

# Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted

## Chapter 361 Ava: Frenzied Hello

Two seconds after I make it through the door, a dark figure pounces on me.

For a split second, panic jacks up my heart rate. Then campfire smoke and amber fill the space around me, and I realize it's Lucas.

A squeal escapes my lips as he shoves me against the door, his mouth crashing onto mine. The cold from outside vanishes in an instant, replaced by a searing heat that threatens to consume me whole. His lips move with a desperate urgency, stealing my breath and scattering my thoughts.

For a moment, I lose myself in the passion of our reunion. My fingers tangle in his hair, pulling him closer as if I could meld us into one being. But reality intrudes as I feel the snow melting between us, dampening his skin.

"Lucas," I mutter against his lips, trying to push him away. "I'm covered in snow."

He doesn't budge an inch. "Don't care," he growls, capturing my mouth again.

His hands cup my face, thumbs stroking my cheeks as he deepens the kiss. The heat radiating from his palms feels like a furnace against my chilled skin. It's almost too much, too intense. I wonder briefly if I'm that cold from being outside, or if he's running hotter than usual.

With a herculean effort, I manage to slip out of his grasp. My breath comes in short pants as I move to take off my jacket and boots. Lucas prowls behind me, his presence almost palpable. There's something different about him, an edge of agitation that isn't normal. His movements are more predatory, reminding me of a wolf at hunt.

Concern creeps into my voice as I turn to face him. "Are you okay?"

His golden eyes bore into mine, pupils dilated. The intensity of his gaze sends a shiver down my spine that has nothing to do with the lingering cold. He doesn't answer immediately, just continues to watch me with that predatory focus.

"Lucas?" I prompt again, really worried now.

He takes a step closer, and I instinctively back up until I hit the wall. His scent envelops me, stronger and more potent than usual. It's intoxicating, making my head spin.

"I missed you," he finally says, his voice a low rumble that I feel more than hear.

Relief floods through me, but it's short-lived as I notice the slight tremor in his hands. Something isn't right. "I missed you too, but you're acting strange. What's going on?"

Lucas leans in, burying his face in the crook of my neck. His breath is hot against my skin as he inhales deeply. "You smell so good," he murmurs, nuzzling the spot where my neck meets my shoulder.

A gasp escapes me as his teeth graze my skin. Heat pools in my belly, desire warring with concern. "Talk to me. What's wrong?"

He pulls back slightly, his eyes meeting mine. There's a wildness there that both thrills and terrifies me. "Nothing happened," he says, but there's a tension in his jaw that tells me he's not being entirely truthful.

Before I can press Lucas further, his lips capture mine again. The intensity of his kiss steals my breath and scatters my thoughts. His hands slide down my sides, leaving trails of fire in their wake. I melt into him, my body responding to his touch even as my mind struggles to keep up.

He backs me against the wall, his body pressing against mine as he trails hot kisses along my jaw and down my neck. A soft moan escapes me as he nips at the sensitive spot just below my ear. Right over my scar. My mating mark.

My fingers tangle in his hair, holding him close.

Another searing kiss, his tongue sweeping into my mouth.

My body arches into his touch. One of his hands slides under my shirt, calloused fingers skimming across my bare skin. Sparks of pleasure shoot through me, and I can't help but respond, my own hands exploring the hard planes of his chest. He's only wearing a pair of jeans, leaving nothing but skin to welcome my touch.

He breaks the kiss, both of us panting for air. Eyes of molten gold are filled with a hunger that makes my knees weak.

My legs wrap around his waist as he lifts me, my hips cuddling against him. He carries me to the bed, never breaking the kiss, and we fall onto the mattress in a tangle of limbs, hands roaming and exploring with frantic urgency.

Clothes are shed hastily, tossed aside without care. His mouth leaves a trail of fire across my skin, driving coherent thought from my mind. All I can focus on is the feel of him, the taste of his skin, the sound of his ragged breathing.

Lucas' mouth is heaven, but it's his hands that steal the breath from my lungs. They skate across my thighs, my hips, tracing paths of fire over my skin. Rough fingers twist and pinch at my nipples, hard and aching for his attention. My fingers weave through his hair, nails digging into his scalp as I feel the mattress shift with his movement.

He dives between my legs, spreading them wide as he licks and laps at the very core of me. A whimper escapes me, half moan, half sob.

The warmth of his tongue slides between my folds, the tip slick and hot against my clit. Lazy licks build a pleasure so intense I can barely stand it. My hips buck off the bed, seeking more friction. I want to grind against his face, to shove myself against that wicked mouth. But he holds me down with firm hands on my thighs, his growl vibrating against my sensitive flesh.

"Please," I beg. It comes out half-strangled, the word torn from my throat as he teases my clit with the flat of his tongue.

One of his large hands moves to my breast, thumb rubbing over the aching peak. My back arches off the bed, my hips pressing up into his mouth.

"Lucas," I gasp, my hands fisting in the blankets. My fingers find the edge of the mattress, knuckles turning white as he continues to torment me with slow, languid licks. "Please, Lucas. I need..."

I can't finish the sentence, but he knows what I need. What I've always needed from him. His mouth leaves my pussy, and I whine in protest, hips circling the air as I search for his tongue.

## Chapter 362 Ava: His Pace

Lucas shifts, crawling up my body until his mouth hovers over mine. His breath fans across my lips, his eyes burning into mine. "Tell me what you need, mate," he whispers, voice hoarse with arousal. "Tell me what you want me to do."

I want him to devour me. To make me forget everything but the feel of him against me, inside me.

"Say it," he insists, lips brushing against mine. "Tell me what you want."

"You," I whisper, hands skimming down his sides. "I want you."

His cock is hard against my thigh, thick and hot. I wrap my hand around it, stroking him slowly as he kisses me. It's not enough. Not nearly enough.

"You have me," he growls, nipping at my jaw. "Always."

His mouth finds mine, devouring me in a brutal kiss that leaves me breathless. My hand moves between us, guiding him to my entrance. Hot. Warm. Everything I need, as anticipation has my thighs shaking.

One thrust and he's inside, filling me in one smooth stroke. The stretch is divine, and I throw my head back with a moan, lifting my hips to urge him deeper.

A quick roll of his hips obliges, but then he pulls out slowly before slamming back in. It's a slow, torturous pace, and he doesn't waver, even as I scramble to grip his hips and drag him forward. Each movement drags a whimper from me, my body arching to meet his. I want faster, harder, but he holds me down, his hands firm on my hips.

He knows what I need but takes what he wants. Slow and steady, drawing out the pleasure until it builds to an unbearable pitch. I can feel it coiling in my belly, a tight knot of sensation that threatens to snap me in two.

"Lucas, please," I beg, hands clawing at his back. My fingers dig into his shoulders, trying to drag him closer, to pull him in deeper.

He whispers against my lips, tongue tracing the shell of my ear. "I've got you, little mate. Let go."

Another thrust, harder than the last. His cock hits that sweet spot deep inside and my world explodes in a burst of color and light, pleasure shooting through me like an electric current. I cry out, my back arching off the bed as I shatter around him.

Lucas continues to move, drawing out my orgasm until it tapers off into aftershocks. I'm boneless, floating in a haze of pleasure, but he isn't done with me yet.

He rolls us over until I'm straddling his hips, his cock still buried deep inside me. My breasts bounce as he pushes up into me, his hands gripping my hips. I move with him, riding him slowly as my breath comes in ragged gasps.

It always leaves me feeling a little insecure up here, having him watch me from below.

"Am I too heavy?" I shift my weight, worried that I might be crushing him, even if it's ridiculous. The man's stronger than an ox.

Lucas groans, pulling me tighter against him. "No, little mate. You're perfect."

