

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted #170 -180

Read Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted 170

Chapter 170: Lucas: Rites
LUCAS

“Everything’s ready for the pack rites, but are you sure our Luna won’t be there?”

Delta Ryder looks as exhausted as I feel. Aside from the moments I stole to be with Ava at the expense of my pack duties, I’ve had no sleep or rest.

My wolf has been silent in my head since she left. We don’t have the connection that Ava seems to have with Selene—our conversations aren’t as in depth, and he doesn’t feel like a completely separate entity as their bond is—but he still feels the loss of his pack children keenly.

He doesn’t even have a name, and I can’t believe I’ve never asked him about it.

I’ve always called him my wolf.

“No. She’s intending to visit with her mother again and see if she can glean any more information.” Not that I’m sure why. I want to tell Kellan to drag her back to Westwood at all costs, but that’s a terrible way to keep her trust.

Despite having a magnet for trouble, I need to let her make decisions for herself.

Rubbing between my eyebrows, I shuffle through more reports. Another dead scout, though we can’t find his body.

Ryder has a few humans he trusts in the Unregistered city, but we have no word from them and no way to check on them. They don’t have a mind link like we do as shifters.

It is limited by distance, but still helpful.

While the city of vampires is as modern as they come and do business with the outside world, they are almost completely closed to any of the large wolf packs. Even the rogue shifters allowed within their city limits have no interest in working with an official pack. Bloodshed is more likely than words exchanged.

Ryder’s tension in front of my desk tells me everything I need to know about the contents of the reports.

Nothing.

All this time and we haven't manufactured a single lead outside of what Ava's learned from her little vampire friend.

"So we can't find even a rumor on this Mad Prince? That's what you're telling me?"

"We have yet to even verify he exists," Ryder agrees quietly. "Are you absolutely positive on the intel?"

"Positive," I grit out, unable to contain the flare of irritation at a delta daring to question their Luna.

Even if he has no idea who gave me the information.

The delta's hands go up in a placating gesture that has my mental hackles rippling. "I didn't mean to question you, Alpha."

A frustrated growl tears from my throat as I scratch at my beard and lean back in my chair, the weight of responsibility crushing my chest. After a few moments, I force myself to rein in my temper. "Stand at ease, Ryder."

He obeys immediately, but the tension radiating from him mirrors my own. "What else can you tell me about the pack rites?" The words feel like sandpaper on my tongue. A funeral for all the young wolves lost in that massacre... children ripped from their families too soon.

"The Silvermoon beta and their Elder Healer arrived an hour ago to show solidarity during the service." Ryder's voice is steady, but I can see the pain in his eyes. "Your funeral clothes are ready for you in your quarters."

Fury lashes through me, hot and sharp. All those innocent lives lost, and for what? I have nothing to tell their families, no justice to offer them. No way to ease their grief.

"Lisa's parents have been calling every few hours for updates." His too-calm words pull me from my spiraling thoughts.

I sigh heavily, running a hand over my face. "I'll call them in the morning." Even though we have no news, no hope to give them. Their daughter is still missing, likely suffering at the hands of a sadistic vampire, and we're no closer to finding her.

"They insist on the local police being part of the investigation."

Another sigh escapes me. "I'll talk to them." Though I already know what a disaster that will be. Humans have no idea about the supernatural world. They're not equipped to handle this kind of threat.

Even if the Granite City police—who are well aware of their jurisdiction and would only send someone sensitive to the supernatural issues at play—were to join the investigation, it would be as nothing more than a gesture.

No human can investigate a supernatural crime.

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It's only asking for more bodies to add to the death toll, and the Unregistered don't play nicely with any government entity at their door.

"Any human joining the investigation is likely to have a hard time," Ryder points out, echoing my thoughts.

"I know," I snap, my frayed nerves getting the better of me. Taking a deep breath, I force myself to relax. "I'm sorry, Ryder. I shouldn't take this out on you."

He nods in understanding, but I can see the strain on his face. We're all pushed to our limits, desperate for a break in the case, for some way to strike back at the monsters who did this.

I stand abruptly, needing to move, to do something. "I'm going to check on the preparations for the rites. Keep me updated if anything changes."

"Yes, Alpha." Ryder bows his head respectfully as I stride past him, my mind already racing ahead.

The hallways of the pack house are eerily quiet as I make my way outside. Even the usual bustle of activity is subdued, everyone lost in their own grief and anger. I pause at the sight of the funeral pyres being built in the courtyard, the scent of fresh-cut wood and incense heavy in the air.

So many pyres. Too many.

My wolf howls mournfully inside me, echoing the ache in my chest. As Alpha, it's my duty to lead the rites, to honor our fallen and offer comfort to those left behind. But how can I comfort them when I have no answers? No justice on the horizon?

There's only one idea that tries to rear its ugly little head, and I quash it beneath my heel without a second thought.

There has to be another way.

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sa saws up before dinner, with a bag full of doctor stuff and @puu milar ny that tells me I'm got dong anything until she gets

she needs.

bel suffer through the blood pressure, my blood being drawn and Taken away by one of my new stone– faced bodyguards, of which there are at least 6, and a lot of questions she asks me every single day

My answers haven't changed, but she still asks them.

I watch intently as Vanessa packs up her medical supplies, my mind churning with the weight of the secrets I'm keeping. With the balt– baked plans inside my head. With my desperate need to save Lisa from whatever fate the Mad Prince has planned.

I wet my lips, trying to find the right words.

Vanessa, how do you feel about keeping secrets from your mate?" The question slips out before I can stop it.

She pauses, a knowing smile playing on her lips, her eyes twinkling.

Trouble in paradise already with the overbearing Alpha?"

I glance toward the bedroom door "Can the bodyguards hear everything we say in here?"

She looks amused, "No. Your prior Alpha had this room. soundproofed

Relief washes over me and I take her hands in fnine, desperation

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clawing at my throat. "I have secrets, Vanessa. Secrets that I want. to share with you. Most of it is stuff Lucas knows, and some are things I haven't told h on."

Her expression sobers, her grip tightening on my hands. "Ava, I'm loyal to the Westwood pack and to my Alpha." She pauses, conflict. flickering in her ey my own judgment. However, if this endangers the pack..."

"It won't," I assure her, my interruption swift. "It doesn't endanger Westwood. But Lucas won't like that I'm doing things without his permission."

She watches me, caution on her face, even as she squeezes my hands in reassurance. "I can't give you a straight answer without knowing what it is. My

I struggle with her response, torn between the need to unburden myself and the fear of betrayal. Selene's voice echoes in my mind, urging me to trust Va

She's your best option right now, Selene reminds me gently. You need an ally, Ava.

I take a deep breath. "Selene isn't a dog. She's my wolf."

Vanessa's expression shifts to one of bewilderment. Her brows knit together, creasing her forehead as she processes my revelation.

"How is that possible?" she asks slowly, her eyes flickering between me and Selene, who yawns from her spot on the bed.

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I grimace. "Honestly, I've yet to get a straight answer out of her. It's impossible. She drinks secrets for breakfast. But Lucas knows

about her"

Relief is clear in Vanessa's eyes. "Oh. That's good, at least." But I can see the wheels turning in her head as she thinks things through.

Before she can ask for more clarity on things, I rush, "Selene thinks she can talk to my mother's wolf. I want to try. The real problem is that we have to fo

"That might kill her," the healer says automatically, glancing again. toward Selene. "And only an alpha can force a switch in pack allegiance. Even then, i

"But they would need to be in physical contact."

"Yes. Which, I suppose, is unlikely to happen." Vanessa frowns. "Let me think this through for a moment. There has to be a better way." It would be good

I watch as Vanessa paces around the room, her brow furrowed in concentration. She mutters under her breath, occasionally shaking her head as if dism

Settling onto the bed beside Selene, I run my fingers through her soft fur, focusing on the sensation of her head and ears beneath my touch. It's a small comfort amidst the ch

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mind.

