

Grace of a Wolf –

Chapter 31: Caine: A Fool or a King

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CAINE

Fenris's response makes me realize what I'm thinking and I groan, driving my fist into the nearest wall again. It's a new habit, developed about ten minutes ago. The plaster crumbles under my knuckles, leaving a crater the size of my hand. "Fuck. You're in my head again."

I most certainly am not, Fenris replies, his voice dripping with disdain. I would never put such idiotic thoughts in your head. My goal has always been to keep the girl with us, in our pack—not set her up in some pathetic human apartment like a kept woman.

The truth in his words stings worse than my knuckles. These thoughts—this obsession with providing for her, protecting her from afar—they're mine alone, turning me into a hypocrite. I killed Brax for breaking our laws, didn't I?

"What the hell is happening to me?" I demand of my wolf, grateful this section of the lodge is empty. Talking to the air isn't uncommon in a pack—we all have arguments with our wolves, and they aren't always confined to our heads—but it's not the kind of conversation I want others overhearing.

What's happening is that you're fighting your instincts while pretending it's my influence. It's exhausting to watch.

I press my forehead against the wall with a groan. "She's human, Fenris." If she wasn't, this would all be easier. I still couldn't take her as a mate, but at least it would give me options...

The universe doesn't follow your rigid little rules, Caine.

Blood rushes in my ears as frustration surges. "The laws exist for a reason. Humans and shifters don't mix—they never have."

There are precedents.

"Like Brax?" My mocking laughter echoes through the empty corridor. "His mate ran away. Humans don't belong in a pack."

It's likely her mother was not Brax's fated mate. Or if she was, he treated her so terribly she felt life was better without him. It says more about Brax than it does about her human mother.

"Assumptions," I mutter, but I don't have the heart to say things like *maybe her mom was the problem*. I've met Brax. There's no way a human woman was the problem. "It doesn't matter. The girl will return to human society where she belongs, and that's final."

Then why haven't you sent her already? Why obsess over her injuries, her meals, her comfort?

My jaw clenches. "I'm gathering information."

You're stalling.

"I'm being thorough!"

You're being a coward.

A growl rips from my throat.

The truth hurts, doesn't it? Fenris continues, relentless. You're terrified of what she makes you feel. Of how your control slips every time you're near her. Of the possibility that the Lycan King might actually need someone.

"Enough. You've pushed too far."

And you haven't pushed far enough. All this solitude made you forget what connection feels like. You're so scared of repeating the past that you can't see what's right in front of you.

The burn of my tattoos intensifies, spreading across my neck and down my spine like liquid fire. Fenris is pulling away, separating himself from our shared consciousness.

I'm going to rest, he announces, his voice growing distant. Later, I'll visit the girl myself.

"You will do no such thing," I snarl, but I can feel him receding, retreating to a place within me where I cannot follow.

It's becoming pointless for me to see her when my Bonded keeps destroying whatever progress I make. I bring her comfort; you bring her terror. I offer warmth; you offer threats. And then you wonder why she's scared of you.

I flinch.

I am your other half, your balance—and lately, the only one of us with any sense.

The burn of the tattoos diminishes as Fenris retreats deeper, severing our mental connection. I'm left alone in the hallway, my breathing heavy, staring at a cracked wall.

Fine. That furry bastard's right about one thing—I've been stalling. But it's not fear driving me. It's practicality, damn it. The girl needs protection, and I need information. I can't in good conscience send her out without making sure she has everything she needs.

We both saw what was in her backpack. I have no idea how she thought she was going to survive with just her meager stash of supplies, but the girl is ignorant of the world, sheltered due to Brax's selfishness.

It's my job to keep her here, safe under my watch, until I can set her free.

At least, that's what I tell myself as I storm off once more, ignoring the pull urging me to go see her again, to breathe in her scent.

Maybe the truth is more complicated than I'm willing to admit. Maybe I feel a little of the pull Fenris keeps existing is between us. Maybe, just *maybe*, I want to hold on to that little human, too, desperate for a peace only her scent can bring me.

But that doesn't make her my mate. It makes her a liability. A weakness I cannot afford.

The kingdoms of men rise and fall on the backs of such weaknesses. How many have crumbled because they placed their hearts above their duty? How many packs have dissolved into chaos when their alphas chose passion over reason?

I reach the end of the corridor and pause, looking out the window at the Blue Mountain territory stretching before me. The sun hangs low in the sky, casting long shadows across the land. A land now without its alpha, thrown into turmoil because of a girl who smells like blueberry muffins.

If I were wise, I'd send her away tonight. Put her on a bus to Sterling City with enough money to start a new life. Cut this strange connection before it grows any stronger.

But wisdom has never been my strong suit. And Fenris is right about another thing—I'm not sending her anywhere until I understand exactly what's happening between us.

Whether that makes me a fool or a king remains to be seen.

Chapter 32: Grace: One Last Visitor

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Caine's strange behavior takes more mental real estate than it should, but I manage to finish my dinner with him gone. Eating under pressure is a lot harder than I ever expected.

With a full stomach and nothing else to do, I curl up on the bed. My eyelids grow heavy despite lingering anxiety; will Andrew really come? Is this plan going to work? Will I be okay once I get to Sterling City? So many questions, all impossible to answer without more time.

Eventually, the soft mattress beckons me into sleep, a temporary escape from this bizarre reality.

A rough shaking wrenches me out of deep sleep, and my foggy mind registers someone's hand on my shoulder.

"Grace, wake up."

I sit up with a yawn, stretching my arms above my head until my joints pop. The motion helps clear some of the cobwebs from my brain, but when my vision focuses, my body freezes mid-stretch, hands locked high in the air. "Rafe?"

It's not Andrew's face hovering in front of me, but Raphael's. His blue eyes shine so brightly, my stomach flips. Not with cute butterflies, but in dread. His gaze is too intense, almost fanatical.

"What are you doing here?" I hiss, scrambling backward until I hit the wall. The distance between us isn't nearly enough.

Rafe's pine-and-earth scent, once thrilling and now rather generic, fills my nostrils, bringing unwelcome memories. His golden hair catches the light from the bedside lamp, creating a halo effect that seems laughably inappropriate given our recent past. How can someone so cruel look so much like someone's fantasy of a hero?

"I needed to see you before you leave for Forest Springs." He sits on the edge of my bed like he belongs there, reaching for my hand. "Andrew will be here soon."

I almost blurt out that Forest Springs is the last place I'd willingly go, but snap my mouth shut. He doesn't know about the change in plans; it's strange, but I'm not complaining about it. It's better this way.

Though, there's always the possibility Andrew lied just to appease me. I guess I'll find out soon.

"Why would you need to see me?" I ask instead, pulling my knees to my chest and keeping my hands out of his reach.

His expression darkens as he takes his hand back, his brows drawing together. "Of course it's because I care about you, Gracie. I haven't been able to see you since they murdered our people. I was worried."

The audacity makes my jaw clench. His hands gesture between us as he continues.

"Everything's been a mess, but I'm fixing it. You'll see, Grace." He leans closer, earnestness radiating from him like heat. If my IQ was single digits, maybe I'd even believe in it. "Ellie understands now. And soon, the Blue Mountain Pack will be officially mine. It's only a matter of time before I can bring you home."

Home. The word once meant something—safety, acceptance, belonging. Now it's just four empty letters. This pack is not my home, and he's one of the people who made it like this.

My face remains impassive through his passionate speech. His hands reach for me again, but I duck away from his attempted hug, scrambling off the bed.

"You need to leave," I say, my voice flat. "Before you ruin the entire plan and bring the Lycans running back to my room."

He shakes his head. "Don't worry, Grace. Everything's fine. I have a little time. I just needed to see you."

But it's not fine. Nothing about this is fine. The space between us feels charged with something toxic—his delusional hope and my simmering resentment. A dangerous combination.

