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Chapter 81: Grace: Strawberries (II)

"Almost done, Bun." I rub a threadbare towel over her damp curls, careful not to tug. She giggles and stomps.

So. Freaking. Cute.

A pipe juts from the cave wall, spouting fresh water. Its source? No clue—maybe a spring somewhere. Whoever built this place balanced primitive with practical.

Her bath took place in a large brown basin—smaller than a kiddie pool, bigger than any basin I've ever seen. The water's gone gray-pink from scrubbing off the strawberry massacre. The juices had run straight through her outfit.

Since the toddler seems intent on spending as much time as possible in my lap, having long ago realized I'm *not* a hungry dragon out to eat her, I asked Owen if she needed a bath. The man apparently thought it meant I wanted to give her a bath.

I didn't, but it isn't like anyone else offered, and now here I am—no relevant childcare experience, bathing a strange toddler in a cave after being pseudo (?) kidnapped.

I'm sure stranger things have happened in this world, but I can't really imagine it.

Bun squirms and I pull the towel off, blinking at the actual, real life, honest-to-goodness fluffy white bunny ears popping out of her head.

They weren't there just minutes before.

Shifter, then. Bunny shifter?

She looks shy, twisting her tiny little ham fists together in front of her as she peeks up. Is she old enough to worry about my response to her ears? My heart breaks a little at the thought.

"Hold still, sweetie." The endearment slips out naturally, and her giant, dark eyes glimmer with trust as I pat the last of the droplets from her chubby legs.

Behind us, Jer and Sara are using wet rags to clean up the sticky strawberry disaster while Ron supervises them with crossed arms. Must be the benefit of being the oldest, not having to do the actual work.

The kids are grumbling.

"Why did we have to clean it?" Jer hisses. "She made the mess."

"Because she's a baby, dummy." Sara, sounding disgusted by the question.

"So? She's always making messes. Owen will clean it later, anyway."

"Royalty doesn't live with pigs, Jer." Ron. Then a thunking sound, and—

"Ow! Why'd you hit me, Ron?"

"To kickstart your brain, Jeridiot. You missed a whole strawberry over there."

"Brains aren't motors," Sara says primly. "Besides, Owen said no hitting."

"The strawberry's on Sara's side of the floor," Jer protests.

The stone walls amplify their bickering.

Scooping the bunny-eared Bun into my arms, I step out of the little bathroom/washroom section of the cave.

Owen moves between his workstation and the high rock shelf, arranging his latest batch of tanghulu creations where tiny hands can't reach, turning it into a strange strawberry bouquet with some sort of wide metal cup as a vase.

Not once does he look over at me or the children, yet I sense he's aware of everything happening.

My kidnapper. My... rescuer? The jury's still out.

Bun pats my cheek with her water-wrinkled fingers, drawing my attention back to her. Some primal instinct in me responds to her neediness, even though I've never been around children much. Humans weren't trusted with wolf cubs.

Alpha always said it was to keep me from getting hurt on accident due to their enhanced physical strength, but... well, let's say I'm doubting a lot of things these days.

"All clean now?" I ask her.

She responds with unintelligible babble and a decisive nod.

Owen approaches with a small bundle in his arms—clothes and a diaper for Bun. I don't even know where he got them from. A second ago he was sticking sticks of sugar-coated strawberries in a cup.

His face remains expressionless as he hands them over.

My heart thumps against my ribcage; I was going to ask him a little later, but maybe now is good.

"Hey, um—" I clear my throat, aiming for casual. "Could I maybe borrow your phone? To call my friends?" I swallow. "They're probably worried."

He studies me for a long moment, dark eyes unreadable. Then, without a word, he nods and walks away. Just like that.

I exhale slowly. Not a no. His easy agreement catches me off guard—I'd prepared for resistance, excuses, threats. The kids said he was rescuing us, but it doesn't mean the guy isn't a giant, stone-faced liar.

Something inside me unclenches. He really doesn't mean me any harm.

He's still weird, but at least I'm not trapped. I'll just call Lyre and have her find me. Easy. And maybe she can get some answers out of the big lug.

I hum a little as I dress Bun in a faded yellow onesie with cartoon ducks printed across the front. It's well-worn but clean, like everything else here. She cooperates by thrusting her arms up when needed, though she squirms impatiently as I navigate the diaper.

Three tiny snaps and she's fully clothed once again.

"All done," I announce, and she immediately scrambles to her feet, toddling toward the other children with surprising speed. They panic, still wiping up mushed berry.

Owen returns, phone in one hand. With his other arm, he scoops up Bun mid-stride. She squeals in delight as he hoists her onto his hip, and Jer lets out an exaggerated sigh of relief.

He holds out his phone—an older model with a cracked screen—then disappears around a curve in the cave wall, Bun peering over his shoulder with curious eyes.

My fingers tremble as I stare at the blank screen. Freedom is literally in my hands now. I can call for help. I can let Lyre know I'm okay.

I press the power button. The screen flickers to life, showing a generic background and the time: 9:49 PM. No password protection. No fancy security.

I tap the phone icon, and the keypad appears.

And then reality hits me like a bucket of ice water.

I don't know anyone's number.

Not Lyre's. Not Caine's. Not even Andrew's.

I know Rafe's, but I'm not calling him even with my life on the line. Rotten ropes can never be trusted.

My mind scrambles through memories, searching for digits, for anything. But there's nothing. The modern era has provided us with the ever-convenient contact list and cell phone memory, which means *none of it* is stored in my head.

I don't even know my *own* number. It's an old phone of Lyre's.

The keypad swims as tears gather. I could call 911, but I'm now mostly convinced Owen isn't a terrible person, and these kids keep talking about blood witches and the Great One. It all sounds very fantasy novel-esque, but supernaturals *do* exist in this world, so it would be stupid to dismiss their concerns out of hand.

And humans can't fight supernaturals. At least, not easily.

Biting my lip, I press a few numbers. Seven something? Seven-three... no. Damn. I can't even remember the area code.

The screen dims from inactivity, then goes black.

I've never felt so trapped by goodwill.

Chapter 82: Grace: Strawberries (III)

"Here." I hand Owen his phone once he returns, and the absence of the device makes my fingers curl into fists. It's like handing over my safety.

He accepts it with a nod, tucking it into his pocket. Bun wiggles in Owen's arms, leaning toward me with grabby hands. Her eyes—wide and dark—fix on mine with intensity.

"Guh!" she demands, and I reach out without thinking.

Owen transfers her into my arms without comment. The weight of her settles against my chest, warm and solid.

I freeze.

The bunny ears I'd gently dried minutes ago have vanished. In their place are triangular, twitching appendages covered in fine black fur.

Cat ears. Definitely cat ears.

I blink hard, certain I'm hallucinating. My fingers tentatively reach up to touch one. It twitches beneath my touch—warm, soft, and undeniably real. Not a headband or costume piece, but flesh and bone and fur growing directly from her scalp.

A dizzy sensation washes over me. This isn't possible.

"What the—" I cut myself off, glancing at the other children.

None of them seem remotely concerned. Sara and Jer are finished cleaning. Ron sits cross-legged on a woven mat, flipping through a dog-eared book with some cartoons on the cover.

Jer skips over, reaching up to stroke Bun's new ears with familiarity.

"Are you a cat now?" he asks with a grin, unfazed by this new development.

Bun responds with a high-pitched "Meow!" which sounds uncannily authentic. Her eyes narrow in satisfaction as Jer scratches behind her ears.

My arms tighten around her instinctively. "But she was—"

"Ooh, be a duck next!" Sara interrupts, hovering at my elbow. "Ducky Bun is the best!"

