

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted #Unshift 261 - Read

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted Unshift 261

Unshift 261

261 Ava: Yanking At Her

It's almost like a presence saying hello.

Thinking of that little string, I tug back. Twice.

An answering jerk. One. Two. Three

The words I just spoke drift into my head: It's like the book is alive.

Is it crazy to talk into this void in my head, in the general direction I hope the book is in?

Sure. But at least no one can see or hear me doing it.

Hello? I call out, trying to

there?

Use the same mental channel I use to speak with Selene. Are you

Another tug on that string.

I really, really need you to come to where I am. It's safer here. Or something. How do you explain. to a book that the world has gone to shit and you want to keep it from being used to create further catastrophe?

Please.

Being polite never hurts.

This time, that string-y feeling yanks, and it feels like my heart is constricted, interfering in its ability to beat.

I can't breathe. Pain explodes in my chest, radiating outward like a supernova. My lungs burn, desperate for air that won't come. The world around me blurs, sounds fading into a high-pitched buzz that fills my ears.

One second passes. An eternity compressed into a heartbeat.

Two seconds. The edges of my vision darken, reality slipping away like sand through an hourglass.

Then, as suddenly as it began, the pain recedes. The world snaps back into focus, colors sharpening and sounds returning. I gasp, drawing in a ragged breath that feels like sandpaper in my throat.

“Ava? Ava! Are you okay?”

Vanessa’s voice cuts through the lingering fog in my mind. Her hand grips my shoulder, shaking me gently but insistently. I blink, trying to orient myself. We’re still in the truck. Marcus is at the wheel, his knuckles white as he grips it tightly, eyes darting between the road and the rearview

mirror.

“L... My voice comes out as a croak. Swallowing hard, I try again. “I’m fine.”

But am I? What the hell just happened? It felt like my heart was being squeezed in a vise, like something was trying to pull it right out of my chest. And that string, that connection to the book—it’s still there, only it’s stronger and pulsing.

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There’s a thrumming in my veins that’s familiar.

“Are you sure?” Vanessa looks me over with a frown. “Your face went white as a sheet and your groaned like you were dying. I’m pretty sure you stopped breathing.

I had, hadn’t I? The memory of those endless seconds without air sends a shiver down my spine. “I think I made contact with the book. It was weird.”

Marcus’s eyes meet mine in the mirror. “What happened?”

My thoughts are still scattered, my mind overflowing. “I’m not sure. I was reaching out to it, trying to call it to me like Magister Orion said. And then...” I trail off, unsure how to describe the sensation. “It was like it grabbed hold of me. I feel like I was somewhere else for a minute.”

“Is that normal?” Vanessa asks, before shaking her head. “Stupid question. How would we know?”

So many questions, and so few answers.

Marcus’s

jaw clenches. “We need to be careful with this. Magic books that try to yank your soul out of your body don’t exactly scream ‘trustworthy’ to me.”

He has a point, but something in me rebels against the idea. “No, it wasn’t malicious. Just desperate.” I pause, surprised by my own certainty. How can I be so sure about the intentions of an inanimate object? And yet, I am.

The string inside of me tugs again, and I swear it’s a friendly one.

Vanessa’s hand finds mine, squeezing gently. “Either way, we can’t risk you getting hurt. Maybe we should wait until we reach Lucas before trying again”

I scratch at my arms, trying to soothe the strange thrumming in my veins. It’s like my body is vibrating from the inside out, a constant reminder of the magic pulsing through me.

“You’re right,” I say to Vanessa. “We should wait until we’re somewhere safe before I try contacting the book again. Too many weird things keep happening to me. I’d rather not risk dying before we reach Lucas.

See? I have a sense of self-preservation in me somewhere.

Even if I desperately want to try again.

The thought of Lucas sends a pang through my chest.

“Have either of you made contact yet?” I ask, looking between Vanessa and Marcus. Hope flutters in my chest, fragile and desperate.

Vanessa shakes her head, a worried frown creasing her brow. “No, nothing yet. Vester should be able to reach me by now. It’s strange.”

“How long has it been since you could sense him?” Surprised, I peer out the window, but there’s nothing to see in the darkness.

Vanessa’s frown deepens. “Well, you’ve been focusing in the back for about an hour now!”

An hour? It felt like mere minutes had passed. The realization is chilling. How much time am I

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losing, slipping away into that strange, mental-magical space?

Marcus talks with his eyes glued to the road. “I felt a pack presence once,” he admits. “But it was brief. Flectr before I could really grasp it.”

“It’s just a matter of

ting closer,” Vanessa says, her tone reassuring. But I can hear the undercurrent of worry beneath her words. “We’ll make contact soon. I’m sure of it.”

I nod, but anxiety churns in my gut. Too many strange things are happening around us. The moon and our washed out headlights are the only things illuminating the world as we drive. My stomach growls, a sharp reminder that we haven’t eaten in hours. The granola bars Acarus gave us are long gone, nothing but wrappers and crumbs left behind.

“We need to stop soon, Vanessa says, shifting uncomfortably in her seat. “I need a bathroom break.”

Marcus glances at her, his expression a mix of concern and frustration. “Can you hold it? We’re getting close.”

Vanessa’s eyes narrow. “I told you an hour ago I needed to stop. I can’t hold it any longer.”

Heat flushes my cheeks. “I, uh... I need to go too, I admit meekly.

Marcus sighs. “We’ll make one last stop, but we need to be quick. It’s not safe to linger out here,”

The reminder of the danger surrounding us sends a shiver down my spine. The apocalypse has come and here we are, about to stop because nature calls.

Marcus pulls over, just off the road. There’s nothing around except a few straggly bushes. More

like bush–wannabes.

“Alright,” Marcus says, his voice low and tense. “Let’s make this quick. Vanessa, you take Ava. I’ll keep watch. Two minutes, tops.”

Vanessa nods, already opening her door. I follow suit, the cool night air hitting me as I step out of the truck. My legs feel stiff and unsteady after sitting for so long.

“Come on,” Vanessa says, grabbing my hand. “Behind the bushes for privacy.”

It isn’t like Marcus will look if we go right by the truck, but I get it.

When I’m done, Vanessa and I switch places. Aside from a lot of chirping from what I can only assume are crickets, the low rumble of the truck’s engine keeps me calm, knowing Marcus is nearby.

It's weird to be in the dark, stars dotting the sky in the middle of nowhere, just peeing behind a bush.

It feels like there are predators watching our every move.

"Okay," Vanessa says, emerging from the darkness. "Let's get back to the truck."

The thrumming in my veins intensifies, and I scratch at my arms again.

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262 Ava: Cassiopeia

"Are you okay?" Vanessa asks, grabbing my arm and inspecting the welts I've given myself.

"Just crazy itchy. Ever since I connected with the book, it's like energy is just buzzing right below my skin. Like a million ants at a dance party."

She frowns. "I wish I knew more about magic and its side effects. I hate not knowing if these things are normal."

"No kidding" Pulling my arm away, I scratch at it again.

Marcus's voice cuts through the night air. "Time's up. Let's move. Ava, come up front this time."

I climb into the passenger seat, grateful for the change. At least I can stretch out my legs a little. The cracked leather beneath me is hard and pokey, but it's still an improvement.

Vanessa takes the back, and I can feel her watchful gaze on me even in the darkness.

The truck rumbles to life, and we're back on the road. I lean my head against the cool glass of the window, my eyes searching the sky. The stars are bright out here, away from the city lights. It's been so long since I've really looked at them.

My fingers find their way to my neck, scratching at the persistent itch that's taken up residence- there. I try to focus on the constellations, searching for familiar patterns in the vast expanse

above.

There's Orion's Belt, three stars in a perfect line. I remember learning about it as a kid, fascinated by the idea of hunters in the sky. Now, it feels like we're the ones being hunted, even

when no one knows where we are.

