

Grace of a Wolf –

Chapter 91: Grace: Conflict Resolution

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"Good night, Bun," I whisper, tucking the blanket around the toddler's tiny shoulders. Her eyelids droop, but she still fights sleep like it's her mortal enemy.

"Quack," she mumbles, her duck bill morphing back to human lips mid-yawn.

Sara rolls her eyes from her nest of blankets. "Just ignore her. She'll be asleep in thirty seconds."

The feral baby protests with a grumpy babble, but it's soft.

I smooth down a wayward curl on her forehead. "Sleep tight, baby."

True to Sara's prediction, soft snores rise from her little bed of blankets before I've even made it five steps away. The rest of the makeshift bedroom settles into comfortable silence—Ron's already asleep, Jer's fighting it, and Sara's watching me leave.

I linger in the main room, fluffing a pillow that doesn't need fluffing, zipping and unzipping my hoodie. It's strange how quickly these kids have wound themselves around my heart. It's only been a few hours, but my heart's all-in on their orphaned life.

When I finally glance up, I spot Caine sitting alone, one arm resting on his bent knee, his gaze fixed on nothing. The harsh angles of his face are shadowed in the dim light of the cave.

I ease down to the floor across from him. Not close enough to touch, but not so far that I have to raise my voice. My knee is only inches from his.

He doesn't acknowledge me, but the slight tick in his jaw gives him away. He knows I'm here.

I watch him for a moment, gathering courage. "Earlier... Lyre said something about you tearing this city apart. What does that mean?"

His jaw ticks again. The silence stretches, punctuated only by the soft breathing of semi-sleeping children.

"Don't—" I pause, searching for the right word, "—sugarcoat it for me."

His eyes flick toward me, then away.

"I don't need the noble version. I'd like the real one." I pull my knees to my chest, hugging them close. "Lyre explained things to me. I already know you're not some psychopathic serial killer or whatever."

Caine's head snaps toward me, genuine surprise breaking through his stony expression. "You thought I was a serial killer?"

"Oh. No. Of course not." Yes, yes, I did. "Maybe a little bit." A lot.

Something shifts in his face—the tiniest twitch at the corner of his mouth. Not quite a smile, but close enough that for a second, the tension cracks.

He exhales, rubbing a hand over his face. The gesture is so unexpectedly vulnerable, it catches me off guard.

"I wouldn't attack a pack without cause," he says finally. "Blue Mountain gave me one."

I raise an eyebrow, not bothering to hide my skepticism. *Uh-huh*. I was there.

Caine meets my gaze directly, and I resist the urge to look away from his storm-gray eyes. They're too intense. Too probing.

Too... pretty.

"Brax has been a problem for years. Always smiling, always compliant. But he was never truly loyal. I had my eye on him for a long time. Not all packs are thrilled with having the Throne filled once again."

Asking for details would interrupt him, so I keep my mouth shut, even though I'm desperate to know more about what Brax did. My brain's been avoiding the past, still struggling to reconcile the man I once saw as a father figure and the one who abandoned me without a second thought once I returned from the Mate Hunt, still... human. Because I am one.

Caine hesitates, the strong line of his jaw tightening as he glances away. "Still... maybe my reaction was a little extreme."

I scratch at my jaw with a laugh. "Well, you didn't kill *everyone*."

"The kids seem to think he did, but after Lyre smacked me with a bit of reality, I now understand—it was proof of Caine's restraint."

What little he has of it, anyway.

A soft, half-laugh escapes me, uncertain and slightly nervous. "I'm still getting used to... this. All of this."

"What?"

"Your idea of, er... conflict resolution?"

Caine leans forward, and my breath catches. The air between us shifts from cautious to charged, the energy of the moment crackling in my very bones.

His cologne-like smell grows stronger, and I force myself to exhale slowly instead of sucking it all down like a woman drowning for it.

"What do you mean by that?" he asks, his brows drawing together in genuine confusion.

I stare at him for a second too long, my brain switching from *I like how he smells* to whatever was happening in our conversation. Then my mouth drops open.

The realization hits me like a punch to the gut: Lyre wasn't exaggerating when she said Caine has all the emotional intelligence of a rock. He's actually, sincerely mystified about what I'm trying to say.

He has to be teasing me, right? He can't possibly be confused.

"I mean..." I blink a few times. "It's a little scary to watch someone order the deaths of a bunch of people who once took care of me. Don't you think?"

His face darkens, but it isn't directed at me. He's looking over my shoulder with a frown, his left eyebrow twitching.

"That pack did not treat you well." His voice drops lower, the rumble of vibrating through the air and settling into my chest like a purring cat. "They don't deserve your grief."

Something awful wedges in my throat. I clear it and rub the bridge of my nose, fighting a sudden, stupid prickling behind my eyes. It's not as if I loved the Blue Mountain Pack with every fiber of my soul. Plenty of them made it their daily mission to remind me I didn't belong in a world of wolves. But they were still my... something. My familiar. My history.

My place.

And now I understand. Caine isn't playing dumb—he truly, genuinely doesn't understand why I'd feel sympathy for people he considers trash. The disconnect is so profound, it's fascinating.

Like I have a hint into his personality. How his strange, murderous brain works.

"You're right," I admit, and my voice is stronger than I expect it to be. "Most of them didn't really like me. And Brax..."

Once again, my avoidant personality rears its head and kicks me off the road leading down to hard memories. I give a one-shouldered shrug and end with a lame, "I just don't see how killing people is... normal."

Caine grunts, his tattoos sliding over his neck. "Fenris seems to understand your weak human heart better than I do."

My shoulders stiffen. I can't decide if I'm more offended by the "weak" or the "human" part.

Both are true.

But it doesn't feel good to hear.

"It's not weak to value life," I protest, digging my nails into my palms. "Even the lives of people who were cruel."

Caine's expression shifts as he sits straight up, dropping his leg to the ground. "No—*that* isn't why you're weak..."

Somehow, his words only make it worse.

"Oh. Really?" I ask, even more offended by the bald truth he speaks, though I know it's ridiculous to feel this way.

I *am* human. *And* weak.

It isn't something to argue over, but it doesn't make his words sting any less.

He hesitates, his jaw working like he's chewing through what to say next. Then, without warning, his hand reaches across the space between us.

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My body reacts before my brain even notices. I scramble backward like an awkward human crab, making it a foot away before my right wrist buckles out of nowhere.

My elbow crashes into the ground.

I adjust my position, trying to make my panicked retreat look casual.

I fail.

Spectacularly.

At least if I'm judging by the look on his face.

My cheeks are hot enough to light a fire.

Caine's hand hangs suspended between us, frozen in mid-air. His face has transformed from brow-creased concern to wide-eyed bewilderment, like I just sprouted a second head.

He's back to concern, but now it's the kind of concern you give a kid after they faceplant a sidewalk.

"No touching, remember?" I manage, my voice hitting soprano when it's usually a comfortable alto.

For a long moment, he stares at his outstretched hand like it's not even his. Then he slowly brings it back to his side.

Tension thickens between us.

"Right," he mutters. "No touching."

I pull my knees tighter to my chest, wishing I could disappear into the stone floor.

"It's not that I don't—" I stop, feeling my face grow even hotter. How does one say *yes, I'd like you to touch me* without it sounding like a perverted invitation?

So I keep my mouth shut instead of finishing my sentence.

Fated connection or not, I still feel embarrassment. And awkwardness. And like we're a little too close to feel like strangers now—especially since his hands have literally been in my pants, which is *way* out of stranger territory—but still feeling as if I don't know the man at all.

We've fast-forwarded through the most basic part of a relationship: getting to know each other. Like, at all.

The things I know about Caine fit on one hand. One: Murderous instincts. Two: For some reason, he can manifest his wolf outside of his body. Three: His touches feel *really* good. Maybe too good. Four: He doesn't like Lyre very much.

I'm sure there's a five somewhere.

"You don't have to explain," he says.

But I do. I really do. Because his jaw is doing that tense thing again, and his shoulders have gone rigid, and somehow I've managed to offend the most dangerous predator I've ever met by *not* letting him touch me.

