

# Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted

## Chapter 401 Ava: Ivy's Memories

"Fiona used to braid my hair every morning." Ivy's voice breaks. "She'd tell me about the boys she liked, about her dreams of becoming a teacher. She never stopped treating me like just... me."

A tear slides down her temple, disappearing into her hair. My chest tightens at the raw pain in her voice.

"James was the funny one. He'd make these terrible jokes during pack meetings. Once, in second grade, he..." She draws a shuddering breath. "He put a rubber snake in Clayton's desk, and my brother shrieked like a child. Everyone laughed. I hated him, because Clayton was my hero. But then they became best friends after that. At some point, I stopped hating him."

Her grip tightens, and I let her anchor herself to me. Whatever it is in her system pulses against my magic, as if testing it. Beneath it, I sense something else—genuine grief, sharp and jagged.

"And David." Her voice drops to a whisper. "He was going to propose to his mate. Had the ring picked out and everything. He showed it to me the morning before..."

She breaks off with a sob that wracks her whole body. Without thinking, I squeeze her hand back.

"I should have protected them all better." The words tumble out between gasping breaths. "They trusted me. And now they're dead because I wasn't strong enough."

"You couldn't have known—"

"Don't." Her eyes snap open, fever-bright and desperate. "Don't tell me it wasn't my fault. Don't tell me there was nothing I could do. I've heard it all before and it doesn't help."

I fall silent, understanding completely. Sometimes platitudes just make the guilt worse. She's an accomplished warrior, trained by her pack. Trying to minimize her pain is more of an insult than a comfort.

Her fingers clutch mine so hard it hurts, but I don't pull away. Touch grounds us, connects us. Right now, that connection might be the only thing keeping her from drowning in her grief.

"I see their faces every time I close my eyes," she whispers. "I hear their screams. Feel their pack bonds snap. Over and over and over."

The taint surges with her distress, and I have to bite my tongue to keep from telling her about it. Not now. Not when she's this vulnerable, this raw.

Her other hand finds my arm, gripping it like a lifeline. "How do you do it? How do you keep going when everything hurts so much?"

The question hits me hard. How do I keep going? Through the abuse, my mother's rejection, my father's manipulation—through all of it, I just... did. Because stopping wasn't an option.

It wasn't always pretty, and there's so much I regret. But I kept going.

"You breathe," I tell her softly. "You take it one moment at a time. And you honor their memory by living the life they'd want for you."

Her fingers spasm against mine. "Do you know what happened out there?"

"No."

Her eyes stare into mine. Hunted. Frightened. Shadowed with the deaths of wolves she considered family. "I'm not sure I do, either."

My blood turns to ice. "What do you mean?"

"Everything's... fuzzy." Ivy's grip tightens on my hand. "We were on the route. Nothing out of the ordinary. Then—" She shakes her head, wincing. "Pain. So much pain. And darkness."

The taint pulses against my magic again, stronger this time. I force myself to stay still, to not react.

"I remember running." Her voice drops to barely a whisper. "But I don't know what from. Or to. Just... running. And screaming. But I don't know if it was me or—" She breaks off with a choked sound.

"Take a breath." I squeeze her hand. "You're safe now."

"Am I?" Her eyes lock onto mine, fever-bright but lucid. "Something's wrong with me. I can feel it. Like there's something inside me, clawing to get out."

My heart pounds. She knows. On some level, she knows about the taint.

"When did it start?"

"After the attack. Maybe during?" She shivers despite her fever. "Everything changed."

Ivy's eyes roll back, and her head lolls to the side. Just like that—as if someone flipped a switch. Her grip on my hand goes slack, her fingers sliding away from mine.

"Ivy?"

No response. Her chest rises and falls in the steady rhythm of deep sleep. The taint inside her pulses once, twice, then settles into a dormant state.

The door creaks open behind me. Vanessa's footsteps approach, accompanied by the soft clink of medical supplies.

"She fell asleep in the middle of our conversation." I turn to face Vanessa. "One second she was talking about feeling something inside her, clawing to get out, and the next..."

Vanessa's brow creases. She sets down her supplies and presses two fingers to Ivy's throat, checking her pulse. "That's not normal. Even with the fever, people don't typically drop off mid-sentence like that."

"Could it be exhaustion?"

"Maybe." But her frown deepens as she checks Ivy's temperature. "Did she say anything else before she fell asleep?"

"She talked about her escort team. About not remembering parts of the attack." I pause, debating how much to share. "And she mentioned feeling different afterward. Like something changed inside her."

Vanessa's hands still against Ivy's forehead. "Different how?"

"She couldn't explain it clearly. But she knows something's wrong."

I watch Ivy's face, peaceful in sleep. No hint of the torment she'd shown minutes ago. No trace of that desperate grip on my hand or the raw pain in her voice.

"I think she came into contact with the taint. But something's not right about it." My voice barely rises above a whisper, even though the woman's asleep and unable to hear me.

Vanessa turns, tilting her head to the side as she listens. "What do you mean?"

"Whatever's inside her..." I press my fingers to my temples. "It's too strong to be a light corruption. I felt it surge multiple times while we talked. But it's different. The taint always feels mindless. Aggressive, even. This feels more... controlled."

"Then perhaps it's not the taint at all." The healer reaches for her stethoscope, then pauses. "Could it be something else? A magical illness?"

"Grimoire?" I direct my thoughts inward. What do you think?

His presence stirs in my mind. I need to conduct a full examination to be certain. But if this were a light corruption, you shouldn't be able to sense its fluctuations so clearly. This is strange, indeed.

"You felt what I was feeling?"

Through our connection, yes. The surges aligned with her emotional peaks—particularly when she spoke of her lost pack members.

Selene interrupts. I will bring the book to you. You can do your examination then.

"I don't know," I finally answer Vanessa, who waits patiently as she watches my face.

She nods to acknowledge my words before pressing the stethoscope against Ivy's chest, her movements precise and methodical. The silence stretches, broken only by Ivy's steady breathing.

"What do you know about the attack?" My voice comes out softer than intended. "About what happened to her escort team?"

Vanessa removes the stethoscope and drapes it around her neck. "Not much. Alpha and Beta have been handling the investigation personally." She tucks a blanket around Ivy's shoulders. "All I know is they found signs of a struggle, but no bodies."

No bodies. That's strange.

"Her heart rate's elevated." She makes a note on her chart. "And her temperature's still climbing."

Whatever's inside Ivy pulses again, as if responding to Vanessa's words. Stranger still.

I need to understand what happened out there. What turned a routine escort mission into a massacre that left Ivy the sole survivor. Something inside of me insists that this strange darkness within the Shadowpine she-wolf has something to do with it.

It isn't even like I know much about what happened, but something deep inside of me insists that something strange is going on. That I need to look into this.

It's nothing more than a hunch, but I know I'm right.

"I should talk to Lucas." I need to know what they found. What clues the investigation turned up that might explain this controlled corruption festering inside her.

Where do you want this book? Selene's voice cuts through my thoughts.

Bring Grimoire here. Set him near Ivy. I glance at the small table beside her bed. He can observe her while we're gone.

## Chapter 402 Ava: Reporting to Lucas

"Nothing." Vester's voice carries through the tent flap. "Not even static. Just dead air."

I pause outside the debriefing tent, my heart thudding against my ribs. The grim tone in Vester's voice makes my news about Ivy seem trivial.

"And the watch?" Lucas asks.

"Same as the others. No signal, no connection." A pause. "This isn't like Ryder. He knows better than to go dark without warning."

I push through the tent flap. Both men turn toward me, their faces drawn with concern. Maps and papers litter the table between them, markers dotting locations I don't recognize.

"How long since his last check-in?" Lucas asks Vester, though his eyes stay on me.

