

Grace of a Wolf –

Chapter 211: Grace: Ron's Not Like the Others

Caine and the Lycan both look a little too smug when they look in my direction, leaving me feeling a little uneasy, like I'm missing something. But the feeling's not nearly as strong as the shock from watching Fenris take a bite out of someone's shoulder.

Ron's finger taps against the back of my hands, where I've plastered them over his eyes to save his innocent teenage soul.

"Can I look yet?"

I stare at the now-conscious Lycan's mangled shoulder. Blood flows freely from the bite wound, and yet both men are standing there like it never even happened. He's even *smiling*.

"You should probably just go inside," I tell Ron uncertainly. New to parenting or not, even I know children shouldn't be exposed to this level of violence. I very clearly remember my dad covering my eyes and my mom covering my ears during certain parts of superhero movies at the tender age of six, and those were the ones made for kids.

He snorts. "I can assure you, I've seen worse."

And he probably has. It does give me a little pause, but I defend his innocence to the death with a faint, "That's not the point."

"Actually, it kind of is," Ron argues, then wraps his fingers around my wrist and pulls my hand down by force. He's stronger than I expected him to be, leaving me a little nonplussed.

The Lycan only catches his interest for a second. "Oh, it's not even that bad."

I stare at him in disbelief, then back at the wound where Fenris's teeth tore through muscle. "Don't make it sound so normal," I say, feeling queasy as another pulse of blood oozes down.

Ron looks at me and snorts again. "Welcome to shifter life, Grace. Are you sure you were raised in a pack?"

"Yes!" My attention successfully diverted, I fight the childish urge to stomp my feet. It won't help me gain some sort of parental authority in his eyes. "I lived here for six years, under the previous Alpha."

"Was it peaceful?"

"Very." Old, instinctive pride has me prattling on, "Alpha had complete control over the pack and a great rapport with the neighboring packs. It was rare for us to even have an issue with rogues..."

But my voice trails off as I realize I'm still speaking like Alpha's proud daughter, without even thinking about it. My tongue twists like it would from eating sour candy and I grimace.

But the teenager doesn't seem to notice as he says, "Oh, they must all be weak, then."

I blink. "How is that so?"

"There's no such thing as a strong wolf pack without violence. Even I know that."

The way he talks, so matter-of-fact, makes my skin crawl a little. "What do you mean?"

"Um. Having a strong leader raises strong wolves. We're all attracted to a strong alpha, which means we grow up stronger ourselves. Didn't you know a strong alpha's leadership causes more alphas to be born?"

I blink. "No. Isn't it completely from bloodline?"

"It's like, seventy-five percent bloodline and twenty-five percent alpha. It's why rogues almost never birth alphas, and the Lycan Pack has more alphas per birth than other packs."

"Isn't that because they're... Lycans?"

"No, it's because they're already strong."

I squint at Ron, not sure if I should believe him or not. On one hand, he's even younger than I am. On the other, he's literally grown up as a shifter, so he would know. "That's not what they taught in class here."

"Of course not." He rolls his eyes. "Why would they teach a weaker pack they're weak? He was probably hiding it to seem like he was a strong alpha."

"No, he wasn't weak..." He was well-respected in the area and had good leadership. But I don't really know details beyond that. It wasn't like Brax ever really taught me anything; I'm just repeating what I've heard over time.

"Nah, he's weak. If your ex is the the new alpha of this pack, it means he was the strongest after your alpha, right?"

"Right."

Ron shakes his head with a sneer. "He's weaker than I am. The reason you didn't see violence is because no one was strong enough to challenge anyone. Alphas fight a lot. Alpha challenges happen all the time when young alphas grow up to adulthood. Stuff like that," and he points at the Lycan and Caine, who are smiling strangely in our direction, "is normal."

"Weren't you raised with Owen?" As in, not in a pack.

"Yeah, so?"

"How do you know all this?"

He rolls his eyes. "Who doesn't?"

Me, apparently.

"Alpha... sorry, Brax always said violent wolves were uneducated wolves. Did Fiddleback have a lot of alpha challenges...?"

"No one lived long enough to challenge him."

Oh.

My heart drops a little at the dark turn our conversation's taken. Try saving a kid from seeing some gore and suddenly things go sideways.

Rubbing at my eyebrow, I let out a little sigh. "Okay. I get it. This level of violence is nothing and normal and I shouldn't overreact."

Ron leans forward with a strange gleam in his eye. "Was your Alpha really considered strong in this area?"

I hesitate before nodding. Brax's reputation is what it is, even if it's starting to feel a little... spoonfed, compared to what Ron's saying. "Yeah. He was."

"Interesting." His expression turns thoughtful, but I have no idea what he's thinking.

Caine comes toward us then, with the Lycan now nowhere to be seen. It's a little relieving to know he isn't around; his hatred toward me isn't the kind of thing to subside so easily, right? No matter what orders Caine gives.

"Brax was considered a strong alpha for the area due to his strength in diplomacy," he says calmly, his gaze resting on Ron. "He had strong backings among the other packs and

led a large faction. While we usually prioritize a more physical strength, Brax had his own talents to make up for his lack of physical strength. It's how he lasted so long."

It starts off a little shocking to hear anything even mildly complimentary toward Brax coming out of the mouth of the man who killed him, but the rest of it kind of sounds... not so much.

"With his passing, the alliances he's created will fall over the next few years," Caine continues, his gray eyes fixed meaningfully on Ron. "It will be a good chance for those who want to take it."

My spine stiffens as I look between them. The subtext isn't even subtext—it's practically written in neon. "Are you trying to say Ron should challenge and take over one of these packs?"

He's a kid. A teenager. He should be worrying about normal teenage things, not pack politics and alpha challenges.

They both ignore me completely.

"You think that's a good idea, too?" Ron asks Caine, his voice steady but excitement visible in his shining, dark eyes. His hands keep clenching and unclenching, and I've never seen him so animated.

The Lycan King says, still calm in the face of adolescent exuberance, "As long as you train for it. You can follow me to learn if you're interested."

"Hell yeah, I am."

Something in my chest twinges—a strange mix of pride and loss. When did my reliable, protective Ron start thinking about being an alpha? About leading? I look between them, feeling suddenly like I'm watching something being snatched from my grasp.

"Don't you think he's a little young?" I try again.

Caine's gaze flicks to me, then back to Ron. "In five years he'll be the perfect age to spread his wings. Don't you want him to be successful?"

The question makes me feel too selfish. Of *course* I do. But this feels too fast, too soon. I just found these kids, and already one's planning his departure.

Ron claps my shoulder, his expression unexpectedly serious. "Don't worry. I'll make sure there's room for you in the pack, too."

My heart warms a little.

"She won't need a place in your pack."

The possessive edge in Caine's voice could easily be annoying, but something warm flutters in my heart instead. But he isn't the problem here, so I focus on the teenager.

"Oh, that's sweet," I tell Ron, meaning it despite the hollow feeling spreading through me.

He must notice something in my expression because his face softens. "Don't worry. I won't do anything when Bun is still so young. It would put her in danger."

"I can keep Bun safe," the Lycan King interjects, sounding genuinely insulted that his protection would be questioned.

A faint smile tugs at my lips, but my heart breaks every time I look at Ron's face. The kid isn't even shaving yet, and he's already considering fighting for his own pack. Though—I squint hard—it does kind of look like he has some dark hairs growing on his upper lip.

Damn it.

My shoulders droop.

Ron looks at me with unexpected amusement. "How old do you think I am, Grace?"

"Fifteen?" I venture, suddenly unsure.

He nods. "I'm not a kid like the other three."

"You didn't even have a chance to be a kid," I murmur, my heart twisting painfully. "You deserve a chance to be a kid. Is it really time to be worrying about this?"

He shakes his head with the certainty of someone much older. "I need to start planning my future. I need to make a safe place for people like us. Like you, too. Fiddleback isn't the only place we're in danger."

All this time, while I've been thinking of him as just the oldest of the children, he's been carrying this burden. This vision... How many nights has he lain awake, planning how to protect the others if and when Owen can no longer do so?

"You'll follow me starting tomorrow," Caine says with the casual authority of someone who expects to be obeyed.

"But he's so young..." I protest weakly, knowing I've already lost this argument.

His expression doesn't change. "An alpha's heir learns starting before the age of ten. He's already late."

My mouth snaps shut. There's no arguing with the weight of shifter tradition behind his words. Ron isn't just a kid—he's a potential alpha. And in their world, that means a lot.

