

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted #Unshift 321 - Read

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted Unshift 321

Unshift 321

321 Ava: His Name

"Holy shit," Vanessa breathes, her eyes wide. "Is that-?"

I nod, unable to keep the smile off my face despite the gravity of the situation. It's her first time seeing my mate's new wolf form. "Yep, that's Lucas."

Vester takes in the sight of the massive golden wolf sprawled across my living room floor. "How... when did this happen?"

"A couple hours ago," I say, running my fingers through Lucas' thick fur. He leans into my touch, a low rumble of contentment vibrating through his chest. "The short version is that we finally tried to unlock his memories, and... well, this was the result. I'm not sure why he looks different now. Maybe Sister Miriam will know. Selene? Do you?"

Hmm, is her nonresponse.

Vanessa takes a tentative step forward, her healer's instincts clearly kicking in. "Is he okay? I mean, physically and mentally?"

A slight shrug. "Physically, he seems fine. Maybe even better than before. But mentally..." I trail off, glancing at Selene for support.

He's disoriented, Selene supplies. The wolf is in control right now, but he's not feral. Just confused. Waiting for Lucas.

I relay this information to Vanessa and Vester, watching as they exchange worried glances.

"Can he shift back?" Vester asks, the surprise on his face now faded back to his usual stoic expression.

I shake my head. "I don't know. Probably not. His wolf is the one in control right now. Lucas is still healing."

Vanessa kneels beside Lucas, her hand hovering just above his fur. "May I?" she asks, looking to me for permission.

He lifts his head, surprisingly not growling or upset in any way. Then again, he was only irritated with Lisa; maybe it's the lack of pack bond that bothered him.

I nod, and Vanessa gently places her hands on Lucas' wolf body, checking him over with deft, professional movements. "He's much larger than before, but I'm not sensing any issues in his joints. It's hard to tell without a full check-up, but I'd say he might be stronger than before."

I turn to Selene. "You know, it's really weird to keep calling him 'Lucas' wolf' or just 'the wolf.' Doesn't he have a name?"

Selene's ears flatten against her head, and I can feel her reluctance through our bond. He did, once. But that was a long time ago.

"Come on," I prod gently. "What was it?"

Selene huffs, clearly uncomfortable. In our past life, when we were... closer, I called him Aurum.

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Ava: His flame

The moment the name leaves my lips, the wolf's ears perk up. His golden eyes lock onto mine.

"Aurum," I repeat, more confidently this time. The wolf—Aurum—lets out a soft whine and nuzzles my hand.

"It seems like that name holds some significance, Vester observes.

"It's from his past life, apparently. The one he shared with Selene."

Vanessa's eyebrows shoot up. "Past life? Ava, what exactly happened when you tried to unlock his memories?"

"Oh, no. That's not from... No." Pressing a hand to my forehead, all the tidbits of information in my head take a minute to reorganize. I can't remember who knows what anymore. "Selene has memories of her past life, and she and Aurum were mates then."

"But how is this possible?" Vanessa steps away from Lucas—Aurum—now that her examination is over, taking a chair at the table. "How can someone remember their past life?"

Glancing at Selene and how her ears don't even perk up for this conversation, I realize she has no interest in clarifying things. Even to our friend.

So I hedge. "It's just part of what makes her so special." Text

“Aurum,” Vester muses, standing beside his wife as he leans against the dining table, his arms crossed over his broad chest. “That’s Latin for gold, isn’t it? Seems pretty appropriate, considering his new color.”

Is it? I’m not familiar with Latin. They stopped teaching it in school in my parents’ generation, from what I heard.

Glancing at Aurum and his gorgeous golden fur, I point my thoughts to Selene. Is this what he looked like in your past life?

Yes, she says shortly.

Why didn’t you tell me?

But she goes stubbornly silent, leaving me frustrated and answerless.

“But why would his shifted form change?” Vanessa wonders. “I don’t know how the pack is going to feel about this,”

“They’ll all be able to sense he’s Alpha,” Vester says, reaching out to brush some hair from her face. “Don’t be too worried. Can’t you feel it? How strong he’s become?”

“Of course I can, but-” The healer motions in Aurum’s direction, sounding frustrated. “He’s still not present in the pack bond. I tried greeting him when we walked in. Silence.”

She will hear him soon, Selene says, proving she’s listening and present, just unwilling to answer my question. She even pads over to Vanessa to rest her furry husky head against the healer’s knee in a comforting gesture.

Aurum, for his part, snuggles even further against me, whining a little as he glances in his mate’s direction. He’s distraught by Selene’s lack of affection, but I have no idea how to help him.

11:25 TO

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321 Ava. His Name

Sorry, buddy. She’s still holding grudges from your past. My thoughts are aimed in his direction, but of course he can’t hear me.

It’s Selene who responds in my mind, with a derisive snort.

Grimoire pipes up then. She’s hard to get along with. It’s going to be a long road for that poor wolf.

“Yeah, it really—wait a second.”

I sit bolt upright, my eyes darting around the room until they land on the familiar leather-bound tome resting innocently on the dining table.

Not in my lap.

I’m not touching it at all.

And his voice is in my head.

“How are you talking to me right now?”

Really? You’re just now noticing? His voice echoes in my head, tinged with amusement. We’ve grown stronger. Our bond.

Slowly tapping my finger against my knee, I ask, “And... you weren’t going to tell me?”

You never asked, comes his cheeky reply.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. Of course, he’d have a smart–ass answer like that.

Love at World’s End~

Unshift 322

322 Ava: Luna’s First Trial (I)

“Ava?” Vanessa watches me carefully, her head tilted to the side. “Is everything alright?”

“Sorry, I zoned out for a second.”

Vanessa raises an eyebrow but doesn’t press further. “I was asking if Kellan informed you about

the brawls.”

“Brawls?” Come to think of it, he’d mentioned something about fighting. “Not in detail.”

Vester’s posture shifts, his spine straightening as he faces me. The change is subtle but unmistakable, and I sit up straight in response, rolling my shoulders back as I meet his gaze.

He’s a soldier reporting to his superior; not a pack member speaking casually to his Alpha’s

mate.

“There were multiple violent altercations just before midnight. Multiple reports were taken of altered states of mind, and all have returned to their normal state by early morning, at

approximately 9 this morning.”

“Go on,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady and authoritative.

Vester clears his throat. “The incidents occurred primarily in the communal areas—the shared dining hall and lodge. Three separate brawls broke out, involving a total of twenty-five pack members. The fights were unusually aggressive, beyond typical pack disputes.”

