

## Grace of a Wolf –

# Chapter 141: Caine: Brat vs Brot

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CAINE

"We're firing up the grill tonight," the old woman says, patting her husband's arm affectionately. "Got some ribs marinating since this morning. You folks should join us!"

Grace stutters beside me, her cheeks flushing as her eyes dart from me to our new, extra-friendly neighbors. "Oh, that's—"

"Is there gonna be BRAT-worsts?" Jer interrupts, bouncing on his toes with a manic energy that makes me wonder if he's capable of standing still for longer than three seconds.

Grace whispers, "It's *brot*—not brat."

The kid crosses his arms, defiant as he frowns at Grace. He has spunk, but he's going to need to learn not to cross a Luna so easily. "I like *bratwurst*."

"You should at least *say* the word right," Sara mutters, conveniently placing Jer between her and Fenris. She probably doesn't think anyone notices, but I do.

Most parents would probably be displeased at the idea one of their children would willingly sacrifice the other, but my lips quirk. A little sibling rivalry goes a long way to character development. It isn't as if Fenris would hurt the children, but if he were truly an unstable wolf, it would be a lesson well-learned for the younger boy. Never ignore the unstable wolf beside you.

Ron clears his throat, scratching at his head as he says, "Oh, we don't like to impose."

He acts too old for his age, and I frown. He could do with a few pups his age. It's time for him to get into a little trouble and learn his own way, not spend his time watching over the children. Jack-Eye has a large family; I'm sure he has a nephew or cousin to take Ron in.

"Right, right!" Grace adds quickly, nodding too enthusiastically. "We wouldn't want to impose."

The old man waves a weathered hand. "Nonsense! We *love* company."

Jer's eyes light up again. "Are we gonna stick the brats on *sticks*? Over fire?"

"Brots," Sara hisses, smacking him in the shoulder. Then she freezes and looks at Fenris.

I chuckle, and she jumps a little, slowly turning around to peek in my direction. She looks worried, and I smile at her.

Somehow, it makes it all worse, and she dashes over to Ron's side, clinging to his hand.

The old man laughs at Jer, a full-bellied sound of a kind and gentle soul. "Sure thing, boy!"

Grace's smile strains as she shoots me a sideways glance. Her cheeks are flushed red from the commotion, and the slightly sour scent of anxiety rolls off her in waves thick enough to taste.

Bun reaches for her, but I shift her to my other side, patting her diapered behind again. She grunts and settles into her thumb-sucking with extra ferocity, looking particularly grumpy.

I inhale deeply, trying to place the old couple's scent. There's something... not quite human about it. Not shifter, exactly. More like... Owen.

*Yes, they smell like Owen, Fenris agrees. But not like family.*

They're not human, and yet they're posing as such. They should be able to recognize our lack of humanity, so it makes no sense for them to continue this pretense.

Better to figure them out now.

"We'd appreciate it," I cut in smoothly, watching Grace blink as I accept their invitation. She doesn't seem to think I'm capable of interacting with others.

*Considering how you met, this should be obvious,* Fenris mutters. I can still feel him sulking over the mutt comment.

Ignoring him, I continue, "We're still settling in, and this storm's only made it harder. It's our first time taking this rig out with the family."

Ron gives me a long, confused look. Sara goes a little pale beside him, mouthing "family?" at him with wide eyes.

The old couple either doesn't notice, or pretends not to.

Jer, completely unconcerned with the nuances of our strange social dynamics, throws a fist in the air and roars, "FIRE!" before taking off, heading toward the old couple's camper. The golden retriever bounds after him, tail wagging enthusiastically.

"Come back!" Grace yells after him, panicking. It's easy to tell by the way her hands flutter around and she spins between me, Jer, and the elderly couple, clearly uncertain if she should apologize, wait for me to handle it, or run after him.

The old couple just laugh, completely unperturbed by the chaos. "Let the child run," the old lady says with a dismissive wave. "It's good for them."

"Oh, but..." She looks back at me, and I nod.

Everything's okay.

But for some reason she just looks more distressed after I try to reassure her.

*Again, considering your history of behavior—*

*Lay off, Fenris.*

"This'll be so helpful, you coming," the old lady continues, patting her husband's arm as she beams. "We always make too much. Big fridge, you know. We're used to larger family affairs. He always says I cook like I'm making food for an entire army."

Grace laughs awkwardly, the sound pitched a little too high to be natural. Her eyes continue to dart between the old couple, the retreating back of Jer, and me.

I slide my arm behind her, not quite touching but close enough to feel the heat radiating from her body. It's an exquisite torture. "Let's go, dear."

An even deeper flush spreads across her cheeks at the endearment, her eyes widening slightly. I've never called her that before. It feels good.

A little *human*, but... good.

"How sweet," the old woman coos, patting her husband's shoulder again. He must bruise with how often she does it. "Remember when we were like that, dear?"

Grace twitches a little at her use of *dear* but just remains staring at me, looking somewhat dazed.

Humans love their pet names. *Mate* would be my choice, though.

*Sweetheart, honey, babe, baby. These are your choices. And for the sake of all the gods above and my sanity, do not call her Muffin.*

Hmm. I'd never considered it, but Muffin would be—

No.

I frown a little, freezing the expression when Grace jerks again. Have to watch my face around her. *Honey and baby are on the list, but not Muffin? How does that add up?*

*Don't bother questioning me. You'd never understand.*

Fenris lopes off, catching up to Jer and Sadie with swift ease, and I return my attention to the now-stiff woman beside me. She looks almost panicked. If our lives depended on subterfuge... she would definitely give it all away.

Cute.

But we might need to work on that.

The Lycan King doesn't always announce his presence, after all. And as my Luna and Queen, she would be in too much danger if I wasn't by her side.

*Don't underestimate her. She'll be fine once she stops worrying about your sanity.*

I frown again, my mouth freezing as soon as I realize I am. Instead, I try to smile at my mate, who's still staring at me with concern. *What do you mean?*

*You're being too sweet and neighborly, and far too affectionate. It's confusing her.*

I am perfectly capable of sweet. And neighborly. I run an entire pack, and visit several more in a single month alone. As far as affection, I've been showing it as best as I can since accepting her as my mate—

*Yes, yes. You're just a beacon of humanity.*

I can't help the slight shudder of revulsion at his words.

*Exactly. You're acting human, and it's weird.*

Ah. Now I understand.

Grace prefers a Lycan to a human; acting like one throws her off. My slightly cringed shoulders ease. Well, who wouldn't prefer a Lycan to a human? Of course, I'd never choose a she-wolf over her...

*That's not what—you know what? Never mind.*

"Uh, let me just change Bun's diaper first," Grace stammers, holding out her hands. She's no longer frozen, but she won't meet my eyes.

The toddler's been trying to lean across my body to reach her, frustrated when I keep holding her back.

Ron, picking up on her distress, steps forward. "I'll do it." He plucks Bun from my arms with practiced ease and heads back toward the camper without another word.

"Sweet kid," the old man announces, like we don't already know that. My parental pride wars with parental annoyance.

"He's a good one," I agree politely, and Sara stares at me with huge eyes. I smile at her. She looks at Ron's back, then turns and runs after her little brother, instead.

I drop my arm as we begin walking, following the old couple at a safe distance. Grace's hand swings by her side, her fingers occasionally brushing against the fabric of her pants. The urge to reach for it, to tangle my fingers with hers, is strong.

I clench my fist instead. The image of her lying pale and unconscious on Lyre's bed flashes in my mind—a stark reminder of what happens when we get too close.

Maybe when she's rested and stronger. Maybe then.

She looks so tired. The shadows beneath her eyes have deepened, and her skin lacks its usual glow. Her shoulders slump forward slightly, like she's carrying an invisible weight. She needs real food. Water. Rest. And she probably doesn't even realize it.

