

Grace of a Wolf

#Chapter 101: Grace: Domesticity - Read Grace of a Wolf

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A soft scuffling sound pulls me from sleep. I blink against the dimness, my eyes adjusting to the cave's weak morning light.

It's the same as its evening light, just whatever's being given by the stringed lights across the walls. It just feels darker because waking should feel bright and sunny, not dim and... well, cave-like.

Sara's crawled from her little nest to the edge of the alcove, peering out to the main part of the cave. She slept with her hair in braids, and they're a mess, half-fallen off her head with large strands of hair floating in every which direction.

"Owen?" she whispers, too loud to be an actual whisper.

"He's not here." Jer sits by his rumpled blankets, knees pulled tight to his chest. He seems very vacant for a kid full of energy. Yesterday, he couldn't stop talking; today, he's... monotone.

I try to sit up but discover I'm pinned. Bun's tiny body is wrapped koala-style around my torso, her face buried so deeply into my neck I can barely even feel her warm breath puffing against my skin. It's just *there*.

Both chubby hands are limp with the relaxation of deep sleep.

How do I get out of this situation?

"Bun," I whisper, gently stroking her back. "I need to get up."

She makes a sleepy noise of protest and burrows deeper, her tiny arms tightening with surprising strength.

"Come on, Bun-Bun. Breakfast time."

"Nooooo," she mumbles, clinging tighter. Her little fingers dig in like claws.

A shadow falls across us, and I look up to see Caine standing over me, his expression unreadable in the half-light.

"I'll take her," he offers, reaching down.

Bun's head snaps up, suddenly fully awake. Her eyes widen at the sight of Caine's outstretched hands. The growl emanating from her throat sounds like absolutely nothing a toddler should make—it's pure animal warning. She actually slaps his hand away, then presses her face back against my collarbone.

His eyebrows shoot up, but the corner of his mouth quirks. "Well, then."

He's taking it in stride. He seems to have a soft spot for kids.

"Sorry," I mutter, struggling to sit up while keeping Bun balanced. How do moms do this? "She's... attached."

From across the room, Ron's scowling. Even without really looking at him, I can *feel* it. I'm not sure how long he's been awake. "She used to come to me first," he mutters, just loud enough for me to hear. The hurt in his voice is barely disguised beneath teenage indifference.

But instead of dwelling on it, his attention shifts to the others. He stands up, stretching his long limbs, and moves toward Jer with practiced efficiency.

"Up," he says, not unkindly. "Sitting like that gets you nowhere."

The younger boy doesn't budge.

Ron sighs and crouches beside him. "Three seconds before I carry you to breakfast. One, two..."

"I'm up." Jer stands with a sigh.

Sara's still peering around the corner, knees to chest, and Ron heads over to ruffle her hair. "Come on. Owen will be back later."

"He should be back already," she argues, though there's no heat in her voice. "He's always back by morning."

"Well, he's not. Let's eat some breakfast. Brush your hair first; you look like you stuck your finger in a light socket."

Through some strange magic of being the eldest of the children—siblings, basically—Ron gets them all up, moving, and in the main living area, sitting in a semi-circle for breakfast. Sara's got a plastic brush and, after multiple light swipes over her hair, she somehow looks worse than before.

"Give me that," the teenager says, snatching the brush out of her hand. "You didn't even take them out of their braids."

She yawns. "Sorry. Owen always does my hair."

It's obvious Ron's never done this before, as he struggles to get the black elastic bands out of her hair. The girl yelps every so often as his fingers comb through tangles trying to undo her braids, but she seems to be doing better under his care than before, no longer obsessively staring and waiting for Owen to walk through the door.

I don't know how to do this. These aren't my kids. I have exactly zero experience with children; I don't know what they eat, if they have routines, or how to read their cues. I don't know how to comfort them without Owen here.

The panic rises in my throat, sharp and sudden. I didn't sign up for four kids overnight. I'm barely holding my own life together. And yet I'm taking on the responsibility of a toddler somehow, one who won't stop clinging to me despite me having no idea what to do or even where her clean diapers are stored. Ron's been the one to get them all.

And if I take Bun, I can't leave the others behind. So they're all mine now, but Ron is only a few years younger than me, and I have *no* idea how I'm supposed to teach a girl how to brush her hair. How did my mom teach me? I can't even remember not knowing.

Caine clears his throat, pulling me from my spiral. He's moved to the kitchenette, standing in front of the open refrigerator with a perplexed expression.

"Why are there twelve pounds of carrots?" he asks, staring into its depths.

The randomness of the question breaks through my panic. "What?"

He gestures at the fridge. "Carrots. There's enough to feed a stable of horses."

"Uh... they're good for eyesight?"

He grunts and moves on to the tall, freestanding cabinet Owen's repurposed as the cave's pantry. His brow slowly creases as he surveys its contents. "What do you even do with this many apples?" He pulls out a bag filled with small red apples. "There's three more bags in here."

"Snacks. And... fiber?" I guess weakly.

"Bun eats them," Sara pipes up, squeaking as Ron gets at another one of her tangles. "She takes a few bites and then throws them away, though."

Ah. So there's a lot of waste involved.

I wonder how we're supposed to fix that.

Jer snorts, the first sign of his usual personality this morning. "Owen calls them crunchy treats. Says we need the vitamins."

He sounds disgusted. Guess he's not a fan.

Caine eyes the produce skeptically, then shrugs. Without further commentary, he pulls out eggs, bread, and what looks like a cast iron pan. He moves with the confidence of someone who knows exactly what he's doing, cracking eggs one-handed and throwing bread into an ancient toaster.

All the electricity in this place—not that there's much—comes from extension cords strung across the ceiling. Aside from a few lights, most everything running electric is in the kitchen.

Everything being a fridge, a single-burner induction hot plate, a coffee maker, a microwave, and a toaster. I'm pretty sure we can't run them all at the same time. The fridge has its own extension cord.

No idea where the extension cords lead to, but they come out of a wall near the bathroom.

But the miracles of modern day electricity aren't what catch my attention. It's Caine, silently taking over the kitchen as he makes breakfast while wearing the same clothes from yesterday, his hair slightly mussed from sleep and his face calm.

Watching him now, it's a wonder I ever thought of him as some sort of serial killer. Granted, his facial expressions were darker and he tended to glower every time he looked at me...

This is a side of him I haven't seen before.

He works in silence, the sizzle of eggs filling the cave. When the toast pops up, he arranges everything on mismatched plates—no idea where he found them. Then, surprisingly, he takes a knife and slices apples and pears into thin wedges, creating small piles on each plate.

Bun, still clinging to me, finally raises her head at the smell of breakfast. Drool drips from her partially open mouth as she stares in Caine's direction.

"Jer, get the margarine," Ron says, and the younger boy shuffles toward the fridge with a yawn.

"Ow," Sara says as he works at another tangle. "That hurts!"

"Well, if you would brush your hair before bed..."

"Owen wasn't home!"

"Learn to do it yourself, then."

"Enough, kids." Caine slides the plates in front of each kid, and Jer returns with a butter knife and a giant tub of margarine. "Eat first. You can finish her hair when she's done."

"Yes, sir." Ron tosses the brush to the side as he takes his place on the floor, grabbing the knife from Jer as he butters a piece of toast.

Unsurprisingly, he hands it to Sara when he's done. She takes it like she was expecting it, and he does another.

That one goes to Jer.

Then another. He comes to me, and Bun stares at the toast in his hand, still drooling.

"Here you go, Bun. Butter toast. Your favorite!"

She shakes her head, and he frowns. "Aren't you hungry? I can see you drooling."

Bun shakes her head again and dives back into my neck. Not sure what to do, I hold out my hand. "Here. I'll feed her when she's ready to eat. You should focus on your own food."

Ron frowns, his face a mask of teenage disappointment. Something sharp twists in my chest at his expression.

"Sit." Caine's order causes him to jerk up straight, and he shuffles back to his spot on the floor. He keeps his eyes fixed on his plate, stabbing at his eggs with more force than necessary.

Bun shifts in my arms, reaching for the toast in my hand with eager fingers. Her tiny face lights up as she takes a giant bite, crumbs cascading down the front of her pajamas and onto my lap. Happy little humming noises come out of her with each chew, and the teenager glances at us again.

Another frown crosses his face as he watches Bun's delight. He quickly looks away, but not before I catch the hurt in his eyes.

