

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted

Chapter 391 Lisa: Talking with the Grand Sage

LISA

With Ava out to purify the large mass of corruption she calls a taint, and Lucas busy being Alpha, I've been stuck in Kellan's cabin, surrounded by ten werewolves in tactical gear and impassive faces.

They don't talk, no matter how much I try to be friendly to them. Maybe they're the kind of wolves who don't like humans. Or maybe they're just really professional.

They aren't holding me hostage or anything, though, so I learn to ignore them. Eventually they follow me to the Grand Sage's cabin.

Thick gray smoke curls from his chimney, letting me know that it will at least be warm inside. Maybe no tea or food, though. Ever since Elverly's been working in the kitchen to feed the pack, his cabin's turned into a bit of a bachelor pad.

My boots crunch on the path to his home, shoveled free of feet of snow thanks to someone Kellan assigned to the task during the last round of snowfall.

I duck through the doorway into blessed warmth.

Only two of my guards follow me inside. The others spread out around the cabin's perimeter like silent shadows in tactical gear. At least I won't have ten pairs of eyes boring into my back while I'm in here.

Hopefully they know to keep their mouths shut, too. Almost no one knows the Grand Sage is actually a gnome. Everyone just thinks of him as the eccentric Dr. Blackwell.

The two who entered position themselves by the door, weapons at the ready. Their faces remain impassive, but I catch the slight wrinkle of their noses. The Grand Sage's cabin smells like a mix of burning metal, ozone, and something vaguely medicinal.

It's ever-changing, depending on what he's working on.

Papers cover every surface, covered in the Sage's cramped handwriting. Bits of metal and crystal lie scattered among the documents. The man himself hunches over his workbench,

muttering as he sketches something that looks like a cross between an hourglass and a medieval torture device.

I sink into the chair across from him, but he doesn't look up. His quill scratches against the parchment as he adds more details to whatever he's designing. After watching him work for several minutes, I clear my throat.

He startles, ink splattering across his latest drawing. "Oh! Child, when did you arrive?"

"Just now." Lifting my arm, I nod toward the brace, its metal glinting in the lamplight. It's always dim in here. "I had to use it."

His eyes light up behind his wire-rimmed glasses. "Really? How did it perform?"

An inkwell nearly falls over as he scrambles for a fresh sheet of paper. His quill hovers expectantly as he waits for my response. I've given him so many pens, but he really likes his quills lately. Says it's a more authentic experience.

"It worked." My words are hollow, but of course he doesn't seem to notice. When it comes to his inventions, he's blind to everything else. "It manifested exactly as designed. Clean hit, complete incineration of the target. Seemed more powerful than normal, though. Is it supposed to sync with my emotional state?"

"Excellent, excellent!" He scribbles frantically. "It might, as it's bonded to you by your blood. How was the power consumption? Did you notice any drain on your personal energy reserves?"

Mira's lifeless eyes flash through my mind, and I cringe away from the memory. "No drain. Just death."

But he's too absorbed in his notes to notice my tone. "Good, good. No matter how much testing is done, it's always a relief to hear it's working properly on the battlefield."

"It worked too well." My fingers trace the metal surface, remembering the searing heat of my rage. "I was feeling more murderous than usual, and the brace seemed to pick up on that. The blast was much stronger than our practice sessions."

The Grand Sage's quill pauses mid-stroke. "Fascinating. Tell me more about your emotional state during deployment."

"I was angry. Very angry. I wanted to see her burn, and I wanted her to die miserably." Now that I'm so far removed from the moment, it's crazy to me that I could have that level of anger toward another person. Even someone who hurt my friend.

"Are you sure I can't use magic? Because that didn't feel normal. It felt like... like that power came from me, not just the brace."

"Unfortunately, no. You cannot generate or manipulate magic. However, your magical affinity can influence certain bondings, such as with your brace."

"Bonding?" I pounce on that word. It's his second time using it now. "You never told me I was bonded with it before." Or he did, and it was lost in all the words he likes to use when he gets excited. It's certainly a possibility.

"Ah, perhaps I should clarify." He sets down his quill to regard me with a thoughtful stare. "It's not a bond like what you've seen between mates or pack bonds. Think of it as a natural reaction. The brace becomes sensitive to its wearer over time, affected by mental state and purpose."

"But how does that work if I can't use magic?" Magitech is already something way over my head. The fact that some of my blood can power a magical item is already bonkers. Having something that can somehow read my mind is crazier still. It was already weird to me that visualizing what I wanted out of my brace would cause that shape to materialize; this is on a whole different level.

"While you cannot release the magic within your blood, what exists in your body can still be affected by you. In fact, there was actually a fascinating case in history—a Fae-blessed human woman who transformed her blood into a type of poison. She became a walking toxin. No one fully understood how she managed it, but she became a much sought-after assassin. I hear she was beautiful, too."

My stomach turns. "That's disgusting." I stare at the brace with new wariness. "Wait, are you saying this thing has some kind of sentience? Because that's creepy as hell." Artificial intelligence, but with magic.

The Grand Sage chuckles. "No, no. Not sentience. Think of it more as an extension of your arm. It responds to your intent, your emotions, just as your muscles respond to your brain's signals."

"That's... not as comforting as you probably think it is."

"Yes, I suppose it wouldn't be."

Chapter 392 Ava: Storing Magic

Clumps of white powder scatter across the wooden planks of my doorstep as I stomp my booted feet. The others are headed to the cafeteria for a well-deserved dinner, but I'm too amped up to eat. Magic thrums beneath my skin like dancing electricity, even as my body's exhausted from the day's events.

"Your capacity has grown." Grimoire materializes beside me once I enter the cabin, in his favored childlike form. "The Grand Sage's quartz would make excellent storage."

It's pleasantly warm inside, encouraging me to throw off the thousand layers I'm wearing. Lucas always makes sure our place is tended to so I come home to a heated home. "Where did I put those stones?"

"Under the bed." Grimoire watches as Selene veers away from us, toward the far corner of the kitchen. "In the wooden box with the brass clasp."

"Running away already?" I ask her.

The stones reek of after you enchant them. They make me sneeze and itch.

"Fair enough." Crouching beside the bed, I pull out the ornate box. Inside, three chunks of milky quartz nestle in red velvet, each the size of my palm. "How do I do this? Same as the little ones?"

Grimoire nods, floating in mid-air. "Yes. These hold quite a bit more than you would think. They're of better quality than what we usually use for batteries, so it should be enough to drain you."

I cup the first stone between my palms. The quartz is cool and smooth against my skin, and I swear my magic is eager to dive into it. Closing my eyes, I imagine my excess power as a glowing river, channeling down my arms and into the crystal.

It takes little more than a second for the stone to warm against my skin. Energy pulses in steady waves, and my breath catches at the raw sensation of magic moving through me.

If I let it go too fast, the stone will shatter under its force; it's a lesson I learned the hard way months ago. Now, it's almost second nature to restrict the pace of magical transfer.

"Good," Grimoire murmurs. "The crystal accepts your power easily."

He's right. Unlike the violent push-pull of purifying taint, this is peaceful. Natural. The quartz drinks in my magic like a sponge absorbing water.

The first stone, the smallest of the three, reaches capacity after a few minutes. When I open my eyes, it gleams with an inner light, small sparks dancing in its cloudy depths. Lucas says he can't see it, but it's clear in my view.

"One down," I say, setting it carefully back in the box. "Still feel pretty full, but not like I'm about to burst."

"Take your time with the next one. No need to rush the process."

