

# Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted

## Chapter 411: Ava: Run -- SEASON SIX END

The next seven minutes are a whirlwind.

At first, Kellan wastes precious time trying to argue with me. To tell me I have to stay behind, for safety.

But a Luna doesn't hide when her pack is in danger. They've put their lives on the line for me; it's only right for me to do the same.

Three minutes of arguing. Three minutes of reports bombarding the pack link. Three minutes wasted.

Lisa's there. Kellan's already reported that. I try not to think about it; she has her bodyguards, who have orders to get her out.

I sprint toward the hospital, lungs burning from the frigid air. But as fast as I run, Kellan's faster. He's already there to face the carnage.

Something's wrong. This energy isn't right.

Grimoire's voice isn't telling me anything new. My magic is excited, dancing in my gut, desperate to lash out—but when I try to reach for the strange presence in the hospital, my magic fizzles away.

It's reminiscent of the strange corruption in Ivy.

Obviously. It's her wolf. There's no other explanation.

"We can't assume that," I gasp out, wondering here all my physical conditioning has gone. Now that there's an emergency and I'm sprinting at full speed, it's like I've never run before. My side already hurts, and I can't get the right cadence. "Vanessa couldn't get eyes in the room."

The last word comes out on a high-pitched squeal as I stumble. One of my guards—I assume—grabs my arm and yanks me forward without ceremony, barely breaking stride as he does so.

It takes a second, but I regain my balance and bolt forward.

This is not the time to be clumsy and incompetent.

It feels like ages, but is only a few seconds later when the hospital comes into view.

A body lies crumpled near the entrance. The building is done for; half of the roof is collapsed. Several walls are down.

The shadow-wolf towers over the hospital's entrance. Its form shifts and grows, like smoke given substance. Even Aurum, the largest wolf I've ever known, would look small beside this monstrosity.

Can that really be Ivy's wolf?

Grimoire's frustration bleeds through our connection. My magic slides right off. But she's right there.

I reach for my own power, trying to sense what we're dealing with. Nothing. Even the non-magical elements around us—the building, the ground, my pack—have some sort of existence that my magic can acknowledge.

The shadow wolf? It's like she—it— isn't there at all.

And yet there's all this destruction saying it is.

The shadow-wolf's head swings toward us, and unnaturally bright green eyes pin me in place. Its mouth opens in a silent snarl, revealing nothing but void.

More bodies litter the ground—wolves who tried to engage this thing directly. Their blood paints macabre patterns in the snow.

The shadow-wolf takes a step forward. The ground doesn't crunch under its paw, though the darkness of its form devours the sunlight that should reflect off the snow. It's wrong. Everything about it is wrong.

Wolves dive forward, but I can already see it. They can't do any damage. They're biting air.

Meanwhile, the shadow wolf swipes a single paw and three bodies go flying.

I don't care what my magic says. It's there. Killing people. My people.

Kellan dashes forward, with several others. But every strike, every snap, does nothing. It doesn't even get the creature's attention.

No. That's all on me.

This is what true horror feels like—not the fear of what you can see, but the terror of facing something that shouldn't exist at all.

How the fuck are we supposed to fight something like this?

We can't hurt it.

My magic can't even see it.

And it's coming straight for me.

My fingers tremble against Grimoire's leather binding, tucked securely into my messenger bag. Those eerie green eyes bore into me, promising violence and death. The shadow-wolf's form ripples like ink in water, defying reality itself.

Don't even think about it, Selene snaps in my head. You can't reach it with magic. You'll drain yourself for nothing.

"There has to be something." My voice comes out steady despite my racing heart. "We can't just watch it kill everyone."

I'm trying to understand what we're dealing with, Grimoire mutters. This isn't normal. It's like a void. An absence where magic should be.

Another wolf charges the creature. Another body hits the snow with a sickening crunch. The metallic scent of blood fills my nose, mixing with the crisp winter air.

My bodyguards press closer, muscles tense. Half of them are in wolf form now, fur bristling as they growl. The others remain human. I have no idea what they're saying to each other; I just have to trust they know what they're doing.

Several position themselves between me and the monster.

The shadow-wolf takes a step toward me. Its massive form towers overhead, blocking out the weak winter sun. Those green eyes never blink as they stare in my direction, and I'm pretty sure this monster is intelligent.

My magic swirls inside me, useless and frustrated. But I keep my gaze locked on those unnatural eyes.

Someone grabs my arms, trying to yank me back, but my brain's already centered on a plan of action.

Not a great one. But is there such a thing as a great plan right now?

I only have one focus.

Minimize the damage.

This is suicide, Selene snarls.

"Maybe. But I won't watch any more of my pack die."

Ava, Grimoire's voice holds an edge of desperation, wait. Let me try to analyze—

"We don't have time."

More wolves are charging in. More lives at risk.

My lip curls as I stare into the creature's eyes, baring my teeth. "Hey!"

Whoever has my arm yanks me back, but I surge forward a step. "Hey, you piece of shit! Try picking on someone your own size!"

Okay. Yes, in the realm of talking shit... I'm not winning any awards.

For one, it makes no sense. The monster's clearly enormous, and I'm not.

For two, am I five?

But the shadow-wolf seems to tense and bristle, even if its body is made of black smoke.

It doesn't like me talking back.

I can feel Selene in my head, radiating panic and worry. But she stands by my side and growls at the monster, who throws a few more bodies to the ground with an idle swipe of its tail.

The unnatural gaze flickers away from me, just for a moment. They focus on Selene.

"Enough," I say, and my voice carries across sudden silence. "You want me? Here I am."

"Ava! No!" Vanessa's voice is a shriek in the wind.

Then I do something that would be considered cowardly by any pack—in most circumstances.

I yank my arm out of my guard's grasp and bolt to the left. They're all thrown off by my sudden movement. I'm not going toward danger, and I'm not retreating.

It might even seem like I'm running in a random direction.

But I already have a goal in mind.

This time, the moment my feet pound against the packed snow, I remember how to breathe. How to move my feet. How to run without feeling like I'm dying.

My magic, so frustrated at its inability to interact with the strange magic it senses, blazes forth as soon as I call for it, surging through my limbs in a way that's almost painful, before it settles into a warm, tingling hum in my body.

The scenery around me is little more than a blur as I focus on speed.

My guards can't keep up.

I'm not even sure Selene can.

But, judging by the prickling feeling on the back of my neck, the shadow wolf can. And is.

I don't have time to look behind me and see. Only run.

You can't fight this on your own, Selene snaps in my head, and I can feel her terror.

I'm not alone. Grimoire's heavy weight thumps against my hip with every stride. Keep trying to contact Lucas. I'll lead this thing as far as I can.

And hopefully not die.

Hopefully.

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## Chapter 412: Ava: No Plan At All

Running away from a mysterious wolf made of shadows and dark magic is probably not the most brilliant plan I've ever come up with.

Especially when my own wolf can't keep up. And I have no idea how far I should run. Too far and I risk more participants in this deadly chase. Not far enough, and my desperate ploy might be for naught if it turns back around after eating me.

Not a pleasant thought, but the reality is that I have no fucking clue how to fight this thing.

Have we confirmed it's Ivy's wolf? I blast the thought at Selene; talking is impossible right now. Running is the priority.

I swear I can feel the creature's breath on the back of my neck, but it's at least a hundred yards behind me. My magic can sense it; it's like eyes in the back of my head. Almost. Kind of.

