

Grace of a Wolf –

Chapter 21: Caine: You're an Idiot

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CAINE

Even without being manifested, I can feel my wolf staring holes into my head.

You're an idiot, Fenris observes for the twentieth time today.

Ignoring him, I nudge a plate closer to the empty seat across from me. The table is covered in a feast; plates of scrambled eggs, bacon, ham, biscuits, scones...

This pack runs well enough, and it's objectively a loss to have murdered its Alpha last night. While Jack-Eye hasn't spoken to me about my sudden decision, I know it's going to be a headache when we get back to our territory. Once news reaches the other packs, protests will come to the throne. Other packs will even send envoys.

There's no way to sugarcoat an act of war, even for the Lycan King. If I want to keep the peace I've forced onto our people, I can't go around killing Alphas—but his treatment of *her*...

Was it much better than yours? Fenris asks, with a bit of a snarl in his mental voice. He's still angry with me for acting as if I was going to choke the girl.

"I didn't hurt her. She's alive, isn't she?"

He sighs. How was she supposed to know you wouldn't hurt her?

Nagging isn't a usual part of our relationship, and his insistence on taking care of this human is frustrating. I'd spent all morning cleaning up our mess, and even kept her golden-haired lover alive to take over as Alpha. She should appreciate my restraint, considering the mess I created over her.

You're going to regret thinking like that.

Ignoring Fenris' warning, I drop into the chair, drumming my fingers against the table. Where is Jack-Eye with the girl? The food is nearly cold, and the girl hasn't eaten all day.

That's your fault. You forgot about her.

"Shut up." The words escape through clenched teeth. Besides, I didn't forget about her. I just forgot to feed her.

You're an idiot, my wolf opines again, sounding disgusted.

"Get out of my head." My knuckles whiten around the edge of the table. "I'm only feeding her because she needs to stay alive until we sort this mess out. She goes back to the humans after our investigation is complete."

Fenris snorts. And how do you plan to investigate when you slaughtered everyone who might have answers?

Pain shoots through my temples. I squeeze the bridge of my nose, a snarl building in my chest. "There are survivors." It isn't like I massacred the entire pack. Just a chunk of it. Enough to make an example and take the edge off the anger burning in my chest. "The girl will answer my questions."

Will she? Then why didn't you ask her some when you went to visit her?

Because the entire room smelled like her. Because as soon as I walked in, I was drawn to the bed, where everything was drenched in her obnoxious blueberry muffin scent. Because it was all I could do not to throw her onto it when she came out of the bathroom, wet and steamy—so I stole her pillow instead, taking it to my bed.

Fenris remains silent, but his smug presence is overbearing in my head. I want nothing more to punch that son of a bitch wolf in his muzzle the next time he manifests.

Footsteps echo down the hall. My head snaps up, nostrils flaring at her scent before she even enters. Jack-Eye opens the door, and there she is.

The human girl steps inside, her brown hair falling in waves around her shoulders. Dark circles ring her grass-green eyes, her skin pale from lack of food. Not that I care. This is purely Fenris's obsession making me notice these details.

I wonder what possessed me to think you were intelligent enough to become King.

Ignoring Fenris's sarcasm, I watch her hesitate beside her chair. Her eyes dart between me and the spread of food, her throat working as she swallows. Her entire body is stiff, and she keeps cradling her hands against her chest. Does she really think I'm going to hurt her?

Why wouldn't she? What part of you has shown you won't?

The skin around my eyes tighten, and I fight the urge to scowl at the frail human, saturating this room in the scent of muffins. I might have tied and gagged her, but it isn't like I hurt her. Scared her, maybe, but she should realize how much restraint I've shown—

As you keep pointing out when it's convenient for you, she's human. Not a shifter. Violence is not normal in their world.

I scoff. Human news glorifies violence.

Fenris sighs.

My beta's hand brushes her arm as he pulls out her chair. "Sit," he tells her, and she does, though with hesitation.

My fingers dig into the table's edge. That casual touch sets my blood boiling. Even if it's just Jack-Eye being courteous, the sight of his fingers grazing her skin makes me want to separate his hand from his wrist.

"Get out," I snarl.

The girl flinches, shrinking into herself. Jack-Eye raises an eyebrow in my direction, but doesn't argue. If anything, that bastard smirks.

"Call me if you need me."

The door clicks shut behind him, but the sound of his retreating footsteps does nothing to calm the rage coursing through my veins.

I dig my elbow into the wooden arm of my chair, focusing on the dull ache that spreads through the joint. The pain grounds me, keeps my wolf's influence at bay. Keeps me from reaching across the table and—

And what? Fenris asks, sounding far too smug. He has front-seat views to the obscene visions in my head. Hell, he probably put them there.

I didn't. That's all you.

The girl rubs her wrist, head bowed. Her scent fills my nose with that maddening sweetness. The dark circles under her eyes stand out against her pale skin, and a muscle in my jaw ticks. "Eat before you faint."

She startles like a spooked deer, those green eyes darting up to meet mine before skittering away. Her gaze drifts across the room, taking in the sitting area with its plush chairs and ornate furniture.

"Where am I?"

My fingers curl into my palm. "My bedroom."

Her spine goes rigid. Those grass-green eyes snap to the open door across the room, where she can see the bed just beyond. The bed where her pillow now rests. Her heart rate spikes, flooding the air with the acrid scent of fear.

You're scaring her again.

A growl builds in my chest. I shove to my feet, the chair scraping against hardwood. Snatching her empty plate, I stab my fork into the spread before me. Scrambled eggs. Sausages. Bacon. A full slice of ham. Some strange, square potatoes. Scones. Each item lands with a clatter.

The plate hits the table in front of her with a loud thud, and she jumps again. "Eat," I order, handing her the fork.

There's still a caustic undertone to her sweet scent, and her fingers tremble as she reaches for the utensil. Not once do her eyes meet mine, though she's faced me in worse situations. Earlier, her face was flushed in embarrassment as she demanded to know why I was in her bed. Now, she's a frightened rabbit.

I don't like that.

Chapter 22: Grace: Eat

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There's food heaped onto the plate in front of me, turning into a small mountain of breakfast. I was starving, but now the egregious stack of food—enough to feed three people—leaves me nauseated.

"I'm not hungry," I lie, even though I'll regret it later.

"Eat," the overbearing monarch says, his voice so cold I swear there's an icy breeze in my ear.

But who can eat when there's a strange man standing over them, arms crossed, watching with a death glare? Nope. Not happening. My stomach roils and rebels, even though it was begging me for food just a while ago.

I must not move fast enough for his liking, because he takes back the fork he'd given me and stabs a large bite of egg, shoving it at my face like I'm a child. "You haven't eaten. You need to."

He's still waiting, acting as if he can wait all day for me to eat what he's offering. It's awkward—beyond weird, really—but I lean forward and open my mouth. Cold metal clinks against my teeth as I try to manage the massive portion of scrambled eggs. Half of it falls back to the plate while I struggle to chew what made it in, heat rising in my cheeks over the mess I'm making.

His pupils dilate as he watches me, and he spears a thick sausage link next, bringing it toward my lips.

No way. Once was enough.

"Wait." I hold up my hands to fend him off, though the effort feels futile. "I can feed myself."

"Your mouth's too small." His voice comes out rough, yet his face betrays nothing but clinical observation.

My cheeks burn hotter. I grab a napkin and wipe away bits of egg from the corners of my mouth. "It's not that my mouth is small. That bite was just too big."

"You just need practice." He doesn't lower the fork.

The sausage hovers between us. It's spicy, just the way Alpha always liked them. My stomach seems to have decided on hunger over nausea, and rumbles, begging me for sustenance.

