

Grace of a Wolf

#Chapter 11: Grace: Rules - Read Grace of a Wolf

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Time isn't my friend, so I lay down the ground rules. "Look. I'm trying to get out of here, okay? You can come with me if you want, but no more skulking around in the shadows. And definitely no pouncing on me anymore. If I sprain my ankle, I'm never getting out of here. Got it?"

Not even a flick of his ears to show acknowledgement.

He has to be a shifter, though. There's no way some random, glowing wolf just exists on its own in the wild.

"You're a rogue, right?"

Ear flick.

I guess that's his way of saying yes. "Okay. I don't know why you won't shift, but that's not my business. Either help me or stay out of my way. That's all I'm asking."

No ear flick, or tail wag, or any change in his body language whatsoever.

Fine. Don't answer. Two can play the quiet game.

Turning my attention to my mission, I glance around. Which way was I headed?

East, because I need to head east toward the city. But which way is east? Now that I'm all turned around, I'm not sure. The stars peek through branches above, but their patterns mean nothing to me. That *definitely* is something we covered in training, and would be helpful to know about now.

My feet crunch over dead leaves as I pick a direction that seems right and start walking. The wolf's massive paw steps behind me pause. A low rumble draws my attention back to him as he winds around me.

He plants himself in my path, blocking the way forward.

"What now?"

His head tilts to the right, ears perked forward.

"That way?"

Another ear flick. Progress.

I change course, following his suggestion. The tension in my shoulders eases as he falls into step beside me. His ethereal glow provides better light than my dying flashlight ever did.

My hand reaches out, brushing over his side. The fur feels softer than I expected, almost silk-like between my fingers. He doesn't pull away.

His presence keeps the worst of my fears at bay, lulling me into comfort.

"I'm heading to Sterling City," I say, breaking the silence after a while. "It's the closest human settlement I know of. Should be about east of pack territory."

Not sure how far east, but I do know it isn't far—by car. Walking is a different story.

His steady pace never falters.

"I can't stay with the pack anymore. Humans don't belong in wolf packs. I was stupid to think otherwise."

A branch snaps under my boot, but I'm no longer paranoid about making a little noise.

"The thing is, I don't know the first thing about being human. I lived a normal human life until Alpha took me in, but that was a long time ago. A *really* long time ago. Haven't been back since."

The wolf's ears swivel toward me, listening.

"I don't even know how to get a job, or rent an apartment, or—"

My foot catches on an exposed root. The ground rushes up to meet my face, but sharp teeth snag the back of my shirt. The wolf's quick reaction saves me from eating dirt.

He lets go once I'm back on my feet.

"Thanks."

Ear swivel again.

See? He's listening. We're having a conversation.

It's shocking how lonely I feel. It hasn't been that long since I was happy. Only days, really. And yet it feels like months since the last time I could talk to someone comfortably.

I'm not usually this much of a talker. It isn't like I won't, but I spent most of my time around Rafe listening.

Well, whatever. The wolf doesn't seem to mind, and—

"Fenris, why the hell did you bring her here?"

—shit.

My heart plummets to Earth's core, taking my blood pressure with it. My knees? Traitorous things, they buckle, causing me to stumble three paces, ending in a drunken sway.

Someone grabs my arm with a hand that's hard and cold as iron, hauling me upright as my feet scramble.

It takes a few seconds, but my brain and body sync back up. My heart starts beating again, even if it is a little too fast and furious, and I curse myself nine ways from Sunday for being so stupid as to trust some random fucking shifter in pack territory.

Of *course* he brought me back.

Of. Fucking. Course.

Idiot!

As I'm busy berating myself, iron-hand-guy spins me around.

My breath catches in my throat as I stare up at the man towering over me. His scowl is enough to shrivel my soul and every last millimeter of my self-worth, and I *know* his frosty gray eyes are coming for my dreams.

The nightmare kind.

He's handsome, too. Because of course he is. All dark and broody and serial killer-esque.

Black tattoos snake up his neck and disappear beneath the collar of his shirt, intricate designs that shouldn't exist on a shifter's skin. The patterns seem to shift in the moonlight, as if alive with their own dark energy.

He smells like a walking ad for some expensive cologne. The kind with half-naked guys on TV. Warm, dark, sexy. Nothing like Rafe, who smells like the forest.

This is something else entirely, something I can't name, though it makes my head spin. Or maybe it's my bottomed-out blood pressure.

"I asked you a question." His voice rolls through me like thunder, deep and commanding. Each word drips with barely contained violence. Also, I'm pretty sure he didn't ask me anything.

But maybe he did, when I was busy ogling him.

My mouth opens, but no sound comes out. The grip on my arm tightens, and pain shoots through my muscles. It feels like he's going to pop it right off, no chainsaw necessary.

He steps closer, and I catch more details I wish I hadn't. A scar cuts through his left eyebrow. He has a scar under his bottom lip, like he used to have a piercing there. Those gray eyes hold secrets darker than the spaces between stars.

Okay, the last part is really just the lower half of my body coming online to whatever strange pheromones he's putting out.

Everything about him screams danger. Power. Authority. And sex. Lots of sex.

My brain is suddenly inundated with way too many theories on how the man's chest looks under his shirt, in ways it never did with Rafe.

And then, through the sudden sexual haze that clouds my intellect, it clicks.

The massive black wolf. The ethereal glow. The way he moved through the forest like he owned it.

The Lycan King.

Oh, God. Or Moon Goddess. Or who-the-fuck-ever deity is up there.

I've been wandering through the woods with the most dangerous shifter alive, treating him like some kind of pet. Telling him my pathetic life story.

My knees threaten to give out again, but his grip keeps me upright. The forest spins around me as the full weight of my situation crashes down.

I'm alone in the dark with the wolf king who supposedly murdered his last mate—

A soft whine cuts through my panicked mental gibberish, and I blink rapidly at the glowing black wolf standing next to the strange man, poking his wet nose against my arm, where it's gripped so tightly I'm positive blood flow has stopped.

Okay. Backtrack. Wolf is still there. So, not the Lycan King? Maybe a rogue. Rogue king? Do those exist? Or maybe a serial kille—

Pain shoots through my arm as he shakes me hard, growling some question at me. A shriek tears from my throat, echoing through the trees. The sound startles even me—high, piercing, full of raw terror. Like I'm being actively murdered.

Panicked self-preservation has arrived. A little late, but better than never, I guess.

The massive wolf's growl vibrates through my bones. Before I can blink, he rams his shoulder into the man's side. The impact knocks his iron grip loose, and I stumble backward.

My feet move before my brain catches up.

I turn and run.

"What the fuck, Fenris?"

His enraged voice carries through the trees, spurring me faster. My lungs burn. Roots and fallen branches grab at my feet, but terror keeps me upright and pure luck keeps me from spraining my ankle.

The darkness swallows me whole. Without the wolf's ethereal glow, I can barely see where I'm going. My hands stretch out in front of me, batting away branches before they can take out my eyes.

Thorns tear at my clothes. Every obstacle threatens to send me sprawling, and at least one sends a shooting pain through my ankle, leaving me with a limp.

But I keep going. I can't slow down.

The Lycan King (maybe). I just ran from the Lycan King (maybe). Or he's a serial killer. Or something.

Oh God, oh God, oh God.

A heavy weight explodes against my back, and my consciousness decides then and there to give up.

Chapter 12: Caine: She's Not Mine

CAINE

My wolf's glower burns into my back as I finish tying his little human obsession's hands together.

"Will you stop that? I'm not going to hurt her." Not yet, anyway. Or maybe ever.

"She was running away."

"Yes, and isn't that interesting?" Grunting, I push myself off the ground, stretching my back. My entire body's sore from sparring, and I just had to chase my wolf's little rabbit through the woods for no reason at all.

I wasn't even trying to scare her. She just ran for no reason.