Before I can process what's happening, the cat ears melt away. Not falling off, not retracting—they simply disappear, sinking into her head. Bun's entire face shifts next, her nose and upper lip extending outward, hardening and flattening into an unmistakable yellow duck bill.

"Quack!" she announces proudly, her voice muffled by her new anatomy.

My knees nearly buckle, but I hold myself upright by sheer force of will and the vague panic I might drop the baby. "What's... how...?"

Cold sweat breaks out across my forehead. I've lived with wolf shifters for years, seen what transformation looks like.

But they can only transform into *wolves*. Not random other animals.

A shifter can only be one thing.

This? It's impossible.

"Stop messing with her," Ron calls out, not looking up from his book. He sounds bored. Maybe mildly irritated. "You know she gets stuck sometimes when she shifts too fast."

My mouth opens and closes several times before words finally emerge. "What kind of shifter is she?"

Ron looks up with a blink, slamming his book closed. "Didn't we already tell you? We're all special."

"But..." I can't wrap my head around this. There's special, and then there's impossible. "Shifters can only transform into one animal. That's how it works."

The kid shrugs, unimpressed by my crisis. "Says who? The rules people tell you are just the rules they know."

Owen pats Bun's head. "Turn back," he says, and I wonder how he doesn't scare her with the way he speaks. He sounds like he's going to murder us all if she doesn't do as he says.

But the toddler just quacks at him. She's now sporting not only the orange duck bill, but whiskers. She looks at me and quacks again, seeming delighted as her eyes crinkle up into happy little crescents.

"That's not..." My voice trails off. "That's not possible."

Sara plops down beside me, her small legs folded beneath her. Bun dives toward her head-first, sliding out of my arms with alarming ease, and my heart plummets, already envisioning her head splitting open when she hits the ground.

But the older girl catches her like this is a daily occurrence. Maybe it is.

Bun wiggles in Sara's lap, making her duck noises with glee as she flaps her arms.

Sara blows raspberries onto Bun's neck, dissolving the little girl into a peal of honking laughter.

Jer stands in front of me, arms across his chest and legs spread wide as he announces, "I can be five different animals."

The brown-haired girl groans, rolling her eyes dramatically. "A mouse and a rat are basically the same thing. And a guinea pig isn't much better."

"They're different," he insists, glowering at her naysaying.

"Barely."

"I can still shift into more animals than you!"

"Please. At least mine are *different*."

He sneers, with all the arrogance of a seven-year-old. Or however old he is. "Yeah, so different you can't even fly when you shift into a bird."

"Enough," Owen says, and Sara sticks her tongue out at Jer when he turns his back.

Bun moves with surprising insight and agility, suddenly rolling off Sara's lap and bolting toward my legs.

Jer suddenly launches himself at Sara with all the ferocity of a tiny predator. Tiny round ears pop out of his head.

They tumble across the floor, a tangle of child-sized limbs and high-pitched shouts.

"I'm gonna bite your ear off!" Sara shrieks.

Jer bellows. "Yeah? Then I'll make you bald!"

I stand frozen as Bun clings to my leg. My mind races through potential responses. Should I intervene? Let them work it out? The line between responsible adult and confused hostage is very, very fuzzy.

Back at the pack, I was never responsible for breaking up fights between kids. Even young, they're strong.

Before I can decide, Owen wades into the chaos like a superhero of questionable origin. One moment they're a tangled mess on the ground; the next, two kids have been hauled off the floor by the backs of their shirts, kicking and punching wildly as they dangle a foot off the ground.

It's... comical, really.

"I said, enough," the reticent man states, as impassively terrifying as ever.

"He started it!" Sara yells, her freckled face flushed with outrage.

Jer's indignation matches hers. "She stuck her tongue out at me!"

Owen regards them with stony silence, but neither of them break. They keep up the glowers and occasional kicks in each others' direction.

Tension builds until he finally speaks, his voice low and matter-of-fact: "I was going to order pizza."

The mild statement has an immediate—and astonishing—effect. Both children freeze mid-flail, their expressions shifting from fury to shock to calculation in the span of seconds.

Sara clears her throat, smoothing her expression into something resembling contrition. "On the other hand, maybe I was a little mean to Jer."

"Yeah," Jer agrees, nodding solemnly.

Sara shoots him a venomous look. He catches it and hastily adds, "But I should have been the bigger man and let it go." Like he isn't younger than her.

Sara rolls her eyes.

But she doesn't argue.

The well-meaning (?) kidnapper lowers them to the ground with surprising gentleness. The moment their feet touch the floor, they throw their arms around each other's shoulders, plastering identical grins across their faces—the fakest expressions of friendship I've ever witnessed.

Ever.

"See? We made up," they chirp in perfect unison.

Jer leans toward the man, his whisper loud enough to qualify as a shout, "Can we still eat pizza?"

Owen grunts. "Behave first," he commands.

"Got it," they chorus.

Ron sighs.

My heart rate quickens as I watch him move toward what must be the exit. This is it—my first glimpse at a potential escape route. Bun tugs at my leg and I pick her up absently, my eyes glued to Owen as I angle myself for a better view of what he's doing.

He approaches what appears to be just another section of cave wall, tapping an unremarkable-looking rock formation.

The floor shakes, and a section of wall slides away. Like magic. Harry Potter style.

No daylight comes through the door—it's dark out. But there's a faint breeze, carrying fresh air.

I breathe in deep.

Bun reaches up, grabbing at my hair right above my scalp as she scrambles to stand in my arms. Her chubby foot scrabbles at my chest and throat as she climbs my face, and I grip her torso with as much strength as I dare, terrified of her falling.

Ron, the absolute angel, comes over and plucks her off my face. These kids handle her with confidence, like she's as dangerous as a sack of potatoes. Me? I feel like I'm handling glass.

Wiggly, slobbery glass.

He hands her back to me, settled into a more normal position. Despite the duck bill hiding most of her expression, I get the distinct sense Bun is grumpy.

"Don't let her do that," Ron advises, patting her head. "She won't stop if she thinks she can get away with it."

Chapter 83: Caine: Directions

CAINE

I grip the steering wheel tight enough to leave indentations in the leather as Jack-Eye's voice crackles through my phone's speaker. My patience—already hanging by a thread—stretches thinner with each passing minute.

We couldn't find Halloway anywhere. Even Thom couldn't track him down, much like he couldn't track Grace. He keeps blaming some strange magic in the area, but I don't care about excuses; only results.

And we have none.

Which is why we're in our current situation.

"No, you need to take Spruce Avenue, not Bruce Avenue," Jack-Eye says for the third time.

"There is no fucking Spruce Avenue!" I slam my hand against the steering wheel with a low growl, my vision hazing red for a split second.

The GPS on this car's dash shows nothing but a maze of similarly named streets in a godforsaken suburban hellscape.

"Well, that's what Lyre says, and since she's the one who knows where we're going—"

I snarl. "If she'd just give us the damn location, we wouldn't be driving in circles."

A new voice cuts in, Lyre's sardonic voice bleeding through speakerphone. "Sorry, did I miss the part where I invited the big bad wolf pack to join my rescue mission? You two should be grateful I'm even letting you tag along."

Fenris grumbles in my head.

"What street did you just pass?" she continues, oblivious to her own audacity.

It's hard to unclench my teeth, but I manage it. "Beech Street."

"Okay, then turn left at the next intersection."

"That's a one-way street going the wrong direction," I growl, peering ahead at the road sign.

Jack-Eye's voice returns. "Look, just take a left onto Pine Street, then follow it to Spruce."

I check the map again. "There's Pine Street and Bruce Street. No Spruce."

"No, it's definitely Spruce," Jack-Eye insists.

Fenris groans in my head. *The streets in this area follow a tree-naming convention. Pine. Oak. Maple. Spruce would fit the pattern, not Bruce. Just find Spruce.*

I take the turn onto Pine, driving slowly while scanning every street sign. "There's no fucking Spruce!"

