

Grace of a Wolf –

Chapter 191: Grace: Her Return

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Returning to the pack feels weird.

Worse than weird.

Icky.

Yeah, icky is a good word for it.

I stare out the window as Andrew pulls into a large, semi-circular driveway toward the edge of town. My stomach knots tighter with each rotation of the tires, like my body is physically rejecting the idea of being back on Blue Mountain territory.

The last time I was here, I was running away. Now it kind of feels like I'm crawling back with my tail between my legs—except I don't have a tail because I'm human, which is exactly the problem in the first place.

Caine's already backed the RV beside a small home with boarded-up windows. The fading light catches on the dusty greenhouse attached to the main building, its glass panels shattered in places, jagged teeth ready to bite anyone who ventures too close.

"What's the name of this place again?"

"Miller's Flowers." Andrew's voice is flat as he parks. "It's been empty since Eliza Miller moved to a different pack."

The memory clicks. "The omega who married that beta from North Ridge?"

"Yeah."

Eliza was sweet. She used to give me flowers whenever I ran into her. Of course, I'd only been here a year when she was mated out and left.

I didn't realize this was her place, but it makes sense. I remember the greenhouse; it was always filled with rows of vibrant flowers. The pack mostly ignored it because, as it turns out, wolves don't really use florists much. Something about the scents being too cloying.

I frown at the building, at its broken windows and faded sign. Kids from the pack used to dare each other to spend the night here. It's commonly considered to be haunted by the younger pack members, though of course I'm an adult who doesn't believe in such superstitions anymore.

Not much, anyway.

But then again, things have changed since I ran away, and my worldview has... widened.

"Is it really okay for us to stay here?" I unbuckle my seatbelt and glance at Andrew.

He nods, already reaching for the door. "The Lycans have already settled it."

The Lycans. Not "Caine" or even "your mate." It feels like a subtle distancing, but I could just be reading too much into it.

Honestly, the Walmart parking lot is where I'd rather be. Staying there would be so much better than being in reach of this pack again, and I'm already second-guessing my request to keep my identity as Caine's mate a secret.

But the app had dinged at me almost as soon as we entered the city limits with a new mission—to present myself to the Guardian for assignment, or something strange.

Sara clutches Bun's hand as she takes in the dilapidated structure, her red eyes wide and uncertain. "Are we living in *that*?" she whispers.

She looks like I'm delivering her as dinner to a pack of ghosts. Bun, on the other hand, just looks curious.

I reach out to smooth Sara's hair, my touch gentle as I reassure them both.

"No, we're staying in the camper. But this place has enough space to park, plus we can hook up to water and electricity."

Caine had given us the rundown before leaving. I hadn't even considered where to park Lyre's camper once we got here, so his foresight is certainly appreciated.

The Lycans, however, remain in the main lodge. Which means Caine won't be nearby anymore.

And there won't be any midnight run-ins. Which is probably for the best, but makes my heart feel a little itchy for some reason.

But, his distance aside, at least Rafe will be even farther, since he's taken over the Alpha lodge. Which means Ellie will have to come all the way here to bully me, and I doubt she'd bother.

The thought provides small comfort as I take in our new temporary home. Ron and Caine are already getting things put together, and Andrew frowns in their direction. It takes me only a minute to realize the Lycan King is being way too helpful for someone he shouldn't care too much about.

I should be little more than a nuisance he brought back, and he's over here playing Boyfriend, with a capital freaking B.

Jer, oblivious to the undercurrents of our thoughts, bounds to the men as he shouts over his shoulder, "Can I explore?"

"No," I answer too quickly, then soften my tone. "I mean, we need to keep a low profile. We can play games in the camper, and maybe explore a tiny bit of the surroundings, but we should stay inside for now."

I'm not entirely certain how the pack will treat these kids, and Andrew seems to understand my reasoning because he nods immediately. "Don't worry, guys. It's going to be hectic today and maybe tomorrow, but after that we should be able to go on a lot of adventures."

Sara, still staring at the dilapidated structure in front of us, mumbles, "I feel like the adventure's already here."

Then she shivers dramatically.

Bun, watching her sister, also shivers dramatically, scrunching up her face.

Aiming to reassure the girl, who keeps eyeing the shuttered building like it might grow fangs and eat her, I state, "It's not haunted."

She jumps, her red eyes widening. "So it *is* haunted?"

Isn't that exactly the opposite of what I just said?

Pressing my fingers against my temple, I clarify, "No. I said it *isn't* haunted."

"But why would you bring up it being haunted if it isn't?"

The suspicion all over her small face leaves me with no real way to explain through her illogical reasoning.

"Are you stupid? She said there are no ghosts," Jer shouts from where he's now helping Caine unload something from the back of the truck. His voice carries across the yard with the special volume only unhelpful siblings can achieve.

"Stupid," Bun whispers, the word falling from her lips with p-e-r-f-e-c-t clarity.

My head swings around so fast I nearly give myself whiplash. I glare at Jer, who just blinks back at me with a completely oblivious expression. He didn't hear Bun—which isn't surprising given how quietly she spoke—but still.

"Both of you, watch your mouths!"

Meanwhile, Bun seems to realize she said something she shouldn't and hides her face in her hands, assuming I can't see her if she can't see me.

Jer shrugs from across the driveway, clearly not grasping what he's done wrong, while the toddler peeks through her fingers to gauge if I'm still looking. I am, but I soften my expression.

It's not like she's the one in trouble. She's just mimicking what she hears.

"Okay, grab your things out of Andrew's car," I say, trying to regain some semblance of order. He's standing around awkwardly, probably wanting to leave.

But my orders are wasted breath. Jer's glued to Caine, doing... something. I'm not sure it's a task we actually need done, but at least it's keeping him busy, I guess.

Sara sighs with all the drama of a teenager twice her age—so, basically... me, I guess? Hm. That's a sobering thought.

"I'll just get everything myself, then." Her martyred tone would be funny if it weren't so accurate, and she shoots her younger brother a nasty older sister glare as she grabs Bun's hand and marches back to the car.

At least she's no longer side-eyeing the house.

Is parenting ever going to get easier?

Andrew's still hovering, shifting his weight awkwardly as he stands near me.

"What?"

"I need to go check in with Rafe," he says, his words coming out slow and careful, like he's testing how the words land.

I nod. I'm surprised he's still here, and it isn't like he needs to report to me. Having him around was helpful, but it isn't like I *asked* him to stay with us. Technically, this all started with him stalking me.

"That's fine."

But before he can leave, I remember the car seat. "Wait, we have to get Bun's seat out first."

The cat's already in the shade, corralled in a tiny pink kennel. And Sara's already grabbed their snack-filled backpacks out of the car, so it's the only thing left.

His brow furrows. "Why?"

I stare at him blankly. Is he serious? "Because we bought it." Obviously. It's not like we're leaving a perfectly good, brand new car seat with someone who doesn't have a child.

Andrew's frown deepens, and something shifts in his expression. "I'll help whenever you need it, you know," he says quietly. "You don't have to act like I won't be around."

The statement catches me off guard. There's a hurt there I wasn't expecting, and I'm not entirely sure how to respond.

Another voice cuts through the awkward silence.

"That won't be necessary." Caine's voice is cool, putting distance between us and Andrew without any ambiguity. "I'll be here."

I didn't even realize he was done with the camper.

Andrew shifts his weight again, looking uncharacteristically stubborn in front of the Lycan King. "You can't do much if you're trying to hide your relationship, so—"

"She'll be fine," he says again, the voice of ice and snow.

It isn't even directed my way, but I shiver anyway.

Chapter 192: Lyre: Restricted

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LYRE

Admittedly, I hadn't expected the Fiddlebacks to have such extensive warding through their little underground tunneling system, though it isn't like I thought there would be *no* warding.

And I definitely didn't expect removing one to cause an immediate Plausibility Warning to alert on my app, giving me a 36-hour limitation on arcana use.