I pick up the second crystal, larger than the first. This time I let the magic flow even slower, savoring the strange feeling. It's almost as freeing as shucking off your bra at the

end of a long day. The quartz resonates in harmony with my energy, creating a soft humming sensation that travels up my arms.

From her corner, Selene sneezes. That smell gets worse every time.

"Sorry." I can't detect whatever scent bothers her so much, but her nose twitches with each pulse of magic.

The second stone fills gradually. I watch the light spread through it like dawn breaking.

"Last one." I reach for the final crystal, the largest of the three. "How much can these hold?"

"Quite a bit," Grimoire says. "The Grand Sage chose these specifically for their capacity. Quality quartz can store remarkable amounts of magical energy. Not as much as, say, jade, but it's easier to come by."

I cradle the stone in my hands and begin the transfer again. This one takes longer, drawing the magic out in steady streams. My shoulders relax as the pressure of containing so much power finally starts to ease.

"There." I place the third crystal back in its velvet nest. All three stones pulse with captured magic now, like a cluster of stars in the wooden box. "That feels better."

Selene's tail swishes against the floor. They smell like a lightning strike waiting to happen.

"The stones will hold that power indefinitely," Grimoire says. "You can draw from them later if needed, or use them to power spells. Useful if you have to do a large-scale ward in the future."

I close the box, watching the brass clasp click shut. The thrumming under my skin has settled to a manageable level, though I can still feel the magic ready to answer my call. "We're going to need more of these."

Grimoire tilts his head thoughtfully. "We can always ask the Grand Sage tomorrow if he's come across more quartz."

"Good idea. With all the magic I'm going to pull from the next purification, I'll need another two of these, at least." I'm not drained, but I'm still pretty full of magic. Maybe half? It's hard to tell, though Grimoire assures me I'll get used to it as I fill and drain my magic in more cycles.

Speaking of the Grand Sage, when was the last time I saw him? The gnome's been scarce lately, though I assume he's still alive and kicking—Lisa would have mentioned otherwise.

He has a habit of vanishing into his cabin for days. Sometimes I think the pack forgets he even exists.

He's got a brilliant mind, though I still don't understand how he can do what he does. Magitech is even stranger of an existence than magic.

"Magitech is a peculiar invention," Grimoire says, floating in lazy circles near the ceiling. "I've never needed it myself. Pure magic has always served me well enough."

I stretch my arms overhead, feeling the satisfying pop of joints realigning. "How does the Grand Sage do it? Mixing technology and magic seems impossible."

"Magic is infinite in its possibilities. Though I confess, his methods elude my understanding." Grimoire settles onto the dresser, his childlike form swinging his legs. "How are you feeling?"

"Surprisingly good." Another stretch and my spine cracks. "My body's ready to collapse, but my magic feels... balanced? Like I'm not about to explode anymore." I rub my temples. "Though my brain feels like it weighs twice as much as normal."

"That's to be expected. You pushed yourself hard today. Which is why we're taking tomorrow off from purification."

"Didn't we already plan on that?"

"Yes. We should work instead on some basic control exercises."

I sink onto the edge of the bed with a yawn, pulling off my socks. They're uncomfortably damp from sweat. Traveling in the deep snow comes with a lot of challenges; I didn't realize sweating through my clothes would be one of my biggest daily issues. "I thought I had decent control."

"You do, but today showed some concerning lapses. The taint nearly overwhelmed you. And it's not just magical control we need to work on. Your assertiveness could use improvement as well."

"What do you mean?"

"You hesitated when confronting that patch of corruption. Doubted yourself. Let the taint's whispers affect your judgment." He fixes me with a stern look. "Magic responds to confidence, Ava. Uncertainty is dangerous."

He's right, Selene chimes in from her corner. It's always been a problem for you. You second-guess yourself too much.

Thanks, peanut gallery.

You're welcome.

Chapter 393 Ava: Snowball Training

The mattress dips, and warmth radiates against my back as Lucas slides under the covers, his scent wrapping around me in comfort.

"Sorry I didn't get to see you when you got back." His voice rumbles through his chest, pressed against my spine. "I was with the trainees."

"S'okay." I burrow deeper into his embrace, savoring the solid wall of his chest. He makes the best winter heater. "Everything okay?"

"Mostly." His breath tickles my neck as he nuzzles into my hair. The tension melts from my muscles, replaced by a bone-deep contentment that only comes from being held by my mate.

Then he sniffs me, nudging against the scar and mate mark on my neck.

"You smell like magic." His nose traces along my shoulder. "I heard it was rough today."

Sleep tugs at the edges of my consciousness, but I fight it to enjoy this moment. "Yeah, but it'll be easier next time."

His hand rests with possessive familiarity against my hip, the simple touch sends sparks of pleasure through my drowsy body. "Good. I worry when you push yourself too hard."

"I'm learning my limits."

The bed shifts again as Selene hops up, circling twice before nuzzling her head against Lucas' hip and belly.

I crack one eye open to glare at her.

What? Her tail thumps against the mattress. I missed our mate too.

"Traitor," I mutter, but there's no heat behind it.

It's perfectly normal. She yawns, showing off her impressive fangs. We're connected, remember? I feel what you feel.

His chest vibrates with silent laughter. "Let her stay."

I huff but snuggle deeper into his arms. Her presence adds another layer of warmth to our cozy nest.

"Sleep," Lucas murmurs, pressing a kiss to my temple. "Everything else can wait until tomorrow."

Not fair, Grimoire complains, and when I crack my eyes open again, I can see him on the floor in his silver fox form. I'm the only one left out.

Selene makes a little rumbling growl. Stay out.

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Stop yawning.

"Sorry." Another yawn escapes before I can clamp my mouth shut. My eyes water, and I swipe at them with my gloved hand.

Your body is adjusting to normal magical levels, Grimoire says, his fox form perched on a nearby log. You've been running on excess power for so long, you don't even realize how much you've been borrowing from your magic.

A snowball whizzes past my ear. I throw up a small shield, just big enough to deflect it. The packed snow explodes into powder.

Squeals of delight erupt from behind the snow fort where five of our youngest pack members huddle. Their excitement at being included in "Luna's training" hasn't dimmed despite the cold turning their cheeks and noses bright red.

"Again!" little Sierra shouts, her gap-toothed grin visible even from here.

Remember, efficiency and accuracy over power. The shield should be no larger than necessary, and only last as long as it's required.

"I know, I know." My next shield wobbles, barely materializing in time to block Tommy's fastball. The boy has scary good aim for a six-year-old. He got me in the butt once, and my eye another time.

Another projectile comes from my left. I spin, conjuring a shield the size of my palm. The snowball splatters against it, sending icy spray across my face.

"Ha! Got you wet!" Penny bounces up and down, her pigtails flying.

Partial hits still count, Grimoire says, as if I care about the score. The kids do, of course. Grimoire has a little scoreboard going for them. Focus on placement.

My arms are starting to feel like lead weights. Even these tiny bursts of magic drain more energy than I expected. Without my usual reserves to draw from, each shield requires precise control.

The more I do, the more mental exhaustion takes its toll.

Plus, I have to infuse my mana into the air around me, so I get advance warning before a snowball hits. My natural skills aren't high enough to avoid what I can't see; my magic has to fill that gap.

It drains my magic every second my magic pulses around me, and I only have about a five-foot radius of awareness protection.

"You're doing great!" Marcus calls from his position near the kids. He and Greg volunteered to supervise the "ammunition makers" after the first snowball fight devolved into chaos.

