

Grace of a Wolf #Chapter 221: Caine: Sneaking In - Read

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CAINE

Sneaking through the dark hall of her camper is starting to become a habit.

Not a great one, either.

Fenris sounds sour from his place beneath the RV, where he's been keeping watch since Dylan and Randy left after the children were put to bed. He was less than enthused with my idea, but at least he isn't getting in my way.

If she catches you, I was never here.

Such loyalty from the other part of my soul.

Gritting my teeth against his brazenly perfidious nature, I manage to avoid creaking or shaking the RV as I sneak my way into the master bedroom.

Sara and Bun are fast asleep, cuddled on either side of Grace. The fan's on, blowing strands of golden hair across her nose, and yet the woman's oblivious.

The scene's so peaceful and perfect, it makes my little plot for a night of peace seem... dirty and mildly perverted.

What the fuck am I doing here, lurking in the darkness like some kind of deranged stalker because I can't sleep without her goddamn scent?

This is pathetic even for you, Fenris agrees. The mighty king reduced to stealing pillows. How the legends will sing of this heroic quest.

"Shut up," I growl under my breath.

Just take what you came for and go. Or don't. Either way, I'm not the one getting hit when she wakes up.

My original plan—swapping out the unused pillow under my arm for one carrying Grace's scent—suddenly seems not just desperate but genuinely disturbing. What would she think if she woke to find me looming over her bed?

And it wouldn't even be the first time.

You could just ask her for a shirt like a normal person.

It isn't like I haven't thought about it, but stealing her pillow somehow seemed a little less creepy at the time I made my plan.

Have you considered explaining it to her?

Damn him and his good points. I scrub a hand over my scruffy cheeks and inhale deeply, soaking in her blueberry muffin scent and consoling myself it's better than not smelling it at all.

If you just explain, I'm sure she'll be happy to send her pillows to you. Grace is very understanding.

My fingers twitch at my sides, the urge to step further into the room nearly overwhelming.

I take a step back.

This has gone too far. My need for her has crossed from inconvenient to unhinged. While not abnormal in a mating bond, Grace has a slightly different view of boundaries, and I'm supposed to be respecting her needs.

Sighing, I turn away from the doorway, forcing myself to retreat. Tomorrow I'll come back when she's awake, explain how important scent is to a mate, and arrange a more normal, consensual pillow swap instead of sneaking in like a thief.

At first, her presence and touch soothed me, its effects long-lasting. And now it feels like I need to see her every hour just to keep calm.

I sneak another deep inhale as I step out of her room.

You're whipped.

"I'm leaving," I hiss, tired of his constant prattling.

After standing there for five full minutes breathing like a stalker.

"Rich coming from you," I retort, still mindful of keeping my voice low to avoid waking the children. "You've been trying to get me to claim her since the day we met her."

Yes, but I suggested marking her, not creeping around and stealing her pillows.

The mental image of Grace's neck marked by me sends a welcome rush of heat through my body, but I force it away quickly. She's not ready for it yet, and I've already

pushed her into too much intimate contact. She needs to recuperate without me pawing at her like a horny, rutting beast. This content belongs to findnovel.net

Every step away from her bedroom makes the ache in my chest grow heavier, among other things.

You know, you could just sleep here and stop torturing yourself.

Of course I want to, but I don't have permission. And for some reason, Grace seems less than pleased with how I've been handling things.

"...Caine?"

My entire body freezes. Grace's voice, heavy with sleep but unmistakably alert, sends heat straight through my veins. I turn slowly, finding her silhouette in the hallway, one hand braced against the wall for support.

I'd been so distracted with my own imagination I hadn't heard her getting out of bed.

Her hair is tousled from sleep, her oversized t-shirt sliding off one shoulder. Even in the dim light, I can see the confusion in her eyes, the wariness in her posture.

"What are you doing in here?" she asks, her voice so tiny my enhanced hearing barely catches her words.

I have exactly zero good explanations for why I'm in her camper at three in the morning with a pillow under my arm and a growing hard-on in my pants.

Without thinking, I place the pillow over my crotch and turn away to awkwardly look at her over my shoulder.

Tell her you were making sure she was safe.

That lie feels too transparent.

Tell her you sensed danger?

And send her into a panic? No.

Tell her you missed her.

I'd love to, but if I start down that road, I might end up being the horny, rutting beast I just told myself I'm not.

"I couldn't sleep and wanted to make sure everything was okay here."

Grace tilts her head slightly, studying me with sleep-soft eyes, even as her eyebrows go up quizzically. "So you decided to break in?"

Put that way, it sounds even worse.

"I have a key."

"Oh, right." She crosses her arms over her chest and leans a little harder against the wall, blinking her big green eyes at me and doing absolutely nothing to get my erection to stop erecting. "Are you planning to make this a habit?"

Say yes.

"Yes. I mean, no." Damn it. "I'll go."

I turn toward the door, swallowing down the bitter taste of rejection before it's even offered.

"Caine."

I pause, still awkwardly clasping a pillow over my dick and hoping she doesn't ask me why I'm carrying one.

You can always say you wanted to sleep here, Fenris points out.

Brilliant. He has his uses.

"You can stay, if you want."

I turn, then remember the pillow and my hard-on and freeze, craning my neck over my shoulder again. "Are you sure?"

Her eyes flicker. "You're already here," she says evasively.

It's how she always does things when she doesn't want to be too forward, pushing the responsibility on me and acting passive. I don't mind; it's rather cute.

"Then I'll stay."

"The kids will be happy to see you in the morning. And it's safer if you're here."

She doesn't say she wants me here, but she doesn't have to. The invitation itself is enough to ease the knot in my chest, even though I'm now struggling with the idea of sneaking Bun and Sara out of her bed and taking over it myself.

But that would be terrible.

Awful.

Tempting.

Not helping.

"Do you want to look at the stars?" I ask, unsurprised to see her blinking owlshly at me again.

Oh, no. Say no, Grace. He has ulterior motives.

Shut up, Fenris.

Chapter 222: Grace: "Stargazing"

Caine's bizarre behavior is too much for my sleepy brain to compute, and for some reason he seems to be hiding something from me, only looking at me from over his shoulder.

It's too dark to make out what he's doing, but also I have to admit I'm not really focused on figuring it out. Instead, I'm trying not to stare at his butt or how broad his shoulders are or how he smells so damn good. Original content can be found at FindNovel.net

The man's turning me into a closet pervert and I'm not sure how I feel about it.

"Do you want to look at the stars?" he blurts out.

I blink. "The stars?"

"Yes. Outside." He gestures vaguely toward the door with something big and bulky in his hand, only to jerk it out of sight again and hold it in front of him. "It's clear tonight."

He wants to go stargazing? At oh-dark-thirty?

I should say no. I should go back to bed, where Sara and Bun are sprawled across my mattress like tiny dictators. I should absolutely not follow this man outside where anyone might see us while wondering if he's going to slam me against his truck and have his wicked way with me.

Wow, my imagination's really broadening these days.

"Okay," I say, and it's not because I'm tempted by the strange thoughts going through my head. It's *not*

.

The night air hits my bare legs as Caine opens the door, and I immediately regret not grabbing pants. At least I'm wearing panties this time, though, and the shirt is oversized enough to cover my thighs.

Still, I tug at the hem, trying to make it longer through sheer willpower as Caine does an awkward waddle out the door and tosses something under the camper.

I reach for the light switch for the strip lights on the camper's exterior, but he suddenly jumps up the few steps to cover my hand with his.

"Don't," he says softly.

His touch sends a familiar jolt through me—the strange, electric current that connects us, mixed with the brain-melting heat of desire.

"Okay," I whisper, completely lost to whatever sexual siren call he's putting out. My inhibitions are very clearly zero.

