

Grace of a Wolf –

Chapter 41: Caine: Tracking (II)

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CAINE

We reach Grace's door, and I pause, inhaling deeply. Her scent lingers, but it's already growing fainter. She's already been gone for two days, and the knowledge makes my blood simmer. I spent a day and a half going to the Forest Springs Pack and back for nothing; if this warlock doesn't deliver results, the weak grasp I have on my sanity might slip after all.

"What about defensive spells?" The question surprises me as much as it does him.

Thom blinks rapidly. "I—well, I can ward off a bee."

So, useless.

The vague thought in my head to keep him around to protect her fades in an instant.

We wouldn't have to worry about her safety if you'd charmed her a little. Would it have really killed you to smile at her even once? Maybe apologize for killing the man who was once her father?

My molars grind together. "Who was the one to rip out his throat, Fenris?"

At your order, he says. Don't make me the same as you. She liked me. She doesn't like you.

Knowing it's true only makes the damn itch worse, and I slam Grace's door open with a grunt. Her scent comes in a rush, and I inhale deeply.

The itch fades.

"Find what you need," I tell Thom. "But don't touch anything more than necessary."

The warlock nods and steps inside, his eyes sweeping the space with professional interest. I remain in the doorway, arms folded, watching as he moves cautiously through the room that held her.

You still don't see it, Fenris says.

Reacting to his little comments only makes it worse, so I stay silent.

Seriously? Even now, you're not going to admit it?

I grind my teeth and keep my eyes on Thom as he approaches the bed. He doesn't reach for the sheets as I feared, but instead crouches down to peer at something beneath.

"This might work," he murmurs, reaching under the bed frame.

His hand emerges clutching a small, dark object. A hair elastic. Simple and ordinary, yet my fingers itch to grab it from him.

"Her essence is strong on this," Thom says, examining the tiny band. "She used it recently, probably to tie her hair back. There are some strands in here still."

"Can you track her with it?"

Thom holds the elastic up to the light, squinting at it through those ridiculous spectacles. "I can try. It'll be stronger if I have something with a more significant genetic trace, though. Hair with follicles attached would be ideal."

"The bathroom," I say, nodding toward the en-suite. "Check her brush."

As Thom disappears into the bathroom, my eyes drift around the room. The bed is a mess, blankets kicked to the foot of the bed. There's a pillow, but it doesn't smell like her, only laundry detergent. The sheets, though...

Jack-Eye. Bring the sheets and blanket from her room and put them on my bed. No—leave them here.

I don't need to bring them; I'll just sleep here, where her scent is strong.

"Got some," Thom calls out from the bathroom. "Give me just a second. If she's within five hundred miles, I should be able to pinpoint her within a five-mile radius. The closer we are, the more accurate it will be."

I straighten, a prickling sensation crawling up my spine. Something's happening.

It's only a few steps to the doorway.

The warlock hunches over the sink, his spindly fingers clutching Grace's hairbrush. His eyes are closed, lips moving in rapid succession as he mumbles in a strange language. It sounds like ten strangled cats attempting to meow after their vocal cords were cut.

The air shifts, a faint breeze materializing from nowhere. The bathroom mirror fogs, then clears, then fogs again.

Thom's voice rises, his words taking on a peculiar cadence, and twenty white butterflies burst into existence around his head. Translucent wings glow with an unnatural light as they flutter in an organized pattern, circling Thom's face like a living crown. Each one looks identical—not natural butterflies at all, but constructs of pure magic.

My tattoos itch, the sensation crawling across my skin like ants. I resist the urge to claw at them. Magic always has this effect on me; it's one of the reasons I avoid warlocks when possible.

Thom's eyes snap open, his irises glowing the same white as the butterflies. He barks a final word in his screechy voice and splays his hands outward. The butterflies shoot away as if propelled by an invisible force, zooming in twenty different directions; they pass straight through the walls, leaving no trace of their passing.

The warlock slumps forward, catching himself on the edge of the sink. His breath comes in ragged gasps, sweat beading on his pale forehead and dripping down his temples. The entire display has left him looking like he's run a marathon.

I scratch absently at the back of my neck, where the itching is most intense. "How long before we get results?"

Thom straightens with effort, adjusting those ridiculous glasses. "Just a few minutes, High Alpha." His voice sounds raspy, drained. "My seekers will find her if she's within my range."

I look him over, noting how his hand trembles against the counter. His face has flushed an alarming shade of red, and the vein in his temple pulses visibly beneath his skin. All this from a simple tracking spell.

This is exactly why I've always found wolf prejudice against magic-users pointless. Look at him—a dozen flying paper weights and he needs to catch his breath. They're just as weak as humans, only with magical parlor tricks.

"You need water?" I ask, more out of practicality than concern. I need him functional.

He nods gratefully, and I exit the bathroom to fetch a glass from the bedside table. When I return, he gulps it down like a man rescued from the desert.

It occurs to me her lips might have touched the same glass, and I suddenly want to rip his mouth off.

"The spell is active," he says after emptying the glass, and I stare at it for far too long, trying to seek evidence of where her lips might have touched. "My seekers are extensions of my consciousness. I'll know in real-time if they find a trace of her."

I lean against the doorframe, arms crossed, telling myself I can't hurt him. Yet. "And if they don't?"

"Then I'll need something stronger. Something with more of her essence."

There's that word again. My jaw tightens.

"Blood would be ideal," he continues, oblivious to my irritation. "But since we don't have that, I could try—"

He jerks upright, his eyes glazing over. "Found her. But it's strange. Everything's muddled."

Without conscious thought, my hand flies out and grabs the front of his shirt. "Where is she?"

"Hold on! Hold on, I'm—" Thom bats at my hand, his eyes still glazed. "She's to the north. There's too much interference. I have to..." His hands curve in the air, fingers wiggling as he does something I can't even begin to understand. "Gather. Yes. All of you—it needs to be concentrated... There. Okay. That's strange."

"What is it?"

My hand's still gripping his shirt, but Thom's out of his head, his eyes not seeing anything in this room. His hands keep moving around like he's orchestrating something, and I'm not sure he hears me. "Oh, *that's* why. That would make sense. Okay, I think I found her."

My eye twitches. "Where?"

"She's at a gas station."

Chapter 42: Grace: Lyre's Strange Behavior

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When Lyre slides into the chair across from me, I lose track of the strange cat. It disappears as if it was never there at all.

"White?" Lyre asks between bites, completely unconcerned as I tell her about a bizarre cat only I can see.

"Yeah."

"Don't worry, it's harmless."

Andrew's out there now; I watch through the window as he sniffs the air, turning to shrug his shoulders at me through the glass. He must not smell anything.

Having a stalker is annoying, but hey, if he wants to brave the strange and mysterious for me, I'm not going to complain. If I have to suffer through his constant unwanted presence, I may as well get something out of it.

I nibble at a French fry, enjoying its salty potato goodness as I watch her eat. "What do you mean by 'harmless'?"

Lyre shrugs, her slitted eyes narrowing slightly as she takes another monstrous bite of her burger. Ketchup dots the corner of her mouth. "Exactly what the word means."

She's already halfway through her meal, and she's only been sitting here for a minute. My stomach growls in response, my appetite suddenly returning now that Lyre's here.

The burger's greasy and generic, but for some reason its flavor rivals the food the pack offers. Freedom is the best seasoning.

"Our plans are going to be messed up, though," she muses between chews, staring out the window. Andrew paces a few more times, nostrils flaring, before he heads back to the entrance, presumably to come back here.

"What do you mean?" Mustard gloops out the side of my burger, and I wipe at it with a napkin. It isn't that I dislike mustard, but too much of it is just... well, too much.

"It means what I said." Her tone borders on patronizing, as if I'm asking a stupid question.

I blink, waiting for elaboration that doesn't come.

"Well, that's why it's always best to expect the unexpected." Lyre's voice comes out languid, lazy almost. She stretches in her chair, leaning back as she finishes the last quarter of her food. "We won't go far tonight. I'd rather have a comfortable place to stay."