"I can feed myself." Snatching the fork out of his hand, I take a defiant bite of sausage, a little flustered when grease spurts out and drips down my chin. It isn't the image of an independent adult woman I wanted to portray, but at least I've successfully gained control of feeding myself.

Or so you'd think.

He shoves a piece of bacon at me. "Try this, too."

I chew as fast as I can, wanting to tell him to back off. The moment my lips part, crispy bacon slides between them. His storm-gray eyes fix on my mouth, intense enough to send warning signals down my spine. The bedroom door stands open behind him, and my stomach drops as I remember we're alone in his suite.

Did he really summon me here to—

"You're making a mess." His voice comes out low and rumbly, almost like a purr.

The rough pad of his thumb swipes across my chin, wiping away grease, and my body betrays me with a jolt of heat. His touch leaves a trail of fire across my skin, and my thighs clench. What is wrong with me? This man murdered Alpha. He's holding me captive. He's dangerous and clearly unhinged and—

I jerk my head away from his touch, face burning. My knees snap together under the table as I try to get myself under control.

A knock echoes through the suite, interrupting the strangely sexual moment. Thank you, God. I think I need to see a priest and confess all my sins, but very few shifter packs allow a church onto their territory.

"Enter."

Surely he'll step back now and give me space to breathe... but he doesn't.

Caine doesn't move an inch. He reaches for a napkin, still looming over me as if the person at the door doesn't exist. His fingers thread through my hair, gripping the back of my head to hold me still while he dabs at my face with meticulous care.

"The Blue Mountain Pack's new Alpha requests an audience," a voice says from the doorway, and I recognize the red-haired Lycan's voice immediately.

"Tell him I'm occupied." Caine squints at my chin before letting go of my hair, apparently satisfied.

"You're the one who called him here." The Lycan Beta's voice sounds distinctly amused, and I wonder if he's smiling or still showing a deadpan face. He'd seemed friendly enough yesterday, before the attacks.

The simple act of holding a fork seems strange to me now, my movements jerky and trembling as I stab at a small, fluffy cloud of egg. A thousand thoughts race through my mind—most of them cursing myself for being some strange style of pervert around dangerous men—and I don't pay attention to what I'm doing, only to be surprised when pain floods through my wrist.

The fork clatters onto my plate in haphazard fashion, and I take a deep breath through the pain radiating from forearm to palm. Ellie must have sprained my wrist; it hurt all the way here, but seeing the Lycan King had put my body on high alert, and I'd almost forgotten about it.

"I changed my mind." Caine still doesn't turn around to talk to his beta, frowning instead as his gaze lingers on my hand. I swear the temperature in the room drops ten degrees.

"He's already—"

A low, grumbly sound vibrates through the air. It takes a second for me to realize he's growling. It isn't a vicious, violent sort of growl, but more... discontent. The Lycan King never once turns around; only the words he grits out show he's listening. "Get. Out."

The door clicks shut without further argument, leaving me alone with a murderer who makes my body wish he was an angel.

I focus on the plate, determined to eat and get out of here as fast as possible. Grabbing the fork only makes the pain worse, and a quiet hiss escapes my lips before I can stop it.

"What's wrong with your hand?" His voice is sharp, demanding answers as if he's entitled to know everything about me.

"Nothing." I switch the fork to my left hand, awkward and clumsy as I try to spear a piece of egg. My right hand finds refuge in my lap, hidden under the edge of the table. "I'm fine."

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not—"

His hand shoots out, unerring as they dive beneath the table. His fingers wrap around my forearm and I yelp as he draws my injured wrist up for inspection. His touch is surprisingly gentle despite his harsh tone, but that doesn't stop the way my heart pounds against my ribs.

"Who did this?"

"No one. I fell." I have no idea why I'm lying to protect Ellie, but this situation feels dangerous.

His grip tightens a fraction, but I'm pretty sure his fingers won't leave bruises. Is he being gentle with me? The same man who tied me up, left me in a forest, and choked me? Then again, this is the same psycho who stole my pillow. There's no point trying to make sense out of his actions.

"Try again," he says, as my brain scrambles to understand what he's doing.

Chapter 23: Grace: Not Clear At All

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I press my lips together, not sure what to do. If I tell him Ellie hurt me, he might... hurt her, right?

No, wait. This line of reasoning has no basis in reality. He doesn't care about me. If he was going to get upset over someone grabbing my wrist, his beta wouldn't have stood there so calmly while she did it. Ergo, there's no point in protecting Ellie. I don't even like her. She's an objectively terrible person.

Sighing, I tug my arm out of his grasp, mildly surprised when he lets go. His brow creases as he stares at my hand. "I just had a little altercation with Rafe's mate earlier. Since I'm human, I get hurt pretty easily."

"Altercation?" Brooding eyes shift from my wrist to my face. "Didn't I make it clear you're mine?"

I stare at him, my mind blank. The absurdity of his claim only rises after yesterday. "No? I don't think it's very clear at all, actually."

His tense jaw goes slack, his narrowed eyes now wide at my response. He opens his mouth, then closes it, tilting his head as he inspects my face. "What did you say?" he finally asks, his voice much higher than normal.

He's probably not used to being contradicted, but what does he expect with his strange behavior? Nothing's clear at all! "I said no, you didn't make it clear. What does being *yours* even mean?" My hands shake, and I clasp them into my lap tightly. I can't keep looking at his face, so I look at the wall behind him instead.

This is a terrible idea. He's going to kill me for going against him. He doesn't like his authority challenged. But my mouth keeps going. "First, you tell the entire pack I'm yours—which I'm not. Then you tell them my presence here is illegal and I'm the problem between the packs. So which is it? Am I your property, or am I a criminal you need to get rid of?"

His nostrils flare. The muscles in his jaw work as if he's grinding his teeth. "I never said—"

"You were mad at Alpha for taking me in. You kept asking him why a *human* was let into the pack. I didn't know it was illegal then, but it makes sense now. So how can you be angry at Alpha if you're also saying you've laid claim to me? Your actions are contradictory, don't you think?" *Please don't kill me, please don't kill me, please don't kill me.* My bravery makes it hard to breathe, but at least the words are finally out there.

The crease between Caine's brows deepens. His hand rises to his forehead, and he releases a long sigh while taking a step back. The space between us grows, and my lungs remember how to function again.

"I see your point," he says.

The words hang in the air as he walks back to his chair, dropping into it with a fluid motion that reminds me of a predator settling in for the hunt. The silence stretches, thick and uncomfortable.

And awkward.

My stomach growls, reminding me of the cooling food in front of me. With trembling fingers, I pick up my fork in my left hand. Each bite is a challenge, but I chew on autopilot, the weight of Caine's stare making it hard to swallow.

He slams his hand against the table out of nowhere, and I jump, tightening my grip on my fork before I drop it again.

"There's nothing wrong with saying you're mine while I investigate your situation." He sounds almost triumphant, his entire face relaxing as he stares at me.

It takes me a few seconds to process what he's saying and understand he's explaining himself. Meanwhile, his finger jabs through the air—at me, then himself, then back to me.

"You. You're *my*

prisoner." Each word is firm, with clear enunciation as he emphasizes every syllable. "No one else can lay their hand on you until my investigation is complete."

His chair scrapes against the ground. Before I can form a response, he storms out, the door slamming behind him with enough force to rattle the plates.

I sit frozen, fork suspended in mid-air, bits of egg dropping back to my plate. What kind of captor gets territorial over their prisoner's well-being?

No. I decided not to try and apply basic logic to the man's words or actions. The man is a lunatic, and nothing he does is ever going to make sense. Better to accept he's crazy and move on.

At least he didn't hurt me.

I stare at the door he just slammed. For all his intimidating presence and penchant for murder, the Lycan King seems more frustrated with me than homicidal. That's a good thing, I think.

