

Grace of a Wolf –

Chapter 71: Caine: Banquet (I)

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CAINE

The van rumbles beneath us, carrying our mismatched party through Fiddleback territory. My fingers drum steadily against my knee.

"High Alpha, we're approaching the venue now," Elizabeth announces, cool and collected once again. "Alpha Halloway wanted to do justice to the Lycan King's presence. This is our community's premier venue. We host all major affairs there—celebrations, council meetings... mate ceremonies."

She turns her head slightly toward Jack-Eye at the last bit.

My beta shifts in the passenger seat. "It's a beautiful place," he says, perfectly noncommittal.

Fenris snorts from his position in the captain's chair beside me. He's perched on it like it's his throne, and even I have to admit the visual is mildly amusing. *He's about to collect another mating proposal. How many is that now?*

Twenty, maybe? I have no idea why his mere presence seems to addle their brains, but women are always desperate to attach themselves to the man.

And I know exactly what he'll say when teased about it. *"It's not my fault the local females have taste."* I've heard it more than once, when other Lycans have ribbed him over his casual conquests.

Behind me, Thom and Andrew sit silent—Thom fidgeting with his glasses, and the Blue Mountain pup staring stonily out the window. The extended van feels overcrowded despite the empty seats of even more rows.

My phone buzzes, and I check it briefly. Another photo. Grace is still asleep. Lyre's still reading, *not* responding to my text. Thankfully, once I bring my mate home, her contact with the rainbow-haired woman will be close to severed. She's a bad influence.

Are you trying to run her off again?

Fenris snaps at the air between us, his teeth gleaming in the dim light of twilight, and I frown at his absurd question.

She will return with us. It's no longer an option. A wolf doesn't leave his mate behind. She might fuss a little, but she'll understand in the end. She's a smart girl.

He heaves a sigh, his ears pressed tight against his head as he stares at me. *You're an idiot. Again. I take back everything I said about you becoming smarter after you accepted Grace. You're stupider than before.*

My teeth bare at his accusations. *Are you suggesting we leave her with someone who can't be trusted to keep us informed of her health?*

No, you imbecile. I'm saying don't force Grace to do something against her will.

Oh.

My shoulders relax.

If that's your worry, we have no problem. Grace will return with us.

I settle back into my seat, an edge of satisfaction spreading through me. The certainty of Grace's connection to me is undeniable. It seems a little silly to have been so resistant against this clear tether between us, this tug in my chest. Even now, I can feel her as a soft, warm presence anchored beneath my ribs.

She felt it, too. I saw it in her eyes. Felt it in her body's response.

A mate bond doesn't lie.

My gaze drifts to my hand, turning it palm up. Lyre had spouted off some strange explanation of energy transfer, saying I'd somehow siphoned Grace's power. Such a bond is unheard of; there is nothing like it in our history.

We can strengthen our mate. Protect them. But to accidentally harm them? To drain them of their strength? Impossible.

Either Lyre's wrong, or...

No matter. I'll figure it out. I always do.

Are you listening to yourself? Fenris growls, his tail smacking against the back of his chair. *Get your head out of your ass.*

I narrow my eyes at him. It's a good thing others can't hear how disrespectful the Lycan King's wolf can be. *Mind your tongue.*

If I could break our pact myself, I would. You're going to destroy her.

His suggestion is so outrageous I nearly laugh. *Calm down. Have a little more faith in our mate.*

In Grace? Fenris snaps his teeth again, and Elizabeth flinches in the driver's seat. *I have plenty of faith in Grace. It's you I don't trust.*

The clarity my mate has gifted me fades as rage simmers just under my skin. *Enough.*

The van slows, pulling into a massive parking structure, attached to another building. This must be the venue Elizabeth spoke of so charmingly.

Through tall windows, I glimpse chandeliers suspended from exposed beam ceilings.

Elizabeth shifts the vehicle into park. "We've arrived, High Alpha."

I nod curtly, but my focus remains on Fenris. The fury coiling in my body is enticing, beckoning me further, but I dig in my heels.

Grace likes Fenris.

Do you truly believe I would hurt her? I ask, quieter this time.

His ears flatten. *Not intentionally.* There's a weight to his words, and a reluctance in the part of our soul stitching us together. *But your intentions aren't the problem. It's your inability to see past your arrogance and see things as Grace does.*

My fingers tap against my knee again. The arrogance of a Lycan King has always been considered a strength. Not a weakness. Has Fenris gone soft?

Idiot.

Jack-Eye opens the passenger door, creating a welcome diversion. "Shall we, High Alpha?"

Behave yourself, I warn Fenris, deciding to shelve this conversation until later.

Fenris huffs, a deep rumble in his chest as he slinks out of the van behind me. His massive body brushes against my leg—not quite submission, but not outright defiance either. *I'll behave better than you deserve.*

The night air smells strange here, almost itchy to my nose, but I can't pinpoint anything to cause it.

Jack-Eye's somehow procured a charcoal suit, fitting him perfectly despite his broad shoulders and well above-average height. If I didn't know better, I would think he brought it with him. Even his shoes are polished.

"High Alpha," he says, looking me over, "are you sure you don't want a suit?"

"No."

The tactical gear I'm wearing feels right against my skin—dark pants with reinforced knees, a fitted shirt allowing full range of motion, and boots capable of handling a chase through rough terrain. It's part of the standard gear we keep stashed on long trips, and far more comfortable than a restrictive suit.

I have no need to impress a pack as small as Fiddleback. I don't need a suit to remind these wolves who I am.

Andrew and Thom come to stand behind me, both reeking of anxiety. Thom's has the bitter edge of fear, but Andrew's is a little sharper. My eyes narrow at the Blue Mountain pup.

He's obeying every command given, but the hint of defiance beneath it all has yet to disappear. I don't trust him.

Once inside the venue, it's all glass and timber beams, pretending to be rustic while overwhelmed by modern lines and bright white walls. Figures.

Alpha Ian Halloway struts toward us, arms spread wide in welcome. His smile stretches too far across his face.

"High Alpha!" His voice booms across the space between us. "What an honor to host you in our humble territory."

He extends a hand toward me, and I take it, feeling the pressure of his grip. I squeeze back just hard enough to make his eyes widen.

"Alpha Halloway," I acknowledge. "Your hospitality is... appreciated."

Fenris stands by my side, his massive head level with Halloway's chest. The ethereal blue glow he emits is stronger than usual, bathing us all in its light. The Fiddleback Alpha's eyes drift to him with poorly concealed fascination.

"And the legendary Fenrisúlfr himself," Halloway says, bowing his head slightly. "Tales of your exploits have reached even our remote corner."

Chapter 72: Caine: Banquet (II)

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CAINE

Fenris doesn't acknowledge the greeting, instead fixing his gaze on something beyond the Alpha's shoulder. I follow his line of sight to a display of ancient-looking weapons mounted on the wall inside—ceremonial, but deadly nonetheless.

There is blood. Fresh. Not even a day old.

My nostrils flare, but I can't pick up any scent.

Halloway's eyes drift over our party, dismissing Andrew and Thom almost immediately before pausing on Elizabeth with a distinct frown. Then he settles his attention on Jack-Eye, his lips thinning. Not quite hostile, but... something. "I see your beta has dressed for the occasion."

Jack-Eye inclines his head. "I believe in respecting local customs, Alpha Halloway."

"Indeed." The Fiddleback Alpha's smile doesn't reach his eyes. "And the others are...?"

"My warlock," I say, nodding toward Thom, who shrinks further into himself. "And a wolf from Blue Mountain."

"Ah." A flash of recognition crosses Halloway's face as he looks at Andrew. "From the rumors. You have our condolences."

Andrew says nothing, his posture rigid.

