

Grace of a Wolf

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My body feels like it's been used as a car crash dummy. Voices filter through the cotton stuffed between my ears, muffled and distant at first, then gradually sharpening into familiar tones. Angry tones.

"Absolutely not. Stay ten feet away at all times." Lyre.

An unmistakably familiar growl. "You aren't in charge here."

"No, but they are, and you're sucking her dry every time you make contact. Keep your damn mutt off her, too."

A snarl. Definitely Fenris.

"Stop looking at me like that. You're a mutt without manners."

Consciousness hovers just out of reach, and honestly, slipping back into oblivion seems like the smart option. Nothing good waits in a room where Lyre and the Lycan King are squaring off. Death wish, party of one.

"Her energy is finally stabilizing, and you two want to go right in and take what she's gathered—"

"If touching hurts, why are you letting *them* touch her?"

"They're not feeding off her like she's an all-you-can-eat buffet."

Oh. This sounds... not great.

A cool touch slides along my inner arm, followed by a sharp sting. Something tugs at my skin, and the sensation drags me closer to full awareness. Not Lyre's touch—someone else's. Cold and strange-feeling.

"BP is 90/60. Heart rate stable at 64." An unfamiliar voice, clipped and professional.

"Okay, the IV's in."

"All right. Let's push some fluids." Another stranger.

Kind of sounds like I'm in a hospital.

"Let's get ready to move her."

"You're not taking her," Caine snaps.

Okay, maybe not a hospital. Oh. They probably called an ambulance. Now it makes sense.

"They can if they need to," Lyre argues.

Fenris whines.

My eyes flutter.

"She moved," Caine says immediately, tension vibrating through his voice. "Grace?"

Play dead, I tell myself. Just five more minutes of unconsciousness before facing whatever catastrophe awaits.

But the light beyond my eyelids burns red through the thin membrane, and someone's fumbling with my arm again, and everything feels wrong and strange and cold, and hiding isn't an option anymore.

I peel my eyes open with a groan. The ceiling light stabs straight into my brain.

"Too bright," I croak, voice like sandpaper.

"She's awake." Caine again, closer now. I might not be able to see, but I can *sense* him looming.

He's a very looming kind of person.

The word looming is starting to sound weird after using it twice in a row. Even worse with the third.

"I'll turn off the lights," Lyre offers, sounding further away than Caine.

A hand grabs mine, and I vaguely sense an inner movement as soon as the contact is made. It's strange, like... Like someone's turned on a faucet, and something inside of me is gushing out, directly to the point of skin contact—

Something beeps. A lot.

"Stop touching her, you idiot!"

"I was just trying to—"

"Sir, you need to step back."

A growl.

My wish comes true, and unconsciousness takes me away again.

* * *

This time, when consciousness creeps back into my head, it's quiet.

I tentatively open my eyes, breathing out a soft sigh when lights don't stab into my eyeballs this time. There's a faint amber glow illuminating the tiled ceiling above.

Now, for sure, I'm at a hospital.

A rustling sound catches my attention. I turn my head, the left side of my neck protesting, stiff from however long I've been laying here on a crinkly plastic pillow.

Lyre's standing next to me, her rainbow hair mussed and wild. Her cat-slit eyes look exhausted, with dark circles underneath. She tilts her head, studying me in silence.

"Hi," I croak. My voice sounds like I've been gargling gravel. How long was I out?

"Hello there, sunshine." Lyre's voice carries its usual musical lilt. "How are you feeling?"

I try to swallow, but my throat feels like it's filled with glass shards. I cough and try again, grimacing through the pain. "Like someone ran me through a washing machine and hung me up to dry."

A smile quirks at the corner of Lyre's mouth. "Well, at least you're clean, then." She reaches for something out of my sight, then returns with a paper cup. "Water?"

I nod and try to push myself up. My arms tremble with the effort, embarrassingly weak.

"Easy." Lyre slips a hand behind my shoulders, supporting me with surprising strength. Her touch is cool against my skin, which feels fever-hot and oversensitive. "Small sips. Your system's been through the wringer."

The water slides down my throat like salvation. I hadn't realized how parched I was until the first drop hit my tongue.

"Where's—" I start to ask, but Lyre cuts me off with a finger to her lips.

"He was kicked out. Can't be within one hundred feet of the building, so he's across the street, probably glaring at your window."

I blink.

She shrugs. "He deserved it."

I believe her, but...

My gaze drifts around the room. It's not a standard hospital room—no clinical white walls or plastic chairs. Instead, the space is warm, with natural wood accents and what looks like hand-woven fabric covering the walls. A string of small lights creates the gentle glow I'd noticed earlier.

"Where am I?"

"It's a hospital. You're in the special ward upstairs." Lyre's lips quirk. "The one for VIP supes."

I blink again. "I'm human."

"Yeah, but *he* isn't."

Slowly, I tilt my head. I'm a little dizzy even from that movement. "What does Caine have to do with what ward I'm on?"

"Well..." Lyre scratches at her cheek. "You know what? I'm going to let him answer that question."

My eyes narrow at Lyre's evasive answer. "You can't just drop that and walk away. What does Caine have to do with this?"

Lyre shrugs, the movement almost too casual. "Let's just say your boyfriend threw his weight around."

"He's not my—" The denial sticks in my throat. Um. Maybe he is. Unless he does this kind of thing with women casually all the time... Does he? Shit. It isn't like we had a conversation before he ripped my shirt off.

Reflexively, I glance down—but no, I'm not naked. There's a hospital gown covering me.

"Do you remember what happened right before you passed out?"

Heat floods my face so fast I wonder if I might pass out again. Fragments flash through my mind—strong hands gripping my thighs, the heat of his breath against my neck, the

relentless pressure of his fingers inside me, the way his voice rumbled against my ear as he—

Lyre's nostrils flare as she waves her hand in the air. "Get it together, Grace. You're projecting so hard I can practically smell it."

I yank the thin hospital blanket up to my chin as if it might shield my thoughts. "It's not—I don't—" But there's no point denying it. My body betrays me with its crimson flush that surely extends from my hairline to my toes.

"So it was good, huh?" A hint of mischief dances in Lyre's expression.

"Shut up." I bury my face in my hands, mortification making me dizzy. "I can't believe I... with him... and then just... collapsed."

"'Collapsed' is putting it mildly." Lyre perches on the edge of my bed. "Your energy was practically nonexistent. I've seen ghosts with more life force."

She's so casual about it, like she's really seen a ghost before. Lyre isn't one to bluff, but... "Wait, have you really seen ghosts?"

"Why? Do you believe in them?"

"Ghosts? No, of course not."

Lyre's laugh rings through the room, light and musical, yet with an edge. The hair on my arms stands up.

"Oh, Grace. You might want to open up that worldview a little more. There's so much more than just humans and shifters out there." She gestures vaguely to the space around us, as if invisible creatures lurk in the corners of the hospital room.

"I know that," I say uncomfortably, fidgeting with the edge of the blanket. Everyone knows there are other supernaturals. Witches. Vampires. But I haven't met any of them.

Lyre chuckles. "Do you? Well, I suppose that's a conversation for another time." She leans forward, her inhuman eyes studying me. "Do you remember stabilizing Caine?"

I shake my head immediately, frowning at the unfamiliar term. "Stabilizing? What do you mean?"

Lyre scratches at her cheek again, hesitating for a split second before her expression shifts to blunt curiosity. "Well, the two of you fucked, right?"

A cough rips through my throat, and I cover my burning face with both hands. "We didn't—" My voice drops to a whisper. "We didn't go all the way."

"Close enough." Lyre waves her hand dismissively. "The more intimate the contact, the more transference is going to occur."

My hands drop to my lap. "What are you talking about?" The question comes out weak, pathetic. I try desperately not to think about what happened in the camper after Lyre left us alone—Caine's hands rough with need, my body arching against his, the way he growled against my ear, the shocking intensity of release that crashed through me...

Not thinking about it is clearly going well.

My face heats further.

"Energetic transference." Lyre's voice shakes me from my thoughts. "Look, I don't need the details of what you did. I'm just trying to explain what happened when you did it."