My shoulders droop a little, my upper back tense from holding into my fear from the moment I walked into this room. The constant terror of imminent death ebbs, replaced by a dull sort of acceptance. If he wanted to kill me, he'd have done it already. Instead, he's oddly fixated on protecting me, I think. At least from others.

I reach for one of the golden-brown scones. Taking a small bite, I savor the subtle sweetness as it crumbles in my mouth.

The door crashes open again and the pastry slips from my hands, mashing itself against the floor. My heart leaps into my throat as I stare at the Lycan King's broad frame filling the doorway, his expression stormy. My spine crawls.

"Er... did you forget something?"

"No." But he doesn't move from the door.

My neck itches, probably from all the stress, and I reach up to scratch it without thinking. Pain shoots through my wrist at the movement, making me wince.

Caine's boots thunder across the floor. One moment he's at the door, the next his fingers wrap around my upper arm. His touch burns against my bare skin, and more touch burns through the fabric of my shirt.

"Get up." The words come out as a rough growl.

I have no idea what he wants, but I have no intention of pissing him off. It kind of feels like I've used up all my luck for the day already, so I stand immediately, following as he herds me to the other side of the room, where a couch sits across from a simple brick fireplace.

"Sit," he commands, and I do so, wondering if I look as confused as I feel.

Chapter 24: Caine: Can I Have My Hand Back?

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CAINE

The girl's wrist is so thin and fragile, I'm reasonably certain it would break under the pressure of lifting a gallon of milk.

She's not that weak.

The bruises on her skin say otherwise, perfectly spaced. Four fingers and a thumb.

Hmm. How many fingers does a Luna need? She can probably get by with none. In fact, the Blue Mountain Pack has gone years without a Luna; I'm sure they would be just fine without one now...

Oh? Fenris perks up, his mental presence a little stronger. Are we killing her, then?

It's a tempting thought.

I take a deep breath of blueberry muffin-scented air, recalling the unknown scent all over her when we first met. My upper lip curls back in a snarl. Better to keep that vicious little Luna alive; she'll keep her mate in line.

Fenris hums in the back of my head. *Good idea. Or we can kill both of them?* His hopeful question is another temptation, but it would only bring forth more headaches in the long run.

At least without cause.

"Um..." The girl's sweet voice interrupts my vengeful train of thought. "...Caine?"

"Yes?"

"Can I have my hand back?"

"No." She always seems to be asking for things back, a surprisingly irritating trait.

Jack-Eye, bring me a first-aid kit.

The girl's grass-green eyes flash dark, but she doesn't move from her place on the couch. She still smells fearful, but not enough to overpower her ever-present muffin fragrance. Still, judging by the way she avoids meeting my eyes, it's very clear she's afraid of me.

Frowning, I grab her left hand, checking that wrist over. There's a small bruise, but she seems able to use it freely.

I don't miss how she jumps when I grab it, though.

"Why are you so scared? I'm not going to eat you."

Her laugh is breathy and artificial, but she still doesn't meet my gaze. My fingers still circle her delicate wrist, monitoring her pulse as it beats frantically beneath my touch.

Her laughter dies quickly. "Oh. You're not being funny."

"I was being serious. I have no intention of eating you." This assurance should be enough to ease her fear.

Fenris's amusement is overpowering through our bond. *You're trying to be nice. How adorable.*

Ignoring him, I focus instead on the way her pulse jumps when I brush my thumb across the tender skin of her inner wrist. The sight of her bruises sets my teeth on edge.

Her eyes dart behind me, before wandering away again. She shifts on the couch, drawing back slightly, but I have no intention of letting her move further away. As soon as she realizes I'm not letting go, she stops. "Well, you killed Alpha Brax. And everyone else."

"Yes, I did."

"That kind of thing..." Her voice trails off as she stares at my hand on her wrist. "You know, humans call it murder."

My fingers tighten and the scent of her fear spikes, sharp and acrid. It's starting to grate on my nerves. I've given her no reason to think I'd harm her—quite the opposite, really. I've fed her, clothed her, and protected her from that pathetic excuse of an Alpha.

You also chased her, tackled her, tied her up, left her in the forest, choked her...

Point taken. "If I wanted to hurt you, little human, I would have done so in the forest that first night."

You did, though, Fenris chides. Ruined all my progress with her. Now she doesn't trust either of us.

I'm definitely going to punch him the next time he manifests. He's a little too comfortable lately.

"You did hurt me," she says, in an echo of my wolf.

A growl rips from my throat before I can stop it, and the girl startles.

You're scaring her again. Also, Jack-Eye's here.

Jack-Eye's scent precedes him as he enters, first aid kit in hand. He doesn't bat an eye at our relocation to the couch, but I can smell his curiosity.

While we all showed solidarity last night, none the Lycans I brought with me agree with the actions I took last night. The political headache alone doesn't seem worth it, and I have to admit they have a point.

I snatch the kit from him, finally dropping the girl's injured wrist. The white gauze roll feels rough against my fingers as I pull it out, very different from her soft, delicate skin.

"Hold still," I command, wrapping the bandage around her wrist. She doesn't resist, but her eyes track my every movement.

Her scent shifts—less fear now, more confusion. The bruises disappear beneath clean white layers as I work.

Take her back to her room, I order Jack-Eye through our pack link. And make sure nothing like this happens again. No one touches her.

Jack-Eye frowns at the girl's gauze-wrapped hand. *Didn't think a simple grab would do that much damage, honestly.*

"Jack-Eye will take you back to your room. Try not to get in trouble on your way there."

The girl tests her bandaged wrist with careful movements. A small wince crosses her face, and she lets it rest in her lap. Her eyes drift past my shoulder, toward my bedroom door.

"Is that..." She points with her good hand. "Is that my pillow?"

My spine stiffens. Heat crawls up my neck as I recall the soft bundle lying haphazardly over my comforter, still radiating her scent.

Jack-Eye clears his throat beside me. His face remains neutral, but the sharp tang of amusement floods my nostrils. That bastard. I'll make him run laps until his legs fall off.

"No." The denial comes out too quick, but she doesn't seem to realize it.

"Oh." She bites her lower lip. "Could I maybe have my pillow back, though? It was my only one."

"You'll get a new one." I wave my hand dismissively, refusing to acknowledge the burning in my ears. "Jack-Eye, take her. Now."

Jack-Eye's amusement spikes higher as he gestures for the girl to follow him.

I didn't think you'd be quite this hopeless, Fenris sighs. At least learn how to talk to her.

"Shut up," I growl under my breath, watching them leave. The pillow's scent is a weak echo of her warm blueberry scent, but I'm still not going to give it back. She can have a dozen new ones for all I care.

Chapter 25: Grace: Changing Overnight

The bodies are gone, leaving only a large, dark stain on the ground.

The sight is enough to bring me back to my senses, though. The moment I walked into Caine's suite, my brain was scrambled. There's only one thing I can pinpoint as the cause of my strange behavior: The man is just too attractive.

It's stupid. I know it's a stupid reason. But...

God. Was I always this type of person?

The window is cool and soothing as I rest my forehead against it, my sigh deep enough to wilt my entire body. I always considered myself a good person, someone with morals and loyalty.

My head thuds against the glass again. What kind of person am I becoming? Alpha's blood stains the ground below, yet here I stand, thinking about the way Caine's fingers felt against my skin.

"You're disgusting," I mumble to myself, shuddering at my lack of humanity.

This pack helped raise me. Fed me. Gave me a home when I had none. Sure, they cast me aside the moment I proved useless, but still—they were my family for years.

I press my palm flat against the cold window. The chill helps clear my head, but not enough. My thoughts keep drifting to steel-gray eyes and calloused fingers, sending tingles through my body.