I rub my eyebrow, not even sure what to do with this information. “Were there any serious injuries?”

“Fortunately, no life-threatening injuries were sustained. However, several wolves required medical attention for broken bones and deep lacerations.”

My eyes flick to Vanessa, who nods in confirmation. She must have been busy treating the wounded.

“What sparked these fights?” I ask, my mind racing to understand the sudden outbreak of

violence.

Vester’s expression tightens slightly. “The exact cause is unclear, Luna. However…” His eyes dart

to Aurum’s massive form beside me.

I follow his gaze, understanding dawning. “You think it’s connected to what happened in here?” But Selene and Aurum didn’t fight until hours after the brawls broke out. Still...

“It’s a possibility we can’t ignore,” Vanessa chimes in, coming to stand beside her mate. “There is some precedent to aggressive spikes within packs during times of turmoil within the Alpha. It’s like a trickle effect. While most wolves will have a psyche strong enough to brush it off, there are those who will be affected. The timing seems to match up, and it would explain the phenomenon.”

Aurum, for his part, just sits there, gazing at both of his pack subordinates in an aloof manner, as though it has nothing to do with him.

322 Ava: Luna's First Trial (1)

Does he understand he's this pack's Alpha wolf? I ask Selene, worried.

In a sense. However, shifters are different than I. He is the Alpha's wolf; not the Alpha himself.

Grimoire slips in to explain further as Selene falls silent. While this is his pack, he borrows Lucas' authority. Though, if you really look at it, Lucas' authority is given due to the strength of his wolf. It's a fascinating social dynamic in this situation. He will not act as Alpha alone; he's too primal of a mind. Selene is very different from the wolves inside these shifters' heads.

I nod slowly as he speaks, piecing it together. The pack bond, usually a source of stability and unity, had been thrown into chaos when we attempted to break Lucas' mental barriers. With his wolf taking over, it makes sense that some wolves might have reacted poorly to that disruption.

The tendency toward aggression and fighting is far more of a wolf characteristic than human. They must have felt what Aurum was feeling.

"And the involved parties are no longer... agitated?" I ask, choosing my words carefully.

"No, Luna. All participants have calmed significantly since the incidents. They're currently confined to separate areas for everyone's safety, but they've expressed remorse for their

actions."

He said that was starting around 9 this morning; so, about the time Selene had forced Aurum to

submit.

It all tracks.

I feel a small surge of relief at that. At least we're not dealing with ongoing violence.

"And the rest of the pack?" I press. "How are they handling this?"

Vester's expression softens slightly, approval flickering in his eyes at my question. "There's unease, naturally. Several are worried that there's something going on to instigate such behavior, and there

are those paranoid about sabotage. But no further incidents have occurred.”

“Thank you for your report, Vester,” I say, proud of how steady my voice sounds. “How do you recommend we proceed?”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I want to kick myself. I’m supposed to be giving orders, not asking for them. But to my surprise, Vester doesn’t seem disappointed by my question. If anything, there’s a glimmer of respect in his eyes. 2

“Typically, in situations like this, we would hold a formal hearing,” he explains. “The involved parties would be given a chance to explain their actions, and appropriate disciplinary measures

would be decided.”

I nod, grateful for his straightforward answer. “And who usually presides over these hearings?”

“The Alpha,” Vester says, then adds, “Or in his absence, the Luna.”

The weight of responsibility settles more firmly on my shoulders. With Lucas currently unable to fulfill his duties, this falls to me. The thought is terrifying, as someone whose personal life is in shambles, but I can’t shy away from it.

Kind of wish I’d had some sort of managerial leadership in my life, though. That would be helpful

322 Ava: Luna’s First Trial (1)

about now.

“I see. Thank you, Vester.” But as I glance at Aurum, the source of the agitation within the pack, I shake my head. “I don’t believe a formal hearing will be necessary in this situation, if we are the

cause of it.”

“If I may, Luna,” Vanessa cuts in, “I respectfully disagree.”

“I also disagree with utmost vehemence, Luna.”

Their earnest dissent leaves me a little flustered. “You think I should question them, despite knowing the likely cause of their outbursts?”

“Yes,” Vester says, standing even straighter. I didn’t think that was possible. “With all due respect, Luna, the pack needs stability. If we were to admit that such a wave of

violence came from our Alpha's fractured state, it would reduce faith in our Alpha. Questioning the offenders and showing benevolence will not only increase morale, it will avoid such an outcome."

Unshift 323

323 Ava: Luna's First Trial (II)

I blink, taken aback by their united front. My gaze shifts between Vester and Vanessa, trying to process their suggestion. A knot forms in my stomach as the implications of their words sink in. "You're suggesting that I lie." My words come out flat. Disappointment churns in my chest. Vanessa shakes her head. "No, Luna. Not lie. We're suggesting a strategic approach to the truth."

"A strategic approach to the truth," I repeat, the words tasting bitter on my tongue. "That sounds an awful lot like lying by omission."

Vester steps forward, his expression earnest. "Luna, please understand. The pack is already on edge. If they were to learn that their Alpha's condition caused such widespread aggression, it could destabilize us further." 2

I run a hand through my hair, even though it isn't in my face. My hands just need something to do. They're shaking. "But isn't honesty important? How can I expect the pack to trust me if I'm not forthcoming with them?"

"Trust is built on more than just raw honesty," Vanessa says gently. "Sometimes, it's about providing the stability and leadership the pack needs, even if that means carefully managing certain truths."

My eyes dart to Aurum, still lounging on the floor. His golden gaze meets mine, and for a moment, I wish I could ask him what he thinks. But he can't answer, can he? And even if he could, would the wolf understand the nuances of pack politics?

I wish Lucas was here to take these reins. I'm not fit to make these decisions.

But he's not.

It's pointless to sit here and whine about it.

"It feels wrong," I tell them, though their words make too much sense.

Grimoire's voice echoes in my mind. Politics is rarely about what feels right, little witch. It's about

what works.

I almost snort out loud. Of course he'd say that. I'm not sure he has much empathy for people's struggles.

Empathy isn't what keeps you alive.

Selene, surprisingly, chimes in as well. The book isn't wrong. Sometimes protecting the pack requires tough choices.

Their input only adds to my inner turmoil. I've never been good at lying, even by omission. But then again, I've never been responsible for an entire pack before.

"Luna," Vester says, his voice softer now. "We're not asking you to fabricate a story. We will not punish any of these wolves for their actions. It is nothing more than window dressing. A quick hearing, listen to their words, and tell them to be careful in the future. We're addressing the situation, we are just not revealing certain details."

