

# Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted

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LUCAS

I need to temper my desire, because there's an aggression behind it born of frustration and anger, mixed with relief that she's alive.

But Ava, my sweet mate, meets my passion at every step.

My fingers trail over Ava's skin, savoring each shiver, each gasp. Her pulse races beneath my touch, and the sweet scent of her arousal fills my senses. Aurum's already lost to it, demanding me to claim, to mark, to possess—but I force that primal urge down. Ava deserves better than a rutting beast.

Even if the bond in my chest tells me to leave every inch of her marked for my pleasure.

"Lucas." Her voice breaks on my name as I peel away her shirt.

A growl rumbles through my chest at the sight of her bare skin. The marks I left days earlier have already faded, and something dark and possessive inside me needs to replace them. "Mine."

Her fingers tangle in my hair as I trail kisses down her neck. The taste of her skin, honey-sweet and addictive, makes my head spin. Each breath draws more of her scent into my lungs until I'm drunk on it.

"Please." She arches against me as I unclasp her bra.

The fabric falls away, and another growl tears from my throat at the sight of her perfect breasts. My hands span her ribcage, thumbs brushing the undersides of those tempting curves. Her skin is so soft, so delicate compared to my callused palms.

"Beautiful." I capture her mouth in a fierce kiss as I back her toward the bed. Her pants join the growing pile of discarded clothing, leaving her in nothing but simple cotton panties.

The sight of her nearly bare before me steals my breath. How did I get so lucky? This fierce, stunning woman is mine. My mate. My Luna.

My hands shake as I hook my fingers in the waistband of her underwear. The wolf claws at my control, desperate to claim what's ours. But I won't rush this. Won't let the beast's urgency override my need to worship every inch of her.

"Lucas." Her voice carries a note of command that makes both man and wolf snap to attention. "Stop teasing."

A wicked grin curves my lips as I slowly drag the cotton down her legs. "As my Luna commands."

My fingers trail up her inner thigh, savoring each tremor of anticipation. Her breath catches as I press a kiss to her hip bone. The sweet scent of her need fills my lungs, making my head spin. But I pull back before giving her what she wants.

"Lucas." Her voice carries a note of frustration.

"Patience, little witch." I trace patterns on her skin, deliberately avoiding where she wants me most. "I want to savor this."

Her fingers tangle in my hair, tugging sharply. "You're being cruel."

"Am I?" I press another kiss to her stomach, letting my stubble scrape against her sensitive skin. Her whole body arches at the sensation. "I just want to appreciate every inch of you." And bite every inch while I'm at it.

"I swear—" Her words cut off in a gasp as I nip at her hip.

"You swear what?" I move up her body, letting my weight pin her to the mattress. The heat of her bare skin against mine nearly shatters my control. "Tell me what you want, Luna."

Her nails dig into my shoulders. "You know exactly what I want."

"Do I?" I capture her mouth in a slow, deep kiss that has her writhing beneath me. When I pull back, her eyes are dark with need. "Maybe I need you to be more specific."

"You're impossible." She tries to pull me back down, but I resist.

"I prefer thorough." My hands slide down her sides, mapping every curve and dip of her body. She's perfect—soft where I'm hard, yielding where I'm unyielding. The bond between us pulses with shared desire.

But I won't give in. Not yet. The wolf wants to claim, to possess, to mark—but the man wants to drive her mad with want first.

I trail kisses down her neck, careful not to leave marks despite Aurum's demands. Her pulse races beneath my lips. The sweet scent of honey and vanilla mingles with her arousal until my head spins with it.

"Please." She arches against me as I lavish attention on her breasts.

"Please what?" I blow cool air across her heated skin, watching goosebumps rise in its wake.

Her growl of frustration sends a shiver down my spine. "Stop teasing."

"But you're so beautiful when you beg." I capture her wrists as she reaches for me, pinning them above her head. The position arches her back, presenting her body like an offering. "And I'm nowhere near done with you yet."

The bond between us throbs with shared need as I continue my torturously slow exploration of her body. Every gasp, every whimper, every plea feeds the possessive beast inside me.

Ava tastes like my personal brand of addicting madness. She writhes under my touch, her body arching into me, begging for more.

Soft moans become sharp cries as I mark her, unable to resist biting at the delicate skin of her breasts.

She's soft and vulnerable beneath me, her fingers digging into my shoulders with sharp nails as I nip and suckle, drawing out little cries of pleasure I can't get enough of hearing.

She's so responsive, each mark making her shiver and twist, pressing that perfect body into me as hard as she can.

Neither of us can get enough. Her pulse thrums under my lips, and the heady scent of her arousal makes me dizzy. Aurum is drunk on it, his possessiveness growing by the second. The wolf claws at my control, wanting to leave marks that will last, bruises that will brand her as mine, visible to all the world.

It's a struggle to hold him back, to maintain some semblance of restraint when all I want is to claim and mark and mate. To show the world this woman is mine and no one else's.

But she's more than just a mate to mark and possess. She's Ava. My brave, stubborn, beautiful mate who deserves more than rutting in the dark. So I force Aurum to settle for marking the pale globes of her breasts, where the marks won't be visible in the light of day.

## Chapter 382 Lucas: Ava Takes Control

LUCAS

Her breath catches as I tug with my teeth, and she cries out at the sting. The sound goes straight to my cock, making it twitch with need. "Harder," she pleads, her fingers tightening in my hair. "Lucas, please."

I oblige gladly, taking her swollen peak between my teeth and biting down harder, at the same time sliding my fingers between her legs and deep into that silken sheath.

She whimpers at the sting, her body bowing as her nails bite into my shoulders. And then she's crashing back down, crying out as her body pulses around me, vagina tight against my fingers as I piston them into her.

She rocks against me, riding out the waves of her pleasure until she goes lax beneath me, breathless and sated, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

I growl in satisfaction, releasing her wrists and shifting to press soft kisses to the marks I left, soothing the tender skin with my tongue. But inside, Aurum is howling for more.

"Lucas," she murmurs, her hips lifting again, rocking against my fingers.

It's a plea I can't resist.

I can't take it slow anymore. My need for her, for this, is pounding in my veins, demanding to be satisfied.

Ava trembles beneath me, her eyes glazed with desire. Her fingers tighten on my shoulders as her head falls back, baring her throat to me. She's exposed and vulnerable, and the wolf inside me growls in triumph.

Mine.

The sight of her, naked and flushed and quivering with need, is almost enough to push me over the edge. I need to be inside her. Need to claim and possess and mark, to root out every last vestige of uncertainty between us.

My cock throbs, hard and unyielding.

Aurum is demanding it, a pulsing heat in my veins. He wants to take. Wants to dominate. But I hold him back, forcing him to let me go slow.

For now.

I catch Ava's swollen lower lip between my teeth, nibbling gently before releasing it with a soft pop. "You're so fucking beautiful," I murmur against her lips. "But I can't take it anymore."