He releases my hand, and I miss his touch immediately.

Everything is quiet and still; this isn't a bustling area at any time of day or night, but I wonder how many people are in the shadows watching. There's no way Ellie doesn't have at least one spy on me at all times.

The whole "secret relationship" plan is unraveling by the minute, and I can't make myself care a single bit.

Caine suddenly stops, and I nearly crash into his back. He turns and grabs my wrist, his grip gentle but firm.

"Don't trip and fall," he says quietly, like he isn't the reason I almost did.

Still... he has a point. In the darkness, I can barely make out the ground, much less the details of it. And I'm barefoot.

"Okay," I say for what feels like the hundredth time tonight, letting him guide me to Lyre's truck.

He opens the passenger door, not the tailgate.

I slide in, confused. If we're supposed to be stargazing, why are we getting inside the vehicle...?

Before I can ask, Caine nudges my hip, pushing me toward the middle seat. I scoot over, my sleep-shirt riding up dangerously high. He climbs in beside me and slams the

door, plunging us into silence. The little bit of natural noise outside is gone and only the harsh beating of my heart remains.

"What are you—"

My question dissolves into a squeak as he grabs my waist and hauls me into his lap, my legs straddling his thighs. He's all hard muscle and radiating heat and...

Ahem.

Other things.

I'm suddenly, acutely upset I'm no longer commando.

"You can look at the stars through the windshield if you want," he says with a smile. But he's positioned me facing him, my back to the windshield, making his suggestion completely ridiculous.

It's clear star-gazing is not the point of us leaving the camper tonight, and my face flushes.

My head spins from exhaustion, arousal, and the sudden energy transfer happening where our bodies connect. It's flowing out of me faster now, making me lightheaded and warm. I lick my lips, trying to think clearly.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea."

"Me neither," he admits, "but I'll go crazy if I don't touch you."

His warm hands encircle my wrists and tugs me down with gentle force, until our foreheads press together in a strangely innocent, intimate moment, even as I can feel the hard length of him pressing against me from below.

His exhale warms my face, smelling faintly of chocolate.

"I won't kiss you," he promises. "I just want to hold you for a little bit. Can you handle it?"

"Yes," I whisper, mentally kicking myself for not even trying to get control over it from the beginning. I was too busy being dazzled by his... assets.

Sucking in a deep breath, I close my eyes, trying to focus on the torrent of arcana flowing between us. Something's different about it tonight. The usual wild rush feels... tamer. More contained. Almost obedient, even. When I mentally nudge it to calm down, it actually does, leaving me wildly confused.

"Are you upset with me?" Caine asks, and I open my eyes to shake my head at him.

"Just confused, because it's easier to control than before."

He nuzzles his nose against my cheek. Warm breath assaults my ear, sending a tremor through my entire body. "Mmm... Have you been practicing?"

I have, actually, in stolen moments on the road. Testing how quickly I can sense the energy in objects, specifically in cars zooming past. I hadn't realized how second-nature it's become until the laundromat earlier today. The way I zeroed in on the first dollar bill wasn't random; once I'd pinpointed what I was looking for, I'd known there was something there.

Is it possible that even this little bit of practice has had this much effect...?

"A little, but—"

The rest of my sentence dissolves into a gasp as Caine bites my earlobe, my body stiffening when his hips rock up against mine. Heat surges through me, pooling low in my belly, and I grind down without thinking.

"You said you wouldn't kiss me," I accuse, though my voice is a little too breathy and melted to have much impact.

"I'm not kissing you, Grace." He drags his teeth down the side of my neck, flicking his tongue against my skin, then bites firmly.

A whimper escapes me, and my control over the arcana flowing between us falters. It surges again, wilder now, responding to the spike in my pulse. He slides his hands down, linking his fingers slowly with mine, and the feel of our fingers rubbing together sends electricity zapping up my limbs, then down into the core of me. I shiver, every nerve ending achingly aware of everywhere we touch.

Chapter 223: Caine: Taking Too Long

CAINE

If Grace doesn't stop grinding onto my cock, I'm going to end up claiming her in the truck—which is not how I wanted it to happen.

But rational thought is long gone as I nip and suck at her neck, wondering why her skin's as sweet as she smells.

"If you keep—mm—doing that, I'm going to—ahh." Her hips wiggle as my fingers slide under her shirt and the tight band of her bra. One flick of her areola has her groaning and shoving her hips down even harder, and it takes everything in me not to rip off her panties and bury myself inside her right now.

I drag my mouth across her throat, sucking hard enough to leave my mark. Possessive instincts surge, chaotic and unrestrained, as I feel her pulse thudding beneath my lips.

Mine.

Saying she isn't leaves my mouth tasting sour, and the sweetness of her skin finally erases the repetitive denials of today.

I bite down just enough to brand her with purple evidence of my claim, deciding to leave a few more marks. Even if she doesn't want to claim a relationship with me in public, I'll make sure that asshole ex of hers knows she's unavailable.

She should be grateful I'm still playing along after smelling his scent all around my mate.

Grace's breath catches at the force of my teeth and her fingers tighten in my hair, nails scraping my scalp as she yanks me closer, demanding more without a single word. The pain only heightens the smug pleasure as I greedily mark her skin before she realizes what I'm doing.

Her blueberry scent is strong, and I swear she tastes like a muffin herself. A perfect, Grace-berry muffin, chock-full of her pheromones and an aphrodisiac that goes straight to my dick.

"Caine," she whimpers, tilting her head to give me access to the other side of her neck.

Fuck, I love when she says my name.

I press a smug kiss against a fresh mark, taking a moment to admire my work. Now everyone will—

"Fuck!" The word jumps out of my throat before I have a chance to process what her talented little fingers are doing.

They're working the button of my jeans with surprising dexterity, and my hips buck up involuntarily, my cock greedy for whatever she's willing to give.

I grab her wrists, pulling them away before I lose the last thread of my control. "Grace, if you keep touching me like that, I won't be in control anymore."

Her eyes find mine, her face flushed and pupils blown wide. "The longer we take, the more energy I lose. We don't have time to play around."

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

At least seventy-five percent of my brain is demanding we turn her around, rip off her panties, and fuck her until sunrise, but the other twenty-five percent is very clear on how dangerous this is. "No. We can't."

"We can," she insists, yanking her hands free and returning them to my waist with a determined look on her face. With the amount of focus she has and knowing her eyes are right at my cock, who can blame it for jumping a little in excitement?

But I try again to bring reason back into the moment. I'd intended on some heavy petting, a lot of hickeys, and maybe finger-fucking her into bliss a time or two if she could manage it.

The cramped confines of the truck is not ideal. A bed would be better. Maybe an entire suite, with multiple surfaces to throw her on.

"It isn't worth sending you to the hospital again," I say, focusing on the more important issue. Fucking her on beds and tables is not as important as her health and wellness.

She huffs a little as her devilish hands succeed in unbuttoning my pants and sliding down my zipper. "Then hurry up, because time is our enemy here."

Damn it, this is starting to sound reasonable, which means my cock is only getting harder and my rationality is slipping farther.

I'll take over if I sense anything go wrong, Fenris offers with a sigh. It isn't like I can even watch from over here.

Ignoring his mournful martyrdom, my hands defy my stalling brain to reach up and rip Grace's panties in one fell swoop.

The dainty fabric is damp and shredded under my half-shifted claws, and she mutters, "You keep destroying my clothes."

"I'll buy you more."

Her hands grip either side of my waistband and tug down awkwardly. "Come on, lift your hips."

"Are you sure?" The question feels ridiculous in this situation, but some last sliver of decency in the back of my head demands I give her this final chance to back out.

"Get. Your. Dick. Out," she hisses between sharp tugs downward.