The Big Dipper comes into view, its ladle shape unmistakable. I trace it with my eyes, following the line to the North Star. It's supposed to be a guide, a constant in a chaotic world. Right now, I could use some of that stability.

My mind wanders to Lucas, wondering if he's looking at these same stars from his hospital bed. The thought sends a pang through my chest, sharper than any physical pain.

I hope he's okay.

I hope he knows I'm coming.

The bond in my chest feels stronger, maybe because the distance between us is shrinking. It feels like it's happy we're close.

My nails dig deeper into my skin as I scratch, the itch becoming more insistent. It's like my is trying to crawl out of itself, restless energy with nowhere to go.

I wonder if this is how Lucas feels when the full moon approaches, this barely contained wildness.

"Ava," Vanessa's voice is soft but firm from the back seat. "Try not to scratch. You'll make it

worse.

body

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overwhelming. Instead, I press my palms flat against my thighs, focusing on the rough texture of

my jeans.

I hunt for the only other constellation I really know: The constellation Cassiopeia, its distinctive W shape a stark contrast to the surrounding darkness.

I remember reading about the myth, the vain queen who boasted of her beauty. Now she's forever in the sky, sometimes right-side up, sometimes upside down. I wonder if the gods who put her there knew how apt a metaphor it would be for life—constantly turning, never stable.

Feels like me.

Marcus clears his throat, breaking the silence that's settled over us. "How are you holding up?" I tear my gaze away from the stars to look at him. His eyes are fixed on the road ahead, but I can see the tension in his jaw, the way his hands grip the steering wheel a little too tightly.

"I'm okay" I lie, because what else can I say? That I'm stressed about the fate of the world and worrying that we won't find Lucas where he's supposed to be? That I feel like something else crazy is about to come around the corner at us at any second? "Just trying to relax a little.

He nods, not calling me out on the obvious untruth. "Good. We should be there soon. Just hang in there a little longer."

My fingers twitch, wanting to scratch again. I curl them into fists instead, nails digging into my palms. The pain is a welcome distraction from the incessant itching.

"Do you think Lucas is awake?" The question slips out before I can stop it, my voice sounding small and uncertain in the confines of the truck.

"It's late," Vanessa says gently from the back. "He's probably resting. Healing"

I nod. Of course he's sleeping. What time is it now? Midnight? A patient shouldn't be awake at this time of night.

Trying to distract myself, I think about the magic thrumming through my veins, the power that seems to have a mind of its own. Is it like starlight, traveling vast distances to reach its vessel- me? Or is it more like a supernova, a brilliant explosion waiting to happen?

Considering how everyone was worried I'd just explode and take a chunk of the world with me, I think it might be the latter.

Or, you know, it's magic, and can't be compared to something like stars...

The itch intensifies, and before I can stop myself, my hand is at my neck again, nails scraping against skin. I catch myself quickly, but not before Vanessa notices.

"Ava," she says, her voice a mixture of concern and exasperation. "You need to try to relax. The more you focus on it, the worse it'll get.

"I know, I know," I mutter, forcing my hand back to my lap. "It's just driving me crazy. Like my skin doesn't fit right anymore"

Marcus glances over at me, his brow furrowed. "Is it getting worse?"

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262 Ava: Cassiopeia

But even as I say it, I'm pretty sure I'm lying. The energy buzzing beneath my skin feels wilder now, less contained. It's as if connecting with the book has opened some floodgate inside me, and now I'm struggling to hold back the tide.

I turn my attention back to the stars, desperate for any distraction. The Milky Way stretches across the sky, a river of light cutting through the darkness. I remember reading once that every star we can see is part of our own galaxy, that the vast majority of the universe is hidden from

our view.

Like our lives now, and this new universe that's taken over the world. Living in a wolf shifter pack, I thought we were the odd ones.

Meeting Sister Miriam, then being invited into the Fae Ward...

It's just proven that there's so much more out there. Even wolves like Marcus and Vanessa have been awed and humbled by the things they've witnessed.

So much has been hidden, our lives segregated. And now, war.

The truck hits a bump in the road, jolting me out of my thoughts. I realize I've been absently scratching at my arm again, and I quickly pull my hand

away.

"Sorry," I mumble, though I'm not sure if I'm apologizing to Vanessa, Marcus, or myself.

Marcus's voice is gentle when he speaks. "It's okay, Ava. We're all on edge."

"I hear him," Vanessa says in excitement. "I hear Vester!"

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My heart thumps hard, trying its best to knock my ribs out of place with excitement. "Is everyone okay?"

What's going on?"

Vanessa's eyes unfocus as she communicates with her mate. Waiting is like being bitten by a squad of fire ants, each prickle against my skin beginning to burn as I squirm, impatient for answers.

"He doesn't want to give any answers until we see him, but he said things are stable." There's an uncertain waver in her voice, but I keep quiet as she speaks with Vester, feeling my own unease building.

Stable.

That could mean a lot of things, and they aren't all good.

Marcus stiffens beside me and I glance out the window, expecting to see something on the road.

Nothing.

"There's a few scouts nearby," he says after a long pause. "Vanessa, you sense them?"

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"Three," she confirms. "I'm not familiar with them, but I recognize them."

"We're about ten minutes out. We'll run into a few

more waves of scouts, staggered so they can stay in contact." He glances at me. "Like a telephone relay."

"Ten minutes?!" Vanessa frowns. "Vester should have been able to reach me a long time ago."

"I should be able to reach the alpha," Marcus agrees. "But I can't."

"Something's wrong." The healer's look of relief is once again replaced by worry. "This isn't right."

"The area's safe, so just relax until we get there. Someone should be able to give us proper answers then."

I hope he's right.

"Shit. Hold on!"

The truck lurches violently, throwing me against the door as Marcus slams on the brakes. Gravel crunches under the tires, and I barely catch myself before my face meets the dashboard.

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“Shit!” Vanessa curses, her body sliding across the seat.

My heart races as we careen onto a narrow road I hadn’t even noticed. The sudden turn sends a jolt of adrenaline through my system, momentarily

distracting me from the constant itch of magic under my skin.

“Who the hell cut out the seatbelts?” I mutter, rubbing my elbow where it smacked against the door.

Marcus doesn’t answer, squinting at the winding gravel path ahead. Trees press close on either side, branches scraping against the truck’s exterior. It’s a small forest here, much more densely wooded than the places we’ve passed on our drive.

After what seems like an eternity of bumps and swerves, the forest gives way to a clearing. My breath catches as I take in the sight before us. A cluster of cabins nestles against rolling hills, the structures weathered but sturdy. A creek meanders past, its gentle burble barely audible over the truck’s engine.

But it’s not the picturesque setting that captures my attention. It’s the eerie stillness.

Where’s the bustle of pack life? The children playing,

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the daily routines that should animate a community? Instead, a group of wolves emerges to meet us, their expressions grim and their bodies bristling with

weapons.

This isn’t the Westwood I know. This is a war camp.

The truck rolls to a stop, and I’m out the door before Marcus can fully engage the parking brake. My eyes scan the gathered faces, searching desperately for anyone familiar.

Then I spot him, broad-shouldered and steady.

“Kellan!”

I rush towards him, questions tumbling from my lips. before I can even catch my breath. “Where’s Lucas? Is he okay? What happened?”

Kellan’s face, usually so composed, shows the strain of recent days. He holds up a hand, silencing my barrage of questions. “Ava, there’s a lot we need to discuss before I can take you to him.”

My stomach drops. “But he’s here, right?”

He’s supposed to be in a hospital, but none of these cottages scream hospital to me. And unlike the Fae Ward. I doubt there’s magic here that turns a cozy

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cottage into a giant tower.

“He’s here,” Kellan confirms, but his tone does little to

reassure me. “And he’s... stable. But things are

complicated.”

