

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted #Unshift 311 - Read Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted Unshift 311

Unshift 311

311 Lisa: Would a Watch Work?

LISA

"You've gotten fat. Elverly greets me, in that traditionally hateful way of hers.

Does the fact that I missed her toxic tongue mark me as abnormal? Probably. But I hug her anyway, smiling when her body doesn't tense, even as she grumbles at me for touching her without permission.

The rest of the night with Kellan was nothing but awkward silence. Being away from him is a blessing right now. I just keep thinking about how he smelled—yeah. No. Not thinking about that.

"I'll ask next time. How have you been?"

Elverly's snort could mean anything really, but I choose to interpret it as I've missed you too.

Maybe I'm psychotic. Or delusional. But I'm pretty sure that's what she means.

"Their food is terrible," she mutters. "Not a cook among them."

"They are refugees from war," says the Grand Sage, sounding rather resigned. "It isn't as though they would gather the kitchen before escaping."

"Food is important, the old gnome woman snaps. "Eating well is an important part of recovery."

"Yes, yes."

I can't help but smile as I watch the Grand Sage and Elverly bicker. Their dynamic reminds me of an old married couple, though I'd never dare say that out loud. Elverly might actually bite my head off if I did.

"It's good to see you, Lisa," the Grand Sage says, turning to me with a warm smile.

"Kellan thought it'd be the safest place for me while Ava and Lucas are... you know."

The Grand Sage's eyes twinkle with understanding. "Ah, yes. It's always important to step away from new mates. Wolves don't have the same deep-seated urges for privacy as humans do."

My cheeks burn at the implication. Desperate to change the subject, I nod towards the papers scattered on the table in front of him.

"What are you working on? Looks like some kind of design."

The Grand Sage's face lights up. "Indeed it is. I'm developing a communication device. Something smaller and more portable than what we currently have.

"Oh?" I lean in, genuinely curious. "Like a magical walkie-talkie?"

He chuckles. "Something like that. Communication is a weak point for us right now, and I'm trying to address that. But I'm working with limited options due to our lack of supplies." We're refugees, after all. It's not like we have access to the latest tech or endless resources. "Plus," he continues, "it needs to be independent of magical affinity."

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311 Lisa: Would a Watch Work?

"What do you mean by that?"

The Grand Sage sets down his pencil and turns to face me fully. "Not everyone in our camp can utilize or sense magic. We need a device that anyone can use, regardless of their magical

abilities."

Oh. Yes. Obviously that's what that means. "Right. Gnomes can't use magic. Or wolf shifters."

He smiles. "We gnomes have always been deaf to magic."

I lean against the table, fascinated. "So, how does that work with werewolves? I mean, their whole shifting thing is pretty magical, right?"

"Ah, excellent question," the Grand Sage says, his eyes lighting up. "Werewolves do indeed have a form of innate magic that allows them to shift. But that doesn't necessarily translate to an ability to manipulate other forms of magic. It's a bit like how some humans might have extraordinary physical abilities but no talent for, say,

mathematics. They are unrelated. Now, let's get back to the communication device, shall we?"

I nod, leaning in to look at his sketches. They're intricate, full of symbols I don't understand and diagrams that make my head spin. "So, how exactly would this work?"

The Grand Sage picks up his pencil again, tapping it against the paper. "The basic principle is to create a network of energy that can carry messages across distances. Think of it like your human radio waves, but powered by a different kind of energy."

"Magic," I supply.

He nods. "Yes, but not in the way you might think. The device itself would be charged with magical energy, but using it wouldn't require any magical ability from the user. It would be like using a flashlight. The electricity makes it work, but you don't need to be an electrician to turn it

on."

It always surprises me how familiar the gnome is with our human world and its inventions, but I suppose that's why he works on magical technology, trying to blend the two things. "That makes sense. So, what's the hold-up? Why isn't it working yet?"

The Grand Sage sighs, running a hand through his beard. "Resources, mainly. We need certain materials to construct the devices, and they're not easy to come by in our current situation. And then there's the matter of testing and refining the design. It's a delicate process. But above all, we would need a way to charge them."

So many intricate designs and symbols are scattered across the papers. A thought strikes me, and I can't help but voice it.

"Instead of starting from scratch, what if you used something that already exists as a base?" @

The Grand Sage's eyebrows rise with interest. "That would depend on what you have in mind, my dear."

It seems almost silly to suggest, but... "Well, what about watches? You know, instead of carrying around something bulky, we could take old watches and turn them into something like cell phones. Kind of like smart watches for humans."

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311 Lisa: Would a Watch Work?

His eyes light up with fascination. “Smart watches? I’m afraid I’m not familiar with this term. Could you

elaborate?”

“So—watches are these small devices we wear on our wrists to tell time. But smart watches are like tiny computers. They can do all sorts of things—make calls, send messages, even track your health. They’re often linked to our cell phones.”

The Grand Sage leans forward, clearly intrigued. “Fascinating! And these are small enough to

wear on one’s wrist?”

“Yep. They’re super convenient. I thought maybe we could do, something similar with magic.” “Could you perhaps draw one for me?” he asks, sliding a blank piece of paper towards me.

I grimace. “I’ll try, but I have to warn you—I’m not much of an artist.”

Taking the pencil, I start sketching. My lines are wobbly, and the proportions are all off, but I do my best to capture the basic shape of a watch face and band. (2

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312 Lisa: Elverly’s Seasonings

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LISA

“So, this is the face,” I explain, pointing to my crude circle. “And these are buttons on the side for different functions.” I add a few lumps to represent the buttons.

The Grand Sage peers at my drawing, stroking his beard thoughtfully. “I see. And you believe we could adapt something like this for magical communication?”

“Maybe?” I shrug, feeling a bit self-conscious about my suggestion now that I’ve said it out loud. “I mean, I don’t know much about magic. It was just an idea.”

He nods slowly, his eyes still fixed on my terrible sketch. “You know, Lisa, your idea has some merit. The compact size would certainly be an advantage. Of course, I’d need to acquire some of these watches to see what I could do with them, but it’s an intriguing concept.”

A warm flush of pride spreads through my chest at his words. It's nice to feel like I've contributed something useful, especially when I often feel so out of my depth in this magical world.

A strange scratching sound comes from the door, startling me out of my warm glow. I glance at the Grand Sage, who looks equally puzzled.

"I'll get it," I offer, pushing away from the table.

As I approach the door, the scratching intensifies, sounding distinctly impatient. Curious, I turn the handle and pull the door open.

To my surprise, Selene slinks into the room, her silver fur gleaming in the dim light. Ice-blue eyes meet mine before she pads past me, walking straight toward the older gnome, where they stare at each other in silence. Probably mind-reading each other or something.

Elverly gives an exasperated sigh, grabbing for a washcloth and wiping the floor. Muddy paw prints trail behind Selene, leaving the marks of her presence. "Walking into a home, leaving it a mess. I'd never have a dog as a pet. Too much time spent cleaning up after them."

"Some people don't mind the mess. But Selene isn't a dog. She's a proper wolf and the Westwood

Pack Luna now."