My forehead creases. A thousand questions bubble to my lips, but I swallow them down with another bite of burger. Who am I to argue or complain? Lyre's a free spirit, willingly bringing me along at her own expense. If she's being a little weird, well, she was weird from the moment we met, so it isn't really that strange when I think about it.

The silence between us isn't uncomfortable, exactly. Just... weird. At least on my end. Lyre seems perfectly content to exist in her own bubble of certainty while I flounder in confusion beside her.

She finishes her burger long before I'm even halfway through mine. While I continue to eat, she plucks fries from the container between us, scrolling through her phone with greasy fingers.

"Looking for a nearby campground," she explains without looking up. Her brightly colored nails click against the screen as she huffs. "Damn it. If I'd known we were going to camp properly tonight, I wouldn't have bothered dumping the tanks here."

"I'm sorry." Apologizing is second nature, a reflexive response. Somehow, I feel responsible for this inconvenience, even though camping tonight is news to me, too.

Lyre's head snaps up. "Why are you apologizing?"

The last French fry dangles in midair as I blink at her. "I don't know. It just... felt necessary."

She shakes her head and clicks her tongue. "Stop apologizing when there's nothing to apologize for. It makes you look weak."

My cheeks burn; it isn't like I'd ever considered myself strong, but being looked down on is never a great feeling.

Lyre squints at me, her unusual eyes calculating. Then comes another sigh, deeper than the last, as if the weight of the entire world rests squarely on her shoulders. She shakes her head again. "You need to remember how to appear strong, even when you feel weak."

"I am weak," I say automatically, used to the designation.

"You don't have to be strong. Just look strong."

My eye twitches. "You want me to lift weights?"

"Of course not." Lyre points her finger at me. "Don't think I don't know you're doing this on purpose. Be strong of mind, Grace. Don't lower your head for just anyone. You're a queen, you know."

I blink. Her strange behavior aside, the lines she's spouting now belong on some sort of TV melodrama. "You're being weird, Lyre."

Lyre groans and tosses her phone onto the table with a clatter. She scratches at her head with both hands, completely mussing her rainbow-colored hair until it sticks up in wild directions.

"I know," she says, sounding utterly miserable.

Then she jerks her head up, glowering at me with her unsettling slitted eyes. "If you appear weak, then those beneath you will have nowhere to stand."

I stare at her for a long moment, my burger forgotten in my hands. "Did you major in saying things without any context whatsoever? Because you're really excelling at it."

"Occupational hazard." She grimaces. "Just hurry up and eat."

Andrew slides into the chair beside me, a scowl etched into his face. "There's nothing out there."

Neither Lyre nor I acknowledge him. I take another bite of my burger, chewing slowly as I study the strange woman across from me. Her hair looks like a rainbow exploded on her head, especially now that she's messed it up, and looks kind of like a young, rainbow-colored Einstein, but younger. And prettier.

"So we're camping tonight?" I ask, trying to understand our next steps.

Lyre's eyes flick over to Andrew for a split second before returning to me. "Yes. There's a little place about twenty minutes from here. Nothing fancy, but it should do. We'll have internet, too."

"That isn't very far," Andrew observes, straightening in his chair. "Is something wrong?"

We ignore him.

"Once we set up at the campsite, I'll need to run some errands," Lyre says instead of replying, her voice casual despite an odd intensity in her slitted eyes. "You should probably stay with the camper."

"I can help, if you want."

"I have another errand to run after setting up." She taps her nails against the table, creating a rhythmic clicking sound. "I can't do it if you're with me."

Oh? This is new. My mind races with possibilities—is she meeting someone dangerous? Planning something nefarious? A one-night stand...?

Okay, the last one is probably not it, but as I stare at Lyre, I think I understand. "Is whatever you're doing illegal?"

Andrew's eyes widen.

Lyre's expression doesn't change. Not a flicker of guilt, not a hint of surprise at my directness. Her eyes remain fixed on mine, unnervingly steady, and she doesn't give me an answer.

That's probably... the answer, right?

Interesting. Lyre's some sort of criminal. Her free nomad lifestyle suddenly makes a lot of sense.

"Are you done eating?" she asks, nodding toward my half-finished burger.

The deflection is as clear as a neon sign, but I want to know. "You didn't answer my question," I press, unwilling to let it drop. She doesn't seem angry, so it's likely she isn't telling me for my own safety.

"You didn't answer mine," she counters smoothly.

Andrew clears his throat. "Maybe we should—"

"Shut up," Lyre and I say in unison, neither of us breaking eye contact.

The silence stretches for a few more minutes before I give in. Prying into her business is rude, especially when she's the one doing me favors. I've brought nothing but a stalker to the table.

"Yes, I'm done eating," I sigh.

Chapter 43: Grace: Scars

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The campground is a little place about five miles off the highway, surrounded by trees. It's like a sardine tin of RVs, but we're lucky enough to have an empty spot beside ours.

Of course, it isn't empty anymore—Andrew's taken it. Apparently, he has a tent, too.

With all the slides extended, Lyre's camper transforms from cramped travel mode to something that could rival a small apartment. The living area in the back boasts two plush couches and a daybed, arranged in a U-shape around a TV that looks absurdly large when you consider we are technically camping. The Wi-Fi signal from the campground is surprisingly strong, and once Lyre leaves for her mysterious errand, I spend hours browsing through her streaming accounts.

I flip mindlessly through shows I've never heard of, content to let a few hours slip by. She's forbidden me from leaving the camper, warning me not to let anyone in, leaving me itching a little over the feeling of being confined. How easily I trade one form of captivity for another. At least this prison comes with Netflix. Besides, Lyre isn't about to kill me.

I'm at least ninety percent certain, anyway. There's always the ten percent she's waiting for me to let my guard down before chopping me to bits, but it's a risk I've already taken at this point.

The rest of my day wastes away in a blur of fictional dramas far less complicated than my life, yet riveting. As evening shadows stretch across the campground, the familiar rumble of Lyre's truck engine announces her return. The door swings open moments later, bringing with it the savory aroma of Chinese food.

"Hungry?" Lyre asks, triumphant smile brightening her face as she holds up a paper bag heavy with takeout containers.

My stomach growls in response. I haven't eaten since the truck stop burger. While Lyre gave me full permission to raid her pantry and fridge, it felt odd to do it while she was gone.

"I brought you something else too." She passes me a small brown paper bag.

I peer inside, finding what appears to be an artisanal jar of body butter. When I unscrew the lid, the sweet scent of coconut wafts up, rich and tropical.

"Scar treatment," Lyre explains, setting the food on the counter and beginning to unpack it. "For your back."

I freeze, the jar suspended halfway to my nose. "My back?"

"You were whipped, right?" She says it so casually, like commenting on the weather. "It's for those scars."

Blood drains from my face. She's never seen me shirtless. "How do you know about that?"

Lyre glances over her shoulder, expression neutral. "I saw them when I was helping you wash out the bleach. Through the gap here." She points at the back of her shirt collar. "Hard to miss."

My mind races back to the bathroom, to standing bent over, head in the shower while Lyre rinsed my hair.

"How long did it take to heal?" she asks, separating chopsticks with a clean snap.

The question's odd, but then again, everything about Lyre is odd. "Overnight. It wasn't as bad as you'd think." Of course, then there was the next night... And the next...

Lyre hums thoughtfully, her eyes never leaving mine as she passes me a container of lo mein.

"Interesting. You had your wrist wrapped when we met, right? And it's still bruised a few days later."

I glance down at the ugly purple-green marks circling my wrist where Ellie had grabbed me. The bruises have faded slightly, and my wrist still hurts when I use it too much, but it's healing.

"So how does a terrible wound like a whipping heal overnight," Lyre continues, twirling noodles around her chopsticks, "when your wrist is still hurting days later?"

The question catches me off guard. I've never thought about it before.

"The whips weren't really that bad," I offer lamely, picking at my food.

"Bad enough to scar, though."

I fall silent, staring at the jar of scar cream as I poke at my lo mein.

"Have you had other instances where wounds healed abnormally fast?" Lyre's voice is casual, but her eyes are too sharp. She knows something.