Ron ruffles my hair with a grin. "Don't worry. You'll still be my big sister even when I'm the alpha of my own pack."

He's thinking five years ahead, and I'm still struggling to adjust to today.

I smack his hands away, a lump forming in my throat. How is it possible to feel proud and heartbroken at the same time? "Okay. I'll hold you to it."

Meanwhile, the Lycan King stares at us with a deep frown before he steps over to my side. He leans down, his hot breath brushing my ear as he whispers, "Were you planning on leaving me, Grace?"

Chapter 212: Grace: The Great Laundry Dilemma

Somehow, "You'll start following me tomorrow" turned into Ron asking to follow Caine today, leaving me alone with three younger children and a bleeding new-mama heart, with a side hustle of arousal thanks to Caine's wicked little whispers in my ear, which we are *not* going into, thank you very much.

I'd dodged the question with all the alacrity of a gazelle under hunt (if said gazelle had four broken legs) and I don't think my blush faded for at least fifteen minutes, but that is *not* the issue here, okay? Not. The. Issue.

Seriously, my own (kind of) son-slash-younger-brother just ditched me to follow his dad (???) to bring-your-son-to-work day.

The whiplash is real and my thoughts are getting seriously parenthetical. I haven't been a mom long and now it feels like I need to worry about my child's rent and college tuition, before I've even figured out my own...

Note to self: Don't adopt older children, they grow too fast.

Bun grabs my leg, her tiny fingers latching onto my jeans as she babbles something that sounds vaguely like "Go-go-da-ma-ba" with a whole slew of other sounds and strange inflections mixed in. I have no fucking clue what she's saying, and little rabbit ears have popped out from her dark curls, twitching frantically.

My heart melts into my freaking socks (also in low supply, now that I'm thinking about it) and I scoop her up, savoring the warm weight against my chest. At least someone still needs me and doesn't dash off to do boring alpha things with boring alpha men. She immediately jams her face into the crook of my neck, her soft baby breath reeking of applesauce and peanut butter.

Over Bun's head, I survey the remaining chaos—Sara and Jer are sprawled on opposite ends of the couch, their shirts decorated with a modern art masterpiece of juice, applesauce, and what I think might be chocolate.

Please let it be chocolate.

"Do either of you have any other clothes to change into?" I ask, already knowing the answer in my heart.

I know, okay? Grace Harper is not good mom material. Grace Harper did not do laundry. Laundry is like, tier one mothering instincts. Clothes are important. Grace Harper does not remember to do things like laundry when she's on the run from weird supernatural bullshit.

All the fun stuff in this camper, and Lyre skimped on a freaking washing machine...

Would be nice about now.

Sara shakes her head as she picks at a crusty stain on her sleeve.

"Nope," Jer says, not even bothering to look at his own clothing as he grabs a cup of juice from the cupholder at the end of the couch.

Damn.

I take a deep breath, trying to assure myself everything's fine and the world isn't on fire. I lived here for six years. I know this pack's territory like the back of my hand—well, at least the parts of it with roads.

But that was before Ellie and her urge to bury me six feet under.

Taking three kids to the laundromat sounds like a great way to get in massive trouble, but also being naked isn't really a great option.

My phone dings, and I shift Bun to my hip to check it.

[ASSIGNED MISSION: Investigate the compromised artifact located at 'Wash-N-Were', 3047 N. Moonlight Ave.]

I stare at it, unblinking.

Does the App read minds?

It has to read minds.

Obviously, Wash-N-Were is the laundromat. Fantastic naming sense aside, it's clean and reasonably priced and definitely where I was going to go.

Then there's another notification beep.

[CAERIEL: Don't worry. My eyes are on you.]

Hmm. Yes. Perfect. A creepy guy watching me is exactly what I want in life.

Sure, he's probably powerful enough to keep me safe, but it doesn't mean he *will* keep me safe. Lyre seemed to think he would step up when it comes down to it, but...

I type back quickly:

[GRACE HARPER: Will you help me if Ellie's goons come after me again?]

No reply comes, leaving me with a 50/50 chance of reliable protection.

Lovely.

I stare at my hand, turning it over as if I might find instruction manual etched into my palm. The surge of power I'd used to escape Ellie would sure be helpful to call on demand.

"What's wrong?" Sara asks, her face appearing out of nowhere.

I look up, forcing a neutral expression. "Nothing. Just thinking about laundry. Any chance you two could watch Bun while I run a quick load to the laundromat?"

The words leave my mouth, and I immediately regret them. Leaving Bun with these two is like asking pyromaniacs to housesit a match factory. Stupid idea, impossible execution, a fat neon N-O in skyscraper-sized letters.

"No problem!" they chime in unison, their enthusiasm doing nothing to reassure me.

Sadie, who's been curled beneath the table, raises her head and lets out a sharp bark, and I swear I can understand exactly what she's saying: *Terrible idea, absolutely not.*

Even the cat—who wants to live under the sink forever as far as I can tell—emerges from its dark little kingdom, leaps gracefully onto the counter, and fixes me with a judgmental stare and a yodeling meow.

"Get down," I hiss at the cat, nudging it off the counter. "And you," I point at Sadie, "calm down. I'm just thinking out loud."

My head throbs. I should have held Ron back. Should have asked him to stay, explained I needed him to stick around while I got the laundry done. But I'd kind of forgotten about it all, focusing instead on how awkward it felt to go commando without thinking about the *reason* I'm commando.

More brilliant life choices, courtesy of me.

Maybe the clothes can last another day? I glance at Jer and Sara, trying to calculate just how much worse those stains could possibly—

"Oops."

The word hangs in the air for a split second, and I fight the urge to close my eyes and pretend nothing's happened.

Jer now has an empty juice cup in one hand and a fruit punch-saturated, already filthy shirt on. His pants are collateral damage to the spill.

My eye twitches involuntarily as he calmly pulls the soaking shirt over his head and tosses it onto the floor with a wet splat.

"Too bad I don't have any clothes," he announces, not sounding particularly bothered by this development as he then proceeds to yank his shorts down.

"Ew!" Sara gags. "At least take your clothes off in the bathroom like a normal person!"

"Why? I'm gonna be walking around naked anyway." Jer kicks off his shorts, then points suddenly across the room. "Wait, what's under there...?"

Sara follows his gaze. "Under where?"

"Hah! You said underwear!"

Jer bends over with a maniacal grin, now pointing directly at his sister's face.

Her expression goes from confusion to rage so fast I almost miss it. "You're underwear! Your whole family's underwear!" She grabs a throw pillow and hurls it at Jer with surprising force. "No one wants to see your stupid Spider-Man underwear! Get out!"

"It's Venom, you idiot!" he retorts, like that helps literally *anything* about this situation.

I'm about to separate them when there's a knock at the door. A polite, unfamiliar voice calls out: "Miss Harper? I was sent by the High Alpha to watch over the children."

The tension drains from my shoulders so fast I nearly stagger. A babysitter. Caine sent a babysitter.

I love him so much in this moment, I'd tell him yes in a heartbeat if he asked to go public. Or become his Luna. Or do anything. Have twenty kids? Sure, no problem. Jump on his dick in public? Absolutely.

Wait—no. Not sure how babysitting turned into dirty thoughts, but that's a big no, and the memory of his whisper against my ear needs to be locked away until the children are in bed and I have the wherewithal to be Grace-with-needs and not Grace-who-needs-to-do-laundry-and-doesn't-have-panties.

Seriously, the desperation of a single mother knows no bounds, apparently. No idea how they do it, because I'm already lost.

Ignoring the fight happening in real time in my living room, Sadie's sudden surge of barking, the cat jumping from counter to couch to the dinette table to swat at the dog beneath it, and literally everything to do with decorum or manners, I dash to the door and yank it open, my hopeful gaze landing on the younger, vaguely familiar-looking Lycan standing in front of me.

He was definitely here before, but I don't remember his name or anything about him. Bun, still on my hip, waves at him.

"Ha-yo," she chirps, with the cutest little voice and oh my Goddess, why is she so adorable?

For a second, I want to just nom on her cute little toddler cheeks and bask in the joy and glory of a sweet, freshly bathed baby, but there are important issues at hand, a naked child in my living room, and a full-on brawl starting.

So I blurt out the most important question: "Please tell me you have experience with babies."

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Randall or Raymond or whatever his name is wades into the chaos like Super Nanny, unfazed even when I explain the laundry fiasco to him.

