

Grace of a Wolf –

Chapter 163: Grace: What Jer Saw

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My lungs burn from the effort of dashing to Jer's scream.

Even then, I trail far behind Lyre and Owen, who have the advantage of supernatural speed.

I hate it.

Hate being human and slow when a child needs me.

These kids are vulnerable, and I'm supposed to be watching over them—what was I thinking, letting him dash off like this?

Easy: Jer was being Jer. Overexcited about the idea of taking a dog with us, even if we don't need it and she belongs to other people. I didn't think twice about his exuberance as he bounded off to "ask for permission". I should have.

By the time I reach the Archie and Doris's camper site, everything's already in motion. Broad-shouldered Owen pushes his way into the trailer first, disappearing into the doorway. Lyre, on the other hand, reaches inside and drags Jer backward, away from whatever he's seen.

As soon as he spots me, the boy bolts from Lyre's grip. He slams into me, arms wrapping around my waist so tight I almost stagger back. His entire body trembles against mine, his face buried in my chest. I curl my hands around his shoulders instinctively, one palm moving to cradle the back of his head.

Whatever he saw is bad. Bad enough to shake a rambunctious seven- or eight-year-old boy.

Lyre stands behind Owen in the RV doorway, peering around his bulk. She lets out a long sigh. "I knew it."

"I should have noticed," he agrees, his voice tight with frustration.

"They hid it well enough." Her tone is flat; whatever horror is inside, it hasn't affected her. "They knew what they were doing."

My stomach knots into multiple tiny pretzels. "What's wrong?"

Against my shirt, Jer's voice comes out muffled and small. "They're dead."

My heart drops to my feet. Archie and Doris—the sweet elderly couple who'd welcomed us with barbecue and laughter—dead? We'd just had dinner with them yesterday. It's impossible.

"Owen, take care of the kid," Lyre says without looking back, stepping deeper into the RV to make room.

Owen backs out of the camper on her order and kneels beside us. I loosen my grip on Jer just enough for Owen to reach out, patting his head with surprising gentleness for hands so large.

"They're not dead, Jer," Owen says, his voice calm and measured. For once, he doesn't sound terrifying.

But his words don't make much sense.

I blink, utterly confused. "What?"

"The bodies are just puppets," he explains, glancing up at me. "Vessels. Nothing to fear. Those within are merely absent for the moment."

"How is that possible?" I ask, still holding Jer close.

Owen squints at me, like he's trying to think of how much to share. Finally, he says, "It's more common than you'd think. Their souls will return to inhabit the bodies when needed."

Souls don't just leave your body, take a stroll, and pop back in. That's not how anything works. Not unless it's App-related.

And if that's the case? Of course Owen's not explaining—he's worried about Plausibility again.

This damn Plausibility is seriously getting in my way.

I don't even know who sets the rules or who created the App, but I have a feeling the information's on a need-to-know basis.

Jer shakes his head violently against my chest. "No. They're dead. I saw them." His shoulders shake harder, little tremors rippling through his small frame.

A familiar feeling in the air alerts me to a familiar approach, and I glance over my shoulder to see Caine striding toward us, his posture tense and alert.

Far behind him, Sadie sits in the field like she hasn't noticed the chaos at all. Her golden fur stirs in the breeze, tail sweeping calmly across the grass. She doesn't seem tense or stressed—just quietly waiting, tongue lolling.

I don't think she knows what's happening inside the camper. Or maybe she does. Maybe it's why she came to us.

Caine's eyes scan the area before landing on the boy.

"What happened?" he asks, gentle despite the tight look on his face.

The boy lifts his head from my chest, looking up at Caine with eyes too wide and dry for how much he's trembling. "The old people. They're dead now." Despite his quivering shoulders, his voice is unnaturally calm.

The disconnect between his body language and his tone makes my chest ache. He's trying to be brave in front of the Lycan King. He's a kid. He shouldn't have to worry about being brave.

I know I'm useless here. Whatever's happening in that camper isn't something I can fix or understand.

But there is something I can do, and it's to get him out of here.

"Jer, come on," I say softly, running my palm over his dark curls. "Let's go back to the others and let them figure out what's going on."

He nods, subdued in a way he never is. It shatters my heart into thousands of tiny pieces.

He reaches for my hand, wrapping his small fingers around mine with desperate tightness as we walk away slowly. Behind us, I hear the low murmur of Caine and Owen talking, but I focus on the child beside me.

We've barely made it halfway across the field when Jer speaks again. "Is it because of us? Is that why they died?"

The question twists my heart into knots. A seven-year-old shouldn't have to wonder if he's the reason people are dead.

"No, Jer. Owen already said they aren't really dead."

He shakes his head stubbornly, dark curls bouncing. "No. They were alive before. They weren't puppets. They were warm and they liked to make jokes." His voice cracks. "Puppets don't look like that. Puppets don't smile or have fun."

What nightmare did he see inside that camper? What trauma is repeating itself in his young mind? I let go of his hand to wrap my arm around his thin shoulders, drawing him closer against my side and squeezing gently.

"Don't worry. Owen wouldn't lie to you."

Jer's response is immediate and matter-of-fact. "He would. He would if he thinks he needs to."

Chapter 164: Lyre: Constructs

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LYRE

"Ugh," I mutter, stepping deeper into the camper and waving a hand in front of my face. The stench of angelic essence burns my nostrils like bleach mixed with summer wind—concentrated Owen, basically. "Should've brought a gas mask."

The bodies of Archie and Doris lie neatly arranged on the RV's floor, hands crossed over their chests like they're auditioning for the world's most wholesome vampire flick. Not a drop of blood, not a sign of struggle. Just two elderly puppets with their strings cut, wearing placid expressions to make your skin crawl.

I've seen this before. Many, many times.

Owen steps around me, careful not to disturb the scene as he crouches beside the bodies. His own scent mingles with the stink emanating from the corpses.

"Are they your relatives?" I ask dryly, moving toward the tiny kitchen.

"Not mine." His voice carries a careful, measured tone. "But yes. Order. Likely angel-descended."