Fenris scoffs. *"You know what effect you have on others. You should have treated her more gently. She's going to hurt when she wakes up."*

One little tackle to the ground and she even lost consciousness. She's pathetically weak, and the faint prick of guilt against my conscience is unwelcome. "Not my problem, Fenris. We agreed you would stay away from her until I finished my investigation."

To his credit, Fenris doesn't argue, instead padding over to rub his head all over the human girl.

Her obnoxious blueberry muffin scent wafts through the air, and I grimace. It's mixed with the scent of other wolves; one stands out stronger than the rest. My skin crawls and tightens, and I tell myself it's because human scents should never mix with wolves. "We'll have to find a place to put her until tomorrow."

A distinct sense of disapproval emanates from my bond with Fenris, but I ignore it.

"Just keep her with us. Is that so hard?"

"Stop it. You know the restrictions. I'm only here to investigate why they hid her existence and brought a human into a Mate Hunt. This is Bran's second time flaunting law."

Fenris scoffs. *"You would be hard-pressed to find a pack who hasn't broken this one. Humans are historically desirable."*

"Humans are weak, and bringing them into any pack is considered kidnapping under international laws—"

"Only if they don't like it."

My eyes narrow as I stare down my wolf. "This investigation will proceed *lawfully*. Get your obsession under control, Fenris. Humans only bring trouble to a pack. And stop marking her." My voice comes out rougher than intended as Fenris continues rubbing his massive head over the girl's unconscious form. "You're acting like a pup with a new toy."

"Her scent is tainted with other wolves."

"And that's none of our concern." The words are like rotten blood in my mouth as I get another whiff of the foreign wolf scents clinging to her skin. The one is particularly strong, and I want to scrub her skin raw until it's gone. My jaw clenches. "Back off."

"Make me."

The girl's sweet scent floods my nostrils—warm blueberries and fresh-baked muffins. Nauseatingly sweet. Artificial. Wrong. My body responds anyway, and I blame Fenris's obsession seeping through our bond.

I nudge her hip with my boot. No response; she's still out cold.

"Gentle," Fenris growls.

"Shut up." My fingers curl into fists as another wave of that possessive wolf scent hits me. Someone's been all over her, marking her like she's his territory. It's fresh.

"Now who's obsessing?"

"It's your fault. You won't shut up about her." I grab her arm, hauling her over my shoulder. Her body molds against mine, soft and warm. I have to ignore how perfect her body feels, but blood rushes against my will. "We'll just keep her somewhere secure until tomorrow."

"You feel it too. There's only one explanation for this pull."

"Enough." My tattoos burn with warning. "She's nothing but a legal headache. Focus on the investigation."

Fenris disappears, and my tattoos grow warm. There's always something missing inside of me when he manifests into his separate form; when he returns, the connection between us is stronger. Sharper.

Each step jostles her body against mine. Her curves press into my shoulder, soft and warm. Blood rushes south with a vengeance, and I bite back a curse.

"Fuck."

Having trouble? Fenris's smug satisfaction bleeds through our bond.

"Shut up."

Her scent wraps around me with each movement. My fingers dig into her thigh to keep her steady. Another step, another shift of her body. My jaw clenches, and I use my other hand to stabilize her at the waist. And if a few of my fingers dig a little lower, into the soft flesh of her ass—it's an unavoidable accident, that's all.

You could always carry her properly.

"Not happening."

Your loss. Though I must say, your struggle is entertaining.

"We know nothing about this girl or why she's out here. For all we know, she could be a spy."

A spy? Fenris's mental laugh echoes through my skull. *She's been outcasted. Can't you see she's the victim here?*

Her body slides against mine again. I adjust my grip, sliding my hand a little higher up her thigh. It's just to keep her steady, to limit her bouncing around up there. Nothing more. "An outcast wouldn't reek of another wolf's claim."

Fenris goes quiet. The silence stretches, heavy with something dark and possessive.

It doesn't matter who thinks they have a claim on her. His voice turns eerily mild. *She's ours now.*

A dark chuckle escapes my throat; his true self is finally bleeding out. "What do you think she'll do when she realizes you aren't a sweet little puppy?"

It doesn't matter. She's ours.

The calm certainty in Fenris's voice is far too comforting, making me almost feel like he's right. Like he's brainwashing me with his determination. "This obsession of yours is going too far."

Is it?

"Yes."

Then will you return her to the wolf who's laid his claim all over her?

My fingers dig deeper into her thigh. It's impossible to ignore the alien scent coating her body. She's saturated in it. There's a level of intimacy there... Red bleeds into my vision. "Fuck."

My tattoos burn as Fenris's emotions crash against mine, amplifying the possessive fury until my hands shake.

"This isn't—" My jaw clenches as another wave of the other wolf's scent hits me. "We're only here to investigate."

Keep telling yourself that. Your grip says otherwise.

I force my fingers to loosen, but they tighten again of their own accord when she shifts against me. The soft curves of her body press closer, and my blood burns hotter. "It's your fault. You're pushing these feelings through our bond."

Am I? Then why does your skin crawl every time you catch his scent on her?

"Shut up."

Why does your hand keep sliding higher up her thigh?

"I said, shut up." But he's right. My palm has crept up, fingers spread possessively across her flesh, my fingers just inches from a warm and welcoming heat. I jerk my hand back down, cursing when she almost slides off my shoulder.

Face it. You feel it too.

"What I feel is irritation at being stuck with your new toy."

She's not a toy.

I scoff. "Then what is she?"

You know what she is. You've known since you first caught her scent.

Denial courses through me, and I growl, "Don't even think it."

Why not? Because she's human? Or because you're afraid?

My fingers flex against her thigh again. "She's human. It's impossible."

Then explain why every inch of you rebels against another wolf's claim on her.

I can't. I can't explain why my skin feels too tight, why my blood burns, why I want to hunt down whoever touched her and tear out his throat. I can't explain why her scent

calls to me even as it repulses me, why my hands keep wandering, why everything in me screams *mine*.

She's just a human.

Chapter 13: Grace: Kidnapped

My head throbs with each pulse of my heart and my stomach churns. A sharp ache shoots through my shoulders as consciousness creeps back. My wrists burn, bound tight behind my back; whatever's holding me captive bites into my wrists. There's a gag binding my mouth, and it takes everything in me not to panic and try to shove it out with my tongue; I can breathe, but it feels like I can't.

Aside from some chirping from birds, there's no other sound to be heard.

I open my eyes to look around.

Still in the forest—somewhere. Dawn's covered the area in a soft haze, the grass misted over. I should be cold, but something warm is covering me.

A quick glance tells me it's a giant black tail.

Heat radiates against my back, and the hint of ethereal light tells me exactly who the massive tail belongs to. Each breath he takes lifts my body slightly where I'm pressed against his side.

My furry captor sleeps curled around me like some kind of protective barrier. The irony would be funny if I wasn't tied up.

Damn it. I thought he was my friend, and he betrayed me. This is why you don't go around picking up strays.

The events of last night crash back in a flood; the serial killer/Lycan King/weird stranger with tattoos isn't around, but he's clearly not worried about me getting away.

Arms bound behind my back, gag in mouth, and giant wolf on guard, even if he's asleep. Check, check, and check. There's no escape in my future, but I test the ropes anyway, unsurprised when they don't budge. The more I struggle, the tighter they become, cutting off circulation to my fingers.

The wolf's twitches, and a soft whine escapes his throat. Whatever he's dreaming about has his massive paws twitching against the ground.

My shoulders scream as I try to sit up, stiff and aching from my position on the ground. The movement pulls at muscles I didn't know existed. The gag muffles my groan of pain.

The wolf's tail tightens around my waist like a furry seat belt.

"Mmmph!" The shocked sound I make is embarrassing, but the gag at least muffles it into something unrecognizable.

His ear flicks. One gray eye cracks open, fixing on my face.

I narrow my eyes at him, trying to radiate all my disapproval and betrayal in his direction.

The wolf lifts his head and yawns, displaying rows of teeth that could snap my bones like twigs. His tongue lolls out, and he has the audacity to look pleased with himself.

