

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted

Chapter 330 Ava: We Need Supplies

Grimoire grumbles a little, but he obediently pops back into his book form, saying he needs to run some calculations before we can get started.

I grab Grimoire's book form and place it on the dining table, my fingers lingering on its worn leather cover. A pang of worry shoots through me as I glance at Aurum, his massive form unmoving despite the commotion. Is he okay? He didn't even greet me when I returned. He must be in a deep sleep.

He is, Selene confirms. He needs this rest. Don't worry too much.

Kellan drags my attention back to him as he recounts the harrowing events of the mission that should have been easy.

Hunters. The word alone is chilling.

"Are these hunters an already existing faction, or did you name them that yourself?"

"No, there's no existing faction of hunters. But they're obviously hunting."

Vanessa and Vester nod along with his words.

"We need to limit our contact with the outside world," Vanessa says, absently twirling a strand of hair around her finger. I've never seen that nervous gesture from her before. "My biggest concern is over supplies. This mission was also to help stock up on supplies, and now we don't have them. We need safe drinking water. Shelf-stable food.

Meat. More blankets and clothes for the upcoming winter. We don't have long before we're freezing at night. I'm surprised it hasn't happened already."

"And snow," Lisa pipes up thoughtfully. "What are we going to do when it snows?"

Running water is a problem for most of the houses here. There are a few giant tanks that supply a few buildings, and some—like mine—run off a well, so it isn't absolutely detrimental to be without bottles of water. But it is a massive inconvenience for many.

Some of the buildings even lack electricity and basic plumbing, and will be reliant on wood stoves for the winter.

"Who lived here before us?" I ask, drumming my fingers against my forearm as I think.

"There are a number of families here from a rogue pack. They have no alpha, and have been under the protection of Westwood for generations. This is the land given to them a long time ago, and they've been building it up in case it was ever needed," explains Vester.

"And the hospital here? That isn't for a few families of wolves, and it's been here a while."

"Yes, they founded a hospital that treated rogue wolves in the area, with the permission of an Alpha long ago. There were transient families who came and went, all rogues. And from what Dr. Blackwell has said, they have learned to treat other supernaturals while keeping it quiet. I believe now that some of their human staff were not always humans."

"I see." It makes sense that more people in the world would know of the Fae and gnomes than just me. My eyes have been opened to the vast world beyond pack borders; while I once thought humans were sheltered because they didn't understand life inside a pack, I'm now realizing wolves are just as sheltered as humans, living within our own realities.

Shaking off such thoughts, I ask, "They are still here, right? The founders of this place."

"Of course."

"How have they kept themselves supplied in the past?"

Vester shakes his head. "It's never been a problem for them to go to local cities in the past."

Right. Of course it wasn't. Silly question.

"We'll have to use scent blockers for a real supply run. We don't have enough to do this often, so we'll need to make a big one as soon as we can, before supplies run out. Without the ability to contact their suppliers, they'll be running out of stock soon, if they haven't already." I blow out a long breath. "I know we're waiting for our missing people to return, but we need to plan this now."

Every day we wait is more things we won't be able to buy anymore."

"I'll put together a list," Vanessa offers immediately.

"And I'll get a mission team together. Kellan, I'm going to need your help vetting who we should bring on. We have too many people out right now."

"Got it." Kellan brushes a kiss against the top of Lisa's head before pushing himself off the couch. "Anything else, Luna?"

I shake my head, feeling both out of my depth and proud of myself for taking control without thinking about it. "I can't think of anything."

"We'll be back soon a plan for the supply run." Kellan glances at Lisa. "Do you mind staying here until we're done?"

"Of course not." She makes a shooing gesture. "Go."

* * *

With everyone out of the cabin, Lisa relaxes, waggling her eyebrows at me. "Throwing around your authority must feel good."

"Hah." I shake my head, my lips twitching upward. "No. I feel like I'm a blind person leading more blind people. Any minute now I'm going to fall off a cliff."

"You're doing great, in my humble opinion. Not that I have much experience. But I'd definitely vote you employer of the month if I could."

My laugh is real, even if it's short-lived. "Thanks, Lise."

Lisa stretches, her joints popping audibly. "I think I'm going to grab a shower. I feel like I've been wearing the same clothes for a week."

"Go ahead. I'm going to check on our food situation. I can't keep relying on Kellan for everything."

As Lisa heads off, Selene's voice echoes in my mind. I'm proud of you, Ava. You're stepping up.

I turn to see her blue eyes fixed on me, her tail swishing gently. "Thanks, Selene. That means a lot." My gaze drifts to Aurum, still curled up on the floor. "Will you stay with him?"

Of course. I'll keep an eye on him. Go, take care of your pack.

Despite the stress of everything, I feel a comfortable warmth in my chest. Aside from missing Lucas, I'm starting to feel...

Well, not exactly happy. It's hard to be happy with the situation the world is in. With the situation my pack is in.

But having a place I belong—having people who want me here—is a massive boost to my soul.

No, I'm not happy. But I belong.

It's a good feeling.

Maybe I'm already growing into my Luna crown.

I wrap my arms around Selene's neck, burying my face in her soft fur, feeling a burst of gratitude for her presence in my life. "Thank you," I whisper before pulling away.

Go on, little one.

Stepping outside, I approach one of my guards. "Can you take me to where we store our food?"

To my surprise, he nods without hesitation. I guess a part of me really does feel like I have to ask permission from my guards, but things have changed.

Now, they're my subordinates.

I'm going to have to be careful. I don't want to abuse my authority.

But it kind of feels good. Empowering. Like I'm coming into my own. No more worries about gilded cages; that part of my life is long over.

"Of course, Luna." He calls over to another wolf nearby. "Wes, can you lead Luna Ava to the storage area?"

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The new wolf turns, and I feel a flicker of recognition. I know him from somewhere, but his name escapes me. He jogs over, a friendly smile on his face. Young. Really young. A little scrawny compared to the others, but broad-shouldered and tan.

Tousled blond hair.

"Hi Luna, I'm Wes. Follow me."

As we start walking, I try to place where I've seen him before. "How are you doing, Wes?"

He shrugs, his smile fading slightly. "It's been rough for everyone, but we're managing."

I study his face, trying to gauge his age. He's barely more than a kid, judging by the patchy scruff across his face. "If you don't mind me asking, how old are you?"

Wes glances at me and laughs. "I'm sixteen."

My eyes widen in shock. "Sixteen," I repeat, my voice soft. Yet he's wearing tactical clothes similar to those my guards wear.

He nods, then adds, "We used to train together under Amara."

That's why I recognize him. Memories of those group training sessions flash through my mind, and I feel a pang of guilt for not remembering him sooner.

"You're a lot different from what the rumors said," Wes comments, pulling me from my thoughts.

I raise an eyebrow, curiosity piqued. I knew there were rumors, but no one's been willing to repeat them in my presence. "Oh? What kind of rumors?"

Wes looks sheepish for a moment. "Well, I used to believe you were just a filthy Blackwood, manipulating the Alpha. That you didn't have a wolf and were utterly worthless." He rushes to add, "But that changed when I watched you training. You worked harder than anyone."

Perhaps not all those eyes I felt on me during training were filled with suspicion or derision. Maybe some, like Wes, were watching with growing respect.

A wave of regret washes over me as I once again realize how prickly and defensive I've been. How many potential allies did I push away with my walls of ice?

"Where's your wolf today?" Wes asks, breaking the silence that had fallen between us.

"She's resting," I reply, grateful for the change in subject.

Wes nods, a hint of excitement in his voice. "It's pretty cool that our Luna has a separate wolf. It's all anyone's been talking about lately."

I'm not sure how to respond to that. But Wes's enthusiasm is infectious, and I find myself smiling despite my unease.

"It's certainly unique," I agree, trying to keep my tone light. "But tell me more about you, Wes. How are you handling all of this?"

His face clouds over. "One day I'm worrying about training and school, and the next we're running for our lives. But..." He straightens his shoulders, a determined look in his eyes. "I want to help. I want to protect our pack."

We walk in companionable silence for a few moments before Wes speaks up again. "We're almost there. The storage area is just around this bend."

How dire is our situation, exactly? I hope Kellan hasn't been feeding me in relative luxury compared to the others. Not that sandwiches are particularly luxurious in normal times, but these days are different.

