

Grace of a Wolf

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Chapter 201: Grace: Like You Were Chased

"Stop it!" I hiss as sharp claws sink into my forearm. "I'm trying to save your ungrateful asses!"

The cat yowls louder, twisting in my grip while Sadie drags against my hold, nearly pulling my arm from its socket. I stagger backward toward the camper, my arms straining with the effort of controlling two animals determined to run toward danger.

"I swear to all that's holy and not," I growl through clenched teeth, "if I get mauled by Ellie because you two decided to play hero, I'm coming back to haunt you both."

The cat hisses its objection as I practically hurl its pristine white body through the doorway. Sadie is worse, feeling like a ton or two of squirming, barking, foaming-at-the-mouth golden retriever I somehow manage to haul up and manhandle inside like an oversized sack of flour.

My pathetic biceps are ready to wimp out, but I hold on for dear life, knowing I'll never be able to replicate this heroic dog-hauling if she dashes off again.

"Get. In. Here," I grunt, kicking the door closed behind us.

My fingers fumble with the lock, twisting it with the last reserves of my strength. The second it clicks into place, every ounce of adrenaline that's been keeping me upright abandons ship. I slide down the door until my ass hits the floor with an unceremonious thud.

My heart hammers so hard I swear it's about to crack a rib. Each breath comes ragged and shallow, my lungs still burning from the exertion. Sweat trickles down my neck, making my shirt collar stick uncomfortably to my skin.

This is what dying feels like. Has to be.

Sadie hasn't given up her mission, frantically circling the small entryway, claws clicking against the laminate flooring as she continues barking at the door. The white cat, meanwhile, has vanished somewhere into the camper's interior.

Fuck pets.

Whose idea was it to bring them along, anyway?

Oh, right.

Mine.

Seriously, what the fuck was wrong with me?

My legs sprawl out in front of me, utterly useless, while my hip throbs where I collided with Andrew.

Oh, right. Andrew.

I hope he's okay.

I should be more grateful, but exhaustion has crowded out every emotion except a bone-deep weariness.

"What the hell was that all about?"

I crack open one eye to see Jer leaning over the back of the dinette couch, Sara beside him. They're both looking at me like I'm some kind of bizarre life form.

At least Ron looks marginally worried, though even his expression holds more confusion than fear. It's still better than being stared at like I'm a bioluminescent snail or something.

None of them know there might be homicidal werewolves headed our way, and I want to keep it that way for as long as possible.

"Nothing," I wheeze out, trying to sound casual and failing spectacularly. "Just... needed some exercise."

"You smell like you're scared," Sara remarks, her nose wrinkling. "And your heart's going really fast."

I'd forgotten about their heightened senses. Not that my racing heartbeat requires supernatural hearing to detect. It's practically doing the freaking cha-cha in my chest.

"Exercise does that to humans," I lie, knowing she's too sharp to buy it but too tired to come up with anything better.

Jer snorts. "Is that why you're bleeding?"

I glance down at my forearm where four perfect lines of red have bloomed, courtesy of our new feline friend. Blood beads along the scratches, not deep but definitely stinging now that I'm noticing them.

"That's from the cat."

Sadie's barking finally tapers off, though she continues to pace anxiously by the door, occasionally stopping to sniff at the crack beneath it.

I force myself to sit up straighter. "Where's the cat gone?"

"Kitchen sink," Ron supplies, bouncing Bun gently. "It jumped straight in there. Guess it thinks it belongs there now."

Sara keeps staring at me, and says something uncomfortably perceptive. "Were you being chased?"

"No," I lie immediately.

She frowns. "You look like you were chased."

"Yup," Jer agrees, thumping his chest. "Trust us. We know. We're the world's best at being chased."

My heart hurts at how easily and proudly he claims the honor.

I consider lying again, but what's the point? These kids have survived Fiddleback. Sugarcoating danger won't help them. If anything, it might get them killed.

"Yeah," I admit, shifting to a slightly more dignified position. My muscles protest the movement. "The Luna here isn't a fan of mine."

"Did she hurt you?" Ron asks, his voice suddenly deep and manly.

I shake my head. "No. I got away."

Jer nods, with a fierce look of pride. "Of course Grace got away. She's one of us. We're the best at being chased. Zip zoom swoosh, and away we go."

His hand movements are hard to follow, but the gist is clear: he's fast. Maybe with some parkour abilities of his own, though I've seen how he jumps around the couches. They're probably not as good as whatever parkour skills I'd appropriated over the past ten minutes.

Though I still don't know how it happened.

I fish my phone from my pocket, pleasantly surprised to find it still intact after my impromptu parkour session. Just as I'm about to check the App to see if it's done some strange divine interference on my behalf, Sadie's head jerks up again, her ears perking forward. A low growl builds in her throat.

Every muscle in my body tenses.

"What is it, girl?" I whisper, but I have a nasty little feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Ellie's here.

Andrew failed.

Or maybe he didn't even try.

I press my ear to the door, straining to hear whatever has set the animals off.

Nothing.

Then, footsteps. Heavy and deliberate, coming up the metal steps of the camper.

My heart skips a beat as Sadie begins barking frantically.

I scramble away from the door like an awkward crab before shoving myself to a wobbling stand. The children are all frozen, and the door catches as someone tries to open it.

Thank Goddess I locked it.

Without thinking too hard, I grab a skillet from the sink and clutch it in both hands.

A knock sounds. Three sharp raps.

I jump, despite having anticipated it.

"Grace?"

Chapter 202: Grace: Intruder Alert

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.

Chapter 203: Grace: He Might Be Dead

The camper lurches violently, and I grab the back of the bench to keep from falling. My stomach drops like I'm on some demented carnival ride—one where the operator's trying to kill you and your frying pan is your only defense.

So basically, a ride that doesn't (and shouldn't) exist.

But we're on it anyway.

Sadie's barking shifts from alert to something more feral. The white cat materializes out of fucking nowhere, back arched impossibly high, fur standing on end like it's been electrified, entering the fray with yowling growl-adjacent noise haunted houses might use to terrify children.

The combined noise level reaches *fuck this shit* awful quick, but we're all too busy bracing for the second impact to tell them to shut their fucking muzzles.

But time keeps marching, and nothing happens.

Just a whole lot of squalling from the animals.

"What's going on?" Sara asks, her voice shaking.

I risk a glance back. Ron's got one arm around Sara, who's clinging to Jer, who looks like he's trying desperately not to look terrified. Their eyes are wide, faces pale—well, not Ron's, but the other two.

It would be heartbreaking if I had the time or luxury for my heart to break.

Meanwhile, Bun squirms in Ron's other arm, completely oblivious to our imminent doom, chanting, "Kitty! Kitty!" with all the excitement of a toddler who hasn't realized we're all about to enter the wolfpocalypse, armed only with a frying pan and two really loud pets.

I press my lips together and swallow hard against the fear clogging my throat and take the pan with me as I edge toward the window again.

The blinds stick as I try to push them up. My hand shakes, and I mutter, "Please don't jump up and scare me," because my nerves can't handle a horror-movie face suddenly appearing at the glass, and I'm pretty sure that's what's about to happen.

But when the blinds finally cooperate, there's nothing. No snarling Lycan. No face pressed against the window. In fact, no Lycan at the door at all.

I blink, confused, and scan the area. Where did he—

My eyes stop on a large, dark shape sprawled on the ground yards from the camper. It doesn't move. Not even a little.

Sadie and the cat continue their noisy defense, their barking and hissing escalating to a toothache-inducing pitch, and I wave the pan in their general direction and snap, "Hush!"

To my shock, both animals immediately quiet down. Sadie sits at the door, panting happily, tongue lolling out like she personally dispatched our would-be attacker. The white cat gives us all a look of supreme disgust before stalking down the hallway, clearly done with our amateur protection squad.

I press my face closer to the window, squinting at the still form on the ground.

He's not moving. At all.

Oh shit.

He might actually be dead.

But in good news, Lyre's protections over this camper are totally working.

Not that I ever really doubted her, considering she's like, the most badass person I've ever met—but it isn't like we've ever properly seen them in action.