"Rafe, please—"

He reaches out suddenly, fingers brushing against my neck. The touch sends revulsion crawling across my skin, and I jerk away.

"I'm so glad you're staying true to me," he says with a strange, overly soft smile. "Refusing the Lycan King's advances. Such a brave girl, my Grace."

My brain stutters to comprehend his words. He thinks I'm rejecting Caine... for him? A laugh bursts from my throat, sharp and incredulous. His delusions are only growing, becoming more ridiculous. Maybe it's his way of dealing with trauma.

Rafe's eyebrows lift at my reaction, but he must misinterpret it, because he steps forward, arms opening for an embrace as his head swoops closer, lips pursed for a kiss.

I dodge again, almost tripping over my own feet. Now I'm between him and the door, which is not where I want to be. It'll be hard to shove him out in this position.

His face twitches, irritation flashing across his features before he smooths it away. "Come here, Grace."

No.

Not only no, but *hell* no.

"If your scent gets on me, the King will go crazy," I say, grasping for any excuse which might penetrate his thick skull.

This finally gives him pause. He runs a hand through his hair, sighing dramatically. "You're right. Of course, you're right." His shoulders slump as he glances at me, his eyes wide and pathetic. It's his puppy dog face. I used to think it was cute.

Now, it's childish.

He steps around me, but his shoulder bumps against mine. The backs of our hands touch for a split second, but I try not to flinch. He's doing what I want him to; I don't want to start an argument and keep him here longer.

"I should go," he says, as if he's wanting me to argue and beg him to stay.

Relief floods through me as he pauses only for a second before moving toward the door. His hand rests on the doorknob, but he turns back, expression solemn.

"I'm never going to hurt you again, Grace." The words fall from his lips with weighty significance, as if he's delivering a romantic vow rather than an empty promise.

I don't bother responding, turning my back instead as I walk toward my bathroom. When I finally look back, the door's closed and he's gone.

Thank. Fucking. God.

How can he possibly forget his cruelty on the night of the Mate Hunt, and the way he treated me the moment his fated mate appeared? Such thick skin he has, acting as if none of it happened—like I should be grateful for his attention, thrilled by his promise to "bring me home."

Perhaps all shifters are closet psychopaths.

I press my palms against my eyes until random shapes and colors bloom behind my eyelids. Rafe's visit has left me rattled, on edge again, ruining what rest I'd managed.

I splash cold water on my face, trying to wash away the lingering disgust. The mirror seems to emphasize the dark circles under my eyes, but at least the water helps clear my head.

When I step back into the bedroom, I freeze. Andrew stands by the window, dressed head to toe in black like some wannabe cat burglar. Black jeans, black hoodie, even black sneakers. My mouth drops open.

"Are you serious right now?"

He turns, frowning. "What?"

"The all-black ensemble? Could you be more obvious about sneaking around?" I gesture at his ridiculous outfit. "You might as well wear a sign that says *'I'm up to no good'* in neon letters."

"This is tactical gear."

"It's a hoodie from Target." I cross my arms. "You're a wolf. You should know better than I do, anyone following is going to smell us anyway. The color of your clothes won't matter."

Andrew tugs at his sleeve, looking slightly offended. "It's about blending into shadows."

"In a pack full of creatures with night vision?" I shake my head. "You're going to stick out like a sore thumb. Everyone's going to take one look at you and know something's up."

He scowls. "You sound like you've done this before."

"No, I just have common sense. The best way to not look suspicious is to not act suspicious."

Andrew sighs. "Whatever. It's too late to change now. We need to move soon if we want to make it out before the ceremony starts. Did you meet with Rafe?"

I bite back the annoyance building in my chest. "He thinks you're taking me to Forest Springs."

"I figured it'd be better to tell him after." He grimaces, scratching at his head. "No point starting a fight when we're on such a tight schedule. I'll just explain everything once you're settled."

"Or you could just never tell them," I mutter, even though I know full well he would never keep a secret from Rafe.

Andrew's frown deepens with my words, disapproval radiating off him in waves. His loyalty to Rafe is basically his only personality trait. Even now, he's probably only helping me because Rafe asked him to, not out of any real concern for my wellbeing.

I paste on my best fake smile. This is no time to alienate my temporary benefactor. "Should we get going?" I gesture toward the door, eager to leave before anyone else decides to pay me an unexpected visit.

Escape, take two.

Chapter 33: Grace: So Easy

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Leaving pack lands is laughably easy with Andrew by my side, and I can't help but wonder if he's laughing at me in his head for overreacting to his blacked-out getup.

There's no one around to care, much less notice us.

The dented blue Toyota looks like freedom on four wheels. It's just one of the many cars parked here, but it's my gateway to a new life.

"Do you have the keys?" I ask, standing by the locked passenger door.

Andrew dangles them from his finger. "What, you think I'd walk us out here without them?"

He slides into the driver's seat, and I fold myself into the passenger side. The seats are clean and well-maintained, and it smells like French fries inside.

"There's a blanket in the back seat, if you want it."

A blanket in this weather? But I realize why he offers when he cranks the AC as high as it goes. Once it kicks in, I'm going to turn into a human ice cube.

When Andrew turns the key in the ignition, my heart stops, wondering if someone's going to come running and ask why we're in the car.

But no one comes.

I'm still tired from Rafe waking me up earlier, but napping isn't an option. Gripping my seat belt, I stare out the window with wide eyes, intent on watching every minute.

I'm in the car because it's the easiest way out of the Blue Mountain Pack's territory, but there's still no guarantee Andrew isn't going to deliver me straight into the hands of Ellie's father. There's a point when the rural road leading to pack lands joins with the highway; if he goes left, he's taking me to Forest Springs.

Right? Sterling City.

Andrew's profile gives nothing away. The moonlight catches on the angles of his face, shadows pooling beneath his cheekbones. After the past few days, he looks suddenly very young to me. Much younger than Caine or the Lycan Beta, and with only a fraction of their confidence.

His fingers tap an uneven rhythm against the steering wheel. Is that nervousness? Guilt? Or just a habit?

Paranoia blooms in the silence of our ride, not even broken by the radio. I guess Andrew prefers to drive in silence.

The closer we get to the highway, the tighter the grip on my seatbelt. My breath catches in my throat. I've prepared myself for the worst—to fling myself from the moving car if necessary.

It feels like hours have passed, but the city isn't *that* far.

The turn signal clicks. Right.

Sterling City.

The breath I've been holding escapes in a soft rush. My shoulders drop an inch as we merge onto the highway, the needle on the speedometer climbing steadily.

Andrew glances over. "You okay?"

Moonlight bleeds through the windows, casting his familiar features in an unfamiliar glow. For a heartbeat, I see the boy I grew up with, not the wolf who'd snarled at me in the forest.

"I'm great. I can't believe we've made it this far."

"I told you, everyone's busy. The Alpha succession isn't really a voluntary event."

The highway is filled with cars, even at this time of night. We're just one of many. Even if someone's looking for us, it won't be easy to find a single car among so many.

Silence falls between us again.

"Why are you helping me?"

Andrew keeps his eyes on the road. "You really want to know?"

"I wouldn't ask if I didn't."

He sighs, a long exhale that seems to deflate him. "Because what they did to you was wrong. What Rafe did was wrong."

I stare at his profile, searching for the lie. "You never liked me."

"I never said I didn't like you."

"You didn't have to. It was pretty clear."

Andrew's mouth twists. "It wasn't about liking or not liking you, Grace."

"Then what was it about?"

His shoulders rise and fall. "Does it matter now?"

"Yes." I'm surprised by how much it matters, suddenly.

The road hums beneath us. A semi-truck passes in the opposite direction, its headlights briefly illuminating the car's interior in harsh white light. I catch the conflict on Andrew's face before darkness reclaims him.

"I kept my distance because Rafe asked me to," he finally says. "In the beginning."

