

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted

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Don't take everyone.

"What?"

The more people, the more victims.

"Oh." Shit. I hadn't thought of that. Biting my lip, I look over my entourage. Vanessa's brows raise as she watches me, her breath puffing out in the frigid air.

They're my bodyguards, but they can't save me from something magical.

Selene's thoughtful hum vibrates in my head.

"Marcus, you and..." I scan the faces, settling on a stoic-looking wolf. I think his name is Greg. "You. Stay with me. The rest of you, I need you to be our lifeline."

Vanessa frowns. "Ava, are you sure about this?"

I nod, trying to project more confidence than I feel. "I can sense magic and familiar energies, but there's no guarantee I haven't missed something. Or someone."

The other wolves shift awkwardly, as they always do when I speak of magic. It's still an uncomfortable subject for many in the pack.

"If something goes wrong, you need to get word to Lucas immediately."

Discontent ripples through the group. I can see it in the set of their jaws, the tension in their shoulders. They don't like the idea of letting me walk into potential danger without them.

"I know you don't like this," I say, addressing the group's unspoken protests. "But none of you are able to help with a magical force. I need to make sure the pack is warned if anything goes wrong."

Marcus, ever the professional, takes over. "We'll check in with Vanessa every ten minutes. Standard procedure."

I turn to Vanessa, holding up my wrist.

"Let's sync our watches. We can't afford any miscommunication."

With our watches synchronized, allowing us to contact each other directly, and the plan set, I take a steadying breath. The dark, cloud-like presence I sensed earlier is a little closer now. It's moving at a sluggish rate, but I don't know if it will stay that way.

"Alright," I say, squaring my shoulders. "Let's move out."

Marcus moves silently beside me, his eyes constantly scanning our surroundings. Greg brings up the rear, watching our backs. And Selene roams ahead, no longer happy-go-lucky in the snow as she scouts ahead of us all.

It smells strange, she reports.

My bracelet tingles, like it's gotten too cold against my skin. As we get closer, it sends small, pulsing shocks into my wrist. Not enough to affect the use of my hand or arm, but just irritating enough to keep my attention.

Eventually, we reach the area where the dark, cloud-like energy roams.

To the eye, there's nothing wrong. All Selene can sense is a strange scent in the air, something she doesn't recognize.

But I can feel its existence, even if we can't see it.

I turn to Marcus and Greg, my words firm. "Stay back. It's dangerous."

Their faces tighten but they obey, retreating several paces. As they move away, Grimoire materializes before me, no longer in his usual humanoid form. Instead, he's a small white fox, his fur gleaming against the snow. He bounds forward, stopping just shy of the dark energy's edge.

To my sight, he's just standing in the middle of snow.

But I can sense it, just beyond his feet.

"Do you recognize this?"

Grimoire's ears don't even twitch as he stares ahead. It has a horrible feeling to it.

I circle the area slowly, hyper-aware of every step. As I move, the energy seems to shift, turning towards me like a flower following the sun. My skin prickles. "I think it's following me."

I freeze in place, but the energy continues its slow creep in my direction.

Step back, Grimoire warns. Don't let it touch you.

Before I can move, Selene lets out a sharp yelp.

Marcus and Greg step forward, but I hold up an arm, waving them back. "Are you okay, Selene?"

Something stung my nose.

Grimoire scratches his ear. Be more careful, wolf.

I can only approximate its location through Ava's senses, Selene retorts sourly.

Selene's irritation seems disproportionate to Grimoire's words, but maybe she's just embarrassed. "What's the purpose of this thing?" I ask.

Grimoire's turns and bounds through the snow until he makes it to my feet, winding around my ankle in a coquettish gesture. He's learned that his fox form gets him a lot more affection than his human one, even when he's a child.

It feels like a taint. Not malicious magic sent with purpose, but more of an aftereffect. Like someone performed larger magic without acknowledging its consequences.

"Larger magic—like what?"

I don't know. You can't reverse-engineer magic from a taint.

Rubbing my hands together, I squint at the invisible presence. "What does it do?"

Those who touch it will act differently. More aggressive. Violent. Irritable, too.

Are you saying I'm irritable? Selene snaps.

Grimoire turns his face up to mine, his fox eyes somehow managing to look exasperated as he narrows them against the sun. See?

None of that sounds good. "Marcus, Greg," I call out, "step back even further." As they comply, I retreat as well, putting more distance between us and the dark energy, even as it oozes a little closer to me.

Grimoire rubs his cheek against my knee. This is as good a time as any to learn to purify.

"Purify? You mean, get rid of this... taint?"

He nods, sitting back on his haunches. Exactly. It's a crucial skill for any magic user, especially one as powerful as you.

I keep my face absolutely neutral, but can't help the vague thought in my head that purification sounds more like a religious thing. Maybe something a nun would do. Or a priest. Someone wearing black and white, anyway.

No. Why would it be religious? Magic is magic.

God. Sometimes I forget they can read my thoughts.

"Okay. What do I need to do?"

Grimoire's fox form finally unwinds from my ankle as he walks a few paces away. Then he sits primly in the snow, his tail curled around his paws. Purification isn't quite as gentle as it sounds, he begins, and I feel a knot form in my stomach.

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"What do you mean?"

You'll need to draw the energy into yourself, he explains, and then overpower it with your own magic.

This is not what I expected. "Draw it in? Like... absorb it?"

He nods. Exactly. The resulting friction between your magic and the taint creates a sort of burning purification. It neutralizes the harmful energy and can even bolster your own reserves.

The idea of pulling this dark, ominous energy into my body makes my skin crawl. "And what if there's too much? What if I can't handle it all at once?"

Grimoire's ears twitch. In those cases, you'd need to purify in stages or enlist help from other magic users. The stronger you are and the more magical capacity you have, the more efficiently you can handle these situations. This amount should be easy for you, especially with your recent expenditures at the wards.

I grunt, still uneasy about the whole concept. The thought of willingly drawing this taint into myself feels wrong on a visceral level.

It's relatively easy magic, Grimoire assures me. It just requires fine control, which you've been improving lately.

His words are meant to be comforting, but they don't quite hit the mark. Maybe because it feels kind of like he just told me to eat evil. It's just wrong. "Does it hurt?"

Grimoire pauses, and that hesitation speaks volumes. It can cause fevers as your body fights against the toxic nature of the taint, he admits. But it doesn't necessarily hurt in and of itself.

"Fevers," I repeat, my voice flat. "Great. For how long?"

As long as it's required.

So, a while. Not super cool, but we can't just leave a mass of aggression-inducing taint—which really doesn't sound right—around. It's invisible. None of our wolves would be able to avoid it, even if they knew its scent.

I close my eyes, too distracted by how it's not visually there, and reach out with my magic. It surges to my command immediately, as easy as breathing.

The taint feels like an oil slick on water, but light and fluffy, like clouds. It's strange.

Good, Grimoire encourages. Now, imagine drawing that energy towards you. Like you're inhaling it.

My eyes snap open. "Wait, literally inhale it?" My lungs cringe at the thought.

No, no, he says quickly. It's just a visualization technique. You're pulling it into your magical core, not your lungs.

Closing my eyes again, I inhale as deeply as I can, even as I let my magic touch the strange, icky energy before me.

