

# Grace of a Wolf

## #Chapter 171: Grace: Not Paranoia - Read Grace of a Wolf Chapter 171: Grace: Not Paranoia

### Chapter 171: Grace: Not Paranoia

The phone in my back pocket chimes with a notification. I wipe peanut butter off my fingers, and Jer snatches the PB&J with a quick, "Thanks!" tossed over his shoulder.

For whatever reason, he and Sara are in some sort of competition, where they're counting white cars (Sara) and red cars (Jer). They also yell out when they see tow trucks pass—as if rubbing salt into the wound of our long wait.

Caine and Andrew are outside with the dog, probably still staring at the tire they can't fix.

Whatever keeps them happy, I guess.

Since Bun's napping on Ron's lap and my hands are once again free, I check the phone, expecting to see another Divinity Connect message.

Instead, I see Lyre's name.

**[LYRE: Owen's place was burned down. Good thing you got out.]**

I gasp. Burned down?!

Ron glances up from where he's been playing with Bun's feet as she sleeps.  
"Everything okay?"

"Hm? Oh. Yeah. Everything's fine." I'm already lying to children. I'm a terrible mother.  
"I'll be right back. I need to call Lyre."

"Okay," Jer and Sara chorus.

My hands shake as I duck into Lyre's bedroom and shut the door. This isn't a conversation to have over texts.

The phone rings over and over, until finally it clicks.

Before she can even say hello, I demand, "What do you mean, burned down?"

On Lyre's end, chaos reigns. Something crashes. There's shouting, then a sound like glass breaking. Suddenly, it all cuts off.

"Big fire makes everything into ash." Her voice is as dry as usual.

I groan. Now is not the time for humor. "You know what I mean. What happened?"

She sighs. "We went to pick up Owen's car, and found the aftermath. They got his car, too. The rest of the street was fine, so the fire was only contained to his lot somehow."

It takes me a second to remember the cave was somehow connected to a house.

"And the cave?"

"It's... fine."

She doesn't sound like she's telling the truth, though, and my suspicion only grows when she quickly changes the subject.

"How far are you now? Where did you stop for the night?"

I lean against Lyre's dresser, staring at my reflection in the mirror. Blonde hair I'm finally used to. Dark circles under my eyes. A weird stain on my shirt; no idea where it came from.

Maybe it's snot. Not mine, obviously, but Bun's.

I look as frazzled as I feel.

Traveling with kids never sounded like it would be easy in the first place, but I was wholly unprepared for the reality of it.

"How far... hah. So, funny story..."

I explain our current predicament, occasionally distracted by random spurts of noise on her end of the line. It all sounds very... squishy. And disturbing.

She doesn't interrupt. When I finally finish, dwindling into silence after telling her about the flat tire, she speaks.

"Trouble just seems to follow you everywhere, doesn't it?" she drawls. "Try to stay safe, at least. Let me know if you need money, I'll add more on the card I gave you. Tires aren't cheap."

The tattered remnants of what (if you're generous) might be considered pride bristle. It's good to know I have some *somewhere*, though. "I can't keep taking your money, Lyre."

Though, Caine's the one footing the bill. So what little pride I've managed to accrue shrivels. I'm still too dependent, but it isn't like life's slowed down since escaping Blue Mountain.

"I have too much of it anyway." There's a note of dismissal in her voice, suggesting this topic is non-negotiable.

I sigh. Realistically speaking, I'm poor. I have no job and no prospects for one in the near future, with this strange lifestyle I've somehow acquired. Who am I to argue with free money? If it wasn't for Lyre—and now Caine—I'd be homeless and starving.

Before I can respond, a wet, sloppy sound comes through the line, followed immediately by a high-pitched scream. It makes my ears tingle uncomfortably. A slight shudder runs down my spine.

"What was that?" I pull the phone away from my ear, checking the screen as if it might show me what's happening. "Lyre, what are you doing right now? Are you—"

"Just clearing up an infestation." Her tone remains casual, as if she's swatting flies. And yet it sounds quite violent on her end of the line. "Don't worry about it."

