

Chapter 260: Grace: Saved? (2)

There's a soft, shuffling sort of sound, and I turn my head to the cat.

It stands over my phone, back arching in a long, luxurious stretch, spine curving impossibly high—and then it keeps going. Its fur ripples, somehow darker than black. The body elongates, limbs both thickening and shortening at the same time, so strangely distorted I have to blink the visual away.

It's like the cat can't decide what it wants to be. For a horrible, fluid second, it's neither cat nor anything else, just a shifting mass of shadow and suggestion.

Then a face emerges from the mass.

Bun's face.

Round cheeks. Enormous dark eyes. Her little Cupid's bow mouth.

I jerk upright, my hands almost numb with sudden cold.

But then her sweet face flickers and shifts, and Sara's sharp freckled features replace Bun's for a heartbeat. Then Jer's. Even Ron's. Faster and faster, a carousel of children's faces spinning through like someone flipping channels—

It settles on Bun.

The form solidifies into a toddler-sized human, bare feet, round belly, and all. Bun but not Bun, and I'm suddenly so angry I can hardly breathe.

How dare—?

How dare this thing take the form of my kids.

I push myself back onto my heels, forcing myself to stand, even as I sway. "What the hell are you?" I demand.

The Bun-shaped thing tilts its head. Its lower lip pushes out into a pout so perfect, so devastatingly toddler-accurate, that my gut clenches with recognition even as every instinct screams *wrong wrong wrong*.

"What, you forgot me already?" The voice comes out in Bun's register—soft, high, candy-sweet—but wrong. She speaks like an adult, not like the baby she is. "Strange. I usually have more of an effect on people."

Ellie's frozen. I'm still in this weird parallel world place—

Wait.

Weird otherworld? I've been in one before.

My eyes narrow. "Chaos...?"

"Ding-ding, bingo, yahtzee, uno," Chaos-Bun sings out, holding up both arms with a bright grin. "You've become brighter. Did you take something to raise your IQ, little anchor?"

Deciding not to focus on the backhanded insult disguised as a compliment, I suck in another breath, trying to settle my still-revolting stomach. The pain might be gone, but I still want to vomit.

"Why are you here?"

"Ah. Well. Hm." Chaos-Bun immediately gets a little shifty, no longer meeting my eyes. "I heard there was a strange phenomenon in this area and decided to take a look."

Funny; I'm not feeling anything insidious or dangerous coming from him, but at the same time, he doesn't feel like an ally or a friend.

Already unnerved by the fact he's stolen Bun's face, I'm even more off-balance with the way he's hiding truths.

"Did you do this? Bring us here?"

"No," he says swiftly, but his eyes go left, right, then up to the sky before he amends, "Well, I suppose you *could* blame it on me. But I wouldn't."

My head's hurting already, but I have no interest in following his blame game. "Then get us out."

"Her, too?" Chaos-Bun tilts his head as he stares at me with eyes too keenly intelligent and mature for her face. "Are you sure?"

Honestly, I couldn't care even an iota less if Ellie stays here to rot. "Just me, then."

His little eyebrows fly up. "Really? That callous?" Then he turns to Ellie, clicking his tongue. "Bet you saw it coming, though, didn't you? Alas, lady, I cannot do you this favor."

My hands clench at my sides. Chaos is true to his name; giving him easy reactions is not going to help me. He acts as if he's toying with me; if I remember right—not that my memories are particularly clear—he was like that before, too.

So I take a deep breath and try to emanate the calm and poise of Lyre, hoping I even manage ten percent of her aura. "Then why are you here?"

Again, his eyes dart around. Then he sighs, shoulders slumping. "Fine. Fine! I'll play along."

With who? But I don't ask, only raising one brow as slowly as possible.

Nix that; both of them go up, markedly unconcerned with how cool I wanted to look by only raising one.

"So, we've run into a little calamity..."

My back stiffens. "Calamity?"

"Well, perhaps calamity is a strong word," he hedges, looking remarkably like a chastised Bun as he puts both hands behind his back. "Maybe *situation* is a better word."

"Explain," I demand, still trying to channel a badass Lyre.

It must work, because he clears his throat and explains, "Well, you see, this place has recently come under the purview of Chaos after the loss of its leader. Did you know?"

My face remains blank by some miracle, but my teeth grind a little. "I heard about it." I'm sure he knows I was there. He's a Divinity.

"Hmm, yes. Dreadful stuff. Well, it's been delightful for me, but dreadful for the rest of them, I assume."

Then he pauses, apparently waiting for my reaction.

I'm still trying to figure out how this all ties in.

"And...?"

His little Bun mouth droops. "So I decided to lend a hand. Bring this place a little further into Chaos, as it were. There's quite a treasure trove of relics in this area—old history, boring stuff. It was simple enough to bring some of them out to play."

Seriously, I need some sort of translator to understand *the point*. "I see." But I don't. Not exactly.

"Well, if two time-altering relics are in play at the same time, and the parallel timelines converge..." He brings his little Bun hands out and links his fingers together, with a shrug. "A collision causes rifts. Anomalies within time and space, as the world tries to adjust to a new trajectory. And here you are."

Uh-huh.

I blink a little. "So you're the reason Ellie's gone crazy."

"Well, regression can have that effect, yes."

Pulling the coin out of my pocket, I ask, "Is this your doing, too?"

He squints. "Oh, that? Yeah. That was me, too. Sorry." Of course, he doesn't sound particularly apologetic; if anything, he sounds cheerful.

"So you gave us both items that will turn us back in time?"

"To be fair, if you don't die, time doesn't turn. So if you two would just stop dying..." He shrugs. "It isn't my fault."

The sheer frustration boiling under my skin has even Bun's cute face looking particularly irritating right now. "So all of this is your fault?"

I had plans for today, okay? Plans. Fun ones. Things that definitely didn't involve ambushes and dying and weird rifts and freaking relics. Speaking of which—I don't understand the difference between artifacts and relics, but I have the feeling asking Chaos is going to get me a whole lot of nowhere.

So I don't.

Instead, I suck down another lungful of air, realizing belatedly that the scratches on my arms have disappeared. There's no evidence of being mauled by the cat at all.

"What's with the cat?" I ask, temporarily distracted.

"Oh, the cat. Mmm. Well." He scratches at his nose. "Sometimes I like to watch what's happening."

My eyes narrow.

"Hey. Don't look at me like that. It's perfectly normal. We all do it."

"So the cat was you the entire time?"

"No, no, no." He shakes his finger with a click of his tongue. "The cat is a cat."

Yeah, nowhere. The man's worse than Lyre; she might keep her secrets, but he's just... well, chaos. "Are you the one who caused my magic to..."

Huh. I'm not even sure what word to use.

Implode?

"Oh, no. You can't blame that one on me." Then he looks at his wrist, where there's no watch, and says, "Oh, dear. We're running out of time. Well, this chat has been delightful..."

Oh, hell no. Self-preservation kicks in as I dash toward him and the phone still under his feet. "Don't you dare leave me here!"

He looks at me, eyes wide and aggrieved. "Who said I was leaving you here? I said I was here to help."

Since when?!