

Grace of a Wolf #Chapter 231: Grace: Bruised - Read

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Chapter 3: Grace: Bruised

"I'm here to see Grace."

Andrew's voice carries through the door, steady and cool despite the demeanor of the old Lycan gate-guarding my doorway. It's a little surprising to feel the relief threading through me when I hear his voice; Dylan's become a little too much of a sycophant, and the reversal's too quick. It's enough to make a girl uneasy around him, not sure how much is real and how much he's faking.

Besides; his behavior isn't for me, Grace. It's for Caine's mate. Shockingly enough, I'm not averse to borrowing his power... but it doesn't really feel good to know someone's taking care of you because of your position and not your personality, you know?

"I don't think you have any need to see her," Dylan says harshly. His voice is old-sounding enough for it to be harsh without trying, and now he's obviously trying.

"I don't think you have the right to decide that."

My lips quirk a little. Speaking of sycophants, Andrew's always been the ultimate one in my head all these years, always standing by Rafe's side. He never had much of his own personality; he was always "Rafe's best friend, Andrew".

But unlike Dylan, who achieved sycophancy after discovering my identity, Andrew's lost his. It's not hard to assume who I'd prefer to talk to.

"Let him in," I call out, wiping banana from Bun's chin. She tries to avoid it, even bending backward in an attempt to pretzel herself, but I win because she's strapped into a chair.

Her entire face scrunches up in disgust as I scrub a crusty bit of oatmeal from under her eye while I'm at it.

Meanwhile, Dylan's entire face goes sour and he steps aside with all the enthusiasm of someone allowing a raccoon into their pantry. Andrew slips past, and Dylan shuts the door with force.

Andrew, meanwhile, doesn't even acknowledge the Lycan now that he's made his way inside. His brown eyes settle on me instead, a now-familiar half-smile tugging at his mouth. "Hey. How are you doing?"

My cheek twitches a little as the old Lycan scowls at his back, probably plotting his murder or something. Somehow, I have the feeling Andrew's being too friendly on purpose to piss him off, but it's more amusing to watch than anything... mainly because I know his attitude would change if Caine walked through the door.

"Fine. Why are you here?"

His eyebrows lift as he shoves his hands into his pockets, slouching a little as he stands in the hall. Dylan's forced to shove him forward in order to enter the kitchen, his scarred face looking particularly dark and scary as he shoots the younger man a quick glower.

Andrew doesn't seem to notice, his eyes steady on me, occasionally drifting to the still-arched Bun.

"What, I can't be here?"

"I mean..." Deciding Bun's clean enough, especially considering she's just going to shove more mashed banana on her face—which she promptly does as soon as I take away the demonic wipe I used to clean her—I settle back into my seat with a frown.
"You don't have a particular reason to be."

The statement hangs awkwardly in the air, but it's true. I'm not trying to be rude, but our relationship has always been defined by Raphael. Andrew was Rafe's friend who tolerated me. Now he's saying he's a friend who's chosen me over Rafe, but... well, when did we become hang-out-every-morning friends?

I was not consulted.

The idea still feels weird, though not as impossible as it used to.

Then again, after having Super Nanny come by yesterday and utilizing Andrew as a chauffeur, I'm starting to become inordinately fond of having lackeys...

Andrew coughs into his fist, a faint red flush creeping up his neck. "I told you before. I've made my choice. I'm not going back to Rafe's side."

Dylan's head swivels as he pours two burned pancakes into the trash, looking a little less grouchy when he observes Andrew.

Meanwhile, something else has caught my eye. It's a yellowed bruise near his temple, in the stages of late healing. And if I squint really hard, I think there's dried blood at the corner of his mouth, though whatever injury is long healed.

My eyes narrow.

"Did Ellie give you trouble?"

His hand flies up reflexively, fingers skimming the bruise before dropping away. "What? No. Hey, Jer and Sara are still sleeping?"

The denial comes too fast, wrapped in a casual tone that's anything but as he evades further questioning.

"Andrew—"

"Where's Sadie's leash?" He cuts me off, even as he's already found it on the counter. "I'll take her out for a bit. She's probably ready for a walk."

I frown. "You don't need to—"

He snatches the leash off the counter and whistles. "Come on, girl."

Sadie slips off the daybed and trots over to Andrew, but slinks when she gets near. Her eyes are wide, the whites of them clearly visible as she looks at Dylan before practically plastering herself against the younger shifter's legs.

I turn to Dylan, who's returned to his pancake fortress, my frown intensifying as my suspicions are proven correct. "Did you scare my dog?"

He pours new pancakes into the pan. "I did not terrorize the beast, ma'am."

"Pa cay!" Bun shouts again, stretching her hands toward Dylan's stack with renewed determination.

Andrew clips the leash to Sadie's collar, his movements stiff. The bruise on his temple is more obvious now that I know to look for it. For it to still hang around, it's probably from earlier this morning. And he's trying too hard to act like nothing happened, which either means it's very related to me... or he's trying to protect his ego.

I let it slide for the moment, determined to pin him down later.

"She's been acting weird since we got here," I point out. "Like she's afraid of your reaction."

"Dogs have instincts," Dylan says flatly. "Perhaps she recognizes superior predators when she encounters them."

Hah! She wasn't even afraid of Caine when she first met him, our first sign of her not being a normal dog. Though she does seem to prance a little lighter around Fenris, who does, in fact, terrorize her, only further proving I'm probably right.

Andrew snorts and mutters, "Or maybe she just doesn't like assholes."

The Lycan turns from the stove, but the tense moment is interrupted by another knock on the door, because apparently we're the party house of the morning.

Sadie flattens herself to the floor and belly crawls behind Andrew as he goes to open it, whining a little.

This time, it really is Randolph, and he comes inside with a smile. Aside from giving Andrew a curious look, he nods politely in my direction and grins widely at Dylan. "I thought I smelled breakfast. Is that going to be enough, though?"

Even Andrew does a double take as we both stare at the pile of food on the counter.

"Are you blind? I'm still cooking," Dylan snaps.

Bun reaches out for Randy with a soft coo, and he unbuckles her to pull her into his arms.

For some reason, I feel like scowling at the man as Bun happily pats at his face, leaving me uncomfortable with the surge of jealousy I feel as she smiles at someone unrelated to our little family unit.

"Good morning, princess. Are you done eating breakfast?"

She shakes her head.

"No? Are you still hungry?"

She nods and places both hands on either side of his face, saying solemnly, "Pa cay."

The urge to scowl fades almost immediately.

Instead, I smile. "I need to shower. Do you mind feeding her some pancakes, Randolph?"

"It's Randy, ma'am."

Jesus. I'm perfectly capable of remembering a name, and yet I can't figure out his for the life of me. "Right. Randy."

"No problem, ma'am. Do you want some pancakes, Bun?"

"Bay."

"And bacon?"

"Ey."

"Eggs?"

Super Nanny seems particularly proficient in her gibberish.

Bun nods with satisfaction, but my newfound jealousy is still calm in my chest. After all, I'm not going to be the one cleaning up her sticky mess. If he wants to sacrifice himself, he can.

A little smug and high on having newfound lackeys to do everything for me, I even shoo Andrew and Sadie outside before half-skipping into the bedroom to grab fresh clothes for my shower.

My mood brightens further to find Caine's sent me a text.

[CAINE: Good morning. Did you have breakfast yet?]

[GRACE: Yep. About to shower now.]

[CAINE: Alone?]

I blink at my phone, but the weird question doesn't ruin my happiness.

[GRACE: Yes...?]

[CAINE: Good.]

And... there's our conversation.

A little bemused, I read over the few texts again.

Ah, he probably was asking if I was showering with Bun. Now it makes sense.

The man doesn't seem terribly proficient at conversational texting. His question's not only weird, but he's left our conversation at a standstill. How the hell am I supposed to respond now?

[GRACE: Why, do you want to shower with me?]

His response is shockingly swift.

[CAINE: Can I?]

[GRACE: No.]

[CAINE: Oh.]

A blush heats my cheeks even as I stare at the screen in exasperation. He's left it at a dead end again...