I want to scream in frustration. Complicated doesn’t begin to cover the chaos we’ve been through. I need to see Lucas, to touch him, to know he’s really okay.

A movement behind Kellan catches my eye. Another wolf—it takes me a while to recognize Ryder, one of

Lucas’ deltas—embraces Vanessa. The reunion of brother and sister would be touching if I weren’t so focused on my own mate.

“Where’s Vester?” I ask, noticing the absence of Vanessa’s mate among the welcoming party.

Kellan’s jaw tightens almost imperceptibly. “Come with me,” he says, guiding me towards a small cabin set apart from the others. It looks more like a guard post than a home, and my unease grows with each step.

I glance back, seeing Marcus and Vanessa being led in a different direction by Ryder. The separation makes my skin prickle, and I scratch at my arms furiously in an attempt to get rid of the sensation.

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They've been with me for so long. Being without them is weird.

"Kellan, what's going on?" I demand as we approach the cabin's door. "Why all the secrecy?"

He pauses, his hand on the doorknob. "Ava, I need you to understand that everything we're doing is to protect the pack."

"Protect us from what?"

Kellan's eyes meet mine, and the weight of

responsibility in them is staggering. "From forces that want to tear us apart. Both from outside... and within."

He pushes open the door, revealing a spartan interior. A table dominates the small space, covered in maps. and documents. The walls are bare except for a few strategic diagrams and what looks like a duty roster.

"Welcome to the war room," Kellan says grimly.

I step inside, my eyes darting around the room, trying to make sense of the information before me. "You're

scaring me, Kellan. What's wrong? Just come out and say it."

He touches a finger to his lips, closing the door and

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checking the windows. "Soundproof, as long as everything's closed," he explains.

The idea that we would need that kind of precaution in the middle of our own pack has ice blooming beneath my skin. "Kellan. Explain."

His expression softens. "He's been our rock through all of this, Ava. Leading us, strategizing, putting himself on the front lines to protect both our people and innocent humans caught in the crossfire."

Pride swells in my chest, but it's quickly tempered by fear. "That's how he got hurt. Protecting humans. Right?"

Kellan nods. "There was an ambush. Lucas took on

multiple opponents to buy time for civilians to escape. By the time reinforcements arrived, he was barely standing."

My throat tightens, imagining Lucas bloodied and outnumbered. "But he's healing, right? Shifter healing should-"

"It's not that simple," Kellan interrupts. "And before we get into that, let me explain the situation. As you can see, Westwood has been taken. But it isn't just us. Your

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father and Renard led an army into Blackwood and

took it over. Kellan barely escaped with five other shifters, out of everyone there. Even the woman of

Blackwood were decimated—the ones who defected under Lucas' protection."

My heart stumbles. I never thought they would hurt the people they'd once cared for.

Stupid, to ever think they were capable of such levels of humanity.

"That's terrible."

Kellan takes a deep breath, sitting on the edge of the table and crossing his arms. During the fight for Westwood, the enemy seemed to know our every move. Every time we would move noncombatants to a safe location, there was a breach. Even when we

ordered the humans to evacuate to safety, their escape routes were attacked."

My entire body stiffens. It sounds like he's saying...

No. It can't be.

But he's nodding at the look on my face. "That's right. Westwood has a traitor."

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264 Ava: Lucas is Recovering

264 Ava: Lucas is Recovering

“How can that be?!”

It’s a stupid question. Betrayal comes in all shapes and sizes. It can happen to anyone at any time.

But it’s still a shock.

Kellan shakes his head. “It’s the only thing that makes sense. Someone knew every move we made. It’s why secrecy is valued even here.” He rubs the bridge of his nose with a long sigh. “Getting everyone here felt impossible. We lost so many, even after the fighting, during the retreat. Especially after Lucas was hurt.”

“He’s okay now, right?”

Kellan stares at me, a muscle in his cheek twitching. “To an extent, yes. Your Sister Miriam arrived in time

to stabilize him.”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“If she and Selene hadn’t been there, Lucas would have succumbed to his injuries.”

That can’t be possible.

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264 Ava: Lucas is Recovering

It’s hard enough to accept that he was grievously injured without a single hiccup in the bond between

1. us.

It’s worse to think I could have lost him, and had no idea. Even now, the only feeling in my chest is of my bond humming in excitement, ready to see Lucas, impatient with this detour Kellan’s devised.

"I can't feel anything different. It feels the same as it always does, in here." I touch my chest, tears filling my eyes at the thought of almost losing Lucas. We've barely had time together, with all these insane happenings around us. "Why didn't I feel it?"

"You have a fated mate connection, but you aren't marked. You aren't mated. You wouldn't feel anything. It's either there, or it isn't." He rubs a hand vigorously over his head, making a face. "Can't feel direction or anything else, not unless they're nearby."

Oh. He's frustrated.

He's mated to Lisa and has yet to see her.

"Lisa's coming," I blurt out. "She should be here soon."

Kellan moves so fast I barely register it. His hands clamp down man munnner arme his grin tight enough

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264 Ava: Lucas is Recovering

to form bruises. His eyes burn with an intensity that

takes my breath away.

"Are you serious?" he demands, raw and emotional in a way I've never seen. Not even when he first recognized his mated connection, the day we lost Lisa.

For a moment, I'm stunned by his reaction. Is this how Lucas felt when he finally found me? My heart flips at the thought, a desperate longing to see him washing over me. I push it aside, focusing on Kellan.

"Yes," I assure him, keeping my voice steady. "That's what I was told. Lisa should be on her way here."

Kellan blinks, seeming to come back to himself. He glances down at his hands, still gripping my arms, and abruptly lets go. Stepping back, his features smooth into the mask of beta professionalism I've always thought was his normal face.

"I apologize, Ava," he says, voice clipped. "That was inappropriate of me."

"It's okay," I tell him, rubbing my arms where his fingers left imprints. "I understand."

And I do. The relief and hope in his eyes, quickly
masked is forever burned into my memory.

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264 Ava: Lucas is Recovering

It occurs to me Lisa doesn't know about their fated connection. I'm not sure how well
that's going to go

over.

"When did you get this information?" Kellan asks, all business now.

"Just before we left to come here," I explain. "A man named Acarus told us. He's...
connected to Sister Miriam."

Kellan's eyebrows rise slightly at that. "Sister Miriam," he murmurs. "She's been quite
involved lately."

Then he shakes his head, as if clearing away unwanted thoughts. "About Lucas."

My heart races. "I want to see him."

"He's... recovering," he says carefully. "But there have been unexpected setbacks."

This time I'm the one to close the distance between us, my fingers wrapping around
Kellan's forearm. The muscles beneath my grip are taut, betraying the tension he's
trying so hard to hide.

"What do you mean?" I demand, my voice rising. "Stop beating around the bush, Kellan.
What's going on with

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Luca

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Kellan's eyes flutter shut, and he drags his free hand down his face. A low growl
rumbles in his chest, a sound of frustration and something I can't quite put my finger on.

“Lucas isn’t...” He pauses, swallowing hard. “He’s not the same as before.”

My grip on his arm tightens. I can feel my nails digging into his skin, but I can’t let go.

“Stop being so fucking cryptic and just tell me!” Desperation claws at my insides.

“What’s wrong with him?”

Kellan’s eyes snap open, meeting mine. The pain I see there steals my breath. When he speaks, his voice is barely above a whisper.

“Alpha has lost his memory.”

The words hit me like a physical blow. I stumble back, my hand falling from his arm.

“What?” I breathe,

unable to process what he’s saying.

That can’t be possible.

Kellan continues, his voice low and strained. “He doesn’t recognize any of his wolves. He’s been unable

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264 Ava: Lucas is Recovering

to communicate through the pack bonds, though we seem to still have a connection to him as our alpha.”