"Thank you for showing me the way, Wes. And thank you for being honest with me. It means a lot."

* * *

It's honestly amazing no one's starved to death.

The shelves are practically empty. We have some beans and rice, cans of tuna, and several jars of peanut butter and jelly. There's flour and sugar, but no other baking supplies.

There's also bread, eggs, and several jars for protein shakes. Oatmeal. Some boxes of cereal and a shelf filled with Pop-Tarts, with a simple paper taped to it saying "Only For Children." Only a few cases of bottled water left.

"Is this all?"

"We have a refrigerator inside, but yes. It's meager, but we do have people going out to hunt. There's a small vegetable garden, and we're making a greenhouse to extend our yield as long as possible." Wes points at a cupboard on a far wall. "We do have a small amount of cookies and chocolate for children, too."

"I see."

The sight of the nearly barren shelves has my stomach twisting. It's sobering to be here, to see it for myself.

"What are people most worried about right now?"

Wes shifts his weight, his eyes darting around the storage area before settling back on me. "Well, Luna, there's a lot of concern because Alpha hasn't been around much lately. But honestly, most of the stress is about food and making sure the kids will be okay through the winter."

"How are people coping?"

"Most are just taking it day by day," Wes says with a shrug. "It's all we can do, really."

A knot forms in my throat as I consider my next question. "Wes, have you heard much talk against Lucas?"

His face freezes, and I can see the internal struggle playing out in his eyes. Slowly, he lowers his head, avoiding my gaze. "Yes, Luna."

My heart sinks, but I press on. "Are they talking about challenges?"

Wes nods, still not meeting my eyes.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for his answer. "Do you feel the same way?"

His head snaps up, eyes wide with surprise and a hint of hurt. "No! Absolutely not, Luna. Alpha's been good for the pack. He's done so much for us, even if... even if things are difficult right now."

The intensity of his disagreement catches me off guard. I can see the frustration etched in the lines of his face, the way his jaw clenches as he speaks. It's clear this situation is weighing heavily on him, perhaps more than I initially realized.

Deciding to change the subject, I gesture back to the sparse shelves. "Let's talk more about the food situation. What are we most in need of?"

Wes seems to relax slightly at the shift in topic. "Well, there's a real lack of milk for the kids. That's been tough. But a lot of the adults have been getting by on what we're hunting. So it's not quite as dire as it might look here."

I raise an eyebrow, considering his words. "That might work for now, but what about when winter comes? The hunting will get harder, won't it?"

He nods, his expression grim. "We're all worried about that. The cold months are going to be tough if we can't stock up more before then."

When I resolved to become a good Luna, I didn't realize I'd be taking over during a situation like this.

Trial by fire.

There's no point bemoaning fate. We're here. We're struggling. And I'm supposed to help these people.

You're doing great. Ask him about the hunts. It sounds like people are hunting for themselves and not for the pack.

"Who are our best hunters?"

"Ah—I don't know, Luna. We have a few families who aren't doing bad right now. They don't take much from the kitchens, I think."

"Okay. Show me these refrigerators. Do we have freezers, too?"

"Yes."

Chapter 332 Ava: Winter Preparations

I follow Wes to the main kitchen, my mind racing with thoughts of how to address our dire food situation. The sight of the two refrigerators and three chest freezers does little to ease my concerns.

The refrigerators are practically barren, save for a few sad-looking vegetables and some condiments. The first two chest freezers echo the same emptiness, their cavernous interiors mocking our predicament. It's only when Wes opens the third freezer that I feel a small spark of hope.

"There's some meat in here," I say, peering into the frost-covered interior. The packages are wrapped in butcher paper, neatly stacked and labeled. It's not much, but it's something.

"Yeah, someone's been bringing in their hunts," Wes confirms.

I turn to him, curiosity piqued. "Do you know who's been stocking these freezers?"

Wes shakes his head, his brow furrowing. "No, Luna. I'm not sure. It just started appearing a few weeks ago."

It's encouraging that at least one person in the pack is thinking ahead, trying to contribute to our collective survival. But the fact that we don't know who it is speaks volumes about the lack of communication and organization within the pack. Kellan's been focused on security and making sure everything's running. We need more than one person bearing the burden of everything.

First, we need to identify and mobilize our resources, starting with our most skilled hunters and those who've shown initiative in caring for the pack.

I look at Wes, a small smile forming on my lips. "Wes, I have a favor to ask of you."

He straightens, his eyes alert and eager. "Anything, Luna."

"I need you to go around and get me the names of our best hunters in the pack. And if you can, find out who's been responsible enough to try stocking the public kitchen." I gesture towards the freezer with the meat. "We need to know who our assets are if we're going to make it through this."

Wes's face lights up with understanding and determination. "Of course, Luna. I can do that right away."

"Thank you, Wes. This is really important."

He nods emphatically. "I understand. I'll get on it immediately and report back to you as soon as I have the information."

I watch Wes disappear through the kitchen door, his steps quick and purposeful.

We have shelter. We're working on food. Kellan and Vester are working on security and the supply run. I can ask Vanessa to report on our medical supplies and the state of the hospital. The gnomes are working on communications—which reminds me, are there walkie talkies anywhere? The wolves don't need it, but I do.

Lisa and the gnomes could also benefit.

* * *

The sun is long beneath the horizon when I make it back to my cabin. Lisa's gone, staying with Kellan for the night.

I close the cabin door behind me, exhaustion settling deep into my bones. The day's events replay in my mind as I lean against the wooden frame, taking a moment to breathe. My gaze falls on Aurum, curled up on my bed. He has to be miserable, locked up here. No one seems to mind when he goes out for quick potty breaks, but I'm sure there are questions.

"Hey there, big guy," I murmur, crossing the room and sinking onto the mattress beside him.

Aurum shifts, making room for me. I run my fingers through his thick fur, marveling at how soft it feels. His warmth seeps into me, comforting and familiar, even if the wolf before me isn't quite the Lucas I know.

"I hope you don't mind me talking to you," I say softly, settling in beside him. "I know you might not understand, or maybe you do. I'm not sure how much of Lucas is in there right now."

Aurum's ears perk up at the sound of his name, and I can't help but smile. It's a small sign, but it gives me hope.

"We've had quite a day, you know," I continue, my voice barely above a whisper. "I never thought I'd be organizing hunting parties or discussing food preservation techniques. But here we are."

I stroke Aurum's head, scratching behind his ears the way Lucas always liked. His eyes close in contentment, and for a moment, I can almost pretend everything is normal.

"I set up teams to stock our freezers," I tell him, recounting the day's accomplishments. "We're going to need all the food we can get for winter. Did you know we have she-wolves who are experts at preserving meat? I didn't, but I'm grateful for them now."

Aurum rumbles low in his chest, almost like he's acknowledging my words. I choose to believe he is.

"Kellan and Vester have been a huge help," I say, my fingers still moving through his fur. "They gave Grimoire a map for setting up security measures. I hope that's okay with you. I know you're not entirely comfortable with Grimoire, but we need all the help we can get right now."

I pause for a response, even though I know there won't be one.

"I wish you could tell me if I'm doing the right things," I admit, my voice catching slightly. "There's so much I don't know, Lucas. How did you manage all of this? How did you always seem so sure of yourself?"

Aurum shifts, pressing his large head against my hand. I take it as encouragement and continue.

"I'm trying my best to keep everyone safe," I say, my words barely audible. "To keep the pack thriving until you come back to us. Because you will come back, right?"

The question hangs in the air, unanswered. I swallow hard, pushing back the fear that threatens to overwhelm me.

"Selene's been with you all day," I change the subject, forcing a lighter tone. "Not a single fight between our wolves today. That's progress, right?" I chuckle softly, but it sounds hollow even to my own ears. Aurum's eyes open, fixing on me with an intensity that takes my breath away. For a moment, I see a flicker of Lucas in those golden depths.

"I miss you," I whisper, the words slipping out before I can stop them. "I miss talking to you, hearing your voice. I miss your smile, your laugh. I miss how safe I feel around you."

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes, and I blink them away. "I'm sorry," I say, shaking my head. "I shouldn't be dumping all of this on you. You've got enough to deal with, trying to find your way back to yourself."

Aurum whines softly, nudging my hand with his nose. I smile despite myself, scratching under his chin.

