

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted

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LISA

Early morning is a bitch.

I've never really been lazy, exactly. Having to wake up early isn't something that usually ruins my day. But there's a huge difference between waking up in your apartment and driving to work or school, and waking up in the middle of your strange werewolf compound, dressing yourself in a thousand layers to keep warm, and leaving before the sun even rises—to spend hours trudging through snow.

Living out here gives me a hell of a lot more respect for those social media homestead influencers I've watched. It used to be vague fun to watch them make bread from scratch and gather their own milk while eating something I picked up from a drive-thru on the way home.

Living this life is...

Well.

It's definitely a different experience.

And I don't hate it. Most days.

But this morning, I'm seriously regretting begging Kellan to bring me along

Snow crunches under my boots with each labored step. My thighs burn, but I keep pushing forward, following the path Kellan's long legs have carved through the deep drifts. The sled he's dragging behind him mocks me, bouncing along behind him like it's nothing.

No way am I sitting in that thing.

My breath comes out in harsh puffs of white vapor. The cold air stings my lungs, but I maintain my steady pace. Sure, I complain about the ungodly hour and arctic temperatures, but that doesn't mean I'm going to wimp out.

It was my idea to come here. I need to prove I can handle it.

A flash of movement catches my eye as one of the refugee she-wolves pulls up beside me. She matches my plodding pace with effortless grace, barely breaking a sweat despite the freezing temperature.

"You're doing amazing," she says, her voice warm and encouraging. "Most humans wouldn't even attempt this."

"Thanks." I recognize her heart-shaped face and copper-colored curls from the newcomers who arrived last week. "Mira, right?"

"That's me." Her smile brightens her whole face. "I have to say, I'm impressed. You're keeping a solid pace."

My legs feel like they're made of lead, but her words give me a boost of energy. "Trying to prove humans aren't completely useless out here."

Her genuine laugh makes me smile.

"No one's useless. Humans are just different. You guys deal more with technology. I locked myself out of my smartphone once. See? Different." Mira gives an exaggerated shrug.

"Which pack are you originally from?" I ask between breaths, genuinely curious about her background. Most refugees don't volunteer information about their past unless asked directly. I guess Kellan and them know where they're from, but they don't tell me, anyway.

I have no idea how to differentiate between the packs. Maybe Ava knows how. I should ask.

"Silvermoon. I was a Westwood wolf before, though."

My foot catches in the snow, and I pitch forward with a yelp. Strong hands catch me before my face meets the ground, and it takes a second to get my legs properly settled.

All these thick layers make it impossible to move sometimes. Like a gazelle in four casts.

"You okay?" Mira steadies me, her grip firm but gentle.

"What do you mean, you were a Westwood wolf before?"

"My mate was from Silvermoon." A soft smile plays on her lips. "I moved there after we met. I was actually on my way to visit my parents in Westwood when everything happened."

"Oh." I brush snow off my pants, relief flooding through me. For a second, I thought she was some sort of defect and I was making friends with someone who might have a questionable past. "At least you get to spend time with your family now."

The moment the words leave my mouth, her smile vanishes. My stomach drops as I realize what I've done.

"Oh God, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean—"

"It's fine." Mira waves off my apology, but her eyes have lost their sparkle. "I was one of the lucky ones. I wasn't anywhere near the cities when the attacks happened. My mate bond disappeared, and I found out what happened when I ran into a group of runaways heading north."

I nod, trying to look understanding while my brain scrambles to make sense of the travel. "Wait, you were traveling between... what, Idaho? And North Dakota?"

"Yeah." Her smile returns, though smaller this time. "You can always fly or drive to visit family, but some of us like to shift and run the whole way on our own four feet."

"You what?" I stop dead in my tracks, mouth hanging open. "You ran? As in, actually ran? The whole way?"

Her laugh rings out across the snow. "It sounds crazy, right? But everyone does it at least once. There's nothing like being with your wolf, feeling that freedom. Just you and the wilderness, running wherever your paws take you. Eat what you hunt. Sleep when you want. It's great."

"So you just... ran across multiple states?" I shake my head in disbelief. "What about food? Water? Did you sleep in the woods?"

"Wolves are natural hunters." Mira's eyes sparkle with amusement at my endless questions. "And yes, I slept in the woods. Though sometimes I'd stop at safe houses along the way."

"Safe houses?"

"Places where shifters can rest, get supplies. Most packs maintain them for traveling wolves."

My mind reels at this whole hidden network. "That's incredible. Like a supernatural underground railroad."

"Something like that." She adjusts her scarf against the wind. "Though nowadays, most wolves prefer cars or planes."

A thought strikes me. "If you're from Silvermoon, why aren't you heading there now? Shouldn't you be with your pack? Or—dammit, that doesn't sound right." I sound like a buffoon. A mean-spirited one. I don't want her to think she isn't welcome here. Not that I have much to do with it, but—well. "I mean, are you going to stay here now? How does it work?"

Her smile dims. "I will have to return, yes. My mate's family has certain... rights. They will want any grandchildren to be raised in Silvermoon territory."

"But your mate..." I trail off, not wanting to cause more pain.

"Passed away, yes." She pats her flat stomach. "But he left me with a gift. I'm five months along."

I stop dead in my tracks, nearly face-planting in the snow again. "You're what?"

Her laughter echoes across the pristine white landscape. "Pregnant. Five months."

"But you're..." I gesture at her trim figure, bundled in winter gear but clearly not showing any signs of pregnancy.

"Wolf pregnancies can be different." She grins, clearly enjoying my shock. "Don't worry, I'll get bigger in time."

"That's..." I search for words. "That's actually amazing. And terrifying. How do you even know you're pregnant if you don't show?" Wait. That's a stupid question. I'm sure they pee on sticks, like we do.

"Oh, we know." Her eyes soften. "The connection with the pup starts early. Plus, there are other signs. Enhanced senses, stronger protective instincts. Your mate can usually smell it before you even know."

I absorb this information, fascinated by yet another aspect of wolf culture I never knew existed. "And your mate's family wants you to return to Silvermoon?"

"Most likely, they will. It's their right to request it. The pup will be part of their bloodline." She shrugs, but I catch a hint of sadness in her eyes. "Once things settle down, I'll head back."

"What if they're..." I stop the words before they continue. No need to sound that crass.

"Dead? Then it is up to the alphas to choose."

Huh.

As we walk, another thought occurs to me. "What if a human gets pregnant?"

It's Mira's turn to stumble. "Are you?"

"What? No. Of course not."

"Oh. Well, usually the pack does their best to bring the pup back. Wolves raised in a human environment don't always turn out for the best. They need their packs. But it doesn't always work out."noveldrama

Glancing at Kellan's back, I resolve silently to make sure we use condoms if we ever get around to—well, you know. There's no birth control in this strange, apocalyptic world of ours. Or at least not enough of it.

Definitely wouldn't want kids to muddle what's already strange and weird between us.

Chapter 372 Lisa: Ava's Camp

LISA

After miles of walking, the sun is pretty high in the sky.