But worst of all, none of us had expected to smell and hear the distinct sounds of people in cages.

Which basically brings us to now—over a day later, watching Thom shakily pull through his meager amount of arcana storage to dismantle yet another ward. He's swaying on his feet and almost bone-dry, but we're only ten feet from yet another cage of pitiful shifters.

These aren't wolves, but others. Bunnies, cats, even a lone cougar shifter who came from California. All with a sad story, an even sadder capture, and a fractured future.

Thom's glasses slip down his nose. His hands tremble as he traces the final sequence in the air, his fingers leaving pale blue trails of light to shimmer against the dank tunnel walls.

The man's exhausted. We all are. But there's something particularly heartbreaking about watching a warlock drain his arcana to the dregs.

"Almost..." he whispers.

The ward flickers. It's a sickly yellow-green membrane, at least to the eyes of those who can see arcana, stretched across what appears to be solid rock. It pulses once, twice, then dissolves without a sound.

The illusion of stone melts away, revealing another chamber beyond.

While we call it an illusion, it was sturdy enough to hold anyone back.

Isabeau didn't have this level of craftiness in her skillset. Aside from her ability to manipulate, she was never able to master more than the basics. If it wasn't for her depraved proclivity as a sanguimancer, she would be considered worthless two hundred years ago.

Aaron, having been impatiently waiting for this moment, doesn't wait.

He charges forward the moment the opening appears, his shoulders squared with his irritatingly heroic presence.

Over twenty-four hours without sleep, crawling through mud and filth and who knows what else—some of these tunnels seem to serve as the sewer system—he still moves like he's fresh off vacation and filled with vitality.

Wolves are useful in this way, but some people who had their access to arcana blocked by a particularly annoying divinity control system are exhausted.

Me, obviously.

It takes him less than seconds to get the cage open. Practice makes perfect, I suppose. This is the fourth "collection point" we've found. The prison door creaks open with a loud, rusty screech, and my teeth tingle at the sound.

The stench flooding out is unbearable with unwashed bodies, rotting flesh, and human waste.

And fear.

Always the fear.

Ten of them this time. Adults, all different species of shifter. An elderly man huddles in the corner, his white beard matted with dirt. He doesn't look up when the door opens. None of them do.

It's as if they've forgotten that freedom is a possibility.

My lips tighten, but I stay back.

We've acquired a routine for these situations.

Owen moves past me, his fresh angelic scent a welcome break from the festering air. The angel-descendant doesn't speak as he kneels beside the nearest shifter—a woman with hollow cheeks and too-thin wrists, and a slightly protruding belly. Could be a nasty case of internal parasites, or pregnancy. It's hard to tell.

There's a crisp taste of mountain air and sunlight, an orderly tug of arcana threads, and then a soft breeze of magic spreading through the room like a physical thing, revitalizing what it touches.

Jack-Eye sneezes, like he does every time.

The shifters respond to Owen's touch like wilted flowers to water. Their backs straighten, just a bit. Their eyes focus. It's not a miracle cure—such a thing doesn't exist for the trauma they've endured—but it gives them enough strength to stand and hope for something different.

Meanwhile, I remain in the tunnel, holding Thom's cold, damp hand in mine.

His fingers curl weakly around my palm as I let a trickle of my power flow into him.

It isn't much, but it's enough to keep him from collapsing.

I'd regretted filling him with arcana when the new mission had arrived, but it came in handy. Once the restrictions are lifted, I'll have to fill him again.

"Thank you," he murmurs, and the difference in his voice is stark, flat and drained instead of soft and dreamy.

Usually, his eyes are wide and worshipful every time I'm within ten feet. But not anymore. Today his gaze is dark. Haunted.

The near-worship has been replaced by something harder, something that looks too much like the beginning of actual backbone.

Our little warlock is growing.

Trauma has a way of changing people. Not always for the better, but sometimes.

"Save it," I tell him, keeping my voice serene. Better not to show the boiling rage in my veins. All three of these men feed off my mood, and I don't need them agitated. It's a waste of energy.

Aaron moves through the small space with efficiency, helping the shifters to their feet, murmuring reassurances that sound sincere even to my cynical ears. He's good at this part. The hero part. It's almost enough to make me forget how insufferable he can be.

Almost.

"I'll take them back to the safe house," he says, turning to me once they've all been through a quick examination. Every one of them is able to walk, even if it is a shuffling gait. With only ten of them, all mobile, this will be the easiest rescue we've had.

Somehow, while the rest of us are dirty and covered in muck, Aaron's red hair is pulled back with what looks like a shoelace and yet remains clean. His face, on the other hand, shows the passage of time in his growing stubble.

But this is a ridiculous time to be distracted by his pretty looks.

I incline my head to show I'm listening. This is our dance now—he speaks, I acknowledge, we pretend there isn't something messy and undefined growing between us.

Priorities.

But it's hard to ignore the sliver of affection I've grown in the past day, watching an efficient and reliable Aaron instead of charming playboy Jack-Eye. The mystery of his position as Lycan Beta is finally revealed.

"These ones can walk, mostly," Aaron continues, his gaze sweeping over the group. "The old man might need help, but—"

"I can carry myself," the elderly shifter interrupts. His voice shakes, as does his head, but he pushes himself to stand to prove his point.

His legs quiver under his weight, but he announces with surprising calm, "Seven decades as a bear shifter. I've survived worse than this."

He's as thin as a rail now, with no part of his physique betraying his bear shifter attributes.

My lips tighten. If I had access to arcana, giving the old man a boost would be little more energy than a single breath.

Sixteen hours before I can use significant arcana again, and even then I'll be under harsher restrictions than before.

Sixteen hours of effectively running off human power, with Thom drained dry. Despite pumping him to the brim with clean arcana, his skills are subpar; he's never learned how to use glyphs in his life, and he's now learning on the job.

Even under my tutelage, too much was wasted.

Under normal circumstances, I'd call it a day and book myself a spa retreat.

But nothing about this is normal, and lives are at stake.

I've already failed too many; turning back isn't an option.

"Let's keep going," I tell Owen as Aaron takes the survivors back. He'll catch up; backtracking doesn't take long, but making our way through the ridiculous amount of wards and traps Fiddleback's thrown down slows our rate of advancement to a crawl.

It's a habit at this point to check my phone. Divinity Connect ignores such mundane details as cellular connection and works regardless, but there are other small issues to deal with. Like battery life and the lack of ability to send or receive texts.

So, even though I pull my phone out of my pocket to glance at it, the screen remains dark, the device powered off to conserve battery.

My skin itches. Aaron reports back every time he surfaces, and I know she's fine, but his stupid broody alpha is terrible at filling in details.

Owen clears his throat, and I realize I've been caught staring at my phone like some lost teenager after I said we were going already.

Shoving the useless device into my pocket, I stride ahead. "Let's move."

The chamber branches in two directions. Both are equally dark, equally damp, and equally likely to hide more atrocities.

I point to the right path. "We'll go right."

We're still mapping this place, so it's always right.

Thom sighs behind me, his shoulders hunched as he follows. His glasses have slid down his nose again, and he doesn't bother pushing them up. "I think I'd rather take the ghouls," he mutters.

I glance over my shoulder, one eyebrow arched. "They were all people once. Are you really sure about that?"

His mouth snaps shut, color draining from his already pale face.

Chapter 193: Grace: Telepathy Failure

Settling into our little corner of Blue Mountain is not as easy as I thought it would be.

For one, Caine refuses to leave.

For two, having three more burly Lycans in Lyre's camper has stretched its occupancy to max limit.

For three, every time I look out the damn window there's at least five Blue Mountain shifters staring at us.

Considering how little traffic this place gets, it's very clear they're here to snoop. Which means my whole *don't let people know you're my mate* plan is going fucking swimmingly, on top of being incredibly worried the children will be mistreated by the assholes outside.