His tail wags once, thumping against my hip. He stretches, pressing closer against my back. His nose nudges my cheek, and his breath fans hot across my face.

Dew has soaked through my jeans where I lie on the ground, my fingers have gone numb from the ropes, and this oversized furball acts like we're on some kind of camping trip.

The gag makes it impossible to tell him exactly what I think about this situation. About him. About everything. It's going through my head with a lot of curse words, though. If I'm going to die anyway, I may as well tell him exactly what I think of his disloyalty.

The wolf stands, shaking out his coat. Sparks of light dance through his fur like fireflies. He circles me once, twice, sniffing at the ropes, and I'll *die* before I admit the disappearance of his warmth sucks.

"Just untie me," I say through the gag, though it comes out as unintelligible mumbling.

He sits back on his haunches and cocks his head to one side. Those storm cloud eyes study me with far too much intelligence.

"Please?" I try to make my eyes wide and innocent. It works in movies, though not usually on wolves.

His tail sweeps across the ground. Amusement radiates from every line of his massive body. I don't know how, because nothing changes, but I can *feel* it in my bones. He's laughing on the inside.

A branch snaps in the distance. The wolf's head whips toward the sound, ears forward. A low growl rumbles from his chest.

My heart kicks into overdrive. Fight or flight instinct screams at me to run, but I can barely wiggle my toes, let alone stand.

The wolf's fur bristles along his spine. The glow intensifies until it hurts to look at him directly. He positions himself between me and whatever approaches, muscles coiled tight beneath his shimmering coat.

"Oh, fuck off, Fenris. I'm not going to eat her."

The voice makes every muscle in my body seize as the wolf growls in a grumbling sort of way before settling onto the ground, like a dog who's been told to lay down.

The stranger steps into view, and my heart stops to see those dark tattoos on his neck. His gray eyes are disturbingly similar to the wolf's—Fenris, this man calls him—so I assume they're... brothers, or something?

"You survived the night," he says, as if he's displeased.

My throat closes behind the gag. Fenris huffs and settles his massive head on his paws, but doesn't look my way even once.

Disloyal as a damn dog, once anyone shows up with a milk bone. I knew it.

The stranger's boots crush and destroy fallen leaves as he approaches, the sound far more intimidating than it would be under any other circumstance. My skin prickles as he crouches in front of me with a long sigh.

His fingers grip my chin, rough and calloused, sending goosebumps down my spine. He jerks my face to one side, then the other. The inspection makes me feel a bit like a budget cow at auction, and his touch burns against my skin.

At least I'm not thinking about him shirtless anymore.

Though, now that I think of it—

No. What the hell is wrong with my brain? He must have some insane power to take over a woman's thoughts and throw them straight into the gutter. He's my kidnapper, and kidnapping is literally zero percent sexy.

"Interesting." His thumb brushes my cheek, and I flinch. "A human girl who reeks of shifter." His lip curls. "Tell me, are you mated to one of those Blue Mountain mutts?"

The question makes me flinch. Rafe's face flashes through my mind, and Ellie right beside him. Bile rises in my throat. I shake my head. My eyes burn with unshed tears.

His fingers tighten on my jaw. "Don't lie to me, little human. I can smell him all over you."

Fenris growls, and the sound vibrates through my bones.

"Quiet," the man snaps without looking away from my face. "Answer me truthfully. Are you mated to one of them?" The anger in his voice leaves me terrified. If he hates the Blue Mountain Pack this much, he must not be the Lycan King—my bet is *definitely* on deranged serial killer, even if I can't quite figure out why the wolf would help him out.

I shake my head again, even as his fingers dig tighter into my jaw. *Please believe me. Please.*

His nostrils flare as he scents the air around me. "Then why do you carry their stench? Are you one of those human whores who like to fuck wolves?"

Oh, hell no. I've heard of pack bunnies; Rafe's told me about them.

This time, I jerk my head out of his grip to shake my head in vigorous denial. No, definitely not one of those, either.

His narrowed eyes roam over my face. "I guess I won't get answers out of someone like you. It's better to go straight to the source."

The stranger rises to his feet in one fluid motion, his height towering over my bound form. My protests turn into muffled nonsense behind the gag, but he acts like I don't exist.

Just take out the gag and let me explain!

His complete dismissal of my presence burns worse than the ropes cutting into my wrists. Here I am, tied up and gagged, and he won't even give me a chance to explain? Even worse, it sounds like he's going to go straight to the pack—which means they're going to know exactly where I am.

Fuck me.

Chapter 14: Grace: Sent Back

By evening, I'm still alive—but now I don't want to be.

The man's an absolute psychopath.

Psycho. Path.

Since when does "go straight to the source" mean *waltz into the middle of the grand event welcoming the fucking Lycan King?*

And, even if that *is* what it meant—which *it isn't*—what madman throws a bound and gagged woman to the floor in the middle of the room?

Him. That's who.

My skin burns with everyone's eyes on me, and I know my face is redder than a tomato. *Everyone* can see the state I'm in, and there isn't a single friendly gaze in the bunch.

The meticulously decorated event hall is gorgeous, filled with random, expensive-looking floral arrangements. Everyone in the pack is here, from Alpha and Beta down to the lowliest omega; the main lodge is the only building on pack lands large enough to handle a crowd this size.

There's a long table at the front of the room to seat the guest of honor and his party on one side, and Alpha and other high-ranking wolves of the Blue Mountain Pack on the other; it's a standard seating arrangement.

Several Lycans already sit there, leaning forward with interest, but the Lycan King's seat—next to Alpha—is empty.

And Alpha...

My heart sinks at the look on his face.

Alpha's knuckles blanch white against the dark wood of the table. His jaw clenches so tight, a muscle twitches beneath his skin. A vein in his forehead pulses steadily.

"What is the meaning of this?" His voice comes out low, controlled—the kind of control that precedes an explosion.

The stranger yanks me up by my bound arms, forcing me onto my feet. Pins and needles attack my legs, leaving me swaying against his grip. A whimper escapes through the gag, and I find myself missing my betrayer wolf friend. He might be disloyal, but at least he cares about keeping me warm and alive.

"Found this thing in the woods." The man's grip tightens on my arm, and I can already tell they're leaving bruises. Though that's the least of my problems right now. "I thought you might want to explain why a human smells so much like your pack, Brax."

The color drains from Alpha's face at the challenge, and he bows his head in a show of submission I've never seen from him before.

"My deepest apologies, High Alpha. I should have informed you of her presence beforehand."

Wait. For Alpha to treat him with such deference... So this psychopath really *is* the Lycan King?

"A rogue wolf pack attacked her family when she was young." Alpha's voice softens with false sympathy. "We found her alone, traumatized. I couldn't leave an innocent child to die."

My jaw would drop if it wasn't already forced wide open from the gag in my mouth. Lies spill from Alpha's mouth, smooth as honey.

"She grew up among us, causing no trouble. Until recently." Alpha's eyes narrow. "When she began interfering with pack matters."

The Lycan King's grip loosens, but the relief is short-lived as his scrutiny burns through me. "You took in a *human* child, Brax?" There's a warning underlying his words, but I'm not sure why.

"An act of mercy, nothing more. We kept her separate from pack business, taught her to be useful." Alpha spreads his hands. "What else could we do? The human systems would have failed her. We raised her as well as we could, taking responsibility for the rogues in our territory."

Bile rises in my throat. All those years calling him my adoptive father, believing he cared about me, only for him to speak of me like I'm a stray dog he picked up off the street.

"And now she runs." The king's voice carries notes of steel. "Why?"

Alpha's mouth tightens. "She developed... inappropriate attachments. When those proved impossible, she fled rather than accept her place."

My chest constricts. Inappropriate attachments? Now he's making my relationship with Rafe sound dirty and twisted. I search the crowd for Rafe's face, though my field of vision is limited without twisting my head around.

