

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted

Chapter 341 Ava: Aspen's Here

"Ava."

The sound of my name has me sitting up immediately, even before my eyes open. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. Calm down." Lucas pulls me into his arms, and I wrap my arms around his waist as I blink in the dim light, trying to wake my sleepy brain.

"We've made contact with a group of wolves at the border," he says, making my heart skip a beat again. I've been asleep most of the past two days. Grimoire said my body needed to recuperate after such a large draw of power.

This is my first time hearing anyone was even near the perimeter of our pack.

"And?" Since Lucas is calm, I know it can't be bad.

"They're from Aspen," he says, confirming my thoughts. "While they haven't been hit as hard as us, they've sent out scouting packs to make contact with us and others."

"How did they find us?" Despite knowing this group isn't a danger to our safety, that detail makes me nervous.

"Clayton already knows about this place. He has a safe haven of his own near the coast."

"Oh."

Lucas' voice is steady as he continues, "The leader of these scouts specifically asked for your presence."

"What? Why didn't you lead with that?"

Attempting to jump out of his arms doesn't go well. He tightens his hold, keeping me in place. "Calm down, Ava. There's no rush. Get dressed first."

As I scramble for clothes, my thoughts are a jumbled mess. Aspen wolves. Here. Asking for me. But who would ask for me?

Only Clayton would. Maybe Rowan? But Lucas would have named either of them, I'm pretty sure.

"How many?" I ask, pulling on a pair of jeans.

"A small group," Lucas replies. He's already dressed, leaning against the wall as he watches me. "Ten."

Very small. Not enough to even make up for our losses a few nights ago during the vampire attack. But the thought of connecting with another pack boosts my spirits. We need allies in order to move forward. We need to hear more about the world outside of our small area.

Once I'm dressed and ready, complete with a cup of coffee, Lucas guides me to the planning room, his hand resting against the small of my back.

The scent of unfamiliar wolves hits me immediately. My sense of smell lately has been stronger since the attack, though most of it is a muddled mess to my nose. Lucas, Selene, and Lisa are the only three I can recognize with my eyes closed. Everyone else is a mix of scents I can't quite pull apart.

Lucas says it's because my brain already knows their scents, as they're my most important people. But Grimoire says it's more likely my magic sensing those with the closest bonds to my heart.

My eyes scan the room, taking in the faces of the strangers. Some look curious, others skeptical once they get a whiff of my scent. I smell strongly of the pack, but the scent of my magic is strong, now. Some wolves even sneeze when I get too close. (Selene, surprisingly, doesn't, though she will if Grimoire flaps his pages too quickly in her direction.)

A woman steps forward, elbowing past the males in front of her. Auburn hair catches the light, and striking green eyes meet mine. My breath catches in my throat as recognition dawns.

Ivy.

The last time I saw her feels like a lifetime ago, back when Phoenix had kidnapped me. So much has changed since then. The girl from that time feels like a stranger to me now.

Clayton's sister approaches with measured, graceful steps, opening her arms as she calls my name. "Ava."

She speaks with warmth, but her eyes have that strange distance to them, leaving me once again a little unsettled in her presence. I haven't thought of her in so long; I'd forgotten how strange her reaction to my presence was back in Washington.

The hug is lukewarm at best, a perfunctory gesture that lacks any real affection, despite calling my name with such familiarity. I can feel the stiffness in her posture, mirroring

my own discomfort. As we pull apart, I search for something to say, grasping for words to bridge the chasm of time and circumstance between us.

"How are you doing, Ivy?" The question sounds hollow and weak, even to me. It's a woefully inadequate way to greet someone after all this time, but my eyes flicker to her head as I think of her bleeding in the car.

A faint smile curves her lips, though it doesn't touch her eyes. "Long healed." Ivy's gaze shifts, moving past me to settle on Lucas.

If I had hackles, they'd raise at the way her eyes travel over him. Maybe it's just my discomfort in her presence.

When she speaks again, there's a strange inflection in her voice, an undercurrent I can't put my finger on. It isn't really friendly, but I can't quite say it's unfriendly, either.

"I heard you're Luna here now."

"Yes, I am." My shoulders straighten as I respond, pulling myself as tall as I can stand.

Ivy's eyes narrow slightly, assessing me. "Interesting," she murmurs. "It's good to see you doing so well, Ava."

The tension in the room ratchets up a notch. I'm acutely aware of the other Aspen wolves watching our exchange, but I'm at a loss on why it feels as though I'm dancing some strange political line every time Ivy speaks. *noveldrama*

Then, she smiles, and it's as friendly and warm as you'd expect from a close ally, as if my strange emotions are nothing more than fanciful thinking. "I'm so happy you guys are here and doing so well. Our alpha was quite concerned about all of you."

Her eyes flicker to Lucas at the last sentence, as if trying to gauge his response to Clayton's concern. Or is it just paranoia, after all?

I wouldn't be so certain, Selene opines, sounding thoughtful. She seems to have something against you. Maybe she's upset you didn't mate her brother, after all.

But even Selene sounds doubtful. Ivy hadn't seemed particularly interested in me as a potential sister-in-law back then. You'd think she'd be ecstatic to hear I'm mated to someone else now, leaving her precious brother free and clear of my influence.

Chapter 342 Ava: Ivy's Motives

I push the doubts aside, focusing on the task at hand. "What brings you here, Ivy?" I ask, injecting a note of authority into my voice. "Lucas mentioned you asked for me specifically."

"Always straight to the point, aren't you, Ava?"

Was I? I don't really remember our past encounters that way. It always felt as though I were dancing around her, never sure what she really thought of me.

"I just wanted to make sure you were doing well. Clayton said you would likely be with the Westwood Pack. It's been a long time, and I had no way of contacting you since you left your phones behind."

The way she speaks makes it sound as though I'd left them behind on purpose.

I push aside the nagging unease about Ivy as Lucas guides me to the table. As we sit, she takes a seat across from us, her smile still warm and inviting. It's this warmth that throws me off balance, making me question my earlier impressions.

Why does Clayton's sister have to be so enigmatic? Her brother is straightforward, his intentions clear as day. But Ivy? She's a riddle wrapped in a mystery.

"How are things in Washington?" Lucas asks, calm beside me. He doesn't seem to sense anything strange with the woman.

Ivy's face transforms, the smile fading into a somber expression. "We barely made it through a vampire attack," she says, her voice low. "It was intense. We lost many lives."

As she describes the attack, I can't help but compare it to what we faced here. The force she talks about seems almost paltry compared to the onslaught that hit Westwood. It's hard to reconcile the two experiences.

"What about the rest of the area?" I ask, leaning forward slightly. "Have there been other attacks?"

Ivy nods, her green eyes meeting mine. "Some of the larger human cities have been hit, but it's been mostly quiet on the coast. The biggest issue is communication. We can't get cell towers or internet up and running."

"How are you getting information then?" Lucas asks.

"Radio, mostly," Ivy replies. "All the news networks are basically dead. It's like we've stepped back in time."

Her gaze sweeps over us, taking in our appearances, the room, everything. "How has it been here? The closer we got, the more evidence of fighting and destruction we saw."

Lucas shifts beside me, his arm brushing against mine. "It's dangerous to leave Wolf's Landing," he says, his voice grave. "There are hunters out there, searching for any supernatural presence."

Ivy tilts her head. "Hunters? We haven't encountered any of those."

"Have you been in the cities?"

She shakes her head. "No. We did travel by car, but the past three days have been on foot, shifted."

Lucas looks thoughtful. "You were lucky to get here unscathed. The supernatural communities seem to be allied with the attackers. A traveling pack would be easy to track."