My fingers clench the thin hospital blanket. The mortified part of me wants to derail this conversation entirely, but obviously this isn't an option. "I get that, but I'm not understanding what you're saying."

Lyre frowns. "Has anyone ever explained what happens with a mate bond?"

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"Oh—he didn't... I'm not..." My hand jumps to the side of my neck awkwardly. "We aren't mated or anything."

She rubs her forehead. "That's not what I was asking. Do you know what happens to two shifters when they complete a mating bond? The marking scars are just the physical expression. The real bonding happens on an energetic level. When a shifter claims their mate, there's an exchange of energy. Usually, it's balanced. A give and take."

A cold feeling settles in my stomach. "Okay..."

"It isn't much, and there are levels of sensitivity to a bond. Some pairs can feel each others' emotions, for example. There's almost always a mental link between pairs. And they can share in each others' pain and healing to a small extent."

I nod.

"And then there's you."

Now she's just getting ominous. "I'm listening."

Lyre's expression softens with something that might be pity. "Caine... took. A lot. Though I don't think he meant to. To be fair, you're a bit of a special case, yourself."

I squint at her. "Um. Lyre? Not to sound repetitive, but Caine wasn't trying to mark me."

She runs her hands through her hair with a groan. "Grace, you need to work on your relationship aversion. I know he wasn't trying to mark you, but are you really trying to say you still haven't figured out you two are fated mates?"

Time stops. My mouth hangs open. The twinkling lights grow dim in my vision as I process her words.

Lyre arches one eyebrow, waiting for my response. The silence between us stretches uncomfortably long.

My heart jumps at the thought, but then I crush the hope ruthlessly in a mental fist. No. Stop daydreaming.

"That's..." My voice comes out flat, emotionless. "That's impossible. Humans can't be fated mates with shifters."

Lyre snorts. "Says who?"

"Says... everyone. It's common knowledge. Fated mates are a shifter thing. It's about compatibility between wolves. Humans don't have that... that biological imperative."

"You sure about that?"

"Yes." But even as I say it, doubt creeps in. Lyre doesn't make things up. At least, I don't think she does.

Lyre crosses her arms. "And yet here we are, with you nearly dead from transference overload."

I shake my head slowly, my thoughts spinning out of control.

If what she's saying is true... if Caine and I are actually fated mates...

My mind races back through every interaction, every moment we've shared. The way my skin prickled with awareness whenever he entered a room. The inexplicable pull I felt toward him from the very beginning—the strange gravity causing me to revolve around him.

How my body seemed to recognize his before my mind did.

The intensity of my reactions to his touch, his scent, his voice. The way my heart raced and my stomach fluttered and my breath caught in my throat. The heat pooling low in my belly whenever he looked at me with those storm-cloud eyes.

I'd attributed it all to fear, to adrenaline, to simple physical attraction.

But what if it was more? What if it was biological? Inevitable?

And then there was Caine himself. The brutal, dangerous Lycan King who tracked me down without any clear motive.

I'd let him in. Dropped my guard. Let him touch me.

Despite all logic and reason, despite all self-preservation instinct, I'd been drawn to him like a moth to flame.

"Oh." The sound escapes my lips as realization crashes over me. "Oh. It makes so much sense now."

Lyre lets out a soft snort. "Figured it out, have you?"

I press my palm against my forehead, feeling light-headed. "But it's not possible. I'm just... human."

"Not impossible. Improbable." Lyre corrects me with a flick of her slender wrist. "There's a difference."

My mind stumbles over this distinction. Not impossible means... possible. My entire worldview shifts.

"So humans and shifters can be fated mates. Even when the human doesn't have a wolf soul?"

"It happens. Rare, but it happens." Lyre grabs a strand of her hair, twisting it in one hand as she squints at the ceiling. "The idea of mate bonds being only through wolf souls is also incorrect. Their soul is a dyad. A twinsoul, if you will. The wolf's half of it is just more sensitive to things like a fated connection. It's steeped in magic, after all."

"Oh." I'm learning things we've never been taught in school. In fact, I'm pretty sure the stuff coming out of Lyre would be considered werewolf heresy.

I wait for her to continue, but she simply studies me with those unsettling cat-slit eyes. The silence stretches between us.

"What?" I finally ask.

She sighs. "I told you before—you're a special case."

Rewinding my brain, I vaguely recall something along those lines. I'd been a bit distracted and hadn't focused on her words though. "Special how?"

Lyre's gaze drifts to the window as she doesn't answer.

I frown. "Come on, Lyre. What do you mean, I'm a special case?"

She taps her fingers against her thigh in a rhythmless pattern. "You know, it's funny. Humans are so obsessed with knowing things."

What the hell. She's the one who brought it up!

I push myself straighter in the hospital bed, ignoring the protest of my muscles. "Don't get all cryptic and evasive on me now."

"I'm not being cryptic." She rises from the edge of my bed, stretching her arms above her head. "I'm being selective about what I share."

My patience snaps. "You're the one who started talking about it all! You can't just drop bombs like 'special case' and 'transference overload' and then stop."

"Hmm. Well, yes." She wrinkles her nose. "You aren't wrong. But still, some facts shouldn't be spoon-fed, Grace. They need to be discovered."

I press my palms against my eyes, exhaustion and frustration battling for dominance. When I look up, Lyre has moved to the small window, gazing outside.

"You're dangling information in front of me like a carrot," I accuse her.

Without turning, she shrugs one shoulder. "That's because you make a cute little rabbit."

The deadpan delivery catches me off guard, startling a laugh from my throat. The tension in the room dissipates slightly.

"I'm serious, Lyre."

"So am I." She turns back to me, expression contemplative. "Look, I know it's frustrating. But some things—important things—carry more weight when you discover them yourself."

"Is this about my parents?"

The question ambushes us both. I hadn't planned to ask it, didn't even know the thought was lurking beneath the surface until it escaped my lips.

Lyre's expression shifts, caution replacing humor. "What makes you ask that?"

I shrug, trying to appear nonchalant despite the sudden rapid beat of my heart. "Just a hunch."

"Your parents are part of the equation," she admits carefully. "But not in the way you're thinking."

"How would you know what I'm thinking?" I challenge.

Her lips twitch. "You aren't hard to figure out."

Chapter 63: Caine: Ten Minutes

CAINE

In hindsight, our arrival to the hospital could have been handled better.

Fenris grumbles, refusing to acknowledge his part in the chaos. He's still upset to learn wolves aren't allowed in the hospital. Service animals only.

... and getting mad at your mate's doctors for refusing him entry doesn't endear you to the hospital staff—or security.

Granted, I could have stood my ground. It isn't as if their pathetic security force is enough to stop the wrath of a Lycan, much less their king. From what I can tell, even an average beta could wreck the place. After all, like most hospitals, they cater to humans. Even a weak shifter can overpower an average human.

A place like this doesn't need someone capable of standing up to an alpha, much less a Lycan. Most of us don't even heal slow enough to require hospital care. A few might require intensive treatment if they're too weak for natural healing to kick in, but such situations are rare. Broken bones do need treatment, but rarely require an overnight stay. By far, the majority of shifters admitted to a hospital are there for one reason: Pregnancy.

Illness and injury may not plague our people the way it haunts a human's lifetime, but even supernaturals can have issues with birthing offspring.

Which explains why the humans became so squirrely when I threatened to throw her first doctor through a wall, daring to tell me our presence is unnecessary because Grace was just sleeping. A violent environment is no place to bring a fresh pup into the world.

Magnanimous as I am, I allowed their pathetic security force to escort me off hospital grounds...

Only because Lyre threatened to lock you out of her home if you didn't, Fenris huffs. You can't keep treating humans like this if you want Grace to like you.

She *does* like me. This fact is now established. Granted, she liked me a little too much and fainted afterward...

I check my phone again, a growl building in my throat. Nothing. The screen remains stubbornly blank, no new messages from Lyre.

Ten minutes. Ten goddamn minutes since her last update.

She said Grace is stable. You heard the doctor yourself.