They both are thrilled with this training regimen, because it's something that actively works on my self-defense.

Two more snowballs fly at me simultaneously. I manage to block one with a perfectly sized shield, but the second catches me in the shoulder. It's a tiny, icy rock, the snow packed densely by tiny little hands.

"Direct hit!" Tommy pumps his fist in the air. "Did you see that? I got you, Luna!"

"Very impressive," I say, unable to hold back my smile at his pride. This training session is not only helping my control, but it's helping my bond with my pack. The mothers of these young pups are thrilled to have them interacting with their Luna, and the kids are over the moon to be a part of the fun.

Another yawn ambushes me. My next shield flickers and dissipates before the snowball reaches it, leaving me with a face full of snow.

Perhaps we should end here for today, Grimoire suggests. You've made excellent progress.

"I think we're done, kids." The suggestion fills me with relief; I'm exhausted, and way too many snowballs have gotten through my defenses. While many of them are just fluffballs that explode into harmless powder, some of them—like Tommy's little bombs of ice—sting a little on impact.

Pathetic, Selene mutters in my head, and I can feel her doggy disapproval from wherever the hell she is, hunting down some rabbit trail.

"No!" Five voices protest in unison.

"Just a little longer," Sierra pleads, already packing another snowball with her tiny hands. "Please, Luna?"

My heart melts at their eager faces. "Five more minutes," I concede. "Then hot chocolate for everyone."

The promise of hot chocolate sparks a flurry of activity. They've once again ditched the snow fort, having more fun assaulting me from different angles.

I brace myself as my young attackers prepare their final assault, determined to make these last minutes count.

A volley of snowballs arcs through the air. I summon shield after shield, each one exactly where it needs to be, no larger than necessary. My timing has improved greatly from earlier this morning, when I couldn't get a shield up in time for the life of me. Thankfully, the projectiles were just snowballs and not something more life-threatening.

But fatigue makes my reactions sluggish, despite the clear improvement.

Better. You're learning to anticipate trajectories instead of just reacting.

"Thanks, I—" A snowball catches me in the back of the head. I spin to find Selene in wolf form, looking far too pleased with herself, next to a guilty-looking Greg.

"That doesn't count!" I protest. "You're not part of the game."

My wolf just wags her tail, already nosing another pile of snow.

The kids dissolve into giggles at my indignant expression. Greg holds up his hands, clearly caught between his Luna and her obstinate husky-wolf. Even Marcus struggles to maintain a straight face.

"All right, time's up!" I announce before Selene can launch another sneak attack via some random pack member. For all I know, she'll get a kid in on it. I thought she was out hunting her favorite furry prey; clearly, she took advantage of my busy brain to sneak back in and get one over on me. "Who's ready for hot chocolate?"

The clearing I've co-opted for my snowball fight training empties in record time as small bodies race toward the cafeteria.

Grimoire clears his throat. You did well today. Your control is improving.

Chapter 394 Ava: Casual Conversation

"Hot chocolate delivery!" Lisa's voice carries across the clearing, and I turn to see her balancing a large tray of steaming mugs.

The kids swarm her like hungry puppies, but Lisa navigates through them with practiced grace. Her skin looks almost translucent against her dark sweater, and shadows pool under her eyes.

"Thanks for the assist." I help her distribute the mugs, making sure each child has a secure grip before letting go. "Careful, it's hot."

"Blow on it first," Lisa reminds Tommy as he tries to gulp his down.

We settle on a nearby log while the kids huddle in small groups, sipping their treats and chatting about their successful hits during training. Lisa's hands tremble slightly as she wraps them around her mug.

"Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine." Lisa takes a careful sip. "Why?"

"You don't look fine. You're pale as the snow."

Lisa's free hand flies to her cheek. "Really? I feel fine, though." She presses the back of her hand against her forehead. "No fever or anything."

"Then what have you been up to?"

"Oh." Lisa brightens. "I was actually training with something new the Grand Sage created." She extends her pinky finger, showing off a delicate silver ring. "What do you think?"

I squint at the unremarkable piece of jewelry. "It's... pretty?"

"It's not much to look at," Lisa admits. "But it can send up an emergency flare if I'm in trouble. It also has a secondary function, though. It can send a ten-second recording to a paired ring that the Grand Sage has. He's been fiddling with the technology from the magic watches he created."

"Hmm." Not sure how to respond, I take a sip of my hot cocoa.

"It's kind of neat. Nothing super crazy, but it might be useful."

"Could be," I agree, though I'm a little confused on why it would be more useful than the magic watch Lisa already has. Why send a limited voice recording with a tiny ring when you can just use your magic watch to call someone?

But I guess it might be helpful in an emergency. Still doesn't seem that great, though.

"It also doesn't need to be charged as often. And I can send a video of this right now. It's pretty much undetectable, he says, so it can all happen under the nose of any vampire or Fae. This way, if I get kidnapped again, it'll be easier to find me." She pauses. "In theory."

Oh, a video recording... That would make more sense. "How does that work? Wouldn't it need a camera or something?"

"No, because it's magic video. And no, I don't understand any of it, so don't ask. I can't control where the focus of the video is, so he's hoping to figure that out, but he did manage to get the locator working. He could find me anywhere in the compound just from using the paired rings."

Now we're talking. "That sounds amazing. As soon as Lucas hears about it, he'll probably put one on every finger."

"Every finger and toe," Lisa agrees with a grin.

Steam rises from our mugs as we watch the kids chase each other through the snow. They've finished their drinks in record time, with the immunity to tongue burn that only little kids seem to have.

Tommy shows off his snowball-making technique to the group, his chest puffed with pride. He's landed the most hits on me.

Fifteen out of twenty-eight, Grimoire reports.

"Why bring the hot chocolate out here?" The question slips out as I notice the elaborate setup. Tables and chairs, as if it was planned. "The cafeteria would have been easier."

Lisa's face twists. "Ivy's back."

My grip tightens around the ceramic mug. "What? She shouldn't be back for at least another week." The travel time alone should have kept her away longer.

"Her wolves were attacked." Lisa's voice drops. "She was the only one who made it back. Lucas and Kellan spent all morning questioning her."

"I hadn't heard anything about this." A frown tugs at my lips. Why wouldn't Lucas mention something this significant?

It isn't common knowledge yet, Selene says softly. At least, it wasn't until about thirty minutes ago when she showed up in the cafeteria to eat.

"How do you know that?"

Because I'm listening to the gossip right now.

I blink, realizing Selene isn't anywhere near us. The mental image forms of her sprawled under a cafeteria table, ears perked as she eavesdrops on conversations above.

My first reaction is irritation that Lucas didn't tell me about Ivy's return. But even as the emotion rises, I recognize it as unfair. Lucas doesn't typically seek me out for every development that doesn't directly involve my responsibilities. We catch up throughout the day, sharing information as needed.

Still, this is Ivy.

You're being territorial, Selene comments, sounding pleased.

"Shut up," I mutter into my cocoa.

"What?" Lisa asks.

"Nothing. Just talking to my nosy wolf. Did Kellan tell you?" A tiny smidgen of jealousy flares at the idea that Kellan would take time out of his day to warn Lisa, when Lucas won't even tell me—damn it, no. Down, Ava. You're better than this.

You're not.

Shut up.

"No. I got to hear all about it when her adoring fans fawned all over her, asking why she has a bandage on her face. No idea how a woman can look so glamorous with bandages on her head, but she managed to." My best friend sounds sour; she's very against Ivy's existence ever since our little girl talk over the she-wolf.