"What?" Ivy's confusion is evident. "That can't be right. Our supernatural communities were attacked, just like our pack."

"How do you know that?" Lucas asks, his voice sharp.

She doesn't flinch under his questions. "I've been to them," she says simply. "When Clayton first started reaching out to see how widespread the devastation was, I volunteered to make contact. We have no real affection for them, but this isn't the time to be picky about our allies."

"You've been able to travel freely?" I ask, unable to keep the disbelief from my voice.

Ivy nods, her expression softening. "It hasn't been easy, but yes. We've managed to establish contact with several communities along the coast."

"And they've all been attacked?" Lucas presses.

"To varying degrees," Ivy confirms. "Some worse than others, but none have been left untouched."

I exchange a glance with Lucas, seeing my own confusion mirrored in his eyes. If what Ivy's saying is true, then the situation outside our little bubble is vastly different from what we've experienced. But why? What makes this area so different?

"Tell us more about these attacks," Lucas says, leaning forward. "How do they compare to what you faced?"

As Ivy begins to detail the various attacks she's heard about or witnessed, I find my mind racing. The discrepancies between her account and our experiences are stark. While we've faced organized, strategic assaults, the attacks she describes seem more random. Chaotic.

The human cities were hit worse, without any way to fight back. Aspen, on the other hand, still holds control of their pack lands.

"It's like they're testing defenses," Ivy says. "Probing for weaknesses, but not committing to a full-scale attack."

"That's not what we've seen here," I interject, rubbing a finger against my temple as I try to think through the new information. "The attacks on Westwood were devastating. Coordinated."

"That's... concerning," she says slowly. "Have you had any contact with other packs or communities in this area?"

Lucas shakes his head. "We've been focused on survival and rebuilding. The few attempts we've made to reach out have been met with hostility."

"Which is why your arrival is so significant," I add. "You're the first friendly faces we've seen from outside in... well, it feels like forever now. We're completely cut off."

Ivy nods, her expression thoughtful. "I can see why Clayton was so worried about all of you. Unfortunately, we don't bring supplies. It's just us."

"Are you here to stay, or are you moving on?" Lucas rests his arm behind my chair, and I swear Ivy's eyes follow that movement like a hawk.

"I'll be sending a scout back to Clayton with information, but the rest of us are here to stay and support. We're your official liaison with the Aspen Pack. Seeing as your situation is more dire than ours, I can put in a request for extra manpower and some supplies, but I don't know how safe it would be."

"We'd appreciate that."

"Of course," Ivy says, smiling again. "We are long-standing allies."

As Ivy and Lucas exchange some basic platitudes, Selene's voice enters my mind, tinged with a faint growl. I don't trust her, Ava. Something's off.

You think she has ulterior motives?noveldrama

I keep my expression neutral, not wanting to give away our silent conversation, but of course it's impossible to speak without blanking out. It's got to be obvious to every wolf in the room.

Ivy glances at me with a brief frown.

Definitely. The way she looks at you isn't right.

I consider her words carefully. Do you think she's dangerous to the pack?

There's a pause, and I can feel Selene's hesitation. I don't think so. Not directly, at least. But I still can't shake this feeling. We shouldn't trust her completely.

I agree silently, careful to maintain my attentive facade as Ivy makes eye contact with me. I offer her a small smile, which she returns readily.

You know, I tell Selene, I can't help but feel like she's upset about me being mated to Lucas.

Yes. There's something possessive in her eyes when she looks at him. It's unsettling.

Relief washes over me. I'm not imagining things. I'm not being paranoid. Selene sees it too.

"Ava?" Lucas's voice breaks through my internal dialogue. "What do you think?"

I blink, realizing I've missed part of the conversation. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

Ivy's lips quirk up in a small smirk. "Lost in thought?"

"Just processing everything," I lie smoothly. "It's a lot to take in."

Chapter 343 Ava: Prototype Progress

Ivy and her people are settled into a place of their own, and I'm left feeling awkwardly unbalanced between trusting her and feeling like I can't.

Lucas doesn't seem to have the same misgivings, and—despite Selene's soft growls in my head—I leave him to handle the Aspen wolves, resolving to talk to him later.

It doesn't feel like the issues with Ivy will be detrimental to the pack or cause issues with our alliance with Aspen, but it's not something I want to ignore, either.

She's a strange one, Selene murmurs.

Grimoire sounds thoughtful. She seems to have a great amount of power and respect in her pack. Perhaps she had always hoped to mate another alpha and become Luna, rather than an alpha's sister.

"Maybe." Heading toward the gnome's cabin, I add, "She was strange before Lucas ever entered the picture, though."

Yes, when you mated with the Aspen alpha.

My feet stumble over nothing. "I didn't mate with him. I was in heat."

He marked you, Grimoire points out. That's mating. Though you're lucky it didn't take.

It's a grim reminder of a dark past I really don't want to think about. "Let's move on from this topic."

It didn't take because we are stronger, Selene says, proudly ignoring my request. She is only matched by our Alpha.

Her smug tone irks me. "You hated him, remember? I distinctly recall you making snide remarks and encouraging me to sleep with—"

The past is the past, she mutters, and I can practically feel her metaphorical tail tucked between her legs.

Oh, so the all-knowing wolf is capable of mistakes? Grimoire sounds positively gleeful at this new knowledge of Selene's past. She isn't perfect after all?

Shut up, book. All you have is theory with no real life experience. You've lived between pages all your life.

Better than a wolf who pretends to know everything when she doesn't.

My head aches with their back and forth, and I slip into the gnome's cabin after a quick knock. "Hello? Dr. Blackwell?"

The Grand Sage's head pops up over a pile of gadgets and gizmos on his dining table, his eyes twinkling with excitement. "Ava! Just the witch I wanted to see!"

His enthusiasm is infectious, and I can't help but smile back. "Hello, Dr. Blackwell. How's the prototype coming along?"

"Oh, my dear, you wouldn't believe the progress we've made!" He waves an arm wildly around to gesture at everything, nearly knocking over a precariously balanced stack of papers. A few flutter to the ground.

I don't even know where he's gotten that much paper from. It must have come from one of the supply runs. Everyone wants to help Dr. Blackwell, though most wolves are confused about who he is and why he's so important.

"Come, come, let me show you!"

I carefully navigate around the clutter, glancing over the (presumably) organized chaos. The dining table, once a place for meals, now serves as a workbench for the Grand Sage's work.

"So, where are we at with the magic watch?" I ask, genuinely curious about his work.

Dr. Blackwell's eyes light up, and he launches into an explanation that leaves my head spinning. "Well, you see, we've successfully integrated the quartz magic batteries you provided into the basic digital watch structure. The energy conversion rate is remarkable! We're achieving a 98.7% efficiency in translating magical energy into usable power for the device."

I nod, trying to follow along. "That sounds... impressive?"

"Oh, it is!" He beams, picking up what looks like a normal digital watch. "We've managed to create a stable magical field within the watch casing, which allows for the storage and manipulation of magical energies without interfering with the electronic components."

He points to various parts of the watch as he speaks, his excitement palpable. "The crystal display now serves a dual purpose - not only does it show the time, but it also acts as a focal point for magical energy projection. This is what will allow for long-distance communication."

"That's amazing," I say, genuinely impressed by the words I'm not fully understanding. "So, what's the hold-up?"

Dr. Blackwell's smile falters slightly. "Ah, well, that's where we've hit a bit of a snag. You see, while we can project magical energy through the crystal, we're having trouble maintaining a stable connection over long distances."