"I don't trust them," I mutter, pacing outside of the gas station conveniently located across the street from the hospital. They want me one hundred feet away, which is fine... but I'm not going any farther. "How hard is it to send a text?"

She's ignoring you. Stop demanding updates every five minutes. She has better things to do, like actually watching over Grace.

I grit my teeth over the annoying truth of his words. "Don't start."

Maybe he's right, though. Five minutes might be extreme. Ten minutes should be fine, though.

I wasn't the one who threatened to disembowel the nurse for asking you to fill out paperwork.

My eyebrows snap together. "He was keeping me from Grace. Her IV was pulling at her skin—"

He was doing his job. And Lyre fixed the IV.

The rainbow-haired enigma had even slapped my hand away again, telling me in no uncertain terms to stay away from Grace. *That's* when it all started. The humans had given me strange looks.

Fine. Maybe he's right about the one instance, but the rest...

You mean the doctor you pinned against the wall?

"He told us to leave."

What about the nurse you yelled at for asking you to lower your voice?

"She was disrespectful."

I squeeze the bridge of my nose with a sigh. When Fenris mentions all the incidents at once like this, it *does* make me sound a little out of control. Not as much as normal, but my mind has enough clarity today to recognize what he's trying to say.

What about the receptionist you made cry when she couldn't access Grace's file immediately?

I bare my teeth. "Are you keeping a fucking list?"

Someone should.

I growl. A nearby woman clutching a coffee cup flinches, scurrying to her car and slamming the door shut.

My phone's still silent, even after listening to Fenris list my transgressions. Like he's some sort of priest instead of an equally hot-headed wolf.

This isn't about me. It's about you.

"What the hell does that mean?" I snarl, trying to keep it a little quieter than normal. These humans find talking to yourself strange, despite it being a common occurrence on pack grounds.

Another reason humans aren't a great choice of mate.

Not my Grace, though. She's comfortable with wolves.

You're afraid, Fenris points out, ruining the small surge of pride and affection coursing through me over the thought of Grace's acceptance of wolf culture.

"I'm not—"

You're worried because you almost killed Grace. Instead of admitting it, you're lashing out at everyone else. Kings have pride, but only an idiot king would be so childish.

I clench my jaw, pointedly ignoring Fenris's sanctimonious lecture. The silence stretches between us, heavy with his accusations and my refusal to engage.

My phone vibrates, screen lighting up with a new notification. Every muscle in my body tenses as I check it.

[LYRE: She's fine.]

"She's fine?" I growl at the screen, as if it might reveal more information under threat. "What the hell does that mean?"

Two words. Two fucking words after making me wait fifteen minutes. The vague message only amplifies my anxiety rather than alleviating it.

It's good Grace is fine, Fenris says, taking the moral high ground he seems determined to make his home. It's all an act, though. I can feel the anxiety radiating from his corner of my brain.

I type back furiously, thumbs punching the screen. I hate phones.

[CAINE: Define 'fine'. Is she awake? Still resting? Test results back??]

The three dots appear, indicating Lyre's typing a response, then disappear. Appear again. Disappear. My patience frays with each flicker.

Ask nicely, Fenris suggests.

"Fuck off."

A middle-aged man walking past gives me a startled look before quickening his pace. I bare my teeth at his retreating back.

My phone remains stubbornly silent. No typing dots. No response.

"Goddammit." I pace across the gas station parking lot, unable to stand still while my mate lies in that sterile building across the street. The distance—mere hundreds of feet—feels like miles. An insurmountable barrier erected between us.

Fine. I'll try it Fenris's way.

[CAINE: Please update me on her condition. Is she conscious?]

The response comes almost immediately.

[LYRE: She's awake. Still waiting on test results. She needs more rest. I'm sure they'll keep her overnight.]

I exhale sharply, relief flooding through me. She's awake. Conscious. Speaking. The tightness in my chest loosens just enough to breathe properly.

[CAINE: Can I come back?]

Another immediate response: **[LYRE: No.]**

My claws extend reflexively, scraping against my phone case. A growl builds in my throat, rumbling so loud a car pulling into the gas station diverts to another pump farther from me.

[LYRE: They'll call security again. She doesn't need that stress.]

Fine. I suppose that's fair.

"High Alpha?"

An unfamiliar voice comes from behind. I missed his approaching scent, and I wonder why the Fiddleback Pack keeps sending idiots to speak with the Lycan King. It's common knowledge not to approach a stronger opponent from downwind. Unless, of course, you're planning something nefarious.

"What?" I snap, turning to face the stranger.

A young wolf stands before me, shoulders pulled back, chin tipped up in an almost challenging posture. Dark brown hair swoops across his forehead, and he smiles at me with perfect white teeth. His stance suggests casual confidence, like we're equals meeting at a bar rather than a subordinate addressing the Lycan King.

"I'm Deputy Marshal Dawson. Everyone calls me Marsh." He extends a hand for a shake. "Alpha sent me to—"

My stare locks onto his, and my lips curl back just enough to expose the tips of my canines. I don't move to take his hand. Awkward silence stretches as he swallows his words.

His smile falters first. Then his hand drops to his side.

"Um..." His eyes dart toward the ground, then back up, unable to maintain contact with mine. His shoulders slope downward, the bravado seeping out of him with each passing second.

I take a single step closer.

"Alpha..." he begins again, voice pitched lower. He takes one step backward, creating deferential space between us, his body slightly bent forward in submission. "The Alpha has organized a welcome banquet tonight. In your honor, High Alpha."

The words emerge in a rush, like he can't get them out fast enough. His eyes are now pointed toward the ground rather than meeting my gaze directly.

"A banquet." Such social pleasantries are the bane of my responsibilities as the Lycan King. The thought of listening to small talk and veiled attempts at gaining my political favor set my teeth on edge.

"Yes, sir. At the pack house. Eight o'clock."

A waste of time, Fenris grumbles inside my head.

I glance toward the hospital across the street. I have no interest in attending, but it would be discourteous to refuse hospitality while residing in Fiddleback territory.

Pack protocol dictates certain formalities when one alpha enters another's territory—doubly so for the High Alpha. Under normal circumstances, I would have contacted the Fiddleback Alpha immediately upon arrival, paid my respects, and maybe even presented a small token of appreciation for his hospitality. All details I usually have Jack-Eye attend to.

Instead, I stormed into his territory and brushed off his well-meaning, if irritating, scouts for daring to question my presence.

Not my most diplomatic moment, though diplomacy has never been a great strength of mine to begin with.

I glance again at the hospital. Grace is in there. Awake. Weak.

If we cause trouble with the local pack, it could make things harder for her, Fenris says, surprising me with his reasonableness.

I hate when he's right.

"Fine. I'll attend."

Relief relaxes the young wolf's features. "Great! That's great. The Alpha will be—"

"On one condition."

His mouth snaps shut.

"My mate is in the hospital. I need updates on her condition."

"I'm sure we can arrange—"

"Every five—no, ten minutes."

Marsh blinks rapidly, processing the demand. "Updates... every ten minutes? From the hospital?"

"Yes. And I need a way back in if she needs me."

A loophole, Fenris grunts approvingly. *Finally, you're using your brain. I was starting to think you discarded it.*

Marsh hesitates, clearly calculating how to fulfill this request. "Of course, High Alpha."

Chapter 64: Grace: My Fault

Lyre keeps pulling out her phone and frowning. At first, I thought it was her way of avoiding more conversation about my parents and my identity.

Turns out I was wrong. Lyre's shameless enough to refuse to answer questions outright, without excuses. Remembering her past frustration over not being able to give me clear answers, I'm starting to wonder if maybe...

I don't know. It's weird.

Maybe she really *can't* tell me some things. She's said as much, so it isn't too far-fetched of an idea, but it seems like there's something keeping her from spilling everything she knows.

Lyre's phone gives another annoying *ding*. She scoffs, glaring at the screen before shoving it into her pocket with more force than necessary.

"Something wrong?"

She waves a dismissive hand through the air. "Your boyfriend's headed out to greet the local alpha."

"He's not my—" The denial sticks in my throat again, because... well. Then my mind catches up with the rest of her sentence. "Wait, what?"

