

Grace of a Wolf –

Chapter 171: Grace: Not Paranoia

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The phone in my back pocket chimes with a notification. I wipe peanut butter off my fingers, and Jer snatches the PB&J with a quick, "Thanks!" tossed over his shoulder.

For whatever reason, he and Sara are in some sort of competition, where they're counting white cars (Sara) and red cars (Jer). They also yell out when they see tow trucks pass—as if rubbing salt into the wound of our long wait.

Caine and Andrew are outside with the dog, probably still staring at the tire they can't fix.

Whatever keeps them happy, I guess.

Since Bun's napping on Ron's lap and my hands are once again free, I check the phone, expecting to see another Divinity Connect message.

Instead, I see Lyre's name.

[LYRE: Owen's place was burned down. Good thing you got out.]

I gasp. Burned down?!

Ron glances up from where he's been playing with Bun's feet as she sleeps. "Everything okay?"

"Hm? Oh. Yeah. Everything's fine." I'm already lying to children. I'm a terrible mother. "I'll be right back. I need to call Lyre."

"Okay," Jer and Sara chorus.

My hands shake as I duck into Lyre's bedroom and shut the door. This isn't a conversation to have over texts.

The phone rings over and over, until finally it clicks.

Before she can even say hello, I demand, "What do you mean, burned down?"

On Lyre's end, chaos reigns. Something crashes. There's shouting, then a sound like glass breaking. Suddenly, it all cuts off.

"Big fire makes everything into ash." Her voice is as dry as usual.

I groan. Now is not the time for humor. "You know what I mean. What happened?"

She sighs. "We went to pick up Owen's car, and found the aftermath. They got his car, too. The rest of the street was fine, so the fire was only contained to his lot somehow."

It takes me a second to remember the cave was somehow connected to a house.

"And the cave?"

"It's... fine."

She doesn't sound like she's telling the truth, though, and my suspicion only grows when she quickly changes the subject.

"How far are you now? Where did you stop for the night?"

I lean against Lyre's dresser, staring at my reflection in the mirror. Blonde hair I'm finally used to. Dark circles under my eyes. A weird stain on my shirt; no idea where it came from.

Maybe it's snot. Not mine, obviously, but Bun's.

I look as frazzled as I feel.

Traveling with kids never sounded like it would be easy in the first place, but I was wholly unprepared for the reality of it.

"How far... hah. So, funny story..."

I explain our current predicament, occasionally distracted by random spurts of noise on her end of the line. It all sounds very... squishy. And disturbing.

She doesn't interrupt. When I finally finish, dwindling into silence after telling her about the flat tire, she speaks.

"Trouble just seems to follow you everywhere, doesn't it?" she drawls. "Try to stay safe, at least. Let me know if you need money, I'll add more on the card I gave you. Tires aren't cheap."

The tattered remnants of what (if you're generous) might be considered pride bristle. It's good to know I have some *somewhere*, though. "I can't keep taking your money, Lyre."

Though, Caine's the one footing the bill. So what little pride I've managed to accrue shrivels. I'm still too dependent, but it isn't like life's slowed down since escaping Blue Mountain.

"I have too much of it anyway." There's a note of dismissal in her voice, suggesting this topic is non-negotiable.

I sigh. Realistically speaking, I'm poor. I have no job and no prospects for one in the near future, with this strange lifestyle I've somehow acquired. Who am I to argue with free money? If it wasn't for Lyre—and now Caine—I'd be homeless and starving.

Before I can respond, a wet, sloppy sound comes through the line, followed immediately by a high-pitched scream. It makes my ears tingle uncomfortably. A slight shudder runs down my spine.

"What was that?" I pull the phone away from my ear, checking the screen as if it might show me what's happening. "Lyre, what are you doing right now? Are you—"

"Just clearing up an infestation." Her tone remains casual, as if she's swatting flies. And yet it sounds quite violent on her end of the line. "Don't worry about it."

I'm worried, for all kinds of reasons.

"Was this a bad time?"

"It's almost never a bad time for you, Grace. But hold that thought."

More awful noises. For some reason, I'm imagining her bludgeoning people with a bat, and it leaves me uncomfortable.

Not only because she might actually be doing that very thing—this is Lyre we're talking about, and I'm starting to understand she's as crazy as Caine in her own special Lyre way—but because some of me doesn't really care.

Who am I, and what have I done with my morals?

Does it really only take a few days to change your entire world view?

Apparently so.

"Okay, I lied. It's a bad time. Keep me updated, and I'll call you later."

The line goes dead before I can get another word in.

I stare at the phone in my hand, unnerved and off-balance after the brief conversation. Slowly, I set it on the dresser and wrap my arms around myself, rubbing at the sudden chill racing along my skin.

Who the hell went after Owen's place? And what would they have done to us, if they managed to get in...?

My uneasiness from earlier wasn't paranoia after all. Whatever's out there, the strange feeling had saved us from it. I just wish I had more answers on what *it* is.

But it's not hard to make a guess.

The children have been hunted all their lives, and Owen's lost many more than the four we've taken under our wing.

They have to be after the children.

Another shiver wracks through my body, and I gulp down a couple deep breaths, trying to calm my racing heart.

It's fine. Everything's fine.

Chapter 172: Grace: Theories

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By the time the tow truck comes and goes and I've made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for all the adults (only to find out Caine likes grape jelly like a *psychopath*), I'm calm again.

We're out. It didn't happen to us. And right now, that's my focus.

Besides, despite having lucked out onto a wide shoulder like this, I'm still a little worried a car's going to crash into us. With our current streak of luck, it isn't a baseless concern.

Andrew dangles a piece of crust in front of Sadie, who's been sitting in front of him with begging eyes since he first started eating. He seems both nonplussed and enthralled by her.

At first, it was weird. But then I thought about it. Wolves never get to spend time with dogs, so they've never had the Sadie experience.

Her tail swishes against the floor as she gingerly snatches it from his fingers, only to then scarf it down like a feral beast.

Then he gets a second bit of crust out, dangling it in front of the dog.

"Don't feed her that!"

Andrew freezes mid-motion, the crust hovering between his fingers and Sadie's expectant mouth. "Why not?"

Sadie's eyes lock with mine. Her tail stops wagging. I've destroyed her doggy Christmas.

"Because we don't know what's up with her." I take another bite of my sandwich, chewing slowly as I frown at the dog. She's cute, but knowing there's something strange about her... it's hard to see her as just a big, loveable ball of fur.

But so far, aside from her lack of fear, she's just... a normal dog.

Too normal.

Shouldn't she want to go back home? Why is she so comfortable in a stranger's car? And now she's going in and out of the camper with us like she's been part of the family forever.

"It's just a dog, Grace." Andrew shrugs and drops the crust anyway. Sadie's tail resumes its happy rhythm as she snatches the offering.

"She's not just a dog," I mutter.

When I'd asked what Sadie actually was, Lyre had danced around the subject. She did say the dog wasn't any sort of threat, and might actually be helpful. How a dopey golden retriever's going to somehow *help* our little caravan has yet to be realized, though.