“Is it possible for Selene to pull the wolf’s presence out if the human host is unconscious?” Vanessa asks suddenly, her gaze intense as she looks at me

I glance down at Selene, who tilts her head, considering the question. It might be possible, she admits, her voice echoing in my mind. But there are too m

“Selene says it might be possible, but there are too many variables to know for sure,” I relay to Vanessa, watching as she absorbs the information.

Vanessa nods, her expression thoughtful. “And what about your mother’s wolf? Will she be loyal to Renard?”

The question catches me off guard, and I find myself at a loss for words. Loyalty is a complex thing, especially when it comes to the dynamics between a wolf and their alpha.

It’s unlikely, Selene chimes in, sensing my uncertainty. Strong wolves usually chafe under alpha demands. But the bond between

your mother and her wolf is strong. It may override any desire to break free from Renard’s control.

I repeat Selene’s words to Vanessa, my heart sinking at the realization that even if we manage to separate my mother from her wolf, there’s no guarantee that the wolf will be on our side.

My entire plan rests on trying to convince the wolf to betray her alpha.

Vanessa absorbs the information, her lips pressed into a thin line. “So, we have a potential way to communicate with your mother’s

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wolf, but no assurance that the wolf will cooperate.”

I nod, my fingers tangling in Selene’s fur as I try to quell the rising anxiety in my chest. “It’s a risk,” I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. “But it might be our only chance to get some answers.”

Vanessa meets my gaze, her eyes filled with a mixture of concern and determination. “I don’t like the idea of putting

in danger, Ava. But I understand the need for answers.” She sighs, running a hand through her hair. “Let me think a little more. I think this might work, but there are different things to consider...”

Her voice trails off as she paces again, clearly deep in thought.

“Thank you, Vanessa. I know this isn’t an easy situation.”

Distracted by her plotting, she tosses me a vague smile. “Nothing about this is easy, Ava. But we’ll figure it out. I’m not sure how we’ll...”

Her voice trails off again as she begins to mutter.

I think she has a solid plan, Selene pipes up. The only issue will be getting our hands on something that will knock your mother out.

I shake my head slightly. Even if we do that, her wolf can always tell her about you. Then the danger is still there. She can mind– link with anyone still in the pack, and if they can get word back...

Selene goes silent, just in time for my phone to ring.

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172 Ava: Boiling Point

The jarring melody blares out of my phone, startling me nearly out. of my skin.

Selene’s ears flick as I grab it, seeing Lucas’ name flash across the screen. Both butterflies and dread swim through me; butterflies, because it’s Lucas.

Dread, because I’m hiding things from him again.

“Hello?”

“I miss you.”

H

His greeting is so him, and my lips curl up immediately. “I miss you, too.”

“Are you okay? Hurt anywhere?”

Of course, he knows about the riot. “I’m fine. Not hurt at all. Everyone kept me safe.”

When he sighs, I can imagine his face, how his brows furrow as he inspects me. “I wish you hadn’t come outside.”

“I held my own, though, didn’t I?” There’s a little pride in my voice over that.

“So I hear. It would have been better if you weren’t in danger, though.”

Vanessa’s stopped pacing to stare out the window, still in thought. Selene flops into my lap, and I scratch behind her ears absently. “You can’t shelter me

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“I should be able to.”

It’s weird, the way his words both warm my heart and send my hackles up. “I’m not a child, Lucas.

“I never said you were, Ava.” Immediately into that soothing tone. He’s always trying to calm me down, and for some reason that makes me even more a

He’s always going to be protective of his mate, Selene murmurs, The begrudging approval in her voice helps soothe that vague restless feeling inside of me.

“I know. I’m sorry.” Focusing on the soft feel of Selene’s fur beneath my hands, I force myself to relax. It’s Lucas. He’s done so much for me, and yet I’m

With that thought in mind, the words come out before I realize.

“I have an idea, and you’re going to hate it.”

Shit.

The phone goes dead for a few seconds, and I close my eyes.

May as well tell him now.

“Selene and I are going to try talking to Mom’s wolf. She might be more willing to give us any information we need.”

The silence continues.

“Selene is strong enough to force a-”

“I’m flying over there Lucas interrupts me with a grim note in his voice I’ve never heard before.

My heart falters a little. “You can’t. You have so much to do there.

Leaving in this situation...”

“My mate is trying to do crazy bullshit again, and you expect me to stay here and let you do it?”

I yank the phone away from my ear, my eyes wide as Lucas’ fury lashes through the speaker. What the hell? My heart races, confusion and shock warring

“Lucas, wait, let me explain. Selene is strong enough to-”

“It’s time for you to grow up and realize you’re in too much danger to be doing anything like this. I’ve given in to you too many times. What are you going

His words hit me like a punch to the gut, and I physically recoil, curling in on myself. Selene growls low in her throat, hackles rising as she glares at the phone.

Tears prick at my eyes, but anger flares hot on their heels. I

straighten my spine, gritting my teeth. “I’m not under your control, Lucas.”

“Bullshit. You can’t keep yourself out of trouble for one goddamn second! How long have you been in Blackwood? And there’s already a riot on your front

“That’s not fair! I’m trying to help Lisa, or have you forgotten about her?” My voice rises with each word, trembling with barely leashed emotions. This isn

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take care of it?

“By ignoring your safety? How did that go for you? I gave in to you and there was an entire massacre on pack lands, Ava. Do you know how many families

Bile rises in my throat. “I thought we were safe on pack grounds. I never would have asked if I knew...”

"You know now," he cuts in harshly. "You know now. And you're aware of how much effort I'm making in trying to get Lisa back, even when she isn't my p

"I don't trust you? I told you my secrets." Blinking away tears as rapidly as they fill my eyes, I struggle to keep my voice even. "You

have no idea how hard it was to do that."

"You might trust me with secrets, but you don't trust me to bring Lisa back. Or that I'm doing things with your best interest in mind. You don't think about me, and the brained fucking scheme-"o

"You can't stop me from trying to help my best friend, especially if you won't even listen to me!"

"I am listening, but you're being blind to your situation. It's too dangerous, Ava. I'm trying to protect you!"

"I don't need you to treat me like glass! I can handle myself." Even as I say the words, doubt coils in my stomach. Can I really? I've

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never proven that.

The vampire didn't kidnap me, but he got Lisa.

That's not a win, no matter how you look at it.

Lucas scoffs, a harsh sound that crackles through the phone. "Right. Because your past has proven that you can take risks like this without something te

His words are like a slap, stinging and brutal. I can't breathe past the lump in my throat, hot tears spilling down my cheeks. A small, broken sound escapes me before I can stop it. "If all you're going to do is yell at me, I'm ha

Selene nuzzles against my hand, her ears flat against her head.

"Ava, wait-"

I hit the button, cutting off his words. The phone tumbles from my numb fingers, bouncing on the bed. I wrap my arms around myself, hunching over as s

Selene whines, pressing close and nosing at my hands. He's just worried, Ava. He let his fear control his words.

“He’s right though, isn’t he? I’m a walking disaster.” The words are bitter on my tongue, voiced on a shuddering exhale.

No. Selene’s voice is fierce in my mind. You’re not a disaster. Having powerful enemies does not mean you’re a disaster.

I want to believe her, but Lucas’ accusations ring in my ears, insidious and haunting. Am I really so blind? So thoughtless in my

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actions?

Vanessa sits beside me, tentatively resting a hand on my shoulder. “Ava? Are you okay?”