"Your Lycan King has deigned to socialize with the local pack. Progress, I suppose."

My stomach drops. The image of Caine splattered with blood and surrounded by bodies flashes through my mind. "Is he going to kill everyone here too?"

The moment the words leave my mouth, I realize how blunt—and ridiculous—they sound. But Lyre doesn't seem offended. Instead, her catlike eyes narrow and she tilts her head back, looking at me as if I'm some strange specimen on display at a museum.

"What makes you think he's going to kill anyone?"

"I mean..." Sure, Caine hasn't exactly been super murderous around me since then. Especially when things got steamy between us. But the memory of *that night* is going to be branded in my brain forever. The snarls. The screams. The wet, meaty sounds of violence I tried so hard not to hear.

My body yearns for him, and he might be my fated mate for some strange reason, but ultimately, he's still... who he is. I'm still wrapping my head around the idea a killer can genuinely care for someone.

"He started massacred my pack." Wait. Now it sounds like he killed everyone. "Some of them."

"Hmm." Lyre stretches, yawning widely. Her slightly sharp teeth glint in the light. "Tell me, what kind of person do you think the current king is?"

"Mass murderer." My answer comes without hesitation or thought. No consideration, no moment of reflection. It's hard to shake first impressions, I guess.

She snorts, then coughs, patting at her chest as she clears her throat. "Okay. And what does that make you? The girl who let a murderer into her pants?"

Prickling heat suffuses my cheeks. My shoulders slump as I groan, "Shameless. I'm pretty sure I'm going to hell."

Lyre's peals of belly laughter fill the room. "If there is a hell, we're all headed there for one reason or another." She taps a finger against her lips as she snickers, de-escalating her amusement. "Though I have to wonder—if you believe he's a cold-blooded killer, why did you sleep with him?"

I open my mouth to respond, then close it. The simple, terrible truth is that there's no good answer for me to give.

"I didn't... think about it." My voice is tiny as I admit it. "When he touches me, I can't think at all."

"Hmm." Lyre chuckles. "My sympathy for the wolf is rising once again."

"What do you mean?"

She shakes her head. "He has a lot of work ahead of him, that's all. And he doesn't seem emotionally intelligent enough to navigate the maze in your head."

I rub at the tip of my nose awkwardly, still overwhelmed by feelings of embarrassment. Once I accepted her premise—Caine and I being fated—some of her earlier comments made a lot of sense, too. The ones about my intelligence level. Like when she asked about my grades in school.

At the time, I was oblivious. Maybe on purpose, refusing to see what was in front of my face. Now, I know exactly what she meant when she asked me that question. It's enough to make a girl feel... you know. Stupid.

"Tell me something, Grace. Why did the Lycan King kill your pack?"

"I don't know."

Lyre's slitted eyes narrow as she leans forward. "Really? Do you really not know? Or are you just not wanting to think about it?"

My fingers twist in the thin hospital blanket.

"I—"

Memories I've tried to sidestep keep rushing forward. Caine's face. His hand on my neck. The weight of his dominance crushing the room. Fenris, appearing out of nowhere. The way Caine was furious every time Alpha... no, Brax, screamed at me.

I close my eyes, forcing myself to remember the conversation that preceded the slaughter. The words. The tone. The subtle shifts in body language I'd noticed but hadn't understood.

Caine must have already known then what I only learned today.

My eyes open, and I stare at Lyre with crushing melancholy. "He did it because of me," I whisper, the realization unfurling like a poisonous flower in my chest. My lungs constrict.

"What?"

"He killed my entire pack because Brax hurt me."

A hot tear escapes, trailing down my cheek. Then another. And another. The weight of it crushes me—all those lives.

All dead.

Because of me.

Lyre jumps up from her chair, panic flashing across her face. "Hey, are you okay?"

My chest heaves with suppressed sobs. "He killed Alpha because of me! And everyone else, too! They're all dead because of me!"

My voice rises to a near-wail. The heart monitor beside me beeps frantically as my pulse races.

Lyre's hand lands awkwardly on my back, patting in a rhythm that's more confused than comforting. Her other hand scrambles for the remote the nurses set on my bed, and she presses the red call button.

I hiccup, then sob harder.

"Breathe," she says, patting a little firmer. "Calm down. It's not your fault. None of it is your fault. I wasn't trying to make you think it was."

"But if it wasn't for—" hic "—me, they'd all..."

"They were bad people, weren't they? So does it even matter? It isn't worth being upset when trash takes itself out."

I burst into full-on tears.

"Shit," she mutters. "That backfired."

Chapter 65: Grace: Cultural Differences

Lyre waits for me to calm down, awkwardly patting at my back the entire time.

When the embarrassing sobs finally subside, she disappears into the connected bathroom, only to re-appear with a damp towel. She shoves it at me. "Here. Wipe your face."

I take the towel, pressing its cool dampness against my swollen eyes. It relieves the burn, but does nothing for the crushing weight of guilt settling into my chest. I drag the cloth across my face, trying to wipe away the shame along with the tear tracks.

When I lower the towel, Lyre stands watching me, her slitted eyes narrowed. Without warning, she rakes both hands through her rainbow hair, back and forth in wild, vigorous strokes, leaving her disheveled.

She heaves a sigh so dramatic it could deflate a balloon. If she was one. "You know death is not the same for people like them, right?"

I blink, the towel still clutched in my hands. "What?"

"Shifters. Wolves." She waves a hand in a vague circular motion. "The Lycan King. Death doesn't mean the same thing to them that it does to humans."

An inappropriate bubble of hysterical laughter hits my throat, and I swallow it back. "But they still *die*, Lyre. They have families. Lovers. Kids. You know?"

She perches at the edge of my bed, rubbing a few fingers against her forehead. "Look, Grace I get it. But you're still seeing their world through human eyes."

The sense of guilt fades, buried under my brain working to understand what she's saying. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that what Caine did—" She pauses, choosing her words carefully. "It wasn't extraordinary by their standards. Brutal? Sure. Excessive? Maybe. But unexpected? Not really."

"I mean—it's a lot of people, Lyre. The pile of bodies was..." My voice trails off as she lifts one shoulder in a half shrug, holding a hand between us with her palm.

It's so dismissive.

"And how do you think he became Lycan King? By asking nicely?"

My mouth opens, then closes. I'd never really thought about it before.

"Alpha challenges end in blood," Lyre says, matter-of-fact. "Especially for the highest throne. Loyal wolves fight to the death. It's brutal, sure—but it's tradition."

"But—"

"Territorial expansion?" She counts on her fingers. "Smaller packs get crushed underfoot all the time. Rogue wolves? Executed without trial. Challenges to authority? Met with swift and often deadly force. Shifters don't have law enforcement. Shifters enforce themselves, under the authority of their Alpha. And in this case, he *is* the authority."

I shift my weight, listening to the plasticky pillow behind me crinkle at the movement. Her words... make sense. But it's hard to reconcile with my own brain. I don't recall any violence in the Blue Mountain Pack. There were certainly no alpha challenges. And Alpha...

Damn it. I have to stop calling him that. He is no longer my alpha.

Brax.

Brax didn't expand their territory.

So, what she's saying... makes sense. But it isn't the reality of the years I've lived.

"I'm not saying you should approve," she adds, her voice softening slightly. "I'm just saying that death is an expected consequence in their world."

I twist the damp towel between my hands. "Even a lot of it?"

"They wouldn't call it murder. They'd call it war, or justice. Even injustice sometimes. Or pack law." She shrugs. "I'm not defending it. I'm just translating the wolf mindset for your tender human sensibilities."

"My sensibilities aren't tender," I protest, though the evidence of my tears suggests otherwise.

Lyre raises one eyebrow in a deliberate, slow movement. Her eyes lower from my face to my hands, and I flush.

"Okay, fine. Maybe they are. But I still can't just... accept that people died because someone hurt me."

"Did you ask him to do it?" Lyre asks, brow still raised.

"What? No!"

"Did you hint at it? Tell him you wanted revenge?"

"Of course not."

She leans back, satisfied. "Then it wasn't because of you. It was because of him. His choice. His code. You can't take responsibility for how their life works, Grace."