The alpha steps aside, allowing us entry into a vast open space with vaulted ceilings and tables draped in white linens. The room buzzes with at least fifty wolves, all in formal attire, watching us. A string quartet plays in the corner, though the music falters as the musicians notice our arrival. They're all human.

"I hope you don't mind," Halloway says, gesturing to the gathering, "but word of your visit spread quickly. Many were eager to pay their respects."

As if he didn't spread the word himself. My lips quirk. I'm sure he's assembled his entire inner circle, possibly his full pack hierarchy. It is interesting he could call in so many on such short notice.

They're either incredibly loyal... or deeply afraid of their alpha.

"My pack takes pride in our efficiency," he adds, as if reading my thoughts.

A server, also human, appears with champagne flutes on a silver tray. I wave them away with a sharp gesture. Halloway takes one, sipping delicately.

"I was hoping for a private discussion," I say.

"Of course, High Alpha. After dinner." His smile tightens. "But surely you understand—it would be an insult to deprive my pack of the chance to honor your presence."

Halloway raises his glass in a grand gesture, eyes searching the crowd in a manner I can only describe as practiced theater. "Tonight, we celebrate an unprecedented honor—the presence of the Lycan King himself."

A chorus of approval ripples through the attendees. I nod once, sharply, refusing to play this game of ceremonial adoration. The music swells slightly as conversation resumes, and Halloway guides us deeper into the gathering.

My jaw's already clenched with the anticipation of holding my temper at bay for an hour or more.

"Might I introduce some of our most esteemed members, High Alpha?"

I say nothing, which he takes as permission.

Within minutes, I'm surrounded by eager Fiddleback wolves, each desperate for a sliver of my attention. Some bow deeply, others attempt conversation with rehearsed questions about Lycan territory. I answer in clipped sentences when required, my attention split between the sycophants and Fenris's increasing agitation.

He's surrounded by his own adulating fans, and I can feel his temptation to disperse.

Something's wrong here, he says, sounding confused. Something smells strange.

A quick glance behind me shows Thom nervously hovering by Andrew's side. The latter looks bored, and his dark eyes meet mine with the faintest hint of defiance before he lowers his gaze in deference.

Bastard.

Maybe I should have just killed him after all.

Grace is comfortable with me now. Killing off a pesky brat like this one shouldn't scare her.

Don't even think about it.

Fighting the urge to bare my teeth at Fenris's snappy demand, I turn my attention to the next obsequious Fiddleback.

The gathering appears normal on the surface—formal attire, respectable conversation, an appropriate amount of deference. But Fenris is right. Something's... strange.

"Such an honor, High Alpha." A woman in her fifties squeezes between two men to reach me. "I'm Carla. I head the treasury."

I barely acknowledge her with a nod before another pushes forward.

"Michael, medical coordinator. We have excellent facilities. Should your companion require anything beyond what the human hospital can provide—"

My upper lip curls back. "My mate's care is not your concern."

His face pales. "Of course, High Alpha. I apologize."

Jack-Eye materializes at my side; he's been schmoozing in his own way. Now, his expression is neutral but his eyes are sharp. "High Alpha, perhaps you'd care to see the outdoor terrace? The view is rather impressive."

I follow his suggestion, grateful for the momentary reprieve. The terrace stretches along the back of the building, overlooking a manicured garden. Subtle ground lighting provides elegant ambience, completely wasted on two Lycans.

The night air is humid, but still easier to breathe in than the stifling formality of this banquet.

"Your patience is commendable," Jack-Eye murmurs, low enough that only I can hear. "Though I suspect it's running thin."

"This circus serves no purpose." My fingers drum against the stone balustrade. "I need to get back to Grace." But I can't. Not until I figure out what's going on beneath the surface of this pack.

"I understand." He nods toward the gardens below. "Note the security cameras. Four on this terrace alone, another six surrounding the perimeter."

My eyes narrow as I follow his gaze, spotting each one easily. "Excessive."

"Indeed. Especially for a pack that claims such harmony with its human neighbors."

The doors to the terrace swing open, and Halloway emerges. Fenris slinks in from behind. He's agitated, hackles up as he snaps at the air.

Thankfully, his ill temper is legendary among the packs. An agitated Fenris shouldn't put anyone on too high of an alert.

Still...

Behave, I warn him.

He sneezes.

"High Alpha, I hope the banquet meets your expectations." Halloway joins us at the railing, champagne still in hand. "We pride ourselves on balancing traditional pack values with modern amenities."

I incline my head. "Interesting priorities."

He chuckles as if I've made a joke. "Evolution is necessary for survival, wouldn't you agree? Even for wolves."

Something clicks into place as I consider his words, and I turn to survey the room through the giant glass doors.

Chapter 73: Caine: Banquet (III)

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CAINE

Elizabeth and Marsh stand out starkly among the crowd of Fiddleback wolves. Both appear to be in their mid-twenties at most, though I would bet every last penny of my pack's treasury Marsh is no older than twenty. The rest of the pack members present are significantly older, most well into middle age or beyond.

No young adults. No adolescents. And, I recall, no hint of children in the territory.

Even the most formal events typically include a range of ages—the entire pack hierarchy represented from pups to elders. Yet here, there's a clear generational gap.

"Your pack seems... mature," I comment, interrupting whatever Halloway was saying about their investment portfolio.

He pauses, the champagne halfway to his lips. "I beg your pardon?"

I gesture subtly toward the gathering. "No pups. Few young adults."

Something flickers across his face as he grows tense. "Ah." He sets down his glass with careful precision. "We're selective about our growth. Quality over quantity, as they say."

"An unusual approach for wolves. Especially for a pack so intent on survival, as you say."

"Times change, High Alpha. We've found that careful expansion allows us better integration with the human world." His smile returns to his face, but it's hollow. "Our younger members are quite valuable. Elizabeth and Marsh represent the future direction of our pack."

"Just them?"

"There are others, of course." His tone remains light, but his scent sharpens with something acidic. "Many are traveling or occupied with responsibilities elsewhere. We don't keep our members caged, after all."

Jack-Eye shifts beside me, his attention fixed on Holloway with calculated intensity.

"And your mating ceremonies?" I press. "Elizabeth mentioned hosting them here, but there seems to be a lack of candidates."

His eyes flicker to the gardens. "Yes, well, not all mate young. Much like you, High Alpha."

"When was your last mated pair?"

His smile tightens. "As I've explained, we focus on compatibility rather than quantity."

Elizabeth appears, her heels clicking as she whispers something in Holloway's ear. Even with my enhanced hearing, I can't make out the words.

Fenris's ears flick. *Me neither.*

The Fiddlepack Alpha's expression darkens before smoothing into neutrality once again. "If you'll excuse me, High Alpha. A small administrative matter requires my attention. Please, enjoy the banquet. I believe it's about time to be seated for our meal. We'll speak privately afterward as promised."

My phone buzzes, and I glance at the image sent. Yet another angle of a sleeping Grace.

Jack-Eye peers over my shoulder, and I elbow him back.

"Wait—is that what they just sent you?"

My jaw tightens as Jack-Eye's fingers close around my phone, yanking it from my grasp before I can react. The audacity burns through me like molten silver. No one touches what's mine.

"Give that back." I haven't had a chance to zoom into Grace's face yet.

Jack-Eye ignores my command, scrolling through the photos with narrowed eyes. "The sun went down ages ago."

I blink, momentarily derailed from my anger. "Say something less obvious."

"Look." He tilts the screen toward me, finger tapping at the background. "The light is all wrong. This was taken earlier today—see how the sunlight is hitting her bedside table?"

My blood freezes. The slant of light through the hospital window casts long shadows across Grace's sleeping form—shadows which can't exist after sunset.

These aren't explained by overhead lights.