"I'm looking at it right now," Jack-Eye argues. "S-P-R-U-C-E."

The car fills with the sound of my low, continuous snarling. "Well, I'm looking at a street sign that says B-R-U-C-E. Bruce Street. Not Spruce."

Strange. Jack-Eye wouldn't make such a basic error.

I slam on the brakes. "Get out."

"What?" my beta asks.

Who?

"You, Fenris. Get out."

"Are you kicking your own wolf out?"

I'm not even manifested.

"Then manifest. Get. Out. Walk the block. Find this mythical Spruce Avenue yourself."

Fenris pauses. *That's childish and inefficient. Just keep driving.*

"So is listening to you two argue about a street that doesn't exist!" I hit the steering wheel again, harder this time. Something cracks beneath my fist. "Every minute we waste is another minute Grace is with strangers who took her from the hospital. Who knows what they're doing to her—"

My throat closes up, the words dying there. The thought of Grace scared, hurt, or worse makes my chest feel like it's being crushed in a vice.

A new voice enters the conversation.

"Um... High Alpha? Can I see the map?"

It's Andrew. Both he and Thom have been silent in the backseat, and I almost forgot either of them existed.

"Who's that?" Jack-Eye asks.

"Sorry, sir. This is Andrew speaking. The map. I think—High Alpha, can you just let me see your phone for a second?"

I grunt, tossing it in the backseat. My beta's voice is distant now as he says, "Whose phone? What's happening?"

Not even thirty seconds later, the Blue Mountain brat says, "Oh, I see. The Lycan Beta must be looking at an old map. There's been construction in this area—they renamed the streets."

Andrew's eminently reasonable words cause my shoulders to roll back and my spine to straighten. I blast the smug feeling in Fenris's general mental direction.

He scoffs.

"That's impossible," Jack-Eye protests. "My app is up to date."

"It just means the maps haven't been updated yet," Thom pipes up, though his voice shakes a little. "If you look at the street view data, it's from almost four years ago."

"There's an updated map on the city website," Andrew agrees.

Silence falls over the line.

"Well, shit," my beta mutters.

"Bruce Street," I say through gritted teeth. "It used to be Spruce Avenue. Now it's Bruce Street."

"I guess so, High Alpha. My apologies."

I swallow my rage and put the car back in drive. "So which way on Bruce Street?"

Lyre's laughter echoes faintly from the speaker. "I can't believe I'm surrounded by alleged apex predators who can't follow basic directions."

"Just give us the fucking address, then."

"No."

"Thom," I snap, "Just tell her to give us the address."

The wizard squeaks from the backseat. "M-me? I c-can't..."

"Hold on, I'm trying to look up the updated map," Jack-Eye says, sounding almost frantic.

Andrew sighs. "I'll send a text to you, Lycan Beta. Just click on the link, and we'll get it figured it out on our end."

"A link?"

"It'll enable location sharing. It takes two seconds, and it'll be easier to find you that way."

"Wait, really? You can share your—oh, it's here. Okay. I'm clicking. There we go, and... is it working?"

"Yes," the Blue Mountain pup says, sounding both patient and bored. "High Alpha, go right at the next intersection."

I pull back onto the road. "Tell that infernal woman if she doesn't share the destination in the next thirty seconds, I'm going to—"

"—do absolutely nothing because you need me," Lyre's voice cuts in. "We're heading to a contact who specializes in finding people who don't want to be found. She's on the move. There's no address. Just shut up and follow."

My hands tighten on the wheel again.

"Fine."

"Hey, beta dog. Hang up the phone. They're annoying me, and I'm trying to focus."

My jaw clenches as Jack-Eye hastily says, "See you soon, High Alpha," and the line clicks.

The car plunges into silence, only broken by the occasional instruction from Andrew. No arguments over street names, just general directions. Right here. Keep going straight. Left, then the next right.

Simple. Easy.

The kid's got some promise, after all.

You know, Fenris says, clearing his mental throat, *Jack-Eye had outdated information. It wasn't entirely his fault.*

I grunt.

And maybe I was wrong to assume he was correct, he continues, undeterred by my bad attitude. *But to be fair, I'm not usually the wrong one in our relationship.*

My fingers flex. "That's a terrible apology."

I never said I was apologizing.

Chapter 84: Lyre: Irritating Company

LYRE

I drum my fingers against the steering wheel, counting each breath the oversized wolf takes from the passenger seat.

Inhale. Exhale. Each one sounds like someone slowly deflating a balloon made of sandpaper. If I weren't tracking the faint magical signature pulsing at the edge of my awareness, I might conjure a plastic bag just to get some peace.

"So where exactly are we headed?" Jack-Eye asks, his voice carrying the forced politeness people use when they think you're being unreasonable.

The pulsing grows stronger, moving toward the eastern edge of the city. They're still on the move.

"I told you," I snap, taking a hard left as my tires squeal, "I don't know yet."

"Not to be difficult, but that's hard to believe." He braces one hand against the dashboard. "You're obviously driving *somewhere*."

I narrow my eyes at the road ahead, the thread of magic pulling me forward. Tracking magic is a constant annoyance, like a fish hook caught under my ribs. "If you don't shut your face in the next five seconds, I'm pulling over and kicking you to the curb."

The threat buys me approximately twenty seconds of blessed silence before he opens his mouth again.

"You're a strange woman, you know that?"

My lips curl into something too sharp to be called a smile. "Is the big, handsome wolf upset because he found a woman who doesn't fall for his charms at first sight?" I take another turn without signaling, just to watch him grab for the handle above the window.

His mouth quirks into an insufferable grin; I can see it out of the corner of my eye. "At least I know you think I'm handsome."

Blech.

Not only is he way too young for me, his conceit is nauseating. Playboys have never been my thing.

"Your ego is showing. Might want to tuck it back in before someone steps on it."

Jack-Eye chuckles. "That's the best comeback you've got?"

"I save my good material for people who matter," I mutter, ignoring how his eyebrows shoot up. "Right now I'm busy trying to find your king's missing girlfriend before someone drains her for parts. Or something."

Though, if my suspicions are right...

The pulsing changes direction slightly, and I make a sharp right turn.

"Do you always drive like you're stealing the car?" he asks, his knuckles white where he grips the seat. Good to know even a wolf fears car accidents.

I don't. But he should.

"Only when I'm stuck with backseat drivers." I tap the brakes just to make him lurch forward. "If my driving bothers you so much, you're welcome to get out and follow Caine's car."

"And miss this stimulating conversation? Never."

The fishhook tug feels like it's trying to yank an entire rib out. We're close.

I slow down, eyes scanning the street ahead. The strip mall on our left houses a pizza joint with gaudy neon signs, a laundromat, and what appears to be a vape shop with blacked-out windows.

Tempting. It isn't like I'll ever have to worry about cancer, and the flavored ones are quite delicious. Birthday cake in a puff? Yes, please.

"Hold on," I murmur, pulling into a parking spot.

Jack-Eye leans forward. "Are we here?"

"No. I just wanted a smoke break," I say, deadpan.

He stares at me, like he's considering actually believing my words. How cute.

I squint through my windshield, rolling the window down just a little, enough to let the air in. The taste of mixed energies washes over me—human mostly, stale and ordinary. But there, moving among them, a bright silver thread of something else. Something *other*.

My tongue slides over my teeth, a little sharper than usual as the urge to hunt rises. The tugging has ceased, leaving only the faintest vibration. "Whoever took Grace might be here," I say, keeping my voice low. "Or at least, someone connected to them."

Jack-Eye tenses beside me, and I can practically feel the predator rising to the surface of his skin. His hand drops to his waistband, where I know he's carrying at least one knife.