Chapter 102: Grace: Pack

Bun continues to scarf at her piece of buttered toast with all the hunger of someone who hasn't eaten in a month, even if her chubby little rolls bely her actions.

Her death grip on my shirt has loosened significantly as her focus shifts entirely to the food.

"I see how it is," I murmur against her hair. "Food trumps fear every time."

Her eyes, wide and shining, meet mine as she chews. For the tiniest moment, I swear they change from brown to blue, then back again. Another piece of toast disappears into her mouth.

Ron peels a banana and leans over, holding it out in his hand like he's trying to coax a wild animal. "Want some banana? Your favorite."

Bun turns at the sound of his voice, her entire body going rigid. The halfhearted smile on Ron's face falters as her mouth opens and an ear-splitting shriek fills the cave.

No words. Just pure, agonizing, shrill shrieking as she throws herself back against my chest with enough force for me to tip over. I catch myself with one hand on the floor, and Caine jerks toward me like he's going to catch me. Thankfully, one of the toddler's flailing fists whacks his hand away before our skin can touch.

"Sorry," Ron mutters, backing away with the rejected banana. The defeat in his eyes makes my chest ache.

"She's adjusting," Caine tells him, pulling Bun out of my arms with practiced efficiency. Even with her wild, maniacal movements, he swoops her into his embrace without a blink.

She screams louder, and he walks away, heading into the kitchen. "Pups who scream don't eat," he warns her with a steady, stern voice.

The decibels continue to climb.

Sara scoots a little closer to Ron and snags the toast from his plate.

"Hey!" He scowls, but doesn't make a move to grab it back.

Without missing a beat, she rolls her eyes. "Oh please, you weren't even going to eat it. And it's going cold."

"It was already cold," Ron grumbles, but there's no heat behind it.

Bun's screaming stops abruptly; she's angrily chewing on a piece of apple, staring at me over Caine's shoulder. My ability to translate baby facial expressions is still new, but I'm pretty sure she's giving me the *you've-betrayed-me* look.

I glance away. Making eye contact seems like a bad idea.

Jer's stabbing at his eggs without actually eating them, so I focus on him instead. There's a plate of sliced apples next to me—Caine must have put them there. I slide them toward the kid without a word.

At first, I think he doesn't notice. Then, without looking up, he reaches for an apple slice and pops it into his mouth. His shoulders drop a fraction of an inch.

It's all so quietly domestic, my heart swells a little, even as my panic continues in the background of my head.

This is a pack. Not the one I was adopted into, nothing so shallow as to discard each other the moment something changes. But a real pack, nonetheless, messy and awkward and forming before my eyes.

And Caine? He's a part of it, too.

He seems okay with it. More than me, and I'm the one drawn to these kids in a way I can't explain, even to myself.

"You okay?" Caine's voice pulls me from my thoughts. I'm staring at nothing, probably looking crazy, and he's only a few feet away now, frowning in my direction.

Bun's no longer reaching for me, both hands full of mushy apple, cheeks bulging. He hasn't exactly won her over, but it looks like they've achieved some sort of truce.

"I'm okay. I was just thinking."

He watches the children for a moment, his expression thoughtful. They're almost done eating, but Jer's only had a few pieces of apple. I'm not sure any egg has made it past the murderous fork to get into his belly. "They're nervous."

It's not a question, but I nod anyway. Owen not being here has them spooked. He's their savior, so it makes sense.

"Lyre, Owen, and Jack-Eye should be back soon," he says casually, loud enough for everyone to hear. "They're hunting down the perpetrator from last night."

He doesn't mention Andrew or his little wizard tagalong, and I wonder if they're with the group or settled elsewhere.

All three of the older kids' heads snap up in unison, attention locked on Caine.

"What about the others?" I ask, playing along.

"They're helping," he says vaguely, and I wonder if he doesn't know, either. He doesn't seem terribly concerned about them. "But things are going to change around here now that the Great One is dead."

Sara's fork clatters against her plate. "The Great One is dead?" Her voice pitches higher than normal. "For real? Really-really?"

"How do you know? Are you sure?" Jer demands, leaning forward.

Both of them talk over each other, their voices rising with each question.

"When is Owen coming back?"

"Is he okay?"

"Was it really the girl with the rainbow hair?" That's Sara—she must have been listening when we were talking to Lyre yesterday. A mild surprise, considering how overwhelmed she was by Caine's mere presence.

Caine holds up a hand, and they fall silent immediately. It's a kind of instant obedience coming from somewhere deep in their shifter bones, responding to the presence of the Lycan King.

"Soon," he says, his voice calm and certain. "It won't take them long to root out the rest of the problems here."

Sara's shoulders visibly relax, and Jer exhales slowly, nodding to himself. Ron, however, watches the Lycan with a measured gaze. Unlike the younger ones, he understands—this isn't as simple as killing one monster and being done. His eyes flick to mine, and I recognize the weight of knowledge there.

"So we're safe?" the older girl asks, her voice smaller than I've heard it before.

"You're safe," Caine confirms. His eyes meet mine, conveying more than his words. "Nothing's getting past me."

Even I believe him when he says it like that.

Bun shifts in his arms, looking up at him with her tiny fingers opening and closing in a universal "gimme" gesture. Ron jumps up and hands her the rejected banana offering from earlier, and she coos happily.

He grins.

It's the most relaxed look I've ever seen on his face, and I want to hug him with relief.

"Always hungry, that one," Sara says with the weary authority of someone three times her actual age. "Owen says it's the shifting that does it. Burns a lot of energy."

"It does," Caine confirms, settling her on his hip as he heads back to the kitchen area. "Especially when you're young and growing. You were probably the same as a pup."

"I'm not a pup," she says, stuffing toast in her mouth.

"You are now."

"Huh." She chews thoughtfully.

Ron watches Bun, smiling when she drops a chunk of banana on the floor. She stares over Caine's shoulder with watery eyes, as if her older brother can somehow magic it back into her hands.

"She seems adaptable," I murmur, glad to see a more uplifted look on his face.

"Babies usually are."

Chapter 103: Jack-Eye: Hooked

JACK-EYE

My left leg cramps for the fifth time in an hour. Fuck compact SUVs and their contempt for anyone over six feet tall. I shift, trying to find a position that doesn't feel like my knees are pressed against my throat, but there's no relief to be found in this rolling sardine can.

Dawn's coming, with weak pink and gold fingers creeping across the lightening sky.

And we're still on the highway.

No known destination, being driven by someone more likely to turn us into amphibians than answer questions.

We've been driving all night, and the mood in the car has settled from the aftermath of rage and deep sorrow into something fragile. Like if we breathe wrong, we might remember everything all over again.

In the back seat, the Blue Mountain kid's snoring with his head pressed against the window. The sniveling wizard is asleep against his shoulder, twitching occasionally. Once he flinched so hard, his glasses flew off his face. It still didn't wake him up, even when Owen shoved them back on.

The strange guy—an angel, or something related to one... apparently—has been awake this entire time, like he's used to forgoing sleep for missions.

And then there's Lyre.

One arm drapes across the steering wheel with casual confidence, the other resting against her door. Like she could drive this road with her eyes closed.

She hasn't spoken in hours, but her lips have gone from a tight line to slightly pursed, and her eyes no longer crinkle at the corners, more relaxed as she stares ahead. There's still the hint of simmering rage burning the air around her, but at least I'm reasonably sure she won't set the car on fire.

I catch it again—a faint shimmer across her knuckles. A subtle glow pulsing beneath her skin when she thinks no one's looking.

She's powerful. Shifters aren't exposed to her kind of magic, but even I can recognize it's greater than anything I've seen before. And it's barely contained by a slip of a girl with rainbow-colored hair and strange eyes which flash between human and cat-like.

Without warning, she takes an exit ramp, the SUV gliding smoothly off the highway onto a stretch of rural back road.

"We getting close?" I ask, rolling my shoulders to work out the stiffness.

"No." Her voice is flat. End of conversation.

Damn it.

Aside from one pit stop for gas and Thom's desperate rush to the bathroom—both to rinse out his vomit-stale mouth and to use the more traditional facilities—we haven't gotten a break from this damn tin can on wheels. She's a woman on a mission.

Dangerous. Pretty, but full of mortal peril if you look at her wrong.