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323 Ava: Luna's First Trial (II)

His words soothe me. A little, anyway. "And what would that look like, exactly?"

Vanessa steps closer, her expression sympathetic. "You would hold the hearing as normal. Listen to their accounts, show understanding for their actions while still emphasizing the importance of pack

unity and control. Then, you'd issue a fair judgment. Knowing they weren't in their right mind, you can attribute it to stress and tell them you're letting it go this time, with a warning for

the future."

I chew on my lower lip, weighing the options. On one hand, the idea of withholding information from the pack feels fundamentally wrong. On the other, I can see the logic in their argument. If the pack loses faith in Lucas's ability to lead, especially now when we're so vulnerable...

Those alpha challenges will roll in like a storm.

Am I willing to risk that over a little thing like morals?

Okay, yes, morals are a big thing. A big, big thing. But so is my mate's life.

“What about when Lucas regains control?” I ask. “Won’t the pack feel betrayed if they find out

later?”

Vester shakes his head. “By then, the situation will have stabilized. And if handled correctly, it may never need to come to light at all.”

The weight of the decision is on my shoulders, not theirs. But their faces are drawn, too. Vanessa’s eyes are a little red, as if she hasn’t slept. Vester’s face is grim and tight.

They aren’t taking this lightly.

They care about their pack. Just like Lucas does.

I look at Aurum again, his massive form a reminder of just how precarious our situation is. Then to Selene, her blue eyes watching me intently.

What do you think? I ask her silently.

I think you need to decide what kind of leader you want to be, she replies, maddeningly unhelpful.

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I’m not here to make your decisions for you, Ava. I’m here to support the decisions you make. Unless you want to start eating someone’s pups.

Well, obviously I’m not going to do anything that horrible.

Then what are you worried about?

I take a deep breath, steeling myself. “Okay,” I say finally, my voice steadier than I feel. “I’ll do it. But I want to be clear—we’re not lying.”

Vanessa and Vester exchange a look of relief.

“That’s a wise decision, Luna,” Vester says, his face a little more relaxed than before. Not by much, but some.

This choice doesn’t rest comfortably in my heart, but the necessity is clear in my mind. Maybe it’s a terrible decision. Maybe it’s objectively wrong. But it’s the decision I’ve made. I’ll take

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323 Ava: Luna's First Trial (II)

responsibility for it.

"When should we hold this hearing?"

"As soon as possible," Vanessa suggests. "The sooner we address this, the less time there is for rumors to spread."

"Alright," I agree, straightening my posture. "Let's aim for this afternoon, then. Vester, can you arrange for the involved parties to be brought to... where do we usually hold these hearings?"

"The main lodge would be appropriate," he replies. "Most will not attend the hearing, but it has space in case they wish to."

"Perfect. Have them brought to the lodge at..." I glance at the clock, calculating, "...three o'clock. That should give us enough time to prepare." And by prepare, I mean I need a shower. And maybe to find some clothes that make me look a little more authoritative and less like a homeless child. 2

Unshift 324

324 Ava: Luna's First Trial (III)

The main lodge is a humble log cabin with an open layout that somehow manages to feel both spacious and cozy. Exposed wooden beams stretch across the ceiling, and a massive stone fireplace dominates one wall. The furniture is simple but sturdy—all handcrafted, I'd bet.

There's a raised platform where I stand, and plenty of space for people to stand.

There are no rooms. No kitchens. I think they even said there isn't a bathroom.

I tug at the hem of my black shirt, which hangs a bit loose on my frame. The jeans I'm wearing are slightly too big as well, but they're the best I could find on short notice. My hair is pulled back in a simple ponytail, practical if not particularly stylish.

Not glamorous. Not intimidating. The best I managed to aim for is clean and presentable. Hopefully it's enough.

My fingers tap an anxious rhythm against my thighs as I watch shifters file into the room.

Calm down, Selene's voice echoes in my mind. You're radiating anxiety. They can pick up on it.

They can probably smell it.

Yes.

Ugh.

Straightening my shoulders a little further, I clasp my hands behind my back, trying to look confident and no-nonsense. Like I'm a leader, and not someone just fumbling around in this Luna

role. Damn it. I want an instruction book.

No such thing, Grimoire says cheerfully. You'll have to make it up as you go along.

I liked it better when he was a book who couldn't talk to me at will.

That's cruel. (2)

But honest.

Selene stands beside me, ears pricked forward as she watches more wolves enter. They all incline their heads slightly as they pass us.

They're showing respect, Selene explains. They've all greeted you through the pack bond.

A twinge of jealousy shoots through me. "I can't hear it, I murmur, keeping my voice low.

It shouldn't be impossible for you to hear, Selene replies, sounding thoughtful. I have some ideas.

Grimoire's presence stirs in my mind. I agree. We'll work on that, little witch.

My heart does a little somersault. The idea of having a real pack bond, where I can communicate with other wolves, is a dream I've had since I was a young girl.

I long ago gave up on it, but if it's possible...

Vester clears his throat beside me. Delta Ryder, Vanessa's brother, leads several wolf shifters into the lodge, some sporting fading bruises. None are bound. All walk in line as if being

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324 Ava: Luna's First Trial (III)

marched.

This is it. The moment of truth.

Well—not exactly truth. I guess it's more of a moment I try to pull wool over the eyes of my own people.

I straighten my posture, trying to project an air of authority I don't quite feel. Vester steps forward, his voice carrying easily through the room as he begins to introduce the wolves before

1. us.

The charges—for lack of a better word—are laid out simply.

Vester's voice rings clear through the lodge as he lists the charges. "Unprovoked aggression, destruction of pack property, and endangerment of pack members."

The terms all sound horrible and vicious, even though I know everyone's a victim. I keep my face carefully neutral, but a bead of sweat trickles down the back of my neck.

The first wolf, a burly man with a fading bruise on his jaw, steps forward. Vester addresses him directly. "Jerrod, explain your actions on the night in question."

Jerrod shifts his weight, his eyes darting between Vester and me. "It wasn't unprovoked," he growls. "That bastard Will's been running his mouth, saying our Alpha's gone soft. That we're weak now." His fists clench at his sides. "I couldn't let that stand."

I feel a vague ripple go through the crowd. People are standing a little straighter, listening a little more intently.

It's a hot topic.

Vester nods, his face unreadable. "William, your response?"

A leaner wolf with a split lip steps forward, his shoulders drooped in shame. "I apologize, Luna. I don't know what came over me. My friends can tell you, I only drank one beer. We're all limited to one, you know."