I shake my head, not trusting my voice. She sighs, rubbing soothing circles on my back. We sit in silence for a long moment, my sniffles the only sound i

“He’s scared,” Vanessa finally says, quiet but certain. “He lashes out when he’s terrified of losing you.”

“That doesn’t make it okay,” I whisper, even as doubts run through my head.

Comentario 8

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173 Ava: Hard Truths

Vanessa sighs, her hand warm and gentle against my back, rubbing in soothing circles. “Ava, understand that you can be wrong, even when you’re right. Or right, even when you’re wrong.”

A laugh bubbles up, hysterical and wild. “That makes no sense.”

“You chafe under his protection. You feel caged, right?”

A quick nod. Of course. That much is obvious.

“It’s okay to feel that way. It’s normal, even. But is Lucas wrong to keep your safety in consideration?”

Selene sighs, bumping her head against my legs, and I tug at one of her ears. "No, of course not."

"The party was a terrible misfortune. None of us expected a

vampire attack on pack lands. For something like this to happen..." Her words trail off, and she glances away. "I don't even know how long it's been. We

Unregistered in some way, but to have this level of alliance is unheard of."

Hunching my shoulders, I mutter, "I never would have gone, if I'd known."

"I know." The gentle rubbing never ceases. "And Lucas didn't blame you. He doesn't blame you. He blames himself."

"But he didn't do anything wrong. It was me." Guilt gnaws at me. "I was the one who bothered him about the guards. About my freedom. I pushed to go t

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1. me. The vampire wanted me, and now Lisa's gone."

Resting my forehead on my knees, I whisper, "I'm a plague to

everyone who cares about me. So many people are dead, and even Lisa..."

"A defeatist attitude isn't going to help you, Ava." The back rubs stop as Vanessa gets off the bed, her voice firming. "The time for wallowing is long past.

massacre happened. Neither you or Lucas knew it would happen. It's a terrible and unfortunate situation."

"But it's my fault. What am I supposed to do?" Turning my head so my cheek is against my knees, I watch Vanessa as she stands in front of me. "It's my danger..."

Vanessa stares at me, one brow raised, as my words trail off.

I'm saying something wrong. I can tell in her facial expression.

Her piercing gaze holds me captive, demanding an answer I'm not sure I possess.

"Was that truly the only way, Ava? Your only two choices in life? To go to the party without guards, risking everything for a taste of freedom, or to stay loc

I remain silent, my tongue leaden and useless.

It seems so silly when she lays it out.

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Vanessa's voice softens, but her eyes remain unwavering. "Was there no middle ground, Ava? No way to get what you wanted while staying within the b

The words rattle around in my skull, colliding with the unyielding walls of my stubborn resolve. I want to argue, to defend my actions, but the weight of he

Is she right? Could I have found another way?

The answer seems obvious, but I shy away from it in my mind. Selene's presence brushes against me, a reminder of her presence. Perhaps I pushed to wolf. Her voice is more hesitant than I've ever heard it.

Straightening into a proper sitting position, feeling too childish in how I'm moping, I do my best to meet Vanessa's regard.

I want her respect. She's always been amazing, one of the few supports in my world. So I take a deep breath and think, letting her words soak in, pushin

"Maybe there was another way. But at the time, it felt like my only choice."

My excuse sounds pathetic, even to my own ears.

Vanessa nods, her expression softening with understanding. "The world is rarely black and white, Ava. It's a tapestry woven with countless shades of gra cut? That there are only eyer two options?"

"No, of course not." The answer comes easily, a truth I've always know but somehow forgotten.

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"Then why," Vanessa presses, her voice gentle but insistent, "do you paint your own choices in such stark contrasts? Why do you see only the extremes

Her question hangs in the air, a challenge I can't ignore. I close my eyes, searching for the answer within myself. Selene's presence is a comforting warmth.

Because it's easier? Easier to believe I have no choice, that I'm backed into a corner with no way out.

But that's not the whole truth, is it? Deep down, I know there were other options, other paths I could have taken. Compromises I could have made, if only

I was too determined to stand on my own two feet.

More determined to prove my independence than consider reality.

"I was scared," I whisper, the admission tearing at my throat. "Scared of losing myself, of being suffocated by the constant surveillance and control. I wan

Vanessa grabs my hand in hers, the warmth of her grasp traveling up my arm and into my heart.

You are strong, Selene insists, with the softest whine. You are much stronger than you believe.

"You are strong," Vanessa echoes. "But that doesn't mean leaning

allies is weakness. That doesn't mean compromising

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changes your boundaries. And it doesn't mean you won't be you."

She squeezes my hand, and I squeeze back, grateful for the connection between us. Her voice is soft as she continues, "The desire for freedom, for aut

I nod, blinking back the tears that threaten to spill down my cheeks. "The massacre."

"Yes. Many lives were lost. Young lives, lives with promise. While the fault lies with our enemies, it is a consequence that we should have avoided." A flick of those lives on his soul, because his decisions led to that tragedy. He does not hide from it."

Like me.

Only thinking of Lisa.

"I should have been more careful, more thoughtful," I murmur.

Vanessa watches me. "What do you think you should have done?" My mind falters.

“You’re just focusing on your guilt, aren’t you?” she asks, though her tone isn’t accusing. “Focused on how my words are causing you to feel. Not on how

Feeling somehow ashamed, I nod. I’m not sure how else to reply. I just feel terrible.

She pats my hand gently as my phone buzzes. “That’s probably

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your alpha, apologizing. Perhaps you should, too. And really think about things. My therapy session ends here. I have a lot to look into regarding your mother. Oh, and Ava...”

About to unlock my phone and check the text notification, I pause. glancing toward her. holds this content.

“Be careful how much you depend on Selene.” Her steady gaze and faint smile takes the sting out of her words. “We shifters learn quite young that our wolves are not human, and do not see things as humans do. They are self– centered and independent, and don’t understand the nuances of human relationships as well as they might seem to, at first glance.”

Selene sits up, her ears forward and her body language affronted. I am not self– centered!

Vanessa points her finger at Selene. “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re thinking. You’re not self– centered; you’re only thinking about Ava’s benefit, right?”

Those husky ears go back and she slinks down, her voice now a mutter in the back of my head. Why does she even ask, if she already knows?

The woman in front of me is confident as she stares Selene down, and what boggles my mind is that...

She wins.

Selene deflates, lowering herself to her belly with a little whimper. I will let her finish.

She sounds a little like a child who’s been scolded.

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Vanessa’s wolf reached out to me, Selene mutters, startling me.

“You spoke to her?”

Comentario

Ver todos

>

Publica u primer comentariol

Voto

1

FANDOM

Chapter 174: Ava: Selene Isn't Human

Selene writhes against the bedspread, looking like a puppy chastised. She says these are our growing pains, and I'm too old to be throwing a tantrum like a pup.

She sounds so offended that I almost laugh.

Almost.

But I can feel the threat in her mental presence. If I dare to laugh now, I'll never hear the end of it.

So I focus on Vanessa, instead.

“Ava, listen. A wolf is not human. Our wolves think of ourselves first, and everyone else secondary. They're focused on power first, and results second. Not on the sacrifices. Results are what matter, and everything else will fall into place with them.”

A soft, husky-like yowling bark comes out of Selene. That isn't true.

Isn't it?

Somehow, it feels very...

Don't you dare finish that thought. Selene snaps at the air. We also care about the sacrifices, and understand relationships become complicated when we do what needs to be done.

Vanessa watches me with a patient stare.

“Sorry. Selene was talking.”

"I can see that." Her smile is faint. "They usually do, when we get this talk. But it's usually when we're pups, and it comes from our parents. This is the first wolves and the babes chat I've had with an adult."Material © of

Wolves and the babes?

That sounds so... adorable.

But I remember clearly what a 12-year-old wolf shifter is like. A voracious appetite, short temper, and a tendency towards sneaking around to get what they want.

