

Grace of a Wolf –

Chapter 241: Grace: Sour Burritos

The awkward silence filling the car is only made worse by Andrew's blasé demeanor as he drives to a small cemetery used only by the original Blue Mountain Pack bloodline, closed over a hundred years ago to new burials.

He doesn't ask me anything. Doesn't even give me the old side-eye as his arm rests casually over the steering wheel. Just drives to where I told him to go, content to keep his silence and let me do whatever I want without explanation.

Predictably, in the face of such loyalty from someone I once considered an enemy, it makes me squirm in my seat.

I mean, should I thank him for playing along, or pretend nothing's happening? It isn't like I've had the opportunity to be well-versed on the proper routine for best friend-level reliability.

In my lap, my fingers twist around each other, over and over, until I finally blurt out, "Thanks for going along with me."

"No problem."

And that's the end of the conversation.

I'm starting to see some similarities between Andrew and Caine... okay, it's just the one similarity. Being a shifter doesn't count; that's like saying humans are all similar because they're, you know, humans.

Gnawing at the inside of my cheek and watching the scenery go by—which isn't much, honestly, because we're going through the main business district, with yet another laundromat, a shady-looking diner with some bomb pies, and (strangest of all) a Mexican restaurant. There's an entire family in the Blue Mountain Pack who came from Texas and introduced the area to their authentic salsas, tacos, and a bunch of food I'm not entirely certain how to pronounce.

Of all the families in the Blue Mountain Pack, they probably spend the most time with humans. They've also never treated me poorly, though it doesn't mean they've been friendly, either. Indifferent at best.

Their salsa's pretty good, though...

"Hungry?" Andrew asks out of nowhere, and I jerk my eyes away from the yellow-and-lime-green sign announcing Ernesto's Tequila Corner has the best burritos in town.

Also the only burritos in town, so if anyone's really nitpicking, it isn't saying much... but they are pretty good. At least to my unrefined palate.

"No," I mumble, knowing it's one of Rafe and Andrew's favorite haunts. Or used to be, I guess.

My hands ditch twisting and turning for cuticle-picking, a newfound habit about ten seconds old.

"You sure? You always liked the chips and salsa there."

I always ate chips and salsa because I didn't want Rafe to spend money on me. There were always rumors about how I used my position as the Alpha's adopted daughter to force him into dating me, and while Rafe would tell me to ignore them on one hand, he would always encourage me to be money-mindful. He said it was for our future and because it was the duty of every pack member to be able to manage their finances appropriately, but... yeah, thinking back, it was probably because of the rumors.

Which is silly, because there were always rumors. Most of them were so stupid it was honestly shocking to think anyone would believe them, but hey, there's always someone out there willing to believe you're the daughter of a super secret assassination organization who blackmailed the Alpha into an adoption because of something super secret-y and dangerous.

Yeah. I know. Stupid.

But reason and logic will never beat the juicy drama of made-up rumors, and bullies don't need much to rationalize what they want to do to their prey.

I sigh, only to sit upright as Andrew brakes out of nowhere to take a hard right into the familiar parking lot.

"Wait—why are you stopping? I said I wasn't hungry."

He gives me a strange look as he parks the car. "You were drooling over the sign like you haven't eaten in a year. I can afford some chips and salsa, Grace. If you don't want to eat inside, we can just take it to go."

Oh, dear Goddess. "I'm really not hungry, though."

"You don't have to be so polite. It's not a big deal to get you some food."

A muscle twitches in my eyelid. "No. Really, Andrew. I'm not hungry. I ate breakfast, and I'm pretty sure Ernesto's doesn't even open until eleven or so."

"Ah." He leans over the steering wheel to peer in the direction of the front door. "You're right. Says it opens at eleven. Huh. Since when?"

"Since always...?" Ernesto's isn't exactly known for their breakfast menu. Heartburn-level salsa and burritos ready to guide you to Heaven's door, sure.

But now that I think about it...

Trying to be sneaky, I pull out my phone and scroll through the list of locations Caeriel sent me earlier.

Ernesto's... is not on it.

But every building around it is.

Fascinating. Maybe it's a coincidence, but my Sherlockian radar is pinging. Something's hinky. Why is only Ernesto's not on the list?

A hand abruptly cuts off my thought process as it covers my screen, and I look at Andrew with a frown. "What?"

He looks exasperated. "I called your name at least five times. You didn't hear me?"

"Oh..." Feeling a little guilty, I sneak the phone back into my pocket. "No. Sorry. I was thinking."

He shakes his head a little. "I always knew you liked the place, but I didn't realize you were *that* obsessed with their food. You only ever ordered the chips and salsa and you would always share it with both of us."

Duh. It's the appetizer. It's free. And they liked it, too.

It isn't like I *ordered* it. It just came with the food.

Funny; Rafe always espoused financial mindfulness, but thinking back, he was always ready to spend on his own food...

I frown, the cheerful sign of Ernesto's suddenly becoming dull and rather annoying to my eyes. It used to be a place filled with happy memories and time spent together in puppy love, but now it's just a glaring neon sign announcing how much of an idiot I was one month ago.

Glancing at Andrew, who's only guilty of trying to be sweet, I state flatly, "I'm not. I don't like Ernesto's very much; it was Rafe's favorite place. Not mine."

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I didn't realize the awkward silence could only get more awkward.

Andrew hesitates, frowning at me for a long time. It's not the I'm-mad-at-you kind, but like he's thinking things through. Maybe he, too, is remembering the times we were there together, and how I rarely ordered anything for myself.

Meanwhile, Rafe never skimped on his meals. It was always because of his training, or hunting, or whatever used up his calories for the day. When did it start...?

There was a time he would say, "Well, if you don't want to order anything, we don't have to eat there."

Every time, I would insist he eat, because he was tired and worked hard.

Eventually...

Well. One day it wasn't like that anymore. I just can't really pinpoint the time it changed.

Andrew suddenly nods, a sharp up-and-down jerk of his head, before he peels out of the parking lot. "You know, I was never a fan of Mexican food, anyway."

Liar. Much like Rafe, Andrew's plate was always filled with food. Though, despite being rather distant and indifferent to my plights and woes, he would politely offer me things on occasion.

Never took him up on it, of course, because... well, my head was filled with Rafe, and I was always under the impression Andrew didn't like me very much.

Which begs the question: How did I never realize Rafe's lack of regard, when someone I assumed disliked me would offer me food off his plate, but my own boyfriend wouldn't?

It's a sobering thought process. Like opening Pandora's Box; now that I'm thinking about it, I can't stop... noticing.

I point half-heartedly at the cemetery looming ahead, not far from us. "We're almost there."

"Uh-huh." The sound's more of a grunty acknowledgement of my words than anything; it isn't like he needs directions. He was born and raised here, after all. This is his pack by life and legacy.

I'm just filling air because the silence between us feels like a third passenger in the damn car.

My phone vibrates against my thigh, and I fish it out, already knowing who it'll be. Caeriel's name flashes across my screen with a single line of text:

[CAERIEL: Jebediah Wulfric]

I stare at the message with a frown. He's not being weird or cryptic; I recognize the name, of course. It's the first alpha of the Blue Mountain Pack, the one who brought his people here and fought and bled for his new territory. I might not remember the packs here before the Blue Mountain Pack, but I definitely remember the name Jebediah Wulfric, the first alpha to claim the territory.