I snatch the phone back, examining each photo sent over the last hour.

All identical. Same position, same light, same everything.

"They've been sending the same picture repeatedly," I murmur, barely containing the growl building behind my words. "Possibly for hours."

"It might not even be the same photo." Jack-Eye bends over my phone again, blocking my view. "See the text on Lyre's book? It's different every time. A little strange, too."

Fenris growls. *Grace.*

"It might be AI. You'd be surprised at how good it's become—"

"Jack-Eye."

"Yeah?"

"Shut up."

I tap open my contacts, selecting Lyre's number. It goes straight to voicemail.

My pulse drums against my temples as I try again. Nothing.

Her phone's off. Explains why all my messages have been sitting there, unread and unanswered.

Damn it. I should have known better than to trust someone the Fiddlebacks sent to the hospital, but I hadn't expected them to be this rotten.

Whatever their secret is, I'd expected it to have more political impact than anything. The pack is too small to pose a threat, even with only two Lycans in the area. Their strength is underwhelming, and I'd been arrogant.

Of course they'd go for Grace. It's the only way to cut our power off at the knees.

Having a weakness is new to me. It's a lesson I won't soon forget.

"Call the hospital," I order Jack-Eye, already striding toward the terrace doors, ready to start violence. "Find out if Grace is still there."

Kill them, Fenris snarls, padding behind me. His glow is brighter now, enough to hurt your eyes if you look directly at him. *All of them*.

Jack-Eye's phone is already pressed to his ear, but I don't wait for the answer. I know what it will be.

Fenris stalks alongside me, his ethereal blue glow intensifying with each step. *She's gone. They've taken her. Kill them all.*

Andrew and Thom jump forward from where they stood near the terrace doors. The Blue Mountain pup must have some insight, because he frowns when he sees me. The wizard, meanwhile, hangs his head with his signature tremble.

"Stay back," I warn them both. They don't have the protection of my pack link.

The Blue Mountain pup grabs the shaking wizard and yanks him behind me. If he wasn't a sniveling little shit, I'd be proud of his ability to assess a situation.

Dominance rolls off me like a rogue wave, flattening the crowd to the ground and cutting off the music and soft background chatter in an instant.

"Halloway." My eyes roam the room, but there's no hint of their alpha anywhere. My voice booms through the crowd. "Where the fuck is Halloway?"

Chapter 74: Lyre: Something Wicked This Way Comes (I)

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LYRE

Life was a lot easier when I roamed free.

This strange urge I have to help Grace has pushed me to do things I haven't done in centuries. Things I've almost forgotten about.

But some habits die hard—like my talent for making dramatic entrances.

The reinforced steel door crumples under my foot like it's made of aluminum foil. Pathetic. Not even warded properly. The crash echoes through the underground chamber it guarded, and I step through the wreckage with practiced nonchalance.

"What the fuck—"

"Intruder!"

"Kill her!"

Same predictable script, different basement. I don't bother wiping the boredom from my face as three young wolves lunge at me, all snarls and extended claws.

Amateurs.

I've been dealing with their kind when their great-great-grandfathers were still pissing on trees.

A flick of my wrist sends arcana pulsing through the concrete floor. The energy responds to my command instantly, gravity suddenly quintupling beneath their feet. All three slam face-first into the ground with satisfying thuds.

"Stay." I twist my fingers, condensing the air around their mouths. "And shut up."

Their muffled protests turn to wide-eyed panic. Shifters always forget some of us breathe magic rather than simply use it.

The corridor ahead stretches into darkness, lit only by intermittent bulbs, flickering like dying fireflies. The stench here is about what I expected—a nauseating cocktail of rotting meat, puddles of blood congealing along the packed dirt floor, unwashed bodies, and the product of their existence in this place. I grimace, wishing I'd thought to bring a mask. Seven centuries, and I still haven't mastered the art of proper preparation.

"Humans have invented air fresheners, you know," I mutter to no one in particular as I stride forward. "Decent plumbing, too. Revolutionary concepts. More dungeons should have them."

The corridor opens into a wider chamber, and my stomach tightens. Cages. Rows of them, stacked two high along both walls. Inside each, ten to fifteen bodies crammed together—shifters ranging from infants to teenagers. Some whimper as I pass. Others stare with hollow eyes. There's no hope when they see me pass. They've long since stopped hoping for rescue.

Perhaps they never learned how.

I've seen atrocities to curdle the blood of gods, but this particular brand of cruelty never fails to ignite that dangerous pocket of rage I keep carefully contained. Humans call it trafficking. Supernaturals call it breeding programs. I call it the same bullshit with different packaging, century after century.

The strong will always come out to oppress the weak.

A toddler reaches through the bars as I pass, tiny fingers grasping at my sleeve. His eyes flash amber in the dim light. The sight twists something ancient and painful inside me.

"Not today, little one," I whisper, gently untangling his fingers. "But soon."

I continue deeper into the labyrinth, following the pulse of familiar magic tingling against my skin. Distinct, unmistakable—like recognizing someone's voice in a crowded room. It leads me to a heavy metal door at the corridor's end, marked with symbols I haven't seen used in proper fashion since the Inquisition.

Amateur hour continues. Then again, she was never great at learning her lessons.

I don't bother with subtlety. Another kick, another crash, another doorway reduced to scrap. The room beyond is larger, circular, with sigils etched into the floor and blood pooling in the carved channels between them.

And there she stands—small as a child, with wide eyes and porcelain skin. Dressed in a pristine white dress, as if she's headed to Sunday school instead of conducting blood rituals in a gross, damp basement.

"Isabeau," I sigh. "Still going for the creepy Victorian doll aesthetic, I see."

Her face contorts with rage, her eyes crimson with madness.

Again; she's bad at learning her lessons.

"Echo Witch," she snarls, and I bow.

"In the flesh."

With a shriek, she lifts her hands, and the blood pooling around her feet rises in dozens of crimson missiles, hurtling toward me at killing velocity.

I stop them mid-air with a lazy wave and slight fluctuation of arcana, transforming the attack into a suspended crimson constellation. Pretty, in a macabre sort of way.

"Missed me, Belle?" I grin, using the nickname she's always hated. "It's been what—Leipzig, 1843? You were selling werewolf children to aristocrats as exotic pets back then, too. At least be original."

"You interfering bitch." Her voice doesn't match her childlike appearance—deep, rasping, ancient. Creepy, but my spine refuses to tingle. "This territory is protected. You have no right—"

"Protected by whom?" I interrupt, walking casually around the suspended blood droplets. "Your new wolf friends? The ones currently eating dirt in your hallway?"

She snarls, fingers twitching as she attempts another spell. I shut it down before she can finish the first weave of magic, compressing the air around us until the pressure makes her gasp.

"Two hundred years, Belle. Two hundred years since I last caught you doing this exact same shit, and you haven't learned a thing." I click my tongue in disappointment. "Still the same parlor tricks. Still the same business model. Still the same terrible security."

"What I do is necessary," she hisses through clenched teeth. "The balance—"

"Save the lecture. I've heard it from better witches than you." I release the pressure just enough to let her breathe. "What you're doing isn't balance. It's exploitation wrapped in mystical bullshit to make yourself feel better about being a glorified supernatural trafficker."

I move toward her, closing the distance until we're inches apart. Up close, the illusion of youth slips—ancient malice gleams in her eyes. Those who wax poetic liken them to rubies, but they've always been the color of blood.

"Here's what you never understood about the 'natural order,' Belle." I lean in, my voice dropping to a whisper. "Nothing about it says I can't rip your still-beating heart from your chest and feed it to you."

She flinches, and I smile.

"Now, let's discuss why your disgusting scent is all over this city. It took me a little time to find you, I'll grant you that. The only thing you've learned in two hundred years is how to hide."