"Luna or dog, does it change these muddy paws on my floor?" Elverly points at them, her ascerbic words even throwing Selene off guard. The husky raises a paw, leaning her head down to sniff at it, her tail sliding between her legs.

"Come now, Elverly. She is a guest here. Do treat her with a little more understanding."
-Elverly's scowl deepens as she turns her gaze from Selene to the Grand Sage. Her wrinkled face

contorts into what I can only describe as a grimace of politeness as she curtsies. It's like watching a cat try to swim—unnatural and slightly painful to witness.

"My sincerest apologies for my unseemly outburst, Grand Sage," she intones, her voice flat. "It was most unbecoming and shall not happen again."

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312 Lisa: Elverly's Seasonings

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. Elverly's delivery? Let's just say she'd never make it as an actress.

Elverly's attention snaps to me. Maybe she could hear my internal laughter, which stops abruptly as she stomps over, each step punctuated by a soft thud of her gnomish feet.

"You," she barks, jabbing a gnarled finger at my midsection. "Kitchen. Now. We need to put some meat on those bones."

A grin spreads across my face. "Didn't you say I was fat?"

She snorts, already turning towards the kitchen. "You're getting fat. You aren't fat yet."

Wait a second. Wasn't she just complaining about the quality of the food here? "Did you pack your seasonings?"

She pauses at the kitchen doorway, throwing me a look over her shoulder that clearly questions my intelligence. "Of course I did. I understand what priorities must be had."

As she disappears into the kitchen, I can't help but chuckle. Trust Elverly to consider her spice rack a priority during an escape. But then, a memory flashes through my mind—the chaos of our flight, the urgency, the fear. My smile fades as I realize something.

"Elverly?" I call out, following her into the kitchen. "Did you... did you pack your seasonings before you woke me up to save my life?"

She's already bustling around the small space, pulling out pots and pans with a clatter that seems too loud in the sudden silence that follows my question. For a moment, I think she hasn't heard me. But then she turns, fixing me with those sharp eyes of hers.

"And what if I did?" she challenges, one eyebrow raised. "Would you rather I left them behind? Then where would we be? Eating bland, flavorless mush like savages?"

I stare at her, mouth agape.

Really?

"Close your mouth, girl. You'll catch flies," Elverly snaps, turning back to the stove. "And make yourself useful. Chop those vegetables over there."

Numbly, I move to the counter where a pile of vegetables sits waiting.

I start chopping, the rhythmic thud of the knife against the cutting board matching the confused beating of my heart. The silence stretches between us, broken only by the sizzle of whatever Elverly's cooking and the steady chop—chop—chop of my knife. Text

“You know,” Elverly says suddenly, her voice gruff as always, “a good chef always has their tools ready. Can’t make a proper meal without the right seasonings.”

I pause in my chopping, glancing over at her. She’s not looking at me, focused intently on stirring something in a pot.

“But,” she continues, “a chef is nothing without someone to cook for. What’s the point of all those spices if there’s no one to appreciate the meal?”

17:35

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312 Lisa: Elverly’s Seasonings

girl. I still think you’re a nuisance. But you’re my nuisance. And I’ll be damned if I let anything happen to you on my watch.” 2

A warmth blooms in my chest, chasing away the cold doubt that had settled there. I feel my lips quirk up into a smile.

“Thanks. I like you, too.” 2

She huffs, turning back to her cooking. “Don’t push it. Now hurry up with those vegetables. I’m not getting any younger over here.”

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313 Ava: What Do You Think I Should Do?

Grimoire’s presence inside of me is unfazed after his revelations from the morning. I swear his

book form even looks cheerful, sitting there on the table.

You seem worried, Selene says, sounding distracted.

“I am. I still don’t agree with Grimoire”

About the summoning?

“Yes. Wouldn’t you know if you were summoned?”

I suppose. Selene goes quiet for a bit, before asking, How does Lucas feel about it?
Text

Lucas.

He's standing by the window, watching the light rain drizzle across our world. The soft patter of droplets on glass is the only sound outside of my voice. Sister Miriam and Vester left a while ago, leaving us to contemplate our next move. Lucas hasn't spoken since they departed, his thoughts as opaque as the cloudy sky outside.

"I don't know."

He seems ambivalent to the idea of summoning his wolf, but I can't blame him.

After dropping the bomb of Selene's alleged summoning—though she denies it—he did mention the possible negatives.

While Lucas would not lose his sense of self, he might lose his wolf. Like me, he would exist as a human. But unlike me, he wouldn't have magic to bridge that supernatural gap.

No healing. No strength. What would happen if he were challenged then?

Is it any better than now?

His wolf would be strong, but can an Alpha survive without his internal wolf? Would the pack accept that?

Crossing the room in silence, I slip my arms around his waist, pressing my cheek against the broad expanse of his back. The steady thump of his heart echoes through me. Soothing. Strong. My anchor in the storm.

Lucas large hand covers mine where they rest on his stomach. His touch is warm, familiar, yet so new. We stand like this as the rain continues its gentle patter.

and

Time stretches, undefined and uncertain. The warmth of his scent fills my lungs, surrounding me in assurance, soothing the anxiety beating in my veins.

"What do you think I should do?" His voice breaks the silence, low and rumbling. I can feel the vibration of his words through his back.

What should he do? The options before us are all shit, covered in more shit, until it becomes a

shit mountain.

A What 10 You

Do You Think I Should Do?

If it weren't for the state of the world...

If it weren't for the pack....

Maybe we'd have more time.

Maybe we wouldn't be forced into these decisions.

But as I've learned so many times, life isn't fair.

"I don't know," I admit softly. "There's so much at stake.

Lucas's fingers tighten slightly over mine. "Tell me what you're thinking"

A soft sigh, with all the weight of the world in it, escapes my lips.

"Even if you keep your sense of self... I worry that you would feel as if you were living half a life without your wolf."

I know how it feels to be so alone..

Having Selene has changed my world, but it's still different from the bond any normal shifter has with their wolf. Distance can create emptiness within our bond. And—scariest of all—I can die and leave her alone in this world.

Or she can die, and I'll be alone again.

My voice wavers slightly. "And I worry about what that would mean for you as Alpha. Would the pack accept a leader without abilities?"

Lucas remains silent, but I can sense him listening intently.

I shift, pressing closer to him. "And selfishly, I miss you. The you who remembers our history."

Lucas turns in my arms, his golden eyes searching my face. "I feel that connection with you," he says softly. "Even without the memories, there's something right about being with you. It's here: He taps his chest, then mine. "Something inside of me is so happy, every time you're near.

My heart swells. "I feel it too," I whisper.

He cups my face in his hands, his touch gentle. "But this isn't just about us. I have a responsibility to the pack."

I nod, leaning into his touch.

Do you regret that we are not one body? Selene asks, still sounding distracted.

Sometimes, I admit. But I can't imagine not being able to touch you, either.

It is the same for me.

The rush of love I can feel from her bond has me smiling, and Lucas narrows his eyes. "Are you talking to the book again?"