Likely. We can't find Ivy.

Okay, it was a long shot to hope that this wasn't Ivy's wolf, but my heart still sinks—through all the pounding—to hear the confirmation.

Her wolf seems to be corrupted in some way, but Ivy isn't. I can't just blast her to smithereens (assuming I figure out how). I might not like her, but I know she'd never approve of hurting any of us.

Her wolf might be the reason her friends are dead.

Grimoire's observation sounds almost absent-minded. He's a little preoccupied with being the brains of this operation; someone has to be, and I'm too busy trying to stay alive.

That's a terrifying prospect. One my mind automatically shies away from. I don't have the luxury of dwelling on such a horrifying possibility. If Ivy's wolf murdered her entire entourage...

My foot catches on something—a root, a rock, who knows—and the world tilts. The ground rushes up to meet my face, but training kicks in. I tuck my shoulder, roll, and spring back to my feet in one fluid motion.

"Fuck." My lungs burn. Magic might enhance my body, but it isn't perfect, and I'm not calm. My fear and panic leave my control lacking.

Focus, damn it.

Dwelling on Ivy won't help me survive this. I need a plan. A real one. Not this half-assed 'run until something better occurs to me' strategy.

Any ideas yet? I direct the thought at both Grimoire and Selene.

Physical attacks don't work. The shadow-wolf is exactly that—shadow and darkness given form. Teeth, claws, it doesn't matter. There's no substance.

Unless she wants to attack. Then my pack's blood spills.

Not yet, Grimoire admits. I'm running through different wards we can try to contain her, but I don't think we have the time to make anything usable.

Fuck. Not the answer I wanted to hear.

I've long since passed any usable trail, but my feet fly over the crusted-over snow instead of sinking in thanks to spreading my magic around my feet like invisible snowshoes.

If it wasn't for that bit of quick thinking the first time my feet sunk into a pile of snow, Ivy's wolf would have caught up to me a couple miles back.

Damn it. How far are we now? It feels like I've been running for hours, but it's probably only been ten minutes.

A howl sounds behind me; it's closer than I thought. Too close. My heart thuds harshly against my ribs.

My legs quiver. I've run faster and longer before, but not with this level of panic in my head.

Lucas was there. And his wolves. And I was free and safe.

Now? I'm running and scared.

My body—my magic—knows the difference.

I didn't train enough under duress. Somehow, I'm going to have to fix that. Later. If I survive this.

Light, Selene suggests. Shadows can't exist in pure light, right?

Grimoire makes a weird sound in the back of my head. The sun is out.

Oh. Never mind, then.

At least they're not arguing.

She's gaining on us, Grimoire says. He sounds tense, his mental voice clipped and hard. And Selene is a five-minute run behind us.

Kellan and the others are here, too, she reports.

That doesn't surprise me. None of them would have just stood around while I ran away with danger at my heels.

They're all going to be so fucking pissed. You know, if we all survive.

Stop saying if. We will survive.

Grimoire's stern lecture would have more effect if he didn't sound so goddamn concerned.

You've lived for hundreds of years, right? Selene snaps. Why can't you figure out a damn plan, then?

Living a long life doesn't mean I have every answer at hand. I have ideas, but they all require time we don't have. We need to seal the wolf and force Ivy's consciousness to take over, but Ava can't create a sealing ward in less than ten, maybe twelve minutes.

Damn.

And you still can't reach Lucas? I ask Selene, almost tripping over something again. My ankle twinges.

Lucas won't have the same effectiveness as Clayton, Ivy's alpha. But he's still an alpha and could at least try to force a shift on Ivy. Not sure if it would work, but at least it would be an option.

No. But...

But?

Selene is silent for a breath. Two.

We can try. I'm strong enough. But I'm too far away. You'd have to hold on until I reach you.

Fuck. If all I needed to do was have Selene overpower Ivy's stupid wolf, all this running was an overly dramatic, unnecessary plan.

A forced shift is not the same as a sealed soul, Grimoire cautions. I'm not sure your friend is in a state where a forced shift would be possible. She was not conscious.

Son of a bitch. So it won't work?

Maybe. You have about three seconds before she catches up to you, though.

Fuck.

My feet slide across the snow as I veer left, my magic the only thing keeping me from face-planting into the nearest tree. Selene, get here now!

Daring a quick glance behind me leaves me with regret. It's an eerie sight.

The shadow wolf's massive form phases through branches and brush like they don't exist. No sound accompanies its pursuit—no crunch of snow, no snap of twigs, no rustle of leaves. Just darkness shaped into a wolf.



My boots catch on solid ground. I pivot, snow spraying up around me.

No time to think. No time to plan.

I squeeze my eyes shut and reach for my magic. The power surges through my veins, hot and electric, eager to be of use. White-hot bursts of pure light explode from my hands, one after another after another. Even behind my closed eyelids, it's bright.

Between bursts of solar-level light bombs I've somehow conjured out of nowhere and the vaguest idea in my head, I dive. Left. Left. Back. This time to the right.

By some miracle, I don't hit a tree or bush, and no shadow mouth bites my head from my shoulders.

After a few more bursts of light, I pause. The sense of wrongness that is the shadow wolf hasn't moved.

Did it work? Grimoire asks, sounding surprised.

I keep my eyes closed, afraid to look. Afraid to see if I failed. I don't know.

Open your eyes, Ava.

My heart pounds against my ribs. Sweat freezes on my skin despite the magic warming me from within. I force my eyes open, ready to throw more light if needed.

The shadow wolf stands frozen mid-stride, tendrils of darkness writhing around it like panicked little smoke tentacles.

Her head snaps back and forth, as if searching for something it lost. I'm suddenly afraid to even breathe. Can shadows hear? Or is it still all wolf?

It can't see, Grimoire says. At least, I don't think it can.

Relief floods through me, but I don't dare move. One wrong step and this temporary advantage disappears.

Keep going, Selene urges. We're almost there.

My magic pools in my palms, ready to unleash another barrage of light, but the shadow wolf's head whips toward me. Those unnatural green eyes lock onto mine—Ivy's eyes, but wrong. So wrong. The familiar forest green has turned acidic, toxic. No warmth exists in that gaze.

My breath catches in my throat. The magic in my hands flickers, destabilizing as my concentration wavers.

I think she can see, I whisper in my head.

Dodge, you idiot!

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## Chapter 413: Ava: Courage From Somewhere

Reconciling this strange shadow wolf with Ivy's existence is impossible. This creepy thing can't be her wolf. It just can't be.

But my brain's denial doesn't help anyone in this situation. Especially when the eerily silent creature dives toward me with a clear intent of violence.

Grimoire's voice echoes in my head, piercing through my frozen brain.

Pure instinct throws my body to the side. Something heavy collides with my shoulder, and it feels like my arm's torn from its socket.

A sudden heat explodes around my wrist. The silver bracelet the Grand Sage had given me so long ago ignites with white-hot power. The surge rushes through my veins like liquid lightning.

And, more importantly, the shadow wolf stumbles back a step, its darkness rippling as if struck by an invisible force. Ivy's toxic green eyes widen with what looks like surprise.

My breath catches. What just—

The creature lunges again. Faster.

No time to think.

The bracelet. That's our answer! Grimoire shouts, his excitement flooding our bond as I dodge again, my brain and body finally in sync again.