Ten minutes later, the kids are in front of the TV re-watching a movie about a blocky world, Jer is dressed in clean clothes, even if they're a size too large, and Randall-Raymond-Whoever hasn't even said a word about her bunny ears and cat whiskers coming and going.

He acts like this is just a normal Monday, and even politely offers to have someone do the laundry for me. But I shake my head, cognizant of my phone burning a hole in my pocket.

It isn't like the random someone can do my laundry *and* my mission.

"I'm fine. I'll go on my own."

Randall-Raymond-Whoever frowns. "High Alpha wouldn't be pleased—"

"There's nothing wrong with doing a load of laundry."

"I'm here to keep you safe—"

"The children are our biggest concern."

"If you'll wait a moment, I can call someone—"

"No, thank you." It isn't like the offer isn't tempting, but I don't need some random Lycan breathing down my neck while I try to hunt down a mysterious artifact in the local laundromat.

Seriously; it isn't like I haven't been there before. There's *nothing* in that building to warrant the label of 'artifact'.

RRW looks hesitant, and I have the feeling he's talking to Caine from inside his head.

In the wise words of someone, somewhere, sometime, it's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission. So I paste on my sunniest smile and clap my hands at the kids.

"Be super nice to Mr. Raymond while I'm gone, okay?"

The Lycan clears his throat. "It's Randy, ma'am."

"Oh. I'm sorry, Randall." My apology is sincere, though my attention is a little spotty as I haul the straps of the first backpack over my shoulders. There are two more, all stuffed to their zippers' max capacities.

"Randy." He sounds especially polite as he corrects me again, and I pause for a second.

"Right. Randy. Sorry again."

"It's fine, ma'am."

My smile feels plastic as I call out, "Kids, be nice to Mr. Randy. I'll be back in a little while with clean clothes."

Jer spins around from the TV, his dark curls bouncing as he pins me with a particularly intense stare. "You'll remember to wash my underwear, right?"

"Of course." Does he think they're kept separately from the other laundry?

"Cool." He turns back to the blocky movie without another word.

Sara, on the other hand, looks at Randy with caution, her red eyes slightly narrowed. "Is he going to kill us if you leave?"

"Of course not." My jaw would drop, but I'm already a little used to her doomsday scenarios when it comes to the Lycans. I'm surprised she isn't clutching her metaphorical pearls and moaning about being doomed like she did when Caine came around.

Then again, Randy's just a Lycan, not the Lycan *King*.

"Hmm. Okay then." She doesn't sound convinced at all, her freckles scrunching up as she eyes Randy like he's planning to cook them for dinner.

Jer snorts, not moving his attention from the TV. "Don't worry. Caine will flatten him like a pancake if he hurts us. He's our dad, remember?"

"Uh-huh," she says, clearly unconvinced by this ridiculous family cosplay we've got going.

Randy coughs lightly. "I'm your bodyguard. It's my job to do the flattening."

"See?" Jer nods vigorously. "Like a *pancake*."

My presence is no longer necessary, so I slip toward the door while they're distracted, grabbing the last two laundry-laden backpacks. Right when I make it down the steps and turn to close the door, Sadie bounds past me, tongue lolling happily, followed by the giant white cat.

"Go back inside!" I hiss, trying to shoo them back up the stairs by swinging the two backpacks in my hands.

The animals dance around, just beyond my reach. My shoulders already ache from the weight of the backpack. I haven't even started walking yet.

Randy appears at the top of the stairs, looking concerned. "Miss Harper, I think you should wait while I call someone over to drive you there."

"I'm fine," I say hastily. No way am I waiting around for some chauffeur to hover over me during my magical artifact hunt, and I'm more than a little displeased over the entire existence of this app for not only having me turn down protection, but a ride I'm crazy to refuse. "Really. I... need the exercise."

Wow.

Lamest excuse ever.

Who exercises by taking three overstuffed backpacks of laundry on a one-mile walk?

Giving up on my excuses and on corralling the animals, I start walking, glancing over my shoulder to see if Randy's closed the door yet.

He hasn't.

He watches me with a worried frown, and now I'm absolutely *positive* he's tattling on me to Caine.

Sadie and the cat follow behind me like I've been training them for years as I set off down the street. The laundromat is about a mile away.

If I make it there.

I must look like some bizarre Disney princess with my animal entourage—if Disney princesses wore jeans a size too small and borrowed t-shirts.

"You two are the worst," I mutter. "I hope you know that."

Sadie wags her tail as she picks up her pace to trot beside me. I can't see the cat since it's behind me, but I'm sure it probably looks smug. Cats always do.

The midday sun beats down on us as we walk. Blue Mountain territory looks exactly as I remember it, and it makes my heart feel a little sweet and sour. Bad or good, these are memories of an entire six years of my life. It wasn't all terrible, so it's hard to cut all emotional ties to this place.

But I definitely don't feel the urge to stay here. No way.

Once these missions are done, I'm leaving. Though I should probably ask Caine why the Lycans are still here and how long he needs to stay...

We haven't really discussed the future properly. We've somehow agreed to co-parent a bunch of adopted children together, but what about the logistics? Where are we going to live? How is this going to work?

My head hurts just thinking about it.

Or from this horrible "exercise" I've cornered myself into.

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CAINE

The moment Fenris and, a few moments later, Randy, report Grace left without any sort of protection, my head pounds.

This woman is going to be the death of me.

Of course, she isn't alone; my wolf is stalking her without her knowing, mainly because she'd be furious if she did. Thankfully, humans don't have the superior senses of shifters; it isn't hard for Fenris to stay hidden.

I grind my teeth together so hard my jaw aches and turn to Dylan. "Pick up Grace. She's on her way to the laundromat."

Dylan's weathered face remains impassive, but his eyes flicker. "Which one?"

I stare him down, my patience hanging by a thread. The question strikes me as deliberately obtuse—there can't be that many laundromats in this backwater territory.

You'd be surprised.

The Lycan clears his throat. "I'll figure it out, then."

He leaves the room without another word, boots clicking against the floor in retreat.

"What's going on?" Ron asks curiously, looking up from the stack of reports in front of him. Nothing major, just reports on the different complaints brought up by pack members and notes on what have been done to either pacify or dismiss whatever issues were brought to my people during my absence.

All things he needs to learn if he wants to become a pack alpha in the future.

"Exactly what I said." I keep my voice level, not wanting to spook the kid. "Grace is out alone, and left the children with Randy. Dylan's going to take care of her."

Ron's brows pull together, his mouth pulling down into a sharp frown. "That's strange. Grace wouldn't leave the kids with a stranger."

I wave off his concern with a sigh. "Randy's a father. He's good with children."

Fenris grumbles. *Probably better than you with women, too.*

He's not thrilled about a younger, virile male being near our mate. Neither am I, but Reggie didn't work out, and Randy's the most open-minded of the Lycans here.

Dividing my attention now would be foolish. Dylan is capable and, while he doesn't respect humans, he seems to have accepted Grace's position as someone to be protected. Though I'm sure I'll hear his complaints later.

That's the problem with letting your subordinates have a voice. They use them a little too much.

Ron shakes his head, unconvinced. "Grace doesn't seem like she would trust someone she just met."

I open my mouth to point out she's done precisely that; Lyre's a walking example. But I swallow the words back.

There's no need to tarnish her reputation in the heart of a child.

They need stability, and Grace provides it.

My irritation with her recklessness shouldn't undermine what she's built with them.

"Grace trusts my judgment," I say mildly instead.

Hah.

Ron gives me a strange look. He doesn't believe me, but he's smart enough not to say so directly.

"I think I should go back."

Crossing my arms, I lean back in my chair, meeting the teenager's gaze. "Why?"

I keep my face neutral as I watch him squirm. This is part of his education too—learning to articulate his instincts rather than just following them blindly. Reasoning through the situation.

My mind might be often muddled these days when it comes to Grace, but it's training any alpha has from a young age.

With our strength comes a volatile temper; controlling it is a necessity.

That sounds so righteous coming from you.

My eyebrow twitches. *Shall I rip out your tongue the next time you manifest?*

As if you could.

Ron's fingers crinkle the paper in his hand, as his gaze slips from mine. "I should be with them. With the children." His voice drops, not quite mumbling but close. "Sara and Jer don't know Randy well, and Bun—"

I listen without interrupting, but he cuts himself off. I tilt my head slightly, studying his face.

"Do you think I want to leave Grace or the children on their own?"

His shoulders stiffen. "No."