"What? Why would he—"

"Because I liked you too much." He says it casually, like commenting on the weather, but his grip on the steering wheel tightens. "Back when you first came to the pack. Rafe noticed before I even said anything."

The confession lands like a stone in still water, ripples of implication spreading outward. I struggle to reorganize my memories around this new information, trying to make sense of years of perceived indifference.

"You're lying."

"Why would I lie about that?" A humorless laugh escapes him. "It wasn't a big deal. Just a stupid crush. But Rafe..." His voice hardens. "Rafe made it clear you were off-limits."

I think back to all those times Andrew avoided me, how he'd leave rooms when I entered, the careful distance he maintained. I'd interpreted it as disdain—the same disdain most of the pack felt toward me.

"You could have just told me."

"What would have been the point? You only had eyes for him."

The truth of that statement stings more than it should. I turn toward the window. "So all those times you were cold to me—"

"Self-preservation." The corner of his mouth lifts in a wry smile. "Being around someone you want but can't have isn't exactly fun."

A road sign flashes by—Sterling City, 7 miles.

"And now?"

"Now I'm helping an old friend escape a bad situation." His tone is deliberately light. "Or trying to, anyway."

I study his profile, seeing him—really seeing him—for perhaps the first time. The slight bump in his nose from when Rafe broke it during training. The small scar above his right eyebrow. Freckles. His face has been background noise in my life for years.

It doesn't feel like the full story behind this person named 'Andrew', but it's a piece of it. One I never knew before.

"I'm sorry," I say, meaning it. "For not seeing."

"Nothing to be sorry for." He shrugs. "We don't get to choose who we fall for."

The irony of his statement isn't lost on me—not with Rafe and Ellie and their fated bond, and not with whatever strange pull exists between me and the Lycan King.

"No," I agree softly. "We don't."

The car eats up the miles, the highway empty except for the occasional truck. I notice Andrew checking the rearview mirror more frequently now.

"Do you think they'll come after us?" I ask.

His expression darkens. "Eventually. But the ceremony will keep them busy until morning at least."

Uneasy, I shift in my seat. Caine was so quick to murder people; what's he going to do when he realizes I'm missing? Hopefully nothing. I'm a human, going back to humans. This should be a good thing for everyone.

"And then what?" I ask.

Andrew's eyes meet mine briefly. "Then you start over. Become whoever you want to be."

It sounds so simple when he says it, so possible. A clean slate. A human life.

I lean my head against the cool glass of the window, watching the mile markers slip past. Sterling City grows closer with each moment—and with it, the promise of freedom.

But from the way Andrew keeps checking the mirrors, I know we're not free yet.

Chapter 34: Grace: Lighten

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Sterling City is a small town. Too small to hide in. Andrew's words, not mine.

"So you're not leaving me here?" I ask, confused.

Andrew's grip tightens around the steering wheel. "It's the first place they'll look. You're going to need some more distance from the Lycan King, just in case."

His words send ice through my veins. Of course they'd search Sterling City. It's the closest human settlement, so it makes sense I would run here.

"We're going to keep driving for a while, but first we need some food."

He pulls into a vast parking lot illuminated by harsh fluorescent lights. A massive blue sign looms ahead.

"Where are we?"

"Walmart. We need food."

The automatic doors slide open with a mechanical hiss, releasing a blast of cold air that prickles my skin. Inside, the store stretches endlessly, aisles upon aisles of... everything. So many things.

"Bathroom first," Andrew mutters, nodding toward the back of the store.

We navigate through the nearly empty store. Past midnight, only a few night owls roam the aisles alongside us. A tired woman in a blue vest pushes a cart of items to restock, and two guys crowd stand in front of the frozen pizzas. They're the only two people I see.

After using the bathroom, I emerge to find Andrew waiting. His gaze follows mine as I take in everything around us.

"Want to look around?"

I hesitate. "Is that okay?"

"Sure. If you're not tired." He shrugs. "We can take ten minutes to look around."

It's a little embarrassing to admit how much fun it is just to drift through aisles.

I end up in haircare, drawn to a wall of colors and promises. My hair's brown and boring, but I'd never cared much about it before. It's just hair, after all.

A box with a blonde woman catches my eye. I reach for it, reading the instructions with burning curiosity. A transformation in a box. A new identity for \$8.99.

I'm still reading when Andrew says, "Wait here while I grab some food and snacks, okay?"

I nod absently, already reaching for another box. How different would I look? Would Rafe even recognize me? Would Caine?

I pick up a third option when a soft voice interrupts.

"I don't recommend that brand. You'll end up brassy."

I turn to find a girl with hair in every color of the rainbow. Her eyes—unnaturally slitted like a cat's—survey me with amused interest.

"I'm not really sure what I'm looking at," I admit.

She glances around before grabbing a different box. "This would work best out of what's on the shelves."

"Oh." I read over the box, not seeing any real difference except—"This one costs more."

"The cheap ones aren't worth it." She cocks her head, studying me. "Ever lightened your hair before?"

"No."

She rubs the tip of her nose, eyes narrowing as she looks me up and down. "You from around here?"

I hesitate, looking around. She seems a little too helpful to be a wolf shifter, but I'm still nervous. Where's Andrew?

"My rig's in the parking lot," she says, jerking her thumb toward the entrance. "If you want help going blonde."

"Oh. Are you... some sort of hair dresser?"

She laughs. "Nah. Just a vagabond. But I've bleached my hair enough times. I can help with yours."

Andrew appears then, his basket filled with canned foods, crackers, apples, and a couple bottles of water. I introduce him to the girl, whose name I realize I don't even know.

She tells us to call her Lyre, solving that problem.

Looking at Andrew, then me, and the things in his basket, her eyes narrow. "You two run away from home or something?"

I flinch.

"No," Andrew says too quickly. His eyes drop to the box in my hand. "Did you want to change your hair color?"

I hastily return the box to the shelf, feeling oddly guilty. I wasn't trying to spend Andrew's money or anything. It feels even more awkward now, probably because he admitted having a crush on me once before. "I was just curious."

"It's fine," he says, grabbing it off the shelf and tossing it into his basket. "Might be a good idea anyway."

"If you've run away from home," the girl interjects, "you really don't want to botch up your dye job. Also, you'll need at least one more box."

Ten minutes later, we're following her to a pickup truck across the parking lot with a giant camper hitched to the back. My stomach churns with nerves. It's probably stupid to follow a stranger, but at least we're in the parking lot of an open business.

Besides, with Andrew here, it's unlikely she can do anything terrible to me.

Lyre opens the door to her fifth wheel, sweeping her arm in a dramatic gesture. "Welcome to my humble abode."

The space that greets us isn't what I expected. It's like stepping into another world—one splashed with color and life. Every surface holds something fascinating: lightweight cloth in rich jewel tones drape across the walls, fairy lights strung in zigzag patterns across the ceiling cast a warm glow over everything, and plants hang from macramé holders in every corner. The kitchenette gleams with copper pots dangling from a rack, while the small dinette area has been transformed with cushions covered in fabrics that look like they came from at least four different countries. It feels more like a bohemian apartment than an RV.

"You staying anywhere in town?" Lyre asks, tossing her keys into a ceramic bowl shaped like a lotus.

"No," Andrew answers, his posture stiff. He doesn't elaborate, and I catch the slight narrowing of his eyes—a warning to me.

"Hmm. Well, let's get started then." Lyre motions for me to follow her toward the back of the trailer. "Bathroom's this way."

The bathroom is tiny, but just as colorful as the rest of the space. A shower curtain printed with peacock feathers hangs beside a sink adorned with shells and small crystals. Even the mirror has been decorated with pressed flowers embedded in its frame.

"It's going to get tight in here," Lyre warns, pulling out a towel in a faded purple hue. She rummages through a cabinet and produces a small jar. "First things first—petroleum jelly around your hairline. Keeps the bleach from burning your skin."