Another slash of claws tears through the air where my head had been a heartbeat before. The bracelet pulses, and again the creature stumbles back.

"What the hell is happening?" I grip my shoulder, which still throbs from the impact.

"What do you mean, that's the answer? What's happening? A little more detail would be helpful right now!"

It phases into reality the moment it's set to strike. Otherwise, any hit would just go right through you. That's the key.

My feet slide across the frozen ground as I dart away from another strike. The shadow wolf's claws whistle past my ear, close enough that I feel the air displacement ruffle my hair.

So what you're saying is I need to let it hit me to hit it back? My magic pulses through my limbs, lending me the speed I desperately need. That sounds like a fucking suicide mission.

Well, not exactly. Grimoire's mental voice carries a note of grim humor. You can always hit and evade at the last second, if you're fast enough.

I'm not. So.

Another dodge. Another near miss. My lungs burn from the constant movement, and my shoulder screams where the creature struck me earlier. The bracelet pulses, once again pushing the shadow wolf back. But is it my imagination? It's growing weaker.

It doesn't have an infinite level of power to protect you.

Makes sense, but damn. I'd love a low battery notification right now.

Something catches my eye as I pivot away from its next attack. Where the wolf's claws struck the ground, patches of dead grass spread in perfect little circles. The blades shrivel and blacken, as if decades pass in seconds.

It wasn't doing that before.

Grimoire. Look at the grass.

I see it. Death magic. Or rather, anti-life magic. It's consuming the vital energy of everything it touches. It seems your jewelry is doing some damage it's trying to repair.

My stomach lurches. If those claws had connected with more than a glancing blow to my shoulder, would my arm be rotting off about now?

Just focus on what you need to do.

Easier said than done. My brain's going fifty miles an hour.

Just another minute, Selene says, her words clipped and intense. We're coming.

Moments ago, I wanted her here. Now, I wish she was farther away. Once they catch up, we're back in the same situation I was trying to avoid. More casualties.

We can help, she insists, though I have no idea where that confidence comes from.

Maybe it's because there's no other option than false bravado.

That's where I am, as I surge power into my arms and legs, watching toxic green eyes track my every movement. I don't want to kill Ivy, but I don't want to die trying to be some sort of noble ally to the Shadowpine pack.

The wolf gathers itself to spring, and I gather courage from somewhere.

My fingers curl around the bracelet, its metal warm against my palm.

Please work. Just one more time.

This strange version of Ivy's wolf takes one step forward, muscles bunching and shadows rippling.

Time stretches, each second extending into eternity. The world narrows to pinpoints of detail. The way the shadows writhe. Those vibrant, eerie green eyes—so brilliantly artificial, like some sort of manufactured poison.

No more strange, dead circles beneath the paws of darkness. I guess whatever damage taken is now restored.

This time, I don't run.

Believe in yourself, Grimoire says, sounding way too calm for this moment. You have the control and power to make it through.

The wolf launches forward, but everything moves as if underwater. I can track each flex of its ethereal form. My breathing never quickens, and my pulse is smooth.

The world is sharper. More vibrant. Somehow, it's as if time has slowed.

It's easy to shift my weight to the side. Just enough to avoid a fatal blow, but it isn't enough to avoid all damage.

The creature's teeth pass inches from my throat—close enough that I feel the cold emanating from its form.

Cold.

And a strange scent that causes my nostrils to wrinkle, though it's faint enough to miss if my mind wasn't working overtime.

Perfect.

Magic surges through my veins, different from before. Not the desperate scramble of survival, but something calculated. Precise. I channel it through my arm even as my bracelet surges to repel the wolf's attack.

But before its shield can slam into my attacker, my magic coalesces into a lance made of pure light, and I slam it home—into the wolf's semi-solid shoulder.

My fingers still touch nothing, curling around smoke. But my magic has met resistance.

The creature's momentum carries it past me as my magic burns through its form. Its snarl is no longer silent, and it flinches violently from the contact. Where my hand connects, cracks of light spread through its shadowy body like lightning through storm clouds.

The wolf whirls back toward me, but its movements aren't as fluid now. Light still spreads from where I struck it, creating a spiderweb of brightness through its dark form. It charges again, but this time I can really see.

I pivot again, this time catching its flank with another burst of magic. More cracks appear, more light bleeding through its form. The bracelet doesn't pulse, but I don't need its protection anymore.

Time is no longer slow, but my body now outranks my brain. It moves fluidly, as if I'm in a practice spar, without my life—or others'—on the line.

I can sense it when Selene and the others burst onto the scene, but it's just an observation in the back of my head as Ivy—or her wolf, or whatever this is—lunges at me again.

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## Chapter 414 414: Ava: Fight Back

This time, I gather as much magic as I can, yanking it from every cell in my body.

The moment I can sense the shadow wolf phasing into semi-reality, I don't think about how my hands still can't touch it. I throw my hand forward, as far into the shadowy body as I can, feeling the chill against my skin even if its body is only as tangible as smoke.

My magic practically shrieks with joy as I let it loose in an explosion of pure chaos.

It isn't elemental. It isn't some sort of coordinated spell. It's just my magic, thrown out of my body in a violent wave, condensed to this single spot above my palm.

What happens when you try to squish that amount of power into a teeny-tiny space?

It erupts. Combusts. Detonates.

Those toxic green eyes are locked with mine in its last moments.

A visceral scream pierces the air; it isn't human or wolf, but something inhuman and shrieky, sending goosebumps along my skin.

The wolf's form disappears in a cloud of smoke, its chill disappearing from the area.

My heart twists in my chest.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, wondering how to tell Lucas what happened. How we're going to tell Clayton. "I never wanted it to end this way, Ivy."

Smoke fills my lungs and I double over coughing, stumbling back a few steps. My eyes water as I wave uselessly at the thick cloud surrounding me.

Are you alright? Selene asks urgently.

Ava? Grimoire's concern mingles with Selene's.

"You're both literally in my head," I croak out. "Pretty sure you already know the answer."

If she's being a smartass, she's probably fine, Grimoire says, sounding relieved.

Something solid slams into me from behind. My knees buckle, but no fear takes over. I know in an instant that it's Kellan, though I'm not sure how I do.

Hands grab at my arms, my shoulders, trying to drag me backward. Bodyguards. Probably.

"Wait—"

"Get her out of here!" Someone's voice drowns out my protest.

None of them are in their wolf forms anymore—probably because it's easier to shove me around with hands instead of paws. Makes sense, but it will never not be awkward to be manhandled by a group of naked men.

"Stop, it's fine—" My words fall on deaf ears as they continue pulling me away. "Would you just—"

The yanking and tugging persist as they drag me several feet away from perceived danger.

My feet plant firmly against the ground. Magic surges through me, lending strength to my voice. "Damn it, listen to me!"

A gust of wind whips past, clearing away the smoke like nature's own fan. Everyone stiffens as they see the figure sprawled on the ground.

My breath catches as I spy silver hair.

That's not Ivy.

\* \* \*

The runes need to be brighter here.

My fingers trace over the rope, following Grimoire's instructions. Light blooms beneath my touch, illuminating the strange symbols.

This one needs to curve more at the end.

The not-so-fun thing about runic symbols is how similar some of them look. A small detail can ruin not only the strength of the wards I produce, but even their intent.

Perfect, Grimoire says. That should restrict any type of magic. At least for a while.