I'm oddly bothered by the pristine state of this camper. Everything is meticulously organized—canned goods arranged by height, dishes stacked with military precision. The counters gleam like they've never seen a cooking spill.

I pull open the fridge, finding it fully stocked with condiments, fresh produce, dairy. The freezer contains neatly packed meat and frozen dinners. All the hallmarks of human existence, but not a single plate of leftovers. The mayo squeeze bottle looks like it's barely been used, and when I check the bucket of margarine, it's never been touched.

"Interesting," I mutter, shutting the door.

The trash can beneath the sink is nearly empty—but there's a closed bag next to it. A quick glance inside shows some bones and paper towels with barbecue sauce. Ribs of corn. Things they would have eaten at the barbecue Grace mentioned yesterday, and nothing else.

I check the cabinets: cleaning supplies, dishes, pantry goods.

But there's no dog food.

"Where's Sadie's kibble?" I call out.

Owen doesn't answer immediately. When I turn, he's examining Doris's hand with clinical detachment.

"Owen. The dog. They don't have food for it."

"They wouldn't need to," he replies, still focused on his inspection.

Yeah, that's what I figured.

I tap the panel of tank sensors mounted near the door. Fresh water: full. Gray water, black water: All completely empty. Propane, too. So they have water but never shower, never use the toilet, never cook with gas...

"So let me get this straight," I say, crossing my arms. "We've got two 'people' who don't use the bathroom, don't create trash, don't eat, and don't feed their magical golden retriever. Did they take over actual humans, or are they just... creations?"

Owen stands, wiping his hands on his jeans like he's touched something unclean. "They're always creations. Only Chaos uses real bodies."

"Right," I drawl. "Because that's so much more ethical."

I return to the living area, my irritation growing when a new presence fills the doorway. Caine stands there, arms crossed over his chest like the brooding apex predator he is, eyes scanning the interior with razor-sharp focus.

His nose wrinkles instantly. "It reeks like Owen in here."

"Of course it does," I reply, not bothering to explain further.

I fight the urge to scratch at my palm.

Screw divine bureaucracy and their ridiculous rules. Seven hundred years and I'm still playing their game of *"don't tell the mortals too much or else."*

His eyes narrow at my evasiveness. He's in that frustrating place where he's perceptive enough to know something's off but not quite connected to the divine world enough for me to just tell him outright. The App would absolutely love that conversation.

Hey, Your Royal Grump, funny story—your reality is managed by bureaucratic celestial entities with a penchant for pretending to be elderly campers. Also, the dog's coming with you, whether you like it or not. And it isn't a dog, so try not to get smote.

Yeah, that would go over well. One look at Owen's carefully blank expression tells me he's in the same boat—too many warnings accrued to risk another strike.

Caine's jaw tightens as he surveys the two bodies. "What killed them?"

I rub absently at my palm. "Overwork?"

It's probably true, too. Though they aren't dead. Just temporarily not home.

He snorts, disbelief evident in the curl of his lip. "A retired couple spending a vacation out here is overworked?"

"Well, humans are weak, aren't they?" I deflect, deciding it's time to get him out of here before he asks questions neither Owen nor I can answer. "Do me a favor and check on the boy. He seemed pretty shaken up."

Caine's upper lip lifts in a slight snarl—a reminder that for all his human appearance, he's still very much wolf. But then he takes a deep breath and asks calmly, "Should we be worried?"

Wow. He's growing. His mama would be proud. Probably.

"No. This isn't dangerous for Grace or the children." This, at least, is true. Order would never go so far as to dirty their hands by screwing with Fate or Plausibility. It's kind of their schtick.

They look at mortals like little chess pieces following a structured storyline. Things are the way they should be, and it should always stay that way. Of course, life doesn't follow such rigid thinking—hence Chaos.

Balance always has to mediate between the two, which is why its other name is Neutrality.

But Balance isn't any better. In its own way, it's worse.

I sigh.

Caine grunts, and it's clear he's no longer interested in the situation at hand. "Jack-Eye and Andrew are on their way back with the car. How long will your investigation take?"

I glance at Owen, who shakes his head. He doesn't know, either. I didn't expect him to, but it was always possible he might know a little more.

I might be older, but he's the one associated with Order. Not me.

"Not long. We'll get it figured out."

"Understood." Caine frowns again at the bodies on the floor. For a moment, I think he's curious enough to ask questions. Maybe something like *why are they posed like that* or *why does Owen smell like them*, but no—his disinterest is real.

He turns and walks away without another word. Not even a polite goodbye.

Sighing, I prod at the head of the old man with my foot with a frown. "So, why were angel constructs here before Grace even arrived?"

This chapter is updated by freew(e)bnovel.(c)om

Chapter 165: Grace: Reassurance

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Jer's knuckles are white against my hand as we trudge back toward our camper. His fingers tremble, but his breathing has evened out.

Ron and Sara stand under the awning. Bun toddles between their legs, rabbit ears twitching above her dark curls. She doesn't even notice us; something on the ground appears to be fascinating her.

"Can I... can I go to them now?"

I release the boy's hand and nudge him forward. "Yeah. Just stay where I can see you."

He bolts toward the others, his shoulders already loosening with every step away from Archie and Doris. Away from what he saw. I fold my arms across my chest, trying to trap the cold spreading there.

Dead bodies, but not really dead?

It's surreal.

The words spin through my head, refusing to settle into anything making sense. I press my palm against my forehead, willing the pressure to ease. One more supernatural mystery I don't understand, dropped onto me when I'm already drowning.

"What happened?" Sara's voice cuts through my spiral as she approaches, her curious eyes flickering between me and Jer. "Why was he screaming?"

I glance back at the other camper, where Lyre, Owen, and Caine are still inside with... whatever those bodies are. Not human, I guess.

Not anymore, at least.

Or ever?

"He was just startled. Come on, kids. Let's finish getting everything ready."

"Are we really taking the dog with us?"

I blink and turn around, only to find Sadie, tail wagging low and golden fur catching the morning light. She's giving us her cute dog smile, which is basically an arrow of guilt straight into my heart.

My head's hurting again. "I don't know yet."