Chapter 75: Lyre: Something Wicked This Way Comes (II)

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LYRE

"You have no authority here, Echo Witch." Her eyes narrow, as she steps back. Her feet are bare, and blood squishes between her toes as she steps in a small puddle of it. "This territory is claimed, these creatures are bound, and you have no standing to interfere."

I release the suspended blood with a flick of my wrist, letting it splash to the ground in a wet slap. "Claimed? By whom, exactly? Last time I checked, America wasn't your playground."

"America." She snorts, circling me with wary steps. "You speak as if you have some claim to it. Where have you been, Lyrielle? Over a century of silence, and now you appear with demands?"

"You don't get answers, Isabeau." I scuff one of her blood sigils with the toe of my boot. The symbol sputters and shudders as its magic fractures. "Why here? Europe's full of dark little corners better suited for your brand of rot."

Her laugh is like gravel dragged across concrete. It's always been unpleasant—an ugly sound to match her uglier soul.

"Perhaps I wanted a taste of American hospitality. The wolves here are so... accommodating."

I grimace. I'm sure she ran here with her tail between her legs, looking for fresh meat. Fed until she could walk upright again.

Rebuilding her strength must've taken effort. Not that it'll help her now.

"Mmm." Her tongue drags over too-sharp teeth. "Such enterprising creatures. Always chasing more—time, power, life. Is it really so monstrous to give them what they want?"

I suspected as much the moment I scented her stench on the wind outside town. Still, the confirmation annoys me.

If she's been feeding off the local wolves for long, the stink's probably sunk into the dirt by now. This is the problem with her kind. They don't just corrupt people. They rot places.

Grace's frustratingly obtuse boyfriend is in her territory, too. Damn. And her nasty little claws have dug deep into this pack. Am I going to have to save him?

No; he's this generation's Lycan King. There should be enough strength left in the old magic to help him survive whatever wretched curse Isabeau's infected the local pack with.

The real problem stands in front of me now. She's both their captor and their source of strength.

And when the source of that arcana dries up...

Well.

You can't pay with magic you don't have.

I step over the smeared blood sigil, each footfall deliberately placed to avoid the worst of the viscous ooze.

"So your business model *has* evolved. Congratulations. You've gone from merchant to farmer. But even a glutton can't eat the same thing every day. You need variety."

Isabeau keeps at least five paces between us, taking a step for every one of mine. "Your jokes weren't funny then, and are even worse now."

"Tsk." I click my tongue. "You always did have a warped sense of humor."

"Why are you here, Lyrielle? Who are you working for this time? Fate? War? Pestilence? I haven't caused any issue, have I? Why hunt me down?"

As if I need orders to get rid of her unsightly face.

"Pack your things and crawl back to Europe, Isabeau." I keep my voice flat, bored even. "Do that, and I'll let you continue your miserable existence. Leave no trace you were ever here. It's simple terms. Even you should understand them."

A familiar insufferable smirk tilts her lips. I've seen it on a dozen faces she's worn throughout the centuries. Different bodies, same rotten core.

"What exactly do you think a depleted Echo Witch is going to do about it?" Her French accent thickens, mockery curling at the edge of her vowels. "I've been here a long time, Lyrielle. No prophecies. No fate-weaving. No trace of your old rituals. Has the Old Magic forsaken you?"

She increases the distance—ten paces now. Her bloody footprints trail behind her like a signature.

"You've lost your touch," she goads. "And your power." I blink, staring at her for a moment.

"Does this new body come with brain damage, or have you always been this stupid and I just forgot?"

Her smirk falters.

I gesture to the crumpled steel door I kicked in. To the puddles of blood she tried to weaponize. To her sputtering sigils. Anyone with eyes can see her spellwork's unraveling.

"Which part of my entrance screamed 'depleted' to you?" I ask. "The part where I tore through your defenses like wet paper, or the part where I disarmed your attack with one hand? Is it my face? I do look younger than ever, but I'm not sharing my skincare routine with you."

Isabeau's lip curls back from her teeth. "The old Lyrielle would never have offered negotiation. She would've struck the moment she walked in." She paces now, less cautious. She thinks she has the upper hand. Pity. "You've gone soft. Offering mercy to hide the fact your power has waned."

I snicker. "Is that what you think this is? Mercy?"

"I hold the power now." Her voice drops to a silken purr. "Times have changed. The balance has shifted."

Genuinely baffled, I stop moving, folding my arms. She's serious. She believes this nonsense.

She's barely clinging to a third of her strength. No matter how many wolves she consumes, the magic inside modern werewolves is diluted—faint echoes of what once was.

Has she forgotten what real power feels like?

It's been two hundred years, after all. And she was never the brightest crayon in the sanguimancer box.

"Have you been sampling the modern drug scene?" I ask sweetly. "I hear it's quite the experience. Psychedelics, edibles, alchemy. Not really my thing, but I could *definitely* see you vibing."

Her expression curdles with rage.

She flings her arm forward. Blood leaps from the floor, needle-sharp and shrieking toward my chest. At least two dozen projectiles—center mass, vital zones. Predictable.

Again.

A second wave crackles across the concrete, corrosive magic streaking toward my feet in a hiss of vapor and heat.

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LYRE

Her attempt at offensive magic is... cute, I guess.

I flick my fingers in her direction with a sigh. The blood missiles dissolve midair, raining harmless droplets across the floor, splattering across my boots. The corrosive spell makes it a few more inches before dissolving with a faint hiss, leaving only the faintest etching on the floor.

Isabeau stumbles back, throwing a few more spells my way.

They all fail. Spectacularly.

It isn't hard; disrupting arcana isn't something anyone can do, but it's been a special talent of mine since childhood. Chaos, after all, is my purview.

Seriously, does this girl remember nothing? Perhaps all her deaths have addled what little capacity she had for thought.

"You should be weak," she hisses, unable to fathom her terrible reasoning being... well, wrong.

I uncross my arms, genuinely perplexed at this point. Her stupidity is almost endearing in its persistence. Almost.

"Why would you think that? For even two seconds?" I gesture around at the carnage of her failed defenses. "After I waltzed in here like I was taking a stroll through a public park? I put my strength on display, and you decided it never even happened."

Isabeau shakes her head, her hair flying almost violently around her face with the movement. "The amount of mana required to break through those wards should be exponential. Even for you. Especially when you're no longer under divine grace." She points at the scuffed sigil. "That was calibrated to require the energy of three full covens to breach. Three."

I don't bother explaining. It costs me almost nothing to disrupt arcana, but she would never understand. For creatures like her, magic is always transactional—power for power, energy for energy. Always with a cost, always with limits. Must be exhausting, living like that.

"Your pathetic concept of limitations doesn't apply to me." I inspect my fingernails, deliberately casual. The blood spatter is going to be a nightmare to clean later. I'll have to shower before I see Grace. She's an anxious little thing. "Maybe it's time to accept that your little calculations aren't universal laws."

The look of outrage on her face is almost worth the effort of this conversation. Almost.

But I've dallied too long. If I add the time it takes to shower... Ugh. Grace will definitely be awake by the time I get back. Worse, Caine might even be there. I want to help Grace, but I don't want to see them making googly eyes at each other.

"All of us have limitations," she snarls. "Even the highest denizens of Order and Chaos are bound by rules."

I bite back a laugh. Her certainty is charming in a pitiful way, like watching a toddler confidently explain how the world works. She knows what I am, and yet she still doesn't understand.

"I see motherhood hasn't improved your intellect. Still living in the shadow realm of your own ignorance."

Her eyes widen. "You know about—"

"Of course I know. I know everything about you, Isabeau. I'm just not particularly interested." I take another step forward, deliberate and unhurried. "Now, what to do with you..."