"Eight hours. He should have reached Jericho's location by now."

My fingers twist together. The weight of their conversation presses down on me, making my own concerns feel small. One of Lucas' deltas is missing—possibly in danger. My news about Ivy and her strange corruption can wait. It isn't as urgent.

"What is it, Ava?" Lucas' voice softens when his eyes land on me. He extends his hand toward me, an invitation I can't resist.

Stepping closer, I savor the warmth of his hand curling around mine. "It can wait. This is more important."

"If you're here, it's important." His thumb strokes over my knuckles. "Tell me."

Vester shifts, his attention moving to the maps. The illusion of privacy in a space too small for secrets.

Tell him, Selene urges.

"It's Ivy." The words tumble out. "She's sick—but it's more than that. There's something inside her. A corruption, maybe, but different from what we've seen before. More controlled."

Lucas' grip tightens. "Controlled how?"

"It pulses with her emotions. Responds to them. And she's aware of it, even if she doesn't understand what it is." I glance at the maps, at the markers showing Ryder's last known position. "She passed out in the middle of telling me about it. About feeling something clawing inside her."

"When did this start?"

"After the attack on her escort team. I'd like to know more about that."

"The attack site was... messy." Vester spreads his hands over a section of the map marked with a red X. "Blood everywhere. Signs of a serious fight."

"But no bodies?" My stomach churns.

"None." Lucas' jaw tightens. "The snow was disturbed enough to suggest multiple casualties, but we found no remains. The blood patterns indicated fatal wounds."

"Could they have been taken?"

Vester traces a line on the map. "Most likely. The tracks were confusing. Some led north, others south. Most were obscured by fresh snowfall before we arrived."

"What about Ivy's account?"

Lucas exchanges a look with Vester. "She described a brutal ambush. Said her entire escort died protecting her."

"I believe her."

"We do, too."

Despite our issues, the raw pain in her voice when she spoke of her lost pack members rang true. "But how did she survive?"

"That's what troubles us." Lucas releases my hand to lean over the map. "By her own account, she was surrounded. Yet she made it here with only minor cuts and bruises."

"Could she have shifted?"

Vester shakes his head. "She arrived human, fully clothed."

I study the map, trying to make sense of it. But there are no answers.

"There's another thing." Lucas taps the attack site. "It took her three days to reach us. In that time, she didn't run into a single patrol. None of our scouts picked up her scent until she was practically at our doorstep. Nothing that worried us before, but..."

The implications settle like ice in my stomach. Either Ivy possesses skills she's never revealed, or something else carried her through that frozen wilderness. Something that left that controlled corruption inside her.

"We need to know what really happened out there." Lucas straightens, his expression grim.

"I can help with that." The words come out before I can stop them. "I might be able to see traces of whatever's inside her. Maybe track it back to its source."

"No." Lucas' response is immediate. "It's too dangerous."

"I agree with Lucas." Vester's normally calm voice carries an edge of concern. "If something out there can take down an entire escort and possibly one of our deltas, we can't risk you exposing yourself to it."

I shake my head. "I don't mean I'm going to run out and chase it down. I mean here. With Ivy. Our source." The corruption pulses in my memory, so different from the chaotic taint I've been fighting. Understanding it could be key to everything we're facing. "And if this somehow spreads to others, we need to know."

Lucas studies me for a long moment. "Only if you take precautions. And you don't attempt to interact with whatever's inside her without discussing it first."

"Agreed." It's an easy promise to make. Right now, I just need to understand what we're dealing with.

Be careful, Selene warns. This feels like a trap.

Everything feels like a trap lately, I reply, but I know she's right. Whatever happened to Ivy's escort, whatever's happening to her now, it's all connected to something bigger.

Hopefully not something that's been waiting for us to notice it.

Lucas' fingers brush against my arm, drawing my attention back to him. "Thank you for telling us this, Ava."

Heat rises to my cheeks at his praise, but more than that, the knot of anxiety in my chest loosens. I'd thought briefly that I should walk away, that Ryder's situation was more

urgent. Now, pulling together the extra information, it seems that Ivy's situation is worse than I thought. I wouldn't have known if I'd swallowed my words and walked away.

"I almost didn't. It felt small compared to what you were talking about." Admitting the truth makes me feel a little like a child asking for more praise, though.

"Nothing about this situation is small." Lucas pulls me closer, his warmth steady and reassuring. "Your ability to sense these things, to notice what others might miss—it's invaluable. Don't ever hesitate to bring your concerns to me."

Vester nods in agreement. "The smallest detail can reveal the largest threats. If you hadn't mentioned this about Ivy, we might have missed a crucial step in our investigation. More lives could be at stake."

My gaze drifts to the maps again, seeing them with new eyes. Every marker, every note that might be significant. How many other "small" things have we overlooked?

Lucas squeezes my shoulder. "We need every piece of information, every observation. Your perspective helps us see patterns we might otherwise miss. Don't underestimate the importance of what you know."

## Chapter 403 Ava: It Isn't There

Buoyed by my mate's support, though dreading what Ivy's situation might mean—for her and for all of us—I scurry through the packed trails of camp, unsurprised as fresh snow flutters through the sky. It feels like we snow more days than not.

Find out anything yet? I reach out to Grimoire, who's been silent. I can sense Selene watching, but have no idea what he's doing. Sometimes I wish I could just pull his expertise into my head so I don't have to take the long route of actually learning how to do things myself.

Don't be lazy, he chides.

Okay, but did you discover anything yet?

He's silent, leaving my brain to itch as I wait for his response. Finally, he does.

No.

Helpful.

Don't blame me. I'm limited in my abilities until you get here.

"I'm not blaming you," I grumble, almost slipping over a patch of re-freeze. The temperature's plummeted, more than I'd think it would. The sky isn't even fully grayed out.

My magic wriggles in my belly, and I realize I've covered myself in a light layer of warmth without thinking twice.

Like autopilot, but the magical version.

Nice.

Stop being impressed with yourself and hurry up.

"I am, I am." Picking up the pace, I notice a small group of wolves headed toward the debriefing tent. My connection with the pack is not as defined as it should be, but I can vaguely sense that they're Westwood wolves. Must be a scout party coming in.

Hopefully they come with good news. We could use some.

You're slowing down again.

Selene's gentle nudge kicks me into a light jog.

The hospital lodge smells of antiseptic and bleach, a stark contrast to the crisp winter air outside. My boots squeak against the freshly mopped floor as I enter, and I wave at the receptionist—someone I've seen several times, yet still can't remember her name. She nods back, professional and distant.

"Luna," she murmurs as I pass.

"Looks like it's pretty quiet today."

Her eyes widen. "Luna, you can't use that word. You know it's bad luck."

Oops. "Sorry—" I surreptitiously peek at her little badge—"Tanya."

She reaches over to knock on the wooden frame of her desk. "Better safe than sorry."

Flashing an apologetic grin, I head down the hall to Ivy's room.

A solid mass crashes into my shoulder, throwing me off balance. My hand flies to the wall to steady myself as a man in dark clothing stumbles back.

"Sorry," he mumbles, voice rough and low. He keeps his face angled down, dark hair falling forward to obscure his features. His shoulders hunch as he hurries past me, footsteps quick and deliberate.

I turn to watch him go, unease prickling at the base of my neck. There's something about his posture, his hurried exit—

But my pack bond assures me he's a Westwood wolf. Not an intruder.

Oh. Maybe he's one of Ivy's little fans. Probably didn't want to be caught by his Luna. Cute. Her followers are everywhere.

The door to Ivy's room flies open. Vanessa stands in the doorway, her face pinched with worry. "Her fever's spiked again. Any news?"

My heart jumps into my throat. "No. Even with the medicine, it's going up?"