"No. I can't talk to Grimoire unless I'm touching him."

There's a familiar yank in our bond.

"Speak of the devil; I murmur, pulling away.

213 Ava: What Do You Think I Should Do?

A sudden jerk pulls me back, and I find myself pressed against Lucas's chest. His arms wrap

around me strong and possessive. The warmth of his breath tickles my ear as he nuzzles into my hair.

"I don't like the book," he grumbles, frustration evident in his voice.

His declaration catches me off guard. I pat his arms, trying to soothe him. "Why not?"

Lucas's grip tightens slightly. "Grimoire is a man."

A laugh bubbles up from my chest. "Well, he's male in a sense, I suppose. But it's not the same for him as it is for us.

"He's still a man," Lucas mutters, his tone bordering on petulant.

Another hard yank tugs at my bond with Grimoire. I can feel his impatience growing.

"I need to talk to Grimoire," I say, attempting to pull away.

Lucas's arms tighten around me. "Do you have to?"

For a big, strong alpha wolf, he sounds...

Childish.

I can't help but laugh at this side of him. It's endearing to see him so vulnerable, so different from the composed Alpha I'm used to. "I do," I reply, my voice gentle but firm.

With a resigned sigh, Lucas releases me. But as I move towards the table, he grabs my hand, following close behind. I shake my head, amused by his persistence.

As we reach the table, I extend my free hand to touch the book. The moment my fingers make contact, a spark ignites. Magic surges through my bond with Grimoire, a rush of energy that leaves

me breathless.

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314 Ava: Grimoire's Manipulation

Before my eyes, the book's form fades. In its place, Grimoire materializes, perched on the edge of the table. Flames lick at his skin, but do nothing to the wood of the table. His expression is distinctly sour as he glowers at Lucas.

"It isn't right to wedge yourself between my bond with Ava."

I feel Lucas tense behind me, his hand tightening around mine.

"I'm not wedging myself anywhere. She's my mate."

Grimoire's eyes narrow. "And I am her magical counterpart. Our bond is just as important. Perhaps even more so."

The way my mate tenses behind me has me scrambling to defuse the situation. "Enough, Grimoire."

Know your place, Selene adds, her mental growl making my eardrums vibrate.

Lucas's thumb traces circles on the back of my hand, and when I glance back, he looks... pleased. His lips curl up, his face relaxed. In fact, I think I'd categorize him as distinctly smug. Grimoire, on the other hand, has shrunk from the size of a man to the size of a child. He even looks younger, the planes of his face round and soft, and his voice a higher pitch than before. "He still has to respect our bond, Grimoire insists, crossing his arms in a sulky demeanor that makes him seem about five years old.

He's...

Adorable.

HIGO

Patters.

Even though I know he's thousands upon thousands of years old, my heart pitters and squeezing out maternal affection at his appearance.

Really? Selene's exasperation snaps me out of it. He's a book, Ava. Not your kid.

Frowning at Grimoire, I focus on the bond between us. There's an odd sort of fuzziness there that brings up all those maternal feelings again when I touch it.

My eyes narrow. "Are you manipulating my emotions, Grimoire?"

His eyes go wide. Wider than should be possible. He looks like a weebegone child, and my heart trembles—until I slam closed the magical connection between us. The childish figure of Grimoire pops out of existence, leaving behind only his book form.

Our bond tugs and yanks incessantly.

"Not until you act right. No manipulating me, Grimoire. I mean it. It doesn't feel good to know he was able to force emotions into me I didn't want to feel.

The yanking stops.

Lucas pulls me into his arms, his chest warm against my back. "See? I don't like him. He turned

into a child tes grain vestr svmnathu"

314 Ava. Crimaire's Manipulation

Instead of a yank this time, there's a tiny little tug. So gentle I would miss it, if I wasn't waiting

for it.

Reaching out, I touch the book again, thinking of how my magic flowed into it last time. He hadn't asked for permission; he'd just taken it. That pisses me off, now that I think about it.

"Do you have something to say to me?"

I'm sorry, Grimoire says, sounding suitably chastised. I won't do that again.

Narrowing my eyes at the book, I ask suspiciously, "And how am I supposed to believe you?"

I swear I won't do it again. I allowed my jealousy to take over. You've been spending all your time with him and ignoring me

That doesn't excuse what you did, Selene says irritably. You're old enough to know better. Bonds are sacred. If you only bonded her to manipulate her into doing what you want, I'll tell her exactly how to break it

Break it? You can do that? Fascinating...

I won't. I won't do it again. I promise. Please, let me out. I'll be on my best behavior.

There's no hint of the condescending elitist; it's all back to that puppy-dog bond, the one that's overly affectionate and needy.

Infusing our connection with magic is easier than I thought it would be. The book fades away again, leaving child-Grimoire in its place. This time, I don't feel a rush of maternal emotions when I see his face.

It's cute, but in the way children can be cute. Nothing special. Just a kid.

"Thank you," child-Grimoire says gratefully.

Lucas grunts, his arms tightening around me. "Why is he back?"

"I wanted to say something!" Grimoire holds up his tiny hands. "I want to help."

As if any of that was helpful, Selene mutters. If I was there, he'd have teeth marks all along his spine.

Grimoire shudders. "I'm sorry, okay? I already apologized."

That is hardly an apology.

"What more should I-"

"That's enough." Interrupting the two is necessary for my sanity. "Why were you trying to get my attention, Grimoire?"

"Ah." Grimoire brightens, Somehow, this childish look of his suits his personality. "I thought of something."

"Oh?"

"Your wolf was once mated to his, wasn't she?"

Selene's growl inside my head intensifies You have no right to sneak of such things.

314 Ava: Grimoire's Manipulation

He scowls. "How can I help it? I'm bonded to your mistress, too." Then close your ears to what doesn't concern you, she snaps.

"Your wolf is as illogical as you are," Grimoire mutters.

I narrow my eyes, but he just looks away, clearing his throat. "Either way, this means the mate connection between them is strong. For it to persist through several lifetimes is quite rare. It is a blessing from the Goddess."

The sheer rage that out of s

if Lucas wasn't holding me up.

side of our bond would have me falling to my knees,

"What's wrong?" he asks, his arms tight as he bears my weight.

"She's angry."

You know not of which you speak, Selene snarls. Get your filthy soul out of this bond.

"Your mate might not have appreciated the blessing, but that doesn't change the truth, wolf. Enough, book.

"Guys..." Even though Selene's not here, I hold my hand up as if flagging their attention. "Can we get back to the problem at hand?"

It's clear my new bond has upset the delicate balance inside my head. They hate each other. And my mate isn't fond of him, either.

"Selene," Grimoire says, pointing at Lucas over my shoulder, "can control his wolf. Use the bomb.

Love at World's End-

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Unshift 315

315 Ava: Plan of Action, Finally

"The bomb is risky" I protest automatically. "You said it could shatter his mind.

Meanwhile, the rest of my brain is focused on this idea that Selene can somehow control Lucas' wolf. Really? He's an alpha. The strongest of the strong. Though, Selene showed her presence as Luna, and that was a force I never expected....