Lyre reaches past me to crack open a small window. "This smell is going to be intense."

Andrew hovers in the hallway, his tall frame filling the doorway. There's barely room for Lyre and me in here, let alone him. His eyes track Lyre's movements as she begins setting out supplies on the counter.

"You can sit on the closed toilet," Lyre tells me, opening one of the boxes. "We'll section your hair first."

I perch on the strange, tankless toilet, watching as she mixes chemicals in a small plastic bowl. The sharp scent hits my nostrils immediately, making my eyes water.

"Told you it was strong," Lyre chuckles. She glances at Andrew's rigid stance. "Dude, you can chill. I'm not going to kidnap your girlfriend."

"I'm not—" I start to say.

Andrew cuts in, his voice firm. "I'm just being careful."

Lyre rolls her slitted eyes. "Got it. Secret runaways who aren't a couple."

As she begins sectioning my hair with plastic clips, I take in more details of the trailer. Beyond Andrew, there's a bed piled high with mismatched pillows. Books stack precariously on every surface, and dried flowers hang upside down from the ceiling.

"How long have you lived like this?" I ask, curious about this nomadic lifestyle that seems so free.

"Three years in this beast," Lyre answers, beginning to apply the bleach mixture to sections of my hair. "Before that, I had a van. And before that, just a backpack."

Is it crazy to think fate put Lyre in the store tonight to meet me? Someone like her might be able to help me with my dream of independence and re-integrating with humans.

"Do you stay in one place very long?"

Lyre's fingers work deftly through my hair as she considers my question. "It just depends," she finally says with a shrug. "I go where the wind takes me. I've been here for about three days, but the manager's pretty sick of me hanging around. Tomorrow, I'll head toward Yellowstone."

How free.

Chapter 35: Grace: Blonde

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My hair is blonde, and it's weird.

For whatever reason, I hear Caine's voice in my head. *"Your hair is brown,"* he'd said. A mere observation, not even a compliment, but for a second I mourn my generic brown hair.

"The toner helped with the brassiness, but it still isn't perfect." Lyre runs her fingers through my hair with a soft click of her tongue. "Virgin hair is so nice to work with. It's so soft even after lightening."

Andrew scratches at his cheek, his eyes darting everywhere except my face. "It, uh, looks pretty good."

"Thanks," I mutter, uncomfortable with his awkwardness. His crush doesn't seem completely gone if he can't meet my eyes over a simple compliment.

My attention drifts back to the mirror on the camper's bathroom wall.

A stranger stares back at me. The blonde frames my face differently, catching light where shadows used to be. I twist a strand between my fingers, still damp and smelling of chemicals. My reflection looks alien.

I can't stop touching it, running my fingers through the strands, flipping it side to side. The weight feels different. Everything feels different.

Lyre said it would be lighter after it dries, but something about solar power and batteries means she can't run her hair dryer.

"So?" She leans against the doorframe, eyes bright with anticipation. "Do you like it?"

"I honestly don't know." My hand drops from my hair. "But I definitely would've botched it without your help."

She waves a hand about airily. "It isn't really that hard to do. Just need the right products and a bit of patience."

We shuffle out of the cramped bathroom and into the dinette—a small table with bench seating crammed against her kitchen counter. I slide in first, pressing myself against the wall to make room for Andrew. The space between us and the counter can't be more than ten inches.

"Sorry it's tight." Lyre squeezes past to grab three glasses. "Always harder to move around when the slides are in."

My eyes follow her gesture toward the back half of the RV, which looks practically inaccessible. "What are slides?"

"Parts of the RV that extend outward." Lyre sets down the glasses and pours water from a filtered pitcher. "They give you more living space inside. But when they're extended, I hang over into neighboring parking spaces, so I don't do it unless I have to. When I'm renting a space it's fine, but parking lots are a different matter. But it's free, so I can't complain."

Andrew shifts beside me, checking his watch as she hands us each a glass of water. "Actually, Grace, we should probably get going. We've stayed longer than we should have."

Lyre rests her chin on her hand, observing us with her strange, slitted eyes. I fiddle with the glass, not answering Andrew. He's right about the time, but I'm oddly reluctant to leave this tiny, colorful haven.

I've known this woman for all of an hour, yet there's something about her—something free and untethered, calling to the part of me that's been controlled my entire life.

"You could come with me, you know." Lyre's voice breaks through my thoughts.

My head snaps up, my heart suddenly thumping faster in my chest. "What?"

"You can come with me. I want to visit Yellowstone, so I'm headed that way tomorrow. I've got a friend there with some land and full hook-ups, so I can stay a while if I want to." She traces a pattern on the tabletop with her finger without looking, her eyes on mine. "You'd be welcome to tag along."

Yellowstone. It's a national park; I've seen pictures of it. And it's really far from here, putting a massive amount of distance between me and anyone with fur.

"Absolutely not," Andrew says, glancing at me. His voice lowers. "Don't forget, Rafe's coming soon."

Ugh. This is why I didn't want Andrew to stick around.

Lyre's eyebrows rise, but she doesn't seem particularly offended. "Just offering." She shrugs, the gesture fluid and unconcerned, and sips at her water.

"Sorry. I'm not trying to be rude. We appreciate your help, but we have plans. And we don't know you very well." Andrew's polite, at least, as he explains things to her.

"Fair enough." She smiles at me, not him. "The offer stands though. Especially if those *plans* aren't really what you want to do."

I open my mouth, not even sure what I'm going to say, when Andrew's hand presses lightly on my arm.

"We really should go," he murmurs.

If he wasn't here, I know I'd take her up on the offer, but Andrew—

Wait. So what if Andrew's right here? It isn't like I'm obligated to follow along with their ridiculous plan of bringing me back to the Blue Mountain Pack. In fact, I never planned on playing long with their plan to begin with. Andrew was always just a means out of there.

I square my shoulders, my shirt damp against my back, thanks to my wet hair. Something about the chemical smell lingering on my skin feels like a transformation—like shedding my old life.

"I want to come with you," I tell Lyre, my voice louder than I meant for it to be. "To Yellowstone. If you really don't mind."

The words hang in the cramped air. For a split second, I feel weightless, like I've jumped off a cliff and haven't started falling yet. It's even better than when I tried to escape the

first time; it feels as if I can reach out and touch the light at the end of my dark and twisted tunnel of life.

"Grace!" Andrew jumps up, but his thighs slam into the underside of the table. Water sloshes over the rim of his glass and he drops back into his seat, rubbing his legs as he curses, "Shit!"

Lyre's slitted eyes widen slightly, but her expression remains neutral as she watches our exchange.

"You can't be serious," Andrew hisses at me, snatching at my forearm. "What about Rafe?"

I yank my arm from his grip. The mention of Rafe's name hardens something inside me—calcifies all the doubts swirling through my mind. Lyre might even be the kind of person who lures innocent girls out of stores only to sell them later, but I'm taking my chances.

"I have absolutely no interest in returning to the pack, Andrew. Not for Rafe. Not for anyone."

Andrew's lips press together, his face dark. "The plan—"

"Was never my plan. It was yours and Ellie's, remember? You should go back, Andrew."

"Grace, you don't understand what you're doing." His voice drops even lower, eyes darting to Lyre and back to me. "The Lycan King—"

"Killed Brax." The words emerge flat and factual. "I know. I was there."

"Then you know what he's capable of!" Andrew leans closer. "And he's fixated on you. If you disappear now—"

"That's exactly why I need to disappear. You being here isn't going to help me. It isn't like *you* can win against him."

He flinches.

I press my palms against the cool table. "I'm out now. I'm going to live my life on *my* terms. You aren't a part of my life. Neither is Rafe. You should go back to the pack. You belong there, don't you?"

Andrew's jaw tightens, his hands curling into fists. "That's not fair, Grace."

