

Grace of a Wolf

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Feeling a little nauseated, I tap at the notification.

[This message thread has been removed for multiple Plausibility violations.]

I blink at my phone. The error message stares back.

"What the hell?" I mutter, tapping the screen again as if that might fix it. It doesn't. The entire conversation—gone. Like it never existed.

My thumb hovers uncertainly over the back button, my eyes drawn to the new direct messages sent my way, from Wrath and Madness.

Sounds like a fun time. Not.

Wrath's message draws my attention first, and I open it.

The message thread loads, revealing a string of increasingly agitated texts:

[WRATH: ???????]

[WRATH: Who are you?]

[WRATH: How did you get into our group?]

[WRATH: ANSWER ME.]

[WRATH: I swear if you're another one of Chaos's little playthings I will PERSONALLY come find you.]

[WRATH: ???????????]

I stare at the barrage of question marks and threats. Whoever—whatever—Wrath is, they clearly have anger management issues. Their name is appropriate.

Ignoring this would probably be the smart option.

Instead, I find myself typing.

[GRACE HARPER: I didn't ask to be added to your group. I just got a notification saying I was invited.]

The reply comes instantly, like they were staring at their phone waiting.

[WRATH: WHO INVITED YOU?]

[GRACE HARPER: I don't know.]

[WRATH: USELESS]

He seems to love caps lock.

[GRACE HARPER: Is Lyrielle's nickname Lyre?]

I hit send before I can overthink it. Three dots appear, bounce, then disappear. Then reappear. Wrath seems to be typing and deleting multiple responses.

Finally:

[WRATH: Who wants to know?]

Oh, for—

[GRACE HARPER: Me. Obviously. I'm asking because I know someone named Lyre and I'm trying to figure out if she's the Lyrielle from your fan club.]

There's a longer pause this time. I glance up to check our surroundings. Andrew's focused on the road, and dark clouds are rolling in quickly. But it looks like we're only a couple miles from our exit now.

Right on cue, the walkie talkie crackles, and Caine says, "Exit in two miles."

Andrew's the one to grab the unit and respond. "Understood."

There's a flash of lightning in the distance.

My phone vibrates.

[WRATH: Are you with her now?]

[GRACE HARPER: No.]

Obviously. Or else why would I be asking him?

[WRATH: Has she mentioned any of us?]

[GRACE HARPER: No. Look, I just want to know if Lyre is Lyrielle. Yes or no?]

[WRATH: Who the fuck are you?]

Obviously, I'm getting nowhere. So I back out of the message and into the one sent by Madness.

[MADNESS: Hello darling~]

[MADNESS: Welcome to the club~]

[MADNESS: If you have pictures, share them with me~]

[MADNESS: <('o')>]

What the fuck is the last message supposed to be?

Giving up, I go to exit the app, only to see another flood of messages.

[WRATH: Come back.]

[WRATH: I'm sorry, I'll be nice.]

[WRATH: We're just curious.]

[WRATH: Come back, Grace Harper. We don't hurt mortals.]

[WRATH: Come back! We're curious about Lyrielle and she never talks to us anymore.]

[WRATH: I didn't realize who you were. We don't pay attention to mortal names.]

My eye twitches. Wrath kind of feels... annoying?

Whatever it is, I have the strong sense getting involved with him will only be to my disadvantage, so I click out. No more messaging people on this bizarre app. They're all strange. No; they're *bizarre*.

Maybe being divinities does something to their brains.

If that's the case, Lyre's shockingly normal. Owen, too.

"...Grace?"

Jerking my head in Andrew's direction, I ask, "Sorry, what?"

"I said, do you want me to get the stuff for the cat while you guys get the camper ready?"

"Oh." Blinking out the window, I realize we're about to turn off onto the exit for our chosen Walmart stay. "Yes. That would be great, thank you. Litter box, litter, cat food, a kennel for travel—"

"Why a kennel? It seems to be just fine in your lap."

I hesitate. "I don't know. Just in case. What if it gets curious and gets under your feet?"

He nods thoughtfully. "Yeah, that would be a problem. Sadie's too big to get under there."

I rest my head on my hand and stare out the window, watching as tiny raindrops hit the windshield.

Shockingly, everyone's still asleep, even as the car slows.

Andrew leans forward in his seat, squinting upward at the charcoal clouds swirling above us. "Looks like it's here."

"Isn't it a little early, though? It's only six." I check my phone screen to confirm. We made good time, too. The storm wasn't supposed to hit for another hour or two.

"Well, it isn't a downpour yet. We'll have to hurry before it becomes one." He flips the wipers on low as more droplets pepper the windshield, leaving streaky trails across the glass.

Somehow, it's worse to see with the wipers than without.

The walkie talkie crackles to life again. Caine's deep voice cuts through the static: "It's starting to rain."

My lips quirk. His sense of observation is as keen as always.

Snatching the receiver before Andrew can, I drawl, "We see it."

"Just making sure."

I set the walkie talkie back in the center console, unable to contain the grin spreading across my face.

"You really like him, don't you?" Andrew asks.

I blink, caught off guard by the question. He keeps his eyes on the road, but his fingers drum against the steering wheel.

His eyes flick to me, then back to driving.

"I mean, you're smiling like crazy right now just from hearing him talk," he adds.

My hand flies to my cheek, feeling the warmth there. Am I really that transparent? The thought makes my skin prickle with self-consciousness. I hadn't realized I was so obvious.

"There's nothing wrong with smiling," I say defensively.

The white cat shifts in my lap, settling into a more comfortable position as we brake to a stop.

His shoulders hunch. "No, there isn't. I was just..." He sighs. "Sorry. I guess I was meddling a little too much. It's just hard not to worry about you."

I eye him suspiciously.

"You worry more about me now than you did when Rafe threw me away."

He flinches. "I'm sorry," he says quietly. But at least he doesn't make up excuses.

I wave a hand dismissively, already regretting bringing it up. "Stop. I don't even want to think about the past anymore."

It's already bad enough we're going back.

Chapter 182: Jack-Eye: The Infestation in Question

JACK-EYE

I'm no stranger to death.

But life after death is... new.

After finding Owen's little hideaway not only burned down on the outside but "unlinked," as he calls it, from whatever magical pocket dimension it once occupied, we had to trek into the hills and down a segment of caves and caverns to make any horror movie director cream their pants in delight with all their warning signs and roped off entrances.

After a few tight squeezes and a few panic attacks from the wizard, we make it to Owen's secret lair, which is covered in blood, strange writings on the wall (written in blood, of course), and teeming with—

Zombies.

Owen and Lyre call them "ghouls," but who the fuck are they kidding? Rotten flesh. Vacant stares. Arms outstretched while they moan and shuffle toward us like it's an all-you-can-eat buffet and we're the prime rib.

Actually, their shuffling is pretty fucking speedy, and their arms are only outstretched because they're trying to tear our heads off, but the point is, the visual's there.

Though I'm not entirely certain we're still on our planet. Sure, we all *talk* about zombie apocalypses—and every man has a plan for one, whether they admit it or not—but it doesn't mean *we actually expect to go through one*.

Come on. *Zombies*. Seriously?

"They're not technically zombies," Owen says for the third time, driving some old-ass dagger he conjured out of nowhere through one's eye socket with disturbing precision. "Zombies are reanimated human corpses. These are—"

"The same damn thing!" I duck as one lunges at me, swinging my half-shifted claws through its neck. The head tumbles off, but the body keeps coming. "If it walks like a zombie and tries to eat me like a zombie—"

"Ghouls don't actually consume the flesh," Lyre cuts in, kicking the legs out from under another one like she does this every damn Monday. "They feed on the residual life force."

