

# Grace of a Wolf

## #Chapter 191: Grace: Her Return - Read Grace of a Wolf

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Returning to the pack feels weird.

Worse than weird.

Icky.

Yeah, icky is a good word for it.

I stare out the window as Andrew pulls into a large, semi-circular driveway toward the edge of town. My stomach knots tighter with each rotation of the tires, like my body is physically rejecting the idea of being back on Blue Mountain territory.

The last time I was here, I was running away. Now it kind of feels like I'm crawling back with my tail between my legs—except I don't have a tail because I'm human, which is exactly the problem in the first place.

Caine's already backed the RV beside a small home with boarded-up windows. The fading light catches on the dusty greenhouse attached to the main building, its glass panels shattered in places, jagged teeth ready to bite anyone who ventures too close.

"What's the name of this place again?"

"Miller's Flowers." Andrew's voice is flat as he parks. "It's been empty since Eliza Miller moved to a different pack."

The memory clicks. "The omega who married that beta from North Ridge?"

"Yeah."

Eliza was sweet. She used to give me flowers whenever I ran into her. Of course, I'd only been here a year when she was mated out and left.

I didn't realize this was her place, but it makes sense. I remember the greenhouse; it was always filled with rows of vibrant flowers. The pack mostly ignored it because, as it turns out, wolves don't really use florists much. Something about the scents being too cloying.

I frown at the building, at its broken windows and faded sign. Kids from the pack used to dare each other to spend the night here. It's commonly considered to be haunted by the younger pack members, though of course I'm an adult who doesn't believe in such superstitions anymore.

Not much, anyway.

But then again, things have changed since I ran away, and my worldview has... widened.

"Is it really okay for us to stay here?" I unbuckle my seatbelt and glance at Andrew.

He nods, already reaching for the door. "The Lycans have already settled it."

The Lycans. Not "Caine" or even "your mate." It feels like a subtle distancing, but I could just be reading too much into it.

Honestly, the Walmart parking lot is where I'd rather be. Staying there would be so much better than being in reach of this pack again, and I'm already second-guessing my request to keep my identity as Caine's mate a secret.

But the app had dinged at me almost as soon as we entered the city limits with a new mission—to present myself to the Guardian for assignment, or something strange.

Sara clutches Bun's hand as she takes in the dilapidated structure, her red eyes wide and uncertain. "Are we living in *that*?" she whispers.

She looks like I'm delivering her as dinner to a pack of ghosts. Bun, on the other hand, just looks curious.

I reach out to smooth Sara's hair, my touch gentle as I reassure them both.

"No, we're staying in the camper. But this place has enough space to park, plus we can hook up to water and electricity."

Caine had given us the rundown before leaving. I hadn't even considered where to park Lyre's camper once we got here, so his foresight is certainly appreciated.

The Lycans, however, remain in the main lodge. Which means Caine won't be nearby anymore.

And there won't be any midnight run-ins. Which is probably for the best, but makes my heart feel a little itchy for some reason.

But, his distance aside, at least Rafe will be even farther, since he's taken over the Alpha lodge. Which means Ellie will have to come all the way here to bully me, and I doubt she'd bother.

The thought provides small comfort as I take in our new temporary home. Ron and Caine are already getting things put together, and Andrew frowns in their direction. It takes me only a minute to realize the Lycan King is being way too helpful for someone he shouldn't care too much about.

I should be little more than a nuisance he brought back, and he's over here playing Boyfriend, with a capital freaking B.

Jer, oblivious to the undercurrents of our thoughts, bounds to the men as he shouts over his shoulder, "Can I explore?"

"No," I answer too quickly, then soften my tone. "I mean, we need to keep a low profile. We can play games in the camper, and maybe explore a tiny bit of the surroundings, but we should stay inside for now."

I'm not entirely certain how the pack will treat these kids, and Andrew seems to understand my reasoning because he nods immediately. "Don't worry, guys. It's going to be hectic today and maybe tomorrow, but after that we should be able to go on a lot of adventures."

Sara, still staring at the dilapidated structure in front of us, mumbles, "I feel like the adventure's already here."

Then she shivers dramatically.

Bun, watching her sister, also shivers dramatically, scrunching up her face.

