

## TANGLED IN MOONLIGHT: UNSHIFTED

### Chapter 421: Ava: Functioning Luna in Crisis (II)

"What ship?" I ask, because it's the first time I've ever heard of this thing. We have a ship? We're not even close to the ocean, so how can we have a ship?

But the Grand Sage isn't interested in answering. He jumps to the floor in a flurry of movement, snapping his fingers in our general direction. "Come, come. You wanted to know where they are. Now we know."

My eyes brighten. If the Grand Sage knows where they are, then—

"Stay here," Kellan says.

"No."

Okay. Maybe Functioning Luna—

Stop.

Maybe Functioning Ava shouldn't be heading out. Maybe she should be staying here, safe in Wolf's Landing, with her people.

But there's something zinging around in my blood, insisting that I need to be there. My wolves are great people. They are strong, capable, and I know they would lay down their lives for this pack.

Magic, though? They're woefully incapable of handling anything to deal with magic.

"I'm going," I say, even though my instinct is to ask for permission instead.

Kellan just nods. That's it. The argument's over in half a second. "Understood. Dr. Blackwell, how far is this ship?"

The Grand Sage shakes his head. "It's close. Near where your soldiers picked us up when we got here."

I have no idea where that is, but Kellan seems to know immediately. "Understood. Greg," and he motions to the wolf in question, "will be your guardian. Stay with him at all times. Do not separate from him."

The gnome waves his hand. "I am aware of how to travel with a guard, young beta."

Marcus, though, is the one to bring up the overwhelming issue at hand. "What about that?" he asks, jerking his head toward the captive in the corner.

Still unconscious. Still roped up.

Damn it. I need more than one of me. We need an army of freaking witches I can send wherever I need. Maybe I can start some sort of magic school and hunt down the talented and—

That's exactly how covens began. Along with wizarding academies and the like. Grimoire perks up at my train of thought, sounding excited at the prospect, but I shake my head hard to dispel my little squirrel trail of thinking.

Not the time, Ava. Not. The. Time.

"The ropes are warded." Mustering confidence is hard, considering how much damage this creature can do to my people. "They shouldn't be able to do anything once they wake up."

And then a brilliant idea hits me. Or maybe it's not brilliant. I'm not sure how the biology of gray-skinned Fae-maybe people work, after all. "Have Vanessa come by. I'm sure she has something on hand to ensure they stay knocked out a little longer."

Kellan nods along with my words, a silent approval of my plan. It isn't the kind of nod where people have to check with him to make sure it's okay to obey me, though, and that's important.

"Understood, Luna."

"This one doesn't leave your sight for a single moment, Marcus," Kellan orders.

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Lisa's back before we leave, but there's no time to even acknowledge her. We're in a rush, and there's a whole-ass army behind us.

Well, like twenty wolves, anyway.

Half of them are shifted, and I learn through Kellan's orders that they're going to split off. Some ahead, some behind, just keeping an eye on things to make sure we're safe.

Everyone just needs a word or a motion of Kellan's hand to know what they're supposed to do. I'm a lot less trained, so I just follow my beta as we run out.

It's an easy lope, and my body adjusts to it immediately. It's easy to breathe, even in this cold. The sky is clear and bright, without any clouds to muddy us up with any possibility of snow. The breeze is a bare minimum, not adding to the chill.

Unfortunately, that also means visibility is far and I'm deeply concerned the people we are out to hunt will spot us first.

Always assume they will, Selene says. She's far ahead, scouting with the shifted, and her predatory instincts are strong enough to underline every thought she tosses back to me.

Hunt.

Hunt.

It's like a rhythmic chant in my bones, an insistent whisper in my ear.

Hunt.

Grimoire is silent in my head. This isn't his kind of thing; he's just around in case I need him.

Time passes in near silence; everyone's absorbed into the moment. The mission.

My muscles burn from the constant motion, but it's a comfortable kind of burn. Running like this? I could do it for hours now. At least that's how it feels.

They've found something, Selene says. Her voice carries an edge of anticipation that makes my skin prickle and my heart rate pick up. Kellan wants us to slow down.

I watch his form ahead of me. His shoulders are taut, head up as he scents the air.

My magic stretches out like invisible tendrils, seeking anything unusual in our surroundings.

Kellan's hand rises, palm flat. Stop. Even I understand that one. The wolves around us freeze mid-step.

My senses go further, across the rolling hills. Nothing out of the ordinary, but that doesn't mean anything. My ability to sniff things out with magic is still pretty limited.

Kellan points left, then right. Two fingers.

Split up, maybe?

Stay close to Greg and the Grand Sage, Selene warns. Kellan wants us to circle wide.

Aha.

I follow Greg's lead, keeping my steps light as we edge our way around the next hill. Selene's not with us; she's still with the advance party, closer to Kellan's side.

My magic starts feeling fizzy in my veins, and the ball of it inside of me starts bouncing around frantically, as if trying to tell me something. Not for the first time, I wish I could just talk to it. Kinda feels like a lot of mystery would be solved if we could just sit down and chat.

But of course that isn't possible, so now I have to figure out what's set it off.