"Lucas, please." My mate arches against me, her fingers digging into my back as her legs wrap around my waist. "Need you."

How can I deny her?

I align myself with her entrance, already slick and swollen from my fingers. We both moan at the first touch of my cock to her core—a soft, tormenting glide that has her back arching and her nails biting into my shoulders. The bond between us flares with shared pleasure, overwhelming every other sense.

Her body pulses around me, drawing me in, and I slide home with a harsh groan. There's nothing gentle about this. I'm too far gone, too desperate for slow and steady. My hips snap forward, driving into her, and I watch her face contort with ecstasy as the wolf inside me howls in victory.

Mine.

My hands glide up her sides, palming her breasts as I withdraw, then squeezing them hard as I thrust forward again. She cries out, her hips lifting to meet me. Her body is so tight, so hot around me—it's almost too much. I freeze, buried deep, as pleasure rockets through me.

"Don't stop," she gasps, her nails digging into my skin. "Lucas, please—more. Harder."

I can't hold back. I tug her breasts, using them for leverage as I slam into her again and again, chasing the pleasure that's dancing just out of my reach. Her cries fill the room, but it's not enough. Not nearly enough.

Mine.

I slide my hands down her sides to her hips, lifting her to meet each powerful thrust. The slapping sound of our bodies connects fills the room, harsh and desperate. She's panting beneath me, her fingers tightening on my biceps as she meets each one of my thrusts, urging me on.

I can feel her coiling tighter, her inner walls fluttering against me. The bond between us is ablaze with desire, a searing heat that has Aurum roaring in approval. The wolf wants to mark her, to leave his brand on her like a badge of ownership.

I lean down, capturing her swollen lips in a kiss as I snap my hips forward, thrusting hard and deep. Her nails dig into my shoulders, and she breaks the kiss with a desperate cry. The feel of her tight, wet heat squeezing around me sends me over the edge.

I bury myself inside her, spilling into her as she clenches around me, crying out my name. My mate. My Luna. Mine, forever.

My breath comes in harsh gasps, my body slumping onto hers as I fight to catch my breath. She's still quivering beneath me, her heart racing as she buries her hands in my hair, pulling me down for a slow, deep kiss. I can taste myself on her lips, and the wolf inside me rumbles in satisfaction.

Mine. Always mine.

I press soft kisses to her forehead, her nose, her cheeks, but she's not having any of it. Her hands slide down my back, urging me to move. I growl low in my throat, the sound vibrating between us.

"Not done," she murmurs, her fingers tightening on my ass as she pushes me back onto my heels.

"Ava—" But it's too late. She's rolling us over until I'm lying on my back, her hands already sliding down to wrap around my cock. I can't stop the groan that tears from my throat as she takes me in hand, already stroking. "Goddamn, woman."

She just smirks and climbs on top, guiding me into her heat. The stretch of her body around me has me clenching my jaws against the pleasure. She's so tight, so hot, and I can't even speak as she lifts her hips and then sinks back down onto me. She's all in control, her movements slow and torturous.

Until she's not. Until she's riding me hard, her hands fisting against my chest as she snaps her hips down, taking all of me. Eyes closed, head thrown back in ecstasy, with her gorgeous blonde hair spilling over my thighs—she's a fucking goddess among mortals.

I can do nothing but hold on for the ride. My fingers dig into her hips, urging her on as my cock pulses with the need to spill again.

She's told me before that she's on some sort of contraceptive, but that primal part of me just says to breed the fuck out of her, to spill my seed until her womb is heavy with pups, and I'm helpless against the urge.

She throws her head back, crying out as she shudders around me. Her fingers tighten on my chest, her nails biting into my skin, and I snap my hips up, driving into her as she rides out the waves of her orgasm.

Mine.

Her nails leave faint pink streaks on my skin, but I barely feel them through the haze of pleasure.

As she slumps forward, spent, I wrap my arms around her, rolling us over until I'm buried deep inside her once more. I cradle her against my chest, pressing soft kisses to her hair. Aurum is purring inside me, his need to mark and claim sated for now.

# Chapter 383 Lisa: Shutting Down

LISA

"Take a shower."

Kellan's soft words distract me from the darkness inside my head.

I don't even remember leaving Ava's place, but here we are. Home. His home, but also mine.

My fingers refuse to work. The zipper on my coat stays firmly in place despite my attempts to grip it. Everything feels distant, like I'm watching someone else's hands fail at this simple task.

"Here." His hands replace mine, steady and warm. Rough and calloused. Strong. Dependable. "Let me help."

The zipper slides down with a quiet hiss. He peels the coat from my shoulders, but it's warm in here; I don't need it. There's a fire going in the wood stove already. I'm not sure if someone kept it going for us while we were gone, or if they started it when we returned.

Dark stains splash against the brown fabric, mostly from behind. Mira's blood. The sight should make me react, should make me feel something. But there's nothing. Just emptiness. I'm exhausted; all my feelings have been felt.

"Arms up."

I comply without thinking, letting him pull off my sweater. Then the thermal shirt. Another sweater. The layers fall away one by one until I'm in just a thin long-sleeve shirt that clings to my skin, damp under the arms from sweating.

"Your pants are wet from the snow."

His voice stays gentle, clinical. Like he's talking to a spooked animal. Maybe he is. I stare at my snow pants, noticing more dark patches near the knees where I knelt beside...

Hmm. No. Those thoughts lead to danger. I've already spent too much time down that road today.

Function, Lisa. You need to function.

My boots come off next. Then the snow pants. Two pairs of thermal leggings. My movements are mechanical, automatic, following Kellan's quiet instructions without really processing them. My body and mind have lost their intrinsic connection.

He gathers the bloody clothes into a pile. Maybe they'll need to be burned. Can't wash out that much blood. Can't...

The room tilts slightly. Kellan's hand steadies my elbow.

"Shower," he reminds me. "You'll feel better once you're warm."

Will I? It feels warm enough in here. I don't think I'm that cold.

Besides, the numbness feels safer than whatever waits on the other side of it. But I stay silent, letting him guide me toward the bathroom. My feet move without my input, carrying me across the wooden floor.

The bathroom light flicks on. Steam rises from the shower—he must have started it while I undressed. The mirror shows a stranger's face, pale and blank-eyed. I don't recognize her. She looks like shit.

"Do you need help?" He asks from the doorway.

I shake my head. The motion feels disconnected, like my body belongs to someone else. "I can manage."

"I'll be right outside if you need anything."

The door clicks shut. Water drums against tile, filling the small space with white noise. I strip off my remaining clothes, slow and clumsy. Step under the spray.

Heat penetrates the numbness, just barely. Water runs pink for a moment as it washes away traces of blood I hadn't noticed on my hands. Even on my neck.