I shake my head, denial rising like bile in my throat. “No,” I whisper. “That’s not possible. I would have felt something. Our bond-”

“Your bond isn’t complete,” Kellan reminds me gently. “You’re not marked. Not mated.”

The truth of his words crashes over me, and I feel my knees buckle. Kellan reaches out, steadying me with a firm grip on my shoulders.

“How?” I manage to choke out. “How did this happen?”

Kellan’s jaw clenches. “The attack. When he was. injured... Sister Miriam saved his life, but there were complications. We don’t know if it’s temporary or...” He trails off, unable to finish the thought.

My mind races, trying to make sense of this new reality. Lucas, my Lucas, doesn’t remember me.

Doesn’t remember us.

The future we'd begun to build together, the promises we'd made—all of it, gone in an instant.

"I need to see him," I say, my voice stronger than I feel.

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264 Ava: Lucas is Recovering

"Take me to him, Kellan. Now."

Kellan hesitates. "Ava, I'm not sure that's—"

"Now," I repeat, steel in my tone. "I don't care if he

doesn't remember me. I need to see him with my own eyes."

For a moment, I think he's going to argue. But then his shoulders slump, and he nods. "Alright. Follow me."

New Book!

Comment \$

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265 Ava: The Receptionist

265 Ava: The Receptionist

It isn't until we're walking that I realize still I don't hear Selene in my head. Her presence hasn't filled its

space.

I was so focused on Lucas that I forgot my own damn wolf. That's terrifying, in a way.

"Didn't you say Selene's here?"

"She was." He glances at me in the dim moonlight. "She's been coming and going a lot. Can't you talk to her?" He appears confused; I guess no one's

specifically told him that Selene and I can't contact each other over long distances.

"No."

"Oh." He's quiet as he processes that. "So you just... can't talk to your wolf?"

I shrug. "She's her own person. I guess it's because she isn't in my body."

Kellan makes an odd sort of noise in his throat. I glance at him in concern. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he says, shaking his head. "Your bond

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265 Ava: The Receptionist

with Selene is just strange. Communication isn't equal among wolves—some can have full conversations, some don't—but you're another level."

Ah. Yeah, it is weird. It's become such a normal part of my life, though. "Yeah." To me, it's strange to think

someone has a wolf and can't talk to them.

"How did you know to come here if you don't speak

with Selene?" Kellan asks.

The golden stranger's strange friendliness and otherworldly presence flash through my mind. I open my mouth, ready to explain about Acarus again, figuring he'd forgotten the brief conversation from

earlier.

Westwood might have a traitor.

The realization hits me like a sudden downpour, and I snap my mouth shut. We don't know who it is or if they're still here in this compound. Every word we say can potentially reach the wrong ears. My throat tightens.

"I'll explain later," I say instead, putting heavy emphasis on the last word. I meet Kellan's eyes, willing him to understand the unspoken message.

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265 Ava: The Receptionist

His eyebrows raise slightly, but then understanding dawns on his face. He faces forward, but I can still see

the hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

“Smart idea.”

My mind races, cataloging every interaction, every face I’ve seen since arriving. Which is only about six of

them.

Who could the traitor be?

The thought that someone close to Lucas is working against him...

My stomach churns.

Kellan leads me to a simple building. It’s a long building with blacked out windows, looking desolate in the dark of night.

Gleaming tiles catch me off guard as we step inside. It’s like walking into another world—sterile, bright, and utterly unlike the unassuming ranch house exterior.

It’s a modern hospital.

The contrast is jarring, and I find myself blinking

rapidly trying to adjust to the sudden change.

20.22

37

265 Ava: The Receptionist

A dimly lit hallway stretches to the side, with several doors, all closed. The familiar smell of antiseptic has my nose twitching.

The front desk, in contrast, is brightly lit. A pair of double doors marked 'Staff Only' stand beyond it, showing the faint shadowy outline of people as they walk past. Even this late at night, it's good to know there are people around to take care of the patients, just like any other hospital.

"Is this a real hospital?" I ask Kellan in a hushed whisper.

"Yes. It's been here for a long time." He taps at my shoulder, nudging me to follow him to the front desk.

A human woman in crisp blue scrubs sits, her fingers flying over a keyboard. She looks up as we approach, a warm smile spreading across her face. "Beta

Ashbourne," she greets Kellan, her voice syrupy sweet. "Alpha is sleeping at the moment. Is there something I can help you with?"

Kellan's hand settles on my lower back, guiding me forward. "Actually, yes. I've brought his mate to see him."

20:73

417

265 Ava: The Receptionist

The receptionist's eyes flick to me, and in an instant, her demeanor changes. The warmth vanishes, replaced by a cool professionalism that borders on frigid. "I see," she says, her tone clipped. "I'm afraid visiting hours are over for the day."

My heart sinks. Lucas is so close and yet still out of reach. I want to scream, to demand entry, to use whatever authority being his mate grants me, but I hold myself back.

That would be unethical. Rude. Terrible.

Even if it sounds pretty good right now.

"But she's his mate," Kellan argues, his brow furrowing. "Surely an exception can be made?"

The receptionist's lips thin into a tight line. "I'm sorry, but the rule applies to all patients, regardless of rank or relation. It's for their well-being and recovery."

The fight drains out of me. If what Kellan says is right- if he's lost his memories-seeing me as his mate might agitate him. Besides, if I throw my weight around here, it'll only reinforce the idea that I'm some entitled outsider, throwing my weight around.

Vallan munt

20:22

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265 Ava: The Receptionist

my shoulder gently. "It might be for the best," he says softly. "This way, he'll be awake and rested when you come by in the morning."

I hate that he's right. I hate even more that a part of

me is relieved. What if Lucas isn't happy to see me?

Without his memories, will he want me around?

"You're right," I murmur, then turn to the receptionist. "I'm sorry for coming by so late. We'll come back in the morning."

She nods, her professional mask firmly in place. "Visiting hours begin at 9 AM."

Kellan's already turning away, heading for the door, but something makes me hesitate. I glance back at the receptionist, catching a glimpse of her face before she notices my gaze. The sneer twisting her features is unmistakable, a flash of pure disdain that vanishes as quickly as it appeared.

"Have a good night," she says, her voice pleasant but her eyes cold.

My throat tightens as I hurry after Kellan. The cool night air hits my face as we step outside, and I take a deep breath, trying to shake off the weight of the

20:22

265 Ava: The Receptionist

receptionist's contempt.

"You okay?" Kellan asks, scrutinizing my face.

I force a smile. "Yeah. Just really want to see Lucas."

New Book!

Comment 2

J

Unshift 266

266 Ava: Cottage

There's a tiny cottage a few buildings away, with familiar faces guarding the entrance. Their eyes barely flick in my direction as Kellan brings me inside,

reminding me I still have a long way to go in order to gain affection from this pack.

After being in the Fae Ward, I'd almost forgotten how few of even my own guards actually like me.

Most of them are tolerant. Loyal enough, but I wonder now if they would have sacrificed everything to keep me safe when the attacks happened.

Marcus would have. I don't doubt that. I've seen his dedication.

No. No point doubting them. That's no way to start a friendly relationship.

Shaking off the depressed thoughts edging in, I look around the interior, pleasantly surprised once again.

These buildings all look rustic and old from the

outside, but inside, they're clean, fresh, and modern, with bright walls and glossy black trim. It only has one

20

266 Ava: Cottage

bedroom, a tiny bathroom with a stand-up shower,

and a tiny kitchen. Two armchairs face a window. No TV or other electronics.

"Where's Selene?" Since I can't see Lucas, I may as well focus on other important things.

"I'm not sure. That's a question you'd have to ask Sister Miriam. Once she stops by, I'll let her know you're here." Kellan checks the fridge. "There's no food, but I'll bring some over."