Soon enough, it's like some sort of magical siphon as it flows over my magic and into circulation.

As the first tendrils of tainted energy touch my magical core, I gasp. It burns, a cold fire that spreads through my veins. My teeth clench against the discomfort.

Keep going, Grimoire urges. You're doing well.

I push through the pain, breathing slow and steady, continuing to draw the energy in. It feels endless, like I'm trying to drink an ocean through a straw. Just when I think I can't take anymore, it slows down.

Now, Grimoire says, push back with your own magic. Overwhelm it.

I gather my strength, feeling my magic surge within me. It crashes against the taint like a wave, and for a moment, I'm afraid it won't be enough. It's like being too full after drinking way too much water, magic sloshing this way and that within me, making me sick.

But then I feel something give way, and suddenly I'm flooded with a rush of power.

The burning sensation intensifies, and I can feel sweat beading on my forehead despite the cold. My whole body feels like it's on fire, and my magic slowly consumes the toxic energy I've drawn into my body.

I open my eyes, gasping for breath. The world spins around me, and I stumble, nearly falling face-first into the snow.

Only there's no snow.

Just dirt and yellow grass in a wide circle around me.

Marcus is there in an instant, steadying me with a strong hand on my arm.

"Are you alright?" he asks, concern etched on his face.

I nod, not trusting my voice just yet. My whole body aches, and I can feel the beginnings of a fever setting in. It's like my very bones are aching, and my teeth chatter, despite feeling as though I'm on fire.

Grimoire's fox form disappears, and the heavy weight of his book form tugs at the strap of my messenger bag once again. Well done, Ava. That was an impressive first purification.

"Thanks," I manage to croak out. "Is it always that intense?"

It gets easier with practice, he assures me. And as your capacity grows, you'll be able to handle larger amounts of taint more efficiently. It will take some time to filter it all out, but your magic will do that, even if you sleep.

I nod, still trying to catch my breath. I feel gross. Horrible. Sick.

"We should head back," Marcus says, eyeing me with concern. "You look like you need rest."

My legs feel shaky, but I take one step. Then another. Good; I can move. "Yeah. Let's go."

Thankfully, this strange energy wasn't anything more ominous than this strange taint. Imagine if it had been some kind of poison.

No, it was dangerous, Grimoire corrects my thinking. All it would have taken was one angry wolf to come under its effects. A violent wolf is always dangerous, but most especially when they aren't under their own will.

My skin wants to curl in on itself at the thought.

"Was it left there, or did it travel there?"

That's something I can't answer. Unlike a leak, you can't trace its source. It can travel hundreds and thousands of miles away from where it began.

Well, that's ominous as hell.

Yes. Magic has consequences, and someone is ignoring them. Or they don't care about them.

A breeze kicks up, and I shiver. But it isn't from the cold, or the fever warming my body.

Chapter 353 Lucas: Aggressive Behavior

LUCAS

Five wolf bodies lie on the ground, their blood settled into pools of blood beneath them, frozen now in the snow.

My beta approaches, his face grim. He kneels beside one of the corpses, examining it with a critical eye. "You said they weren't in their right minds?"

I've seen my share of battles, but this was different. The rogues attacked with a ferocity that bordered on madness. "It wasn't natural. Almost rabid. We didn't have a chance to communicate."

I stand over the largest of the bodies, frowning. It wasn't as though we hadn't tried to bring them in alive. They just had no interest in negotiating. There isn't much we can do at that point.

Kellan's voice breaks through my thoughts. "They're only five miles from the compound."

"They were heading south," I say, watching as Kellan's shoulders visibly relax. "Not toward the pack."

It's a small comfort, but I'll take what I can get. Still, the proximity is unsettling. These rogues could have easily changed course, stumbled upon our territory. They're too close. We need to tighten our security, make sure we don't let it happen again.

I crouch down beside one of the bodies, studying it closely. "Maybe we should examine them further. There might be clues—"

Kellan shakes his head, cutting me off. "We don't have the facilities for that, Lucas. Autopsying random wolves would be a waste of resources we can't afford right now. What

building are we going to take over? We can't bring dead bodies into the hospital. We don't have the room there, either."

With winter in full swing and refugees to care for, we can't spare the time or manpower for an extensive investigation over a few violent wolves. Still, the nagging feeling that we're missing something crucial gnaws at me.

"What if they were just traumatized?" Kellan suggests after a moment. "Starving, maybe. Could have gone feral."

It's a reasonable theory. We've seen it before—wolves pushed to their limits, reverting to pure instinct. Especially as rogues without a pack. But as I look at the bodies sprawled before us, something doesn't add up.

"It's possible," I concede, "but I don't think that's it." I gesture to the nearest corpse. "Look at them. They're young, strong. Their bodies are well-fed. This wasn't desperation."

"Then why attack without provocation? It doesn't make sense."

"We'll never know now."

The finality of my words hangs in the air. Five lives snuffed out, and for what? Such a waste of life.

My gaze falls back to the bodies at our feet. Their eyes are still open, glazed over in death, but I can't shake the memory of the feral gleam they held during the attack. It was as if something had stripped away their humanity, leaving nothing but raw, uncontrolled aggression.

"What do you want to do with the bodies?" Kellan asks, rising to his feet as he brushes snow off his knees.

It's a practical question, but one that carries weight. We can't leave them here, that's for certain. But disposing of them carelessly could leave a trail right back to us.

"We'll send a team to take care of it," I decide. "Have them move the bodies several miles out, away from our territory. They'll have to use a truck. Maybe burn them out there. They don't deserve to be something's dinner."

"I'll get it organized."

It feels as though reports of aggressive rogues have been on the uptick, but why?

The questions pile up in my head, leaving me to second-guess leaving these bodies behind. But we have no technology to help us here. No laboratory to run blood samples. Not even a microscope.

"Kellan," I call out. He turns back to me, eyebrow raised in question. "Once we've taken care of this, I want to double our patrols. We can't afford another surprise like this."

* * *

The sound of the front door opening cuts through the rush of water.

Ava.

I shut off the shower, not bothering to rinse the soap from my body. Water drips down my chest as I grab a towel, hastily wrapping it around my waist. The tile is cold beneath my feet as I stride into the living room.

My mate stands there, snowflakes melting in her golden hair, tied back into a ponytail. Her cheeks are flushed from the cold, blue eyes bright. Something in my chest loosens at the sight of her.

"You didn't have to cut your shower short," she says, a smile playing at her lips.

I cross the room in three long strides, wrapping my arms around her. She's so small against me, fitting perfectly into the curve of my body. Honey and vanilla, with that faint hint of orange, surround me, stirring Aurum in the back of my head.

Mate, he breathes, and I can feel his tail wagging.

Ava laughs, the sound brightening my day. "Lucas! You're getting soap everywhere." She shoves at my chest, but there's no real force behind it.

I reluctantly let her go, watching as she shrugs off her snow-laden coat.

"Why don't you join me? I was just getting started."

Ava looks at me strangely, her head tilted to one side. But then she nods, a slow smile spreading across her face. "Alright."

My heart races as I lead her to the bathroom. Steam still hangs in the air, fogging the mirror. I turn on the water, adjusting the temperature before stepping aside to let Ava in first.