It's even said Blue Mountain was named so because of the mountain ranges of his youth, or something, which has nothing to do with the mountains surrounding our territory.

History lesson aside, the first alpha is buried in this very cemetery. It's clear Caeriel's giving me a hint on what to look for.

It's equally clear he's watching my every move from somewhere.

Or there's some sort of creepy GPS-slash-surveillance going on with the App, which is... mm, not particularly reassuring.

[GRACE HARPER: Are you watching me?]

[CAERIEL: Yes.]

... apparently Caeriel, Andrew, and Caine all go to the same school of terse answers.

[GRACE HARPER: How?]

[CAERIEL: With my eyes.]

So fucking helpful. I roll mine, secretly hoping Lyre shows up and kicks his ass. Too bad this is all supposed to be all Secrety Secrets, because I bet Caine would do it just on a whim. It's not like he's opposed to violence...

And apparently, I'm starting to become a little desensitized myself.

My fingers tap against the display as I frown at Andrew's profile, barely registering him pulling into a parking space. He doesn't even look my way.

"What?"

"Nothing." Tap, tap, tippity tap.

"Clearly it's something."

"It's nothing, really. Just... wondering why our pack is so peaceful." I pause. "Your pack."

Andrew rests both hands on the wheel, staring out the windshield. "Peaceful? I suppose. We're in a time of unprecedented peace in the area, something we haven't seen since the First Alpha's age. At least, that's what they say."

There's something in the way he's saying it. Not quite a lack of confidence, but... something.

It's hard to put my finger on.

"Still... you, of all people, know how unwelcoming we are to outsiders. Not just humans like you, but rogues, too."

I flinch, and he finally looks at me with sympathy. "You didn't do anything wrong. Rogues aren't inherently evil, cruel, or dangerous. As long as they haven't gone feral, they're just like you or me."

Then he pauses, sympathy fading from his face as his lips quirk into a grin. "Well, maybe not you. Rogue wolves are still shifters."

Locked memories are banging on the door, insisting on coming out to play, but I have no interest in entertaining them. They already came out without warning the other day, and I have no interest in another visit.

Refusing to meet Andrew's gaze or even respond to his understanding sympathy, I pop open the door and slip out of the car, heading into the cemetery without even waiting to see if he follows behind.

After about twenty feet or so, I pause and glance behind me, somehow unsurprised to see Andrew hasn't left the car. He's watching me, though, and waves through the window.

Uneasiness stirs over his implicit understanding. I wasn't sure how I was going to get space from him in order to get my sleuthing done, but he somehow seems to understand I'm holding secrets.

Worse, he's okay with them.

Which is a good thing and I'm not complaining—not even close—but it does leave me a little off-balance. So far, when you consider the balance of friendship between us, it's heavily weighted on Andrew's side.

He's helped me out several times.

He's shown me loyalty.

He saved me from Ellie's goons.

He's showing up with strange bruises.

And I'm... what, feeding him occasionally? It's clear our friendship isn't very equal, and I wonder how I'm going to even it out.

But first, I need to find Jebediah Wulfric's grave.

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CAINE

I stand in the middle of the main lodge, keeping my expression neutral while Blue Mountain wolves exchange glances and wrinkle their noses. Dylan's covered from head to toe in dried mud and slime, smelling of swamp and death rot. If it weren't for the pack bond between us, I'd doubt his identity.

But it's him, gripping an equally muddy Sadie's collar with a death grip and dangling a grumpy-looking, once-white cat in his other arm. Whatever adventure the animals went

through was very obviously torture for Dylan, who's gone without sleep to relentlessly track them since they bolted.

"High Alpha," Dylan says through clenched teeth, his dignity barely intact as Sadie's tail swishes slowly across the floor to smear more muck across the polished floor. "I've returned with your... pets."

The inane greeting is necessary because of basic hierarchical obligations, but also to give the animals status in the eyes of the Blue Mountain Pack. Which is why I've welcomed him here, in the main lodge, instead of in Brax's—now Alpha Raphael's—office.

But it's hard to find a proper response when looking at this bedraggled trio.

"Your effort is... commendable," I finally say.

My focus shifts to the small square, presumably a box, clamped between Sadie's jaws. It's roughly the size of a human fist, details indistinguishable thanks to the grime and mud coating it. The dog's posture changes when I eye it—her tail stops wagging, her hackles rising.

Interesting.

"What's with the box?" I nod toward Sadie, keeping my voice calm.

My subordinate lets out a low growl. "She won't release it. I attempted twice. Got this for my trouble." He shifts his weight to reveal a tear in his pants—not deep enough to break skin, but a warning nonetheless. Whatever scratch Sadie's claws may have caused has already healed over.

"From her?" The surprise is real. The golden retriever, though obviously not a mere dog, has shown no signs of aggression to this point.

That thing runs when I look at her sideways, Fenris agrees.

"Yes, sir."

Two Blue Mountain wolves hover nearby, cleaning supplies in hand and hostility radiating from their gazes. Not at Dylan, of course, but at Sadie. Even with their status as my pets, it would be strange to expect any wolf shifter to look at a mere dog with respect.

I wave everyone out of the room, not wanting them to bear witness to the details. Once they've left, I raise a single brow. "Report."

Dylan's face settles into a blank mask, probably to hide the annoyance wafting off him. Lycans may be loyal, but he's definitely holding a grudge over this one.

"They ran for an abandoned hunter's cabin, sir. A human one, nothing the pack would use. It was approximately two miles from the edge of their territory to the south. They made a direct line for it with no deviation, hesitation, or rest, almost as if..."

He hesitates, which is understandable. Even for a battle-hardened veteran of the Lycan Pack, it's strange to think a random dog and cat would act in this way.

"As if they knew exactly where they were going," I finish for him.

"Yes, High Alpha. The basement was partially flooded, the water scummy. Shit was growing down there, despite being indoors. Other than that, nothing strange about the place. Except the fact the basement existed at all."

Hunter's cabins don't generally have basements. They aren't homes; just rest areas for, as the name suggests, hunters.

So his suspicion over its origins is eminently reasonable. I'm curious about it, too.

"What did they do there?"

"They ran all over the place sniffing, and Sadie ended up digging through the water until she got this out." He glances askance at the now-growling retriever, who jerks her head away with a faint snarl when he does. "I tried to take it from her, but..."

"Don't," I warn Sadie, who growls deeper in response.

Dylan shrugs. "As you see, High Alpha."

Scrubbing a hand over my cheeks, I shake my head a little. "You made the right call bringing them here." Sadie's strange protectiveness over her haul aside, they're contaminated by whatever scum is thriving in a flooded basement.

"Yes, sir. Didn't want the little one touching this."

"Alright. Clean yourselves up. Use the facilities out back. Once you're decontaminated, bring Sadie to Grace's camper."

Dylan's eyebrows lift a fraction. "Sir? The box—"

"Let her keep it." I step closer to Sadie, meeting her gaze directly. Her ears perk forward attentively, her hackles lowering as I speak. "Don't fight her for it. I suspect she wants to bring it back to Grace."