"Not. Helping."

Thom hasn't stopped screaming since we saw the first one. His voice grates on every damn nerve I have as he cowers behind us, absolutely useless. I'm about to tell him to shut the hell up when Lyre makes a sharp gesture in his direction.

His mouth keeps moving, but the sound cuts off instantly.

"Thank you," I mutter, cleaving another zombie-ghoul-whatever from shoulder to hip. Thankfully, since they're *dead* and basically rotten, it's easy to tear them apart.

They stink so fucking bad, though.

I'd rather live in a landfill than smell this shit.

Two hours and a phone call from Grace later—only Lyre would use her phone in the middle of a ghoulish uprising—I'm panting, covered in black, putrid goo, and surrounded by dismembered body parts that won't stop twitching. My arms ache. My clothes are ruined. And I still don't have any fucking answers.

I kick at a severed hand, still crawling toward Lyre. "So anyone want to tell me why Batman's secret lair is full of the walking dead?"

She doesn't even look at me as she casually boots a decapitated head across the floor. "Hmm. That's the question, isn't it?"

And that's it. That's all she offers while she wipes her blade—another dagger conjured out of fucking nowhere, which would be real fucking handy for me but no one fucking offered—on what used to be someone's shirt. I stare at her, waiting for more, but she just continues cleaning her knife.

For the first time since meeting her, I feel precisely zero urge to flirt or fantasize. She's covered in black slime, her rainbow-colored hair is matted with gore, and there's a chunk of... something... stuck to her cheek I don't want to identify.

I probably look worse.

And smell worse.

"I need a shower," I mutter, running a hand through my hair and immediately regretting it when my fingers come away sticky.

"You can over there," Owen says, gesturing toward the back.

My expression surpasses unfriendly into downright hostile. "Pass."

"It's fine. There are plenty of showers where we're going," Lyre says, sheathing her knife.

In the corner, Thom's doubled over, his body jerking with each silent hurl. Whatever magic Lyre used doesn't obstruct his mouth, but no sound comes out as he empties his stomach onto the floor.

"What did you do to him?" I ask, nodding toward our resident warlock.

She glances at me, her expression completely untroubled as she admits, "I muted him."

"You can do that?"

"Obviously."

Huh.

I guess I should be grateful she hasn't done it to me... yet.

"So... are we going to talk about this?" I gesture broadly at the carnage around us.
"Because this doesn't seem like your standard home invasion, no?"

Lyre and Owen exchange a look, and my hackles rise. They keep doing that, this silent conversation between them.

"The mission is related," she says, and he nods like it makes perfect sense.

It doesn't. Obviously.

"No point in separating," Owen agrees.

I scowl.

"What mission? What are you two talking about? Care to share?"

Silence.

"I've been hacking apart the undead for hours without knowing why they're here or who sent them. Throw me a damn bone here."

Lyre pauses, studying me for a moment. Her eyes are all slitted and feline again. Finally, she answers. A miracle.

"Someone is dabbling in forbidden magic," she explains. "We're going to stop them."

And... that's it, that's all I get. No names, no details, no explanation of what kind of forbidden magic creates a horde of hungry corpses.

I nod, because what else can I fucking do? I'm at this woman's mercy, and I begged to be here. "Okay."

She looks over at Thom, who's still bent over but seems to have finished emptying his stomach. "Is the signal still coming from the tunnels?"

He nods, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. He can't speak to clarify, because, you know, she fucking muted him.

Not really complaining, but maybe she should remember that before asking him questions.

She makes a little humming sound before standing up straight and snapping her fingers.

A strange blue fire erupts out of nowhere, crawling up all four of us simultaneously. I tense, expecting pain, but it feels more like a warm tickle against my skin. The flames consume every speck of gore from my clothes, my skin, and even under my fingernails.

Doesn't take away the unclean feeling underneath it all, though.

All around us, the dismembered ghouls catch fire too, the blue flames reducing them to ash in seconds.

As quickly as it appeared, the fire vanishes. I'm left standing there, pristine and clean, not even the smell of those nasty bastards lingering.

"Why the hell couldn't you have done that in the first place? We spent hours chopping these things up when you could have just..." I snap my fingers.

She stretches her arms above her head with a yawn. For a second, I swear I see fangs, but then they're gone the next. "Believe it or not, there are limits to what I am allowed to do."

Behind her, Owen nods sagely, like he understands perfectly. It sends a surge of irrational jealousy through me. Exactly *when* did those two get so cozy? Since when does he—who nearly pissed himself after being turned into a toad—act like her confidant?

Besides, "allowed" by whom? Since when does anyone tell her what to do?

But it's obvious these aren't answers I'm privy to, so I change lanes.

"Are there more of these things where we're going?"

She snorts. "No. These were a warning."

"A warning? Like 'stop interfering with our dastardly plans before we send more zombies' kind of warning? Seems a bit theatrical." I look over at Owen. "Though I guess that tracks if he's secretly Batman."

She stares at me blankly for a moment. "*I'm* Batman. If anything, Owen's Alfred."

I blink, thrown by her correction. But it tracks. "Wait—then who am I?"

She tilts her head, considering me for a moment. "Robin?"

Of course. Why ask?

Before I can respond, Thom tugs at Lyre's arm and points frantically at his mouth, his eyes wide. She flicks a finger in his direction, and he coughs, suddenly audible again.

"Thank you," he gasps, his voice hoarse. "They're moving, but the signal's too fuzzy to pin them down. I just know they're underground."

"That's expected." She pats at his head like he's a dog, and he preens a little under her touch. "You did well. Stop the tracking for now; we already know where to start looking."

She says *we*, but clearly the plural isn't the case, because I have no fucking idea where we're going. "Where?"

"Fiddleback territory."

"You mean their subdivision?"

"Yes." But then she points down. "But beneath it."

Chapter 183: Lyre: Do You Sense It?

LYRE

The moment we hit the Fiddleback subdivision, the arcana changes. It's darker, but strangely clean despite the undercurrent of blood magic seeping the land.

I notice the house before Jack-Eye points it out, because it glows like a beacon of bright arcana.

"That's where they had us stay," he says, as expected.

On the outside, it looks no different from the others. I'm sure the wolves wouldn't be able to sense how unique this particular domicile is. Perhaps even Fiddleback didn't know.

The moment we enter, the smell hits. It's not a physical scent—nothing the wolves would notice. But it's like a lingering odor clinging to the threads of arcana, mixed with sweat, wolf musk, and the unmistakable residue of werewolf sex.

One scent stands out with embarrassing clarity.

I glance at Aaron from the corner of my eye. "You worked hard."

The flush crawls up his neck like wildfire, starting below his collar and racing across his cheeks. He scratches at his head, fingers tangling in his red hair.

"I was—" he starts.

I wave a dismissive hand, already uninterested in his explanation before it begins. Something else has caught my attention.

"Owen," I say, cutting Aaron off mid-stammer. "Do you sense it?"

The angel-descendant's silver eyes narrow, his jaw tightening as he gives a single, grim nod. "Yes."

"Sense what?" Aaron looks between us as the blush slowly recedes. "What are you talking about?"

Owen just smacks him on the shoulder and moves deeper into the house, methodically checking rooms.