Sadie sits, looking up at me with devoted puppy eyes as her entire body vibrates with golden retriever joy. No. I can't get a soft spot for a dog. I'm already swamped in four kids.

Tearing my gaze away, I call out, "We have a lot to do before we leave."

But none of them move. Instead, Sara turns her interrogation to Jer. "What did you see in there? Was it scary?"

"Leave me alone," Jer snaps, his small shoulders hunching defensively as he stomps toward the RV steps.

"But you were screaming—"

"I said leave me ALONE!" he shrieks, high enough and loud enough to hurt my ears.

The oldest of them all steps forward, blocking Sara from her younger brother. "Why don't you just play with Bun outside," he says to Jer, his voice low and steady. "We'll deal with the rest, okay?"

Sara opens her mouth to protest—it's clear from her expression she's outraged Jer's getting some sort of special treatment—but Ron clamps a hand on her shoulder and steers her toward the camper. "Come *on*," he mutters.

"But I want to know what—"

"Read the room!" he hisses as they pass me, just loud enough for me to catch.

"What room? We were outside!"

I exhale heavily and cross to where Jer's standing and gently pat at his dark curls, noticing how they spring back under my touch. He doesn't flinch away, which feels like a small victory when his tiny shoulders are still all scrunched up.

He's fixed his gaze on Bun, who's down on her hands and knees in the dirt. The toddler's completely captivated by a line of ants marching in formation to an unknown destination. Her rabbit ears twitch with excitement, her little nose scrunching adorably as she watches them.

"Are you going to be okay?" I ask him, keeping my voice soft enough Sara can't overhear from where she's sulking just inside.

Jer nods, his eyes still tracking Bun's movements. "Yeah. It isn't the first time, anyway."

My hand freezes mid-stroke. The casual way he says it...

I sink down to his level. My fingers find his small hand, wrapping around it.

He squeezes like he's desperate for my touch.

"You've seen this before?" I whisper, praying for him to say I misunderstood.

"No." He shakes his head, finally meeting my eyes, and I'm relieved.

"There was more blood before."

Or not.

Fuck.

This is not what I wanted to hear.

My blood goes cold as his words hang there, his face blank. It's a struggle to maintain a neutral expression while my mind races through horrible possibilities.

"Blood?" My voice comes out strangled. I work to soften it, to keep the shock from scaring him. "What do you mean, Jer?"

He shrugs one shoulder, his gaze returning to the ant-entranced Bun. "It happens sometimes. Fiddleback isn't a nice pack."

That's not an answer, but pushing for one feels wrong.

My heart pounds against my ribs so hard I'm surprised he can't hear it. I want to pull him into a fierce hug, but something in his rigid posture warns me against it. Instead, I squeeze his hand, trying to anchor both of us.

"Jer, I'm so sorry."

"It's okay." He says it like he's comforting me. "Those people in there—they're not bleeding. So at least it didn't hurt."

My mouth opens and closes, because I can't find the words. How do I make sense of this for a kid who's already survived horrors adults have issues facing?

A shadow falls over us both. Caine's scent wraps around me a split second before his presence registers.

He places his large hand on Jer's head, the gesture incredibly gentle for a man whose hands have ended lives. The boy looks up at him, his eyes red-rimmed and glistening.

"It's okay," he says quietly. "You're safe."

Just that. No false promises that everything will be fine. No empty sunshine about better days ahead. I want to be outraged Caine isn't mustering up some more care for this traumatized boy, but a single glance at the child tells me I'm wrong to be upset.

His shoulders relax, and he stands a little straighter.

Jer nods once, accepting the offering of certainty from the most dangerous predator for miles. A single tear escapes, rolling down his cheek before he wipes it away with an angry swipe of his hand.

Something tight in my chest eases, watching them.

Caine doesn't try to hug him or offer empty comfort. There's just the weight of his hand, the certainty of his presence. It's enough.

Better than what I've managed to do.

If the situation wasn't so serious, I might even be jealous. But I'm grateful, instead.

Bun notices Caine and abandons her ants, toddling over with her arms outstretched. "Up!" she demands. Unlike the others—mostly Sara—she's never shown any fear of the Lycan King.

More importantly, when did she learn to say *up*? She's already growing too fast.

Without missing a beat, Caine sweeps her up with one arm, settling her against his chest. She immediately starts patting his face, and he looks at me.

"The others have it under control. Let's focus on getting out of here."

"I'll help," Jer volunteers, his voice steadier now. He darts past me toward the RV, seemingly eager for a purpose.

"What happened in there?" I nod toward Archie and Doris's camper, figuring the change of conversation will be at least slightly less terrible than Jer's mental state. Maybe.

Caine shakes his head. "Lyre and Owen will take care of it. We have our own work to do."

Chapter 166: Grace: Seating Arrangements

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"—can't just rely on Ron holding her in his lap for multiple days, Caine." My hands plant firmly on my hips as I stare up at the immovable wall of muscle and tattoos before me. His cologne ad smell is doing a serious number on my rational thought, but I'm holding firm on the argument we've been having for about fifteen minutes. "Bun needs a car seat."

Everything's ready to go. Jack-Eye and Andrew are only ten minutes out. Lyre and Owen haven't emerged from Archie and Doris's camper.

The only thing holding us back is what we're doing with Sadie—if anything—and the issue of Bun's car seat. I'm trying not to think about the former. If I do, I'll end up submitting beneath the guilt and trying to figure out how we're going to raise a dog around wolves.

Seriously. Imagine going to Blue Mountain with a dog in tow. A *dog*. She might actually get torn apart.

A muscle twitches in Caine's cheek. "We made it here without one."

He's said this ten times, and I've responded the same way another ten.

"I know." I gesture toward the grassy area where Jer and Sara chase each other in wide circles, Sadie barking excitedly at their heels while Ron monitors from a distance. Bun toddles after them with high-pitched squeals of laughter. "But what if we'd crashed? What if someone had hit us? She would've gone straight through the windshield."

"I would never let that happen."

"It's not about what you'd *let* happen." My voice rises despite my efforts to keep calm. "It's physics. Basic safety. Even the High Alpha of all werewolfdom can't override a *car crash*."