"No, it's getting worse." Vanessa pulls me into the room, her grip tight on my arm. "Come see for yourself. It just started."

Ivy thrashes on the bed, her skin slick with sweat. Her head whips from side to side, auburn hair plastered to her face. The blankets twist around her legs as she fights some unseen enemy in her fevered state.

But what catches my attention isn't her physical state—it's the corruption inside her. The darkness pulses like a second heartbeat, stronger than before.

A flash of silver light fills the room. Grimoire materializes beside me in his adult form, towering and alien, red hair floating around his face.

"Take her hand," he commands, his voice deep and resonant. "I need you to establish a physical connection."

I reach for Ivy's hand. Her skin burns against mine, and the contact amplifies the sensation of that strange, pulsing darkness.

Grimoire's silver eyes narrow as he studies her. His hands hover over her body, trailing ethereal light. After a moment, his brow furrows.

"This isn't possible." He moves his hands again, more deliberately this time. "I can't make contact with the corruption. It's as if it isn't there."

"What do you mean you can't make contact?" My grip tightens on Ivy's hand. "I can feel it right now."

He shakes his head. "Try to make contact. It isn't there."

My frown deepens as I stare at Grimoire. "That's impossible. I can feel it right here." The darkness pulses beneath my fingers, a steady rhythm that matches perfectly with Ivy's elevated heartbeat.

"Try to touch it with your magic."

"Fine." I close my eyes and kneel beside the bed, clasping both my hands around Ivy's burning fingers. The position reminds me of prayer, and I press my forehead against our joined hands.

My magic surges forward, eager to investigate the corruption. The sensation of wrongness grows stronger as I focus on it, like oil sliding over my skin. The darkness calls to my power, a song of corruption that promises answers if I just reach out and—

Nothing.

My magic drifts through empty space, finding no purchase. No resistance. No darkness to purify.

I try again, certain I must have missed something. The corruption is right there. I can feel it, taste it, smell it.

But my magic passes through the space where it should be, like trying to grab smoke.

"It's an illusion," Grimoire says.

"Her fever isn't," Vanessa points out, her voice tight.

"How?" I lift my head to look at him, keeping my grip on Ivy's hand. "How can it feel so real? My magic is practically begging to interact with it."

"That's what concerns me."

The darkness pulses again, strong and steady. If I wasn't trying to touch it with my magic, I'd never know it wasn't real. The deception is perfect—too perfect.

Selene slinks beside me, her black nose sniffing intensely at Ivy's hand, grasped tightly in mine. She sneezes. It smells so real. If this is an illusion, what purpose would it serve?

## Chapter 404 Ava: New Theory

"That's the million dollar question," I mutter as Vanessa presses a wet washcloth against Ivy's forehead.

The coolness seems to settle her, and I wonder if she's conscious enough to hear our conversation. This isn't how I wanted her to find out that there's something definitely going on inside of her body.

Though now we really have no idea what it is.

Grimoire rounds the bed to squat on the other side, his intense gaze fixed on Ivy. Stoking Ivy's hand in a gesture I hope is comforting, I focus on the sensation emanating from her. The corruption pulses beneath Ivy's skin in an odd rhythm—one, two, three... pause. One, two, three... pause. Like a heartbeat, but not quite right.

This is no illusion. Your vast intellect must have overlooked something, oh wise one.

"Your sarcasm does nothing to help the situation." Grimoire glowers at Selene over the bed. "Unless you've suddenly developed expertise in magical theory?"

Calling it an illusion makes no sense at all. Even I know that much.

"Please enlighten us with your extensive knowledge of magic. I'm sure your centuries of study far exceed my own limited understanding."

The steady count in my head falters as their bickering intensifies. One-two-three... what comes next?

"Both of you, stop it." My fingers still on Ivy's wrist. "Selene, leave Grimoire alone. He's doing his best."

Her tail swishes. But—

"We're all missing something here, and sniping at each other won't help us figure it out." The strange rhythm starts again under my fingertips. One, two, three...

Why are you counting? Clearly decided retreat is better for her lupine pride, Selene nudges at my thigh with her paw.

"I don't know. I just am." Frustrated, I reach out with my magic again. But there's just nothing to interact with. Just Ivy, whole and—magically speaking—healthy.

That core of power inside of me almost vibrates in frustration.

"Why do you think it's an illusion?" Vanessa's voice interrupts my frustrated dead-end thoughts.

Grimoire doesn't even glance at the healer as he answers, settling into lecture mode. "Magic leaves traces. It isn't so easily hidden. When examining a patient, you must first establish baseline readings of their natural energy signature."

My eyes narrow at his tone. He sounds like one of my old teachers. Not one I liked. Condescending and elitist.

Selene rumbles a little. She doesn't like how he's addressing Vanessa, either. It's a valid question from someone with no training in magical theory, after all.

"Start with the physical symptoms." He gestures to Ivy's prone form. "Temperature, heart rate, blood pressure. Then layer magical sensing over those readings. The metaphysical exists alongside the physical, not separate from it. But in Ivy's case, there are no physical manifestations. When I attempt to trace the corruption Ava senses, the magic disperses like smoke. A true corruption is much like any disease; it leaves its effects. Magical residue, if you will. There's none here."

The steady beat under my fingers skips. One-two... pause. Three?

Is this thing listening to him?

"But there is something," Vanessa argues. "She has a fever. And this sleep is not natural."

She seems like she's in a coma, Selene agrees. Why isn't she awake with all your poking and prodding and talking?

"You check vitals, then order tests based on symptoms, yes? Even a negative result can rule out causes. There's nothing there; therefore, the fever might not be—"

He freezes mid-sentence.

The silence stretches so long I lift my head. "Grimoire?"

Slowly, he turns to Vanessa, an intense gleam in his unnatural eyes. "You. Healer. Is there a way to force a shifter to transform?"

Startled, she shakes her head. "It's dangerous. Forcing a shift on an ill wolf is not recommended."

"Her wolf," he says sharply. "We need to see her wolf."

Understanding dawns. We've been examining Ivy's human form, but what if the corruption is hiding in her other half?

"The corruption's in her wolf?" My fingers tighten on Ivy's wrist, that strange rhythm suddenly taking on new meaning. Maybe it isn't her heartbeat. Maybe the ebb and flow in response to her emotional state has a simple reason.

"It would explain why we can't detect it." Grimoire's eyes gleam with triumph. "The wolf exists in a state between physical and metaphysical. If something's affecting only that form..."

"We'd need alpha command." Vanessa shakes her head. "And even then, it's risky. Her fever's too high."

"But how can something affect only her wolf?" I interject with a frown.

The same way Lucas and Aurum are separate, even though they're one.

I guess that kind of makes sense. Maybe. "But if you break your leg when you shift, it's still broken when you become human again."

"Not now." Grimoire waves his hand in my direction, as if batting away an annoying fly. "We need to verify this theory before we go down any metaphysical rabbit holes."

Rabbit holes are fun. Selene yawns and shakes her head vigorously. Much more fun to explore those than magic ones. At least there's something to chase at the bottom.

My lips twitch at her commentary, even if the humor seems ill-timed. But Vanessa's stern voice draws my attention back to the matter at hand.

"We can't just force a shift when she's this unstable." She checks Ivy's temperature again. "Her fever's still climbing. The strain could kill her."

"And if we wait, whatever's affecting her wolf form could do far worse. We have no idea what it can do." Grimoire's eyes flash with that eerie silver light. "We need your alpha here. Now."

"Absolutely not. I won't allow it until we get her temperature down and her vitals stabilized. I don't care what magical theory you're testing—I won't risk my patient's life."