"Stop it, Grace." I smack my forehead against the glass again. It's oddly comforting. "He's a murderer. A monster."

But my traitorous mind replays how gentle his touch was while wrapping my wrist. How his presence made me feel safe despite everything he's done. How he fed me, even if he seemed irritated about it.

What's wrong with me? The pack members who died have families. Children who'll grow up without parents. Mates left alone. And here I am, swooning over their killer like some deranged groupie.

My breath fogs the glass as I keep muttering to myself. "I'm going straight to hell. The deepest circle, where they keep the worst of the worst. Even Satan is judging me right now."

The strange part is how removed I feel from all this death. Like watching a movie instead of living through a massacre. Shouldn't I be crying? Screaming? Something other than thinking about the way Caine's jaw clenches when he's angry? And maybe, just maybe, *not* paying any attention to the tiny corner of my brain that almost feels smug someone stood up to Alpha when he was so cruel to me.

Now that I acknowledge the feeling, it grows a little, stabbing holes into my conscience. It doesn't care about the dead people, it's primally satisfied the Lycan King stood up for me.

My stomach churns. This detachment isn't normal. Neither is this pull toward the Lycan King. It's like my moral compass shattered the moment he walked into my life.

I close my eyes, but that only makes it worse. His face appears in the darkness—those sharp cheekbones, the way his lips curve when he's amused. My heart speeds up.

"Get it together, Grace." I dig my nails into my palms until it hurts, irritated with my vapid thoughts. "He killed Alpha. He's probably killed hundreds of others. The man doesn't have a soul."

But my body doesn't seem to care about that little detail. Neither does my mind, apparently, since it keeps circling back to him like a moth to flame. Maybe it's a side effect of his alpha domination. Yeah, this theory makes sense. After all, my morality can't just change overnight.

My changed morality is even trying to insist he's not evil, just different. Shifter society doesn't hold the same standards and morals as humans do, and—no. Unacceptable.

It's not me who's changed. This *has* to be a side effect of his Lycan Kingness. Like a poison to the mind of humans.

I push off the window and collapse onto my bed with another bone-deep sigh. The mattress feels wrong without my pillow, empty and uncomfortable without a place to rest my head. I roll onto my side, curling into myself.

Where are the new pillows, anyway? Hopefully someone delivers them soon. I still can't understand why he would steal mine.

My chest tightens, and I swivel to my other side, facing the wall. This situation is so bizarre. One minute I'm cleaning floors, the next I'm apparently important enough to start a war over. And the so-called king is not helping with his mixed signals, treating me like he cares one second and like I'm a criminal the next.

"You're mine." I mimic his deep voice. "But also my prisoner. But also don't let anyone touch you. But also stay locked in this room. Pfft. How stupid."

The memory of his possessive grip makes my skin tingle pleasantly and I scrub my arms, trying to erase the sensation. I need an antidote for this before it gets worse. Avoiding him would probably help, too.

Being miles away would be even better. If I'd escaped properly the first time, Alpha wouldn't be dead, and I wouldn't have this struggle on my conscience. Yeah—this all would have been better if I'd made it to Sterling City like I planned.

Stupid Fenris ruined everything.

I sit up, my resolve hardening over the truth. My original plan was right. I need to leave—not just the pack, but this whole supernatural world. Find my place among humans where I belong. Humans don't belong in a pack. It's illegal, and I can see why.

"I'll start over. Get a job. An apartment. Maybe even go to college." My heart pumps hard as I re-imagine the dreams I'd held onto just one day ago. Yes, this is what I need to focus on. Not strange murderous Lycans with sexy tattoos.

Normal human things. Safe things. Things that don't end in bloodshed because I exist in the wrong place.

I press my palms against my eyes until stars burst behind my lids. It's the only logical solution. Whatever this thing is with Caine—this pull, this confusion—it doesn't matter. I refuse to be responsible for more death.

The human world is waiting. All I need is a plan. It can't be haphazard like the last one, but I'm sure I'll find a way somehow.

Chapter 26: Grace: A Suspicious Hand

A series of knocks jerks me out of a dream involving a lot of naked skin, among other details I have no business recalling. I wipe a trail of drool from my cheek. "Gross."

Another knock.

"Come in." My voice comes out scratchy. Clearing my throat, I sit up on my bed, wondering who it is.

My entire body stiffens as Andrew steps through the doorway. His limp brown hair falls into his eyes and something about his expression is strange, but what catches my attention is the pillow in his hands.

"What are you doing here?" Despite him obviously being here to deliver what I need, the words come out defensive. I was glad to see he was alive earlier, but it doesn't mean I wanted to see him in person. I just didn't want to recognize another body on the pile.

"Delivering this." He holds up the pillow like a peace offering, but his eyes are intense as they look me over. "Lycan King's orders."

My fingers twitch with the urge to snatch it from him.

"Just toss it over here," I say, waving airily at the other side of my bed, aiming for nonchalance despite how desperately I want it. My neck hurts from the impromptu nap I took without one.

Andrew hesitates, his eyes darting around the room. "You... Are you okay?"

My eyes narrow at Andrew's question. Something's off about his visit—the Lycan King wouldn't send him of all people to deliver a pillow, would he? Fenris should recognize him from their encounter during the Mate Hunt.

Then again, I'm acting like the Lycan King cares about me. He probably hasn't thought twice about a wolf as insignificant as Andrew. Even if Rafe came in here, I'm sure he wouldn't bat an eye...

Then I remember yesterday. Okay, maybe not Rafe. The Lycan King doesn't seem to like him very much for some reason.

"I'm as fine as anyone can be in this situation." Despite trying to sound neutral, my words come out clipped. My tongue presses against my teeth, stopping the automatic 'how are you?' from escaping. Old habits die hard, but I'm not about to pretend we're friends.

He's alive. Great. I don't need to know more details.

Andrew's feet shuffle against the floor as he takes a step forward. Then another. His arms wrap tighter around my pillow, pressing it against his chest like a shield. The sight of it makes my fingers curl into my palms. That's *my* pillow, and now it's going to smell like him.

Scents aren't something that usually bother me, and I've always found shifters to be a little odd with how finicky they can be about them. But now I get it. I don't want to smell Andrew in my bed while I sleep. Ew.

I imagine burning the pillow, but no, it didn't do anything wrong. It's a victim.

"Rafe's worried about you, you know."

A harsh laugh bursts from my throat before I can stop it. Of course that's why Andrew's here. He's always been Rafe's right-hand gofer.

His face tightens, his mouth curving down at the corners. "He's been busy, but he's still taking the time to look after you."

"Pfft." Pressing my lips together before another scoff comes out, I focus on taking three deep breaths through my nose. Once I'm sure I won't laugh in Andrew's face, I reply, "Rafe has bigger problems to deal with. He's Alpha now, right? He should focus on running his pack and getting on the Lycan King's good side before more of you die. And he already has a mate, so he has no business looking after his ex, don't you think? Only a sleaze would do that behind her back."

The words come so easily now, without a twinge of pain.

A warm rush of satisfaction spreads through my chest. The words came out without a single crack in my voice, without the slightest tremor. Look at me, already over Rafe. Maybe trauma is good for something after all.

"You don't mean that." Andrew scowls, still holding my precious pillow hostage. "The pack's a mess right now, but we still want to take care of you."

The declaration hits like a slap. My mouth falls open as I stare at him, wondering if I heard right. "*Take care* of me?" Did I wake up in a parallel universe?

"Yes, we—"

"Ellie told the Lycan Beta she would personally destroy me on the Lycan King's command. She said harboring humans in the pack is illegal. Now you're trying to tell me you all want to *take care* of me?" My eyes narrow. "Or do you mean you're going to kill me?"

"What? No!" Andrew's face pales. "Rafe would never—"

"Uh-huh."