I'm worried, for all kinds of reasons.

"Was this a bad time?"

"It's almost never a bad time for you, Grace. But hold that thought."

More awful noises. For some reason, I'm imagining her bludgeoning people with a bat, and it leaves me uncomfortable.

Not only because she might actually be doing that very thing—this is Lyre we're talking about, and I'm starting to understand she's as crazy as Caine in her own special Lyre way—but because some of me doesn't really care.

Who am I, and what have I done with my morals?

Does it really only take a few days to change your entire world view?

Apparently so.

"Okay, I lied. It's a bad time. Keep me updated, and I'll call you later."

The line goes dead before I can get another word in.

I stare at the phone in my hand, unnerved and off-balance after the brief conversation. Slowly, I set it on the dresser and wrap my arms around myself, rubbing at the sudden chill racing along my skin.

Who the hell went after Owen's place? And what would they have done to us, if they managed to get in...?

My uneasiness from earlier wasn't paranoia after all. Whatever's out there, the strange feeling had saved us from it. I just wish I had more answers on what *it* is.

But it's not hard to make a guess.

The children have been hunted all their lives, and Owen's lost many more than the four we've taken under our wing.

They have to be after the children.

Another shiver wracks through my body, and I gulp down a couple deep breaths, trying to calm my racing heart.

It's fine. Everything's fine.

## **Chapter 172: Grace: Theories**

By the time the tow truck comes and goes and I've made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for all the adults (only to find out Caine likes grape jelly like a *psychopath*), I'm calm again.

We're out. It didn't happen to us. And right now, that's my focus.

Besides, despite having lucked out onto a wide shoulder like this, I'm still a little worried a car's going to crash into us. With our current streak of luck, it isn't a baseless concern.

Andrew dangles a piece of crust in front of Sadie, who's been sitting in front of him with begging eyes since he first started eating. He seems both nonplussed and enthralled by her.

At first, it was weird. But then I thought about it. Wolves never get to spend time with dogs, so they've never had the Sadie experience.

Her tail swishes against the floor as she gingerly snatches it from his fingers, only to then scarf it down like a feral beast.

Then he gets a second bit of crust out, dangling it in front of the dog.

"Don't feed her that!"

Andrew freezes mid-motion, the crust hovering between his fingers and Sadie's expectant mouth. "Why not?"

Sadie's eyes lock with mine. Her tail stops wagging. I've destroyed her doggy Christmas.

"Because we don't know what's up with her." I take another bite of my sandwich, chewing slowly as I frown at the dog. She's cute, but knowing there's something strange about her... it's hard to see her as just a big, loveable ball of fur.

But so far, aside from her lack of fear, she's just... a normal dog.

Too normal.

Shouldn't she want to go back home? Why is she so comfortable in a stranger's car? And now she's going in and out of the camper with us like she's been part of the family forever.

"It's just a dog, Grace." Andrew shrugs and drops the crust anyway. Sadie's tail resumes its happy rhythm as she snatches the offering.

"She's not just a dog," I mutter.

When I'd asked what Sadie actually was, Lyre had danced around the subject. She did say the dog wasn't any sort of threat, and might actually be helpful. How a dopey golden retriever's going to somehow *help* our little caravan has yet to be realized, though.

But the kids like her. So I guess there's that.

Come to think of it, Lyre gave no explanation about what happened to Archie and Doris—just reiterated Owen's claim that *they're not dead* and leaving them there will be fine.

Which, of course, makes *zero* logical sense, but I'm coming to think of this as the App Phenomenon. Anything under its purview is on a need to know basis.

Though I still don't understand why an old couple who like to barbecue have anything to do with divinities and Chaos.

And Caine's been no help with dragging information out of Lyre. I'd thought he'd be pushier, demand answers, but the moment the magic words came out of her mouth, he was done. It just took the one phrase: "They have nothing to do with Grace, and they're not a danger to you."

After that, his focus had instantly shifted back to us—to me—with his intense, single-minded concentration. He'd even said, "If it's not a threat to Grace or the children, it's

not my concern right now," without even a flicker of discomfort over saying a line I'd read out of a sappy romance novel somewhere.