My hand slides between her thighs as she tries to pull down my pants, and I tell myself her logic is sound.

The longer we take, the more energy is transferred. So if we do this fast and hard, she should be fine. She said she's in more control, and so far we've been able to handle the consequences of our play.

My fingers circle her entrance, gathering her wetness before pressing one finger inside. She's tight—too tight—and I force myself to go slow, even though the primal, rut-crazed half of my brain wants to plunge several fingers in to see just how far I can stretch her.

She moans, and I bite back the urge to tease and play, my neck aching with the force of holding myself back.

"So wet for me," I murmur against her ear, adding a second finger, stretching her carefully. Her body grips me, muscles clenching as I curl my fingers forward.

She leans forward and bites my shoulder with a soft grunt, grinding down onto my hand. Then she mumbles, "Shove your pants down, damn it."

In this tight space, her demands are mildly unreasonable, especially when my fingers are sliding inside of her. But I hold myself up with my free hand and lift my hips up, just enough for her to tug my jeans down an inch or two.

Just enough for my cock to spring free, sliding against the warmth of her as I pull my fingers out.

"Hurry," she hisses, putting both hands on my shoulders as she awkwardly tries to position herself over me.

I grit my teeth as she misses by a freaking mile, sliding her wet pussy against my denim-clad thigh. "Hold on, Grace. I need to get—"

She groans. "You're taking too long."

Chapter 224: Grace: Just the Tip

I'm going insane.

Absolutely, positively insane.

Between the energy surging between us and the ache between my legs and how he keeps sucking on my neck like it's the best lollipop in the goddamn world, I'm ready to explode.

Half of me is concentrated on the energy rushing between us, keeping it muted. The other half of me is deeply concerned about the lack of dick in my vagina, and I have no self-control left whatsoever.

Who needs self-control? I don't have any time to deal with it when I'm busy trying to keep us alive through the sex. Priorities.

Caine's not being as helpful as I thought he would be, constantly pulling back when I'm trying to jump forward. He's obnoxiously worried about me while I'm desperate to fill the aching pulse between my thighs, and I swear I'm going to die right here, right now, if he doesn't fuck me already.

Trying to shove it in myself isn't working, as his dick stabs against my inner thigh while I grind down on his leg. But it's okay. Practice makes perfect. If I can just aim it myself...

I'm so focused I can hardly hear what he's saying.

"Hold on, Grace. I need to get—"

I groan. He's slowing us down again, and I'm frantic to do the deed before we hit my metaphysical limits. "You're taking too long."

It's usually Caine in charge of the flow of our unfortunately few sexual contacts, but embarrassment is completely absent in the truck, uninvited to the party. Once again, I don't have the time or energy to deal with something as simple as shyness or embarrassment when my vagina's pulsing the way it is, almost painfully aroused, while I've got a death grip on the arcana flowing from me to him.

So without waiting for him to go through whatever mental crisis he's having, I slide one hand down to wrap around his cock, breathing out a soft little moan as I lower my hips again.

"Shit—Grace, no, I haven't—"

I throw my head back as the hot, blunt head of Caine's cock presses against my entrance. The promise of relief is so fucking close and I'm desperate.

Desperate.

I grind down harder, desperate to take him inside me, imagining how he'll fill me in one swift move, driving the full length of him inside until I'm stretched and full and panting—

Then pain slices through me.

Sharp and unexpected, it's nothing like the teasing stretch of his fingers I've felt on what is now multiple occasions.

This isn't a slow, sensual, thigh-shaking stretch. This is a fucking sword slicing through the dangerous fog of my arousal, splintering my rose-colored dreams with brutal reality.

"Ah!" I gasp, my body stiffening above him. My thighs clamp around his hips, muscles locked in shock, and tears fill my eyes.

My concentration shatters in an instant. The arcana I've been desperately controlling bursts free—a dam breaking after holding back a flood. Energy surges between us, wild and untamed, flooding Caine's body with everything I've been restraining.

His eyes flash silver and his head snaps back against the truck seat, tendons straining in his neck. "Fuck—damn it, I can't..." His hips surge upward, the movement involuntary and powerful, driving him an inch deeper into me, and I swear I'm dying.

Dying.

Oh my fucking God, it hurts, this is impossible, sex is literally impossible, why is he so fucking big, oh my God, oh my *God*, nope, I'm becoming a fucking nun.

"Get out, get out, get out," I hiss, smacking at his shoulder as I try to jump off his dick, my arousal shriveling into nothing in an instant.

"Wait—fuck, Grace, wait, don't move."

His arm wraps around my waist and holds me in place as my entire body stiffens, my thighs trembling with the force of my rejection. A lone tear escapes, the dramatic beginning of what promises to be an epic waterfall of broken sexual dreams.

Sweat beads on Caine's forehead. His jaw is clenched so tight I can see the muscle jumping beneath his skin. His tattoos are gleaming with what might be faint blue light, or I'm just delusional from the fact that his dick is literally slicing me in two right now.

"Grace," he growls, my name strangled as his other hand grips my hip hard enough to leave five distinct bruises. But he doesn't push me down, even as his fingers keep flexing against my skin. "I told you to wait, didn't I?"

My lips tremble, and I'm not sure if I should cry. Or laugh. Laughter might break the awkward mood, but crying feels like the most authentic reaction.

My poor, abused, broken vagina throbs around him, and I wonder why the hell people even *want* to have sex. Foreplay is where it's at. Never will I covet a dick again. He's got to be halfway inside and it's already impossible.

Everything online says vaginas stretch. Yeah, right. Liars. And all the romance books say it's *just a little pinch*.

Hah!

Hah.

Fucking *hah*.

"M-maybe we should have started slow," I mutter. "Half of you at once was too much. It really hurts, Caine."

He grunts, his fingers flexing again. Then he says, "It's only the tip."

I stiffen further, which only makes it hurt worse. He groans.

"Stop, Grace. Just relax."

"I can't. Maybe you should just... get out?"

"No." He stares at me, and I think his smile is supposed to be sweet and comforting. Instead, it just looks like he's being tortured.

By me.

Or, I guess, by my vagina.

Death by Vagina. Looks like I finally have a talent.

But since he didn't understand my suggestion for him to take his dick and go wasn't really a suggestion, I rephrase it: "Pull it out."

"Grace, just... relax a minute. It won't hurt as much if you just relax."

Hah. I've heard this line in romance novels, too. "I was relaxed. But I didn't know it would hurt this much."

A muscle in his jaw jumps. "It won't hurt as much in a few minutes."

I hesitate.

"I don't think I can hold myself up like this for even one more minute," I admit, my legs tense and trembling with the force of holding me high above his stabby-painful dick.

There's *no* way I'm lowering myself down, because that means he's going to go in deeper. And the way the tip hurts? Yeah fucking right. If he gets within a mile of me with that weapon, I'm calling the police.

He blows out a breath. "Just calm down, Grace. If you—shit, don't move like that—"

My thigh's starting to cramp, and I shift a little over his lap, only for my other thigh to slip while I'm moving.

If some poor, innocent soul happened to pass by the truck in that specific moment, they'd probably think someone was being murdered.

But no, it's just me, literally slipping on my boyfriend's dick until it's another ten inches inside of me, and the arcana is completely out of control.

But self-preservation instincts right now are reigning, so I force it under control before I end up making this awkward moment even worse by fainting. Goddess, the thought of explaining to Lyre how I went unconscious because his dick was trying to murder me... no, thank you.

"Oh my God, I think you split me in half," I hiss.

Caine sounds a little strangled. "I barely went in, sweetheart. It's still just the tip."

Chapter 225: Caine: Is It Sex If...?