The figure on the ground remains motionless, their silver hair stark against skin the color of storm clouds. Their features are delicate, almost ethereal, but something about them seems wrong. It's almost like looking at a muted version of a photo negative instead of the actual picture.

I've never seen one in person, but there are filters.

I step back as Kellan approaches to inspect my work, acutely aware of his aggressively polite body language. Right now, he's not a friend. He's a very upset-with-me subordinate who uses excruciatingly polite behavior to get his point across.

"Luna," he greets me, with no warmth at all. His jaw tightens when his eyes meet mine, but otherwise there's no outward sign of his anger toward me.

The title stings more than his silence. I've known Kellan long enough to read his moods, and right now, he's furious. But pack hierarchy demands a certain level of respect, even when—especially when—emotions run high.

The angry beta circles our captive, checking each knot with methodical precision. His movements are crisp, professional. Way less awkward than what I did when I was tying her up.

It's a minor miracle any of them let me close enough to do it, but none of them can imbue magic into each knot. Otherwise, I'd probably already be at Wolf's Landing, locked in my lair to await my lecture.

Stop that, Selene scolds me, even as she paws at the strange person on the ground. She's done it more than once, convinced the enemy's just playing possum and will attack as soon as our backs are turned.

I know, I know. This knee-jerk reaction to feel like a child who's about to be scolded by Dad again... I wonder if it will ever go away.

In time, probably. For now, remember that you are Luna. Grimoire's words are supposed to be uplifting, but for some reason I get the mental picture of an uncle patting his young niece on the head to comfort her.

Selene sighs. It's a long mental sigh. Ever have someone sigh inside your head? It's annoying. Like a whistle, but not.

"The sealing magic should prevent them from shifting or using magic," I say, shaking myself out of my little-kid-in-trouble fugue. I'm an adult. I made a decision. Maybe it was a bad one, but I did what I thought was best in the moment. "I restricted everything Grimoire could think of."

"Very good, Luna." His tone is perfectly correct. Perfectly distant.

My stomach twists. Sure, running from the hospital in a wild attempt to sacrifice myself probably wasn't my brightest move. The weight of my actions, and how they affect these people who have guarded my life for months now, settles heavy on my shoulders as I watch Kellan direct the guards to secure the perimeter.

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## Chapter 415: Ava: So Strange

He'll get over it, Selene assures me. He was just worried.

Yeah, well, he can join the club. I study our captive's face again. The pointed ears suggest Fae heritage, but I've never seen one with skin like this. The fabric of their clothing is equally puzzling—it looks like silk but moves like water, absorbing light rather than reflecting it. Very strange.

"The area is secured, Beta," one of the guards reports.

Of course it is. No one else is here. But, I get it. Better safe than sorry.

Kellan nods. "Maintain the perimeter. No one approaches without direct authorization from myself or the Luna."



"Yes, Beta."

I want to apologize, of course. I want to beg forgiveness. But there's some things I can't do.

Pack dynamics are delicate enough without their Luna apologizing to the beta. I have to show that I'm confident in the decisions I've made.

Correct, Selene murmurs.

It might sound like an alpha should never apologize when they do terrible things, and that's not true, either. I'll speak with Kellan in private, knowing how he feels, and he can talk to me then. But right now the pack needs a confident leader, not a question of whose orders take precedence in this emergency.

"Should we take them back to Wolf's Landing?" I ask Kellan, mentally kicking myself for not phrasing things a little more assertively.

But he doesn't blink. "I would suggest that we wait until we're certain the binding holds, Luna."

That title again. Each utterance feels like a tiny knife of guilt.

The runes along the rope pulse steadily with my magic.

"Has anyone found Ivy yet?"

"No, Luna."

I cross my arms, fighting the urge to fidget under Kellan's rigid professionalism. The guards pretend not to notice the tension, but their careful attention to their tasks speaks volumes. We're all playing our roles, maintaining the hierarchy that keeps the pack stable.

Marcus isn't here. Neither is Greg, or other faces I'm familiar with. I wish they were, even though I know they'd be treating me the same way Kellan is.

But I'm not ready to ask if they're okay.

I'll check, Selene offers.

Shaking my head, I reply, No. If it's bad news, I'll break right here.

Grimoire, oblivious to my emotional state, barges into my head again. I just can't get a read on this thing. It has no presence at all. Like it doesn't exist.

The silver-haired figure draws my attention again. No point in dwelling on pack politics when we have this mystery to solve. My magic pulses through the runes I've carved into the rope, steady and strong, but something feels off about our captive.

I take a step closer, reaching out with my magical senses. Nothing. Not even a whisper of energy or life force. If I closed my eyes, I wouldn't know anyone was there.

It isn't right. No magic, no life force, no... anything.

Perhaps they're dead, Selene suggests.

But I shake my head. "Heart's beating. They're breathing."

A few guards glance over, but they look away once they realize I'm talking to people inside my head again. I should probably stop talking out loud one of these days. It's a quirk no other wolf has.

Grimoire, are you absolutely sure you don't know what they are?

If I knew what manner of creature this was, don't you think I would have told you by now?

Selene's ears prick forward as she lifts her head to stare at my bag, where Grimoire is safely nestled. She bristles. Watch your tone, book.

I apologize, little witch. His voice softens immediately. That was uncalled for. I'm frustrated by my own ignorance in this matter. In all my years, I've never encountered anything quite like this. I'm concerned.

The idea that there's an entire person who can leave Grimoire so puzzled is certainly a foreboding one.

I still think they're dead, Selene mutters. Look.

"Stop that." My voice comes out sharper than intended as Selene starts pawing at and tossing different body parts with her muzzle. Each one falls with a limp flop to the ground, like a ragdoll.

They're not responding to pain stimuli, she says, nosing at their shoulder. Look at this.

She shoves her muzzle under their neck and gives a sharp toss. Their head flops and falls to the ground like a stone, with a meaty thud that makes me cringe.

This person, or whatever they are, harmed my people. But there's still something weird about seeing their head hit the ground over and over, and my husky-wolf playing with their body like it's some sort of toy. "I get the point. You can stop now."

I'm telling you, they're dead.

"They're unconscious," I mutter. But I clear my throat. "Beta Ashbourne, could you check their pulse?"

I'd do it myself, but I'd probably get tackled if I got too close to them again. Now that they're tied up and sealed, I shouldn't be approaching them anymore.

Kellan responds immediately, kneeling beside the prone figure. His fingers press against their throat. "Steady pulse," he reports.

"But they're not responding to anything."

"No."

Selene noses their face again, and I resist the urge to scold her. The silver-haired person's head lolls to the side, their features slack.

See? Selene paws at their chest. Breathing. Heart beating. But no response. Not even a twitch.

The guards maintain their positions, but I notice a few stealing glances our way. They must think we're crazy—their Luna and her husky poking at an unconscious attacker like they're some fascinating science experiment.

At least I'm not the one actually doing anything.

Selene lifts their hand with her muzzle. It falls with another dull thud.

"Please stop that."

Why? They tried to kill you.

"Because it's..." I struggle to find the right words. "It feels wrong."

Wrong like everything else about them? She noses their silver hair. No scent. Everything has a scent.

She's right, but watching her toss around their limbs makes my stomach turn.

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## Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted

LUCAS

Something isn't right.