The steady pulse beneath my fingers quickens. One-two-three-pause. One-two-three-pause. Faster now, like Ivy can sense the tension in the room even in her unconscious state. Or maybe it's her wolf after all.

"Your medical expertise is admirable, but you don't understand the magical implications—"

"And you don't seem to understand basic biology." Vanessa crosses her arms. "Forcing a shift puts enormous strain on the body. Her heart is already stressed from the fever. Add a forced transformation? Are you going to take responsibility if her heart stops? A shift is not a simple change, Grimoire."

Grimoire scowls, but I shake my head.

"Vanessa's right. You need to think about the person behind all the strange phenomenon, Grim. Whatever this is, it seems to be stable enough to wait for us to treat Ivy first."

Don't argue with our healer just to prove your superiority, Selene agrees, with another wide yawn.

He deflates a little. "Fine."

There's a definite sense of wounded pride radiating from him, but I turn my attention back to Ivy, whose brow furrows as she lets out a soft little whine.

Vanessa, to her credit, doesn't rub the ancient book's nose in her victory. Instead, she takes the opportunity to take another full set of vitals, before bustling away to get some more medication in hopes of lowering Ivy's fever.

"Come on, Ivy. It would be super helpful if you could wake up now." I squeeze her hand gently, forgetting all about my grievances with the pretty she-wolf. "You're stronger than this."

## Chapter 405 Lucas: News From Aspen

LUCAS

"Too many strange things are happening," my beta mutters, watching our latest group of scouts head off after their report.

"It's unnerving." Vester raps his knuckles against the map in front of us. "Five missing scouts. Ryder's missing in action. There's been no news from Jericho's side in a week. The Aspen scout massacre. Ivy..."

"Something's happening. We need to figure it out."

My fingers rake through my hair as exhaustion settles deep in my bones. The map is little more than a blur in front of my unfocused eyes; I need more sleep. But I don't have time for that.

"We need more teams in these sectors." Vester points to the eastern quadrant. "Three of them went missing somewhere here."

"Three teams of four." Kellan traces a path with his finger. "If we space them out—"

A sharp electronic trill cuts through the air. We all jump, the foreign sound of a ringtone jarring after months of silence. Kellan pulls his phone from his pocket.

"It's Rowan." He taps the speaker button. "Beta Goldstein."

"Beta Ashbourne." Rowan's calm voice fills the tent. "I received your message about Ivy."

"Alpha Shadowpine is not available?"

"Alpha Shadowpine is investigating unusual rogue activity in our territory. He should return tonight to speak with you directly."

The muscles in my jaw tighten. More rogues. More problems. It isn't just us. We're all in danger, but working blind. "Beta Goldstein, Ivy's condition remains uncertain. Our Luna and best healers are working to determine the cause."

"I see. That's unfortunate." The calm in the beta's voice is betrayed by the slight crack in it.

It's tempting to keep more information to myself. After all, we have no proof of anything. Only wild theories. But Clayton—and his pack—are our allies. They deserve nothing less than transparency. "We suspect magical involvement."

No apology follows my words. It isn't the time to say, "I'm sorry your pack members have suffered such tragedies under our protection." That conversation belongs between alphas, not their seconds. The politics of our world demand certain protocols, even in times of crisis.

"I understand." Rowan's tone stays measured, diplomatic. "Please take care of her. The Aspen Pack places its trust in your judgment."

"Beta Goldstein," Kellan says, as I motion for him to take over, "We still have no leads on your lost wolves, but we're still searching."

"We appreciate it. Thank you for your efforts."

"There's something else." Rowan's voice drops lower. "We've had several casualties from feral rogues in our territory. They're not acting normal. Much like the issues you've reported happening there."

My fingers press against the map, leaving indents in the paper. It sounds like this taint has spread farther than we realized. "Define not normal."

"They're attacking without provocation, without pattern. No interest in territory or resources. It's pure aggression. We are doing our best to keep it contained." A pause. "But that's not the strangest thing to happen this week."

Kellan and Vester exchange glances. My wolf stirs, sensing the weight in Rowan's words. Aurum has been silent of late. Sleeping, like a hibernating bear.

"Earlier today, we received a visit from what appeared to be Fae representatives. They're searching for someone." The staticky words are hesitant. Cautious. "The description matches your Luna."

Ice floods my veins. Aurum's hackles raise as he growls in the back of my head. "What exactly did they want?"

"They weren't specific. They requested a meeting with Alpha Shadowpine tomorrow. We're not certain of their intentions."

The urge to destroy something rises in my chest. The mere thought of anyone hunting Ava sets my teeth on edge. But I can't let that show. Not now. "Did they identify themselves?"

"No. They maintained anonymity. All wore cloaks." Rowan's voice carries a note of unease. "Though one detail stood out—their leader. Extraordinarily large, even by our standards."

"Names?"

"None given. Clayton will attend the meeting, but..." Rowan trails off.

"But you don't trust them."

"No. Something feels off. I thought you should know, given your Luna's... unique situation."

My jaw clenches. More threats. More unknowns. As if we don't have enough to deal with already. "Keep me updated on the meeting's outcome."

"Of course, Alpha Westwood."

The call ends, leaving the tent in heavy silence. My wolf paces beneath my skin, agitated by this new development. Anyone seeking Ava is a potential threat until proven otherwise.

"Lucas," Kellan starts.

"I know." I straighten, pushing back the protective rage. "Double the patrols around Ava. No one approaches her without clearance."

To their credit, both of my subordinates nod without a word. Even though she's probably drowning in guards already. We could send out several scouting parties with the amount of men we have guarding Ava. And Lisa.

Shaking off that thought, I glance down.

The map spreads before me like a maze of failures. Every X marks another dead end. A missing patrol, corruption that hasn't been cleared, scenes of attacks, rogue spottings, and other pieces of this twisted puzzle we can't solve. My fingers trace the route where Ryder disappeared. "This timing is shit."

Vester shifts his weight. "You still want to lead the search party for Ryder?"

My thoughts drift to Ava, to the mysterious Fae seeking her. But they're in Aspen territory, not here. Clayton can handle them for now. And Ryder is one of mine. My responsibility. Even more than that, he's a friend.

Explore stories on My Virtual Library Empire

"Yes. We leave in an hour." I'd planned to leave in the morning, but something inside of me is intent on urgency. I tap three locations on the map. "These are our priority search zones. Alert our best trackers."

"What about the refugees?" Kellan asks.

"You'll oversee camp operations. Keep Ava—" I catch myself, correcting the personal to professional. "Keep our Luna protected. Increase the guard rotations."

"And Jericho?"

"Just keep our ears open. Hopefully he checks in soon." But we all know there's something wrong. "I'll head direct to his location. See if I can contact anyone there."

"I don't like splitting our forces," Kellan mutters.

Neither do I. But there's too much to be done, and if I can find Jericho, I also need to have a chat with those vampires staying with him. We need to consolidate our allies once and for all.

Something's coming for us.

"We need answers. Ryder might have found something important before he disappeared. And Jericho's vampire contacts could shed light on what's happening."

"The taint spreading, the aggressive rogues, now Fae looking for Ava..." Kellan shakes his head with a groan. "It's all connected somehow. I just know it."

"Which is exactly why we need to move now." I roll up the map, my decision made. "Vester, gather the search team. Full tactical gear. We don't know what we're walking into."

My delta nods and exits the tent. I turn to Kellan, lowering my voice. "If anything happens while I'm gone—"

"I'll protect her with my life." His gray eyes hold steady. "You know that."

"I do." I clasp his shoulder. "Keep them safe."

He smacks his fist against mine. "Be careful out there. Something's not right with any of this."

My wolf rumbles in agreement. Every instinct screams that we're missing something vital, that all these scattered pieces form a picture we're not seeing. But standing still won't bring that picture into focus.