CAINE

Between the absurd logistics, the clear pain in Grace's eyes, and the urge to drive myself deep into her warmth and claim her as my own, it's impossible for my mind to clear.

So inexperienced, you can't even make the first time good for her, Fenris mutters in disgust.

Damn it.

I wasn't prepared for the *first time* to be here, and I hadn't quite expected this level of sensitivity on her part. Instead, I'd fantasized over hours of my mouth between her thighs before finally claiming her...

And threw it all away in a haze of lust and excitement over her impatient fingers.

The only happy one in this situation is my cock, thrilled by the slight vibrations of her pussy fluttering against it, even as she stiffens further.

If she keeps this up, I'm going to disgrace myself.

"Maybe we should stop," Grace mumbles, her eyes wandering away from my face as a faint blush colors her cheeks.

At least she's not frantically trying to shove away from me anymore, though she doesn't seem to notice that her pain level has decreased. Green eyes, heavy-lidded with desire only moments before, now shine with unshed tears, made brighter by the faint redness rimming them.

She's even pretty when she cries.

My cock throbs, demanding more, but my chest aches with something far stronger than lust. She's young and already forever bound to me; the least she deserves is a romantic first night.

Oh, you realize that now...?

Fenris, free and clear of the lust hazing my brain, continues to grumble and ruin what little of the moment remains.

Shut up.

He does, with a long-suffering sigh.

My hand tightens against her hip just as she shifts, trying to adjust her position again. The movement drives her down another tempting millimeter onto my desperate cock, and I clench my teeth hard against the pleasure.

Sweet fucking agony.

Her inner walls flutter around me, her body instinctively trying to accommodate the intrusion.

"If I can just—if you'd move your hand, I can just—"

"Stop moving," I order her again, flexing my fingers against her skin. "Or it's really going to hurt."

She freezes at the soft threat, giving me enough time to blow out a breath and try to salvage the moment as best as I can. Getting intimacy out of her has already been hard with the limitations of her body; if I let her jump off and scurry back into the camper after this disaster, I'll be lucky to see the inside of her bedroom for months, if not longer.

So I slide my hand from her hip to the back of her head, and grabbing a fistful of bleached waves as I murmur, "You talk too much."

If I thought she was stiff before, she's a wooden plank now. "That's a little rude, don't you th—mmph!"

Yanking her forward is impulse, and her surprised gasp allows my tongue to sweep into her mouth, claiming her, silencing her protests with passionate greed.

For a heartbeat, she remains frozen against me. Then, slowly, she melts, and I tighten my arm around her to keep her from sinking further. The last thing she needs is more pain, but I'm unable to give up the sweet torment of her heat.

Her tongue tangles with mine, her breathing going from shallow and panicked to heavy and hot, green eyes hidden behind half-closed eyes.

I was wrong. The moment isn't ruined at all. A mere touch is all it takes to reignite her flame.

Her thighs have completely relaxed against my hips, my arms the only thing holding her up from the promise of more pain.

My hand slides from her hair, trailing down the elegant curve of her neck, over her collarbone, until I reach the perfect weight of her breast. Her skin is fever-hot, impossibly soft beneath my rough palm. I roll her nipple between my fingers, teasing the sensitive peak until it hardens again.

She moans into my mouth, a vibration I feel straight through to my soul, and it takes everything in me not to surge up and claim her innocence in a single thrust.

I'm not that far gone.

My arm tightens as her hips roll, feeling her flinch almost immediately. I nip at her bottom lip, suck it between my teeth, then soothe the sting with my tongue, pleased when she responds once again.

She rocks, my cock aches, and then a flinch. It happens again, and again, but each time I distract her with merciless attention, until she's panting and languid in my arms, her hips rocking with abandon, pussy fluttering and clinging to my cock, soft and warm.

"Caine," she breathes against my lips, once again lost to desire.

Fucking her would be heaven, my cock begging me for more.

"That's it," I murmur, trailing hot kisses along her jaw to the sensitive spot below her ear. "Just feel me, sweetheart. Nothing else matters."

Her breath hitches as I suck at her pulse point, marking her pale skin, trying to convince myself it's just as good as shoving deep inside her welcoming warmth.

She shifts in my lap again, and I groan as she inadvertently takes more of me inside her. Her inner walls do their best to strangle my cock, driving me insane. But I force myself to stay still, to let her body adjust at its own pace.

"I didn't know—" she starts, then breaks off with a shaky inhale as I twist her nipple just so. "I didn't realize it would be so..."

"I know," I say against her throat, dragging my teeth across her thundering pulse and feeling her shiver. "Just relax. Let me take care of you."

My free hand slides between our bodies, finding the slick bundle of nerves at the apex of her thighs. She jolts against me, a sharp cry escaping her lips as I circle my thumb around her clit. The cry morphs into a moan as I continue the slow, deliberate pressure.

"Better?" I ask, though I already know the answer. Her inner muscles have relaxed, her body softening around my intrusion.

"Yes," she sighs, her head falling back to expose the graceful column of her throat.

I take full advantage, laying claim to the offered territory with lips and teeth and tongue. All the while, my fingers work between her legs, coaxing her back to that knife's edge of pleasure.

I'm restraining myself by a thread and pretty fucking sure I'm going to have regrets in the morning, but I'll be damned if she remembers this fiasco as our first time.

Her hips move in aggressive circles, chasing the pleasure my fingers provide. She's slick enough for my cock to slide a little deeper in, then out, with each movement, a tease I'm unwilling to give up.

Does it count as sex if it's only the tip?

Yes.

Fuck, having a wolf in your head is so goddamn inconvenient in moments like this.

But also, he's a wolf. What does he know?

"More," Grace murmurs, her hips rocking with abandon. "Deeper, please."

Shit.

Each tiny movement drives me a fraction deeper into her tight heat, and my jaw clenches with the effort of staying still.

"That's it," I encourage, my voice a rough growl against her skin. "Take what you need."

Her hands, which had been braced against my shoulders, slide up to tangle in my hair. She pulls my mouth back to hers, kissing me with newfound hunger. The tentativeness is gone, replaced by raw need, and my skin buzzes with her touch.

"Caine," she moans against my lips, and the sound of my name in her breathy, desperate voice nearly undoes me.

My thumb increases its pressure on her clit. I can feel her building toward another peak, her inner walls fluttering around the head of my cock, her soft gasps only making me harder.

"Concentrate, Grace. Don't lose control."

"Control..." Her eyes flutter open, then closed again, and the faint buzzing fades. "Got it—ah. Mm." Her hips jerk again.

Fuck. I'm so goddamn close, but the vision of having her in a bed for our first time refuses to leave the back of my head—

You say that, but you're still inside of her.

I growl in frustration, biting at her soft neck as she grinds down, fighting my grip around her waist. "I need more," she whimpers, failing to impale herself, no longer afraid of the pain.

"Not here, baby. It'll hurt more."

"No, it won't." Her head thrashes from side to side; she's completely lost in arousal again, as desperate and forward as she was when her fingers first dove for the button of my jeans. "It's better now."

My need to thrust is almost painful, but I don't have protection, and we're still in a truck, in a suboptimal position for her first time. My teeth grind together as I force down my more debauched desires and soothe her with, "Soon, sweetheart. Come for me first."

If I was a good man, I'd slip out of her and fuck her with my fingers, giving in to her needs a little more. But I'm selfish, and her pussy is so fucking perfect, even if it's only greedily holding onto an inch of me.

Grace suddenly wraps both arms around my neck, her lips meeting mine in a savage, needy kiss full of tongue and teeth, as she shoves down again, her entire body tense with effort. My skin buzzes again, everywhere we touch.

But she's unable to break my grip, and her perfect little teeth bite down hard on my lower lip as she lets out a little human growl of frustration. "Damn it, Caine, just fuck me already!"