## Chapter 422: Ava: Functioning Luna in Crisis (III)

The feeling of my magic bounding around like an excited puppy leaves me almost motion sick.

That's interesting, Grimoire says, finally breaking his silence since we started our run.

Interesting is a word for it, but right now my entire body and mind are focused on trying not to vomit. That would be an amazing way to instill confidence in everyone here. Not.

The fizzy, carbonated-soda feeling in my veins persists, which is an odd counterweight to the nausea in my belly.

My magic writhes and rebels against my attempts to contain it, like a squirrel on a heavy dose of Ritalin, but I come out on top eventually. The sensation settles deep in my gut, a constant vibration that makes my teeth ache.

"Stay close," Greg whispers, his hand steady on my elbow. He should look ridiculous with the Grand Sage on his back, but he doesn't. Just rock-solid and comforting, like he won't let anything happen to us.

My magic writhes inside me, refusing to cooperate. It's impossible to send out another search net with it acting this way.

I don't see anything, Selene says, her confusion clear in our mental link. The tracks stop here, but—

There's something, Grimoire says. It's in the air.

The Grand Sage taps Greg's back, before pointing over his shoulder. "The ship is about a hundred yards ahead. It's cloaked, so you won't be able to sense it."

Greg's fingers tighten on my arm as we edge forward, and I realize only then that I keep stumbling without realizing it. Most of my concentration is on not vomiting and keeping my magic contained.

It wants to explode out of me.

Grimoire, what the hell is going on?

It senses something.

Great. That much is kind of obvious. I really need something more to work with.

Wait. Selene's mental voice cuts through my concentration. There's something— A violent sneeze echoes in the clearing. Something familiar. That scent...

My heart pounds as I try to process what this means. The vibration in my gut intensifies, and I press my hand against my stomach, willing it to settle.

"Ava!"

The shout pierces my eardrums. My body jerks so hard I almost lose my footing again, but Greg's steady grip keeps me upright.

"Holy sh—" The curse dies in my throat.

One second there's nothing but pristine snow ahead of us. The next, bodies materialize from nowhere. The group stands like fur-covered specters in the white landscape, and my brain refuses to process what my eyes see.

A mountain of a man towers over the others, his shoulders broad enough to block out the sun. The rest blur together in my snow-blind vision, but that one—that one catches my attention like a spotlight.

My magic surges, no longer contained. The force of it floods my system with pure, electric energy. With joy.

Kellan and his wolves erupt from the snow bank to my right. Their coordinated attack speaks of years of training, their movements fluid and deadly as they charge toward the group.

"No!" The scream rips from my throat before conscious thought kicks in. "Kellan, stop!"

My magic amplifies my voice, carrying it across the field. The sound bounces off the snow, echoing in the crisp air.i

The air crackles with power as Magister Orion turns to the oncoming wolves, raising his hands. Magic pools around him and his companions like a living thing, ready to strike. My magic freaks out again as I panic.

"They're friends!" I shout, yanking out of Greg's grip as I run forward, waving my arms like a madwoman. "Friends! Don't attack!"

Kellan's wolves skid to a stop, snow spraying in their wake. Only Selene keeps moving, her silver form a blur as she races toward the group, but I already know she's not going to attack.

"Are you certain?" Greg follows close behind, his legs in an easy loping rhythm compared to my more frantic one. "It could be a trap, Luna."

The magic in my veins pulses with recognition, with rightness. I should have listened to its frantic, excited energy and realized there was no danger.

"It's not!" Laughing almost hysterically, I run faster. "Friends, Greg! They're my friends!"

"Luna!" Greg's heavy footsteps crunch behind me. "Wait!"

Magister Orion lowers his hands as he turns to look at me again. The oppressive weight of gathered magic dissipates. His eyes lock onto mine across the distance.

"Little witch," he yells, like we're having a casual conversation in a cafe. "You've grown stronger."

Selene reaches them first, prancing around their feet like an overexcited puppy. Her tail wags so hard her entire body wiggles, and I can see Tinker laughing. Hear it, too.

"They're from the Fae Ward!" I shout at Kellan, who's still tense. "They taught me magic!"

The beta signals our wolves to stand down. They remain alert, but their aggressive postures ease.

My magic continues to dance and spark, responding to the familiar signatures around Magister Orion.

His giant, beaming grin warms my heart as I finally slow to a stop in front of them, breathing hard.

"How did you find us?" I ask between panting breaths.

"We didn't." Magister Orion's deep voice holds a note of amusement. "We saw traces of magic and felt it was necessary to explore them. We expected a response after breaching the wards—were those your doing, Ava?"

Greg catches up to me, still carrying the Grand Sage. "Luna, perhaps introductions are in order?"

Selene weaves between Magister Orion's legs like she's marking her territory, her tail still wagging with enough force to create mini snow drifts.

I missed them, she says, unashamed of her behavior, even if she looks more like a giant cat right now than a husky-wolf.

The Grand Sage slides off Greg's back with surprising grace for someone his size. He shuffles through the snow to approach Magister Orion.