Funny—when I left here, I was still feeling guilty and terrible over all the deaths the Lycan King brought here.

Now I'm feeling like it wasn't enough.

Strange how perspective changes things, though I'm more than a little worried my humanity's going astray.

Sara leans over to cup her hand by my ear and stage-whisper, loud enough for literally everyone to hear, "Why are they all here, anyway?"

"I have no idea," I mutter back, shooting Caine a milk-curdling glare.

The three Lycans standing at attention before their king are vaguely familiar; at least one of them stood guard outside my door for a time.

But what's far more concerning than their vague familiarity is how they keep swiveling their heads in my direction. And every single time, their nostrils flare wide enough to host a whole farm of honeybees.

They're scenting me.

Repeatedly.

If I were actually an ordinary human girl and not raised by this pack, their behavior would rank somewhere between disturbing and call-the-police territory. But I've spent six years in the Blue Mountain Pack. I know how they catalog their world—sight second, sound third, and scent always first.

This doesn't make it less nerve-wracking, though.

Jer, who apparently missed the day they taught children about indoor voices and social awareness, leans across Sara's lap and announces at full volume, "Why do they keep staring at you like that? Shouldn't they be bowing in front of their queen?"

The blood drains from my face so fast I go light-headed.

Caine's lips twitch upward at one corner, actually amused by this catastrophe. All three of his Lycan goons go rigid, their eyes widening. It would be amusing on their grim, scarred faces full of disapproval and curiosity—if it didn't make my entire, brilliant plan shatter into tiny little pieces.

Sara, bless her oblivious heart, doesn't catch a single nuance of this disaster as she hisses back, "Maybe they're rude and he's going to chop off their heads. Just shut up and watch."

Bun, meanwhile, focuses on her mushy cookie as she sits in my lap, content to ignore the world for the tiny pieces of M&M she's determined to dig out with her fingernails.

And Ron is pretending all of us don't exist, his face buried in one of Lyre's books where he's sitting on the couch. He's the smartest of us all.

I sit frozen in the middle of the dinette as the three Lycans swivel toward me in perfect unison, their expressions a mixture of confusion and dawning horror. I shoot Caine my most desperate *fix this right now* glare, finishing it off with slightly widened eyes and a tiny head shake in their direction.

The man mercifully smooths his face into a blank royal mask. He clears his throat, immediately recapturing his subordinates' attention.

Then Caine, King of the Lycans and apparent champion of the most graceless social maneuvers known to wolfkind, announces to the room: "Grace is not my mate."

He looks directly at me and gives a small, satisfied nod like he's just brilliantly defused a bomb instead of strapping additional explosives to it.

I close my eyes and draw in a deep breath through my nose.

My boyfriend's an idiot.

"High Alpha—" three different voices chorus in unison, and Caine holds up a hand to interrupt them.

"No questions will be taken at this time."

Does the man think he's holding a press conference?

Jer asks Sara, "Aren't they mates?"

Sara replies, "I think so?"

But Ron, the only one I can rely on, drawls, "Didn't you two idiots hear? Grace isn't his mate. He'd never mate with a human."

The oldest of the Lycans gazes at Ron with a troubled stare, then turns back to his king. "High Alpha..."

"No questions," Caine repeats, taking the opportunity to smile in my direction.

My face twitches.

"Who are these children?" he continues, ignoring his king's order.

Caine glances at me, and I shake my head tightly. He should just pretend he doesn't know or care about them.

But our relationship telepathy is *still not working* because he announces, "They are my children. Treat them as such."

My shoulders stiffen.

Ron chokes on air.

Jer and Sara look at each other, then at me, then at Caine.

Jer's the first one to break the awkward bombshell silence. "Does that mean we have to call him Dad?" he asks Sara, sounding incredibly worried.

He should be.

We're *all* worried.

Everyone except Caine, who's standing in front of us preening like a goddamn wolf in a chicken coop.

"No," I snap.

"I think so," Sara says at the same time.

Both children look at me with confusion.

Caine clears his throat. "You may call me Dad if you wish. Father is also acceptable." His eyes linger on Sara and Bun. "Daddy would work, too."

Sara's face goes white.

Bun doesn't glance up from her M&M-centric archaeology.

And me?

I'm still sitting here dumbfounded, with no idea how to deal with this man.

I'd made it perfectly clear—*perfectly. fucking. clear.*—he was supposed to keep his distance.

No one warned me the man was incapable of acting.

And why would he announce the kids as his? Anyone with a nose—which is every single person in this pack—will know they aren't Lycans. They aren't even wolf shifters.

My mouth opens.

Then closes.

Then opens again.

The words I finally manage to choke out are hoarse and tight. "I don't think that will be necessary, *Sir*."

The three Lycans share an awkward glance, and Jer whispers, "So do we call him Daddy or Sir?"

Sara mumbles, "Just don't talk to him and we won't ever have to worry about it."

Then she peeks at Caine, who frowns at her with the faintest hint of downturned lips and furrowed brow, and she gulps. Her tune changes rapidly as her face goes even whiter, if possible.

"Or call him Daddy. I think Daddy will work."

Chapter 194: Caine: Like a Wrecking Ball

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CAINE

I hadn't intended on calling my subordinates into Grace's camper, but they showed up while I was still here.

As did several nosey Blue Mountain bastards. Not a single whisper carries on the air, probably because their gossip was all done through their pack link as their bastard eyes lingered on my mate.

So I brought my loyal Lycans inside, intending to warn them about keeping Grace safe at all costs.

After all, while Grace insists on keeping our relationship some strange sort of secret, it's been obvious from the start it will only be a superficial denial. My scent is all over her, these children, and this camper.

But if my mate wants to pretend she has nothing to do with me, I'll indulge. For a little while, anyway.

So I did as she asked and publicly announced no relationship between us, but for some reason, the woman's angrier than ever.

And claiming the children to keep them safe from any Blue Mountain bullying only seems to make it worse.

My eyebrows draw together in a faint frown as even Sara tries to deny a connection, only to ease somewhat when she declares, "Daddy will work."

See? Even the children understand the benefit of being adopted into my pack and being under my protection. They're smart kids, so it's to be expected.

Grace's face twists through a parade of emotions. Her left eye keeps twitching, but I'm more focused on the dark circles under her eyes.

She needs rest.

I kept her up too late.

And while it was enjoyable, she's still recuperating.

"Grace," I say, keeping my voice calm in the face of her somewhat labile emotional state, "you should take a nap with Bun. You didn't sleep well."

The transformation is spectacular. Her face flushes a brighter crimson than before, as if I just suggested we recreate last night's bathroom encounter in front of my men. Then all color drains from her cheeks, leaving her pale as moonlight. Finally, her features lock into place, her jaw rigid enough to crack her teeth.

"I'm fine, thank you, *Sir*." She practically spits the honorific, turning it into something profane.

Dylan shifts his weight, eyebrows drawing together as he exchanges a look with Reggie.

Neither of them are impressed with her attitude. I'll have to pull them aside later. They won't accept her easily, but they *will* accept her.

But Randy, younger and a little more open-minded, studies Grace with a different understanding. His gaze slides from her to the children, then back again. Despite his young age, he has a mate and children of his own.

He gives a subtle nod in my direction.

I keep my expression neutral while I reach through our pack link to touch the minds of my men. *Make sure no one bothers them*, I command, letting my authority ripple through the connection. *No one enters this place, and no one speaks to her or the children without my express permission.*

Reggie frowns, his facial scars becoming more hideous with the movement. Sara flinches.

Perhaps I should keep the older Lycans away from here. Then again, the kids will need to toughen up. Reggie and Dylan aren't the only Lycans with scars in our pack.

I give a slight nod as I think it over. Yes. Better to get them used to it now.

Reggie and Dylan may look down on humans, but they're loyal and wouldn't do anything to harm children I've declared as mine. More importantly, they're capable of fighting off the entire pack if it comes down to it.