His nostrils flare. "We're not separating."

"Then we need to find a car seat that fits in your truck." I cross my arms, matching his stance. "There's got to be a baby store within twenty minutes of here."

The truck's backseat is far too narrow to fit a standard car seat, or probably any car seat at all. There's no room for one, but there has to be a way somehow, right?

Storms rage in his gray eyes. "You're not leaving my sight."

"Fine. Then let's find a car seat to fit the truck, and we'll all stay together," I repeat.

He knows as well as I do—we aren't going to find anything.

"Then we'll get a car seat and put it in the front with us."

I shake my head immediately. I don't know much about car seats, but I do know one thing: I've been in enough cars with a warning to never place a rear-facing car seat in the front. "That's not safe."

He pinches the bridge of his nose with a long sigh. "First you say she needs a car seat to be safe. Then I say to put her in the front and you insist it isn't safe. Which is it, Grace? Is it safe or not?"

"It's safe, but not in the front seat. The air bags—"

I cut off abruptly, because I'm not really sure of what happens. I just remember the warning says not to because of the air bag.

"The air bags what?"

"Can... hurt her?"

"You're not going in Andrew's car, Grace."

Here I am, trying to be a responsible mother figure to a toddler, and the man who's taken over as a daddy figure keeps getting in my damn way. I scowl. "Are you saying Bun's life isn't as important as your possessive ego?"

"No, I'm saying both of you are in greater danger with Andrew driving than with me."

I throw up my hands in frustration. "How would you even know that? Have you ever seen Andrew drive before?"

"I don't need to see him drive to know I'm right."

A scoff escapes me. Crazy to think I was once too terrified to mock this man's lack of reasoning skills. "You're being ridiculous."

"No, I'm being cautious. My mate and daughter are not going in another man's car."

"What if he was a woman?"

Caine hesitates.

"Hah! See? It's because he's a man, not because of his driving skills." I point at him in triumph. "You lose this argument. I'm not putting her life at risk because you're jealous."

"Grace—"

"No. This argument is over. We're going to the store to buy her a car seat, and we'll install it in Andrew's car."

Caine's expression hardens again. "No."

The single syllable and his blockheaded stubbornness ignites something in me—a spark of defiance building since the first time Brax looked at me like I was a burden rather than a daughter.

"I'm not asking permission." I meet his gaze steadily. "I'm telling you how we're keeping Bun safe. Either help me find a solution that works for everyone, or I'm doing this my way without your help. I'll go to Blue Mountain with Andrew and take all the kids with me, and you can drive alone."

"There isn't room for all of them in his car," he points out.

Damn. He has me there.

"Then I'll take most of them."

A low rumble builds in his chest. The sound vibrates through the air between us, and I can practically feel Fenris's presence even though the massive wolf is nowhere to be seen.

"Let me be clear," Caine says, his voice deceptively soft. "You will not be in a vehicle I'm not driving."

"Then find a miraculous car seat to fit the truck."

"Grace." His voice has dropped lower, that rumble still present beneath the surface. "Stop this."

I lift my chin. "Stop what? Being responsible? Making sure Bun is safe? What exactly should I stop, Caine?"

His eyes have darkened to near-black. "Testing me."

"This isn't about you!" The words come out louder than intended. I lower my voice, aware of the kids still playing outside. "This is about your control issues. I don't know you very well, but I was raised in a pack. I know exactly how possessive you guys can get over your mates."

He pauses, his entire face relaxing a little as his eyes rove over my face.

"What?" His sudden silence and lack of argument is mildly unnerving.

"You consider us mates?"

I blink at him a few times, completely struck mute by the inane question. "We had an entire conversation about our relationship, didn't we?"

"Yes, and you didn't seem to consider us mated." He steps a little closer. "You wanted me to court you. For us to get to know each other. To... *mesh* more thoroughly. No?"

The intensity of his stare has gone a completely different direction than our argument about seating arrangements, and I lick my lower lip nervously. "I told you I've accepted our bond..."

"But you don't treat me like a mate." He reaches out, his fingers hovering just a millimeter from my face. Then he drops his hand. "You said you don't imagine our future together."

I'm pretty sure that's not exactly what I said, though.

"I mean... we're mates. So we're mated, right? And we've..." My hands flutter awkwardly as I press my fingers together. "You know. Been intimate. Doesn't that count as treating you like a mate?"

Caine leans down, his eyes now gleaming. "We haven't been intimate enough. There's still a lot I haven't been able to—"

I slap my hands over his mouth, then gasp at the immediate surge of energy that pulses between us—hot and electric and *way* too familiar. I jerk my hands back like I've been burned.

It's not entirely inaccurate to say I have been. After all, desire's a *kind* of heat...

Shit. No. Bad Grace. Don't join Caine in the gutter. You're a responsible mother-figure of four now.

"The kids are *right over there*," I hiss, fighting the flush creeping up my neck.

And then Caine does something I've never seen before.

He laughs.

Not a snort or a scoff or even a smirk. A real laugh—deep and resonant, making his eyes crinkle at the corners. Something in my chest clenches tight. When he laughs, the years of brooding darkness fall away and he looks... younger. Less like the terrifying Lycan King and more like some devastatingly handsome playboy who breaks hearts for sport. Or maybe the devil inviting you to sin.

My mouth goes dry. My heart does a stupid little flip in my chest. Warmth goes places it has no freaking business going at this time of day, before we're about to be stuck in a tiny space together with four youthful sets of eyes watching our every move.

"I should—" I swallow hard, suddenly needing to be anywhere but here. "Um, I should see if we have water for Bun's bottles."

I dart away before he can stop me, feeling his eyes on my back the entire time.

My legs carry me to the camper in record time. I rush inside, shut the door, and lean against it like I'm in some romantic comedy running from my feelings. Which I'm not.

Obviously.

I'm just... strategically retreating from a conversation we should definitely not be having with children nearby.

My cheeks are hot to the touch, and my breath's harder to come by than usual. It should be illegal for Caine to laugh like that. It's like a nuclear explosion of desire.