My heart races.

"I don't think so—" I begin, then stop, remembering one. Maybe. The details are hazy.
"When I was twelve, my parents died in a home invasion gone wrong."

The words are rote by now; it's my story, the one I've told several times. A summary of a bleak time in my life.

Mom and Dad died.

Three days later, Alpha picked me up.

But what happened in those three days? That's where it gets hazy. I remember being in the hospital, but I don't remember being hurt.

"Were you hurt?" Lyre asks, as if she can hear what I'm thinking.

"I don't know. Maybe. I remember being in the hospital." For some reason, I've always remembered the hospital, but I remember thinking it was because of my parents.

But I have no memory of seeing Mom or Dad in the hospital.

Pain stabs through my head as I work through the timeline, and I shake my head abruptly. Whatever secret is buried there can stay there. Mom's my mom. Dad's my dad. Maybe we should just leave it at that. "Never mind."

"Hmm." Lyre slurps a noodle louder than is necessary, pointing at my container with her chopsticks. "Eat." The word is clear, even with her mouth full.

I grab my lo mein and make my way to the dinette. The small booth offers the perfect view of the TV, a welcome distraction from the sudden bomb Lyre's thrown my way.

My head continues to ache, even though I stopped prodding at old, awful memories.

Lyre slides in across from me, her multicolored hair catching the overhead light. "Aren't you curious?"

"No." I shake my head decisively, stabbing at the noodles with my chopsticks. "Not curious at all."

Her mouth quirks up at one corner as she studies me. She reaches across with her chopsticks, fishing through her container until she plucks out a shrimp and places it deliberately on top of my noodles. "Eat more. You're going to need the energy."

The comment makes me pause mid-bite. "Why would I need energy?"

Lyre's eyes flicker toward the door. The movement is quick, but I catch it—a flash of alertness, almost like she's listening for something. "Just a feeling I have."

I narrow my eyes, lowering my chopsticks. "You know something, don't you? You've been cryptic and weird since we stopped at that truck stop earlier today, even changing our plans and camping here instead of driving longer."

As I'm talking, Lyre leans across the table, snags the shrimp she'd just placed in my container, and shoves it in my mouth.

"Stop being so anxious and just enjoy dinner." She settles back into her seat with a huff. "I'll apply the scar cream when you're done eating."

The shrimp is perfectly cooked, tender with just enough spice, but I'm too distracted to appreciate it fully. I chew and swallow before responding.

"Don't worry about it. I'm not in a hurry."

Lyre squints at me, her slitted eyes narrowing further. "It's probably better for everyone if you just deal with it."

My laugh is half-snort, half-chuckle. "You're acting like my scars are somehow a life and death issue."

Lyre stares at me for a long time. Long enough for me to take two bites before realizing she's still watching me with a deadpan expression.

When I pause, trying to figure out what I said, she lets out a deep sigh. "It must be nice to be oblivious," she muses, sounding genuinely envious.

I point my chopsticks at her, my eyebrows jamming together. "That! That's the cryptic stuff you've been doing since earlier."

"Occupational hazard," Lyre says, as if that's any sort of explanation at all. "Either eat or take your shirt off."

I blink at the stark options, then stuff a large bite of noodles into my mouth.

Chapter 44: Grace: Do You Believe in Fate?

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After dinner, Lyre applies the scar cream to my back, apparently unfazed by the raised blemishes on my skin. The emollient is cool at first, but slowly begins to burn.

"Give it about thirty minutes," Lyre says, screwing the lid back onto the ointment jar. "Just lay there. It's going to hurt for a bit, but the pain will disappear soon."

Grunting, I shove up onto my elbows, looking at her over my shoulder. "Are you sure it's safe? It's burning my skin."

"Its effectiveness comes with a price." She tosses the jar next to me. "Trust me. In half an hour, your scars will be a memory. Just don't touch it."

Fiddling with the remote, I nod. "Got it." Thankfully, with access to this back living room, I have the daybed to lie on and TV to watch, so I won't be bored. Even if it is awkward to be topless around someone who's essentially a stranger.

Lyre settles into the couch across from me, scrolling through her phone. She doesn't need much to entertain herself, spending most of her time on the small device. Evenings with her have been peaceful and silent. Usually, I read one of her books—she has several—while she browses the internet.

Starting the next episode of the TV series I'd started earlier, I try to pay attention to the plot. Magical academy, a girl with secret powers, and the boys who fall in love with her... The writing is subpar, but reminds me of the awkward lines I've heard recently from Rafe and Ellie. It's probably why I've become invested in this story; I want to see her come out on top and watch the antagonists get what they deserve.

Revenge isn't something I have the power to attain, so I'm living vicariously through characters on screen.

But now, I can't focus on the plot or the over-the-top acting as my mind keeps wandering to Lyre's question. How *did* my wounds heal so quickly, while my wrist hasn't? What strange phenomenon is behind it?

But then I shy away from the answers coming to mind.

I'm human. I've been human all my life, and I never expected to be anything else. Aside from Alpha's—Brax's—strange assumption I was his biological daughter... No one's ever suspected otherwise. *I* have never suspected otherwise.

I've never healed faster than a wolf, and I have no powers to my name. There's no superhuman strength or speed hiding in this body of mine. Even if I had some wounds heal a little faster than what might be considered normal; so what? Stranger things have happened in this world.

I grab the remote and rewind the show, huffing quietly to myself. Dwelling on these mysteries will only lead me down a spiral of questions with no answers. And, even if there are answers, I'm not entirely certain I *want* to know those answers.

How many nights had I spent wondering why Alpha took me in only to throw me away? Why Rafe claimed to love me while choosing Ellie? Some questions just lead to more pain.

The show reloads to where the protagonist first meets who I think is her third love interest in this magical academy. I'd completely missed the last fifteen minutes.

"You okay over there?" Lyre asks, her eyes never leaving her phone screen. The blue light casts an eerie glow on her face, and her slitted eyes seem to glow.

"Fine." I shift my position on the daybed, careful to keep my bare chest pressed against the sheets. "Just missed some parts of the show."

My shoulders roll back instinctively, and I notice something different. The burning sensation crawling across my back is fading, now less like thousands of hot, stabbing needles and more like an overly warm heating pad. The relief makes me sigh out loud.

"Hey, is it okay if I put my shirt back on yet?" I ask, already reaching toward the folded t-shirt beside me. The evening air is cool against my exposed skin, and despite Lyre's casual attitude, I'm not entirely comfortable being half-naked in front of someone I've known for less than a week.

Lyre finally looks up from her phone, her gaze assessing as she studies my back. "Give it another ten minutes."

She pauses, her eyes drifting to the ceiling. Her lips move silently, and it takes me a second to realize she's... counting? Her fingers twitch slightly with each unspoken

number. The gesture seems oddly methodical for something as simple as how long cream should stay on skin.

Eventually, she grunts and nods. "Yeah, ten minutes is probably still safe."

Safe? That's an interesting word choice for skin cream.

"Am I going to get cancer or something if I leave this on too long?" I ask, suspicion creeping into my voice. The burning had been intense, almost unnatural. What kind of healing ointment causes that much pain?

Lyre's attention returns to her phone, thumb scrolling with practiced ease. "The ointment isn't what I'm worried about," she says absently.

I push myself up on my elbows again, twisting to look at her. "What does that mean?" My heartbeat quickens. "If not the ointment, then what?"

She doesn't answer immediately, which only amplifies my unease. The hairs on my arms stand up. "Lyre?"

"Someone's been following us," she finally says, still scrolling. "Not Andrew. Well, yes Andrew, but someone else too."

My breath catches. "Wolves?"

Her finger pauses.

I scramble upright, snatching a pillow to cover my chest. "Lyre, did they find me? You know something, don't you?"

Lyre sighs and sets her phone on her belly as she closes her eyes. "Don't worry so much."

"Don't worry?" My voice cracks as it reaches a new pitch. "You just told me someone's following me, and now you're saying don't worry?" The pillow slips in my grip, and I clutch it tighter against my chest. "That's not helping me worry less."

