

GRACE OF A WOLF

Chapter 255: Grace: It's a... Cat?

Ellie taps her claw-fingers against her thighs, tilting her head this way and that as she stares at me. Then she bounds forward so suddenly I don't have time to scramble away.

Next thing I know, she's crouched in front of me and reaching out to pinch my chin between her thumb and forefinger. Her claws prick at my skin, but don't draw blood. It's a tight grip, and she jerks my head around, examining me like I'm a prime hunk of meat.

I hold my breath, my entire body stiff as a board, and a now-familiar rush of energy surges from deep inside me on a mad dash to where Ellie's fingers touch my skin.

My eyes nearly cross as I grasp frantically for control. Losing all my energy and blacking out would be less than ideal with my potential murderer in front of me, but it somehow feels like the exact kind of thing I'd have happen to me...

Thankfully, Caine's been giving me a lot of practice. It's more fun with him, though.

The energy slows to a trickle instead of a flood, but it's enough. Ellie's face has completely smoothed out, her partially shifted features gone like they never were. Her claws no longer threaten to pierce my skin, leaving the jagged remnants of a once-perfect manicure.

The wild, unstable look in her eyes fades until I'm staring at the exhausted leftovers of the polished, arrogant girl I could never stand.

Ellie, no longer insane (I think) stares at me for what feels like a full minute before finally letting go and standing up straight. Her movements are different now—hesitant, a little unsteady. She looks around us, blinking like she's just woken up from a deep sleep. Or maybe after drinking a little too much.

Whatever. The point is, she's not all murder-stabby right now, and *that's* what matters.

"Cut off your head and burned the body. Hoped it would end it, but it didn't. How did you do it?" she asks, her voice now lacking not only the manic edge but her usual arrogant condescension, too. She sounds... exhausted.

"I didn't do anything," I say quickly, still sitting on the sidewalk, afraid to move. My entire body's trembling with how stiff I am. Holding yourself still is surprisingly hard work.

She scoffs, rubbing at her forehead with her palm. Her hair's still a tangled mess, and she pulls at it with a faint scowl as she inspects what has to be a thousand split ends. Then she flicks her offending hair away and looks at me again. "That's bullshit."

The woman who apparently once decapitated me (seriously, can I shudder? I want to shudder) has been replaced by someone who just seems tired of life.

Her life this time, not mine. To be clear.

"Look, I don't know what's happening either," I try again.

Ellie doesn't seem to care, because now she's inspecting her fingernails, frowning at them like they aren't her own. Eventually, she grimaces and raises her face to the sky. "I'm so tired of this shit, Grace."

For the first time ever, I have a twinge of sympathy. Only a little, though. I mean, the woman's killed me multiple times, so... yeah. Nope. The sympathy's gone.

"But I didn't—"

Just then, a familiar black cat saunters into view from between two parked cars. It stops a few feet away, sitting primly on its haunches as it stares at us with unnerving focus.

Ellie frowns at the cat, suspicion darkening her expression as her gaze slides back to me. "You know what that is, don't you?"

My eyes flick from the cat back to her. "You don't?"

Her brow wings up, and I can feel the sarcasm without her ever saying a word. Deciding not to piss her off now that she's finally calm, I quickly blurt out, "It's a cat."

Her lips press together into a thin line. Clearly, it's the wrong answer.

"Black cats aren't actually unlucky," I add helpfully.

It kind of feels like the lunacy's coming back to her face.

"...is it not a cat?" I finally venture, starting to get the point. I swear, I'm not stupid. How was I supposed to know this was a magic cat?

Then again—well, I'd suspected it too...

"What normal cat would enter pack lands? It's strange from the start. But worse, this cat never dies." Ellie turns her gaze back to the innocent-looking feline, a slight snarl underlying her words. "No matter what, it never dies. Not like you."

I blink a few times, not really sure how to process what she's saying. Beyond the whole killing a cat thing—which isn't very surprising, considering Ellie's a wolf—I'm more concerned about the whole not-dying thing. And further, if a freaking magical cat isn't dying no matter how many times she tries, why the hell would she want to pin the whole time-rewinding thing on *me*, of all people?! Humans aren't inherently magical, but magic cats who don't die are *obviously* suspicious in this case, don't you think?

But trying to point this logic out kind of feels like signing my own death warrant, so I keep my mouth shut and just make a little *hmm* sound to encourage Ellie to keep talking.

The cat yawns, unimpressed by the entire situation, and scratches at its ear, completely ignorant to the way I'm trying to make eye contact. If it's really a supernatural being, I want to be able to communicate with it somehow.

But the stupid black cat is completely uncooperative with my attempts to build an anti-Ellie alliance, and even proves how little it gives a shit by suddenly standing up and sauntering over to rub itself all over Ellie's ankles.

Her dirty, but still pretty, but also slightly manic again face scrunches up with distaste and her hand shoots out. Ellie yanks the friendly, allegedly magical feline up by the scruff, baring her teeth in a low growl. Then she throws it at me.

"What," she demands, "is that? Is it your friend?"