

GRACE OF A WOLF

Chapter 256: Grace: Seriously, This Damn Cat

Catching a cat is like catching air: impossible.

But it lands a few scratches on my arms for the attempt. For the record? Not a great way to say thank you, but whatever; this is why cats aren't man's best friend.

A couple choice swear words want to escape my mouth, but I bite them back with the force of sheer willpower and throw a nasty little scowl in the direction of the now-offended feline as I scramble to my feet before she throws the cat at me again. This time I want to be able to dodge if she does. "If it was my friend, would I have these scratches?" I demand of Ellie, holding out my bleeding arms.

Seriously. Cat scratches hurt like no other.

"Hm," she grunts, completely ignoring my point as she looks around. Her jaw must be itchy, because she keeps scratching at it. "How long are you keeping us here this time?"

The way she thinks I know everything she knows is both annoying and relieving. Annoying, because I don't. Relieving, because... well, it's keeping me alive.

I think.

Or making it worse. I don't know.

"I'm not really sure how to get us out," I say, even though I definitely am not the one who brought us here. Wherever here is. But it isn't a lie, so it shouldn't spark any deceitful smells to tip her off; I really have no idea, after all.

But seriously, what is this? A parallel version of reality where no one but the three of us reside, I guess. A pocket dimension, maybe? I should have read more science fiction books. Maybe I'd know exactly what's going on if I did.

"Hm," Ellie grunts again, and I wonder what exactly she's lived through to warp her personality so bad.

Ellie's always been about perfection. I've spent enough time on the other end of her condescending smirks and snide remarks and petty ways to make my life worse to know this isn't really the Ellie of before.

"So," I say, trying to be as casual as possible even as I take a subtle step back to regain a little distance between us. Not like a step is going to do much in the grand scheme of a shifter's attack, but still. "Ever consider doing something other than trying to kill me to get this cycle to stop?"

Her sharp emerald gaze has me freezing in an instant, my foot awkwardly hovering a centimeter or so above the ground. I set it down an agonizing millimeter at a time, breathing a silent sigh of relief when she doesn't snap my head off.

"Like what?" she asks after a too-long stare. She sounds almost bored, but I swear there's a glimmer in her eyes. Her desperation has piqued her curiosity.

I clear my throat and square my shoulders, trying to act more confident than I feel. "I know a guy. Maybe he'll have some answers." He better, anyway. But considering his track record...

Ellie lurches forward, then stops and straightens, almost pathetic in how purposefully blasé she tries to make herself seem. "A guy," she says coolly, flipping her tangled hair over her shoulder. "It's always a guy with you, isn't it?"

For a wolf, she's pretty damn catty herself.

Speaking of...

I glance to the side, where the offended cat is sitting with its tail tucked around its paws, blinking at us.

"Yeah, I guess," I mutter, deciding to go along with how badly she thinks of me. Soothe the savage beast and all that.

She makes a little scoffing sound that sounds very before-Ellie, then flicks her fingers at me. Her messed up manicure catches her eye when she does, and she frowns at her fingers again. "Go on, then. Who's this guy?"

"He's my... teacher, I guess you could call him. Been around a long time." My words rush together, almost tripping in my eagerness to get them out. "I'll message him, see if he can figure this out. Get you—uh, I mean, us—back to normal."

Her upper lip curls. "And you're just willing to help me, even knowing how many times I've killed you?"

Okay. Guess it was too much to think she'd believe me. "I'm not fond of dying. If helping you means you won't kill me, I'm one hundred percent for it."

Her fingers tap against her arms. "Okay, then. Call him. Prove it. All you've done is talk; if you can really fix this, hurry up and get it done."

Excuse me? All I've done is talk because you've been threatening to kill me.

But I know better than to let that thought out, so I smile instead, even if it feels more like a grimace. "No problem."

My phone's still miraculously with us, though I don't really remember putting it in my pocket. Still, not about to look any gift horses in the mouth. A quick swipe of my thumb unlocks the screen, and my heart drops when I see there's no signal at all.

But, if I remember right, the app should work regardless of service.

Clearing my throat again and hoping she doesn't realize how anxious I am, I let my shaking fingers swipe and flick their way into my list of messages. Just as I'm about to hit Caeriel's name, though, the stupid fucking cat gets in the goddamn way.

Again.

Because of fucking course it does.

One second it's sitting there staring at us like cats do, in that morally superior furry high horse kind of way they have—magical or not. In the next, there's a goddamn bowling ball of fur and snarls attacking my hands and sounding like a freaking chainsaw.

I shriek. Ellie doesn't even flinch, a fact I notice out of the corner of my eye as I scramble backward and drop my phone, only for that stupid black cat to pounce onto the device and lay on it like a perfect loaf of annoying magical cat.

Are.

You.

Fucking.

Kidding.

Me.

Now it isn't just my arms bleeding; my hands are throbbing, bleeding, and I can practically feel the cat scratch fever kicking in already. Or it's a severe case of hyperchondria. Either way, they *hurt*, and the damn cat looks smug as hell as it covers my phone with its body, purring so loud even I can hear it from this distance.

"Still think it's my friend?" I ask Ellie with a hint of sarcasm... if hints moonlight as sledgehammers.

She returns to her inspection of her nails. "This could be your elaborate way of hiding the fact you don't actually know someone who can help us."

Rude. But then again, I guess I can see her super-paranoid point.

My phone dings.