

Grace of a Wolf

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The knock comes again and Sadie launches into another frantic round of guard-barking, making my already pounding head throb harder.

Holding the frying pan up sounds easy, but it doesn't take long for the weight to start wearing on my wrist. It's an eye-opening example of precisely how weak I am.

"Grace? Grace Harper?" The voice outside carries a rough edge of irritation now. It's male, deep, and both generic and vaguely familiar.

But *vaguely familiar* could mean anyone; I don't recognize every Blue Mountain pack voice. Just the ones I run into all the time.

I grip the skillet tighter, my knuckles aching and arms trembling. Partly from exhaustion, partly from the rush of adrenaline still making its way through my system, and a lot because what the *fuck*, I am so sick of this insanity and how I don't get a chance to sit down and relax.

Seriously. Is a movie night too much to ask for?

Maybe lunch outside in a cool breeze?

But no, I don't get family movies or pretty picnic lunches. I get chased through my old pack lands and strangers knocking on my camper door.

"Aren't you gonna answer it?" Jer asks curiously, still watching me from his spot on the dinette bench.

Sara delivers a swift elbow to his ribs, making him yelp. "Read the room!" she whispers fiercely. "She's going to kill him with the frying pan."

Her little brother rubs at his chest, looking thoroughly offended and also unimpressed. "Yeah, well, it isn't Rapunzel's frying pan, so I don't think it's going to work."

"It isn't a *special*

frying pan, you dingus."

"If you want to get specific, it's cast iron. Cast iron is heavy. Whatever Grace is using is just those cheap nonstick pans you get for like, ten dollars."

Reasonable Ron strikes again, but somehow he's more irritating than the other two.

"Shut up," I hiss, waving the pan in a frantic shooing motion toward the living room area. "All of you, get back. Now."

Is it appropriate to tell children to shut up? Pretty sure it isn't.

Seriously, there are so many damn rules to this whole parenting gig, and I think I've already broken, like, ten of them. Maybe twenty. Or a hundred, give or take.

Ron herds the younger siblings while Bun stares at me from over his shoulder, curiously drooling but strangely silent.

"But—" Jer starts.

"Now," I repeat, my voice dropping to that deadly serious tone I've learned makes even the most stubborn child comply.

I stole it from Caine.

But I don't think mine works as well, because they retreat with obvious reluctance, shooting glances over their shoulders as they do so.

Sadie continues her manic barking by the door, though the urgency seems different than when I first came rushing back.

"Grace Harper?" the stranger at the door continues, his irritation obviously still on the rise.

I drop to my knees on the dinette bench and scoot awkwardly across it until I make it to the window. My legs still feel like jelly and I keep smacking elbows and feet against different things, but I'm intent on keeping my frying pan up and ready in case a head needs clobbered in.

Then, slowly, I peek out the side of the blinds to see who's at our door.

My eyebrows rocket toward my hairline.

Standing on the metal steps of the camper is a Lycan. Not just any Lycan—one of the ones who was here earlier, with the scarred face and permanent scowl. He doesn't like me, and he doesn't approve of the kids.

Our eyes meet through the window—his narrowed, mine wide—and a flush of awkwardness washes over me. I let the blinds fall back into place, then realize how ridiculous it is to pretend he isn't there when he literally saw me peeking.

"Come on, Grace. Open the door."

Seriously, though, who gave him permission to use my first name? We're strangers. He should at least call me "Miss Harper".

"No, thank you," I call through the blinds and window. "We don't open the door for strangers."

Okay, my excuse makes me sound like I'm twelve instead of a solid eighteen, but give me a break, here. I'm running on fumes and the vague memory of energy.

"If you don't open the door, I'm breaking it down."

I grip the frying pan tighter.

"Don't even think about it," I warn him. "The Lycan King's children are in here." I was mad earlier when Caine claimed the children, but now their identity as his kids is useful. And, since this Lycan was there when the claim happened, he won't doubt my words.

Even if he doesn't like them.

"And that's exactly why I'm going to break down this door," he snaps. "Open the fucking door, human."

Wow. I've been demoted from a presumptive use of my first name to just being addressed by my species.

It's so awkward I'm not even sure if I should be angry. Seriously, who goes around calling people *human*? I feel like I should be offended, but it just comes off...

"Cringe," Jer mutters from behind me. "Does he think he's some sort of bad-ass?"

"Language," Sara and I say at the same time.

"You have one minute to open this door, or I'm breaking it down."

My head throbs even harder. "No, thank you."

"Some supers don't like humans very much," Ron explains calmly, continuing the madness.

Jer snorts. "I *know*. I'm not a kid. I know things."

If I wasn't focused on the door and being ready to smash a head in with this frying pan, I'd shoot the kid in question a look. He's literally a child. Not even close to adult size yet.

"Forty seconds."

"Still not opening it. What if you're here to kidnap them? I can't trust you."

"Your trust isn't my concern."

"You can't say you're not a kid when you can't even reach the top shelf," Sara says with supreme disdain.

"Grace can't reach the top shelf," Jer points out.

Rude.

"Well—she's a special case."

"Maybe it just means she's a kid like us."

"Not all adults are tall," Ron points out.

"Yeah, Grace is real short. I'm gonna be taller than her soon. Probably next week."

"Shut up, Jeridiot. Kids don't grow that fast."

"Stop Sarasplaining."

Meanwhile, Sadie's still fucking barking and this Lycan idiot is still at the door and—

"Correcting your stupidity isn't Sarasplaining!"

"Suhspain!"

"Shut *up*!" I snap, and they—thankfully—do.

"That's it," the Lycan snarls, and the camper shudders as something large and solid slams against the door.