Aaron rolls his shoulder with a scowl. "What the hell was that for?"

I head for the stairs, not bothering to explain or see if he follows.

Of course, he follows. I'm sure he's trying to think up a way to explain this to me.

"It was reconnaissance," he mutters behind me. "Getting close to potential informants is standard procedure."

As expected. But he overestimates my interest. This isn't new information about the man, after all.

"Mmm."

Each step up the staircase brings me closer to the source of that strange energy signature. It's too orderly, too perfect—like someone took the chaotic weave of reality and combed it straight.

I check each room systematically, but the house is empty of personal effects, outside of what the wolves brought with them.

In the third bedroom, the signature pulses stronger. The room reeks of Aaron and a wolf—female, young, fertile. The bed is still unmade.

Aaron clears his throat awkwardly. "There was nothing serious between us."

I turn to stare at him, genuinely surprised by the comment. "Why would there be?"

His face does something complicated—relief mixing with what might be disappointment. He really thought I cared about his little werewolf flings.

But explaining is too troublesome and gives him too much hope, so I don't. We can always settle it later, if it comes down to it. But not in the middle of gathering crucial information.

Priorities matter.

I return my attention to the room, extending my senses beyond the physical as I inspect the threads of arcana, perfectly and unnaturally aligned.

"It's strongest here," I murmur. "But why didn't he sense it before? Another in his territory should have set off every alarm bell."

Owen pokes his head into the room, his silver eyes tight and dark. "They weren't here before."

My lips twist down. "Explain."

He steps fully inside, gaze sweeping the room without focusing on anything physical. I recognize the look—he's seeing what I see, the perfectly knitted strands of arcana.

Aaron shifts closer to me, his body radiating heat. It's annoying how he does that—inserts himself into my space like he belongs there. But I don't shove him away.

"I've been to this place many times," Owen says calmly, though his words are rougher than normal. Betrayal does that, though. His fists are tight, his back too straight, as he continues, "They were never here before."

The arcana here has been manipulated, but there's no way to tell how long it's been this way, or how many people have touched it. And as a denizen of Order, Owen isn't prone to lies.

It isn't *impossible*. Unlikely, though. Especially in this situation.

"Who are you talking about?" Aaron interrupts, his breath tickling my ear. as he gets even closer. "What's new here?"

I turn to inspect him with a frown. For some reason, his scent is getting on my nerves, especially mixed as it is with the history of this room.

"Go shower," I tell him flatly.

His eyes narrow, but instead of arguing with me, he directs his glower at Owen, as if the angel-blood is somehow responsible for me sending him away.

Ridiculous creature. He acts like I'm asking him to travel to another dimension rather than down the hall for basic hygiene. The real issue, of course, is being sent away while Owen stays.

Wolves are such a pain.

"Aaron," I say with deadly calm. "Go shower."

He holds my stare for two seconds before stomping toward the door, not even acknowledging the order.

So childish, and yet the reaction is almost endearing instead of irritating. Maybe I'm getting soft.

His feet thump down the hall, and I can hear him shout down the stairs, "Thom, I'm taking a shower. Take yours after I'm done."

A muffled response floats up from below, too faint to make out. He's probably collapsed onto the couch, still a mess after witnessing the infestation of ghouls.

In reality, there weren't as many as you would think. Certainly plenty, but the real problem lies within the constant cycle of reanimating. Cutting them into pieces slows it down significantly.

Burning takes care of the rest.

Of course, it would have been over in seconds if I didn't have so many damn Plausibility warnings piled up against me. It's been at least two hundred years since the last ghoul outbreak...

I definitely wasn't expecting one here.

Probably should have, though.

Order really hates when people mess with the dead. Balance does, too. Chaos, of course, delights in it.

What was more surprising was how Divinity Connect hadn't said a single word about it. Reanimation is usually cause for an emergency alert.

But now that we're here, it's starting to make sense.

Once Aaron's footsteps fade and a door slams, I turn back to Owen, dropping my voice as I hiss, "What the fuck is an angel doing working with a sanguimancer?"

Chapter 184: Grace: Bad Luck

Someone cranks the volume on the TV, drowning out the rain beating down on the RV's thin roof.

Andrew had worked some technological magic earlier, casting from his phone to Lyre's television. Now the children are hypnotized by a movie about people living in a world made entirely of blocks. It's strangely soothing to watch, even if I don't fully understand the appeal.

All four kids have crammed themselves onto the daybed, a tangle of limbs and blankets. Poor Ron is smothered, with Sara and Jer on either side of him and Bun in his lap, but they all look content.

It's sweet.

Across from them, I'm wedged between the arm of the couch and Caine's solid warmth. He's not touching me, but there's barely an inch of space between us at any given point.

Andrew should be the only one without a living being taking up space beside him, but both Sadie and the cat have elected to use him as a bed.

It's all very... cozy.

And cramped.

Incredibly cramped.

This camper was not made for a giant family, a tagalong, and two large animals.

My phone vibrates against my thigh, and I stifle a groan. Probably another message from Wrath or Madness, begging me to explain how I got into their chat. I've been ignoring them for quite some time, but they haven't given up.

I pull out the device, already planning on discarding the notifications, but freeze when I see Lyre's name on my screen.

Finally, a response.

[LYRE: Just ignore any messages on Divinity Connect. It might be hard to reach us for a few days. Just wait until I contact you again.]

Or not.

Not only is her text rather unhelpful—I'm already ignoring the messages and still don't know if I should be worried about these people—the latter half of it makes my chest feel heavy.

[GRACE: Are you okay? What's happening?]

No response. The message shows delivered but not read... again.

She was just texting me two seconds ago!

I frown at the screen, trying to decide if I should be worried. I mean... it's Lyre.

Bun squawks at the TV, and the kids suddenly shout, "Chicken jockey!", with all of them erupting into laughter. Bun giggles, though she seems to be more amused by their reaction than to understand whatever joke just occurred on-screen.

I don't get it, either.

"Is something wrong?"

Caine's voice startles me. I hadn't noticed him leaning closer, his sharp gaze catching my screen. I exit the messages so fast I nearly drop my phone, feeling strangely like I'm cheating.

Shit. This whole keeping-Divinity-Connect-a-secret thing is going to give me a heart attack before I hit twenty.

"Fine," I say, too quickly. His storm-gray eyes look unconvinced, and I backpedal. "I mean—Lyre just messaged. Says it might be hard to reach them for a while."

His expression shifts, subtle enough for someone who hasn't spent hours studying his face to miss it. A slight tightening around his eyes, the barest twitch of his jaw.

"Did she say why?"

I shake my head. "No."

He grunts, unsurprised. After all, crypticity (is that a word?) is her nature.

He's quiet for a moment longer, processing. Then he rises from the couch, phone already in hand, and walks down the narrow hallway toward Lyre's bedroom.

It doesn't take a genius to know he's probably calling Jack-Eye.

On screen, one of the characters builds a blocky tower at impossible speed while Sara mumbles something about ingredients. Jer hisses at her to hush.

They're so quiet, it's a little unnerving.

Was TV the secret to peace all along?

I should feel settled by this moment of calm, but Lyre's message nags at me. I check my phone again. Still no response.

What could be happening to make her unreachable? Between the strange sounds during the last call and this, I have a bad feeling.

She did say the App doesn't give them missions they can't handle, but I can't help the worry.

Heavy footsteps announce Caine's return. He settles back beside me, a tiny bit closer than before. His arm stretches along the back of the couch, fingers just inches from my shoulder.