Dark hair falls across his forehead as he looks down at the paper he's slowly destroying, and he sets it carefully on the top of the stack, smoothing it out with a nervous touch.

I rap my knuckles against the table and sigh. "The position of an alpha comes with sacrifices," I tell him, keeping my voice even. "The children are fine; they're watching TV. If Randy reports otherwise, I'll bring you there myself."

I can almost see the thoughts warring behind Ron's eyes—the need to protect battling with his desire to learn. He hesitates, then his shoulders drop as he settles back into his chair with a soft huff of resignation.

"I must seem pretty childish to you."

"No. An alpha's protective instincts are strong. We don't want others to protect what's ours."

Ron looks at me with some curiosity. "You seem fine with it, though."

Tapping my knuckles against the table again, I keep my words mild. "Appearances are just that. Sometimes I have to let go of what I want to do what is necessary."

You say that like you wouldn't be up her ass if she'd let you. The only reason you're letting Dylan pick her up is because you're worried she's going to tear you a new one.

My eye twitches. *And what about you? Why aren't you showing her you're nearby?*

That's unrelated.

"How do you remain so calm, then?" the teenager asks, oblivious to the side conversation in my head.

By stalking her every move so she's never alone, Fenris mutters.

"I trust my people." Though Reggie's actions were regrettable, they were largely due to his misunderstanding of Grace's importance. It wouldn't have stopped me from ripping his head off if I'd been there—

"But your people tried to break into the camper," Ron points out.

My lips tighten. "Yes, I know. It won't happen again."

"How do you know?"

"They've been warned."

He goes quiet, probably thinking of Reggie's wound.

You could still kill him, Fenris opines, as if taking a bite out of our subordinate's shoulder wasn't enough.

That's because it wasn't.

The back of my hand finally rests quietly against the table as I consider it. But, as easy as it is to bring back the rage, I'm aware of how much of the responsibility lies on my shoulders. *No. It's my fault for not explaining things when I knew he hated humans.*

Huh. You're learning to be rational.

My eyes narrow. *I've always been rational.*

No, I'm the one who forces rationality onto you.

Chapter 215: Grace: Andrew's Loyalty

There's a saying somewhere about narrow roads and enemies and it seems pretty fucking accurate.

A familiar blue sedan slows to a stop beside me, and Andrew leans across the passenger seat with a frown etched deep into his forehead as he rolls down his window.

It's pointless to pretend like I don't notice, so I stop walking and wait to see what he has to say.

"What are you doing?" he asks sharply, glancing around like we're in some spy movie. His nostrils flare as he scans the area.

I adjust the heavy backpack straps digging into my shoulders; Sadie and the cat meander around my feet, completely oblivious to his presence. "Heading to the laundromat. What does it look like?"

As far as retorts go, it isn't a good one. Carrying a few backpacks doesn't scream *laundry run* at all. If anything, it looks like *I'm* on the run. But it's not like I'm about to start treating Andrew like a bosom buddy or anything.

Even if he seems to be on my side.

His eyes drop to the three stuffed backpacks I'm lugging. Doubt shadows his expression, but he says, "I'll give you a ride."

I consider my options.

Having him help isn't like having some random Lycan guard breathing down my neck. If he gets too nosy, I can always kick him to the curb. The thought of the power being back in my hands has my mental ears perking up, and I upgrade him from the mental category of enemy to frenemy.

Then, thinking about how he was willing to get Ellie off my literal back and didn't tell Rafe anything, I begrudgingly upgrade him again to friend with a question mark.

Oblivious to my mental classification system, Andrew jogs around to grab my bags and tosses them in the backseat while I slide up front, grateful for the sudden rescue. The animals hop into the back with the laundry without even an invitation.

The car smells like Andrew and the vague pine tree undertone of all Blue Mountain shifters. I roll down the window a crack, wondering why it smells so offensive after years of living with it.

"Which one?" he asks, back in the car and buckled in.

"Wash-N-Were."

"Got it."

Silence reigns for a whole block before he asks, "Why are you on your own?"

"You think bringing Bun along is a smart idea?" He's seen her random shifting.

"Oh. Right."

More silence for an entire second block, then, "Don't run around too much on your own. Ellie's backed off for now, but I don't expect it to last long."

My eyebrows shoot up with curiosity. That's right. Ellie never did come to pound on my camper, though now I regret not leading her there after seeing how the one Lycan was treated by Lyre's protective spells.

"How'd you manage that?"

He gives an awkward cough, and I'm immediately on edge. It's the kind of *oh no, how do I explain this* cough. You know the one. I know the one. He knows the one.

It's universal.

"If I told you not to eat any food except what's in the camper or what I bring to you, would you get it then?" he asks weakly.

"No," I answer without thinking, then pause. If he doesn't want me to eat other food, it's because... "Wait. Is she trying to poison us?"

"I think the proper term is drugging."

My stomach turns. If it isn't poison, then... "Please don't tell it's a lame plotline where she's going to drug us to sleep and then kidnap me, probably involving a lot of burly guys and some nude photos." Or, you know, worse. A lot worse.

Nude photos is probably the nicest of the options.

Andrew coughs again, his discomfort radiating through the car. "It is."

Of course it is.

"How do you know about it?" I demand.

"I helped her plan it."

I stare at him in disbelief. Obviously, he isn't intending on harming me if he's telling me about it, but there's just... there are standards, okay? Standards. "That's a terrible plan. Even the soapiest of operas is looking down on you. I've already been kidnapped once; how can there be a second kidnapping in the same lifetime? Come up with something different, at least."

"Look—" he grips the steering wheel tighter "—she thinks I'm on her side, and I was trying to buy a little time. It's all I could think of."

I snort and look out the window. *Standards*, okay. He could have at least come up with a better fake idea.

Now he's planted the awful ideas into Ellie's head, and I'm going to spend the rest of my stay in this territory worried she'll do it with or without his help.

Damn it. Couldn't he have come up with something else? Like a melodramatic showdown in an alley where she tells me dramatically to keep my hands off her man? Better yet, I've seen some TV shows where the other woman has money thrown at her. Why can't I be a part of those storylines?

But no, it's kidnapping again.

I sigh.

"I was just trying to help."

"It's fine." It's like pulling teeth, but I add slowly, "Good job."

Even without looking, I can sense his entire presence relaxing a little with my approval. Sighing, I prop my cheek against my fist and stare out the window, wondering what I did in my past life to cause so much drama in this one...

Speaking of which.

"Rafe thinks I've seduced you."

He brakes a little harder than necessary, and I thank seatbelts as my entire body jerks forward.

Ow.

"What?"

"He thinks you're under my spell. Blamed me because you wouldn't tell him all my secrets."

My gaze flicks over to Andrew, who looks appalled. I'm sure it's terrible to be accused of having a relationship with your best friend's ex-girlfriend—

"Damn, I hope he doesn't start any rumors. If the Lycan King hears about this..."

Oh.

That's why he's worried.

My lips quirk a little, and he glances at me with a frown.

"It's not funny, Grace. Rafe was bad enough, but Caine might actually kill me if he hears it."

I wipe the smile off my face. "Don't worry, I'll vouch for you."

My heart eases a little, though I still find it suspicious how quickly he's ditched his loyalty to Rafe. I might not be able to trust him completely, but I'm pretty sure he's on my side.

"You better," he mutters. "I spent all that time following you around to make sure you weren't getting kidnapped and sold off. It's only right to make sure your mate doesn't cut off my head."

This time, my head swings around completely. "I thought you were sticking around to spy on me."

"Of course not." He pulls into a parking spot at the familiar laundromat with a sigh.
"When I chose not to take you to Forest Springs, I chose to give up on being Rafe's Beta. I just wanted to make sure you were safe." The source of this content is find(N)ovel.net

Huh.

Maybe I should erase the question mark.

Chapter 216: Grace: Inside the Wash-N-Were

Inside the Wash-N-Were, several machines are in use, but no one's inside.

A little strange, I suppose, but it isn't uncommon for shifters to go for a little run while they wait for cycles to finish.

Still, it's creepy to be in an empty laundromat.

Thankfully, Andrew's staying in the car, though the animals are determined to follow me inside.

Sadie prowls around, sniffing every inch of floor as her fluffy tail swishes back and forth.

The white cat—still nameless, despite the many suggestions ranging from "Snowball" to "Death Claw"—jumps from machine to machine with effortless grace before settling on top of a washer mid-spin cycle. It curls into a comfortable ball, eyes half-closed, clearly preparing to sleep.