I study her profile, the sharp line of her jaw, the slight upturn of her nose. Everything about her is a contradiction—she looks soft, yet she's capable of things so arcane they feel just this side of illegal.

"So what are you, exactly?" The question's been eating at me for a while now, only stronger after I watched her walk out of that place, hands clean but eyes haunted. "I've seen powerful before, but you're something else."

No one's been able to throw Caine around like she does, that's for fucking sure. There's a reason he has my loyalty.

From the back seat, Thom stirs. His eyes flutter open, landing on Lyre with an unsettling intensity. "She's..." His voice drops to a reverent whisper. "She's beyond powerful. I can feel it. Like we're standing too close to the sun."

He sounds more poetic than usual, probably because he's half-asleep.

Lyre's eyes flick to the rearview mirror, then back to the road. The silence stretches.

I should be annoyed by her refusal to answer. It's the kind of shit I'd call Caine out on in a heartbeat. But with her, I'm... intrigued. The mystery of her sharpens something in me, a curiosity bordering on hunger.

She has freckles scattered across the bridge of her nose. I hadn't noticed them before, when we were knee-deep in blood and crisis. They're unexpected on someone so intimidating—like finding wildflowers growing in a volcanic field.

Her posture radiates confidence, a bone-deep certainty that she belongs exactly where she is. Even when she's angry.

Let's be real, I noticed her curves the moment we met. I'm not dead. But this feeling crawling up my spine isn't just attraction. It's different. Thrilling. Staring at a beautiful predator and wondering if it would be worth it to get closer, just to see what happens—that kind of obsessive, ill-advised pull.

"Why are you staring?" she asks without taking her eyes off the road. Her tone is dry as dust, and I wonder if it would change if I told her I wanted to tear her clothes off and fuck her until she's begging.

Someone as strong as her, demanding more of my cock? It twitches just thinking about it.

I let the corner of my mouth lift and aim for an answer less... explosive. "Trying to figure you out."

"Don't bother." The words slice cold and clean between us. "You wouldn't even know where to start."

From the back seat, Owen clears his throat. "It's better not to meddle with the likes of an Echo Witch." He sounds reverent, but the kind of reverence where you're scared you'll be turned into ash for sinning.

Andrew stirs for the first time in hours. I guess the atmosphere of the car's even woken the kid.

I turn, keen to know more. "Echo Witch? That a rank or a warning label?"

Lyre says nothing, of course.

The atmosphere in the car shifts, grows heavier. Andrew and Thom both shift in their seats before pretending to fall asleep again, but the rhythm of their breathing never changes.

It's as if speaking those words aloud stirred something ancient, something better left sleeping. It makes my gut twitch, my ears perk. There's a story there, information to dig out. Secrets hidden.

Or maybe I'm growing fanciful in my old age.

Owen meets my eyes in the dim light of dawn. "If you don't know... you don't need to."

Damn.

Foiled again.

I lean back in my seat, keeping Lyre in my sight. The rising sun catches in her hair, setting the wild colors ablaze. I should feel threatened by the heaviness that's settled over us, by the clear warning in Owen's voice.

Instead, I'm hooked.

Good thing I've never listened to warnings.

Chapter 104: Jack-Eye: Rot and Rainbows

JACK-EYE

My already cramped leg slams against the door panel as we hit another pothole.

Fuck these fucking soccer mom SUVs.

A shabby excuse for a structure comes into view through the dusty windshield. It's not much—just a weathered storage shed with a half-assed attempt at a deck slapped against its side. It has a cheap metal roof and probably leaks every time it rains.

There's nothing but overgrown weeds and sparse pine trees. And probably about five hundred species of spiders, but we won't talk about how a single big, bad Lycan is terrified of brown recluse bites.

I've seen shit, okay? And it's nasty.

Anyway, this is the kind of place you'd miss if you blinked driving past, but Lyre's already slowing down.

Andrew leans forward. "Huh. Looks like someone's trying to build a tiny house."

Yeah, and failed.

Nobody answers his inane observation. Thom's not snoring anymore—guess his head was too rattled from the gravel road to allow for more sleeping—and Owen's so tense he's radiating nervous energy through the car.

Lyre's frowning. She isn't relaxed anymore, either, but she doesn't have the edge of anticipation I can smell off Owen. No, she seems... irritated. Maybe disappointed. The scents keep coming and going, blending together until it's hard to tell them apart.

Whatever she was looking for, this isn't it. Or at least, it isn't what she expected to find.

She kills the engine but stays frozen in her seat. Her fingers start tapping against the wheel, one-two-three, one-two-three, like she's keeping time with a funeral march only she can hear.

Fuck waiting. I need to move before my leg permanently fuses to this position. Whoever's here must have already heard us coming, so it isn't like I'm going to destroy the surprise of our arrival.

Shouldering the door open, I slide out with a grunt. My back pops in three places as I stretch, the muscles in my thighs screaming in protest.

Staying up all night? Easy. Fighting? No problem. Folding myself into an accordion for a long-ass car ride I wasn't expecting? Sucks fucking balls, man.

The others practically tumble out after me the moment the back door opens. Andrew's more graceful about it, with all the edge of youth, but even he's got relief written all over his face as he reaches for the sky. First one arm, then the other.

Owen, meanwhile, stretches like a man twice his age. Me? I have to hide the creaking joints. Don't want Lyre thinking I'm too old to keep up with her.

The wizard, though, just looks pathetically grateful to be out of the stench of armpit and stale cigarettes. No one here smokes; it's just baked into the interior of the car.

But Lyre still doesn't move. She just sits there, fingers still tapping, eyes focused on the shed like she's calculating exactly how much force it would take to reduce it to splinters.

I roll my neck and take a deep breath of morning air.

Then I freeze.

It hits my nostrils like a sledgehammer—not the good forest smells of pine and dirt and morning dew, but something rancid. Not normal rot. Not roadkill or garbage or even a carcass left too long.

This is deeper. Older. *Wrong*.

It's the same stink that permeated Isabeau's prison, but less diluted. More concentrated. The kind of stench where you want to scrape your own skin off afterward.

My hackles rise, wolf instincts slamming against human skin. Every muscle coils tight, ready to shift, to fight.

I look around and see I'm not the only one who caught it. Owen stands stock-still, his face unreadable but his shoulders rigid. Andrew's mouth is a thin, tight line. Only Thom seems oblivious, quietly gazing at the clouds like we're on a fucking nature walk.

I bend down to peer through the passenger window at Lyre.

Holy shit.

Her expression is locked down tight, but there's a calculation happening behind those strange eyes, a cold fury building. She looks like someone planning a massacre.

I've seen that look on Caine's face plenty of times. I know exactly what I'm seeing.

My wolf whimpers in the back of my head. Fucking coward. He's been a mess ever since Lyre turned the angel-man into a toad.

And yeah, maybe it made my knees turn to rubber for a bit, too. But I'm over it. He isn't.

She finally opens the door and slides out with liquid grace.

"Don't get comfortable," she says flatly, not looking at any of us. "We're not staying."

Not like any of us would want to stick around this stench.

I give her a sidelong look and a grunt of acknowledgment. But when she starts moving toward the shed, I step in front of her, putting my body between hers and whatever fucked-up thing waits inside.

It's stupid. She could probably turn me into a smear on the ground with less effort than it takes me to shift. But some instincts run deeper than self-preservation.

When I glance behind her, she's got one perfect brow arched like she knows exactly what I'm doing, and she doesn't find it cute.

It's fine.

It isn't like I'm trying to get brownie points. Yet.

This is just basic manners.

And maybe a way for her to notice my ass. I've heard it's pretty fantastic.

The scent of death gets stronger with each step toward the shed. My brain splits three ways—one part screaming *bad magic*, one part tracking the positions of everyone in our group, and one part...

One part won't stop looking back at her.

The rising sun sets fire to her rainbow hair, turning each strand into a different jewel tone. Her skin glows in the warm light, those freckles standing out across the bridge of her nose. She should look exhausted after an all-night drive through hell and back, but instead she looks...

Fierce. Powerful. Fuckable.

Way, way too fuckable.

"Lot of birds," Thom comments, following us and still oblivious.

Andrew smacks him on the back; I can hear the movement, but I can't see his face. He's probably mildly exasperated by the human's inability to sense what we all do.

At least his vapid commentary helps break me out of my lustful thoughts.