I keep staring at the motionless Lycan through the window, trying to process what just happened.

Beside me, Jer presses his face against the glass, his breath fogging it. When did he get over here?

Guess I was just... zoned out. Staring at the man who won't move and prove he's still living.

"Did Sadie kill him with her bark?" he asks, his voice filled with awe. Like he's just witnessed a superhero origin story. Sadie, the Supernatural Dog of Wonder.

Sara makes a sound somewhere between a snort and a scoff. "Why are you so stupid? Dogs can't kill people with barking."

"You don't know that," he fires back, not taking his eyes off the prone body in the street. "Maybe she's special."

I should intervene, should tell them to stop arguing, but my brain feels disconnected from my body. I'm still clutching the frying pan with white knuckles, as if letting go might somehow reverse the protective magic that had just saved us.

Ron appears at my side, quiet as always. He reaches for the pan with calm, decisive movements, prying it from my cold fingers.

"Are you okay?" he asks, his voice low, so the younger kids can't hear.

I nod mutely. My heart's still pounding like crazy.

He puts the makeshift weapon back into the sink, where it can resume life as a simple cooking tool.

When he returns, he extends his hand to me. It's such a simple gesture, but my eyes water with a suspicious amount of heartwarming, motherly feelings. I'm the adult here, the one who's supposed to take care of these kids, and he's the one taking care of me.

As usual.

"Thanks," I whisper, taking his hand and letting him help me up from the bench. My legs feel steadier than I expected, and I'm inordinately proud of them for not buckling under my weight.

We both turn toward the door, staring at it like it might suddenly dissolve and leave us open to another violent attempt at entry.

"Do you..." Ron starts, then clears his throat, asking awkwardly, "Do you think we should check on him?"

I scratch at my neck, thinking it over. He's a Lycan. One of Caine's people. I should care what happens to him, right? That's what a good person would do.

But then I remember how he spat the word *human*, like I'm some sort of disease.

My upper lip twitches into a small, involuntary curl.

Nah. If he's dead, it isn't my fault.

Why put myself in danger to check on someone like him?

Then I straighten in shock.

Shit.

Was that the sound of my humanity shattering? When did I become someone who could potentially watch a person die and just... shrug it off?

"We should call someone," I finally mutter, trying not to acknowledge how coldhearted I was just seconds ago. If I don't admit to it, the kids will never know. "Maybe let Caine know."

Chapter 204: Jack-Eye: The Old Ways

JACK-EYE

Pulling the phone away from my ear, I stare at the screen to make sure I'm not hallucinating.

But no, the display is very clear, announcing I've been on the phone with contact "King Dumbass" for forty-seven seconds.

There's only one "King Dumbass" in my contact list, and he's thankfully oblivious to what I've named him. It changes every so often. For a few months he was Alpha Shitface, until Caine happened to see a message thread and asked who it was. Still can't remember what lie I pulled out of my ass that day, but it worked.

It's a perk of being best friends; you can name your boss whatever you want and probably survive when he finds out because he's so sick of your bullshit he'll just let it slide.

"I'm sorry, say that again, boss?"

Caine's irritation is palpable even in the slightly staticky silence. "I said we're putting together a forum to listen to their goddamn complaints."

Okay, that's what I thought he said.

"*You* are?"

"Yes."

"Without me?"

Sigh. "Yes."

When I pull the phone away from my ear again, it still declares I'm on the line with "King Dumbass".

"Who's helping you?" I ask suspiciously, because there's no way Caine's capable of the amount of patience this kind of thing requires.

"Do you think I'm incapable of gathering a few wolves and listening to what they have to say?" he snaps, and I nod vehemently, wishing he could see me.

"Yeah, that's exactly what I'm saying."

Silence for about two-point-three seconds, then, "I'm going to kill you."

"No, you're not. You're too dependent on my pretty face and you have no idea how to add appointments to your calendar app."

Silence again. "Why the hell are you even calling?"

Ah.

Right.

"Just updating you. Doesn't look like we have signal down in the tunnels, still haven't seen even the tip of Holloway's tail, but we've rescued about thirty-five shifters. I know you're busy there in Blue Mountain, but I think you should send Dylan up here."

Caine grunts. "Fiddleback isn't a large pack. The territory can be absorbed by their neighbors."

"Agreed, but the problem is the mess they've left behind. I'm not sure what a neighboring alpha might walk into, and we don't need them following Halloway's footsteps."

Another grunt. "Not Dylan. He's helping me with the forum."

I smirk into the phone. "So you need help after all, my liege."

"Grow up," Caine snaps, his voice carrying that special strain of annoyance he reserves just for me. The one that means I'm right and he hates it.

I clear my throat, switching to a more professional tone. No need to antagonize him further when I need something. "If you can't spare Dylan, perhaps send someone from home. We need bodies here. Every time I head back underground, the victims are left unguarded. Makes me feel a little itchy, you know?"

Caine's long-suffering sigh whooshes through the phone. I can perfectly picture him rubbing his forehead, a vein probably throbbing at his temple. It's like he's here in the room with me, only better, because I don't have to worry about him throwing a punch when I inevitably say something to piss him off.

He doesn't do it often. Just sometimes.

And you deserve it each time, my wolf mutters, popping into my consciousness in a rare moment of interest.

"Fine. I'll get a team out there. How many do you need?"

"Five or so should be enough."

"Got it. Forward me the address so they know where to go."

"Do you know how to share—"

"I'll figure it out."

Yeah, right. I'm sure Dylan's going to have to help Caine. It's a sad sight to see a grizzled old wolf teaching the younger one how to use modern technology, but Caine's always been tech-illiterate.

"Got it, boss. Send a healer, too. They're in bad shape."

"Why not kidnap a doctor?"

"And how am I going to keep them here? I'm not leaving Lyre to deal with the tunnels on her own."

"Why not? She's stronger than you."

My spine straightens. "Seriously, bro?"

"Call me bro again and you'll be an omega before the moon comes up."

He hates the current generation of slang.

I clear my throat, tactfully returning to the conversation at hand. "Something's going on. She can't use her magic or some shit. It'll be another half a day before she's back to normal."

"How did that happen?"

"No idea. You know how she is."

He makes a soft sound of acknowledgement. "Okay. I'll figure it out on my end."

"Rush it if you can. How's Grace doing?"

He grunts, sounding rather sour. "Don't even ask. I did everything she asked and she still looks at me like I'm some sort of monster."

Somehow, I feel like there's more to the story. "What did you do?"

"She doesn't want our relationship known to the pack, so I let our people know she isn't my mate."

My eye twitches a little, warning bells going off in my head. There's no way that's how the story really goes. "And how did you do that?"

"What do you mean, how? I told them she isn't my mate."

Closing my eyes, I send up a prayer to the Moon Goddess to keep my king in her good graces. "Did they *think* she was your mate?"

"How the hell am I supposed to know? I just made it clear like she wanted."

Now it's starting to make sense. Sad, horrible, but painfully true-to-character sense. "Maybe don't be so proactive next time."

"What, am I wrong?"

The edge in his voice assures me I'm not only on thin ice, but dancing on it. With a flamethrower. "No, boss. Just saying, she probably wanted control over it. You should have waited for her signal."

At this point I'm just saying whatever bullshit comes to mind in an effort to save my own skin, and I send up an additional prayer to the Moon Goddess, asking her to intervene if Grace tries to skin me alive later.

Caine goes quiet again. "Hmm. You think so?"

"Oh yeah. Totally. One hundred percent. You know me; I know women."

Fuck, I'm so screwed. Then again, he's never been the best at communicating, so hopefully my "help" will never come up, and I'll never have to deal with the future Queen's wrath.

"I was thinking of sending Fenris to her—"

"You mean a literal sign saying 'This is my mate, don't touch her?'"

He sighs. "I claimed the children. I can always say he's there to protect them."

"You claimed the..."

You know what? Why the hell am I even entertaining the man? Let him dig his own grave. I have more important problems.

"Why, is that a problem, too?"

"No, no. Not at all. Great idea. The best idea. You're doing great, boss. Oh, no, my signal's fading! Can you hear me? Hello? Hellllooooo...?"