Am I listening to the devil? Because somehow, the guilt eases. Not gone, but lighter. And that's awful. People are dead. And I feel... relieved.

I twist the damp towel tighter between my fingers, and water drips onto the thin blanket covering my legs.

"So basically, I should just excuse massacres as cultural?"

"Not shrug it off. Understand it. There's a difference." Lyre taps her thigh, tilting her head. "Humans made laws and prisons because your bodies are fragile and your lives are short. That's what you grew up with. What's familiar—all the way down to your..." She waves a hand. "Bone marrow?"

Ew.

"Anyway, anything outside that code will feel wrong. But shifters are stronger, heal faster, live longer. Their justice is immediate and physical."

The idea of Rafe delivering Caine-style justice twists my stomach. But then I remember how cold he was during the Mate Hunt. Was he pretending to be gentle just to play the part I wanted?

It's like my memories have been under a filter—only showing me what I wanted to see.

"I guess I lived in a bubble."

Human but not. Pack but separate.

I lean back. A yawn threatens, but I tense my jaw to fight it. It burns my nose. My entire body feels bruised from the emotional fallout.

Lyre's shoulders ease, and she sighs—softer this time.

"Thank the Goddess. I thought I was going to end up owing that idiot."

I blink. "What?"

"Not you," she clarifies. "The other one."

Wait. What other one? Does she mean Caine? And if she's clarifying I'm not the idiot...

My eyes narrow. "So I *am* an idiot. Just not the one you're talking about?"

Lyre holds up her hands, palms out, like she's surrendering. "Wow. You sure get sharp at the most awkward timing."

Well, it's not like it's the first time she's insulted my intelligence. Granted, I was oblivious the first few times... which only proves her point.

Damn it.

Chapter 66: Caine: Strange (I)

CAINE

The Fiddleback Pack is unusual, settling most of their central pack territory in the middle of a human city.

There are rows of cookie-cutter homes, differentiated only by paint color. Manicured lawns, where even the trees look trained. White fences.

The back of my neck itches, and I resist the urge to scratch at it. "How do your wolves stand this?"

Marsh glances at me from behind the wheel, his expression placid. "Stand what, High Alpha?"

"This." I gesture at the subdivision sprawling around us. "Boxed in like sheep. No room to breathe."

A yard the size of a postage stamp comes into view, a plastic swing set crammed into one corner. The thought of a pup confined to such a space makes Fenris bristle.

"We're used to it." Marsh shrugs, turning down another identical street. "Most of us were born here."

"That's worse."

Fenris growls agreement in my head.

"Why live among humans like this? Most packs claim territory where their wolves can run free."

Marsh's fingers tap against the steering wheel. "Numbers, mostly. Our pack isn't large enough to maintain extensive territory. The subdivision houses all of us. Seventy-four wolves total."

Seventy-four. Barely enough for a functional pack hierarchy. My pack numbers over a thousand.

"And the humans don't care?"

"We've adapted." Marsh's voice carries a hint of pride. "Integration gives us options our ancestors never had. Jobs. Education. Resources. The humans think we're just another community association with strict property rules."

The car slows as we pass a human woman pushing a stroller. She waves, and Marsh returns the gesture with practiced ease.

"And if one of you shifts accidentally?"

"Hasn't happened in fifteen years. Our control is exceptional."

I observe his profile. Though young—perhaps twenty-five at most—he carries himself with the confidence of someone comfortable in his environment. No strain of keeping his wolf leashed. No yearning for wilderness.

"Is that why your pack uses these unusual titles? Deputy Marshal?"

Marsh's eyebrows lift. "Oh, Deputy Marshal?" A smile touches the corner of his mouth. "It's because we've taken on as law enforcement around here. We keep it clean."

"Law enforcement." The concept is strange. Wolves policing humans while suppressing their nature.

"Sheriff Halloway—Alpha Ian—was elected ten years ago. Most of our enforcers work for the department now."

We turn onto a wider street, the houses growing larger but no less uniform. There's no presence outside. No children in the yards. No one walking in the streets. It's too silent, too devoid of life.

Aren't they preparing a banquet?

"And the humans trust you to police them?"

"Our presence has benefits for everybody. Crime rates are the lowest in the state."

I can imagine. Few criminals would survive crossing paths with even the weakest of their bunch.

"What happens to those who break your laws?"

Something shifts in his scent. "Justice."

Opening the pack link to my beta, I ask, *What is the situation with Fiddleback?*

Jack-Eye's thoughts reach back immediately. *Surprisingly luxurious for such a rural pack. Humans would love to live here. Thom's impressed.*

And the pack?

A little rough around the edges, but disciplined.

No pups. That detail snags my attention. Every healthy pack should have children running underfoot, testing boundaries, learning their place in the hierarchy.

Keep watch. Something isn't right here.

Always watching, my King. His mental voice is syrup-sweet and obsequious.

Enough.

I break the connection as Marsh pulls into a curved driveway before the largest house yet. Stone facade, three-car garage. Several cars are parked on the street out front.

"Alpha Ian's residence," Marsh announces. "And the pack gathering place."

"No communal den?"

"This is our den," he says simply, shutting off the engine. "The basement level connects to several neighboring homes through tunnels. For full moons and pack gatherings."

"Your pack has adapted indeed." I keep my voice neutral despite Fenris's growing agitation.

Marsh smiles, clearly taking my observation as approval. "We've evolved beyond old limitations. Survival requires adaptation."

As I step from the car, the air carries no forest scents, no wild game, no earthy undertones that should mark wolf territory. Just cut grass, chemical cleaners, and the faint metallic tang of human machinery.

If I couldn't smell them, I'd assume only humans lived in this place.

Fenris paces within me. *I don't like this.*

"This way, High Alpha." Marsh gestures toward a set of double doors.

Before following, I glance back at the perfect rows of houses stretching into the distance. A human neighborhood indistinguishable from thousands of others across the country. Nothing to suggest the predators living among them.

Fiddleback is more than strange. It's unnatural, skirting hard around the edges of pack law. Humans aren't allowed in pack territory. But moving the territory to them? That's something else entirely.

The entryway gleams. Between the polished hardwood and the shiny chrome fixtures overhead, it feels very... human.

My teeth grind together.

"Alpha Ian is waiting in the great room."

Great room? My lip curls.

I follow Marsh past photographs of smiling pack members in graduation gowns, police uniforms, and wedding attire. Every image carefully selected to emphasize their human accomplishments rather than pack bonds.

No wonder they're nervous about my arrival. By living this way, they've been operating in that dangerous territory between pack law and outright defiance.

Perhaps I should visit more of these rural packs. See how common this kind of lifestyle is.

Marsh leads me to a man with graying hair, his face weathered but unremarkable. Alpha scent, but diluted. Weak.

"High Alpha." He bends at the waist, dropping his gaze to the floor. "I am Ian Halloway, Alpha of Fiddleback. Our pack is honored by your presence." His scent is sour and sharp.

I incline my head. "Alpha Halloway."

Marsh moves to stand slightly behind his alpha, no longer my guide.

"Please." Halloway gestures to the seating arrangement, a group of leather armchairs by an unlit fireplace. "Make yourself comfortable."

I remain standing, taking my time to study the room. A large flat-screen television dominates one wall. Art pieces hang at precise intervals. A gas fireplace, something no proper wolf would ever have in their home.

"Your territory is... unexpected."

Halloway's smile tightens. "We've worked hard to create a comfortable environment."

"Comfortable." I step closer to the fireplace, examining a photo of Halloway in what appears to be a campaign rally. "And expensive."

His scent shifts, anxiety mingling with pride. "Fiddleback has been blessed with prosperity."

"How does a pack of seventy-four maintain all this?" The question is blunt, my tone making it clear I expect an equally direct answer. "Every house I passed screams of wealth."

Halloway clasps his hands before him. "Our integration strategy has proven financially advantageous, High Alpha. Every member of Fiddleback contributes to our collective through their human-world employment."

"Hmm."