Chapter 226: Grace: Like a Good Girl

I twist against Caine's grip, desperately trying to force my hips down. The sensation of him barely inside me, stretching me to full-but-not, has me freaking feral with each ragged breath I take.

But my mate's oblivious to my torment, holding me up with the steel bar he calls an arm, refusing to finish the job. His thumb continues its relentless circles against my clit, making my thighs tremble, but it's not what I'm searching for.

"You'll cry if I give you what you want," he growls against my jaw. "Be good."

"I won't," I insist, even as my body clenches around the small part of him I've managed to take. "I'm not afraid of the pain."

We'll just pretend my little panicked interlude never happened, okay? I'm over it and want to know what all the romance books are talking about. By the way all my blood's surged down below, I'm throbbing and aching and going to explode if he doesn't help me out a little.

Is there a vaginal equivalent of blue balls? If so, I have it.

And the longer this torment goes on, the more energy he's sucking out of me—more or less literally at this point—and I'd rather not have to jump out of the car with a tuck and roll and no panties just to avoid going unconscious.

With my luck, I'll hit my head on some sharp rock and end up with a traumatic brain injury.

But, all these thoughts happen in a flash, here and gone again in between pulses of frantic, let-me-grind-onto-your-damn-cock-already, frustrated passion.

Caine pulls his hot mouth back, just enough for me to see his storm-gray eyes flash dark. "Such a greedy girl," he murmurs, his fingers rubbing faster. For whatever reason, it's his breath getting more shallow, like he's getting as much pleasure as I am.

Or maybe it's the practice squeezing I'm doing. I'm not sure I'm doing it right—everything feels strange and overly full and I'm starting to think I don't have a proper brain-vagina connection.

"Stop playing with me," I beg shamelessly, trying to angle my hips down again. He jerks a little, and I whimper as his cock goes in deeper. But then it's back out again, which is so fucking frustrating, I might scream.

"The first time should be in a bed," he says calmly, like his dick isn't already partially inside of me. "With candles and shit."

A broken laugh escapes me. "I don't care about candles and shit." Seriously, I have literally thrown myself onto him, and he's over here trying to be Prince Charming when he's *already inside me*.

It occurs to me I might have set myself up for failure. Wasn't I the one demanding we take things slow and get to know each other?

Maybe our bodies should just get to know each other first. They seem to know what they want; my brain, on the other hand, seems to be suffering from whiplash.

His fingers press harder, moving faster, and a preposterous laugh dies in my throat, replaced by a moan that doesn't sound like me at all. The pressure inside me builds, threatening to shatter me completely, and I roll my hips forward, hissing a little at the mix of pain and pleasure, whining a little when he jerks me back.

Caine leans forward, his teeth scraping my jawline, and my thighs clench. He groans against my skin. "Stop fighting," he growls, his breath hot and heavy. "Come for me, Grace. Come all over my cock like a good girl instead of trying to be a naughty one."

His words send a shiver through me so intense it borders on pain as everything shatters. The death grip I have on our energy falters, and the resultant surge is white-hot and overwhelming.

Waves of pleasure. Tense heat. And a strange, new sensation down below as he stiffens and curses, his already-hard arm tightening further.

The force of it steals my breath, my vision, my thoughts—everything narrowing to the points where our bodies connect, where his cock suddenly jumps inside of me, pulsing with its own heat.

I'm still dazed and confused when I suddenly hear him say, "This is not our first time."

Well, no shit. It is definitely not the first time he's had me boneless after orgasm. I think I might be developing an addiction.

"Just consider it a trial run," he mutters, far more talkative than normal as I lean forward to collapse against his chest. Both of his hands are on my hips now, still holding me up, even though I'm dead weight.

Trial run of what? Truck sex? I think I like truck sex. It's a little awkward and hard to manage, but I'd do it again in a heartbeat.

"You can still consider yourself a virgin," he adds, and it's only then I realize the man sounds... nervous.

With his dick still *right there*.

I blink against his neck, wondering what the man's on about. If P meets V, I'm pretty sure it equals sex. Ergo, not a virgin. Even if I didn't manage to get all of him inside me—though it isn't like I didn't try.

A lot.

Maybe half a virgin, then. Is there such a thing as a half-virgin?

Seriously, if he was already inside me, he could have done the gentlemanly thing and gone all the way in...

But then again, I did kind of make a hysterical fool out of myself in the middle.

When Caine slides out of me, I feel strangely empty and unfulfilled. But those feelings disappear with a sudden surge of mortification.

Something's dripping out now that he's not, er, plugging the hole.

My thighs clench.

Ohmygod, don't leak all over his lap.

Holy shit.

Why is there so much?

Am I a waterfall?

Caine doesn't seem to notice as he *lowers me onto him*, completely oblivious to the absolute puddle I'm oozing out. Of course, I don't have the bravery or self-esteem to announce it's happening. Too busy trying to emulate an ostrich.

"Grace? Are you upset?"

His hands travel from my hips to my back, doing an awkward pat, followed by gentle strokes, trying to soothe me from whatever he thinks I'm feeling.

"No," I mumble, stiff as a board and wondering if he brought spare clothes.

Oh, wait. I did laundry. Whew. Crisis semi-averted, except the part where I have to tell him what my vagina's done and then know he's going to live the rest of his life remembering this moment.

Fuck. Is it possible to knock him out and dress him against his will and without his consent?

"I'm sorry. I should have had better control..."

He's still talking.

And his control was just fine, damn it. A little too fine. And now he's blaming himself, but my memory is still unfortunately intact and I am very clearly remembering who jumped on who and who instigated what.

Spoiler: It's me. All me, one hundred percent verified.

"Um..."

"What is it, sweetheart?"

He sounds so damn sweet and encouraging and worried, and my brain's still stuck on the puddle I'm puddling in his lap and whether or not I'm half-virgin or if such a thing even exists, and why he thinks I give a damn about it.

"I think I'm leaking on you," I mumble against his neck.

Chapter 227: Caine: Voyeur

CAINE

By the way my skin's buzzing, I'm positive Grace has lost control again. It's a faint feeling, something I never noticed before—or attributed to her touch without thinking twice.

"Grace," I murmur against her ear, and she flinches and buries her face further into my neck. "Are you in control?"

"Of course I—oh." Suddenly, the strange feeling disappears. "Yes."

The witch seemed to think we should be able to control it on our end. Fascinating. You're right, it's as if she's dampened the connection between us.

It should be a positive thing, but my lips turn down a little at the thought of our connection being reduced in any way. But more importantly, we need to get to the bottom of this transference. If this truly is something I can manipulate, Grace will never be in danger again.

Her hips shift uncomfortably as I run my hand over her back. "Are you still dripping?"

A faint nodding sensation against my shoulder.

"Do you want me to wipe you down?"

Her body stiffens. "No. I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." Her voice is barely a squeak against my neck, making my lips quirk up. The faint buzzing returns for a second, only to disappear again.

It feels most similar to dominance, the moment a stronger wolf releases their aura. It's something I haven't felt in years, but it's also vastly different from my memory.

You're right. It's similar, but not the same.

Obviously. If it was, we would have recognized it from the beginning, and Grace would never have ended up in the hospital. Though if she was never at the hospital...

My eyes flicker to the camper in deep thought, wondering what Owen and the children would be doing now, without us in their lives. It's a sobering thought.

But then my eyes travel farther, in the shadows between two buildings. Even my enhanced sight can't pinpoint the body I know is there.

He's been there for a while, Fenris points out. I know you sensed him earlier.

The new alpha seems disinclined to keep his distance from Grace, but at least he didn't arrive in time to scent her climax, only its aftermath. Still...

My eyes darken as I press my lips against soft golden hair. "You should go inside."