The old lady loops her arm through Grace's cheerfully, launching into a story about her grandchildren I only half listen to. My mate smiles politely, but I can see the tension in her jaw, the slight crease between her brows as she looks back at me.

My teeth clench as I watch them. The old woman's grip looks gentle, but there's something proprietary about it, making me bristle.

But I can't just kick an old lady. It would horrify Grace.

*You're finally learning. Congratulations.*

But maybe I can kick my wolf.

# Chapter 142: Grace: Acting Weird

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Caine's acting weird. Too polite, too friendly, too... everything not-Caine. He's smiling—not smirking, actually *smiling*—at the middle children as they dance around the campfire.

The elderly couple, Archie and Doris (we finally introduced each other by name), poke at the massive fire they've built in their stone-ringed pit. A smoker sits off to the side, ribs already going inside. Apparently they've been going all day.

The smell of them makes my stomach growl, but something about this whole setup just feels... strange.

"This is my brat-dance!" Jer announces, performing some chaotic bounce and wiggle; it looks like he's being electrocuted. Or having a seizure. Or both.

Sara rolls her eyes. "It's called the floss, dummy. And you're doing it wrong." She demonstrates with quick, precise arm movements, though her cheeks flush with embarrassment. "See? Arms straight."

"I'm not a dummy. I just made it better!"

Archie chuckles and shuffles over to join them. "Let me try," he says, swinging his arms with creaky enthusiasm.

As terrible as it sounds, he makes the dance look like some painful physiotherapy exercise.

It would be charming—sweet, even—if not for how unsettled I feel. I can't pinpoint what's wrong exactly, and there's absolutely no reason to suspect these two sweet old neighbors.

Which means it must be Caine and his bizarre level of friendliness.

"Bun, no!" The man in question bolts after the toddler, who's wandered dangerously close to the fire for the third time in five minutes. He moves with calculated speed, scooping her up and redirecting her away from the flames.

"No!" Bun shrieks, squirming in his arms.

"No." His voice is firm, but gentle.

He sets her down several feet from the fire pit, and like a heat-seeking missile, she immediately pivots and toddles back toward danger. Caine follows, shadows her movements, redirects again. It's a dance they've been performing since we arrived, and despite his obvious frustration, he hasn't snapped once.

Bun breaks free from his watchful eye for just a second—long enough to hurl her sippy cup directly into the fire pit.

The plastic immediately starts to melt and smoke. Bun's face crumples, and she stands in the dirt and wails, face to the sky, like the world's just ended.

Because she threw her own cup into the fire.

Toddler logic. I've vaguely heard of it, but seeing it in action is an entirely different experience.

I lunge forward, but Caine is faster. He crouches by the fire, somehow extracts the half-melted remnant with a stick, and grunts, "It's fine." As if retrieving melting plastic from open flames is something he does every day.

Bun sobs louder, her tiny body heaving with the dubious injustice of losing her cup. Sadie ambles over and sniffs curiously at Bun's bare toes; her shoes have disappeared somewhere, too.

The toddler's sobs transform into hiccupping giggles.

"See? All better," Caine murmurs, rubbing her head.

Who is this man, and what has he done with the Lycan King? My heart can't take it. It's going to explode if he calls me *dear* again, like we've been married forever or something.

"Hey, Caine!" Jer yells, waving his arms frantically. "Come on, just try it!"

He seems to have developed an appreciation for the scary man.

Sara, on the other hand, goes absolutely pale, her arms freezing mid-floss as she stares at Jer like he's just committed suicide. Ron frowns at her, giving the faintest shake of his head.

Yes. We're supposed to be pretending to be a happy family, but Sara keeps acting like Caine's about to eat her.

Archie claps Caine on the shoulder—actually touches him without permission!—and announces, "It's more fun than I expected," even if he's wheezing a little as he says it.

Caine's face goes statue-still, and I recognize the look. It's how he looked when he was listening to Alpha Brax babble, right before he lost his temper. This must be the outer limit of his hospitality.

But slowly, with obvious reluctance, Caine lets Archie push him over to the dance group. Jer's delighted as he chatters instructions, demonstrating the move again with exaggerated motions.

I watch, wide-eyed, as the Lycan King—ruler of all wolf shifters, nightmare of his enemies—attempts to floss. His powerful arms move stiffly, his timing completely off. It's the most awkward, endearing, terrifying thing I've ever seen.

Ron snickers behind his hand, quickly masking it with a cough when Caine glances his way.

Sara looks absolutely horrified, her hands to her mouth, but she can't look away, either.

A sharp yip draws my attention to the camper. Fenris has cornered Sadie underneath it, his massive form blocking her escape. Bun yanks on his ear, but even so his stance radiates smug wolf superiority as Sadie yelps again and scrambles belly-first into the dirt.

She's clearly outclassed by the supernatural wolf, though I doubt she understands exactly why.

Or maybe she does. Though, if she did, you'd think she'd be miles away by now.

My list of *things that don't make sense* is getting longer by the minute.

Doris emerges from their camper with a large tray of raw burger patties and bratwursts. The meat glistens in the firelight, and I squint. It looks like there are diced onions in the patty.

"The cheese is already mixed in," she tells me, smiling wide. "Have you ever cooked over open fire? It's my favorite."

Ah. Cheese, not onions. Even better.

But I stare at the blazing inferno Archie's built. "Er... I've cooked hot dogs on sticks?"

How are we supposed to cook anything over this, though? It's absolutely roaring. We'll have charcoal on the outside and raw meat inside.

Doris laughs creakily. "Oh no, dear. We have to wait for it to burn down to embers. That's when the real magic happens."

A cold pit forms in my stomach as I realize what she means. We're going to be here a while. Hours, maybe.

With a temperamental Lycan King and a toddler who now lacks a sippy cup and has a mild obsession with fire.

Bun toddles toward the tray of raw meat, reaching for it with gleeful fingers.

"No—no, no—don't touch that." I grab her tiny wrist, pulling her hand back.

Her bottom lip protrudes in a dramatic pout. Her mouth opens, and I catch a glimpse of sharp, pointed teeth—definitely not the normal teeth of a toddler. My heart lurches as I glance at Doris, who isn't even looking. Thank goodness.

"We have to cook it first, sweetie," I explain, trying to keep my voice steady. Calm. Reasonable.

Is it possible to reason with a toddler?

We're about to find out.

"It's not safe to eat raw meat, baby."

As if understanding, the sharpness recedes, returning to her normal baby teeth. Bun gives a disappointed "Hmph," but stops reaching for the meat.

Once Doris places the tray on the aluminum table she's placed near the fire, she does something unexpected. She clasps her hands over it and bows her head.

"We ask divine blessing now, before flame shapes flesh," she intones, her voice suddenly deeper and more resonant. Less... old.

I hold Bun against my hip, deeply unsettled. People say grace before eating, not before cooking. And those words don't sound like any blessing I've ever heard.

Then again, I haven't lived with humans for years. Maybe I just don't know—

I look at Caine, who's stopped dancing mid-move and is staring at me so intensely, my breath catches. His jaw is tight, eyes narrowed.

Bun claps once, loudly, mimicking Doris's gesture.

"Ah." Doris chuckles. "Children always know where to find joy."

Caine storms over, snatching Bun out of my arms. "Darling, you shouldn't be holding her."

I blink. He's smiling again. And he called me *darling*.

Not dear, but *darling*.

I don't know who this man is, but he's definitely not mine. Or he's infected.

"What a devoted daddy you are!" the old lady says, beaming. "You're so lucky, Grace."

Jer dashes toward us, screeching to a stop in front of me as he announces, "I need to go pee."