But the kids like her. So I guess there's that.

Come to think of it, Lyre gave no explanation about what happened to Archie and Doris—just reiterated Owen's claim that *they're not dead* and leaving them there will be fine.

Which, of course, makes *zero* logical sense, but I'm coming to think of this as the App Phenomenon. Anything under its purview is on a need to know basis.

Though I still don't understand why an old couple who like to barbecue have anything to do with divinities and Chaos.

And Caine's been no help with dragging information out of Lyre. I'd thought he'd be pushier, demand answers, but the moment the magic words came out of her mouth, he was done. It just took the one phrase: "They have nothing to do with Grace, and they're not a danger to you."

After that, his focus had instantly shifted back to us—to me—with his intense, single-minded concentration. He'd even said, "If it's not a threat to Grace or the children, it's not my concern right now," without even a flicker of discomfort over saying a line I'd read out of a sappy romance novel somewhere.

But it should be his concern. It should be *everyone's* concern when two seemingly normal people turn out to be something strange and dead-but-not-dead. In my world, we call those *zombies*, thank you very much. And zombies bring uprisings and the apocalypse.

"Why are you mad at Sadie?" Sara asks, popping up by my elbow. I blink, realizing I've been glaring at the dog while aggressively masticating.

I swallow my bite. "I'm not mad at her."

"You keep staring at her like you are."

Andrew snorts. "More like she's trying to decide if Sadie's secretly plotting world domination."

He's come late to the game, so he doesn't know why I'm suspicious of the dog. I could always fill him in—and would—but dragging him into another room to explain something sounds like a bad idea.

For him, anyway.

"Well, maybe she is," I mutter.

Sara flounces away to approach Sadie, running a hand over her golden fur. "Look! She's such a nice dog."

Caine chooses that moment to duck his head into the camper, filling the doorway. His eyes sweep the interior, cataloging all of us in his quick, assessing way before landing on me. "Everything alright in here?"

"Grace thinks Sadie is an alien," Jer pipes up from where he's sprawled on the couch.

"I never said that." I break eye contact with Caine, feeling heat creep into my cheeks.

His gaze shifts to Sadie, who meets his stare with unflinching calm. Her tongue lolls happily. She looks like a poster child for retrievers everywhere. "Lyre said she isn't dangerous. Do you not believe her?"

"I do. I just think it's weird and suspicious she's sticking around us. What if she's a magnet for trouble?"

"She's a dog," Andrew interjects again. "She can't be that bad."

Sadie whines, and I'm convinced she not only knows we're talking about her, but she can understand every word we're saying.

Maybe she's a shifter like the children?

It would make sense. She loves them, and there's certainly no rule saying dog shifters don't exist. I mean, Sara can turn into a hedgehog, and all of these kids are able to shift well before the standard age of sixteen.

Maybe the old people were like Owen, saving a little soulspliced shifter who prefers to live as a dog.

The more I think about it, the more it makes sense. Caine had said something about the old people smelling a little like Owen. And when Jer was freaking out, it was Owen who came to explain they weren't dead.

Yep.

Sadie's a soulspliced child.

I just know it.

But how to prove it?

Chapter 173: Grace: White Cat (I)

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It takes three hours to get the truck fixed, but we've run into a tiny dilemma.

Actually, it's not very tiny. At least to Caine.

"Damn it," he curses, running a hand through his hair. "I didn't think about this."

"I didn't, either."

Andrew and Caine are both staring at the set of keys on the dinette table, which they've been doing for the past five minutes since we got the call the truck was ready.

I rest my hand on my chin, watching their impasse with mild frustration.

Caine lets out another huge sigh, and Andrew follows suit.

"I should have gone with him," Andrew says, rubbing at the back of his neck. "Didn't even think about the logistics."

"We'll be fine for thirty minutes without you guys."

"No," they say in unison.

I roll my eyes at their stubborn veto. "So, how are you going to pick up the truck then? Caine, even if you shift, you'll take at least an hour to get there, right? Wouldn't it be more dangerous for you to be gone for so long?"

"I could shift," Andrew offers.

"It'll still take you at least an hour to get there," I point out. "This is ridiculous. It's not even a big deal. The drive there will take ten, fifteen minutes at most. Just go and come back. Thirty minutes and you're done. What do you think is going to happen in thirty minutes?"

Caine grimaces. "Leaving you here is dangerous. Any crazy person can come off the road—"

"So leave Fenris here. He'll scare anyone off."

"But—"

"Just Fenris is fine."

"If there's a—"

"Just. Leave. Fenris. And go get the truck. Please."

Caine rubs at his forehead, the hard line of his jaw twitching beneath his stubble. "Fine."

The air between us shimmers, and suddenly his wolf is there—the slightly-less-terrifying "dog" version of him, anyway. And the first thing he does?

He swings his head toward Sadie and snarls.

Sadie—all golden retriever friendliness until now—yelps and leaps onto the couch in a rush of honey-colored fur, practically climbing behind Jer for protection.

So she's afraid of Fenris, but not afraid of Caine or Andrew. I'm more convinced than ever Sadie's a shifter child who won't return to her human body for some reason.

The wolf, meanwhile, apparently satisfied with establishing his dominance, belly crawls under the dinette table until he reaches me, then sits up to plop his head into my lap in silent demand for pets.

"Good boy," I murmur, scratching behind his soft ears.

Caine snatches the keys off the table and stomps to the door, and I swear the man is sulking.

Is it possible for the great and powerful Lycan King to sulk? Because—he is.

He slams the door open, then hesitates at the threshold. His shoulders tense before he whips back around, fixing each of the kids with his steel-gray gaze.

"Not a single one of you sets foot outside while I'm gone. Unless this thing catches on fire, you stay inside with Fenris. Understood?"

"Yes," all three chorus, sounding mildly exasperated in the way only children can.

Satisfied with their obedience, Caine turns to me. "Lock the door behind me."

Oh, my God. The man's ridiculous. "I know how doors work, Caine. Just go already."

His jaw clenches, but he turns and walks out. I follow, watching him and Andrew go before closing the door and flipping the lock with an exasperated sigh.

Like an RV's lock will do much if someone really wants in. Fenris is the real defense here.

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Fifteen minutes after they leave, Sadie won't stop pacing by the door and growling. Even Fenris's snarls don't faze her. The growls evolve into high-pitched barks, and all the kids cover their ears. The noise makes Bun stir in Ron's lap.

"She's going to wake her up!" the boy hisses.

"She probably needs to go potty. I'll take her out. You guys stay in here."

"But Caine said—" Sara begins.

Sadie barks again, and I snap on her leash and open the door. She bolts out, nearly pulling me down the stairs. "Hold on!"

She frantically barks again, spinning on the end of the leash as Fenris comes out with us. I close the door behind him, and Sadie yanks so hard she's choking herself with her collar.

"Calm down, Sadie!"

Sadie drags me across the asphalt like a dog obsessed. I loop the leash twice around my hand to keep from losing it, trying to yank her back. "Sadie! Come on. What's wrong with you?"