Her head moves in another slow nod. "I need a shower. I can't get back into bed like this. I'm gross."

She isn't. She smells divine, and I want to breathe her in for the rest of the night as she sleeps wrapped in my arms. But the thought of Randy or Dylan smelling her in the morning has me agreeing with some reluctance. "You should."

"Do you want to shower with me?"

And lose her scent? Absolutely not.

"Not tonight. I have some work to finish."

Grace awkwardly pulls away from my neck, tucking her hair behind her ear and not making eye contact. Instead, her gaze jumps from place to place, but never my face. "Are you at least coming inside to change your pants?" Her cheeks go vibrant red as she asks the question.

She's blushing over wet pants, but not over demanding I fuck her.

I wonder if she realizes how silly she is.

Hooking my finger over the tip of her nose in a playful caress, I explain, "I'm not going to wake the children for fresh clothes. I'll change at the lodge."

She nods, still looking at anything but me as she reaches for the door handle. Of course, she isn't looking in that direction, either, making her hand grab at air three separate times before I reach around her, popping it open with ease.

Grace scrambles out of the car like my lap's an open flame, leaving only the memory of her warmth and her sweet, blueberry scent.

I pull my jeans back up properly, fixing myself, and glance up to see her staring at my crotch looking even more crimson than before. Her mortification is clear on her face, her gaze fixed on the wet stain she left behind.

Sliding my tongue over my teeth, I let my gaze wander over her body, barely decent in the moonlight. The scent of her arousal is still strong, and knowing the shredded remnants of her panties are on the floor of the truck...

Hmm. Round two wouldn't be a terrible idea.

But not with him watching.

"Um, thank you," she stammers, backing away the moment I hop out of the truck. "I should... check on Bun and Sara. Make sure they didn't wake up."

Before I can respond, she bolts for the camper in her bare feet, somehow better able to make her way through the darkness, leaving me behind.

It's an interesting feeling, to be ditched after sex. My lips twitch as she opens the door gingerly, before waving at me one last time.

Interesting mate you've chosen. She takes what she wants and runs.

"Aren't you the one who chose her?"

Since I've been, in essence, discarded after the deed, I circle the truck to enter through the driver's side this time, letting my gaze drift to the shadows between two buildings.

He's still there, watching. I can feel his eyes on the camper—on her.

My emotions are calm after a satisfying session with Grace, and I decide to let it slide for now. Let the kid think he's gotten away with his stalking. His behavior isn't enough to justify the actions I want to take.

Don't you dare use Grace as bait, Fenris warns me, his entire body stiffening from his position under the camper.

"I'm not." Insulted by my own wolf's lack of faith, I hop back into the vehicle, though I don't start it.

Closing my eyes, I reach for the pack bond.

Reggie.

Yes, High Alpha?

My fingers drum against my thigh. Grace's ability to regulate my emotions seems to be getting better, but it doesn't erase my irritation completely. *Why is the Blue Mountain Alpha lurking near Grace?*

He's drunk, High Alpha. But he's making no attempt to get closer. Just... watching.

I open my eyes again, staring through the darkness at the place where Rafe stands. *I can see that for myself. I'm asking why you allowed him to get this close.*

It's a little surprising to hear he's drunk. It takes significant effort for a wolf shifter to achieve such a state—our metabolism burns through alcohol too quickly. He must have been drinking steadily for hours.

Alternately, he's gotten his naughty little paws on wolfsbane.

As expected, he's making my job easier.

My apologies, High Alpha. What would you like me to do? Reggie's mental voice is carefully neutral.

He isn't in the wrong for waiting; if Rafe has no intention of approaching Grace yet, it's better not to reveal his presence. Blowing out a sigh, I reply, *Nothing yet. Keep watching.*

Will you be returning to the lodge tonight, High Alpha? Or staying here?

The question is asked with perfect deference, making my finger tap a little harder. Reggie isn't far from the Blue Mountain Alpha, with stronger senses. He's fully aware of what happened here just minutes ago, but I've been very clear about Grace's status. The man must be confused, and yet he isn't asking questions. How strange.

Not yet, I finally answer, feeling somewhat disgruntled. As if I would leave when another man's watching over my mate and children.

Understood, High Alpha.

I settle deeper into my seat, breathing in Grace's sweet blueberry scent mixed with the heady aftermath of our passion. My body still tingles with the echo of her pleasure, the way she came apart beneath my hands. No, I won't be leaving her unprotected.

Would you like me to remove the Blue Mountain Alpha with force? Reggie suddenly offers, a hint of eagerness in his mental voice.

He's probably itching to show his prowess after the massive sucker punch from Lyre's magical protections.

I chuckle. *No. Let him be for now, but don't let him come any closer.* Let him see what he's lost. Let him understand who she belongs to.

Yes, High Alpha.

I recline the seat slightly, positioning myself for a long night of watch, and allow myself a satisfied smile.

Chapter 228: Grace: Notifications -- (END BOOK FOUR)

Sleeping... isn't happening.

Kind of obvious, considering.

My entire body's languid, worn out from Caine's touch and the emotional overload of the moment. My face? On fire. And my heart...

...is a little frustrated.

Even after a bird bath in the bathroom—a shower would be too much noise, and I don't want to wake the children—and about ten solid minutes of me pacing in circles trying to figure out if I'm a virgin or not, along with some regret over not looking down to see exactly how much "the tip" means, I finally flop back into my tiny third of the bed, grateful for once Bun has rolled all the way over to the other side, curled up in her sister's warmth.

Then I bang my face against my pillow a few times with a silent groan.

Stupid. Couldn't just grit my teeth and bear it for a few more minutes? Overreact from a little pain and the man won't even pop my cherry properly.

Not like it's his fault. I'm not blaming him. The blame's not only mine, but gift-wrapped with a whole ass bow on top.

Sure, losing my virginity in a truck in the middle of the night was not exactly how I thought it would go, but the heat level was definitely there, and my body was ready, and most importantly, *I didn't pass out*.

Everything. Was. Perfect.

And then stupid me had to...

Argh.

Burying my face into my pillow with a silent scream eases the frustration in my soul a little bit, though every time I move my nether lady bits twinge. Which is totally a sign I'm *not* a virgin, I think, and some tiny, prudish part of my soul is absolutely horrified.

For years, I thought I wouldn't have sex until I was married. Even when Rafe would occasionally try to go beyond kissing, I'd push him away. For whatever reason, my skin would crawl a little whenever he'd stick a hand up my shirt, and I was never fond of him kissing anywhere except my lips. Even our first kiss had taken forever, and... was admittedly a little underwhelming after all the excitement and build-up.

Of course, Rafe had never blamed me, insisting he respected my boundaries. And yet...

Popping my face out of my pillow, I roll onto my back, rubbing the tips of my fingers gently over the purplish marks Caine left against my neck with a faint smile. Funny; Caine can smash through my boundaries without a single apology and I melt in his arms, somewhat literally. And yet Rafe would push time and time again, only for me to deny him, ending up in yet another round of apologies and assurances where I somehow felt as though I'd wronged him even as he told me he respected how I felt.

But—funny, how he had so much respect and yet never stopped.

And then to ignore my boundaries completely once his fated mate appeared and he threw me away.

Ugh.

No.

Ruining beautiful memories with thoughts of that bastard should be illegal. Thought police, lock me up.

In the darkness, I'm barely able to make out the details of the ceiling; the blackout blinds in the RV work great, only allowing a sliver of light in through the sides. Great for sleep, sucks when you're used to staring blankly at random details to focus your squirrel brain.

No wonder I'm thinking about nonsensical bullshit about my past.

Since I can't distract my overeager mind, I push a finger hard against one of the hickeys. There are several, all over my neck and some over my collarbone, each one bringing memories of pleasure and arousal when I think of his mouth against my skin.