Not very adorable.

"Look, Ava. Ultimately, the relationship wolves have with each other is not the same as humans have with each other. A wolf might understand why they were pushed aside, once all is said and done. They can accept these cases as they come, without detriment to their pack bond, knowing that the end result is the most important thing. But we," and she points between us, "are not like that. If Lucas were to ghost you, how would you feel?"

That's easy. "Terrible." We've already lived through that.

"And if he did things behind your back, saying the entire time that it was what was best for you, and you just have to trust him?"

Seeing where she's going, I can't hold her gaze, lowering mine to the bedspread. It's soft, with a few threads loose, perfect to pluck while being forced to face hard truths. "I would feel awful. Like he doesn't trust me. Like our relationship isn't as strong as it should be." Thinking on it, on how I felt when I lived in what I felt were gilded cages, "And angry. I would definitely be angry."

Vanessa nods. "Now, have Selene answer that question, and think about it. I'm going to see what I can do to make this 'hare-brained' scheme of yours work."

* * *

Selene walks stiff-legged to curl up under the window, flatly refusing to respond to Vanessa's homework.

Which must mean that Vanessa's assessment of her Lycan psyche is spot-on.

It is not, Selene huffs, sounding rankled.

"Mhm."

But I get it. These revelations are... hard.

There's a huge part of me that still doesn't feel like I really did anything wrong.

There's another part of me that's horrified to think back on the last few weeks.

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But more than that...

Lucas' text stares up at me from my phone screen.

[LUCAS: I'm sorry. None of my behavior was acceptable. I just hate knowing that you're putting yourself in danger without coming to me for help first. When you're ready, can you please call me?]

"Selene."

Yes? Selene's ears twitch, but her sulking doesn't change.

"I think we should go back. For the rites."

Lucas had said bodies would burn tonight. It has to be for the rites.

I wonder if I'll make it in time.

Selene is uncharacteristically silent as I set my plans in motion. I don't ask how, but Kellan manages to get a last-minute flight.

We're supposed to land an hour before the rites begin, which should be just enough time to make it there in time. Kellan alternates between calm and brooding, but there's a distinct feeling of approval that I don't think he's ever given me before.

He's looked at me with respect as Lucas' mate; he's never once looked at me with high regard for me.

There's a subtle difference, one that stabs into my heart like a knife.

All because I wanted to attend the rites of lives lost during the massacre.

Selene is uncharacteristically silent herself, seeming to struggle with Vanessa's words. There's a faint sense of her emotions in the back of my head, and I can feel her waffling between frustration and confusion.

But I don't have much time to think about it, because Vanessa's words keep circling around and around in my head.

I can be wrong when I'm right.

It seems like a simple concept, and yet it's changed something inside my head. Something that makes it hard to look back at things.

The soft rumble of the plane's engines fills my ears as I rest my head against the small oval window. These overwhelming thoughts and emotions threaten to drown me with questions and revelations.

For a moment I shove away all thoughts, my unfocused gaze drifting over the endless expanse of clouds. It's a beautiful sunset below us, with orange and pink and shades of blue, darkening into night.

I close my eyes, letting out a shaky breath.

So many lives lost, and all I've really thought about is Lisa.

She's important, but—I'm the alpha's mate.

A failure of an alpha's mate.

A failure of a Luna.

The only thing on my mind was independence. Of proving I didn't need anyone. Of my life in Cedarwood. All things that take me away from here.

Away from responsibility.

Away from reality.

Lisa is missing. She's important. But those people who lost their lives? Those families with a forever-missing piece?

They're important, too.

"Did I want freedom, or did I want to hide?"

Kellan shifts uncomfortably, hearing every word of my soft mutterings. "Do you really want my answer?"

His movements reflect on the glass as he turns to look at the back of my head, probably wondering what's come over me today.

"I don't know." My sigh is long, my shoulders slumping at his words. Whatever his opinion is, it's clearly not great. Vanessa was kind in how she approached me, and I have no idea what blunt words will come out of Kellan's mouth.

It's pathetic to worry about my hurt feelings when I'm on my way to a funeral, and yet my heart cringes at the thought of another blow.

It hurts more, I think, because I'd been so certain I was growing as a person; now, I feel like I've taken so many steps back.

How do the families of the victims see me?

I shudder away from the thought, wondering how many will be furious to see me there. Is this a bad idea?

Kellan turns away again after I don't continue the conversation, and I can see his reflection in the window as he crosses his arms and leans back against his seat, staring straight ahead.

"The answer is both," he says after a while, and my shoulders hunch as he speaks.

He sounds tired.

That makes sense. He's been working overtime, watching over his alpha's failure of a mate while trying to find his own.

While complaining about him always being around, how often have I considered how much time and effort he's put into keeping us safe, even while running the pack in Lucas' absence?

I've known about it. But have I really thought about it?

Thanked him, even when he's heard Lisa and me groaning in the other room about our lack of autonomy?

Considered how awful his job was, babysitting two ungrateful women?

It's crazy how a few words from Vanessa can change how memories feel in my head.

There's something bitter and sour eating through my stomach as memories fly through my mind, like viewing my own actions on a movie screen.

Selene, for her part, stays quiet, wrestling with demons of her own.

If I hid things from you, how would you feel? I ask Selene as I continue watching the sunset.

Her silence goes on for so long that I'm no longer waiting for her response when she says something. If I found out after you did what you needed to do, and you had succeeded, I would have been proud of you for succeeding.

She sounds puzzled and hesitant. Things I would have never associated with Selene before.

It wouldn't hurt you?

No. Why should it? You succeeded in your goal. I don't see the problem.

A hint of frustration tinges her mental voice.

You've told me before that a relationship can't be built on lies.

She's silent again, before murmuring, Trust is vital, yes. And it does not yet exist between the two of you as mates. But once you trust each other, shouldn't you be able to understand why the secret was kept in the first place?

Her words are legitimately bewildered, and I can see it now.

There it is.

The divide between us.

That Selene is not human talk Vanessa gave me is sinking in.

175

175 Ava: A Wolf's Identity

If Vanessa was here, I'd love to talk to her.

Unfortunately, she's not. We're on a plane, and she's still in Blackwood, plotting on how to force answers out of my mom's wolf.

So I look at Kellan..

"If your mate kept secrets from you, even if it's for the best of reasons, in order to accomplish a goal—how would you react?"

"Furious." His answer is swift, and his eyes suspicious. "What are you up to now, Ava?"

"Nothing. Shame twists my gut as I turn back to the window. His immediate reaction is to think I'm up to something, bringing trouble to those around me.

It's not like I blame him, but the feeling I'm left with is...

Sticky. Gross. Awful.

A few days ago, I would have chafed at such a response, frustrated over Kellan treating me like an errant child.

But now?

His uneasy stare bores into the back of my head, and I rest my head against the window with a sigh. "Do you ever argue with your wolf?

"Not anymore. I used to. Why, are you having problems with yours?

175 Ava A Woll's identity

My head snaps around faster than should be possible. "What do you mean, mine? I don't have a-

"Yeah, yeah," Kellan leans back, closing his eyes. "You don't have a wolf. But I've seen that look on your face a thousand times. We're all shifters, Ava."

I can't help it; I touch my cheeks in confusion. "What look?"

Cracking open one eye, Kellan looks exasperated. "The look. Talking to her. You do it when you think we aren't watching, and half the time you do it out

Shit. Really?

"Why didn't you tell Lucas?"

"Some things don't need to be reported." He rolls his shoulders, trying to get comfortable. "Some things are yours to tell. And I had no proof of my suspic

Double shit. I'd confirmed his guess. He was bluffing.

Smart, Selene says in approval, the first real glimmer of energy I've seen since Vanessa spoke with us.