The golden retriever doesn't acknowledge me; just keeps choking herself against her collar, each desperate bark coming out strained and phlegmy. We hit the grass, and I expect her to squat immediately, but she doesn't. She keeps lunging forward, dragging me toward the open field beyond.

"Sadie!" I dig my heels in, yanking back on the leash. "Just potty here. Right here. Come on!"

She ignores me completely. Not even a glance in my direction. Her bark turns frantic, high-pitched yelps, sounding more like an alarm than nature's urges.

Maybe I was completely wrong about this dog. Would a kid do this to themselves?

Looking at her now, she's acting exactly like a dog. A really, really fucking annoying dog who won't listen to basic commands, even though she was an absolute angel in the store.

Fenris stalks forward, his lips curling back as he snarls at Sadie. It sends a shudder through my bones, even when I know he would never hurt me.

Sadie doesn't even flick an ear his way.

My skin prickles uneasily. "Come on, Sadie. Let's go back inside."

A sharp tug barely budes her an inch back.

She barks again, fixed on the distance. I squint, struggling to see beyond the green sea of grass.

Something's moving out there.

Fenris's ears perk forward, his entire body tensing beside me. Then he prowls forward, head hunched low.

Whatever's out there, it's caught his attention too.

Sadie suddenly calms, her frantic barking quieting to occasional yips. Her ears stand at attention, tongue lolling as she watches Fenris take point. The black wolf stalks forward, and the familiar ethereal blue glow appears beneath his fur.

With a lightning-fast pounce, Fenris lunges into the tall grass. Something white and fluffy bolts out—a massive white cat, streaking across the field with Fenris in close pursuit.

"What the—"

The cat changes direction, darting straight toward me with Fenris closing in behind it. My heart jumps into my throat, but before I can move, the cat slides to a stop precisely at my feet and begins winding around my ankles, its loud rumbling purr sounding like a small engine and hearty enough to vibrate my legs.

Sadie barks excitedly, bouncing forward to box at the cat with her front paws. The golden retriever's entire demeanor has changed—now she's playful, like she's greeting an old friend.

This is no ordinary cat. It's massive, nearly the size of a bobcat, with pristine white fur and blue eyes and—

Son of a bitch.

Is this *that* cat?

Fenris snarls, saliva dripping from his jaws as he lunges for the cat.

"Stop!" I shout, throwing my hand out. "Fenris, no!"

Chapter 174: Grace: White Cat (II)

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Five minutes later, I'm sitting on the couch watching Sara roll around the floor with the mysterious white cat and I'm not only praying it doesn't have fleas, but also wondering how the hell I'm going to explain to Caine we've somehow acquired a new cat when I wasn't supposed to leave the camper.

This is bad.

An absurd level of panic keeps rising in my chest, even as I try to convince myself it's fine.

"We're keeping it, right?" Jer asks, his arm around Sadie as he watches his sister play with the cat.

I shift uneasily. "I don't think the cat wants to stay with us." Better to blame the strange feline than my fear over Caine's temper.

Even as the words leave my mouth, the white cat stretches languidly across Sara's belly, looking for all the world like a giant, furry limp noodle. Its eyes close to contented slits as her small fingers trace patterns through its suspiciously pristine fur.

Shouldn't a cat out in the wild like this be—I don't know... dirtier? Especially when it's white.

"It *looks* like it wants to stay with us," Jer points out, eyebrows raised like I'm the one not seeing reason here.

"Oh, please?" Sara begs, soft and pleading. She cradles the cat against her chest even though it's longer than her torso, and the cat purrs louder.

I rub at my closed eyes with a groan. Caine's going to be so mad when he gets back, and he should be back any minute. Not just mad—furious.

I was supposed to be inside with the doors locked, not chasing mysterious animals across open fields. And I'm pretty sure I definitely wasn't supposed to bring one of those animals back inside.

Especially a cat.

A disgruntled huff comes from under the dinette. Fenris sulks in the shadows. His storm-gray eyes track the cat's every movement, ears pinned back against his skull. After I told him to leave the cat alone, he retreated to pout like an overgrown puppy.

Meanwhile, Sadie's practically vibrating beside Jer, her golden body trembling with the effort of restraint. She whines every so often, desperate to get to the cat but not being allowed to.

I've got her leash wrapped around my wrist, just in case. Cats and dogs aren't supposed to mix. Probably not with wolves, either.

"We can't keep it," I say, trying to sound firm even as Sara's face falls. "It probably belongs to someone, and we're not exactly in a position to adopt pets right now."

"It doesn't have a collar," Ron points out. Isn't he supposed to be my most helpful kid? And now he's working against me, too. "And it came right to you, didn't it?"

"That doesn't mean anything," I counter. "Cats can come to anyone if they're friendly enough."

And if this particular cat is the same one I saw before... what are the odds?

I mean, we're in the same general area, but it shouldn't be possible...

Bun jerks upright in Ron's lap out of nowhere, and turns around to blink as she looks around the room. Her eyes are still glazed from sleep, but she pushes his hands away when he tries to pull her against him.

Then she sees the cat and squeals. All semblance of sleepiness fades as she dives off her brother's lap.

He catches her before she falls head-first onto the floor, setting her upright. "Be careful. We have to be gentle, okay?"

She babbles something nonsensical as she toddler-stomps her way across the floor, squatting next to Sara and the cat. Little whiskers sprout on her face, and she meows.

The cat just turns its head and gently bumps its nose against Bun's outreached fingers.

"See?" Sara says triumphantly. "Cat likes us. What are we gonna name her?"

"Who says it's a girl? Maybe it's a boy."

Fenris growls from his hiding spot. The cat ignores him. Yet another animal showing no fear of a wolf, which is just... alarm bells, okay.

Maybe it and Sadie are related.

"We don't have cat food. Or a litter box. Or a kennel for the drive. We can't keep this cat. It would be irresponsible of us."

Then there's the sound I've been waiting for with dread: an engine.

My heart rate goes ballistic, and I clench my fists in my lap. He's going to be so angry, and I'm still not sure how I'm going to explain this. Sadie was barking, Bun was sleeping, I brought Fenris with me—it seemed like a reasonable risk in the moment.

"Caine's back," I announce, trying to quell the rising tide of panic in my belly.

"Should we put it outside, then?" Ron asks, coming behind Bun and leaning down to scratch at the cat's belly.

Sara makes a distressed sound, clutching the cat closer. "No! Grace, please no!"

The cat doesn't struggle in Sara's tightening grip, just lets her squeeze it like it's a stuffed pillow.

"I'll handle it," I say, rising from the couch and handing Sadie's leash to Ron. My legs feel shaky beneath me. Or maybe the camper's swaying.

"What are you going to tell him?" he asks, his dark eyes concerned. I guess he's worried, too.

I run a hand through my hair, wincing as my fingers catch in a few tangles. "The truth, I guess. What else can I do?"

"Lie?" Jer suggests helpfully, earning a sharp look from Sara.