I press the red button with finality after pulling the phone as far from my mouth as I can manage, deciding to never again put myself in the middle of my alpha's relationship problems. He's hopeless.

I slip my phone back into my pocket with a grimace, half expecting the damn thing to burst into flames from the sheer awkwardness of that conversation. How a guy who can rip enemy packs apart without blinking manages to fuck up so spectacularly with one human woman is beyond me.

"That was the Lycan King, wasn't it?"

The question comes from the middle-aged man who's been herding the rescued shifters like an anxious sheepdog since we pulled them from those hellish tunnels. Unlike the others, he's a little less malnourished, having been in the cages for less time. He still has some vitality left in him, his skin still tanned from sunlight.

His eyes are clear, too, alert and watchful. And, belying his overall bulky frame, he's some sort of prey shifter.

Deer, I think.

Elk?

Then again, he's kind of bulky, so I wouldn't even bat an eye if he said he's a buffalo shifter.

"Yeah." I roll my shoulders, working out the tension from holding the phone between my ear and shoulder for too long. "He's sending help our way."

The shifter's face transforms in an instant. His weathered features soften with something like reverence, and before I can process what's happening, he's making a fluid gesture with his right hand—fingers spreading like antler points before sweeping inward to touch his heart, then his forehead.

"May the throne stand strong," he murmurs, voice hardly a whisper. "May the moon's light shine upon his path."

I blink. What the actual fuck?

The phrase and gesture is something we only do during the most formal ceremonies of a Lycan King's ascension. Nobody does that shit out of nowhere anymore. It's a relic of the past.

Basically, it's like watching someone break out Shakespearean English at a McDonald's drive-thru.

I narrow my eyes, studying him closer. "Where'd you learn that?"

My scent must've spiked with suspicion because the guy straightens, suddenly looking uncertain. "The old customs are still practiced in some circles. I mean no disrespect to the High Alpha."

Now I'm really interested. Prey shifters typically keep to their own communities, maintaining distance from predator packs due to the rampant bullying. They sure as hell don't usually bow to wolf royalty.

Not anymore, anyway.

"Interesting choice of devotional for an elk," I say, crossing my arms and throwing out my guess as to his identity.

The elk shifter's lips quirk in a small smile. "The Lycan Throne has long been a symbol of hope for many old shifter clans. Not just wolves."

Oh?

I straighten.

"What do you mean by that?"

He shakes his head. "The old ways have been long forgotten by most, but my grandfather taught me as a child. He remembered when the Lycan King stood for all shifters, not just wolves. Our duty was to pray for the day when the throne would once again bring equality to all shifters, both prey and predator."

My wolf, usually content to doze in the back of my mind, suddenly perks up with interest. We've never heard this particular interpretation of the Lycan monarchy. Sure, there are traditional packs who hold to ancient customs, who view the Lycan King with greater reverence than others, but prey shifters with a devotion to the throne? That's unexpected.

"What, is there some kind of prophecy or something?"

He blinks at me, a strange look crossing his face. "No, of course not. Just a belief we hold."

Damn. It would have been cool if there was some ancient prophecy floating around.

Still, it's interesting, though I can't really imagine my blockheaded alpha being the one to bring equality to the world.

Chapter 205: Lyre: Power Corrupts

LYRE

Thom's barely able to walk, stumbling every few steps, even with his hand in mine. His eyes have long ago glazed over.

His arcana's a bare whisper of existence at this point. When Aaron returns, I'll have to send the wizard back for real rest. One little ward was all it took to finish wiping him out, of course only an hour after the Beta had left.

Owen's off scouting ahead, since he still has the ability to defend himself if necessary. Plausibility hasn't blocked him yet, and he's essentially our last bastion of defense if anything arcana-capable comes our way.

Our emergency escape, if you will.

The effect of blood magic in this space is overwhelming the further we go, saturating the arcana in its taint. One would think such a level of corruption would be mirrored above ground, the earth incapable of nurturing the grass and trees, but it's the opposite: blood magic, nauseating or not, is a source of energy.

The earth siphons it greedily, creating a lush land of fortune for those unaware of its price.

But underneath the bloated, oil-feeling arcana threads runs something else. Something cleaner and deliberate, organizing patches of arcana as if fixing small defects.

When Owen returns, his face is grim enough that I don't need to ask, but I do anyway.

"You, too?"

He nods.

He's a refreshing partner; no wasted words. Just quiet competence and a remarkable ability to follow my train of thought without me having to spell things out, convenient when we have to curate our words in front of the others.

Bonding him to me would make things easier, but thinking of Aaron's jealousy makes my head already throb. He was already a mess over a simple arcana infusion with Thom, and—

My brows crowd together as I snap my head in Owen's direction again, frowning at him without meaning to.

How could I even consider passing up such a capable minion just because of a single possessive wolf?

It's as if I've been infected by their pack mentality. We don't have this kind of relationship.

Owen must sense the weight of my gaze because he meets my eyes, only to have his widen as he takes a step back. "I didn't do it."

"What?"

"You look like you're angry with me over something. I can promise you, I didn't do anything." He holds one hand up in the air, saying solemnly, "I scouted ahead but ran into no one and touched nothing. No ward was tripped."

The man's acting as if I'm unreasonable. Then again, I did turn him into a toad. For someone like Owen, to be overpowered by another, it would have been a humbling experience.

I'd really thought he was over it by now. We've been working together seamlessly for a while, and he stopped flinching every time I looked in his direction.

Pressing my fingers against my forehead, I let out a little sigh. "I was just thinking about something. Relax."

His shoulders remain tense, his expression wary.

This is why you don't turn your subordinates into toads. They start losing rationality over fear.

Nothing like the sudden urge to eat flies to ruin a relationship.

I sigh again, turning away from him to focus on the pale wizard swaying by my side. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see the angel-descendant finally relax his shoulders.

Pathetic.

Then Thom stumbles beside me once again, his knees buckling. I yank him back before he falls face-forward, then guide him to the nearest wall.

"Sit down. Rest for a while."

He slides down, back against the concrete, breathing hard. Sweat drips from his face. "Sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

I pat his shoulder a few times, hoping it's enough to boost his sagging morale. Before, even a glance in his direction would lift his spirits. Now, weighed down by what he's seen, the amount of information I've forced down his throat, and his depleted energy, it seems almost impossible to pull him out of his funk.

Sleep should help. And food.

Though I might have to hold his hand all night.

My lips turn down at the thought before stepping away with Owen, far enough for Thom not to listen in if we whisper.

"The further I go, the more signs of angelic interference I find," he murmurs. "And the App still hasn't updated its mission. We're here to find the agent of Chaos, no mention of Order's involvement at all, which makes no sense. There's clearly angelic work here."

"Not all descendants would be bound by Probability and Causality."

Owen's nose wrinkles a little. "I've never heard of an angel who isn't."

His polite way of telling me I'm full of shit, without wanting to go head-to-head on the matter. I snort.

"There was a community of them long ago. Descendants upon descendants." I trace a line in the dusty floor with the toe of my shoe, frowning as the long-forgotten memory returns. "They wanted the blood diluted just enough to create an entire race of angel-descended supernaturals. A great power in their own right, without the oversight of Balance."

Owen stares at me with naked suspicion. "I've never heard of such a thing in our history."

"Of course not." The laugh that escapes me holds no humor. "Angels tend to gloss over the darker sides of their history. It's inconvenient to be compared to Chaos."

He goes silent, then asks reluctantly, "What happened to them?"

"They all died." I shrug. "Too weak to defend themselves."

The angel-descendant's unnaturally bright eyes fix on me, unblinking. "How does that compare to this, then? This person clearly has power."

I tilt my head. "When did I say they were powerless?"

"You just said—"

"I said they were too weak to defend themselves." I hold his gaze steadily. "Who do you think eradicated them?"

His mouth twists. "Chaos?"

"Wrong." I smile faintly. "Balance. They didn't approve."

"You said they weren't bound by Plausibility or Causality," he points out with a frown.