She doesn't thank me for taking point, but I swear there's a flicker of something like approval in her eyes when she thinks I'm not watching. Or maybe it's wishful thinking. It sends a dart of heat straight to my groin, which is the absolute wrong reaction to have while walking toward what smells like certain death.

As we near the shed, the stench grows powerful enough to make my eyes water, and my libido finally takes notice and backs down. I track the change in Lyre's posture—the way her shoulders tighten, her steps becoming more deliberate, her breathing shallow.

I glance back at her for what feels like the thousandth time. Maybe taking point was a terrible idea. I want to be able to see her at all times. Owen, the blockhead, gets in my damn way, coming to stand beside me with his fists clenched as he stares at the door.

Of course, he probably has no idea I'm over here ogling the strange witch-woman, but logic does nothing to temper my irritation. Of course, I'm not the kind of guy to show it. Shove it down. Jack-Eye is easygoing and calm at all times, damn it.

"Is it her?" he asks Lyre. At least, I assume he's asking her, since none of us know what he's talking about.

She doesn't answer right away. Her right hand lifts slowly, palm out, and a soft glow builds beneath her skin, like she's captured stars beneath her skin. Only brighter, because you can even see them with the sun out.

"No," she says, voice weary with a knowledge none of us share. "In some ways it's worse."

The door swings open.

Chapter 105: Lyre: Time-Locked

LYRE

The trail's not cold. It's frigid. Cryogenically sealed in regret and futility.

I knew this place would be empty before we even turned onto the access road, but thoroughness is one of the many lessons learned over agonizing centuries. It means checking every lead, even the ones that reek of wasted time.

Better to knock out the possibilities now, before they come back to spirit you into another dimension for three weeks, four days, seventeen hours and eleven minutes.

Those are memories I'd rather not revisit. Or experience again.

Jack-Eye gets out first, stretches his long frame like he's been folded into an origami wolf for too long. The others follow. And me? I'm too irritated to even open the damn door.

I already know what's inside.

Tapping my fingers against the steering wheel, I stare at the front door, wondering exactly how hard the restrictions would hit if I went on a rampage here.

It's tempting. Oh, so fucking tempting.

But being without power while trying to chase down the asshole trying to reanimate Isabeau would be a stupid decision, so I have to calm down before I lose my shit.

Deep breath.

Meditation was never my strong suit. Too impulsive, too fiery, too *much*

—the excuses are endless, but it all boils down to the same basic issue. It doesn't fit with my personality.

Still, I borrow from it a little to cool the rage flowing in my blood.

Deep, deep, *deep* breath.

Gotta do it in the car, because sucking in a lung full of death and bloody arcana's only going to raise my blood pressure more.

Finally centered and in control once again, I slip out of the car, pretending like nothing awful's about to happen.

Jack-Eye edges in front of me, straightening his shoulders as he scents the air.

Well. That's unexpected.

His wolf might be cowering, but his human half still maintains some functional instincts. Huh. Good to see he's still functional, even when he's afraid of my power.

I guess I can see why the annoying King appointed him as beta. He's an alpha-level Lycan, which means he has the right to challenge Caine for his throne. Instead, he serves with absolute loyalty.

His Royal Dumbass makes good choices. Sometimes.

The magic in my veins prickles harder as I approach the shed. I already knew what I was going to feel, but it's still strange and *wrong* to my senses. The rot stench hangs in the air, thick as syrup, but the magical landscape is scrubbed clean. Clinical.

For humans, it's as if we stumbled onto a loody crime scene wiped free of fingerprints and DNA.

A deliberately manufactured void.

My stomach clenches.

Even Isabeau, that festering parasite, left grime and residue behind. Magical evidence. A mystical fingerprint that could be tracked.

This? This is nothing.

This is Reaper-level sanitization.

Something even Owen, an angel-descendant, can't quite copy.

As we reach the shed door, I lift my hand, feeling the familiar pattern of a time-anchor spell forming beneath my skin. Arcana flows from my fingers to the air around this place, weaving itself into a large bubble of suspended reality.

My phone dings. Right on cue.

I ignore it. The Divinity Connect app can kiss my ass. I'm not letting these idiots stumble into a Reaper's path. I'm the one who brought them here; protecting them shouldn't be a fucking plausibility issue. Of course, basic logic tends to mean nothing to the team of Balance.

"Is it her?" Owen asks, and I can feel the anger simmering beneath his deceptively mild words.

"No. In some ways it's worse."

The shed door swings open without so much as a creak, of course. They'd never allow something so pedestrian as a creaking hinge.

The time-anchor sets with a soundless snap. To Jack-Eye and the others, nothing has changed. They're frozen in place, suspended between one second and the next.

For me, the world shifts into a peculiar muted palette of suspended time. Colors fade just slightly. Sound dampens. All momentum bleeds away into perfect stillness, like I've closed a snow globe around us and sealed it with a whisper.

A figure steps out, and I fight the urge to roll my eyes.

The Reaper is still irritatingly beautiful—all porcelain skin and eyes like black mirrors, reflecting everything and absorbing nothing. He's wearing the ridiculous uniform they all insist on: matte-black cloak with shadows that cling too long, too thick. And, naturally, a full-length scythe.

It's purely ornamental. They don't need it to reap souls, and they aren't allowed to harm anything living. I guess they could use it in a battle against divinity, but those are all strictly regulated, thanks the rules of Plausibility and Causality.

"Still using those for balance, I see," I say dryly.

His mouth curves into a smile, but it doesn't disturb a single muscle in his face. Creepy to humans, normal to those of us who were raised with these assholes. "We were expecting you."

I cross my arms, letting my weight shift to one hip. "Stop playing around. Why are you here so early? There's a reason, isn't there? Who's behind this?"

"You've created a thread of deviation." His voice carries the exact same inflection it did three centuries ago, which is *none*. Monotone bastard. "We aren't the only ones dispatched to achieve balance."

"Listen. I've got better things to do than play cryptic bullshit bingo with you. Burn the shed, raze the evidence, do whatever administrative ass-covering you need to do. But I'm not stopping, and you can't make me. So either get on board or get out of my way."

He sighs, the sound too perfect to be real. "Do you ever tire of fighting the very system you were born into?"

"Do you ever tire of being a cosmic hall monitor? Get laid. Learn to relax. Maybe try yoga."

A smile plays at the corners of his mouth. "Is that an invitation?"

"I don't fuck the undead."

He chuckles, taking a step closer, one pale hand reaching toward my face. "That's not what I recall."

I smack his hand away before he can touch me. "Your flirting has only gotten creepier in the three hundred years since I last saw you."

"I miss you, Lyrielle."

"You're just a pervert with a fancy job title."

"You rather liked my personality once." His eyes drift to my lips. "Before the last plague."

"You were my rebellious phase, Caeriel. Until I realized you weren't rebellion. You were bureaucracy with better cheekbones. Pretending to buck the system while bending over for it."

He laughs, the sound too fucking beautiful. Then again, it's the entire point of a Reaper. Too beautiful to be real. "We're done here. You can undo your magic." His eyes flash with something way too close to hunger. "I'll see you next time."

The promise makes my skin crawl. He disappears—along with the presences I'd sensed inside the shed, hiding instead of coming out to face me—leaving behind nothing but a faint scent of lemon.

I drop the time barrier with a sigh, reality snapping back into normal flow.

Jack-Eye and the others immediately tense, sensing the shift but unable to identify what changed. The red-haired wolf lifts his head, nostrils flaring as confusion washes over his face.

"The smell," he says, looking between me and the shed door. "The death stench is just... gone."

"It's safe to go in." I'm already turning back toward the SUV. There's no reason to go inside now. "You won't find anything useful."

Jack-Eye sniffs again, his brow furrowing. "It smells like... lemon furniture polish."

"Yeah," I mutter. "That tracks."

Chapter 106: Jack-Eye: Irrational, But Still

I push the door open wider, stepping inside the shed first because that's what you do when you're second-in-command. Take point. Assessment. Protection. All that shit.

Definitely not because I want Lyre noticing how I can take care of her, even if she's the strongest person in this motley little crew of ours.

The rush of lemon hits my nostrils again, but underneath it—

"Fuck."

A body sprawls across the concrete floor, limbs at all the wrong angles like someone dropped him from a height. The position is too awkward, too unnatural. Like he tried to curl up before the end.

"What is it?" Andrew calls from behind me.