"That's top secret information," I whisper, and he makes a vague

circular motion with his hand. Material © of

"All human, all of them listening to that godawful movie they put

1. on. You're fine."

Somewhat mollified, settle back into my seat, distracted from my darker thoughts by this new surprise. Overall, I'm relieved. I won't have to hide Selene's

17. 17.

18 As A Wolf's demity

"So, what's the secret?"

Kellan's voice comes out of nowhere after another long period of silence, and I blink at him in surprise.

"What secret?"

"The one you're hiding from your mate," he says impatiently. "You asked how I would feel-

"Oh. That. No, that was just theoretical."

"Ava..."

He doesn't believe me, and I sigh. "Vanessa sat me down for a wolves and the babes discussion this morning."

"Wolves and the babes? Didn't you learn that at-oh." Understanding dawns on his face. "You didn't have a wolf."

Giving a one shoulder shrug, I just say, "Bingo."

Kellan glances at Selene, who's peering at him from beneath the seat. I don't know if he understands that she's my wolf, but I don't feel like verifying tha

Later, in private.

Relaxing now, he sighs. "When we're young, we fight with our wolves a lot. They're more instinctual than we are. Fighting over perceived insults, tussles

sometimes."

"I see." That doesn't help my situation. Selene isn't really bloodthirsty.

17:44

17h Ave. A Woll's identity

Am I not?

I remember Lucas hated his wolf for a while. Said he was sick of hearing about dominance and getting into fights just because someone looked at him the wrong way. Guess it's harder with an alpha wolf."

A faint smile plays around his mouth, and Kellan's face is more relaxed than I've seen it since the party. The massacre. Lisa's kidnapping.

"One time, his wolf even convinced him he'd be better off running away and starting a new pack. Of course, we don't really do that kind of thing when we

"What did he do?"

"Oh, he ran off. Took me and a few of our friends with him. We camped in the forest as wolves and were ready to start life as

rogues."

Fascinated despite the cycle of negative thoughts in my head, I turn a little more in my chair, pulling a leg up beneath me to get comfortable. "And? Wha

Kellan grins openly now, opening his eyes to meet mine. "It rained. We found out that we could either eat raw meat or starve for the night."

That doesn't sound so unusual.

"We don't normally eat first blood until we're adults and have an easier time separating our senses during shift, he explains.

"Ahh." I'd never paid attention to such details. They didn't apply to

me, since I didn't have a wolf. They still don't apply to me, as I can't shift.

I prefer cooked food to raw, but not that kibble you like to feed me. It tastes like charcoal with drops of flavoring

Noted.

"Lucas caught a rabbit, took one taste, and they fought because he

wanted to shift back and go home. He snorted. "Alpha, my ass. We're all just kids at that point. Alpha or not, he wanted his mom's

dinner.

"Wow." It's hard to imagine Lucas acting that way, but it makes me smile to think of a younger version of him throwing a fit because he had no way to cook his rabbit.

“His wolf didn’t talk to him for weeks. Said he was bonded to a weakling who had no idea how to lead. They worked it out eventually. Our wolves don’t ta

settle in.”

How odd. I wonder why? I can’t imagine Selene... not talking.

Perhaps it’s the identity crisis of human and wolf.

Perhaps.

She sounds frustrated again.

What have you been thinking about?

Selene huffs. Humans. Wolves. Memories.

That’s a lot of nothing for an answer, but I’m used to it from her.

My memories are odd, she finally says, sounding confused.

376 Aa Attending the tes

176

176 Ava: Attending the Rites

Odd? How so?

Selene’s soft whine catches Kellan’s attention. “We’ll be there soon. Will she be okay?”

It doesn’t seem that he realizes the dog is not actually a dog. “She’s

fine.”

I thought I had all my memory, but when I try to think back, everything is fuzzy. Even my own name doesn’t come to mind.

My head aches at the thought of trying to unravel that. What kind of memories? From becoming a dog?

Not exactly. My past life. My identity. Many things... Things I thought I remembered. Vanessa’s words sound familiar, but I cannot access the memories.

That just sounds... Yeah. She’s right. It’s odd.

How long have they been missing?

Silence.

Then, I don't know. Forever.

Leaning down, I rub at Selene's head. It'll be okay. I'm sure we'll figure it out. But we both know my promise is hollow. I have no way of keeping it.

Selene whines again, resting her head on her paws as she stays beneath my chair. Ava, am I a detriment to you?

Of course not. My denial is swift and from the heart. But... I think

176 Ava Attending the Rites

we might make bad decisions together.

Her mood plummets; I can feel it in the back of my head. Like Lucas and his wolf, as children.

Scratching behind her ears in gentle consolation, my heart is

buoyed when she leans against my touch. You have given me much strength by being here. We'll figure it out together.

Together, she confirms, but that insecure edge to her words is still

there.

Nerves have my knees so weak, my walk resembles the wobbling of a cooked noodle.

But I make it to the pack lands as twilight hits. The entire place is like a ghost town.

No lights on.

No people.

No signs of life at all.

Not until we make it to a large field deep in the forest, filled with people. Some are in wolf form. A few are naked. Others are clothed.

We're the only ones to drive; everyone else used four paws to get here.

My stomach clenches, twisting painfully in my gut as I see so many of them turn in our direction, surprised by our arrival.

Selene presses against my leg; Kellan hadn't wanted to bring her,

170 Ava Attending the Piton

but I'd insisted she come.

Grief makes this air thick, she whispers, slinking out of the car with her tail low.

I've never seen her with such insecure body language. She usually struts about with confidence, tail high and head erect... But I feel

the same way.

Like I don't belong.

Filled with shame.

There are eighteen pyres, and my heart sinks. Lucas hadn't mentioned that three more people had died in the hospital.

No sound breaks the silence, save for the occasional mourning keen. There are no words to be said. No platitudes.

Only a crowd of bodies surrounding the pyres, the entire clearing bathed in the darkening edge of twilight.

Kellan stays close to my side as we make our way to the back of the crowd. His hand rests on the small of my back, guiding me with gentle pressure as

We finally settle on a place near Jericho, who stares grimly ahead, his jaw clenched. Even his weathered face, marked by countless scars, can't hide the

The entire mood is somber, a heaviness pressing down on my chest until it's hard to breathe.

Standing here, surrounded by the weight of so much loss, I'm hit with the price of my willfulness, of my blind demand for

independence. How many of these are on my bands?

lost because of selfish chances?

Every single one

Vin heart aches for Lisa capped in the churches of a madman but it bleeds for she dead
for the families left behind. For the pack that will never be whole

Tears Burn Behind my eyes but I blink them back. I have to right to cry, not when my
actions have caused so much pain. Not when I've been so focused

the consequences.

Kellan's hand tightens on my back, and I glance up at him. His face is a mask of
stoucisa, but I can see the cracks in his armor. The warr his eyes shine

Tim sorry I whisper, my voice barely audible over the soft keening

of the mourners

He looks down at me, his brow furrowed For what?"

For everything For being so selfish. For not thinking about how my choices would affect
everyone else."

Kellan stares at me, anguish clear in his eyes. His face. In how his lips curve down at
my words.

Eventually, he turns away, staring ahead again. It's not your fault. Ava. You didn't cause
this. We were too arrogant in the safety of

our land:

But in my heart. I recognize the le

If I hadn't been at that party, those vampires wouldn't have gone

We might not understand why they would risk outright war... But we know what their
goal that night was.

Perhaps another attack, on another day, would have happened.

But it wouldn't have been that day.

It wouldn't have been that place. Material © of

Facing this crowd-

Those pyres-

These lives, forever changed-

The weight of my guilt is crushing.

Selene presses against my leg, her warmth a small comfort in the face of so much sorrow. You couldn't have known, she says softly. her voice echoing i

But no longer is her voice confident.