How soon can we do this again?

My body's running low on arcana, but thanks to Lyre's little bit of teaching, it's a lot easier to replenish than before. Like now, without thinking, I've been pulling arcana in—the magical equivalent of fast-charging versus slow.

If I really focus, I wonder how long it would take to top me off. And then, maybe, we can revisit this whole virginity thing and take care of the question once and for all...

But, how exactly do I bring up the subject? Because I'm pretty sure saying "Have sex with me" is not how it's supposed to happen.

Though I'm not exactly opposed, I might die of embarrassment before the words get out.

My phone buzzes against my hip somewhere, and I reach for it blindly, not wanting to move too much. Whatever energy my body had has been sucked out by Caine.

A quick tap of the screen brings harsh blue light, and I desperately tap down the brightness until it's not eyeball-searing, glancing hesitantly at the girls to my side.

They're still snoozing peacefully.

Rolling carefully to my side to block the light, I squint at my display, wishing it wouldn't destroy my retinas even on the lowest brightness setting.

There's a whole cluster of alerts, all from the Divinity App.

[DIVINITY SYSTEM NOTICE: Emergency Maintenance in Progress.]

[DIVINITY SYSTEM NOTICE: We apologize for the inconvenience.]

[DIVINITY SYSTEM NOTICE: In case of emergency, please queue through prayer.]

[DIVINITY SYSTEM NOTICE: We are aware the system is down. Abusing the report feature will incur penalties.]

[DIVINITY SYSTEM NOTICE: All accounts abusing the report feature have been banned for thirty-six hours.]

[DIVINITY SYSTEM NOTICE: CHAOS, STOP.]

Huh.

First off: I knew that damn mission alert was bugged to hell and back. Hopefully whatever they're doing will fix it so I know what I'm supposed to do next.

Second: Wow, whoever's working on the App seems to be a little touchy. Their professionalism went downhill fast.

Which begs the question: Who, exactly, is maintaining this App? I wonder if I'll ever find out.

Another notification.

[DIVINITY SYSTEM NOTICE: Prayer queue has been suspended until further notice.]

It feels like there's a story behind this, and I'm desperate to know how one suspends prayer. If I pray now, is someone going to just... block my thoughts?

Or do prayers just go into the abyss?

Wait—did prayers always go into the abyss? Which prayers reach the gods? Is there some sort of required faith level for it to make it into whatever queue they're talking about, or are only people with access able to reach the ears of the divine?

So many questions. Too bad there isn't a *Divinities for Dummies* book. I'd devour it in a heartbeat.

Bun shifts in her sleep and I hastily turn off the screen, not wanting to wake her.

Mysterious App issues aside, I just need to wait for its maintenance to end so I can decipher my new mission and get the hell out of here. Between worrying about Ellie's next move, the bad memories I seem to hold onto now that I'm back, and the headache of knowing Caeriel's watching my every move...

I stiffen.

Fuck.

That creep wasn't watching us, was he?

Ugh.

I hope not.

My phone vibrates again, and I peek at the display with the assumption it's another crazy App notice.

But it's not.

It's a text message.

From Lyre.

I sit up so fast I nearly drop the phone, then freeze, checking to make sure I haven't woken the girls. Thankfully, they don't stir.

I open the message, heart pounding with relief; it's been radio silence over there, and I've been worried.

The words on the screen make me blink, certain I've misread:

[LYRE: Want some more kids?]

Chapter 229: Lyre: Kids

LYRE

There are few things more heartbreaking than the sound of a child's desperate sobs, even for a heart as jaded as mine.

Which is why my fingers are flying across my phone's keyboard with unnatural speed, responding to Grace's text with the most bullshit sweet talk I've ever mustered in my long, long life.

[LYRE: Want some more kids?]

[GRACE: Define "want", "some more", and "kids".]

[LYRE: They're cute, sweet, possibly potty trained, and don't you think Bun needs someone to play with?]

[GRACE: She has siblings.]

[LYRE: Great! Having a secure family unit will help them acclimate to their new lives. We'll invest in a 12-passenger van.]

[GRACE: ... can you just explain like a normal person for once?]

I glance up from my phone to the two tiny creatures huddled on the bed, pressed against the headboard. Their gaunt faces are contorted as they sob, but no tears fill

their reddened eyes. It's not that they're faking—their bodies simply don't have enough moisture left to waste on crying.

The girl clutches a handful of comforter like it might disappear. The boy stares at nothing, rocking. Both look about three or four, though it's hard to tell with the malnutrition. Hell, they could be twins for all we know.

[LYRE: Found two kids in Fiddleback tunnels. Survived somehow. They're alive, but barely.]

I shift position, and both children startle like I've fired a gun. The girl presses herself harder against the headboard. The boy's rocking intensifies.

Fuck. This is why I don't do heroics.

But the moment I saw them, another little body flashed in my memory, and... well, now they're in the room I've claimed as mine.

But unlike Grace, I don't have "mom" instincts. So this is temporary.

[LYRE: Owen's already planning to take them in. You can't deprive the kids of their siblings, can you?]

[GRACE: ... how far away are you?]

The door creaks open and Owen edges in, balancing a tray with two small bowls of porridge. His broad shoulders seem to fill the entire doorway, but he moves with careful precision, as if he's carrying something precious.

The children don't even look at him, trying to shrink further into their corner of safety. Not even his angelic presence has gotten them to open up.

"Made it thin," he says quietly, even though I didn't ask. "It's what they need for now. Too much at once will make them sick."

The children flinch when he kneels by the bed. The boy's rocking turns frantic, a sour smell filling the room.

I sigh and add another text:

[LYRE: They're really quiet and don't take up much space.]

[GRACE: ... they aren't objects, Lyre ...]

Owen moves with efficient calm, setting the tray on the nightstand before backing away a few careful steps.

"It's just a little food," he says, his voice abnormally soft. Even so, he still sounds like he's threatening to murder them.

Huh. I wonder how he coaxed the other children into trusting him. I wouldn't, and I've been an adult for too many lifetimes.

Strangely, they don't flinch, and the boy even stops rocking. Food bribes work, even if you sound like a killer, I guess.

"I'll stay over here," Owen continues, settling against the far wall. "No one's going to make you eat."

My eyebrow twitches. If they don't eat, I'll happily be the bad guy and force feed them. Even if they don't trust us, they need something in their bellies. They're starving and dehydrated, and they'll die if they don't eat.

But I suppose informing children of your intent to feed them, even against their will, is probably not going to endear them to you very much.

My phone vibrates with another text.

[GRACE: How many children?]

[LYRE: Two.]

More, actually... but they were already bodies before we got to them.

The last couple days have been a parade of horrors. Nothing I haven't seen before, but it hits hard every time. In the end, our hunt has turned into a rescue mission, our prey likely long gone. No matter; I'm sure we can pick up their trail again later.

Turns out Isabeau's operation went deeper than even I'd expected. This underground complex stretches for miles beneath Fiddleback territory, a true labyrinth hiding the monstrosities behind the pack's existence.

Owen sneezes, and the boy jerks his head toward the movement, eyes wide with animal terror.

"The porridge will get cold," the angel-descendant says mildly. "Just thought you should know. I'll be right here if you need help."

[GRACE: Well, we can't just leave them alone.]

My lips curve. As expected of a woman with her fate.

Sweet, predictable Grace. Always so ready to help, even with four magical children already in her care.

[LYRE: I'll figure out how to ship them.]

[GRACE: They aren't things, Lyre...]

I glance up from my screen to see the girl inching toward the food. She freezes when she notices me watching, so I deliberately look back at my phone.

[LYRE: You know what I mean.]