She hesitates for just a moment before slipping out of her clothes, avoiding my gaze. I drink in the sight of her, my eyes tracing the curves of her body as she steps under the spray of water.

I drop my towel and join her, closing the glass door behind us. The shower suddenly feels much smaller with both of us in it. Water cascades down Ava's body, and I can't tear my eyes away.

"Lucas?" Ava's voice breaks through the fog of desire clouding my mind. "What happened?"

Her words drag my eyeballs off her ass and to her face. "What do you mean?"

She turns to face me, water droplets clinging to her eyelashes. "You're acting strange. Did something happen?"

I hesitate, unsure how to respond. The memory of those five dead wolves flashes through my mind, their unseeing eyes staring up at the sky. But I push it away.

"Nothing happened," I say, reaching for the shampoo bottle. "Just missed you, that's all."

Ava's eyes narrow, clearly not believing me. But she doesn't press the issue, turning back to let the water run over her face.

I pour some shampoo into my hand, working it into her hair. My fingers massage her scalp, and I feel some of the tension leave her body. She leans back against me, and I have to stifle a groan.

"You're a terrible liar, you know that?" Ava says, her voice soft.

I freeze, my hands still tangled in her hair. "I—"

She turns in my arms, her eyes meeting mine. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

I take a deep breath, the steam filling my lungs. "We found some rogues a few miles out. They were... aggressive. We had to put them down."

Her body stiffens. "How many?"

"Five."

She reaches up, her hand cupping my cheek. "I'm sorry, Lucas."

I lean into her touch, closing my eyes. "It's terrible, but that's not what worries me. Something was off about them. They were acting almost... feral. But they weren't starving or desperate. It doesn't make sense."

Ava is quiet for a moment, her thumb tracing small circles on my skin. "I think I might now what happened. I ran into some tainted energy near one of my wards."

My eyes snap open. "What tainted energy?"

She tells me about her encounter in the woods, how Grimoire helped her purify a strange, dark energy. As she speaks, a chill runs down my spine despite the hot water pouring over us.

"Why didn't you tell me about this sooner?" I ask, unable to keep the edge out of my voice.

Ava's eyes narrow, her shoulders hunching up a little. "I've been home for five seconds."

Steam clouds the air, and I breathe it in, forcing my tense muscles to relax.

Even Aurum is calm in my head, taking the danger in stride when he would normally be a hot mess over any possible threat to her life.

She is our Luna, he says simply, as if that's all I need to know.

I guess it is.

"Turn around," I murmur, gently guiding her shoulders so her body faces me. She complies without a word, and I tilt her head back, reaching around her to rinse the shampoo from her hair. My fingers work through her golden strands, careful not to tug or pull.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped at you." The words are barely audible over the rush of water, but I know she hears them.

Her shoulders relax, her body language no longer so defensive. "It's okay," she replies, but her voice lacks its usual warmth. The subdued tone tugs at something in my chest.

I finish rinsing her hair and turn her to face me again. Her blue eyes meet mine, a mix of emotions swirling in their depths. I cup her face in my hands, my thumbs tracing her cheekbones.

"Hey," I say, my voice gentle. "It's okay to tell me when I'm being overbearing. I know I can be... intense sometimes."

A small laugh escapes her lips, more tension leaving her body. "Isn't that always?"

Chapter 354 Ava: Ryder Brings Good News

A horde of wolves stream into our camp. Several shift in the middle of the snow, eager to embrace their friends or family for the first time in months. It feels as though the entire compound is out to watch the largest crowd brought in by our scouting team.

There's an overall atmosphere of joy and celebration, but underneath it all, my mind worries over simple problems. Food. Firewood. More shelter. We only have so many tents, so many beds, so many blankets... And winter isn't over yet.

"Kellan," I call out, spotting his broad shoulders in the crowd. "Get these people settled in the new tents. Make sure they're comfortable. We may need to switch people around to make sure no family units are broken up."

He nods, already moving to direct the flow of refugees. A pang of worry hits me as I consider our dwindling firewood supply. We'll need to send people out for more.

My eyes scan the crowd. Some of them are from other packs; they hang back, tails tucked, in small groups of their own. One group has their tails up, panting in the snow as they glance around. Probably Aspen wolves.

Right on cue, Ivy approaches them.

Distracting me from the influx of new people is Delta Ryder Thorn, looking like he's been through hell and back. He's lost weight, and his fur seems matted. But there's something about him that has Selene sitting up to take notice.

"What's going on?" I ask Lucas, who unwraps his arm from around my shoulder.

"I don't know. He wanted to tell us in person. Come, let's head to the debriefing tent."

Ryder follows us without comment, though he's practically bouncing on his paws. He shifts almost as soon as the tent flap closes behind him, grabbing some clothes at random off the shelves we have for that purpose.

"I bring good news," he announces, his voice hoarse but triumphant.

Lucas raises an eyebrow, a silent command to continue.

"We found Jericho."

My hand shoots out, grabbing Ryder's freshly donned shirt before I can stop myself. "Where is he?" I demand. He wasn't in the group.

A firm hand pulls me back, and I let go of his black shirt as my back bumps into Lucas' chest. To his credit, the delta doesn't flinch at my reaction, only grinning wider. "He's with a group of supernaturals, about a hundred miles northwest. They're all in hiding."

"How did you find him?" Lucas asks, cool as a freaking cucumber. Like it's any report on any given day.

"He found us through the pack link. When we got close enough, he reached out."

Frowning, I ask, "Why didn't he come back with you?"

The bright light of excitement fades, and Ryder's lips thin. No longer keeping eye contact, he gazes off to the side, clasping his hands behind his back and shifting his feet, as if bracing himself.

"Beta Mentor Jericho was severely injured. Many of the wolves we brought today were saved by his efforts. But he lost both his legs."

Devastating words. Tears fill my eyes as an image of the grizzled old shifter jumps to my mind's eye. Fit. Healthy. Energetic.

"But he's alive," I whisper, trying to give myself something positive to cling to.

Both of my shoulders bow under the weight of my mate's hands, and he squeezes gently. "He's alive."

His words rumble against my back, and I nod jerkily, blinking against tears.

"Why didn't he return with you?" Lucas addresses Ryder now, all business, as I'm still reeling.

I'm sorry, Selene offers quietly. She never followed us into the tent; she's overseeing the new arrivals and keeping an eye on Ivy. Jericho is a good wolf. He saved many lives.

Yes, but at what cost?

My heart twists, wondering how he's handling it. No one ever deserves a disability. Ever. But it's turning my world upside down to imagine someone so strong and vibrant forever trapped in a wheelchair.

"Kellan will be here soon," Lucas says, and I realize I've missed part of the conversation. "I want him to hear in person."

"Understood, Alpha."

* * *

Lucas and his subordinates spent a long time in discussion. About Jericho, mostly, and the new problems that have now arisen. The old wolf managed to bring together many survivors. Not just wolves, but other supernaturals.

Including vampires.

Jericho remained with them as the pack discusses whether to bring them here, to the safety of Wolf's Landing, or keep them where they are.

What do you think? Selene asks, having followed me—and my ever-present bodyguards—to a giant log in the center of the compound.