"Grand Sage!" Magister Orion's voice rumbles through the clearing as he drops to one knee. The gesture strikes me as both foreign and familiar—the way he manages to make himself smaller while losing none of his presence. "It has been too long, old friend."

## Chapter 423: Ava: New Order

These two know each other?

"Indeed it has, Orion." The Grand Sage is dwarfed next to the Magister. He speaks with warmth, though. "Though I wish our reunion came under better circumstances. This isn't the first time I've caught you breaking into one of my ships, is it?"

"Ah. It was yours, then. We were concerned... Well, never mind that." The giant man looks sheepish as he ducks his head. "My apologies, Grand Sage. Though now that I am seeing you both, I must ask—is your friend safe now? The human girl?"

"Lisa?" My heart swells at his concern. Even after all this time, he remembers. "Yes, she's safe."

The Grand Sage nods in confirmation. "We've kept her well protected since her return."

"Good, good." Magister Orion's shoulders relax slightly. "We have feared the worst in these past months. Establishing contact with friends has become impossible with the New Order in place."

"The New Order?" My throat tightens as memories of the press conference flash through my mind. The President's vacant stare. His monotone voice. The way everything felt wrong.

That must be it.

Of course they have some terrible name like the New Order.

"Ah." Magister Orion's face darkens. "You've seen them, then?"

"The President's speech, right?" I shift my weight, and the sole of my boots squeak over packed snow. "It was strange. All the supernaturals there."

"The president is a puppet." Magister Orion's voice drops to a growl. "The New Order seized control months ago. They've systematically dismantled every supernatural authority structure across the country."

Kellan arrives then, still suspicious despite the clear harmony between us. He looks at Magister Orion's party, inspecting them all one by one, even as he speaks. "What do you mean?"

"Your wolf councils? Gone. The vampire courts? Destroyed. The registered communities live under martial law. Even the unregistered territories have fallen." He spreads his massive hands. "They've taken everything, little witch. Pack lands. Vampire havens. Fae sanctuaries."

"How did no one notice?"

His eyes gleam with a dangerous light, beard bristling as he shakes. His words, tight and hard, are also hoarse. "The New Order was thorough. They infiltrated every level of power. By the time anyone realized what was happening, it was too late. That was the first wave of attacks."

As we suspected, Selene murmurs.

Yes. We've put much of it together over time, though we still don't understand who they are. Or why they're doing what they do.

"Their control is absolute," Magister Orion continues. "They've placed their people in every major pack. Every vampire coven. They monitor everything. They're determined to maintain their power. Any resistance is... eliminated."

A shudder travels through my body, before leaving my legs feeling a little like jelly. Greg reaches out in silence to grab my elbow again when I sway.

Even my magic is trembling. Not the kind of happy vibration it was doing earlier, but a morose kind of rocking and rolling with a tinge of fear.

The New Order's reach seems endless, and my mind refuses to process the implications. It has so many other questions right now. Easier ones, I hope.

"How are you here? Last time I saw you—" My voice cracks. The memory of that night still haunts me: Magister Orion telling us to escape. The door exploding. Guards invading, yelling for his arrest. "They said you murdered Florice. How did you get out of there?"



"Ah." His massive shoulders rise and fall. "That particular misunderstanding was cleared up rather quickly. It was little more than a ruse to begin with. It was you they wanted."

"Misunderstanding?" That was way too much for something as simple as a misunderstanding. They sent in their equivalent of a freaking SWAT team. They used bombs.

Even if they were more interested in me, it seems like overkill to pretend he murdered someone just to get me away from his protection.

Tinker zips up from behind him, her mechanical wings whirring as she speaks up for the first time. It's good to see her, too. "It was quite the dramatic escape for us all."

"You broke out of a Fae prison?"

"Prison?" Magister Orion's laugh booms across the snow. "Little witch, they never got me that far. Don't you worry. There is no bounty hanging over my head."

"What about the others?" Immediately, I think of Layla. She's missing. Most of the faces here with the Magister are unfamiliar, or only vaguely familiar. "Is Layla—"

"Safe." Tinker smiles. "Layla's running a resistance cell in the south."

"Though some chose to stay." Magister Orion sighs. "To maintain appearances."

"Oh." So, they have spies. That's a promising fact.

The cold bites into my cheeks as I glance around, taking in the scene. Everyone stands frozen in the snow like mannequins, watching our conversation with varying degrees of wariness. Right. Social graces. Those are a thing.

"We should get out of this weather." I gesture toward Wolf's Landing. "You're all welcome to come back with us."

Kellan's head snaps toward me, his eyes narrowing. The rest of our wolves tense.

"They're safe," I say, meeting Kellan's gaze. "I trust him with my life."

His jaw tightens. The others remain silent, but their body language screams distrust—shoulders rigid, faces hard, hands ready for violence. Those who have shifted still bristle, hackles raised, despite the peace here.

My heart sinks as I realize the problem. As a shifter pack, we've spent our entire lives in isolation from other supernaturals. I didn't even know they existed, not really, until a few months ago.

They've never had the chance to see beyond their own community, and what little experience we have had with others is negative. Blood-filled.