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I nod, even though I didn't know. "Go on."

"It's like I got drunk right off it. Like I'd been slamming shots all night. I don't know what came over me. I can't even really remember it clearly."

Vester nods and moves to the next wolf.

One by one, their stories unfold, each eerily similar to the last. The words blur together, a chorus of confusion and regret.

"It came out of nowhere..."

"I felt drunk, but I'd barely had anything..."

"I was looking for a fight, and I don't know why..."

"When I came to my senses, I couldn't understand what I'd done..."

Vester's voice cuts through my thoughts. "Luna Ava, how do you judge these actions?"

11:00

324 Ava: Luna's First Trial (III)

looking to for judgment.

Is it really that simple? No further investigation, no gathering of evidence beyond these testimonies, and boom, we're done? It just seems unfair.

Why are our packs so basic compared to human law?

Selene's voice fills my mind. The Alpha is the law in the pack. You know this. While some matters require deeper investigation, others can be handled swiftly. It depends on the Alpha's discretion. It can be a boon or an injustice.

"Your actions have caused harm to our pack," I begin, my voice steady despite my nerves. "We need to work together. To become stronger. To heal from the true enemy of our pack. And yet we brawl among ourselves. We speak poorly of our Alpha. We rage at the very people we should be fighting for. This cannot go unpunished."

I pause, letting the weight of my words sink in. The accused wolves lower their heads, shame evident in their postures.

"However," I continue, "I believe your testimonies. We are all exhausted. We've been pushed past our breaking points. We have lost friends. Family. We're displaced."

A few nods in the audience. Good. At least some of them are resonating with my words.

“Therefore, my judgment is this: You will work to repair the damage you’ve caused. Apologize to each other. And move on.”

A ripple of surprise moves through the crowd. Even if they’re not whispering, I’m sure the pack bonds are buzzing with the things they’re saying to each other.

“But let this serve as a warning,” I add, my tone hardening. “Watch your words carefully from now on. Question our Alpha again, and it will be the Alpha himself who passes judgment. And I assure you, he will not show the same mercy I have today.”

The accused wolves nod as one.

There’s a subtle shift in the room. Something in the energy, perhaps. In their gazes as they look

at me.

They’re nodding. A few even have faint smiles. Even Vester’s stoic expression softens, though this was his plan and no surprise at all. Maybe he’s just relieved I got through it without fumbling.

Well done. You showed strength tempered with compassion in your first act as Luna. They will remember this.

Reaching down, I brush my fingers over Selene’s head in silent thanks for her words. Trying to speak like a confident judge is much harder than I thought it would be, and I never assumed it would be easy.

Unshift 325

325 Lisa: Shopping Mission (I)

LISA

The pack only has a few cars now. Nothing like the SUVs they used at the Westwood Pack; these are older sedans and a couple trucks.

The Grand Sage sits in delight in the front, while Elverly crosses her arms and scowls out the window from her side of the backseat. Kellan seems minorly irritated I gave up shotgun to the Grand Sage, but maybe it’s just me projecting things.

Despite being pretty okay with giving me space, he’s also clingy. I know, I know, I’m contradicting myself. It’s just how things feel right now.

The gentle rumble of the car lulls me into a drowsy state as I gaze out the window. It’s almost hypnotic, the way the landscape rolls by.

“How does this auto—mo—bile function without horses?” the Grand Sage asks for what feels like the hundredth time. His enthusiasm for technology is endearing, if a bit exhausting. for technology is endearing, if a bit exhausting.

Kellan, to his credit, answers patiently. “It’s an automobile, sir. And it runs on an internal combustion engine.”

I stifle a yawn, my eyelids growing heavy. The constant questions and explanations fade into background noise as I let my mind wander.

“Why do we keep passing these cities?” Elverly’s sour tone cuts through my haze. “Are none of them suitable?”

Kellan glances in the rearview mirror. “These aren’t cities, ma’am. They’re small towns. We’re avoiding anything too close to the safe haven to maintain our cover.”

The old gnome scoffs. “Humans and their excess. Calling these sprawling monstrosities ‘towns.’”

I turn in my seat, meeting Elverly’s disapproving gaze. “Actually, these are pretty small compared to real cities. In big human cities, the buildings touch the sky.”

“Humans aren’t so capable.”

“They’re engineering marvels,” I explain, warming to the subject. “Some are over a hundred stories tall, with foundations that go deep into the earth.”

The Grand Sage turns in his seat to peer back at me, eyes sparkling. “Fascinating! And how do humans traverse these vertical metropolises?”

“Elevators,” I say, then catch myself. “Um, they’re like... vertical moving rooms? They carry people up and down.”

Elverly shakes her head. “Stairs work just fine.”

I shrug. “A hundred flights of stairs is a lot. There are elevators everywhere. You’d understand if you saw them. We have to build high because of the population of the cities; we’ve run out of space to house them. Millions of people can’t share one or two story houses in such a small

area.”

11:00

325 Lisa Shopping Mission (1)

“Millions?” Elverly’s voice is barely a whisper, her face pale. “In one city?”

It must sound overwhelming to someone who’s never experienced it. “Yeah, New York City has over eight million people.”

“Eight million souls, all in one place,” the Grand Sage muses. “The magical potential of such a gathering boggles the mind.”

Elverly sniffs. “It sounds like a nightmare. How do they not suffocate each other?”

I can’t help but laugh. “It’s not so bad. There are parks and open spaces. And the city has its own kind of magic, you know? The energy, the diversity, the constant motion...”

“You sound fond of it,” Kellan observes, his eyes meeting mine in the rearview mirror.

“Yeah, I guess I am. I mean, I always wanted it to be my home. To become a city girl like that.”

The Grand Sage nods sagely. “Home is where the heart finds peace, regardless of its surroundings. There are those who thrive in a busy atmosphere.”

“It’s not just the atmosphere. Convenience, too. Oh, and the food.”

“Food?”

“You could get anything you wanted, any time of day or night. Indian, Chinese, Italian, Ethiopian... And the best pizza in the world, if you go to New York.”

“Pizza?” the Grand Sage inquires.

“Oh man, you guys haven’t lived until you’ve had pizza.” I grin. “It’s like... a flat bread with tomato sauce and melted cheese and toppings. It sounds simple, but when it’s done right, it’s heavenly.”

Kellan chuckles. “You’re making me hungry.”

“Sorry,” I say, not feeling sorry at all. “But seriously, the food in the city is amazing. And then there’s the museums, the theaters, the music...”