The incredible slide of pleasure and friction makes it hard to think, to focus. I move experimentally, my body taking over where my brain falters. The drag and pull of his cock inside me has me moaning and rocking my hips forward, back, forward again.

Oh, that's... Yeah.

That's what I need.

"That's it," he murmurs, his hands grabbing my hips to help guide me, showing me the rhythm he wants. "You like that, don't you, little witch?"

The endearment sends a little shiver over my skin.

His fingers bite into my hips, his thumbs rubbing over the flare of my hip bones. My moan fills the room, my body clenching around him as he thrusts up into me. The pace is leisurely, almost lazy, but every movement drags another whimper from my throat.

It's probably the least ladylike I've ever sounded, but I don't care. Not even if the pack can hear it all outside our window. I'm beyond embarrassment, beyond care.

There's only this—this and Lucas. My body moves of its own accord, and the gentle glide of his cock inside me turns my thighs to liquid fire. They shake from the effort. It's harder than I thought it would be.

"That's it," he says again, voice rougher now, more strained. "You're doing so good, little mate. Come on. Faster. Ride me harder."

Harder. I can do harder. I lean forward, bracing my hands on his shoulders, and move faster, finding a rhythm we both need. His hips snap up to meet mine, his back arching off the bed. His eyes burn into mine, primal, hungry.

The bed creaks beneath us, the feral sound of our bodies slapping together filling my ears. No words are needed as his hands fall away from my hips, skimming up my sides to cup my breasts instead. His thumbs brush over my nipples, and electricity shoots straight to my core.

"Oh—"

Breath is wrenched from my lungs as my body tenses. Lucas rolls his hips, lifting to meet me, and the world tilts on its axis. Everything narrows down to the feel of him inside me, the drag and pull of my body moving against his.

I don't know how long we move, lost in a rhythm dictated by our bodies and needs. It's carnal. Sensual. Totally and utterly focused on the pleasure building between us, drawn out in long, delicious strokes.

His hands fall away from my breasts, fingers tangling in my hair as he pulls me down for a kiss. I taste myself on his lips, the tang of sweat and sex, and his moan vibrates against my mouth. I'm breathless, panting as I move against him, lost in the slide and glide of our bodies.

"That's it," he whispers against my lips, his breath hot and heavy. "Come for me again, little mate. Let me feel it."

I don't need to be told twice. My body is coiled tight, wound like a spring, and when he shifts his hips, hitting that spot deep inside that lights up my nerve endings, I shatter once again. I cry out, my body bowing as I fall apart around him. Lucas lets out a hoarse shout as he follows, his body tensing beneath mine.

For a long moment, we're frozen, our sweat-slicked bodies pressed together.

My legs burn, making me wonder how Lucas does it every time, without a single complaint. Men are just made different, I guess.

Still trembling with aftershocks, I collapse onto his chest. I'm a mass of quivery Ava pudding, and I have no energy left in me. His heart thunders beneath my ear, matching the rapid beat of my own.

Between the wards, traveling miles in the snow, and our fun exercise, I'm ready for some serious snuggles and a long nap—

The world spins as Lucas rolls us over, pinning me beneath him once more. His amber eyes burn with renewed hunger.

"Not done with you yet, little mate."

"No, no, no." I laugh breathlessly, slapping my palm over his mouth before he can kiss me. "I'll die if we go again. My legs already feel like jelly."

His eyes glitter with amusement above my hand, and he presses a kiss to my palm. "Shower then? We both need to clean up."

"Now that," I say, lowering my hand to trace his jaw, "sounds perfect."

## Chapter 363 Ava: He Lied!

He lied.

That asshole motherfucker lied.

Lied. To my face.

To.

My.

Face.

My glare could melt steel, but Lucas just pulls his shirt over his head, muscles rippling with the movement. Our blanket is clutched tight against my chest—not that there's any point in modesty after last night, but right now I need all the armor I can get.

He gets ideas when he sees my bare skin.

"You lied to me."

"Did I?" His eyebrow arches as he buttons his jeans. "We showered."

"Oh, is that what you call what happened in there?" Heat floods my cheeks at the memory. My skin bears the evidence of his attention—little marks scattered across my collarbone, my breasts, my thighs. Everything aches in the most delicious way, but that's not the point. "You said we'd clean up."

"And we did." His lips twitch. "Eventually."

"After you—" My voice catches. Even now, after everything we've done, after months of intimacy, certain words stick in my throat.

"After I what?" The bastard's enjoying this.

"You know what."

"I never said I wouldn't." He shrugs, all false innocence. "You assumed."

I pull the blanket higher, wincing as muscles protest the movement. "You're impossible."

"You weren't complaining last night." He crosses the room, and before I can dodge, his lips press against my forehead. "Rest today. You need it."

The pillow flies from my hand, but he's already moving, laughing as he sidesteps my attack.

"Jerk!"

A blast of arctic air hits my bare skin as Lucas disappears through the door. The blanket does little to shield me from winter's bite, and every muscle protests as I force myself to stand.

"Never again," I mutter, hobbling toward the bathroom. "Never trusting that lying Alpha again."

You knew exactly what would happen the moment he stepped into that shower with you.

"Whose side are you on?" The hot water stings as it hits my shoulders, washing away the evidence of our activities. Steam rises around me, and I lean against the tile wall for support.

My own, as always. Selene's mental yawn echoes through my mind. Though I must say, our mate's enthusiasm is entertaining.

"Please don't." Heat creeps up my neck that has nothing to do with the shower. "It's bad enough you have to witness everything."

"Speaking of witnessing everything." Grimoire materializes on the counter, in his child form, his flame-red hair dulled by the steam. "Do you two have any idea how difficult it is to maintain my form when you're—"

Opening the shower door, I snap, "Don't you dare finish that sentence." Grabbing my loofah, I point it at him threateningly. "And go be a book somewhere. It's weird to have you watching me while I'm naked."

"When you're engaging in carnal relations," he continues, ignoring my warning. "The amount of magic you release during those moments is astronomical. Your control is nonexistent. How awkward would that be, to have me appear next to your bed while you were in the middle of... that?"

Poor baby. Selene's amusement fills my head. Is the ancient being uncomfortable with a little physical affection?

"I am not uncomfortable." Grimoire straightens his shoulders, looking for all the world like a sulky child. "I simply find the act far too intimate for someone of my experience."

You mean you're a prude.

"I am several millennia old!"

"And currently arguing about my sex life while I'm naked in the shower." Slamming the shower door shut as gently as I can manage while showing a little temper, I glare at Grimoire through the glass.

Squeezing shampoo into my palm with more force than necessary, I add with as much calm as I can fake, "Can we not? I think it's reasonable to shower in private. Necessary, even."

He started it.

"I most certainly did not. I merely pointed out—"



"Both of you, shut up." Soap suds slide down my back as I rinse my hair. "Or I swear I'll bind you both into actual books and donate you to a library."

Impossible.

"I'm already a book."

"I'll donate one of you as a rug and one of you as a book, then."

Grimoire looks unsatisfied

You don't know how to skin animals.

"Is that your only concern, Selene? Because I can learn."

The silence in my head is satisfying, and Grimoire disappears from the counter.

A mindless tune escapes my lips as I finish rinsing off, letting the hot water soothe my aching muscles. Stepping out, I wrap a fluffy towel around myself and pause.

Wait a second.

The counter's empty.

I peek into the bedroom. Nothing but rumpled sheets and scattered clothes from last night's activities, as I expect. Water drips down my legs as I pad into the living room, leaving wet footprints on the wooden floor.

The messenger bag hangs innocently by the door.