Chapter 232: Caine: Instilling Fear

CAINE

After five minutes without another reply from Grace, I let my gaze travel gloomily from my phone display to the she-wolf kneeling before me.

Kneeling is a pleasant term for her almost limp body, held upright by her arms. Her facial features are obscured by swelling, and there isn't an inch of skin on her unblemished.

Rapping my knuckles against the desk, I murmur, "Your Luna is thirty minutes late."

"H-High Alpha, the Luna is not in our territory—"

Another gentle tap of my knuckles causes her to flinch.

"Lie," Ron says calmly from my left.

I nod. "Correct." He's learning quickly, as expected of my son.

The she-wolf goes silent, having even lost the will to whimper. My eyes darken.

"This King has given great mercy to the Blue Mountain Pack, allowing most of you to live, and yet your Alpha and Luna refuse to show their faces upon my return."

Her head droops lower. It's hard to tell if her eyes are even open through the swelling. "Our Alpha and Luna have been called out by the esteemed Alpha of Forest Springs, High Alpha. They are not in territory."

"Lie," Ron says again.

This woman is one of the devious Luna's most loyal attendants, but getting the truth out of her was never my intent. If I wanted their Alpha in my hands, it would have happened this morning.

And his Luna is even less of a worry.

Neither of them have showed their faces since my return, though it may have something to do with the rampant rumors flying through the pack; considering they both approached Grace before learning she is still under my protection, it's no surprise.

More importantly, my little mate has things to do in this pack. Considering her reaction when I first killed her pathetic excuse for a foster father, I have no interest in creating more distance between us by eliminating the rest of her problematic pack from this world, especially when there are already a multitude of political headaches stemming from my impulsive actions.

But instilling fear will keep them from tormenting her further, and forcing the new Alpha and Luna into the shadows will only heighten their anguish as their legitimacy is questioned with the advent of the upcoming forum.

It's apparent the current leadership isn't capable of much, anyway. That whelp of an alpha has allowed his mate to not only once, but twice, attack the woman under my protection. Even without my interference, this pack is doomed to fall.

My gaze travels back to my phone, dark and listless without Grace's sweet responses. Perhaps she's already in the shower.

If I wasn't dealing with this pesky pack...

I lean back in my chair with a long sigh, waving my hand in dismissal at the beaten she-wolf. Her loyalty is admirable, if misplaced.

"Take her away," I tell the Lycan holding her up by her arm. "Keep her in custody until her Luna returns. Perhaps she'll be more motivated to show her face when her favorite pet is missing."

The guard nods sharply, hauling the woman to her feet. She doesn't resist, doesn't even whimper as she's dragged from the room. Ron watches with clinical detachment, his young face already hardened into jaded indifference.

I'm not sure if I should be proud or concerned.

My phone vibrates against the desk, the display lighting up. I jerk up straight to reach for it—but the name illuminated isn't Grace's. Jack-Eye's contact photo stares back at me instead.

Disappointment is instant.

Fighting the instinctive urge to reject the call, I press the phone to my ear. "What is it?"

"Well, hello to you too, sunshine." Jack-Eye's voice carries its usual sardonic edge. "Where the hell are our reinforcements? We've been waiting."

I press my thumb and forefinger against the bridge of my nose. "They should be there within the day." I'm not actually sure exactly where they are, but there's only so much driving that can be done in a day, and the pack lands are far from Fiddleback territory.

He clears his throat. "Great. Anyway, thought you should know—Lyre and Grace have come to an agreement about sending a couple kids your way. There are two we found in the tunnels."

A soft hum escapes me as I process this information. My little mate with her boundless compassion. It seems our house is destined to be lively.

Perhaps I should have a larger one built.

"I'm planning on having one of the new Lycans drive them over," Jack-Eye continues. "And we might need a few more."

"Understood. How are things on your end?" I ask, leaning back in my chair.

His sigh is heavy. "It's rough. I thought we'd make quicker progress once Lyre could use her magic again, but for whatever reason, she says it isn't a good idea."

"I see. And the wizard?"

"We're bleeding him dry. Poor bastard can barely stand anymore. Because this is taking so long, we haven't made much progress on investigating anything else in Fiddleback. Sorry, boss."

I hum again, my gaze drifting to the window. It will be nice when I can bring Grace home, instead of seeing Blue Mountain territory everywhere I look. She'll be safe there, even if I have to leave to investigate something like Fiddleback.

But I have to be by her side in a place like this.

"Keep at it. There has to be something."

"Is that all you've got? 'Keep at it'? Very inspiring leadership."

"Did you call for inspiration?"

"Fair point." He pauses. "Anything else you need me to report?"

"Not unless you have something else to share."

"Nah, that covers the basics." Another pause, this one longer, more calculated. "So... have you figured out your little problem yet? The touching thing with Grace?"

I freeze.

"You sound strangely mellow today," Jack-Eye continues, his voice dripping with insinuation. "Must have used that new technique I suggested—"

I end the call without changing my expression, placing the phone face-down on the desk with careful precision.

From the corner of the room, a Lycan who has been silent throughout my dealings steps forward at my beckoning motion, his face carefully blank despite his hearing being acute enough to hear Jack-Eye's words.

His expression remains neutral as he approaches my desk, having a much better sense of self-preservation than his Beta.

"High Alpha," he acknowledges with a slight bow of his head.

"What's the status of the forum? Have all the participating packs confirmed their attendance?"

Chapter 233: Grace: Dad is Home

The entire day passes in peace, which is... great.

So great.

Except for the part of me so unused to it, it leaves me with a spiraling coil of anxiety until I feel like I'm about to pop out of my own Pandora's box of fears.

I've taken Sadie outside for a "potty break" about five times since dinner—which was only an hour ago—and I've deep-cleaned every inch of the RV, which includes finding a bizarre amount of instant ramen packages hidden deep in a cupboard above Lyre's bed. They're expired, and both Dylan and Randy (whose name I think I've mostly committed to memory) spent about twenty minutes arguing over whether expired instant noodles is safe to eat or not.

Andrew spent the morning with us and then disappeared after lunch, saying he had things to do and being rather vague, but at least the older Lycan doesn't look like he wants to murder him anymore.

In the end the noodles were tossed, but not before Dylan taught the children about a popular 90s boyband group with their vocalist's instant noodle-reminiscent hair. They've been playing one of their songs on repeat for the last hour because Bun's obsessed, and now she won't stop screaming "Bye!" while jumping from on the furniture.

All in all, it's a wonderful night for our new little family plus our Lycan helpers. No Rafe sightings, no random bullies Ellie's thrown my way, no messages from the App—which is still under emergency maintenance—and aside from a message from Lyre saying a few Lycans will be driving the children to us once they're stabilized, it's... calm.

Very, very calm.

Too calm, damn it.

Which is why I'm not taken by surprise at all when, on Sadie's sixth trip outside for a "potty" break (which is really just me suspiciously looking around in the dark waiting for Ellie and her goons to show up and hopefully get pummeled by an angry Dylan), Sadie slips her collar and dashes out into the darkness.

I'm so unfazed I don't even yell after her.

She's not a real dog, anyway. My fears for her safety have largely disappeared since Caeriel's little insights at the Wash-N-Were, because I'm sorry but no dog on this planet goes around giving reports to anyone. Not unless "reports" has become a new euphemism for dog shit.

Instead of panicking, I just loop the now-loose leash around my hand and head inside, further unsurprised when a furnado dashes out with a yowl the moment I give it a chance at freedom.

I probably should have expected that.

Worry sneaks in now, but not the same worry the children are currently having.

"No! You let out the cat!" Jer wails, about to jump out of the RV instead of taking the three steps like a normal person.

"Get back inside!" My arm shoots out just as Jer's about to launch himself through the doorway, and my palm smacks against his chest before he jumps.

Kids are so *fast*, but my reflexes are slowly catching up to their insanity.

"But the caaaaaat!" Jer shouts, grabbing at my wrist and staring anxiously beyond me, straining to find a single white kitty in the darkness.

Randy, only a step behind with Bun in one arm, pulls him calmly out of the doorway as Sara bounces on her feet in the hall, her face pale. Super Nanny to the rescue.