It's smooth, free of bark, and the perfect height to sit on. It's also easy to eavesdrop in the area, so I take the time to converse through our bond link and not with my mouth.

I understand wanting to bring them here. Survivors are survivors, and we need allies.

But, Selene prompts.

I sigh, looking up at the sky. A few puffy white clouds float by, but for the most part, it's a vast expanse of brilliant blue. I also understand why the wolves are cautious. Everyone's been separated for so long, even wolves don't know much about the other supernaturals. It makes it harder to build trust.

Soft fur tickles my thigh as she leans against my leg. Do you think the wolves would treat the Grand Sage differently if they learned he is a gnome, and not one of your tiny humans?

I shake my head. I don't know. Not many of them really know him. I think they could just as easily believe he is a murderer as they can believe he is a good person.

Selene's head settles on my knee. Petting her gives me a little solace, a break from my thoughts with the repetitive motion of my fingers sliding through her soft fur.

My mind wanders to the refugees and the potential new arrivals. The camp already feels stretched thin, resources dwindling faster than we can replenish them. Yet, turning away those in need goes against everything we believe in.

"What would you do, Selene?"

It is not a decision that needs to be made today.

I lean back, resting my palms on the smooth surface of the log. The breeze picks up, carrying with it the scents of pine and snow. Winter's grip is tightening, and I can't help but worry about how we'll manage when the real cold sets in.

We were doing well before. Now, it's as if we are barely scraping by. There's always a new influx of bodies of late.

You're overthinking again, Selene chides gently.

I smile ruefully. "Can you blame me? There's so much at stake."

True, but worrying won't solve anything. You need to act.

"And what action do you suggest?" I ask, genuinely curious about her perspective.

Selene rolls her head to the side, her ice-blue eyes meeting mine. Go see these supernaturals for yourself. Talk to them, understand their needs and what they can offer. Then you'll know if bringing them here is the right choice.

The thought of parting from Lucas makes me grimace. We've spent far too much time apart.

Talk to him. See what he thinks. It's not a decision you can or should make on your own.

Rubbing her ears, I tease, "Six months ago, you would have told me that I should do whatever I want."

Six months ago, you weren't Luna. You were finding yourself and responsible for no other. She snorts, her doggy breath warm against my leg.

"Oh. It has nothing to do with the fact that you—"

Selene jerks back, yowling in typical husky fashion. Must you bring that up again?

"Bring what up? Oh, the fact that you hated—"

A warbling, up-down grumble—maybe it's more of a yodel—has me biting my lower lip hard to keep the snicker from escaping.

That was a long time ago, she protests. I have accepted your choice in mate.

"Yes, yes. I'm sorry. I won't ever bring up the fact that you once hated Luc—"

No!

Her triple-time aroos and the whining cadence that comes with them almost break me, and I turn, pressing a fist against my mouth, desperately trying not to laugh. She's going to be so upset with me if I laugh at her.

But there's nothing more hilarious than Selene when her husky side comes out. It's like she forgets she's actually a wolf inside.

"Luna!"

Struggling to regain my composure as Selene mouths at my arm in frustration, probably because she can feel the laughter in my head, I turn to the familiar voice, squinting against the bright sunlight. "Hi, Wes."

Chapter 355 Ava: Wes' Concerns

Wes comes to an abrupt stop a few feet from me, breathing heavily from his run. "Hi, Luna."

He avoided me for months after the vampire incident, apparently suffering from a severe case of hero worship. Once I finally cornered him and told him to treat me like normal, we've regained a new status quo.

One where he stares at me with stars in his eyes, and I try really, really hard not to notice.

The hero worship has yet to wane. He's absolutely fascinated with the fact that his Luna can wield magic. Most of the younger wolves are. Some of the older ones aren't thrilled, but the overwhelming response has been in my favor, effectively keeping them quiet.

Oh, there are whispers. And those whispers are routed to Lucas' ears.

I know they exist, but I refuse to know what people are saying. As Selene and Vanessa have both pointed out, my self-esteem can be deflated with a single pin.

It's a work in progress.

"What are you doing, Wes?" Judging from his flushed cheeks and how he was running across the compound, I'd guess he's on some sort of errand. The younger wolves have really stepped up lately. Many of them even help gather firewood.

Wes grimaces before smoothing his expression into careful neutrality. "I was tasked with helping the Aspen wolves settle in, Luna."

His attitude catches my attention immediately. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Wes replies, his gaze fixed somewhere over my left shoulder, avoiding mine.

I narrow my eyes, channeling every ounce of stern Luna energy I can muster. It's not much, considering I still feel like an imposter most days, but I give it my best shot.

Selene, ever the helpful companion, radiates just a touch of her power. It's enough to make Wes' shoulders slump in defeat.

"I don't like the Aspen wolves," he admits in a whisper.

The soft words startle me. The Aspen wolves have integrated seamlessly into our pack life since their arrival. They pull their weight, joining hunting parties and scouting expeditions. They've even been invaluable in relaying information back to Alpha Clayton.

Having a solid relationship with a stable ally has boosted the morale in Wolf's Landing greatly.

"Why not?" I probe gently. "They've been nothing but helpful."

Wes scowls, his youthful features twisting in distaste. "They all think Ivy's a better Luna candidate. And they think Alpha Lucas is going to take her as his second mate. But he would never!"

Selene growls low in her throat, the sound reverberating through our bond. I reach out to tug at her ears, a gesture that's become our silent signal for 'calm down'.

"Don't worry about such silly rumors, Wes," I say, forcing a lightness into my tone that I don't feel. Inside, irritation flares hot and bright. It's an emotion I've become all too familiar with since Ivy's arrival.

Who do you think those rumors came from? Selene grumbles through our bond.

I tug at her ears again, harder this time. Such things can't be proven. Even though the same damn thoughts go through my head. They wouldn't come up with such an idea out of nowhere.

Exactly.

"But Luna," Wes protests, his eyes wide with concern, "they're saying—"

"I know what they're saying," I interrupt, gentler than I feel. "Rumors are just that—rumors. They have no power unless we give it to them."

The words sound hollow even to my own ears.

Wes doesn't look convinced. His brows pull together, and I can almost see the gears turning in his head. "But what if—"

"No 'what ifs'," I say firmly. "Alpha Lucas and I are mates. I'm his only mate, and I'm the Luna of this pack. Nothing will change over some silly rumors."

Wes nods slowly, but I can tell he's not entirely reassured. "I just don't want anything to happen to you, Luna," he mumbles, a faint blush coloring his cheeks. "We're all loyal to you. A lot of us feel really bad for how we treated you before. You've been amazing. More than amazing. You're an angel to our pack!"

His earnestness tugs at my heart, even through the awkward singing of my praises. "Nothing's going to happen to me, Wes. I appreciate your concern, but I promise everything's fine."

Wes looks as though he wants to believe me, but can't. Then he shuffles his feet, clearly uncomfortable. "I guess I should get back to helping them out," he says reluctantly. "The new wolves need some clothes and food."

I nod, offering him a smile I hope looks more genuine than it feels. "Thank you for telling me about this, Wes. And remember, if you hear anything else, you can always come to me."

He brightens at that, his chest puffing out slightly. "Of course, Luna. I won't let you down."

As I watch him jog away, the smile slips from my face. Selene presses against my leg, a soft growl still emanating from her throat.