I stand there, letting the water pour over me, not really washing. Just... existing. The steam wraps around me like a blanket, and I float in the emptiness.

My mind turns off, letting me just exist in the moment.

"Lisa?"

The shower door opens abruptly, letting in a rush of cool air. Kellan's broad frame fills the space, cool air breezing against my skin.

"Lisa? You've been in here for twenty minutes."



A violent shiver wracks my body. The water pelts my skin like needles of ice. When did it get so cold? I never noticed.

"Shit." He reaches past me to shut off the water. "You're freezing."

My teeth chatter. I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly aware of how numb my fingers feel. How long have I been standing here? The last clear memory I have is watching blood swirl down the drain.

I didn't like that.

"You haven't even washed." Kellan's voice stays soft, but his jaw tightens. He grabs the shampoo bottle. "Let me help."

The warmth of his hands against my scalp sparks the first real sensation I've felt since... since. His fingers work through my hair with gentle efficiency, spreading soap in careful circles. I close my eyes, focusing on that touch, on the way his callouses catch slightly against my wet hair.

He guides me under the spray, which he's turned on again. It's warmer now.

Rinse, water off, condition, water on, rinse.

The motions blur together as his hands move down to my shoulders, working shower gel across my skin. There's nothing sexual about it—his touch remains clinical, purposeful. But it's real. Present. The only solid thing in a world that's gone sideways.

Steam rises around us again. His shirt is soaked through, clinging to his chest. He doesn't seem to notice or care as he finishes washing me, his movements quick but thorough.

"Stay here." He steps away, returning with a huge fluffy towel. The air feels colder without him close.

He wraps the towel around me, rubbing my arms to generate warmth. Another towel for my hair. His hands never stop moving, never stop touching. Each point of contact anchors me a little more firmly in my body.

Kellan kneels, using a fresh towel to dry my legs. "Foot up." He pats his knee.

I comply, watching as he methodically dries each toe, my ankle, my calf. His hands are so warm. Everything else feels distant, muted, wrapped in cotton wool. But his touch... that's real. That's here. That's now.

The need hits like a physical blow—the desperate desire to feel something, anything, that isn't this horrible emptiness. To connect with someone real and alive and present.

I grab his face between my palms and crush my mouth to his. His stubble scrapes my fingers. His lips are soft, surprised. For one heartbeat, he's absolutely still.

## Chapter 384 Lisa: I Want to Feel

LISA

There's a soft inhale.

Then, his lips move against mine with devastating gentleness. The emptiness inside me cracks, letting in a flood of sensation. His hands slide up my back, cradling me close as he rises to his full height. The towel drops, forgotten, as I press against the solid warmth of his chest.

My fingers curl into his wet shirt. His heart pounds beneath my palm, strong and steady and alive. So alive.

He breaks the kiss with obvious reluctance, pressing his forehead to mine. "Let's get you dressed."

The bedroom feels too bright and dry after the steam-filled bathroom. Kellan's hands stay on my shoulders, steadying me as I shiver. He guides me to sit on the bed, then moves to the dresser.

"Arms up."

I comply without thinking. The soft cotton of my shirt slides over my skin. His knuckles brush my ribs, sending sparks of awareness through my body.

"Lift."

Another mindless response as he helps me into underwear, then flannel pants. Each touch leaves trails of heat that make me ache for more. I need his hands on me again. Need to feel connected to something real.

The mattress dips as he settles me under the thick comforter. "Try to rest."

"Wait." My voice comes out scratchy.

He doesn't, taking a few steps away before unbuttoning his soaked shirt. The wet fabric peels away from his skin, revealing the muscled planes of his chest. Bruises. Cuts. Scars.

Water droplets trail down his abs as he turns to the dresser, distracting me from all the other things.

I watch him pull on dry clothes, my throat tight. The bed feels too empty, too cold. Too much space, practically begging intrusive thoughts to barge in.

"Stay with me?"

His shoulders tense. "That wouldn't be wise."

"Please." I sit up, reaching toward him. The comforter pools around my waist. "I need you."

My voice cracks on the last word. Kellan turns, his expression torn between desire and restraint as he stares at my outstretched hand.

The mattress shifts as Kellan sits, his weight creating a dip that draws me in like gravity. I don't fight it. My body moves on instinct, seeking his warmth, his strength. My knees bracket his hips as I settle into his lap.

"Lisa." My name comes out rough, almost pained.

I silence whatever protest he's about to make with my mouth. No more words. No more thinking. Just this—the slide of my lips against his, demanding a response. His hands settle on my waist, neither pulling me closer nor pushing me away.

The emptiness inside me morphs into hunger. I nip at his bottom lip, drawing a sharp inhale from him. His fingers flex against my sides. The thin cotton of my shirt does nothing to mask the heat of his touch.

"I need this." I break away just enough to speak against his mouth. "Need you."

His control fractures. One hand slides up my back, tangling in my damp hair as he claims my mouth. The kiss is deep, desperate—everything I need to drown out the memories trying to surface.

It isn't just Mira, you see.

It's Bren, too.

And the lives I know they lost during the first massacre.

My parents, who have no idea I'm okay.

This new world of ours, filled with a daily struggle to survive.

I rock against Kellan, feeling the heat of his cock graze against me. Hard. Thick. A sensual promise that he can wipe all these horrible thoughts and feelings away, at least for a little while.

My hips rock faster, chasing the friction, the connection. His other hand grips my hip, guiding my movements. The soft flannel of my pants creates a maddening barrier between us.

"Please." I don't recognize my own voice, breathless and needy. "Make me feel something else. Anything else."

Kellan growls, the sound vibrating through his chest where I press against him. His mouth trails fire down my neck, teeth grazing my pulse point. Every touch burns away another piece of the numbness, replacing it with liquid heat.

Between my thighs, I'm soaked. Already wanting him inside, dreaming of that stretch.

My fingers fumble with the hem of his shirt, desperate to feel skin on skin. He lets me pull it over his head, and I trace the planes of his chest, mapping each scar, each bruise. Proof that he survived. That he's in front of me now.

His hands slip under my shirt, calloused palms sliding up my ribs. I arch into his touch, silently begging for more. When his thumbs brush the undersides of my breasts, a whimper escapes me.

"Lisa." He pulls back, pupils blown wide with desire. "We should slow down."

"No." I roll my hips deliberately against him. "I don't want to think. Just feel."

I capture his mouth again, pouring all my need, my desperation into the kiss. His resistance crumbles beneath the onslaught. Those capable hands map my body like he's memorizing every curve, every shiver, every gasp he draws from me.

No longer arguing, he pulls back only to yank my shirt over my head, letting my breasts swing free between us.

My nipples pebble in the cold, and he groans at the sight, before leaning in.

Kellan's touch is fire and lightning. Teeth and tongue. My breasts tingle with sensation as he worships them with his mouth. My back bows, thrusting me harder against his cock.

