking way too good for someone who doesn’t want me yet. My body and bond within me yearn to get closer, to snuggle against him, but I shove that urge aside:

The

enemy, he muses. “A curious choice of mate.

“It’s a fated connection. No choice for either of us, I remind him, and his eyes flash.

“Right. I forgot about that”

288 Ava: Healed

Forgot. Like it’s just some random detail... We’re fated.

I have to stop letting these little phrases get me down, but it’s hard.

Scratching at my arm, I realize my itching is back, and that string of connection within me is humming, tugging as if to get my attention.

But I can’t focus on that right now. I’m with Lucas.

“What’s wrong?” he asks me, studying my face.

I’m sure you’re

“Just itchy. Have the doctors said anything about you breaking out of this room? I’m sure desperate to get out of here.

“Right. Desperate. His face shutters, and I wonder what landmine I’ve walked into. “We haven’t talked about it.”

Awkward silence descends. Squeezing my hands between my knees, I try to look anywhere but at Lucas, who stares at me like he's trying to figure out a puzzle.

His intense

gaze sends shivers down my spine. They're pleasurable, at odds with the ache in my heart. I scratch absently at my legs, trying to ignore the growing itch that seems to spread across my skin. The air between us feels charged, heavy with unspoken words and emotions I can't quite decipher.

I know what I'm feeling; the question is what he's feeling. Sometimes I think he's warming up to me. Other times I think he's suspicious of me. It's like walking on a tightrope of emotions. "What do you want from me?"

His sudden question makes me jump. I blink, caught off guard by the directness of his words. "I... what?"

Lucas leans forward, his golden eyes never leaving mine. "You heard me. What do you want from me, Ava Grey?"

The

way he says my name, like it's unfamiliar on his tongue, twists something inside me. There's arousal, and the bond telling me to jump on him, to slather myself in his scent and warmth. Does he not feel any of it? Or is he able to ignore it, to pretend it isn't there?

I want to ask, but I don't want to know the answer.

Swallowing hard, I pull my thoughts back. "I just want your memory to return, I say softly, my voice barely above a whisper. "I want you to remember who you are, who we are to each other. To feel the bond between us."

He tilts his head, considering my words. "And if my memory never comes back? If the bond isn't there? What then? What's your expectation of me?"

The question stalls me in the moment. I've been so focused on getting Lucas's memory back that I haven't allowed myself to consider the possibility that it might never happen. The thought terrifies me, but I force myself to face it head-on.

"I guess that would depend on what you want to do with yourself, I say, choosing my words carefully. "Even without your memory, you're still you, Lucas. You're still the Alpha of the

288 Ava: Healed

Westwood Pack. You still have responsibilities, people who depend on you. But the decision to take up that position is ultimately yours.”

I pause, taking a deep breath before continuing. “But beyond that, it would be up to you. If you decide you don’t want anything to do with me, with us, I... I’d understand. I wouldn’t like it, but I’d respect your decision.”

The words are bitter on my tongue, acid against my throat, but they’re honest. As much as it would kill me to lose Lucas, to have him choose to walk away from what we have, I can’t force him to be with me.

He looks curious. “You’d let me go? Just like that?”

“You’re not a prisoner. You’re my mate, yes, but you’re also your own person. If you decide that you don’t want this life, don’t want me, then... then I’d have to accept that.”

He makes a soft sound I can’t decipher, leaning more comfortably against the head of the bed. “I don’t think I’d do the same in your position. I’d chase you down and force you to remember me.”

My lips quirk. “Yes, that kind of sounds like you”

His nod is slow, considering. “That’s good to know. I’m still me, even if I don’t know me.

## **Unshift 289**

289 Ava: Who He Is

The way Lucas watches me is terrifying,

Terrifying, because there’s finally interest in his gaze.