"You're right," I say, as if he'd spoken. "I should focus on the positive. We're making progress, aren't we? The pack is coming together, working as a unit. We're preparing for winter, thinking long-term. That's good, right?"

I pause, considering my next words carefully. "I know we're not ready to fight back yet. We're not strong enough. But we will be, Lucas. I promise you that. We'll get our pack lands back.

We'll make the Westwood Pack stronger than ever."

Aurum's tail thumps against the bed, and I choose to take it as agreement. I lean back against the headboard, my hand still absently stroking his fur.

"I have so many questions for you," I murmur, my eyes growing heavy. "About the pack, about being a leader. About us. But I guess those will have to wait until you're back."

Aurum shifts, curling his large body around mine protectively. I sink into his warmth, feeling safe and comforted despite everything.

"Goodnight, Lucas," I whisper, my eyes drifting closed. "I'll be here when you're ready to come back to me."

Chapter 333 Ava: Wolf's Landing

Several days pass in relative peace, and the general atmosphere of this place has changed.

For one, it has a name now. Wolf's Landing. Not my doing; Lisa's. Then Kellan ran with it. And now everyone's calling it that.

They're starting to take pride in the place, realizing we're here for the long haul. At least for now. It's no longer a temporary refuge, but our new (albeit still temporary) home.

Our freezers are slowly filling. Wolves are excellent hunters, but it doesn't mean every hunt ends in success. Two expeditions to town have filled our pantry, and a group of she-wolves have come forward to take over the general cooking.

"Why didn't they do all this before you took over?" Lisa asks, peering over my shoulder as I doodle on paper.

"They were, but they had very few supplies to work with, and many families were just going out and feeding themselves, thinking it would be better to be self-sufficient. Some fed others they knew needed help. But it just wasn't organized."

"And since no one was starving, it wasn't something that really came up."

"Right. But if we're going to make efficient supply runs now that our ability to go into town is limited..." I tap my pen against the paper, distracted once again. Every day, I introduce myself to at least five new people. My goal is to know all their names and families.

Aurum has been sleeping more and more lately; the pack seems under the impression that Lucas is on a mission, buying us time. For now, I need to ingratiate myself to the pack members, show them their leadership is thriving despite the situation we're in.

Vester is back, Selene reports. He'll be there in five minutes.

"Grimoire, Vester's—"

I heard her, the book says testily. I'm in your head too, you know.

Yeah, yeah. Thumping my knuckles against his cover, I remind him, "You know I'm technically your master, right?"

It's a tidbit Selene let me know during a particularly sassy lesson; the bond I have with Grimoire is very different than my mating bond and my bond with Selene. He isn't a part of me, but a spirit pledged to serve me.

In other words, he's my servant. Or—well, there's a worse word for it, but I try to avoid that one.

An uneducated master, he mutters.

"I can always order you to—"

But a benevolent and wise master you are, yes.

His false praise has my lips twitching, and Lisa sits across the table, resting her chin in her hand. "I really wish you could see this from my point of view sometimes."

"What do you mean?" Now that I'm done teasing Grimoire, I slide him into a messenger bag Kellan brought back during their supply run. It's sturdy and perfectly sized for Grimoire's hefty weight.

"You just say things out of nowhere, and I'm always having to fill in the gaps on my own."

"Ah." I grimace. "Sorry. I was just teasing Grimoire."

"It's fine, Ava. I just think it's kind of funny. You should see some of the story lines I've cooked up watching you guys."

Adjusting the strap of Grimoire's new home, I squint at Lisa, noticing the watch on her wrist for the first time today. "Is that—?"

"No, it's just a watch. See?" When she holds it up, I can read the time clearly. "The Grand Sage is pretty close to the first prototype, though. He said your little crystal things helped."

Grimoire taught me to infuse some of my magic into quartz. It's a readily available mineral, and the young children have fun looking for stones with quartz in them, keeping them out of their parents' hair and giving them something to do.

Quartz, especially in the concentrations found in these random rocks, doesn't hold a lot of my magic, but it's enough to at least turn into some sort of battery for the tinkering gnome. I have no idea how it works; I just do as I'm told.

Today, though, we have another mission in mind.

Creating my first security wards, and keeping my pack safe.

I lean down to hug Aurum, his warm fur soft against my cheek. He's sprawled across the couch, dead to the world. "I'll be back soon," I whisper, though I doubt he hears me.

Lisa's voice comes from behind me. "Don't worry, I'll keep an eye on him until Selene gets back."

I straighten up, turning to face her. "Thanks. Selene shouldn't be gone too long. She's just out hunting."

"We'll be fine here."

A knot of worry tightens in my chest. "If anything happens—"

"I know, I know. Tell the guards to tell Selene." Lisa rolls her eyes good-naturedly. "You've only said it about a hundred times."

I sigh, frustration bubbling up. "I hate how roundabout this is. If I could just access the pack bond myself..."

"But you can't, so we work with what we've got." Lisa's tone is gentle but firm.

Giving Aurum one last pat, I sink my fingers into his thick fur. He doesn't stir, his breathing deep and even. Vanessa's assured us he's just sleeping, and Selene tells me he's not in danger, but it still worries me to see him like this.

Still, it's probably a good sign that he's sleeping. Sleeping is healing and all that.

"Alright, I'm off," I say, heading for the door.

Outside, the breeze bites through my sweater, warning me that winter's around the corner. Slipping my coat on helps with the chill, but not as much as I'd like. It's fine for a quick walk through camp, but it's going to be brutal later, especially once the sun goes down.

"Luna."

I turn to see Vester approaching, his expression serious as always.

"Are you ready?" he asks.

I pat the messenger bag at my side, feeling the reassuring weight of Grimoire inside. "As I'll ever be."

Vester nods, his eyes flicking to the bag. "Then let's get started. Where first? North?"

Chapter 334 Ava: Securing the Perimeter

The branch trembles in my hand as I trace the intricate pattern onto the exposed earth. Sweat beads on my forehead despite the chill in the air. I've never done anything like this before, but Grimoire guides me through each step.

First, a rune.

Then, to tie in all four elements.

"Hold it steady, Vester," I mutter, glancing up at him. He's holding Grimoire open, carefully following me around the circle without stepping on any of my work.

You're doing well, Grimoire's voice echoes in my mind. Remember, precision is key.

I nod, focusing back on the task at hand. The rune is complex, all swirling lines and sharp angles. One mistake could render the whole thing useless. No pressure, right?

I'm not entirely certain how these runes and glyphs work, but Grimoire assures me they're what we need. Of course, I have questions like who was the first one to discover these glyphs and why do random glyphs have the power to do crazy things, but Grimoire just tells me to try to understand basic magic before diving into advanced history.

Not super helpful.

Finally, the last line connects, and I sit back on my heels, surveying my work. It's not perfect, but it's close enough. I hope. A rune that spans across five feet in a rough circle of earth we've cleared for this purpose.

"Now what?" Vester asks, his voice low.

"Now, we fill it with twigs," I explain, reaching for the pile we've gathered. "They need to be connected, like a network."

We work in silence, carefully placing small sticks and brush into the inch-deep grooves I've carved. It's painstaking work, but eventually, we finish.

Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes and reach for my magic. It comes easier now, a warm current flowing through my veins. I direct it towards the flammable debris, willing them to ignite.

A soft whoosh fills the air, and when I open my eyes, the entire rune is ablaze. Fire dances along the lines, consuming the sacrifice of fuel with glee.

"Impressive," Vester murmurs, and I can't help but feel a small surge of pride.

As the last of the twigs turn to ash, I call upon my magic again. This time, I summon water, watching as it pools in the grooves, turning the ash into a murky slurry. Slowly, the water seeps into the earth, leaving behind damp, ashen lines.

Earth. Fire. Water. Wind. It's all here; all four elements.

Now, infuse it with your magic, Grimoire instructs. Visualize your power flowing into the earth, creating a barrier.

I place my hands on the ground, feeling the cool dampness against my palms. Closing my eyes, I imagine my magic as a golden light, seeping from my fingertips into the rune. It's harder than I expected, like trying to pour honey through a pinhole.

But gradually, I feel something shift. The earth beneath my hands grows warm, and when I open my eyes, the rune is glowing with a soft, golden light. It pulses once, twice, three times before fading away.