"I'm okay tonight," I say quickly, not wanting him to work any harder. My stomach grumbles, immediately revealing the lie for what it is.

"I'll get you something," he says firmly, walking away before I can argue.

While he's gone, I explore the tiny house a little more closely. There's no dust. The air isn't stale. It's been freshly cleaned, and the bedsheets and comforter don't sport a single wrinkle.

Squishing down on one of the pillows, I watch it bounce back. Fluffy pillows. I like fluffy pillows. I need two of them under my head and if I'm really fancy, a third for between my knees. When I lived with my

200 Ava: Cottage

parents, I had a single pillow that was as flat as a pancake. Nothing like these.

Scratching at my arms, I peek through the cabinets of the bathroom. Women's sanitary supplies under the toilet, different styles. Good call; I'm due for my period

soon.

We're out of heat suppressants, which didn't worry me before we got here because we were coming to Lucas. Now, I'm a little worried..

At least my last dose is still working.

The crescent scar on my neck burns, and I rake my nails over it, scratching frantically. It's like a thousand tiny itches merged into one.

The energy thrumming in my veins kicked up a notch after leaving the hospital. It—and my bond—are angry that we left Lucas' proximity

Well, sorry. I didn't make the rules.

If I could imagine my bond as a person, it's definitely someone flipping a table in my chest, sending my heart flip-flopping with the force of its annoyance.

I can't stop moving, can't stop scratching. My skin

20:21

266 Ava: Cottage

crawls, refusing to be soothed no matter how much I

claw at it.

“Damn it,” I mutter, pacing the length of the room for what feels like the hundredth time. My feet refuse to stay still, bouncing me from one end to the other like a pinball.

The string inside of me twitches and tugs, reminding

me of its existence.

Kellan’s still not back.

Throwing myself into one of the armchairs, I toe off my shoes and cross my legs, taking a deep breath as I try to ignore the itching.

I close my eyes, trying to shut out the world around me. The incessant itching, the restless energy, the worry about Lucas—I push it all away, focusing on that strange, new connection I felt with the book. It’s like a gossamer thread, barely there, but I can sense it if I concentrate hard enough.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

The string inside me vibrates, a faint resonance building. I reach for it with my mind, trying to grasp that elusive feeling. It’s like chasing smoke but I

260 Ava: Cottage

persist. The world fades away, and I feel myself getting closer, closer...

The door creaks open.

My eyes snap open, the tenuous connection shattered. I can’t help the sigh that escapes my lips as I turn to see Kellan entering, his arms laden with groceries.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” he asks, eyebrows furrowing as he takes in my expression.

I shake my head, forcing a smile. “No, I was just meditating. Lost my focus for a second there.”

Kellan nods, but I can see the concern in his eyes. He doesn’t push it, though, instead moving to the tiny kitchen area. I watch as he starts unpacking, stocking the fridge with water bottles and a carton of

strawberries.

“I brought some other stuff too,” he says, tossing a few items into the cupboards. “Thought you might be hungry.”

As if on cue, my stomach growls. I hadn't realized how famished I was until now. Kellan chuckles, pulling out bread and a can of tuna.

20:23

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266 Ava: Cottage

"How about a sandwich?" he offers, already reaching for a plate.

I nod, grateful for his thoughtfulness. As he prepares the food, I try to ignore the crawling sensation under my skin. The itch has returned full force, and I resist the urge to scratch.

Kellan places the sandwich in front of me, and I can't help but wrinkle my nose. The smell of tuna brings back unwelcome memories of Todd Mason, his leering -face flashing in my mind. I push the thought away,

reminding myself to be grateful.

"Thanks, Kellan," I say, picking up the sandwich. I take a bite, forcing myself to chew and swallow. It's not bad. It's actually really good—he's mixed it with basil and peppers, adding a nice bit of crunch and flavor. It's just... tainted by association.

Kellan watches me eat, his expression unreadable. When I'm finished, he takes the plate, rinsing it in the

sink.

"You don't have to do that. I can take care of myself," I protest, but he waves me off. "Don't worry about it. Relax. I'll be by in the morning."

20:21

266 Ava: Collage

He stiffens, turning back to me as he slides the plate into a drying rack. "You'll have guards at all times."

There's a hint of worry in his voice as he mentions the guards. I'm sure he's thinking of the hundreds of times Lisa and I complained about them, but I've really come a long way since then.

"It's fine," I assure him, mustering up a smile. "I've learned to accept it. Marcus and Vanessa never left me alone while we were gone."

He nods, looking relieved. "Get some rest, Ava. We'll figure everything out tomorrow. I'm sure Lucas will be happy to see you."

He doesn't sound sure, but I try not to think about it too much. "Thanks, Kellan. Will Marcus and Vanessa be

back soon?"

He shakes his head. "They're being debriefed and then will be off duty for a few days, since they've been with

you

this entire time. I'm sure they'll visit you once they

can."

As he leaves, I'm left alone with my thoughts once more. The silence of the cottage feels oppressive, and I find myself longing for Selene's presence. Without

266 Ava: Cottage

her, without Lucas, I feel incomplete.

That sense was dulled by the proximity of Marcus and Vanessa, who I'm just now realizing I recognized and accepted as my pack, while we were in Dakota Sanctuary. Now, I'm alone, with a couple guards outside my door who weren't even happy to see my

return.

It's weird. I never minded being away from wolves before. My time in Cedarwood was a peaceful blessing.

Now? It's like some sort of force pressing on me, reminding me that I'm alone.

I guess once you have friends and companionship, it's hard to be without them. Wolves are pack animals,

after all. Even a bizarre shifter like me is bound to have these feelings, right?

I curl up in the armchair, hugging my knees to my

chest.

The string inside me pulses, a constant reminder of the connection I can't quite grasp. I close my eyes, trying once more to reach for that elusive feeling.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

The world fades

Awa

and I focus on that gossamer

266 Ava: Cottage

thread. This time, without interruption, I feel it growing stronger. The resonance builds, vibrating through my entire being, and I can feel it moving around. It's rhythmic, like it's dancing.

Familiar and alien.

Comforting and terrifying.

New Book!

J

You've arrived at the latest chapter

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1

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Unshift 267

267 Lisa: Waking to War

A tiny hand shakes me awake with incongruous force, something I'd attribute to King Kong and not the gnomes who've been sheltering me and teaching me about magitech since my escape.

Groaning. I pull my blanket over my head. I'm too tired. "Go away

"Wake, wake, lazy girl! The war has come!"

The wizened old housekeeper—it has to be her, because no one else treats me like an unruly pig - yanks my covers off and slaps at my legs. "Hurry up, or die here alone!"

War?

Die?

My brain isn't functioning yet, but I stumble out of bed as she throws some clothes at me. "Dress! Hurry! Boots too!" Those are tossed at my feet, bruising my pinky toe in a way that has me hissing and hopping on one foot. "No time, you lazy girl! Get moving!"

Uncertain of what's going on but recognizing that her anxiety level is sky high, I throw on a clean shirt and jeans that they must have sourced from humans. Too bad they didn't bring a bra, too.

But at least there's socks.

I

Shoving my feet into them, the gnarled woman shoves at me until I fall onto my ass on the bed. "Put this on," she snaps, throwing a coat at me.

"Okay, okay. Hold on. You haven't even explained what's happening!"

"War!" she snaps. "Hurry!"

Despite her gruff demeanor, she kneels to shove my boots on as I shrug on the coat, two sizes too big and I double check what I'm feeling strapped in some hidden pockets—armed. With knives.

In fact, they seem to fit the term dagger more than knife.

"Let's go. Hurry, hurry. The Grand Sage is waiting"

The Grand Sage is the old man who's taken me under his wing and owns this place. He's some sort of high-falutin' to-do in the gnome community. They don't explain a lot, but it's what I've gathered over time.