She keeps her eyes closed, considering this for a moment. The silence stretches between us, punctuated only by the murmur of the TV show I've completely forgotten about. Finally, she nods. "Fair assessment. I'm not helping."

She turns her head to look at me, her eyes reflecting the dim light of the camper like a cat's. "Tell me. Do you believe in fate,

Chapter 45: Grace: Knock, Knock

The question catches me off guard, a sharp left turn from my panic about being hunted.

"Fate?" I hesitate, my fingers digging into the soft pillow. "What do you mean by fate?"

"Fate." She rolls the word around like she's tasting it. "When you're destined for something. No matter what you do, you can't escape it. Your path is already written."

My throat tightens. Once, I thought Rafe was my soul mate. I thought our lives would intertwine forever, that nothing could separate us. Then fate arrived wearing Ellie's face, and everything changed. The memory of his cold eyes as he chose her still burns in my chest.

"Fate took Rafe from me," I whisper, more to myself than to Lyre. "His fated mate appeared, and suddenly nothing else mattered. Not our years together, not our plans. All my happiness was taken away, and all I was left with was pain." The bitterness in my voice surprises even me.

My newly blonde hair falls over the pillow like a golden waterfall, and I grab a few strands between my fingers. "Fate makes me sound helpless. Like I'm just going wherever I'm pushed." My jaw sets with determination. "I'd rather fight to be happy than sit around accepting whatever I've been given. That's why I'm here."

Lyre's lips curl into a knowing smile. The expression transforms her face, softening her sharp features. "Fate would never destine you for unhappiness, Grace."

A bitter laugh escapes me, surprising in its harshness. Orphaned, abandoned, rejected... It doesn't seem like fate has anything good in store for me. "I'm not so sure about that."

"I know," Lyre says simply, before settling back on the couch and closing her eyes again. "Don't worry, Grace. What will be, will be. And what you don't want will never be."

I study Lyre, resting so calmly despite the bombs she's thrown into a simple conversation. Even the moment I met her, I thought she was strange; but this goes beyond what I ever imagined.

I want to ask what she is, and what powers she holds. She's clearly not human, and knows more than she lets on. But remembering how happy she was when I said it didn't matter makes it really hard to ask again.

My fingers dig into the pillow still pressed against my chest. The burning on my back has subsided completely now, replaced by an odd coolness, like menthol spread across my skin. I bite my lip. "You still haven't explained who's following us and why we're not running right now."

Is she tired of having me around? Is she willing to just throw me back to the pack?

She doesn't know the details of who I'm running from, or how I got here. She hasn't asked. At first, I liked that. Now, I'm wondering if I should have told her; maybe appealing to her, showing her how awful my life was there, would have been a better decision. Maybe she wouldn't be so willing to just sit here while someone hunts me down.

Then again, she never said they were here for me. Maybe she's running, too; who knows what danger we're in?

Lyre just snuggles deeper into the couch, stretching her legs out in a languid movement. "It's pointless to run anymore," she says through her stretch, voice unconcerned. "May as well be comfortable."

"Are we in danger?" This is the most important question.

She sighs. "No. You're not in danger."

I notice how she says *I'm* not, but she doesn't say *we're* not.

"Are they looking for you or me?"

Lyre turns her head again, opening her eyes to stare at me. She doesn't answer, saying instead, "We can run if you want. Pack up right now. Drive all night. Find some random parking lot when I can't drive anymore, then keep going."

Someone shouts on the TV, but neither of us break our stare-lock.

"But they'll catch up," she continues matter-of-factly. "It might take longer, but they will. And you'll be tired, hungry, and scared when they do."

My throat tightens. "So what's your solution? Just wait here for them to catch up?"

Lyre waves a hand, encompassing the room in a single gesture. "My solution is to be comfortable. There's no danger, so why run? Better to deal with it now, with our bellies full and our bodies rested."

"Okay, well, now I know they're coming, and I'm scared. So why won't you just tell me who's coming?" I lean forward, trying not to let my voice rise too much. She's my benefactor, and I think she's my friend, so there's only so far I can push.

But I'm pushing anyway.

Lyre scratches at her cheek, squinting at the ceiling. "I know *what* is coming, Grace, but I don't know *who* carries the fate."

I frown, my patience wearing thin. "Can you just give me a direct answer for once?"

Lyre's eyes meet mine, strangely luminous in the dimly lit camper. "It doesn't work that way." She taps her temple with one finger. "Clarity isn't part of the package."

Something inside me snaps. The fear, the uncertainty, the cryptic half-answers—it's too much.

"What are you?" The question bursts out of me, fueled by desperation and fear. "You talk about fate and you knew about my scars without looking and you know when invisible cats are dangerous or not and—" I drop my voice to a harsh whisper. "Someone's following us, and all you can tell me is I'm not in danger. But there's more to being alive than just breathing. I ran away for a reason. So tell me what you know!"

Lyre tilts her head, her multicolored hair catching the lamplight. "You said it didn't matter what I was." She doesn't even address the rest of what I word-vomited at her.

Heat rushes to my face; I'm not sure if it's shame or anger. "That was before you started acting weird and not giving me straight answers."

"Humans. You're all the same." She sits up straight, her eyes suddenly hard and gleaming, like polished stones. "You say one thing but change your minds so capriciously. *'It doesn't matter what you are, Lyre.'* Until it does. Until you're scared. Until you need something."

The disappointment in her voice is like a slap to the face, and I flinch. My shoulders slump. She's taken me in out of kindness, and I'm here demanding more and more.

But isn't it normal to want clear answers? Wouldn't it be normal to be frustrated in this situation?

Still, it seems like I've hurt her feelings, too...

"I'm sorry," I murmur, clinging to the pillow like a lifeline. "I really don't care what you are. I just..."

Three sharp knocks echo through the camper, and I jump.

Lyre sighs. "Put on your shirt, Grace. They're here."

Chapter 46: Caine: Inane Argument

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CAINE

The warlock is an annoying companion on a long drive, but his ability to track the girl's presence is little short of miraculous.

"I'm telling you," Jack-Eye says, gesturing wildly in the cramped backseat at Thom, "a woolly mammoth would absolutely destroy an elephant in combat. Thicker fur, larger tusks—built for the ice age, man."

Thom shakes his head. His glasses slip down his nose, and he pushes them back with trembling fingers. "Elephants have superior intelligence and agility. African bull elephants can weigh up to seven tons and reach nearly thirteen feet. Your mammoth would be too slow."

"Too slow? Are we forgetting they hunted in packs?" Jack-Eye counters.

This conversation has lasted at least the last thirty miles. It started, oddly enough, with a conversation about chickens.

"We're discussing a one-on-one arena battle," Thom says, voice steady despite his physical weakness. "Not a pack hunt."

Their absurdity grates on my nerves, and I clutch the steering wheel harder. "How much longer?" I ask, interrupting their inane debate without guilt.

"Three point seven miles, still in the same location," Thom answers, not missing a beat.

"Even without the pack there—"

"This entire discussion is idiotic," I say through gritted teeth. "Woolly mammoths are extinct."

Fenris's voice is a low grumble. *They're just trying to pass the time. Not everyone broods in silence like you.*

I don't brood. I contemplate.

Four hours of contemplating how to approach the girl doesn't count as brooding?

I ignore him, focusing on the road signs flashing past in the darkness. Three point seven miles. There's a tug in my chest, almost a whisper of premonition telling me I'm close. The distance between us has become physical pain—like someone slowly peeling back layers of skin.

"How about now?" I ask.

Thom sighs. "Same as thirty seconds ago, Your Majesty. The girl hasn't moved. She's been stationary for hours."

"And the interference?"

"Still present."

My fingers tap against the steering wheel. "Is she in danger?" I've asked this a hundred times, at least.

"I don't believe so. It isn't malevolent, but it's impossible to tell for certain."

Jack-Eye leans forward, grabbing onto my headrest. "What do you think, boss? I still say the mammoth—"

"Shut up," I growl. "Your hypothetical fight between extinct creatures and modern elephants is beyond asinine."