In the wake of his lips, my skin feels almost painfully sensitive. But it's a good hurt. A hurt that begs for more. More nip. More bite.

I have to fight against an insane urge to yank him up by his hair and shove his face into my neck. For some reason, I want him to bite me there.

Want it to hurt, to bleed, to mark me forever as his.

I get it now, this strange biting kink the wolves have. I want it, too.

He chuckles, the vibrations rolling through my chest, and I swear he just read my mind as he nibbles his way back up to my neck. He nips my pulse point again, sending sparks of awareness down my spine. Desire buzzes under my skin, leaving all of me tingly and panting.

## Chapter 385 Lisa: Finally Connected

LISA

"You're so responsive," he murmurs against my neck. "Like a live wire, ready to shock the hell out of me."

I reach for his hair, winding the damp strands around my fingers. My eyes fall shut as I pull him back toward my breasts, desperate for more.

"I think you're already shocking me," I admit.

His mouth curves against my skin, and I feel the vibration of his laugh again. Those clever, experienced hands drift over my hips, splaying across my stomach before dipping lower, beneath my waistband and between my thighs.

Slick. Hot. Ready.

Everything in me tightens, and I tilt my hips toward his touch. My breath catches as his fingers slide over my folds, gathering proof of my arousal before circling my entrance.

"Jesus, Lisa." His voice is barely a growl. "You're already soaked."

He pushes a finger inside me, making me keen with need. It's been so long. Too long. My skin is on fire. Nerves alive.

"Kellan, please." My fingers tighten in his hair, urging him to continue. "Don't tease. I need—"

Words fail me. I don't even know what I need. Just more. More of him. More pleasure. More of this feeling that drags me away from the memories of blood on snow and death.

Because right now, I'm alive. Right now, I'm here, in Kellan's arms, and nothing else matters.

"I know what you need." His voice is rough as he pushes another finger inside me. Stretching me. Filling me. His lips close over my nipple, and my back bows off the bed.

My body is alive with sensation. Every touch. Every breath. It's all too much and not enough, all at once.

"Fuck." He swears as I clench around his fingers. "Maybe I should tie you down. Keep you still so I can—"

"Don't you dare." My chest heaves as I battle the coil of need twisting tighter with each passing second. "Don't hold back with me, Kellan. Not tonight."

His eyes flash amber, his wolf a hairsbreadth away. "I'll break you."

"I won't break." I punctuate each word with a desperate kiss. "Need you, Kellan. Please."

My heart beats a wild staccato, blood rushing in my ears. My skin is hypersensitive. Awareness of Kellan's body against mine has me on edge, hovering on the knife blade of control. I need release. Need to feel something. Anything.

He kisses me with an almost bruising force, his fingers thrusting in and out of me, stretching, preparing me. I push back against his hand, rocking my hips, chasing the most pleasure I can draw from his fingers, even as I ache for something more.

His fingers leave me feeling empty, and I lift my hips, silently begging. "Kellan."

"Need you naked." The words are little more than a growl against my lips as he suddenly yanks his fingers from inside me, before gripping my pants in both of his hands.

Then he rips them apart.

Just a great tearing sound and cool air flooding in to brush against my ass, along with a heavy dose of arousal gushing between my thighs.

Holy shit.

Tell me why that was the hottest thing I think I've ever experienced.

It takes only seconds to tug the remnants of my poor flannel pants off, and his weight shifts as he kneels between my legs. Hot and hard and perfect, his cock presses against my entrance, leaving me keening with need.

"Let me know if it's too much." His voice is hoarse, underscoring the tension thrumming through his body.

I dig my fingers into his arms, pulling him down, guiding him inside me. The stretch is perfection. I'm hot and wet and so, so ready. His weight settles over me, his cock sinking deep into my body.

Stretching.

A little painful.

But oh, God, so good.

"Fuck." His hips flex, slowly easing more of himself inside me. "You have no idea how long I've wanted this."

Me, too. I've been fighting this for so long.

Winding my legs around his waist, I urge him to take more. To take all of me, as hard as he wants.

"All of you," I murmur, jerking my hips forward. "Now. Hurry."

There's a little discomfort as he bottoms out, then the burn fades into exquisite sensation.

I kiss him with everything I have. The slide of his mouth against mine. The press of our bodies. The primal rhythm of this mating dance our bodies have memorized without our input.

It's wild. It's desperate. It's everything I didn't know I needed.

He moves above me with a slow, steady rhythm that has my head spinning.

And then he curses, and that steady rhythm goes wild.

His hips slam into mine, jolting my entire body further up the bed, hard enough to make my moans turn into screams. Every thrust brings us closer together, every rock of his hips pushes me nearer to the edge.

But it's more than just physical. As our bodies join in perfect harmony, the soul-deep connection sparks between us. Fated mates. Meant for each other. This moment was written in the stars.

I cry out as pleasure washes over me in wave after wave, carrying me away on a tide of pure sensation. Heat coils in my belly as I shatter around him, screaming his name.

But he doesn't stop.

He keeps moving, thrusting hard enough to bring the stars down from the sky, prolonging my pleasure as my core clenches around him. I'm distantly aware of his cock throbbing inside me, the pressure of his release, but it's secondary to the inferno he's unleashed inside me.

Spent, I sink into the mattress, my eyelids feeling like lead. Kellan follows a moment later, his weight comforting, solid as he settles onto his elbows, breathing ragged.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?"

I squint my eyes open, watching as he stares at me with concern.

"No." I reach for him, tangling my fingers with his. "It was perfect."

The word feels inadequate.

It's complicated and messy and perfect, all at once. Fated mates. Human and wolf. My breath tangles with his as I bask in the afterglow, and he doesn't roll off me.

He remains inside, keeping me pleasantly stretched as he nuzzles my throat.

It takes a few minutes and the haze of pleasure subsiding for me to realize he's still hard. My breath hitches.

"Not enough," he murmurs. "I need more."

That doesn't sound like a bad idea at all.

## Chapter 386 Ava: They Disappeared

"What do you mean, they haven't found them?"

The map sprawls across Lucas's desk, its edges curling where the paper wants to roll back into itself. Red marks pepper the surface—each one a spot where our scouts searched and found nothing.

"The tracks led here." Kellan's finger taps a spot near the eastern border. "Then nothing. Like they vanished into thin air."

Lisa shifts beside me, her arms wrapped tight around herself. The memory of Mira's death weighs heavy on her still. "Are they gone, then?"

"They're not thinking straight enough to hide." Kellan traces the path on the map. "The taint makes them aggressive, reckless. They'd be attacking anything that moves."

Lucas's jaw tightens. "Unless someone's controlling them."

The thought sends ice through my veins. Selene perks up, staring at me. She's been extra sensitive to my worry of late.

"The Mad Prince." Lisa's voice cracks. "You think he's controlling them?"