Maybe it's the smooth run through the night. Maybe it's the peace in the air. I'm so used to something coming around every corner these days; for plans to move without a single hiccup, it's no wonder my paranoia is on the rise.

The flat landscape stretches before us, an endless expanse of winter-kissed grass and scattered snow patches. My paws eat up the distance with practiced ease, though my mind wanders to the watch secured in the pack strapped to my back. One quick shift and I could check on Ava.

No. I promised myself I wouldn't hover.

Aurum rumbles in agreement, but a whine escapes him anyway. The scent of honey and vanilla has long faded, but lingers in our mind.

Soon, I promise him. We'll be back before you know it.

My wolf's restlessness mirrors my own. The territory ahead shouldn't be so bare, and I should be able to sense something with my pack link. Yet we've encountered nothing but empty plains and unsettling silence.

There's not a single sign of Ryder's passing.

Vester appears by my side, keeping our steady pace easily. We should have crossed paths with at least three different patrols by now.

His thoughts echo my own. We're close enough to Jericho's safe haven that I should sense him, should be able to reach out through our bond. But there's nothing beyond our small group.

We knew this was a possibility. We'll know more when we get closer. Any word from Vanessa?

His mate's reach is farther than mine. I'm not certain of its exact limitations, but I know she's messaged him at long distances in the past.

Nothing since well before dawn.

The sun beats down from its highest point, marking noon's arrival. We're maybe two hours out from our destination, but each step feels wrong.

Aurum's hackles rise as we cross a familiar marker—an old oak split by lightning. I haven't seen it myself, but its impression lies deep in my memory, given by my scouts.

There are no birds. No small game. Just the whisper of wind over crusted snow.

Something isn't right.

Agreed, Alpha. But I scent nothing. Not even his vampire friends.

That's what bothers me most. No trace of friend or foe. Just... emptiness.

Someone must have been through here in recent days. But not even a rabbit?

Nature shouldn't be this clean of life's traces. It's unrealistic.

Just keep your senses open.

Understood, Alpha.

Unnerved, my thoughts circle back to Ava. It's hard to shake this sense of dread, and the urge to shift and check in through the watch grows stronger with every thud of my paws against the snow.

But, I tell myself, she's capable. She's grown so much, changed so much, in a short time. The flight risk that was my mate has become a capable Luna, despite the responsibilities I've heaped onto her shoulders.

Aurum huffs. Our mate is strong. These responsibilities will not break her.

Flat ground gives way to rolling hills. We're close. There should be sentries. Signs of life.

Instead, there's more silence.

My muscles coil with tension as we press forward.

A breeze cuts across the plains, carrying with it a scent that stops us dead in our tracks. Aurum's nose lifts to the air, testing each note with growing unease.

Magic. It's an itchy smell, not clean and pure like Ava's. Something darker, like I'd imagine corruption to smell—not that the taint in our region has any scent, but if it did, I'd expect this.

And underneath it all, the unmistakable stench of death.

West, Aurum confirms. Miles from where Jericho's camp should be.

The rest of our group fans out behind us, alert and waiting. No one needs to voice what we're all thinking—this doesn't bode well for what we might find at the camp.

Vester circles around to my right flank. This is not natural.

No. Aurum's teeth bare at the air. It's tainted.

His hackles bristle, his tail down. We should investigate.

It's not a question. The scent speaks of danger, and as Alpha, I can't ignore a threat this close to my people. But time works against us—every minute we spend tracking this magic is another minute something could be happening at the camp. Another minute we fall behind chasing the ghosts of our pack.

Aurum's golden eyes narrow against the horizon as I think it through. We split the group. Send scouts ahead to the camp while we check the source. It's the logical choice, even as my instincts rail against dividing our forces when we don't know what we're walking into.

Four with me, I decide. The rest of you continue to the camp. Stay alert and wait for our signal before approaching.

It only takes a minute. Six of my wolves, including Vester, then peel away, heading north toward the camp. I watch until they disappear over a ridge, then turn west.

The wind shifts, bringing another wave of that putrid magic. This time, there's something else with it.

Something strange and familiar.

\* \* \*

Snow whispers beneath our paws as we shimmy our way up the last rolling hill. My wolves fan out behind me, their movements precise and controlled despite the uneven terrain. That scent of dark magic and decay is strong enough to make a grown man puke.

Being in wolf form might seem like it would make it worse, but it's actually easier to handle this way.

The hilltop reveals nothing at first glance. Just more endless snow and winter-dead grass. But there—a subtle difference in the landscape's contours catches my eye. What I initially took for another snow drift...

Alpha, one of my wolves confirms. Structure ahead.

The wind shifts, and Aurum's nose twitches. The stench hits us full force now. My teeth bare involuntarily.

A sod house. I haven't seen many of those in my life. Earth and grass are packed together to form walls, now buried under winter's blanket. If I hadn't been looking for something out of place, I might have missed it entirely. Smart.

Despite the lack of any signs of life, I remain cautious in my approach.

Circle around, I order two of my wolves. Check for other entrances.

My remaining guards take position as I approach the crude doorway. No tracks mar the snow—not even animal prints. Like the plains we crossed, this place exists in unnatural isolation.

The door hangs crooked. Through the gap, absolute darkness waits. That putrid magic pulses from within, making my fur stand on end.

No other ways in or out, my scouts report. The walls are solid.

One entrance. One exit. A perfect trap, if that's what this is.

Hold position here, I command. Alert me to any movement.

I nose the door wider. The hinges creak, the sound sharp in the dead silence. Aurum's senses stretch to their limit, testing each breath for threats.

The corruption is overwhelming inside, but underneath it... something familiar teases at my memory. Something I should recognize.

That scent, Aurum growls. We know it.

But from where? Recent days blur together in an endless parade of crises.

I take another step inside. My eyes adjust to the gloom, revealing bare earthen walls and a dirt floor. No furniture. No signs of habitation.

Just a pile of bodies rotting in the center of the floor, surrounded by a sickly green circle.

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## Chapter 417: Lucas: Strange Symbols

LUCAS

What the hell is this?

Our fur bristles, but we can't linger on the shock of the moment.

The green circle pulses with an otherworldly glow, yet Aurum's paw passes through it as if it's nothing but air. No scent, no resistance.

Magic. Obviously.

Our attention turns to the bodies. There's something strange about them. Bloated, decaying, but somehow devoid of... bugs.

It's unnatural.

Unnatural, Aurum agrees with a growl. His agitation is high in here. Desecrated.

The stench of death fills my nose, but beneath it... Pack. My pack.

These bodies...

Yes, Aurum confirms. Pack.

Their faces, bloated and discolored though they are, are recognizable. Pack lost at different times in these past few months. The initial attack at Westwood. During the strange invasions. And more.

My feet carry me around the circle. Each step reveals another familiar face. Another pack member I failed to protect.

Five bodies total are pack. All who should have been laid to rest with proper rites, their spirits released to run free with the moon.

Instead, they're here. Defiled. Used for some sick ritual that makes me want to howl with rage.

The green circle pulses again, mocking us. Aurum wants to tear through the walls, hunt down every bloodsucker responsible for this desecration. But I force myself to stay focused, to memorize every detail.

They were preserved somehow. Kept from fully decomposing. We've seen some of our wolves brought back to life in some strange way, used as a zombie army; is this how it begins?

Or have they outlived their usefulness?

Too many questions. Too few answers.



Beneath the bodies we know, partially hidden, lie others. Fresher ones. Maybe humans. Maybe wolves from other packs.