I am stronger, she asserts, sounding mildly insulted.

"Don't shatter it, then. Only weaken the barrier."

"Not destroy it completely?" I ask again, seeking clarification—because this is nothing like he explained earlier.

Grimoire's flames flicker as he nods. "Correct. Your magic would create a weak point, allowing Lucas' wolf to break through naturally."

"But then wouldn't that lead to my wolf side taking over?" Lucas asks, absently running a hand

hair in a gentle caress. "Wouldn't that be the outcome we are trying to avoid?"

over

my

"Indeed," Grimoire confirms. "Once your minds reconnect, the wolf will become feral due to the breakdown of your psyche."

Feral. The image of Lucas' golden eyes, wild and uncontrolled, flashes through my mind. Reaching up to grab his hand, I link our fingers in a firm grip, even as my hand shakes at the worries of my

mind.

"That's where Selene comes in, right?" My gaze never leaves Grimoire, my voice steady with false calm. "She can control his wolf. Keep him from becoming feral."

Grimoire looks pleased. "Precisely."

Forcing submission is not easy. Not when your opponent is an alpha.

But she doesn't sound like she opposes the plan.

Grimoire continues, his voice taking on a lecturing tone. "As long as Selene maintains control, Lucas will be able to recover his mental strength and regain balance. It's crucial

to understand that Lycan and human souls can only coexist when the Lycan soul is tempered into submission.

“If that’s so,” I interject slowly, turning these facts over in my head, “Why weren’t Lycans like this before? I mean, in the past? Selene was never feral.

It was uncommon to run across a feral Lycan. Usually a rogue, with too little time spent in a pack.

Grimoire’s flames dance excitedly, clearly pleased by my curiosity. “Ah, an excellent question! You see, the human mind is inherently too weak to contain a Lycan soul and endure its primal instincts. This is precisely why the shifters of today are much weaker than the Lycans of history.”

Lucas leans forward. “What are these Lycans? This doesn’t sound like proper history.

He wouldn’t know anything about the true history of wolf shifters; only what he’s grown up with. I can’t even remember if I’ve ever shared what I learned with him before his memory loss.

315 Ava Planol Action, Finally

As Grimoire launches into what promises to be a lengthy explanation, I clear my throat. Even with as little time as I’ve spent with the book, I can recognize that he’s getting carried away with

his own voice.

“Grimoire,” I interject, trying to sound firm instead of exasperated. “We appreciate the history lesson, but maybe we should focus on the matter at hand?”

Selene adds her own mental nudge, and Grimoire’s flames flicker.

“Of course, of course. My apologies, I do tend to get carried away with the wealth of knowledge at my disposal.”

Lucas, for his part, looks a little

the problem in front of us, to Appointed at the interruption. But it’s too easy to try to avoid

the problem in front of us, to get distracted by other things. I don’t want his memories to become a lack of priority.

There’s too much at stake, and the idea that an alpha challenge could come at any time has the area between my shoulder blades itching.

“What do you think?” I ask, pulling his attention away from the book. “Should we try Grimoire’s plan?”

I’m not sure how I feel about it.

“Something in here... Lucas taps his chest. “Something tells me to try it.”

His wolf agrees, Selene says quietly. His wolf wants out. He hates being apart from Lucas.

But that doesn’t mean this is a great idea..

Privately funneling my thoughts toward Selene still feels awkward. You said it won’t be easy. Do you really think you can do it?

At first, there’s silence. Then her mental voice, firm and steady. I will do it.

Fumbling to enter Lucas’ mind is an exercise in futility.

“It isn’t inside you,” Grimoire lectures, though his tone is kind. “It’s in the mental bond between

you.”

But no matter how I open myself up, no matter how I reach, and no matter how I try to feel for anything else, any glimmer of connection between us, there’s only the bond that’s warm and golden in my chest.

It pulses steadily, but now that I know what I’m supposed to be hunting for, there’s a vague sense that it’s incomplete. Like a bridge missing its other half.

“Ava,” Lucas murmurs, his voice a soothing balm to my frayed nerves. “It’s okay. Take your time.

I feel his hand reach for mine, seeking to offer comfort. Before our fingers can touch, a sharp crack echoes through the room.

“No physical contact, Grimoire snaps. “It’ll only muddle things further

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My ever so patient mate grunts in annoyance but doesn’t argue. I hear him shift on the couch, probably settling back into position.

“Sorry,” I mutter, more to Lucas than Grimoire.

“Don’t apologize,” he says. “You’re doing great.”

But I’m not. I’m falling miserably.

“You’re thinking too hard, Grimoire chides. “Stop trying to force it. Let the magic flow naturally.”

I want to snap at him, to tell him how easy that is to say when you’re not the one fumbling in the dark. But at some point, I’ve learned more about myself. I can recognize that instinctive reaction as my frustration with myself, not with my teacher. I’m angry at my own incapability.

And, as Magister Orion cautioned me many times, that frustration is only an obstacle to my eventual success.

Taking a deep breath, I clear my mind. It’s an easy exercise now, hardly worth a thought in my

head.

I focus on the golden warmth in my chest, imagining it expanding outward. Like tendrils of light that stretch from me, searching for something—anything—to connect with.

Nothing.

“Again, it isn’t from there, Ava. You’re looking out now, but that’s still not where it is. Not from here. I can feel his fingers tap my chest. “It’s up here.” And then my temple.

“Okay, okay.”

But even when I fumble up there, there’s nothing

Only Selene. And Grimoire.

“Such latent talent,” Grimoire mumbles. “Yet you’re so dense at picking up the application.”

Love at World’s End-

Unshift 316

316 Ava: Selene vs Grimoire

I crack my eyes open, glowering in Grimoire’s direction. To my surprise, Lucas mirrors my expression, his brows furrowed as he stares daggers at the sentient book. Even Selene, now sitting across the room as she watches, growls with unmistakable hostility.

Grimoire clears his throat, clearly sensing the shift in the room's atmosphere. "Perhaps a more hands-on approach would be beneficial, he says, his tone noticeably softer. "Ava, if you would hold my hand, I'll guide you through the process!"

Hesitantly, I reach out and place my hand in his. The moment our skin touches, I feel a surge of energy coursing through me. It's different from the raw power I've experienced before—more focused, controlled.

I want to ask him why, when I touch him as a book, he takes my magic. And how, now that he's here and human, I can take his. But that's a question for another time, not when I'm busy doing something important.

"Now," Grimoire instructs, "close your eyes and follow my lead."

I obey, letting my eyelids flutter shut. Grimoire's presence in my mind is gentle but insistent, guiding my consciousness along unfamiliar paths. We delve deeper into the recesses of my psyche, searching for that elusive connection to Lucas.

But as we explore, Grimoire's mental touch becomes hesitant, then puzzled. The silence in the room grows heavy as minutes tick by without result.

Finally, Grimoire's voice breaks the stillness, tinged with confusion. "This... this can't be right."