He's off to the side of the hall, not ranked high enough to be sitting at the main table. Instead, he stands with Ellie, who looks positively gleeful over my predicament. His expression is blank, showing no reaction to my father's—no, to Alpha's words.

"How interesting." The king's voice is so bland, I can't tell what he's thinking. Then again, he's clearly insane. "That you'd risk harboring a human all these years, purely out of the goodness of your heart, and then throw her away."

Alpha's throat bobs. "We've always strived to be merciful when possible, High Alpha."

The stranger—the *Lycan King*—turns to me, leaning down to yank the gag out of my mouth, his fingers scraping against my cheek as he does so. The rough fabric scrapes against the corners of my mouth, and I wince at the sharp sting.

My tongue feels like sandpaper, and I work my jaw to ease the ache.

"Well?" His gray eyes bore into mine. "Is what he says true?"

Oh, *now* he wants me to answer his questions? He's definitely a madman.

The weight of Alpha's stare burns into the side of my face. I chance a glance his way and immediately regret it. The promise of retribution in his dark glare makes my stomach clench.

My split lip throbs. The metallic taste of blood lingers on my tongue. One word from me could destroy Alpha's entire narrative, and the truth is heavy in my chest, begging to be released. But I've lived among wolves long enough to know—wolves don't trust humans. Pack is ultimately pack, and humans are *other*.

The silence stretches thin as the Lycan King looms before me, awaiting his answer. Patient. Dangerous.

A bead of sweat rolls down my spine. The room feels too hot, too crowded. Every breath carries the mingled scents of wolves, almost overpowered by the Lycan King's dark, musky scent. My head spins.

My mouth opens, but no sound comes out. What can I possibly say that won't end with my throat torn out?

"I—"

Alpha's palm slams against the table. The sound cracks through the room like a gunshot, and I flinch back violently. Wine sloshes from glasses, and somewhere, a fork clatters to the floor. At least I'm not the only one startled.

"You dare show your face here?" Alpha roars, apparently unwilling to let me have my say—even if he has to overtake the Lycan King's act. "After your actions?"

My throat closes up, and my lungs shrivel, leaving me to pant frantically for air. This isn't the man who once held me through nightmares and tears, telling me I was safe with him. This is a stranger wearing his face, twisted and evil.

It doesn't matter how brave I want to be; I'm bound prey in front of an apex predator. There's only fear left in me, and the desperate wish to survive.

"I didn't—"

"Silence!" the Lycan King snaps, and I snap my mouth shut. But he's not looking at me; his stony gaze is on Alpha. "You have had your turn to speak, Brax."

Chapter 15: Grace: Demand for Answers

From the way Alpha's glaring at me, I'm pretty sure he wants me dead. Well, living isn't all that great right now.

The Lycan King looks at me again. "Answer the question, human."

But my panicked brain can't quite recall what it was. Averting my gaze from his intense gray eyes, my eyes dart around the room, flinching away from Alpha's glower.

Instead, I look at the Lycans sitting at the table. One of them has fiery red hair and freckles all over his cheeks, and he leans his elbows on the table, smiling faintly when our eyes meet. Out of everyone waiting for me to speak, he's the only one who seems remotely approachable.

It gives me a tiny boost of courage, enough to take a deep breath and remember the question posed to me. "My biological parents were killed six years ago. Alpha..." My words falter as gray eyes flash, and an instinctive part of my brain insists he doesn't like me using my adoptive father's title, even if it doesn't make much sense. What else are you supposed to call your pack alpha? "Um, Alpha Brax came three days later, saying he was a family friend, and adopted me as his daughter. I've lived as his daughter for six years."

Alpha slams his fist on the table again. "Lying cunt!"

The explosive sound has me jumping back a step, and I focus on the Lycan King and his strange tattoos. It's easier than looking at his eyes, stormy yet cold. His winter storm temperament is easier to weather than Alpha's fury, though.

"Go on," the royal in front of me says, his Adam's apple moving as he talks. One of his tattoos stretches and moves lazily along, as if it's noticed me watching. Impossible, of course, but at least it gives my brain something to latch onto that isn't... terrifying.

Then again, the man's my kidnapper. He could be the worse option.

"For six years, I was known as the alpha's adopted human daughter—"

A sigh. "You already said this."

"Um." Licking my dry lips, I dare to glance up.

The Lycan King seems to have lost interest in my words, glancing instead to the red-haired Lycan at the table. But this is my chance to set the record straight, and I need to take it. "In that time, I developed a friendship with someone in the pack, and it turned into a relationship. I suppose it could be considered inappropriate, as I am only human. But that isn't why I ran, sir." Wait, how do you address wolf royalty? "Uh, Your Majesty."

Soft snickers ripple through the crowd behind me; I must have chosen wrong. My cheeks burn, but the sound dies instantly as the Lycan King's hand rises, quelling the laughter.

"Um." Another lick of my dry lips; my mouth is parched, my throat sore now from talking without a drop of water. "I was drugged, I think, and thrown into the forest during the Mate Hunt. I don't remember how I got there, and woke up alone."

Wood splinters. The table cracks in two as Alpha's fist connects with its surface. Chunks of polished oak scatter across the marble floor. "Enough with your lies!"

A roar rips through the room, making my bones vibrate. "Sit, Brax!" The Lycan King's voice drops to a deadly whisper. "Or I'll take this as a challenge to my authority."

Alpha's chest heaves. Veins pop on his neck as he glares at the king. One heartbeat. Two. Three. But he submits, shoulders slumping as he drops back into his chair.

The red-haired Lycan's lips twitch. He kicks the table away and leans back in his chair, crossing his arms as he watches, like it's dinner theater.

"Continue your damn story." The king's words crack like a whip, this time at me.

"I—" My throat closes up. "I found out that my mother was once Alpha's mate." Whispers. A lot of whispers, and gasps too; I guess not everyone knew. "He thought I was his daughter, but I'm not. Just human. When I didn't shift, he—" My voice cracks, despite trying to keep it steady. "He, um, threw me out and sent me to work at the omega lodge."

A peek at the Lycan King's face tells me nothing. Does he believe me, or not?

The words are sour and stuffy in my mouth, hard to push out, but somehow I manage to admit, "I left because there's no place for me here anymore. The pack sees me as less than nothing, so I ran. I want to go back to live as a human, with humans."

My eyes burn, but I refuse to cry, blinking as fast as I can to keep them at bay.

"A strange story," the Lycan King says. There's absolutely nothing in his voice to tell me if he believes my words.

"A false story," Alpha says, but I don't look at him. I can't. His gaze is burning into the side of my face, but I refuse to acknowledge it.

"Who is it?" the Lycan King asks, and I blink, my eyes rising to meet his again. There's a muscle twitching in his cheek, his eyes narrowed and dark.

Going through my own words in my head, I can't figure out what's unclear. "Excuse me?"

His hand snaps out, fingers locking around my throat, and my heart slams against my ribs. *Not again.* The room spins. Why is it always the throat? Is strangulation something that speaks to their more primal side?

Stupid question when I'm about to die, but...

"Please." The word comes out as a wheeze, though I can still breathe. "Everything I said is true."

"Who. Is. It?" Each word drops like ice, his fingers tightening with each syllable.

My hands fly to his wrist, but I might as well try to bend steel. The tattoos on his arm writhe and twist, serpentine patterns that make my vision blur. A whimper escapes my lips, and I suck down air.

Easily.

Very easily.

In fact, he's not strangling me at all, though his fingers might leave marks on the sides of my neck.

My heart rate slows a smidgen. "Your Majesty, I swear I'm—"

"*The relationship.*" His breath fans across my face; it smells like peppermint. "Who is it?"

Oh. My mouth goes even drier—not that I thought it was possible.

"Answer me." The king's voice drops lower, a growl that vibrates through his fingers and into my bones. The pressure increases, but only at the tips of his fingers. My lungs are still free to fill themselves with oxygen.

"Rafe," I whisper. "Raphael Wilder." Pointing in his direction, I can see in my peripheral vision Ellie is still beside him, but the details are unclear. My field of view is dominated by the Lycan King's face.