She retreats, backing toward the far wall. "You're violating territory rights. The ancient accords—"

"Ancient accords?" I laugh then, unable to contain it. "Those were written by the same creatures who believed the earth was flat and bleeding people cured disease. Perhaps you'd like to cite some medieval property laws next?"

The room trembles slightly—not from her power, but from mine seeping into the foundations of this pitiful place. I'm not even trying. It just happens when I stop caring enough to contain it.

"You're a relic," I continue, watching her eyes dart around for escape routes that don't exist. "Clinging to outdated paradigms, feeding on creatures half their former strength, and thinking you're building something that will last."

Her chin lifts in defiance. "The wolves here are more than pleased with our arrangement. They get power, strength beyond their natural limitations. Youth. Vitality. I'm doing nothing wrong here."

I gesture to the cages beyond the room. "Those poor creatures. Did you tell them the fine print? That after you're done with them, they'll be hollow shells? That each time you feed, you take a little more than you give back?"

"They know the cost."

"Do they?" I tilt my head. "Do they know you're the reason shifter magic has grown thinner over the centuries? That your kind drained the power of their bloodlines for generations?"

Her expression falters for just a moment, and I see the truth. Of course she hasn't told them. She's selling them a fantasy of power while delivering a slow death.

"The Lycan King knows," she whispers, a sly smile creeping across her face. "He was more than happy to accept my gifts."

That gives me pause. If Caine has made deals with this parasite...

No. He might be an idiot, but his arrogance would never allow him to deal with a sanguimancer.

Ah, Grace. I want to get back to her. She likes to pretend she's okay, but she hates being alone.

I need to finish this.

"Even if that were true, it changes nothing about our current situation. You have exactly two choices: leave peacefully, or leave in pieces."

"You would destroy a mother?" She places a hand protectively over her abdomen, her eyes wide with feigned innocence. In her ten-year-old body, it's... disgusting. Even for me.

"That doesn't make you a mother." My voice drops, all pretense of amusement vanishing. I can sense what she's incubating, but it's not a child. Not in the sense humans would think of.

It's more like a parasite. A servant created of her own flesh, blood, and magic, with no soul to speak of.

It takes more time to blink than it does to gather the ravaged threads of chaos in this place. The residual discord becomes orderly, focused, and arcana thrums in the air.

Her face contorts. "You'll regret challenging me, Lyrielle. I am not the only one here. There are others, more power—"

I don't let her finish.

The blast isn't dramatic. No blinding light, no thunderous boom. Just a sudden rush of energy tearing through her defenses, ripping through the resistance of her physical body as if it were air.

Her body—that stolen child's body—convulses once, then falls apart like wet tissue. Blood droplets hang suspended for a moment before gravity reclaims them, spattering across the concrete floor.

Those crimson eyes fade slowly to a mundane brown. They stare upward, unblinking.

I grimace, looking at the small crumpled form. No matter how many centuries I've lived, no matter how many monsters I've dispatched, deaths involving children's bodies never sit right with me. Even though Isabeau wasn't a child and just a body-hopping parasite wearing a child's form, my discomfort doesn't ease in the aftermath.

Isabeau isn't dead. She'll be back in another ten years. Twenty at most. Sanguimancers are notoriously hard to kill, and Isabeau always has an escape plan. She might be an idiot, but her ability to escape death is unparalleled.

My boots leave bloody footprints as I walk through the corridor of cages, ignoring the bodies within.

The toddler from earlier stands by the bars, her hands reaching toward me. I pause, guilt tugging at me. But then I glance away.

I'm not the hero of their story. It's never been my role.

Besides, there's someone whose actual job description includes this sort of thing. Someone with resources, authority, and a tedious sense of honor compelling him to protect his people—even if he's a little bloodthirsty. Someone who's probably wondering why I haven't texted him any updates in a while.

The Lycan King can clean this up. They just have to wait a little longer. An hour. Maybe two.

As I climb the stairs out of that blood-soaked basement, I hum an old tune. Something from the 1940s, I think, but I can't quite recall. By the time I reach the exit, I'm almost chipper.

Fresh air hits my face as I step outside, and I breathe deeply, letting it cleanse the stench from my nostrils. It's dark. Grace will be awake soon. Maybe she already is.

I pull my phone from my pocket to check the time, but the screen remains stubbornly black.

I press the power button. Nothing.

Damn. Did I forget to charge it?

Now I'll need to shower *and* charge my phone before heading back to Grace.

I hope she hasn't tried to call me. The girl puts on a brave face, but she's deeply anxious underneath all her forced composure. She hates being alone.

Well, nothing to do but get moving. I'll be back to her soon enough.

More important is what I'm going to tell her little guard dog boyfriend. How do I explain a basement full of caged wolves? And a dead sanguimancer. From what I've gleaned over my years of travel, people here have never even *heard* of sanguimancers.

Maybe I'll just leave an anonymous tip. The less I have to explain myself, the better.

Chapter 77: Caine: Unnatural Silence (I)

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CAINE

I stalk through the banquet hall, my vision tinged with crimson rage. The Fiddleback wolves cower against the floor tiles, submission rippling through their bodies as my dominance rolls over them. But I don't care about their fear.

I need answers.

"Halloway!" My roar shakes the crystal chandeliers. "Face me, you coward!"

Jack-Eye's voice cuts through the mess in my head. *Hospital says there's no patient registered under Grace's name. No blonde human female admitted in the last 48 hours. She's gone.*

The world stops.

Everything narrows to a pinpoint of blinding rage. My chest constricts. My skin burns.

Grace. My Grace. Gone.

Where is she?

"Halloway!"

Movement flickers at the edge of my vision. The wolves on the floor—supposedly flattened by my dominance—spring to their feet with impossible speed. Eyes gleam with malice, not fear.

Chaos erupts.

Bodies twist and contort. Bones snap and reform at unnatural speed—alpha speed, and yet too many. Their shifts should take longer. They don't.

I barely dodge the first attack, and claws graze my shoulder. The wound burns like silver, hindering my natural healing.

As expected, something's deeply wrong with this pack.

Fenris appears beside me, a colossus of midnight fur and crackling blue energy. *This was a trap.*

The blessings of the Lycan Throne are manifold; my tattoos allow Fenris a body of his own, but they also give me control of mine.

Lycan. Wolf and human. I can use either form at will.

Together, we are a force few can survive. Where Fenris is black, I am white. Where he glows blue, I glow red.

Favored by the gods. Marked to rule.

"I don't care what it was." I let the shift take me, welcome the split of bone, the stretch of sinew. "I'll kill them all."

A dishwater-blond wolf lunges for my throat. I catch him midair, claws ripping through his ribs. Blood sprays across my muzzle as he drops, lifeless.

Three more charge and I dive low.

My claws tear through soft underbelly, disemboweling one. The others hit Fenris; he snaps a spine in his jaws and crushes another underfoot as he grows another foot in size.

If he keeps this up, he'll burn out before we get through them all.

I have enough power to get through this, he growls. Now focus!

They keep coming. Ten. Twenty. Too many.

My dominance lashes out, a tidal wave of power capable of stopping a heart. It slides off them like mist.

Then they are not wolves, Fenris says, his voice eerily calm in the havoc. *Only graves await those who oppose our throne.*

A russet wolf sinks her teeth into my thigh. Pain lances up my leg. I grab her by the scruff and slam her into the marble floor. Her skull cracks, broken as easily as splintered wood. But there's no time to finish her—two more have already taken her place.

I feel Jack-Eye's arrival as he tears through the back ranks, but there's something more important for him to do.

Get to the hospital, I snap. *Find Grace.*

I can't leave you—

FIND HER! I rarely touch him with dominance, but there's no time for hesitation. Grace is in danger.

He hesitates, then vanishes in the chaos.