Super fucking helpful. A part of me had kind of assumed these two strange animals-but-clearly-more-than-just-animal-beings would be a little more help with the way they tagged along against my will, but nope. Find the newest release on [find\(N\)ovel.net](http://find(N)ovel.net)

Just a mundane cat and a mundane dog, doing shit-fuck for my mission.

Ignoring them both, I take the time to do the most pressing assignment: shoving our disgusting laundry into three separate machines. Thankfully, Wash-N-Were has detergent provided for those of us who forget to bring it (or don't know where Lyre has it stashed).

Coins clank as I feed them into the slots, and the washers rumble to life, blending into the sounds of already-running machines.

I glance out the window. Andrew's still in his car, head down, probably scrolling through his phone.

His loyalty's welcome, but confusing. He was Rafe's shadow, his wingman, for years. I'm tentatively positive he's a safe ally, but it still just seems... strange.

Loyalties can't change so easily, can they?

Or were they never as close as I thought they were?

Whatever. I don't have the mental bandwidth to solve that puzzle right now. I have a quest, like I'm some sort of video game character, but with less clues.

My phone feels heavy in my pocket. I pull it out and open the Divinity App, hoping for... I dunno.

Something.

Anything.

A notification. A message. A hint.

But there's nothing, except a text about a 20% off sale for diabetic supplies. I don't know a single person with diabetes.

Deleting the spam text with fierce prejudice, I glance around the laundromat with a frown.

Investigate an artifact. Sounds easy, but... what the hell am I looking for? A magical sword hidden in a dryer? A cursed amulet taped under a folding table? A haunted sock magnet that gathers missing socks from every washer and dryer in the land?

Who fucking knows.

The laundromat is bigger than it looks from the outside and incredibly clean, with signs on every machine explaining how to use them. Rows of washers and dryers line both walls and a few folding tables stand in the center.

At the back, there's a small alcove with vending machines and a bulletin board filled with self-printed business cards.

If the app won't tell me what I'm looking for, I'll have to search every inch of this place myself.

I start at the back, beside the vending machines. The bulletin board is a chaotic collage of cards—lawn care services and babysitting offers being the most prevalent. For some reason, shifters hate taking care of their lawns...

I run my fingers along the edges of the board, feeling for anything unusual.

Nothing.

I check behind the vending machines as best I can without moving them, but all I find are dust bunnies and a single ancient peppermint candy still in its wrapper.

The bathroom door has an "Out of Order" sign hanging crookedly from a single piece of tape. I push it open anyway. The lights flicker on automatically, revealing a single toilet, sink, and a small trash can. I check under the sink, behind the toilet, even lift the lid off the tank.

Empty.

Back in the main room, Sadie has moved to the far corner, her nose pressed against the baseboards, tail straight as an arrow. The cat hasn't moved, still perched on its washer, apparently asleep.

"Any hints?" I ask them both.

Sadie ignores me, intent on whatever she's sniffing.

The cat's ear twitches.

I move methodically down the row of washers and dryers, opening doors and peering into empty drums. As expected, there are no magic swords—or socks—to be found.

Not even a speck of lint.

I'm halfway through my inspection of the front counter when I notice something odd about the wall behind it. There's a slight discoloration, a rectangular patch about the size of a sheet of paper that looks newer than the surrounding paint.

I lean over the counter for a better look. It could be nothing—maybe they patched a hole, or hung something there that was later removed. But in my new life of supernatural weirdness, coincidences are rare.

My fingers brush against the discolored patch. It feels slightly warmer than the rest of the wall. Interesting.

I press harder, and—nothing happens. It's just a wall.

A random dryer dings and I jump about ten feet in the air.

Whoever the clothes belong to still hasn't returned, though.

Giving up on the weird wall discoloration, I lean against one of the folding tables and stare at the ceiling.

Maybe I need to think more literally. Artifact. What counts as an artifact? Historical objects, items of significance, things people preserve...

Things people preserve.

My eyes dart over the wall with the bulletin board. I'd glanced over the various photo frames on the wall, detailing boring things about the business's first milestones.

And the laundromat's first dollar earned.

I walk over and examine it more closely. The frame is nothing special—cheap black plastic. The dollar inside looks ordinary too, if a bit old, which is to be expected.

I lift the frame off its nail. It's lighter than I expected. Turning it over, I pop off the back panel.

The dollar slips out, along with a tiny, folded piece of yellowed paper.

My heart beats faster as I unfold it carefully, but it's blank, except for what looks like a weird maroon smear.

Damn it. I thought I was onto something...

Then my phone buzzes.

[MISSION SUCCESS: Acquired 'Blood of the Demi-Gods'. Submit sample for further testing.]

Chapter 217: Grace: Where's Sadie (and the Cat)?

The yellowed paper suddenly feels... gross.

Blood?

Demi-God or not, I highly regret not bringing gloves along on this search. Hopefully said blood doesn't transmit strange diseases.

And where the hell am I supposed to submit this thing? Does the App have a brick and mortar location? Business hours? A lab?

For one crazed second or thirty, I hold the paper to my phone, half-expecting it to disappear into the world of internet data and update my App.

Unsurprisingly, nothing happens.

"What are you doing?"

Cold, lemony breath blasts my ear and I jerk to the side in justifiably dramatic fashion, cringing my shoulder up to the side of my face to protect myself from Caeriel's breathing.

My spine does its best to shrink back against my skin, equally revulsed by how close he is. "What are you doing?"

"Observing." Pale fingers pluck the paper from my hand, and he sniffs at it, his face too handsome for his creepy behavior. "How interesting. Good job."

How did he get in? I'm pretty sure Andrew would have followed him if it was through the front door. And when, precisely, did he arrive? I didn't hear the telltale jingle.

Caeriel examines the small bit of blood-streaked paper like it's truly some ancient artifact and not a possibly hazardous biosample, and I wonder if he can get any information just from sniffing at it... or if he's just weird.

Honestly, I'm betting on weird.

"Were you watching the whole time?" I ask, even though I'm pretty sure he was, considering his earlier message.

"Mhm."

"So you were here?"

"Of course. It's my job."

I point at the paper with a disdainful flick of my finger. "Then why is this even a mission? You probably could have sniffed it out in half a second, and it took me..." I'm not sure how long, but it was probably an embarrassing number.

Suddenly, I hope my washer is still on the 'wash' cycle, and not 'spin-dry'.

Silver eyes flick up from the paper, one perfectly arched eyebrow rising with them. His expression radiates condescension the way normal people radiate body heat. Seriously, I can practically feel it in the air.

"Were you anticipating a subjugation mission for your first foray as a Guardian, Miss Grace Harper?" His voice has an annoying lilt, the kind where even a patient old grandma would want to smack him for his sass. "Perhaps battling a demon horde single-handedly? Stopping a dimensional rift with nothing but your wits and a butter knife?"

Thanks, I know I'm weak, no need to bathe my ears in your sarcasm. "No, but—"

"Not every mission involves heroics, Miss Harper. We try to escalate our missions appropriately."

Way to make me sound unreasonable. I was just trying to point out how inefficient and stupid the mission was, and he's turned me into some glory hunter.

But... Follow current novels on findnovel.net

I press my lips together.

Sarcasm aside, his logic is logical, even if it only increases my frustration.

One of the washers suddenly goes manic-high on a spin cycle, making the entire ground vibrate.

"Fine, but you have to admit it's a bit anticlimactic to find essentially nothing. A piece of old paper isn't exactly the stuff of legends, and it wasn't hidden very well."

He hums thoughtfully. The paper disappears somewhere into the folds of his ridiculously dramatic trenchcoat, and I wonder where his scythe is. Maybe it's out auto-collecting the souls of lesser mortals.

"Tell me, Miss Harper," he says, and my name has *never* sounded so damn annoying in my entire life, "Why would a random demi-god's blood sample be hidden away in an establishment catering to werewolves?"

He even crosses his arms and legs to lean against the wall as he questions me, sounding rather Socratic. Apparently Wash-N-Were was only fronting as a laundromat to hide its real identity as Professor Creep's lecture hall.

But his question is a good one, and while I might not be thrilled over my assigned professor, I still have a mission to complete and I need help.

All the help.

So. Much. Help.

So I think it over. Demi-god blood in a shifter laundromat does seem... odd. My mind races through possibilities, none of them comforting, and most of them pulled out of fantasy books and battle-hungry animated shows, which means they all basically end with either the threat or reality of world domination at the hands of some evil master villain.

Likely? Probably not. Then again, this world is apparently a lot more complicated than I ever thought it was, so who knows.