Aiming to reassure the girl, who keeps eyeing the shuttered building like it might grow fangs and eat her, I state, "It's not haunted."

She jumps, her red eyes widening. "So it *is* haunted?"

Isn't that exactly the opposite of what I just said?

Pressing my fingers against my temple, I clarify, "No. I said it *isn't* haunted."

"But why would you bring up it being haunted if it isn't?"

The suspicion all over her small face leaves me with no real way to explain through her illogical reasoning.

"Are you stupid? She said there are no ghosts," Jer shouts from where he's now helping Caine unload something from the back of the truck. His voice carries across the yard with the special volume only unhelpful siblings can achieve.

"Stupid," Bun whispers, the word falling from her lips with p-e-r-f-e-c-t clarity.

My head swings around so fast I nearly give myself whiplash. I glare at Jer, who just blinks back at me with a completely oblivious expression. He didn't hear Bun—which isn't surprising given how quietly she spoke—but still.

"Both of you, watch your mouths!"

Meanwhile, Bun seems to realize she said something she shouldn't and hides her face in her hands, assuming I can't see her if she can't see me.

Jer shrugs from across the driveway, clearly not grasping what he's done wrong, while the toddler peeks through her fingers to gauge if I'm still looking. I am, but I soften my expression.

It's not like she's the one in trouble. She's just mimicking what she hears.

"Okay, grab your things out of Andrew's car," I say, trying to regain some semblance of order. He's standing around awkwardly, probably wanting to leave.

But my orders are wasted breath. Jer's glued to Caine, doing... something. I'm not sure it's a task we actually need done, but at least it's keeping him busy, I guess.

Sara sighs with all the drama of a teenager twice her age—so, basically... me, I guess? Hm. That's a sobering thought.

"I'll just get everything myself, then." Her martyred tone would be funny if it weren't so accurate, and she shoots her younger brother a nasty older sister glare as she grabs Bun's hand and marches back to the car.

At least she's no longer side-eyeing the house.

Is parenting ever going to get easier?

Andrew's still hovering, shifting his weight awkwardly as he stands near me.

"What?"

"I need to go check in with Rafe," he says, his words coming out slow and careful, like he's testing how the words land.

I nod. I'm surprised he's still here, and it isn't like he needs to report to me. Having him around was helpful, but it isn't like I *asked* him to stay with us. Technically, this all started with him stalking me.

"That's fine."

But before he can leave, I remember the car seat. "Wait, we have to get Bun's seat out first."

The cat's already in the shade, corralled in a tiny pink kennel. And Sara's already grabbed their snack-filled backpacks out of the car, so it's the only thing left.

His brow furrows. "Why?"

I stare at him blankly. Is he serious? "Because we bought it." Obviously. It's not like we're leaving a perfectly good, brand new car seat with someone who doesn't have a child.

Andrew's frown deepens, and something shifts in his expression. "I'll help whenever you need it, you know," he says quietly. "You don't have to act like I won't be around."

The statement catches me off guard. There's a hurt there I wasn't expecting, and I'm not entirely sure how to respond.

Another voice cuts through the awkward silence.

"That won't be necessary." Caine's voice is cool, putting distance between us and Andrew without any ambiguity. "I'll be here."

I didn't even realize he was done with the camper.

Andrew shifts his weight again, looking uncharacteristically stubborn in front of the Lycan King. "You can't do much if you're trying to hide your relationship, so—"

"She'll be fine," he says again, the voice of ice and snow.

It isn't even directed my way, but I shiver anyway.

## **Chapter 192: Lyre: Restricted**

### **LYRE**

Admittedly, I hadn't expected the Fiddlebacks to have such extensive warding through their little underground tunneling system, though it isn't like I thought there would be *no* warding.

And I definitely didn't expect removing one to cause an immediate Plausibility Warning to alert on my app, giving me a 36-hour limitation on arcana use.

But worst of all, none of us had expected to smell and hear the distinct sounds of people in cages.

Which basically brings us to now—over a day later, watching Thom shakily pull through his meager amount of arcana storage to dismantle yet another ward. He's swaying on his feet and almost bone-dry, but we're only ten feet from yet another cage of pitiful shifters.

These aren't wolves, but others. Bunnies, cats, even a lone cougar shifter who came from California. All with a sad story, an even sadder capture, and a fractured future.