Patting at my chest and willing myself to calm down (which, of course, doesn't work at all), I lean back against the door. It will be much smarter to stay in the car with Andrew if this is how it's going to be every time the man looks at me the wrong way.

Chapter 167: Grace: There's a Lot to Learn

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Getting a car seat is a lot harder than I thought... and we haven't even left the campsite yet.

It never really occurred to me we can't just take a big rig like ours into a random store parking lot. Some of them aren't easily accessible for something closer to a semi truck than a regular car.

I squint at the map on my tiny phone screen as Lyre zooms into a spot just off the highway.

"Your only option nearby is going to be this Walmart," she says, toggling the satellite photos. "See? They've got the space for overnight parking."

"We aren't staying there overnight."

"No, but that means they have enough room."

Right, right.

"Funny it's another Walmart," I mumble. It's where I met Lyre.

"It's always another Walmart. Get used to it." She smirks a little before zooming back out. "Anyway, you remember what I told you, right?"

I nod automatically. "Only two to three hundred miles a day, don't put out my slides in a parking lot, and try to park to the back so we aren't bothering the others."

"Our tanks aren't very full, but don't forget to stop by a dump site, especially one with extra fresh water. And always turn off your—"

"Water pump if we stop to use the bathroom," I finish for her. "I remember."

The RV life crash course she gave me feels like it happened years ago instead of days. So many rules I never knew existed for a life I never planned to lead.

Owen and Caine pause by us, done inspecting the truck. Owen is some sort of car seat guru, apparently, and he's our tie-breaker on the seating arrangement.

His silver-gray eyes meet mine immediately. "You can fit a forward-facing car seat in the truck," he says. "In the front."

Forward-facing...?

I stare at him blankly, then look over at Bun, who's currently worm-crawling through the dirt with Jer. Her little body wiggles with determination as Jer laughs, showing her how to improve her technique. They're both going to have to change before getting in the truck.

"Is she big enough for that?" I ask. I'd pictured Bun needing one of those car seats with a handle you carry around the grocery store, something to cradle her tiny body. She's so small, even for a two-year-old.

Owen shrugs. "It's the only option for the truck. If she's in the car—"

"She won't be," Caine cuts in.

"—a convertible car seat facing the rear should be fine. But not a bucket."

"Bucket?"

"The ones with the handle. They're for young babies, not toddlers like Bun."

Ah. So basically the kind I thought we were getting. Turns out there's a lot to learn about kids and car seats.

He clears his throat. "It would be better to put a few children in Andrew's car. The bench won't be comfortable for them for long drives."

I don't bother hiding the smug look I shoot at Caine. See? There isn't enough room. Take that, you pigheaded alpha.

His response is immediate and cold. "Absolutely not."

"This isn't up to you," Owen says calmly, unruffled by the Lycan's anger.

Caine's eyes narrow, his face darkening. The air's suddenly charged with an unhealthy dose of alpha posturing.

I step between them instinctively, palms out and hovering over Caine's chest without touching. "Owen's been taking care of these kids from the beginning," I remind him. "We should follow what he wants for them. He's the closest thing to a parent they have."

His jaw works, the muscle there jumping beneath his skin. "Then they have three parents."

Even an idiot can figure out the math he's using, and Owen's no idiot. His brow arches as he looks between us, and I blush.

"It's not that easy, Caine."

But it's sweet to see how willingly he accepts the children as his.

His gray eyes lock onto mine, steady and unwavering. "It is if you want it to be."

God, how is everything so black and white for him? As if claiming something makes it real. As if saying we're a family means we suddenly know how to be one. I wonder how he's lived his life to have such a simple worldview.

Things are how they are for him, and that's the end of it.

"I don't want my family driven by anyone else," Caine says, his voice hardening as he shifts his attention back to Owen.

The word "family" again. So casually tossed out there like the other man hasn't been the one to literally save their lives and take care of them daily.

I bite back a groan. He's just claiming the kids from their current parent without asking if it's even okay. I get it; I've been doing the same in my head. But unlike a certain someone, at least I never dreamed of separating them from Owen...

I might not know Caine very well, but I know one thing as absolute fact. Caine definitely never listed Owen in his future dreams of raising the kids with me.

To his credit, the other man doesn't back down. He stands there, facing the Lycan King head-on, not a flicker of fear in his posture.

"I won't let them go to someone who refuses to take care of them properly when the option is there," he says evenly. "Especially Ron. He's been through too much to keep sacrificing over ego."

I thought I'd seen impressive things in the supernatural world, but watching Owen stare down Caine might top the list. My first impression of Owen had been terrifying; then again, I'd thought he kidnapped me, so give me a pass, okay?

But then I'd seen him practically shaking in fear of Lyre. I guess one just can't undo the memory of being a frog.

And now he's so bold in front of the Lycan King.

This must be the power of parenthood; the fierce protectiveness to override even reasonable fear.

Or maybe... maybe he's just not very afraid of Caine. And if he isn't very afraid of Caine... how powerful is Owen?

For that matter, precisely how powerful is Lyre then...?

I side-eye her, taking in her relaxed posture, the way she watches the standoff like it's mildly entertaining. She catches me looking and arches one brow.

"What?" she asks.

"Nothing," I say quickly, looking away.

Caine grunts, stepping around me to get closer to Owen, and Lyre pulls me back by the back of my shirt so I'm no longer in between them.

My heart rate spikes.

"Caine, don't—"

But instead of the posturing I'm expecting (or, you know, something more violent), he smacks Owen on the shoulder, squeezing hard. "I understand."

Lyre leans an arm against my shoulder; it's quickly becoming a habit with her. "Wow. The big, bad Lycan King is finally learning manners."

Chapter 168: Lyre: Separated, Again

Chapter 168: Lyre: Separated, Again

LYRE

Watching my camper leave without me is a strange feeling. I'm more attached to it than entire castles I've had built in the past.

Every girl dreams of a castle.

It just turns out my favorite one is shaped like a box and gets dragged behind a truck.

A warm weight settles against my waist, and something inside me twitches, instinctively repulsed by any form of casual, possessive affection.