I don't answer right away, my focus locked on the corpse. There's no blood. No signs of a fight. Just this kid—a Fiddleback—dead on the floor. And I know him.

The more disturbing thing, though, is how Lyre's acting. She got weird the second we reached the door. Tense in a different way than before, and no longer interested in what's inside.

The door had swung open on its own too, which is freaky as hell when I can see the hinges and latch are in perfect condition. Someone must not have closed it properly, but my hinky magic meter—newly acquired and still working out the kinks—is pinging.

Just as I'm about to call out a warning, Thom comes up behind me and immediately recoils. His weak stomach strikes again.

"Oh, gods—" His face goes pale green and he bolts, the unmistakable sound of retching following his hasty exit.

Andrew steps in beside me, his nose wrinkling as he scents hard. "Why doesn't it smell worse?"

I'm wondering the same thing. A dead body should reek, especially to our senses. But all I get is the strange lemon scent layered over the barest whisper of death. All the horrible rot and strange darkness? It's gone, like it never existed. Like I'd imagined it all.

Owen gives the body a wide berth, moving straight to the metal cabinets along the far wall. He starts opening them methodically, patting the walls, searching for something. He's supposed to be part angel or something, right? And yet he doesn't even glance at the body. He's busy looking for... I'm not sure.

Evidence, maybe. Or threats. Traps?

Lyre finally slips past me, her rainbow hair catching the dim light as she crouches next to the body with that eerie calm I'm starting to expect from her. Like death is just Tuesday.

Kind of thought she was heading back to the car, but I guess she changed her mind again. Strange woman. Still wildly appealing, though.

"It's Marsh," I tell her calmly. "A Fiddleback. He brought Caine to their territory from the hospital."

The kid's young. Shame he was born into such a shitty pack. Just a dumb kid. I doubt he really understood what his pack was up to.

Or maybe he did. Maybe his innocence and youth hid something darker inside. I wonder if Elizabeth was the same way. She's probably dead, too, thanks to Caine and Fenris.

Marsh's face looks peaceful despite how his body looks. No visible wounds, aside from the strange positioning of his limbs.

But Andrew's right. The scent is all wrong. He's already rotting, his abdomen bloated, with skin breaking down and—

Wait a second.

He was alive two days ago.

"For this level of decomp, it should smell worse," Andrew says, still fixated on the scent.

"He was way too alive two days ago to be this far along," I point out.

Lyre doesn't look up from her examination, unimpressed by my observation. "The smell will come back. It's only clean because of the sanitization."

"What sanitization?"

Her fingers hover over Marsh's chest, not quite touching. I wonder if she's doing something magic.

"The Reapers have already been here," she explains absently, pulling her fingers away. There's some hair on his chest. Short, gray hair. Maybe fur.

But my brain's far more concerned about her little verbal bomb. "Reapers? What reapers?"

Then, after I think it over for another millisecond, "You don't mean... Grim Reapers?"

She turns her head slowly, giving me a blank, withering look, like I'm the biggest idiot in the room. "What other kind would make sense here?"

"Right." Clearly there's more to this supernatural shit than we learn in our packs, and I'm not a fan of feeling outclassed. I'll have to talk to Caine about upgrading our education.

Lyre remains crouched by Marsh, silent and brooding. The silence stretches uncomfortably. Owen returns to stand by her, and the mere ten inches between them has me rattled with a strange level of possessive irritation.

I've never felt possessive over a woman in my life.

"What now?" I grunt. "You brooding your way to an answer?"

She doesn't look at me, her eyes fixed on the body. I can't see from here, but I bet they're cat slits again. They always seem to do it when she's thinking hard, or doing something magical. "They sacrificed a viable young wolf. Not one of the breeding stock. That means they're close. Real close."

"Then can't you track 'em from here?"

"Not close in distance, fool." She leans back on her heels, no longer hunched forward in observation. Something flickers across her face—an idea forming, probably. Her scent's a little sharper with purpose.

"Hey. Wizard," she calls suddenly.

Thom reappears in the doorway, reluctantly edging inside. He sidesteps awkwardly, as if determined not to look at the corpse.

"Get in here," Lyre commands.

"I can't look at it—" he starts, his face still ashen.

"You don't need to. You can track, right?"

He shifts his weight nervously, glancing at me as he shoves his glasses up the bridge of his nose. He does it every few minutes, but even more when he's nervous. Which is almost always. "It's the only thing I'm good at."

"That's not true," Lyre says mildly. "But we'll worry about that later."

She steps closer to him, and I find myself tensing, watching her every move. She drops her voice, but my hearing catches it clearly.

"If it's you, it shouldn't trip Plausibility."

Thom's eyes widen. "Wait—what does that mean?"

Owen steps forward, his face tight. He's looking straight at her, for once. "Are you sure about this?"

He sounds calm, but his fists are tight at his side, and his entire body's tense.

"Shut up," she says, not even bothering to look at him.

Before I can ask what the hell is happening, Lyre grabs Thom by the collar of his shirt and pulls him into a kiss. Not just any kiss—deep, deliberate, intense. The kind that ruins men, with her gorgeous pink tongue flicking out and shoving its way into his mouth.

A shock of magic erupts from the point where their lips meet, crackling through the air like static electricity. It's not just visible, but both acrid and sweet to my nose.

White butterflies—actual fucking butterflies—materialize out of nowhere, swirling around them in a luminous spiral before zooming off into different directions, phasing through the walls of this place like they don't even exist.

My nostrils flare involuntarily. The arousal scent is unmistakable—his, not hers. Something ancient, from simpler times, roars to life in my chest, clawing its way up my throat.

I have no claim on Lyre. I barely know her.

And yet...

Fuck, does her tongue move like that when she—

I cut the thought short before I go down a path I'm not ready for. I'm equal parts enraged and turned on, and I hate both reactions. Punching Thom in the face for experiencing what I've been stupidly fantasizing about? It sounds like an amazing idea right now, even though it isn't.

And I also kind of want to watch her do it again.

This is so fucked up.

When she breaks away, the lucky motherfucker drops to his knees, boneless and dazed. He's blinking up at her like he's seen the face of the Moon Goddess, lips parted, breathing ragged.

Lyre, on the other hand, isn't looking at him. Her face is raised, eyes squinted as she... does something. Who knows what the fuck she's doing. She walks a few feet away, lifting her hand to the air, and Owen watches her like she's about to catch on fire or something.

The bewitching woman turns slowly, her hair glowing faintly in the filtered light coming through the shed's dirty windows. She looks more like an angel than the reticent Owen.

Probably won't look so angelic with my dick in her mouth, though. Which... is definitely going to have to happen. I'm not sure how. Or when. But it's the only way to get this shitty memory out of my head.

And then I'll know if her tongue really *does* move like that...

Damn. I told myself I wasn't going down that road, and here I am, parked right on it like I don't ever want to leave.

With a dead, rotting corpse beside me.

There are probably better times for this.

Thom's still kneeling, staring up at Lyre like she's a devotional painting come to life, even as his dick's rock-hard in his pants. I lean down close to his ear, desperate to break the spell for both our sakes.

"Put your cock away, Romeo," I murmur.

"I—no, it isn't..."

He jerks out of his daze and covers his crotch with both hands, eyes wide and words frantic. "It's just a reaction... the magic... anyone would have felt it. I didn't..."

"Easy, kid."

The raging jealousy in me fades. Doesn't go away—I still want to grab him by the throat and squeeze until his nerdy little head pops off—but seeing how scared he is does a little to ease my fury.

At least he won't get in my way. Not on purpose, anyway.

"We have another lead," Lyre announces. "It wasn't strong enough, but at least we have a direction."

My eyes narrow. "Does this mean you have to kiss him again?"

Thom's cheeks flush into a deep crimson, even as he stares at Lyre with a mix of devotion and lust. "I—I don't mind."

Of course he fucking doesn't.

"Not yet," she says, oblivious to how I feel. To how he feels. She's looking at Owen, instead, and I'm suddenly furious at the man for having such bulging biceps. Women like biceps, don't they? And he's handsome. Ridiculously handsome. Makes sense, if he comes from angels.

Though—since when do angels fuck around?

Chapter 107: Grace: Creeping Dread

Bun screeches with unholy glee as her limbs morph and multiply—six insect legs sprouting where toddler legs should be, skittering across the stone floor at a speed no two-year-old should possess. Her laughter echoes off the cave walls, high and piercing and just a little bit wrong.