It's tempting to lean in.

But then there's the whole going-into-a-coma problem, and sanity prevails. For once.

"Jack-Eye isn't answering," he says, voice pitched low. "But it's not necessarily cause for concern. They probably require radio silence."

He doesn't sound worried, which should reassure me. If anyone knows Jack-Eye's habits, it's him. And if anyone can handle themselves in a dangerous situation, it's Lyre.

I release a long breath and nod. "Right. Of course."

My phone screen lights up again—another notification from Divinity Connect. I silence it without looking, suddenly very tired of immortal beings and their drama.

"You've been getting a lot of messages," he observes, his eyes on my phone. He sounds... displeased.

Stiffening, I slip it into my pocket. "Just spam."

* * *

The next day, Caine and Andrew conspire to drive farther than Lyre's daily recommendation. We argue for half an hour, but they win in the end.

The heavy storm passed with little fanfare or damage, as if mocking all of us for taking precautions—but another's on its way by the next evening, as if chasing us down. If we only go the recommended miles, we'll be stuck in the storm again.

In the end, nine hours later, we're exhausted but right at the edge of Blue Mountain territory, in a familiar Walmart parking lot.

And Andrew's weather app shows a familiar sight: a storm, ready to hit by midnight. There's even a state of emergency announced by the human government.

Kind of feels like we did something pointless, though this leg of the trip went without any strange hitches. No emergency stops, no throwing up—thanks to the motion sickness pills Andrew grabbed from the store—and, best of all, the children slept for over half the trip.

The second half was spent listening to Jer and Sara play strange car games. It started with *I Spy* and ended with them using their hands as puppets and pretending to be the narrators of various cars' lives.

Some of their storylines were not only convoluted, but disturbing. The worst was probably the semi-truck, a well-meaning, hard-working man, and the white sedan cheating on him with a red pickup truck.

It makes me wonder what things Owen allowed them to watch on TV.

But more importantly...

I point at Andrew's screen, announcing severe thunderstorm warnings after ten p.m. "Didn't we come this far to *avoid* this storm?"

"Yes." He turns off the car without another comment, and doesn't seem nearly as surprised as I am.

I frown. "Were you expecting this?"

He shakes his head. "Caine did."

Huh.

Predictably, Jer shoves between our seats to announce, "I have to pee so bad, my entire head might float away."

His minor emergency becomes our new focus, the details of the storm pushed aside as the boy bounces impatiently in his seat.

By now, we're almost professional at getting everything ready.

Fifteen minutes later, Jer still has his head and everyone's inside, able to rest, relax, or stretch their legs as desired.

Everyone except me, outside with Sadie on her leash and waiting for her to potty. The golden retriever seems intent on sniffing every inch of grass before relieving herself, though, no matter how many times and different ways I urge her to pee.

"Go potty!" didn't work. "Go pee!" didn't either. Nor any variation I could think of. She's made it about two feet into the grass, still sniffing like her life depends on it.

The moment Caine steps outside, I can feel the air change. Without looking back, I ask the question stewing in my head.

"Did you know the storm would follow us?"

His heavy steps pause, then he comes to stand beside me, frowning at Sadie.

She looks back at him and squats immediately.

My eye twitches. All that begging I did, and it only took Caine one look in her direction to make her go?

Meanwhile, he gives me a strange look as he responds, "This storm isn't following any normal weather pattern. I felt it was worth testing."

I stare at him blankly. He just accepted the strange storm hunting us down like that? So easily? "You're so... open-minded."

If it wasn't for Lyre pumping my brain full of information on gods and divinity and this strange app I can't uninstall, I would have assumed these storms to be a strange phenomenon of nature. Now I have all sorts of strange conspiracy theories crowding my mind, like wondering if Wrath or Madness are upset I'm ignoring their messages.

Flash flood warnings definitely sound like they would fall under a petty Wrath, right?

And Madness—well, a storm hunting people down certainly sounds like insanity to me.

But Caine doesn't know anything about Divinity Connect or the conversation I held with Lyre, much less my identity as an Anchor.

And yet he says simply, "Hard not to be after the first storm."

I nod slowly. Then again, he's the Lycan King. His wolf appears out of thin air. Maybe these types of supernatural goings-on aren't as strange for him as they are for me.

As far as I'm aware, no wolf pack deals with bizarre issues like this.

"You really don't think it's strange?"

He takes Sadie's leash from me, careful not to let our fingers touch. "Strange has become normal these days."

Fair enough.

With Sadie's business now complete, he motions for me to go inside first.

But then she starts barking at something off to our left, at a row of parked cars.

A black cat suddenly darts out from beneath a car and dashes away.

I shiver. Aren't black cats bad luck?

"Come on, Sadie. Let's go inside."

Chapter 185: Grace: Middle of the Night

When the storm wakes me at two thirty-seven in the morning, it's a relief.

For whatever reason, my dreams were infested with zombies. There's only so much running away from the undead a girl can handle dreaming about—which is zilch, by the way—and I'm way above my quota with one night alone.

Drenched in sweat, I slip out of bed. Sara and Bun don't even twitch on their two-thirds of the mattress, cordoned off with a pile of rolled up blankets and body pillows Caine acquired from the store.

He's insistent on reducing even the possibility of accidental touches, even though I can't feel anything when I touch Bun. It's only Caine who seems to pull my energy out.

Lyre hadn't given much explanation when I explained it to her, not that we had much time to talk about it in between... everything else. Just said Bun needed the stabilization, and I should know my limits. But, of course, the Lycan King doesn't agree, saying if I knew my limits I wouldn't have fallen unconscious.

Reaching out, I brush my fingers against Bun's ankle, focusing on the brief contact. But there's nothing. No sudden rush of magic, no feeling of anything draining from me.

Perhaps it only happens when she's out of control. Lyre said it was stabilization, so such a scenario would make the most sense.

Which begs the question: what's wrong with Caine, for him to require it at all times?

I scrub at my face and sigh, heading silently into the bathroom, where I can at least stretch my legs a little, since getting back to sleep feels a little impossible right now.

The phone's built-in flashlight comes in handy as I stealthily close both bathroom doors before finally flicking on the overhead lights, blinking a little in the sudden brightness.

It's quiet.

Outside, the sound of an occasional car makes it through the walls. But where we are, in the back of the parking lot, there isn't much going on, leaving things surprisingly quiet.

My shirt clings to my back, sticky with night sweat. I peel it off, followed by my bra, and inhale the slightly musty air. The storm thuds against the roof with incessant, heavy rain, somehow making the humidity worse just by thinking about how wet it is outside.

I dampen a washcloth under the tap, careful to keep the water pressure low. You can hear everything in this camper, from people moving around to every time the water's being used. Privacy is an illusion.

The cold water brings relief as I squeeze the now-wet cloth over my skin, rivulets sliding down to catch in my waistband. Without thinking twice, I kick off my pants, too.

Not quite a proper shower, but it's enough to wash away the remnants of those endless zombie dreams and the sticky sweat covering my skin.

The RV feels like a pressure cooker tonight. With the unseasonable heat passing and cooler fall temperatures finally making its way to the area, the rain's forced us to shut every window. Without a cross-breeze or the air conditioner running, we rely on fans to circulate the stagnant, humid air, made worse by the sheer number of living beings breathing in this enclosed space. Even with Lyre's dehumidifier running.