But it should be his concern. It should be *everyone's* concern when two seemingly normal people turn out to be something strange and dead-but-not-dead. In my world, we call those *zombies*, thank you very much. And zombies bring uprisings and the apocalypse.

"Why are you mad at Sadie?" Sara asks, popping up by my elbow. I blink, realizing I've been glaring at the dog while aggressively masticating.

I swallow my bite. "I'm not mad at her."

"You keep staring at her like you are."

Andrew snorts. "More like she's trying to decide if Sadie's secretly plotting world domination."

He's come late to the game, so he doesn't know why I'm suspicious of the dog. I could always fill him in—and would—but dragging him into another room to explain something sounds like a bad idea.

For him, anyway.

"Well, maybe she is," I mutter.

Sara flounces away to approach Sadie, running a hand over her golden fur. "Look! She's such a nice dog."

Caine chooses that moment to duck his head into the camper, filling the doorway. His eyes sweep the interior, cataloging all of us in his quick, assessing way before landing on me. "Everything alright in here?"

"Grace thinks Sadie is an alien," Jer pipes up from where he's sprawled on the couch.

"I never said that." I break eye contact with Caine, feeling heat creep into my cheeks.

His gaze shifts to Sadie, who meets his stare with unflinching calm. Her tongue lolls happily. She looks like a poster child for retrievers everywhere. "Lyre said she isn't dangerous. Do you not believe her?"

"I do. I just think it's weird and suspicious she's sticking around us. What if she's a magnet for trouble?"

"She's a dog," Andrew interjects again. "She can't be that bad."

Sadie whines, and I'm convinced she not only knows we're talking about her, but she can understand every word we're saying.

Maybe she's a shifter like the children?

It would make sense. She loves them, and there's certainly no rule saying dog shifters don't exist. I mean, Sara can turn into a hedgehog, and all of these kids are able to shift well before the standard age of sixteen.

Maybe the old people were like Owen, saving a little soulspliced shifter who prefers to live as a dog.

The more I think about it, the more it makes sense. Caine had said something about the old people smelling a little like Owen. And when Jer was freaking out, it was Owen who came to explain they weren't dead.

Yep.

Sadie's a soulspliced child.

I just know it.

But how to prove it?

### **Chapter 173: Grace: White Cat (I)**

It takes three hours to get the truck fixed, but we've run into a tiny dilemma.

Actually, it's not very tiny. At least to Caine.

"Damn it," he curses, running a hand through his hair. "I didn't think about this."

"I didn't, either."

Andrew and Caine are both staring at the set of keys on the dinette table, which they've been doing for the past five minutes since we got the call the truck was ready.

I rest my hand on my chin, watching their impasse with mild frustration.

Caine lets out another huge sigh, and Andrew follows suit.

"I should have gone with him," Andrew says, rubbing at the back of his neck. "Didn't even think about the logistics."

"We'll be fine for thirty minutes without you guys."

"No," they say in unison.

I roll my eyes at their stubborn veto. "So, how are you going to pick up the truck then? Caine, even if you shift, you'll take at least an hour to get there, right? Wouldn't it be more dangerous for you to be gone for so long?"

"I could shift," Andrew offers.

"It'll still take you at least an hour to get there," I point out. "This is ridiculous. It's not even a big deal. The drive there will take ten, fifteen minutes at most. Just go and come back. Thirty minutes and you're done. What do you think is going to happen in thirty minutes?"

Caine grimaces. "Leaving you here is dangerous. Any crazy person can come off the road—"

"So leave Fenris here. He'll scare anyone off."

"But—"

"Just Fenris is fine."

"If there's a—"

"Just. Leave. Fenris. And go get the truck. Please."

Caine rubs at his forehead, the hard line of his jaw twitching beneath his stubble. "Fine."

The air between us shimmers, and suddenly his wolf is there—the slightly-less-terrifying "dog" version of him, anyway. And the first thing he does?

He swings his head toward Sadie and snarls.