He growls, finally tossing the pillow at me. It lands on the floor, just inches from the bed. "For your information, Ellie's the one who suggested we help you."

A burst of laughter escapes my throat. "Ellie? Wanting to help me?" I shake my head, unable to help the hysterical giggles from bubbling up. How absurd. "You'll have to do better than that. I may be human, but I'm not an idiot."

Andrew's jaw clenches. He opens his mouth to argue, but I cut him off before he can.

"Save it. I don't want to hear any more lies." I point at the pillow on the floor. "Thanks for the delivery, but you can go now. I'm sure you have more important things to do than pretend to care about me."

He sighs, vigorously scratching at his hair as he scowls at me. "You're being so obstinate. Ellie knows you're in danger, and she knows Rafe wants to keep you safe. We all decided to help you out."

"Stop." I hold up my hand, needing a moment to process this absurdity. My eyes narrow as I study Andrew's earnest expression. Either he's the world's best actor, or he actually believes what he's saying.

A chill runs down my spine as I realize what this means. They think I'm stupid enough to fall for this. Maybe Andrew's serious, but I *know* Ellie isn't.

I point over his shoulder at the door. "You do realize there's a Lycan guard right outside? He's heard every word."

Andrew shakes his head, a hint of triumph in his eyes. "They're all gathering with the king right now. There's no Lycan on guard. Just pack."

My heart skips a beat. The way he says it, like it's supposed to reassure me, makes my skin crawl. But... is it so bad to take this hand they're offering?

Ellie definitely has an ulterior motive, but wouldn't our interests align in this case? She'll want me out of Rafe's life, and that's *exactly* what I'm hoping for. Relying on the fickle mindset of the Lycan King is not a great way to survive to old age.

My thumb finds its way between my teeth as I study Andrew's face. The earnest look in his eyes makes my stomach twist. Either he's telling the truth, or he's been thoroughly fooled by whatever game Ellie's playing.

"Fine." I drop my hand to my lap. There's no harm in listening to what they have to say; it doesn't mean I'm going to do it. "What's this brilliant plan you all cooked up?"

Chapter 27: Grace: An Absurd Plan

Chapter 27: Grace: An Absurd Plan

"—the car would leave tonight, before midnight. Just a few miles east of the river crossing. Forest Springs is Ellie's father's territory, so you'd be safe there until—"

My fingers curl into the soft fabric of my recovered pillow, digging in until my knuckles turn white. Forest Springs Pack. The neighboring territory ruled by Ellie's father.

I keep my face blank while Andrew continues explaining their supposed escape plan, but inside, my stomach twists into knots dense enough to sink through the floor. In the end, Ellie and Rafe want me to go to her father's pack.

Silly me, to ever think Ellie and I could be on the same page for even a moment.

"Alpha Thornton will personally guarantee your protection," Andrew says, leaning forward with an earnestness that might be convincing if I didn't know better. "It's the perfect solution."

The room suddenly feels smaller, the walls closing in as Andrew's voice drones on about routes and timing and security measures. Each word lands like another shovelful of dirt on my grave.

"—Rafe wanted to come himself, but he's tied up with the transition meetings. The Lycans are demanding a lot from him as the new Alpha."

Of course they are. Convenient excuse.

I trace a loose thread on my bedsheet, keeping my gaze down so Andrew won't see what's in my eyes. This plan isn't about keeping me safe. It's about getting rid of me permanently. Ellie's intent is to make sure I'm forever miserable.

If it was about my safety, they'd send me to Sterling City.

"—and once the Lycans leave, probably in a few weeks, Rafe will send for you and—"

A bitter laugh threatens to burst from my throat, but I swallow it down. The fantasy that Rafe would "send for me" after the Lycans leave might be the most ridiculous part of this whole charade. Ellie would sooner tear out her own heart than allow me back into Rafe's orbit, even at the edges.

"Grace?" Andrew pauses, finally noticing my silence. "Are you listening?"

"It's a lot to take in," Andrew says, mistaking my silence for consideration. "But we don't have much time."

"Ellie's put together a bag for you—clothes, some toiletries. Basic stuff to get you through the first few days until you're settled."

Clothes picked by Ellie. I imagine scratchy fabrics, wrong sizes, colors meant to wash me out and make me look sickly. Little cruelties hidden in gestures of false kindness.

I stare at Andrew, something inside me finally snapping. The pretense of polite consideration evaporates, like water beneath the noon sun. "Do you actually believe any of this bullshit you're spewing?"

My words are a brutal knife slicing through his plans. Andrew blinks, taken aback by my sudden shift from passive listener to open skeptic.

"What? Grace, this isn't—"

"This isn't what? A convenient way to get rid of me? To hand me over to people who would hate me even more than the ones here do?"

Andrew's expression hardens. "Look, I wouldn't be part of this if I thought you'd be in danger. I'm coming with you."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm going with you to Forest Springs. To make sure you're treated well." He leans forward, earnestness radiating from him. "Rafe wants me to make sure you're okay. He specifically asked me to accompany you. If she wanted to hurt you, why would she send me along?"

I tilt my head back, staring at the ceiling with a humorless laugh. I lift my injured wrist, the one Caine had so carefully bandaged.

"Did you know? Ellie's the one who hurt this wrist this morning."

Andrew's eyes widen slightly; I can see his expression out of the corner of my eye.

"She grabbed me in the hall and wouldn't let go. Squeezed until I thought the bones would snap." My voice drops to an icy whisper as I finally meet his gaze. "She did this in front of the Lycan Beta. She didn't care who saw."

I lean forward, forcing Andrew to maintain eye contact. "So tell me again why someone like Ellie—someone who was willing to physically harm me in front of witnesses—would suddenly be so concerned with helping me? The human ex-girlfriend of her mate?"

The question hangs in the air between us. Andrew shifts uncomfortably, his gaze dropping to my bandaged wrist. The certainty in his expression wavers.

"Maybe she..." he starts, then falters. His throat works as he swallows. "It's still better than being prisoner to the Lycan King, isn't it? You've seen it. He's crazed for violence. He'll kill you the moment he's done with you."

My stomach twists. Yes, I know. It isn't like I trust him, either. But it doesn't mean I'm going to jump into a fire.

Andrew's eyes suddenly narrow, and he takes an aggressive step forward. The shift in his attitude sends a shiver through my body. "It can't be... Do you actually believe what he said? About you being 'his'?"

The memory of Caine's voice echoes in my head—his furious declaration in front of the entire pack. The way Fenris had materialized beside him, as if summoned by his rage.

"No. Of course not."

But then I think about my strange meal with him and how he bandaged my wrist so tenderly. Heat creeps up my neck.

Andrew's nostrils flare slightly. "If there's something between you and the Lycan King that you're not telling us..."

"There's nothing," I snap. I don't need more rumors. Everyone's confused enough as it is.

"Then why are you hesitating?" Andrew presses. "If there's nothing, why not come with me tonight? Get away from all this?"

I study his face, searching for answers. Does he really think he's helping me? And why is he so damn stubborn about this? Andrew has never liked me.

"You didn't answer my question," I say quietly. "Why would Ellie want to help me?"

He sighs, running a hand through his hair. "Rafe is concerned about you. He feels guilty. Ellie knows that, and she wants him focused on the transition, on becoming the Alpha the pack needs right now. As long as you're around..."

"I'm a distraction," I finish for him.

"You're a complication," he corrects. "And with the Lycans breathing down everyone's necks, complications are dangerous."

"And if I refuse to go?" I ask, though I already know the answer.

Andrew's expression turns grim. "Then we can't protect you from whatever happens next. The Lycan King has claimed you as his, but nobody knows why. What if he's just playing with his food?"

I'm not going to eat you, he'd said, like that was supposed to ease all my fears. The thought of it is laughable now.