I consider checking the battery levels to see if running the AC for a few hours would drain us too much. The thought of cool air makes me close my eyes in longing, but I dismiss it immediately. It's more likely to wake up the others, and we all need rest after such a long road trip.

And who knows how we'll be resting tomorrow night.

Tomorrow, we'll officially be back in Blue Mountain territory, where Rafe's taken over as Alpha. Even the thought of seeing his face makes my stomach roil with nausea, and I scrub a little harder against my collarbones, forgetting I'm just trying to cool myself down.

Better not to think about Rafe and Ellie and how awkward everything's—

The bathroom door swings open.

I freeze, washcloth pressed to my chest, tiny streams of water streaming down my stomach and legs.

Caine stands in the doorway.

His gray eyes meet mine for one electric second before they drop, tracing the curves of my exposed body. His pupils dilate instantly, black eclipsing gray.

I shiver.

Neither of us moves. Neither of us breathes. The storm outside seems to pause with us, only to give up the illusion as thunder claps.

No matter how many times I smell the man, I can't quite pin down what he smells like. It's just uniquely him and right now, it's overpowering in the bathroom as he steps inside and closes the door.

My pulse hammers against my wrist, my throat, between my thighs, until I'm dizzy.

He doesn't apologize. Doesn't back away. His gaze burns a path across my skin, leaving heat in its wake.

The washcloth in my hand is useless as a shield, and his gaze roves over my body without shame, taking in my nudity without a single apology. "You're awake."

"I—" My voice cracks. I clear my throat and try again. "I thought everyone was asleep."

"I thought it was one of the kids."

"Nope," I croak, destroying the sexiness of my nudity with my own voice. Classic. "Just me."

Awkward, when I'm still standing here naked and he's still... looking at me.

You know, *naked*.

Jesus.

Do I scream? Crouch and cover my lady bits? Yell at him to leave and risk waking up innocent children?

These are all options, but instead I remain standing there, watching as he takes a step closer.

Which is exactly what I want him to do.

Not that I'm admitting to it.

His hands twitch at his sides as he takes another step.

The bathroom isn't very large. He's practically in front of me now, his eyes dragging up my bare legs, my abdomen, lingering at my breasts.

I clear my throat, and his stare finally meets mine.

"You should go," I whisper, not meaning it.

"I should," he agrees, making no move to leave.

Lightning flashes, barely visible behind the dark shades covering the small bathroom window. He reaches out, pinching the washcloth between two fingers as he slides it from my grasp.

The tiny square of cloth wasn't really hiding anything, but I suddenly feel even more naked than I was before, my skin covered in goosebumps as his breathing comes faster.

Chapter 186: Caine: Control (Or Lack Thereof)

CAINE

I shouldn't be here.

Not like this, ogling my mate when she's still weak and exhausted.

But I'm weak to the temptation wrapped in her skin, to the overwhelming scent of blueberry muffins in this space, and to the indecent fantasies taking up most of my thoughts.

Jack-Eye said he learned a new trick, Fenris reminds me.

I hadn't paid much attention at the time, and now I regret it. I'll have to ask Jack-Eye for more details. The thought of asking him for details of his sex life is... not appealing.

But he'd mentioned one crucial point: it didn't require touching.

My eyes darken as I curse the me of yesterday, too impatient to deal with Jack-Eye's perverted ramblings while I worried about bringing my frail mate back to the pack she'd escaped.

Against my better judgment, my hand reaches out. The pathetic square of cloth peels away from its clinging embrace, baring the whole of her breasts to my view.

Satisfaction rumbles in my chest, and her nipples tighten in the humid air.

I barely keep myself from groaning.

She exhales, a shuddering little breath, and it instantly drags out memories of her flushed beneath me, responsive to my every touch.

Focus.

Taxes. Rogue disputes. Jack-Eye's dissertation on scat identification when we were pups. All topics to cool the fire burning in my loins, and yet—

Nothing works. Not with her standing there, droplets sliding down her skin, wetness darkening the waist of her thin panties.

The attraction of a mate bond is brutal for any wolf, but this—this is torture beyond what I imagined possible. Every day I've kept my hands off her deserves a goddamn medal. The longer we go without feeding the bond, the worse it gets, like an addiction crawling beneath my skin.

Control yourself. Fenris's voice rumbles through my thoughts, unusually serious.

My mind assents, but my body...

"How much control do you have over the energy transfer now?" My voice comes out husky and rough with need.

I mentally kick myself. She's already been through so much. The last thing I should be doing is pressuring her with my own lack of control.

But Grace parts her lips, running her tongue over her bottom lip, and blood rushes to places it shouldn't.

Fuck.

She sways forward, the space between us shrinking, and I remind myself she's not in control. She's as much of a victim to this mate bond as I am. Perhaps more, as she's a mere human against the force of it.

A good mate would keep his damn hands at his sides and step back.

But I'm not a good mate.

"I've learned a little," she whispers, "but not enough."

Her voice has a pouty quality, and her expression matches—a sultry little downturned mouth I'm desperate to taste. Either that or I'm utterly depraved, painting her with seduction when she's just standing there.

I force myself to take a step back, putting precious inches between us before I do something we'll both regret.

Disappointment flashes across Grace's face, a quick furrow of her brow I probably wouldn't have caught if I weren't staring at her so intently. But then she shakes her head and takes her own step back.

My hands twitch.

Then my damned mouth opens on its own. "Do you need help?" I gesture with the washcloth I'm still holding.

She was... washing herself, right?

It's okay to help out.

You're not supposed to touch her, my blasted wolf reminds me.

But Grace turns, pulling her unnaturally blonde hair over her shoulder and presenting me with her bare back.

My mouth goes dry.

I take a deep breath that does absolutely nothing to clear my head. The scent of her fills my lungs instead, making my cock twitch and my control fray.

I'm a king. The fucking Lycan King. I've been in battlefields soaked in blood without flinching. I've sentenced traitors to death without remorse. I can stand in a tiny bathroom with my near-naked mate without losing my goddamn mind.

"Where's your soap?" The question comes out through gritted teeth, and I hope she doesn't think I'm angry.

Grace's shoulders subtly hunch in defense, and I feel like a goddamn heel for not speaking more gently.

"I wasn't really washing," she says softly. "I was just... hot and sweaty. Trying to get a little relief."

Hot. Sweaty. Relief.

My cock throbs painfully against the confines of my jeans. Every word out of her mouth might as well be foreplay. I turn to the sink and adjust myself.

I'm not some sex-deprived virgin.

I can control this level of desire.

Sure you can.

Damn wolf.

Running cold water over the washcloth and feeling an irrational surge of jealousy over the inanimate fabric she'd run across her body, I take in a deep breath, and wring out the excess until it's merely damp.

When I turn back, she's looking over her shoulder with her wide, grass-green eyes. Then she jerks her head away to look straight ahead, and I feel a little empty.

The first touch of cloth to skin has us both inhaling sharply. I drag it across the back of her neck, where tiny blonde hairs cling to her damp skin. Water beads at the nape, then slides down her spine in thin rivulets, gathering at the small dip at the base, above her underwear.

I want to drop to my knees. Press my mouth to that exact spot. Let my tongue trace back up her spine, tasting every inch of her skin.

The thought sends even more blood rushing south so fast I'm dizzy with it.

Instead, I run the washcloth along her shoulders, over each vertebra, mapping the contours of her back with calculated precision. The washcloth barrier between my fingers and her skin is the only thing keeping me from completely losing control.