But one thing remains constant. There's a strange mark on all of them. Strange, interlocked circles. An arm here. A chest there. One has it on their face.

All semi-preserved in this unnatural state.

Aurum's rage simmers, mirroring my own.

The green circle flares. For a split second, the air fills with the taste of copper and rot. Then nothing. But the bodies... the bodies are gone.

Son of a bitch.

Track the scent!

My orders whip out through the pack bond, even as I know it's too late. Whatever this is, it won't be that easy to find our lost people.

A snarl rips from my throat, echoing Aurum's fury. Every instinct screams to chase after our pack members, to track down whoever dared desecrate their bodies. But we can't afford to lose focus now.

The spot where the green circle pulsed now shows bare ground, as if nothing supernatural ever happened here.

Even the scent of decay and death is gone.

We catalog the scents, but so much of it has disappeared, as if it never existed. Death. Decay. Magic that burns my nose. And underneath it all, a sickly-sweet vampire stench. All gone.

Alpha. We can't catch the trail.

I figured as much, but won't give up that easily. Keep looking. Keep your noses to the ground.

But after ten minutes of methodical searching, the truth becomes clear. Whatever magic whisked the bodies away left no trace for us to follow.

Vester's contact makes my mental ears itch. We are here. Signs of attack everywhere. A lot of blood.

Another growl builds in our chest. Aurum's rage goes cold. Casualties?

No bodies. No people. It's completely empty. We can see claw marks, broken buildings. But no bodies, living or dead. The entire camp's been cleared out.

Aurum rumbles as we finally escape the sod house. Jericho would not leave so easily.

Perhaps.

Hold position, I tell Vester, already gathering my party. We're heading your way.

\* \* \*

Jericho's camp is as empty and ravaged as Vester reported. Unlike the sod house, though, there's a lot of scent to wade through.

Still no sign of Ryder, but we can find traces of Jericho and his vampires.

The scents paint a picture of chaos. Blood. Fear. Rage. Death lingers beneath it all, a stench that burns my nose and makes my wolf snarl.

Vampire-scent is abundant, but it's impossible to tell if it's from friend or foe.

One of the wolves checks in. Alpha. Found traces of Jericho's scent leading north, but it vanishes at the tree line.

Our team is spread out, methodically checking every corner. The vampires have left their stink everywhere. But underneath...

There's something else. Something familiar that makes my skin prickle. I follow it down a hallway we've already cleared, past overturned furniture and shattered windows.

The scent grows stronger in what used to be a bedroom. A few books litter the floor, pages torn and scattered. A strange thing to find, I'd think. We don't have many books at Wolf's Landing. They don't rank high on the survival priority list.

We already cleared this room. Vester follows me, his ears pricked forward in curiosity.

Ignoring him, I circle the room, letting Aurum take over.

It's faint, but it's there. Ozone and lightning. The air before a storm.

Magic.

Claws click against the wooden floor as I follow its trail to the pile of destroyed books. Beneath the heap, something pulses with energy. Not the sickly green corruption from the sod house, but something older. Ancient.

It reminds me of Ava's magic. I can't always sense it, but sometimes I can smell it.

Aurum recedes into the back of my head as I shift back to sift through the pile. Without his nose, the scent fades into obscurity.

None of the books seem particularly special. They look like the kinds of books you'd find near the checkout of major stores—at least, before the electronic generation.

Thrillers. Murder mysteries. Basic paperbacks that have been torn apart.

One even has a half-naked man on the cover with some trivial title.

Thumbing through them provides no more clarity. Maybe the magic origin is in the floor?

"Can you smell this?" I ask Vester. who's still watching me.

He shakes his head with a soft snort. What are you looking for? It just smells like books to me.

After the fifth book I thumb through, a folded piece of paper falls to the ground.

Opening it reveals a few strange symbols. They shimmer like oil instead of ink, and are foreign to me.

Maybe Ava will know what it means.

I tuck the paper into my backpack and pull out my watch. My fingers tap the familiar pattern to connect with my mate.

Nothing happens.

The screen stays dark. No static, no interference—just dead air.

"That's not right." I try the sequence again, slower this time. The watch face remains lifeless, a black mirror reflecting my frown.

The emptiness of the room presses in, making my skin crawl. Something about this whole situation stinks worse than vampire corruption.

I switch channels, attempting to reach Kellan instead. Same result. The silence mocks me.

"Come on." My jaw tightens as I try Lisa's frequency. Then Marcus. Then the general emergency channel. Each attempt meets the same wall of nothing.

The watch has never failed before. We tested it extensively, have been using them for ages. This can't be a simple malfunction.

"Vester." My voice carries through the building. "Get back here."

He appears in the doorway, ears perked at my tone. What is it?

"The watch isn't working. I can't reach anyone at Wolf's Landing."

His eyes narrow. Try mine.

I take his offered watch, but the result is the same. Dead air across all channels.

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## Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted

LISA

I hate feeling helpless.

Ava's out there being chased down by a freaking monster and I'm stuck in a building, surrounded by wolf shifters with a bad attitude.

Not toward me—but in general. The kind of badassery that makes me feel as safe as I guess I can feel, despite knowing that no one can apparently damage the strange wolf.

Guilt and frustration war inside of me. I was starting to get a little comfortable with the idea that I can defend myself, damn it. It was feeling good. Today's been not only a huge blow to that bit of ego, but it's ramped up all kinds of not-great feelings.

Like, I know a lot of lives were lost today. Even one is too many.

And I know my bodyguards were expecting to be part of that number.

Hell, I did, too.

And now I can't even help Ava. If I could just send my damn guards to her, I would.

"Calm down, child." The Grand Sage glances up from his meditation, acting for all the world like Apocalypse v2.0 isn't happening in our own front yard. "Your agitation is riling them."

My guards' eyes flick toward me for the hundredth time, their shoulders rigid beneath their tactical gear. Heat creeps up my neck. They're always so calm and collected, it never really occurred to me that my agitation might feed theirs.

It makes sense, though.

"Sorry."

"Sit down before you wear a hole in the floor." Elverly's voice cuts through my pacing. "Unless you think you're some kind of hero who can save the day by walking back and forth."

Her attitude always seems to transcend the events of the moment. She used to intimidate me, but now I know it's just how she is. "I know, I know. I just—" My hands clench into fists. "I hate that I can't help. That I'm not strong enough yet."

"Strong enough?" The old gnome's snort could peel paint. "Accept what you are, girl. Stop trying to be something you'll never be."

The words sting, but I recognize the concern beneath her harsh tone. It's just Elverly being Elverly. Still hurts though.

"That's quite enough." The Grand Sage's mild rebuke carries weight even with his eyes closed. His meditation pose hasn't shifted an inch since we arrived.

I turn to the nearest guard—he's not one of mine. I think he's one of the guys who follow Ava around. His name escapes me. "Any word yet?"

His jaw tightens, but he doesn't respond. Just like the last dozen times I've asked. Just like all of them have been doing for the past thirty minutes.

The silence grates against my nerves, but I don't bother them. They might be talking through their pack link or something.

Thankfully, we're in Kellan's cabin, so it's at least comfortable, if a little crowded. There are seven guards in here, and even more outside.

My brace is warm against my wrist; I swear I'm never going anywhere without it again, even if it makes me look like a poor man's Wonder Woman.