Why are you getting the house wet? Selene asks, sounding exasperated. She must have come back in while I was showering, and has what suspiciously looks like jam on her muzzle. Probably the toast with jam Lucas made for me before he got dressed.

Selene has a small problem with stealing food off the counter. She figures if I don't eat it, it's fair game.

But more importantly—I poke at Grimoire's bag.

"How the hell did you appear in the bathroom when your book form is all the way over here?"

Grimoire materializes beside me, his childlike face twisted in a sour expression. "Our bond has grown again. Something someone of your magical caliber should be able to detect."

"I'm sorry—" The words slip out automatically before I narrow my eyes. Reaching out with my magic, I probe our connection. "Wait. It feels exactly the same to me."

He sighs, shoulders slumping. "Sometimes you're very slow for someone so talented."

I step toward him with a scowl. "Want to repeat that?"

"Fine." He backs away, hands raised. "I can project a spiritual form of myself within a few feet if I have enough power banked."

"What does that mean?"

"Exactly what I said." His form flickers, shifting into a small fox before returning to the child-shape. He floats upward, pointing toward his bag. "See? I'm still right there."

I peek inside the bag. Sure enough, there's his book form, exactly where I left it. "But how—"

His sulky expression deepens as he crosses his arms, floating cross-legged in the air. "With all the work we've been doing together, isn't it natural for our bond to grow closer?"

Not as close as ours, Selene says, slipping behind me to rub her head against my thigh. Pieces of fur stick to my wet skin, and I shove her away.

"At least I don't shed," he snarks back.

Can't really argue with that. Leaving them to their mild rivalry, I pull Selene's fur off my leg before getting dressed and cleaning up all my wet footprints. By the time they've insulted each other's ancestors, IQ levels, and their taste in food, I'm done.

"So." I cross my arms, staring at Grimoire's floating form. "Are you ever going to explain how I'm supposed to recognize when our bond gets stronger? Or am I just supposed to guess?"

His childlike form shimmers, and he waves a dismissive hand. "You should be able to feel it."

"But I can't."

"Then I don't know what to tell you." He floats higher, legs still crossed. "It should just feel stronger. More present. Like a rope getting thicker, or a river growing wider."

"That's not helpful."

"It feels stronger to me." His shoulders lift in another shrug. "Much stronger."

Maybe it means she doesn't like you as much as you like her. Selene's mental voice drips with lazy amusement. She stretches out on the floor, front paws crossed. Simple explanation.

Grimoire's form flickers, his mouth dropping open. "That is not how bonds work! They're a two-way connection, built on—" His hands flap as he sputters. "The bond grows naturally through use and trust. It has nothing to do with liking each other."

His form solidifies as he regains his composure.

Keep telling yourself that.

"Are you sure?" I press my lips together, fighting a smile at his scandalized expression. "Because Selene might have a point."

"She does not have a point." Grimoire's feet touch the ground and he stalks toward me, every inch the offended ancient being trapped in a child's form. "Our bond is sacred. Pure. Based on—"

Like.

"Stop that!" His voice cracks. "You're both impossible."

## Chapter 364 Ava: Spreading Contamination

The next week is busy.

Reports of scouts encountering aggressive rogues. Even angry humans, armed with guns.

Three wolves are lost in the resulting skirmishes, and several are injured. While many heal within a day or two, some have spent the rest of the week in our hospital. Not all wolves heal quickly.

The snow crunches under my boots as I trudge forward, my breath visible in the frigid air. Marcus and Greg flank me in their human forms while five other wolves circle our perimeter, their thick winter coats blending with the snow-covered landscape.

"There's another pocket ahead." My voice comes out raspy from the cold. "About fifty yards to the right of that fallen pine."

Marcus nods, his dark eyes scanning the treeline. "Same protocol as usual?"

"Yes. Keep your distance when I start the purification."

The taint feels different today—heavier, more viscous. Like tar seeping into the earth. Each step closer makes my skin prickle with unease.

It's been getting worse.

"Ready?" Greg asks, positioning himself just behind me.

I pull off my gloves and stretch my fingers. The cold bites into my skin, but I've learned that direct contact makes it all easier. "As I'll ever be."

The wolves spread out in a wider circle as I approach the contaminated area. No vegetation grows here—just dead, blackened earth in a perfect circle. The taint didn't affect the surrounding area at first. Lately, it's as if it's eating into the earth itself. Before, it was like an invisible cloud living above ground. Now, it's like it's fusing into everything.

The ground. Trees. Every living being that passes through it. Even squirrels seem to have gone mad.

We've had to be careful hunting; I have to look over all the game our hunters bring home. There's no idea what will happen if we ingested corrupted meat.

Drawing in a deep breath, I press my palms against the frozen ground. The taint immediately responds, writhing beneath the surface like a living thing. It fights me as I draw it up through the soil, into my hands.

Pain shoots through my arms, sharp and biting. The alien darkness is strange and hostile, fighting me every step of the way. My magic pushes back against it, trying to transform the corruption into pure energy.

"Breathe through it," Marcus coaches from several feet away. "You've got this." Of course, he doesn't understand any of it. But he's turned into a bit of a cheerleader lately.

Sweat beads on my forehead despite the cold. The taint resists, clinging to its corrupted form. I grit my teeth and push harder with my magic, forcing it to yield.

Slowly, agonizingly, the darkness begins to change. The pain in my arms intensifies as I convert more of the tainted energy. My hands tremble against the ground.

"Almost there," I gasp out. One final surge of magic, and the last of the corruption dissolves into pure energy. I slump forward with a grunt, exhausted.

Marcus is at my side instantly, helping me sit up. "You okay?"

"Yeah." I flex my tingling fingers. "That one was stronger than usual."

Greg prods at the ground in front of me with his boot. He's the most curious of them all when it comes to magic. "We should head back. You've already purified three spots today."

"Just one more." I struggle to my feet, legs shaky. "I can feel another pocket about a quarter mile east."

"Ava..." Marcus's tone carries a warning.

"The longer we leave these spots, the more they spread." I tuck my hands back into my gloves. "I can handle one more."

The wolves adjust their formation as we change direction. It's eerily silent—no birds, no small animals. Even the wind seems muted.

It's strange out here, and it's growing at an alarming rate. I'm not going to be able to keep it at bay forever.

Grimoire is silent in my mind. I no longer need his guidance to purify. He's been deep diving, trying to figure out ways to help that are more efficient than chasing these pockets of corruption down.

We find the fourth spot nestled between rolling hills. This one is smaller than the others, but the energy feels just as potent. I kneel in the snow, bracing myself for another round of cleansing. At least this time it hasn't settled into the ground. It's always harder then.

The process is familiar now, though no less painful. Draw up the taint. Channel it through my body. Transform it with magic.

By the time I finish, my whole body trembles with exhaustion. Marcus has to practically carry me as we start the trek back to Wolf's Landing.

"No more excursions today," he says firmly. "You need rest."

I don't argue. I feel depleted, stretched thin from hours of purification, even as I'm filled with magic.

But I can't shake the nagging worry that we're not clearing these spots fast enough. Every day we find more pockets of corruption, spreading like a disease through our territory.

The guards remain vigilant as we make our way home, their ears pricked for any sign of those increasingly aggressive rogues. So far we haven't encountered any, but the threat looms constantly.

"You did good work today," Greg says quietly as Wolf's Landing comes into view. "Four spots cleared."

"Thanks." I lean more heavily on Marcus as fatigue settles deep in my bones. "But tomorrow we'll need to check the northern border. I sensed some dark energy in that direction."

Marcus sighs, but doesn't protest. He knows as well as I do that we can't afford to leave any of these corrupted areas unchecked.