"Don't be stupid," she snaps. "Alpha wolves can smell lies."

The camper rocks as someone steps on the stairs, and all of us freeze.

I move to stand between the door and Sara, as if my body can somehow hide the evidence of my disobedience.

The door swings open, and Caine fills the frame, his broad shoulders blocking the light from outside as he looms in menacing Lycan fashion. His gray eyes immediately lock onto mine. "I leave you for thirty minutes and you bring home another pet?"

What the hell? Did he smell it as soon as he walked in?

Fenris huffs, and I freeze. Of course. Caine already knows. His wolf was here the entire time, and probably told him *everything*.

I'm so screwed.

Squeezing my hands together, I suck in a deep breath. "The kids want to keep it."

"Of course they do." He tosses the keys onto the dinette and closes the door behind him. Then he steps forward, grabs my wrist, and drags me to Lyre's bedroom as energy surges immediately at the contact.

"Wait, why are you—"

"We need to talk," he snaps.

Chapter 175: Caine: Her Reaction

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CAINE

My first instinct is anger, but between Fenris's nagging and the look on Grace's face the moment I walk through the door, it disappears.

She's so pale I'm certain she'll faint at any moment, and her entire body's trembling as a disturbingly familiar, sour scent rolls off her.

Fuck the cat. And the dog.

This is a bigger problem.

Grabbing her wrist, I drag her to Lyre's bedroom, trying to block the pounding in my head.

You shouldn't just snatch her like that. It makes it worse.

I know.

I fucking know.

But if I open my mouth right now, who knows what'll come out.

Your restraint would be commendable if you weren't scaring her even more. Still, I suppose it's progress.

My wolf is on my last damn nerve.

I pull Grace to the bed, setting her on the edge of it before releasing her wrist. She jerks it to her chest immediately, rubbing it with her other hand as if I hurt her.

This doesn't seem like a conversation we should have near the children, but my attempt to buy us privacy seems to have made the entire situation worse.

Her eyes fix on the floor, shoulders bunched so tight they nearly touch her ears. The scent of terror is thick in the air, and it makes my stomach twist.

Grace is afraid of me.

It isn't the first time. Her fear was present through most of our beginning encounters, but it hurts to scent it now. We've come so far from the girl who flinched every time I so much as looked her way.

You've made it worse, Fenris notes, like I don't have fucking eyeballs.

Every instinct demands I touch her, pull her against me until her trembling stops. But this ridiculous issue with transference...

My molars grind together as I fight to keep my temper at bay. No point in fuming over something she can't control; it will only make her worry. Grace seems to take the blame for things onto her shoulders, even if it isn't her responsibility to bear.

Even when she's trying to put boundaries between us, she backtracks when I get angry, or softens her words. Things she doesn't need to do in front of me.

For some people, this is an ingrained reaction of the weak before the strong. But this isn't what's happening with Grace.

You act like you're the one who's noticed all this about her. Give me some credit, will you?

I kneel in front of her, making sure to keep space between us. Her hands twist in her lap, shaking with the force of her grip. Her blueberry muffin scent is thicker in here, and keeps me calm even as her fear agitates something deep inside.

I wish Brax could come back to life so we can kill him again. This time, I'd do it myself. But slower, torturing him until he's begging for relief.

"Why are you like this?" I demand, sounding more aggressive than I mean to be.

Great job, idiot.

Grace's lips barely move. "I don't know. I'm sorry."

I frown. This isn't the woman who stood toe-to-toe with me at the camper site, arguing about car seats. She has fire in her veins and a spark in her soul; this is like a pathetic shell of herself.

She looks broken.

Keeping my breathing calm takes more effort than it should, and I keep a tight hold on my alpha aura. Even a flicker of it at this state will make her withdraw further, and I can't have that.

"This isn't like you," I say, keeping my voice soft and even. "Why are you afraid?"

She shakes her head.

"Do you think I'll hit you?"

She shakes her head again, quicker and sharper this time, but still doesn't look at my face.

She seemed to think you would be very angry about the cat, Fenris points out, finally being helpful instead of just annoyingly observant. Like she expected an argument.

But it isn't as if we haven't argued before. She stood toe to toe with me only hours earlier.

If it isn't the argument... is it my anger? But she's faced that, too.

Which means...

Punishment, Fenris murmurs. She's afraid of punishment.

I exhale slowly. "I don't care about the stupid cat, Grace. Fenris already told me everything."

That makes her look up, finally. Her grass-green eyes go wide, reddened with the hint of tears brimming.

The sight makes my chest tighten.

"Aren't you angry?"

I sigh, rubbing my hands over my face. What the hell kind of monster does she think I am?

Considering your past—

Lay. Off.

Normally, with the adrenaline rush I felt the moment I saw her terrified face, I'd be pacing. Burning off the energy flooding through my veins.

But moving would only spook her more. It's like handling a wolf gone feral.

"No, Grace. I'm not angry."

Her brows pull together like she doesn't believe me, and she studies my face. Fenris huffs in the back of my mind.

"You're capable of making decisions in the moment," I say, keeping my voice even. "And while I'm not thrilled you stepped outside where any bastard could see you, it's not like I don't understand why you did it."

She looks so damn small sitting there. Vulnerable.

"I'm not your jailer, Grace. The demands I make are for safety reasons, not to control your every move."

She nods, quick and jerky, but her eyes remain unfocused. I might as well be talking to a wall. She's not really here with me—she's somewhere else entirely. Somewhere I can't reach her.

"Was Brax often angry with you?"

Her eyes slide away from my face, focusing somewhere off to the side.

Finally, she shakes her head. "Not often. He took very good care of me."

A growl rumbles up from my chest before I can stop it. "Don't lie to me, Grace."

She flinches, drawing further into herself. Her scent spikes with fear again—sharp and sour.

Control yourself, you imbecile, Fenris snaps, his disgust evident. *You're making it worse.*

I know, damn it.

I clear my throat and start over. "What I saw of your treatment was terrible."

Grace meets my eyes for just a second before looking down at the floor again. "That was after. He treated me like his own before."

"That doesn't explain why you're reacting like this now. I've been annoyed before, and you've never shut down like this." I gesture to her hunched form. "This isn't normal."

She gives a one-shouldered shrug. "I'm not lying. He did treat me well. But sometimes... only when I was really in trouble, he would get mad."

She's being evasive, and I'm not sure how far I can push.

Grace settles her hands in her lap but picks at her fingernails. The urge to place my hand over hers and stop the nervous fidgeting is almost overwhelming, but I resist. At least it's better than rubbing her wrist like I assaulted her.

If you want to get technical—

Enough.

—never mind, then.

"I think there's more you aren't telling me," I say. "When you're ready to talk about it, I'm ready to listen. But I'm not angry about the cat, and I'm not going to lecture you. So can you please relax?"

Chapter 176: Caine: Where's the Cat?

Chapter 176: Caine: Where's the Cat?

CAINE

Grace seems calmer, but she's still a little too fidgety and pale for my liking.