And then, to my amazement, the earth begins to move. The grooves fill themselves in, erasing any trace of our work. Within moments, it looks like we've done nothing more than clear a patch of ground.

"By the moon," Vester breathes. He's not one to stun easily.

Careful, as if worried he'll ruin my work, he walks over the area, trying to find evidence of the ward. But there's nothing there—at least not to his eye or touch.

My magic, though, recognizes it. Senses the ward I've placed here, like a beacon.

The science of glyphs might be shaky in my head, but I can see that they really work.

My legs feel a bit shaky, and I realize how much energy I've expended.

Vester stands as well, brushing dirt from his knees. "So, we're done?"

I laugh, but it comes out more like a sigh. "Not even close. We need to do this every mile around the entire perimeter."

His eyebrows shoot up. "That's going to take all night. Longer, actually."

Try days, Grimoire chimes in, unhelpfully.

I relay this information to Vester, whose expression grows concerned. "Can you keep up that pace?" he asks, eyeing me critically.

The question stings my pride a bit. "I managed well enough the night you rescued me," I remind him. "I can handle this."

He looks thoughtful for a moment, then nods. "Fair enough. Where to next?"

* * *

We get a quarter of the perimeter done before it's too dark to see. Vester hands me a flashlight without comment and slows his pace to mine.

Walking isn't hard. My muscles aren't sore or stretched. But my body has no energy left, as if I've sapped it of everything.

Pretty much, Grimoire says cheerfully. But that's a good thing. Depleting your reserves will only force your body to draw more magic in. Make sure you eat well. Your body needs fuel, too.

The cold bites through my clothes, seeping into my bones. I hadn't expected it to drop this drastically. A shiver runs through me, and I clench my jaw to keep my teeth from chattering.

Without a word, Vester shrugs off his coat and drapes it over my shoulders. The residual warmth from his body envelops me, and I pull it tighter around myself.

"Thank you," I murmur, touched by his thoughtfulness.

He doesn't say a word, quiet as he usually is. Instead, he shifts into his wolf form as we walk. His fur ripples in the dim light; like most wolves, he's a beautiful gray-furred wolf. Much larger than Selene, but small compared to an alpha like Lucas.

He pads ahead, leading the way back to our home.

As we walk, I can't help but smile. It's no wonder Vanessa loves him so much. Vester's quiet strength and kindness shine through in moments like these. I make a mental note to tell her how much I appreciate her mate.

The lights of the camp come into view, and my heart lifts at the sight. Ever since I've started working with the pack, it's come to feel like home. More than any other place I've lived before; even more than my precious apartment in Cedarwood.

It's a place I have purpose. A place where I matter.

As we approach, I see several figures waiting for us.

Exhaustion weighs heavily on me, but I straighten my spine and square my shoulders; a Luna does not droop.

"Luna Ava!" a familiar voice calls out. It's Wes, the young wolf I've been getting to know. His enthusiasm is infectious, and I feel my spirits lift.

"Hello, Wes," I reply, managing a warm smile. "How are things here?"

As Wes launches into an update, others gather around. I recognize each face—Mara, the skilled huntress with a dry sense of humor; Jace, the quiet but dependable guard; Lila, whose green thumb has been invaluable to our garden efforts. She's even put together a greenhouse, in hopes of keeping our vegetables alive a little longer.

I greet each of them in turn, asking about their days, their families. It's more than just politeness—I genuinely care about these people. They're my pack now, and I want them to know they matter.

A familiar face catches my eye. Sasha, a she-wolf I met just days ago. The angry red scar across her face is still healing, a reminder of the dangers we face. But her eyes are kind as she approaches.

"Luna Ava," she says softly. "You look chilled to the bone. Come, let's get some food in you."

My stomach growls at her words, reminding me of how much energy I've expended today. Sasha gently takes my arm, leading me towards the communal kitchen. The scent of something savory and warm wafts towards us, making my stomach growl again, this time audible to everyone near.

Inside, the kitchen is a miniature hub of activity as several people sit at tables, eating.

Sasha guides me to a seat and disappears for a moment. She returns with an enormous bowl of stew, steam rising invitingly from its surface.

"Eat," she urges, placing it before me along with a thick slice of bread. It's soft and squishy, freshly baked. "You need to keep your strength up."

I don't need to be told twice. The first spoonful is heaven—rich broth, heavy on the meat, with spare bits of our meager amount of vegetables from the garden. Thankfully, wolves tend to be meat eaters, so they don't complain.

"How are you feeling?" Sasha asks, taking a seat across from me.

I swallow a mouthful of stew before answering. "Tired," I admit. "But good."

She nods, understanding in her eyes. "You were scouting the perimeter today, right? It's an important job. A Luna wouldn't normally do it." The words might sound a little strange, but there's approval in her tone.

"I want to help. If there's something I can do, I'm going to do it."

She nods again. "Many are noticing this about you. Our Alpha has chosen wisely."

Heat rises to my cheeks at Sasha's words, and I quickly duck my head, focusing on my bowl. The warmth of the stew seeps into my hands as I lift another spoonful to my lips, savoring the rich flavors. It's a welcome distraction from the unexpected praise.

I'm not used to this—people noticing my efforts, appreciating what I do. For so long, I was the outcast, the one who didn't fit in. Now, to hear that others see value in my actions... it's overwhelming in the best possible way.

Chapter 335 Ava: Sister Miriam's Warning

A low, mournful keen jerks me out of a dead sleep.

Beside me, Aurum's massive form twitches and writhes, soft whimpers escaping his muzzle.

"Selene, what's happening?"

I think Lucas is waking, Selene's voice echoes in my mind. She's curled protectively around Aurum, her silver head resting atop his golden one.

My breath catches as hope surges in my chest. It's taken so much longer than I expected.

Aurum lets out another pitiful whine, his paws scrabbling against the sheets. I reach out instinctively, wanting to comfort him, but Selene's head jerks up.

Enemies.

"What do you mean?" My question is sharper than intended.

Intruders. Get dressed. Now. Kellan's on his way.

I bolt out of bed, even though I don't understand.

Then a strange, vibrating ping resonates inside my head.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Intruders repelled by the ward, Grimoire says with absolute calm. We need to find out what's going on.

I scramble into the first clothes I can grab, my heart pounding so hard I can barely hear Selene in my head.

As I rush out the door, I collide with two familiar figures.

"Oof!" Lisa stumbles back, caught off guard.

Kellan steadies her with one hand while ushering us all back inside with the other. He closes the door behind us, his movements quick but controlled.

"A scouting party found traces of a strange group near camp," he explains in a hushed tone, his eyes darting between Lisa and me.

My stomach drops. "Someone was near the northeastern wards," I blurt out. "I can pinpoint exactly which ones were tripped. They didn't make it through, though."

"How far do your wards extend?"

I shake my head, frustration and fear mingling in my gut. If only I'd pushed myself harder. I could have had more wards placed. "Not even halfway around the perimeter." The admission feels like failure.

Pushing past my self-doubt, I grab the map from the nearby table, spreading it out. My finger traces the line where the wards end, then taps the spots where they were triggered. "This is where we're warded. And here. This is where they hit. Three, almost one after another."

Kellan leans in, his brow furrowing. "That's farther than I thought they'd be. They're moving fast."

The gravity of the situation is not lost on me. Another fight. We've just settled in after the last one. "How did they get so close without us noticing?"

Probably scent blockers, Selene's voice echoes in my mind, her tone laced with concern.

Before I can respond, the air in the room shifts. A familiar figure materializes in the center of the floor, and I gasp. Sister Miriam stands before us, her eyes wild and her clothes splattered with blood.

"Prepare for a fight," she says, her voice tight with urgency.

My brain reels at her sudden appearance—and the blood all over her—but a strange sense of calm takes over my mouth. "We were just discussing it. We've discovered traces of intruders. They hit my security wards."

"Security wards?" She glances at me in approval. "You've grown. But, they won't be enough. It's an initial scouting party of vampires. They've caught the scent of the camp."

My blood runs cold.

A group of vampires killed and injured so many during the first invasion of pack lands. Can we stand up to them when we're already this weak? Without Lucas?

Where the hell have you been? Selene's voice rings out, sharp with accusation.