You can't ignore this forever.

"I'm not ignoring it. I'm choosing not to let it affect me."

Selene's disbelief radiates through our bond. And how's that working out for you?

I don't answer. We both know the truth.

Ivy, with her perfect hair and flawless skin, her easy grace and effortless charm. Ivy, who seems to know exactly what to say and do in every situation. Ivy, who comes from a respected pack and understands wolf politics in a way I never will. Always ingratiating herself with as many people as she can, solidifying her power base.

Stop it, Selene growls, nudging my hand with her nose. You're spiraling again.

Scowling at the reminder, I take a deep breath. Then five more. My pulse slows, having kicked up several notches since Wes started talking.

"I should talk to Lucas," I mutter, more to myself than to Selene.

Yes, you should, she agrees readily. Communication is key in any relationship, especially one as complicated as yours.

I snort at that. Complicated doesn't even begin to cover it.

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted

As it turns out, I don't get a chance to talk to Lucas that night.

Or the next one.

Or even the one after that.

A surprise storm blows in, stranding Lucas—and a small team of scouts—several hours from the compound, on what should have been a simple evening run. He's been taking groups of younger wolves out at night in what he calls field training.

Thankfully, we still have contact with each other, even if it is limited. It's never fun to be separated. With as much time as we've spent apart, we both do our best to make sure we spend a little time with each other daily.

Not having him around leaves me a little depressed, but knowing he's safe with the younger wolves makes our brief separation at least bearable.

No, not having Lucas around isn't the problem setting my teeth on edge.

She's at it again, Selene observes sourly, nosing through the kitchen.

I watch Elverly bustle around the kitchen, her tiny form a whirlwind of frustration. The gnome's grumbling grows louder as she yanks open cabinets and slams them shut.

"Look at this." She waves a wooden spoon toward the freezer, which is now almost empty, and the empty shelves of beans. "Three days of that beanpole demanding more protein. Does she think food just appears out of thin air?"

Elverly's rants are almost legendary among the kitchen staff. For a tiny gnome, she has a laundry list of complaints. Today, however, they're valid.

After a simple three-day blizzard, our food stock has plummeted.

"And now we're running low, even though we just had a stocking run last week." She kicks a pot out of her way, the clang echoing through the kitchen. "If she comes in here one more time, I'll make her feed the entire compound herself!"

Despite the situation, it's comforting to know not everyone is falling for Ivy's act

Scrawling down the missing items into a notebook I've learned to carry around, I speak as calmly as I can. Sometimes you just have to let Elverly be angry. She's more bark than bite. "I promise I won't let Ivy mess with your system anymore. You're doing an amazing job here, and I understand the frustration. We were already worried about feeding so many new mouths."

Elverly huffs, but I can see her tension easing. "I need to prepare for lunch. After three days of stew, I think we'll go for lighter fare."

"That sounds great."

As the gnome stops clanging and banging, I turn to Selene, who's crammed herself into a corner to avoid getting hit by any rogue pots. "Do you know where Ivy is now?"

Selene's ears twitch, and she slinks out of the corner to follow me out the door. She's in the main lodge, cleaning up. Now that the refugees are returning to their tents, it's a bit of a mess.

Ivy's overstepped her authority a few times, but not usually with any level of consequence. Now I'm going to have to talk with her, and I'm not looking forward to it.

Confrontation isn't my strong suit. I'm better now, getting more comfortable with giving orders and being an authority figure, but Ivy still leaves me off-kilter every time we talk.

"Is there anything you need help with?" I ask, turning back to the gnome.

Elverly shakes her head. "No, no. I've got it under control. Just keep that walking tree out of my kitchen. I can put together the list of supplies we need for another run, but the meat is the real problem. We can't keep up with consumption."

I can't help but chuckle at her description of Ivy. "Okay. I'll see what we can do with the hunters." Meat is scarce in the winter, but it isn't impossible to get what we need. "For now, let's try to stretch what we can. Our numbers are only increasing, and we all need to tighten our belts."

With a final nod from Elverly, I head out of the kitchen, Selene trotting by my side.

There's no wind in the air, a blessed relief after the last three days. Pristine snow glitters everywhere I look. Groups of wolves shovel trails to tents and clear snow from entrances; it's a widespread effort, and heart-warming to see everyone pitching in to keep everything in order after so much snow dumped on us.

A few of the tents are almost buried on the outskirts of the compound, and there are massive twenty-foot drifts on the eastern edge.

I huddle deeper into my heavy coat, grateful for its warmth as I trudge along the shoveled path toward the main lodge. Snow crunches beneath my boots, and every breath puffs into visible clouds.

With each step, I remind myself of who I am. Luna of the Westwood Pack. Lucas' mate. His only mate. I have authority here, even if it sometimes feels like I'm still that scared girl running from her past.

"You can do this," I mutter under my breath, steeling myself for the confrontation ahead.

Ivy's face flashes in my mind, her perfect features always looking reasonable, with that strange smile on her face. I grit my teeth, pushing down the surge of irritation that threatens to overwhelm me.

It's not about her character. This is about the pack and putting a strain on our resources.

Granted, I should have noticed three nights ago and not today, but—well, there's been a lot to juggle.

It's perfectly reasonable for me to assert my authority, even if Ivy is our main point of contact with the Aspen Pack. Our alliance is important, but not at the cost of our pack's well-being.

I push open the door, the warmth of the lodge enveloping me as I step inside. The scent of woodsmoke is dense in here, thanks to the fire burning steadily, providing this space with much-needed heat.

Several cots are stacked and lined against the walls, giving people space to move around. Several folding tables and chairs are being taken down, now that we no longer need to keep everyone in as few buildings as possible.

Ivy's near the far wall, directing a group of younger wolves to clean the next group of tables. For a moment, I'm struck by how effortlessly she commands their attention. Not a single one of them stops to wonder if she has the authority to order them around. They just do as she says.

It's no wonder some of our pack members are drawn to her. Ivy would make a good Luna... somewhere else. Not here.

I make my way across the room, weaving between busy wolves scrubbing floors and wiping down surfaces. A few nod respectfully as I pass, and I return their greetings with a smile.

"Ivy," I call out as I approach, keeping my voice level. "I need to speak with you."

She turns, her green eyes meeting mine. Her face, as always, settles into a polite mask. "Of course, Ava. What can I do for you?"

I gesture toward a quieter corner of the lodge. "In private, if you don't mind."

Ivy nods, following me to the secluded spot. I can feel the eyes of the other wolves on us, curiosity piqued. I'm sure they've all heard the rumors by now.

Chapter 357 Ava: Confronting Her

Once we're relatively alone, I turn to face her. Up close, I'm reminded of how tall she is, towering over me by at least half a foot. She always seems smaller, with her more lithe and graceful figure.

I've burned a lot of fat lately, but I'll always be a little more round than she is, even at my fittest.

"Ivy," I begin, keeping my voice as firm as possible. "We have a small problem."

"Oh?" Her brow arches, and she tilts her head just a little.

Somehow I already feel on the defensive, even though I'm the one instigating the conversation.