No longer are her words a secure beacon, holding me above my fears.

One person's place in the world should never be created at this
cost.

No. It's time to stop this distance; time to give up the dreams of a quiet life in Cedarwood.

178 Ar Attendingt Rites

Reality isn't beautiful. It isn't pretty. It isn't idyllic.

Reality doesn't wait.

Life is unfair. Accepting that is my only way forward; my only way out of this quagmire of my own creation.

This is not Lucas' pack.

This is my pack.

And they're hurting

Comentario

Wer todos

>

FANDOM

177

177 Ava: Accepting Her Pack

During the few funeral rites Alpha Renard held in Blackwood, he spent a lot of time pontificating. Especially during the rites for h

sons.

Here, Lucas says nothing. Does nothing. Only stands there, his arms crossed over his chest, as he watches the pyres burn.

The amount of human bodies decreases as they all take to their wolf forms, standing and waiting. When I glance at Kellan, I can see that unfocused look

Lucas must be talking through the pack link.

That's why it's quiet. holds this content.

There are wolves to either side of him, and I don't recognize any them. Then again, I know very few members of the pack.

I'd chafed over that, used it as an excuse to go to the party. But how much effort had I made to get to know these people? At every turn, I felt stifled by th

If I can't even get to know the bodyguards sent to keep me safe at the cost of their own lives...

What kind of person doesn't even try, and just complains about her lack of freedom? a

If I had gotten to know them, perhaps things would be different.

17:44

177 Ava Accepting Her Pack

Instead of complaining that I couldn't go anywhere without them, maybe outings would have been fun with them. Maybe the other pack members would

Ah.

All those people watching me during training take on a different meaning in my head now.

Who would welcome an aloof wolf into their midst, knowing she's made no effort to assimilate into the pack?

My whining is a sour taste in my mouth, especially knowing that some of those people have now lost their lives because of me.

Despite understanding the tragedy, despite feeling terrible over the loss of life and injuries, I'd never once put a single one of their lives as a priority. I'd fo

They deserve more from us, Selene murmurs, sitting beside me with her ears flat against her skull. I once led my pack. I would

have never...

Her words trail off in confusion once more, and I stroke a hand.

over her head without looking down.

Without breaking eye contact with those burning pyres and the smoke covering the sky in a dense, gray-black cloud.

I cannot sacrifice this pack to save Lisa, I whisper back, feeling the tears filling my eyes once more. We cannot lose more people. I don't know what to do

this... This was wrong.

Selene stiffens. Ava.

The warning in her voice catches me off guard. She's no longer staring toward the bodies burning in front of us. She's staring into the forest, her ears pricked forward and body tense.

What is it?

Selene lifts her muzzle, her nostrils flaring as she scents the air. I'm not sure. It seems familiar, but wrong

Kellen doesn't seem to notice anything. No one here does, and they're all in their wolf forms now.

Only Lucas, Kellan, and I remain in our human forms.

Lucas' eyes connect with mine from across the clearing, his amber eyes fiery as they reflect the light of the burning pyres.

That fated bond between us is a warm weight, a comfort in my chest, even through the guilt.

Tapping Kellan's arm. I wait until his eyes meet mine. Not wanting to cause panic with words, I jerk my thumb toward Selene, still alerting to something o

He takes in her body language and turns in the same direction with

frown. before that familiar, unfocused look hits his eyes once. again.

A wolf breaks away from the pack in that direction.

They're checking on it. I assure Selene, but I can hear her mental

hine, as if she's struggling not to run over there herself.

You can go, too. I offer to her, but she presses her body against my shins, even as she continues to stare in the distance.

No They might focus on my scent instead

117 Ava Accenting Her Pack

Ah, I hadn't thought of that. It isn't like every member of the pack is attuned to Selene's scent.

Lucas shifts into his massive wolf, larger than any of the others. His fur is so dark it's nearly black, but the flickering light of the funeral pyres highlights th

He lifts his muzzle to the sky as the last vestiges of twilight fade into the oncoming night. A howl rips from his throat, deep and mournful, the sound vibrat

One by one, the other wolves join in the lament until the entire area echoes with their song of grief and loss. Tears streak down my cheeks, but I make no

As the fires continue to burn, several wolves break from the pack and lope into the forest.

"Many will spend the night in their wolf forms," Kellan murmurs in my ear, his voice taut with tension. "A pack hunt to honor the

fallen."

I nod to show I heard him, but my eyes are locked on Lucas' wolf. He stares back at me, his amber eyes glowing in the flickering light. The bond between us pulses, and I want nothing more than to go. to him, to bury my face in his fur a

But Selene tenses beside me, a low whine escaping her. Ava, we should get in the car.

She sounds troubled, her ears still pricked towards the forest. Before I can even respond, Lucas bolts. His powerful legs propel him forward at a monstro

Selene had been scenting.

“Ava, get in the car. Now! Kellan barks, shoving me none—too—gently towards the vehicle.

Chaos erupts, snarls and growls that sound far too vicious for simple hunt. Fear claws at my throat. Another fight? “What’s happening?”

They caught the scent of a vampire.” Kellan practically throws into the backseat before jumping behind the wheel. “They’re o

hunt.”.

As we peel away from the scene, I twist in my seat to stare out back window at the blazing pyres lighting the sky. The wolves a gone, vanished into the d

A vampire? Here?

Margot’s warning slams into me, and I curse myself for not remembering sooner. “Kellan, Margot mentioned something abo a vampire at Blackwood whe

Kellan curses under his breath and pulls out his phone, punching i a number. “Vester? Is everything okay there? Any sign of a vampire?” He’s silent for a

He ends the call and glances at me in the rearview mirror. “Vester says everything is peaceful in Blackwood, but he’s sending his men out. You think the

My heart sinks like a stone.

1 Avec Aconiting Her Pack

“I don’t know,” I admit, hating how little information I have to giv “I got the impression it was a vampire that had business with Blackwood, not necessarily

Kellan’s brows shoot up. “How do you know about the Mad Princ I stumble over my words, not sure how much to explain. Only Lucas knows about Siste

But that doesn’t seem right.

It’s Kellan. He wants Lisa back as much as I do. He’s kept me safe : all costs. He was there when Lucas pulled me out of my parents’

home.

I can’t stop holding everyone at a distance. He’s an ally I can lean on. Just like Vanessa tried to explain to me.

"It's a long story, but there's a vampire who was working with Blackwood. The one who sent the letter here. Sister Miriam? I met

with her, and she told me that the Mad Prince is the one who took

Lisa."

Kellan grunts. "That explains the lead Lucas brought me."

We've reached the alpha lodge. Kellan parks the car and turns to face me fully, his face grave.

"Ava, I know you've fought being brought here before, but we weren't prepared-"

"It's fine. I'm not going to fight you guys anymore." I meet his gaze with more confidence than I feel, as my heart tremors in my chest.

372 Ava Accepting Her Pack

"Our pack has lost too many lives because I was being stubborn. I never want that to happen again."

He watches me in silence before giving a sharp nod. "Good. I'm going to hunt down this motherfucker. You'll have two guards with you in the room, two o you don't leave your room. Do you understand?"

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178

178 Lucas: Hunt Him Down

LUCAS

Hundreds of wolves flood the forest in search of the elusive

vampire, filling my blood with the lust of the hunt and pride in my pack.

Ava's at the lodge and safe. I'm on my way. Kellan's mental voice is a welcome interruption.

Ryder scented him near the border of the human dairy farm. Take a team and move south, in case he's fucking with his trail.

Got it, Alpha.

Now that I don't have to worry about her safety, I can focus on this bastard who has the balls to come to our lands during this sacred time.