## Chapter 143: Grace: Too Domestic

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A few hours later, we're finally back in the camper. The last of the barbecue has been packed away, the fire doused, the children full and sleepy, even though Jer insists he's wide awake even as he rubs his eyes.

My shoulders ache from the tension I've been carrying, but I check the solar panel as the kids flop onto the couches in the living room, relieved by the cool, air-conditioned air.

"The battery's low," I mutter, checking the display panel. The numbers flicker between 10% and 11% in a way that makes my stomach knot. Something's still not right, even though the storm has passed and everything looks normal.

"I'll start the generator," Caine says, already heading for the door.

"Thank you," I call after him, but he's already gone.

When he returns, the roaring of the generator accompanies his re-entry.

The battery's already gone back to 11% and is now steady, as if all the strange flickering never happened. Relief washes through me for all of three seconds before Caine launches into action.

"All of you, go wash up," he orders the kids, who groan from their positions on the couch. Bun looks around at each of them, then mimics the groan.

"We don't have much water—"

"We'll sponge-bathe," he corrects himself. "We need to conserve."

"I already washed my hands," Jer protests, but Caine gives him a Look.

The boy scurries into the bathroom, followed by Sara. Immediately, there's a spat of squawking.

"Get out of my way!"

"Stop elbowing me, Jeridiot! Go stand in the shower!"

"But we aren't even using it."

"So? At least your ugly face won't be next to me."

Ron sighs and gets up, but Caine waves him down. "I've got it."

The older kid blinks and looks at me, and I shrug. The man's in Daddy mode again; I have no explanation for him.

Caine wades into the fray of Jer and Sara's constant squabbling. "Take turns. Jer, wash in the shower, just don't keep the water on. Wet this washcloth with some soap and scrub yourself down..."

Sara squeezes out of the bathroom, her face a little white from being too close to Caine again, and jumps onto the couch beside Ron, whispering, "I think he's fattening Jer up to eat him later."

Ron shakes his head and pats hers. "He's not going to eat us. Get over it, already."

"He *is*," she hisses. "Didn't you see how mad he was when he first came back?"

"He wasn't mad. He was concerned. There's a difference."

She grunts. "Concerned his dinner might have run away."

My lips quirk. "Sara—"

"Sara," Caine interrupts, popping his head out of the bathroom. "I'll have you wait until Jer and Ron are done, since you're a girl."

The color drains out of her face as Ron heads to the bathroom. "Yes, Sir."

Caine frowns. "You don't have to call me 'sir', Sara. Just Caine is acceptable."

"Right, Sir."

While the kids take their turns in the bathroom—Caine even brings them their backpacks so they can get dressed in something clean—I'm ushered into a couch to sit and relax.

Bun is dragged to the kitchen sink, where Caine wipes her down on the counter and she does her best to make music with various utensils and the countertop. She's surprisingly well-behaved for the wipe-down.

By the time she's done, Ron is back, and he takes Bun as Caine wipes down the counters. Then he goes around straightening cushions and folding the blanket on the daybed that Jer had disturbed with his bouncing earlier. He looks like some kind of deranged househusband, moving with military precision through domestic tasks.

Bun whines from her spot in Ron's lap, making grabby hands at nothing in particular. Ron's trying to work the TV to play one of her favorite cartoons.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" I move toward her, but Caine is there in an instant, scooping her up.

"She's thirsty," he announces, as if he's suddenly fluent in toddler. He grabs a sippy cup from the cabinet, fills it with water, and hands it to her without missing a beat.

Even Ron looks surprised, his eyebrows raised as he turns on some show about a blue dog.

Jer groans. "Not this again."

"Bun likes it, and we left her tablet behind. So either watch it or don't."

"*Fine*. But I want to choose what we watch when she goes to bed."

"You'll be going to bed at the same time," the Lycan King says, not even glancing up to see the disappointment on his face.

"Aw, man..."

The older girl creeps out of the bathroom, trying to avoid Caine as she goes to squeeze onto the couch beside Ron.

Thankfully, between this couch, the loveseat, and the daybed, there are enough places for all of us to sit. Jer, for example, has sprawled all over the daybed Caine just finished fixing. The comforter's already a mess as he rolls around in boredom.

"Sara," Caine says, and the girl freezes. "Come play a card game with me. I found one in the closet. Jer, you too."

"Ca ga?" Bun asks, shaking her sippy cup.

"You can play, too," he says seriously, taking her with him as he grabs a strange box out of the closet.

I squint at it. "I don't think this is appropriate for a toddler."

He frowns at the box. "It says it's for humanity. How bad can it be?"

"It's probably not appropriate for me, either," Jer says, but he looks excited. "I've heard about this game. It'll be fun."

Sara hesitates, glancing at me before reluctantly joining Caine at the dinette. Jer's a lot more enthused, and Bun just wants to grab anything within reach, demolishing every card at her fingertips.

Caine reads through the instructions, then explains the rules to the children like he's some sort of expert.

Jer suddenly slides out of the dinette and comes running at me. "Grace, come play with us! It's more fun with more people!"

Before he can launch himself at me, Caine's got him by the back of the shirt.

"Grace is tired," he says, redirecting Jer to the dinette. "Why don't you help me with Bun's hair after this? It's all tangled."

## Chapter 144: Grace: I'm Fine

*Chapter 144: Grace: I'm Fine*

Something clicks in my mind. The pattern comes into focus with sudden clarity: Caine is orchestrating everything so that I'm not needed. And he's blocking anyone from getting close to me.

Ron scratches at his cheek, watching them all. "He's just trying to help," he whispers, following my gaze to where Caine is demonstrating how to shuffle cards to Sara. "But you look like you're gonna punch him."

"What? No, I'm enjoying the peace." But the words come out through gritted teeth.

I uncross my arms, not realizing I'd been holding myself so rigidly. I should be grateful. Caine is being attentive, gentle with the kids, helpful around the camper. But it feels smothering, like he's wrapped me in cotton and placed me in a display case.

The air conditioner cycles off again, the third time in the last five minutes. I glance at the temperature display—it's dropped outside, and with the sun going down, we're wasting battery power.

"I'll turn off the AC," I announce, standing up. Finally, something I can do. "Let's just keep the dehumidifier going and open the windows."

I move toward the control panel, but Caine is there before me, dropping the game immediately to get in my way. His hand covers the panel, stopping me from doing anything. "I'll do it," he says. "You should rest."

"I'm fine," I insist, reaching past him.

Even with my fingers just an inch from his, his hand doesn't budge. "You're exhausted. You need rest."

Something in me snaps. A rubber band pulled too tight, finally giving way.

"Fine," I mutter, not bothering to hide my irritation. "I'll go take a nap if you insist on playing martyr."

I turn and stalk to Lyre's bedroom, feeling his eyes on my back the whole way.

The door clicks shut behind me, and I flop onto the bed after opening the windows for a cool breeze and spend the next few minutes glowering at the ceiling. My jaw aches from clenching it so tight. Only after a long exhale does the tension begin to release, my muscles unclenching one by one.

I roll onto my side and pull out my phone. The screen lights up, reminding me of something odd from earlier—the strange Divinity App. I scroll through my apps until I find it, tapping the icon.

The screen flickers, but the app won't open. I frown, looking more closely at the icon itself. It looks different now—desaturated and dim, as if all the color has been leached from it.

Was it a hallucination? Some kind of glitch caused by the storm? I've never seen an app change its appearance before.

My phone vibrates with an incoming text. Lyre's name flashes across the screen.

**[LYRE: We're on our way. Should be there in a few hours.]**

Relief floods through me. Lyre will know what to do about... everything. About Caine's strange behavior, about the storm, about that weird app.