I don’t want to hold hope, because every time I have even the glimmer of it, he says something that crushes my heart. The way he doesn’t even recognize our fated bond kills me. It’s yearning aching in my chest, wanting me to go to him. To claim him. To shake and scream until he

remembers all the pain and all the joy between us.

Instead, I sit there, scratching more vigorously at my arms, and the string inside of me tugs harder, as if trying to get my attention. I ignore it.

“Your scent.”

Glancing at Lucas, who stops talking mid-sentence, I sniff discreetly in the direction of my armpits. Did I forget to scrub? He keeps talking about my smell.

“Do I stink that bad?”

“It’s getting stronger, he confirms, his voice husky.

Maybe this is his way of getting me to leave again. “Do you want me to go?”

“No.”

Oh. Never mind, then.

My heart dances at that denial, though, raising hope high on a flag pole and waving it at the walls I’ve tried desperately to construct around my heart.

“Tell me what you think of me,” he says, shifting his weight as his eyes never leave me. They’re golden and intense, different from the way he looked at me when I first walked in.

Is he finally recognizing the bond?

That would be great.

Memories wash over me. Lucas’s scent, amber and campfire smoke, fills my senses, and I’m transported back to Cedarwood. Back to when he’d found me, after I’d run away from everything I’d ever known.

“You found me in Cedarwood, far from here, I say softly, my eyes meeting his. “After the Gala. I wanted nothing to do with you, but you stuck around anyway. You were determined, and I was just afraid you’d leave me again. Change your mind at any time. But you never once blamed me for how I reacted.

A small smile tugs at my lips as I remember those early days. “You’d break into my apartment while I was at work. Spread your scent around. It should have been creepy, but... it wasn’t. Somehow.

Lucas’s brow furrows slightly, but he remains silent, listening intently.

“You can be so sweet sometimes, I continue, my voice barely above a whisper. “And awkward.

200 Ava: Who He is

too. It’s endearing, really. The way you bend over backwards to keep me happy, to keep me safe.

My throat tightens as I recall darker times. “You saved me from my family, Lucas. You’re the first person to ever do that.”

The weight of everything he's done for me, everything he's been through because of me, settles heavy on my chest.

"I respect you so much," I admit, my voice cracking slightly. "I can't even begin to understand how you can be so strong, so secure.

in love, especially after... after all the times I pushed

you away.

His golden gaze never leaves mine.

It's not my Lucas, but at least he isn't staring at me like I'm a complete stranger. He's starting to see me, even if he doesn't see his fated mate. It's a start, right?

"It feels like life is forcing me to repay a debt, I say, the words tumbling out before I can stop them. "You were always there, waiting for me to turn to you. And now.... now the tables have turned. It's my turn to wait for you."

I fall silent, my heart pounding in my chest. Lucas grunts, a low sound that reverberates through the quiet room, but I have no idea what he's thinking.

"How'd it go?"

Lisa practically pounces on me as soon as I walk through the door, her eyes shining with optimism and the belief that fated mates trump

all.

Groaning, I melt into the couch, my body shivering at the memory of his eyes burning into me. "I don't know. Every so often, I think he's getting a hint of the bond. Then he says something so casual that just destroys every last hope I've ever held."

Lisa hands me a plate with half a tuna sandwich and a pitiful handful of chips. I raise an eyebrow at her, and she flashes me a sheepish grin.

"I got extra hungry," she admits, shrugging. "Wasn't sure when you'd come home, so I helped myself."

Home. The word hits me like a punch to the gut. Is this really home now? It feels temporary, but our home isn't ours any longer. What does it look like now? I'm not sure I want to know.

I pick at the meager remains of my lunch, my appetite suddenly gone. "It's fine. I'm not that hungry anyway!"

eyes

Despite my less-than-stellar report on Lucas, Lisa's practically bouncing on her toes. Her are sparkling with barely contained excitement, and it's so at odds with the heaviness in my chest that I can't help but eye her suspiciously.

"What's going on?" I ask, narrowing my eyes. "You look like you're about to burst."