Silence fills the car. I feel a slight pang of regret—not for silencing them, but for revealing how tightly wound I am. A king should never appear desperate, even when he is.

You are desperate, Fenris chides. Admit it.

But of course, the silence doesn't last. Not with my beta in this car. Why did I bring him along, again?

"How does it work?" Jack-Eye asks after a moment, turning to face Thom. "Your tracking. Is it by scent, like us?"

The warlock seems grateful for the change in subject, judging by the relief in his voice. "No, not scent. It's essence. Everything that exists occupies not just physical space but essentialistic space as well. Every living thing disrupts the essence of an area simply by existing within it."

Jack-Eye's brow furrows. "Like mana? In those, what do you call them... video games?"

"It's called by many names. Mana, ether, chi, prana." Thom's hands flutter as he explains, then fall back to his lap, trembling. "But it all boils down to the energy something holds within the world. Your... Grace... has a particularly distinct essence. Bright. Unusual for a human."

I file this information away, another puzzle piece I don't yet know where to place.

Jack-Eye whistles low. "Must be nice, tracking something so clearly. We lose scent trails all the time."

Thom's laugh is hollow. "It comes at a price."

I glance in the rearview mirror. The warlock's skin holds the pallor of old parchment, bluish veins visible at his temples. His eyes are sunken, rimmed with dark circles. Hours ago, when I first dragged him from Forest Springs, he'd been merely nervous. Now he looks half-dead.

"I'll need at least a week to recover from today's work." His hands tremble more violently as he shoves his glasses up his nose again. "The spell consumes my own essence to track another's. A fair trade, usually, but the distance was... substantial."

Jack-Eye shoots me a look. I can't see it, but I can feel it in the back of my head. He probably feels bad for Thom, but I can't pretend to feel anything for his suffering. The warlock is a tool, nothing more—a means to reclaim what's mine.

You should care more,

Fenris murmurs. *Magic users are rare. Breaking this one won't serve you. They're weak, but they can be useful. His talent is a good one to keep around.*

I scoff. My wolf acts as if I've done something terrible. *I didn't break him. He's doing his job.*

And if his job kills him?

My fingers tap against the wheel again. *Then I'll find another.*

The GPS announces our exit, and I take the turn sharper than necessary. Thom grunts as he's thrown against the door.

"There." He points with a shaking finger toward a green sign illuminated in our headlights. "Pinewood Campground, next right."

My pulse quickens. We're close enough now that I can almost taste her in the air, a ghostly imitation of blueberry sweetness with each breath.

That's the pillow, Fenris says, pragmatic as always.

Grace's pillow sits in the passenger seat, buckled in to keep it from falling onto the ground. Jack-Eye knew better than to say a word when he saw it, but Thom had the audacity to say it wouldn't help him track her any better.

It's a silly thing to bring along, but the scent wafting off it is the only thing keeping me calm and in control, like a fresh breeze coming through a bloody field of thoughts.

The brief hint of sanity is something I haven't felt since before Fenris's voice came into my head. Before the weight of my crown wore down my soul.

It's a peace I never felt, not even *before*.

Because Grace is the one.

I rub my temple with a sigh. Arguing with Fenris only makes the headache worse.

Chapter 47: Caine: Knock Like a Normal Person

Chapter 47: Caine: Knock Like a Normal Person

The campground entrance is easy to miss, hidden in the darkness without any streetlights to mark it. Thankfully, many of the campers parked here have LED lighting strips along their rigs, and I slow before I miss the turn.

"Where?" I demand.

Thom closes his eyes, concentrating. "Keep going. She'll be on our left. I'll know when we get closer."

I drive deeper into the campground, wheels crunching on gravel. Rolling my window down seems like a mistake at first. The place reeks of humans—their food, their waste, their cheap alcohol. But beneath it all, I catch hints of her scent, growing stronger.

"That interference," Thom mumbles, seemingly to himself. "It's stronger here. Almost like..."

"Like what?" I snap.

"Like something's deliberately masking her." He opens his eyes, pupils dilated. "Something old."

Jack-Eye opens his own window, shoving his head outside to breathe in deep. "There's a shifter... Blue Mountain."

I can smell him, too.

"There." Thom points to a large RV. The lot next to it isn't empty, but only holds a blue sedan and a tent. "She's there."

I park the car on the opposite side of the road and kill the engine, and Jack-Eye slides out of the car with languid ease. "I'll deal with the traitor."

I grunt at them both, reaching for Grace's pillow with fingers that itch to crush something. One brief caress over the soft fabric. One deep breath of her scent—blueberry muffins, mixed with fabric softener.

My chest loosens as the pillow's scent cuts through the noise in my head.

"Stay here," I tell Thom without looking at him.

The warlock slumps in relief. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Opening the car door, I step out into the night, vaguely irritated by the humid heat despite the sun having set long ago.

Each breath I take now isn't filtered through the car's ventilation system, and her scent grows stronger. She's close. My muscles coil with anticipation.

Fenris materializes beside me, his massive form condensing into something more mundane—at first glance he appears to be a large black dog rather than a monstrous wolf. Even his ethereal blue glow has dimmed to almost nothing, just the faintest shimmer visible only if you know to look for it.

Remember—calm and unthreatening, Fenris says as he pads beside me. She's already frightened enough to run.

"I know," I mutter through clenched teeth.

Do you? Your face suggests otherwise.

I force my features to relax, though the effort feels like trying to reshape stone. If I approach her with all the rage burning inside me, I'll only drive her further away.

There are things I've done to reassure her she's safe. I didn't kill the Forest Springs Alpha. Or her boyfriend. I wanted to, but I didn't; I even held Fenris back. This should be enough to prove she can return without worries.

Pride in my self-restraint rises, just in time for the crunch of gravel to draw my attention to the nearby tent.

A young man emerges, his scent far too familiar. What was his name?

Andrew, Fenris growls, the sound carrying through the quiet night air.

His movements are cautious, deliberate; he's not stupid. He's caught our scent.

He spots Jack-Eye first, but then his eyes land on me. His body goes rigid.

Jack-Eye, to his credit, keeps his posture relaxed. Andrew approaches with his head slightly bowed, then drops into a formal submission posture ten feet away from us.

"Lycan King," he murmurs, voice barely audible.

I lift my upper lip, unable to suppress the snarl building in my throat. His scent is all over the area and around the camper—all over Grace's space. The rage bubbling beneath my skin threatens to spill over. My fingers itch to tear, to rip, to punish.

But then I remember how Grace trembled when she walked into my suite, and I take a deep breath.

Humans are weak. They're too fragile to understand the violence underpinning our society. I must hide it from her.

There will be time to repay this pup's disloyalty.

"Take him back to Blue Mountain," I tell Jack-Eye, not wanting to linger. Not with Grace within reach. "We'll deal with his punishment there."

"Got it, boss."

Andrew's eyes dart between me and Jack-Eye, weighing his options. Smart enough to know there aren't many. "Alpha Wilder asked me to protect her," he says quietly. "To make sure she reaches Forest Springs safely."

"And yet you're not in Forest Springs."

His anxiety spikes, filling the air with the sour smell of fear. "She... she decided to come with someone else. A stranger. I couldn't leave her unprotected."

I take three measured steps toward the camper, my eyes fixed on its door. Andrew's scent is everywhere around it, but it's the camper itself giving me pause.

The skin between my shoulder blades prickles with unease. There's something here—something neither wolf nor human.

"Who is she with?" I demand, still facing the camper door.

"A woman named Lyre. She offered to take Grace to Yellowstone." His voice drops even lower. "Grace wanted to leave the pack life behind. All of it."

Leave it all behind. Leave *me* behind. The thought cuts deeper than it should.

I take the final steps toward the camper door. For a brief, violent moment, I contemplate kicking it down, asserting my dominance the way I would with any challenger. My foot actually lifts from the ground.

Fenris nips sharply at my leg, teeth catching the fabric of my pants.

Don't be ridiculous, he growls. Knock like a normal person.

I scowl down at him. "I am the Lycan King. I don't need to—"

You're also trying to win her trust, not terrify her further. Knock.