A second message appears:

**[LYRE: Is everything okay now?]**

My fingers fly over the keyboard.

**[GRACE: Yes. We had a weird storm that messed with electronics but it passed.]**

The dots appear, indicating she's typing a response. They stop. Start again. Stop. There's a long pause, and I stare at the screen, waiting.

Finally, a new message.

**[LYRE: I'll be there as soon as I can. Try not to interact with anyone.]**

I frown.

**[GRACE: Too late. We ate with the neighbors. Older couple and a dog. They were here before us, though, so I'm sure they aren't a problem.]**

She's typing again, but all that comes through is:

**[LYRE: ...]**

Then:

**[LYRE: If Caine's with you, you're probably fine. But be reclusive. Don't trust anyone right now.]**

**[GRACE: Why? What should I be on guard for?]**

No response. The messages aren't even showing as "read" anymore.

The bedroom door cracks open, and Caine peers in. "You should rest," he says with alpha finality.

I glower at his overhelpful face. "I *am* resting!"

How much more resting can I get when I haven't even left the bed?

He opens his mouth to reply, but I cut him off: "It's not like I have anything else to do, right?"

The words come out bitter and resentful, but I don't take them back. I'm still grumpy over how he's not letting anyone near me. Didn't invite me into the game. Won't even let me push buttons on a freaking display.

He's going overboard.

Caine stares at me, silent. His expression unreadable. Then slowly, he pulls the door shut again.

Through the thin walls, I hear him tell one of the kids, "Shh. Grace is trying to sleep."

I groan, pressing my palms against my eyes until I see spots. Now I feel horrible for being so ungrateful when he's being the most helpful person ever.

But I don't need a keeper. I don't need to be bubble-wrapped and set aside like some fragile figurine. It isn't as if I don't want him to help—I'm incredibly grateful he's here. What would I do without him around? Even when he was gone to get gas, I was worried and wanted him back.

But his fake family portrayal with the old couple, the way he keeps calling me *dear* and *darling*, started a strange feeling under my skin. Something restless and a little frustrated by the facade he's putting forth.

I'm not even sure how I feel about it. A little happy. No, a *lot* happy. But also, a *lot* strange. Especially when he wouldn't let me try to figure out this strange situation between us where I can't even touch him.

Maybe he's right. Maybe I do need sleep, and I'll feel normal and balanced and less like some sort of weird crazy woman after I get a little rest...

But every time I think of how he won't let the kids even *touch* me, I grab a pillow and smack my face into it, trying not to scream.

My entire body stiffens when I feel Caine coming up the steps to this room again. It's impossible not to tell—the entire camper moves whenever someone's walking around.

I jerk the comforter over me and do my best to pretend to be asleep.

Steady breathing. I'm calm. Everything's fine and I'm not having a strange mental and emotional breakdown over someone being *too helpful*. I'm not.

I'm asleep.

Thankfully, it's dark in here without the light on, so he must not notice when my eyelids keep twitching. Instead, I focus on keeping my breathing deep and even.

Then, slowly, he leans forward and lifts my head off the pillow. Almost immediately, I feel a surge of energy bursting out of me and into him at the contact.

Still pretending to sleep, I try to focus on the feeling, on how it almost feels like I can reach out and touch it—

—and Caine pulls the pillow out from beneath my head.

Then he slides a different one under it and lets me go, ending the strange connection between us.

I jerk upright. This man has a strange obsession with pillows. "What are you doing?"

He stiffens. "Nothing. Go back to sleep, Grace."

## Chapter 145: Grace: The Deal with Pillows

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I sit upright in bed, glaring at Caine, who clutches my old pillow against his chest like some kind of security blanket. His knuckles are white against the pale cotton, and he's avoiding my eyes with the dedication of someone who's been caught doing something deeply embarrassing.

"This one's more comfortable for you," he says, nodding at the pillow he just slid under my head.

"What is your deal with pillows?" The words snap out of me before I can stop them.

His entire body straightens further. "I don't have a deal with pillows."

The silence stretches.

And stretches.

He doesn't say anything else, just stands there, rigid and awkward, clutching the damn pillow to his chest.

I sigh, and he immediately asks, "Why are you so angry?"

"I'm not angry." The response is automatic, defensive, and a total lie to my current state of emotions.

He raises an eyebrow, skepticism written across every part of his face, and I wince.

"I'm not," I insist. The truth is, I do think the pillow thing is creepy. Weird. Inexplicable. But saying so would hurt his feelings, and despite how irritated I am in this moment, I don't actually want to do that.

"No. You're angry," he says firmly, like he already knows. Which... he isn't wrong, so he does, but even his certainty grates on my nerves. "You've been angry for a while. And I don't understand what I did wrong."

I groan, pressing my palms against my face. I'm not prepared for this emotional reckoning. Not now. I was still busy pouting and being outraged and hadn't worked through my feelings completely. The storm left me dizzy and off-kilter, and I was relying on sleep to fix it.

I exhale slowly, dropping my hands to my lap, twisting the blanket between my fingers. It's warm in here since we kicked off the air conditioner, but the faint hint of a cool breeze is at least coming through the windows.

"I don't know. Maybe I'm going crazy." My voice comes out tiny and pathetic, lowering further into a mumble as I continue, "But every time you won't let the kids even *near* me..."

I lower my hands, peeking out from behind a curtain of blonde hair I'm still not used to seeing in my peripheral vision.

Caine is finally looking at me again. His brow is furrowed, eyes serious, the storm-gray of them focused entirely on my face. The intensity of his stare makes my skin prickle.

"Bun took your energy," he says calmly. "Of course I can't let her touch you."

"What?"

My brain screeches to a halt. Did he just say—

"Bun took your energy," he repeats, with the flat certainty of someone stating water is wet.

I stare at him, mouth slightly open, trying to process these words that make no sense. "What are you talking about?" I've held Bun so much and she's never taken my energy before.

"She took your energy. I came in here and you were unconscious, still holding her. Bun is fatal to you right now, and I'm not risking it. With any of the kids."

My heart twists. "Fatal?"

Caine nods once, sharp and precise. "It must have been triggered with her shift during the storm. It might be... why she calmed down."

My head suddenly hurts. A lot. I squeeze both sides of my head together, feeling a little like my skull is trying to split apart. "Are we sure? Maybe I just fainted." I was feeling particularly lethargic and tired, but then again, I did just come out of the hospital... well, was kidnapped out of it. An altruistic kidnapping, if you will.

But denial is strong within me, because we're talking about *Bun*. Sweet little baby Bun, who needs hugs and kisses and constant affection. I can't just *not touch her*. "This doesn't make sense. I was just... tired. Exhausted. The storm was weird. I'm not used to mothering four kids."

"You were dying, Grace."

The certainty in his voice chills me again. He believes what he's saying. And... I do, too.

But I don't want to.

"Then why didn't you tell me?" I demand, my anger flaring hot again. Better to be angry than deal with whatever's really going on, because *I can't touch Bun*. "Why keep it a secret and just... just manage me like I'm some kind of invalid? You've been treating me like glass, keeping the kids away, doing everything yourself, calling me 'darling' in front of those old people—"

"Grace."

Caine sits awkwardly at the edge of the bed, perching there like it's going to collapse beneath him. By the way it's dipping, it might. He clears his throat and scoots up a little closer, and the mattress no longer dips. Of course, this now means he's only a couple inches away from me.

"What?" I'm surly, and he doesn't deserve it. This man is trying to protect me, and he's shown me how far he can go to do it. But I'm still angry and this anger has to go somewhere.

"Your scent..." His fingers brush against the pillow in his arms, and he sighs. "It has some special power over me. Calms me when nothing else has. Keeps my thoughts clear. For the most part." His eyes drop to my mouth, going a little dark.