"It's possible." Lucas straightens, his shoulders rigid. "We can't assume they've just wandered off. Not with everything else that's happened."



His beta frowns. "I doubt that. They acted just like the wolves touched by the corruption. The only difference is their lack of scent."

"Could be a smokescreen. A way for them to keep us assuming horses instead of zebras." Golden eyes meet mine. "Or it could be exactly what it seems. Either way, we need to deal with it. We just need to increase security. Are you prepared?"

I nod. "The longer we wait, the more it spreads. I'm ready to go now."

"Kellan will lead a team of fifteen wolves to guard you while you work. I'd rather go myself—"

"You have too much to do. I'll be under the best guard." Standing, I head to his side, sliding my arm through his. His body's tense, filled with frustration.

"Lisa, you'll stay here." Kellan looks conflicted, much as my mate does.

"With her own security detail," said mate adds sternly.

"That's fine. But I want updates. Constant ones."

"You'll have them." Kellan's voice softens when he addresses her. There's a newfound intimacy there, and I'd love to know more. But that will have to wait. Time for girl talk right now is a luxury.

I glance at the map; it takes me a while to figure out where we were when we found it. "I think it's over here. It took us an entire day to get there, but we won't be searching around this time. Should be there and back again by dinner."

"I'll gather the team." Kellan heads for the door, pausing to squeeze Lisa's shoulder as he passes.

Lucas waits until they're gone before pulling me into his arms. Amber and campfire smoke wraps around me like a comforting blanket.

"I don't like this," he murmurs into my hair.

"I know." I press my face into his chest. "But it needs to be done."

His arms tighten. "Be careful."

"I will." I lean back to meet his gaze. "I have too much to come back to."

\* \* \*

The warmth of Lucas' embrace is long gone by the time we reach the area of taint. Marcus and Vanessa trudge along beside me, while others roam ahead and others trail behind.

Selene's usual playful energy is missing—her paws barely leave marks in the snow as she trails behind me. She's been silent for a while, her mind brewing over something.

It's spread. It's double what we encountered before.

Grimoire's words whisper in my head.

My stomach twists. "Can I handle it?"

I'm uncertain. The concentration is... troubling.

Marcus shifts closer, his broad shoulders tensed. The wind blows his scent at me, tinged with something bitter. I think it might be anxiety. I'm still getting used to what I can smell. "Everything alright, Luna?"

"No." I hate admitting it. "Grimoire says the taint is worse than expected."

"Should we turn back?" Vanessa frowns. "We don't want you to overwork yourself."

Leaving this corruption to fester isn't an option. Not when it could twist more wolves into mindless killers.

"I need to at least assess it. We might just need to do it in increments." It isn't ideal, but it is what it is. Too bad we don't have any other witches in our pack. It would make things a lot easier.

Attempting to purify this much at once could be dangerous, he agrees. But it also might spread faster than you can purify it.

Puffing my breath out, I stomp through a patch of compacted snow. "Guess we'll find out."

A pulse of darkness cuts him off; I can sense it off in the distance. The taint surges, reaching out like tentacles of pure corruption. My knees buckle as nausea hits. Marcus steadies me before I can fall.

"Are you all right?" Vanessa grabs my arm.

"I'm okay." My stomach still churns, but I force myself to straighten up. "Grimoire, what was that?"

It's growing. His voice carries an edge I've never heard before. Faster than I anticipated.

"How does it grow?" The cold bites at my exposed skin as I pull away from Marcus and Vanessa's support. The wind's picked up, and I don't think the timing is coincidence.

By feeding. Grimoire materializes beside me in his fox form, silver fur bristling. It consumes energy, corrupts it, spreads like a disease.

What is it feeding on? Selene's mental voice is as sharp as the wind whipping around us.

Everything. Grimoire's tail lashes back and forth. The land, the animals, any magical energy it can reach. And when there's nothing left to corrupt...

"It moves on to find more." No wonder it's spreading so quickly—there's plenty of life force out here in the wilderness for it to consume.

The nausea rises again as another pulse hits me. It's like watching a heart beat, if that heart was made of pure corruption. Each throb sends out another wave of taint, spreading further into our territory.

My fists clench.

Don't think you can clear it all today, Grimoire warns me. Don't let your emotions take over. You need to be in control.

## Chapter 387 Ava: Corrupted Whispers

The snow ends in a perfect line, as if someone took an eraser to the landscape. Beyond that boundary, the earth lies bare and lifeless. No grass, no moss, not even the hardy winter plants that usually peek through frozen ground. The soil itself looks wrong—ashen and cracked, like the bottom of a dried riverbed.

"I've never seen it this bad." My boots crunch on the dead earth. Each step sends up little puffs of gray dust. "Even the insects are gone."

The corruption is absolute here. Grimoire's fox form prowls beside me. It's consumed everything.

My bodyguards hang back at my insistence, though I sense their unease. Marcus keeps shifting his weight, uneasy despite his experience in these matters.

A wave of corruption rolls over me, and my stomach heaves. The taint feels different here—thicker, more concentrated. Like wading through tar instead of water. The dead zone stretches as far as I can see, pulsing with that sickly energy.

To the wolves, they only see dead land. But it's so much more than that.

Glancing at Grimoire, who's focused on the corruption, I ask, "How am I supposed to handle this? The purification usually takes over once I start. I've never had to stop it before."

It's about will and control. You must maintain awareness of your limits.

"That's not exactly helpful." The corruption beckons, a seductive whisper promising power. I've felt it before, but never this strong. "What happens if I can't stop?"

You must. His mental voice carries an edge of steel. Or the taint will consume you as surely as it's consumed everything else.

The dead earth crunches beneath my feet as I take another step forward. The boundary between life and death is so stark—winter's white giving way to corruption's gray.

"I need specifics, Grimoire. How do I cut it off when it gets to be too much?"

The same way you control any magic—through force of will. You must remain conscious of your boundaries.

I press my lips together, frustrated. It isn't that I don't understand what he's saying, it's just that it's so freaking vague.

The corruption pulses again, stronger this time. My knees buckle, but I force myself to stay upright. The taint wants in—wants to corrupt my magic the way it's corrupted everything else.

"If I fail—"

You won't. Grimoire looks up at me with his unearthly fox eyes. But you must start small. Don't try to purify everything at once.

I'll call you back if you get lost, Selene adds, whining softly. She's far back, too, and hating the distance I've forced her to keep.

The dead earth crumbles beneath my knees as I sink down. My palms press against the ashen ground, and a shudder ripples through me at the wrongness of it. No life, no essence, just emptiness where nature should thrive.

"Start small," I whisper to myself. "Just a tiny piece."

I can do this.

My magic surges forth before I finish the thought, eager and hungry. The corruption rushes in—thick, viscous, choking. My stomach revolts as the taint floods my system. Acid burns up my throat.