"Our pack members serve as lawyers, engineers, even teachers." His chest puffs slightly. "I myself have been the county sheriff for a decade. We pull our salaries, invest wisely, and share the proceeds through the pack fund."

Fenris grumbles.

"And your wolves are content with this?" I gesture toward the window, to the manicured lawns and identical houses. "Being trapped in human occupations, playing at human lives?"

Halloway's forehead creases almost imperceptibly before smoothing out again. "We've evolved beyond the limitations of traditional pack structure. Our wolves understand the benefits of adaptation."

I grunt, unimpressed. "I'd like to see my beta."

"Of course. Deputy Marshal Dawson can escort you—"

The title grates on my nerves, and I loose a soft growl.

Halloway's mouth closes with an audible click. He nods to Marsh, who steps forward.

"This way, High Alpha."

Fenris rumbles within me. *They're strange.*

If there's rot here, I'll find it.

Chapter 67: Caine: Strange (II)

CAINE

The house Marsh leads me to is no different from the others.

Marsh pushes the door open without knocking. No courtesy, not even a perfunctory tap. Interesting.

Inside feels bare, even more than a model home. There are no photos. No art. Nothing personal. Even Halloway's pretentious display of wealth had some semblance of life to it. This place resembles a vacant rental property.

There is furniture, though.

Jack-Eye emerges from what must be the kitchen with Elizabeth trailing behind. His shoulder brushes against hers, a short-lived point of contact, and it speaks volumes. The faint whiff of her scent clings to him.

He catches my eye and winks, that insufferable smirk playing at the corner of his mouth.

"Where are the other two?" I ask Jack-Eye, scanning the barren living room.

"Upstairs." Jack-Eye jerks his thumb toward the ceiling. "The wizard doesn't like being around shifters. Gets the shakes." He drops his voice to a mock whisper. "I think we scare him."

Elizabeth chuckles.

"And Andrew?"

"In another bedroom."

Confined. Good.

Marsh clears his throat. "If that's all, High Alpha, I'll return to Alpha Holloway. We still have the banquet to arrange—"

I wave him off with a dismissive hand. His eagerness to leave is palpable, but I don't think it's from my display of dominance earlier. He seems more comfortable now that we're here.

Letting my gaze wander to Elizabeth, I ask, "Is this your home?"

"Yes, High Alpha." There's a tightness around her eyes, and the faint scent of deception. "I hope it meets your standards."

I cast another glance around the clinical space. "It seems rather large for a single woman."

"It serves multiple purposes." Her eyes don't quite meet mine. "Guest lodging when needed. Work space when the den gets crowded." She gestures vaguely toward a closed door. "I have a home office through there."

The practical explanation doesn't align with the emptiness. A multi-purpose space would show signs of its various uses. This place resembles a blank canvas.

Strange. My assumption they brought me here in order to show their legitimacy seems... wrong.

If they wanted to present their pack life as an acceptable twist of shifter society, it's a little too strange. Almost as if their families live elsewhere, and their presence here is little more than a performance.

There is too little life in this place. They have another purpose for inviting me here.

Fenris grunts. *Your brain has become exceptional since accepting Grace.*

"I'm surprised you aren't mated with a few pups running around by now," I tell Elizabeth, leaning into a side of me I rarely access. My lips curve into a friendly smile, and I can see Jack-Eye twitch.

He's always uncomfortable when I act, as he calls it, *normal*.

Elizabeth glances away. "Not everyone follows the same path, High Alpha. I like my work."

"Of course." I keep my tone light, but file away her reaction. Another piece in this strange pack's puzzle.

Jack-Eye clears his throat. "Elizabeth has been kind enough to offer her home instead of putting us up at the den. Isn't she sweet, Caine?"

"Very."

Elizabeth's blush is expected, and Jack-Eye slides an arm around her waist. She leans into him naturally.

For a woman who claims she would prefer work to pups, her body language says otherwise. She seems a little dazed by my beta's affection.

"Would you like to see where you'll be staying?" she asks, with a shy glance toward Jack-Eye. "There are four bedrooms. One is for you, and your beta has already settled your guests into the others. The last is mine."

Jack-Eye grins, pulling her a little closer as he says, "Don't worry, boss. You won't have to share."

His charm is irritating and inauthentic, but Elizabeth seems to love it. A soft giggle escapes her, at odds with her no-nonsense demeanor at our first meeting.

The performance is nauseating, but I keep the fake smile on my face. The moment I show any discomfort, Jack-Eye will ramp up his efforts—it's his favorite amusement.

If he wasn't my beta...

But he is.

Unfortunately.

You share such a strange friendship.

"I believe I'll explore the place myself, if that's acceptable."

Elizabeth's eyes flicker behind me. It's a microsecond of reaction before she plasters a bright smile on her face. "Of course, High Alpha. My home is your home."

"We have a couple hours before this banquet, correct?"

"Yes, High Alpha."

"Would you mind checking with Marsh about the hospital contact I requested? I'd like regular updates about my mate's condition."

Elizabeth's smile falters. A frown creases her forehead, and an acrid scent spikes off her.

Jack-Eye spins her around with fluid grace, lifting her chin as he brushes a kiss against her lips.

My eye twitches.

"You're a gem, Elizabeth," he murmurs. "Completely wasted in Fiddleback. What would they do without you?"

Her transformation is immediate, her discomfort disappearing as she softens in my beta's embrace.

He plays her like a violin. You should take notes.

No.

Jack-Eye's manipulation is effective, but his gestures are empty, lacking true affection. Grace and I have so much more between us.

Elizabeth remains silent for several beats, lost in whatever fantasies Jack-Eye planted with his feigned respect and admiration. Then she blinks, returning to the present moment. Her smile, when she turns back to me, seems more genuine.

"I'll contact Marsh right away, High Alpha. You should be getting your updates shortly."

I nod, watching her pull out her phone and step into her supposed office. The door clicks shut behind her.

"Subtle," I tell Jack-Eye once she's gone.

He shrugs, dropping the charming facade as we head upstairs. He lowers his voice. "While you were at the hospital with our new Luna, I did a sweep of this place. Nothing out of the ordinary. No obvious traps."

"But?"

"But there's no way this is her actual home. No personal items, not even a spare toothbrush in the bathroom cabinet."

I grunt. "That much was obvious."

"Oh? And here I thought I was being clever." He rubs the back of his neck with a sigh. "Something's off about this pack. They don't seem dangerous, but they're planning something. I can feel it."

Chapter 68: Grace: What Are the Chances...?

Lyre's pulled her phone out and frowned at it at least fifteen times in the past few minutes, driving me mildly batty.

My nurse fiddles with a new bag of IV fluids, having saved us from the incessant squawking of whatever machine they have attached to a pole. A few buttons beep, and clear fluid drips in steady rhythm once again.

I crane my neck around the nurse's blue scrubs, trying to catch Lyre's eye. What's with all the phone checking? But she doesn't notice my curiosity, her eyes fixed on whatever message is on her screen.

The nurse taps the IV bag once more. "All set, honey. Your fluids are running nice and steady now."

"Thanks," I mumble, distracted by my friend's increasingly pinched expression.

"Just hit that call button if you need anything. Anything at all," the nurse chirps.

As soon as the door clicks shut behind her, Lyre finally looks up from her phone.

"What are the chances your boyfriend's gotten himself kidnapped by the local pack?"

A laugh bubbles out of me. "Caine? Getting kidnapped?" The absurdity of it makes me laugh harder. "Maybe if they're dragons in disguise."

But Lyre doesn't join in. Her slitted eyes narrow further.

My laughter dies in my throat. "Wait. You're not joking."

"I wouldn't say I'm genuinely concerned." She taps her phone against her palm as she glances out the window. "More... cataloging unusual happenings."

My heart does a nauseating somersault. "What unusual happenings? Is he okay?"

"Well, up until an hour ago, he was incessantly messaging me for updates. Now it's radio silence. I watched him leave with one of the local shifters. It's a small pack, so it shouldn't be a problem even if they act up, but..."

"I'm sure he's fine." The brief flare of worry disappears. It's Caine we're talking about. The Lycan King. The local pack doesn't stand a chance.