I sigh. I had been planning on moving us out tonight, at least a little farther so we could get off the road. Now, I'm wondering if we should stay here overnight and leave in the morning.

We should leave soon, Fenris says. Before one of those human cops shows up.

I leave her in the bedroom to relax, feeling the weight of her silence like an uncomfortable boulder pushing down a part of my soul.

What the hell kind of trauma does she carry to trigger such a terrible response? She wasn't even this afraid after I took over her pack, or when I'd come to her in the forest—though, thinking back on the memory only serves to make my heart twist into an awkward, guilt-ridden pretzel.

I was so angry at the idea of a human mate—irritated by the idea of another mate at all—and took it out on her, furious she dared to be so alluring with her blueberry muffin scent and pretty green eyes.

I'm not exactly known for my gentle touch, but I'm learning. At the very least, I'd never tie her up in a forest again. Or yank at her hair. Or choke her...

Damn it. Fenris is right. Considering our history, it's a miracle she doesn't run screaming every time she sees my face.

I told you.

Hindsight is a terrible thing.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, annoyed by the headache I've been fighting since earlier this morning.

It's the cat. It has to be the cat making her feel so strange. Let's get rid of it.

"I can't do that."

Why not?

Because if I get rid of the cat now, she'll think I lied about not being angry. She'll think I'm punishing her.

I rub both hands over my face, roughly scrubbing away the faint exhaustion after a long day with these children and now my terrified, pale-faced mate.

But you are angry, Fenris points out, and I hate how he knows me too well.

I'm not angry about the cat. I'm angry she put herself in danger.

After all, what if it hadn't been just some random cat? What if it had been something worse?

But now it's impossible to say anything, and I already told her a bunch of bullshit about how I'm not mad and I'm not going to lecture her.

I have to stand by my word.

Maybe you can take this time to reprogram your personality, Fenris suggests oh-so-helpfully.

"Fuck off, Fenris."

"Fah!" Bun squeals, a half-second after me.

She's on the floor with the damn dog, who seems content with her life as a toddler's toy.

I frown. It isn't as if we have any strict rules on swearing around pups in the pack, but it still sounds off-putting to hear a toddler repeat words she shouldn't even be hearing.

"No more swearing in front of Bun," I announce to the room at large.

Three sets of eyes turn my way, and all three of those children look dumbfounded.

Jer's the first to speak up. "You're the only one who swears."

"Yeah," Sara chimes in. "We're good kids. We don't swear." But then she looks at my face, blanches, and turns away with a mumble. "Most of the time."

She seems to be afraid I can sense her lie. It's a useful fear, but I'm not sure what to do about the girl. She gets closer, but then returns to inexplicable states of fear around me. Perhaps it just takes time. I've heard girls are more sensitive.

"Owen's never allowed them to swear," Ron explains from his position on the floor beside Bun as she plays a drumbeat on Sadie's back.

There's only one thing missing.

My eyes narrow as I look them over. "Where's the cat?"

Jer and Sara exchange glances, and it isn't subtle at all. "What cat?"

My left eyebrow twitches. Do these two really think they can pretend a cat doesn't exist?

But they don't bend under the pressure, even though both Sara and Jer look away, unable to keep eye contact.

"Where is the cat, kids?"

"Meow," Bun says proudly, cat ears sprouting from her head. She dashes to me, forgetting about the dog as she holds both hands up in a silent demand.

"Is she the cat you're talking about?" Jer ask, with an exaggerated face of surprise. "It's just our sweet Bun. She loves to be cat-Bun."

"Meow!"

"Yeah, Bun *loves* to be a cat. She was a cat the entire time you were gone. Right, Ron?" Sara says, sounding higher pitched than normal.

The older kid pushes himself off the floor and takes his favored seat on the couch with a sigh. "Don't drag me into this."

I cross my arms and lean against the kitchen counter, watching in amusement as these children scramble to sell their story. They're terrible liars. They'll have to learn to do better.

Sara hisses, "Help us out for once!"

"No."

Bun stares at me, her enormous eyes wide and unblinking. Her little hand reaches up to pat at my hair, exploring the texture between her fingers. Then she touches her own head, her tiny fingers brushing over the cat ears that have sprouted there.

She frowns.

Then she returns her attention to my head, patting around for matching ears. She looks confused.

"We told you! Bun is the cat. See? Look at her ears!" Jer says, after being elbowed by Sara.

She nods vigorously beside him. "Yeah! She's been doing cat all afternoon. She's *really* good at it."

"Meow," Bun adds helpfully. She pats my head again, clearly troubled by my ear deficiency.

I sigh, the sound dragging from deep in my chest. Bun mimics it immediately, her tiny shoulders rising and falling in exaggerated imitation.

"Ron. Where's the cat?"

He doesn't even look at me, instead choosing to rest his head on the back of his seat, arms crossed as he relaxes. "It's under the sink."

"Traitor!" Jer shouts.

Sara's face screws up. "We had a pact!"

Ron shrugs one shoulder, still without looking. "It was a stupid pact."

I walk smoothly to the kitchen sink, Bun still balanced on my hip. The cabinet door comes open under my hand, and sure enough, a giant white cat is crouched behind the pipes and cleaning products, filling up the space.

It's a surprisingly large cabinet, and yet this cat fills the space. I'm not entirely certain how the children got it in there.

But more importantly, it's not a normal cat, the same way Sadie isn't a normal dog. It blinks slowly, unfazed by my alpha presence.

"Come out," I tell the animal, keeping my voice level. "Now."

It slinks out with lithe grace and winds around my feet, purring. It's far larger than most domesticated cats, and looks strangely familiar.

Chapter 177: Grace: Fake It Til You Make It

Chapter 177: Grace: Fake It Til You Make It

I collapse where I am, curling my knees to my chest. My throat still feels tight.

Caine must think I'm certifiably insane. What kind of person freaks out the way I did? And the moment he grabbed my wrist, I shut down completely.

It wasn't like he hurt me. It wasn't like he did anything wrong. He was trying to talk to me in private. Perfectly understandable.

And yet my entire body reacted like he was about to throw me into traffic.

I slide up the bed until I can bury my face in a pillow.

"I'm losing it."

It's the only explanation.

I smack my forehead against the pillow once. Twice. Three times. Maybe if I hit hard enough, I can knock some sense back into myself.

Heat crawls up my neck and spreads across my cheeks. Caine was so worried and gentle, he'd even asked if I thought *he would hurt me*. Of course I don't think he'll hurt me.

Well—not anymore, anyway.

"You're crazy. You've gone insane. You've lost your mind."

Each sentence is punctuated with a frustrated thump of my face into fluff.

The embarrassment is almost worse than the sudden spike of fear. Now, anyway.

My heartbeat gradually evens out, and the flush of heat going up my neck and prickling along my scalp recedes.

But the self-loathing stays.

It doesn't make sense. Caine wasn't yelling at me. He didn't grab me with any real force. Sure, I couldn't pull away easily, but it wouldn't have been impossible.

Nothing about the situation should have triggered such a level of panic.