He's right, damn him. With jaw clenched tight enough to crack teeth, I raise my fist to the door and knock three times, each one sharp and distinct. The sound echoes in the quiet campground, too loud in the stillness.

After two seconds, the door is still closed, so I knock again.

Fenris sighs. *Have a little patience. We can hear them moving in there.*

Which is exactly why they should have this door open already, damn it. I lift my hand again.

Chapter 48: Grace: Different Wavelengths

Chapter 48: Grace: Different Wavelengths

Lyre's hand twitches as whoever it is knocks again, right before her fingers touch the door handle.

Her head jerks back as she scowls, before dropping her arm and stepping back. Leaning against the opposite wall, she crosses her arms and counts silently, her lips moving with each number.

Her confidence is enough to instill awe. I can't imagine a time I've ever felt as if I could just stand in front of a door as someone impatiently knocks, without answering.

And yet it makes all the sense in the world. This is *her* home. Her sanctuary. Who dares come knocking like this?

I want to be more like her.

"I'm grabbing a soda. Want one?" I whisper, slipping past her to the tiny kitchen nook.

Lyre shakes her head, still counting. I watch her lips move as she mouths, "Forty-two... forty-three..."

The knocking grows more insistent. Harder. Louder. The RV shakes with each impact, swaying gently underfoot. The first night, I'd been mildly seasick over the feeling. Now, I'm used to it.

After pulling a cold can from the fridge, I slide into one of the dinette seats, facing the door. From here, I can't see the door, but I can watch Lyre's methodical resistance.

"Eighty-six... eighty-seven..." She hasn't even glanced at the door again, her eyes closed as her lips continue to move soundlessly.

I'm sure it's Rafe out there, and am only surprised he isn't yelling and demanding for us to open up at this point.

Then again, it isn't like he knows Lyre, and we're in the middle of a human settlement, even if it isn't permanent homes. It would be awkward if the human authorities were called, I'm sure. We're far out of pack range; I have no idea whose territory we are in now, actually.

It isn't as if I was never taught about other territories, but there are *so* many, and I had no reason to be interested in packs so far from ours. Only our neighbors and some of the larger packs are familiar names.

"Ninety-eight... ninety-nine... one hundred." Lyre pushes off from the wall and strolls to the door with deliberate slowness.

The knocking has become pounding now, the thin door shuddering in its frame.

Lyre yanks it open. "Yes?" Her voice could freeze a desert in an instant. "What exactly is so important that you felt entitled to damage my property?"

I take a long sip of cold soda, relishing the sweetness. Let Rafe stew out there. Let him explain himself to someone who doesn't care about his excuses. I'm looking forward to it; Lyre doesn't seem like the kind of person to deal with his arrogant attitude.

"I'm looking for Grace Harper."

The soda catches in my throat. Not Rafe's voice. It's deeper. Colder.

Caine.

I choke, sputtering as the liquid burns down the wrong pipe. My eyes tear with the pain.

There's a commotion—heavy footsteps, a wolf's snarl, Lyre protesting, and then there's Caine in front of me, his giant frame overpowering the tiny camper space. He kneels by my side, eyes locked on mine, storm-gray and intense. His oversized hand whacks at my back as if I'm choking on a peanut and not a sip of carbonated Coke.

My lungs seize with panic. I can't breathe. Can't speak. Can't do anything but stare at the Lycan King who murdered Alpha Brax kneeling in front of me in this ridiculous rainbow camper looking at me like—

His hand connects with my back again, delivering a firm smack between my shoulder blades. The impact dislodges the soda from my airway, and I cough again, the sound much less wet this time.

"Are you okay?" His voice sounds strangely gentle for a serial killer who's hunted down a runaway.

I gasp, finally drawing air. "What are you doing here?" The words are shrill and tinny, but at least they come out.

Caine's eyes narrow, scanning my face, my hair, my body. His nostrils flare slightly. "Your hair is blonde."

It's like déjà vu, the way he comments on my appearance. My hand flies self-consciously to my now-blonde strands. "That doesn't answer my question."

Behind him, Lyre leans against the wall, her slitted eyes observing with unnerving calculation. She doesn't seem afraid of Caine, which strikes me as either incredibly brave or suicidally stupid.

A strangely familiar black dog pokes his head around Caine's side with a hopeful whimper, only to have his muzzle shoved back.

I blink.

"You left," Caine says, and if I didn't know he's a psychotic serial killer, I'd think he's a wounded husband hunting down his wife after coming home to signed divorce papers or something. He sounds so... *betrayed*.

Maybe it's my imagination.

It's doing a lot of things right now. My mind's even insisting his stare lacks the razor-sharp edge I remember from our previous encounters. The tightness around his mouth has softened, and the crease in his brow isn't as deep. Even his lips are soft, his jaw relaxed instead of clenched.

Like I'm watching him through some kind of photo filter.

I shake my head, trying to kick out all these strange thoughts. It's hard to think clearly, and my heart keeps hammering against my ribcage in a distracting rhythm. Blaming it on fear would be nice, but my body's all *ooh* and *ahh* over his damn cologne-ad smell, which is probably what's doing it.

Whatever it is, it's toxic to my intelligence. I swear I've been thinking just fine the past two days without him around, and now my hips are wiggling just a little where I sit, trying to ease the pressure down under.

My brain and body are *not* on the same wavelength, and this is a huge problem. Have I turned into some sort of pack bunny, after all? Is it possible to lust over a man's body like I have no purpose in life beyond being his vapid sex doll? I mean, even Rafe didn't have this effect on me.

His hand lifts slowly, giving me plenty of time to flinch away, but I'm frozen. His fingers brush against my cheek with unexpected gentleness, and I stop breathing altogether.

"Grace," he says, my name sounding so soft and delicate when it comes out of his mouth.

The calloused pad of his thumb skims my skin with such delicacy it might as well be a whisper. My eyelids flutter against my will as his touch travels to a strand of my newly blonde hair.

He tucks it behind my ear, his fingertips lingering at the sensitive skin just below my earlobe.

Lyre clears her throat, and I jump, the strange, overly sexual connection between us fizzling. Shoving Caine's hand away, I blink a few times to clear my vision.

But he still looks all soft and gentle and not murderous, which is just... not right.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, doing my best to sound like his presence is unwanted. Which it is. Definitely. Even if my body doesn't seem to have gotten the memo, despite being marked *urgent*

.

"You left," he repeats, as if that explains everything.

It doesn't.

The black dog—no, wolf—peeks around Caine again with a soft whine, his gray eyes familiar.

Fenris.

The recognition is instantaneous without attraction hazing my thought process, and I have to suppress a hysterical laugh. The massive, otherworldly wolf has somehow been reduced to what looks like an all-black German Shepherd.

Lyre clears her throat again from where she's leaning against the wall. "So, this is who you're running from."

Caine doesn't even glance in her direction, his attention fixed entirely on me. "Are you hurt?" His eyes dart to my wrist, which hasn't been wrapped since my first night with Lyre.

"What? No. I'm fine." My brain scrambles to make sense of his presence, of his demeanor, of the fact that he's kneeling before me in this tiny camper with an expression I can't decipher. Intrusive thoughts about us being naked—together—try to horn in, but I shove them away without remorse.

Is there medicine to fix my imagination? I'm in desperate need of a lifetime supply of it.

"Why are you here? How did you find me?"

His jaw tightens slightly. "You left without telling me where you were going."

I nod. "Yes, I know."

His eyes tighten. His entire face tenses, the now-familiar Lycan King mask returning to place, hard and cold. "I'm here to bring you back."

"No, thank you." Heat rises to my face as I struggle to remain composed. Thankfully, all the inappropriate thoughts have flown off with my rising irritation. "I'm not your prisoner."

"We discussed this."

"*You* discussed it. I disagree with the facts."

His jaw tightens, the muscle there flexing beneath his skin. He looks different somehow. More dangerous, yet also more human. His dark hair is mussed, as if he's been running his hands through it, and there are dark circles under his eyes, like he hasn't been sleeping well.