Seriously, he makes it all look so easy. I'm mildly jealous.

"It's gonna die out there. We're in wolf territory. They'll eat it." Sara's voice drops to a horrified whisper. "They'll eat its guts first, probably."

"I'm sorry, Grace. The cat came out of nowhere and ran right for the door before we noticed anything was happening," Randy explains, shoving both kids back and into the living room. "We'll get it back."

Thankfully, wolves are built-in trackers.

Bun wiggles down and bounces over to the TV, where noodle-head is once again on repeat with their song. She either has no idea what's going on, or doesn't care. Her new obsession has all her attention.

"This is our fault," Dylan says calmly, even as he's stripping off his shirt in the kitchen.
"Don't worry, ma'am. It'll just be a few minutes."

"Wait, no, it's not—" I don't even get to finish my sentence before Dylan tosses his shirt into Randy's hands and bolts out the door.

I hastily step out of the way, not wanting to get bowled over by an overeager Lycan.

A muffled crack echoes as he bounds out the door and suddenly there's no man but a massive silver-gray wolf racing into the shadows. He's smaller than Fenris—well, every wolf is smaller than Fenris—but still a good two hundred pounds of muscle and teeth vanishing into the night.

I press my fingers against my forehead with a sigh. Dylan's response time is admirable and probably unnecessary, but I guess it's better not to call him back. Who knows what those two are up to. I'm pretty sure they'll be fine, but it's always possible they won't be. They wouldn't run off like this without reason. Something clearly has their attention.

Hopefully it's nothing bad.

Randy practically drags me back inside, slamming the door shut with a grim look on his face. When I frown at his rough handling, he drops his hands almost immediately.
"Sorry, Grace. We'll be more careful about the pets."

"It's fine." He's completely mistaking what's upsetting me, but judging by the way he's swatting at a few moths that have invaded thanks to our extended door-opening time, he just wanted to get the door closed before more insects invade.

Still, he could have just asked me to come in.

Now that I'm inside, Sara's sharp eyes zero in on the empty leash dangling from my hand. "Where's Sadie?" she asks, panic raising her voice to a new high.

"Having adventures with the cat," I say, trying to sound upbeat and unworried. Explaining the animals are supernatural stalkers in cute disguises can come later, when the Lycans leave. If Caine hasn't already explained their oddity to his men, I won't, either. He probably has reasons.

Or he's forgetful.

Either way, I'll ask first.

Randy's eyes widen with alarm. "I'll tell Dylan to go after—"

"Don't bother." My cheeks flush a little with embarrassment over his level of worry. "They'll come back if they want to. They're technically strays, anyway."

He stares at me like I've suggested we abandon them in a rural field on purpose. "But—"

"It's fine. They probably just want to explore. They're smart."

He frowns and goes silent, but I'm pretty sure he's already passed onto Dylan to hunt down both the cat and the golden retriever.

Sara scrambles onto the dinette bench, pressing her face against the window and cupping her hands around her eyes to block the reflection. "What if the wolves eat them before Dilly gets there?" she whispers, breath fogging the glass.

Oh, right. The children have decided Dylan's new name is Grandpa Dilly, and no amount of us explaining how awful the name is has changed their minds. In fact, I'm pretty sure it's cemented their love of the name further.

Jer says it makes Dylan sound like a redneck grandpa who likes to go fishing and eat cornbread, and it seriously makes me question what Owen's been teaching these children during his time raising them.

Not judging. Just curious.

"They're probably goners," the boy says solemnly, climbing up beside her. "Wolves probably like cats because they taste like chicken."

"Dogs do too."

"I think cats taste like them more."

"Then do dogs taste like cows?"

Their conversation's already taken a straight left into lala land, which at least is better than them worrying over the assumed demise of the two supernatural pets.

"They'll be fine, and I'm pretty sure they don't taste like chicken. No one's going to eat them."

Sara stops her window-gazing for a second to give me an accusing look. "The cat probably wants better food."

I blink. Suddenly this is my fault? I was outside!

"Yeah," Jer nods, for once in complete agreement with his older sister. "That cat food stinks. So does the dog food. No wonder their poop is so stinky, too."

"Maybe they're jealous 'cause we get to eat Dylan's cooking," the girl suggests, returning her face to her darkness-peering.

"I'm sure it's not the food," I mutter, feeling guilty for no reason, all because of two children throwing random blame my way.

Sara suddenly straightens her back. "Oh!"

"Are they back?" Jer asks eagerly, shoving his face against the window, too.

"No, Caine..." Sara stops abruptly and looks at Randy guiltily. "I mean, 'Dad' is home."

Chapter 234: Grace: Do I Have Rabies?

Ron's the one to walk through the door first, though he pauses to give Bun—who's ignoring him for noodle-head on the TV—a strange look before heading for the bathroom.

"I'm taking a shower," he says, deliberately raising his voice a little.

The ungrateful and obsessed toddler shouts, "Bye!" as she scoots a little closer to the TV, her limbs waving in an uncoordinated attempt to follow the dance moves.

Ron shoots me an even stranger look, one I interpret as *she used to love me before you came along and now you're corrupting her with this?*, but I hope my telepathy with the older kid is on the fritz and I'm wrong.

"I'll heat up some leftovers—"

"I already ate," he calls over his shoulder as he disappears into the other bathroom.

Jer and Sara, meanwhile, don't even care about Ron, too busy peering out the window still.

"Is he coming in?" Jer stage whispers to his sister.

"I don't know. Maybe he's just going to live in the driveway?" Sara answers with extreme doubt, switching to a new section of glass as if that will give her a better idea of what's going on.

Randy settles into the kitchen with a dish towel, wiping crumbs off the counters as he says, "I'll make sure he gets food when he's done. The kids will be fine for ten minutes if you wish to say hello to the High Alpha."

He acts so calm, like he isn't burning with curiosity over our relationship, and my lips twitch a little. He and Dylan seem far too excited over their alpha being mated...

Excited enough to ignore my identity as a human, despite how clear their disdain was for us just the other day.

It makes me wonder how long they've been hoping for him to have a mate, and how they can throw their dignity to the ground to accept any mate at all.

"I'll be back, then."

My heart skips a thrilled beat as I hustle out the door, pushing it shut behind me with a firm click.

It feels a little like I'm sneaking out, despite Randy knowing exactly whose truck I'm rushing toward.

The headlights are off, but the engine purrs. For a second, I hang back, memories of our last little... romp... in the truck flooding my head. Caine isn't expecting round two, is he?

Because I am... against it. Yes. I'm a responsible mother who would definitely not canoodle in the truck when she has children peering out the window.

Then again, maybe Caine could drive off to a secluded little...

No! I'm against it. I'm a responsible mother and sex is definitely not going to distract me from being one. Clenching my hands and breathing in the night air, I've got myself convinced we're just saying a brief hello and goodbye when my phone buzzes, distracting me from my mental gymnastics.

Expecting it to be Lyre or the App, I pull out my phone, only to shiver at the message on my screen.

[CAINE: Get over here.]

The glow of my phone casts blue shadows across my face as I stare at Caine's text. Three words. That's all it takes for my stomach to clench and my pulse to skip.

The man's a dictator. And yet...

I slip the phone back into my pocket and glance toward the RV. With the blinds up and the lights on, it's easy to see Sara and Jer still plastered to the glass, peering outside with curiosity and tracking my every move like baby versions of FBI agents.

My body still hums with the memory of last night, but my brain conjures up a mental spray bottle and spritzes down those thoughts immediately.

No. Bad Grace. Naughty girl, calm yourself down.

I take a deep breath, willing my pulse to slow.

With purposefully light steps, I cross to the passenger side of the truck and open the door, peering inside with what I hope is casual nonchalance and *not*

a lascivious stare as my eyes zero in on how his muscular thighs fill his jeans.

Drool.

"Aren't you coming in?" I ask, my voice remarkably steady for the lewd thoughts running through my brain. "The kids want to say hi."

Yes, yes. Bring the kids front and center so I don't jump into the vehicle and make my way into his lap to do something I'll regret later.

For the timing, to clarify. Not for the action.