"Easy, big bad," I say, placing a restrictive hand on his arm. He's warm and surprisingly solid. Lycans have always been a dense breed, though.

In muscle, not brain.

Though... maybe both is more accurate.

"You don't know what we're dealing with. If you go charging in teeth bared, we might spook him and lose our only lead."

His jaw clenches, but he nods. "What's the plan, then?"

"I track the signature, figure out who's carrying it. You stay in the car until I signal."

He barks a laugh. "Not happening."

"Wasn't asking permission," I say, already reaching for the door handle.

"Caine would have my head if I let you walk in there alone."

"Caine's not my alpha." I turn to face him fully, letting my glamour slip just enough for him to see what lurks behind my human facade; my slitted eyes are usually enough to get the point across. "And neither are you."

To his credit, Jack-Eye doesn't flinch, though his nostrils flare slightly. "Impressive party trick. Still coming with you."

I consider turning him into something small and warty for about three seconds, but decide it's not worth the energy expenditure.

"Fine. But no wolfing out, no threatening anyone, and if I tell you to back off, you back the hell off. Understood?"

He mimes zipping his lips, which might be more convincing if his canines weren't slightly more prominent now.

The bell above the pizza shop door jingles, and both our heads swivel toward the sound. A young man exits, balancing three large pizza boxes in his arms. His hoodie's pulled low over his face, but there's something in his movements—careful, deliberate, constantly scanning. It sets off alarm bells.

Well, that, and the energy radiating off him.

"That's him," I whisper, reaching for the door.

Jack-Eye's hand locks around my wrist, surprisingly gentle for someone who could probably crush my bones without trying.

"Wait. Let's see where he goes. If he leads us back to where they're keeping Grace—"

"Since when are you the reasonable one?" I mutter, but sink back into my seat.

I sniff discreetly at the air, but there's no hint of Grace's scent. Maybe I'm wrong.

The man slides the pizzas into the back of a battered Honda Civic, then climbs into the driver's seat. As the engine starts, I turn the key in my own ignition and pull out of the parking space, leaving just enough distance between us and the Civic ahead.

The energy signature pulses steadily now, like a beacon drawing me forward. If it leads us to Grace, we might actually have a chance of getting her back before Caine tears this entire city apart looking for her.

Chapter 85: Grace: Wild Child

I reach for the fluttering brown sparrow darting through the room, but my fingers close on empty air as Bun zips toward the ceiling.

"Damn. You were so close," Ron says.

"Yeah, damn," Jer echoes.

Sara sighs. "You're not supposed to use bad words."

Meanwhile, I'm waving my hands frantically as I shout, "Bun, please come down!"

The tiny bird chirps manically, wings beating frantically in hunger-induced chaos. She's been shifting nonstop for twenty minutes—from bunny to kitten to fish (a terrifying thirty seconds of flopping), and now this. My heart hammers against my ribs even as I wonder how a toddler who can barely walk a straight line has already figured out flying.

"She's losing it," Ron says beside me, craning his neck upward. "The pizza's taking too long."

Jer nods grimly. "Sugar crash. Plus she's still growing."

He sounds so wise, but I don't think her growth has anything to do with her current state of mania.

I watch helplessly as the little brown bird dives toward a particularly threatening-looking piece of wall. "Can't you guys do something?"

Sara crosses her arms, shaking her head. "She's too fast. Last time she went bird, Owen had to use a net."

"And Sara can't figure out how to fly, so she's useless," Jer adds.

"Shut up, Jer!"

The sparrow swoops directly over our heads, chirping what sounds suspiciously like swear words. Except she's a toddler, and I'm pretty sure she only knows about fifteen actual words.

Ron sighs, sounding so resigned, you'd think he was asked to work overtime. "I'll get her."

His transformation happens in a blink—one second he's a gangly preteen boy with messy hair and eyes too old for his face, the next he's a young gorilla, his fur glossy black.

My jaw drops.

"Told you," Sara says with a shrug. "Ron can turn into anything. Well, with a heart."

Gorilla Ron makes his way up the cave wall with surprising grace, powerful hands finding invisible holds in the rock. Sparrow Bun flutters in panicked circles as he approaches, her tiny heart probably racing twice as fast as mine.

"Be careful!" I call out uselessly, my hands pressed against my lips.

Bun finally perches on a ledge, her beak open as she trembles. Do birds pant? Because it looks like she's panting.

With surprising gentleness, Gorilla Ron's massive hand cups around the tiny bird. She pecks at his fingers, but he doesn't flinch, just cradles her close to his chest and begins the descent.

"Thank god," I breathe as Ron reaches the ground, carefully extending his palm toward me. The sparrow glares at me out of the side of her beady little eyes.

Sara appears out of nowhere, a bright red apple in her hand. "Look, Bird Bun! Food! Want the yummy apple? A is for apple! Ah ah apple!"

The transformation is instant—feathers disappear into chubby little arms. Ron barely has time to set her down before she's fully Toddler Bun again, grabby hands reaching for the fruit.

Sara thrusts it into Bun's tiny palms. "Here, eat this before you transform into a freaking pterodactyl!" Her voice is cajoling and upbeat, but the words don't match her tone.

Bun takes one giant bite of the apple, juice dribbling down her chin, her eyes wide with momentary satisfaction—before her face scrunches up in disgust. She hurls the apple to the ground with unexpected force.

"NOOOOO!" Her scream bounces off every surface, amplified by the cave's acoustics into something almost supernatural. "PAH! PAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

I swoop down to collect her before she can shift again, lifting her squirming body against my chest. Her back arches in my arms like something possessed, her spine bending at angles which can't be natural. Her tiny hands fist in my hair, yanking hard enough to bring tears to my eyes.

"Ow—Bun, stop it!" I struggle to contain her flailing limbs as she twists, doing her baby damndest to pull my hair out of my head. "The pizza's coming!"

Sara backs away rapidly, hands to her mouth and eyes wide with horror. "Oh my Goddess, Bun, stop! The Lycan King's gonna eat us!"

I freeze, Bun still writhing in my arms like a banshee baby. "What?"

Tiny toddler teeth attack my forearm, and I bite back a yelp.

"Oh, no," Sara moans, her eyes fluttering to the ceiling. "We're doomed. Ron, can you turn into a horse? We need to run!"

"But the pizza—" Jer starts.

"Stop overreacting." Ron's back from gorilla mode. He and Bun are both dressed, not naked; their shifts don't seem to affect their clothing. Handy, but... odd.

"Bun's hurting the Queen," Sara hisses, like I'm not *right here*.

He rolls his eyes. "Don't be so dramatic, Sara. She's not the Queen."

"Yes, she is!" Sara insists, backing further away from me and the terrifying, feral Bun.

I'm still trying to process the moment when Jer jumps in, rounding on Ron. "Dude, don't you pay any attention? The King wiped out an *entire pack* just because her ex-boyfriend was in it. They said the bodies lined for *miles*."

Bun's somehow ended up curled around my head, chewing on my hair. I try my best to intervene in the escalating, inaccurate facts being thrown about, but every time I open my mouth, another kid's shouting even louder.

"They say he killed like a hundred wolves because one of them looked at her wrong!"

"That's not true," I protest, fighting to be heard over Bun's continued screaming. "Caine didn't—I mean, he did kill some of my pack, but not because of my ex. That's ridiculous."

They all stare at me with varying degrees of horror and fascination.

Jer turns to Ron. "See? Told you."

"She said *some*," Ron defends.

I groan.

Sara's eyes go impossibly wider. "See? He kills anyone who hurts her! We're dead. We're so dead. Ron, make Bun stop eating Grace before we're all dinner."