I open my eyes to find him staring at me, his brow furrowed in concentration. "What is it?" I ask, anxiety creeping into my voice.

"You are correct, he admits reluctantly. "There's nothing there. No trace of a pack bond, no lingering connection: Grimoire shakes his head, clearly struggling to articulate his thoughts. "As if the bond doesn't exist.

How could that be possible? I've felt the connection between Lucas and me, felt the warmth of our bond, the presence of his mind, at the moment of our mating connection. It can't just not

exist.

Selene sounds downright surly. This shouldn't be news to you, book. Ava has no access to the pack bond. Why act surprised now?

Grimoire bristles at her words. "There should still be something," he snaps back. "A remnant, a trace, anything. Even without access to the full pack bond, there should be some evidence of the

connection between mates." Text

Lucas reaches out, his hand hovering near mine before he remembers Grimoire's earlier admonition. "It doesn't change how I feel," he says firmly. "Bond or no bond, I know there's something between us, Ava. I can feel it."

"Of course there's a bond, you alpha moron. It's only one facet of it that seems to be missing..."

310 Ava: Solone vs Grimane

Grimoire's voice trails off as he looks at Selene, silver eyes brightening. "Of course. Of course!

Such an oversight."

Apologize, Selene growls.

"Apologize? For what?"

She slinks forward, hackles raised and teeth gleaming as her upper lip lifts in a snarl. You disrespected our mate.

I nod. He did. I heard it.

Lucas, watching in silence, is as lost as ever.

"Excuse me? I have been nothing but—ah!"

The shriek that tears from Grimoire's throat is almost comical. One moment he's there, all righteous indignation and flashing silver eyes, and the next he's gone. The heavy thud of his book form hitting the floor echoes in the sudden silence.

But Selene isn't done. She pounces on the fallen magical tome, her teeth bared in a snarl as she clamps down on its spine. The growl rumbling from her chest is low and menacing, a sound I've rarely heard from her.

I bite my lip, trying desperately not to laugh. The sight of my fierce, dignified dog—wolf gnawing on a book like an overgrown puppy with a chew toy is almost too much to bear. But I know I need to intervene before she does any real damage.

"Selene, come on," I say, reaching for the book. "Let him go"

She growls again, her teeth still firmly embedded in Grimoire's leather binding. I have to tug a bit before she finally releases him, leaving behind a few wet marks and indentations from her sharp canines.

As I cradle the slightly worse-for-wear Grimoire in my arms, I glance up to see Lucas watching me. His eyebrow is raised, a mix of amusement and confusion playing across his features. Right. He has no idea what just happened.

“Sorry,” I say, feeling a bit sheepish. “They were arguing. Selene... well, she took offense.”

Lucas nods slowly, his eyes darting between me, the book, and Selene. “I see,” he says, though his tone suggests he doesn’t really see at all.

Grimoire’s voice suddenly erupts in my mind, loud and indignant. That flea-bitten mongrel! How dare she attack me? I am an ancient repository of magical knowledge, not a common chew toy!

I wince at the volume of his mental tirade. “Grimoire, calm down. She was just defending Lucas.”

Defending him? he scoffs. From what? Words? How painful they must be

Selene’s growl grows louder, her ice-blue eyes fixed on the book in my hands. Apologize, she demands, her mental voice a low, dangerous rumble.

For a moment, there’s silence. I can almost feel Grimoire’s indignation warring with his self-preservation instinct. Finally, he speaks, his mental voice noticeably subdued.

E.. apologise, he says grudgingly. Aly words were... perhaps... poorly chosen.

I have to stifle another laugh at the reluctance in his tone. It’s clear he’s not used to backing down, but Selene’s fierce protectiveness has cowed even his considerable ego.

“There” I say, patting the book’s cover gently. “Was that so hard?”

Excruciating, Grimoire grumbles, but there’s less heat in his words now.

Lucas clears his throat, drawing my attention back to him. “So,” he says, a hint of amusement in his voice, “are we done for now?”

His question brings me back to reality, “Oh. I don’t know-

It was an unpardonable oversight on my end, Grimoire says. We should try again. This time, that vicious monster needs to be a part of it.

The vicious monster in question snaps lazily at the air just centimeters away from him.

Selene, he hastily backtracks. Selene needs to be part of it.

“She does?” Somehow this makes sense, but-

Your mating bond involves your wolves. She is your access point to the pack bond. Such a simple thing I never should have overlooked.

I guess it’s good to know even a semi-omnipotent magic book of ages can make stupid mistakes.. It’s even a little bit of a boost to my ego.

Idiot, Selene mutters.

Murderer, Grimoire responds. And if there’s a mental equivalent to him hiding behind me, I’m pretty sure that’s what’s happening right now. It’s hard to put it into words, but I can feel it. In my head.

This personality of Grimoire’s is odd and capricious. At times his ego is more vast than the sky, and at others he’s little better than a child. It’s hard to get a grasp on him.

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“Okay, okay. Exasperated, I press my palms against my eyes, trying to stave off an incoming headache. “Can we please get to the important stuff, you two? I want to help Lucas, not deal with

bickering bonds.”

Of course, Grimoire save

find access to Lucas.

promptly. This time, enter through Selene’s mind. Through her, you will

“Wait. If I have to go through Selene, wouldn’t I have to go through Lucas’ wolf?”

It is possible. As long as you can get to either of them, you’ll have access to the mental barrier in place.

Love at World’s End-

Unshift 317

317 Ava: Mindscape

Diving into my bond with Selene is like falling into warm clouds. It’s an odd feeling to enter a mental space, but she draws me in naturally, her expertise in this space far outstripping mind.

It's as if my body is separate now, almost a distant memory.

I can't feel the air on my skin. Can't feel the ground I'm sitting on. Even the weight of Selene's body against mine is gone.

There's no smell here.

It isn't even accurate to describe this place as darkness.

It's just—void.

This isn't a place of physical senses, but something else. An energy of the mind, with its own

ent that ebbs and flows.

As I sink deeper, initial comfort gives way to a maelstrom of emotions so intense, so raw, that I nearly lose myself in them. It's as if I'm drowning in a sea of feelings that aren't entirely my own. yet resonate within me on a primal level.

I want to rage at the fleeting memory of my mate rejecting our fate.

I want to cry as I die alone, the last of my pack. Text

I'm suffused in wonder as my eyes open to a new life.

Panic. Longing. Frustration. Love. They crash over me, intense and impossible to control, coming and going in such fleeting moments that I can't hold my own.

As soon as I recognize a memory as not mine, it's gone, replaced by another that drowns me in

how real it feels.

Focus, Ava, Selene's calm voice cuts through the chaos. Let me guide you. Focus on the bond between us. You're drowning in my memories.

The bond between us has a sort of glow that doesn't exist in the real world. Something I can see with my mind's eye, despite there being nothing here.

She steers me through the tumultuous sea. Gradually, I begin to discern a pattern in the chaos, a rhythm that pulses with a familiar energy.

His wolf.