He fiddles with the watch, his brow furrowing in concentration. "The magical signal tends to degrade after about fifty miles. We need to find a way to amplify and stabilize it without overloading the watch's delicate components."

I lean in, examining the watch more closely. But to me, it just looks like any old watch. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

The Grand Sage perks up. "Yes. You see, the magic used here is dormant. It's like the last of an echo. Your magic, however, is live, coming straight from you. If we could somehow incorporate that into the watch's magical matrix..."

He trails off, lost in thought for a moment before snapping back to attention. "Would you mind if I took a small sample of your magical energy? Just a tiny bit to analyze and potentially replicate?"

I hesitate, remembering all the times my magic has been unpredictable or dangerous. "Is that even possible?"

"Absolutely. I'll just need you to infuse it into this crystal. It's been specially prepared." He holds up a piece of what looks like pristine quartz, not the little rocks with bits of quartzite pebbled in.

Squinting at the quartz, I ask in confusion, "How is this different from the stones I've been infusing with magic before?"

"Well, you see," the Grand Sage begins, his excitement barely contained, "the quartz stones you've been working with are meant to store magical energy, like batteries. It feeds off the power given to it. This crystal, however, is designed to capture the essence of your magic itself."

Tucking strands of hair behind my ear to keep my vision clear, I tilt my head and peer a little closer at the crystal.

Nope. Still looks like plain old quartz.

"How so?"

The gnome's eyes practically glisten. "Excellent question!" he just about bellows into my face.

This is a man dedicated to his craft, Grimoire observes approvingly.

"Think of it this way: the quartz stones you've been charging are little more than batteries. They contain a certain amount of power, but it's basic. Nonspecialized."

He pauses, gauging my reaction. I nod slowly, encouraging him to continue.

"This crystal is more like... well. You can have one that specializes in fire, allowing you to create magitech with the ability to invoke fire. Or water. Or even a wand that produces great winds. It brings your elements into the magic.

Some even say a hint of the caster's wisdom is brought with it."

"But they're both quartz," I point out.

"What? No!" He clutches the crystal to his chest in shock. "This is not quartz. It's a crystal created for the purposes of containing magic. It is something I use often in magitech, but my source is usually Fae magic. I have not had a chance to harness a wizard."

"Oh..."

The fanatic look in his eye makes me feel like a slab of bloody meat, leisurely swirled in the ocean before a ravenous shark.

"It won't hurt," he adds, dropping it into my palm now that I've been educated in its provenance.

As my fingers close around the crystal, I can feel a slight tingle, different from the usual sensation of channeling magic into quartz. It's as if it's reaching out to my magic, eager to connect.

It takes barely more than a nudge to direct the flow of magic within me, almost constantly circulating, and divert it into the crystal in my palm.

It's strange. The quartz stones feel energetic when I'm done, but this crystal almost feels alive. In fact, it feels suspiciously similar to the necklace and ring I wore for quite some time. Whose magic filled those crystals? noveldrama

The process doesn't take long.

The Grand Sage gently takes the crystal from my hand, his eyes alight with excitement and gratitude. "Thank you, Ava. This may be all we need for our breakthrough."

I rub my palm, my skin almost itchy where the crystal made contact, but swallow back the words asking how it's supposed to help. He'll just launch into another explanation I don't fully understand. "No problem."

Chapter 344 Ava: She's Grown -- END SEASON FIVE!!

My palm itches as I walk through our compound. It's quiet again, reminding me of the first day Marcus, Vanessa, and I rolled in.

The attacks have probably brought up plenty of unresolved trauma, but the lost lives and wounded are the main source of our bottomed out morale once again.

Yes, we defended our home—but at what cost?

The energy here is strange. We should be high with Lucas' show of power, and instead we're all hiding again.

I spot Wes up ahead and raise my hand to wave, a smile already forming on my lips. But as our eyes meet, his widen and he's gone, darting behind a nearby cabin.

"Wes?" I step in his direction with some hesitation.

Many wolves aren't sure what to make of what they witnessed the night of the attack. They are scared of your power.

The night I wielded magic like some kind of supernatural warrior, decapitating vampires with energy blades? Yeah, I can see how that might have people feeling some kind of way.

Sighing, I change course and head toward the kitchens, now paying attention to the body language of the wolves I encounter. Their gazes slide away from mine. Some are outright avoiding me.

Someone carrying a stack of firewood nearly stumbles as he hurries past, careful not to brush against me.

"This is ridiculous," I mutter under my breath. "I saved their lives."noveldrama

You also scared them, Selene points out. Power like yours isn't something they're used to seeing, especially not from someone they considered... well...

"Weak?"

I was going to say 'human', Selene corrects me. But yes, that too.

I reach the kitchen entrance and pause, taking a deep breath. The scent of fresh bread wafts out, reminding me why I came here in the first place. Food. Focus on that, not on awkward social dynamics.

As I step inside, the bustling activity doesn't stop, but it shifts—pardon the pun.

Conversations die down, replaced by the clinking of pots and pans. A young wolf stirring a large pot of stew—which has become our standard fare as the weather continues to cool—avoids my gaze.

Shockingly, Elverly is working here, moving from table to table with efficiency. She has several bowls and trays stacked when she stops in front of me.

"Luna Ava," she greets me, much more polite than Lisa ever made her out to be. "What can we do for you?"

It's telling that the gnome, and not my own people, is the one to greet me. I know my magic is strange. Jericho even warned me a long time ago that the pack might push back against Lucas' choice of Luna when they learn I can wield magic.

What did he say? Witches don't have a great reputation. Among humans or wolves... Even though our history is actually one of cooperation, apparently.

Though, if there's one thing I've learned since leaving Blackwood, it's that real history isn't anything like the books say it is.

I force a smile, trying to ignore the way everyone seems to hold their breath. "Just came to see how our supplies are holding up. And maybe grab a snack, if there's anything to spare?"

Elverly nods, her movements efficient as she sets the dirty dishes aside. She comes back with a small loaf of bread and a wedge of cheese. "Here you are. We're doing alright on basics, but fresh produce is running low. The hunting parties have been bringing in good hauls, though. Did you want some stew?"

Mary over there can help you with that."

"Thanks, Elverly."

I turn the bread and cheese over in my hands, ready to leave, but Selene stops me.

Hiding isn't going to make anything better.

With a deep breath, I pivot and approach Mary, the young wolf stirring the stew. Her eyes widen as I near, and I'm pretty sure I can smell her anxiety. It's eye-tingly, like freshly cut onions.

"Could I have a bowl of stew, please?" I ask, keeping my voice soft and friendly.

See, people? I'm not a threat. I'm just your Luna, who wields magic and decapitates vampires. Nothing strange here!

God. Who am I kidding? I'm not normal at all.

Mary nods rapidly, her hands shaking as she ladles the steaming liquid into a bowl. She almost drops it twice before managing to hand it to me.

"Thank you," I say, offering her a warm smile as I take the bowl.

As I turn to leave, Mary's voice, small but clear, stops me in my tracks.

"Thank you for saving us all, Luna."

The sincerity in her words washes over me, melting away some of the ice that had formed around my heart. I look back at her, realizing what I saw as fear was actually awe.

She's not terrified of me.

She's just beside herself.

Her eyes practically glitter with an entire galaxy of stars as she stares at me.

Before I can respond, a few other wolves stand up from their tables. One by one, they offer their thanks, their voices growing stronger with each expression of gratitude.

"We owe you our lives, Luna Ava."

"Your magic saved us all."

"We're honored to have you as our Luna."