Sadie—all golden retriever friendliness until now—yelps and leaps onto the couch in a rush of honey-colored fur, practically climbing behind Jer for protection.

So she's afraid of Fenris, but not afraid of Caine or Andrew. I'm more convinced than ever Sadie's a shifter child who won't return to her human body for some reason.

The wolf, meanwhile, apparently satisfied with establishing his dominance, belly crawls under the dinette table until he reaches me, then sits up to plop his head into my lap in silent demand for pets.

"Good boy," I murmur, scratching behind his soft ears.

Caine snatches the keys off the table and stomps to the door, and I swear the man is sulking.

Is it possible for the great and powerful Lycan King to sulk? Because—he is.

He slams the door open, then hesitates at the threshold. His shoulders tense before he whips back around, fixing each of the kids with his steel-gray gaze.

"Not a single one of you sets foot outside while I'm gone. Unless this thing catches on fire, you stay inside with Fenris. Understood?"

"Yes," all three chorus, sounding mildly exasperated in the way only children can.

Satisfied with their obedience, Caine turns to me. "Lock the door behind me."

Oh, my God. The man's ridiculous. "I know how doors work, Caine. Just go already."

His jaw clenches, but he turns and walks out. I follow, watching him and Andrew go before closing the door and flipping the lock with an exasperated sigh.

Like an RV's lock will do much if someone really wants in. Fenris is the real defense here.

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Fifteen minutes after they leave, Sadie won't stop pacing by the door and growling. Even Fenris's snarls don't faze her. The growls evolve into high-pitched barks, and all the kids cover their ears. The noise makes Bun stir in Ron's lap.

"She's going to wake her up!" the boy hisses.

"She probably needs to go potty. I'll take her out. You guys stay in here."

"But Caine said—" Sara begins.

Sadie barks again, and I snap on her leash and open the door. She bolts out, nearly pulling me down the stairs. "Hold on!"

She frantically barks again, spinning on the end of the leash as Fenris comes out with us. I close the door behind him, and Sadie yanks so hard she's choking herself with her collar.

"Calm down, Sadie!"

Sadie drags me across the asphalt like a dog obsessed. I loop the leash twice around my hand to keep from losing it, trying to yank her back. "Sadie! Come on. What's wrong with you?"

The golden retriever doesn't acknowledge me; just keeps choking herself against her collar, each desperate bark coming out strained and phlegmy. We hit the grass, and I expect her to squat immediately, but she doesn't. She keeps lunging forward, dragging me toward the open field beyond.

"Sadie!" I dig my heels in, yanking back on the leash. "Just potty here. Right here. Come on!"

She ignores me completely. Not even a glance in my direction. Her bark turns frantic, high-pitched yelps, sounding more like an alarm than nature's urges.

Maybe I was completely wrong about this dog. Would a kid do this to themselves?

Looking at her now, she's acting exactly like a dog. A really, really fucking annoying dog who won't listen to basic commands, even though she was an absolute angel in the store.

Fenris stalks forward, his lips curling back as he snarls at Sadie. It sends a shudder through my bones, even when I know he would never hurt me.

Sadie doesn't even flick an ear his way.

My skin prickles uneasily. "Come on, Sadie. Let's go back inside."

A sharp tug barely budges her an inch back.

She barks again, fixed on the distance. I squint, struggling to see beyond the green sea of grass.

Something's moving out there.

Fenris's ears perk forward, his entire body tensing beside me. Then he prowls forward, head hunched low.

Whatever's out there, it's caught his attention too.

Sadie suddenly calms, her frantic barking quieting to occasional yips. Her ears stand at attention, tongue lolling as she watches Fenris take point. The black wolf stalks forward, and the familiar ethereal blue glow appears beneath his fur.

With a lightning-fast pounce, Fenris lunges into the tall grass. Something white and fluffy bolts out—a massive white cat, streaking across the field with Fenris in close pursuit.

"What the—"

The cat changes direction, darting straight toward me with Fenris closing in behind it. My heart jumps into my throat, but before I can move, the cat slides to a stop precisely at my feet and begins winding around my ankles, its loud rumbling purr sounding like a small engine and hearty enough to vibrate my legs.