Lyre points her phone at me. "Confirming: it's okay for me to stop worrying about him, right?"

I can't help but laugh. She looks ridiculous, arching her brow as if she needs my permission. "Sure. You're free to ignore all worries about his possible kidnapping."

"Okay," she says, sounding as if she's warning me. "I'm washing my hands of it from this point on."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it." My lips keep twitching as she lets out a long breath.

Then she slides her phone into her back pocket, her shoulders easing a little. "Okay. With that done, I'm afraid I need to run a few errands again."

I blink. "Again?"

"A girl's got needs, Grace. Specifically..." She pauses, tilting her head. "Let's say I have connections to check in with."

She reveals herself in fragments, each piece offered like a gift when the time is right. It better be worth it. Her cryptic rainbow personality isn't exactly getting old, but... Yeah, it's getting old.

She steps closer, scanning my face with her unsettling perception. "I don't have to go if you'd rather I stay."

It's been so long since anyone's prioritized my comfort over their own agenda. First Caine breaking his own rules to protect me, now Lyre ready to postpone her plans if I need her. It's enough to make a girl swoon.

Though, I guess I already did.

"Go," I wave my hand toward the door. "I'm fine. Better than fine."

I'm lying. My limbs feel like I've run a hundred marathons, and my brain is a little heavy after our conversation. A friend's presence isn't going to fix any of it, though.

A nap might.

Too bad this pillow is flatter than a folded sweatshirt. And it crinkles. So annoying.

"You sure? You don't look fine."

"I'm sleepy, so I'm just going to pass out while you're gone. It won't be very fun to stick around."

Lyre studies me for a moment longer, then nods. "Okay. But if you need me—"

"I'll call. Promise." She's got my phone on the cabinet by my bed, charging so it doesn't die on me.

"I won't be gone long." She hesitates at the door, her hand on the knob. "Don't do anything crazy when I'm not here."

A surprised laugh escapes me. "I'm held hostage by an IV pole and a hospital gown. If I try to get out of bed, everyone's going to see my backside. I'm pretty sure I can't get into any trouble here."

Lyre snickers at my reassurance and pulls the door open. I sink deeper into my pillows, ready to enjoy some quiet.

Not even two seconds pass before her rainbow-colored head pokes back through the doorway.

"One more thing. If wolf boy returns while I'm gone—no sex in the hospital bed."

My jaw unhinges. "Excuse me?"

"In fact," she continues, stepping back into the room completely, "don't let him touch you. At all."

"Lyre, I'm hospitalized. Sex isn't exactly on my to-do list right now."

She ignores me, stabbing a finger in my direction. "Consider the man a vampire. Bathe in garlic. Do whatever you need to, but don't let him touch you."

Heat crawls up my neck. "Are you serious right now?" It's not like I'm sex-starved. Things just kind of happened.

Her cat eyes gleam. "Your energy levels are barely above 'functioning human.' One wolfy hand on you and you'll flatline."

My lips twitch despite my embarrassment. "Where exactly am I supposed to get garlic in a hospital?"

"I don't know. Call room service." She scowls. "Just do as I say, or I'm putting 'Fucked to death by a werewolf' on your headstone."

A laugh bursts out before I can stop it, echoing in the sterile room. "You wouldn't."

"Watch me." She flicks her rainbow hair over her shoulder. "I know a guy who does cemetery engravings."

"Of course you do." The image of some poor soul chiseling those words into granite sends me into another fit of giggles.

"I'm not joking, Grace. No touching Caine."

I snort. "Fine. No touching."

"Good girl." She shoots me finger guns before backing toward the door again. "Remember, garlic. Lots of it."

My lips twitch. "You know he's not *actually* a vampire, right?"

Lyre's laugh follows her out the door.

Chapter 69: Grace: Strange Nurse

As expected, I fall asleep quickly once Lyre's gone, dreamless and deep.

A scraping sound startles me awake.

My eyelids struggle against the weight of interrupted sleep. A figure in scrubs moves around my bed, his features indistinct thanks to the dim lighting and my own disorientation. The nurse—a man, based off his broad shoulders and overall bulky physique—unplugs my IV from the wall outlet, methodically winding the cord to rest on the metal pole.

"What's going on?" I ask, completely disoriented.

He doesn't look at me, instead tapping at a tiny vial hanging near my fluids on the IV pole.

Then he turns, pushing a button to recline my bed until it's flat. "Taking you downstairs for imaging." His voice is flat. Professional, but distant to the point of disinterest. He has a badge hanging from a lanyard around his neck, but I can't make out what it says.

"Oh, okay..." Imaging? Nobody mentioned tests. But then again, hospitals operate on their own schedule, and doctors don't always tell us what they're going to do.

Cold air hits my legs as he straightens my blanket. My bed jerks forward as he disengages the brake with his foot, the mechanical click oddly loud in the quiet room.

I stare blankly at the ceiling as he wheels me toward the door, going backward. My hands rest limply on the blanket, still too heavy with sleep to move properly. The bed bumps slightly crossing the threshold.

A soft ping from the nightstand reaches my ears just as we round the corner—my phone. My hands twitch.

Oh, no. My phone. It's still on the nightstand.

The realization filters slowly through my drowsiness. Should I ask to go back for it? It seems trivial to delay whatever test they need to run. Besides, imaging never takes long, does it? Twenty minutes, thirty at most? I'll be back in my room before Lyre returns from her errands.

The nurse steers my bed into an elevator, an awkward affair involving an eight-point turn. It doesn't seem to bother him, though, like he does this every day. I guess he does.

The doors slide closed, sealing us in the metal box, and I gain a sudden case of claustrophobia. New-onset.

"What kind of imaging am I getting?" I ask, trying to chase away the cloudiness in my head.

His eyes remain fixed on the illuminated panel of floor numbers. "Standard procedure."

The vague answer should bother me, but I'm still too groggy to push further. The elevator descends, my stomach lifting slightly with the motion, and I hope I don't throw up on my blanket.

When the doors open, the air feels different—cooler, for one. The lighting is harsher here, with no attempt made at the softer, more comforting glow of the patient floors.

I crane my neck around. Utilitarian hallways stretch in both directions.

"Is this radiology?" I ask, because it doesn't look like any hospital department I've seen before. No signs on the walls, no other patients or staff visible.

"Just through here." He makes a sharp turn, wheeling me toward a set of double doors.

A flicker of unease ripples through my chest. The fog in my brain is lifting, replaced by uncomfortable prickles of alertness. Something about this doesn't feel right.

We pass through the double doors into yet another corridor, lined with doors. The temperature drops another few degrees. Goosebumps rise on my arms. I look like a naked chicken.

"Wait," I say, my voice stronger now. "What department is this?"

His pace doesn't slow. "Almost there."

Sickly green walls have given way to gray concrete. The shade of green didn't seem particularly conducive to a healing atmosphere, but bare concrete is worse. It's...

Are we in a parking garage?

It... kind of looks like one. Only with no cars. Or parking spaces. And I can't see the sky.

Where the hell is this? The basement? It's obviously not the department of x-rays and MRIs.

"Stop! I'm going back to my room." I push myself up on my elbows, fighting against the weakness still clinging to my limbs, and it's a new level of stupid to think he's going to respond well to my demands.

But—I mean, I can't just *let* him take me.

Even verbal resistance is something, especially when my body's not *listening*.

His hand comes down on my shoulder, pressing me back against the mattress. Not forcefully, but with unmistakable purpose. He's not even trying to explain the situation away.

"Lie still. This won't take long."

Fear has cleared the last of the grogginess, but the adrenaline running through my veins is no match for the lethargy of my body.

I twist my head, searching for someone. Anyone. But it's eerily quiet as the squeaking of my bed and the soft thud of his feet echo in this empty space.

My phone's still on my nightstand upstairs. No way to call Lyre. No way to call anyone. Damn it.

"Who are you? You're not a nurse." I speak the words with as much strength as I can muster, but they still come out thin and shaky. If I could just have the strength to roll off this bed and run...

For the first time, he looks down from above. His eyes are cold and distant as they meet mine.