I'm too exhausted to shove back layers to take a peek at my watch, plus I really don't want to know what time it is. If it's too early, I'll know we're still ages from seeing Ava. If it's too late, I'll be even more exhausted knowing how long we've been trudging through the snow.

Better to just keep going as my lungs burn and my whole body aches. I really thought I was ready for this, but I'm not in as good of shape as I'd thought.

Kellan's doubtful stare when I asked to come along is really making sense.

"Don't worry." Mira's friendly voice tells me she's back. Sometimes she roams ahead, helping break trail. "We aren't far now."

Thank. Fucking. God.

Mira points at a thin line of grey against the pale winter sky. "See that smoke? That's their camp."

My shoulders sag with relief as I stare at the back of Kellan's head. His broad shoulders haven't slowed once during our trek, and here I am ready to collapse. "Have I slowed you all down?"

"Not at all." Mira's smile warms her words. "We don't always scout in wolf form, you know."

"Why not?" It hadn't occurred to me that they would do that, but now that she's mentioned it—well, why wouldn't they? "Wouldn't it be easier?"

Mira kicks at the snow, her boots sending up a sparkling spray. "Things are different when we're shifted. We don't make a habit of staying in wolf form for too long."

"Different how?"

"Our thoughts are simpler. More primal. Instincts take over. Pack bonds grow stronger, but complex reasoning becomes harder. Plus, clothes are a pain to deal with. No one likes shifting butt-naked in snow."

I steal another glance at Kellan's back. His steady stride hasn't faltered once during our conversation.

Sweat trickles down my spine despite the freezing air. My legs burn with each step through the deep snow, and my breath comes in harsh pants that crystallize in front of my face. The rising sun does nothing to warm me, though its rays paint the endless white landscape in shades of gold.

The smoke is ever closer, and eventually the scent of cooking meat makes my mouth water. The promise of warmth and food urges me forward those last few steps until the camp comes into view.

"Lisa!" Ava's excited shout carries across the snow as she waves both arms like a maniac.

Before I can wave back, a silver blur crashes through the snow. Selene slams into me with the force of a furry semi, knocking me flat on my back. Her tongue assaults my face with enthusiastic licks.

"Stop, stop!" I laugh, trying to shield my face from her assault. "Your breath stinks!"

Mira's strong hands grip my arms, hauling me back to my feet. Snow clings to my clothes, but I don't care as I stumble forward to wrap Ava in a tight hug.

"What are you doing all the way out here?" Ava squeezes me back just as hard.

"Just wanted to see you." I pull back, noting the rosy flush in her cheeks. She looks better than I do after a night in the wild. "Heard you've been busy."

"Not so much, actually. But once Vanessa shoves this meal down my throat, I've got a lot to do."

Kellan's already deep in conversation with Marcus, their heads bent together as they discuss whatever important wolf business demands their attention. We're here to bring meat back to Wolf's Landing.

"So I heard you caught a moose?"noveldrama

Ava snorts. "The men caught a moose. I'm just going to help eat it. Want some stew? You look half-frozen."

On cue, my stomach lets out an embarrassingly loud growl. Ava laughs and loops her arm through mine, leading me toward the tent. The smell of herbs and meat grows stronger with each step.

Inside, Vanessa methodically packs supplies into neat bundles, barely sparing us a glance as we enter the warm space.

"Luxurious," I observe. Most tents I've ever seen camping are small. Not the kind you stand up in.

"It wasn't bad, but Greg snored all night."

Warmth welcomes me as Ava has me sit on what appears to be a folded sleeping bag. My muscles protest the movement—I'll definitely feel this trek tomorrow. But it was worth it. Good to know what these people do every time they go out.

I didn't realize even my best friend does this every time she goes out to purify the world. Then again, she isn't really human. She's long since outmatched me in strength and stamina.

"Here." Ava hands me a steaming bowl, and the rich aroma makes my mouth water. "Careful, it's hot."

I cup the bowl in my hands, relishing the heat against my frozen fingers. "Thanks. So how's the purifying going?"

"That's the weird thing." She settles cross-legged beside me, taking the opportunity to brush her long blonde hair. I guess she hasn't been up long. "There's barely been anything to purify."

Steam rises from my spoon as I blow on it carefully. My brow pinches as I process her words. "Wait, what? How is that possible? You said you've been knee-deep in them all week. I think the word you used was drowning in them."

"I know." Her blue eyes are troubled as they meet mine, only to break eye contact as she yanks through a particularly gnarly tangle. "It doesn't make sense. There's a large patch nearby, though. I wanted to get an early start, but the guys deserved a break after their long night."

I take a careful sip of the stew. The rich broth explodes with flavor on my tongue—tender meat and root vegetables perfectly seasoned. Yum. I love moose. Never had it before we came here, but now I'm addicted.

"Any idea why?"

"No. Maybe whatever's causing it is finally winding down? I've only found two small patches to purify. Both were pretty weak."

Huh. This is not the news I was expecting. "At least you didn't overwork yourself, I guess?"

"Yay?" Ava chuckles, but sobers quic. "I don't know. It makes me feel uneasy. Like something's going to happen."

"Go knock on wood. Don't jinx us."

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Once Lisa's finished eating and we feed the wolves who came with her—including Kellan, who seems determined to keep some level of distance from his mate, even as he sneaks glances at her when she's not looking—the entire tent goes down, including our stove.

It isn't long before I'm tucked back into my sled, despite protesting that the next area isn't far and I can walk there.

Lisa waves at me as she heads off with Mira, their forms growing smaller against the stark white landscape. The young she-wolf's animated gestures make Lisa laugh, and something in my chest loosens at the sound. It's good to see her making connections beyond just me, Kellan, and the gnomes.

"Time to move." Vanessa takes her place behind me; the guards are already in their wolf forms and harnessed.

It's still weird, even after having experienced it all day yesterday.

The sled glides smoothly over the packed snow, Marcus and Greg working in perfect sync at the lead, their fur gleaming under the weak winter sun.

You're brooding, Grimoire says, materializing beside me in his silver fox form.

"Just thinking about the late start."

You thought it was worth it.

"It was. I just wish there was more time in a day, that's all."

Have you noticed the change? He's adopted the tone of a professor to student again.

"Yes. It's denser than yesterday when I first sensed it, and it's moving, even though it's slow. Like a crawl."

The magical corruption pulses at the edge of my awareness, a nauseating weight that makes my skin crawl. It feels different. Concentrated. Wrong.

Keep your senses alert.

"I know. I have a theory, though."

Oh?

"I think it might be gathering all the local corruption. That's why we aren't seeing much. All the little bits are getting drawn to the big bit."

His tail swishes. It is possible, but we haven't seen it in action. It's a workable theory, but the question would be to what end.

Marcus's ears flick back toward us, probably catching our quiet conversation. His massive gray form maintains our steady pace through the snow.

I close my eyes, focusing on the nauseating pulse of dark energy. It's definitely stronger than before, a heavy miasma that seems to coat the inside of my skull. But there's something else, something I can't quite grasp...

I guess we'll find out soon enough.

* * *

It doesn't take very long for us to make it to the edge of the dense taint.