A flash of chestnut hair catches my eye as several people head toward us. My muscles lock up and I push away from Marcus, determined to stand on my own. No way am I letting Ivy see me weak.

"Ava!" Ivy waves as she gets closer. Three Aspen wolves trail behind her, along with a young Westwood. I recognize his face but don't remember his name. Her perfect face creases with concern as she looks me over. "Are you alright? You look pale."

"I'm fine." The words come out clipped despite my effort to keep them neutral.

"There was a small issue with some of the newer batch of wolves Delta Thorn brought in." Ivy clasps her hands in front of her. "Nothing major—just some confusion about sleeping arrangements. I took care of it."

My eyebrows rise. "Thank you for handling that. Though I'm curious why you didn't bring it to Kellan's attention?"

"Oh." She waves a delicate hand. "It wasn't serious enough to bother Beta Ashbourne. He's so busy these days."

"That's what he's there for." My words fall flat between us. "Any pack matter, no matter how small, should go through proper channels."

She's testing boundaries again. Selene's words come on a faint growl in my head.

I want to growl too, but I'm supposed to be making nice with Ivy. Fuck. The reminder makes my temples throb.

"But I do appreciate you taking initiative," I add, softening my tone. "Maybe next time we could work together on resolving these issues? I'd love to hear your perspective on how the refugees are settling in."

"Of course, Ava. Whatever you think is best." Her syrupy sweet words set my teeth on edge.

She's not stupid enough to fall for that, you know.

Fighting the urge to roll my eyes, I just send back, I have to try. Between being out all day on purifying these stupid taints, I don't have time to play political games.

Exhaustion weighs heavy in my bones. Four purifications in one day might have been pushing it, but what choice do I have?

"Why don't you settle in? I'll bring you something to eat. You've been working so hard," Ivy says, coming up beside me to thread her arm through mine. As much as I dislike her, she's comfortable to lean on.

Really? Leaning on her, of all people?

But my body's too tired to care about how it looks. No matter how much I tell it I can stand on my own, it keeps leaning against her as we head toward the Alpha cabin.

Reminding myself yet again to be nice, I say sincerely, "Thank you, Ivy."

"Of course. I'm here to help. You can rely on me anytime."

She sounds so kind in this moment, so reliable, that it'd be easy to take her at face value. But of course I balk, because I'm not so far gone in my exhaustion as to forget who I'm dealing with.

"Kellan can bring me my food," I say, realizing I don't even want her in my home when we're a few feet away. "But I really appreciate it."

"Are you sure? It would take so long to find him and then let him know. Neither of us have the pack bond with him..."

"But I do," Marcus interrupts. A few seconds later, he says, "Beta Kellan will be here soon. He says Elverly's stew is great today."

Ivy's arm tenses around mine. It's just a second before it relaxes. "It is delightful," she agrees cheerfully. "You should love it."

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"Hold still." Vanessa's voice carries that stern edge I've come to associate with her healer mode as she slides a needle into my arm. "Your veins are collapsing. That's not good."

"I've been drinking water." The defense sounds weak even to my ears. Especially since I almost collapsed this morning, after nine days of nonstop purification. Marcus dragged me straight to the hospital, berating me the entire time for not taking care of myself.

To be fair, I didn't feel any worse than usual today. Not until the first round of taint cleansing.

"Not enough." She connects the IV line with practiced efficiency. "Your body's burning through resources faster than you're replacing them. These purifications are taking more out of you than you realize."

The fluid starts its slow drip into my veins. The bedroom feels too quiet, too still. Lucas and I are never here during the day anymore; we're both too busy. Even Selene and Grimoire have gone silent, probably sensing my exhaustion.

"I had three full bottles today."

"And you purified four sites yesterday over five miles." Vanessa checks my pulse, her fingers cool against my wrist. "I don't have the data to back this up, but I'm going to go on record and say it's like running four marathons back-to-back without refueling. Your electrolytes are dangerously low."

"But—"

"No buts." She pulls up a chair beside the bed. "Judging from your symptoms, the potassium levels in your blood are concerning. And when's the last time you ate a full meal outside of dinner?"

I have to think about that one. "Breakfast?"

"A piece of toast and a bit of jam isn't breakfast." Vanessa's voice softens. "The magic you're channeling requires fuel. Real fuel. And these purifications... they're not just cleaning the taint, right? You said they're drawing on your own magic to transform it."

Grimacing, I settle further back into my pillows. I've been trying to take care of myself, but I never really factored in things like electrolytes. That explains the bone-deep exhaustion. "How long do I need to stay here?"

"Until this bag is empty." She pats the bag and a tiny glass jar hanging beside it. "And you're going to eat the soup Kellan's bringing. All of it. Elverly swears by it. Says it's her mother's recipe."

"I will. I promise."

"You're lucky Lucas isn't here to see you like this." Vanessa adjusts the drip rate. "He'd have kittens if he knew how far you pushed yourself today."

"That's why we're not telling him."

"Oh, we absolutely are telling him." She raises an eyebrow at my strangled protest. "Doctor-patient confidentiality doesn't apply when it comes to the Alpha."

"I'm not—"



"You are." She cuts me off. "Your body is showing signs of severe stress. The purifications are affecting your blood chemistry in ways we don't fully understand. Maybe it's just that you need to eat and drink a little more, but I can't guarantee that's the only issue. I don't have enough experience with magic."

Grimoire makes a disgruntled noise in my head. It's my fault. I should have monitored you better. Your body isn't used to the amount of magic you're handling daily.

He's been self-flagellating in my head since I almost keeled over.

"What does that mean?"

"It means we need to be more careful. Monitor you more closely." Vanessa pulls out a small notebook. "I want you tracking everything. Water intake, food, how many purifications you perform, how you feel afterward."

"That seems excessive."

"What seems excessive is finding you barely conscious after pushing yourself to the brink." She scribbles something in her notes. "You're not just dealing with magic here, Ava. This is your life we're talking about."

The truth in her words stings. "I can't just stop. The taint is spreading."

"No one's asking you to stop. We're asking you to pace yourself." She looks up from her notes. "What good are you to anyone if you work yourself into a collapse?"

I hate that she's right. The room spins slightly as I shift position, proving her point. "How long until I can get back out there?"

"At least twenty-four hours." She holds up a hand before I can protest. "Non-negotiable. Your body needs time to recover."

The fluid slowly drips into my arm, each drop a reminder of my limitations. Outside, I hear the bustle of pack life continuing without me. Voices carry through the window, wolves going about their duties while I'm stuck here in bed.

"I know it's frustrating," Vanessa says, her voice gentler now. "But you're not helping anyone by running yourself into the ground."

Blowing out a long sigh, I can only say, "I know." It isn't that I disagree with her, or think she's wrong. I know she's right.

But with the taint spreading every day, being the only one able to deal with it—how am I supposed to pace myself, when I'm already behind?

It feels like an impossible situation.

The mattress dips as Selene leaps onto the bed, her weight settling across my legs. The extra warmth is a welcome; even with the wood stove stoked high and the relatively comfortable temperature, I'm fighting chills.

I couldn't even sense anything was wrong. One moment you were fine, the next— She presses her cold nose against my hand. You just dropped.

"I'm fine now." My fingers sink into her thick ruff, seeking comfort as much as giving it.

You're not fine.

Grimoire sighs. She pulled too much magic for that last purification. But it wouldn't have been an issue if she wasn't already worn down.

"Both of you, please." The last thing I need is them tag-teaming me with guilt. "I get it. I'll take care of myself."

Vanessa makes another note in her book, and something about her movement catches my attention. There's a subtle difference in how she holds herself, a softness to her usual precise motions. My eyes narrow as I study her more carefully.