The offending appendage wrapped around my waist is large and tanned. A working hand. A fighter's hand. A hand with no business settling on my waist like it belongs there.

"You okay?" Aaron murmurs, leaning down so his breath is hot against my ear.

"That depends. Are you particularly attached to this hand?"

He pulls back immediately, the warmth vanishing.

Smart.

"I was just checking on you," he says, keeping a careful half-an-arm's-length distance. "You seem worried."

"I'm fine." Do I look like I need babysitting? I know my fancy Korean facial creams make my skin glow, but it isn't as if I'm as young as I look.

Thankfully.

Because then I'd be a sentient pile of dirt.

I pop the trunk of our SUV and toss my bag in, and Thom pops out of the backseat to follow at my elbow like a lovesick puppy.

"Lyre, I've been thinking about how we might approach the tracking when we—"

"Get in the backseat, wizard."

He blinks through his ridiculous copper-wired glasses. "I—but I thought we should—"

"Backseat."

He deflates and shuffles back to the rear door, now a kicked lovesick puppy.

I sigh.

Managing these men is going to be awful.

Sliding into the front passenger seat before Aaron can even think about it, I click my seatbelt into place and stare at the side of Owen's face. "Your place first, right?"

Aaron's left to go in the back, where he crams his tall frame behind Owen's seat. He looks like he's considering various methods of angelic decapitation. Behind the driver is the worst spot for someone his size, but it isn't my fault he didn't get in the car before the wizard.

Owen starts the engine without another word.

"So, where the hell are we going?" Aaron asks, his knee knocking against the back of Owen's seat in what I suspect is a completely intentional move.

The angel-descendant doesn't react. He probably has the patience of a saint.

"I can begin tracking now," Thom pipes up, poking his head between us as he leans forward. "I still have the energy from our—" His cheeks flush as he looks at me out of the side of his eye. "From before."

"Sit back, wizard."

"Yes, ma'am."

Even without looking, I know Aaron's grinding his molars against each other.

"We're not tracking yet," I announce. "We're going to Owen's place first."

"The cave? Why?" This time the Lycan's the one to lean forward and shove his face in my space, and I press my palm against it to push him back.

He doesn't budge, and his tongue flicks out against my palm.

Refusing to lose, I infuse the faintest hint of arcana into my arm and shove again. He jerks back, his head slamming against the headrest.

Oops.

"I need to collect my vehicle before we leave," Owen says, unfazed by the wolf's shenanigans. His silver-gray eyes remain fixed on the road, as calmly as if he were announcing the weather.

It's clear skies. For what it's worth.

"Oh," Aaron says from behind me, the word coming out pinched and nasally.

I twist in my seat to look back, an eyebrow arching. He's prodding at his nose gingerly, checking for damage. A drop of blood beads at one nostril.

Again: oops.

"Is it broken?" I ask, even though I'm not particularly concerned. Wolves heal fast. It's probably fine by now even if it was broken.

He drags his thumb across his nostril, smearing the blood. "Nah. That was a hell of a push, though. Do we have paper towels in here? Napkins? Baby wipes maybe?"

The center console has a hoard of napkins of various colors and types, and I toss a few at him. They flutter in the air, and he snatches one and lets the others fall like confetti.

"Thanks."

"Sh-she doesn't like people in her space," Thom tells him, his voice wavering a little with his sudden and random bravado. His glasses slip down as he leans forward, over my shoulder. "Right?"

I don't bother with arcana this time. A simple palm against his forehead is enough to send him flopping back into his seat. His copper-wired glasses go askew, and he looks up at the car's ceiling with a dazed expression.

There's no way he's hurt, which means...

Ugh. He might be one of those hopeless, lovelorn cases. The ones who always end up begging to be used and abused.

No, thanks.

I gesture emphatically to the empty space between Owen's seat and mine. "See this? This is a no-person zone. Stay the fuck out of my personal bubble, both of you. If I can smell your breath, you're too close. If I can feel it, I will punch your face. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am," Aaron drawls from the backseat, no longer nasally. See? He's fine.

Before I can appreciate his momentary compliance, he lunges to lean into the exact space I'd just visually cordoned off, close enough for his breath to brush my ear. He whispers, "You're hot when you get strict. Can we try a librarian roleplay next time?"

The urge to elbow him in the throat is almost overwhelming. Instead, I shove at his face with tiny burst of arcana. He curses as he flops back again.

"Damn. I think it's broken this time. You know that can kill a lesser man, right?"

"Are you a lesser man?"

Owen makes a small noise, his shoulders shaking. I'm pretty sure it's amusement. Good to know he can laugh. It's hard with angels—they're not exactly known for their sense of humor. Serious is their default.

There's enough rustling in the back seat to assume Aaron's grabbed one of the confetti napkins to stem whatever bleeding I not-accidentally-this-time caused.

His smug satisfaction radiates through the car in the form of syrupy sweet pheromones. He thinks getting a rise out of me counts as a win, as if I haven't spent far too many lifetimes dealing with creatures more irritating than a freckled wolf with boundary issues.

"So, what's the difference between a wizard and a warlock anyway? I've been meaning to ask."

Thom squeaks a little. "W-we're the same thing. Wizard. Warlock. Magician. Sorcerer. Witches. We're all the same."

"Huh. Then why so many names?"

"I don't know."

I stare out the window at the passing landscape as Jack-Eye continues to quiz the wizard, feeling oddly hollow out of nowhere as we ride through the rough terrain. We could probably run faster than this car is going, but I'm not much for exercise.

This body is maintained through a bad diet and over-reliance on arcana. Gained ten pounds? A blast of arcana goes a long way.

Not through magic liposuction, but energy costs. Throwing a ton of arcana around will eat through calories in no time. Who needs a healthy diet when they can lose weight almost at will?

Granted, it also means our hunger can be insatiable at times...

Thom clears his throat from the backseat. I guess their conversation's already done. "Are you—do you need me after we get Owen's car?"

"Yes, wizard."

Judging by the faint growl coming from Jack-Eye's corner, Thom's beaming.