Sister Miriam's gaze snaps to where Selene sits, her eyes narrowing. "I've been busy infiltrating the other side when an opportunity presented itself," she retorts, her tone leaving no room for argument. "They sent one back to report to their superiors, but he won't make it."

The blood on her suddenly makes sense.

Kellan steps forward, his face a mask of determination. "How many are there?" he asks, cutting straight to the heart of the matter. "What kind of weapons do they have? How soon can we expect an attack?"

"Five. They're all younger, turned within the last decade. As for weapons?" She smiles mirthlessly. "They're vampires, beta wolf. What do you think?"

I turn to Lisa, seeing the fear in her eyes that I'm sure is mirrored in my own. "We need to alert the others," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "Can you help gather everyone in the main hall?"

"No need," Kellan cuts in. "I can alert them through the pack link."

Right. Of course.

"Vanessa and Vester—"

"They're preparing as well. Vanessa will be here soon to help."

The wards may not cover the entire perimeter, but they've given us some warning. It's not much, but it's something to work with. It's a stroke of luck.

Whoever they are, at least they have no idea how far the wards extend. Hopefully it'll buy us some time as they try to figure out how to get through.

Aurum keens again in the bed, and Kellan looks concerned. "Is he okay?"

"Selene says he's waking up." My voice is soft. "But the timing..."

Kellan's face twists into a grimace, his eyes darkening with the weight of the decision. "You need to evacuate. We'll send all the non-combatants with you."

My heart sinks. We've only just settled in, and now we're running again. But I know he's right. We're not ready for this fight, not with Lucas still incapacitated.

"Aurum will need to evacuate as well," Kellan adds, his gaze flicking to the massive golden wolf on my bed.

I nod, swallowing hard. "We'll figure something out." The words feel hollow, but what else can I say? We have no choice.

Kellan's expression softens slightly. "Use the guards to carry him if you need to. We have stretchers if he won't wake up."

Aurum whimpers softly in his sleep, and I wonder if some part of him can sense the danger we're in.

Kellan turns to Sister Miriam, his posture straightening as he slips into his role as Beta. "Come with me. We're going to need your insight."

As they leave, I'm left standing in the middle of the room, feeling lost and overwhelmed. Lisa touches my arm gently, her presence a small comfort in the chaos.

"What can I do?" she asks, her voice trembling slightly. But she doesn't flinch, her eyes meeting mine without wavering.

Chapter 336 Ava: Under Attack

Vanessa bursts through the door, calm despite the energy buzzing around her. "You have two minutes to pack a bag. Evacuation is now."

I grab my messenger bag, with Grimoire inside. Lisa stands ready beside me, already with a bulging backpack slung over her shoulders.

"Kellan had a 'go bag' ready for me since I moved in with him," she explains sheepishly.

I nod, impressed by Kellan's foresight. My own preparations feel woefully inadequate in comparison. Hastily, I stuff a couple of extra outfits into my bag.

Turning to Vanessa, I gesture towards Aurum's massive form on the bed. "We need a way to carry him. He's not waking up."

Vanessa frowns as she assesses the situation. "We'll figure something out. Maybe a stretcher."

Movement to the east, Selene's voice interrupts, her tone distracted and tense. They're trying to find a way around the wards.

"We don't have enough vehicles for everyone. Most of the pack will have to go on foot. We'll need to split the evacuation—humans in the cars, shifters on foot."

My heart sinks at her words. That means I'll be separated from the pack. "Is that safe? Splitting up, I mean?"

Vanessa's eyes meet mine, a mix of determination and worry in her gaze. "It's not ideal, but it's our best option. The shifters can move faster through the forest, and we need to get the humans to safety as quickly as possible."

I nod, understanding the logic even as fear gnaws at my insides. My gaze drifts back to Aurum, his golden fur rising and falling with each breath. How are we going to move him?

"What about Aurum?" I ask, unable to keep the concern from my voice.

"We'll use one of the trucks. Don't worry."

Vanessa instructs the guards outside the door to carry Aurum on a stretcher to the truck. To their credit, they ask no questions, obeying in efficient silence. Only minutes later, we're in the heart of the pack with the others. Humans are divided into cars, as many as they can fit. Their fear is so strong, even I can smell it in the air.

"Ava." A familiar voice cuts through the chaos, and I turn to see Marcus approaching. Relief washes over me at the sight of his weathered face.

"Marcus!"

His eyes never stop scanning the area. "I'll be sticking with you and Lisa. We need to keep the human evacuees safe."

Having Marcus here, solid and dependable, makes the impossible task ahead feel manageable.

All around us, wolves move with practiced efficiency. It's a sight to behold—every pack member helps at least one other before shifting into wolf forms, securing packs to each other's backs. The chaos I expected is surprisingly absent, everything moving along in orderly fashion.

"They're all pros by now," Vanessa says, following my stare.

"What about the wounded?" I ask, dreading the answer.

She smiles, her worried eyes lightening at the question. "We have no wounded. Everyone's healed since the last attack."

Thank God for small favors.

I watch as three groups of wolves dash out into the night. Their coordinated movements speak of countless drills and, likely, real-life experience.

"They're going to reinforce the scouting party," Vanessa explains, her voice eerily calm given the circumstances.

Contact is made, Selene's voice echoes in my mind, sending a jolt of fear through me.

"How far out are they?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Only half a mile from camp."

I strain my ears, expecting to hear the sounds of battle, but there's nothing. Is a half-mile really that far away? "I can't hear anything."

A presence materializes behind me, and Sister Miriam's voice drifts over my shoulder. "They're probably suppressing the sound of fighting so they don't scare us off."

I turn to face her, taking in her enigmatic expression. "What about you? What are you going to do since we're all evacuating?"

She reaches out, patting my head in a gesture that feels both comforting and patronizing. "I need to make sure all loose ends are cleaned up so no reports of this camp get back to their headquarters."

Her fingers brush my hair behind my shoulders, and her eyes meet mine. "Don't worry, little Luna. You and your people will remain safe."

Before I can respond, she vanishes from view, leaving me staring at the empty space where she stood.

In and out, with a few words.

I let out a sigh. "She's so unpredictable."

"She's a good ally," Vanessa says, her tone matter-of-fact.

"I know," I agree, just as a piercing scream tears through the air.

Chaos explodes into our orderly evacuation with another scream.

Marcus curses. "Vamps. They're here."

They're running toward us, speeding blotches of black hundreds of yards in the distance.

My voice barely audible over screams and howls. "Humans, evacuate now!"

I spot several she-wolves herding children, their bodies low and protective as they run in the opposite direction of the invaders. "Marcus! Make sure some are guarding the children as they escape."

"Yes, Luna!"

We need to buy them time to get to safety.

All around me, wolves leap into battle, intercepting the vampires before they can reach the most vulnerable members of our pack. It's too dark to see from such a distance, but there's a certain sound when they finally clash, and a few wolves yelp and scream.

"Get in the truck!" Vanessa yells at me. "We need to get you to safety!"

I shove Lisa in first, as Marcus directs some wolves to aid the evacuees.

Selene dashes by us all, joining the wolves in the fight. Her determination is fierce inside my head, her full attention on the vampires.

So much happens in the matter of seconds.

Are you running or fighting? Grimoire's voice is calm and collected despite the mayhem.

Marcus' hand clamps down on my arm as he lifts me into the truck. "We need to go, Luna."

The sight of my pack fighting for their lives, for our survival, makes something fierce and protective well up inside me. How can I leave them?

More screams. More growls. The scent of blood fills the air, apparent even to my weak nose.

I can help you fight, Grimoire's voice comes again, more insistent this time. We can save lives, but you need to make a decision.

Marcus shoves me forward. "Ava, we need to go. I can't protect you here."

I look into his eyes, seeing the grim determination there. Then I glance back at the battle raging around us. My pack needs me. They need their Luna.

"No," I say, my voice steady despite the fear coursing through me. "Marcus, I need you to guard Aurum. Make sure he's safe."

"Luna—"

But I duck under his arm and jump out of the truck, hoping I'm not making another horrible mistake.

I'm exhausted. My magic is spent. But Grimoire's confidence has me clinging to it like a lifeline.

"Help me," I whisper, reaching into the messenger bag at my hip. The moment my fingers touch his cover, a surge of magic floods through me. It's foreign; it doesn't come from the world around me. There's a different feeling to it, as though it's more refined. Sleek. Concentrated.