"Correct. And because they weren't, Balance could act. They were yet to be woven into the fate of the world, but also unprotected by natural laws." She points a finger to the sky with a faint smile. "The great gods above don't like when uncontrolled power comes into play. Chaos had similar designs many times over the centuries, and they inevitably found the same end."

"Ah... I see."

I'm not sure how much he believes me, though.

I point at him, my finger stopping just short of his chest. "One of your parents is a pure angel, no?"

He nods, the motion stiff.

"But didn't teach you these things?"

A brief hesitation before he begrudgingly admits, "I have never met her."

Hmm. "Let me guess. Your father raised you with some vague notion of your heritage, but never the specifics."

"No. He had no idea." His eyes narrow. "He raised me as best as he could."

"I'm not criticizing daddy dearest." I wave a dismissive hand. "Most angels would stick around to raise their offspring precisely because of the laws in place. It's rare for one not to, but certainly not the fault of the human parent."

I glance back at Thom, checking that he's still conscious. Still breathing. Still with us. He meets my eyes and attempts a weak smile, and I wonder if he expects me to smile back.

I don't, but at least it doesn't seem to affect him as he leans his head back against the wall and closes his eyes.

"The dilution was deliberate," I continue. "A way to create beings who could move more freely in this realm without triggering the automatic safeguards of Balance, but still created under the purview of Order, effectively increasing their power in this world."

"And this community thought that would somehow exempt them from divine oversight?"

"They miscalculated." I keep my tone purposely light. "They believed the further their bloodline strayed from pure angelic stock, the less interest Balance would take in them."

"But they were wrong."

"Spectacularly. Their very existence became a threat to Balance. Think about it, Owen. A faction of quasi-divine beings with just enough power to manipulate reality but not enough divinity to be bound by the rules. What happens when that faction starts altering human destinies on a large scale? When they start interfering with pack structures, magical bloodlines, the threads that hold this mess together?"

Understanding dawns on his face. "Balance corrects the deviation."

"Bingo. They were idiots to think otherwise, and yet it happens every few generations. Power corrupts, even in Order."

He frowns. "But then why is the App not having us look for..."

My head shakes long before his sentence is finished, and he trails off awkwardly. "It won't. They would send such a mission to a team of Balance."

"Oh." He pauses. "That makes sense."

"The point isn't to worry about an angel-descendant going off the rails. I'm saying, you should be less worried about the angel and more worried about the team going after them."

He shakes his head slightly. "I still don't understand why angels would be working with all of... this."

It's a question we've been throwing around since discovering the signs.

"Power corrupts. Even for those associated with Order," I repeat calmly. "I'm more interested in who is capable of hiding their existence from the Guardian of this place."

Chapter 206: Grace: Braindead Ex

When the knock comes, I don't think twice before opening the door.

For what it's worth, you should never open a door without checking who it is, even when you know who's coming.

Because sometimes it isn't who you think it is.

His golden hair is dulled with dust. Or sweat. Or... both? It hangs limply around a face both familiar and not, with heavy shadows beneath his eyes and a grim twist to his lips. His confident, glowing, heroic aura is gone like it never existed, and now Rafe looks...

Honestly, he looks like he belongs in a dark alley somewhere with needle marks on his arms, okay? The whole drug-addled cliché you see on TV.

And his blue eyes are no longer clear and beautiful, but reddened around the edges and burning with something I've never seen before. If I had to guess, he's... angry? But his body language says otherwise.

"Grace." He sighs out my name like I'm a lost child finally found.

I step back out of pure instinct, eager to gain two inches of space. Unfortunately, Rafe seems to take it as an invitation to walk in, because he steps over the threshold.

Lyre's protections do nothing; after all, I'm the dumbass who opened the door.

Fuck.

His hand clamps around my forearm. "Why didn't you follow the plan? You weren't supposed to—"

"Who's that?" Jer's voice cuts through our dramatic and unlucky reunion, and Rafe stiffens.

"Is something wrong?" Ron's deeper tone follows, steady but wary, and out of the corner of my eye I can see him motioning for Sara to watch over Bun. He's clearly outclassed against an alpha wolf like Rafe, but the teenager squares his shoulders and straightens his spine to increase his aura as he walks unhesitatingly to my side.

My brief moment of shock breaks and I twist my arm free, planting both hands against Rafe's chest as I shove him backward.

He doesn't budge.

"Get out."

My words are calm despite their force; raising my voice here will only make me out to be weaker. All I have to do is wait. Caine is on his way.

I just need to make sure he doesn't take me away or hurt the children.

Knowing this keeps me steady, with only a smidgen of fear undercutting my indifferent facade. Fear because this isn't the Rafe I fell in love with. This one is strange, on edge, and filled with what I can now recognize as obsession.

"Why did you leave me?" Each word is harsh, ragged. "We had a plan, Grace. You were supposed to wait for me. What did you tell Andrew? What did you do to him?"

A half-hysterical laugh wants to escape, but I swallow it down. "Why are you here? Andrew should have explained everything by now." Keeping my voice level without any extra inflection is harder than I thought it would be.

My hands itch, both from disgust from touching him and with the urge to slap his stupid face. But I refuse to lower my arms, knowing if I do this man will probably consider it an invitation to waltz into my home.

His hands reach up to hold just above my elbows as his eyes travel over my face with frantic little movements. His upper lip curls into a snarl, a faint rumbling coming from his chest. Then, like flipping a switch, he tries to smooth it away. His face arranges itself into something meant to be understanding, I think.

It's gross.

How did I ever think Rafe was handsome?

After days with Caine—and even seeing Jack-Eye as often as I have—he's severely lacking in that category.

"I understand," he says, voice dripping with false compassion. "You seduced him to get back at me. I get it, Gracie. I don't blame you."

My head jerks back.

How the fuck did we even...?

No, why would he think that?

But then my eye twitches as I realize what this means. His ignorance, how he's acting as if I did something to his most loyal friend: Andrew hasn't told him anything.

My heart, previously a little frozen toward the guy I considered an enemy all this time, thaws a little.

More importantly, there's the casual possession in Rafe's tone. And he has the audacity to still call me Gracie after all this?

"You don't blame me?" My voice rises with each word, even when I'm struggling to keep it flat. "That's funny, because I blame you for quite a lot."

Ron's full of tense energy beside me, practically vibrating as his hands twitch at his sides. Once again, I jerk my arm out of Rafe's hold, this time to grab the teenager's arm and squeeze gently.

Hopefully my mom-telepathy is better than relationship-telepathy; the squeeze is supposed to mean *Everything's okay, don't worry*.

If Ron attacks Rafe...

Even if he's under the Lycan King's protection, Rafe is the current Alpha of the Blue Mountain Pack.

"You need to leave. Right now." I clench my teeth as I try to force Rafe backward with only one arm, which he's now clinging to with both of his hands, still staring at me with his feverish obsession. "I don't want you here."

Rafe leans in, too close. His familiar pine scent suddenly smells artificial and overpowering, making me sneeze. "I'm looking for you. I came for you. Do you have any idea what I've been through when I realized you disappeared?"

"Not enough, apparently," I mutter.

His crazed eyes narrow. "You don't understand. It's okay. I forgive you, Gracie. You don't trust me, but I'll show you how serious I am—"

"That's not it." I cut him off without mercy. "You found your mate. You chose her. I accepted it. It's the end of our story, Rafe. I don't want you anymore."

"It's not that simple!" His voice rises sharply, and Ron takes a step forward.

I jerk him back with the faintest shake of my head.

If Rafe hurts him...

"Yes, it is," I counter, ignoring my ex-boyfriend's rising panic. "You need to leave."

"Our bond isn't—I didn't expect it. That's all. And Ellie isn't like what I thought. But you, Gracie, you're everything—"

"Shut the fuck up," Ron snarls, the muscles of his arm bunching beneath my hand. "Didn't you hear Grace? She wants you to leave."

"Your mate drama isn't my concern, Rafe. You need to leave."

Raphael's eyes finally turn to Ron, taking him in with a sneer. "Who's this? You're even bringing in kids to make me jealous, Gracie? That's how desperate you are to have me back?"

I didn't think it was possible for Ron to stiffen even more, but he does, somehow. I jerk him back with another firm shake of my head, even as I wonder what the hell happened to Rafe's brain cells. I swear he wasn't this stupid before.