The stench of corrupted magic hits me before we reach it. It's not something that really hits my nose so much as my metaphysical senses, but my stomach roils, acid burning up my throat. Next to me, Selene sneezes repeatedly, her silver form shaking with each violent burst.

"Everyone stay back." I wave the wolves away from the edge of the taint. "Let's get you unharnessed first."

Vanessa's lips press into a thin line as she helps me unbuckle the wolves from their leads. Her movements are quick, efficient, but her face betrays her unease. "Something's not right here."

"Fresh tracks." Selene's voice echoes in my mind. Another sneeze. "But no scent."

"What tracks?"

Marcus gestures with his chin toward a patch of snow. I follow him, careful to keep my distance from the corruption's edge. The tracks are clear—what look like distinctive wolf prints pressed into the fresh powder.

"These are recent." Vanessa crouches beside me, pointing to the crisp edges. "See how the snow hasn't had time to crystallize or drift? I'd say no more than three, maybe four hours old."

The lack of scent makes my skin prickle. Even with the corruption's interference, we should pick up something. "Could they be using scent blockers?"

No one answers immediately, but it isn't like I need them to confirm it. What else can it be?

Marcus circles the area, his movements precise and measured. "At least ten different sets of prints. And no one from our pack was here today."

"Not Westwood," I echo, but I already figured that much.

I trace the direction of the tracks with my eyes, my breath catching as I realize where they lead. "They're heading toward the camp site." Where we were not so long ago.
noveldrama

Vanessa stiffens beside me. "We didn't pass any wolves on our way here."

"Or smell them," Selene adds between sneezes.

Ten unknown wolves, moving without scent, near a pocket of corruption. None of my companions spotted them despite our vigilant travel here. They're likely aggressive, and they're headed in the direction of... Lisa.

Shit.

"Alert Kellan."

The corruption pulses behind us, a reminder of why we came here in the first place. Ten mysterious wolves or not, this taint needs to be dealt with. But the tracks... Something about their presence here feels wrong. Calculated. Maybe it really is coincidence, but why would they be using scent blockers?

My stomach twists as I turn to Marcus.

"How long to catch up with Lisa and the others?"

Marcus's eyes narrow as he calculates the distance. "Hour and a half, maybe less if we push hard."

Too long.

"We need to move." I glance toward the taint one last time. The dark energy is heavy, but it will have to wait. "Let's go."

The wolves shift without question. My boots crunch through the snow as I head back to the sled, my pulse beating hard in my neck. "Vanessa, is Kellan aware?"

"Yes. They haven't noticed anything yet, but if they're using scent blockers..."

Right.

Her breath comes out in white puffs as she settles in behind me, her feet solid on the runners. "You think they knew we'd be here?"

"Someone did. Why else use scent blockers?"

Ten wolves don't just happen to wander through our territory disguising their scent.

In little time at all, wind once again cuts through my blankets like icy daggers, forcing me deeper into their protection. My exposed skin burns from the assault of wind and deep winter cold, but I can't bring myself to care about the discomfort. Not when Lisa could be in danger.

"Faster," I whisper, though my wolves need no encouragement. Their muscles bunch and stretch as they power through the deep snow, following the path we made earlier.

Kellan reports no sign of them yet, but the snow's picking up. Visibility's getting worse.

Strange. It isn't snowing here, and we aren't that far apart. In fact, the sky is pretty clear.

Chapter 374 Lisa: Something's Wrong

Seeing Ava seems to have breathed life into my limbs again.

Our return is easier. Perhaps it's because we've already trampled a path in the snow, or maybe moose stew is just that rejuvenating. Either way, I'm confident I won't be a complete mess by the time we return to Wolf's Landing.

And if a part of my brain is thinking, good, I won't bring shame to Kellan's status in the pack, well, I'm pretending not to notice too much.

It's hard to be a human among wolves. Humans aren't as strong, aren't dialed into the pack bond, and just aren't as respected as other wolves. Even refugees outside the pack find a place in Wolf's Landing. Jobs to do. Friends. A circle of community that gives back.

Me? I have Ava. And Kellan. And the Grand Sage. Even Elverly's mostly lost to the daily cycle of feeding so many people.noveldrama

It isn't that I'm unhappy—shockingly, I'm pretty okay, outside of wanting to find my parents—but that I feel lost.

No one really knows what to do with me. Which is fair, because I don't know what to do with myself. I'm starting to understand why Ava had such a hard time standing on her own two feet and growing a sense of self-worth; it's like floating in a sea on a piece of driftwood while everyone else plays happy dolphin family.

Does that make sense? Maybe it doesn't.

I've made a few friends, but it's all surface-level. It's not like before, which is probably because I'm now known as the beta's mate. They all treat me a little differently now, which is why it's so nice to have Mira with us today. A little bit of normal interaction in this crazy mess of a new life.

I'll get it figured out. I know I will.

In a good mood, well-fed, and with the sun rising high to help a little with the frigid temperatures, we stroll arm-in-arm behind the other wolves, who help Kellan drag along the sled of moose meat.

Technically, I know he doesn't need that much help and could bring the moose back himself. He's strong enough. But there always has to be an extra bunch of wolves around to keep me safe.

After being kidnapped by a crazy vampire, I have no problem with this idea. I just feel bad for the guys watching over me. They're probably bored.

Then again, they get to see the weird shit the Grand Sage makes me do, so at least it's entertaining. Maybe.

But then my mind wanders to my captivity, and how people seem to think I've been through more trauma than I did. It was terrible, yes. But I only saw the crazy vampire once. Now that I'm free, it honestly kind of feels like I got off pretty lightly.

Shouldn't everything have been... I don't know. More traumatic? Maybe a couple missing limbs or something? I've read enough books and movies to know I'm lucky not to be dead right now. Or creepily mind-enslaved like Marisol...

"Something's wrong." Mira's mutter distracts me from my random introspection, her arm tense against mine.

The shifters ahead of us freeze mid-step. Even from behind, I notice their bodies are as rigid as stone.

Kellan slows to a complete stop, glancing around.

"What's happening?" My hand slides to my wrist brace, cold against my skin, hidden beneath a few layers of clothing. It won't be easy to access, but just knowing it's there makes me feel a little more secure if something suddenly comes charging at us.

Unless it's some giant monster eel that swims in snow, though, I don't know what we're looking for.

Mira shakes her head, her dark eyes scanning the trees. She doesn't know either. Of course. She's not part of whatever mind-talking they're doing. She's from another pack.

Kellan's head snaps up, and a low growl rumbles from his chest. Whatever message he received through that supernatural connection can't be good.

The other wolves move into a defensive formation around us without a word. My heart pounds against my ribs as I recognize their practiced movements. This isn't just caution—this is preparation for trouble.

"Stay close to me," Mira whispers, pulling me tight against her side. She knows it, too.

The silence in the forest feels different now. What I'd thought was peaceful winter stillness now seems charged with tension, like the air before a storm. Even the wind through the pines sounds ominous.

My hands shake slightly as I wait for someone to explain what's happening.