I'll clear his path, Fenris snarls, leaping over the pack. He crushes wolves like ants under his paws, drawing attention as Jack-Eye slips through the breach.

One wolf with strange markings circles me, too calm. I feint right, then drive forward. He pivots fast—but not fast enough. My jaws close around his throat. He drops.

More come.

I twist and crush the leg of one attacker in my jaws—bone splinters. But the wolf doesn't scream. Doesn't flinch. His teeth stay buried in my hindquarters.

Do you feel it? I ask Fenris.

Indeed.

There are no yelps. No howls of pain. Only the mechanical rhythm of violence: bone cracking, flesh tearing, silence.

They don't fight like wolves. They fight like machines. Like puppets with no souls.

I tear into another throat. Blood mats my white fur crimson. My wounds throb, but adrenaline overrides pain. *How many left?* I demand; he has a better view of the battlefield.

Less than half.

The weight of four wolves drags me down, their jaws locked deep. Blood slicks the floor.

I thrash. A russet she-wolf gnaws into my shoulder. Her teeth grind into my bones, and she refuses to let go.

A flash of blue light and Fenris towers above, a mountain of snarling fur with wolves clinging like ticks. He shakes. Bodies fly.

He barrels toward me.

With one sweep of his paw, he flings the wolves off me. One slams into a pillar. It cracks.

This is taking too long. My breath is ragged, coming in short, sharp pants.

It won't be much longer, Fenris assures me.

Power shimmers around him. He grows, stretching until his back brushes the chandelier above. Another waste of his energy, but I can already feel him ignoring my opinion.

Stand clear.

I leap aside. No time to argue over his choices in battle.

His skull hits the chandelier and it crashes to the floor, crushing a wolf beneath it. Darkness swallows a quarter of the room.

The wolves hesitate, and that opening is all we need.

Fenris sweeps a massive paw, catching at least eight wolves. They crash into pillars, tables, walls—clearing a path.

I lunge through the opening. Two wolves react fast—one gets a claw across my flank. The other I tear apart mid-leap.

I scan the room. Bodies litter the floor, but too many still stand. Still fight. Still block my path to Grace.

A gray wolf lunges from behind a broken table. I sidestep. My teeth tear through his flank—no scream, no cry—just silence.

Even dying, they make no sound.

Blood drips from my muzzle. My legs ache. My side burns. But I feel nothing.

Only purpose.

A wolf leaps from behind—raking claws down my back. I whirl, bite down on its spine. One sharp twist—it drops.

Another charges.

I spear through it like a blade, jaw clamping around its head. Bone crunches. Still, no scream.

A flicker of movement to my left. I twist—too late. A wolf slams into me, teeth locking on my ribs. I feel them crack.

Fenris is already there.

He crushes the wolf beneath a single forepaw.

And then, as if every one of them were little more than a marionette, they crumple to the floor. All at once, twitching and groaning, as if they've returned to their senses.

Chapter 78: Caine: Unnatural Silence (II)

Chapter 78: Caine: Unnatural Silence (II)

CAINE

Bodies lie scattered around us, some moving, most still.

Fenris, sensing my intention, shrinks himself down to a less imposing size—though still massive by any normal wolf standard. The blue glow around him dims to a gentle aura as he pants, surveying our carnage with grim satisfaction.

I let my shift reverse, bones cracking back into human form. Changing when wounded is never recommended, as it can make everything worse. Pain radiates through my body as wounds reshape themselves. My vision clears from wolf to human.

A Fiddleback nearby twitches, trying to crawl away. I stride toward it, naked and bloodied but unconcerned with such trivial matters. My foot connects with its ribs—not hard enough to break, just enough to turn it over.

"Shift." The word carries only a whisper of my dominance, but it's enough.

The wolf's body contorts, bones reshaping at an agonizingly slow pace. This time, the transformation happens as it should—not the unnatural speed from before. Paws elongate into fingers. Fur recedes into skin. Muzzle shortens to a human face.

A woman. Mid-fifties perhaps. Thin face, sharp features. Recognition flickers—Halloway introduced her earlier. Something about treasury management. I didn't bother committing her name to memory. It was unimportant then, and only mildly useful now.

I place my bare foot against her throat, not pressing down—yet. "Where's Halloway?"

Her eyes dart wildly around the room. Blood trickles from a cut above her brow. Her arm's flopped at an unnatural angle and her breath comes in short, desperate gasps.

"I—I don't know—"

My foot presses down slightly, cutting off her words. "Try again."

Fear sharpens in her eyes. "I don't—"

My voice remains level, but the pressure on her throat increases. "I don't have time for your lies."

She swallows hard against my foot. "He's... he's looking for your Luna."

My spine turns to ice. "What do you mean?"

The woman coughs, her windpipe constricting beneath my foot. I ease the pressure—just enough to let her speak. Death would be too merciful for what I need now.

"The h-hospital..." she wheezes. Blood flecks her lips as she draws a ragged breath. Internal injuries, probably from the shift I forced on her. "Halloway got a call. The girl escaped. He went to retrieve her."

My eyes narrow. "Escaped? Or was she taken?"

Her eyes dart sideways, avoiding mine.

I press my foot down again, just enough to make her gasp. "Answer."

"I don't know," she chokes out. "Just that she's loose."

Relief and terror war within me. If Grace escaped, she's smart. Resourceful. But also vulnerable.

Jack-Eye will be there soon. We will know more then.

Fenris's words do little to soothe the worry and anger blending together in my chest.

I kneel beside the woman, blood from my wounds dripping onto her face. "Why were you stupid enough to think you could go against the Lycan King? What did Halloway promise you?"

Her face changes. A beatific smile crosses her face, her eyes glazing as she croons, "None can escape the Great One." Her voice strengthens despite her broken body. "Her powers eclipse that of even the Lycan Throne. She has lived for hundreds of years. You'll never win."

A chill trickles over my back. Not fear—I don't fear gods, or monsters. But it's never good to hear of something unfamiliar.

"Her?" I narrow my eyes. "Who is your Great One?"

Her teeth stained red as she laughs, though the sound immediately turns into a sputtering, wet cough. "You'll know soon enough," she wheezes.

I glance around the decimated hall. Bodies lie scattered across marble floors. Blood paints abstract patterns across white tablecloths. This is the Fiddleback Pack—or what remains of it.

"Where is your Great One now?" I grab her chin, forcing her to look at the carnage. "Fiddleback's abandoned. I've won. You've lost."

Her lips pull back in a bloody grin. "She is everywhere. She can never die."

A gasp builds into a groan. Not just from the woman beneath me, but from every living body scattered across the floor. The fallen wolves arch their backs, spines cracking as they bow upward at impossible angles.

The screaming howl they emit defies description, a chorus of agony and the wails of hellbound souls.

My hands instinctively cover my ears, but it does nothing to block the sound; it exists both inside and outside my head.

The woman beneath me convulses, her back arching like the others. Her scream joins the unholy chorus.

Look! Fenris's voice provides a buffer against the painful sound.

The Fiddleback wolves are changing.

I stumble back, watching as decades melt away her flesh in seconds. Skin pulls tight across her cheekbones, then desiccates, cracking like ancient parchment. Her eyes sink deep into their sockets, darkening, shriveling.

In mere seconds, what was once a middle-aged woman becomes a mummified husk.

All the wolves shrivel beneath their fur.

The screaming stops.

The sudden silence is somehow louder than the chaos.

Fenris approaches cautiously, sniffing one of the corpses.

"Don't touch them." I've never seen magic like this. Never felt it. Where's Thom? I scan the room, but he's nowhere to be found. Neither is Andrew.

How unnatural, Fenris observes.

No shit.

But we don't have time to investigate. We have to find Grace.