The moment I recognize it, his presence slams into me. Old memories mix with new. Selene's fury mix with her mild exasperation. Her desire to tear out his throat has me raging, wanting-

Ava.

Her voice steadies me, buffers me from the memories. But this time, the frantic energy of his wolf engulfs me, a whirlwind of recognition, joy, and desperate frustration. He knows me. He sees me as his mate, his other half. But there's an underlying current of anxiety, a maddening sense of incompleteness.

317 Ava Mindacapa

He's half feral already.

Mate, the wolf whines. Here but not here. Why?

The anguish in that simple question breaks my heart. I want to reach out, to comfort him, but I don't know how.

Selene yanks at my mind, dragging it with her as we go deeper.

Bloodlust rises, but it isn't as intense now.

I'm buffering you, she says, her mental voice strained. The hope of being reunited has incited. sort of madness in him. Just focus on me. Push away what doesn't belong to us.

I try to heed her advice, but it's like navigating through a storm with my eyes closed. The wolf's emotions buffet me from all sides, each one a vivid burst of sensation. His frustration at being separated from Lucas is so intense that it's almost a physical ache, despite not having a body in this space.

And then, suddenly, I hit a wall.

It's not a physical barrier—nothing is truly physical in this mental landscape—but it might as well be. One moment I'm swimming through a sea of emotions, and the next, I'm brought to an abrupt halt. It's like trying to push through solid stone with my bare hands.

This is it, Grimoire's voice echoes in my mind, startling me. I'd almost forgotten about him in the intensity of the experience. This is the barrier we need to break.

Gather your magic, Ava. Let it flow through you, through Selene, through the bond. All you need to do is weaken this place. Selene and his wolf will do the rest.

Is it strange to suddenly fixate on how his wolf has no name?

Not now, Ava. Selene's words are calm, though strained. Hurry.

It's disorienting, existing in this place of pure sensation. There are no visual cues to ground me, no physical sensations to anchor me to reality. Just emotions, energy, and the vague sense of

presence.

I reach for my magic, trying to summon that familiar warmth, but it's not there. It just doesn't

exist.

"I can't I say, frustration building. "I can't find it. It's not... it's not there."

I'm speaking, but is it coming from my body or my mind?

I can't tell.

I think it might be in

my head.

It exists, Grimoire insists. You're just looking for it in the wrong way. It's in your very essence. Focus on your own feelings, Ava, Selene's voice cuts through the chaos. Find what's distinctly yours in this sea of emotions.

I take a deep breath—or at least, I imagine I do. Her words anchor me, giving me a direction.

317 Ava Mindscape

concentrate on that feeling, letting it fill me up. The warmth of his smile, the strength in his arms, the way his eyes light up when he looks at me. Even with his memories gone, there's still that spark between us. That connection that defies explanation.

As I focus on these thoughts, something shifts in the emotional landscape around me. It's subtle at first, like a ripple in still water. Then I feel it—a gossamer thread, delicate yet unbreakable, stretching out into the void.

Our bond.

I reach for it, my nonexistent hands grasping at nothing and everything. The moment I make contact, it's like touching a live wire. The bond jumps, almost as if startled by my presence. It pulses with life, with recognition.

Lucas, I think, pouring all my love and longing into that single thought.

And then, slowly, I feel it. A familiar sensation creeps through me, starting from my core and spreading outward. It's a thrum of energy, a tingle in fingertips I don't have in this place. My magic, responding to my call.

Good, Ava. Now, guide that energy. Focus it on a single point in the barrier. Attack it there. How? I can't see anything here. How am I supposed to aim at something I can't see? It sounds simple until you're actually about to do it.

Your mind understands the intent of your actions, Grimoire explains patiently. Trust in brain. It knows what you want to do.

your own

Trust my brain? That seems like a tall order when I'm floating in a void of pure emotion and

energy.

Okay, brain. Let's do this.

I picture the barrier in my mind. Not as a physical wall, but as a resistance. A point where the flow of energy and emotion suddenly stops. I imagine my magic as a laser, focused and precise. In my mind's eye, I see it striking that point of resistance.

The release of magic is intentional, something I control, but it almost feels like I'm firing blind.

No, that's actually how it feels. Not almost

But to my surprise, I feel something give way. It's small, barely noticeable, but it's there. A tiny crack in an otherwise impenetrable wall.

Encouraged, I pour more of my magic into that focused beam. The crack widens, spreading like a spiderweb across the surface of the barrier. With each pulse of energy, I feel the resistance weakening.

But it's not enough. The barrier is vast, and my magic feels like a mere drop in an ocean. Frustration builds within me. We're so close, yet still so far.

You don't need to break through, Grimoire reminds me. His wolf will do the rest. And then it will

be Selene's turn.

Unshift 318

318 Ava: Waiting For Him to Wake

Out, Selene says simply.

The journey into his wolf's mind was long. It was a turbulent sea, every inch taken a victory.

Getting out is much easier.

Between one instant and the next, there's nothing more than a distinct yank from Selene's mind, and it's as though I'm sucked through a vortex and thrown back into my own head. There's enough force that I pitch forward and almost hit my face against the ground before my hands fly up to save myself.

"Fuck"

My body's soaked. There's only a small light on in the kitchen; the rest of the house is dark, the windows showing evidence of nightfall.

I'm a used dishrag, flattened to the floor, struggling to push myself to my knees and check on

Lucas.

Grimoire's hands grab onto my arms, pulling me up. He's huge again, his flames higher than normal, his eyes red instead of silver.

Where his hands touch me is odd; pressure without temperature. Not cold. Not hot.

My legs wobble as I struggle to my feet, grateful for Grimoire's steady grip on my arms. The room spins for a moment before settling, and I blink away the disorientation. My gaze lands on Lucas, sprawled across the couch.

He's asleep, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. But something's off. Sweat glistens on his skin, running in rivulets down his face and soaking into his hair. His hands, resting on the couch, tremble visibly.

My stomach knots. "Is he okay?"

Grimoire's grip on my arms tightens slightly. "His wolf is attacking the barrier.

The grim tone in his voice sends a chill down my spine. I turn to look at him, searching his fiery face for any sign of reassurance. There is none.

"Isn't that what we want?" I ask, dreading the answer.

Grimoire's flames flicker, casting dancing shadows across the room. "The wolf is already feral. Completely focused on reuniting with its other half. The moment he felt evidence of the breach,

he went wild."

"But Selene-" I start, turning to where I last saw her.

My words die in my throat as I spot her curled up on the floor. Her eyes are closed, nose tucked into her tail. She looks peaceful, but something feels terribly wrong.

And that place in my head where she rests is empty.

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31B Awa: Waiting For Him to wake

"Breathe, Ava," Grimoire interrupts, his voice firm but gentle. "Selene is fine. She's fully immersed in Lucas and the wolf's psyche right now."

I take a shaky breath, trying to calm my racing heart. "But why can't I feel her? She's always. there, always..."

"She's not here. She's there. He gestures toward Lucas. "We have to watch and wait

There's nothing I can do except sit by his side and wait.

Sometime in the carly hours of morning, there's a knock on the door.