My fingers trace the edge of the bandage Caine wrapped around my wrist. His touch had been surprisingly gentle for someone so feared, but he's unstable. Strange. Unreadable.

I can't stay here, but I'm not going to go along with Ellie's plan.

"I'll go, but not to Forest Springs. You need to take me to Sterling City."

Andrew's brow furrows. "Sterling City? Why would you want to go there?"

"Because I'm human, Andrew. That's where I should have been all along."

"The humans abandoned you," Andrew says, his voice hard. "We took you in."

A humorless laugh escapes me. "Really? Because the Lycan King seems to think differently. He practically accused Alpha of kidnapping me from human society."

"Alpha Brax would never—" Andrew's face flushes red. "He wouldn't kidnap a human child."

My hands drag roughly over my face as I groan in frustration. "Look, I don't care what you believe. Sterling City is the only place I'm going, with or without your help."

He shifts his weight, uncertainty flickering across his features. The silence stretches between us until he finally speaks. "Fine. I'll come with you to Sterling City."

What? No. "I don't need you."

"Rafe asked me to keep you safe." Andrew's jaw sets stubbornly. "I gave him my word."

I roll my eyes toward the ceiling. The man's incapable of thinking for himself. It's always about Rafe.

Having Andrew along will complicate things, but fighting him on this will only waste time I don't have. "Fine."

Sterling City is big enough. Once we're there, losing Andrew in a crowd shouldn't be too difficult.

Andrew frowns at me, as if my quick agreement leaves him suspicious. Hopefully he gets over it. "Okay. Remember, the succession ceremony starts at midnight. Everyone will be focused on Rafe taking his place as Alpha and re-bonding the pack members. Every Lycan will be there—they have to witness the transfer of power."

I tilt my head. "What happens if they catch us?"

Andrew's expression darkens. "We can't get caught."

So, death. It's what I thought, but it's still unsettling to think about it. "Okay."

The weight of what we're planning settles in my chest like lead. If the Lycan King finds out... The image of Alpha's broken body flashes through my mind.

A strange part of me feels as if I'm betraying my family by escaping, but I shake it off. "You should go before someone notices you've been here too long."

Andrew nods, but hesitates at the door. "Grace... just be ready, okay? I'll get here as soon as I can."

The door clicks shut behind him, leaving me alone with my thundering heart and a thousand doubts.

Chapter 28: Caine: Intervention

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CAINE

The sweet scent of blueberry muffins has faded, replaced by a more generic odor—body sweat and wolf musk, courtesy of all my subordinates crowding my suite.

It shouldn't infuriate me as much as it does, but I want to smash their heads together for it.

I rub at my temple, the dull throb behind my eyes a stark reminder of my lack of sleep. "Stop standing there in silence."

They all look at Jack-Eye; he's clearly been chosen as their spokesperson. The beta clears his throat, stepping forward. "It's about last night, Alpha."

I expected as much. "What about it?"

"The death of an Alpha, even one as problematic as Brax, requires proper protocol. The packs will question—"

"Let them question."

"With respect," Reggie advances to stand beside Jack-Eye, his scarred face twisted in concern, "we're not questioning your authority. But slaughtering an alpha and half his pack over a mere human—"

My fist slams against the table with a sharp crack. "Mere? Are our laws just decoration?"

Jack-Eye elbows Reggie in his side, not bothering with discretion. "But there are procedures for this. The other packs will see this as an act of—"

"Tyranny. It isn't like it's a new opinion." I've done worse in the past, when uniting all packs under my rule. Of course, it was a different time then.

"High Alpha." Reggie glances at the others and squares his shoulders, facing me once more. "We stand with you. Always. But the whispers have already returned. Not just 'The Mad King', but now they're calling you 'The Butcher of Blue Mountain'."

Fenris stirs within me, pleased with the titles. He's been silent since the girl left, resting to recover his strength. *A King's strength is fearsome.*

Fighting a sigh, I wave my free hand in the air. "When the delegates arrive, we'll deal with them."

They all share glances, and Jack-Eye groans when their gazes land on him. Shoving his hand through his hair, he snaps, "Caine, this is a problem. Brax had his hand in a lot of fucking cookie jars. There are plenty who might be happy he's gone, but Blue Mountain isn't just some backwater pack. They have solid allies within the region. Cowing them alone is easy, but if they decide to gather and rebel against us—"

The muscles in my jaw tighten. "What exactly is your point, Beta?"

"We need to understand where your mind is at before we move forward." Jack-Eye's gaze holds mine, unflinching. "You've never shied away from violence—none of us have—but

this is out of character, even for you. Do you really want to destroy the peace we've finally attained? We've spent years cleaning up your image. Have your goals changed?"

Crossing my arms, I lean back in the wooden chair, studying their faces. Their concern radiates off them in waves, stinking up the room. It's expected, but irritating.

"Brax sealed his fate the moment he showed insolence. An alpha who can't control his temper has no business leading a pack."

Jack-Eye's eyebrow twitches, and he presses his lips together. I'm sure he has some smartass remark coming, but he's wise enough to stay silent.

Reggie's throat works, a low growl building as his hands clench at his sides. "We all know this isn't about his leadership. It's about that human git."

Kill him, Fenris demands, outrage pouring into our bond. *His disrespect has gone too far.*

My tattoos burn with his rage, but I ignore it. Fenris is too sensitive over the girl, and his emotions have clouded my head for too long.

My emotions? They're yours, too. The longer it takes for you to accept it, the harder it will be for both of us.

"Humans don't belong in a strong pack," Reggie continues, his upper lip curling in a snarl. "They're weak and useless. She's already proven to be a liability—"

"If you're so hell-bent on following the law," I cut in, my voice dropping to a dangerous whisper, "why are you pestering me about enforcing it?"

Dylan, an older Lycan with gray hair and a penchant for smoothing things over, steps forward. Even his face is twisted in a sneer. "Are you really investigating that... thing, Alpha?"

The tattoos across my chest burn with a dull ache. Fenris snaps at the air inside me. *I'm going for his throat.*

I give a lot of leniency to my people in return for their loyalty, but Fenris is another matter—he would have them on the ground and bleeding in a heartbeat to maintain his status in the pack.

If he hadn't used so much energy in the past week, he'd probably manifest on the spot to prove he means what he says. Instead, I'm able to subdue him through force of will, clamping down on our bond until he has no choice but to go silent.

Jack-Eye stomps on Reggie's foot without batting an eyelash, and the resulting grunt helps ease the tightness in my chest. Jack-Eye's beta domination is a soft whisper in the air, almost a tickle against my skin, but Reggie and Dylan take a step back in unison.

Their faces are tight and grim, but at least they're quiet.

"Grace Harper," Jack-Eye says, and my eye twitches to hear her name coming out of his mouth.

Even I don't use her name.

"Her name is Grace Harper," he continues, frowning at each Lycan in turn. "Remember it well."

Every molecule in my body wants to snap at them to keep her name out of their filthy mouths, and I wonder if Fenris is manipulating my emotions again.

No, it's just you.

Jack-Eye, oblivious to the rage simmering in my veins, turns back to me with a frown. "You're holding her captive when she's clearly Brax's victim. Why are we still holding her here? We should be escorting her to the nearest human city."

The fire of rage is replaced with ice with his words. My fingers tighten against each armrest, wood splintering beneath the force of my grip. "I am still investigating. There is always the possibility she forced her way into the pack."

It's a flimsy excuse, and I know it. They do, too, judging by the way they're staring at me.

Just admit it.

"I know Fenris wants her, but it doesn't seem so one-sided to me. You're feeling it too, aren't you?"

The other Lycans stir; it's clear none of them know what Jack-Eye's implying, and I want it to stay that way. "Enough."