So why did it feel like—

Darkness. Concrete cold against my feet. The smell of mold and dust. My throat hurts; I've been screaming for hours.

Please let me out.

I'll be good.

I promise I'll be good.

I shake my head violently, forcing the memory back where it belongs. Locked away. Buried deep, where it's been for four years and counting.

No. *That* was different. Completely different. It was a big mistake. *My* mistake.

Even Rafe said it was my fault.

The old Rafe, who cared and loved me. Not the new one, who's cruel and strange and somehow thinks he'd have Ellie on one side and me on the other.

I shake it off again, refusing to linger on the whys and wherefores.

Getting in trouble for helping a rogue wolf is not the same as bringing a cat home.

I heave a sigh before pushing myself up, forcing my sluggish, overwhelmed body into movement.

Wallowing in pillows is childish. Get over it and move on, Grace.

I shove my hair back into some semblance of order and cross my legs into the fake zen pose people do when they're trying to convince themselves they're not losing their shit.

Me.

I'm people.

Rolling my shoulders back like I'm trying to impress lifelong yoga-doers (not me), I suck in a deep breath and let it out in slow, measured fashion.

There's only one way out of this horrible, mortifying situation.

Just be shameless and pretend nothing happened.

If I pretend nothing happened, maybe Caine won't say anything either, and we can just... keep pretending. Yeah.

Just pretend I'm not totally insane and apparently prone to freaking out when he comes home angry.

Except he wasn't even angry.

Whatever zen I'm supposed to be getting from this is clearly not happening.

I press the heels of my hands against my eyes, watching the colorful shapes bounce around behind my eyelids. Focusing on them makes it easier to calm down and slow my racing thoughts.

Okay.

Normal Grace is back, and ready to shamelessly pretend like she didn't have an absolute fucking meltdown when her boyfriend dragged her to a private room to discuss bringing an unauthorized cat into the family.

I plaster a smile off my face, but my cheeks ache almost immediately. I probably look ridiculous.

Scooting off the bed, I approach the dresser mirror, leaning in to examine my pathetic attempt at normalcy.

Yeah. I look like a lunatic. Or maybe someone auditioning to play a haunted doll. The reddened eyes from almost crying don't help, either.

Come on, Grace. You've faked being okay a thousand times. This is easy.

I shake out my hands out and roll my shoulders back.

Take two.

This time I think of something genuinely pleasant: Bun's excitement every time we hand her a carrot stick.

Then I look in the mirror again.

Better. I won't be making any awards as an actress, but at least I don't look like I'm plotting a bomb threat or murdering people with a knife and a red wig.

"Just act natural," I coach my reflection. "You're fine. Everything's fine. Just a normal girl having a normal day with her kind-of-boyfriend and four supernatural children and a magical dog and—"

"Bun, *no!*"

The shout cuts through my pep talk, followed immediately by an unholy screech that can only be described as the sound a demon might make if you stepped on its tail.

Sadie's barking joins the chorus.

"*Enough!*" Caine's voice booms through the camper, and I swear it rattles my bones from here.

So much for zen.

I bolt from the room, nearly catching my hip on the dresser corner.

The scene in the main area is pure chaos.

There's water everywhere.

Bun's sippy cup is the clear source, with its lid about five feet from the cup and the straw missing. The toddler herself is in Caine's arms, wailing like a siren. Jer and Sara are holding Sadie back from something, and Ron's missing.

He pops his head out of the bathroom. Never mind. Ron's been found.

"It's hiding in the shower. Should we just leave it there, or do we want to try and catch it with a towel?"

"Close the door and let it calm down," Caine orders, sounding completely calm despite the frazzled environment.

Andrew opens the door, and Sadie's barking suddenly resumes.

"Shut *up*, Sadie!" Jer shouts. I'm pretty sure this is not appropriate language for a child his age, but I'm not exactly a professional mother.

"You can't say that!" Sara shrieks. Well, at least I was right.

"Enough!" The Lycan King orders again, and Sadie whimpers and flattens herself to the ground.

Andrew, still in the doorway, hesitates. "Is this a bad time?"

Chapter 178: Grace: Strange Notification

Chapter 178: Grace: Strange Notification

Caine's calm demeanor is impressive as he tells Andrew to close the door behind him.

He does as ordered, awkwardly standing in the hall as the Lycan King orders children around like an expert babysitter. Or maybe he's just indiscriminately used to ordering people around.

"Sara, stop screaming and get a towel to clean the floor. Jer, put her cup in the sink to be washed. Ron, take Bun and feed her some snacks to calm her down. Fenris, keep the damn dog quiet."

From chaos to order in only fifteen seconds.

It isn't hard to figure out what happened. Bun must have opened her cup, probably all over the cat. It explains the demon-yowl.

"Shouldn't we dry off the cat?" Sara asks, plopping a towel over the water puddle.

"No. It might scratch you if you try." Caine hands Bun off to her older brother and motions for me to come closer.

A little confused, I stand obediently in front of him as he narrows his eyes at my face. "Your eyes are red."

I frown. "A polite person wouldn't mention it."

He seems startled, jerking his head back a little. "You think I'm polite?"

"No, because if you were, you wouldn't have mentioned it."

"Ah." He seems a little disappointed, and Fenris huffs from where he's laying on top of Sadie, pinning her to the floor.

The golden retriever's eyes are wide enough to see the whites around them, and Jer looks like he's itching to save her from the predicament.

Sadie whines, and Fenris's lip lifts in a soft snarl.

The whining ceases.

Caine lifts his hand to my face, brushing hair out of my eyes. The faintest touch of his fingers against my skin sends another surge of energy his way. "You should rest more. You look exhausted."

"Actually—" Andrew interrupts, awkwardly sidling into the conversation, "have you looked at the weather?"

Caine scowls at Andrew, but his eyes seem more focused on the mere five inches between my shoulder and his than the interruption.

He grabs my hand and yanks me to his side. At least this time it doesn't cause my brain or body to dive headfirst into panic mode.

"What about the weather?" he demands.

The contact with his skin leaves me light-headed, my energy draining in a now-familiar way. I guess I haven't recuperated enough arcana to make up for what we drained.

I yank my hand out of his, breathing out a soft sigh as my dizziness fades almost immediately. How long will it take before I can handle these casual touches? A week? A month? Never?

The thought of permanently flinching away from him makes my stomach twist, but I remind myself we're working on it. I'll just have to practice.

Andrew meets Caine's gaze with an impassive face, and I wonder how he manages to be so calm in the midst of all the insanity to hit us. He's just taking it all in like this is normal.

"There's a massive storm system moving in. They're saying it will hit later tonight—record rainfall, flash flooding, the works. Temperature's supposed to drop like twenty degrees and put us back at a normal fall chill.

"It's all over the news. They're calling it a 'weather emergency' and telling people to prepare for power outages." Andrew rubs the back of his neck, then shrugs. "The weird thing is it came out of nowhere. No one knows how it's happening."