*For the most part.*

A little tingle shoots through my back and into my abdomen, and I shiver. Caine clears his throat.

"Fenris said she was wild. Feral. Wouldn't calm down until you touched her."

I nod stiffly. Remembering Bun like that isn't something I like doing. I'd rather not think about it.

He reaches out a hand, resting it gently on my knee, covered by the blanket. There's a vague, soft flush of something going into him from me, but it's muffled. Like something's in the way.

"You seem to have a power to calm the beast inside of us. I'm not sure how or why; I've never heard of anything like you before. It's why you could calm Bun. But until we know what the limits of this power is, or how it's triggered..."

"By touch."

"Yes. But when? Why? How much? And how much can you take?" He turns more fully toward me, letting the pillow fall limp in his lap as he reaches out to grab a strand of my hair. His voice goes husky. "I don't want to risk seeing you hurt, Grace. That's all. I'm not trying to take the children away from you."

It's hard to focus on his words with the way his eyes are focused on mine, but I manage. Somehow.

Maybe I could get a gold medal in Surviving Werewolf Pheromones. It should be an Olympic sport.

"Okay."

All the anger I had fizzles out with all his soft, calm words and reasonable explanations, leaving me feel strangely empty. And tingly. And...

The back of his fingers brush against my cheek and I stiffen at the explosive contact, sucking in my breath hard. Caine's breath hitches, too, and he yanks his hand away.

I grab his wrist, feeling the surge of energy between us. "Touch me. Don't pull away this time."

## **Chapter 146: Grace: Zero to Sixty**

Caine tries to jerk his hand back, but I hold on, my fingers tightening around his wrist. No way I'm letting him pull away now. The strange current between us is back, and I'm determined to figure it out, damn it.

Otherwise I can't hold Bun.

"It's too dangerous," he snaps, but his resistance is already faltering. Though his muscles remain taut with tension, he stops trying to break free of my grip.

"I'm never going to learn to control whatever this is if you don't touch me," I say, my voice far steadier than the lack of certainty in my head. I can *feel* it, but it doesn't mean I'll be able to control it. Still, I want to try. "You can't protect me by keeping me in the dark about my own power, Caine."

He groans, dropping his head forward until his dark hair falls across his face. "Look at yourself, Grace. You're exhausted. Weak. You need rest, not... experiments."

"I feel fine right now." I straighten my spine, trying to look stronger than I probably appear. "You just need to stop if I start looking... bad."

A corner of his mouth twitches up despite everything; I can see it, even from this angle. "You'll never look bad."

I blink, momentarily thrown off balance. "Are you seriously flirting with me in the middle of this conversation?" I push indignation into my voice even as I fight the smile threatening to form. Butterflies dance in my belly.

He looks up with a sigh, but his mouth is still half-quirked in amusement. "You're killing me, Grace."

Goddess. Every time he says my name...

*Dear* and *darling* do it, too.

Basically any time he looks at me like that, I'm drowning in a sea of tingly, throbbing feelings.

"I thought you were the one killing me, though?" I counter, trying to make the atmosphere a little less... seductive.

He growls low in his throat. It doesn't help the throbbing down below, damn it. "That's not what I mean."

Okay. Better not to talk at all.

"Hush. I'm concentrating." I turn his palm around, my heart racing as I slide my hand against his. Even the slide of his callused palm against mine sends frissons of excitement through my skin, and I fight the urge to wiggle. If I do, my reaction will be obvious, and the last thing I need is to be obvious.

I lock our fingers together, squeezing slightly as I focus on the strange sensation flowing between us and *not* the throbbing between my thighs. This time it's easier to feel. Not just sense, but actually *feel* the current passing from me to him.

My eyes squeeze shut as I concentrate harder. My face scrunches. I probably look ridiculous.

Whatever this energy is, I need to grab it, control it. But it's like trying to hold water—completely fluid, passing through my mental "hands" no matter how I try to grasp it.

Then, behind my closed eyelids, I see it—a glowing golden thread. No, not one thread—countless threads, pulsing and alive, connecting our joined hands. I can see our fingers, or at least strange, luminous outlines of them, like x-ray images dunked in a sea of iridescent rainbows.

Fascinated, I mentally reach out, stroking the threads with my consciousness. They respond, vibrating like harp strings.

Caine groans—not in my mind but out loud, the sound rumbling from his chest and shaking the bed a little.

My eyes snap open, but I don't lose the sensation. The golden threads remain visible in my mind's eye even as I focus on Caine's face. His jaw is clenched, cheeks flushed with heat.

I stroke the energy threads again, experimenting, and his whole body goes rigid. His eyes darken, pupils expanding until there's barely any gray left, and they drop to fix on my lips.

The intensity he exudes steals my breath.

"Um, I think I—" The words die in my throat as he lunges forward.

His mouth crashes into mine, desperate and hungry. The force of his movement sends me falling backward onto the bed, his weight pressing me down into the mattress. The energy between us explodes from controlled threads into a raging river—wild, untamable, impossible to grasp.

But I can't focus on that anymore. Not with his lips devouring mine, his tongue pushing into my mouth with bruising urgency. His hands move down my body with frantic need, finding my breasts and squeezing them through my shirt, fingers digging in hard enough to make me gasp against his mouth.

The air around us suddenly smells sweet. My skin's on fire. One of his hands shoves up my shirt as I try to wrest his off; we're a tangled mess of kissing and shirts and *oh my Goddess*, his hand is *in my bra* and he's pinching my nipple hard enough to hurt.

Except it doesn't.

It does, but it *doesn't*.

I give up on pulling his shirt off and grab at his other hand, shoving it down to my pants.

"We can't—" Caine murmurs against my lips, even as his fingers fumble for the zipper.

"Can," I say, even though energy's surging through me at an alarming rate and I have literally zero control over it. But if he doesn't touch me, I might actually die. My entire body's strung tight, going from zero to sixty in one kiss.

His lips slant over mine again, his tongue shoving past my teeth in a crude and way-too-sexy-for-these-sloppy-noises enactment of what exactly he wants to do to my body.

And he's taking too damn long to get my pants off.

So I help him, popping the buckle and jerking them down my hips, kicking them off in panicked need as he rips off my panties. Just rips them off. It must be a thing for him, because he destroyed Lyre's shirt the last time, too.

"Fuck, you're wet," he mutters against my mouth as his fingers slide through it all.

I whimper, my entire body ready to explode. He leans back, pressing gently against my core with a finger as he growls, "Do you have control, Grace?"

The lie feels natural. I should lie. Say yes, let him do whatever he wants to me, and damn the consequences. I want it more than anything.

But... those consequences aren't small.

So I shake my head slightly as he stares down at me with arousal-darkened eyes and whisper, "Not yet."

"Take control, Grace." His finger slips in with the slightest stretch, and I arch my hips with a moan. "Now."

## Chapter 147: Grace: Squeeze

*Chapter 147: Grace: Squeeze*

His finger pushes deeper, hitting a perfect, toe-curling spot inside me.

I can't think, can't breathe—can only feel. The energy between us rushes like a freaking tidal wave; it's become millions of threads, impossible to contain as it overwhelms every rational thought.

He curls and drives his finger just right, dragging moans out of me with every slow grind, and it's absolute madness in my head.

My hips buck against his hand with a will of their own. I'm grinding down, chasing the pressure, the friction, desperate for more. The golden threads connecting us pulse brighter with each movement, multiplying until they're all I can see behind half-closed eyes.

"Do you have control, Grace?"

Fuck. I was supposed to be focusing.

His voice is strained, as if he's hanging onto his restraint by a thread.

Me, too.

I shake my head—wildly, desperately, honestly. The confession burns my pride, but lying now would be catastrophic.