Her scrubs hang differently on her frame. The way she keeps one hand near her middle when she moves. The slight flush in her cheeks that I'd attributed to the warmth of the room.

"Ava?" Vanessa pauses mid-note. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." I shake my head, still watching her. "You just seem... different."

Her pen stills against the paper. "Different how?"

"I'm not sure." But I am sure. Something's changed about her energy, like a second pulse beneath her own. "You move differently."

Vanessa's eyes widen slightly before she schools her expression. "Focus on yourself right now. You're the patient here."

She's right, Selene says, but her head tilts as she studies Vanessa. Though now that you mention it...

Grimoire even perks up. Oh. Well, that's interesting.

"What is it, Grimoire?"

"Nothing that concerns you right now." She tucks her notebook away with deliberate movements. "How's the dizziness?"

But now I can't unsee it—the subtle changes in her demeanor, the way her scent has shifted ever so slightly, even though I'm not as sensitive to smell as others. Something about her reminds me of the pregnant she-wolves in the pack, that same gentle glow about them.

Oh.

Oh.

My mouth drops open, but Vanessa points her pen at me in warning. "Don't. Whatever you're thinking, don't say it. Focus on getting better."

I close my mouth obediently.

## Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted

LISA

I am a precision instrument.

Or, well, my wrist brace is.

Okay—the word precision might be stretching it a bit. If I'm within fifty yards of my target, I might be able to get a single hit off in a real fight.

But the real point here is, if I hit my target, their head is going to explode. The power I hold in a single wrist brace might be getting to my head a little.

"Timber!" I shout cheerfully, though no one's near the tree now falling.

The Grand Sage's pen scratches across his notepad with manic energy. His white hair sticks up in every direction, like he's been electrocuted. Which, knowing him, is entirely possible.

"Excellent work today, Lisa. The trajectory calculations are spot on." He peers at me over his glasses. "Your aim has improved significantly, and we've even increased the economy of power consumption."

Pride swells in my chest. "Thanks to your adjustments on the brace." I flex my wrist, admiring how the metal catches the weak winter sunlight. "Though I still need to work on my stamina."

"Nonsense." He waves his pen at me. "The amount of magical energy required to power these devices is substantial. Your body needs time to adjust."

"But what if I need to use it in an emergency?" The tree I felled lies in the snow, its branches spread like fallen soldiers. "I can't ask the bad guys to wait while I catch my breath."

"Which is precisely why we're developing alternative power sources." He flips through his notes. "The blood activation is merely temporary. I have some promising theories about crystalline batteries."

My eyebrows shoot up. "Crystals? Like the ones Ava uses?"

"Similar principle, different application." He scribbles something else, muttering under his breath. "We could potentially store excess magical energy for later use."

The concept makes my head spin. "So I wouldn't need to use my own energy every time?"

"Precisely!" His eyes light up with that mad scientist gleam I've come to both love and fear. "Think of it as a magical battery pack. Pre-charged and ready for deployment. It would allow more than just a Fae-blessed owner to use this magitech."

I rub my arms, trying to warm up. The cold has seeped through my workout clothes, and my sweat is starting to freeze. "But you'd need to use Ava's power for that, right? She's already stretching herself too thin."

"In a sense, yes."

The Grand Sage's shoulders slump at my mention of Ava. "That girl works herself to exhaustion. No concept of pacing."

"She's just desperate to keep everyone safe." My throat tightens. The memories of that party flash through my mind—blood and screams and death. Bodies of wolves who died protecting us. Protecting me. "She blames herself for every injury, every death. She takes her role as Luna seriously."

I can't blame her. There's a silent debt on my soul, even though no one's said a word to me about the lives Westwood lost at that ill-fated party so long ago.

"Much like someone else I know." The Grand Sage's keen eyes pierce through me.

I busy myself with adjusting my brace. "At least I'm doing something useful now. These weapons you're creating could save lives."

"Well, never you fear. I have no interest in adding to your burdens." He shuffles through his papers with renewed vigor. "I've been developing a theory about creating a magic siphon that would require minimal input from Ava."

"How would that work?"

"Picture a self-sustaining magical engine." His hands wave through the air, sketching invisible diagrams. "Once initiated with a small spark of power, it would generate its own energy through a continuous feedback loop. The applications would be revolutionary! We could power entire cities, create defensive barriers that never falter, develop weapons that—" He stops mid-gesture, his enthusiasm deflating. "Well, that's assuming it's even possible. Right now it's just theoretical."

"It still sounds incredible." The concept of unlimited magical power makes my head spin. "Like something out of science fiction."

"Actually..." He adjusts his glasses, peering at his notes. "According to ancient records, such technology once existed. In ancient cities, the ability to harness and perpetuate magical energy was commonplace. But like so many other wonders of the past, that knowledge was lost to time."

I wonder if Grimoire knows anything about this.

"Tell me more about these ancient cities." Entertaining myself by puffing out clouds of my breath, I keep pace with the trudging elderly gnome as we head back to Wolf's Landing. My bodyguards follow behind, as usual. "Where were they supposed to be?"

"Ah." He shuffles through the snow. "According to legend, they existed in a space between realms. Neither fully in our world nor in the Fae realm. The stories speak of crystal spires that touched the clouds, streets paved with precious metals that conducted magical energy."

"That sounds..." My nose wrinkles. "Unreal? Like a fairy tale."

"Indeed. The texts describe gods walking among mortals, sharing their knowledge freely. Magical fountains that could cure any ailment. Buildings that floated in the sky." He chuckles, closing the journal. "Pure fantasy, most likely. Though the principles behind these stories intrigue me more than their historical accuracy."

"What do you mean?"

"Consider the concept of the floating buildings. While the story itself may be fiction, it suggests our ancestors understood principles of magical levitation that we've lost." He taps his notepad. "The same applies to their supposed mastery of magical energy. The idea that they could create self-sustaining magical circuits..."

"And that's where your siphon comes in?"

"Precisely." He beams at me like a proud teacher. "Whether or not these cities existed is irrelevant. The theoretical framework they present—the possibility of creating a perpetual magical energy source—that's what fascinates me."

"But how would it actually work? I mean, even basic spells need some kind of power source, right?"

"Think of it like a waterwheel." His hands move through the air, sketching invisible diagrams. "The initial push of water starts the wheel turning. Once in motion, the wheel's movement draws more water, which keeps the wheel spinning. A perfect cycle."

That sounds too easy. "You think it'll work?"

"I have no idea." He adjusts his glasses. "But that's why we experiment. We learn. We improve. Speaking of which, I think it's time to bring the brace into some sparring, but there's a problem."

My lips twitch. "You mean the one where I might accidentally blow someone's head off when we're just trying to practice?"

"Yes. I failed to activate any sort of safety measure for testing purposes. I suppose I should work on that. Your efficacy will come with practice, and you can't aim at trees forever. We need moving targets, real-time danger."

The enthusiasm in his words gives me an uneasy sense of déjà vu. Like a certain grizzled wolf shifter who loved to throw two girls into intense marathon sessions of running and other calisthenic workouts.

"That sounds... Dangerous."

"It should be, yes. Otherwise how can we trust you will be able to act in a real emergency? You need training. You need to think while hurt and stunned. Think while on the run. You need to be able to access its power under any circumstance, without faltering."

Jesus. He's going to be worse than Jericho.

## Chapter 367 Ava: New Plan

Vanessa and I have come up with a plan. It's a little crazy, and something we've been trying to avoid, but—there's a chance it's going to make things a lot easier for me.

We're going to spend a week on the perimeter, chasing down areas of corruption. No more wasted time walking miles back home every day. Granted, we'll be carrying a lot

more stuff than normal, but I've already been banned from holding anything heavier than a whisper.