"I just don't want to end up back in the hospital," I say quickly. "The energy thing, remember? Lyre said we shouldn't—"

"I remember," he cuts me off, his voice clipped.

It feels like I've done something wrong, which makes something inside my chest twist up into a spiral of anxiety. It's hard to take a lungful of breath, and heat flushes through my scalp, making my hair prickle. "It isn't because of you—"

"I know, Grace." His voice isn't really *softer*, but some of the edge is gone. Closer to it than not.

Clearing my throat, I glance toward the alcove. At least the kids seem to have fallen asleep. It would be mortifying if they were watching all this unfold. Sara's still convinced the Lycan King's going to eat them all before morning, and his current aura would *not* help her fears.

"Anyway," I say, desperate to change the subject before this gets any more awkward. "You were explaining... about Blue Mountain."

Caine shifts, his massive shoulders rolling as if shaking off the moment. "Not much to explain. They suffered the proper consequences."

All of thirty seconds ago, he'd admitted his actions might have been extreme. Now he's back to cold and indifferent.

I pinch my lips together. Maybe it's better to be quiet, before I offend him further.

* * *

Silence settles between us, charged but not exactly uncomfortable. The distant sound of Bun's soft breathing from the alcove and Ron's occasional sleep-mumbling fills the cave.

Caine remains statue-still, his profile sharp against the dim light—all defined jaw and brooding eyes.

I'm making this worse by staying away.

The realization hits me with sudden clarity. His hand stretched out was an offering, and I scrambled away like he was contagious. Mate bond or not, energy drain or not, I've just hurt his feelings.

Something about it—this idea of a terrifying Lycan King having hurt feelings—makes my chest tighten.

With a slow breath, I slide closer until I'm sitting right beside him, our backs against the same wall. I don't touch him—obeying the rule like a good girl—but I've closed the gap. Our arms are just inches apart now. Close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from his skin.

He doesn't move away. I don't either.

"The Fiddleback Pack was strange."

His voice comes so suddenly and quietly that I almost miss it. I turn my head toward him, suddenly alert. This is it—he's finally answering my first question about why he tore through the city like a hurricane, right?

"Strange how?"

He stares straight ahead, eyes focused on something I can't see. The silence stretches for so long I think maybe he didn't hear me, but then his hands clench. It's a subtle movement, but I feel attuned to every last twitch of his muscles, every soft exhale of breath, and the growing need between us.

No physical contact didn't seem like a big deal when Lyre mentioned it.

The reality is much different.

I underestimated how much I want to be with the man. Want to press myself against him. Want to feel his hands on my skin.

Something inside me keeps pulling...

No.

Pulling is too gentle. It's more of a yank, hauling me around like a ragdoll, demanding I submit to this strange connection between us. It's hazed my brain so it's hard to think of anything else, until I'm willing to accept everything he throws my way.

Even if it's more murder.

"So what happened?" I press gently, hoping against hope he has a good excuse this time.

Somehow, I feel like I wouldn't care even if he didn't. But the old Grace, normal, human Grace with morals and values who cares about people living and dying, is still inside my head beneath all the fated bond nuance, and she *definitely* cares. Sort of. Maybe.

Or I'm already too far gone.

He leans his head back with a sigh. "They're dead. Most of them." The flat, emotionless delivery doesn't even send a chill down my spine. Watching him out of my peripheral vision, I wait for him to continue.

"I'll have to ask your friend what's happening around here. She seems to know more than she's willing to share."

My stomach knots. The way he says "your friend" makes it clear he means Lyre. I can't help the spike of protective fear.

It's good to know I'm still Grace, the person who cares about her friends, and won't just throw Lyre under his claws in hopes of him getting his hands in my panties again.

"You're not going to—"

"Not unless she gives me a reason," he cuts me off, his voice still unnervingly calm.

I nod, but the worry doesn't leave my thoughts, even when I remind myself she literally... *swooshed* him across the room like it was nothing.

A sleepy whine from the alcove interrupts my thoughts.

Bun toddles out. Her tiny fists rub at her eyes as she makes her way toward us with the slightly off-balance gait of a small child who's still mostly asleep.

Without hesitation, she flops directly into my lap face-first, landing with a dramatic sigh against my shirt like she's had the most exhausting day in toddler history.

Then again, with all those shifts—yeah, she did. I'm pretty sure it wins, hands down.

"Hey there," I say softly, my hand automatically moving to stroke her back. "Back so soon?"

Bun answers with an incoherent toddler mumble, her face buried in my shirt. Her little body is warm against mine, completely trusting. Something shifts inside my chest, unfurling like a flower to the sun. Something deeper and more expansive than anything I can understand.

When I look up, I find Caine watching us. His expression isn't exactly soft—I'm not sure his face does soft—but the hard edges have smoothed somehow. His eyes track my hand as it moves in gentle circles on Bun's back.

"Are we keeping her?" he asks suddenly.

My hand freezes mid-circle. "What?"

"The child." His eyes flick to Bun, then back to me. "Are we taking her with us?"

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The way he phrases it makes my soul want to simultaneously crawl into his lap and drop kisses all over his face, and run screaming into the night so he can never find me again. It's a dissonance of free will/bonding desire, and I don't really know how to feel about it.

This whole *fated to be with each other* thing is a little... much. Until Lyre had broken it down, I'd been under the assumption humans can't *have* fated mates. Everyone says so, therefore it must be true—only... it's not.

Shifting my weight so my left buttcheek doesn't go numb, I answer, "She's staying with me."

The words come without conscious thought or consideration of consequences. Not angry, not defensive—just a simple statement of fact. Like saying the sky is blue or water is wet.

She's mine now. I'll put my life on the line to make sure she's safe. I know it from the hair on my head down to my tiniest toenails. This child has wrapped herself around my heart. Learning she has no parents had the decision cemented before I ever consciously thought about it.

Bun snuffles against my shirt, her little fingers curling. It feels *right* to have her weight and warmth in my lap, like she's always been meant to be here. Children were never a priority for me. It wasn't as if I didn't want to be a mother—of course I do, someday—but it was an abstract future for a much older Grace.

Tiny puffs of warm breath hit my collarbone as she falls back into deeper sleep.

Caine's eyes narrow slightly. "Then we'll make arrangements when we return to my territory."

There it is.

The assumption.

We. Us. Together. A package deal.

My hand continues its gentle circles on sweet little Bun's back while I choose my next words carefully. This isn't about picking a fight—it's about establishing truth.

"No 'we' yet. I said she's with me. Not us."

His jaw tightens. In the dim lighting, the shadows of his face are more pronounced, making him seem more angry than he sounds. "You don't seem to understand how this works."

This. He must be talking about the bond between us.

"Maybe I don't," I acknowledge, keeping my voice soft for Bun's sake. "But I do understand I'm not property. And neither is she."

"I never said—"

"You didn't have to." I shift the girl slightly, tucking her more securely against me even as I wiggle into a slightly different position. Now my right cheek wants to go numb. "Look, Caine. I know there's something between us. We're fated mates, right?"

He nods. Just one little dip of his head to acknowledge my words, even as his eyes burn into me.

"I feel it, too. But it doesn't mean I'm going to hand over my life, my choices, and my future." I take a breath. "Or hers."

Caine leans forward, forearms on his knees, every line of his body tense. For a moment, he says nothing, just watches Bun's sleeping form so intensely I hold her a little closer.

"You're expecting me to court you," he finally says, like the concept is completely foreign. Not angry, just... bewildered.

A startled laugh almost escapes me, but I catch it to avoid waking the baby. "No, not exactly." I mean, we're already fated to be together, right? It seems silly to deny it at this point. "I'm just saying we need to get to know each other. I don't know what I'm getting into, and you don't even know what my favorite color is. It's not conducive to a healthy relationship for us to jump in just because of our bodies..."

My voice falters a little as his eyes gleam in the darkness.

"Because of our bodies?" he asks, sounding way too innocent for the predatory look on his face.

"You know... *meshing*."

"Are you talking about when I—"

"*There are children here*," I hiss, swiping at his face with one hand. I miss gagging him by about six inches. "Watch what you say."

"—talked to you privately?" he finishes smoothly, as if he wasn't about to say anything about the dirty, naughty things his mouth and hands had done.

"Yes. That."