"I need to tell Ava I'm leaving." The words taste bitter. I hate leaving her, especially now. But sometimes being Alpha means making choices that tear at your soul.

## Chapter 406 Ava: His Departure

I'm reluctant to leave Ivy's side, but Vanessa thinks my presence might actually be worsening the fever.

So—reluctantly—I leave the hospital, followed by my silent and shadowy entourage of guards. It kind of feels like there are more of them now. I can't really keep up, but I've gotten used to having them around.

But apparently, even with a giant mob of wolves surrounding me, I can still be snuck up on.

"Ava."

Before my brain recognizes the warm voice, I jump near out of my skin. It's dark out now, and my observational skills are (clearly) a little lacking. Probably due to the fact that I'm constantly surrounded by professionals who do it for me.

"Jesus, Lucas. You could warn a girl first."

His rich laughter wraps around me, warming my anxiety-ridden heart, as his arm slides around my waist. The solid weight of him against my side blocks the wind, but all our layers keep the heat of his skin away from me. Proper shifters are always so warm. He's like my own personal heater.

There are definitely benefits to being mated.

"Where are you headed?"

"Home." I press closer, shivering a little in the bitter cold. My body's warm, but my cheeks are freezing. And my nose. "Are you done with the others?"

Lucas nods, but there's an unusual tension in the set of his jaw. His fingers flex against my hip.

"What's going on?"

"I need to take a team out." He keeps his voice low. "We're going to track down Ryder and Jericho."

My stomach drops. I lean into him more heavily as we walk, needing the emotional connection more than his physical support. "How long will you be gone?"

"Hard to say. Depends what we find out there."

The words hang between us, heavy and heartless. Maybe they're dead. We've been losing a lot of people lately. Scouts here and there. Not enough to dent the numbers, but we shouldn't even have one loss.

Snow crunches under our boots as we walk, and I focus on that sound rather than the fear trying to claw its way up my throat.

What if he runs into the taint? I won't be there to sense it.

What if he gets hurt?

What if—

Damn. This must be how he feels every time I leave Wolf's Landing.

Probably.

Selene's dry voice at least lends a little humor to the moment.

"You okay, Ava?"

Glancing up at Lucas, who's staring down at me with worry creasing his eyebrows, I can only smile. "I'm fine. Just worrying about you. Wishing I could keep you home, in bubble wrap."

His eye twitches. "What?"

"Nothing." It's like his face is going through a variety of emotions. I think he's happy I'm worried about him, but he's also definitely offended. "I just hate when we're apart."

"Me, too."

Lucas tugs my hand free from my pocket, lacing his fingers through mine. The warmth of his skin seeps into my frozen fingers, and I squeeze his hand tight. Our boots crunch in sync as we head toward our cabin.

"I need to leave soon. Everyone's gathering now."

My heart constricts a little. "Promise me you'll be careful out there."

Experience new tales on My Virtual Library Empire

"Always am."

"But what if something happens here while you're gone? The taint is spreading faster, and Ivy's condition—"

"Kellan will be here." Lucas squeezes my hand. "The entire pack knows what to do in case of emergencies. We've trained for this, Ava. Even for an unscheduled vampire attack."

"They're never scheduled," I mutter.

"It was a joke, Ava."

Huffing out a breath, I just grumble, "Not a good one."

Lucas clears his throat, his lips twitching. "The point is, my anxious little Luna, we're ready. Every wolf here knows their role. And you've got your magic."

We're as prepared as we can be. I have to trust in that. "Just come back to me in one piece, okay?"

"Whenever I ask you to give me that promise, you say I'm being an overbearing alpha."

I wrinkle my nose at him. "When did you get so witty?"

"The tables seem to have turned today." Lucas tugs me closer, his golden eyes sparkling with mischief in the dim light. "I'm just going with the flow."

The urge to wipe that smug look off his face overwhelms me. I shove my shoulder against him, putting my whole weight into it—which, let's be honest, isn't much compared to his solid frame. My attempt to knock him off balance fails spectacularly.

Lucas bursts into rich laughter that echoes across the snowy grounds. Before I can process his next move, his hands grip my waist and lift me into the air. The world spins as he twirls me, and my stomach swoops.

Snow swirls around us like confetti, catching in my hair and on my eyelashes.

His lips capture mine mid-laugh, with a heat that blazes with contact. The kiss steals my breath away, deep and passionate. The warmth of his face presses against my frozen nose.

My fingers curl into the fabric of his coat, clinging as the world continues to spin even after he sets me back on my feet.

Lucas' fingers slide along my jaw, tilting my face up as his lips claim mine with renewed intensity. The playful moment shifts into something deeper, more primal. His thumb traces my cheekbone while his other hand splays across my lower back, pressing me closer.

My heart thunders against my ribs. The cold air vanishes, replaced by a spreading warmth that starts where his lips meet mine and radiates through my entire body. His tongue teases the seam of my lips, and I part them with a soft gasp.

The kiss deepens, and my fingers curl tighter in his coat. His scent wraps around me, amber and woodsmoke filling my lungs until I'm dizzy with it. I want more, and the fact that we're separated by all these layers of clothes is almost too much to bear.

It would be better if we were bare instead. Hah, hah. Even in the midst of being kissed to half an orgasm, I can make jokes in my head.

Please stop, Selene begs. We can hear you, you know.

A quiet growl rumbles through my mate's chest. The sound shoots straight through me, igniting every nerve ending and shoving Selene's pleas out of my head.

"Lucas," I breathe against his mouth.

His grip tightens, and for a moment I think he'll sweep me up and carry me back to our cabin.

But then he breaks the kiss, resting his forehead against mine. We're both breathing hard, creating little clouds in the frigid air between us.

"I have to go." His voice is rough, strained.

"I know."

He presses one more swift kiss to my lips before stepping back. "I love you, Ava."

"I love you, too."

Lucas strides away, broad shoulders straight and determined beneath the moonlight. Snow swirls around him, catching the dim light. Even after he disappears into the darkness, I stand there, my lips tingling and my heart racing.

Wait a second. When did it start snowing?

I hold out my hand, but no snowflakes fall into my palm. Apparently it's only snowing around Lucas, like some sort of dramatic movie halo effect.

Pretty much. Did you like it?

Grimoire sounds pleased with himself.

"You did it?"

It seemed appropriate. Very in the spirit of romance.

My lips quirk. "Thanks, Grim."

## Chapter 407 Ava: Delirious Mutterings

Vanessa's coming.

Selene's sudden warning jolts me out of my I'm-not-that-tired couch nap. You know, the kind where you sit down and think, I'm not that tired, and wake up hours later? Yeah. One of those.

"Is it about Ivy?" My voice is more croak than words, but thankfully she's able to pluck the words straight out of my head.

I would assume so.

My muscles protest as I shift on the couch, stiff from sleeping in an awkward position. Selene's claws click against the wooden floor as she makes her way to the door, her silver fur catching the dim light. Only one lamp is on, which in hindsight might be why I fell asleep. It's too dark in here.

A sharp, quick succession of knocks rap against the door.

"Come in." My voice is still rough. A series of pops accompany my stretch. Relief floods through my spine, and I cough to clear my throat.

Vanessa opens the door, her hair pulled back in a messy bun. She smells like antiseptic, which isn't unusual for someone in the medical profession.

"Sorry to wake you." She steps inside, looking exhausted. "But I thought you'd want to know about Ivy's condition."

I straighten, my fuzzy brain slowly clearing. "Has something changed?"

"She's stable. Her fever's down, but still elevated. She woke up for a few minutes, but thought I was her mother." Rubbing her eyebrow, Vanessa settles into a chair across from me. "Halfway through our conversation, she fell back asleep. She asked for a strawberry birthday cake."