Mainly from this gnome—Elverly is her name, but I'm not allowed to call her that. No, it's always Mistress Keeper.

I don't think that's a real title, but it's definitely what she enjoys being called.

“Mistress Keeper, I don’t-”

“If you don’t understand, then shut your face,” she hisses. “This isn’t the time for questions. Let’s

go.”

I bite my tongue, swallowing the questions bubbling up inside me. Even I’m not brave—or stupid.

14

267 Lisa Waking to War

-enough to challenge Elverly. That tiny terror has no qualms about doling out pain to keep me in line. So I follow her silently through the dark building, my feet now sure on the

once—confusing paths.

The labyrinth of corridors no longer bewilders me. After perusing a map for hours on end, I the layout etched into my mind.

Not that it’s any sort of comfort at the moment, as I’m dragged through the halls in the middle of the night with hardly an explanation.

A deafening boom shakes the entire structure. The floor bucks beneath my feet, and I stumble, my heart leaping into my throat. Elverly’s iron grip closes around my arm, yanking me upright with surprising strength.

“Hurry!” she barks, her gravelly voice laced with urgency.

We break into a run, my longer legs having to put in a surprising amount of effort to keep pace with her rapid, shuffling gait.

There are shouts and screams, the kind that chill your blood and raise the hairs on the back of your neck.

War.

Elverly’s earlier words echo in my head, taking on a horrifying new meaning. I’d thought she meant some sort of far—off conflict, a theoretical threat that brought changes to the plan.

Not a war here.

Not a war now.

The reality of our situation slams into me as we careen down a flight of stairs. The basement. We're heading to the basement, where the Grand Sage awaits.

His wizened face is grim as we burst into the room. Without a word, he ushers us toward what he calls the "safe room. The door swings open, revealing a space crammed with gadgets and gizmos I can't even begin to identify.

"Quickly, he urges, his usual calm demeanor cracking under the strain.

We pile in, and he locks the door behind us. The room comes alive, whirring and clicking. Panels shift, mechanisms engage, and the space around us shrinks. It's like being inside a giant, mechanical Rubik's cube as it solves itself.

When it finally stops, we're left in a space so cramped I can barely sit. Standing is out of the question, and moving? Forget about it. I'm wedged between Elverly and the Grand Sage, my knees drawn up to my chest.

The air feels thick and heavy as we all breathe into this tiny space, sharing the mingled scents of oil, metal, and fear. I struggle to control my breathing, trying not to give in to the claustrophobia clawing at the edges of my mind.

That's a new thing, ever since my escape. I don't like being confined.

"What's happening?" I whisper, unable to keep silent any longer.

24

C

267 Lisa Waking to War

The Grand Sage sighs, a sound filled with weariness and resignation. "War has come to our doorstep, child. Those unhappy with their lot have sought to overturn the world, seeking death and reform."

"But who-

Elverly cuts me off with a sharp hiss. "Quiet!"

The Grand Sage's wrinkled hand reaches out, patting Elverly's gnarled fingers. His touch seems to calm her, if only for a moment. Then he turns his attention to a panel of buttons I hadn't noticed before. His fingers dance across them with practiced case, and suddenly, the world

shifts.

A deep, resonant rumble fills the cramped space. It vibrates through the metal walls, through the floor, and right into my bones. My stomach lurches, twisting in that familiar way it does when an elevator starts moving too fast. But this... this is different. It's not just up or down. It's like we're defying gravity itself.

"What's happening?" I gasp, trying to keep the panic from my voice.

The Grand Sage's eyes meet mine, calm despite the chaos. "We're headed to a safe haven, child. Away from the fighting"

My

mind reels. Safe haven? Away? But what about...

"Your work!" I blurt out. "All those gadgets, the magitech you've been teaching me. Are we just.... leaving it all behind?"

A small smile tugs at the corner of the Grand Sage's mouth. "Fear not, Lisa. All the important work is with us!"

I blink, confused. Then it hits me. Before this room became our cramped refuge, it had been packed to the brim with... well, everything. Gadgets, books, materials I couldn't even name. When it rearranged itself, I'd assumed it was just making space for us. But what if...

"Did you... pack everything into the walls?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

The Grand Sage nods, a hint of pride in his eyes. "Dimensional compression. One of our more useful innovations."

My mind struggles to wrap itself around the concept. It's like something out of a sci-fi movie, and yet, after everything I've seen in the past weeks, it somehow makes perfect sense.

But there's still one thing I can't figure out. "How are we going anywhere? We're in a tiny room in the basement of-"

Elverly's patience, already worn thin, finally snaps. "We're flying, you stupid child!" she hisses, her eyes narrowed in frustration.

Unshift 268

268 Lisa: Flying?

Oh... (0

That explains the defying-gravity feeling.

I look from Elverly to the Grand Sage, waiting for one of them to crack a smile, to tell me it's all an elaborate joke. But their expressions remain deadly serious.

"Flying" I repeat, the word feeling strange on my tongue. "As in... up in the air? Like a plane?"

The Grand Sage chuckles, a warm sound that seems at odds with our dire situation. "Not quite like a plane, my dear. Our methods are a bit more unconventional"

I want to ask more, to understand exactly what's happening, but another violent shake rocks our little sanctuary. This time, I'm certain I feel us lifting off the ground. My stomach does a somersault, and I have to swallow hard to keep from being sick.

The room continues to vibrate around us, and I can't shake the feeling that we're ascending rapidly. My ears pop, confirming my suspicions.

"Where exactly are we going?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

The Grand Sage's expression grows somber. "There are multiple safe havens through the land. I know of one, and I can only hope it has not been breached."

Despite the size of his building, we are the only 3 living beings within it.

"I heard screaming."

"Yes. We have guards. He corrects himself. "We had guards. You never had a chance to see them, but they have always been there!"

"And we're just leaving them behind?"

Elverly's face hardens, her wrinkles deepening. "They knew the risks. They chose to stay a fight."

and

She sounds angry, but there are unshed tears in her eyes. Despite her harsh words, she's mourning. That angry mask of hers is nothing more than a facade for her grief.

*Fight who?" I press, desperation creeping into my voice. "Who's attacking you? Is it... is it

because of me?"

The Grand Sage shakes his head. “No, child. There are forces at play that even I...”

His lips tighten, and he strokes his beard. His wizened hands tremble with the movement. “Even I did not see this coming, child. Do not worry. It does not lie on your tiny shoulders.”

butt

My legs have long since fallen asleep, and I’m pretty sure my is permanently fused to this uncomfortable seat. I shift, trying to find a position that doesn’t make me want to scream, but it’s hopeless. We’ve been in this flying... whatever it is for what feels like days.

It’s probably only been an hour but it feels like

14

268 Lisac Flying?

“How much longer? I ask, not for the first time. Elverly shoots me a look that could curdle milk, but I ignore her. I’m past caring about niceties at this point.

The Grand Sage strokes his beard, a gesture I’m beginning to recognize as his thinking pose. “Not much longer now, my dear. But tell me, aren’t you curious about how we’re managing this little journey undetected?”

I blink, surprised by the question. To be honest, I hadn’t given it much thought. I’ve been too preoccupied with not losing my mind in this cramped space. But now that he mentions it.

“Actually, yeah. How are we going to make it to this safe place without being followed?”

The change in the Grand Sage is immediate and startling. His eyes light up, and for the first time since this nightmare began, a genuine smile spreads across his face. It’s like he’s been waiting for someone to ask him this ve

question.

“Ah! I’m so glad you asked,” he says, leaning forward eagerly. “You see, I’ve manufactured a cloaking device that’s quite remarkable. It even beats out human radar—DARR!”

I can’t help it. My lips twitch at his pronunciation. It’s such a stark contrast to his usual eloquence that it catches me off guard.

“You mean radar?” I ask, trying to keep the amusement out of my voice.

He waves a hand dismissively. “Yes, yes, that’s what I said.