Sadie barks excitedly, bouncing forward to box at the cat with her front paws. The golden retriever's entire demeanor has changed—now she's playful, like she's greeting an old friend.

This is no ordinary cat. It's massive, nearly the size of a bobcat, with pristine white fur and blue eyes and—

Son of a bitch.

Is this *that* cat?

Fenris snarls, saliva dripping from his jaws as he lunges for the cat.

"Stop!" I shout, throwing my hand out. "Fenris, no!"

## **Chapter 174: Grace: White Cat (II)**

Five minutes later, I'm sitting on the couch watching Sara roll around the floor with the mysterious white cat and I'm not only praying it doesn't have fleas, but also wondering how the hell I'm going to explain to Caine we've somehow acquired a new cat when I wasn't supposed to leave the camper.

This is bad.

An absurd level of panic keeps rising in my chest, even as I try to convince myself it's fine.

"We're keeping it, right?" Jer asks, his arm around Sadie as he watches his sister play with the cat.

I shift uneasily. "I don't think the cat wants to stay with us." Better to blame the strange feline than my fear over Caine's temper.

Even as the words leave my mouth, the white cat stretches languidly across Sara's belly, looking for all the world like a giant, furry limp noodle. Its eyes close to contented slits as her small fingers trace patterns through its suspiciously pristine fur.

Shouldn't a cat out in the wild like this be—I don't know... dirtier? Especially when it's white.

"It *looks* like it wants to stay with us," Jer points out, eyebrows raised like I'm the one not seeing reason here.

"Oh, please?" Sara begs, soft and pleading. She cradles the cat against her chest even though it's longer than her torso, and the cat purrs louder.

I rub at my closed eyes with a groan. Caine's going to be so mad when he gets back, and he should be back any minute. Not just mad—furious.

I was supposed to be inside with the doors locked, not chasing mysterious animals across open fields. And I'm pretty sure I definitely wasn't supposed to bring one of those animals back inside.

Especially a cat.

A disgruntled huff comes from under the dinette. Fenris sulks in the shadows. His storm-gray eyes track the cat's every movement, ears pinned back against his skull. After I told him to leave the cat alone, he retreated to pout like an overgrown puppy.

Meanwhile, Sadie's practically vibrating beside Jer, her golden body trembling with the effort of restraint. She whines every so often, desperate to get to the cat but not being allowed to.

I've got her leash wrapped around my wrist, just in case. Cats and dogs aren't supposed to mix. Probably not with wolves, either.

"We can't keep it," I say, trying to sound firm even as Sara's face falls. "It probably belongs to someone, and we're not exactly in a position to adopt pets right now."

"It doesn't have a collar," Ron points out. Isn't he supposed to be my most helpful kid? And now he's working against me, too. "And it came right to you, didn't it?"

"That doesn't mean anything," I counter. "Cats can come to anyone if they're friendly enough."

And if this particular cat is the same one I saw before... what are the odds?

I mean, we're in the same general area, but it shouldn't be possible...

Bun jerks upright in Ron's lap out of nowhere, and turns around to blink as she looks around the room. Her eyes are still glazed from sleep, but she pushes his hands away when he tries to pull her against him.

Then she sees the cat and squeals. All semblance of sleepiness fades as she dives off her brother's lap.

He catches her before she falls head-first onto the floor, setting her upright. "Be careful. We have to be gentle, okay?"

She babbles something nonsensical as she toddler-stomps her way across the floor, squatting next to Sara and the cat. Little whiskers sprout on her face, and she meows.

The cat just turns its head and gently bumps its nose against Bun's outreached fingers.

"See?" Sara says triumphantly. "Cat likes us. What are we gonna name her?"

"Who says it's a girl? Maybe it's a boy."

Fenris growls from his hiding spot. The cat ignores him. Yet another animal showing no fear of a wolf, which is just... alarm bells, okay.

Maybe it and Sadie are related.

"We don't have cat food. Or a litter box. Or a kennel for the drive. We can't keep this cat. It would be irresponsible of us."