Not sure how to even respond, I can only stare.

The healer shrugs. "She's not oriented to person, time, or place."

"I see."

"Could be the fever. Could be whatever this stuff is you're trying to hunt down. Her symptoms are too nonspecific, and our testing abilities here are too limited."

My head feels too heavy to hold up, so I rest it against my hand, leaning into the couch cushions. My eyes burn from exhaustion as I blink at Vanessa. Something's off about this late-night visit—she wouldn't trek through the snow just to tell me Ivy's fever is down.

"What aren't you telling me?"

Vanessa grimaces. "She asked how much longer she has to give her blood away."

My spine straightens despite my fatigue. "What?" That sounds distinctly like she's involved in something vampire-adjacent.

"I need to emphasize that she's completely delirious." Vanessa holds up her hands. "She thought I was her mother, remember? She was asking for birthday cake. Whatever she's saying right now, we can't take it at face value."

True, Grimoire chimes in out of nowhere. Fever dreams rarely make sense.

But how often do fevers talk about giving away blood?

"Did she say anything else?"

"No. She drifted off right after that." Vanessa's scrubs rustle as she shifts in her chair. "Her temperature is still high. Enough to possibly account for confusion and hallucinations."

"But you felt it was important enough to tell me."

Vanessa meets my eyes. "Because while I agree she's not in her right mind, sometimes delirium reveals truths patients wouldn't normally share. I've seen it before—they lose their filters, their ability to keep secrets."

The antiseptic smell coming off her grows stronger as she leans forward. "I'm not saying this means anything. So don't do anything rash."

My stomach churns. Blood. Why would Ivy be giving away blood? And to whom?

And when? Is this something that happened when she was five years old and liked strawberry cake? Grimoire muses.

Why five? I like strawberry cake, and I'm an adult. Ostensibly.

Fine. Maybe thirteen. Or sixteen. Does it matter? So sensitive about some strawberry cake.

Seriously, these two in my head are probably killer for my sanity.

We should interrogate her. Selene bares her teeth. Wake her up. I'll get her to talk.

Rubbing my eyebrow, I sigh. She really hates Ivy. "We have no proof of anything except that a very sick woman is having fever dreams."

"Exactly." Vanessa stands, smoothing her scrubs. "I just wanted to keep you informed. Try not to read too much into it. She also told me she wanted sprinkles on her cake and that her stuffed unicorn was hiding under the bed."

I nod, watching as she heads out. Obviously, I want to know if this is some random fever gibberish or some sort of clue, but it still feels awful to have any sort of suspicions toward someone we consider an ally.

Hopefully it's nothing, but we can't ignore it, either.

Vanessa pauses with her hand on the doorknob. "Try to get some real sleep, okay? In an actual bed?"

My lips quirk. I guess it was obvious I fell asleep on the couch. "I will."

The door clicks shut behind her. I stare at the spot where she sat, turning this new piece of information over in my mind. Blood. Taint. Missing wolves. They have to be connected somehow.

Maybe. Maybe not. Don't be so insistent they're all related. It could be unrelated, too.

Grimoire's helpful lecture only makes my newly minted headache throb a little harder. "It would be easier if everything's connected. One enemy is better than an army of them."

Stay tuned for updates on My Virtual Library Empire

Better to assume there's an army of them, Selene agrees, in rare harmony with the book. You don't want to overlook anything by being too dialed into a pet theory.

Her muzzle rests against my knee as she stares at me with her icy blue eyes, and I rub her ears. I should be wide awake after the conversation with Vanessa, but I'm tired, and my brain feels like a slug with this new information. "I get it, guys. Keeping my mind open to all possibilities."

But don't ignore the possibility that they're related, either, Grimoire cautions.

Selene chuffs. She knows that.

Your defense of her is admirable, pup, but sometimes she needs things spelled out for her.

My eyes narrow, but I'm too tired to mount any kind of protest at his evaluation of my mental faculties.

Before they can devolve into another fight in my head, I hold up my hands. "That's enough, guys. I'm keeping an open mind to all possibilities. But in order to do that, I need sleep. Restful sleep. No squabbling in my head, please."

Enhance your reading experience by removing ads for as low as **\$1!**

Remove Ads From \$1

## Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted

Of course, I get no sleep.

My anxiety overruled my exhaustion, and I kept startling awake every twenty minutes. The dark circles under my eyes are so pronounced, I might have to self-identify as a raccoon shifter.

It isn't that bad. Selene nudges my hand with her cold nose.

"It is, but thank you for lying to me." Rubbing her ears, I head toward the direction of the hospital. Or try to.

Selene's furry body blocks me, and one of my bodyguards actually grabs me by my shoulders and turns me in the direction of the cafeteria. I can smell eggs and something that smells suspiciously like bacon. Again, my smell isn't as good as other shifters—but it's way better than a default human nose.

"I want to visit Ivy," I protest, even as my stomach rumbles.

"Alpha's orders. He said you need regular meals."

The young guard's blond hair sticks up in every direction, like he just rolled out of bed. His mild brown eyes dart around, scanning for threats while pointedly avoiding my gaze. Hmm. He's smart. Probably knows I'm going to try to persuade him to let me check on Ivy first.

It's a lot harder to put pressure on someone who won't look at your face.

"You're new." I cross my arms, studying him. "What's your name?"

"Brett, Luna." His voice comes out steady, but his shoulders tense. He knows what's coming.

"Well, Brett, I appreciate your dedication, but—"

"Alpha's orders are clear." His tone remains firm. "Breakfast first."

My stomach betrays me with another loud rumble. The scent of bacon grows stronger, making my mouth water despite my protests.

Our mate takes good care of us, Selene preens, her tail wagging. He knows you'd skip meals otherwise.

Oh? Grimoire enters the mental conversation out of nowhere. How interesting. Didn't you use to despise Lucas, Selene? Something about him being an arrogant, controlling, stupid—

That was before, Selene cuts him off with a snap of her teeth. Ava has chosen him. He's proven himself worthy.

They're already in fine form today.

"Where's Marcus? And Greg?" Ignoring their mild bickering, I pin my attention on the guard in front of me. There are others, of course, but at a distance.

"They'll be back on rotation this evening, Luna."

A dissatisfactory answer. I can talk to Marcus. He would understand my desire to check on Ivy before heading to breakfast. A fifteen-minute delay in scarfing down a plate or two of food isn't going to harm me, after all.

But this Brett guy seems devoted to following the letter of Lucas' demands.

A grouchy grunt escapes before I can stop it. "Brett. As Luna, I need to check on our esteemed guest. Her health is a priority."

"As your guard, I need to ensure our esteemed Luna eats breakfast. Alpha's orders are my priority." Brett's mild tone carries an edge of humor. "Besides, Vanessa threatened to sedate me if I let you skip a meal."

Damn. Even she's in on this. "You're not supposed to admit to the threats." My lips twitch. "It ruins the whole stoic guard image."

"I figure honesty might work better than stoicism." He shrugs, still not meeting my eyes.

Where did Lucas find this one? Probably dug around the pack until he could find someone who wouldn't get sweet-talked into nudging the boundaries of his orders, damn it.

"Fine." I narrow my eyes. They might be able to keep me from going to Ivy's room, but there's more than one way to skin a wolf. "Now ask Vanessa how she's doing."

Brett's face slackens, his eyes unfocused. The telltale sign of mental communication. I tap my foot, waiting for his report on Ivy's condition.

"Healer Vanessa seems well, Luna, though she snapped at me for interrupting her rounds."

"That's not—" My hands clench. "I want to know how Ivy's doing, not Vanessa."

One must be clear and concise when giving orders, Grimoire points out. He sounds amused.