The crunch of snow under paw becomes the only sound as the other wolves shift forms. Their clothes litter the ground around the sled as they take up positions in a wider circle. Only Kellan and Mira remain human.

A branch snaps somewhere in the distance. I jump, but Mira's grip on my arm keeps me steady.

"Kellan?" I hate how small my voice sounds, but damn it, I'm fucking terrified now, and no one's telling us what's going on. "What is it?"

He doesn't answer immediately, still locked in whatever silent communication is happening through the pack link. His jaw clenches as he scans the sparse trees in the area.

But there's nothing there.

I know I'm just human, but there's nothing out there. It's all snow. A few trees here and there. Some hills I guess someone could be hiding behind? But we can see everywhere.

The silence stretches, broken only by the soft padding of wolf paws in snow as our guards adjust their positions. I want to ask more questions, but if Kellan isn't talking, it has to be for a good reason. Maybe he's still listening to someone else.

Mira's sharply indrawn breath has me looking at her face, then following her gaze to something moving in the snow.

Dark specks, quickly growing larger, coming down one of the small hills I'd mentioned.

The wind is coming from their direction, so it makes no sense when Mira whispers, "I can't smell them."

That... can't be good.

Chapter 375 Ava: First Contact

They have contact.

Selene's words have my heart dropping down to my half-frozen toes.

"How far are we now?"

Too far.

If it weren't for the gloves keeping my hands warm, my nails would be cutting through the skin of my palms. "We need to hurry."

My words are ripped away by the wind, but Selene knows what I'm saying, and I know she's relaying my words to the wolves.

Ten wolves. How many were with Lisa today? I think it might have been five. Outnumbered not only two to one, but one of ours is human.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Grimoire, is there anything we can do?"

I know there isn't, but I have to ask. It's Lisa, for God's sake.

You aren't sensitive enough to pick up the enemy. What do you expect?

His words sound harsh. Cold. Like judgment's already been made, finding me lacking. But I know it's his own frustration bleeding through.

"Is there anything you can do?"

I've learned things about our bond. Little trickles of information over time. Like, Grimoire's constrained by some basic laws in this world. He can't just utilize his magic and become a God among men, for example. That's why he was locked away for so long.

He's bound to his book and whatever rules were created at the time—things he hasn't deemed necessary to share.

But beyond that, he's limited by our bond. While he's able to use some of his magic through me, it's only as much as my body can handle. And while he can somewhat take over my magical control, or even boost it, it's all within the boundaries of what I would—theoretically—be capable of.

They're all nebulous rules for someone like me, who doesn't fully understand them. Maybe Magister Orion would know more; as thrilled as I am to be reunited with Lucas, I'm frustrated by my lack of support here. Grimoire's knowledge is wonderful and helpful, and I've learned a lot.

But ultimately, he isn't mortal.

He thinks of things in different ways than we do. Sees things in different ways. Feels things in different ways.

It's like a language barrier between us sometimes.

Grimoire stays silent after my question, probably thinking it over. There are ways for him to surpass his limitations to a small extent—something he did the day the vampires came to Wolf's Landing. But they came with great cost. To me, and to him, apparently.
noveldrama

I still don't know exactly what he lost in the transaction, but I do know it wasn't insignificant.

The exhaustion I suffered afterward was not insignificant, either. And while my magical affinity was boosted, it was forced in a strange way, taking a while to adjust.

The distance is too great, little witch. Even if I could see them, my magic would be too diluted by the time it reached them.

A groan tears from my throat as I duck my head between my knees. The blanket offers some protection from the relentless wind, but my cheeks and nose still burn from

exposure. My heart hammers against my ribs. Each beat is a reminder of how far we are from Lisa.

The sled jerks beneath me as we hit a rough patch. Marcus and Greg maintain their brutal pace, their massive wolf forms cutting through the snow like ships through water. Steam rises from their fur in great clouds that dissipate instantly in the frigid air.

It's a small thing, but I've managed to cast a warm barrier over them all. It's not a lot and something I wish I'd thought of earlier, but it helps melt the snow they come into contact with.

I don't recommend trying to touch them, either, but that's a separate issue.

"What about the taint? Has anything changed?" I can barely feel it at this point.

Nothing distinct.

"Selene, any updates?"

They're fighting.

My stomach lurches. "Who's winning?"

I cannot tell. The connection is... strange. Like static.

"How long has it been like that?"

Since they started fighting.

Perfect. Even our mental communication is compromised.

Strange. Everything's just too strange.

The wind howls around us, drowning out everything in my ears except for my own ragged breathing. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to focus on anything else besides the growing knot of dread in my gut.

Lisa's face flashes through my mind—her smile this morning as she joked about the cold, the way she laughed when Selene tackled her.

"We have to go faster," I whisper helplessly. "How far are we now?"

The wolves are already at their limit, Grimoire says. Any more and they risk injury. Your heart rate is increasing dangerously. You need to maintain control.

"I don't care about control right now!"

You should. If we arrive and you're too worked up to properly channel magic—

"Fuck!" Pain bursts through my fists as I slam them against my knees in frustration. My magic pulses erratically inside of me. The bitterness in my voice surprises even me. Grimoire falls silent, but I can feel his disapproval radiating through our bond. Fine. Let him disapprove. Let him judge.

It's okay for me to be angry, damn it.

It's okay to be frustrated.

As long as I don't lose control.

Another jolt from the sled has me gripping the edges. The wind cuts through my clothes despite the blanket, but I barely notice the cold anymore. Every cell in my body seems focused on one thing: getting to my people.

The distance between us feels like a physical weight pressing against my chest, making it hard to breathe.

Ava, Selene's voice is gentle in my mind. We will reach them.

"Not in time."

Not fast enough. But I know you. And I know Lisa. She's stronger than you give her credit for. They will hold firm until our arrival. Trust in your pack, Ava.

She's right about that, at least. Lisa's been training. She has her brace. She's with Kellan and other wolves. She's not helpless.

But against ten unknown entities that can mask their scent and interfere with pack bonds? Against creatures that move through our territory like ghosts?

My teeth clench so hard my jaw aches. The sound of blood rushing in my ears almost drowns out the wind. Almost.

But I take a deep breath, forcing myself back into control, even as magic floods through my limbs, eager to rush out of me. Eager for my next command.

Chapter 376 Lisa: First Kill

LISA

Mira stands in front of me, fully wolfed out, gray fur bristling.

Snow crunches beneath my boots as I back a little further away.

Something isn't right. Ten massive wolves wrestle with the Westwood wolves, brutally aggressive, and yet not a single one glances my way.

A gray wolf—one of our guards, I'm pretty sure—flies past us, blood matting his fur. He slams into a tree with a sickening crack. My stomach lurches. I can't recognize the wolves by sight like Ava does, because they all look alike. Only Kellan stands out from the rest, a little larger and more russet than gray.

He launches at two attackers, his teeth finding purchase in one's throat, trying to pull him to the ground. But these wolves don't seem to notice pain.

The brace on my wrist is warm, already charged with a few drops of blood and ready to fire. But there's no way I can use it with them all tangled together like this. I'm as liable to hit one of my guards as I am an enemy.