"You pushed the kitchens into using too much of our stock during the last three days. I understand your reasoning, but it isn't your place to meddle. Elverly knows what she's doing, and now we are low on supplies. Everyone would have stayed warm and healthy, even without the additional protein."

Her eyebrows raise slightly. "Oh? I was under the impression that I was helping by ensuring everyone was well-fed. Several of the new arrivals were malnourished and weak, and needed a little extra care."

I shake my head, tamping down my frustration. "While your intentions might have been good, you've been putting a significant strain on our resources. We're facing a harsh winter, and we need to be mindful of our supplies. We can only afford so much food, and our hunters can't create miracles when there's nothing to hunt."

Ivy's expression doesn't change, but I notice a slight tightening around her eyes. "I see. And you believe I've overstepped my bounds?"

"Yes," I say, surprised by the steadiness in my voice. This is easier than I thought it would be. "I understand you're used to a certain level of authority in your pack, but here, decisions about our resources need to go through me." I pause. "Or Lucas. And in the event neither of us is available, Kellan, our beta."

She tilts her head, a small smile playing at her lips. "Of course, Luna Ava. I apologize if I've caused any inconvenience. I was merely trying to ensure the comfort of our allies."

There's something in her tone that sets me on edge, a hint of condescension that makes my hackles rise, if I had any. And is there a little emphasis on my title? But I push my feelings aside, resolving to remain professional.

"I appreciate your concern," I say, careful to keep my voice neutral. "But in the future, please consult with me before making any decisions that affect our pack's resources. We're all in this together, and we need to work as a team."

She nods, her smile widening. "Absolutely. I wouldn't dream of undermining your authority, Luna Ava. Is there anything else you need from me?"

I study her face, searching for any sign of insincerity. But her expression is a perfect mask of compliance and respect. It's unsettling.

"Thank you for understanding, Ivy. I look forward to working together more effectively in the future."

She inclines her head in a small bow. "As do I, Luna Ava. Your pack is lucky to have such a... conscientious leader."

With that, she turns and walks back to the group of young wolves, resuming her instructions as if our conversation never happened. I watch her for a moment, a nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach.

You did well, Selene says, though she also seems unsettled. You stood your ground.

I nod slightly, acknowledging her words. Yes, I stood my ground. I asserted my authority as Luna. So why do I feel like I've just lost an important battle?

* * *

Lisa's running on a cleared track, her dark hair bouncing in a ponytail behind her. Several young wolves, barely teenagers by the look of them, are scattered around the area, some running, others stretching. Their dedication is remarkable, even in this frigid weather.

As Lisa finishes her lap, she jogs towards me, her cheeks flushed red from exertion. Her breath comes out in rapid, visible puffs.

"Why are you pushing yourself so hard in this weather?"

Lisa takes a moment to catch her breath before responding. "It's... it's about the magitech," she pants. "My physical condition affects how drained I get when I use it."

I tilt my head, studying her closely. Now that she says it, there's something different about her energy, something I hadn't noticed before. It's as if she's surrounded by a faint aura of magic, not quite inside her but coating her like a second skin.

"Why does your physical condition matter?" I ask, curiosity now piqued by this strange revelation. None of the wolves have a similar feeling to them.

Lisa furrows her brow, clearly trying to recall something. "It's... ugh, how did the Grand Sage explain it?" She flaps her hands in frustration. "Something about how my body uses the magic in the air to recover. I don't really remember the details, to be honest."

"Is it because of the Fae-blessing thing?"

She nods, reaching for an insulated cooler nearby and pulling out a water bottle. Even in winter, it's important to stay hydrated.

I stare at the coolers thoughtfully. "We're using coolers to keep water from freezing in winter, when usually we'd use them to keep water cold in summer."

Lisa lowers the bottle, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "Yeah, it is weird when you think about it."

"How are you holding up with all of this?" I ask, gesturing vaguely at the training grounds and the young wolves still running their laps.

Lisa grimaces. "Getting tired of being the slowest one, but it's fine. I can't really hold my own during spars, but I'm getting better at avoiding hits. I just can't keep up."

We head toward Kellan's cabin, crunching over a shoveled path to get there. It's like walking through a snow-maze, with tunnels through snow that's sometimes as deep as three or four feet.

"Tell me more about your magitech training. How's it going?"

"Mm. I think it's going okay, but I'm not sure if it's a weapon that'll actually be helpful in the grand scheme of things."

Almost tripping over some branches hidden under the snow, I kick them to the side so I don't do that again. Which I totally would—I've fallen on my face more times than I want to admit.

"How so?"

Lisa's face scrunches up as she thinks. "So, the wrist brace is pretty cool, but it's got this whole process before I can actually use it. Those seconds are really going to be detrimental mid-fight. Oh, and I have to keep replenishing it with blood."

It's instinctual to cringe at that. "Blood? That sounds a little too vampiric for my taste."

Lisa nods vigorously. "I know, right? It's weird. But you know, Fae-blessed and whatnot. My blood holds magic that I can't use myself. The brace sort of... activates it, I guess? I don't know the science behind it." She pauses. "Or magic, I guess."

It's fascinating, but also a bit unsettling. The idea of using blood for anything magical always makes me uneasy.

We reach Kellan's cabin, and I stomp the snow off my boots before entering. The warmth inside is a welcome relief.

Lisa doesn't waste any time. "I need a hot shower after that run," she announces, already peeling off layers of clothing as she heads for the bathroom.

Chapter 358 Ava: Girl Talk

Left alone, I take the opportunity to glance around the cabin. It's cozy, with a rustic charm that suits Kellan. My eyes land on the couch, and I'm surprised to see a pillow and blanket neatly folded at one end. It looks like Kellan's been sleeping there.

The realization makes me frown. I knew things were awkward between Lisa and Kellan, but I didn't realize it had gotten to the point where they weren't even sharing a bed. The whole "fated mates" situation is clearly causing more tension than I'd thought.

I settle into an armchair to wait.

The shower shuts off, and a few minutes later, Lisa emerges wrapped in a fluffy towel, her hair damp and skin flushed from the hot water.

"Feel better?" I ask.

She nods, grabbing some clothes from a nearby dresser. "Much. Nothing like a hot shower after freezing your butt off outside."

As she dresses, I can't help but ask about what I've noticed. "So, um, is Kellan sleeping on the couch?"

Lisa pauses, her shirt halfway over her head. She pulls it down slowly, avoiding my gaze. "Yeah."

I wait, giving her space to elaborate if she wants to. After a moment, she sighs and sits on the edge of the bed.

"It's just... this whole fated mates thing is a lot, you know? I mean, I like Kellan. He's great. But it feels like there's all this pressure and expectation for our future, and I'm not sure I'm ready for that."

Sympathetic to her plight, I can only nod. "It's a big adjustment, especially for someone who wasn't raised in pack culture."

Lisa runs a hand through her damp hair. "Exactly. And Kellan's been so patient and understanding, but I can tell it's hard for him too. But, you know, he's Kellan, and always

trying to be a gentleman. So he decided he should give me even more space the other day."

"Hence the couch," I conclude.

"Hence the couch," she agrees with a wry smile.

I lean back in the chair, considering her words. Despite her words, there's a layer of frustration in her voice.

"How are you feeling about it all?"