Is it crazy to admit that I'm a little excited?

Lucas frowns as he tugs my coat firmly closed. "I don't like it."

"It doesn't matter if we like it or not. We don't have a choice." Wrapping my hands around his, I keep my voice soft. "We can't risk our people getting caught up in this stuff."

His fingers work methodically to secure each button of my coat. "I just don't see why you can't come back every day."

"And waste hours and energy trudging back and forth through the snow?" My boots are comfortable, like walking on clouds, and I stamp my feet experimentally. They're new; Lucas gave them to me last night. I'm a little worried about breaking them in, but he swears up and down I won't get a single blister. "That's not practical. We need to cover more ground, and camping out is the most efficient way. It'll give me more rest between sites, too."

"I said no." His jaw tightens as he tugs my scarf higher.

"You didn't, actually. You said you don't like it. There's a difference."

His golden eyes narrow, and I swear I can see him pondering whether or not to wrap my mouth with the scarf to keep me from arguing with him. Of course, he won't keep me here. He's already agreed to it. He's just reserving his right to complain—at length.

"Winter camping is brutal, Ava. The temperatures drop well below freezing at night."

"Good thing you've assembled an experienced team then." I catch his hands as they fuss with my collar for the third time. "I'm not the same girl you first met. I'm stronger now."

"Being stronger doesn't make you immune to hypothermia."

"No, but it means I can handle myself better." I squeeze his fingers. "Marcus has years of experience with winter expeditions. Greg practically grew up in the snow. The entire team knows what they're doing. And I have my magic to keep me warm. Fire's easy."

"That's not the point."

"Then what is? Because from where I'm standing, this is the most logical solution. We can't risk leaving any of that tainted energy out there where it could affect more wolves."

Lucas's shoulders tense. "The point is that my mate wants to camp in subzero temperatures while there are rogues and hunters in the area. Not long after collapsing, too."

"Your mate wants to protect our people." I step closer, letting his warmth seep into me. "And she has an entire team of highly trained wolves to keep her safe while she does it. Plus, Vanessa and Marcus are coming. They'll make sure I don't put my health into danger. And Grimoire's keeping a closer eye on me, too."

"Still, they can miss something."

"It's a team that includes two of your most trusted people, and arguably the best healer in your pack." I press my palm against his chest, feeling his heart thunder beneath my touch. "Plus Selene and Grimoire. I'll have more protection than the average alpha."

His hands settle on my waist, grip firm through the layers of winter gear. "You're not the average anything."

"No, I'm your Luna. Which means I have responsibilities to our pack." I rise on my toes to brush my lips against his jaw. "Let me do this. Let me help keep them safe."

Lucas pulls me closer, his lips capturing mine in a heated kiss that makes my toes curl inside my boots. The cold air vanishes, replaced by his warmth.

"You need to eat." His words vibrate against my mouth between kisses. "More than usual. The cold burns through—" Another kiss steals his words. "Through your energy reserves."

"We've packed enough supplies." I lean into him, savoring his touch. "Plus, Marcus and Greg are excellent hunters."

His hands slide up my back, pressing me closer. "Check in every morning and night." His teeth graze my lower lip. "No excuses."

"Yes, Alpha." A smile tugs at my lips as he growls at my teasing tone. "You know, if you time your night patrols right, you could always stop by our camp. That would be a fun way to keep warm, don't you think?"

A rumbling sound in his chest is his only response before he claims my mouth again. His kiss turns possessive, demanding, stealing my breath—

The front door creaks open, followed by Vester's exaggerated sigh. "This is what's taking so long?"

"Shut up. Like you don't maul Vanessa before every mission." Lucas doesn't bother looking away from me.

"I do not maul—"

"You absolutely do." His thumb traces my cheek. "At least I keep my clothes on."



"That was one time! And we thought we were alone."

Lucas steals another quick kiss. "Behind the med tent isn't alone. Everyone uses that path."

This is a fascinating story, and I'm definitely going to bother Vanessa about it later. But I shove my gloved hands against my mate's mouth, my cheeks hot. "I have to go."

"Agreed." Vester clears his throat, once again cool as a cucumber. "Are you done saying goodbye, Alpha, or should I give you another minute?"

Lucas growls, but there's no heat or aggression behind it. Sliding his arm around my waist, he guides me to the door, following Vester.

Once we reach the de facto village exit, where most of us gather before saying goodbye to any scout team departing—where most of our cars are parked, currently buried beneath a few inches of snow—I stop in my tracks.

The sight before me is...

Startling.

Four massive wolves stand in formation, hooked up to what can only be described as the most impressive dog sled I've ever seen. Their fur gleams in the morning light, like someone's given them a bath and brushed them out. Leather straps connect them to a wooden contraption that looks both ancient and perfectly maintained.

"Surprise!" Vanessa's voice rings with pride.

My mouth opens. Closes. Opens again.

"You said you had it worked out, but..." The words trail off as I take in the setup. Supplies are already loaded, secured with thick rope against the wooden slats.

"Did you think I meant we'd just carry less?" Vanessa's laugh echoes across the snow. She seems excited, more energetic than normal.

She's very happy, Selene agrees, dashing out of nowhere to approach the sled. Her delicate black nose goes wild as she sniffs it over.

"It's perfect." The words come out breathless. No more fighting through waist-deep snow. No more exhausting myself before I even reach the contaminated areas.

Marcus steps forward, adjusting one of the harnesses. "These four are our best distance runners. They'll have us covering twice the ground in half the time. They're also great hunters. We're bringing food, but they'll be able to supplement what we have."

"And you'll actually have energy left to purify the taint when we find it." Vanessa's smile turns smug as she catches her alpha's eye. "See? Told you I had it handled."

His arm tightens around my waist, but I can already tell he's more relaxed than before. "You could have mentioned this part earlier."

"And miss the look on your face?" Vanessa snorts. "Not a chance. It's not every day an Alpha gets to see his wolves hooked up like common huskies. No offense, Selene."

The husky in question just snorts and shakes her head, her ears swiveling back and forth.

Vester checks the supplies one last time, his movements precise and practiced. "You should head out soon. You'll want to cover some ground before the temperature drops."

"Right." I turn in Lucas's arms, pressing a quick kiss to his jaw. "Time to go."

His fingers flex against my hip. "Remember. Check in—"

"Morning and night." I pat his chest. "I know."

"And eat—"

"More than usual." Another kiss, this time to the corner of his mouth. "I know that too."

"And if anything feels wrong—"

"I'll tell Vanessa immediately." I catch his face between my gloved hands. "I promise."

His forehead presses against mine, his breath warm against my lips. "Be safe."

"Always am."

A pointed cough from Vester breaks us apart. "If you two are quite finished..."

"Never." Lucas steals one more kiss before releasing me. "But you can have her anyway."

The wolves hooked to the sled stamp their paws impatiently, eager to run. Their excitement radiates through the air, infectious enough to chase away the last of my nerves.

"All aboard." Vanessa pats the sled. "Your chariot awaits, Luna."

## Chapter 368 Ava: Where's the Taint?

"This is strange."

It is, Grimoire agrees, sounding confused.

The tiny patch of taint spans no more than two feet, and purifying it takes no time or energy at all. It's so light, in fact, that I almost second-guessed what I was feeling when we tracked it down.

After days and days of corruption spreading faster than I can purify it, there's suddenly... nothing?

Why?

In normal circumstances, I'd be relieved. But there's something strange about all of this as it is, and I don't like not knowing what's going on.

"Grim, how far could I scan if I really pushed myself? With your help, I mean."

Grimoire hesitates, his fox eyes narrowing as he looks up at me. It's not wise to open yourself up that widely, Ava. The wider the search, the less control you have over your magic. And the more likely someone will be to sense it, even with my guidance.