Then there's the sound I've been waiting for with dread: an engine.

My heart rate goes ballistic, and I clench my fists in my lap. He's going to be so angry, and I'm still not sure how I'm going to explain this. Sadie was barking, Bun was sleeping, I brought Fenris with me—it seemed like a reasonable risk in the moment.

"Caine's back," I announce, trying to quell the rising tide of panic in my belly.

"Should we put it outside, then?" Ron asks, coming behind Bun and leaning down to scratch at the cat's belly.

Sara makes a distressed sound, clutching the cat closer. "No! Grace, please no!"

The cat doesn't struggle in Sara's tightening grip, just lets her squeeze it like it's a stuffed pillow.

"I'll handle it," I say, rising from the couch and handing Sadie's leash to Ron. My legs feel shaky beneath me. Or maybe the camper's swaying.

"What are you going to tell him?" he asks, his dark eyes concerned. I guess he's worried, too.

I run a hand through my hair, wincing as my fingers catch in a few tangles. "The truth, I guess. What else can I do?"

"Lie?" Jer suggests helpfully, earning a sharp look from Sara.

"Don't be stupid," she snaps. "Alpha wolves can smell lies."

The camper rocks as someone steps on the stairs, and all of us freeze.

I move to stand between the door and Sara, as if my body can somehow hide the evidence of my disobedience.

The door swings open, and Caine fills the frame, his broad shoulders blocking the light from outside as he looms in menacing Lycan fashion. His gray eyes immediately lock onto mine. "I leave you for thirty minutes and you bring home another pet?"

What the hell? Did he smell it as soon as he walked in?

Fenris huffs, and I freeze. Of course. Caine already knows. His wolf was here the entire time, and probably told him *everything*.

I'm so screwed.

Squeezing my hands together, I suck in a deep breath. "The kids want to keep it."

"Of course they do." He tosses the keys onto the dinette and closes the door behind him. Then he steps forward, grabs my wrist, and drags me to Lyre's bedroom as energy surges immediately at the contact.

"Wait, why are you—"

"We need to talk," he snaps.

## **Chapter 175: Caine: Her Reaction**

### **CAINE**

My first instinct is anger, but between Fenris's nagging and the look on Grace's face the moment I walk through the door, it disappears.

She's so pale I'm certain she'll faint at any moment, and her entire body's trembling as a disturbingly familiar, sour scent rolls off her.

Fuck the cat. And the dog.

This is a bigger problem.

Grabbing her wrist, I drag her to Lyre's bedroom, trying to block the pounding in my head.

*You shouldn't just snatch her like that. It makes it worse.*

I know.

I fucking know.

But if I open my mouth right now, who knows what'll come out.

*Your restraint would be commendable if you weren't scaring her even more. Still, I suppose it's progress.*

My wolf is on my last damn nerve.

I pull Grace to the bed, setting her on the edge of it before releasing her wrist. She jerks it to her chest immediately, rubbing it with her other hand as if I hurt her.

This doesn't seem like a conversation we should have near the children, but my attempt to buy us privacy seems to have made the entire situation worse.

Her eyes fix on the floor, shoulders bunched so tight they nearly touch her ears. The scent of terror is thick in the air, and it makes my stomach twist.

Grace is afraid of me.

It isn't the first time. Her fear was present through most of our beginning encounters, but it hurts to scent it now. We've come so far from the girl who flinched every time I so much as looked her way.

*You've made it worse,* Fenris notes, like I don't have fucking eyeballs.

Every instinct demands I touch her, pull her against me until her trembling stops. But this ridiculous issue with transference...

My molars grind together as I fight to keep my temper at bay. No point in fuming over something she can't control; it will only make her worry. Grace seems to take the blame for things onto her shoulders, even if it isn't her responsibility to bear.

Even when she's trying to put boundaries between us, she backtracks when I get angry, or softens her words. Things she doesn't need to do in front of me.

For some people, this is an ingrained reaction of the weak before the strong. But this isn't what's happening with Grace.