"No one's trying to make you jealous, and I don't want you back. Ever."

His eyes dart around the camper, landing on the children in the living room.

"What's all this? Who are these kids? Are you playing house with Andrew now?"

At this point, it's impossible to be angry over his accusations. The level of ridiculous in this situation has risen to TV drama-level stupidity, so it's easy to remain level-headed as I respond, "That's none of your business."

"Everything about you is my business!" He growls, fully growls, his reddened eyes boring into mine. "I've been going out of my mind, Grace. Ellie's been—" He stops, nostrils flaring. "Wait. I smell... What is that?"

I know exactly what he smells. Caine's scent on me, in the camper, everywhere. My heart pounds harder.

"You need to leave."

His expression darkens. "You smell like—" He stops, jaw working as he processes. "Who have you been with?"

"Also none of your business."

"Grace." The way he says my name now carries a warning. "Tell me you haven't been stupid enough to get involved with another pack. Tell me you're not—"

"She asked you to leave." Ron's voice comes from behind me, steady and cold.

Rafe's gaze snaps over my shoulder as he snarls. "This doesn't concern you, kid."

Somehow, the calm I've forced myself to wear shatters with this little moment, and I let go of Rafe's hand, my hand flying for his face.

He's an alpha wolf; he certainly has the ability to dodge a simple slap. But he's distracted and out of his freaking gourd, so my palm lands against his cheek with a loud smack, startling all of us.

I didn't even know I was going to hit him; my body moved on its own, full of motherly rage and how a kid like Ron, who endures everything calmly and spends all his time taking care of others, shouldn't have to deal with the vitriol of my extra-stupid ex-boyfriend.

Ron being only a couple years younger than me doesn't matter; in my head, he's my kid, under my protection, and I won't let anyone hurt him.

Even if it is just a snarl from my braindead ex.

My hand stings immediately, and I pull my hand back.

Rafe stares at me in shock, and I wish his cheek would turn red from the force. It doesn't, though. A pathetic slap from a human isn't going to do much against an alpha wolf.

"Get out," I demand, my voice suddenly hoarse as tears come out of nowhere. I blink them back.

"Gracie..."

"Get out," I repeat, refusing to engage.

Chapter 207: Grace: Tolerate

My command, unsurprisingly, falls on deaf ears.

Rafe lunges forward, completely ignoring how hard I'm trying to shove him away, even with every ounce of strength I can muster. My skin crawls where it contacts his chest.

He moves—forward, though. Not backward.

Inexorable and manic, his eyes darting all over my face.

"I'll allow that slap, and even this—" his voice drops low, his familiar voice now unfamiliar and nauseating, "—just this once, Grace. I understand you're angry with me. I'm letting you vent. But I won't tolerate it in the future."

Won't tolerate it.

The words echo, bouncing around my head like a toxic cannon ball.

Won't tolerate it.

As if he has any right to tolerate or not tolerate anything I do.

To Rafe, I'm a silly girl throwing a tantrum, not the wronged woman he cheated on.

What a scumbag.

My mouth goes dry. I stare at him—really stare—and wonder how I ever looked at this man and saw someone worth loving. His perfectly symmetrical face, those blue eyes I used to craft embarrassing mental poetry over, and the now-greasy golden hair I used to run my fingers through.

All of it makes my stomach churn.

It's like Prince Raphael of my memory turned around, grew up, started smoking, and became a sleaze.

"Are you even hearing yourself?" The words come out faint, because it's honestly hard to even believe the level of delusion this man's operating under. My first impression, of him being some drug-addled nitwit from a TV show, slithers back into my head. Seriously, is he on drugs?

Then again, I don't think any drugs work on werewolves.

Behind me, Ron's barely holding himself back, the air practically vibrating with his frustration.

And the kids are watching all of this unfold.

I can't let this keep going.

Won't tolerate it, he said.

What a fucking dick.

Disgust rises like bile in my throat.

I'd desperately tried to be good enough for this pack. For Brax, who held the highest position. I didn't want to shame the man I considered my stepfather; didn't want to shame the boy I fell in love with.

I twisted myself into mental and emotional pretzels for trash.

Humble pie is bitter as fuck.

"You know what?" A laugh bubbles up from somewhere dark inside me, and it sounds happy. Too happy. So happy it's fucking hysterical. "You're right, Rafe. You absolutely shouldn't tolerate it."

His expression shifts, confusion softening the hard lines of his face. Then he smiles beatifically, his head tilting as his lips curve, eyes soft and warm.

He thinks I'm agreeing with him.

What an idiot.

I step closer. My stomach twists violently, revulsion crawling across my skin like a million tiny spiders, but I force myself forward.

His eyes light up, a wolf-bright gleam of victory. His prey is surrendering. He's won.

"Gracie..." he breathes, so sweet, so familiar, as his hands reach for me.

The movement gives me the perfect opening. I bring my knee up hard between his legs, putting every ounce of my body weight behind it. At the same instant, I slam both palms against his chest in another shove.

The combo catches him completely off-guard. His eyes bulge, face contorting in shock and pain as he stumbles backward.

Wolves might be strong, but their balls are as tender as any human's.

His foot misses the top step, and suddenly he's tumbling, arms windmilling as he falls off the RV steps to the ground below, like a scene from a cheap comic.

A sneer twists my lips as I stand in the doorway, looking down at him.

"We're over, Rafe. Go back to Ellie and apologize to her for being such a piece of shit."

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Grace?" Even though every word comes out through gritted teeth as he rolls and writhes against the ground, it isn't hard to understand him.

I roll my eyes; I can't help it. The drama he's creating over nothing...

"You, Rafe. You're what's wrong with me. You can't take no for an answer and you don't know when you've overstayed your welcome. You honestly think cheating on someone is the way to a woman's heart?"

"It's not—" he hisses out a breath and grinds out the rest of the sentence in one fell swoop, "it's not cheating with us."

It takes a few seconds to unravel his meaning, and I snort.

Ron, no longer tense, grabs at my arm and pulls me out of the doorway. "Don't argue with him, Grace. Some people aren't capable of learning."

His earnest explanation for Rafe's stupidity helps ease the frustration and fury simmering beneath my skin, and I scrub my hands absently against the sides of my legs. They no longer tingle, but I feel... dirty. Like I should take a shower or something.

"Grace—!"

"Stop calling her name." The teenager in front of me no longer looks like a child as he glares down at Rafe, completely oblivious to the power the other man holds in this pack. Or maybe he doesn't care. "You aren't worthy."

My lips twitch.

"Where'd you learn to talk like that?"

Ron doesn't even glance at me as he lowers his voice. "TV."

No wonder.

Rafe's groans resemble the sounds of a dying animal. A really loud rodent, if I have to specify. Which I don't. But I do anyway, because it feels good to compare him to something ugly. Like a possum.

A mutated one.

Cross-bred with a naked mole rat.

I'd love to say it's satisfying to watch him roll around in pain, but it's mostly a hollow victory.

Understanding you've spent years on trash makes it kind of hard to enjoy the moment.

"Come on, get inside," Ron says, his hand on my shoulder, like he's the adult in this situation.

Regaining a little of my pride, I step back inside, watching in amusement as he shoves me behind him.

"Just close the door. He can't get in."

Ron stares at Rafe, still rolling on the ground and swearing in between calling out my name, and something dark flashes across his face. But then he obediently closes the door and engages the lock with a defiant click.

The camper's quiet without Rafe's dramatics, bringing peace back to our lives. Of course, now we have two werewolves on the ground outside of it, but—whatever. I'll leave them for Caine to figure out when he gets here.

I wipe my palms against my legs, unable to shake the crawling sensation from where I touched the bastard, and turn to face the living room. Jer and Sara stand there, wide-eyed and frozen; Bun's propped on Sara's hip, where she's uninterested in all the drama and instead focused on chewing the tail end of Sara's dark braid like it's some form of chocolate jerky.

Meanwhile, the older two keep staring at me with a very strange expression, one I can't quite decipher.

"What?" I ask, suddenly self-conscious. "Are you guys okay?" Guilt pricks. "Were you scared?"