My entire life feels like the trajectory of some fantastical tragedy, so maybe some evil overlord isn't too far off as a possibility.

"I have no idea," I finally admit, deciding not to give voice to all the crazy scenarios in my head. If I don't say them out loud, no one will know I thought them, and then Caeriel won't think I'm some sort of crazy teenager who watches too much TV.

Frankly, I watch a lot less than most humans do.

"None at all?"

"Nope," I lie, even as I've already created an entire backstory of how angels and demons had babies and one of them started a laundromat in a poor backward werewolf town, only to be killed by a particularly evil sibling who didn't like them donating money to orphanages and increasing the goodness level of the world.

The corner of his mouth twitches—not quite a smile, but definitely amusement at my expense. Outside, Andrew’s still waiting in the car, completely oblivious to the fact that I’m having a conversation with Death’s fashion-forward cousin.

Either he hasn’t paid a lick of attention to me in a while, or he can’t see Caeriel. I’m not sure which option is better.

Wait.

Where’s Sadie?

And the cat?

My head whips around, but neither animal is anywhere to be found. A faint, foreboding feeling snakes down my back as Caeriel pushes off the wall to step too close to me, asking what I’m looking for.

He smells like lemon furniture polish with the faintest whiff of stale cigarette smoke, and my eyes fall automatically to his fingers. His left index and middle finger have yellowed calluses near the first knuckles.

Huh. He’s a smoker.

Too bad the possibility of lung cancer in his future doesn't help me in this moment as I ask faintly, "Did you do something to my dog and cat?"

Chapter 218: Grace: A Normal Mentor Would Be Nice

Caeriel's face is too close, blocking most of my view. But then he steps back with a faint smile. "You're frightened."

"I'm not," I lie to him again, realizing belatedly he might be able to smell it. Hopefully he can't.

Either way, our encounters are not going very well.

Was it too much to ask for a *normal* mentor, and not someone I'm pretty sure is a psychopath? Actually, if I really want to get into it, why is everyone around me so damn weird? My own boyfriend is definitely not normal in his head, either.

Though... less terrible than I thought he was.

Which, I'm pretty sure, is not the case for Captain Grim Reaper over here.

"They're giving their reports."

"Reports?" I stiffen immediately. "I knew it. They're not normal animals!"

Vindication floods through my veins, sweet and sharp. See? I *knew* Sadie was weird. And the cat, too. Yet another situation in which my paranoia wasn't paranoia, because it isn't paranoia if it's true. The rightful source is [Find_Novel\(.\)net](#)

Caeriel's mouth stays curved, but his amusement feels very at my expense. "Of course not. What normal animals would dare to stay by the Lycan King?"

Hah, hah. What might be normal for him isn't normal for me, thank you very much. I'm still adjusting to this super-supernatural world. Extrasupernatural, I guess. Though the word kind of makes me think of extraterrestrial, and they aren't aliens.

Are they?

He looks me over, his gaze sliding from my face to my feet and back again. The tiny crease between his eyebrows deepens into a frown that makes my skin crawl.

"Still not answering? Your intellect doesn't seem very high." His voice drops, becoming softer, almost intimate, even as his words come out cruel. "I can't fathom what Lyrielle sees in you."

Why's he suddenly insulting me?

Oh—the question. Right. I got sidetracked with the animals.

But I'm far more interested in my own issues, so I try to change the subject back.

"When you say giving their reports—"

He cuts me off with a dismissive flick of his wrist. "It's exactly as I said."

End of story.

It's clear he doesn't want to go into more detail, which is frustrating. The answers are literally standing in front of me, but he's too much of a jerk to give them. Lyre might be cryptic, but at least she isn't a dick.

"Now, little mortal child, answer: Why would the blood of a demi-god be found here?" His eyes bore into mine, unblinking and expectant.

The laundromat suddenly feels too small, the hum of the machines too loud. I deflate a little, despite the defiance in my thoughts. Ultimately, the weak bow to the strong. I'm not proud of it, but I'm not stupid enough to challenge a crazy person.

Then again, there were those times I mouthed off to the Lycan King...

But I guess I was never as scared of him as I am of Caeriel.

I shake my head again.

"I already told you, I don't know."

Caeriel sighs, his disappointment beyond obvious. "Okay, then let's make the question easier." He over-enunciates each word as if speaking to a toddler. "Knowing this is a demi-god's blood, would you consider this im-por-tant? Or un-im-por-tant?"

The condescension in his tone makes my cheeks burn. Exactly how little respect does he have for me? I'm not stupid—I just don't have access to whatever cosmic encyclopedia of supernatural facts he's apparently memorized.

Though it does bring up a couple moments with Lyre where she also... no, let's not go there; if I don't believe in my own intelligence, who will?

"Important, obviously." I avoid snapping, but can't avoid saying it through gritted teeth to show how insulting he's being.

His eyebrows rise a fraction. "Ah, so it was obvious."

"...Yes, it was." The word comes out tight. I wasn't questioning the *importance* of demi-god blood, but rather how freaking easy this so-called 'mission' was.

"My apologies." He inclines his head, but there's not an ounce of sincerity in the gesture as he explains, "I rarely have a chance to work with mortals, and I have to adjust to your lesser intellectual capacity."

I curl my fingers into my palms, pressing my nails into my skin. It's official. I'm pretty sure I hate this man.

"Look," I say, struggling to keep my voice steady. "I'm not an idiot. I just don't have the context for any of this. Demi-gods, divine guardians, magical laundromats—this wasn't exactly covered in high school."

"Excuses only highlight the limits of your reasoning, Miss Harper."

My molars grind together.

"Now, why would this blood be hidden?"

"Because it's important?" I ask sarcastically, already forgetting how I decided I was too scared to mouth off to him. Amazing how much self-esteem returns when his silver eyes aren't boring into mine. Instead, they're closed.

He sounds bored as he says, "Is that your best answer?"

I change it reluctantly. "If it's found, something bad might happen."

"And you consider that your best answer?"

My eyes roll in the safety of him not being able to see. "More or less."

"More, or less? Be precise, Miss Harper."

There's a faint edge to his voice, and my ears are attuned to it like any rebellious teenager facing someone in authority. "Give or take. One way or another?"

His eyes open into mere slits, and the faint rebellion stirring in my veins dies an immediate death at the faint line of silver there.

Nope. Still afraid. Sarcasm is bad, don't recommend, zero out of ten.

I straighten. "Considering the importance of a demi-god's existence, either the knowledge of one being in the area or the possible properties of their blood can have negative consequences on Plausibility."

Okay, let's be real—I'm kind of just throwing anything out there and utilizing this whole Plausibility thing because it seems to be important. I have no idea what I'm talking about.

But Caeriel's eyes open all the way, and he reaches over to ruffle my hair, like I'm a child. "Good job, Miss Harper. Perhaps your intellect isn't as low as I thought."

Am I supposed to be pleased?

But I smile anyway. "Thank you."

Yep. I'm willing to be a bootlicker if it keeps this creep off my back. Somehow, I have the feeling it's better to bore him with a fawning demeanor than to show him I have any spirit whatsoever.

His hand pauses, and he withdraws it with a frown. "Even a trivial mission can be attached to dire consequences. Remember that, Miss Harper."

It's an effort not to point out running out to meet him for no reason doesn't seem particularly dire, and I wonder if he's creating these missions on purpose just to toy with me.

"Yes, Caeriel." I even toss in a salute to show how seriously I'm taking his words.

He glances away, his eyes going back and forth over empty space for a few moments. Then he says, "You have a new mission. Try to complete it in a timely manner."

Seriously? I just finished this one.

But I salute even harder. "Yes, sir."

This time, when his silver eyes return to me, they're distant and cool. His interest seems to have waned.

I give myself a little mental pat on the back for figuring him out so quickly. Maybe I'll get through this "mentor" period unscathed after all.

"Report to me if Lyrielle contacts you," he adds coolly. "Immediately."

Or not.

"Of course, sir," I lie through a megawatt smile.

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After checking my phone, where a new mission has not appeared despite Caeriel saying it did, I glance up...

And he's gone.

What the hell.

My eyebrows twitch with irritation, but mostly I'm just grateful the creepy reaper vanished. One second he's all looming condescension, the next—poof. Supernatural beings must get off on dramatic exits.

My phone buzzes in my hand, the screen lighting up with a notification. Well, would you look at that. The mission he promised has finally materialized.

But the contents are... strange.