But my beta has never been one to respect boundaries. He's more of a bulldozer than a wolf. "Alpha, is there really a fated connection between you?"

"Impossible," Dylan snaps, and the others echo his sentiments.

"Humans are unable to form a fated connection," Reggie agrees with a scowl. "Brax tried to claim that human bitch as his fated mate to justify her kidnapping, but in the end it was proven fake, wasn't it?"

"Technically, the Council of Alphas agreed it was impossible to form a consensus," Jack-Eye says, his eyes never leaving mine. "And Fenris has a clear draw toward the human girl. He's been protecting her this entire time."

The room descends into chaos as my Lycans argue among themselves, their growls and voices setting my teeth on edge.

"Fated bonds are between wolf souls," Dylan says, pointing in the general direction of the human girl's room. "She has no wolf. Humans can't be a fated mate!"

Fenris growls, and the burn of my tattoos intensifies. A dull ache spreads across my chest.

"High Alpha." Reggie's voice cuts through the noise. The others fall silent as he steps forward, chin raised in challenge. "We need an answer. Is the human girl truly your fated mate?"

Tell them, Fenris demands. I've already accepted her as ours. Why can't you?

Scowling, I hold Reggie's stare, letting out a flare of alpha dominance. It's enough to take the wind out of his sails, and his chin lowers. "My choice of mate isn't up for debate."

You're avoiding the question again.

"Any delegates who come to protest will be informed that the rightful successor of Blue Mountain Pack remains alive and in power." The words come out from between gritted teeth as I picture that blond pup—tall, muscular, with perfect features. His scent lingers in my memory, wrapped around her like a claim. "The Lycans haven't seized control, so there should be no issue."

"And the human?" Dylan asks.

"There are questions that need answers regarding Brax's decision to harbor a human in his pack. Her role remains... unclear. Until we determine the full scope of this situation, she stays under our protection."

Liar.

Reggie's face contorts. "It's a disgrace for Lycans to guard a human."

Murmurs of agreement ripple through the room, the sound grating against my nerves like sandpaper. I felt the same just two days ago, but the memory of her injured wrist has my jaw locking tight enough to crack teeth. The girl needs protection. More than that, she needs to stay locked in her room. For her own safety.

"We've already assigned Blue Mountain Pack members as her guards so we could all be here," Jack-Eye points out. "They've been thoroughly warned about keeping their hands to themselves. We'll just continue this way."

The thought of those wolves—any wolves not under my direct control—near her sets my blood boiling. But my subordinates' shoulders relax, their faces showing relief at this solution. Sighing, I wave my hand at Jack-Eye. "Do that, then."

Chapter 29: Grace: Did I Offend Him?

Chapter 29: Grace: Did I Offend Him?

My stomach is gnawing itself to death.

I press a hand against it, willing it to calm down as I resume pacing the perimeter of my room. Seven steps along the wall. Turn. Five steps across. Turn. Seven steps back. Turn. Five steps to the door.

I crack it open for the fifth time in twenty minutes.

The Blue Mountain shifter stands at attention, back rigid as a plank. He doesn't even twitch as I peer around the edge of the door. His eyes remain fixed forward, as if I'm nothing but a breeze passing through the hallway.

I close the door with a sigh and press my forehead against the cool wood. My stomach clenches painfully. The mountain of breakfast from earlier features in my regrets; I should have stuffed my face while I had the chance. Or at least taken some with me.

Another cramp twists my insides. Decision made.

I yank open the door, determination straightening my spine.

"Hey! I need—"

My words die as I nearly collide with a broad chest. Not the Blue Mountain guard. The Lycan King himself stands before me, his hand raised mid-knock, a tray balanced perfectly in his other palm. The scent of lasagna and garlic bread makes my mouth water in the most unbecoming way.

His eyebrow arches, storm-gray eyes assessing as they rove over me. I take an instinctive step back, which is apparently Lycan for *come on in* because that's precisely what he does.

Rude.

Then again, he made it oh-so-clear I'm his prisoner, so can I really complain?

He kicks the door closed with his heel without looking, his gaze never leaving my face. "Are you comfortable?" he asks, setting the tray on my bed.

I eye him suspiciously. Personally delivering food and asking about my comfort? His behavior is on a rollercoaster again.

"I'm fantastic, thank you."

His jaw tightens. "You're not."

"I just said I am, though?"

He grunts. "Your boyfriend will be instated as Alpha tonight."

I already know that, thanks to Andrew. "I'm sure he's happy about it."

Another grunt, and he hasn't moved from the side of my bed, effectively cutting me off from the food.

My stomach begs me to dive for it, but I wring my hands together, digging my nails into my skin to keep my composure. "Did you need something else?"

His eyes land on my linked hands. "How is your wrist?"

"It's fine." It's not, but as long as I'm not using it much, the pain is bearable. It's the hunger killing me now, but it's being gatekept by a Lycan with a questionable grasp on sanity.

His hand reaches out so quickly I don't have time to flinch. My breath catches as his fingers capture a strand of my hair, letting it slide through them with unsettling fascination.

There are no nerve endings in my hair, but the action sends shivers down my spine regardless.

The lasagna's rich aroma taunts me while my captor plays with my hair, and I'm struck again by the strangeness of this situation. Thankfully, Andrew's coming tonight. Just a little longer and I'll be free. For real this time.

"When were you first brought to the Blue Mountain Pack?"

I barely suppress a groan. He brings me food—which I'm dying to devour—but of course it comes with a cost. I guess I won't be allowed to eat if I don't answer.

He probably doesn't remember any of what I said before, but it's still annoying to repeat it.

"Six years ago," I answer crisply, fighting the urge to step away. Any sudden movement might upset him, and I'm not risking him taking away my food or something in retaliation.

His fingers continue their exploration, twining around the strand. "Six," he repeats, as if testing the word. "And your parents?"

"Dead," I snap. He might not remember the details of what I told him, but he should at least remember I'm an orphan, damn it.

"And he claimed you as his daughter?"

"Yes." My hands clench at my sides. "Until he didn't, the night of the Mate Hunt."

Caine's eyes narrow, his fingers still absently toying with my hair. "Yes, explain that again."

My patience fractures. The lasagna is right there, its cheese congealing while he plays twenty questions. "Could I maybe eat while you interrogate me? Since you brought dinner?"

His eyebrows rise, but he releases my hair and steps aside with a gesture toward the bed. "By all means."

I move cautiously, as if approaching a sleeping predator, and perch on the edge of the mattress. The first bite of lasagna hits my tongue, and I have to stifle a moan. It's perfect—rich tomato sauce, seasoned beef, and cheese that stretches in satisfying strings. Heaven wrapped in pasta layers.

The Blue Mountain Pack is no longer home, but the chef is great.

Caine stands uncomfortably close, looming over me as his eyes follow my fork. "Continue."

I swallow, forcing myself to eat slowly despite my hunger. "Not much to tell. I must have been drugged, because I woke up practically naked in the forest during the Mate Hunt. I guess he was trying to force me to shift. He thought I was his biological daughter and found out I wasn't." I shrug. "Then he tossed me to the omegas."

"And how did he 'find out'?" His voice carries an edge that makes me pause mid-bite.

My brows draw together. "I told you, after the Mate Hunt. When I didn't shift."

He circles to face me, blocking the light from the window. "Did he ever bring up shifting before?"

"No."

"Not even at sixteen?"

"No—oh." Staring blankly at the lasagna, I recall, "He did throw me a pretty big sweet sixteen. He would always get me a cake for my birthday, but it wasn't usually a big party like that."

Caine frowns. "I see. How was his mood?"

The memory is clear, because the day was so special to me. "He had to leave halfway through because something came up. I didn't think much of it because Rafe was with me." Poking my lower lip with my fork, I squint in the air, as if it'll help me see my memory with more clarity. "He was happy when I first saw him that morning, but he was pretty subdued by evening. I thought he was just busy."