Their words chip away at my preconceptions. I've fallen back into old habits, assuming the worst about how others perceive me. But these wolves aren't avoiding me because they don't want me around.

They're unsure, even afraid. But they don't hate me.

They just don't know how to approach me anymore. I'm an anomaly, but I'm not anathema.

Heat rushes into my cheeks, and I blink back the tears trying to flood my eyes.

Here I am, standing with a bowl of stew, some bread, and some cheese, in the middle of a makeshift cafeteria, suddenly thrust into an impromptu address.

"You don't have to thank me." I meet their eyes as steadily as I can, even though I just want to find a corner to cry in. Happy tears, though. So different from the past. "You are my pack, and I am your Luna. I would lay down my life for every one of you."

There's no applause for my words, and I don't expect them. Just a few nods, some proud smiles, and a surprising amount of she-wolves who approach me as I sit, finally freeing my hands by placing everything on the table.

"Luna Ava," one of them says, her silver-streaked hair pulled back in a neat bun, "is there anything you need? Anything we can do to help?"

I recognize her. She organized laundry days. It's a simple thing, doing laundry—but having no washing machines makes the job much harder. Having a large group of women take on the chore has helped make sure everyone has clean clothes, and we've even managed to more properly sort people into correct sizes.

I'm touched by her offer, by this sudden outpouring of support. "Thank you," I reply, genuinely moved. "Right now, I think what we all need most is to come together as a pack. To support each other and rebuild our strength. We have more fights to come in our future, and we need to be prepared."

As I eat my stew, I feel Selene's approval resonating in my mind.

That's it, Ava. Stand tall. Don't let anyone make you feel less than the strong Luna you are. Your people will follow your lead.

She's right. I've spent too long doubting myself, letting others' perceptions shape my own self-worth.

But I'm not that scared, powerless girl of my past. I'm Luna of the Westwood Pack, mate to Lucas, magician-in-training (or something to that effect), and protector of my people.

I've grown.

Chapter 345 Ava: Winter in Wolf's Landing

Blowing on my hands in a futile effort to bring warmth back to my numb fingers, I squint across the vast expanse of snow at a group of wolves coming in. "Is that Vester's group?"

No. Ethan's. Selene rests her furry head against my leg, panting after her playful romps through a few snow drifts. She's very much in her element in this weather, and I've had more than one mother come to me complaining that their pups have all been following Selene around the compound to play in the snow all day.

It wouldn't be a problem, they stress—repeatedly—if they were old enough to shift. But they're not, and it's cold, and they're obsessed with the only dog they've ever seen.

Wolves aren't nearly as cool as a husky, apparently.

I can see two kids right now, peeking around a truck like we can't see them. They're whispering to each other and pointing in Selene's direction.

Did I mention that their favorite game is pelt-the-husky-with-snowballs? Yeah. That's a thing now.

When Selene catches them out of the air, they always fall over laughing.

I should go tell them to go home, but I've been there and done that. Repeatedly.

They keep coming back within minutes, giggling from whatever abysmal hiding spot they've found this time. Selene's the most popular person in camp among their age group.

Even their mothers have given up, especially when other young wolves would shift and play in the snow, too. Unlike in our traditional pack lands, we don't have miles of land to roam and keep our inner wolves happy. We're holed up in this relatively tiny area, and our numbers keep growing.

Oh, yes. More and more refugees have arrived. Some rogue. Some from allied packs. And even some who had been presumed lost from our own packs.

We have groups now who spend weeks at a time traversing the country, bringing back news and people.

Wolf's Landing has grown, even in this harsh weather.

As the wolves draw near, I finally recognize Ethan's wolf form and raise my hand in a welcoming wave.

My smile falters when I spot Ivy trailing behind him.

Great. Just what I need today.

Ivy's popular among the wolves. As a strong she-wolf, she's done a lot for the compound. As an ally, she's great. But no matter what, I can't seem to get along with her. Around everyone else, she's a warm and inviting leader of the Aspen Pack. Around me?

Things are a little different.

It's like she always sees me as lacking, and that she should be the Luna here. Lucas knows how I feel about her, but doesn't see what I do.

The best weeks are when she's out scouting with the men, even though that only gives her even more bonus points among my own pack members.

We make our way to the main debriefing tent, a far cry from the cozy cabin we once used. The refugees needed it more than we did, so here we are, huddled in canvas walls that barely keep out the biting wind.

Ethan and Ivy shift, quickly donning warm clothes while I busy myself with the wood stove. The tent's not exactly toasty, but at least it's a reprieve from the relentless cold outside. As I add another log, the fire crackles to life, casting flickering shadows across the canvas walls.

"Thanks, Ava," Ivy says, her voice syrupy sweet. I nod, not trusting myself to speak without a hint of sarcasm. *noveldrama*

The tent flap rustles, and Lucas strides in, his presence filling the space instantly. He makes a beeline for Ethan, greeting him with a bear hug and a hearty slap on the back. "Great job out there," Lucas says, his voice warm with pride. "You deserve to stay home and relax for a while."

Ethan shakes his head, a wry smile playing on his lips. "There's too much going on to rest, Alpha."

I can't help but frown at his words. "You should take a break, Ethan. Relax once in a while."

He turns to me, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "Traveling relaxes me more than sitting in one place, Luna. But I appreciate the concern."

Before I can respond, Ivy's voice cuts through the air. "Lucas!" She greets him with a warm smile that makes my stomach churn. I grit my teeth, forcing down the surge of irritation that threatens to bubble up.

Lucas returns her greeting, his tone friendly but neutral. I watch as Ivy moves in for a hug, her arms outstretched. But Lucas smoothly sidesteps her, turning towards me as if that was his intention all along. His arm slides over my shoulders, pulling me close to his side.

The warmth of his body seeps into mine, and I can't help but lean into him. A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth.

Stop looking so smug, Selene says.

I glance down at her, sprawled out near the wood stove, panting. You can stop radiating your own smugness, then, I retort.

Selene's tail thumps against the ground, her canine grin unmistakable. She's enjoying this as much as I am.

"So, what news do you bring?" Lucas asks, his attention focused on Ethan. Ivy takes the subtle rejection in stride and stands beside her mission partner.

The scout's expression grows serious. "We've picked up some chatter about increased vampire activity to the south. Nothing concrete yet, but it's concerning. Humans seem to have grown complacent since the attacks ceased, but the government is definitely keeping an eye out. They're just downplaying it."

Lucas' arm tightens around me, the only outward sign of his tension.

"Any word on Blackwood?" I ask, unable to keep the tremor from my voice. Even after all this time, the thought of Renard and my father fill me with fear. I'm positive Lucas is more powerful than them combined, but—it's hard.

Vanessa says it's my trauma and I need to work through it, but... Well, being Luna keeps me busy, and the idea of spilling my guts to a stranger who specializes in tearing apart my every decision and motive is not appealing.

Ethan shakes his head. "Nothing new. They're still keeping a low profile. Beta Grey is still reported to be in Westwood."

Chapter 346 Ava: Ivy's Help

The chill that floods the tent emanates from Lucas. For his enemy to have control of his pack lands is a neverending thorn in his side. But he doesn't show his frustration.

"That's not like them," he says calmly. "There's something going on there."

I nod in agreement. Their silence is more unnerving than any overt threat.

From a worldwide apocalypse to sudden silence—it's strange. And then there are the hunters, always trying to find lone supernaturals struggling in this new world. We still don't know what they're trying to do, but we've saved a few from their clutches.

"We did come across a small group of rogues," Ivy chimes in, drawing everyone's attention. "They seemed... off. More aggressive than usual."