*You act like you're the one who's noticed all this about her. Give me some credit, will you?*

I kneel in front of her, making sure to keep space between us. Her hands twist in her lap, shaking with the force of her grip. Her blueberry muffin scent is thicker in here, and keeps me calm even as her fear agitates something deep inside.

I wish Brax could come back to life so we can kill him again. This time, I'd do it myself. But slower, torturing him until he's begging for relief.

"Why are you like this?" I demand, sounding more aggressive than I mean to be.

*Great job, idiot.*

Grace's lips barely move. "I don't know. I'm sorry."

I frown. This isn't the woman who stood toe-to-toe with me at the camper site, arguing about car seats. She has fire in her veins and a spark in her soul; this is like a pathetic shell of herself.

She looks broken.

Keeping my breathing calm takes more effort than it should, and I keep a tight hold on my alpha aura. Even a flicker of it at this state will make her withdraw further, and I can't have that.

"This isn't like you," I say, keeping my voice soft and even. "Why are you afraid?"

She shakes her head.

"Do you think I'll hit you?"

She shakes her head again, quicker and sharper this time, but still doesn't look at my face.

*She seemed to think you would be very angry about the cat, Fenris points out, finally being helpful instead of just annoyingly observant. Like she expected an argument.*

But it isn't as if we haven't argued before. She stood toe to toe with me only hours earlier.

If it isn't the argument... is it my anger? But she's faced that, too.

Which means...

*Punishment*, Fenris murmurs. *She's afraid of punishment.*

I exhale slowly. "I don't care about the stupid cat, Grace. Fenris already told me everything."

That makes her look up, finally. Her grass-green eyes go wide, reddened with the hint of tears brimming.

The sight makes my chest tighten.

"Aren't you angry?"

I sigh, rubbing my hands over my face. What the hell kind of monster does she think I am?

*Considering your past—*

*Lay. Off.*

Normally, with the adrenaline rush I felt the moment I saw her terrified face, I'd be pacing. Burning off the energy flooding through my veins.

But moving would only spook her more. It's like handling a wolf gone feral.

"No, Grace. I'm not angry."

Her brows pull together like she doesn't believe me, and she studies my face. Fenris huffs in the back of my mind.

"You're capable of making decisions in the moment," I say, keeping my voice even.

"And while I'm not thrilled you stepped outside where any bastard could see you, it's not like I don't understand why you did it."

She looks so damn small sitting there. Vulnerable.

"I'm not your jailer, Grace. The demands I make are for safety reasons, not to control your every move."

She nods, quick and jerky, but her eyes remain unfocused. I might as well be talking to a wall. She's not really here with me—she's somewhere else entirely. Somewhere I can't reach her.

"Was Brax often angry with you?"

Her eyes slide away from my face, focusing somewhere off to the side.

Finally, she shakes her head. "Not often. He took very good care of me."

A growl rumbles up from my chest before I can stop it. "Don't lie to me, Grace."

She flinches, drawing further into herself. Her scent spikes with fear again—sharp and sour.

*Control yourself, you imbecile*, Fenris snaps, his disgust evident. *You're making it worse.*

*I know, damn it.*

I clear my throat and start over. "What I saw of your treatment was terrible."

Grace meets my eyes for just a second before looking down at the floor again. "That was after. He treated me like his own before."

"That doesn't explain why you're reacting like this now. I've been annoyed before, and you've never shut down like this." I gesture to her hunched form. "This isn't normal."

She gives a one-shouldered shrug. "I'm not lying. He did treat me well. But sometimes... only when I was really in trouble, he would get mad."

She's being evasive, and I'm not sure how far I can push.

Grace settles her hands in her lap but picks at her fingernails. The urge to place my hand over hers and stop the nervous fidgeting is almost overwhelming, but I resist. At least it's better than rubbing her wrist like I assaulted her.

*If you want to get technical—*

*Enough.*

*—never mind, then.*

"I think there's more you aren't telling me," I say. "When you're ready to talk about it, I'm ready to listen. But I'm not angry about the cat, and I'm not going to lecture you. So can you please relax?"