"Stop it," Ron says firmly. "You're scaring Bun."

But Bun is past caring, her hunger tantrum reaching nuclear levels. She yanks my hair again with a wild, angry scream, and I somehow get her off my head and into my arms, facing out.

I'm genuinely bewildered and more than a little... lost. Between the feral toddler, the crazy rumors, and just—this place.

Am I supposed to be the adult managing this situation? Or should I just leave it be?

"When did you even hear about *any* of this?" I ask, baffled.

Jer shrugs. "Everyone knows."

Bun chooses that moment to slam her head backward, catching me square in the chin. My eyes water.

"Damn it, Bun!" I gasp, tasting blood where I've bitten my tongue.

The toddler suddenly goes rigid in my arms, her eyes wide as dinner plates. Her entire body shudders, and for one horrifying moment, I think she's about to shift into something with claws while still in my arms.

Instead, she opens her mouth and lets out an ear-splitting wail.

"PAH!" she screams, pointing toward the cave entrance we can't see from this chamber.

"Pizza's here," Ron translates.

Sara and Jer bolt for the entrance.

I stand alone, still holding the suddenly cooperative Bun, my mind spinning.

How the hell did I go from pack outcast to shifter royalty in the span of days? And more importantly—does Caine know these rumors are spreading like wildfire?

Chapter 86: Grace: Honey, I'm Home

The kids race toward the entrance of the cave and I trail behind, arms sore from handling the little shifter tornado, who now twists in my grip at the promised arrival of food.

"Pah! Pah!" Bun chants, kicking her legs against my ribs as she giggles.

The exhaustion hits me in a wave. Between Bun's shifting frenzy, the bizarre rumors about Caine and me, and just the general chaos of being trapped in a cave with hyperactive shifter children—my body's tapped out. Done. Dead.

My hospital stay seems like a lifetime ago, and yet it's only been hours.

Owen staggers inside, arms loaded with the promised holy food, and Jer shouts, "Did you remember cheese?"

The man grunts, his eyes darting around the room until he sees me. Then he glances behind him.

He looks paler than when he left, a sheen of sweat visible on his forehead. The unflappable, impassive man is...

Nervous.

My stomach drops.

"Pizza!" Sara and Jer practically tackle him, grabbing at the boxes, oblivious. Despite their excitement, Owen remains rigid, jaw tight and eyes wide.

"What's wrong?" I ask, shifting Bun to my hip as she makes grabby hands toward the food.

Before Owen can answer, another figure steps into the chamber.

I blink.

"Honey, I'm home." Lyre's rainbow hair catches what little light filters into the cave as she saunters in like she's arriving at her own dinner party instead of a hidden shifter hideout. She waves at me with casual flippancy, cat eyes gleaming with satisfaction.

Behind her, the massive form of Jack-Eye ducks through the entrance, his red hair tied back, expression as bewildered as I feel.

"Lyre?" I ask in disbelief. "How did—"

"We followed the pizza boy," she says with a shrug. "Oldest trick in the book. You okay?"

Owen flinches when she speaks, practically jumping backward. The pizza boxes wobble dangerously in his grip, and Sara shrieks.

"Put those down before you drop them," Lyre commands, and Owen instantly complies, like he's been shocked.

Jack-Eye edges away from Lyre, pressing himself against the cave wall and maintaining at least ten feet of distance between them. His eyes never leave her, tracking her every

movement like she might explode at any moment. The Beta of the Lycan Pack—a man who commands respect from alphas—looks like he’s sharing space with a live grenade.

I blink again.

Am I hallucinating? I must be hallucinating. Maybe Bun ran into my head while she was flying around, and now I’m unconscious.

"Everything’s fine," Owen says to the suddenly silent children. "They are Grace’s... friends."

Ron, ever the observant one, narrows his eyes. "Are they?"

Sara grabs a box of pizza with a frown and takes five or six steps back, as if she’s afraid Lyre’s going to snatch it out of her hands. "Are they going to eat, too?"

Bun reaches out with a shriek. "Pah! PAH!"

Lyre strolls over to the stack of pizza boxes now on the floor and flips open the top one. "Pepperoni. Basic, but acceptable."

Bun twists, smacking my face with her chubby hands.

Nope. I’m not unconscious.

"Ron, can you..."

"Got her." The older boy plucks the toddler out of my arms. "Jer, go get her chair so she can eat."

Jer’s hand pauses a millimeter from a slice of pizza, and he groans. "Fiiiiine."

"You okay, Grace?" Jack-Eye asks, without moving closer. His eyes flick from Lyre to me and back again. "Caine’s on his way. He should be here soon."

Oh, dear.

Sara’s concern about being eaten suddenly sounds legitimate. "Ah," I mumble, not sure what to say, but already worried about Bun. And the kids. And even Owen, who technically kidnapped me, though he seems to have had a good reason for it.

"She’s fine," Lyre says, grabbing a slice of pizza. Sara’s eyes follow her every move with a frown.

I can see her look at Ron and mouth, *I don’t think he got enough pizza.*

My lips twitch.

Owen herds the children toward the food, his movements stiff. "Everyone grab some pizza and eat in the other room."

The kids, sensing the gravity in his tone, gather slices and retreat without argument. Even Bun allows herself to be guided away by Ron, who looks back at us with suspicion as they disappear around the corner.

Jer, on the other hand, sighs loudly when he has to turn around with the chair he just brought in, grumbling about how they could have told him before he got it.

With the children gone, I turn to Jack-Eye, who stands unnaturally still, his gaze fixed on a point just past Lyre's left shoulder. His entire posture screams discomfort.

"Okay, what's happening? Why are you acting like that?" I gesture toward Jack-Eye, then to Owen, who's still staring at Lyre like she's about to eat him. "Both of you look terrified."

The Lycan Beta clears his throat. "I'm not—"

"He's afraid I'll turn him into something unpleasant," my rainbow-haired friend interrupts, taking a bite of her pizza. "Toad, newt, slug—the possibilities are endless. Good pizza. You should eat some too."

Jack-Eye's face flushes red beneath his freckles. "That's not—"

"You turn someone into a toad once and suddenly everyone thinks you're going to do it to them." Lyre sighs dramatically, licking sauce from her thumb. "I'm hurt by the assumption. Truly."

My jaw drops. "You turned someone into a toad?"

Owen pales.

"For all of two seconds," she says dismissively.

I look from Lyre to the Lycan, who now stands with his arms crossed protectively over his chest.

"Was it him?" I ask, pointing at Jack-Eye.

"No," he answers quickly.

Owen flinches.

I trail my finger in my erstwhile kidnapper's direction, and the beta clears his throat and nods.

Wow. Poor Owen.

Lyre shrugs. "I wanted to know where you were, and he realized we were tailing him about a mile in. It was the easiest way to get his attention. Don't worry. I waited until he was at a stop sign. I'm not a monster."

Then she tilts her head, looking thoughtful. "Sounds like the real monster's arrived, though."

Chapter 87: Lyre: Embraced (?)

LYRE

There's a special joy that comes from watching someone who once stood tall crumble into terrified submission. Owen—all six-foot-something of Order-aligned angelic muscle—keeps flinching whenever I so much as breathe in his direction. It's adorable, really.

He's young. Strangely young. Maybe mid-twenties at best. Seems odd, considering his bloodline, but I'm not about to ask. Knowing means involving, and involving means work.

No, thank you.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I fish it out while maintaining eye contact with Owen, just to watch him swallow nervously. Poor thing. I'd only turned him into a toad for a few seconds. Just enough to make sure he didn't run away.

Didn't think it would bother him this much, but it *is* a delightful bonus.

The text on my screen makes me roll my eyes.

[CAINE: Why aren't you answering your phone? This is just an empty building. Where are you??]