Lisa's grin widens, if that's even possible. "Kellan heard from Sister Miriam," she blurts out. "They should be back this evening

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280 Ava: Who He is

My heart leaps into my throat. "Selene?" I breathe, hardly daring to hope.

Lisa nods vigorously. "Yep! Your furry friend is coming home."

A genuine smile spreads across my face. The thought of seeing Selene's husky face again, of burying my face in her soft fur and feeling that comforting presence in my mind, makes everything else fade away.

"When?" I demand, suddenly full of nervous energy. "What time? Did Kellan say anything else?"

Lisa holds up her hands, laughing. "Whoa, slow down! I don't know the exact time, just that it'll be this evening. Kellan didn't give me many details."

Tempering my excitement is an impossible task. I need to see her. To know she's okay.

"So," Lisa says, plopping down next to me on the couch. "What do you want to do while we wait? We could try to summon that book again, or maybe practice some of your magic?"

"The book, I decide, not needing even a second to choose.

Lisa eyes my plate. "Maybe you need more food first."

Shaking my head, I settle into a cross-legged position on the floor, smiling in thanks as she tosses a throw blanket over my lap. "Shake me awake if Selene gets here."

"You know I will."

**Unshift 290**

290 Ava: Imbalance

“You’re really bad at taking care of yourself, aren’t you?”

The little bit of life I’d managed to bring back to the forest is already dwindling, but the spirit- Grimoire, I’m pretty sure—is floating in the air when I open my eyes, lying on their side with their head propped on their hand.

“Excuse me?” What a welcome.

“Not eating. Don’t even notice you have a fever. Wild magic inside of you.” They shake their head. “You’ll implode at this rate.”

A fever? My forehead feels cool to touch. “I don’t have a fever.”

“Your hand is as hot as your—never mind. Not my problem if humans want to kill themselves.” They roll over, presenting their back to me.

“What do you mean by wild magic? And why would I implode?”

The spirit waves their hand dismissively, not even bothering to look at me. Their indifference is frustrating.

Last time, they spoke with me after I connected with the magic hidden here.

Fine. If that’s what it takes to get answers, I’ll try again.

Once I focus, the hidden magic pulses beneath the lake, calling my attention.

I touch my forehead discreetly. It feels cool to me, but the spirit’s words nag at the back of my mind. Could I really have a fever?

Pushing the thought aside, I concentrate on the magic thrumming beneath the water, the faintest whisper of it grazing the land. Reaching out with my senses, I try to coax it to life once

more.

At first, nothing happens. The forest remains silent, the air still. But then, slowly, I feel a warmth spreading from my fingertips. It travels up my arms, settling in my chest before radiating outward.

The golden glow returns, seeping from my hands into the ground. It spreads like veins through the earth, bringing color and vitality.

As the magic flows, I become acutely aware of my body. There's a strange heat building inside me, different from the warmth of the magic. It's uncomfortable, almost feverish. Maybe the spirit's right.

I open my eyes, hoping to see the spirit more willing to engage. To my surprise, they're hovering closer now, their ethereal form shimmering with an intensity that wasn't there before.

"Interesting," they muse. "You're more persistent than I gave you credit for."

"Does this mean you'll answer my questions now?"

The spirit tilts their head, regarding me with those unfathomable eyes. "Perhaps. Though I

200 Ava imbalance

wonder if you're asking the right questions."

I bite back a frustrated sigh. Why can't magical beings ever give straight answers? Is it against some freaking supernatural law they hold deep in their souls? It's ridiculous.

"No law. It's just how I am.

Damn. I forgot they can read my thoughts. "Okay, then what should I be asking?"

"Why don't we start with why you're here?" They gesture to the revitalized forest around us. "You seek more power, yet you don't understand the power you already possess.

"I'm s

still learning. My teacher—I was separated from my teacher. I'm on my own right now."

you humans.