"Can you feel anything?" My voice is so low it's hardly recognizable.

"It f-feels good," she whispers in response, her voice trembling.

Fuck.

My cock jumps. Hard as granite now, aching with the need for friction, for her heat. I clear my throat, trying to reclaim some semblance of rational thought.

"I meant the energy transfer." My fingers flex beneath the damp cloth. "Does it happen even when I'm touching you with this?"

She's silent for a beat, and I watch the subtle rise and fall of her shoulders as she breathes. Then a small nod.

"It's there," she says. "But not very much at all. It's hard even to notice."

I step closer, close enough for her scent to overwhelm everything else. Then again, I'd blocked out all other scents since the moment I walked in here.

My hand slides around to her side, the washcloth gliding over her ribs and dipping beneath the curve of her breast.

Her breath hitches.

That sound. The smallest catch in her throat sends fire racing through my veins.

My lips hover near her ear, close enough to feel the heat radiating from her skin without touching.

"Where else are you hot?"

Chapter 187: Caine: Restraint

CAINE

Grace whimpers, and I glide the washcloth over her breast, pinching her nipple with the rough fabric. She sucks in a deep breath, her body arching into my touch despite herself, and it takes everything in me not to just throw her to the floor like a wild man.

I'm civilized. Perfectly capable of holding back.

Even if every little shuddering breath of hers wants to rip my control to pieces.

"Where else are you hot, Grace? Here?" I slide the washcloth lower, over the soft plane of her belly.

My cock hardens painfully as she rises on her tiptoes, her body instinctively seeking more. Her legs part in wanton invitation, but I stop at her lower abdomen, hovering just above where she needs me the most.

"Here?" I whisper, my voice rough and breathing heavy.

She nods frantically, her pulse jumping visibly at her throat. The scent of her arousal is better than anything I've ever smelled before, and I want it on me every damn minute, every hour, every day of the rest of my life.

"I can smell it." The words are supposed to come out as more of a dominating growl, but it's more like a needy groan as I hold myself back.

"Don't say that," she whispers, her cheeks flushing crimson.

"Why not?"

"It's d-dirty." Her teeth catch her bottom lip as she stares at the ground. Or my hand.

I hope it's my hand she's watching, but she's so fucking bashful, it's hard to tell.

My fingers press a little harder through the cloth, but don't travel any lower. "But I can smell how hot you are. How much you want me to touch you. Want me to move a little further..."

Her legs tremble, the muscles in her thighs twitching. Every instinct in me demands I drop to my knees, taste her, claim her, fuck her until she's breathless and messy and marked beneath me.

Fenris huffs. *Keep yourself under control.*

I *am* under control, damn it.

"How is it now?" I ask, fighting for control with every breath.

She shakes her head, her blonde hair falling across her face. I want to twist it around my fist, pull her head back, and devour her mouth.

"Is it too much? Too little? Can you handle this?" Each breath draws more of her scent into my lungs.

"More," she whispers, the word barely audible.

"More what? Grace, you have to tell me what you want." I need her to say it. Need to hear the words from her mouth.

If I can't fuck her, I at least need the satisfaction of knowing exactly how much she wants me.

"I want you to touch me... more." Her voice breaks on the last word.

My control slips another notch. "But what about the energy, Grace?"

She sucks in a groan that shoots straight to my groin. Her fingers wrap around my wrist with surprising strength as she shoves my hand down farther.

"Let go, Grace. We can't touch, remember?" My voice sounds strangled, my fingers tense as I fight back the urge to drop the fucking cloth and plunge them inside of her until she gushes all over this floor.

Her fingers spasm around my wrist before she releases me. Her hands fall to her sides, quivering as she jerks them one way, then another, as if not sure what to do with herself.

We're going too far; my control's slipping.

I pull back, though every cell in my body protests our separation.

Dampening the washcloth at the sink, again, gives me a few seconds to breathe. But this time I barely squeeze any water out before running it across her shoulders again.

Cold water drips down her skin, pebbling it, and I groan as her entire body goes rigid.

Her dusky nipples are gorgeous and tight and I want to spin her around and ravage them until her breasts are left with my marks across every last centimeter of skin.

But I hold back.

Again.

Barely.

"Tell me where you want it, Grace." My voice is barely human at this point, gritted out through my teeth.

"Stop saying my name," she begs, her eyes squeezing shut.

"Why?" I step closer, telling myself it's okay. My clothes are between us. If the washcloth is helping, then so will my shirt.

And my pants, as she immediately shoves her ass back against my cock, nestling its length between each pert little handful of flesh.

Fuck.

There's no man in this world who can hold back in this situation, and I grind against her with a harsh groan.

"Why, Grace?"

She twitches.

"Is it because every time I say it, you gush a little more?" I breathe her in, letting her know I'm aware of every reaction. "Don't lie, Grace. I can smell it every time."

The feral half of me is clawing to get out, wanting to hear her scream my name until her voice gives out. I tighten my grip on the washcloth before roughly shoving my hand between her thighs, cupping her where she wants it.

Her hips buck, and I shove my cock more firmly against her with a groan.

If she keeps this up, I'm going to come in my pants before I ever get her to her peak.

I fight against the tide of lust that threatens to drown us both, holding onto the threads of my humanity by sheer force of will. "You're not answering me, Grace."

"B-Because..."

She bites at her lip again and shoves back, whimpering as I rock my hand against her.

"Because it's too much!" she gasps, her body trembling against mine. "When you say my name like that—it's too much."

Her words pierce through the haze of lust that's clouding my mind. Too much.

Her body's too rigid, and she sounds panicked.

I freeze, my hand still pressed between her thighs through the washcloth, my chest heaving against her back. The washcloth drips onto the floor, each splatter loud in the sudden silence.

My cock throbs painfully, demanding I continue, but I force myself to pull away, removing my hand first, then taking a deliberate step back. Cold air rushes between us. My skin feels like it's on fire while also feeling like I've jumped into an ice-filled lake.

"I'm sorry," I rasp.

And I am. Not for wanting her—never for that—but for pushing so hard when she's clearly overwhelmed.

But then she looks over her shoulder at me, her green eyes dark and wide and so very confused, "Why did you stop?"

Chapter 188: Grace: Why Did You Stop?

When Caine pulls away, my first thought is I did something wrong.

But when I look at him, at how hard he still is and how his breathing's heavy and charged, I realize... I didn't.

Though I'm still not sure why he stopped.

"Why did you stop?"

Way to sound desperate, Grace.

"You needed me to...?"

The arrogant Lycan in front of me sounds strangely unsure of himself, and I shake my head. "I didn't."

He draws in a deep breath and rubs his hands over his face, then through his hair. "You should."

"But I don't."

The place between my legs is wet and aching, water dripping down my thighs, and it's awkward to still stand here without him... touching me.

I'm not entirely certain what to do, actually.

Caine groans.

"We're going too far," he warns.

My eyebrows pull together. "I told you, the energy transfer isn't... much."

It's there, but it's nothing like it is when our skin touches.

It's impossible to completely avoid us touching even then, but they were more like sparks and rushes of energy lasting a second or two, not a constant drain of arcana. And, if I'm being brutally honest—which horny Grace apparently is—it felt really, *really* fucking good every time his skin would brush against mine.

So right now I'm feeling more than a little lost and kind of abandoned in the middle of what was promising to be an amazingly intimate, stolen moment in the middle of the night, and Caine looks... tortured.