Under normal circumstances, I'd be having a freakout over a cute little toddler turning into something adjacent to the most unholy creature on this planet. But my brain's elsewhere.

"Watch it!" Jer shouts as Bun darts between his legs, sending him sprawling face-first into the dirt. "Sara, control your monster!"

Sara doesn't look up from her book. "She's not my monster. She's everyone's monster."

"Then everyone should help!" The younger kid scrambles up, brushing dirt from his shirt.

Ron flips a page, leaning against the far wall. He's reading an old hardback with faded letters, so I have no idea what the story is. "You're the one who gave her sugar."

"I did not!"

"You absolutely did." Sara's voice drips with disdain as she finally looks up. "I watched you slip her those candy wrappers."

"That was yesterday!"

"Sugar has a half-life of forever in Bun," Ron mutters.

The bickering continues. Words bounce off the cave walls, amplifying the chaos until it's a physical presence in the room. I stand in the middle of it all, watching Bun zoom by with too many eyes blinking from her forehead.

It should feel normal. Almost comforting in its familiarity—the way chaos becomes routine when you live with children who can sprout wings and tails and limbs at will.

But something's off.

I can't place it. The noise is the same. The children are the same. Even Caine, who's inserted himself into our weird family unit with surprising ease, is behaving normally—catching Jer before he trips again, stopping Bun from licking a suspicious patch on the floor.

"No, don't put that in your mouth," he says, scooping her up effortlessly, apparently unphased when she resembles a monstrous spider instead of a human child.

Yet my skin crawls with wrongness. The sensation creeps through my skin, settling deep into my bones, and it's hard to breathe. I cross my arms, pressing my palms against my ribs, trying to soothe the gnawing tension building there.

Nothing helps.

"Sara, I swear, if you don't get up and help—" Jer's voice fades to background noise.

I'm here, but not here. My body stands in the center of the cave like abandoned furniture while my mind races, searching for the source of the dread. It's not a vision. Not a voice. Not a clear warning or sign. Just a feeling—insistent and urgent, like radio static growing steadily louder.

I try to take a deeper breath, but my lungs refuse to expand fully.

Danger's coming.

I press my fingertips harder against my sides, trying to interpret the warning misfiring through my system. It's like trying to read Morse code without knowing the pattern—just persistent dots and dashes of anxiety, refusing to translate into anything coherent.

Across the room, Caine's eyes find mine again. He's been glancing over every few minutes while managing the chaotic energy of the kids. This time, his gaze lingers. The slight furrow between his brows deepens as he studies my face.

He hands Bun—currently sporting triangular cat ears and whiskers alongside her extra eyes—to Ron, who accepts the wriggling bundle with practiced ease. Caine crosses the room in a few long strides, his presence cutting through the noise around us.

"Grace?"

His voice is low, meant for me alone. My name in his mouth still does things to my insides, even with this dread crawling through my veins. I reach for his shirt sleeve, my fingers pinching the fabric with the barest pressure—careful to avoid skin contact. It's a whisper of a touch, barely there.

His reaction hits immediately. His breath catches. His pupils dilate, stormy gray darkening further as his gaze drops to where my fingers connect with his shirt. The air between us charges, familiar heat flaring in response.

For a moment, I almost forget the warning thrumming through my body. The pull between us is still so strong, a physical tug that makes every nerve ending light up with awareness. But the unease coiling in my stomach can't be ignored.

I tug him toward the shadowed sleeping alcove, away from the kids. His footsteps follow without hesitation.

In relative privacy, he leans in, close enough I smell his scent—warm, dark, distinctly Caine. His breath fans against my hair as he bends toward me, and he steps a little too close.

I step back. There's a different unease now, one where I'm pretty sure he's misunderstood why I dragged him with me. If I move even a millimeter closer, I'm pretty sure he's going to throw the *no touching* room out the window—not that the cave has one—and kiss me senseless, audience or no.

"Something's coming," I whisper, my voice tight with tension as I try to defuse the strange atmosphere he's brought with him. "Something bad. I can feel it, I think. It's weird. Maybe I'm going crazy."

The change is immediate. The heat in his eyes doesn't exactly vanish, but it transforms, hardening into something else entirely. His shoulders square. His jaw sets. In an instant, he shifts from the man who looks at me with desire to a warrior king. A protector.

He doesn't question me. Doesn't dismiss my feelings as paranoia or ask for evidence I don't have. He simply nods, accepting my warning as truth.

My heart melts.

"Where?" he asks, voice sharpened to a tactical edge.

I shake my head, frustrated by my own vagueness. "I don't know. I just feel it. Here." I press a hand against my sternum, where the heaviness sits. "Like something's about to go wrong."

His eyes scan the cave, no longer focused on me. He's in a different world in his head, doing alpha things. "Is it coming for the kids?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's about Lyre and the others. I'm not sure. I just can't shake this... feeling."

I could just be having a mental breakdown. After all, it sounds crazy trying to explain it to him, and I've never had an ability to foresee chaos or disaster. But something inside me *knows*. It's a bone-deep surety, something I can't doubt, no matter how much I try to logic it away in my head.

And Caine believes it.

He hasn't looked at me with a single shred of doubt.

He nods once, decisive. "We need a plan. First priority is securing the cave. Second is establishing communication."

No questions about my certainty. No dismissal of my intuition. Just immediate, practical response.

I exhale slowly, some of the tightness in my chest easing. The dread doesn't diminish—if anything, it intensifies—but sharing it makes it more bearable somehow.

"Maybe... we should leave the cave?"

The anxiety lessens a little, and I nod. "Yeah. We should leave the cave. I think it might happen... here."

It's a little easier to breathe.

Could be my imagination. Could just be residual from sharing my worries. But again the strange *something* inside me feels like it approves of what I'm saying.

His hand hovers near my elbow, not quite touching, but close enough to feel the heat of him. "Stay with the kids," he says. "I'm going to check outside."

"What if I'm wrong?" I ask, suddenly doubting the strength of my conviction.

He meets my eyes, serious and steady. "Then we're prepared for nothing. But we need a plan if we're leaving with all these children."

And if I'm right—

Well.

Chapter 108: Caine: Get Them Out (END BOOK TWO)

CAINE

Owen's cave is, strangely enough, located in a run-down neighborhood. Half the lawns are overgrown, and most families use their yards as storage instead of a decorative display.

The building housing Owen's strange cave system looks the same as the rest. Several sun-bleached gnomes decorative what used to be some sort of garden, and more windows are boarded than not. Before Owen had given us access, the house was as empty inside as it looked from the outside.

Dirty, dusty, and bare of any life or even basic furniture.

I haven't asked what strange magic connects the cave to this place. Lyre and those connected to her seem to live by strange rules. While magic isn't necessarily unfamiliar, the strength and breadth of their powers are leagues beyond what any normal wizard could ever dream of accomplishing.

I circle the perimeter a third time, scanning for anything out of place, but nothing pings my radar.

The silence is absolute. Too absolute.

Animals go quiet when predators approach. Right now, not even the birds call.

"Something's coming," Grace had said with absolute certainty. Not a question, not a fear—a fact.

She senses things she shouldn't be able to sense.

Fenris's voice is sluggish in my mind, weakened from our battle at Fiddleback. He's quiet most of the time now, conserving strength, but Grace's warning roused him.

His power is great, but the price of its consumption is equal in measure.

I grunt. He sounds a little too thoughtful, but I have no interest in questioning things further. There are more important things to deal with. *I don't question it.*

It's more than a feeling. The wolf's curiosity ripples through our shared consciousness. A human shouldn't detect danger before a wolf. She's showing traits she shouldn't possess. Don't you wonder what that means about who she really is?

My jaw clenches. *Don't care. She's Grace.*

That's not an answer. She could be—

She's Grace. I cut him off with a flash of irritation. *My mate. That's all that matters right now. If there's a threat incoming, we get her and those kids out. Nothing else takes priority.*

Fenris huffs, a grudging concession rather than agreement. His fascination with Grace is no less than mine, but it feels as if our roles have reversed since he first met her during the Blue Mountain Mate Hunt.

The vibration of my phone cuts through the tension. Jack-Eye's name flashes on the screen.