Thom's glasses slip down his nose. His hands tremble as he traces the final sequence in the air, his fingers leaving pale blue trails of light to shimmer against the dank tunnel walls.

The man's exhausted. We all are. But there's something particularly heartbreaking about watching a warlock drain his arcana to the dregs.

"Almost..." he whispers.

The ward flickers. It's a sickly yellow-green membrane, at least to the eyes of those who can see arcana, stretched across what appears to be solid rock. It pulses once, twice, then dissolves without a sound.

The illusion of stone melts away, revealing another chamber beyond.

While we call it an illusion, it was sturdy enough to hold anyone back.

Isabeau didn't have this level of craftiness in her skillset. Aside from her ability to manipulate, she was never able to master more than the basics. If it wasn't for her depraved proclivity as a sanguimancer, she would be considered worthless two hundred years ago.

Aaron, having been impatiently waiting for this moment, doesn't wait.

He charges forward the moment the opening appears, his shoulders squared with his irritatingly heroic presence.

Over twenty-four hours without sleep, crawling through mud and filth and who knows what else—some of these tunnels seem to serve as the sewer system—he still moves like he's fresh off vacation and filled with vitality.

Wolves are useful in this way, but some people who had their access to arcana blocked by a particularly annoying divinity control system are exhausted.

Me, obviously.

It takes him less than seconds to get the cage open. Practice makes perfect, I suppose. This is the fourth "collection point" we've found. The prison door creaks open with a loud, rusty screech, and my teeth tingle at the sound.

The stench flooding out is unbearable with unwashed bodies, rotting flesh, and human waste.

And fear.

Always the fear.

Ten of them this time. Adults, all different species of shifter. An elderly man huddles in the corner, his white beard matted with dirt. He doesn't look up when the door opens. None of them do.

It's as if they've forgotten that freedom is a possibility.

My lips tighten, but I stay back.

We've acquired a routine for these situations.

Owen moves past me, his fresh angelic scent a welcome break from the festering air. The angel-descendant doesn't speak as he kneels beside the nearest shifter—a woman with hollow cheeks and too-thin wrists, and a slightly protruding belly. Could be a nasty case of internal parasites, or pregnancy. It's hard to tell.

There's a crisp taste of mountain air and sunlight, an orderly tug of arcana threads, and then a soft breeze of magic spreading through the room like a physical thing, revitalizing what it touches.

Jack-Eye sneezes, like he does every time.

The shifters respond to Owen's touch like wilted flowers to water. Their backs straighten, just a bit. Their eyes focus. It's not a miracle cure—such a thing doesn't exist for the trauma they've endured—but it gives them enough strength to stand and hope for something different.

Meanwhile, I remain in the tunnel, holding Thom's cold, damp hand in mine.

His fingers curl weakly around my palm as I let a trickle of my power flow into him.

It isn't much, but it's enough to keep him from collapsing.

I'd regretted filling him with arcana when the new mission had arrived, but it came in handy. Once the restrictions are lifted, I'll have to fill him again.

"Thank you," he murmurs, and the difference in his voice is stark, flat and drained instead of soft and dreamy.

Usually, his eyes are wide and worshipful every time I'm within ten feet. But not anymore. Today his gaze is dark. Haunted.

The near-worship has been replaced by something harder, something that looks too much like the beginning of actual backbone.

Our little warlock is growing.

Trauma has a way of changing people. Not always for the better, but sometimes.

"Save it," I tell him, keeping my voice serene. Better not to show the boiling rage in my veins. All three of these men feed off my mood, and I don't need them agitated. It's a waste of energy.

Aaron moves through the small space with efficiency, helping the shifters to their feet, murmuring reassurances that sound sincere even to my cynical ears. He's good at this part. The hero part. It's almost enough to make me forget how insufferable he can be.

Almost.

"I'll take them back to the safe house," he says, turning to me once they've all been through a quick examination. Every one of them is able to walk, even if it is a shuffling gait. With only ten of them, all mobile, this will be the easiest rescue we've had.

Somehow, while the rest of us are dirty and covered in muck, Aaron's red hair is pulled back with what looks like a shoelace and yet remains clean. His face, on the other hand, shows the passage of time in his growing stubble.