A bitter laugh escapes me. "Was it fair when Rafe abandoned me during the Mate Hunt? Was it fair when Alpha threw me to the omegas? Was it fair when Ellie tormented me every chance she got?"

"I'm done with fair. I'm done with all of it. You've been kinder than most, but you're still theirs. Not mine."

Andrew's face falls. "I thought we were friends, Grace."

Chapter 36: Grace: Eight Hundred Miles

Chapter 36: Grace: Eight Hundred Miles

Lyre shifts in her seat, her slitted eyes observing our exchange with quiet interest. She doesn't interrupt, doesn't try to persuade either of us. Her neutrality is refreshing after years of wolves who thought they knew what was best for me. Though I wonder what she's thinking about behind her impassive face. We must sound crazy.

Andrew rubs his hand across his face, losing some of his aggressive denial. Instead, he's pleading. "You have no idea how dangerous this is. You're human, Grace."

I look to Lyre. "How far is Yellowstone from here?"

"About eight hundred miles," she says calmly, like we're discussing the weather or something.

Eight hundred miles. Eight hundred miles between me and the Blue Mountain Pack. Between me and Rafe and Ellie. Between me and the murderous Lycan King.

"You can't outrun them," Andrew insists. "Especially not the Lycan King. If he wants you—"

I roll my eyes. "Andrew, you brought me here under the assumption we *could* outrun him. Now you're changing your story because I'm not going to do what you want. You can't have it both ways."

"But—"

"He doesn't care about me. Trust me." The memory of Caine's gray eyes flashes through my mind—the intensity of his gaze as he wrapped the bandage around my wrist. But I push it away.

"You're wrong. He—" Andrew stops himself, huffing something between a sigh and a groan.

"He...?"

Grimacing, Andrew shakes his head. "It doesn't matter. What matters is that you're making a mistake. This woman—" he gestures at Lyre, "—you don't know her. You don't know what she is."

Lyre's lips quirk at that. "He's not wrong about that."

I glance between them. Andrew's obvious mistrust, Lyre's casual acknowledgment.

"Are you something other than human?" I ask her directly.

She tilts her head, catlike. "Does it matter?"

The question gives me pause. Does it? After everything I've been through with wolves, should I fear other supernatural beings just the same?

But then I think of my life at the pack—the constant reminders of my humanity, my weakness, my otherness.

"No," I decide. "It doesn't matter. As long as you're not planning to hurt me."

Lyre smiles, revealing teeth that seem just a touch too sharp. "I have no interest in hurting you, Grace. You're far more interesting alive."

Andrew makes a strangled noise. "You can't be serious. Grace, listen to yourself!"

"You should go back, Andrew. Before they notice you're missing too."

"I'm not leaving you with—"

"You are." My voice hardens. "Because this is my choice. Not yours, not Rafe's, not Ellie's. Mine."

Andrew stares at me, frustration evident in every line of his body. His jaw works as if chewing on words he wants to spit out.

Lyre scoots out of the dinette, stretching her lithe body as she stands. "So when do you want to leave? I'm flexible."

"Now would be best." The words come out without my bidding, and I press my lips together, embarrassed. "I mean, if that works for you. I'm not in a position to make demands."

A small smile plays on her lips as she nods. "Now works. Just need to batten down the hatches."

She moves through the cramped space with the fluid grace of someone who knows exactly where every inch of their body is. Her hands reach up to unhook a macramé plant hanger, carefully cradling the vine trailing from it.

"Have to secure everything before driving," she explains, gently arranging the plant into what looks like a modified kitchen cupboard. "Otherwise it all becomes projectiles the first time I hit the brakes."

Andrew's hand clamps around my forearm again, his fingers digging into the same spot he'd grabbed earlier. The pressure makes me wince. "Grace—"

"Get your hand off her or you're going to lose it." Lyre doesn't even turn around, just continues methodically securing her plants. The calm in her voice makes the threat more chilling.

Andrew's grip falters but doesn't release. His breath comes faster beside me, and I can feel his indecision. It isn't fear, but he seems worried. Probably thinks if he pisses me off, Rafe's going to yell at him—but also if he lets me leave, Rafe's going to yell at him.

Lyre places another plant into the cabinet, her movements unhurried. "The decision's been made. Either you get out, or I'll kick you out."

The growl rumbling from Andrew's chest is pure animal—a sound I've heard countless times in six years. My heart thunders in my chest, but I refuse to cower. I've had enough of being controlled.

Sliding out of the dinette, I shake my arm violently until he finally lets it go. "Let me help you, Lyre."

For a moment, I think Andrew might lunge at me—his body tenses, his face contorting. But the moment passes. He stands, shoulders tight and fists clenched.

"Rafe will come for you," he says, voice low and rough. "Hopefully you'll be a little calmer by then."

My brows fly up. "Am I not calm?"

His nostrils flare. "You have no idea what you're doing."

He acts like he's capable of fighting off an army to keep me safe, yet even Alpha and Beta fell under the might of the Lycans. It didn't take very long, either. "At least it's my mistake to make."

For several tense moments, Andrew just stands there. His breathing grows heavier, more labored, like he's physically restraining himself from shifting. Huffing and snarling under his breath, he finally stomps toward the door.

The entire RV shakes with the force of his exit, the door slamming so hard that one of Lyre's dreamcatchers swings wildly from its hook. The sudden motion makes my stomach lurch—a strange, mingled sensation of physical disorientation and emotional whiplash.

Lyre's hand lands gently on my shoulder. "It'll be fine."

The simple statement, delivered without drama or excessive reassurance, is strangely calming. I let out a long breath.

"I'm sorry for bringing drama to your door. You just met me and now you're dealing with... this." Grabbing a cactus off the kitchen counter, I hand it to her. Offering to help was impulsive, but there's one problem—I don't know where anything goes or how to secure a camper for travel. I've never even been in one before today.

She takes the plant from me, securing it in a holder bolted to the wall. "I'm the one who invited it in." Her voice is light, almost amused.

"You couldn't have known—"

"Couldn't I?" She glances at me, slitted eyes narrowing slightly. "I saw you with him in the store. I knew exactly what you were running from."

A chill creeps up my spine. "What do you mean?"

She shrugs, moving to secure a strap across a shelf, keeping books in place. "Desperation has a particular scent. So does fear. And wolves—well, they have their own distinctive smell."

My fingers go numb as comprehension dawns. "You already knew Andrew was a shifter?"

"Of course." She gestures vaguely toward her eyes. "I'm not exactly standard issue human myself."

I'd assumed her eyes were contacts—a theatrical choice to match her vibrant aesthetic. But the casual way she references them suggests otherwise.

"What are you?"

"Does it matter?" she asks again, echoing her earlier response.

This time I don't hesitate. "No. It doesn't."

And I mean it. Whatever Lyre is, she's offered me freedom. After years of being judged for my humanity, the last thing I want to do is judge someone else for being different.

"Good answer." She smiles, revealing those slightly-too-sharp teeth again.

Chapter 37: Caine: You Touched Her

Chapter 37: Caine: You Touched Her

CAINE

Far in the distance, the horizon glows a dull orange, courtesy of the giant pyre burning the Blue Mountain Pack's dead.

Everything's going too smoothly this evening. Not a single issue has come to my attention. No one's acting out. Trouble is nonexistent. It's unrealistically peaceful.

The succession ceremony was flawless, but there's a vague itch in the back of my head. Something is brewing in this pack, but I've yet to find even a hint of what it may be.

"You look like you're about to start another rampage," Jack-Eye observes. He's been in good spirits since my subordinates' little intervention; funny, because my mood has only soured.

I glower at my beta, my jaw tight. My gaze shifts past him as the new Luna struts toward us with a self-important smile plastered on her face. Great. Dealing with her will only make my irritation worse.

"Handle her," I mutter to Jack-Eye, turning away before she reaches us. "I'm not in the mood."