The action... I'm willing.

The timing, less so.

Caine sits motionless behind the wheel, one arm draped loosely over it as he turns to look at me. His face is sharp in the interior light, his brooding stare a little darker than normal.

"Get in," he says.

I glance back at the RV, where two curious pairs of eyeballs are still watching. "We can't just—"

"Just five minutes, Grace."

My spine turns into a limp noodle with the way his voice caresses my name, and I hop inside before realizing I'm doing it.

His long fingers tap against the steering wheel as I plaster myself to the end of the bench, half my body pressed against the door. "Do I have rabies?"

I blink. "I don't know; do you?"

His gaze darkens further, and I stop pretending not to understand as I scoot an inch closer.

No further.

I might not be incredibly experienced in bedroom affairs, but I can feel the aura coming off this man and have no interest in creating an 18+ play for minors watching through the window, which means I need to keep myself away from temptation.

My tongue darts out to lick my dry lips. I should introduce a neutral subject.

Oh. The dog and cat have run off. Maybe Randy and Dylan haven't reported it to him yet. I could start there; pets running off is not the kind of conversation where hands end up under shirts and then you end up in awkward situations where you're not sure if you're a virgin or not anymore.

Yes, this is the perfect topic to introduce, and I should, but instead the words that come out of my mouth are:

"Let's find somewhere a little quieter to park."

Chapter 235: Grace: In the Gutter

Caine's eyes linger on my face as his lips curve up. Just a little. Just enough for my breath to stutter and warmth to wiggle its way down between my thighs.

The man's too handsome. I used to think he looked like some sort of cologne ad-slash-underwear model, but now I think he belongs on all the porn videos. All of them.

But no one else can watch. Only me.

... I'm pretty sure my intelligence has hit rock bottom, lazily snuggling up to the gutter and refusing to come out. I'll blame it on my age and not on the probable pheromones this man's wafting my way.

Why does he smell so good? There's got to be some sort of science to mateship.

"That wasn't what I called you in for, but if you insist—"

His hand slides over to the gear shift doohickey on the side of the steering wheel and my pulse goes ballistic.

"No, I didn't mean—um, that wasn't supposed to come out. I meant, how was your day?"

His fingers are long and lean, with well-defined knuckles, and I never understood the idea of hands being sexy until now, with my eyeballs glued to them and various not-safe-for-work memories dancing around in the memory core of my brain.

Since when are knuckles so attractive?

Since now, I guess.

"How does 'how was your day' turn into 'let's find somewhere quiet to f—'"

"That's not what I meant!"

My shout comes out panicked and kind of breathy as I lunge across the bench seat to slap a hand over his mouth before he can say the word I know is coming.

Caine's eyes curve over the edge of my fingers, and something soft, warm, and wet flicks against my palm. I shiver and jerk my hand back, cursing myself for my gutter brain and being incapable of life-ing properly around this man.

Now that he's obediently quiet, I pull my hand away, giving him a stern, *don't you dare bring this conversation into the gutter* look.

But, of course, I forgot the entire premise of our relationship's telepathy being shit.

His mouth opens and he says calmly, picking right up where he left off, "Fuck?"

My eyes close without my permission as I suck in a deep, grounding, responsible and so not in the gutter breath. "It was an accident. The kids are awake and Randy's still inside. I definitely didn't mean to say that."

I did. I did mean to say it. My entire body's humming with denial and refusing to accept ownership of the words currently coming out of my mouth.

But I'm not going to admit it. Nope. This is new Grace, who has control of her libido and definitely isn't going to hump him into quasi-sex (?) in the truck. And our relationship is technically a secret right now, even if it's the literal worst secret in the history of secrets, ever.

If the pack had a tabloid, we'd be front page, headline news.

"Ah," he drawls, and something hot and electrifying lands on my hip. Then my other hip.

Then I'm unceremoniously yanked into his lap, and my ass hits his steering wheel with a startling honk.

I yelp.

He chuckles.

At this point, I'm fully aware we are deep into sexy-flirtation mode. The kind that might end up with my pants off—again—and my body's screaming *I am not opposed to this.*

But my brain reminds me that, despite the darkness, there are two curious pairs of eyeballs glued to the window. Especially after accidentally beeping the horn.

"Caine, Jer and Sara—"

"Don't worry. I'm not doing anything to you," he says, like his hands haven't already swooped under my shirt and finagled their way under my bra strap, only inches away from my now-aching nipples.

My eyes snap open, meeting his in the darkness. At some point, the interior light went off, at least reducing whatever the children can see of our shadows in here.

"Your hands seem to be doing something," I mumble, trying to sound stern but coming out kind of...

...inviting.

His lips brush up just beneath my left ear. "I heard human women need regular exams to catch breast cancer early." His eager hands pause where they're at, not advancing any further. "I'm just doing my duty."

No, you're not. You're not doing anything. Your hands are just sitting there and not playing at all and this is so not fair.

But what comes out of my mouth instead is a little squeak, because something is hard and growing under my thighs.

"If you aren't concerned about your health, I can always stop," the sanctimonious bastard says like he's actually inspecting me for lumps and bumps.

I suck in a deep breath and try to glower at Caine, but my gaze ends up landing on his chin instead. "I'm going to need to see proof of your medical degree."

He chuckles again, the sound vibrating through his chest and straight into my bones. Then he leans over, his chest pressing against my body, his scent wrapping around me, and one of his hands... disappears. Somewhere. Doing something, but not me.

I blink.

Then, suddenly, the seat jerks back and the steering wheel is no longer digging into my ass.

I yelp in surprise, my hands flying to his shoulders to steady myself.

"Since you insist on sitting here, I needed to make space," Caine says calmly.

Who's insisting? Who's insisting?! I didn't climb into his lap—he put me here!

"I didn't insist on anything," I hiss, very aware of his hands settling back on my hips, warm and steady. "You're the one who yanked me over here like I'm some kind of..."

"Mate?" he offers, his chest all rumbly and the thing down below getting... mm, yep. Harder.

"Sex toy?" I rebut, trying and failing to have the courage to meet his eyes.

Nope. Still firmly in *oh my God we're doing it again* territory and my brain has migrated down south for this event.

"Hmm."

I swear I can hear the smirk in the sound.

"I'm not opposed," he says, officially opening the flood gates even as I try to tell myself him being okay with calling me a sex toy is totally not a turn-on.

My body, once again, is not on the same wavelength as what little logic I have left. It says it is, and a major one.

My eyes finally meet his, only to skitter away in panic at the triumphant, dark look on his face. Like he's about to devour me and enjoy every second.

Yes, please, but also *wait*, no, not yet.

"I should go—"

His wandering hand has returned, gripping my chin as he leans forward to press his lips against mine.

I'm expecting possession and dominance, but instead it's just a light feathering touch as he strokes a finger against the line of my jaw. "Tomorrow," he says, pulling back almost immediately.

"Tomorrow?"

His mouth quirks. I know this because my eyes are glued to it, and I lick my dry lips, unsatisfied by the brief kiss.

"I'm taking you to dinner tomorrow," he says, enunciating each word clearly.

My dazed stare finally lifts as I replay his words in my head. Then I jerk upright a little.

Wait a second.

Does he mean we aren't going to do anything—?

Oh. Right. That's what I wanted. Because... of curious eyes.

Yeah.

Totally. Not. Disappointed. At. All.

"Oh," I say, unable to bring up as much enthusiasm as I'd like over the announcement of our first date.

I lick my lips again, and his hand goes from my chin to my nose, flicking it gently. "My eyes are up here."

Chapter 236: Lyre: Halved

LYRE

Finding survivors has become a bit of a rare event.

Bodies, though... we do find a lot of those.

Stepping back, my eyes rove over Thom's pallid face. His cheeks have a light flush in them now, though his overall skin tone seems to have become several shades paler—as if he's severely anemic.

Days of chronic arcana deprivation will do that to a person.

He returns my attention with glazed eyes, his pupils blown and lips still parted. He's always a little too excited for a kiss transfer, which is why I'd prefer something simpler, like hand-holding.