"No." The word comes out as a gasp between heaves. "Too much."

The corruption keeps coming, drawn to my magic like a magnet. It tastes of rot and decay, filling my mouth with the flavor of death. It's a new experience I could do without; my body tries to reject it, but the flow won't stop.

Another wave of nausea hits. I double over, one hand pressed to my mouth, the other still connected to the dead earth. The purification process has never felt like this before—never been this violent.

Pull back.

I need to pull back.

But my magic refuses to listen. It wants to consume all the corruption, cleanse every inch of tainted earth. The flow increases, and black spots dance across my vision.

Ava! Grimoire's voice cuts through the haze. Focus. You must control it.

My arms shake as I fight to stay upright. Sweat drips down my face despite the winter chill. The corruption pulses through me, each wave bringing fresh nausea.

"I can't—" Another heave wracks my body. "It won't stop."

It will if you make it. Grimoire's mental voice carries steel. You are stronger than the corruption. Prove it.

The taint whispers seductively, promising power if I just let go. Let it in. Let it consume everything. My magic reaches for more, eager to purify, to cleanse. Like two sets of personalities inside of me.

My stomach lurches again. Tears stream down my face as I retch, the taste of bile mixing with corruption's decay. But I keep my hand pressed to the earth, stubborn despite my body's rejection.

Small.

Think small, damn it.

Don't let it all in at once.

Focus narrows to a single patch of ground beneath my palm. Not the whole field. Not the endless stretch of corruption. Just this one spot. This one tiny piece of earth.

My body shakes with the effort of restraining my magic, of forcing it to pull back when it wants to surge forward. The corruption fights me, clinging to every scrap of power it can reach, as if it knows it can overpower my purification.

Like it's alive.

Another wave of nausea hits, and I gag on nothing. My throat burns. My chest aches. But I hold that focus—that single point of contact where my hand meets earth.

The corruption surges past my defenses, a tidal wave of rot that floods my senses. My magic reaches for it, desperate to purify, to cleanse—but there's too much. Far too much.

"No." The word comes out as a strangled gasp.

The world tilts sideways. My body hits the dead earth, and the contact only makes it worse. Corruption pours in through every pore, every breath. The taste of decay fills my mouth, coats my tongue. My stomach heaves, but nothing comes up.

Dark whispers fill my mind. Power thrums through my veins, intoxicating and terrible. The corruption promises everything—strength, control, dominion over life and death. All I have to do is let go. Let it in.

My magic pulses with eagerness, reaching for more. The corruption responds, surging forward until I can't tell where it ends and I begin.

Ava! Selene's mental scream pierces the darkness. Come back!

But the corruption's call is stronger. Sweet. Seductive. It shows me visions of what I could become—a being of pure power, unconstrained by mortal limits. I could protect everyone. Save everyone.

Rule everyone.

## Chapter 388 Ava: Is That Normal?

It feels like an eternity of struggle. Of push and pull, and evil over light. Eventually, Grimoire's cool touch and its guiding force help restrain my magic and pull me back.

The sensation of temptation leaves me ill, but my focus returns to the small patch of ground in front of me.

My hands shake with relief over feeling like myself again, and I pull frigid air in short, panting breaths. "I don't understand how you resist it so easily."

Who said anything about easy? The taint affects everything it touches. The difference lies in how we respond to its call.

He never seems affected. If anything, it's like he's almost removed from the effects.

I refuse to bow to it, that's all. The same way you refuse to bow to those who would control you.

The comparison kind of stings, knowing how easily he can shrug it off and how I was almost sucked in.

Your insecurities feed its power over you. Stop doubting yourself. You know how to purify. You've done it countless times. Focus on that certainty instead of what might go wrong.

I've cleansed corruption before. I know the feel of it, how to draw it in and transform it.

I breathe deep, letting the crisp winter air fill my lungs until they twinge in pain. The taint pulses against my senses, but this time I acknowledge its presence without letting it overwhelm me.

My magic rises, familiar and sure. I've done this before. I can do it again.

That's it. Grimoire's approval washes over me. You don't need to fight it. Just be stronger than its allure.

The corruption tries to seduce me with whispers of power, but I let them slide past. I know who I am. I know what I can do.

My magic flows smoother now, guided by confidence instead of fear. The small patch of earth beneath my palms begins to warm as the taint retreats before my steady advance.

Power thrums beneath my skin, building with each patch of earth I purify. The sensation reminds me of static electricity, making my hair stand on end. My fingertips tingle, and my chest feels tight, like I've swallowed lightning.

"Something's different."

We need to address the magic you're storing. Grimoire's voice carries an edge of concern. But that can wait until we finish here.

The corruption retreats faster now, almost as if it's eager to be transformed. Or maybe it's just docile beneath my control. Each time I pull the taint in, more power builds inside me, at a rate much faster than normal.

Selene whines softly. Your scent has changed. The magic is affecting your body.

It doesn't hurt, though. If anything, I feel stronger than ever. Energy courses through my veins, making me want to run or jump or do something to release this buzzing sensation.

Despite the slight discomfort, it feels... amazing.

Which is probably a bad thing, in hindsight.

It doesn't seem right, my wolf agrees with worry.

It is normal for the amount of magic you're converting. Your efficiency has increased, so there is less loss during the purification. A bigger concern would be how much magic you have stored within you.

Considering that an overabundance of magic can turn me into the living time bomb we never wanted me to become, yes, I can see how that would be concerning.

But right now I don't feel as though I'm near my limit. In fact, it's almost too easy to carry this extra energy within me, and purification is happening with very little strain on me.

The extra magic is being recycled, as it were. Because you have a great amount of clean magic within you, it's easier to deal with the small amounts you're pulling in. If you were to lose control and increase the rate of purification, it would not be this easy. I don't recommend rushing this, though.

"Why not?" My words puff out easily, as if I wasn't gasping just a while ago from the strain of fighting off the taint.

You are still at the edges of this spread of corruption, where it's lighter. When you hit the denser taint, it will take more out of you to purify. If you're doing it too quickly, you might not realize the danger until you are overwhelmed. Slow and steady is better than rushing regret.

Now that he's spelled that out, it makes sense—some of the larger patches I've purified have felt harder at some points than others, but I hadn't thought about why in depth. I guess it's easier to overlook when they're smaller and easy to handle in a single session.

Magic is a constant learning experience. You're wobbling in your control; tighten it up.

My magic flutters at Grimoire's warning, and I realize how loose my control has become. Corruption flows wild, like a dam was lifted. When had I let my guard down? The ease of purification lulled me into a false sense of security.

I pull back on the reins of my magic, forcing it to bend to my will once more. The buzzing sensation dulls to a manageable hum.

Grimoire, is it normal for her to glow like that? Selene's question comes out of nowhere.