He nods. "Then I agree. Our bodies *mesh* quite well."

Of course, there's the whole *if-he-touches-me-I-might-die* thing, but it seems the great Lycan King isn't willing to talk about *that* little detail.

"Anyway," I continue, with a little more emphasis than necessary, "I don't believe in throwing away who I am just because some metaphysical divine being decided we're soulmates."

Caine goes still. It's not a good sign, but I'm determined to stand my ground.

It isn't like I'm trying to break up with him. I'm not even trying to create distance. All I'm asking for is boundaries. Building a relationship the right way. Starting from scratch.

Not relying on a bond.

Rafe's already shown me the bond isn't everything. If it was, he wouldn't go behind Ellie's back to come back to me.

The kind of relationship I want isn't one where I spend my life worried my partner's only with me because he's required to be. I want an equal partnership. And—most of all—I don't want to be powerless.

Caine's the Lycan King. He can order anyone to do anything. If I become his mate...

There's a lot to unpack. I don't know if he's going to want me to take on any responsibilities; I wouldn't be surprised if he doesn't. But these are all conversations we need to have at some point, *before* I decide to join him and his pack.

Right?

"You chose me," he says, each word delivered with absolute certainty. "You want to be with me."

The conviction in his voice makes my breath catch. It's not a question, not even a statement seeking confirmation. It's a foregone conclusion in his mind. A fact as immutable as gravity.

"I am drawn to you," I say softly, carefully. It feels like walking through a minefield, and I'm worried he's going to take my words the wrong way. "But I don't know if our future is feasible yet."

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His face—ah, his face. It's like watching a fortress wall crack in real time. Something vulnerable and raw flashes behind those storm-gray eyes before his expression hardens again. My words have genuinely blindsided him.

"Feasible," he echoes. He looks as if he's hearing the word for the first time.

I shift again. Both buttcheeks have lost feeling, but I still don't want to interrupt Bun's sleep. "Yeah. You know—long-term. Values. Morals. Views of the future."

"You're questioning whether to accept the mate bond." His voice drops an octave, rougher around the edges. Not threatening, but definitely unsettled.

"No. I've accepted it—"

"Have you?"

"I'm not *denying* it. I'm just asking for *more*. This isn't just about some mystical connection, Caine. It's about two people with separate lives figuring out if they're compatible."

His laugh is short and harsh. "Compatibility is irrelevant. The bond doesn't make mistakes."

"Maybe not for shifters," I counter. "But I'm human. And humans don't typically commit our entire futures to someone we've known for less than a week."

Bun stirs against me, her tiny nose scrunching up before settling back down. I lower my voice further.

"I want to get to know you," I continue. "The real you—not just the Lycan King or the guy who can make my body feel things I didn't know were possible. Not as the man who killed people I've known for years. I want to know Caine so well I can judge what you're thinking just by the way the skin wrinkles at the corner of your eyes, or how your lips curve up or down. If we don't have that, is it really a relationship at all?"

Caine rubs a hand over his face, frustration radiating from him. "You speak as if we're strangers deciding whether to date."

I mean—aren't we?

It's hard to understand why he thinks we're not.

"Aren't we?" I ask quietly. "Besides you being possessive and lethal, what do I really know about you?"

His gaze shifts to Bun, then back to me. "I've been trying to picture it," he admits, and the vulnerability in his tone catches me off-guard. "You, with me. Children. A home."

I bite my lip. "I haven't."

By the way his face darkens, I've said the very, very wrong thing.

Hastily, I try to patch it up. "I want to know what makes you laugh, what keeps you up at night, what you dream about when you're not killing people for looking at me wrong. These are the things I've been thinking about."

Well—among other, R-rated things. But admitting that here feels very dangerous.

Caine's face is a battlefield of emotions—disappointment warring with confusion, frustration tangled with something that looks dangerously like hurt.

"You're rejecting me," he says, sounding flat and emotionless.

"Absolutely not." See? I knew he'd take it the wrong way. "That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying I need to actually know the person I'm supposedly destined to spend forever with. Let's take it slow."

His jaw works, muscles tensing. "You know me."

"No, I don't. And you don't know me."

"I know you. I know your scent. I know how you breathe when you're rattled. You keep picking at your thumb when you're nervous, and you pretend to be submissive when you're thinking about running."

I blink, glancing down at the thumb in question. There's a tiny section of ragged skin by the cuticle; I'd broken the habit years ago, but I guess it's come back. "Okay—but what's my favorite color? Favorite food? Do I like horror or do I like romance? Do I like to read? What about school? What do I want to do in my future?"

He frowns. "Knowing or not knowing changes nothing."

"These aren't trivial things, Caine. They're the foundation of actually sharing a life with someone."

"You think wolves court like humans," he says flatly. "With dinner dates and favorite colors."

I'm pretty sure I said a lot more than that. I very specifically pointed out it's more than just surface-deep, didn't I?

My eyelid twitches. "I'm saying I think we need something between 'hello' and 'let's start a family.'"

His gaze drops to Bun again, and I see the calculation happening behind those storm-cloud eyes. "You've already accepted this child into your life without hesitation."

"That's different."

"Is it?"

"Yes," I insist. "She's innocent and defenseless and—"

"—and you felt a connection to her," he finishes. "An immediate, unquestionable bond that told you she belongs with you. Despite barely knowing her."

Shit. He has a point.

It throws me for a loop, and I struggle to regain my high ground in this conversation. "It's not the same," I argue, but my voice lacks conviction. "A child isn't a life partner. The obligations and expectations are completely different."

"The principle isn't," he counters. "You recognize bonds that matter. You act on them instinctively. With her. With me."

I shift Bun gently in my lap. "I'm not denying our connection. I'm just saying the connection isn't enough by itself."

Caine frowns. "In wolf culture, the bond is everything. It's sacred. Wolves who find their mates consider themselves completed. Two halves of one whole."

"I'm not a wolf," I remind him gently.

"No," he agrees. "You're not."

Something about the way he says it—not dismissive, but contemplative—makes me wonder if he's finally starting to understand the gap between us. It's not just species or culture. It's entire worldviews colliding.

"This matters to you," he says slowly. "This... getting to know each other."

"Yes."

"Beyond the physical."

I feel heat creep up my neck. "Considering the physical nearly killed me last time, yes, definitely beyond that."

The corner of his mouth twitches, almost a smile. "What exactly did you have in mind? Shall I recite poetry and bring you flowers?"

The image of the fearsome Lycan King clutching a bouquet makes a bubble of inappropriate laughter rise in my throat. "Maybe start with telling me something about yourself that isn't terrifying."

He considers this for a long moment. "I play chess."

Chapter 95: Lyre: Weight of Life (I)

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LYRE

"Keep up or get left behind," I call over my shoulder, not bothering to slow my pace. "Consider it motivation to avoid becoming part of the décor."

The ragtag group of the Lycan King's misfits follow in shocked silence. The reinforced steel doors sealing off this prison from the outside world are still on the ground from when I broke through them earlier.

And from the moment we walk into this hellscape, we're greeted with the scent—which hasn't dissipated, despite the fresh air I've introduced to this place.

Ragged edges of magic still spark against my skin like static electricity, the desperate, dying throes of glyphs barely holding on.

"Don't touch the walls," I add, watching Andrew trail his fingers dangerously close to a partially destroyed binding sigil. "Unless you want to spend the next decade convinced you're a teacup."

There's no possible way for a basic defense glyph to create such mental havoc, but he has no idea.

The young man yanks his hand back, his face paling under the weak emergency lights. He's been jumpy since we entered the tunnel system, looking over his shoulder every few steps like he expects something to grab him from behind. Not entirely irrational, given the circumstances, but amusing to watch.

The nervous wizard follows closely behind him, his fingers digging into his arms, which are crossed across his chest as if to hold his racing heartbeat in. He looks like he's going to pass out any second, and his eyes dart all over the place behind ridiculous copper-wire spectacles. The poor thing is practically vibrating with anxiety.

He's still a baby. Barely able to manipulate mana. Too much exposure to the blood arcana in this space might burn out what little talent he has.

Oh, well. It isn't my problem.

Would be a shame, though.

