

Grace of a Wolf –

C 229

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LYRE

There are few things more heartbreaking than the sound of a child's desperate sobs, even for a heart as jaded as mine.

Which is why my fingers are flying across my phone's keyboard with unnatural speed, responding to Grace's text with the most bullshit sweet talk I've ever mustered in my long, long life.

[LYRE: Want some more kids?]

[GRACE: Define "want", "some more", and "kids".]

[LYRE: They're cute, sweet, possibly potty trained, and don't you think Bun needs someone to play with?]

[GRACE: She has siblings.]

[LYRE: Great! Having a secure family unit will help them acclimate to their new lives. We'll invest in a 12-passenger van.]

[GRACE: ... can you just explain like a normal person for once?]

I glance up from my phone to the two tiny creatures huddled on the bed, pressed against the headboard. Their gaunt faces are contorted as they sob, but no tears fill their reddened eyes. It's not that they're faking—their bodies simply don't have enough moisture left to waste on crying.

The girl clutches a handful of comforter like it might disappear. The boy stares at nothing, rocking. Both look about three or four, though it's hard to tell with the malnutrition. Hell, they could be twins for all we know.

[LYRE: Found two kids in Fiddleback tunnels. Survived somehow. They're alive, but barely.]

I shift position, and both children startle like I've fired a gun. The girl presses herself harder against the headboard. The boy's rocking intensifies.

Fuck. This is why I don't do heroics.

But the moment I saw them, another little body flashed in my memory, and... well, now they're in the room I've claimed as mine.

But unlike Grace, I don't have "mom" instincts. So this is temporary.

[LYRE: Owen's already planning to take them in. You can't deprive the kids of their siblings, can you?]

[GRACE: ... how far away are you?]

The door creaks open and Owen edges in, balancing a tray with two small bowls of porridge. His broad shoulders seem to fill the entire doorframe, but he moves with careful precision, as if he's carrying something precious.

The children don't even look at him, trying to shrink further into their corner of safety. Not even his angelic presence has gotten them to open up.

"Made it thin," he says quietly, even though I didn't ask. "It's what they need for now. Too much at once will make them sick."

The children flinch when he kneels by the bed. The boy's rocking turns frantic, a sour smell filling the room.

I sigh and add another text:

[LYRE: They're really quiet and don't take up much space.]

[GRACE: ... they aren't objects, Lyre ...]

Owen moves with efficient calm, setting the tray on the nightstand before backing away a few careful steps.

"It's just a little food," he says, his voice abnormally soft. Even so, he still sounds like he's threatening to murder them.

Huh. I wonder how he coaxed the other children into trusting him. I wouldn't, and I've been an adult for too many lifetimes.

Strangely, they don't flinch, and the boy even stops rocking. Food bribes work, even if you sound like a killer, I guess.

"I'll stay over here," Owen continues, settling against the far wall. "No one's going to make you eat."

My eyebrow twitches. If they don't eat, I'll happily be the bad guy and force feed them. Even if they don't trust us, they need something in their bellies. They're starving and dehydrated, and they'll die if they don't eat.

But I suppose informing children of your intent to feed them, even against their will, is probably not going to endear them to you very much.

My phone vibrates with another text.

[GRACE: How many children?]

[LYRE: Two.]

More, actually... but they were already bodies before we got to them.

The last couple days have been a parade of horrors. Nothing I haven't seen before, but it hits hard every time. In the end, our hunt has turned into a rescue mission, our prey likely long gone. No matter; I'm sure we can pick up their trail again later.

Turns out Isabeau's operation went deeper than even I'd expected. This underground complex stretches for miles beneath Fiddleback territory, a true labyrinth hiding the monstrosities behind the pack's existence.

Owen sneezes, and the boy jerks his head toward the movement, eyes wide with animal terror.

"The porridge will get cold," the angel-descendant says mildly. "Just thought you should know. I'll be right here if you need help."

[GRACE: Well, we can't just leave them alone.]

My lips curve. As expected of a woman with her fate.

Sweet, predictable Grace. Always so ready to help, even with four magical children already in her care.