But then he drops his hands, and his eyes are all dark and hot and intense again, and my belly flutters.

"Are you sure?"

I nod. I think I am, anyway.

Caine looks at the cloth on the ground, then grabs another out of the cabinet and walks to the sink again, only inches away from me.

Am I supposed to close my legs now? Or still stand here with them awkwardly spread out? Do I turn around? How exactly does this work...?

I'm not really great at being sexy, so I'm not entirely certain how to pull this man back into the mood.

"Bend over the sink," Caine says, his voice rough.

Never mind. I guess my awkward stand-like-a-statue move is working.

My stomach flips, my core pulses, and I shakily make my way to the sink and hold onto the edge of it. He nudges my feet further apart with his own, the gentle pressure of his foot against mine sending sparks up my legs.

If I'm being honest—again!—the energy transfer is a little greater now than it was before. Maybe it's the ambience. But this time, I vow silently to actually pay attention to

what's happening and maybe try to control the arcana instead of getting swept up by the man's words and pseudo-touch.

"Bend over," he murmurs, and I do, until my forehead touches the mirror over the sink. The cold countertop is like ice against my heated skin, and he runs the cloth over my back again, the frigid water making my skin pebble with goosebumps.

Gently.

Like he's trying to drive me crazy, knowing I'm already way beyond a couple brushes against my back.

My hips wriggle a little with want, and Caine slides the cloth down my back, over my ass, and down my right thigh. Then he pushes against the back of my knee.

I bend my knee obediently, not sure what he's doing until his hand cups the back of my thigh, lifting it with careful pressure. The cool countertop meets my knee as he positions me, opening me up in a way so debauched I'm... not entirely certain how to feel about it.

Hot? Yes.

Awkward? Also yes.

The core of me clenches hard, though, greedily accepting anything he does to me and wanting more.

I teeter on the tiptoes of my other foot, feeling exposed and vulnerable. The position is precarious and I still have no idea what he's doing, leaving me off-kilter and not sure how to proceed.

It's definitely worse than just standing there awkwardly after he backed off.

The washcloth slides from my thigh upward in a tortuously slow path, and I change my mind.

Not worse after all. It's better.

Way better.

Every inch the cloth travels higher sends ripples of anticipation through my body, slowly dominating the embarrassment.

"What are you doing?" The question slips out breathless, my lip caught between my teeth as I struggle to maintain what little composure I have.

Not that there's much to be had when you have your leg hiked up on a counter.

At least my panties are still on, though... I'm not sure if it's a good thing or a bad thing at this point.

"Worshipping," Caine says quietly.

The single word hits me like... I don't know, *something*.

He didn't say *playing*. Or *looking*. Or even *teasing*. No, he had to go with the big guns and come out with *worshipping*?

Like I'm something sacred and wonderful instead of a girl who wishes this whole energy transfer thing wasn't an issue so we could do a hell of a lot more than all this teasing.

The cloth continues its ascent, his knuckles brushing the sensitive skin of my inner thigh through the damp fabric. My breath hitches, and I press my forehead harder against the mirror, seeking its coolness as my temperature rises.

"You don't need to—" I start, but my words dissolve into a gasp as the cloth finally makes contact.

It's warm after so much contact, rough, and strange as his fingers move in gentle circles, barely brushing against the center of nerves.

I want more.

It's a terrible tease as my hips jerk and grind down, but he doesn't give me what I'm searching for.

"I do need to," Caine counters, his voice a low rumble behind me. "You have no idea how much."

Fuck.

I roll my hips back and lose my balance, but he's right there, his chest hard and hot against my back as he shoves his palm against the core of me, encouraging me to roll and rock against it.

My panties are soaked from the cloth and...

It isn't enough.

I want his fingers inside—

But he shakes his head like he can hear what I'm thinking. "I can't put it inside, Grace. No matter how much you're aching for it. It won't feel as good as you think."

How the fuck would he know?

But he keeps his fingers flat as he rubs and presses, until a surge of arousal catches me by surprise, my thighs shaking as my entire body tries to stiffen against it.

"Relax," he murmurs, and I throw my head back against his shoulder with a groan.

His mouth brushes against my ear, and that tiny point of contact is all it takes for me to explode.

Chapter 189: Grace: Oh My Goddess

The sound of my harsh breathing is all I can hear after I squeeze my eyes shut and try not to think about how I desperately need to change my underwear.

And how the washcloth will actually need to be used for its proper purpose.

And how I'm really, *really* hoping Andrew's dead fucking asleep, because if he isn't, he *fucking knows what happened in here* and I. Am. Mortified.

Horny Grace has already gotten what she wanted—well, to an extent—and has fled in the face of rational, calm, normal, oh-my-Goddess-what-did-we-do Grace.

Caine's warmth disappears from my back, and the wicked washcloth suddenly starts wiping down my thighs with a more clinical touch.

My body doesn't care what his intentions are, because it gets all sparky and ready for round two, but I shove down all those embarrassing thought processes before they get started, realizing I'm a little... dizzy.

Cloth barrier or not, there was still some energy transferring. And it definitely got more intense toward the end. And... I'd told myself I was going to focus on it and didn't.

Not even a little bit.

I was rather... preoccupied.

Caine taps against my knee, and each one sends a flush of arcana his way, not that he seems aware of it at all.

Obediently lowering my leg and straightening so I'm a little less wanton, I crack my eyes open and peer over my shoulder.

He's kneeling behind me, looking focused and calm as he wipes what I'm pretending is *water*

, okay, *water*, off my legs.

Then the floor.

And then he stands, and my eyes are now wide, *wide* open as they stare directly at his crotch.

Horny Grace got what she wanted. She did. And she definitely shouldn't throw a fit over it, because Caine's little friend—scratch that, his very large, very *obvious* friend—did *not* get the same treatment.

Caine gives a light cough and I guiltily flick my gaze away, heat crawling up my neck so fast I might combust. I'm too mortified to turn around and face him properly.

But then he's there, looming behind me again, both hands pressing against the counter on either side of me. His body cages mine without actually touching it, and the heat of him radiates against my back, and his gaze meets mine in the mirror and this is way too hot.

Nope. Abort. Cannot go further. Bad idea.

"What were you looking at, Grace?" he asks, his voice a low, sexy, inviting rumble of sin and wanton pleasure.

Nope.

Nuh-uh.

Not taking this invitation.

But the way my name rolls off his tongue sends a spark straight down to my clit and I squeeze my thighs together, pretending we're in public surrounded by like, a hundred people.

Even Horny Grace wouldn't climb him like a fucking tree with a hundred people watching.

I think.

Maybe.

No. I'm *done*. Scratch that, I need capitals: I'm *DONE*. I got what I needed. I do *not* need to react this way. This bathroom is approximately seventy square feet (give or take fifty since math and geometry are not my strong suits) of terrible decision-making, and I've already made my quota for the night.

Come to think of it, I've met a lot of personal quotas tonight. From zombie dreams to pseudo-fucking in the bathroom.

Is it a full moon? It kind of feels like it should be a full moon.

"Nothing," I mumble after being quiet way too long, staring fixedly at the sink drain and not the giant batch of temptation pinning me against the counter with sheer presence alone.

His chuckle brushes against my ear, warm and knowing. "Did you get more control today?"

I stiffen, guilt flashing through me. Hadn't even tried. Wanted to, but my brain kind of went off onto a whole different road and forgot.

I shake my head, unable to lie.

He lets out a little hum of acknowledgement, not sounding particularly surprised or concerned.