Rah–DARR

I decide not to correct him again. Instead, I focus on what he’s actually saying. “How do you know it beats radar? Have you tested it?”

The Grand Sage nods enthusiastically. “Oh yes, multiple times! We’ve taken many flights to ensure its effectiveness. I have a friend in the aviation industry who’s been most helpful.”

Again, there’s something off about how he says “aviation,” but I can’t quite put my finger on it. It’s like he’s reading from a script he doesn’t quite understand.

A thought occurs to me. “Is your friend human?”

The Grand Sage chuckles. “No, no. He passes as what humans call a ‘little person’ in their world.”

I’m not sure how to process that information. A non–human passing as a little person? Working In aviation? It’s almost too much to wrap my head around.

They don’t even look like the little people’ he’s talking about. They’re too proportionate.

“So, this friend of yours... he helps you test the cloaking device?” I ask, piecing together this. bizarre puzzle.

“Indeed!” the Grand Sage exclaims. “He’s been instrumental in our research. You see, the device works by...

As he launches into a detailed explanation that goes way over my head, I find my mind wandering. I think about Ava, wondering if she’s safe, and if the war’s reached her.

“Lisa? Are you listening?” The Grand Sage’s voice breaks through my reverie.

I turn back to him, forcing a smile. “Sorry, I got lost in thought for a moment. You were saying?”

208 Lisa Flying??

He peers at me closely, his earlier excitement dimming. “You’re worried about your friend, Ava Grey, aren’t you?”

Inod, not trusting my voice. The lump in my throat feels like it might choke me if I try to speak.

The Grand Sage reaches out, patting my hand gently. "I understand, my dear. These are trying times for all of us. But I promise you, we're doing everything in our power to keep you safe. And once we reach our destination, I'll do what I can to find information on your friend, as well."

His words are meant to be comforting, I know, but they only serve to remind me how helpless I feel. I'm flying to who-knows-where in a magical contraption, with people I barely know.

I'm not ungrateful. I'm incredibly grateful. I'd rather be here than back in the vampire's dungeon.

I just wish I was somewhere where I could have a little control over my life again.

And I miss my parents.

Thinking about them would only break me when I was incarcerated. Now that I'm free, the thoughts of them intrude in my mind more and more often. I need to contact them soon. They probably think I'm dead. Maybe they're even looking for my body.

Hah. At least they won't find it.

The morbid humor lifts my spirits an infinitesimal amount, but at least it helps.

"What's this war about, Sage?"

I call him Sage because "Grand Sage" is not only a mouthful—it sounds kind of preposterous. At least I can pretend Sage is his actual name.

Different worlds and different cultures, I guess. I wonder if I'll get used to it after a or if it will always be weird to me.

few

months,

He sighs, stroking his beard with hands that once again tremble, his eyes unfocused on the wall behind me. "There are many who have been upset with how the supernaturals bend to the order of humans, child. Humans are weak and powerless, even more so since their wizards died out so long ago. And yet no one wishes to go against them. Despite being a weak race, they have numbers in droves. Trying to eradicate them is like trying to eradicate..." He looks at me, back in the moment again. "Well, trying to eradicate flies."

It doesn't feel good for humans to be compared to flies, but I understand what he's trying to say.

“It appears that those self–same people are now fighting back. There have been attacks...” His voice trails off. “Unfortunately, they came to us quickly. I will have to check on the situation once we are in a safe place.

The way his fingers tremble as he combs through his beard hurts my heart.

The Grand Sage is not a fearful person. He’s either enthusiastic or calm, a peaceful person in this crazy world. When he talks about *mágic* technologies, he’s a force of energy that can’t be stopped. And when he’s just chatting with me over tea in the garden, he’s the sweetest old man. Like a grandfather.

268 Lisa: Flying?

“Can you...” I start, then hesitate. “Can you tell me more about this cloaking device? How does it

work exactly?”

The Grand Sage’s eyes light up again, and I know I’ve said the right thing. As he launches into another explanation, I try to focus, to lose myself in the intricacies of magical technology. It’s better than dwelling on things I can’t change, at least for now.

Unshift 269

269 Lisa: The Farmhouse

LISA

The entire world shakes and shudders, and I wake with a jolt. “Earthquake!”

“We landed, you idiot.” Elverly scowls at me. “Next time, don’t use me as a pillow.”

“Don’t take her vitriol seriously, Lisa. She’s the one who covered you with a blanket.” The Grand Sage nods toward me, and I glance down, surprised to see a flannel fabric about as large as a baby’s blanket.

She yanks it off me with a huff, folding it and tucking it under her arm, where it disappears.

I blink.

“Where did it go?”

*Dimensional storage, The Grand Sage tells me, pushing different buttons. The vibration of the room ceases. “Stay here. I’m going to check on matters, and the cloaking device isn’t enough to

cover everyone outside”

A hatch above us creaks open, letting in a sliver of light that makes me squint. I hold my breath, not daring to move as the Grand Sage maneuvers his way between Elverly and me. His robes brush against my arm, and I catch a whiff of something herbal—sage, maybe?

Funny. Sage for sages.

my

As he climbs, I can’t help but stare at the rungs he’s using. Were those there before? I wrack brain, trying to remember if I’d noticed them during our journey, but come up blank. It’s possible they were there all along, hidden in the shadows of this cramped space.

But it’s more probable that they popped out of the wall when he was pressing one of those many buttons.

The Grand Sage’s feet disappear through the hatch, and I strain my ears, trying to catch any sound from above. The silence remains unbroken, broken only by my own shallow breathing and the faint rustle of Elverly’s clothes as she shifts in her seat.

“Do

you think-” I whisper, but Elverly cuts me off with a sharp look.

Right. Stay quiet. Got it.

I

press my lips together, fighting the urge to fidget. The waiting is excruciating. How long has it been since the Grand Sage left? A minute? Five? Time seems to stretch in this confined space, each second feeling like an eternity.

A soft thud from above snaps me back to the present.

The hatch opens wider, and I blink against the sudden influx of light. The Grand Sage’s face. appears in the opening, his expression unreadable.

“It’s clear,” he says, but his words are grim. “You can come up now.”

Elverly moves first, gracefully rising from her seat and climbing the rungs with practiced ease. I

follow more hesitantly, my muscles protesting after being cramped for so long. As I near the top, I can't help but look down, curiosity getting the better of me.

The rungs definitely weren't there before. I'm sure of it now. They seem to melt seamlessly into the wall, as if they've always been a part of it. Another bit of magic? Or some kind of advanced technology? The line between the two seems increasingly blurred around these two.

I haul myself out of the hatch, taking in our new surroundings. We're in what looks like an old barn, dusty sunlight filtering through cracks in the wooden walls. The air smells of hay and something earthy I can't quite place.

How the hell did we magically land inside a barn?

I want to ask, but I already know the explanation will be over my head.

Our "safe room" sits in the middle of the floor, looking for all the world like an oversized metal egg with a flat top. If I hadn't just climbed out of it, I'd never believe it could fit three people inside, plus all the things that are in the 'dimensional storage' they speak of.

"Where are we?" I ask, unable to contain my curiosity any longer.

The Grand Sage turns with a faint frown. "We did not go far. About two hours' drive from the

heart of the Westwood Pack."

"You don't seem very happy to be here." Glancing around, I ask, "Are you sure it's safe?"

It certainly seems quiet.

"Safe for now, yes. He reaches for my arm, slapping a white bracelet onto it. Elverly gets the same treatment. "This is in case we are parted. If anything happens, come here and press the green button on your bracelet. It's programmed for the next destination. Don't wait for any of us, even if you're the only one aboard."

Wow. That seems terrible. I can't imagine leaving them behind.

He pauses, seeming to weigh his words carefully. "Don't introduce yourself by name. Use a pseudonym, if you must. His nose wrinkles. "This place doesn't smell right. Be on your guard."