Sara shakes her head slowly, her expression one of pure awe. "I didn't know these things really happen to people."

I push my hair out of my face, confusion momentarily replacing the lingering disgust from my encounter with Rafe. "What things?"

"Ron always says TV isn't realistic, but it's spot-on," she explains, still sounding starstruck.

I stare at her, a little helpless. "Should you be watching soap operas at your age?"

"I watch them, too," Jer pipes up helpfully.

"That's even worse."

"Way to be an influence on young children, Grace," Ron says, resting his elbow on my shoulder. "Sara, don't date guys like that. You don't want to end up like Grace."

"I dunno—looked kinda fun. Especially the end part where she went *wham* with her knee!" She jerks her knee up with a particularly evil grin, and my heart drops.

Yep. Mother of the Year. Now my pseudo-daughter wants to date scum just so she can knee them in the balls.

Pretty sure I'm failing at all the things...

Chapter 208: Caine: Disdain

CAINE

My overeager steps slow as I approach the witch's RV, an unwelcome and all-too-familiar scent heavy in the air.

That damned whelp of an alpha was here.

I barely glance at Reggie's unconscious form sprawled several feet from the camper. I'll address his failure to protect what's mine later.

Pacing the perimeter helps keep my boiling blood at a simmer, even as Fenris growls and snaps in my head. He's been half-asleep all morning, grumpy with the decision to keep him away from Grace and the children, and harassing me every step of the way here to remind me how terrible of an idea that was.

Just shut up and manifest already.

No way. I'm not manifesting until I know she isn't angry.

Fucking coward of a wolf.

No, I just don't want to share blame with my idiot soulbond.

Still a coward, though.

The camper door creaks open and my head jerks up, my heart jumping eagerly. I'm like an overzealous pup, desperate for an ounce of affection—but the feeling dissipates almost immediately.

It's Ron who emerges, shutting the door behind him to close off even a hint of Grace's scent. There's the faint scent of blueberry out here, something I'd breathe in deep in other situations, but not when it's mixed with her spineless ex's.

Not so spineless if he's sneaking around behind your back to get to her.

My molars grind together at Fenris's oh-so-helpful commentary.

He's not wrong, which only adds to its irritating flavor.

The teenager leans against the doorframe, arms crossed and eyebrows raised in what can only be described as pure adolescent judgment.

I pause. Even Fenris halts his mental barbs.

What the hell is this?

I stop my pacing and level a glare in his direction, though I temper its intensity—no need to scare him. Grace would be upset.

But I can't let insubordination slide, even from a child under my protection.

Instead of cowering, Ron drops onto the camper steps with casual disregard and lets out a dramatic sigh.

"So, are you just gonna let her ex-boyfriend wander around her whenever he feels like it?" His tone drips with disdain. "I thought the almighty Lycan King would be able to keep Grace safe. Not looking too reliable from where I'm sitting."

My eyes narrow as I assess the boy's unexpected challenge. Something unexpected flickers beneath my annoyance. The kid has balls, speaking to me this way. Most grown men wouldn't be able to.

More importantly, he's protective of Grace.

Good.

Retracting my glower, I focus on what's important.

"Raphael was here."

Ron nods. "He's gone now. Grace was pissed."

This particular detail soothes something primal inside me. Fenris rumbles with approval.

"It won't happen again," I assure the kid, reminding myself he's in need of protection. He's upset with me because I failed to protect his family; it's understandable. No point in picking fights with children. "He won't come near her."

Ron doesn't budge from his sentry position. I move to brush past him, eager to see Grace with my own eyes, confirm her safety, and breathe in her scent to calm the storm raging inside me.

Instead, the kid shifts, deliberately blocking my path.

My back stiffens. "Move."

"No." He jerks his thumb toward Reggie's unconscious form, meeting my gaze without a single flinch. "Take care of that first."

I suck in a deep breath, reminding myself I see this child as my own son. He's usually more responsible and less audacious, but he's mine now, and throwing my child off the steps is not an appropriate response to the situation.

Wow. Your intelligence has risen another point. Congratulations on leveling up your basic humanity.

I swear, if Fenris was manifested—

Abusing animals is illegal under human laws.

My teeth grind even further.

"Where's Grace?"

It's suspicious she hasn't come out and allowed the teenager out here on his own to greet me. Also, mildly annoying. Does she not want to see me as much as I want to see her?

"Inside," Ron answers, unfazed.

"Get out of my way, then."

"No."

The temperature between us drops several degrees. Fenris snickers. Under normal situations, he would be as irritated as I feel, but he seems to enjoy watching Ron get in our way.

I like watching you struggle.

The boy isn't afraid—not even remotely. His heartbeat remains steady, his gaze unwavering. He has absolute faith I won't hurt him, and it calms the rising annoyance in my chest.

He's obviously doing this for a reason, Fenris says, finally helpful. He's not happy with you.

"She's taking a shower with Bun," Ron explains, still perfectly calm. "There was an incident with applesauce."

I frown, momentarily distracted. Applesauce? "That doesn't explain why you won't let me inside."

Ron blinks at me like I'm being deliberately obtuse. "Aren't you supposed to be keeping your relationship a secret?"

The grimace on my face comes half from the reminder and half from Fenris's mocking laughter. "There's no issue with checking on her safety."

He glances around me, and I follow his gaze.

Reggie's still over there, unconscious, a pathetic representation of our kind.

"Why'd you send him over, anyway?"

"To keep you safe."

"Hah."

My eyes narrow, but I can't exactly argue with his mocking sneer in the Lycan's direction. "Don't worry. It won't happen again."

All the Lycans are now aware of my fury with Reggie; they'll be walking on eggshells around Grace. Of course, I was careful to reiterate that we are not mates per her wishes.

This time, I'll leave Fenris here. I've only been gone a short amount of time and she's already dealt with an insubordinate Lycan and this pathetic little alpha sniffing around; who knows what else she'd deal with if given a few more hours.

The girl seems to attract trouble in a strange way.

Ron stares at me with clear, calm eyes. "It better not."

My eye twitches. This kid...

I like him.

"It won't."

If I discipline him, Grace will probably be upset. She's protective over these children and too soft-hearted. Pack discipline is much harsher than what she would have grown up with as a human, though the details of how Brax raised her are a bit fuzzy.

An upset Grace will be even more unwilling to acknowledge our relationship publicly.

It has nothing to do with you being too lenient to lay a hand on him, Fenris drawls.

Of course not. The Lycan King has no qualms about disciplining his unruly children. His Queen, on the other hand...

Right. It's definitely because you're scared of Grace and not because you want to coddle them all for the rest of their lives.

Shoving my annoying wolf's presence to the back of my head as much as I'm able, I squint at the boy in front of me. "You're upset with me."

"Oh, you just figured that out?" His lip lifts in a little sneer. "The only thing you have going for you is your power, and you're not even capable of keeping her safe from your own people."

My head jerks back a little. "The *only* thing?"

Ron looks me over, from head to toe, in a strangely assessing way. Then he says reluctantly, "And your looks, probably."

Chapter 209: Grace: Commando

One tiny jar of applesauce can make an enormous mess.

It's bathed half the living room, the ceiling, a toddler, and a dog. The cat, miraculously, escaped. Jer and Sara were lucky enough to be on the far side of the room.

One awkward water-conserving shower later is when I realize no one's kept up with the laundry.

Bun has no clean clothes. Zero. Zilch. She's now running around naked with a diapered bottom, Ron's missing, and I'm out of underwear.

"Where's Ron?"

"Outside," Jer says, fiddling with the TV remote. Now that we're hooked up to electricity, the RV has full wi-fi access via something-or-another and they're browsing the TV, arguing on the merits of turtles with access to samurai swords versus kids bitten by radioactive spiders and acquiring superhuman prowess.

"Why is he outside?" I ask sharply, even though it feels a little weird to be upset with a kid barely younger than me. How am I supposed to discipline him? Bend him over my knee and spank him? Yeah, right.

But still, he shouldn't be outside—

"He's talking to Caine," Sara continues, snatching the remote from Jer.

"Hey! Give it back!"