I wonder how Rafe looks. Apologetic? Or is he going to deny it all? Will he spew lies like Alpha, or admit what I say is true? Probably the former.

A snarl rips through the room. The king's eyes flash, his pupils expanding until there's nothing left but darkness rimmed in quicksilver.

Quickly, I add, "But it's over now. He—um, he found his mate at the Hunt."

Something flickers across the king's face. His fingers twitch against my throat, and for a heartbeat, I think he might snap my neck right here. But then he releases me, leaving me to stumble back, chest heaving with each gulping breath.

I could breathe, but it was still hard through the panic.

"Come forward," the king commands, turning to Rafe. "Let me see who dares touch what's mine."

My stomach drops.

Wait. What?

Chapter 16: Grace: What's His

Mine.

The world buzzes in my ears, and time seems to slow.

Alpha's standing now, veins protruding from his neck as he shouts at the Lycan King. Ellie's yanking on Rafe's arm, but he isn't looking at her. He's looking at *me*, his blue eyes dark and angry, as if I've somehow done something wrong.

My wrists and legs hurt where the rope still bites into my skin; there's no doubt I'm the king's captive, not anything he considers precious. And yet there's my brain, lost and stuttering over his words.

Let me see who dares touch what's mine.

Me? His?

My eyes return to the Lycan King, the source of this mess. His back is to me as he confronts my pack.

Muscles ripple beneath his shirt, each movement deliberate and controlled. The black ink of his tattoos shifts across his skin; at first, I thought of them as serpentine and slithery, but right now I can see they're more like soft ropes of shadow caressing his skin. The patterns almost dance, mesmerizing in their fluid grace.

A bead of sweat rolls down Alpha's temple as sound slowly comes back into focus, no longer buzzing in my ears. "High Alpha! What claim could you possibly have on this human?"

The Lycan King's shoulders tense, his head tilting ever so slightly. "You dare demand explanations from me? Tell me, Brax, what gives you the right to question your king?"

Alpha lowers his head in submission. "High Alpha, I do not mean to demand anything—I only ask for clarification." His words are polite, but his words come through gritted teeth.

Murmurs ripple through the crowd as the tension rackets up. And who turned the thermostat up to ninety? It's so hot, it feels like noon in midsummer.

"I was the one. Grace and I have been dating for years." Rafe's voice cuts through the crowd as he strides forward, chin lifted high, every bit the entitled future alpha he was raised to be—but he looks like a child playing hero to my eyes, incomparable to the Lycan King standing before us.

"Rafe, stop!" Ellie's hiss carries even over the murmuring crowd. Perfectly manicured nails dig into his forearm. "You're making a scene. Think about what you're doing."

Rafe shakes her off, never once glancing back—his eyes are still locked on mine.

"Don't you dare humiliate me like this." Ellie's whisper carries the edge of a growl. "Not in front of everyone. Not for *that*."

The ink beneath the Lycan King's skin darkens, like storm clouds gathering before lightning strikes. His fingers flex at his sides, and I can't tear my eyes from the way the shadows seem to follow his movements, as if the tattoos themselves share his fury.

"You claim what's mine?" The king asks, his words more growled than spoken.

Rafe's arrogant saunter pauses; his blue eyes tear away from me to focus on the alpha of alphas and king of wolves, finally seeming to understand he's in danger.

He frowns, sweeping a hand in my general direction. "She's part of our pack, High Alpha. Unmated and unclaimed. If any claim was made, it would have been mine."

"The boy speaks truth, High Alpha." Brax's voice carries an edge of desperation beneath his usual authority. "Your words suggest you've laid claim without cause. As if she were your..." He swallows hard, then continues without finishing. "Their relationship predates your arrival."

My throat burns where the Lycan King's fingers pressed moments ago, and I wish these damn ropes were no longer holding me here. If I had the chance, I would run—as far and as fast as I can, away from this place.

Danger. It's dangerous here, and the king is about to explode.

I don't understand why, but I understand this: There's no way I'm going to be unscathed in the crossfire of his temper.

"She was involved with this..." The Lycan King's lip curls as he regards Rafe. "This pup. But that's ended now, hasn't it, Brax?"

Alpha nods so fast I worry his head might detach. "Yes, High Alpha. Ended when he found his true mate." He gestures to Ellie, who smiles tightly, her fingers still digging into Rafe's arm, like talons holding onto her prey.

The king's voice drops to a soft rumble. "And you're certain this arrogant pup understands it is ended?"

The question hangs in the air. Rafe's shoulders square, but I catch the slight tremor in his hands. His earlier bravado cracks under the weight of the king's attention.

"I—" Rafe starts, but Ellie's sharp nails dig into his arm.

"Of course he understands," she declares loudly. "Tell him, Rafe. Tell him it's over."

Rafe's mouth opens and closes, caught between Ellie's demands and the king's scrutiny. For the first time since I've known him, he looks small. Finally, he lowers his head. "Yes, High Alpha. It is over. Ellie is my fated mate, found during the Mate Hunt."

The air thickens, pressing against my skin like a physical weight. My bound legs buckle, and I fall backward onto my butt with an undignified thump. A wave of pure dominance rolls through the room, and wolves drop to their knees left and right.

"You have laid your claim, and yet you dare touch what's mine?" The king's voice thunders through the hall. The shadows of his tattoos writhe beneath his skin, no longer fluid but sharp and jagged.

My chest constricts. Each breath comes shorter than the last as the pressure builds. But something's off—the others are gasping, clawing at their throats. Even Beta crashes to his knees, his face twisted in submission. Ellie follows, then Rafe, then Alpha. One by one, they fall like dominoes.

The Lycans at the broken table remain sitting. Watching. Unfazed.

And me? Sure, my heart pounds against my ribs, and sweat beads on my forehead, but I'm not choking like the others. The king's power feels more like a heavy blanket than the crushing force that's brought an entire pack of shifters to their knees.

Chapter 17: Grace: Everything Goes South

"Answer!" The king's roar shakes dust from the rafters.

Rafe's face presses against the floor, his shoulders trembling. "High Alpha, I didn't—she was never marked—"

"Silence!"

As if he hadn't been demanding an answer a literal moment ago.

The temperature spikes. A faint glow emanates from the king's skin, pulsing in time with his rage. The shadows of his tattoos seem to reach out, grasping at nothing.

My head spins. This is chaos. *Insanity.*

Alpha's forehead touches the ground, well and properly cowed this time. "High Alpha, please. We didn't know she bore your mark. How could we expect a human to bear the High Alpha's claim?"

The pressure in the room doubles. Voices cry out as every shifter in the Blue Mountain Pack presses themselves flat against the floor. The king's power fills every corner, every crevice, until the very air feels ready to ignite.

But still, it barely touches me. Like I'm wrapped in some invisible barrier that keeps the worst of it at bay. The king turns, and our eyes meet. Gray like storm clouds, just like that night in the forest. Just like the wolf that protected me.

Oh.

Oh, no.

It's strange—impossible, really—but the pieces click together, and my stomach drops. The massive wolf with the ethereal blue glow and the Lycan King, with his own faint glow. They're one and the same, aren't they?

But wait—I've never heard of a wolf and their shifter body being separate.

Still, somehow I know I'm right. It rings true down to my soul.

"She was unmarked, High Alpha. I swear it," Rafe says, and Ellie's hand is still holding onto his arm, trembling violently.

Everything feels distant, like I'm watching a play unfold. Or a TV show. The king's power thrums through the room, but my mind fixates on the oddest details—the way dust motes dance in the air, how Beta's left boot has a scuff mark, the way the Lycan King's cologne-like smell wafts through the air, thicker than before. Maybe it's from his alpha dominance.

Oh. Maybe I'm in shock. It would make sense if I am. Shock is the body's way of protecting itself from trauma, right? And God knows I'm in need of some protection here. More mental than anything at the moment, but who knows—things can change at any moment.