My fingers hover over the brace. If I can just get a clear shot...

But it doesn't look like that's happening anytime soon.

Another guard crashes nearby, his leg bent at an impossible angle. Still, not one of the attacking wolves turns our way. It's like Mira and I are invisible, or...

"They're only targeting the pack," I murmur.

But how do they know?

Kellan roars in pain as three wolves pin him down. My heart leaps into my throat. The brace grows hot against my skin, responding to my panic.

But why avoid me? Unless...

Unless someone wants me alive. noveldrama

No. That's crazy. Who would—

Mira whirls suddenly with a vicious snarl, bounding behind me in an instant. Before I can turn, something whistles behind me.

Ice floods my veins. My muscles lock up as a primal part of my brain screams danger.

Red sprays across pristine white in my peripheral vision, and I jerk around while stumbling back, slipping in the fresh snow.

Mira's body crumples in front of me, and I'm already raising my arm, aiming my brace at—

No.

My whole body trembles.

Marisol stands before me, but she's wrong. All wrong. Her delicate features remain unchanged, that same pixie-like face that had brought me food in that dark cell. But power radiates from her. Or something does, anyway, with an aura of darkness and fire. Her unnatural green eyes practically glow like fluorescent toxicity, and her skin... her skin seems to ripple with shadows that shouldn't exist.

"Sweet Lisa." Her voice carries the same musical lilt I remember, but now it scrapes against my ears like broken glass. It's strange, like it isn't her speaking, even though her mouth moves with her words. "Did you miss me?"

The brace is right there, charged and ready, aimed straight for her face. But I can't say the words. Can't make my body respond to my mind. I'm frozen in fear and memories I've done my best to bury.

Those eyes. Those horrible, beautiful eyes hold me captive, as if all this freedom is nothing more than an illusion.

The shadows writhing beneath her skin stretch outward, reaching for me with grasping tendrils. My legs won't move. My lungs won't work. The sounds of fighting fade to a distant roar as those toxic eyes consume my world.

Just like before. Just like that cell. Just like every nightmare since. I can't do anything.

But this isn't before, and I'm not the same helpless girl I was then. This time I have power of my own.

"Shape," I whisper. In my head, all I can see is a giant lance made of flame.

A spear of pure flame, ten feet long and thick as my arm. Its tip blazes white-hot, the shaft a swirling inferno of orange and gold. Something large enough to contain all my terror. All my rage. All the helplessness of those days lost in darkness. The grief over Mira's body, just lying there, surrounded in a sea of crimson.

"What?" Marisol's melodic voice carries a note of confusion, her eyes moving to the arm I have pointed at her.

Naturally, I picture the lance piercing straight through her chest, burning away the darkness that writhes beneath her skin. The flames would consume her from the inside

out, turning those toxic green eyes to ash. My lips part as I whisper the command that will make it real.

"Fire."

Marisol isn't a hundred yards away. She's mere feet from me, with Mira's blood splashed on her face and clothes. With just a few steps, I could touch her.

I've been practicing on giant trees, perfecting my aim from fifty yards out. Destroying them so they teeter and fall, no longer connected to the earth.

There's no Westwood wolf entangled with this thrall of the Mad Prince.

There's nothing to get in the way of all the emotions I've thrown into this moment, in the lance so clearly depicted in my head, in the horrible death I'm wishing upon this woman. This person I once thought of as a victim, and now see as nothing more than a murderer.

So it comes as no surprise as at all as the lance bursts forth, blazing with all the rage held in my soul. She has less than a second to react, and it isn't enough.

It slams into her chest, just as I pictured.

For a split second, Marisol's eyes widen with shock. Her mouth forms a perfect 'o' of surprise. Then the flames burst outward from the impact point, consuming her in a blinding inferno of white and gold.

The stench is godawful. Nothing I was prepared for; it's acrid and sweet, like burning hair mixed with rotting meat. My stomach heaves as memories of that dark cell flood back, but this is different.

It's flesh and bone burning away to nothing.

The fire spreads rapidly, engulfing her entire body. Her form becomes a silhouette of pure light, so bright it burns spots in my vision. Then she disappears, crumbling into nothing but ash that scatters across the blood-stained snow.

She didn't even have time to scream.

I stumble back, gagging on the smell of her death. The snow beneath my boots is stained with Mira's blood, and now the air is thick with smoke that carries particles of... of...

I retch, doubling over. Nothing comes up but bile. The magical flames still rage where Marisol stood, but I can't look. Can't process what I've done. The smell alone tells the story.

I don't care. I don't care that I just killed someone. I don't care that I wanted her to suffer. I don't care about any of it.

"Mira?" My voice breaks as I stumble forward, falling to my knees beside her still form. Her gray fur is matted with blood, so much blood. "Mira, please."

My hands shake as I reach for her. She's still warm. Maybe that means something. Maybe she's just unconscious. "Wake up. Please wake up."

The snow soaks through my pants as I gather her head into my lap. "You can't die. You're pregnant. You have a baby to think about." My fingers tangle in her fur, desperately searching for any sign of life. "Please. Please don't leave."

Tears blur my vision, falling onto her fur. "Mira, please. You were so kind to me. Wake up. Just wake up."

But she doesn't move. She doesn't respond. Her body grows colder by the second.

"Please," I beg, my voice nothing more than a broken whisper. "Please don't be dead."

Snow crunches behind me and I whirl around, my arm already raised, ready to unleash another deadly blast. My heart pounds so hard I can barely breathe.

But it's Kellan. Just Kellan and our guards, all of them bleeding and limping toward us with careful steps.

Fresh tears spill down my cheeks at the sight. Blood all over their fur, dripping onto pristine snow. One wolf's leg hangs at a sickening angle. Another keeps shaking his head, like he can't see straight.

Not a single whimper escapes them, despite their clear pain.

My gaze darts past them, searching the battlefield. Only three bodies of our attackers lie motionless in the snow. The rest have vanished like smoke.

"Is it over?" The words come out as a broken sob. Mira's body grows colder with each passing second.

A shimmer of magic ripples through the air as Kellan shifts back to human form. His chest and arms are covered in deep gashes, blood still flowing freely.

"They ran." His voice sounds rough, strained. But there's something else in his tone, a wariness I've never heard before. His eyes keep darting between me and the pile of ash where Marisol stood. "What happened here?"

I can't answer. Can't find the words to explain how I burned someone alive. How I wanted to make her suffer. How her death brought me satisfaction even as it made me sick.

My fingers tighten in Mira's fur. "She killed her." The words taste like ash in my mouth. "Mira tried to protect me and that... that monster killed her."

"Lisa." Kellan takes a step closer, then stops as if unsure. Blood drips steadily from his wounds. "Who was she?"

"Marisol." The name comes out as barely a whisper, my eyes dull as I stare at the pile of ashes where she once stood. "She was there—the vampire's servant. The one who kidnapped me."

Chapter 377 Ava: A Terrible Loss

The smell is everywhere. Blood. So much blood it pierces through the crisp winter air, making my stomach turn. The pristine white landscape ahead is no longer—violent arcs and puddles of blood mix with churned patches of snow, depicting the aftermath of battle.