"Off how?" Lucas presses.

Ivy shrugs, her eyes darting to me for a moment before focusing back on Lucas. "It's hard to explain. They were just... different. Wilder, somehow. We managed to avoid a confrontation, but it was close.

They were not friendly."

"How far out was this?"

"Two days' run. They were traveling in the opposite direction."

The tent flap rustles again, and Lucas glances up as Kellan enters. The beta greets Ethan with a quick one-armed embrace and a hearty smack of his shoulder. "Welcome back."

A warm smile spreads across Ethan's face. "Good to be back, Beta."

"I got your refugees all set up in the outer tents," Kellan tells him. "They'll be safe now."

A frown tugs at the corners of my mate's mouth. "Make sure they're warm and comfortable," he says unhappily. He hates having the refugees in tents, but we just don't have the space. "And see that they have enough to eat. We can't afford to have anyone falling ill in this weather."

I'm already mentally cataloging our supplies and wondering if we'll need to send out another hunting party soon. The influx of refugees has put a strain on our resources, but we've managed so far. Still, it's a constant balancing act.

"I can help settle them in," Ivy offers. My teeth clench involuntarily at her words.

Lucas' eyes flick to me, then back to Ivy, though his eyes look over her head instead of at her face. "Ava will handle it," he says firmly. "She's the Luna, after all."

I can't help but feel a surge of satisfaction at his words, even as I notice the flash of irritation in Ivy's eyes. It's petty, I know, but it's been months of subtle dig after dig, and less subtle attempts at undermining me or taking over things I'm responsible for.

It always feels good to have Lucas publicly affirm my position.

"Thanks for volunteering, Ivy," I say, injecting as much warmth into my voice as I can muster. "But I've got it handled."

Her smile doesn't quite reach her glittering green eyes. "Of course," she says. "Well, I should go check in on my pack mates. It's been a long journey."

"Good idea," I agree, eager to be rid of her presence. "I'll head out to the refugee tents now."

We both exit the tent, the frigid air hitting us in an instant. Selene trots out behind me, her tail held high as she surveys our surroundings.

"So, Ava," Ivy says as we walk, her breath forming small clouds in the cold air. "How have things been going? Running a pack this size can't be easy."

I paste on my brightest smile. "Things are going great, actually. We've had our challenges, of course, but everyone's really come together. It's amazing to see."

Ivy nods, her expression unreadable. "Being Luna is hard work," she says, her tone almost patronizing. "You know, if you ever feel overwhelmed, you can always ask for help. I'd be more than happy to lend a hand."noveldrama

The offer sounds sincere enough, but there's something in her eyes that sets my teeth on edge. It's the same look she always gives me—like she's assessing me and finding me wanting.

There's a huge difference between how she treated me in Aspen and how she treats me here. In Aspen, she was the magnanimous high-ranking wolf taking care of her brother's pet lover. Here? She's a guest in my pack.

Her true colors are easier to see.

"Thanks, Ivy," I say, keeping my tone light. "I appreciate that. But we've got a great team here. Everyone pitches in where they can."

She looks at me for a long moment, that odd expression still on her face. Then she shakes her head slightly. "So be it," she says, her voice neutral. "Well, I'd better go find my people. Take care, Ava."

I watch her retreating back, unable to keep the grimace off my face once she's out of sight. Beside me, Selene lets out a low growl and kicks some snow in Ivy's direction with her back paw.

"Play nice," I mutter, even though I want her to do it again. "Ivy has a lot of support in the pack. We can't afford to alienate her or her people."

She started it, Selene grumbles in my mind. I don't understand what her goal is. You have plenty of support in the pack too, you know.

I sigh, reaching down to scratch behind Selene's ears. "I know," I say softly. "But Ivy's been doing this a lot longer than I have. She knows how to play the game. And right now, we need all the allies we can get."

Selene huffs, clearly unconvinced. She's up to something. I can smell it.

"Maybe," I concede. "But there isn't much she can do. She might want him, but he's not falling for it. So we just need to ignore her. Come on, let's go check on those refugees."

As we make our way towards the outer tents, I can't shake the unsettled feeling Ivy's presence always leaves me with.

The wind picks up, sending a fresh flurry of snow swirling around us. I pull my coat tighter around me as Selene jumps through the snow, darting back and forth joyously as I trudge my way through.

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted

LISA

"Sorry!"

My voice carries across the clearing, and three shifters wave their hands over their heads in my direction. It could be to say everything's fine. Or maybe they're cursing me and want me to die.

Can't really blame them. They almost got blasted with a ball of fire that went rogue.noveldrama

"Much farther range than expected," the Grand Sage muses, completely nonplussed by the near-accident.

The strange metal brace on my wrist glints in the sunlight. It looks more like a prop from a sci-fi movie than a magical weapon. "Are you sure this is safe enough to test? I nearly turned three wolves into barbecue."

The Grand Sage, lost in thought, mumbles, "Wolves aren't traditionally cannibals."

"I don't think that's the point." Sometimes I wonder if his genius comes with a side of selective hearing. He's always lost in his head.

He snaps back to attention. "Tell me again, what did you feel at the time of activation?"

I take a deep breath, trying to put the sensation into words. "It was like... a surge of uncontrollable power. Like using a chihuahua's leash on a mastiff."

The gnome's fuzzy white eyebrows wiggle together, like two caterpillars turning into one. "I'm not familiar with your words."

"Right, sorry." I hold my hands about a foot apart. "Chihuahua, tiny dog." Then I spread my arms wide. "Mastiff, huge dog. The leash is way too small to control it."

He nods thoughtfully. "Ah, I see. Remember, you shouldn't expect full control of the magic, just the ability to influence it."

"Influence?" I scoff. "I nearly influenced it into killing innocent people."

The Grand Sage waves his hand dismissively. "They should have stayed behind you." He turns and shouts to the three wolves, "Stay behind her at all times!"

The men, who are actually my almost ill-fated bodyguards, adjust their positions with perfectly straight faces. I can't tell if they're amused or annoyed; just before this incident, the gnome had told them they were perfectly safe where they stood.

"Now," my obsessive magitech inventor says, rubbing his hands together, "let's try again. This time, focus on directing the energy rather than containing it."

"Okay, but if I accidentally set the forest on fire, you're explaining it to Ava."

He chuckles. "Deal. Now, concentrate on the brace. You should feel some sort of magic when it activates."

When I flip the switch on, it hums with energy, like a low level of electricity against my skin. It's uncomfortable.

"I feel it," I murmur.

"Good. Now, send your commands down. Remember to use your words. It will only work with the proper vocal commands."

The brace on my wrist feels alien, yet strangely intimate. The Grand Sage explained that it's attuned to me through my blood, but the specifics are lost on me. Magic and technology blend in ways I can't begin to comprehend. All I know is that a part of me is now tied to this device, for better or worse.

"Standby," I command, my voice steady despite my nerves.

The brace hums to life, warming against my skin. It's not painful, but definitely uncomfortable—like wearing a heating pad cranked up too high.

"Good," the Grand Sage nods approvingly. "Now, aim for that tree again." He points to a massive oak a hundred yards away, well to the left of where my bodyguards had their near-death experience earlier.

I extend my arm, squinting as I try to line up the thin metal strip running along the brace with my target. It's not exactly precision equipment, but I do my best.

"Shape," I say clearly, remembering the proper command.

"Visualize it," the Grand Sage reminds me, his voice eager. "Picture exactly what you want to create."

I close my eyes for a moment, imagining a sleek, deadly arrow. Opening them, I take a deep breath and give the final command:

"Fire."