"Status," I snap, waiting beside the front door. I'll go in soon, but I don't want the children to hear any bad news., voice low.

"We're heading back your way, I think," Jack-Eye replies, his voice tinny through the speaker. "Signal's shit out here."

He's too far to utilize the pack link. While I can access any wolf on my pack territory, anything outside a fifteen-mile radius is too far outside of it.

"Are you coming here, or looking for something else?"

"About that." There's a hesitation. "She hasn't exactly shared our exact destination yet. Driving blind. Well, you know Lyre. She's an open book. One with all its pages glued together."

I grunt, unsurprised. That woman's defining trait is her refusal to give straight answers.

"We're evacuating the cave. Grace has... a feeling. Something's coming."

There's a pause, too long to be casual. I hear the murmur of voices in the background—Jack-Eye relaying the information.

"Lyre says that's smart," he finally responds. "She says Grace should take her truck and camper. There's a remote boondocking site—whatever the fuck that is—about forty miles northeast. Secluded enough to hold you over. Grace knows how to set it up."

My eyes narrow at the quick response. "Lyre anticipated this?"

"You've met her, right?" There's a dry note in Jack-Eye's voice. "I'll text the coordinates. We'll meet you there when we can."

"Fine." I don't bother with a goodbye, ending the call with a press of my thumb.

I have no idea what boondocking is, but I'll figure it out. The priority is moving now, not understanding terminology.

Back at the cave entrance, I give the neighborhood one last scan before heading inside. Overhead, the clouds gather, thick and gray. Rain will hide our scent if something is tracking us. Small mercies.

Inside, Grace has already mobilized the children with impressive efficiency. Each one clutches a small backpack, expressions solemn. Even Bun, currently sporting only human features—a rarity—bounces slightly on her toes but remains silent, her round face unusually serious.

Jer stands closest to my mate, his face pinched with worry. Sara's eyes dart nervously toward the entrance as I enter, her hand clenched around something. Ron stands tall, his teenage frame already carrying hints of the man he'll become, shouldering the largest pack.

I glance at the contents visible from the open top—diapers, wipes, formula, a small stuffed rabbit. Baby supplies for Bun. His attention to detail makes something in my chest tighten unexpectedly.

One day, these kids will make formidable pack members.

Some primal force inside me has already claimed them as pack. Regardless of their bloodline, they'll be considered Lycan if they choose to stay.

"Food?" I ask, meeting Grace's eyes.

She nods, her blonde hair pulled back tightly. I miss the brown, but I'll take her in any color.

"Good call. We'll need it with the kids. I only have a few snacks packed."

Without hesitation, I grab Owen's spare canvas bag from a hook on the wall and head to the small kitchen area. I don't bother with selection—just grab anything that looks edible and portable. Apples, protein bars, packages of jerky, a few cans of something. It all goes in.

"Bun needs her cup," Grace says from behind me, reaching past to grab a purple sippy cup from the counter.

Her arm brushes mine through the fabric of our sleeves, and even this indirect contact sends a jolt through my system. The bond between us doesn't care about timing or circumstance—it happily urges me to throw her down on the nearest flat surface and tear off every last shred of fabric getting between us.

Not the time, but a wolf's mating bond has never been considered rational.

Outside, Lyre's truck sits where we left it. I've never looked closely at it until now. The vehicle seems solid enough, though I question its ability to hold all of us.

Grace already has the kids lined up, her movements crisp and decisive as she holds the toddler in her arms. "Ron, help Sara with her bag. Jer, stay close."

There's a moment of uncertainty as we all stare at the truck cab.

"Can we all even fit?" she asks dubiously.

I reach past her, opening the door to reveal the bench seat. With a practiced motion, I flip up the hidden middle seat that had been folded down. "Fits six. Barely."

Grace looks skeptical, eyes darting to Bun, who's currently leaned far over her arms to try and chew on Sara's sleeve. I share her doubt about the toddler's ability to endure a long drive without wreaking havoc, but we don't have options.

The mood remains heavy as we load up. The children climb in with none of their usual arguments or chaos. They sense it too—the importance of moving quickly, the weight of Grace's warning.

Smart kids.

Ron helps strap Bun into a makeshift seatbelt arrangement in the rear seat, with Sara on the other side to keep her contained. Jer slides reluctantly into the middle of the front bench, his small frame barely taking up space between Grace and me.

I insert the key—conveniently left in the ignition—and the engine rumbles to life. Lyre's carelessness with her vehicle security works in our favor today, though it seems odd the witch would make such a flagrant mistake.

Bun crunches loudly on an apple, the sound startling in the tense silence. No one speaks. No one asks questions. The children, for once, seem to understand the gravity of the situation.

Grace meets my eyes across the cab, her green gaze steady and trusting. Something unspoken passes between us—an understanding, a shared resolve.

"We're heading back to get the camper," I tell her, and she nods.

I drive.

Grace doesn't say a word.

Neither do the kids.

There's nothing left to say when the only thing that matters is getting out.

Chapter 109: Grace: At the Campground

"This is it," I say, pointing through the windshield as we pull into the campsite. Lyre's fifth-wheel camper sits right where we left it, nestled against the backdrop of beautiful woods.

When we pulled in the first time, it looked beautiful and free.

Today, it looks... ominous.

Perspective is everything, I guess.

"Is something wrong?" Caine asks, his voice rumbling through the truck. The kids are all quiet, even Bun. They understand danger in ways no child should.

I shake my head, but the skin at the nape of my neck prickles. "It looks fine."

But it doesn't feel fine.

The camper sits undisturbed. No broken windows. No kicked-in door. Not a single sign of intrusion. And yet... something heavy hangs in the air. A pressure against my chest. A whisper just beyond hearing. My fingers twist into the fabric of my jeans.

"Let's get the kids inside," Caine says, steel-eyed as he scans the tree line. He's felt it too. Or he's just naturally suspicious.

"Finally!" Jer mumbles, unbuckling himself from the middle seat and following me out the door. "I have to pee so bad my eyeballs are floating."

Okay, maybe they aren't as freaked out as I thought they were.

"Gross," Sara mutters as she slides out of the back. Her red eyes dart toward the camper with undisguised relief; she's definitely more tense than the younger boy.

Ron, of course, is as teenage-stoic as ever as he grabs Bun and hops down.

"Careful, guys. Stay close."

"We know," Sara and Jer chorus. They're already beelining for the camper door.

Jer reaches it first, yanking the handle.

Nothing happens.

"It's locked," he whines, dancing from foot to foot.

"Hang on," I say, digging in my pocket for the key Lyre gave me. "I've got it."

I hand him the key, watching him slide it into the lock and turn.

No click. No give. The door remains firmly shut.

"Let me," Sara pushes forward, her braid swinging as she grabs the handle and rattles it with surprising force for a nine-year-old. "It's stuck."

"Maybe it's the wrong key?" Ron suggests, shifting Bun to his hip.

"No, this is definitely it."

"Let me try." Ron steps forward, adjusting Bun on his hip.

He grabs the handle, yanking with more strength than either of the younger kids could muster. Nothing. The door remains stubbornly shut, like it's been welded closed.

Bun leans forward in Ron's arms, reaching out her chubby hands toward the door. Before I can stop her, she starts banging her tiny fists against the metal surface, making hollow thumping sounds.

"Bun, honey, that's not going to—" I start, but the look on her face stops me. It's cute, with her giant eyes narrowed in concentration.

Never mind. Keep banging. It's adorable.

But an uneasy feeling slithers up my spine, and I glance around. No one's outside, no one's watching, but it just feels...

Not right.

"Okay, everyone get out of my way," I order the kids, who all back up on command. Bun scowls at the door over Ron's shoulder.

Caine steps closer, his body a wall of heat at my back. The prickling sensation isn't unpleasant—it's almost grounding compared to the creeping unease trailing me all day.

I step forward, suddenly self-conscious with everyone watching. I grip the key tight, my knuckles turning white. Another deep breath, and I slide it into the lock.

The key turns smoothly. No resistance. The handle gives under my palm, and the door swings open with a soft creak.

"See? It was just stuck," I say, trying to sound casual while my heartbeat hammers in my throat. "Come on in."

I step inside, the familiar space of Lyre's camper greeting me—cozy bohemian fabrics, the faint smell of incense, colorful glass bottles catching the afternoon light. But the air's too still and empty, like it's been abandoned.

It's only been, like, two days.