But this is a ridiculous time to be distracted by his pretty looks.

I incline my head to show I'm listening. This is our dance now—he speaks, I acknowledge, we pretend there isn't something messy and undefined growing between us.

Priorities.



But it's hard to ignore the sliver of affection I've grown in the past day, watching an efficient and reliable Aaron instead of charming playboy Jack-Eye. The mystery of his position as Lycan Beta is finally revealed.

"These ones can walk, mostly," Aaron continues, his gaze sweeping over the group. "The old man might need help, but—"

"I can carry myself," the elderly shifter interrupts. His voice shakes, as does his head, but he pushes himself to stand to prove his point.

His legs quiver under his weight, but he announces with surprising calm, "Seven decades as a bear shifter. I've survived worse than this."

He's as thin as a rail now, with no part of his physique betraying his bear shifter attributes.

My lips tighten. If I had access to arcana, giving the old man a boost would be little more energy than a single breath.

Sixteen hours before I can use significant arcana again, and even then I'll be under harsher restrictions than before.

Sixteen hours of effectively running off human power, with Thom drained dry. Despite pumping him to the brim with clean arcana, his skills are subpar; he's never learned how to use glyphs in his life, and he's now learning on the job.

Even under my tutelage, too much was wasted.

Under normal circumstances, I'd call it a day and book myself a spa retreat.

But nothing about this is normal, and lives are at stake.

I've already failed too many; turning back isn't an option.

"Let's keep going," I tell Owen as Aaron takes the survivors back. He'll catch up; backtracking doesn't take long, but making our way through the ridiculous amount of wards and traps Fiddleback's thrown down slows our rate of advancement to a crawl.

It's a habit at this point to check my phone. Divinity Connect ignores such mundane details as cellular connection and works regardless, but there are other small issues to deal with. Like battery life and the lack of ability to send or receive texts.

So, even though I pull my phone out of my pocket to glance at it, the screen remains dark, the device powered off to conserve battery.

My skin itches. Aaron reports back every time he surfaces, and I know she's fine, but his stupid broody alpha is terrible at filling in details.

Owen clears his throat, and I realize I've been caught staring at my phone like some lost teenager after I said we were going already.

Shoving the useless device into my pocket, I stride ahead. "Let's move."

The chamber branches in two directions. Both are equally dark, equally damp, and equally likely to hide more atrocities.

I point to the right path. "We'll go right."

We're still mapping this place, so it's always right.

Thom sighs behind me, his shoulders hunched as he follows. His glasses have slid down his nose again, and he doesn't bother pushing them up. "I think I'd rather take the ghoul's," he mutters.

I glance over my shoulder, one eyebrow arched. "They were all people once. Are you really sure about that?"

His mouth snaps shut, color draining from his already pale face.

### **Chapter 193: Grace: Telepathy Failure**

Settling into our little corner of Blue Mountain is not as easy as I thought it would be.

For one, Caine refuses to leave.

For two, having three more burly Lycans in Lyre's camper has stretched its occupancy to max limit.

For three, every time I look out the damn window there's at least five Blue Mountain shifters staring at us.

Considering how little traffic this place gets, it's very clear they're here to snoop. Which means my whole *don't let people know you're my mate* plan is going fucking swimmingly, on top of being incredibly worried the children will be mistreated by the assholes outside.

Funny—when I left here, I was still feeling guilty and terrible over all the deaths the Lycan King brought here.

Now I'm feeling like it wasn't enough.

Strange how perspective changes things, though I'm more than a little worried my humanity's going astray.

Sara leans over to cup her hand by my ear and stage-whisper, loud enough for literally everyone to hear, "Why are they all here, anyway?"

"I have no idea," I mutter back, shooting Caine a milk-curdling glare.

The three Lycans standing at attention before their king are vaguely familiar; at least one of them stood guard outside my door for a time.

But what's far more concerning than their vague familiarity is how they keep swiveling their heads in my direction. And every single time, their nostrils flare wide enough to host a whole farm of honeybees.

They're scenting me.

Repeatedly.

If I were actually an ordinary human girl and not raised by this pack, their behavior would rank somewhere between disturbing and call-the-police territory. But I've spent six years in the Blue Mountain Pack. I know how they catalog their world—sight second, sound third, and scent always first.