Grace's mouth stretches into a thin smile as she stares at me, and a vague sense of foreboding traipses down my spine.

She's unhappy.

And yet I've done everything she's asked of me.

I frown.

"You seem busy," she says, voice dripping with artificial sweetness. "We don't want to keep you here."

My eyebrows lift a fraction of an inch. Her sudden shift from fury to docility makes my instincts prickle with suspicion.

Fenris snorts, the first sound he's made since I invited the Lycans inside.

What is it? I ask in his direction, a little surprised by his lack of nonsensical commentary.

Don't even think about it. I'm not helping you this time. Dig your own grave and leave me out of it.

Jer clears his throat. "Uh, Da—um. Fath—no. Daddy...?" He cringes visibly and scratches at his head, finally settling on, "Dad?"

Fenris's unhelpful mood is immediately pushed to the side as I respond, "Hmm?" with a faint smile.

"If you're going to be our dad, then is Owen our dad too?"

My smile freezes.

My subordinates do, too.

Grace closes her eyes and pinches at the bridge of her nose with a long sigh. "You don't have to call him Dad, Jer."

My frown returns, and Sara flinches.

I can hear her as she frantically whispers in her little brother's ear, "Don't listen to her. Call him Dad, or he might eat us."

The panic in her words only undermines my claim further, and three pairs of Lycan eyes turn back toward me with various degrees of intensity.

"Dad," Ron says carelessly, not looking up from his book, "You haven't mentioned who Mom is."

My eyes—and three other pairs—immediately land on Grace, who opens hers slowly and jumps a little to see us staring at her.

She holds up her hands immediately. "It isn't me."

For the first time since acknowledging Grace as my mate, irritation stirs deep inside. "Are you trying to abandon our children?"

Randy is the first of the Lycans to break protocol, stepping away from me to get a little closer to Grace. His body's completely turned toward her as he shows me his back, and I bare my teeth in his direction.

"Ma'am," he says politely, and she gives him a wary look.

"Yes?"

"How old are you...?"

"Randy," I snap in irritation, even as Reggie and Dylan slowly nod their heads.

Reggie steps between us, taking on the brunt of my glower as he says, "High Alpha, this is strange for all of us. You disappear for days with the Beta, and return with this human git—"

My eyes narrow.

He pauses.

"—human girl."

I incline my head arrogantly. "And?"

"Anyone with eyes can tell she isn't their mother."

Side-stepping the question, I respond with a simple, "I already said, these children are mine."

I would call her their mother, but Grace seems hell-bent on denying our relationship for now.

Dylan steps in front of Reggie with a dark frown. "What he means to say is, High Alpha, are these your Luna's children?"

Fenris growls in my head, and I can sense his desire to manifest.

Don't.

Grace immediately says, "I'm not his Luna," though she does shoot me a somewhat apologetic look as she does so.

But my brows pull together. Dylan and Reggie would never presume to call a human their Luna.

They aren't speaking of Grace.

"No."

Chapter 195: Grace: Buzzles

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Out of nowhere, Caine was suddenly in a downright awful mood and wouldn't stop glowering at his Lycan friends. But at least he finally left, even if he did basically stomp out of here with a dark cloud hanging over him.

I stand in the doorway watching them go, my feelings a jumbled mess of relief and something that feels suspiciously like abandonment. The camper seems emptier without his overwhelming presence filling every corner. Quieter.

Lonelier.

My eyes follow Caine's broad shoulders as he marches away with his men, his entire body rigid and his fists clenched at his sides. Even from here, I can feel the waves of anger radiating off him.

Suddenly, he stops, spins on his heel, and strides back to me with purpose in every step.

I stiffen.

Did he notice how I felt?

My heart jumps into my throat as he looms in front of me, one step below where I'm standing. Close enough I could reach out and brush my fingertips against his long, silky eyelashes, with the perfect amount of curl mine require tools to replicate.

"Don't worry about what they said," he murmurs, his voice pitched low so only I can hear.

I blink down at him, mouth opening to explain that *his* terrible acting is what I'm worried about—but he's already gone, stalking back the way he came.

His shoulders look even more tense than before, if that's possible.

I rub my face with my palm and sigh. This is going to be a lot harder than I thought. Caine playing the role of "not my mate" looks an awful lot like Caine is my mate and going to murder people if they hurt my feelings.

Not exactly subtle.

A few yards away, several Blue Mountain wolves linger, watching everything unfold. Their faces carry familiar expressions, the kind weighing me down year after year. I didn't realize how oppressive they all were until I'd left.

Smug superiority. Disgust. Disdain.

But for once, those looks don't make my stomach twist with shame.

One of them—a shifter I vaguely recognize but can't name—catches my eye deliberately. His lip curls in a sneer, and he spits on the ground, giving me a smirk before sauntering away.

My terrible, plummeting mood rises immediately.

It worked. Our terrible acting job *actually worked*.

Fighting the smile threatening to curve my lips, I step back inside and close the door, watching as more Blue Mountain shifters stare with smug, awful faces in our direction.

They'd started out curious and now look down on me. They'd never do that if they were scared of the Lycan King's reaction.

Caine's inexplicable bad mood out of nowhere saved the day.

The brief victory is great, even as it feels hollow. I know what comes next—the insults will get bolder, the "accidental" shouldering in hallways harder, the whispered comments louder. They'll push until they find my breaking point, and I'm not exactly looking forward to living under this pressure again.

But as long as they leave the kids alone, it'll be fine. I've survived this treatment my entire life. I can handle it again, especially when it's only temporary.

I won't be here forever.

Once this mission is over, I'll be hundreds of miles away again, living my best life away from the oppression of the Blue Mountain Pack and my dark history here.

"What the heck was that?" Sara asks the moment the door clicks shut, her red eyes wide.

"What the hell was that?" Jer echoes, practically vibrating with indignation. "Aren't you the Queen? Why's he acting like you aren't his mate?"

"Hell!" Bun shouts gleefully, bouncing on her pudgy legs. Thankfully, no ears sprout out of her hair today. We'll have to keep her inside as much as possible so they don't appear at the wrong moment.

If she'd stick to one set of ears, it would be easier to explain away. But we don't need rumors of her ears going from cats to rabbits at any given opportunity.

"Language!" I snap automatically. It's starting to feel like second nature.

When I look up, three pairs of eyes are trained on me with varying degrees of bewilderment. Even Ron has joined the staring brigade.

"Sorry," I say, forcing my voice to steady. "That was weird, right? Everything's a little... complicated here."

"He said you're not his mate," Sara says, crossing her skinny arms over her chest. "But that's not true. You're the Queen!"

"And he said we're his kids," Jer adds, his voice rising to ear-piercing decibel. "Which is totally crazy because we just met him! Now I have to call him Dad?!"

Ron just looks curious.

And Bun? Well, she's Bun. A fly came in at some point, and now she's trying to catch it. Without breaking eye contact, Sara pulls her off the table and sets her on the ground, leaving her free to toddle after flying insects.

I drag a hand through my hair. "Look, it's... We're pretending, okay? Caine and I are pretending we're not together, and he's pretending you're his children, not mine."

"So you're our mom?"

"No, idiot." Jer gives Sara a disgusted look. "She said we're pretending to *not* be hers."

"Then who's our mom? Ron, do you know?"

Ron nods, with a faint smile twitching at his lips. "It's Grace."

"No, that's not—" I start, but Sara beats me to it.

"Stupid, she just said she's *not* our mom."

"If he's our dad, Grace is definitely the mom."

Jer chimes in, "Yeah, she's not Mom. She said so."

But the older kid shakes his head. "You two are the idiots. She's definitely the mom."

"But what about Owen?" Jer challenges. "Maybe he's the mom!"

"Owen can't be the mom, Jeridiot." Ron bares his teeth. "He's a guy."