The sled slows as we approach. There are a few unmoving wolf bodies on the ground. They aren't ours.

Except one, further off, surrounded by Lisa and the others.

"Lisa!" My voice cracks as I jump off the sled and rush toward my best friend. She sits motionless, the head of our fallen wolf in her lap. "Are you okay?"

It must be Mira she's holding.

My guards fan out around us, creating a protective circle. Vanessa rushes to the nearest injured wolf, her medical supplies already in hand. Not sure what she can do for what's clearly a broken leg, but this is her field of expertise.

Mine is... well, I don't know.

First, checking on Lisa. Then, figuring out what the hell we're going to do.

"I'm fine." Lisa's surprisingly calm, but it doesn't seem right. More like she's detached from reality. There's no emotion, no sense of self in her words. Lifting her arm, where her brace glints in the light, she says simply, "She didn't stand a chance."

Who? Mira?

Another betrayal?

No. Selene's voice is clipped and tight. These ashes were a body once.

Oh.

So Lisa...

Killed them.

Good riddance.

Yes.

But there must be something wrong, because Selene seems upset.

I'm not sure yet, but they smell wrong.

Kellan, naked and bleeding, shimmies into some clothes he pulls from the sled, watching Lisa with a surprising amount of caution.

Pressing a hand against Lisa's shoulder with a gentle squeeze, I slip by her to kneel beside the ash pile. Strange magic tingles across my skin. The residual energy almost makes my teeth ache. Is it from Lisa's brace? Or from the owner of the ashes?

Marcus stands near Kellan.

"Seven missing," Lucas' beta says, his deep voice carrying easily. "We aren't in shape to chase them down."

Of course, the hotheaded part of me wants to declare that we're uninjured and we can do it. But that would be stupid. We need a better plan.

"What does Lucas say?"

"Reinforcements are on the way."

Pointing at the ashes, I change the subject to what's bothering me the most. "This wasn't a wolf, was it?"

"No." Kellan glances at his mate, who's just stroking Mira's head, oblivious to what's happening around us. "She says it's a woman associated with the Mad Prince. She was there during her captivity. His ally."

My stomach twists into knots. The Mad Prince. A name I've pushed to the back of my mind since Lisa's return, buried under an avalanche of—well, so many things. He wasn't supposed to be part of our present anymore. Old news.

Has he been searching for her this entire time? For me?

Damn it.

Even if he was, it's unlikely he would have found you since you learned to shield your powers. But I don't think this was a vampire. Probably a thrall.

"A thrall?"

I don't smell vampire, Selene confirms. Just blood magic and death.

Grimoire materializes beside me in his child form, crouching to examine the ashes. "Blood magic lingers past death. This one was under an immense level of control—likely one of his favorites."

Lisa mentioned Marisol. This must be her. Unless it's another one.

"How many thralls does he have? Do you know, Lisa?"

She continues stroking Mira's fur. "I don't know. He apparently collects them like toys, but they don't survive long. I was lucky, because he was out looking for another one. No idea if he found her."

Sister Miriam might know, but she's impossible to reach.

We haven't heard from her in months. I don't even know if she's alive.

Lisa's vacant stare pierces my heart as she continues stroking Mira's fur, lost in her own world. My knees sink into the snow beside her, but she doesn't acknowledge my presence.

"Lisa. We need to get you somewhere warm."

No response. Just that mechanical petting motion, over and over.

"Please." I touch her shoulder again, squeezing gently. "You'll freeze out here."

"She told me this morning." Lisa's voice cracks, barely a whisper. "About the baby. Her last present from her mate. He died, too."

My throat tightens. The tears come hot and fast, blurring my vision. Two lives lost, not just one.

"Why was she out here? Why was she guarding me? She was pregnant. If I hadn't come along, maybe she wouldn't have been here, either."noveldrama

Wrapping my arm around her shoulders, I pull her close. She's trembling, though whether from cold or emotion, I can't tell.

"I killed her." Lisa's voice breaks. "Marisol. I burned her alive and I'd do it again. What does that make me?"

"A survivor." The word comes out fierce, protective.

Kellan adds, "You protected yourself and your people. You did a good thing."

Lisa shakes her head. "I enjoyed it. Watching her burn. I wanted her to suffer. But she didn't even scream."

My heart aches. I know that feeling, that mix of satisfaction and horror at your own capacity for violence. The way it haunts you afterward. I can still feel the power of my magic as I took down vampires. The same beings who terrified me long ago.

Now I know I can stand up to them, but there are nightmares all the same.

"She was pregnant." Lisa's shoulders shake under my arm. "Mira was pregnant and I couldn't save her. I was right here and I couldn't—" A sob tears from her throat. "I should have been faster. Should have seen her coming. Should have—"

"Stop." I pull her closer, pressing my cheek against her hair. "This isn't your fault. None of this is your fault."

Her body shudders as the tears finally come, harsh and raw. I hold her tighter, letting her cry against my shoulder.

Chapter 378 Ava: Mira's Choice

"This wasn't how our trip was supposed to go," Vanessa murmurs, watching as an entire horde of wolves descend upon us.

Vester leads them all. Apparently there was a huge ruckus over the position, but Lucas lost because he was terrible at rock-paper-scissors. (I didn't know important things could be decided by a fist or two fingers, but there it is.)

Instead, our venerable Alpha—my beloved mate—sent orders in no uncertain terms. Get Ava's ass home as soon as possible, taint be damned. According to Vester, that's a direct quote.

Until we know what's going on, it's too unsafe for me to be far from Wolf's Landing.

It's a typical Lucas move, but I can't disagree with the decision, even as my stomach churns at the idea of leaving that dense patch of corruption behind.

Crunching a small patch of pristine snow beneath my boots, I wait as people discuss and confer and do all their tactical-minded decisions. It leaves me, Lisa, and Vanessa off to the side, just waiting for our escort home.

Being around here with so many wolves should make me feel more at ease. There's protection everywhere, right? But that also means there are more potential targets. More lives I'm responsible for.

Mira's loss is already too much to this pack of aggressive rogue wolves and a vampire's thrall.

Lisa's shoulders stop shaking as she wipes her face with the back of her hand. Her eyes remain red and puffy, but the wild panic from earlier has settled into something quieter. More controlled. *noveldrama*

"Why was she even out here?" Lisa's voice cracks. "She was pregnant. She should have been safe inside the compound."

"Lisa—"

"No, I mean it. Who lets a pregnant she-wolf take guard duty? What kind of pack puts their pregnant women in danger? It isn't right."

"The kind of pack that respects a woman's right to choose her own path." Vanessa's voice cuts through the frigid air, firm but not unkind. A tone carrying the weight of her experience. "We're not delicate flowers to be wrapped in silk and hidden away."

Lisa blinks, taken aback by the healer's sharp response.

Her voice softens. "I knew Mira. We've been friends for years. She's come to me over her concerns about her pregnancy, and also came to me about continuing her duties as a scout."