"Careful now. Wouldn't want to aggravate your condition." His mouth curves into what might technically qualify as a smile, but contains no warmth. "You're quite valuable, you know."

A strange looms ahead, different from the others—heavier, with some kind of electronic panel beside it. The nurse—or whoever he is—pulls a keycard from his pocket and swipes it.

The lock disengages with an ominous click, and that's it. I'm convinced. I'm being kidnapped. There's no radiology department. This nurse is out to kill me and bury my body in a ditch somewhere.

"Help!" I shout, the word tearing at my throat. "Somebody help me!"

His hand clamps over my mouth, fingers digging into my cheeks. "Nobody can hear you down here. Don't make this difficult."

See? Kidnapper.

I should have reacted so much sooner.

I bite down hard on his palm. At least I have enough strength for this much. He jerks his hand back with a curse, and I scream again, louder. My hands scrabble at the rail of the bed, trying to yank my heavy body up.

Move, move, *move*, you worthless sack of flesh and bone!

He recovers quickly, producing something from his pocket—a syringe, the needle gleaming under the harsh lights.

"I didn't want to do this yet, but you're not giving me much choice."

I thrash wildly, kicking at the blankets, but my movements are uncoordinated, my body still weak. He grabs my arm with unsurprising strength, pinning it against the mattress as I flail.

The cold sting of the needle pricks my skin, and almost immediately, the edges of my vision begin to blur.

"Wha..." My tongue feels thick, uncooperative. "What did you..."

"Shh." He's back to not looking at me, attention fixed on pushing the bed through the doorway. "Just relax. We aren't going to hurt you."

Damn it. Who the hell would be after someone like me? Lyre's quip about Caine being kidnapped by the local pack runs through my head, sending a chill down my spine. She should be back soon, right? She'll find me... or Caine will.

Chapter 70: Caine: Strange Magic

CAINE

To the unobservant eye, the house is exactly as Elizabeth says. Her home.

But it doesn't take much effort to scratch at the lie.

Devoid of personal effects, lacking the clutter everyone's living space acquired. Every piece of silverware is accounted for. There are no scratches on any of the cookware. Even the closets are eerily empty.

The cleaning supplies located under the kitchen sink are all brand new. There's no bag in the trash can, and the box of replacements is unopened.

No vacuum. No broom.

Everything you'd consider a daily necessity of life is missing. There are extra sheets in the linen closet and a small stack of towels, as if this is a guest house, not a home.

The fading light casts long shadows across the room. Fenris's hackles raise from his position by the door. He's been tense since we arrived.

Me, too.

My phone vibrates against my thigh. Another message.

The screen illuminates with a photo—Grace, pale and vulnerable against hospital sheets. Her blonde hair fans across the pillow, eyes closed, chest rising in shallow breaths. The rainbow-haired nuisance sits nearby, book in hand, watching over what's mine.

I zoom in on Grace's face with my thumb, tracing the curve of her cheek through the screen. A poor substitute for the real thing. The longing to touch her, to breathe in her unique blueberry scent claws at my chest.

Being apart is agony, growing worse with every hour.

"She'd be safer with me."

Fenris growls his agreement. If it wasn't for the strangeness of this place, he would have run to the hospital, doing his damndest to sneak in regardless of their position on animals.

I scroll through previous messages; it's been hours since Lyre contacted me directly, leaving me reliant on the Fiddleback contact, a nurse at the hospital who sends photos like clockwork but offers no real information.

Of course, Grace is sleeping. There isn't much to report. But it still rankles.

My jaw tightens. This arrangement is intolerable. Once I get Grace to Lycan territory, under my protection, surrounded by people I trust...

A hiccup breaks my concentration.

The wizard kneels before me, a pathetic sight with his trembling hands clenched atop bony knees. Thom keeps his gaze fixed on the floor, shoulders hunched as if expecting a blow.

"Look at me when I speak to you." His groveling only makes my distaste for him grow.

Thom's head jerks up, his glasses sliding down his nose. Behind the tinted lenses, his eyes hold a strange, foggy quality. The familiar, harsh scent of fear radiates off him like waves.

"Explain it again." I set my phone face-down beside me. "And this time, make sense."

"Y-yes, Your Majesty. Er, High Alpha." A full-body shudder runs through him. "There's something interfering with the magical currents in this region."

"What kind of something?"

"I... cannot say, High Alpha. It's old. And s-strange. Not natural." His voice cracks.

"Define strange."

"As I've explained before, magic has signatures. Textures. Like scent, for you." His hands shake, the knuckles turning pale, despite my reasonable attitude as I listen to his explanation for a second time. "Normal magic is clean. This is messy. Like a blurry photo. Or static."

I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. "You said it was interfering with Grace's location earlier."

Thom nods.

"But it's stronger here?"

He nods again, his head jerking like a puppet. "It's concentrated here. I thought it was s-strong near the c-campground, but..."

"Stop stuttering."

"Y-yes, High Alpha."

Rubbing at my eyebrow, I sigh. "And you don't know what it could be? How do you know it's old?"

"It just feels... old." The copper wires of his glasses catch the light as he swallows.

"Could it be some sort of trap?"

"No." For the first time, his voice carries conviction. "Not a spell. It's older. A presence. Something which affects everything inside of its boundaries."

My nostrils flare, testing the air. All I smell is the stale emptiness of this staged house, the wizard's fear-sweat, and a faint chemical tang clinging to the new furnishings, almost plastic.

"And this affects your tracking abilities how?"

"It's like... trying to see through m-murky water." His fingers twitch, his confidence already gone. "Signals get lost. Distorted. When I tried to focus on your... on the girl, there was... interference."

"Her name is Grace."

"Uh. Yes. G-Grace." He pushes his glasses higher. "When I try to track her, something pushes back. It's why I couldn't get a clear location until we were practically on top of her."

My phone buzzes again. Another update. Same format. Different angle of the same scene—Grace sleeping, Lyre reading.

Even with these updates, I feel uneasy. Why is the rainbow-haired brat no longer messaging me?

She's been silent since I left the area.

Does she really think she can get by with ignoring me?

My jaw tightens as I pick up my phone again. Enough of this silence. I swipe to Lyre's contact and type out a message with more force than necessary.

[CAINE: Any medical updates on Grace? Real ones, not just photos.]

The message sits there, undelivered.

I rub at my eyebrow again, waiting. But she doesn't read it, or respond.

The audacity of Grace's little nuisance.

[CAINE: If anything changes with her condition, I expect to be informed immediately.]

Still nothing.

I slam the phone down beside me, causing Thom to flinch violently, nearly toppling backward.

"You'll be joining us for the banquet tonight," I say absently, my mind still on Grace.

"M-me?" Thom's voice cracks. "I don't usually... I mean, I'm not typically invited to—"

"It wasn't a request."

He swallows. "Y-yes, High Alpha."

Which brings me to another annoying issue: the Blue Mountain pup who dared to spirit my Grace away. He's been tucked away upstairs since our arrival.

He can't be left unsupervised.

I reach for the link I share with Jack-Eye. Our connection snaps into place immediately.

Bring Andrew to the banquet tonight. Keep him in your sight at all times.

A beat of silence, then Jack-Eye's consciousness floods with irritation.

Seriously? Now? His mental voice sounds strained.

I frown.

Is there a problem with my order?

An exasperated groan fills my head. *Can you stop interrupting at the most awkward fucking times?*

I narrow my eyes, even though he can't see me. *What could possibly be so—*

I'm fucking Elizabeth, what else would I be doing? The impatience in his voice is tangible. *You've been inspecting every nook and cranny of this place for hours, and I needed to keep her out of the way.*

The mental image accompanying his words is unwelcome and explicit.

Of course, had I not been distracted and thought about Jack-Eye's disappearance even for a second, it would be obvious what his intentions were the moment he said he was looking for Elizabeth.

The man's a beast, even for a Lycan.

My lip curls, and I can feel Fenris rumbling his disapproval as well. *Remember who you're speaking to.*

Of course, High Alpha. My beta's words drip with sarcasm, but there's a note of contrition beneath it. *I'll collect the pup. Just give me a few minutes to... finish up.*

Fine.