Greg's grip on my elbow loosens, but his stance remains protective. Even he radiates suspicion.

I straighten my spine and lift my chin. Time to be the Luna they need me to be.

"They are our allies," I say, my voice firm as I meet each wolf's eyes in turn. "They protected me when I needed it most. They taught me to control my magic. And right now, we need all the friends we can get."

## Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted

"Greg." My voice cuts through the tense silence as we approach the debriefing tent. "Have Marcus bring our guest here. I want Magister Orion's opinion."

Greg nods and peels away from our group, his boots crunching in the snow. The sight of Wolf's Landing standing intact on our arrival released a giant knot of tension in my chest. It was hard to shove away intrusive thoughts of the shadow wolf breaking out of all restraints and murdering everyone over my decision.

Thank God, the Goddess, and the freaking moon none of that happened.

"You've captured someone?" Magister Orion's deep voice rumbles behind me.

"A Fae, maybe? I'm not sure. Gray skin. Silver hair. Not the same as anyone I saw in the Ward, but you'd know better than I."

"Gray skin?" Tinker zips ahead, her mechanical wings whirring. "That's not typical Fae coloring."

"Nothing about this situation is typical." Kellan's voice drips with frost as he enters behind us. He's still not thrilled they're here.

I thought he'd be a little more understanding, but I guess it's hard when it all comes up at once without warning.

The debriefing tent feels cramped with so many bodies. Maps and papers cover the central table, weighted down with mugs of cold coffee. I start a fire as Kellan clears the table, clearly uncomfortable with Fae eyes on our information.

We'll get there. I think.

We will. Kellan is a reasonable man. Selene settles near the stove, waiting for it to emanate heat, like she isn't insulated against the cold.

"Most of the pack is in the alpha lodge now, right, Kellan?"

"Yes, Luna. It was safest to bring in everyone from the outer edges, as we were expecting an attack."

"Since we know the danger is passed, we should send them back. Lower the alert level and let people adjust." There's a lot to do. I still have bodies to identify. The hospital is destroyed; I have no idea what we're going to do about that. We don't have another building large enough, except the alpha lodge.

"Your wards were holding strong." Magister Orion strokes his beard, his eyes glittering as he examines me. "You've improved greatly since I've seen you. Like a baby gazelle who's finally learned to run."

The visual is strange, but I know he means well. "Thank you, Magister."

Heavy footsteps approach outside. Marcus enters first, his face grim as he half-carries, half-drags our unconscious captive. The silver-haired figure looks smaller in the tent's warm light.

Magister Orion's breath catches. His massive frame goes still.

"You recognize them?" Hope flares. Maybe we can finally get some answers. Maybe they will lead us to our missing Ivy.

"This is... unexpected." He circles the figure as Marcus sets them down.

"Can you tell what they are?"

"They're not Fae."

Magister Orion drops into a crouch beside our captive, his massive frame making the action look almost comical. He looks even stranger as he sniffs the air, like he's a wolf himself.

Except he's not. He's Fae.

"How did you come across one of these?" His voice holds an edge of disbelief.

"They attacked our hospital." It doesn't take long to explain the events, though my rendition might be a little scattered as I try to intersperse bits of information. Like who Ivy is, and why we thought it was her.

"When I hit them with magic, they changed into... this."

"It tried to kill you?"

"Yes. Multiple times." My fingers brush the silver bracelet. "This saved me."

Magister Orion releases a deep sigh that seems to deflate his entire body. "You're lucky to be alive."

"What exactly does that mean?" Kellan steps forward, arms crossed. "We've been waiting for an explanation. What is this creature?"

"Beta Ashbourne." Magister Orion's swirling eyes fix on Kellan. "Your impatience, while understandable, is not appreciated."

The beta's words crack like ice. "Enlighten us. Stop beating around the bush."

"Kellan." I wait until he looks my way, meeting his eyes with hard ones of my own. "Please. He's a guest here."

The tent falls silent except for the crackle of the fire. Tinker's mechanical wings whir as she hovers near the captive's face, her usual chatter absent. Magister's other friends are all huddled to the back of the tent, as far as they can get from the captive—they look horrified.

"These creatures have many names," Magister Orion finally says, pushing to his feet with a sigh. "It isn't unconscious, just recharging. It's a byproduct."

"Of what?"

He rubs his nose, a hint of color flushing into his cheeks, barely visible beneath his beard. "That is... Well." He harrumphs and coughs, rubbing the back of his neck, and Tinker squints at him.

"It's a dream-eater, isn't it?"

"A dream-eater?" The ominous-sounding name doesn't quite fit with this gray-skinned creature in front of me, but it does sound about right for a strange shadow wolf that can't be touched.

Magister Orion smooths his beard with another harrumph, and Tinker pokes at the dream-eater's face with one foot, looking fascinated.

"They should have been destroyed long ago. They're an abomination. How interesting. I wonder if I can run some tests—"

"Tinker."

Magister Orion stares the gnome down, and she snaps her mouth shut, though she pouts a little. My teacher glances at me and sighs. "She suggests something that has been banned for centuries. The temptation of a dream-eater can be too much for inquisitive souls."