At the mention of Grace's name, Sadie's tail wags enthusiastically, spattering more swamp muck across the polished floor.

"Yes, sir." Dylan doesn't question further, though I can tell he wants to. "And the cat?"

The white feline meets my gaze with undisguised contempt, as if being carried by Dylan is the greatest insult it's ever suffered.

"The cat needs to be washed too. I'm sure you can survive a few scratches." Felines seem infamous for hating baths.

"Yes, sir. Oh, and Reggie checked in with me. He's been following the missing alpha. He's staying in some hidey hole not far from where the animals went. His phone's dead, so he hasn't been able to call. Kid seems like he's waiting for something. Thinks he might be suffering from some kind of withdrawal."

My brows raise. I haven't been worried about the man—he's capable of handling a hell of a lot more than a whelp of an alpha and a lack of sleep—but this update is a pleasant bonus.

Concerning, but pleasant.

It's good to know he's far from Grace, especially with what I have planned for tonight, but before that...

"Withdrawals? Have you seen any evidence of illicit substances in the territory?"

He shakes his head. "No, sir. Not even a peep. Outside of wolfsbane, but..."

"Wolfsbane isn't addictive," I murmur. Gets you drunker than a skunk, gives a bit of a false high, but is also toxic at higher doses. One of the few substances with the ability to bypass a shifter's natural healing and metabolism, it's highly regulated but not illegal.

Generally, the only wolves you'd see indulging are the shifter equivalent of alcoholics, or young, curious shifters.

But if he's acting like some sort of addict...

"Moonbane."

He gives a one-shouldered shrug. "That's his thought."

It's a new product, something considered wolfsbane-adjacent. Unfortunately, it's highly addictive... and several times more toxic.

My fingers tap against my thighs. "Get cleaned up. I'll look into this."

"Yes, High Alpha."

Chapter 244: Grace: Please Don't Let it be Zombies

Okay, so, finding the first Alpha's grave is a little harder than I thought, because it's not there anymore.

Seriously, it's gone.

And before you ask how a grave wanders off and disappears, it's pretty simple—it's been dug up and run off to a new home, obviously not on its own. Or, if it was on its own, I'd rather not know about it. Ever.

I draw the line at zombies, okay? No walking dead, please.

Unsurprisingly, a tiny ache thuds behind my eyes as I stare into the disturbed earth, all ten feet deep of it.

It's not uncommon for supes to be buried a little deeper than you would for a human burial. I know about this because Brax had organized my parents' funeral. Funny enough, Dad was buried six feet deep, like normal. But Mom was buried ten feet.

Brax said they made a mistake because the grave diggers thought Mom was pack, saying shifters believe the inherent magic in their bodies need the deeper depth to avoid scavengers, and I never really thought about it again.

But I sure as fuck am thinking about it now as I look down a giant hole, complete with a dead rectangle where the tombstone once lay.

First off, why would human gravediggers think Mom's pack when she's buried in a very human cemetery?

Second off, Brax knew full well Mom was human and doesn't seem to have held her in high regard. It's obvious now he did it on purpose, but it seems a little strange.

There's a mystery there. Or Brax considered her pack because they'd been mates. Wolves are notoriously possessive, after all...

It's something to think about.

But first things first, I guess.

Jebediah Wulfric used to rest in peace here. I've seen his grave before, even if I'm not exactly intimately related to this place. Every kid in the pack has run through here at least once, usually as a test of bravery.

And as much as I'd like to think I'm mistaken and some other random person has been dug up, the surrounding headstones are all filled with Wulfric names and appropriate dates for the First Alpha's generation.

Blowing out a breath, I squint at the cloudy sky. A swarm of fluffy white cotton balls have swallowed up all the blue and blocked the last bits of summer heat.

Even for someone like me, who doesn't check in on the local weather much, can tell. Mainly because there's a chill breeze and my skin is pimpling in the sudden cold, but also because it's autumn and about that time.

O course, I wasn't expecting the cold front to perfectly match my visit to a creepy graveyard where someone's body was just taken away, but hey, can I even consider it strange compared to what I've been through lately?

Not really. In fact, it feels kind of expected at this point.

A sudden crumbling of dirt near the edge has me scrambling back a few steps, wary of my bad luck taking over and sending me to the bottom. Andrew's here so it isn't like I'd die forgotten and alone at the bottom of the grave, but falling into it makes the top ten list of things I'd rather not do right now.

"Okay, Jebediah Wulfric. Send me a sign. A note. I'll take GPS coordinates if you have them, but just give me a little direction here, will you? I even brought you flowers." I didn't technically bring it. There were a few random flowers along the path, probably blown over from another grave, and I brought them along because they were pretty.

But those are details I have no intention of sharing with his ghost, especially when the asshole doesn't bother giving me any sign at all. His grave's been disturbed and I'm willing to hunt his body down and he's not even listening, assuming ghosts exist.

Which they... might not, but Lyre doesn't seem to think that's the case, and considering I know now angels can have babies, paranormal hauntings don't seem very far fetched these days.

Pulling out my phone with heavy reluctance, I type quickly.

[GRACE HARPER: He's missing, what now?]

The reply comes so fast, I suspect it might even be automated.

[CAERIEL: Figure it out.]

Most helpful mentor ever. Shouldn't he be teaching me and holding my hand?

Metaphorically, I mean. I have no intention of making skin contact with the man, but come on, throw me a goddamn bone here.

Had I known so much of my life would turn into trying to solve bizarre mysteries, I would have read a lot more Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in hopes of Sherlock's IQ rubbing off on me.

Obviously, help isn't coming. And no matter how much I look around this stupid gravesite, there aren't any tracks to be seen. In fact, there's no evidence heavy machinery's come through here at all, which brings up the entire *how the fuck did someone dig up ten feet of dirt plus a body* line of questioning.

Maybe Andrew can find something. I've never been great at tracking, and I can't smell for shit since I'm human. Caeriel's useless, so it's going to have to be Andrew.

Decision made, I spin on my heel to drag him over.

A streak of sunlight breaks through a bank of clouds overhead, light flooding the cemetery in a sudden burst of gold. I shield my eyes and for some reason turn back to the grave—no idea why.

And then I freeze.

Something's glinting at the bottom of the hole, precisely in the center of it.

Something small, catching the light like a diamond, or a shard of glass, or metal, or... something stupidly important.

There's a buzzing feeling going from the soles of my feet, up my legs, and into my chest as I continue to stare at it, even when the clouds cover up the brief moment of dazzling light. And why is there something magical and glinty in the smack dab middle of a dug-up grave?

Obviously because it's a trap to pull in the unsuspecting.

Not today, Satan!

Back to my original plan: Bring Andrew over, because every Sherlock needs a Watson.

Yanking my gaze away from temptation, I bolt for the car, muttering under my breath, "Please don't let it be zombies. Please don't let it be zombies. Seriously, don't let it be zombies."

Chapter 245: Grace: Coin (I)

Andrew rubs at the back of his head, staring at the hole in the ground with a frown. "Who would have done this?"

I shrug, even though I'm pretty sure I know the answer. "Wouldn't it require some heavy machinery to dig up this dirt?"