I'm trying—I swear I'm trying—but every time he curls his fingers—fuck—my brain goes blank.

He growls, the sound rumbling through the room and straight to my clit. His free hand grabs my chin, fingers digging into my jaw as he claims my mouth again—wet, open, demanding. His tongue sweeps inside, commanding rather than asking, and I surrender willingly.

The energy surges between us, doubling in intensity. I feel it everywhere—not just where his finger works inside me, but racing along my skin, crackling through my veins, setting fire to every nerve ending and diving into him at every goddamn opportunity.

His finger curls, pressing hard against a swollen spot deep inside, and I cry out against his mouth. He adds a second finger, stretching me, filling me, working me with ruthless precision.

I arch. I can't not. My back arches hard, and I clutch the sheets as if they'll anchor me. I can't even tell what I'm reacting to anymore—the pressure, the tension, the way everything slick and perfect keeps winding me tighter, or the magic racing wild beneath my skin.

I should be doing something—anything—but my brain's gone completely sideways.

No control.

No thought.

Just sensation, heat, pulse, and more. Too much and not enough all at once. I think I'm panting. Or maybe whimpering. Goddess, he's going to kill me with this.

The golden threads in my mind's eye are so bright I can't look directly at them anymore. They're searing white at the center, blinding, overwhelming. I try—really try—to grasp them, to contain them, but it's impossible.

It's like trying to hold onto an orgasm on the edge of freaking heaven, and I might actually explode if I try. But also I might die if he doesn't...

No.

It's too much.

I have to tell him...

Fuck, it feels so good. The way his fingers slam inside, how his thumb rubs at my clit, the way my entire body's coiled and about to—

"You have to stop," I gasp, tearing my mouth from his. "I can't—it's too much—"

He pulls away like he's been burned, yanking his hand back and rearing up on his knees above me. "Fuck!" The curse rips from him, his chest heaving as he stares at me like a wild man.

It's awkward.

Of course it's fucking awkward.

I was a literal half-second from glory and he hasn't even gotten a hint of release yet, and I slammed the brakes right in the middle of my whimpering puddle of almost-orgasm.

For a moment, he just stares down at me, eyes wild. Then he brings his glistening fingers to his mouth and slowly, deliberately licks them clean, his eyes locked on mine the entire time.

My core clenches painfully at the sight. It's a claim, pure and simple. An ownership of my pleasure, my taste, my desire.

Shit.

I want him to do it again.

I'm wrecked beneath him—thoroughly undone, breathless and flushed. My shirt clings where it shouldn't, and my whole body feels like it's been rung out and left wanting. I throb in all the wrong places, desperate and unsatisfied.

The broken current between us leaves tingles skimming over my skin. Magic jitters in my veins, sparking and seeking release, trapped just beneath the surface as it makes my fingers twitch and my legs weak..

He probably feels the same. Maybe even worse, judging by how the bulge in his pants strains.

My gaze flicks up to his face, only to find him now staring directly between my thighs. The heat in his eyes could melt steel. Shit. That's hot, too.

Everything about him has me on fire.

He holds out a hand silently, offering connection again. I hesitate only a second before reaching up. Our fingertips brush—and a spark slams through me, forcing reconnection. My body jerks on the bed, back arching involuntarily, but I force myself to maintain contact.

It's not a rush anymore, but a steady stream of a few threads. It's fine. I can do this.

I need to get control of this. Need to understand it. Need to master it.

Slowly, we link our fingers again, palm to palm. The arcane surge builds once more—slower this time, but no less intense. Strong. Erotic. Inexorable.

I try again to control it, focusing on pulling the energy back toward me, trying to yank it into submission. Nothing happens. The flow continues unabated, moving between us, a current I can't redirect.

Caine's face is tight with strain, his body trembling. His knuckles are white where he grips the sheets with his free hand. I'm not doing any better—my body's tight as a bowstring, every muscle clenched in anticipation.

I want more.

*Need more.*

A kiss can't be that bad, right? I should be able to handle a kiss without losing control completely.

"Kiss me," I whisper, the words escaping before I can think better of it. Stupid idea. Bad Grace. I can't even handle holding hands, what makes me think I can handle a kiss?

But I *want it*.

"No," he growls, jaw clenched, eyes screwed shut tight. The tendons in his neck stand out like cords. "If I do—I'll lose control."

Damn him and his responsibility and smart choices. Must be nice.

Frustration and arousal build in equal measure. I shift on the bed, wiggling just slightly to ease the ache between my legs.

The effect on him is immediate and devastating.

Caine groans, his head tilting back to expose the strong column of his throat, his hands fisting in the sheets beside my hips. "Don't move like that," he rasps. "Don't smell like that."

I freeze, but my mind races, desperate for a solution. Pulling didn't work. Maybe...

This time, I stop trying to pull the energy back. Instead, I imagine squeezing it—like gripping a garden hose to slow the water flow. I focus on compressing the golden threads with my mind or whatever the fuck I'm using, applying pressure rather than direction.

The energy flow slows. Not stops—but definitely slows. My eyes widen. Holy shit. It's working.

Caine's reaction is immediate and visceral. A groan tears from his throat, his hips jerking forward involuntarily. A low snarl escapes him, primal and uncontrolled.

"Whatever you just did—" he pants, eyes flying open to fix on mine, "—don't do that."

I stare up at him, chest heaving. "What if I do it again?"

His eyes narrow in warning, but I'm not deterred. I squeeze again, applying more mental pressure to the energy flow.

This time, Caine drops to all fours over me, his face buried against my neck, his body caging mine. The snarl that vibrates against my skin is barely human.

And then he bites me.

## Chapter 148: Grace: Choked

*Chapter 148: Grace: Choked*

"Ow!" I yelp, my hand snapping up to fist a handful of his hair and jerk his head away. "What the fuck?!"

Pain slices through the sexual haze, sharp and clarifying as a bucket of ice water, even as energy explodes between us. Threads multiply into cables, into ropes, into a goddamn tsunami of power pouring out.

My hand flies to my neck, feeling wetness. When I pull my fingers away, they're spotted with blood.

"Did you just fucking *bite* me?!" I hiss.

He doesn't answer, just groans against my shoulder.

The bite throbs, hot and electric. I can feel my heartbeat in it, pulsing in time with the arcane current, and try desperately to grab onto the energy between us again. But it's too much.

Caine makes a sound that's more animal than man, his entire body going rigid above me.

"Don't. Move." His voice is ragged, barely recognizable. "Not an inch."

I open my mouth to sass him back, to tell him to go to hell for biting me, but the words die in my throat as I realize he's fumbling with the button of his jeans.

Oh.

*Oh.*

My eyes go wide as he pushes his jeans low enough to grip himself—his hand tight around the hard, flushed length.

It's bigger than I expected—not that I've spent time thinking about it. Much. Sometimes...

My core clenches hard at the sight of him, arousal slamming back through me with brutal force. But panic bubbles up alongside it, and I squeak, "Caine, I don't have that much control yet—"

He doesn't seem to hear me. His hand moves—slow, rough strokes, like he's trying to hold himself together more than chase release. His face is tight with strain.

"I'm not going to—" His eyes shut, jaw clenched. "*Fuck.*"

"

When he looks at me again, it's like something ancient is clawing behind his eyes.

"I'm not in control anymore, Grace." The words sound torn from him. "Get out. Before I hurt you."

I should listen. I should absolutely listen to the massive predator telling me he's about to lose control.

Instead, I just stare—caught by the way his muscles ripple with each movement. The flush beneath his skin. The way his abs tighten with each harsh breath.

My hand moves on instinct, fingers brushing the hot, sensitive tip.

Caine jerks at the contact like I shocked him, a growl tearing free from deep in his chest.