But this time, his magic needs were a little too high, his reserves almost running into the negative. He's a little too foolishly devoted, willingly working himself to the brink of death just to obey my commands.

A puppy, but a dangerous one in his own way, requiring more hands-on care than I generally prefer to give.

Thom leans forward, still dazed and yearning for more, despite the kiss being a mere press of our lips.

I sigh and shove my palm against his face, pushing him back gently. "How do you feel?"

His hands spasm at my sides, before reluctantly pulling them from my waist. "Not... not full yet."

"I'm pretty sure you are."

His shoulders droop.

Poor puppy. He always wants more than he can handle, desperate for even a glance in his direction. It's enough to make this old lady feel guilty.

There are more sigils than normal here. Intricate, overlapping patterns; he'd run out of power halfway through disabling them. Hence the kissing. Hence his wide eyes and trembling hands.

"Get back to work, Thom."

His dazed eyes brighten, as he always does when I use his name. He's so innocent it's off-putting, and I wish for a moment Aaron was here. His irreverent stares and dirty jokes help create a buffer to the young wizard's devotion, but alas, he's upstairs dealing with the massive amount of survivors we've acquired from this place.

"Yes, ma'am."

As he works, I pull my phone from my pocket, swiping my thumb across the display with a frown. The Divinity App is still showing its emergency maintenance screen, oddly ominous after a few glitched plausibility warnings I've been receiving.

The App doesn't tend to require much maintenance, which is worrying.

Owen's having the same problems, including a few glitchy warnings of his own. We've been interfering too much in this region, even when utilizing Thom to do all the dirty work.

The cosmic bureaucracy doesn't appreciate our meddling; Balance has us on their radar.

Too bad. Stopping isn't an option.

Though coming under further magic restriction wouldn't be ideal...

I've already received my second restriction, only hours after the first lifted.

I flex my fingers, remembering the sensation of my power being halved after the first warning. Like having a limb fall asleep, but throughout my entire being. It makes me want to burn something to the ground just to prove I still can.

The App's current glitched state presents an opportunity. Anything I do now might fly under the radar. If we continue at this snail's pace—no offense to poor puppy Thom, who's working himself to exhaustion—there's even less chance of finding these poor souls alive...

Morality is such an inconvenience. Having it, I mean.

It would be easier to walk away and decide that this isn't my problem. I've spent centuries perfecting the art of not giving a shit. But here I am, underground in a sanguimancer's dream hole, worried about strangers and furious I can't simply unleash my full power to save them.

I could clear this entire labyrinth with a thought, but I could lose my power again if I trigger another restriction. Or worse, a purge protocol.

Damn it.

Mocking other deities for playing possum to these damn restrictions is more like me; now, I'm in the same damn boat, playing this game to the letter.

The cycle of doom-and-gloom thoughts comes to a crashing halt when I feel the last sigil shatter under Thom's painstaking efforts.

"After you," he says, servile as always.

The boy's looking at me with such a fawning smile, despite the sweat beading his brow and the faint shake in his fingers. He's pushed himself far past his limits over the past few days.

He deserves a little praise.

I pat his shoulder as I pass by. "Good job."

The wizard beams as he trots behind me, those two measly words apparently injecting him with an absurd amount of energy. But whatever positivity he's holding onto disappears as soon as we step into the room beyond.

My eyes go dark immediately. The display on my phone cracks beneath my grip, fractures racing across the screen.

It doesn't even require a pulse of arcana to see what we've found.

None of these people survived.

Bodies line the walls—dozens of them, practically mummified, stacked in layers. It's far more than in the other rooms we've cleared. They're desiccated husks with hollow eye sockets and mouths frozen in silent screams, ranging in ages from infant to adult.

It's a grotesque tableau of horror, even after everything we've seen. Somehow, this decayed, preserved evidence of torture is worse.

Perhaps it's the number.

The only saving grace to this place is knowing there was no way to save them, even if I'd blasted my way through this entire labyrinth the first day I arrived. They were dead before I even entered this territory.

I expected as much, but it's still upsetting.

Thom retches behind me. He always does.

The room is larger than the others we've explored, with what looks like a coffin positioned in the center of the floor—empty, of course, though the absence seems more ominous than if we'd found a body inside.

But I've already taken care of its owner.

"Master..." Thom's taken to calling me that since I began teaching him.

I glance up with a frown. "What is it?"

He's staring at the coffin, his trembling more pronounced now. Forget being a puppy; now he resembles a terrified quail. "Doesn't it feel strange...?"

There are sigils, different from the defensive wards I've had him dismantling. These are elegant and ruthless, written in blood around the coffin; he's never seen them before, but should be able to feel the death and rot within.

"This is the center room. It's different from the rest. This is where Isabeau would recuperate."

Over the past few days, Thom and the others have absorbed a crash course in sanguimancers and their history with wolf packs. Information they need to fight back, though every drip of knowledge came with a corresponding warning in the App.

I glance down at my hands, fist and releasing my fingers a few times. Halving my power seems a little extreme for that bit of information, but at least it was only half.

Thom stands by the coffin, circling it slowly as he inspects the wards. His earlier flush has already drained away. His use of arcana is becoming more inefficient by the hour; you can only push a mortal body so far.

He needs rest.

I smile faintly. "It's good news," I say, forcing a light-hearted tone. The poor thing's on the edge of a breakdown. "Now that we've found the control, it'll make things easier for us."

"How?"

I flex my fingers again, already calculating what punishment will come my way this time. There's no way it will settle with a simple loss of power. The system gets creative when you repeatedly disobey.

"Just wait and see."

Chapter 237: Lyre: Backlash

LYRE

Thom stares at me in both confusion and blind devotion, already shifting from scared little quail to absolute certainty I'll be able to fix everything in a moment.

It's almost embarrassing. Especially after how little I've been able to do in the past few days.

Power hums under my skin, but its resonance is tainted by the contaminated aura of Isabeau's underground prison.

"Fucking sanguimancers," I mutter. Owen's never going to get this place purified under his own power. Even with his angelic ancestry, this level of corruption would take forever to scrub clean. Isabeau's created a monstrosity spanning miles.

Manipulating the flow of arcana in this space is as easy as breathing for me under normal circumstances. With my power halved, it requires a little more concentration.

I send up a half-prayer, though it's really more of a sardonic comment than anything: *I'm not interfering too much... The wards were already here. So don't make the punishment too severe this time, okay?*

Of course, no one's listening. People gave up on me centuries ago.

I let out a soft breath as I reverse the flow of arcana in each ward, feeling the magic within them bend and twist under my will. Isabeau's work looks like child's play to my eyes, but to someone like Thom, her work is that of a master.

As much as I might mock her skills, the system she's created in this place is methodical, with a decent level of precision. She certainly spared no expense to throw wards at every twist and turn—then again, it isn't as if she placed much value on the lives she drained to acquire the power.

I vaguely hear Thom calling my name, his voice thin and distant through the veil of magic as my consciousness flies through the interconnected ley lines of Isabeau's wards, disabling them as if flicking switches on a circuit board. The network unfolds before me—elegant in its cruelty, a labyrinth designed solely for that bitch's feedings.

In seconds, I've finished mapping the layout and identified the areas with flickering life signs. Three distinct areas with pulses, weak but persistent, buried deep in the northeastern quadrant.

My consciousness snaps back to my body with a jolt. The room tilts sideways for a moment before settling, something that would never happen if I was at full power.

Thom stares at me, paler than ever behind his copper-wired glasses. He looks relieved with my consciousness returned, which means...

I lick my lips, unsurprised to feel my fangs have extended. Judging by Thom's expression, my eyes probably went full predator. No wonder he looks like he's seen a ghost; he's only ever seen my human facade.

"It's done," I say calmly, not acknowledging his worry.

What I did was easy, but with only half my power, it's more draining than it should be. The taste of copper floods my mouth, and I swallow it down. If Thom sees blood coming out of my mouth, he'll probably faint, and I have no interest in dragging him back above ground.

I glance at the mummified corpses. The wards here were steeped in their blood, and I've tasted too many memories belonging to the dead in this room—flashes of terror, confusion, resignation. The bitter end of hope.