Nothing happens. The warmth against my skin fades, and the brace goes silent.

"Hmm," the Grand Sage mutters, already fiddling with the device while it's still on my wrist. His gnomish fingers work with surprising dexterity, opening panels I didn't even know existed. "Ah, I see. It needs more blood. Fuel's empty."

I groan. "Seriously? Again?"

He shrugs, unperturbed. "Trial and error, my dear. It's all part of the process."

Sighing, I watch as he produces a small needle. "Fine. Let's get this over with."

The prick is sharp but quick. I squeeze my finger, letting ten drops of blood fall onto a small red crystal nestled within the brace. It glows faintly as it absorbs the offering.

"There we go," the Grand Sage says, closing everything back up. "Now, let's try again."

I nod, steeling myself. "Standby."

The familiar warmth returns, stronger this time. I aim carefully, picturing the arrow in my mind.

"Shape."

"Fire."

This time, there's a rush of energy. A small, glowing arrow materializes and shoots forward. It's not the massive fireball from earlier, but it's still impressive. My excitement is short-lived, however, as the arrow falls short, embedding itself in the ground several feet before the target tree.

The Grand Sage doesn't seem disappointed. He scribbles in a notebook, muttering, "Approximate 50-foot range. Interesting."

I lower my arm, feeling a mix of accomplishment and frustration. "Well, at least I didn't almost kill someone this time."

"It is progress," he agrees. "How did it feel this time? With your chihooahas and massives?"

"Chihuahuas and mastiffs." Correcting him has become an ingrained habit. "It didn't overwhelm me. I just felt it when it went through."

"Hmm. Yes, it appears that your intent does matter quite a bit. Very interesting."

I take aim at the tree again, willing the brace to cooperate. "Standby."

The familiar warmth spreads through my arm. "Shape."

This time, I picture a ball of energy in my mind. "Fire."

A glowing sphere materializes and hurtles forward. It falls short, dissipating harmlessly in the air. Frustration bubbles up inside me, but I push it down. Progress is progress, right?

"Again," the Grand Sage urges, his eyes gleaming with excitement.

I nod, refocusing. "Standby. Shape. Fire."

Another arrow forms, sleeker than the first. It travels further but still misses the mark.

One last try. I picture a long, flaming lance in my mind. "Standby. Shape. Fire."

The brace hums louder than before. A brilliant spear of flame bursts forth, streaking across the clearing. For a moment, I think it might actually reach the tree. But it fizzles out just shy of the target, leaving a scorched patch of grass in its wake, a clear circle without snow.

The brace goes silent. I tap it uselessly, but nothing happens. "I think it's dead again."

"Marvelous!" The Grand Sage claps his hands together, seemingly oblivious to my disappointment. "Such variety in the projections! And did you notice the increased range with each attempt?"

I hadn't, actually. My focus had been on hitting the damn tree. But now that he mentions it, each shot did go a bit further than the last. It's something, I guess.

A gust of wind cuts through the clearing, and I shiver violently. In all the excitement, I'd forgotten how cold it was out here. I bring my hands to my mouth, breathing on my frozen fingers in a futile attempt to warm them.

"Perhaps we should call it a day," the Grand Sage suggests, finally noticing my discomfort. "We've gathered plenty of data for now."

"Agreed." My teeth chatter slightly as I speak. "I could use a hot drink and about twelve blankets."

Chapter 348 Lisa: Their Strange Situation

LISA

As we make our way back to camp, I'm acutely aware of my three bodyguards following silently behind us. They've been stoic throughout this whole ordeal, even after nearly becoming collateral damage earlier. I wonder what they really think about all this.

Wolf's Landing comes into view after a mile of trudging through snow, a sprawling collection of tents and cabins. It's a far cry from the cozy apartment I shared with Ava in Westwood, but it's home now.

As we walk, I catch snippets of conversation from passing wolves. Most of it revolves around patrol schedules, supply inventories, and the latest gossip. But every so often, I hear whispers about the Grand Sage's strange inventions.

It's funny. Most of the pack has no idea what we're really working on out here. They see the gnome as some kind of eccentric engineer, tinkering away in his tent. But many wear his crowning achievement on their wrists—those "magic watches" that have revolutionized how we communicate across long distances.

I glance down at my own watch, marveling at how something so small can be so crucial. It's not perfect—sometimes the signal drops, or messages get garbled—but it's a lifeline for our scouting parties, once out of the range of their strange pack mind link thing.

Of course, all watches need to be linked in order to send or receive. There's a couple master watches (worn by the pack alpha and beta, of course), but several are linked to others, like a mate or direct superior. Or something. I don't know exactly how it works; I'm not super hip on the chain of command stuff they do around here.

The Grand Sage's voice breaks through my reverie. "I'll need to make some adjustments to the brace. Perhaps a larger blood reservoir... or we could experiment with different types of crystals for energy storage, but we don't have many to work with."

I nod, only half-listening. My mind is already drifting to the promise of warmth and comfort waiting in Kellan's cabin. "Sounds good. And maybe on not blowing up random innocents when I make a single mistake."

He chuckles, patting my arm. "Of course, of course. Rome wasn't built in a day, you know. Or was it? I can never keep human history straight."

* * *noveldrama

The cabin I share with Kellan is cozy and warm. It's a luxury to not share space in this place, especially lately, with all the new wolves being added with each returned scouting party.

The instant coffee tin mocks me as I scoop out a meager portion. Hot water, stir, and voila—a sad excuse for caffeine. I take a sip and grimace. Bitter, watery, and somehow both burnt and flavorless at the same time.

"Shit coffee," I mutter, padding back to the couch.

I wrap myself in a thick blanket, cradling the mug for warmth as I stare out the window. Snow falls in lazy flurries, blanketing the world in white. It's peaceful, almost hypnotic.

My brain feels like mush after today's magitech testing. The quiet is a balm, letting my thoughts drift aimlessly.

The front door creaks open and Kellan steps inside, shaking snow from his boots.

"Oh. Hi," I manage, my voice catching.

Snowflakes cling to his dirty blonde hair, now tousled from the wind. It was always super short before; it's longer now. His cheeks and nose are flushed from the cold, making his stormy gray eyes pop. As he shrugs off his coat, I can't help but notice how his shirt clings to his broad shoulders and muscular arms.

After he sets his boots aside to dry, he runs his hands through his hair. My eyes trail down his neck to the hollow of his throat, visible where his shirt is unbuttoned.

I force myself to look away, focusing on the shit caffeine in my cup.

"Hey," he replies, equally awkward.

I fidget with my mug, searching for something to say, but nothing comes out. Kellan clears his throat after some time.

"Just here to take a shower."

"Okay," I nod, perhaps too enthusiastically. "Sure. Yeah."

He disappears into the bedroom. A few moments later, I hear water running.

I sigh, my shoulders slumping. This weirdness between us has been building for months. Ever since I balked at the whole "fated mates" thing, Kellan's backed off, giving me space. And I appreciate that, I do. But now there's this... gap.

We're sharing the beta cabin, but it feels like we're worlds apart.

For a while, we were growing closer. But now? We're not even friends. Just roommates. And he's got three bodyguards keeping an eye on my every move. Which, for the record—I'm not complaining about.

I get it. I appreciate it. But... I don't know. It's just strange, I guess.

He cares about me. He's made that clear. And I get that mates are important to wolves. I've watched it via my own best friend.

But that's not how I was raised. This whole fated mates shit is weird ass voodoo, not something humans are supposed to be a part of.