There's also a full half of my brain still grappling with the idea I'm somehow marked by a psychopathic wolf-king who smells like he should be an underwear model and looks like a mobster. He said *mine*, but he doesn't treat me like I am.

If he really meant it, he'd treat me with a little more care, right? Instead I was kidnapped, thrown to the ground, kind of choked... Okay, yeah, I have to be in shock. The list of things I've gone through is getting a little too long.

The king takes one step forward. The sound of his boot against the marble floor echoes through the silent room. It's a soft sound, a bare scuff, but that's how dead the air is in this place. Even when he crouches he towers over Rafe, close enough now that his breath stirs his golden, picture-perfect hair.

Like a demon king subjugating a hero.

"Are you certain?" Each word drops like ice, and I swear the entire room is holding their breath, waiting to watch the end of this horrible play.

Rafe's mouth opens and closes, but no sound comes out.

The king's head snaps up, his storm-gray eyes finding Alpha. "Was she truly unclaimed after the Mate Hunt?"

Alpha's face goes slack. His throat bobs as he swallows. "There was... there was a presence. A wolf we didn't recognize."

"And?" The king's voice carries a dangerous edge.

The words come swiftly, as if hurrying the pace will save him from the man's fury. "When we found her, she was alone and the strange wolf was gone. We assumed it fled when we approached. But Grace, she never showed signs of being marked or claimed."

The silence that follows feels like glass about to shatter. I press my hands against my throat, remembering that night, and how I'd told the wolf to run.

"Tell me, Blue Mountain Pack Alpha." The king's voice drips with lethal calm. "Was there a scent covering her that night?"

My former adoptive father seems small now, oppressed beneath the weight of Lycan dominance. He's nearly prostrated, as weak as the others, as if he's not an alpha at all. "There was... a scent, High Alpha." He sounds resigned.

"And?"

"We assumed it belonged to a rogue wolf." The words come out choked, as if each one causes him physical pain. Maybe they do.

A laugh cuts through the silence. It's not a pleasant sound—my soul cringes from it.

"Fascinating." The king turns away from Rafe, and I can finally see his face again. It's closed off, cold and distant, as if speaking to air and not living, breathing people. Every word he speaks is punctuated by a step toward Alpha. "The mighty Blue Mountain Pack. So incompetent they can't distinguish between a rogue's scent and that of a Lycan.

"Perhaps we should discuss your education, Brax. Clearly, your nose needs... retraining." His boots stop directly in front of the man I'd considered a father for six years. "Or did you simply choose to ignore what you smelled?"

Alpha's breath hitches. "High Alpha, please—"

"Silence."

The command cracks like a whip. Alpha's mouth snaps shut so fast I hear his teeth click.

"A pack that can't recognize their king's scent." He shakes his head, a terrible smile playing on his lips. "What other basic skills have you neglected to master? The difference between up and down? Perhaps you mistake rabbits for deer?"

Scattered nervous laughter ripples through the prostrated crowd, quickly stifled when the king's gaze sweeps over them. Even when their heads aren't raised, they must be able to feel the weight of his attention.

"This goes beyond mere incompetence." His voice carries to every corner of the room. "This speaks to a fundamental failure of leadership."

Brax remains frozen, face pressed to the floor. Even from here, I can see him trembling.

"Your pack requires re-education." The king's words fall, like stones into still water, rippling through every body here. "Every. Last. One." The glow intensifies around him, a beautiful blue, and there's no mistaking it—it's the same ethereal light as the wolf.

"Fenrisúlfr."

A massive black, glowing wolf materializes beside the king, and my brain short-circuits. No. That's impossible. *Impossible*. He was left behind, where I'd been tied up for the entire day.

He can't just appear out of thin air like that.

Fenris's ethereal blue glow pulses in time with the king's aura; he towers over the crouched forms of my former pack, his shoulders level with the king's chest. He doesn't look back at me once.

The king's voice carries an edge of satisfaction. "Re-educate them."

The command barely registers in my ears when Fenris lunges. My scream tears through the silence as his massive jaws clamp around Alpha's shoulder. Blood sprays across the marble floor.

"No!" The word rips from my throat before I can stop it. As much as Alpha has hurt me, he's still the man who raised me for six years.

Brax's agonized howl morphs into a snarl as he shifts. His bones crack and reform in an instant. Even as a large wolf himself, he's dwarfed by Fenris.

The room erupts as the Lycan King's dominance drops from the air. The sound of shifts erupt from every direction and wolves surge forward, fur bristling, teeth bared, growls and snarls rending the air.

The Blue Mountain Pack rallies around their alpha, their unified howls shaking dust from the rafters.

But they're not the only ones here.

The Lycans rise from their seats, their transformations fluid and graceful. Where the Blue Mountain wolves are large, these creatures are enormous. Every one of them is larger than Alpha, and Fenris grows larger still, until his shoulders brush the ceiling. Every step of a paw is a crunch of someone's bone, accompanied by screams and shrieks of pain.

Power radiates from them in waves, and I retch against the floor, my stomach twisted from... everything.

Fenris releases Brax, who stumbles back into the protective circle of his pack. Blood mats his gray fur, but his lips are pulled back in a vicious snarl. Rafe and Beta flank him.

The first clash sounds like thunder. Bodies collide in a fury of teeth and claws, and my vision goes black.

Something warm covers my eyes. "Don't look," the king murmurs, his breath tickling my ear with the faint scent of peppermint. He sounds annoyed as he adds, "Humans aren't strong enough to watch this sort of thing."

My stomach swoops low as the ropes on my wrists, then ankles, go tight with sharp tugs before loosening abruptly. I'm free, except the Lycan King's chest is pressed against my back, his warmth bleeding into me.

There's nowhere to run as the sound of death and mayhem continues.

Chapter 18: Grace: Pillow

The next morning dawns with somber silence and a pile of bodies in front of the main lodge.

Alpha's is on top for everyone to see, but it's the sheer number that makes me want to vomit every time I look out the window. I was right when I thought the Lycan King was a serial killer. He instigated a riot and caused the death of... how many? Twenty? Thirty?

He's a madman.

And I still don't understand why he did it.

Alpha's dead. So is Beta. I don't know where Rafe is, but I did see Andrew this morning, limping as he helped gather the bodies.

The door creaks. I whirl around, heart in my throat, expecting the mass murderer in question to be standing there.

A red-haired Lycan stands in the doorway, the same one who smirked at my predicament last night. His posture is formal, almost stiff. "Caine thought these might fit you." He extends a stack of fabric.

I don't move to take it, watching him with suspicion. Caine must be the Lycan King's name, but that's just an assumption. It could be any of them.

After standing there for a solid ten seconds, he sighs and walks inside, not bothering to ask for permission as he brushes by me. He places them on the bed before backing away with measured steps. "There's a bathroom through that door if you'd like to freshen up."

I already know that. It isn't my first time in the main lodge's guest quarters, though I've never stayed in them overnight. It's interesting, though, that he's so concerned about me. Bringing me clothes, urging me to shower?

He—and his kin—massacred my adoptive pack. The Lycan King himself bound me with rope before dragging me to this place.

It's strange. So strange.

The door clicks shut behind the red-haired Lycan and I sigh, heading to the bed to inspect what he brought.

Shirts, blouses, jeans, and slacks. I guess so I can pick whatever I'm most comfortable with? There's a pair of sneakers underneath them all, black with rose gold accents, and

they look brand new. No socks, though. Or underwear. And yet there's a bra, though a quick glance at the tag says it's a little too big, both in bust and cup.

A soft thump outside the door reminds me I'm trapped in here, with a guard stationed in the hall.

This is insane. People don't just get kidnapped by wolf shifters anymore. They don't witness massacres, have their entire *city* get taken over, or get claimed by the king. This isn't a movie, or a book. It's my life.

As a normal human, I would be worrying about college and my future. As a human in a wolf pack, my life is already different from other people—but not *this* different.