My feelings are all overly dramatized because of the dread. That's all.

I've become paranoid.

"Jer, you can use the bathroom first," I say, turning back to the doorway. "Then Sara."

But Jer isn't following me in. He stands frozen at the threshold, his face scrunched in confusion.

"I can't," he says.

"What do you mean, you can't? The bathroom's right there." I point toward the back of the camper. There are actually two of them, but I figure Lyre might not want them using the one attached to her bedroom.

Jer steps forward—at least, he tries to. His foot reaches the doorway and stops, like he's hit an invisible wall. He pushes against nothing, his sneaker meeting resistance where there shouldn't be any.

"I can't get in," he says, voice rising. "It won't let me."

Sara pushes past him, rolling her eyes. "You're just being dramatic." But the same thing happens to her. She hits the invisible barrier and bounces back slightly, her red eyes widening. "What the hell?"

"Language," I say automatically, but my mouth has gone dry.

Ron steps up next, still holding Bun. His expression is grim as he reaches out one hand toward the door frame. His palm flattens against thin air, like he's touching glass. Bun makes a frustrated sound, reaching for me, her little fingers splaying against the nothing that's keeping her out.

"Grace," Caine says, his voice a low warning. He doesn't need to elaborate. We both know this isn't normal.

"Hey, kids," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "Why don't you wait by the truck for a minute? I need to call Lyre."

"But I have to pee!" Jer hisses, hopping from one foot to the other.

"Go behind a tree," Ron mutters, already leading them away. "Like a normal animal."

"I'm not an animal right now!" the younger one protests, but he follows. Sara lingers, her eyes narrowed at the camper.

"It's magic, isn't it?" she asks quietly.

Smart kid. Too smart for her own good. "Lyre probably has it spelled against intruders." Which is both relieving and unbelievably unwanted at this point in time.

When they're out of earshot, Caine steps forward, his massive frame blocking out the sun. He reaches toward the door—no hesitation, no surprise when his hand passes through without resistance. He steps inside, close enough that I can smell his scent. His dark, cologne-ad smell is as distracting as usual.

His gray eyes scan the camper's interior, missing nothing. "A protection spell. But why would it keep out the cubs and not us?"

"Lyre didn't know them when she put it together, obviously. Just give me a minute. I'll call her."

Chapter 110: Grace: Being Watched

I pull my phone from my pocket, hands shaking slightly as I find Lyre's number. It rings once, twice, three times. My heart sinks with each unanswered tone. What if she doesn't pick up? What if something's happened to her? What if—

"Grace?" Lyre's voice fills my ear, sounding slightly breathless. "I was just thinking about you."

Relief floods through me. "Lyre, thank the Goddess. We have a problem."

"When don't we?" she says, but the sarcasm sounds strained. "What's happening?"

"We're at the camper, but the kids can't get in. There's some kind of... barrier keeping them out."

"Oh, that." Lyre sounds utterly untroubled. "Access ward. Safety feature. Got tired of jackasses breaking in whenever I park somewhere remote. It'll disengage once you hitch it to the truck. Don't worry about it."

"Don't worry—" I bite back the rest of my sentence, too aware of little ears. "Fine. Thanks."

"You good otherwise?" she asks, suddenly sharper.

I hesitate, not wanting to voice the creeping dread slithering up my spine. "Yeah. We're fine."

"Hmm." She doesn't sound convinced. "Call if you need anything else. I mean it."

I hang up and turn to the kids. "Slight change of plans. The door won't open until we hook the camper to the truck."

"But I need to pee!" Jer wails.

"Go in the trees," Sara says, pointing.

"I'm not peeing in the trees! There could be bears!"

"There are definitely bears," Ron says, deadpan.

Jer's eyes widen in horror.

"Enough," Caine's voice cuts through the bickering. The kids fall silent immediately. Even Bun stares at him with her huge, solemn eyes. "Everyone back in the truck. Lock the doors. I'll help Grace prepare the camper."

"I think you should all stay in the truck," I say quietly. "Even you."

Caine's eyes narrow. "You can't do this alone."

"I've seen Lyre do it. It's not that complicated."

"Then I'll help make it faster."

I shake my head. "Ever pack up an RV before?"

"No."

"Then you'll be in the way. Stay with the kids. I'll do it."

He nods once before striding back to the truck. I exhale shakily, relieved to have space to work without his looming presence adding to my anxiety.

Alone, I move faster. Inside, everything loose gets shoved into nearby cabinets. Certain pieces of furniture are moved together to keep them from moving around with any bouncing movement of the trailer. Anything questionable goes on Lyre's bed in the front.

Then it's making sure there are no dirty dishes in the sink.

A quick press of a button dumps the black tank. Lyre likes to rinse it out a few times, but my shoulders keep prickling, so I forego the extra step. The gray tanks are next. A little water and some black tank treatment and they're all ready to go.

Slides go in, and the camper's ready—on the inside, anyway.

Outside, it goes quicker. Disconnect the water hose and electric. Stow away the gross sewer hoses. Use about half a bottle of sanitizer, even though I used gloves. Pull strange triangular blocks from the wheels, which are supposed to keep them from moving. Once it's ready, I rap on Caine's window and have him back up so we can hitch the trailer.

All in all, I think it takes about forty-five minutes. I'm sure Jer's about ready to burst, and I'm only about half certain I did everything right.

My breath comes in shallow puffs, the feeling of being watched intensifying with each passing minute.

I stop, scanning the trees again. Nothing moves except leaves stirring in the breeze.

"You're being paranoid," I whisper to myself.

Swallowing hard, I hit the button to retract the slides. The mechanical whirr seems obscenely loud in the quietness of the forest. Sweat trickles down my back despite the cool air.

Caine's taken Jer to the campground bathroom, and I'm about to burst with anxiety. Thankfully, the sheer terror over what ifs somehow meanders down the idea of horrible disasters, and horrible disasters reminds me to turn off the propane tanks.

That would have been dangerous.

Done. Everything Lyre showed me is now complete. Maybe. Hopefully.

If I break her trailer, I really hope she doesn't make get too mad, but other than that little fear? A tiny spark of pride flares.

I did it all. By myself.

The trailer's now ready to go,

Still, I don't linger to savor the feeling. Instead, I sprint back toward the truck, suddenly desperate not to be alone for another second.

Just as my fingers brush the door handle, something moves in the trees behind me—a flash of shadow, a rustle too deliberate to be wind.

I freeze, whirling around, my heart in my throat.

Nothing. Just sun-dappled foliage and the gentle sway of pine boughs.

"Wind," I whisper. "Just the wind."

But I know better.

I yank the truck door open and scramble inside, slamming it shut behind me.

"Something wrong?" Ron asks, way too observant.

"No. Just wind." Locking the doors, I huddle a little further into my seat. Caine and Jer should be back soon. "We ready for our adventure?"

"Adventure?" Sara asks in confusion. "I thought we were running away."

"We're not running away," I say, forcing brightness into my voice. "We're just being overly cautious. Like a fire drill, you know? Better safe than sorry."

Sara's eyes narrow, skepticism etched across her small face. "Then why did you tell us to pack everything we own?"

My stomach knots. "Because we might be gone for a few days. It's an adventure while we wait for Owen to come back."

"An adventure," she repeats flatly.

I nod with more conviction than I feel. "Exactly. We'll find a nice campsite. You guys can explore, and we can do s'mores at night." I'm laying it on too thick, but I can't seem to stop. "It'll be fun. Promise."

Ron catches my gaze in the rearview mirror. His dark eyes cut through my bullshit like a knife through butter. He knows. Of course he knows. The slight tilt of his head, the tightening of his jaw—he's not calling me out, but he's not buying it either.

I look away first, unable to hold his stare any longer. Shame crawls up my neck.

"But what about Owen?" Sara persists. "How will he find us?"

"He's with Lyre, and Lyre told us about this camping spot. Don't worry."

Bun gurgles from her spot between them, sprouting delicate rabbit ears. They keep twitching. She must be picking up on my anxiety.

"It's okay, Bun," I reach back to stroke her cheek. The rabbit ears recede, replaced by normal human ones. "Everything's fine. Maybe we'll even stop by a store and get you a proper carseat. Would that be fun?"

"Fuh," she chirps.

Another lie. Nothing is fine. I have no idea what I'm doing or where we're going. I just know we can't stay here.