Lisa shrugs, her expression a mix of emotions. "Honestly? I'm not sure. Part of me is drawn to Kellan in a way I can't explain. But another part of me is terrified of what it all means. I mean, am I supposed to just accept that some mystical force has decided who I'm meant to be with for the rest of my life?"

I think about my own complicated relationship with Lucas, the push and pull between us. "I get it," I say softly. "It's not always as simple as the stories make it out to be."

Lisa looks at me gratefully. "Exactly. And then there's all this other stuff going on. It's a lot to process."

"Have you talked to Kellan about how you're feeling?"

She sighs. "A little. But every time I do, it's like he thinks he's not giving me enough space, and it drives us further..." A vague gesture toward the couch. "Apart. Anyway. Enough about us."

I arch a brow, but don't push the subject any further. If she doesn't want to talk about it, I'm not going to force her.

"How are things with you and Lucas?"

I can't help but chuckle at her attempt to change the subject. "Oh, you know. Complicated in our own special way."

Lisa raises an eyebrow. "Care to elaborate?"

I consider for a moment. "Have you heard any rumors lately?"

* * *

An hour later, armed with a tiny stash of venison jerky, four bottles of water, a freshly baked loaf of bread, and a watery soup that's more potatoes than sausage—but surprisingly delicious—Lisa slams her hand against Kellan's dining table.

"She's outrageous."

Shrugging, I shred a sliver of jerky into my soup. "But what am I supposed to do? She isn't technically doing anything. And she might get a little too close to Lucas, but he doesn't do anything to raise her hopes, either."

"Send her back to Washington. We don't need her here."

I blow on my soup, even though it's already lukewarm, before taking a bite. As I chew, a warmth spreads through me that has nothing to do with the temperature of the food. It's nice to have someone be outraged on my behalf. Lisa always delivers on that front.

Me, too, Selene protests.

Yes, yes, you too.

"I can't just send her back," I say finally. "She's the official liaison between packs."

Lisa's frowns, stabbing her spoon into her soup in a savage motion. "But Lucas and Clayton are friends, right? Can't Lucas just tell Clayton what's going on?"

"Once again, aside from overstepping her boundaries about the food, Ivy hasn't technically done anything wrong. And she's very popular among both packs."

"But she's spreading these awful rumors!"

"Have you ever heard any of this from Ivy's own mouth?"

Lisa scowls, her fingers tightening around her spoon. "The rumors wouldn't be so prevalent if she would stop them. Since she isn't, they're basically coming from her."

I lean back in my chair, considering her words. She's not entirely wrong, but the situation is more complex than that. "It seems like a stupid reason to sow discord between our packs. Especially considering what Lucas and Clayton had to overcome to even remain friends after—well, you know."

She goes silent at that, the bluster knocked out of her. She swirls her spoon in her soup, even though there's very little left in her bowl. The silence stretches between us, filled only by the soft clink of metal against ceramic.

"That must be weird," she says finally, her voice quiet.

"Yeah," I agree heavily. "It really is."

"I just wish..." Lisa starts, then trails off. She looks up at me, her eyes filled with a mix of frustration and concern. "I just wish it was easier for you. You've been through so much already."

"I wish things were easier for all of us." Reaching over, I poke at her shoulder. "For you, too. We still haven't gotten word about your parents. That's way worse than having to deal with Ivy on a daily basis."

She sighs. "Yeah. It sucks."

There isn't much to say to that. It does suck. A lot. Her parents have no idea she's alive and healthy and thriving here.

We don't know if they're alive, either.

"You know," I say, breaking the silence, "maybe we're looking at this all wrong. Instead of trying to get rid of Ivy, maybe we need to find a way to work with her."

Lisa looks skeptical. "Work with her? After everything she's done?"

I shrug. "She hasn't really done anything, remember? And she is good at her job. Maybe if we include her more, make her feel like she's truly part of the pack, she'll be less likely to cause problems. I've been keeping her at arm's length because she always makes me feel awkward, but..."

"Or she'll use it as an opportunity to get closer to Lucas," Lisa mutters.

"Maybe," I concede, because Lisa's probably right. What's that saying? A leopard doesn't change its spots. "But Lucas has made his choice clear. And if Ivy can't respect that, then she'll be the one causing problems, not me."

Lisa nods slowly, considering my words. "I guess that makes sense. But Ava, you have to promise me something."

"What's that?"

"Don't let her walk all over you. You're the Luna of this pack. You have power, whether you realize it or not."

I feel a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth. "I promise. No doormat Ava here."

Chapter 359 Ava: Reinforcing Wards

Lucas is almost to Wolf's Landing, Selene reports, my ever-dutiful link to the pack since I can't hear them myself. He sounds exhausted.

"I'm sure he is."

I trudge through the snow, each step a battle against the elements. The white expanse stretches before me, sometimes reaching my waist.

"Damn it," I mutter, yanking my foot free from a particularly deep drift. "We really need to invest in some snowshoes."

Ahead of me, my bodyguards forge a path in their wolf forms. Their massive paws act as natural snowshoes, distributing their weight and making it easier for them to navigate the treacherous terrain. I envy their effortless grace as I stumble along behind them.

Without them breaking the trail, it would be even worse.

We're approaching the first ward, Selene encourages me. We've made better time than I expected.

I nod, focusing on the task at hand. The wards are a crucial part of our defense, and maintaining them has become a significant part of my duties as Luna. It's time-consuming work, but necessary. Especially now, with the recent blizzard potentially compromising their integrity.

"Grimoire," I call out, my voice muffled by the thick scarf wrapped around my face. "Any signs of damage?"

The magical tome materializes beside me, taking the form of a silver fox. His fur shimmers against the white snow.

Not that I can sense. Remember that while a strong storm can wipe out the energy signature of a weak ward, it isn't common when they are properly maintained. I still think you're being overly cautious.

"I'm not taking chances. Not with the pack's safety."

Your caution is commendable, though we might all freeze to death.

I can feel the first ward before long, a tingling sensation that dances across my skin, even beneath the layers of fur fashioned into a coat, courtesy of our hunters. As we draw closer, I extend my senses, probing the magical barrier for any signs of weakness or decay.

To my relief, the ward seems intact. Its energy pulses steadily, a testament to the care and attention I've poured into it. But there's always room for improvement.

"I want to strengthen the obfuscation element," I tell Grimoire, who's bounding through the snow as if he's a pup himself. "Make it harder for those taint-touched wolves to find us. Or anything else that might be out there."

Grimoire pauses in his joyous bounding. A wise precaution.

It's surprisingly easy to reinforce obfuscation wards. It's an additional one, not part of the main security system, and simpler than you'd think.

After melting an area of snow, thanks to a bit of summoned fire, I simply draw a simple glyph into the ground and infuse it with magic.

Legend—well, Grimoire—states that this rune was created by one of the Fae gods, though he admits the history is a little fuzzy, even to him. Despite his longevity, he technically only came into power when created.

It's all very mystical and strange, and apparently the concept of time back then was quite fluid to his senses. Grimoire's very existence is remarkable, something us mere mortals can't truly fathom.

More than a book, but not any sort of god, and not even really a person.

Power flows from me into the ward, guided by my will and Grimoire's quiet instructions. The cold fades away, replaced by the warmth of my magic.