I trail off, realizing I’m gushing. But the gnomes are listening intently. The Grand Sage, of course, is always interested in things humans do, but not Elverly.

“It sounds... vibrant,” Elverly admits grudgingly. “Though I still can’t fathom so many people in

one place.”

The Grand Sage claps his hands together. "Marvelous! We must find a way to visit one of these human metropolises someday. Think of the technological wonders we could study!"

Kellan coughs. "That might be a bit complicated, sir. Many of them have been attacked."

"Ah, yes. He strokes his beard with a sigh. "The world has changed. A pity"

These facts are hard to fathom when you can look outside the window and see what looks like pristine rural towns on the side of the highway. Like all of it happened in another world.

Kellan glances at the Grand Sage again. "Maybe we can bring some of that city magic to the safe

haven."

I perk up at that. "Oh! We could totally have a pizza night. I make a mean homemade pizza."

41.00

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325 Lisa: Shopping Mission (1)

Elverly turns to me with a scowl. "You cook?"

"When I have to," I shrug. "It's not as good as New York pizza, but it's not bad."

The conversation drifts to other topics as we continue our journey, but I find my mind lingering on thoughts of home. Not of fancy cities, but of the life I left behind. My parents, my friends,

college...

My heart clenches as I think of Mom and Dad. They probably think I'm dead. I want to see them, to hear their voices again, to feel Mom's arms around me.

The Grand Sage's voice cuts through my reverie. "Are you alright, my dear?"

I blink, realizing I've been staring out the window, lost in thought. "Hm? Oh, yeah. I'm fine."

But I'm not, not really. I force a smile, hoping it doesn't look as brittle as it feels. The last thing I want is to worry anyone.

"We're about ten miles from the city," Kellan announces, his eyes flicking to mine in the rearview mirror.

Turning back to the window, I use the motion to discreetly wipe at my eyes.

Unshift 326

326 Lisa: Shopping Mission (II)

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The moment I step out of the car, a chill runs down my spine that has nothing to do with the temperature. Something's off.

People hurry across the parking lot, their eyes downcast and shoulders hunched. Shopping carts rattle past, piled high with bottled water and toilet paper. It's like everyone's preparing for some impending disaster. O

"What's going on?"

Kellan appears at my side. "You feel it too, huh?"

I nod, watching as a mother hurries past with two small children in tow, her face pinched with worry. "This isn't normal, is it? I thought these towns were supposed to be... I don't know, untouched by everything."

He shakes his head grimly. "Looks like nowhere's really safe anymore."

Another car pulls up nearby, and I recognize some of the wolfy bodyguards from our group. Kellan leans in close, his breath warm against my ear. "They're going to gather some essentials, if there are any left."

"Good luck to them," I mutter, eyeing the frantic shoppers streaming in and out of the store.

We make our way towards the entrance, the Grand Sage and Elverly trailing behind us. It's strange to see them so subdued, their usual chatter silenced. As we pass through the sliding doors, the tension only seems to increase.

Inside, the store is a hive of barely controlled chaos. People jostle each other in the aisles, their carts overflowing with canned goods and other non-perishables. The shelves are picked clean in places, gaping holes where everyday items used to be.

"This way," I murmur, leading our small group towards the jewelry and accessories section. It's quieter here, removed from the frenzy of the grocery aisles.

The Grand Sage's eyes widen as we approach the watch displays. "Fascinating," he whispers, leaning in close to examine the various timepieces.

I point out different styles, keeping my voice low. "These are digital watches," I explain, indicating a sleek black model. "They use electronic displays to show the time. And these over here are analog watches, with traditional clock faces and moving hands."

The Grand Sage nods, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "And which would be most suitable for -our purposes, do you think?"

I consider for a moment. "Probably digital. They're easier to modify, and the display could potentially show messages or other information beyond just the time."

He picks up a chunky sports watch, turning it over in his hands. "This one seems sturdy. Built to withstand various conditions."

"Good choice," I agree. "Those are designed for outdoor activities, so they're pretty durable."

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326 Lisa: Shopping Mission (II)

As the Grand Sage continues to examine the watch, I can't help but glance around nervously.

"Have you decided on one?"

He holds up the sports watch. "I believe this will suffice. Now, we'll need to acquire the necessary tools to modify it..."

As he speaks, I notice a small group of people approaching our section. They look different from the panicked shoppers—more purposeful, their eyes scanning the area with a predatory

intensity that makes my heart race.

"Kellan," I whisper, nudging him gently.

He follows my gaze, his body tensing beside me. "I see them. Stay close."

The Grand Sage and Elverly pick up on the change in atmosphere.

"We should go," I suggest, trying to keep the tremor out of my voice. "We can figure out the rest later."

Kellan nods, his hand coming to rest protectively on my lower back. “Agreed. Let’s make our way to the checkout.”

As we start to move, I catch snippets of conversation from the approaching group.

“...definitely picked up a scent...”

“...not human, that’s for sure...”

My pulse quickens. They’re looking for something—or someone—supernatural. And we fit that bill perfectly.

Well, not me. But the rest of them.

We weave through the aisles, trying to blend in with the other shoppers while making our way to the front of the store. The group seems to be following us, though they’re trying to be subtle about it.

“Almost there,” Kellan murmurs, guiding us towards an open checkout lane.

As we approach, I notice the cashier giving us an odd look. Her eyes linger on the Grand Sage and Elverly, widening slightly. I hold my breath, praying she doesn’t say anything to draw attention to us.

The group is getting closer. I can feel their eyes on us, burning into my back. My palms are sweating as I place the watch on the conveyor belt, fumbling with my wallet.

“That’ll be \$49.99,” the cashier says, her voice sounding unnaturally loud in my ears.

I hand over the money with shaking hands, willing her to hurry. Every second feels like an eternity as she bags the watch and hands me the receipt.

“Thank you, have a nice day.”

We’re almost to the exit when I hear a shout behind us.

“Hey! You there! Stop!”

Kellan’s grin on my arm tightens “Run” he whispers urgently

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326 Lisa: Shopping Mission (II)

We burst through the doors into the parking lot, the sound of pursuit close behind us. My heart pounds in my ears as we race towards our car, the Grand Sage and Elverly struggling to keep up. “Get in!” Kellan yells, fumbling with the keys.

I dive into the backseat, pulling Elverly in after me as the Grand Sage clambers into the front. Kellan starts the engine just as our pursuers reach the car.

“Go, go, go!” I shout, my voice high with panic.

Kellan floors it, tires squealing as we peel out of the parking lot. In the rearview mirror, I catch a glimpse of angry faces and raised fists.