He's just a young pup, Selene says, almost on top of him. Still learning.

Find exclusive stories on My Virtual Library Empire

My eye twitches. Why are you both acting like I just verbally flayed him alive?

Selene's tail wags slowly. You get a touch bitchy without proper sleep.

"I do not!"

The mutt is correct. You do have a tendency toward bitchiness when you're tired.

Brett, to his credit, says nothing as he keeps steering me toward the cafeteria.

The familiar scent of Elverly's cooking fills my nose as I push through the double doors.

"Leave your blasted guards outside! We don't have room for them to skulk about." Elverly's voice cracks through the air like a whip.

I glance behind me, but no one followed me in.

The serving station beckons, and I step toward it, ready to load up a plate.

"Sit down!" Another sharp command from the gnome chef, who hasn't even looked at me.

My feet carry me to the nearest table before my brain catches up. Moments later, Elverly appears at my elbow, slamming down a plate piled high with eggs, bacon, and what looks like fresh biscuits.

"You look like shit."

A smile tugs at my lips. There's something oddly touching about her gruff concern. "Didn't sleep well."

She grunts, shuffling away only to return with a steaming mug of tea that she sets beside my plate. Brett suddenly materializes at my elbow.

"The patient's condition remains stable, Luna. No changes since last night." Brett's report releases some of the tension in my shoulders. At least she isn't getting worse.

"Did I stutter?" Elverly snarls, hands on her hips as she looks him over. "No guards inside means no guards inside!"

Brett's eyes widen as he holds up his hands. The gnome is infamous throughout Wolf's Landing, and very few people have the courage to stand up to her. "My apologies, ma'am." He backs toward the door, somehow not tripping over anything. "I'll wait outside."

"Good." Elverly's sharp nod follows him out. "These wolves think they can do whatever they want in my kitchen."

The smell of fresh biscuits draws my attention back to the plate. Steam rises from perfectly scrambled eggs, and the bacon looks crispy, just how I like it. My stomach growls again, louder this time.

See? Food is important. Selene's mental voice carries a note of satisfaction.

I pick up my fork, hiding my smile. There's something comforting about Elverly's cantankerous nature. She treats everyone the same way—even Lucas gets snapped at sometimes. Once because he spilled his coffee on her freshly mopped floor.

The first bite of eggs melts in my mouth. How does she make something as simple as scrambled eggs taste this good?

Magic, Selene suggests.

Actually, it's technique, Grimoire corrects. The key is in the—

"It was a rhetorical question," I mumble around my mouthful of eggs.

"Stop dawdling and eat." Elverly appears again, this time with a jar of honey for my tea. "You're too skinny."

Her reluctantly loving care somehow has the ability to melt the anxiety that had weighed me down all night, and I sip at my tea in between shoveling food into my face at an immodest pace.

Something's strange, Grimoire says, as every ward I've placed suddenly alarms.

Enhance your reading experience by removing ads for as low as **\$1!**

[Remove Ads From \\$1](#)

## Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me."

My food goes from delectable to soggy cardboard as my heart drops.

This isn't good. Book, what's happening?

Something's triggered the wards. Every single one. But it's strange; I can't sense anything.

[Find more to read at My Virtual Library Empire](#)

My chair scrapes against the floor as I bolt up. The wards alarm through my head, discordant and jarring enough to nauseate me. My breakfast sits abandoned as my feet carry me through the door; Elverly shouts something, but my senses are too busy with the racket in my head.

"Luna?" Brett asks, but I'm already running.

They all follow without another word, but my mind's tuned inward, my magic reaching out to the bright beacons of my wards. It isn't like a net that encompasses everything in the area, but direct lines; I wish I had the ability to sense everything like a net right now, though.

That's the thing about power. It's never enough.

"I can't feel what triggered them. Every ward at every site is going off. That can't be possible."

Neither can I, he replies. The magic feels strange. But going to investigate will be dangerous.

Whatever this is—it's clearly part of someone's plan.

"Not investigating isn't really an option, though." We have to know what's happening out there.

Snow whips past my face as I sprint toward my cabin. The familiar path stretches endless before me, my lungs burning with each frozen breath. My guards' footsteps thunder behind me, but I don't slow down.

Selene, I need Vester, Marcus, Greg, and Kellan at my cabin now.

On it. Vester left with Lucas last night, though.

Damn it.

I burst through my cabin door, yanking off my coat as I head straight for my closet. My fingers fumble with the clasps of my tactical gear—the reinforced vest first, then the knife sheaths.

The wards continue their silent screaming in my head, but my magic keeps coming up empty.

There's nothing anywhere that I can sense. It doesn't mean nothing's there; it just means it's beyond my ability to sense it.

"Grim, can you figure anything out yet?"

Nothing concrete. It's like fog.

"Is it the taint?"

No. At least, not that I can tell.

That's what I thought, too.

The door flies open as I strap on my last knife. Kellan stands in the doorway, chest heaving.

"What's happening?" He pushes the door closed, his eyes sharp despite his breathlessness. He's on full alert, already dressed for battle.

"The wards." I check my boot knife. "All of them triggered at once. But we can't find what set them off."

"First things first. You're not going out there." Kellan's grim words halt my movements for only half a second.

"Like hell I'm not." I check my last knife strap. "These are my wards. You won't know what to look for."

"Which is exactly why you need to stay put." He steps forward, radiating all the intimidating aura of an alpha. It isn't as strong as Lucas, or even Selene. But it's enough for me to know he's serious. "Think about it, Ava. Every single ward going off at once? This reeks of a trap."

My fingers pause on the buckle. "Or a large-scale ambush."

"Think about it, Ava. Would they spread their forces that thin? Someone's trying to entice you out of your safety net. I'll send out emergency scouting parties instead."

The logic hits hard, but my instincts scream to protect what's mine. "The pack—"

"Needs their Luna alive and safe." Kellan's eyes soften. "We're trained for this. Let us do what we need to."

But even if they're trained, I already know a harsh truth I don't want to face. If there's something out there, we're going to lose wolves.

I don't want lives on my hands anymore. Never again.

I swallow back frustration. "How far out is Lucas?"

Kellan's jaw tightens. "They wolfed it to cover more ground. They're... farther than I'd like."

A cold knot forms in my stomach. For something like this to happen when he's not in territory... "Can you reach him?"

"No. That's how I know they're out of range."

I can't reach Aurum either, Selene adds, her mental voice tight with worry.

The knot in my stomach turns to ice. "Kellan, check if Vanessa can contact Vester."

He closes his eyes, his face slack as he reaches through the pack bonds for the healer. After a tense moment, his expression darkens. "She can't."

"Try the watch." My voice sounds hollow to my own ears. "Maybe you can reach Lucas that way."

"Already tried before I got here." Kellan shakes his head. "No response."

Fuck.

The door bursts open again. Marcus and Greg fill the doorway, both of them armed to the teeth.

"You're not going anywhere," Marcus announces the moment he crosses the threshold and spots my gear.

Greg nods. "It's safer in camp."

"Kellan already read me the riot act." I tap my tactical vest. "But I'm not taking this off."

"Good." Marcus moves to Kellan's side, both of them pulling out their watches. "No luck on my end either, boss."

"Same. What about you, Greg?" Kellan's voice is tight.

Greg shakes his head. "Nothing."

My fingers drum against my arm as I reach out to my wards again. The racket in my head hasn't ceased—if anything, it's grown stronger. Whatever's out there is still fucking with the wards.

Grim, if I feed you power, can you do a more thorough scan of the wards?

I don't think the scan is the problem.

Kellan's soft muttering with Marcus—they're planning scouting parties and putting out alerts to keep Wolf's Landing on defense—suddenly stops, jerking my attention his way.