But Sara looks thoughtful. "I think Jer's right. Owen's the mom."

I clear my throat, feeling another headache coming on. They've become frequent since my new life with children. "I don't know about that, but the important thing is this pack doesn't need to know anything about us and Caine, okay? If they think I'm in a relationship with him, I'm not going to learn what I'm here to... learn."

What a weird sentence. It feels awkward and convoluted even as it comes out.

But the kids seem to understand, all nodding in unison. Sara and Jer both look very serious, but Ron just looks... amused.

Then Jer's face scrunches. "But why is he our dad, then?"

"Because..." I don't know, either. He went off-script for that one. "Because the people here don't like humans very much. They especially don't like me. But they're afraid of Caine. If they think you're his, they won't mess with you."

"They don't like you because you're human?" Sara asks, something flickering in her red eyes.

I nod. "I grew up here. They never really accepted me."

"That's stupid," Jer declares, his loyalty heart-warming. "You're better than all of them."

My throat tightens. "Thanks."

Bun toddles over to me and holds up her arms, demanding to be lifted. I scoop her up, grateful for the distraction. Her weight is solid and warm, grounding me as she nestles against my chest.

"Dad," she says clearly, patting my cheek with her chubby hand.

"No, sweetie. We're just pretending, remember?"

"Dad," she insists, more forcefully this time.

Sara snickers. "I think she thinks *you're* the dad."

"If Grace is the dad, then is Owen still the mom? Or is it the Lycan King?" Jer asks curiously.

Ron snickers. "Go ask him. See what he says."

Wasn't Ron my most reliable, level-headed kid? The one to help me through all the awkward situations? My eyes slide to him, but it's hard to feel even a sliver of irritation. It's kind of... good, to see him acting a little more his age. Being a bit more of a troublemaker.

But I clear my throat to gain their attention again, and Bun mimics the sound, even if it does kind of sound like she's dying when she does so.

"Look. You guys just need to... act normal. Stay in the camper as much as possible. If anyone asks, yes, Caine is your father, and no, I'm not connected to you at all. I'm just... here. No—better yet, I'm your babysitter."

"That's a really bad plan," Jer says bluntly.

"If you've got a better one, I'm all ears."

He opens his mouth, then closes it again, defeated. "You can be our grandma?"

Ron laughs out loud. "Brilliant, Jeridiot."

"Thought so." I stand up, shifting Bun to my hip. "Now, who's hungry? We should eat something before we get too—"

My fucking phone dings, vibrating harder than I've ever felt it vibrate. I check it, my face paling a little at the notification I received.

The mission about meeting with the Guardian has updated.

[Meet the Guardian within 10 minutes, or penalties will be applied.]

There's a bunch of numbers underneath, looking like some sort of coordinates. I press my thumb against it, and a map pops up, complete with arrows and a line for directions.

"I want mac and cheese," Sara announces, flouncing into the kitchen to check the pantry cabinet.

"I want pizza," Jer counters.

Ron, watching me, returns to the reliable and steadfast kid he usually is. "We're having sandwiches. It looks like Grace is leaving."

I glance up, blinking a little in his direction. "Uh—yeah. I have to go..."

My phone buzzes again. New word: vibration with epic intensity, okay?

A quick glance informs me a countdown has started.

A fucking *countdown*.

This mission means business, and I'm terrified over what these damn penalties might be. Some clarity would be nice, but without them, I have to think about worst case scenarios.

Like zombie invasions, per my dreams.

"I have to go right now. Ron, watch the kids. No one go outside. Sandwiches only, and don't touch the propane. I'll be back as soon as I can."

My words tumble all over themselves as I brush a quick kiss over Bun's curls and hunt my shoes in the pile by the door.

I'm not exactly certain how far this Guardian is, but I have the bad feeling I'm going to have to run to make it in time.

Chapter 196: Grace: Unwanted Interruption

Chapter 196: Grace: Unwanted Interruption

Seven minutes. That's all I have left.

I sprint down the street, phone clutched in my sweaty palm as I check the map for the fifth time in thirty seconds. The little blue dot of my location inches painfully slowly toward the destination marker. This app doesn't bother with luxuries like street names or turns—just a straight line cutting through buildings, yards, and whatever else stands between me and this mysterious Guardian.

My lungs burn, legs already turning to jelly. I'm no stranger to running away from danger, but there's a huge difference between running on demand and running out of fear.

When I'm afraid, I don't notice things like how my thighs ache and I have a stitch in my side and how my breathing's getting too short and shallow. Adrenaline takes over and I just go until I can't go anymore.

But now I'm forcing every extra step. Running for thirty seconds? Doable. A minute? Sure. Three minutes straight? Torture.

Had I known this was going to happen, I would have started working out days ago. Maybe trained like I was going to enter a marathon.

Behind me, there are shifters shadowing my every move, probably not even breathing hard. They've been following me since I burst out of the camper, probably watching my every move to feed gossip to the pack. Or maybe wait until I'm even farther and more isolated to bully me to tears.

Too bad. There's a scary little app in my phone far more terrifying than the shifters I grew up with.

I cut across someone's front yard, earning a startled curse from an older shifter out watering her herb garden.

"Sorry!" I gasp, not slowing down.

My destination is still too far, and—

A hand clamps onto my arm, yanking me backward with enough force I nearly topple over. The world spins as I'm whirled around, meeting vicious green eyes.

Ellie.

She's exactly as beautiful as I remember—long black hair framing a perfect face, emerald eyes, pretty nose. But now her flawless features are twisted with something feral, something unhinged as her lip curls into a snarl.

"Let me go!" I snap, trying to wrench free.

My arm doesn't budge an inch in her grip. My human strength is nothing against hers, and we both know it. I glance at my phone screen—6:42 and counting down.

"Why the hell are you back?" she hisses, her nails digging into my skin. They're the sharp, pointy kind of manicured nails, and they hurt like hell when paired with her level of power.

I pull again, fighting back a wince as her grip tightens. "Why do you care? I'm not going after your precious mate, so you don't have to worry about that." She can have Rafe in all his disgusting glory.

Her face contorts as she demands, "What did you say to my father?"

"Your father?" I blink, genuinely confused, temporarily pausing at trying to regain ownership of my own limb. "Seriously? I've never even met your father." How she expects a human girl to contact the alpha of another pack, I just can't fathom.

Her eyes narrow dangerously. "Don't lie to me, you wicked little bitch."

As if anyone on this planet would think I'm lying...

She starts dragging me sideways, toward a narrow alley between houses. For the first time, I realized her hair's a mess instead of neatly brushed, and there are dark purplish bruises on her arms and legs.

Strange.

Not quite as strange as how she's acting, though.

"It all started with you, and I'm going to end it," she mutters, and I flinch.

Panic floods my system. The shifters who were following me haven't moved a muscle to help, of course. They're loyal to Rafe, which means they're loyal to their Luna.

A quick glance at my phone shows she's wasted twenty seconds of my precious minutes.

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about!" I struggle harder, digging my heels in. "Leave me alone, for fuck's sake! You can have Rafe—I don't want him!"

The back of Ellie's hand connects with my face so fast I don't even see it coming. My head snaps sideways, and I hit the ground hard, my knees scraping against the pavement. Blood fills my mouth as my lip splits open. Still, she doesn't release my arm, and I'm left dangling awkwardly from her grip.

"Shut up! I know what you are. You filthy little whore. What tricks have you pulled?"

I can't help but flinch when she raises her hand again, but I meet her gaze squarely. "I haven't pulled any tricks."

But my heart beats traitorously as I wonder what she means when she says she knows what I am. Does it mean Ellie knows about the App? About Anchors and Chaos and all the crazy shit still making my mind twist into pretzels to understand?

A contemptuous laugh bubbles from her throat. "No? Then explain how a worthless human like you caught not only my mate's attention but the Lycan King's as well?" Her voice drops to a silky purr. "Don't worry though. Once I've mangled their precious little human—maybe taken a limb or two—they'll both lose whatever ardor they hold for you."