Chapter 169: Grace: Everything Goes Wrong

Chapter 169: Grace: Everything Goes Wrong

It takes us about two and a half hours to go fifteen miles.

The car seat started the entire fiasco.

Everything was going fine. We even snuck Sadie into the store under the guise of a service dog, even though I'm pretty sure I'm going to hell for doing so. But come on. It isn't like we could just leave her in the truck, and the camper's hot without the air conditioning running.

Granted... they did make us buy a leash first, and Caine seemed abnormally interested in how easy it is to pose as a service dog, but those aren't the type of details to derail our trip.

It all started when Caine finagled the oversized box into our cart and we made the mistake of thinking we were done. I very clearly recall saying, "Well, the hard part's over," because choosing one was a lot harder than I thought.

Seriously, why are there so many types of car seats?

But I digress.

Anyway—we thought we were done.

Hah.

Bun had other plans. Ron calls it an "epic blowout", I call it "sensory trauma". (For me—not her.) She thought the entire situation was hilarious. We unanimously disagreed.

Caine was forced to run back to the camper for the supplies necessary to deal with the situation.

Of course, things couldn't end there. Oh, no. That'd be too easy.

As soon as we made it to the long line of self-checkout stations, Jer had to pee, this time declaring his entire brain was floating in it and he would burst like a bomb.

Well, guess what?

You get a lot of looks when you have a kid shouting about being a bomb. I'm half-convinced the cops were called.

Not to mention, we just *came* from the bathrooms. But it was fine. Lesson learned: never assume kids know if they need to use the restroom.

Andrew, thankfully, took Jer and Ron both while Caine and I checked out. Sara insisted she didn't need to go at all. (This turned out to be wrong.)

What happened next?

Ah, yes.

Installing a car seat isn't as easy as it sounds. We spent another thirty minutes in the heat trying to get it installed without being slightly tilted to the right, before Caine reluctantly agreed to try Andrew's blue sedan.

It took us five minutes to install it in his backseat.

Five minutes.

After sweating for thirty, trying to fight the truck and wondering if we needed a different brand.

Then, five miles down the highway, when we thought we were free and clear, Sara was hungry. So hungry she became what the boys call *hangry*, which involved a lot of snapping every time someone called her name. Which Jer did. Repeatedly.

And then she desperately needed to pee, too.

So of course, we pulled over at the next giant truck stop for gas station pizza, snacks, and yet another potty break.

But the horror doesn't end there.

Bun had another epic blowout, all over Ron this time.

And then she threw up.

Everywhere.

But did we give up? No. Caine insisted everything was fine, even though up to that point it was an entire dumpster fire. Maybe two dumpster fires. Andrew, the jerk, told me, "Some days are just like that."

Silly me.

I believed him.

And now?

We're fifteen miles from where we started... and we have a flat tire.

By some insane miracle, the flat occurred near a section of wide shoulder Caine could pull onto, so at least the camper's not in any danger of being rear-ended. Still, the road isn't *that* far from us.

Ron ended up joining Sadie and the children in Andrew's sedan in order to keep them corralled.

Which brings us to now, where we are three adults staring at the offending truck tire that's become our collective last *fucking* straw.

"Does Lyre have triple-A?" Andrew asks, finally breaking our moody stalemate.

Great question, but... "No idea."

Caine pinches the bridge of his nose with a long sigh. "Grace, let's get the camper settled for the day. We'll have to rest here."

"Here?" Several cars whiz by, as if to emphasize my question. "Really?"

"We don't have much choice. Andrew, find a place who will get our truck back to us before the end of business today, then call a towing service to take it there."

"Yes, High Alpha." He's quick to turn on his heel and stride back to the car, briskly following orders without batting an eye.

Huh. Andrew's surprisingly calm around Caine. I didn't even spend a second thinking about it, but he's adapted seamlessly into our strange little group. He's been staying in the

background, something he's probably used to after a life spent following Rafe around, and hasn't shown even a flicker of defiance.

I still can't really trust him, but at least I know he's capable of taking children to a public restroom, I guess. He hasn't done a single shady thing. Okay—unless you count the stalking. But aside from that, the sketchiest thing he's done is be without reproach.

He doesn't even glare at Caine when the latter isn't looking. He's been, as loathe as I am to admit it, well-behaved.

"Grace."

"Huh?" Blinking at the handsome face suddenly taking over my field of vision, I backpedal about three steps. "What is it?"

Caine crosses his arms, his mouth turning down into a frown. "Why are you staring at him?"

"At who?"

"Him." His head jerks in the direction of Andrew's sedan. It's impossible to miss who he's talking about, but he looks so surly, I can't help poking the wolf a little.

"You mean Ron?"

He gives a faint rumble of displeasure, and I laugh. "Sorry. I wasn't really staring at him. I was just thinking—he's really taking this situation well, isn't he? Doesn't bug us with questions. Doesn't complain."

His brow arches. "He is doing as he should."

Seriously, this man's denser than a brick. "Don't you think he should be angrier, after you killed so many of our pack? Maybe resentful you came in here and bulldozed his plans?"

"No." Caine's upper lip lifts in a faint sneer as he looks in Andrew's direction. "He values his life too much. And it isn't me he's loyal to. It's you."

I shake my head. He's wrong, but I don't want to argue. Arguing means explaining he isn't loyal to me, but Rafe. And I don't want to think about that bastard for a single second more than I need to.

"I'll get the kids," I mumble awkwardly, too grateful for an excuse to detach myself from this conversation. With us returning to Blue Mountain, I really don't need him overthinking the situation too much.

I'd like to think I've gotten to know Caine well enough now to understand he doesn't just go around slaughtering packs without reason, but... well, there's a little tiny part of me convinced he might just decapitate Rafe or Ellie for looking at me wrong once we get there...

Wait.

I gnaw on my lower lip, thinking hard.

"Grace? Aren't we getting the kids?"

"Yeah, but..." My decision's made. Rolling my shoulders back, I stand as tall as I can, which is miserably short next to the oversized Lycan in front of me. "Actually, about Blue Mountain. I have a request... but you're not going to like it."