The digital equivalent of a wolf's howl.

Sighing, I turn to Owen. "Do they need a key?"

He nods stiffly. "Yes."

"Better go let them in before His Royal Broodiness tears this place apart with his bare hands."

"This isn't—" He stops himself and blows out a heavy breath. "Okay."

Jack-Eye straightens. "I'll go with you."

Of course he will. Any excuse to get away from the big bad witch who turned his new friend into an amphibian. Wolves are so predictable. So *boring*. Take away their agency once and they lose their ability to function.

Owen hesitates, looking from me to Grace and back again.

"Don't worry," I tell him with my sweetest smile. "We're *best* friends. Right, Grace?"

The angel-descendant looks at Grace, his silver eyes troubled. "Will you be—"

"I'm fine," Grace interrupts, her cheeks flushing pink as she looks at me. "We're friends."

I press a hand to my chest, mock-offended. "Just a friend? After everything we've been through? I'm wounded."

Grace's face crumples with genuine concern, her green eyes widening as she reaches toward me. "Oh no, I didn't mean—I just—best friends! We're best friends!"

I chuckle. "Breathe, blueberry. I'm just messing with you." I wave my hand dismissively. "You're wound too tight. Relax!"

Grace's shoulders visibly relax, tension melting away as she exhales a long breath. "That wasn't funny," she mumbles, but there's no heat behind her words. A small smile tugs at the corner of her mouth despite her best efforts.

She's so cute. A sweet little bundle of innocence, wrapped in a world determined to grow her into a fate too large for her dainty shoulders.

I can see the threads of her fate, and they're beautiful.

But surrounded by so much pain.

The best fates usually are. The Divinity call it *balance*, but I've never agreed.

Jack-Eye follows a hesitant Owen toward the exit, and I can't help but twirl my finger in the beta's direction. "Ribbit, ribbit."

He actually *snarls* at me before following Owen out. At least he has some spice to his fear. Doesn't like being poked at, does he? Maybe he'll be more fun than I realized.

When they're gone, Grace collapses onto one of the cushions scattered across the floor, her eyes wide. "You turned him into a *toad*

?"

"Just for a second," I tell her with an easy smile. "I wanted to talk to him, and it's the easiest way to get a point across."

"Is that why Jack-Eye is afraid of you too?"

I shrug. "Jack-Eye just has good instincts. Unlike your mate, who bulldozes through life with all the subtlety of a freight train."

Grace's face does that endearing pink thing again. "He's not my—"

"Grace," I interrupt, sitting beside her, "we're well past that particular denial, don't you think?"

She opens her mouth, then closes it, hands fidgeting in her lap. Her nervous energy fills the space between us—anticipation and anxiety in equal measure. It's sweet.

"Is Caine really upset?" she asks quietly.

"He's been tearing the city apart looking for you." I pat her knee. "In his own charming, homicidal way."

A soft smile plays at the corners of her mouth, and I marvel at how someone so genuinely *good* could end up bound to a creature like Caine. The universe has a twisted sense of humor.

"I should warn you," I add, "he might be a bit... intense when he sees you."

Her smile falters. "Intense how?"

"The 'I'm going to smother you with my overprotective wolf-king energy until you can't breathe' kind of intense. After what happened last time—" I pause, watching comprehension dawn in her eyes.

"Oh."

"Yeah, *oh*. So maybe avoid physical contact until we're sure you've recovered. I'd hate to have to explain to the hospital staff why you're back in a coma." Though, I'm sure Caine will never let her out of his sight again.

Which is going to be a problem.

Before she can respond, a commotion echoes from the hallway—heavy footsteps and voices, one deep and rumbling with barely contained emotion.

Caine.

Grace sits up straighter, unconsciously smoothing her hair. It's so painfully obvious how she feels, and I can't help but sigh. All that beauty, tied to an emotional brick wall with anger issues.

Seven hundred years, and I still don't understand the mating bond's peculiar sense of matchmaking. Though, Grace has her own ability to emulate an emotional rock, so I suppose they *are* quite the pair.

The footsteps grow louder, and then he's there—the Lycan King himself, filling the doorway with his massive frame, eyes locked on Grace like she's the only thing in the universe.

Mate bonds.

Most people find them romantic. I find them cloying, contrived, and annoying.

The raw emotion on his face makes my face scrunch up. There's something compelling about witnessing such naked vulnerability from someone who works so hard to appear invulnerable—on television.

In person? Blech. I know it comes with a whole side of overbearing and obnoxious.

Grace rises to her feet, swaying slightly.

"Grace," he breathes, like she's Divinity and he's her supplicant.

And then he's moving toward her with single-minded focus, arms already reaching.

Right on cue.

I lunge between them, throwing my body into Caine's path just as he's about to embrace her. His arms close around me instead, and for one horrifying second, I'm trapped in the Lycan King's bear hug.

We both freeze.

His face—millimeters from mine—contorts with shock and revulsion. I'm pretty sure my expression mirrors his.

"What. The. FUCK." His voice is a strangled growl as he releases me with such force I nearly stumble.

I smooth down my shirt, suppressing a shudder. "Unless you want to send her back to the hospital, keep your paws to yourself."

Caine steps back like I've slapped him, his eyes darting to Grace. "Are you still...?"

Grace, the traitor, is laughing—actually *laughing*—tears gathering at the corners of her eyes. "Your faces," she manages between giggles. "I wish I had a camera."

"This isn't funny," Caine growls, but the way his eyes linger on her laughter suggests he doesn't entirely mean it.

"I don't know," she says, wiping at her eyes. "It was pretty funny."

His expression softens, just for a moment, before hardening again as his attention shifts back to me. "Touch me again and I'll—"

"You'll what?" I cut in, baring my teeth in a smile that's just a little too sharp. "Please, finish that sentence. I'm dying to hear what you think you could do to me."

Grace of a Wolf #Chapter 88: Lyre: Let's All Calm Down - Read Grace of a Wolf Chapter 88: Lyre: Let's All Calm Down

Chapter 88: Lyre: Let's All Calm Down

LYRE

Jack-Eye steps forward, hands raised. "Let's all calm down."

I ignore him. "Do you want to send her back to intensive care? Because that's what will happen if you drain her again. Energy transference isn't a joke."

Caine's jaw works as he processes this, his desire to touch Grace warring with his need to keep her safe. It's almost endearing how much his instincts conflict with each other.

Finally, he moves to a cushion near Grace—close, but not touching—and sits with the stiff posture of someone expecting an attack at any moment.

"Where is Fenris?" Grace asks, leaning forward but keeping her hands to herself.

"Recuperating," Caine answers shortly. His gaze never leaves her face, drinking her in like a man dying of thirst. "He used a lot of energy."

The way his voice darkens tells me there's more to the story, but now isn't the time to pry. His brain's somewhere else, I'm sure, the kind of place it shouldn't be with children under the same roof. Thankfully, they're in the other room.

Then his attention shifts to me and Owen.

Huh.

Maybe I'm wrong. The man's upper brain is still working.

"What is this place?" the overbearing brute demands. "Why is Grace here?"

Grace moves so suddenly I almost don't catch her in time. One moment she's sitting there all wide-eyed innocence, the next her hand is reaching toward Caine's arm with an instinctive need to comfort.

I lunge forward, smacking her hand away before contact.

"No touching!"

Grace's mouth drops open in shock as she cradles her hand against her chest. Not that I hurt her—I'd never—but the surprise of it stings worse than the tap itself, I'm sure.

Caine, predictable as the tide, snarls at me. A rumbling, guttural sound that would make most creatures soil themselves and beg for mercy. His eyes flash dangerously, muscles tensing as he prepares to launch.

Seven hundred years is plenty of time to lose patience with this particular brand of alpha male posturing.