"Not just to dig it up—the dirt's gone," he points out with a sigh. "Why would they take the dirt?"

Huh. Now that he mentions it...

But the mystery of the missing dirt is also not my problem. I'm sure Caeriel had his bizarre reasons, assuming he's the one behind Jebediah Wulfric's missing body.

The sky's still cloudy, though they're thankfully white and puffy without a storm in sight. Still, uneasiness creeps its way across my skin as I take a step closer to the open grave.

"I need to go down there," I tell Andrew, deciding to go with blunt. It isn't like there's a reasonable explanation for wanting to scour the bottom of a robbed grave, anyway, and he's been cooperative thus far.

His head whips around, eyes widening. "You want to what?"

"Go down there."

"...into the empty grave?"

"Yes."

"You?"

I nod. "That's what I said."

"Why the hell would you want to do that?"

"I just want to check something."

Andrew's eyes dart between me and the hole, one brow raised. "Grace, it's just dirt in there—never mind. At least it's just dirt in there. Better than a corpse, I guess."

"Zombies can't exist without a body," I agree, watching his face go from quizzical to blank.

"Zombies?"

Oh. I guess we were on very different wavelengths. "Never mind," I mumble, not wanting to explain my semi-real fear of a horde of zombies appearing.

He shakes his head and looks me over, then the hole again, before letting out a long sigh. "Fine. Let me get something to help you down. You'll probably sprain your ankle if you jump."

Rude. On point, but rude. "Thanks."

I watch him trudge back to his car, muttering under his breath. Something about me being insane and how this wasn't what he signed up for.

Just in case, I step a few feet away from the edge, not wanting to fall in before he returns. I'm may not be sure how strong the edges of the ground are, but I know exactly how bad my luck has been lately.

Andrew returns moments later with a coil of thick rope slung over his shoulder, and I have no idea why I was imagining him coming back with one of those tall ladders instead.

"You just... happen to have rope in your car?" I ask curiously, even though rope seems slightly more normal than a random super tall ladder.

He shrugs like it's the most normal thing in the world. "Why wouldn't you have rope in your car?"

"I don't know, maybe because most people aren't preparing to dispose of bodies on the regular?"

Andrew's lips twitch, and my eyes narrow with suspicion.

"Wait, were you planning to kidnap me later? Is that why you've been so helpful?" I'm half-joking, mostly because he would have tried doing so a long time ago if that was his goal.

This time he actually laughs out loud. "Believe it or not, rope has far more practical uses," he says, kneeling at the edge of the grave. "Towing, camping, makeshift clothesline..." He works quickly, tying several knots at regular intervals along the length. "Though I guess 'lowering humans into empty graves' is now on that list."

His fingers work deftly with the rope, creating proper handholds, and I vaguely recall learning something about tying different knots several years ago. I've already forgotten them all, though. Outside of tying the occasional bow, I haven't had much use for the knowledge.

"You're surprisingly good at that."

"You should be, too. We learned it in the same class." He pauses. "Then again, I guess Rafe did everything for you, so you never needed to remember it."

His name coming out of nowhere is a little jarring, especially how casually Andrew throws it into the conversation. "Yeah, I guess so."

"I never agreed with him," he adds, finishing the last knot. "Told him it was better for you to learn how to do it all yourself so you could survive if it ever became necessary, but he said you were too weak to survive without relying on the pack anyway."

I blink a few times, a little floored. "He said that?"

"Yep." He throws the rope down the hole, and it dangles a foot or two shy of the ground. "Said you only ever needed to learn how to get back to the pack."

What a dick. Hearing this only makes me more frustrated with younger, oblivious Grace, who thought everything Rafe did for her was romantic and sweet.

"And why were you friends with him?" I ask curiously as he wraps the other end around his waist.

"Why were you dating him?" he counters. "You couldn't possibly be blind to all the flaws in his personality."

Coughing lightly, I mumble, "Well, you know, love is blind."

"Betas don't question their alphas. The hierarchy isn't just taught. It's instinctual, something we can feel in our blood. I'm not and will never be an alpha, but Rafe was from the start." He shrugs. "It didn't matter if he was an asshole or a saint. He chose me, and I followed."

Putting it that way casts their friendship in a horrifying light. "Surely you have a choice."

"It's not a big deal," Andrew says, sounding indifferent to the truth of his past as he motions for me to get moving. "Hurry up with your zombie-summoning ritual before someone reports to the Lycan King I've thrown his mate into an unmarked grave."

I roll my eyes a little, even though his suggestion is mildly horrifying. Imagining Caine's response to that report is... less than pleasant.

Well, for Andrew. It's quite heart-warming for me.

Grabbing the rope with both hands, I eye it skeptically before glancing back at Andrew. "You sure you can hold this? I'm not exactly a featherweight."

His face shifts into exasperated tolerance. "No, but you're not as heavy as a car. I think I'll manage."

Do they regularly move cars...? Then again, he has shifter strength to fall back on, so I guess it's maybe a reasonable comparison.

"Such a gentleman," I mutter, stepping to the edge. Loose soil crumbles, and my heart jumps a little. It's only ten feet, perfectly safe even if I was thrown in, but for some reason it feels like twenty. "If you drop me, I'm haunting you forever."

"You'd haunt me even if I didn't drop you. Also, you're not dying from this height."

My heart pounds as I lower myself over the edge. I've climbed ropes before, and if I recall correctly, I was pretty shit at it.

Sweat coats my hands as I make it down a few knots. For whatever reason, the air down here already feels several degrees colder. And thicker somehow, making it hard to breathe.

Am I having a panic attack over only ten feet?

"We don't have all day, Grace."

My hands slip, and I shriek as I fall, my feet hitting the bottom with a dull thud.

Miracle of miracles, I don't sprain my ankle.

"Made it," I shout up, feeling a little silly for being so scared. After a moment, Andrew's face appears at the edge of the hole.

"Well, are you done yet?"

"I just got down here!" Making sure to roll my eyes with a little extra exaggeration, I turn to observe the space, wrinkling my nose a little at the strange, pungent scent permeating the area.

My lungs burn, and I pull the collar of my shirt over my nose, coughing at a sudden tickle in the back of my throat.

"What's wrong?" Andrew calls from above.

"It smells weird down here!"

"I mean, it held a dead body for how many years..."

True. Considering I haven't made it a point to hang out in dug-up graves, I'm not familiar with the general scent of, well, grave.

But I kind of feel like maybe it shouldn't smell like anything at this point, what with decomposition and all...

Still uneasy over the scent lingering here, I hurry to the center of the grave, trying to find the source of the glinting. There's a gold coin almost completely covered in loose dirt, with only the barest hint of it peeking out; it only takes a few swipes of my fingers to uncover it. Rather than an old treasure being unearthed, it's as if someone planted it.

Chapter 246: Grace: Coin (II)

We manage to leave the cemetery without further incident, though Andrew had to haul me out of the ground because pulling your entire body up a rope is a lot harder than it might seem.

I really need to exercise more. Running, I can do. Anything involving strength, not so much.