"But why would she risk—"

"Because that's who Mira was." Vanessa settles beside us, her hands folded in her lap, as she answers Lisa's question. "She never sat on the sidelines. Not once. Even before joining Westwood, she was known to be a decent scout. She was always proud of that."

The wind whistles by us; it's been slowly picking up speed as the day goes on.

"She volunteered for this mission," Vanessa continues. "No one assigned her. No one forced her. She chose to be here because she believed in protecting others." A pause. "Just as she chose to protect you today."

Lisa's breath hitches.

"By taking responsibility for her choices, you diminish the strength she showed throughout her life. Mira knew the risks. She accepted them. And she died protecting what she believed in."

"But her baby—"

"Was part of her choice too." Vanessa's hand rests on her own stomach, so subtle I almost miss it. "We're wolves, Lisa. Our children are part of our strength, not our weakness. Mira understood that better than most."

Lisa's fingers twist in her lap as she absorbs Vanessa's words. "I just... I keep thinking if I hadn't been here..."

"Then someone else might have died instead. Or worse." Vanessa's voice remains steady. "Mira made her choice."

Glancing toward her mate, the healer adds, "It looks like they're done talking. We'll be heading home soon. You'll feel better after a hot shower and some sleep. It won't take the pain away, but it'll help calm your mind."

Vanessa's words might sound harsh to human ears, but there's a raw truth to them that resonates with my wolf nature. Death walks hand in hand with our kind—we face it, accept it, honor it. The price of freedom is steep, but it's one we choose to pay.

Still, I understand Lisa's pain. Because I, too, carry the weight of every wolf's death on my shoulders.

"Come on." I take my best friend's arm, steering her toward the sled. "You need to rest."

"I can walk." Lisa plants her feet in the snow, stubborn as ever.

"You're still in shock. Your body needs time to recover."

"But—"

"No buts." I shove her onto the sled, arranging the furs around her. "The last thing we need is you collapsing in the snow."

"Second to last thing," Vanessa corrects me.

Startled, I glance over my shoulder at the healer, who's smiling wryly. Lisa, however, laughs. She seems to understand.

"Yeah, Ave. That means you aren't allowed to collapse, either."

Oh. Now I get it.

Lisa sinks into the pelts, her resistance crumbling as exhaustion claims her. The shadows under her eyes tell their own story—one of grief, guilt, and the death of Marisol. Her joy at disintegrating the woman will probably haunt her dreams for the rest of her life.

"I'm fine. I haven't done anything in two days. I can handle a walk back to Wolf's Landing."

Vanessa nods, surprising me with her lack of argument. Then again, what else am I supposed to do? Sitting on the sled just makes more work for the guards, and I can't steer the sled because I have no idea what I'm doing.

"Kellan is going to lead Lisa and the others home on a quick run. We'll follow behind. But we're going to need to be fast. We can't let them get too far ahead in case they need our help. And Vester will take the others to track down the rogues."

You'll have to use your magic, Selene translates. The trail is already broken, so it shouldn't be too hard on you.

Grimoire, still in his child form, bounces on the balls of his feet. You have plenty of magic stored. It will be good to use it. You haven't expended much of what you've purified.

He's got a good point there. "Sounds like a plan."

Chapter 379 Ava: His Unwelcome Return

Lisa sits beside me on the couch, cradling a steaming mug of hot chocolate.

"I should have killed her sooner. When I first met her, I knew something was weird about her."

"You couldn't have known she would do something like this." The couch cushion dips as Lucas settles beside me. "Taking on the responsibility of her choices will just lead you down a road of madness. Don't blame yourself for this. None of us expected them to show up again."

It's a terrible oversight on all our parts, but it's been months, and the world has changed. While we still knew danger was out there, none of us actually expected the Mad Prince to show up again. At least, not like this.

Furious with myself for being so complacent, I mutter, "I should have kept better tabs on Dakota Sanctuary. Crazy vampires don't stop being crazy because the world ends."

Lucas' words brook no argument. "We had to focus on surviving. We barely had enough wolves to defend ourselves, let alone spy on other territories."

"But—"

"No." His fingers brush my chin, turning my face toward his. "You did what you had to do. We all did. I kept security on the both of you in case anything happened, but I too bear this blame. Neither of you need to take this responsibility on. Do you understand?"

His eyes flick to Lisa, too. And Kellan, standing in the corner with deceptive calm, despite radiating frustration and fury. I may not be able to sense the pack bond, but I can definitely feel that.

Lucas shifts, his expression hardening as he thinks. "Did this Marisol say anything before..."

"Before I burned her alive?" Lisa's laugh holds no humor. "No. She just asked if I missed her."

My fingers curl over the edge of the cushion I'm sitting on. "It can't be coincidence she was there. The Mad Prince must have sent her there. We have to assume our location has been compromised."

Lucas and Kellan grunt in unison, a sound of pure male aggression that would be funny in any other situation.

"How much will he know now that his thrall is dead?" Lucas' jaw ticks as he speaks.

A flash of silver light announces Grimoire's arrival. He takes his child form, all gangly limbs and messy red hair. "That depends on their connection. If Marisol was sharing her senses with her maker, he would know everything she saw and heard in her final moments."

My stomach drops. "And if she wasn't?"

"Then he'll only know the general direction where his thrall perished."

"He'll be suspicious of her death happening around here. If he didn't know we were here before, he knows now."

Kellan's voice comes out tight as he finally speaks. "He has no way to know it was a wolf pack."

"Who else would take down a vampire thrall?" I arch an eyebrow at him. "Humans?"

The silence that follows gives his answer; we all know humans likely wouldn't stand a chance against a vampire thrall.

"The Mad Prince isn't stupid." I lean back against Lucas, drawing comfort from his solid presence. "He'll figure it out, if he hasn't already. Lisa said the man's obsessed. It makes sense he wouldn't have given up after her escape, even with the world the way it is."

"Could the Mad Prince be behind the corruption?" His fingers stroke my arm absently, his eyes distant as he thinks things through.

Grimoire shakes his head, red hair falling into his silver eyes. "Without more information, it's impossible to determine if he's involved. It's always possible, but I don't know."

"Great." I press my fingers to my temples. "So it could be that he's the giant bogeyman we have to deal with, or he can have a friend making everything twice as bad."

"The bigger concern is whether he knows you're both here." Kellan pushes off the wall, his presence commanding attention. "If Marisol was sharing her final moments with him—"

"Then he knows exactly where we are." Lisa's voice cracks. "And he knows I killed her."

"Which means we need to prepare for the possibility of an attack. We have to assume the worst." Lucas' arm tightens around me. "Kellan, double the patrols."

"Already done." The beta's gray eyes fix on Lisa. "You're not leaving my sight."

Lisa opens her mouth to argue, but something in Kellan's expression stops her. She's probably thinking she can have regular guards instead of imposing on Kellan, but there's no way he'd let that happen.

"The same goes for you." Lucas' words brush against my ear. "No more solo missions. I have to go with you."

"I'm never solo." I gesture to my constant companions. "Selene and Grimoire—"

"Are powerful allies, but we need physical protection too. Marcus and Greg stay with you at all times. And I mean at all times, Ava."