Jack-Eye is ill-at-ease, but you'd never guess it if you weren't paying attention. He moves with focused precision, not distracted by things like blood-smearred magical sigils, but his shoulders are locked tight. His nostrils flare constantly, filtering through the smells of this place.

He knows this place is strange, but he's not going to pester me with questions.

Small favors.

Owen leads from slightly behind me. He's seen ugliness before—it's etched into every line of his body. The tension in his body speaks the language of resigned obligation. Not surprising, for someone who's taken on the duties of a Guardian to this place.

With every step I take, the air changes. Thickens.

And suddenly, the scent hits us like walking face-first into a wall. My jaw tingles with the sudden urge to vomit, but I swallow it back.

The others struggle. Andrew recoils violently. Jack-Eye freezes mid-stride. The baby wizard? He doesn't make it, doubling over to retch violently on the floor.

Owen pats his back with a stoic expression; the tension of his entire body already tells me what I know. He's smelled it all before.

When Thomas—Tommy?—finally straightens, his face is flushed with embarrassment, a thin line of saliva still connecting him to the puddle of vomit on his shoes.

"You'll want to burn those shoes," I tell him flatly. "And maybe your soul."

He laughs, but the sound is hollow.

The stench is too strong. Rot and blood and something else—something ancient and cloying, sticking to the back of your throat so you can taste it every time you swallow. It's the scent of decay, but not just physical decomposition. It's magic rotting from the inside out.

Fucking sanguimancers.

"What is this place?" Jack-Eye finally breaks his silence, voice tight with disgust as we move forward once again.

"Exactly what I told you. A sanguimancer's playground." I step over a dark stain on the floor. "Isabeau liked to collect living batteries. The longer they suffered, the more power she could extract."

"And the cages? What are they? How much farther?" Andrew asks, still keeping his distance from the walls.

"They're feeding pens. They aren't far."

No one asks me to elaborate. The description is enough.

It's only then that I notice the silence.

Complete, absolute silence.

No breathing from the trapped shifters. No whispers of movement. No signs of life at all.

Just... stillness.

My heartbeat quickens against my will. A cold, creeping dread crawls up my spine—a sensation I haven't felt in centuries. I've lived too long to fear most things, but this silence speaks a language I understand all too well.

This isn't peace. This is aftermath.

"Wait here."

"But—" Andrew starts.

"Here." I pin him with a flat stare, and he shuts his mouth instantly.

Owen doesn't listen; he keeps moving forward. Jack-Eye hesitates only for a step, before following behind.

Andrew and the wizard stay where I tell them to.

It doesn't take us long to make it through the tunnels into a more widened space, lined with cages.

Cages once full of bodies, of people who acted more dead than alive.

Now they're just dead.

Bodies are everywhere—sprawled across the ground, slumped against open cage doors, limbs twisted at impossible angles. The scene reveals a massacre, not an escape. Some poor souls died where they'd been imprisoned, others made it only steps toward freedom before being cut down.

My eyes catch on a tiny form crumpled near the wall—the toddler who had reached for me with innocent desperation. Now those little hands are still, face frozen in terror, eyes empty. Something ancient and terrible stirs inside me.

The rage builds with each heartbeat, pulsing through my veins like lava. I can feel it vibrating through my body, making the very ground beneath us tremble. The arcana in the air responds, humming with discordant energy as my control slips.

My teeth clench so hard my jaw aches, fangs growing and pressing against my lips as I struggle to contain what's building inside me—a fury older than the last breath of the Aztecs. Older than the bones of Constantinople, rotting beneath new kings.

The weight of my choice is like a terrible, self-loathing boulder rolled onto my chest. I could have stayed. Should have stayed. Instead, I'd shrugged off the responsibility of these lives, decided to hand them off to Caine's care—and forgotten them.

If I'd remembered in time...

If I'd only taken the effort...

But now I'm staring at the consequence of that decision.

Chapter 96: Lyre: Weight of Life (II)

Chapter 96: Lyre: Weight of Life (II)

LYRE

My magic curls out like tendrils, brushing against the walls of the chamber, tasting the carnage.

I'm too late.

The walls tremble. Dust sifts from the ceiling. My phone vibrates, one after another. Nonstop, and I already know what's happening.

Divinity Connect is lighting like a Christmas tree, sensing the shift in my control.

Blood. So much blood. Most of it dried to rusty brown, flaking from the walls in macabre patterns. But near the furthest wall—fresh crimson glistens in the dim light. Still wet. Still new.

I walk deeper into the chamber, my steps deliberate. My magic extends further, parsing through the residual energy, and I go very still.

This wasn't Isabeau.

Not entirely.

Jack-Eye steps up beside me, his face drained of color. "What the fuck happened here?" His voice shakes. He's furious, and barely controlling his panic. The scent of it is strong, and yet still almost buried beneath the gruesome stench of this place.

I don't answer. I can't. My attention is focused on the room itself, on the energy patterns hanging in the air like invisible cobwebs. The bodies aren't quite randomly placed. At least, not the ones outside of the cages.

Owen crouches beside one of the bodies, his movements clinical. He acts unaffected, but I can feel his core of arcana shaking. He checks for rigor mortis, examines the wounds on the neck and chest, like he does this every day. And maybe he does. "They didn't fight back."

"They never had a chance." My voice is flat, but the rage continues building. At Isabeau, at whatever did this—but mostly at myself. I should have come back sooner. Should have evacuated them immediately. Should have not been distracted by Grace and her stupid mate and their nest of soulspliced kids.

I know better than to leave loose ends.

Then Jack-Eye stiffens beside me. "Do you smell that?"

I do. A sharp, chemical tang cutting through the stench of decay. An unnatural odor that doesn't belong, like rain mixed with burnt sugar and molten iron, wrapped in rotting flesh.

My stomach turns.

"Ritual," I mutter. "But wrong."

Owen rises, his silver eyes gleaming unnaturally in the dim light. "Blood magic. But why does it smell like that?"

"They didn't know what they were doing." The words taste bitter. Amateur work. Powerful, but sloppy. Like watching a child with a loaded gun—deadly, but not by design.

I step carefully through the bodies, eyes locked on the floor. And there they are. Four symbols, equidistant from each other, perfectly etched into the concrete. The glyphs are pristine, untouched by the blood and bodies surrounding them.

North. South. East. West.

I kneel beside the eastern mark, narrowing my eyes. The lines are a little too squiggly. Some are too short. A few are too long. There's a hook where there shouldn't be and a few too many loops, but the glyphs are clear in intent.

"He's pulling from banks."

Owen's face hardens as he kneels opposite me, examining the western symbol. "A mass harvest."

"The anchor's moved." I press my palm against the floor, feeling the emptiness where power should resonate. When I destroyed Isabeau, the magic in this space should have dissipated gradually, returning to the earth. Instead, it's gone—completely—as if siphoned away and anchored elsewhere.

Owen sighs, a sound heavy with foreknowledge. "She had an unusual hold over this pack."

Jack-Eye moves closer, his tall frame tense with barely contained fury. "Who? Who did this? What are you talking about?"

Someone's reanimating Isabeau, drawing on her power, perhaps even with the help of her her consciousness. Someone with enough power to gather this much blood energy but not enough finesse to do it cleanly.

Someone desperate.

"I don't know yet."

It's a good thing I forced the wizard to stay behind. Who knows how his magic would have responded to such a scene.

It might have even been sucked away, tied to the blood sigils pulling arcana from this room.

I grit my teeth and throw out my hand, channeling my rage through my fingertips. The sigils ignite instantly—blue-white flames burning unnaturally hot, consuming the markings without spreading.

The fire doesn't make a sound, doesn't crackle or hiss. It just burns, clean and merciless.

Owen flinches with his whole body, stumbling back like I've just tried to incinerate him. His silver eyes go wide, reflecting the flames so they look molten.

The terror on his face would be amusing if the situation weren't so fucked.

Jack-Eye takes two hasty steps away from me, though his face remains mostly impassive. His eyes twitch, though.

"Get out," I say, my voice rough with barely contained fury. "Take Andrew and that twitchy wizard and get out of here."

"But what about—" The Lycan Beta starts.