I frown at my phone, completely devoid of notifications or help, as usual. *Thanks for all your freaking help, Caeriel.*

The coin sits heavy in my palm and I turn it over for what already feels like the hundredth time, tracing the worn edge with my fingertip. There's something about it, a latent energy inside. I can't sense it the way I sense arcana, but I can feel it in the form of static electricity and an unnatural coolness against my skin.

"Never see a half-dollar before?" Andrew asks curiously.

It's not a half-dollar, but that's all he can see when I show it to him. He doesn't see how it's actually a gold coin, hammered some time long ago. The etchings are too worn to make out.

"No, I have. I actually used to have a small jar of them." A long time ago, when Mom was alive.

"Oh, so you're a collector."

It wasn't like I was actively trying to; Mom always gave them to me as little gifts, saying they'd be worth money someday.

No idea where the jar is now, though.

Shaking off the memories, I squint at the coin again, a little uneasy. Before, at the Wash-N-Were, I'd had an update immediately when I found whatever clue I was supposed to find. This time, there's nothing but radio silence.

And it smells. Even after I practically drowned the coin in hand sanitizer from the glove compartment, it carries the same scent from the grave.

Andrew turns onto an unmarked gravel road, only minutes from the cemetery. There were multiple locations on the list Caeriel sent me, but for a second it felt like the coin got hot when my eyes landed on this one.

It didn't happen again, not even when I told Andrew to head there. But I can't shake the niggling feeling it's somehow connected to this coin, and following this yellow brick road is what I need to do. I think.

Too bad I'm not really Sherlock; his brain would be super helpful right now.

After cresting a small hill, the skeleton of an old building rises, looking like some sort of ancient ruin. It's less creepy than the cemetery because there are no dead bodies here—I think.

What might have once been a two-story structure is now just a burned-out husk. It's been here for decades, but I've never cared to explore it before.

"There've been a lot of fires in our territory," I mutter.

"I mean, they probably didn't have fire departments a hundred years ago." Andrew squints out the window. "Shocked it's still standing, honestly. I haven't been here since I was ten or eleven, I think."

"Whose house was it?"

"No idea. We just call it the burned-down plantation."

"I know that." It's what Caeriel called it, too, even though this definitely was never a plantation. Maybe a farm house once upon a time, but not a plantation. "But you guys don't have any stories about the old owners or anything?"

"Not really, but I think they used to be human. There were a lot of them back then."

"Hmm. Wait here; I'll be right back."

"Got it."

Sliding out of the car again, I make my way across the overgrown plot of land, wondering when a gravel driveway was even put in. If this house really burned down a hundred years ago, who put in a driveway?

Thinking about it now, doesn't it all seem strange? And why is there even a gravel road leading up to this place?

But more importantly, why does it smell like the grave?

Whatever history happened here is long gone, eaten by time and fire. It doesn't take much to search the place, and there's nothing to find except dandelions.

"Did I seriously think I was going to find something here?" I mutter, kicking at dead grass.

I pull out the coin again, turning it between my fingers. I swear the damn thing had felt warm earlier, but it's cold and inert now, despite the faint buzzing against my skin.

Something green and sinuous slithers across my foot.

"Fuck!" I stumble backward, my heart hammering as a small garter snake disappears into the overgrown grass. It wasn't even that big, but my heart hammers like I've just seen a rattlesnake.

Okay, calm down. I've seen plenty of snakes in my time living with wolves. But it doesn't matter how harmless it is, they always send a little slither of fear down my back.

Shaking off the sudden scare, I shove the coin back into my pocket and close my eyes, trying to sense the arcana of this place. I should have done this at Jebediah Wulfric's grave, but I felt so rushed, like if we didn't leave soon, something bad would happen.

But, as the sun beats down on me in between cloud covers, making the day seem a little warmer than it is, there's nothing my senses can pick up, either physical or magical. There's nothing here. It's just an old, burned down building.

My first failure, I guess—

"Grace, get in the car!"

Andrew's sudden shout startles me more than the snake, and I trip over nothing to fall onto my knees.

Still, a jolt of adrenaline bursts through my limbs and I bolt for the car immediately, not questioning the urgency in his words. Anything could be happening right now, but I know one thing for certain: Andrew's here to protect me.

I hurtle toward the car as five wolves appear over the hill, running full speed in our direction.

Fuck.

I dive into the passenger seat, slamming the door just as Andrew slams the car into reverse. The tires spray gravel as we fishtail back onto the narrow road.

We can't go back; we're heading further out of territory. But once we get on a main road, we should be able to circle back.

"Who are they?" My voice sounds too high, too breathless, too shaky.

He grunts. "Forest Springs. Buckle up, don't just stare in the mirror."

"Got it." But my heart's stuttering over the implications. Forest Springs is Ellie's birth pack, which means the only person who could be behind this is... "Ellie."

"She's an idiot if she's really trying something again," Andrew says, accelerating harder. No matter how fast the wolves run, they can't keep up with the speed of a car.

Assuming we don't crash going sixty on a gravel road.

My brain feels like it's getting bounced into paste, and my ass is already in pain.

"The Lycan King's made it crystal clear anyone who bothers you won't live past the day. Even if it's the Alpha or Luna. There's always going to be an idiot willing to try, but she's throwing away her life and future by going after you."

I shake my head, my fingers fumbling with the seatbelt. It finally clicks after too many tries.

Ellie's never made sense to me. She has Rafe. She won; game over. I never fought her, never tried to get him back, and yet her fixation with me only seems to be growing. Jealousy isn't uncommon in a pack, but shouldn't she be over it by now? Especially if her life is at stake?

"Why can't she leave me alone?" I hiss. "I stay away from him!" I've even managed to knee him in the balls when he tried to get pushy. What more does she want from me?

"Yeah, but he doesn't stay away from you—fuck!" Andrew slams on the brakes, and I lurch forward against my seatbelt.

My lower abdomen and shoulder both feel bruised from the sudden force, but I would have slammed my head against the windshield if I wasn't buckled in.

Seat belts save lives.

A wall of wolves has materialized in the road ahead of us, cutting off our escape. At least three of them, not including the ones now catching up from behind.

We're pinned.

"Get down," Andrew hisses, reaching over to push my head below the dashboard.

"What are you—"

"Stay down, Grace."

The shift in Andrew's voice makes me freeze. It's not panic I hear—it's something deeper, something primal. The tone of a wolf preparing to fight.

"Andrew, you can't—"

"Call Caine." His voice is strained, muscles tensing beneath his skin. "Now."

My fingers are clumsy as I pull out my phone. The screen blurs, and I blink away what might be tears of frustration. "There's no signal."

I don't think there's a single place in this territory without at least a few bars of service.

"Damn it. They're probably jamming us. Look, Grace—I can't hold them all off. We only have a few seconds of opportunity here. I'll take them on. You need to drive as fast and as far as you can."

"I'm not leaving you behi—"

"Shut up and do it, Grace!" he barks, already out of the car and slamming the door closed. I dive for the door lock first, just before one of them tries to open the passenger door.

Andrew's human form has disappeared into a wolf a little smaller than the ones coming after us. They're not as big as an alpha, but neither is Andrew.

Fuck.

Howls are only somewhat muffled by being inside the car, and one of the wolves jumps onto the hood before Andrew's wolf form slams into his side and knocks him off.