Taking a deep breath, I slowly turn in the cage of his arms. It's not easy in this tiny space to avoid contact, and my bare skin slides against the counter's edge, which feels really warm after leaning against it for so long. I let my gaze land somewhere in the region of his chin and throat, not quite brave enough to look him in the eyes as my cheeks flame wildly.

"I was a little... distracted," I admit.

Understatement of the century. Brilliant line choices, Grace. You should write a fucking screenplay.

My eyes dip a little lower—an involuntary glance, I *swear*

—at the hard length of him still readily visible against his pants. My lips feel suddenly dry, and I wet them without thinking.

"Does it... hurt?"

Caine widens his stance a little and reaches down to adjust himself. I watch intently, unable to tear my eyes away from the movement of his hand.

"Would you do something for me if it did?"

His voice.

I'd even agree to murdering a man if he asks me like *that*.

I nod without thinking, then freeze as my brain catches up with what I just agreed to. I dare a glance at his face, and he looks... amused. His lips curve upward, eyes soft, but there's still a dark intensity behind them.

I'm a whole puddle of Grace under his stare.

Clearing my throat, I look away, trying to find something—anything—else to focus on in this tiny bathroom. But my eyes slowly, traitorously, slide back to where he's cupping himself casually.

His hands are large, looking strong at a glance, with just the right amount of veins and wow, his fingers are long.

My mouth goes dry again with thoughts I told myself not to have.

"We can't," I say, though I don't sound particularly firm about it. Even to my own ears, it's more coquettish than anything, and I'm half-hoping he pushes my boundaries.

But he doesn't, damn him.

Caine laughs softly. "Don't worry. I'll be fine."

Rude.

I'm over here drooling and he's not even noticing.

And he doesn't *look* fine.

My fingers feel suddenly itchy as I remember how I'd brought him to climax before. Granted, I'd... choked it to near-death, but hey, orgasms are called little death in French, right? So maybe my technique wasn't too terrible.

Without thinking too much about what I'm doing, my hand reaches out, drifting toward the very thing keeping about ninety percent of my attention.

"I can—"

But before I can get the offer out, the RV shifts a little with someone's movement and my hand reverses course, shoving at his chest in blind panic. "You need to go."

Chapter 190: Caine: A Night of Unrest

CAINE

I stare at the bathroom door, bemused by how quickly Grace shoved me out, like we're teenagers caught in a compromising situation.

My tongue slides over my teeth as I adjust myself again, my body still raging with need. Especially after that brief moment where it seemed like she was about to—

A movement to my left catches my attention. Andrew. Coming out of the other bathroom with perfect fucking timing. Our eyes meet, and I catch the flicker in his expression before he manages to mask it. But there's no hiding his scent: discontent.

He inclines his head at me before lying back down on the dinette-converted sleeping area.

He woke up at a convenient fucking time, didn't he?

He'll be gone tomorrow. Back to his master's side where he belongs, Fenris reminds me, but the knowledge does nothing for irritation flickering through me.

I'd been so close to extending the intimacy with Grace...

It's not just about tomorrow, I snap at my wolf.

The way she looks at him sometimes, like she trusts him even as she pretends not to, crawls under my skin. Granted, he seems loyal enough to the girl, and I have yet to find him attempting to contact his new Alpha, but I'm not stupid enough to trust a Blue Mountain cur.

He has clear feelings for Grace, even if he's not acting on them. It isn't good to keep him around, muddling the picture.

The quicker we can leave Blue Mountain again, the better for Grace. If it wasn't for this damn energy transfer issue, I wouldn't have allowed her to come back.

She doesn't like her pack. You know this. Fenris's voice in my mind is calm and reasonable, but it only serves to annoy me further. *Control your temper before you scare her again.*

My jaw tightens.

Besides, you should be more worried about how she'll feel about you crushing the Alpha's hand when she disappeared.

I bite back a growl. Sometimes my wolf is too damn helpful. *We'll make sure she doesn't find out.*

I'd like to think she wouldn't mind, but she'd been devastated after killing Brax. The Alpha who'd treated her so poorly, and yet still became a wedge between me and my mate. Instead of considering me a savior, she'd seen me as a monster.

Grace is too soft-hearted, emotionally weak thanks to her human soul. My biggest mistake was letting her see the dark, gritty reality of pack life before she'd accepted our bond.

Fenris is silent in my head.

Then he suddenly drawls, *Yeah, THAT'S where you went wrong.*

I clear my throat as I settle onto the couch, already knowing this will be a night of restless, frustrated sleep.

Among other things, I admit grumpily, further irritated when Fenris snorts.

Across the living room, Jer suddenly flops on the bed. His new position causes him to snore.

I stare at the ceiling as lightning flashes, focusing on the sound of the rain against the roof and not the images of Grace's sensual curves and the sound of her whimpers.

My already-aching cock refuses to settle, and I grind my teeth together, trying again to focus on the rain. On the annoying bastards I'll have to see again once we officially return to Blue Mountain territory in the morning.

But instead I just keep hearing the way her breath hitched, my fingers twitching as they remember her heat, and all the things I wish I could have done to her if we weren't so constrained by this damnable issue of ours.

* * *

As expected, I get no sleep, though my raging hard-on did fade—eventually.

An already tense morning is made worse by Grace's obvious avoidance of me, even though it's obvious she's just embarrassed. Her red cheeks have been noted by even the children; Ron keeps asking if she's okay and even privately pulls me aside to worry about her having some sort of fever.

The kid's worried.

I sigh and pat Ron's shoulder. "She'll be fine in a few hours. Don't worry about it."

But it doesn't ease his worry as he keeps observing her as we prepare to leave once again, our new normal.

I can't help frowning at Grace as she carries Bun through the camper. The only time she's met my eyes this morning is when I tried to take Bun away from her, and she gave me a defiant stare and said, "It's fine."

So, despite knowing how she's probably mortified by our little connection last night, I'm on edge and irritated. Worried.

She hadn't even eaten the four-pack of blueberry muffins I'd grabbed from the store for breakfast, handing them out to the children instead. Not that I mind, but the woman needs to eat something. She's skin and bones, wasting away by day.

She looks the same as yesterday, my wolf observes calmly. It's only been a few days, and you're acting as if she's lost fifty pounds.

There are dark circles under her eyes—

And yours.

—and she's moving a little slower than usual.

Because you won't stop staring at her. Aren't you usually calmer after...?

I hesitate as I watch Grace and the younger children pile into Andrew's car. Not my car. It rubs me the wrong way, more than ever.

Ah.

Scowling, I tear my eyes away from my mate as she clips Bun into her carseat and stomp toward the truck, where Ron's already inside, fiddling with the radio.

Ah, what? I snap.

You know she won't ever go back to that pathetic pup of an Alpha. Worrying about it is pointless.

Sharing your thoughts with a wolf makes moments like these particularly frustrating. "That bastard would never have the courage to approach her if Grace would just let me tell the pack she's my mate."

It takes all my control not to rip the door off its hinges as I hop into the truck.

Ah, Fenris goes, and then says, Well, it's fine.

He sounds far too calm, and I snarl, "It's not fine."

Ron stares at me, then at the pillow between us—something I'd snatched from Grace's bed during our preparations to leave—but then looks out the window instead of asking what's wrong. He's a smart kid.

It's better if he approaches her, my wolf says, still eerily calm. Then we have a reason to kill him.

My bad mood lifts instantly.