"These souls need peace." I cut him off, watching as the flames die down, leaving nothing but black scorches. "And I don't want even a sliver of Isabeau's influence to remain here."

My phone vibrates again—and again—and again, a constant buzz against my hip that's becoming harder to ignore. Divinity Connect is having a field day with my emotional state. Probably logging every spike in my power for some archangel's spreadsheet.

Or Chaos wants in.

Either way, I ignore it.

"Now," I add when neither of them moves.

Owen stares at the charred sigils and nods once. "Understood."

Jack-Eye hesitates longer, eyes darting between me and the carnage. "What exactly are you planning to do?"

I turn to face him fully, letting just a hint of what I am bleed into my eyes. His pupils contract to pinpricks as he sucks in a breath.

Grace has always been able to see my eyes for what they are. Jack-Eye has only ever caught glimpses.

"I'm going to clean up."

He frowns, but Owen smacks his shoulder and jerks his head back the way we came. "Right. We'll wait outside."

"Do that."

They back away, Owen moving with the careful precision of someone trying not to startle a predator, Jack-Eye with the wariness of someone who's seen enough supernatural shit to know when to retreat.

When they're gone, I close my eyes and breathe in the stench of death and failed magic. Seven hundred years, and the scent never gets easier to bear.

My phone vibrates again, insistent and annoying.

Clairvoyance is not perfect. An overreliance on my abilities will always lead to heartbreak.

It's a lesson I've learned time and time again.

And it never gets easier.

Chapter 97: Grace: One Tiny Fist

Chapter 97: Grace: One Tiny Fist

My back aches against the cave wall, but I don't dare move. Bun's warm weight anchors me where I am, her slight body rising and falling with each breath, rabbit ears occasionally twitching against my stomach. I'm not even sure when they appeared. When Caine was done explaining how chess was something his father taught him as a child—in an effort to teach strategic thinking for battle, which made his confession seem a little less lighthearted than it was—I'd looked down, and there they were. Little white rabbit ears.

And a tiny puff coming out of her diaper. I can't smell anything, so I'm about seventy-five percent certain it's a little puffy rabbit tail and *not...* something else.

She's completely conked out, one tiny fist clutching my shirt like I might disappear if she lets go.

An inch away—literally just one inch—Caine sits with his back against the same wall, arms crossed over his chest, eyes closed. He's not sleeping. I can tell by the rhythm of his

breathing. Too measured. Too controlled. The space between us pulses with unspoken tension, an invisible boundary neither of us wants to breach.

Or, more accurately... one we *want* to breach, yet can't.

I shift slightly, and my shoulder nearly grazes his. My entire body goes rigid, muscles locking up as if he's poison. Or a live, sparking power line.

This is ridiculous. We've had sex (well... partly), but now I'm terrified of our shoulders bumping? And our conversation's come to a complete, grinding halt.

Maybe I've made everything worse with my boundaries. Maybe I should've just let whatever this is between us unfold naturally instead of trying to control it. But every time I think about giving in, there's something inside me begging to stick to it.

I glance at his profile in the dim light. There's stubble covering his jaw, darker than this morning. His eyelashes are long and lush, and instead of envy my first thought goes to eventual children and if they'll have his eyelashes.

Now I get it, what he said about imagining a life together. Kids. The whole shebang and probably the little dog too.

Well—no, nix the dog. No cats, either. Wolf shifters don't do pets.

Dinner, yes. Pets? Not so much.

And yet, despite me throwing down rules and needs and confusing him with where my heart's at, he's still here. Staying. His shoulder next to mine, respecting my space but not continuing distance.

My heart thumps hard.

No psychopathic serial killer would treat a girl like this. Then again, Ted Bundy got married—no. No more negative thoughts.

What happened with Brax and the others wasn't murder. It was pack justice.

Dwelling on it is only going to keep me stagnant.

I'm halfway between waking and dreaming when shuffling footsteps jerk me back into fully awake.

Ron emerges from the darkness of the sleeping alcove, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand. His dark hair stands up in tufts, making him look younger than fifteen-ish. He's tall and lanky, but scrawny. Still a child.

He freezes with one foot in the air when he sees us, his eyes widening as they lock onto Bun curled against my chest.

"She usually comes to me," he says, confusion etched across his face. He shifts uncomfortably, glancing between me, Caine, and the sleeping toddler. "Not even Owen gets to put her back to sleep."

The way Ron looks at her—protective, confused, a little hurt—makes me wonder if I've stepped into a role that wasn't mine to take.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "She just climbed into my lap and fell asleep. I didn't want to wake her."

He approaches cautiously, crouching down beside us. "I can take her back to bed," he offers, reaching out his hands. "She kicks in her sleep sometimes. You'll get more rest without her."

His fingers barely brush Bun's shoulder before she stirs, her face scrunching up in immediate distress. Her tiny hand tightens in my shirt as she swats blindly at Ron with her other arm.

"No!" she cries out, her voice thick with sleep but unmistakably adamant. Her entire body curls tighter against me, rabbit ears flattening against her head.

My arms tighten around her, trying to give her a sense of security, soothe her back into sleep. "Shh, it's okay," I murmur, one hand stroking her back in gentle circles. "You're safe. Everything's okay."

The older kid pulls back, looking at me like I've performed some kind of magic trick. The rejection in his eyes hits me harder than I expected. This isn't a competition, but somehow it feels like I've won something I never signed up for.

"Leave her."

Caine's voice cuts through the silence, low and firm, without a hint of aggression but filled with quiet authority. His eyes are open now, fixed on the teenager with unwavering intensity.

Ron straightens immediately, his posture shifting from confused kid to alert shifter. It's subtle but unmistakable—the way his shoulders pull back, chin lifting slightly. A response to an alpha's command.

"Sorry," he mutters, backing away a step. "I just thought..."

"She's fine where she is," Caine says, his tone softer, but no less final.

I glance between them, feeling the weight of Bun growing heavier in my arms. "Actually, I should probably put her to bed properly." Struggling to my feet without jostling her is a new skill, one I'm going to have master as soon as humanly possible. My legs prickle with pins and needles after sitting so long, but I manage to stand without stumbling.

It's a small victory, but I'll take it.

Caine rises in one fluid motion beside me, close enough for me to feel the heat radiating from his body without actually touching him. He doesn't offer to help, doesn't try to take Bun—he just stands there, a silent presence at my back, until I navigate toward the sleeping area.

The children's alcove is warmer than the main cave. While the makeshift beds are all just piles of blankets, Sara and Jer are sleeping so deeply, they don't even twitch as I stumble inside.

I lower Bun gently onto her bed, trying to disentangle her fingers from my shirt. She whimpers, her face crumpling at the loss of contact.

"It's okay," I whisper, smoothing her hair back from her forehead. "I'm not going far. Just sleep now, baby girl."

Something about her pulls at me in ways I can't explain—a fierce protectiveness I've never felt before. I tuck the blanket around her tiny form, marveling at how someone so small could carve out such a huge space in my heart in such a short time.

"Sweet dreams," I murmur, leaning down to press a light kiss to her forehead.

Her fingers finally release my shirt, but immediately latch onto my pinky finger instead. I wait, watching as her breathing evens out again, her grip gradually loosening as she slips deeper into sleep.

When I'm sure she won't wake, I carefully extract my finger and rise to leave—only to freeze at the sound of voices from the main room.

"Tell me about them."

Caine's voice is softer than I've ever heard it, laced with genuine curiosity rather than demand.

I ease back into the shadows between the sleeping area and the main cave, hesitant to interrupt whatever conversation is unfolding.

"Where did you come from?" he continues. "What happened to their parents?"

From my hidden vantage point, I can see Ron's face, illuminated by the faint glow of string lights. He looks wary, chewing on his bottom lip like he's weighing how much to share.

"Don't know about our parents," he finally says, eyes fixed on some distant point. "Never had any. Owen found us all separate. Different places, different times. I've been around the longest." He shrugs. "But the story's the same for all of us. Shifters don't like it when their kids come out wrong."

My heart squeezes painfully in my chest as I watch his expression, hardened into practiced indifference. "Bun was the worst off. She's the first one to come here as a baby. She was starving. Wouldn't eat for anyone."

Fuck.