"What do you mean by that?" Kellan asks, still sounding suspicious of every word that comes out of his mouth.

"These dream-eaters were created long ago, by those who wished to become gods." He grimaces. "Or birth them."

My eyes widen. "Are they some sort of genetically engineered Fae?"

"They are creations made with blood of several supernatural species, birthed in the body of a vampire. Abominations. They are not truly alive, but powered by the magic infused within. They're voracious in their desire to survive, but they are not people."

Tinker kicks at the dream-eater's limp hand. She's just like Selene, who watches her at work. "It's probably grown by eating at all this corruption in the area. No wonder it grew so powerful."

"How do you know about the dream-eaters?" the Grand Sage inquires, watching Tinker. "Even I did not know of their existence."

"Who do you think helped the Magister find any book mentioning them?" She grins with pride. "I'm probably the best-read gnome on the continent!"

The Grand Sage blinks at her, a mild expression that probably means nothing, but her face flushes as red as a tomato. "Uh, after you, of course, Grand Sage."

"No need to flatter, child."

## Chapter 425: Ava: Culture Clash

The others who came with the Grand Sage seem to understand the horrors this dream-eater brings. "Do they know about dream-eaters?" I ask the Magister, who glances behind him.

They all shake their heads, but they still look horrified.

One steps forward. Vaguely familiar. Red hair. Super long, pointy ears. Weirdly wearing what looks like clothes you would buy out of any sort of outdoorsy sports store, not stuff people wear in the Fae Ward. Seeing a giant, fur-lined winter coat, jeans, and boots on a Fae definitely feels weird.

"Mistress Ava—"

The snarls ripple through the air before I even process what happened. My people bare their teeth, chests out and eyes dark, metaphorical hackles raised at the red-haired Fae's words. My stomach drops at the sudden hostility.

Magister Orion steps between his companion and the wolves, his voice booming. "Why such aggression to one of mine, wolf?"

"She is our Luna," Kellan says, his words frigid. "She is no mistress."

Their dramatic overreaction would be amusing, if it didn't ratchet the tension in this tent by a factor of two hundred or so.

Males, Selene says with a sigh, even as Magister Orion inclines his head.

The gesture is diplomatic, and he spreads his hands wide. "My deepest apologies for our oversight. We meant no disrespect to your Luna."

Some of the tension bleeds from Kellan's shoulders, though his eyes remain sharp. The others relax their stances, though too many of them are still frowning.

Magister Orion turns to the red-haired Fae, whose delicate features make it impossible to determine their gender. They're all so pretty. "You must understand—among wolves, titles and rank carry great weight. Luna Ava rules beside her mate as an equal partner. She is not my student here, but a leader of her people. We must show proper respect."

The Fae listens carefully, their blue eyes wide as they bounce around from person to person. I know the feeling. It's more than just disconcerting when a bunch of wolves start growling at you.

Though, maybe less terrifying for a Fae than a human-like person.

Magister Orion faces Kellan again. "Please understand that 'Mistress' is a standard term of respect in Fae culture. There are no... implications your people might associate with such a title."

The growls finally cease. I clear my throat, eager to move past this cultural misunderstanding before it can fester. Besides, if my wolves weren't being so suspicious of and mildly hostile toward the Fae, they probably would have never noticed the form of address.

"What's your name?" I ask the red-haired Fae. "You were about to tell us something?"

The red-haired Fae twists their fingers together, eyes darting between me and Kellan. "I am called Heize, Lu- Luna Ava."

They glance toward Kellan after stumbling over my title. His expression never changes; just an imposing stare on his impassive face.

Kellan's perfected that look over years of being Beta, and he wields it like a weapon. Lucas, too.

"We don't know of dream-eaters specifically." Heize's musical voice wavers as they keep glancing at Kellan and the others. "But that thing—" They point toward the unconscious figure. "It radiates with malicious intent. Any Fae can sense it. If I were to explain it in human terms, it feels evil."

The Magister nods along with the Fae's words. "It doesn't belong in this world," he agrees. "A strange existence in nature. Something manufactured and unnatural. Any Fae would feel uncomfortable standing near such a creature."

"How can you sense this?" Kellan asks, no longer sounding quite so interrogative. Just curious.

"All Fae are attuned to natural magic." Heize's confidence grows as they speak about something familiar, their shoulder's straightening as they stand taller. "This creature disrupts those natural flows. Imagine having a row of fish, and then seeing a wolf. It doesn't belong, you see?"

Selene confirms. Even I can sense the wrongness, though differently than they do. I would have never understood they were a manufactured creation, though.

Kellan looks thoughtful. He hasn't softened, but his body posturing has calmed down. "And you've never encountered anything like this before?"

"Never." Heize shakes their head vigorously. "We keep extensive records of magical creatures. For us not to know of these dream-eaters..."

Their words falter, and they glance toward the Magister, who waves a hand at them. "You can speak your truth here, child."

The red-haired Fae's mouth presses together, making a thin line even as worry wrinkles their forehead. "My assumption would be that the knowledge was buried intentionally."