Pretzeling myself into the driver's seat takes precious, precious seconds as a naked shifter slams his fist against the passenger side window.

Chapter 247: Grace: Coin (III)

Andrew's little sedan, which technically belongs to the pack but no one seems to care he's driving it around these days, lurches forward with a miniature roar as I slam my foot down on the accelerator, hoping and praying I don't hit Andrew if he falls off the hood.

I don't, in fact, hit Andrew, though I do hit *someone*.

My forehead bangs against the steering wheel as I brake for a second without thinking. Then I hear what I think is Andrew screaming at me to go, and my foot returns to the accelerator with a hard stomp. The sedan bumps over something and shoots forward, taking me away from the fight with haste.

My other hand jerks at the seatbelt until I'm safely buckled in and (hopefully) safe from another forehead-steering wheel slam if I run into anything else.

Not that I'm planning to, exactly, but—

My palms are sweaty and my fingers already ache from how tense they are on the wheel, but I lean over while keeping my eyes on the windshield, fumbling around on the passenger seat for my phone as I fight to hold myself steady against every bump of a speeding car on gravel.

Eventually, I find it and dare a quick glance.

Still no signal.

God, I hope Andrew's okay.

But, of course, as soon as I think that something slams into the side of my car, sending me careening off-road into a nauseating spin.

The seatbelt once again saves me from a concussion, and I glance at my window, only to scream a little when I see Ellie's face pressed against the glass.

Jesus.

Fucking.

Christ.

She looks like she's walked right out of a horror movie, strands of her long black hair caught in her mouth and her emerald green eyes wide and crazed.

Blood trickles down her forehead, only completing her deranged look.

I jerk my eyes away from Ellie's horror-movie face and slam my foot on the gas pedal, but nothing happens. The engine roars, but the car goes nowhere. Can't even feel the tires spinning.

It might have something to do with the hood being crunched in on one side, but while I'm not a mechanic, it doesn't seem likely.

Rafe's jealous Luna pounds against the window. Her hair's in sweaty clumps around her face and there's blood trickling down from somewhere on her scalp, making her seem like some sort of war refugee even though she's acting like a dangerous maniac.

Must be pretty privilege. You can look pitiful even when you're being crazy.

But my ridiculous panicked brain focusing on how she's both horrifying and pretty is not going to get me out of this mess.

"Get out! Get the fuck out!" she shrieks, in a frantic way I've never heard from her before. She might be a bitch, but she always holds herself at some level of composure, even if she's delusional.

The only word left to describe her is rabid.

The doors are still locked, not like it'll help much. If she puts her real strength into it, she'll shatter these windows. It looks like she's too out of her mind to be rational right now, which at least gives me time to figure out... something.

Fuck. But what?

My fingers shake as I snatch up my phone, but there's still so no signal.

My heart rate spikes again when I see a notification appear on my screen. There's still no signal. How the hell—?

[CAERIEL: Blast her.]

For a second, hope surged in me seeing his name. He's my mentor, so he can save me. But reading those two simple words has it crashing back at my feet.

What the hell; if he wants me to blast her, can he at least give me step-by-step instructions on *how*?

The window explodes inward.

Glass shards spray across my face and chest as Ellie's fist punches through. Before I can react, her fingers lock around my throat, squeezing with inhuman strength. Her nails dig into my skin, drawing blood.

I'm too shocked to feel pain, I think, because everything goes in a blur.

I grab her wrist without thinking, trying to pry her hand away. She's screaming something, but all I can focus on is the pressure crushing my windpipe and the sudden surge of heat in my chest. It's not fear—it's something else. Something deeper. It burns and pulses, gathering into what feels like a... baseball. A flaming baseball right behind my sternum.

Instinctively, I reach for it, and the moment I do, the energy shoots through me, from core to fingertips. It explodes outward with a thunderous crack.

The blast throws Ellie backward, sending her flying through the air, and her nails scratch my throat as her grip is forcefully ripped away. The car door sails right off its hinges with her, crashing to the ground yards away.

I stare at my hand in shocked disbelief. My palm tingles with residual heat, and my fingertips look faintly scorched. This is... different from the last time, isn't it?

My phone buzzes again, and I look down out of habit more than anything. I'm pretty sure I'm in shock again. It's starting to feel familiar.

[CAERIEL: Just like that, do it again. I'm not helping this time.]

Helping... oh. He must have been the one to make my magic do something.

I guess he's not completely useless after all.

Ellie staggers to her feet, her clothes singed and torn. Though I didn't see a single flame, she looks burned. And even from this distance, I can see her eyes have gone wolf-yellow.

She's going to shift, and I'm no match against shifter speed, much less shifted shifter speed.

I focus inward, searching for the same heat, the same power, trying to imagine it into the flaming baseball I'd sensed before. It's clumsy how it all comes together, and I'm not exactly sure how I do it. It's mostly instinct, copying the feeling without knowing exactly how I'm doing it; as if the arcana knows my intent.

It's sloppy and maybe more of a weirdly shaped blob than a baseball, but Ellie's already launching herself forward as she shifts and I have no time left.

Thrusting out my hand, I shout, "Stay away from me, you crazy bitch!"

The energy erupts from my palm again. It hits Ellie square in the chest and she crashes to the ground and lies motionless, smoke rising from her clothes.

Oh, fuck. Did I just kill her?

Wait—Andrew! What about Andrew?

My seatbelt is still buckled, so it takes a minute for me to untangle myself from the wreck of the car, and I scan the area wildly, not quite sure which direction I came from. I'd spun when Ellie hit the car.

They're too far away to make out details, but considering how aggressively they're all moving, he's still alive.

Waiting around isn't an option; he can't win against them all by himself.

So, ignoring the smoking Ellie on the ground and half-hoping I didn't kill her because I'm so not capable of handling the idea I've taken a life, I bolt for the man I'd finally accepted as a friend while trying desperately to draw arcana into another ball in my chest.

I'm about halfway there when something jumps onto me from behind, smelling like burned skin and hair.

The hold I had on the vaguely ball-ish shaped arcana in my chest fumbles, and the entire world goes white.

Chapter 248: Grace: Coin (IV)

My eyes feel like sandpaper when I open them, and the familiar, pungent smell of Jebediah Wulfric's grave fills my nose.

Before my eyes can even focus on my surroundings, I heave whatever's left of breakfast onto the soil beneath me, groaning as my ribs spasm with the violence of it.

I'm so focused on the vomiting it takes me a minute to realize I seem to be trapped in a square of nasty-smelling earth again, and it looks vaguely familiar.

"Grace? Grace, if you don't answer me, I'm coming down there and we'll both be stuck," Andrew shouts.

My mind buzzes a little as I stare at a familiar coin buried in loose soil, and my fingers shake as I reach out to free it, watching in numb disbelief as it frees from the dirt so easily.

Then, as if not sure I'm seeing what I think I'm seeing, I turn slowly to take in every inch of where I am.

And no matter how intensely I stare, the fact remains:

I'm in Jebediah Wulfric's grave. Again.

How?

"Grace, I'm coming down."

"No, don't!"

Fuck, I can taste the vomit in my mouth still, mixing with the smell of this place. Shuddering, I rush to the rope hanging from where Andrew had thrown it down so long ago, letting me down into the grave.