The mental image is enough to bring tears to my eyes, my stomach threatening nausea.

"How old were you and the others?"

Ron's eyes flick toward the sleeping area—toward me, though I don't think he can see me in the shadows. Then again, he's a shifter.

"Old enough to know we can't trust people easy." He blinks in my direction, his lips curving up on one side. Just a little. Almost imperceptible. "They all like Grace, though."

"And you?"

The kid's stare doesn't waver, his eyes locked onto mine. He *definitely* sees me, making this standing around listening in a little creepy. Then he looks away. "She's probably the best thing to ever walk into this cave. None of us remember our moms. She feels like one."

He pauses.

"She's a little young to be mine. But an older sister, maybe. One who sticks around."

I lean against the cool stone wall, listening, heart thudding painfully in my chest as I realize just how much these children have endured—and how much I've unwittingly stepped into.

Chapter 98: Caine: The Kids

Chapter 98: Caine: The Kids

CAINE

Something about these children sets my senses on edge.

I watch the kid closely as he speaks about the small sleeping forms in the alcove. His body language shifts constantly—defensive, protective, cautious. But it's not his movements that catch my attention. It's his scent.

A strange undertone clings to him. Sweet. Fruity. Similar to overripe strawberries, but not quite the same. It's subtle beneath his normal teenage smell—sweat, hormones, and a hint of animal musk.

At first whiff, he smells like a wolf.

I take a deeper breath, letting my senses expand through the cave. The little one, Bun—she smells like prey at her baseline. Rabbit.

But different as they are, they all share the same signature of scent. Strangely, almost synthetically fruity.

Owen doesn't carry it at all; he smells of summer and wind and something cleaner. Not human, though. Something else is there, but it's not like theirs.

"What kind of danger surrounds these kids?" I keep my voice low, even though I already know Grace is around the corner, listening. She probably thinks she's being quiet, but I can hear every shallow breath and the faint brush of her clothes against the wall. "Why is Owen the one saving them?"

He doesn't answer right away, looking instead toward the sleeping children. Then he rubs at his head with a long sigh, pulling at a few strands as he thinks my question over.

"There's something rotting in the bones of this place," he finally says. "But it's not just here. Packs have been weakening for decades. Even prey shifters are struggling."

His jaw tightens as he meets my eye. "More kids like us are being born. Owen tries to get them out when he can, but he fails more than he succeeds."

I've observed unrest among the packs, but it's always attributed to politics. Natural power struggles. Nothing like this.

"What's an aberrant?"

The kid frowns. His eyes are too old for his face, his bearing too weary for his age. "Owen says we're the world correcting itself. Spliced souls, carrying too much. Built to survive what's coming. But we don't shift right, so our packs don't want us. Owen can't fix it, but he can take us away. The people who want us... aren't good people."

This isn't rebellion. Nor is it political unrest. This is something ancient and invisible working under the skin of the world, something I should have sensed long before now. So why haven't I?

"Even the Lycan King has never heard of this. It sounds like a fairy tale."

He glances away, blinking hard. "You've never hear about kids who die mysteriously? The weak ones. The sick ones. The ones nobody loves?"

I go quiet.

It isn't as if I've never heard of cubs lost to illness, or accidents. Even unexplained causes. Troubling statistics exist in every population.

But they've never brought further inquiry.

Never connected dots which might have formed a more sinister picture.

What else have I missed?

Pups are the future of any pack, and they've gone unnoticed.

"I have now," I tell him quietly, once his gaze returns to mine. He's tall, starting to fill out in his shoulders. Young still, but growing fast. In another year, he'll look nothing like he does now. But he's still a child at heart, his eyes red-rimmed and his cheek twitching with the force of holding back strong emotion.

He nods. Once, a jerky little movement of his head. But it's enough to see he's softening.

"Why is Grace here?" I probe, hesitant to push this kid much further. But he knows more, and I need to know everything if I want to keep them all safe.

His response drops between us like a heavy stone. His words are so simple, and his facial expression shifts. Like he thinks it's a silly question.

"Because she's like us."

The certainty in his voice collides with everything I know as truth.

"She's not an aberrant. She's human." My voice comes out hard, a little too sharp. But he doesn't flinch.

He raises an eyebrow instead. "Aberrants can be human, too."

Before I can question him further, Jack-Eye's voice drops into my mind, the pack link opening without warning. It's intrusive enough to wake Fenris, who's sleeping deep inside.

You need to hear this.

The intensity behind his words brings a frown to my face, and the kid watches intently. I force my expression into impassivity; an adult should never scare children.

Well... sometimes.

But this is not one of those times.

They're all dead. Every single one of them. Someone came around and killed them all in some sick magic ritual. Fiddleback is fucked, Caine. Rotten from the ground up. This is way beyond anything we've ever seen before.

It only takes a thought to force the link wider, bringing in sight. Scent.

There's a rotten, putrid smell so vivid my tongue shrivels in my mouth, despite being a mental echo.

Who did it? I demand, even as hazy images filter through the link. Slow to manifest, but the impression is... devastating.

So many bodies. So much blood.

Lyre's burning it now. She seems angry. I don't think she's in her right mind. The woman's got power, Caine. More than even you. Better to keep her on our side—ah, shit, the wizard's puking again. I'll keep you updated.

The connection cuts as abruptly as it opened, leaving me disoriented, the cave spinning around me for a heartbeat.

"You okay?" the kid asks, reaching out with a hesitant hand.

"Caine? Are you all right?"

Footsteps shuffle against the stone floor, and Grace finally emerges from her hiding place, her blueberry scent hitting me hard. Breathing it in helps still the slight dizziness, smooths the ripples the kid stirred up in my chest. Her grass-green eyes are dark with worry, her fists clenched at her sides.

Ah. She probably wants to reach out. The visions must have affected me more than I thought, if these two can see how disoriented I am. If even Grace wants to try and stabilize me.

Thankfully, her hands remain at her sides. If I can't even control my expression right now, I'm sure I won't be able to control whatever transference bullshit happens when she touches me.

No touching, Fenris murmurs.

"I'm fine," I tell them both roughly, rolling my shoulders back until I'm straight again.

The kid doesn't seem to care anymore, looking at Grace instead as he asks, "Is she asleep?"

"More importantly," I cut in, "Who are these people after you?"

Chapter 99: Grace: Too Young For This

"The Great One. Isabeau. She's who's after us."

Ron's words come out flat and even, like he isn't talking about the scariest person in his life. My heart clenches further at how he doesn't even have the freedom to be a scared child.

Granted, he's what... fifteen? Fourteen? I'm sure he doesn't want to break down in front of strangers.

But he should be able to, if he wanted.

"Lyre took care of her, I think. You should be safe now." She hadn't mentioned names or any real details, but I'm assuming the sanguimancer Lyre dealt with is the same as the monster Ron and the children are hiding from.

Caine gives a slight nod. "She did. I recall the name."

Ron shakes his head and looks back at the sleeping children. "She'll be back. She's been around for ages. Older than a witch's ti—uh." His face goes pink. "Older than your grandparents, even. Blood witches don't die easy. And she's got minions. It isn't safe."

"But Lyre said she killed her," I point out. "I thought—"

"Killing her body doesn't kill her magic. And she's not the only one. There are others, all over the world. They hunt kids like us. We might be the oldest ones still living."

"But why? Why would they hunt you?"

Ron looks directly at me, his eyes empty in a way that scares me more than rage ever could. "Because we're batteries."

"Batteries?" I repeat blankly.

Caine shifts beside me, cutting off the faintest rumble out of his chest.

"Sanguimancers feed on the energy of the living. Soulspliced energy is even better for 'em. That's what Owen calls us—soulspliced. Aberrants. Our energy runs different. Stronger. More... conductive." He rubs his hands together, and shudders. "Normal shifters give them power, sure. But us? We're like their own personal nuclear reactors. They'll kill thousands to capture one of us."

My brain struggles to process the idea of young, defenseless children used as batteries. They're *children*. Even Brax took care of me until I was an adult—whatever his reasoning might be.

But there were some in the pack...

Maybe they would have sided with this strange Isabeau.

"Most don't survive long. Blood witches will feed on every last drop if you let them."