“The others—”

“Already warned them. We’re splitting up. That might not be the only group.”

As

my adrenaline rush fades, I slump back into my seat with ragged gasps. Even that short run across the parking lot was too much for my body.

“What... what was that?” I manage to ask between gulps of air.

Kellan’s knuckles are white on the steering wheel. “Hunters, I think. Or some kind of supernatural— aware group.”

The Grand Sage clutches the bag with the watch to his chest. “At least we accomplished our mission,” he says, though his voice lacks its usual cheer.

Those untouched towns I’d imagined earlier seem like a distant fantasy now. The reality is far grimmer—a world on edge, where even a simple shopping trip can turn into a life—or-death situation.

“Good thing we weren’t close to the haven.”

“That’s exactly why we weren’t. And now we know someone’s hunting supernaturals.” Kellan taps his fingers against the wheel, his voice tight.

Unshift 327

327 Ava: A Book’s Debate

That’s absolutely ridiculous.

"It's a solid theory," Grimoire counters, sitting on the floor across from Selene. He's back in his child form, with only minimal flames flickering over his skin. Aurum, for his part, watches in silence, exactly seven feet separating the tip of his paw from her side.

If he moves even an inch forward, she snaps at him. It didn't take long for him to realize he should stay back.

I feel bad for him, but-

Don't feel bad for him.

-Selene doesn't have any interest in backing down.

Of course I don't.

Grimoire continues, unfazed by our side conversation. "Look, the fault lies with her, no matter how you slice it."

That is factually incorrect.

"You use that word, but I don't think you understand what factual means."

That is also factually incorrect.

"No. You have to break it down. Let's start from the beginning. Victoria and Gene were dating, right? But then Gene asked for a break. He never said they were breaking up, right?"

He asked for a break because he wanted to take Layla to the prom. Stop trying to spin this around

so Gene's the victim.

Groaning, I hit my forehead against my knees. This discussion started with Selene trying to explain the first season of her favorite show, and now the two are arguing over the main plotline in season three.

It's enough to drive the brain host (that's me) certifiably insane.

There's no one to certify that.

"You should really be a part of this conversation, since your life mimics this story line a little," Grimoire adds, both of them staring at me from across the room.

"Excuse me?"

"You know, when you and Clayton-

"No." Holding up a finger, I shake my head firmly. "We are not going there. That is ancient history.

Done. It's over."

"Technically, ancient history would be-

"It's ancient history, Grimoire. Drop it."

"I'm just saying that Gene and Victoria were also in an ambiguous relationship setting at the

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327 Ava: A Book's Debate

time of-

If you keep this up, she might shut you back into that book forever, Selene points out, sounding

far too smug.

She's right, though.

Grimoire shuts his mouth with a scowl, and she takes the opportunity to lead in the argument.

Taking a break means the relationship was inactive. There's nothing wrong with Victoria being with Sam during that arc. In fact, I'd argue that Sam is better for her.

"Oh, so you're saying Clayton's better for Ava, then?" he asks sarcastically.

"Oh, my God. How am I even involved in this conversation? You're talking about a TV show.

Please talk about the TV show, and not about me."

"I'm just pointing out how her logic is based on emotional response and not facts."

That is factually incorrect, Selene says primly again. 2

I groan and bury my head against my knees, wishing I could tune them both out. The bickering is driving me insane, and I just want a moment of peace.

“You know I can hear that thought, right?” Grimoire’s stupid voice cuts through my attempt at

mental solitude.

As can I, Selene chimes in.

Just great. What did I do wrong in my past life to be tortured this way? Maybe I should have asked Vester and Vanessa to find me some more busy work as Luna instead of opting to spend

time with Aurum, waiting not-so-patiently for Lucas’ psyche to return.

A soft whine draws my attention, and I feel a warm, furry body press against my side. Aurum has abandoned his Selene-stalking to curl up next to me, nuzzling my arm with his cheek. I can’t help but smile, running my fingers through his thick fur with a sigh.

“At least you’re not joining in on their silly arguments,” I murmur to him. “I bet when you’re thousands of years old, you won’t waste time debating the finer points of TV drama.”

Oh, you’d be surprised, Selene’s dry voice echoes in my head. Right now, he’s thinking about how good fish tastes when it’s half-burned and covered in the ashes of a campfire. You might want to rethink your assessment of his IQ and maturity level.

Aurum’s ears perk up at Selene’s words, and he pants hard, staring at her once again. It’s clear he’s thrilled that she’s paying attention to him, even if it’s just to mock his thoughts.

“Wait, how do you know what he’s thinking?”

Grimoire bursts into laughter, clutching his sides as he rolls in mid-air. “How does she know?” he wheezes. “She can’t not hear him. It’s the mate bond. She’s got a constant stream of

consciousness flowing between them. It’s driving her crazy.”

Selene lets out a low, menacing growl at Grimoire’s outburst. Aurum tenses beside me, his

relaxed demeanor vanishing in an instant. He turns his head, fixing Grimoire with a dark, intense

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327 Ava: A Book's Debate

The atmosphere in the room shifts, catching me between the urge to diffuse the situation and the instinct to stay very, very still.

Grimoire doesn't seem to have that level of self-preservation, because he's still cackling over Selene's plight.

"Okay, let's all calm down," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "Grimoire, maybe tone down the laughter? And Selene, I'm sure he didn't mean any offense."

He knows exactly what he's doing, Selene's voice rings in my head, laced with what feels like centuries of resentment, even though they've barely known each other for like, two days.

Aurum's muscles bunch under my hand, and I realize he's ready to spring into action at a

moment's notice.

Grimoire's laughter dies down, but a mischievous glint remains in his eyes. "Oh, come on. It's just

a bit of fun."

I stroke Aurum's fur, trying to soothe him. "Hey, it's okay," I murmur. "No one's going to hurt anyone here. We're all friends, remember?"

Selene suddenly stares at the door, and Aurum follows suit.

Lisa and Kellan are almost back.

"Yeah?" Grimoire asks lazily, floating in the air and spinning in a slow circle. "How'd their shopping trip go? For watches, right? Gnomes do love to tinker."

Not well. She pauses, probably listening to a mental report. They're still a while out. Kellan will take the gnomes directly to their cabin before bringing Lisa here. She's a little stressed out.

"What happened?" All the levity of the past few minutes has dispersed. Grimoire even quits his mid-air spinning to listen in silence.

Someone is hunting supernaturals in the human communities, they think. They were chased, but got away. Selene hesitates. It might be good to send a scouting party out to make sure no one's managed to follow them without being noticed.