"Who is she?" He jerks his chin toward Lyre without looking at her.

"Lyre." She answers before I can, her voice light but edged. "And you're in my home without an invitation."

Caine still doesn't turn. "You took what belongs to me."

I frown. "I don't belong to anyone."

His nostrils flare. "Why do you smell like coconuts?"

Chapter 49: Grace: Did You Kill Andrew?

Chapter 49: Grace: Did You Kill Andrew?

What the hell does smelling like coconuts have to do with anything? I blink at Caine, genuinely confused by the bizarre shift in conversation.

Caine's jaw tightens as his nostrils flare again. He breathes in deeply, looking almost offended by my smell.

"It's lotion, okay?" Something about the intensity of his stare makes me want to fill the silence, but I have nothing particularly nice to say. Instead, I mumble, "Not that it's any of your business what I put on my body."

His eyes darken at my words, and I immediately regret my phrasing. It's stupid to antagonize someone when you don't want them to kill you, but it's hard not to get a little uppity when they act so damn strange.

I shift in my seat, tapping my fingers against the table as I gather my courage. "Look, I don't think you have any legal right to hold me as a prisoner."

It's something I've been thinking about for some time, going around in circles in my head. Trying to sound confident, even as my heart threatens to burst through my ribcage, I add, "I was a minor when I was taken to the Blue Mountain Pack, and I haven't done anything illegal."

"I need to investigate," Caine says simply. No other explanation. No details. Just those four words, like it's all he needs to say and I should just go along with it.

"Investigate what?" My voice rises despite my effort to stay calm. "We know I'm human. Alpha Brax brought me here. I was a minor, so it isn't like I had much choice. What else is there to look into?"

Caine stiffens, his shoulders squaring. "There are things I need to look into," he mumbles, still without a real explanation. "Your involvement..."

When he trails off, I assume he's going to finish his thought. But he doesn't. It's like he's trying to make up excuses or something.

"My involvement in what? Dating Rafe? It's over now."

He shifts his weight, looking strangely uncertain. It's almost hard to reconcile the Caine in front of me with the Lycan King I met in the forest. For one, he's still kneeling in front of me, like he's trying to serve me instead of keep me prisoner. For two, he's just so... *soft*. Almost approachable, even.

"I still need to determine—"

"Dude." Lyre's voice interrupts his words as she enunciates clearly, "Back. Off."

Caine's head whips toward her, all pretense of gentleness evaporating. A low growl rumbles from his chest, like a reminder of how threatening he can be.

But Lyre doesn't flinch. She squeezes past him in the tight space, her rainbow hair brushing against his shoulder as she slides into the booth beside me. Her hip nudges mine, pushing me further into the corner as she becomes a physical barrier between me and the Lycan King.

Caine's mouth tightens as he stands, looming over us with his outrageous height difference.

Crossing her arms on the table, Lyre leans forward, her catlike eyes narrowed. "So let me get this straight. You're detaining a human girl who hasn't committed any crime, based on what exactly? Your royal prerogative?"

Caine's nostrils flare. "This doesn't concern you."

"Actually, it does." Lyre's voice drops to a dangerous purr. "Since you're in my home, threatening my guest."

My heart pitters and patters. She's defending me. It's the sweetest moment I've had in way too long.

"I'm not threatening anyone," he protests.

"No? What would you call it then?" She tilts her head. "Forcible relocation? Kidnapping? Unlawful detention?"

Caine's eyes flash with something dangerous. "She was found in the forest during a regional Mate Hunt—"

"Against my will," I pipe up, emboldened by Lyre's support.

"She was connected to pack affairs—"

I grimace. "He means Rafe," I whisper to Lyre. She's heard me mention him, though I haven't exactly *explained* anything. "My ex-boyfriend. He ditched me as soon as he found his fated mate."

Lyre nods as she listens. "As an unwilling participant," Lyre counters Caine smoothly, as if I didn't interrupt with my clarification. "It sounds as if Grace was raised by wolves, but isn't one herself. She's human. She has no legal obligation to follow pack law. Human laws apply to her, and human laws are pretty clear about forcibly taking people against their will."

Fenris whines from where he sits at Caine's side, his ears pressed flat against his head. The sound is startlingly human in its distress, and he nips at Caine's hip.

Caine swats absently at Fenris's muzzle. "I'm not here to detain her," he says, as if he hadn't *just* tried to argue about my status as his prisoner. "I'm responsible for her safety."

"No, you're not." Lyre straightens, her voice taking on a formal cadence. "Grace is a legal adult in the eyes of human society. She has the right to go where she wants and live how she chooses."

Caine's eyes flick to mine, then back to Lyre. "She has no resources. No support system."

"She has me," Lyre says simply.

"Yes, and..." His lip curls in a faint snarl. "Who are you?"

"Someone who dislikes the overbearing ego of werewolves."

The air between them crackles with tension. Fenris, on the other hand, seems irritated with Caine, nipping at his thigh when he keeps getting batted away from his hip. Finally, he flops onto his belly and crawls between Caine and Lyre's feet.

I peer under the table to see his eyes blinking at me. Another few inches and he's finally close enough to plop his head into my lap with a soft chuff. I rub his ears, forgetting for a second his status as a traitor.

"Grace needs protection," Caine insists, his voice softer now but no less intense. "I'm here to help her get settled into human society comfortably. There's no reason for her to suffer for the actions of one of my packs."

"Mmm." Lyre hums. "Sounds like a convenient way of saying you don't actually have a valid reason."

"It's my responsibility to ensure—"

Something clicks in my brain. A missing piece of this bizarre puzzle suddenly registers, and I jolt upright in my seat.

"Andrew! Did you kill Andrew?"

How could I have forgotten about Andrew? He's in a tent right next to us. There's no way the Lycan King missed his presence.

Caine's expression shifts, the hard lines of his face softening into something disturbingly like satisfaction. "I did *not* kill Andrew," he says with an odd little smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

I exchange a glance with Lyre. Her slitted eyes narrow slightly, a silent message passing between us. Something's off about his answer—he's too pleased with himself.

"I also didn't kill the Forest Springs Alpha," Caine adds quickly, his hands spread wide in a gesture which seems meant to be reassuring but feels more performative.

Fenris shifts his massive head in my lap, releasing a derisive snort. The reality of what Caine's saying finally registers. He's listing people he specifically *didn't* kill—which suggests...

"So no one's died, right?" I press, searching his face for confirmation.

Caine's stormy eyes slide away from mine, finding sudden interest in the garish pattern of Lyre's curtains. My stomach drops. The way he can't meet my gaze tells me everything I need to know.

A cold shudder ripples down my spine. He's lying to me.

Without thinking, I scramble over Lyre, ignoring her startled "Hey!" as I push past her and Caine's broad frame. My elbow connects with his solid chest, but he barely budes. I have to shoulder my way around him, my heart thundering in my ears as I dash for the door.

Humid night air hits my face as I burst outside, my eyes frantically scanning the darkness for any sign of Andrew. I need to see him. Need to know he's okay. Need to—

I come to such an abrupt halt I nearly topple forward.

The red-haired Lycan—Jack-Eye, I remember—stands a few feet away, arms crossed over his chest as he smirks. But what's happening next to him stops me cold. Andrew is on the ground, his body contorted into what can only be described as a plank position, except his butt is hiked comically high in the air. His face is pressed into the dirt, arms at his sides, looking for all the world like he's doing the world's most uncomfortable push-up.

Relief floods through me, so powerful it makes my knees weak. He's alive. Humiliated, apparently being punished in some bizarre wolf way, but alive.

"Are you *that* happy to see he's still alive?"

Caine's voice comes from directly behind me, low and displeased. I hadn't heard him follow, but now I can feel the heat radiating from his body, separated from my back by the barest sliver of space. His breath disturbs the hair at the nape of my neck, sending an involuntary shiver across my skin.

"Of course," I mumble, taking a step away. Caine just moves closer, though, rendering the slight movement moot.

"Why?" he demands.