Grace doesn't need more responsibility, but these hollow-eyed children need her specific brand of fierce protection. They need her pack of misfit shifters.

And she probably needs the distraction, or she'll end up barefoot and pregnant in Lycan territory before she knows what's happened to her.

The girl inches closer to the tray, reaching a trembling, near-skeletal hand toward one of the bowls, barely visible in my periphery.

I frown down at my screen; porridge isn't enough for these little ones. We need formula, something fortified with all the things they need.

A knock at the door makes both children jump. The girl's hand retreats, and she's back against the headboard in an eyeblink. I bite back a curse, but Owen just glances at the door without even a blink to show his irritation.

"Come in," he says calmly.

Aaron—Jack-Eye to everyone else—pushes the door open with his shoulder. His red hair is pulled back in its usual leather tie, but there are dark circles under his eyes. Even his upbeat, overly charming disposition has been darkened and shadowed by the events of the last few days.

"Everyone's settled for now," he says. "At least, as settled as they can be. We've got people in six houses, all with clothes from the closets. Most are fed." His eyes drift to the untouched bowls. "Doctors say they're about halfway through triage, but some people need more care than they can give here."

I nod. "Any luck with those portable IVs?"

The kids have already been checked over, but we're out of supplies and waiting for more. Aaron more or less kidnapped a few doctors from the local hospital and an ambulance, but now we need to go back and raid their supply closets.

It's sanctioned now; amazing what a few phone calls to the right people can do.

"They'll be back in half an hour, hour tops. Then we can get these kiddos on some fluids. Ambulance is already at the hospital, and they've got a few more volunteers coming."

"Good."

Aaron rubs the back of his neck. "I'm heading to the store for some stuff. We haven't found any clothes for the kids yet, and we're out of towels again."

"They need formula, too," Owen says from his position against the wall. "And Pediasure for electrolytes."

The red-haired Lycan blinks. "They're a bit big for bottles, aren't they?"

"Get bottled water, too. Not enough cups to go around," I add, ignoring his question. He'll figure it out if he thinks it through, I'm sure.

"Got it. Bottled water, towels, baby formula, electrolytes, and clean the shelves of all their meds and vitamins. Anything else?"

The girl's lost all her courage, no longer attempting to get close to the food. I sigh, but Owen shakes his head at me, mouthing something.

I squint, and he mouths it again.

Patience.

Yeah, I get it.

"Lyre?" Aaron prompts.

"Soft toys. Maybe some fuzzy blankets." The girl seems to like the comforter.

Chapter 230: Grace: Breakfast with Bun

"Come on, sweetie, just one more bite." I hold the spoon of scrambled eggs in front of Bun's mouth, but she turns her head away, rabbit ears flopping dramatically as she does.

She's eaten about five bites of her breakfast, and four of them ended up dribbling out in dramatic fashion as she gagged over the very same eggs she's gobbled up every morning the past few days.

I guess on Tuesdays eggs are poison.

As soon as I think I'm getting a handle on this parenting gig, she's tossed a new curveball my way.

Sighing, I check my phone again. Nothing. I've sent Lyre three texts in the last hour, and her responses have dwindled from vague to nonexistent. Granted, the woman's busy with a bunch of victims she's pulled out from the literal underground, but I'm a little antsy knowing she has kids she wants to send my way.

"Doesn't seem like she likes eggs," the old Lycan, Dylan, says from the stove, flipping another perfect pancake onto an already towering stack. "Try the banana again."

"I know what she likes," I mutter, but grab the banana anyway. The spotty, overripe fruit is one of the many offerings Dylan brought over at dawn—along with eggs, milk, pancake mix, and basically the entire bacon section of whatever grocery store he raided.

There's already a literal aluminum pan filled with bacon, as if he's feeding twenty of us and not four. (No idea when Ron left, but he was gone by the time I'd finally woken out of my fitful post-coital napping.)

In fact, when I'd stumbled out of bed at seven, Dylan was already in my kitchen cooking up a storm. I'm pretty sure the bacon's what woke me in the first place.

I glance at my phone again. Still nothing. Goddammit, Lyre. I need more details, here.

On the daybed in the living room, Jer and Sara remain dead to the world, limbs tangled together in sleep despite their constant waking battles. The white cat—still nameless, still definitely not normal—is curled between them, while Sadie's golden body stretches protectively along their feet. The dog raises her head briefly, watching Bun before settling back down.

She's not interested in Bun's spit-up leftovers, which is also unusual. Sadie basically inhales food. I'm pretty sure Dylan's had some sort of heart-to-heart with the dog, Lycan style, to keep her out of the kitchen/dining area of the camper while he's cooking.

"Here, Bunny Bun. Banana?" I offer a mushy piece, and compliant Bun opens her mouth, deciding the overripe fruit's better than chicken babies.

"How about pancakes?" Dylan asks, starting a new tower of them.

"No, thanks. She hates pancakes." Technically, she loves them, as long as they're swimming in syrup. But since I have no interest in bathing a sticky mess of a child, I'm avoiding the pancake dilemma.

"Pa cay!" Bun cheers through a mouthful of mush, and half of it promptly drops out of her mouth and into her lap.

In my short career as a mother, I've learned motherhood is not very glamorous.

I rub my temples, where another headache threatens to bloom. I've had so many of them lately, enough to make me wonder if it isn't just stress and annoyance. I've never been particularly prone to headaches before.

"You should eat," the Lycan opines. "There's plenty of food. Make yourself a plate."

My belly twists at the idea of food, and I shake my head. "No, thanks. I'm not hungry." Thanks to my headache, my stomach's also rebelling. Skipping breakfast isn't unusual for me, anyway. "What is Caine doing today?"

Keeping the question casual is practically godlike acting skills, and I give myself a mental pat on the back. Good job, Grace.

He answers without hesitation... or detail. "The High Alpha is handling pack business."

Uh-huh. Helpful.

"What kind of pack business?"

"Lycan business."

Is it classified, or is he just unable to read the room?

"Um—do you know if he's coming over later? To see the kids, I mean."

Dylan turns a little to stare at me, flipping a pancake without looking. He's got skills. "I'm sure he will stop by to see the children, ma'am. He does seem inordinately fond of the children. In fact, the High Alpha seems to place the children as his highest priority these days."

He keeps emphasizing *the children*, and he keeps staring at me with a lot of meaning in his gaze.

"He's a devoted father," I mutter, letting my eyes wander off as I pretend not to notice how he's practically begging me to admit to the relationship between me and his king.

It's obvious the whole *keeping our relationship a secret* thing isn't working, but I'm not about to say anything yet. I still haven't spoken with Caine about it, and... well, with having two Lycans following me around, the danger from Ellie seems a little less worrisome.

So I haven't clarified anything yet.

Even with an old Lycan practically winking at me every time he "helps" me maintain our cover.

For a grumpy old man who didn't seem to respect me very much, his tune has changed drastically...

"Where's Randolph?" I ask hastily, changing the subject without any finesse whatsoever.

"Randolph?"

"Pa cay," Bun says again, trying to interrupt us even as she grabs for the rest of the banana in my hand.

I frown, handing her another piece without really thinking about it. "Rudolph?"

"Randy, ma'am?"

"Right, him." I have no idea why I can't keep his name straight.

"He's on the way."

Right on cue, someone knocks on the door, and Dylan waves me back when I move to get up. "You sit. Don't open the door on your own."

My mouth opens to protest automatically, but I close it almost immediately. If the man wants to open the door, I have no reason to complain. "It's just Randy, isn't it?"

He shakes his head, leaving his precious pancakes to cook unattended as he opens the door. His somewhat genial grandpa-like demeanor disappears into the cold and brusque manner of yesterday as soon as it opens. "The hell you want?"