As much as I want to push further, to find the source of this corruption and purge it from our lands, I know better than to be reckless. "Damn. I just wish I could see farther. What if the taint is still spreading, but we're looking in the wrong direction?"

It's possible, Grimoire admits, his tail swishing thoughtfully through the snow. But it's better to be slow and cautious than alert the enemy. There are plenty who would take an interest in your magic, even before the world went to shit.

Such a way with words.

Sighing, I turn back towards the sled, my mind still churning with possibilities. What if we're missing something crucial? What if, while we're out here chasing wispy patches of taint, it's building in giant masses to the east? Or further south? What if it gets too close to Wolf's Landing? No one has the ability to sense it like I do.

I shove the thought away, refusing to let it take root. No more spiraling. Just do what I can, the best I can.

As I reach the sled, I absently pet the fur of my wolf bodyguards, thanking them for their vigilance. They've been working tirelessly, breaking trail through the deep snow, their keen senses alert for any sign of danger. It's made being out here infinitely easier—at least for me.

They seem to be having fun, though.

Because they're all trying to prove they're stronger than each other. They're going to compete on leads during this entire trip. Selene sounds amused.

It makes sense, though. I wondered why they were so excited to pull a sled. I thought it would be underneath their dignity as wolf shifters.

Settling back into the sled, I tuck the blankets around myself, shivering slightly as the cold seeps through my layers. The bitter chill of winter is relentless. Far worse than previous years, from what everyone's been saying.

You should rest, Grimoire says, hopping up beside me.

"I haven't even done anything yet today."

Oh. Right.

\* \* \*

There's no taint for several more miles.

The strangeness of its absence is like a heavy weight on my shoulders, scratchy straw against my skin, and scraping metal to my ears.

It's like my magic and soul shrivel into an anxious mess, waiting. Just waiting. Knowing something terrible's going to happen next.

Spiraling? Selene questions, sounding rather invigorated despite running behind the sled all day.

No.

But I can't shake that nagging feeling, no matter how much I reason with myself.

The sled glides over fresh snow, each bump sending a jolt through my tired bones. The thick wool blankets are my only refuge from the biting wind. Grimoire's spiritual fox form presses against my side, but he offers no warmth or comfort. It's little more than an illusion, because his book form is snugly tucked inside my messenger bag.

"Can we track where the taint originates?" My voice comes out muffled through the layers. "There has to be a pattern, right?"

Grimoire's fox ears twitch. You asked me this before, little witch.

"I did?" I can't remember this conversation. We have too many of them. In fact, some days it feels like neither of them stop talking.

Yes. And the answer remains the same—there is no way to predict its path or find its source. The taint follows no logic we understand. Sometimes it rides the wind like dandelion seeds. Other times it follows magical currents.

Oh. I vaguely remember a talk about dandelion seeds now. Maybe when I was half-asleep.

But it still doesn't make sense. There has to be a way, even if it's imperfect.

"There must be something—"

Sometimes it hunts. Like a predator seeks prey, searching for things to corrupt.

Disturbing thought.

Indeed. Taint—corruption—whatever you wish to call it, is not very well-studied. What we do know is that it takes significant magic to cause such an effect in the world.

Snow-laden trees pass by in a blur. The steady rhythm of wolf paws crunching through snow fills the silence.

Even with Grimoire's explanation, I'm left dissatisfied. It's frustrating to feel as though we're always reacting to what's happening to us, rather than fixing the problem at its core.

It is what it is. Sometimes the wisest course is patience. My wolf-husky butts into the conversation, and there's a distinct sense of her panting heavily as she runs.

It isn't like I haven't learned this lesson; it's just a hard one to swallow sometimes. Learning and liking are two very different things.

You learned to like your bodyguards, Selene points out.

"That's different."

Is it, though? You wholeheartedly accepted what was necessary. But there's a part of you that still feels like you're not doing enough, and that's why you're frustrated.

"That's normal," I mutter. "There are a lot of lives at stake."

Dwelling on it doesn't change the circumstances.

Chastened, I try to ignore the restless energy humming beneath my skin. Every mile without finding taint feels as though some kind of trap is tightening like a noose around my neck.

You're a paranoid one, Grimoire notes thoughtfully. Always waiting for something bad to happen next.

"Can you blame me?"

I suppose not.

## Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted

We're about to call it quits and find a spot to camp when something pings the edge of my magical radar.

Of course, I want to go straight there and purify it. But we still have to put up the tent, start a fire, and make dinner, and it's over a mile away.

It's one thing to make myself suffer; it's another to force the others to set up camp in the dark because I want to push our timeline.

The sled slows to a gradual stop, runners creaking against packed snow. That pulse of dark energy beckons, but the practical part of my brain overrides it. Night comes early, and I can always get to it in the morning.

Wiggling out from under the mass of blankets keeping me warm during our run—which has spanned a much larger area than we normally would, with how little corruption we've run into—I grab the flat pack I'd been sitting on for hours.

Vanessa's already unhooked the wolves from the sled, and they shift right there in the snow.

The pack had been wedged beneath me during the ride, keeping their spare clothes from freezing solid. A simple solution, but effective. My body heat combined with the magic flowing through me meant the clothes would be wearable, if not exactly toasty.

"The taint feels different." I stretch my legs, stiff from hours of sitting. "More concentrated."

"All the more reason to rest and prepare properly." Vanessa throws sets of thermal gear at the naked shifters, who get dressed with a speed I cannot replicate. "We don't need you collapsing from exhaustion again."

"I didn't do anything today," I protest. Which is true. Aside from clearing up a few mini clouds we've run into, I've just enjoyed a long-ass ride behind four wolves who've broken trail all day.

They're the ones she should worry about.

But they just shimmy into their clothes, acting as if they've done little more than go for a brisk evening jog.

Our breaths puff white in the gathering dusk. No one complains about the cold—we're all too focused on getting camp set up before full dark.

Marcus and Greg make quick work of clearing a large rectangular space, laying two tarps across the packed snow. Their efficiency speaks of years of experience; I'm still working on what everything is that's been packed into our sled.

The rest of us work together to unload, but I'm more of a hindrance than a help.

"Stand back." Marcus pulls a long bag from the sled.

The tent goes up in minutes, poles snapping into place with satisfying clicks. With all of them working together, it looks effortless.

I duck inside to help with the wood stove, fitting the pieces together while Marcus tosses sleeping bags onto the ground behind me.

"Where's everyone else?" The tent feels empty, and the break from the wind is heavenly.

"Gathering wood and hunting." Marcus peers out the tent flap. "Speaking of which—can you sense prey with your magic? Might make tracking easier."

"No, nothing like that." I secure the last piece of the stove. "My magic's not that sensitive. I can sense corruption and dark energy, and sometimes people—especially if I'm attuned to them—but regular animals are beyond me."

It is possible, Grimoire's voice echoes in my mind. But you're nowhere near ready for that level of expertise.

A quick mental check reveals Selene's absence. Where are you?

Hunting, comes her reply.

Greg returns with an armload of kindling and several larger pieces of wood, perfect for starting the fire. He deposits them near the stove and disappears back into the growing darkness without a word.

"At least we'll be warm soon." I arrange the kindling in the stove, grateful for the promise of heat.

Vanessa stamps her feet before coming in, dropping off a few canvas bags. "The water's frozen, so we'll have to melt some snow. Great job on the stove, Ava."

It's a small compliment, but I preen. The first time I had to figure out how to put one of these small metal stoves together, I had no idea what I was doing. The idea of having a fire inside a tent was horrifying, in fact.