Glad I'm not in the cafeteria, if that's the subject of the day. Unable to help the bad mood that's descended, I try to focus on enjoying the cup of hot cocoa in my hands.

"You're going to break that cup if you hold it any tighter," Lisa points out.

Damn it. I've been living with the plan to kill Ivy with kindness and acceptance, but I enjoyed her lack of presence too much. Having her back destroyed that bit of tranquility. Even with all the shit that's happened, at least I didn't have to see her face as she kept doing things to make her seem indispensable.

It's hard to throw a fit when your opponent is always doing good things. I'd look absolutely out of my gourd for throwing a fit because someone helps other people or saves lives or finds a giant chunk of quartz for me to store my magic in.

Forcefully relaxing my fingers around my cup, I sip at my hot cocoa, only to blink in surprise. My cup is empty.

"Here, I'll get you some more." Lisa plucks the mug out of my hands, but I hold her back with a shake of my head.

"Don't worry about it. Just stay here with me."

"I wasn't going to tell her you're out here." Lisa settles back on the log, her breath visible in the cold air.

A groan escapes me. "Is it pathetic that I'm out here avoiding another she-wolf? I mean, I'm Luna. I should be able to handle one person without hiding behind snowball-wielding children." But damn it, it's so freaking hard to deal with her without looking like the one being unreasonable.

Chapter 395 Ava: Something Strange About Ivy

It isn't that I'm avoiding her because of my feelings. I'm avoiding all the eyes that will be glued to us during our entire interaction. These stupid co-Luna rumors have gotten popular.

"Please. I'd avoid her too." Lisa watches Tommy demonstrate his perfect snowball technique to an attentive audience. "Actually, I am avoiding her. Hence why I'm out here with two thermoses of hot chocolate and way more cups than necessary."

"At least you have an excuse. You're human."

"And you're Luna. You can do whatever you want." She grins. "But there's nothing wrong with strategic avoidance. It's better than snapping and setting her on fire."

I snort. "I wouldn't set her on fire."

"No?" She arches an eyebrow, studying me. "Because your magic is kind of making you sparkly. Thought it might be because you're angry."

I glance down at my hands, noticing the faint shimmer beneath my skin. "That's different. That's just... excess magic."

Strange. I shouldn't have much.

That is strange, Grimoire agrees, sounding confused.

"Right. Excess magic that showed up when someone mentioned her name."

"You're exaggerating."

"Am I?" Lisa's voice drops to a whisper. "Ivy."

The shimmer intensifies. I can see it.

I can, too.

"Stop that, Lise."

"See? I rest my case." Lisa looks far too pleased with herself. "Though I have to admit, the whole glowing thing is pretty cool. Like a built-in mood ring. When did that start?"

She's taking it in stride more than I am. I'm freaking out a little and trying to pretend it isn't happening. "It's not cool when I'm trying to maintain my composure as a dignified Luna."

"Who says Lunas can't glow? Maybe it's a feature, not a bug."

Despite myself, a laugh bubbles up. Trust Lisa to find humor in my magical tells. "Yeah, because nothing says 'respect my authority' like lighting up like a Christmas tree whenever I'm annoyed. Maybe I should star in the next Blockbuster vampire flick."

"Better than what I do. Last time she tried to talk to me, I knocked over an entire rack of practice weapons. Just... whoosh. Down they went. Had to distract myself before I got too mouthy with her too-perfect persona."

"That was you?"

"Yep. Kellan had to help clean it up." Lisa's smile turns wistful. "He thought I tripped."

"Did you?"

"Nope. Pure spite. Though I did pretend to stumble so I wouldn't look completely unhinged."

The kids' laughter rings out across the clearing as they perfect their snowball techniques. Their joy is infectious, making it hard to maintain my sour mood.

"Maybe we're being unfair," I say, though the words taste like I vomited into my own mouth. "She did just lose her entire escort team." That's actually, objectively terrible. It's a tragedy, and I'm over here whining because I don't like her. What kind of shitty Luna does that make me? Even if they weren't my pack members, these are people who have spent a long time with us in Wolf's Landing.

"Maybe." Lisa doesn't sound convinced. "Or maybe she's playing up the sympathy angle. Just wait until you see her. You'll notice how the bandage on her face somehow makes her look more attractive. Like some kind of wounded warrior princess."

"Lisa!"

"What? You will."

She's coming, Selene says sourly.

Shit. I need to put on my proper Luna face, and not grumpy-she's-back Ava face.

The sound of people crunching through packed snow has me turning, and my petty irritation dissolves at the sight of Ivy's face. A white bandage covers her left cheek, and dark circles rim her eyes. Her usual perfect posture is gone, replaced by slumped shoulders and dragging feet.

"Luna." Her voice lacks its usual musical quality.

"Ivy." I step forward, leaving Lisa with the kids. "How are you doing?"

"I've had better days." She touches the bandage on her face, a gesture that seems unconscious rather than calculated. "Much better days."

The genuine grief in her voice strikes me harder than expected. Whatever issues exist between us, she's lost people who mattered to her. Her escort team wasn't just protection—they were companions, and likely friends.

"I'm so sorry about your team." The words come naturally, powered by real empathy rather than social obligation. "If there's anything you need..."

"Thank you." She swallows hard, her eyes fixed on some distant point. Her voice cracks. "We were together for three years."

My heart aches. How many times have I worried about losing my own guards? Marcus, Greg, all of them—they're more than just protection. They're family.

"The kids are having hot chocolate," I offer. "There's plenty to share."

Ivy glances at the clearing where the children play, their laughter a stark contrast to her pain. "Maybe later. I think I'll rest for now."

"Let me walk you to your building." The words slip out without thinking. Maybe it's the grief etched into her face, or maybe I'm just tired of being petty. "You look exhausted."

"Thank you." Ivy's voice carries none of its usual musical lilt. "I'd appreciate that."

We walk in silence through the packed snow, our boots crunching with each step. The cold bites at our exposed skin, but it's been a constant companion for months.

Living in Wolf's Landing has made winter feel like an old friend—harsh but familiar.

She's watching you, Selene mutters.

Yes, she glances at me occasionally, but her eyes lack their usual calculating gleam. She just looks... lost.

"How are you doing, Ava?" Ivy breaks the silence as we round the corner of the cafeteria. "I heard you've been working non-stop with the corruption. You must be exhausted."

My spine stiffens. There it is—that hint of concern that could be genuine or could be another subtle dig. Another way to suggest that maybe Lucas needs someone to pick up my slack. Someone who isn't constantly drained from magical duties.

Don't trust her. She's playing you.

But maybe this is her attempt at normal conversation, at finding common ground. It's always hard to tell with Ivy.

"I'm managing." I keep my voice neutral, choosing the high road.

"It must be hard to keep up with everything. And dangerous, too."

I wait for the other shoe to drop, for the suggestion that maybe I shouldn't be out there alone, that maybe Lucas needs someone else to help shoulder the burden. But Ivy just trails off, her eyes distant and pained.

She's good, Selene grumbles. Very good.

"We take precautions." I gesture toward Marcus and Greg, who maintain a respectful distance. It occurs to me that they probably deserve a day off. "And the work has to be done."

Ivy nods, and we lapse back into silence until we reach her temporary quarters. She pauses at the door, her hand resting on the handle. "Thank you, Ava. For walking with me. And for... for not treating me like I might break."

The sincerity in her voice catches me off guard. I search her face for any sign of manipulation but find only exhaustion and grief.

"Of course." I hesitate, then add, "If you need anything..."