Every drop of magic feels five times more powerful than what I draw from within myself.

This is Grimoire.

My senses sharpen, the world around me coming into crystal-clear focus.

You are my bond, Grimoire says, every word in my head rumbling with the power he holds. You have my power.

A vampire breaks through our defensive line, his eyes locked on a group of evacuees.

Without thinking, I thrust my hand out. A bolt of pure energy erupts from my palm, striking the vampire square in the chest. It flies backward, crashing into a tree with enough force to splinter the trunk.

Chapter 337 Ava: Coming Into Her Power

For a moment, I stare at my hand in disbelief. Did I really just do that?

You used too much power, Grimoire says. You can't let it shoot out like that. You'll hurt an innocent.

I wasn't trying, though. I'd just moved without thinking.

Yes. That's why you need to focus. Pay attention, he's getting back up.

Several wolves converge on the fallen vampire, but he swings his arms with a blood-chilling shriek.

He's hurt. He's going to draw on all his power to fight back.

But he's already doing it before Grimoire's words finish, swinging his arms in a wide arc that throws off five grown wolves. They aren't massive, but they're solid, large male wolves, who can't just fly through the air with a swing of someone's arm.

But the vampire manages it, his glittering red eyes locking on me.

"Ava!" Vanessa screams.

A pair of hands grabs me from behind, pulling me back toward the truck. I thrash, shocked to turn and see Wes' grim face. "Luna, you need to run. We'll hold them off for you."

"No, Wes, I'm not—"

The vampire's eyes lock onto me, a predatory gleam that sends ice through my veins. He moves so fast, he's nothing but a blur. My body reacts before my mind can catch up.

"Sorry, Wes," I mutter, planting my feet and using the young wolf's momentum against him.

I throw Wes over my shoulder, my muscles straining with the effort. He hits the ground with a thud and a yelp, but he's safe. The vampire's claws whistle through the air where Wes had been standing just a heartbeat ago.

Relief floods through me, but there's no time to dwell on it. The vampire is already pivoting, his attention solely on me now.

A gray blur slams into the vampire's side. The wolf—I can't quite place who it is in the chaos—snaps and growls, momentarily throwing the vampire off balance. But it's not enough. With a snarl of his own, the vampire grabs the wolf by the scruff and hurls it away like a rag doll.

Now, Ava! Grimoire's voice rings in my head. Channel the magic through your core, not just your hands. Visualize the energy coalescing in your chest, then direct it outward.

I don't have time to question or doubt, feeling the magic surge through me. It feels directed, as though Grimoire's hands are on it, guiding it to where it needs to be. It's different from before—more focused, more potent.

Everything moves in slow motion. The vampire's arm is piercing forward, claws straight out, aiming for my chest, white fangs bared in a feral grin. He's covered in streaks of blood, ruby red eyes wide with crazed furor.

Sliding past his arm, I throw a punch at his chest, willing my magic to follow the movement. It's easier to channel magic through my body.

A blast of pure energy erupts as my fist makes contact with his chest, and his torso explodes as though it's made of paper. The force of it sends him staggering backward, his eyes wide with shock.

For a moment, I think it's over. But the vampire doesn't fall. He looks down at the gaping hole in his chest, then back at me. Blood drips everywhere, and it smells... decayed.

His lips curl into a sneer.

You need to cut off his head. They can survive without blood, you know.

Seriously? A literal hole in the chest isn't good enough?

This is why it's hard to fight vampires.

"I don't have a weapon!"

Use your magic. Shape it, mold it. Imagine a blade of pure energy.

The vampire lunges. I dodge to the side, feeling the rush of air as his claws barely miss my face. He might still be alive, in whatever vampiric sense that is, but he's definitely slower.

My heart pounds in my ears, but my brain tells me something that I know with all my heart.

I can do this.

He's slow enough for me to dodge.

I can fight.

I try to focus, to shape the magic as Grimoire instructed. But it's hard to concentrate with death literally snapping at my heels.

Three times I fail, as I evade the vampire's attacks, one after another. He's not giving me a chance to regroup.

Focus.

The vampire's next attack catches me off guard. His hand closes around my throat, lifting me off the ground. I gasp for air, clawing at his iron grip.

As spots dance in my vision, something inside me snaps. A surge of determination, of raw survival instinct, floods through me. I stop fighting against the vampire's grip and instead pour all my concentration into the magic swirling within me.

You can do it, Grimoire says, and that magic inside of me once again feels as though it's being molded and guided by his hands.

It's like a giant cheat, but that's okay. As long as I survive, I'll try anything.

I feel the magic respond, coalescing into a tangible form in my hand. Without hesitation, I swing my arm in a wide arc.

The magic-forged blade slices through the vampire's arm without even a hint of resistance. His grip on my throat vanishes, and I drop to the ground, gasping for air.

But I don't stop. I can't. Before the vampire can recover, I lunge forward, swinging the energy blade with all my might.

Once again, there's no resistance. It's as if I just slice through air. The vampire's head topples from his shoulders, his body crumpling to the ground a second later.

I stand there, panting, the magical blade still clutched in my trembling hand.

You aren't done! Grimoire shouts. There are four left. Get it together!

Shit.

All of that felt as though long minutes passed, but the wolf that had collided into the vampire's side is just now getting back on her feet. It's Vanessa. Now that I my eyes are focused, I can recognize her immediately.

Wes is also standing beside me, eyes wide in shock. And behind me is Marcus, just now slowing to a stop. He'd been running to save me.

"Keep Aurum safe!" I hiss, realizing I'm still gasping for breath. My lungs burn and ache, making it hard to shout orders.

Vanessa shifts back, pointing to the crowd of fighters. "Aurum's there, Ava."

Chapter 338 Lucas: We Are Alpha

Danger.

An insistent whisper that pierces a cloud of dreams and memories, a place I cannot escape.

But it fades, and the urgency within it does too.

"You'll be Alpha one day, Lucas. You'll have to learn to put your people first."

"But Father, that has nothing to do with blackberry pies." Clinging to a branch high above my father's head, I'm refusing to come down and face punishment.

Kellan's already been taken by his father, the scary-faced Jericho. Me? I ran my blackberry-stained face into the forest, knowing Father—the pack Alpha—would tan my hide for stealing a few pies.

Mom always did love to bake.

"Those pies were to go to the widows of last night's raid," Father says, his face fading and blurring from view.

Danger, that strange voice whispers again, and I sit up on the branch, no longer five years old.

I'm older now, but still a child.

Father argues with Uncle Jericho. We're in a dense patch of woods, where sunlight barely reaches. I'm hiding behind a bush, straining to catch every word.

Their voices are laden with tension. My chest tightens as I drink in Father's face, committing every line and shadow to memory. A dull ache spreads through me, a pain I can't quite place.

"He drinks only from animals," Jericho insists, his gruff voice earnest. "He has no interest in harming people."

Father's jaw clenches, his hands curling into fists. His entire body is tense. "He's too newly turned, Jericho. You can't possibly believe he has control over his instincts."

Their words echo in my mind, stirring a primal fear I've been taught since birth. Vampires are dangerous. Vampires can't be trusted.

But Uncle Jericho stands his ground, his broad shoulders set with determination. "You're too prejudiced against vampires. This isn't about ancient history anymore."

"Why would you put the pack's safety over someone you barely know?"

It's rare to see Father this agitated, his usual calm demeanor cracking. Flaring nostrils. Fists that tremble as his knuckles turn white. A sour, bitter scent that permeates the air.

This forbidden conversation keeps me rooted to my spot. I'm downwind. They don't see me.

Jericho's expression softens, his next words catching me off guard. "All supernaturals should have each other's backs in this world. We're all fighting the same battle. We should open our minds to new possibilities rather than living in the past."

"Why doesn't he settle in the established supernatural communities? Why live like a ghost among humans?"

Surely, if this vampire means no harm, he'd seek out others of his kind? Father's right. I can feel it in my bones.

"He's a wanderer by nature," Jericho explains, his tone almost defensive. "Not everyone fits into neat little boxes, Alpha. You of all people should understand that."

I watch Father's face closely. Uncle Jericho's words have reached him. But then Father shakes his head.