The worst part? I'm horny as hell. My body craves his touch. Every time I look at his face I want to jump on it. But I can't bring myself to cross that line. Not when I know he wants more than just sex.

It wouldn't be fair to either of us.

Though... what if I did? What if I just let go and gave in to these urges?

I close my eyes, letting my imagination run wild. In my mind's eye, I see Kellan emerging from the shower, water droplets clinging to his muscular frame. Steam curls around him as he walks towards me, a towel slung low on his hips. His eyes, stormy gray and intense, lock onto mine.

"Lisa," he says, his voice a low rumble. It sends shivers down my spine.

In this fantasy, I don't hesitate. I stand, letting the blanket fall away. My hands reach for him, tracing the contours of his chest, feeling the warmth of his skin beneath my fingertips. He pulls me close, one hand cupping my face while the other slides down to the small of my back.

Our lips meet, and it's electric. Months of tension and longing pour into that kiss. His stubble scratches my chin, but I don't care. I tangle my fingers in his damp hair, pressing myself against him.

He lifts me effortlessly, and I wrap my legs around his waist. The towel falls away as he carries me to the bedroom. We tumble onto the bed, a tangle of limbs and breathless laughter.

His lips trail down my neck, leaving a path of fire in their wake. I arch into him, craving more. His hands roam my body, teasing and exploring. I gasp as he—

The water shuts off, jerking me back to lonely reality.

I take another sip of my coffee, grimacing at the taste and my frustration.

Chapter 349 Ava: Daily Life

Once all the refugees are settled in, I spend time checking on the laundry. In the winter, it's an effort to get done, but we now have several hand-pump wells located in strategic areas around the compound, making it a little easier.

The biting cold nips at my cheeks as I make my way to the laundry area.

"Good morning, Luna Ava," a chorus of voices greets me as I enter.

I smile, nodding to each of them. "Good morning, everyone. How are we doing today?"

My eyes land on Tess, her gray hair pulled back in a tight bun. Her stern expression softens slightly as she meets my gaze. "Luna, we're managing. These new refugees have doubled our workload."

"I'm here to help," I say, rolling up my sleeves. "What needs doing?"

Tess points to a pile of sopping wet clothes. "Those need wringing out and hanging. Mind the cold—it'll freeze your fingers if you're not careful."

I nod, grabbing a bucket of wet clothes and get to work, in tandem with another she-wolf. She's newer, a refugee from the Twilight Ridge Pack.

"How are you settling in, Mara?" I ask her.

She gives me a shy smile. "It's different, Luna. But good. Everyone's been so kind." noveldrama

"I'm glad to hear it." Once the clothes are wrung, we head outside to hang them, where they'll freeze on the line and slowly evaporate until they're dry. "If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask."

We work in companionable silence for a while, the only sounds the snap of fabric in the wind and the occasional grunt of effort. My fingers are numb, but I keep going. These clothes need to dry, and every pair of hands helps.

"Luna," Tess calls, "could you help gather the frozen clothes? They're nearly dry."

I nod, moving to the lines where stiff, icy garments hang like bizarre winter decorations. It's a strange sensation, peeling them off the line. They crackle and crunch.

"Where do these go?" I ask, arms full of frozen clothes.

Tess gestures to a series of shelves along the wall. "Sort them by size on those shelves. These aren't for any specific cabin."

I nod, carefully placing each item in its proper place. As I sort, I chat with the other she-wolves, learning about their days, their families, their concerns.

"How's your little one doing, Sarah?" I ask, folding a tiny pair of pants.

Sarah beams. "Growing like a weed, Luna. He's already trying to shift, but we tell him he's still got a few years left before he finds his wolf. He doesn't believe us."

As we work, the conversation flows freely. The she-wolves speak of their mates, their children, the latest pack gossip. I listen, soaking it all in.

* * *

With the laundry sorted and hung, I stretch my aching muscles and head out of the building. While laundry might seem like a simple task, it's rougher work than you'd think.

Pulling my coat tightly around me to block out the biting air, I find myself longing to check on Lucas now that I have some precious free time.

"Selene, have you seen Lucas?" I ask, my voice hopeful.

He's out on reconnaissance, Ava. Left a few hours ago.

I sigh, disappointment settling in my chest. "Of course he is. We've barely seen each other lately."

It's the nature of your positions, Selene replies, her tone sympathetic. Would you like to check the perimeter? It might help clear your head.

"Mm. Yeah, I guess. Any news while I was busy?"

Vester's group returned a while ago. No refugees with them this time.

A small smile tugs at my lips. "That's good to hear. Vanessa must be happy to have him back."

I gather a few of my guards, selecting five wolves I trust. Well—really, I grab Marcus and let him choose the other four. But his trust is my trust.

As we prepare to head out, I'm surprised to see Vanessa approaching, bundled up against the cold.

"I heard you were heading out. Mind if I join you? There are some herbs to the northeast I'd like to gather."

I blink, caught off guard. "Herbs? In this weather?"

Vanessa's eyes twinkle with amusement. "Winter plants, actually. They're quite useful for certain remedies. Humans have little benefit, but shifters do."

As we trudge through the snow, Selene's warm presence at my side, I can't help but feel a sense of peace despite the biting cold. The crunch of snow beneath our feet creates a rhythmic melody, broken only by the occasional whisper of wind through bare branches.

Ah, we're venturing out? Grimoire's sleepy mental voice suddenly perks up, catching me off guard.

"What have you been up to?" I ask, curiosity coloring my tone. It's not often that Grimoire sounds so... drowsy.

Just shuffling through memories, he replies, his voice carrying a hint of something I can't quite place. Nostalgia, perhaps?

We continue our journey in companionable silence, the wards our destination. I can't help but marvel at how far out they've been placed now. It's a testament to my growing strength, I suppose, but it still feels surreal. It takes me a few days to check them all.

Suddenly, Grimoire's voice breaks through my musings. Ava, do you remember the history of rune magic?

I furrow my brow, caught off guard by the question. "You haven't really taught me anything about it. Just that wizards put their excess magic into their wards and glyphs."

Grimoire hums thoughtfully, the sound reverberating in my mind. Then he falls silent again. I don't prod him for more information, though. I've learned that with Grimoire, patience is key. He'll speak when he's ready.

As we approach the first ward, I feel a faint tingle of magic in the air. It's barely perceptible, like the ghost of a touch against my skin, but I recognize it instantly. My magic.

I pause, closing my eyes and reaching out with my senses. The ward is invisible to the naked eye, but to me, it's as clear as day. A shimmering veil of energy, pulsing with power.

Taking a deep breath, I focus my energy and begin to infuse a little more of my magic into the ward. It's a delicate process, requiring concentration and control. Too much power could overload the ward, too little would leave it weakened.

As I work, I can feel the ward strengthening, its energy intertwining with mine. It's an oddly intimate sensation, like I'm leaving a piece of myself behind to protect this place.

When I'm satisfied with the ward's strength, I open my eyes and nod to the others. "Let's move on to the next one," I say, my voice soft but firm.

The wind picks up, sending a shiver down my spine despite my warm coat. I pull it tighter around me, grateful for its protection against the biting cold.

"Vanessa," I call out, glancing back at the healer. "How much further until we reach those herbs you're looking for?"

She looks up from where she's been studying the ground, a small smile on her face. "Not too far now."

As we trudge through the snow, Grimoire speaks up again, distant and contemplative. You know, glyphs weren't created by humans. They're patterns drawn by magic itself.

"I thought it was an ancient language."

In a way, yes, it is. But not one made by people. The words written on my pages are the language created by witches, inspired by the runes we use.

