

Grace of a Wolf

#Chapter 176: Caine: Where's the Cat? - Read Grace of a Wolf Chapter 176: Caine: Where's the Cat?

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CAINE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I told you.

Hindsight is a terrible thing.

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

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

"I can't do that."

Why not?

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

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

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

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

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

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

I have to stand by my word.

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

"Fuck off, Fenris."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There's only one thing missing.

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

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

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

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

"Where is the cat, kids?"

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

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

"Meow!"

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

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

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

Sara hisses, "Help us out for once!"

"No."

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

She frowns.

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

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

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

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

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

"Ron. Where's the cat?"

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

"Traitor!" Jer shouts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 177: Grace: Fake It Til You Make It

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm losing it."

It's the only explanation.

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

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

Well—not anymore, anyway.

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

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

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

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

But the self-loathing stays.

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

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

So why did it feel like—

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

Please let me out.

I'll be good.

I promise I'll be good.

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

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

Even Rafe said it was my fault.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Me.

I'm people.

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

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

Just be shameless and pretend nothing happened.

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

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

Except he wasn't even angry.

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

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

Okay.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Take two.

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

Then I look in the mirror again.

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

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

"Bun, *no!*"

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

Sadie's barking joins the chorus.

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

So much for zen.

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

The scene in the main area is pure chaos.

There's water everywhere.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 178: Grace: Strange Notification

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

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

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

From chaos to order in only fifteen seconds.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The whining ceases.

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

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

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

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

"What about the weather?" he demands.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So I guess it can.

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

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

"Around seven tonight. Maybe eight."

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

"Tornados?" Sara squeaks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh—I don't know if we're..."

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

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

"I'm first!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 179: Grace: Not Wolf Enough For Him

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Good call."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Caine clears his throat. "Everyone ready?"

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

* * *

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

Andrew grabs it and says, "Copy that."

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

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

"Better than what?"

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

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

"Hmm."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ah."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He rubs at his eyebrow, glancing at me again before looking back at the road. "I'm not saying you should choose us. I'm just saying I'm worried about you. That's all. If you need help, I'll help you. And if you don't... I'll stay back. I just didn't want to see you being played with. That's all."

Chapter 180: Grace: Fan Club

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

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

Well—third. Ellie exists, after all.

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

No new texts from Lyre.

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

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

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

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

Maybe.

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

Speaking of which...

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

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

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

A notification immediately appears.

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

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

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

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

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

[MADNESS: Join the dark side, baby~]

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

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

[MADNESS: Wasn't me~]

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

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

[TIME: How uncouth.]

[WRATH: I'll show you uncouth.]

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

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

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

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

[TIME: Are you drunk?]

[MADNESS: Yup~]

[WRATH: @Lyrielle was it you?]

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

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

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

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

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

My skin crawls. He reeks of stalker vibes.

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

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

I wait, watching for the read receipt, but it doesn't happen. I'm not panicking, not *exactly*

—this doesn't feel like the bone-deep dread from before the last storm. This is just regular (I think) human anxiety about being contacted by strangers with weird names on a magical social media platform.

Totally normal reaction.

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

So, the storm. Right?

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

But why are they in Lyre's fan club?

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

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

"I'm fine."

"You don't seem fine."

"I'm *fine*."

"Okay, okay. I was just worried."

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

We lapse back into silence.

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

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

Then another hour.

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

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

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

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

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

Maybe I shouldn't have ignored all the buzzing.