[LYRE: I'll figure out how to ship them.]

[GRACE: They aren't things, Lyre...]

I glance up from my screen to see the girl inching toward the food. She freezes when she notices me watching, so I deliberately look back at my phone.

[LYRE: You know what I mean.]

Grace doesn't need more responsibility, but these hollow-eyed children need her specific brand of fierce protection. They need her pack of misfit shifters.

And she probably needs the distraction, or she'll end up barefoot and pregnant in Lycan territory before she knows what's happened to her.

The girl inches closer to the tray, reaching a trembling, near-skeletal hand toward one of the bowls, barely visible in my periphery.

I frown down at my screen; porridge isn't enough for these little ones. We need formula, something fortified with all the things they need.

A knock at the door makes both children jump. The girl's hand retreats, and she's back against the headboard in an eyeblink. I bite back a curse, but Owen just glances at the door without even a blink to show his irritation.

"Come in," he says calmly.

Aaron—Jack-Eye to everyone else—pushes the door open with his shoulder. His red hair is pulled back in its usual leather tie, but there are dark circles under his eyes. Even his upbeat, overly charming disposition has been darkened and shadowed by the events of the last few days.

"Everyone's settled for now," he says. "At least, as settled as they can be. We've got people in six houses, all with clothes from the closets. Most are fed." His eyes drift to the untouched bowls. "Doctors say they're about halfway through triage, but some people need more care than they can give here."

I nod. "Any luck with those portable IVs?"

The kids have already been checked over, but we're out of supplies and waiting for more. Aaron more or less kidnapped a few doctors from the local hospital and an ambulance, but now we need to go back and raid their supply closets.

It's sanctioned now; amazing what a few phone calls to the right people can do.

"They'll be back in half an hour, hour tops. Then we can get these kiddos on some fluids. Ambulance is already at the hospital, and they've got a few more volunteers coming."

"Good."

Aaron rubs the back of his neck. "I'm heading to the store for some stuff. We haven't found any clothes for the kids yet, and we're out of towels again."

"They need formula, too," Owen says from his position against the wall. "And Pediasure for electrolytes."

The red-haired Lycan blinks. "They're a bit big for bottles, aren't they?"

"Get bottled water, too. Not enough cups to go around," I add, ignoring his question. He'll figure it out if he thinks it through, I'm sure.

"Got it. Bottled water, towels, baby formula, electrolytes, and clean the shelves of all their meds and vitamins. Anything else?"

The girl's lost all her courage, no longer attempting to get close to the food. I sigh, but Owen shakes his head at me, mouthing something.

I squint, and he mouths it again.

Patience.

Yeah, I get it.

"Lyre?" Aaron prompts.

"Soft toys. Maybe some fuzzy blankets." The girl seems to like the comforter.

Chapter 230: Grace: Breakfast with Bun

"Come on, sweetie, just one more bite." I hold the spoon of scrambled eggs in front of Bun's mouth, but she turns her head away, rabbit ears flopping dramatically as she does.

She's eaten about five bites of her breakfast, and four of them ended up dribbling out in dramatic fashion as she gagged over the very same eggs she's gobbled up every morning the past few days.

I guess on Tuesdays eggs are poison.

As soon as I think I'm getting a handle on this parenting gig, she's tossed a new curveball my way.

Sighing, I check my phone again. Nothing. I've sent Lyre three texts in the last hour, and her responses have dwindled from vague to nonexistent. Granted, the woman's busy with a bunch of victims she's pulled out from the literal underground, but I'm a little antsy knowing she has kids she wants to send my way.

"Doesn't seem like she likes eggs," the old Lycan, Dylan, says from the stove, flipping another perfect pancake onto an already towering stack. "Try the banana again."

"I know what she likes," I mutter, but grab the banana anyway. The spotty, overripe fruit is one of the many offerings Dylan brought over at dawn—along with eggs, milk, pancake mix, and basically the entire bacon section of whatever grocery store he raided.

