

GRACE OF A WOLF

Chapter 259: Grace: Saved? (1)

Ellie's face gets all pinched as she stares at me. "Are you going to get that?"

That being my phone, I guess, since it just beeped.

I scoff. "Are you kidding me? I'm not getting near that cat if you pay me." Did she not just witness everything herself? It's become abundantly apparent the cat doesn't want me touching my phone. I'm not about to argue with it.

I'm also not going to let my phone just go, but a direct confrontation with a snarling furnace is not my strong suit. My hands and arms throb and ache, the pain enough to twist my stomach, and my phone's being held hostage by evil in a fur suit while I stand here like an idiot.

But...

My eyes go from the cat to the cranky, murderous Ellie, an idea forming.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You're a Luna-class wolf," I point out.

Her shoulders go back and her chin goes up. "Of course." Apparently her bone-deep pride is still intact through whatever she's been going through.

So I turn up the sweetness level of my smile as I continue, "You've been combat-trained since you were young, right?"

"Of course," she repeats arrogantly, with an annoying little curve to her lips. "Even Rafe would struggle in a true fight against me."

"So," I point out, saccharine as can be, "One little cat wouldn't be a big deal for someone as great as you."

Her face falls immediately. "Do you think I'm an idiot?"

Well, it was worth trying. Flattery went nowhere, so I turn to reason. "Look, we need my phone, and I'm not even strong enough to fight one little bitty house cat. You, of all people, would know how weak I am."

Her green eyes are more suspicious than ever, and I hurry to cinch my case. "It'll be barely more effort than breathing for you, but then we could finally get out of here." Hopefully.

Ellie frowns at me for a long beat. Her jaw works side to side like she's chewing through every possible angle of my request, searching for the trap.

Then she turns to the cat.

A low growl builds in her chest. This isn't the kind of posing growl you'll hear at parties and pack meetings, but the *I'm going to kill you* kind, where it resonates through the air and ground and into your very bones.

I shiver.

The cat doesn't budge.

If anything, it settles deeper into its loaf position on top of my phone, tucks its paws tighter beneath its chest, and closes its eyes. The purring intensifies into a lazy, rattling drone.

Ellie's upper lip curls as her growl intensifies to a snarl, and she takes a single step forward.

That's it.

Just the one step.

But the world... cracks.

No sound precedes it. No warning sign.

One second Ellie's foot is in the air and the next her whole body's airborne, thrown into a car parked thirty feet behind her. There's a sickening crunch of metal and bone and the car's alarm screams to life—a shrieking wail screaming emergency.

I flinch so hard I stumble a little.

The cat hasn't moved. Its eyes are still closed.

Ellie peels herself off the crumpled hood. Glass tinkles to the ground, blood dripping from cuts everywhere, and her green eyes aren't fixed on the cat. They're looking straight at me, dark and wild and far too clear.

The frustrated confusion from before is gone. In its place sits something simple and clean and terrible.

She's done with the cat, done with this place, done with questions. Her expression says she's picked the one variable she *can* control, and that variable is... making me stop breathing.

My stomach drops to my toes.

Ah, shit.

"Ellie—"

She rolls her shoulders back, cracks her neck, and starts walking in my direction, all expression gone.

My arms keep throbbing, like I don't have bigger problems than a few cat scratches. My phone's stuck under an uncooperative feral cat and there's absolutely no backup in this weird, quiet (well—currently blaring) world.

Sure, I can't fight against a mouse, much less a Luna-class shifter, on the best of days. But I'm no longer helpless, and there's no way I'm going to sit around and let death happen to me.

I pull in a breath, sucking oxygen deep into every little crevice and corner of my lungs, and reach for the magic coiled inside me. The arcana floods into my veins with glee, and I try to shape it—a ball, a blob, anything—but it won't obey. Instead of gathering in my chest like before, it spreads everywhere at once, filling every vessel, every nerve—

"Stop," I grit out, not sure if I'm talking to her or my magic.

But then power erupts somewhere behind my ribs.

It's not the good kind, where it blasted Ellie off me. It's something awful, a furnace melting me from the inside out, with all the pressure and heat contained inside my skin.

I fall to my knees with a shout, or maybe a scream. I don't know. Everything kind of goes hazy as I retch, but nothing comes out.

My body tries again anyway, convulsing around an empty stomach while the heat stabs into my heart and collapses into a sick, throbbing ache radiating through every single nerve ending. Millions of them.

Something's wrong, and now I'm going to die.

Through the blur of tears, I see Ellie break into a sprint, and while I'm pretty sure my own magic is burning me alive...

She freezes.

Mid-stride. One foot off the ground, hair fanned behind her, fingers hooked into claws, Ellie's there frozen like someone pressed pause on a movie and forgot to tell the rest of reality.

Her eyes are still alive though, green and furious.

"No," a voice says from nowhere and anywhere all at once.

The flame scorching my every nerve fades so abruptly the relief is almost worse than the pain, leaving me disoriented. But Ellie still doesn't move.

"What..." I croak, still on my hands and knees. Bile burns the back of my throat.

Behind me, the purring stops, along with the car alarm.