Jack-Eye's chuckle follows me as I cut through the crowd, wolves parting before me like shadows fleeing fire. Unfortunately, it doesn't take long before I collide with the only person worse than this pack's new Luna.

Raphael Wilder. Rafe. The brand-new Alpha of the Blue Mountain Pack, and the girl's ex-lover.

"High Alpha." He extends his hand, a warm smile on his face, as if he hadn't once prostrated himself at my feet. Now he seems to believe he's close to my equal, living a fever-dream as the new Alpha. "I wanted to personally thank you for attending today."

I stare at his outstretched hand. My fingers twitch with the urge to grab his throat instead. To crush his windpipe. To feel bone and cartilage give way beneath my grip.

Instead, I loose a deep breath. Fenris gave me one last command before falling into his deep resting state: *Don't kill anyone*. Normally, I would ignore such a nonsensical order, but I remember how much fear spiked the girl's scent when the bloodshed began.

"Congratulations on your succession." Giving him even a sliver of civility is hard, but I don't want to hear Fenris nagging later. I don't take his hand, though.

His arm drops awkwardly to his side. "Thank you for ensuring a... peaceful transfer of power."

There's something in the way he phrases it, his humble words rubbing my fur the wrong way. It could be a side effect of wanting to rip his limbs apart, but my eyes narrow. "Did you expect otherwise?"

"Of course not, High Alpha."

He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, before drawing his shoulders back, probably reminding himself to stand tall. Watching him squirm satisfies something primal in me. I let the silence stretch a beat too long.

"No, I wouldn't expect you to," I finally say.

He's too young to be a true Alpha. Too weak to present any real threat to me. And yet my contempt has nothing to do with his capabilities and everything to do with the way his scent lingered on a human I struggle to admit is mine.

A muscle twitches in my jaw as I wonder how many sides of the girl he's seen. How far they've gone.

"High Alpha, how much longer do you and your Lycans intend to stay with us?" Rafe's tone is carefully measured as his gaze meets mine. He's no longer shifting around, his stare a little too direct. "Are your accommodations satisfactory?"

I tilt my head. "Oh? Are you playing host now, Alpha Raphael?"

He swallows, his eyes once again sliding off to the side. What little confidence he'd gathered is gone with a mere sentence, leaving me disgusted once again. "I apologize if that came across poorly. My people are still... adjusting to the Lycan presence."

"Are there complaints?"

"No, of course not." The lie reeks more than the alcohol being passed around; his pack is desperate to drown their sorrows, if only for a few hours. "It's an honor for the Blue Mountain Pack to host the Lycan King." Lie, again.

A cold smile stretches across my face. This pup has rebellion brewing behind those eyes, even if he isn't strong enough to shoulder the will. Perhaps I should have cut the head off this pack entirely when I had the chance, leaving no successor.

The temptation is real, but I remind myself of Jack-Eye's nagging and Fenris's order. *My rule will not be marred with death. I am more than my bloodlust.*

As much as I want to tear this pup's throat out for daring to have once coveted my human, I am capable of stepping back and allowing rational thought to take over, damn it.

A breeze drifts through the open windows, carrying Rafe's scent toward me. Distinctly wolf, with a strong scent of forest pine, but underneath...

Blueberries. Sweet, faint. Unmistakable.

My vision hazes.

Her scent. On *him*.

My fingers curl into a fist, tattoos burning across my skin as Fenris howls inside my head, no longer locked away.

Power pulses out in a crushing wave, and unsuspecting shifters fall to their knees. Beer and wine soak the grass as their grips fail. Their new golden-haired alpha prostrates himself at my feet, his forehead and hands pressed against the ground and body trembling beneath the force of my rage.

"Why?" I ask, clenching my fists at my side. I want to crush his bones, but manage to hold back.

"I—I don't understand." His words are muffled against the ground. "Did we do something to offend you, High Alpha?"

My hand shoots out, grabbing his hair and yanking his head up until he can meet my stare. "The girl," I snarl. "Why do I smell her on you?"

His eyes widen. "It's a misunderstanding."

"Don't." My grip tightens. "I can smell your lies."

"I visited her," Rafe admits, his words admirably steady compared to the pallor of his face and wide eyes. "To explain we were over, and to give her a final goodbye."

Lie.

"Did you touch her?"

"No."

Lie.

"You touched her."

Chapter 38: Caine: The Price of Stealing

Chapter 38: Caine: The Price of Stealing

CAINE

"No! I didn't. She—she wouldn't let me get near her. I swear it, High Alpha."

Fenris growls low in my head, but Jack-Eye's hand grasps my shoulder, squeezing hard. "Caine," he says. Just my name, but his tone is full of warning.

I killed the last Alpha. Killing his successor is going to bring more trouble and headache. These are all facts I understand, but my brain is screaming, howling for a blood payment to ease my rage.

"That girl is mine," I whisper, forcing my clenched fingers to relax. The moment tension is released, his face slams to the ground again, still victim to my dominance.

Kill him, Fenris says, as if he wasn't the one to force a promise of pacifism out of me earlier.

I shake my head, fighting to clear the red haze of bloodlust clouding my vision. The struggle is visceral—a war between my baser instincts and whatever shred of civility I've managed to maintain since ascending the Lycan's throne.

It hasn't been this hard since... A long time ago, in memories I refuse to recall.

My foot comes down on Raphael's outstretched hand. Not an accident. Not a mistake. A deliberate, calculated expression of my fury.

Tiny bones crunch beneath my heel, bringing me a sliver of satisfaction, though my face remains blank.

Raphael grunts, jaw clenched tight, fighting to maintain dignity through the pain.

I'm not satisfied with this small display. Digging my heel in deeper, I grind against already fractured bones. Something inside me—something darker than even my normal temperament—wants to hear him break completely.

When Raphael finally releases a high, shrill scream, I feel the barest hint of satisfaction.

"Who does Grace Harper belong to?" My voice drops low, barely above a whisper. The question hangs in the air between us, loaded with threat.

"You," he groans. "She's yours, High Alpha!"

The fury inside me ebbs slightly at his admission. The submission in his voice calms the savage beast clawing at my chest, at least enough to lift my foot from his hand.

My gaze sweeps across the clearing, taking in the mass of prostrated wolves. Some have their faces pressed so hard against the dirt I wonder if they're still breathing. Others tremble visibly. Terror and fury mix in a bitter, pungent odor, overpowering even the smell of burning corpses brought in by the breeze.

"Keep your filthy hands off the girl. All of you."

The crowd is frozen, without so much as a twitch in response.

Something nags at the edge of my consciousness. A detail I've missed. I scan the gathering again, more carefully this time, cataloguing the faces, the scents, the postures.

That's when it hits me. Raphael never appointed a beta tonight. It's a glaring oversight for a succession ceremony. While it isn't required, it is certainly unusual for a beta-less pack to leave the position empty.

There's always the possibility his first choice of beta died, but it's a potential sign of trouble, leaving me uneasy. Especially when I also realize the scent from the girl's room, the strange wolf who'd challenged Fenris in the forest, is missing.

Fenris.

My wolf responds instantly to my silent call, the tattoos on my skin burning as he materializes beside me, saturating the immediate vicinity with a faint haze of blue light.

"Check on the girl," I order him, keeping my eyes on Raphael.

Fenris doesn't hesitate, bolting toward the main building with supernatural speed. The sight of him—manifested separately from me—sends another wave of fear through the crowd.

I kneel in front of Raphael, grabbing his hair to once again bring his face level with mine. His eyes are glazed with pain, his breathing shallow.

"Who else visited Grace tonight?" My voice is calm now, almost conversational. The contrast to my earlier rage probably makes it all the more unsettling.

"Caine," Jack-Eye says again, with a sigh.