The crunch of gravel under my feet feels surreal as we exit the barn. My eyes dart around, taking in the vast expanse of farmland stretching out before us. Horses and

cows graze peacefully in nearby paddocks, oblivious to our status as refugees. A cluster of beat-up trucks sits in the driveway of a dilapidated white farmhouse.

Elverly's nose wrinkles as she surveys our surroundings. Her disdain is palpable, and I can't help but share her sentiment. This place seems a little too worn down to be considered a safe haven.

Then again, I guess no one would expect to find two gnomes here.

The Grand Sage motions for us to follow him towards the farmhouse.

As we approach, two men materialize, seemingly out of thin air. My heart leaps into my throat, and I stumble back a step. Their sudden appearance is startling enough, but it's the low, rumbling growls emanating from their chests that really set me on edge.

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Shifters. They have to be.

The Grand Sage doesn't seem fazed. He addresses them directly, his voice calm and authoritative. "I need you to take me to the alpha of the Westwood Pack."

The shifters exchange wary glances, their postures tense. I hold my breath, waiting for their response. To my surprise, the Grand Sage smoothly introduces himself.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Dr. Jonathan Blackwell, senior consultant for Paradigm Solutions. I was hired to assist with a few of your delicate matters."

I struggle to keep my face impassive. Dr. Jonathan Blackwell, my ass. But the way he introduces himself so smoothly makes me wonder how much time he's spent dealing with humans who had no idea they were shaking hands with a supernatural.

A gnome.

I've never even heard of gnomes.

Garden gnomes, but otherwise, no.

The shifters still look uncertain, but before they can respond, a familiar face emerges from the farmhouse. My heart skips a beat as I recognize Ryder, one of the deltas of the Westwood Pack. He's followed closely by Mia and Chloe, two faces I know all too well from my time with Ava.

Panic floods my system. The Grand Sage is undercover for some odd reason, and wants us to be, too. But there's no way I can keep my presence here a secret now. They know me.

On the other hand, I can ask them about Ava-

But as their eyes sweep over our little group, something strange happens. Or rather, doesn't happen. Their gazes slide right past me as if I'm not even there. They focus intently on the Grand Sage, hanging on his every word as he reintroduces himself as Dr. Blackwell.

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I blink rapidly, my mind struggling to process what's happening.

The glint of the bracelet the Grand Sage slapped onto my wrist catches my eye. Could it be some kind of cloaking device? He does love his magitech. It would make sense that it has multiple

uses.

That has to be what it is. These are all people who know me. They know my scent and my face, even if it is haggard after my incarceration. The bracelet must make it so I'm less noticeable somehow.

Ryder steps forward, his brow furrowed as he looks at all of us.

He can see me, but it's like he doesn't really notice me.

Worry is etched into every line of his face. "Dr. Blackwell," he says, sounding relieved. "We're having problems with our phones."

"Yes, so I was informed." The Grand Sage looks at all the wolves with interest. "Shall we go inside? I'm going to need everyone's devices in order to check on the situation."

"Of course." Ryder snaps his fingers at the other wolves, who follow behind us without a word. Everyone seems on edge, shoulders tense and eyes wary.

As we step into the farmhouse, the sight before me steals my breath. Injured shifters lie scattered across the floor, their bodies arranged on blankets in a makeshift triage. The air is thick with the

metallic scent of blood, leaving me nauseated.

Two women I don't recognize flit between the injured, their hands steady as they tend to wounds. Their faces are grim, etched with determination and exhaustion. I'm rooted to the spot, overwhelmed by the sheer scale of suffering before me.

Ryder's voice breaks through my shock. "I apologize for the mess, Dr. Blackwell. We're still setting up after our... retreat.

The hesitation in his voice speaks volumes. This wasn't a planned withdrawal; it was a desperate

escape.

The Grand Sage—Dr. Blackwell now, I remind myself—waves off the apology. "No need for that. We're here to help, after all."

Ryder nods, but his eyes narrow slightly. "Speaking of which, how did you get here? Our communications have been down, and we've had scouts watching the roads."

I tense, waiting for our cover to be blown. But the Grand Sage merely clears his throat, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Ah, well, that's a trade secret, I'm afraid. Proprietary technology and all that."

Ryder doesn't look convinced, but he doesn't press the issue. Instead, he leads us to a battered kitchen table, pulling out his phone. "Well, whatever your methods, we're glad you're here. This

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is my phone. Mia, Chloe, hand yours over too."

Chloe, the taller girl with striking green eyes, immediately reaches into her pocket and places her phone on the table. Mia, however, hesitates. Her red hair seems to bristle with suspicion as she eyes the Grand Sage.

"How do we know we can trust him?" Mia demands, her voice sharp with fear and frustration. "We don't even know this guy, and now we're just handing over our only means of

communication?"

Ryder's eyes flash dangerously. "Mia, he growls, his voice low and threatening. "Do as you're

told. Now."

The command in his voice is palpable, and I find myself shrinking back instinctively. Mia's shoulders slump in defeat, and she reluctantly places her phone on the table with the others.

The Grand Sage gathers up the devices, his movements calm and assured. "You three will be fine for now," he says, his voice soothing. "I'll look into the problem and see what I can do."

As he speaks, his eyes meet mine for a brief moment. There's a glimmer of something there- reassurance, perhaps, or maybe a warning. I can't quite tell, and it does nothing to settle the unease churning in my gut.

I glance around the room, taking in the tense faces of the wolves. They're injured, cut off from communication, and now relying on the help of a stranger.

A stranger who isn't who he claims to be.

I really hope shit doesn't hit the fan.

As the Grand Sage examines the phones, I drift toward one woman tending to the injured. She looks up as I approach, her eyes tired but kind.

"Can I help?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

She nods gratefully, handing me a roll of bandages. "Start with him," she says, gesturing to a young man with a nasty gash on his arm. "Clean the wound, then wrap it tightly."

I kneel beside the injured shifter, my hands shaking slightly as I work.

He hisses in pain as I apply antiseptic, and I murmur an apology. His eyes meet mine, filled with a mix of pain and gratitude. In that moment, I realize it doesn't matter why I'm here or how I got here. What matters is that I'm here now, and I can help.

It's so much better than sitting around mindlessly, not knowing what to do with my life. First as a prisoner, then as an escapee under the Grand Sage's tutelage.

This is the first thing I've actively chosen to do, of my own volition, in so long

As I continue to tend to the wounded, I keep one ear on the conversation at the kitchen table. The Grand Sage is speaking in low tones with Ryder, their words too quiet for me

to make out. But from the furrowing of Ryder's brow and the tight set of his jaw, I can tell the news isn't good.

Mia paces nearby, her agitation palpable. At one point, she reaches for her phone, only for her

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hand to be slapped away by Ryder.

"Calm down, Mia. We've worked with Dr. Blackwell before. He's trustworthy."

"Sorry, Delta." She cradles her hand to her chest, stepping away from the desk with an air of chagrin.

Mia's attitude is odd. I mean, I get being wary of strangers, but Dr. Blackwell isn't exactly a stranger to them, is he? Ryder seems to trust him, at least.

And yet, there's something about the way Mia's eyes dart around the room, the tension in her shoulders, that sets off alarm bells in my head. It's like she's waiting for something to happen, something bad. 2

Chloc, meanwhile, stands still as a statue, her eyes fixed on the Grand Sage's hands as he works on their phones. The tension in the room is so thick I could cut it with a knife.

Chloe stands still as a statue, her eyes fixed on the Grand Sage's hands as he works on their phones. The tension in the room is so thick I could cut it with a knife.

It's only then that I see Chloe's not as calm as she's pretending to be. Her fingers are clenched into her palms, tight enough for blood to drip to the ground beneath her.

Strange.