There's already a literal aluminum pan filled with bacon, as if he's feeding twenty of us and not four. (No idea when Ron left, but he was gone by the time I'd finally woken out of my fitful post-coital napping.)

In fact, when I'd stumbled out of bed at seven, Dylan was already in my kitchen cooking up a storm. I'm pretty sure the bacon's what woke me in the first place.

I glance at my phone again. Still nothing. Goddammit, Lyre. I need more details, here.

On the daybed in the living room, Jer and Sara remain dead to the world, limbs tangled together in sleep despite their constant waking battles. The white cat—still nameless, still definitely not normal—is curled between them, while Sadie's golden body stretches protectively along their feet. The dog raises her head briefly, watching Bun before settling back down.

She's not interested in Bun's spit-up leftovers, which is also unusual. Sadie basically inhales food. I'm pretty sure Dylan's had some sort of heart-to-heart with the dog, Lycan style, to keep her out of the kitchen/dining area of the camper while he's cooking.

"Here, Bunny Bun. Banana?" I offer a mushy piece, and compliant Bun opens her mouth, deciding the overripe fruit's better than chicken babies.

"How about pancakes?" Dylan asks, starting a new tower of them.

"No, thanks. She hates pancakes." Technically, she loves them, as long as they're swimming in syrup. But since I have no interest in bathing a sticky mess of a child, I'm avoiding the pancake dilemma.

"Pa cay!" Bun cheers through a mouthful of mush, and half of it promptly drops out of her mouth and into her lap.

In my short career as a mother, I've learned motherhood is not very glamorous.

I rub my temples, where another headache threatens to bloom. I've had so many of them lately, enough to make me wonder if it isn't just stress and annoyance. I've never been particularly prone to headaches before.

"You should eat," the Lycan opines. "There's plenty of food. Make yourself a plate."

My belly twists at the idea of food, and I shake my head. "No, thanks. I'm not hungry." Thanks to my headache, my stomach's also rebelling. Skipping breakfast isn't unusual for me, anyway. "What is Caine doing today?"

Keeping the question casual is practically godlike acting skills, and I give myself a mental pat on the back. Good job, Grace.

He answers without hesitation... or detail. "The High Alpha is handling pack business."

Uh-huh. Helpful.

"What kind of pack business?"

"Lycan business."

Is it classified, or is he just unable to read the room?

"Um—do you know if he's coming over later? To see the kids, I mean."

Dylan turns a little to stare at me, flipping a pancake without looking. He's got skills. "I'm sure he will stop by to see the children, ma'am. He does seem inordinately fond of the children. In fact, the High Alpha seems to place the children as his highest priority these days."

He keeps emphasizing *the children*, and he keeps staring at me with a lot of meaning in his gaze.

"He's a devoted father," I mutter, letting my eyes wander off as I pretend not to notice how he's practically begging me to admit to the relationship between me and his king.

It's obvious the whole *keeping our relationship a secret* thing isn't working, but I'm not about to say anything yet. I still haven't spoken with Caine about it, and... well, with having two Lycans following me around, the danger from Ellie seems a little less worrisome.

So I haven't clarified anything yet.

Even with an old Lycan practically winking at me every time he "helps" me maintain our cover.

For a grumpy old man who didn't seem to respect me very much, his tune has changed drastically...

"Where's Randolph?" I ask hastily, changing the subject without any finesse whatsoever.

"Randolph?"

"Pa cay," Bun says again, trying to interrupt us even as she grabs for the rest of the banana in my hand.

I frown, handing her another piece without really thinking about it. "Rudolph?"

"Randy, ma'am?"

"Right, him." I have no idea why I can't keep his name straight.

"He's on the way."

Right on cue, someone knocks on the door, and Dylan waves me back when I move to get up. "You sit. Don't open the door on your own."

My mouth opens to protest automatically, but I close it almost immediately. If the man wants to open the door, I have no reason to complain. "It's just Randy, isn't it?"

He shakes his head, leaving his precious pancakes to cook unattended as he opens the door. His somewhat genial grandpa-like demeanor disappears into the cold and brusque manner of yesterday as soon as it opens. "The hell you want?"