"No way."

I peer through the window to check and sure enough, Ron's sitting on the camper steps. Caine's in front of him, arms crossed and a stern expression on his face. Is he berating the teenager?

Seems like it.

My first instinct is to bolt outside. Whatever's happening between them, Ron shouldn't be facing Caine alone. He might be tall and overly responsible, but he's still just a kid.

Then an air conditioning-propulsed breeze hits my legs, and I remember my current predicament. No underwear, which is not exactly prime intervention attire.

It's amazing how much confidence a pair of panties can bring your way. Try walking around in public without them.

If it doesn't feel any different, kudos to you, but me? I feel naked.

"Jer, Sara, keep an eye on Bun for a second," I call over my shoulder, not waiting for their response.

"We're busy!" Jer protests, still wrestling with Sara over the remote.

"She's eating paper," Sara adds casually, not even looking at the toddler.

I whip around to see Bun happily shredding what appears to be tissues, as evidenced by the bright green Kleenex box beside her.

Damn.

"Come on, guys. Watch her. Just—don't let her choke, okay? Two minutes."

"Fiiiine," they chorus with identical groans.

I dash into Lyre's bedroom, shutting the door behind me, desperate to find my last bit of undergarment armor.

A plaintive whine from the bathroom interrupts my search.

"Shit," I mutter. Sadie. I'd completely forgotten about her.

The golden retriever's been locked in the shower stall since I rinsed the applesauce off her tail. The bathroom now reeks of wet dog and artificial apples, which is not a pleasant combination.

"Just a little longer, girl," I call through the door. "As soon as I find some clothes."

Another whine, this one distinctly accusatory. I can sense it. I may not be a professional dog trainer, but this whine definitely says something like *Can you hurry up? I'm dying in here.*

"I know, I know. It's not my fault Bun decided to use applesauce as a projectile weapon. Give me a bit and I'll take you outside to dry off."

I tear through the dresser drawers, looking for underwear. My last clean pair is apparently victim of applesauce carnage.

The laundry situation has reached crisis levels, and I had no idea.

Mom of the Year. Again.

How many awards can I accrue in a day? I'm probably going to end up in the Guinness book of records.

All I find in the drawers is an assortment of lace, silk, and what appears to be something made entirely of straps, and none of it is mine. I close that drawer quickly.

Lyre and I might have bonded over supernatural disasters and hair dye, but we are absolutely not panty-sharing close. There are boundaries, and that's definitely one of them.

I slam the final drawer shut with a groan. The few drawers I've stolen as my own are nearing levels of apocalyptic—in other words, empty, empty, *empty*.

I have to go commando.

Pulling on a pair of Lyre's clean jeans, which are a size too small and give me serious muffin top syndrome, tug at the crotch area a few times, wishing the spandex percentage was at least doubled.

I'm about to confront an alpha werewolf while wearing zero underwear. There's probably a metaphor for my life somewhere in that. And it's unlikely to be complimentary.

I wonder if he can smell the absence of panties. I sure as hell hope not.

That would make things awkward.

Just before I leave, I crack open the bathroom door. Sadie looks up at me with betrayed eyes, her golden fur still damp thanks to the wrestling match her mini-shower had turned into, but she's still perky and her tail wags with excitement.

"Come on. Let's go outside and confront a wolf king."

Her tail droops.

* * *

"Ouch!"

Sadie launches herself through the doorway like a golden torpedo, slamming the door wide enough to crack against the unlucky someone on the others ide.

Peering around the edge of the door, I find Ron scowling at me, one hand rubbing the back of his head where the door must have connected. His dark eyes narrow with teenage affront, and I smile weakly.

"Sorry..."

Sadie, completely oblivious to the chaos she's caused, bounds down the camper steps and side-steps Caine warily before bounding into the grass to squat.

"That dog has issues," Ron mutters, dropping his hand from his head.

"She's not my dog," I mumble, though the argument feels increasingly thin. Sadie certainly behaves like she's mine, even if she technically belonged to a pair of weird old people and I still feel kind of guilty she's with us.

Seriously, this is either considered dog-napping or I've left two dead old people to be discovered by some hapless camper in the future. Granted, they keep saying Doris and her husband aren't dead, but still...

Man, life is weird these days.

Caine watches our exchange. His face gives nothing away, but I know him well enough now to read the tension in his shoulders. He's unhappy.

Okay, it's not really rocket science—the frown on his face gives it away more than his tense shoulders.

Clearing my throat, I point at the unconscious Lycan several feet away and bring up the most pressing issue at hand. "Can you take that away?"

Caine's eyes don't even flicker toward his unconscious subordinate. Instead, his gaze locks onto mine with laser focus, his expression hardening. "Why was Raphael here?"

Ah, shit. I'm not ready for this conversation.

Not because I'm hiding anything—I'm not, I swear—but because it's...

Well, let's be honest.

It's embarrassing.

Like, *seriously* embarrassing. Who wants to tell their mate their ex came by and tried to make it seem like being their mistress was some great honor? Seriously, it makes me feel dirty and gross and I still haven't really wrapped my brain around the stupidity of the situation yet.

I drop my eyes to the grass between us, suddenly fascinated by the remnants of a dandelion, puff-free. Heat crawls up my neck, and I desperately wish I had a pair of panties. Somehow, this situation would feel easier to deal with if I was wearing underwear.

Shut up. It makes sense in my head.

"Nothing important," I mumble, shifting my weight from one foot to the other.

I can't meet his eyes, so I stare at Sadie instead. She stares back as she squeezes her feet as close as they can get and desecrates the lawn further.

Damn. I'm going to have to pick that up later, aren't I?

Then I see Ron rolling his eyes.

Caine's voice deepens, sending an awkward quiver through me. "Grace. Why aren't you telling me the truth?"

Excuse me. That *is* the truth. It was very much *not* important.

But instead of giving him a confident amount of sass, I mumble, "It's really nothing. He showed up, spouted a bunch of nonsense, and I handled it."

And I did handle it. Sort of. I slapped him and then kneed his balls and he fell down the stairs, and I'm pretty sure that counts as handling it.

But my mind keeps circling back to a different, safer question, and I try to change the subject without much subtlety, pointing emphatically at the unconscious body we're all ignoring. "More importantly, why was your guy trying to break down our door? He was threatening us!"

Caine's expression shifts from possessively jealous boyfriend interrogation to exasperation. The hard lines soften as he pinches the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger, exhaling a long, controlled breath.

It's the closest thing to resignation I think I've ever seen on his face.

"I apologize," he says finally, dropping his hand. "He was sent to protect you."

I scoff.

Ron says, "I had the same reaction," and lifts his hand in my direction.

Belatedly, I realize he's asking for a high-five, and I give it to him with a faintly puzzled feeling. Was this a high-five worthy moment?

Apparently it was, because he shoots me a lopsided grin, apparently harboring no ill will for smashing the back of his head in with the door. Then again, that was technically Sadie's fault.

Caine sighs again. "I've talked to my men, and it won't happen again."

My puzzled smile freezes and I shoot him a wary look. "What do you mean, 'talked' to them?"

I'd regretted keeping our relationship a secret when Ellie was chasing me down, but it isn't like we've had a conversation about going public yet.

"Don't worry," he assures me. "I made sure to explain we are still not mates."

I stare at him with mild exasperation, not sure if I'm happy or irritated. Or just relieved. No, wait; not exactly relieved. If he sends a guardian spy to follow my every move, what am I going to do when Caeriel calls me over again...?

Things are getting complicated.

So I just reply faintly, "Oh."

Chapter 210: Caine: You've Chosen Well

CAINE

Grace looks awkward, her smile a little too forced and her eyebrows pulled together. Strange. I thought assuring her of our secret being safe would make her happier, but it seems to have done the opposite.

I give up. You'll never understand.

Ignoring Fenris's pointless commentary, I head for Reggie's unconscious form with a faint sneer. Nudging his body with my foot yields no reaction. His breathing is deep and even, his skin tinged pink with healthy blood flow, and his presence in the pack link is muted, but not gone.

He's sleeping.