Chapter 170: Grace: Let's Keep it a Secret

Chapter 170: Grace: Let's Keep it a Secret

Caine stares at me with clear suspicion scrawled all over his face. "What is it?"

I clear my throat. This is going to be a hard sell, and beating around the bush will only make it worse. "I don't want anyone at Blue Mountain to know that I'm your mate. Not yet."

His entire body goes rigid, and his face gets all twitchy as his eyes narrow. Even his tattoos move around more than normal. Before he can unleash whatever storm is brewing inside, I rush to explain.

"It's not like I'm denying our bond," I clarify, shaking my hands in the air for emphasis. "Not even close. It's just—"

What is it about, exactly? My brain scrambles to piece together the half-baked logic behind my request. There was something Lyre mentioned about me and my purpose at Blue Mountain, but the specifics escape me now that Caine's looking at me like I've just suggested something terrible.

"I think I might need to... do things there." Goddess, I sound like an idiot. At least throw me a freaking bone here, deities. Help a girl out. I'm doing *your* bidding, after all. "And if everyone knows I'm your mate, it might complicate... things."

Wow.

I'm so eloquent I could cry.

This is never going to work.

"Complicate it how?" His voice has dropped to a dangerous level of low, the kind where every word comes out as more of a rumble. Not the kind of voice you'd normally use on your girlfriend, but maybe someone you have tied in a torture chamber somewhere.

My palms sweat. The children are too far to serve as effective human shields. I take a breath and decide to just be honest.

"Look, information moves differently around pack royalty. I know it. You know it. If they know I'm your mate, they'll treat me differently. They won't talk freely. They won't gossip. And gossip is information. *Good* information."

The muscle in his cheek jumps, but at least his eye has stopped twitching. He's listening.

Progress.

I'm making progress. Even if I'm fumbling.

"I mean, think about it. If the pack members know I'm with you, they'll either hate me more or they'll fake being nice to get your favor. Neither of those options sit well with me."

Caine remains silent, his gaze intense enough to burn holes through me. Maybe there's no progress after all. But at least his face is no longer twitching.

A sudden, brilliant thought comes to me. "It would be even better if you act like you hate me, too. Maybe say I'm trouble."

"No." The single syllable comes out with such force, I take a step back. While I wouldn't quite categorize it as a shout, it's definitely shout-adjacent.

"But—"

"Absolutely not." Each word is clipped and hard, coming through gritted teeth. "Hell no. Under no circumstances, Grace."

I glance away, grumbling, "You didn't even consider it."

"There is nothing to consider. I will not pretend to hate my mate. How the hell is that going to help you control an energy transfer?"

Oh, right. *That* was the lie Lyre lied.

"It's just pretend," I argue, even though the sentence makes me feel like a kid trying to con another child into some ill-considered prank. "It would make everything easier."

Caine steps closer, close enough I have to tilt my head back to maintain eye contact. His warm, musky scent wraps around me and my body gets the urge to climb all over him.

But I don't.

Because I'm a responsible adult with a plan, and his stupid sexy face is not going to ruin my concentration.

Even when he leans down so our faces are only millimeters apart.

"Why do you need to listen to gossip, anyway?"

Eye contact is hard when you're lying, but I manage it. Somehow. "I just need to."

"I will consider the first part of your request," he says finally, still sounding like he's going to tear my nails out. "But I will not act as if I hate you. Not for a moment. Not for any reason."

"Fine," I concede, trying to ignore how it tingles where his breath brushes against my lips.

Kissing is nice. Kissing can't be that dangerous, right?

My body sways, but then a shriek of laughter from Bun kicks me out of the gutter.

Jesus.

We are on the side of the freaking road, not a private bedroom. *Get it together, Grace.*

Caine doesn't move his face away. He doesn't seem to have any qualms about the lack of space between us.

I step back again, and he steps forward. Retreat isn't an option.

"Fine?" he snaps. "That's all you have to say?"

"Er... thank you?"

Gratitude goes a long way to soothing a grumpy beast.

He stops looming so much, straightening his back.

"But you have to promise to keep your distance then. You can't go around being all growly when someone looks at me sideways."

His lip curls slightly with displeasure. "Fine."

Didn't he just get upset with *me* for using that word? The double standard here is so not fair.

But arguing with him isn't going to do me any favors.

"And if they start bullying me, I need you to look the other way. At least for a while."

He tenses again, snarling, "Absolutely not."

"It won't be anything terrible. I'll be fine. I've survived it plenty of times."

"No."

"Caine—"

"No."

I guess I'll just have to hope and Ellie isn't going to play any tricks while I'm there. The rest of the pack isn't much better, but at least they're willing to show some restraint with the Lycans around.

"And about the kids—"

"You are testing my patience, Grace Harper."

I click my mouth shut.

For about two seconds.

"Well, I just think the children should stay with me."

The way his face darkens, it's no wonder he's the Lycan King. Seriously. He's the scariest thing on the wolf side of supernatural.

I flinch.

He closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose again. I guess stress reaches even the highest-ranking wolves.

Finally, he lets all the air out in one loud sigh. "Okay. Explain your reasoning."

Is he... is he being reasonable right now?

"Yes, I am."

Slapping my hand over my mouth, I mumble through my palm, "I didn't mean to say that out loud."

Another sigh. This one's a *you're taking too long* sigh.

"Um—right. Why I want the kids to be with me. For one, if they're suddenly under your care, they'll stand out too much."

His shoulders twitch as he stares at me. Then he grunts. "Go on."

"Plus, they won't be able to relax. There are a lot of other shifter kids in Blue Mountain, but none of them will want anything to do with ours if they know they're—why are you looking at me like that?"

He clears his throat, the smug smile disappearing like it was never there. "Keep going."

Suspicious now, I finish, "They won't want to hang out with kids associated with the Lycans. They'll be too scared."

He nods. "Understood."

This was too easy.

Way too easy.

Somehow, it feels like it's going to come bite me in the ass later.

"You're really okay with it?"

"No. But I'll take it under consideration."

"Tow truck's on the way," Andrew shouts from his car.