I blink, trying to process what he's saying. A storm system that big doesn't just appear. There's satellite imaging, predictive models—

But then, we just had a strange storm coming straight out of clear skies without warning.

So I guess it can.

Caine rubs along his jaw, looking thoughtful as he stares over Andrew's head.

"We need to find shelter," he says finally. "When is it supposed to hit?"

"Around seven tonight. Maybe eight."

"Then we have a few hours to drive. Grace, look about one hundred twenty miles out, find a place for us to stay with a structure that can withstand tornados. Another large parking lot should do; we can run the children into the store if it comes down to it."

"Tornados?" Sara squeaks.

Jer scoffs. "Andrew didn't say anything about tornados!"

"We need to prepare for this storm to be as strange as the last one. Both of you, use the bathroom. We aren't stopping this time, even if you burst."

Andrew nods. "The first storm made national news. Bunch of motorists stranded when their vehicles died all at once, power outages... Weather service is getting hammered for the lack of warning, but they say there was none to give."

I glance toward the window. The sky outside is clear blue, not a cloud in sight. But we know it means nothing.

"Okay, kids. Get ready to go. Everything off the floor, put your cups in the sink. Use the bathroom. We're pulling the slides in as soon as you're done."

"What about the cat?" Sara asks, hurriedly swiping up the last bits of water off the floor. "How are we going to take it with us?"

"Oh—I don't know if we're..."

"I'm sure it will be fine until we can buy one," Caine says calmly. "Don't worry about other things. Just get everything ready for us to leave again."

"Got it," they all chorus, and Jer's the first one to run for the bathroom.

"I'm first!"

"No fair! I was going to be first!"

"Just shut up and go," Ron snaps. "Didn't you hear him? We're in a hurry."

I also have a job to do, so I escape from Caine's side to sit on the couch. One hundred and twenty miles; I have no idea what the next town is, much less what's coming in two hours of driving. But my phone has everything I need to find out.

The screen lights up, and I open my map, about to search for a potential overnight spot when a notification banner slides down from the top of my screen.

[Divinity Connect: You have been added to the side chat, "Lyrielle's Fan Club".]

I freeze, my thumb hovering over the screen. What the actual hell is this?

Chapter 179: Grace: Not Wolf Enough For Him

Chapter 179: Grace: Not Wolf Enough For Him

"Is something wrong?" Caine asks, and I shake my head immediately, swiping the notification away.

He shouldn't be able to see it, but I'd rather avoid situations where I have to outright lie to him.

"Nothing, just an annoying notification. I'm looking now."

I pull up the map on my phone, pinching and zooming while everyone bustles around me. Sara zips around gathering toys for Bun, Jer searches for his missing shoe, and Ron's already standing by the door with Bun, who's got her hands filled with carrot sticks.

It takes under three minutes to find exactly what we need. I zoom in on the blue dot marking our salvation.

"There's another Walmart about one hundred seventy-four miles away," I announce, turning my phone to show Caine. "They've got a massive parking lot, and it's right off the highway. No rivers in sight, so hopefully no flooding, either."

Caine stares at the screen with a frown. "Another Walmart? Why is it always Walmart?"

I shrug. "Lyre says they're the best choice for overnight parking. They don't hassle RVs. Well, most of the time."

He grunts. "She would know best, I guess."

"She's lived in that camper for god knows how long. So yeah." I zoom in further, showing him the satellite view. "I was going to look for a truck stop with hookups, but this is better because we need to get cat supplies, too."

"Good call."

His approval sends a flutter through my chest. Being useful is such a nice feeling.

"Andrew, pull up the directions." Caine hands his phone to the other man without skipping a beat.

He takes it, his expression unreadable. "Sure thing."

The next ten minutes are a flurry of activity—securing the cabinets we opened, tucking away loose items from play, and washing the dishes we'd used. It's now our third time doing this, and we've found a bit of a rhythm to our chaos.

Everyone knows what to do, and it makes a big difference. Well, that and we didn't exactly camp out like we were expecting to stay here.

"Who's riding with who?" Ron asks. "Same as last time?"

Caine looks to me, allowing me to make the call. It's a small thing, but it doesn't escape my notice.

"Same as before, except—" I glance at the hall, where the cat's still locked in the bathroom. "I'll take the cat with us. Sadie can go with Caine and Ron in the truck."

He nods. "That works. Sara, Jer, Bun are still with you, then?"

"I want the dog!" Jer protests, his bottom lip jutting out.

"Not this time," I say, my tone firm enough to prevent further argument. "The cat stays with us, and Sadie will stay in the truck."

With the cat loose, who knows what havoc it might cause. Having an adult pair of hands to wrangle it is better than leaving it up to Ron while Caine has to focus on towing while he drives.

Andrew pulls a small black rectangle from his pocket, handing it to Caine. "Got these on my way back. Old school, but they work. Better than using the phone during the drive."

He turns the walkie talkie over in his hands. "Smart."

"They've got about a two-mile range," he explains. "Better than nothing if our phones die in the storm."

Though there's no guarantee the walkie talkies won't, either...

Caine clears his throat. "Everyone ready?"

A chorus of "yes" and "yeah" fills the camper. I do one final sweep, making sure we haven't forgotten anything essential, then scoop up the soaking wet cat out of the bathroom, where it's hidden itself behind the toilet.

* * *

The walkie-talkie crackles to life. "We're pulling out now," Caine's voice comes through, slightly distorted, but easy to understand. "Stay close."

Andrew grabs it and says, "Copy that."

Is it wrong of me to feel like they're two boys playing with toys?

"You look better," he comments, keeping his eyes on the road.

"Better than what?"

"Better than you did earlier. You looked pretty pale, but there's some color in your cheeks now."

I press my hands against my cheeks in surprise. "Oh. I guess I was just a little tired."

"Hmm."

The white cat shifts in my lap, kneading its paws against my thighs before settling into a tight, if still oversized, ball. Its fur feels impossibly soft under my fingers. I stroke along its spine, and a rumbling purr vibrates against my legs.

"You're a strange little thing, aren't you?" I whisper.

The cat's ears twitch but it doesn't open its eyes.

I can't shake the feeling that it's not just a cat, just like I'm positive Sadie's not just a dog.

I glance over my shoulder after ten minutes have passed, surprised by the quiet from the back. The kids are all zonked out, their little bodies surrendering to the exhaustion of the day. Sara and Jer have their heads tilted toward each other, both leaning against Bun's car seat. Bun's head has drooped forward, her mouth slightly open, a tiny puddle of drool collecting on her shirt.

I smile and pull out my phone, snapping a quick picture of the peaceful scene. After the chaos, this moment feels precious.

Andrew catches my movement and glances in the rearview mirror. "Hopefully they stay asleep until we get there."

"That would be good." I tuck my phone away and rest my head against the window. "It's a nice change of pace from the rest of this hellish day."

We drive in silence for another few miles, and suddenly Andrew clears his throat.

"So... you and the Lycan King, huh?"

My whole body tenses. I keep my eyes fixed on the road ahead. "What about it?"