"Indeed," Magister Orion sighs. "We Fae pride ourselves on our vast libraries and knowledge. For something of this nature to be omitted from our history books, it would be—"

"The Fae Throne." Another one of his friends jumps forward then. They're shorter than most Fae, with long black hair and lilac-colored eyes that glitter. "Hi, Luna Ava. My name is Eris. It's a pleasure to meet you." She holds out one hand, then pumps mine with an incredible amount of friendly energy.

"You, as well," I murmur, taken aback by her amicable nature.

"We cannot speak ill of our King—or Queen. But the Fae Throne has always been embroiled in dark scandals, and they will use geas if necessary to keep their darkest secrets from seeing light. It must be their order to bury the dream-eaters in history. And that means they were involved in their creation."

"How many kings ago was that?"

Curiosity seems to be melting my pack; one of my guards speaks up from over my shoulder.

Magister Orion's eyes grow distant, his voice taking on the cadence of a storyteller. "The earliest mention of dream-eaters comes from the reign of King Theron the Third. A succubus named Lady Aranthé caught his eye at court. None could match her beauty or grace, and she rose quickly through the ranks to become Imperial Consort.

"The tales speak of her otherworldly allure. How she could entrance anyone who looked upon her face. For three years, she held sway over the court, until King Theron discovered her true nature. He had her beheaded at dawn and her body burned to ash, scattered across the sea."

Eris lets out an unladylike snort. "That tale reeks of propaganda. More likely the King created his perfect consort and disposed of her when he tired of his toy." Her lilac eyes flash. "The Fae Throne has always dabbled in the forbidden. What better way to hide their crimes than to paint themselves as the heroes who destroyed such creatures?"

The room falls silent. Eris's eyes widen as she seems to realize what she's said.

"My sincerest apologies, Luna Ava." She drops into a deep curtsy. "I should not speak of such unseemly matters in your presence. The politics of the Fae court often descend into... matters best left unspoken in polite company."

"It's fine." I wave off her apology, more interested in the implications, and why the Fae all seem so uncomfortable with how easily she speaks against their ruler. "So you think the Fae Kings might have created the dream-eaters?"

"There is such a possibility," Magister Orion says carefully. "Though we must be cautious in making such accusations without proof, Eris."

She scoffs, and Heize squeezes her shoulder. "Watch your words, lest the wind bring them to the King's ears."

## Chapter 426: Lucas: Pack or Mate



LUCAS

All of us stand in what must be Jericho's room. His scent is heavy in the air, and a wheelchair sits on its side, tossed into a corner.

It's an unnerving sight that begs the question—is he still alive? Even if he ran, how far could he get without a wheelchair? And if he's taken captive, how badly is he being treated as an invalid?

Aurum snarls, his rage echoing through my skull. The sight of that wheelchair burns into my eyes and soul. A stark reminder of Jericho's new vulnerability—and my failure to protect him.

Vester is the first to break from the ominous sight, his voice clear through the pack bond. What is our next move?

The watch is still dead. No signal from Wolf's Landing, no word from Ava or Kellan. The silence is filled with too many scenarios I've played out in my head.

But the mate bond pulses steady in my chest. Ava's alive. They all are—every mated pair in our group can feel their other half. It's the only comfort we have right now.

"We follow Jericho's trail. Kellan and Ava know the evacuation protocols. They'll keep our people safe if anything happens."

They have to.

The words I don't say hang heavy in the air. Every alpha faces this choice—pack or mate. The needs of many versus the call of your heart. Right now, my chest aches, but my alpha bond is yanking me forward.

There are times I can let the world burn to choose my mate, but this is not one of them.

She's strong, Aurum reminds me. He, too, feels the pull to our pack. To those taken from us, dead and alive.

I know.

The familiar weight of command settles over my shoulders as I shift to resume the hunt, leaving that damned wheelchair behind. It doesn't make the ache in my chest any less, but the explosion of scent at least keeps my mind busy as I trot behind my scouts, aggression pulsing through my veins.

When we find these damn bloodsuckers, I'm tearing out every one of their throats. Every vamp will burn on pyres stacked to the sky.

And whoever's casting this dark magic on our dead—they, I'll rip apart limb by limb.

Move out. My order rings out sharply in the pack link, and I can sense bloodthirst rising in all of them.

We're all ready for a confrontation. We've spent too long hiding from our enemy.

Snow tells a story, if you know how to read it. Fresh powder covers most tracks, but beneath that pristine layer, chaos reigns. My nose brushes the ground as I follow the faintest traces, piecing together what happened here.

Multiple sets of prints. At least seven distinct patterns, but possibly more.

There's one set that catches my attention the most. A little heavier, the stride inconsistent. Perhaps someone carrying Jericho; I can catch his scent like an afterthought.

A growl builds in my chest. Seven against one injured wolf and whoever was carrying him. The cowards.

The tracks weave between the trees. This was no casual stroll, but a run for their lives. We might not be able to differentiate the different supernatural scents saturating the trail, but the tracks have already told the story.