I grab the plain black t-shirt and a pair of dark jeans from the pile. Simple, comfortable, and not tainted by the events of last night. Perfect for whatever nightmare awaits me next.

The bathroom door's lock clicks into place, but I test it three times. A flimsy barrier between me and whatever guards lurk outside, but it's something. The sound of running water fills the space as I turn the shower on full blast.

Steam rises, fogging the mirror. My reflection blurs, and for a moment, I see the ghost of who I used to be—Alpha's daughter, Rafe's girlfriend, part of a pack. Now what am I? A prisoner? A prize?

Who fucking knows. Enlightening me doesn't seem high on anyone's priority list.

The hot water stings my skin, but I keep it quick. No time to contemplate my situation under the spray. My muscles ache from being bound, throat still tender from... everything.

The thought of putting on dirty underwear makes my skin crawl, so I wash them by hand in the sink. Soap suds swirl down the drain as I scrub them clean, along with my bra. Both items end up hanging over the shower rod to dry.

My long, wet hair goes into a messy bun, where it'll take forever to dry—but at least it won't soak my shirt. The only towel in the bathroom was a hand towel. It is what it is.

Comfortable, dressed, and clean—at least as clean as soap and scrubbing hard can do, though it feels like everyone's deaths will forever stain my skin—I open the door to my jail cell.

A scream tears from my throat before I can stop it. The Lycan King lounges on his side, on my bed, like he owns it—which, technically, he probably does now. But that's not what makes my blood run cold.

He's holding my pillow to his face and sniffing it.

"What are you—why are you—*what are you doing*

?!"

Outrage outweighs fear in this absurd moment, as I clutch the doorknob and stare into the eyes of this murderous stranger.

His cold gaze slowly lifts to mine as he takes a deep whiff.

My fingers flex and curl at my sides. The urge to snatch my pillow from his grasp wars with the instinct to stay perfectly still and keep from antagonizing a killer. And worse than either is the part of me wanting to get closer and sniff him back, bury myself in that cologne-ad scent of his.

It's like my mind's gone as insane as the man in front of me, even as it catalogues every part of his face to memory, while lamenting the fact he's clothed. Casual clothes, just like yesterday. Shirt. Pants. All black.

What am I thinking? The man's a murderer. What does it say about me, when my brain can be so obsessed with his beauty while the evidence of his misdeeds is literally *piled* outside this building?

His face remains buried in my pillow, and the silence stretches thin between us. Each inhale of his makes my skin crawl. What kind of person—king or not—breaks into someone's room to smell their pillow?

A psychotic person, that's who.

The mattress creaks as he finally sits up, gray eyes fixed on mine with an intensity that pins me in place. "I hate muffins."

I blink. Once. Twice. My mouth opens, but no sound comes out.

"Especially blueberry ones." His nose wrinkles with distaste.

What in the...? Why would I care about his breakfast preferences?

I want to point out that I didn't ask, or that this is the strangest conversation opener I've ever heard, but my throat closes up. Because this isn't just some weird guy with boundary issues. This is the Lycan King. The same one who had Fenris rip out Alpha's throat last night.

Maybe he's telling me because he plans to make me his slave? That makes sense, I guess. Doesn't explain why he's smelling my pillow, but one problem at a time.

So I stand here, dripping water onto the carpet, staring at him like he's speaking another language. Which, honestly, he might as well be.

The Lycan King crosses one leg over the other, his arm draped across his thigh with casual elegance that doesn't match the predatory gleam in his eyes.

Seconds continue to tick on as he doesn't move or blink.

My wet hair drips down my neck. The silence stretches until it feels like a physical thing between us, heavy and thick. I wonder if I'm going to die today, and the thought is almost casual as it flits through my head.

Fear is strangely distant, even as it keeps me frozen. Maybe it's shock. Does shock last this long?

"Your hair is brown," he says suddenly, and for some reason I actually roll my eyes up, like I'm trying to see for myself.

Of course my hair's brown. It's been brown since the day I was born. "Yes..."

"But your eyes are green."

My hand twitches; another strange reflex where I want to touch them, as if that will confirm his statement. "Ah—yes."

He grunts. "I thought they'd be blue. Like blueberries."

There's no particular animosity in the way he speaks or watches me, though my skin still crawls under his attention.

Maybe...

Maybe he's not evil, but just completely unhinged. The way he's fixated on my pillow, rambling about muffins? It reminds me of some of the more unstable wolves in the pack. The ones who go missing after a while, never to be seen again. Alpha said it was from spending too much time in their wolf form, where they lost touch with their human side.

I clear my throat. "Are you—is your name Caine?" May as well get that bit of curiosity out of my head.

He inclines his head in a slow, regal gesture. I think it's his way of saying yes, but it's the most arrogant way I've ever seen it done.

"Could I have my pillow back?"

Caine's eyes flicker. "No."

Then he stands in one fluid motion, my pillow clutched to his chest like a trophy. Without another word, he strides to the door and leaves, taking it with him.

I stare at the closed door, mouth hanging open. What just happened? Did the Lycan King—the most powerful shifter in existence, the man who just orchestrated a bloodbath—seriously just steal my *pillow*?

The absurdity of it hits me, and I sink onto the now-pillowless bed. A hysterical laugh bubbles up in my throat. Of all the scenarios I imagined when I woke up, the Lycan King becoming a pillow thief wasn't one of them.

"I wish he'd just kill me and get it over with," I mumble, staring out the window. At the sky, so I don't focus on the bodies.

It's blue. Fluffy clouds pass by, indifferent to the suffering below, and I wonder—again—what he's going to do with me.

Chapter 19: Grace: Aftermath

The rest of the morning passes without incident.

Or food.

My stomach growls. The clock on the wall ticks past noon, and each second is another twist of my belly. It's been over a day since I've eaten, but at least I have free access to water now.

Small mercies.

But I can't stay in this room forever, can I?

My fingers tap against my lower lip as I stare at the door. It's a standard wood-grain door, probably hollow, with a simple knob. Nothing extravagant or strange, and yet my heart stutters at the thought of what lies beyond it.

Life isn't the same anymore. Alpha's dead, and I've lost all protection. What do Lycans do with humans? Alpha never let me see them before, saying it was dangerous. It's clear that's one thing he didn't lie about. Honestly, the fact I'm even alive when so many are dead...

"This is ridiculous." My voice is soft in the silence, but speaking at all seems to build my courage to push off the bed and ignore how my legs shake as I take one step, then another.

The brass doorknob is cool under my palm. I curl my fingers around it, but my grip trembles.

My stomach growls again, loud enough to echo off the walls. The sound startles me out of my frozen state, and I open the door. Just a tiny inch of space, not really enough to peek through.

I press my ear to the gap but hear only silence. No footsteps. No voices. No breathing.

The door opens wider under my palm. I peek through the crack, scanning the hallway beyond. Carpeted floor. Framed landscapes along the wall. Bright light overhead.

A massive figure looms in the hallway. Dark eyes lock onto mine, set in a face carved from granite. The Lycan's lip curls, revealing the edge of a fang, and I swear I can hear a growl rumbling my way.

I slam the door shut and scurry back to my bed, breathing hard.

Dangerous. That was dangerous.

He was not happy to see me. I'm definitely a prisoner, not that I had much doubt over the situation. I may not understand *why*, but at least I know *what* I am.

Goosebumps race up my arms and I rub them hard, wishing I was braver. Stronger. A lot sneakier, too. It would be nice if I could just disappear. In fact, if that damn wolf—Fenris—hadn't come around in the forest, I'd be in the city by now.

Stupid, oversized, disloyal dog.

Three sharp knocks crack against the door and I jump as the red-haired Lycan walks inside, not waiting for me to answer.

His eyes flicker to the bed in a moment so brief, I'm not sure I actually see it happen.

"Miss Harper," he says, sounding indifferent to my fate, "You will come with me now."

Not *please follow me*. No information on where I'm going, or why. Just a flat order, with no emotion on his face.