More accurate to say it's abnormal that you can see it at all. Grimoire's fox form circles me, his silver fur rippling with an otherworldly sheen. Most creatures cannot perceive magical auras unless specifically trained. Even then, it takes years of practice.

"I'm glowing?"

Like moonlight through water. It started when you were fighting the corruption's influence, and it's getting brighter. At first I thought it was sun glare.

The amount of magic you're holding has reached a threshold where it's becoming visible to those sensitive to such things, Grimoire explains. Selene shouldn't be able to see it at all, but she has proven to be more sensitive to magic than the normal wolf.

"Is this dangerous?" Glowing feels like it would be an unnerving precursor to a big explosion. My magic wobbles again, and I curse softly as I force myself to control the stream of taint I'm drawing in.

It's too easy to let go and be distracted because of how easy it feels.

Not inherently. But it does mean we need to address your magical storage soon. The stronger your magic grows, the more careful we must be with its containment.

## Chapter 389 Ava: Pulling Away

My hands tremble against the frozen earth. The corruption no longer yields so easily to my touch. Each pull of taint feels like dragging a boulder through mud; I'm exhausted.

Stop. Selene's command rings sharp in my mind. You're exhausted.

She's right. You need to pull back now.

The corruption fights my attempts to draw it in, thick and viscous. My earlier confidence crumbles as my magic strains to pull in more corruption. It's hungry.

Sweat trickles down my spine despite the bitter cold.

I try to pull away, but the corruption clings like tar. My arms shake with the effort to break free. The magic inside me churns, no longer the smooth current it was before.

Get up. Selene's teeth close gently on my coat sleeve. I've cleared a lot of space, and it's no longer unsafe for her to be by my side. Let go.

"I'm trying." Panic edges into my voice. The corruption wraps tendrils around my magic, and my magic grabs onto it like a starving child. "It won't let go."

Focus. Grimoire's presence wraps around my mind. Your magic belongs to you. It is under your power. You are in command.

The corruption pulls harder. My vision blurs at the edges. The buzzing under my skin turns to needles of ice.

Fight it, little witch.

I close my eyes, concentrating on Grimoire's voice. On Selene's steady presence. On Lucas waiting for me back at Wolf's Landing. On Lisa who needs me strong and whole.

On all of Westwood, who have come to accept me as their Luna.

The corruption's hold wavers.

I yank my hands back from the earth, falling backward into the snow. My chest heaves as I gasp for air. The magic inside me whirls like a storm, making me dizzy; if it were truly sentient, I'd describe it as angry.

Breathe. Selene presses against my side, her dog-breath in my face as she licks me desperately. Just breathe.

I stare at my trembling hands. Selene's right; I am glowing. The light beneath my skin pulses erratically, matching the chaos of my stored magic.

"What happened?" My voice comes out raw. "It was so easy, and then it just wasn't."

You reached the denser corruption, as I warned might happen. It will seem effortless until you're lacking energy, and then it's like walking through knee-deep mud. You did well, but your control still needs work.

Good thing they were both there for me.

Now that you've experienced it, things will be easier the next time. You've never encountered an amount of corruption you can't cleanse on your own. It's understandable to falter in the face of its power. Grimoire's words are a soothing balm in my tired head. Now, we should return. You need to eat and recoup your power. We should return in two days, before it grows too much.

Vanessa's cool fingers press against my wrist, her frown deepening. "Your pulse is racing. How do you feel?"

"Tired." Despite trying to project a strong front, I yawn around the word.

"You're clammy." She presses the back of her hand to my forehead. "And pale as fresh snow. You need to drink some water."

Huh. Water. I didn't drink a single sip during that entire process.

Everything blurs together after the first hour or so.

Aurum says Lucas is worried sick. You've been at this for eight hours straight.

Eight hours? That can't be right. But I glance around, taking in the deep purple shadows stretching across the snow. Twilight bathes everything in muted colors, the sun nothing more than a memory on the horizon.

"I didn't realize it would take this long."

Marcus steps closer, his boots crunching in the snow. "How much of the taint is left? How many more times will we have to come here?"

"About two-thirds."

Sharp inhales from the wolves around me. Greg mutters a curse under his breath.

"Two-thirds?" Vanessa's voice rises, her eyes wide. "You've been working for eight hours straight and there's still that much left?"

Marcus and Vanessa have been there for every purification trip; they've seen how much I've done in the past. It must be a huge shock for them to see different this patch is than the others.

"Yes. It was very large."

Vanessa shakes her head, already digging through her pack. "Here. Small sips." She presses a water bottle into my hands. "Your body temperature is all wrong. We need to get you warmed up. I have some energy bars, too."

The water tastes like heaven on my parched tongue. I hadn't realized how thirsty I was until that first drop hit my mouth.

"Careful," my ever-present healer warns. "Not too fast."

Greg paces at the edge of our group, his agitation clear in every movement. The other wolves mirror his unease, though nothing happened during the purification. Maybe they can sense how close I came to losing control.

You weren't as close as you think, Grimoire says, but I disagree.

If he and Selene weren't there...

You would have won in the end. It just would have taken longer.

The vote of confidence gives me a little boost.

"We should head back," Marcus says. "It's getting dark, and you need rest."

My body betrays my exhaustion. My hands still shake, and the magic inside me feels raw and unstable, and uncomfortably full.

"The corruption isn't going anywhere," Vanessa adds, misinterpreting my silence for reluctance. "We can come back tomorrow after you've had proper rest and food."

The mention of food makes my stomach clench. When did I last eat? The morning feels like it happened in another lifetime. When Vanessa hands me an energy bar, I crunch through it like it's the best treat I've ever tasted.

Everything's more delicious when you're starving.

You should use some of your stored magic to heat the area around you. Be careful with it. Then flush some through your body. It will temporarily relieve your exhaustion so we can return home without too much delay, but it isn't a cure. It's more of an illusion than anything.

Sending a burst of acknowledgement in Grimoire's direction, I chew on another bite of my energy bar as I send out my magic to surround me in heat, much as I had done to my wolf-shifted bodyguards when they pulled the sled.

## Chapter 390 Lucas: What's Going On?

LUCAS

I rub my temples, staring at the radio equipment spread across my desk. Static crackles through the speakers, a sound that's become far too familiar these past days.

"Nothing." Ryder switches the dial again. "Dead air on every emergency frequency. Been like this for a few days now."

Vester crosses his arms. "That's what worries me most. The humans have been relying on their radios to stay organized; why would it go silent now?"

My wolf paces beneath my skin, sensing a storm on the horizon. "And Jericho's message?"

"Just as I said." The healer's mate pulls out a crumpled note. "'Be alert.' His vampire contacts are usually more specific. I can only assume that it's a gut feeling on their side, as well."

"Given the recent attack, we can assume—" Ryder begins, and I already know where he's going. To tie Jericho's vampire refugees with the Mad Prince; it's something everyone's already thinking, and I can't deny that it would make sense. But in my gut, I know it's wrong.