The steel in his voice leaves no room for argument, except... "They're already with me all the time, Lucas."

"Vanessa and Vester too."

"They both have greater responsibilities."

"Fine. I'll add three more to your security detail."

"That's fine." I'm not arguing against more protection. "But what about my purification work?" The taint isn't going to wait while we hide from vampires.

"We adjust. Larger teams, more backup. No more small groups spread thin across the territory."

Grimoire nods, shifting to sit cross-legged in the air. "The taint is dangerous, but a vampire with an obsession is worse. Especially one who's had months to plan."

My blood runs cold at the thought. What has the Mad Prince been doing all this time? Planning? Gathering forces? All while we've been distracted.noveldrama

Lisa sets down her mug, her hands trembling. "I'm sorry. I've brought this danger to your pack."

"No." The word comes out sharper than I intend, and I soften my words. "The Mad Prince was always going to be a threat. At least now we know he's still out there instead of being blindsided later. You're not his only target, Lisa. He would have come here even if you weren't around."

Chapter 380 Lucas: Their Bond Wants More

LUCAS

Being blindsided by the enemy sends pure rage through my body, but I struggle to keep it contained, to hide the depth of my fury from my sweet little mate and her human friend.

They're busy blaming themselves, and I'm ready to burn the world down for bringing this onto their shoulders.

This Mad Prince has gone too far once again. I already have a large blood debt to pay; this has brought it back to urgent priority.

Aurum paces beneath my skin as I watch my mate push a bowl of stew into Lisa's trembling hands. The human's face remains pale, her eyes haunted. Even after proving her strength in battle, she looks fragile enough to shatter.

"You need to eat." Ava's voice carries that gentle tone she uses with injured wolves. "Please, Lise."

Lisa stares into the bowl as if it holds answers rather than meat and vegetables. "I'm not hungry."

"Just a few bites. The protein will help."

"Kellan." I keep my voice low as I motion him closer. "We need to implement those changes now."

He nods, following me to the corner of the room. "The rotating patrol schedule?"

"Yes. I want the best trackers we have checking the perimeter twice daily."

I tap my fingers against my thigh, considering our options. "Our supply runs will need double the guards. Make sure we have them staggered so no one knows where they're going. We've been too complacent, shopping too close."

"And the taint?"

That's the real problem. Without Ava's purification, the corruption will spread. But we can't risk her, either.

"Any sign of taint, the area gets quarantined immediately. No exceptions."

"The hunting parties won't like that."

"The hunting parties can starve or adapt. I won't lose more wolves to this corruption. She'll still be purifying, just at a slower rate. That's all."

"Lucas." Ava's voice draws my attention. She's gotten Lisa to eat half the bowl, but the human looks ready to fall over. The shadows under her eyes speak of bone-deep exhaustion.

"Go," I tell Kellan. "Take her home."

Lisa stiffens. "What about Mira's—" Her voice breaks.

"Her burial rites won't be today," Ava says gently. "Get some rest."

The door clicks shut behind Lisa and Kellan. My mate's shoulders slump, and I pull her closer, letting her lean into my strength. Her scent carries the sharp tang of exhaustion mixed with honey and vanilla. The combination twists my protective instincts into knots.

"She'll need time." My thumb traces circles on Ava's hip. "Kellan will watch over her."

"I just hate seeing her like this. She's always been the strong one."noveldrama

"She's still strong. Taking a life changes you, even when necessary."

"I should have been there faster."

I turn her to face me, cupping her face between my palms. "Don't. You did everything possible. Stop acting like you can stop every bad thing in the world from happening. It's impossible."

Her ice-blue eyes shimmer with unshed tears. The weight of leadership sits heavy on her small frame—my fierce little mate who takes every loss personally. Who feels responsible for everyone under our protection. She's changed so much since taking on the responsibilities of Luna.

It's a source of deep pride that my mate has shown herself so worthy of the title, but she has yet to learn how to find balance between the sorrows and joys.

"The Mad Prince won't stop." She presses her forehead against my chest. "He's going to keep coming after her. If he's been looking for her even with the world in such a state, nothing's going to stop him."

"Let him try." A growl edges into my voice; our pack's history with this single vampire is enough to light the rage simmering in my blood. "He'll find we are not as unprepared as before."

Aurum rises closer to the surface, and I breathe in Ava's scent to calm him. My wolf wants blood—wants to hunt down every threat to our mate and pack. But rushing in without planning would only put more lives at risk.

We need to find the bloodsucker first. Then...

"I need you to promise me something." I stroke my fingers through her blonde hair. "No more solo missions. Not until we deal with this threat. You can't take on responsibility for every single bit of corruption we find. We'll do what we can, but you have to put your safety first."

She tenses against me. "But it's a danger to everyone if we let it continue."

"I mean it, little witch. We're all aware of what you've done to keep us safe, and we're grateful. I'm not saying you won't be going out at all. We just need to be more careful. Coordinate everything. Either Kellan or I need to be with you at all times." Ideally, it would be me every time. But the reality of life as Alpha is that I can't do everything on my own.

A soft huff of breath warms my shirt. "You can't argue with me when I tell you what to do once we're at the taint."

"Deal." I press a kiss to her temple. The familiar spark of our connection tingles across my skin.

Our bond pulses between us, a living thing demanding attention. My fingers tighten in Ava's hair as her breath warms my chest. The rage still burns hot in my blood, but my focus—our bond's focus—shifts. The need to hunt transforms into something else entirely.

"You're tense." Her hands slide up my back.

A growl builds in my chest. That single gentle touch sparks a possessive need to claim. To mark. To lose myself in her scent until nothing exists but us.

In a perfect world, I'd hide her from everyone, burying ourselves in each other as the world burns, just to keep her safe. But life isn't that easy, and too many people are under our protection.

"Lucas?"

I capture her mouth with mine, knowing the passion burning in me is a byproduct of fear. Fear of losing her, fury at the audacity of our enemies.

She tastes like the savory stew she forced her best friend to eat. And exhaustion. And home. And love.

Her soft gasp feeds the fire burning through my veins. My hands drop to her hips, lifting her against me.

"Need you." The words come out rough. Primal. "Right now."

"Now?" Her eyes are glazed with passion and confusion. "But we..."

I silence her with another kiss, deeper this time. More demanding. Her fingers curl into my shirt as she melts against me. The bond in my chest thrums with approval, with want, with need. It demands more.

I can't feed it the blood of our enemies, but at least I can deepen the connection between us.

"Now," I confirm. Her neck is warm, her scent blooming from her skin. I can already smell the desire dampening between her legs.

Her pulse races under my lips. "We're supposed to be planning—"

"Later." I nip at her skin, drawing a sharp inhale from her. "Let me have this moment with my mate. Isn't our bond screaming for it?"

She shivers as my hands slip under her shirt, tracing the soft skin of her back. The bond floods with her desire, matching mine, amplifying it. The anger transforms completely into raw need.

"You're impossible." But she's already tugging at my shirt, her touch eager despite her words.