I can feel my subordinates standing with him, but they remain silent, probably disapproving. I'm bringing more trouble and work onto my shoulders, but it's impossible to hold back the rage in my head, the whispers of vengeance driving my every action.

Raphael's eyes slide off, and I shake his head until his gaze meets mine again. "Who is it, Alpha Raphael? Which of your people went to her room tonight?"

"No one," he says, his voice hoarse.

Lie, lie, LIE.

"Lying again?" I grab his jaw, forcing him to maintain eye contact. "After what just happened to your hand, you're still lying to me, you little shit?"

A tremble runs through his body. It's hard for any alpha wolf to submit, even a young one, but hardest for those who rule over a pack. Still, he should know better than to keep foolishly resisting.

"Andrew," he finally whispers.

Andrew. The name means nothing to me, but I'll find him soon enough. "And why would this Andrew visit her?"

Raphael swallows hard. "He was checking on her well-being."

Half-truth. The scent of deception is weaker, but still present. My eyes narrow, fingers digging into his cheeks. All I want is to rip this pup apart, to raze this pack to the ground, but I hold myself back. I have to.

If I kill everyone, she'll always be afraid of me, won't she?

"Checking on her for what purpose?"

Sweat drips down Raphael's temple as he struggles to speak through my grip. "Just to make sure she was okay."

Lie.

"Last chance." I tighten my grasp on his jaw until he winces. "What was Andrew doing in her room?"

Something in Raphael breaks. Perhaps it's the pain, or maybe the realization that I won't stop until I have the truth. "We were going to move her," he gasps out. "Tomorrow morning. To Forest Springs."

Forest Springs is a neighboring pack. The Alpha's daughter is now Raphael's Luna, who hurt the girl only this morning. "Do you know the price of stealing from the Lycan King, Raphael?"

Caine, Fenris says, growling. Fury burns through our bond, leaving my wolf incoherent with rage as he howls. Words are unnecessary; I already understand.

Grace is gone.

Chapter 39: Grace: How Can You Miss It?

Chapter 39: Grace: How Can You Miss It?

Over the next two days, Lyre drags her camper—and me—across the country. It's actually only across one state line, but it's still farther than I've ever traveled before.

The driving itself isn't long each day; Lyre says she never drives more than three hundred miles a day when she's hauling a camper. Still, the routine is more tiring than I expect.

And Andrew follows behind every step of the way, clearly obsessed with keeping his eye on me. I'm sure it's to tell Rafe where I am, but it isn't like a new Alpha can just wander across the country to take me back.

Still, it's not a great feeling to know you're being essentially stalked. He doesn't hide what he's doing, but he isn't *not* doing it, either...

The high noon sun is bright and merciless, which means the camper's going to be an oven when we finally make it to our stop tonight. We still have another hundred miles to drive before finding a rest stop tonight.

"Food run," Lyre announces, exiting the highway. "They have a dump station here, too. Why don't you order while I get some diesel and clear out the tanks?"

I've learned a lot in the past forty-eight hours, and most of it involves how much work is involved in keeping a camper convenient. Like toilets. I never really thought about where waste goes when you flush, but it's not as though we have plumbing in the parking lots of giant retail conglomerates.

We have a supply of fresh water for hygiene and dishes, but we also have separate drinking water. And tanks beneath the RV somewhere, magically holding all the gross

stuff until we make it to a dump site. Lyre keeps talking about full hook-ups when we get to her friend's place in Yellowstone, which will make our lives easier, but so far I haven't had to lift a finger. Lyre does all the work.

"Got it. Bacon cheeseburger?"

I push open the passenger door, my blonde hair—still strange to see in mirrors—blowing across my face, thanks to the strong breeze. It smells like gasoline and fried food, which is now synonymous with freedom in my head.

"Give me about twenty minutes," Lyre calls after me. "Get something for me too. Nothing with pickles."

I nod and slip her credit card into my pocket. The first time she handed it to me, I'd stared at the plastic rectangle like it might burn my fingers. Now it feels normal, even as guilt gnaws at me for using a stranger's money.

The automatic doors slide open with a mechanical hiss, cool air-conditioned comfort wrapping around me as I step inside. The cashier barely glances up from her magazine—another blessing of human society. No nostrils flaring to catch my scent, no scowls when they see I don't belong. Even Lyre, with her rainbow hair, wouldn't get a second look.

It's so... *anonymous*

. I love it.

But I need to find a job soon. Lyre's generosity has limits, even if she hasn't mentioned them. Strange how someone who seems so detached can be so thoughtful—letting me use her card, teaching me how to dye my hair, taking me in without asking for anything in return.

If angel shifters existed, she'd probably be one.

There's a giant fast food restaurant taking up a third of the building. Several truckers are already scattered around, and there's a mom with a toddler in the back corner.

So wholesome. So human.

The only thing polluting this pristine bastion of human society is Andrew, five steps behind me. He pulled into the gas station right after us, of course.

My mouth waters as I scan the illuminated menu board. "Two bacon cheeseburgers, large fries, and..." I pause, remembering Lyre's aversion to pickles. "And make sure there's no pickles on either."

The hair on my neck rises as I pass Lyre's card over. Andrew's glowering, like he always does, but who knows what's triggered him this time. We haven't exchanged a word since I told him I wasn't going back to Rafe; I'm trying to pretend he doesn't exist. Hopefully he'll get bored and leave once we get to Yellowstone and settle in.

The sensation of being stalked is not pleasant, but I'm getting used to it.

Who am I kidding? It's weird and sucks.

There's only one place I'm free, and I turn take the card and receipt and walk as casually as I can to the bathroom. It's always good to visit one when we stop anyway, but it's also the one place Andrew won't follow me.

The women's bathroom smells vaguely of vomit, urine, and some sort of orange-scented cleaner. Not pleasant, but at least Andrew's eyeballs aren't drilling into the back of my head.

It doesn't take long to do what needs to be done, and I keep the water running for a while as I stand in front of the mirror, toying with my blonde hair. It's going to take forever to get used to, but I think I like it.

Lyre says my skin tone seems to be more cool than neutral and my blonde is a little too warm, but I don't really get it. In theory, I understand her words and the concept of warm and cool undertones. In practice? My skin just looks like skin to me...

Oh, damn. I've been staring at myself in the mirror too long. Our food's probably ready by now.

Sighing, I push open the bathroom door, only to jump back when I nearly collide with a solid chest.

Andrew stands directly in front of the door, arms crossed as he frowns down at me. "I was about to check on you."

Nope. This is the final straw.

"Are you seriously waiting outside the women's bathroom?" I hiss, glancing around to make sure no one's watching.

They aren't. Everyone's involved in their own lives, and nobody cares about what's happening in this tiny little corridor.

His frown remains on his face. "I'm just making sure you're safe."

"In the women's bathroom?"

"You could have been unconscious."

"Jesus, Andrew." Covering my face with my hands in an attempt to keep myself from screaming in frustration, I count my breaths. He remains silent as I breathe in deep. One. Two. Five. Ten times. "You can't follow me into the women's bathroom."

"I wouldn't have stayed—"

Dropping my hands, I snap, "That's not the point!"

His mouth clicks shut, before he finally mutters, "I was just worried."

Somehow, despite Andrew being the one in the wrong, I'm the one who feels guilty. "Just—stay away from me. Go back to Rafe and live your life. Stop following me around."

"I'm doing what I need to do," he says stubbornly, staring over my head instead of looking at my angry face.

Arguing with him is pointless.

Shouldering past, I try not to stomp too hard as I head back to the counter, where my order's waiting. Lyre's nowhere in sight, but she *did* say it would be almost a half-hour before she was done.

I should have waited before ordering.

I grab the tray with our food and head to the table furthest away from any strangers. Another thing I've learned over the past two days—humans like to talk.

I've had some really fascinating conversations while standing in line. These aren't bad experiences, but Andrew's soured my mood, and I have no interest in looking at anyone's face today.