My blood freezes. This isn't just bullying or intimidation anymore. The gleam in her eyes tells me everything I need to know—Ellie has completely fucking lost it. Cuckoo and bonkers, but with the ability to kill someone and hide the evidence if she so wishes.

"Let me go!" I scream, true panic flooding my system. She starts dragging me across the ground toward the alley, and I swear I can feel my shoulder socket straining. My free hand claws at the pavement, fingernails breaking.

Something hot and electric pulses under my skin, building with my desperation, and I snap, "Get off me, you psycho bitch!"

The words tear out of my throat with the taste of coppery blood and with it all comes a rush of... something.

It surges through my veins, races under my skin, and aims straight for the place where her slender fingers bite into my flesh.

There's a crack like thunder in my ears. A flash of blinding light. And Ellie is suddenly airborne.

Her body flies backward, slamming into a parked car with enough force to dent the door. She crumples to the ground, momentarily stunned, her face a mask of shock and rage.

I stare at my arm where her fingers had been. There's no mark, no bruise—nothing to explain what just happened.

For a single moment, nobody moves. The shifters who'd been following me stand frozen in disbelief. Ellie blinks at me from the ground, her expression morphing from surprise to murderous fury.

I don't wait to see what happens next. I grab my phone and run.

Chapter 197: Grace: Dark Fashion

Chapter 197: Grace: Dark Fashion

Don't let anyone know I'm your mate, I'd told Caine with all the confidence of a girl whose borne countless hours of bullying in this pack.

Past Grace is Stupid. Capital S and all.

Granted, I had no idea Ellie would jump from basic bullying to attempted murder, but whatever—I should have known it was a possibility when her fated mate was sneaking around behind her back to try and keep me as his little side piece lover.

Wolves don't play when it comes to their mates, and a girl like Ellie has too much pride to ever lose to a human like me.

At least if Caine had stayed with me, she wouldn't have had the balls to grab me as soon as I ran off on my own.

Then again, she's clearly lacking any intelligence or rationality whatsoever, so who knows. Maybe it would have made it all worse.

I mean, she even thinks I've been talking to her father!

Hopefully he's the cause behind all her bruises. She clearly needs a stronger hand in parenting.

I glance at my phone again and vault over a fence, shocking myself with the fluid motion. Since when can I do parkour? My body launches over the wooden slats like I've been clearing obstacles my whole life instead of ducking pack bullies.

No time to question it now. The Guardian dot on my screen pulses brighter as I close in. I'm moving fast—unnaturally fast. Not werewolf fast, but definitely not normal-human-girl-who-gets-winded-walking-up-stairs fast either.

The shifters who were tailing me have disappeared from view, which isn't as comforting as it sounds. They can track my scent as easily as reading a neon sign. But right now, beating this timer matters more than whatever game of supernatural cat-and-mouse Ellie's forced me to play.

I skid to a stop when my phone indicates I've reached the destination, with two minutes and twelve seconds to spare. My lungs burn like I've inhaled fire. I double over, one hand clutching my side where a stitch pulses with each labored breath.

Nothing.

Nobody.

Just an empty parking lot surrounding an abandoned building—the old alpha lodge. Half of it stands charred and crumbling, a skeleton of its former grandeur after the fire that ripped through it a couple decades ago. I don't know the full story, just fragments.

"Hello?" I gasp out, checking the map once again.

Yep. This is the right place.

I gulp down air, trying to stand straight despite the knife-like pain in my side. I smack at the stitch, as if I can physically beat the cramp into submission. Each breath hurts, but I force myself upright, spinning in a slow circle to scan my surroundings.

Still empty.

My phone dings. The countdown has vanished, replaced by a notification.

A new private message.

[CAERIEL: Good job. You can go back now.]

That's it? I ran halfway across town, probably making myself a target for every shifter with a grudge, for this dismissive little message?

And who the fuck is this Caeriel person?

Since the chat originated from the Divinity app and is (I think) from an approved personage of... whatever this stupid app does, I type back:

[GRACE HARPER: Are you the person I was supposed to meet?]

The response is immediate.

[CAERIEL: Consider us met.]

I stare at my screen, rage building in my chest. This cryptic bullshit is all I get for my troubles?

[GRACE HARPER: That's it? You made me run all the way here just to send me a text message?]

Three dots appear, disappear, appear again. Just like text messages. It makes me wonder what came first—the app or the egg, so to speak.

Then:

[CAERIEL: The journey matters. Your capacity needed testing.]

I kick at a loose piece of gravel, watching it skitter across the cracked pavement. It's entirely possible I'm shooting myself in the foot with my angry sass, but forgive me for being a little pissed off.

[GRACE HARPER: My "capacity"? For what? Running? I could've told you I'm not exactly track team material.]

[CAERIEL: And yet you arrived with time to spare, outpacing shifters. Interesting for someone who claims human limitations, isn't it?]

My breath catches.

Even the slowest pack member can outpace a human, probably with both ankles broken. And the fence jump? Not exactly in my usual repertoire of skills.

[GRACE HARPER: Who are you?]

[CAERIEL: Ask Lyre.]

Lyre. Of course.

[GRACE HARPER: Are you one of her weird creepy friends?]

I wonder if he's part of the fan club.

The typing indicator pulses for nearly thirty seconds before his reply appears.

[CAERIEL: Better.]

I'm about to respond when movement at the edge of the parking lot catches my eye. A figure appears—tall, impossibly slender, dressed all in black. Carrying a giant, ornate scythe... and a phone.

It's obviously the Grim Reaper. With a phone.

Seriously, a *phone*.

My heart drops.

The figure stops about twenty feet away. It's a man—or at least man-shaped. His pale skin gleams in the shadow of his oversized hood, and long black hair falls past his shoulders, framing a face of such severe beauty it hurts to look at him directly.

At first, I thought he was wearing some sort of giant, creepy Grim Reaper cloak, but now I can see it's some fancy, somewhat archaic-styled long jacket with a deep hood.

The scythe is still scary, up close or afar.

"Caeriel...?"

He nods.

Taking an awkward step back, I glance at his scythe again. "Are you here to take me to the underworld? Did all that running kill me? Am I dead now?"

Note: Thinking you're dead has a severe side effect of running mouth syndrome.

His beautiful face frowns at me. "No."

Okay. Not dead. Cool. I'll take it.

My fingers tremble, and my phone falls to the ground with a clatter. The screen spiders on impact, and I curse softly.

I have no idea how much the phone costs, but I do know I definitely have no idea how to replace it.

Caeriel leans down to pick it up, waving a hand over it before giving it back to me with a fully intact screen.

I take it with both hands, feeling suddenly reverent to this strange man with his gothic attire and terrible treatment. "Thanks."

He leans forward. "Since you're thankful, you can do me a favor."

Alarm bells ring, and I step back. He has far too much interest written all over his face. "I'm sorry. I have a boyfriend." Should I have said *mate* instead? But that would be a little weird.

His face rearranges itself into another gorgeous frown.

Chapter 198: Grace: No Effect on Her Chastity

Chapter 198: Grace: No Effect on Her Chastity

"Fascination with the banal has never been one of my vices," Caeriel says, sounding displeased and... snooty.

It takes a little longer than I'd like to admit for his insults to pierce through the haze of confusion over meeting a Grim Reaper (*with a phone!*) in an abandoned parking lot, but once it does, I frown in his direction. "Maybe ask for favors less creepily, then."

This man can probably kill me with a flick of his wrist, but somehow I can't help the snark coming out of me every time I talk.

I don't like him.

He doesn't seem like a good person.

And I really hope he isn't Lyre's friend, because we might have to have a small chat about who she keeps around her. I know she isn't super fond of Caine, but at least Caine wouldn't make me run to meet him and then make me leave...