*"Fuck!"*

The arcane surge slamming into me from that single point of contact is like mainlining lightning. It rockets through my system, pleasure so intense it borders on pain.

I whimper, but I don't pull away. I can't. My body craves this contact like a drug, even as my mind fractures under its force.

His cock throbs against my palm. Hot. Velvet over steel. My fingers wrap around it instinctively.

My rational brain flickers briefly back online, reminding me that I need to get this surging energy under control before it consumes us both.

*Focus. Squeeze the energy. Compress the threads. Control it.*

I concentrate hard, trying to throttle the golden flow with my mind, to regulate the power crackling between us.

At the same time—because I’m an idiot with zero multitasking ability—my hand tightens around his cock.

The effect is catastrophic.

Caine’s entire body goes rigid. The tendons in his neck stand out like cords. His jaw locks. His thighs tremble. His free hand clamps around my wrist in a bruising grip.

"Grace—" He gasps. "What are you doi—"

The rest of the sentence dissolves into a snarl as his hips jerk forward involuntarily, driving his cock through my grip.

Wait.

*Wait.*

Am I choking his dick with magic?

"Caine—!"

His only response is a wrecked, obscene sound. Something between a groan and a growl, something you'd only hear in bed. The kind of sound to make your ears go red and your heart beat a little faster.

I start to pull away, suddenly panicked that I've pushed too far—but it's already happening.

His body locks up, every muscle straining as his hand clamps tight around mine. A hot rush spills across my belly, splashing my fingers, the hem of my shirt—every pulse of it pushing another wave of energy through the bond.

His cock jerks in my grip as a violent burst of arcane power slams between us, stealing the breath from my lungs.

I gasp, my entire body jolting with the echo of it. Sensation flares—hot, sharp, overwhelming. My back bows off the bed, legs trembling as I shake beneath him, the magic crackling across my skin like ungrounded power.

For a moment, neither of us moves. We're frozen—Caine braced above me, panting hard, and me... sprawled out, wide-eyed, covered in heat, heart pounding, and still aching so badly it hurts.

Most. Awkward. Ending. Ever.

I literally choked his dick into orgasm.

*Choked it.*

Hello, inexperience. thy name is Grace.

I blink up at him. "Um... so..."

He groans, dropping his forehead to rest against mine for a brief second. "That wasn't how I wanted to..."

The room spins suddenly. My head feels like it's filled with too much oxygen. I can still feel my core pulsing, desperate for release, but the dizziness is overwhelming.

Too much.

We did *way too fucking much*

.

Shit.

"You need to go." Panic rises in my voice. "Right now. Caine. *NOW*."

I shove at his chest, panicked urgency lending strength to my arms, before he even has a chance to react.

Caine jerks back, stumbling over his half-lowered jeans and crashes to the floor with a thud, shaking the entire camper.

I try to scramble up to help him, but vertigo hits me hard. The room tilts sideways and I tumble sideways, sprawling in an undignified heap.

Heavy footsteps pound toward the bedroom door, and I can hear Fenris growling. "Is everything okay?" Ron's voice calls out, concerned.

"Everything's fine!" My voice comes out as a panicked squeak-shriek.

I whip my head toward Caine, hissing, "Did you lock the door?!" even as the world spins around me.

"Fenris is guarding it." He sits up with a resigned sigh, then zeroes in on me with concern. "Are you okay?"

I flop my forehead onto the bed with a groan, then laugh.

"I'm fine." The laugh transitions into a sigh. "Dizzy, but fine."

My hips wiggle restlessly against the bed, my body still insanely aroused despite the arcane overload. Suddenly, the bed dips on either side of me. Caine's hands are there as he leans over me, not touching, but close enough to make my entire body spark again.

I peek up—then jerk upright when I realize his dick is still hanging in the breeze. And I'm covered in...him.

My head collides with his chin hard enough to make my vision swim. He stumbles back with a soft curse.

"Shit," I groan, grabbing the back of my head. Caine rubs at his jaw, eyeing me warily.

"Sorry," I mumble.

"There's nothing to apologize for. I was in your space."

I laugh awkwardly, not knowing where to look. The whole situation is... awkward.

"You didn't come," Caine says, the bluntness of the observation making my eyes snap to his.

*Of course* he'd say it like that.

Heat rushes to my face. I'm still physically aroused—my body thrumming with need—but the emotional tidal wave has receded enough for embarrassment to take hold.

"It's fine," I mutter, staring fixedly at the ceiling. Anywhere but at his dick I'd choked into orgasm.

Caine tilts his head, studying me with unsettling intensity. "I can't touch you anymore, but there's no rule saying you can't touch yourself, right?"

My whole body goes rigid, even as my core tightens. "Excuse me?"

## Chapter 149: Grace: No. Nope. Never.

*Chapter 149: Grace: No. Nope. Never.*

Caine hovers over me, all rippling muscles and heaving chest, his words hanging in the air between us.

"...there's no rule saying you can't touch yourself, right?"

My brain dies. Just kaboom, explodes, done-for.

Did he just—? Is he suggesting—?

Wait. What now. Did he just—

He wants to *WATCH* me?

Heat explodes in my face as my eyes go wide. The suggestion alone sends a traitorous pulse of arousal through me, but it's instantly swallowed by a tidal wave of utter mortification.

Nope. *NO*. Never. Not happening.

My thighs may be clenching with need, but my embarrassment screams louder.

"Absolutely not," I splutter, my voice somewhere around ten octaves higher than normal. I'm not even sure if ten octaves exist, but if they do, I'm *there*, baby. High and freaked out.

I lurch backward on the bed, scrambling like a freshly squashed insect. My legs are noodles, my dignity a corpse. I manage two feet of retreat before vertigo hits like a sucker punch.

"Shit," I mumble, squeezing my eyes shut and willing the spinning to stop. My stomach lurches dangerously, and for a horrifying second, I think I might actually throw up. Yeah. Way to complete this masterpiece of indignity.

Caine's expression shifts instantly. The heat in his eyes cools, replaced by sharp concern as he takes in my pallor.

"Are you okay?" he demands.

I wave a hand. It might as well be my flag of surrender. "I'm fine... I think. Maybe."

My body can't decide if it wants to chase the lingering arousal or pass out from overexertion. I'm putting my bets on passing out, because no matter how much throbbing there is between my legs, my body can't back it up.

Besides, the kids are out there. And Fenris. And yeah, I get wolves live inside their masters' heads, but oh my Goddess, *Fenris was out there the entire time.*

We were basically a sexual audiobook for a wolf.

*Not cool.*

Caine pulls back, jaw tight. Then he slams a fist into the mattress beside me. The entire bed jumps, and fabric tears under his fist. Seriously? How do you rip a sheet with just one punch?

Shifters are just cheating at life at this point, aren't they?

"I shouldn't have touched you," he growls, his voice dripping with self-loathing.

Oops. Way to dial up the drama, Grace.

"No! It's not—" I start to protest.

Except it is. It absolutely is. This—whatever we just did—was too much, too fast. I haven't processed any of it. The sex. The magic. The fact that I'm still dripping with his semen.

*Semen*

.

Which should be gross and totally isn't.

And now my boyfriend (?) is blaming himself when I am *one hundred percent* the person who asked for more.

Way to go, me. I'm an amazing girlfriend. Obviously.

He runs a hand through his dark hair with another growl before standing, and my protests die in my throat as I watch. He adjusts himself, and I wonder vaguely where it's always hiding. I don't generally make a habit of staring at men's crotches, but seriously, shouldn't anacondas in pants be illegal or something? Especially when they hide?

His cheeks are faintly flushed, and a light sheen of sweat makes his tattoos gleam. They're calm now, no longer moving, and I wonder if he can feel it when they do.