My head's spinning in confusion, aching with what I'm experiencing and what I just went through.

I grab at the rope, hissing as my raw palm touches the rough texture of it. A quick glance explains why: it's bright red and looks almost scalded. My neck throbs, too, and when I touch it with my other hand, my fingers come away with blood. When I swallow, my throat hurts as if it's been crushed, proving what I'd just been through was real.

Ellie was choking me. I escaped and tried to save Andrew. My hand must have burned from my power, maybe? But... how am I back?

What happened? Was it my magic that did it, or something else?

I look up at Andrew, who's frowning down at me with concern.

"What happened?" I ask him, and his brows go up.

"You tripped and fell on your face." His voice shifts suddenly, sharpening. "Why are you bleeding? You didn't fall hard enough to hurt yourself."

I'm not really sure how to respond, and Andrew's face disappears. Moments later he's jumped down into the grave beside me and jerks my face up as he inspects my neck, his fingers surprisingly gentle despite the force of his grip.

"What the hell, Grace. How the fuck did you get so many scratches just from a trip and fall? I know humans are weak, but this is too much even for you."

I want to ask if he remembers the ambush, but for some reason my mouth doesn't move to form the words. Any attempt to reference what happened results in not just silence, but my body not responding to my wishes.

"I don't know what happened," I cut him off, pulling away from his touch. My brain feels like it's splitting in two. The phantom pain from Ellie's nails digging into my throat remains, and my eyes are still raw from the blinding whiteness I'd experienced. "I—I want to go back. I don't feel well."

I'm not crazy. It all happened. The evidence is right here, all over my body. I'm actually a little concerned I'm going to end up with bruises around my neck, because I have no idea how I'm going to explain those away.

But somehow I'm back to an earlier time, and Andrew seems oblivious to what's happened, which means it *hasn't* happened. And yet I'm standing here with crystal clear memories of it all.

Obviously, this is related to the App in some way. I just don't really understand how.

It's only then I realize my phone's been vibrating nonstop. I check it, a little relieved to see I have signal. It means Ellie's nowhere near; she'd blocked our cell signals when she was ready to attack. Of course, the other option is that she's nearby but not ready to do anything about it yet.

I shiver a little.

The App's sent me a few notifications, but my eyes have already settled on my message history, my hands shaking as I see Caeriel's messages. They're still there, once again proving what I went through was real.

But the entire App is red and important notifications are flashing, so I click on them.

They're all saying things like unauthorized use of prohibited magic, warnings about plausibility, and then finally, an announcement.

[ALERT: Region 20-L

Breach of plausibility detected. Unauthorized divine activity linked to *Coin of Ascension*. Emergency rollback executed. All guardians in 20-L are ordered to locate and contain artifact immediately.]

"You okay?" Andrew asks, gently resting his hand against my arm. "You look like you're about to collapse all of a sudden."

"Uh—yeah. Sorry. I'm fine." Emergency rollback... The thought of something being able to literally rewind time and start over is, frankly, beyond terrifying. It's also something I'm getting used to feeling. "I guess the smell's getting to me."

He sniffs the air in confusion. "What smell?"

My entire body freezes. There's nothing I can smell that a wolf shifter can't. "It kind of smells like death down here."

He draws in a deep breath, then gives me an odd look. "If you say so. Did you hurt your head?"

"No, I—"

Wait. It would be better to say I did.

"—maybe. I feel a little dizzy. Let's go home. No, wait—I want food. Let's go eat."

"You just threw up."

"It's fine, I'm not sick. I'll be fine once we get out of here. I think it was just nerves."

Andrew's entire face looks unconvinced, but I force an innocent smile out. Finally, he shakes his head with a sigh. "Fine. You go up first."

I distinctly remember how I tried and failed to climb up with the help of the rope earlier. Some of my reluctance must show on my face because he just sighs again, louder this time.

"Never mind. Just get on my back and I'll bring you up. Make sure your mate doesn't kill me for it, though."

"No problem. I promise."

Chapter 249: Grace: Coin (V)

There's a dinky diner not far from the cemetery, and I convince Andrew to stop there. It's a popular little breakfast nook for the older population of Blue Mountain, and not trendy enough for the younger crowd.

The booths are covered in cracked vinyl and there's a persistent smell of bacon grease, the kind where it's so seeped into the walls and tables this place would probably have to be burned down in order to be anything other than a greasy little diner.

Andrew sits across from me, fidgeting with a sugar packet as he keeps staring at my face.

He's worried. I get it; I'm acting weird. But every time I try to tell him what happened, there's only silence. My mouth won't even open.

It's as if the App's put out a gag order on the rollback, which is beyond frustrating.

"You want to tell me what happened back there?" he asks.

I stare out the window at the bustling parking lot. It's the reason I chose this place and demanded Andrew pull in; even a crazy bitch like Ellie won't start something in the middle of a crowded place, right? She wouldn't want word to get back to the Lycan King.

But then I remember she's the Luna of this pack, and I wonder if I'm making a terrible decision. Wouldn't all of these people do her bidding and join in on the fight?

Shit.

My eyes lower to my phone, where I check the signal with obsessive regularity. Still have it, which (hopefully) means Ellie isn't anywhere near. Still.

"Not really," I answer once I remember he's asked me a question.

An older waitress stops by, not even holding a pad or pen as she scowls at me. Then she switches to a sweet smile when she looks at Andrew. "You've grown so much. Haven't seen you since you were a wee little one. When are you taking your place as our Alpha's Beta?"

He shakes his head. "I'm not sure yet. Things have yet to settle. Could you get me a coffee? And..."

His eyes slide toward me, and I shrug. "A slice of apple pie."

I'm not actually hungry. Coming here was never about the food.

"...and an apple pie."

"Anything for you, future Beta." She still doesn't look my way before leaving, and Andrew looks uncomfortable, even though this is how it's been since... forever.

He and Rafe always had to place the orders for me, because it was rare for anyone to look my way. And with Brax's death being kind of my fault, I'm sure it's only gotten worse.

Damn. Coming here might have been really stupid, after all. But I didn't want to bring a crazed Ellie back to the RV and the kids, not even with Super Nanny there.

My hands tremble slightly as I unlock my phone, remembering how hopeless and terrified I was when no one knew where we were.

My fingers tap quickly.

[GRACE: Hey, you. I made Andrew take me out for breakfast. I've got a few things to do today, so I'll be bouncing around the territory a bit. I'm at a diner here, I'll send you the location ping.]

There. Casual checking in from a girlfriend to a boyfriend, plus I told him I have someone with me so he shouldn't be too concerned. But still checking in so he can find me if I go missing.

It's perfect.

But the perfect text comes back with an imperfect response as Caine focuses on the wrong thing.

[CAINE: Why are you eating breakfast with him?]

"Who are you texting?"

"Caine."

He pauses as I tap away at my response. "You—did you tell him we're together?"

"Why wouldn't I? It's not like we're on a date." More taps.

[GRACE: I figured you don't want me going out by myself.]

[CAINE: Not with him.]

[GRACE: Rupert is with the kids.]

[CAINE: Who the fuck is Rupert?]

[Grace: Ronald?]

[CAINE: ?]