Then again, he might do it to someone else.

Still, something in my gut insists Caeriel is bad news bears, and I have no interest in becoming friends with the man.

Caeriel rubs a slender, pale finger against his forehead as he lets out a calm, distinctly condescending sigh.

"Rest assured, any favors would have no effect on your chastity."

Then he looks at me with faint disgust, his eyes going from my head to my toes in one smooth, dismissive flick.

Well, excuse me for reading his strangely intent aura wrong.

I cross my arms over my chest, my fingers digging into my arms as I mutter, "I don't think we're close enough for favors, though."

His lips twist, then tighten into a thin line, and his silver eyes narrow slightly.

"Did she tell you about me?" His voice drops lower, and the intensity of his presence increases. A familiar oppression makes it hard to breathe in the suddenly thick air.

The hairs on my arms stand up and my stomach twists. Warning signals go off in every corner of my brain. Yeah. This is definitely the guy Lyre didn't want to talk about, and I'm kind of starting to see why.

This man's got obsession written all over him.

"Who?" I ask, playing stupid.

"Lyrielle."

The way he says her name is gross, too familiar and foreign. There's a strange accent in the way he says it, not like how I read it in my head, and the way he practically purrs it? No way.

If he wasn't a pale-skinned emo Grim Reaper, I'd imagine him with greased-back hair and a smarmy smile.

I eye him warily, trying not to let my unease show too plainly on my face. My pulse quickens as Caeriel takes a deliberate step forward, and the air grows even denser, making it impossible to breathe through my nose.

"Tell me exactly what Lyrielle has said," he demands, his voice quiet but carrying an unmistakable command. "Every inflection. Every syllable."

His eyes meet mine with unshakable fervor, and no matter how I try to drag my gaze away, I can't.

A cold shiver runs down my spine.

My throat tightens.

"Didn't you say I can leave?" I manage, even if the words come out in little more than a squeak. "I think I'll leave now."

The countdown is over. I've fulfilled whatever bizarre obligation this app demanded. And somewhere not far behind me, there are shifters probably still hunting me.

The last thing I need is to linger here with someone with an ambiguous connection to the most powerful person I know. Especially in an abandoned parking lot. When he has a giant fucking scythe.

I want to ask a lot of questions about his outfit and the scythe, but it's clear distance is the better part of life and valor here.

His perfect features arrange themselves into a scowl. "Answer my questions first."

Somehow I'm able to look away this time, and I make a whole show out of checking my phone, my fingers trembling as I swipe through random screens. Maybe if I look busy enough, he'll get the hint.

"What are you doing?"

I clear my throat, refusing to meet his stare again. I'm a little worried it'll be impossible to look away if I do. "Checking the mission parameters. And nowhere does it say I have to answer personal questions just because you want me to. In fact, my mission's complete. Done. Finished. Which means I can leave."

His expression darkens further, but I plow ahead before he can cut me off.

"It was nice to meet you," I say with forced politeness, already taking a step backward.
"But I'm busy. A lot to do, people to see. Missions to accomplish."

Caeriel steps forward for every step I take back. Not creepy at. Fucking. All.

"There's no rush to leave," he says, still calm. "We'll be spending a lot of time together."

My stomach drops. No, thank you.

But instead of thinking it, the words blurt out of my mouth with no control whatsoever:
"No, thank you!"

His lips twist into something you might consider a smile—on anyone else. On him, it just looks like he's studying an interesting bug before deciding how to squash it.

He chuckles, but the sound just sends slivers of ice through my sluggishly-working veins.
"You don't have a choice. You can't complete this mission without me. But I'll let you run for now, scared little girl. It looks like your friends are searching for you."

Son of a bitch. This must mean Ellie and her goons have caught up.

My heart rate doubles as I risk a glance over my shoulder, half-expecting to see Ellie standing there.

The parking lot remains empty.

But my gut knows he's not lying.

I'm trapped between two kinds of predators, and I have no idea which is worse.

"Go on," Caeriel says, making a shooping motion with one hand. His fingers are long and pale, like they've never seen sunlight. "Run, little girl."

The way he says it—like he's giving me permission, like I need it—sparks something hot and angry in my chest. I lift my chin, even as I take several hasty steps backward. "I don't need your permission to leave."

"No," he agrees pleasantly. "But you'll need my help eventually. Divinity doesn't make mistakes with its assignments."

I open my mouth to argue, but the sound of footsteps cuts me off. Multiple sets, moving fast. Getting closer.

Funny, I don't think my hearing's ever been quite this acute before.

Caeriel tilts his head, listening. "Three of them. The black-haired female is leading." He sounds almost bored. "She's quite angry."

"How do you—"

"Death follows anger like a faithful hound." His eyes slide back to mine, and this time I can't look away. "Her anger toward you is especially potent. What did you do to her, I wonder?"

"Existed," I mutter, taking another step back as my eyes frantically scan for my best exit strategy. "That's usually enough."

The corner of his mouth quirks up. "Fascinating."

The footsteps get louder.

I need to move, now.

"Nice to meet you. Let's not do it again."

My choice is already made as I turn and bolt.

"You'll call for me," he says, his voice carrying easily despite its softness. "Sooner than you think."

What a creep.

But I have more immediate problems.

Chapter 199: Caine: Mired

Chapter 199: Caine: Mired

CAINE

My subordinates remain quiet as they follow me to the alpha lodge, which no longer reeks of blood and death. Instead, it smells pleasantly of citrus and less pleasantly of bleach.

The Blue Mountain shifters all still move with a sense of gloom and inefficiency, though, which leads me to wonder what the hell my Lycans were doing while I was gone.

A lack of proper leadership brings out weak habits in otherwise strong wolves, and it's prevalent through this entire territory. We weren't even approached on our way in, and it wasn't as if we were hiding our presence.

I scan the lodge, taking in the shifters hunched over their tables. They sit in pockets of strained silence, barely acknowledging each other.

It's the weight of uncertainty—a pack without direction.

And where the fuck is their so-called alpha? Grace's ex should have been at the door the moment my scent hit his territory. This blatant disrespect only darkens my already foul mood.

I turn to Reggie with a scowl. "What the fuck have you all been doing here? This place is running like a wounded animal."

Reggie clears his throat, shifting his weight in the way he does when he knows I won't like what he's about to say. They all do it.

Most alphas would never allow their subordinates to have a voice, but I do.

To an extent.

"High Alpha, the neighboring packs have sent official complaints regarding Brax's death. They're also challenging the legitimacy of the new alpha's claim to the pack."

I grunt. Nothing unexpected there. A dead alpha always brings vultures, especially when the succession isn't clean. But that's not what I asked.

"That doesn't explain why this pack is functioning like it's been gutted. Where's the discipline? Where are the patrols? I walked straight into this territory without so much as a wave."

He rubs the back of his neck. "There's been a split, sir. A big one. Several members want Forest Springs to absorb Blue Mountain entirely. Believe they'd be better off under established leadership."

My jaw tightens. "And the others?"

"Others have sided with the new Alpha, Raphael. They're loyal to the bloodline, following tradition."

As expected.

"That still doesn't explain this mess."

Reggie's eyes flick to the side before meeting mine again. "There's a third faction, small but vocal. They reject both options. They want to establish their own Alpha through the old way—combat trials. Strongest wolf leads."

I stare at him coolly, my patience thinning with every second. "The Alpha has already been chosen and established, with the approval of the Lycan Throne."

He holds out his hands in a slight shrug, a gesture that borders on insubordination. On any other day, his drawl would earn him a fist to the face. "With all due respect, High Alpha, a certain king wandered off to chase a human girl right after destroying the stability of a pack. Things weren't exactly handled in the proper manner."

My frown would send most wolves cowering. Reggie holds his ground, but his scent shifts to something more cautious.

Yes, I allow my people to have a voice.

But I don't stand for insubordination.