A low growl rumbles through the room and Caine spins away from me, pacing the floor. Five steps. Turn. Five steps. Turn.

I set my fork down, appetite vanishing under the weight of his agitation. He's ruining all my meals.

"Did Brax intend to mate you with Rafe?"

The non sequitur throws me for a loop, and I blink. "No, Alpha had nothing to do with our relationship."

"Stop calling him Alpha." Caine whirls toward me, his voice sharp as a blade. "He's not your alpha anymore."

I flinch, my shoulders hunching. "Alpha Brax," I correct myself, my voice smaller than before, "had nothing to do with our relationship."

His scowl deepens, storm clouds gathering in his eyes. "How long were you in a *relationship* with the pup?"

The way he spits the word 'relationship' makes my skin crawl. It's so venomous. "You mean Rafe?"

A sharp nod answers me, his jaw clenched so tight I can see the muscle jumping beneath his skin.

"I don't know. We were friends from day one, and it just grew to more one day." Rubbing at my arms to soothe my crawling skin, I add, "Alpha Brax wasn't against the relationship. He was fine with it until the Mate Hunt."

"Of course he was," he mutters, resuming his pacing. "Your mother. She was his mate?"

"That's what Alpha Brax told me." My fingers twist in my lap. "But I don't know anything about her. His mate, I mean. The pack never said a word about her."

Rafe probably knows... and kept it from me. It's a depressing thought.

"There's probably a rule against it." Caine's pacing slows, his broad shoulders tight with tension. "Because of his pride."

He knows. My heart pounds against my ribs. He knows something. "Do you..." The question sticks in my throat. I swallow hard and force the words past the knot. "Do you know about her? My mother?"

His jaw works, muscles jumping beneath his skin. "It's old history. Most in the region would know."

He's too busy pacing to look at me, so he probably doesn't see my face as my heart splinters into jagged pieces. I just want to know more about Mom, to piece this mystery together. Is it so hard to share a few words?

But he's the Lycan King, interrogating a prisoner. There's no reason for him to soothe my injured heart.

Lowering my head, I stab out another bite of lasagna. "I see."

Andrew might know something. Maybe during the drive to Sterling City, I can get him talking. It'll give us something to talk about, anyway. I was already dreading his presence for the ride.

The pacing stops. A shadow falls over my plate as Caine hovers by my side, towering over me.

I peek up through my lashes. His brows draw together, creating harsh lines across his forehead as he scowls down at me. "Eat more."

My fork hovers over the lasagna. "It's a little hard when you're standing there watching my every move."

His frown deepens. The muscle in his jaw ticks once, twice. Finally, a hissing sound escapes through his teeth—not quite a sigh, and more like steam escaping a pressure valve. "I'll leave you in peace, then."

A second later, the door slams shut.

Did I... offend him?

Chapter 30: Caine: Behaving Strangely

CAINE

There's something strange about her tonight. She's calmer than this morning, a little more assured, despite the familiar scent in her room. Storming down the hall, I snap at Fenris, *Are you sure it's him?*

When have I ever mistaken a scent? It's the wolf who followed her when we first met. His irritation only feeds mine, like a cloud of dark energy following behind.

No new injuries marred her skin, no fresh bruises. At least there's that. But that doesn't explain the scent of another wolf in her room. A Blue Mountain wolf. One who shouldn't dare approach...

"Damn it. She's driving me crazy."

It will only get worse if you keep denying our connection to her.

The tattoos on my neck burn, and I lift my upper lip in a snarl. "Everything will be fine once I settle things." The others were right; she's a victim, not a prisoner. And yet I can't bring myself to send her back to human society.

She's been under Brax's thumb for six years. There are things she needs in order to survive as a human. A driver's license. A place to live. Money. Food. A job.

The more I think of, the worse it feels to even consider sending her back to the humans. At least if I brought her with us, she would have shelter, food, and never have to work again...

Shit. Fenris is messing with my thoughts again. Now I'm even considering bringing her to our pack, as if a human could ever survive surrounded by Lycans.

I want nothing more than peace in my head again. Peace without this obsessive need to surround myself in the aroma of blueberry muffins fresh out of the oven. Without imagining how her hair would feel between my fingers. Without wondering what her skin tastes like.

My mind betrays me, conjuring an image of her bare beneath me, her skin flushed and warm beneath my touch. I see every curve, every soft plane of her body, exposed for my eyes alone, the vision so vivid I can almost feel her pulse beneath my—

Fuck.

I shake my head sharply, forcing the image away.

This obsession Fenris has forced upon me is disrupting everything. I've already killed for her, and I'm acting...

Strangely, Fenris agrees. I'm glad you're finally seeing it.

"Because of you," I grumble.

No. Because you're fighting what we both know is true. My mind is clear because I've accepted our connection with the human. You, on the other hand, seem perfectly willing to descend into madness with your denial.

"Ignoring a mate bond doesn't cause madness. Some even reject their mates." Or so I've heard. I've never had much interest in the issue. One mate was enough.

You're not a normal wolf. Or even a normal Lycan.

A grunt escapes my throat. The cost of the throne weighs heavy, its evidence marked on my skin in the form of tattoos. The separation between wolf and man comes at a steep price. It leaves me stripped of the natural balance other shifters enjoy.

Where they feel love, I feel possession. Where they feel protectiveness, I feel rage. Where they feel desire...

The gods gave you power, but they took your humanity in exchange.

I reach the end of the hall and turn, pacing back the way I came. The Blue Mountain shifter standing guard outside her door stiffens. It wasn't his scent in her room, but he probably knows who it was.

But if I force an answer out of him, what am I going to do? Hunt the man down? Demand to know why he was visiting? The girl isn't hurt; if I go around tyrannizing everyone who looks at her twice, the rumors will only grow. As if Jack-Eye's nagging isn't enough.

My hands curl into fists as I spin on my heel and stalk away again, cursing myself for being weak enough to go back in the first place. She won't eat with me standing there, and she needs the sustenance. I have to give her space, even if I want to throw open the door and stand there, breathing in her scent for the next hour. Maybe three hours. A day. A week.

Forever? Fenris suggests.

No, damn it. She's human. I killed Brax to uphold our laws; what would it say of me if I followed in his footsteps? I swore to uphold the law when I became King. I said I wouldn't let power define me.

Being mated is a separate issue.

My teeth grind together as I tense my jaw. *She isn't our mate, Fenris. She's human.*

His tone turns calculating. *I see. Tell me, then, how do you feel when you're touching her?*

The question stops me cold. My mind flashes back to this earlier—the soft skin of her wrist beneath my fingers, the gentle pulsing of her heart against my thumb. The way her scent surrounded me, letting me breathe freely for the first time since I tackled her onto the forest floor.

Peace. For that brief moment, there was peace in my mind.

Exactly, Fenris purrs, catching the edges of my thoughts. He's like a snake, striking while I'm weak. If you want peace again, you need to get closer to her, not act like a feral beast who's never been around a female. You're scaring her off completely with your bizarre behavior.

"I don't care if she's scared. She won't be around much longer, anyway." Maybe I can stretch out this investigation for a few more days, though. Just enough to get things settled for her in the human world, not because I want to keep her around.

It's for her benefit. Not mine.

Hell—my pack can afford to subsidize an apartment for her. She's a victim, after all. And if she's in the apartment I'm paying for, I can keep an eye on her. Get her a job somewhere I know she'll be safe. Somewhere without other

men. Maybe I can convince her she doesn't need to work; I'll send her an allowance... Enough to keep her comfortable. Happy. Safe.

You're an idiot if you think that'll be enough. Just take her with us.