"There are three groups of survivors," I say, lifting one hand to point. "Northeast section. All the wards have been disabled, so it will be safe for any extraction team to get to them."

Arcana flows from my fingertip in a few faint threads, creating blue-lit lines along the floor as they snake to their destinations. Arcana pulses gently, creating a path in the darkness.

"What are you..." Thom adjusts his copper-wire glasses, blinking rapidly. "What did you just do?"

His confusion makes sense; all this time I've forced all the work into his limited hands.

But explaining isn't really an option, so I just ignore it.

"Guiding the way. Come. We're going back."

He falls into step beside me, stealing glances when he thinks I won't notice. I do my best to hide how my legs have gone somewhat numb, my muscles tingling with pins and needles.

It shouldn't feel this way; the amount of power I used isn't very much, and arcana's still brimming inside me.

But sucker-punching my way through contaminated arcana always comes with some level of backlash. It's easy enough to deflect... but dodging the price of my actions will only increase the severity of whatever restriction comes my way. It's a carefully considered risk versus benefits scenario.

The temporary pain of backlash is worth the reduction of the restriction I'll face.

Though I seem to have overestimated my own ability to handle the backlash. How long has it been since I've faced true pain?

I fight back the urge to cough; if I do, I'll spray blood. My chest hurts. My vision's hazy.

I almost stumble over my own feet and catch myself against the wall.

"Are you—" Thom hesitates, his perpetual nervousness momentarily overridden by concern. "You don't look well. Should we stop? I could try to—"

"I'm fine," I cut him off. "Just peachy. Nothing a nap and a sacrificial virgin wouldn't fix."

His eyes widen. "I'm more than willing to help—"

Damn. That is *not* what I meant.

"I'm fine, Thom. It was a joke." Swallowing back the blood rising in my throat is not my idea of a good time, but this puppy-like quail is already trembling like a leaf in the wind...

Ah, it would be a lot easier if Aaron were here. At least I could trust him to carry me back if I fell.

"You don't seem fine. Why would you... do it yourself? You've been teaching me this entire time. Did you think I couldn't handle it?"

The wizard's eyes well with tears.

I stare at Thom in mild exasperation. The man's creating his own little story in his head and now he's feeling sorry for himself.

"This type of magic would have eaten through your arcana reserves before you finished mapping the first corridor. No matter how many times I top you up, I can't increase your maximum capacity."

His face falls, those watery eyes somehow getting even more pathetic. "I'm not good enough yet?"

I sigh again, deeper this time. Would be nice if Aaron were here. His confidence might be annoying as all hell, but at least I wouldn't have to worry about curating his tender sensibilities every five seconds. Aaron would have just nodded, maybe thrown in some sarcastic comment about my methods, and gotten on with it.

The weak wizard, on the other hand, needs his emotional hand held in a literal death chamber.

"Thom," I say as calmly as I can manage, "you're going to need to take care of the rest. I've overstretched myself."

There's nothing left to take care of, though the lie should at least boost his confidence. But the effects of the backlash are, unfortunately, real. They might not kill me, but it's going to be a hell of a ride for the next few hours.

The copper taste in my mouth is growing more insistent.

His face brightens a little, desperation shifting to determination in my shimmering haze of fading vision. "I'll do whatever it takes. You can count on me." He squares his narrow shoulders, a quail impersonating an eagle.

I open my mouth to reply, but instead fight back a violent cough. My chest feels like someone's pouring concrete into my lungs. They're heavy and tight, impossible to expand as I suck in a greedy breath, oblivious to the nasty remnants of blood-rot.

My vision abruptly fades in and out, and I stumble.

My legs buckle beneath me.

Damn it. I should have brought Aaron along. He'd have caught me, carried me out without asking stupid questions.

My phone buzzes in my pocket; down here, without any reception whatsoever, there's only one thing it can be.

The App is back.

Within seconds, the arcana within me severs its connection, leaving me in actual mortal peril since I made the decision to endure the backlash.

Fuck.

Chapter 238: Jack-Eye: Something's Missing

JACK-EYE

Our new influx of Lycans is well-timed; with Owen babysitting the two young children Lyre's become so concerned about, the others have become somewhat problematic.

Between the rampant infections and having to rearrange people into homes based on medical need, a few medics who aren't thrilled to be here, and two deaths, there's far too much to handle with both Lyre and Thom disappearing into the underground to find more survivors.

I cross my arms, looking down at our reinforcements. They've been hand-selected by our illustrious king for their discretion and, more importantly, their ability to follow basic fucking instructions.

As a whole, shifters are better known for their physical ability and less for the intellectual side of things. Not that we're stupid—far from it—but too many of us have learned to rely on instinct and the other half of our souls. And wolves might be intelligent, but their intelligence is uniquely primed to survival, not thrival.

Which is why most of our territories tend to struggle financially, though we're also remarkably self-sufficient.

"Any questions?" I ask the newly arrived four, daring them to waste my time after twenty minutes of running through the situation at hand.

Four heads shake in perfect unison.

Derek is a little older than I am, and while his mustache might make him look like some sort of predator against women, he's also happily mated with four pups of varying ages.

"You." I jerk my chin in his direction. "You're in charge of transporting the two children to Blue Mountain territory. Don't get comfortable here. You leave as soon as Owen clears them for travel."

"Yes, Beta."

"The rest of you," I continue, "we've got survivors with varying degrees of infection and physical trauma. We have food to make, laundry to wash, and deliveries to sort. Our medics are already stretched thin. These are survivors, so remember to treat them with care."

"Understood, Beta," the other three say in unison.

I lead them through the make-shift command center we've established on the main floor of what used to be Fiddleback's alpha lodge. It was once decorated with class and flair, but now it's piled high on every surface with plastic bags from the local grocery store and stacks of cheap throw blankets, along with unorganized clothes from a thrift store haul Owen managed before Lyre went back underground.

Fiddleback's turned into a refugee sort of situation, and we still haven't figured out the long-term logistics here.

After introducing the new Lycans to some of the hospital staff we've forced into twenty-four-seven staffing on site, along with a few of the healthier survivors who've taken more of a leadership role, my nose twitches as a faint and familiar scent rides on the air.

But it's a little wrong.

My steps falter as I turn my head instinctively to its source. Derek almost collides against my back.

"Sir?"

"Familiarize yourselves," I tell them, too distracted now. "Tell me if you need anything. Derek, I'll introduce you to Owen later."

"Got it, Beta."

But I don't wait for their acknowledgment, because I'm already moving toward the scent. My pace quickens with each step, that wrongness growing stronger. It's Lyre but... strange, like a part of her scent is now missing.

My heart kicks against my ribs, an unfamiliar panic rising.

The moment I cross the threshold of our building, my eyes land on Lyre, collapsed onto a sofa and strangely pale. She's unnaturally still and a human medic has his gloved hands all over her.

"What happened?" I bark out, my long legs taking only a few strides to make it to her side, shoving Thom out of the way with sheer presence alone.

The woman doesn't flinch. Even her rainbow-colored hair seems limp. Her chest rises and falls, but too slow for my comfort.

The wizard's red-faced and panting, his shirt so damp with sweat it's nearly transparent, and Lyre's scent surrounds him. But the scent on him is full and normal, reminiscent of the times she's given him magic.

So why does Lyre herself smell so wrong?

Sam, the human medic who's seen and dealt with far too much over the past few days, doesn't even glance in my direction as he moves his stethoscope to another spot on her chest. "She's unconscious. Blood pressure's elevated, but no visible injuries. Lungs are clear, but her respiratory rate is a little low."

My focus narrows to the woman's face, her lips pale and slightly parted and her skin lacking any sort of healthy flush whatsoever. As if she's bled out, except there's no apparent injury to be had.

So my eyes focus on the trembling wizard, realizing some of the sweat running down his face is actually his tears. "Explain."

He shakes his head a little, smacking at his cheeks with both hands as his glasses go askew. "I don't know. S-She just collapsed. I'm—I'm not versed in healing magic, I don't know what happened. There was no reception... I couldn't just... I couldn't leave her there. I dragged her all the way back. She—She didn't wake up..."