[ASSIGNED MISSION: 20-L.fnd-dgID.0039]

So helpful.

I didn't think I'd miss Caeriel, but now I do. Maybe he'd explain what the fuck this means. It looks like some sort of error in the code instead of a proper mission.

Staring at it isn't going to help me decode it any faster, though, so I shove my phone in my pocket, resolving to wait for ten minutes to see if some sort of update gets pushed through the app.

I scan the laundromat absently, going still when I see Sadie once again sniffing in the corner and the cat sleeping on the same washer it was before.

What the hell, what the hell, what the *hell*. Caeriel said they were gone giving reports, but now they're back in the exact same positions they were the last time I looked at them?

Creep Meter has maxed, Grace Harper.exe needs to restart, this is getting too fucking weird.

(Fine. It was funnier in my head.)

Neither seems particularly disturbed by the fact Caeriel was just here.

Let's rip the mask off these fake pets and start over.

I march across the worn linoleum floor toward Sadie, arms crossed over my chest. The golden retriever continues her intense investigation of whatever fascinating smell she's found.

"I know you can understand me," I announce, keeping my voice flat so it doesn't betray my annoyance. "What the hell are you?"

The golden retriever's head whips around at the sound of my voice. She abandons her sniffing expedition immediately, her entire demeanor transforming into quintessential dog joy. Her tail wags so hard her butt swings with it. Big brown eyes lock onto mine with what appears to be pure, innocent adoration.

Convincing as hell, but we all know better now, don't we?

I narrow my eyes, not buying the act for a second. "I know you aren't a dog. Spill."

Sadie's response is to crank the excited puppy routine to eleven. Her entire body wiggles with enthusiastic tail-wagging before launching at me, her front paws landing on my shoulders as she tries to lick my face with sloppy devotion.

"Ugh!" I shove her off, wiping dog slobber from my cheek. "Gross." Even worse knowing she isn't really a dog.

Sadie lands on all fours, looking supremely pleased with herself. Her tail continues its metronome-like sweep. If dogs could smile, she'd be grinning from ear to floppy ear.

Whatever she is, she's holding onto her secrets hard.

But she doesn't seem out to hurt me.

"Fine. Play dumb." I wipe my hands on my jeans. "But I'm onto you."

The dog tilts her head, one ear flopping over in what has to be a calculated move of cuteness. I'm not falling for it.

I check my phone again, examining the new mission notification, but it's as glitched out as it was a few minutes ago.

Okay then. Another five minutes before I'll try wracking my brain to figure it out.

Meanwhile...

Sadie might not be willing to spill her secrets, but there's always the cat.

Eyes on my new prey, I stalk across the laundromat to grab it by its scruff. It's too heavy to dangle in the air, so I just lift its front half off the washer to ask harshly, "Whatever you are, take your true form and explain it to me."

The cat yawns, showing needle-like white teeth, then blinks big blue eyes at me like I'm stupid.

Sadie barks from behind me, and I can *feel* her butt-wagging joy even without looking.

"Come on. I already know you disappeared to send in a report. What are you? Who are you reporting to?"

Shaking the cat a little and trying not to feel like an animal abuser does little to bring forward movement to my interrogation.

The cat just half-dangles there in my grip, purring as it continues to stare at me with innocent blue eyes.

Hah.

"I'm warning you, if either of you bring trouble to me or the kids..."

"Miss Grace Harper, there you are!"

The door jingles to accompany an old man's voice, and Andrew piles into the laundromat behind him, saying, "Grace, it looks like the king sent one of his lackeys to watch over you."

The old Lycan turns to frown at Andrew, who squares his shoulders and stares back. They both block the door rudely, though it isn't like anyone's queued outside to barge in behind them.

I look at the old man suspiciously; he's one of the Lycans who came to the camper with Caine, too. He didn't seem as friendly as Raymond—no. Rodney? Fuck. He'd just corrected me on his name twice, and I've already forgotten it.

Whatever. The point is, this new guy isn't nearly as open-minded as Super Nanny, and I stiffen a little as he looks me over, like he's judging me in his head. Then he barks, "I was trying to find you so you didn't have to walk here."

If you could emoticon in real life, I'd definitely have question marks above my head. Alas, you can't.

So I just stare at him blankly instead.

Sorry, is that my problem...? But I don't quite have the bravery levels required to say it out loud. The man's intimidating, with his weathered, scarred face. And, while I have about ninety-seven percent faith Andrew will try to protect me if he comes after me like the crazy one from earlier, I have about ten percent faith he'd win.

With all the math mathed out, I'm pretty sure my best bet is to *not* get on this guy's nerves. So I give a slightly confused smile instead.

I made the decision to become Caeriel's bootlicker to survive; may as well do the same with the weird Lycans Caine chooses to keep me... questionably safe.

"I already found her," Andrew points out.

He snorts. "I have eyes, kid."

Mm, yes, this is going swimmingly. Both men are here to keep me safe and yet they're at odds. We should be united against the common enemy, but first I have to work on not *also* being the enemy.

So I say, "Thank you, sir. I appreciate it. I'm sorry, had I known, I would have waited."

Which is a lie, because there's no way I would have entrusted myself into the car of some weirdo who stared at me with such disdain earlier this morning.

And I'm still holding the cat by its scruff, which just makes everything really awkward. So I set it down, watching as it immediately stretches and resumes its previous position as if I hadn't just been interrogating it.

Just you wait.

Once we're alone, the interrogation begins anew.

But maybe I'll try to clip its claws first.

"You're a Blue Mountain pup," the Lycan tells Andrew coldly. "You can leave. Miss Harper is under the protection of the Lycan Pack."

"I have yet to bind myself to the new alpha," Andrew retorts, completely unfazed by the fact he's going up against a Lycan as a lowly beta-tier wolf. Even alphas bow their heads before the lowest-ranking Lycan, and this one follows Caine around like a lapdog. "If we're getting technical, I'm more a part of the Lycan Pack than Blue Mountain, as my only loyalty is to our one and only High Alpha."

I was impressed by my own bootlicking, but now I realize I should be taking lessons from the master.

The old Lycan appears stumped as his mouth opens and closes a few times. Finally, he shoves Andrew aside and snaps at him to know his place as he stomps in my direction.

My back stiffens, but I desperately keep the faint, welcoming smile on my face. "Can I help you?"

He clears his throat. "That's my question."

The way he looks at me is more curious than condescending, though his lip curls a little when he looks me over. Whatever his judgment is, I don't seem to have a passing score—as expected. But he's calm and polite, even subservient, with his words.

"I'm sorry?" I ask, not sure I heard him right.

He rolls his shoulders back. "My apologies, Miss Harper. I am here to help you in any capacity you require."

I glance at Andrew, who shakes his head at me like I'm supposed to understand what he's trying to say.

The Lycan's acting like I just berated him, and he even looks a little pleased by it, with his cold eyes warming just a little, with faint crinkles at the ends.

No; I'm probably overthinking it. He's probably offended but trying his best to act. THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY find(N)ovel.net

"I don't require anything—"

"Miss Harper, I'm here to help with *anything*," he stresses calmly. "Please have a seat. Which machine is yours?"

He places his hands on my shoulders, gently manhandling me into a hard-shelled plastic chair. There isn't even an intimidating squeeze or glare to keep me in line, but my entire body goes stiff anyway.

What's with these Lycans and their sudden about-faces in how they treat me?

"Um... What exactly did he say?"

"I'm sorry?" the Lycan asks, so very courteous even though I know he finds me lacking. It's weird.

"Caine. What did he tell you?"

"Ah." The old Lycan only lets go of me only once my butt meets seat, and takes three steps back as he clasps his hands behind his back. "Miss Harper and the four shifter children she has with her are to be treated with utmost respect. The children have been acknowledged by our High Alpha as his own, and Miss Harper is..." His lips quirk a little, with an almost imperceptible pause. "...not his mate."

This time, the pause is very obvious before he adds calmly, "He was very clear that you are not his mate, Miss Harper. Please don't worry."

Andrew's lips keep twitching like he wants to laugh and is desperately trying to hold it back, and it takes everything in me not to glare at him.

"Oh..." I say faintly, wondering how everything's gone so terribly wrong.

c 220

Grace of a Wolf

In the end, the rest of the day passes without further incident.

No clarifying update appears on my phone, either, leaving me exasperated. And Caeriel hasn't answered any of the ten messages I've sent his way, asking for an explanation on the gibberish he calls a new mission.

He wants me to do it quickly, but how can I do it without any information at all?!