"Mark my words, Jericho," Father says, his voice low and ominous. "In an extreme situation, that vampire cannot be trusted."

The vision fades around me. But I cling to it, desperate to see more, to understand. Father's face blurs, and I reach out, trying to grasp this memory that feels both familiar and foreign.

Danger, that strange voice whispers again, pulling me back to a reality I can't quite grasp. The forest dissolves, leaving me adrift in a sea of fractured memories and half-formed thoughts.

Who am I? Where am I?

Lucas. Alpha.

Yes. My name is Lucas. Alpha of... of what? The pack name eludes me, slipping from my tenuous grasp of reality.

A face flashes in my mind—a woman with impossibly light, brilliant blue eyes. They hold the secrets of the universe. She smiles, and my heart aches. I want to hold her, but her face fades as everything does here.

I'm Lucas Westwood. I'm... an Alpha? Yes, that feels right. But something's wrong. I'm not where I should be.

I'm not who I should be.

Danger. Ava's in danger.

The voice echoes through my mind, a beacon in the fog of confusion. It's familiar, comforting, yet filled with unexplainable urgency.

I grasp at it, desperate to understand why it feels so right, so much a part of me.

Don't leave.

Don't leave me here alone.

Danger. Ava's in danger.

Ava. The name ignites a fierce protectiveness I can't explain.

Who is she? Why does her safety matter so much?

Ah, yes. I remember now. The blue-eyed woman. Beautiful. She holds the world in her eyes.

Before I can ponder further, images flood my consciousness. Vampires, their faces twisted in feral snarls, lunging at familiar people, though I don't know them. There's blood. It makes me twitch, leaves me unsettled, and the images fade.

Blood.

Death.

Despair.

And power. Power beyond anything I've felt before...

Then the images return, with a fierce whisper.

They're all in danger.

Pups wail in terror, their cries piercing my heart. They're running.

No, escaping.

I strain to make sense of it all. These people, they're important to me. They're... my pack? Yes, that feels right. I'm their Alpha.

I should be there, protecting them, leading them.

But I'm not. I'm trapped here, in this limbo of fractured memories and half-formed thoughts.

My attention snaps to a group of humans huddled near a truck. Among them, a woman with long blonde curls catches my eye. Something about her pulls at me, demanding my focus. As I study her face, recognition slams into me.

Ava. My Ava.

My mate.

The realization brings with it a torrent of emotions—love, fierce protectiveness, and gut-wrenching fear. She's in danger. They're all in danger, and I'm not there to save them.

I'm here, in this strange place of memories that ebb and flow of its own accord. Lost in time.

We are Alpha.

I struggle against the fog that holds me, desperate to break free. I need to get to her, to my pack. They need me. Ava needs me.

"Let me out!" I roar, my voice echoing in the void. "I have to protect them!"

But the fog doesn't yield. It swirls around me, taunting me with glimpses of the battle raging beyond my reach. I see Ava's face again, determination etched in her features as she faces down a vampire with a giant hole in its chest. Pride swells in my chest, but it's quickly overshadowed by terror.

She's strong, my mate. But she's also vulnerable. Human. The vampire lunges, and I cry out, straining against my invisible bonds.

Remember, the voice insists. Remember your strength. Your power. Your duty.

I close my eyes, focusing on the words.

My strength. My power. My duty.

Images flash through my mind—training with my father, learning to control my wolf, taking my place as Alpha. The responsibilities, the weight of an entire pack on my shoulders.

This voice.

I know this voice.

It's my wolf.

We are Alpha, he growls in my head. We must protect our pack. Our mate. We must wake.

The scene before me changes again. I see myself, but not as I am now. This version of me is different—stronger. Larger. Primal and raw. Golden, as if the sun itself came to bless my fur.

Different from the others, my eyes glow with otherworldly light, and my power pulses in palpable waves, throwing weaker enemies to the ground.

Vampires. Humans. Strange wolves without souls. All are the enemy, and I will not let them win this fight.

My people depend on me.

They're all fighting, coming as one, too much for any single wolf to take on. But I move with impossible speed and strength, tearing through them like they're made of paper.

Is this... me? Is this what I'm capable of?

Yes, the voice confirms. Our power.

But why? Why would I hide such strength when my pack needs it?

As if in answer to my unspoken question, the scene shifts once more. I see the aftermath of the battle. The vampires are gone, but so is much of the forest around us. Trees are uprooted, the ground scorched. And I'm nearly torn apart, bleeding on the ground. There's so much pain.

My body could not hold onto the power, and it pulverized me from within.

I understand now. This power, it's dangerous. Uncontrollable. I locked it away to protect them, to protect myself.

Our body is too weak, the voice agrees. But we are still strong. Get up. We must protect them.

Chapter 339 Ava: Defend the Pack

Aurum's golden figure streaks through the wolves defending us, in an unerring line straight for the closest vampire.

Seconds later, there's a blood-curdling roar.

Stop standing around staring, Grimoire says, unaffected by the fear crawling through my skin. They need your help.

Tearing my eyes from Aurum/Lucas, I dash forward, my magic-crafted blade cool against my sweaty palm.

"What's next?" I ask, squeezing through a mass of fur and hot bodies. The noise is too loud to hear my own voice, but Grimoire picks up my words straight from my head.

Get closer. You'll hurt an innocent if you try to do anything here. You don't have the control yet.

Ducking under a wildly swinging arm, I come face to face with a stranger. Pale skin. Lips glistening red, cracking at the corners, where you can see pale flesh peeking out beneath the blood.

Fangs. Long fangs, far longer than I ever thought a vampire could have, and red eyes that lock onto mine with unerring accuracy.

Don't go straight for the head, Grimoire warns as I do just that.

My blade whistles through the air. It's a clumsy strike, born of fear and adrenaline rather than skill, and I'm too far in to abort.

A vice-like grip closes around my forearm. The vampire's strength is inhuman, and I'm yanked forward, losing my balance.

But my body moves before my brain can catch up. Instinct takes over, even if it's a little sluggish and unrefined. With a twist of my body I'd never be able to replicate again, I manage to wrench my arm free of the vampire's grasp. Moving with the momentum, I throw myself into an awkward roll. My shoulder hits the ground hard, but I manage to scabble back to my feet, now behind the vampire.

He's turning, trying to get to me, but he's too slow, dragged in various directions. Everyone's grabbing, snapping, clawing at him, even as he fights back. He has too many enemies.

I don't hesitate. With both hands, I drive my blade into his back, angling upward.

Add fire to the blade. Grimoire's command rings clear in the chaos.

I don't question it. I reach for that well of power inside me, channeling heat through my arms and into the blade. The effect is instantaneous. The vampire's body stiffens, then begins to glow from within. He tears away from me with an unholy shriek that freezes the blood in my veins.

He writhes in agony, wrenching himself away, even as my weapon tears through his flesh and bones, leaving me staggering as he frees himself. The wolves in front of him dart back, likely afraid of the flames they can see.

Then, impossibility unfolds before my eyes. Strange, inky clouds materialize around the vampire's form. They writhe and pulse, shot through with flashes of crimson lightning. It's as if the very fabric of reality is tearing apart around him. To my horror, I watch as the vampire's body begins to grow, stretching and contorting into something monstrous.

Before I can even think to run, the creature turns lunges at me with impossible speed.

Duck left! Grimoire's voice cuts through my panic. I obey without thinking, feeling claws whistle past my ear. Get your hand on him. Any part of him. Channel your fire.

My body moves as if possessed, following Grimoire's instructions to the letter. The vampire-thing lunges for me and I slam my hand against its face, feeling its fangs cut at my palm. A spurt of flame erupts from my skin, greedily reaching toward the strange vampire's distorted face.

It reels back with another shriek.

Blade to your left hand, infuse it with ice. Strike at its midsection.

I switch the blade to my left hand, willing it to frost over. There's no thinking left in my magic. It just does what I want, as if the magic itself can listen to Grimoire's words and my wishes.

The creature charges again, but I'm ready this time, filled with an otherworldly calm. Maybe it's Grimoire's presence inside my head. Maybe he's taken control of my body. It doesn't really feel like me, and yet it's my body that's moving, with a grace I shouldn't have.

I sidestep its attack and slash across its torso. The blade leaves a trail of frost in its wake, slowing the monster's movements as the ice slowly grows, capping its shoulders.