Let me see if I can find Elizabeth's things. She has the keys.

"It doesn't matter whose car we take. Just find any of them. We can figure out what car it belongs to on the way."

Good point.

A familiar ringtone pierces the quiet, and I look around until I find the shredded fabric which had once been my tactical gear.

We're going to have to find clothes. Humans don't like naked people roaming their cities.

The ringing stops, then starts again. I fish my phone out of the pile before it stops a second time, seeing Lyre's name on the screen.

I've never answered a phone so fast. "Where's Grace?" I demand, ditching all formalities to get straight to the point.

"Hello to you too, Your Majesticness." Lyre's voice crackles with its usual sarcasm. "I got your text messages. I was out running an important errands. I'm on my way to the hospital now."

My breath catches. She doesn't know.

"Grace is missing," I snap. "Jack-Eye is on his way to the hospital, but they're saying they have no patient by her name, and even claim no blonde women have been admitted in forty-eight hours."

"What the fuck do you mean she's missing?" The lazy drawl vanishes from Lyre's voice.

"When did you last see her?"

"Before I left to... do something. She was tired and wanted to take a nap. The nurses were monitoring her. How long has she been missing?"

"We don't know. The Fiddleback Pack had sent someone to keep an eye on her, but they were sending me doctored images—"

"Fuck," she hisses. "You *trusted*... Never mind. You wouldn't have known. Damn it. This is what I get for... Son of a fucking bitch. Isabeau, you fucking cunt, I should have made it hurt."

Chapter 79: Lyre: Hunting for Grace

Chapter 79: Lyre: Hunting for Grace

Chapter 21: Lyre: Hunting for Grace

LYRE

There's no point in being angry with the brainless boyfriend; trusting in his authority as the Lycan King is to be expected. All wolves fall under his purview, and even rogues would think thrice before double-crossing the throne.

But I still want to kick his stupid face to the curb.

I slam through the hospital doors with enough force to make the two security guards behind the reception desk jump to their feet.

My wards should have screamed the moment anyone approached Grace's room with harmful intent. They were simple but effective—the magical equivalent of trip wires rigged to flash bombs. Not exactly subtle, but subtlety wasn't the point.

"Miss, you can't—" a woman in scrubs starts.

I cut her off with a look. "Grace Harper. Where is she? Don't give me any bullshit about her being discharged, either."

The security officers are already acting like I'm another problem in their minimum-wage day. Hands shift toward batons, shoulders square, and there's the whole *I'm-not-looking-at-you* side-eye where they're completely tuned in to every breath I breathe.

Well; there's no point in arguing with someone manning the information desk. A quick glance at her lanyard says she's not even a nurse. Why the hell is she even wearing scrubs? She's a receptionist.

Spinning on my heel, I head toward the elevators. Of course, Burly and Muscles immediately step out from their little desk cocoon with a whole lot of ego and cheap cologne wafting my way. One's hand hovers near his taser, the other plants himself directly in my path.

"Ma'am, I need you to return to the desk," says the broader one, Burly.

I don't slow my stride, and Muscles gets ahead of me, holding out an arm to block my path. "Ma'am, you'll need to come with us—"

With a flick of my finger, all three of them—the receptionist and both security guards—go flying backward, pinned to the nearest wall like butterflies to a corkboard. The receptionist's mouth opens for a shrill scream—so I gag them all with air.

No one wants to listen to high-pitched shrieking. It's murder, but for ears.

Their bodies struggle uselessly against my binding, arms splayed wide, feet dangling inches above the floor.

In about ten minutes, they'll be free again. Maybe mildly traumatized, but I'm sure they'll get over it one day.

Someone screams at the meager display of power and people scatter across the lobby like fleeing rats. A woman yanks her child close, shielding his eyes.

I don't have time for any of their bullshit. If I don't find Grace soon, the Lycan King's going to rampage all over this city. And if he does *that*...

No. Better not to think about it. The moment any of this reaches *their* ears, my precious peace is going to become a distant memory for the next few centuries. Do you have any idea how hard it is to escape the yoke of Divinity?

Almost impossible, okay? It involves almost five hundred years of bribes, dirty little secrets, and a whole ass pirate fleet.

People stay far away from me as I approach the elevators. The ignorant few who reach the lobby give me a curious look as they exit, while everyone watching probably has a mild heart attack.

Like I'm just indiscriminately attacking people or something.

Humans are such silly little creatures, but I get it. They're shockingly fragile.

Like a certain Grace.

I jab my index finger against the elevator "close door" button repeatedly, not caring if I look like an impatient lunatic. The doors finally slide shut.

Ascent begins with a mechanical groan. I cross my arms and tap my foot against the floor, watching the numbers crawl upward. Six more floors until I reach Grace's room.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out, glancing at the notification banner.

Divinity Connect: 3 new messages

Oh, for fuck's sake.

I tap on the notification, knowing I'll regret it. The sleek black interface of the app opens up, showing the group chat I muted years ago.

Unfortunately, muting doesn't work when they specifically tag you.

[WRATH: @Lyrielle went on a rampage and didn't invite us. Rude.]

[MADNESS: I thought we had an agreement. You kill something interesting, you send pictures. That was the deal, @Lyrielle.]

[TIME: Some of us are stuck in meetings for literal eons. @Lyrielle, the least you could do is share the entertainment.]

These idiots.

As I scroll through their complaints, a new message pops up.

[WRATH: !!! HOLD UP EVERYONE.]

[WRATH: @Lyrielle's reading us!]

[MADNESS: LYRI DARLING. Tell us EVERYTHING. Was there blood? How much blood? Did you make that little witch cry before you ended her?]

[TIME: I told you she'd check eventually. You owe me a tropical island now, Wrath.]

[WRATH: No fair. You probably peeked ahead.]

I jab the exit button with my index finger, closing the app before they can draw me into their nonsense. Whose brilliant idea was it to create a fucking app for Divinities? Life was so much better when you could only communicate through prayer.

The elevator dings, and I shove my phone into my pocket.

It immediately buzzes again. And again. And again.

If I didn't need it, I'd throw the damn thing into the nearest incinerator. Unfortunately, the app can't be uninstalled.

And no matter what phone I buy, it'll be on there. Even if I borrow someone else's. It's like the worst virus of all time.

When the doors finally open on Grace's floor, I stride out with purpose. The nurses' station is directly ahead, and three nurses are huddled behind it, gossiping about whatever and who cares.

"Where is she?" I demand.

The oldest nurse, her hair pulled back in a tight gray bun, glances at me. "I'm sorry, ma'am. May I ask who you're looking for?"

"Grace Harper. Room 3629."

The nurse with the gray bun blinks at me like I've asked her to explain quantum physics in interpretive dance. Or maybe she thinks I'm here to tag the walls and summon Satan in the cafeteria. I keep forgetting I dyed my hair in various shades of vibrant on a whim last week.

"Room 3629?" She turns to her computer, tapping away with frustrating slowness. I know she's old, but can't she at least learn to type like everyone else?

"Oh, wait, is that Danielle's room? The one with the girl who went to imaging, but then her record couldn't be accessed anymore?" one of the younger ones asks, looking over the old woman's shoulder.

"No, she was discharged. The record was just glitched for a few minutes." The other younger one.

"Ah, yes. It says here she was discharged," the old one says, after her snail-pace typing finally yields results.

"Thanks, ladies." Snail nurse was no help, but the little gossips were. Such darlings. Rumors have always made the world go round... not always for the better, but hey, sometimes they're actually useful.

Another buzz of my phone. Probably the stupid Divinities, but I check anyway, just in case.

Thankfully, I'm wrong.

[CAINE: Thom can't track her.]

[LYRE: Who the fuck is Thom?]

[CAINE: My wizard.]