I flick my finger toward him—a casual gesture, like brushing away a particularly annoying insect—and the air responds instantly, condensing into a wave that slams into Caine's chest and throws him backward into the stone wall.

The impact makes a satisfying thud. Nothing that would actually hurt him, just enough force to rattle his oversized ego. The cushions scatter around him as he slides down to the floor, his expression a spectacular blend of shock and fury.

Owen, lurking near the entrance, makes a strangled sound. Poor thing. Probably contemplating which exit strategy won't get him killed.

"Do you both think I'm joking?" I ask, looking between Grace and Caine. "That I'm just being dramatic for fun?"

Silence hangs in the air.

Jack-Eye clears his throat. "Well—she *did* say no touching."

At least one of them is smart.

"Your energy is critically depleted," I continue, focusing on Grace. "And his—" I jab a finger toward the now-seething Lycan King, "—is overwhelming. One touch, even a small one, and he'll pull from you again. He can't help it."

Grace's eyes widen. She looks down at her hand like it's suddenly foreign to her.

"I wasn't intending to... Sorry, Lyre."

"That's the problem with mate bonds." I sigh heavily. "They override rational thought. You don't think, you just act, and suddenly you're back in a hospital bed with tubes down your throat."

Caine pushes himself off the floor, bristling with barely contained rage. His hands clench and unclench at his sides, tattoos rippling across his skin like living shadows.

"You have three seconds to explain why I shouldn't tear your head off," he growls.

Uninspired. I roll my eyes. "Because A: you can't, and B: I'm trying to keep your mate alive, you absolute walnut."

"Walnut?" Jack-Eye whispers from somewhere behind me, sounding far too amused for someone who's supposed to be blindly loyal to his king.

I clap my hands together, loud enough to startle everyone. The brief nudge of arcana to amplify the sound might have helped. "Charming as this display of dominance is—truly, it's riveting—there are way more important questions to ask right now, don't you think?"

Caine opens his mouth, no doubt to say something predictably threatening, when movement catches my peripheral vision.

The feral toddler comes tearing around the corner, her face smeared with what appears to be pizza sauce and possibly chocolate. I *hope* it's chocolate.

Behind her, a girl with braided hair sprints with her arms outstretched, looking equal parts furious and desperate.

"Bun, get back here!" she hisses, reaching for the escaping toddler.

But Bun is faster than she looks. She careens across the floor with the unstoppable momentum of a tiny, sauce-covered missile. Her destination is clear, and nothing—*nothing*—will deter her.

She launches herself directly into Grace's lap with a flying leap Olympic gymnasts would admire and lets out a bellow loud enough to shake dust from the cave ceiling. "MAMA!"

The word echoes, bouncing off stone walls and ringing in the sudden, profound silence that follows.

Grace's face goes slack with shock, her mouth wide enough to catch an army of flies as she instinctively catches the child. Motherly instincts. Not surprising, for someone with her fate.

Bun immediately snuggles against her chest, tiny fingers gripping Grace's shirt with surprising strength as she rubs her sauce-streaked face against the fabric. She's babbling a mile a minute, looking aggrieved with her scrunched up expression and fat crocodile tears.

Caine looks like someone just hit him with a sledgehammer. His expression cycles through confusion, shock, disbelief, and something that might be horror, all in the span of three seconds.

Oh.

This.

This is *delicious*.

My lips quirk at the horrible misunderstanding going through his head, even as I see panic widening Grace's eyes.

"What," he says, voice dangerously flat, "is that."

The older girl skids to a halt at the edge of our little circle, her face draining of color as she realizes what just happened. Her pale skin goes even whiter, red eyes wide with panic. "That's the Lycan King, isn't it?"

Grace's hand hovers uncertainly over the child's head, not quite touching. "I—she's not—we're not—" Her face has gone an alarming shade of crimson.

"So," I drawl, enjoying this moment perhaps more than I should, "when were you going to mention you acquired a child? Must have slipped your mind during our quality time together."

"She's not mine!" Grace manages to squeak out. "She just—I don't know why—"

Jack-Eye looks like he's contemplating the nearest exit strategy, his gaze darting between his alpha's increasingly thunderous expression and the child now contentedly nestled against Grace.

Owen steps forward, hands raised in a placating gesture. "I can explain," he begins, then immediately takes a step back when Caine's attention snaps to him, like a predator catching movement in tall grass.

"Please do," the Lycan says, each word dripping with menace.

Chapter 89: Grace: Mama?!

Bun burrows deeper into my lap, trembling against my chest. The cave has gone deadly silent except for her sniffles.

"I can explain," Owen says again, taking another careful step back when Caine's eyes lock onto him like heat-seeking missiles.

My heart pounds, trapped somewhere between panic and a bizarre protective instinct for the toddler currently using me as a human tissue. I've known this child for less than a handful of hours, but the bone-crushing tension radiating from Caine makes me want to shield her with my body.

"She's not—we're not—" My voice is thin. "This isn't what it looks like."

The words are lame, but it isn't as if I was expecting to defend myself against a toddler calling me her mother.

Caine's jaw twitches. The tattoos on his skin seem to pulse darker, shadows writhing beneath his flesh. I can practically hear the calculations happening behind his stormy eyes—dates, timelines, possibilities...

Not that there's much to calculate.

No. Wait. Is he really wondering if Bun could be Rafe's...? *No.*

Owen clears his throat. "Bun has no parents. None of the children do." His voice remains steady despite the death stare Caine is drilling into him. "They're all soulspliced aberrants I rescued from various facilities. Bun is the youngest."

It's the most words I've ever heard him put together at once.

"Soulspliced?" I echo, glancing down at the little head tucked under my chin.

"Their souls are..." He moves his hands awkwardly. "Mixed with more than one source. Aberrants."

Bun raises her tear-stained face to look up at me. Her features shift slightly—bunny ears pop out of her head, and whiskers sprout her cheeks again. Then they're gone.

It happens so fast I might have imagined it if I hadn't seen it multiple times already.

"MAMA!" she wails again, louder this time, pressing her face back against my collarbone.

Caine's expression darkens further, if that's even possible. His hands curl into fists at his sides.

Jer sighs from behind us all. "Grace, you have to acknowledge it."

Acknowledge—what? That I'm her *mother*?

But he's continuing, "She'll keep repeating herself if you don't. It's right there—on her knee."

I twist my head to peer down at the knee pressed against my side. It looks a little red. "Her knee?"

"Doomed," Sara moans from behind her hands.

Bun pulls back, her lower lip jutting out as she sniffs hard. "Mama," she whines, sounding a little more pathetic and less... loud. But there's a promise of escalation if I don't handle this right.

The dark-curved boy rolls his eyes. "We know it hurts, Bun. Grace, you have to kiss it. Bun, you want Grace to kiss the owie?"

The toddler brightens. "Mm! Mama. Hee. Mama." She kicks her leg out, proving it doesn't hurt at all—except in her memory.

"What's she saying?" Lyre asks, looking way too amused by this entire situation. Her cat-slit eyes are dancing from person to person, her lips twitching every time she looks at Bun.

"She's saying 'owie here'," Jer translates as I kiss Bun's knee.

"Wait—are you saying she isn't calling Grace mama?"

"Huh?" The boy frowns at Lyre, crossing his arms. "Why would he call her mama? We just met her. 'Mama' means 'owie'."

Oh.

Ohh.

The relief on Caine's face is immediate and palpable, like someone just lifted an entire truck off his chest. His shoulders drop a fraction of an inch, and the murderous gleam in his eyes dims to merely threatening. He even smiles.

Smiles.

"She's hurt," he says, still smiling.

I narrow my eyes in his direction, but he doesn't seem to notice, still with an absurd tilt of his lips as he nods, as if the world is right again.