My wolf snarls, a vicious rumble deep in our shared chest as we race through the shadowed forest.

Moonlight weaves between the trees, illuminating the underbrush in random patterns, brushing against my dark fur as I weave

between ancient trunks.

All around me, howls rise into the night sky. It's an eerie symphony of bloodlust, feral and free, as we rush through the land in pursuit, ready to tear any v

The pack's rage pulses through me, mingling with my own, until I can't distinguish where mine ends and theirs Begins.

Good. Let them feel the depth of my wrath, the seething

17:45

178 Lisas Hunt Hen Down

maelstrom that demands vengeance and blood in price for the eighteen wolves I've lost.

I inhale deeply, seeking past the earth and trees, far past the past the warm musk of my wolves racing alongside me. There. A trace of sweetness, cloyin cold, shot through with the metallic tang of old blood. Death given form.

Vampire.

A vicious growl tears from my throat. My blood surges as I lunge in the direction of that unholy scent. My paws devour the distance, powerful muscles fle

of the chase.

Kellan, take your team northwest. Scent leads that wa

way.

Even my mental voice sounds more beast than man, roughened by the intensity of my focus. I sense Kellan's acknowledgment, feel him gathering the w trail.

Ryder, swing your group around to flank from the east. Box the bastard in..

We'll catch this undead filth that dared to invade my territory, dared to threaten and kill my people. And when we do...

My lips peel back from gleaming fangs in a silent snarl. When we do, I'll tear his fucking head from his shoulders and mount it on a pike for all to see. A w

Alpha, I've got the scent near the perimeter! Sabine, one of my hunters, her excitement bleeding through the mind-link.

17:45

10 luck that Hen Down Material © of

As do 1, Ryder cuts in, his mental presence sharp with confusion. But it's... to the south. Opposite direction from Sabine.

A cold thread of unease winds through my gut. South should lead them away from the trail, not...

Picking up the scent by the human farms. Kellan again, terse and grim. Miles from the original trail. What the fuck?

More voices crowd the pack-link, wolves reporting contact with the same sickly sweet vampire stench in different locations. Scattered throughout our territory like a web of dark corru

I slow my headlong charge, a low growl building in my chest. This isn't right. It's too spread out, too perfectly placed at the edges of our land. Almost like

Fuck.

A snarl of frustration rips from my throat. I should have seen it immediately. Multiple trails, each leading in opposite directions- it's a ploy. The leech is try

The unease solidifies into a leaden weight in my stomach, a

gnawing sense that we're missing something vital. Being played for fools by a cunning monster who knows exactly how to manipulate our instincts.

I halt in a small clearing, my sides heaving as I cast out with all my senses. Straining for any sign of the vampire's actual location amid the chaos of false

pack—link like a whip. We're being loved with. Ryder, Kellan, take a group each and sweep through the area.

Snarls of protest and bloodthirsty rage batter against my mind, but I shut that connection down with ruthless efficiency. I understand. my wolves' frustratio

I will not be goaded. I will not be ruled by base instinct when the lives of my pack are at risk. Grinding my fangs together, I turn sharply and begin loping

Ava.

Hunt, my wolf snaps. Rend them. Don't be a fool.

Every inch of me rebels at running from this fight, at showing weakness to our foe. But this is a battle of wits, not claws and

fangs. The vampire wants to throw us off balance, divide our focus so he can slip through our defenses.

There's only one thing he wants.

Ava.

I won't allow it.

As I race through the night—shrouded forest, the simmering unease crackles into a sense of foreboding so intense it borders on dread.

A vampire openly taunting us, attacking my people on a sacred night of mourning... it speaks to a level of arrogance, of complete. disregard for our stren

178 LUNG Post Ham Pow

It's been over a century since the last conflict between wolf and vampire. What does this vampire have behind him, to believe he can handle what this brings to his door?

This creature is planning something. Something terrible and bloody and brutal. I can't shake the sinking feeling that we're already three steps behind.

Dancing to a tune of death and madness composed by a mind that knows neither mercy nor fear.

Comentario 0

179 Ava: Surprise Visit

Selene lies curled in a patch of moonlight, her head resting on her tail, eyes closed. Her presence usually brings me comfort, but even she can't soothe t

The room feels more like a prison than a sanctuary, the air thick with unspoken animosity. I glance out the window again, searching the darkness for any

Nothing, of course.

They're miles away.

Their howls fill the air, raising the hair on my arms and the back of my neck.

It takes time, Selene murmurs, her eyes still closed as she basks in the moonlight.

She looks as relaxed as can be, but the edge in her mental voice tells me otherwise.

The knot in my stomach refuses to unravel. It's the same feeling I had before the attack on the party, a sense of impending doom that crawls beneath my

The two shifters standing guard don't help matters. They're strangers to me, with unfamiliar faces and rigid stances. The tension in the room is palpable.

1. me.

Minutes drag by, and nothing changes.

No updates.

Only the occasional cough from the guard with short hair and a scar under his left eye.

By the unfocused look that comes over their faces here and there, I know they're listening in to the hunt. They know something.

My thoughts keep circling back to Lucas and the others out there. hunting the vampire. The not knowing is torture, my imagination conjuring up increasin

Unable to bear it any longer, I turn to the shifters, my words tight with barely restrained panic. "Any updates on the vampire?"

The taller of the two, a broad-shouldered man with cold brown eyes, regards me with open disdain. "Why do you even care?"

His harsh tone catches me off guard, and I flinch as if he'd struck me. Heat rushes to my cheeks, a mixture of embarrassment and indignation. "I'm worri

The second shifter grabs his companion's arm, shaking his head in silent warning. They both turn away from me, their dismissal cutting like a knife.

I'm pretty sure this is where Selene would normally tell me to stand up for myself and not let them treat me like this, but she's quiet.

Maybe, like me, she feels the treatment is warranted.

LIM ANG PHuman Vel

Don't wallow, Selene says suddenly startling me in the silence. I'm only quiet because I'm thinking things through

Oh.

Was I wallowing again?

Yes.

Damn it.

Restless energy floods my limbs and I pace the room, starting with a small square, then expanding my field of march. The guards step back, giving me s

The acrid scent of cigarette smoke wafts through the air as the tall guard lights up, filling the room with a haze. My nose wrinkles in distaste. "Could you

He looks at me with disdain, taking a long drag before blowing the. smoke in my direction. "Save your complaints, Blackwood."

The other guard elbows him sharply in the ribs, hissing under his breath. "Stop it before you get us in trouble."

But the tall guard isn't deterred. He leans against the wall, a sneer twisting his features. "She's not even our alpha's mate. She was rejected. Nothing but

His words hit me like a physical blow, knocking the air from my lungs. I know I'm not well-liked here, but to hear it stated so bluntly...

"Mia said the vampires were only there for her," he continues,

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jerking his chin in my direction.

Mia? How would she know something like that? Questions swirl in my mind, but before I can voice them, both guards suddenly

collapse to the ground, their bodies hitting the floor with a dull thud.

I gasp, my heart leaping into my throat as a figure materializes out of thin air. Sister Miriam. She bends down, picking up the still-smoldering cigarette from the tall guard's limp fingers. Taking a long drag, she regards the unconscious man with a look of disdain before delivering a sh

I wince at the sound, even as a small, vindictive part of me whispers that he deserves it.

Sister Miriam turns to me, an apologetic smile on her face. "Sorry for the dramatic entrance, my dear. But I come bearing a warning." Selene is on her fe

"Oh, stop that, you short-sighted furball." Sister Miriam flicks her cigarette ashes in Selene's direction. "Never able to see past the nose on your face. Ava, you'll be pleased to hea

"A merry chase?"

Her lips curve, and her unsettling eyes sparkle for a moment in a way that almost makes her look human. "Never you mind. It keeps him away from the c

how."