[GRACE: Anyway, Andrew's my ride. We found something at the cemetery.]

[CAINE: I can drive you. Who's Rupert and Ronald?]

My lips curve into a smile.

[GRACE: The guy you sent to guard us. I never remember his name. Aren't you busy?]

[CAINE: You don't need to remember his name. I'm never too busy for you. I'll come pick you up.]

[GRACE: Do your work. We have a date tonight, remember?]

[CAINE: We can have the date now.]

"Everything okay?" Andrew asks, watching me giggle at my phone. "Seems like good news."

Fuck, I have company.

Sending Caine a firm negative on the pick-up, I place my phone decisively to the side, deciding not to flirt via text anymore when Andrew's staring at me from across the table.

He's frowning, and my stomach sinks. I'd just accepted him as a friend, but if it's going to come with jealousy—

"We need to get your neck treated. It doesn't seem to be bleeding anymore, but infection could start at any time. Humans are weak and prone to infections."

—or not. He's just being a good friend. My shoulders relax. "It's fine. Actually, I have some questions for you, if you don't mind."

"Shoot."

The waitress returns with coffee and pie, but hand both to Andrew before leaving, practically flouncing away.

For a woman with that much gray in her hair, she sure acts like a teenager.

Andrew sighs as he pushes the pie my way, and my stomach churns. I'm not hungry, but I poke at it with a fork anyway.

"Has Ellie been acting strange, do you think? She seems a little too fixated on me these days. I wouldn't put it past her to stage a huge ambush and try to kill me."

Stirring sugar into his coffee, Andrew says slowly, "I'm not sure. I wasn't very familiar with her before the Mate Hunt, but I do think she's a little more focused on you than most she-wolves would be. It's probably because Rafe doesn't want to let you go. But I don't think she would try anything now. Your mate's made it clear anyone who touches you is dead."

Chapter 250: Caine: Room Service

CAINE

It's strange.

My head pulses as Dylan explains what those damn suspicious pets were doing in the basement of a hunting cottage, struck by the strangest sense of *deja vu*.

None of what he says surprises me.

No, it would be more accurate to say I *am* surprised. Surprised I've somehow known all of it before he's said a word.

"You're dismissed. Make sure those animals are thoroughly cleaned before they come within fifty feet of Grace or the children." My voice remains steady, without a hint of the uncertainty leaking into my thoughts.

Dylan nods and backs away, Sadie's muddy tail thumping against his leg as they go. The moment the door shuts behind the messy trio, I rub at my temples, attempting to clear the pressure building there.

Scrolling through my messages with Grace only reinforces the strange, not-quite-right feeling in my gut.

I read them again. And again. The relatively short exchange doesn't trigger the same disorienting feeling of foreknowledge, but it doesn't ease my discomfort either.

If anything, it's worse.

Grace has never voluntarily updated me on her whereabouts. She certainly never mentioned when she needed to get the laundry done. Never mentioned her little jaunt into the forest for no apparent reason.

The steady rhythm of my finger tapping against the table irritates even me. Clenching my hand into a fist helps still the impulse, but the restless energy trapped in my body no longer has an outlet.

I'd love to believe her text messages are a simple signal of progress in our relationship, that she's inching toward accepting her role as my mate, my Luna, the woman who will rule beside me and carry my children.

But it isn't.

My chair scrapes back as I jerk upright and stride to the door, slamming it open with great irritation. I grab the first Blue Mountain shifter I see—a young male whose name I can't be bothered to remember.

"Where are your Alpha and Luna? When did you last see them?"

The shifter's eyes widen. "I—I believe Alpha Raphael is at his private residence, High Alpha. The Luna..." He swallows as my eyes narrow. "I haven't seen her today. I can—I can ask the pack, High Alpha. Please give me some time."

I grunt. "Do that."

Reggie's on Rafe's annoying little tail, but his Luna... I'll have to arrange someone to watch her. If Grace won't keep herself safe, I'll have to do it for her.

A quick check with Randy assures me the children are fine, inside the RV and playing together. Ron has taken the day to spend with the family, leaving me more comfortable ordering Randy to do a more thorough sweep of the area to ensure no one's creeping around.

Something isn't right. The crawling sensation beneath my skin intensifies, my tattoos seemingly restless for the first time in years. I press my palm against my neck, trying to calm the now unfamiliar itching.

I could track her, Fenris offers out of nowhere, having been silent all day. *Find where she's gone.*

He's speaking of the annoying Luna, of course, not my mate.

"Do it," I reply, then immediately reconsider. "No. Go to Grace. Stay with her. Don't let her see you, but remain close." She's obviously determined not to stay under the protection I've provided, but I have to be patient.

She doesn't understand the weakness she represents in my life, and she has some vague objectives in this area.

"Let her do what needs to be done. Only show yourself when necessary."

Do I need reminders from a whelp like you? he scoffs.

I rub at my forehead, a dull ache settling behind my eyes. The Blue Mountain shifter I grabbed earlier has already hustled off for answers.

Fenris materializes beside me, looking a little smaller than usual. Even his ethereal blue flicker seems muted.

Do you have strength? I ask, frowning. He hasn't expended much energy of late, and yet he seems almost empty.

Enough for this. I'll be fine with some rest tonight.

He bumps his cold nose against my thigh before he lopes away, in search of my errant mate, gallivanting across the territory with another man.

What are you going to do, since we're all doing your work for you?

The mild sarcasm lining Fenris's words is so familiar I barely notice it.

I look out the window as I head toward the lower floor of the lodge, my mind already calculating. *Make sure everything's perfect for tonight. The resistant packs arrive tomorrow. I need time with Grace tonight—without interruption.* Otherwise, I'm not sure when I'll be able to.

Will you mark her tonight?

I halt mid-stride on the staircase, my fingers curling around the banister, sinking in to leave imprints.

The loaded question sparks my imagination into a frenzy, and shoving those desires down takes more effort than I expected.

"You were the one who said I shouldn't." My voice drops low enough that any passing shifter would hear nothing but a king muttering to himself like a crazy person. Granted, we all do it. "Not without her consent."

Irritation bleeds into every word as I stalk my way down the rest of the stairs.

The mark would bind her to me completely, wrapping her in my power and keeping her by my side forever.

So get her consent tonight.

My teeth grind together. Simple. Clean. Fenris delivers the directive like he's suggesting I order dessert, but somehow I know it isn't as easy as he says it is.

"You think she'll agree?"

No.

I stop again, this time at the bottom landing. Annoyance flickers in my chest, but I was expecting this kind of reaction from my trickster of a wolf.

He loves to rub my face in any inadequacies I might hold.

"Then why the fuck are you even telling me to do it?"

A Blue Mountain wolf darts around the corner, freezing at the sight of me standing there. Then he turns around and walks the way he came, retreating without ever meeting my gaze.

To change her damn mind, obviously. Fenris's mental voice drips with condescension. *Are you too useless to even figure that out? Remember to order flowers. And a romantic dinner that isn't just room service.*

My heart jerks. "How did you—"

The thought had crossed my mind not ten minutes ago. Order something up to the suite I'd prepared, let her relax instead of having to go out and face more people... I'd thought it was a good idea.

I live in your head, you idiot.