Chapter 50: Grace: I Don't Want to Go

Caine's question kind of feels like a minefield waiting to happen, so I focus on something more important.

"Could you step back, please?" I ask, keenly aware of his proximity. My skin prickles where his breath touches the nape of my neck.

He doesn't move. Not even an inch. If anything, he leans closer, his chest nearly brushing my back.

"I asked you a question." His voice rumbles, deep and demanding. "Why are you so relieved to see him alive?"

Before I can answer, something large and furry forces its way between us. Fenris wedges his massive body into the sliver of space, effectively pushing Caine backward while pressing his warmth against my side. When I turn to rub his ears, he blinks his intelligent gray eyes at me in what almost seems like reassurance.

Wait. I squint in the dim lighting. Is he bigger now? Maybe it's just the shadows playing tricks, but he seems more substantial, more imposing.

Did he get bigger so he could push Caine out of the way? If so, that's... sweet.

"You need to respect her personal space," Lyre calls out, arms crossed as she leans against the frame of the camper's doorway. "Not everyone appreciates being loomed over by strange men."

I'm falling more in love with Lyre every time she speaks.

Fenris lets out a soft huff that sounds suspiciously like agreement, nodding his massive head once before pressing harder against me.

I take a few deliberate steps away, circling around Andrew's still-immobile form. To my surprise, Caine follows, moving in tandem with each step I take, like we're engaged in some bizarre dance. When I look over my shoulder, his eyes never leave my face, tracking my movements with predatory focus.

Fenris stays between us, his massive body a living barrier. When Caine tries to step around him, the wolf snaps his jaws with a sharp click that makes the Lycan King stay back.

"Did he just—?" I start, shocked at Fenris's rebellion.

"Yes," Caine's beta says, his voice barely containing his amusement. "He did."

I can't help the small smile that tugs at my lips. Maybe Fenris isn't such a traitor after all. Between leading Caine to me and now keeping him at bay, I'm not sure whose side the wolf is actually on. But right now, he seems to be on mine. I'll take it.

"Grace." Lyre's voice cuts through the tension. She steps down from the camper, her colorful hair catching the moonlight as she squints her cat-like eyes at me. "Do you want to go with them?"

The question hangs in the night air. Andrew shifts slightly in his uncomfortable position but doesn't speak.

"No," I say, the word coming out clear and firm. "I don't."

Caine's jaw tightens. He reaches around his wolf, extending his hand toward mine. "Grace—"

The way he says my name makes my knees want to buckle. Thankfully, Fenris's teeth snap at his fingers, missing by centimeters. Caine yanks his hand back with a curse, and I stay upright, even if I'm swaying a little.

"Stop it, Fenris," he growls.

I sidestep, putting more distance between us. The wolf moves with me, still blocking Caine's path.

"I'm staying with Lyre," I tell him. My voice doesn't waver. "You don't have any right to detain me."

"I told you, I'm not—"

"You locked me in a room," I remind him. "You had guards posted outside my door. You brought me food, but wouldn't let me leave. That's the definition of imprisonment, and I'm pretty sure it's illegal." My confidence wanes the longer I talk, though, under the weight of his stormy stare.

Caine growls again, louder than before. It vibrates through the air, shaking my bones. His hands clench at his sides, and I brace for an explosion of temper.

The camper's basically a tin can; if he wants to attack us, we have nowhere to hide. Running from wolves is pointless; it just delays the inevitable.

"So you're really not coming back?" Jack-Eye smoothly interrupts, stepping forward with his head tilted in curiosity.

His calmer approach helps temper the anxiety bouncing in my stomach, so I address him directly. "No, I'm not. I was kidnapped and locked in a room for no reason I can understand. I value my life—and my freedom—too much to voluntarily return to that situation." There. I sound rational. Composed, and logical. They can't argue with the facts.

Jack-Eye nods thoughtfully. Behind him, Caine continues making a low rumbling sound, like distant thunder.

"Fair enough," Jack-Eye says.

He's surprisingly reasonable, which puts me on guard.

The beta slings an arm around Caine's shoulders, the casual gesture at odds with the tension radiating from his king. "So what's your plan then, ladies? Heading somewhere specific?"

I hesitate, glancing at Lyre. Telling them where we're going seems like a terrible idea, but they don't seem like they're just going to let us go.

"We'll be staying here for a while," the rainbow-haired woman says with a nonchalant shrug. Her eyes flick meaningfully toward Caine and Jack-Eye as she continues, "Seems like we have some bugs who aren't quite ready to leave yet."

Caine's rumbling grows louder. "Grace can't—"

"Actually, she can," Lyre interrupts, sounding bored. "I've paid for this spot through the weekend, and I don't plan to waste my money."

Jack-Eye's lips twitch as he inspects her, but eventually he smacks Caine on the back with casual familiarity. "Come on, High Alpha. Let's give the ladies some space to think."

"I'm not leaving her here," Caine hisses, shaking off Jack-Eye's arm. While his words are softer than before, leading me to believe he's not trying to be heard, he isn't *that* quiet. Every syllable is clear.

Fenris lets out an elongated, up-and-down kind of whine, turning his head to look at Caine. The king glowers back.

"Fine," Caine finally snaps. "But we're staying too."

"No, you're not." Lyre's denial is swift and firm.

Fenris makes another huffing sound and nudges Caine with his massive shoulder, nearly knocking him off balance; Jack-Eye coughs behind his fist, but by the way his lips keep quirking, I'm pretty sure it's to hide laughter.

Must be nice to find this situation so amusing. I'm shaking with my own audacity and worried Caine's going to snap and go for Lyre's neck, but the beta's over here snickering.

"We'll be back in the morning," Jack-Eye says after a few seconds, and Caine's head snaps in his direction.

"Bring breakfast if you're going to intrude. Bacon, not sausage. I like my eggs over easy, but Grace likes them scrambled."

The beta looks right at Lyre and laughs, seemingly unbothered by her flat stare and monotone demand. "Bacon, not sausage. Got it."

"White toast only," she adds, not a hint of emotion crossing her face. "If you get me wheat toast, I'll put my fork right through your tenders. And coffee. Black for me, cream and sugar for Grace."

Her remembering my coffee preferences isn't even something I blink at anymore; Lyre seems to remember everything the first time it's mentioned. Sometimes even things I don't remember telling her. Of course, it's only been a few days; it doesn't take a lot of brain power to remember basic preferences.

But I don't recall us ever eating eggs together.

"Consider it done." Jack-Eye gives a mock salute, then jabs his elbow sharply into Caine's ribs, without any deference to their difference in status.

His alpha doesn't flinch at the impact, but his gray eyes narrow into dangerous slits. The two men lock gazes in some silent battle of wills—Caine's expression darkening with each passing second while Jack-Eye's remains irritatingly pleasant.

It's enough to make me wonder if I've been wrong about the Lycan King this entire time. If you'd asked me a few days ago, I would have said Caine would kill anyone for even daring the slightest inch of insolence in his presence. Yet he allows his beta to argue with him, smack his back, and even dig his elbow into his side?

I shift my weight from one foot to the other, and Fenris presses closer. Maybe he thinks I'm cold. The breeze has kicked up, blowing my hair into my face.

Finally, Caine exhales a loud, deliberate sigh, though it sounds more like another growl. "Fine."

He stalks toward me, stopping barely a foot away. The breeze carries his scent my way, and I wonder what his cologne scent would be called. Something like *Full Eclipse*, maybe. Or *Wildfire*.

My body betrays me with a small shiver as I breathe it in.

"I'll see you in the morning," he says stiffly, and his words sound like a command more than a promise.

Irritated with my body, and him, and his stupid cologne smell and why does he look so good when he's a freaking murderer, I mutter, "You really don't need to come back."

Oops.

His jaw tightens.

Oh, well. I've already said it, so I put every ounce of sincerity I possess into my voice as I add, "Really. Truly. You don't."

His scowl sends a chill down my back. "I'll be back."

Why does it sound like a freaking threat? It's just three words, but they land like stones, heavy with certainty.

"Eight o'clock," Lyre calls out from behind me. "Any earlier and we won't be decent."