"Enough." My words are sharper than I mean for them to be, but both my deltas are used to that. "Jericho should be here. His insight with the vampires could prove invaluable."

Ryder scoffs. "If we could even trust his friends. Who knows? Maybe one of them is related to the Mad Prince. How else would they know he's on the move?"

"Jericho's contacts aren't affiliated with that monster. The warning came after our contact with his thrall."

"Can we be certain? The world's gone dark, Alpha. For all we know, those vampires aren't even in hiding. Maybe they're trying to use Jericho to get to us."

The pack's bias against bloodsuckers is one that won't disappear anytime soon. There are many who still look at Sister Miriam with some suspicion, and her recent disappearance has only heightened those feelings.

Of course, I've learned that not all vampires are evil as we always understood them to be.

"We can't afford to alienate potential allies. This is no simple territory war."

"And we can't risk bringing enemies inside our walls." Vester's calm voice sides with Ryder. He's been more cautious since the betrayals from our own pack members. "Though I agree—having Jericho back would be a great help."

There's little more to be said on the subject. I was hoping to see Jericho in person and discuss the nature of his vampire friends, but with our current situation, that's impossible. I can't leave the pack.

"Something's happening. Ava says the taint has gathered and become dense. The radios have gone silent. It's been too peaceful for too long, and now this attack by the Mad Prince." Drumming my fingers against the table, I lean back in one of our folding chairs—our luxurious seating arrangement in the debriefing tent.

Vester sighs. "There has been no suspicious activity in the last few days. The patrols report nothing but snow and more snow. Animal activity seems normal, and the human cities still seem to be keeping their stores stocked."

"So, why now? The cold should work in our favor. Isn't it what stopped them?" Ryder is skeptical; he doesn't have the same view as I do. He thinks the Mad Prince's attack is unrelated.

But we've all learned to assume the worst.

The real problem is that he's right. Winter has been our greatest ally these past months. The snow slows everyone down—rogues, vampires, and humans. With the lack of easy communication and the severe winter conditions, we assumed all the attacks stopped due to basic logistics.

My deltas and I assumed our enemies would wait for spring.

"What if the cold is exactly what they want?" It was only ever an assumption, anyway. One that we decided must be correct after months of peace. "What if they've been waiting for the worst conditions, hoping we're all weak and hungry?"

Vester's eyes narrow. "It would be clever. We've gotten comfortable thinking the weather protects us, waiting for the thaw."

"Yes. Look at our situation. We're housing refugees. Our supplies are stretched thin. The cold makes it harder to hunt, harder to gather resources."

"And harder to evacuate if needed." Ryder stops his pacing. "We're all concentrated in one place, trying to stay warm."

We've gathered our people close, thinking it safer. Instead, have we made ourselves an easier target? That might be a problem.

"The rogues who attacked Lisa's group moved fine in the snow. They weren't slowed down at all. They were shifted, but that doesn't mean they should be able to disappear in thin air."

"Because they were enhanced by the taint?" Ryder offers; it's more of a statement than a question, but it's a reasonable assumption.

Vester rubs the tip of his nose as he thinks. "The corruption changes them. Makes them more aggressive and stronger. Maybe they're faster too?"

It's impossible to sit still as we discuss this; I'm full of energy, wanting to rush out on a hunt of my own. Instead we're all sitting here in this tent, spending the morning in discussions instead of action.

Ryder continues the conversation as I remain quiet, working through my thoughts. "Our Luna says the taint is gathering. Getting denser. They went almost a full day without finding any corruption, until this large patch she's trying to clear. That can't be coincidence."

"Enough." Waving a hand through the air, I cut off our musings. "We know to be wary. Let's shelve that for now. Ryder, take a team to Jericho, with a little more food. See what

you can glean from the vampires he's working with, and update him on the situation with the Mad Prince's attack."

"Understood."

"Vester, have you heard from the Aspen team?"

"No, Alpha. Our last communication was during the midnight check-in, and there were no issues then. Ivy should be checking in sometime early this afternoon. If they are making good time, she should see Alpha Shadowpine tonight. If not, it will be tomorrow."

"Good." Leaning back again, I sigh. "While she's gone, I want to adjust the location of the Aspen tents. They need to be on opposite ends of my cabin. There are too many rumors about her presence here in the pack."

It isn't as though I've been unaware of them; it's impossible not to know, with how frequently wolves gossip. Too many seem to be under the impression that I would be willing to take a second mate in this situation.

Ivy is a fine she-wolf and would make someone a wonderful mate one day. A strong hunter, well-versed in pack politics, with ties to one of the strongest Alphas of the Northwestern Territories? She is a desirable mate.

But I already have mine.

My deltas share a look between them, and Aurum bristles at their hesitation. "What?"

"Some of the refugees..." Ryder shifts his weight. "They're hoping you'll take Ivy as a second mate. As co-Luna with Ava. They think it would strengthen the pack."

A bark of laughter escapes me before I can stop it. The theory is as ridiculous now as it was the first time I heard it. "Co-Luna? That's not even possible. There's never been such a thing in our history."

"We know that." Vester's voice remains steady. "But the refugees don't care about history. They see Ivy's strength, and while many appreciate Ava's powers, they are uneasy in the face of magic. Especially our dependence on the purifications. These are wolves who have been forcefully separated from their alphas and packs; they desire normalcy above all else."

"Many insist they would switch pack allegiance if Ivy became Luna of Westwood." Ryder grimaces. "Even without their Alpha's consent."

It's nonsense. "Make sure all of these rumors die while she's visiting Clayton. The last thing we need is drama between the packs."

"We've been trying." Vester's lips press into a thin line. "But Ivy herself seems to be encouraging these rumors."

"What do you mean?"

"She's been suggesting things. Talking about pack alliances through mating bonds. Making comments about how much easier things are with two strong she-wolves at Westwood. Nothing overt. Just enough to fan the fires." Vester meets my gaze, his own eyes cold. He liked Ivy once; he's clearly lost respect for her in recent weeks. "Is there really nothing we can do about this?"

There is. I can always bring this to Clayton's desk. But after our past... I shake my head. "I won't burden her brother. I owe him that much."

"But—"

"No." The word comes out with alpha authority. "Clayton sacrificed much to help Westwood, even in the face of the Council's disapproval. I won't repay that by complaining about his sister's behavior unless she crosses a clear line."

"And what line would that be?" Ryder asks.

"She hasn't directly challenged Ava's position. She hasn't openly defied pack hierarchy. Everything else is just talk." I lean forward. "Let the refugees gossip. They'll find something new to discuss soon enough. But just in case, Vester, see if there's any way we can find the Twilight Ridge and Silvermoon camps. Since their bonds haven't been severed with their packs, we know their alphas are alive. We should send their wolves home before they get any more bright ideas."