No shit. Kicking his leg doesn't wake him up, either. While I don't have a bucket of water to throw on his face—and I would—I'm certain it wouldn't wake him up from his peaceful slumber.

Whatever little trick the witch weaved into her camper protection is working very well, indeed.

Reluctant admiration trickles its way into my brain. It's pathetic for a Lycan to be so easily rendered helpless, but it's only proven the potency of her power.

"Manifest," I order Fenris, this time poking the toe of my shoe at Reggie's temple. With the change in position, his mouth falls open.

Then he begins to snore.

Nope. You're about to harass her about that pup again, and I'm not stupid enough to stand in the crossfire.

Would a little loyalty hurt?

Yes.

My mouth twitches with irritation, and the surge of power I send Reggie's way might be a little more than necessary.

"Wake up," I snap, his snoring sounding like a saw on my very last nerve. But I'm still conscientious enough to narrow the range of unleashed dominance, not wanting to scare Grace or the children. As far as they're aware, I've done nothing.

But Reggie twitches, and his mental space in our pack link flickers with life.

Infusing my voice with the power of an alpha is as easy as breathing. "Wake up, Reginald."

His eyes snap open, unfocused and disoriented as my dominance fights through the strange blanket of energy surrounding his presence in the pack. After a few blinks he scrambles to his feet, as awkward as a newborn pup, limbs moving in awkward jerks until he's finally standing in front of me, shoulders pulled back as he tries to salvage some dignity.

His eyes are finally clear, but when he opens his mouth, only a loud squawk comes out.

There wasn't much sound in the area to begin with, but it falls into dead silence as the sound fades.

Reggie's face contorts, morphing from confusion to horror.

His throat works, and then he opens his mouth again. But...

"Squawk!"

The second attempt seems to have broken something in him. He narrows a furious glare behind me, aggression flooding the air with a hint of smokey scent.

Heat floods my veins, power gathering under my skin like a storm. I don't even need to turn to know he's directing his anger at Grace, my little human who can barely throw a proper punch, let alone defend herself against a full-grown Lycan.

One flick of my wrist sends a precise lash of dominance slicing through the air.

Reggie's knees hit the ground hard with a cap-breaking thud. His shocked eyes snap to mine, mouth hanging open in silent protest.

"Don't you feel ashamed," I say, my voice winter-cold, "to be so weak you've been hexed by a witch?"

Through our pack link, his thoughts scramble, thankfully unchanged by whatever strange prank Lyre's added to her protection: *High Alpha, forgive my unseemly appearance. I'll teach that witch a lesson she won't forget.*

His burning gaze slides past me again as he speaks.

I don't respond with words. The pressure of my dominance rolls off me in waves, narrowed to the man in front of me. Reggie's spine curves, fighting it for barely a second before his arms shoot out, palms slapping against the dirt to keep from faceplanting completely.

He's on all fours now, exactly where he belongs.

High Alpha, please— Another mental rush of panicked submission floods our link. *I only meant—*

"Your job," I cut in, each word precise and cold, "was to protect *everyone* in that camper."

Reggie's breath comes harder, the pressure of my aura leaving him fighting for each inhale. *The witch attacked me, High Alpha. She's standing right there; the one with blonde hair!*

My eyes flicker as I fight the urge to look back. Not to clarify his words, obviously, but just to look at her. To take a minute to sniff in her pretty blueberry scent and drink her in.

But first I have to deal with this idiot.

Takes one to know one.

Something dark and vicious surges forward from inside me, taking shape beside me in a rush of shadows.

Fenris materializes, his massive black form rippling with barely contained rage. His snarl cuts is bone-chilling, his lips pulled back to reveal teeth longer than human fingers.

"That witch is under our protection." Fenris's voice fills the pack link, vibrating with terrible power. Reggie flinches. *"Don't blame your failure on her."*

The connection carries every ounce of our shared disgust. Grace and Ron can't hear it, but Reggie feels the full impact; the weight of an alpha's displeasure crashes down on him.

"Why would you intimidate those I have under my protection, Reginald?"

His shoulders stiffen, but he remains in his position as sweat breaks out across his skin.

Fenris moves closer, his massive head lowering until his muzzle is inches from Reggie's ear. His jaw snaps shut with a cruel click of his teeth.

"Squawk!" The sound escapes Reggie as he flattens himself further, his chest nearly touching the ground. The stink of humiliation rises from him in waves, his skin flushing crimson with shame.

I was wrong, High Alpha, he acknowledges through the link, the thought small and contrite. *Completely wrong. I misunderstood the situation.*

I stare down at him, letting the silence stretch.

"You've proven you can't be trusted with their safety," I say finally. "Your new assignment is to monitor the Blue Mountain alpha. His behavior has been... erratic. Report directly to me on his movements."

Reggie's relief floods the link, grateful for any task that removes him from my immediate presence.

"If you so much as look at Grace or any of those children the wrong way again..."

I let the threat hang unfinished. Some promises are more effective when left to the imagination.

But Fenris doesn't bother with threats. He lunges forward and sinks his teeth into Reggie's shoulder, then jerks his head back, tearing skin from muscle and letting blood flow freely.

The Lycan squawks again, but doesn't fight back. His shoulder will be healed by tomorrow, so the damage isn't severe. Just enough to show my wolf's displeasure.

Humans speak with words and warnings, but our wolves are far more primal.

"Stand," I snap, and Reggie shoves to his feet immediately. At least he isn't pale and swaying like many a lesser wolf would be.

His gaze is steady and resolute, and this time doesn't slide behind me to glare at someone he shouldn't. *Yes, High Alpha.*

] "Let me make something clear," I say, my voice low enough it won't carry back to Grace and the children. "Every human under my protection is worthy of your respect. Especially her."

The 'her' hangs in the air between us, weighted with meaning. Reggie swallows hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. He bows his head in proper submission. His face is impressively blank, with no trace of the bias I know lurks beneath the surface.

"Yes, High Alpha. I understand completely." His voice comes out normal now, the squawking effect apparently worn off. Shame. "It won't happen again."

Fenris prowls around him, his massive paws silent with each step. Blood stains his muzzle, his black lips pulled back in a faint snarl. His head reaches past Reggie's waist even when the Lycan is standing upright.

"Not all humans are as fragile as they appear," Fenris projects. "The one you threatened walks between worlds. Be careful she doesn't decide your next sleep should be eternal."

The slight jump in my subordinate's pulse is the only indication Fenris's words have affected him.

I raise an eyebrow at the wolf. He's well aware it's from Lyre's protections weaved into her home, and Grace is weaker than any wolf in our territory. And yet he's impressively stolen Lyre's valor and applied it to Grace's presence.

Fenris turns his massive head toward me, storm-gray eyes unblinking. *It's better for him to believe her power did this. Lycans respect strength above all else. If he thinks she's dangerous, he'll keep his distance. A witch has greater value than a human, even among those who detest them.*

It's not a bad strategy. A flicker of amusement stirs in my chest as I consider it.

You're getting soft.

I've always been soft on her, Fenris responds without hesitation. *You're the one catching up.*

My eyes narrow at the implication, but I don't bother arguing with him. There's no point. Not when he's right, anyway.

I'm always right, too.

Reggie clears his throat, his eyes fixed on the ground. "High Alpha, if I may be excused to begin my surveillance of the Blue Mountain alpha?"

"Treat your wounds first. Don't allow him near Grace—the children—again."

He nods, slowly raising his head. His eyes flicker behind me, but this time they're not angry. They're calm and somewhat inquisitive. "May I ask what your relationship is with—"

"We are not mates," I explain calmly.

He pauses. "You're not?"

"No." Then I glance at Fenris, remembering how he put power in Grace's hands. It wasn't a bad idea. In fact; I should add to it. "She's been very clear about us not being mates."

Reggie's eyes widen faintly. "She's been... I see."

This time, when he looks around me, there's a faint whisp of respect on his face. "To think a human would be so daring. Not bad, High Alpha. You've chosen well."

I nod, because he's right. I have. But then I caution, "I haven't chosen anything. We are not mates."

He nods back, with a faint grin. "Oh, I understand. Of course, High Alpha. You aren't mates."

You're both idiots.