Ah. The sniveling thing he brought with him, with the strange glasses. Well, it's no surprise someone of his meager talent would be lost in this situation. Humans were never great vessels for arcana.

[LYRE: At hospital now. Checking for traces. I'll update when I find something.]

[CAINE: Jack-Eye is already there.]

I lift my head with a scowl as I almost collide with a wall of wolf muscle. Jack-Eye—Caine's beta with a ridiculous name—steps out of Grace's hospital room, wearing an expression matching my own.

Just what this clusterfuck needs: two people with bad news and nothing else.

I shove my phone into my back pocket. "Learn anything?"

Jack-Eye shakes his head, nostrils flaring. "Nothing. If I didn't know better, I'd say she was never here."

The muscles in his jaw twitch with frustration, and I sniff at the air. My sense of smell is far stronger than a human's, but all I can pick up is the smell of bleach and the distinct undertone of wolf, courtesy of the Lycan Beta.

"Move," I say, not bothering with courtesy as I shove my way past.

The flow of arcana—a subtle current of existence, or energy, or magic, whatever you'd like to call it—shimmers in the air like thousands of colored threads.

They're too... straight. Clean. Perfect.

Woven by someone with a master touch, but not enough experience to understand their work only raises red flags.

Grace's room should be a mess of magical residue—my wards, the hospital's ambient energy, her presence, the bond she shares with her annoying boyfriend...

Instead, the pattern here is strange. It reminds me of something. I can't quite remember, though.

Jack-Eye follows me into the room with a grunt.

"What do you see?" he asks, his voice lowered to a faint rumble.

"Shut up." Extending my hands helps with feeling the currents.

I walk the perimeter of the room, fingertips tracing invisible lines. Near the window, I pause. The pattern shifts here. This is where they began their weaving.

"Someone's erased her presence," I tell Jack-Eye, who just nods. He gets it. To his nose, this room must smell strange. Missing things. Even a recently cleaned room has a multitude of scents, and yet there's nothing here.

As if everything has been planted. Not just what we smell, but also the arcana in this place.

I run my fingers over the wall absently. "They didn't just grab her. They erased the very concept of her being here."

That's what bothers me about the symmetry. It reminds me of—

The memory clicks like a lock tumbling open.

"Son of a bitch."

Chapter 80: Grace: Strawberries (I)

Chapter 80: Grace: Strawberries (I)

Giant brown eyes watch me with such suspicion, I'm pretty sure their owner thinks I'm a very hungry dragon with toddler on the menu.

I pretend not to notice the tiny human's approach. Looking directly might spook her—or worse, encourage her to come closer. The bunny ears on her onesie bounce with each determined step, her diapered bottom swaying like a pendulum as she toddles across the uneven stone floor.

My kidnapper—can I even call him that now?—thrusts three sticks toward me. Each holds several bright red strawberries coated in a crystalline shell that catches the dim light. Tanghulu. I'd seen pictures of it before; fruit skewers dipped in sugar syrup that hardens into a candy coating.

The man's face remains impassive, nearly hostile, as if handing me this sweet treat is equivalent to passing over the keys to his entire fortune.

I accept them cautiously.

Not a word has been spoken in the ten minutes since I regained consciousness, lying on a pile of thin fleece blankets.

My kidnapper (?) grunts at me before shuffling back to his boiling pot, dipping yet another stick of strawberries in it.

"Uh... thank you," I offer, though I'm not sure why I'm thanking someone who drugged me and stole me from a hospital.

The cave—or whatever this place is—stretches around me in a peculiar mix of primitive and modern. Natural stone walls curve overhead, but someone’s strung LED light chains across them, the wires draped between wooden beams jammed into terracotta pots. The effect is oddly... homey.

A few other children sit cross-legged on mismatched rugs and pillows scattered across the floor. They crunch on their own tanghulu, sugar crystals catching in the corners of their mouths. They don’t seem concerned about being here. None look malnourished or scared.

What kind of kidnapping operation is this?

The toddler’s eyes remain locked on my untouched treats, a thin line of drool escaping the corner of her mouth. Her own tanghulu casualties lie scattered on the floor beneath her—strawberries separated from the stick, their sugar coating cracked and sticky against the stone floor.

Someone should probably clean that up.

Not me, but... someone.

No one seems to care, though.

"You don't have to give her any if you don't want to." The oldest kid—maybe fifteen—squints at me. "She's just a glutton. Already wasted hers."

The toddler's bottom lip quivers at this betrayal.

"I don't mind sharing," I say, surprising myself. I'm still woozy from whatever drug I was given, but clear-headed enough to wonder at my own calm. Shouldn't I be screaming? Fighting? Looking for escape routes?

Instead, I'm contemplating sharing candy with a drooling toddler and possible fellow kidnappee.

I tap one of my sticks against my palm, testing its stickiness. "Is this place... where you all live?"

He shrugs, his dark hair falling across one eye. "Sometimes. Depends on what's happening."

A younger boy pipes up, maybe seven or eight, strawberry juice staining his chin. "It's one of the safe houses."

"Safe houses?" I repeat.

"For emergencies!" A girl with braids wrapped around her head like a crown says this like I should already know. "You know, when the bad people come for us."

The toddler has reached me now, standing so close I can smell the strawberry on her breath. Her fingers tentatively reach upward.

I hold out one of my sticks, and she snatches it with surprising dexterity.

"What's your name?" I ask her.

"She doesn't really talk," the oldest says. "We call her Bun."

Bun collapses onto her padded bottom right next to me, examining her prize with intense concentration.

"And you are?" I direct this question to the teenager.

"Ron." He gestures at the other two. "That's Jer and Sara."

"I'm Grace," I offer, though nobody asked.

"We know," Sara says, as if I'm an idiot. "You're the Lycan Queen."

I blink.

"Uh—no, I'm... not?" I think. Wait, am I?

Sara blinks.

"Why did he bring me here?" I change the subject, pointing to my kidnapper.

"Owen brings people here when things get dangerous," Jer explains, wiping the back of his hand over his strawberry-covered chin. "You were in danger, so he brought you too."

"The hospital isn't safe," Sara agrees. "The blood witch will get you."

I take a tentative bite of my tanghulu. The sugar shatters between my teeth, sweet and crisp before giving way to the tartness of the strawberry beneath.

The man might have a sour face, but he makes great candy.

"What's a blood witch?"

The children exchange more meaningful glances. Clearly, they know something I don't.

"The hungry kind," Jer finally says. "The kind that eats you from inside."

Bun makes a chomping sound and giggles, oblivious to the ominous nature of Jer's words. She's already demolished her strawberries and eyes my remaining stick with naked desire.

I hold it out to her almost automatically. "Here."

Owen's head snaps up from his fruit-dipping. "Don't spoil her," he growls, the first words I've heard him speak since waking up. His voice is as rough and scary as I remember.

Too late. Bun's already snatched her treat, cradling it against her chest like treasure.

"Sorry," I mutter, not feeling sorry at all.

He grunts again. I guess that's his usual method of communication.

"Am I in danger here?"

He stares at me. "I said, we won't hurt you."

Does he really expect me to *believe* him...? Judging by his impassive face, yes. Yes, he does. "Oh."

Bun plops herself in my lap without invitation, sticky fingers clutching her tanghulu in one hand while the other pats my arm in what feels like reassurance. It's clear she no longer thinks I'm going to eat her.

"Why are you all here?" I ask.

"Same as you," Ron says with a shrug. "We're special. Need protection."

"Special how?"

"Different ways," he replies evasively. "But the Great One would take us if we weren't hidden."

The Great One. Sounds kind of lame, but by the way the other kids shiver, I should be afraid. "Who's the Great One?"

"She eats people," Sara says. "Sucks 'em dry 'til they're a husk. Like a vampire."