This doesn't make it less nerve-wracking, though.

Jer, who apparently missed the day they taught children about indoor voices and social awareness, leans across Sara's lap and announces at full volume, "Why do they keep staring at you like that? Shouldn't they be bowing in front of their queen?"

The blood drains from my face so fast I go light-headed.

Caine's lips twitch upward at one corner, actually amused by this catastrophe. All three of his Lycan goons go rigid, their eyes widening. It would be amusing on their grim, scarred faces full of disapproval and curiosity—if it didn't make my entire, brilliant plan shatter into tiny little pieces.

Sara, bless her oblivious heart, doesn't catch a single nuance of this disaster as she hisses back, "Maybe they're rude and he's going to chop off their heads. Just shut up and watch."

Bun, meanwhile, focuses on her mushy cookie as she sits in my lap, content to ignore the world for the tiny pieces of M&M she's determined to dig out with her fingernails.

And Ron is pretending all of us don't exist, his face buried in one of Lyre's books where he's sitting on the couch. He's the smartest of us all.

I sit frozen in the middle of the dinette as the three Lycans swivel toward me in perfect unison, their expressions a mixture of confusion and dawning horror. I shoot Caine my most desperate *fix this right now* glare, finishing it off with slightly widened eyes and a tiny head shake in their direction.

The man mercifully smooths his face into a blank royal mask. He clears his throat, immediately recapturing his subordinates' attention.

Then Caine, King of the Lycans and apparent champion of the most graceless social maneuvers known to wolfkind, announces to the room: "Grace is not my mate."

He looks directly at me and gives a small, satisfied nod like he's just brilliantly defused a bomb instead of strapping additional explosives to it.

I close my eyes and draw in a deep breath through my nose.

My boyfriend's an idiot.

"High Alpha—" three different voices chorus in unison, and Caine holds up a hand to interrupt them.

"No questions will be taken at this time."

Does the man think he's holding a press conference?

Jer asks Sara, "Aren't they mates?"

Sara replies, "I think so?"

But Ron, the only one I can rely on, draws, "Didn't you two idiots hear? Grace isn't his mate. He'd never mate with a human."

The oldest of the Lycans gazes at Ron with a troubled stare, then turns back to his king. "High Alpha..."

"No questions," Caine repeats, taking the opportunity to smile in my direction.

My face twitches.

"Who are these children?" he continues, ignoring his king's order.

Caine glances at me, and I shake my head tightly. He should just pretend he doesn't know or care about them.

But our relationship telepathy is *still not working* because he announces, "They are my children. Treat them as such."

My shoulders stiffen.

Ron chokes on air.

Jer and Sara look at each other, then at me, then at Caine.

Jer's the first one to break the awkward bombshell silence. "Does that mean we have to call him Dad?" he asks Sara, sounding incredibly worried.

He should be.

We're *all*

worried.

Everyone except Caine, who's standing in front of us preening like a goddamn wolf in a chicken coop.

"No," I snap.

"I think so," Sara says at the same time.

Both children look at me with confusion.

Caine clears his throat. "You may call me Dad if you wish. Father is also acceptable." His eyes linger on Sara and Bun. "Daddy would work, too."

Sara's face goes white.

Bun doesn't glance up from her M&M-centric archaeology.

And me?

I'm still sitting here dumbfounded, with no idea how to deal with this man.

I'd made it perfectly clear—*perfectly. fucking. clear.*—he was supposed to keep his distance.

No one warned me the man was incapable of acting.

And why would he announce the kids as his? Anyone with a nose—which is every single person in this pack—will know they aren't Lycans. They aren't even wolf shifters.

My mouth opens.

Then closes.

Then opens again.

The words I finally manage to choke out are hoarse and tight. "I don't think that will be necessary, *Sir*."

The three Lycans share an awkward glance, and Jer whispers, "So do we call him Daddy or Sir?"

Sara mumbles, "Just don't talk to him and we won't ever have to worry about it."

Then she peeks at Caine, who frowns at her with the faintest hint of downturned lips and furrowed brow, and she gulps. Her tune changes rapidly as her face goes even whiter, if possible.

"Or call him Daddy. I think Daddy will work."