I ignore it.

Grimoire's long since reverted to his book form, the heavy leather-bound paper resting on my lap as my eyes never once leave Lucas' sweating form. He occasionally thrashes and even moans, but he doesn't open his eyes.

Doubt creeps in, whispering that we've made a terrible mistake.

That Lucas isn't coming back.

That we're going to lose him.

His face contorts in pain, sweat beading on his forehead. My heart aches to reach out and comfort him, but Grimoire made it clear: Physical contact might cause more issues.

The door creaks open, and Kellan's voice breaks through my haze of worry. "Ava? We need to

talk"

I tear my eyes away from Lucas to see Kellan and Lisa enter. Kellan's usually composed demeanor is frayed at the edges, his hair mussed and dark circles under his eyes.

"The pack is going wild," he says, running a hand through his disheveled hair. "I've spent the last several hours breaking up fights between all the younger males."

His gaze drifts to Lucas, concern etching deeper lines on his face. "What's going on here?"

"We're trying to get his memories back," I reply, my voice flat and lifeless even to my own ears.

Kellan falls silent, his eyes widening slightly. After a moment, he speaks again, his tone softer. "I wish you would have called me here for it.

"You're right. It might have been better to have you here. I take a deep breath, forcing myself to explain further. "Lucas' wolf has gone completely feral?

Kellan nods slowly. "Sister Miriam explained some things to me. I somewhat understand the

situation"

I return my attention to Lucas, watching as he twitches and mumbles incoherently. My fingers itch to brush the damp hair from his forehead, to offer some small comfort, but I remain frozen in place.

Silence stretches.

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318 Ava: Waiting For Him to Wake

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"Yes," I whisper, clinging to that connection like a lifeline.

"Then don't look so down," Kellan says, his voice gentle but firm.

I try to smile, to show some glimmer of hope, but it feels forced and brittle on my face. Suddenly, Lucas bolts upright, his eyes wide and unseeing. We all jump, startled by the abrupt

movement.

Then it's Selene. She's no longer curled up into a placid ball of fur, but standing, hackles raised and a low growl rumbling.

The air in the room is thick and heavy with oppressive energy, all emanating from Lucas. It's as if all the oxygen has been sucked out, leaving me gasping for breath.

Lucas' eyes are open, but they're not his. Not really. The warm golden hues I've come to love are now a blazing, feral amber. His gaze darts around the room, unfocused and wild. The sheer power emanating from him is overwhelming.

"Lucas?" I whisper, my voice barely audible even to my own ears.

He doesn't respond. Doesn't even look at me. His chest heaves with rapid, shallow breaths, and his muscles are coiled tight, ready to spring at any moment.

He can't hear you right now, Grimoire says. Stay quiet. This is Selene's fight.

Unshift 319

319 Ava: Wolf vs Husky

A soft thud draws my attention for a split second. Lisa's crumpled to the floor, her face pale and eyes wide with fear, gasping for oxygen. An alpha's presence is too much for humans.

Kellan is at her side in an instant, shielding her with his body while keeping a wary eye on Lucas. "Be careful, Luna. That's not Lucas right now. That's pure wolf."

I know he's right. The man I love is nowhere to be seen in those wild eyes. This is something primal, dangerous. Yet I can't bring myself to be afraid. The mate bond pulses between us, stronger than ever before. It tugs at me, urging me closer even as every instinct screams to keep my distance.

Selene's growl deepens, drawing Lucas' attention. His head snaps towards her, lips curling back to reveal elongated canines. The tension in the room ratchets up another notch as Lucas shifts.

In mere seconds, where my mate once stood, a massive wolf now looms. My breath catches in my throat as I take in his new form. This isn't the Lucas I remember.

His fur gleams like spun gold, an ethereal glow emanating from each strand. He's enormous, dwarfing Selene in a way that makes my stomach clench with worry.

Before I can voice my doubts, Lucas lunges at Selene. The room erupts into chaos as the two wolves clash, snarls and growls filling the air.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Kellan react swiftly. He grabs Lisa, shoving her between himself and the wall, shielding her from the fray. The protective gesture would be touching if I weren't so terrified for Selene.

My wolf, my other half, fights with everything she has. But Lucas's sheer size gives him an overwhelming advantage. My heart pounds as I watch him overpower her, pinning her to the ground with his massive body, her throat grasped between his jaws.

Then, something shifts.

Selene's presence explodes outward, filling the room with an energy so potent it makes my skin tingle. Lucas yelps, leaping away from her as if burned. He shakes himself, looking disoriented, while Selene struggles to her feet. She's limping and hurt, but her presence in my head is silent.

I don't know what she's thinking. What she's feeling, as she looks at him.

She's already launching herself at Lucas again. This time, though, the fight is different. Selene's presence continues to pulse through the room, and I can see its effect on Lucas. His movements become less certain, his attacks less ferocious.

Selene is subduing him, not with physical strength, but with the sheer force of her will. I watch in awe as my small, silver husky holds her own against the golden giant.

He's coming to his senses, Grimoire remarks calmly, as though everything's been under his control this entire time. Her presence is breaking through that primal part of him. He should recognize her soon.

My heart leaps into my throat as Lucas thrashes Selene to the ground. The sight of my mate and

319 Ava: Wolf vs Husky

my wolf locked in such a violent struggle tears at my soul. I want to intervene, to protect them both, but I know this is beyond my control.

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Suddenly, the golden wolf pauses. My breath catches as I watch his bristling, stiff tail lower and tuck between his legs. The change is so abrupt it takes me a moment to process. Gone are the fierce growls and snarls that filled the room moments ago. Instead, a soft whine escapes Lucas' muzzle.

Selene, seizing the opportunity, surges forward. She pins Lucas to the ground, her teeth nipping at his face and ears. It's not the vicious attack from before, but a display of dominance. My wolf is asserting herself, and to my amazement, Lucas is allowing it.

I watch, transfixed, as Lucas slowly lowers himself to the ground in submission. The sight of such a powerful alpha yielding to my Selene is both awe-inspiring and slightly unnerving. Selene, panting from exertion, lays atop him, her eyes meeting mine with an unmistakable air of smugness.

Well done, I think, unable to keep a small smile from tugging at my lips. Despite the tension still thrumming through my body, pride swells in my chest.

As I draw nearer, Lucas' nose twitches. He begins sniffing frantically, his nostrils flaring as he catches my scent. The change in him is immediate and startling. He pokes his head out from beneath Selene, whining and whimpering in my direction. His paws scrabble against the floor as he tries to move towards me, desperation evident in every movement.

Selene snaps at him, a quick, sharp reprimand. Lucas settles instantly, but the whining continues. He isn't Lucas, she says, her mental voice a welcome reprieve from the silence in my head. He's in there somewhere, but right now, his wolf is at the forefront of his mind.

"Is that okay? Is he going to be okay?" Sitting beside them, I rub a finger over Lucas' wolf muzzle. I get several frantic licks for my efforts.

Yes. His psyche is overwhelmed, but he should be back soon. You can feel it in your bond, can't you?