Remember to keep your instructions at the forefront of your mind. This glyph will absorb its instructions from you and act accordingly. It is very simplistic in that aspect.

Finally, I open my eyes, swaying slightly; my balance is off now that my focus is back in my physical body. Following magical currents leaves me a little dizzy.

One of my bodyguards—pretty sure it's Marcus—steadies me with his massive furry body.

"Thanks," I murmur, patting his flank. To Grimoire, I ask, "How's it look?"

The magical fox circles the area, his nose twitching as he assesses my work. The obfuscation element is significantly stronger. It should prove quite challenging for any unwanted visitors to penetrate. It's a little shaky, but I think it should do as you want.

"Good. But we're not done yet. How many more wards do we need to check today?"

Three more on this patrol route.

We set off again, the wolves breaking trail as before. The going is a little easier this time. The wolves guarding me also seem to have perfected how they break the trail for me,

leaving a flatter path. On the other hand, the wind has picked up, driving bits of ice into any exposed skin.

As we approach the second ward, I steel myself for another round of magical exertion. The fatigue from reinforcing the first ward lingers, a dull ache behind my eyes, but I push it aside. There's work to be done.

This ward feels different from the first—not weaker, exactly, but less stable. The energy fluctuates in a way that sets my teeth on edge. It's jarring.

"Grimoire," I call out, "are you sensing this?"

Indeed. It seems the storm has had some effect on this one. Not catastrophic, but certainly in need of attention.

I nod, already reaching out with my magic to assess the damage. It's my first time touching a damaged ward, but somehow it all maps out in my head. I've created enough of them. It's easy to narrow down the areas of instability.

It's going to take more work to fix this one.

The best way to describe it is—I don't know. Weaving, I guess, though I'm not an expert. Back and forth, in careful layers of magic, creating little patches of stability where damage has torn away at the ward.

By the time I'm done, you can't even see where the damage was. It all melts into the ward, leaving it as pristine as the day I created it.

When I finally open my eyes, the world spins for a moment before settling.

Marcus nudges at my elbow with a whine.

He wants to know if you want to return. He's worried you're pushing too hard today.

"I'm okay. There's two more left. Let's keep moving."

Chapter 360 Lucas: Post-Blizzard Return

LUCAS

Ava's nowhere to be found, but Aurum is quick to let me know she's checking on her wards again.

He sounds grumpy, and I don't blame him.

The woman's turned into a bit of a workaholic when it comes to her magic wards. I don't understand them—they're far more advanced and finicky compared to the pack wards we've used for generations. She says it's because they're practically useless, but I think they work just fine.

Aside from the vampire problem, which probably means she's right. But it still shouldn't need to go out near-daily to check on them, right?

But I can appreciate her dedication to our pack's safety, and it's true no one's stumbled upon us since she put them up.

It would just be nice if she'd check on her mate as religiously as she checks on those damn wards.

Jealousy, Aurum whispers in the back of my head.

Shut up. You feel the same way.

His agreement is without guile. Aurum is true to himself and comfortable with his insecurity involving our mates. Goddess knows he makes a scene around Selene whenever he gets a chance.

Mate, he says wistfully.

I sigh, stamping my feet to dislodge the snow from my boots. The cold seeps into my bones, and I head straight for the shower, eager to warm up. As the hot water cascades over me, I make a firm decision.

We're staying in tonight. No scouting runs, no training, no debriefings. I just want to spend the night with Ava. Eat a nice dinner together. Relax. Ask her about her day...

And more.

My mind drifts to the carnal side. The curve of her hips, the softness of her skin. Aurum rumbles his approval in the back of my mind. Just as I'm imagining the sound of her cries as I slam into her from behind, a strange sound interrupts the pleasant daydream.

I shut off the water, straining to hear. It's hard to smell anything over the powerful scent of Ava's bodywash—something I've gotten into the habit of using when I miss her.

Quickly exiting the shower, I slap a towel around my waist, tracking water everywhere as I head to the living room. Whoever it is, it isn't pack. Must be Aspen.

The scent hits me first, feminine and familiar.

Ivy.

What the hell is she doing here?

There are no guards; they're out with Ava. There's no need to guard this place when she isn't here. Ava's absence means Ivy waltzed right in without hindrance. Irritation flickers at the breach of protocol.

"Ivy," I call out, keeping my voice level. "What are you doing here?"

Her eyes rove over my half-naked form. Something in her gaze makes my skin crawl. She takes a step closer, too close for comfort.

I let out a strong pulse of alpha power, stopping her in her tracks. Her eyes widen. There's fear, yes, but something else I'd rather not name. I've been doing my best to pretend I don't notice it.

"Alpha," she says breathily, recovering quickly. "I apologize for the intrusion. I have urgent news about the food supplies. We're running dangerously low on—"

I cut her off with a raised hand. "And this couldn't wait until morning? Or be relayed through proper channels?"

She blinks, her bright green eyes wide and innocent. "I thought it best to inform you immediately. Our people's welfare is at stake."

It sounds legitimate on the surface. But I've been an alpha too long to fall for such transparent manipulation. And the way she says our people sets my hackles to rising.

"Ivy," I say, my voice low and dangerous. "There's no reason for you to barge into the Alpha's quarters for such a paltry reason. Food supplies, while important, are not an emergency that requires you to enter my private space uninvited. Further, you can speak with my Luna."

She opens her mouth to protest, but I continue, "Furthermore, my Luna is in charge of the food situation here. Any further concerns should be brought to her attention first, as she's the Luna of this pack."

Her face twists for a moment before smoothing out. "Of course, Alpha. I meant no disrespect. I simply thought—"

"You thought wrong," I interrupt, my patience wearing thin. "Now, I suggest you leave. Immediately."

She hesitates, her eyes darting around the room. Looking for what, I wonder? But then she nods, backing away slowly.

"My apologies, Alpha. It won't happen again."

I watch her go, my jaw clenched. Something about this doesn't sit right. Ivy's always been ambitious, even when she was younger. She has more drive and thirst for power, probably from living in her brother's shadow.

But she's never seemed to be the kind of person to play such strange games.

Aurum growls in my mind; her scent is strong, and he doesn't like it.

I flex my hands, frustration coursing through me as I watch Ivy's retreating form. The door closes behind her, but the unease lingers. With a low growl, I turn and head back to the shower. The warm water cascades over me once more, but it does little to soothe my agitation.

My mind races, replaying Ivy's unexpected visit. Her flimsy excuse, the way her eyes roamed over my body—it's a sign that the situation's growing untenable. I've done my best to avoid anything remotely questionable between us, underlying Ava's position at every possible chance.

But it seems like things are escalating.

It all sets my teeth on edge. I scrub my skin harder than necessary, as if I could wash away the memory of her presence in our home.

"Dammit," I mutter, rinsing off the soap. The scent of Ava's body wash fills my nostrils again, and a different kind of tension coils in my gut. I close my eyes, letting the familiar scent wash over me. It's not enough. I want—no, need—my mate here.

Now.

My cock twitches, responding to thoughts of my mate. I groan, leaning my forehead against the cool tile of the shower wall. The contrast of temperatures sends a shiver down my spine, and I can't help but imagine Ava's cool hands on my heated skin.

"Fuck," I breathe, struggling to control my thoughts.