His spine straightens as my dominance leaks out, and he clears his throat. "My apologies, High Alpha."

I bare my teeth at Reggie, letting a low growl rumble through my chest. "Don't open your mouth if you can't filter your filth."

He averts his gaze immediately, the proper response when I flex even a fraction of my dominance. It isn't worth punishing him further—I need my men cohesive, especially in this shitshow of a territory. The bitter tang of discord hangs in the air.

Dylan steps forward, his weathered face impassive. He's always been the steady one, more diplomat than brawler. "High Alpha, where is our Beta? I expected him to return with you."

The mention of Jack-Eye pulls at a loose thread of irritation. He should be here, handling this mess while I deal with more important matters—like Grace and whatever the fuck is happening with her. Instead, he's off chasing Lyre's skirts and fighting who-knows-what.

I conveniently overlook the part where I assigned him to do those very things.

Of course you do.

"He's on a mission." I keep my voice clipped, offering nothing further. "He'll return when it's done."

Dylan's eyes narrow slightly, but he nods. He's been around long enough to recognize when I'm withholding details, but he's also smart enough not to push.

"Understood." He shifts his weight, glancing at the scattered pack members around us before lowering his voice. "If I may suggest, High Alpha—a formal forum would be appropriate. The leaders of each faction, including this standing Alpha, should present their cases. Perhaps representatives from the neighboring packs that filed complaints should attend as well."

I run my hand through my hair, barely containing the snarl building in my throat. This political bullshit is precisely why I've always hated territorial disputes. Blood and claws are cleaner. Faster. But ignoring the proper channels creates more problems than it solves.

And all of this—every fucking bit of it—is my job. My responsibility.

Plus, I started it by killing Brax without taking a second to consider the consequences.

Still, resentment burns in my gut. It's more time away from Grace and the children, leaving me mired in pack politics until my teeth ache from not sinking them into someone's throat.

"Make it happen," I grunt, already calculating how long this will take. Too long. "And send the current Alpha pup to my room. Immediately."

Dylan nods sharply. "Your previous room on the second floor is prepared for you, High Alpha."

At least that's something. I stride away without dismissal—I don't need to excuse myself from my own men. Wolves part before me, their scents spiking with a mixture of fear and curiosity as I climb the stairs to what was once Brax's domain.

Then I pause.

Reggie—go keep an eye on the children.

Better not to leave them unattended, especially when I'm about to be busy.

Chapter 200: Grace: Furnado

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Each breath is little more than a desperate gasp as I vault over another fence. This new speed still feels alien in my body—like someone downloaded parkour skills directly into my muscles while I wasn't looking.

I leap from a shed roof to a fence top, my mental map of the Blue Mountain territory flickering like a half-remembered dream. No time to check my phone. No time to slow down.

Can't hear Ellie and her goons anymore, but that means nothing. Wolves move silent as shadows when they want to. And they definitely want to right now.

Where the fuck am I supposed to go?

Back to the camper means leading Ellie straight to the kids. The image of her near Bun makes my stomach twist into knots. And the alpha lodge is too far—Caine might be there, but I'd never make it without getting caught.

And, considering how our relationship telepathy is going, who *knows* the consequences of going there. Though it's better than dying.

I spot the camper through a gap between houses, painfully close. I veer right instead, away from the children.

Better me than them.

One more fence. I gather momentum, pushing off from a garden planter, and launch myself over—

"OOF!"

My body slams into something solid. *Someone* solid. Arms and legs tangle as we tumble, sharp pain shooting through my hip and leg as we roll. When we stop, I'm straddling a body, my hands pressed against a familiar back.

"What the fuck?" Andrew groans beneath me, his face half-buried in dirt.

"Shit! Sorry." I scramble off him, my hip throbbing where it collided with his shoulder blade, or something else pointy and hard. "I didn't see you!"

He flips over, spitting out a mouthful of dirt. "Since when do you drop out of the sky like a human missile?"

His irritation vanishes instantly when he sees my face. Whatever I look like, it sobers him immediately. "They're after you."

I nod.

"Damn. I was hearing a lot of chatter across the pack link, but..." His face twists into annoyance as he looks in the direction I came. "Hurry up and get to the kids. I'll deal with this."

Hah.

Like Andrew can deal with Ellie.

But his face is set and his eyes are dark as he pulls out his phone. When I don't move, he looks at me again with impatience. "Get out of here!"

I hesitate, glancing from Andrew back toward the camper. Even in this moment, I'm not entirely sure how far I can trust him.

But a desperate victim can't exactly throw away allies.

"Thanks," I manage to squeeze out between pants, the word feeling inadequate paired with my long-held suspicion of his motives.

"Go," he snaps, not even looking at me and completely unaware of the guilt scrawled all over my face.

The last glimpse I catch is his determined expression as he pulls out his phone. Time to cross my fingers he can actually handle Ellie and her pack of loyal attack dogs. He is Rafe's best friend, but...

Well.

Things change when mates are involved. Especially mates who've become Luna to the pack.

My lungs burn with each stride, the supernatural speed from earlier still coursing through me but fading. Every step is slower than the last, my muscles starting to feel wobbly and jelly-like.

Then I can hear Sadie's muffled frenzy of barking.

I force more speed out of my exhausted muscles, barely making it up the steps. A quick yank of the door shows it's locked, which is a good thing but mildly irritating in the moment.

I pound on it with a closed fist. "Open the door! It's me!"

The lock clicks, and the door swings open to reveal Ron's worried face, Bun balanced on his hip. Her eyes are wide, three fingers shoved into her drooling mouth, and Sadie's barking doubles in volume.

"Grace, what's—"

I don't hear the rest because two furry missiles launch themselves out the door before I can hop inside.

The white cat slips between my legs like a snake, while Sadie slams against my knees with enough force to nearly topple me backward down the stairs.

"What the—Sadie, no!" I grab at nothing as they both dash past me, their bodies aimed like arrows in the direction I just came from. The cat's back arches, fur standing on end as it hisses, a sound so vicious it seems impossible from its elegant form. Sadie's barks turn deeper, more threatening than I've ever heard from her.

Huh.

I cock my head, momentary confusion cutting through my panic. They're facing Ellie's direction, not cowering behind me.

At least they're loyal, I guess.

If somewhat stupid.

Can a cat and dog stand up to wolf shifters? The answer is no. Unequivocally so.

"Grace?" Ron's voice pulls me back to reality. Bun sneezes, her tiny hands clutching his shirt for balance with the force of it. "Are you okay? You look like—"

"Get inside," I snap, waving him back into the camper as I remember I'm in frantic urgency. "Now!"

He hesitates, his eyes darting between me and the animals. "But Sadie—"

"I said get inside where it's safe!" My voice comes out too sharp and shrill, but there's no time for gentle. Not with Ellie potentially seconds away and Andrew's efficacy as a guard in question.

Ron steps back obediently, pulling Bun closer to his chest. She buries her face in his shoulder, still staring at me with wide eyes.

"Get in here!" I shout at the animals while motioning behind me again for Ron to retreat further inside.

He finally complies, but I remain frozen on the steps, torn between safety and responsibility. Sadie continues her frenzied barking, hackles raised. The white cat prowls in tight circles, raising its head in yowling little growls.

They're my responsibility now, aren't they? These weird, possibly supernatural animals that have attached themselves to our bizarre little family. But they're being complete assholes, not listening to a single command, and Ellie is somewhere behind me with every intention of tearing my arms from my body.

Sadie's barking reaches a new pitch of hysteria, her entire body vibrating with the force of it, and I keep thinking about what a terrible person I'd be if she mutilated the pets because I was too scared to bring them inside.

"Fuck it," I mutter, abandoning rational thought as I lunge toward them.

I grab Sadie's collar with one hand, my fingers barely getting purchase on the leather as she twists and pulls. With my other arm, I scoop up the white cat, who immediately becomes a hissing, clawing furnace.