The bond between me and Lucas is strong, pulsing, and warm, far more present than before. It almost feels like I can reach out to touch it.

And there's something in my head—it isn't quite there, but there's a nebulous space where something should be.

"I think so."

He will return, Grimoire assures me. He isn't broken. But his wolf is the one in control right now. A smile tugs at my lips as Lucas—no, his wolf—nuzzles against me. The golden fur is soft beneath my fingers, and I can't help but marvel at how such a

massive, powerful creature can be so gentle. His eyes, though still wild and unfamiliar, hold a warmth that makes my heart skip a beat.

319 Ava: Wolf vs Husky

“Will I be able to communicate with him soon?” I ask, glancing between Grimoire and Selene. The question burns in my mind, a desperate need to connect with my mate in any way possible. 2

Unshift 320

320 Ava: A Stronger Bond Than Before

Soon, Grimoire assures me. O

Great.

Selene sets her paw on the golden wolf’s head, shoving it down while she rubs her head against my hand.

“Jealous?” I ask her in amusement.

Why would I be jealous? she asks, even as she wiggles her way between us.

Unlike with Lucas, she isn’t trying to share affection with the golden wolf. It’s me she wants to snuggle against.

I guess she still doesn’t have a full connection with his wolf.

No, she agrees shortly.

As Kellan and Lisa approach, the golden wolf lets out a low, menacing growl in warning. Selene, ever protective, sits up abruptly and snarls back. He immediately cowers in response.

Kellan’s voice cuts through the tension. “It might be best to keep him in here. Not everyone’s seen their Alpha’s new form.”

The pack is already on edge; seeing their Alpha in an unfamiliar state could cause more unrest. He’s taking it in stride, but maybe he’s already seen it before.

Selene’s agreement comes with an unexpected caveat. It wouldn’t be good for them to see their Alpha wolf submitting to me, either. Unless... Her piercing gaze falls on me. Unless you wish to

become Alpha yourself.

Me? Alpha? The very thought sends a jolt of panic through my system.

“No. Absolutely not. No way!”

The vehemence of my refusal surprises even me. I’ve never wanted that kind of power or responsibility. I’m still adjusting to becoming Luna.

As if sensing my distress, Lucas’ wolf squeezes past Selene. He bumps his massive head against my shoulder, whining softly, in tender affection.

Selene grumbles, clearly not thrilled with the display. I can feel her conflicted emotions through our bond—protective, jealous, and yet somehow resigned.

Lisa settles beside me, with slow and steady movements. He ignores her. She reaches out tentatively, her hand hovering over Lucas’ golden fur. To my surprise, he allows her touch, though he remains somewhat aloof.

“It was hard to breathe when he first woke up,” Lisa says, her voice barely above a whisper. “Like all the air was suddenly pulled out of the room.”

I nod, understanding exactly what she means. “That was his alpha presence. It’s always hard for humans to take, especially when it’s unleashed suddenly like that.”

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320 Ava: A Stronger Bond Than Before

Lisa sighs, her hand still absently stroking Lucas’ fur. “Wolf business is way too complicated for humans.” She glances over her shoulder at Kellan.

“Are you having a hard time staying with Kellan?” I ask, concern coloring my voice. I’ve been so wrapped up in my own drama that I haven’t had a chance to really check in with her about her new living situation.

Lisa just shrugs, her expression carefully neutral. “It’s fine.”

But I know my best friend. There’s something going on.

“Do you need to stay with me instead?” I offer, even though I’m not sure how I’d manage it with Lucas in this state. What if he tries to eat her because she gets up to use the bathroom at night?

Lisa shakes her head quickly. “No, no. You need to focus on your mate.” She gestures to the golden wolf still pressed against my side. “This is way more important.”

Rubbing the wolf's soft ears, I ask, "What have you been up to? Setting in here okay? How about the gnomes? Are they doing okay, too?" I need to be more present in pack life and learn about everything. I've spent all my time in this cottage.

Thankfully, the excuse of being newly mated means no one expects to see me around much for

the next week or so.

Lisa gives a thoughtful hum. "The Grand Sage is working on a new communications device. He's still designing it. He thinks he might be able to make, like, a magical smartwatch."

"Oh?" This is news to me. "That's fascinating. Does he think he can do it?"

"He does, but says there's a lot of things to work through. He wants to go to a local human city so we can buy a few watches to work on."

Kellan's voice cuts in, his tone a mix of surprise and concern. "This is the first I'm hearing of this."

Lisa has the grace to look a bit sheepish. "We haven't brought it up to you yet. It's all very preliminary."

A flicker of worry ignites in my chest. I turn to Kellan, searching his face for any sign of how he feels about this. "How safe would it be to do something like that? Going so far out right now."

He frowns, taking a moment to think. "It's probably safe, but I can't guarantee it. Nothing's certain these days. Still, Sister Miriam mentioned that it's been quiet."

I can see the wheels turning in his head as he considers the possibilities. After a moment, he adds, "I could bring along a few wolves for extra protection."

Relief washes over me. "That's a great idea."

Lisa leans against me with a dramatic sigh. "More guards, right?" But her tone is playful, not

grumpy.

It's crazy to think we were both once so angry and frustrated to have guards shadowing our every move. Life can change so quickly.

320 Avt A Stronger Bond Than Before

he wants to insist on going with her. The thought of Lisa venturing out into the human world, even with protection, sends a tendril of fear curling through my gut.

But the Luna can't just go out on a whim so I can buy a bunch of watches. At this point, something like that is a mission, not an errand. It has to be planned out to keep everyone safe.

I swallow hard, pushing down the urge to be overprotective. "Be careful, okay?"

She punches my shoulder lightly. "I'm always-"

Lucas' wolf growls, his hackles bristling.

Selene snaps at him, and he flattens to the ground with a whimper.

Lisa snorts. "Never thought I'd see the day a husky can overpower a wolf"

I can't help but chuckle at Lisa's comment. It's true—the sight of Selene dominating Lucas's wolf form is amusing.

Kellan clears his throat, drawing my attention. "Luna, I'd like to request permission to accompany Lisa and the gnomes into the city for their shopping trip."

His formal tone catches me off guard. It takes me a moment to remember that as Luna, I have the authority to grant or deny such requests. Yet another massive change.

"Of course," I say, trying to sound confident. "That's probably for the best."

As soon as the words leave my mouth, a wave of anxiety washes over me. Kellan is Lucas' right-hand man, the beta of the pack. He's been taking care of everything in Lucas' place. Am I going to be able to handle anything that comes up?

Trial by fire, I guess.

His expression softens. Maybe the panic is written on my face. "Don't worry, Luna. Vester and Vanessa will be here to help. They're more than capable of handling things in my absence. And me, Selene points out. But let's hope nothing happens. I'm ready for a lazy day.

Honestly? Me, too. My body's exhausted. My heart's exhausted. Every cell in my body and being wants a beach vacation with no stress, no worries, and no war.

It's weird to think that a beach vacation like that might not happen for years. Not out of poverty, but because of the state of the world.