

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted #Unshift 291 - Read Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted Unshift 291

Unshift 291

291 Ava: New Bond

Leaning forward, I stare at the spirit, who seems nonplussed by the intensity of my gaze.

"What?" They sound defensive for the first time.

"You aren't fond of wizards or magicians, are you?"

They scowl. "I am not fond of humans, human:

"I told you, I'm Lycan. Kind of.

"Hmm." They don't sound convinced. I guess I can't blame them. It isn't like I can shift.

"You're Grimoire, aren't you?"

In between one blink and the next, they're now standing in front of me, feet firmly planted against the ground and taller than before. How tall? Seven feet? Eight?

Are those flames I see flickering over their skin? Yes. Yes, those are.

Gone is the ethereal, androgynous being. In their place stands a towering figure, flames dancing across skin that seems both solid and intangible. His hair is as red as blood, his eyes an unnerving silver, and he's unmistakably male.

I keep my eyes on his face.

His hand shoots out, gripping my arm with surprising strength. I try to pull away, but his hold is unyielding.

"How did you know?" His voice, deep and undeniably masculine now, rumbles through me.

I swallow hard, fighting the urge to struggle against his grip. "It seemed pretty obvious in retrospect." My eyes dart to his face, taking in features that seem both ancient and ageless. "Why do you look and sound different now?"

A smile spreads across his face, transforming his stern expression into something almost warm. "You're simply seeing me for who I am, Ava Grey"

I glance around, momentarily distracted by the transformation of our surroundings. The clearing, once bordered by decay and darkness, now teems with vibrant life. Lush greenery. stretches as far as I can see, pulsing with an energy that makes my skin tingle.

"Let go of me," I say, tugging at my arm again.

His grip doesn't budge. "I can't. I must maintain contact with you for the transfer.

That sounds a little unnerving. "Transfer? What transfer?"

"I redouble my efforts to shake off his hand, twisting my arm and pushing against his chest with

my free hand. It's like trying to move a mountain.

"Stop struggling" Grimoire says, his tone both commanding and oddly gentle. "You'll only hurt yourself.

"Then explain what's going on," I demand, forcing myself to stand still despite the panic creeping

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up my chest. "What transfer are you talking about?"

His eyes, now a swirling mix of silver and white, bore into mine. "The transfer of knowledge, of course. You came seeking answers, did you not?"

I nod hesitantly, not entirely sure I like where this is going. "Yes, but-

"Then be still and listen, he interrupts.

The urgency in his voice gives me pause. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart. "Okay. I'm listening

Grimoire's expression softens. "Good. Now, close your eyes and open your mind. This may be uncomfortable."

A surge of energy courses through his hand into my arm. It's like being struck by lightning, every nerve in my body lighting up at once. I gasp, my knees buckling under the onslaught of

sensation.

Grimoire's other arm wraps around my waist, supporting me as images and information flood my mind. Centuries of magical knowledge, secrets long forgotten by the mortal world, pour into me in a torrent I can barely comprehend.

I see the rise and fall of civilizations, the ebb and flow of magic throughout history. I witness the triumphs and failures of countless witches, wizards, and magical beings. Through it all, Grimoire's presence is a constant, observing and recording.

As quickly as it began, the transfer ends. I sag against Grimoire, my head spinning from the influx of information. "What... what was that?"

"A glimpse of what I am," he replies, his voice echoing strangely in my ears. "A fraction of what

I've seen.

I blink, trying to focus on his face. The world seems sharper somehow, colors more vivid and textures more defined. There's an undeniable pull between us now, and the string within me is thick and sturdy, filled with a warm presence that I now recognize as Grimoire.

He sets me on my feet, though he keeps a steadying hand on my shoulder.

My head hurts.

It feels like it's splitting apart.

"Yes, it will be like that for a while. My apologies."

A sudden chill wracks my body with violent shivers. The warmth from earlier is gone, replaced by an icy cold deep in my bones.

Grimoire brushes a hand over my forehead, his brows tugging together in concern. "Your fever has worsened. I'm sorry, I should have been more careful."

My teeth chatter as I wrap my arms around myself, trying to step away from him, despite wanting to lean into the warmth of his body. "W—why did you do that without asking me first, then?"

Veunought this hand. Aun Did you not sama kama ta

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He looks like a wounded puppy.

Frustrated, I point out, "What bond? I was trying to summon a magic book, not bond with you. Whatever you are. He's old and magical, but he's definitely more than just a book.

Grimoire points between us, his finger tracing an invisible line. "Our souls are linked now. It's a profound connection, one that-

"How many souls am I supposed to be linked to?" My voice is eerily calm, a stark contrast to the turmoil inside me.

He looks offended, drawing himself up to his full height, which has now shrunk to a more normalized six-foot-something. "Are you bonded with others?"

"Selene and Lucas are the other pieces of my soul," I reply without hesitation.

Grimoire puffs out his chest, looking both proud and slightly miffed. "Well, I am now also a part of your soul. A rather important part, I might add."

I raise an eyebrow, recalling our first conversation. "I distinctly remember you saying Grimoire likes his peace. This doesn't seem very peaceful to me."

He rolls his eyes dramatically. "Who wants more peace and silence after hundreds of years of not being around another living soul? Certainly not me."

"I guess that makes sense, I mutter, still trying to wrap my head around this new development. Grimoire's face lights up, a beaming smile spreading across his features, the new bond within me humming with happiness. It's then that I truly understand—the feelings coursing through the new connection inside me? That's his true self. The sarcastic, grouchy exterior is just a facade. Before I can process this revelation, Grimoire envelops me in a bear hug. His warmth seeps into me, chasing away some of the chill. "I've been so lonely" he sighs, his voice muffled against my "hair. "I was worried a new master wouldn't care about me."

I stand frozen for a moment, unsure how to react. This overly affectionate side of Grimoire is unexpected, to say the least. Slowly, I bring my arms up to return the hug, patting his back awkwardly.

"Um, it's okay," I say, my voice slightly strained from the tight embrace. "I do care. I just wasn't expecting all of this."

Grimoire pulls back, his hands resting on my shoulders. His eyes, swirling with silver and white, search my face. "I apologize for the abruptness of our connection. I should have explained more before initiating the transfer,

I nod, still feeling a bit overwhelmed as I try to shove him a little further away. “Yeah, that would have been nice. So, what exactly does this connection mean? What am I supposed to do now?”

He finally releases me and takes a step back, though one of his hands grasp mine, swinging my hand between us in a childish fashion.

The standoffish spirit is a cuddlebug. Noted.

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“The connection allows us to communicate more easily. You’ll be able to access my knowledge and abilities, and I’ll be able to guide you on your magical journey.”

“But what about Selene and Lucas?” I ask, worry creeping into my voice. “Will this affect my bonds with them?”

Grimoire shakes his head. “No, this connection is different. It complements your existing bonds rather than competing with them. Think of it as adding another instrument to an orchestra—it enhances the overall harmony without diminishing the other parts.”

I can see it in his face. He wants to hug me again, looking all pathetic and neglected.

Very much like a puppy.

It’s like I’ve acquired a new pet. A lap dog, to be precise.

Somehow, I feel like I’ve bitten off a hell of a lot more than I can chew with this new bond of mine. “Okay. So, I have a magical book spirit linked to my soul now. That’s normal, right?”

A chuckle escapes Grimoire’s lips. “Normal is relative, especially in the magical world. But yes, for a witch of your potential, it’s not uncommon to form such a bond.”

“So...” I squint. “You are the book, right?”

He nods. “In simple terms, the book is one part of me. A gift for the witches who yearned to understand the true nature of magic in the world.

“So when I go back, the book will be...?”

He frowns. “I’m right here.”

“No. The actual, physical copy of the book. The one I’ve touched. Where will that be?”

“Oh. Looking thoughtful, he shrugs. “Anywhere you want me to be? You can bring me into existence at any time. Though, I prefer this form. Being book is quite boring. Nothing to see.”

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292 Ava: Renewed Connection

When I open my eyes this time, Lisa’s napping on the couch. Grimoire, in book form, is on the ground before me.

Seeing him in that form, a question comes to my mind—something I’d forgotten to ask him in that strange mental—magical dimension. Why did he send me to Magister Orion and the fac Ward, if he had little respect for wizards?

That thick cord within me, the new bond linking me with Grimoire, vibrates intensely vening almost irritated. Without thinking, I stroke the cover of the book, trying to calm down this dog—like spirit within.

Once my fingers contact the cover, I can hear his voice inside my head, sounding like a sulky child and not a hulking spirit with flames covering his skin. Odd how they didn’t burn me though.

I have respect for wizards, he snaps peevishly. They’re just idiots sometimes.

Yeah. So respectful.

Respect comes in many forms.

I laugh. My mind has been so quiet without Selene; having Grimoire in it is a different feeling but it helps soothe the loneliness.

Lisa jerks upright at the sound of my voice. “Ave?” Her groggy voice makes me smile.

“Hey. You look tired.”

“Sorry. Just dozed off while thinking...” Her eyes drop to the book I’m touching “Is that it?! Did you do it?”

Bouncing off the couch, she practically slides across the floor, up on her hands and knees over it “It even looks old and magical. Holy shit, Ava. You did it!”

Tell her to stop breathing on me.

Ignoring Grimoire, I take a moment to reach out with my senses, trying to see can get even a glimmer of Selene anywhere. - ©.

Do you need my help?

Glancing at the book beneath my fingertips, I raise my brows. "Are you able to?"

"Able to what?" Lisa asks, reaching out to run a finger down the worn leather cover.

Tell her to stop touching me and I will

"He doesn't want you to touch him."

She jerks her hand back, mortified. "Oh. I'm sorry"

If you pour magic into our bond, I can amplify.

Okay. I get the English, but it's like reading directions putting together a dresser. They make no

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sense without pictures

Just do it

Closing my eyes-

Why do you do that? You can't see if your eyes are closed.

Snapping my eyes open, I scowl at the book. "It's so I can concentrate.

Can't you concentrate with your eyes open?

"It helps when they're closed."

But then you can't see.

"Are you talking to the book?" Lisa asks hesitantly.

I nod. "He's in my head, as long as I'm touching the book, I think"

As our bond strengthens. I will be able to speak to you at longer distances.

I'm not sure if that's a great idea. I wonder how he and Selene will coexist in my head. It feels like

a pretty small space for three minds.

It is remarkably small he agrees, in a tone that sounds distinctly derogatory.

It is, he confirms.

Scowling. I yank my hand off the book, only for that new connection inside of me around in frustration.

“Not if you’re going to insult me,” I warn him.

It stills, with the distinct sense of remorse. It’s odd how I can sense it so clearly.

to bounce

A sharp knock at the door startles me from my thoughts. I glance at Lisa, who shrugs, looking as confused as I feel.

*Ill get it.” I say, pushing myself up from the floor, sensing the frustration from Grimoire when I

leave.

I open the door just enough to peek out, surprised to see Vanessa standing there. Her usually calm demeanor is gone, replaced by a harried expression that makes my stomach twist. The guards outside my door are also gone.

“Vanessa? What’s wrong?”

She shakes her head, her eyes tight around the corners. “You need to come with me. Now

The grim tone of her voice stops any questions from forming on my lips. Whatever’s happening, It’s serious.

“Lisa,” I call over my shoulder, “I’ll be right back.

I don’t wait for her response before stepping out and closing the door behind me. Vanessa’s already moving, and I hurry to keep up with her brisk pace.

As we head in the direction of the hospital, my heart clenches. Lucas. It has to be Lucas. What’s

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wrong? He was fine just a while ago.

The bond with Grimoire vibrates with frustration. Right, I left him behind. I'm sorry, I think, hoping he can hear me even though I'm not touching the book. I'll be back soon.

I'm not sure if he receives the message, but the vibration settles somewhat. It's fascinating how different Grimoire's presence feels compared to Selene's. Selene, while having her own space in my head, is also an extension of myself. Grimoire feels distinctly separate, the bond between us similar to the fated bond in my chest, but different even from that.

We pass the front desk without challenge, a strange tension in the air. There's something odd in the way people look at me, and I realize after a moment that everyone's female.

Where did all the men go? There were plenty of male staff this morning.

Stranger and stranger still.

Vanessa knocks on Lucas' door and opens it, ushering me inside before closing the door behind.

1. me.

Bizarre.

My eyes are immediately drawn to the bed where Lucas lies.

He's awake, propped up against a mountain of pillows. His face is pale, a sheen of sweat glistening on his forehead. But it's his eyes that catch my attention—they're fever-bright, locked onto mine with a hunger that's familiar.

"Lucas?" My heart beats faster, wondering if he's finally recognizing me.

"Ava," he says, but the intonation is all wrong. It doesn't sound like how he usually says my name.

So, not my Lucas. But then why is he staring at me like this?

"Are you oka—"

Before I can finish my question, he lunges off the bed. His hands grab my wrists, slamming me back against the closed door. The impact knocks the breath from my lungs, and for a moment, I'm too stunned to react.

"Lucas, what's wrong?" My heart pounds like a sledgehammer in my chest. This isn't like him at all. Even without his memories, he's never been violent toward me.

His face is inches from mine, golden eyes wild and feverish as they roam over my features. Sweat trickles down his forehead, and I can feel the heat radiating off his body. His hands on my wrists are scorching, like brands against my skin.

“Why?” he asks, his voice rough and desperate.

Confused, I try for reason. “Why what? Lucas, you’re burning up. We need to get you back to bed. You’re sick.” Wolves don’t get sick. Why is he so hot?

But he doesn’t move. His grip tightens, and I wince. “Lucas, you’re hurting me.”

He doesn’t seem to hear me. His eyes bore into mine, searching for something. “What did you do to me?!”

: Renewed Connection

“Do what?” I ask, bewildered.

His scent envelops me, familiar yet different. There’s an undercurrent of something wild, primal. Intense.

Dangerous.

“You did this,” he growls. “I can feel it. Ever since you came here, it’s been getting worse. Your scent—what’s wrong with it?”

I shake my head, fear creeping up my spine. I know my mate would never hurt me. The trouble is - he doesn’t feel the mate bond like I do. Not anymore. “I didn’t do anything, Lucas. I swear. You’re not well.”

Where is Vanessa? She should be in here.

He leans in closer, his nose skimming along my jaw, down my neck, to nuzzle against the crescent scar beneath my ear. I shiver, caught between fear and an unwelcome spark of desire. This is wrong. So wrong.

But the fated bond in my chest is ecstatic, begging me to press against him.

“Your scent,” he murmurs. “It’s driving me crazy. I can’t think straight. I can’t sleep. I can’t eat. All I can think about is you.”

My breath catches in my throat. Is the mate bond reasserting itself?

“Lucas,” I say softly, trying to keep my voice calm. “I know you’re confused, but it’s probably the fated bond between us. It isn’t something I did to.

it's just us. You're my mate. And I'm yours."

He pulls back slightly, with a soft growl. "Mine?"

But then he shakes his head. "No," he says. "This isn't just a connection. This is... more. It's like you've crawled under my skin. Like you're in my blood. What kind of magic is this?"

Magic? My heart skips a beat. Is this to do with my-

He dives against my neck again, breathing deep and growling. "You smell like an omega."

My heart trips.

Omega.

Shit. Of course.

There were no guards outside my door. No males in the hospital. Every male within range has probably been dragged away. No wonder Vanessa looked so stressed.

How stupid am I? I must be going into heat. He'd mentioned my strange scent earlier. I haven't had any suppressants.

Grimoire had even mentioned my fever.

"Lucas, I need you to listen to me.

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293 Ava: Re-Establishing...

"Lucas!" I call out sharply, shoving against his chest. My heart races, desire coursing through my veins as fear dissipates. He isn't violent. He's just affected by my heat,

And as much as I'd love to have it take over us both, I can't let that happen. I know how it feels to regret decisions made in the moment. I don't want Lucas to feel that way about us.

He blinks, shaking his head as if clearing fog from his mind. Stepping back, he murmurs, "I'm sorry. I'm not sure what came over me"

"It's okay, I say softly. "I think our bond is trying to reassert itself, now that I'm here. It's what makes the most sense in this scenario, anyway.

My bond yearns toward him in my chest, and it's physically painful to not step forward and nuzzle into his chest.

Lucas nods slowly, his brow furrowed. "That makes sense. The way I'm drawn to you is overwhelming." Even as he says that, he lifts his hand to brush his fingers against my cheek. I can't help but lean into his touch, craving the connection we once had. His skin feels like fire against mine.

I want so much more than this.

"Why are you so hot?" he asks, concern lacing his voice.

I blink, confused. "Me? You're the one burning up."

Lucas shakes his head. "No, your cheeks are flushed. You feel warm!

As if on cue, a chill runs through my body, making me shiver. Lucas' eyes narrow.

"You have a fever," he says sharply. "Why?"

I can't help but laugh, though it comes out a bit strained. "Pot, meet kettle. You're not exactly the picture of health yourself."

His frown deepens, and I sigh. There's no point in hiding it. "I think... I might be going into heat. And it's affecting you, too." I don't remember Clayton being hot like this, though. Is it because of our bond?

Lucas freezes, then leans forward, his nose skimming along my neck. A soft growl rumbles in his chest, sending shivers down my spine that have nothing to do with fever.

"What do you usually do?" he asks, his voice husky. "For your heat?"

I swallow hard, memories of Clayton flashing through my mind. "I, uh... I slept with another alpha during my last heat. I rush to add, "But that's not an option now."

Lucas' eyes flash gold as his head snaps up, a possessive snarl escaping him. "Damn right it isn't." Despite everything, I can't help but smile at his reaction, a flicker of triumph dancing through the bond in my chest. Even without his memories, some part of him recognizes me as his.

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But then confusion flickers across his face, as if he's surprised by his own vehemence. He takes a step back, running a hand through his hair.

"I'm sorry" he says again. "I don't know why I'm acting like this."

I reach out, touching his arm gently, watching him shiver beneath my touch. "It's okay. It's the bond, and my heat probably isn't helping matters."

Lucas suddenly steps forward with a curse, his hands clamping around my hips. His touch sends electricity through my body, and I have to fight to keep my knees from buckling. He stares down at me, his eyes dark with desire.

"You're going to have to leave if you keep smelling like this," he growls, his voice low and husky.

point

My heart races, and I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks. I'm acutely aware of every po where his body touches mine, and it takes all my willpower not to lean into him. "Vanessa dragged me here, I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. "She threw me into the lion's den.

Lucas stills at my words, his grip on my hips loosening slightly. His eyes search mine, and I can see the conflict raging within him. He's fighting against his instincts, against the pull of our bond.

"Do you want to leave?" he asks, his voice strained.

n every

I shake my head, unable to lie to him. The thought of walking away from him now, when fiber of my being is screaming for his touch, is unbearable. But I know I have to give him a choice. He doesn't remember me, doesn't remember us. It wouldn't be fair to take advantage of his current state.

"I will if you want me to," I say softly, even as my heart aches at the thought.

Lucas's eyes darken further, and his fingers flex against my hips. The movement sends a jolt of pleasure through me, and I have to bite my lip to keep from moaning.

"I don't want you to leave," he says, his voice rough with need. It's not a request or a suggestion. It's a statement of fact, delivered with all the authority of an alpha.

I suck in a sharp breath, closing my eyes as a familiar fire spreads through my veins. It's like my body remembers his touch, even if his mind doesn't remember me. Every cell in my body is singing, calling out for him to claim me.

With monumental effort, I open my eyes and meet his gaze. "You have to keep your hands off me if you want me clear-minded," I tell him, my voice shaky.

A slow, predatory smile spreads across Lucas's face, sending shivers down my spine. "Who said I wanted either of us clear-minded?" he asks, his voice a low rumble that I feel in my bones.

My breath catches in my throat. The look in his eyes is pure hunger, and it takes every ounce of self-control I have not to give in to it. I want nothing more than to lose myself in him, to let our bodies remember what our minds have forgotten.

293 Ava: Re-Establishing...

"The heat is talking," I warn him, even as my hands slide of their own volition over his chest. "This isn't your decision. You're affected by-"

"I've wanted this from the moment I saw you," he interrupts with a growl, yanking me against him as he buries his face against my neck. "You smelled like heaven. Vanilla. Honey. Just a little bit of orange. I wanted to taste you. Touch you. Claim you."

He did?

I distinctly remember how he first looked at me. Politely disinterested. Like a stranger. "I thought you-"

Lucas's lips crash into mine, cutting off my words and thoughts in an instant. The world narrows to this single point of contact, his mouth hot and demanding, invading my world. My mind, so full of questions and doubts just moments ago, empties in a rush, leaving nothing but pure sensation in its wake.

His kiss is both familiar and new. The shape of his lips, the taste of him—it's all as I remember. But there's a desperate edge to it, an exploration that's new, like he's never kissed me before.

He's devouring me, nipping at my mouth and demanding submission.

I melt into him, my body responding on instinct. My hands slide up his chest and around his neck, pulling him closer. The heat of his skin burns through the thin fabric of his shirt, igniting a fire in my core that threatens to consume me.

Lucas growls into my mouth, the sound vibrating through my entire body. His hands, which had been gripping my hips, now roam freely. One slides up my back, tangling in my hair and angling my head to deepen the kiss. The other dips lower, cupping my ass and pressing me firmly against

him.

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294 Ava: His Kiss

I gasp at the contact, feeling every hard plane of his body against mine. The bond in my chest pulses with joy, singing at the reconnection. It feels right, like coming home after a long journey. T Lucas takes advantage of my parted lips, his tongue sweeping into my mouth. The taste of him explodes on my tongue. I moan, unable to hold back the sound of pure pleasure.

Our kiss becomes more frantic, more desperate. It's as if we're both trying to make up for lost time, to reclaim what was taken from us. My fingers tangle in his hair, tugging lightly. He responds with a low growl that sends shivers down my spine.

I'm dimly aware that we're in a hospital room, that anyone could walk in at any moment. But I can't bring myself to care. All that matters is Lucas, his hands on my body, his lips against mine. He breaks the kiss, but before I can protest, his lips are on my neck. He trails hot, open-mouthed kisses down my throat, pausing to nip at the sensitive spot where my neck meets my shoulder, his tongue tracing my crescent scar. I cry out, my head falling back to give him better access.

"Lucas," I breathe, his name a prayer on my lips.

He responds by sucking hard on my pulse point, surely leaving a mark. The possessive gesture sends a thrill through me, diving straight into the core of me. Even without his memories, some part of him knows I'm his.

His hands slide under my shirt, calloused palms skimming over my heated skin. Every touch leaves a trail of fire in its wake. I arch into him, craving more contact.

"Ava," he murmurs against my skin, his voice rough with desire. "My Ava."

Those two words shatter what little control I have left. I pull his face back to mine, kissing him. with everything I have. All the longing, the fear, the joy of having him back—
I pour it all into the

kiss.

Lucas responds in kind, his hands tightening on my waist as he spins us around, walking me backward. Probably to the bed, but somehow we end up against the wall, instead.

He presses against me, leaving no space between us. I can feel every hard line of his body, every tremor of desire that runs through him.

This position is so intimately familiar, it nearly brings tears to my eyes. Just like our first time together.

I wrap one leg around his waist, pulling him impossibly closer as I grind against him, gasping at the friction as his hips pump against me. Even through our clothes, I can feel how much he

wants me.

It isn't enough.

His hands slide down to my thighs, and in one smooth motion, he lifts me. I wrap both legs around him instinctively, my arms tightening around his neck. The new position brings us even

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205 Ava: His Kiss

closer together, and we both groan at the contact.

Lucas breaks the kiss, resting his forehead against mine. We're both breathing heavily, our chests heaving in unison. His eyes, when they meet mine, are molten gold, filled with a hunger that makes

my insides clench with desire.

"I don't remember you," he says, his voice low and husky. "But my body does. Every part of me is screaming that you're mine!"

I nod, unable to form words. I know exactly what he means. Even when my mind was telling me to be cautious, my body was yearning for his touch.

He leans in, his lips brushing against my ear as he speaks. "I want to remember you, Ava. I want to know every inch of you, to relearn every sound you make when I touch you."

A shiver runs through me at his words. "Yes," I breathe, tightening my legs around him. "Please, Lucas."

He captures my lips again, the kiss slower this time but no less intense. It's a promise, a declaration of intent. His hands start to roam again, sliding under my shirt and up my sides.

I arch into his touch, my own hands exploring the broad expanse of his back. The strength in his muscles, the heat of his skin. I want more. I want to feel his skin against mine, to trace every new scar and learn his body all over again.

Lucas seems to read my mind. He breaks the kiss long enough to tug at the hem of my shirt. I lift my arms, allowing him to pull it over my head. The cool air of the hospital room hits my heated. skin, making me shiver.

His eyes roam over my newly exposed skin, darkening with desire. "Beautiful," he murmurs, before dipping his head to trail kisses along my collarbone. One hand slides lower, dipping into the waistband of my pants, sending electricity through me.

"Put your legs down. Spread them."

The coolness of the wall against my back contrasts with the inferno raging in my body. My fingers tighten in his hair as I try to keep myself upright, lowering my leg to the ground, following his every whispered order.

When his hand dives between my legs, his fingers brushing against that slick core of me, throbbing and aching for his touch, I almost sob from the pleasure. "More. Harder

"God, Ava. You're so wet," he says, his voice a gravelly growl against my ear. "You're soaking for

me."

My cheeks heat at his words, but I can't bring myself to care. All I can do is whimper as he slides. a finger inside, curling it and seeking out the spot that makes sparks burst behind my closed eyelids. I tilt my head back, exposing the line of my throat as pleasure shoots through me..

His lips are right there, and he nips at my pulse again, gentler this time. A needy sound escapes me, part plea, part surrender. My body is his to do with as he pleases. I just need more.

294 Ava: His Kiss

I feel him smile against my skin. "So eager. So demanding, my little mate," he says, his voice filled with dark amusement. "You're going to be the death of me."

"Only if you don't kill me first," I mutter, my grip on his shoulders tightening.

He chuckles, the sound vibrating through me.

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295 Ava: His Touch

Lucas pulls his hand from between my thighs, leaving me bereft and aching for more. I whimper at the loss of contact, my hips bucking forward in a desperate attempt to regain it. He chuckles darkly, the sound sending shivers down my spine.

“Patience, my little mate, he murmurs, his voice low and husky. “I’ll give you what you need.”

Before I can respond, he’s kneeling before me, yanking my pants down until they puddle at my feet. Exposed. Vulnerable.

But when Lucas looks up at me, his eyes filled with desire and hunger, I feel powerful.

A kiss to the inside of my thigh. Lips, hot and soft. I gasp at the contact, my fingers tightening in

his hair.

A trail of kisses. Waves of pleasure. And desire that grabs my thoughts and twists them into a delicious tangle.

When he reaches the apex of my thighs, he pauses, his breath tickling my skin. “You’re so beautiful, Ava,” he says, his voice filled with awe. “I could spend hours worshipping your body.”

I whimper at his words, my hips bucking forward involuntarily. He chuckles again, and the vibrations of the sound go straight through me. Without warning, he’s pressing his mouth there, his tongue darting out to taste me.

The sensation has me crying out, back arching, legs shaking as I shove hard against the wall at my back, trying to stay upright. He sucks and bites at my sensitive flesh, his tongue darting in and out in a rhythm that leaves me breathless.

The heat he brings is an inferno raging through my veins, so quick to bring me to the brink Every touch has our bond delighted, every groan as he tastes me sending pleasure on a direct circuit to my clit, and my entire body’s gone boneless.

One of his hands slides up my belly, sending electricity through every inch, his fingers splaying as he holds me against the wall. The other grabs my thigh, sliding it over his shoulder.

“Relax” he rumbles, and I whimper.

“I can’t-

“Shh. Relax, little mate. I’ve got you.

I'm standing on the very tips of one foot, the other hanging over his shoulder, terrified I'm going to slip at any second but unwilling to give up the ecstasy between my legs.

-I can feel myself getting closer and closer to the edge, my body trembling with the effort of

holding on.

Lucas seems to sense my impending orgasm, his movements becoming more urgent as he sucks and bites at my clit, laughing when I tangle my fingers more firmly into his hair.

"I can't-"

295 Ava His Touch

"You can."

He dives more firmly between my thighs, one hand still pressing against my abdomen to pin me to the wall. With his other, he slides two fingers inside me, curling them and hitting that spot that brings

me to the gates of heaven. I cry out his name, my hips bucking wildly, teased by the climax just beyond my reach.

But Lucas doesn't stop. He keeps licking and sucking at me, his fingers moving in and out in a relentless rhythm. I can feel it building, my body coiling, my calf spasming as my legs tense.

"Lucas!" His name is barely more than a gasp. "I can't... I can't!"

He chuckles darkly, the sound sending shivers down my spine. "Oh, you can, my little mate," he says, his voice filled with dark amusement. "You can take so much more."

He draws out my response with each flick of his tongue, holding me on edge, hovering close to the climax I so desperately crave. I can barely stand, my calf muscles trembling with strain, threatening to give out from under me as I use the wall to support my weight.

It's too much, yet not enough. I want to fall, to sink to the floor and let him continue his delectable torture, but his hold on my body keeps me upright, pinned against the wall with his fingers curled inside me.

I cry out, arching my hips as his fingers thrust deep, seeking to find that spot again, his tongue never ceasing its relentless assault. "Lucas! Please, I need-"

"I know, little mate. His hot breath fans against my skin. "You've been so patient. I'll give you what you need."

His tongue swirls around my clit, circling it, teasing it, while his fingers thrust faster, harder, seeking to give me what I need.

With each swirl of his tongue, each thrust of his fingers, the coil inside me tightens, the pressure building until I'm sure I'll explode. I can feel the climax bubbling up inside me, waiting to be unleashed.

But he's determined to edge me closer, drawing out the exquisite tension, never letting me crest the wave of ecstasy.

"Lucas, please, I beg, threading my fingers through his hair, holding him to me. "Please, you said you would..."

His chuckle vibrates through his chest to my sensitive flesh, sending bolts of pleasure straight to my core. "Then come, little mate, he rumbles, his voice thick with desire. "Come for me."

Why?

Why is that single command everything? It electrifies me, causing my back to arch, my hips to buck, my world to narrow to the sensation there.

His tongue flicks my clit, his fingers curling again, finding that perfect spot, and the dam breaks. I shatter into a million pieces, crying out his name as the wave washes over me, something deep inside me howling in delight. Pleasure surges through me, bright and fierce, tightening every

295 Ava: His Touch

Lucas continues to lick and suck gently, drawing out my pleasure until I'm a whimpering, boneless mess, sliding down the wall to the floor. Gently, he gathers me in his arms, cradling me against his chest as he kneels beside me, his fingers gently stroking my sensitive skin.

"We aren't done yet, he whispers, and I shiver.

"I need a minute." I need a lot of minutes, actually. Shit. He hasn't even been inside me yet—I can feel that emptiness, the ache for him, for more. But my legs are worthless. There's no way I can get up from here.

He laughs, the sound all dark promise. "You get thirty seconds.

Fuck. The way I clench down there at the sound of his voice—I'm not sure I'm going to survive this heat.

Unshift 296

296 Lucas: Her Touch

My world has been nothing but shades of gray since the moment I opened my eyes, co

A life I don't recognize.

Unfamiliar faces. Voices. Scents. Relentless pain.

Concerned friends, but can I trust them? Are they allies, or enemies playing a dangerous game? Crazy stories of a world gone mad, and endless silence where half my soul should reside.

It's as though I've been living in a haze of simmering rage. At the world. At those who proclaim friendship. And this mysterious, alleged mate of mine, who comes in smelling like sex and hope, with wide blue eyes and the golden hair of an angel.

She's too perfect.

I'm drawn to her. Every inch of me clamors to soothe the grim lines around her lips, to take away the burdens weighing down her tiny shoulders. Some part of me insists that she's mine and I need to keep her, to hide her away from everyone's view until she's so wholly mine she can't even breathe without me.

I want to possess her.

My lips brush against the crescent scar on Ava's neck. The constant tension in my muscles cases, replaced by a warmth I can't explain. Her scent envelops me, that mix of honey and vanilla that feels like coming home..

I'm so tired. Tired of second-guessing every word, every touch. Tired of searching for hidden motives behind kind gestures. Tired of feeling like a stranger in my own skin.

But here, with Ava in my arms, the world makes sense again.

Her soft gasp as I trace the scar with my tongue sends a shiver down my spine. My hands tighten on her waist, pulling her closer. I want to memorize every curve, every freckle, every

scar.

"Lucas," she whispers, her voice trembling.

I lift my head, meeting her gaze. Those blue eyes, wide and vulnerable, hold a universe of emotions. I want to understand everything about her.

"I'm here," I murmur, though I'm not sure if I'm reassuring her or myself.

My fingers trail up her spine, feeling the delicate bumps of her vertebrae. She's so small, so fragile in my arms. Yet there's a strength in her that calls to something primal within me..

I've been living in a world of shadows since I woke up. Everything's been muted, distant. But Ava... she's a burst of color in my grayscale existence. A ray of sunlight breaking through storm clouds.

For the first time since opening my eyes to this unfamiliar life, I feel anchored. Grounded. The constant buzz of suspicion in the back of my mind quiets, replaced by a certainty I can't explain.

206 Lucas: Hor Touch

This is right. She is right..

The entire world might burn, but she's my everything.

I know it now, deep in my bones.

She feels so damn good in my arms—right where she belongs. Her warmth seeps into me, chasing away the chill of uncertainty, of a life in limbo.

I'm ravenous for her. Insatiable. Like a starving man at a feast, I'm desperate to gorge myself on

her.

Her skin is silk under my fingers as I smooth her hair away from her face. My thumb brushes her cheek, reveling in the softness. Everything about Ava is a temptation I can't resist.

That gasp again as I lower her onto the bed. Her eyes are as deep and dark as the ocean as she stares at me.

Willing,

Waiting.

Soaked with desire. With longing.

It takes everything in me not to just take what I need from her. What my body is screaming for. Her hair tumbles over my arm as I lean down. Her lips are so damn sweet. So soft. The moment they touch mine, something in me ignites. This kiss is a brand, searing into my very soul.

I could spend a lifetime just kissing her. Exploring every contour of her mouth. Tasting her. Memorizing every nuance of her.

But my body has other ideas. Hands of their own, they wander, mapping her curves. Exploring what's mine to claim. Ava arches into me, a soft moan caught between our lips. The sound goes - straight to my cock. I ache for her. For the feel of her tightening around me. For the moment when we're so tangled up that I don't know where I end and she begins.

This is where I'm meant to be. Here, in this bed, with her.

It's like the rest of the world falls away, leaving only her. This moment.

My mouth trails down her jaw. She shifts, restless beneath me, the movement causing the bed to creak. I burn to feel her under me. To watch her expression as I sink into her. To hear her cry out my name.

Her hands slide under my shirt, nails scraping lightly against my back. Everything in me tightens at that touch.

"Why am I naked when you still have your clothes on?" Her whisper against my lips has me groaning.

"I thought you needed to regain your energy. But I'm no fool; it takes two seconds to yank my shirt over my head.

The way she looks at me, hungry and heated, has that primal part of me racing to the forefront. A low growl rumbles in my chest.

2001 Lucas: Her Touch

"I'm energized:

The growl builds in my chest, a bass rumble of need and possession as I yank her toward me. Ava's fingers dig into my shoulders, her lips opening under mine as I plunder her mouth. This kiss isn't soft or gentle—it's a claiming. A branding.

Mine.

I can taste her need, her desire. This want is a living thing, snarling and wild between us. I want to devour her. Brand her as mine. Mark her so every male with a mile's radius knows she's

taken. 2

Taken by me.

The heat between us is consuming me. Consuming her. Leaving nothing behind. We're just two fuses in this fire.

I feel the spark as her fingers brush against my neck. A jolt shoots through me, straight to my cock, straining and aching for her touch.

"I can't hold back, little mate, I warn her, with the last vestiges of sanity at my disposal. "Then don't.

Those two words make up the sexiest thing I've ever heard.

The beast within me roars to the forefront, demanding what's mine.

Teeth bared, I tear my mouth from hers, leaving a trail of wet, open-mouthed kisses down her neck. The crescent scar on her neck is a target, a brand that calls to something dark and primal within me. I lick and nip at the delicate skin, growling as her head falls back, baring her throat to

1. me.

"Lucas," she pants, her fingers tightening in my hair.

Claiming.

Possessing.

I want to mark every inch of her. To leave my scent on her, a declaration to any rivals that she's taken. Mine.

The rough fabric of my pants abrades my skin as she tugs them down. The air is cool against my heated flesh. But then her hand wraps around me, the heat of her palm like a brand. My back arches, driving me deeper into her fist.

A groan rips from my throat. Her other hand joins the first, stroking me. Her touch is hesitant at first, then determined. Hungry.

A mate's touch.

My hips jerk involuntarily, seeking more. My hands splay on her thighs, feeling the soft skin there. I burn to explore every inch of her. To learn every response. Every sound she makes.

Mine.

Unshift 297

297 Ava: Marked

There's something different in his kiss, in the way his fingers dig into my skin. Every stroke of

hands has his eyes half-closed, a low groaning rumble spilling from his throat.

The power I hold with my touch leaves me fascinated, even as a heat deep within urges me to lie back and let him claim me.

Exploring the velvet heat of him is thrilling, but he yanks my hands off his cock and flips me over, trapping me beneath the weight of his body.

"Stop," he growls against my ear. "Or this'll be over before it even starts."

My laughter is breathless and quickly turns into a moan as his lips trail kisses down my back. There's a fire building inside me, spreading through my veins like a drug. I'm so sensitive to his touch, the pleasure is almost painful.

I want to claw my skin off. To meld into his body until we're one. I want him to kiss everywhere. at once. He doesn't have enough hands for the desire exploding through me, the wetness pooling between my legs.

His hands grip my hips, fingers digging in hard, probably leaving bruises. I shove my ass back, wanting contact. Wanting him inside.

I can't handle any more teasing.

His whisper is hot and dark against my ear. "You like this, don't you? Knowing how much I want you?"

My throat is dry, and I can barely think straight as the bond between us pulses with need. "Yes," I rasp out. "Please, Lucas."

The side of my neck is on fire, wanting his attention. Wanting his kisses, the warmth of his tongue, his teeth. Desperate to be marked.

A low curse escapes his lips, and then his hand is around my throat, leaving my heart fluttering in my chest. The strength in his fingers is a thrill, as if my life is in his hands.

His knee pries my legs apart as he yanks my hips further back, his cock nudging against my entrance. "Mine," he grits out.

"Yours," I whisper, arching my head back and thrusting my neck further into his grasp. His fingers tighten for a moment, making me shudder beneath his grasp.

“Mine,” he growls again, and I whimper as he thrusts into me, filling me with a harsh, primal need that matches my own.

I can’t think beyond raw, blazing pleasure, like fire raging beneath my skin. The way he holds onto my throat, the way into the tender skin of my hips—it makes me ache

his other hand d

for his mark. His bite.

For the pain and pleasure.

I need it.

1. wa. Marked

I want to be his in every sense of the word. I want him to dominate me—to take what’s his. I can’t speak, I can barely breathe as our bodies merge and my desire burns hotter than ever before.

I love the possessive way he holds me, the way he growls against my neck as our bodies find a brutal rhythm. His thrusts are hungry and desperate, just like mine. He fills me, stretches me, sears every inch of my body with his need.

I can feel his teeth graze my neck again, a promise of what’s to come. “Ava,” he grunts, his voice raw, and I know he’s struggling to hold back. “I need—fuck, I need to=

I can barely hear him through the blood pounding in my ears, through the exhilarating joy of the bond that’s screaming for him to mark me. “Please, Lucas. Please. Take me. Make me yours.”

His body tenses above me, every muscle strained as his control snaps. With a low, guttural snarl, his teeth sink into my neck, claiming me as his mate.

It’s blinding—the pleasure and pain merge into something indescribable. I can feel his teeth dragging across my flesh, the searing fire of his mark, the way it burns.

My back arches off the bed, my body trembling, every nerve screaming, and it feels like I’m flying apart. His name tears from my throat as the world shatters and reforms around us. I’m drowning in sensation, in the bond that’s crying out for completion.

In our bond. finally whole.

It’s not just lust and desire anymore—it’s a deep, unbreakable link. Our souls are intertwined,

and I can feel him as surely as I feel myself. The emptiness in my head shatters as the warmth of his presence intrudes.

And something else. The faint sense of something missing finally returning. A voice I don't recognize, but unmistakable in its source.

His wolf surges forward with a deep growl, and I can feel his golden eyes in my head as Lucas slams into me again, pleasure coming now from both mind and body.

Mate, his wolf rumbles, and I cry out.

I can't even think as he pushes me further and further, the primal need taking over as the pieces of our bond settle into place. It's like the world explodes around us, my back arching as I cry out

his name.

I don't even realize tears cover my face until he spins me around, wrapping holding me tight as I

sob into his chest.

Everything is just... too much.

My mind and heart are too full.

Lucas strokes my hair, soft whispers I can't quite decipher pouring out of him. I can feel our combined presence still reeling from what just happened, a whole new depth added to our bond. as I breathe in his warmth.

I feel so exposed and vulnerable, but I don't want him to let go. I need his touch, his scent, his closeness.

207 Ava. Marked

His wolf is right there too, warm in my mind, nuzzling against us both. I can feel his adoration. and love, and it sends another burst of warmth through me.

Mine, his wolf says, his voice deep and rumbling. My mate.

A new presence in my mind finally completes that last bit of us, soothing the overstimulation of this new bond, sliding in with a curious atmosphere.

Ava? Selene's voice has my heart flipping with joy. I see you've finalized the bond.

Lucas goes stiff. "That voice—is that your wolf?"

“Selene. Yes.”

Glad I didn’t get here a few moments ago, Selene mutters. That would have been awkward.

A laugh bubbles up in my chest. Are you almost here?

Almost. Soon. She sounds annoyed, and I can distinctly sense Lucas’ wolf trying to get her

attention.

The presence is fading, and I smile at Lucas. His wolf isn’t gone. The relief I feel is overwhelming.

“I wonder where mine is, Lucas says, making the smile freeze on my face.

“Where your what is?”

“My wolf.”

He shifts to sit against the head of the bed, pulling me more comfortably into his lap as he strokes my hair.

“You can’t hear him?” He was just talking in my head, though. I heard him. He was there.

“No. He’s gone.”

“But-” I try reaching in my head, but his wolf’s presence has faded. Selene, can you sense him?

Of course. He won’t stop bothering me now. She sounds resigned.

Lucas can’t hear him.

So I’m hearing.

“Can you still hear Selene?”

He shakes his head. “No. It was just for a moment. Everything’s quiet again in my head.”

I’ll be there soon, Ava. Just make sure you’re both dressed when I get there.

Unshift 298

298 Ava: His Wolf

Sister Miriam doesn't accompany Selene—thank God, because while I convinced Lucas to get dressed, the room smells like sex and pheromones.

The heat beneath my skin has dissipated, though. I'm not sure if that's normal, or if there's worse to come. Either way, with my neck marked by Lucas, at least I'm no longer a danger to the other shifters. My pheromones should only affect my mate now.

The relief from that knowledge has my shoulders so much lighter; I hadn't realized how stressed

the thought of heat made me all this time.

Seeing Selene's silver husky form slip through the door, my heart is full near to bursting. Her presence in my mind is great, but her physical presence eases something inside of me.

Selene's lost a little weight. The pristine white of her fur is dulled with what seems to be flecks of dried mud. But her bright blue eyes are sparkling with joy as she bounds forward, vaulting into the bed to roll and wiggle her body against the both of us.

It's my first time seeing her give Lucas affection, but he doesn't seem surprised at all, even lifting his hand to rub her ears and give her a sweet little hug.

What happened between them when I was gone?

He's not so bad when you get to know him.

Selene's nonchalant words has my eyes narrowing. Not so bad? Get to know him?

"Who are you, and what did you do with my wolf?"

Don't be impertinent. Selene snorts in my direction, wiggling further into Lucas' lap and headbutting him until he scratches behind her ears. He gives good ear scratches. You should ask

for some.

Yeah, I'll get right on that.

Well, I suppose you have other things you'd prefer he scratch.

"Selene!"

She sneezes in my direction, tail thumping as Lucas rubs across her fur with vigorous affection, looking for all the world like the queen of huskies accepting the attention that's her due.

"When did you guys start getting along so well?" Not sure if I'm jealous or not, I watch Lucas with a distinctly sulky feeling. I want them to get along—I do—but Selene's my wolf, isn't she? "Did we not get along well before? Lucas seems surprised as Selene licks his hand, flicking her

ear at me.

"She hated you.

"Well, she likes me now."

The distinctly smug feeling emanating from Selene feels almost like a challenge.

I worked hard not to let him know for you would know

298 Ava: His Wolf

Scooting closer into Lucas' side, I shove at Selene until she's half off his lap. "Thanks, Selene. I appreciate it:

Way to get between a wolf and her mate, Selene mutters.

"Your mate? He's my mate."

Our mate.

"Still mine, though."

Selene bares her teeth at me.

"What's going on?" Lucas wraps his arm around my back, stroking my hip in a familiar manner that has my heart filling with joy.

"We're arguing over whose mate you are."

He seems startled by that one. "Aren't I your mate?"

"Exactly."

Selene jerks her head around to stare at him with cold blue eyes, her tail no longer thumping and muzzle wrinkling with displeasure.

And mine.

“You’ve done a complete one—eighty on your reaction to him.” Reaching out to pet Selene, I’m not offended when she gives my hand a pretend snap before nuzzling into it.

I changed my mind.

High praise, indeed.

His wolf, she says suddenly, changing the subject. He’s weak. He can’t break through the barrier

himself.

“Wait—hold on. What barrier?” Selene’s words have me straightening in Lucas’ arms, putting aside our childish banter for a moment. “Is that why Lucas can’t hear him?”

Correct. Lucas has some sort of barrier in his mind. It’s blocked out his memories, but also his wolf.

“Why? How? How do you know about it?”

His wolf told me. I couldn’t hear him before, but the bond between us- and she sounds oddly disgusted at that, considering how affectionate she now is with Lucas—makes it so he can reach

Questions swirl in my head. I need to tackle them one at a time.

“Selene... I asked you a long time ago what your problem with Lucas is. I think it’s about time you explain.

Ugh.

She sounds like a teenager being told to do their chores.

“You do, kind of

Selene groans, resting her head on Lucas’ knee. I don’t know how to explain it.

But I can sense the lie in her words.

Lucas, to his credit, stays quiet, watching us both.

His wolf is a presence familiar to me, Selene finally admits, sounding as if I’m dragging the words out of her. I knew him in my past life.

Honestly, I've forgotten—more than once—that Selene once lived long ago and retains some of

the massacre, when

those memories. How long has it been since she's talked about it? 50 and retains some of

Vanessa woke me up to my own personality flaws, I think.

Selene had been quiet for days, saying she didn't have all the memories she thought she did. And she hadn't spoken much of them ever since.

It didn't seem very important at the time. There was always something else to think about or focus on. My magic, for example.

I stay quiet, sensing that she's thinking things through.

It is not my first time being mated to that wolf, Selene admits, sounding rather sour. He rejected the bond in our last life. Mated to another she—wolf.

My heart constricts at the thought of Lucas mating someone else.

It was another time. Another life.

Still—I can't help but stare at Lucas, who seems uncomfortable at the intensity of my gaze.

"Did I do something?" His brows draw together in confusion. "Are you upset with me?"

"No, I lie. Well, it isn't exactly a lie. I'm angry at this Lucas—wolf Selene's telling me about. My Lucas, the one here in front of us today, would never.

He rejected us, but he came back. He didn't choose another wolf.

Yes. He has proven himself. But Selene still sounds a little bitter. He is separate from his wolf. His human side was never a part of our bond before.

"Right. Because Lycans came before shifters. "So you're still angry about it?"

Wouldn't you be? Selene's tail thumps hard as she snarls. He mated her in front of me, as I reeled from the pain of his rejection. If it wasn't for the pain, I would have tore his throat out. And hers,

too.

Lucas winces, grabbing his head in a sudden gesture, and Selene nuzzles against his leg. Her concern flows through our bond.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine. Just had a stabbing pain for a second. His eyes are tight, his teeth clenched, but he gives me a smile anyway. “It’ll go away”

Probably his wolf. He’s very upset. He’s insisting he would never reject me, but he doesn’t have the

208 Avar His Wol!

Reaching out, I rub Selene’s ears, trying to soothe her past hurt. It takes a little more concentration to speak in my head, but I don’t know how much of this to share with Lucas. It isn’t my story; it’s Selene’s. Don’t judge him based on the past. He’s in a whole new life now, isn’t he? He isn’t the same wolf who made those decisions. Though, I’m not sure how that works. For one to remember their past life, and the other to be blissfully ignorant of the pain he inflicted...

What a strange dynamic.

No wonder she had such strong feelings toward Lucas’ rejection, even when he came back groveling.

I know. My wolf sounds exhausted. I’ve been trying all this time. For your sake.

“I’m sorry I didn’t realize.”

No need to apologize. Selene leans her head into Lucas’ hand as he strokes her fur. I no longer recall many details. Only the pain and anger. Some of the many memories that have disappeared.

She still sounds confused when she mentions her memories.

“Are you still losing memories?”

I don’t know. Things can be murky when it comes to the past, but I still remember some things. It no longer feels as real as it used to. Almost like I’ve only ever lived this life. She sounds frustrated now. But never mind that. His wolf is struggling, and he won’t leave me alone.

“What do you think we can do about that?” Feeling terrible for forcing Selene to relive frustrating memories, I follow along with the change in topic as smoothly as I can.

We need to recover his memories.

Unshift 299

299 Ava: Lucas is Alone

Lucas watches us both, calm despite only hearing one half of our conversation.

Grabbing his hand, I give a gentle squeeze to show I'm still paying attention to his presence.

"Do you know how?"

you!

Selene's idea is a tall order. It isn't like amnesia has some sort of cure.

The dhampir has an idea. We can talk to her about it.

Wow. I'd forgotten about Sister Miriam entirely. Between Lucas and now Selene's return...

My thoughts are interrupted when Selene suddenly darts out of her comfortable position to shove her nose into my chest, sniffing intensely.

Showing mild irritation, Lucas grabs her by the scuff and yanks her away. To my surprise, Selene merely slinks low in submission as her ears tilt in my direction, blue eyes hard and suspicious. What's that scent?

Slapping my hand over the new mate mark, right next to my crescent scar, I ask defensively, "What scent?"

Lucas sniffs at me. "You smell fine to me."

There's something new, she insists, pawing at my leg. What is it? What did you get into?

"I didn't get into-

The string near my magic tugs, and I pause. "Oh. Maybe it's that."

"What?" Lucas nuzzles into my neck, brushing his lips against the raw skin of my mate mark. "Is something wrong?"

"No. Selene can just sense something I almost forgot about. Sorry, Grimoire. "Actually, I-

The string yanks again, almost painful in its insistence, and I pause. This isn't a safe place to mention him. "I'll tell you both later." Where it's safe, I add silently to Selene, wishing Lucas could hear me. Wait. Shouldn't he be able to...?

"When?" he asks, answering my question. I guess he can't hear me. I'll have to ask Vanessa. Is it because I haven't been brought into the pack?

"When you're discharged home." I pause. "To the place I'm staying, I guess. Is there another place you'd go? Do you know?"

He shakes his head.

"Okay. Then when they discharge you and I bring you home."

You can tell me now, Selene points out..

Later. Let me focus on Lucas first.

She whines and rubs her head against his knee.

He seems to understand, because his hand squeezes mine and he changes the subject. "The

should be home soon."

The way he stresses the word home has my stomach flip-flopping. We've shared a sleeping space before, but we haven't necessarily cohabitated.

Though, there's Lisa—so I guess it isn't exactly the same. Especially with one bedroom. But still.

"The sooner the better," I agree. "I don't like being apart. Most of our time as mates has been spent away from each other. It's high time that ends.

I have a semi-teacher now in the form of Grimoire. My magic seems stable-ish. We're all in hiding due to the new-found apocalypse. As dire and terrible as it is, maybe it'll finally afford us both a little time to deepen our bond with each other.

Silver linings and storm clouds, I guess.

Lucas's arms wrap around me, pulling me close as I melt into his embrace. The warmth of his body and the steady thrum of his heartbeat bring me that elusive peace, strengthening our connection.

Oddly, I feel none of the frenetic desire of my last heat, content to just nuzzle into Lucas' arms like this without needing more.

The mark helps.

Right. That would make sense. Lucas' body seems to have lost its feverish temperature as well.

A low whine breaks the silence, followed by the insistent press of fur against my leg. I crack open an eye to see Selene trying to wedge herself between us, her tail wagging with hopeful enthusiasm.

"Really?" I mutter, shifting to accommodate her bulk. "It's just like having a real dog."

Selene's ears flatten against her head, and I feel a wave of indignation through our bond. I am not some common canine, she huffs, her mental voice dripping with disdain.

Lucas chuckles, the sound rumbling through his chest, vibrating against my head. His hand reaches down to scratch behind Selene's ears, and her eyes close in bliss despite her attempts to maintain her aloof demeanor.

"Don't be too hard on her, Lucas murmurs, his voice soft and tinged with affection. "Selene's the only reason I've stayed sane in this room."

The admission sends a rush of warmth through me, and I feel Selene's joy and pride surge through our connection. Still, she maintains her air of nonchalance, as if Lucas's words mean nothing to her. But I know better. I can feel the depth of her emotions, the way his acknowledgment soothes an old wound.

I run my fingers through Selene's fur, marveling at the complexity of our situation. My wolf, my mate, and me—all tangled together. Only his wolf is missing.

He's howling in my head about it.

I bet.

"I'm glad you had each other, I say softly, meaning every word. The thought of Lucas alone in

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200 Ava: Lucas is Alone

taking care of him, Selene."

She huffs again, but I feel her pleasure at the recognition. Someone had to look after him, she replies, her mental tone softening. He's important to us both.

A chuckle breaks out at her words. As if she would have ever admitted such a thing just weeks. ago.

A knock sounds at the door.

Selene's ears perk. It's our healer.

"Come in, I call out.

Vanessa enters, no longer looking tense and harried as her eyes touch on my neck before meeting my gaze. "Looks like you two made the best of your time together.

Heat rushes to my cheeks, but I nod as regally as I can manage. How are you supposed to act when people walk in knowing what you did? The smell is probably still in the air. On our skin. Everywhere.

God, I hope she can't smell all of it.

And whoever was out there probably heard...

God. This is horrifying.

I mean--no, she doesn't know the details. But anyone can take a look at the mark on my neck and know what we were doing in here.

Whose idea was it to have sex in a hospital?

Terrible idea.

I was not made for this kind of public scrutiny.

Lucas doesn't seem affected by this situation at all, merely nodding at Vanessa, his posture aloof and guarded.

I'm taken aback by the sudden tension radiating from him. This is Vanessa. Why would he react so defensively in her presence? Even if he doesn't have any memories with her, he should have been told she's one of his people.

He doesn't remember her, Ava, Selene's voice echoes in my mind. To Lucas, everyone here is a stranger--even those who were once his closest friends and allies. Even his mate. Can he trust someone simply because they say he can?

Shit, I hadn't really thought much about that. I was so focused on me, on him not recognizing me, that I didn't think how it must have been for him with everyone.

Unshift 300

300 Ava: Present Her as Luna

How could I have forgotten, even for a moment? Lucas has lost everything—his memories, his sense of self, even his wolf. And here he is, surrounded by unfamiliar faces, hearing whispers of betrayals by his own pack.

The pack he can't remember. Can't hear.

My heart aches. How terrifying and isolating it must be, to wake up in a place you don't recognize, with people claiming to know you, to care for you, when you can't remember a single thing. The vulnerability, the constant state of wariness—it must have been exhausting.

I glance at Lucas, really seeing him now. The slight furrow between his brows, the tightness around his eyes, the way his muscles are coiled. He holds tension in every fiber of his body, carrying this burden alone, while I've been too caught up in my own emotions to understand what he's going through

No wonder he didn't react well to me coming around and telling him all about how we're mates. It's just noise at that point, isn't it?

I reach out, gently tapping his arm to get his attention. When he turns those intense golden eyes: on me, I lean in close, my lips nearly brushing his ear as I whisper, "Vanessa can be trusted. I trust her with my life."

I feel the change in him almost immediately. The tension in his muscles cases, just a fraction, but it's there. He doesn't relax completely—I doubt he's capable of that right now—but there's a subtle shift in his demeanor.

Vanessa's eyes widen slightly, and I know she's sensed the change too. Her gaze flicks between

1. US.

"How are you feeling, Lucas?" Vanessa asks, her voice gentle and professional. "Any lingering pain or discomfort?"

Lucas shakes his head. "No pain. Fever's gone. His voice is gruff, but not cold.

She glances toward me. "The fever came from the proximity to your mate's heat. Now that the mating mark has been applied, it shouldn't be quite so extreme. We did evacuate all unmated males once we realized her heat was approaching..."

Evacuate. Wow. It makes me sound like a natural disaster.

Though, thinking of how my heat had affected even Clayton... Okay. I get it.

“Thanks, Vanessa. Would have been nice to get a heads–up, though.”

She hesitates. “A heads–up... on your own heat, Luna?”

For the first time, the title almost feels like it fits. Maybe it’s the mating mark on my neck.

But her question itself makes me snap my mouth closed. How am I supposed to admit that I didn’t realize my heat was coming up again? I should have been on high alert, knowing that we didn’t have suppressants around any longer.

200 Ava: Present Her as Lund

Selene snorts, having gotten the general gist of the situation from my head.

Vanessa shakes her head, but lets my lie stand. “My apologies, Luna. However, as lovely as it is to see you, I’m here with a purpose.”

The seriousness in her voice has me sitting up a little straighter. “What is it?”

Her eyes flick toward Lucas, who inclines his head in her direction. “Speak.”

The order in his words is firm, sending a vague thrill through my body.

“Our wolves have returned from the recent evacuation, but there is a little unrest among the pack. I believe it would be in our best interest to proclaim our Luna’s position. Tonight”

I watch Vanessa carefully, feeling Lucas tense behind me. His reaction sends a ripple of concern through my body. I squeeze his hand, hoping to offer some reassurance.

“What do you mean by proclaiming my position?” I ask, my voice steady despite the flutter of nerves in my stomach.

Vanessa’s eyes meet mine, her expression serious. “The Alpha would present you as his Luna to the pack. It’s a formal recognition of your status and role within our community.”

I nod slowly. Normally, I’d imagine such an event would be a grand affair, filled with ceremony and celebration. But given the current state of the pack—displaced, uncertain, and missing far too many of its members—it hardly seems appropriate to make a big production of it.

“Usually, a Luna’s ceremony is quite an elaborate event,” Vanessa continues, echoing my thoughts. “However, given our circumstances, we believe a more subdued approach would be

wise.”

As she speaks, my mind drifts to the recent conversation with Kellan. His worried words about potential alpha challenges echo in my memory. With Lucas still disconnected from his wolf... My skin crawls.

We have to avoid that level of discontent among his people.

I glance at Lucas, studying his face. His jaw is set, tension visible in the lines around his eyes. He doesn't look pleased with this suggestion.

“This would put Ava in danger,” he says, his voice low and firm. “As an official pack leader, she would be a target.

“She's already a target,” Vanessa counters. “Everyone's aware she's your mate. This would be a great way to boost morale, and cement loyalty among the guards assigned to keep her safe.”

His concern for my safety warms my heart, but I can't help feeling a surge of determination. His pack needs stability, needs to see strength in its leadership. And if I can provide that, even in some small way, Isn't it my duty to do so?

Before Lucas can continue his objections, I squeeze his hand again and turn to Vanessa. “I think it's a great idea, I say, my voice stronger than I expected.

I'd spent so long avoiding responsibility. Putting my position in the pack in the hands of its

300 Ava. Present Hor as Luma.

members, wanting them to approve of me, to want me as their Luna.

There's no time for that anymore.

I need to keep my mate safe.

Lucas stiffens beside me, clearly caught off guard by my quick agreement. I can almost feel the protest forming on his lips, but I slide off the bed and out of his arms.

Standing on my own two feet seems a little silly, but I need him to understand. I don't want to be protected any longer. I want to be the one saving him. Saving all of them.

Somehow.

“Lucas,” I say softly, turning to face him. His eyes meet mine, a storm of emotions swirling in their golden depths. “I’m ready to step up. For you and for the pack. You’ve been waiting for this, even if you don’t remember it.”

The words hang between us, heavy with meaning. I see the conflict in his expression—the desire to protect me warring with the understanding of what the pack needs. The pack he doesn’t remember.

His ties to these strange wolves is almost nonexistent, but his identity as an alpha is bone-deep. He must understand what it means.

This isn’t just about us anymore. It’s about the entire Westwood Pack, a community that’s been through hell and back. They need hope, need to see that their leaders are united and strong. And if I can provide even a fraction of that strength, I have to try. At least until Lucas is whole again.

“Are

you sure about this? Lucas asks

torn.

I nod, offering him a small smile. “I am. We’re in this together. You’ve been my strength. Now it’s time for me to help you.

Even if he doesn’t know everything happening, I know he’s aware. He knows his wolf is missing. He understands life as

a wolf shifter. An alpha without a wolf is vulnerable.

I can see that understanding in his eyes, feel it in the bond between us.

The tension in his shoulders eases slightly, and I feel a wave of relief wash over me.

“Alright” he says finally, turning back to Vanessa. “We’ll do it. But I want every possible

precaution taken. Ava’s safety is paramount. The way the orders slip out of him is so reminiscent

of the past.

Vanessa nods, a hint of approval

arrangements.

I in her eyes. “Of course, Alpha. We’ll make all necessary