Huh. So, witches knew about the runes.

Yes. The different designations of magic-users came later on.

Fascinating. The history of Lycans and magic always catches me by surprise as I learn more of them.

I admit, it's a rather simplistic way to boil down the history. There's much more to it, of course.

"Why are you telling me this now?"

Chapter 350 Ava: At the Perimeter

There's a pause, and when Grimoire speaks again, his tone is more serious. Do you remember what I said when we first met?

The dying, otherworldly forest flashes through my mind. But try as I might, I can't recall anything specific Grimoire might have said.

"No."

Vanessa and the others don't even look at me as I speak; they're all used to my one-sided conversations at this point. Of course, very few people know about Grimoire, but they all know about Selene.

Who's ignoring our conversation as she hops through the snow, tail high.

I mentioned that you have wards all over your soul.

The words trigger a vague recollection, and I frown. "I... yes, I think I remember that now." But why wouldn't I remember something so important? At least, it sounds important.

It's precisely because of the wards on your soul.

Hmm.

What are these wards? Selene's voice echoes in my mind, her curiosity palpable.

Grimoire sighs, a sound that reverberates through my consciousness. I've been trying to figure that out myself.

"Wait, what?" I blurt out, earning a curious glance from Vanessa. I wave her off with a smile, focusing on the conversation only I can hear. "You don't know what they are?"

I don't know every literal thing about the world, Ava, he retorts, a hint of defensiveness in his tone. I only know what I've witnessed over the centuries.

Have your memories faded since being with Ava? Selene asks him.

Absolutely not, Grimoire replies firmly. My knowledge and memories remain intact.

She stops her playful bounding through the snow, turning to stare at the messenger bag where Grimoire rests in his book form. Her ice-blue eyes narrow, and I can sense her jealousy.

"Why are you suddenly bringing this up?" I ask, absently patting the bag, as if making sure Selene hasn't grabbed at it and hauled him away to chew on his spine.

She's done that a couple times when he really got on her nerves.

Despite our repeated failures at integrating you with the pack bond, I still believe it's possible. These wards are the problem, Ava. They're blocking you from full integration with any pack.

I pause, considering his words. "But I feel connected to the Westwood Pack. It's not as strong as what others describe, but it's there."

That extra connection you feel, Grimoire explains, is likely supplemented by your bond with Selene and your mate bond with Lucas, not from you, yourself.

"Have you seen other wards on souls before?" I'm curious as to the extent of his knowledge in this area.

I have, he admits. Usually, they're simpler. Protection spells, curses, that sort of thing. But yours... they're different. Layered.

Almost as if they were put there over time. I first thought they were to hide your powers, but you don't seem limited by their existence.

She cannot shift, Selene points out.

Touche, wolf. Maybe it is suppressing her shifter abilities.

"Ava, the herbs are just north of us. I'll meet you at the next ward."

I nod at Vanessa, watching her retreating form as she breaks off from our little group.

A flicker of concern crosses my mind.

"Marcus, can one of the them accompany Vanessa? Just to be safe."

Marcus nods, his expression stoic. "Of course, Luna." He signals to one of the wolves, who trots off after the healer.

I turn back to the path ahead, my feet crunching through the snow. It's not as difficult as it was months ago. My muscles have grown stronger, more accustomed to grueling hikes. I can feel the difference with each step.

Marcus and the remaining three bodyguard wolves fall into formation behind me as I make my way to the next ward.

As my thoughts settle, I turn my attention back to Grimoire. "So, what's your plan? You wouldn't bring up these wards without having an idea in mind."

Perceptive as always, Ava, Grimoire's voice echoes in my mind. I've been considering a ritual that might help us understand these wards better, possibly even remove them.

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. "A ritual? What kind?"

It's an ancient practice, one that allows a person to delve into their own soul. To see and interact with the very essence of their being.

"That sounds... intense. And potentially dangerous."

All magic carries risks, Grimoire admits. But this could provide answers we desperately need.

Selene, who has been quietly listening, chimes in. I don't like it. It sounds too risky.

The familiar tingle against my skin tells me we've arrived, and I replenish this ward as I did the last. But this time, instead of leaving for the next, I clear a patch of snow and sit on the ground, waiting for Vanessa.

"I don't feel like the benefits outweigh the risks."

You don't even know the risks yet.

"Let me guess. I can get lost inside my soul or something?"

Grimoire goes silent for a long time, before reluctantly admitting, Yes.

"See? Benefits don't match the risks."

You shouldn't put Ava in danger just to appease your own curiosity, Selene snaps at him, coming to flop onto my lap as she pants heavily.

Marcus clears his throat, drawing my attention. His brow is furrowed, concern etched across his weathered features. I realize he must have overheard my conversation with Grimoire and Selene.

"Don't worry, Marcus. I'm not about to do anything stupid or risky," I assure him, offering a small smile.

His shoulders relax slightly, but the worry doesn't completely leave his eyes. "Of course, Luna. I trust your judgment."

I would have been there the entire time, Grimoire mutters, sounding almost petulant. You wouldn't have been at risk.

Selene lifts her head from my lap, her ice-blue eyes narrowing. Don't fix what isn't broken. Ava's just fine and growing stronger every day, even with the wards in place.

It doesn't feel right to leave her soul warded. He sounds frustrated.

I stroke Selene's fur. "Let's just focus on the present for now, okay?"

We lapse into peaceful silence as we wait for Vanessa. The quiet of the forest settles around us, broken only by the occasional crunch of snow as one of the bodyguard wolves shifts their weight. The rhythmic sound of Selene's breathing and the warmth of her body against mine lulls me into a light doze.

Suddenly, a sharp tingle shoots through my wrist, shocking me awake. My heart races as I look down at the witch bracelet, its silver surface gleaming in the weak winter sunlight.

What does that mean? Selene asks, her ears perked forward in alertness.

"I don't know," I admit, running my fingers over the cool metal. It's silent, like it's a normal bracelet again.

I've been wearing it for so long, I almost forgot it's a magical artifact. Unfortunately, I still have no idea how it works. Maybe the Grand Sage will know.

It's a warning, Grimoire says, his tone grim.

I shoot to my feet, nearly dislodging Selene from my lap, my mind immediately rushing to Vanessa's safety.

Marcus tenses.

Calm down, Grimoire says, his voice steady. The bracelet reacts to certain types of magic. Run a magical survey around your perimeter.

Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes and reach out with my senses, feeling the magic that thrums through the forest. I can sense Vanessa's familiar energy signature, moving steadily towards us. But there's something else, a slow-moving, cloud-like feeling of dark energy that makes my skin crawl.

"I can see how far Vanessa is," I report, opening my eyes. "She's on her way back. But there's something else out there. It feels... wrong."

We need to investigate, Grimoire says, his calm demeanor a stark contrast to the unease churning in my gut.noveldrama

"Should we wait for Vanessa first?" I ask, glancing in the direction I can sense her approaching from.

It's moving slow enough that waiting should be fine.

I nod, turning to Marcus. "There's something out there. We're going to wait for Vanessa, then investigate."

Marcus's expression hardens, his hand moving to rest on the hilt of his knife.

"Understood, Luna. We'll be ready."

As we wait, I can't shake the feeling of unease that's settled over me. The forest seems too quiet now, as if holding its breath in anticipation of what's to come. I find myself straining my ears, trying to catch any sound that might give away the nature of the dark energy I sensed.

The sound of crunching snow alerts us to Vanessa's approach before we see her. She emerges from between the trees, her backpack bulging. The fourth bodyguard tags along behind her.