Except Lyre's, of course.

Andrew pulls out the chair at the table directly next to mine, and my mood plummets further.

A sigh escapes me before I can stop it. I've lived with wolves long enough to know what this is—territory marking. He's making sure everyone knows I'm under his protection, which would be sweet if I actually wanted it. It's also stupid, because humans don't do this kind of thing.

"You're ruining my appetite." I slide Lyre's burger to the empty spot across from me, pushing the remaining one toward me and leaving the fries centered. My stomach growls despite my annoyance.

Andrew rests his arms on the table, his eyes never leaving my face. He has no food, and I wonder how he's been surviving without buying anything to eat or drink.

"Just pretend I'm air," he says, sounding serious and not at all joking.

My words are a soft whisper, but I know he can hear every word: "Air doesn't scowl like you do."

I pick at a few fries. They're crisp and well-salted, but my appetite's run off since Andrew's trying to stare holes into my face. The ketchup packet remains unopened in my hand as I wait for Lyre to appear. I check the time on the wall clock—she should be done soon.

My gaze drifts to the window, where I'm surprised to see a white cat watching my every move.

It's sitting on the sidewalk just feet away from my window, and it's huge. Not big enough to be confused with a tiger or something, but large enough the word *housecat* seems... wrong. Maybe it's one of those wild hybrid cats.

Its posture is unnaturally still, and its eyes—bright blue—are fixed directly on me.

"I think someone's lost their cat," I murmur, more to myself than to Andrew.

"What cat?"

I want to be irritated by his question, but I'm the one who spoke out loud. He probably thinks I'm holding a conversation.

Sighing, I point toward the window. "That one. The white one sitting right there." The animal hasn't moved an inch, its tail curled neatly around its paws. It's almost statue-like.

Andrew follows my finger, his brow furrowing as he peers through the glass. He stares for a long moment, then turns back to me with a blank expression.

"I don't see anything."

A chill runs down my spine. "What do you mean? It's right there. The huge white cat staring at us."

His eyes narrow as he looks again. "There's nothing there, Grace."

I lean forward, pressing my palms against the table as I focus on the creature. It's impossible to miss—it must weigh thirty pounds at least, with a coat so white it almost hurts to look at.

"How can you not see it? It's massive." I gesture more emphatically. "Right there. White cat, blue eyes, staring straight at me."

Andrew's face changes, concern replacing irritation. "There's no cat, Grace."

Chapter 40: Caine: Tracking (I)

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There's an itch under my skin I can't get rid of, and it isn't helping my temper. I've already been to Forest Springs, only to find out Grace isn't anywhere in their territory. Their Alpha, however, is a reasonable man.

He traded his pet warlock for his life. I didn't spill a single drop of blood, something I'll have to remember to tell the girl later; it'll show her I'm capable of holding back.

The thought of her relief when I tell her helps soothe the itch, until Fenris snaps, *You still don't get it, you idiot.*

He's barely said a word to me since we discovered Grace missing two nights ago.

My new warlock's hands shake as he takes her pillow from me. My fingers twitch. I want to snatch it back—the soft bundle of polyester fluff still smells like her.

"This will do nicely," he says, his voice thin and reedy. The Forest Springs Alpha wasn't lying when he said his pet magic user was skittish. What's his name again?

Thom, Fenris snarls.

Right, Thom.

My lip curls. "I don't need your commentary, Thom. Just find her."

The warlock adjusts his peculiar glasses—thick, smoked lenses with copper wire wrapping around the frames. They look ridiculous, but I know their purpose. They shield his eyes from what witches call "magical ambience"—the glow that surrounds every living thing that normal people can't see.

You drove her away, Fenris growls, his presence swelling with accusation. *Our mate is gone because of you.*

"She's not our mate," I mutter, too low for the warlock to hear.

Lies

Fenris paces our shared consciousness, claws dragging against the mental barriers I've erected to keep him contained. He's becoming more unruly by the hour. Since the moment we realized Grace had fled, he's been half-feral, snapping and snarling. The guard for her bedroom is yet another body she's going to hold against me.

As well she should, he mutters, like he isn't the one who ripped his throat out.

The warlock brings the pillow to his face, inhaling deeply. Fenris howls, and I fight to keep my hands at my side and not twisting his head off his scrawny little neck. "Don't do that."

Thom freezes, his owlsh eyes widening further behind his ridiculous glasses. "Uh, sir—High Alpha—I was just checking the density of her essence."

My eye twitches. If he says *essence* one more time, I might have to punch his mouth. "And?"

"This isn't enough. Something with a little more of her DNA would be best."

I snarl without meaning to, my lips peeling back to reveal teeth.

Thom flinches hard, throwing his hands up to shield his face. The pillow slips from his fingers and tumbles toward the floor.

My hand shoots out, snatching it from midair before it can touch the ground. Her scent is the only thing keeping me calm. I can't let it be contaminated by the floor's stench of polish and feet.

You could smell her directly if you hadn't scared her off, Fenris says, sounding colder than ice.

I ignore him, brushing my palm across the pillow's surface, erasing any trace of Thom's scent. The gesture feels ridiculous even as I do it, but I can't stop myself. Once satisfied, I place it gently on my bed.

"Follow me," I bark at the warlock.

He scrambles after me like a kicked puppy, keeping a careful distance as we exit my quarters. Grace's room sits on the opposite side of the lodge—a deliberate choice on my part, though now the distance feels like punishment. To myself.

The corridor stretches long between us, punctuated by wolves going about their duties. Each time we pass a pack member, they spare a curious glance at Thom before curling their lips in disgust. One even growls low in his throat, causing Thom to press himself against the wall until we pass.

Interesting.

"Is this normal?" I ask, nodding toward a she-wolf who's openly glaring at him.

Thom's shoulders hunch further. "What, the growling? The looks? Yes, High Alpha. Spellbloods aren't exactly welcome in these parts."

"Why?"

"Most of the Alphas in this region consider our practices heresy against the Goddess. They teach their packs that we're unnatural. Makes it hard to make a living." His voice carries a practiced neutrality that doesn't mask the bitterness beneath.

"Stupid belief," I grunt.

The change in Thom is immediate. His posture straightens, and he scurries closer to my side, eyes wide with something like hope.

"Right? It's completely short-sighted! The prejudice against spellbloods goes back centuries, but it's based on misunderstanding. Magic is just another natural force, like your shifting ability. We're not so different, really, and the potential for collaboration is—
"

The itch beneath my skin intensifies with every syllable from his mouth. His voice hits a particularly grating pitch, and a muscle in my jaw twitches.

"Enough."

He snaps his mouth shut, but the damage is done. My patience, already thread-thin from the girl's absence, threatens to snap entirely.

"The belief is ridiculous because there isn't a witch or warlock on this planet powerful enough to pose a threat to even the weakest wolf." I fix him with a cold stare. "Not a single one of you could stand against us. That's why the fear is stupid."

That's not necessarily true, Fenris comments. It's his first time reacting to anything not connected with the human. They might be able to hurt the weakest of wolves. Pups, perhaps.

Thom deflates before my eyes, his shoulders hunching back to their original position. "Right. There's that perspective too."

We continue down the corridor in silence. The lodge feels emptier than usual. Still, the ones who remain give Thom a wide berth, their disdain palpable; though, when they meet my eyes, they cower.

"My only real skill is tracking," Thom offers after a moment, quieter now. "But wolves don't have much use for that, do they? Not when you can smell a rabbit from a mile away."

I spare him a sideways glance. His thin fingers worry at the hem of his worn jacket.

"The Forest Springs Alpha only kept me around to track other magic-users. I don't have a single offensive spell."

I have no interest in this man's life story, but if he falls into some sort of depression and can't track the girl I might lose my mind. So I grunt, showing I'm listening.

It must be enough, because his shoulders relax a little. Thankfully, he goes silent after that.