170 AweSurprise Visi

"I... see. Sister Miriam still throws me off kilter, and I don't know

how to feel about her. Friend? Foe? : text © owner.

Selene growls. "How did you enter this place?"

She kicks the toe of her glossy black pump at the lighter that fell to the floor. "I had a link, wolf. Don't be so suspicious. We're all allies

here, aren't we?"

"Are we?" I ask, trying to edge my way to the door. Just in case.

She glances out the window. "Ah, time. I don't have much more of it. Ava, have you prepared your price?"

"My price?"

She taps her chest. "For your power. I said I would find you a teacher."

"Oh. No." My answer is swift. "You told me to be more careful about agreeing to things so easily."

"I did, indeed." She smiles as she looks me over. "It seems like there's been some change in you, child. How interesting. In exchange for that interesting

"Advice?" Wary, I take another step toward the door. Her eyes flick to it and back to me, and her lips curve into a sardonic smile.

"Yes, Ava. Advice."

Selene growls, still between us. I don't like this, Ava.

"What advice?" I ask in suspicion.

"Tell your alpha not to wait so long before burning them next time." She glances out the window, shaking her head slightly. "A twofold Tragedy. It's a sham

"Twofold...?" A horrifying possibility comes to mind, and she laughs.

"Worse than you're thinking. Far worse." Her gaze returns to mine, and she smiles again, that weird smile that doesn't quite touch her eyes. "I'll be seeing you in the Unregistered City soon, Ava.

Remember to apply under my grace."

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180

180 Ava: Alerted

Sister Miriam is gone as quickly as she appears, just as my

bedroom door slams open.

"Miss Grey, are you all right?" The two guards outside my door are more familiar to me. I think they used to guard me at Lisa's

apartment, as well.

Their eyes flick to the two crumpled forms of my guards, and their noses flare at the scent of cigarettes. "We heard two thuds. What happened?"

Their words startle me out of my confusion. "Two thuds? Right now?"

"Yes, just now. What happened?"

The two fallen guards stir on the floor, groaning and grunting as they push themselves to standing. The tall one grabs his head with a curse. "Shit, that fu

That dhampir was here too long for them to only come in now, Selene says, grim concern darkening her words.

But it seems impossible. Did time pass slower when she was here?

Selene pads in silence to the guards slowly getting off the floor, sniffing at the head of the taller one. He swats her away, but she avoids his hand easily,

of air.

It's like she was never here, Selene marvels in confusion. T makes no sense.

180 Ave Aborted

"How the fuck are you two on the ground?" one of the new men snarls, pulling them to their feet with a harsh yank. "If Alpha hears about this-"

The one, Tall Asshole, snorts, swaying as he unfolds himself, still holding gingerly to the spot where the pointed tip of Sister Miriam's heels had stabbed w over his chest. "My cigarette! Fuck, where did it go?"

All four guards search the room frantically for the missing cigarette, their gazes sweeping every corner and crevice. The tall one even checks his pockets cigarette might have magically reappeared. Their confusion is palpable. Material © of

Cigarettes don't just go missing.

I perch on the edge of the bed, my fingers gripping the soft comforter as I observe their futile efforts. Selene sits beside me, her presence a solid warmth against my leg

They didn't even ask if you were okay, Selene points out, her voice tinged with disapproval. Some guards they are.

I sigh. It's to be expected. After the massacre, I can't blame them. We both know what they've seen out of me these past few days.

A child, demanding to be allowed to go out without guards.

Then a Luna missing from the scene, caring only for her own friend.

To them, I have no concern for this pack.

Paternicern fin their alpha

Ain't about being their charge; it n't about my safety. To them. Im not worthy

orthy of the care Lucas bestows upon me

A filthy Blackwood, just like the rest of them.

.

Until I can prove otherwise, I can't fight against their disregard.

selene huffs, her tail thumping against the bed in agitation. Their personal feelings shouldn't affect their job. They're supposed to protect you, not ignore second. Well, vampires are well-versed in mental muddling. They're probably not thinking straight.

I nod, acknowledging the validity of her argument. She's right, of course. The guards' primary responsibility is to ensure my safety, regardless of their op

my agreement.

I know, I tell Selene, my fingers finding comfort in the soft fur behind her ears. But I don't want to cause a stir. I've done nothing to gain their respect, and

Being upset over their feelings doesn't help me move forward.

This is a situation of my own creation.

At least I can see it now, even if I don't know how to fix it. How to change things.

There's always the truth—a great way to start.

180 Ava: Alerted

And if Kellan were here...

I don't trust these wolves, Selene mutters.

But then my heart constricts. These wolves, these ones I don't trust, who I've even acknowledged as having reason not to trust or respect me they're my

The pack I've chosen.

So, shouldn't I speak up?

"You won't find it," I tell them, as politely as I can manage.

The two who were knocked unconscious for a brief—yet— long time don't bother to acknowledge my words. The new guards, the ones from outside the door, glance at each other, nod after a second, and then st

They stand in front of me instead. "What happened?" the one on the right says, and I focus on him. His eyes are a dark, muddy kind of blue—hazel, and his face is kind, even if suspicion has his brows drawn together and his stance somewhat standoffish.

"A vampire appeared. Right there." I point in the general direction Sister Miriam had stood. "She kicked him," and my finger moves to the taller one, who

"And why would a vampire come see you, Blackwood bitch?" Sister Miriam's victim snaps, even as his hand touches the undoubtedly sore spot on his he

"Enough, Alex." Muddy—Blue Eyes admonishes him without even

180. Ava Alerted!

glancing in his direction, studying me closely. "What was her intention?"

His words are clipped and terse, but not accusing.

My shoulders relax; I hadn't even realized I was so tense.

"She left me with a message for Lucas. For the alpha," I correct

myself swiftly. "She said he shouldn't take so long for the rites next time."

All four of them are quiet after that, looking at each other with

confusion written all over their faces.

“They can’t be—turning wouldn’t take so long, would it?” Tall—asshole shifter mutters, as the other two look unfocused, presumably reporting to...

Actually, I don’t know who. Do they talk to Lucas directly? Or Kellan? Or someone else?

I hope it’s someone else; I don’t want Lucas or Kellan distracted during their hunt.

Damn, maybe I should have kept quiet a little longer. But I’ve turned over this new leaf of honesty and sharing and relying on allies, and it felt weird to sa

“I wondered the same thing, but she told me it is,” and I raise my hands in the air, curving my fingers as I quote her, “far worse than I’m thinking.’I don’t k

“Fucking bloodsuckers.” Tall Asshole’s friend throws me an uneasy

100 Ava Aleted

look, both suspicious and holding a good amount of self—preservative worry. “Did she say anything else?”

Not sure if I should reveal anything about the Mad Prince to them, I shake my head. Once Kellan or Lucas get here, I can explain the

rest of it.

Muddy— Blue Eyes loses the unfocused stare, scowling at the two guards who’d fallen before Sister Miriam’s appearance. “Alex, Jason, you’re dismissed. Report Mentor. He’s furious, so be prepared to run five miles. Twenty laps around the track might even wake you idiots up. How do you let a vampire into your A

Both of them look startled, and even protest, but Muddy— Blue’s partner backs him up with a snarl. “Regardless of how you feel about her, she’s our future Luna. You’re a failure if you can’t see the priorities in fro nose.”

“She’s a Blackwood-” Alex protests, his face red and fists clenched

at his side.

“Alpha rejected her-“ Jason follows up, not as upset as Alex but still with the air of someone being unfairly punished.

Muddy Blue Eyes cuts them off, his words rumbling with authority. “If Alpha had rejected her, would he be bending over backward for her every time we turn around? Think with

your fucking heads, you idio even think with the two brain cells you have. Get the fuck out of here."