"That's..." I can't find the right words. Horrific? Evil? Those seem inadequate.

Ron shrugs, like this is just the facts of life and I should be used to it by now. But it's *not*. This is strange and bizarre and so beyond normal, and every part of me aches to grab him and hug him and show him there's a better world out there. Even if he's taller than I am and has the faint hint of a mustache on his upper lip, all I can see is a young child, alone and unloved in this world.

"The irony is what they do creates more of us," he says, unusually talkative now that we're on the subject. I don't know if he wants to educate us or if he just needs to get it all off his chest. Caine remains quiet as he talks, letting him say as much as he wishes. I want to beg him to stop. To never speak of it again. I'd rather him live pretending none of this ever happened.

But it's his reality, so he continues, "Every time they destroy one, the imbalance grows wider, and more come to fill the void. So they're making more batteries by draining them over and over. They just need to keep making babies, and more aberrants will pop out."

The cave suddenly feels colder. I wrap my arms around myself as my stomach twists into knots.

"That's what Fiddleback wanted us to be," Ron adds, his voice now barely audible.

Caine grunts. "That explains..."

But he trails off and doesn't finish his thought.

My nails grip into my forearms. They might even draw blood. My entire body keeps trembling, and I can't make it stop. "What was Fiddleback, exactly? Aren't they the local pack?"

"Yeah. But they're not really a pack. They're just a breeding farm."

My mind flashes to livestock, to animals kept in pens, forced to reproduce for human consumption. But he's talking about people. About shifters. About children.

None of this can be possible, right? Who's evil enough for this kind of horror?

"The adults weren't worth much," he continues, eyes fixed on some distant point. "Old wolves were kept around to make babies. That's it. More stock."

"And the children?" I ask, though I already know the answer will haunt me.

"Sorted." Ron's fingers dig into his arms. "The ones with shifting anomalies, strange scents, flickers of power—they'd be sent away once they were two or so. They're lucky to make it to five, usually."

"Five?" My voice cracks. Five isn't nearly long enough. "Why only... five?"

"Best energy-to-lifespan ratio." His clinical tone makes it worse somehow. "Younger, and they're not strong enough yet. Older, and they start becoming individuals. Hard to control. Five is optimal."

Bile rises in my throat. "And 'elsewhere'? Where is that?"

"Don't know exactly." He shrugs one shoulder, looking at Caine when the man blows out a deep breath. "It's one hundred percent mortality rate. That's all I know."

The Lycan's energy beside me feels like a thunderstorm, contained in a tiny bottle. A glass one, ready to shatter at any moment.

"Your parents..." I begin hesitantly. "Were they from—"

"Fiddleback? Yeah." Ron nods. "My mom was one of Halloway's favorites."

The way he says it—so detached, so matter-of-fact—breaks my heart. "Do you know her name?"

"No." He shrugs. "Just her face. Saw her once. Before."

"And your father?"

Ron snorts. "Who knows? All the old wolves fuck around. Part of the program. Halloway's the worst, though." His lip curls in disgust. "He sold his honor. He didn't want to be a pack alpha. He wanted more power than that."

I think of Alpha Brax, of how he cast me aside the moment he learned I wasn't his biological daughter. I thought that was betrayal. But this—this systematic cruelty, this calculated evil—makes my own pain seem small in comparison.

"How many children?" I ask, my voice barely a whisper.

"Hundreds over the years." Ron's eyes dart back to the alcove. "Most don't make it out."

"But you did," I say softly.

Ron's face hardens. "Yeah."

"Are... Jer and Sara? And Bun? Are they all Fiddleback, too?"

He shakes his head. "Nah. They're not from the program. They're just from local families. That's why Owen could get them out alive."

"Was it only pack, then? In the program?" If the other shifter families aren't involved...

But he shakes his head. "No. Any shifter they could grab. Sometimes new families would move here without knowing, though. Or they'd bamboozle 'em. Humans, too. Sometimes they survived. Sometimes they didn't."

My trembling intensifies. "And the ones who survived... what happened to them?"

He meets my eyes, hollow and direct. "Pregnant."

Oh.

Of course.

That would... make sense. A horrible, awful sense.

Was Mom a product of something like this? Did Brax also...?

No. I would know if we had a breeding program somewhere in our pack, wouldn't I? I mean, they can't hide it from everyone, right?

I don't know whether to cry or vomit. I do neither. I just sit there, hollowed out.

The silence stretches between us. Ron doesn't seem inclined to fill it. He's said his piece, laid bare the horror that shaped his life with the detachment of someone reciting historical facts. But he's fifteen.

When I was fifteen, I'd been dreaming about kissing Rafe for the first time. Silly adolescent dreams.

"How do you even know these things?" It comes out somewhere between accusation and plea. Because no child should know these things. No fifteen-year-old should talk about breeding programs and energy-to-lifespan ratios with such clinical distance.

Ron scoffs. "You don't get to stay a kid when you're born like this."

As if childhood is a privilege we can revoke. An expiration date stamped on innocence.

Caine shifts beside me, the tension in his body palpable. His face is carefully composed, but I can see the storm raging, can feel it in the air crackling around him. Something inside me surges and twists, trying to reach out to him, but failing and falling short.

When he speaks, his voice is low and controlled. Calm, as if we hadn't listened to the horrors of a child too grown for his years. "It's late. Go get some sleep."

Ron hesitates, then nods, pushing himself to his feet. He turns and heads toward the alcove, but pauses at the entrance. "Owen's good people," he says quietly. "If you're wondering."

Knowing their past, it would be insanity to think otherwise.

He must be an angel, to sacrifice himself for these kids. To try and try again, despite so many failures.

My eyes burn.

Caine waits until Ron is out of earshot before he turns to me. Even in the dim light, I can see the weight of knowledge pressing down on him.

"Grace..." His voice is a whisper, his eyes too somber. He doesn't want the kids to hear. "The rescue mission. Jack-Eye updated me."

It's not good news.

If it was good news, he wouldn't have sent Ron away.

"What happened?"

I don't think I can take any more sadness today, but I straighten my back and take a deep breath, preparing for the emotional blow.

"They're all dead. Everyone in the cages. Everyone Lyre found. All of them. Even the kids."

The air leaves my lungs in a slow, painful exhale. "All of them? But—"

"How many?" The question's hard to choke out.

"Too many."

I close my eyes, trying to block out the images his words conjure. It doesn't work. I see small bodies in cages. I see blood. I see vacant eyes staring at nothing.

"If we had known sooner... if we had found out earlier—"

"Don't." Caine's voice is firm. "That path leads nowhere good."

I bite my lip. Lyre had forgotten about them. For how long? If she'd told us earlier, would we have been able to save them?

Is she okay, knowing they were alive before, and now they're not?

Is it okay to be angry with her for this?

Harsh lines of grief are etched into Caine's face. His hand rises, almost involuntarily, reaching toward me. For a moment, I think he's going to touch my hair, offer some physical comfort, and I yearn to lean into him. But then he flinches. His hand falls to his side, fingers curling into a fist.

Right. No touching.

The small, aborted gesture of comfort makes everything worse. We can't even console each other without risking my health.

I've never felt more isolated.

My gaze drifts toward the alcove where the children sleep. Do Jer and Sara understand what they've been saved from? Does little Bun, with her ever-shifting features, have any concept of the fate that might have awaited her?

How many others like them never made it out? How many were consumed by blood witches or syphoned for their energy until nothing remained?

"Thank you," I say suddenly, surprising myself.

Caine tilts his head, questioning.

"For destroying the Fiddleback Pack." The words feel strange in my mouth, but right. Just days ago, I'd seen him as nothing but a murderous monster. The Lycan King who slaughtered an entire pack without remorse. Now I understand.

Lyre had called it pack justice.

"Thank you for stopping them."

It's not justice when there's no one left to save. It's just blood for blood—but the price had to be paid.

Chapter 100: Lyre: Plausibility

Chapter 100: Lyre: Plausibility

Blue-white fire dances across the walls, twisting in impossible patterns and defying all laws of physics. The flames consume nothing—not the blood-soaked concrete or the bodies scattered like broken dolls.

This isn't destruction.

It's preparation.