Marcus pulls a lighter from his pocket and gets the fire started with practiced ease; even though I can do it with magic, he prefers the old-fashioned way. Says it just isn't right, relying on magic that way. The kindling catches quickly, and soon the stove radiates a gentle warmth through the tent.

Vanessa rummages through our supplies, pulling out a folding table and various bags of food. She sets up the table with military precision, organizing ingredients into neat piles.

"Aren't we waiting to see if they catch anything?" My curiosity takes over as I watch her sort through dried meat and vegetables.

"If we wait for them, we won't eat until midnight. Better to get started now."

The wood in the stove pops and crackles. A pot of snow sits on top, already beginning to melt. The temperature in the tent rises steadily, enough that I can finally remove my outer layer.

"Here." Vanessa hands me a cutting board, knife, and a bag of vegetables. "Make yourself useful."

I settle cross-legged on my sleeping bag and start slicing carrots and potatoes into even chunks. The routine task keeps my hands busy while my mind wanders to that pulse of dark energy I sensed earlier.

Even to my senses, it's heavy.

"Focus on the vegetables," Marcus says, reading my expression. "That corruption isn't going anywhere."

Well, not far, anyway. It doesn't seem to move quickly.

Vanessa moves around the tent with purpose, organizing our gear and setting up sleeping areas. Marcus helps her, the two of them working in comfortable silence.

Through the tent flap, I catch glimpses of them building a second fire outside. The flames cast dancing shadows on the canvas walls, and the scent of woodsmoke mingles with the aroma of vegetables and melting snow.

The tent grows cozy as I work through the pile in front of me.



Steam rises as I slide the potatoes and other vegetables into the pot. The water bubbles, already turning cloudy from the starch. There's something about cooking that makes any place feel like home, even a tent in the middle of nowhere.

Vanessa's boots crunch against the snow outside before she ducks in, bringing a blast of cold air with her. She adds strips of dried meat to the concoction, and dashes of seasonings. Unlike me, she doesn't need to measure any of it.

"Should make a decent stew." She stirs the contents with a long wooden spoon. "Though fresh meat would be better."

Marcus follows her in, carrying another pot of snow and an old metal percolator. Both are filled with snow, and he adds some coffee grounds to the percolator.

A flash of excitement pulses through my bond with Selene. She's caught a scent trail, something worth pursuing.

Distant howls echo through the trees, and I'm instantly alert. But Vanessa remains relaxed.

Not the howls of rogues or warning calls of sentries. They're hunting calls, coordinated and purposeful.

## Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted

Marcus pokes his head through the tent flap. "Taking the sled to pick up the firewood." His breath clouds in the cold air. "Greg's got a good pile going, but it's too far to carry."

"Be careful out there." The words slip out before I can stop them. He's more than capable of handling himself, but after everything we've seen lately, caution feels necessary.

He nods once before disappearing into the growing darkness. The runners of the sled scrape against packed snow as he moves away from camp.

The percolator starts to bubble, filling the tent with the rich aroma of coffee. My stomach growls. Trail mix and jerky only go so far.

Through my bond with Selene, I feel her satisfaction. Whatever she's tracking, she's getting closer. Her excitement bleeds into my own awareness, making it hard to focus on the mundane task of stirring the stew.

"The others seem to have found something good," Vanessa says, noticing my distraction. "Selene, too?"

"She's on a trail." I add another piece of wood to the stove. "Fresh tracks in the snow. Are they hunting together?"

"No. She must have found something else."

The tent grows warmer as the stove works its magic. Between the heat and the smells of coffee and stew, it's a lot cozier than I thought this experience would be.

Another howl splits the night, closer this time. Victory rings in that sound—they've cornered their prey.

"Sounds like we might have fresh meat after all," Vanessa says, already pulling out extra cooking supplies.

The percolator bubbles faster now, coffee nearly ready. I breathe in the steam, letting it chase away the lingering chill in my bones.

"What did they catch?"

"Moose."

My eyebrows fly high. "That's a quick hunt for a moose." I've long since gotten over my shock that we even have moose around here. Aside from hearing a few comments about how strange it is that they're around so early in the year, I've learned they've always been part of the hunting season. For some reason, I thought they were only in Alaska. Oh, and Canada.

Her lips quirk. "It was stuck. They got lucky once they tracked it down."

The tent flap rustles as Marcus and Greg return, their arms laden with split wood. The scent of fresh-cut pine fills the air as they stack the logs near the stove.

"Need more?" Greg arranges the pieces with practiced efficiency.

"Bring in what we need for the night." Vanessa stirs the stew. "Just pile the rest outside."

Marcus nods and heads back out.

It isn't long before he's back.

"Going to help with the moose." He pokes his head back in. "Shouldn't take long with this many hands. They'll need the sled."

The tent feels emptier after he leaves. I add another piece of wood to the stove, watching the flames dance through the small plastic window. "What are we going to do with an entire moose worth of meat?" I'm no expert, but I know it's a lot to carry around.

"Get creative with the packing." Vanessa ladles some stew into bowls. Steam curls up from the thick broth. "We'll have to reorganize everything, but we can make it work."

My spoon freezes halfway to my mouth. "Won't that exhaust everyone? They've already broken trail all day, and now they have to haul all that extra weight tomorrow?"

Her laugh rings through the tent. "I'm teasing, Ava. The hunting team will come by in the morning to collect most of it. We'll just take what we need for the trip."

Heat floods my face. "Oh." Yeah, that makes a lot more sense.

"Did you really think we'd try to haul an entire moose around?" She hands Greg a bowl. "Even wolves have limits."

"I didn't know." The stew warms me from the inside out, leaving me comfortable. "I've never been on a winter camping trip before. For all I knew, that's how you usually do things."

Greg snorts into his bowl, but doesn't comment. Good man.

"Fair enough." Vanessa settles onto her sleeping bag with her own portion. After a second, she snorts with laughter. "Though I'd love to see Marcus' face if we told him that was the plan."

The mental image of Marcus' usual stoic expression cracking makes me laugh, too. "He'd probably just give me that look. You know the one."

"Like you've suggested something completely ridiculous but he's too polite to say so?" Her eyes sparkle with amusement. "That's his specialty."

"At least he's diplomatic about it. Unlike some people I could mention."

"You mean Grimoire?"

Hey! His indignant voice bellows in my head. I am the pinnacle of tact.

I share his response, and Vanessa nearly chokes on her stew.

"Right." She wipes her mouth. "Because 'that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard' is the height of diplomacy."

"He said that to me yesterday."

"I'm pretty sure he says that at least five times a week."

The coffee percolator bubbles, reminding me of its presence. Since Vanessa's done most of the work here, I jump up to pour three cups, passing them around. The rich aroma fills the tent, mixing with woodsmoke and savory stew.

"This is nice." I wrap my hands around the warm mug. "Different from what I expected."

"What did you expect?"

"More suffering?" I shrug. "Less comfort? I don't know. Lucas seemed worried."

"We're not savages." Vanessa adds more wood to the stove, making the fire inside spark. "Besides, the entire point was to make sure you were still getting proper rest between purifications. Can't do that if you're freezing and miserable."

Through my bond with Selene, I feel her satisfaction with the hunt. She's headed back now, tired but content, with what I think might be a mole.

Vole, she corrects me. I was going after a rabbit, but it got away.

The wind picks up outside, whistling through the trees. Our tent stands firm, the extra guidelines Marcus added ensuring we won't blow away in the night.

"How long will it take them to process it?"

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I try to imagine Marcus and the others butchering a moose in the dark, but the mental image won't quite form. There's still so much I don't know about a self-subsistent lifestyle. I'm not unfamiliar with hunting; I just never was the one to do it.

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