My fingers tug at my sleeve for the hundredth time, the fabric bunching and releasing in a nervous rhythm. The door creaks open and my heart leaps—but no. Just Vanessa. Not Ava.

The healer exchanges a quick nod with my guards before making her way to me. "Are you alright?"

"I wasn't hurt." My voice comes out sharper than intended. "I never even saw the thing up close."

She reaches for my wrist anyway, her fingers cool against my pulse point. "Let me check."

I submit to her examination, knowing arguing with a healer is pointless. "Has anyone heard from Ava? Is she okay?"

"She's on her way back." Something in Vanessa's tone makes my stomach drop.

"Is she hurt?" The words tumble out. "Did that thing—"

"No, no." Vanessa's hands move to my shoulders, steadying me. "Minor injuries from what I hear. Nothing serious."

"Then what's wrong? You sound like someone died."

Vanessa releases me, straightening her scrubs. "The entire compound is on high alert. We've detected multiple breaches in the perimeter."

"What?" I glance at my stoic guards. "More attacks?"

"We haven't identified who or what is testing our defenses." Vanessa's voice drops lower. "But you need to be prepared. All of you."

My guards knew. They've probably been communicating through their pack link this whole time, leaving me in the dark. I bite back a scowl—they're just doing their jobs. "I'll be careful."

"Has anyone explained the evacuation protocols to you?" Vanessa's eyes narrow at my guards.

"No?" Frowning a little at the oversight, I mutter, "I guess they were too busy protecting me to share that tidbit."

Then I feel ungrateful, because hello, they are willing to die to keep me safe. But come on. At least communicate with me a little. It's not like we don't speak the same language.

Vanessa's glare could melt steel. The guards shift uncomfortably, and one of them—the one that belongs to Ava's bunch, I think—rubs the back of his neck. Their faces twitch in that way I've learned means someone's chewing them out through the pack link.

"Unacceptable." Vanessa's voice drops to barely above a whisper. "What if you're all incapacitated? What then?"

"We won't—" one of them starts.

"Shut up." Vanessa turns to me then, motioning for the gnomes to listen. The Grand Sage even opens his eyes, giving her his full attention. "Listen carefully. There are three escape routes. The first is through the kitchen pantry—there's a tunnel behind the dry goods

shelving. Second is beneath Kellan's bed; I'll show you how to access it. Third is in the hospital wing, behind the supply cabinet in exam room three."

There's an escape route under our bed?

How did I miss that?

This isn't paranoia—they're prepared for the worst. They've already had to leave their territory once.

"If you're separated from your guards, get to the nearest tunnel. Don't wait. Don't look back. Just run."

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## Chapter 419: Ava: Trauma Lingers

Our strange captive never does wake, and we drag them on a makeshift sled. Kellan and the others make do with some long, willowy branches and armfuls of pine.

Practical skills like this are so much more impressive to me than conjuring fire out of nothing.

Really thought we'd run into the intruders out here. It's strange there's nothing.

Selene's musings almost have me tripping over my feet, and Kellan glances over his shoulder in concern.

I wave him off with a weak smile.

You mean this person isn't the reason they went off?

Selene and Grimoire are quiet.

When they're intentionally silent like this, their lack of noise has a heavier weight in my head.

My silver husky looks up from my side, and I swear her pale blue eyes are digging their disappointment straight into my stupid brain. You thought this one was responsible for the alarms?

Grimoire adds, The wards are quite a distance from camp. For all of them to go off at once, do you really think a single being could do it?

Okay. Okay, look. Maybe it was the epitome of stupidity to think that—

It was, the book confirms without hesitation.

But seriously, two epic situations at the same time? Who expects that?

Literally every wolf surrounding us at the moment, mine says. I thought you were waiting to hear from the scouts. I didn't realize you left your brain back at the hospital.

Of course. Damn it. All that hyping myself up about being a responsible and capable Luna—

She's spiraling again, Grimoire observes. Should I tell her this is an inappropriate time?

She can hear you just fine.

My groan this time isn't over their interaction. It's at me, myself, and I.

You aren't used to dealing with these kind of emergency situations, Selene offers, her attempt at understanding ringing inauthentic. You aren't trained the way they are. It's understandable you would let down your guard.

Grimoire grunts. So we lie to her now? Is that acceptable?

All right. No spiraling. No self-flagellating. Focus, focus, focus. My inexperience isn't an excuse when lives are at stake. Move on and forward.

Multiple alarms plus strange attack by strange being plus missing Ivy. Three separate, possibly related but right now separate issues. I need to figure them out instead of relying on Kellan to do it for me.

Jogging up to catch up to the eternally polite, angry beta, I hope no one else has noticed my incredible lack of self-preservation. Of pack-preservation.

"Has anyone reported back from the perimeter?"

"No signs of intrusion detected yet." Kellan's voice maintains that crisp, professional tone that cuts worse than any angry outburst. It's not quite similar to my mother's cold distance, but it makes me feel just as small. "All of Wolf's Landing remains on high alert. We will find them, Luna."

Curious that they haven't struck, Grimoire muses. We are quite exposed out here.

It isn't that easy to find someone, even in a mile's radius. A single mile can be impossibly large when someone is hiding from detection. Selene breaks off from my side, trotting



further ahead. There is a lot more than a single mile to check. We could be quite far from any of them, or they can be watching us now. That's why we must remain vigilant.

Grimoire doesn't respond, but his mental presence remains thoughtful.

Her words make sense, but I'm with Grimoire. Whoever's tripped our perimeter alarms has a reason for doing so. Wouldn't they be on the hunt for any of us? And a giant group of us, slowed down by our unexpected baggage, would be a perfect target.

That is under the assumption you—or the pack—is their target. It could be anything. Keep your mind open, Ava. The scouts haven't found their trails yet. Not a single one. That suggests there isn't an army about to burn us to the ground.

My feet falter, and Kellan's hand lashes out to grab my arm, tugging me forward. He must have thought I was about to fall.

"Sorry. I was just thinking."

His eyes cut toward Selene. "Just be careful."

That's it. Just a mild rebuke. Not that he would do more than that over such a minor stumble, but my skin still crawls over how distant he's being.

I'm definitely flashing back to my life at home, feeling tiny and worthless, all over Mom's disapproval.

You aren't tiny or worthless. You're Luna. Selene's words are simple enough, but there's another whisper inside my head, telling me she's wrong.

What's wrong with you? She returns to my side and hits my thigh hard with her nose. Get out of your wallowing. Why are you acting like this?

Trauma, Grimoire says, and he sounds far away when he talks. She's struggling. Why does she keep thinking of her mother?

Fuck.

I smack my cheeks hard, the sound ringing out and causing several of the guards to look my way. Kellan frowns, his own pace finally slowing.

"Luna? Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Shaking off my strange little fugue, I take a deep breath. Inadequacy will always be my trigger, I guess. That, and people I care about showing they're upset with me.

You need to work on that. Grimoire's voice sounds normal again, right in my head, clear as day.

Yeah. Straightening my shoulders and blowing out a deep breath, I focus on each step. This isn't the time to sink into bad habits or feel sorry for myself. Jesus.

I thought I was getting better, but...

Wallowing, Selene says.

Fighting the urge to smack my cheeks again—they still sting, and the cold air isn't helping—I gulp down another breath of frigid air.

Not the time, Ava. There are far more important things to focus on. Like invaders and the lives of your people.