"I know where to find you." A ghost of her usual smile flickers across her face. "Get some rest, Luna. You really do look tired."

Chapter 396 Ava: Cell Towers

I don't trust her, Selene says, coming out from me to stare suspiciously at the door Ivy closes behind her.

The walk back feels longer, my boots crunching through snow as my mind churns. Something about Ivy's story nags at me, like a splinter under my skin. It leaves me uneasy and uncomfortable, but I can't pinpoint why.

"Selene, could you ask around about the attack?"

She trots beside me, staring at me with her sharp blue eyes. Why do you want to know about that?

"I can't put my finger on it. It's just strange. Maybe I'm being paranoid." Lord knows I've got serious issues with the woman. Paranoia feels far too natural around her. Of course, she encourages it with her strange behavior and passive-aggressive nature, but... I don't know.

There's something about this. I just know it.

You think she's lying?

"No, no. Not that."

She was too nice?

"No." Frustrated by my own inability to understand what's bothering me, I kick at the snow compacted to the side of the trail. "It's probably nothing. I'm just—"

Her presence felt strange to me, too, Grimoire offers, sounding thoughtful. I paid little attention, but it was strange. I don't know why, either.

Maybe that was it. "Think she was affected by some taint she passed by?"

It could be. We haven't had much experience with the early stages of exposure. We can keep an eye on her.

"Wouldn't you know if it was, though?"

No. It's different every time. It can manifest in many different ways, depending on its source.

Glancing over my shoulder at Ivy's cabin, I wonder if that could possibly be it. It doesn't seem right, but what else could it be?

Selene's muzzle connects with my thigh, nearly sending me face-first into a snowbank. I hop and skip a few steps to regain my balance. "A little warning next time?"

How many times have rogues have attacked our scouts? Her ears prick forward. Twenty? Thirty? And yet we've only found five of our own affected by the taint.

My steps slow.

That's because Ava's been diligent with her patrols, Grimoire says. The corruption near Wolf's Landing has been contained. The rogues have been affected elsewhere, completely oblivious to the dangers.

"But what about the wolves who venture out further? The ones who hunt, or patrol, or gather supplies?"

Exactly. Selene's tail swishes. What if some have been touched by the taint but aren't showing symptoms yet? What if they're like Ivy—something's off but we can't quite place what? If Ava isn't near them, would we know?

Marcus and Greg move closer, clearly noting my tension. I wave them back, not wanting to alarm anyone unnecessarily. "Grimoire, is there a way to scan everyone? To see if others feel wrong like her?"

The type of scanning I do isn't that in depth. I'm not sure if I can search for a specific type of feeling.

It's not impossible, but it would take considerable energy. This isn't a general area scan, but more of a fishing expedition. The magic spent is far greater, and the control is much tighter, to search for that specific resonance. In order to match it, you would also need to be very familiar with what you're looking for. It isn't easy, but it isn't impossible.

In other words, I need to spend more time with Ivy.

Yes.

* * *

Lucas isn't hard to find today; he's in the debriefing tent again, with Kellan. Ryder and Vester are gone on whatever missions they've been given, but Vanessa's there, her face pinched and pale.

I press a quick kiss to Lucas's cheek, catching the tail end of their conversation. Something about cell towers makes me pause.

"Wait, what about the towers?"

Lucas's face tightens. "They're back up."

"Since when?"

"Just happened." His voice carries a weight that makes my earlier worries about Ivy seem trivial. "Vanessa?"

She pulls her phone out, her fingers dancing across the screen before holding it out to me. The video quality is crisp, as if there wasn't a months-long digital blackout for all of us.

A news anchor's face fills the screen, her usual professional demeanor cracking around the edges as she speaks.

My legs weaken. The crawl at the bottom of the screen screams "STATE OF EMERGENCY" in bold red letters. The president is dead. Not just dead—assassinated. The words blur together as the anchor continues her report, but certain phrases punch through:

"An unprecedented attack on the White House... Vice President Matthew Collins has assumed command... Several supernatural delegates present during emergency address..."

The video shifts to the Oval Office. Our new president stands behind that famous desk, but he's not alone. Beings that would have never been seen in the Oval Office before now flank him openly.

A vampire's pale skin gleams under the lights; he doesn't even hide the fangs curving into his lower lip. A Fae, with elongated ears and exotic beauty. Others I can't even identify stand proud and tall. Maybe they're human, but it sounds like they aren't.

"The world as we know it is changing," President Collins says, his voice steady despite the chaos he must be facing. "In the wake of these devastating global attacks, we must embrace those who have lived among us, barred from positions of power. We cannot fight this global threat alone. It is time for unity, for understanding..."

My fingers press against my lips. "How long ago was this broadcast?"

"Twenty minutes," Kellan answers.

After weeks of communication blackouts, of isolation, of wondering what was happening beyond our borders... this is what breaks through first?

Conveniently when the digital world reconnects itself once again?

"He's talking about cooperation." I can't tear my eyes from the screen. "About peace. But..."

Lucas slides his hand around my waist with a sigh. "Right. Are they fighting our enemies, or are they affiliated with them?"

"Creating their own state of emergency in order to gain the power they always wanted," I murmur, watching as our president declares FEMA is ready to make their way across the entirety of the country and save all of us from the disasters of the last few months.

I've never been politically savvy, but even I can see what a train wreck all of this is.

"It's too perfect," I whisper. The president's death, the immediate supernatural presence, the restoration of communications—none of this is coincidence. "Someone orchestrated this. They can't possibly believe the people aren't going to notice this."

"There's already outrage online," Vanessa says, taking her phone back. "They're asking why the government has been so silent, taking so long to send aid. Everyone's asking where the so-called aid has been going to all this time."

It hasn't been a complete dearth of information in the human cities; the radio waves, after all, are alive and kicking. But it's nothing like the freedom of information that the internet and personal phone calls have given us in modern times.

While the stores weren't stocked as efficiently as they were before the attacks, they aren't empty. Stores are still open. The highways are still open. Life has moved on, even if it looks different than before.

But now, the floodgates to modern life have re-opened.

Chapter 397 Ava: How Long...?

"They'll blame the late president," Kellan says simply. "He's an easy scapegoat. We haven't heard a full list of casualties, but I'm sure very few of his team have been left alive. It'll be easy, and people are desperate. There are already videos of trucks on the road and helicopters landing in Los Angeles and New York. Once they get the aid they desperately need..."

"They're not going to care about the truth as much," Lucas finishes grimly.

A chill creeps through my bones as I watch the screen, and I rub my arms, somehow far colder now than I have been at any point this winter. "Is there any chance the government is actually fighting back against whoever did all of this? That maybe this is legitimate?"

The silence in the tent tells me how naive it is to even hold such a hope. Lucas's arm tightens around my waist, and Kellan's face hardens into stone. Even Vanessa's usual gentle expression turns grim.

"Look at their positioning," Lucas says calmly. "The vampire stands closest to Collins. That's not an accident."

My stomach turns as I study the footage again. "Maybe. Or that just happens to be where he's standing."

I'm not trying to argue, but just holding out that slim thread of hope that our enemies haven't taken over the freaking White House. But it's a weak and flimsy wish. The kind toddlers might beg of while praying to a shooting star.

Nothing but a fairy tale dream.

"Has to be." Kellan reaches over Vanessa and taps the screen where another figure lurks in the shadows. "See that one? Bet it's a thrall."

"How can you tell?"

"I don't know. Just looks like one."