"You can learn without a teacher, if you pay attention. That's the problem with Never paying attention. There are no ornate rules to magic. Do you need lessons to breathe?" Magic seems a little different from breathing, though.

"Is it? It doesn't feel that way to me."

Well, they're a spirit, and I'm a human-

"You have a lot of sass in your head for someone asking a favor.

I clear my throat, trying to keep my thoughts out of my head. "Sorry"

The spirit nods, a knowing look in their eyes. “You don’t understand what you’re trying to control, and therein lies the danger. Wild magic, untamed and uncontrolled, is a force of nature. It responds to your emotions, your desires, but without proper guidance, it can consume you. It isn’t like electricity, flowing only within the conduits they’ve installed. It’s everywhere!”

“When you say consume—I was told I needed a teacher so I wouldn’t kill myself and everyone around me.”

“Ah, yes. That has happened to you humans quite a bit, hasn’t it? They’re rotating in the air, spinning slowly until they’re upside down, seafoam-colored hair reaching the ground. They look ridiculous, despite the grim words and solemn expression.

“Magic requires balance, they explain. “What you’re doing now is drawing power from the world. around you, but you’re not giving anything back. It’s like trying to fill a cup with a hole in the bottom. Eventually, the pressure will become too much”

My mind flashes back. They’d mentioned witches gave back. Is this what they meant?  
“Yes”

“Then how do wizards control it?”

The spirit’s eyes gleam with an otherworldly light as they consider my question. Their body continues to rotate slowly in the air, defying gravity in a way that makes my head spin if I focus on it too long.

“Wizards,” they begin, their voice taking on a slightly mocking tone, “they think they’re so clever. They’ve found a way to cheat the system, or so they believe.”

Hean forward eager to understand “What do you mean?”

200 Ava Imbalance

“They use glyphs and wards as a magical dumping ground. When they feel the pressure building up, they funnel that excess energy into these constructs. Imagine a pot of boiling water. Instead. of turning down the heat, they just keep adding more pots to catch the overflow”

The image forms in my mind. “But doesn’t that just move the problem somewhere else?”

“Precisely. The spirit’s eyes flicker with what I can only interpret as approval. “They’re not addressing the root cause. They’re just shuffling the excess around. Their wards are fantastic

things, though.”

I consider this for a moment, trying to wrap my head around the concept. “So, they’re not actually in control of the magic? They’re just redirecting it.”

\*In a manner of speaking, yes, the spirit nods, their upside–down position making the gesture look comical. “They’ve created an intricate system of magical plumbing, if you will. But they don’t truly understand the source of the flow. They mime turning on a faucet.

I tilt my head. “What about magicians? Are they different?”

The spirit’s form shimmers, and suddenly they’re right–side up again, hovering cross–legged in the air. “Ah, magicians. They have their own tricks.

I wait, sensing there’s more to come.

“Magicians have found another way to cheat,” the spirit continues. “They’ve discovered that certain rare jewels can act as reservoirs for magical energy. So, they spend their time stockpiling magic into these gems.

My eyes widen. The concept is fascinating. “Like magical batteries?”

“An apt comparison,” the spirit nods. “They pour excess magic into these jewels over time, storing it up. Then, when they need to perform a particularly powerful spell, they draw upon this stored energy.

A twinge of admiration for their ingenuity flickers through me. “That sounds... impressive”

They ch

“Oh, it is. To the uninformed observer, it makes them seem incredibly powerful, They can unleash massive amounts of magic in a single burst, drawing gasps and awe from those around them.”

“But?” I prompt, sensing there’s a catch.

“But it’s still not addressing the fundamental issue,” the spirit says, their voice taking on a more serious tone. “They’re treating magic like a finite resource to be hoarded and expended, rather than understanding its true nature as a flowing, living force:

I nod slowly, trying to process all this information. “So, both wizards and magicians are finding ways to work around the problem of magical buildup, but neither is really solving it?”

“Exactly, the spirit confirms. “They’ve bigger picture: