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Unshift 301

301 Ava: Let Selene Be Known?

All the necessary arrangements keep Vanessa and Kellan busy.

Someone manages to procure some sort of white, wispy dress that Lisa says will make me look like an angel, but I think looks more like something I'd wear on my honeymoon.

Definitely not something I should wear in public.

"Lucas won't like it, I predict, scowling at how much of my skin shows beneath the sheer fabric. "Hell, I don't like it."

Lisa squints. "I can see your bra. I wonder if we can source a sexy one."

"This isn't an ad for lingerie. I'm supposed to be presented as Luna, not as the Alpha's whore." Yanking off the flimsy excuse for a dress, my lip curls in distaste. "Who brought this over?" Lisa shrugs. "Some woman. I don't really know the pack well enough to say who

A frown deepens on my face as I ball up the dress and shove it back into the bag it came in. "Well, whoever she is, she's got terrible taste."

We still have the small pile of clothes Kellan had scrounged up for me when I first arrived. They're not fancy, but they're practical and comfortable. More importantly, they cover my skin. I grab a pair of well-worn jeans and a simple t-shirt.

"Are you sure about this?" Lisa asks, poking at the meager selection of clothing. "I mean, it is kind of a big deal, you becoming Luna and all

I shake my head as I pull on the least distressed pair of jeans I can find. "It's not some grand coronation, Lisa. I don't need to look like a queen.

"Maybe we should ask one guard to find something else?" Lisa suggests, glancing towards the

door.

"No," I say firmly, tugging a t-shirt over my head. "This is fine. It's who I am, and if the pack can't accept that, then..." I trail off, not wanting to finish that thought. They have to accept it. It isn't really their choice. I'm their Alpha's mate.

But what if choosing me as Luna spurs others into an alpha challenge?

What if, in trying to make it better, I make everything worse...?

Stop trying to borrow trouble before it finds you, Selene says, interrupting my doom-spiraling. Lisa, unaware of the thoughts that flashed through my head, just hums as she tosses a shirt back onto the tiny pile of clothes. "Okay. If you're sure."

I am sure. The thought of parading around in that gossamer nightmare makes my skin crawl. It's not just about the dress, really. It's about what it represents—like I'm a Luna made to breed little alpha puppies.

That's not who I am.

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Not who I want to be.

Grimoire's insistent tugging on our bond leaves me a little off-kilter as I ponder my first speech to my people. It's usually made through the pack bond, but I've never been able to use one- leaving me to fret that my obvious defects will also bring weakness instead of strength to Lucas' position.

Just be yourself. You underestimate how much you have to offer.

I groan. "You're obligated to love me because we're bonded. You're a biased observer."

I don't have to. I choose to.

Hah.

"Is she yelling at you for worrying again?" Lisa asks from where she's standing, staring out the

window.

Kellan's out there somewhere, and as much as she might deny the bond between them, her eyes gravitate to him.

I sigh, grateful for the wardstone of silence in the room. Its presence allows me to voice the fears that have been gnawing at me since this whole Luna business began.

"Lisa, I'm worried. What if trying to become Lucas' strength actually backfires instead?"

She turns from the window, her attention peeled off her mate, who's running around getting the pack ready. "What do you mean?"

Flopping onto the couch, I groan. "I can't even use the pack bond to give my first speech. That's, like, the basic of all basics. Everyone knows I don't have a wolf. It's going to be a shit-show." "Ava, come on," Lisa says, crossing the room to sit beside me. "You're selling yourself short." "Am I though? Ultimately, I'm still an outsider. A Blackwood. Their enemy. And even if they're okay with that, it's about perception. What if the pack sees me as a liability? What if they think Lucas is weaker for choosing me? I'm trying to avoid him getting challenged, not bring them out of the woodwork"

"Is there any point in worrying about it now? You've already decided on this. There's a mark on your neck—which looks hideous, by the way, and I still think it needs some Bacitracin. But you can't really

go back now, can you?"

You can always introduce me to the pack, Selene says thoughtfully. Now that you're mated, Alpha Renard isn't going to want you for himself.

Jerking upright, I stare at Selene, who thumps her tail casually against the floor as she watches.

1. me.

"That might make you a target, though. You're still in a husky body, not a wolf one."

I told you, appearances are deceiving. I can hold my own, Ava.

"What's going on?" Lisa asks. "What did she say? It sounds important."

301. Ava, Lot Solenn Elo Known?

"Selene thinks I should introduce her to the pack. On the one hand, it would greatly diminish my liability as a wolfless defect of a Lama. On the other—it would bring forth so many questions.

But the world has changed.

The situation is different.

Lisa looks thoughtful, surprising me. I would have figured she would be on my side, rejecting the idea outright.

"Do you agree with her?"

"Maybe. I don't know. I'm not familiar enough with pack politics to have a real opinion, I think

His wolf wants me to declare myself, Selene admits.

A sharp knock on the door interrupts the conversation, and Lisa jumps up to open it, probably thinking it's Kellan.

I'm pleasantly surprised to see Lucas and Vester. And, surprisingly, Dr. Blackwell.

Then, behind all of them, Sister Miriam.

Lucas immediately sits beside me on the couch, linking our hands together and bringing some warmth to my panicked heart.

"Where's Vanessa?"

Vester looks surprised by my question. "She's been running around to get an appropriate venue set up for tonight. Do I need to call her here?"

"No, no. Feeling a little uneasy around Vanessa's mate, I shift uncomfortably on my feet. "It's okay. I was just surprised she wasn't here."

The apartment is crowded with all of us, and Sister Miriam glides toward me, shocking me by leaning over to give a brief hug. It's almost like an air hug, so nothing too intimate—but affection has never been a part of our relationship before.

She's establishing your power base, Selene says softly. Everyone will know behind our Luna,

Wouldn't that be a negative thing? Wolves hate vampires.

Sister Miriam stands

Sister Miriam has a good reputation among the pack. She saved several lives and that of their Alpha as well. Though there are those who will never like her, no one is foolish enough to go up against her directly.

Oh. That sounds promising. Definitely eases some of my worries that I'm about to be Lucas' liability tonight.

Indeed,

"What are you guys doing here? Lisa asks, as Dr. Blackwell comes to stand beside her. "Is something wrong?"

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little support."

“And to speak with a little privacy,” Dr. Blackwell says with a wry smile. “There is always a chance for tonight to go badly.”

Vester glances at the gnome with some suspicion, his body tense. “Indeed.”

Three groups brought together as allies, but so many of them aren’t familiar with each other. I still don’t know Dr. Blackwell, really. Or the infamous Elverly, who seems to be content with hiding in whatever house they’re staying in.

But it’s a good thing they’re here. Straightening my shoulders, I clear my throat. “Selene brought up an interesting proposal.

Lucas stiffens beside me, even as his thumb gently caresses the back of my hand. “Oh?”

“She thinks we should introduce her to the pack as my wolf. Make her identity public.”

“No,” he refutes immediately.

Sister Miriam chuckles. “What a wily wolf. I do agree; it would be a prime situation to release the information and keep it contained. With communication outside of this compound inaccessible. it

would mitigate several risks.”

Vester, on the other hand, crosses his arms, gazing at Selene with a raised brow. “Why?”

Selene stands, her ears pricked forward. We are bringing Ava forward as Luna to cement Lucas’ position as Alpha, are we not?

He looks startled. “We are. Why can I hear her?”

The hand caressing mine tightens, squeezing hard enough for me to wince, before Lucas seems to notice and lets go with a muttered apology.

I pat his leg, wondering why he reacted that way to Vester being able to hear Selene’s voice. “If she wants you to hear her, you will hear her!

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302 Ava: Strengthen Her Position

Selene ignores Lucas’ reaction. Avar needs a show of strength when she’s introduced to the pack Too many know her as a Blackwood wolf, and all know she cannot shift. Once they know of me, it will be easier to form connections with the pack members.

Sister Miriam smiles faintly. "Those who want Ava's power would not care about her wolf, and Alpha Renard will lose interest in her once she is announced as the Westwood Luna. It is low risk, as I see it."

Lucas frowns, but his gaze settles on the gnome sitting quietly on the other side of the room. "Who are you?"

"Dr. Blackwell," I whisper in Lucas' car. "He saved Lisa. Then, when I realize he doesn't understand, I add, "She's my best friend. The human with black hair. She's Kellan's mate."

"Ah"

Sister Miriam inclines her head toward Dr. Blackwell. "He is under an alias here in your territory, but he is a powerful figure among many supernaturals outside of your influence. The Grand Sage of the gnome community, and a pioneer in magical technology."

Lucas' emotions ripple through our bond, a mix of confusion and frustration that bleed over, affecting my own feelings. It leaves me antsy and tense.

Just push the bond away, Selene says then. Mate bonds can be very strong in early days. Your emotions will be mirrored if you can't get control of it.

He doesn't seem as affected as I am, but I imagine a thick blanket over his emotions, creating a small barrier between us. It's enough to ease the tension in my shoulders.

"It would be a good decision to placate the wolves," Vester says, his tone grim. "They need a little hope. Right now, even with the ability to sleep and rest, everyone's on edge."

I turn to face him, noting the tight lines around his eyes, the slight downturn of his mouth. He continues, "Morale is low. There are a lot of questions due to Alpha's absence. His

unresponsiveness in the pack bond is also coming up, especially when they saw him out today" He nods his head toward Lucas.

Lucas' hand finds its way to my back, his touch warm and comforting as he rubs slow circles. The gesture is so familiar, yet tinged with the knowledge that for him, it's all new. I lean into his touch, soothed by his affection.

"You want Ava to be my buffer, he says, his words flat and cool, at odds with his gentle touch. "Yes," Vester doesn't flinch from his Alpha's regard. "We need to buy time and avoid the worst case scenario. Are you up for an inevitable challenge?"

A soft rumble escapes Lucas, a low growl. "I will not hide behind my mate."

"We aren't intending for you to hide, Alpha. Merely boost confidence among our people. We have

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families, their pups. They need you to be strong, Alpha."

Lucas holds Vester's gaze, until the delta's eyes drop to the floor. "I can see the merit in the argument," he says finally, his voice low.

"I want to do it."

As do I.

He nods. "Do as you wish."

Sister Miriam clears her throat. "With that decided, I'm here with news. Good news, this time."

Selene settles by my feet, resting her head on Lucas' knee. Her affection for him is obvious, and Lisa stares with a puzzled frown.

Yeah, it's still weird to me, too.

Sister Miriam's voice fills the room, her words flowing with an eerie calm that sends a shiver down my spine. "There is no evidence of any supernatural activity within sixty miles in any direction" she reports, her red eyes scanning the faces around her. "The closest hub is actually a registered community to the west, which is decimated and abandoned."

I feel Lucas tense beside me, his hand on my back stilling for a moment before resuming its comforting circles. The absence of supernatural activity should be reassuring, but knowing others are suffering only brings ominous shudders to m

my spine.

Lisa, ever practical, voices the question on my mind. "How is that good news?"

Sister Miriam's gaze shifts to Lisa, those unsettling red eyes boring into her. "It is good to know there are those who are not allied with our enemies," she says, in her languid way.

Dr. Blackwell's calm voice cuts through the tension. "The enemies of our enemies are our friends, he says. "We need allies."

Lisa shakes her head. "I don't get it. They're all gone. How can we ally with dead people?" Lucas speaks up then. "It's unlikely they were all killed," he says, his voice steady. "They are. probably in hiding, waiting to fight back, as we are."

But I can feel the hint of surprise inside of him. Is he surprised he spoke up?

"There are others out there," Sister Miriam agrees. "Perhaps as scared and desperate as we are, looking for allies. We are in the middle of a dead zone, which means we're less likely to be attacked. So far, aside from influential human cities, the only places to be attacked are supernatural hubs." Her eyes flicker to the wolves in the room. "And packs"

"Which is why we need strong leadership. We have to find allies. We can't fight back alone." Vester points at me. "You will be the catalyst for our rebirth."

"Me?" Startled, I glance around the room. Everyone—including Lisa!—look as though they approve of Vester's words. "How is it me?"

Sister Miriam sighs. "Child, you have to open your mind. Have you learned nothing t

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weeks?"

Apparently not.

Don't take it to heart, Selene murmurs. She's just like that.

Oh, and now these two are besties, I guess.

We have reached a truce between us.

"You brought Westwood their first allies, child. They want you to take over diplomatic relations." The vampire's red eyes glitter. "Such accolades will serve to strengthen your Luna position and take gossip off their Alpha's healing"

Unshift 303

303 Ava: Westwood Luna

Everything moves too quickly, and before I know it, Lucas and I are standing in front of the entire pack.

All the scouts are back for the occasion. Even the humans who lived in this community before

our arrival are here.

This place was long ago chosen as a safe place in case of invasion, though I'm sure previous alphas never believed such a day would happen.

Lucas stands before the pack, his presence a palpable force that washes over the gathered crowd. I can't help but marvel at the sheer power he exudes, even without his memories. His alpha aura blankets the area, and I watch as it affects both wolves and humans alike.

The weaker members of the pack bow their heads, unable to meet his gaze; it's a stark reminder of the hierarchy that exists within wolf society. But it's the stronger wolves that catch my attention, their eyes glittering as they watch Lucas. A mix of pride and unease churns in my stomach. How many of them are eyeing his position, waiting for a moment of weakness? Lucas's voice rings out, clear and commanding. "I have found my mate, your new Luna."

The cheers that follow are halfhearted at best, a ragtag chorus that lacks true enthusiasm. My heart sinks a little. I knew this wouldn't be easy, but the lukewarm reception still stings. "Ava, Lucas says, gesturing for me to join him.

I step forward, my legs feeling like lead. As I look out over the crowd, I'm not surprised to see several faces twisted with discontent. Their disapproval is written plainly across their features, and I fight the urge to shrink back.

Lucas continues, his voice steady and sure. "Ava has been working tirelessly to bring allies to our pack. She understands the threats we face and is dedicated to our survival.

I keep my expression neutral, though inside I'm a mess of nerves. It's also strange to hear Lucas speak about me this way when I know he doesn't remember our history.

"In fact," Lucas says, his tone taking on a note of pride that makes my heart skip, "it was Ava who brought Sister Miriam to us. As we know, her actions have saved countless lives."

The change in the crowd is immediate and startling. A loud cheer erupts, catching me off guard. The sound washes over me, a far cry from the tepid response from before.

Sister Miriam saved many of the wounded, including those still in the hospital, Selene says, sounding rather proud of the vampire she once bickered with.

I scan the faces before me, trying to gauge the sincerity of their reactions. Some still look doubtful, but others nod in approval. It's a small victory, but I'll take it.

Lucas's voice takes on a more serious tone, and I can feel the shift in the atmosphere. "I know there have been rumors circulating about Ava not having a wolf.

BIG Ava Westwood Luna

The crowd falls into an unnatural silence. Every eye turns to me, scrutinizing, judging. I force myself to stand tall, my chin lifted. I meet their gazes head-on, refusing to cower or look away.

fear. My heart pounds in my chest, but I won't let them see my

"I want to address these rumors directly," Lucas continues, his voice firm and unwavering. "Ava is no defect. She is not wolfless."

A ripple of surprise moves through the crowd. Whispers start up, quickly hushed as Lucas raises his hand for silence.

"Ava is unique," he says, his eyes scanning the faces before us. "She is one-of-a-kind, but her wolf stands among us."

Confusion replaces the surprise on many faces. I can almost hear the questions forming in their minds: How can this be? What wolf? What is he saying?

Lucas turns slightly, gesturing to his side. "I'd like to introduce you to Selene."

On cue, Selene trots forward, her movements graceful and deliberate. She takes her place beside me, her presence a comforting warmth against my leg. The crowd's confusion deepens, their gazes darting between me and Selene. After all, she's a husky. I'm sure they think it's a big joke. They've all seen her around.

She's just a dog to their eyes.

Ask Lucas to formally bring you into the pack as Luna, Selene's voice echoes in my mind. It's time.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself. This is it. The moment that will cement my place in this pack, for better or worse. I turn to Lucas, my voice steady as I recite the ritual words I've been taught.

"Alpha of the Westwood Pack, I stand before you and our people. I offer myself as your Luna, to serve and protect this pack with all that I am. Will you accept me as your mate and as Luna of the Westwood Pack?"

Lucas's eyes lock with mine. His voice is strong and clear as he responds.

"Ava Grey, I accept you as my mate and as Luna of the Westwood Pack. May your strength be our strength, your wisdom our guidance, and your love our shelter."

As the last word leaves his lips, I feel it. A sharp, sudden snap inside me, like a rubber band breaking. I gasp, my hand flying to my chest. It takes me a moment to realize what I'm feeling—or rather, what I'm no longer feeling. The pack bond, the one I'd never truly felt before, has broken. It was brittle and frayed, barely existing within my soul.

But before I can fully process this loss, a new sensation floods through me. It's warm and golden, spreading from my core to the tips of my fingers and toes. It feels like coming home, like finding a piece of myself I never knew was missing. This, I realize, is what a true pack bond feels like. The wolves in the crowd begin to cheer, but it's hesitant, uncertain. Their confusion is palpable,

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a living thing that hangs in the air between us.

Suddenly, Selene's voice rings out, not just in my mind, but in the minds of everyone present. We will serve the Westwood Pack as Luna with our very life. This is our vow, our promise, our destiny. The shock on the faces of the pack members is almost comical. Some stumble back, others shake their heads as if trying to clear them. A few of the stronger wolves growl, their instincts

rebelling against this strange intrusion.

But Selene stands strong against the confusion, and I can feel it.

A presence stronger than any wolf here, pulsing from her.

Unshift 304

304 Ava: Selene's Presence

The crowd falls silent, a wave of submission rippling through the gathered wolves. Some drop to their knees, eyes averted, while others struggle against the invisible force emanating from Selene. I watch in awe as her aura pulses, a shimmering curtain of power that washes over even the strongest wolves until they, too, lower their heads in deference. |||

Even Kellan has his gaze lowered.

Only Lucas stands, unaffected.

but I can't

Of course. I would never undermine his authority here. Selene sounds way too smug. blame her. This display of raw power is unlike anything I've ever witnessed, and it's coming from my wolf—from a part of me I'm realizing I took for granted.

Lucas seizes the moment, his voice ringing out clear and authoritative. “Wolves of the Westwood Pack, bear witness. Ava Grey stands before you as your one true Luna. She is my mate, chosen by fate and accepted by me. I demand your loyalty, your respect, and your unwavering support for

her

His words carry weight, each syllable heavy with the command of an Alpha. I feel their impact. through our newly forged pack bond, a ripple of energy that seems to reinforce Selene’s display of dominance.

Now is the time for your speech, Ava, Selene’s voice echoes in my mind. Show them who you are.

I take a deep breath, steadying myself. This is my moment—our moment. I step forward, feeling the

eyes of every wolf upon me. The silence is deafening, expectant.

“Wolves of the Westwood Pack, I begin, my voice stronger than I expected. “I stand before you not just as Lucas’ mate, but as a warrior in my own right.” Though the idea of calling myself a warrior falls flat in my head, Selene assured me it’s the right word to use. “I may not have been born into this pack, but I choose it. I choose you.”

I pause, letting my gaze sweep across the crowd. Some faces are still wary, others curious, but all are attentive.

“I know many of you have doubts. You’ve heard rumors, whispers of a Luna without a wolf. But as you can see, those rumors were false. Selene is my wolf, as much a part of me as your wolves are a part of you. We are different, yes, but that difference is our strength.”

I gesture to Selene, who sits regally by my side. “In Selene, I carry the wisdom of ages, the strength of our forebears. Through her, I am connected to the very essence of what it means to be a wolf. And through me, she is tied to humanity in a way no ordinary wolf can be.”

I can feel the crowd’s energy shifting, curiosity replacing wariness. I press on, emboldened, but the weight of my words is heavy on my tongue. “I won’t lie to you. The road ahead is difficult. We face threats from all sides—vampires, rogue wolves, even traitors within our own ranks. But we are not helpless. We are not weak.”

Cada Ava Salorier’s Preistinece

My voice grows stronger. “We are the Westwood Pack. We are survivors, fighters, a family bound by more than just blood. We will rise again. With every last drop of my

blood, with every last breath, I promise to serve as your Luna and lend my strength to our pack

“You did great,” Lucas says, rubbing a hand over my back. Lisa’s not in the cabin—Kellan whisked her away, and I’m not asking questions. I’m sure I’ll hear the details later.

For now, Lucas and I are alone.

Well, almost.

I forgot how it feels to be with a pack, Selene says, sounding almost blissful as she wiggles her husky body between us, shoving at Lucas’ arm until he pets her instead of me.

His eyes flicker. “Did she just say something? I think I almost heard it.

“She did. Said she forgot how it feels to be a part of a pack

That bit of light in his eyes goes dark. “Oh. I sec.”

My heart hurts as his face shuts down. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” Lucas pinches my ear in a way that should be playful, but feels to me as if he’s just masking his pain. “I’m proud of you.

“Is it hard?” I ask, as Selene wiggles even harder, wedging herself more firmly between us as we sit on the couch. “Not feeling the pack? Can you tell it’s missing? I’ve never felt a pack before.”

“There’s an emptiness. Like a hole that can’t be filled. Lucas rubs Selene’s ear tips, and my dog— wolf lets out an enormous, pleased sigh over the affection. “I know what it should feel like, but I can’t remember having it

We should call Sister Miriam, Selene opines, licking his hand. She has a theory on his memory,

Damn. I hadn’t even thought of asking while she was here-

We were focused on you, Luna.

Hearing the title from my own wolf makes my skin cringe.

“Lucas, do you mind if we consult with Sister Miriam? Selene says she might have some ideas on restoring your memories.”

His hand pauses in its gentle fluffing of Selene’s ears, his gold

fine”

gaze intense on mine. That’s

But he sounds oddly unenthused at the idea of regaining his memories.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Lucas says, his voice low and husky. Before I can press further, he grabs my waist and pulls me over Selene, settling me onto his lap.

The sudden movement catches me off guard. My hands instinctively brace against his chest

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feeling the solid warmth beneath his shirt. The scent of amber and campfire smoke envelops me, bringing a familiar tingle to my skin.

Selene, ever perceptive, takes her cue. She slides off the couch, her nails clicking against the

floor as she pads to the door. With a few determined scratches and nudges, she manages to get it open and slips outside.

A guard’s face appears in the doorway, concern etched on his features, Lucas’s reaction is immediate and fierce.

“Close the door,” he snaps, his voice a low growl that sends shivers down my spine.

The guard quickly complies, the door slamming shut.

In the sudden silence, I’m acutely aware of Lucas’s breathing, deep and slightly ragged. He buries his face in the crook of my neck, inhaling deeply. His stubble scratches against my skin, sending tingles of electricity through my body.

“Are you doing this on purpose?” he murmurs against my skin, his lips brushing my pulse point. My breath catches in my throat. “Doing what?”

His hands tighten on my waist, pulling me closer. “Smelling like this. It’s driving me crazy. Like you want me to breed you.”

Lucas's words send a shiver through me, his hot breath against my neck igniting a fire in my core. My body responds instinctively, pressing closer to him as if drawn by an invisible force. "I'm not doing anything on purpose," I manage to stammer, my voice barely above a whisper.

In

His lips brush against my skin, trailing up to my ear. "Are you sure about that, Luna?"

The title, spoken in his deep, husky voice, sends another wave of heat through me. My fingers curl into the fabric of his shirt, desperate for something to anchor me as the world starts to spin.

Are these two wolves or bunnies?

Unshift 305

305 Ava: Under His Control (1)

Lucas's hands roam my body, leaving trails of fire in their wake.

There's heat in his eyes. Golden flames flicker in their depths, reflecting the fire burning between us. I shiver as he teases his fingers beneath the hem of my shirt, a shudder that starts deep in my core and ripples outward.

His hands slide up my stomach, burning trails of need across my skin. "You didn't answer my question, Luna."

His fingers brush under my breasts, never quite touching what I need. I arch forward with a gasp. "Wh—what question?"

"Are you sure you aren't doing this on purpose?" My nipples peak beneath his teasing.

"I'm not—Lucas..." My plea is breathless, and he chuckles.

"What do you want, Luna?" Again, the way my thighs clench and desire pulses between my legs when he calls me that. Shit. I'm drenched.

His lips brush my ear, nipping at my earlobe, sending another shock of need through me. "Do you want me to breed you, Luna?"

My entire body goes up in flames.

Ava, calm down, Selene says, sounding amused. You're going to pass out from sensory overload at

this rate.

You're not helping, I snap back at her, my body bucking involuntarily as Lucas continues his relentless torture, teasing and tormenting me with his fingers. My nipples are pinched and rolled, tugged and fondled, until they're swollen and aching for more.

"No answer?" he murmurs, nipping at my neck. His hands press against my breasts, squeezing hard, before trailing lower. "What do you want, my sweet little mate?*

"I... I want...

I can't finish the sentence. His fingers slip under the waistband of my jeans and under the elastic band of my panties, sliding lower.

Teasing.

Tormenting.

I'm burning up, panting, desperate for more.

"Take your clothes off, Luna. I need to feel your skin against mine." His voice is ragged, controlling, dominating.

And I obey. Because I can't do anything else. I'm putty in his hands, a slave to his touch.

He growls as I stand, throwing my shirt to the floor. My hands shake as I unbutton my jeans, sliding them off.

He doesn't let me get my underwear off before he enine me around and vanke me acainet him

305 Ava. Under His Control (1)

His chest is warm against my back as he buries his face in my hair, inhaling deeply. "Your scent" he mutters, his voice hoarse. "It's driving me insane."

His hands slide down my body, gripping my hips and pulling me back against the hard length of him. "Please," I breathe, not even sure what I'm begging for anymore.

His teeth scrape my shoulder, sending another shock of pleasure through me. "Please what, Luna? Fill you? Stretch you? Make you scream?"

"Yes, yes I nod frantically. "All of that."

Lucas growls, a deep, primal sound. It reverberates through his chest, through me. My entire body is buzzing now, hypersensitive to his every touch.

His fingers slip between my legs again.

“You like that, Luna?” He sucks a mark onto my neck, his fingers gliding over my most intimate spot.

More! I want to scream it at him, but the words won’t come out, overwhelmed by pleasure.

“Say it, Luna. Tell me what you want.” He slides my legs further open, hooking them outside of s. A finger teases the opening of my vagina, making obscene sounds as he slides a finger in,

then out.

It should be disgusting, but it just makes me shake uncontrollably. “More.”

He chuckles, the sound vibrating against my back. “Anything for you, Luna. But I want to hear you beg.

Beg? I can barely form words anymore. I’m a mess of need, desperate for release, for him. “Please, I gasp. “Lucas, please.”

His fingers slide away, leaving me empty, aching. My hands fly to my breasts, trying to relieve some of the pressure building inside me.

“Not

good enough,” he growls. “Get on your knees and beg your Alpha to breed you, little Luna.”

It’s as if his words are a match to the tinderbox of my body. When he says “breed”, desire pools between my legs, soaking the thin fabric of my underwear.

I slide off his lap, hearing a rumble of satisfaction as he slaps my ass.

Fuck. Why is that hot? That shouldn’t be hot.

Turning, I kneel and reach out to tug his shirt out of his waistband. He grabs my wrist, and I still, raising my eyes to meet his.

Hungry. Hot. Absolutely feral.

The way his jaw is clenched—he’s holding himself back.

Slowly, I sink to my knees. The floor is cold, but my skin is burning.

Knowing he's watching my every move—naked as can be, while he's still fully dressed—makes every second a thrill.

() 10. Aval Under His Control

305

This is not something we've done before.

My breath quickens, and I slide my hands up his thighs, feeling the hard muscles beneath. My body is on fire, but I don't know what to do next.

"Beg. Luna. His voice is a low growl, vibrating against my skin.

Oh. He meant that.

"Please, Alpha." My cheeks flush. I can't help but squirm, even as my vagina clenches hard. Shit. I don't know what's stronger—the embarrassment, or how much this is turning me on.

My voice is hoarse, barely recognizable as my own, but I manage to string a few more words together. "I want you. Breed me. Please

The strength I needed to let those words slip out of my mouth—it's hard to ask for what I want. It's even harder to beg for it.

"That's it. Luna. Such a good girl, aren't you?" His hand tangles in my hair, yanking my head back. I'm exposed, vulnerable, and completely at his mercy.

loly. Shit.

I'm pretty sure there's a puddle beneath me.

"Take my pants off, sweet Luna.

I swallow hard, hesitating for a moment, before I reach forward and hook my fingers into the waistband of his jeans. Unbuttoning them while being unable to lower my head is awkward, but every brush of my fingers against his cock, straining against the rough denim, has his eyes darkening.

Slowly, I tug his pants down.

"Boxers. One word. No real command. But it's obvious what he's asking.

Do not judge me for the words I place upon a page. Thank you and good day...

Lenaleia

Unshift 306

306 Ava: Under His Control (II)

Listening to his breaths shorten, feeling the way his thighs shake when he lifts his hips for me to pull everything down—my confidence soars.

And the way his cock springs up, unrestrained and free, makes me want to climb onto his lap so he can slide inside.

But I wait, heart pounding, vagina drenched and pounding with arousal.

His hand tightens in my hair. “Use your mouth, Luna”

Another shock of desire hits me.

Fuck.

I lean forward, pressing a kiss to the tip of his cock. I can feel his pulse racing beneath the skin, his heartbeat thrumming through me. He’s musky, salty—not quite pleasant, but not terrible. Hearing his little hiss as I flick my tongue over the head of his cock makes me want to do more. He might be giving the orders, but I’m the one with the power.

Good girl, he murmurs, his fist relaxing in my hair to stroke my head.

The way my body lights up at his praise—God.

I need more.

“Suck,” he commands, and I obey, closing my lips around him. His hands clench in my hair once again, guiding me as I take him deeper into my mouth. I moan around him, and he groans, his hips jerking involuntarily.

“Good girl, Luna. You’re so good at that. Keep going.” His voice is tight, but the fist in my hair is gentle. “Take me in, sweetheart.”

I hum in response, delighting in how he jerks a little at the vibration.

My saliva

mixes with his pre-cum, making it easier to slide my lips over his shaft, but it still feels strange, almost alien, in my mouth. He doesn't push me to go too deep, and I'm too afraid to gag. The musky scent lingers, making my head spin, but the more I do it, the more I crave it.

His breathing grows ragged, and I can feel his heart pounding through his cock, pulsing in time with mine. The realization that I have this much control over him, that I can bring him to the edge with just my mouth, sends a thrill through me.

I increase my pace, sliding my lips over him faster, using my tongue to tease the sensitive underside of his shaft, wrapping my fingers around the base of him, stroking what doesn't fit inside my mouth. He groans, his hips bucking, and I know I'm doing something right. It's intoxicating.

My own fingers find their way between my legs, stroking the wetness there as I work him with my mouth. I'm so close, and he hasn't even touched me.

300 Ava: Under His Control (1)

"Stop. His command is abrupt, and I pull back, his cock sliding out with a soft, wet pop. His breathing is harsher than ever, his eyes glittering with need. "Stand up, Luna. I want to see you."

My hands tremble as I stand, facing him. My legs are weak, my body on fire. Lucas's eyes roam over me, taking in every inch, lingering on my breasts, my thighs, the damp fabric of my underwear.

"Take that off, slowly. His voice is a husky whisper, and I shiver, my hands shaking as I reach behind me to hook my fingers beneath my panties. Slowly, I tug them down, my thighs clenching as the cool air hits my overheated skin.

"Beautiful." He leans forward, sliding his hands up my legs to cup my ass, pulling me towards him. I straddle his lap with as much grace as I can muster—which isn't much—but his groans in my ear tell me I'm not doing terribly.

His cock brushes against my ass, hot and velvety.

His lips touch my ear, the breath of his words making me shiver. "You're so responsive, my little Luna. It's adorable. Tell me what you want."

I bite my lip, shy even as my need burns. "I want you, Lucas.

His hands tighten on my ass, his thumbs stroking over the plump flesh. "So sweet, Luna. You're my perfect mate."

His praise sends another wave of heat through me, and I moan, pressing closer to him, lifting my hips in invitation. "Lucas, please"

"I know, baby. I can smell how much you need me. He nips at my neck, sucking another mark onto my skin as I writhe against him. Finally, his hands grip my hips and he lifts me, the warm head of his cock settling against my core.

I could cry with how relieved I am to finally have him there, only for him to keep me lifted as he trails kisses down my collarbone and over my left breast, drawing my nipple into his mouth.

It's amazing. It's all wonderful. It's great.

Except I want to scream because I just want him inside already, even as my back arches for him to suck harder.

"Lucas!" His name is more of a sob than a word.

I'm moaning. Thrashing, really.

God, I want to be

but the words stick in my throat. He's killing me, making me feel like this, but not giving me my release.

My back arches as he caresses my spine, his mouth ravaging my breasts in the best way.

I whimper.

I can't form any other words, can't say anything coherent. Can't say please, beg him to let me go. to slide down on his cock and take him inside me. I can't say any of it. All I can do is make desperate, pleading sounds as he continues to tease and torture me..

108 Ava: Under His Control (11)

He groans against my nipple, nipping at it sharply. "God, Ava. You're so fucking beautiful,"

I shudder at his words, at the way his low growl makes my inner walls flutter. He drags his lips across my shoulder, and I can feel his cock, the broad tip pulsing with his heartbeat, dragging through the slick folds of my core. But he won't breach me.

*Please, please, please," I chant, writhing in his arms. "I can't. I can't. Lucas!"

He groans, pressing firmer into me, and suddenly, his hands are both wrapped around me, pushing down on my hips, lowering me onto him.

Finally.

I stifle a scream of relief as he slides inside me, every muscle in my body clenching down on him. His jaw drops to my shoulder as he slams my hips down, burying himself to the hilt, his arms like iron bands holding me up. He freezes, his breath harsh and ragged with the effort of holding himself back.

He fills every space inside me, stretching me in the best possible way.

But I'm too desperate for release.

rock against him in frantic movements, peppering kisses along the side of his face as I beg him

to move.

I'm surrounded by his scent, his heat, his strength, and all I want is for him to slam into me harder, until I'm falling apart.

"Fuck," he hisses, sliding his arms from around me to grip my hips hard enough that I'm positive he's bruising me.

The pain only urges me to rock against him harder.

He slides out, and I want to beg him to stay—only for him to thrust into me again, slamming my hips up and down on his cock as he fucks into me, desperate and wild.

Unleashed and untamed. No longer holding back.

I claw at his shoulders, my nails digging into his skin as my back arches, baring myself to him, offering everything, as every thrust sends me higher.

He growls, reaching between us to rub his thumb over my clit. And it's enough, the spark that sets off the explosion.

Stars burst, my body tenses, and my inner walls clenching around him as pleasure racks my body. I cry out his name and he follows, his thrusts becoming erratic as he spills himself into me with a hoarse shout.

We're both breathless, spent. Collapsed together in a tangle of limbs and damp skin.

Unshift 307

307 Ava: His Memories

“Ava.”

Someone’s gently prodding at my shoulder, and I groan, my entire body battered. Oh, right. Lucas... was an animal last night.

“Ava.

“What?” Now that I’m marginally awake, his voice registers in my brain. I turn my head to squint through a tangled mass of hair. I need a shower. And a brush. And, like, five cups of coffee.

“Sister Miriam’s here.”

Sister Miri—oh.

Sitting up abruptly, I must startle Lucas. He jumps up from the edge of the bed, hands in the air as he watches me cautiously, like I’m about to bite.

“Sorry, I’m up.”

“I see that. Lowering his hands, he adds, “You didn’t warn me you’re such a bear when you’re asleep.

A bear? Me?

You bit him when he tried to wake you up earlier, and you kicked him when he tried to cover you in a blanket. Selene’s helpful, overly chipper words have my head pounding.

The still-new string of connection to Grimoire pulses urgently, tugging and yanking every which

way.

Damn. Wake up and everyone needs you, all at once.

“Selene said I bit you. And kicked you.”

He shrugs, politely ignoring the heat reddening my cheeks. “Take your time. Do you want to shower first?”

“No, I’m okay-

But Lucas arches a brow in such a meaningful way that I pause. Damn. Do I smell like our sexcapades?

You do. It's everywhere. You should shower.

"I'll shower.

Sister Miriam is sitting at the table, nursing a cup of coffee that lost its steam a while ago. Without speaking, Lucas slides a cup of coffee in front of me. It's as black as Sister Miriam's hair. Silently, I grab some creamer and sugar, dumping them into the mug as he watches in what looks

like horror

His Memories.

307 Ava His

Lucas is a coffee purist. He might drink it with a little sugar, but he seems to enjoy torturing himself with its bitter flavor. Not me. I love myself, so I doctor mine up with as much cream and sugar as I can manage while still maintaining a decent level of caffeine.

Flavored syrup would be great, but that's a luxury we don't have in this place. Commune? Camp? Hideaway? It needs a word, so I can settle on one in my head.

"Morale is up," Sister Miriam mentions casually, languidly drawing a finger around the rim of her cup. "Your wolves seem to be in good spirits. You've given them their first taste of hope since their arrival. You did well, child."

Her approval sends a little butterfly flutter through me, leaving me more pleased than I'd like to admit. "Thank you." Her report is a bit of a surprise to me, though; wolves don't change off a few words, and I don't have the best history in this pack.

They accept strength. It is the ultimate law of the land, Selene says, and I glance around in surprise. She's nowhere to be found.

"Where are you?"

Lucas looks at me with concern, and I grimace. "Sorry. I was talking to Selene."

I've

got to get used to this whole mind-speak business, but it just feels weird to converse that way. I guess it's normal when you've grown up your entire life doing it, but it's hard to concentrate and separate my mental speaking from just... brain noise.

There is an exceptional amount of noise, says Selene, sounding far too amused for my liking. As for your question, I'm poking my nose in other people's business.

“Whose business?”

The gnomes.

Sister Miriam clears her throat. “Your wolf is with the Grand Sage.” She taps the stone in the center of the table. “We are clear to speak, so let’s get started. It is imperative we retrieve

your alpha’s memory. While you made a good display yesterday, it doesn’t change the feelings of some more troublesome wolves.”

Sipping at my coffee, I nod to show I’m listening. Lucas leans back in his chair in silence; it looks as though they’ve already discussed this, and I’m just being brought up to date on the situation.

I must have been exhausted, to sleep right through that. This place isn’t that big.

The bed is just outside the range of the stone. You heard nothing.

Oh. That makes sense, too.

Sister Miriam studies me, her ruby red eyes as disconcerting as ever. “Your mate has lost his connection with his wolf. This is why he could not heal properly.”

I nod; Lucas had already told me his wolf is gone. “How many know about this?” While I suspect Kellan realizes, it isn’t a subject I’ve brought up to anyone. The danger Lucas faces without his wolf is too terrifying to let that information out loose.

“Do you know why?” I ask, leaning forward slightly, trying not to let hope rise too high in my

Thears

Sister Viram doesn’t answer immediately. Instead, her gaze fixes on Lucas, who meets her stare with an impassive expression. His arm drapes casually over the back of my chair, a gesture that feels back protectie and possessive. The tension between them thickens, and I resist the urge

to squirm in my seat

Es dear he has no intention of contributing to this conversation. He seems to hold respect for Sister Miriam, but there is also a cold distance between them.

After what feels like an eternity. Sister Miriam breaks the stalemate. Her attention shifts back to me her expression softening slightly. Ava, how much do you know about the attack that injured

binic caught off guard by the question. My mind races, quickly gathering the fragments of information that have been tossed my way. "Not much. I admit, feeling a twinge of guilt. I'm always so overwhelmed with what's in front of me. I forget to ask all the right questions. But how in some way supposed to juggle this all so easily?"

stow he was trying to save civilians, but beyond that... I trail off. It must have been brutal. Will it upset him to hear about it even if he doesn't have memories of the attack? I glance at Lucas, But his expression remains unreadable. The bond in our chest has quieted, making it impossible to feel his emotions as clearly as I did yesterday.

That is normal. Selene antires me. It is not good to feel each other so closely. You lose yourselves in your bond. That is not a good thing

Tseet Sitter Miriam murmurs, her fingers drumming lightly on the table.

Sweet creamy sips of coffee do little to soothe the knot forming in my stomach. There's clearly more to this story than I've been told, and I'm not sure I'm going to like what I hear.

Peran Sister Minam continues her voice gentle but firm, it would be beneficial for you to understand the full scope of what occurred

I nod meeting myself for whatever revelation is coming. "Yes, I think that would help I turn to Lucas reaching out to place my hand over his, where it rests loosely on the table. "If that's okay

Fit goes a cunt nod his fingers tightening almost imperceptibly around mine.

Siener Miram Sakes a deep breath, her gaze growing distant as if she's looking into the past. "It was here. They had put evacuated the pack lands. Many wolves were already dead, and wolves Bard to the Their connection to the pack bonds from the backlash of so many lives lost. They

Sining in firen entreat, livean received word about an attack on Granite City. He gathered his team to care the rullans, hoping to buy time. It was the first attack on humans.

1 presses Liven determined and leashed, leading his wolves into danger to protect innocent

307 Ava: His Memories

lives. It's so quintessentially him that my heart aches.

“The attackers were not rival wolves, as initially believed, and as were seen with the attack on Westwood. They were a mixed group. Vampires, rogue shifters, and even some humans.”

“Humans?” I can’t keep the surprise from my voice. “Are you sure?” This is the first report I’ve heard of humans working with the attackers.

Sister Miriam nods grimly. “It appears there are factions within the human world that have aligned themselves with supernatural entities. Their motivations are unclear, but we can guess as to their motivations.”

Right. If these new supernaturals want to take over the country—even the world—there aren’t enough numbers. The promise of power is an allure few can resist, and humans outnumber all supernaturals by a large margin.

The implications of this send my mind reeling.

There’s no one we can trust. Not even humans,

Unshift 308

308 Ava: Get His Memories Back

“Lucas and his team were outnumbered, Sister Miriam continues, her eyes flickering to Lucas. He remains stoic, but I can feel the tension radiating from him. “They managed to evacuate most of the civilians, but the fighting was...” She pauses, looking thoughtful. “Brutal.”

I swallow hard, my imagination filling in the blanks with scenes of chaos and bloodshed. My grip on Lucas’s hand tightens.

“In the midst of the battle, he pushed himself beyond his limits. He tapped into a power most alphas cannot access without severe consequences.”

My brows pull together. “What do you mean?”

Sister Miriam’s gaze is intense as she looks at me. “There’s a reason alphas are so revered, Ava.

ar They possess abilities that go beyond what ordinary wolves can do. But accessing those abilities

comes at a cost.

I shiver at the implications of her words. “What kind of cost?”

“The deeper an alpha delves into their power, the more they risk losing themselves to their wolf,” Sister Miriam explains. “It’s a delicate balance. Push too far, and the human side can be overwhelmed. The human psyche is not meant for the power a Lycan wields. Not even this weakened version of Lycans you have become.”

“So he...?” I glance at Lucas, who returns my stare with an impassive expression. He remembers none of this; it’s like talking about a stranger.

For the first time, I’m grateful he doesn’t have his memories. How traumatic it must have been. “I’m sure your alpha had no idea what he was doing. None of you know your true heritage. But it’s still a knowledge deep inside your souls; something your wolves are aware of, even if they don’t realize it. He pushed himself to the brink to save his pack and the civilians. He unleashed a power that decimated his attackers, but in doing so, he nearly lost himself entirely”

I struggle to process this information.

It’s as if she’s giving me words, but they just flow over me like water, impossible to understand. “When the dust settled; Sister Miriam says, “Lucas was found unconscious, barely clinging to life. His physical injuries were severe, but it was the damage to his psyche that was most concerning

“His memories,” I whisper.

I can’t fathom the power.

Sister Miriam nods. “In order to protect himself from being consumed by his wolf, Lucas’s mind retreated. It locked away not just the memories of the attack, but everything that made him who

he was.

“And his wolf?” I ask, though I suspect I already know the answer.

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308 Ava Get His Memories. Back

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“Locked away as well; Sister Miriam confirms. “It cannot be allowed free reign without Lucas’ human side to temper it. So now, they’re separated—neither able to reach the other.”

Lucas remained impassive through the vampire’s recounting of events. Even Selene is silent in my head, leaving me to sort through it all.

Sister Miriam sips at her coffee, gazing out the window and leaving me to process.

I squeeze Lucas' hand, seeking comfort in his touch. His fingers tighten around mine, a reflexive response that sends a flutter through my chest. But when I look at his face, I see no recognition, no understanding of the weight of Sister Miriam's words.

He's unfazed, as if we're discussing the weather rather than the near-loss of his humanity.

The bond between us is still, serene.

Grimoire, on the other hand, is still insistently tugging at me.

I turn to Sister Miriam, feigning a calm I don't possess. "How do we fix this? How can we get his memories bac

Sister Miriam's crimson eyes meet mine, her expression grave. "It's not a simple process, Ava. The mind is a delicate thing, especially when there are two involved."

way"

"But you know of a way I lean forward. "You think you know how we can do it, right?"

Sister Miriam sighs, setting her coffee mug on the table. "The most straightforward method would be to trigger your memories through intense emotional experiences. Recreating moments from your past, exposing you to familiar scents or sounds—anything that might jog your subconscious."

"That doesn't sound too risky," I say, a glimmer of hope rising in my chest.

"The risk lies in the unpredictability, Sister Miriam counters. "We don't know which memories might surface first. If the wrong memory is triggered—say, the trauma of the battle—it could send Lucas in

a downward spiral, potentially causing more harm than good."

My hope deflates like a punctured balloon. "What other options do we have?"

Sister Miriam's face goes blank. "There are magical methods we could explore. Spells designed to unlock hidden memories, bridging the gap between conscious and subconscious minds."

"But?" Lucas asks calmly, as if this isn't his life we're talking about.

"Magic always comes with a price."

Grimoire's presence pulses erratically within me, making it hard to focus.

"What do you mean by 'a price?'" I ask, wondering how bad it must be for her to beat around the bush.

Sister Miriam's crimson eyes lock onto mine, her expression grave. "Magic, especially magic that deals with the mind, requires balance. To restore Lucas's memories, we would need to offer something of equal value"

308 Ava Get His Memories Back

I swallow hard, a knot forming in my stomach. "Something from Lucas?"

She nods slowly. "Yes. The magic would require a sacrifice from him—something deeply personal, something tied to his very essence."

What could he possibly give up that would be worth his memories? I glance at him, studying his face. He looks calm, almost detached, as if we're discussing someone else entirely.

"What kind of sacrifice are we talking about?" Lucas asks, his voice steady.

Sister Miriam sighs, her gaze flickering between us. "It could be many things. A cherished memory, a defining personality trait, even a portion of his power as an alpha. The magic seeks balance—to give back what was lost, it must take something in return."

The thought of Lucas losing any part of himself, even to regain his memories, feels wrong on a fundamental level.

I open my mouth to protest the unfairness, but Grimoire's presence suddenly flares within me, sending a jolt of energy through my body. The sensation is so intense that I gasp, my free hand flying to my chest.

"Ava?" Lucas's voice is laced with concern. "What's wrong?"

Grimoire's energy pulses erratically, making it hard to concentrate on Sister Miriam's words. It's as if he's trying to tell me something, but the message is garbled, lost in the chaos of his frantic energy. "Hold on."

Unshift 309

309 Ava: Grimoire's Plans

Ignoring Sister Miriam's curious stare, I dart for the cupboard where Grimoire's resting.

I rush to the cupboard, my fingers tingling as they make contact with Grimoire's supple leather cover. The moment I touch him, his mental shouts pierce my mind like a blast of thunder. "Grimoire, for the love of all that's holy, quiet down!" I wince, pressing my free hand to my temple. "Speak at a normal volume before you shatter my mental eardrums."

The roaring stops abruptly. Through our bond, I sense an almost sheepish energy emanating from the book. He clears his mental throat.

You've been wasting time theorizing when you could have just consulted with me, Grimoire says, sounding far too condescending for someone who was screaming at me to notice him.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "Now you tell me." 2

"Ava?" Lucas's voice cuts through our conversation. I turn to find him frowning at me, confusion etched across his face. "What's going on?"

I take a deep breath, suddenly aware of how bizarre this must look to him and Sister Miriam. "I'd like you both to meet someone." I hold up the book. "This is Grimoire. He's... well, he's a sentient magic book. And apparently, he has some thoughts on our current situation."

Sister Miriam's eyes widen, a spark of fascination igniting in their depths. She steps forward, hand outstretched. "Fascinating. May I?"

Before I can warn her, her fingers brush the cover. A bright spark erupts between them, and she yanks her hand back with a hiss.

Tell the bloodsucker to keep her hands off me, Grimoire's voice echoes in my mind, indignant. My lips twitch. "He doesn't want to be touched. He called you a bloodsucker. I don't think he's very friendly."

I'm very friendly, he snaps. When I want to be.

To my surprise, Sister Miriam's lips curl into an amused smile. "Well, he's not wrong. Though I prefer the term 'vampire' these days. It has a bit more... panache.

Setting the book on the table, I keep my hand flat on the cover as I sit next to Lucas once again. "Okay, Grimoire. You've been listening. What do you think about this situation?"

Your alpha's predicament is indeed complex. The memories aren't gone, merely locked. Think of it as a defense mechanism. The human mind couldn't process the raw, ancient power the wolf tapped into. So it builds a wall.

“So, how do we break down the wall?”

With a bomb, he says cheerfully.

There’s no way I heard that right.

“With a what?”

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309 Ava: Grimoire’s Plans

Lucas leans forward. “What did he say?”

I relay Grimoire’s words quickly before pressing my hand more firmly against the book’s cover.

“Care to elaborate?”

Not a physical bomb, you simpleton, Grimoire’s voice echoes in my mind, dripping with disdain. A magical one. A surge of power so intense it shatters the mental barriers.

So, the Grimoire I first met is still a part of his personality. Not just a cuddlebug puppy of a bond, but an intellectual elitist.

No, no. I didn’t mean it like that. The way he backpedals would be amusing if I wasn’t more focused on the information he gave.

I relay his words again, watching their expressions shift from confusion to intrigue.

“That sounds dangerous,” Lucas says, his voice tight with concern.

Sister Miriam leans forward, her eyes gleaming with interest. “It’s not entirely without precedent. Brute force is often used when finesse fails.”

Tell the bloodsucker she’s not entirely useless, Grimoire says, sounding pleased by the vampire’s understanding.

“Grimoire, what exactly would this ‘magical bomb’ do? And what are the risks?”

There’s a pause, and I can almost feel Grimoire considering his words. It would be a concentrated burst of magical energy, focused on breaking down the mental barriers. The risks... well, they’re not insignificant. Best case scenario, it works perfectly, and all memories are restored. Worst

case...

I swallow hard, already dreading the answer. “Worst case?”

Worst case, it could shatter more than just the barriers. It could fragment the mind entirely, leaving nothing but broken pieces.

My heart plummets. I relay Grimoire’s words, feeling my brief rising hope dissipate.

Lucas is the first to break the silence. “So, it’s either get my memories back or become a vegetable? Those aren’t great odds.”

One option is a gradual approach. Instead of a bomb, think of it as a slow erosion. We could use magic to slowly wear away at the barriers, allowing memories to trickle back over time.

“That sounds better,” I say, hope rising in my chest. “What’s the catch?”

It would take time. Possibly months, maybe even years. And there’s no guarantee it would work completely. Some memories might remain locked away forever.

Once again, I’m a parrot, repeating it all for Lucas and Sister Miriam.

“We don’t have that kind of time,” Sister Miriam muses. “The war won’t wait for a single alpha to regain his memories. The longer he is without them, the worse it is for all of us.”

“What do you think, Selene?” I ask, fishing for her presence in my mind.

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309 Ava: Grimoire’s Plans

everything he’s lost. His memories, his sense of self, his connection to his wolf...

I shake my head; it doesn’t feel worth the potential downsides.

I know it’s not what you want to hear, Selene says, her presence in my mind softening. That’s why I’ve remained silent during this discussion.

“Grimoire, is there anything in between these two extremes? Something that balances risk and speed?” Lucas asks, for the first time showing real interest in the conversation.

There is one other option, Grimoire says, his tone serious. It’s a bit... unconventional.

“At this point, I think we’re open to unconventional,” I mutter.

The alpha could summon his wolf.

I blink, confusion washing over me. “Summon his wolf? What do you mean?”

Just as you summoned your wolf, Grimoire explains, his tone matter-of-fact.

My brow furrows deeper. “What are you talking about? I never summoned Selene. She just appeared one day.”

I can almost feel Grimoire’s exasperation through our bond. Child, do you truly believe a powerful being like Selene would simply materialize without cause? You called her, whether you realize it or not.

Unshift 310

310 Lisa: Humans Have Pheromones?

LISA

Kellan’s stare leaves me unsettled. It’s been intense ever since our reunion.

I’m grateful for the space he’s given me—this whole fated mate business is like being slammed into by a rogue freight train—but there’s a whole lot of little things that keep throwing his feelings into the foreground, making it impossible to ignore.

Like how he touches me a little too often.

How he watches my every move.

He hasn’t kissed me again, but it doesn’t make the current situation any less awkward.

“Can’t sleep?” he asks, as if us sharing a bed and him lying on his side to stare at me for the past hour is somehow conducive to falling asleep.

“Nope.” The word pops out with a little more sass than I intend, but damn it, does he have to

stare at me like that?

“Oh.”

And awkward silence again.

“So, why couldn’t I just bunk with Dr. Blackwell?” My question breaks the uneasy tension

between us.

“They don’t have an extra bed,” he explains easily.

“And no empty beds anywhere else? At all? Just—none?”

“None.”

“No sleeping bags?”

“No.”

“Extra blanket?”

“Not even one of those.”

He’s lying through his damn perfect teeth.

“You have a couch,” I point out. I saw it. I know it’s there.

“People come in and out at all times of day. It isn’t the safest place to sleep. Better to be in bed.”

“Right.” Fiddling with the comforter—soft and warm and smelling like Downy—I dare to glance in his direction again, only to be caught by his unblinking gray eyes.

“You could sleep on the couch,” I point out in a vague mumble.

“I don’t want to.”

Of course he doesn’t. These wolves just do what they want and damn the consequences.

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make an inane sort of sound and watch the ceiling in the darkness. I hate to admit it, but I kind

of like that he's there.

"I hope Ava and Lucas are getting along."

I'm sure they are.

The heated huskiness of his voice has all my lady bits tingling.

Bad Lisa. Bad! He thinks you're his mate and he's being all caveman about it. Don't give in.

I clear my throat, desperate to change the subject from the tension simmering between us. "It's only right to give the newly mated couple their own space, don't you think?"

Kellan nods, his intense gaze softening slightly. "Absolutely. Ava and Lucas need to be around each other as much as possible for the next few days."

My curiosity piques, momentarily overriding my discomfort. "Why's that?"

"The mate bond requires proximity," he explains, his voice taking on a lecturer's tone. "Especially in the beginning stages. It's like... imagine a sapling that's just been planted. It needs constant care, water, and sunlight to grow strong roots. The mate bond is similar."

I let out a little hum. "So, they literally need to be in each other's presence? Like, all the time?"

"At first, Kellan confirms. "Their bond will demand that time together. She'll feel wrong and anxious without his sense, and his aggression will increase when she isn't near."

Wow. More reasons this whole mate thing is kind of bullshit. It's a lot less romantic when you suddenly get slapped with the label yourself one day out of nowhere. "Huh."

We lapse into silence, but it feels different now. Less awkward, more... contemplative. I find myself studying Kellan's face in the dim light, noting the strong line of his jaw, the warmth in his gray eyes.

"Can I ask you something?" I venture after a while.

"Anything," he replies immediately. Text

"What happens now? I mean, with us? With this whole... mate situation?"

Kellan goes very, very still. It's like he isn't even breathing, until he finally talks again. "That's

up

to you, Lisa. I know this is a lot to take in, and I don't expect you to just fall into my arms and live happily ever after. We can take things as slow as you need."

"And if... if I decide I don't want this? The mate thing, I mean."

He's quiet again.

"You aren't going to force me, are you? Drag me into your cave and have your wicked way with me?"

He sounds strangled when he responds, "Of course not."

I let out a sigh of relief, my body relaxing into the mattress. The tension that had been coiling in my muscles starts to unwind, but it's short-lived.

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Shit. My eyes widen as I realize how my words must have sounded. "No! I mean, I don't-" I stumble over my words, trying to backpedal. How do I explain that it's not him specifically, but this whole situation that has me on edge?

Kellan sighs, his broad shoulders slumping slightly. "Look, Lisa, I know you're an independent soul. The last thing I want to do is scare you or make you feel trapped."

I narrow my eyes, suspicion creeping back in. "So... does that mean you are going to do it and you're just lying to me now?"

A strange sound escapes Kellan—half groan, half laugh. "No, Lisa. I would never do that to you. Never." His gray eyes lock onto mine, intense and sincere in the dim lighting. "I want you to come to me of your own accord."

The conviction in his voice sends a shiver down my spine. I believe him, I realize. Despite everything—the chaos of the past few days, the whole mate situation being dropped on me like a bomb—I believe that Kellan won't force me into anything.

"Oh," I breathe out, not sure what else to say.

Kellan shifts, propping himself up on one elbow. The movement causes the blanket to slip further down his chest. He doesn't have a shirt on, which is far too enticing for a woman like me. Especially when I'm trying so hard to not fall into his arms. "I know this is a lot to take in," he says softly. "Hell, it's a lot for me too. But I meant what I said earlier—we can take this as slow as

you need."

"Can I ask you something else?"

"Of course."

Since he's being so kind as to explain things, I may as well ask all the questions we humans want to know. "What exactly does being mates mean? Like, practically speaking. Is it just... attraction?"

Or is there more to it?"

"The mate bond is more than just physical attraction, though that's certainly part of it. It's a deep, instinctual connection. Like finding a missing piece of yourself you didn't even know was

gone."

His words send a flutter through my stomach. It sounds romantic, sure, but also terrifying. "But

what does that mean for us? For our lives?"

"It means we're uniquely suited to complement each other," Kellan explains. "In theory, we should balance each other out—strengths and weaknesses, personality traits. The bond encourages us to be better versions of ourselves."

I can't help but snort at that. "So, what? The universe decided we'd be perfect together and now we're just supposed to accept that?"

The way his voice changes, I can tell he's smiling, even if I can't see it. "I know it sounds crazy. Trust me, I've been grappling with this too. But the mate bond isn't a guarantee of happily ever after. It's more like... a strong foundation. We still have to put in the work to build something on

it."

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"Are you going to have problems because you're mated to a human?"

Kellan's body jerks a little, and my breath stops. Damn. I didn't realize the question was such a bomb.

"The pack will accept my fated mate" he says in a nonanswer,

"So, it'll be a problem for you, Undermine your position, maybe?"

"No."

"Don't lie to me, Kellan."

He sighs, "A mate bond with a human is rare, I didn't even realize it at first"

"That's right!" I sit up in excitement. "You didn't know at first. Ava said you find out when you smelled my blood, but I've had so many scratches, and you never knew"

His

grunt is

my only answer for a while. Then, "It isn't just the blood," he says tightly. "I could smell your pheromones."

"Pheromones?" I frown. "Humans have pheromones?"

Kellan's body tenses beside me. "I could smell that you had sex"

Shock courses through my body, and I jerk back instinctively. The sudden movement throws me off balance, having moved too far off the side of the bed, and I flail as I fall.

Just as I'm sure I'm about to hit the floor, a strong hand grabs my arm and yanks me to safety. My body thumps against Kellan's chest with an undignified squeak escaping me.

For a moment, we're frozen like that—me pressed against him, his arms holding me tight. I can feel the heat of his skin through the thin fabric of my pajamas, can hear the rapid beating of his heart. Or is that mine?

"I... you... what?" I stammer, my brain still trying to catch up with everything that just happened. Kellan's arms loosen slightly, but he doesn't let go completely. "Are you okay?" he asks, concern evident in his voice.

"Physically? Yes. Mentally? I'm not so sure" I reply, my voice shaky. I push myself up, putting a little distance between us, but not quite breaking free of his hold. "Did you really just say you could smell... that?"

I'm not a prude by any measure. I'm not ashamed of sex. But somehow, my cheeks are burning He nods, a grimace twisting his features. "It's part of being a wolf. Our senses are... enhanced" "Enhanced enough to smell... Oh my God: Mortification washes over

me as the full implications of what he's saying sink in. The heat rising to my cheeks is so intense I'm surprised the room doesn't burst into flames.