And in a way, it is. I get it. To go from motherhood to not-motherhood in the span of three seconds, I also feel relieved. And no one's getting murdered over a misunderstanding, so even better. But as I look down at Bun's tearful face, at the smudge of red on her knee I've already kissed, there's a tiny, sharp pang of disappointment.

Ridiculous.

I've known this child for hours, not days or years. I'm not her mother. I don't *want* to be her mother. I'm eighteen and just escaped a pack that treated me like dirt for being human. The last thing I need is a shape-shifting toddler calling me "mama" and meaning it.

And yet.

For one brief, insane moment, someone needed me. Someone chose me, specifically. Not because I was convenient, or there, or because a mystical bond said so. Just... me.

I swallow hard and force a smile. "See? Not my kid."

My heart breaks a little.

Bun beams, wiggling her magically better leg.

The tension drains from the room by degrees. Jack-Eye looks like he might start breathing again. Owen's no longer tense, though as soon as he meets Lyre's eyes, he jerks back until he bumps into the wall.

Unsurprisingly, Lyre looks disappointed.

"That's a shame," she drawls, stretching her arms over her head. "I was looking forward to the whole 'you have a secret baby' drama. Really would've spiced things up."

Caine glowers at her, but she doesn't even look at him. I used to think she was suicidally stupid to stand up to the man, but after seeing her fling him across the room? I'm starting to see there's a *lot* more to Lyre than I ever expected.

Bun turns her face back toward me, rubbing her nose against my neck. I wrap my arms around her, careful not to squeeze too tight. There's something uncomfortably right about holding her. Like my arms were designed for exactly this.

"So all these kids are... what did you call them? Soulspliced?" I ask Owen, desperately needing to change the subject before I think too hard about the maternal instincts apparently lying dormant inside me.

He nods, relieved to be discussing something other than perceived parenthood. Lyre takes a step closer to him, and he stiffens further. I wasn't sure it was actually possible. "Yes. Their soul has the essence of multiple souls within it, which is considered—"

"—Fuck."

Chapter 90: Grace: Sanguimancers

Lyre's voice cuts through his explanation, and she groans. Loudly. Rubbing at her forehead as she looks at the ceiling, her other hand propped onto her hip.

If I had to guess at her emotional state, it would be exasperated, but I'm not sure why.

"What?" I ask, tightening my grip on Bun instinctively.

"I forgot the cages," she says, smacking her palm against her forehead once. Then twice. "Damn it, I forgot about the cages."

Caine's attention snaps to her. "What cages?"

"The facility where I found—ugh. It's a long story. Look, the point is that there are cages underground. A lot of them. Filled with shifters." Lyre's gaze flicks to Bun, then back to Caine. Her usual sarcasm has vanished entirely. "Some have children in them."

"You forgot about kidnapped people?" I blurt out, unable to process how anyone could forget something like that. Lyre's strange, but she's caring.

Her catlike eyes narrow at me. "I got some bad news. It was no longer a priority."

My heart flips a little.

The Lycan King has returned, all trace of the slightly warmer and marginally more approachable Caine gone as he asks, "Were they alive?"

"Yes. Mostly."

His face hardens. "Where? How many? Why are they there?"

"About ten miles to the northeast of here, there's an abandoned industrial complex. Doesn't look like much from the outside, but there are magical wards everywhere." Lyre's eyes drift to Bun again, who has mercifully fallen quiet in my arms; she's chewing on the collar of her onesie as she rhythmically kicks her foot out, content to sit where she is. "At least one was soulspliced. Shifters, most likely. Possibly some humans mixed in. They've been there a long time."

Owen sighs, and Sara lets out a little whimper. She looks horrified, but by the way her stare's still glued in Caine's direction, I'm not sure if she's reacting to what Lyre's saying or if she's just... really convinced Caine's going to eat her.

Jer, on the other hand, is ignoring all of us. He's trying to get to the rest of the tanghulu, set out of his reach.

My heart constricts painfully. "We have to help them."

Jack-Eye steps forward, a hand already reaching for his phone. "I'll coordinate a team. We can have wolves there within—"

He pauses, sharing a glance with Caine. The Lycan King shakes his head. "The closest are all still in Blue Mountain. It would be hours before they get here."

His beta sighs. "I told you we should have brought a few more with us."

"It's better for them to keep an eye on the brat ruling there." Caine runs a hand through his hair, blowing out a breath. He glances at me with a frown.

"We don't need a rescue team," Lyre says calmly. "It's just a retrieval."

"It's better to be safe—"

"There's no danger," she interrupts him. "I can vouch."

He frowns.

Owen clears his throat, and I'm impressed. He's facing Lyre without shaking.

But then I follow the line of his gaze and realize he's looking way over her head. She probably isn't in his peripheral vision.

"I will go. If any soulspliced are alive..."

"I'm going too," I announce, starting to rise before remembering the toddler in my lap. The words come out of me without conscious thought; maybe I'm just swept up in the moment. Or maybe it's the thought of another Bun-like child, trapped in a cage. Maybe without its mother. Family.

"Absolutely not," four voices ring out in unison, and I blink.

"You're no help at all," Lyre says, and her gentle tone is at odds with her words.

"You'd be in the way," Owen agrees, his arms crossed over his chest.

Jack-Eye and Caine don't have a follow-up. They're just standing there like they expect me to follow their every word.

Which I will, because they're all right. I have no business going around trying to save people. Even if I was completely recovered, I have no skill sets to help out. I'm not particularly strong or agile, and I don't have magic like Lyre.

"Sorry. I know. I don't know why I said it."

Jack-Eye frowns at me, then looks at his alpha. "You're staying here, right?"

Caine's jaw works as he considers, his gaze darting between Lyre and Owen, then back to me. "Yes. We can't leave Grace without a guard. But keep me updated. Check in at least once an hour."

"Not every five minutes?" Lyre asks lightly, before pressing her lips together so tight they turn white. Her shoulders shake a little, though.

"I'm sure every hour will be adequate," his beta cuts in hastily. "Come, Madame Lyre. Please lead the way to the children."

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The tension in the room shifts from panicked to purposeful as everyone begins organizing themselves. Owen steps away from the wall, his shoulders squared despite his obvious discomfort around Lyre.

"I might have a place to take any survivors," he says, his voice more confident than I've heard before. "But we should hurry. The sanguimancer—she's dead?"

"For now," the rainbow-haired girl replies, making a vague gesture with her hand. "It will take her some time to recuperate."

"How long?"

"Years."

Owen's so startled he actually looks right at her. "Years? You destroyed her vessel?"

A faint, one-shouldered shrug. "Is there any better way?"

"No." But he looks more afraid than ever as he leads them out of our safe little cave.

Even Caine looks taken aback, his eyebrows lifted slightly as he watches them leave. Bun shifts in my lap, chewing harder on her collar, oblivious to the atmosphere.

"What's a sanguimancer?" Jack-Eye asks, and I lean forward to listen. "Are they dangerous?"

"She wasn't particularly challenging—just annoying. They're blood witches, in the crudest sense of the world. Their own or others', it doesn't matter. They use it to feed themselves, bind others to their will, cast nasty little spells..."

Her voice trails off, and I glance at Caine, who's frowning. "Have you ever heard of sangwa.. Um, blood witches?" It's a term I've never heard before.

He shakes his head. "No."

Lyre pops her head back in, just before the rock wall closes. "No touching. I mean it, Your Royal Blockheadedness."

"I heard you the first time," Caine growls.

"And yet I still don't believe you'll listen." Lyre's slitted eyes narrow further. "I won't be happy if I come back to find Grace unconscious again."

"Doomed," Sara whispers, still dramatically covering her face.