Here. Vester's voice cuts through my concentration from the vanguard. Blood.

My head snaps up. Twenty feet ahead, crimson stains the snow. Not much, but enough to confirm violence. The scent is days old, muddled with vampire stench and something else. It smells like mushrooms and tree rot and summer. Strange.

Spread out, I command. Check for diverging paths.

The prints tell an ugly tale. Scuff marks in the snow indicate a struggle. Jericho didn't go quietly—wheelchair or not. Pride mingles with fury in my chest. He fought back.

Drag marks, heading northeast. One of the scouts has already found what we're looking for.

My muscles tense, hackles rising. Drag marks mean Jericho was incapacitated. Alive, but helpless.

More blood here, another reports. And signs of magic use. No idea what kind, but it has that itchy smell that Luna gets sometimes.

The snow around that spot is melted in a perfect circle, as if hit by intense heat. But we already knew the vampires weren't working alone.

I press my nose to the ground again, trying to separate the scents. Vampire. Wolf. Blood. And underneath it all, that itchy-smelling magic my scouts have already scented.

If Ava were here, she could probably glean some information from that. Unfortunately, she's back at Wolf's Landing.

At least, I sure as fuck hope she is.

It doesn't take long to clear the area; only one trail heads out for any distance, and we follow our noses faithfully.

The tracks continue northeast, growing fainter with each yard. Seven sets of prints become five, then three. They're covering their trail—professionals, not random attackers. And they're no longer hunting. They have what they came for.

Maybe Jericho. Or maybe his friend. Or—neither of them. They were searching his hideout; perhaps they wanted an object, not a person.

The possibilities are endless, but they give us all something to bounce around in our heads as we continue the hunt.

This is too easy, Vester's voice echoes in my head. Like they wanted us to follow.

They covered their tracks, and yet still left a clear trail. His suspicion isn't unwarranted; I've been feeling a similar uneasiness.

How many scouting parties have we had run into rogue wolves? And yet, aside from a brief glimpse of some corpses and strange magic, we've had no hiccups on our run.

Luck for the unlucky is ominous.

Alpha! Over here! The excited bark of one of my scouts cuts through my uneasy thoughts. I found Delta Ryder's scent!

Vester's wolf form slows from a lope to a trot. His ears are flat against his skull, and I can smell his apprehension mixing with the crisp winter air.

I should feel elated. Finding Ryder's scent means we're on the right track, means we might actually rescue our people. But Vester's words ring too clear in my head.

Coming. My reply is terse as we change direction.

The snow crunches under our paws as we trot toward the scout. Every step feels weighted with foreboding. My instincts scream that something's wrong.

The scout's tail wags as we approach, but I barely acknowledge his enthusiasm. My nose is already working, parsing through the layers of scent.

Yes, there it is. Ryder's distinct scent, as clear as if he'd just passed through. Too clear. Like a freshly laid trail.

It's recent.

Too recent, Vester mutters. How haven't we caught wind of him before now?

The words hang in the pack bond like a death knell. We all know what this means. What it has to mean.

It's a trap, I state flatly. No point dancing around it. We're far behind those we're tracking, but someone seems to realize we're here.

Perhaps we triggered something when we stumbled upon that strange sod house. That would make sense. Like the wards Ava placed for Wolf's Landing.

Orders, Alpha? Vester's mental voice is steady, grounding.

I scan our surroundings. The trees stand silent witness to our dilemma, their branches heavy with snow. Somewhere ahead, our enemies wait. Behind us lies nothing but emptiness.

Why would they bring out a new scent when we're already following, though? Only one possibility comes to mind.

They're trying to split our forces, I warn Vester. It would make sense for one group to follow the old trail, and the second to follow the new trail of Ryder's. We stay together. If they want us split, that means we have a chance in a head-on fight.

## Chapter 427: Lucas: Follow the Trap

LUCAS

For Ryder's scent to be so crisp, he should be in range for a pack link.

And yet there's nothing when I try.

More evidence it's a trap.

We follow the original trail. There's always a chance I'm wrong, and it's really Ryder. If it is, though, he's in a better situation than Jericho to survive.

Choices. It always comes down to choosing. The hardest part of leadership.

My pack falls into line without question as we continue our pursuit of the attackers.

The original trail weaves between snow-covered pines. The tracks continue to lessen, until it seems as if only one of them remains, but each step is heavy in the snow. Jericho's drag marks persist, but at intervals, as if he's carried at some times and pulled along at others.

But then, after another mile of tracking, it all stops.

Vester circles the area where the trail ends, agitation swishing his tail. There's nothing. Not even a lingering scent.

The growl that vibrates my chest comes from Aurum; my brain's too busy processing what we're seeing. Check the perimeter. Twenty-yard radius.

My wolves spread out, methodically searching every inch. They examine trees, rocks, anything that could hide a clue. The sound of their movements only emphasizes the unnatural silence that's fallen in this part of the world.

But there's nothing.

We widen the perimeter, but stick together. Fifty yards.

Then seventy-five.

One hundred.

Still nothing.