"How is it possible no one's found anything yet?" I ask Kellan, wondering if my voice sounds weird.

He doesn't seem to notice. "It's not surprising. We don't have exact coordinates, and so far there's no scent trail. They're searching for signs of disturbance or any recent tracks, but it takes time to cover that much space."

Thinking of Selene's words, I mull it over. "Is it likely to be some sort of direct attack?"

"We would have caught the trail of any large army headed our way." His eyes flicker to my face, his brows raised just a little. I think he approves of my questions.

Thanks, Selene.

You're welcome.

"So, maybe some sort of widespread reconnaissance?"

"My guess would be it's the forward scouts. There could be a force following behind. Maybe a few hours. Maybe a day. It's impossible to tell yet."

"Forward scouts in those numbers?"

He shrugs. "It's possible. We always need to keep the worst case scenario in mind."

My shoulders relax as he continues to answer my questions. The remnants of Mom's presence fade from my head, no longer intertwined with Kellan's anger.

Different.

It's different, and so am I.

One little mistake—okay, a big mistake—and I immediately walk down roads I thought I'd closed off.

You've always done it. Just less than before.

Selene bumps against my thigh as Kellan moves on to explain the evacuation scenarios in place. Still overly polite, but no longer do I feel paralyzed by his anger.

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## Chapter 420: Ava: Functioning Luna in Crisis (I)

Okay. Fuck all my inadequacies. This isn't the time, and trauma is a luxury.

That... doesn't sound right.

Ignoring Grimoire, I've managed to haul my brain into functional Luna in crisis mode by the time we make it back to Wolf's Landing.

We would have been here ages ago, but we used the time to scent out our general area on the way back—just in case.

Still no sign of the invaders, of course, but about five minutes out, we finally get a message from one of the scouting parties. They've found tracks and are on the hunt.

Good. Finally, something productive.

Still no way to contact Lucas, which is a massive problem and I have to haul back dire thoughts about him getting murdered or kidnapped—both of which, Selene points out, are far more likely to happen to me, which is a totally awesome ego boost (not, obviously), but it does help put the dangers into perspective.

My first big step as Functioning Luna in Crisis is to haul ass to the Grand Sage the moment I get permission. Our gray-skinned captive comes with me, along with a whole-ass platoon of shifters and a bunch of gawking on the way there, but they're the least of my concerns right now.

The shadow wolf murderer is still unconscious, anyway.

Lisa and I share a brief moment of hugging and being relieved each other is alive, and I finally learn that Marcus and Greg are, too. They're both here, watching over her.

Then I send all three of them away. Lisa needs to be outfitted in full tac gear, like all of us. The aesthetic isn't a big deal, but there's a vest that protects against claws and teeth (and knives, which I think was the original point of it), and different weapons that can be tucked in strategic places, and boots that won't freeze her toes when we go thirty below.

All things that might matter if terrible things happen to us all.

Meanwhile, it takes the Grand Sage less than five minutes to say there's something interfering with our communications. Which, I know, is pretty damn obvious at this point. But I wasn't here for the diagnosis—I'm here for the treatment.

"Can you fix it?" I demand, sounding way too pushy and impatient for Normal Ava. However, it sounds pretty right for Functioning Luna in Crisis.

That's a stupid name. Selene's comment is pretty mild, though. It's not bothering her that much; she just thinks my naming sense sucks.

God, if we ever have kids, she'll be a nightmare about her opinion of their names.

Not unless you call them something stupid. Like Lemon. Or Grape. Or Sawdust.

Despite the gravity of the situation, I laugh at the idea of shouting for a toddler named Sawdust to come home for dinner.

Elverly grabs my elbow in a grip reminiscent of eagle's claws. "Have you eaten?" she snaps. "You're skin and bones."

I'm pretty sure I've actually been gaining weight, though I don't argue with the gnome. Her harsh words are always meant to hide her true feelings. "No. I was kind of busy being chased down by a big, bad wolf."

Oh, wow. Apparently Functioning Luna in Crisis also has a sassy mouth.

Please stop calling yourself that. Guess it's bothering her more than I thought.

No. It's just childish.

Oh.

Elverly grumbles, "That's no excuse to skip breakfast," like it wasn't a pack-wide tragedy that just happened. With dead people.

Fuck, I haven't even gone to identify all the dead and wounded. That's next on the list.

Only if things are calm enough. Grimoire's doom-and-gloom observation sends a little shiver down my back, but then again... He's right. We're sitting around waiting on some notice from the scouts. Any minute now, shit could hit the fan.

It takes a second for me to realize Elverly disappeared. She's probably scrounging up my dinner, complaining the entire time about how I can't even walk to the cafeteria to get it.

I love her. She might grumble, but she does what needs to be done. I need to be as efficient as her. Less mouthy, though.

"Kellan." Yanking my brain out of these stupid side pathways it keeps going down, I remind myself that I'm a Functioning Luna in—

You have to stop.

Fine.

"Yes, Luna?"

"Get me another set of ropes. I'll engrave them with runes, too." Better to be prepared in case they wear off or something. "Actually, get me a few. We should have some for backup." Never know when we'll have another magical thing held captive.

His eyes are thoughtful, even as he immediately barks out commands to get things done as I've asked. I guess he's noticed my change of mindset. Good. That means what I'm doing is working.

Throw all the stupid shit into a box and lock the damn lid. My own Pandora's box of bullshit.

Elverly appears in the doorway with a plate piled high. Bacon, sausage, and eggs, along with a single fluffy biscuit. "Eat," she demands, slamming the plate onto Kellan's table.

Eyeballing the food warily, I ask, "Aren't the kitchens closed? We should be on full alert."

"They are," the pack beta confirms.

Elverly just stares at me, her diminutive stature somehow more intimidating than someone who towers. "Eat."

"But how did you—"

"Eat."

"Okay."

The eggs look delicious but taste like cardboard in my stressed-out state. Still, I force them down under the gnome's watchful glower, though I return my attention to Kellan. "We need more scouts out there. We can't keep sitting around with nothing to go off."

He shakes his head. "Too much time has passed since the breaches. We'd be spreading ourselves thin for no reason."

"But we need information." A piece of bacon snaps between my teeth with more force than necessary. "We're sitting here blind."

"That would be the worst decision." Kellan leans against the wall, arms crossed. He's stressed, too. But like Lucas, you can't even tell. He's got this whole leadership thing down pat. If he wasn't a beta, he'd make a great alpha of his own. "Think about it. If they wanted a direct confrontation, we'd have found them by now."

The fork scrapes against the plate as I stab another chunk of eggs, imagining it to be someone's eyeball. A little gruesome, but I'm kind of feeling a certain way toward people who would harm my pack. "So what, we just wait?"

"We bunker down. Secure what we have. Prepare for the worst. Whoever's out there is playing stealth, but that doesn't mean they won't take an opportunity we hand to them. A weak central force is exactly that kind of opportunity."

Damn him and all his reasonable logic. I'm practically zinging with the need to do something, but he's shooting down everything. As he should, but God. I don't want to sit around waiting for something to happen to us.

It's like this entire year has been just things happening to us.

The Grand Sage, almost forgotten despite taking over three-quarters of the table with the watch he's deconstructed, suddenly snaps his head up with a hiss of what I think might be outrage. I've never heard him make a sound like that before. "Someone's trying to break into my ship."