

Grace of a Wolf - Chapter 262: Grace: Saved.

(4)[1,026 words]

Caine won't stop running his hands all over me, like I'm some sort of broken porcelain he's tracing.

He's also listening, because he's answering everything I say, but it kind of feels like he's not really *listening*, either. Like everything's going in one ear and partially processed before he goes back to his whole-body inspection.

I grunt as Fenris bumps a little harder into my legs, as if frustrated I'm not giving him attention.

It isn't like I don't want to—Caine just won't let me. Every time I reach down, he grabs my arm and puts it around his waist again.

With my face practically plastered against his chest, it makes it almost impossible to see what's going on. I'd barely registered our return before Caine came running to me, and now I'm so relieved I'm half-limp, only able to stand thanks to his support.

His heartbeat drums against my cheek, steady and constant. The sound's so comforting it becomes its own kind of gravity, pulling me deeper into the wall of his chest until I can't tell where the bruises end and the warmth begins.

I should move.

I should grab the cat—no, Chaos—or whatever it is now, and sit everyone down and explain. Ellie's behavior. The rift. The coin burning through my pocket like a tiny, overpowered sun, capable of bringing me back to life in a new timeline.

All very important things.

But Caine's palm spreads flat against my lower back, and his thumb traces a slow circle over my spine, and my bones dissolve. Just—gone. Liquid. I'm held together by skin and comfort and the fact his other arm hasn't released my waist since I fell out of that rift.

Five more minutes. That's all I need. Five minutes of not being chased, not being potentially murdered, not being thrown backward through time into an open

grave. Five minutes of smelling the dark, warm scent clinging to his shirt and making my thoughts go soft at the edges.

Fenris presses his massive head into my hip again. A low whine vibrates through his muzzle, and I feel it in my teeth.

"I know, buddy," I murmur into Caine's chest. "I missed you too."

Caine's hand leaves my back to cup the base of my skull. His fingers thread into my hair and tilt my face up. Storm-gray eyes sweep over me, cataloging every scrape, every bruise, every smear of dirt.

I open my mouth to start explaining, but then the ground leaves my feet.

There's no other way to describe it.

One second I'm standing. The next I'm airborne, scooped up with an efficiency that suggests Caine has rehearsed this moment.

One sturdy arm hooks beneath my knees, the other braces my shoulders, and he turns on his heel like a man who just decided something and has no interest in debate.

"Andrew." His voice carries clear through the sudden silence. "Handle the rest. Fenris will stay with you."

Fenris chuffs—a sound that might be agreement or might be irritation. Hard to tell with a wolf his size.

"Wait—" I smack Caine's shoulder as my brain cells return to a semi-powered state. My palm stings against solid muscle; I might as well have slapped a concrete pillar. "Put me down. I need to explain about Ellie, she was—"

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"You need to be checked over." He doesn't slow. Absurdly long legs eat up the ground at a rapid pace as he heads straight for the truck. "Then you can take a shower and relax at the hotel."

I stare at him.

Hotel.

The word bounces around my skull like a pinball, hitting nothing useful at first. Hotel. Hotel. Ho—

Oh.

Heat floods my face so fast I feel dizzy.

The *date*.

Right.

We had plans. Normal, human-adjacent plans involving food and possibly candles and definitely a bed—

But wait.

Hotel means overnight, and I have a sudden and desperate urge to hug the real Bun and make sure she's still her.

Caine reaches the truck and shifts me with one arm long enough to open the passenger door before setting me onto the seat with supreme gentleness.

His jaw's still rigid, though, showing he isn't as calm as he's trying to pretend.

My hands shoot to his shoulders, my fingers curling into the fabric of his black shirt. "Caine, I don't want to go to the hotel. The kids—"

"The kids will be fine," he says calmly.

He's probably right, but I think of Chaos-Bun again and try again, even if my words are a little weaker this time. "You don't know that. Bun won't sleep without—"

He catches both my hands and peels them off his shoulders, bringing them together between us. He presses his mouth against my knuckles. Soft, warm breath exhales hard against my skin, until his lungs have emptied.

Then he lifts his head.

Those gray eyes lock onto mine, and I feel more frozen than Ellie under the weight of his stare.

"I'm not okay, Grace. You disappeared."

His words are deep and rough, the agony beneath them so clear it takes my breath away. Ripples of guilt spread through my chest, even though it wasn't my fault.

My fingers tense in his grip, and I lower my eyes. "About that, I—"

"I was going to wait."

Huh? I blink, looking at his face again in confusion. "What do you mean?"

His thumbs press into the center of my palms, beginning a gentle massage. I'm not sure if it's to calm me or him. Maybe both of us.

"I wanted to wait until you were comfortable," he clarifies, which isn't very... clarified. "But I don't think I can."

My heart dips. Thuds.

"What are you—"

His gaze drops, following the column of my throat. It settles on the curve where my neck meets my shoulder.

Rough fingertips brush the side of my neck in a light, almost reverent touch. Heat sinks beneath my skin and pools somewhere dangerous, as if I didn't just have a life-altering experience only ten minutes prior.

"I'm marking you tonight, Grace."

The words don't register.

Then they do.

All at once.