"Good call. Do that. What's Sister Miriam doing?"

I don't know. She isn't here. She's out somewhere.

Oh. I had no idea she wasn't around. I guess it's hard to keep tabs on a vampire.

She has her own information network and acts on her own terms. She is a powerful ally, but she's a bit capricious in her own way. I'm sure she will be back soon.

"I'm surprised you even know the word capricious," Grimoire mutters, and Selene gives a lazy snap in his direction.

"Is everyone accounted for? Are we missing anyone?"

We don't know yet.

"Okay. Make sure we have people covering their trail, just in case. Call Vester and Vanessa here and let them know what's going on."

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327 Ava: A Book's Debate

Just moments ago, I was complaining because Selene and Grimoire were bickering over a soap opera's plot line. Now, there's so much worse coming our way. 2

Unshift 328

328 Ava: Scouting Parties

Vester and Vanessa pore over a map unfurled on my dining table. Our ward stone of silence has gotten a lot of good use here, keeping everything private.

"This is the city they went to, right?" Vanessa asks, tapping her finger against the thick parchment.

"Yes. It's not as large as this one," and Vester taps at a city sixty miles away, "but it's a little

arther, to throw off anyone searching for us."

The healer nods thoughtfully. "There are three main interstate highways branching off here, so it's a good choice. It's likely that the others went down this highway. It'll add another hour to their drive back, but should throw off anyone in pursuit, as well. If we send some scouts this way, they might be able to pick them up."

"My thought as well," her mate agrees. "But we will have to emphasize stealth. If there are groups searching for supernaturals, they would be able to pick up their scent."

Awkwardly, I lean forward to interrupt their conversation. "What about scent blockers? Can't we use those?"

"We can," Vanessa says with a wry smile. "But we don't have many, and have no way to replenish

our stock. It is better to conserve those for emergencies."

"So, our scouts are also possibly leading any intruders straight to us?"

Vester's eyes meet mine, a hint of amusement dancing in their depths. "Of course not."

His words are reassuring, but a flicker of embarrassment flushes my cheeks. I never once questioned scouts in pack lands. They've been around all my life. Now that I'm here and worried about my people, I realize how little I understand.

There's so much to learn.

But there's too much at stake for me to wallow in self-doubt.

"Our scouts are highly trained," Vester continues, his voice taking on a patient, instructional tone. "They don't simply run straight lines from point A to point B. They employ a variety of techniques to muddy their tracks."

Motioning me closer, he gestures to the map, using a finger to mimic what he's talking about. "False starts, backtracking, twisting patterns—there are a variety of ways to confuse and misdirect any potential pursuers."

Vanessa nods, adding, "It's not just about physical movement either. They use natural elements to their advantage—streams, rocky outcroppings, dense foliage. Anything that can disrupt or mask their scent. In pack lands, our scent is everywhere, in a wide radius. It's impossible to track down the den by scent alone. You'll have to search every square inch of miles upon miles to find the heart of the pack, even if you knew we were in the general area."

"Sometimes," Vester continues, his finger tracing an intricate pattern on the map, "they'll even split up. creating multiple false trails before reconvening at a predetermined location. It's a

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constant dance of deception. Now, here, where we are, we have limited our radius to avoid exposure. Once you catch our scent, we are easier to find. But you have to know that we are in this

small of an area in order to find us. And this town isn't even on any map. It's just a private

commune, on private land."

Their explanations make a lot of sense. "And we're branching out. So, that makes us more likely

to be found"

Yes. But our scouts will work in anti-reconnaissance in order to confuse any potential pursuers.

the worst case scenario, when someone catches their scent, they will have to throw them farther off the trail in different directions. At that point, we cannot have a relay in order to remain in touch with our wolves. They'll be on their own out there until they make it back

home."

I try to picture it in my mind—wolves darting through the wilderness, weaving an invisible tapestry of misdirection. It's both impressive and slightly dizzying.

"But doesn't that slow them down?" I ask, genuinely curious. "All that extra movement?"

Vester nods, acknowledging my point. "It does. But the trade-off in security is worth it. Better to arrive a bit later than to lead enemies straight to our doorstep."

"How long does it take to train a scout?" I ask, my mind already racing with possibilities. Could I learn these techniques? Would it help me protect the pack better?

Vanessa answers this time, her expression thoughtful. "It varies. Some wolves have a natural aptitude for it, while others take longer to master the intricacies. But generally, we're looking at months, if not years, of intensive training."

Years. So, that's not feasible after all.

“Don’t look so discouraged,” Vester says, clearly reading the doubt on my face. “You learn quicker than you think. And you bring other strengths to the table.”

“Thanks.” But the weight of my inexperience is still frustrating. Glancing at Grimoire, who’s once again in his book form, I wish I could just take all his knowledge and shove it into my mind in a

usable format.

Technically, that’s what our bond is.

Yeah, but not really. The knowledge is in his head, not mine. He just relays it to me. And it doesn’t come with understanding.

You have yet to put our bond to work. We can work on some of your magic training later. I’ll show you how much help I can be.

Selene’s mental scoff is loud and clear.

Don’t doubt me, he warns her. I’m the most powerful item in Ava’s arsenal.

I can shred you with one bite. You’re not as powerful as you think you are, she retorts.

-Luna? Ava? Are you listening?”

“Sorry” Shaking my head and imagining I’m shoving their faces out of my head, I blink in

328 Ava. Scouting Parties

Vanessa’s direction. “They wouldn’t be quiet.

“Mm. Yes, I’m sure there’s a bit of dominance posturing going on between them. The healer glances at Grimoire with a curious frown. “Our wolves aren’t usually great at sharing.”

Thinking of Selene, I nod. “Yeah, that sounds about right.” But this isn’t the time to ponder the relationship between my bonded souls. “How many scout teams have been sent out?”

“Three.” Vester leans back in his chair, looking thoughtful. “Marcus and Delta Ryder are leading two. They are not specialized in scouting, but we have a lack of leaders right now. Thankfully, we do have Ethan Hawke, one of our best scouts. He leads the third.”

Vanessa sighs. “If Jericho ever shows up…”

“Yes. He would be the best option in these situations.”

My heart twists. I haven't seen Jericho since arriving here, and I've avoided asking about him. That's what we've all done. There are many missing faces, and no one mentions their names.

Too many are gone. Too many missing.

My vision blurs as I turn away, desperate to hide the tears threatening to spill over.

Jericho is strong, Selene says quietly. I have faith he has survived somewhere.