He doesn't even know anything about thralls, but I have to admit that it just feels like the guy might be one. His skin is strange and his eyes look glassy, even on camera.

"They've infiltrated the highest levels of government. This is what they've been working on. This is why the attacks stopped." Lucas grimaces. "It had nothing to do with the weather."

"More like they've taken control of it," Vanessa whispers. Her hand drifts to her belly, a protective gesture that makes my heart ache. "The timing is too perfect. Communications restored, FEMA mobilized, supernatural beings suddenly accepted into government power..."

My mate grunts, his entire body stiff. "And the previous administration conveniently eliminated. Not only that, they have access to all the information and data alphas provide to the government."

"Does the government know about Wolf's Landing?" I know that wolf packs are highly regulated by the government, but I didn't even know safe havens existed before everything happened.

"No."

"Thank goodness," the healer mutters.

"What does this change for us right now?" The question comes out harsher than I mean for it to, and I backpedal quickly. "I mean, what do we need to change now that this is happening?"

Lucas smiles wearily. It's grim and tight, but he's clearly trying to keep me at ease. "That's what we're trying to figure out."

"We need to be more careful than ever." Kellan throws his head back to look at the ceiling, his eyes narrowed as he thinks. "Social media's back up. People will share anything strange they see. One wrong photo, one video of wolves in the woods..."

"Precisely. And these FEMA caravans they're organizing? Perfect cover for moving soldiers around. We need to stay close to Wolf's Landing for now."

"We've made good progress with supplies," I point out. We have a stockpile. This is what we've been aiming for since the beginning.

"We have. Which is why it's the perfect time to hunker down and watch what unfolds." Lucas' voice carries that edge of authority that means his mind is made up. "We need to see what game they're playing."

A knot forms in my stomach as I consider the situation even further. "Do you think the attacks will start again?"

"Yes. This time, they'll be hunting down any supernatural who refuses to fall in line with their new world order."

The chill in my bones spreads deeper. "But Westwood is accepted by the government. We're part of the Northwestern Council. They can't just turn around and say we're enemies, right?"

Lucas shakes his head, his golden eyes dark with exhaustion. "Think about it. What's to stop Blackwood from painting us as the aggressors? We invaded their territory. Took their land."

"But they attacked us first..."

"Did they? Or did we steal their beta's daughter and force them to retaliate?"

Right. This is a conversation we've had before. Blackwood was always intending to turn Westwood into the aggressor.

Lucas continues, "Renard's been working with the vampires all along."

"Which means any story they spin about us will have the backing of the new administration." Kellan grimaces. "The Council will bow to the White House, but even before that, a new Council will be built. Aspen, Westwood, Twilight Ridge, Silvermoon... We have no place in a world where Blackwood is the rising power."

"That's why he was so confident." Thinking back to Alpha Renard's insane plans and how they had never sat right with me, the last puzzle piece has finally fit. His absolute certainty that he could take on Westwood and get away with it, despite Council opposition, suddenly makes perfect sense. "He knew this was coming. He knew he'd be in power when the time came, because he was always waiting for this."

My throat goes dry as everyone heaves long sighs. "How long have they been planning this?"

"Since before any of us were born, most likely. They would have had to get their support just right within the pack lands. Eliminate any alphas who might pose a real threat. Territory placement would be important, too."

"Your father," Kellan murmurs.

Lucas' jaw tightens. "Among others, probably."

The implications make my head spin. My entire life—all our lives—have been shadowed by some grand vampire scheme. While we've been running around in desperation, trying to keep our pack alive, trying to figure out what's going on, we've never done more than scratch the surface of what's out there.

It makes me wonder how much Sister Miriam knew and refused to tell us.

How much any of them knew.

But maybe they were as in the dark as we were. After all, everyone was shocked when the attacks happened. Even in Dakota Sanctuary.

"But how did they keep it so secret? It doesn't make sense."

Chapter 398 Ava: Divine Artifacts

"Where did I put it?" I rummage through the dresser drawers, tossing clothes onto the floor. "I swear I had my phone when we got here." I pause. "Didn't I?"

The details are a little fuzzy, considering. Between months passing and the insanity of our escape from the Fae Ward...

You've never been good at keeping track of your belongings.

"That's not true." But even as I say it, doubt creeps in. When was the last time I saw my phone? Is it still in the Fae Ward? The idea that someone might have access to my texts leaves me a little sick to my stomach.

Oh? Remember that time you lost your house keys three times in about five minutes?

"That was different. I was distracted."

And your favorite shirt? The blue one?

"It probably got mixed up in the laundry." I move to the nightstand, rifling through the drawer. Nothing but a few hair ties. A luxury item, and I try my best not to lose them.

What about your necklace and ring?

My hand flies to my throat, fingers searching for a weight I already know isn't there. It's been months.

"They must be in my luggage back at Westwood." But even as I say it, uncertainty gnaws at me. Did I put them somewhere else for safety, instead? Well, it doesn't matter. Either way, they're in Westwood. Someone's probably stolen them by now.

Those pieces of jewelry were more than accessories—they were protection, ways to hide what I am. Hopefully they don't fall into the wrong hands. Not that I'm sure what anyone can do with them.

Shaking those thoughts off, I head back to my dresser. It has to be there, if it's anywhere at all.

"What are you two discussing?" Grimoire materializes beside me, his child form perched on the dresser. Sometimes he's nosy.

"Just my old necklace and ring." I push aside a stack of sweaters, but there's still no phone. "The ones Selene made me wear to suppress my magic."

A strange sensation tickles my mind—like fingers rifling through my memories. The jewelry appears in crystal clarity: the amethyst pendant and its matching ring.

"WHERE ARE THEY?" Grimoire's voice booms in my head and ears, making me stumble back. His eyes glisten with excitement.

"God, Grim." I rub my temple. "No need to shout. And I thought we talked about these before?"

He scowls at me. "I would remember discussing the Goddess' blessings. This is the first I'm hearing of them." He pauses. "Though, if I hadn't seen them, I suppose I might not have realized..."

"The... what?"

What is he talking about? Selene's voice holds an edge of wariness.

"The Goddess' blessings," Grimoire repeats, more insistent. "Those weren't mere trinkets to suppress magic. They were divine artifacts."

Somehow, this feels right. Those things never seemed normal. "What do you mean by that?"

Grimoire's eyes shine with an otherworldly light. "The Goddess crafted three pieces of jewelry for a young Luna, thousands of years past. A necklace, a ring, and a bracelet."

"A bracelet?" My heart skips. "I never had a bracelet."

"The Luna was much like you—a witch who mated with an alpha." Grimoire's voice takes on a rhythmic quality, as if reciting from memory. "Her children were strong shifters, all except one. A daughter, blessed with magic but unable to shift or control her power."

That sounds familiar. Selene's mental voice carries a note of unease as she looks right at me.

"The Goddess heard the Luna's prayers," Grimoire continues. "She crafted these artifacts to help the young witch channel her magic safely."

"And you're saying the necklace and ring I wore were two of those pieces?"

"Without question. Divine magic leaves traces even time cannot erase."

I turn to Selene. "Where exactly did you get them?"

I didn't get them from anywhere. Her hackles rise. I found them.

But she'd already known about them when we met. The one was in my apartment, and the other—I still remember that horrible run. And how she made me dig for the box because she didn't want to get her paws dirty. "You had to have known about it from somewhere, though."

Selene's ears flatten. I... I don't remember.

"Then how did you know what they were for? How did you know they'd help suppress my magic?"

She paces, agitated. I just... knew. But now that I think about it, I can't recall how I knew.