"Nothing." His fingers tighten on the steering wheel. "Just surprising. I thought you loved Rafe."

My lips press tightly together. "No. I stopped loving Rafe when he stopped loving me."

"Ah."

He goes silent again, and this time I'm annoyed enough to break it. "Why? Is there something wrong with Caine? Because he's way better than Rafe."

"No, of course not. It's just..." He hesitates. "He's the fucking Lycan King, Grace. And you're... you."

I have plenty of insecurities over this relationship, but they're mine to have. Not anyone else's. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? Is it because I'm not wolf enough for him?"

"That's not what I said. He glances at me, but I refuse to look at him. "If anything, it's the other way around."

That pulls me up short. I twist in my seat to face him. "What do you mean?"

He sighs, his shoulders slumping. "Look, I've known you for years, Grace. You're kind. You look after people. You pretend not to notice when the pack treats you like shit, just so you don't cause trouble. And Caine is..." He shakes his head. "He's not a kind person, Grace."

"You don't know him well enough to say that!"

"Do you?" he counters. "We've known him the same amount of time. He killed Alpha. He killed *our people*. I just don't think it's good for you to stay with him. You need someone better for you."

"Like you?" I scoff. "Like Rafe? Neither of you are good options for me, Andrew."

He rubs at his eyebrow, glancing at me again before looking back at the road. "I'm not saying you should choose us. I'm just saying I'm worried about you. That's all. If you need

help, I'll help you. And if you don't... I'll stay back. I just didn't want to see you being played with. That's all."

Chapter 180: Grace: Fan Club

Chapter 180: Grace: Fan Club

Awkward silence reigns in the car, and there's no way I'm breaking it. Andrew's tension is palpable even from here, but you know what? He deserves to feel anxious and off-kilter after having the audacity to question my relationship with Caine.

He's a Rafe loyalist. He's the second to last person on this planet I want poking his nose into my affairs.

Well—third. Ellie exists, after all.

I pull out my phone, needing something to focus on besides my irritation. My thumb hovers over my messages app.

No new texts from Lyre.

I type out a quick message asking if she's okay and to text back when she can.

The message changes to "Delivered", but even five minutes later it still doesn't show "Read."

My skin crawls as I consider the strange sounds in the background. No matter how I try to convince myself I might be mistaken, they sounded distinctly... violent-against-people-y.

But Owen's there. I'm sure he's helping keep her in check.

Maybe.

Then again, I'm not really sure anyone can keep Lyre in check outside of Divinity Connect.

Speaking of which...

My gaze shifts to the notification I've been avoiding. The one about "Lyrielle's Fan Club" on Divinity Connect.

Taking a deep breath, I tap on the app icon. The interface looks a little different today, but still says (Limited). But now there's a new chat thread at the top of my inbox, saying "Lyrielle's Fan Club" in bold letters.

My thumb hovers over it. Curiosity wins out, and I tap.

A notification immediately appears.

[Grace Harper has accepted the invitation to join Lyrielle's Fan Club.]

The messages flood in within seconds, but not before I notice I have no access to backchat.

[WRATH: ? Who the hell is this? Who the fuck sent out an invitation? This is our safe place, remember?]

[TIME: Maybe it was you in an alternate timeline.]

[WRATH: Stop fucking with me. You know that shit makes my brain hurt.]

[MADNESS: Join the dark side, baby~]

My eyes widen. What the hell kind of usernames are these?

[WRATH: Was it you, you piece of shit? We said no more invites.]

[MADNESS: Wasn't me~]

[TIME: Perhaps you should stop living up to your name.]

[WRATH: Perhaps you should take the stick out of your hourglass.]

[TIME: How uncouth.]

[WRATH: I'll show you uncouth.]

[TIME: Do you know what the word means?]

I scroll through the messages, my unease growing with every exchange. These people definitely know each other, and I have no idea who they are.

[MADNESS: More importantly~ why isn't she talking? Hello? I know you're reading us~]

How do they know? No; they don't. They're guessing.

[TIME: Are you drunk?]

[MADNESS: Yup~]

[WRATH: @Lyrielle was it you?]

I slam my thumb against the home button, exiting the app in inexplicable panic.

What the actual hell is this, and who the hell is Lyrielle?

At a quick glance, it makes me think of Lyre. And it would make sense, because who the hell else do I know associated with this app? Except the strange, face-shifting man in my dreams.

My phone chimes again with another notification. Despite my better judgment, I check it.

[CHAOS: This time, it isn't me, little anchor. Do you miss me? I miss you.]

My skin crawls. He reeks of stalker vibes.

I open my messages and frantically type out a text to Lyre.

[GRACE: Someone just added me to a chat called "Lyrielle's Fan Club" on Divinity Connect. There are users called Wrath, Time, and Madness in there. Is Lyrielle you? Also, Chaos sent me a message and he sounds like a stalker. Should I be worried? Because I'm seriously worried. Please answer as soon as you can!]

I wait, watching for the read receipt, but it doesn't happen. I'm not panicking, not *exactly*—this doesn't feel like the bone-deep dread from before the last storm. This is just regular (I think) human anxiety about being contacted by strangers with weird names on a magical social media platform.

Totally normal reaction.

Panic versus anxiety aside, the message keeps bouncing around my head like a stray ping pong ball. "This time, it isn't me." Isn't what him? The storm? The invitation? But he used present tense, so he's probably not talking about something that's already happened. He's talking about something happening now.

So, the storm. Right?

My head throbs, a dull ache building behind my eyes. Wrath. Time. Madness. Chaos. These aren't just weird internet handles, not when Divinity Connect involves... well, divinities. These are *entities*. Forces. Or just people with really bad naming sense.

But why are they in Lyre's fan club?

The white cat rolls onto its back, and I rub at its stomach without thinking. All four paws wrap around my wrist as it lightly chews against my knuckles. It *acts* like a perfectly normal cat, just like Sadie *acts* like a perfectly normal dog, but...

"Are you okay?" Andrew asks, finally breaking the silence.

"I'm fine."

"You don't seem fine."

"I'm *fine*."

"Okay, okay. I was just worried."

"I don't need you to be—" Cutting myself off, I suck in a deep breath. My annoyance with him aside, he hasn't done anything except ask if everything's okay. Sniping at him only makes me the immature one here. "Nothing's wrong. I just want to get settled in for the night. This storm's making me nervous."

We lapse back into silence.

Occasionally, Caine checks in via the walkie talkie, asking if I'm okay. Sometimes it's Ron.

The children stay asleep through it all, even an hour into the drive.

Then another hour.

We're almost there, and storm clouds have begun gathering in the sky, dark and menacing.

My phone keeps buzzing, but it's always Divinity Connect, never Lyre. Andrew keeps giving me strange looks over it, but I don't offer, and he doesn't ask. It's two hours of awkward nothing between us.

Ten miles from our destination, I finally check it again, only to see:

[Lyrielle's Fan Club: 573 new messages.]

How long is it going to take for me to read through them all?

Maybe I shouldn't have ignored all the buzzing.