The App is as cryptic as he is!

But now we have clean laundry, and Super Nanny—whose name, I remember now, is Randy-not-Randall—is not only fantastic with the children, but even conjured a savory and aromatic beef stew out of nowhere, making it so I don't even have to worry about dinner.

After peacefully restocking dressers and showering the children, Super Nanny even has the kitchen cleaned and dishes done. Dylan, meanwhile, has cleaned the litter box every time the cat uses it, and takes Sadie out every thirty minutes to run around in the grass. He's even thoughtfully picked up her little chocolate doggy bomb out of the yard from this morning.

It's all so very peaceful, so very peaceful...

And it makes my skin crawl.

Every time I pick up anything weighing more than a piece of paper, there's a Lycan there to grab it from me and offer their help. Randy doesn't seem to have the slightest hint of an ulterior motive whatsoever, just perfectly content to play babysitter while I sit around and watch him do it.

Dylan, on the other hand, is very clearly judgmental of every move I make, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't exactly *like* me. But he treats me well and hasn't slipped once in his treatment of me.

Andrew, on the other hand... no idea what he's doing. They wouldn't let him in.

But since this is his pack and territory, I'm pretty sure he's fine. Maybe.

Even if there is a niggling sense of doubt and worry making its way into my head, along with a healthy heaping of reluctant responsibility. After all, the man said he basically gave up his pack to be my friend; only a complete dick wouldn't feel a little guilty after hearing that.

By ten, my brain is in shambles and Bun's turned into a couch-hopping banshee with bunny ears and a golden retriever's tail. Dylan and Randy haven't even blinked at her odd shifting, and Sara and Jer are comfortable enough to be their normal selves in front of them. The rightful source is find*.novel.net

Jer even managed to get the more reticent Dylan into an entire conversation about how pterodactyls and crocodiles are basically, in a weird way, cousins. I'm not entirely certain I believe him, but the kid's so convincing I kind of think he might be right, too.

If he's not, then he probably has a great future as a car salesman.

I gnaw on a piece of beef jerky—something Dylan brought, not the kind in packages we bought at Walmart—as my mind bounces around all these things taking up prime anxiety real estate.

Well... not the pterodactyls or crocodiles. But the rest, yes.

Though watching Bun—all rabbit ears, golden retriever tail, and pure manic toddler energy—temporarily pushes everything else aside.

"One!" she shrieks, leaping from the left cushion.

"Two!" she announces proudly, landing on the right.

Is it just me, or is her speech improving at an unusual rate? I need a parenting book.

The rhythm of her jumps and shouts has almost lulled me into a meditative state when the door swings open with enough force to make me jolt upright, jerky hanging forgotten from my mouth.

For a split second, I'm worried it's Rafe again, even though logically I know it's impossible because we locked the door.

But no, it isn't Rafe at all. It's Ron, and his usually stoic face is flushed, his eyes bright with inner fire. He even looks an inch or two taller all of a sudden, though it might be the suit he's wearing.

I did not send him to bring-your-son-to-work-day in a suit. No idea where he got it. Caine, obviously, but still—where?! I used to live here, and we don't exactly have a plethora of suit stores.

He barely spares a glance for Dylan and Randy, so I guess he already knew they were here. Makes sense, if he was by Caine's side all day.

But what happened to my aloof teenage boy and why did a young man walk through my door?

"Ron!" Bun screams, abandoning her cushion game instantly with her arms stretched toward him.

He strides forward and scoops her up in one fluid motion, swinging her high as she shrieks with delight, completely unguarded. "Bun-Bun! Did you miss me?"

Jer and Sara converge on him like excited puppies, practically bouncing off the floor.

"Did you fight anyone?" the younger boy demands, eyes wide with bloodthirsty curiosity.

"Did Caine make you howl at the moon?" Sara cuts in, not waiting for an answer to Jer's question.

My face freezes into a weird expression. I can feel my mouth smiling, but I know my eyebrows are twitching like crazy. "Why would they howl at the moon, Sara?"

She rolls her eyes at me with such exaggeration, I almost feel offended. "Duh, they're wolves, Grace. Wolves howl at the moon."

Oh, silly me.

I roll my eyes back, but she tosses her head back to Ron. "Well? Did you?"

He laughs. "No, and no."

"What's with the suit? Are you, like, a prince now?" Jer asks, grabbing Ron's sleeve and tugging. "Because Caine's like a king, right? So that makes you a prince!"

"Uh—"

Sara gasps dramatically, one hand flying to her chest as her red eyes go wide. "If Ron's a prince.. Does that make me a princess?"

Then she grabs Ron's other arm, shaking it urgently. "I need to know, Ron. This is important for my future. Am I a princess?"

Ron rolls his eyes, but there's no hiding the smile tugging at his mouth. "No, squirt. That's not how it works."

"Then how does it work?" she demands, unwilling to let go of potential royalty status so easily.

"Yeah," the youngest of them echoes, "explain the political structure of Lycan society to us!" He pronounces 'political structure' with careful precision, clearly a phrase he's picked up recently and is proud to deploy.

Ron shifts Bun to his hip, where she immediately grabs a fistful of his hair and tugs. He doesn't even flinch. "It's complicated."

"We're complicated," Sara counters, hands on her hips. "Try us."

"Well, you need a blood transfusion first."

"A blood... transfusion?" Her forehead wrinkles. "Why?"

"Because you'd need to drain all of yours and fill it with Lycan blood, stupid." Ron flicks her forehead with a smile, taking some of the sting out of his words.

"You're the idiot!" she retorts, stomping a foot as she flings his arm away from her. "It's a valid question!"

There's no mistaking her heartbreak over her lack of princess title, and I bite back a laugh as I get off the couch and guide Ron out of the hall and into the living room proper, though I level a disappointed glance at the front door he's closed behind him.

I was under the impression Caine would come in after bringing Ron back—

But, of course, I'm 'not his mate'. And he seems determined to stick to the script, even if his execution is... flawed.

I sigh, then shake it off to focus on the person I haven't seen all day. "How was it, really? You seem like you enjoyed it."

"It was..." He pauses, searching for words. "Different than I expected."

"Different good or different bad?"

"Different important, I guess? I learned a lot."

Bun leans forward and bites his shoulder, and he winces. "Ouch, Bun! No biting!"

"No ba!" she mocks, shaking a finger in his face like he's the one who did something bad.

My lips twitch as he attacks her face with kisses, making her squeal. Then he gives me a stern look and says, "It's past her bedtime."

Randy looks guilty from where he's standing in the kitchen. "Miss Harper wanted to wait until you were home..."

"Don't wait for me next time," Ron says seriously, frowning at me. "Her schedule's been messed up, and she really needs a consistent bedtime."

"Sorry. I'll make sure she's in bed early tomorrow."

Sara suddenly announces out of nowhere, apparently still stewing over her lack of princesshood, "Fine. I don't have to be a princess. But I should at least be a Duchess."

"You can be the royal pain in my—" Ron starts, but catches my warning look and redirects, "—royal advisor."

"Advisor?" She scoffs. "I want a crown."

"Duchesses don't have crowns."

"Yes they do!" Sara turns to me with a pout. "Don't they?"

How the hell am I supposed to know?! But I grab my phone and look it up.

"I'll be the royal scientist," Jer announces, puffing out his chest. "I'll make weapons and potions and—"

"No, you're the clown," she says dismissively, cutting off his joy and importance before it can go anywhere.

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

Ron sighs. "Do you guys really think we're part of the British royal family or something? That's not how it works."

I clear my throat, reading off the results of my search: "Duchesses can wear coronets, which are basically little crowns."

"I'll take it!" Sara crows, turning to point at Ron. "Suck it! I'm a Duchess!"

"That's still not how it works, Sare-Bear."

"Yeah, Sara the Hedgehog." Jer lifts his lip in a sneer. "You're too little to be a Duchess. They have to be, like, fifty years old."

Somehow, the misinformation surrounding royalty is only getting worse, and Dylan looks like he's positively apoplectic as he fidgets in his spot at the dinette.

A little worried, I try to shush the kids before he has a heart attack. "Guys, let's stop joking around."

The Lycan smashes his fist against the table, and we all flinch, except Randy and Bun.

"If the girl wants to be a princess, let her be a princess!" he roars, his face crimson.

"Princess!" Bun declares with perfect diction as she throws a hand up. "Yay!"

Wasn't he... angry?

But, judging by the way his face softens as he looks at Bun, he's... not.