Grimoire leans forward with a frown. "That's impossible. Knowledge like that doesn't simply appear. Someone must have told you."

Well, they didn't. Selene's mental voice snaps with irritation. Or if they did, it's lost with the rest of my memories.

"The rest?" he asks, pouncing on that information. Have they not talked about this before? Sometimes it's hard to remember that Grimoire hasn't been with us forever. It feels like forever sometimes.

You know many of my memories have faded. Her tail droops. Perhaps the knowledge of the artifacts came from... before.

"These aren't just any magical items," Grimoire says. "They're divine artifacts, created by the Goddess herself. They were lost to time long, long ago."

Then how do you know about them? Selene challenges.

"I've lived through such history," he says pompously.

For someone who's lived so long, you know precious little.

Grimoire deflates a little. "I have witnessed things," he mutters. And he has. He's been around for so much. But we've long ago established that much of Grimoire's knowledge is theoretical, from what the witches have recorded in his pages.

After all, he doesn't really exist outside of the book. If he isn't brought out, he can't see.

His knowledge is great and vast, but also limited in many frustrating ways.

"Don't make him feel bad, Selene."

He started it.

Grimoire sounds thoughtful. Perhaps I can delve into your mind, wolf. See why there are so many blocks in your memory. You recall your past life, so there should be no holes in what you remember.

Selene sneezes. It's a sign of discomfort, not an itchy nose.

Perhaps, she agrees reluctantly, torn between finding out more about her lost memories and having to accept her nemesis rummaging through her mind.

I can feel the struggle in our bond.

"Come on, Selene. Isn't it worth trying?"

Didn't you have something important to do?

Chapter 399 Ava: Magic Awareness

I slap my forehead. "Son of a bitch!"

The attack on Ivy's people. The possibility of corruption in our pack. Both conversations I needed to have with Lucas slip through my fingers like water. My teeth catch my inner cheek as I consider his current load—the president's assassination, the supernatural reveal, our tenuous position in this world.

I guess I can wait a little.

"Something wrong?" Grimoire floats upside down in front of me, his red hair touching the ground.

"Just remembered I need to talk to Lucas about Ivy and the corruption." I release my cheek with a sigh. "But with everything happening right now..."

"Ah. Perhaps waiting until tonight or tomorrow would be wiser. The situation with the government takes precedence."

"My thoughts exactly." I rub my temples. "Speaking of Ivy though—how long would we need to spend around her to get familiar with whatever's happening there? To really understand what we're dealing with?"

Grimoire's begins to slowly circle in midair, his hair oddly hypnotizing as it obeys gravity. "I cannot even begin to guess. The nature of corruption is... unpredictable. What manifests in one person might present entirely differently in another. We can only start by trying."

A grimace pulls at my lips. The prospect of spending extended time with Ivy, watching and waiting for signs of something amiss, makes my stomach turn. But if there's even a chance she's been touched by the taint...

"Wonderful," I mutter. "Just wonderful."

You should keep an eye on her anyway. Selene's disgruntled mood is clear, her mind voice more of a grumble than anything else.

"I know, I know. I can't bring her with me, but at least between purifications..." My fingers tap against my thigh as I consider the logistics. "I could invite her to help with the refugees, I guess. That's what she would be doing anyway."

But the thought of purification snags in my mind like a hook. Obviously, I can purify Ivy now. But if I do that, I lose my chance at recognizing this low-level corruption among others in my pack.

"Does it make me a bad person? To let her suffer just so I can figure out what corruption looks like in others?"

Grimoire stops his slow rotation, hanging upside down again with his eyes fixed on mine. "She isn't suffering yet. She's the ideal test subject."

"When you put it that way, it sounds worse." My fingers twist in the hem of my shirt. "But if there's even a chance others are corrupted... if we can learn what to look for..."

It's practical, Selene offers. But you're asking the wrong question.

"What do you mean?"

The real question isn't whether you're a bad person. It's whether you can live with the consequences of your choice.

"Consider this," Grimoire says, finally righting himself. "What would Ivy choose, if given the option? To be purified immediately, or to help protect the pack by allowing us to study the corruption's effects?"

"That's not fair. She'd choose to help the pack because that's what she thinks will prove her loyalty. She'd martyr herself for a chance at acceptance."

But then I feel like shit for saying that, because... well, my issues with her aside, Ivy's always been devoted to her pack. I shake my head. "No. She would do it because it's the right thing to do."

Then perhaps you should respect that choice.

"But it's not her choice if we don't tell her, Selene."

Grimoire shrugs. He's already upside down again. "The fact that you're struggling with this decision speaks volumes, Ava. A truly bad person wouldn't care about the moral implications."

"Or maybe I'm just trying to justify doing something terrible by feeling bad about it." I press my palms against my eyes. "We should tell her. We already know what she's going to say, right? So we don't lose out on anything. I can't just not tell her."

I don't like her very much, but what's wrong is still wrong.

She'll probably take credit, Selene warns me.

"That's fine. She will deserve it this time."

A weight lifts from my shoulders. The decision feels right, even if it means giving up tactical advantages. Some things just aren't worth the cost to my conscience.

I suppose.

Grimoire drifts closer to Selene, floating just above her head as he pokes at her ears. "Those missing memories of yours are quite fascinating."

Her ears flatten against her skull. No.

"Come now, surely you're curious about what you've forgotten? About your connection to these divine artifacts?"

I said no.

"Just a tiny peek? For science?"

For science? Really? Selene's tail lashes back and forth. That's the best you can do?

"Would you prefer 'for the good of all mankind'?"

I prefer you stay out of my head.

I sink into the nearest chair, watching them like a tennis match. The bickering is almost... comforting. Normal. A break from all the heavy decisions weighing on us.

"But think of all we could learn!" Grimoire spreads his arms wide. "The secrets of the past, the true nature of your bond with Ava—"

The true nature of my foot up your—

"Selene!" I bite back a laugh. "Be nice."

He started it.

Grimoire floats upside down again, his hair defying gravity this time. "I merely suggested a perfectly reasonable course of action."

Reasonable? You want to go poking around in my head!

"Well, it's not like you're using all of it."

Selene's growl fills the room. I will bite you.

"You can't bite a spirit."

I can bite you as a book.

"Children," I interrupt, unable to keep the smile from my voice. "Play nice."

Grimoire rights himself with a dramatic sigh. "I'm simply saying, if there are memories lost, they might be important ones."

They're still my memories, Selene snaps. Mine. Not yours to rifle through like old newspapers.

"But—"

No.

"What if—"

Also no.

"You're being unreasonable."

You're being pushy.

I lean back, crossing my arms. "You know, Selene, he does have a point. Those memories could be important."

Not you too. Her head droops, betrayal echoing through our bond. I thought you were on my side.

"I'm always on your side. But that doesn't mean I can't see his point too."

Grimoire preens. "Thank you, Ava."

Fine. You want to know what's in my head? Selene bares her teeth. Mostly it's ways to make you disappear.

"How creative of you." Grimoire circles her slowly. "But surely there must be something else in there. Something about the Goddess, perhaps."

I press my fingers to my temples. "You two are giving me a headache."

He started it, Selene repeats, but there's less heat in it now.

"And I'm finishing it." I fix them both with what I hope is a stern look. "Grimoire, stop pushing. Selene, stop antagonizing him."

They both manage to look somewhat chastened. For about three seconds.

"But if we just—"

Touch my memories and die.

So much for that.

A flutter ripples through my magic, like a bird testing its wings. The sensation distracts me from Selene and Grimoire's bickering.