I focus on my breathing, willing myself to find composure. Footsteps approach, and a gentle

hand rests on my shoulder. Vanessa says nothing, just stands beside me as we both gaze out the window.

Surreptitiously wiping my tears, I ask, "How long before they get here?"

Vester clears his throat. "They should be here within the hour, depending on the back roads taken. Kellan won't attempt a direct route here."

Unshift 329

329 Ava: Security

A beat-up red sedan rolls to a stop. Then the passenger door flies open, and Lisa dashes out.

"Ava!"

I meet her halfway, throwing my arms around her and pulling her close. She's clammy with sweat, and her hands shake where they rest against my back.

"Are you okay?"

mf

she says, trying to sound breezy and nonchalant even as her voice shakes. "Just glad to get out of the car."

Over Lisa's shoulder, I see Kellan emerge from the driver's side. He looks grim, with a tight-lipped expression of concentration. He nods at me before turning to the back of the car, where the Grand Sage and Elverly are.

"Come on," I say, tugging gently on Lisa's arm. "Let's get inside. We can talk there."

As we walk, Lisa fills me in on their harrowing escape. Her words are rushed, stumbling over each other, a vivid picture of her fear, even as she throws a few jokes in to lighten the mood.

“Kellan floored it before they reached us, but we left some of them behind.”

“I know. We’re still waiting to hear from them.”

Lisa’s shoulders droop. “I hope they’re okay. If they got hurt because we went there...”

“Hush. It isn’t your fault. Missions are always filled with risk. Now we know someone’s out looking for us—or at least people like us—and we can plan accordingly.”

I don’t recognize the guards outside my cabin today, but they incline their heads, one of them opening the door when Lisa and I get close.

“Thank you.”

“Of course, Luna.”

Lisa settles on the couch beside Selene, yawning as she relaxes against the cushions. My gaze drifts to Aurum, curled up beneath the dining table, and I can’t help but wonder...

“Did you bully him again?” I ask my wolf with suspicion.

Selene’s tail swishes lazily. No. It’s so people don’t see him as easily when they open the door.

I frown, puzzled by her logic. “Why didn’t you just have him sleep on the bed?”

Her ears flick, but she gives no other response. It’s clear she did it just to exercise her power over Aurum. “You should enjoy this while you can, because I don’t think this is always going to be how it is between you two.”

Selene rests her head against her tail, blatantly ignoring my words.

Grimoire’s voice enters my head. I have an idea. He’s resting in book form on the table.

“Hold that thought.” I tell him, heading to the kitchen to fetch Lisa a cup of water. When I

829 Ava Secinity

return, Grimoire has transformed into his child-sized form, perched on the edge of the table.

“Get down from there,” I say absently, handing Lisa the water.

Lisa takes a sip, watching Grimoire hop off the table to float an inch off the ground instead.

“You take all this magic so easily,” she marvels. “Like it’s natural.”

A random person floating randomly in midair is definitely an odd sight, but I can only shrug as I

ettle into a nearby chair. “I guess I’ve gotten used to it.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t think I ever will.”

Grimoire interrupts, his small face alight with excitement. If it wasn’t for his bizarre coloring and overall ethereal attributes—plus the tiny bits of flame flickering along his skin—he’d truly look like a happy kid. “I have a great idea, both for your magical practice and for the pack. We should create a magical security perimeter.”

I lean forward, intrigued. “Go on.”

“While researching, I found—” he begins, but Lisa cuts him off.

“How does a book research?” she asks, genuine curiosity in her voice.

Grimoire’s eyebrows snap together. “Many things have been written in my pages that I haven’t paid attention to when I was locked away,” he explains impatiently.

I nod, remembering our first encounter. He was there for a while, locked away with the magic of that strange forest, in the world that isn’t here. That weird place in my head, where magic seems

to live.

Grimoire continues, shooting a scowl in Lisa’s direction. “As I was saying, while researching, I learned that most pack lands were not chosen by wolves. They took advantage of already existing security wards, created hundreds of years ago by witches.”

As he speaks, Kellan walks in, settling beside Lisa on the couch. He wraps an arm around her, and she leans into him naturally. They’re comfortable together, despite the earlier tension in their relationship.

I wonder if Lisa’s noticed how she’s reacting to his presence lately.

Grimoire's voice pulls me back to the conversation. "These wards can keep us safe, acting as a natural repellant against those who wish harm upon the pack."

Kellan perks up at this. "Are we talking about security wards?"

I turn to him, curious about his knowledge on the subject. "How much do you know about

them?"

Kellan's brow furrows as he considers the question. "Not much, to be honest. I know how to maintain the ones on pack lands, but that's about it." His expression darkens. "And even those weren't enough to keep the vampires out."

The reminder of the vampire attack sends a chill down my spine. I glance at Lisa, remembering how close we came to losing her. The idea of strengthening our defenses is certainly appealing,

but I don't Insur hour to do it

329 Ava Security

"Grimoire. I say, turning back to the small figure, "how would these wards be different from what we already had? What makes them more effective?"

Grimoineyes light up at my question. "The wards I'm proposing are far more complex and powerful in the basic protections most packs use. They're rooted in ancient magic, drawing power from the land itself. And they won't be half-broken. Without a witch to maintain its

adaries, it's unlikely to have worked at proper strength. I'd have to inspect them to know for sure where its weaknesses lie, of course, but-

"Okay, okay" I lean forward, brushing off his tangent. "And you think I could create something like that, with my current skills?"

"With my guidance, absolutely," Grimoire asserts. "It would be an excellent opportunity for you to expand your magical abilities while providing a tangible benefit to the pack"

I chew my lip, considering the implications. The idea of strengthening our defenses is tempting, especially after recent events. But what if I mess up? What if the wards fail when we need them

most?

Well, I guess we won't be in any worse of a situation than we are now.

It's all potential benefits with no downsides.

"Okay. How do I do it?"

"I'm still in the process of planning the wards. We'll need to establish what our perimeter is and see how much magic you'll be able to use at a time. The bigger the area, the more draining it will be, and the more work it will be."

"I can help with that," Kellan offers. "At least if you let me know what our possible coverage area is, I can help define our boundaries."

"We can go walk together-"

"No," I cut in immediately. "Grimoire, we aren't ready for others to learn of your existence. Kellan can bring a map, or we can bring you along as a book. We still don't know if there are traitors here. It hurts to even admit it, now that I've been here for a little while."

I don't like looking at faces and wondering if any of them are willing to betray us. Willing to murder us, even if it isn't at their own hands.

The Novel will be updated on this website. Come back and continue reading tomorrow, everyone!