I crouch beside the sofa, leaning in to sniff at her neck, frustrated by the wrongness of her scent. It's definitely Lyre, but I can't figure out what's missing.

"Were you attacked?"

"No, no. We found the, uh. She said it was the center room. She used her... her magic, but nothing happened in there."

"Take a deep breath."

He nods, sucking one in and letting it out as he struggles to straighten his shoulders and meet my gaze. But his watery eyes keep turning back to her.

The situation's dire and yet my hackles rise anyway at the attention he's giving her.

Thom bites at his lip, probably sensing the darkness in my eyes, and continues with a calmer pace, "She said she found three more groups of survivors and marked the way, but then when we were on our way back, she fell. And now she won't wake up."

My jaw tightens. Lyre hasn't been using her magic at all, brushing us off whenever we try to ask questions. We all know she can't use her magic, but not why.

But Owen probably knows.

He seems to know a hell of a lot more than we do.

But I've seen Lyre work before; she doesn't seem like she would faint like Thom. If I had to guess, she has enough magic in her to be unfathomably powerful. So why would she...?

"Bring Owen here."

Chapter 239: Grace: Dazed

I'm not entirely sure how I get to sleep, or how I even function the next morning, but after a few days of Bun being a traitor and clinging to Super Nanny she's now glomped onto my leg and refusing to step more than two inches away from me, even forcing me to hold her when I use the bathroom.

Which I don't.

Culminating in about a fifteen-minute temper tantrum over the thirty seconds it took me to go pee, and no, it wasn't worth the fight.

Dylan... hasn't returned, and Super Nanny isn't explaining much. It leaves me a little off-kilter. I'd expected Sadie and the cat to return last night, and the kids—mainly Sara and Jer—are deeply upset, convinced they've come to some sort of irreparable harm.

"Dylan still hasn't contacted you?" I push Rudolph. No, wait—Randy.

Right, his name is Randy.

Seriously, *why* is his name the only one I can't remember? It isn't *that* strange.

"Not since last night, ma'am. He might be out of reach of the pack link. I've sent him a text, so he should call when he gets it."

Super Nanny—I'm just going to call him that because my brain keeps slipping with his real name—slides a plate of scrambled eggs with freshly grated cheddar cheese in front of me.

Bun immediately reaches out and grabs a handful, shoving it into her face with gusto. She's wrapped around me like a koala and refuses to even let Super Nanny touch her.

Ron thinks it's because he's been gone the past two days, plus the animals now missing. Owen's not around either, so it might just be Bun being a little insecure about people leaving her. Because of this, Ron is in the living room playing some sort of memory card game with Jer and Sara, trying to keep Sara from coming up with doomsday scenarios over what's happened to the bodies of the cat and the dog.

The girl is obsessed with worst-case scenarios involving death, which I'm pretty sure is some way of coping with how horrible Fiddleback was in all aspects. I have no idea how to deal with it or treat it.

A child psychologist might help, but I'm not entirely certain a human psychologist is going to understand how very different life is here on the supernatural side...

I live in it and I'm still struggling to understand it.

Anyway, between Caine's promise of a date later today, my missing supernatural pets-who-aren't-pets, and a koala-like Bun who won't even be bribed off me with her new favorite noodle-head music video, I'm a complete mess and utterly reliant on Super Nanny and Ron to keep the house, as it were, running semi-normally.

Which is why, when my phone buzzes non-stop in my pocket, I have a horrible sinking feeling in my gut as I check my notifications.

The App is back, as expected.

There are multiple messages from Caeriel.

And my mission's finally updated.

I check the mission first, and the horrible feeling is justified almost immediately.

[ASSIGNED MISSION: Investigate the identity of the demi-god in region 20-L within 24 hours, or penalties will be assigned.]

"You've got to be kidding me," I mutter.

The mission wouldn't worry me so much if it wasn't for the time limit, and the time limit wouldn't worry me quite as much if it was really twenty-four hours.

But the countdown the app has provided says something very different. It lists my remaining time at 12:32:53 which is *not* twenty-four hours, no matter how you look at it.

My head aches again as I look through the notifications, my eyes finally landing on the times associated with them.... Ah.

The App has only been up for a few minutes, but the mission was assigned a little less than twelve hours ago. Which means I'm basically being penalized for not having a working App up until then. How is this fair?

I'm starting to regret going with Lyre when I first met her. I bet if I didn't, none of this would have happened and I wouldn't have this stupid App giving me impossible missions and taking away an entire twelve hours despite me being the victim of whatever glitch they created in their own App.

Seriously. How. Is. This. Fair?

Another notification comes up as I'm death-glaring the countdown.

[CAERIEL: I know you're online. You don't have much time left. Are you really going to waste it?]

"...ma'am? Grace?"

My head jerks up before my brain's fully rewound to realize Super Nanny's been calling my name for a while. "Sorry, what?"

"Did you want waffles or pancakes?" He frowns a little, inspecting me with a little more care than normal. "You look pale. Is everything okay?"

"Uh—I'm fine. I'm not really hungry." There's another pile of pancakes on the counter, this time smaller than what Dylan made yesterday. Turns out all the food Dylan made was for Super Nanny, who eats basically a house and a half's worth of food at every meal. Something about metabolism or... something. I don't know. I wasn't paying attention.

But it does make me wonder how much the Lycan Pack spends in a single day on food. It must be astronomical. Dylan ate a lot, too.

Caine doesn't seem to eat nearly as much, but now it makes sense how he had piled so much food on my plate the first time we ate together...

"...Grace?"

Shit, my mind's wandering again. I blink at Super Nanny. "Sorry. I was just thinking about Caine—er, the Lycan King."

"Ah." He smiles in a way that's a little *too*

understanding. "I understand. I'll leave you to your thoughts, then, ma'am. Please think of our High Alpha as much as you wish."

My lips twitch a little. "Right. Thanks..."

Super Nanny returns to the kitchen with a cheerful whistling tune, and my cheeks burn a little with his enthusiasm.

I wasn't thinking about Caine like *that*, okay?

But then my mind wanders to last night and his thighs and his hands and the tingling and how I was left unsatisfied, aching, and waiting with the promise of tonight...

Shit.

Okay, maybe a little like that.

But I wasn't until stupid Randall brought it up, thank you very much.

Bun shifts in my lap, grasping another fistful of eggs and smashing them against her face in what I assume is her attempt at eating independently. Or maybe she's just trying to get attention. It could be either, honestly.

"Do you want a fork?"

"Nuh." A mouthful of eggs and cheese dribbles out of her mouth with her response. I'm going to need another shower.

I took one last night, after Caine left, for... reasons.

Nonparticular reasons.

It's nice to have water hook-up again. I've been taking a lot of showers.

Deciding to give up on being clean, I let Bun do whatever she wants as I return my focus to my phone, forcefully yanking my brain out of the gutter into functional I Have Shit to Do mode.

The countdown on my phone continues to tick down, and I frown at the mission they've given me. Seriously, I have twelve hours to find the identity of a demi-god without any hint whatsoever. I guess I can go back to the laundromat, but...

Didn't Lyre say the App doesn't give us missions we can't handle?

Lyre's a liar.

Giving up on the brain-twisting requirements of this mission, I check the messages Caeriel's sent me, already dreading what he's sent.

But they turn out to be surprisingly... helpful.

It's a list of locations with what he says are "elevated energy signatures", finally giving me some direction to go with my mission. Which only makes it weirder still that they're sending *me* to do something he can clearly do in a snap of his fingers, but I have to remind myself that this is training.

What seems hard to me is probably child's play for any of the so-called Guardians this App has made.

I wonder how many are like me, drafted into the situation against our will. Or are they born into it, like Lyre seems to have been...?

Then my eyes narrow on the tiny, almost illegible text under all the messages.

[These messages are being monitored for the safety of all Guardians in the Trainee Program. Inappropriate Mentor activity can be reported via the help menu...]

Huh.

I swear I never saw this before.

Is this why Caeriel's suddenly so helpful in the messages...?

"Pa cay!" Bun suddenly shrieks, and I glance up to see a dreaded plate of pancakes—with syrup—slid in front of us.