"Do you feel that?" My hand presses against my sternum.

Grimoire pauses his orbit around Selene's head. "Feel what?"

"My magic. It's... moving." The flutter comes again, stronger this time. Not unpleasant, just strange. Like bubbles rising in champagne. "Is that normal?"

"Define moving." Grimoire drifts closer, peering at my chest as if he could see through it.

"Like butterfly wings. Or maybe..." I search for the right words. "Like when your stomach drops on a roller coaster, except it's not my stomach. It's my magic."

"Ah." He nods, floating back. "Your awareness is increasing."

The flutter comes again, stronger this time. "But why now? I've been using magic for weeks."

"And purifying corruption for days. That's intensive work, requiring precise control and awareness. It's natural your sensitivity would increase."

"So nothing's wrong?"

"Nothing at all. Though you might start noticing other sensations as your awareness grows. Temperature changes, pressure differences, that sort of thing."

I rub my chest where the feeling is strongest. "Will it always feel this... obvious?"

"You'll get used to it. Like background noise or the weight of clothes against your skin. Though you might want to pay attention to any dramatic changes. Your magic could be trying to tell you something."

"Great. More cryptic magical messages to decipher."

At least these ones don't involve ancient artifacts, Selene offers, apparently done sulking.

"Small mercies." The flutter settles into a gentle pulse, barely noticeable now that I'm not focusing on it. "Is this what you feel all the time, Grimoire?"

"No. You're probably feeling it moving inside of you. Even when you aren't using it, there's always a bit of circulation going on. It doesn't just sit there."

That's something I already knew; I can sense it when I meditate.

"Your sensitivity will continue to develop," Grimoire says.

The flutter picks up again, like my magic knows we're talking about it. "Will it affect my control?"

"Only positively. The more aware you are of your magic, the more precisely you can direct it." He demonstrates by creating a tiny ball of light that dances between his fingers.

"That makes sense." I watch the light show, noting how smoothly it moves. I can't replicate that. "Though I could do without the constant reminder that I'm basically a magical battery."

Grimoire snorts. "You're far more than that."

"Yeah?" The flutter intensifies, almost like agreement. Is it possible for magic to have personality? Because I swear mine does. "What am I then?"

"A work in progress." He grins at my mock glare. "But one with tremendous potential."

Chapter 400 Ava: Confronting Ivy

Snow crunches under my boots as I pace, each step carving deeper tracks into the pristine cover of snow that swept in overnight.

Three steps left. Three steps right. My breath clouds in front of my face.

"Just knock already," I mutter to myself.

You've been out here twenty minutes, Selene points out.

"Not helping."

How do you tell someone they might be corrupted by dark magic? 'Hey, noticed you've been acting weird lately, mind if I check for evil taint?' Yeah, that'll go over well.

The door flies open with a bang that makes me jump. Ivy stands in the doorway, her usual perfect appearance nowhere to be found. Dark circles ring her eyes, and her chestnut hair hangs limp around her face.

"What do you want?" Her voice comes out raspy, like she's been gargling glass.

"I..." All my carefully planned words evaporate. "Are you okay?"

She leans against the doorframe. "Fine. Just tired."

But she's not fine. I can see the slight tremor in her hands, the way she's barely keeping herself upright. My magic flutters in response to... something.

"You look sick."

"Thanks." Her laugh turns into a cough. "Always good to hear how terrible I look."

"That's not what I meant." I step forward, catching her arm when she sways. "Did you get any sleep?"

"Yes." She tries to pull away but doesn't have the strength. "Or tried to. Everything hurts."

The trembling gets worse. Without thinking, I press my palm to her forehead. She's burning up.

"You need to see Vanessa."

"I don't need—"

"You have a fever." My tone brooks no argument. "And you can barely stand."

She opens her mouth to protest, then closes it as another wave of dizziness hits. I tighten my grip on her arm.

"Fine," she whispers. "But only because I don't think I can make it there alone."

I wrap my arm around her waist, supporting her weight. She's lighter than I expected, and heat radiates through her clothes.

"Small steps," I murmur. "We're not in a rush."

We make slow progress through the snow. Ivy's breathing grows more labored with each step, and I take more of her weight.

"Almost there." The medical lodge comes into view, smoke curling from its chimney. "Just a little further."

"Why are you helping me?" Her words slur slightly. "You hate me."

"I don't hate you." The door opens as we approach, Vanessa's concerned face appearing. "I just don't trust you. There's a difference."

"Semantics." Her head drops to my shoulder. "Everything's spinning."

Vanessa rushes forward to help, and together we guide Ivy inside. The warmth hits like a wall after the bitter cold.

"What happened?" the healer asks, directing us to an empty bed.

"Found her like this." We ease Ivy onto the mattress. "High fever, dizzy, weak."

Ivy's eyes flutter closed as soon as she's horizontal.

"How long have you felt ill?" Vanessa asks, already checking her blood pressure and temperature.

"Few days." Her voice is barely audible. "Thought it was stress."

My magic pulses again, stronger this time. I want to reach for it, to understand what I'm sensing, but not here. Not yet.

"You're probably dehydrated. And your body temperature is dangerously high." Vanessa disappears from the side of the bed, ostensibly to get supplies.

I hover uncertainly. This isn't how I planned to approach Ivy about the corruption, but maybe it's better this way. Get her healthy first, then deal with the rest.

"Stay or go," Vanessa says, returning with an IV bag. "But don't just stand there looking lost."

"I'll stay." The words surprise me as much as they seem to surprise Ivy, whose eyes crack open. "Being alone sucks. I can keep her company."

"Still playing Luna." Ivy's laugh turns into a weak cough. "Always... so... responsible."

Her eyes close again as Vanessa inserts the IV. I sink into a chair beside the bed, watching the steady drip of fluids.

"What do you think caused this?" I ask our healer quietly.

She shakes her head. "Could be several things. Her body's fighting something, but I can't pinpoint what. We'll start with fluids and fever reduction, see how she responds."

I nod, my magic still fluttering uneasily. I know what her body's fighting. I just don't know how to tell either of them.

Grimoire, should taint cause illness like this? The question forms in my mind as I watch Ivy's restless sleep.

It's always possible. Some become aggressive, others paranoid. Physical symptoms aren't unheard of. Do you need me there? His concern bleeds through our connection.

I'm not sure. My fingers twist in my lap as I consider the implications.

I can bring him, Selene offers from wherever she's stationed outside.

Wait. Let's see how this plays out.

Vanessa bustles away to check on another patient, leaving me alone with Ivy. The silence stretches, broken only by the steady drip of the IV and Ivy's labored breathing.

"Have you ever lost someone really close to you?"

Her question catches me off guard. My heart squeezes painfully as my mother's face flashes through my mind—her cold eyes, her distance, the way she never quite looked at me. The flood of emotions threatens to overwhelm me, memories of a lifetime of rejection mixing with the raw wound of her death.

Funny. I don't think of her much anymore. I guess it's easier just not to think about it.

I swallow hard and veer away from those thoughts immediately. "I almost lost Lisa."

"My guards were all childhood friends of mine." Her voice cracks on the last word.

A vulnerable Ivy is someone I don't know how to deal with.

"Tell me about them," I offer, sitting on the edge of her bed and resting one hand over hers.

Ivy's fingers wrap around mine with surprising strength for someone so ill. Her skin burns against my palm, and I resist the urge to pull away from the scorching heat.

The pain in her eyes is too deep; there's no way for me to walk away now.