I stand at the center of it all, unmoved, untouched. Fire caresses my skin like an old lover, recognizing what I am and making way. My hair lifts slightly in the heat, rainbow strands floating as though underwater.

The inferno is beautiful in its terrible way.

I lift my hand, palm up, fingers splayed. My nails lengthen just a fraction, blackening at the tips.

"Come," I whisper, and the command reverberates through the chamber. Not with sound, but with intent.

The effect is immediate. Pinpricks of light rise from the bodies—pale blue, silver-white, soft lavender. They drift upward like embers from a dying fire, hesitant at first, then eager. Soullight. Released from flesh which can no longer serve.

The Reapers haven't arrived, so it's the perfect time.

Wispy trails streak toward my outstretched palm, hovering inches above my skin. They pulse with awareness—terrified, melancholy, angry. So much anger. I can taste their fury, where it coalesces in my palm.

They deserve better than this forgotten death, better than becoming fuel for someone else's ambitions.

Deserve more than someone who never wanted to be their hero.

"Cleanse," I murmur, the single word ringing with the power of arcana.

The souls respond, stretching upward like plants seeking sunlight. They know what I am—what I represent. Neither Order, nor Chaos, nor Balance; something between all three, part of everything but belonging to none. Something else entirely.

These poor, forgotten souls spiral higher, streams of light crawling toward ceiling of this place, phasing through concrete and earth and whatever else is between them and the sky above.

My phone vibrates against my hip. Once. Twice. Then a continuous buzz, like it's an angry hornet trapped against my skin.

Divinity Connect, having an absolute meltdown over my presence here, over what I'm doing. Like I didn't know what was going to happen from the moment I took this step.

The app is the supernatural world's most persistent annoyance—part divine social media, part surveillance.

I ignore it.

The souls continue their ascent, streaming upward in ribbons of light, fireflies escaping a jar. Free. Finally free. The last traces of soullight disappear through the ceiling, leaving only the empty shells behind.

The blue-white flames flicker and dim around me. My work here isn't finished, but the souls, at least, are beyond reach. Beyond corruption.

I don't speak again. Don't look back. The concrete beneath my feet cracks with each step as I walk through the chamber, past empty cages and discarded bodies. An avenging ghost leaving judgment in her wake.

Behind me, new flames begin to rise—orange-red this time, hungry and cleansing. They won't stop until nothing remains.

* * *

The scent of smoke curls at my back, wrapping around my limbs like desperate hands, but never touching my skin. It knows better.

My rage has transmuted—no longer choking or desperate, but elemental. Present. A constant companion rather than a flaring outburst.

Each step I take leaves behind a blackened imprint. I'm still burning, power leaking from my edges where control has frayed.

I stop suddenly, frowning.

Four figures stand in a loose huddle several yards away—Thom, Andrew, Jack-Eye, and Owen. Their heads are bent together in conversation, shoulders rigid with tension. Fear and exhaustion rolls off the wizard especially in a cloying wave.

I'd forgotten they existed.

For a brief, disorienting moment, I'm confused by their presence. Humans. Wolves. Angel-blood. Inconsequential mortals with inconsequential concerns, waiting for me to acknowledge them, when my mind is already set on vengeance.

Jack-Eye notices me first, his head snapping up when he catches my scent. He breaks from the group, striding toward me with determination, as if he isn't afraid.

But he is.

I guess I'm leaking more than I thought I was.

"What happened down there?" He grabs my arm, fingers digging in as he drags me away from the billowing smoke now pouring from the tunnel entrance. "Get over here. Breathing this isn't good for your lungs."

I let him pull me along, mildly amused he believes I'm fragile enough to need protection. His hand on my arm is warm and solid—convinced of its own authority.

We reach the car, parked haphazardly along the dirt access road. Owen stands off to the side, his silver eyes fixed on me with wariness bordering on terror.

He knows. Of course he knows. Angels are sensitive to souls; he probably watched them all ascend.

My phone keeps buzzing.

A retching sound draws my attention. The wizard's doubled over behind a half-uprooted tree, the contents of his stomach splashing onto dead needles and rocky soil.

Jack-Eye sighs. "That's the third time."

Andrew pauses from where he was about to climb into the back seat of the car. His words are flat as he observes the situation. "He's human. They have weak stomachs."

There's no judgment in his tone, no mockery—just quiet resignation. They've seen too much today, these creatures whose lives are measured in decades rather than centuries.

Jack-Eye's fingers finally release my arm, leaving behind red marks. They fade as soon as I notice them, but he has no idea; he's too focused on the retching spellblood. "You gonna make it back to the car, or do I need to carry you?"

Thom straightens, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. His glasses have gone askew. "I'm fine," he mutters, though he sways slightly on his feet. "Just—give me a minute."

The phone at my hip continues to vibrate, more insistent now. I let out an irritated sigh, yanking the damn thing from my pocket. My vague sense of disassociation disappears, my mind grounded by the irritations of reality. The screen's bright enough to illuminate the space around me.

This isn't a regular notification—this is divine spam.

Expected... but still annoying.

I thumb through the app with a grimace, already knowing what I'm going to find. And there they are: three plausibility warnings flash immediately, angry red alerts scrolling across my screen.

[PLAUSIBILITY WARNING: Unauthorized Soul Transit.]

[PLAUSIBILITY WARNING: Unsanctioned Purification of Uncategorized Souls.]

[PLAUSIBILITY WARNING: Excess Magic Discharge.]

I clear them with a mental *fuck off*, swiping through the alerts without reading the details. Like I need their permission to help these souls pass on. If I'd stayed, they wouldn't have needed it. They'd be settled into some safe house somewhere. Eating dinner. Talking. Maybe even laughing for the first time in years.

Unsanctioned, my ass.

Fuck their rules.

The app chimes again, a new notification sliding into view. Then another. And another. New messages flood in, each one carrying the distinct energy signature of its sender.

[SANCTION: You're bordering on systemic violation. Reapers were already on their way, @Lyrielle.]

Of course. Order's faithful bulldog, always first to bark when someone steps outside the lines. The next message pops up with a sparkle effect, stabbing my eyes with its enthusiasm.

[WHIM: Ohh, baby @Lyrielle, keep going. This is delicious. Why aren't we allowed to use emojis? Imagine three fire emojis right here, okay?]

[WRATH: You're spiraling again. Is it really worth it? You took years to recover last time.]

Jack-Eye clears his throat. "Are you okay?"

"Fine. It's just work." Stepping away from the group, I let my thumbs fly across the screen. How long has it been since I entertained them on this thing? Probably when it was first made.

[LYRIELLE: If you're not going to help the mortals who keep your pathetic little shrines warm and your worthless names remembered, shut up and enjoy the show, you self-righteous cowards.]

I'm not done. My fingers keep moving, venom leaking into each word:

[LYRIELLE: Or better yet—do something. But you won't, because Plausibility gives you the perfect excuse to do *nothing*. Fuck all of you and your stupid winged horses.]

The air crackles around me as I finish:

[LYRIELLE: You all feed on worship, and yet leave your people bleeding in the dirt. You're not gods. You're *parasites*.]

Of course, it doesn't stay silent for long.

[SANCTION: This borders on insubordination, Echo Witch. Your status will not shield you from formal repercussions.]

[WRATH: You're going to trigger another plausibility review. Is that what you want? After last time?]

[MADNESS: She has a point, though.]

[TIME: We are bound by Causality. Desire is irrelevant. Even gods have limits. Did we ask for this, @Lyrielle?]

I roll my eyes and slam the app closed. My phone screen darkens, but not before I catch the reflection of my own eyes in the glass—slitted and glowing with too much power. I need to rein it in before shit really hits the fan.

If I get hit with a review, I won't be able to do anything for a while. Could be days, could be years, depending on whose stick is up whose ass.

Owen's still watching me, and I snarl until he jerks his eyes away.

He knows what I've done. Angel-blooded always recognize soul work. But he doesn't need to make it obvious. He was flinching every time I so much as breathed earlier, and now he won't stop staring. The more attention brought to my actions, the worse the Plausibility slap will ring.

"I'm hunting down whoever did this," I announce to the group at large. "Come with me or don't, but stay out of the way. I'm taking the car. Walk back if you don't want to follow."