Her chubby little toddler hands go right for it before I can stop her.

Each pancake has even been helpfully pre-cut into squares.

"Here you go, Bun. Your favorite pancakes!" Super Nanny says cheerfully, either not hearing or straight up ignoring my groan as her fingers squish into a particularly syrupy section.

Is this revenge? It's revenge, isn't it?

But Super Nanny just pats an egg-covered Bun on the head before heading back into the kitchen to finish cooking, which makes it honestly impossible to tell.

"Bun, we should use a fork—"

Nope, pancake to the face, fist-style.

I groan, and sweet Ron comes out of the living room, holding out his hands. "Here. I'll finish feeding her."

Bun shrieks as soon as he reaches out, smacking at his hands with syrup and egg-covered hands of her own. "Nuh!" Then she wraps her arms around me and buries her sticky face into my neck, determined to stay glued to me.

If I didn't know the child couldn't read, I'd seriously suspect her of knowing I'm about to ditch her for the day to get this damnable mission done.

Sweet Ron grabs koala-Bun without changing his expression, completely calm as he says, "Come on, Bun-Bun. I'll feed you all the pancakes you want, but you have to let Grace go."

"Nuh!"

"Bun..."

"Nuh!"

It's enough to make a girl wonder what exactly these penalties the App threatens might entail. Is it worth taking one to avoid a screaming baby?

Sure, it might seem like a silly question, but unless you're the one with a koala baby clinging to you with a bunch of syrup and eggs covering her and the threat of another major tantrum—you won't get it.

I know I wouldn't have before I met these children.

But now I'm seriously pondering it.

"Come on, Bun. Grace has something to do today."

My back stiffens as my eyes snap to Ron's face. "Wha—how did you know?"

Chapter 240: Grace: Brilliant

Ron gives me an odd look, his eyebrows twisting and lips pursing as he continues to stare. Then he says, "Your phone, right?"

All the hair on my skin tries to jump right off. "You know?"

"Kind of hard not to notice after living with Owen."

My eyes guiltily dart to my phone. "I was just... texting a friend." Somehow, the way he's being so nonspecific makes me certain he doesn't *quite* know, even though he obviously... well, *knows*. Sort of.

But Lyre made it clear I'm not supposed to be broadcasting the existence of the App to people, so it's time to bring my (less than) stellar acting into play. At least it can't be worse than any Lycan's.

"I know," he says, flicking a glance in Rudolph's direction. "Since I'm not going out today, I'll watch the kids for you."

Wow. My child is now going to cover for me and hide my secrets.

I should probably start a jar for mom fails. A quarter for every time I screw it up.

I sigh, watching Bun flail in Ron's arms, resembling some sort of slithery serpent who's downed six Red Bulls and smells like maple syrup and cheese. Her little arms stretch toward me, fingers grabbing at air as she arches her back and twists into some sort of demonic mode of rabid toddler.

"Bun, honey, you need to sit with Ron to finish breakfast." I point to her half-eaten plate. "Do you want more pancakes?"

She makes a half-whine, half-growl, and wolfish-seeming ears pop out of her head as she glowers.

Her older brother shoves her into a high chair, buckling her in with the kind of record-breaking speed I couldn't imitate with a hundred years of practice, then spears a pancake with a plastic fork.

The growl stops, but Bun's huge brown eyes lock onto my face as she chomps onto a bite of syrup-soaked pancake. Every inch of her radiates betrayal, and I bet if it wasn't hidden by her sitting in a chair, she'd probably half a little wolf tail poofed out behind her in outrage.

"Bun, eat properly," her brother chides.

Grunt.

"Do you want some chocolate later?"

The grunting disappears as her suspicious eyes stare at the teenager, her chubby fingers flexing and ears swiveling.

"If you want chocolate, you have to be a good girl."

Another grunt, but this time her eyes sparkle.

I sigh in relief. Bribery is such a great tool.

My phone buzzes again with another missed message from Caeriel. The moment I unlock the screen, Super Nanny slides a steaming mug of coffee in front of me.

"You look like you need this," he says, oozing friendliness from every pore.

My heart's doing the freaking cha-cha slide, but I manage a hollow laugh. "Thanks. Caffeine is life, you know."

"So I hear," he says brightly. "Doesn't really affect us the same way, but a lot of us like the taste."

I really wish I had some video surveillance of whatever orders Caine gave these men.

The coffee smells amazing, but my stomach's churning a little too much to appreciate it. Besides, there isn't nearly enough sugar. Or creamer. Or anything particularly flavored to hide the taste of coffee.

I take a sip anyway, needing something to do with my hands besides fidget, and immediately want to spit it back into the cup.

But I don't.

Instead, I give a too-casual cough and start plotting how I'm going to somehow hide the existence of the App and my missions with Caine assigning Lycans to my every move.

"So," I begin, hoping I sound natural, "I think I'm going to take a little walk. Stretch my legs. You know, start my morning right."

Why do I sound like some sort of horrible infomercial on TV?

More importantly, Super Nanny R-something is already frowning. "Not sure that's a good idea. Dylan's still out looking for the animals."

Translation: No one's available to keep their eyeballs on your every move.

Which is exactly the point, damn it, but I can't tell him that.

So I come up with the first lie I can think of. "It's fine. I'm meeting up with Andrew." It's brilliant, as long as he doesn't stop by and ruin my story. None of the Lycans can pack-link with him. "I won't be alone, so it'll be okay."

Super Nanny hesitates, his frown deepening.

Ron, without looking up from feeding Bun, says, "Your job is to protect the children, isn't it? That's what the High Alpha said."

What a good kid. I throw him a few mental thumbs up.

My Lycan babysitter looks at me, then Bun, then back to me, clearly torn. "Then I should let the High Alpha know—"

"No!" I blur, then dial it back as fast as I can. "I mean, don't tell Caine. I'm actually, um, preparing a surprise. You know. For tonight."

Blush, dammit. Blush! But... blushing on demand is way beyond my acting skills.

So I think about Caine, his long fingers, and—

Oh, there we go.

My cheeks flame like crazy, and I even squirm a little with the rush of feelings inappropriate for my current time and place.

What's-his-face's eyebrows draw together into a single furry caterpillar across his brow, and I hope it's a sign of him thinking and *not* tattling on me to his king.

A knock at the door saves me from further explanation, though it's probably just going to bring more problems.

"It's Andrew," Ron says without batting an eyelash.

Or not. Damn it. There goes my brilliant lie.

I tilt my head at Ron, who's been shoving pancakes into a now-compliant Bun thanks to the promise of chocolate. "How do you know?"

He looks a little exasperated as he looks at me, then taps his nose.

Right. Smell. He's a shifter, too. Stupid question, Grace. For some reason, I just keep thinking of these kids as kids, not full-on shifters in their own right. Which seems silly when Bun's literally sporting bunny ears and eating pancakes, I guess.

Wait, bunny ears...?

My eyes zero in on her ears; they were wolf ears just a bit ago. Seems like she's in a better mood. My guilt eases somewhat, thanks once again to the oldest of the bunch.

I already miss the days where I could just focus on the children all day instead of getting the run-around from weird apps. Then again, those days involved bizarre arcana storms and acquiring strange pets, so... there are downfalls there, too.

But not as bad as being back in this territory.

Randy opens the door with a polite smile, miles warmer than Dylan's hostile greeting yesterday. Andrew steps inside, looking tired but even more bruised than yesterday.

My fingers twitch on my phone, suspicion rising. Andrew's never wandered around with randomly acquired injuries, not with his position as the future Alpha's beta. And somehow I doubt the Lycans are beating him out of nowhere.

Which means this is definitely because of me.

And, knowing Andrew, he's probably not going to explain a single bit of it without being harassed into answers.

First, though—protect my lies with my life. Time to level up my acting skills and hope I have some level of telepathy with the man.

"You're so early! Are you ready for our *plans*?" I over-emphasize the last word, trying to telegraph: *Play along, please play along, I'm begging you.*

Andrew pauses a beat, but follows through like a fucking champion. "Uh—yeah. Sorry. Did you want me to wait until later?"