Now for his head.

My arm moves with a will of its own, the blade singing through the air before Grimoire's words fully register. The strange vampire thing's head separates from its shoulders with a sickening squelch, its body still struggling against the ice encasing its torso.

As if in slow motion, the creature topples, its form twisting and warping until it settles into a more recognizable shape—just another vampire, no longer the monstrous entity it had become.

My chest heaves, each breath ragged and harsh. Blood and acrid, flesh-burned smoke fills my nostrils, making me want to gag. But as I glance around, confusion replaces the adrenaline coursing through my veins.

Everyone's standing still. The chaotic battlefield has frozen in an eerie tableau.

Too many bodies litter the floor. And yet no vampires remain standing.

Aurum catches my gaze. Gorgeous. Massive, towering over all the other wolves, some of whom cower at his feet. There's blood all over his face and muzzle, dripping to the ground. Despite the gore, he looks majestic—a true alpha, his presence blanketing the area.

In the time it took for me to fight one vampire, he took down three.

As our eyes meet, something shifts. The world seems to tilt on its axis, and suddenly, I'm not just looking at Aurum. I'm seeing Lucas—my Lucas. His voice, so achingly familiar, whispers in my mind.

Mate.

The word reverberates through me, igniting a warmth that spreads from my core to my fingertips. It's him. It's really him. After all this time, all the uncertainty and fear, Lucas is back.

His golden gaze sweeps over the pack, breaking that brief connection between us, and he gives a long, low howl. I watch in awe as every wolf around us drops to the ground, bellies pressed against the earth. The sheer power radiating from him is greater even than what I felt from Selene when we became Luna.

This is Lucas, my Lucas, but he's also so much more. The alpha energy emanating from him is something I can even sense with my magic. It's as though that core of energy within me yearns to reach out and touch Lucas' power.

A strange sensation creeps into my mind. It's like a tickle, a whisper just beyond my comprehension. I strain to hear it, but the harder I focus, the more it slips away.

Around us, the remaining wolves begin to shift back into their human forms.

They move with purpose, gathering the wounded and carrying them towards the hospital.

Grim faces. Pained eyes.

Everything happens in silence as I stand, rooted to the spot, a dead vampire at my feet.

Then, my gaze falls on the bodies being laid carefully side by side. My pack. My people.

Their loss aches in my soul. The pack bond I can feel is a little weaker than before.

Chapter 340 Ava: Reunited Mates

A shimmer in the air draws my attention back to Aurum. His massive form begins to shrink and change, fur giving way to skin, until Lucas stands before me in his human form.

I don't remember deciding to move, but suddenly I'm running towards him. We collide in a tangle of limbs, holding each other so tightly it's hard to breathe. But I don't care. He's here, he's back, and nothing else matters.

"You're back," I whisper into his chest, my voice thick with emotion. "God, Lucas, you're really back."

His arms tighten around me, and I feel his lips press against the top of my head. "Thanks to you," he murmurs. "You took care of everyone. Thank you, Ava."

I pull back slightly, looking up into his face. His eyes are the same, filled with warmth and love, but there's something else there now—a depth, a wildness that wasn't there before. It's breathtaking and a little terrifying.

My gaze drifts back to the bodies laid out nearby, and a wave of guilt washes over me. "I couldn't save them all," I say, my voice barely audible. "I tried, but I—"

Lucas cuts me off, pulling me back into his embrace. "You did everything you could," he says firmly. "More than anyone could have expected. You protected our pack, Ava. You led them when I couldn't."

Kellan and Vester approach, also covered in blood, with a bleak look on their faces.

I know they need to speak with him, to update him on everything that's happened. And I have somewhere I need to be, too.

This isn't the time for our reunion.

He's Alpha.

I'm Luna.

We have jobs to do.

"Go," I say softly, stepping back from Lucas's embrace. "They need you. I should help with the wounded."

Lucas nods, his eyes lingering on me for a moment before he turns to his beta and delta. As they begin to speak in low, urgent tones, I slip away, heading toward the hospital.

The scene that greets me is one of organized chaos. Vanessa is at the center of it all, her entire body stained with blood and dirt. She moves from patient to patient with practiced efficiency, barking orders and administering treatment, even as she limps.

I guarantee she hasn't treated herself at all, running straight to her people instead.

As I approach, she glances up at me, her eyes tight with stress. "Luna," she says, her voice clipped. "Good, we need all the help we can get. The evacuees are on their way back, but until then, it's just us."

I nod, rolling up my sleeves. Of course I want to yell at her to take care of herself first, but I get it. A sprained ankle is bad, but it's nothing compared to the wounds of others. "What do you need me to do?"

* * *

The scent of antiseptic and blood fills my nostrils as I rush from one patient to another, my hands shaking but determined. I've lost track of time, the hours blending into a haze of bandages, stitches, and whispered reassurances.

"Luna, we need more gauze over here!" someone calls out.

I sprint to the supply closet, nearly colliding with a familiar face. It's the human receptionist from my first day at Wolf's Landing, her eyes wide with recognition.

"Here you go, Luna," she says, her tone respectful as she hands me a stack of gauze pads. "Is there anything else you need?"

The change in her demeanor catches me off guard, but there's no time to dwell on it. "Thanks. Can you bring some saline solution to bed three?"

She nods and hurries off, leaving me to wonder at the shift in her demeanor. But that's a small blip on my radar, and I shrug it off as I head back with the bandages.

As the night wears on, the tide of emergencies begins to ebb. The return of the evacuees helped. All the nurses and doctors are back, and a few volunteers as well.

At some point, someone brings around a tray of steaming cups. The rich aroma of coffee mingles with the gentler scent of herbal tea, a little pick me up for all of us as we dash from person to person.

I grab a cup of tea, the warmth seeping into my cold hands as I take a moment to breathe. The lobby is quieter now, the frantic energy of earlier replaced by a bone-deep weariness that seems to affect everyone.

With the last critical patient stabilized and the severe cases under the watchful eyes of the doctors, I find myself at a loss. My body aches, my mind reels from the night's events, and I'm not sure what to do next.

I spot Vanessa leaning against a wall, looking as exhausted as I feel. Without a word, we both slide down to sit on the floor, our backs against the cool surface. Two young she-wolves move around us, mopping up the blood-stained floor in silence.

For a while, we just there, watching the slow, methodical movements of the mops. The quiet is almost surreal.

No chatter.

No screams.

No sobbing.

"You did amazing tonight, Ava," Vanessa says after a while.

I turn to look at her, surprised by the compliment. "Me? Vanessa, I watched you work for hours. What you did to keep people alive... that's what's truly impressive."

She lets out a small, tired laugh and rests her head against the wall. "There are going to be a lot of questions about your powers after tonight, you know."

I nod, the reality of the situation sinking in. In the heat of battle, I hadn't given a second thought to using my magic. Now, in the aftermath, I realize the implications. "I didn't even think about it in the moment. It just happened."

"You did the right thing," Vanessa says firmly. "Ava, thank you. You saved so many lives tonight. Without you, our wounded and dead toll would be much higher."

I feel a flush creep up my neck at her words. "Lucas did most of the work," I mumble.

Vanessa turns to face me, her expression a mix of exasperation and fondness. "Just take the credit that's given to you, Ava. You still have to work on that self-esteem of yours."

Chastised, I duck my head. "Sorry. You're right. Thank you."

She nods, seemingly satisfied, and we lapse back into silence. I glance at Vanessa, taking in the dark circles under her eyes, the blood staining her clothes. She's given so much of herself tonight, as she always does.

Is that how people are looking at me?

Why even the receptionist's eyes have changed when she sees me?

Yes, Selene says, startling me with her mental presence out of nowhere. They are proud of you and grateful for what you did for them. You'll see it yourself soon enough.

"Why are you still sitting here?" Vanessa asks, her question distracting me from Selene's words.

"I'm too tired to even breathe."

"Is that so?" She smiles at me and juts her chin toward the front door. "But your mate's here for you."

My heart flutters at her words, and I turn my head to see Lucas staring at me. He's fully clothed now, and for the first time I realize his black hair is shockingly long, almost to his mid-back.

It's attractive as hell, but more importantly—it's strange. Hair doesn't grow that fast.

Time is a strange thing, Grimoire says.