I look at him helplessly, unable to find words. What do you say after accidentally choking someone's dick with magic, especially when the dick-owner is the one blaming himself for it?

Caine's expression hardens as he moves away from the bed. "Get some rest," he mutters.

"Oh. Um. Okay, but—"

And the jackass doesn't even pause as he jerks the door open.

"Wait. Caine—"

Then it closes.

Dumb me, busy ogling him while he's dressed, and now I can't explain it isn't his fault.

I'm dazed and frustrated and confused all at once. The golden energy between us is long gone, and it's left a strange emptiness in me, where even my limbs feel hollow and empty.

I flop back onto the bed with a dramatic groan, throwing my arm over my eyes. The ceiling spins above me, so I squeeze my eyes shut tight, trying to find equilibrium.

A shaky laugh bubbles out of me, teetering on the edge of hysteria. I was mad at him before this. Mad that he was acting all domestic, taking care of the kids, pushing me to the sidelines.

*Mad.*

How ridiculous. It's nice, being taken care of.

Though now I have to worry about how he's taking this all as his responsibility alone, when I clearly remember asking him to do things to me. I'm the one who asked him to kiss me. Insisted I could get control. Demanded he touch me.

Which was... awesome.

Seriously. Awesome.

Is it always like this? I get why people are so obsessed with sex if it is.

My smile slips as reality creeps back in. I'm still aching between my legs. Still a mess. And I'm only a smidgen closer to understanding this connection between us.

Something has to give at some point, right?

In the silence, a buzzing sound cuts through my thoughts. My phone vibrates somewhere on the bed, lost in the rumpled sheets. I pat around blindly, muttering curses as I bat at fabric.

"Where the hell—"

My fingers finally close around the cool metal. I bring it to my face, blinking at the screen.

It's not a text from Lyre. It's the weird Divinity App again.

But this time, there's no text. Just strange, glitchy lines of code. Symbols I don't recognize—some of them don't even *stay still*, like they're shifting mid-glance. My eyes hurt just looking at them.

I stare at it for a few seconds, trying to decide if I'm hallucinating.

Then I sigh and drop the phone onto the bed.

"Not today, cosmic nonsense."

With a groan, I force myself off the bed. My legs wobble beneath me, and I have to grab the wall to keep from falling. One step at a time, I make my way toward the bathroom, remembering Caine's face as he...

Damn.

I need a shower. And maybe a priest. I wonder if Lyre counts. She's something more than magic and humanity, isn't she? Maybe she can purify my newly found gutter brain.

## Chapter 150: Lyre: Did You F#\$% Her?

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**LYRE**

The RV is parked where it should be, easing some of the stress from my shoulders.

Knowing she made it safely and seeing it for myself are two different things.

Sucking in a breath of cooler night air, I tell Aaron, "Take the boys to a motel for the night."

Aaron freezes as he steps out of the vehicle, his shoulders stiffening as he slams the door closed. The night air hangs heavy, charged with something more than just the sound of the generator running, and I look at him with a frown.

"I thought I was staying with you," he says with a sigh, leaning back against the SUV with his arms crossed.

I raise one eyebrow, almost scoffing. Really?

But then I notice it—the slight furrow between his brows, the barely-there flare of his aura shifting from confusion to irritation. He's trying so hard not to show it, keeping his face neutral except for the one tiny tell.

He's serious.

Seriously, give a man one orgasm...

"There's no reason for you to stay with me." My reply is calm and measured. Better to keep things simple.

Maybe he won't be a great toy after all. His wolfish instincts are already rising, trying to claim me. Possess me as his own.

Not happening.

A beat of silence stretches in the night. Owen's awake, but doesn't open the door; he can hear every word, and he seems to have the presence of mind to keep out of this awkward situation.

He already knows things have transpired between us. Angels aren't nose-blind like other supernaturals in this world.

Aaron's eyes flick toward the RV, then back to me. I watch his expression dim—just for a second, a flash of hurt crossing his face before it flattens into nothing.

Better to hurt him now, before he gets too serious.

"I'll take the others," he says finally. "Get them some rest, Lyre."

As simple as that. No argument. No questions. Just acquiescence followed by the sound of him herding the others into his truck.

I feel a twinge of—something—as I watch the taillights fade down the gravel road, leaving me alone with my arcana-charged camper and whatever mess waits inside.

I've seen countless men bruised by my dismissal over the centuries. It's never bothered me before.

Maybe I'm getting soft.

The creaking of the RV door interrupts my thoughts.

In the doorway stands the annoying blockheaded Lycan King, his broad silhouette blocking most of the light from inside. His wolf pads out in front of him, ethereal and massive against the night.

I stiffen.

The smell hits me full force—Grace's scent, wrapped in arcana, and unmistakably intertwined with sex. My lips curl into a cold, almost-smile.

I'm going to kill this son of a bitch.

"Where is she?"

"She's resting," Caine replies, his tone clipped and emotionless. Aloof and unburdened by fear as he closes the door behind him and makes his way closer.

This piece of shit.

My gaze sharpens as I snark, "Is *that* what we're calling it now?"

I circle him slowly, predatory and cool. Smelling him. Scenting every trace of what transpired here while I was gone. This foolish animal king with his instincts and his needs, unable to control himself around his mate.

"You couldn't keep your claws to yourself for a single day?" I ask, the words dripping with contempt.

Caine doesn't rise to it. His tone remains flat, detached. "What happens between me and Grace isn't your concern, Lyre."

My fingers flex at my sides. My palms ache to spark with resonance, to pull at the fabric of reality and show this pup exactly what concern looks like. But I think of the blasted Divinity App, of the restrictions threatening to bind me.

If I get slapped with another Plausibility Warning here, I might lose access to my power. Or worse.

Even an hour without the power to defend Grace...

My teeth grind together, and I know the asshole wolf can hear it.

Fenris growls, and I stifle the urge to kick him in his massive muzzle.

Caine steps closer, crowding my space. The air presses down—a pulse of dominance, primal and laced with challenge, rolls off him in waves meant to cow lesser creatures.

I don't flinch.

Instead, I release a faint signature of my own—calm, cold, and infinitely older than his bloodline. The pressure disperses around me. Neutralized.

His nostrils flare. His jaw tightens. A silent standoff between ancient predators, neither willing to yield.

Sorry, pup, but I've been dealing with your kind for far too fucking long.

"How far did you go?" I ask quietly.

Calm, Lyre. Stay fucking calm.

Caine says nothing, but his scent shifts.

Guilt.

My eyes flash. "Did you fuck her, you sex-crazed bastard?"

He tenses, but doesn't say a word to defend himself.

Interesting. The legendary Lycan King, known for his brutality, restraining himself. If I hit him first, Grace will be upset.

So I don't.

Even though I really want to.

A punch won't trigger Plausibility, will it?

Just one punch.

Or a kick between his stupid fucking legs... though, if he's incapable of siring children, I'll probably get slammed with at least three Plausibility Warnings for obstructing her fate.

Damn it.

"That's not your business," he says finally.

I draw in a long breath. Let it out. "It is if you break her," I say softly. "I told you not to touch her, didn't I? Several times. You acknowledged it. I *warned* you."

A shadow crosses his face. He sighs, running a hand through his dark hair, the tattoos against his neck shifting slightly in the moonlight.

"She's fine. Just tired." Another hesitation. "She thought she could control the transfer."

I stiffen, startled. "She felt it? Properly felt it?"

"It seems like it. I don't understand it, but she seems to feel something."

Already? It shouldn't be possible. Not this quickly, not without training. She was arcane-deaf a few days ago. Now she's able to feel an arcane transfer...?

My eyes narrow as pieces fall into place. "Tell me about the storm."