My throat closes up, making it hard to breathe. After witnessing what happened to my former pack, the last thing I want is to follow any Lycan anywhere.

"Miss Harper." Steel threads through his tone. "Now."

* * *

Everything's different.

The event hall has been scrubbed clean, all the decorations gone. Days of preparation have disappeared overnight and no hint of the bloodbath remains. Vaguely, I recall a pile of *stuff* from my window. It didn't seem very important while a pile of dead bodies took center stage, but it makes sense now. Everything was tossed.

It's as somber as a funeral in here. Pack members shuffle past with downcast eyes, their shoulders slumped. No greetings exchanged, no morning pleasantries—just the soft scuffle of footsteps against the floor.

A pack without an Alpha is a dead pack, and that's exactly how they're acting. I wonder what our fate is now. I've heard stories about the Lycan King, to some extent, but not enough to give me any information. Do packs like this disintegrate after the Alpha is murdered?

And how much do I really care? But it's hard *not* to care, after seeing... everything. It isn't like I'm loyal to the same people who turned their backs on me. I want nothing to do with them!

But... a massacre is extreme.

Though, I guess it makes sense why all wolf packs would be subordinate under the Lycan King. They're probably all scared of having their throats cut out, just like Alpha. As far as I've ever understood, the Blue Mountain Pack isn't weak, and yet they stood no chance against a mere handful of Lycans.

Somber thoughts are doing nothing for the uneasiness crawling all over my skin, but I can't push them away.

My escort's red hair gleams under the chandelier lights as he strides forward. His presence is enough to clear his path; it doesn't matter what anyone is doing, they scurry back ten feet to avoid contact. They don't seem to notice I'm following behind, their fearful glances focused on the Lycan. He doesn't have the terrifying presence of the Lycan King, and yet they can't even lift their heads as he passes by.

A woman drops her cleaning supplies, the clatter echoing through the silence. She scrambles to pick them off the floor, her hands shaking. The Lycan doesn't break stride, though everyone else turns to look. In fact, he's not even glancing back to make sure I'm following.

Then again, why would he? It's not like I can go anywhere else, I guess.

My stomach growls as I walk behind, watching the space between us grow. It isn't an intentional defiance, but a side effect of his pacing. He doesn't seem to realize I can't keep up yet.

Maybe I should jog to catch up—

Fingers clamp around my wrist, yanking me backward.

I spin around and freeze. Ellie's perfect features twist into something monstrous, her teeth bared. Her manicured nails dig crescents into my skin as her nostrils flare. Her green eyes are so much more vibrant than mine, hard and cold as emeralds, and they're currently flashing with gold.

"You," she hisses, the venom in her voice palpable as I cringe against her grip. "Why are you still here?"

Chapter 20: Grace: Intelligence is Lacking

"Let me go!" Tugging my wrist back just causes more pain; I'll never get away by relying on strength. I wouldn't win against even the weakest wolf, and Ellie is not weak. But I can't just sit there and do nothing, so I keep trying.

"This is all because of you," she snaps, her fingers tightening to the point it feels my bones are being crushed. "Coming in here and causing a misunderstanding between our pack and the Lycans."

Our pack, she says, as if she's already Luna or something.

Not that I'm competing, or even want to, but don't I have a little more claim to this pack than she does? Even if I've become an abandoned human, I at least lived among these people for six years.

There's no point in arguing semantics, though. I don't want this pack anymore; I want to leave.

"Let me go," I say again, trying to pry her fingers off with my other hand. They don't budge, and she snatches my other wrist as if I'm a child, with the same bone-crushing grasp.

The pain's enough to send me to my knees, but I don't want to go down in a pathetic heap in front of *her*, of all people.

"Is there a problem here?" The Lycan's finally noticed I'm no longer behind him, striding toward Ellie from across the room.

Relief floods through me as he approaches, but it evaporates just as quickly. His expression remains neutral as he watches Ellie crush my wrists, not a flicker of concern crossing his features.

"Lycan Beta." Ellie's voice drips honey, her grip never loosening. "I was just having some words with the disgrace."

My stomach churns at her use of that word. Not that it's the first time I've heard it, but somehow it cuts deeper coming from her perfect lips, especially in front of someone who could actually help. If he wanted to.

But he doesn't. The Lycan Beta's gaze slides between us, assessing, measuring. Like he's watching a mildly interesting experiment rather than someone in pain.

My wrists throb, and I can feel the bones grinding together under Ellie's supernatural strength.

The Lycan Beta's nostrils flare, probably catching the scent of my fear, my pain. These wolves, they can smell everything—tears, blood, terror. And yet he stands there, unmoved.

What did I expect? These are the same Lycans who turned the event hall into a slaughterhouse last night. The same ones who piled bodies outside the building like a haphazard Lego pile. One girl's crushed wrists probably don't even register on their scale of acceptable violence.

Ellie's fingers tighten further, and a small whimper escapes me before I can stop it. The Beta's continued silence is all the permission she needs.

I should have known better than to hope for mercy from monsters—

"Who are you?" the Lycan asks Ellie bluntly, and her grip falters.

"Lycan Beta, my name is Ellie Thornton, mate to Raphael Wilder, the new Alpha of the Blue Mountain Pack."

My knees almost buckle, but I lock them before I fall. Rafe is alive. Not just alive—he's Alpha now.

But I can't process it. My mind stutters over the reality that Rafe survived while Alpha died. That in the aftermath of carnage, he claimed leadership. That somehow, in the space of hours, everything has shifted again.

"The new Alpha?" The Lycan Beta's voice carries a dangerous edge.

Ellie's fingers finally release my wrists; she sounds cautious now, no longer deranged with her hatred of me. "Yes, Lycan Beta. Raphael is the former Alpha's heir."

I cradle my arm against my chest, angry red marks blooming where her grip crushed blood vessels. The Beta's gaze drops to the bruises.

"Does the Blue Mountain Pack make a habit of touching what doesn't belong to them?"

A chill runs through me at his words. The way he says it—like I'm property.

Ellie's perfect posture falters. "I apologize, Lycan Beta. I acted rashly." Her voice drips with rehearsed contrition. "You see, this human has been the source of much discord between our pack and yours. I only wish to understand why."

My throat tightens as she continues, each word precise and calculated.

"I will personally investigate her situation. After all, we want nothing but peace between our packs now."

The Beta's attention hasn't left my wrists. Something in his stance shifts, a predatory stillness that makes my skin crawl. "Will you now?"

"Of course. It's clear she's caused enough trouble already."

The Lycan Beta's lips curl into something between a sneer and a smile. "Your loyalty is commendable. Your intelligence, however, seems to be lacking."

Ellie's perfect posture crumbles. The change in her demeanor is so sudden, it's like watching a flower wilt in fast motion. Gone is the self-assured female who crushed my wrists moments ago.

"The Lycan King made his stance quite clear." His voice drops to a dangerous whisper. "Or did you miss that part while cowering on your knees?"

A shudder runs through me at the memory of last night—the way everyone dropped except me. The raw power that had filled the room. The blood that followed.

Ellie's gaze darts between me and the Beta, uncertainty clouding her features. "High Alpha said harboring humans goes against international law." Her voice wavers. "The Blue Mountain Pack intends to follow such law to the letter."

"And this human is no longer the Blue Mountain Pack's concern." The Beta's words slice through the air like ice. "Your new Alpha would do well to remember whose leniency allowed him to live."

The threat in his voice makes my blood run cold. Ellie pales, her perfect complexion turning ashen.

She takes another step back, then another, until she's far enough away that even I can breathe easier. "I apologize, Lycan Beta. We will leave her fate to your discretion."

The Lycan Beta spins away from her, meeting my gaze briefly. "Follow."

I stumble after him, my bruised wrist throbbing as I cradle it against my chest. So many questions fill my head.

A chill runs down my spine, and I glance over my shoulder. Ellie stands frozen where we left her, her perfect features twisted into something ugly. The hatred in her eyes burns into me, raw and primal.