His face goes slack, eyes unfocused—the telltale sign of pack communication.

"Stay put." His words are aimed at me as he snaps back to attention. "Don't move from this cabin."

Greg exchanges a look with Marcus, then nods, before darting out the door.

"What's happening?" My heart pounds against my ribs. The air's gotten heavier, their faces colder.

Marcus shakes his head. "There's an incident at the hospital. We'll get it under control."

"What incident?" My voice sharpens immediately. "What's going on, Kellan?"

Enhance your reading experience by removing ads for as low as \$1!

Remove Ads From \$1

## Chapter 410: Lisa: Strange Wolf

LISA

Lately, the Grand Sage has been buried deep in his magic energy flux capacitor thingamajig research, insisting there has to be a way to create a renewable energy source. Which is why he's the last person I expect to see when a knock raps against the door of Kellan's cabin.

Our cabin now, I guess.

"Grand Sage?" A little flummoxed, I open the door wider. "Did you need something?"

"Yes, actually."

"Bring your brace and come with me." The Grand Sage bounces on his toes, his eyes bright with that manic gleam he gets when he's made a breakthrough. "I've had an idea."

"Right now?" I glance at the clock, despite already knowing what time it is. "I haven't had breakfast yet."

"Indeed, now would be preferable."

"It's freezing outside."

He stops bouncing, looking at me over the rim of his glasses as if I'm a recalcitrant child. "It has been well below freezing for months, child."

He has a point.

I grab my heavy coat and boots, knowing better than to argue when he's this excited. The brace is easy to find; it sits on my bedside table. "Should I be worried?"

"No, no. Well. Perhaps a little. It's somewhat unorthodox."

Those words from the Grand Sage have the uncanny ability to send chills down my spine. I'm incredibly fond of this short little man and his eccentricities, but there are definitely things I've come to understand about gnomes.

Like, they don't understand the limitations of a human body.

And sometimes they don't really think of humans like people. Not in a bad way, but in like... I don't know. A sciencey way.

"Define unorthodox," I say, with a lot of foreboding.

He trudges along the worn-down paths in the snow, slipping on occasion. The gnomes don't have anything that really fit them; his coat is too large, even though it's sized for children. He looks funny as he walks. Like a kid, but with white hair and a long beard.

"I believe I've found a way to increase the efficiency of your brace. It involves quartz stones—a matched pair. A linked pair, to be precise."

So far, it doesn't sound terrible. "Okay..."

"One would be embedded in your upper arm."

I stop walking. "Embedded?"

"Yes, and the other in the brace. The stone in your arm would draw power directly from your blood's magic and feed it to its twin in the brace."

"Like a wireless charger," I mutter, thinking of my phone.

"A what?"

"Never mind." My brain returns to the most important thing. "What exactly do you mean by embedded in my arm?"

"Ah." He tugs at his beard. "That's actually why we're heading to the hospital. I need to consult with someone who understands human physiology better than I do. I'm not entirely certain it would work with a human body." He ushers me forward, and I follow blankly, not really thinking about what I'm doing.

"But it would work with someone else?"

"Oh yes. The Fae used to do this quite regularly—those at the highest ranks would have jewels embedded within their bodies. The most skilled gnome artisans would create these connections."

"If it was so great, why isn't it common now?"

His expression turns sheepish. "Very few possess the necessary skills to create such a connection. Knowledge lost in time, as it were."

I narrow my eyes at him. "Do you?"

"In theory." He straightens his tiny shoulders. "I've studied the old texts extensively."

Oh, hell no.

I'm all for helping this eccentric little old man figure out all his little research. I've shot fire at trees and nearly murdered my own guards—on accident, of course. The brace he's given me has literally saved my life.

But I absolutely will not be a part of some experimental body-modifying surgery. No, thank you.

"Absolutely not." I come to a screeching halt. "No. Nope. I'm not getting some bizarre rock put in my body over this theory."

His face falls. He's so devastated that for a moment I actually feel like I'm being unreasonable for telling him no.

"I thought this would be a great experiment. It would make it easier on you."

I shake my head. "I'll go with you to talk to whoever you want to talk to, but I'm drawing the line at putting anything inside my body. It's already weird enough that I have to drop my blood on a rock—"

"Quartz, actually."

"—in order to make this thing work. It still gives me the heebie jeebies that it can see inside my head. So, no. We won't be doing any surgery on me."

The Grand Sage's shoulders slump, and he lets out a heavy sigh. "Very well. I will not pressure you into any decision."

Relief floods through me. I follow him back along the path, grateful he's not pushing the issue. My arm itches under the brace—probably psychosomatic after all that talk of embedding things in my flesh.

The Grand Sage pauses, his white beard swaying as he turns his head. He does this twice more before we reach the hospital entrance.

"Something wrong?"

"The weather." He squints at the sky. "It doesn't appear as if a storm approaches, and yet..."

"And yet what?"

"There's one in the air."

I rub my wrist where the brace sits. "What, do you have some kind of built-in weather app in that gnome brain of yours?"

His frown deepens. "It's strange."

We enter the hospital's warmth, and I shake off the snow from my boots. "So who are we meeting with?"

"Oh." He tugs at his beard. "I haven't actually set up a meeting. I don't know anyone who works here."

Somehow, this lack of organization on his part is very him. He seems fastidious and well put-together, but he's used to having people manage his life for him.

"You dragged me out in the cold without even..." I press my fingers to my temples. "Never mind. Let me see what I can do."

He smiles. "I would appreciate that."

Approaching the receptionist's desk, I force a polite smile. "Hi there. Is Healer Vanessa working today?"

The receptionist's gaze slides over me like I'm something unpleasant stuck to her shoe. Pack or human? The curl of her lip suggests pack—that special brand of wolf superiority that makes me want to prove myself.

I'd flaunt my relationship with Kellan, but there isn't much to flaunt. Plus, it just makes me feel icky. Like I'm nothing more than a trophy wife or something.

Not that I'm a wife or anything.

Awkward.

"Healer Vanessa is busy with patients."

"Could you let her know I'm here? Just for a moment." My fingers tap against the brace under my coat sleeve; it feels cold and my skin is itching again. "It won't take long—"

A thunderous crash echoes from down the hall, followed by a sound that turns my blood to ice—a roar that's neither human nor wolf. I'm frozen in the precious seconds that follow, but the receptionist slams her hand on a red button.

"Security! Room 13!"

My guards materialize around me, a wall of muscle and protective instinct. One breaks formation, sprinting toward the commotion. Through gaps between bodies, I see Vanessa's form hurtle through the air, striking the wall with a sickening thud.

My heart stops beating for a second. Of all the people who could be involved, I somehow wasn't expecting it to be a friend.

She crumples, then forces herself up on shaking legs.

"Vanessa!" My throat burns with the force of my scream.

Pure chaos erupts as something emerges from the room—a wolf, but wrong. Its form ripples like living shadow, massive and impossible, with eyes that gleam with unnatural green light. The beast's growl vibrates through my chest as people scatter.

Wolves burst from human skin all around us, fur and fangs replacing uniforms. The shadow-wolf lunges, and I swear it almost feels gleeful.

Then iron hands grab my arms and drag me out of the hospital.

"Let me go!" I thrash against the grip of my grim guards as they haul me and the Grand Sage to safety. "Vanessa needs help! We can't just leave her!"

But my words are for naught. My safety is their only priority, and they inexorably drag me further. My struggles only ensure that one of them—no idea who the fuck he is—throws me over his shoulder. Another hauls the Grand Sage up like a toddler, one arm around his waist like he's a potato sack.

And then they run—away from the hospital, despite my protests.

Enhance your reading experience by removing ads for as low as **\$1!**

Remove Ads From \$1