First the empty camp, then the bodies, now this. Every lead dissolves like smoke the moment we get close, as if they're playing with us.

They must have teleported. But why wait until now? They should have done it from the start.

Vester's question is a valid one as we trot back to the end point of the trail.

Magic has rules, just like anything else. There must be limitations to their skill. Energy cost. Distance. Number of people they can transport. Sister Miriam was able to appear over large distances, but from what we have learned, she is an old vampire with unique skills.

So they had to wait until they reached a specific point? one of my scouts asks. Or maybe until they recovered enough power?

Or both. There could be other limitations. Thinking of how their numbers seemed to shrink, and how we assumed it was from them covering their tracks more wisely, I add, They started it a while ago. This was just the last of them.

They waited to transport Jericho until the end. Why? That seems strange, if he was one of their targets.

More questions. Always more questions without answers; I'm convinced these damn bloodsuckers are trying to drive us mad.

There's always Ryder's trail, Vester points out privately, not broadcasting the option to the other wolves.

We should follow Ryder's trail.

Aurum's certainty pulses through our bond.

It's a trap.

Of course it's a trap. Aurum's mental voice carries a hint of amusement. But traps work both ways.

Our enemies want to split our forces—which means they're counting on us doing exactly that. They expected me to choose between Jericho and Ryder. At least, that's the theory.

And if we're wrong?

But Aurum just radiates with readiness, bloodthirsty for battle.

And I am, too.

Alpha? Vester's question hangs in the air.

Broadcasting to all of them, I announce, We backtrack. It's time to follow Ryder's trail.

Vester's ears perk forward. You're sure?

They want us divided, so we stay together and spring their trap on our terms.

My wolves spread out in defensive formation as we backtrack the mile back. The crisp scent of Ryder remains where we found it, too fresh to be real, with his presence absent in my head.

The trail leads west, away from the direction Jericho was taken.

Aurum's certainty floods our bond again. Whatever awaits us, he's ready to face it. And so am I.

Stay alert.

We press forward, our formation tightening. It's an easy trail to follow, and our pace is fast. The tracks in the snow fade suddenly after half a mile, but the scent remains.

The scent of Ryder saturates the air, so thick it coats my tongue. No wolf's scent should be this strong, not even if they rolled in the snow and marked every tree.

Something's wrong. Aurum's ears flatten against our skull. This isn't natural.

Keep moving. My paws sink into the deep snow as we crest another hill. The landscape stretches before us, white and pristine save for scattered patches of brush and lonely trees.

The wind shifts, bringing another wave of Ryder's scent. My nose burns from its intensity. Aurum's hackles rise, his aggression bleeding into our shared consciousness.

Slow down. I signal the formation to tighten. Check every angle.

My wolves spread in a defensive circle, scanning the terrain. The snow-covered hills offer too many places to hide. Each dip and rise could conceal enemies lying in wait.

Alpha. One of my scouts motions toward a cluster of snow-laden bushes. The scent is strongest there.

We approach with measured steps. The overwhelming smell of Ryder emanates from that spot like a beacon, drowning out any other scents that might warn us of danger.

This is wrong. Aurum's thoughts mirror my own. His scent shouldn't be this concentrated.

Another gust of wind brings not just Ryder's scent, but an underlying note I hadn't caught before. Something chemical. Artificial.

Stop. I halt our advance. They're using his scent to mask something else. Or they're too idiotic to place a trap correctly.

Vester's nose twitches. Like a scent bomb? How is that possible?

The memory of that sickly green circle and its preserved bodies flashes through my mind. We need to be ready for anything. Fall back. Ten yards.

My pack retreats in perfect synchronization, maintaining their defensive positions. The wind whips across the open ground, stirring loose snow into small flurries. Ryder's scent continues to pour from those bushes, becoming more artificial with each passing second.

But outside of the artificial nature of his scent, there's nothing there. Not even a whisper or zing of magic to sting the nose.

Move with caution. My command ripples through the pack link as I edge forward. Aurum grumbles in my head, our nose burning. Watch the perimeter. They want us focused on this spot.

My wolves maintain their positions, alert and ready. Vester's silver form prowls to my right, his muscles coiled tight beneath his fur. The rest of my pack spreads in a protective circle, their eyes scanning the terrain.

Snow crunches beneath my paws as I push through the first branches. The bush's needles scratch against my fur, releasing a sharp, fresh scent that cuts through the fake Ryder smell. Nothing appears disturbed inside the branches. No footprints. No broken twigs. No sign anyone's been here.

There's nothing here, Aurum notes, his frustration matching mine.

I press deeper into the bush, sweeping my nose low across the ground. The snow feels different here, packed harder, as if—

Click.

My paw sinks into something solid beneath the snow. Metal scrapes against metal.

Every muscle in my body locks. My pack freezes in place, their breath held.

One second passes.

Two.

Five.

Eight.

Ten.

Nothing happens.

Alpha? Vester's question carries an edge of tension.

Stay in position.



I lift my paw with deliberate slowness, backing away from whatever mechanism lies hidden beneath the snow.

The Novel will be updated first on this website. Come back and continue reading tomorrow, everyone!